**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 9**

**Episodes 897-1018**

**Episode 897**

VIOLET

Charlie and I were running through the forest, heading back to the pack house. Our wolves moved as one—the same pace and force. I loved every second of it. It made me feel comforted and much calmer after the battle.

Charlie and I had fought in battle, and we had survived.

*Together.*

My mate and I were okay, even after Demeter had targeted me. Being stuck under the witch’s spell, seeing her demonic eyes trying to look into my soul, or whatever crazy stuff she’d had in mind, had been terrifying. Cali had defended me multiple times against the witch’s spells, and Artemis had gotten rid of Demeter, and for that I would always be grateful to both of them. As if hearing my thoughts, my sweet mate said the same thing.

*We need to thank Artemis and Cali for getting rid of that golden-armed bitch*, he told me through our mind link. *Wait, I meant witch.*

My wolf snorted as we continued running through the forest. *Demeter was both those things. And yes, we definitely should. I don’t know what the hell Demeter wanted to do with my pendant!*

*Today was outrageous, Violet*, Charlie said. *I can’t believe everything that happened… That I’ve fought not only one, but two battles so far as a werewolf. Is this really how life treats you guys?*

*No, actually*, I replied. *Usually it’s just camping naked and having barbecue parties.*

*Seriously?* Charlie sounded dubious. *No violence?*

*I mean there is always some violence and some murdering, but it’s rarely me who does it or has to deal with it*, I said. *Xavier and his twin Colton deal with all that, with any threats toward the pack.*

*I’m still trying to process what just happened in the field, honestly. All those fights, all those dead werewolves…* Charlie trailed off. *What would my friends back in Minnesota say?*

I was a little worried when Charlie mentioned that.

*Sorry, Charlie*, I said. *But they can’t ever know. Being a werewolf, and all that… You get it, right?*

Charlie sighed. *Yes. It’s probably best that I forget about everything that happened. But I don’t know if that’s even possible. I feel like I’m going to have nightmares for years.*

Sometimes, I had nightmares too.

*I know. I’m sorry this had to happen straight after you became a werewolf*, I said. *It’s a weird, scary thing, especially for newcomers.*

*I* was *scared*, Charlie admitted. *And really worried, but not for myself. Mostly, I was worried about you. What if something had happened to you?*

I slowed my pace, facing my mate.

*I have no idea what I would’ve done without you, Violet*, Charlie said. His voice was soft and tender in my head. *You’re the only thing keeping me sane right now. You’re the most important person to me…*

My heart started racing at Charlie’s words. I wasn’t used to having someone like Charlie, someone who worried about me. Who cared about me so deeply, and who talked about it. This was a little like Xavier’s protectiveness, a little like Lilac’s. And during the battle, even as I was fighting for my life, I’d felt like I’d been part of something—something bigger than me. Something like a family.

For the first time in a long time, since Lilac’s death, I felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. Xavier was back, Charlie and I had gotten rid of the psychotic Rogue who had turned my mate, and Silas’s reign of terror was over. The threat of the all-mighty Alpha was gone. Now, there was nothing standing between and Charlie and me.

No serial killing Rogue werewolves, no Silas, no Sandi.

Smooth sailing, finally. Just us together.

The thought made me tingle with happiness.

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By the time we reached the pack house, the others had already shifted back to human. Charlie and I joined them, but once again, I couldn’t help but be extremely aware of Charlie’s naked body. Would I ever get used to it? Nudity wasn’t supposed to be a big deal among werewolves, but when it came to my mate being naked, I could apparently get a lot of ideas…

I kinda hoped that this emotion would never end, though. It was exciting, thrilling, to feel so close to someone. So attracted to someone. The thought of touching Charlie was in my head all the time, and my fingertips twitched with the need to reach out and trace the smooth skin of his back, his chest, his abs, and uh…

Other things? *Maybe?*

“You’re staring,” Charlie said, his mischievous tone shocking me out of my daze. I hoped I hadn’t been drooling.

“What?” I spluttered, pretending to be cool. Although I really, really wasn’t.

“You were staring, Violet.” Charlie smirked. “Admit it.”

“Well,” I said awkwardly. “You were staring too!”

Charlie opened his mouth and closed it. Then we both laughed awkwardly, our blushes matching. He was just so, *so* cute…

“What are you kids laughing at?” a voice asked. I looked up and saw Artemis eyeing us, eyebrows raised. She was bloody and dirty but still seemed a little bored. She always looked a little bored and haughty, even after killing Rogues and witches. Artemis was definitely the cool one around here.

“Nothing,” I said quickly. “We just wanted to thank you and Cali for all your help earlier.” Charlie nodded.

“It was quite the battle,” Artemis said. “I’ve been in a lot of fights in my life, but this was something else.”

Charlie nodded again, this time a lot more vividly. “It was like playing a hundred lacrosse matches at once, but with, you know, weapons.” He looked like he was still amped from the adrenaline. But then he deflated. “Except if you lose, you die.” His voice lowered. His expression became somber, suddenly, and I squeezed his hand.

I didn’t want Charlie to get used to werewolf violence and war. Secretly, I hoped that we would never have to deal with anything like this again. I hoped that Charlie and I could just… be happy.

“So what’s the deal with that?” Artemis pointed at my pendant, interrupting my thoughts. “Why was the witch so obsessed with it?”

“I have no idea,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s a family heirloom.”

Artemis raised an eyebrow. “It sucked up ghosts, Violet. It must have some magic behind it.” She tilted her head to the side, eyeing my pendant. “I could use that in my line of work.”

I gasped, clutching the pedant. “It’s mine, Artemis. I’ll never let it go!”

Artemis nodded seriously. “Fair enough. But a word of advice…” She leaned closer, glancing around. “Everyone saw what happened. Including that witch, Big Mac.” She glanced at the pedant. “You might want to put it somewhere safe.”

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Joss’s funeral pyre was lit a few hours later, after everyone had washed off the grime and blood. After we’d been given a moment to breathe. Everyone from the pack was gathered around the pyre. Greyson was in the middle, staring at each of us, one by one.

His voice was loud, but as deep as ever.

“Our Luna was a remarkable woman,” he said. “Her loyalty and dedication were unmatched. She had a strategic mind and a strong spirit. Even the times that we didn’t see eye to eye, I knew that she was an incredible diplomat, a skilled warrior...”

Greyson’s words made a lump form in my throat. As he continued to speak, someone cleared their throat. I looked across the fire and saw Ravi.

In the light of the flickering flames, Ravi stared at Greyson with pure hatred.

Charlie noticed the same thing. I swallowed nervously as Charlie whispered, “That doesn't look good.”

It really didn’t.

“… Joss was always there when the pack needed her,” Greyson went on. “When I was away, she took over without fail. And when I lost my way, she led me to the path that was best for the pack, always. She was the most exceptional, the smartest leader I have ever had the privilege to know. And her sacrifice…” Greyson paused, staring at the flames.

I could swear I heard his voice break.

“Her sacrifice and bravery will never be forgotten.”

Silence fell all around the pack at the end of Greyson’s speech. Everyone watched as the pyre burned. When Greyson nodded at Xavier and Colton, they pushed it slowly into the lake.

“She was the best,” Rishika said, wiping her red eyes. “Even when she yelled at us to get shit done.”

Colton was uncharacteristically serious when he spoke up. “When we went to the pack council, she dealt with everyone like a pro. And even when she bugged me or bossed me around, I always knew that that woman… That woman was a badass.”

Joss hadn’t been *just* a badass to me, though.

She had been sweet and kind and thoughtful.

She had looked out for me, like a big sister.

My heart ached. Maybe I’d had more family than I’d thought.

*It wasn’t fair.*

War and losing the ones you loved just wasn’t fair.

*I’m so sorry, Joss…*

I turned and started going back up toward the house. It was still completely unreal to me that Joss was gone. She hadn’t deserved this.

Then, a presence interrupted my thoughts. Startled, I felt someone hovering behind me, and I swiftly turned to face them. It was Big Mac, with an unreadable expression to her face.

“What?” I asked, wiping the tears from my cheeks.

Glancing at my neck, Big Mac leaned in and whispered, “You need to give me that pendant.”

**Episode 898**

GREYSON

I moved away from the lake as Joss’s funeral pyre went out.

I didn’t feel like being around anyone. The triumph of my battle with Silas was overshadowed by the loss of Joss and the others. I knew what would follow; I’d seen it before. A period of solemn quiet, and then cathartic release—drinking and partying. Even as a Rogue, I’d gone through the same pattern time and time again.

Sabine caught my eye as I walked toward the woods. She came up to me, holding a cup of something that had steam wafting off of it.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Herbal mushroom tea,” she said, placing it in my hands. “Drink up. It will help ease some of the tension.”

Eyeing the cup, I wrinkled my nose. “It doesn’t exactly smell good.”

She chuckled, taking in my expression. “The face you just made… It reminded me of my own father.”

My stomach flinched at her words. She stared at me, her gaze soft. It felt so weird, but also good. Being around her like this felt so good that I wondered if I deserved it.

“How are you doing?” she asked.

I drank all of the tea at once. It thankfully just smelled like shit and didn’t taste like it. I shrugged. “Just glad it's over.”

Sabine sighed. “I feel exactly the same way.”

I looked at her, taking in her calm expression, the tenderness in her gaze. She gazed at me like I was her kid, even though my father had been a monster.

“I’m just relieved he’s dead and happy that you’re safe, Greyson. That’s all there is to it. I just want to move forward now.” She hugged herself, eyeing me cautiously. “What about you?”

“The same. I guess,” I said. Perhaps we were more alike that I had never imagined.

Then Sabine’s expression changed. “How do you feel about Joss?”

I swallowed thickly, looking down at my empty cup.

“It’s okay to be affected, Greyson,” Sabine rushed to say. Her tone was soothing. Assuring. “You wouldn’t be alive if you didn’t feel her loss.”

I wasn’t just *affected* by Joss’s loss. I was also affected by the role I had played in it. Ravi’s accusation throbbed inside my head, not letting go.

“I feel guilty,” I admitted. “If I hadn’t chosen Joss, she’d still be alive. I put a bullseye on her back, and—”

Sabine shook her head. “Don’t doubt her agency like that. Joss knew what she was getting into when she agreed to be your Luna. Every Luna does, and Joss knew all the complications that could come with the position. That was part of what made her a good leader—she was deeply aware of the consequences of her actions.” Sabine paused, squeezing my shoulder. “Don’t blame yourself, Greyson.”

“It’s hard not to. She was there for the pack even while I was losing my shit about…” I didn’t finish my sentence. I didn’t mention Silas’s name, or Cali’s. But my mother understood. “Joss was always there to deal with everything,” I said. “Even when I wasn’t.”

Sabine nodded. “And that was what made her great. She died as a proud Luna, fighting for what she believed in.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. If it even mattered. But my mother was trying here, and to me, that was enough right now.

“Thank you. For your support,” I said. It sounded really fucking awkward, but I said it. “I’ll be okay.”

She sighed. “You won’t be okay if you don’t allow yourself time to grieve, Greyson. Joss’s loss has hit you hard, and there’s no shame to that.”

“I guess I’ll think about that.”

My mom squeezed my shoulder again, just as Big Mac joined us. “Sorry for your loss, Greyson,” she told me somberly. “It’s never easy when an Alpha loses his Luna.”

I eyed Big Mac, glancing at the ruby on my mother’s hand. The ring that had protected her from dying. Fighting to keep my voice even instead of demanding or outraged, I asked, “You helped your partner survive, so I have to wonder… Why didn’t you use that same spell on the entire pack?”

Big Mac eyed Sabine with a blank expression, but I could still feel her annoyance over my mother sharing the truth about the ring with me. Well, tough shit. Mothers and sons talked, and Big Mac had better get used to it.

Her response to my question, though, was a shrug. That wouldn’t do.

“Seriously?” I scoffed. Anger started to seep into my tone, but I reined it in. “What aren’t you telling me? I’m tired of all your secrets.” I nodded at the ring. “What’s up with that spell?”

Sabine’s voice was calming. “Greyson—”

“No, seriously,” I said. “If she could protect you, why couldn’t she do the same for any of the others who died?”

“Greyson, please, calm down,” Sabine said, but I’d had enough of this witchcraft bullshit.

“For me to stay goddamn calm, I need an answer, Big Mac,” I demanded.

“I don’t like your tone,” Big Mac snapped. “I’ve helped all of you time and time again. I don’t have to explain my reasons for what I do.”

“Listen, you—”

“Greyson.” Sabine cut me off. Her tone was sharper than usual, so I was distracted. She stared at Big Mac. Her gaze was piercing as she asked, “I want to know why you didn’t use the spell on the pack, MacKenzie. It’s an expected question.”

Big Mac’s poker face was gone for good. She scowled, glaring between us. “You should be thanking me for saving your mother,” she told me, gritting her teeth. “And because you’re begging to know, I saved her because she’s my top priority. She’s the fucking love of my *life*. How is that different from you literally constantly saving Cali?”

I glared back at her. “I didn't use magic to save Cali. But if I could, I’d like to think I wouldn’t be so selfish with it.”

Big Mac bristled. “*Selfish?*” She huffed. “If you had any idea what’s involved in a spell like that, you would understand!”

I stood my ground. “So make me understand. I’m all fucking ears!”

“Greyson,” Sabine said, squeezing my forearm, “watch your language.”

I was so shocked by Sabine actually mom-scolding me that I stood there gaping. She then turned to Big Mac and softly said, “Maybe explaining it to him would help. He’s the Alpha. He needs to know.”

Big Mac scoffed.

“MacKenzie,” Sabine said patiently. “*Please*.”

And just like that, Big Mac’s secretive resolve crumbled. Grunting, she stared at me. “It’s an ancient spell, requiring the fertility of a willing participant. Which Joss agreed to provide.”

I paused. Slowly, I asked, “Meaning… what exactly?”

Big Mac sighed. “It removes someone’s ability to have children.”

“*What?*” I asked. “Could that have weakened her?”

“Joss understood the implication, Greyson,” Big Mac said. “Don’t underestimate her.”

I could barely fucking believe this. “Why would Joss agree to that?”

“She wanted to remove the Luna mark,” Big Mac said. “She was planning on leaving the pack after the battle.”

Joss had wanted to—she’d wanted to leave us? I had once thought that Joss and I understood each other. I hadn’t been the best Alpha, yeah, and she’d had too many responsibilities, but still, we’d agreed, and she...

This was all my fucking fault, wasn’t it?

“As for using the spell on the others,” Big Mac added, “there’s no guarantee it will work. It’s old magic.” Her cloudy expression shifted once more. This time, she started choking up. I was shocked to see it. She turned to my mother, sniffling. “When you… When you fell out there… I thought you had died.”

“Shh, come on,” Sabine muttered, trying to pull her into a hug.

But Big Mac shook her head and turned to me. This witch, who I barely ever thought had any feelings, looked up at me with angry, tearful eyes. “Sabine is the only person I have, the only person I ​love,” she stepped forward, pointing at me. “Don’t you *ever* try to make me feel guilty for trying to protect her.”

Big Mac stormed off after saying those words. I had no idea what to say. Looking emotional, Sabine caressed my arm. “I’d better go talk to MacKenzie. Will you be okay?”

That question was pretty loaded.

“Go,” I said. “Go talk to her. I’ll be fine.”

Sabine walked off, and I was left behind. And I was also certain that no, I wouldn’t be fucking fine. My mind was racing. How could I not have known that Joss wanted to leave? Was Big Mac lying? Had Joss really been so unhappy as my Luna that she’d wanted to abandon the pack? Actually, that sounded pretty realistic, considering all my fuck-ups.

Joss had been a great Luna. Better than the Alpha that I had been.

Maybe it was all a sign.

Maybe *I* should be the one who left.

I’d never wanted to be the Alpha, anyway. I’d done it to deal with Silas. And now that I had dealt with him, what the fuck more was left? I looked around the pack—they’d survived. They didn’t need me anymore. I’d managed to protect my brothers and Cali, and now…

Maybe it was time for me to go Rogue again.

For good.

**Episode 899**

ARTEMIS

I looked down at the beer in my hand, not sure how I’d ended up with it. I was learning that werewolves *loved* beer. I set it down on the kitchen counter and grabbed a red plastic cup. I remembered that I’d liked those mixed drinks from the bar Greyson had taken me to, so I grabbed a few bottles from the counter and started pouring. Music blared suddenly through the house’s speakers—a deep, thumping base rhythm—and the pack cheered at the sound.

The somber mood of the house had already started to lift, and—with the first beat of the music—it was gone completely. I leaned a hip on the counter and took a sip of my drink, watching them. They were an interesting bunch, werewolves, and I was learning a lot. They continued to raise their drinks to Joss, drinking to her memory. I watched Sage choke up when she said her name, then down her shot of whiskey and scream for more. Joss and the others from the Blue Blood and Samara packs had died gloriously—it would seem. Apparently, werewolves saw dying in battle as an honor.

I took a long pull of my drink, which tasted terrible but burned in a satisfying way all the way down. When a Fae died in battle, the loss was honored with songs and ceremonies, but not glorified. Not like this.

Death in battle was no stranger to me. When Fae died, it was necessary, but tragic. I swallowed hard, trying not to think of all the deaths I’d seen. Some were harder to forget than others.

I gave my head a hard shake and looked around. Cali was walking through the kitchen with a cup in her hand, and I caught up to her.

“Hey, how’s the wound feeling?” I asked.

“Better,” she said, nodding.

“Good thing Torin was around,” I said, trying not to shiver. “That thing looked like it hurt.”

Cali went a little pale. “I’m okay. It’s a little tender, but he did a good job. I feel good, which is more than some can say.”

My eyes flicked up to her neck, where I could see the cursed veins swirling ominously from beneath the neck of her pullover. I raised my eyebrows. “So. Now that this Silas thing is over, what are you going to do about the two mates thing?”

Cali sighed, looking suddenly tired. “I don’t know.”

I tipped my chin toward her neck. “They’re not going away on their own, you know. That curse isn’t going anywhere.”

“I know,” she snapped. “I’m going to look through the books again. I’m still hoping Cassandra’s journal or that spell book might have something that can help me.”

“And if they don’t?” I asked flatly. There was no point in beating around the bush. If I hadn’t lost my little sister to the battle today, I sure as fuck wasn’t going to lose her because she was indecisive.

Cali frowned, but before she could answer, Astrid and Torin walked over.

Well, Astrid walked over. Torin stumbled over, supported by Astrid.

He was holding a beer in each hand and smiling widely. “This stuff is *fantastic*. Have you tried this stuff, Cali? Beer, they call it. *Beer*. When I get back home, I’m going to open a beer distillery. We’ll do small batches.” He hiccupped. “Maybe I’ll grow a mustache.”

Cali laughed and rolled her eyes. “Great idea. You’ll be the first hipster in the Fae world.”

“When *are* you going home?” I asked.

Torin shrugged sloppily. “That’s up to Astrid.”

Astrid smiled. “I don’t know. We came to help Cali, of course, but, now that we’re here, I kind of want to explore this strange world a bit first. We’ve never been here.”

I listened, thinking of my own plans. What *were* my plans? I had wanted to do a little exploring, too, and I had done it. It’s not that I didn’t find the human world interesting—I did. And I wanted to learn more about my mother and my sister and spend more time with them. But… the reason Cali had come to the Fae world in the first place was because her mother—*our* mother—had been dying. Because she’d stayed away from her world for too long. *Years*. And as curious as I was to see what life was like with a family, I had no plans to die to find out.

“Hey, can I join the Fae meeting?”

I looked up as Rishika walked over.

She smiled around at the group. “I wanted to thank all of you for your help today. We couldn’t have done it without you.” She looked at me. “Especially you. I was impressed with your skills. Where’d you learn to fight like that?”

I raised my eyebrows; was she really asking that? “The Fae Wars have been raging my whole life. I learned everything I know from experience. I’ve been on my own for a long time, so I learned fast.” Rishika nodded, clearly impressed. I cleared my throat. “I was watching you, too. You’re good. Fast. Even for a werewolf.”

Rishika chuckled. “Thanks.”

I could feel my cheeks heat. “No, I mean, I was watching you before you shifted. You’ve got some real skill.” I glanced around the room. “Most of them wouldn’t be able to fight their way out of a paper bag if they couldn’t shift.”

Now she laughed, her eyes sparkling. “That’s true.”

“Maybe you could teach me a little?”

Rishika gave me an assessing look. “Yeah, maybe,” she said, with a slow smile. “Maybe you could teach me some of your Fae powers.”

I laughed. “I’m not sure that’s possible.” I could feel Cali’s eyes on me, but I didn’t bother looking over. For a moment, I almost considered apologizing for giving her such a hard time about liking werewolves so much. Maybe she had a point. Some of them were pretty hot. “So,” I said, leaning on the counter, “what’s your story? Where did you learn to fight?”

Rishika took a long pull of her beer. “I’m a bit like you, I guess. I’ve been on my own, too. But for me, it was by choice. I went Rogue to get away from the pack mentality. I wanted to see the world without any restrictions.”

I frowned. “So why are you with the Redwood pack, then?”

Rishika looked around the pack house, which was full of people drinking and laughing. To an outsider it would have looked like a party, but Rishika’s dark eyes were filled with empathy as she looked around, like she understood that this was their way of processing the trauma. “Things started to change for me when I came across the Manus Cruentae,” she said thoughtfully. “There was this Rogue named Ryker. He destroyed so many of our packs and families, and then Greyson killed him. He just seemed like someone I could follow after that. And then, the more I got to know this pack, there was just something about them that really spoke to me.”

“And now?” I asked.

Rishika looked at me, her eyes searching. The she shrugged, the gesture casual. “I like it here, but who knows what the future holds?”

Torin gasped. “You two should team up!”

I shook my head. “You’re drunk, man.”

“He is, but he’s right,” Astrid said. “You’re both awesome fighters. You could be a security team or something.”

“Or *bounty hunters*,” Torin whispered, his eyes wide with awe as he looked between Rishika and me. “Like you were in the Fae world, Artemis.”

I glanced at Rishika and found her looking back at me. “It’s not the worst idea I’ve ever heard,” I said.

Cali, who hadn’t been paying attention, looked over. “What’s not?”

“Artemis and Rishika becoming a crime fighting, bounty hunting security team!” Torin exclaimed.

Cali looked surprised for a moment, then grinned. “It’s *not* a bad idea. I mean, why not? What would you call your business?”

“How about Fae Bites?” Astrid suggested.

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“You know, because you’re Fae and she’s a werewolf,” Astrid explained.

“Whip and Claws!” Torin yelled.

“Stop,” Rishika put her hand up. “Just stop.” She turned to me. “I’m going to get a drink. We should talk more later.”

I nodded and watched her disappear into the crowd.

“Hey,” Torin said, grabbing Astrid as he looked over the heads of the pack. “Have you ever tried a belly shot? I heard that Colton was pouring them.” And he pulled her toward the living room.

“*Whip and Claws*?” I asked, rolling my eyes as I turned to Cali.

She laughed. “Torin always means well.”

I crossed my arms. “You never answered my question. You have to choose by Halloween. Who are you going to pick?”

The smile slid off Cali’s face. “I don’t want to think about it right now, okay?”

The sight of the veins swirling up her neck always made me a little sick, and I looked away. “You can’t keep putting this off, Cali. You have to make a choice. You know you do,” I said firmly. “Xavier or Greyson? Who’s it going to be?”

“Greyson told me to choose Xavier,” Cali blurted out.

I stared at her, stunned. “*What?*”

She nodded. “He told me that I should choose Xavier.” She looked up, past my shoulder, and the color drained from her face.

I spun around and found Xavier standing behind me, a drink in each hand, staring—thunderstruck—at Cali.

“Greyson told you *what?*”

**Episode 900**

My heart hammered in my chest. “Xavier, I didn’t—when did you—were you *eavesdropping?*” I stammered idiotically.

He narrowed his blue eyes. “I was bringing you a drink.”

Artemis’s eyes grew wide as she looked between us. Then she looked around. “I think I’ll go see about getting one of those belly shots after all.” And she vanished into the crowd so fast I could have sworn she’d used magic.

Xavier stepped closer to me. “So Greyson thinks you’d be better off with me?”

I swallowed hard but didn’t answer. I kind of wished he would hand over that drink he’d brought me.

“When did he tell you this?” Xavier demanded.

The *last* thing I wanted to do was talk to Xavier about this. I hadn’t even had time to process everything Greyson had said to me, and I didn’t want to talk through it with Xavier. Not now. “He told me before the fight, and ‘better off with you’isn’t exactly how he put it.”

Xavier put the drinks down on the kitchen counter and took me gently by the arm. He led me through the kitchen and toward the back door, where a cold breeze blew into the overheated room. When he turned to look at me, I could see pain flashing across his eyes. “So then why haven’t you chosen me?”

I shook my head. “You don’t understand—”

“Then help me understand,” he said, his voice almost a plea.

My heart ached. I knew I was hurting him. I could feel his pain in my heart, as though it were my own. “You should know why I haven’t been able to choose, Xavier.”

He took a deep breath, like he was working hard to stay calm. “I know about the curse, Cali.” He nodded toward the veins on my neck. “It’s fucking hard to forget about. I know that it means that you’re supposed to choose. But I also know that we’re mates. We both know it. We’ve always known it. So just choose me and get it over with.”

His voice had become a growl by the end, but I knew he wasn’t angry, not really. He was desperate and frustrated and—well, maybe a *little* angry.

I would have been, too. I was angry with myself. I pushed my fingers to my eyes. Xavier wasn’t wrong. I could still remember the undeniable pull I’d felt toward him, the moment I’d met him. So why couldn’t I do it? Why couldn’t I just choose Xavier? Greyson had told me to do it. What was holding me back?

And then it hit me. It felt like a punch to the chest, and I took a stumbling step back.

I couldn’t do it because I literally couldn’t choose one over the other. My heart squeezed hard and I struggled to breathe past it. What I was feeling went *beyond* the curse—beyond *due destini*. I was truly torn between these two men. I had connected with them—mind, body, and soul—and the thought of losing either of them made me feel physically sick. How could I live without them?

“Cali.” Xavier’s voice was rough. “I’m waiting.”

I shook my head as tears burned in my eyes, behind the pressure of my fingers. “I can’t answer you. Not in any way you would understand. Not in any way you would accept.”

Xavier’s hands were gentle as he pulled me toward him. “Try me.”

But it was too much. I jerked away from his arms. “Not here,” I gasped, looking up at him. “Not now.”

“When, then?” he growled.

I shook my head. “I don’t know,” I murmured, and pushed away from him, through the crowd, out the back door.

My heart ached. Physically ached, like someone was squeezing it, making it beat erratically. And I didn’t need to look down at my chest to know that the black veins were throbbing and swirling across my skin. The house was too close and too hot and filled with too many people and when I burst out the back door, I gulped in the cold night air gratefully.

There were people on the back porch, too—Sage tried to wave me over—so I turned and headed toward the lake. I wasn’t in the mood to talk to anyone right now.

Xavier was right—he deserved an answer. But what answer was I supposed to give him?

I knew why Greyson had told me to choose Xavier. Because he loved me. Which made his advice so complicated. Because I loved him, too. I loved them both.

As I walked around the house toward the lake, I saw a massive outline resting against the house like a granite column.

“Steinar,” I called, raising a hand. He’d sat out the battle, still too weak from Demeter’s magic.

He looked up. “Do you have my books?”

I shook my head. “I don’t have them,” I said flatly, as I continued toward the lake. The books. Those damn books that had failed to break the curse. I had been so certain they would help, but I hadn’t found anything useful. My thoughts flitted to the orb. I’d felt so much power when I’d held it in my hands. I balled my hands into fists as I walked, remembering the warmth that had flooded through them. Could the orb actually help, or had it just been lying to me? Trying to manipulate me so I’d use it and its dark power?

I took a deep breath. There was a part of me—a big part—that wished I could just run away. But the throb in my heart reminded me that that was not an option. The curse didn’t allow escape. If I tried to run, we would all perish—me, Xavier, and Greyson. Just like Cassandra, Symeon, and Arion had perished before us.

As I reached the edge of the lake, I felt the frustration beginning to mount. It was filling my chest with pressure and making my head pound. What could I do? What as I *supposed* to do? I was on the verge of screaming these questions into the blackness of the water when I saw a familiar form standing nearby.

I stilled. It was Greyson. For a moment, I considered running back up to the house. After my conversation with Xavier, I was afraid to face him—afraid to deal with the questions for which I had no answers.

But before I could make any move at all, he turned.

“Cali?”

“Greyson,” I breathed. I shook my head. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to disturb you. I didn’t think anyone was down here.”

He walked toward me. “I don’t mind being disturbed by you.”

When he got closer, I could see the unhappiness clouding his grey eyes. “Are you okay?”

“Are *you* okay?” he asked, deftly deflecting my question.

“I’m fine. I just needed some air.”

“Same here,” he said, nodding, and looked out over the lake.

We were quiet for a long moment, the only sound the song of the evening birds and the distant rumble of the music from the pack house.

Finally, Greyson sighed. “It was a hard day.”

I thought about this for a moment. He had faced his terrifying father in a battle to the death. He had lost his Luna. He had lost his mother, then seen her come back to life. Calling it a “hard day” seemed like a pretty massive understatement.

“He was your father,” I said quietly. “It must have been terrifying. You’ve been wanting him dead for so long, but he was your father, so facing him must have been so much harder than facing any other enemy.” I reached for his hand, and he let me thread my fingers through his. “It’s okay to be conflicted about what you’re feeling.”

He nodded, his eyes still on the lake.

“If anyone knows about conflicting feelings, Greyson, it’s me.” He smiled into the fading sunlight. I gave his hand a squeeze. “You deserved a better father.”

He chuckled a little. “Couldn’t have been much worse than that guy.”

I smiled. “At least you have Mrs. Smith.” The smile slid off Greyson’s face and he nodded, once. “You should try, Greyson. Make an effort to open up to her. She wants to be a part of your life, if you’ll let her. She’s lived so much of her own life without you, too. And you could both use each other to lean on. Now more than ever.”

Greyson didn’t answer for a long moment. He closed his eyes against the cool wind as it blew across the lake, bringing with it the smell of earth and deep forest and dark water. Then he turned to me with a smile. “You, Caliana Hart, are a good person.” He grasped my other hand and pulled me close, then leaned down and pressed a kiss on my lips. The evening was cold, but his mouth was warm, and his kiss was as sweet as June honey. It wasn’t hungry, but wistful, somehow, and so full of longing it made my heart ache.

He pulled gently away but stayed close, his storm-cloud eyes on mine as he brushed his fingers softly down my cheek. “Which makes it so much harder to say goodbye to you.”

**Episode 901**

The world went silent around me as I stared at Greyson. The wind died, the birds quieted, the music from the house went silent. Everything was blanked out except for the sound of my own heartbeat, which thundered in my ears.

“Goodbye?” I finally managed. “What are you talking about? Where are you going?” I asked, my voice choked.

He shook his head and gave me a small smile. “I’m sorry, Cali. It’s not like that. I’m not leaving in that way—”

“How *are* you leaving, then? What are you even talking about, Greyson?” I demanded, taking a step back, stepping out of his arms. “I don’t understand. You just saved the pack. Why are you *abandoning* them now?”

“No, Cali. Listen.” He took a deep breath. “When a Luna is killed in battle, it’s customary for the Alpha to go to pay tribute.”

“Oh,” I said with a sigh of relief. I’d thought—okay, I’d *freaked out*—because I’d thought he was leaving because of what he’d told me before the battle, about choosing Xavier. “Oh. Okay. Um, do you want me to come with you?” I asked hesitantly. Halloween was getting closer every day. *Could* I go? What if I wanted to choose Greyson? Would he be back in time?

But Greyson was shaking his head. “No, no. I’ll only be gone for a day. Maybe two.” He smiled. “Thank you for the offer, but it’s something that has to be done alone.”

“Sure, that makes sense,” I nodded. “Um, what’s involved in the tribute? You don’t have to throw yourself on a funeral pyre or anything, right?”  
 The corners of his mouth turned up—almost like a smile—but his eyes stayed sad. “No. It’s an old ritual. Sacred to werewolves. But it will honor Joss, a fallen Luna. She deserves it.”

I nodded and glanced away.

“You okay?” he asked.

I looked back. “I’m fine. It’s a little strange. Joss and I were never really the best of friends. I don’t think she ever really trusted me. But I grew to respect her. The whole pack did. She was a really great leader. A good Luna. The best the Redwood pack could have had.”

Greyson nodded. “Thank you for saying so.” His eyes shone bright before he looked away, back across the lake.

Guilt and remorse radiated off him like waves of heat. I felt it too, in my own heart. I wasn’t responsible for Greyson choosing Joss, but I knew by his making that choice, he’d saved me. I thought about Silas’s cold, empty eyes when he’d seen me. The lethal hunger in them. If I’d been the Luna—and he’d targeted me from the start—things could have ended very differently.

A shiver moved up my spine and I shook it off. “When are you leaving?” I asked, looking back up at Greyson.

“In a few hours.”

We both looked up in surprise when a large cluster of pack members—Redwoods and Blue Bloods—burst out of the back door of the pack house. They were singing and laughing and screaming, and seemed to be heading down to the lake.

“I should probably get inside,” Greyson murmured, his eyes on the drunken crew. “I have to get ready for the trip.”

I grabbed his wrist as he walked past and pulled him around to look at me. “You *are* coming back, right?” I asked, looking intently into his eyes.

He smiled gently down at me. “In a day or two.” He leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to my forehead, then turned and started toward the house.

I watched him as he strode up the dark lawn. I knew I should have felt relieved—the danger with Silas was over—but I couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t quite right. I hugged myself, feeling suddenly cold in the chilly October air. It was just, seeing Greyson so sad… I wasn’t used to it. That had to be it.

But was that really it? I couldn’t be sure.

He was gone now—vanished into the house—but I still looked after him. He hadn’t mentioned Xavier at all. Hadn’t asked any questions. Had he assumed I’d already made my choice?

My heart gave a throb of pain, and I put my hand over it. The pain never really went away. It was always there, reminding me of the curse. I *had* to find a way out of this before it broke my heart or drove me crazy. And before it killed me. I thought through my options. Big Mac was supposed to be helping me, so maybe it was time to go talk to her. I turned toward the house and headed up the lawn with new determination. She’d been putting me off, but the battle with Silas was over, so there were no more excuses. No more putting this on the backburner.

The rowdy crowd was still spilling out the back door, so I went around to the front of the house and let myself in through the front door. Which was lucky, because I found Big Mac in the little office just off the living room. It was a small room, mostly filled with a large desk and bookcase, and it was one of the only places people rarely went. She was sitting at the desk, muttering to herself, and when I tapped on the door and walked in, she looked up, annoyed. “What the hell do you want?”

I narrowed my eyes. It had been—as Greyson had put it—a hard day, and I was getting a little tired of Big Mac’s attitude. “You should know why I’m here,” I snapped. I unzipped my pullover and yanked it aside, showing her the black veins swirling up my neck. “What can you do about this?”

Big Mac’s eyes scanned my skin, her eyes following the dark, ominous swirls of the cursed veins. The she looked away and shrugged dismissively. “It’s a curse. You’re cursed. Deal with it.”

Anger bubbled up in me, but I took a deep breath, trying to keep it together. Big Mac was always like this. Yelling wouldn’t help anything. “When I held the orb, it told me it could help me.”

The witch looked up at me quickly, her eyes wary. “You shouldn’t believe what it told you.”

“And why not?” I asked, crossing my arms.

Big Mac didn’t answer right away. She looked like she was thinking about this, like she hadn’t expected my question and had to think about the answer. “Because,” she finally said, “magic is a living thing, and sometimes it has its own agenda.”

I stared at her. “What the hell does that mean?”

She rolled her eyes, looking the same way she always looked: annoyed that everyone else didn’t know what she did. “A body is a vessel for magic, little girl. Nothing more.”

This didn’t seem like an answer to my question. Trying to get an answer out of Big Mac was like trying to catch a fish with your bare hands—she was so damn slippery. “But shouldn’t we try *something?*”

“Not with the orb,” Big Mac said with finality.

I blew out a breath through my nose. “Well then isn’t there something in that spell book that can break curses?”

She shrugged and leaned back in her chair. “Why don’t you go out and ask your slab of rock?”  
 “Because he’s not a *witch*!” I yelled, beginning to lose my temper. “He’s a *librarian*. And a gargoyle. Which—while interesting—is not helpful for curse breaking. Besides, this isn’t just any curse. You told me before that it’s not simple to break a curse, but it’s also not impossible.”

“No,” Big Mac said. “But that doesn’t make it easy.”

“So—”

“So why should I help you?” she demanded.

This stopped me. I stared at her, and there was suddenly a new pain in my chest that didn’t have anything to do with the curse or the swirling veins. “B-because,” I stammered. “I thought we were friends.”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Friends? You already owe me. Or have you forgotten, little one?”

“So send me a bill!” I exploded.

The witch stood so quickly the rolling desk chair flew into the wall behind her and she glowered at me. “What is it with you and this pack?” she spat furiously. “Everybody wants something from me. You. Lola. Joss. Greyson. Xavier.”

“What did Joss—” I started, but she spoke over me.   
 “I’m not here to serve you bunch of ingrates whenever you need help. In fact”—she pressed her lips into a tight line—“I’ve had enough.”

“*What?*”

“Silas is dead. I don’t need to hide anymore. I don’t need the so-called safety of this pack. Not that you kept us safe, anyway,” she said, standing up. “Sabine is alive because of *me*. She and I are leaving.”

“What?” I said. “You can’t just—”

Big Mac glared at me. “We’ve had enough. Good luck finding a new witch.”

**Episode 902**

XAVIER

Holding up my hand, I stopped Colton mid-sentence. “Hang on, do you hear that?”

Colton stopped talking and listened. We both heard it. Over the sound of the music and the party around us, Big Mac’s distinctive voice was yelling somewhere on the other side of the house.

We turned and headed toward the sound, reaching the small office just off the living room just as she was storming out.

“What’s going on?” I asked, looking at her, then at Cali, who was standing inside the office, looking shaken.

Big Mac glared at me as I stepped into the doorway, blocking her exit. “I don’t answer to you, Evers. Now get out of my way.”

“Whoa,” Colton said warningly. “Easy there, witch. Don’t forget, you’re in a house full of werewolves.”

She turned her icy stare on him. “Meaning what?”  
 Colton matched the coolness of her eyes. “Meaning you might want to keep a civil tongue in your head if you know what’s good for you.”

“Are you really going to speak to me that way? After all I did for you?” she asked him.

“Hey, I was just asking a question,” I said quickly, trying to defuse the tension that was quickly building between Colton and Big Mac. “I was just wondering where you were going.”

“She says she’s going to leave the pack,” Cali said, stepping forward.

I looked at her, then at Big Mac. “So?” I shrugged. “That makes sense. The thing with Silas is over. She’s a witch, we’re werewolves. We don’t usually hang out. I don’t think anyone was expecting this to be a long-term arrangement—”

“But she was going to help me break the curse,” Cali added, starting to sound desperate.

Big Mac’s nostrils flared as she rounded on Cali. “I never agreed to that, girl—”

“Wait,” I said, looking between them. “Everyone just calm the hell down.” I took a deep breath and blew it out, wishing I could say what I really thought—that the curse could be broken easily if Cali would just choose me—but I kept that to myself. After the way she’d broken down the last time we’d talked about it, I was hesitant to bring it up again. As much as I wanted to, I knew I couldn’t push her to make a choice. No matter how much easier it would make everyone’s lives. Especially mine. With Cali as my mate, I could challenge Greyson’s claim. I could—and *would*—become the Alpha of the Redwood pack, and make her my Luna.

I hadn’t told her any of this, of course. One thing at a time. And the “one thing” of the moment was Cali’s next question, directed at Big Mac.

“What about the orb?” Cali asked.

The witch rolled her eyes and stepped back into the office. She leaned on the desk, looking tired. “Not this shit again.”

“Why not?” Cali asked, looking intensely frustrated. “I want to talk about it at least. When I held it—”

“We need to put the orb somewhere it can be protected,” Big Mac said, her voice bulldozing over Cali’s. She shot a glare at Colton and me. “And I’m sure as hell not going to trust it to the Evers twins again. Not after what happened this last time.”

Next to me, Colton stiffened. “How the fuck were we supposed to know Silas knew where it was? You didn’t. No one did.”

“My mother should never have given it to you,” Big Mac spat.

“Well, she did,” Colton said flatly. “Sounds like you’re just mad because she didn’t give it to you—”

“Okay!” I shouted over the escalating argument. “None of this is relevant. The orb still exists, and I think the one thing we can all agree on is that it needs to be secured. Somehow.”

“But how are we supposed to do that?” Cali asked. “It’s such a dangerous object. We all saw what Silas almost did when he got his hands on it. It’s too powerful to be trusted with anyone.”

“Obviously it can’t be trusted to werewolves,” Big Mac snarled.

I rolled my eyes. “Did you have something else in mind, then?” I asked.

Big Mac crossed her arms, looking stubborn. “Right. Like I’m going to tell you, just so you can come steal it back?”

I ground my teeth in frustration. “No one’s planning on stealing the damn thing.”

“You don’t know that,” she hissed, her dark eyes flashing. “You’ve never held it.”

I scowled. “What does holding it have to do with any—”

“You can’t know how powerful it really is until you’ve held it in your hands. The power that flows through you… *I’ve* held it,” Big Mac said, her voice low and dangerous. “I know what it could do to *me*—god only knows what it could do to a werewolf. What it could *promise* you.”

Her words hung in the thick silence that followed them.

“What the fuck is *that* supposed to mean?” Colton finally asked. “What *who* could promise you?”

“She’s right.” All three of us looked at Cali, who was pale, but looked resolute. “I’ve held it, too. Big Mac is right. It speaks to you. Whispers, somehow. It… *does* things to do you.”

“What things?” I asked.

She bit her lip. “I don’t know. It feeds your hunger for control. Or power. You can hear it inside your mind. It promised me that it could help me break the curse.”

Every eye in the room was on Cali.

“And what?” Colton said, breaking the silence again. “Now you want to use it?”

She looked scared but nodded. “If it could help me, then yes.”

Big Mac began to swell like a bullfrog, so I jumped in before she could let loose on Cali. “When we got the thing, Big Mac’s mother warned us never to touch it. Ever. And we never did. She gave it to us in a protective bag, and that’s how we kept it. So obviously it can affect those who touch it. That must have been why she warned us. So we have to tread very carefully.” I turned to Cali. “I know you’re worried about the curse, and are looking for a way to break it, but I don’t think this is that way.”

“Xavier—”

I shook my head. “We don’t know how the orb’s power works.”

“But if it can help me—if it could help *any* of us—shouldn’t we figure that out?” Cali asked desperately. “We have it in our possession. Aren’t we just wasting an opportunity if we don’t even try?”

“And what if it destroys *you* in the process?” I asked heatedly. “You said you held it, Cali. You said you could feel it. You know how powerful it is. Not everyone can—”

Colton cleared his throat.

We looked at him.

“Why don’t we just smash it?” He shrugged. “That way no one has to be in charge of it, no one comes looking for it. Problem solved.”

I rolled my eyes. “God, Colton, do you *ever* listen? We talked about this. If we destroy it, then the power within it gets released. Power is like matter—it can’t be created or destroyed, it just gets moved around.” I turned to Big Mac, feeling agitated now. “Fine, so you don’t want us to have it. Why should we trust you with it? Your mother didn’t even trust you. She gave it to us. It’s not like she didn’t have your address. I don’t know why you think you’re the orb’s default handler here. Who’s to say you won’t be tempted to use its powers?”

Big Mac raised her eyebrows, and she looked at me with what I could almost have mistaken for grudging respect. “For once, Xavier, I happen to agree with you.”

Colton threw up his hands. “Well this is great. We’re going in fucking circles here. *We* can’t be trusted with it; *she* can’t be trusted with it. All we’ve established is that *no one* can be trusted with it!”

“Which is why you’re going to let me take it,” Big Mac said softly.

I stared at the witch. “We never agreed to that.”

Colton huffed in an irritated way. “What other options do we have?” He rubbed his eyes, looking tired. “Maybe we could hide it in plain sight. Have Phil build it into a piece of furniture or something.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Big Mac said, rolling her eyes. “It’s not a souvenir shot glass from your trip to New Orleans. You can’t just put it in a box on a shelf. It *speaks*. It would call to you. It would call to everyone. You couldn’t *keep* people from flocking to it.”

“Then what are we supposed to do with it?” Cali demanded.

Big Mac passed a hand over her eyes. She looked tired and older than she had this morning. She looked worn out, and worn down by the conversation. “I know a safe place. I’ll hide it.”

**Episode 903**

VIOLET

Someone from the Blue Blood pack had built the bonfire and people kept adding to it until it resembled something castaways might build if they were hoping to be spotted by a rescue plane. But the ground around the fire was wet and everyone was laughing, and I just couldn’t find a way to feel really worried about anything. The music that was wafting from the house through the open doors changed to a slower, sweeter song, and Charlie pulled me up from my chair.

I laughed as he pulled me close. “What are you doing?”

“Dancing, Violet.” He looked down at me. “Don’t you know how to dance?”

“Umm…”

He grinned. “Are you telling me you’ve never been to a dance before?”

I leaned my head against his chest so he couldn’t see my cheeks flame red. “It’s not like there was a werewolf prom, Charlie.”

He laughed and wrapped an arm around my waist. “Well, there’s no trick to slow dancing,” he said. “You just lay your head here…” He turned my head so my cheek was against his chest. “And then we just kind of sway.”

We revolved on the spot, rocking without speaking as the party raged around us.

He was right, I thought, closing my eyes. There really wasn’t anything to slow dancing. It just felt so good to be there with him, our bodies close, his arms around me. I was trying to just solely enjoy the moment, but without trying, my thoughts went to the back to the battle, and I gripped him a little tighter. I was just so grateful he had gotten through it. There had been so much carnage. Our fatalities had been low, but we’d lost Joss, which had come as a real shock to us all. And if she had been vulnerable, then we’d all been vulnerable.

But, I reminded myself, we’d made it through. Both of us. And now, with Silas dead, we had nothing to worry about. Charlie and I could just think of each other.

Again, though, my thoughts betrayed me, and I remembered the car slowing to a stop and the driver offering me a ride. Isaiah. At least that was who I’d thought it had been. If I had known it was really Silas…

I thought about how easily he’d ripped Nolan’s head from his body, how close I had been to those hands, and I shivered.

“Are you okay?” Charlie looked down at me, worry flashing across his amber eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I said quickly. I tried to smile. It was so nice, just being close to him, and I didn’t want to spoil the moment. “I just felt a chill.”

His face relaxed and he pulled me close again. “Then I should warm you up,” he said, his voice rumbling in his chest. He leaned down and pressed a kiss to my lips. “I still can’t believe I’m here.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

He looked around at the bonfire and the lake and the dark trees. “I mean, it’s not like I’m here in Oregon for a visit, Violet. I’m here to say, with a pack. I have a pack,” he added in disbelief. He looked down at me. “And I have you.”

My heart thumped in my chest. “So you’re not sorry you came? Even after everything?”

Charlie looked stunned. “Sorry? How could I be sorry?”

“*Come on*,” I said. “After what I happened today?”

I felt a tremor of fear pass through his body, and he pulled me close. “I won’t lie, Violet—I’m still trying to come to terms with everything I saw today. I mean, I just fought in a war. *Me.* With werewolves. *As* a werewolf.” He shook his head. “If I didn’t know any better, I would have thought this was some kind of video game. But it’s not. It’s real.”

I thought of Joss and hugged him close. “It’s real, all right.”

He started dancing again, swaying to the music, and we were quiet for another moment.

“I think I’m really going to like it here,” he said. “Maybe I’ll look into transferring my academic records sometime next week. After everything calms down and I get settled.”

I nodded. “That sounds good.”

“But first I have to come up with something to tell my parents about why I moved out here. I can’t exactly tell them that their son is a werewolf and moved across the country to be with his mate.”

“No, I guess not.” I smiled and buried my face in his chest. My own chest felt tight with happiness. I felt closer to Charlie than I ever had before. When I thought back to how this had all started—just catching a glimpse of him through a car window—I still couldn’t believe that we were here. But I’d known—I’d just *known*—that there was something about him. From the moment I saw him, I’d known we were mates.   
 “What are you thinking about?” Charlie asked.

I looked up at him. “Do you believe in fate?”

He thought about this for a long moment. “I’m not sure. I don’t know if I ever did before. I think I always thought that whatever happened in life was a combination of choices and just dumb luck. But…” He looked down. “But then I met you. Seems like fate had to have played a part in that, doesn’t it?”

I smiled. “I think there’s a reason why *fate* and *mate* rhyme.”

Charlie half-laughed, half-groaned. But he sobered as his eyes focused on the pendant around my neck. “What are you going to do about this?” he asked, touching it with a finger.

I wrapped my hand around it. “Big Mac made it sound like I had to give it to her by the end of the night. But there’s no way that’s going to happen.”

Charlie raised an eyebrow. “What happens if you get into an argument with a witch?”

“I’m not sure, but I don’t really care,” I said stubbornly. “Lilac’s ghost is in here, and I made a vow to protect him, and I don’t intend to break it.”

Charlie nodded. I’d known he’d be on my side.

I clutched the pendant tighter. “But I do wonder if there’s a way to free Lilac—and the other ghosts.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t like the thought of him being trapped in here forever,” I said, looking down at the tiny pendant. I looked up at Charlie. “What do you think? Do you think it’s possible?”

Charlie’s eyes grew wide. “You’re asking *me?* I have no idea. But I’m with you. Whatever you need, I’m ready to help.”

“You are?” I asked, an odd, floating feeling in my stomach.

“Lilac was your brother, Violet,” Charlie said, his eyes flashing golden in the firelight. “I’ll do whatever I need to do. How do we find more information about the pendant? Is there someone we can talk to?”

“The book!” I said, the thought coming to me suddenly.

Charlie frowned. “What book?”

“The spell book that Lola had,” I said excitedly. “Maybe we could find a spell to free Lilac’s ghost!”

Charlie still looked confused, but enthusiastic. “It seems like a good place to start. I took a research methods class last semester, so that might be useful.”

I laughed and grabbed his hand, towing him toward the house. “Let’s go find it.”

Members of all three packs were everywhere—around the bonfire, draped all over the back porch, and all throughout the ground floor. I pulled Charlie upstairs to check the bedrooms, hoping we wouldn’t catch anyone taking advantage of the privacy. In that way we were in luck, but we couldn’t find the spell book anywhere.

“Whose room is that?” Charlie asked as we reached the last room at the end of the hall.

“Big Mac and Mrs. Smith’s,” I whispered. My heart beating hard, I turned the knob and pushed the door open. I gave a huge sigh of relief when I saw that the room was empty and started looking around. I was about to give up when I saw that her bedside table drawer was slightly open. I pulled it open the rest of the way and my heart leapt when I saw the strange leather book resting just inside the drawer.

“Here it is!” I whisper-shouted, waving the book around as I tip-toed out of the room.

Trying to keep from laughing, Charlie stuffed the book into his shirt, and we crept back downstairs and out the front door. “We’ll go out into the trees and look at it,” he whispered. “So we can be alone.”

I nodded, trying not to giggle. Something about the sneaking around made me feel slightly giddy, and I was having a hard time keeping my cool.

So I nearly screamed when—as we stepped off the front porch onto the grass—a massive, granite hand descended and grabbed Charlie by the shoulder. It lifted him from the ground and slammed him against the side of the house.

“And just where do you think *you’re* going?”

**Episode 904**

LOLA

Watching Violet and Charlie slow dance around the bonfire made me feel like a proud mama-bear. They were so cute. But when I looked for them again after I grabbed another beer, they were gone. I smiled to myself, wondering if they’d snuck off to finally hook up.

*They just grow up so quickly…*

“Hey, Lola, can I talk to you?”

I looked over at Jay, who’d walked over from the other side of the bonfire. “Sure.” I followed him around the fire to a secluded area, past an old potting shed. “What’s up?” I asked, peering at him through the falling darkness.

He looked a little nervous, but there was a determined look in his eye. “I’ve been thinking, now that the battle is over and Silas is dead, maybe you could… not shift for a while.”

I groaned. “Not this again, Jay. I really—”

“Just let me finish,” he said, speaking over me. “We both know how serious your shifting issues have been. How seriously they’ve been affecting you. Come on, Lola. You know I’m right.”

“Of course I know,” I bit out. “And I’m fully aware of how serious the problem is. That’s why I went to Big Mac for help, for fuck’s sake. But…” I trailed off, my heart beating fast.

“But what?” Jay asked, taking a step toward me.

“But… I’m scared,” I finally managed.

He frowned. “Of what?”

I looked up at the night sky and blew out a long breath. “What if I get stuck as a human?” I looked back down at Jay. “What happens then? Would you still love me?”

Jay’s eyes widened for a moment, like this was the last thing he’d been expecting to hear, and then he pulled me into a hug. “Is that what you’re worried about? *Of* *course* I’d love you, Lola. We’re mates. We’re bonded. For life.”

I let myself be enveloped my him. “I know,” I said, my voice muffled against his shoulder. “But, Jay…”

He shook his head. “I wouldn’t have been so hard on you about your shifting if I didn’t love you, Lola. I’ve just been so worried. And today… God, I was terrified.”

“Were you?”

He nodded, his chin bobbing against my shoulder. “Not about being killed myself—I was worried about you. If I lost you, Lola… I don’t know what I’d do.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “You love me *now*, I know that, Jay, but I’m not human now. I’m a werewolf.” I took a step back and looked into his eyes. “And if I were to be stuck—like, not able to ever shift again—you might not feel the same.”

Pain flickered across Jay’s eyes. “Of course I’d still love you,” he said, “How can you say that? What difference would it make?”

I tipped my head. “You really don’t think it would make *any* difference? Come on, Jay.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head, “I don’t. Look at Xavier and Greyson. They both love Cali, and neither of them have ever had any issue with her being human—even when they thought she was *entirely* human. No, Lola, I don’t think it would make a difference. I love you. I always will.”

I shook my head. “I think you’re just saying that. I just don’t think that’s something you could ever really know. I think the truth is that it would change everything.”

“Lola—”

“I already feel inadequate around the other werewolves,” I blurted out. I bit my lip as a burning feeling in my chest started to rise into my throat, threatening tears. “I’m *similar* to them, but we’re not the same. And if I became human, then that would be it. The similarity would end.” I dashed away a rogue tear as it slipped down my cheek. “They would know it. And you would, too.”

Jay took another step toward me, reaching for me, but I quickly turned away. I didn’t want him to see me like this. “Can you go grab me another beer or something?” I said, trying to keep my voice light as tears began to course down my cheeks.

He hesitated for a moment. “Sure,” he finally said. “I’ll be right back.”

I waited for his footfalls to fade before I breathed out a shuddering sob, then slipped around the other side of the old potting shed and headed back toward the house. The living room was full of people, but no one noticed me slipping inside and up the stairs. My room was thankfully empty, and I dropped onto the bed without bothering to turn on the light.

Anger rolled through me in waves, mingling with confusion and hurt. Jay was usually so empathetic, but it just felt like he wasn’t *listening* to me. He was telling me my species didn’t matter to him, but it felt like he was just saying what he thought I wanted to hear. How could he possibly *know* how he would feel about me if I was just a human? If there was nothing special about me at all? If I lost that spark that made me who I was?

Tears rolled down my face as I stared up at the dark ceiling. Of course, I reminded myself, there was a chance that the spell would work and my wolf would be restored and my shifting problems would be over and everything would be all rainbows and kittens and fluffy clouds and I was just worrying for no reason at all.

But if the spell *didn’t* work…

When the doorknob turned, I turned my head and buried my face in my pillow. I wasn’t in the mood to see anyone.

“Lola?” Jay asked, sounding baffled. “What are you doing up here? I was looking for you. Why did you run off?”

“How’d you know I was here?” I asked, my voice muffled by the pillow.

The bed dipped as Jay sat. “We’re mates, remember?”

I shifted my head so I could glare up at him with one eye.

He smiled. “And I saw you heading into the house.” He waggled a beer. “I brought you a drink.”

“I don’t want it.”

Jay put the drinks down on the table next to my bed and put his hand on my back.

“You should go back downstairs,” I said. “Have a good time. You deserve it, after today.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said quietly. “It wouldn’t be any fun without you.” He rubbed my back in slow, concentric circles. Then he leaned down and kissed the back of my neck. “Besides, I owe you an apology.”

I turned over to look at him, surprised. “For what?”

He looked down at me, the expression in his eye gentle. “I don’t know if I’ve been listening to you, Lola. I’ve been hard on you because I love you with my whole damn soul, and I’m worried about you—”  
 “I know,” I said, trying to turn my face back to the pillow.

But Jay stopped me. “But I *understand* why you’re worried. Not just for me, but for yourself. But, Lola, I promise you—whatever happens—I’m going to stand by you. I’m your mate—I have to. But more than that, I want to. No matter what happens, I’m with you.”

I looked up at him. “You really mean that?”

Jay smiled and leaned down to brush a kiss across my lips with every word, “Every. Single. Word.”

I smiled up at him as a welcoming warmth spread through my body. “Hmm, I’m not sure I’m totally convinced yet.”

His smile grew into a grin. “Then I guess I’ll just have to think of some way to convince you.” He kissed me again, laying himself down next to me. He let his hand trace down the center of me, between my breasts, along my stomach, and past my belly button to the joining of my legs.

My legs parted a little and I breathed out a little moan as he ran his fingers softly along the seam of my jeans.

“Am I getting warmer?” he asked, whispering into my ear.

“Warmer.” I nodded. “Much, much warmer.”

He increased the pressure and my core flamed to life.

I dropped my head back onto the pillows. “Warm enough that I’m going to melt right here on the bed if you don’t take my pants off real soon,” I breathed.

Jay chucked and kissed me again, then he kissed my neck, then he pulled my shirt off and kissed each breast, feather-light. He kissed my stomach and then bit the top button of my jeans.

“Oh my god, Jay,” I panted.

When he moved his mouth to the seam of my jeans and blew his hot breath into me, my toes curled. “You have to touch me or I’m going to fucking die, I swear.”

Jay laughed and reached for the button of my jeans.

I fumbled with his belt and, after a moment of pulling and tugging, we were naked. I rolled on top of Jay.

“Hey,” he protested, frowning up at me. “This isn’t exactly what I had in—*fuck*.” His frown disappeared as I lowered myself down, sliding his cock into my slick core. “Oh, holy hell, Lola. How do you feel so amazing?”

I smiled. “We’re mates, remember?”

Jay chuckled. “Oh, I remember.” He grabbed my hips and pulled me down even further, filling me completely.

A wave of pleasure rolled through me, and I braced my hands on the headboard and rocked into him, feeling the pressure of his cock against my every nerve ending. I dropped my head back with a moan and did it again, and again. And *again*. I was so close, riding Jay hard. He shivered beneath me and we came together, gripping each other and holding on tight.

*Mates*, I thought, as the waves of pleasure washed through me. Connected. Mind, body, and spirit.

And we would always be, right?

**Episode 905**

The yelling brought me running outside.

“Violet!” I gasped as I raced down the porch steps. “What’s going on?” I looked up at Steinar, who had Charlie pinned against the wall of the house.

“Cali!” Violet was beside herself, nearly in tears. “Do something!”

“Steinar, let Charlie go! What’s come over you?”

Steinar turned his slate-grey eyes on me. “The book. They have the book.”

“What book?” I asked, baffled.

“They were stealing my book!” he rumbled, his voice like a rock fall.

“We weren’t *stealing* it!” Violet protested. “We were just borrowing it! We just wanted to look at it.”

Steinar moved his hand from Charlie’s throat, and he fell to the ground in a crumpled heap. “Then why was the book hidden beneath his shirt?”

Violet rushed over to Charlie and helped him to his feet. “We wanted to see if there was something in there that could help me free Lilac and the other ghosts from my pendant.”

“God, Violet, why didn’t you just ask me—” I started, but Steinar spoke over me.

“I have been very patient,” he rumbled, “but this has gone far enough. This book has already been stolen from your possession once before. You must see that these books are not safe here, in this house. You must give them to me to return to the library.”

“Steinar—”

“Do you have any idea how cruel and vindictive Hypatia can be?” Steinar asked.

“Um, I guess not. She seemed like a pretty weird librarian, but maybe just a little eccentric?” I said, hopefully.

The massive granite man shivered with fear and shook his head ominously.

Violet took a step forward. “But it’s not fair!”

I turned, confused. “What’s not fair?”

She gripped her pendant. “My brother is *trapped* in here. That’s not fair for him. Or for the other ghosts held in here. And if there’s a spell that can free him—and if it’s in *that* spell book—then isn’t it right that we should at least *try?*” she asked, looking around desperately.

Steinar looked down at the pendant. “Your brother? He’s—trapped? In there?”

Violet nodded, her eyes bright with tears.

Steinar’s stone face looked stricken. “But it’s so small. So dark. It must be so… awful in there for him,” he said quietly.

We needed that book. Violet needed it for her brother, Lola needed it for the inversion spell, and I needed it if I was going to break the curse that made my whole chest ache with pain—and this was my chance to keep it.

I stepped forward, closer to Steinar, who was wiping away a tear from his granite face. “Please, Steinar,” I said. “Couldn’t you give us just a few more days? Please?”

He looked up, his expression conflicted.

“*Please?*” I asked again. “At least until Halloween?”

He looked down, and his massive body moved as he sighed deeply. He lowered himself onto the porch step. “How can I refuse such a request?” He looked up at me. “I want to help you. You have all been so nice, but you must understand—Hypatia is not so understanding. And if I don’t return with the books…” He shook his head.

I thought quickly. “Maybe I could go with you?” I offered. “To return them. I could explain everything to Hypatia. About how you came to get them and guarded them and insisted we give them back. That way you won’t get into trouble.”

Steinar smiled. “That is a very kind offer.” Then he frowned. “When, exactly, is this Halloween?”

“Just a few days.” I smiled. “And then the books are all yours. Do you think Hypatia can hold off a little longer?”  
 He shrugged. “She might. She might also turn me into a paperweight, but I’m willing to take that chance, if it will help you.”

I beamed at the giant. “Thank you.”

Violet grabbed the book from his hand and started rifling through it. “Is there a table of contents or something?”

“Maybe we should go somewhere slightly less visible,” I said, looking around. We were standing just beyond the front door, in the bright light cast from the porch light. “Big Mac is going to be pissed if she sees us with this. And she’s in a pretty bad mood already.”

“Where should we go?” Violet asked, looking up from the book.

“Let’s go up to my room,” I suggested.

Charlie stuck the book back into his shirt and the four of us crept back upstairs, though I had to shush Violet a couple of times to keep her from giggling, and tell Steinar to duck as we reached the top of the stairs. We didn’t meet anyone on the way up, which was good considering we made kind of a strange group, but I couldn’t help but notice that I didn’t see either Xavier or Greyson as we moved through the house. Maybe they were outside at the bonfire with the rest of the pack. Or maybe Greyson was in his room, getting ready to leave.

I thought about his journey to perform the ritual to honor Joss. I wondered where it would take him. I understood why I couldn’t travel with him, but I hated to think of him going alone, when he was feeling so guilty about everything.

“Watch your head,” I told Steinar, and he stepped into my room, ducking so he wouldn’t hit his head on the door frame. My room wasn’t small, but with the three of us plus Steinar’s massive frame, it was like standing inside a dollhouse. “Maybe you’d be more comfortable if you sat,” I suggested.

“Oh, don’t worry about me,” Steinar said lightly, waving a hand. An instant later, he had transformed from a massive man into his gargoyle form. “Much better,” he sighed.

I agreed, as his gargoyle head only came up to my hip and he took up much less room, but Charlie looked at him, his eyes wide with surprise.

“Whoa! What just happened? How’d you do that?” He looked at Violet. “He’s that same gargoyle!”

But Violet wasn’t listening. She had pulled the book out from Charlie’s shirt and was already sitting on my bed, flipping quickly through the pages.

“You might have better luck if you try the index in the back,” Steinar suggested helpfully.

Charlie nodded knowledgeably. “He’s right. The index. I learned that in my research methods class.”

Steinar looked impressed. “The index is alphabetical and organized by spell type. That should help you find what you’re looking for.”

Violet made a frustrated noise. “But I’m not even sure what spell I’m *looking* for. Or if it even exists!”

She looked like she was starting to spiral, and—looking at the book in her lap—I could understand why. Somehow, I’d never noticed how giant that book was. If you didn’t really know what you were looking for, finding the right spell could take forever. I shook my head, wondering if this was going to work at all. If only we could ask Big Mac. She was like a volcano—I had no idea what was going to make her explode next—but she could probably have found what we needed in seconds.

“Perhaps you should try page three hundred and forty-seven. The spell is…” Steinar frowned for a moment. “It’s for shadow invocation.”

Violet flipped to page three hundred and forty-seven and ran her hand down the age-spotted page. “It’s just words,” she said quietly, her face registering disappointment. “Where’s the spell?”

Steinar shook his head. “That *is* the spell,” he said. “It’s an incantation. The easiest spell there is. All you have to do is follow the directions and read the words aloud.”

I leaned over, trying to read the cramped writing over Violet’s shoulder, but there was an odd buzz in my brain. I kept thinking about Big Mac’s warning, about how spells were complicated. I thought about Lola invoking that tidal wave on the ferry, just by reading from this book.

“Are you sure?” I asked Violet quietly.

“Sure about what?” she asked, craning to look up at me.

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

Violet hesitated for a moment, then held up her pendant. “It’s not for me. It’s for Lilac. And for the others trapped in here. They don’t deserve that.”

I looked at her for a moment, then nodded. “Okay.” I sat next to her on the bed and looked at the book. “We’re supposed to put the vessel—I guess that’s your pendant—on the floor and then form a circle, holding hands. Then someone has to say the spell.”

Violet pulled the pendant from her neck and laid it carefully on the dark wood of my bedroom floor. She placed the spell book at her feet so she could read the incantation. Then we gathered around in a tight circle and held hands.

“*Blood thick, water thin,*

*Keeper of keepers,*

*Release what thou holds.*

*It belongs not to thee.*

*Release. Release. RELEASE!*”

Violet’s voice grew louder as she spoke, filling the room. It moved within me, and I was hearing her inside my mind, like she was mind linking with me, but that couldn’t be right…

I frowned, but then all other thoughts were pushed out of my mind when the pendant on the floor began to tremble. Steinar’s stone hand clutched mine tightly as the pendant shook violently, clattering against the floor.

Then, before anyone could say or do anything, the pendant burst open and filled the room with a blast of sudden, blindingly white light.

**Episode 906**

VIOLET

The light was blinding, and I squeezed my eyes shut. But that wasn’t enough. I let go of Cali’s hand and threw my arm up, trying to shield my face, but the light still seeped through my eyelids.

“What’s happening?” I screamed.

I felt Charlie squeeze my hand.

The only sound in the room was the clattering of the pendant on the wooden floor, and I squinted my eyes open to look at it—I *had* to know what was happening. It was glowing bright white, like there was a fire burning deep within it.

My heart pounded. Holy shit, was I burning Lilac? *What had I done?*

I was about to take a step toward it when I heard a chorus of voices. The sound filled the room, as though hundreds of people had just poured into Cali’s bedroom and were all talking at once. I looked at the pendant, frowning in confusion, and it began to swell. It grew larger and larger, and then a series of misty figures began to stream out from within it. My eyes widened and I gasped. It was the ghosts.

I watched them, trying to look at their faces, but there were so many of them. I couldn’t tell them apart. Hundreds of them. One of them had to be Lilac. I’d seen him enter the pendant.

“Lilac!” I called desperately. “*Lilac!* Where are you?”

But there was no answer. The ghosts began to move around the room, like they were all in a giant station and had trains to catch. And then something strange began to happen. Whenever a ghost passed by me, close enough for me to feel a cool rush of wind against my arm, I would see something—a memory, but not my own. I saw a boy on a wobbly first ride on a bike and felt a rush of fierce pride; I saw a woman’s angry eyes and felt the sting of her slap on my cheek; I felt the rush of cold air as I stepped out onto a window ledge and then a sickening fear as I leapt; I saw the trees rushing by me as I ran through the woods as a wolf. But still, this wasn’t my memory. I looked around. All of the memories belonged to the ghosts filling the room.

Where was he? Where was Lilac?

And then another memory came. This one, I knew. I was in our old living room, the one with the brown spotted rug. Lilac and I were sitting in the square of sunlight pouring through the window, building towers with chipped wooden alphabet blocks. I could feel the smoothness of the wood beneath my fingers. My tower was the largest I had ever built, and I was so proud, but, as I looked at it, it began to sway. I tried to steady it, but the tower fell anyway, and I began to cry.

Lilac took my hand, squeezing three times, the way he always did. With the other hand, he began to build the tower again. “This one will be even bigger,” he promised.

His voice was so small and his cheeks were so round. We were babies, and even then, he understood my pain.

And I—the me in the here and now—burst into tears.

From out of nowhere, Charlie’s arms twined around me. “Hey,” he murmured into my ear, his voice almost lost in the cacophony of whispers. “Are you okay?”

I swallowed and took a shaky breath, about to tell him what I’d just seen, when—across the room—I saw him.

*Lilac*.

The whispers from the other ghosts faded away. Distantly, I could hear Charlie calling for me, but even his voice faded as I stared at my brother’s face. Even as a ghost—barely more than a shadow—his features were as familiar as my own.

“Lilac,” I sobbed. “I’m sorry. I’m *so* sorry. I’m sorry you were trapped in the pendant. I’m sorry you’re *gone*. I miss you so much—” A sob welled up in my throat, choking me.

“*Violet*.” His voice was an echo, but calm and steady, just as it had always been. “*Thank you for releasing me. You’ve been so brave. Please don’t be sorry.*” He smiled. “*The pendants were a gift from a witch after our mother did her a favor. She didn’t know what they were capable of*.”

Tears streamed down my face as I shook my head. “She couldn’t have.”

“*The others*…” Lilac gestured around the room. “*They told me it was an ancient hold. A trap of sorts. Meant as a punishment for the dead—*”

“Oh god,” I wailed, swaying on my feet.

But Lilac shook his head. “*It isn’t your fault, Violet. The pendant did what it was created to do. You did nothing wrong*.”

I nodded, trying to breathe. “I can’t believe it. That something so special to us—so sentimental—could be so evil. But you’re free now, right?” I asked, anxious again.

Lilac nodded. “*We all are. Thanks to you*.”

I stared at Lilac, my eyes hungry for him. “I wish you could come back. I’d do anything to have you back, Lilac. I’d trade places with you—”

“*Violet*.” he said gently. “*That isn’t possible. But there is something you* can *do.*”

“What?” I demanded. “I’ll do anything.”

He smiled. “*Be happy, sister*.”

“What?” I repeated, dashing tears from my eyes. “Happy? How can you say that to me? I can barely breathe, Lilac—”

Lilac stepped closer to me, and I felt a rush of cool air, like a spring breeze. “*I’m glad you found your mate, Violet. And the Redwood pack is your family. Your home. Now I know that you won’t ever be alone.*”

“But Lilac—”

“*You must release me*,” he said firmly.

I shook my head. “I don’t understand.”

“*I need to know that you’re going to be okay, Violet. I won’t be able to rest until I know. Will you promise me that you will be happy?*”

“I’m happy,” I sobbed out.

He smiled. “*Will you promise that you won’t get sad whenever you think of me?*”

I shook my head. “I can’t promise that!”

He gave me a stern look. “*Will you promise that you will enjoy every day of your life, Violet, and that you will open your heart to Charlie and to everyone else who loves you? Will you let me rest knowing this?*”

There was an aching in my belly just looking at him, but I was listening as hard as I could to what he was saying to me, and I nodded. “If it will make you happy, and let you rest, then I will.” I took a deep, shuddering breath. “I promise.”

Lilac smiled, and it filled me with a happiness as warm as sunshine. I smiled back through my tears.

“*I will always be with you*,” Lilac said softly. “*I love you.*”

“I love you, too,” I said, stepping toward him. But as I spoke, he disappeared, dissolving beneath my fingers from a wispy form to a million twinkling stars. The light faded and the silence receded, and I found myself standing in the middle of Cali’s room, surrounded by Charlie, Cali, and Steinar. All of whom were looking at me cautiously.

“Violet?” Charlie asked, his eyes wide. “Are you okay?”

I smiled at him, laughing in confusion. “Of course I’m okay. Didn’t you just see what happened?”

“Um,” Cali said, her face pale. “We saw a really bright light and a bunch of ghosts.” Her eyes went wide. “Wait, did you see Lilac?”

I nodded, smiling. “Yeah. I spoke to him. It worked. The spell worked. He’s free.” I took a deep, relieved breath. Then I looked down at the pendant at my feet. “What should we do with this now?”

“What do you mean?” Cali asked.

“Oh, it’s like a ghost prison. Lilac told me. It’s pretty bad news. It’s probably not a great thing to keep around.” I nudged the pendant with the toe of my shoe. I knew I couldn’t just keep such a dangerous object around, but I hated the thought of giving away the last memento I had of my family. “I wonder if there’s a way to remove its abilities? Anyway,” I said, turning back to Charlie, “I set him free. And, I think he set me free, too.”

Charlie smiled, like he understood, and pulled me into hug.

I hugged him back, holding him close, so grateful to have him.

“Hey, let me in on that,” Cali said, pulling me away from Charlie and wrapping her arms around me. “I’m so glad it worked, Violet.” She leaned back to look at me. “You look like sunshine.”

“I feel like it,” I smiled. “But what about you? Let’s find a spell to help you, too.”

Cali’s smile slipped. “Oh, well… It’s not quite that easy. I need a special kind of spell. One that can break curses.”

There was a sound like crushing gravel, and we all looked at Steinar, who was clearing his throat.

“Well, I’m no expert, but you might try the spell on page seven hundred and ninety-three.”

Grabbing the spell book off the floor, I flipped to page seven hundred and ninety-three. Cali leaned over my shoulder.

“*To fracture malediction*,” Cali read. “Holy shit,” she added quietly.

“What does *that* mean?” I asked, frowning down at the book.

Cali grabbed the book from me. “It means I might be able to break the curse!”

**Episode 907**

AVA

The party raged behind me, but I kept my back to it, my eyes on the darkness of the lake. The Redwoods and the Blue Bloods—even some of the Samaras though there weren’t many left—were celebrating their victory over Silas. They were celebrating their survival and their life, but I couldn’t share their happiness.

My brother was dead—killed by his own folly and foolishness—and as I stared into the dark forest beyond the lake, I wondered if the pain of it would ever really leave me.

If he had died in battle—fighting for what was right—I think that would have been easier to live with. But this was harder. Not only to lose him, but to know that he had lost himself… I had to mourn him through a haze of anger and bitterness.

I leaned my hands back on the damp, dead grass and looked up at the sky, trying to breathe past the tightness in my throat. He was the only family I’d had left, and now he was gone.

There was a scream of laughter followed by a thud. I heard the wood in the bonfire shift, and sparks crackling in the cold night air. They were adding fuel to the fire. They were celebrating. Maybe I should have been celebrating with them, but I couldn’t. The cost of the battle had been too high.

My only consolation was that Xavier and Greyson had made Silas pay for what he’d done. I only wished I could have been the one who’d ripped out his heart. I would have savored it—the look in his eyes, the fear flashing across them, knowing that he was about to die… I swallowed hard, my mouth watering at the thought.

At least I’d been able to kill some of his followers.

But now what?  
 I wrapped my arms around my legs and rested my chin on my knee. What was I going to do now? I had no family, no home. Xavier had made it clear he wanted nothing to do with me—

I felt a stab of pain at that thought, but I shook it off. It didn’t matter. I had made the right decision. No matter what, I had chosen to fight on the right side today.

And maybe someday, Xavier would see how I’d tried to correct my past mistakes.

But that was a distant hope. I wasn’t delusional. I knew he’d never forgive me. But there was nothing wrong with a little hope. And that was what I felt, burning deep inside me. It was a tiny little flame, but I guarded it carefully. I knew I’d done terrible, unforgivable things. But I also knew what Xavier and I had between us. We were mates. I’d known it from the moment I set eyes on him, when we were both children.

We were destined for each other.

“Ava.”

My heart beat a wild tattoo at the sound of his voice. “Xavier,” I said, turning to look at him.

The planes of his face caught the light from the bonfire, and he looked lit from within as he gazed down at me. “You’re all alone.”

I shrugged. “I don’t feel much like celebrating.”

He nodded slowly. “Would you take a walk with me? I want to talk.”

I didn’t answer right away, wondering if I was hearing things. When he raised his eyebrows, I got to my feet. “Okay.”

As we walked downhill toward the lake, the sound of the party died away.

“You might not believe me, but I really am sorry about Nolan,” Xavier said. “Silas used people—that was his game. Nolan just fell under his power. It wasn’t entirely his fault.”

I nodded. We weren’t looking at each other.

Xavier stopped walking and turned to look at me. “I’m not ready to forgive you Ava—I never will be,” he corrected himself. “But I’m glad you fought with us today.”

The little fire inside my chest burned a little brighter. I nodded. “Thank you.” I wished he would forgive me. I wished it with all my heart. But he’d come to talk to me. He’d sought me out. Only a few weeks ago, he’d been chasing me through these woods, trying to kill me. He’d hated me. Now, he was willing to look at me. Maybe time would continue to soften his heart.

I thought of his mother’s ghost, and the anger in her eyes when she’d seen me outside Silas’s cabin. But she had protected me—helped me get away. If Marlene had been willing to help me, maybe Xavier would soften too, in time.

He bristled whenever I said it, but he knew as well as I did that we were mates. If something had really changed—if he had truly broken the bond between us—I would have felt it. I know I would.

“So, what are you planning?” he was asking. “Are you going back to the Samara pack? Going to go Rogue?”

It was nice that he was interested, but strange, and I cocked my head to look at him. “Why do you care?”

“I don’t. Just thought I’d ask. I wanted to know if you were planning on hanging around.” He shrugged. “It might be best if you moved on.”

This stung like a slap and I glanced away. It hurt, but I wasn’t surprised. “I’m not sure. I was thinking about going back to the Samara pack—at least until they name a new Alpha.”

Xavier nodded. “Sounds good.” He turned to leave.

I caught him by the wrist and he looked down at my hand on his, surprised, then up into my eyes.

“Is it always going to be like this?” I asked, desperation creeping into my voice for the first time. “Between us?”

Xavier’s blue eyes were cool as he looked at me, and impossible to read. After a moment, he shook his hand loose and turned, walking toward the bonfire without looking back.

*Everything* in me wanted to go after him. To throw my arms around his neck and plead with him, *beg* him to listen to me. But I wasn’t a beggar. I turned back toward the lake resolutely. Xavier knew where I was, and he knew what he felt in his heart.

Nolan was dead, but I—through some strange mix of magic and luck—was alive again. And that *had* to mean something. I glared at the dark water, thinking hard. I had to find myself again. Figure out how I fit into this world. I hadn’t given it much thought before Xavier had asked, but maybe I should go back to my pack, organize it, help them pick an Alpha. Maybe then I would feel part of the world I thought I’d left behind.

I didn’t mean to, but I glanced over my shoulder at the bonfire—at Xavier. He could be part of that world, too.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw someone walking toward me, and I was surprised as hell to see it was Cali.

“Yes?” I asked warily as she approached.

“I wanted to say thank you for fighting with us today,” she said carefully, stopping in front of me.

I eyed her cautiously. “Trying to be the bigger person?” I ventured.

She took a deep breath, like she was trying to control her temper. “Listen, I wasn’t the one who pretended to be me.”

I rolled my eyes and looked away, back out at the lake. After everything that had happened today—seeing my brother murdered in front of my eyes—this girl playing petty games was the last thing I needed.

Cali cleared her throat. “I think you should leave, Ava. Tomorrow.”

Something wild rolled through me and I spun to look at her. “So I’m away from Xavier?” I guessed. “Or is it Greyson you’re worried about?”

The flash of pain and guilt on Cali’s face told me I had guessed her true agenda. She narrowed her eyes. “Why did I even bother coming over here?” she spat, then turned on her heel to walk away.

I watched her head back toward the bonfire. And then I watched her as she stopped to speak to Xavier—probably to say goodnight—before she walked into the house. My eyes went back to Xavier, standing before the bonfire, looking into the flames. My mate, though he didn’t realize it. Not yet. But he would. In time.

Then it hit me. Maybe *that* was my purpose. Maybe *that* was why I had been brought back. To right this great wrong. Helping to end Silas had only been part of it—but maybe the greater wrong was what had happened between Xavier and me.

My heart beat hard as I looked at Xavier’s still figure in the distance. Maybe I’d been brought back to fix it—and to make Xavier mine again.

That would make it all worth it—everything I had been through, everything I had endured. To have him back.

To get what was *owed* to me.

**Episode 908**

GREYSON

I moved through the quiet house, picking up the cups and bottles and cans and shoving them into the trash bag in my hand. They seemed to be everywhere—tables and countertops, even lining the mantelpiece. The chest in front of the living room sofa that was usually full of blankets had been emptied and filled with empty beer cans. I shook my head and tossed them all into my bag. Someone else was going to have to sort through it for recycling. When I looked up, I spied Jay curled up uncomfortably on a wingback chair, his eyepatch on the wrong eye. “Hey.” I nudged him with my foot. “Get upstairs.”

He blinked his one eye open and, pushing the eyepatch over, hauled himself to his feet, then stumbled toward the stairs and up to his room. The rest of the Redwood pack seemed to have made it upstairs already, and the rest of the couches were filled with the Samara pack members. The Blue Bloods were passed out in the den, so I stayed quiet as I moved around. They’d all earned their rest.

I moved through the kitchen, sweeping a counter-full of red cups into the trash bag. Truth be told, I was pretty jealous of the houseful of passed-out werewolves. They’d been drinking for hours and were unconscious all over my floor but still managed to look so peaceful. If I’d been able to sleep, I imagine it would have felt fucking fantastic to pass out after a fight like the one we’d been through. Especially after all the tense days we’d had leading up to it.

But I couldn’t sleep.

I opened the door to the back porch and stopped, surprised, when I saw Colton and Xavier sprawled out on the lounge chairs.

Colton took a look at the trash bag in my hand and grinned up at me. “Hey, I thought we gave the maid service the night off?”

I rolled my eyes but dropped the bag and headed toward the third chair. “Can’t sleep?” I asked, grabbing a beer out of the cooler at Colton’s feet.

Xavier shook his head, but Colton laughed as he reached over to pop the top off my beer. “Nah. Gotta check out that sunrise when it hits. It’s our first Silas-free day, gents. We gotta greet that with a toast.” He clinked his beer bottle with Xavier’s.

I took a long pull of my beer, the very first I’d ever shared with my brothers. It was strange to sit here with them. They probably still didn’t like me, but at least they knew I wasn’t actively trying to kill them. I stretched out in my chair, feeling the tension in my neck unknot a little. “So, Colton, how much longer do we have you around?”

“Yeah,” Xavier added, giving Colton a sarcastically simpering look. “What about Maya? Isn’t she *longing* to see you?”

Colton grinned. “Listen, as much as I’d love to stay and show you losers how to party, I gotta check out of this hotel for wolves first thing in the morning.”

“That’s soon,” I said, raising my eyebrows.

He shrugged. “The nice thing is that I don’t have to worry about being attacked by Silas and his peeps on my way out. So that’s something.” He smirked. “We really did kick that bastard’s ass, didn’t we?”

I smiled. “We did.”

“I’ve got to hand it to you, Greyson,” Xavier said, leaning back in his chair. “Ripping out the old man’s heart like that—that was a nice touch.”

It was an odd compliment, but it was still a compliment, and I chuckled. We’d never had this chance before, to spend time together, like a family. Like brothers. And it was nice… Even if our point of connection was the murder of our father.

I doubted it would last, once the good feelings of our victory wore off, but—for the moment—it was all we had.

“You crashing soon?” Colton asked, looking over at me.

I shook my head. “No, I’m heading out. The Luna ritual. To honor Joss.”

Colton nodded. “Right. That’s a hell of a thing. She went out a hero, though.”

“Yeah, she did,” I said quietly. I peered over at Xavier. “While I’m gone, man, you look after the pack.”

Xavier snorted—a sound half-amused, half-disgusted. “What am I, your Beta now?”

Colton burst out laughing, cuffing Xavier hard on the shoulder. “His Beta!”

I smiled into the darkness. I liked the sound of Colton’s easy laugh.

Xavier pushed Colton’s hand away and gave a long-suffering sigh. “Fine, I’ll watch the sheep while you’re away. But I meant what I said before, Greyson—I’m going to take the pack back. I’m going to challenge you for it.”

“I never doubted you would,” I said without looking over at him. I could feel the intensity of his gaze on me. “It’s in our blood, Xavier.”

He was quiet for a moment, then he raised his beer. “To our blood, then.”

Colton raised his beer. “Our blood!” He smashed his bottle into Xavier’s beer, then mine, and we all drank, draining our bottles.

“Be careful what you wish for, little brother,” I said, looking out at the sky, which was now turning the charcoal grey of pre-dawn.

“What does that mean?” Xavier asked.

I shrugged. “Being Alpha isn’t a walk in the park.”

Xavier looked at me for a moment, then he shrugged, the gesture deliberately casual. “I can handle it.”

There was a lot that was going unsaid between us. Namely, Cali. We both knew it. Colton knew it, too. I could see it in his eyes. But to bring it up now would spoil this strange, suspended moment, and even Colton—subtle as a bag of rocks—didn’t want to do that.

So I just nodded. “I’m sure you could.”

We all leaned back in our seats, our eyes on the brightening sky.

“Can I ask you one thing, Greyson?” Xavier asked, breaking the silence.

“I guess,” I said. My throat felt like sandpaper.

“Was this your plan all along?” He looked over at Colton, then at me. “To protect us, to bring us all together—all of it—in order to kill Silas?”

I wasn’t sure what answer he was looking for. Honestly, I wasn’t even sure what the answer was. So I just shrugged. “He’s dead, we’re alive. That’s all that counts.”

Colton laughed, his chuckle rumbling warmly in the cool morning air. “Ah, that’s Greyson for you. A man of mystery.”

We were quiet for another moment, then Xavier sat up straight and turned to me, his expression somber. “Listen, Greyson, I owe you an apology.”

I looked at him curiously. So did Colton.

“I shouldn’t have left you in that zoo.”

The zoo. I stared at him, and the memory came rushing back. The fury and fear that had coursed through me when Xavier had left me to die in that place. Then, on its heels, the absolute, crushing sadness when I’d realized how much he must have *hated* me to do that.

My throat tightened painfully, and I stood up quickly. “It doesn’t matter. That’s behind us now. Forget it.”

Colton got to his feet too. “All right,” he said, clapping his hands. “Enough of this men’s weekend emotional retreat touchy-feely bullshit. How about we do what werewolves do best, and take a run through the woods?”

Without waiting for an answer from either of us, he tossed his empty beer bottle onto the lawn, climbed onto the porch railing, and leapt off, shifting as he fell so that he landed on four paws as a wolf. Then he threw back his head with an ear-splitting howl.

Xavier and I looked at each other, then—as one—launched over the porch railing and shifted, joining Colton’s howling chorus.

*Three times around the lake. Last one back makes pancakes. No! Waffles!*

Colton started off, heading clockwise around the lake.

*We* can’t *let him win*, Xavier said, mind linking with me, and he and I leapt into action, sprinting to catch up with Colton.

Xavier distracted him by nipping at his back foot while I overtook him, so both Xavier and I managed to outpace him by the time we started our second lap of the lake.

*Bastards, the both of you*, Colton grumbled.

We were sprinting, full out, the cold wind in our fur, the sharp pine-scented air in our lungs. I had never run like this with my brothers before, and I knew I’d remember every second of it for the rest of my life. The freedom, the happiness, and the completeness of feeling like a real family for the first time.

But as we rounded the house and started on the third lap, I slowed my pace a little. I watched as Colton and Xavier ran ahead, leaping and striding smoothly through the trees. They were howling and racing, sleek and powerful, clearly enjoying every second of it. I looked at the house one last time, then at my brothers, before they disappeared into the trees.

Then, resolute, I headed off in the opposite direction, leaving them.

I knew what I had to do.

**Episode 909**

I peeled my eyes open and jumped out of bed early that morning, pushing myself through my morning routine with more cheer and optimism than anyone had any right to feel at six a.m. I couldn’t wait to talk to Big Mac about the spell we’d found in the book last night. After the craziness of last night, it felt like a whole new world of possibilities had opened up. Now that Violet had been able to use the spell book to release all of the ghosts from her pendant, surely with Big Mac’s knowledge and the spell combined, the *due destini* curse could be broken.

I bounded down the stairs, the spell book tucked under my arm, my heart racing with excitement and my mind wracked with terrifying what-ifs.

The fact that—even after all this time, and with a deadline hanging over my head—I still couldn’t choose weighed heavy on my shoulders. But it also proved just how badly I needed to break this curse. I couldn’t make this choice right now, especially not with some otherworldly magic trying to force my hand. I needed to make this decision on my own terms

*And if I don’t find a solution to all of this, I’m going to die—and Xavier and Greyson will go down with me. We can’t waste this chance to fix things.*

I reached the landing and glanced down the hallway and into the living room. Pack members and people who’d joined with us to face Silas were scattered around the pack house, passed out left and right. Considering how hard everyone had partied last night, I wouldn’t be surprised if they were all seriously hungover this morning. I realized then that I was probably the first person in the house awake and ready to face the day.

*Should I stop by Big Mac’s bedroom and see if she’s awake yet?* Then I imagined how she would react if she were *not* awake and mentally prepared to fulfill my request. She’d gotten so upset yesterday. What if she hadn’t quite cooled down yet?

No, it’d be better not to seek her out just yet—at least not without a peace offering of sorts. I turned down the hallway and crept toward the kitchen, careful not to disturb any of the pack members sleeping it off in the living room, or even those curled up on the floor in the hallway.

*I’ll bring her some tea as a show of good faith*… *What kind of herbs do witches even like? Witch hazel, maybe? Wait, is that even a tea?*

I stopped in the kitchen doorway, surprised to find Pip sitting at the kitchen island with a steaming mug in her hand. “Oh. Good morning.”

Pip raised her glass in greeting. “Well, if it isn’t the witch killer.”

“I guess so.” I headed to the kettle on the stove, grabbed it, and began filling it at the sink. “I’m surprised to see you up this early. I thought you’d be sleeping like the others.”

She shook her head. “Couldn’t sleep for long. Perhaps you feel the same way, what with everything you did yesterday. You sure have come a long way since your first barbecue.”

I put the kettle onto the stove to boil, not sure what to say. I knew she’d lost people she cared about last night, and now that the celebrations were over and it was time to face the world without Silas’s shadow hanging over us—and without the people we’d lost—I could understand how rest might not have been easy to come by.

Still, I didn’t like being called “witch killer”. I’d done what I had to do to survive and protect the people I loved. And that wasn’t exactly a nickname I wanted floating around when I was about to ask for Big Mac’s help.

“Um, thanks,” I mumbled, unsure whether or not Pip was being complimentary. I began searching through the cabinet for a witch-appropriate tea. *Sleepytime? No, not first thing in the morning. English breakfast doesn’t seem right, either.* My fingertips hovered over a sachet of chamomile. Maybe it would be nice and soothing and get her ready to fulfill my request?

But that didn’t seem quite right either. I impulsively grabbed a sachet of hibiscus tea along with a mug and tucked the tea inside before turning back to the heating kettle.

As soon as I turned back around, I felt Pip’s eyes on me. Had she been watching me the whole time?

“Is it true that you’re a *due destini* mate?” she asked suddenly. My face must have betrayed my shock at the invasive question, because she put her hands up. “The rumors have been going around since the Lupo finale. And it’s just, I’ve never met one before. Everything says it’s just a story. But I’ve heard that maybe there’s more to it?”

The kettle began to puff out tiny little whistles, a warning before it would go full screech and wake up the entire house. I pulled it off the burner, turned off the stove, and poured some hot water into Big Mac’s mug.

Pip was still there, waiting for my answer. I swallowed. “It’s not a story.”

Then I scurried out of the kitchen before she could ask me anything else.

I didn’t want to be rude to Pip, but I hated being reminded of my curse, hated talking about it and being stared at like I was some kind of sideshow. And really, it wasn’t any of Pip’s business. She wasn’t even in the Redwood pack.

*Now that Silas is gone, is everyone talking about the half-Fae with the* due destini *curse?* I guess that was just more reason to get Big Mac to help me out.

I slowly approached Big Mac’s door and knocked lightly. *Please be awake and please don’t be grumpy*.

Sabine opened the door and smiled. “Oh, Cali. Good morning.”

“Good morning. I brought some tea for Big Mac. Is she awake, by any chance?”

The witch’s voice boomed from behind Mrs. Smith. “It had better not be chamomile! I hate chamomile.”

*Wow. Really dodged a bullet there.*

“It’s hibiscus?” I called back, hoping that flavor wasn’t somehow worse than the dreaded chamomile. *With my luck, she’s allergic to hibiscus*.

Sabine stepped aside, pulling the door open wider to reveal Big Mac sitting on the edge of the mattress, fully dressed and glaring at me. I swallowed roughly.

“Why don’t I leave you two alone?” Sabine said.

“Oh, that’s okay. You can stay!” I insisted.

The witch’s eyebrows rose. “What, are you afraid to talk to me alone?”

“N-not at all!” I said brightly. “It’s just that I could use Mrs. Smith’s support.”

Big Mac gestured me inside. “Let’s get down to business. The tea is nice and all, but I know you want something from me.”

Hesitantly, I stepped into their bedroom, holding out the tea—which Big Mac immediately put down on the nightstand—and then handed over the spell book. “I’m sorry about last night. I don’t want either of you to leave.”

She frowned, looking at the spell book. “How’d you get that?”

“Steinar let me borrow it,” I explained, not wanting to get into an argument.

She glared at me. “Never trust a gargoyle, Cali. Ever.”

I ignored that, opened the book to the curse spell, and showed it to the witch. “Can you use this to break the curse?”

“How did you find this?”

“Steinar suggested it.”

She scoffed. “And what does he know about spells?”

Sabine rubbed Big Mac’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about Steinar, sweetheart. Do you think you can help Cali?”

Big Mac rolled her eyes, huffed out a breath, and read over the spell, mumbling to herself. “This is an ancient spell, and there’s no way of knowing if it can break your curse. It was created to break curses on crops and drought—not a *due destini* curse.”

“Sure, but aren’t spells meant to be interpreted or whatever?” I asked. The witch gave me a look and I huffed. “You know what I mean. Can’t it be updated to this century, somehow?” I had only four days to break this curse. I couldn’t let pedantic concerns get in my way.

Big Mac looked over the spell again and sighed. “I might be able to update it, but Cali, I know what this is about. I don’t think there’s a way to break the *due destini* connection you have with Xavier and Greyson.”

I shook my head. “I’m not asking you to get rid of the *due destini*—just the curse. The black veins, the chest pains, the I’m-going-to-die-if-I-don’t-choose-someone by Halloween.”

“You know it would be a whole lot easier, and certainly safer, if you just choose. Flip a coin. Either way, you end up with a werewolf and the curse will be broken.”

I took a deep breath. “Helpful” advice like that never failed to make me want to scream and tear my hair out, but I didn’t think Big Mac would be too keen on helping me if I blew up at her. “I would choose if I could,” I said carefully. “But it’s not that easy.”

“And neither is trying to use an ancient spell to solve a problem like yours.” Big Mac shut the book with a snap. “The problem with you is that you’re just a spoiled brat. You’re whining because you have to choose a mate. You have two who both want you. Most people would die to be in your position.”

My chest tightened at her words. It was easy for her to say that—she wasn’t the one who had to live with the choice. And I didn’t think people would exactly be *dying* to be in my position, especially since I was four days away from being killed by this stupid curse if I couldn’t break it.

“How can you say that?” I demanded, feeling some of my control slip from my grasp. “Would you be so callous if you felt the same way about someone else as do you about Mrs. Smith? What if you were forced to choose? How easy do you think things would be then?” There was a beat as the witch stared at me, considering my words, and I pressed on. “But if all you’re going to do is attack me for asking for help, then maybe I need to find another witch.”

Big Mac’s eyes widened at this. “Hey—”

I cut her off. “Are you going to help me?”

**Episode 910**

XAVIER

I stepped out of the shower and quickly toweled off. I wanted to catch Colton before he left to Montana or wherever the fuck he’d been and give him a proper goodbye. Even though he kept things with Maya close to his chest, I knew she had to be important to him, considering he’d stayed away from the pack for so long to help her. Which meant that he’d put a lot on the line to stay and face Silas alongside Greyson and me.

Wiping the steam off the mirror, I glanced at my reflection. The bruises from the battle had already faded—no surprise there. Everything could have been so much worse. Guess my mom had been right—it had taken all of Silas’s sons, not just me and Colton, or me and Greyson, to finally defeat him.

I thought back to last night, after the battle, when Colton and Greyson and I had raced around the lake. I hated to admit it, but it had actually been a lot of fun racing with my brothers. Colton had managed to be just short of too obnoxious, and Greyson had left before we’d fallen back into old habits or, worse, one of us had brought up Cali. Honestly the whole thing had been kind of perfect.

And now Greyson was off to honor Joss. It was absolutely the right thing to do, which made it more than a little surprising that Greyson was the one doing it. He still existed in that tainted corner of my mind alongside the memory of our father, and it was all too easy for me to remember every terrible thing Greyson had ever done to me or someone I loved.

Doing the right thing definitely didn’t seem like his MO, but his decision to put me in charge of the pack while he was away… Well, even I couldn’t argue with that being a good decision. Maybe the best one he’d made since becoming Alpha.

With a sigh, I pulled myself away from the mirror and went into my bedroom to change. I didn’t want to miss Colton.

As I pushed open Colton’s bedroom door, I realized that I’d been overly optimistic about the likelihood of my brother getting out of bed at a half-decent hour. He was passed out on top of his bed, not even under the covers.

*Some things never change.*

I rolled my eyes, crossed the distance between us, and shoved Colton off the bed. “Wake up dickface!”

His body hit the floor with a loud *thump* that sent reverberations across the floor. If anyone else was up this early, they were sure to have both heard and felt that one. I smirked as Colton jolted upright with a gasp. “What—the—hell?” he gasped out.

I leaned over him, allowing my lips to stretch into a shit-eating grin that I knew would piss him off. “Rise and shine, bro.”

He reached for me, no doubt to try to do some bodily harm, but I easily stepped out of the way. “Not a morning person, huh?”

His glare could have melted stone. “You’re such a douche, you know that?”

“You’re just pissed because I won the race last night.”

“That’s only because *I* was drunk and Greyson dropped out halfway through.”

I shrugged. “Come on, Colton. I’ve seen you drunk—all the different kinds of drunk. And you were only mildly tipsy last night. Just admit it—I’m the best.”

Colton leaned back, letting his head rest on the carpet as he calmed down from the shock of being essentially tossed out of bed. “Nah. If that ego gets any bigger, you’re not gonna be able to fit through doors anymore.”

I took a seat on the edge of his mattress. “So you’re really heading out today?”

“You’re not gonna miss me, are you?” he teased. “Want me to stay, bro?” He grabbed a pillow that had fallen on the floor and flung it at me.

I caught it. “Not at all. You’re way too obnoxious to deal with on a day-to-day basis. But that doesn’t mean I want you to forget about checking in from time to time.”

“Oh, so you do miss me.” Without even looking at him, I could hear the smile in his voice.

I slung the pillow back down at him. “You’re easier to take the farther away you are. Give Maya my regards.”

He laughed and finally got off his ass. He pulled on a sweatshirt and started grabbing all his things to take back with him. “Fine. Keep all your feelings locked inside like always. So, are you ready to be Alpha for a day?”

I smirked. “It’s a good warm-up, I guess. Now that Silas is gone, I’m going to be the Redwood Alpha.”

My brother paused, his eyebrows raising. “Yeah, about that… so, what? Another Lupo Finale then? What’s with you two? Why not let Greyson be the Alpha? Who wants all that responsibility? I didn’t think that was your scene anymore.”

Colton wasn’t wrong, necessarily. The last time I’d taken charge, I’d found it irritating trying to keep the pack in line and dealing with all of their petty complaints and navigating the politics of being Alpha—especially considering who my father was, and the history that the other packs had with him. I *hadn’t* wanted to be Alpha anymore, and then having a human mate on top of that had complicated everything. It had all seemed like too much, and even though I’d hated Greyson with everything I had, there had been some release in not having to bear that responsibility anymore.

But now everything felt different. Silas was gone. Cali was no longer just my human mate; she was a fierce half-Fae I’d fought tooth and nail to be with. And ever since I’d told Greyson I was going to challenge him, I’d known I was going to win and become the Alpha.

“Well, we’ll have to see how things go when Greyson gets back,” I said simply.

Colton snorted as we headed downstairs together. The house was still mostly quiet, but I could hear a few people bustling around in the kitchen. “Oh, I’m sure we will.”

“You wouldn’t understand. You’ve never wanted to be an Alpha.”

He nodded. “And I still don’t.”

“Good. Saves me the trouble of beating your ass.”

Colton rolled his eyes. “In your dreams, bro.”

We stopped in the kitchen so Colton could say a few goodbyes and grab some snacks for the road. Mrs. Smith was in the kitchen, and she gave Colton a tight hug.

“Don’t be a stranger,” she whispered.

“I won’t. I’m gonna miss your white chocolate mochas. You need to franchise,” he said with a smile.

I followed Colton out to the car and watched passively as he threw his stuff into the back seat. He turned to face me. “So what’cha gonna do about Cali?”

I sighed. I’d known this question was coming. “I don’t *have* to do anything. She’s going to choose me.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re feeling confident. Still, if things don’t work out, you’re always welcome to come out my way.”

I didn’t dignify that with a response, instead pulling him into a hug as Cali, Lola, Jay, Violet, and some of the others hurried out to say goodbye.

We watched as Colton peeled out of the driveway in his old car, kicking dust into the air. I hated to admit it, but I was going to miss my twin brother. Even if he was a totally annoying dick, when the time had come for him to step up, he had. He always did.

Cali nudged my shoulder. “How are you doing?”

I smiled and put an arm around her. “I say good riddance.”

“You’re a terrible liar. Why can’t you just admit that you love Colton?”

“Never,” I scoffed. Loving him wasn’t the issue. I knew I loved him, and Colton knew it too. We didn’t need big emotional displays to show it. I turned to the others.

*It’s time to get my Alpha on.*

“Thank you, everyone, for joining in the fight against Silas, but it’s time for the other pack members to return to their pack houses.”

“What?” a Blue Blood pack member gasped. “But we’ve only just started celebrating!”

I shook my head. “And you can save that energy for Halloween. I want my pack house cleaned up.”

There was more grumbling, but Cali took my arm. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

I nodded and she pulled me aside. God, she was beautiful. Now that my father was gone, I felt like I had a new lease on life. We had all the time in the world to savor each other—but that wasn’t what this was about. I had to force myself to listen to her instead of ogling her.

“… and Big Mac agreed to use the spell to try to break the curse,” she was saying. “It’s not a perfect fit, of course, but I’m hopeful that she can tailor it to fit our specific needs.”

“Wait, what?” I frowned. “She’s gonna try to break the curse?”

She nodded. “I need your help. Big Mac says everyone affected by the curse has to be present when she casts the spell.”

“So me and Greyson? But he’s gone.”

Her eyes widened. “Already? I didn’t realize he was leaving so soon.”

I blew out a breath. Some of the joy of being free of my father and finally taking back control of the Redwood pack was fading. We were back to curses and choices, like nothing had changed.

“Cali, you don’t need a spell to break the curse,” I said. “Why can’t you just choose me?”

**Episode 911**

VIOLET

It was sad to say goodbye to Colton, especially after it seemed like I’d just gotten him back. He and Xavier were the big brothers I’d never had, and they’d been there for me after Lilac had died, had given me a sense of family that I’d needed more than anything else.

But Colton had honored our family by coming back and fighting for us, by risking his life to defeat his father, and now it was time for him to go back to Maya and the family he was creating with her. It would be selfish to ask him to put his life on hold for me.

Besides, I had Charlie now. A mate. And I still had Xavier, too. I still had a family.

I was just glad that Charlie had gotten to meet Colton, despite the less than desirable circumstances—and Colton’s uncanny ability to walk in on us when things were just starting to heat up. I smiled at the embarrassing memory as I headed back inside to look for Charlie.

It felt like the world was blooming with new possibilities. That Rogue back in Minnesota was dead, our tracks had been covered so the MIB wouldn’t come after us, Silas had been defeated, and, most importantly, Charlie had recognized me as his mate.

We could finally be together and enjoy the moment. Just live in our happiness without waiting for the other shoe to drop. I wanted to show him the entire pack house, and the lake. I wanted to run through the forest with him, race him, and show him all my favorite places in the area. Maybe even discover some new favorites together. I wanted to show him how great life was here in Oregon and, of course, just spend some much-needed time with my mate.

I hoped he still felt the same way about me. Now that the battle was over and the rush had passed, I hoped he still didn’t have any regrets about coming here and joining my pack. And if he did, I hoped I could change his mind, get him to come around—just like he’d eventually come around to leaving Minnesota and his friends and Sandi behind.

This was our time. I knew it in my bones. We were safe, we were together, and we were going to be so, so happy.

I found him lying on his stomach on my bed, his laptop open in front of him. “Hey.” He smiled when I walked in. “Colton gone?”

I nodded, frowning just a little bit. “I’m gonna miss him. He’s like a brother to me. Him and Xavier both.”

Charlie held out his hand, and I took it. He gently pulled me onto the mattress next to him and kissed the side of my head. “I’m sure he’ll be back.”

I shook my head. “Maybe, but his mate didn’t come. I feel like he’s probably going back to her.” From what I’d heard about Colton and Maya’s relationship, things weren’t exactly smooth sailing, but I couldn’t imagine Colton abandoning his mate to come live here with the pack.

“Then he’ll come visit, or we’ll go visit them.”

I blinked. Had he just said *we* would visit them? As in, Charlie and me? Together? Making plans for the future? “Do you really mean that?”

He nodded. “Of course. He’s family, right? He won’t stop being family to you just because he’s a couple states away.”

I felt a smile tug at my lips as my body relaxed, sinking into his warmth and love. He was so, so perfect. What had I ever done to deserve a mate like him? My gaze slid from his warm, loving expression to the computer screen. “What are you looking at?”

“Oh.” He sat up, bringing his laptop with him to show me what he’d been working on. “I’ve been doing some research, and I think I can transfer all my credits to the local college. Plus, they have a decent lacrosse team.” He grinned, his eyes bright with excitement.

“That’s great,” I said as my brain slowly processed all this new information. I hadn’t realized he’d been *that* serious about returning to school, but apparently it was a bigger priority than I’d thought. At least he was looking into local schools—because that could only mean one thing. He wanted to stay, to be with me.

I nodded at the laptop. “Can that wait for a minute? I want to give you a tour.”

Charlie shut the laptop and gently pulled me onto his lap. My stomach did somersaults when his lips, warm and soft, brushed against mine. “You can take me anywhere,” he breathed.

I grinned. Part of me wanted to see where things could go, here on my bed with nobody to rudely barge in and interrupt us… But I really did want to show him around the pack house and the surrounding land.

I regretfully pulled away from his mouth. “Why don’t I give you a tour outside first? It’s such a nice day.”

“That sounds great. I didn’t really get to see it much last night. And with such a good-looking tour guide, how could anything go wrong?” His eyes sparkled.

My grin widened. Maybe after I showed him the lake, we could take some time for each other. Maybe even go skinny dipping…

“Come on then, before we spend all day in bed.” I climbed off his lap and tugged him to the door, despite his protests.

As we headed outside, I mulled over my tour plan. We could start with a run around the property and then finish up at the lake? That might be a good place to cool off… or heat up, depending on how things went. Yeah, that was a good plan.

I stepped off the front porch, tearing my eyes away from my mate—and froze. Big Mac was coming our way, and she did *not* look happy. Not that she ever looked particularly joyful. Instinctively, I grabbed my pendant.

The witch’s eyes landed on me, and then flicked down to the pendant in my hand before jumping back up to my face. Her eyebrows lifted, and I jumped in before she could say anything.

“The ghosts are gone!” I blurted out. “I let them free last night, so the pendant isn’t of any use to you anymore. And I’m not going to—”

She held up a hand. “I don’t want your pendant, Violet.”

Relief plowed into me, with confusion hot on its heels. “What?” I blinked. Since when was she not interested in my pendant? Last night it had seemed like she wasn’t going to take no for an answer. I’d half-expected that I’d end up running away from her and hiding it in the woods somewhere to keep her witchy hands off my family heirloom. “You don’t want it?”

“Well, I might want it later,” she conceded. “It holds a lot of magic, most of which you wouldn’t understand and could land you in some seriously big trouble if you misused it.”

Wait, what? Was she saying she’d ask me for the pendant when she needed it? Or was this just some kind of lecture on responsibility? I shook my head slowly. “I have no idea how to use it, and I don’t want to learn. The ghosts were the ones who decided to move in. I didn’t have anything to do with that. But now that they’re gone, I just want to wear it. It reminds me of Lilac.”

Charlie reached out and squeezed the hand that wasn’t clutching my necklace.

“Well, that’s all well and good, but I don’t need any more trouble from werewolves, so make sure you keep an eye on it. And if you ever need to keep it safe, come to me. Don’t trust it to anyone.” Big Mac threw a dubious look at Charlie. “Not even college boy here. Got it?”

I grimaced at that last bit. Charlie was my mate, while Big Mac was a scary witch with her own agenda. Like hell was I going to trust her before I trusted Charlie. But she didn’t need to know that, and I really, really wanted her to leave us alone before she ruined our tour. “Okay, fine.”

After a long beat in which Big Mac stared us both down, she finally headed back into the house.

I let out a sigh. “I guess that went better than expected.”

Charlie chuckled. “You really didn't know it had magic?”

“I swear I didn’t. And I’m sure my parents didn’t know either, or they would have told me.”

My mate gently squeezed my hand. “So how about that tour?”

I was all too happy to oblige. I walked him around the house, describing the many updates it had compared to the pack house we’d been living in before.

“Wow,” Charlie said. “How did you find this place?”

Grief hit me square in the chest, and it took a moment to find the right words. “Joss found it,” I finally said. She had been a better Luna than any of us deserved.

But now wasn’t the time to dwell on sadness. I took Charlie’s hand. “There’s a great place with a view of the lake and the woods. It’s not very far away. You’re going to love it.”

“Can we shift sometime and run around?” he asked as we walked to the lookout.

I grinned. “That would be fun. And now we don’t have to worry about Silas and Rogues.”

“Who do all those cars in the driveway belong to?”

“Pack members, probably. I think a few of them are Xavier’s.”

“Do you think he’d let me borrow one sometime?” Charlie asked.

“I’d have to ask him, but why? Where are you planning on going?”

He winked. “How about a surprise date?”

I laughed. “If Xavier refuses your request, I’ll kill him.”

Charlie’s phone started ringing and he pulled it out of his pocket. “Oh, it’s my dad. Hold on.”

As soon as he answered, his expression shifted into confusion and then anger. “I already told you! I don't want to come home.”

**Episode 912**

“Argh! Why does he have to be such an asshole?” I snapped, storming back and forth across my bedroom. Artemis sat on the edge of my bed, blinking sleepily and listening very supportively to my concerns, I was sure.

I’d come downstairs after talking with Big Mac about breaking my curse, so sure that Xavier would be excited for us to no longer have this curse hanging over our heads. And instead he’d just gone all dominant and pushy, just like he’d been before we’d broken up, and asked me *that* question.

“I mean, I can’t believe Xavier asked me why I don’t just choose him!” I continued. “Like it isn’t killing me—*literally* *killing me*—to have to make this choice. Like I’ve just been casually examining my options and waiting till *now* to tell him I’ve chosen him. It’s not that easy, Xavier! How many times do I have to explain it to him?”

When he’d asked me the question, I’d been so upset and speechless that I’d left without another word. Part of me had wanted to push back, to remind him how much his pushiness hurt me when I was trying very hard to make a choice that would change all of our lives, but I could tell from the look in his eye that he wasn’t in the mood to talk things out, especially not with so many eyes on us.

So I’d left him in the dust, woken up Artemis, dragged her into my room, and now here we were. She yawned loudly. “I wouldn’t take it personally.”

I stopped and spun to face her. “Really? He’s literally judging me for not making a decision the way he wants me to. How is that not personal?”

“Maybe he’s just frustrated,” she suggested. “It’s like you’ve put Xavier on a shelf, and all he can do is sit around and hope you’ll pick him. Besides, you told me that Greyson told you to choose Xavier. Xavier wants you to choose Xavier. And you admitted you love Xavier. So choose Xavier. If you don’t, you’re just being selfish.”

My jaw dropped. There it was again. *Oh Cali, just choose one. You’re so lucky to have two powerful, handsome men vying for you. Blah, blah, blah.* Nobody understood what it was like to hold two equally wonderful options in your hands, options that you loved deeply, and know that in the end you could only choose one.

And the other one? They’d be alone and heartbroken. Maybe forever. Sure, I could, in theory, choose one brother and ride off into the sunset with him and live happily ever after. But what about my other mate? What about the man who didn’t get a happy ending? How could I be happy—hell, how could I live with myself—knowing that I was the one who’d caused all that hurt?

I drew in a deep breath, trying to keep myself from losing my shit at my sister. She was just trying to help. She was offering advice. Because she loved me and wanted me to be happy.

So why didn’t that make me feel even a tiny bit better? “That’s what Big Mac told me. She said I was being a selfish brat.”

Artemis considered this for a moment. “As much as I hate to admit it, I agree with her.”

I blinked back tears. “Aren’t I allowed to be a little selfish here?” I demanded. “This is my *life*, Artemis. It’s maybe the most important decision I’ll ever make. Aren’t I allowed to think about it, to take the time—even if it makes me a selfish brat—to come to terms with this impossible choice?”

A crease appeared between her eyebrows. “But if they’re both your mates, and you love them both, then won’t you be happy regardless?”

That tiny thread of control finally snapped. “I don’t want to be forced to choose! I want to make this choice in my own time, my own way, and this curse is forcing me to make a choice now. I want to choose with my own free will. What part of that is so damn hard to understand?”

My sister sighed. “Either way, curse or no curse, you have to make this choice. You can’t outrun it forever. That’s the *due destini* thing.”

Fury pulsed through me, and for a moment I thought I might explode my entire bedroom if it meant I didn’t have to have this conversation anymore—

And then there was a knock at the door.

“Who is it?” Artemis asked.

“It’s Steinar,” he called through the door.

I stomped over to my bedroom door and wrenched it open. “What do you want?”

The gargoyle blinked at me, clearly shocked. “I, um, I’m sorry to bother you, but I just heard from Hypatia. She’s… Well, she’s very displeased that the book has not yet been returned to her. She’s gotten rather impatient, and wants the books returned sooner rather than later.” He swallowed roughly. “She has even threatened to come and get them herself, believe it or not.”

“Great.” I sighed. A pissed off magical librarian was threatening to come to Oregon and take the spell book I desperately needed. Who knew what kind of power she had? With my luck, Hypatia could make Demeter look like Glinda the Good Witch. Plus, she was probably going to penalize me for not only stealing the books, but making her schlep all the way out here to return them. I could only imagine the hell she had in store for people who took her precious books.

“I just need it for a few more days,” I assured him. “We’re almost finished with it.”

“Are all witches such a pain?” Artemis asked, sprawled out on my bed. “First that golden-armed witch, and now this angry librarian. Yes, we took the books, but that just means we’re reading them! Isn’t that the point of a library? To offer information for other people to partake of?”

I thought this was a great speech, but Steinar just shrugged. “I don’t know. Hypatia can be… challenging. You don’t want to cross her. Ever.”

“Could we not make an enemy for five minutes?” Artemis grumbled to herself.

“So, what should I tell Hypatia?” the gargoyle pressed.

“Um, tell her she’ll have it back after Halloween—if everything goes as planned, we don’t need it anymore,” I said. “Tell her I’ll pay double the fine if she can just let us have it for a few more days. I mean, we’ve kept it safe. Mostly.”

Steinar gave me some side-eye at that last comment, but he nodded. “I’ll do what I can, but know that I can’t make any promises. If Hypatia wants that book back badly enough to come get it herself, I won’t be able to do anything to help you.”

Well if that wasn’t the exact opposite of comforting… “Thank you, Steinar.”

He headed back down the hallway, and I closed the door behind him and slumped against it with a sigh. I’d thought once the battle was over I’d have more time to process everything and maybe even—god forbid—be able to relax for a change. It was looking more and more like that wasn’t going to be an option after all.

Artemis sat up. “You know, for a gargoyle, he’s kind of cute. I mean, in a stone-ish kind of way,” she quickly amended. “And for a guy who spends all his time in a library… But back to the problem at hand: *due destini*.”

I slid down to the floor with a groan. “Please don’t remind me. This whole thing is so annoying! *Due destini*, the curse, and Big Mac’s typical obscure warning that the spell might not work the way I want. How will we know if we never try?”

“Well, she did agree to help, right? So maybe you should just take a moment and calm down.”

I glared at her but pulled in a slow, deep breath. “She also said she’s going to want something in exchange. How much more does she want from me? My firstborn?”

“Oh, she’d better not. I want full aunt privileges, and no witch is going to deprive me of that.”

She said it in such certain terms, like it was a sure thing. I cracked a smile for the first time since I’d spoken to Xavier. *Artemis would be such a wild aunt. She’d probably give my child a whip for their first birthday present.*

“Maybe I could use my mind control on Big Mac to make her do the spell and forget about you owing her anything,” Artemis suggested, her lips quirking in such a way that I knew she was joking.

I decided not to encourage that train of thought. “No matter when or who I choose, I’m going to hurt someone.”

“And by not choosing, you’re hurting them both,” Artemis reminded me. “You’re not allowing either of them to move on with their lives.”

I sat up, a new possibility rolling through my mind. “Then what if I did choose? Could you make it so that the other guy forgets that he ever loved me?”

**Episode 913**

ARTEMIS

My sister had lost her mind.

That was the only thing that could explain why she was looking at me with hope and excitement in her eyes, like the stupid half-formed thought she’d just spat out was actually a good idea.

I’d thrown out the mind control thing as a joke, and I’d thought she understood that. But maybe she hadn’t? Or maybe she was so desperate for any small thing to make this choice easier for her that she was willing to actually ask me to tap into my powers—powers I’d only recently discovered, inherited from the father I’d never met, who had allegedly been a member of a powerful Dark Fae family. Cali might have been torn between two men she loved, but if I went back to the Fae world, I would be torn between two families, two cultures, and two kinds of magic on opposite sides of a seemingly endless war. Picking between two hot guys seemed easy and childish, by contrast.

“Artemis?” Cali asked softly. Her eyes pleaded with me to understand.

But I didn’t. Not really. Not the way she so clearly wanted me to. Honestly, if I had been in her shoes I probably would have flipped a coin, or given each of my prospective mates a difficult task to complete. I would have made sure the choice was simple.

I wasn’t exactly comfortable talking about all of this, or even *considering* using my powers on Greyson, or Xavier. Greyson was my friend, and if Xavier caught on to any plan—no matter how terrible it truly was—to erase his memories of Cali, I was pretty sure he’d try to kill me just to be safe.

And, quite frankly, my life had been complicated enough *before* I’d learned about this powerful ability. I shook my head with a grimace. “Cali,” I said. “You know I don’t have control of my mind powers. How can you ask me to use them on someone you love? It would be too dangerous, and too much of a responsibility for me to bear if something went sideways.” I sighed. “Not to mention it seems wrong, doesn’t it? To make someone love you or forget you—to force them to feel things they wouldn’t normally feel.”

Maybe it was the Dark Fae blood running through my veins, or maybe it was simply a product of my upbringing, fighting tooth and nail for survival every day of my life, but out of the two of us, Cali was usually the one who worried about stuff like that. Morals and right and wrong and good and evil. I didn’t like that the pressure of making this choice was putting her in a position to be reminded—by me, of all people—that she was better than this.

“I get that,” Cali conceded, still slumped against her closed bedroom door. “But wouldn’t it be okay to use your powers to protect someone else from being hurt? If you could keep that person from remembering the worst thing that ever happened to them?”

My lips twitched. *She must have no idea how arrogant she sounds, thinking that being rejected by her would be the worst thing that ever happened to either of those men.* But I schooled my expression. All of this was coming from a place of love, no matter how problematic.

“I’m not so sure about that. You might think you’re doing them a kindness by trying to protect them from all of that, but heartache, pain, disappointment, anger—they’re all part of life,” I said. “They make us who we are. By taking those things away from someone, you could be keeping them from the experiences that will shape their lives for the better. Besides, you don’t want the curse to force you to choose—if you went ahead with this plan, wouldn’t you sort of be doing the same thing? Forcing either Xavier or Greyson to forget you?”

I watched Cali process my response, and I could tell from her expression that she knew I was right.

“I guess you’re right,” she said. “Well, maybe the spell will work and I won’t have to resort to Fae magic, either way.”

I certainly hoped so. Because there was no way I was going to use my powers on either of those werewolves. “Your position sucks, no matter how you look at it. Now, what are we supposed to do about that spell?”

Before Cali could answer, there was another knock at the door.

“Who is it?” Cali called.

“It’s Astrid and Torin!”

She opened the door to let them in. Torin pointed at me. “Oh, there you are. Are you going to come back with us?”

I blinked. “Back?”

“Oh, sorry. We just assumed that you were planning to return to the Fae world,” Astrid said.

Cali looked at me, her eyes wide. If I wasn’t mistaken, she looked a little bit betrayed by the possibility of me leaving her now. “Wait, you’re leaving?” she asked. “We never talked about it…”

I ignored my sister and met Astrid and Torin’s eyes. “I’m honestly not sure,” I confessed. The same question had been hanging over me since Silas had been defeated. I’d explored the human world a bit, I’d met my birth mother, I’d helped my sister countless times, and I’d helped the werewolves defeat one of the most powerful monsters I’d ever encountered. What now? Had my purpose in the human world been served? Or was there more to see? “I left the Fae world because everything I had going for me there had fallen apart. No more Kollector, no more work. And I’ve barely explored the human world…”

“It’s not safe to stay away for too long,” Astrid reminded me.

“I know,” I said. “But I still feel like I have time to decide.”

Cali nodded, looking relieved to hear that I wasn’t in a rush to return to my world. “Our mom was okay for a really long time before she got sick. Years, even. I don’t think there’s any need to rush.”

“Wait.” Torin’s eyes brightened. “Does that mean we have time to go to a mall?”

I blinked.

“Huh?” Astrid asked.

“It’s a place where humans go to buy stuff,” he explained.

“Oh. Like a market?” I asked. “Big deal. We have plenty of those in the Fae world.”

“But human malls are different. At least, that’s what Lola told me. You can buy anything there.”

Oh, well wasn’t that intriguing. “Can I buy a horse?”

“No, you cannot buy a horse at a mall,” Cali said.

“Oh. Well then I don’t see the point of it.”

“I think we should all go and see for ourselves!” Torin said.

And I thought Torin was just a tad too perky—and naïve—for his own good. I honestly didn’t understand how he hadn’t already been killed or eaten by something in the Fae world. That kind of bright-eyed innocence didn’t tend to last long there. If there truly was such a thing as a mall, then it probably had a dark side. From my experience, everything did.

But on the other hand, maybe this could be the excuse I needed to learn to drive a car. What better excuse than taking the Fae who had fought so valiantly in the war against Silas to explore the human world at a mall? Hmm…

“Why don’t you guys mull it over for a few days? Say, till after Halloween?” Cali suggested. “And then you can decide if a mall is something you’d really be interested in seeing. Right now, we have more serious things to deal with.”

“Okay.” Astrid sighed, clearly disappointed. “Torin, let’s go ask Lola about the barbecue.”

“What barbecue?” Cali asked.

Torin shrugged, smiling. “No clue.”

“Truth be told, we’re not entirely sure what a barbecue *is*,” Astrid confessed. “But we heard Lola and Jay talking about it earlier. Maybe we can help them with… whatever they need.”

“Your friends are so nice!” Torin gushed.

And then Astrid pulled him away. I watched them go, a new set of questions on the tip of my tongue. I turned to Cali. “What *is* a barb—”

She cut me off. “So if you don’t want to help me by using your Fae powers, will you help me collect the things Big Mac needs for the spell?”

Oh. Back to that. I wasn’t even allowed to ask a simple question about human world culture.

All right then.

I shrugged noncommittally. Foraging for spell ingredients wasn’t really my thing. Cali might not have the full wealth of my powers, but she could certainly handle collecting a few herbs on her own. Especially since she was clearly single-minded in her focus right now. She wasn’t going to be any fun to be around until this curse breaking thing was put to rest.

“Ugh, fine.” Cali groaned. “I’ll do it myself.” She headed out of her room, and I allowed her to stomp down the hallway and then waited until I heard her feet on the staircase before leaving her room. Maybe I could find Rishika and talk about her fighting techniques. That would be a very entertaining way to spend a few hours.

I was pretty sure Rishika would take the time to tell me about barbecues, too.

I stood up, about to head down the hallway to search for Rishika, but then I noticed Ravi creeping down the hallway, looking over his shoulder several times to make sure there was no one else around. Then he slipped into Greyson’s room.

*Huh*. *That’s weird. Greyson’s not around right now.*

So what was Ravi up to?

**Episode 914**

LOLA

My wolf wouldn’t stop howling at me.

“Come on, you stupid bitch,” I hissed under my breath as I curled my body forward. I’d lost count of how many crunches I’d done. Somewhere above seventy but below a hundred, and still that need to move, to act, to *shift* was pulsing beneath my skin, snapping at me and scratching at the walls of my mind.

*What if I just shifted and went for a run, really quick? It wouldn’t take long, and nobody would need to know. I’d be out and back again faster than you can say “Benedict Cumberbatch makes a sexy dragon”…*

I lurched upward, ignoring my muscles, which ached with the strenuous activity but still seemed to be begging for more. So I started another round of burpees. After that, maybe I’d do some jumping jacks, some push-ups, some lunges, and another round of crunches. I was giving myself the workout of my life, but it just wasn’t anywhere near the workout my body was begging for.

I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that shifting was all it would take to make these ugly feelings go away. I’d feel better; I’d feel in control. My wolf would stop snarling at me and my muscles would be singing, full of that primal energy I couldn’t seem to get enough of.

*No!* I shook myself, then actually slapped myself. “Ouch.” I winced. No, I couldn’t shift. Not after everything that had happened, not after promising Jay I’d be more careful. He deserved better than a mate as out of control as I was, and I was going to be the mate he deserved if it killed me. And this wasn’t forever. I only needed to keep it together for four more days. And then Halloween would be here and we’d finally have a solution—one way or the other.

*Just four more days. Four sunsets. Ninety-six hours. You can keep it together for four more days.*

And the working out *was* helping a little bit. It wasn’t easing the desperation that hummed through my blood, but it was taking the edge off. Besides, I knew I needed to be strong AF if I was going to hold onto my wolf through that spell, and—regardless of how sweetly Jay had assured me I’d be his mate no matter what—there was no way in hell I was coming out of that spell without my wolf.

Especially not after seeing Greyson’s wolf being ripped out of him in battle. The thought of losing my wolf like he’d almost lost his was almost too much for me to handle. And he was Greyson—super strong, full-blooded Alpha Greyson. If that had been tough for him… Well, I’d just have to make sure I was ready.

I didn’t want to think about the alternative.

My heart was racing and sweat was running down every inch of skin by the time I was done with the burpees. I moved on to the jumping jacks without stopping.

Jay, for his seemingly endless love and patience, didn’t understand. He’d assured me that he’d love me no matter what, but what he failed to see was that that wasn’t a promise he could really make. There was no telling what losing my wolf would do to our mate bond, or my place in the pack.

And if I was being honest with myself, I didn’t know if I’d want to stay with the pack if I lost my wolf. All I wanted was to repair my connection with her, to change it from a sick, desperate fix and find some harmony. I loved my wolf. She was part of me—maybe the best part. There was absolutely nothing like her, and no human could ever understand what it was like to have a wolf.

I didn’t want to think about living without her. Jay or not, I wouldn’t feel like I belonged with the pack if I didn’t have her with me. I probably wouldn’t feel like I belonged with Jay, either—no matter how loving and accepting he was.

*Maybe if I do end up losing my wolf in all this, I could convince one of the other pack members to just kill me. Or go pick a fight with another pack.*

I grimaced at the thought. Okay, maybe that was a little dramatic, but the thought of living without the other half of me was beyond terrifying. I transitioned from jumping jacks to lunges, pushing myself harder and faster so that, for one brief moment, I couldn’t hear my wolf howling over the burning pain of my muscles.

Yep, this was what I was gonna do for the next four days. This was how I was gonna keep my wolf: sheer muscle power.

My thighs were screaming by the time I moved into another set of push-ups. I was ten push-ups in before sweat trickled down my face and into my eyes.

“Dammit,” I groaned, wiping it away. How was I gonna keep this up for three more days?

And what if I somehow managed it, and it still wasn’t enough?

I needed to talk to someone about this. Maybe Cali could be my sounding board. God knows, I’d done the same for her enough times to deserve a few minutes of her attention.

Lucky me, the half-Fae herself walked out of the house at just that moment, carrying a basket under one arm and heading out across the lawn. I hurried after her, my muscles simultaneously begging for relief and pleading for the one thing I refused to give them.

“Hey, Cali!” I called. “What are you doing?”

She barely glanced over her shoulder at me and didn’t stop walking. “I have to collect everything Big Mac needs to do the spell to break the *due destini* curse.”

Something in her tone made my hackles raise, but I brushed it off. *Down, wolfie.* I followed after her. “Do you think you can spare a minute?” I asked. “I have a real problem to figure out, and I could use your help.”

She scoffed and spun around. “And you think I don’t? This curse is *literally* killing me, Lola—and everyone I love.”

I frowned. “Hey, you’re not the only one here with problems. I could become a plain old human and lose the person I love. My *mate*,” I added, though I wasn’t sure if the clarification was for her benefit or mine.

“That sounds pretty peachy, compared to *dying*.”

My wolf snarled in my ear, and I took a deep breath. Just because Cali was being a little bitchy, that wasn’t an excuse to rip her throat out… Right?

I shook myself. “I’m not saying it is or isn’t. What I’m saying is…” I took a deep breath. “What I’m saying is that we both have problems and when that’s happened in the past, we’ve always listened to each other. No matter what, we always took the time to talk—”

“I don’t have time!” Cali snapped. “If I don’t break this curse by Halloween, I’ll be dead.”

“Everything isn’t always just about *you*, Cali! You didn’t used to be like this.”

She scowled at me, adjusting the basket on her hip. Oh, I definitely had her attention now. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

My wolf was going wild inside me, howling and snarling and scratching at the inside of my mind, desperate to be loosed on this new source of antagonism. I took another breath. “I don’t want to fight, but the truth is, you’ve changed. Ever since you came back from the Fae world, you’ve been different.”

“And you haven’t? Ever since we came here, all you’ve cared about is shifting.”

I scoffed. “You’re not a werewolf. You wouldn’t understand.”

“I wanted to be one!” she snapped. “And now apparently it might be impossible.”

My body was tense as I fought against every instinct that begged, pleaded, *commanded* me to shift. “Sure, but wanting to be a werewolf isn’t the same as actually being one.”

“You think I don’t know that?”

“Honestly, your head has been so far up your own ass lately, I wasn’t sure.”

Cali’s lips twisted into a snarl. “Why don’t you just go shift if it’s so great? Go run off into the woods and leave me the hell alone—you’ve gotten pretty good at that lately.”

My jaw dropped. She *knew* I was trying to keep things under control. She knew how hard this was for me. “You little—”

“Hey!” Jay called to us as he rushed over. I hadn’t realized how loud our voices must have gotten. “What the heck is going on?” he demanded when he reached us. “Why are two best friends locked in a screaming match?”

Cali nodded toward me. “She started it.”

“I did *not!* You did. All I did was dare to ask you for a little help!”

“Okay, maybe you guys can back up a little bit and explain what’s going on,” Jay said in the voice he only ever used when he was trying to calm me down.

I turned on him. “Why are you taking her side?”

“What?” He held his hands up. “I’m only trying to help!”

“Well maybe I don’t need your help!” I turned back to Cali. “And I’m sure as shit not getting it from you!”

Jay stepped between us. “Lola, come inside. We can talk about this.”

But it was too late. My pulse was thrumming, my body was tensing, and my wolf had broken through all the meager protections I’d set up. We were past the point of no return.

“Get out of my way!” I snarled, shoving Jay aside. And then I shifted and lunged at Cali.

**Episode 915**

Lola had lost her fucking mind.

I shrieked as she pounced on me, sending us both hurtling to the ground. My back hit the grass and the wind was knocked out of me. I gasped and wheezed, my body going haywire from adrenaline and panic and not being able to breathe properly.

Lola saw the opportunity and took advantage, snarling and snapping at me. My hands wrapped around her snout and I managed to wrench her jaws shut just inches away from my throat. *Oh god, she’s going to kill me. She’s going to rip my throat out right here in the front yard!*

My throat finally cracked open and enough air rushed in for me to scream.

“HELP!” I shrieked in desperation. “Please! Lola, stop! Someone!”

I held onto Lola’s snout with every ounce of my strength. As long as I kept her mouth closed, she couldn’t use those terrifying razor-sharp teeth on me. And as long as her teeth were out of the equation, I still had a snowball’s chance in hell of surviving this. She shook her head left and right, yanking me across the grass like a ragdoll, still half-pinned underneath her. Her claws sank into my side, where she was keeping me stuck to the ground, and there was a bright flash of pain that made me lose my grip.

I was dimly aware of hot, fresh blood slipping down my spine just moments before Lola reared back, breaking my hold her mouth, and lunged—

Jay’s wolf slammed into her mid-lunge and the pair went rolling across the grass. Jay shifted in the chaos, but he was still powerful enough to pin her face-down on the ground, even in his human form. One hand gripped the scruff of her neck, and the rest of his body was pinning hers, holding her in place as she thrashed and howled and snarled. Jay’s free hand stroked Lola’s face, and she snapped at him. He was lucky he didn’t lose a finger.

He held her head down against the grass with his free hand. “*Lola*,” he crooned, his voice low and soothing, yet commanding. “Enough. Stop this. Just… try to think.”

I scrambled back while he tried to do his animal whisperer bit, clutching my bleeding side. Pain flared from my hip to my ribcage with every small moment, and I couldn’t hold back the whimper that slipped through my throat as I tried to put some distance between myself and my attacker.

My best friend.

Or… was she now my former best friend?

Lola’s eyes narrowed on me, and she started fighting even harder. She bucked and thrashed in Jay’s grip, whining mournfully. She didn’t care about whatever he was saying to her. She only wanted me.

*“*LOLA!” Jay got in her face, blocking me from her view. “Come on, baby. Come back to me. You promised to be careful, remember? You promised not to shift.”

Suddenly Lola’s body went still, and then she shifted back to her human form, breathing heavily. She looked… absolutely wrecked. She didn’t try to get up, even after Jay had gotten off her, and I could see her shoulders heaving from my place several feet away. She was crying. I realized, belatedly, that it had never even occurred to me to call on my Fae powers to defend myself.

Jay crouched down next to her, rubbing her bare shoulder. “Hey, you’re okay. And Cali’s okay.”

“Not really!” I snapped, gesturing to my side. “What the hell, Lola?”

She sat up, her face mottled with tears. “I didn’t mean to. I… I don’t know what happened.”

“What happened was that we argued and you decided the answer was to try to murder me!” I shouted.

Lola’s face crumpled and she stood and ran back to the house. Jay watched her go, his shoulders slumped. He let out a long, slow breath before rising to his feet and turning to me. “I’m so sorry, Cali—”

I shook my head. “It wasn’t your fault.” Now that the threat was gone and adrenaline was no longer being dumped into my veins, I suddenly felt shaky. And my side was on fire. I gingerly pressed a hand against the scratch. “I… I should have talked to her.” I blinked slowly, thinking back to our argument. Of course, we’d argued a few times over the years, but I didn’t think we’d ever fought like *that*—even before Lola had lost control of her wolf and tried to kill me. “Lola came to me asking for help,” I told Jay, my heart sinking. “And I was too busy to even stop to listen.”

Jay nodded distractedly and then looked down at my wound with a grimace. “You should probably get that looked at.” He was still clearly focused on Lola and wanting to follow after her. Nothing but his kindness and respect was keeping him here with me when he so clearly wanted to be comforting his mate.

“I’ll take care of it.” I forced a pained smile. “Maybe you should go check on her. Something’s clearly wrong.”

He didn’t even pretend to argue. In a flash, he was headed back to the house, leaving me bleeding and bruised, alone on the grass.

I drew in a deep breath, and then another. And another. The realization of what had just happened began to set in. Tears filled my eyes, and I bit my lip to keep a whimper inside my chest. I tried to take a step toward the house, and fiery pain licked down my side. I was frozen, shaking, in so much pain I couldn’t see straight—or maybe that was the shock sinking into my bones.

*What the* fuck? *My best friend just tried to* kill *me. We were just talking and then we were arguing and then her teeth were snapping at me, ready to sink into my throat…*

I remembered the sharp pain of her claws digging into my side, the helpless terror when she’d knocked me to the ground and I hadn’t been able to breathe. The Lola I knew and loved never would have done that to me. Was this part of the curse, too? Was I going to lose my best friend along with the two men I loved, and my own life?

The front door swung open and footsteps pounded briefly on the porch before racing in my direction. Before I could really register it, Xavier was there. His eyes were wide with shock, running over every inch of me to assess the damage.

“I heard what happened,” he breathed. “Are you okay? Did she hurt you?”

I tried to swallow, but my mouth had gone dry. “Kind of, yeah. But I’m more rattled than anything.”

His gaze zeroed in on my bloodied side and he let out a low curse. He knelt down next to me, gently peeling my hand and my torn shirt away from the wound. “Did she bite you?”

“It’s just a scratch. A deep one, maybe. But she didn’t bite me.” In the back of my mind, I wondered what would have happened if Lola *had* bitten me. Would she have turned me even though she was a hybrid? I knew Artemis said it was impossible but… Part of me couldn’t help but hope a little. And if she had, how would Xavier have reacted to that?

With a gentleness that belied his immense strength, Xavier scooped me up in his arms. “We can have Mrs. Smith take a look at it, just to make sure.”

I wanted to prove that I was strong enough to walk inside on my own, that it would take more than a scratch to knock me down, but it felt too good to be in Xavier’s arms.

He glanced down at me as he carried me inside. “What were you doing out here?”

I weakly held up my basket. “I was heading out to gather stuff for the spell.”

“And Lola just attacked you?”

I shook my head. “Not exactly. We had an argument, and it got a little out of control.”

His grip on me tightened a bit. “I’m going to have to talk to Lola and Jay—if she can’t control her shifting, it’s too dangerous to have her around.”

“That’s what *her* spell is for,” I reminded him. And then I recalled exactly *why* Lola had wanted to talk to me: her concerns about losing her wolf, losing everything she was. And I hadn’t even stopped walking to listen. My heart sank. *Big Mac and Artemis were right. I* am *being a selfish brat.*

Xavier dropped a kiss onto my forehead. “When all of this is over, we’ll figure it out.”

He carried me up to his bedroom and gently laid me down on his bed. “Can I take your shirt off?” he asked. “I want to get a better look at the wound.”

I nodded, and he gently peeled away the fabric. My heart was still racing from my confrontation with Lola, and Xavier’s gentle fingers on my bare skin weren’t helping anything.

“I was worried about you,” he said, before focusing on my wound.

I waved a shaking hand at him. “It’s going to be fine. I probably just need to wash it out.”

“A scratch like this, even from Lola, isn’t something to brush off.” He stepped back and shifted right there in the bedroom. What the hell?

Despite my recent run-in with a crazed wolf, I wasn’t afraid. I knew Xavier would never hurt me.

I heard his voice inside my mind. *Stay still.*

Then he leaned in and licked my wound. A cool, soothing sensation radiated from the scratch, and I sank into the mattress, closing my eyes and forgetting everything but the relief of the pain disappearing.

When I opened my eyes again, Xavier had shifted back. And he was naked.

He crawled up onto the mattress next to me, and our eyes locked for one heady moment.

And then he leaned in and pressed his lips to mine.

**Episode 916**

XAVIER

God, I’d missed this. Tasting Cali’s mouth, feeling the warmth of her body against mine… This was exactly what I’d needed. Our kiss started out slow, just a gentle brush of my lips against hers, firming every so often, and then pulling back and letting her breath wash over my mouth, watching her pupils dilate as I trailed a line of featherlight kisses across her jaw and over to her ear. I gently took her earlobe between my teeth and tugged. Her soft, pleasured gasp sent blood rushing straight to my cock.

But I held off. I might have been a bossy Alpha who loved control—almost as much as I loved discovering the sounds I could get Cali to make as she broke apart against me—but I knew how to be gentle too. Soothing. I knew how to give love and affection and warmth and safety instead of taking my pleasure. And after what had happened in the yard—and maybe after the last couple of days, too—I knew my mate needed gentle.

Her wound had to have knitted back together by now. She had been right; it wasn’t all that deep. But I had a feeling her emotional state wouldn’t be so easy to fix. My chest had seized when I’d seen her in the yard, panicked and heartbroken and on the verge of going into shock.

My sweet mate needed comfort, a reminder that she was safe and loved, a gentle distraction that would bring her back down rather than wind her up again. And I was all too happy to be the one to give that to her.

I gently cupped her jaw in my hands, tilting her mouth up so I could scrape my teeth over her full bottom lip. She opened for me automatically, and I deepened the kiss, going slow and deep and sinking my fingers into her hair.

Her scent wrapped around me, mixed with blood and grass and Lola though it was, and I savored it. My father was dead. Greyson was gone. And I was here, leading the Redwood pack. I was here with Cali. It was everything I’d ever wanted and had never allowed myself to truly hope for. And with everything else that had been happening lately, I hadn’t had time to realize just how much I’d missed this. Just Cali and me, in a peaceful moment where we didn’t have to rush, where I didn’t have to smell Greyson all over her, where there was no looming sense of dread constantly weighing us down.

Even with Halloween four days away, and the *due destini* curse still very much in play, I felt good. Amazing. Like the world was finally slowing down and opening up, making space for all the possibilities that existed between my mate and me.

Her hands slid down my bare chest in tandem with her tongue sliding against mine, and her breath hitched when I crawled over her, pressing my bare body against her clothed one, sinking into the cradle of her legs, letting her feel how much I wanted her, how much I loved her.

A breathy moan slipped between her lips, and I couldn’t help circling my hips against hers just enough to pull that sound from her throat one more time.

God, she was so sweet. So perfect. So—

She sat up suddenly and pushed me back. She cringed as she pulled away from my mouth.

My body was far too heavy for her to push away on her own, but I immediately rolled onto my side, thinking I’d hurt her somehow. Her side had to be completely healed by now, but maybe I’d missed something. Maybe in the adrenaline rush she hadn’t realized she was injured somewhere else.

“What’s the matter?” I asked, my voice low and just this side of breathless. “Are you all right? Are you in pain?”

She shook her head, her face crumpling. “I just can’t do this anymore.”

I froze. My eyebrow pulled up in confusion. “Can’t do… what?”

“It’s not *fair*.”

“Wait, what? Not fair to whom?” The sudden shift in her demeanor had given me emotional whiplash, and I was struggling to keep up.

Cali tugged a blanket up to her chest, covering herself since her shirt was still on my bedroom floor. “When you told me to choose you, I refused to answer you—and you must know why. Are we really going to act like that conversation never happened?”

“I’m not pretending it didn’t happen.” I sighed. “I just don’t get what’s so difficult about this for you.”

Her gorgeous, kiss-swollen mouth twisted into a grimace, and I caught her hand before she could argue with me. “Cali, baby. All you have to do is think about what you’re feeling *right now*. Between us. If it’s even half of what I’m feeling, the choice should be easy.”

She yanked her hand out of my grasp. “And that’s what you refuse to understand, no matter how many times I tell you. I feel that for both you *and* Greyson. Lola didn’t understand, Artemis didn’t understand—nobody does. I’m alone in this, Xavier. And it’s not fair to any of us to pretend that things are okay when they’re not. Maybe they never have been.”

The pain that rolled across my chest left me breathless, and the black veins over my heart started throbbing again. Cali probably felt them, too. God, I wanted to tear my hair out, wanted to make her understand in no uncertain terms that I was the one for her. Not Greyson. *Me*. Her true mate. The one who had loved her all along. Before that bastard had even been a blip on her radar.

But I knew, as I stared into her tear-filled eyes, that I couldn’t keep pushing her. If I did, I’d push her right into Greyson’s arms. I took a deep breath and decided to try a softer approach. “I do understand,” I said. “More than you think.”

She huffed out a breath. “And do you think I’m selfish too?”

“Where is this coming from?”

“That’s what Big Mac and Artemis told me,” she said. “I’ve asked both of them for help, and they both said that I should consider myself lucky and just pick one of you and be happy with my choice. They think I’m just… trying to have you both, I guess.”

I bit my tongue. Big Mac and Artemis weren’t the only ones who felt that way, but I knew better than to tell Cali that. I cleared my throat and gently rubbed her arm. “You shouldn’t care what other people think—that’s never stopped you before.”

“You didn’t answer my question.” The smile she gave me was humorless. “Do you think I’m selfish, too?”

I paused. This felt like a trap, and I didn’t appreciate it. Did I understand that she was under a huge amount of stress? Sure. Should I tell her that she would be making the biggest mistake of her life if she didn’t pick me? Hell no. It was something I would have said without remorse when I’d first met Cali, but things had changed. I had changed. And it wasn’t about what I believed so much as it was about Cali understanding that I was the right choice.

“I don’t think you’re being selfish.” The words tasted like a lie, but I pushed through it. The truth wasn’t going to help with this particular situation. “You’re under a terrible strain, caught in a curse and bound by *due destini*. There’s no way anyone can understand what you’re going through.”

She seemed mollified by that, so I leaned in and brushed a kiss over her forehead. “You should get some rest while that wound heals.”

“Thank you, Xavier,” she said with a grateful smile. She settled back on my bed, and I quietly left her alone to rest.

After getting dressed, I slowly walked downstairs, hoping I hadn’t just made a huge mistake. Still, I was glad I hadn’t lost my cool and let my frustration with this situation get the better of me. Cali needed me to be patient—as impossible as that seemed—so that was what I would do.

And while she rested, I needed to talk to Jay about Lola. Because if Lola ever tried that stunt again, Jay would end up mateless.

But before I could find them, Mace stepped into my path. He’d been injured during the battle but was completely healed now. “Don’t worry, we’re leaving,” he said quickly, no doubt noticing the hard look on my face. “But we want to have a barbecue, and we’re thinking of holding it on Halloween. We can invite all the allied packs to officially celebrate our victory. It would be a good way for everyone to get to know each other.”

I nodded. “Sounds good to me.”

“Of course,” he added, “I should check with Greyson first.”

I scowled. “Why?”

“He’s your Alpha. It should be his decision.”

An idea popped into my head. “What do you think of Greyson?”

“I have to admit, I was a bit surprised when he became Alpha. At first, I wasn’t sure he had the best interest of the packs in mind.”

“I thought so too. In fact, I’m still not entirely on board with him as Alpha.”

“Well, he got us through the battle with Silas, and he *is* still the Alpha, so I suppose it doesn’t really matter now.”

I paused for a moment, trying to read Mace’s expression, searching for any unspoken meaning behind his words. Then I just decided to go for it.

“Maybe it does,” I said. “I’ve been thinking it’s time for a change. Would you support me if I challenged Greyson for Alpha?”

**Episode 917**

GREYSON

I hadn’t stopped running since I’d left my brothers at the lake, but I didn’t feel tired. Maybe it was the freedom of knowing there was no more Silas breathing down my neck, but my muscles, my lungs, my racing heart, were all singing with joy, and I was savoring the strength that ran through them—and this precious opportunity to run and run and *run*.

The farther my feet took me from the pack house, the more the weight across my shoulders lifted. The burden of the pack was disappearing, just like the house itself, which had vanished behind the tree line so many miles ago. It was amazing—there was no one to ask me for anything, no responsibilities, no petty arguments to settle. Suddenly it felt like the good old days when I’d been a Rogue, responsible for nobody but myself.

This was it. After all those years living under Silas’s shadow, after all the plotting to take control of the Redwood pack so that we stood a chance in a fight against my father, my task was complete. And I was free for the first time in far too long.

Being a Rogue hadn’t been a cake walk, of course. There were good reasons why werewolves were meant to live in packs, and my time as a Rogue—liberated though I’d been—was a good example of exactly why I’d decided to come back and rejoin the Redwood pack. It was lonely living as a Rogue, with nobody to depend on. Nobody to come home to or stay in bed with once morning rolled around.

My thoughts shifted to Cali, and my pace slowed just a bit.

My Rogue days had been long before I’d ever met her. Back when *due destini* had been some old wives’ tale and Xavier had still been mated to Ava. In some ways, those had been simpler times. But I wouldn’t go back—not now that Cali was in my life.

God, I missed her. After all the time I’d spent fighting, I’d been hoping for more time with my mate. But I was still Alpha, whether I was with the pack or not, and I had responsibilities to attend to—respects to pay to the Luna who’d been so much more than I’d ever deserved.

I could only hope that Cali missed me as much as I missed her. I’d agonized over leaving her with Xavier; it seemed that there were so many ways for that plan to go wrong, and if I knew my brother at all, I knew he would do everything in his power to take advantage of the opportunity to monopolize our mate.

But I still was sure that she would choose me when the time was right. Even though I’d told her to choose Xavier.

*Now* that *was fucking idiotic*, I mused. But there was something about Cali that never failed to make me lose track of my senses, and when I’d told her to choose Xavier, I’d done so in an attempt to be the better man, to try to make her life easier because I knew just how much this choice was hurting her—in every way possible. And, frankly, I’d also done it because part of me hadn’t expected to survive my confrontation with Silas.

But apparently, now that the dust had cleared after my father’s death, I wasn’t feeling quite so generous. Honestly it was still shocking to me that I’d been able to defeat Silas knowing that Cali was there, exposed to the danger.

And nothing but the complete respect I had for Joss and all of my remorse for not being a better Alpha to her was keeping me from turning tail and running back to Cali. But this wasn’t about Cali or *due destini*, for once.

It was about me honoring Joss, the Luna I’d chosen in the hope that she would rise to the occasion and lead my pack through perhaps one of the darkest chapters in the Redwood pack’s history.

She’d risen to the occasion beautifully, offering me and the pack so much more than I’d ever allowed myself to hope for, so much more than any of us truly deserved.

And now she was gone. She’d given up everything for her pack, and if I didn’t honor her now, I’d never be able to look any of my pack members in the eye ever again.

My pace slowed to a lope as I approached my destination: a swimming hole nestled between two mountains. I’d heard of this place, but I’d never been here. I’d never had a reason to visit. The sun was just beginning to set between the dual peaks, casting an orange glow through the clearing and reflecting off the water’s surface.

I shifted back to my human form, found a flat, clear area, and set up my camp. There was a warm, magical sort of feeling in the air as I settled into my spot near the water’s edge. There was a beauty in this place, a quiet energy that seeped into my bones, comforting and soothing.

Cali would love this place, though she probably wouldn’t be thrilled about camping. A smile tugged at my lips as I imagined her fiddling with the tent. We’d done more than enough camping in the Fae world, after all. But she’d still appreciate the view, the serenity of this hidden cove. It was hard not to.

I looked up at the darkening sky. The moon would be out soon. There was a circle of large stones by the water’s edge. I built a fire in the center, then found a flat rock and set it to the side. I glanced around the clearing and then back at the makeshift altar in front of me. I’d never done this ritual before, and I probably should have done a bit more research before running off.

Joss deserved the best, after all—not just whatever I could slap together. Although, if I was being honest, that was a pretty damn good representation of the kind of Alpha I’d been to her.

I sighed and set that thought aside. The self-loathing could wait. This wasn’t about me. I stood and began gathering stones from the shallow end of the pool. They’d been polished by millennia of glaciers melting and reforming and leaving this pool tucked into the shadow of the two mountains. This sacred pool was known for these stones.

Careful not to disturb the water too much, I searched through the shallows, my vision adjusting as evening slipped into night. I selected only the best, most polished and perfectly shaped stones, leaving the imperfect stones in the pool. It was the very least I could do.

When I had enough, I placed the polished stones in a circle within the larger circle, representing the orbit of the moon around the Earth. Next, I needed some wild sage, which I had learned could also be found in this area. I followed my nose, and it didn’t take too long to find the plant tucked among some bushes. I picked a few sprigs and carried them over to the fire, carefully holding the sage so that the thick leaves on the end burned first.

Soon the clearing was ripe with the scent of burning sage, and I reached into my bag to pull out a large hunting knife. I’d carried it for years as a Rogue, and I’d never imagined using it for something like this. I held my hand out over the polished stones and drew the point of the knife across my palm.

Holding my hand out over the stones, I allowed my blood to drip onto each of them, one by one, until I’d completed the circle and the blood was glimmering in the firelight.

“Joss,” I breathed, recalling the words of the ritual. “These are for you. For all you’ve given. I will never forget you, or the sacrifice you made for our pack.”

Then I rose and walked over to the water. The sun had gone down, the moon rising to take its place. The water was chilly as I waded deeper and looked up at the moon, keeping my eyes open as the water slowly got deep enough to cover my head.

Under the surface of that sacred pond, all sounds faded, and I was left with only the beating of my heart to keep me company.

Then, like a phantom limb, I felt a sudden loss. My Luna connection to Joss was leaving me. Memories rushed through me then, crisp and fresh, as if they’d only just happened. I remembered Joss coming toward me when I’d selected her as my Luna after the Lupo Finale. She’d looked so radiant, so proud.

Her image dissolved around me. *I’m so sorry, Joss.*

I burst through the surface of the water, oxygen rushing into my lungs, and looked up at the moon. Was it brighter than before? I hoped so. And I hoped that, wherever Joss was now, she was happy and free.

I turned back to return to the shore, my heart somehow heavy and light at the same time. And then I froze.

In the bluish light of the moon, I saw someone watching me from the shore. My heart stopped.

“Maren?”

**Episode 918**

GREYSON

*Five Years Earlier*

I was unstoppable.

My opponent, Rufus, was big and mean and the kind of guy who preferred that his opponents couldn’t walk out of the ring once everything was over. He lunged forward with a growl, and I just barely dodged his blunt, swollen fist. I slid under his arm and moved in, delivering two stiff jabs to his solar plexus.

Rather than press my advantage, I let Rufus stumble back, wheezing. Sometimes I wanted a quick, efficient fight. Other times, though, I enjoyed playing with my food a little. Tonight, my reluctance to take my opponent out may have had something to do with the bet I’d placed on myself.

The fight club was underground, and one of Seattle’s best kept secrets—its best funded, as well. It drew the elite, including a few celebrities, as well as the scrappy undesirables looking to make a good chunk of change. It was no secret which group I belonged to.

It wasn’t a secret that I could line ‘em up and knock ‘em down quick, despite being only twenty-one years old, and the brief amount of time I’d spent in the underground fighting ring. But lingering, that was riskier, that was opening myself up to more damage, potentially taking hits that I could have avoided if I’d put a pin in this earlier. And that was why I was going to walk out tonight with more money than I’d made to date.

“You… You son of a bitch!” Rufus croaked, stumbling back.

I grinned lazily, waving my fingers at him. “Come and get me.”

Dumbass that Rufus was, he did just that.

With a growl, he barreled toward me, his fists raised. I watched him, waiting for the right opportunity to dodge and hit his open side. It was a tried and true tactic, especially when you had supernatural speed on your side. The extra oomph in my punches didn’t hurt, either.

Rufus feinted to the left and then came up on my other side, and I didn’t quite dodge his meaty fist. It glanced off the side of my cheek, still powerful enough to send me back an inch or so. That was a new one—apparently an old dog like him was good for something after all.

Rufus was a slow motherfucker, but if his hits landed, they could be devastating. At least, they would have been for someone without werewolf healing abilities. I glanced at the clock—time was running down. If I took him out now, I’d be in the clear for my wager.

I sidestepped his next attack and hit him square in the jaw with a right hook, followed up with a matching hit to the left side and—the coup de grâce—a roundhouse kick right to the center of his chest.

The crowd went wild as Rufus stumbled back, smacking into the barrier that kept us wild things contained in the ring. All he had to do was forfeit or step outside that barrier, and the match would be over.

Fortunately for me, Rufus wasn’t quite that smart. He spat a mouthful of blood onto the floor, then took a wild swing at me as I moved in to take him out. A glint of metal flashed in his closed fist, and I snarled as I ducked out of the way of the blow.

The fucker had a razor blade tucked between his fingers. I wasn’t exactly surprised, knowing what I knew about good ol’ Rufus, but still—it pissed me off that he’d resort to something like this.

*Fine. I’ll stop going easy on him.*

From there, I was a blur of motion, my fists and feet moving too quickly for the beefy human to follow, and things quickly went from a fight-winning series of moves to me just plain beating the shit out of the guy.

Finally, Rufus—bloodied and beaten and sure to never look the same ever again—smacked his hand against the floor. Conceding defeat. I finished up with one last punch that made his eyes roll back in his head, then I stood.

With my opponent unconscious and bloody, I raised my arms in victory, savoring the roar of the crowd. Everyone was cheering for me—well, everyone except a trio of men near the front of the crowd. They glared at me before turning and leaving.

I knew their faces; I’d seen them around before, and I wanted nothing to do with them. I circled the ring one last time, enjoying every last second of my victory. And then I caught sight of a gorgeous woman.

She held my gaze, a smile tugging at her lips before she spun around and left.

Once I was officially declared the winner and Rufus was dragged off to be treated, I headed to the locker room to change.

The doors swung open and my bookie, Kenyan, came bounding in. He grinned. “You really took it home tonight.” He handed me a thick envelope of cash that I didn’t bother to count. I knew Kenyan wouldn’t dare cheat me. As I tugged a shirt on, the man eyed me. “You don’t even have any bruises. How’s that possible?”

I shrugged. “Thick skin, I guess.”

His eyebrows rose, but I could tell from the look on his face that he didn’t quite believe me. “Where’d you even come from?” he asked. “How’d you learn to fight like that?”

“I’ve picked up a few things in my travels.”

Kenyan rolled his eyes. “Dude, you are a man of mystery.”

I shut my locker and turned to face him. “And I’d prefer to keep it that way.”

With an easy smile, Kenyan left to go follow up with everyone else who’d placed bets on tonight’s fight. I grabbed my bag, ready to head out. But then the door to the locker room swung open and a man entered, wearing a smile that was as cold as ice. He kind of reminded me of my dad.

“Hello, Greyson. I’m Hans,” the man said, holding out his hand.

I eyed it, then decided to ignore it completely. “What do you want?"

“I was very impressed by your performance tonight, and so were my friends.”

“Huh.” I leaned back against my locker. “I’m surprised to hear that a weasel like you has any friends.”

The cold smile slipped off the man’s face. “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll think twice before pissing me off—or pissing off my friends.”

I barely resisted the urge to roll my eyes. “And what do *you* think is good for me?”

“My organization doesn’t like losing money, so we’d like to offer you a deal. Come work with us.”

I snorted. “You want me to throw a few fights?”

He didn’t respond, but the implication was obvious.

Rolling my eyes, I grabbed the man by the collar and hoisted him up, slamming him against the locker. “I don’t work for anyone, least of all scum like you and your so-called friends. Got it?”

Hans nodded.

“Good. Now stay out of my way.” I tossed him to the side, grabbed my bag, and stormed out of the locker room.

As soon as I stepped outside, I was accosted by two gorgeous women who could easily have been models. All my frustration at Rufus and Hans evaporated immediately. God, I loved my life.

“We’ve been waiting for you, Greyson,” one of the women said with a pout. I was sure she’d told me her name before, but I’d probably forgotten it the moment she’d said it. “What took you so long?”

“I’m sorry, ladies.” I slung an arm around each of them. “How about I make it up to you?”

We went to a nearby bar, the one I went to after every fight. As soon as we walked in, I noticed the envious looks from other customers.

I grinned. Going Rogue had been the best decision I’d ever made. I could do whatever the hell I wanted, whenever the hell I wanted, and I didn’t have to answer to anyone.

Maybe I’d been a little harsh with Hans, but who the hell really cared about that anyway? The guy was obviously bad news. He’d all but asked me to throw a fight in my opponent’s favor, and I didn’t need to be on some scumbag’s payroll. I wasn’t ever going to work for anyone, but even if I changed my mind, I’d never, *ever* work for a guy like that.

My ladies and I took a corner booth. Both of the women were fawning over me, touching my chest, leaning in to whisper in my ear, giving me fantastic views down their perfectly revealing dresses. There was nothingI didn’t love about this life. Why the hell would I ever give it up?

I glanced around for the waitress, but she was busy with another table, so I shimmied out of the booth. “Excuse me, ladies. I’ll be right back.” Never let it be said that I wasn’t a gentleman.

I squeezed into a spot at the bar, but as I was about to place my order, I noticed the woman from the fight in the reflection of the mirror bar. She was sitting right next to me, a martini glass at her lips.

Our eyes met in the mirror, and then face to face. I smiled and then caught the bartender’s attention. “Two Appletinis for the ladies”—I nodded back at the booth where I’d left my dates for the night—“and Maker’s Mark for me—”

The woman next to me put her hand on top of mine. “No, you don’t want that.” She turned to the bartender. “Lagavulin, neat.”

I followed her perfectly manicured nails up her arm to her glittering eyes.

“I’m Maren,” she said.

**Episode 919**

GREYSON

*Five Years Earlier*

I kicked open the door to my apartment and pressed the smooth body of the woman I’d met at the bar against the wall, kissing a hot line down her neck. After Maren had introduced herself, it hadn’t taken long for me to forget the two other women completely. There was just something about her—the confidence, the sultry way she smiled at me, her *scent*—that made me lose my fucking mind.

I forced myself to break away from her mouth. “Do you want to—”

“Take me to your bedroom,” she demanded, and then pressed herself against me, resuming our combative kiss.

Well, there was no arguing with that.

We stumbled to my bedroom, peeling our clothes off along the way, and I wasted no time throwing her onto my mattress. She laughed, her body bouncing, and grinned up at me when I crawled on top of her.

She reached for me, and I caught one hand and then the other, pressing them into the mattress above her head. Ladies, I’d learned, loved a dominant man. But Maren didn’t lie there gasping and moaning like I was used to. She reached for me again, pulling me down to settle in the cradle of her thighs, to feel her warm and wet against my cock.

“Come on, Greyson. Let’s see you put that fighter’s body to good use.” Her legs wrapped around my hips, and I let out a low groan as I sank into her. Fuck, she felt good. Hot and soft and wrapped so perfectly around me that I was already seeing stars.

I immediately set a quick pace, snapping my hips against hers just so I could hear her moan.

Her thighs squeezed my hips even tighter. “H-harder!”

Fuck, really? I let my upper body cage hers, my elbows braced on either side of her head as I pistoned in and out of her. Christ, this felt amazing. I didn’t usually get to be this rough.

While I was busy giving her everything I had, Maren dragged a line of kisses up my throat, then caught my earlobe between her teeth and bit down. If I hadn’t been halfway to coming, I was sure the “love bite” would have hurt like hell. Instead, it sent a shockwave right to the pit of my stomach. My shout echoed through the bedroom.

God, this woman was amazing. I’d been with a lot of women, but it was rare for one to be able to keep up with me. This was more than worth giving up those two women at the bar. I seriously doubted that they’d have been able to match Maren’s passion, hunger, and skill.

I groaned and reached between our bodies with one hand, finding that bundle of nerves at the apex of her thighs. I wasn’t going to last much longer, but I’d be damned if she didn’t come before I did.

“Come for me,” I groaned, my breath hot in her ear.

Her body tensed, her breath hitched, and I felt her inner muscles clamp down on me moments before I lost myself.

In the aftermath, I pulled out and lay beside her, breathing heavily and grinning from ear to ear. That had been amazing—easily the best sex I’d had in a long, long time. Maren must have had a good time too, judging by the noises she’d made. I really must have taken her places.

I turned to face her, a lazy grin on my face. “Not bad, right?” I raised my eyebrows expectantly.

Maren was lounging against the pillows, still completely nude and looking for all the world like she belonged there, like the bed and the linens and even the paint on the wall had all been purchased with her in mind.

She cocked her headed and nodded slowly. “Yes, I suppose it wasn’t too bad. But it could have been truly exceptional.”

I blinked. My mouth opened and then closed again. Wait, what? What the hell was she talking about? I’d just rocked her world! I licked my lips, trying very hard to remain confident and not pull the sheets around me and politely ask her to leave. “Well, no one’s ever complained before.”

“I can believe it.” She agreed with me easily, like it was nothing to weigh the relative worth of my manhood right in front of me. “They must have been intimidated by you—or perhaps they lacked the experience to know any better. But I’m not, and I don’t.”

I… had no fucking clue how to respond to that. What was with this chick? Sure, the sex had been hot—really hot—but was it worth being casually ripped to pieces?

She must have seen the shock and apprehension on my face, because she rolled over and took my hand. “You know, I’ve seen you fight before tonight.”

I recognized her words for the lifeline they were. “Have you?”

She nodded. “I’ve seen you fight a few times, now. You’re always so domineering in the ring. You always get your way…” Those dark eyes seemed to consider me. “Perhaps you’ve grown so accustomed to it that you think your whole life should be like that.”

Before I could defend myself, she rolled on top of me and straddled my lap. Her swollen folds were still wet from our first encounter, and I immediately began to harden beneath her. The sex must not have been so subpar if she was already coming back for more.

But she wasn’t finished with her lesson. “Perhaps if you learned to listen, to ask, to give… things would be exceptional for *both* parties.”

I stared up at her in a heady combination of confusion and arousal. Never in my life had I met someone with such an uncanny blend of gentleness and brutal honesty—much less a woman who was literally entangled with me. And rather than be put off by her refusal to stroke my ego like every other woman I’d ever fucked, I was intrigued. Curious. And hella turned on.

“Now.” She leaned in, her voice soft and low. “Why don’t we try again?”

The second time was slower, less a race for pleasure and more a conversation between our bodies. I still took the lead, since we both seemed to enjoy that, but I let Maren guide the way I touched her, tasted her, the angle at which I moved against her. Her cries were the sweetest thing I’d ever heard, and I made sure she was absolutely boneless with pleasure before I finally sank inside her once more.

I knelt behind her and pulled her body up, her back against my chest, sinking inside her with each swivel of my hips and hitting that spot deep inside her that primed her for pleasure.

“Touch yourself,” I breathed, then groaned when I saw one small, shaking hand slide down to the apex of her legs. “Fuck.” I mouthed at her neck, my arms banded around her chest and abdomen. “Yes, Maren, god.”

This time, we came together.

As I gathered Maren in my arms after our second round, I suddenly understood the meaning of the term *afterglow*. I was completely in awe of what we’d just shared, how our bodies had moved together, how listening and working to make it better for her had made everything so much fucking better for me.

“That was…” I cleared my throat. “That was truly exceptional.”

She smiled up at me. “You’re smart. You learn quickly. I like that.”

“So, who are you?” I asked, suddenly unable to reconcile this amazing woman in my arms with the sort of person who went out to watch the fights. “Why do you go to the fights?”

She laughed. “Do you think a woman can’t enjoy the raw brutality of watching two strong males face each other? Is that a pleasure only men can experience?”

“I guess not,” I conceded. “But I still want to know more about you.”

“I left Seattle when I was younger,” she said, snuggling further into my chest. “I worked a few jobs here and there, discovered I didn’t like being told what to do, and ended up here.”

“Huh. Well, I guess my life isn’t all that different,” I mused, drawing circles on her back. Of course, if she found out that I was a werewolf, this conversation would probably take a very different turn.

“How did you become a fighter?” she asked. “Is it because you’re one of those macho-types? You’re certainly built like one.”

I shrugged. “I’m just good at beating people up, and I figured, if you’re good at something, you might as well make money doing it.”

“You mean you enjoy it?”

I smiled. “I do take a certain pleasure in it, sure. But I’ve only been fighting for money for a few months. Maybe I’ll stop when it stops being fun.”

“And you’ve never lost a fight.”

It wasn’t a question, I noticed. She’d clearly been keeping tabs on me. I tucked that little detail away for later and tried not to let it go to my head. “And I’ve no plans to, either.”

“You’re cocky, aren’t you?”

“I prefer *confident.*”

She leaned in, resting her head on her hand. “What would it take for you to lose a fight?”

I blinked. “Excuse me?”

She rubbed my chest, drawing the same soothing circles I’d traced over her shoulder. “Would you lose a fight for me?”

**Episode 920**

GREYSON

*Five Years Earlier*

“Lose a fight for you?” I chuckled. She had to be joking. “Sweetheart, I don’t know you well enough to throw a fight on your behalf.”

“Fair enough,” she purred. “Then how about you get to know me better? Because I would certainly love to get to know you more.”

I was sure my eyes lit up like a kid on Christmas. She was ready to go again? I was the luckiest guy in the world. “Well…” I leaned in. “I think I know a way for us to do that.”

And then we got to know each other even better—no words required.

A few months passed, and my undefeated streak continued. Even better, tough guys were travelling in from all over for the chance to dethrone me—not that any of them ever even got close.

I was riding high. The money was pouring in, I’d made a few smart investments, I’d developed a hell of a reputation, and every time I considered giving it up, I saw the look on Maren’s face when she watched me fight. It was something else. *She* was something else. She pushed me to be better, faster, smarter, and when I was in the arena… God, I could almost get off on the way she looked at me as I demolished another opponent..

It was like she was beyond proud of me, like she was actually gaining pleasure from watching me take down fighter after fighter and remain undefeated. And who was I to burst her bubble? The obvious joy she got from watching me fight filled me with new purpose. I wanted, more than anything else, to please her. It wasn’t about the money or the small bit of fame, necessarily. It was her. And so I kept fighting.

It honestly freaked me out a little bit, that desire I had to please her. While I generally tried not to be a complete asshole to the women I spent time with, I’d never been in a real relationship before. After everything I’d gone through with Silas, it was my way to avoid creating any serious attachments. Attachments were liabilities. Weaknesses.

And yet this thing with Maren was becoming very serious, which wasn’t only going to be a problem for me. It could put this amazing woman I cared about in danger too. Because the longer I allowed myself to be with her, to grow even more attached to her and to twine our lives together, the greater the chance that my father would find out what I’d been up to all this time and come looking for me.

Hell, maybe he already knew. Word was spreading of my ability, after all, and I didn’t usually linger so long in one place. Maybe Silas was letting me do this just long enough to feel successful, like I’d truly escaped him once and for all, before he swooped in and destroyed everything I’d worked so hard to build. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d pulled that trick.

No, the writing was on the wall. At some point, I would need to get out of the ring, change locations, and stay on the move for a while before Silas found me, destroyed me, and took Maren down just for fun.

Hans and his grumpy-ass crew I could handle, but my father? I’d prefer to not find out the answer to that one.

I met Maren at a cozy whiskey bar near my apartment that she’d recommended. She smiled as I slid into the seat next to hers and brushed a kiss over her cheek.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey, yourself.” She nudged my leg with her own in that effortless way that couples did when they’d been together for a while. “I wasn’t sure what you wanted, so I just got you a water.”

“My favorite.” I winked and sipped at the glass. “I can’t drink too much tonight. I have a big fight in a couple of days, and I need to stay focused.”

Maren laughed, and I savored the throaty sound of it, the way she tilted her head back, exposing the slope of her neck. It was a happy sound, a sensual sound, a sound I could never imagine getting sick of.

We chatted for a while, sipping our drinks. I stopped after my first glass of whiskey. At the end of the evening, I caught Maren’s hand and handed her a scrap of black silk. A blindfold.

Her eyebrows lifted as she looked down at it. “What’s this all about?”

“I have a surprise for you,” I said. “Will you trust me?”

She looked up and met my eyes. “I already do.”

I led her out of the bar and into my car where Maren allowed me to tie the blindfold around her head, obscuring her vision. I drove us to an apartment building across town, escorted her inside, and whipped off the blindfold.

She blinked, her eyes adjusting to the light as she took in the luxurious apartment. “Wow. What is this place?”

I slid my hands into my pockets, glancing around in satisfaction. “It’s my new home. So… What do you think?”

Her mouth made a delectable ‘O’ shape. “I thought you weren’t keen on sticking around in any one place?”

“I thought so too, but things have changed since I met you.”

She spun to face me, a teasing smile tugging at her lips. “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

I shook my head. “There haven’t been any other girls, not like this.”

Maren slowly closed the distance between us. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

We’d never talked about seeing other people or laid down any ground rules. “Have there been any other boys?” I asked tentatively.

She smirked. “I don’t sleep with boys.” Then she leaned in and kissed me, and I scooped her up and carried her into my brand-new bedroom. I pressed her gently into the mattress, spending the longest time just kissing her, savoring this amazing woman who’d waltzed into my life and changed everything. She was so perfect for me and I was so fucking screwed, because now that I had her in my life, I didn’t even want to imagine things without her.

Slowly, our clothes were peeled away as our kisses grew more intense. I pulled her into my lap, desperate to keep her close against me, to kiss the sighs of pleasure right out of her mouth.

My fingers slid effortlessly between her slick, swollen folds, and she bucked her hips when my thumb drew little circles around her clit. Two fingers became three, and Maren groaned as she stretched to accommodate the new intrusion. “Greyson,” she breathed into my mouth, a desperate plea.

“I’m here, lover.” My thumb circled her clit faster now, and my fingers twisted inside her, preparing her for what was to come and dousing her with pleasure all at once. Almost too fast, she was coming on my hand, riding out her pleasure while her release coated my fingers.

I thought she was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. A gorgeous flush made its way down her neck to the top of her breasts, and I couldn’t stop myself from tasting her nipples, drawing out each aftershock with my mouth and fingers.

“I need you,” she breathed. “Now.”

I smiled and brushed a kiss against her swollen lips. “I think that can be arranged.”

I eased her off my lap and guided her down to lie on my bed, then I crawled up between her legs, kissing a trail from her knee to her hip to her breasts and back up to her mouth. I lifted her legs to rest her ankles on my shoulders. “You are so fucking perfect,” I whispered. And then I entered her in one smooth motion.

Maren’s back arched, and she cried out. “Ah—Greyson, yes!”

My hips snapped against hers, my cock plunging into the deepest parts of her body with a rhythm that had her eyes rolling into the back of her head. Perfect siren that she was, Maren met me for every thrust, kissing me deeply and pulling me ever closer until I couldn’t tell where I ended and she began.

With a wail of pleasure, her walls clamped down on me, and I spilled myself inside her. We rode out our shared climax, each thrust and roll of our hips drawing out the aftershocks, glutting ourselves on ecstasy.

After what seemed like an eternity of bliss, I lifted my body off hers and eased myself out of her with a groan. I gathered her up in my arms, pressing a kiss to the crown of her head.

“Wow, that was great, even for you,” she breathed. “This night is just full of surprises.”

“They’re not over yet.” I reached into my nightstand, pulled out a small black box, and presented it to her.

Her eyes widened. “This isn’t…” She trailed off.

“Why don’t you open it up before jumping to conclusions?”

She stared at the box and didn’t move a muscle. “It’s just… We’ve only known each other for—”

“Maren,” I said softly. “You trusted me enough to blindfold you. I need you to trust me again and open the box.”

With a shaky breath, she nodded, and I watched her face as she cautiously opened the box to reveal—

“A key?” A crease appeared between her eyebrows.

I smiled softly. “A key to this apartment, so you can come and go as you please,” I said. “Because what I’m really hoping for is that you’ll move in with me.”

**Episode 921**

GREYSON

*Five Years Earlier*

A nervous laugh bubbled out of Maren’s chest. “You want me to move in with you?”

I winced. “That wasn’t exactly the reaction I was hoping for.”

She laid a hand on my shoulder. “Oh, I’m sorry, Greyson. That’s not what I meant at all. This is *so lovely*. I was just worried it was…”

My eyebrows raised. “Worried it was…?”

She suddenly became very interested in the design stitched onto my comforter. “I thought you were proposing!” she blurted out, her face burning.

Her embarrassment was pretty adorable but ultimately wasn’t necessary. I mean, if I was willing to invite her to live with me, that meant I wasn’t going to scare off easily, right? And maybe it was my werewolf upbringing, but I didn’t see a whole lot of semantic difference between marrying someone and committing to live with them.

I loved Maren. She made me happy and gave my life a new purpose. Since meeting her, for the first time I knew what hope felt like. Like my future wasn’t just something to dread—a long period of time spent waiting for my father to find me and for the other shoe to drop. I wondered what Maren would have said if I *had* proposed. And it didn’t escape my notice that she hadn’t said yes to moving in yet, either.

Still, I allowed myself to laugh at her uncharacteristically bashful behavior. I wanted to keep this light, just in case things didn’t go the way I hoped. “Well, do you want to move in with me, Maren?” I asked.

She toyed with the key in her hands, clearly avoiding my gaze. “Are you sure?” she asked. “Do you realize what you’re inviting into your home?” Her voice was soft and serious, and that was how I knew she was really considering my question.

“What are you, a vampire?” I smiled. “Should I be worried?”

Maren shook her head, then finally looked up at me. There was still some seriousness in her expression, but I thought I saw a familiar gleam in her eyes. “The only thing you have to worry about is not being able to keep up with me. And yes, I’ll move in with you.”

She threw her arms around my neck and kissed me deeply.

It felt like fireworks were going off inside my head. This was it—the woman I loved was going to move in with me, and we’d face the future together. Excitement, relief, and a jittery kind of affection all bubbled up inside me.

*Is this what it feels like to find your mate?*

My good mood followed me through the rest of the day and into the locker room as I dressed for that night’s fight. I could barely pay attention to the buzzing of the crowd coming from the arena, or the warning that a couple of the jockeys had given me when I’d come in. The way they told it, there was a lot of money riding on this fight—way more than normal—and my opponent, Axel, was unlike anyone else I’d ever faced.

Apparently, Axel was also undefeated and had sent more than one of his opponents to the hospital—at least one of the unlucky SOBs was in a coma, and it didn’t look like he’d come out of it anytime soon.

*Maybe I’ll finally have to break a sweat to win a fight*. I smirked to myself as I dressed. I wasn’t intimidated in the least.

Sure, this Axel guy was big and strong. I didn’t doubt the gym jockeys’ descriptions of my opponent. But I was a Rogue werewolf with Alpha blood. Axel and I weren’t even on the same playing field, and so there was nothing to be afraid of. He’d go down, just like the rest of them.

There was a knock at the locker room door, and to my surprise, Maren walked in. Her eyes were wide and her expression was pinched. She was clearly upset, and I knew from experience how rare that was. Whatever was going on, it had to be bad.

I instinctively pulled her into my arms. “Lover, what’s the matter?”

She buried her face in my chest. “I’m worried,” she mumbled. “I don’t want you to fight this guy, Greyson.”

I froze. She didn’t want me to fight? Since when? “Have you heard the hype about this Axel guy too?”

She shook her head. “It’s not hype.” She pried herself away from my chest long enough to look up at me. “I’ve never asked you to do this before, you know that. But if you insist on fighting, I want you to lose.”

“What?”

“I’m asking you—no, I’m *telling* you—to throw this fight, Greyson. If you don’t, you’ll die.”

I shook my head. “I appreciate you worrying about me, but I seriously doubt that’s going to happen. You shouldn’t worry. Besides, with this one win, I’m going to earn enough to set myself up for a long time. I placed a side bet on myself.”

“Greyson, you’re not listening to me,” Maren pleaded.

I kissed her forehead. “It’ll be okay. You don’t have to watch if you don’t want to, but I’m going to fight. And I’m going to win.”

Ignoring her protests, I led her to the door and gave her another kiss. I could feel her trembling, and that—more than anything else—set my nerves on edge. Maren wasn’t exactly the type to shake in her boots.

She gave me a long, mournful look, then left the locker room.

I puzzled out her request while I waited for the fight to begin. I never liked anyone telling me to throw a fight, let alone Maren. *At least she has my well-being in mind*.

I finished getting ready and headed to the ring. The crowd roared in welcome, and I lazily grinned and waved at my fans before turning to face my opponent.

Well, Axel was certainly an ugly motherfucker. And his looks matched his hype—big, mean, and built to kill. He sneered at me. “You can say goodbye to that winning streak of yours.”

“I’m good, thanks.” I glanced at the crowd. Maren was seated near the front, as usual. What was *un*usual was the anguish in her expression as she watched me. I winked at her and turned back to face Axel. And then the fight began.

Axel didn’t hesitate before he started laying into me, his punches coming way faster than I would have expected from a big guy like him. I took a couple punches—more than I’d truly expected to—and I realized that the longer I let this fight drag on, the more distressed Maren would become. This was probably scaring the shit out of her.

*I could throw this fight,* I thought. *All I have to do is let Axel hit me a few times and then fall to the floor*.

It wouldn’t be hard, considering he’d already gotten in more hits than the vast majority of my opponents had ever managed. And no matter how strong this guy was, his fists wouldn’t be nearly as painful as some of the werewolf fights I’d been in.

But losing wasn’t my style, and I had so much of my future at stake here. The money from this win would keep me secure for a long, long time. I loved Maren, but taking a fall went against everything I was. If I threw the fight now, I’d never forgive myself.

So I went on the offensive, hitting Axel hard and meeting him hit for hit until the bell rang and the round ended.

Axel didn’t look too happy about suddenly being on the defensive, and I shot him an arrogant smirk. I could end this. As soon as the next round started, I was going to knock the guy to the floor. I glanced over at Maren and gave her a thumbs up.

*It’ll be okay, baby*.

Then the bell rang and we squared off again. I moved quickly and started hammering away at Axel, eager to end this fight—and then I saw a flash of silver, and blinding pain shot through my stomach.

*Silver*. *This motherfucker is using silver!*

Fury pumped through my veins, and I let out a roar, ignoring the pain in my stomach and the hot blood that slipped down my abdomen. Axel looked startled that I still had fight left in me. The bastard had known exactly what he was doing when he’d stabbed me. I pummeled him without mercy, until he was a bloodied heap on the ground.

The crowd was going wild, but I could already feel the poison spreading through my body. I clutched the barrier of the ring, desperately looking around for Maren. But my vision was starting to blur, and I couldn’t make out her shape in the crowd.

I was only dimly aware of my victory being announced as I stumbled to the locker room, avoiding my screaming fans. I crashed into a row of lockers and hit the floor.

*At least I didn’t lose in the ring. I’ll die undefeated, never having thrown a fight.* I was proud of my record, of my reputation, despite the pain.

The door burst open and someone rushed to my side. My vision was too far gone to see who it was, but I recognized her scent—Maren. I tried to sit up, but her hands—stronger than I recalled them being—pushed me back down to the floor.

“Stop, Greyson. I need to look at the wound.”

Through my blurring vision, I made out the flash of a knife. Before I could react, Maren slashed her palm and let her blood drip down onto my wound.

GREYSON

What the fuck was happening? Why was Maren bleeding on my wound? Had she lost her mind or something?

“What are you doing?” I slurred. The pain was still nearly unbearable, and the world spun and blurred around me. I’d been stabbed with silver, and now I was going to die on the filthy floor of this fight club locker room. There was no coming back from this.

At least the pain was starting to ease up a bit. It meant I was about to die, but still, it was a nice change of pace compared to feeling like I was being burned alive from the inside out.

“Shut up!” Maren hissed, shoving her bleeding hand against my wound. The pain suddenly flared back to life.

I groaned weakly. God, why couldn’t I just die? Death had to be better than this.

“Why couldn’t you just do as I told you?” she demanded. Her face was starting to come back into focus, but I didn’t need to look at her to see how truly and deeply pissed off she was. “Why didn’t you lose the fight?”

The pain was ebbing again, but somehow my vision was actually clearing. I blinked rapidly, staring up at Maren as her face came back into focus. My eyes instantly zeroed in on her bloodied palm, and shock ran through me.

*Oh my god. I’m not dying. I’m actually healing.*

Except that didn’t make any sense. I was a werewolf, and I’d been stabbed with silver. I’d seen other werewolves die from silver wounds far less severe than mine. So how was I recovering from what should have been a fatal injury?

My strength returning, I caught Maren’s wrist. “What are you?” I demanded.

She let out a bitter laugh. “I’m a fool for helping a werewolf.”

No string of words could have shocked me more. My mouth went dry, and I stared up at Maren’s face, half-expecting this all to be some kind of sick joke. But she wasn’t laughing, and I’d never found anything less funny than the situation I was in now.

“You knew?” I croaked, more out of shock than as a result of my injuries.

She sighed, and her voice softened. “Of course I knew. I’ve known for a long time.”

I managed to sit up and looked down at my wound. It was closing now, as if I’d never even been hurt. How was that even possible? Was her blood some kind of werewolf cure-all? I looked back up at her, my mind buzzing with more questions than I knew how put into words. “I should be dead.”

“You should be,” she conceded. “But my blood is healing you.”

I shook my head helplessly, too confused to be relieved about my sudden second chance at life. “Why? How?”

Maren paused for a moment, staring at me with such affection and grief that I forgot to breathe. Whatever she was about to say, it would have a price. And there would be no going back to the world we’d lived in before she said them.

“I’m Fae,” she finally said. “Fae blood can heal werewolves from silver poisoning.”

I was stunned, and for a moment I just stared at her, confused and hurt and desperate to understand how the woman I loved more than anything else had been Fae all along—and I’d never once noticed. Fae were rare in my world, but I’d heard enough about them to be on my guard. Especially since I was a werewolf. Werewolves and Fae didn’t tend to get along, or that’s what I was raised to believe.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked.

She stood up. “We’d probably both be better off if you *were* dead.”

“What the hell are you even talking about?” I snapped, slowly getting to my feet.

“Don’t you get it?” she snapped back. “I warned you to throw the fight because I was forced to.”

“By whom? How?”

She sighed and rubbed her face. “You’ve pissed off the wrong people. They bet against you tonight, and you were supposed to lose.”

“But I told you I wasn’t going to…” I trailed off, trying to make this clusterfuck of puzzle pieces fit together into a shape that made sense. The woman I loved was Fae, and she’d been ordered to convince me to throw the fight. In that first round, things had gone okay. It wasn’t until I’d started fighting back, started asserting myself against the chosen champion, that things had gone sideways.

And then it hit me—Axel had used silver. Not just any old knife, but one made of the only metal in the world guaranteed to take me out quickly. How had he known to use it?

The answer was staring me in the face.

I grabbed Maren by the shoulders. “You told them? You came in here acting like you were worried about me, when in fact you were selling me out? Betraying me?”

She shoved me back. “It wasn’t like that.”

I had no reason to believe her. “Was this whole thing a setup from the beginning?”

Maren didn’t answer, which in itself was all the answer I needed. I was going to be sick.

“Okay, truth time,” she said in a rush. “It *was* a setup—me meeting you at the bar that night. I was supposed to gain your trust. But while I was doing that, I made a mistake. I fell in love with you.”

“Bullshit,” I snarled. “That’s not love.”

“I know it’s hard for you to believe this, but I truly never meant for any of this to happen.” She took a step forward, and I took a step back, maintaining that distance between us.

“They tried to kill me tonight, Maren. Were you in on that, too?”

“I wasn’t going to let you die. I just needed you to lose.”

“So you had them cut me with a silver knife?” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “Get out.”

“But—”

“Get out,” I hissed. “Before I lose control.”

Maren shook her head. “I’m not afraid of your wolf. I just want to talk to you, to make you understand.”

“And I just want to get as far away from you as possible.” My mind was spinning, racing through variables faster than I could ever hope to keep up. Maren was Fae, and I’d had no fucking clue. All this time, I’d been completely blinded by love—a love crafted by a Fae. A love that I now felt sure had never even existed to begin with. But, of course, I’d had to learn that the hard way.

I tried to push past her, to escape this claustrophobic room with the woman I’d given my heart to, but she stepped into my path. “Please, just listen,” she begged.

“Get out of my way.”

I thought back to my run-in with Hans—another person who’d cornered me in this locker room and asked me to lose on purpose—and a new puzzle piece clicked into place.

“Hans and his gang of weasels,” I said questioningly. “Is that who you’re working with? Are you all some kind of Fae mafia?”

“Do you really want the answer to that question? Because I’d be happy to explain everything.”

I scoffed. There wasn’t anything she could say that would explain what she’d done to me. That would excuse her betrayal. I still couldn’t believe that this woman I’d given my whole heart to had been lying to me all along, playing me like a fool. I should have known. Everyone else in my life had betrayed me. Why should Maren be any different?

Still, I couldn’t help but wonder why she would do this to me. Had this Fae mafia threatened her? If she was Fae herself, was there even anything that they could threaten her with? Was it possible that the whole lot of them were Fae? Axel too? It was crazy, but it also was the first theory that was making sense since Maren had dropped this bomb on me.

I looked down at my wound. The skin had knitted back together, but there was a jagged, raised scar cutting diagonally across my abs. I couldn’t resist running my finger down the fissure.

*I’ve never had a scar before.*

Maren caught me looking at it. “With my blood, you won’t die. But the knife was Fae-made, so it will leave a scar.”

I couldn’t stand the sight of her. Even her voice left me on edge. “Get out,” I snapped. “I don’t want to ever see you again. Do you understand?”

“But I love you, Greyson! Don’t do this!” She reached for me again, but I stepped back. She bit her lip. “Do you think you’re ever going to find anyone else who you have this kind of connection with? We’re unforgettable together.”

She had that right—in more ways than one. I looked down at my scar again. “No, I won’t ever forget you, but that doesn’t mean I want you in my life. Now get out.”

**Episode 922**

GREYSON

*Present Day*

I couldn’t believe what I was staring at. *Who* I was staring at.

*Maren*. She was here, tucked into the shrubs and trees at the edge of the clearing, nothing more than a few yards separating us. It was unmistakably her, but her skin looked to be a rich, midnight-purple shade that looked absolutely ethereal in the moonlight. There was a shimmer as she walked toward me and her skin became the warm, russet tone I remembered. Her long, black hair cascaded over her shoulders.

*Am I imagining this?*

At first, it seemed like the only logical answer. The last time I saw her she was crying and looked terribly, beautifully human. And now she looked terrible and beautiful, but in a whole new way.

*I’ve gotta be seeing things*. That had to be what was happening here. I’d told Artemis all about my old Fae flame who’d broken me into pieces. Maybe dredging up all those memories had had a lasting impact and—coupled with the stress of the last few months, and all the time I’d spent lately thinking about my days as a Rogue—had made my brain conjure my own personal demon right in front of me.

Except she looked so real. She even smelled the same.

Before I could continue my deep dive into what was truly real anymore, Maren stepped forward.

“Greyson.” Her voice was just how I remembered it, low and soft, gentle and unyielding. A voice that demanded to be listened to, a voice made for teasing laughter and serious discussions and saying *I love you, Greyson*.

I shook myself. No, this wasn’t happening. I was here to mourn and pay tribute to Joss. I had a mate and an entire pack waiting for me back at the pack house. I’d grown in the five years Maren and I had been apart, and I’d come into my own. I’d even unseated my father and put him down like the rabid dog he was.

So why did just seeing Maren, hearing her voice, stir up so many memories? Why did it feel like I was back in that locker room, my heart shattering all over again because of her betrayal? I still couldn’t quite believe she was standing here in front of me.

Maren was my first love—the greatest, most world-shattering love I’d ever had… until Cali had come along. I’d thought that what Maren and I had shared was the kind of relationship that would last forever. The kind that weathered storms, eagerly faced new challenges and opportunities, and always looked to the future with hope and optimism.

And then she’d told Hans and his little group of lackeys exactly how to hurt me. How to wound me so deeply that nothing except her blood would save me. That hadn’t been love. Even years later, I was stuck with a permanent reminder of what she’d done to me in the form of the scar etched into my skin.

She might as well have driven the knife into my stomach herself.

So how the hell was she here now? Was it a vision of some kind? Like a side effect of the *due destini* *curse*?

I squeezed my eyes shut. I didn’t want to look at Maren. Not now. Not ever again.

Then, like a soothing balm, Cali’s face flashed through my mind. I might have loved Maren once upon a time, but what I felt for Cali was on a whole other level. More than naïveté and betrayal and whatever the fuck I’d had with Maren.

When I opened my eyes, the Fae liar was still standing there, cautious and waiting.

“What are you doing here, Maren?” I didn’t recognize the dark quality of my voice at first, the tone that dripped with cold fury and loathing. Five years was a long time, but I had neither forgotten nor forgiven what she’d done.

“I, um… I didn’t know anyone else was out here.” She looked around, blinking slowly and no doubt making sure there were no other werewolves lurking nearby. I had to admit, she looked just as surprised as I felt. “I wasn’t expecting to see anyone here, let alone you.” She let out a nervous laugh. “Honestly, I thought you’d fallen off the face of the Earth.”

Her eyes slipped down from my face, and I realized she was staring at my stomach, where my hand was pressing against my scar. I hadn’t even realized I was doing it.

“You haven’t forgotten, have you?” Maren asked softly. There was something in her voice that made me think she already knew the answer. And if she hadn’t known it before this terrible little moonlight reunion, she sure as shit knew it now. I was a mess of tells, and I needed to pull myself together if I wanted to walk away from this encounter with my dignity intact.

So I decided to ignore her stupid question altogether. “Why are you here?” I demanded again.

She pointed to the water behind me. “This is a sacred body of water, respected by the moon. Many Fae who are in your world come here to… to rejuvenate, I guess. The magic here restores our powers and protects us.”

I scoffed. “Well, you’ve come to the wrong place to seek protection.”

I took a step forward, my fists clenched so tightly my fingernails were digging into my palms. I didn’t really have anything resembling a game plan, here. I wasn’t sure why I wanted to fight Maren, or even *if* I wanted to fight her. What good could possibly come of picking a fight with her after all these years? But I was pulled forward by something feral, a wounded animal lashing out, and it didn’t occur to me to stop until she threw her hands up.

“I’m Fae, Greyson,” she said sharply. I heard the unspoken threat in her tone. She thought she had me outclassed. Well, she was wrong.

“I haven’t forgotten,” I assured her. “But as it turns out, I’ve gained a lot more experience with Fae since we parted ways. I’m not as naïve as I used to be, either.”

Maren looked around again, her eyes wary. “Why are you here? Are you still a Rogue?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“But you came here by yourself?”

I cocked my head, considering her question and the unspoken concern underneath it. “Which answer would you prefer? That I’m here by myself and it’s just the two of us, or that I’m here with a pack?”

She shrugged. “I’m not worried either way. And I’m sure you won’t believe me when I say this, but it’s nice to see you.”

“I stopped believing anything you said five years ago.”

She paused, considering. “And what if I told you a day hasn’t gone by that I haven’t regretted what happened?”

I scowled. What kind of idiot did she take me for?

But she was already launching into her explanation. “I was trying to protect you that night! I knew that if you didn’t lose the fight, they’d kill you. But you were too stubborn, weren’t you? You were too damn proud to lose.”

“Great story,” I deadpanned. “I’ll try to remember to cry over it someday.”

I strode out of the water and headed to my meager campsite to get dressed. The Luna ceremony was over, and Joss’s connection to me was gone. There was no reason for me to linger here, especially not now. The one upside to my little chat with Maren was that the bloodlust had receded, and I suddenly remembered all the reasons why I had zero interest in getting into a fight with a Fae.

I forced myself to go slow, to appear casual and unaffected by this mindfuck from the past breezing in when I least expected her. Inside, I was a fucking mess, and all I wanted was to get the hell out of here and go back home to the pack house. To Cali. To a place where I belonged, and where I knew I fit. A place where I was strong, untouchable.

A place where I could leave that sad, broken, past version of myself behind.

I started haphazardly throwing my shit back into my pack. “Well, the place is yours, I guess. I’ve done what I came here to do.”

Maren folded her arms over her chest. “So you’re going to run away? Just like Seattle? Even after all this time?”

I eyed her but didn’t say anything. I didn’t have to explain myself to her. I zipped up my pack and threw it over my shoulder, ready to get the hell out of Dodge. But then I heard a child’s voice.

“Mommy?”

I turned to see a young boy step out of the shadows behind Maren. When he saw me, his eyes widened and he leapt behind Maren’s legs, cowering. “Who’s that?” he asked with a whimper.

*Oh my god. Maren has a child?*

She bent down so that she was eye level with the blond-headed boy, then she wrapped her arms around him. “It’s okay,” she soothed him, locking eyes with me. “He’s an old friend. He won’t hurt you.”

The boy peered at me from the safety of his mother’s arms, his grey eyes visible in the moonlight.

“Greyson,” Maren said. “This is my son, Fenrir.”

I stared at the boy, and my world ground to a shuddering halt. “How old is he?”

**Episode 923**

Heaving a sigh, I slid off the bed. I grabbed the shirt that Xavier had thrown to the floor when we were making out.

God, I missed the feel of Xavier’s lips. Almost immediately, a feeling of guilt washed over me as I remembered Greyson and his fiery kisses… How could I possibly choose between Greyson and Xavier? My heart belonged to both of them.

I pulled on my shirt. The sooner I got rid of this curse, the better. But first, I needed to fix things with Lola.

Tears pricked at my eyes as I thought back to our argument. Honestly, the whole situation was ridiculous. It had been a stupid argument, started by my own selfishness. I wasn’t the only one around here who was dealing with shit. I should’ve been there for Lola. I should’ve listened to her. I should’ve been a better best friend.

I rubbed the tears from my face, determined to stop crying. The fight hadn’t been entirely my fault, but I just wanted my best friend back. And if she wasn’t going to come to me, then I’d go and apologize to her. I owed her at least that much—especially considering I’d been an extra crappy human, lately.

After giving myself a once-over in the mirror, I made my way to Lola’s room. I knocked on her door twice before pushing it open.

“Hey, it’s me,” I said quietly. I wasn’t sure if she even wanted to see me.

Lola looked up at me from the bed, her eyes puffy and red. It was obvious she’d been crying. My heart ached at the sight. The last thing I wanted was for Lola to feel hurt.

“Jay’s still pissed at me for shifting.” Lola hiccupped, her face splotchy with emotion. “He—” She took a deep breath, clearly trying to calm herself down. “He thinks I would have actually *hurt* you.”

Jay had a fair point, though. I pointed at the cut she’d given me, a wry smile on my face. “Well, it sure seemed like you were trying to kill me.”

Lola stared at the cut, shock and horror marring her face. Crap, I hadn’t realized she didn’t know about the injury. I immediately regretted even pointing it out. Good one Cali, putting your foot in it again.

A fresh batch of tears trailed down Lola’s cheeks. “If Jay hadn’t stopped me… What if I’d *killed* you! Would you ever have forgiven me?”

Despite myself, I let out an involuntary little laugh. “It would be a little hard to do that if I was dead.”

“You know what I mean,” Lola muttered, tears streaming down her face.

Still smiling slightly, I walked over to her, enveloping her in a hug.

“It wasn’t your fault, Lola,” I said gently. “None of this is your fault.”

Lola sniffled in my arms, clearly disbelieving.

“I was just so caught up in my problems that I didn’t listen to you,” I admitted. “I should’ve been a better friend.”

The reality of both our situations hit me.

“Truth is, we’re both caught up in something that we didn’t ask for, and that we both need help to deal with,” I continued. “And it seems to be getting worse for both of us. You don’t have control over your shifting, and I’m facing a curse that could kill me and two people I love.”

“And I could lose my wolf—and Jay,” Lola said, her voice breaking as she said his name.

I squeezed her tighter, and we held each other in silence. God, I couldn’t imagine what Lola was going through. At any moment, she could lose an entire part of herself. She could be left disconnected, always missing her wolf.

“We’ll get through this,” I whispered fiercely after a moment. “But let’s do it together, okay?”

She nodded in agreement, then slowly detached herself from my arms. I released a long breath.

“I could really use a drink right now,” Lola grumbled, wiping away her tears.

I chuckled, relieved that we were all right. “You and me both.”

Lola looked at me, mischief on her face. “You? You barely ever drink! Things MUST be bad.” She laughed, and I felt so relieved that she was teasing me again.

With one final hug, we went downstairs. It seemed like there was still some partying going on. People were flitting around, chatting with each other. Werewolves really didn’t stop celebrating. Like, *ever*.

I grabbed a can of soda—rethinking the alcohol thing—while Lola filled her cup with whatever mixture was on the counter. As she took a sip, she spotted Jay across the room.

Without even turning to me, she said, “I’d better go talk to Jay. He was super pissed off.”

I gestured for her to go after him as I drank from my can. With one last small smile at me, Lola squared her shoulders and joined Jay.

“It looks like you two have made up,” a deep voice greeted me.

I looked up at Xavier. “Well, you know,” I told him cheekily. “We’re too close to let anything come between us. Even a little light mauling.”

Xavier opened his mouth to say something but was interrupted by Charlie.

“Xavier?” Charlie asked, sweating a little. “Could I ask for a favor?”

Xavier crossed his arms and stared at Charlie blankly, waiting for him to go on.

Swallowing audibly, Charlie continued. “It’s just, I want to take Violet out on a date. But I don’t have any way to go anywhere, aside from shifting… so I was wondering if I could borrow a car? It would just be for a few hours, and I promise I’ll return it without a scratch.”

I couldn’t help but smile at Charlie’s anxious chatter. It was just so cute, how he obviously wanted to make a good impression on Xavier, like he was Violet’s big brother or something.

But Xavier was sure acting like it, too.

“Where do you plan on taking her?” Xavier demanded, a slight smirk on his face. “And for how long? When do you plan on being back?”

As a pale-faced Charlie rattled off answers to Xavier’s questions, I realized Xavier was just toying with him, trying to make him squirm. Poor Charlie—he looked like he was about to pass out.

Xavier asked a couple more questions, pinning Charlie with an intense stare. At this rate, I wouldn’t be surprised if Charlie *did* pass out.

“Okay, that’s enough,” I interrupted. “He’s just asking to borrow the car, Xavier. Give him a break.”

Xavier rolled his eyes and searched his pockets. “Can’t a guy have some fun?”

Finally, Xavier handed Charlie the keys, eyeing him menacingly. “Bring her back by midnight, or I’ll turn you into a pumpkin.”

Charlie agreed, nodding rapidly. It was obvious that Xavier terrified him.

“He’s just kidding, Charlie,” I assured, giving him a warm smile. “Now go have fun.”

I watched Charlie leave, then turned to an annoyed-looking Xavier and raised a brow.

“I barely know the guy,” Xavier said defensively, brow furrowed. “I’m just looking out for Violet.”

“But Charlie just fought on our side,” I reminded him mildly. “He risked his life for us, for this pack. Cut him some slack. Plus, Violet’s an adult now. She’s perfectly capable of making her own decisions.”

“I can’t help but feel like Violet’s older brother,” Xavier confessed. “It’s hard not to be protective.”

I hummed in understanding. “I get it, Xavier. But try your best, please. Charlie’s probably terrified of you.”

Xavier said nothing in return, just looked away. Typical.

Ignoring him momentarily, I scanned the rest of the room. I spotted Lola and Jay, huddled together and talking quietly. They seemed to be in the middle of a deep discussion. It was good that they were at least talking, especially after all of today’s drama.

A slight pang of fear filled my body as I remembered what had happened. I knew Lola hadn’t meant to hurt me, but the fact that she’d shifted out of nowhere and attacked me… It was scary. She’d had almost no control, and that was terrifying.

“I hope you didn’t forget about your curse,” Big Mac called out as she and Mrs. Smith made their way past Xavier and me, jolting me out of my thoughts about Lola. “The items for the spell aren’t going to gather themselves.”

I rolled my eyes. *Oh Shit*. *The curse that’s actively killing me and my two mates and takes up nearly all of my waking—and unwaking—thoughts? How could I have forgotten?*

Still, my anxiety spiked at the mention. Big Mac had said both Greyson and Xavier needed to be present for her to break the curse. But Greyson was still away, honoring Joss. I chewed on my lip. When would he be back? He’d said he’d be back by Halloween, but what if he was delayed? Or worse—what if something happened to him?

Worry started to overtake me as I thought about Greyson’s well-being, and the curse. Tingling with nervous energy, I spun toward Xavier.

“Do you know when Greyson is coming back?” I asked him urgently.

He shrugged noncommittally. It was clear that he couldn’t have cared less.

“I have no idea,” he said flatly. “Maybe he’s gone Rogue again.”

*He wouldn’t.* My heart beat erratically. Greyson couldn’t go Rogue. I was terrified of the possibility of being forced to face the curse and make a decision without him.

“Are you saying he might not come back?” I gasped out.

**Episode 924**

VIOLET

I felt myself truly relax for the first time in a long time. The purr of the car engine, combined with the cool fall breeze, brought me a sense of peace. It also helped that Charlie was here. *For our first official date.*

Smiling to myself, I rested my head against the car window and gazed at Charlie, who was behind the wheel. *All mine*.

Charlie glanced over and saw me staring.

“Have you ever been to a drive-in restaurant?” he asked me, his eyes bright.

“You mean a drive-through?” I asked, laughing. “You’re telling me that our first date in Oregon is going to be at a McDonald’s?”

“No, not that.” He chuckled. “More like you pull up and park, then they bring your food—on skates!”

It sounded better than McDonald’s, but still, a trickle of disappointment crept through me. It wasn’t exactly the date I’d imagined.

“Oh!” Charlie exclaimed. “And you get to watch a movie. How cool is that?”

It was obvious he was excited about it, so, for him, I would be too. I put on my best smile, trying to generate the same enthusiasm Charlie was clearly feeling.

“I’ve never heard of it, but if you think it’s fun, I’m willing to give it a try,” I said in a peppy tone.

Really, it *could* be fun. Just the two of us, eating together and talking, alone. Where no one could interrupt us…

My smile faltered at the thought.

Charlie noticed, his own joyful grin immediately dropping. His brow furrowed in confusion and hurt.

“Don’t you like burgers and shakes and stuff?” he asked quietly.

Oh, no. This wasn’t how I wanted our date to go.

“That’s not the problem!” I blurted out, slightly panicked. I leaned toward him, grabbing his free hand with both of mine. “Not even close!”

It wasn’t that I opposed the concept of drive-in restaurants. I knew we’d have a good time, and honestly, I would be happy going anywhere with Charlie. It was just…

“I was hoping to eat *inside* a restaurant,” I admitted, calming myself down. I settled back in my seat. “So everyone could see you*.* With *me*.”

I watched him closely, hoping he understood.

Charlie shot me a wry smile. “You want to show me off?”

I grinned widely. *We’re okay*.

He let out a laugh.

“If we did that, you’d have to share me,” Charlie teased. “At the drive-in restaurant, you get me all to yourself.”

He had a point there. As much as I wanted to show everyone he was mine, I didn’t want to share Charlie either. I wanted him all to myself.

“Okay, you’re right,” I drawled sheepishly. “That’s a much better idea.”

Speaking of not sharing, Charlie still hadn’t told me anything about the tense-sounding call with his dad that I’d overheard earlier.

“Hey,” I began. “Did you hear anything more from your parents? Are they okay with you being here?”

Charlie shrugged nonchalantly, brushing my questions off. “That’s just my dad being a dad,” he said. “Don’t even worry about it. It should be all good.”

I considered his words carefully. A part of me wanted to believe that everything really was all right, like he said. But a bigger part of me was weighed down by the possibility that this could be more serious than Charlie thought. I mean, I wanted his parents to have a good impression of me when they eventually met me. And him dodging their calls to be in Oregon, with me, wouldn’t exactly help my case.

Before I could voice these concerns, Charlie exclaimed, “Look, we’re here!”

I twisted away from Charlie to examine where we were. We drove underneath a large sign. It read “Sadie’s Sip ’n Screen” in a red retro font. I giggled internally. Had we gone back in time? I felt like I was in *Riverdale*.

Once we entered the parking lot, we were greeted by a bustle of activity. Waiters zipped by on skates, carrying platters of fries and milkshakes to the cars. Some people were milling around, enjoying the coolness of the night, while others were bundled up in their cars, munching on the food. At the center of everything was a large movie screen, which was playing trailers.

I couldn’t help but be impressed. I actually loved this. Charlie seemed to know me even better than I knew myself.

“This place got a five-star review on Yelp,” Charlie said as he parked in an available spot. I looked at him and saw he seemed to be a little hesitant.

“Well that makes sense. This place is awesome!” I wanted to be enthusiastic to make up for earlier. Charlie was so sweet for planning this date for us, and I felt a pang at how ungrateful I’d come across. “What movie are we watching?”

Charlie scratched the back of his neck, a meek smile on his face. “Funny story,” he said. “I was so excited to find out about this place, I never actually bothered to check.”

I couldn’t help but grin. He was the softest, most precious boy in the world. And he was *mine*.

“We must have missed the sign when we drove in,” Charlie continued. “But I can go find out.”

He started to move, but I shook my head. “No need,” I assured him. “Let’s keep it a surprise.”

With the trailers playing, I reached over to the car stereo and tuned it to the right frequency for the audio. The voices of the actors filled the car. Satisfied, I leaned back in my seat, watching the screen.

Suddenly, Charlie released his seat belt, then reached over and did the same to mine. I arched an eyebrow at him.

“We might as well get comfortable,” he said, smirking.

Charlie sat back and took my hand gently. He started tracing absentminded circles on my palm, staying focused on the screen. My heart was racing faster with each passing minute, his lazy touch igniting a slow fire within me. God, he was so sweet—but maybe I didn’t want “sweet” right now.

My eyes fell to his lips. Nope, I definitely didn’t want to do “sweet” right now.

Feigning innocence, I slid my hand across the center console and onto Charlie’s thigh, caressing it lightly with my fingertips. My breathing became shallow and rapid with anticipation.

Instantly, Charlie’s eyes met mine. His were slightly hooded with desire. Lips curving up into a grin, he inched closer to me.

We were now mere centimeters away from each other, our breath mingling. Just as he was about to close the gap between our lips, a loud knock reminded us that we weren’t actually the last two people on earth.

We reluctantly pulled away from each other. *So close*…

Charlie turned to his window and faced the waitress who was waiting politely outside. Oh, right. We still had to order food. I chuckled quietly to myself. I’d completely forgotten about that.

As Charlie rolled down the window, the waitress took a step back. Once the window was completely down, she beamed at us and began her spiel.

“Welcome to Sadie’s Sip ’n Screen!” she chirped. “I’m Amy, and I’ll be your waitress for tonight.” Amy pointed to the illuminated menu. “Now, what would you like to order?”

I read the sign, then decided on a vanilla milkshake and mozzarella sticks. Charlie ordered a classic cheeseburger with fries.

“I’ll have that out to you shortly,” Amy said, writing down our order. “Enjoy the show!”

She skated away, leaving Charlie and me alone. Then an announcement blared through the stereo.

“Welcome to Sadie’s Sip ’n Screen!” the announcer stated.

Charlie and I paused, waiting awkwardly for the announcement to finish.

The announcer continued. “Tonight’s double feature really is a treat! And a thrill: *An American Werewolf in London* and *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*!”

OMG. Charlie and I whirled around so that we faced each other. One look and we were clutching our stomachs from the hilarity of it all. It felt so good to laugh, especially with him.

Charlie glanced at the screen as the movie started.

Without hesitation, he grabbed my hand and pulled me forward until our lips connected. My previous giddiness was instantly replaced by desire. I wrapped my arms around his neck, my hands tangling in his hair.

The center console dug into my stomach, and my legs ached from the lack of space, but I didn’t care. With every second that passed I became more lost in his kisses. If anything, the retro setting was helping me lose myself in the moment. The roller skates and vanilla shakes were actually really fun. The kisses were even better. It all combined to really make this feel like the perfect first date I’d always imagined for myself. And I realized that was because as long as I was with Charlie, I’d be happy.

We were connected on some higher level, and as our lips continued to press and bite and tease each other, I knew that what we had was really, really special. My mate. Forever.

When his hand made its way to my breasts, I moaned softly into his mouth. At this, Charlie deepened the kiss, his tongue darting in and laying claim. His fingers circled my nipples, taunting and teasing. I whimpered slightly, which caused his mouth to quirk upward.

In the hazy veil of desire, I barely registered the fact that we were in public, and that the movie was playing. Not that the movie mattered—its depiction of werewolves was insanely wrong. Every once in a while, we’d withdraw from each other and laugh at the ridiculousness of the movie. Then we’d quickly resume from where we’d left off, eager for more.

I snagged Charlie’s bottom lip between my teeth and pulled it slightly. This caused Charlie to emit a low growl. I was ready for wherever he wanted to take this next.

As if on cue, we were interrupted by another rap on the window. Charlie, clearly trying to recover, smoothed down his hair and took a couple deep breaths. He lowered the window so that the waitress—Amy—could hand us our food.

She hooked the trays on the door. “The bill is $21.73.”

“This one’s on me,” Charlie told me as he took out his wallet and handed the waitress his credit card. Then he grabbed the food, offering me a fry.

“Thank you,” I said, popping it into my mouth.

It was salty and hot, and it tasted so good. I locked eyes with Charlie as I chewed, wishing we were still alone in our little car bubble. But the waitress was still standing there.

“Excuse me, but your credit card was declined,” Amy said.

Charlie tilted his head in confusion. “Are you sure?”

I watched as she swiped it again. “Still declined.”

Charlie’s face went ashen—clearly, he’d just realized something.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, concerned.

Charlie’s Adam’s apple bobbed up and down for a second.

“I think… I think my parents cut me off,” he choked out.

**Episode 925**

I eyed Xavier, awaiting his response. Greyson hadn’t given me any indication that he might not be coming back. Hell, it wasn’t like him to just *leave*… But what if he actually had?

Xavier glanced at me, a bored look on his face. “I don’t really care if Greyson comes back,” he said coolly.

I gaped at him, my mouth opening and closing like a fish. Whatever anxiety I’d been feeling about Greyson’s disappearance was replaced by shock. How could he not care? Greyson was his brother, for crying out loud. His brother who’d fought withhim, who’d fought *for* him.

“What if Greyson *doesn’t* come back?” I pushed. God, I couldn’t *believe* Xavier’s nonchalance. “What then?”

Xavier shrugged, not meeting my eyes. “Well, it’s better for me if he doesn’t.”

The room started fading in and out of focus as white-hot anger filled me. “And how do you figure that?” I bit out. My head was actually spinning.

Xavier met my stare. “I’m going to become Alpha of the Redwood pack,” he declared, his eyes cold as he assessed me. “I was always meant to be Alpha, and it’s time I take the place in this pack that’s rightfully mine.”

Xavier turned away from me, effectively dismissing me from the conversation.

Great, this was exactly what I needed on top of the whole *due destini* thing. Not only did I have to choose between Xavier and Greyson, but now Xavier wanted to challenge Greyson to become Alpha of the pack.

I took a couple of deep breaths, trying to calm myself down. Getting worked up over Xavier’s behavior wouldn’t do me any good. This… *feud* was between him and Greyson. Right now, I had other things to worry about—like breaking this damn curse.

“I need to find Big Mac,” I said. “If Greyson doesn’t come back, then she can’t perform the spell.”

Xavier whirled around. “What are you talking about?” he hissed, eyes narrowing.

“The spell to break the curse,” I explained, refusing to be intimidated. “Both you and Greyson need to be there.”

Xavier looked at me thoughtfully. “*I’m* the one who’s here with you now.” He grabbed my shoulders and pulled me close. He gazed at me intensely, eyes aflame.

Voice low, he snarled, “Fuck the spell, Cali. Just choose me.”

I wrenched away from his grasp, not able to fully process what was happening.

Why would Greyson have left like this? How could he have gone Rogue, abandoning the pack— and me. He wouldn’t really have done that, right?

Just then, a nasty thought entered my mind. What if Greyson was doing this so that I would be forced to choose? I mean, he *had* told me to choose Xavier.

My hand curled into a fist as frustration built inside me. I didn’t *want* to be forced. That’s why I needed to break this goddamn curse once and for all. And if Greyson wasn’t going to be here, I’d find another way to break it. But first, I needed to find Big Mac.

“I’m going to go talk to Big Mac,” I told Xavier, putting my drink down on the counter. I left without waiting for his response.

I made my way through the house, searching for her, but she was nowhere to be found. Then I went outside, to check if she was there. Bingo. I spotted Big Mac and Mrs. Smith, holding hands. My heart melted at the sight, and a slight smile made its way onto my face. They were so. Freaking. Cute.

I approached them slowly. Whatever conversation they were having immediately halted as they realized I was there. Mrs. Smith gave me a soft smile, but Big Mac looked like she wanted me anywhere but here.

“I’m sorry for interrupting,” I said. “But we need to deal with the curse.”

Big Mac sighed. “Where are Xavier and Greyson?”

I let out a nervous laugh. Big Mac wasn’t going to like what I had to say, not one bit.

“About that…” I trailed off.

Big Mac arched an eyebrow, waiting for me to explain.

“Well, Greyson went off to honor Joss’s memory,” I began. “And he said he’d be back by Halloween. But then Xavier said Greyson might have gone Rogue. Though I don’t really think Greyson would just leave us like that. Still, he could get delayed or something, which brings us back to the same problem.” I caught my breath, winded from my ramble. “Basically, Greyson’s not here,” I concluded. “But surely there’s some other way? A workaround, maybe?”

I looked at Big Mac, hopeful that she’d find some way to break this stupid curse without Greyson.

She eyed me with disdain.

Maybe I shouldn’t be too hopeful.

“*Workaround?*” she asked skeptically.

“Oh, MacKenzie,” Mrs. Smith chided. “If you can help, you should.” The two of them exchanged a series of looks that made me feel as though I was watching people have a conversation in a language I didn’t understand. Finally, Mrs. Smith spoke again. “The sooner you do, the sooner she’ll leave you alone.”

Okay, *rude*. I wasn’t that annoying to be around! But if it would get Big Mac to help me, then I didn’t care what Mrs. Smith said about me.

I waited quietly while Big Mac considered Mrs. Smith’s words. After a moment, she nodded.

“Fine,” Big Mac grumbled. “I need you, Xavier, and something that belongs to Greyson.”

“Like what?” I probed.

“Something—anything—that holds his essence.”

That wasn’t exactly specific, but maybe a shirt would do? Or his cologne? His comb?

“I’ll find something,” I assured Big Mac. “Do you need anything else?”

“Did you get the herbs I asked you to gather?” she asked.

“Yes, I have them in my room.”

Big Mac hummed in approval. “Good. Make sure you bring them to me when you’re ready.”

I smiled in relief, ready and eager to get this over with.

“Thank you!” I called out, already turning toward the house to gather the supplies.

“Wait.” Big Mac reached out to me, grabbing my forearm to stop me from leaving.

She looked at me gravely. “Just remember what I told you before—there is no guarantee that this spell will work. And there’s even a chance that it will do more harm than good.”

My brow furrowed in confusion as I considered the possibilities. The worst possibility that I could imagine was the black veins turning into permanent tattoos. I could deal with that. “What kind of harm?” I asked cautiously.

“You might not survive,” Big Mac said bluntly.

*What?* My body went numb, ice filling my veins.

“If I don’t do this,” I answered quietly, “then I could die anyway. At least with this spell, I have a chance of coming out alive without hurting anyone else.”

Big Mac stared at me, her expression inscrutable. Still reeling from her warning, I hurried into the house and went upstairs.

My heart was beating frantically as Big Mac’s words kept replaying in my mind. *You might not survive.*

I entered my room, pressing my hand against my chest. It was starting to hurt as the reality of my situation dawned on me. *I could die.* But what other choice did I have? The curse, having to choose between Xavier and Greyson… It was all too much, and it was already killing me in its own way. I couldn’t just choose—not so fast and not so soon. So I’d take the chance, risks be damned.

I crossed my room and grabbed the basket of herbs that I’d placed in front of my mirror. I glanced at my reflection, taking in my hazel eyes and brown hair. If Big Mac was able to break the spell, if it worked, would it change me in ways I wouldn’t be able to see? My shoulders curved under the weight of what I was about to do. *Would I still be me?*

The sound of my door opening snapped me out of my wallowing thoughts. I glanced over my shoulder to see who it was—Xavier. He stepped inside, closing the door behind him, but didn’t make a move to come closer. His entire body was stiff, humming with barely contained tension.

“I saw you hurry upstairs,” he said, his voice gruff with concern. “Is everything alright? What’s going on?” He spotted the basket in my arms. “You talked to Big Mac?”

“Yeah,” I stammered, slightly caught off-guard by his sudden entrance. Timidly, I continued. “Big Mac said that she could still break the spell, even if Greyson isn’t here. We just need something that has his essence—like a shirt or something.”

I contemplated telling him about Big Mac’s warning, about how the spell could potentially end for me, but I decided against it. If he knew, there was no way Xavier would let me go through with the spell. I didn’t want to worry him, anyway. Even if *I* was scared shitless about the possibility of dying.

Out of nowhere, Xavier strode across the room in three powerful steps until he was right in front of me. He leaned forward, eyeing me with faint suspicion.

“If this is what you wanted, to break the curse, then why do you look so frightened?” he asked.

Tears welled up in my eyes, and my lip trembled. “Because this might be the last time I see you.”

Xavier jerked back, as if I had slapped him. “*What?*” he ground out. “Does this mean you’re not choosing me?”

I shook my head slowly. He was taking this all wrong.

I set my basket down, gently grabbed his face, and pulled him in for a kiss. Xavier responded immediately, his love and desperation coming through. Painfully, I pulled back.

Resting my forehead against his, I murmured, “No. I’m choosing to have the time and space to make a choice on *my* terms.” I sighed. “I don’t want this choice to be rushed, or made because I’m afraid to die. I want to be able to choose, and for you to know that the choice is final.”

But even as I said that, I felt sickness creeping into my stomach. I knew that feeling. It was dread. Would I really ever be able to choose, even after the curse was broken?

**Episode 926**

XAVIER

My heart sank as I processed what Cali had just said. I couldn’t help but feel disappointed by her lack of certainty in us, in our mate bond. I breathed in her scent, my eyes involuntarily closing as I got lost in her comforting presence. Cali was it for me. And it would always be Cali, I had no doubt about that. I knew I would always be hers.

I pulled back, so that she could look me in the eye. Cupping her face gently, I thumbed her cheek. So soft, so fragile, so *mine*.

“I…” I trailed off, unsure how to tell her how I felt. But she needed to know. Taking a deep breath, I continued. “I don’t want to lose you,” I said, pinning Cali with my stare. I wanted her to understand the passion—the love—that I felt for her. “I didn’t mean to make you feel worse about the entire situation. I know it must be tough, but I also know how I feel.”

I paused. My throat became rough as the truth in my words hit me. Cali was my everything.

“I want you, Cali,” I declared, my voice thick with emotion. “I want you to be mine, and only mine. And one day, I want you to be my Luna. With Silas gone, there are so many possibilities for us. This is an entirely new chapter, and I want it to be with you, as mine. Always.”

Cali opened her mouth slightly, her eyes tearing up once again, her cheeks becoming splotched.

“I don’t want to lose you, either,” she whispered fiercely, her voice breaking. She was quiet for a moment, as if she couldn’t quite bring herself to go on. She closed her eyes briefly, a tear trailing down her cheek. I couldn’t resist the urge to wipe it away.

At my touch, Cali opened her eyes. She wrapped her fingers around the wrist of the hand I was using to cup her face.

“I don’t want to lose *anyone*,” she sobbed out, her words blending together in her emotional frenzy. “And I *know* that makes me selfish, and if that makes me a horrible person…” She hiccupped. “Then I guess that’s what I am.”

*Shit.* I’d been so caught up in my want and need for Cali that I hadn’t realized how hard this must be for her. To just choose, with the threat of death looming over her. And I wasn’t making things any easier. If anything, I was making her feel like a bad person for not choosing me immediately. As much as I wanted her to choose me, pressuring her wouldn’t do us any good. I needed to give her time and space, to be supportive of her decisions. Otherwise, I’d just push her straight into Greyson’s arms.

I stared straight into her eyes. “You could never be a horrible person,” I insisted.

Cali jerked forward, coming even closer to me. “You say that now, but what if I don’t pick you?”

Her watery eyes searched mine, as if looking for the answer.

“What if I don’t make the right choice about anything?” she croaked, her face set in a seemingly permanent frown.

Wait, what? Her questions were throwing me for a loop. I knew she was torn between Greyson and me, but I’d never considered that she actually might not pick me.

Without thinking, I rushed forward, closing the distance between us. I immediately wrapped my arms around her, pulling her roughly against my chest, close to my heart. I held her like my life depended on it—because it did. Without her, life was meaningless. Without her, I was nothing.

I nuzzled close, pouring everything I was feeling into the hug. She trembled slightly in my arms, her tears wetting my shirt. The air hummed with unspoken words, both of us too choked up to speak.

*Mine*.

A beat passed, neither of us willing to let go of the other. If I could, I’d stay like this with her forever. Fuck the world, fuck the curse, fuck everyone who wasn’t Cali. She was more than enough for me.

“I’ve never thought for a second that you wouldn’t choose me,” I murmured into her hair, as I stroked her head.

And it was true. I’d never even entertained a scenario where Cali didn’t choose me. In my mind, I was just so sure of us, of our connection, of our love. And I’d thought she was sure about it, too. In the end, it was always going to be me. But after what she’d just said…

*Who fucking cares?* Even if she did the unthinkable and chose Greyson, I knew, deep in my bones, that it wouldn’t be over. Would it hurt? Fuck yes. But it wouldn’t break what I had with Cali. I wouldn’t let it. No matter who Cali chose, what path she took, I would be there, fighting for us. Because it would be us, in the end. Caliana and me.

My arms tightened around her body, which shook as she worked through another set of sobs. The way the curse was weighing on her was almost physically painful to me.

“No matter what happens tonight or tomorrow,” I said, my voice steady, “I will always fight for you, Caliana. I will never stop fighting for you.”

Slowly, her body stilled. She was no longer crying, and her breathing was slow and steady. But she didn’t say anything for several moments. She didn’t need to. I would hold her for as long as she needed me.

“I’m scared.”

I almost didn’t hear her, considering how quietly she said those two words.

My hands stilled, and I leaned back. I looked her in the eye, taking in her puffy eyes and red face. God, she was still so beautiful.

“You can do this,” I promised her. “I know you can.”

She held my stare for a second, then looked away. Her tears, her demeanor, her fear… I sensed that she was keeping something from me. Something big. I considered asking her about it, interrogating her until she told me the truth, but I decided against it. It wasn’t worth getting into a fight right now. That was the last thing she needed.

Instead, I chose to provide her with words of comfort, to show her that she was more than capable of handling this.

“You’re the strongest woman I know,” I said, my voice unwavering, my conviction total.

Cali’s brow furrowed, her ears turning red with indignation and her mouth opening to argue.

Before she could even entertain those thoughts, I swooped down and cut her off with a kiss. It started off gentle, our mouths working together in tandem. I felt her lips swell up with the increasing force of our kiss, becoming softer against my own.

She let out a whimper as her hand tangled in my hair. Without hesitation, I deepened the kiss, opening her mouth to mine with gentle pressure.

God, she felt so good. I wanted nothing more than to take her against the wall, right now. But I knew she had other things to do, like ending this curse. Reluctantly, I pulled away, breaking us apart.

I was unable to hide my smirk when I saw how breathless she was. Her cheeks tinged pink from arousal. It took everything I had to keep myself from kissing her again.

Still smirking, I asked, “Are you ready?”

Cali nodded, catching her breath. Without saying anything, she picked up the basket with all the herbs. God, there were so many of them.

“Big Mac told you to get all of this?” I asked. There had to be at least twenty different herbs in there.

She nodded again, pursing her lips as she thought about something.

“And I guess we also need something of Greyson’s, since he’s not here,” she mused, clearly frustrated. “But what are we supposed to get? A shirt? A sock? A lock of his hair?”

“How should I know?” I said. It wasn’t like I knew what the witch needed.

Cali gave me a hard glare. “Well, put your thinking cap on!” she snapped. “This has to work.”

Well, if she insisted. But as I thought about Greyson and what object could represent him, I came up short.

“My brother is a lot of things,” I said, “but sentimentality doesn’t seem to run in the Evers family.”

Cali swore colorfully at me, which made me laugh. She was so cute when she got worked up.

“It’s not funny!” Cali bellowed as she stormed out of her room.

Maybe it wasn’t funny to her, but it definitely was to me. But Cali was serious about this, and I wanted to be supportive.

Sighing, I followed her to Greyson’s room, pushing the door open to see Cali rifling through Greyson’s things. She was digging through his dresser, grabbing a random shirt.

As I entered, my senses picked up on another wolf’s scent—Ravi. Huh, that was weird. I briefly wondered why he’d come into Greyson’s room.

Cali barreled past me, heading into the bathroom. I quietly followed and watched her grab Greyson’s razor, toothbrush, and a tub of hair clay.

I shook my head in disbelief. She was making a complete mess of things as she grabbed and tossed various objects in her quest to find something that held his “essence”. *Gross.*

Once her basket was filled to the brim with Greyson’s things, I interrupted her hunt.

“That’s probably enough,” I said.

She mumbled in agreement, then left the room to go find Big Mac. I trailed close behind.

Together, we found Big Mac with Mrs. Smith and Steinar. They were all standing by a small pyre, which was dancing with flames. They immediately looked up when they saw us making our way toward them.

Big Mac glared at Cali. “What took you so long?”

Cali glanced at me, her cheeks flushing pink again, and I thought about our kiss.

Shaking her head and not waiting for an answer, Big Mac came forward and took Cali’s hand. Her initial irritation was replaced by obvious concern.

She peered intently into Cali’s eyes. “Before we begin, I need to know—are you ready for this?”

**Episode 927**

I blinked at Big Mac, processing her words. Her stare was unwavering as she waited for my response.

“Of course she’s ready,” Xavier said harshly, before I could answer. “Why else would she be here?”

Big Mac swiveled and pinned Xavier with a glare.

“I’m not asking you,” she snapped. “Cali’s fully capable of answering for herself.”

Big Mac turned back to face me. I knew why she was asking me multiple times if I was ready. This spell could break the curse—or it could kill me. She just wanted to make sure I understood the risks, but Xavier didn’t know that. Mainly because I hadn’t told him. But I knew if I had, he wouldn’t have let me go through with this, which was the last thing I wanted.

At that thought, I knew I was ready. Despite the fact that I might not survive, I knew I’d rather die trying than be forced to make a choice without being ready. I didn’t want to rush into a decision and hurt everyone any more than I already had. I needed the time and space to make the decision, without this damn curse getting in my way.

I squared my shoulders and met Big Mac’s gaze. “I’m ready.”

Big Mac eyed me for a little longer. “You understand that once we start, there’s no turning back. There’s no stopping.”

I took a deep breath, a sense of calm washing over me. I wouldn’t be able to change my mind once we started, but I knew I wouldn’t want to. It was now or never.

“Yes, I get it,” I assured Big Mac, my voice steadier than it had been all day. “I just want to get this over with.”

Big Mac searched my eyes for a beat. Satisfied with whatever she saw, she nodded to herself.

She bent down to go through the basket I’d brought. Unscrewing each jar and opening each packet, she threw the herbs one by one into the fire she had lit. The flames hissed and sizzled in response, growing higher with each added ingredient.

Once she had unloaded all of the materials into the fire, Big Mac turned to Xavier.

“Step forward and hold out your hand over the fire,” she barked, still focused on the fire.

I watched as Big Mac mumbled some words underneath her breath. It sounded like some kind of incantation, but I couldn’t make out the individual words.

Then, using the razor that I’d grabbed from Greyson’s room, Big Mac jerked forward and sliced Xavier’s palm. Xavier, unprepared and unwarned, winced as his blood dripped into the fire. The fire seemed to gobble it up, eager for more. Big Mac pushed Xavier aside, then dropped Greyson’s razor into the fire.

There was a flash of bright-red light, which made me squeeze my eyes shut as I cowered away from the spreading heat. After a moment, the burst of flames dissipated. I opened my eyes, only to see pink smoke drifting from the fire.

I glanced at Xavier. The cut across his palm was already looking so much better—thank god for werewolf healing powers. Xavier was focused on the fire, his brow furrowed as he watched Big Mac continue with her spell.

Big Mac doused the fire with water, then stooped down and picked up a piece of coal from the ashes. She beckoned me forward.

I slowly walked over to her.

“You need to strip,” Big Mac told me. “Take off all your clothes.”

My mouth popped open as shock rippled through me.

“*Here?*” I squeaked, my voice high with disbelief and embarrassment.

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Just do it, girl.”

Casting a doubtful eye at Big Mac, I took off my clothes, starting with my shirt. I followed suit with my pants, bra, and underwear. What was it with supernatural beings and being naked? Didn’t they ever get cold? Or self-conscious? Considering I had an audience, it took everything I had to resist covering myself, or my stretch marks. I avoided everyone’s eyes and just stared at the ground. This was horrifying. I silently prayed for Big Mac to be done with whatever this was soon. I shivered slightly in the breeze.

Why did this stupid curse have to have a Halloween deadline? Couldn’t the deadline have been during the summer, like on the Fourth of July or something? It was too damn cold to be standing outdoors butt-naked. Nothing about this was even remotely acceptable.

Big Mac approached me. She began to trace my veins from the curse with the piece of charcoal, still warm from the fire. It left tracts of ash on my skin, the lines burning in response to Big Mac’s chanting.

I hissed in pain, recoiling slightly. My mind started to go fuzzy, my vision blurring in and out of focus. I tried in vain to reach out to Xavier, afraid of what was happening, but he remained out of reach. The world seemed to rush past me, and I was pulled into some other place…

For one crystal-clear moment, I heard Big Mac’s chanting and was aware of the outside world, and Xavier nearby. The next, those things all faded out of existence, and I was greeted by a vision of delicate women, all twirling and jumping all around me. *Dancers.*

I tried to rub away the haziness that clouded my mind, but it was no use. It was like I was there and not there, at the same time. There was some sort of disconnect between my mind and my body, as my movements were slurred, and my tongue felt heavy in my mouth. It was almost like I was in a dream, but I was aware of it.

Slowly turning my head, I surveyed myself and my surroundings. A swatch of red caught my eye, and I realized that I was dressed in a ruby-red gown that seemed to glow in the darkness. I lifted my hand in front of my face, feeling an infantile sense of wonder at the beautiful, shimmering bell sleeves. I giggled slightly, happy to be back. I knew this place.

“Come dance with us,” a woman called, her voice soft and light.

Blinking slowly, I smiled at the woman. I knew her. I looked at all of the dancers—I knew all of them. I sighed contentedly. I’d missed them. I’d missed being here.

I felt a yawn pass through me. Gently, I lay down, curling into myself. *There is no danger here. The dancers will keep me safe.*

I closed my eyes, fully intending to sleep. But every time I was about to doze off, a sound woke me up. I could hear wolves howling, trees rustling, owls hooting… It was the sound of the forest, and it refused to let me sleep.

Then, suddenly, I heard laughter. Music. Startled, I jerked up, opening my eyes wide, and looked around. Where was that sound coming from?

As I looked around, a gasp escaped me. It was my pack! And they were surrounded by the dancers! I watched them move, their bodies reaching and twisting as one. Oh, how I wished I could move like them, look like them—so beautiful and joyous and graceful.

I wanted nothing more than to join them. So that was what I decided to do. I scrambled up, my red gown glimmering in the light of the fire. But just as I was about to join the circle, I heard a growl. I turned around. Slowly, a group of wolf faces came into focus—Xavier, Greyson, a one-eyed Jay, Colton, Maya, Joss, Violet, and even Mrs. Smith. They were all in their wolf forms, eyeing me and snarling loudly. My heart beat erratically as I stood there, unsure.

Xavier and Greyson came forward, their paws moving in unison. Once they were in front of me, they shifted back into their human forms. They were almost luminescent, the flames playing on their faces, in their eyes. As I approached them, my lips curved into a sad smile. I reached up and caressed each of their cheeks. God, I loved them so much, it truly hurt. My heart ached as I thought about how much they meant to me.

All of a sudden, I doubled over as the ache from my chest—my *heart*—spread all over. I groaned in pain, releasing their cheeks as I stumbled away from them. I stared in horror at my arms. The black veins were spreading, moving like snakes underneath my skin.

I opened my mouth to scream, to ask for help, but then my voice was cut off. Instead, the black snakes slithered up my throat and out of my mouth. I gagged as they fell to the ground and scattered away, hissing.

I bent over, breathing heavily, tears pricking at my eyes. *Xavier. Greyson.* Needing them for comfort, I reached out, but I found myself unable to touch them, to feel them. All I felt was empty air, and sobs overtook me.

In a flash, I was back in the real world.

My lungs screamed in pain as my body searched for air. My breaths were rapid and jerky, just like my heartbeat. I was practically hyperventilating.

My eyes drank in the sight of the smoldering fire, Xavier, Big Mac, Mrs. Smith, and Steinar. I reminded myself that I was back, and in one piece. It took me a moment to get my bearings.

“How do you feel?” Mrs. Smith ventured.

I didn’t know how to answer her. I glanced at the ground, almost expecting to see the black snakes. I shivered at the thought. Was I cured? Had the spell worked? I didn’t feel different.

When I said nothing, Xavier reached for me. But as he came closer, the ground began to shake, and the world spun. I gagged as my chest was suddenly rocked by terrible pain. I grabbed at it in agony and opened my mouth in a silent scream, begging for it to stop.

Then, with a gasp, I collapsed onto the ground, the world fading away around me.

**Episode 928**

GREYSON

I stared at Fenrir, my mind racing as I tried to do some mental math. Why the fuck was math suddenly so hard? I was no expert in kids—far from it—so I didn’t necessarily have a real grasp on what age a young kid like him would be. But the little guy was small. He could be three, right? Or not? Two? Did three-year-olds talk?

I was in way over my head here.

What the hell would it mean if that boy was my son?

Would Maren really have kept the truth from me all this time? I knew the answer to that: of course she would have—she was cunning and manipulative. She’d probably want to use the kid as a pawn for whatever weird ploy…

But could this really be my kid?

“Fenrir is four years old,” Maren said, finally speaking up.

My heart started racing. What the *hell?* I mulled over the possibilities. Being a father would change everything. What would it mean for Cali and me? I couldn’t imagine that me having a son with another woman—another Fae, at that—would convince my mate that we were right for each other. Then again, I didn’t want her to be convinced of anything if it meant forcing her hand.

This was a fucking mess.

I’d never expected to be a father, especially not like *this*. With *Maren*.

I stared at Fenrir, who was still looking at me shyly, hiding behind his mother’s leg. I studied him closely—did he look like me? He was a handsome little thing, with thick curly hair and wide eyes. The moment his gaze met mine, I was hit by a scent.

Fenrir was a werewolf.

I could feel Maren scrutinizing me, staring at my face without blinking. She had to be cataloguing my every emotion. Clenching my jaw, I said, “I think you and I need to talk.”

Maren sighed. She turned to Fenrir, caressing his head. “Mommy’s gonna be right over there, okay?” she told him in a gentle tone. “Why don’t you play, sweetie?”

At least she didn’t seem like a shit mom. Maybe she was pretending? But the kid was clean and nicely-dressed, and he seemed to be doing okay. He looked up at Maren. “Okay, Momma.”

Were kids always this cute? I didn’t usually like them. Then again, I was never really around them at all. Fenrir proceeded to pick up a nearby stick and some stones. Maren seemed like a good parent, one of which I’d never had as a child. I could see it in Fenrir’s eyes—he loved her. I’d been terrified of even *breathing* too loudly around Silas.

Maren walked toward me. The way she moved was still hypnotizing. Alluring to a disturbing degree. I could see why I’d fallen for her all those years ago—it would’ve been impossible not to. But that made me all the more wary of her, all the more distrustful after she’d stabbed me in the back. Or the front, but semantics.

“We do need to talk, Greyson. You’re right about that.” Maren paused in front of me, leaving three feet between us. The kid was hanging back, still staring at us while he played with the stick, a pile of rocks at his feet, but at least now he wasn’t within earshot. He wouldn’t understand the conversation anyway.

Trying to make sense of everything without freaking out, I looked Maren right in the eye and cut right to the chase. “Is Fenrir my son?”

The Fae smiled at me softly. Then, she shook her head. “No.”

I couldn’t let myself be relieved. Not yet. “Why should I believe you?” I asked.

“Do you think I would have kept something like that from you?” she asked. She looked hurt, which was fucking *rich*.

“Of course I do,” I scoffed. “You betrayed me once, and I have no doubt you’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

Maren’s beautiful face twisted into sadness. There’d been a time when my fucking heart would have broken at a sight like this. But that had been a long time ago.

Now, I had Cali. I had my true mate, and she’d shown me the difference between real romantic love and love that was more like an obsessive, unhealthy infatuation. That was what Maren had been for me.

I wouldn’t fall for her games again.

“I wish you would listen to me,” Maren said, swallowing thickly. “I truly never meant for you to come to any harm.”

I was properly riled up, now. I didn’t trust this woman for a second. I kept glancing at Fenrir, a few feet behind us. He was having fun with the stick, smacking a large rock with it. Little dude was showing that rock who was boss.

Something weird twisted in my stomach at the sight.

“Greyson, look at me,” Maren said, drawing my attention back to her. “I meant it when I said that I’ve regretted what happened ever since.”

I shook my head, huffing. “I don’t want to hear it. I’ve never cared about your excuses, and I won’t start now. Especially not after you drop a bomb like that.” I gestured at Fenrir, tiny slayer of rocks. “If I’m not your son’s father, then who is?”

Maren sighed. “It isn’t important.”

I glared at her. “You don’t see why it’s important that I know who the father of this *four*-year-old is? Seriously?”

Maren pressed her lips together, rubbing her forehead. She looked so remorseful, so melancholy and pretty, that if things had gone down differently between us, I would’ve been a sucker for it. There was something about her vulnerability that would tug at any man’s heartstrings.

This woman was trouble.

“After everything that happened with you,” Maren said, “I was devastated. In a terrible place. I…” She swallowed, glancing at me. “I was with someone else, not long afterward.”

That sounded like a really shitty thing to do. It made it sound like she either had been grieving for us or that I’d never mattered to her. I couldn’t quite believe her.

“Fenrir is half-werewolf, Maren,” I said impatiently. “I can tell.”

​Maren looked awkward. She cringed. “I guess I have a type.”

“Oh…” I trailed off. “So that’s your thing. You like fucking werewolves. It’s a fetish. I was just a fetish to you. An itch to scratch.”

She flinched. “Of *course not*. I loved you, Greyson.”

My head was still spinning. Bitterness settled in my mouth. “Right. You loved me so much that you moved on with the next werewolf available. Figures that it was so easy for you.”

“It wasn’t like that!” Maren said, shaking her head. She moved closer, reaching out to touch my hand. I winced back. I wasn’t going to let her put her hands on me.

“I don’t want to hear a word that comes out of your—”

“It wasn’t easy to move on from you, Greyson. The way I felt about you was—”

“*Stop*,” I growled, cutting her off. “I don’t need to hear any more of your excuses.”

She eyed me, her gaze becoming sharper. “They’re not excuses. I’m telling the truth.”

I shook my head, glancing between her and Fenrir, who was now hugging the rock he’d been attacking with his stick. He was petting it and calling it his buddy. Apparently the rock had become the kid’s pet now.

This whole thing was fucking surreal.

“Greyson,” Maren started again. “You need to listen—”

“No, *you* need to listen and answer my questions,” I said, determined not to let her suck me into her vortex. “If Fenrir isn’t my son, then how the hell do you explain this little rendezvous, Maren?”

“You think I somehow planned this? Fenrir isn’t exactly welcome in the Fae world, being half-werewolf,” Maren mumbled, glancing at her kid. “And besides, Fenrir’s father is in the human world.”

She was evading. She’d always known how to do that. “None of what you said explains why you’re here now—why you found me in the woods.”

“This is a complete coincidence. I take him out of the city, to stretch our legs, to let him explore the werewolf side of himself,” Maren said. “I never expected to see you here. And I didn’t expect,” she inhaled sharply, “that even after all these years, the guilt hasn’t gone away.”

I stared at her suspiciously. “So what, now you’d like to just apologize and be on your way?”

She shook her head. “I’ve been building my life back up, Greyson. Making amends is part of that, and I’d like to. I’ve thought about you so many times.”

I snorted. I didn’t believe a word of this. “I won’t be part of your little self-improvement project, Maren. You’re going to have to learn to keep living with your guilt,” I said. It was harsh, but I couldn’t hold it in. “I opened my heart to you once, and you destroyed it—I’m never opening it to you again. I’ve moved on and so should you.”

Maren swallowed thickly. “You’ve moved on?”

I thought of Cali. My woman. My mate.

She was the only person in my heart.

But then, out of the blue, my heart started hurting.

*What the fuck?*

“Greyson? You look pale,” Maren said, but I wasn’t listening. I clutched at my chest. The ache in it became so immense that I groaned, falling to my knees.

Something had to be going on with the curse.

“*Cali*,” I rasped, repeating her name over and over again in my head, and then…

The world went black.

**Episode 929**

XAVIER

I woke up on the ground, dry-heaving. I must’ve passed out after that terrible pain in my chest. The world was still hazy, and the dull ache in my heart was accompanied by a similar one in my head. I blinked rapidly, looking around for Cali.

She was lying on the ground, unconscious. *Shit.* I immediately sat up, ready to go to her, to make sure she was breathing. But the world swayed around me, and the ache in my head worsened.

“Cali, sweetheart,” Mrs. Smith was saying, bent over my mate. She caressed Cali’s head. The worry in her expression was evident. “Can you hear me? Please wake up.”

Clenching my fists, I forced myself to stand. I shook my head, shaking off the daze before I moved toward Cali. I looked up at Mrs. Smith, my voice shaking. “Is she breathing?”

The moment the words left my mouth, I had to fight off panic. What would I do if the spell didn’t work? What would I do if I lost her? How the fuck would I tell Greyson?

If Cali died, we’d blame each other. We’d kill each other.

I’d never been more certain about anything in my life.

“She’s breathing,” Mrs. Smith replied, putting a stop to my frantic, fucked-up musings. I let out a huge sigh of relief when I saw Cali’s chest rise. She was just unconscious. She was alive. I could keep on living, too.

I pulled her head onto my lap and stroked her cheeks with the back of my hand before kissing her forehead. “I’m here, baby,” I whispered, and she stirred. My eyes followed her movement, and I saw her chest—the veins on it had disappeared! Did that mean the curse was broken?

The relief I felt was so powerful it made me dizzy. What did this mean? Had she already made her choice? I was here, next to her, while Greyson had run off, so could this mean what I wanted it to? I couldn’t wait for her to wake up, to kiss her, to talk to her about our future.

But my hopes were crushed when I glanced down at my own chest.

The veins were still there, as strong as ever.

They throbbed and twisted underneath the surface, as if determined to keep spreading.

*Fuck.*

I was certain that this wasn’t over. None of it. I looked up to see Big Mac staring at me gravely, like someone had died. “What does this mean?” I asked her, gesturing at my chest. My tone was gruff. I felt exhausted, broken down.

“I have no idea,” Big Mac said quietly. “I told you both that this wasn’t a guaranteed deal. ​That spell has been around for centuries—this is new territory for me, too.”

I bit the inside of my cheek hard enough to taste blood. “If something happens to Cali…”

I couldn’t finish my sentence. My mate thrashed in my arms. She was still out of it but agitated, shaking. It was like she was caught in a nightmare or under a trance she couldn’t fucking escape.

“Cali, you gotta wake up!” I said louder, more urgently, trying to shake her out of it. Despair gnawed at my stomach when Cali murmured something. Panting, I leaned down to figure out what she was saying.

“No…” Her tone was agonized. Her brow was furrowed, and she started shaking even harder. “No, please!” Her voice got louder, her shivers worse. “*Please*! Don’t make me choose! I can’t do it!”

My mate was shivering in my hands, in some sort of fucked-up trance, her eyes still closed. My heart was breaking into a million goddamn pieces. Her agony made me realize that there was no way that she was any closer to making any kind of choice. I felt gutted. Hopes shattered, and all that bullshit.

“She’s hurting,” I whispered, watching her writhe. The realization made me hurt too, and I looked up at Big Mac. It was hard not to shout. “She’s hurting! How can we wake her up?”

Mrs. Smith winced, patting my back. “Xavier—”

“No!” I snapped, pinning Big Mac with my gaze. “We need to pull her out of whatever dark place she’s in!”

For the first time ever, Big Mac shot me a helpless look. “I told you that I have no idea what’s happening here, Xavier. You and I are in the same boat here.”

Steinar nodded sagely. “Magic’s will is magic’s will. We just have to let this play out.”

My chest ached, but my fury overpowered everything else. This was *bullshit.*

“I refuse to believe that,” I said gruffly. I pointed at Cali, still unconscious and shivering in my arms. “Don’t you see that she’s suffering? We can’t let this go on—there must be something we can do!”

I leaned back over Cali and caressed her trembling cheek. She looked so pale. “Come back, Caliana… I need you here with me.”

Cali’s breathing evened out, and for a brief moment, I was certain that everything was better. But then she started thrashing in earnest, her face twisting up in pain. The sounds she made, so guttural and agonizing, were like a wounded animal’s. I couldn’t stand it. I pulled her fully into my lap, wrapping my arms around her. I hoped, *prayed*, for her shaking to stop. Cradling her as closely as I could, I whispered in her ear, anything and everything I could think of to comfort her.

“It’s me, Xavier…

“I won’t let anything happen to you…

“I love you so much, please don’t leave me…

“Please fight through this, Cali…

“What the hell will I do without you?

“Come back to me. Please, please come back to me, please—”

Cali suddenly stiffened and stilled. I had a moment of full-blown panic, the veins on my chest seizing so hard I couldn’t breathe.

“Cali? CALI!” I shouted, shaking her. But then she moved. Finally, she moved. She shivered, her body jolting forward with a sharp gasp.

She was alive.

My mate was here.

“Cali,” I said breathlessly, squeezing her tight.

“Xavier!” she choked out, looking around wildly. She was still gasping for air when she asked, “What—what happened?”

Almost laughing with relief, I wiped my nose with the back of my hand. “It’s okay now. You’re back…” I pulled her into a hug, burying my face in her hair.

Her scent, the sound of her breaths made me delirious with happiness.

“Xavier.” She said my name again and again, hugging me back tightly. I faced her, cradling her face in my hands before leaning in to kiss her forehead. She was crying.

“Don’t cry, baby,” I said, wiping her tears. “You’re okay.”

Her breathing started to even out properly. She looked around again, at a worried Steinar, and a speechless Mrs. Smith and Big Mac. And then, suddenly, realization dawned on her features. She looked between me and Big Mac. “Did it work?”

She quickly looked down at herself, desperately wiping the charcoal from her skin. Fresh tears spilled from her eyes, but this time, her cry was one of happiness. “The veins are gone!” she gasped out. “Xavier, look!”

But as she turned to me, full of excitement, her smile fell.

“Xavier…” Her voice breaking, she raised her hand and touched my chest in dismay. She sniffled, her eyes wide and searching when they met mine. “What does this mean?”

I shook my head ruefully. “I have no idea.” I stroked her cheek.

I was so fucking happy she was okay, I didn’t even care about the rest of it right now.

“But it has to be a good thing that the veins on your chest are gone,” I told her. “Maybe that means that at least you’re out of danger.”

And that was good enough for me. Always.

“No, that wasn’t the goal here!” Cali exclaimed. Full of fire and so beautiful, she turned to Big Mac. “What’s going on? What happens now?”

Big Mac sighed. “Cali…”

When the witch trailed off, Cali turned to Steinar. “Steinar! Please, say something!”

The gargoyle’s expression was sad. He opened his mouth to speak, but then…

The ground shook with a *POP!*

Instinctively, I reached out and covered Cali, protecting her from whatever the fuck this was. *Who*ever the fuck this was—this dark-haired woman dressed in red who’d just suddenly appeared.

The woman glared at Cali. “*You!*”

“Hypatia!” Steinar gasped out, taking a step away from her. But the woman waved a hand, and he froze. Was she a witch? As I inhaled, I caught something else. Vampire?

I was about to shift and tear her into fucking pieces either way, but then Big Mac stepped up. “Leave. This is my territory,” Big Mac declared, with Mrs. Smith standing tall beside her.

The witch, Hypatia, took in the scene before her. She looked between Big Mac and Cali, at the fire and the charcoal. And then she stared at me. She stared at the veins on my chest before she let out a gasp. “You performed the Anathema spell? *What have you done?*”

**Episode 930**

Xavier helped me get to my feet while Hypatia glared at us. What the hell was she doing here? Then again, maybe I should have expected her earlier. Steinar had said that she was pretty intense about her due dates.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I demanded. “How did you know that we did that spell? Whatever it’s called?”

Hypatia rolled her eyes at me. *Rude*.

“It’s pretty obvious, given the fire.” She gestured at it. “And the veins,” she continued, pointing at Xavier. She wrinkled her nose in contempt. “But what were you thinking? You should have consulted me. You have no idea how dangerous it is.”

“Look, lady—” Xavier started, but I’d had enough of the witch’s condescension.

“Of course we knew how dangerous it is!” I declared. “But I didn’t have a choice! You told me yourself that if I didn’t choose by Halloween, I would die! And so would Xavier and Greyson!”

Hypatia looked me dead in the eye. “You *still* haven’t chosen?” she asked sternly.

I felt like bursting into tears.

“Of course not,” I said. “I can’t choose. No one understands how difficult this decision is!”

“Cali, calm down…” Xavier caressed my shoulder, but it did no good.

“Don’t you get it?” I asked Hypatia. “I can’t fucking choose right now, and I don’t want to hurt anyone. That’s why we were desperate enough to do the spell—we thought that it would remove the curse of the veins and we’d be free of a death-filled time limit!”

Hypatia looked at me with a deadpan expression. “That spell doesn’t remove curses, you foul-mouthed child. It just redirects them.”

Xavier and I exchanged a look. “Redirects them?” I asked, panicked. “What does that mean?”

I could feel Big Mac’s eyes on me as Hypatia explained. “It means that the curse itself has been redirected away from you—”

“Well, that’s great news then, isn’t it?” Xavier cut in, squeezing my hand. I’d never thought that I’d ever use the word “adorable” to describe Xavier. But there he was, and he was fucking *adorable.* I would die for him. Literally.

Hypatia eyed the veins on Xavier’s chest, and her expression was dark. “It’s great news for Cali, but by just looking at you… this means that when she chooses, the unchosen mate will die.”

For a second, everything around me stopped.

*Surely, she’s mistaken. It’s a joke. It’s a bad lie. It’s—*

“WHAT?” I marched up to Hypatia, fighting to control my screeching. “Just like that? *Boom?* They’ll just drop dead?”

Hypatia nodded somberly.

Now, I really *was* screeching. “ON HALLOWEEN? *IN FOUR DAYS?*”

Hypatia didn’t even bat an eye as she circled Xavier. “No. Now that the curse has been removed from you, the timeline no longer matters. All that matters is that once you choose, the mate you leave behind will—”

“*Die?*” I choked the word out.

“Pretty much,” Hypatia said lightly. She turned to Steinar. “Why does she need me to repeat everything? Was I not clear the first time?”

Steinar said something to appease her, but I wasn’t listening. My head felt like it was ready to explode. I couldn’t endure losing either Xavier or Greyson, and now it sounded like their lives were quite literally in my hands. I didn’t want this.

I couldn’t deal with this.

I could never—*fucking ever*—choose between them, much more so now that the choice would result in someone’s death!

“If you know so much,” I snapped at Hypatia, “perhaps you could have told me all this earlier, before I dove in and started doing spells!”

Hypatia shrugged lazily. “Last time I checked, I didn’t owe you anything.” She eyed me. “In fact, you *stole* something from me that’s now long overdue.” Her gaze fell on the spell book. Her voice became so guttural that I shuddered. “That is *mine.*”

Steinar leapt forward to stand in front of me. Hypatia glared at him. “This isn’t my fault!” he said. “I’ve been doing everything I can to get the books back.”

Hypatia scoffed right in his face. “This idiot child pretended to be your friend, and you forgot your obligations, Steinar!”

“Hey!” I barked. “I didn’t pretend—I am his friend!”

“You’d better watch the way you talk about my mate,” Xavier growled at Hypatia, but she rolled her eyes and ignored us all.

She raised both her hands, and I heard a *WHOOSH!* sound from behind me. The journal had zoomed through the woods and into the witch’s hands. A second later, the spell book leapt out of Big Mac’s grip. I realized she’d been hiding it behind her back, but her trick was no match for Hypatia. If she could overpower Big Mac so easily, who knew what other abilities Hypatia had?

How freaking old was this witch?

“Ah, yes. Finally.” Hypatia gave a satisfied nod once both books were in her hands. Before any of us could react, Hypatia touched Steinar’s shoulder. The second she did, both of them disappeared right before our eyes with a loud *POP!*

For a moment, I was just too stunned to speak. But then, when I realized what had just happened, I gasped.

“Oh my god!” I turned to Big Mac. “We needed that book for Lola’s spell!”

Big Mac raised an eyebrow at me, returning to her usual badass self. “I didn’t trust that the book would stay in our hands for too long. Lola has a photo of it, and I took the liberty of making a copy of the spell as well.”

I exhaled in relief. “You’re a genius.”

“I know,” Big Mac deadpanned. “What about the things that ancient hag said, though?”

The weight of Hypatia’s words sank in.

*No! This can’t be happening, not after all we went through, not after how much we tried, no!* I thought. At the same time, trees behind us started spinning, my vision getting blurry.

“Cali!” Xavier grabbed me before I could fall. “Where does it hurt?”

I looked up at him. He was so beautiful, so sweet, and oh my god, all that *character growth?* How could I ever resist that? My grumpy asshole mate had become my knight in shining armor, and I couldn’t even…

I couldn’t even pick him, not when my heart was torn in half.

“I’m… I’m just exhausted,” I said, sniffling. “I’m sorry for everything, I don’t—”

Xavier picked me up, no questions asked. He mumbled something that sounded like a thank you to Big Mac as I wrapped my arms around his neck and buried my face in the crook of it.

For a moment, I enjoyed the safe feeling of his strong arms around me. But then the guilt took over.

*This is all my fault*, I thought, shivering.

Xavier climbed the stairs, carrying me up to my bedroom and then into the bathroom. He carefully set me down on the side of the tub and began to tenderly wipe off the remaining charcoal from my chest with a washcloth.

Still feeling numb, I sat there. I didn’t say anything—what could I say? *I’m sorry I’m doing this to you? I’m sorry the curse picked us to fuck with? I’m sorry that I’m starting to realize exactly why Cassandra wanted to just… die?*

“Cali,” Xavier murmured, placing the washcloth in the sink. “Look at me.”

I kept staring at the ground.

I couldn’t face him.

But then he cradled my cheeks in his hands and searched my gaze. “Are you feeling any better?”

My numbness was easily broken by a fresh wave of tears. There were a few sobs thrown into the mix, too, and honestly, I hated myself. I hated everything, but at this point, I hated myself the most—I’d tried to fix the curse, and now it was a million times worse.

“How could I possibly be feeling okay, Xavier?” I asked, my voice breaking as I wiped my wet cheeks. “Hypatia just said that whoever I don’t choose will die! This is so fucking unfair that I—”

“Shh.” Xavier kissed the top of my head. “Look at the upside here: Hypatia also said that you don’t have to choose by Halloween anymore.”

“Oh my god!” I cried, sobbing so hard that my body was shaking. “Since when do you look at the upside of things? STOP BEING SO UNDERSTANDING!”

Xavier stared at me, alarmed. “*What?*”

“It just reminds me of all your growth and I just—I love you so much!” I kept crying, and I could have sworn he laughed a little as he shushed me again, squeezing me tighter.

“But I don’t want Greyson to die,” I said, sniffling. “I don’t want anyone to die.”

Xavier nodded, his mouth a thin line. “We’ll find a way out of this.”

More tears dropped from my eyes. “How? Everything’s worse now. There’s no chance I will *ever* choose between the two of you if it means that one of you will die! Give me a tissue—you’re beautiful, and I’ve covered you in snot.”

Pressing his lips together, Xavier gave me a tissue. I blew my nose loudly. But then I continued tearing up as I kept talking. “And who knows when Greyson will be back? He doesn’t even know about any of this!”

Xavier stared at me. “Cali,” he said somberly. “I don’t think Greyson is ever coming back.”

**Episode 931**

GREYSON

When I woke up, my head was pounding. The first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was a bunch of trees. What just happened? Had I passed out? All I could remember was thinking about Cali, then there’d been a pain in my chest, and then… nothing?

I shuddered at the possibility of something happening to Cali. I fought to sit up, but my head felt murky. Had I passed out because I’d sensed that Cali was in danger? Was that what this was about? Or was it the curse… Could it be that Cali had chosen Xavier?

The second the thought formed in my head, more pain seared right through my chest. It was a testament, loud and fucking clear, to the fact that no matter what I said, no matter what I did, I didn’t want Cali to choose anyone other than me.

I grunted, falling back, cursing the curse, and my luck, and everything else.

“Greyson!” Maren suddenly appeared above me. She gasped when she examined my chest. I glanced down and saw that the veins were still there, stronger than ever. *Fuck*.

“What’s this?” Maren frowned, looking worried as she dropped to her knees by my side.

“How long was I out?” I asked groggily.

“A split second,” she replied. “Now, answer my question: what are these veins?” Tentatively, she placed her hand on my chest, barely making contact. “This is powerful dark magic. What have you gotten yourself into, Grey?” Her voice cracked at the question. She looked at me with so much concern and care… It was the same look she’d given me when she’d asked me not to fight.

And I’d gone ahead and done it anyway.

“Greyson, talk to me,” Maren pressed. “Maybe there’s something I can do to help. You can trust me.”

I wouldn’t have trusted Maren if she were the last Fae on earth.

Just then, a little voice asked, “Momma, is the tall man dead?”

I looked ahead. Fenrir stood ten feet away from us, holding his rock lovingly. Having my *aliveness* judged by a toddler who had just chosen a rock as his pet was beyond ridiculous. How the fuck was this my life?

“No, sweetie. See? He’s okay.” Maren gestured at me as I sat up, grunting. “Go play, I’ll be right over,” she told Fenrir. The kid nodded, about to run away when Maren yelled, “And stay where I can see you!”

Grumbling to his rock, Fenrir stayed within Maren’s line of sight. She sighed deeply, in a way that I was sure only mothers sighed, and then turned to face me. “I asked you something.”

I’d never trust Maren. But she had a—by all appearances—pretty normal kid now, so maybe she’d become less of a backstab-y nightmare. Plus, I had to admit that it was possible she’d be able to help, given her grounding in Fae magic. It was worth a try.

Mostly because I had nothing to lose at this point.

I sighed. “Maybe I have a type, too.”

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

I felt uncomfortable talking about this with Maren, but I needed to spill if I wanted to give her a chance to help. “I found my mate not too long ago.”

“Oh,” Maren said slowly. “Your mate.”

I ignored the way her face just fell—what was that about?—and nodded. “But it’s complicated. She’s Fae.”

Maren arched an eyebrow. “*Oh*.”

“But that’s not all.” I cleared my throat. “She’s also mated to my brother.”

Maren stared at me, wide-eyed and shocked. “I didn’t even know that was possible.”

“Yeah, me neither. It’s called *due destini*. It’s an unbelievable mess, obviously,” I said dryly. “I mean, I heard stories about that kind of thing growing up, but I always thought they were fairytales.”

Maren shook her head at me, like a disapproving mom. I glanced behind her. Fenrir seemed to have had a falling out with his rock, because he was back to beating it with a stick.

“You should know better than most that some fairytales are real, Greyson,” Maren told me seriously, regaining my attention.

I snorted. “I guess you’re right. But having two mates isn’t natural. Cali, my mate, she was cursed. And it spread to my brother and me.”

Maren narrowed her eyes at me. “Not natural?”

“Obviously,” I scoffed.

“Love isn’t as straightforward as you werewolves like to pretend it is,” Maren said. She leaned a little closer to me. It was hard not to notice how perfectly shaped her lips were. How thick her eyelashes were…

“It’s not usually easy to find your one true soulmate and be together forever,” Maren said.

She looked deeply into my eyes. I had to look the hell away from the emotion I saw in hers. What kind of game was she playing? Or was it not a game? Was I still dizzy from passing out? Was I just imagining things?

I cleared my throat, avoiding eye contact. “So yeah, I’m cursed. And there’s not really anything that you can help with, I guess. Cali has to pick one of us by Halloween. If she doesn’t, then the three of us will die.”

Maren gasped, wide-eyed. “But that’s in four days!”

I sighed. “Yeah, I think I’m running out of time, and that was what my little episode just then was about.”

Maren kept staring at me with wide eyes as we both got to our feet. Then realization dawned on her features. “Greyson, wait—there actually might be something I can do.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Or I at least have some information that you’ll want to hear.”

After what happened, I needed all the help I could get. “Go on.”

“Back when I first realized that I was falling in love with you—”

I scoffed. “We both know you never gave a fuck, Maren.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Would you let me speak?” she asked me. It was hard to take her seriously when a few feet behind her, Fenrir kept picking up his rock and hurling it gleefully to the ground.

I wondered what that poor rock had done to deserve such abuse.

“Fine,” I told Maren. “Go on.”

“When I first fell for you,” Maren said, her voice quiet, “I kind of freaked out. Fae aren’t supposed to fall in love with werewolves. I didn’t know what it meant. Fae children were always taught to stay away from werewolves, and I’d never even heard of a Fae falling in love with a wolf and in the human world of all places. I needed to know what would happen, what it meant. I traveled back to the Fae world to try to find Feidlimid, the​ most ancient tree in the Fae world, who—”

“Wait, hang on,” I cut her off. Those fucking bastards. “A *tree?*”

“Of course. They’re the oldest living creatures, full of wisdom.”

The image of Mercutio, the tree that had tried to charm Cali while we were in the Fae world, popped into my head. Prick.

“Of course they are,” I scoffed.

Maren looked at me. “What’s your problem with trees?”

“My problem? I have no problem.”

In the background, Fenrir called, “Mommy look!”

Maren called back. “You doing okay?”

Fenrir pointed at his rock, frowning. “Tried to kill Rockie, but he won’t die.”

Well, then. His eagerness to kill things was a quality that I *did* recognize in myself. *Fuck*.

“Be careful—don’t hurt yourself,” Maren told the kid, who was now hugging the rock. The twists and turns of their friendship were giving me whiplash.

Maren faced me again. “*Anyway*. The tree told me that when Fae fall in love with werewolves, it can cause a ripple in the fabric of the magical world.” She paused and stared at me expectantly.

“That’s it?” I asked, frowning. “That’s the story? What does that last part even mean?”

“I’m not entirely sure.” Maren admitted sheepishly. “Feidlimid wouldn’t say any more than that. But maybe it could explain why this mate of yours is also mated to your brother?”

I felt stuck. Glancing at the veins on my chest, I sighed. I needed to contact Cali ASAP.

“Maybe,” I muttered. “But that really doesn’t help with anything. So, there was a ripple in the fabric of magic because I fell in love with a Fae?” Could this have been the Fae world’s way of screwing me over because I was a wolf? How the fuck was I supposed to straighten any of this out?​

Maren bit her lower lip. “I don’t know. But what are you planning to do about it?”

I huffed, shaking my head. “I’m not planning to do anything. This is a choice Cali has to make on her own. She’s already hurting over this, and I don’t want to make it harder for her.”

Maren paused, pinning me with those searching eyes of hers again. “But what does that mean when it comes to your future with her, Greyson?”

**Episode 932**

VIOLET

Charlie looked extremely uncomfortable. “I can’t even…” He took a deep breath, scrubbing at his face. “I can’t even pay for our date. How pathetic is that?”

I stared at him, shocked. “What?” I spluttered, shaking my head. “Don’t be silly; it’s no big deal. You don’t have to pay for everything anyway.” I handed over some cash to the waitress, who gave us a sympathetic smile before skating away. “Don’t worry about it, please.”

Charlie eyed me. He looked so different from his usual self, his expression dark and troubled. Almost bitter. He fiddled with his napkin. “Easy for you to say. I can’t even pay for half.”

The hint of sharpness in his tone made my stomach twitch. What was happening to my sweet Charlie?

“Please talk to me,” I told him, searching for his gaze. “What is going on? What do you mean your parents cut you off? Is it for real?”

Charlie sighed, glancing at me. He looked so uncomfortable it broke my heart. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

I frowned. “Charlie, I’m your mate—you can tell me anything. I’m here for you.” I tentatively reached out to cover his hand with mine. He eyed me, swallowing thickly. He looked frustrated and conflicted, but then he squeezed my hand.

“I just want to help, Charlie,” I said in a low voice. I hoped he could see the genuine concern in my face.

Charlie stared at me before exhaling sharply. “They don’t want me to drop out of school and move to Oregon. That’s why they cut me off.”

I couldn’t really believe this. “That means…”

“No money, Violet. That’s what I’m talking about, obviously,” Charlie told me. His tone was a little off, but I didn’t focus on that as the news settled in.

“But why would they do that to you?” I asked. “It’s not fair! You’re not doing anything wrong. You’re just trying to live your life!”

Charlie stared at me. “Living my life with someone else’s wallet is a luxury, isn’t it?”

I didn’t know what to say to that. Charlie looked more uncomfortable and bitter than I had ever seen him, and I didn’t understand why. How come he was so embarrassed by this? It wasn’t his fault or anything.

“That doesn’t mean it’s right for them to take such extreme measures,” I said. “Are they at least talking to you?”

Charlie shook his head. “My parents are complicated.” He sighed. “I guess… Let’s leave it at that, okay?”

“But—”

“Please, Violet. I just don’t want to talk about it,” Charlie said quietly. “Can you accept that?”

I swallowed roughly, examining his face. I’d never seen him shut down like this. It suddenly felt like there were lots of things about my happy-go-lucky Charlie that I didn’t know about. But I wanted to know everything—even the bad parts. I’d be there for him either way.

He was my mate.

Our date had totally been thrown off now, and Charlie looked stoic and sad, and I hated it. I changed gears, trying to get things back to the fun, romantic vibe we’d had going on earlier.

“Anyway,” I said, “I don’t want you to worry about anything. I have access to pack money, so we won’t be hurting for cash either way.” I leaned over the console and gently kissed his cheek, trying to distract him.

He still felt a little rigid, his gaze fixed straight ahead, on the movie. But I kept going, brushing my lips over the corner of his mouth while caressing his chest, his shoulders.

“I’m so happy to be here with you,” I whispered in his ear.

He shivered, turning to face me. His eyes were dark and beautiful, and the way he looked at me made butterflies erupt in my stomach. When we kissed this time, he kissed me back without any hesitation, his lips brushing over mine tenderly but firmly.

The softness of it made me warm up from the inside out. I needed more of this closeness. As if he could hear my thoughts, Charlie gripped me by the waist and pulled me onto his lap, astride his thighs. I didn’t dare move closer, couldn’t be as bold as to rub up against him in a public place like this, but kissing him was so much easier now. He moved one hand to the back of my neck, while the other moved over my side, tracing gently up and down.

I was squirming, feeling drunk on his every move, from the way he licked into my mouth to the way he nibbled up my neck. I caressed his shoulders, his chest, and I felt his heart drumming. My whole body got wound up, eager for more friction. I just couldn’t get enough.

I couldn’t get enough of his scent, of his touch, of his kiss. My lips traced across his throat and he groaned, which I took as a good sign. I kept kissing across his collarbones, slowly swaying against his thighs to feel the little sparks of electricity the movement set off between my legs. When I softly bit on his collarbone and he groaned again, I got bolder, moving to pull off his T-shirt and get more of his bare skin.

He felt so amazing, he treated me so beautifully, and I couldn’t believe that this incredible guy was mine to kiss and touch.

But then Charlie said, “Wait…”

He stopped me from taking his shirt off. I was stunned for a moment.

“What?” I asked, worried. “What’s wrong?”

Not even meeting my gaze, Charlie moved me to the passenger’s seat and straightened his shirt.

My stomach dropped with embarrassment. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, it’s fine,” Charlie said distractedly.

I didn’t understand. I was equal parts confused and frustrated. What was going on with him? Was he really so upset about the money? Or… was it that he thought he’d made a mistake by leaving Minnesota? By being with me?

That train of thought escalated, filling me with panic.

Charlie looked through the window, and there was a pang in my chest. I couldn’t even imagine losing him now. Not after I’d experienced what it was like to find my mate. Not after I’d experienced how bright, how different my life could be with someone like Charlie in it.

Being without him could kill me.

“Charlie, please talk to me…” I hoped I didn’t sound as desperate as I felt.

But Charlie just shook his head. “You haven’t done anything wrong. I just have a lot of things on my mind right now.”

A lot of things that he didn’t want to talk about with me.

The realization made me feel so lost.

Charlie sighed heavily, glancing at me. “I think we should probably get back to the pack house. Xavier isn’t going to want me to have the car out for too long.”

I swallowed nervously. “I don’t think we need to worry about that. It’s not like Xavier needs it for anything.”

Charlie shook his head. He didn’t even really reply to me, just started up the engine and peeled out onto the road and back toward the pack house.

I couldn’t believe this was how the night was going to end.

I also couldn’t understand what had gone so wrong with what had started out as such a perfect date. Lola had said that communication was super important in relationships—even when she didn’t follow her own rules about that—so I really wanted to talk to Charlie about this. About the way I was feeling, and the fact that he needed to explain to me what was happening with him right now.

But I didn’t want to push him. I’d hate to push him and risk our connection. I wished I knew the right thing to say, the right thing to do to get him to open up to me about what he was thinking. I felt so awkward, hating the entire situation. It just didn’t any make sense.

After a very quiet ride, we finally pulled up at the pack house. Still silent and looking stoic, Charlie got out of the car. I took a deep breath, unsure what to do. Should I pretend everything was fine since Charlie didn’t want to discuss this?

Sighing, I got out as well. My voice was fakely bright. I was just trying not to make things worse between us. “Well, thank you for the drive. I had a really great time…”

I rounded the car, hoping to see his face, hoping to make things better. We were mates, we could work anything out together—right? But then I saw something that made me gasp.

Charlie had shifted into his wolf quietly, and his clothes were in pieces by his feet.

“Charlie!” I said, caught off-guard. “What’s happening?”

To my shock, he didn’t even spare me a look. He just turned his back on me and raced away.

My mate left me behind and ran off into the woods.

**Episode 933**

The first thing I saw when I woke up the next morning was Xavier asleep in the chair next to my bed. He’d stayed there all night. He hadn’t pushed me again about the choice I had to make, and he’d been respectful enough to sleep in the chair instead of my bed. I had cried buckets the night before, but apparently the sight of him was enough to make me start sniffling again.

*No more tears, Cali*, I told myself. *Get a grip!*

I breathed slowly for a moment, staring at him. The light was streaming in through the window, bathing Xavier’s handsome face. His brow, his straight nose, the perfect angle of his jaw, the curve of his lips… He was so gorgeous, it hurt to look at him. It hurt, because when the events of the night before sank in, guilt hit me like a train. My attempt to remove the curse, Hypatia, the news that whoever I chose, the other would die…

*Whoever I choose, the other will die.*

There were no longer any veins on my chest, but I still felt like something was squeezing my heart. I fell back in bed, looking up at the ceiling, feeling hopeless. Was this how it was always gonna be? One step forward and two steps back?

*When will it end?* I wondered.

I thought about what Xavier had said—that Greyson might not come back. My chest kept throbbing at the thought. Could that be true? No, Greyson wouldn’t just leave me right now… Would he? He knew that I needed him. What if leaving was his way of making the choice for me?

But if that *was* the case, how dared he try to make the choice for me? His self-sacrificing bullshit was getting old, and as much as I loved him for his selflessness, it also frustrated me to no end. He’d told me to choose Xavier, but that had been *before* we’d learned that the mate that I didn’t choose would literally die. Was it too much to ask for Greyson to stick around just long enough for us to figure this entire thing out? *Ugh!*

Then again, maybe Greyson had been telling me the truth all along. He was stepping away—not just to mourn Joss, but as Xavier had claimed, for good. Would Greyson really just vanish without telling me goodbye, though? *What the hell?*

I looked over at Xavier, sleeping by the bed. He’d spent the whole night with me.

*He’s here*, I thought. *Right by my side.*

Just then Xavier stirred. I watched as his eyes fluttered open. He rubbed them before facing me. The moment our gazes met, his expression clouded in concern. “Hey,” he whispered, getting to his feet to come to me. He sat on the bed, caressing my arm. “How are you feeling? Were you able to get any sleep?”

Yesterday’s events were still roaming around in my head, and I felt overwhelmed with emotion. I glanced at the veins on his chest, and my voice came out as a croak. “Does it hurt?”

Xavier shook his head. “No, I’m okay.” He pulled me into a hug, his strong arms wrapping me up softly. The comfort of our contact, the pulsating emotion, was incredible. I breathed in Xavier’s scent, so familiar and sweet. I wished the world would just fade away, and I could live in this moment forever—no choices, no confusion, no guilt, just Xavier and me, breathing together.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered in his ear. He pulled back, facing me with a frown.

“This isn’t your fault,” he said. “If anything, it’s a werewolf thing. A werewolf myth and curse.”

I shook my head.

He cradled my face in his hands. “Cali, be honest with me. How are you feeling?”

My eyes were aching. “Your life and your brother’s are in my hands… I’m starting to think that I should’ve just died already, to free you both and get this thing over with.”

Xavier’s expression darkened, and he let out a growl. “Don’t you ever, ever fucking say that again!”

“Xavier—”

“I love you, okay?” Xavier said, breathing against my lips. “I don’t know what the hell I’d do without you.”

It was all too much. His proximity, his emotion, his beauty. Without thinking, I kissed him, desperate to keep that sense of connection between us. He kissed me back softly at first, but then he pulled away.

“I understand that you’re not able to choose,” he said, leveling me with a stare. “But Greyson isn’t here, and I am. I always will be.”

I couldn’t stop myself from kissing him again. I didn’t want to stop.

For as long as my mouth was against his, as long as his hands were on me, I didn’t feel like sinking into guilt and agony. I felt amazing, and with him so close to me, the rest of the world could melt away. The only thing that mattered right now was Xavier, and his kisses. I needed more of them, more of him. I needed to feel alive and in love—without the pain that both of those states could bring.

“Cali…” Xavier panted as I brushed my lips over his jawline, over his throat. I caressed his bare chest, his abs, then reached down to tug at his sweatpants. I couldn’t bear to have anything between us. At the same time, he pulled off my nightie, licking his lips as he eyed my body.

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmured.

No, that was him.

He was beautiful.

He was sweet.

He was a man who I could never stop loving.

I pulled him on top of me, desperate to feel centered by his weight, by his presence. His bare skin was hot against mine, and his mouth was hot against my neck and chest, sucking and nibbling and licking as he moved down my stomach, and then between my legs.

He settled there, looking up at my face as he mouthed at the apex of my thighs, his tongue so featherlight that it made me whine and whimper. I grabbed onto his hair, arching my hips upward. He pinned them down and looked up at me.

“Say my name,” he whispered.

I did.

I moaned his name when he made me come with his mouth and fingers, then when he sank inside me and made my body part like water, then when he took my hand, pulled it down between my legs and said, “Touch yourself. Let me feel how much you need me.”

I was shivering and shuddering underneath him, helpless under his power. I fell apart again as he picked up his pace, and I said his name once more, just to hear him groan. I said it again and again while his hips shuddered and he pulsated inside me. His teeth sank into my neck to leave a mark, to let me know that he was here, and he loved me, and he wanted me.

He wanted me as his alone.

He didn’t stop there, either.

He started moving inside me again, the slide so soft and easy now that he’d made a place for himself in my body. He sucked more and more marks onto my neck, then my chest, then the soft part of my breasts.

“I love you,” he whispered. “Say my name.”

“I love you, Xavier,” I said.

He made me come again, and then he came again inside me, staring deep into my eyes. This gorgeous, perfect man who was hanging on my every word.

“Xavier, I love you,” I murmured, over and over again.

And in that moment, I would rather have died than ever let him go.

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“That was… unexpected,” Xavier muttered afterward.

He looked down at me, keeping me in his arms. He hadn’t moved away even an inch, and I loved it. I loved it, and I hated it at the same time.

Because I could tell that he was holding back.

I could tell that he wanted to ask me if I’d made up my mind now. Now, after we’d shared those amazing moments. But weren’t all our moments amazing? They always had been. This whole mess wasn’t about not loving Xavier. This wasn’t about not needing him.

I loved and needed both men equally, and that was the definition of my curse.

“I don’t want either you or Greyson to die because of me,” I whispered. “How would I be able to move forward after something like that?”

Xavier’s eyes darkened. Before I could tell him how much he meant to me, the door burst open.

“Hey, what the fuck!” Xavier barked at a flustered Lola. “Why the hell does nobody knock around here?”

That was a question that I had as well. Everyone was so rude!

“No time to knock!” Lola was panting, looking between us with panicked eyes. “Xavier, we need you!”

I frowned. This was clearly not a social visit. “Lola, calm down,” I said. “What’s happened this time?”

“You need to come, right now,” Lola said. “Big Mac’s been stabbed!”

**Episode 934**

GREYSON

I woke up in an unfamiliar bed, in an unfamiliar house. A small face with huge grey eyes was staring at me, a wicked smile stretched across the kid’s face.

I snapped my teeth at him and he jumped back from the bed, laughing.

“Just like Daddy!” The kid ran out of the room with a giggle. Had he just compared me to his father? A wave of nausea hit me. Surely Maren wasn’t lying to both me and the man who Fenrir considered his dad about her kid’s parentage, right? What would she gain from hiding the truth from me, anyway?

Her just reaching out to me out of the blue made no sense.

I didn’t want to keep pressuring her about this. But my own father had been such an abusive piece of shit—if I truly *was* a dad, I wanted to be a good one. A great one, not an absent one.

Just then, Fenrir barged into my room again, interrupting my thoughts. He pointed at me and said, “You’re grumpy.”

This child was very astute. “Yeah, well. Shit just keeps happening to me.”

His eyes were alight with mischief. “You said a bad word!”

“Fenrir!” Maren called from somewhere in the house.

“Coming!” he called back. Then he whispered to me, “Don’t worry, I won’t tell Mommy you said a bad word.” And then he dashed away again.

What a tiny weirdo.

Shaking my head, I decided that I needed more definitive answers from Maren about how, exactly, she’d met the kid’s father. I looked around, barely believing that I was in her house. If someone had told me yesterday that I’d be spending the night in Maren’s guest room, I would’ve laughed in their face. I was just hoping that Maren’s Fae knowledge and connections would help us all, somehow… If Cali hadn’t picked Xavier already.

We were running out of time, anyway, with the Halloween deadline looming closer.

Getting out of bed, I looked at myself in the full-body mirror. The veins on my chest were still as big and intense as they’d been yesterday. But I felt fine now. If I closed my eyes, I wouldn’t even know they were there.

I checked my phone and saw that Cali had returned my calls. She’d texted to say that everyone was okay, but that she needed to talk to me. I felt so relieved to hear she was fine. I longed to call her, to hear her voice. I felt the urge to run out of this house and straight back home, so I could feel her in my arms. But would that be the best thing for her? Would *I* be the best thing for her?

With Halloween just three days away, I was certain that stepping back and letting Cali choose Xavier would be the sanest solution. ​It would​ save Cali’s life, and she wouldn’t feel so bad about having to make the choice—not if I was effectively making it for her.

Besides, if she chose me and anything happened to Xavier, our relationship would be doomed from the get-go. The idea of being with Cali with that kind of bitter undertone was almost as painful as the thought of letting her go.

I was stuck between a rock and a hard place, and in the end, I had to focus on one thing: if Cali didn’t choose, she would die in three days. I wanted her alive, no matter what.​ I loved her too much to be the reason for her demise or her pain—even if the pain of thinking about her with anyone else was unbearable. But better me than her.

I would never heal from losing her. I would never stop hurting, but so what? I was damaged already—I’d lived through two werewolf wars, I’d lived through a childhood with Silas, and I’d grown up without a mother. I was used to pain, and if a broken goddamn heart from losing Cali was the thing that finally killed me, it would be worth it.

Because she was worth it.

Swallowing the lump lodged in my throat, I turned my phone off. I headed to the bathroom and washed my face, then used one of the packaged toothbrushes that Maren had in there for guests. It was so surreal to think of her as being so domestic.

Leaving the guestroom, I headed down the hallway and tried to remember where the kitchen was. The house wasn’t massive, but it was big and airy and homey. I followed the sound of Maren’s voice and found her in the dining room, talking to Fenrir, who was eating cereal.

“So a rock can’t be my friend?” Fenrir was asking, with a grave expression.

“I mean…” Maren trailed off, noticing me lurking by the entrance.

“We need to talk,” I told her.

“Good morning to you too, Greyson,” she said with an arched eyebrow. She turned to her kid. “I’ll be right back, okay? Eat your breakfast. All of it, little man.”

Fenrir waved at me happily, and I considered ignoring him. But something tugged at my gut, so I gave in and offered half a wave that made him grin. Maren glanced between us with a weird look on her face. I gripped her arm and led her to the kitchen.

“How did you sleep?” Maren asked, looking up at me.

She was wearing a plain light-blue dress that stopped at the middle of her thighs. The color looked incredible on her. She was such a stunner that I was reminded, yet again, of the way I hadn’t been able to take my eyes off her when we’d first met. And then I remembered, yet again, that she’d betrayed me.

I wasn’t interested in engaging in chit-chat with her.

“That kid is half-werewolf, and he has my eyes,” I said, lowering my voice so Fenrir couldn’t hear from the next room. “If he’s my son, I have a right to know.”

Maren looked annoyed. “I already told you that he’s not.”

“Do you promise?”

Maren raised an eyebrow. “Come on, Greyson. I’m Fae. I can’t just throw promises around.”

I was about to snap at her when Fenrir barged into the kitchen like a mini hurricane. “Mommy! Done eating!” He looked very proud of himself as he kept talking. “Your new friend said a bad word before, but I said I wouldn’t snitch so I won’t.”

“Is that so?” Maren looked between us, amused.

Fenrir smiled. He was so cute, and Maren was so beautiful, and he had my eyes, and I needed to know the truth about the kid because I couldn’t be a shitty father if I truly was one, and I just…

I couldn’t stand this. Any of it.

I couldn’t fucking stand any of this.

Maren clearly noticed the change in my expression. She could probably sense the anger, the frustration that was bubbling up inside me.

“Go to your room and play, okay?” Maren told the kid. “I want to see some beautiful artwork today.”

Fenrir happily dashed away. Maren and I were left alone—just the two of us, along with my bitter restlessness. Suddenly, I was tired of everything.

Suddenly, I was overflowing.

“I’m not here to play house with you,” I told her in a low voice, through gritted teeth. “If you’re telling the truth and that’s not my kid, there’s literally no fucking reason why you wouldn’t *promise* me that it’s the truth.”

“Greyson, I can’t—”

I couldn’t stop myself from getting all up in her face. She took a step back, her back hitting the wall as I caged her there. “I’m not doing this with you,” I declared. “I’m not going to be playing any of your fucking games. I deserve the truth. I deserve—”

“You never listened to me, Greyson!” She hissed, stepping forward and just rising on her toes so we were more at eye level. “Why the hell should I believe that you’ll start listening now?”

Her nose was just inches away from mine. Her scent and beauty were overwhelming. Those two things had hypnotized me, once upon a time. Before Maren had betrayed me, I’d been crazy about her. I’d loved her. I’d worshipped her. I’d been ready to do anything for her. She hadn’t been my mate, but she’d felt pretty fucking close.

And as for my real mate, Cali, the true love of my life—well, I’d told her to choose my brother. At least that way, she would be safe, and she would feel less guilty over her choice. Maybe she’d already chosen Xavier last night, and all I had left from her were the veins on my chest.

Without Cali, all I had left was nothing.

“Greyson…” Maren breathed my name. She licked her lips, staring at mine, and I recognized her expression. The air between us had grown hot, the memory of what we’d once been hanging over our heads.

If I couldn’t have Cali, then didn’t I deserve… *something*?

Maren leaned forward, her sweet breath brushing over my mouth.

And I was desperate enough, broken enough, that I couldn’t stop myself.

I kissed her.

**Episode 935**

SABINE

“MacKenzie!” My voice came out strangled, frantic as I pressed the towels to her back. She was lying on the floor, her eyes closed, her blonde hair in disarray around her.

There was blood everywhere.

I had been reading in the living room when I’d heard a scream. When I’d run into the kitchen, I’d seen MacKenzie lying on the floor, a butcher knife in her back and a rapidly growing pool of blood around her. I’d immediately pulled out the knife, and now I regretted it. I hated myself for my thoughtless decision. The knife had been stopping the blood flow, and by removing it I had made things worse.

Red blood soaked the white towels, still bubbling out at the sides, even though I was pressing with all my might to try to contain the bleeding.​ The second I’d gotten a glimpse of the wound, I’d known that licking it wasn’t going to work. It was far too deep.

“MacKenzie, no, please,” I choked out. I looked up, screaming, “HELP! Someone HELP!” I squeezed her shoulder. “Please, please open your eyes!”

I was begging, but she couldn’t hear me. Her eyes stayed shut, and her skin was getting whiter and whiter. This couldn’t be happening—I refused to let this happen. MacKenzie couldn’t leave me, not after all we’d been through.

Not after we’d survived Silas, not after we’d just survived a war together, not after finding my way back to her after all these years without her.

“Please, please come back to me,” I whispered, pressing on the wound. My whole body felt heavy, as if the knife had gutted me too. “You can’t leave me, I… I need you.”

Needing MacKenzie was one of the biggest truths of my life. Our path to reach each other had been complicated, but I knew that MacKenzie was my soulmate. My chosen mate. My forever. She’d always been there for me, supporting me, protecting me. I couldn’t imagine what life would be like without her.

I couldn’t imagine *having* a life without her.

I caressed her face, tainting her skin with blood. The sight of it made me nauseous. This couldn’t happen, I couldn’t lose her. For god’s sake…

“We are getting married, MacKenzie MacEvoy!” I told her, sniffling. “We have a wedding to plan! You can’t miss it—you’ll probably disagree with all my flower choices and think the cake is too sweet, but you’re going to love it all the same, because…” Tears started dropping down my cheeks. “Because you love me—because we love each other. Please, MacKenzie, come back to me.”

Flashes of all the plans we’d made ran through my head. We were both so young, had so much more we wanted to do together.

“Remember the farmhouse we were going to renovate?” I whispered, caressing her cheek with a trembling hand. “The duck pond? The llamas?”

Her blood had seeped through every inch of the towels.

It was all over my hands now.

I burst into heart-shattering sobs.

“Mrs. Smith!” someone called. I looked up, and through watery eyes, I saw Lola, Xavier, and Cali rush in.

“How did this happened?” Xavier shouted, while a pale Cali took one look at MacKenzie and raced off.

“I d-don’t know,” I said, fighting to speak through the sobs. “I don’t know what happened, but someone stabbed MacKenzie!”

Xavier eyed the bloody butcher knife lying next to MacKenzie. “Who would do that?”

Everyone was talking over my head and moving around me in a blur of buzzing motion. I didn’t know who had done this, and I didn’t particularly care—all I cared about was getting MacKenzie stabilized. She was still alive, but her breathing was getting shallower and shallower. Mine was as well.

I couldn’t lose her. I just couldn’t.

I loved her too much to lose her.

“It’s gonna be okay, Mrs. Smith,” Lola said softly, rushing in to add pressure on top of my hands.

It was hard to believe her. It was hard to breathe while MacKenzie’s breaths were slowing. The idea that this was the end for us, for her, made pain tear through my insides.

If I lost MacKenzie…

“There she is!” Cali’s voice pierced through my ears, gaining my attention. I looked up to see her with one of the Fae who’d come to help during the battle—Torin?

In the muddiness of my mind, a little voice whispered, *Torin is a healer.* Of course. Why hadn’t I thought of that sooner? Could he fix this?

“Everyone, step back!” Torin fell to his knees by MacKenzie’s body and removed all the bloody towels. The wound underneath was gaping and angry, with blood flowing out of it. I couldn’t stop shaking with fear. Lola held me in her arms, shushing me, while we both stared at Torin.

He placed his hands directly onto the wound.

The tightness in my chest eased, and I stared at him in awe as there was a faint blue light from his hands. I watched as the gruesome wound began to stitch itself back together. In barely any time, the wound was fully closed, and Torin carefully eased MacKenzie onto her back.

When her eyes fluttered open, I sobbed in relief.

She looked up at me, her nose scrunching up. Her voice sounded raspy. “Why… Why are you *crying?*” Clearly dazed, she scrutinized my face. “Sabine, you know I hate it when you cry.”

This woman was a menace. I loved her so much. I leaned forward and planted kisses all over her face, which she accepted—even though she still looked a little confused. “Who did this to you?” I whispered against her mouth, pushing her bloody hair away from her face.

She blinked slowly. “Did what?”

“You were stabbed,” Cali said from above us, and MacKenzie winced.

“And they couldn’t bother to finish me off?” she asked, but I shook my head. I loved her sass, I really did, but there was no time for it right now.

“Who did this to you?” I asked again. “Do you remember anything?”

But MacKenzie just shook her head, looking around at the rest of us. She still looked confused. I helped her sit up slowly. “I was in the kitchen getting a cup of tea, *not* chamomile,” she said shooting Cali a look, “and then I felt a sort of pressure from behind me. I don’t remember anything else after that.”

I wiped away my tears. Now that MacKenzie wasn’t in danger, my sorrow was being replaced by rage. Who would do this to her? In our own pack house! ​Would a member of the pack actually hurt her, after everything she’d done for the Redwoods? This was absolutely outrageous, and I needed to do something about it. Right here, right now.

Swallowing down the anger—mainly to keep MacKenzie calm—I helped her to the couch. Lola and Cali fussed over her while the boys explained what had happened to the rest of the pack. Torin told everyone to let MacKenzie rest, to give her space to breathe, but she tugged at my hand.

“Sit with me,” she whispered, after looking around to make sure no one was listening.

“I’ll be right back—”

She gasped. “You’re going to leave me? After I almost *died?*”

“Just for two minutes! And you don’t even remember being stabbed!”

“You should take me upstairs right now and show me how happy you are that I’m alive,” she said seriously, then smirked at me. Clearly, she meant every word.

I leaned forward and kissed her forehead, then her mouth. “I’ll be right back.”

She rolled her eyes but nodded. My heart was full of fondness and relief.

MacKenzie was alive.

And whoever had done this to her had to pay.

I made a beeline for the porch and pulled out my phone. I dialed Greyson—he needed to be here. He was the true Alpha​, and something was clearly wrong at the pack house. He couldn’t just keep running off like this.

I glanced inside, to where Cali was talking to MacKenzie, and my stomach tightened. As much as I didn’t want to blame Cali for anything, seeing Greyson agonize over her day in, day out had been hard on me. And now, with the curse shifting onto the boys, and the penalty for the unchosen mate…

I didn’t even want to think of the possibility of anything happening to my son.

I had no idea what I’d do if Greyson got hurt in any way, ever.

“Hey,” Greyson said, picking up after quite a few rings.

“Where on earth are you?” I demanded.

“It’s complicated,” he said. He didn’t seem to want to talk about it, but my patience was wearing thin.

“Well, wherever you are, you’ve got to come back,” I declared.

“What’s wrong? Is it Cali? I thought I felt something last night—”

“Not everything is about Cali, Greyson,” I said, cutting him off. “Someone tried to kill MacKenzie in the pack house.”

He gasped. “*What?* ​Is she safe?”

“She’s okay now,” I said. “But something happened with the curse. Cali had MacKenzie do a spell.”

Greyson fell quiet. “What kind of spell? Is Cali okay?”

“She is. But listen to me. There’s no longer a deadline,” I said. “But that’s not what I called you to talk about! MacKenzie was almost killed, and it happened in your pack house. You need to come back and lead your pack.”

Greyson fell silent again, and I worried that I’d pushed too hard.

My being his mother was so new for both of us. It felt so fragile, still, but I needed to be honest with him. No more lies.

“Greyson,” I said, taking a deep breath. “Will you come back and help us?”

**Episode 936**

VIOLET

“We need to get to the bottom of this,” Xavier said, looking at each and every one of us in turn.

We’d all gathered in the living room to discuss what had happened to Big Mac. Xavier seemed determined to figure out this attack, ASAP. I was still shocked by what had happened—being a werewolf was dangerous for many reasons, but it was incredibly rare for pack members to turn on each other.

Rishika stood up, and Xavier gave her a nod. Her words mirrored my thoughts. “I don’t think anyone in the pack would have attacked Big Mac,” she said. “Could someone have snuck in? A Rogue leftover from the battle with Silas?​”

Xavier shook his head. “We would have scented an intruder. And Big Mac said that no scent concealment spell had been cast—the would-be murderer was one of us.”

Murmurs ran through the pack. We stared at each other, completely baffled. My heart started pounding when I caught Charlie’s eye. I still couldn’t believe what had happened yesterday, when he’d run off. I still didn’t understand what was going on with him. I’d tried to run after him, but he’d been too fast, and then he’d mind linked and told me to go back.

*Leave, Violet,* he’d said. *Leave me alone for now.*

I still wasn’t sure if I’d made the right choice, but I had gone back. I hadn’t known what to do, and I’d been alone in the woods. And when Charlie had returned to the pack house, he’d still refused to talk to me about what was going on with him.

He’d just said that he felt antsy and needed some space.

As the pack devolved into chaos discussing what happened with Big Mac, all I could think about was how evasive Charlie was being. What did he mean, he needed some space? Space from me? From our relationship? Was I being too clingy?

But then I looked around the group. Jay and Lola spent all their time together. So did Sage and Zainab. Wasn’t it normal to want to be around your mate all the time?

Was there something wrong with me?

Was I making this bad for Charlie?

Did he… Did he regret coming here with me?

The thought made me shiver. My stomach and throat were tight, and I fought to settle myself down. Things couldn’t be so bad, right? Charlie still cared about me. At least, I hoped he did. I hoped I hadn’t done anything wrong, and that this was just a phase he needed to go through, because of his parents. But why wouldn’t he talk to me about it?

I was so worried, so frustrated over everything to do with him. And now this! Big Mac had been *stabbed*. Taking a deep breath, I mind linked with Charlie.

*What happened to Big Mac is crazy, right?*

I hoped that didn’t sound too pushy. Just light and chatty.

But Charlie just shrugged. *I guess,* he said. *I’m new here, but I would have thought violence was kind of common in a house full of werewolves.*

I frowned. *Not at all. The whole point of a pack is to have each other’s backs, not to stab them!*

Charlie didn’t respond. He had seen how united the brothers—and everyone else—had been against Silas. Hadn’t that told him something about our pack? He didn’t have any reason to be afraid, but I was trying to understand how it felt from his perspective…

A few moments later, Charlie still hadn’t responded, and I felt a strange sense of dread in my stomach. Something had changed with Charlie yesterday. Suddenly, I was very aware of the fact that although I felt so close to him, although he was my mate…

I didn’t actually know very much about him at all.

Charlie played lacrosse, ​he had parents, had been bitten by a crazed Rogue, and had an ex called Sandi. But other than that​, what was his story? I didn’t even know much about his parents except that now they’d cut him off. Every time I asked him about his past, he was kind of evasive.

What was happening to my Charlie?

“Everyone, listen up!” Xavier clapped his hands, and I was startled back to the present. “Come to me if you think of anything relevant, of if you saw anything. In the meantime, take care of each other. Do I make myself clear?”

Everyone nodded at Xavier’s words, offering murmurs of agreement. I did the same. I trusted Xavier to find the attacker and protect everyone.

Maybe I should ask Xavier about the way Charlie had been acting.

As the group dispersed, I eyed Charlie again. I followed him back up to our room, questions twirling inside my head. I’d hoped we’d be able to chat about his behavior now, but as soon as the door closed, he said, “I’m going to take a nap.”

It was a simple announcement that effectively shut me out. I pressed my lips together, frustrated, watching as he kicked his shoes off and lay down on the bed. Before he could turn his back on me—because he was clearly about to do just that—I cleared my throat.

“Charlie, I think we should talk.”

Charlie stared at the ceiling and shrugged. “About what?”

“About how weird you’ve been acting?” I asked, trying to be patient.

He glanced at me, shrugging again. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

His simple statement made my frustration explode. “*Seriously?*”

Charlie flinched at my louder tone. So much for me keeping my patience. But I couldn’t stop now, so I went on. “Ever since your card was declined, it’s like you’ve been a different person…”

“What the hell are you talking about?” he snapped, standing from the bed and walking up to me.

“I’m talking about this,” I said, gesturing at him. “You *don’t* snap at me, you *don’t* take naps when I want to talk, you *don’t* run off in the middle of the night, and you *don’t* end a date abruptly. This isn’t the Charlie I know!”

He stared at me, his eyes dark and narrowed. But I couldn’t stop speaking. Now that I had started expressing the way I felt, the truth was pouring out of me like water.

“I don’t understand what’s going on with you at all,” I continued. “Why won’t you talk to me, tell me what you’re thinking? We’re mates, we should be sharing everything! We—”

Charlie suddenly lashed out and punched the wall next to him, hard.

I choked and winced, my heart racing. For a second, I was spooked. This kind of violence… This was nothing I’d seen from him before. It just made me a million times more worried, because he’d never seemed like an angry person.

The moment I took a step away from him, he took a step forward. “Don’t you understand that this is all a lot for me to take in?” he demanded.

“But we’ve talked about this before, and—”

“And I told you what you wanted to hear!” Charlie huffed. “This is insane, Violet.” He gestured around the room. “All of it!”

I was shaking, tears gathering in my eyes. “What do you mean?”

“I was just a regular kid going to college, and now I’ve dropped out of college and I’m living with some kind of supernatural mate and a pack of werewolves! We were at war just a couple of days ago! This isn’t fucking normal!”

“I thought…” I sniffled. “I thought you cared about me. That you were adjusting, and you—”

“That’s bullshit, Violet!” he shouted, and I flinched.

I couldn’t believe that this was my sweet Charlie. The Charlie whose kisses made me feel like heaven, whose beautiful words had made me feel beautiful and cherished. I couldn’t process what was happening, and this angry side of him was overwhelming me in the worst way possible.

“Did you ever stop to think that maybe this is TOO much for me, Violet? It would be too much for anyone!” His voice was loud, echoing in my ears as he brushed past me. He marched out of the room, leaving me all alone.

All alone, with my thoughts.

My pulse was out of control. My head was hurting, along with my stomach. I was so shaken by this side of Charlie, one that I’d never seen before. What was happening to him? I understood what he was saying, but until last night, he’d seemed to be adjusting just fine. Why did his parents cutting him off infuriate him so much? What was going on with him?

Why couldn’t he… Why couldn’t talk to me about all this calmly, like he used to?

Why couldn’t he control his fury?

Suddenly, a terrible thought struck me. It was something that I would never have even considered before today, before I’d seen how much rage Charlie was hiding. But the truth was, I didn’t know where Charlie had been this afternoon.

Could he have snapped and attacked Big Mac?

**Episode 937**

I was lingering in the living room, buzzing with nervous energy.

I was still in shock over what had happened to Big Mac. I couldn’t believe that anyone in the pack would attack her—why would they?

*I mean, I’ve wanted to strangle her myself a few times,* I thought, *but I can’t imagine anyone actually trying to* murder *her. She’s helped us all so much. We should really have been throwing a party in her honor.*

All in all, someone from the pack attacking her made no sense. But if Xavier had said he didn’t smell any intruders, I knew that he had to be telling the truth. He was the best tracker in the pack.

*But what does this mean?* I wondered. *Who would…*

My thoughts were interrupted when I caught a glimpse of Mrs. Smith pacing on the front porch. I frowned. She was on the phone, looking distressed. What was happening? I headed outside to talk to her, to try to comfort her. The poor woman—it must have been so scary to see her fiancée like that.

When Lola, Xavier, and I had reached the kitchen, Big Mac had really looked dead. The blood had been so much, so terrifying. I shuddered. Thank god Torin hadn’t left yet—I made a mental note to thank him. Big Mac had already thanked him, but I believed more gratitude was in order. He’d helped me so much in the Fae world, too. He was a true friend.

As I stepped out onto the porch, Mrs. Smith hung up the phone. She stared at her screen in disbelief, shaking her head. Who had she been talking to?

“Is everything okay?” I asked her like the moron I was, and then I mentally kicked myself.

*Is everything okay?* I scoffed at myself. *Of course it’s not! Her fiancée was just almost murdered!*

I knew I’d lose my shit if anyone ever tried to hurt Xavier or Greyson. All things considered, Mrs. Smith seemed composed enough. But then she looked up at me sharply. “Cali, have you talked to Greyson?”

I was struck by the mention of his name. “Sadly, I haven’t…” I muttered, swallowing thickly. I tried not to sound too bitter, but it wasn’t working. “I’ve called him a million times, but he isn’t picking up.” I glanced at her screen. “Was that him on the phone?

Mrs. Smith nodded.

My heart sank. His mom hearing from him meant that something had happened. “What is it?” I asked, concerned and anxious. “Is he in trouble?”

She glanced at me. “Not exactly.”

“Then what was he calling about? Where is he? Is he safe?” I fired out one question after the other, getting more and more worried.

Mrs. Smith leaned against the wall, avoiding eye contact with me. “I called him first, actually,” she said. “And yes, he’s safe.”

I felt like I’d been punched in the gut.

I’d been telling myself that maybe he was out of cell service or something, but now I had definitive proof that Greyson was just screening my calls. It wasn’t even the first time he’d done it.

I felt so… sad? Betrayed? I loved him, and he kept shutting me out. I blinked back a few rebellious tears and exhaled sharply.

“When is he is coming back?” I asked Mrs. Smith.

Mrs. Smith moved closer to me. Her expression was unreadable. She put a hand on my shoulder. “I’m not so sure that he’s coming back at all, Cali.”

My breath caught. Xavier had thought the same, but to hear it from Mrs. Smith? “What? Did he actually say that to you?”

Even though Xavier had already said that he thought Greyson was gone for good, I hadn’t really believed it. I just couldn’t believe that he’d leave without saying goodbye. That he’d just fucking abandon me. Abandon *us*.

*And I bet he thinks he’s doing it for my own good. Well, how about asking how I feel before running away?* I thought, still fighting tears. *My god, he’s being such a jerk. I guess I deserve it.*

“Greyson said that he doesn’t know when he’s returning,” Mrs. Smith said quietly. “I support whatever decision he wants to make, though… about whether he wants to continue on as Alpha or not.” She looked up at me, pressing her lips together. “The *due destini* curse is a whole other issue. And I assume you haven’t even thought about choosing yet, have you?”

“No,” I said in a shaky voice.

Suddenly, there was a gleaming fire in Mrs. Smith’s eyes. “If you hurt my son, I’ll never forgive you.”

What the—Was she for real?

“Whoa, hey!” I shook my head, completely taken aback. “I would never try to hurt Greyson. I’m actually gutted that he’s not here right now.”

Mrs. Smith pinched the bridge of her nose in a way that reminded me of Greyson. “Look, Cali, I like you. Normally. But what’s happening between you and these boys is a mess, and my son is—”

“I’m so sorry about everything,” I blurted. “You’ve always been so nice to me—I don’t want us to be on weird terms because of all this *due destini* nonsense.”

Mrs. Smith leveled me with a stare. “You didn’t let me finish, Cali. My son is all I have. He and MacKenzie are all that matter to me, and Greyson… I’ve failed him in the past.”

“You didn’t fail him—”

“I couldn’t rescue him, so he was left with Silas,” Mrs. Smith said. Her expression was darker than I’d ever seen it. “I owe Greyson. I owe it to be a good mother to him, and if I lose him…” She took a deep breath. “You can never choose Xavier, Cali. If I lose my son, I swear to you, I will make your life a living hell.”

I gaped at her,shocked.

Mrs. Smith stared at me. Her whole body was shaking, and I was flabbergasted. I never, not in a million years would’ve expected Mrs. Smith to threaten me like that. But I knew that she’d been through a lot—everything with Silas, being separated from her son, losing her husband, finding love with Big Mac again and being reunited with Greyson…

*Even nice people have to snap at some point, huh?* I thought, still overwhelmed by her statement.

“I would never hurt Greyson, not intentionally,” I spluttered defensively. “I love him, you know that.”

Mrs. Smith clenched her jaw. I was starting to worry that she was about to lose her shit at me.

“Greyson is gone, and you say you love him, but you still went to Xavier’s bedroom last night,” she said evenly. “You've been having your cake and eating it too with those boys. You’ve been selfish. I know it’s part of *due destini*, but still, Cali…” She shook her head bitterly. “How the hell do you think I’ve felt all this time, seeing my only child pine over you while you hold all the power?”

My guilt was omnipresent, and her words made it even stronger. But I wasn’t the bad guy here! “I know the situation is fucked,” I said, “but Greyson not coming back means that he’s trying to force my hand. To force me to choose—how is that fair to me?”

Mrs. Smith let out a sharp laugh. “Don’t you see that none of that matters now? Whoever you don’t choose is going to *die*.”

“If the only thing you care about is Greyson,” I said shakily, “then why don’t you just tell me to pick him?”

“If you choose Greyson, Xavier will die,” Mrs. Smith said in a sharp tone. “That would poison your relationship with Greyson. Not only because I know you love Xavier, but also because I’m certain that Greyson loves his brother too, in his own way. I don’t wish that kind of misery on my son, or on you. I know you’re a good person.”

“Even if you think that I’m acting like an entitled, selfish brat?” I asked, sniffling. More tears threatened to escape my eyes. I was frustrated, angry, and so sad to be having this conversation with someone I considered my friend.

Mrs. Smith swallowed, looking away for a moment. She took a long, deep breath. “Maybe the best thing would be for you to leave, Cali,” she said calmly.

I choked. “*Leave?*”

“You’re Fae, not a werewolf. You can go home to Minnesota and leave the pack entirely,” she said. “That might be for the best. Good for you too; there was always that Alex who kept hanging around.”

I shook my head, having a hard time finding the right words. “But this is my family now. I can’t just *leave*.”

Mrs. Smith stared at me, severe. “This could be​ the solution, though. Changing the curse this way means that none of you have to die.”

I fought to process her words.

*Mrs. Smith is telling me to be with neither Xavier nor Greyson.*

Could I do that?

**Episode 938**

GREYSON

Having Fenrir walk in on Maren and me kissing hadn’t been ideal, but maybe in the long run, it had been for the best. I was glad, at least, that his appearance had ended the moment between us without me having to do it.

But now I looked down at the phone in my hand, thinking hard about the panicked sound of Sabine’s—of my *mother’s*—voice on the phone from just a few minutes ago. My heart was still racing, just thinking about it. I’d hoped that with Silas gone there would be a drop in pack drama, but I was having no luck with that so far.

I shook my head in disbelief. Big Mac had been *stabbed?* In the pack house? I just couldn’t wrap my mind around it. I was glad that Big Mac was okay, and that whoever had attacked her hadn’t succeeded—whatever their crazy plan was—but it was still *insane* that someone would even try something like that. In the house, surrounded by werewolves.

I gripped my phone, fighting an almost visceral urge to call Cali. My mother—I didn’t know if I was ever going to get used to calling Sabine that—had said that she was fine, but I wanted to hear Cali’s voice, to talk to her, to hear for myself that she was okay. There was also a part of me that longed to go back and take care of my pack.

And was it true that the curse’s deadline had changed? That there wasn’t a deadline at all? For so long, it had felt like I had a ticking clock in my head, but now—knowing it was gone—I could breathe again. Being away from Cali was awful, but it felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. The last thing I wanted was for Cali to feel forced to choose, and now she didn’t have to. She could choose in her own time.

She could choose *me* in her own time. I didn’t care how long that took.

I could feel in my heart that it would be me. But this was good, that she had more time. It meant that I did, too. And I needed it. Time away, time to find myself. I’d known it was going to be hard, killing Silas, losing Joss, but it had turned out to be even harder than I’d expected.

My thoughts were spinning through this cycle—again and again—when the door to my room banged open and I looked up in surprise. Fenrir came racing in, holding an admittedly impressive Lego spaceship in his small hands.

He stopped in front of me and held the spaceship up proudly. “I just finished building it. Isn’t it so cool, Greyson?”

“Yeah,” I said slowly. “It’s cool.” I wasn’t exactly sure how to proceed. I wasn’t great with kids—I’d never had much practice—but Fenrir grinned at my feeble praise. “So, who gave you that cool ship?” I asked.

“My dad,” he answered simply.

“Oh yeah?” I asked, interested. “And what’s your dad like?”

Fenrir grinned and stood a little straighter. “He’s the best guy in the whole world!”

I couldn’t help but grin at the kid. He *was* a real cutie, and listening to him talk so proudly about his dad eased my mind a lot. I still couldn’t shake a strange feeling about those eyes of his, but clearly Fenrir knew his dad, and the guy was actually in his life. Which was good. He seemed like a good kid, and every kid deserved a father who was around.

“Tell me more about your dad,” I said, but Fenrir wasn’t listening. He was running around the perimeter of my room with his spaceship, making engine sounds. “Where does he live?” I tried again.

Fenrir sprinted toward me, landing the spaceship next to me on the bed. “Do you want to play space battle?” he asked, looking up at me with those startling eyes.

“Space battle?” I asked, a little unsure. “Um, do you have another rocket?”

Without bothering to answer my question, Fenrir raced out of the room. He looked like his mom, but he ran like a wolf—quick and graceful. In a moment, he was back, proudly holding a Lego pirate ship.

“You can use this!” he announced, grinning.

“A pirate ship?” I asked. “Can those go into space?”

His expression grew serious. “This one can. It’s a special ship, because it can go in the ocean and outer space. It likes to sail on the Milky Way, because it looks kind of like water.”

Those big grey eyes of his—looking up at me so seriously—just got to me, and I grinned down at him. “That does make it a special ship.” I took it from him. “Let’s play space battle, then.”

Fenrir had a lot of ideas about how the battle should go, and he acted as general, pointing out where I should advance from. “Come from that side of the bed, that way I won’t see you. Then I can attack on your starboard side.”

“Okay,” I chuckled, sliding my pirate ship along the top of the bed like it was water. “I hope your troops are in position.”

Fenrir grinned. “We’re ready! I’m the first mate. The captain of the rocket is named Aiden.” He rolled his eyes. “Obviously.”

“Aiden, huh? Is that your dad’s name?” I asked curiously.

Fenrir nodded vigorously, his dark hair bouncing around.

“What does your dad do?” I asked, pressing for more information.

The kid twisted his cherubic face into a scowl. “You’re supposed to be advancing your ship!”

“Sorry.” I refocused my attention on my pirate ship. As I moved it forward, I tried again. “What does the real Aiden do, in real life?”

“He’s an ambulance man,” Fenrir said, without looking up from his rocket.

“An EMT?” I repeated, surprised.

Fenrir nodded. “Yeah, he helps all the people who get hurt.”  
 “Hmm,” I said. “That’s a surprise.” What I didn’t add was *why* it surprised me. I’d always gotten the impression that “the bad guys” were precisely Maren’s type, not a goodie-good EMT.

Fenrir’s rocket ship circled around my pirate ship, and I looked down at my tiny Lego figures, wondering how many good men I was going to lose in this battle. “Is your dad around much?” I asked, looking up.

The engine sounds died in Fenrir’s throat, and the hand holding his rocket dropped a little. “No, not very much,” he said, more softly. And I felt like an ass for asking. But then, with a kind of whiplash-fast resilience, Fenrir looked up with a bright grin. “But my mom says it’s because he’s busy keeping everyone healthy, and he’s thinking about me all the time!”

I felt a little stab of pain in my chest, hearing these words in Fenrir’s bright, hopeful voice. I knew a bit about what it was like to have a dad who wasn’t around. But at least this Aiden guy sounded like he was good to Fenrir when he *was* around.

I saw movement out of the corner of my eye and looked up to see Maren standing in the doorway, watching the two of us with an odd, closed expression on her face.

Fenrir, following my gaze, leapt up. “Mommy! Look! My space force is about to defeat Greyson’s pirate crew!” Then he smashed his spaceship into my pirate ship with a shower of tiny Lego pieces, a triumphant grin on his face.

“Oh no!” I cried. “How did I not see this coming? Our antiquated navigation system just wasn’t up to the task of tracking spaceships!” I pressed my hand to my heart, as though I’d been hit. “Farewell, cruel world. As captain, I go down with the ship.” Then I fell back onto the floor.

Fenrir threw back his head, laughing like he’d never seen anything so funny. He dropped the remains of his spaceship and pounced on me. “You’re okay, Greyson!”

I laughed too, and tickled him under his arms, making him laugh even more.

“Okay, okay,” Maren said, stepping into the room. “Nina is here to take you to day care, sweetheart.”

I sat up and saw another woman standing behind Maren.

Fenrir jumped up and ran toward her, throwing himself into her arms. “Nina!”

“His lunch is on the counter,” Maren said to Nina, who nodded and led Fenrir down the hall.

“Bye Greyson!” he called from the front door, making me grin.

When the door slammed shut behind him, the grin slid off my face as I glanced up at Maren. It was an odd, silent moment. I was thinking of the kiss, still not sure how I felt about it.

If I were in the mood to be honest with myself, I’d have to admit that I was feeling confused. Being around Maren again… A lot of old, forgotten feelings were resurfacing, clouding my judgement. I’d been so young when I’d met Maren, and I’d fallen for her so hard—she’d left an impression on me that I knew I’d never really be able to shake. On instinct, my hand went to my abs, and the scar beneath my shirt. She’d left a physical mark that would never leave me, too.

But it wasn’t anger I felt when I looked into her dark, smoldering eyes. She took a step closer to me, into the room, a sly smile spreading slowly across her face.

“Now,” she murmured. “Where were we?”

**Episode 939**

SABINE

“I’ll just feel better when you get more color back, I think,” I said, looking anxiously at MacKenzie’s pale face. “How does your back feel?”

MacKenzie rolled her eyes. “Fine. Perfect. Never better.”

“Somehow, I doubt that. Will you let me see it again?” I asked.

With a long-suffering sigh, she rolled over on the bed and lifted the back of her pajamas so I could look at the fresh scar on her back. “Happy?” she asked.

It was hard to look at. “Torin’s an amazing healer,” I murmured, passing my fingers lightly over the tender skin. Then I pulled her shirt back down. “But no, I’m not happy. I’ll be happy when you have more color. Why don’t you sleep?”

MacKenzie dropped back on the pillows with a gusty sigh. “I am fine, Sabine. Would you please stop treating me like some kind of invalid?”

“MacKenzie,” I said, my voice steely. “You almost *died* today.”

“I know, but—”

“You don’t know what it was like,” I said, my voice catching as tears started to gather at the corners of my eyes. I shook my head, trying to keep my voice even. “Seeing you on the floor like that, in that pool of blood…”

MacKenzie raised an eyebrow. “You do remember that I literally watched you die two days ago, right?”

“Oh,” I said, suddenly remembering. The days had turned into such a blur. “Right. Well, so then you might know what it was like. But, please, just stay in bed for a bit longer. For me?”

A sly smile turned up MacKenzie’s lips. “I’ll stay in bed if *you* stay in it with me.” She reached for my hand to pull me closer.

“MacKenzie,” I complained, even as I let her tow me toward her. “You need to rest.”

“Let me prove just how good I feel.”

Smiling, I leaned down to press a kiss to her lips. Her mouth was warm and the kiss sweet, and—quite suddenly—the tears returned to my eyes. I was so grateful that she was there, alive and whole. So grateful for Torin’s Fae healing powers. Without them, this amazing woman might not…

I tried not to think of what might have been and slipped a hand around her neck.

MacKenzie grabbed my waist and tugged, trying to pull me into the bed, but I took a step back, breaking free of the kiss. I knew what she wanted, and part of me wanted it too, but there was just too much going on in my head. I couldn’t focus.

Restless, I bent down and gave MacKenzie a kiss on the forehead. “Get some rest.” I smiled at her scowl. “For me.”

She huffed out an irritated sigh. “Fine, fine.”

I slipped out of the room and pulled the door shut behind me, then headed downstairs. I had to find some answers. I wouldn’t be able to rest without them. I passed Violet on the stairs. She was heading up, though she looked so distracted, I didn’t even think she noticed me until I spoke. “How are you, Violet?”

She started and looked around. Her eyes grew wide with surprise, but she smiled brightly. “Fine! I’m fine!”

I wasn’t convinced, not with that response. “And that new mate of yours, how is he settling in? I know he didn’t get a very warm welcome, what with one thing and another. I hope Charlie doesn’t think things are always like this around here.”

Violet jumped at the sound of Charlie’s name and clutched the bannister behind her like she needed the support. “He’s fine, too!” she said shrilly, and without waiting for me to say another word, she turned and hurried up the stairs.

I frowned after her. She was acting very strange. I wondered if anyone was checking in on her and Charlie. They were so young…

That was another thing to add to the list of things to discuss with Xavier when I found him. I headed downstairs, looking for him. I had to speak to him about the conversation I’d had with Greyson. I finally found him outside on the back deck. He was sitting on a step, looking out at the lake, a pensive look in his eyes.

He looked up at me as I sat down next to him. “Before you ask, I haven’t made any progress on finding out who attacked Big Mac, but—”

“That’s not what I want to talk to you about,” I said, putting up a hand to stop him.

“Really?” he asked, looking surprised.

“Not just now.”

“Then what?” Xavier asked cautiously.

“I want to talk about the future of the pack. I spoke to my son. He told me he’s not coming back anytime soon.”

This took a moment to register with Xavier, then his eyes darkened and he looked out at the lake. “Classic Greyson,” he said derisively.

Dark anger surged within me. After everything that happened today, I had no more patience for pettiness and selfishness. “I hope you understand the sacrifice my son is making for you,” I started, my voice hard as steel. “For our whole pack. Greyson did what he had to do to protect this pack from Silas. He’s showing real maturity here—real leadership—and it’s about time someone recognized that.”

Xavier looked at me, clearly surprised by the anger in my voice, but I was past caring. Without waiting for him to respond, I stood and stormed away. He could disagree with me all he wanted.

I’d hoped to find some answers, but I knew I was too angry and too worried to make any real headway, so I headed back to my room. I was worried about MacKenzie. I knew she was going to be fine, but the memory of finding her in the kitchen still filled me with fear, and I just felt better when I was with her.

When I slipped back into the room, MacKenzie was awake, sitting on the edge of the bed, bent over a lit candle that she’d placed on the bedside table. Her eyes were closed and she was mumbling something, but she looked up when I walked in.

“So much for resting,” I said, raising an eyebrow.

She shrugged. “I tried.”

I sat on the edge of the bed. “MacKenzie, I want you to think—really *think*—about what happened. Did you pass anyone on your way to the kitchen? Has anyone been acting oddly toward you in the last couple of days? Can you think of anything at all that might help us find who hurt you?”

MacKenzie just shook her head, looking frustrated. “I told you, I was all alone in the kitchen. I didn’t see anyone. I didn’t hear anyone. And then I woke up on the floor.”

I blew out an irritated breath and leaned back against the footboard of our bed. “I have to figure this out. I’m not going to feel safe until we find out who’s done this. Let’s think. Who’s a possibility?”

MacKenzie shrugged unhelpfully.

I shook my head. “I just can’t think of anyone who could have done this. Who would want to hurt you? You’ve done nothing but help the pack. And you’re such an angel. Everyone loves you!”

MacKenzie narrowed her eyes. “Really, Sabine? I know that you think that, but you must know that’s not empirically true. I’m sure I rub plenty of people the wrong way.”

A grin spread over my face. “Well, you’ve always rubbed me the right way.”

A little growl rumbled through MacKenzie’s throat and she reached for me, but I stood and paced away across the room. “I just don’t think it can be anyone from the pack.”

MacKenzie flopped back onto the bed, looking frustrated. “And why is that?”

“It just can’t be,” I insisted. “So let’s think outside the pack. What about that Fae girl, Artemis? Or those other new Fae, Astrid and Torin?”

MacKenzie frowned up at me. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but didn’t Torin just save my life?”

“Yes, of course he did,” I said, waving an airy hand, “and we’re all very grateful, but who knows how Fae think?”

MacKenzie sighed. “Sabine, my conspiracy theorist, will you come over here, please?” I walked over and sat next to her on the edge of the bed. She took my hand and looked up at me. “I know you’re worried and scared, but surely we can think about all this later. We’ve had a helluva week, but I’m alive, and you’re alive, my love. We should celebrate that.”

My heart swelled as I looked into the face of this woman—the most beautiful, enchanting person I’d ever known. “You’re right,” I whispered, and I leaned down to press a kiss to her lips.

This time, I didn’t resist when she pulled me down onto the bed. And, as I stretched out next to her, feeling her arms close around me, I realized that I felt happy—truly happy—for the first time in my life.

I wouldn’t let anyone take it from me.

**Episode 940**

My room seemed small as I paced around its perimeter. I just couldn’t stop thinking about what Mrs. Smith had said to me—that the best thing for me to do would be to just let both Greyson and Xavier go… and just leave.

I put my hand over my chest—a habit I’d picked up when I’d had the cursed veins—but felt nothing but smooth, untroubled skin. But fear and sadness pressed against my heart, crushing it so it beat out a strange rhythm beneath my hand. Mrs. Smith had seemed confident that my leaving would be a safe workaround to the curse, but I just couldn’t be sure. It was a passive choice, but still a choice, and I couldn’t be sure that it wouldn’t put Greyson’s and Xavier’s lives in danger. Would “choosing” neither kill them both?

I just couldn’t deal with that. Taking a risk with my own life, like I had when Big Mac had performed the spell—that was one thing. But I couldn’t take a risk with Greyson’s or Xavier’s life. If something happened to either of them—if one of them *died* because of me—I knew I’d never recover from that.

And even if I could be sure they would be safe, would it even be *possible* for me to just “let go” of Xavier? Or Greyson? They were my *mates*. Real, true parts of me. We shared a connection that couldn’t just be broken with time or distance. How could I just walk away? How could I move on if I was leaving a part of my own *being* behind?

A wave of hot anger flashed through me; Greyson seemed to be managing it just fine. I still hadn’t heard from him. But that wasn’t wholly surprising—I knew Greyson was good at running away from things.

The anger I felt was a quick, hot flame, and it burned out swiftly. And in its place came a fresh wave of sadness. This time it was a slow, creeping sadness, thick and sticky as molasses, and I sank down onto my bed as it washed over me.

“What am I going to do?” I whispered, dropping my face into my hands. My heart twisted in my chest and my throat grew tight, like I was trying to swallow a tennis ball.

Dragging in a breath, I looked up. My room felt suddenly tiny, and growing smaller, like the walls were closing in. I had to get out. Now.

I stepped over to the window and saw Artemis in the yard, sparring with Rishika. That would work—anything to be beyond the four walls of my room. So I headed down the stairs and out the back door. Artemis and Rishika were on the other side of the damp lawn, and as I approached them, I heard them laughing. The day was overcast and the autumn wind blowing off the lake was cold, but they must have been working hard, because they were both only in tank tops. They were training but were having what sounded like a really good time—teasing and trash talking as they fought.

I scowled as I drew closer. Why were they in such good moods? We’d had a hellish week. We’d lost pack members. Joss was dead. Greyson was gone. Big Mac had almost been murdered in the pack house. And I had to consider the possibility of leaving the two men I loved behind, and it was tearing me to pieces. But, hey, at least *someone* was having a good time.

“Hey, Cali.” Artemis smiled over at me as I approached. She held up a hand to Rishika to let her know to stop and walked toward me. “Figure out who attacked Big Mac yet?” she asked, wiping sweat from her forehead with her arm.

“And *when*, exactly, would I have had time to figure that out, Artemis?” I snapped, feeling particularly irritated. “In case you’ve forgotten, I kind of have a lot on my plate right now, what with the whole I-might-accidentally-be-killing-someone-I-love situation.”

Artemis’s eyes grew wide, and Rishika, who had walked over as well, took a wary step back.

“You know,” Rishika said, clearing her throat and looking deeply uncomfortable, “I forgot, I have to go…” Her eyes darted around, clearly grasping for something to escape the awkwardness I’d created. “I have to go grab my laundry. Can’t have it ending up in a pile on the floor. Anyway, see you both later.” She bent to grab her sweatshirt from the ground and then practically ran back toward the house.

“Cali,” Artemis said, turning back to me. “Ease up, girl. I know you’re going through some stuff, but—”

I made a derisive noise and rolled my eyes.

Artemis narrowed hers back at me. “*But* you’re not the only person here going through shit right now.”

I stared at her. “Are you kidding me with this, Artemis? And what *exactly* are you going through? Having too much fun with your new pal?”

“Are you *serious*, Cali?” Artemis asked, her eyes flashing. “I’m trying to figure out what to do with the rest of my life! You think this is easy for me? This isn’t my world. I don’t even know if this is where I belong. I was a bounty hunter for almost half my life. Astrid and Torin might go back, but I don’t even know if I want to—”

“Artemis,” I said, holding up a hand to stop her. “Look, if you’re going to be like this, I don’t even want to talk to you.”

She stared at me, her eyes wide with shock. “If *I’m* going to be like this?” she finally managed, her face flushing with anger. “Can you even *hear* yourself, Cali? I cannot *believe* how selfish you’re being right now.”

And, without another word, she spun on her heel and stormed away, heading toward the trees.

First Mrs. Smith, and now Artemis. I stared after my sister, into the trees where she had disappeared. *Was* I being selfish?

There was an answer to that question somewhere, but my mind was reeling and I closed my eyes, too anxious and upset to even start to try to find it. I turned and headed back to the house, feeling even worse than when I’d come out. The kitchen was full of pack members when I walked in, but I ignored them all and headed for the stairs and went right up to my room, slamming the door behind me. So much for fresh air.

I paced around the small room, fuming. *Selfish? Me? Seriously?* I was facing a literal life-and-death situation, and I was being accused of being selfish for *caring* about it? What the actual hell? It wasn’t like I’d *asked* for any of this. Being a *due destini* mate was a nightmare. I hated it more than anything. I wished it didn’t have to be this way—that my life could be simple and orderly and easy to navigate. But it wasn’t—at all—and everyone was acting like I was somehow responsible for that. Or like I should just get over it.

But *how?* How was I supposed get over it? How could I *possibly* get over it?

My chest ached, and a sob caught in my throat. I just felt so… alone. No one understood what I was going through. Not Artemis, not Mrs. Smith. Not even Greyson or Xavier. I didn’t blame them—there was no way they could know—but it just made me feel very, very lonely.

I looked up when I heard a knock on my door. I was about to tell whoever it was to go away and leave me alone when Lola popped her head inside. Her eyes were red and swollen, like she’d been crying, and instinctively I leapt to my feet.

“Lola,” I gasped. “What’s wrong?”

“Can I come in?” she asked.

“Of course,” I said, waving her in. “What’s up?”

Lola stepped into the room and eased the door shut. She looked around nervously, like she was checking to be sure we were alone.

“No one else is here,” I said, watching her closely. “What’s going on?”

But Lola still didn’t answer. She sat down on the edge of my bed and clasped her hands tightly together, looked down at the floor, and took a deep breath.

“Lola?”

“Cali—this afternoon…” she trailed off.

“Are you upset about what happened to Big Mac?” I ventured when she didn’t go on.

She looked up at me quickly, nodding.

I nodded back. “I know, it’s insane. Everyone’s on edge. I mean, who in the world would do something like that? But don’t worry, it’s only a matter of time before we figure out who it is and then—watch out. In a house full of werewolves? Whoever did this, I don’t like their chances. Lola? Hey, what’s wrong?”

Lola had started crying, tears coursing down her cheeks.

“What’s up?” I asked, sitting down next to her and reaching for her hand. “Big Mac is okay now, it’s all okay.”

She looked up at me. “Cali,” she whispered. “I think it might have been me.”

**Episode 941**

XAVIER

“Okay, Sage. You can go,” I said, as she wiped tears from her eyes.

She nodded, sobbing, and hurried out of the room.

I’d been talking to everyone about what they knew about the attack on Big Mac—who had been in the pack house, where they’d been, what they’d heard. But, as I watched Sage run crying from the living room, I couldn’t help feeling frustrated and hopeless. Sage was upset—everyone was upset about what had happened—but no one knew anything. I’d talked to everyone and hadn’t learned a single useful detail. No one had seen anything unusual, no one had heard anything, or smelled anything. Nothing at all.

I ran a hand through my hair. None of this added up. I knew there wasn’t a Rogue in the house, and—even if there had been—I’d never heard of a Rogue killing anyone by stabbing them in the back with a butcher knife. Wolves tended to use their own built-in weaponry. It just didn’t fit.

I stared out the front window at the trees across the road, but I wasn’t really seeing anything. Maybe the wolf who’d done this was trying to throw me off the scent by attacking in a way that looked human?

Or maybe I wasn’t looking for a wolf at all?

I leaned back into the couch with a gusty sigh. I had to admit that it didn’t help matters that Big Mac wasn’t the most popular member of the pack. She was a witch, for starters, which already made most wolves jumpy. And she wasn’t a particularly friendly witch at that. Everyone tolerated her because of Mrs. Smith, but still, I could see her making some enemies. But this went beyond bad feelings. Who could possibly be angry enough—angry to the point of *murder*—to attack her so brazenly, out in the open, right in the middle of the afternoon?

My thoughts traveled to Ava, and I was hit by that strange rush of feelings I always had when I thought of her—anger and grief and bitterness and loss. But she’d left the night of the battle—just after we’d talked—and I hadn’t seen or heard from her since. She was a wild card, and I knew what she was capable of, but I didn’t think she even knew Big Mac. The math just didn’t add up. Besides that, my gut told me she wasn’t involved in this. I would have been able to smell her if she’d been in the pack house around the time of the attack, even in her human form.

As I leaned my head back on the couch, feeling exhausted, I had to admit it: I wished Colton and Greyson were here. Greyson was a pain in my ass, but at least when he was around, I didn’t have to shoulder the burden of the pack entirely by myself.

With a sigh, I pulled out my phone and dialed. It rang for so long, I didn’t think he was going to pick up.

“Bro!” came Colton’s voice. “I just left! Miss me already? What’s going on?

I groaned. “You don’t want to fucking know.”

“Really? What’s happening?” Colton asked, his voice losing its laughing edge for a moment. It was probably an accident, but he almost sounded concerned.

I scrubbed my hand along my jaw, feeling the scratch of five o’clock shadow. “Where do you want me to start, man? Big Mac being stabbed at the house in the middle of the day? Greyson taking off and maybe not coming back? Or Cali’s curse-breaking spell not really breaking the curse, just redirecting it so it’ll fucking murder whichever one of us she doesn’t chose?”

There was silence for a long moment.

“Whoa,” Colton finally said.

“Yeah.”

“Never a dull moment with you guys, huh?”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t even know why I called you.”

Colton laughed. “Listen, that is… a lot. But, the Cali stuff—if Greyson’s gone, doesn’t that mean you’ve kind of won, man?”

“What does *that* mean?” I snapped. At the moment, it didn’t feel like I’d won anything.

“I mean, don’t you suddenly have everything you said you wanted? You wanted the pack, now you’ve got the pack. You wanted the girl, now you’ve got the girl.”

I gritted my teeth. I got what he was saying, but I shook my head. “I didn’t want it like this—I wanted to earn it. To fucking fight for it.”

Colton laughed again. “What’s that old saying, man? About gift horses and mouths?”

“No, you’re missing the point,” I said, irritated. “Cali’s not some kind of gift, or a prize. I want Cali to choose me, and to *not* choose Greyson. I want to fight for the pack because I want to prove that I’m the true Alpha—that I’m *meant* to lead the Redwoods. I don’t want to just win by default because Greyson took off again.”

“But you’re saying that because she messed with the curse, whoever Cali doesn’t choose is going to die, right?” Colton asked slowly.

“I’m not saying I want Greyson to die,” I growled. “I’m just saying that this sucks, and I don’t have to be happy with this situation as it is. It’s just—*frustrating*, man.”

Colton sighed. “I can see that, bro. I don’t know what to tell you.”

I rubbed my forehead. “I know.”

“Listen, I gotta go,” Colton said. “Hang in there. Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.”

“Sure,” I muttered as I ended the call. I didn’t know why I’d called Colton. He wasn’t a problem solver. He was more of a problem maker. I’d probably just needed to say some of those things out loud. But, having said them, I didn’t feel any better. I felt just as frustrated and stuck as before.

And, strangely, I found myself wishing I could talk to Joss. She had been a difficult person, and our relationship had always been rocky, but she’d been one hell of a Luna. Her focus had always been on the pack, and on what was best for the whole. She’d just seen things that others seemed to miss, even Greyson. She’d probably have known exactly where to start in figuring out this Big Mac problem. But she was gone, and I was stuck, figuring it out on my own.

I glanced up as Ravi passed by the doorway of the living room. He looked like he was headed outside, and he looked upset. I was startled for a minute, but then I remembered that he and Joss used to hook up. Of course he was upset.

“Ravi!” I called.

He stopped and looked into the living room. His expression darkened when he saw me. “What do you want?” he asked flatly.

I stared back in surprise. I didn’t think I’d ever said a word to this guy, so I wasn’t sure where his attitude was coming from. I knew he was upset about Joss, though, so I decided to ignore it. “I’m sorry about Joss, man. I know you two were close.”

Ravi didn’t answer. He didn’t move into the room, either. He just stood in the doorway, glaring daggers at me.

And I still didn’t know what to make of that. “Actually, I wanted to talk to you.” I waved him in, and he reluctantly stepped into the room. “You were closer to Joss than most of the rest of us—”

Ravi made a disgusted sound but didn’t speak.

“—so I was hoping you might have some insight for me. You know about what happened to Big Mac. We’ve got a potential murderer walking around here. Any idea how Joss might have approached this?”

Ravi stared at me in disbelief. “No,” he finally said. “No, I don’t have any idea how she would have solved your problem, man. And if she were alive, she wouldn’t even be here to be dealing with this.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, confused.

“We were going to leave,” Ravi said, his voice growing thick with emotion. “After the battle. We were going to run away together. Me and Joss.”

Now it was my turn to stare in disbelief. “Are you serious?”

Ravi nodded. “But now she’s gone, and all I have is this pack. Joss is gone, and all my plans are gone with her.” He tipped his chin up. “So now I have to remake my future.”

“What does that mean?” I asked, narrowing my eyes. I didn’t like the tone of his voice.

Ravi’s dark eyes were cold. “From what I’ve seen, the Evers brothers aren’t great at putting the Redwood pack first. And I don’t think that makes them very good leaders.” He raised his eyebrows. What was this guy getting at? “I’ve heard rumors that you’re going to be challenging Greyson for Alpha?”

“You heard right,” I said, my voice icy.

Ravi’s jaw was set. “Then I want to throw my hat in the ring as well.”

**Episode 942**

GREYSON

Maren’s smile grew as she looked at me, apparently liking the way I was looking back at her. “Hang on, I think I’ve got what we need.” She walked to the bed and opened a drawer in the small table next to it. After digging around for a moment, she straightened up, holding a condom, a triumphant look on her face. Then she walked back to me and slipped a hand around my neck, pulling me down and kissing me, hard.

It all came back to me. The feel of her—the pressure of her mouth, the curves of her body beneath my hand. She felt different but the same. I was lost in her, just like I’d been five years ago. In some distant part of my brain, I knew this should have felt wrong, that this wasn’t right—I knew I was only doing this because I was trying to distract myself from the pain of leaving Cali—but being here, with Maren, felt good.

Really good.

She threaded her fingers into my hair and pulled, and I wrapped my hands around her waist, feeling the remembered pleasure of her satiny soft skin.

She was intoxicating, the way she wrapped herself around me, her tongue sliding against mine, her teeth grazing my lips, but—my thoughts strayed. To Cali. Always to Cali. How could anyone compare to someone like her? To my true mate?

But even as I thought about her, I tightened my grip on Maren, I needed to let all that go. *And maybe this*, I thought to myself as I slid my hand down, cupping the curves of her ass, *is exactly what I need in order to do that.*

Maren responded to the pressure of my hands by pushing me so I fell back on the bed. I winced and reached beneath me, pulling a Lego out from under my spine and tossing it to the ground.

She laughed. “Comes with the territory,” she said and climbed on top of me, straddling me and bending to press her lips against mine. Her dark hair brushed my cheeks, and her deep, sweet smell—like a field of wildflowers after a summer storm—surrounded me completely, immersing me. It was like being cloaked in memories.

Her kisses were hungry and certain, just like I remembered them. They never asked—they took. Being with her now—feeling her, smelling her, tasting her… I flashed back to the first time we’d been together. I had been with so many women by that point, I’d lost count, but they’d all been the same. Beautiful and sweet, but forgettable. But there had been something about Maren—from the moment I’d first touched her, I’d known she’d be different. And when I’d gotten her home, she’d kicked the door shut, shoved me against the wall, and proceeded to blow my fucking mind.

Back in the here and now, she grabbed the bottom of my shirt and broke our kiss just long enough to pull it over my head. Then she was back, claiming me with such force that it took my breath away.

I slid my hands up under her shirt and let her breasts fill my palms. She moaned against my mouth and I knew I had to feel her skin on my skin. I pulled away from the kiss and ripped her tank top off. I flung it away, then stared up at her beautiful form.

“You haven’t changed,” I said, running a finger from her throat down to her breastbone, to her stomach, stopping to tuck my finger into the top of her jeans. Everything felt clouded over, hazy and in the heat of her.

She raised her eyebrows. “You, too.” She moved on top of me, circling her hips, grinding herself against me, and I felt myself growing harder. I reached for the condom on the table next to the bed, but she shook her head. “We don’t need that just yet.” And, with a sly smile, she dropped her head. She kissed down my chest to my stomach, then lower. She unbuckled my belt and had just slipped her fingers into the waistband, ready to pull my jeans off and make me lose my mind, when I looked down.

My whole body tensed. This wasn’t right. An instant ago, everything felt right, but suddenly everything felt very, *very* wrong.

Maren looked up, surprised. “What’s wrong?”

My heart hammered strangely in my chest and I sat up, pulling away from her. “I can’t do this.”

She raised her eyebrows in surprise as she sat up, too. “That doesn’t sound like the Greyson I remember.”

“I’m not the Greyson you remember, Maren.”

She let this sink in. Then she nodded and reached for her tank top. She pulled it back on as she shifted, coming to sit next to me against the headboard. “That’s okay.”

“Yeah,” I said, still a little confused myself. I reached down to refasten my belt. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” she said, shaking her head. “I know we’re not—I know you still don’t really trust me.”

I gave a bark of bitter laugher. “That’s true.”

Her eyes were on my abdomen, tracing along the scar. “And I guess I don’t blame you.” She looked up. “We can take things slow.”

I frowned. “Listen, Maren, I don’t want you to think this is all leading to a reconciliation or anything. I’m not in a place for any of that right now. What we did just now, I shouldn’t have let happen.”  
 “What exactly do you mean?” she asked warily.

I gestured between us, then around at the room, still scattered with toys. “I mean *us*—a relationship. A kid. I’m still in love with someone else.” Which was what had brought me here to begin with. I shook my head, internally kicking myself. I wouldn’t have let myself get carried away with Maren if I wasn’t so desperate to stop obsessively thinking about Cali. “I’m just not in a place where I can see us—”

“Greyson,” Maren said, cutting me off. She gave me an even look. “I know that. You’ll recall that I haven’t yet asked you to marry me or become Fenrir’s dad. I’m not looking for any of that, either. I just thought we could stand to blow off a little steam, rekindle some history. I know I could, and from the looks of you…” She gave me a sideways glance. “But maybe you’re right. There’s a lot of history between us. Maybe it’s better if we just take things really slowly.”

She was right about the need to blow off some steam, but I was sill uneasy with the way she kept talking about taking things slowly. That was how you built something, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that maybe Maren was thinking we were… going somewhere. She was beautiful, and being with her was an avalanche of memories—good and bad—but I wasn’t sure I wanted to dive back into anything with her anytime soon. Or at all. Ever.

I ran a hand through my hair, feeling a little crazed. All the energy from almost having sex and the confusion that I felt was making me feel like I wanted to claw out of my skin. What was Maren even thinking? Wasn’t *she* the one who’d told me that werewolves and Fae didn’t mix? Why would she even *want* to get back into something with me?

My eyes went down to the scar on my belly, and I felt my jaw tighten. It didn’t matter. None of it. I hadn’t forgiven Maren for what she’d done to me. And, anyway, what with one thing and another, it was probably time for me to take a little break from romance. And especially from Fae.

Maren was watching my face carefully and, after a moment, eased herself off the bed. Then she took a step back, like she wanted to give me as much space as possible. “So,” she said briskly, “what’s the plan from here?”

I stared at her for a moment. “Honestly, I have no idea.” I stood up and reached for my shirt. “Thanks for letting me stay the night,” I said, pulling it over my head. It had been nice to have a place to crash, but, more than that, I’d wanted to get to the bottom of the Fenrir situation. But, having talked to him, I felt confident that he wasn’t my son—those grey eyes notwithstanding. “But I should probably get going.”

“Where are you headed?” Maren asked.

“My place in Portland,” I said, looking around for my shoes. “You remember it. It’s the one—” I stopped and looked at her. I was about to say *it’s the one I bought and asked you to move into*, but I caught myself in time.

She seemed to know, though, and her dark skin glowed as she flushed. She glanced down, clearly uncomfortable. “And then what?”

“And then I’m not sure. I guess I’ll figure it out from there. Just like I’ve always done.”

Maren looked up. “Well, about that. How’s your right hook these days?”

**Episode 943**

I stared at Lola in complete shock. “What on *earth* are you talking about, Lola?” I asked slowly. “You think *what* was you?”

Lola dropped her head and began to cry—really sob—in earnest. I stared at her in shock. I couldn’t remember ever having seen her cry like this before, and I didn’t know what to do.

“This afternoon,” she hiccupped, “I lost control again. Like I did when I shifted and attacked you before.”

“Oh my god,” I breathed. A chill went through me.

This made her cry even harder. “I was talking to Jay, and he was saying that Halloween is just around the corner, and I was staying that I still don’t know if there’s going to be a way for me to become a full werewolf”—she dragged the heels of her hands across her eyes—“and you know how Jay and I have been lately.

“Yeah,” I said cautiously. I did know how they’d been. A little hot and cold given the spell. To a point I understood exactly how Lola felt—the uncertainty and the indecision.

Lola went on as if she hadn’t heard me. “And I was so stressed out, and I felt like he wasn’t even listening to me, and I picked this dumb fight—”

I felt that. I’d been picking those kinds of fights all day.

“—and then it happened again. I didn’t mean to,” Lola said, looking up and shaking her head hard, “I swear I didn’t, but I shifted and then I just took off.”

“Where did you go?” I asked quietly.

“I don’t know,” Lola said, her expression crumpling. “That’s just the thing! I can’t remember where I was or what I was doing.”

“What *do* you remember?” My heart was beating hard as I stared at my friend.

She dragged in a rough breath. “The next thing I remember after fighting with Jay was waking up outside the pack house. And, Cali…” She looked up, tears pooling in her eyes again. “It was hours later! Who *knows* what I was doing in that lost time?”

“Oh, Lola.” I stood up and started pacing the room. I’d been doing that a lot, lately. I glanced out my window at the setting sun and the color-streaked sky, then I turned back to look at Lola, sitting on the edge of my bed, clutching the bedpost for support. “And you’re thinking that maybe you attacked Big Mac when you were out of it?”

Lola nodded miserably. “That’s exactly what I’m thinking,” she said, swallowing roughly.

I thought about this for a moment, then frowned. “But Lola, that doesn’t make any sense.”

“Doesn’t it, though?” Lola wailed. “Think about it, Cali! No one else in this pack house has ever tried to murder someone, and I *just* tried it with you. Remember? And I don’t remember what I was doing when Big Mac was attacked!” She dropped her head into her hands and sobbed.

“Lola,” I said soothingly, sitting back on the bed next to her and putting my hand on her back. “I know you’re scared, but think about this logically. You shifted and you don’t remember what you did, right?” Lola nodded. “Right, so you were a wolf that whole time. Big Mac was stabbed, Lola. *Stabbed*. With a kitchen knife. You don’t even have opposable thumbs when you’re a wolf. How would you have managed it? If you had attacked her, you would have just ripped out her throat or her heart or something.”

Lola looked up from her hands, tears still streaking down her face. She looked horrified, and it occurred to me I hadn’t reassured her as much as I’d meant to.

“What I mean,” I added hastily, “is that there’s no way you could have attacked her. It just wouldn’t make any sense.”

She thought about this for a long moment. “I guess you could be right,” she finally said, looking a little calmer. But then her eyes darkened again. “But what if I was in some kind of a fugue state or something, and I shifted back into a human and attacked her like that? *Then* I would have used a knife.”

“No way.” I shook my head. “That makes even less sense, Lola. You woke up outside the pack house without any clothes on. I’m fairly certain *someone* would have said something if they’d seen you all crazed and naked and roaming around the house wielding a knife. I mean, this place is chill, but not that chill.”

Lola gave a shaky sigh. “I guess you’re probably right.” She looked out the window, but I didn’t think she was seeing the sunset. When she spoke, her voice was low. “I’m scared, Cali. I don’t know what’s going on. And it’s getting worse. Being out of control like that—it’s terrifying. Waking up with no recollection of what I’ve done… I could have done anything. I could have attacked a hiker or someone on the road.”

I rubbed my forehead, letting the anxiety of Lola’s problem settle onto my shoulders. “I know,” I admitted. “It’s definitely not safe, Lola.” She looked so miserable that I threw my arms around her. “Hey, don’t worry, okay? We’ll figure this out.”

“How?” Lola asked despondently.

“Don’t lose hope,” I said, pulling back to look at her. “You and Big Mac still have a copy of that spell. You just have to hang in there for a couple more days.” I shook my finger at her. “So no attacking any hikers, okay?”

She gave me a weak smile. “I’ll try. Thank you, Cali. I really appreciate you talking me down. I didn’t know who to go to about this. Jay would have flipped.”

“I know,” I said quietly.

She looked at me for a moment, her eyes warming. “I’ve missed this, you know?”

“What?” I asked.

Lola gestured between us. “Just this. Us talking, figuring out our problems together.”

I smiled back. “I’ve missed it, too.”

“So,” Lola said, wiping the tears from her cheeks and settling back on the bed. “What’s going on with you?”

“Ugh,” I groaned. “Where do you want me to start?”

“That bad?” Lola asked.

“Well, do you want the good news or the bad news?”

“Um,” Lola looked wary. “The good news?”

“Well, the good news is that the *due destini* curse isn’t going to kill me by Halloween anymore,” I said.

Lola’s eyes grew wide. “Oh! That’s great!”

I stared at her flatly. “Ask me about the bad news.”

She shook her head. “Now I don’t want to.”

“The bad news is that it’s going to kill either Greyson or Xavier—whoever I don’t choose.”

Lola stared at me. “Oh shit, dude.”

“Yeah.”

“I mean,” Lola said, raising her eyebrows, “no pressure, Cali, but what the hell are you going to do?”

“I have no idea,” I said with a sigh, flopping back on the bed. “Mrs. Smith thinks I should just leave.”

“What?” Lola demanded. “*Leave?*”

I nodded. “Just go. Without choosing either one of them.”

“Are you kidding me?” Lola looked scandalized.

“But I can’t do that. I can’t leave them both. And, maybe since Greyson is gone…” My throat tightened painfully. “Maybe I could just move forward with Xavier without actually choosing him.”

“*Really*?” Lola asked, clearly interested.

“That’s the thing,” I said, shrugging, “I don’t know. No one does. And it makes me so scared to take that kind of risk. I don’t want to mess something up and lose either of them.”

Lola brightened. “Maybe that’s it!”

I looked at her, surprised at her expression. “*How?* It’s still a risk. Wouldn’t moving forward with Xavier still technically be a choice?”

Lola tipped her head back and forth, thinking. “Well, maybe, maybe not.”

“How *maybe not?*” I asked.

“Maybe not if you don’t technically accept him as your mate.”

“What?”

“You know.” Lola hopped onto her knees and leaned forward, excited about her idea. “If you don’t do the whole mate mark thing.”

“You mean the Luna mark?” I asked.

Lola shook her head. “No, like a regular mate mark. Hasn’t Xavier or Greyson ever told you about that? They must have.”

“You know they’re both not exactly the kings of openness,” I grumbled. I did remember long ago Xavier talking about a mark. Marking me, and how Colton and Maya hadn’t made anything official yet either… If they ever would. Shockingly, Xavier hadn’t exactly given me all the details. And then I’d gotten so focused on the Luna mark and everything that came with it.

“But is it like the Luna mark ceremony?”

Lola shrugged. “I guess so. I don’t think I’ve ever seen one,” she said.

“Wait, so you and Jay haven’t marked each other?” I found that pretty shocking.

“Not yet. It’s like wedding levels of serious,” she said with a wink. “Jay and I always wanted to do the wedding and the mark at the same time.”

“Oh,” I said, taken aback. I hadn’t considered any of this. If there really was an official mating ceremony… “Would that work, though? Would Xavier still be my mate that way?”

Lola rolled her eyes. “He’s your mate now, isn’t he? They both are. And you don’t have a mate mark.”

“I guess,” I said slowly. “I suppose you’re right. I guess I just always imagined that—whoever I chose—we’d do something to make it like, formally official…”

“A WEDDING?!” Lola squealed. “Am I your maid of honor?!”

“Maybe, I don’t know! It’s all kind of old-fashioned,” I said, flushing. “But that doesn’t solve my problem, which is the same problem I’ve always had with any of this. I just feel like my heart would be torn between the two of them forever.”

Lola’s eyes were uncharacteristically soft when she looked up at me. “Maybe that’s just how things are going to be, Cali. Not perfect, but good enough.”

I stared at her, thinking hard. It was just a lot to take in. Lola’s idea was an interesting one, and I did wonder if it could work, but did it mean that even if I did make things work with Xavier—in order to protect Greyson—we’d never be truly mated? Would they be able to live with that?

**Episode 944**

SABINE

As I dropped back onto the pillows with a contented sigh, I felt lighter than I had in a very, very long time.

“That was *something*,” MacKenzie panted, falling back onto her own pillow. She wiped the sheen of sweat from her forehead.

I was exhausted, but I smiled up at the ceiling. MacKenzie, looking over at me, smiled too.

“What are you laughing about?” she asked, reaching for me and tickling my bare ribs.

“Nothing,” I said, turning in the bed to face her. I rested my hand under my head and relaxed into the pillows, just letting the warm, happy feelings tingling through my body linger a little longer. The threat of Silas and what he could do to me, to Greyson—to any of us—had hung over my head for so long, sometimes I forgot that I didn’t have to worry about him anymore. And then I’d remember and feel that rush of achingly sweet relief all over again. It was wonderful but strange. It was like I couldn’t quite believe that he was actually gone. Like it was too good to be true.

But I knew it was true. I’d seen him die myself—seen Greyson rip his heart out with my own two eyes—and it was a picture I came back to when I woke up in the night sometimes, sweaty and scared. Silas was gone, and I was finally, finally free.

I hated to think I was the kind of person who would wish anyone dead, but Silas… he was a different matter. I had definitely wished him dead, for a long time.

MacKenzie ran a finger down the bridge of my nose. “You’re looking pensive, S.”

“Am I?” I asked, looking up at her. “I’m not. I’m happy, sweetheart. Immensely happy.”

She fixed me with an even stare. “I know you well enough to recognize when you’re thinking too much. And I think I know what you’re thinking about, too. It’s Silas, isn’t it?”

I sighed. “I do not want that terrible name uttered in this happy space,” I said, lying back on the bed and stretching my arms wide. I looked over at MacKenzie. “But yes. I was thinking about him.”

“Not worrying, I hope,” she said, frowning. “He’s dead. He can’t hurt you now. There’s absolutely nothing that *demon* can—”

“I know.” I smiled. “That’s just what I was thinking about. About how now that he’s gone, our future is clear.” I looked up at the ceiling again. “I truly thought he’d be haunting me until the day I died… but now, it’s like a weight has been lifted off my chest. I feel like I can finally breathe.”

MacKenzie put her hand on my chest, just above my heart, and leaned over to press a tender kiss to my lips. When she leaned back, smiling at me, my eyes filled with tears. My heart beat fast beneath the slight weight of her hand, and I was filled with love for this extraordinary, astonishing woman.

She pretended to have such a hard shell for others—when she was *Big Mac*—but from the very beginning, I’d always known there was another side to her. A soft, tender side, vulnerable and sweet. And, as I gazed into her eyes, I still couldn’t believe she let me see that side of her. That she invited me in. That this beautiful, incredible woman wanted to share her life with me. This woman who would do anything and everything to protect me and the ones she loved.

With another quick kiss, MacKenzie rolled away, reaching for the glass of water on the bedside table next to her. With her back to me, I got another glimpse at the light scar tissue surrounding the wound just east of her spine. Torin *had* done an excellent job healing her, but the wound had been alarmingly deep, and I still winced and sucked in a breath whenever I saw it.

I reached out and traced my fingertip around the entrance wound, a shudder passing through my body as I remembered walking into the kitchen and finding her on the floor, unconscious, surrounded by a lake of blood.

MacKenzie looked at me over her shoulder, taking in the anxious look on my face. With a sigh, she turned and pressed a kiss to my forehead. “Don’t worry so much, Sabine. Everything’s fine. I’m fine. I’m not going anywhere. I promise.”

I sat up abruptly and wrapped the sheet around myself, suddenly feeling angry and defensive. “How can you say that, MacKenzie?” I snapped. I knew she was just trying to make me feel better, but I wasn’t in the mood to be placated. Someone had *attacked* her—here, in our home, in broad daylight—and it filled me with an angry, shaking fear whenever I thought about it. “You can’t promise that. We still have no idea who did this to you, or why, or where they went. Whoever it was could still be here, sulking around somewhere. Who’s to say they won’t try again?”

“Sabine, I think you need to—” MacKenzie started, in a would-be soothing voice.

But I cut her off. “The pack needs to know if there’s some kind of crazed killer on the prowl! We all have to be on alert!”

MacKenzie sighed. She sat up as well and thought for a moment, like she was trying to choose her words carefully. “I know,” she started gently, “that it’s impossible for you to distrust any of the pack members, but *I’m* not so sure.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, frowning at her.

She looked at me for a moment. “You are one of them, Sabine, but I’m not a wolf—” She stopped herself, then started again, as though trying another approach. “I know that you always look for the best in everyone, and that’s what you see, but not everyone *is* the best.”

“MacKenzie, what are you saying?”

“I’ve been thinking about the newer wolves in the pack,” she said carefully.

“What about them?” I asked.

“Well,” she started, shifting a little on the bed, pulling the quilt around herself, “what do we really know about them? Who are we talking about here? There’s Sage, and Rishika…”

“Charlie, of course. Violet’s mate,” I said. “He’s the newest.”

“Exactly.” MacKenzie nodded. “We just haven’t known them very long. No one here has. They don’t have the same ties as the rest of the Redwood pack.”

I took in what she was saying and then shook my head. “No, Kenzie.”

“Sabine—”

“*No*,” I said again, more firmly. “All of the people we just listed are good people. I refuse to believe that a member of the Redwood pack did this to you.”

MacKenzie rolled her eyes. “All right, fine. Explain it to me. What makes you so certain?”

“It’s very simple: every one of them swore their allegiance to Greyson,” I said with certainty. “They wouldn’t break that vow.”

The look MacKenzie gave me was almost pitying. “But Greyson isn’t here, is he?”

I opened my mouth but closed it again. I didn’t have an answer for that. But I shook my head stubbornly. “No. It’s just not possible. None of the pack members could have attacked you. Even the newer ones. They proved their allegiance in the battle. Remember? You were there. You saw it.”

“Yes, the battle,” MacKenzie murmured, almost to herself. She thought for a moment, frowning. “The battle. It almost seems like too big a coincidence that this attack happened so soon after, doesn’t it?”

I looked at her, startled. “Yes, it does. Do you think they’re connected?” MacKenzie raised her eyebrows at me. “Do you think it could be some kind of—I don’t know—assassin sent by Silas’s followers? Maybe they’re angry that he was defeated. Do you think that’s possible?”

MacKenzie frowned. “I suppose it’s possible. But…” She shook her head, looking unsatisfied with this answer. “But I wonder if it has more to do with something else.”

“What?” I asked eagerly.

“What if it has to do with the orb?” MacKenzie said slowly.

“The orb?” I asked, confused. “What about it? The orb didn’t stab you.”

MacKenzie gave me a withering look. “The orb is the darkest magical object I’ve ever encountered, Sabine.”

I felt a strange thrum of foreboding. “And?”

“And it’s here, in the house,” MacKenzie said. “Hidden, of course. But let’s open our minds to the possibilities for a second. Is it possible that the orb is slowly infecting the house with its dark energy?”

“What could that do?” I asked in a hushed voice.

MacKenzie shrugged, though she looked worried. “I’m not sure. Its powers can’t be limitless, but they are far beyond my understanding. Perhaps we need to consider the possibility that the orb has power beyond what Silas used it for.” She took a deep breath. “It could be making people do things they’d never normally consider.”

“But if that’s true,” I said slowly, processing her words, “how do we stop it?”

**Episode 945**

AVA

I finished the last bit of my cheeseburger and grabbed a paper napkin to catch the juice dribbling down my chin. I liked them extra rare. I sighed as I swallowed, then crumpled the napkin, throwing it onto the table next to my empty plate. Lunch had been my big plan for the day, and now I wasn’t exactly sure what I was going to do next.

And it wasn’t just today. I leaned back in the booth and looked up at the water-stained ceiling of the old diner. I had no idea what the hell I was doing in general. Nolan was dead. The only brother I’d ever had. The last of my family. Gone.

Xavier clearly wanted nothing to do with me—he’d made that crystal clear. Even though I’d fought beside them against Silas, no one in the Redwood pack trusted me. I’d thought for a while that I’d go back to the Samara pack, but there was really no one left from it. Once Silas had been defeated and Nolan had been killed, the pack had kind of scattered. They had no Alpha and no home.

I pressed my fingers to my eyes as my throat grew tight, like it always did when I thought about Nolan. He had been my touchstone for so long. And after I’d come back—from wherever I’d been—it had been calming to know that I had him. But now I didn’t. Now, I didn’t have anyone. I didn’t fit anywhere.

With another sigh I looked around the grungy diner. I’d happened upon it by accident, drawn from the road by the smell of grilling meat. It was one of those places where the waitresses wore short, mustard-colored skirts and rolled around on roller skates, delivering food to tables. It was campy and kind of dingy, but the strangest part was that it made me smile.

A few booths over, a little girl was sharing an ice cream sundae with what looked to be her grandparents and parents. One of her dads snapped a few pictures on his phone, then they all reached for a spoon and dug in. Looking at them felt like a punch in the gut.

I was completely, utterly, totally alone in the world. I had no one left. No ties. No family, no friends, no pack. Watching that little girl’s family felt like the most normal thing in the world, and I longed for it. For normalcy.

Growing up, I’d never been normal. I was a werewolf, and I’d loved being different. Special. But now—I watched as the girl proudly passed around slices of her birthday cake—now, I’d give anything for that kind of simple happiness.

The roller-skated waitress swung by and dropped the check next to my empty plate. “Here you go, hun.”

I didn’t want to leave—I didn’t have anywhere else to go—but I couldn’t stay here forever, so I dug my shrinking wad of cash out of my pocket a dropped a few bills onto the table. I glanced over at the little girl’s table. The girl’s grandma had dotted the girl’s nose with fudge icing, and she was trying to lick it off. I smiled to myself as I made my way to the entrance.

Just at the door, a bulletin board caught my eye, and I stopped to look over the notices. There was a flier for guitar lessons, one for a lost cat, a big poster about the upcoming movie—*Casablanca*—at the drive-in next door, and, next to that, a large notice:

“*HELP WANTED*”.

I stepped closer to read the small printing.

“*Rockaway Diner seeks waitresses for all shifts. No experience (waitressing or skating) necessary.*”

I glanced over my shoulder at the loud, bawdy diner, thinking hard. I could enjoy this, for a while. Trying to fit into this life while I figured out what the hell I was going to do with myself.

Not to mention, I was almost completely out of cash. The cash I’d stolen from a camper’s tent was almost gone, so there really wasn’t much to think about. I headed back inside.

“Hiya!” the blonde girl behind the counter said as I approached. “What can I do for you?”

“Could I speak to the manager about the job ad?”

“Sure thing. Just sit tight,” she said and disappeared through a door to a back room.

I waited for a long time, looking carefully at the different types of soda on the machine behind the counter. I was wondering what “Mix” meant, and probably didn’t want to know, when the girl came back. She was followed by a man with dark eyes and dark hair. He was tall with a lean, toned build, and I could see a tattoo peeking out underneath his shirt on his right bicep. He wasn’t exactly the type of guy I’d imagined running this diner, not when he looked more like a tan European soccer player.

“This is Iñigo Gagliardi,” the blonde girl said to me, then moved off to help a customer.

I smiled at Iñigo, but he just stared at me without speaking.

This went on for so long that I started to feel a flutter of nerves and took a step back.

“You wanted to talk to me?” Iñigo asked, sounding bored.

“Yeah,” I said, trying to keep my voice even*. Nice to meet you too*, I thought. I wasn’t sure where the nerves were coming from. I glanced over my shoulder at the bulletin board. “I wanted to apply to be a waitress.”

The guy eyed me again, his gaze so strangely penetrating I felt exposed somehow. After another long moment, he turned his back on me. I thought our conversation was over until he waved his hand, gesturing for me to follow him. I noticed the waitress blatantly looking at Iñigo’s ass as he went. I had to admit the view wasn’t half-bad.

As a werewolf, I luckily didn’t have much to be afraid of, so I followed him through the door and along a short hallway into a small office. Given the state of the diner, I was surprised when the office was clean and minimalistic. Iñigo sat down behind his desk, putting on a pair of tortoise-shell glasses.

He rummaged through his desk and pulled out a rumpled sheet of paper. “So you’re really interested in being a waitress, huh?” He asked, giving me a quick glance.

I nodded. “Seems like it could be fun.”

“It’s not,” he said bluntly. “Cranky truck drivers? Whining kids? Are you prepared to clean up milkshake after you’ve slipped in it?”

I shrugged. “Sounds a lot easier than some of the shit I’ve been through.”

His dark brown eyes scanned me again, and I thought I saw the hint of a smile at the corners of his lips. “Fill this out.”

I took the rumpled paper from him. It was an application. “Okay. Can I borrow a pen?”

He handed me one, and I headed gratefully out of the office. And, just for a little more distance, out of the diner.

There were a few tables set up outside in the autumn sunshine, and I took one. The application took only a few minutes to fill out, but as I finished it, I looked up and froze.

There were only a few other people outside, and one of them I was shocked to recognize. It was Ravi, looking in my direction.

What the hell was he doing here? What could possibly have brought him to this campy roadside stop? And who was that guy he was talking to? I could only half-see the stranger’s face, but I knew I’d never seen him before. He was big and hulking and just looked… *menacing*, his face flat and cruel.

After a moment, Ravi turned his attention back to the man, without a nod or a wave to me. As though he didn’t recognize me. I shook my head, confused. Why was he here? Maybe he hadn’t seen me at all.

I stood up and walked back toward the door but stopped just short of it, glancing back once more. Ravi and the man stood. He looked around, like he knew exactly what he was looking for, and found my eyes. I froze, but then Ravi looked away, and he and the large man strode off, walking around the side of the building toward the back.

I watched them disappear, wondering if I should follow them, but then I felt a hand on my shoulder. I jumped and instinctively moved away, my heart thudding. When I turned, Iñigo was looking down at me, his gaze intense.

“I’m glad I caught you,” he said.

“Are you?” I breathed, wondering what he meant.

“I’m not going to need you to turn in an application.”

I looked down at the paper clutched in my hand. “Oh, okay. It’s no problem, I’ve already filled it out—”

“No, that’s not it.” He gave me a strange, searching look, then his mouth turned up in a small smile. “You’re hired.”

“What?” I asked, confused. “Seriously?”

Iñigo eyed me again with a small smile. “Yeah. I have a feeling you’re going to fit in here perfectly.”

**Episode 946**

VIOLET

The air in my bedroom was thick with tension as I looked at Charlie. He was lying on the bed, staring up the ceiling, not looking at me and not talking to me. I’d gone to get him some water, but when I came back he hadn’t moved.

Tired of it, I took a deep breath, thinking hard. Things were weird between us, but I wasn’t going to let that intimidate me. I was going to make things right between us, so I got up from the desk chair and sat down on the bed beside him. “Charlie,” I started quietly. “Will you *please* talk to me?”

He didn’t move. Didn’t look at me, didn’t talk to me.

“Charlie, whatever it is, you can tell me. You can tell me anything,” I told him, my voice catching. “But I can’t help you with whatever is going on if you don’t tell me about it.”

Finally, he turned to look at me, but when his golden eyes met mine, they were filled with anger. I stared at him, startled and scared.

“There’s no way you can help. With anything.” He turned his gaze away. “You don’t understand.”

“*What* don’t I understand?” I almost pleaded. “What, Charlie? I promise I won’t judge you, for anything. You’re my *mate!*”

Charlie gave a little huff, like in disbelief, and my eyes widened in shock. What on earth was *that?* What had changed? He’d seemed so onboard with everything before, so accepting of everything that had come his way—*especially* the fact that we were mates. He’d seemed so excited.

I thought back, trying to think of what could have changed for him. Had something happened? Was it something I had done?

But… no!

I looked over at Charlie, who was frowning at the ceiling. No, this wasn’t my fault. I hadn’t done anything! This was *his* fault. He was acting weird and difficult! Not me!

I got to my feet with an irritated huff and Charlie looked over at me, his eyes impassive.

“*Fine*,” I snapped. “Fine. If you’re not going to talk to me, then I can’t force you to. I’m leaving!” And I spun on my heel and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind me.

By the time I’d made it to the stairs, my anger had grown into a hard ball in my chest and was pushing upward, trying to make it out of my throat, and I felt like I was going to cry. Whatever was going on with Charlie was making me doubt everything, and I hated that. I just didn’t know what to think. He had just started acting so strangely—out of nowhere—then the attack on Big Mac… *No!* I shook my head. I couldn’t even let myself go there. Even though I didn’t know everything about Charlie yet, I knew his heart. There was just no way he would ever intentionally hurt anyone. It just wasn’t possible.

*Right?*

A sharp spear of pain slid through my heart. *Of course not!* What kind of mate would even *wonder* that about their partner? I gripped the bannister and headed downstairs. The living room was empty, so I wandered in, walking to the windows and looking out at the wide lawn. Rishika, Sage, and Zainab were all outside, setting up for something. They were hauling wood and bags of charcoal, and Sage was carrying towers of stacked chairs. For a moment I stared at them in confusion before I remembered the barbecue we’d planned. Everything was kind of a big party, it seemed, with Halloween being the final grand blowout.

The girls all looked like they were having a good time together, and part of me wished I could join them, but I just didn’t feel like celebrating anything just now. I felt confused and slightly guilty and just kind of wistful as I stood there, looking out at the happy scene.

There was a shuffling behind me, and I looked over my shoulder. Torin had walked into the room and was striding toward me, his eyes on the window, an excited look on his face.

“Is this all for the barbecue?” he asked enthusiastically, gesturing toward the girls.

I looked at him, a little startled by his excitement. I’d never seen anyone so pumped about grilled meat. “Um, yeah. They’re just getting everything ready to start the fire.”

My tone was flat, but Torin apparently didn’t pick up on that. He was really nice, but a little oblivious. “I’m really excited about this party. Very, *very* excited. Do you think there will be beer? I had beer at the last party, and I really liked it. It’s great for a party. And I love the idea of a big bonfire. What else do you roast over the fire, besides meat? Any vegetables? We eat a lot of vegetables in the Fae world. Oh!” He leaned closer to the window to get a better look as the girls started doing a silly dance around the small fire. “Is that part of your custom? I don’t want to offend anyone. Do I need to learn a dance?”

I gave him a blank stare. “No,” I finally said. “No dance.”

Torin looked at me, finally registering my expression. His brows drew together in a frown. “Is something bothering you, Violet?”

He was looking at me so kindly, and his voice was filled with so much concern, and I was *so* sad, that I couldn’t help it—I started to cry.

“Oh, Violet,” he said. “Oh no, I’m sorry. What’s wrong? Are you worried about your friend? I promise, MacKenzie will be fine. The wound looked bad, I know, but I’m an exceptional healer. Excellent, really. Just ask Astrid, Cali, or Greyson.” He smiled proudly.

Now that I’d started, I couldn’t stop crying, but I shook my head. “No, that’s not it.”

He looked at me, clearly waiting, and there was something about his kind, patient face that just made me want to open up.

“It’s my mate,” I wailed.

“Ah,” he said, realization dawning. He nodded sagely. “Do you also have two?”

“No, no, that’s not the problem,” I said, shaking my head again. “It’s just Charlie.”

“Oh, yeah, Charlie! He’s very cute,” Torin said with a wink. “So what’s the problem?” Then his face fell and he leaned in closer. “Oh, is he bad in bed?”

My tearstained cheeks flushed. “No!” I said quickly. Though the thought *not that I’d know yet* flashed through my head. “No, that’s not—something’s bothering him.”

“What is it?” Torin asked.

“That’s just it,” I said, dashing my tears away. “I don’t know, and he won’t tell me what’s wrong.”

Torin nodded, his expression sympathetic. “I see. He’s new here, isn’t he, your Charlie?”

I nodded.

“Perhaps he might just be having a hard time adjusting, Violet. Your pack is great, but I can see it being a lot, right off the bat. I’ve always been fascinated with werewolf lore,” he said. “So this is all fulfilling a big personal dream for me, but maybe he’s a little overwhelmed. Maybe you just need to make sure he knows that you’re there for him, no matter what. Make sure he feels safe and comfortable here. Isn’t that how you’d want to feel, if the situation were reversed?”

I stared at Torin, thunderstruck. It was so simple, but was he right? Had I been thinking about this selfishly? All this weirdness with Charlie had started on that date, when he’d found out his parents had cut him off. I kept thinking the situation had to do with me, but maybe this was just some weird family thing that he assumed I wouldn’t understand.

But he was wrong. I was no stranger to weird family things. I mean, I’d just accidentally trapped my brother in a ghost prison, so I could pretty much handle anything at this point.

I took a deep breath. “Thank you,” I said to Torin, filled with determination to do just as he’d suggested and let Charlie know I was here for him, and that I wasn’t going anywhere.

“No problem.” Torin smiled. “And I’m glad to hear he’s good in bed!” he called after me as I strode out of the room.

The house was quiet as I headed back up the stairs. Most of the pack was probably already outside, getting ready for the barbecue. Torin was extraordinarily excited, but everyone else was pretty happy about the party, too, so the hallway was empty as I hurried down it.

I flung open my bedroom door, ready to tell Charlie that he could take as long as he needed to adjust to this new life, and he didn’t have to tell me anything until he felt completely ready. But then I froze. The room was empty.

I stared for a moment, then stepped inside. The bathroom door was open, so I was sure he wasn’t in there, either. As I stood in the middle of the room, I felt a strange prickle in my spine and stepped toward the closet. When I opened it, I sucked in a shocked breath. Charlie’s clothes were all gone. And so was his suitcase.

**Episode 947**

Sunset was streaking the sky, and I leaned back in my chair, looking up at the bright pinks and oranges fading into dark, velvety blues. The smell of grilling meat was just starting to fill the air as the first round of hotdogs came off the grill.

“Who wants one?” Sage yelled and started handing them around.

Though I hadn’t asked for one, Zainab put a hotdog in my hand. “Oh, thanks,” I said, surprised, and she grinned back at me before moving away. I wasn’t feeling particularly hungry, so I put the hotdog on the broad arm of my chair and tucked my knees up against my chest.

The bonfire was high, illuminating the darkening night. Everyone was eating and drinking and laughing, looking relaxed. Looking around, I could almost forget we’d fought a life-or-death battle only a few days before. But that was just how werewolves were—they never missed an opportunity to celebrate life. Rishika was standing with Artemis at the other grill, showing her how to put together shish kabobs on wooden skewers.

Artemis looked amazed and was clearly having a great time loading her skewers from the plates of steak, mushrooms, onions, and pineapple. Having passed out all their hot dogs, Zainab and Sage were curled up together on one chair, intertwined like creeping vines and whispering into each other’s ears. Astrid and Torin were in the busy center, wide-eyed, taking everything in.

I glanced away for a moment, and when I glanced back, someone had handed Torin a bottle, and he was looking down at it with great excitement.

“What’s *Fireball*?” he asked, looking around. He took a long pull of it, straight from the bottle, and his eyes grew large as softballs. “What *is* this concoction? I’ve never tasted anything like it. Astrid, you *have* to try it!” But instead of handing the bottle to Astrid, he took another drink, chugging the liquor like it was water.

I’d just braced myself to get up and stop him when Mrs. Smith rushed forward and pulled the bottle from his hands.

“That’s enough of that,” she said, smiling a little.

“What, why?” Torin protested, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and looking devastated. “I really *like* Fireball! It makes me feel all warm inside.”

“I can see that,” Mrs. Smith said, eyeing him warily. “But you don’t want too much of it, Torin, or you’ll wake up tomorrow feeling like the walking dead. And wishing you were, too.”

Torin kept looking disappointed, but he’d started swaying slightly, so he wasn’t able to follow Mrs. Smith when she walked away with the bottle.

My attention was diverted from that scene by a loud *WHOOP!*, and I looked over at the back porch. Artemis and Rishika had apparently finished with their shish kabobs and were now playing beer pong against Sage and Zainab. I sat up higher in my chair and watched as Artemis—her eyes laser focused—flawlessly threw her cache of balls into every single opposing cup.

And I wasn’t the only one staring. Rishika was also watching her in complete awe.

When Artemis finished, she threw her hands into the air, grinning triumphantly, and Rishika—cheering loudly—threw her arms around her.

“You’ve got to be *kidding* me!” Zainab said, shaking her head in disgust.

“We didn’t even get a turn,” Sage complained. She narrowed her eyes. “You two have some kind of unfair advantage.”

Artemis and Rishika laughed but didn’t dispute Sage’s claim.

I turned back to the fire with a smile. I was glad to see Artemis having a good time, but, despite the party throbbing around me, I couldn’t help but lose myself in my thoughts again. The fire was warm, but the autumn night was cold, especially now that the sun was gone, and I shivered.

Suddenly, Xavier was there, tucking a fleece blanket around my shoulders.

“Hey,” I said, looking up at him.

“Hey,” he said, settling down on the ground next to my chair. “That better?” he asked, tipping his chin toward the blanket.

I nodded. “Lots, thanks. How’d you know?”

He smirked. “You’re always cold. So,” he said with a sigh. “How are you doing?”

I looked into the fire for a long moment before I answered. “I honestly don’t know.”

He nodded, his expression sympathetic. “It’s been a big day, Cali. But Big Mac is going to be fine, and—”

“That’s not it,” I broke in. “I mean, I’m glad she’s going to be okay, but that’s not what’s been on my mind.”

“What is it?” Xavier asked.

I sighed. “I just can’t stop thinking about Greyson.”

Xavier’s eyes went cold.

“Not like that,” I said hastily. *Well, mostly not like that,* I thought to myself. “It’s just—I can’t stop worrying that if Greyson doesn’t come back…” I trailed off.

“What?” Xavier asked when I didn’t go on. “Cali, *what* if he doesn’t come back?”

“I—I don’t know.” I looked down at my hands. “It sounds like his plan is to stay away, so that we can move forward without me actually having to make a choice.”

Xavier was silent for a moment, and when I looked up at him, he was frowning. “If you did make a choice, though—if you *had* to and if you *could*—would it be me?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it again and looked back into the fire, as if I’d find the answer there. I just didn’t know what to say. But he was expecting me to say *something*, so I marshaled my courage and tried. “I want to try to move forward, Xavier—”

He shook his head, frustrated. “But that’s not what’s happening. You’re being forced to choose, Cali. Greyson’s not even here. It’s me or nothing. How is that a choice?”

I closed my eyes as my chest ached with the pressure of his hurt and anger. I dropped my head and took a long, ragged breath. When I looked up, Xavier’s eyes were back on the fire and he was breathing hard.

He didn’t speak for a long time. I looked at him, watching the wheels turning behind his eyes. I thought I could guess what he was thinking. He wanted me to choose him because I loved him, because I couldn’t live without him. Because I wanted him. He didn’t want to be my choice by default. And I didn’t blame him. I wouldn’t have wanted that either. I didn’t want that. My heart ached for him.

“Xavier,” I said quietly. “I know that none of this is ideal. It’s not for me either.”

“I know that,” he said, also quietly, still not looking at me.

“But…” I reached out and grabbed his hand, tugging until he looked at me. His face was shadowed on one side, lit golden by the fire from the other. “We didn’t choose this, but this is where we are. And we have to start working with the reality that we’re currently living in. It’s just not possible for me to formally choose anyone.”

“Cali—”

“Not when one of you would die, Xavier,” I said firmly. I gave him a long look. “I know how you feel, I really do, but would you really—*really*—want me to choose you if it meant Greyson would die?”

Xavier closed his eyes for a moment. “Of course not,” he said roughly.

I knew they’d always had their problems, but there was something in his voice that told me that he meant this. They were brothers, complicated as much as it was.

“So,” I said with a sigh, “now that we’ve agreed on that, do you think we can just try this? For now, at least? I’m just trying to figure out all of this out. Maybe we could just go back to the way things were before, to try things out.

Xavier looked up at me, and for a moment he just searched my face, taking in the worry at every angle. He took a deep breath, like he was about to answer, but before he could say anything, there was a strange sucking sensation, and then a blast of heat, as if from a massive oven. At the same time, there was a deafening explosion, and I covered my ears and cowered in my chair.

Xavier was on his feet in a moment, his arms around me, shielding me from the blast of what I realized was the grill exploding like a bomb. I heard the rush of the bonfire surging into the night sky and the screams of the pack as they raced away. The acrid smell of burning filled the air as Xavier eased himself off me and looked around at the dark, smoky night.

I followed his gaze and saw the smoldering wreckage of the grill, fifteen feet away from where it had started. I looked at Xavier, who was looking startled and fearful, and grasped his hand like a lifeline.

“What the hell just happened?” he demanded.

**Episode 948**

Even locked in Xavier’s arms, his body blocking the worst of the blast, a wave of heat slammed into me and the scent of burning hair filled my nostrils. I heard Torin let out a pained cry.

What the hell was *happening?*

I peered around Xavier’s broad shoulders at the barbecue fire. Huge flames climbed high in the sky, a good ten feet above the ground and roaring outward, threatening to turn the group collected around the barbecue to cinders. Then, just as quickly as the flames roared toward us, they burned out and receded to the confines of the barbecue pit.

Torin let out a cry and dropped to the ground, clutching his face.

Astrid rushed over to the Fae man. “Torin!”

Shock rippled through the group.

“What the hell was that?” Mace demanded, looking around, his eyebrows drawn together in accusation. “Who did that?”

“The meat is burned!” Sage pouted.

*Priorities.*

I peeled myself out of Xavier’s embrace and headed straight for Torin and Astrid. Xavier followed close behind me.

*Oh, Torin.* The poor guy had been closest to the fire when it had erupted. Had he been terribly burned? He was our healer! How were we going to help him if he was badly injured?

Torin hopped up from the ground just as I reached him. I gasped when I took in his face.

“That was incredible! Like looking into the mouth of a dragon!” He was grinning from ear to ear, his face was bright red from the heat, and his eyebrows had been singed clean off. He didn’t seem even slightly concerned about nearly having been burned to a crisp.

My gasp turned to a laugh, and I clapped my hands over my mouth. This was serious. He could have been badly hurt. Beside me, Xavier snorted, and I cleared my throat to cover my laugh. Artemis came up to inspect the damage and seemed shocked by Torin’s hairless face.

Astrid patted his shoulder with a relieved smile. “You can consider that dragon tamed, my friend.” She glanced at the now smoldering fire for confirmation. “Thankfully.”

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Of course! I’m not in any pain. I don’t think I’m hurt at all. Why wouldn’t I be okay?”

Artemis’s expression was somber. “I’m afraid not all of you escaped unscathed.”

Torin looked from Artemis, to Astrid, and finally to me, confusion etched into his hairless face. “What is it?”

“You might want to take a look in a mirror,” Sage suggested, offering a small hand mirror to the Fae. “Here. Use mine.”

Torin’s eyes went wide, and he almost dropped the mirror. “My beautiful eyebrows!”

Xavier looked from the tamed fire to Torin, who was still clearly blindsided by the change in his facial hair. “What happened? Everything seemed fine—until you nearly got hit by a fireball.”

Torin passed the mirror back to Sage with a nod of thanks and then turned back to Xavier and shrugged. “I think perhaps there was some magic in that can.”

I blinked. *Magic in the can?* “What are you talking about?”

“Well, I was dancing by the fire, after drinking some of that transcendent cinnamon elixir—”

“The Fireball whiskey,” Mrs. Smith piped up. The group that had been clustered around the fire was now collecting around the eyebrow-less Fae.

Torin’s eyes lit up. “Yes! And so maybe I might have knocked the can into the fire…”

“You mean the can of *lighter fluid?*” Xavier asked, his tone sharp.

“I suppose so.” Torin shook his head with a laugh. “And what potent fluid it is!”

I felt Xavier tense up next to me, his eyes narrowing. He wasn’t half as entertained by the whole thing as Torin was. In fact, he seemed kind of pissed off.

I put a hand on his chest and smiled at Torin. “So no crisis here, then. Just an accident. Thank goodness nobody got hurt!”

Xavier crossed his arms, staring down at Torin. “If you’re not careful, you *will* be hurt.”

Not only was Xavier pissed, he was angry enough to try to threaten Torin into behaving. *Okay then. Time to defuse this situation…*

“I think it’s probably time to drink some water,” I said, eyeing Torin as he begin to walk toward the coolers. “What do you think, Torin? You’ve probably had enough, right?”

Torin pouted as Astrid steered him back toward us before he could argue. Then she leaned over to whisper, “Please heal your eyebrows. They’re freaking me out. You look like a hairless cat, but without the cuteness.”

Just outside our little circle, Zainab laughed, pointing at the batch of kebabs they were making next. “Sage, yours looks like a piece of shriveled charcoal!”

Just like that, the tension evaporated, the shock of the explosion wore off, and the barbecue picked up right where we’d left it before the fire had erupted. More hotdogs were procured, more drinks were passed around, and Torin was already regrowing his eyebrows.

No harm done.

I tugged Xavier away from the fire, back to our slightly more secluded spot. I could tell the shock wasn’t rolling off him quite as quickly as it was for the others. “It’s not a big deal,” Xavier,” I said, trying to be comforting. “Nothing really bad happened.”

He scoffed. “Whoever put the can so close to the fire should be punished. There’s a reason it’s labeled ‘flammable’.”

Mrs. Smith came over. Worry was etched into her face. “I really don’t like what just happened here.”

“What?” I asked. “I know it was shocking, but it was just an accident.”

“Or it was made to look like one,” she countered. Then her gaze shifted to Xavier. “It’s a little worrisome to have something like that happen—after all, it could have seriously injured people. Especially after what just happened to MacKenzie.”

“I’m well aware of what happened!” Xavier snapped. “Greyson put me in charge, and I’ll take care of it.”

*Wow. He’s really taking this seriously*. *Maybe everything that’s been happening lately is starting to get to him. Then again, how could it not?*

Mrs. Smith glared at Xavier and returned to Big Mac without another word. It was hard to believe Big Mac had been stabbed. She looked fine now, sipping a wine cooler like she didn’t have a care in the world.

*It’s lucky that Torin was around when we needed a healer.*

Torin let out another scream, and my eyes darted over to where he was standing with Astrid and the others, who were laughing uproariously. The Fae man’s eyebrows were huge, bushy, and very green. So it hadn’t been a bad scream, then.

Next to me, Xavier rolled his eyes.

“Astrid, change them back!” Torin cried.

“Fucking Fae,” Xavier mumbled.

My jaw dropped, and I rounded on him in a split second. “*Excuse me?*”

He pointed to Torin. “Need I say more?”

“I’m Fae. You shouldn’t denigrate us.”

“You’re different.” He shrugged. “Besides, you’re the one who used to call werewolves ‘wolf-bears’.”

“That’s what werewolves looked like to me! I didn’t mean to offend anyone. But you, on the other hand, just disparaged me and all the other Fae.”

He rolled his eyes again. “Sorry.”

*Sue me, but that didn’t feel like a real apology*. Was this going to be a constant issue between us? Would my being Fae cause trouble in our relationship?

He must have sensed my concern, because his expression softened and he took my hand. “Hey, I’m sorry. Really. I was out of line.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m going to go talk to Jay about the explosion, see if he noticed anything. Maybe I can get Mrs. Smith off my back.” He brushed a kiss across my forehead before walking away.

As he headed over to Jay, I noticed Artemis glaring at me from the group of Fae. I looked behind me to make sure there was no one there and then looked back at her. Yup, still glaring. What was her problem? She’d been fine just a few minutes ago.

She scoffed and shook her head. Somehow I’d pissed her off in the last few minutes, and pissed her off good. I blew out a breath and headed over to the group to talk to my sister.

Artemis turned back to the group, like she was trying to freeze me out, and I tapped her on the shoulder. “What’s that look about?”

“Oh, nothing.” She shrugged. “It’s just you spend so much time telling everyone how horrible your problems are.”

I blinked. I couldn’t quite believe she’d just said that. *Okay, that came out really bitchy.* “They are horrible, and you know it.” My fingers clenched into a fist as I fought every urge I had to smack my sister.

Then she shoved me, hard, and my vision went red.

“You made your choice,” she snapped. “It’s clear to me and everyone else here—you’ve chosen Xavier and shoved Greyson off the cliff. How does that make you feel?”

**Episode 949**

ARTEMIS

As my words fell around us like shrapnel, my sister’s mouth wordlessly opened and closed like she was a fish on dry land. A new volley of angry, hurtful words filled my mouth, resting on the tip of my tongue.

I was so, *so* angry at what I’d just seen. All I wanted to do was open my mouth and unleash my fury. Grab Cali by the shoulders and shake some sense into her and—

I swallowed the toxic words down, turned on my heel, and stomped away from my sister. I needed to put some space between the two of us before I did something I’d regret. What was wrong with me? I couldn’t recall the last time I’d felt this furious. It was as if, in the space of just a few seconds, my anger had built and built until it had exploded—just like the barbecue fire.

I was the first to admit I had a temper, and from time to time it could go off like a geyser, but usually I was able to control it.

*Something is wrong here. I need some space to get my head on straight. I need to breathe—*

Before I could put much distance between us, Cali grabbed my arm and spun me back around with a surprising amount of strength. Her face was contorted in hurt and fury.

“How dare you say that to me!” she screamed. “You *know* the strain I’m under, the impossible choice I’m being forced to make. How can you accuse me of shoving Greyson under the bus? That’s so incredibly heartless, Artemis! I thought you understood me better than that!”

My stomach twisted with that same toxic anger, and I took a deep breath, desperate to find an ounce of calm before I did something stupid—like use my mind control powers to make Cali pick Greyson and be fucking happy about it. “I… I’m not sure what you mean. What’s a bus?”

She jabbed my shoulder with one pointy finger. “It means you think I don’t care what happens to Greyson!”

Well, she wasn’t wrong about that. Greyson loved her—the big scary kind of love that made people lose their minds. The kind that had made him follow her to the Fae world when he’d had so many reasons to stay home. And I’d watched her yank him—and Xavier—around when we’d all been preparing for battle with Silas. Just thinking about it made my vision haze over with red.

And now that Greyson had left to take care of his own business, Cali hadn’t even skipped a beat before cozying up with Xavier. Xavier, who seemed fine but with whom I didn’t have the trust and history I had with Greyson.

Greyson was my friend. I cared about him. I knew how badly he’d been hurt in the past—and therefore how special his love for Cali truly was. I didn’t want to see him hurt—especially after Cali had jerked him around for so long! He deserved better than this shit!

And just like that, my fury gained control again. “Well, you’re right! I don’t think you care about him at all! I’m not even sure you care about Xavier, honestly, because if you did love him that much, you would have picked him by now! No, all you care about is yourself. You keep telling me we’re sisters, but I don’t think that really matters to you, because you sure don’t treat me like one.”

Her eyes went wide. “*I* don’t treat *you* like a sister? *Seriously?* What about you?” She shoved me, and if I hadn’t been two seconds away from—as they say in the Fae world—slapping a wench, I would have been impressed.

But instead of complimenting her form, I shoved her right back. “Be careful, Cali. I’m in no mood to deal with your bullshit.”

“*My* bullshit? Well, too bad, because this is happening. So what are you going to do about it?”

My fingers clenched into tight fists. I could feel frenetic energy pooling in my limbs, urging me to act, to knock that smug look right off her self-righteous face. “Do. Not. Push. Me,” I gritted out. “Or you’re going to find out exactly what I’m capable of.”

My sister’s eyes narrowed, and I knew she was going to cross that line despite my warnings—

“Hey, guys!” Lola popped up and slung an arm around Cali’s shoulders. “What’s going on? Anyone want to roast a marshmallow?”

The only thing I wanted to roast was Cali, and seeing her with Lola didn’t help. The two of them were closer, much more like sisters than Cali and I had ever been. And suddenly Cali and I were no longer on equal ground. If push came to shove, Lola would back her. It’d be two against one.

I wrenched my arm out of Cali’s grip and stepped back with an easy smile, the one I’d perfected under years of oppression working for the Kollector, the one that said *fuck you* while also looking so, so pretty.

“No thanks. You can have Cali all to yourself. I think I’m done.”

Pain flashed in my sister’s eyes, but I was already on the move, shoving past them and ignoring whatever she said in response. I needed some space, and this time I wasn’t going to let anyone stop me.

My emotions ran wild as I hurried away from the barbecue, toward the lake. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been so upset, so hurt and angry and full of something dark and vengeful. Something that wanted to get out.

*What’s wrong with me? What’s pushing me like this? I usually don’t lose my cool so quickly.*

I glanced over my shoulder. The pack still seemed to be enjoying the barbecue, despite the close call with the lighter fluid. *Werewolves, a witch, and two and a half Fae—how do they all get along? And why can’t I do the same, even in a group like that?*

I wanted to fit in, to have a good time, but I felt like an outsider. A piece that belonged to an entirely different puzzle. I’d always felt that way, to a certain extent, even when I’d been back in the Fae world. Now I knew why. I was half Dark Fae, half Light Fae, belonging to both sides and neither side all at once.

I’d thought I’d be working for the Kollector for the rest of my life. I’d been required to do some pretty unsavory things, but I’d had to in order to survive. And now… Now, I somehow felt more lost than ever. There was plenty of unsavory stuff happening here in this world, but none of it involved me.

I’d fought in a battle on Greyson and Cali’s behalf, but Cali was caught up in her own stuff, and Greyson was gone.

*And now I’m a bystander in my own life.*

My thoughts continued spiraling until I saw a figure approaching from the lake. It was Ravi.

He glanced at me, his expression unreadable. Something about him set my teeth on edge. I remembered seeing him going into Greyson’s room. What had that been about? Maybe it had been nothing. Maybe he was just moody.

He nodded at me in greeting. “If you’re planning on going in, the water’s pretty cold.”

Honestly, that sounded like the perfect thing to cool off my hot head. I pushed all thoughts of Cali away and tried to focus on the man in front of me. “How are you doing?”

Ravi shrugged. “I miss Joss.” He pointed at the barbecue behind me. “And it seems like I’m the only one.”

I sighed. “Maybe the party is a way to help them deal with it.”

He snorted and brushed past me. *So much for that.*

I reached the lake, yanked off my shoes, and dipped my toes in. “Oh gods,” I breathed. Ravi hadn’t been lying about the water. It was freezing.

I skirted along the edge of the lake, avoiding the bone-chilling water but trying to take in the soothing landscape at the same time. Laughter echoed over the surface of the lake, and I looked up to see Rishika coming toward me with a few people I didn’t know.

“Hey, Artemis.” Rishika smiled and pointed at the others. “This is Norah, Elise, and Arlo. They joined the pack the same time as me. Guys, this is Artemis. You all know her sister, Cali.”

They looked at me appraisingly, their eyebrows raised.

Norah laughed. “This is the weirdest werewolf pack—not everybody is even a werewolf.”

My lips twitched, but I didn’t feel like laughing. She wasn’t wrong.

“Artemis, you should join us. We’re going to have a competition to see who can climb that tree the fastest.” Norah pointed to a tall tree at the edge of the woods.

“But don’t feel obligated,” Arlo added. “No offense, but I’m a werewolf, and I’m in pretty awesome shape. I go to the pack’s gym six days a week. Check out these guns!” He flexed his arms.

“You mean the basement? Cool it, Arlo.” Rishika rolled her eyes. “So, Artemis, what do you say? Are you ready to take on a bunch of werewolves?”

**Episode 950**

AVA

I stared at Iñigo in surprise. *Wow, it’s gonna be that easy, huh?*

I couldn’t say that many things in my life had gone easily, especially since I’d come back from the dead. It had been one shitshow after another, being trapped in a body that looked like Caliana’s, lying to my mate and sleeping with another man, losing my brother, almost dying multiple times. And now that things finally seemed to be looking up, I couldn’t help but wonder what the catch was. Because in my experience, if something sounded too good to be true, it usually was.

What manager in his right mind would offer me a job without asking for a reference, a resume, or any kind of documentation? Surely something wasn’t quite right here, for them to accept me so readily. But also… could I really afford to turn this down?

I didn’t have to think twice about the answer. At least until I figured things out for myself, came up with a real plan of action that would help me get Xavier back, and get my life on track—my own real life, free from people who would want to use me and free from the Samara pack and all the memories of Nolan. I had to be smart about this and take my time. If I rushed into things without seriously considering the consequences, then I knew I’d just end up in the same place—alone, confused, and trying to rebuild my life from the shambles it was in.

A job here would earn me some much-needed time. I took a deep breath and nodded. “Okay, I’ll work here.”

“And when do you think you’ll be able to start?” Iñigo asked.

“Oh, um, I guess as soon as I get my affairs in order.” I considered all the steps that that entailed. First things first, I’d need to find somewhere to live. “Do you know of any motels nearby where I could rent a room?” I asked. I didn’t love the idea, honestly, but I’d need something to hold me over while I worked at the diner and saved money and figured out what my next step would be.

Iñigo waved a hand. “Sure, I can give you some options, if you like, but you could also take the room upstairs.” He pointed down the hallway to an unmarked door between the kitchen and a supply closet. “Do you want to see it?”

I nodded, and he led me down the hallway, up the stairs, and used a key on his keychain to open the door. The hallway was small and cramped; I was so close to him I could smell his cologne.

“It’s not much,” he admitted, swinging the door open, “but it’s clean and you could stay here as long as you want—free of charge.”

I glanced around the room, trying to hide my disappointment. It was smaller than my bedroom at the Samara pack house had ever been—frankly, it wasn’t much bigger than a walk-in closet—but he was right. It was clean. And it even had a small bathroom and an even smaller closet.

The furniture in the room—a shabby single dresser and a twin-size bed with a bare mattress—was run down, just like the diner itself, but I didn’t mind. Not really. It would do. It wasn’t much, but it was still a place to start, to rebuild my life from the ground up in relative safety.

But why was this guy offering it to me?

Iñigo had disappeared while I was checking out the bathroom, and he came back in holding a small black bundle in his arms. “Here.” He tossed it over to me.

It was a T-shirt branded with the diner name and logo. “Um, thanks?”

“It’s part of your uniform,” he explained. His eyes went up and down my body for a moment and I blushed. “You don’t look like a roller-skater. Put that on, and you can start right away.”

*Oh. No rest for the weary, I guess.*

“Okay, um… Just give me a second to change,” I said.

“I’ll meet you up front.” He left me alone in my new room. I took a few moments to collect myself, to change and splash water on my face and fix my ponytail. And then I stared at my reflection for a few quiet moments.

Now that I knew what it was like to walk around in a body that wasn’t my own, I savored the chance to look in the mirror and see my own face staring back at me, even tired and worn down as it was.

I was free now, and this was my second chance at life. For real this time. And that more than made up for my shabby room at the back of a shabbier diner, and for the fact that I was essentially alone in the world. At least now, for the first time in far too long, my life was completely in my own hands.

I took a deep breath and left the peace of my bedroom to meet Iñigo.

He nodded approvingly at the black diner T-shirt. “Good. Now let’s introduce you to the rest of the team.”

He brought me to meet a waitress named Mabel who reeked of weed and the cook, Kento, who was sort of attractive, but only gave me a cursory glance and welcomed me with a grunt.

“Hope you can keep up,” Kento said.

I resisted the urge to rip the apron off him—along with his face. I needed to play this low-key, after all. Not stir up any trouble.

Without further ado, I began my shift and my job of shadowing Mabel. I had zero training, but it was all fairly intuitive to handle the slow stream of customers—truckers, travelers, and a few couples—as long as Mabel was around to answer questions. This was a bit tricky since Mabel, I had learned, took every possible chance to go out back and take a 5-minute break. The girl I’d spoken to before who’d checked Iñigo out earlier had seemingly gone home.

Kento was more reliable, but I had to put up with his repeated mentions of the fact that he would have graduated from the Culinary Institute if his cash hadn’t dried up. For a grease-covered short order cook in a C-minus diner, the guy seemed pretty impressed with himself.

For the most part, I tried to ignore him. I had my own things to think about, like where the hell the napkins were kept. I looked around for Mabel, but she was nowhere in sight.

*She’s probably smoking again.*

I approached the cook. “Hey, Kento. I’ve got a customer asking for more napkins. Do you know where we keep them?”

He pointed to the closet next to my room. “There’s a bunch in the supply closet.”

I headed down the narrow, dingy hallway to the back of the diner, but then I noticed Iñigo standing by the open back door, drinking from something. *There it is*, I thought. *This guy may be good-looking and look like he has his shit together, but he drinks on the job*. Then, I caught the smell.

*Holy shit, is he drinking blood? What the fuck? Is he some kind of psychopath?*

*Wait, was he a* vampire*?*

No, that couldn’t be it. I would have been able to *smell* that on him.

What was going on?

Iñigo turned slightly and noticed me gaping at him from the hallway. He shrugged, a smirk catching on his lips. “What, haven’t you ever seen a vampire before?”

I blinked. *Wait…*

“I’m a vampire, you're a werewolf, who gives a shit?” he added.

I had no fucking clue how to respond to that.

“What are you doing back here?” he asked.

“Napkins,” I managed.

He pointed me to the supply closet, and I grabbed a handful of napkins for my customer. A thought occurred to me, and I turned to Iñigo. He was slurping up the last of the blood bag.

“Are there other supernaturals here?” I asked.

“You’re still on the clock,” he reminded me. “I’d suggest you get back to work.”

I bit my tongue and returned to the dining area to give my customer the napkins she’d requested. I eyed Kento and Mabel—who had finally decided to take a break from her many smoke breaks. Were they vampires too? If so, why couldn’t I smell them? There was something very strange about this place.

Mabel caught me staring and pointed to a new customer, seated in a booth. “He’s in your section. Get going.”

Great mentoring. I grabbed a menu and brought it over. When I saw who was seated at the booth, I almost dropped the menu. It was Charlie. Violet’s mate. I remembered him from the battle. What the hell was he doing here?

I considered turning back, but his gaze landed on me and I knew it was too late. And judging by his expression, he recognized me too.

“Oh. I… you know what? I, um, I’m not, uh, hungry,” he stammered, getting up from his booth.

I shoved him back down. “Did Xavier send you?”

“Nobody sent me.”

I frowned. That didn’t make sense. Shouldn’t he be off with his mate? “So why are you here then?”

“Uh, to get a burger?”

I narrowed my eyes at his answer but wrote down his order. It was weird for him to just show up out of the blue, right? “Okay, well it’ll be a few minutes on your order—”

“Please don’t tell anyone I’m here,” Charlie begged, his eyes wide.

“What are you talking about?”

“I kind of ran away from the pack,” he explained. “I don’t want them to know where I am.”

“Not even Violet? Isn’t she your mate?”

Charlie fell silent for a moment. “It’s not working out.”

*Huh. There’s gotta be a story there*. “Okay… Well, I’ll be back with your burger, I guess.”

He didn’t respond, and I headed over to the counter to pass Charlie’s order to Kento. The cook frowned at the little white order slip. “How does he want his burger?”

I shrugged. “How the fuck do I know? He didn’t specify.”

“Well, I’m not going to guess. Making a burger properly is an art.”

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever.” I turned back to go ask Charlie these apparently uber-important questions about his burger, but Iñigo had already approached him. I hurried over. What was that vampire up to?

“You look lost,” Iñigo was saying when I reached them.

*Great, not only is this guy a vampire, but he’s a creep too.*

“I could use someone like yourself,” the vampire continued. “Do you want to make a quick buck?”

**Episode 951**

My jaw was slack with shock as I watched Artemis storm off. I couldn’t believe she’d said all that to me, accusing me of not caring about Greyson, of not treating her like a sister, of jerking both Xavier and Greyson around and not caring about anyone but myself.

*How fucking dare she talk to me like that?*

“Wow, what was all that about?” Lola asked. And then I realized I was so incensed I’d said all that out loud.

I quickly caught Lola up on my “chat” with Artemis, getting angrier and angrier as I recounted every terrible thing my sister had said to me. I was brimming with fury by the time I finished. “Who does Artemis think she is to talk to me that way? And to *shove* me?”

Lola patted my shoulder. “Wow. Your face is getting all splotchy. Try to calm down, and then we can talk about this. Here.” She shoved a wine cooler into my hand. “Take a sip. Or ten. And maybe breathe a bit.”

I threw her a dirty look, but I did as she said and took a long pull from the bottle. “It’s so sweet.”

She nodded. “Now, what the hell is going on with you? First we’re attacking each other, then you’re attacking Artemis? I know you’re worried about this choosing situation, but *girl*. You can’t go around yelling at the people who care about you.”

Guilt rushed in just as quickly as the all-consuming anger had burned through me. I knew Lola was right. Our fight had been awful. A terrible wake-up call for me to treat the people around me better, to empathize and listen—even when I was wrestling with my own problems. And I knew, logically, that my fight with Artemis felt just the same. Like a big toxic tantrum that was already leaving a bad taste in my mouth.

But god, everything was hard right now. I felt completely out of control, and Artemis calling me out for all these perceived slights against Greyson wasn’t helping. He’d *told* me to choose Xavier—and then he’d left. I still hadn’t made my choice, but was I really that horrible for enjoying this time with Xavier?

I took another long pull from the wine cooler. And then another. The colorful liquid sloshed around the bottom third of the bottle. I wished I could drink my problems away, but I’d just end up with the exact same set of problems—plus a shiny new hangover.

Maybe it was best to try not to think about it. “Are you ready for the inversion spell?” I asked Lola. There were only a few days left till Halloween. She had to be feeling the pressure.

She nodded. “I am. Now more than ever. Thinking that I stabbed Big Mac was the wake-up call I needed.” Her face colored a bit. “I’m sorry that that was what it took for me to realize how bad things are. I just want to be myself again, to have control of my body again. Even if that means losing my wolf… It’s worth it if I’m no longer a danger to myself and everyone around me. I just hope it works and I get to keep my wolf, too.”

I smiled softly and pulled her into a tight hug. “I hope so too.”

Maybe if Lola’s problems could be solved once and for all, there was hope for finding a solution to my problems too.

Over Lola’s shoulder, I saw Mrs. Smith approaching and felt my body tense. I really didn’t want to rehash everything we’d said about Greyson earlier. Yeah, Mrs. Smith was Greyson’s mom, and that alone was honestly a little more than I could wrap my head around, but I didn’t want to argue with her. Not anymore. Not when Greyson was gone and I had *so much other shit* to deal with right now.

Lola must have noticed the shift. “What is it?” she asked, still locked in my hug.

I let her go and stepped back, giving her my very best *get me the hell out of here* look, but it was too late. Mrs. Smith was already upon us.

“You need to talk some sense into Xavier,” she said.

I blinked. *Oh. That… was not the conversation starter I was expecting*. “What are you talking about?” I asked.

“The explosion from before. At the barbecue fire. I don't think it was an accident.”

My mind short-circuited for a second, trying to understand a scenario in which Mrs. Smith’s theory wasn’t batshit paranoid. Was she accusing Torin of trying to burn us all to death or something?

“Well I didn’t do it!” Lola piped up. She smiled widely at both of us, way too chipper for the situation. I was happy for her, for multiple reasons—like the fact that she hadn’t been the one to stab Big Mac—but *not* being a murderer didn’t seem like it deserved so much joy.

I shook my head and gave Lola a look before turning to Mrs. Smith. “Oh, maybe you didn’t catch what happened. Torin knocked the lighter fluid canister into the fire. It was just a clumsy mistake. He didn’t mean to make anything happen, and he’d never ever hurt anyone.”

“I don’t think he did,” she agreed. “But that canister shouldn’t have been there in the first place. I think someone wanted the explosion to happen.”

“Uh huh.” I took a long pull from the wine cooler. There was only one more swallow left. “So, what do you mean by that? Like, they wanted Torin to get hurt?” I tried not to laugh at the thought. Who would want to hurt Torin? Sure, he got on Xavier and Greyson’s nerves, but he was like an overgrown puppy. He was nice and gentle and had an almost childlike awe for everything around him. He wasn’t a threat—by any meaning of the word.

“Maybe,” said Mrs. Smith. “Maybe the same way someone wanted to kill MacKenzie. Don’t forget that if it wasn't for Torin, MacKenzie would be dead. So it would make sense to eliminate Torin, don’t you think?”

“How does that make any sense?” Lola snorted. “No offense, Mrs. Smith, but have you been drinking a little too much tonight?”

Mrs. Smith rolled her eyes. “I promise I’m not drunk.”

Lola held her hands up. “Okay, okay. It’s just, Torin’s hardly a threat. I mean, look at the guy.”

We all turned to look at the crowd near the fire. One of the Blue Blood wolves was trying to teach Torin how to floss. Emphasis on *trying.*

*Huh. He’s not the best dancer I’ve ever seen, but that’s not reason enough for him to end up on someone’s hit list.*

“It makes perfect sense,” Mrs. Smith insisted. “If someone tries to kill MacKenzie again—or anyone else—Torin could just heal them. So, if you take out Torin, no more healing.” She raised her eyebrows to punctuate her point.

*Okay, so the logic isn’t terrible. But still—*

“You son of a bitch!”

In the space of a heartbeat, the energy around the fire changed from jovial to strained, and a fight broke out between Sage and a member of the Blue Blood pack. There was a flurry of fists before each of the pack members shifted, their screams turning into vicious snarls.

Xavier and Mace both rushed in to break it up.

“Sage, that’s *enough!*” Xavier snapped, standing back to back with the Blue Blood Alpha, who was giving his own pack member a similar lecture. It didn’t take long for both wolves to come back to their senses and shift into their human forms. They both looked how I’d felt after Lola had talked me down from my anger with Artemis—guilty and confused.

Jay ambled over and nudged Lola’s shoulder with his own. “I guess sometimes werewolves and alcohol don’t mix, huh?”

“What the fuck is wrong with everyone?” Lola demanded. “This is supposed to be a fucking *fun* barbecue. What is everyone’s deal tonight? We killed *Silas*, for fuck’s sake!”

I found it strange too. First the fire, then Artemis getting angry at me, and now fights were breaking out? Sure, the party seemed to be bouncing back from each of these strange events, but it just seemed… off. And even now that the tension had been stopped before it could completely bubble over, I could still feel it, simmering beneath the surface.

“We think the orb might be causing some of this… animosity,” Mrs. Smith confessed.

*The orb. Of course! Keeping a powerful, dark item like that around is bound to have consequences.* Would that explain how I’d been feeling? Fighting with Lola and Artemis? I shook my head and pushed the thought away for another time. This wasn’t about me.

“But how does that relate to Big Mac getting hurt? Or Torin?”

“I don’t know. Yet.” Mrs. Smith looked grave, so unlike the warm, maternal woman I’d come to know. “But you need to talk to Xavier, tell him he needs to keep looking into who has it out for us. They’re not going to stop—not until they get what they want.”

Another commotion broke out on the other side of the barbecue fire. Was there another fight breaking out?

Lola’s jaw dropped. “Seriously?”

“I’m gonna go help break it up,” Jay said before jogging back to the fire.

“Be careful!” Lola called after him.

Her mate came back faster than any of us would have expected. His face was pale, and for how long I’d known him, I’d never seen that expression on his face.

“Is the fight already over?” I asked.

He shook his head. “You guys had better come take a look at this.”

We headed past the fire, to a tree by the side of the house where a group of people were gathered. Xavier fell into step beside us, and we all stopped.

There was something hanging from a branch. Something I couldn’t quite make out. It was black and difficult to see in the darkness of the night.

Lola grabbed my arm and pulled me back. “Watch out.” She pointed to a circle of bones on the ground. They were small animal bones, but knowing they hadn’t come from a human or werewolf didn’t make their presence any less chilling.

Xavier stepped over the circle and pulled the thing down from the tree. He brought it back over, closer to the light from the barbecue.

It was a dead raven.

A chill went down my spine.

Xavier glanced around the group, his face twisted into a snarl. “*Who did this*?”

**Episode 952**

GREYSON

Maren’s question rang in my mind as I continued to get ready to leave. I tied my shoes and pulled on my jacket. Why in the world was she talking about me getting back into fighting again?

Sure, I’d loved fighting: it was easy, the money had been amazing, and it had been the perfect time in my life to be a young Rogue unburdened by anything except doing whatever the hell I wanted to do. I’d had all the women I could have wanted at my disposal, and I’d made a name for myself—I’d made a life out of that fighting ring, really. Or at least the closest thing to a life I’d been able to manage with the threat of my father hanging over me and haunting every step.

Still, when I could look around the shredded mess Maren had made of my heart, I remembered those days fondly. But they were long past, and I didn’t see them coming back. I’d quit the day Maren betrayed me, and I had vowed to never again fight for money. Her betrayal had been a wake-up call for me, in more ways than one.

She’d been the first woman I’d ever allowed myself to love with my entire heart. The first person in the entire world to make me feel excited about the future, to make me believe in the unknown possibilities of tomorrow and see something but hopelessness and despair in my shitshow of a life.

And I would never forget that, or forgive her for it. If someone like Maren could turn on me like that, could lead me on and use me and set me up, then I could only imagine what all the others I didn’t even know would do to secure a win.

Clearly I hadn’t been the only paranormal fighting among the humans.

Maren was still standing there, clearly expecting some kind of answer. I didn’t know how to respond, mostly because I knew Maren was a very smart woman, and I couldn’t understand why she’d bother to ask me a question to which she already knew the answer.

“I should’ve said goodbye to Fenrir,” I managed.

“It’s okay, he’ll understand.” Maren smiled tentatively, her eyes sparkling in that way they did whenever she was teasing. It was funny how many little things I still remembered about her, how many things had stayed the same despite the years hanging between us.

I nodded. I was honestly a little disappointed not to get to say goodbye to the kid. I liked him. He really wasn’t bad for a kid, especially now that I knew he wasn’t mine. My life was already complicated enough without having fathered a child with another woman.

*Cali would never have let me live that one down. Hell, I wouldn’t.*

Though, if Fenrir had been mine, I couldn’t help thinking that it would have made some things so much easier—as long as I could ignore that unfulfilled half of my soul and find some way to make sure I never saw Cali or Xavier ever again. I would never have to go back to her, would never have to ask her to make that impossible choice ever again. Because no matter how much she loved me, if there was a child between us, I knew who we’d both choose—even if it broke both of our hearts.

But there was no use dwelling on that path. Fenrir wasn’t mine, and as complicated as it was to love someone like Cali, I knew without a shadow of a doubt that we were meant for each other. This was the way my life was meant to go—not with Maren and her son, but with my mate and the impossible choice that stood before her. Plus, I couldn’t be a father. Not after all the years of living underneath Silas’s control. It wouldn’t be fair to subject the kid to my father issues.

“So you’re really leaving, then?” Maren asked.

I nodded. “Will you tell Fenrir goodbye for me?”

“Of course.” She smiled. “You know, Fenrir doesn’t usually take to people like he did with you. It must be your magnetic personality.”

My lips twitched. “I’m pretty sure there are people who would disagree with that assessment.”

“Still, I was kind of hoping you’d find a reason to stay a little longer. It’s been nice catching up with you.”

I shrugged. “I’m going to be in Portland for a while. Feel free to look me up, I guess.” I had no idea how long I’d be hanging out in Rose City, but I did know that I couldn’t stay here. I needed to figure some shit out, and I couldn’t do that while I was busy playing house with an old flame.

Maren didn’t respond, but I could tell something was weighing on her. A question, maybe. There was something she wanted from me, something she hadn’t yet been able to bring herself to ask. And now that I was leaving, I could practically see the wheels turning in her head.

“What is it?” I finally asked, throwing her a bone.

“Before you leave, I want to show you something.”

I blinked. *Is this some kind of trick?* Though if it were, I couldn’t imagine to what end. We’d more or less resolved any lingering tension between us, and we’d agreed not to start a sexual relationship. So what was going on? “What do you want to show me?”

“I can’t tell you. I have to show you.”

“Yeah, that’s not going to work for me.”

She sighed. “I know you have questions, but if you can just trust me on this, all of your questions will be answered.”

My eyebrows lifted. “You’re asking me to trust *you?*” I snorted. “Seriously?” I started for the door, but she reached out a hand and caught my arm.

“I can help you,” she insisted.

That made me pause. “In what way?”

“Come with me, and I’ll explain.”

I sighed. “Fine.” *And if anything looks like it’s off, I’ll GTFO before things go sideways.*

Maren’s friend Nina agreed to watch Fenrir for a few more hours, and then we piled into her car and off we went.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“It’s a bar. A special bar. It caters to a certain clientele.”

“Listen, I’m getting really tired of all the mystery here. Just tell me what this is all about.”

Her hands tightened ever so slightly around the steering wheel. “You need to see it to understand. To believe me.”

By the time we finally pulled into the parking lot of this mysterious bar, I was on the verge of losing my patience.

Maren turned to me, her expression grave. “While we’re here, I need you to just observe. Don’t do anything that might upset the customers.”

“You mean like shift?”

She smiled. “Exactly.”

And then she unbuckled her seat belt, and we headed into the bar.

When we walked inside, I was immediately taken aback. Judging by the exterior of the building, I’d been expecting some kind of upscale, fancy, paranormal speakeasy. Instead, we’d walked into a typical Portland dive bar—featuring a lot of bearded dudes, bikers, hard women with tats, and the occasional adventurous hipster.

The normalcy wasn’t what I’d been expecting, and it put me on edge. Normalcy wasn’t something I associated with Maren.

I caught her arm. “What the hell are we doing here?”

She discreetly nodded to something behind me. “On your six.”

Tucked away at a table in the corner was a woman with dyed green hair.

“That’s Hatty,” Maren whispered.

“Is that supposed to mean something to me?” I whispered back.

She nodded at a man at the bar, and I watched as he threw down a flaming shot. “That’s Virgil. And that guy over there holding the dartboard while his friend throws the darts—that’s Ajax.”

“So… what? You wanted to show me that you’ve met some new people? That you hang out at a bar and know a lot of the customers?”

She shook her head. “They’re no ordinary customers. Hatty’s Fae, Virgil’s a warlock, and Ajax… Well, nobody’s sure what his deal is, but he, like the others, has a deep knowledge of the dark arts.”

Slowly, the picture was starting to come together, though I still didn’t see how I fit in. “So this is a supernatural hangout?”

“Something like that.”

I scoffed and shook my head. “And would you like to tell me why the hell you thought it would be a good idea to bring a werewolf into a place like this?”

“Because I think there's someone here who can help you break your curse.”

“Is this some kind of joke?”

“No, it’s not a joke. It’s a matter of life and death.” Her voice took on a raw edge, a tone that, if I didn’t know any better, I would have said was fear.

“Maren, tell me what’s going on. Now.”

Her shoulders slumped. “I need your help. The people I’m involved with have threatened my son. If I help you solve your curse, will you help me?”

**Episode 953**

ARTEMIS

There was a commotion coming from the direction of the house. We paused for a second, listening in as best as we could from our spot near the lake. Had something bad happened? Was Cali okay? Cold rolled through my stomach.

If something bad was happening, if she was hurt, or worse, then what I’d said during our fight would be the last words I ever spoke to her.

“Should we go back?” I asked. “Make sure everyone’s okay?”

Arlo rolled his eyes. “Are all Fae such worrywarts? Let me tell you a werewolf culture secret: As much as we all love to get together and barbecue and drink and wolf at the moon, werewolves and liquor are a dumb combination. I bet someone’s just picked a drunken fight. Probably a Redwood and a Blue Blood trying to best each other.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that. I didn’t know Arlo well enough to trust his judgment, but his complete lack of concern did ease the vice-like feeling around my heart.

A warm hand fell on my shoulder. Rishika’s. “He’s probably right.” She grinned. “And it’s a damn shame we’re not back there. We could place some wagers, really see whose pack is best. I bet by the time we make it back, Xavier and Mace will have bullied everyone into behaving.” Her eyes lingered on mine, soft and understanding.

A smile tugged at my lips, and relief eased the tension thrumming through my body. The jury was still out on Arlo, but Rishika wouldn’t lie to me. Everything at the pack house was probably fine.

“Oh, I think we can settle that bet right here. No need to race back to the house.” Elise grinned and glanced up at the tree we were about to scale.

The last piece of worry and regret evaporated as I stared up at the tree. It was time for our competition, and I intended to show this pack of wolves exactly what a Fae could do. It was such a relief to be away from the house, away from Cali and all the reminders of how little I belonged here. Just being here near the lake had completely washed away all that negative energy. I could barely remember what I’d been so angry about.

But I knew it didn’t matter. Cali and I would make up, I’d find my way through the world like I always had, and there would be adventures and plenty of fun along the way.

And right now, I was going to race Arlo—who was flexing so hard I felt a laugh bubbling up in my throat. The idiot was going to hurt himself before we even got started.

Rishika clapped her hands. “Okay, okay! Whoever reaches the top of the tree the fastest will advance on to the next round. Losers have to take a shot of tequila with no chaser.” She pulled a tequila bottle seemingly out of nowhere and waved it around, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “Also, everyone has to take a shot before anyone starts climbing!”

“Wait, what about some salt?” Norah asked.

“Or at least a friggin’ lime!” Elise chimed in.

“This is the competition,” Rishika said solemnly. “You may take it or leave it.”

She moved down the line. Arlo, predictably, put on a strong face, but from the tears in his eyes I could tell he didn’t like it any better than the other two. When Rishika got to me, she asked, “Have you ever had this before? I’m not sure you’ll like it.” She held my gaze, her eyebrows raised. There was a challenging glimmering in her eyes.

*Never let it be said that I don’t love a good challenge.*

I took the bottle. “No werewolf is going to outdo me.” I took a swig. It was terrible, but not the worst thing I’d ever drunk. The burn was cleansing, in a way. It was different than the whiskey I’d grown so fond of, but just as good. I didn’t wince, groan, or even grimace as the alcohol slid down my throat, leaving a fiery aftertaste on my tongue.

I handed the bottle back to Rishika, my eyebrows raised.

She shook her head and laughed, then took a sip, holding my gaze. She finally broke away and addressed the rest of the group. “Okay, racers! Take your positions!”

Arlo and I squared up in front of the tree.

“A werewolf is not going to be bested by a Fae,” he said with a smirk.

Maybe it was the tequila, but that made me laugh out loud. “Wanna bet?”

“Don’t get cocky, Arlo!” Rishika called.

I looked back up at the tree. It was high but solid. It would support my weight to the very top. It was much like the trees in the Fae world that I would camp out in sometimes, when I was trying to nab someone for the Kollector.

*Don’t think about that. This isn’t that. You’re free now.*

“Counting down!” Rishika cried. “Ten, nine, eight…”

Elise and Norah joined in the count and as soon as the women said “One!” Arlo and I burst forward, heading toward the tree. We reached the trunk at the same time, and Arlo barreled into me with his shoulder—a firm but playful attempt to shove me out of the way.

“Whoops! Sorry, I’m not a great runner!” he called, using the single stride lead he had to hoist himself up into the tree.

I didn’t realize I was grinning until I grabbed a branch, hoisting myself up, and air rushed past my teeth. I could really feel the tequila in my system, smooth and calm, soothing the raw edges of my emotions and allowing me to focus on just this glorious moment.

Laughter bubbled up in my chest as I scaled the tree almost effortlessly. In no time at all, I’d passed Arlo.

“What the hell!” he cried. “Are you part spider monkey or something?”

“Better a monkey than a cheater!” I called back.

My rough years in the Fae world had left me with impeccable muscle memory for climbing trees. My hands and feet were in constant motion, and my eyes scanned each branch so quickly I was almost subconsciously processing where to climb, where to brace, and which branches to avoid. The scent of pine and sap and fresh bark filled my nose.

For the first time in far too long, I felt like myself.

Bark cracked beneath me, and I heard Arlo let out a cry. When I glanced down, he was hanging from a branch by one hand. Shit, was he going to fall?

I slid down the trunk until I was just above him and offered my hand. “Here. There’s a branch you can brace on and move upward—”

“Psych!” He took my hand and knocked it away, almost tossing me out of the whole damn tree before he skittered up the trunk.

I didn’t know what that word meant, but I had enough contextual clues to make an educated guess. From down below, I could hear the rest of the group yelling.

Arlo wanted to play dirty? Bring it on.

I started climbing after him, and when I got close enough I used a small rush of my power to make his foot slip, make him *really* lose control. He cursed and clutched the branch for a few seconds before righting himself. Those few, precious seconds were all I needed to pass him.

And this time, I didn’t stop until I reached the top. I grinned down at him. “Whoops. I’m actually an amazing climber.”

When we were back on the ground, I bowed to the others, my lips curled up into a smile. They looked surprised that Arlo hadn’t won, but they clapped for me all the same.

“She used magic on me,” he grumbled. “That can’t be fair.”

I rolled my eyes. He’d hardly been a paragon of sportsmanship.

Rishika shrugged. “Well, we never specified the rules.” She passed him the tequila bottle. “Now take your shot, loser.”

While Arlo took his shot and the others comforted him, Rishika sidled over to me. “I’d like to learn more about your magic. Maybe you can show me a few things?”

*What kind of things?* I thought. It felt like I was catching a vibe between us—at least I thought so.

I laughed. “I’d be happy to. Anytime.”

Norah and Elise were preparing for their race. Arlo handed the bottle over to Norah so the two of them could take their pre-race shot. I was buzzing with satisfaction, from both the tequila and my win, and I joined in on the countdown.

Then the race began. It was neck and neck until Elise pulled ahead at the end and won. Looked like I’d be going up against her next.

“Well, now that the action’s over, I’m gonna grab a hotdog,” Arlo said, excusing himself. He headed off, leaving me alone with Rishika while we waited for Elise and Norah to climb down.

She took a swig and then offered me the bottle. “Want another?”

“Sure.” Her fingers grazed mine, and I suddenly fumbled the bottle, nearly dropping it before I bent down and caught it. When I straightened, I found my face very close to Rishika’s. She must have also reached for the bottle.

“Uh,” she breathed. “Careful.”

I felt her eyes on me, felt the heat simmering in my blood and that same question nagging at my mind that I’d had for a while. So I decided to just spit it out. “Have you been flirting with me?”

**Episode 954**

SABINE

The raven corpse hanging from Xavier’s hand sent a chill down my spine. It had to be a warning, a signal. It had to mean something. Surely it was connected to the attempt on MacKenzie’s life, somehow. Maybe it was even connected to the rage that was simmering beneath the surface of the pack these days.

“It’s probably just some pre-Halloween joke,” Sage suggested. “Nothing to worry about. Now, I still need a replacement kebab, so I’m just gonna—”

“It’s not a joke.” MacKenzie had joined us while my eyes had been glued to the dead raven. She looked pointedly from the bird to the circle of bones, then lifted her gaze to meet mine. “It’s a message. For me.”

Panic spilled into my stomach, wrapping tight around my chest. I’d suspected something similar, of course, but hearing it from the love of my life herself was a very different story.

“W-what? Why would you say that?” I asked.

Her eyes flicked from mine over to Xavier’s. “In witch magic, bones represent death,” she explained. “And when placed in a circle, they suggest that death is closing in, like a trap.”

Another chill rippled down my spine. *No, I can’t lose her. We’ve only just broken free from Silas. We’re finally together, the way we were always meant to be. I can’t lose everything we’ve worked so hard to build. Not now, not ever.*

Xavier held up the bird carcass. “And this?”

MacKenzie sighed. “To many people, a raven is considered an omen. But to witches, a raven’s meaning can be interpreted as a bridge between the spiritual and the material worlds.”

I had no idea what that could possibly mean, but it didn’t sound good.

“Sorry, why do you think this is a message for you?” Cali asked MacKenzie.

“I’m the only witch here,” she said simply. “The only one who would understand it.”

Xavier let out a growl. I wasn’t sure if he was angry at MacKenzie or simply frustrated by the situation.

“That’s all well and good,” he snapped, “but I want to know who’s responsible. I’ve had enough of this crap.”

I couldn’t help but compare his anger and begrudging attitude to Greyson. My son, for all his faults, had always striven to build the pack up when he was around to lead them. He was firm in his command, but if he was irritated he rarely let it show in front of the rest of the pack. He never made them feel like an inconvenience, or an imposition.

Xavier, on the other hand, seemed to have no problem letting everyone know exactly how burdened he felt by his new responsibility. Not exactly an ideal quality for an Alpha, if you asked me.

How would Greyson have handled this? Would he have taken my concern more seriously? A tiny dose of guilt fluttered in my stomach, but it probably wasn’t nearly enough, given the traitorous thoughts I was having about the acting Alpha of the Redwood pack. I knew I should support Xavier, but I couldn’t help but think that this role might be too much for him.

*Greyson needs to come home. Xavier is a good man, but he’s not a leader. And certainly not the leader we need right now.*

Maybe I needed to do a little investigating of my own. After all, MacKenzie’s life was on the line, and no one was going to get away with threatening her.

I squeezed her arm and leaned in. “I’ll be right back,” I whispered.

I headed over to Mace, a round of questions already filling my mind, but MacKenzie, Cali, and Lola followed. I was only dimly aware of Xavier growling questions at the pack members clustered around him.

“Beer, Sabine?” Mace offered.

I could tell from the look on his face that he had his suspicions about why I was approaching him. It wasn’t as if we were close, after all. He’d always struck me as a distasteful man, and it was only due to his position as Alpha of the Blue Blood pack—and the fact that he wasn’t quite as distasteful as others, say Silas and Nolan—that I even recognized the value in maintaining ties with him.

But that didn’t mean I had to play nice. “I’m not in the mood.”

“What *are* you in the mood for?”

“The truth. Is someone from your pack responsible for this horrifying display?” I demanded. There was no point beating around the bush while someone was plotting against MacKenzie.

Mace looked at me with a furrowed brow, then he burst out laughing. “I had no idea you were such a joker, Sabine. What a pleasant surprise. I never would have seen that coming.”

“Just answer the question,” I growled. Screw him and his deflection. Was he just being disrespectful, or was he buying time for whoever had done this? Was he complicit in all of this?

“I don’t really see the point, to be honest.” He looked at me pointedly. “You won’t believe me, regardless of what I say. You’re angry and you’re looking for someone to blame. The truth has no place in this conversation.”

“Unacceptable. I need to hear you say it because if I find out later you lied, I will tear your throat out.”

In half an instant, Pip stepped between us, snarling. “*Back the fuck off.*”

“Take it easy.” Mace placed a steadying hand on her shoulder. “Sabine and I were just having a friendly chat, trying to figure out who would want to kill a witch like Big Mac.” His gaze shifted to me and he added, “Maybe it would be easier to start with a shorter list of suspects—those who have a reason to hate your MacKenzie, perhaps.”

My vision went red, and my tiny thread of self-control had never been so close to snapping. “Excuse me?”

He shrugged. “I’m just saying, witches and werewolves don’t always get along. Don’t fool yourself into thinking that our kinds will ever be best friends,” he said. “The Blue Blood pack has no problem with witches, Big Mac or someone else. So you might consider taking your detective skills elsewhere.”

I tossed Mace a dirty look, ignoring the warning growl from Pip, and turned back to where MacKenzie was standing with Lola and Cali, several feet away. This was such a mess—the stabbing, the explosion, and now a dead raven and a circle of bones. MacKenzie was in danger, and the threat was close. I could feel it.

*Maybe I should call Greyson. Whatever his feelings are toward Cali, he should always think of the pack first—and whatever is happening here is a threat to each and every one of us.*

I wished he were here. Just when we’d finally seemed to be bonding, just when it had seemed like I was finally going to have my son back, he’d left.

Suddenly, rough hands grabbed my shoulders and spun me around. Pip was there, snarling in my face. “*Never* threaten the Blue Blood Alpha—”

I shoved her off with a growl of my own. “I was asking Mace a simple question, *Tulip*,” I said. “I’m not in the mood to start anything.”

The wolf’s eyes narrowed. “Is that so? Maybe we should settle this right here, right now.”

*Oh my… How did this escalate so quickly?* Anger rose up in me like a tidal wave, threatening to wash away every bit of logic and common sense.

Logically, I had no desire to fight Pip. I’d never been one for violence, and she was part of another pack. In-fighting was not acceptable, especially not with the fragile truce we’d struck with the Blue Bloods. Fighting Pip now would be such a poor way to repay her and the Blue Blood pack for standing with us against Silas—and yet I couldn’t deny the fact that the idea sounded… tempting.

After all, Pip was getting in *my* face. I would be well within my rights to put her in her place.

MacKenzie stepped between us. “Ladies, everything okay over here?” she asked. “This is a barbecue. They’re fun, or so I’m told. There’s wine, so I guess I can’t complain.” She turned to Pip. “Shouldn’t you be grilling meat or something?”

She glared and turned away, and MacKenzie turned to face me. Frustration was written across her face. “What the hell was that all about, Sabine?”

As quickly as the anger had taken over my senses, it fled, leaving me feeling shaken and hollow. Had I really been moments away from fighting with an ally? “You’re right,” I conceded. I sighed and rubbed my face. “Have you noticed how there’s been a lot of tension around lately? There’s been so much fighting.”

“I have. And I have to admit, even for a pack of werewolves, there does seem to be an unusually high number of arguments.”

“If you’re right, if the raven and the bones are connected to the spiritual world and something is affecting everyone here, then there’s only one thing that can explain it,” I said, thinking fast. Grabbing her hand, I started pulling her toward the house. “MacKenzie, we have to take the orb and get it out of here, or we’ll all kill each other!”

**Episode 955**

CHARLIE

I eyed the man in front of me. Something about him just seemed… *off*, to me. *Who the hell is this dude?* All I’d wanted was to eat a burger in peace, and even that had proven almost impossible once I’d realized Ava worked here. I definitely hadn’t seen that coming.

I didn’t know much about her, only that she’d fought alongside the Redwood pack and that Nolan, the leader of the Samara pack, had been her brother. I wondered why she wasn’t with that pack now. Violet had also mentioned there was a strange history between Ava and Xavier, but she’d never really gotten into it.

Now someone with connections to the Redwood pack, to Violet, knew where I was when I’d never wanted to be invisible more. Why couldn’t everyone just leave me alone?

The man in front of me rested a hand on the table. “Come on, it’ll only take a minute. I’ll give you a hundred clams and I’ll throw in your order.”

Well, offering to throw in my lunch order was great, because I was currently broke as shit. But… *Clams from dingy backroads diner?* “Gross.”

The man chortled. “No, no, no. It means greenback, dough, cash money, and”—he looked me up and down with raised eyebrows—“it looks like you could use it.”

With a hot rush of shame, I glanced down at myself and casually tried to run a hand through my hair to tame my sweaty locks. I was probably dirty from my run through the woods. From fleeing Violet. A dull pang hit my heart at the thought of her.

*I miss her so damn much.*

*It’s for the best*, I had to quickly remind myself before I gave up and went running back to her. Though that didn’t make me hate myself any less. She was my mate, the other half of my soul, and I had abandoned her. She was probably worried sick about me, desperate to know where I was, to know what had happened.

She wouldn’t understand. I knew she wouldn’t. And I couldn’t make her understand, because she’d never lived a human life and had it ripped away.

*Remember, it’s for the best*. *Even if it hurts now, that doesn’t mean it’s the wrong decision*. *And I hope that in time…*

I swallowed.

“Hey, buddy, do you want the work or not?” the man asked.

This guy still made me feel uneasy, though I couldn’t quite put my finger on why that was. He didn’t look like he belonged in a diner; maybe an Instagram feed or something. I should have washed my face in the bathroom before I sat down, then maybe this bizarre situation wouldn’t have happened. But the truth was, I could use a hundred bucks.

*If this guy is legit…*

“I’m Charlie,” I offered. “What exactly do you need me to do?”

“Iñigo Gagliardi.” He smiled, though it reminded me of an animal baring its teeth. “I’ve got a delivery coming in, and my regular guy flaked out. I just need you to move a few boxes. Deal?” He held out his hand for me to shake.

I looked down at his hand. It was scarred, like a boxer’s. It was surprising given the rest of his appearance.

*This guy has clearly seen some shit.*

As I tried to decide whether or not this was going to be a huge mistake, I noticed Ava approaching—without my burger. “It’s time for my break,” she said. “Do you want me to come with you?”

How much of our conversation had she heard?

Still, I nodded, grateful for the backup in this strange situation, and shook Iñigo’s hand. It was cold, like he’d just submerged it in ice water.

*Maybe this guy’s cold-blooded, like a reptile?* Then I grimaced. *Paranoid much? He probably just washed his hands. Just because you’ve been spending a lot of time around paranormal creatures lately, doesn’t mean they’re gonna pop up everywhere you go.*

Iñigo smirked. “I didn’t think a guy like you would need a bodyguard, but yeah, Ava, you’re welcome to join us. Maybe you can carry a box too?”

She folded her arms across her chest. “Well, it’s my break, so no.”

Iñigo’s laugh echoed through the diner as he led us to the loading dock in the back alley. A truck pulled up just as we were walking out.

“Excuse me a moment,” Iñigo said, before heading over to speak with the driver.

I turned to Ava. “Thanks for coming out here with me. It seemed like a bad idea to just follow some guy I’d never met before.”

She shrugged. “He’s harmless… I think. So why’d you agree if you didn’t want to do it?”

My cheeks warmed, and I avoided her gaze. “He offered me a hundred dollars. And… I’m not really in a position to turn it down right now.”

“Huh. So you ran away from the pack, and you’re broke? Join the club.”

Her flippant attitude was surprising, to say the least. Almost as surprising as her admission that she was in the same situation I was. Couldn’t she have stayed with her pack? I couldn’t help but wonder how much her living alone—and apparently working at this shabby old diner—had to do with her brother’s death.

But judging by the look on her face, I knew better than to ask. Sometimes it was better for things to stay a mystery.

It wasn’t like it mattered, anyway. I had my own problems, and once I got this cash I was heading straight to Portland and buying a one-way ticket back to Minnesota.

My phone started buzzing in my pocket, and I pulled it out, my stomach knotted with dread. When I saw the name on the display, a wave of nausea washed over me.

Violet.

God, I wanted to answer the call so badly. To hear her voice and confess everything. But I knew I couldn’t. It would be selfish to ask her for acceptance or forgiveness, especially after what I’d done to her. The best thing I could do right now was stay the hell away from her.

I looked up to see Ava staring at me. “Is that why you ran away?” she asked. “Your mate?”

*No. Yes. I don’t know.* I blushed again.

“All right then, Charlie,” Iñigo called. “It’s your time to shine.”

*Thank god.* I wasn’t ready to face this issue on my own, much less talk about it with someone I barely knew.

Iñigo gestured at Ava and me. “Step aside, you two.”

He directed the truck to back up closer to the door. Then the driver hopped out. I froze for a moment, staring at him. He was as pale as a sheet—the kind of pale that made you think of fainting and dead people—and had dark circles under his eyes.

I remembered a documentary I’d had to watch back in my high school health class, about meth addicts. This guy looked just like one of the addicts who had been interviewed. His eyes flashed over me, and I couldn’t help but shudder.

*The quicker I do this, the better.*

The driver opened up the cargo area to reveal dozens of boxes.

“Grab one and follow me,” Iñigo said.

I followed his instructions and picked up a box, momentarily surprised by how heavy and solid it was. *Holy crap. Would I even be able to lift this if I didn’t have my werewolf strength?*

I got a tight grip on the box, then followed Iñigo inside and down a rickety staircase to the basement.

The man brought me to a locked door at the bottom of the stairs, then unlocked it and opened it. “Just put it in the corner and then bring in the rest of them, and you can consider your work here done.”

I froze in the doorway of the basement room. It was bare cement on all sides, with a single, grime-stained window and a single light bulb hanging down from the ceiling. I’d seen this kind of thing in countless horror movies—the serial killer luring his prey into a hidden room and then torturing them to death.

Iñigo laughed. “Don’t worry. Ava’s looking out for you, remember?”

I hurried over to the corner, set the box down, and turned to head back up the stairs. “What is all this?” I asked.

Iñigo paused for a moment. “Just some supplies for the diner. You don’t need to worry about any of that. Just bring the rest of the boxes down and you’ll earn your pay.” Then he spun on his heel and headed back upstairs before I could ask any more questions.

I shrugged. He was probably right. It didn’t really matter what was in the boxes—not to me at least. It wasn’t like I was sticking around. Those boxes could be full of plates, or bags of flour…

*Or maybe they’re stuffed to the gills with drugs.*

I let out a nervous laugh that I was relieved nobody was around to hear. No, it probably wasn’t drugs. That only ever happened in movies, anyway.

I headed back upstairs to the truck.

“Is everything okay?” Ava asked.

I grabbed another box. “I’m good.” I started down the rickety steps again. My foot slipped on the third step down, and the box slipped from my hands, bounced down the stairs, and crashed onto the basement floor, spilling what seemed like an endless supply of wadded-up twenty-dollar bills.

My eyes went wide. Where had all this money come from? “What the hell?”

Iñigo’s voice sounded from behind me. “Well, I’m sorry you saw that, kid,” he said. “Now, I’ve gotta kill you.”

**Episode 956**

With a slight frown, I watched Mrs. Smith try to pull Big Mac away.

It probably made me a bad person, but a not-so-small part of me had been disappointed when Big Mac had stepped in to stop the fight between Mrs. Smith and Pip before it had even really gotten started.

*I can’t believe I almost saw Mrs. Smith throw down with Pip!* Honestly, I would have loved to have seen that play out. Pip was young and strong, but Mrs. Smith had seen some shit. And her experience gave her an edge and a fierceness that made her a formidable opponent when the situation called for it.

*It’s like that scary pissed off mom energy, but on werewolf-y steroids.*

Xavier rushed over. “What happened? What was all that commotion about?”

Mrs. Smith stilled, and so did Big Mac.

Mace crossed his arms, an amused smile tugging at his lips as he glanced at Mrs. Smith. “A bit of advice: you’re going to need to control Mrs. Smith unless you want another war on your hands.”

*Wow, Mace. Exaggerate much? She hardly did anything!* Besides, it was more than a little irritating that he so clearly didn’t take Mrs. Smith seriously.

Xavier looked at Mrs. Smith. “*You* were being combative?”

She shrugged. “Barely.”

“Says the hellcat,” Mace piped up.

Xavier threw him a look but didn’t scold him the way I would have expected. Probably because Mace was an Alpha, and our truce with the Blue Blood pack wasn’t exactly ironclad. Diplomacy sucked.

“Don’t listen to him,” I told Xavier. “Mrs. Smith didn’t do anything wrong; she was just asking about who might have done that to the raven.”

Mrs. Smith stepped forward. “Thank you, Cali, but it’s more than that. We think the orb might be making everyone fight.”

Well shit. I didn’t like the sound of that… It was true, I’d been so irritable lately. My fight with Lola and then with Artemis tonight… Maybe Mrs. Smith was right and this *was* the reason everyone had been so combative lately.

“You think the orb is the reason all of this is happening?” Xavier asked slowly.

I took Xavier’s hand. “When I held the orb, it spoke to me, and it was really persuasive. It seems possible that it’s gotten stronger… Maybe because it gained so much power through Silas using it and absorbing ghosts?”

Xavier looked to Big Mac and Mrs. Smith for confirmation.

“That could be the case,” Big Mac conceded.

He frowned. “Okay, but we had the orb in our house for years and nobody attacked anyone.”

“MacKenzie suspects that it may have been dormant until Silas and Demeter activated it,” Mrs. Smith said.

“Didn’t you say you knew of a safe place to hide it?” Xavier asked Big Mac.

She nodded. “Yes, I know a place that I think could keep the orb safe from those who might want to abuse its power. It should also get rid of the… negative effect it seems to be having on people. I can take it there first thing in the morning.”

“Absolutely not,” Mrs. Smith said, shaking her head. “Someone is out to get you, and going off with that orb alone will only make you vulnerable.”

“You think I’m safer here?” the witch asked. “In the house where I got stabbed, in the yard rigged with all kinds of supernatural warnings for a witch?”

Mrs. Smith’s tone was firm in a way I didn’t often hear it. “I don’t want you to risk yourself.”

“I can do it!” I offered. “I have no idea what it entails, but I’m good with instructions.” It seemed like a no-brainer. I’d gone on my fair share of magical quests, and my Fae powers were surely more than enough to keep me safe.

Big Mac scoffed, which I thought was pretty rude, considering I was offering to do her a serious favor, and Xavier shook his head. “That’s not gonna happen. Didn’t you just tell me that it affected you?”

I scowled. “Well, yeah. But that would be the case with anyone, considering it’s too risky for Big Mac to take it by herself.” My eyes narrowed on Xavier. “So why not me?”

“Regardless of what you decide, I have to be the one to take it, because I’m the only one who knows where the safe place is,” Big Mac said.

“Unless you share that information with someone,” Mrs. Smith pointed out. “It doesn’t seem like that big an obstacle, really.”

“Trusting anyone else with that information would be biggest mistake of my life,” Big Mac countered.

The argument continued, and I noticed Violet passing by. Her face was pale, and her eyes were so puffy and rimmed in red it was easy to make out even in the sparse light from the barbecue pit.

I left the couple to their bickering and went over to Violet. “Hey, are you okay?”

Her head snapped up in surprise. A rogue tear slid down her cheek, and she quickly wiped it away. “Yeah, I’m fine.” Her voice was rough, and she looked like she was about to trip into a full-blown meltdown. I’d never seen a worse lie in my entire life.

“What’s going on?” I glanced around, trying to determine what might have set her off. Was this the orb too? Or… “I haven’t seen Charlie much tonight. Is he doing all right?”

The girl froze. “Charlie is… He’s—he’s out for a run. He’s a lacrosse star, you know, and has to keep in shape. You know athletes, always working on their bodies.” She let out a pathetic laugh.

“Okay,” I said, honestly surprised. “But does that mean he left you here alone at the barbecue so he could go work out?” I asked, hoping that if I guessed right, she’d feel more comfortable talking about it.

Instead, she scowled. “I just told you! Stop asking me invasive questions. You’re not my mother, so leave me alone!”

She stormed off before I could even muster up a response.

*Wow, okay then. Was that the orb’s toxic energy at work, or is there something going on that Violet didn’t want me to know about?*

I sighed. The sooner we got rid of the orb, the better. God, wouldn’t it be nice to have just a few uninterrupted days of peace? No weird orb energy turning everyone into psychopaths. No upcoming spells that could ruin my best friend’s life. No *due destini* and impossible choices. No worrying about where Greyson was and if he’d ever come back to me. What a world that would be.

I rejoined Xavier and the others, hoping they’d come to a solution. But they were still arguing. Jay had even joined up with the group—and was also arguing.

“I can’t go right now,” he said. “I’m not going to leave Lola, not until after Halloween at the very earliest, and maybe not even then.” The unspoken reminder of everything that Lola stood to lose sent a chill down my spine.

“I’m not going to go on this journey with just anyone,” Big Mac said. “So you werewolves need to get your shit together and—”

“Okay, stop.” Xavier held up a hand. “I’ll decide who goes and when. In the meantime, I suggest we all make sure the orb stays protected.”

With the others dismissed, Xavier turned to me and pulled me aside, out of earshot of the various people clustered around outside the house.

“What were you thinking?” he demanded. “Offering yourself up to go take the orb somewhere else?”

“Well, first of all, in my head it’s called ‘Operation Reverse Frodo’, but more importantly, I was thinking that the orb needs to get the hell out of here.”

“And I appreciate that, but you can’t just go volunteering for shit like that.”

I scoffed. “Why the hell not? Am I not good enough? Strong enough? Do I have to throw some Fae power at you for you to take me seriously? Ask Rishika or Artemis—I’m pretty good at defending myself.”

That fire in Xavier’s eyes softened. “I don’t want you to *have to* defend yourself. I don’t want you in that position at all.”

“Wait, are we arguing right now because of the orb? Because if so, that just proves my point—that the orb is bad for the pack and it needs to get gone.”

“No, we’re arguing because you’re being… Well, *Cali*.”

My jaw dropped. “And what the hell is that supposed to mean?”

He grinned, not the least bit repentant. The asshole. “It means that you can be stubborn and impossible and irrational and—”

“And you’re a dick,” I snapped.

His smile widened, and he slowly prowled forward until I was backed up against the house. “I love it when you talk dirty.”

I swallowed. He’d blocked me in with an arm on either side of my body. His eyes sparkled with lust and mischief.

“What else do you want to call me?” he whispered.

I smacked his shoulder. “Don’t try to change the subject, Xavier. Nothing you say is going to convince me that I shouldn’t go.”

“Then I won’t say anything.” He grasped my hips, pulling me into him as his lips crashed into mine.

**Episode 957**

XAVIER

My lips crashed into Cali’s and I fought the urge to sigh against her plush mouth. She was so fucking perfect. I’d never get enough of the taste of her.

My fingers twined in her hair, tipping her head up and pulling back to let my nose brush against her cheekbone, a gentle tease.

Her breathing was already uneven from that simple kiss, and she twined her arms around my neck to pull me closer. I never felt stronger than when I knew I was making her want things, making her want *me*. I leaned in, trailing a line of kisses down her jaw, heading back to those gorgeous lips, but stopping right before our mouths made contact.

“Xavier,” Cali breathed. Her fingers scratched at the nape of my neck.

Her lips were so close I could practically taste them, and I lingered for another second or two before tipping my head down and brushing my lips against hers, a ghost of a kiss, so light and gentle and unfulfilling.

The simple gesture was enough to make sparks ignite in my blood, pulsing in time with my racing heart. I tried to take my time, tried to savor her, to savor *this* and not push for more. We had all the time in the world now, after all.

And then her pink tongue peeked out and traced my lips—and every ounce of my control over the situation shattered.

Gripping her hair just tight enough to send sensation tingling across her scalp, I slid one arm around her waist and her pulled her into me, kissing her deeply.

She moaned against my mouth, her tongue sliding against mine in a sensual rhythm that had my cock threatening to bust through the zipper of my pants. This was everything. I would never get tired of making her feel this way, and the gorgeous noises she made got me off so much more than anything else she could’ve done to me. I slid one hand underneath her shirt, inching upward until my fingers brushed the underside of her breast.

Her fingers slid up from their home on the back of my neck and raked through my hair as I pinned her body between myself and the house. “Xavier,” she moaned into my mouth.

I had foolishly thought that kissing her would sate my desire for her. One or two kisses and I’d have had my fill. Instead, each breathless, desperate crash of her lips against mine left me hungry for more.

I knew I’d had her only yesterday, but it wasn’t enough. Our time together felt like eons ago, and I needed more. I needed to taste her, touch her, feel her wrapped tight around me and making more of those noises I would never tire of.

Reluctantly, I broke away from our kiss, and Cali let out a little whine of complaint. Her lips were swollen, her hair was mussed, and her pupils were dilated, dark pools of wanting. All for me.

I leaned in and whispered in her ear. “Follow me.”

A thrill rushed through me at the way her breath caught, the way I could feel goosebumps rising on her skin, just from the sensation of my breath ghosting over the sensitive shell of her ear.

“W-what?” she asked, clearly dazed from our kiss. I had a strong feeling that if I peeled her clothes away right now, I’d find her wet and ready for me.

I grinned. “Follow my lead.”

I popped out of our little hiding spot and nodded for Cali to come along. She adjusted her clothing and then stepped away from the house.

I wove through the group of partiers, glancing back at my mate every so often. She looked lust-drunk and giddy, chasing after me, and I felt my grin widen.

This was how our first barbecue should have gone, without all of the fighting. It should have been full of kisses and fun. We reached a thick cluster of people, and I darted through the crowd.

“HEY!” Cali shouted after me.

I didn’t even try to stop the laughter bubbling up my throat. “Catch me if you can!”

I started jogging through the crowd, laughing as Cali tried to keep up. This was exactly the break we needed—a time to be silly and in love. I’d been such an idiot before, not to have realized how happy she made me. She was all I needed. My tiger. My mate.

I darted into the house, where the party was raging far too strongly for anyone to notice their acting Alpha and resident half-Fae race through the house. When we reached the stairs, I slowed just enough for Cali to *almost* grab me—and then I hopped out of reach, climbing the stairs while she giggled behind me.

Then I ran until we reached my room and put my hands up as if she’d caught me.

She was panting, her face glowing with exertion and desire. She glared at me, but it lacked heat.

“So this was your plan, then?” she demanded. “Leading me up to your bedroom so we can fool around? You could have just told me.”

I shrugged. “Where’s the fun in—”

With a wave of her hand, I suddenly sailed through the air and was tossed onto the bed. I sat up, my eyes wide. “Did you just use your magic on me?”

She grinned. “Maybe.”

I couldn’t contain myself. I hopped up and lifted her, spinning her around the room while she giggled. We fell back on the bed, side by side, staring into each other’s eyes. I brushed a stray lock of hair away from her face.

“You’re so beautiful,” I breathed.

I kissed her again, and when she reached for me, I held her hands tight. She let out a little noise of frustration but didn’t stop kissing me. Instead, she channeled all her desire into the kiss, nipping at my lips and sliding her tongue against mine in a rhythm that made my head spin.

In no time at all, I released her just so I could touch her myself, pull her against me and feel those beautiful curves.

She tugged my shirt up and dropped a line of kisses down my throat and chest. I was faintly aware of the black veins pulsing deep in my chest, awakened by the current of want flowing between Cali and me. The pain grew sharper the more she touched me, but I didn’t care. I wasn’t going to miss out on a single opportunity to be with her, no matter the discomfort. She was all that mattered now.

Cali brushed her lips over mine and rolled on top of me, and my heartbeat sped up into a new cadence as she eased my pants and boxers down over my hips and tossed them away.

Then she crawled up between my legs, her eyes locked on my cock. And then, despite all the love and desire that was practically radiating off her, she hesitated, her hands braced on my thighs, just short of where I so desperately wanted her.

Suddenly, I was thrown back to the memory of the first time she’d tried to pleasure me.

*“You’re tense,” I said to the girl on top of me. It was time for me to finally get what Colton had paid for, but she looked terrified. There was no way in hell I was going to force the issue if this wasn’t what she wanted. But maybe all she needed was to feel a bit more comfortable.*

*“Never felt like this before,” she said.*

*I froze, trying to unpack that deceptively complex string of words. Was this new because she was a virgin? Or because she’d never been paid for sex before? That sick feeling started to churn in my belly. Maybe we should just call this off.*

*“My turn,” she mumbled. Before I could quite figure out what she was talking about, she lowered herself down and pulled off my boxers.*

*Oh. Okay, then.*

*The poor girl looked like she’d never seen a cock before.*

*She looked up at me, and I tilted my head slightly to take her in. Was she nervous? Confused? Waiting for instructions?*

*Then she reached out and wrapped her hand firmly around my cock. The simple brush of her skin against mine made me huff out a breath.*

*There was a pause, just long enough to make me go half-crazy with want, and then she started moving her hand. It was… nice. Her grip was just this side of too tight, but it didn’t hurt. There was no doubting her virginal status—she had no idea what she was doing. My jaw tightened, but I didn’t look away.*

*“You look nervous,” I said.*

*“Don’t talk to me when I’m doing this,” she snapped.*

*The corners of my mouth curled up just a bit. “Why not?”*

*Then her hot mouth surrounded me and I lost the ability to think. My whole body tensed as she worked my shaft with her hand and teased my head with her tongue. She was licking me like a fucking lollipop and fuck me, but it was one of the most erotic things I’d ever seen.*

*She pulled away. “Now look who’s awkward?” She smiled and then froze. I wished like hell I could read her mind.*

*“Why did you stop?” I asked. “You were doing okay.” She really had been off to a great fucking start.*

*Still, she kept a straight face. “Foreplay wasn’t in the deal,” she stated. “The deal was just taking my virginity.”*

We’d both come so far since then, in more ways than one.

“Keep going,” I said softly.

Then Cali looked up from my cock and burst out laughing.

**Episode 958**

I tried hard to stifle it, but I couldn’t keep it inside me any longer. With a snort, I keeled over laughing. Xavier blinked at me, obviously confused by my reaction. That just sent me into another fit of giggles, my stomach aching as I continued to remember how I’d first reacted to… *all* of Xavier.

I giggled uncontrollably, reminded of how awkward and unsure I’d been with him, having had absolutely no clue what I was doing when I’d first taken him into my mouth. At that point, most of my experience had come from my experimental—and infrequent—porn-watching endeavors. It was honestly a miracle he hadn’t pushed me off of him back then. *Actually*, I thought, *he seemed to enjoy it quite a bit…*

My clueless, gorgeous mate continued to stare at me in confusion. Poor Xavier. He had no idea why I was laughing. Finally, after a couple more moments of listening to my raucous laughter, he spoke.

“Excuse me?” he questioned, clearly put off by my reaction.

I opened my mouth several times, attempting to explain what exactly I was thinking about. But I failed each time as I remembered another detail from that day.

At my non-answer, Xavier’s patience started to wear thin.

“What is so funny?” he demanded, narrowing his eyes.

He was obviously starting to get annoyed. Good one, Cali. I forced myself to try to calm down, and I managed to reduce my reaction to the occasional burst of laughter.

Breathing heavily and still slightly gasping, I choked out, “I’m sorry.”

I grinned at him, wiping away the tears that had formed from laughing too much.

“It’s just…” I snorted. “I couldn’t help but be reminded of the very first time I did *this*.”

I gestured vaguely between myself and his crotch, unable to hide the smirk that formed on my lips.

“You know I had absolutely no idea what I was doing,” I teased, my eyebrows arching mockingly.

Xavier rolled his eyes, chuckling slightly.

“Well you were selling your virginity, Cali. It was pretty obvious,” he replied, grinning. I was sure he was thinking about how awkwardly I’d started with the blowjob back then, my hands just moving slowly up and down. For a moment, he stared at me contemplatively, his gaze turning distant.

Then he started laughing.

“I remember you didn’t even want to do anything,” he recalled, snorting. “You said that foreplay wasn’t part of the deal.”

I started laughing along with him, thinking about how nervous I’d been when I’d claimed it was “my turn” and my shock at how huge he’d seemed. I shook my head as I reflected on my naïveté. *Oh, how far we’ve come*.

Suddenly, I remembered a tiny detail that he had conveniently left out.

“That may be true,” I purred, “but you were the one who stopped me.”

Xavier’s eyes simmered with desire. His large hands wrapped around my waist, and he pulled me forward until I was almost on top of him. He leaned in close, his warm breath leaving goosebumps on my skin. I ached to take him in.

Clearly aware of how he affected me, Xavier licked his lips sensually.

“I’m not going to stop you now,” he said, his voice low and husky. My toes curled at the sound.

I moved closer to him, the air humming with tension. I saw Xavier’s Adam’s apple bob up and down at our proximity. Oh, the effect I had on him.

Giving him a sly grin, I whispered jokingly, “Maybe I’m just going to tease you.”

I trailed my lips along his neck as my hands explored his chest underneath his shirt. I felt his pulse speeding up, his heart pounding strongly against my palms.

I leaned back slightly. “Maybe I’ll leave you high and dry,” I said softly, teasingly.

Xavier shifted his head slightly, making eye contact with me. “I wouldn’t risk that if I were you,” he growled. “No telling what will happen.”

My core warmed at the glint in his eye. It promised lots of trouble—the type of trouble I liked.

Almost impulsively, I closed the distance between us, sweeping him into a kiss. We became frenzied as our lips moved aggressively against each other. I felt my lips slowly swell under the force of our kiss as the warmth in my core heated into an inferno. I didn’t want to stop, but I did want to make him work for it.

It took everything I had to break the kiss. Our chests heaved as we recovered from the intensity of it. I gave him a lopsided grin, still breathless.

Xavier immediately understood what game I was playing. Without hesitation, he grabbed me by my hips and laid me flat on the bed, moving over me.

“I’m not going to let you off the hook that easily,” he said, making sure to press his body flush against mine.

I shivered in pleasure at the feel of his weight on top of me. He pressed a rough kiss to my neck, biting slightly in the process. *Holy fuck*.

I nearly melted into an actual puddle right then and there.

“No, you’re not done,” Xavier said. He moved down my neck, tugging on my skin with his teeth and giving a quick lick afterward. “Not until”—another bite and lick—“I am finished”—bite, lick—“fucking you”—my back arched, easing into his touch as he moved closer to my breasts—“so hard”—he took a hard nipple of mine between his fingers and twisted it—“that your voice is hoarse from screaming my name,” he finished.

I let out a moan, practically begging him to take me on this bed. I didn’t want to play this little flirting and teasing game anymore. I wanted the real thing—I wanted Xavier.

“Please,” I whimpered, tugging on his shirt. “I want you.”

Chuckling, he pulled off his shirt, revealing rock-hard abs and a smooth, chiseled chest. I sighed in appreciation. God, I’d never get tired of staring at him, at his perfection.

I grinned at him cheekily, unable to stop staring at him.

“I’m a bit overdressed, aren’t I?” I quipped.

Pleased with my response, Xavier made quick work of my clothes. He traced a lazy finger across the stiff peaks of my breasts and down the slender curves of my stomach, until he was toying with the waistband of my panties.

Through it all, his hungry eyes devoured the sight of my nearly-bare skin.

Satisfied, he finally pulled down my panties. His lips met the stretch marks—no, tiger stripes—etched onto my body.

“I love these so fucking much,” he whispered, almost reverently.

I glowed under the praise.

He trailed his lips down the curve of my hips to between my thighs. I squirmed as his warm breath met my entrance.

He chuckled, the reverberations sending pleasure through my body. His tongue circled my clit, making me moan. I became increasingly wet as his mouth worked wonders.

He pulled away and reached behind me, undoing the hooks of my bra. He removed the offending article of clothing, leaving my breasts fully exposed. Immediately, Xavier swooped down, enveloping one in the heat of his mouth as the length of him pressed against the wetness of my core. The sensation was indescribable. I hooked my legs around his waist, trying to pull him in.

Getting the hint, Xavier pressed a long kiss to my mouth, aligning himself with my entrance as he gripped my thighs to open my legs wider. Then he was inside me, our bodies moving against each other in a rhythmic motion. Xavier grunted in pleasure with each push, his fingers gripping my waist to keep us steady.

I met his every stroke, reveling in the sensations. There was nothing but Xavier and me. Where one person ended, the other began. We were one and the same, moving in tandem. Connected.

My body trembled as pressure built inside me.

“I’m going to—” I gasped.

“Come for me, Cali,” Xavier groaned.

The pleasant sensations kept filling me. My breaths came fast and loud, and I said his name like it was a prayer. In a flash, my body shuddered, my senses overwhelmed with satisfaction. Then I went loose in his arms once again.

A moment later, Xavier found his release, shaking inside me.

He separated himself from me and cleaned us both up with a towel. Then he lay down beside me, propping himself up on his elbow. He gave me a crooked smile as his eyes roamed my body, ultimately settling on my face.

Now out of the moment, his unabashed staring made me feel slightly self-conscious.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I asked him. “Is there something in my teeth, or what?”

Xavier threw his head back and laughed. After a moment, he focused on me again.

Still smiling slightly, he stroked my hair. “We’ve come a long way since that first time.”

I made a face at him.

He laughed again and said, “At least Colton didn’t interrupt us this time.”

Grimacing as I thought back to all the times Colton had popped in at the absolute worst moment, I agreed.

“True,” I said, nodding thoughtfully. “Your brother has a tendency to show up at the most inconvenient times.”

Xavier hummed in agreement. “Colton can be a total douche,” he agreed, retracting his hand from my hair.

He rolled onto his back, seemingly lost in thought, suddenly brooding. A lot more like the Xavier I’d first met. I stroked his chest, curious what he was thinking.

Suddenly, his gaze snapped to mine, wide-eyed and panicked-looking.

Caught off-guard, I blurted out a high-pitched, “What!?”

“You’re still taking birth control, right?” Xavier asked, clearly straining to keep his voice calm.

**Episode 959**

GREYSON

As I thought about Maren’s offer, I surveyed the supernaturals around me. Fae, vampires, werewolves, and, at this point who knew what else, all in various states of drunkenness, some obviously busy trying to get laid. Typical. I wouldn’t have expected anything less from a supernatural haunt that looked like a rundown Portland dive bar, tucked away down the back of an alley.

I glanced at Maren, who was sitting patiently beside me, waiting for my answer. She was always so calm and unreadable. Was she really telling the truth? It wasn’t like she had the greatest track record with being honest. I sighed heavily, still unsure what to do.

After a moment, I turned to face her.

“Is Fenrir really being threatened?” I asked, my eyes narrowed. “Or is this just another one of your manipulative ploys?”

Maren’s hand fluttered to her throat, her eyes widening at the accusation. “I wouldn’t use my son to *trick* you, Greyson,” she insisted, a slight edge to her voice.

I looked away from her pleading gaze, my mind filling with thoughts of Fenrir. Of how sweet he was, always playful yet demanding. I wanted him to have the chance to grow up. To be a good man. The thought caught me by surprise. Even though I’d only spent a short period of time with him, I’d grown to like the kid a lot.

Honestly, if I’d thought for even a second Fenrir was my kid… I would’ve agreed to move heaven and earth to help. But Fenrir was someone else’s son, someone else’s responsibility. Of course I didn’t want him to be in danger—he was just a child—but I couldn’t shake the feeling that I wasn’t getting the whole story. Doubt filled me, and I eyed Maren suspiciously.

“Why aren’t you asking Aiden to help?” I challenged. He was Fenrir’s father. Maren should’ve been asking him, not me.

Maren sighed, as if she’d been expecting this question.

“Aiden and I…” Maren started, choosing her words carefully. She eyed me, watching closely for a reaction. I just stared at her blankly, unwilling to give anything away.

“We have a complicated relationship,” she said, matter-of-fact. “He’s not exactly someone I trust.”

My mouth twisted into a slight grimace as I thought about my relationship with Silas. He was the definition of an untrustworthy father. Cruel, unwavering in his hunt to become more powerful and to breed bloodthirsty sons who could help him get the power he craved. He’d almost succeeded in exploiting us for his own ends. I was glad he was dead. I shook my head almost imperceptibly to shake out the lie. I’d killed him. I’d killed my own father. And even though he had deserved everything he’d received, I couldn’t help but feel that pang of guilt and sadness. I didn’t want Fenrir to ever be put in a situation like that. No child deserved that.

Maren’s voice snapped me out of my spiraling thoughts.

“So, what do you say, Greyson?” Maren asked. “You scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours.”

There was a glint there of the old playful Maren, the woman I’d thought I’d loved. But I knew better. I’d learned the hard way. Even if it seemed like she was being honest, there were no guarantees.

“With our history, how can I trust that you’ll actually help me?” I asked, eyeing her with suspicion.

Maren pursed her lips, frowning slightly. Her brows scrunched together. She looked as if she was losing patience with me.

“I can’t convince you of something you’re unwilling to believe, but I can say that I would never do anything to hurt my son, and if you help me protect him, I’ll owe you a great debt,” she said, lowering her voice. “But I will do everything I can to help you.”

I considered her words, noting the way she’d leaned earnestly forward. The idea of breaking this goddamn curse was pretty appealing. To not have death looming over me. That would be pretty fucking nice. *But then*, I thought, *what would that do to my relationship with Cali?* If she was able to choose, would she choose me?

I looked at Maren, who was peering at me intently, curiosity clear on her face. I was sick of these damn veins, and I was sick of the uncertainty that came with them.

“Who are the people threatening you?” I demanded. “What would I be getting involved in?”

In a flash, I reached out and grabbed her arm. I pulled her close to my face, her scent mingling with her warm breaths. A mix of honey and pepper. I hated how good she smelled; it was distracting.

“I need the complete picture,” I growled low. “Don’t withhold anything.”

She kept her cool, meeting my gaze and leaning in even closer.

“I won’t,” she whispered.

She gently pulled herself from my grasp and leaned back, putting the distance between us once again.

Sighing, she began to explain. “When I met you I was working for some Fae who ran a gambling ring.” She fiddled with her fingers, breaking our eye contact. “To make sure they never had to pay out, they fixed most fights.”

“They paid someone off in each fight?” I ventured, thinking about what had happened all those years ago.

She nodded and looked up at me. “I think you know they obviously wanted to use you, too,” she said. “And when you refused to throw that fight, I knew they would kill you. They had put a lot of money on your opponent.”

“So that’s why you tried to get me to throw the fight—to help them?” I asked, the pieces all falling into place.

“No. I did it to protect you,” she said fiercely, her eyes tearing up ever so slightly. “But when you refused, I knew they would blame me… and kill me.” She took a shaky breath, her voice dropping. “I… I panicked,” she admitted, a shameful look filling her face. “I panicked, and that’s why I betrayed you.”

All of a sudden, I was taken back to that day. I remembered the sharp pain in my stomach as the silver blade had cut into me, the metallic tang of my blood filling the air. I remembered my breathlessness and the sting of the silver as it spread through the wound. I remembered my horror as I realized it was Maren who had set me up. Even back then, it was her betrayal that had hurt me, far worse than the stab wound itself.

Was I really ready to forgive her? To forgive her enough to help her?

I knew I wouldn’t ever truly forget how she’d betrayed me, but I understood, in a way. I could see why she’d done it, could see what had *driven* her to do it. And her son… Fenrir didn’t deserve to die. It was obvious what I had to do.

I straightened and cleared my throat.

“What do you want me to do?”

For a moment, she gave me a grateful smile, her eyes lighting up. But just as quickly, the smile vanished.

Maren glanced around the bar, looking for prying eyes and ears. She scooted in closer, casually resting her chin on her palm in an effort to seem inconspicuous.

Dropping her voice to a whisper, she said, “I need you to fight. And I need you to lose.”

My breath caught in my throat for a second as I realized what she wanted me to do. It was just like before—only this time, if I threw the fight, I would be able to save Maren and Fenrir, and possibly get the help I needed to break the curse. Just lose one stupid fight, and then I’d be done, they’d be safe, and the curse would be over. Except… I also knew that once I got in with people like that, it would be hard to get out. They’d make sure it was nearly impossible.

But I couldn’t see another way out.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll do it.”

Maren’s shoulders slumped in relief. “I’ll make the arrangements,” she said.

“When is this fight?” I asked, wanting to know the details.

“I’m not sure,” she hedged. “I’ll find out.”

“And what about afterward?” I pushed. “How do we help my problem after I fix yours?”

She gave me a secretive smile. “I want to introduce you to someone.”

Maren stood up, taking my arm and pulling me through the crowd. She led me to a booth where three young women with dark brown skin were drinking beers and looking kind of bored, in that detached “too cool” way. The women had tattoos of various runes and symbols on their arms, and they wore a lot of jewelry—the delicate boho kind, heavy with crystals. I couldn’t tell if they were supernaturals like the others Maren had shown me or just Portland hipsters.

“Greyson, this is Lauren, Chloe, and Posie.” She leaned toward me. “They’re very powerful witches,” she said quietly.

I looked at the three women with a renewed interest. Not only were they dressed similarly, but they looked like family. Like Xavier, Colton, and me.

“Witch sisters?” I guessed.

The middle one—Chloe—eyed me, then arched an eyebrow.

“Mmm hmmm,” she hummed. “Not bad for a werewolf.” She cocked her head, then addressed Maren. “Where’d you find him?”

“He’s… an old friend.” Maren said.

I smirked. “An interesting choice of words,” I said to Maren.   
  
I was about to say something else, but the one on the left, Lauren, interrupted. “Stop your babbling.”

Lauren’s hand shot out and she grabbed my arm. She looked me straight in the eye, her gaze unflinching. She was certainly unnerving, not that I would ever admit it.

Her voice low and intense, she asked, “How would you like to change your destiny, wolf?”

**Episode 960**

Shock rippled through me as I processed Xavier’s words. I pulled back jerkily, nearly falling off the bed, but I caught myself just in time. Did he just ask that? How dare he.

“*What?*” I exclaimed, stunned.

“It’s a simple question,” he said plainly, enunciating each word like I was a toddler who didn’t understand. “Are you still taking your birth control pills?”

“I don’t need you to repeat the question,” I snarled, my jaw set in frustration. “I just want to know why you’re *asking* me that?”

Xavier cocked his head. “I don’t understand why you’re so upset,” he said harshly, clearly confused by my reaction. “I’m just asking. Don’t I have a right to know?”

I felt heat rush to my cheeks, and the tips of my ears burned.

“Why are you asking me that *after* we had sex?” I demanded. “You didn’t wear a condom! You should have thought about that before, not now. It’s your responsibility too.”

At that, Xavier scrambled into an upright position. His eyes were wide, apprehension filling his face.

“Wait,” Xavier said, breathless and panicked. “So, you’re *not* taking birth control?”

I rolled my eyes, then pinned him with a cold stare. “Do you really think I’m that stupid?” I challenged, daring him to answer.

Xavier gaped at me, opening and closing his mouth. “What? I… No!” he spluttered, as he tried to make me understand where he was coming from. “I’m just confused.”

*Wow.* I pushed myself off the bed, turning my back to him. I couldn’t believe Xavier would really think I would be so irresponsible.

Still not facing him, I said, annoyed, “Of course I’m taking my pills.” I whirled around, arms crossed over my naked body. “I’m only twenty—why would I want to risk having a baby? My life has barely begun!”

Seeing my anger, Xavier quickly tried to backpedal. He scratched the back of his neck as a look of shame crossed his face.

“I was just making sure,” he explained, his voice pleading for me to understand. “Between the Fae world, and our battle with Silas… there’s been a lot going on.”

That… was fair. I uncrossed my arms and moved to the edge of the bed. We had been through a lot lately, so I guess I could see why he might be concerned. I forced myself to calm down. But then I got hung up on wondering why he would suddenly ask that.

“Why was this even on your mind?” I asked, far more gently.

A look of relief flooded Xavier’s face. He shrugged. “It was something Colton had said.”

*Wait, what?*

“You discuss my birth control with Colton?” I demanded, horrified by the idea. Colton was always up in our business, but this was too far.

“No, no!” Xavier exclaimed, realizing what he’d said. “That isn’t it, not at all.”

I gestured for him to go on, eager to know what he actually meant.

“Colton and I had had a conversation about whether Maya was pregnant,” Xavier explained. He reached over to the dresser and grabbed his phone, scrolling to the old conversation between him and Colton.

My mouth popped open in surprise. “I… *What*?! Are they pregnant?” I screeched.

Xavier set his phone down back on the dresser. “Not to my knowledge. He told me he was joking.”

He leaned back on the bed, resting his hands underneath his head. He seemed lost in thought for a moment, then broke the silence with a snort.

“Can you even imagine him as a father?”

“You think he was just joking?” I choked out in disbelief at Xavier’s casual dismissal of Colton’s confession. “Maybe you should actually find out?”

As Xavier explained that he’d talked to Colton about it, but he still wasn’t sure, I thought about the possibility of being an aunt. Auntie Cali. *Snap out of it,* Caliana. If he couldn’t get a straight answer, maybe I could. My fingers inched toward my phone as I realized I could just text Maya and ask her myself. But I closed my hands into tight fists. Maya would probably let people know when she was ready. There was no need for me to pressure her—I grimaced—or get murdered by her.

Xavier waved off my questions, steering our conversation back to what we’d been talking about originally.

“So that’s why I asked,” Xavier finished. “I was thinking about Colton, and then I just… my mind wandered.”

I paused.

“What if I hadn’t been?” I asked. “What if I was pregnant? How would you react?”

Xavier answered me without hesitation. “If you had asked me that same question when we first met,” he began, “I would’ve laughed.”

“That’s not the response I was expecting.”

Xavier pursed his lips, sitting up. He had a thoughtful look on his face as though he was trying to figure out the best way to explain it to me.

“See,” he said, his voice serious, “back then, I didn’t know what I wanted. And having a child wasn’t in my plans, *especially* not after having had Silas as a father. But now…”

I watched as a ghost of a smile crossed Xavier’s lips.

“I don’t think I’m ready to be a father,” he finally said, shrugging.

“Ever?”

“No. I mean, I’m not ready *yet*,” he corrected hastily. “But I will be, someday.”

Xavier’s eyes took on a faraway look as the smile appeared on his face again. “Yeah, I’d like that for us.”

My heart swelled. I mean, I wasn’t ready either—that much was clear—but knowing that Xavier was imagining a future with us as parents was reassuring, to say the least.

I stared at him adoringly. He really had changed since we’d first met. Sure, he could still be a real dick—too controlling and too remote—at times… But Xavier had matured. And I’d been a part of that.

I leaned against the edge of the bed and pressed a kiss to Xavier’s lips.

“Let’s go back to the party,” I suggested, stroking his face softly. “People are probably wondering where we are.”

Xavier grinned up at me wolfishly, clearly having another idea in mind. But before he could ensnare me into another round, I pulled away and started getting dressed.

With a longing sigh, Xavier got up. Once we were both presentable, we headed outside. Everyone was partying pretty hard—playing games and drinking just as steadily as earlier. I saw Torin stumbling around, red cup in hand, learning how to play beer pong. It was like Xavier and I had never left.

I grabbed Xavier’s arm. “I want to talk to Artemis,” I said. “I don’t like how things ended with her. We’re sisters… we shouldn’t be fighting.”

Xavier looked skeptical. “Cali, have you met my brothers?” I knew he was teasing me, and he was being kind of adorable, but I didn’t have time for Xavier Evers, cute boyfriend model. I screwed up my face at him, unimpressed.

“See you later, Uncle Xavier,” I teased him back, moving away from him into the throng before he could reply. Artemis had to be here, somewhere. But as I kept looking around, I couldn’t find her. Where was she?

No one could tell me where she was. Each person was drunker than the last. I was starting to get sick of searching when I ran into Big Mac and Mrs. Smith. I was about to ask them if they’d seen Artemis anywhere, but Big Mac cut me off.

“What did Xavier say about the orb?” she demanded, getting right to the point.

*Shit.* Xavier and I hadn’t actually ended up discussing the orb… I opted to not tell Big Mac that, for fear that she might turn me into a frog—or worse.

“Xavier’s still thinking it over,” I lied.

She looked at me crossly.

“He’d better not spend too much time ‘thinking’,” she warned. “The longer the orb remains here, the more of a threat it will become.”

I nodded mindlessly in agreement as I got lost in my thoughts. I remembered how it had felt to hold the orb, how it had spoken to me. It had said it could help me. I could still hear its words: *You seek to break the curse that binds you. Do not destroy me, but keep me safe, and I can help you.*

Logically, I knew it could have been lying, trying to manipulate me. But… what if it was telling the truth? What if the orb could help break this curse, for real this time, and make everything better?

I refocused my attention on Big Mac. Well, there was only one way to find out.

“So, where exactly did you put the orb?”

**Episode 961**

ARTEMIS

I watched as Rishika’s face turned an unnatural shade of red. She seemed caught off-guard by my question. A little tongue-tied, even.

“I mean…” Rishika started slowly, seemingly unsure what to say. “I wasn’t *not* flirting with you.”

Almost instantly, warmth flooded me, an involuntary grin spreading across my face. Rishika *flirting*… with *me*. I had to admit, I really liked the sound of that.

“Is that so?” I teased, still grinning.

By now, Rishika had recovered from her momentary embarrassment.

Her face no longer aflame, she shot back, “I could say it’s because of the tequila shots.”

I crossed my arms, doubtful that was the real reason. Before I could reply with something brilliant and flirty, Rishika continued.

“But if I said that, I’d be lying.” She lifted her gaze, meeting mine. Her eyes seemed to burn with an intense passion. “Truth is, I find you kinda fascinating.”

The warmth in my core transformed into full-blown butterflies. No one had ever described me like that before. Usually, people talked about how strong or clever or resourceful I was… But none of those words made my heart flutter like *fascinating*.

“Now that you know,” Rishika said, her voice uncharacteristically soft, “I have to wonder if *you* were flirting with *me*?”

I shrugged, struggling to keep my carefully cultivated air of nonchalance.

“Of course,” I stated matter-of-factly. “You’re very captivating.” Then, with a smirk, I added, “For a werewolf.”

Rishika bristled momentarily but wasted no time replying. “And you’re very fascinating”—a cheeky grin—“for a Fae.”

We blinked at each other for a second, then burst out laughing. Rishika threw her head back as her body shook with mirth. I felt my eyes crinkle as the laughter bubbled out of me. This lightness, this happiness… it was almost foreign to me. But in this moment, I wished for nothing more than to capture it forever.

Slowly, our laughter died down, but the silence didn’t last.

“I’ve never been with a Fae,” Rishika admitted, more serious now.

I nodded. Fae-and-werewolf was a rare combination, so it wasn’t surprising that Rishika had never been with one. I opened my mouth, about to say that it was the same for me, but then I quickly realized… it wasn’t.

Rishika noticed my hesitation.

“Wait,” she said slowly, her eyes wide. “Have you hooked up with a werewolf before?”

I tilted my head, unclear on what the phrase “hooked up” meant. Was dating considered “hooking up”? If so, I didn’t want her to get the wrong idea; what had happened with Greyson… was nothing, really.

“It was just a kiss,” I told her cautiously.

Rishika, clearly interested in the details, pressed for more.

“*And?*” she exclaimed, coming closer to me, eager to know.

Although I couldn’t for the life of me understand why she was so interested, it was amusing to see how excited she was.

“It was just a kiss,” I repeated, waving a hand dismissively. “Just one kiss, once. Nothing else happened… it was kinda like kissing a sibling.”

Rishika was grinning by this time. “And who was this werewolf sibling you mashed faces with?” Was this how people in this world really talked to each other? Or was it a werewolf thing?

“It was Greyson.”

Rishika’s eyes bugged out, and her mouth popped open in shock.

“OUR Greyson?” she asked. “Alpha of the Redwood Pack, Greyson? Mated to your sister, Greyson?”

Her face was flushed with surprise. She fell quiet, clearly thinking about something. After a moment, she spoke again.

“I’m just—wow,” she muttered. She threw her hands into the air in mock defeat. “I’m trying to imagine under what circumstances that even would’ve happened, but I’m coming up short.”

I chuckled softly at Rishika’s reaction, then proceeded to explain.

“It was shortly after I left the Fae world,” I told her plainly. “Greyson introduced me to that wonderful elixir, whiskey. And one thing led to another, and we just kissed.”

Rishika, obviously still doubtful that I was telling her the whole story, peppered me with more questions.

“And it ended there?” she asked dubiously, her eyebrows high. “HOW?”

I shrugged, not really sure what else I could say. “It was too weird,” I commented after a moment. “It really was like kissing a sibling, honestly.”

Rishika gave a low whistle of appreciation. “You’re hot shit. You know that, right?” she said admiringly.

I wasn’t sure what Rishika meant by that, but the image that came to mind wasn’t helping. Quite literally, I was imagining shit… on fire. Not exactly the most appealing visual, but from Rishika’s tone, the words probably meant something different in this world. I hoped.

Rishika, noticing my silence and the look on my face, laughed. “It’s a compliment,” she assured me, grinning.

I gave a stiff nod but didn’t say anything else. There was an awkward pause as we both pondered what to say. Then Rishika broke the silence.

“How about another shot?” she suggested, raising the bottle in her hand.

Watching me, she licked her lips, then lifted the bottle to her mouth, taking a slow swig. She stretched out her arm and offered me the bottle. I took it from her, my eyes never leaving hers, and took a big swig from it as well.

Under the influence of alcohol and Rishika’s hypnotizing gaze, I started to feel all warm and tingly. I leaned close to Rishika, not entirely sure what I was going to do. Rishika watched me, holding her breath. I felt my heart beating faster as the distance between us closed…

“Don’t hoard the bottle!”

At Norah and Elise’s voices, we quickly jumped apart. They ran over, breathless.

Rishika wordlessly handed them the bottle, then turned to me. “Do you want to take a walk?”

As tempting as it was to say yes, there was something that Rishika had conveniently forgotten about. I narrowed my eyes.

“Hold on,” I said. “What about you? You have to race.”

Rishika’s eyes brightened at the prospect as her mouth turned up in a slight grin.

“Are you challenging me?” Rishika questioned, her voice low but her eyes ablaze with excitement.

I lit up, the thrill of a challenge filling me. “Loser has to swim in the lake.”

Rishika considered my words for a moment, then agreed. “But only if you promise not to use your Fae powers.”

I glanced over at Arlo, who was eating some kind of meat tube on a stick and listening intently to our conversation. Norah and Elise were also watching us, clearly itching to see this challenge play out.

Smirking, I shot back, “As long as you don’t cheat.”

Rishika frowned in faux anger, her brows drawing together. She crossed her arms. “But I like to play dirty,” she whined, her eyes shining with a mischievous glint. A beat later, she let out a laugh. “That was a clumsy attempt at flirting,” she confessed, snorting.

“So clumsy,” I agreed. Although it *had* been a poor attempt at flirting, I realized that it didn’t matter. I really enjoyed hanging out with Rishika, and I liked how she made me feel.

Shaking free of these thoughts, I lined up beside Rishika at the starting mark.

I bounced in place lightly, pumped and ready to win. I just hoped the alcohol wouldn’t slow me down. It would be nice to show off just how athletic I was.

Nora and Elise began the countdown.

“Three,” they called out.

I leaned forward, focusing.

“Two.”

Rishika suddenly bent over, her face close to mine.

“One…”

In a flash, she pressed a quick kiss on my lips.

“Go!”

I gaped in surprise as Rishika raced ahead, her laughter trailing behind her.

I scrambled to catch up, still feeling the phantom presence of her lips on mine. As I sped up, I wondered whether she had done that just to throw me off, or whether it had been something else.

I arrived at the tree and immediately leapt up to begin the climb. I was tempted to use my powers to even things out, but I decided against it. Even if Rishika was playing dirty, I wanted to win fair and square.

I was only a couple feet away when she reached the top. I swore under my breath, slightly put off that I’d lost.

“That wasn’t fair,” I declared once I got to where Rishika was.

She grinned at me, uncaring. “I did tell you I like to play dirty.”

I rolled my eyes, a smile playing on my lips. “You know that I could use my Fae powers and knock you into the lake right now?”

“But you can’t,” Rishika stated confidently. “You made a Fae promise not to use your powers, didn’t you?”

I grinned widely. “Not exactly,” I said, turning away from her to take in the view. I hadn’t said I promised.

From here, I could see everything. The house, the party, the roaring fire, and the lake, which sparkled in the moonlight.

“Have you ever noticed how ordinary things look more beautiful when you’re high up?” Rishika said softly.

I looked over at her and found her staring right at me. I was about to respond when Elise called up to us.

“You ever coming down?”

The moment broken, Rishika started to descend.

“About that kiss…” I ventured.

Rishika paused and looked up. “Yeah?”

I slid down until I was level with her.

“I liked it,” I whispered, closing the distance between us.

But when our lips should have touched, I was instead met with cool, empty air. I opened my eyes to see Rishika falling, hurtling toward the ground at neck-breaking speed.

**Episode 962**

CHARLIE

My heart beat erratically as fear gripped me. I took an involuntary step back.

“It wasn’t my fault,” I pleaded, trembling slightly under Iñigo’s gaze. “It was an accident.”

Suddenly, he broke into a huge smile, his booming laughter filling the room.

“I had you, didn’t I?” Iñigo chuckled, his usually cruel eyes filled with genuine mirth. “You really thought I was gonna kill ya.”

I let out a nervous laugh of my own, slightly relieved but still tense. What if Iñigo was kidding about being kidding? What if I let my guard down, then BOOM! I wouldn’t put it past him to knock me out and turn me into diner sausage.

Iñigo turned away from me and started collecting the money on the floor, counting it as he went.

“Do you want some help?” I asked timidly.

He didn’t even look up. “Why don’t ya leave this alone and go get the rest of the boxes?” he grunted, dismissing me.

I shifted on my feet, hesitant to go. Noticing I was still there, Iñigo twisted around and pinned me with a glare.

“Unless you have a problem?” he growled, his dark eyes promising pain if I actually did.

I swallowed audibly, my mouth going dry. I shook my head furiously and silently hurried up the stairs. The way he’d spoken just now… There’d been real menace in his tone. I wiped away the nervous sweat that had formed on my neck. Fuck, what the hell had I gotten myself into? I should’ve known this was too simple. A hundred bucks for a few minutes of work? Nothing good ever came that easy.

I resisted the urge to smack my forehead. God, I felt like such an idiot. I should’ve just turned the offer down.

I turned the corner and pushed the door open, exiting the building. I was greeted by the sight of Ava, who was leaning against the building’s wall, the pile of boxes by her feet.

“Everything okay?” she drawled, sounding bored, though her brows furrowed in concern. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

The hairs on my arms stood up as I thought back to the look in Iñigo’s eyes, how cruel he’d seemed. It took everything I had to keep from visibly shuddering.

“Nope, all good,” I responded, trying to keep my voice light.

Ava didn’t say anything.

I bent down and grabbed another box, then headed back inside. As I was making my way down the stairs, I ran into Iñigo. Chills ran down my spine as we made eye contact.

“You better be more careful, boy,” he warned me.

I nodded once, my body stiff. “Yes, sir,” I responded, keeping my voice steady.

Iñigo smiled, clapping me on the shoulder. Even his smile had a cruel edge to it, while his eyes simmered with contained anger. A sick feeling built up inside me. I was very sure that if I got on his bad side, he would end me in a heartbeat.

Suddenly, his ice-cold hand tightened its grip on my shoulder, and he leaned in closer.

“You never saw that cash,” Iñigo said, his voice low and threatening. “You’re never going to ask about it. It never happened.” He leaned back slightly, so that I could see his entire face again. He widened his smile, showing his teeth. The effect was terrifying. “’Cause if you do,” he continued matter-of-factly, “I’ll have to kill you. And this time, I’m not kidding.”

Iñigo released his grip on me, maintaining the same fake smile. Without so much as a word, he headed out, leaving me in the middle of the staircase.

It took me a few moments to gather myself. I glanced over at my shoulder, the one Iñigo had touched. It still felt cold, like when I iced my muscles after a lacrosse match.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, then made my way down the stairs. I put the box down next to the others and turned around to fetch another one. I urged myself to go faster. The sooner I got the hell out of here, the better.

As I climbed up the stairs, my phone rang. I pulled it out and looked at the name lighting up the screen. Violet. I would have ignored her call, but my encounter with Iñigo and the money really spooked me… It would be nice just to hear her voice. And this way, I could let her know I was okay, too.

I brought the phone up to my ear, accepting the call. Immediately, I was bombarded with shouting, but it was such a relief to hear her voice, I didn’t even care.

“Oh my god, Charlie!” she screamed. “Charlie, where are you? Are you okay? Please tell me you’re all right!”

I stepped outside, turning away from Ava and the driver.

“Hey, I’m okay, Violet,” I assured her, my voice hushed. I tried to sound steady, so she wouldn’t worry about me too much. “I’m totally fine.”

“Why did you run off like that?” She sniffled, her voice wavering. “Do you have any idea how worried I was? You didn’t even text or call.”

My chest ached as I registered the pain in Violet’s voice. I hated hearing her sound like this, especially since it was because of me. But I couldn’t tell her anything, not yet.

I glanced at the driver, and he glared at me. I sighed. I knew I had to get back to work.

I pulled the phone away from my ear, muffling my voice.

“Violet? Violet?” I called out, pretending that I was losing the signal. “I can’t hear you. Look, I promise I’ll call you back when it’s better, okay? But don’t worry about me. I’ll…”

I ended the call abruptly. *Fuck.* God, I felt terrible about lying to Violet, but there was no way I could tell her the truth. I rubbed my face, pressing the heels of my palms against my eyes. I was tired of this whole situation.

Behind me, the driver cleared his throat.

Dropping my hands, I straightened my spine and got back to work. There was no use in feeling sorry for myself.

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I brought the last box down the stairs and placed it with the others. Finished, I headed into the diner to tell Iñigo, collect my money, then leave this godforsaken place behind.

Once I was inside, Ava spotted me and waved me over.

“How’d it go?” she asked.

I shrugged. It wasn’t like I’d done much.

“It was just a few boxes,” I replied. “Why do you care?”

Ava eyed me. “I was just asking,” she said, her voice clipped.

I watched her carefully. It felt like there was more to her question than she was letting on, but I let it slide for now. I didn’t know her that well; maybe I was reading too much into nothing. After a moment, I mumbled an apology, still on edge. I had a strong feeling Ava was involved in… whatever this whole thing was. And the more I stayed on everyone’s good side, the better. But I still needed to get my money.

“Do you know where Iñigo is?” I asked Ava, trying to keep my voice soft and neutral. “I want to get paid.”

Suddenly, a loud laugh came from behind me. I twisted around to see from who it was coming from.

“Good luck with that,” Mabel—according to her nametag—snorted, busying herself with her work once more.

I turned back around to face Ava. “She’s kidding, right?” I asked. “I did the work; I should get paid.”

“I would assume so,” Ava hedged. “But I wonder, what are you going to do once you collect the money?”

Briefly, I wondered if Ava or Mabel knew about the boxes of money downstairs. Though it probably didn’t matter. Iñigo had made it clear that I was to keep my mouth shut. And I *really* didn’t want to push my luck with him.

“I was planning on taking the bus to Portland,” I said.

Ava raised her brow. “And what’s in Portland?”

“A plane to Minnesota.”

“Well, you missed that bus an hour ago,” Mabel drawled from behind the counter.

I spun around. “Wait, what?”

Mabel clicked her tongue in sympathy. “Yeah, it was the last one for the night,” she informed me. “There aren’t any others.”

My shoulders slumped as exhaustion and disappointment filled me.

“Great,” I moaned. “Now what? Where am I supposed to go?”

Maybe I could spend the night somewhere, then get the earliest bus to Portland in the morning.

I looked at Mabel and Ava. “Is there a motel around here?”

Mabel shook her head.

“A nice boy like you ain’t gonna like that dump,” she said. “It’s right out of *Riverdale*.”

I kept myself from rolling my eyes. This whole damn situation was right out of *Riverdale*.

Sighing, I slumped into an empty booth, resting my forehead on the table. *Fuck.*

Ava came over to where I was slouched and offered a solution.

“Well, you could stay with me.”

**Episode 963**

GREYSON

I looked down at Lauren, whose eyes were rimmed with thick black liner, just like her sisters. It somehow managed to make her eyes look extra piercing—as if a witch’s gaze wasn’t already heavy enough.

Would I like to change my destiny?

Of course. With things the way they were, I was destined to be alone. Without Cali. I was supposed to leave her with my brother and hope that the curse spared my life. A life doomed to be a pale shadow of the one I actually wanted.

But before I could answer her question, Lauren turned my hand over in hers and pointed to my palm with a sparkly black fingernail, trailing the nail along a crease I’d never thought to look at.

“See?” she asked, and I resisted the urge to tell her I wasn’t fluent in palm. “Your life line splits into two paths. Which direction would you prefer?”

Annoyed, I pulled my hand out of her grasp.

“I don’t go for that hocus pocus shit,” I told her plainly. “I want to know what you mean about altering my fate.”

Lauren narrowed her eyes at me, and for a moment I regretted speaking so harshly. The last thing I fucking needed was another curse on my hands. Another angry witch hounding me. But instead of screaming an incantation or telling me to leave, Lauren just leaned back in her chair and looked at me appraisingly.

“What I was *saying*,” she started, the disapproval clear in her voice, “is that you have two paths before you. One is predetermined. The other is not.”

I tried to take this seriously, at least for the moment. There was nothing wrong with hearing this woman out. Maybe there could be truth to what she was saying. If I was already on the predetermined path, it would mean everything in my life had been laid out for me. Already decided.

“So if I’m on the predetermined path, nothing I do matters?” I asked.

Posie snorted and immediately slapped a hand over her mouth. Her sisters looked at her disapprovingly—that was how I could tell she was almost certainly the baby of the family.

“Sorry,” she mumbled. “But to answer your question, that depends entirely on what you do.”

I looked at her, uneasy. Everything was predetermined, but I could change it depending on what I did? Classic riddle-filled witch speak. It always started like this. Next, there’d be the offer of a deal. A deal with lots of invisible strings attached to it, making it impossible to get through without incurring more debt.

I thought about Jay’s missing eye—and that had just been payment for a potion to help Lola shift. What kind of price would I have to pay to change my entire fate? What would these three want from me?

Chloe’s eyes flicked over me, taking me in. Again, I found myself wondering if witches had X-ray vision. It sure as hell felt like they did.

“I didn’t think such a big man would be so reticent around three harmless sisters,” she offered coolly. It was a clear challenge, and I didn’t back down from those.

I chuckled, shaking my head—refusing to look as on edge as I felt.

“Honey, I sincerely doubt that you’re harmless,” I replied, smirking. There was a difference between being afraid and being wary. I didn’t want any confusion about which of those I was.

I turned to Maren, who was watching my interaction with the witches carefully. I hoped I wasn’t an idiot for trusting her.

“Shall we talk about our deal?” I asked her. “I think I’ve had enough witches for one night.”

“Greyson, they can help you with your problem,” Maren insisted, and I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Of course they *could* help me, in some way. But would their help be worth whatever I’d have to sacrifice to get it?

“Are you three really capable of changing my fate?” I asked the trio of witches, not wanting to mince words.

Lauren laughed softly. “Why don’t you just let us show you?” she asked, raising her hands and sending her many bracelets clanking into each other.

But Maren held a hand up. “Not so fast,” she said. “Greyson and I have to talk first.”

Maren grabbed me by the wrist and pulled me out of earshot to another corner of the crowded bar. I scanned the room, looking for threats. I didn’t like being the only wolf here—we traveled in packs for a reason. Even if I was basically a Rogue now.

“I thought I made the terms of our deal pretty clear,” Maren murmured. “You don’t deal with the witches until you help me.”

“This is all too easy,” I told her with a humorless laugh.

“What do you mean?” she asked, clearly puzzled.

“Just that it’s pretty convenient that you dragged me to a bar and introduced me to three witches who claim they can change my fate,” I replied. “Just as long as I help you with whatever *you* need.”

“There’s nothing convenient about it,” Maren insisted. “It’s a deal, Greyson. I get something, and you get something. It’s what we agreed on.”

“And these sisters.” I scoffed. “How do I know they’re legit? How do I know they won’t change my fate by making you my mate or something equally fucking ridiculous?”

Maren smiled at me, the same smile I’d seen a million times. I used to actually think it was sweet, maybe a little devilish. But I knew better now.

“I brought you here to prove that I know people who can help you,” she explained, an edge to her voice. “We can look for someone else if you want. But know this—no one here will help you without my say so.”

I tried to keep my expression neutral while I weighed my options. On the one hand, I could just get out of here—forget about Maren and Fenrir and mind my own business. I’d have to deal with my feelings for Cali on my own and hope for the best. Or, I could get into whatever shady shit Maren was involved in and rely on witches I didn’t know to help me break the curse and hopefully have a chance at a new kind of life.

Neither prospect sounded all that promising.

“I don’t have all night,” Maren pressed. “You agreed to help me, to help Fenrir. Can I depend on you or not?”

I looked over at the witches. What did I really have to lose?

“Just tell me who I’m fighting.”

“Honestly, I don’t know,” Maren admitted, seeming relieved to have gotten a straight answer. “But I can find out.”

I noticed that we were starting to attract some looks from the other bar patrons. Glances that were making me uneasy.

“Why don’t we head back to yours?” I suggested with a significant glance.

Maren’s eyes widened the smallest bit, and she gave a slight nod. She knew exactly what I was implying. Maybe our old shorthand hadn’t completely dissolved.

“Sure,” she answered coolly, then turned to lead the way out. I followed her, making sure to keep my body language casual. Just a guy leaving with the girl he’d come in with. Nothing out of the ordinary.

And we were almost home free when a large man stepped directly into our path—a vampire, by the smell of him. He was dressed in all black, with long hair pulled back in a low ponytail. He glared at Maren and then at me, making his displeasure clear.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” He jammed a finger in Maren’s chest. “Bringing a werewolf here?”

Maren slapped his hand away almost instantly. I recognized the fiery woman I used to know. The one who’d loved to watch me pummel my opponents. Who’d left me with deep scratches down my back every time we’d slept together. A woman you shouldn’t fuck with.

“It’s none of your business,” she hissed.

But the vampire just pointed behind us at his buddies. More vamps, all clad in black and with matching death glares.

“They kind of think it’s our business,” the vampire replied coolly. He turned to look at me, his teeth bared. “Werewolves are the scum of the earth.”

He smiled, revealing his fangs. A clear threat. I took a step back, giving myself some room to shift if I needed to.

“You really don’t want to pick a fight,” Maren threatened. “Just let us leave and you’ll save yourself a lot of trouble.”

The three vampires over by the bar stood up and walked toward us. I inhaled deeply and caught one of their scents—he absolutely reeked of death. It was all I could do not to gag.

They formed a circle around Maren and me. I made sure to stand tall, not wanting any of them to think for a second that they were intimidating me. I looked the big guy up and down and gave him a smirk.

“You know,” I offered casually. “it’s been a while since I’ve had the pleasure of killing a vampire.”

He laughed, and so did his buddies. Another clear intimidation tactic. But I refused to be moved. The tall vamp looked at his friends and addressed them instead of replying to me.

“We’ll deal with the dog later,” he told them. “For now, our quarrel is with the Fae who brought him here.”

And with that, he lunged at Maren.

**Episode 964**

Big Mac laughed right in my face, and I felt my hands ball up into fists.

“Why would I tell you of all people where the orb is?” she asked me, not even trying to veil the contempt in her voice.

“It was just a simple question,” I huffed, trying and failing to hide the hurt in my voice. “You could at least answer it.”

“It’s safe,” Big Mac offered with a sniff. “Safe from people like you.”

How was I supposed to take that? People like me? What the hell? Did she *want* me to blast her with my powers or something?

“Xavier and Colton thought they’d put it somewhere safe, and look how that turned out,” I pointed out.

“Well, given that I’m not a complete idiot, I imagine I’ll escape a similar fate,” Big Mac shot back smugly.

I resisted the urge to stomp my foot. I knew that Big Mac was only trying to rile me up to avoid a real conversation. But damn it if it wasn’t working.

“Xavier is not an idiot!” I replied indignantly. That was my mate she was talking about. I couldn’t just do nothing.

Mrs. Smith stepped between us, placing a hand on each of our shoulders.

“Ladies,” she said, using her most soothing voice. “Please. This could just be the orb stirring things up and making you argue.”

“Or it could be Big Mac being disrespectful,” I fired back.

Big Mac barked a humorless laugh. She was seething with anger, now—her face was turning red with fury.

“If anyone is being disrespectful,” she said, pointing at me, “it’s you. All you do is ask, ask, ask, as if magic costs nothing. As if you know anything about how it works. You—”

Big Mac cut herself off, turned on her heel, and stormed off. Like I wasn’t worth her words anymore. I felt the urge to run after her. To keep the fight going. To yell. To get to the bottom of all this. But Mrs. Smith’s worried gaze pinned me in place.

I felt guilty for fighting with her fiancée right in front of her. For yelling. The further away Big Mac got, the more the tension started to wane. It slipped away from me so fast, it made me a bit dizzy.

“What just happened?” I asked Mrs. Smith.

“It’s the orb,” she replied, brows knitting together in worry.

“Are you sure?” I asked skeptically. The Redwood pack was no stranger to infighting, especially when Big Mac was in the mix. Mrs. Smith loved her, but she was an argumentative person who was often quick to start conflicts.

“I know MacKenzie isn’t always… easy to deal with,” Mrs. Smith admitted. “But someone just tried to kill her. She almost *died.* And it may not look like it, but it rattled her more than she’d ever admit. So maybe it’s the orb *and* her state of mind, but I swear to you, this isn’t normal.”

I nodded, not sure how much I believed Mrs. Smith. Obviously, she knew Big Mac well. But she was also someone the witch had a soft spot for. Mrs. Smith probably didn’t know what it was like to be on the receiving end of her worst behavior.

But still, I hadn’t come here to talk about Big Mac’s attitude. I’d come here because I wanted a chance to “speak” with the orb again. To see if I could get a handle on what it was offering me and decide if it was worth it.

“I was just trying to make sure the orb was safe,” I explained with a shrug. “I didn’t want to argue.”

“MacKenzie has the orb hidden safely in our room, so there’s no reason to worry,” Mrs. Smith told me calmly. “I’m going to go find her and see if I can calm her down.”

And with that, Mrs. Smith left. I watched her go, still feeling unsettled. Xavier approached me and pressed a kiss to the top of my head.

“What was all that about?” he asked, sounding concerned.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said with a shrug. I didn’t see the point in telling Xavier about my interest in the orb. I knew him well enough to know that he’d try to stop me. In his mind, things with the curse were settled enough. But I didn’t agree.

“C’mon.” Xavier took my hand and started leading me outside. “Let’s go down to the lake.”

We walked out onto the porch, then down the steps and onto the lawn. I took in the fresh air and relaxed into Xavier’s touch. I felt so much better than I had a few minutes ago. I looked up at the night sky and willed myself to get some perspective.

Once we reached the water’s edge, Xavier stopped moving. He turned to look at me, his eyes full of concern.

“Everything okay?” he asked softly.

I wasn’t quite sure what he meant. I didn’t think I’d been acting all that strangely. I felt like I’d actually been pretty restrained in the face of Big Mac’s antagonism.

“I’m fine,” I answered with a shrug.

“You’re acting kinda weird, Cali,” Xavier said. “I thought maybe it was because of what we talked about. You know, birth control and babies.”

“Oh.” I nodded. “Well, if anyone’s being weird in that department, it’s you.”

I gave him a friendly nudge, so he knew I wasn’t trying to put him on the spot. Xavier chuckled, and I leaned against him. For a second, both of us just looked out at the peaceful lake. For a moment, things felt easy. I could just be.

“I did some more thinking about what we talked about,” he murmured. “About babies. About being a dad.”

Xavier’s words surprised me. I’d thought we were done talking about this stuff. Having kids seemed a long way off for me. But maybe with everything that was possibly going on with Colton and Maya, things were getting more real for Xavier.

Worry prickled at the back of my mind. I hoped Xavier wasn’t eager to play catch-up with his brother—especially considering twins ran in the Evers family. I was hoping to finish college *eventually*.

“You were?” I asked, my voice sounding squeakier than I’d meant it to. “I told you I’m not ready yet, though. Remember?”

Xavier leaned down and gave me a soft kiss. He cradled the back of my head in his hand, and I felt myself melt a little.

“That’s not what I meant,” he murmured against my lips. “I’m in no rush. I’m just a little worried.”

He straightened up but kept his gaze on me. I could see how hard this was for him to talk about, and I squeezed his hand in mine, trying to show him some support.

“What kind of father could I possibly be?” he asked, his voice sorrowful. “I was raised by a murderous psychopath who wanted to literally eat his children’s wolves…”

I reached up to stroke his cheek, wanting to soothe him. To show him I was there for him.

“But you turned out okay,” I reminded him. “More than okay, in my opinion. Despite every awful thing that Silas threw at you, you survived. You are so, so strong. Not many people could have come out of that in one piece. And besides, neither of us is perfect. If we have kids, you’ll make mistakes, and so will I—but I know you have a good heart. And in the end, isn’t that the most important thing?”

I thought of my own dad. He’d always been so involved in my life, and that made me lucky, because he was a wonderful person. But when the day came that Xavier held his own baby in his arms, he’d be just as good a dad. I knew it.

I pushed up on my tiptoes and gave him a gentle kiss on the lips.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “I’ll try to remember that.”

“Ahem.”

We both turned around to find Jay behind us, looking nervous.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “But some guys are fighting by the woodshed.”

“You think it’s because of the orb?” I asked, nervous.

“No.” Jay shook his head. “I think they’re just being dicks.”

Xavier sighed. “Either way, I’d better look into it. I’ll be back soon.”

He and Jay headed off together, and I watched them go, feeling proud of Xavier for being so responsible. Once I was alone, I looked around to see who else was out here. I noticed Big Mac and Mrs. Smith standing by a big fire.

If they were out here, that meant no one was in their room. Meaning I could pop in there and look for the orb.

I made my way back inside and silently moved through the party, smiling at anyone who caught my eye. I wondered what the hell had happened to Artemis. I hadn’t seen her in a while, and I still really wanted to apologize.

I knew Artemis was tough and everything, but I doubted she was used to the intense kind of partying werewolves got into, and she would never back down from a challenge. And even though we’d fought, I still felt protective of her. Worried, even. I felt like a big sister—which was weird, because Artemis was definitely older and more worldly.

I decided to look for the orb first and then find Artemis. I bounded up the stairs and paused by the hall window. I peeked out and made sure Big Mac and Mrs. Smith were still outside. But then I heard something behind me and whipped around.

I was surprised to see Ravi with his hand on Xavier’s bedroom doorknob. What the fuck?

“Ravi,” I called out, causing him to turn and look at me, eyes wide, totally caught. “What are you doing?”

**Episode 965**

ARTEMIS

My hand shot out as I tried to grab Rishika as she fell. I felt my fingertips brush against hers and tried my best to grasp at her, but she slipped right through my fingers. I watched helplessly as she plummeted toward the ground.

I heard myself scream.

Rishika was going to die, and I’d barely gotten to know her. Her eyes were wide with a terror that matched my own. I wondered if I would still be making eye contact with her when she died. I knew that since I hadn’t caught her, the least I could do was not look away.

But, as she fell, a determined look crossed her face. She spread her limbs wide and began to shift as she crashed through the branches, using each point of contact with the tree to turn herself.

I watched in awe as she landed on all four feet on the forest floor. Like a cat, only much, much bigger.

Wow.

Rishika threw back her head and howled, like she was declaring victory. I couldn’t help but laugh. The sight of her was just so wonderful, so unbelievable. She was okay. She hadn’t died. I was going to get the chance to get to know her.

I scrambled down the tree, scraping myself on more than a few branches because I was moving so fast. But I couldn’t bring myself to care. By the time my feet hit the ground, Rishika had shifted back to human.

I ran toward her, my arms wide open so I could embrace her. I was so excited she wasn’t hurt—so relieved this night hadn’t taken an awful, awful turn. It was only once my arms were around her that I realized she was naked.

That my hand was flat against her warm, smooth, well-muscled back.

I looked down at the scraps of her former outfit, lying on the ground around us, and suddenly felt deeply uncomfortable. I pulled back and sprang away from her, not sure what to say or do or if I’d just wildly overstepped.

Luckily Arlo, Norah, and Elise came running up, sparing us from being alone together for another second. The energy they brought with them was infectious. They were all bouncing up and down like a bunch of hyperactive kids.

“Dude!” Arlo cried. “That fucking ruled!”

“That was awesome!” Elise squealed, slapping Rishika on the back. I noticed right away that no one seemed perturbed by Rishika’s nakedness. So I decided to pretend I wasn’t, either.

But it was tough. Because I had to admit to myself that I found Rishika pretty damn mesmerizing. She was strong, brave, and absolutely beautiful.

“Okay,” Norah said, puffing out her chest. “Now I wanna take a crack at it. See if I can pull a Rishika.”

She threw a grin over her shoulder at us, proud of herself for naming the maneuver. I wanted to point out that it was far from a clever name, but that seemed childish, so I kept it to myself. I felt a desire to show off for Rishika as well, but I knew it was best to swallow that impulse. Drunken demonstrations of strength weren’t always flattering.

Norah hopped up, grabbing hold of a low branch, but Arlo pulled on her leg to stop her.

“I want to try,” he called out, trying to climb up Norah.

“Why don’t we all do it?” Elise suggested.

Rishika laughed, a gorgeous smile breaking out on her face.

“A triple shift jump!” she cheered.

“A triple Rishika,” Norah corrected with a broad grin as she and the others began to shimmy up the tree, all of them playfully insulting each other as they raced to the top.

Rishika and I watched them climb from the base of the tree. I turned to her, still unable to believe how composed she looked after what had just happened.

“What?” Rishika asked, clearly sensing me boring a hole into her with my gaze.

“You just…” I suddenly felt a bit lost for words, now that it was just the two of us. “You aren’t even a little bit shaken up? What if you hadn’t shifted in time?”

But Rishika just shrugged.

“It’s part of my training,” she answered calmly. “Sometimes, you have to shift in a flash. It takes a lot of concentration and focus. But once you learn it, it’s kind of like riding a bike. Or maybe a horse, in your case? You just never forget.”

“Well, I’m sorry,” I said, finding it hard to meet her eyes but forcing myself not to look away. “I should have been quicker. I should have been able to catch you. When you slipped through my fingers…”

“Don’t worry about it.” Rishika put a comforting hand on my shoulder, and I was struck by how warm she felt. “I might have taken you along with me if you’d managed to catch me. And that would have been disastrous.”

“Of course,” I noted, feeling a twinge of guilt in my chest that I just couldn’t shake.

“If you agree with me,” Rishika said, nudging me, “then what’s that look about?”

I swallowed against the lump forming in my throat. I didn’t know why I felt like this. I’d seen a lot of violence in my line of work—far worse than people falling out of trees and surviving. But all the same, my cheeks were heating up, and I felt like I couldn’t stand still.

“I made you fall,” I croaked, unable to keep the thought to myself any longer.

“What?” she asked, eyes wide with surprise. “Are you saying you pushed me?”

“No!” I answered too loudly. “I mean—you fell when I… when I tried to kiss you.”

“Oh,” Rishika replied, looking over my shoulder as she thought about it, nodding to herself. “I guess that is what happened, yeah.”

At this point, I was starting to feel slightly nauseous. My heart was hammering pretty hard, and my palms were slick with sweat. Had it been a mistake, trying to kiss her? I’d thought it was what we’d both wanted at the time, but maybe I’d been really, really wrong.

“Next time, maybe don’t kiss me when I’m hanging onto the top of a tree,” Rishika suggested with a coy smile.

Next time.

*Next time.*

She wanted there to be a next time. She didn’t think the kiss had been a mistake.

“Now…” Rishika’s eyes glinted in the moonlight, and goosebumps rose on my arms. “You lost. Which means you owe me a swim in the cold-ass lake.”

I barked a laugh. I’d completely forgotten about our bet. But I wasn’t one to back away from a challenge.

“If you can survive a fall from the top of that tree,” I said, starting to walk backward, keeping my eyes on her, “I think I can take a dip in the lake.”

Rishika followed me, and we walked together, shoulder to shoulder, our arms brushing every once in a while and sending tingles through my body.

“So are we jumping on three or after three?” I heard Arlo calling from far away. “Like, is it ‘one, two, three’ and we jump on three? Or is it ‘one, two, three, JUMP!’ you know?”

Rishika threw back her head and laughed as they squabbled over the merits of jumping on three or after three. I couldn’t help but laugh with her, feeling at ease. And for a second, I felt a real connection with her.

I had traveled from the Fae world to this one. I had left an entire life behind—my life working for the Kollector. I’d known plenty of people in my world. I’d met more creatures than I could count. I’d never been bored.

But I’d never really had a friend either. Maybe that was starting to change. Maybe the human world would be different.

I had a sister. A sister who I’d just had a stupid, petty fight with. The thought of us shouting at each other made me want to shrink in on myself in shame. How embarrassing.

Cali was having a really rough time right now. I needed to apologize as soon as I saw her. Things couldn’t stay like this between us. We’d already lost so much time together. I refused to lose even more over some dumb fight.

Once we reached the water’s edge, Rishika made a show of dipping her toes into the lake and giving an exaggerated shiver.

“Man, that’s pretty cold,” she teased. “You don’t really have to do this if you don’t want to.”

“A deal’s a deal,” I replied, kicking off my shoes and stepping into the water.

I hissed once I felt the shock of the cold water. Rishika hadn’t been kidding. It was like ice.

“Hey, what are you doing?” Rishika pulled me back to land, and I almost fell over I was so surprised.

“I’m going in, like I said,” I answered, confused. Had I done something wrong? It felt like I was always doing the wrong thing in this world. And I really didn’t want to make mistakes in front of Rishika.

“With all your clothes on?” Rishika asked. “No, there’s no point in ruining two sets of clothes tonight.”

And with that, she reached for the hem of my shirt and started to lift it.

**Episode 966**

Ravi didn’t answer me. He just kept looking at me, mouth agape. But I wasn’t planning on letting this go.

“Ravi,” I repeated. “What are you doing? That’s Xavier’s room.”

Ravi leaned against the door and seemed to slip against it a little, like he couldn’t get his footing. He squinted at me, like he couldn’t make out the shape of me, even though I was just a few feet away.

“Cali?” he asked, his words thick and slurry. “I thought that was you.”

He took a few steps toward me, stumbling across the short distance.

“Are you drunk?” I asked, feeling like it was the only reasonable explanation. I wouldn’t have blamed him if he was. It was as good a way as any to numb the loss of his girlfriend. I felt the twinge I always felt when I thought about Joss’s death. I’d never fully buried the hatchet with her, and that was something I’d always have to live with. She was so important to this pack, and we’d all be hurting over her absence for a long time.

“M’not drunk.” Ravi shook his head. “I’m plastered.”

He wobbled a bit on his feet and threatened to nosedive into the carpet, so I darted forward and grabbed him by the shoulder to steady him. He must have been pretty upset about Joss to drink this much. Was he angry about losing her? Was the Orb getting to him as well? I hoped we’d be able to figure out how to control it before it started controlling us.

“Don’t worry.” I forced a laugh, still feeling awkward. “It happens. But why were you going into Xavier’s room?”

Ravi tilted his head quizzically as he looked down at me. “Huh?” he said. “No. I was going into *my* room.”

“Your room is down there,” I reminded him, pointing down the hall.

“It is?” Ravi asked, eyebrows raising. “Man, this house is too big. I got lost the other night just trying to get a snack.” He gave me a crooked grin. “Felt like I should have used GPS.”

“Well, I’ll be your GPS tonight,” I offered, steering him down the hall toward his room. “You should probably lie down. I think you’re gonna be in for one hell of a hangover in the morning. I’ll talk to Mrs. Smith and see if she can whip you up some kind of remedy. Based on what I’ve seen tonight, you won’t be the only one who needs it.”

Ravi was huge, and helping him down the hall felt like competing terribly in a three-legged race. I managed to get the door to his room open with my free hand and kicked it wide open as gently as I could.

Ravi lurched forward at the sight of his bed and stumbled toward it. For a second, I was terrified he was going to break everything. After all, he looked like a giraffe on roller skates at this point. But luckily, he just fell face-first onto his own bed.

“Thanks Cali,” he mumbled into his bedspread.

“No problem,” I answered, hitting the light and closing the door gently.

Alone in the hall, I sighed. I didn’t know Ravi well at all, but clearly Joss’s death was taking a real toll on him. I stood outside his door for a moment, thinking. If Ravi was angry with Xavier or Greyson—if he somehow blamed them for Joss’s death—then how did he feel about me?

I made my way over to Big Mac’s door and paused outside to listen. I could hear voices and laughter coming from the yard—the party was clearly still going strong. Was that someone singing along to Drake?

For a second, I wished I could join them. That I could let loose and not have to worry about all the complicated magical shit happening around me. But something told me to stay where I was.

I opened the door slowly, not wanting it to creak and alert everyone to my presence. I peeked into the seemingly empty room before taking a step inside. Mrs. Smith had told me that the orb would be here, so all I had to do was find it.

I started to close the door behind me but paused halfway through. Would it be better to keep it open? If I closed it, how would I be able to explain what I was doing inside? If I left it open, I could say that I’d thought I heard someone or something—that I’d gone inside to investigate. But if I left it open, someone could also see me snooping around. And I couldn’t risk that.

I shut the door as quietly as I could, listening for the soft click of the latch. Hopefully it wouldn’t be audible to the wolves over the noise of the party. Werewolf super hearing make it really hard to be sneaky.

Inside and alone, I looked around the room. If I were a witch, where would *I* hide the orb? I peeked under the bed. Nothing. Of course, that would’ve been too obvious. I opened the closet; also nothing. Probably because *that* would’ve been too obvious as well.

I sighed in frustration, wondering if I should just give up.

But then I heard it.

The voice that had spoken to me during the battle at Silas’s house. The orb’s voice. It was murmuring something I couldn’t quite hear. I spun around, expecting to see it behind me. But I didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. Just Big Mac’s gross-smelling incense.

Maybe if I talked to it, it would talk back. Or was that too cartoony? Still, I didn’t have many other options, so I cleared my throat and spoke as softly as I could.

“Orb?” I tried, feeling very, very dumb. “This is Caliana speaking.”

I paused, waiting for a response. I could feel the blood rushing to my cheeks. This was dumb. I was talking to a magic ball.

“Umm, orb?” I tried again. “Where are you?”

I waited for my answer, and with every millisecond of silence I felt more and more embarrassed.

“*Geography is a state of mind, Cali*,” the orb’s voice answered. I sighed with relief. Talking to the orb *had* been a good idea, even if it was talking back in riddles.

I looked around, feeling its presence like a hum in the air. Almost like static electricity. It was the same power I’d felt when I’d held it before.

“*You can have everything you want*,” the voice crooned as I got closer and closer to its source. “*I can help you*.”

“Oh, um, thank you… orb,” I answered lamely, not knowing how one was meant to address a magical object with a disembodied voice that was promising you help.

But then I heard other voices coming from the yard.

“His mom had to drive us everywhere!” Sage cried. “It was the worst date of my life!”

“How old was he?” Zainab asked, clearly trying to be charitable.

“Nineteen at least!” Sage replied, laughing. “Way too old!”

The girls laughed hysterically.

Then I heard Xavier’s voice cut across the yard.

“Seriously, cut it out,” Xavier barked. “We don’t fight our own. Especially not right now.”

“We just had a major win,” Jay added, and I realized they had to be talking to those guys he’d found fighting. “We don’t need one of you accidentally breaking the other’s neck in some bullshit wrestling match.”

How was I hearing this all so clearly? It was like I was right next to them.

I realized this was what it had to be like for all of them, all the time. To be a werewolf. To hear everything around you. To feel strong, powerful, and tuned in to your environment. To feel at one with it.

“*I can do that for you*,” the orb promised.

I took another step toward the voice, toward the power that I couldn’t resist, even though I knew I should. But I didn’t want to. I wanted to hold the orb in my hands again. To feel its power spread through me. To feel strong.

To feel like a protector, instead of the one being protected.

But where was it?

Just as I asked myself that, there was a burst of light and a wisp appeared, hovering in the corner of the room. I grinned at the sight of it. Wisps were special. They were only for people like me.

I walked toward it, approaching the corner of the room. I wondered what it was trying to lead me toward. But after a couple of steps, there was no more moving forward. It was just the floor and the wall.

But all of my instincts were telling me that it was here. That this was where the power was most intense, that this was where the orb had to be hidden.

But how did I get to it?

“*Take me, Caliana*,” the voice entreated. “*I’m yours*.”

**Episode 967**

XAVIER

As I stood there with Jay, I wondered if throwing this barbecue had been a bad idea. Maybe it was the Orb, maybe it was the booze, maybe it was the releasing of tension after all the time we’d spent being anxious about facing Silas, but whatever the fuck it was, it had me feeling like a camp counselor for a bunch of rowdy preteens.

Jay had one of the guys by the neck while I’d pinned another down with my foot on his chest. Both of them were thrashing, yelling, and clearly desperate to get back to tearing into each other.

Obviously, I knew settling disputes was part of being Alpha, and I knew I was good at it. But still, two guys were still wrestling in the corner, and I didn’t know how to take care of them if I couldn’t even get the guy under me to lie still.

“Enough!” I shouted, using the most Alpha-like voice I could summon. The wolf underneath me finally froze, tensing with worry.

The wrestling pair looked over at me, dazed. Both of them had swollen black eyes in the making that would probably heal before they bruised all the way.

“If you can’t stop beating each other up,” I called to all of them—even the guys on the edges of the fight who looked ready to start shit, “I’ll pull the plug on this whole thing. No more booze, no more food. It’ll be a fucking slumber party.”

Around me, everyone moaned and groaned, looking at me reproachfully. Like I was their fucking grade school teacher threatening to cancel recess. I didn’t love how it felt. It was a weighty responsibility I still needed to get used to. I guess I’d just thought it would feel easier. That it would feel like my purpose.

“Come on.” I rolled my eyes at all the moping faces. “You can still have fun. I’m just asking you to stop pummeling each other to do it.”

A few of them cracked smiles, and Jay and I watched as everyone headed back to the firepit. It looked like they were in decent spirits. But the tightness in my chest, the worry and anxiety for what else the night might hold, didn’t go away.

“Man, I hope this is the orb,” Jay piped up. “Because there’s no way I’m doing this every time we get together.”

“Might just be tension between the packs,” I offered. “Agreeing that we all wanted Silas dead isn’t really enough to turn us into one big happy family. Just look at me and my brothers.”

Jay snorted. “Fair enough,” he said with a nod. “Speaking of that…” Jay shot me an apologetic look. “It might be good if you get the Alpha thing sorted out sooner rather than later. I’m not trying to be a dick, but it’s no coincidence that this is happening while Greyson’s gone and we don’t have an official leader.”

“You’re right,” I admitted. “We need to get a more permanent structure in place. But… is it awful that I’m still kind of glad he’s gone, in spite of everything? It means I don’t have to worry about him and Cali. And it’s nice to be able to relax about something.”

“Of course.” Jay nodded. “It’s really complicated, and I don’t envy you three. You have a lot to figure out, and no roadmap for how to do it. At least Lola and I have that spell, and even with that, I’m still freaking out 24/7 about keeping her safe, keeping her from shifting, all of it. But at least I know where she and I stand. That we’re mates.”

“I know Cali and I are mates, too,” I told Jay. But he didn’t say anything in response. He just smiled at me and took a sip of his beer. So he was sympathetic about my struggle, but he didn’t believe me?

“I’m gonna go look for Lola,” he offered before taking off. I watched his back as he made his way through the barbecue. I loved the dude, but I didn’t like how that had just played out.

Before I could stew on it for too long, I saw Violet approaching me. Her shoulders were hunched, her body curled in on itself. I could tell immediately that she was upset. She’d been upset a lot, lately.

“Hey V.” I gave her a big smile. “How are you doing?”

“Um.” She looked up at me hesitantly. It was clear that she was having trouble with whatever she wanted to tell me. “Charlie left me.”

“What?” I asked, so loudly and angrily it made her jump. “When?”

Guilt and sadness flooded me instantly. How could Charlie have left Violet? She didn’t deserve any more heartache. Had I been too hard on the guy? I’d been trying to be big brotherly to her—now that Lilac was gone, it felt like the least I could do. I’d been trying to look out for her. But in doing so, had I ruined her new chance at happiness?

“I didn’t want to say anything,” she admitted, her voice soft. “I was worried he might have been the one who stabbed Big Mac.”

“Why would you think that?” I asked, surprised. I hadn’t gotten any bad vibes from Charlie—I’d only had a few short interactions with the guy. But he didn’t strike me as a murderer. Was Violet hiding something about his true nature?

“It’s complicated,” she admitted, words spilling out of her mouth. “Charlie thought he killed someone back in Minnesota—he didn’t. But it really scared him, and I thought that maybe he was worried he’d lost control and done this. I don’t know, maybe I was making excuses because I didn’t want to believe he just didn’t want to be with me.”

She choked out a sob and I put a hand on her back to soothe her.

“I don’t think he’d do that,” I told her. “He doesn’t even know Big Mac—he didn’t have a reason to hurt her. Have you talked to him since he left?”

“He finally took one of my calls,” she answered with a sniff. “He told me he was okay, but then the call dropped. But I could hear in his voice that something was wrong. And he wouldn’t tell me where he was.”

Her lower lip trembled as her eyes filled with tears. I could tell she was barely hanging on. I pulled her close and wrapped my arms around her. Without thinking, I rocked her from side to side. Violet had been my family for so long. I hated seeing her hurt—especially when Charlie had seemed like such a great fresh start for her.

Maybe he still could be. The bond between mates was strong. But life as a werewolf could be complicated—especially if you were new to it.

“It’s okay,” I murmured into Violet’s hair. “I’ll look into this first thing in the morning, okay? Why don’t you get something to eat and try your best not to worry too much? You deserve to be able to breathe for a minute, after everything that’s happened.”

“Thanks.” She looked up and gave me a watery smile. “But I’m not hungry. I think I’ll just turn in.”

I gave her one last squeeze and watched her walk back into the house. I felt so, so awful for her. The poor girl couldn’t catch a break. First her brother had been killed, and now her mate had run off under mysterious circumstances. She deserved better.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mace coming my way. He had a smug smile on his face that I longed to knock right off. But I restrained myself. That wouldn’t exactly have been good aspiring-Alpha behavior.

Mace jabbed his thumb over his shoulder, toward the party full of drunk, rowdy wolves.

“What a fucking mess, right?” he asked, following my gaze to look at Violet and then back to me. “Far be it from me to tell you how to do your own thing but… you might want to spend less time babysitting and more time leading.”

I bristled at the “friendly advice”, but honestly, it was all I had access to right now. So I figured I might as well use it.

“Do you have to deal with crap like this all the time?” I asked, curious.

“Nah.” He shook his head. “If the Alpha is strong and takes control, the others’ll line up. Look, I know how bad you want to be Alpha—”

“How do you know that?” I asked, guarded.

“I hear things,” Mace answered with a laugh. “Like the fact that you’ve challenged Greyson. Again. Just one thing—don’t call a Lupo Finale. Nobody wants to go through all that again. I know Ravi’s throwing his hat in, too, and there will be others who want to have their shot. But after everything we just went through with Silas, no one wants another bloodbath.”

I nodded, surprised by how rational Mace was sounding.

“I’ll do whatever it takes to be Alpha,” I told him. “Talk to me. I’m all ears.”

**Episode 968**

GREYSON

Without thinking, I jumped between Maren and the vampire.

I told myself it wasn’t because I was worried about her. I told myself that I wasn’t getting into this fight just to “save” her. I knew she was powerful enough to handle herself, anyway, so I was doing this for my own benefit—I wanted to hand that vampire his ass.

Besides, did I look like a guy who would step away from a challenge? *Fuck* *that*.

I shoved the vampire backward mid-lunge, and he fell back like the bag of blood that he was. “How about you pick on someone your own size, you gigantic leech?” I growled.

The vampire hissed, ready to attack again when I crashed into him. We landed on the floor with a thud, breaking two chairs and a table in the process. The vamp clawed at my arms, but I didn’t give a shit about that. As we punched and kicked and fought, it was the fangs that I had to be most careful of. If he bit me, I would be weakened and vulnerable.

I used my forearm to pin the snarling vamp’s throat on the floor before grabbing a stray scarf that was hanging from one of the broken chairs. I shoved it into his mouth when he opened it, but before I could tie it around, he spat the piece of cloth onto the floor. The scent of blood and death coming from this creature was nauseating.

“Stay the hell away from him!” I heard Maren scream from behind me. In my peripheral vision, I saw her face off against the three other vampires, who were closing in. She moved her hands, making them crash into each other like pinballs.

It was kind of badass.

The other customers seemed to agree—they erupted into cheers, placing bets and choosing sides. Just as someone bet a huge amount on me—and I started to feel pretty cocky—the vamp managed a deep scratch across my ribs. It really fucking hurt, but I punched him in the chest and grabbed one of the chair’s legs. Snapping it in half, I aimed for his chest, but he ducked and jumped at me. My back hit the floor a moment later, and the bloodsucker straddled my chest.

I wouldn’t need a stick to kill this leech if I were shifted—I’d just use my massive jaws to rip his head off. But I didn’t want to turn into a wolf and incite everyone else in the bar to turn against me. People in here had issues with werewolves. After all, the fang-banger who was trying to fucking strangle me had called me a dog, and nobody had seemed to mind.

Roaring, I grabbed his wrists and squeezed hard enough that I heard his bones crack. He whined in pain, which gave me the opportunity to shove him off me. Jumping to my feet, I slammed him against the wall. He snapped and yelped, pinned against the solid surface.

I had him trapped now.

The ruckus behind me worsened, so I looked over my shoulder, just in time to see Maren use some Fae magic to send a volley of glasses and bottles toward the other vampires. The damage was instant. Shards of glass were catapulted in every direction, slicing skin and sending blood splattering everywhere. The crowd ducked to avoid getting hit, and I had to admit—I was impressed by her precision, and I wondered what her magic was. She’d never said, and I hadn’t stuck around after finding out she was Fae to find out.

“Your little Fae friend is gonna taste delicious when I drain her!” the vamp hissed from under my grip, and my attention returned to the sick son of a bitch. I grabbed him by the shoulders, driving him straight into the bar before grabbing a stool and smashing it over his head.

He fell to his knees, barely keeping himself straight. Holding his wounded head, he groaned, cursing under his breath. When he tried to stand, he tripped, too disoriented. My hit had landed hard. This was my opportunity.

I snapped off a leg from the broken stool. With the piece of wood in one hand, I grabbed the vamp around the throat with the other. “Good riddance, leech,” I growled, raising the stick to stake him—

But then a hand grabbed my forearm.

“That’s *enough*,” ordered a commanding, hard voice.

I whipped around to face a familiar-looking man with icy eyes. I knew him, but I couldn’t place him. Shaking myself free from his grip, I slammed the vampire into the bar. As the thing slumped to the floor, I turned to the icy-eyed man. “Who the hell are you?”

“Don’t you remember me, Greyson?” the man asked. He moved to take the stick from my hand, but I threw it away first. I could take these assholes without it, anyway.

“I asked you a question,” I snapped.

Raising an eyebrow, the man pointed to the vamp I had knocked out, and then to the three other vamps who were sprawled across the bar, speared with shards of glass from Maren’s attack. “I’m just someone who knows how to end fights. I think you and Maren have done enough.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “How do you know Maren?”

Just then, the bartender came over, nodding at the man. “Thank you so much for stopping the fight before the entire bar was destroyed, Hansel,” the bartender said.

But instead of giving the bartender a “you’re welcome”, the icy-eyed man flew into a rage. He grabbed the bartender by the throat, snarling. “I told you, the name is Hans. This isn’t some fucking fairy tale.”

*Hansel and Gretel* this definitely was not.

“I’m—I’m sorry!” the bartender choked out. Hans let the man go, and I still couldn’t shake the thought that I’d seen him before.

“Do I…” Before I could say “know you?”, I remembered where I’d seen Hans before. I recalled meeting him five years ago, when he’d implied that he wanted me to throw fights. It hadn’t ended well. Yet, here Hans was.

“I know you,” I snapped, shoving Hans back. “What the fuck do you want?”

Hans offered me a cold smile. “I got what I wanted.”

I hated riddles. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Hans pointed at the slumped vampire. “You handled Oskar as if you never left the ring.”

I glared at him. “I hope you remember that I *did* leave the ring, a long time ago.”

Hans kept smiling. What a creep. “How could I ever forget? You put me in a very awkward position back then… My friends lost a lot of money because of you.” He arched an eyebrow. “We wouldn't want that to happen again.”

Hans leveled me with a stare, and I felt like shifting and slicing him in half. I sensed a very dark energy coming off him, and I didn’t like it one bit.

“Greyson…” Maren walked up to me right then. It was a mistake. Hans’s cold eyes fell on her, greedy and dark. “I—”

I didn’t let her finish her sentence, just grabbed her by the arm and pulled her behind me. Yeah, I knew that she could defend herself, and no, I didn’t give a shit about her. But she had a kid, and she seemed like a good mom, and her kid needed her. That was what I told myself to explain the strong urge to keep her safe.

Hans wasn’t one to mess with when he was angry. She knew that.

“I have no idea what you’re saying,” I told Hans. “You’d better let us leave.”

Maren, still behind me, squeezed my hand. I couldn’t help but think how different she was from Cali. Cali would have charged head-first at Hans, appalled by the idea of me protecting her. But Maren seemed almost... comforted.

“You’ve always been free to leave, both of you,” Hans said, raising his hands in mock-surrender. “In fact, I think you should definitely get some rest before tomorrow night.”

I froze, confused. Moving closer, Hans whispered to me, “This time, make sure you lose.”

He smiled behind me, at Maren. His smile was chilling. “Tell your son…” He squinted. “Fenrir, isn’t it? Tell him we say hello.”

Maren’s brown skin shifted into a deep purple. Her worry and anger were obvious. My stomach was in knots.

Not the kid. I wouldn’t let them harm a kid. I was certain about that. Maren, though, was a different issue. I glanced at her as we headed outside. Suddenly, I was absolutely sure she was hiding things from me. She was secretive and slippery, always. Fucking *always*.

I turned to face her, my teeth clenched. She instantly knew that she was in trouble.

“Greyson,” she started. “Please listen—”

“You set this up, didn’t you?” I demanded with a growl.

**Episode 969**

I squinted, looking around. Had Big Mac used a spell to hide the orb? Its voice—soothing and a little creepy, but not creepy enough to deter me—started whispering again.

“*Close your eyes, Cali,*” it said. “*Close your eyes to see.*”

Not that I wanted to disagree with Mr. Orb over here, but how was I supposed to see with my eyes closed? How did that make sense?

“*Don’t worry, Cali,*”the orb continued, like it could hear my thoughts. “*Use all your senses to find me—they have been enhanced. Don’t rely on sight only, there is so much more.*”

I had been able to hear conversations from down in the yard earlier. The orb did make my senses come alive, so I decided to trust its instructions for now. I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath.

At first, there was nothing but darkness.

*Excuse me?* I thought. *This doesn’t feel any different?*

But then, gradually, all other sounds began to fade away. All that was left was my breathing, and the soothing voice of the orb, calling to me.

“*Yes, Cali… Just like that…*”

I felt myself unconsciously preen at the orb’s praise, which was a very weird reaction. But it wasn’t the only weird thing around here—of course not! There was a sudden flash of light.

*Wait…*

Could it be the wisp? It coalesced into a shadowy, round shape. Round like a sphere. Round like an orb.

*The* orb.

*That’s it!* I thought, excited. I moved to reach for it, but something held me back. I held myself back, actually. I was constantly telling the others that the orb was very powerful and that we should all be careful. Shouldn’t I heed my own advice?

“*Why are you reluctant, Cali?*” the orb asked, its tone smooth. “*Don’t you want my help?*”

Suddenly, my mind filled with memories of Xavier and Greyson. Xavier hugging me, kissing my forehead. Greyson folding me into his arms after saving me from the waterfall. Xavier’s head between my legs, looking up at me with a smirk. Greyson on top of me, driving into me, making me come. And then the black veins…

The black veins on both their chests.

The images and memories played on a loop in my head. I couldn’t clear my mind long enough to keep myself from touching the round shape. I reached out, trailing a finger over the orb’s smooth surface, and I felt something like a shock run through me. I was flooded by a wave of emotions, senses, sounds—as if my memories had suddenly become one giant ball of reality, crashing down on me.

I gasped, jerking back like I’d been electrocuted.

*No, this doesn’t feel right…* I thought, opening my eyes. Panting, I looked around. I had expected to see the orb, but I was staring at an empty corner. I scowled. Where had it gone?

I scanned the room, mumbling under my breath, “Hello? What the heck was that?”

“*That was just a glimpse of the power I can give you,*” the orb said, sounding extremely pleased with itself.

I narrowed my eyes. “But how do I know that you’re not trying to trick me?”

“*You are right to be cautious, Cali,*” the orb replied. “*My power isn’t meant for everyone. But you are special—you’re different from all the others, aren’t you?*”

The orb sounded like a creepy guy, trying to get you into bed—not that I had any experience with normal human guys. But still. Then again, I *was* different from the others. I was a half-Fae, half-human in a werewolf pack. So even though I felt wary of the orb, I couldn’t deny that its words had a big dose of truth to them.

“*Let me show you, Cali…*” The orb trailed off. “*Let me show you what I can do to help you, Xavier, and Greyson. And then you can decide if you should trust me.*”

I swallowed roughly. “Okay.”

“*Just close your eyes, and place your palm upon my surface.*”

Breathing deeply, I closed my eyes. The shadowy orb reappeared, and I reached out to it. The moment my fingertip came into contact with the orb, a spark of energy seemed to run through me. I leaned closer, but then a *THUD!* echoed through the room.

The door had burst open, slamming against the wall. “What are you doing in my room?” Big Mac demanded.

*Yikes! BUSTED!* I spun around to face her, stumbling backward. “Oh my god!” I exclaimed. “You scared the shit out of me!”

“Right,” Big Mac deadpanned. “How rude of me to scare you while you were snooping around in my room.”

“Exactly!” I nodded seriously. “You almost gave me a heart—”

“*Cali*,” Big Mac barked. “Answer my question. What the hell are you doing in my room?”

I blurted out the first thing that came to mind. “I’ve been waiting for you. To apologize. For what I said.”

Big Mac eyed me suspiciously. Was she going to buy it?

I decided to double-down. “I thought we could have a talk—you know, to smooth things over.”

Big Mac wrinkled her nose at me. “I don’t like talking about feelings. Just stay out of my way, and we’ll get along fine.”

I blinked. “Wow. And they say werewolves are emotionally constipated.”

“What was that?” Big Mac snapped.

“Nothing,” I said innocently. “Just agreeing with you—if that’s what you want, fine by me.” I was heading toward the door when Big Mac grabbed my arm.

“Were you looking for the orb, Cali?”

My heart was hammering. I was so nervous, but I fought to keep my cool. “Of course not. I know it’s best not to mess with it.”

Slowly, Big Mac let go of my arm. “I suggest you remember that.”

“Okay.”

Big Mac scoffed. “You’re agreeing with everything I’m saying. Are you sure you’re not running a fever?”

“I act weird when I want to apologize to someone,” I said, thinking quickly.

Big Mac rolled her eyes before pointing at the door. “Whatever. Just get out.”

“Good night!” I chirped—I really was acting so fucking suspicious, *oh my god*—and got out of the room as quickly as possible.

My mind was swimming as I walked down the hallway. I wasn’t sure if it was because I’d almost been caught by Big Mac, or if the orb was making me feel funny. Its soothing voice was playing on repeat in my head.

“*Let me show you what I can do to help you, Xavier, and Greyson, and then you can decide.*”

Had I touched the orb long enough for it to make a difference to my powers—before Big Mac had come in and scared me to death? The surge I’d felt, the sudden sharpening of my senses, had vanished. Now, I was just plain old Cali.

Trying to collect my wits, I headed to Xavier’s room.

I knew Xavier was against me helping to move the orb. And given what had just happened, maybe he was right. I had to talk to him about it. I knocked on his door before entering and found him looking out the window. He was leaning against the wall, a scowl on his face.

“Hey,” I said. “What’s wrong?”

He seemed startled to see me. “Nothing,” he replied.

I doubted it was nothing. “Xavier, come on. Talk to me.”

Before I could close the distance between us, he reached out and pulled me close. His arms wrapped around my waist, and I flushed at his closeness. There was a surge of energy inside me, instant and demanding.

When I looked up at him, I could only see his lips.

My throat went dry.

“I was just thinking about something Mace said,” Xavier murmured. Then he arched an eyebrow, his gaze roving across my face. His grasp around my waist tightened. “I feel like you didn’t come to talk about Mace, though.”

Gripping the front of his shirt, I shook my head, biting my lip. Suddenly, I couldn’t talk. Why wasn’t I talking? That was my specialty! I felt so flushed… aching. I did want Xavier, but this felt a little out of the blue. Not that he was complaining.

“What did you come here to do, Cali?” he murmured against my mouth, tucking my hair behind my ear. “What does my girl want?” He brushed his nose over mine. At the same time, he whispered in my ear, “Do you want a kiss?”

I nodded, dazed and flushed, almost whimpering. He licked my upper lip before moving forward, licking into my mouth. I whined when he broke the kiss.

“What do you want, baby?” he asked.

I felt something inside me snap at his words. The orb’s voice echoed in my head: “*Let me show you...*”

Trembling, I looked up at Xavier. “Let me show you,” I whispered.

And then I ripped his shirt off.

**Episode 970**

XAVIER

Cali ripped my shirt off so aggressively that the buttons flew everywhere. I couldn’t help but laugh; this kind of wildness wasn’t her usual style, but I could get behind it. I could get into anything, as long as it was with her. And who cared about the shirt? I had a closet full of them.

“I want you,” she whispered against my neck, biting there as her hands roved all over me. The neediness in her voice, in her touch, shot right through me. I took her mouth with mine, my hands moving to grab her ass and pull her flush against me. I was hard already, ready to pin her up against this wall—but then she looked down at my chest.

She gasped in shock.

“What?” I asked, brows furrowed. “What’s wrong?”

She swallowed thickly, her slender fingers tracing along the black veins. “They’re fading,” she whispered.

“What?”

Cali looked up at me, her eyes sparkling. “Look, Xavier!” She pointed at my chest. “The veins, they’re going away!”

I looked down at myself, realizing that she was right. “They do look faded…”

“Do they still hurt?” Cali’s expression was hopeful, excited.

I was surprised to realize that they weren’t hurting at all. “Actually, no. There’s no pain. Does this mean the curse is broken?” I asked her. My tone was vulnerable, wistful, and even though I felt awkward revealing this side of myself to anyone, I couldn’t help it.

Cali sniffled, caressing my face. “I have no idea, but I hope so.”

I wondered if Hypatia had been wrong. Maybe the curse had been redirected some other way. Maybe the curse truly was broken, and it had just needed a little time to fade away. I couldn’t be sure about any of that, though, and right now, I couldn’t focus on the curse anyway.

All I wanted to focus on was Cali.

I felt better than I had in a while—but maybe that was because of what Mace had told me. He’d explained that if I got the backing of everyone in the pack, I could basically create a mutiny and force Greyson out. My older brother had basically left the pack to me anyway, telling me to take the lead if anything happened to him during the fight, and also leaving and putting me in charge.

Greyson didn’t even seem to fucking *want* to be Alpha. He never did.

And even though he was a powerful, almost unbeatable fighter, he had never been there for the pack like an Alpha should. I knew I would take to the role better than him. I wanted it, and I *deserved* it. At this point, I was ready to just take what was mine. No matter how I got it.

Or maybe this entire thing had to do with my love for Cali.

Maybe, in my wolf’s eyes, taking the pack meant taking Cali away from Greyson, too. Instinct worked in mysterious ways. I wasn’t about to reject it. The pack had been mine from the beginning anyway, and Cali had been my girl first. Nobody else’s.

And right now, we were alone.

She’d come to me, all pink lips and wide eyes, rubbing herself all over me. A part of her had to know that this was her rightful place—in my room, in my territory, with me. With her hands against my skin, and her mouth brushing up against my own, and my claim inside her.

Cali had walked into this room because she knew the truth.

She knew she was—simply—mine.

*Mine*.

I grabbed her T-shirt and pulled it off. She gasped and squealed and laughed, and was about to wrap her arms around me when I reached for her bra.

“Wait!” She swatted my hand away, huffing. “I don’t care about the top, but I don’t want you to ruin another bra! Do you have any idea how expensive they are?”

I grinned, gripping the straps. “I’ll buy you as many as you want as long as I get to do this…” And then I ripped the bra off her. “Oops.”

She gaped, half-shocked, half-outraged, but she had no time to protest when I grabbed her by the back of the neck and dragged her in for a kiss. She melted against me, against my body, clinging onto me in surrender as my lips devoured hers. When I mouthed at her bare collarbones and chest, she moaned and whimpered against me, trembling. She seemed to love me taking charge. She *did* love me, so in the end I had to ask myself: why the fuck should I even be worried about *due destini*?

Why should it matter?

Cali has always wanted me, needed me, loved me—*first*.

I was her first.

I was her Alpha.

This was our fate.

“I love you so much,” I rasped against her mouth.

She nodded, repeating “I love you” with enough emotion to make me feel like a king. I picked her up, and she wrapped her legs around my waist, her arms around my neck. She kept nibbling up my neck as I moved us to my bed, dropping her onto it. She whimpered a little at the drop, reaching out to grab hold of me.

“No touching, gotta get you naked first,” I said, and she made a sound of protest. Smirking, I dragged her jeans and underwear down and off her legs and moved between them. She was naked now, flushed all over, spread before me. The sight always made me woozy, ravenous. I unzipped my pants and lowered my briefs, just to watch her bite her lip as she stared at me. I gripped her thighs, dragging her down until my hardness brushed up between her legs. She felt so warm, so good, I bit the inside of my cheek. She was so wet she shivered at the contact, gripping the sheets at her sides.

“Xavier…” She choked my name out, but I wanted more.

“Say ‘please’,” I murmured, my hands on the insides of her thighs, keeping her spread and open. Just for her to feel me rub and slide up against her, right where she needed me. It would be so easy to make her come like this, just from the pressure and friction. The way she was shaking for it was a fucking trip.

She huffed and moaned with frustration, then she glared at me, sitting up. “You’d better stop being teasing, asshole, before I—”

I pushed her back before she could grab me, leaning forward instead. I caged her entire body with mine. She gasped, instantly wrapping her arms around me, clearly loving the contact, arching her hips to meet mine.

“You want to come with me inside you, baby?” I whispered in her ear, biting her earlobe. “Is that what you want?”

When she offered that trembling *please* I was looking for, I slid inside her. She felt so amazing that I groaned. I ground in, deep and sharp. I made sure to hit that spot that made her whole body seize while reaching down to rub between her legs at the same time.

When I licked up her neck before sinking my teeth in, managing a too-hard thrust all at once, she pulsated around me. And then I let go. I fucked her hard, whispering how beautiful she was, how good she felt, how incredible this was, before falling over the edge right after her.

For a moment, I lay there, still inside her. She faced me. She caressed my cheeks. Sniffling, she said she loved me again and again, in between kisses.

It felt so amazing, my wolf was fucking howling.

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Afterward, we lay there. Her head was under my chin, her arms wrapped around me, and I thought that this was how things were supposed to be.

Sure, Cali and I had had a rough beginning when we’d first met—she’d been so nervous and I’d been so pissed at Colton for bringing her to me, not ready to move on after what had happened with Ava. But that was all in the past now. It hadn’t taken me long to realize that Cali belonged to me, anyway.

I looked at her gorgeous face, kissing her forehead. She snuggled closer, stroking my chest. “Your veins are nearly gone…” She trailed off, tracing the lines of them.

I smirked, tracing a finger over her hip. Over her tiger marks. “Glad those are still there.”

She smiled, kissing me.

It felt like everything was finally falling into place.

Maybe Cali hadn’t officially chosen me as her mate, but maybe she didn’t need to anymore. Greyson was gone, so maybe this was fate—maybe Cali didn’t have to choose because *mates* didn’t have to choose. It was just natural.

Me being the Alpha would be natural, too.

And if I did get the backing of the pack and became the Alpha, there would be only be one thing missing.

I leaned into my mate. “Cali?”

“Hmm?” She looked up at me, her eyes full of desire. Full of love and sweetness.

“Cali,” I started, holding my breath. “Will you be my Luna?”

**Episode 971**

ARTEMIS

I grabbed Rishika’s wrist as she went for the hem of my top.

She arched an eyebrow, smirking. “What? Too scared to get naked?”

The challenge and playfulness in her expression wasn’t fair at all. Her completely naked body was right there—*right there*—and it was so hard not to stare. She looked like a goddess, fit and powerful, her skin so smooth it just begged to be touched.

I fought not to look at her breasts. Or between her legs.

Even though I really, really wanted to look.

“I’m not afraid of anything,” I said, clearing my throat. “But I’m also aware that I’m at a party, where everyone can see me if they just look over.”

She tilted her head, laughing. “Aww, are you shy, then? A shy little Fae?”

I scoffed, rolling my eyes. “When have I ever acted *shy?*”

She shrugged one elegant shoulder. “Werewolves don’t care about nudity, you know. It’s not like they’re gonna be ogling us.”

*I* wanted to ogle her, though. I wanted to look at her all over. And then touch her all over. Ignoring the tightness in my throat, I huffily said, “Whatever. Help me with this?”

I raised my hands to make it easier for her to pull my shirt off, and she grinned.

As she pulled the clothing off me, the back of her hand brushed against my stomach. A current ran through me, making my belly quiver. Surely Rishika noticed, but I didn’t feel embarrassed. I felt exhilarated. Eager to have more of her attention. She folded the shirt and placed it on a dry rock, watching as I reached for my pants.

“You having trouble with those?” she asked innocently.

“You think you’re so smooth, huh?” I said.

“Yep.”

Snorting at her cheeky expression, I slid off the trousers that Cali called skinny jeans—they were very uncomfortable—and stepped out of them. I was left with my undergarments—boy shorts and a sports bra, Cali called them, and they were surprisingly *not* uncomfortable—and looked over my shoulder. I couldn’t see anyone.

I decided to keep the undergarments on anyway; this was enough nudity for me.

Now, if Rishika and I had been alone, that would’ve been a different story.

“Ready?” she asked, reaching out for my hand.

“Ready.” Our fingers intertwined, and I felt a tingle starting from the spot our skin touched. It traveled all over my body.

Rishika slowly led me into the water. “It’s freezing, brace yourself.”

I scoffed. “It’s fine, I’m not some—oh my gods, IT’S FREEZING!”

Rishika laughed. A memory burst inside my head at the sensation: a winter in the Fae world where I’d been hunting a fugitive miner for the Kollector. The nights had been so cold, but I hadn’t been able to light a fire, worried it’d reveal my whereabouts. When I’d finally captured the miner, I’d ultimately let him go, unable to ignore his pleas to let him return to his family. Since then, I’d always wondered if the cold had affected my judgment—the Kollector had never responded well to liars.

Was the cold water affecting my judgement now? Was the burning desire to kiss Rishika—a werewolf, a species all Fae children were told to avoid—due to the cold? Or was it something else? Something too good that made my blood run hot? Cali really was onto something here with these wolves.

“Incoming!” Rishika’s voice was followed by a torrent of water that shocked me out of my thoughts. It was so cold that I yelped, screeching like one of the massive toad kings we had in the Fae world.

“You did *not* just do that!” I shouted, wiping the water from my eyes.

Rishika laughed, splashing me again. Before the droplets could reach me, I raised my hands and sent a surge of power that soaked Rishika to the bone*. Hah!*

“Artemis!” She gasped, sputtering water. “That’s fucking *cheating!*”

I shrugged and smirked, much like she would. “I’m a Fae, so it’s not cheating. It's just what I do.”

She looked so offended that I burst out laughing.

“Cheater!” She sent more water in my direction, and I did the same, my heart pounding despite the iciness of the water. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt so carefree.

“Stop it, stop!” Rishika finally said, waving at me. I was still snickering, and she was too.

“Do you give up?” I asked, arching an eyebrow. “Have I won?”

She snorted, wading through the water to come to me. “You’re shivering, Artemis. I think we’d better call it.”

As much as I wanted to protest, I suddenly realized that my teeth were chattering. “An-and you’re not?”

She grinned, floating two feet away from me, the water just barely covering her breasts. “Werewolves run naturally hot.”

“I can’t believe you’re bragging right now!”

I instantly reached out to grab her, to figure out if she was telling the truth, and she was. She felt so warm that I wanted her to glue herself against me right this instant.

I probably said that last sentence out loud, because she chuckled heartily and wrapped her arms around me. “Let me see if I can warm you up…” she said, trailing off.

Her touch was absolute relief. I was instantly breathless, clutching onto her, sucking up her warmth like I couldn’t get enough. And I really couldn’t. I fought to control my shivering—this was so embarrassing.

“It’s not that big a deal,” I mumbled. Our noses were almost touching.

My shivers died down, but then a single one ran down my spine when Rishika stared at my mouth. “You shouldn’t stay in here much longer,” she whispered.

I swallowed roughly. I was acutely aware of her bare body flush against mine, her lithe arms around me, our legs intertwined, her chest brushing up against mine… I had underwear on, but she was completely naked, and the shape of her had rendered me speechless.

I wasn’t like this, usually.

Usually, I reached out and got what I wanted.

But feeling like this about a werewolf was new territory, and it felt like… It felt like I couldn’t resist. The feeling was a little scary, but I powered through.

I glanced between her dark, gorgeous eyes and her lips. And then I whispered, “Warm me up, then.”

Her hand moved from the small of my back to the side of my face. Her touch was tender but firm as she leaned forward. Her lips brushed over mine, and perfect warmth poured right into me. It was delicious.

I wanted more of it.

“That’s all you’ve got?” I challenged, digging my fingertips into her back to pull her closer. She laughed. The hand that had been resting on my cheek now moved to my nape, pulling my head backward slightly so my mouth could drop open.

When she kissed me this time, it was full-on, overwhelming for every single one of my senses. Her tongue moved against mine, and I spread my legs for her to close the rest of the distance left between us. My shivering was gone entirely now, replaced by a trembling that spread through me as we pressed our bodies together.

“Better?” she whispered in my ear.

Her bare thigh was between my legs. My hips rolled involuntarily, pressing up against her smooth, bare skin. I stifled a moan. “I think… I think I need you to keep going to make sure I’m warm enough.”

She chuckled in my ear, the sound making her body vibrate against mine. I cut her off with more kisses—I kissed her mouth, her neck, her collarbones. Her skin and scent were intoxicating. I couldn’t help but keep coming closer to her, needy for the hot pressure of her, but then she took my hand.

She placed it on her chest, between her breasts. She was so beyond gorgeous that it hurt. My whole body was on fire when she spoke in that raspy voice of hers. “I love kissing you.”

I did too. *Gods*, I wanted to kiss her all over.

I wanted to touch her all over.

“Hey! Where’s Rishika?” someone—Elise? Norah?—was calling for us. The voice echoed, and Rishika looked up, startled. She waved at someone and then eyed me, shaking her head.

“Maybe we should get you out of this ice box?”

I was suddenly aware that we were actually in public, and the water was still extremely cold. I still felt excited and dazed, though, even as we reached the shore together. I took hold of Rishika’s hand—if I couldn’t enjoy the feel of her lips right now, I could still enjoy the warmth of her touch.

As I went to pick up my clothes, I looked up toward the house, hoping that nobody had been watching. Of course, I would do this again in heartbeat, but I didn’t like the idea of them seeing me let my guard down. Weakness wasn’t something I was used to showing anyone.

“What are you thinking?” Rishika asked as I slowly pulled my shirt on.

*Does she really want to know the answer to that?* I stared at her. She was still naked, droplets of water all over her perfect body. My heart was still racing. I was wondering if it would be a mistake to invite her to my room when movement from the second floor of the house caught my eye. A window slid open. My eyes widened.

I pointed at the figure, turning to Rishika. “Wait, isn’t that Ravi? What is he doing?”

**Episode 972**

GREYSON

“This was a setup, wasn’t it?” I demanded, pointing at Maren. The accusation in my tone was obvious.

She sighed, rubbing her forehead. “Greyson…”

“What?” I snapped. “What can you possibly say to defend yourself? The fight at the bar—the vampires knew I was going to be there, knew that if they attacked you, I’d try to stop them. It was a fucking staged fight, Maren! Tell me I’m wrong.”

Maren pressed her lips together, looking down at the ground. Her silence made me even more certain. I was right.

“You betrayed me again,” I said. My tone was lower. Bitter. “You fucking betrayed me, and I fell for it! *Again!* How the fuck could I be such a jackass?” The question was rhetorical, but Maren replied. Finally.

“You’re not a jackass, Greyson,” she muttered. “It’s just…”

“What?” I growled. I couldn’t help it. Old wounds were opening up, and I was aching all over. “What could you possibly have to say for yourself? It was no coincidence that Hans happened to be there!”

“Greyson, please—”

“He was there to watch me.”

“Greyson, listen—”

“Was this some kind of test? Is that what—”

“I had no fucking choice!”

Maren’s scream was accompanied with a shove that silenced me. For a moment, we stood there, panting, staring at each other. Swallowing thickly, I scoffed. “Don’t play that card. There’s always a choice.”

The thought of Cali showed up in my head. How she was being forced to choose because of the *due destini*. But Maren had a *real* choice.

“Not this time,” she said, her voice sharp. “If I didn’t prove to them that you were still a formidable fighter, they never would have agreed to let you fight.”

I couldn’t fucking believe her. The nerve of this woman. “Bull*shit*! You used me! You could’ve just told me the truth, but hey, that’s not your usual MO, is it? You prefer fucking manipulation.”

Her jaw clenched. She kept her tone even, her gaze razor-focused on me. “If I’d told you that you were going to be jumped by a gang of vampires, would you still have come?”

“Of course not!” I snapped.

She walked up to me, her eyes alight as she faced me. Even then, she was so gorgeous it hurt to look at her. “That proves my point. If I misled you, it’s only because Fenrir is my *life*—I’d do anything to protect him. Don’t you understand that?”

I supposed to a point I did. I would do anything for Cali. For my brothers, even if they hated me.

And with her looking at me like that, I could only say, “Even if it means endangering me?” My voice had become pathetically small. “Don’t fucking bother replying,” I added. “I know the answer to that.”

Her eyes were watery. “Greyson, can you blame me? He’s my son. He comes before everything else. It’s just me and Fenrir against the world right now. I’d do anything for him, and that’s how it will be until we’re safe.”

Her words, her vulnerable expression, made me pause. I thought of Sabine—of how devastated my mother had been over being unable to save me from Silas. Then I realized how devastated Maren would feel if she didn’t manage to save Fenrir.

Maren was a lot of bad things, but I had realized that, at least, she was a good mother.

She was a good mother.

Shaking my head, I sighed. I’d made my decision, for now. “I’ll stick to our deal…”

She looked at me hopefully.

“But you need to tell me *everything* going forward. No more surprises. Do you understand?”

She nodded. “No more surprises.”

I peered into her eyes. My voice was gruff. “This is the last time I’m letting you fuck me over. Do not test me.”

She swallowed loudly. “Thank you, Greyson.”

I shook my head. “You’re lucky I like that kid.”

She wiped her eyes, chuckling. “You do?”

I cleared my throat. “I mean, he’s not horrible. For a child.”

Maren grinned up at me like I’d given her the greatest compliment in the world. “Thank you, Greyson.”

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When we got back to the apartment, I was shocked to see some random man playing with Fenrir in the living room. Not that I gave a shit, but I would tear his throat out if he made any sudden movements. I turned to Maren, whispering, “What happened to your friend? Who’s this guy?”

But before Maren could answer, Fenrir turned to the man. “Good job, Dad!”

And then I realized that this had to be Aiden. If I’d expected to see a resemblance between Fenrir and his father, I was doomed to disappointment. Fenrir had grey eyes; Aiden’s were dark violet, and right now they were fixed on me.

This was the man Maren had fucked after we’d broken up. The vague thought that I was much better-looking than this guy and could probably kill him easily entered my mind.

“Greyson,” Maren said, gesturing at the man. “This is Aiden.”

The man moved closer, and I was instantly hit by a scent. He *was* a werewolf. We shook hands, and I knew that he felt as wary as I did when we sized each other up.

“I’ve heard a lot about you,” Aiden said. “Used to be a fighter, right?”

I nodded, wondering how Aiden knew anything about me. Maybe Maren had told him?

“I made a lot of money when you were rising through the ranks,” Aiden added, and I figured where he’d known me from. “What happened to make you stop fighting?” he asked.

I glanced at Maren. “Just haven’t fought in a while.”

Aiden smiled. “I heard that you might be making a comeback.”

“Where did you hear that?” I asked.

“I’m a gambler.” He glanced between Maren and me. “I know what’s going on.”

Maren pressed her lips together. She looked tense. “Why are you here, Aiden?”

I didn’t like her anxious expression. Or his smug one.

“I can’t visit my son?” he asked, smiling.

“We talked about that,” Maren said. “You need to let me know before you drop by.”

Aiden nodded, eyebrows raised. “Right. I was just passing by, apologies.” He glanced at me. “Didn’t mean to spoil your plans for the night.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. The fuck was that supposed to mean? Why would he insinuate that there was something going on between Maren and me?

I watched as Aiden hugged Fenrir. “Gotta go now, little dude.”

“Okay, see you later!” Fenrir replied, hugging him back before going back to playing with his action figures. No whining, nothing.

This kid really was weird.

Maren left to escort Aiden to the door, leaving me and Fenrir alone in the living room.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi,” I said cautiously.

He looked at me up and down. “You look very dirty.”

Wow. Thanks for shattering my self-esteem, man.

“Do I?” I asked. Because I had no idea what to say.

“Yeah,” Fenrir said, frowning. “Also, there’s a lot of red stuff on you, like you’re—”

“Paint,” I blurted. I gestured at the blood on my clothes. “I was playing with paint.”

Fenrir didn’t seem to believe me. Damn kid. Were four-year-olds usually so observant and chatty?

“Does it hurt?” he asked me, still frowning.

“What?” I asked.

“Does the paint hurt?” he pressed.

I let out a chuckle, shaking my head. “No. I’m okay. Nothing hurts.”

He smiled. “Cool. You’re just dirty then.” He wrinkled his nose. “*Gross*.”

“Greyson, I need you in the kitchen,” Maren said after walking back into the room. “We’ll be right back, okay, sweetie?” she told Fenrir.

Fenrir nodded. Then he pointed at me. “He should take a bath.”

This child had just dragged me through the dirt over being dirty after a brawl.

Pressing her lips together—probably to smother laughter—Maren herded me into the kitchen. She started cleaning up my wounds with peroxide and said, “Sorry about Aiden. I had no idea he’d just drop over. I hate it when he ‘just happens to be passing by’.”

I eyed her. “How could you have gotten involved with a guy like him?”

Maren suddenly seemed defensive. “I wasn’t involved with Aiden. He was a hookup, and I got pregnant.”

Her hands were suddenly shaking. I held them in mine. “Sorry,” I muttered. “Didn’t mean to upset you.”

Maren shook her head. “After you left me, I was devastated. I didn’t know what to do. I know anyone would see Aiden as a mistake, but he gave me Fenrir. And I love Fenrir with all my heart.”

“Of course. I get that.” I cleared my throat. “I was devastated by your betrayal too, you know. Took me a long time to recover. Years.”

Maren stared at me. She finished cleaning the wound on my forehead and then moved closer to apply the bandage. She paused, looking down at me. “What would have happened between us if I hadn’t betrayed you, Greyson?”

**Episode 973**

CHARLIE

I sprinted through the woods. I had to be quick. I stopped every so often to find a tree and hide behind it. I had to make sure my parents didn’t see me. If they found out I was following them, they’d probably ground me. Or take away my Nintendo 3DS—they liked doing that, and it made me so mad. I was too old to be grounded, anyway. I was already eight years old! I would show them that I had grown up already. But then, wait…

I was no longer a child.

I looked down at myself. Gone were the skinny knees and tiny feet. I was a man, eighteen almost nineteen years old.

What the hell was going on?

I was suddenly back at Silas’s house. But I was alone. Why was I alone? Where was Violet?

“Violet!” I called, looking around, panicked. I couldn’t lose her. I couldn’t be without her. She was mine, my mate. What if someone hurt her? I’d never be able to forgive myself for not protecting her. I kept calling for her, but then I heard a branch crack behind me.

I turned around to see one of Silas’s Rogues.

Before I could do anything, it attacked me. I raised my clawed hand to strike, but suddenly, my hand was that of a child. I was eight years old again. I didn’t have claws, but I did have a knife. A real knife that I moved down in an arc to kill… Wait, it wasn’t a werewolf.

It was a *vampire.*

How did I know that? How could I instinctively categorize these creatures?

The vampire overpowered me, because I was small, so small. I was just a kid, and he was going to kill me.

“Mom! No, please!”

I was screaming, calling for my mom to help me, when a hand grabbed and pulled me back. I gasped, watching with wide eyes full of horror as my mother stabbed the vampire.

But the second the dagger sank into its skin, it stopped being a vampire.

It was…

*VIOLET?*

She slumped down, her eyes closing. My mom stared at me, her face blank.

“It had to be done,” she said quietly as I sobbed, clutching Violet to my chest.

She was bleeding out in my arms.

“*NO!*”

I woke up with a gasp and looked around the room, the sun peeking in through the blinds.

What the *hell* was that? A dream? Up until Violet’s death—my stomach clenched at the mere thought—it had felt so real. Like a memory. Was there such a thing as a ​dream-memory? A dreamory? A memream? Maybe it had been the dream of a memory. Or the memory of a dream. Maybe I had seen it because of the battle with Silas.

I’d purposely been trying not to think about the battle. The true horror of the fighting—of the blood and mayhem and death—was something that I kept trying to block out. But could I really do that? Could I forget?

I was hit by the flash of Violet’s death in the dream.

My stomach convulsed again.

I wanted to call her, to hear her voice, to make sure she was okay. But she would ask where I was and why I’d run away, and I wasn’t ready to talk to her about that. Not until I figured it out for myself.

A knock on the door scared the shit out of me.

“Come—” I coughed. “Come in.”

Ava poked her head in. “Hey. Do you want some coffee?”

The last thing I wanted right now was to chit-chat with Ava, but here I was. “Yeah, thanks. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Ava smiled before closing the door behind her.

She really was pretty, and she seemed nice enough, but I knew I had to be careful about her. Violet and the other wolves had been very obviously wary of her presence during the battle with Silas. But she’d been very good to me so far—especially by letting me stay here last night.

It was messed up to think that right now, she was all I had.

I glanced at my phone to check the time and realized that Violet had been texting me. I inhaled sharply, shaking my head at myself. This was bad. Violet deserved to be with someone who was always honest with her.

Violet deserved to know the truth.

But I didn’t know the truth, and I couldn’t lie to Violet.

I couldn’t even look her in the eye, not when I felt so sad, so weak. It was too hard for me to deal with, and I could blame the ups and downs of my new life all I wanted, but the reality was that I was acting like a coward.

And deep down, I hated myself for it.

I hated myself for it as much as I needed Violet.

I ignored my mate’s texts—I couldn’t even bring myself to read them. I didn’t trust that I wouldn’t just get choked up and run right back to Violet. And when she would ask for explanations, looking up at me with her beautiful eyes, and I’d stay silent all over again.

Violet deserved the truth.

But I wasn’t good enough, and I didn’t know enough, to give it to her.

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After washing my face and teeth and getting dressed, I found Ava in the sorry excuse for a break room. She was getting ready for her shift, organizing her purse.

“Your coffee,” she said, placing a cup in front of me. She really didn’t seem that bad. Violet had said that she was Xavier’s ex or something… I knew Xavier was with Cali now—while Cali was with Greyson. And Xavier. A threesome with two brothers that was also a curse, Violet had said. Was all that normal for werewolves?

Anyway.

The point was that Xavier was with Cali, but I wondered what had happened with him and Ava. Though I definitely wasn’t about to ask. I wasn’t here to become BFFs with Ava.

I really, really missed my friends from back home.

“Thanks,” I said, taking a sip of the coffee.

Ava leaned against the kitchen island. Her pale-blue eyes peered at me, a little too closely for my liking. “How are you? I heard…” She paused, wincing in what looked like sympathy. “It seemed like you were having a nightmare.”

I hadn’t even discussed my problems with my mate. There was no way I was going do it with Ava. “I’m fine,” I said.

It looked like she didn’t believe me—like, at all—so I noped straight out and changed the subject. “How are you?” I asked. “Thanks again for letting me stay the night.”

She shrugged. “No worries. Are you still planning on taking the bus to Portland so you can fly home?”

I fiddled with the cup in my hand. “I actually haven’t figured things out yet.”

“That’s okay,” Ava said with another shrug. “You can make yourself at home here. Though it’s not like there’s much of that yet—I only moved in yesterday, haven’t had a chance to do anything with it.” She paused. Then hopefully, she asked, “Maybe we can go shopping together after my shift?”

Ava seemed… lonely. Very lonely. And she was being so nice to me. There was a chance that she just wanted a friend, wasn’t there? Perhaps all the things I thought about her were wrong. The Redwoods hadn’t seemed to trust her, but I was no longer a Redwood…

*Was I?*

After Ava left for her shift, I weighed in my options. Should I stay here for a few days, or should I just go back home? My parents were super upset, and the longer I waited, the worse that would probably get.

*I should probably head back…*

But the thought of Violet still made me want to stick around, to be close to her. Even if I wasn’t actually going to see her.

The door opening pulled me out of my thoughts. It was Iñigo.

How the fuck was this my life, though?

Shaking my head at myself—and pretty much the entirety of this past month’s events—I opened the door.

“Good morning!” Iñigo said cheerfully.

I wanted to ask him if he was here to kill me. “Hey,” I said instead.

“I have another truck to unload. Are you interested?” he asked.

I stood there, still not sure if the murder threat was coming now or later, until Iñigo added, “I’ll make it a hundred and twenty-five.”

I sighed. I probably needed all the cash I could get.

I followed Iñigo down and out to the back, where a truck and the same creepy driver were waiting. “Good morning, kid.”

I just offered a nod and disappeared straight to the back of the truck—which was empty.

This really was a murder attempt, wasn’t it?

“Where are the boxes?” I asked the driver.

“They’re in the back of the trailer.” He gestured at me to climb inside.

Goody.

I climbed into the truck, still pretty sure I was about get murdered but still going along with this bullshit for some reason. Perhaps I had a death wish? As my eyes adjusted to the dim light, I realized the truck was empty as well. *Huh?* I turned back around—

Only to see the driver slam the door shut, locking me in.

**Episode 974**

When I woke up, Xavier was still asleep beside me.

*Will you be my Luna?* he’d asked.

I’d told him I couldn’t give him an answer. I’d told him I loved him, and I knew he could feel that, but before the *due destini* curse was settled, I couldn’t take a position like that. A very large part of me wanted to say *yes, a thousand times yes!* But I was worried.

*What else is new?* I wondered, sighing.

I was worried in general and always, because Lola had said that the mate mark could cause the curse to kill Greyson. Wouldn’t a Luna mark do the same thing? Moreover, based on what I remembered from when Joss had received her Luna mark, it was going to hurt like hell. Joss had been a powerful badass, but she’d still been under a lot of pain during the ceremony.

*Pretty misogynistic and barbaric to have the Luna go through so much trauma, if you ask me,* I grumbled internally.

Plus, nobody seemed to know what would really happen if a half-human, half-Fae went through with the ceremony. Maybe it could kill her. Her meaning *me*. It could kill me. I hadn’t survived all this bullshit just to die because of some werewolf pack ritual! Fuck that, honestly.

Also, wouldn't getting a Luna mark from Xavier be the same as choosing him? Wouldn’t that choice put Greyson at risk? And then what would I do about Mrs. Smith? But where even was Greyson? If Xavier was asking me to be his Luna, he must expect to officially be the Redwood Alpha someday. Which meant he was serious when he said Greyson may never come back. I didn’t know how I’d feel about that… if I never saw Greyson again… I didn’t want to think that it was a possibility. Was he okay out there, wherever he was, or was he spending all his time brooding? Had the black veins faded from his chest, too?

I checked Xavier’s chest. The veins were still faded. I hadn’t told him, but I was pretty sure that the fading had to be connected with the magic the orb had bestowed on me. It had said that it would show me proof of its power—and it had. *Right?* I could actually see the results of the orb’s work, and so could Xavier, which meant there was a big chance that the orb was telling the truth.

I had to find out, either way.

I had to figure out if the orb could make this stupid curse go away for good.

“Look at you, all skeptical.” Xavier’s gruff morning voice dragged me straight out of my thoughts. I hadn’t realized he was awake. My heart pounded as I stared at him.

“Hi,” I mumbled, nestling closer to him.

“What are you thinking?” he asked, poking my ribs.

“Nothing,” I said. “I’m not thinking about anything.”

He smirked, arching an eyebrow. “From the look on your face, I assumed you were thinking about how great last night was.”

I rolled my eyes, playfully smacking him. But then I kissed the place I’d smacked, because it was so nice to see Xavier like this—sweet and in a good mood. He snuggled closer to me, and a second later his hard-on was brushing up against my stomach. Alarmed, I thought, *Oh my god* *do I really do this to him?*

You’d have thought that Xavier Jr. would be tired by now, all out of juice, but apparently not. There he was, poking away, demanding attention. Werewolves never seemed to wear out—that had to be why they weren’t called “wearwolves”.

I snickered to myself because of my internal pun. I was a comedian and my talents were wasted in this supernatural wasteland. Meanwhile, Xavier took my snickering as a good sign, and suddenly his mouth was on my neck, and his hand was between my legs.

I instantly shivered, still sensitive from the night before and also a little turned on. Hanging out with werewolves had turned me into a horny monster. I had a lot of things to tend to, though, orb-related things, and nothing would get done if I hung around with Xavier and his mini-me all day!

“I have some things to do,” I said, firmly removing his hands from my body. “Hold that thought for later, though, okay?”

Xavier smirked, about to grab me again, but I was faster for once. I weaseled my way out of bed, and he groaned. His eyes were still full of mirth when he asked, “But shouldn’t we strike while the iron’s hot?”

I started to get dressed quickly, scoffing. “When *isn’t* the iron hot, Xavier? It’s constantly hot! And you’ve made me just like you, and now we’re out of control. I hope you’re happy, you werewolf menace!”

He grinned. “That’s true. It’s one of my greatest victories.”

“Debauching me is one of your greatest victories?” I asked dryly.

“Yes,” he said, looking very proud of himself.

I threw a pillow at his face, and he laughed. But then his happy expression faded. “I want you to think about being my Luna, okay?”

I finished up getting dressed and turned to stare at him. Despite all my reservations and life-and-death situations, I actually liked the sound of it. “If I did it, would I be…” I thought for a moment. “Caliluna of the Redwood Pack?!”

Xavier laughed again. He was glowing. I wished, so hard, for this good mood of his to continue. I fully intended to do my best to help it along by breaking this damn curse. I leaned forward, giving him one last kiss before stepping out of the room.

I made a beeline toward Big Mac’s room, down the hall.

I could already feel the orb’s pull.

It made my heart throb in an odd kind of way that I just couldn’t characterize, but I knew that the desire to speak to it again was gnawing at my insides. I cautiously approached the bedroom and saw that the door was open. This was my opportunity. Unable to resist, I barged in, and…

The room was empty.

*Well, that was anticlimactic*, I thought. *Maybe I should just grab the orb and run.*

Where would I go, though? I hadn’t thought that far. Also, if Big Mac came back, there was no way I’d be able to lie my way out of the situation again. I really wasn’t that great a liar in general. But maybe this was a risk I had to take.

For Xavier.

For Greyson.

For myself.

Breathing deeply, I hurried to that same corner, closing my eyes like I had last night.

Instantly, the soothing voice was back.

“*Hello, Cali…*”

Once again, I could see the shadowy orb where moments ago there had been nothing.

“Um, hi,” I whispered. “I’m back!”

The soothing voice chuckled. “*I can see that. Welcome back.*”

Okay, then. Enough small talk. I would be toast if Big Mac returned. I reached for the orb, but then it spoke up again.

“*Stop!*”it said. “*You asked for proof. Have the veins receded?*”

I paused. “They have. Does this mean the curse is gone?”

“*It’s not permanent, Cali,*” the orb said ruefully. That was a whole lot of emotion right there. Who would’ve thought that magical, potentially evil artifacts had so many feelings?

“Why isn’t it permanent?” I asked, frowning. “I want the curse gone—for good.”

“*Only special people can truly understand and use my power,*” the orb said.

It was trying to flatter me again, and it was full-on working.

“*You care about both Xavier and Greyson, Cali,*”it went on. “*But no one understands how you feel—how could they? Even your friends have called you selfish when you are the victim here.*”

I was hit by this, hard. *Oh my god!* I thought. *The orb understands*.

Ever since I’d been told about the *due destini*, I’d felt trapped, cursed, and now, finally someone understood how I felt. Finally.

“Thank you for saying that,” I whispered. My predicament had been acknowledged; my problems had not been labeled as “Cali being a selfish dick”, and I was so relieved. “But what happens now? How do we break the curse?”

“*I can help you gain the power you need to overcome everything, Cali,*” the voice said. It was suddenly a little less soothing and a lot more excited.

Like a predator scenting blood.

“*I can break the bonds that tie you down! Do we have a deal?*”it asked.

Below the orb’s voice and its pull, a warning bell started ringing inside me. I shouldn’t be agreeing to something like this on impulse, should I? I had heard so many horrible things about the orb. I had seen it do so many horrible things, and I knew the role it had played in the war with Silas.

Why was I even considering its offer?

Why was I in this room, so eager to talk to it?

Yes, I was desperate to break the curse, but everything the orb had said was so convenient, it was almost suspicious. Wrong. Or was I the one who was wrong here?

In the end, I just wasn’t sure.

“*What are you thinking, Cali?*” the orb asked patiently.

“I still don’t know if I can trust you…” I trailed off, crossing my arms over my chest. Over my heart.

And then I heard a loud voice just behind me. “Who are you talking to, weirdo?”

I gasped, whipping around to see Lola standing in the open doorway.

**Episode 975**

ARTEMIS

I was running through the forest, feeling fantastic—even after all the drinking I’d done last night. To me, alcohol was as easy to swallow and keep down as water. Thanks Fae world. I had to wonder why werewolves and humans made such a big fuss out of drinking. Dramatic to no end.

I couldn’t help but think back to when I’d spotted Ravi sneaking out the window the night before. I should probably tell Xavier about that, since he was the acting Alpha. Maybe Ravi was just weird, though—perhaps he enjoyed crawling out of windows. Who was I to judge him? I’d done a lot of questionable things in my life as well, and what he was doing wasn’t really my business. Then again, it couldn’t hurt to tell Xavier—if Rishika hadn’t already told him.

The thought of her made me smile. And go hot. I didn’t normally blush about anything—I’d had my fair share of all kinds of paramours in the past—but being with Rishika in the lake had been different. I couldn’t get over how she’d made me forget about the icy water, if only for a moment.

I also couldn’t stop thinking about her lips, how soft they were. Her arms around me. Her leg between my thighs. Her bare body, all over. I’d dreamed about us in bed together last night, and that time we’d both been naked. That’s where I wanted her: in my bed without prying eyes to watch us. No taboo about a Fae being with a werewolf…

Just her soft skin under my fingertips.

The thought made my spine tingle when I reached the lake.

The evening had been interesting, even before our little dip, when we’d been hanging out with Elise, Norah, and Arlo. It had almost been… fun.

I’d rarely, if ever, had any fun in the Fae world.

I didn’t have any friends back there, either.

Being among my (occasionally infuriating) sister and these werewolves, I felt like I had something new, something different. A group of friends.

And Rishika, who I couldn’t wait to kiss again. Last night we’d given each other a hug goodnight, and it hadn’t been enough. Not nearly.

I was approaching the house after my second lap around the lake when my stomach rumbled. I spotted a nearby bush—maybe there were berries or something on it. So far, though, Oregon had been completely useless in that regard. Too late in the season, apparently. There was also a serious lack of taverns. It was one of the few things I really missed from the Fae world. Sure, whiskey and that other elixir tequila were good, but nothing could beat the Fae world ale, and its forests filled with food.

Perhaps these werewolf heathens had some tasty treats hidden around, like the caches enchanted gophers liked to create, back in the Fae world. I noticed a spot on the ground that seemed like it had been disturbed recently, dropped to my knees, and got to work.

“Ahem.”

I glanced over my shoulder to see Rishika. She was, unfortunately, fully clothed. She was wearing leggings—comfortable trousers that made butts look impeccable—and a shirt of some sort that I had no proper definition for.

I preferred her naked, in all honesty.

“What are you doing?” she asked me. Why did she look so amused? I liked seeing her amused. But I still offered an annoyed huff. There was no need for her to know that I enjoyed seeing her happy. She would get cocky.

She was already pretty cocky.

“Isn’t it obvious?” I asked. “I’m foraging for breakfast, since there’s nothing left in that cold box in the house.”

Rishika burst out laughing.

I wondered if there was a way I could make her shift, just so her clothes would get ruined.

“Why don’t you just go to the grocery store?” she asked, still chuckling.

“What’s a grocery? Is it something you eat for breakfast?” I asked, climbing to my feet. Rishika just laughed again. She was probably laughing at me, I realized. But I didn’t mind—she really looked gorgeous when she smiled.

My chest did an odd twitchy thing when I looked at that smile.

“Come on,” she said, taking my hand. “Let’s take Xavier’s car—I’m sure he won’t mind.”

Despite being distracted by her touch, there was one word that brought things right back into focus for me. “A *car*? Can I drive?”

Rishika gave me a speculative look. “Do they have cars in the Fae world?”

I frowned. “They don’t. I wish they did.”

Rishika moved her arm over my shoulders. “I’ll teach you how to drive, don’t worry. Someone as smart as you should be able to pick it up pretty quickly.”

I squinted at her. “You think?”

But before Rishika could continue, Lola and Cali came out of the house, along with a mopey-looking Violet. We all ended up gathering around Xavier’s car. I had no idea why the others had joined us—all I knew was that I had my sights set on driving today.

“What are you guys doing?” Rishika asked them.

“We’re going to the mall,” Lola replied. She seemed less testy than usual.

“Mall?” I asked. “Weren’t we going to hunt for breakfast at the grocery thing?”

“Grocery store, and yes,” Rishika told Lola, who started getting testy again.

“We came here first!” she snapped.

Rishika rolled her eyes. “You’re lying and you know it. That routine doesn’t work with me.”

“Watch who you’re talking to, you—”

“Guys!” Cali exclaimed. “We should do both. We can have fun—a girls’ day!”

I turned to Rishika. “Excellent! Does that mean I still get to drive?”

At the same time, Cali and Lola said, “*No*!”

I made sure to offer Rishika my most sorrowful look. She squeezed my hand. “Artemis needs to learn how to drive, though. It’s a good opportunity.”

“We can’t let her drive!” Cali replied. What a treacherous sister.

“Yeah, she’d probably kill us all,” Lola added.

I glared at both of them. “Rishika and I got to the car first, so *I* get to drive the metal horse, okay? Take it or leave it!”

Rishika smiled at me. “Well said.”

I felt very tall, suddenly.

Violet sighed. “I don’t care. Let’s just go.”

“I guess if we’re all going, we check with Xavier first?” Cali asked Rishika. That sounded like a very bad idea, because if Xavier knew what I had planned, he’d shut it down right away.

“Xavier has other things to worry about. Orbs and attempted witch murders and imminent death at the hands of his beloved who has also bedded his brother,” I said.

Cali gasped.

“My point is, little sister,” I said loudly, before she could cut in, “let’s not bother him.”

We finally got in the car, the Xavier issue having been dropped after I’d thrown my sister under the bus. That was a new phrase I’d learned, and it was useful for situations like these. I sat behind the wheel, with Rishika in the passenger seat and Cali, Lola, and Violet in the back.

I was mesmerized by all the controls.

“What does this mean?” I asked Rishika, pointing to an arrow symbol.

“That’s your blinker,” Rishika said.

She was so beautiful when she explained things to me.

“This is a bad idea,” Cali, my still-treacherous sister, said from the back.

“A really bad idea,” Lola repeated.

Before I could take offense, Rishika immediately turned to them. “No back seat drivers!”

I had no idea what that meant, but it did shut them up. I also had no idea where to begin, but then Rishika patiently explained what she called “the basics”.

“Your steering wheel,” she said, gesturing. “Your gas pedal.” She pointed at the levers by my feet, naming each one. “And your brakes.”

“If I end up dead, I will kill you,” Lola told me seriously.

I waved her off, determined to shut out her and Cali’s grumbling. This was my chance to master this metal horse and impress my very kiss-worthy teacher. After all, I had mastered riding a horse, and I’d been the best rider in all the land. Probably.

Rishika showed me how to turn on what she called the “ignition” with a key, and then she showed me how to move a stick to get going, and how to press the foot levers of gas and break.

“You’re doing great,” she told me. I gained a lot more confidence and figured it all out easily. When we reached the end of the driveway and headed out onto the main road, I kept the drive smooth, following her directions.

“How about we go a little faster now?” Rishika asked me.

“We don’t want her to go any faster!” Lola exclaimed from the back seat.

“Can you chill? Artemis is crushing it,” Rishika said.

I wasn’t sure what that meant, but I was loving this. “I know how to make it faster! Look!” I said, holding the wheel and pressing the foot levers.

“Great job,” Rishika said again. “The road ahead is a little tricky, okay? Lots of sharp curves and a steep decline, best to take it slow.”

“Got it,” I said, and stepped on the lever on the left side.

Rishika frowned when the car didn’t slow. “Use the brake.”

I tapped it again and again. “Nothing is happening.”

Cali and Lola started shouting at me from the back as the car accelerated downhill. The road seemed to be getting faster and faster all around me, and I felt sick, trying to keep the car in the lane.

“Use the break!” Rishika pressed, and I stomped the lever to the floor. *Nothing*.

The girls started screaming from the back seat. As I lost control of the shaking metal horse, I shouted, “It’s not working!”

**Episode 976**

GREYSON

When I woke up that morning, I was mad.

I was horny.

I was also in Portland. The apartment was exactly as I’d left it. It was strange to be back here, and I was still smarting from that vampire’s scratches from last night. But they were proof that my adventures with Maren, of all people, had really happened. I had met Fenrir, her son and probably the least annoying kid in existence. I had also met Fenrir’s father, who was among the top ten most annoying werewolves I’d ever talked to.

And then there were the three witches I’d talked to before the brawl. The sister witches who might have the ability to change destinies.

*Our* destiny.

Still lying in bed, I closed my eyes and conjured up Cali—*my* Cali. The mate bond with her still felt strong as ever, but I couldn’t forget the moment when I’d blacked out, by the pool in the forest. Did it mean that, even though Cali hadn’t officially made her choice, Xavier was the one closer to her heart? Would it mean that I would be forever doomed to feel this way, connected to her but unable to have her? During our last phone call, Sabine had said that the curse no longer had a deadline, but what did that entail?

In theory, I could get answers to those questions if I just, you know, called Cali back. But there was a part of me that was scared to hear her answers. And if all the *due destini* bullshit wasn’t enough, Maren had asked me a pretty fucked up question last night.

*What would have happened between us if I hadn’t betrayed you, Greyson?* I hadn’t given her an answer, because I didn’t have one. I had no idea what would’ve happened if Maren hadn’t betrayed me. We’d been amazing together. I could still remember the sizzling chemistry—in the bedroom and outside of it. Maybe that would have faded after a while, though. Or maybe we’d still be together. Maybe I would be certain that Fenrir was mine.

It was a lot of maybes.

Too many.

I lay there for a moment, staring up the ceiling. I picked up my phone, itching to call Cali. I wanted to hear her voice, to feel her touch… Groaning, I shook my head, dropping the phone. If I called her, what would I say? The only right time to call her would be when I had a solution to the fucking mess that was the *due destini*.

I needed Cali to be free to choose me, with nothing hanging over her head.

Swallowing thickly, I headed to the bathroom. I’d showered the night before, but after a brawl with a vampire, no amount of water could make me feel clean enough. I turned it on and moved under the stream, resting my hands on the tiles. The hot water washed over my chest, over the faint black veins. They seemed to be fading, and yet all I could think about was the curse and Cali.

How much I missed her.

How much I loved her.

How much I wished she was here with me, under the stream, looking at me over her shoulder. I could picture it perfectly: Cali, her hair wet, her body gleaming with water, arching her back for me as she said, “I want you, Greyson. I love you.”

I’d get on my knees for her, first.

I’d eat her out, just to feel on my tongue how wet I made her. And then I would bend her over, let her hold onto the tile for dear life as I moved behind her, sliding in and out, rotating my hips just to feel her tighten and gasp. I could imagine her whimpering before me, reaching back to pull at my hair, to kiss me. I would mouth at her neck, moving my hand from her throat to her chest and down between her legs, to rub and feel her shake as I pounded in and out of her. I would keep going, just like that, just to feel her come all around me.

I kept the fantasy alive in my head, on repeat, until…

“*Fuck*!” I groaned, punching the tile with one hand, cracking it. I worked my cock with the other, and I was done and gone a moment later, spilling in the stream. The water washed everything off, and I stood there, panting, the image of her still throbbing in my head. An orgasm was always an orgasm, but without Cali here in the flesh—

I felt incomplete.

Still mad but a little less horny, I finished washing up and then got out of the shower. My phone was blinking with a text from Maren.

*Meet me at noon.*

I considered texting her back to tell her to forget the whole thing. Hans was going to be making money off me. Aiden was a gambler, which meant that he was probably going to be making money from my fight as well. What kind of fucking job was that, anyway? What kind of man would do something so parasitic?

I reminded myself that no matter how much I didn’t like Aiden, he was still Fenrir’s dad. And the kid had seemed to like him—he’d displayed no fear with him around. I couldn’t shake the feeling that Aiden was bad news, though—just from the way he’d looked at Maren, from the way he’d looked at the kid.

He was no Silas, but I doubted he was a good, solid dad. Maren should’ve cut him off from the very beginning, but now, I doubted he would just walk away. He had to have a thing for her, still. What a douchebag.

Shaking my head to clear it, I texted Maren back, asking where to meet. She replied instantly. I was about to reply with the dry “k” that drove all women mad when my phone rang. It was Mrs. Smith. Sabine.

Mom.

Why was she calling? Was the pack okay? Was Cali? Bracing myself, I picked up. Before I could speak, though, Sabine was already up in arms. “Why haven’t you been answering my calls, Greyson? Have you lost your charger? Are you in a submarine and have no signal? What’s your excuse?”

Completely obliterated by the Mom Attack, I was stunned for a moment. Then I snapped out of it. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I—I’ve been tied up.”

There was a pause. I was cringing so hard I could die. Then, in a much softer tone, Sabine said, “I shouldn’t have yelled at you. But I was worried sick.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. Again. The guilt trip was strong. Did moms have some sort of superpower when it came to shit like this?

“Is everything okay? How’s Big Mac?” I asked.

She told me everything. It was good news, mostly. I didn’t like that someone had hung a raven to threaten her, but it was a step down from being stabbed.

“I’m glad she’s fine,” I said. “I know she means a lot to you. Do you know who did it? Is Xavier looking into it?”

“He is. He’s taken over the role completely.”

That was good to hear, even if she didn’t sound entirely convinced. No matter our differences, I’d known I could trust him to lead.

“What about Cali?” I asked. “Is she okay?”

Sabine paused. “How are the veins on your chest?”

I frowned. “They got really bad a few days ago, but they haven’t hurt me in the last twenty-four hours. I was actually just thinking that they may be fading…” I looked under my shirt, down my chest.

The veins were faded, almost gone.

The idea that this meant that Cali had chosen Xavier invaded my head.

I dropped onto the bed. My throat was dry, constricted, but I had to know. “Has Cali chosen Xavier?” I asked Sabine, point-blank.

If she had, I would have nobody to blame but myself. Would I be cursed to live the rest of my life heartbroken? Because I knew that I would always love Cali. There was no way out of it.

“Cali can’t pick either of you,” Sabine said. “I told you that the curse had changed, right?”

“Right,” I said. “That there’s no deadline, but if she picks—”

“If she picks one, then the other will die,” she said.

I choked, shooting up the bed. “*What?* What are you talking about?”

“Just what I said: if Cali chooses either you or Xavier, then the other will die.”

I fought to wrap my head around this. There was no deadline, but this was similarly fucked up.

“During your other phone call, you said that Cali had Big Mac do a spell,” I breathed, overwhelmed. “But you never explained to me…”

“I was upset about MacKenzie’s stabbing, Greyson. And then we hung up. And since then, I’ve been calling you to explain, but this is the first time you’ve picked up.”

“How did it happen?”

“The spell that Cali had MacKenzie do changed the curse’s intention,” she replied quietly. “This was the interpretation. The mate she chooses will live, and the other will die.”

I fell silent, fighting to process. Then the doorbell went off. I scowled. Who could it be? Maren?

“I’ll let you think, okay?” Mom said.

Walking toward the video monitor to see who it was, I muttered, “Okay. I’ll keep in touch.”

We hung up. My stomach was in knots, my head pounding.

The doorbell rang again, and when I checked the screen, I was shocked.

It wasn’t Maren.

It was the three witch sisters from the bar.

**Episode 977**

The car careened onto the shoulder, scraping the passenger’s door against the rocky hill. My eyes were so wide they had probably taken over my face. Lola, Violet, and I were basically jumping up and down in the back seat while my sister had literally no idea what she was doing.

*I KNEW I SHOULDN’T HAVE LET ARTEMIS DRIVE!* I screamed on the inside.

Meanwhile, Lola was screaming on the outside, “I told you this would happen, Rishika! SHE’S GONNA KILL US!”

Violet wasn’t even speaking; she was clutching at her chest, aghast and shocked, poor thing, and Rishika—

She was calmly explaining to Artemis what she had to do. The woman was a monster of composure. “You have to use the emergency brake,” she said.

“I have no idea what that means!” Artemis screamed. My heart raced even faster when I realized that this was the first time, ever, that I had seen her afraid.

“Artemis,” I said, reaching out to the front. “It’s gonna be okay! Rishika will fix this!”

Rishika did, indeed, pull up on the emergency brake. *Surely this fucking nightmare will end now!*

But nothing happened.

“Cali!” Artemis screeched. “IT’S NOT WORKING!”

Now all five of us, even calm Rishika and sad Violet, were fucking screaming as the car careened down the mountain road, ramming into the railing. It pivoted us over to the other side of the road and headed us down toward the cliff. The entire time, with adrenaline making me feel dizzy and sick, all I could think of was: *OH MY GOD, WE SURVIVED SILAS, BUT A CAR IS ABOUT TO KILL US!*

“We’re going to go over!” Violet wailed, and a second later Lola screamed as well, but her scream shifted in a second to a…

Roar.

*LOLA HAD SHIFTED, HOLY SHIT!*

“Lola, NO!” I shouted, holding onto her fur. “STOP MOVING! STOP SHIFTING! SHIFT BACK!”

Lola just snarled and growled at Artemis in the front, still irrationally blaming her. My sister, my usually always badass sister, was freaking the fuck out. “What am I supposed to do?” she asked Rishika, helpless.

“Take your foot off of the gas pedal!” Rishika exclaimed.

“I already did that, but the car won’t stop!” Artemis yelled.

“THERE’S A WEREWOLF IN THE BACK SEAT!” I told nobody in particular while Lola tried to eat Artemis. And if all that wasn’t enough, I saw that up ahead there was a van full of a family coming toward us, honking like crazy.

Artemis honked back at them and said, “Hey, this button is the only one that works! Does it stop anything?”

And then I realized something. “We’re on the wrong side of the road!”

Rishika, our savior, leaned over and jerked the wheel just in time to avoid the family’s truck, but we were not done here! The car fishtailed as we all screamed. It headed straight for the rail… and HOLY SHIT the CLIFF! IT WAS BACK.

*OH MY GOD! Am I really going to be killed by something as boring as a CAR? NOT ON MY WATCH!* I thought, furious.

Lola howled and tried to snap at Artemis again. I jumped, screaming at Violet, “Help me hold her back! The seat belt isn’t designed to restrain a werewolf in wolf form!”

“Are we going to die?” Violet sobbed.

“No way that’s gonna happen!” I said.

I had my Fae powers, and I was going to use them. Somehow. I didn’t really know fully how yet. But I’d come up with something.

“Use your power to push us back against the road!” I yelled at Artemis as I rolled my window down.

I tried to do the same, but it was so fucking hard to concentrate as the rail got closer and closer to us, and the car swerved out of control. I had a flash of Greyson and Xavier—them smiling, laughing, looking at me lovingly, and then a thought hit me. What would happen if we couldn’t stop the car?

What would happen if I died?

What would happen to Xavier? To Greyson? Did the curse account for my death at all?

Suddenly, I was more determined than ever to save myself and my friends. I focused all my Fae energy on stopping our fall off the cliff, glaring at the upcoming void, and to my amazement…

The car came to a screeching halt, its nose pressed into the rail.

There was a large gorge just beyond it.

“We’re okay,” I said, panting and shaking. “We’re gonna be—”

Lola howled, rudely interrupting me as she crashed through her window.

“LOLA!” I shouted after her.

“I’m sorry,” Violet said, crying. “I couldn’t hold her back any longer!”

“Forget that,” Artemis declared. “We’re alive!”

Taking deep breaths, Rishika slowly let go of the steering wheel. For a second, there was no sound in the car other than our frantic breaths and Violet’s sniffling. I squeezed her hand, hoping to comfort her. I was so elated that we were okay. Kinda.

Where the fuck was Lola?

“What the hell just happened?” Rishika asked Artemis gruffly.

“I didn’t do anything; it just happened,” Artemis said defensively. “And we didn’t crash… So all things considered, I’d say I did okay.”

I felt like cackling. Madly. “I really need to get to Lola,” I muttered, trying to open the door. It wouldn’t budge.

“Take it easy, Cali,” Rishika told me, “Lola’s right over there.”

I looked over, and sure enough, Lola was standing by the side of the road, naked but unharmed and also crying a little.

*How the fuck is a car freaking us all out more than an actual battle?* I wondered.

“Here you go,” Violet said, taking off the sweatshirt that was tied around her waist and passing it through the window to Lola.

“Thanks,” Lola said, covering up.

“Are you okay?” I asked her.

She nodded, still shaking. Violet crawled out of the window to go sit with Lola on the ground. The two hugged, soothing each other. Rishika forced her door open at the same time, her power as formidable as ever.

“I need to find out what the hell went wrong.” She shot a look at Lola. “Nobody blame Artemis. It’s obvious that what happened back there had nothing to do with bad driving.”

I could have sworn that Artemis preened at Rishika’s words. “So my driving was good?” Artemis asked.

Nobody answered.

Rishika popped the hood and went out to look at the engine. I slid across the back seat to climb out of the window, just like Violet had, but my leg got caught. *DAMMIT!*

“Ah!” I yelped as I crashed to the ground like a sack of potatoes. Great.

“It’s okay,” Artemis was saying. She’d hopped out from the driver’s side and offered me a helping hand to stand, and I realized that my own hand was still shaking. “You’re fine, you’re going to be okay,” Artemis said softly. “You were really smart to figure out how to use your powers to stop the car.”

I was still shaking, and Artemis was being nice to me, so I couldn’t help myself. I grabbed her into a hug. It felt so good, so safe, to have this moment with her.

“I’m so sorry,” I sniffled. “I feel so bad that we’ve been fighting.”

Artemis kept hugging me, laughing in that nervous way of hers. “No, *I’m* sorry. I really don’t even remember what we’ve been fighting about.”

It didn’t matter. The important thing was that we hadn’t gotten hurt, and we’d worked together. It was shocking to me how deeply I experienced this, how connected I felt to Artemis in that moment. Was this what it was like to have a sister? Even if you wanted to smack her sometimes?

“I don’t know what I would have done if anything had happened to you,” I said quietly. “My annoying, lovely older sister.”

Artemis chuckled, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. “I went through a lot of stuff in the Fae world, working for the Kollector, but I don’t think… I don’t think I’ve ever been as scared as I was just now, thinking something could happen to you.”

I was stunned. “Really? But you’re not scared of anything!”

“I guess I am,” she muttered, sniffling. “I’m scared of losing you after finding you at last.”

Now, I was full-on crying. Artemis was tearing up too, and I whispered, “Oh my god! Imagine how mad Mom would be if we died in a car crash.”

Artemis choked. “So mad. And Tom? He wouldn’t believe it. Would probably expect us to come back as ghosts.”

I was laughing and sniffling. I hugged her again. She did the same, but then our perfect emotional storm was interrupted by Rishika clearing her throat. “Uh, girls?”

“Yes?” Artemis stared at her.

She poked her head from under the hood and held up a frayed cable. “I’m no expert, but the brake lines have been cut. I think someone’s trying to kill us.”

**Episode 978**

GREYSON

I glared at the video monitor. “What the hell are you doing here?” I said, though I knew the witches couldn’t hear me.

I hadn’t made any arrangements to meet with those weird witch sisters, so I had no idea why the three of them were now standing outside my building. I narrowed my eyes as a chilling thought occurred to me: if Maren had told them to come here—if she had set something up without telling me—that would be the last straw. That would be one more thing she’d chosen not to tell me—and the last chance I’d ever give her.

The angry sound of the buzzer came again, and I could see the witches muttering to each other, but I turned away from the monitor. “Fuck ‘em,” I muttered and turned to my coffee maker.

But if I’d hoped ignoring them would make them give up and go away, I’d seriously underestimated them. The buzzing of my doorbell just grew louder and more insistent until I finally gave up.

“Go away,” I snapped into the intercom.

One of them—I think it was Chloe—looked up at the camera. “We need to talk.”

I scowled at her pixelated face. “How the hell did you find me?”

Chloe exchanged a pitying glance with her sisters, then looked back up at the camera. “Uh, we’re witches.”

I blew out a frustrated breath. I *really* didn’t like witches. They were just so… weird. It was bad enough my mother was marrying one—though I was glad she was happy—but I preferred not to deal with them at all if I could help it.

“We came because we got cut off the other night,” another sister said. Lauren, I think this one was called. She elbowed past her sister to aim her pointed face up at the camera, too. “We thought you wanted to cure the curse.”

This gave me pause. I wanted Cali back—of course—and I wanted this cruel, complicated curse to end, so this offer was more than tempting. But… they were *witches*, and I knew I couldn’t trust them. I ran my hand through my hair, thinking hard. Then, before my better judgement could prevail, I buzzed them up. I supposed it couldn’t hurt to listen.

When I opened the door, they were standing shoulder to shoulder, their identical dark eyes staring at me. Weird.

Posie’s eyes opened wide and she lifted her nose into the air, sniffing. “Is that coffee?”

“Maybe,” I grumbled as the witches pushed past me into the apartment.

“I like mine dark with just a splash of cream,” Posie announced.

“Lady Grey tea for me, black,” Lauren said, dropping her bag onto my leather couch and looking around the loft with interest.

“And I’d just like a glass of water. Bottled, if you have it. But nothing domestic.” Chloe smiled. “Coffee upsets my stomach.”

I bristled. “I didn’t invite you over here, and there’s not going to be a tea party, ladies.” I took a deep breath, trying to control my temper. Being around three witches made me feel edgy enough as it was, without also being made to feel like a servant in my own house. But I needed to stay calm. “Why don’t you have a seat?” I said, gesturing to the long kitchen table and trying not to sound too aggressive.

The sisters sat, arranging themselves at one end, then looked at me expectantly. With their matching dark hair, dark eyes, and pale skin, it was almost like looking at the same person, three times over.

“You have five minutes,” I said. “What do you want?”  
 So much for not sounding aggressive.

Chloe smiled. “We want to discuss your case.”

“My *case?*” I asked incredulously. I looked between the three sisters, who were all eyeing me coolly. Was this normal for Portland witches? Because this felt less like a supernatural experience and more like a meeting with a trio of lawyers.

Posie spread her fingers on the table in front of her. “Maren has told us quite a bit about your case, Greyson—as part of our research, of course—but we have a few questions that we’d like you to answer.”

I frowned. I wasn’t thrilled with the idea of Maren discussing me with these witches for any reason at all. “What do you want to know?” I asked warily.

Chloe’s eyes were intent on mine. “This Caliana—”

I stiffened. “What about her?”

“Tell us about her.”

“Why do you want to know?” I hadn’t been expecting this, and my voice was angry and defensive.

Lauren looked at me for a moment, then closed her eyes with a sigh, as though my idiocy was too much to bear. “Because Caliana’s the source of the curse, Greyson. We need to know about her in order to break it.”

“And please,” Posie said, leaning forward, “don’t hold anything back.”

I scrubbed a hand over my eyes. I hadn’t been expecting this first thing in the morning. With a sigh, I got up. If I was going to do this, I was going to need coffee, so I pulled out three mugs and a bottle of water for Chloe.

“Cali’s stubborn, for starters,” I said. “She’s the most stubborn person I’ve ever met. Once she gets an idea in her damn head, that’s it—it’s over. She loves her friends like family, and she’d do anything for them. Even if it means risking her own neck.” I shook my head, remembering all the times she’d *literally* risked her own neck.

“When did you know how you felt about her?” Posie asked, accepting the cup of coffee I handed her.

I blew out a breath and leaned against the counter, holding my own cup. “The moment I met her, probably. I don’t know if I knew it, exactly, but I knew there was *something*.”

All three witches nodded, and Lauren dunked her teabag meditatively.

“She’s beautiful, and that was part of it,” I said, wrapping my hands around my warm coffee cup. “She’s got this dark hair and this perfect, porcelain skin. It’s so soft and smooth, like touching silk. And her eyes when she smiles…” I paused, waiting for the ache in my chest to subside. “She’s strong, and she’s brave, too. She’s not afraid to be afraid, you know? She just is who she is, and I…” I looked down into the swirling depths of my coffee. What the *hell* was I doing in Portland? Why was I not with her? Or why was she not *here*, with me?

“Okay, we get it,” Posie said, and when I looked up, she was rolling her eyes. “You’re in love. Gross. Tell us about your brother, Xavier.”

I ground my teeth. “Do you really need to know, or are you just trying to antagonize me?”  
 Lauren raised her eyebrows. “We’re trying to help, but if you don’t want our help…” She dropped her teabag and gestured to her sisters, and they started to rise from the table.

“Okay, okay, hang on.” I sat down at the table. “Xavier and I—we have our differences. We haven’t always gotten along. He’s more rash, more hot-headed than I am, but when push comes to shove, Xavier does what needs to be done. Even if he does bitch about it the whole time.”

“I think we get the picture,” Chloe said. “You love your brother and you hate your brother. Classic. Any questions for us?”

I stared around at the three of them. “Yeah, I have a million questions. But first, I’d like one straight answer—can you actually break this curse? And if you can, what would that mean? Spell it out for me.”

Posie clasped her hands together in a mocking gesture. “Ah, so romantic.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I’m waiting.”

“If we do this spell,” Chloe started, matter-of-factly, “it means that no matter who Caliana chooses, the other will not die.”

“How…” I looked between the three of them. “How do you know about that?”

Chloe smirked. “How do you think, Greyson?”

Witches. Right.

“Well anyway,” Posie interjected. “You *might* die, but it won’t be because of the curse.”

“Right.” Lauren nodded. “You could die in a car accident. Or a vampire might kill Xavier. The world is a very uncertain place.”

“What are you talking about?!” I asked, enraged. Why did they insist on speaking in riddles?

Lauren sighed. “The point is, we can’t guarantee what will happen to any of you—that kind of thing isn’t in our wheelhouse—just that if something *does* happen to you, it won’t be because of the curse.” She shrugged. “That’s all. Anything else?”

I glanced between the sisters. There was something strange going on—something they weren’t telling me, or would only reveal if I asked the right question. “Is there anything else I should know?” I asked cautiously.

“Well,” Lauren said slowly. “If we do this, there’s only one small, tiny detail…”

There it was. There was always another shoe to drop when it came to witches and magic.

“What is it?” I asked.

Lauren glanced at her sisters, then at me. “You’ll never be able to see Caliana again.”

**Episode 979**

VIOLET

The tow truck driver’s name was Duff, which I knew because he had a name tag patch sewn onto his grease-stained coveralls. He was about a hundred years old, his face so lined and wrinkled and sagging that his thick, coke-bottle glasses were nearly enfolded by his papery skin. He was thin and clutched the steering wheel tightly, leaning so far forward I was starting to wonder if those glasses were really doing their job.

Worst of all, he kept turning around to talk to us, huddled in the little jump seats behind the cab of the truck.

“You girls all right back there?” he asked, twisting around to look at us.

As one, Lola, Cali, Artemis, Rishika, and I all nodded.

“We’ll get to the service station soon enough,” Duff wheezed in his dry, reedy voice.

“Great,” Rishika said, her own voice sharp with tension.

We were all feeling it, probably—the fear and edginess that had come with our close call in Xavier’s car. I was too scared to do much of anything, so I just closed my eyes for the rest of the ride, and when Duff finally pulled the tow truck into the service station, I sighed with relief.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” Lola muttered, kicking the door open. She stepped out, adjusting her new “shirtdress”. It was actually just one of Xavier’s long-sleeved shirts that we’d scavenged from the trunk of his car, but it was “long enough to cover the gumbo pot”, as Lola had put it. And she’d wrapped my sweatshirt around her waist to secure it. On anyone else it would have looked insane, but Lola pulled it off.

“How long?” Rishika asked Duff, tipping her head toward Xavier’s mangled car.

Duff adjusted his thick glasses and peered at the car. He whistled softly and shook his head. “A couple of days, at least. Fancy car like this, we’re probably going to have to order a few parts.”

“Great,” Cali muttered. “Xavier’s going to love this.” She sighed. “Feels like we’ve had a lot of car casualties lately.”

Rishika shrugged easily. “That’s what insurance is for.” She looked around. “Who’s hungry?”

“I am,” I said, realizing it for the first time.

“What’s around?” Rishika asked, turning back to Duff.

He tipped his chin toward the garage. “Got a vending machine in there. Sandwiches and such, but the guy hasn’t been in to refill it for a few weeks.”

“Oh god,” Cali murmured, going pale.

“There’s a diner down the road, too,” Duff added off-handedly.

“I think we’ll head down there,” Rishika said. “Thanks.”

We started walking down the lonely highway toward the distant “DINER” sign. Cali pulled her phone out of her pocket and looked at the screen.

“Hey, I’m getting a signal here. Maybe I should call Xavier, have someone pick us up.”

“How about after we eat?” Artemis suggested. “We’re almost there, and near-death experiences always make me hungry.”

I smiled up at her. Even after the accident, I was feeling better. Just being around Cali and the others was making Charlie’s strange absence a little easier to take. Not that I didn’t still miss him—my first emotion when the car had started to careen out of control had been sadness. Not sadness that I was going to die—it wasn’t the first time I’d stared death in the face—but sadness that I wouldn’t see Charlie again. That I wouldn’t get to hold his hand, or hug him, or kiss him again. The last time we’d spoken had been so strange and tense, and we’d left things so unresolved. And it had made me sad to think that that was how things were going to stay, forever.

We were drawing closer to the diner, and everyone must have been hungry, because they were walking faster. Artemis and Rishika were walking side by side, arguing playfully.

“If the brake lines hadn’t been cut, we wouldn’t even be having this conversation,” Artemis was saying, shaking her head. “You’d be telling me what a great driver I am.”

“I’m not saying you’re not.” Rishika laughed. “I’m just saying that you still have some stuff to learn. Though the way you saved the car from going over the edge was pretty badass, I’m not going to lie.”

Artemis waved an airy hand. “That was nothing. Have you ever been on a runaway horse charging toward a cliff? *That’s* scary.”

“Are you kidding me?” Rishika goggled at her. “How fast can a horse run? Thirty miles an hour? We were going eighty!”

“Okay, nothing you just said to me makes any sense,” Artemis said. “But feeling the wild power of the actual horse under you is a totally different experience! Way more intense than any *car*.”

Rishika rolled her eyes, laughing. “Whatever.”

“Okay, thanks. See you soon. You too,” Cali said into the phone, then hung up. She looked around. “Xavier can’t make it, but he said someone will pick us up in an hour.” She turned to look at Lola. “How are you doing?”

Lola raised her eyebrows. “You mean apart from losing my shit back there?” Her shirtdress was riding up a bit, and she yanked it down. “I just hope to hell this curse is broken tomorrow. I’m so over this shifting at random thing.” She glanced over at me. “Thanks for your help back there, Violet.”

“Of course,” I said, smiling. “It was no—” I stopped suddenly as a scent hit me.

“Violet, what is it?” Cali asked, seeing the arrested expression on my face.

“That smell. Oh my god.” My heart started to pound. I didn’t feel like I could think straight. I knew it anywhere. “That’s Charlie’s scent!” I looked around at the other girls, frantic. They didn’t understand my urgency. “Do you smell it?”

Lola and Rishika lifted their noses into the air.

“I can smell a *wolf*,” Rishika said slowly.

“Me too, but it’s not distinct. Mostly I just smell grease. I think it’s that place,” Lola said, tipping her chin toward the diner.

“Grease with a hint of armpit,” Rishika added.

“All I know is that I smell food,” Artemis said, looking excited. She paused for a moment. “And dragon breath.”

I shook my head. “It’s Charlie. I know it. I’d recognize his scent anywhere.” Could he be here? I looked around, feeling hopeful… but also worried. Our last phone call had been so strange. He’d picked up and sounded glad to hear from me—at first. But then he’d gotten weird. *Again*. And why would he be here of all places? Was he okay?

A hand closed around mine and gave it a reassuring squeeze. I looked up, and Cali’s eyes were on me.

“It’s going to be okay,” she said quietly. “Let’s get something to eat, okay? It’ll give us all a chance to calm down. And if Charlie’s here, we’ll find out.”

Grateful for her support, I nodded and squeezed her hand back.

I took a deep breath as we walked into the diner—and immediately started to cough. At first all I thought I’d gotten was two lungfuls of grease smell, but no—there was more. Underneath it, Charlie’s scent was there. I sniffed again, to confirm. It was there. I was *sure* of it.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I dialed his number, but it went straight to voicemail without even ringing once. Which made my heart pound with worry all over again.

“Hiya, ladies. I’m Mabel, and I’ll be taking care of y’all today.” I looked up to see a waitress in a black shirt arrive at the table. She doled out laminated menus like a blackjack dealer and picked up her order pad. She smelled like weed and pretty much nothing else. “What can I get you dolls to drink?”

“Waters all around,” Cali said.

“Coffee, for me,” Rishika added.

“And—Cali, what’s that thing I like?” Artemis asked.

“Diet Coke,” Cali supplied, rolling her eyes.   
 “Yeah, a Diet Coke for me,” Artemis said.

“You got it,” Mabel said, rolling away. That seemed strange, until I looked down and saw that she was on roller skates.

When she was out of earshot, I turned to the table. “Can you smell Charlie now?” I demanded.

Rishika and Lola sniffed the air, their brows furrowed, then they both shrugged. I stared at them in disbelief. I couldn’t *stop* smelling Charlie’s scent. It was the *only* thing I could focus on.

Rishika, seeing my expression, smiled a little. “I can smell a werewolf scent, Violet, but it’s not distinct. It wouldn’t be. Werewolves are travelers—especially Rogues—and they’re always eating in shitholes like this. It could be from any number of wolves who’ve traveled through.”

Mabel skated back over with a tray of drinks. “Listen, gals,” she said, placing the glasses in front of us, “I’m about to go on break, but the other waitress will be over in a sec to take your orders. She’s right over there.” She pointed across the diner. “At table three.”

More out of politeness than anything else, we all turned to look, and then we all froze when the waitress at table three looked up.

It was Ava.

**Episode 980**

CHARLIE

Bouncing along in the back of the dark truck was giving me plenty of time to wonder where my life had gone wrong. I’d actually spent some time trying to get out, but there was no release hatch on the inside of the truck —at least not one that I could find—so I was stuck in the dark with my thoughts. This was all my fault. I should never have agreed to work for Iñigo. He’d seemed like bad news from the start, and there was definitely no way I should have *kept* working for him after I’d realized I was just helping him move boxes of money. I mean—what had I been thinking? I should have turned around and run right then and there.

It wasn’t like I didn’t know *how* to run away. It was what I’d done when I’d left Violet and the rest of the Redwood pack. But that had been an easier choice. I hadn’t done that to save myself—it had been to save Violet.

The truck came to a sudden and unexpected stop, and I crashed painfully against the inner wall. The engine was cut and the radio—which had been playing twangy country music—went silent, so that the only sound was the pound of my heartbeat in my ears. I heard the cab door open and close, then footsteps on gravel, walking along the length of the trailer toward the back.

This was it. Whoever had trapped me in here was coming to kill me. I took a deep breath and clenched my hands into fists. Well, I wasn’t going to go down without a fight. I was a werewolf, so I would shift and fight it out. I scrambled to my feet and prepared to shift as the driver rolled up the door.

When the door was opened, however, sunlight streamed in, surprising me, and I squinted into it, stunned for a moment. The driver’s lean figure was silhouetted in the light and he stood still for a moment, like was looking at me. Then he turned away.

“Well, come on. I ain’t got all day.”

I had no idea what he meant by that, but I held my ground. “You’d just better watch out,” I said, trying to make my voice firm and intimidating. “Or there’s going to be trouble. *Big* trouble.”

The driver—I still couldn’t see him clearly—turned back to me. “What’s wrong with you?” he asked, sounding legitimately confused.

“Just back off!” I shouted.

He stared at me for a moment, then shrugged and moved away. “Okay.”

I stared after him, baffled that my intimidation tactics had worked. When he didn’t return, I stepped to the edge of the truck and peered out. We had pulled up to a loading dock, and the driver—a tall, lean man with a pale face—was leaning against the brick building, smoking a cigarette, looking bored. When he saw me looking at him, he took a long draw, then pointed his cigarette at the dock, which was filled with boxes.

There were stacks of them, and I stared at them, confused. “You want me to put those in the truck?” I asked, hopping down to the ground.

The driver raised an eyebrow. “Well, they’re not going to load themselves, genius.”

“So,” I said slowly, still trying to piece everything together, “you’re not going to kill me?”

The driver looked surprised for a moment, then laughed, showing off a mouthful of yellowing, tobacco-stained teeth. “If I did that, kid, I’d have to load the boxes myself, and I don’t want to do that. I don’t think much of manual labor. I’m more the brain-power type,” he said, tapping his temple.

That manual labor wasn’t his thing was clear, I thought, looking at the man’s stick-thin arms poking out of his dirty T-shirt. “So why the hell did you lock me in the back of the truck?” I demanded, still baffled by the day’s events.

The driver scoffed. “I ain’t stupid, kid. You’re a dirty werewolf. You think I’m going to let you ride in my lap? Come on.”

I glared at him. “I’m not dirty, and so what if I’m a werewolf?”

The driver smiled again, but this time he flashed his long, sharp fangs. “I’m a vampire, kid. You’re a werewolf. We don’t get along. That’s not me saying that, it’s just biologicalistical.” He shrugged.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I muttered, unable to even start with that word. I looked back at the driver. “Once the boxes are loaded, I’m *not* riding in the back of the truck.”

The driver threw down his cigarette, bristling. “And where do you think you’re going to ride, kid?”

“In the front, with you,” I said, anger surging through me now. I crossed my arms over my chest.

“No,” the driver said, shaking his head. “No way. Ain’t gonna happen, wolfy.”

“Fine,” I said coolly. “Then I’m not going to load these boxes, and you can tell your boss why.”

The driver glared at me, and it looked like he was doing some very fast math in his head. “*Fine*,” he finally said, spitting the words out. “Fine. But if you try anything…”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, turning my back on the vampire and heading to the loading dock.

I’d just picked up the first box when a woman stepped out of the warehouse. She was tall and willowy and dressed in a long, flowing dress that swirled around her when she walked. Her dark hair was bound up in a bright-red scarf, and every step she took was accompanied by the clinky-clank of the countless silver necklaces and bracelets she wore.

She looked at me, surprised. “Who are you?” She looked over at the driver, who had followed me over. “Who is this?”

“It’s okay,” the driver said, waving a hand. “He’s with Iñigo.”

There was something funny about the woman. She reminded me of someone. There was a feeling of strange power around her, like a witch. It was a similar feeling I’d gotten when Violet had introduced me to Big Mac. Maybe she was a witch. She smiled at me.

“He has a nice aura,” she said, looking at me but speaking to the driver. “Though it shows signs of internal conflict.”

The driver gave a barking laugh that turned into a cough. “I always get a kick out of your witchy psychobabble, Kira.” He turned to me. “Get to work, kid. I ain’t got all day.” And then he retreated to the truck, where he leaned against the side and pulled out his phone, as if he did, in fact, have all day.

I rolled my eyes and turned back to the boxes, and found Kira staring right at me.

“Have you ever had Valerian tea?” she asked me.

“What? No.”

She took a step closer. “I think it would help mend your bad dreams, dear.”

I stared at her. “How do you know about my dreams?”

She smiled. “It’s in your aura. When did they start?”

“When I came to Oregon. I just moved,” I said, the answer surprised out of me.

She took another step closer. “And why did you come to Oregon?”

“I…” I stopped myself. I wasn’t sure why I was telling her anything, and I really wasn’t sure if I should be telling her about Violet and the real reason I’d left Minnesota. So I just shrugged. “My girlfriend lives here.”

Kira peered closely at me. “That’s not the *only* reason. You came here because you’ve become something different.”

I took an involuntary step back. She was right. I’d come here because I’d become a werewolf.

We both jumped when the truck’s horn blared.

“Get moving, kid!” the driver yelled, looking annoyed. “I need those boxes loaded!”

“Excuse me,” I muttered to Kira, and set about loading the boxes into the truck.

After I’d finished, I sat in the passenger side of the truck’s cab, half-wishing I hadn’t made such a big deal about sitting up front with the driver. Apart from being a vampire, the guy smoked like a chimney, and the bitter cigarette smell coming off him was overwhelming in the small, enclosed cab.

I cracked the window and looked out, thinking about what the witch had said to me. It seemed clear that I was having these dreams now because I was a werewolf—like I had tapped into something supernatural. And they weren’t just dreams. That was the one thing I was certain of. They were unlocked memories—but that knowledge posed more questions than it answered. What the hell were they memories *of?* And why had they been locked away?

The driver pulled up in front of the diner and cut the engine. “Hey, close the window, kid. I’m freezing.”

I didn’t doubt it—the guy was skin and bones—so I rolled up the window before I jumped down from the cab. But the second my feet hit the gravel, I ducked down. Because just inside the diner—at a booth right next to the window—were Cali, Artemis, Lola, Rishika, and Violet.

*Shit.*

**Episode 981**

GREYSON

I stared at the witches, frozen with shock.

“Wait,” I choked out. “Are you *kidding?* Do you really expect me to not see Cali? Ever again?”

Chloe raised an eyebrow. “We don’t *expect* you to do anything at all. That’s simply the way it is.”

“If you want the curse broken, then that’s part of it,” Posie chimed in.

“And what would happen if I changed my mind and saw Cali?” I asked.

Posie’s eyes darkened. “Oh, you wouldn’t want to do that.”

“Why not?”

“Well,” Lauren said, taking a sip of her tea, “the last time we had a client try to break a contract, it didn’t end well.”

I slammed my fist down onto the table, rattling the mugs and making the sisters jump in surprise. “Forget it,” I growled. “There’s no way I’m agreeing to something like that.”

Chloe glanced at her sisters, then back at me. “I don’t think you’re thinking rationally. If you truly love Cali and want her to live, then isn’t it better for you to know that staying away from her will keep her alive? Keep your brother alive? Isn’t that what you *really* want?”

I hesitated, not quite knowing how to answer her questions. Of course I didn’t want to put Cali in danger—and I didn’t want her to suffer. But… she *would* suffer. Just like I was suffering now. Being apart from your mate was agony. It reminded me of *Romeo and Juliet*, and that story ended tragically. I glared at the dark-haired trio of sisters. *This* was why I didn’t trust witches—there was always a catch. They came in demanding coffee and promising to fix your problems, but nothing was ever as it seemed.

Pushing my chair back from the table, I pointed to the door. “I think it’s time for you to go.”

“But, Greyson,” Chloe started, looking confused, “if we leave, how can we help—”

“I don’t want your help,” I said, cutting her off.

“But the curse,” Lauren pointed out. “How will you—"

“I’ll find another way,” I said, standing.

Chloe raised an eyebrow. “Really?” she asked, in evident disbelief. Then she looked at her sisters, and they laughed.

“Well, good luck with that,” Lauren said as they stood.

“If you change your mind…” Posie said as they headed toward the door.

“I won’t,” I said flatly, before she could finish. I slammed the door behind them and locked it, then leaned against it, rattled. But I tried to shake it off. I would figure this out. Somehow. At least we didn’t have the pressure of the Halloween deadline anymore, so I had a little more time to figure out how to fix things. But first, I had to deal with Maren.

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I arrived at the park where she’d asked me to meet her a little before our noon meeting time but saw that she was already there, standing near a bench. I started to walk over but stopped on the sidewalk when I saw that she was already speaking to someone. I took a step back, into the shadow of a giant maple, far back enough that I could see them, but they couldn’t see me. The man she was talking to was tall and very pale—I recognized him as one of the vamps who’d attacked us at the bar the other night. He was leaning against a tree, looking causal, but Maren just looked agitated and upset.

Her voice floated over, sounding scared but like she was trying to cover it by sounding extra tough.

“I need Hans’s word that after this fight, my debt is paid,” she said. “That they’re not going to threaten my son anymore.”

The vampire looked down at Maren and gave a high, mocking laugh. “*You* were the one who made that Fae promise all those years ago. And *you* were the one who broke it. It’s not our fault your werewolf boyfriend ran off and left you in Hans’s debt.”

This was not the response she’d been looking for, and Maren closed her eyes like the words had physically hit her. What the hell was that vamp talking about? Maren had made a Fae promise? To Hans? I had learned from Cali—and from being with her in the Fae world—that a Fae promise was no ordinary promise. It was more along the lines of a sacred vow, and to break it had serious ramifications.

The vampire, who looked like he was enjoying seeing Maren look so unhappy, took a menacing step toward her, which was my cue to step out from behind the tree. I cleared my throat to announce my presence.

The vampire went—if possible—a little paler, and stepped back. “I guess I’ll see you tonight at the fight,” he said to Maren, and scurried off.

“Hey, you okay?” I asked Maren, walking over.

She pinched the bridge of her nose, looking tense. “I’m okay.”

“You sure?” I asked, raising my eyebrows.

She looked up. “I’m a little worried,” she admitted. Then she shook her head, looking away. “Maybe this was all a mistake.”

“What do you mean?”

She took a deep breath. “All of this.” She looked around at the quiet park, her expression lost and hopeless. “Everything I’ve put into place—it could all be for nothing. You must have heard me talking to that asshole—there’s no guarantee that Hans will leave me and Fenrir alone after this fight.”

I ran my hand through my hair. She was right—that Hans guy was bad news. I’d known it from the moment I’d met him, years ago. He was the type to get his claws into people and never let go. That was why I’d refused to have anything to do with him. But there was one thing that was bothering me. “Why’d you do it, Maren?”

She looked up sharply. “What?”

“Why would you make a promise like that to him? Why risk it?”

Her dark eyes flashed with anger and pain. “I thought you would throw the fight because you loved me. But you loved your pride more.”

Whatever response I had expected, it wasn’t this, and I stared at her in shock as my mind spun in a thousand different directions. I *had* loved Maren, but I hadn’t realized the price of that particular devotion.

“You should have told me,” I finally managed, my voice rougher than I’d intended. “You should have been upfront with me. I’m not a goddamn mind reader, Maren. If you needed help—if you were in trouble—you should have told me.”

Maren’s eyes were like pool of spilled ink, and filled with such pain it nearly hurt to look at them. “You said you loved me then, but what about now?”

“What?”

Her jawline tightened. “If you didn’t help me when you did love me, how do I know you’re going to help me now?”

“Maren…” I turned away. I couldn’t look at her anymore.

But she grabbed my arm with surprising strength and yanked me back, so I was looking at her again. “You listen to me, Greyson,” she said, her voice cold as the autumn wind around us. “My son’s life is at stake here.”

“Maren,” I said, in a softer voice. I took her hands. “I was younger then—we both were.” I shook my head. “Maybe you’re right, maybe I was too proud. But that was a long time ago.”

Maren’s eyes searched mine. “So you’ve changed?”

As I looked at her, taking in the fear in her eyes, I thought about Silas. I thought about my lonely childhood, about how I’d never had anyone to turn to as a kid. I knew what it was like to feel alone and helpless. Maren and I had history, but I didn’t want that for her. I held her hands tightly. “I won’t let you down this time. If I were Fae, I’d make it a Fae promise, but this will have to do.” I put my hands on her delicate shoulders and looked into her eyes. “I will do whatever I can to help you and your son.” I looked at her until she nodded.

“Okay,” she said, visibly relieved.

“Okay,” I said, dropping my hands. I looked around. “Now, is there anywhere around here where we can grab some lunch?”

Maren blew out a breath, still looking shaky, but like my comment had slightly taken the edge off. “Yeah, there’s a tavern down Eighth Street that does lunch—hang on.” Her phone started to ring, and she pulled it out of her back pocket. She frowned when she saw the number. “Hello?”

All I could hear was an indistinct rumble from the other line, but Maren’s expression changed immediately, like she’d seen a ghost. I felt myself tense. This couldn’t be anything good.

“Maren? What is it?” I asked when she’d hung up.

She turned to me, her eyes wide and terrified. “Greyson,” she whispered. “It was Nina. Fenrir is missing.”

**Episode 982**

The glass slipped out of my hand and water splashed across the table.

“*Cali!*” Artemis said, pushing the glass upright and grabbing a handful of napkins from the dispenser.

“Sorry,” I said, as the rest of the girls grabbed napkins and mopped up the spill. My thoughts were racing. What the *hell* was Ava doing here? And as a *waitress?* I looked back over and found Ava staring at me. I stood up.

“Um, Cali, are you sure you want to go over there?” Lola asked, dabbing water off the front of her shirtdress.

“Yeah,” I said flatly. And I was. I had a few questions that needed answers, so I strode purposefully over to table three. “What are you doing here?” I asked without preamble.

Ava looked down at me for a moment. Then, expressionless, she pointed at her black Rockaway Diner T-shirt. “I work here.”

I ground my teeth. “I can see that. But that still doesn’t answer my question,” I said, trying to keep my voice even. I was trying my absolute best to not sound too aggressive, but it was hard as hell, because staring into the face of the woman who had tricked her way into the beds of both my mates was making me *feel* pretty aggressive. I wanted to clock her. Rip out her perfect stupid hair with my hands.

Ava shrugged. “I just needed something to do.”

I frowned. “Why aren’t you with your pack?”

She looked at me for a moment, then her eyes flicked over my shoulder. “I see neither of your boys are with you.” She raised an eyebrow. “Had your fill already?”  
 My hand twitched, like it was going to move of its own accord and just slap Ava across the face. What the hell was her problem? Was she being smug just to rile me up? Or was she just avoiding answering my questions? I narrowed my eyes. “Why’d you do it?”

“What?” she asked warily.

“Why did you sleep with both of them?” I asked. I’d been wanting to know for a long time, and now was as good a time as any to ask.

Ava’s jaw worked, like she was biting back a reply, then she turned to finish clearing plates from the empty booth. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

“I was in an impossible situation.” She dropped a stack of plates into her bussing bin and spun around to look at me, eyeing me with some interest. “I guess you’d know a thing or two about those, wouldn’t you?”

I huffed out an irritated breath. I knew more about impossible situations than anyone, but I wasn’t about to commiserate with Ava, of all people. I glanced over my shoulder at my table, where the girls were all staring at us. “Listen, have you seen a young guy coming through here? His name’s Charlie Kim. You might’ve recognized him since he’s a real member of Xavier’s pack.”

Ava shrugged, her attention back on her table. “Name doesn’t ring any bells.”

Her dismissive attitude was really pissing me off. I tapped my foot impatiently. “Well, have you seen him or haven’t you? Dark hair, light brown eyes?” I rolled my eyes. “I don’t have all day here, Ava.”

Ava reached over the table, wiping the farthest side with her dishcloth. “Now that you mention it, a guy like that did come through here. I think he wanted to get on a bus to Portland.”

“Did he get on it?” I asked, irritated, when she didn’t go on.

Ava shrugged again. “My shift was up.” She straightened and dropped the dishcloth into the bussing bin. She shot a look back at the table by the window. “Do you want to order something, or are we just going to glare at each other until one of us breaks?”

My jaw was starting to ache with the tension I was holding, so I tried to relax it. I had a million questions for Ava, starting with what the hell was up with her attitude, but I figured now was probably not the moment. “Yeah,” I said stiffly, “we’re ready to order.”

Ava rolled her eyes and picked up her tray of dirty dishes. “Terrific. Tell your gal pals I’ll be over in a minute,” she said, and then she went into the kitchen.

When I got back to the table, everyone was staring at me, eyes wide.   
 “What happened?” Lola asked quietly.

“Can we just get out of here?” I asked, dropping back into the booth. “I’ve lost my appetite.”

“Well *I* haven’t,” Artemis said, looking aghast. “I’m not leaving until I get a milkshake.” She leaned forward. “Do they literally shake a cow?”

Rishika laughed and shook her head.

“What?” Artemis asked, looking over at her.

“You just have a lot to learn,” Rishika said.

“Are you okay?” Lola asked me quietly.

But I didn’t have a chance to answer. I looked up to see Ava coming toward us, pulling her order pad out of the apron around her waist. This was such a freaking nightmare. I couldn’t believe that after everything that had happened, I had to be here, in the same room—or diner—with this snake.

It was small consolation, but Ava looked as miserable as I felt as she pulled a pencil out of her ponytail. “What do you want?” she asked flatly.

“Get the cheeseburger,” Rishika advised Artemis. “It’s way better than a regular burger. Trust me, you won’t be sorry.”

Artemis rolled her eyes. “Fine, the cheeseburger.”

“Two,” Rishika said, handing over her menu. “Medium.”

“Just make that five,” Lola said, grabbing everyone’s menus and shoving them at Ava.

“And a milkshake!” Artemis added. “Chocolate.”

“Great,” Ava grumbled, and skated toward the kitchen. “Five medium heart attacks,” she called to the cook.

I turned to Lola, forcing a smile. “I’m fine.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “You’re a terrible liar, Cali. You’re letting her get to you.”

I rubbed my eyes. “It’s hard not to.” I looked up. “Do you think I should tell Xavier that she’s here?” *And that she’s going to poison my burger?*

“Why?” Lola shrugged. “I guess you could, but I don’t see the point. She’s not in our pack. Maybe she’s gone Rogue, but it doesn’t matter. Not to us. You’re better off just leaving it.”

“Listen, Cali,” Rishika said, leaning across the table. “Regardless of how you feel about whatever Ava did to you, she did fight with us against Silas. And she fought hard. I saw her. She helped us stop him.” Rishika raised her eyebrows. “She lost her brother. She had to watch him die. I’m not saying it excuses anything she did prior that that, but maybe it should put things into perspective.”

“I don’t care,” I muttered, feeling cold as stone. “I’ll never forgive her for what she did.”

Rishika sat back with a shrug. We were all quiet for a moment, but then the conversation recovered.

“—no, but when you shifted, I freaked out,” Violet was saying to Lola, laughing. “I just threw my arms around you like a teddy bear.”

“Yeah, that did not help my concentration *at all*,” Artemis said, looking annoyed.

Lola rolled her eyes. “Please. The brake lines had been cut. It’s not like my shifting made things worse.”

I was only half-listening to the conversation. My eyes were on Ava as she moved around the diner, working her other tables. She was cordial with the customers, though not overly friendly. I didn’t see her smile once. It was just so… *strange*, for her to be here. And if the past was any clue, her being here meant there was something going on. And if there was something going on, Xavier should know about it.

But maybe Lola was right. What would be the point? If I told Xavier, he would probably come looking for Ava, and that was the last thing I wanted.

I was ruminating on this when Ava skated over with a tray of burgers, which she set down unceremoniously.

Everyone else dove in like they hadn’t eaten in weeks, but I pushed my plate away, my stomach turning at the sight of the food. Ava slapped the check down in the center of the table and skated back into the kitchen without so much as a word.

Artemis was halfway through her burger and I had managed a few bites when Ravi pulled the diner door open. I frowned. Xavier had sent Ravi? When Xavier had told me he’d send someone to pick us up, Ravi was the last person I’d expected.

Ravi spotted us and walked over. “Hey, ready?” he asked expectantly.

“No,” Artemis said, looking up at him, her mouth full of cheeseburger. “I haven’t finished my milkshake yet.”

Ravi gave a gusty sigh. “Seriously?”

“Have a seat and help us,” Rishika said, scooting over to make room. “You can have Cali’s fries. She’s not going to eat them.”

Ravi grabbed a few fries and glanced around. I followed his gaze, feeling tense. I had no idea what would happen if he saw Ava here. I didn’t know him all that well, and he’d been acting so weird lately.

Finally, everyone finished. As Artemis took one last slurp of her milkshake, we all slid out of the booth. Ravi herded us into the car, and we headed back toward the pack house.

“So,” Ravi asked, glancing into the rearview mirror. “Which one of you smashed the car?”

Rishika rolled her eyes. “It wasn’t anyone’s fault.”

“*At all*,” Lola emphasized.

“All right,” Ravi said. He looked back at the road. “All I know is that it was lucky you all survived.”

I looked sideways at him. There was something about his tone that I didn’t like.

“We were just trying to go to the mall,” Lola said, folding her arms across her chest.

“I don’t think you get it,” Ravi said, shaking his head. “Most people die when their brake lines get cut.”

“Yeah,” Violet chimed in. “It was really scary.”

“Wait, how’d you know the break lines were cut?” I asked, looking over at Ravi. “We never told you that.”

**Episode 983**

Ravi’s inky black gaze slid sideways to me, but I couldn’t see the expression in them. “Xavier told me that’s what happened.” He looked back at the road. “Like I said, you were lucky you weren’t killed.”

I looked forward, out at the empty road ahead of us, but I wasn’t seeing anything. I was thinking hard. *Had* I told Xavier that the brake lines had been cut? I tried to remember the call, but it was kind of a blur. Standing on the side of the road, I’d been so upset about the accident, and then afterward with all the stuff with Ava, I couldn’t really remember the details of what I’d said to him.

Ravi looked over at me. “Something wrong?”

“What?” I asked, startled out of my thoughts. “No. No, nothing’s wrong. I just—I’m just hoping Xavier’s not going to be too upset about the car.”

“He’ll get over it,” Ravi said, looking back at the road, his tone flat. “He always does, doesn’t he?”

“Um,” I started, a creeping sense of discomfort moving up my spine. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

He was quiet for a moment, then shrugged. “Xavier’s lucky. He still has you.”

Joss. He had to be talking about Joss.

“Ravi,” I said quietly, so the girls in the back couldn’t hear. “I’m really sorry. I know you and Joss were close. I can only imagine what it was like to lose her—what you must be going through right now.”

Ravi’s hands gripped the steering wheel tightly. “I doubt you can,” he said, his voice thin through his tightly clenched jaw.

I could practically *feel* the anger rolling off Ravi in waves, and I leaned away, flattening myself against the passenger door, trying to get as far from his darkness as I could in the enclosed space. He was acting *so* strangely. And… I just couldn’t shake the feeling that he was lying about Xavier telling him about the brake lines being cut. I looked at his sharp profile as he stared out at the road. But maybe I was overthinking things. He *had* just lost Joss. Of course he was upset. And maybe I *had* mentioned the brake lines to Xavier. Maybe I was just suspicious because Ravi had been acting so oddly. Like when I’d found him drunk, trying to go into Xavier’s room.

And Artemis had mentioned that she’d seen him going into Greyson’s room last week, and then just last night he’d been climbing out of one of the upstairs windows.

I settled back in my seat as we neared the pack house, resolved. Regardless of Ravi’s guilt or innocence, I needed to talk to Xavier about this. Xavier was acting Alpha, and he needed to know what was going on with the pack.

The rest of the ride was quiet. The girls in the back chatted a little. Artemis, stuffed from her lunch, fell asleep, but Ravi and I didn’t say another word to each other. When he pulled up in front of the pack house, Violet shook Artemis awake and we all spilled out into the sharp October air.

“Thanks again, Ravi,” I said as I slammed the door.

I ran inside and found Xavier in the living room, surrounded by pack members, going over plans for the Halloween party. At least, Sage and Zainab were going over plans—Xavier was sitting on the couch, looking like he wished he were anywhere else. His face brightened when I walked in, and he stood.

“Hey,” he said, striding over to me, pulling me into his arms. “You’re here.” He ran his hands down my arms, then around my torso, like he was feeling for injuries. “You’re okay?”

I nodded. “I’m okay.”

“And everyone else?” he asked, looking worried.

“We’re all okay. Everyone’s fine,” I breathed.

“Xavier, we really have to make some final decisions about the food,” Sage called from the couch, sounding annoyed. “Do you want hotdogs or bratwurst? Or should we just do burgers?”

“Just a second,” Xavier snapped, then turned back to me. “God, I’m so glad you weren’t hurt. So what happened with the car?”

My stomach dropped like a stone. “What?”

Xavier frowned. “The car? My car? What happened? Did you just lose control on a corner or what?”

My whole body felt suddenly cold. “Didn’t I already tell you?”

He shook his head. “All I know is that you took my car—without asking—and crashed it.” He peered down at me. “Why? What’s up?”

“I didn’t tell you about the brakes?” I asked, fear reducing my voice to a whisper.

“What about the brakes? What happened to the brakes?”

“Oh god,” I gasped, clutching Xavier’s arms. Ravi was lying. No one had told him about the brake lines. Then… how could he have known?

“Cali?” Xavier asked, concern creasing his face. “Talk to me. Tell me what’s going on.”

Before I could answer, Ravi strolled into the living room. He paused in the doorway and leaned casually against the doorframe, his eyes on me.

“Cali?” Xavier asked again, trying to recapture my attention.

“Ravi,” I whispered, looking at him over my shoulder.

“What about him?” Xavier asked, glancing up at him.

I looked back at Xavier. “I think Ravi cut the brake lines on the car.”

“What?” Xavier’s body tensed, going hard as stone beneath my hands. He looked up, locking eyes with Ravi. “Is that true? Did you fuck up my car?”

Ravi straightened, meeting Xavier’s eyes. For a moment it looked like he was about to answer, but then he took a step back—and took off.

“Stay here,” Xavier snapped at me, then sprinted after Ravi.

Ignoring him, I ran after them. Ravi shifted as he ran out the door. Xavier followed and leapt off the porch, shifting as he fell, landing on four paws as a wolf. He lunged at Ravi.

Drawn by the chaos, the pack started to pour out of the house. Artemis’s eyes were on Ravi as he ran and, as she held out her hand, he tripped, knocked to the ground by the force of her magic.

In an instant, Xavier was on top of him, snarling and snapping. My heart was pounding in my chest. Xavier was strong, but Ravi was desperate, which made him dangerously unpredictable. I covered my mouth with my hand, stifling a scream as Ravi’s wolf bucked and kicked, knocking Xavier back. They tussled, rolling through the dried grass and leaves on the wide, sloping lawn. Their snarls were razor sharp as they snapped at each other. The coward in me wanted to cover her eyes, too, but in a moment, Xavier had Ravi pinned again. Ravi struggled and fought for all he was worth, but the rest of the pack began to close in and, glancing around, he finally stilled. After a moment, he shifted back to human.

Xavier growled, low and menacing. I’d heard it before, and it made my stomach clench with fear. He was going to kill Ravi, and I turned away. I couldn’t watch.

“You could have killed them!”

I turned, surprised to hear Xavier’s voice. He’d shifted back to his human form and was standing over Ravi, his foot on his chest, pinning him to the ground. Xavier looked furious and terrible, but Ravi was still alive, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I’d been around the pack long enough to understand the complicated politics, and that Xavier would have been justified in killing Ravi for what he’d done—but I’d had enough killing. There had been too much blood spilled, and I just couldn’t bear anymore.

Ravi’s dark eyes flashed with inexpressible rage as he looked up at Xavier. “Just do it,” he spat. “Do it! Just put me out of my fucking misery.”

And that was when I saw it: Ravi was angry, but he was so terribly sad, too. And it was so completely justifiable. I couldn’t imagine how much pain he was probably in at the loss of Joss.

Xavier shook his head, disgusted. “No. That would be too easy.” He stepped back, leaving Ravi on the ground at his feet. He turned and motioned to Jay and Rishika, who’d been standing just behind him, ready to jump in. “Get him out of my sight.”

Jay and Rishika bent and hoisted Ravi roughly to his feet. The fight must have taken a lot of out him because once they got him upright, he looked limp and ashen.

“Where do you want him?” Jay asked Xavier.

“Take him to the basement,” Xavier said without looking back. He looked through the crowd for me and took a step in my direction, but faltered, only just catching himself before he fell. Pushing through the pack, I rushed to his side.

“Xavier!”

He looked down, and I followed his line of sight to his chest. What I saw made my blood turn to ice. The black veins on his chest were back, and they were worse than ever.

**Episode 984**

XAVIER

I looked down at the veins on my chest, then up at the wide eyes of the pack, all staring at me.

“Okay,” I snapped. “Show’s over. Everyone back in the house.”

“Xavier,” Cali said, her voice low as the pack began to shuffle back inside. “Are you okay?”

I slipped my arm around her and started guiding her back toward the house. “My favorite jeans are ruined, yeah, but I’m fine.”

Cali still looked worried. “You don’t… *feel* any different?”

I stopped and looked down at her. “I don’t know how to break this to you, Cali, but that isn’t the first time I’ve shifted.”

She scowled. “I’m talking about those,” she said, pointing at my chest.

I looked down. “What?”

“The veins,” she said, clearly annoyed. “They’re back!”

“I know.” I shrugged. “They’re back. Big deal.”

“*Big deal?*” She goggled at me. “*Xavier*!”

I shrugged again. “Sometimes they hurt more than others, but whatever. It’s nothing. I’m not going to let them ruin my life. I’ve got shit to do. A pack to watch over.”

Cali raised her eyebrows. “But you feel okay?”

I smiled and reached forward, smoothing out the worried line between her eyebrows, then kissed it for good measure. “Considering a Redwood pack member just cut the brake lines of my car like a cartoon villain and almost killed my mate, I’d say I’m doing all right.”

Cali gave me the ghost of a smile, but it faded as quickly as it had come. “What are you going to do to Ravi?”

I blew out a breath and looked around. “I don’t know yet,” I admitted, running a hand through my hair. I looked down at her. “What do you want me to do?”

“What do you mean?”

“Lady’s choice. Rip his throat out? Silver dagger to the gut? What?”

She paled, looking a little sick. “Stop joking, Xavier.”

“I’m not,” I said truthfully. But she clearly didn’t want to keep talking about it, so I took her hand and we walked into the house.

Big Mac and Mrs. Smith were at the door, waiting for us.

“What happened?” Big Mac demanded.

“Is it true about Ravi?” Mrs. Smith asked, looking worried.

“Yeah, I’m afraid so.” I sighed, suddenly feeling the weight of what had just happened.

Mrs. Smith cast a glance at Big Mac and Cali, then grabbed my wrist and pulled me into the small office just off the living room. “Do you think Ravi is the one who stabbed MacKenzie?” she asked in a low voice.

“I don’t know,” I said. “But there’s only one way to find out.”

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After getting dressed again, I headed down to the basement with Cali, Mrs. Smith, and Big Mac in tow. I stopped them all outside the small, locked room where Rishika and Jay had put Ravi.

“Listen, you can come in, but you’re not going in to attack. I’m in charge, and I’ll be the one calling the shots in there. Understand?” I asked. I was speaking to everyone, but my eyes were on Big Mac, as she was the one I was most concerned about. She was a witch, and if it turned out that Ravi was the one who’d stabbed her, there was no telling what she might do.

“Understood,” Mrs. Smith murmured.

I waited until Big Mac nodded, which she finally did. Once.

*Keep an eye on Big Mac for me*, I said to Cali through our mind link.

Cali nodded.

Ravi was sitting on a metal chair in the center of the small, windowless room. He was cuffed to the chair and looked angry and miserable. His expression was bitter as we all trooped into the room.

I leaned back against the wall and looked at him for a moment, trying to get a sense of what was going on behind his eyes. “Why’d you do it?”

“What?” he snapped.

“Cut the brake lines,” I bit out. “And don’t get smart.”

Ravi spat on the ground at my feet. “Joss.”

This was not the answer I’d been expecting. “What?”

He looked up, his eyes flashing with barely suppressed fury. “You put her in danger because of your stupid feud with your father. And now she’s *dead* and none of you give a shit!”

Cali’s mouth fell open. “Of course we do!”

“YOU HAD A DAMN BARBECUE THE NIGHT SHE DIED!” Ravi snarled. He looked unhinged.

He’d told me he and Joss had been planning to run away together, but he was so broken by her loss… I’d never imagined they were so serious. I looked into his eyes, and there was something familiar about the anger and the pain in them. My thoughts went to Ava. Losing her had been excruciating—it had taken me years to get over it—and *that* loss had been complicated by so much anger. What if the circumstances had been different? What if I’d lost her and there’d been no betrayal? How much more painful would my grief have been? The last thing I’d come in here to do was sympathize with Ravi, but I couldn’t help it.

“Listen,” I said, surprising even myself. “Losing Joss hit all of us hard, so don’t act like it was your loss alone, okay? But I know it sucks to lose someone you love, so I get what you’re feeling. But that doesn’t excuse what you did. You’ve been putting people in danger, man.” I shook my head. “You say you knew Joss? Then you know that’s not what she would have done. No way.”

Ravi dropped his head, and his shoulders sank.

Mrs. Smith stepped forward, her eyes flashing. “Ravi, did you try to kill MacKenzie?”

Ravi looked up at her for a moment, then back down at his lap. He nodded miserably, and Mrs. Smith gasped.

“I didn’t mean to,” he said quickly, looking up. “I was just—I was just so upset. I was so angry! It was like I couldn’t even see! Something drove me to it. I don’t know…” He shook his head. “It was like I couldn’t even control it.”

“You little *bastard*,” Big Mac muttered, pushing forward. She had her hands outstretched, and her eyes flashed dangerously. “I’m going to turn you into a gnat and squash you flat—”

“Relax,” I warned her. “What did I tell you before we came in?”

But it didn’t look like anything I said was going to stop Big Mac. She looked pissed and kept moving toward a terrified Ravi.

“Stop, MacKenzie,” Mrs. Smith said, low but firm. She laid a hand on Big Mac’s arm, and the witch stopped. “I’m upset too, but we have to remember that Ravi has just lost someone he loved.”

Big Mac blinked. “So that gives him the right to *stab* me?”

“No, it doesn’t, and I’m angry too. Believe me. But remember when you thought I was dead?” Mrs. Smith said, raising an eyebrow. “How did that feel?”

Big Mac was quiet for a moment. “It was awful.” She shook her head. “I’d never wish it on anyone.” She glanced at Ravi, then took a step back to stand next to Mrs. Smith.

“Is it the orb?”

Everyone looked at Cali.

She glanced around, and a flush colored her cheeks. “I just wondered if Ravi was being affected by the orb. Remember how everyone’s been arguing? I think it kind of takes what people are feeling—especially anything negative—and magnifies it. So maybe the orb took Ravi’s grief and anger and made it worse. Maybe that’s why he’s been doing all these terrible things.”

“Maybe,” I murmured. It was a possibility, but I also knew Cali tended to think the best of others, so I had to take that into consideration, too. “I’ll have to think about it,” I said, talking to everyone. “I might bring it to the Council. In the meantime, let’s all just go about our business.” I glanced at Ravi. “You’re in here for a while.”

We all headed back upstairs. Big Mac and Mrs. Smith, hand-in-hand, disappeared out the back door, but I stopped in the kitchen.

“I’m just going to check the laundry room,” I told Cali. “I couldn’t find that dark blue shirt of mine. Colton better not have stolen it when he was here.”

She followed me into the large laundry room just off the kitchen and leaned against the doorframe while I looked around. “I’m really proud of you, Xavier.”

“What?” I asked, surprised enough that I stopped my search. “Why?”

“I know you were upset back there. You could have just killed Ravi. I think you might have, a few months ago.”

“Oh.” I turned back to the laundry bag. “It’s no big deal.”

“I think it is,” Cali said. “It’s easy to be cruel. It’s easy to destroy. But it’s harder to be fair and compassionate. It’s harder to listen. That’s what you did today. That’s what I imagine a true Alpha would do.”

With a smile, I dropped the laundry bag and turned to her. “Maybe my reformation is all because of you.”

I pulled her close and lifted her up, setting her on top of the dryer. Then I kicked the door shut and leaned in to kiss her.

**Episode 985**

GREYSON

The phone dropped from Maren’s hand, clattering to the pavement at our feet, and I bent to pick it up. She was nearly hysterical, her eyes darting around, as if she was going to catch sight of her little boy in some far corner of the park.

“Maren,” I said, trying to draw her attention. “Hey, can you hear me? I need you to take a breath.”

But she didn’t hear me. She was shaking her head, her breath coming shallow and fast, like she was about to hyperventilate. “*Ohgodohgodohgodohgod*. They’ve got him. This is what I’ve been worried about. Since the day he was born, I’ve been worried about this.” She looked up at me, her eyes wild. “Greyson, they have my son!”

“I know,” I said, my heart pounding painfully in my chest.

She started walking, then turned, walking the other way like she couldn’t remember which way she’d come. “We have to do something. I have to call someone.” She patted her pockets. “Where the fuck’s my phone?”

The park wasn’t crowded, but it was lunchtime and there was a small crowd beginning to gather, and every eye was on us as Maren broke down. I grabbed her shoulders and bent slightly, so I was looking right into her eyes.

“Maren,” I said, keeping my voice low but firm. “I know you’re freaking out, but you have to pull yourself together. You have to think. We are outside, and we do not want people asking questions or calling the cops. Do we?”

She bit her lip and shook her head.

“Okay,” I said. She didn’t look any calmer, but at least she’d stopped screaming. “Is it possible that Nina’s just lost track of him? Has Fenrir ever wandered off before?”

Maren shook her head emphatically. “No.”

“He’s young; kids get curious. He didn’t just open the door and walk outside for a second?”

But she was still shaking her head. “No way. He wouldn’t do that. We talk about safety all the time. He wouldn’t.” She met my eyes, and hers were wells of pain. “Greyson, he was taken. I know it.”  
 I was still holding her shoulders, and my grip tightened. “Do you really think someone would take him like this? In the middle of the day?”

She pressed her lips together as they started to tremble, and tears spilled from her eyes, streaking down her satiny skin. “I can’t let anything happen to him. He’s all I have. He’s my whole world!”

I could feel her body losing strength. She was crumbling, so I took her face in my hands, feeling her hot tears against my palms. “I won’t let them hurt him, Maren, but you need to stay with me. I need you to think.”

She blinked, like she was having a hard time bringing me into focus.

“Where would they have taken him?” I pressed, starting to get desperate. It felt like I was losing her.

She shook her head. “I don’t know,” she whispered. “I can’t think where—they wouldn’t dare bring him to their office.”

“What about a gym?” I tried. “A practice area or something? Anywhere! Come on, Maren, think. I don’t know anything about these people—you do. You have to talk to me!”

“I don’t know!” she cried, sobs shuddering through her. “I have no idea, Greyson!” And she crumbled, falling against my chest, grasping my shirt like I was a life preserver and she was lost at sea.

A wave of memory hit me. I was maybe six years old, in the den of an old house. I was playing with a piece of wood from the woodpile that I’d fashioned into a man. He was a brave soldier, and my only toy. I hid him behind a chair as my father walked into the room. I looked up at him. There was something on his face. Something red streaked across it in spattered drops. It was blood, and it glistened in the flickering light of the fire in the hearth.

His eyes went to me, and I stood.

“What?” he asked, his voice harsh, like I’d interrupted him.

“Where’s my mom?” I asked. I’d been waiting to ask the question for weeks, and I’d summoned all my courage to do it. “Why doesn’t she come to see me?”

Silas looked at me for a long moment, and then he smiled. But there was no warmth in his smile, and the effect made even the fire seem dimmer. “Come here, son,” he commanded.

I walked toward him, and he sat on one of the wing chairs in front of the fire. He scooped me up and settled me roughly on his knee. It was uncomfortable, but I kept my mouth shut. It was so unusual for my father to even look at me, let alone hold me, that I didn’t want to ruin the moment with complaints about something as trivial as my own comfort.

I thought he was maybe going to tell me a nice story about my mom, about how much she wished she could be with me, but when I looked into his face, something in my belly told me that wasn’t what was coming. His expression was cold and hard, but somehow amused.

“The world is a hard place, Greyson,” he said abruptly, “and the sooner you learn that, the better. Your mother is dead.”

I was stunned. I felt like I’d just been slapped in the face, and I started to cry.

Silas shook me roughly. “Stop that,” he ordered, his eyes flashing with anger. “Stop it! Your mother was worthless. She wasn’t worth crying over, I can tell you that. And if you don’t learn to harden yourself—to be unafraid to take your place in this world—you won’t be worth crying over, either.”

Back in the here and now, Maren was still crying against my chest, soaking my T-shirt with her tears, and my arms were around her. It was odd that I should be here, comforting a parent over a threat to her child when my own father had spent my entire childhood threatening me on a daily basis.

My thoughts went to Fenrir—to his bright, hopeful smile and big grey eyes—and I felt a surge of anger at the monsters who’d taken him.

“Maren,” I snapped, pulling her away from my chest and looking down at her again, “you cannot fall apart right now. We are going to find Fenrir, but I need your help to do it. Okay?”

Her eyes were wide with fear, but she nodded. “Okay,” she breathed. She took a deep breath and wiped the tears off her face with the back of her hand.

We both started with surprise when her phone buzzed. I’d slipped it into my pocket, and I pulled it out and handed it to her. It was a FaceTime call from an unknown caller.

With a fearful glance at me, she answered it, then gasped when Fenrir’s face popped up on the screen.

“Hey, Mama!” he called happily to her, then looked down at the Legos in his hands.

My heart was still beating fast, but I gave a sigh of relief. At least the kid was okay. He looked completely unharmed. I took in the other available information fast: he was wearing what looked like his regular clothes—a blue T-shirt and jeans—and he was in a nondescript white room. There was no furniture or windows in the background of the shot.

“Fen!” Maren said, smiling, trying to look like she hadn’t been hysterical a second ago. “How are you? Are you okay, baby?”

Fenrir smiled and held up a small block of Legos. “Look, Mama, I made a dinosaur!”

“That’s such a good dinosaur, baby. Fen, where are you, sweetheart?”

The image on Maren’s phone shook, like someone had grabbed the phone Fenrir was using, and then it went dark. The call had ended.

“Fenrir!” Maren screamed at the blank screen. She stared at it, too overwhelmed to do anything, but jumped when it rang again. Another unknown caller.

“Answer it,” I growled when she didn’t move. I grabbed her hand and clutched it in mine. “Put it on speaker.”

With a shaking finger, she answered. “Hello?”

“You see your boy’s not hurt,” came Hans’s icy voice over the line.

“You *bastard*,” Maren hissed. “What do you want with him?”

Hans laughed, the sound cold and sharp. “Well, we don’t want a repeat of what happened before, do we? Fool me once, and all that. So I’m thinking of Fenrir as my little insurance policy.”

Maren’s hand was cold as ice in mine. “You fucking bastard. I’ll kill you. I’m going to rip your heart out of your chest and feed it to feral dogs—”

“It comes down to this,” Hans said sharply, cutting her off, “and it’s really quite simple. If Greyson doesn’t lose the third round of the fight, your son dies.”

And with that, the line went dead.

**Episode 986**

CHARLIE

Staying crouched low, I’d managed to make it around to the back of the restaurant, concealed from Violet and the others. I’d felt like an idiot, and a coward, and just a damned fool, but I couldn’t let her see me. I had wanted to—I had wanted to see her so badly it hurt. And she had been so close. So, so, *so* close. I’d wanted to run into the restaurant and throw my arms around her. To kiss her. To hold her. To apologize for everything. But I couldn’t do that. Not yet, anyway.

I was more convinced than ever that these weird *dreamories* that I’d been having were the cause of that strange, intense blackout I’d had the night Big Mac had been stabbed at the pack house. A cold wind blew through my hair as I leaned against the rough brick of the building, my stomach tightening at the thought; I just couldn’t be sure that I hadn’t been somehow involved in that. And until I *could* be sure, I just couldn’t go back. I couldn’t put Violet at risk.

“Hey!”

I looked up to see Iñigo looking at me from the back doorway. “Yeah?”

“Are you going to stand out here all day? Don’t you want to get paid?”

“Yeah, I do,” I said, pushing off the building and following him back inside.

“Well come on, then. Money’s in the register,” Iñigo grunted, jutting his chin toward the front of the diner.

I stopped. “The register? Up front? Um… Can’t you just bring it to me?” I asked nervously.

The man just laughed. “What do I look like to you, kid? A delivery boy?” Iñigo threw back his head and laughed, like I’d said something really funny. “You’ve got balls. I’ll give you that. You’ve got balls.”

“No, it’s just there’s—” My face grew hot. “There was just someone out there, eating in the diner, who I don’t want to see. I’m not sure whether she’s gone.”

Iñigo peered at me, suddenly interested. “A girl?”

I nodded, feeling pretty stupid.

He chuckled again, then shrugged. “Whatever. Well, come in when you want your money. I’m not going anywhere.” He headed toward the front of the diner.

I leaned against an empty prep table in the back room with a sigh. I had to get out of this place. I wasn’t even totally sure how I’d ended up here, with no money, no friends, and no way out. I had no idea how my life had become so complicated. Yes, everything had started when that psychotic Rogue had bitten me and turned me into a werewolf, but something told me there was more to it than that.

With a heavy sigh, I ran a hand through my hair. I just had to get a bit more money, then I could head off to Portland and… just go from there. I felt my shoulders sag. The vagueness of my plan didn’t exactly fill me with confidence.

From the front of the diner, I heard the distant ring of the register and Iñigo’s terse rumble. It had been long enough; Violet and the others were probably gone. It was probably safe to head out to get my money before Iñigo conveniently forgot about it. And I was about to do just that when my phone rang. I was surprised to see it was my parents.

There was no one in the back room, but I didn’t want anyone coming back here on their break and overhearing me, so I stepped back outside, next to the dumpsters, to answer the call. “Hi, Mom.”

“And Dad,” my dad chimed in.

I smiled when I heard their voices. Iris and Paul Kim were good parents—if a bit overprotective.

“We just wanted to check in,” my mom said, and I could hear the note of worry in her voice, though she was trying to hide it. “We haven’t heard from you since… since the last time we spoke.”

Everyone went quiet. We weren’t great at talking about uncomfortable things—what family was?—and our last conversation had been pretty uncomfortable.

“Well,” I said, with a flash of annoyance, “you cut me off. What did you expect me to do, call and thank you for helping me grow up so fast? I’ve been kind of busy trying to deal with all that.”

“What do you mean?” my mom asked.

“I’ve been trying to find a job,” I said huffily. “That’s what you do when you need money. And I found one.” I left out the part about the job being loading and unloading boxes for a vampire. I figured my parents might not be too impressed with that.

I rubbed my forehead as a cold breeze snaked through the alleyway. The whole conversation was giving me a tension headache. I hated fighting with them. I was an only child, and we we’d always gotten along great before this—due in no small part, I was sure, to our shared avoidance of conflict. I just hated that we were fighting at all. And I missed them. I missed my mom’s cooking—especially her kimchi jjigae, which she’d always whip up with whatever she had left in the fridge. And I missed working alongside my dad, helping out as he puttered around our old house on Saturday mornings, fixing this and that, a nail here, some spackle there.

Now everything felt so strange and foreign—like everything in my life had been turned upside down. And it wasn’t just because of the werewolf thing. It was this weird tension with my parents and with Violet, and also the dreams. They haunted me in a way I couldn’t shake, even when I was fully awake. I gathered up my courage and took a deep breath.

“Hey, I have a question,” I started. “Do you guys remember if there was anything… *strange*, about my childhood?”

There was an odd, elongated pause before my mother finally answered. “What do you mean?”

“You know, just anything weird,” I said, aware of how vague that sounded.

“Of course not,” my mom said quickly. “You were a very normal kid. So happy and energetic.”

I thought of the dreamory fight with the vampire and felt a shiver rattle up my spine. “Yeah, okay. But did I ever get into a bad fight or something like that?”

There was another pause, this one longer than the first.

My dad cleared his throat. “Why do you ask, Charlie?”

“Um…” I frowned. It seemed like a pretty simple question, and I wondered why they were being so weird about answering it. It was almost like they were trying to avoid the question altogether. “I’ve been having this recurring dream.”

My dad cleared his throat again. It was his nervous tick. “What kind of dream?”

“I know this is going to sound crazy,” I said, laughing nervously, “but it involves, like, a vampire or something.”

“A *vampire?*” my mom repeated shrilly. She laughed, but it wasn’t her regular laugh. It was high and thin. “You were always such a poor sleeper as a child, Charlie. It was impossible to get you to bed sometimes. Maybe that’s what you’re thinking about.”

“Maybe—” I started, but then I stopped suddenly. There was a strange sound, like my parents’ phone was being jostled or covered up, and then I heard what sounded like a muted conversation. I listened hard—I couldn’t make out any words—but I thought their voices sounded strained.

“Charlie,” my dad said, coming back on the line. “Are you there?”

“Yeah, Dad, I’m here.”

“It’s been such a stressful time for all of us. Why don’t you come back to Minnesota, get yourself back into school, back where you belong? Then we can help and support you. Stop with all this nonsense, son. We love you; we don’t want to be fighting with you in this way.”

“I don’t want to be fighting either, Dad,” I said quietly. I felt terrible—I hated to hear the worry in his voice.

“And when you get back here, sweetheart, you can go back to Dr. Olson. Do you remember her? That pediatric psychologist you used to see? You loved her,” my mom added.

“Yeah, Mom, I remember her,” I said distractedly. “But I’m not ready to come back. Not yet.”

“But, Charlie,” my mom said, her voice growing thick with emotion. “How can we know you’re safe out there? With those monsters?” There was a sudden, sharp intake of breath on the other end of the line.

“Wait,” I said, my mind spinning. “What do you mean by that?”

My mom’s nervous laugh sounded tinny through the phone. “I meant the monsters in your head, sweetheart.” She gave what might have been a dry sob. “It’s all our fault. We’re the ones who put them there.”

A cloud passed in front of the sun, blotting it out, turning the cold day colder still. “What does that mean?” I asked, taken aback.

“Iris, enough,” my dad said, uncharacteristically firm. He sighed. “Charlie, maybe it’s time we tell you the full truth.”

**Episode 987**

Alone with Xavier in the laundry room, his lips against mine, I wrapped my legs around him, pulling his body closer. He complied, smiling against my lips.

I hummed with pleasure, sliding my hands along his shoulders and down his arms, feeling the push and pull of his muscles shifting beneath his skin.

Xavier removed his mouth from mine, drawing his lips to my ear and letting his tongue trace around the sensitive inner curve.

My toes curled inside my shoes and I gripped him harder, digging my fingers into his skin.

“I think I know where this is going,” he murmured, pulling back enough to grasp the bottom of his shirt and pull it over his head.

He started to move close again, but I put a hand on his chest, stopping him. My eyes were on the veins, which were dark again. A sigh escaped me, all the air leaving my body as I traced the swirling veins with my finger. They dipped and curved along the architecture of his body, and my stomach grew tight with worry as I looked at them. When they’d stayed faded for a while, I’d started to hope that… I didn’t even know exactly what I’d hoped for. That something was changing, maybe. That the curse was losing power. That it was forgetting about me. That maybe—just maybe—I could live without the pressure of it hanging over my head. But looking at the dark, ominous lines on Xavier’s chest disabused me of that notion.

I pressed my palm to his chest and felt the familiar pulse of the veins—the beat that was just a little different to the pulse of his heart. I set my jaw; I was going to have to have another talk with the orb to figure all this out.

“Hey.” Xavier put his finger beneath my chin and pushed it gently upward, so I was looking him in the eye. “*I’m* up here,” he said, with a smiling glint in his eye. “Are you going to stare at my veins all day, or can you spare a glance for the rest of me?”

I smiled and leaned in, pressing my lips to his. “I guess I could spare *a* glance.” I said.

“Just the one?” he asked teasingly. He kissed me again, biting down on my bottom lip.

“I guess a couple,” I admitted, wrapping an arm around his neck and pulling him close, relishing the feeling of his bare chest against me.

Xavier reached his arm around me in what I thought was an embrace, but when the dryer beneath me roared to life, I pulled back, surprised.

“What did you do?” I demanded.

“What?” he asked, laughing.

“This isn’t a porno, Xavier!” I said, smacking his arm.

He raised his eyebrows and dropped his hands to the waistband of my jeans. “Who says it’s not? It could be.” He glanced around, making quick work of the button fly on my jeans without looking. “Some lighting, a camera guy over there, boom mic operator standing on the washing machine, and we’ve got ourselves a cottage industry.”

“All right,” I said, bracing my hands on the dryer to push myself off. “That’s enough of this. I can’t with you like this—”

He cut me off with a kiss. Cradling my neck and threading his fingers into my hair, he covered my mouth with his, consuming me completely, mastering me, possessing me, and I surrendered to him. His other hand stroked down my neck, then my shoulder, then my ribs, his fingers just brushing the side of my breast, which made me shiver. I felt him smile, and he did it again.

He stepped back and looked at me, his blue eyes flashing. “I’m going to lock that door,” he said, breathing hard.

“Yes,” I agreed emphatically.

When he turned back, his eyes had darkened. “Now,” he growled, “tell me, Cali, how much you like me being your Alpha.”

I felt my cheeks heat with a blush. “What? Xavier, are you serious?”

He lifted one eyebrow. “Do I look like I’m joking?”

I shook my head slowly as he walked toward me. “No,” I breathed. My breath hitched as he slipped a hand beneath my T-shirt and slid it upward, running the pad of his thumb over the underside of my breast. I was aching for him, he knew it, too—I could see it in the way he was smirking at me. He must have been able to read the want in my face, and he was teasing me, waiting for me to say what he wanted to hear. “I like it.”

He smiled. “How much?”

I swallowed, leaning forward, wanting him to touch me, to take me in his hands. “*So* much.” Then I frowned, shifting, and turned to look at what I was sitting on. I pulled a wadded-up bunch of fabric out from underneath me. “What the hell is this? Oh my god!”

It was a pair of boxer shorts. I tossed them away, horrified.

Xavier looked down at them, unconcerned. “They’re probably Jay’s. He’s the only man I know who’d buy a polka dot pattern.”

Covering my eyes, I started to laugh. “You have got to be kidding me.”

“Now.” Xavier pulled my hand away from my face. “Where were we?” He slid his hands beneath my ass and I hopped a little, making room for him to get under me, and promptly hit my head on the storage shelf just above the dryer.

The bottles of fabric softener rattled, and I groaned, massaging the back of my head. “Okay, so maybe laundry room sex isn’t quite as sexy as I’d imagined,” I said with a laugh.

Xavier laughed too and rubbed the back of my head, then grasped the bottom of my T-shirt and pulled it off. He leaned down, pressing his mouth between my breasts. This recaptured my attention in an instant and, with a gasp, I dropped my head back. I arched into him, wanting more, so he gave me more, and drew a line with his tongue downward to my belly. A moan escaped my mouth and I gripped the back of his head, pulling tightly at his hair. All the heat in the world was pooling deep within me now, the rush of arousal hot between my legs, and they opened for him, wrapping around him again, pulling him close.

“Cali,” Xavier whispered, standing straight, crushing his lips to mine.

He was claiming me, and I ached for it. I wanted him to take me. I wanted to not think. Everything had been so complicated and difficult lately, but this—with Xavier—felt so natural and right. It always had. It had always been so easy to lose myself in him, and I was doing that now. We were here, in this room, but in his arms, with his hands on me, his mouth on me, his body pressed against mine, I was somewhere else entirely. Somewhere where it was just the two of us in the whole world. It was as if none of this *due destini* ridiculousness had ever happened, as if it had always just been Xavier and me.

I could feel him against me, growing harder. I reached down and fumbled with his belt and the button of his jeans. As his jeans fell to the floor, he reached for mine, yanking them down along with my panties and tossing them aside. His tongue flicked inside my mouth as he ran a finger gently along my sex. It was too gentle, and it made me pant with want.

“Please, Xavier,” I whispered.

“I like it when you beg me,” he whispered back, a wolfish grin on his face. He knew what I wanted.

“Please,” I begged.

His grin widened. “Say it again.”

“Please, Xavier, *please*. I want you. I *have* to have you. *Please.*”

He entered me, the length and level of his arousal so brutal I cried out in pain and pleasure.

“You’re mine,” he swore, catching the back of my neck and pulling me close to crush my lips against his. “You hear that? Mine,” he whispered as he pumped into me.

I nodded in assent. “Yours,” I breathed, knowing the mantra. I knew that was true. I couldn’t remember my own name, but I knew that was true. Everywhere he touched was on fire, and the strength of what was building within me was staggering. I clutched the sides of the dryer and flexed my foot around his back, trying to draw him deeper into me.

He smiled and drew me closer, practically lifting me into his arms, and with one final, primal thrust from him, I began to dissolve completely. I gripped his shoulders, raking my fingernails across his skin, nearly crying as my whole body sparked like a Roman candle on the fourth of July.

“Oh god, *yes*.” The dryer was rattling beneath us, and I was drawing blood as I dragged my fingernails across his skin, but I’d all lost control. My head dropped back in a tumult of abject ecstasy. “Oh my god, Greyson!”

**Episode 988**

XAVIER

I froze, my eyes wide as I stared at Cali. She stared back at me, her eyes reflecting my shock and horror, and she clapped her hands over her mouth with a gasp.

*Did I just hear what I thought I just heard? Yes, I definitely did. She said* Greyson*.*

Cali, my mate, had just called out another man’s name in the middle of sex. My half-brother’s name as a matter of fact. As the realization set in, I felt absolutely gutted. Had she been… fantasizing about *Greyson*, while I’d been *inside her*?

I’d been completely lost in her, in the feel of her wrapped tightly around me, breathing in her scent, listening to her soft moans. I’d been with her one hundred percent. Body, mind, and soul.

But apparently, she couldn’t say the same.

I slowly eased out of her and stepped back. I wasn’t hard anymore. There wasn’t even a single ounce of desire running through my veins. Not anymore.

Even though I’d broken the connection between us, I didn’t go far. I didn’t leave, though part of me desperately wanted to. Instead I just stared at Cali, still sitting on the dryer, and she stared back at me.

She looked embarrassed and guilty and horrified. The sight probably should have satisfied that sense of betrayal rushing through me, but it wasn’t enough. It wasn’t even close. I felt sick.

How could she do this to me? Things had been going so well for us recently. It seemed like she was really giving herself a shot at being happy with me, creating some facsimile of what our lives might look like if she truly chose me. And with Greyson out of sight and—I had thought—out of mind, I’d almost completely forgotten about the whole *due destini* situation. I’d forgotten that I only held claim to half of her heart, half of her soul, and that the other half belonged to the man whose name she’d just called out at the height of her pleasure.

*Greyson*.

My fingers curled into tight fists, and I felt my breathing pick up, a shallow panting that betrayed my hurt, anger, and confusion. What the actual fuck?

She’d even said she wanted to move forward with me—whatever the fuck that actually meant. God, I’d been so stupid to think that we were leaving my brother’s ghost behind.

Now I knew it was far from over. She’d been lying. The whole thing was complete bullshit. Cali clearly still had Greyson at the forefront of her mind. Maybe she’d never really intended to move forward with me at all, maybe she’d just been trying to placate me while Greyson was gone. Maybe—

“Xavier,” she said softly. I barely heard her. My mind was too full, swimming with all the what-ifs and implications of this horrible new realization. I felt vaguely nauseous, like I’d eaten something rotten. That horrifying moment played over and over again in my mind, and it was almost more than I could bear.

Cali stared at me anxiously, waiting for a response. I couldn’t help dissecting every minute piece of her expression—the worry on her face, the wideness of her eyes, the pout of her kiss-swollen lips.

Lips that had said my brother’s name while I was still fucking her. That anger and nausea and confusion and hurt began to bubble over.

Was that true guilt on her face? Or was she just trying to appease me? Maybe she’d never really intended to “move forward” with me, but now that the truth was out she was trying to save face, to do damage control.

Her mouth moved again. I saw the shape of my name on her lips and held up a hand.

She stopped, still eyeing me as a hundred emotions flashed across her face, too quickly for me to place them. I wanted to run away. I *needed* to run away, to clear my head, but I was still frozen in place.

“I’m so sorry,” she blurted out. “It was a slip of the tongue. A *mistake*. It doesn’t mean anything, Xavier. I prom—”

“*Doesn’t mean anything*?” I laughed, a sharp, bitter sound that made her flinch. “You and I both know that isn’t true. It means that you aren’t going to be able move forward with me, even without making any firm decisions. Doesn’t it? Because you’ll still be thinking of *him*.”

She shook her head, tears welling in her eyes. “That’s not true.”

I scoffed and backed up. “I need some air.” I hated to leave Cali when she was crying, but I couldn’t bear to stay, to just keep staring at her and reliving the moment when she snapped my heart in two.

I tugged my clothes back on in jerky motions, all too aware of the quiet sobs and sniffles coming from behind me. By the time I left the laundry room, I was practically shaking with emotion. I couldn’t wrap my mind around what had just happened.

I knew, logically, that the *due destini* was real. That Cali truly did have two mates that she was, impossibly, supposed to choose between. I knew that—just like I knew she hadn’t chosen to be a *due destini* mate, and that she was genuinely trying to make the best of the circumstances she was stuck with.

But logic wasn’t carrying a whole lot of weight for me, not when I knew just as well that when I was with Cali, I didn’t think about anything—any*one*—else. I was hers, completely. Even if she wasn’t all mine. For as much as I hated her being mates with Greyson, I could bare it if I didn’t see it. But what I couldn’t stand was the thought of my mate fantasizing about someone else during those most intimate moments with me.

I took a deep breath, trying to get myself under control. I’d never had two mates. I’d never walked in Cali’s shoes, and I couldn’t even imagine what this situation was like for her, having those thoughts and feelings for two people at once.

I wanted to be sympathetic—I knew it wasn’t her fault, and that she hated it just as much as I did. But that didn’t mean I wasn’t devastated. And that… that was the piece there was no logic-ing my way out of. No, this wasn’t Cali’s fault. But the reality of being with her still had a tendency to break my heart.

I passed through the house, only vaguely aware of the pack members greeting me or trying to get my attention, no doubt wanting me to mediate some stupid dispute. I wasn’t in the mood for conversation, much less babysitting. I needed to get out of the house.

I headed outside and breathed in the forest air. Shifting came to mind. I could feel that itch just beneath my skin, whispering how much better I’d feel with the wind rushing through my fur. But I didn’t want to chance running into any other pack members in the woods. I wanted to be alone.

So I headed for one of my cars—the last one that hadn’t been completely totaled. Hopefully a long drive would calm my thoughts.

Once I pulled away from the pack house, I drove aimlessly, mindlessly following the road while my brain spun in circles around what had happened in the laundry room.

*Will I ever get the sound of Greyson’s name on Cali’s lips out of my mind?*

I pressed on the gas a little harder. I wasn’t even sure which direction I was headed in, and I had no firm destination in mind. All I could think about was putting as much distance between myself and that memory—and Cali herself—as possible.

A sign flashed by, advertising a diner coming up at the next exit. A drink at a place where nobody would know me or bother me was exactly what I needed right now. I took the exit at the last second, my tires squealing on the road, and followed the road to the diner.

I pulled into the parking lot and then hesitated. There actually was one person I wanted to talk to. Hopefully he’d be willing to talk to me.

I pulled out my phone and dialed Colton. He answered on the first ring.

“Hey, is everything okay?” he asked.

I realized my brother probably thought there was some Silas fallout that I needed help with. “Everything’s fine,” I quickly assured him.

“Are you sure? Because you’re calling me and you have that *tone*. The one you use whenever you have bad news to deliver.”

My brother really did know me. I sighed. “It’s Cali.”

“Of course it is. What’s going on now?”

I told him what had happened, and he let out a low whistle. “That’s rough.”

“Tell me about it. She told me she wants to move forward with me without officially choosing me as her mate, but she’s clearly still thinking about Greyson, and I don’t know if I can bear knowing that I don’t have her whole heart and—”

I heard Maya in the background and stopped. Her voice grew distant, and I realized Colton must have moved away from his mate. “So what are you going to do about it?” Colton asked.

My eyes skimmed over the front windows of the diner as I considered my answer. And then I froze.

Ava was inside the diner, pouring coffee into a mug for a patron.

“That depends,” I said to Colton. Then I hung up and headed inside.

**Episode 989**

Tears streamed down my face as I watched Xavier walk out of the laundry room. I sat perched on the edge of the dryer, still naked and now shaking with horror and quiet sobs.

“Xavier,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “Come back. Please, come back.”

I knew his hearing was superhuman, that he had likely heard me as he made his escape. But I also knew—from the fury burning in his eyes, from the bereft expression on his face—that I’d hurt him. Deeply. And he wasn’t going to come back. Not yet.

*What have I done? I can’t believe I just did that.* I couldn’t even imagine how it must have felt for Xavier to hear his brother’s name like that, right at the exact moment that I shouldn’t have been thinking about anything except Xavier and how good he made me feel. What had I even been thinking? How could I have strayed so far away from what was happening right in front of me that Greyson would even cross my mind?

The answer came immediately—I hadn’t been thinking at all. *Of course* I hadn’t been thinking. I’d been so caught up in the moment with Xavier, and then my mind had gone blank and it wasn’t until I’d crashed back to reality after the height of my pleasure—after saying *that* name, the wrong name—that I’d realized what I’d done.

I felt sick.

With that one word, one name spoken at the worst possible time, I’d undone all of Xavier’s and my work at moving forward. He didn’t trust me anymore. I saw it in his eyes, heard it in his voice. I’d shattered his hope of us having that happily ever after—a fantasy he’d been indulging in more and more now that Greyson was gone. And now I’d brutally reminded him that I wasn’t his, not completely, not the way he wanted me to be. He’d never been able to make peace with that reality, and now… Would he even be willing to try again?

I had to fix this. I shimmied off the dryer and pulled my clothes on in a rush. I couldn’t just let Xavier walk out on me, on us. I had to salvage this before things got any worse. I tried not to think about that nagging voice in the back of my head—a voice that sounded an awful lot like Artemis—that whispered that if I was calling out for Greyson in the middle of sex with another man, then maybe I shouldn’t put all my chips on Xavier.

*Shut up, Artemis-brain.*

I still loved Greyson—that much was true. But he was off god only knew where, and he’d *told* me to choose Xavier. And Xavier had stayed. He was leading the pack and he was trying to be with me, even though I couldn’t outright choose him. He was showing me the loyalty and devotion I’d always hoped for. It seemed only fair that I try to do the same.

I raced up the stairs, determined to find Xavier and try to make amends for the huge mistake I’d made. But as I moved from room to room—first the kitchen, then the living room, then poking my head into his bedroom upstairs, and even looking back downstairs on the porch—I couldn’t find him anywhere.

Rishika was on her way into the house, and I caught her arm. “Have you seen Xavier?”

Her eyebrows arched. “Oh, I’ve seen him. He just stormed through here looking like he was in a real mood, then he drove off in his car.”

“What? He drove off?” Panic began spilling into my veins. Xavier had actually *left*? “Did he say where he was going?”

She shook her head. “Sorry, Cali.” She headed into the house.

I clutched onto the porch railing, letting out a shuddering breath.

*This is bad. Greyson’s gone. Xavier’s gone. What is it about me that has Alpha men running for the hills? What if he’s gone for good too?*

I shook myself. No, Xavier wouldn’t do that. He wouldn’t abandon everything while Greyson was gone and the pack needed him.

*Plus he promised he wouldn’t leave me again.* After everything we’d been through, together and separately, since the last time he’d left me, was he really going to fall back into old habits? No, he wouldn’t. I truly believed that he’d changed.

*He just needs some space. And that’s… that’s fair.*

As much as I wanted nothing more than to march in and fix things immediately, I knew the best thing I could really do was allow Xavier to take the time to process what had just happened.

*Maybe I’ll take some time to process too.*

I pushed myself away from the railing. I needed to talk to someone, to get some perspective instead of just wallowing in my self-loathing until Xavier got back. I looked around the house for Lola and found her in her bedroom.

I knocked on her door.

“Come in,” she called.

I opened the door and stepped inside. Lola was sitting on her bed, flipping through a book. She looked up when I came in and her eyes widened. “Cali, what’s wrong?”

I immediately burst into tears. “I th-think I r-ruined everything,” I sobbed. “I really fucked up.” I sat down next to her on the edge of her bed and buried my face into her pillows.

Lola stroked the back of my head. “Oh, Cali. I’m sure you didn’t! You couldn’t have.”

“I *did*.” I sniffed. “I ruined everything between me, Xavier, and Greyson. Now they both hate me.” When was she going to get to the comforting? That was what I really needed right now.

“Cali, that can’t be true,” she said. “What could you possibly have done? You could fart in front of them and they’d just say it’s made of rainbows and sunshine.”

I glared at her. “*Lola*.”

“*Hey*, I’m just saying! Whatever happened can’t be as bad as you’re making it out to be.”

“So what about saying Greyson’s name while I was hooking up with Xavier?” I asked hotly, the words just rushing out of me. “Where does that fall for you?”

“Oh fuck,” she said. Her mouth formed a perfect O. “Seriously?!”

I buried myself back into the pillow, tears coming. “I told you it was bad!”

Lola resumed petting the back of my head. “Well, uh, these things happen, right? Like arguments and in movies and stuff.”

“Not helping, Lola!”

She poked me in the side until I flipped to look at her. “I’m sorry, Cali. I’m just not sure what to say. I mean, this is definitely not great.”

“I know…” I didn’t need Lola to confirm that for me. “But it didn’t mean anything, Lola. I swear. But… I understand how it must look to Xavier. I apologized, and I tried to explain, and now I’m giving him space. I don’t know what else I can do at this point.”

Lola sighed. “I think that’s all you *can* do. I wish I could do something to help you.”

“That’s the thing, it seems like no one can help,” I said, the tears trickling out of my eyes now. “No one understands the *due destini*, and that’s the problem!”

It was this impossible thing, the *due destini*. At first I was doomed to break someone’s heart, then doomed for all of us to die if I didn’t choose between them. And now if I did choose, I’d kill one of the men I loved. How could anyone be asked that question? I would *never* hurt either Xavier or Greyson. No matter how selfish it all seemed.

My heart couldn’t catch a break, and neither could I.

I sat there in miserable, self-indulgent silence for a moment and then looked over at Lola. She watched me, a sad expression on her face. I looked down at the book on her lap and realized it was a photo album—full of pictures of Lola and Jay. She’d been decorating it.

*Buck up, Caliana. You’re not the only one hurting here.*

I took a deep breath and tried to set aside my own issues. It wasn’t like they were going anywhere. “Sorry for dumping all of that on you. How are *you* feeling?” I asked Lola. “Halloween’s tomorrow. Are you ready?”

Lola winced. “Honestly? Not even a little bit. I’m so afraid, Cali. Everything is riding on this spell. It’s going to change my entire future, and we don’t know if that change will be for the better.” She closed the book and clutched it to her chest. “And it makes me feel insane that I don’t have any control over it. I could be giving up half of who I am if I go through with this, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“I feel that.” I reached over and gently squeezed her hand.

Lola squeezed back. “I know you do.”

“And…” I almost hated to ask, but it felt wrong to beat around the bush about Lola’s very real concern. “If you do come through this spell and end up being a regular human… Would you be okay with that? I mean, I know it’s not ideal—”

“No.” Lola shook her head. “My wolf has been a part of me for so long that it would feel like losing half of myself. I… I can’t imagine a scenario in which I’d be okay with that.”

God, there was an eerie similarity between what each of us were facing. *“Losing half of myself”… That’s exactly how I would feel if I lost either Greyson or Xavier.*

I cleared my throat. “Lola, nobody would think any less of you if you were fully human. And remember: it’s equally likely that you’d become a full werewolf.”

She nodded fervently. “I hope it comes out that way.”

“And if it doesn’t?” I pressed.

Her expression turned grave. “If I came out the other end as a regular human…” She shook her head. “I know that Jay would still love me, but I also know that I couldn’t bear being around all these werewolves. It would be a constant reminder of what I’d lost. It would be too painful.”

I frowned. “Wait. What are you saying?”

“I’m saying if I’m a human by tomorrow night, I’m going back to Duluth.”

**Episode 990**

CHARLIE

My dad’s words echoed in my head. “The full truth?” I repeated. “What do you mean, it’s time to tell me ‘the full truth’?”

Silence set in on the other end of the line, and for a moment all I could hear was the panicked racing of my own heart. Something was wrong—terribly wrong. All this time that I’d thought I’d been keeping secrets from my parents—that I was a garbage son for not trusting them with the truth, for running off to live with Violet in Oregon, for dropping out of school and trying to build a future without them in it—*they* had keeping secrets of their own. Secrets that, from the sound of their voices, might change everything.

Goosebumps rose on the back of my neck as I waited for my parents to respond. Before being bitten by a werewolf, I’d never believed in magic or monsters or fate or pretty much anything you could find in a fantasy novel.

Now that I knew just how big and terrifying and mysterious the world truly was, I felt a sense of premonition settling over me. A certainty in my gut, devoid of concrete reasoning or evidence, that told me my parents had been keeping a secret with the power to break me. That I was standing on the edge of a cliff that threatened to crumble beneath my feet. And that, just like my life had forever changed when I’d learned the truth about werewolves and the stark reality of my world, once my parents voiced that secret, once I learned whatever truth they’d spent my entire life hiding, there would be no going back.

I swallowed roughly. My heart was banging against my ribcage like a caged animal, and my hand was sweaty as it clutched the cellphone. For a blindly terrified half-second, I considered just ending the call. Maybe I didn’t want to know this secret. Maybe ignorance *was* bliss. Maybe we could pretend this conversation had never happened and I could just go back to Minnesota, back to college, back to pretending I was normal. Maybe I’d figure out how to be happy… Violet’s face flashed through my mind, and I felt my stomach tighten. Maybe *happy* would be aiming a little too high.

And then my mom’s voice slipped through the phone, calm and soothing and filling me with memories of a hundred different times in my life when her love and protection had been all I’d needed to feel safe. I felt my heartbeat slow down enough for me to think around the panic and fear that threatened to smother me.

“Our family is special, Charlie,” my mom said.

Silence filled the line again, and I huffed in annoyance. What the ever-loving hell was that supposed to mean? “Okay? What do you mean, we’re *special?*”

“Charlie, I’m going to tell you everything,” Mom said. “But I’m going to need you to stay calm and just listen while I explain. And afterward, if you have any questions, we’ll be happy to answer them. Okay?”

I took a deep breath, willing my heartbeat to settle down. It would be just my luck to have a heart attack at eighteen, and I wasn’t going *anywhere* until I learned this “full truth”.

“Okay, explain.” My voice came out a little sharper than I’d intended, but I didn’t apologize.

My dad spoke this time. “Those dreams you’ve been having… with the vampires?” He waited a beat, but I stayed silent like my mom had instructed.

“Well, they’re more than dreams,” my dad continued. “They’re memories.”

I let out a yelp, thinking of the strange, terrifying dreamory that the vampire had starred in.

“*Memories?* How is that possible?” I’d learned from Violet that vampires were real, but it was one thing to discuss the reality of paranormal monsters with a werewolf—it was entirely another to learn that not only had I been attacked by a vampire, but that my boring, normal-ass parents knew about this dark world I now lived in. And that they’d known about it long before I had.

“Charlie, stay calm,” Mom soothed. “You know how we always told you that we met freshman year of college? That wasn’t strictly true.”

There was another beat as they let me absorb this information, which seemed so much less important than the apparent fact that I’d been attacked by a vampire as a child. What the hell did I care about their love story? I wanted to scream, but I waited.

*Tell me what’s really going on, Mom!*

Finally, Mom continued. “Our families had actually known each other since we were born. We belong to a special group of people. People who are tasked with keeping humanity safe from monsters.”

*Monsters? What does she mean “monsters”?*

My mind was reeling with this new information, and suddenly I realized why they were taking this so slow. They were shifting my paradigm in small doses, probably in the hope that I wouldn’t lose my damn mind by the time they were done coming clean.

“Vampires are real, Charlie,” my dad said. “And they’re exceptionally dangerous. Your mother and I… Our families come from a long line of vampire hunters. We’re schooled in the arts of tracking and destroying the beasts that threaten innocent lives.”

“Like on *Buffy*?” I blurted out, suddenly imagining my mom as a teenage vampire hunter, valley girl accent and all. If someone would’ve told me my ex Sandi’s favorite show would somehow apply to my real life, I’d have thought they were crazy.

“Um… sort of,” Dad said.

I couldn’t breathe. This was too much—and I’d already *known* vampires were real before this conversation! How much worse would this be if I were still carefree and human? Would I have believed it was real? It certainly didn’t *seem* real. Maybe this was just another one of my crazy dreams? I pinched myself hard*.* Pain flared up my arm, and I winced.

Nope, this was definitely real. But how was any of this *possible*?

Before I’d been turned by the Rogue and met Violet, I’d led an almost aggressively normal life. I grew up in the suburbs in Minnesota. My dad was a mild-mannered accountant, and my mom was a stay-at-home parent with plans to go back to teaching. Even as I racked my brain with perfect 20/20 hindsight, I couldn’t recall a single hint, clue, or memory that supported this information. If my parents truly were vampire hunters, wouldn’t there have been stakes and garlic and all kinds of weird shit in my house?

“Charlie? Are you still there?” Mom asked.

“This isn’t possible,” I said. “There is no way you two would have been able to keep something like that from me. I mean…” I felt hysterical laughter bubbling up in my chest. “Am I supposed to believe that you two went out hunting monsters every night?”

“Well, sweetheart, there’s a reason why you don’t remember any of that. When you were very young, there was an… incident.”

“We were on vacation,” Dad added, “and unbeknownst to us, our presence was detected by a local nest of vampires. We were attacked in the dead of night, and we only barely managed to fight them off. You were injured in the attack—”

Mom cut in. “It was so horrible, Charlie. I still dream about it. Finding you bloodied…” Her voice took on a raw edge. “You were so young, so terrified. You had nightmares for months, and we knew that we had to do something to protect you, to let you have a normal childhood, free from the trauma that comes along with the life that our families lived. So we took you to a witch and had your memory wiped to ensure that you thought we were just a normal family. To ensure that you could be a child.”

My mouth opened and closed. My brain was threatening to short-circuit from all of this new information, and my emotions were threatening to bubble over. I could barely wrap my head around the fact that I was listening to my pleasant, boring mom casually speaking about vampires and witches, but to think that they’d hired a witch to tamper with my brain?

My vision went red. “You *what?* So you’re telling me that my entire life has been a lie!? Were you ever planning on telling me?”

“Of course we were,” my mom assured me. “We were going to tell you as soon as you finished school.”

“But now that you know,” Dad said, “we need you to come home as soon as possible for the ceremony.”

“The *what?*”

“It’s a rite of passage for our kind,” Mom said. “You’ll be formally inducted into the Land O’ Lakes Defenders, and you’ll learn how to take down all manner of paranormal beasts.”

My overwrought mind froze on those last two words. “What do you mean, ‘all manner’?”

“Well, vampires, demons, things like that,” she said.

“And werewolves?” I blurted out without thinking.

My dad sounded surprised. “Well, yes. Of course. They’re all murderous scum, Charlie, and soon you’ll learn how to destroy them.”

**Episode 991**

GREYSON

“*Fenrir?*” Maren screamed. “Fenrir, baby! Fen, say something!”

I gently grasped her arms. “Maren, the line is dead,” I said, my voice a combination of gentle and firm. The voice of an Alpha demanding attention without resorting to raising his voice. Maren was already getting the attention of the passersby in the park. And nosy humans were the last thing we needed. “There’s nothing more we can do right now. Do you understand?”

She sank to her knees on the grass. Tears slipped down her face, and she still clutched her cell phone, that remnant of a connection to her son. “They have my son, Greyson. My sweet Fenrir. I… I can’t—what am I supposed to do? I have to get him back. He is *everything* to me.”

I knelt down next to her. “I’m sorry, Maren. I can only imagine what you must be going through right now,” I said softly. And it was the truth. The closest thing I had to compare was the memory of my father pressing a claw to Cali’s throat, and though the mere echo of that memory made my stomach lurch, I could at least take comfort in the fact that Cali was alive. That Silas was dead and my mate was safe back at the pack house… with Xavier.

My stomach twisted again, and I forced myself to ignore it.

*You made your choice. You don’t get to agonize about her right now.*

Maren didn’t have any kind of comfort to hold on to right now. Not while Hans and those other evil bastards had Fenrir.

She finally let go of her phone—only to reach out and clutch my arm. “Greyson, you have to throw the fight. *Please*.” Her eyes were wild, desperate, and shimmering with tears.

I blew out a long, slow breath. “Of course I will.”

“Really?” The hope in her eyes threatened to snap my heart in two.

I nodded and gently eased out of her grasp. “Do you really think I’d put your child’s life at risk?”

“I… I don’t know.”

“I would never let anything happen to him,” I told her. “I might still be pissed about everything you failed to tell me, but just because I’m angry at you doesn’t mean I’d ever let anything bad happen to Fenrir.”

Honestly, the thought of that innocent little boy, with all his wide-eyed optimism, stuck at the mercy of those Fae assholes made me want to burst into that fighting ring myself—and tear Hans and each and every one of his lackeys limb from fucking limb.

I didn’t even know why Fenrir had that effect on me—I didn’t even really know the kid—but something about him had gotten to me. Whenever I thought of Fenrir and his lackluster relationship with his father, Aiden, I couldn’t help thinking about my own father… How his cruelty had ruined so much of my life. Even now that he was gone, his ghost was still hanging around, making me feel tainted and broken in ways I didn’t think I’d ever get past.

I couldn’t bear the thought of anything like that happening to another young werewolf. I’d never been one to think much about kids, but Fenrir really struck a chord with me, reminded me of a younger version of myself.

And while I couldn’t go back and save my younger self, maybe I could save Fenrir.

Maren covered her face with her hands, sobbing softly. “My poor baby…” Each breath seemed to rip out of her chest, coming faster and faster until she was practically hyperventilating.

*Shit.* “Maren.” I grasped her shoulders and eased her up so she was no longer hunched over. It’d be easier for her to breathe that way, but it also made it easier for her to see my face, to keep her grounded instead of losing her mind with worry. “Just breathe, okay? We’re gonna fix this, but you can’t help anyone like this.”

She shuddered and sobbed, taking great heaving gasps to get herself under control. I never let go, never took my gaze away from hers. “Just breathe.”

“H-how can we fix this?” she asked when she’d gained slightly more composure. “I’ve been indebted to these people for s-so long…”

“Well, for starters, I’m here. And I’m going to help you.” I offered her a small smile, and she returned it with an even smaller one. “But the situation with the mob, it’s not just going to go away if I do what they want. I know how things like this shake out, how they’re going to play this—they’re just going to keep holding things over your head, blackmailing you at every turn for as long as they can leverage usefulness out of you. You get that, right? This isn’t just one fight. One job. What they have planned for you is going to make the last five years seem like a brief stint, and you’re never going to have a life of your own.”

Maren jerked out of my hold, wiping her tear-streaked face. “You’re shit at comforting people, you know that?”

“I’m just being honest.” I sighed, running a hand through my hair. “Is there anyone who can help you? Me throwing the fight is a quick fix, but what you need is a real solution.”

She sniffled. “You’re right. I know you’re right.” She paused for a moment, thinking. “Maybe Aiden would help?” Her eyes locked back on mine. “Not for me, but maybe he’d do it for his son?”

On the one hand, Aiden rising to the occasion to save his son from a terrible fate seemed like pretty much the bare minimum when it came to parenting, but on the other hand… “Are you sure? He really doesn’t seem like a good guy. He might just make things worse.”

Maren snorted. “True, but he does have a soft spot for Fenrir. What father would be willing to put their son in danger?”

I arched an eyebrow. “You’re really going to ask *me* that?” When we’d been together, I’d opened up to Maren about my father and my childhood. She knew about my history and hang-ups just as well as anyone.

“Right. Your father…” She wiped the last few tears from her face. “Well, Aiden may be a bit of a scumbag, but he’s not evil. I, um, I’m going to go find him. I think he can help.”

The thought of Maren going to Aiden alone to ask for help set my teeth on edge. “Do you want me to go with you?”

She shook her head. “No, I’ll be able to get through to Aiden better without an Alpha werewolf getting him riled up. Just meet me back at my house. I won’t be long.” She gave me a small, watery smile, and then stood up, straightened her spine, and walked away.

I watched her go, unease churning in my gut. I hoped she wouldn’t be too long.

Hours later, I found myself pacing back and forth in Maren’s house. I was still pissed at her for not telling me the truth five years ago, but even more than that, my heart was pounding with anxiety over the fact that she hadn’t gotten back yet.

*I should have insisted that I go with her. What was I thinking? Letting her face that dirtbag alone?*

With everything that was going on, Maren was definitely not safe all on her own, and I sure as shit didn’t trust that Aiden guy. Maren might have thought his paternal tie to Fenrir would ensure his cooperation, but I wasn’t going to hold my breath. I knew better than most that familial ties didn’t mean shit to some people.

I knew a deadbeat when I saw one.

I also knew a volatile abuser when I saw one, and that, more than anything else, had me treading a deep intent in Maren’s carpet, watching the door, listening for the sound of her car.

I yanked my phone out of my pocket and jabbed her contact, listening again to the empty sound of her ring tone until I reached her voicemail prompt. She still wasn’t picking up.

*Come on, Maren.*

And while I paced and worried for his mother, I couldn’t help but worry about little Fenrir too. God, I hoped he was being well cared for and wasn’t too scared—

I shook my head. *What the hell has gotten into me, caring so much about what happens to a kid that isn’t even mine?* But I couldn’t help it. *Maybe loving Cali so much has made me softer.*

Dammit. Another Cali thought. I pushed it away, ignoring that familiar twinge in my chest.

Finally the door opened, and I rushed over as Maren walked in, her head ducked low and her hair shielding her face. She walked right past me, heading for her couch.

“How did it go?” I asked.

She stopped and shook her head. “You should go.”

Something in her voice sent chills down my spine, and I gently took her arm and turned her to face me. “Maren, what happened?”

She looked up at me, and I sucked in a breath. Her left eye was swollen shut.

**Episode 992**

I lay in my bed, my mind reeling from my conversation with Lola, from the shocking revelation that if this spell resulted in the worst-case scenario—Lola becoming fully human—she would leave her life as a werewolf behind entirely and go back to Duluth.

*She can’t be serious, can she? Would she really leave everything behind?*

Jay*?*

I’d tried to convince Lola that even if she became a human, she’d still be a full member of the pack. She would still have a mate, a history with the other pack members. We’d still all love and support her, and we knew she was facing an impossible situation and simply trying to make the best out of an empirically terrible choice. I’d told her that if she lost her wolf, she’d still have a life here, that she didn’t have to leave it all behind.

But she’d been adamant. To Lola, it seemed, if she was no longer a werewolf there would be no love or joy to be found in spending time with the Redwood pack. I could only imagine what that would mean for her relationship with Jay—but it didn’t matter. Because I wasn’t going to let that worst-case scenario happen. The thought of Lola leaving the Redwood pack was completely devastating. After all, it was due to her (and Colton) that I’d met Xavier and became part of this world to begin with.

*Xavier…* I’d pushed him away, and Greyson was gone. If Lola left, I’d be all alone, a half-Fae *due destini* mate who belonged with the Redwood pack even less than Lola believed she would if she were turned human.

I pushed myself up off the bed, unable to stand the debilitating panic of my racing thoughts. I needed to get help. Perspective. Knowledge was power, and all that. Maybe some additional knowledge would help me get a handle on all of this.

I headed downstairs in search of Big Mac. I needed to find out everything I could about the possibility of Lola becoming a human. I found the witch down in the kitchen, brewing a cup of mint tea. She eyed me warily. “Hello, Cali.”

I decided to dispense with the pleasantries. Big Mac had never much liked them, for one, and since our acquaintance was on thin ice lately anyway, I figured it couldn’t hurt to get right to the point.

“So Halloween is tomorrow,” I said.

The witch eyed me, and a very familiar long-suffering expression slipped across her face. She blew out what I could only assume was a calming breath. “And?”

“And you’ll be conducting Lola’s spell. Do you really think that it’s possible that she’ll lose her wolf forever?”

Big Mac sighed and rolled her eyes. “I keep telling you all—I can’t promise the outcomes of these spells. You know as much as I do. She could become a full werewolf, or a human, or there could even be a third outcome that we can’t possibly predict. You do remember your own spell.” She gave me a pointed look, as if to drive home exactly how well *that* had worked out.

I glared at the witch. *Of course I remember—as if I can think about anything else except how I’m now holding both Xavier’s and Greyson’s lives in my hands.*

“What do you want me to say, Cali?” Big Mac pressed. “You know as well as Lola does that I can’t guarantee any sort of outcome. The spell will do as it sees fit. That is the cost of looking to magic to solve all your problems.”

I huffed out a breath. *I can’t believe I expected any answers from this witch.* But still I felt so helpless, and that feeling just multiplied and bubbled up inside me. I hated it. Wasn’t there any easy solution to even one problem anymore?

I blinked as a new idea rushed through my mind. *The orb.* It was all too easy to recall everything the orb had been whispering to me—that with its help, I could finally take charge of my disaster of a life. I could solve my *due destini* problem, and maybe with its power I’d be able to direct Lola’s spell to make sure my friend became a full werewolf and stayed where she belonged.

Once the possibility occurred to me, the mere suggestion of a simple solution to Lola’s terrifying problem, I just couldn’t help myself. This was the break we so desperately needed. And we’d certainly gone through hell trying to get that orb away from Silas and somewhere safe. Hadn’t we earned the right to harness its power to help us? Even just this once?

“About the orb,” I began. “Do you really think it’s infecting everyone with this dark power? Is it evil, or does that depend who’s wielding it?”

Big Mac’s eyebrows lifted, but she didn’t respond.

I dove in to add, “Like it’s evil because of Silas, but with the right person it could be harnessed for good? Could we—”

I stopped at the frown on Big Mac’s face. “Why do you want to know?” she demanded. “You seem awfully interested in the orb lately, Caliana. Is there something you want to tell me?”

I opened my mouth and closed it, and then shook my head. “Nope.” I didn’t like the way the witch was looking at me, as if she was suddenly suspicious of my intentions. It wasn’t like I was trying to steal the orb or anything.

*Well, it’s* kind of *like that, but Big Mac doesn’t need to know that.*

She obviously didn’t trust the orb to help us through these impossible spells that would probably just screw us over like mine had, but *her* best friend’s future wasn’t on the line. I had no doubt in my mind that if Mrs. Smith were facing something like this, Big Mac would be first in line to try to use the orb to help us.

But from the witch’s expression alone, I knew better than to push. She’d refused to use the orb to help me, and she wasn’t going to use it for Lola. It would be best to just get her off my scent so I could figure out a way to fix this mess on my own.

“Are you sure about that?” she pressed.

I shrugged. “Yeah, I was just curious. I mean, do you think that’s why Ravi attacked you? Because of the orb?”

Big Mac was still looking at me strangely, and she didn’t answer. She just let my nervously delivered question hang in the air between us until I was so uncomfortable, I was forced to add, “Well, either way, I’m glad that you’re fine now.”

As my word vomit continued, a cold, disembodied voice slipped through my mind.

*Cali…*

It was the orb. The orb was talking to me! My eyes widened, and I schooled my expression to try to hide my shock from Big Mac.

The voice continued. *Come with me, Cali. I’ll show you what you need to know.*

I cleared my throat. “Well, good chat!” I said, my voice just this side of too bright. “Good luck tomorrow! I’m sure you’ll knock it out of the park.”

Again, the witch didn’t respond.

I laughed. “Okay, bye-bye.”

I headed off, following the disembodied voice in my head.

Something about the voice just felt so… trustworthy. I knew this was a good idea. It wouldn’t harm me. It was here to help. It was the answer to my prayers. I knew, logically, that I should be wary of magical objects, but something about this just felt so right. My instincts weren’t screaming at me to stop, to ignore the voice in my head. If anything, they were telling me to obey it.

*I have everything you need, Cali*, the orb whispered. *You just need to trust me. You may be confused now, but soon everything will be revealed.*

I felt a smile tugging at my lips. For the first time since Xavier had stormed out of the laundry room, I really did feel like maybe everything really *was* going to be okay. And with each step that brought me closer to the orb, I felt hope rising in my chest. By the time I crept down the stairs to the basement, my spirits were soaring.

If I could just get my hand on the orb, I’d be able to fix all of our problems. I reached the bottom of the stairs and opened the door to the basement. The door shut behind me, and the voice abruptly stopped.

I froze, confused, blinking slowly like I was coming out of a trance. And then I saw Ravi.

He raised his head, a feral grin tugging at his lips as his eyes met mine. Then, in one smooth motion he rose, threw off his chains, and shifted.

He lunged toward me with all the devastating strength of his wolf form, snarling and ready to rip me to pieces.

**Episode 993**

XAVIER

I took a seat at a vacant booth inside the Rockaway Diner, waiting impatiently for Ava to come back out to the main dining area. By the time I’d stepped inside, intent on confronting her and asking why my ex-mate who’d come back from the dead was working as a waitress of all things, she’d already been heading to the back of the diner. Perhaps to get more of that burned-smelling coffee to serve to the patrons of this dumpy restaurant.

Seeing her inside the diner when I’d been on the phone with Colton had felt like some kind of sign—like it meant something. And even if I wasn’t quite ready to subscribe to all the woo-woo, fate/destiny/everything happens for a purpose bullshit, her presence here, only a few miles down the road from the pack house, was at the very least suspicious as fuck.

I could not, for the life of me, understand what on earth she was doing in here—wearing a uniform, clearly acting as a waitress. She was the former Samara pack Alpha’s sister. Why wasn’t she with what was left of her pack? With her gift for manipulation, she could probably take it over in no time. So why was she slinging burned coffee and greasy diner food? What the hell kind of game was she playing? Was this some kind of ploy to stay close to the Redwood pack house?

To *me*?

A waitress approached my table. Her voice was low and rough, like she’d spent decades smoking. “What can I get for you?”

“Whiskey.”

The woman gave me a look. “Well, we have Coke, Diet Coke, Sprite, orange juice—”

I interrupted her. “Whiskey. Neat.”

Her eyebrows rose, and she looked at me appraisingly. Her lips tugged up into a sultry smile. “All right then, I think I might be able to make that work. One whiskey, coming right up.”

I caught her arm. “Would it be possible to have Ava as my waitress?”

Her smile faded as soon as my words set in. “Ava? We don’t have anyone named Ava working here.”

*She must be using a new name—the plot thickens.*

“I’m looking for someone who just recently started here. Maybe I got her name wrong?”

“*Oh*.” The waitress’s eyes widened in understanding. “You mean the new girl? I thought it was Erin.”

Suddenly the double-doors to the kitchen swung open and Ava backed out with a huge tray full of food. I pointed. “Her.”

The waitress wrinkled her nose. “Oh, yeah. That’s her. So you want her to be your waitress?”

“Yes, thank you.”

The woman nodded and left, grumbling under her breath. I hoped she was still going to bring me my whiskey at some point. I couldn’t remember a time I’d needed a drink more. But I wasn’t about to wait around for the waitress to inform Ava of her newest customer and hope that my former mate didn’t cut and run.

I got up and headed over to Ava, who was dishing out plates to what looked like a family stopping for lunch in the middle of a road trip. She was so focused on the job she didn’t notice my approach. I waited until she’d set down the last plate.

“Let me know if you need anything else,” she said to her customers. Her voice wasn’t exactly cheerful, but it wasn’t entirely lacking in warmth either. It was still so hard to imagine Ava working in food service, even though I was seeing it play out right in front of me. She’d never been the type to be subservient to others, but perhaps she’d learned the hard way she couldn’t give her customers the same attitude I’d seen her use on so many others.

She left the family alone, heading to the kitchen, and I decided it was time to make myself known. I stepped out from my place behind her, stopping her just before she disappeared into the kitchen again. “Ava.”

She spun around with a gasp, her eyes widening as she clutched the empty tray in front of her. “Xavier? What are you doing here?”

I snorted. “I could ask you the same thing. You’re working as a waitress at a diner?” I couldn’t help the smirk that twisted my lips. I still couldn’t decide if this was something she’d done by choice, or if the universe just had a funny sense of humor.

“And?” She looked up at me defiantly, her expression no longer softened by shock.

“*And* it’s weird as fuck. What are you doing here?”

She shrugged. “What does it look like? I’m earning some money while I figure out what I’m going to do next.” Realization seemed to set in, and a crease appeared between her eyebrows. “But why are you here? Did you…” Her expression softened again, and something that looked very much like hope flashed in her eyes. “Did you come looking for me, Xavier?”

If I hadn’t just had my heart stomped on by Cali, I probably would have laughed in Ava’s face and reiterated just how little I cared about her. I would have taken pleasure in watching the disappointment play out in her eyes, in seeing her hurting after everything she’d done to fuck up my life. There was still so much I hadn’t forgiven her for, would never forgive her for, and it was almost second-nature to lash out at the woman in front of me—former mate or not.

But since I was feeling uncharacteristically vulnerable myself, I just shook my head and kept those cruel thoughts to myself. Strangely enough, the idea of making her hurt didn’t feel quite as exciting as usual. “Unhappy coincidence.”

Her face fell, disappointment pulling her shoulders forward. “Oh.”

And I felt absolutely nothing—no joy, no satisfaction. Just the same emptiness that had hollowed out my chest the moment I’d heard my brother’s name on Cali’s lips. I looked Ava up and down, taking in the plain uniform and jeans she was wearing. It was such a strange sight—she looked like nothing more than a normal human. After everything, it was nearly impossible to picture Ava in any kind of normal, apple-pie life. “So, where are you living now?”

“Oh, um, just a small space nearby. It’s nothing special, but it’ll do for now.”

This was all too bizarre for me to wrap my head around. “Ava, what are you doing here?”

“I told you—”

“No, I mean, why are you *here?* Why didn’t you just go back to the Samara pack?”

Pain flashed in her eyes, and she looked down at the sticky linoleum floor.

She sighed. “Now that Nolan is dead, I don’t think I belong in the Samara pack anymore. I mean, the pack itself barely even exists anymore, anyway. You saw how decimated our numbers are.” She paused, seeming to mull over her words—or perhaps whether it was a good idea to share them with me. Finally, she added, “I don’t belong anywhere, Xavier. That’s really why I’m here. I’m trying to start over, to make something of myself on my own terms. Without Nolan, without my old pack, without anyone who would use me to serve their own ends.” She lifted her gaze to mine. “And without you.”

I blinked, taken aback by the sincerity in her words. I didn’t want to feel anything for her but revulsion, and yet I was almost impressed to learn she was taking charge of her own life.

Still, my suspicions didn’t disappear—no matter how nice her speech had been. She’d still done unspeakably terrible, unforgivable things to me. And I couldn’t just set that aside. Not yet, maybe not ever.

I glanced over at the main counter and noticed a large, intimidating man watching both of us closely. I frowned and pulled away into a nearby alcove next to the bathrooms. I nodded toward the man who’d been watching us. “Who’s that? He’s looking at us.”

Ava glanced over and then turned back to me, her eyes downcast. “That’s Iñigo, the manager.”

Iñigo was still watching us like a hawk.

“What’s his deal?” I asked.

Ava just shrugged, still avoiding my gaze. “He’s all right.”

*Is there something going on between Ava and this guy?* She was acting so cagey now, and I didn’t understand why. She’d been open and honest about trying to make her own way in the world, but now that I was asking about her boss, she’d clammed up. And for Iñigo’s part, his intensity seemed a little more than idle curiosity. I didn’t like his vibe at all.

Movement out of the corner of my eye grabbed my attention, and I turned to face the new potential threat head on. I froze when I found myself staring at a familiar face.

“*Charlie?*”

The young guy froze for a second, shock and horror etched onto his face. Charlie and I stared at each other for a moment, as if he couldn’t believe I was here either.

Then he bolted.

**Episode 994**

This was how I was going to die. Not at the hands of the Manus Cruentae, or the Kollector, or Silas himself. Ravi, filled with new power and with blinding hatred in his eyes, was going to tear me to pieces in the basement of the pack house, all because I’d been stupid enough to listen to the orb.

I stumbled back, trying to put as much distance as possible between myself and the lunging werewolf. I let out a terrified scream, throwing my hands up in front of me even though I’d never felt further away from the well of my Fae power.

It was all happening in slow motion—Ravi’s muscles rippling as he lunged forward, his bared teeth flashing, ready into sink into my vulnerable flesh…

*Come on, Fae magic. Come on, come on, come on!*

Before I could gather even the smallest cluster of my own power, a magical beam blew past me, hitting Ravi square in the chest. There was a terrible cracking noise as his head made contact with the wall, and he slumped to the floor, unconscious.

Shaking, my heart thrumming so fast I could barely breathe, I turned to see Big Mac standing behind me, looking at me as if she thought I’d lost my mind.

I let out a relieved breath. “Thank god you were here!” Then the realization broke through my shock and horror. “Wait, why were you here? Did you follow me?”

The witch was still looking at me like I’d completely lost my mind. “Um, *yes*, I followed you. You were acting stranger than usual, asking those questions about the orb that really weren’t as subtle as you might have thought. And now I can see my instincts were right. What’s going on here, Cali?”

My jaw dropped.

*The orb.*

*Oh my god. The orb led me down here, directly into danger, and then as soon as I was in Ravi’s sights, it stopped talking to me.*

Horror crawled up my skin as I recalled how completely trusting I’d been in that unearthly power, the disembodied voice that had told me to follow it. I had been one hundred percent certain I was doing the right thing, that the orb was going to fix all my problems, all my friends’ problems, that all it needed was someone with a pure heart to help shape its power and intention.

But now I had a sinking suspicion that the other shoe had dropped. Had the orb led me here deliberately? Had it… Had it tried to *kill me*?

*I’m so, so stupid.*

I was suddenly very aware of Big Mac watching my face as I thought through the brief sequence of events that had brought me down to the basement and put me at the mercy of a bloodthirsty werewolf.

“Cali,” Big Mac pressed. Her voice was soft—for Big Mac anyway—like she knew she needed to be gentle even though urgency bled through into her tone. “Something is clearly going on, and I’m not going to be able to help if you’re keeping secrets.”

I felt so torn. In my gut, I felt an impulse to keep the whole “orb talking to me” situation on the down-low. The rules of reality were a bit different where supernaturals and magic existed, but even here, it wasn’t considered a great sign for someone to hear disembodied magical voices.

But on the other hand, I was scared shitless. I’d almost died. I *would have* probably died if Big Mac hadn’t followed me and stepped in to take Ravi down. And, I was beginning to realize, even though I could hear the orb speaking to me, that didn’t mean it was something I could trust or control. What if it tried to convince me to do something again? What if it kept speaking to me, kept putting me in danger, until it eventually led me to my death?

No, I had to come clean. No matter how bad it all sounded.

“The orb has been talking to me,” I burst out.

Big Mac’s eyes widened. “What do you mean, it’s been talking to you? How?”

“In my mind. Kind of like a mind link, but… different?” I’d been able to hear Xavier and Greyson in my mind for a long time now, but never once had their voices had the same power of persuasion as the orb. “It’s almost like a compulsion. It… It told me it could help me, and then it lured me down here.” I glanced over at Ravi’s unconscious body. “And you know what happened next.”

I’d never seen Big Mac look so grave. She took a step closer to me. “You need to tell me everything that the orb has told you. It’s dangerous, Cali. More dangerous than you can imagine. You can’t trust it.”

“I know that *now*!” I said. I was still shaking from my encounter with Ravi, from the realization that the orb had tried to kill me, and from the immense letdown that it wouldn’t be able to help me the way I needed it to. “But… it told me that it could fix the *due destini*. Nothing else can. Maybe it takes dark magic to fix dark magic?”

I could hear the stupid, stubborn hope in my voice, and I hated myself for it. How could I still even entertain the possibility of the orb being able to help us after what it had done? I was grasping at straws, and we both knew it. But the idea of a solution to this curse—this damned problem that I just couldn’t seem to solve—was so seductive that I still wasn’t ready to let it go.

“And that is precisely *why* it’s so dangerous,” Big Mac said, not unkindly but not kindly either. “It’s able to sense your deepest, darkest desires, promising it can fulfill them if only you follow its will.”

I blew out a breath. “But you don’t understand! It felt so right, like I was sure I was doing the right thing by listening.”

“No. Don’t do this. You’re not truly this naïve, Cali. You’re willfully deceiving yourself. Don’t you see you’re falling right into the orb’s trap? You need to fight back, or you could do untold damage—to yourself and to everyone around you.”

“But—”

She held up a hand. “This is not up for debate. We’re going to go get to the bottom of this, but first we need to take care of *this*.” She motioned to Ravi.

I cowered back a bit, all too familiar with the werewolf’s sharp teeth and claws. “Is it safe? Maybe you should zap him again, just to make sure.”

“He’s down for the count; now help me with him.”

Together, we managed to haul Ravi back into the chair, then Big Mac performed another spell to rebuild the chains imprisoning him.

I frowned. “Wait. How did he break them to begin with? I thought werewolves couldn’t break through silver?” I considered how effortless it had been for him to break through the chains, like they were made of paper instead of magically enforced silver.

*What the hell?*

Big Mac sighed, looking burdened by everything the last few minutes had thrown at her. “Normally, they can’t. This must be connected to the orb.”

As soon as Ravi was secured once more, we headed upstairs. Once we reached the landing, Artemis came running up.

“Cali! Are you okay?” she asked. Her eyes were wide, and her expression was pinched. Was she worried about me? “I got the weirdest sense and felt a dark magical force. What happened?”

I opened my mouth to explain, but Big Mac stepped in, shooting me a dirty look. “Apparently the orb has been talking to Cali, and it led her down to Ravi. We also think it helped him escape so that he could attack her.”

My sister turned her wide-eyed gaze on me. “Why didn’t you say anything? You’ve been hearing voices from a magical object?” she asked. “I don’t like this thing. It all sounds like Dark Fae magic. *Powerful*, *ancient* Dark Fae magic.”

“I don’t know a lot about Dark Fae magic,” Big Mac said. “It’s usually rare in the human world…” She trailed off, looking at Artemis thoughtfully. I didn’t like it. Whenever Big Mac looked at someone like that, she was usually considering how she could benefit from that person, and I didn’t want her doing *anything* to Artemis.

“I’ve actually been thinking about the orb,” Artemis began.

“Oh, have you been hearing the voices too?” I asked hopefully. As much as I wasn’t loving being lectured by Big Mac and Artemis on proper behavior around magical objects, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad if Artemis had been hearing it too. At least then I wouldn’t be alone.

She shook her head. “No. If the orb could be Dark Fae magic, then I might be the only one here who is able to control it.” She paused for a moment, clearly considering her words, and then finally added, “If you try to dispose of this orb without me, it will be a suicide mission.”

**Episode 995**

GREYSON

I stared in horror at Maren’s battered face. She tugged against my grip on her arm, but I wouldn’t let go.

Someone had given Maren a black eye. And I had a pretty damn good idea of who that *someone* was. Fury was a raging beast inside my chest, snarling and clawing to get out and return the damage to Maren’s face in kind.

“What happened?” I demanded.

Maren twisted out of my grasp and started toward the kitchen. “It’s fine. It’s nothing.”

I followed, hot on her heels. No. There was no way in hell she was going to show up battered, with her goddamn eyed swollen shut, and act like it wasn’t worth discussing. “It doesn’t fucking looking like *nothing*. Did Aiden do this to you?”

If that deadbeat bastard had hurt her when she’d gone to him for help to save their son, I was gonna rip him limb from fucking limb. I might not have been Maren’s number one fan, but the idea of anyone laying their hands on her to hurt her made my vision go red.

She stopped in front of the fridge, avoiding my gaze. “It’s not your problem to worry about, Greyson.”

My jaw dropped. “It’s not—”

“And anyway,” she continued, cutting me off, “Aiden isn’t going to be any help. So I guess we’re back to square one.” She shook her head and let out a long, shuddering breath.

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. How dismissive she was being. That bastard—and I knew by now that it must have been Aiden—had hurt her, which wasn’t an easy thing to do. If you wanted to hurt a Fae, you had to hit *hard*. You had to want to do damage. And she was acting like it was no big deal! Like she was resigned to the whole thing, like…

I watched her for a moment, the resigned slouch of her shoulders, the shame in her good eye, the way that, as bruised as battered as she was, her first—and perhaps only—concern was Fenrir…

The realization hit me square in the gut.

“He’s done this before, hasn’t he?” I asked, my voice deadly soft.

She didn’t respond, and that in itself was answer enough.

My fingers curled into tight fists. “You should have told me!” I snarled.

She flinched, and I hated it. It only incensed me more to see such a strong, capable woman reduced to this. I took a deep breath to calm myself. It didn’t work, so I started pacing in her tiny kitchen. It took every ounce of my control to not break something.

“I should never have let you go there alone. You shouldn’t be putting up with this, Maren. You need to get away from him, immediately.”

Still, she was frozen, silent, her gaze tipped down to the floor. I stopped in front of her and squeezed my eyes shut.

*Get yourself together. The last thing she needs is to be yelled at by another werewolf trying to push her around.* I breathed in and out until the red in my vision receded, until I could think beyond the need to lash out.

“Maren.” My voice was softer now, but no less urgent. “Hey, look at me.”

Finally, she lifted her face just enough to meet my eyes. She looked exhausted and terrified.

I took another breath and tried again. “You know you need to get away from him, right? I mean, if not for yourself, then for your son. How can you let someone like that be in Fenrir’s life?”

Her nostrils flared and she stood a little straighter, empowered by her own anger. Good. She could be as pissed at me as she wanted. I liked this version of Maren a hell of a lot more than the sad-eyed woman who’d come back to the apartment.

“It’s not like I had a choice. He’s Fenrir’s father. He loves his son and would never hurt him. But who knows what he’d do if I didn’t let him see Fenrir?” she hissed. “I know it must be easy for you to swoop in here and judge everything that I’ve done, but I’m doing the best I can, Greyson. For myself and for Fenrir. You haven’t been around. You don’t get to judge me.”

*I wasn’t there when she needed me*. I heard the unspoken accusation, as well as if she’d said it out loud.

I sighed. “Fair enough.”

I knew I’d put her in a bad spot all those years ago, but I was still so, *so* angry that she hadn’t trusted me enough back then to just be honest with me. If she hadn’t kept so many secrets, we probably wouldn’t have been here right now. And I thought of Fenrir’s wide grin, and his desperation to have a father who loved him.

*If she’d trusted me back then, a lot of things could’ve turned out very differently.*

But I knew it wasn’t the right time to push her. She looked so completely lost and miserable that all I could think about was how to help her.

I rubbed my face. “Okay, Maren. I need you to think about this for a minute. Is there a place you can go where you and Fenrir can live safely?”

Her jaw went slack. “Safe?” she echoed, then let out a bitter laugh. “Nowhere, Greyson! Don’t you get it? Don’t you think that I would have already left if I could? I can’t go back to the Fae world; it’s not safe for Fenrir. I can’t leave here, or the mob will come after me. I’m *stuck*. What part of that is so difficult for you to understand?”

Tears began streaming down her face, even from her swollen eye.

“I’m sorry. We’ll…” I sighed. “We’ll figure this out, okay? Together.”

I brushed past her to the freezer, took out an ice pack, wrapped it in a dish towel, and gently pressed it to her bruised face. “Stay here, and lock the door.”

“Where are you going?” she asked, clutching the ice pack to her face.

“There’s something I need to take care of. I’ll be right back.”

I left her standing in the kitchen and headed to my new destination.

My fury had shifted from a burning inferno to something colder than ice. From a snarling, wild beast to a silent, lethal predator.

And I knew exactly who to release that predator on.

I tracked Maren’s scent to an apartment about half a mile away. It was almost too easy to find my way to Aiden’s door.

I stood on the doorstep, taking in a few of the deep, calming breaths I’d used in Maren’s house. I needed to stay calm. It wasn’t going to help Fenrir if I just ripped Aiden’s throat out—no matter how good it would make me feel.

With every other breath, Maren’s battered face and defeated posture flashed into my mind. I bit back a snarl.

*Focus, Greyson. This isn’t about you.*

I took one final breath and then kicked the front door open, savoring the sound of the wood splintering and the shocked look on Aiden’s face as I stormed into his apartment. The werewolf was lounging on the couch, a beer in hand, probably feeling like a tough guy for beating the mother of his child.

Well, we’d see just how tough he really was.

I closed the distance between us. “You think you’re a big man, huh? Knocking women around? Is that how you get your kicks?”

Aiden snarled at me, shifting in the middle of the room. My lips pulled up into a feral grin. *Perfect*. I wanted nothing more than to teach this punk a lesson. I shifted and pounced, slamming his body into the coffee table and smashing the glass and wood.

Maybe it was the beer, or the fact that I’d caught him by surprise, but it took a pathetically short amount of time for me to pin the other werewolf to the ground. I let out a guttural snarl and then went in for the killing blow—

And stopped just short of ripping out his throat.

Other than Silas—another toxic father—I couldn’t remember a time I’d wanted to end someone’s life more. The urge to rip into Aiden’s jugular was almost overwhelming. But then Fenrir’s face flashed into my mind, reminding me exactly why I was here.

I shifted back to human and stepped away. I half-expected Aiden to press his advantage, but he shifted back as well, watching me with wide eyes.

“I want you to remember how easy it would be for me to do that again—and next time, you won’t be so lucky,” I spat.

“Are you here to threaten me?” he snarled.

I shook my head. “It’s not a threat. It’s a promise.”

“You wanna kill me? Have at it. You can take me out, but you’ll never be able to take on the whole mob. You think killing me is going to help Fenrir? It’ll only make it worse,” he said. “It’s *her* fault he’s in this position. This never would have happened otherwise. I would *never* hurt my son.”

My eyes widened. “Did you have something to do with this? With your own *son* being taken by them?”

Aiden spit. “It’s her fault for having a target on her back in the first place. Maren is why Fenrir is gone, and if she cooperates, he’ll be returned,” he said. “And if you care about him at all, I’d suggest you keep your nose out of my family’s business.”

*Shit.*

Maren was right. She and Fenrir would never be safe as long as they stayed in Portland.

I leapt toward Aiden, grabbed his arm, and wrenched it back. With one powerful twist, the bone shattered. Even for a werewolf, the healing would be painful.

“You think I’m afraid of you?” I whispered, holding the man close with my grip on his ruined arm. “You’ve got another thing coming.”

I shoved him into the broken remnants of his coffee table and walked out. Aiden’s screams of agony were the sweetest music I’d ever heard.

**Episode 996**

XAVIER

Charlie bolted toward the back door of the diner, and I put on a burst of speed and followed. All my questions about Ava and her presence here and what the hell was going on with her boss were momentarily forgotten. She wasn’t going anywhere, at least as far as I could tell. She didn’t seem skittish, and I knew that if I came back, Ava would still be here. We could pick up where we’d left off, and I could get the much-needed answers to my questions.

The same could not be said for Charlie.

I chased him down the back hallway, past the kitchen, some storage areas, and a couple of closed doors. The nauseating scent of decay mixed with the greasy food coming from the kitchen.

“Charlie, wait!” I called.

But he was already pushing through the back door and into the parking lot. I pursued him out of the restaurant with a low growl, gulping down the clean forest air. Charlie wasn’t slowing down.

“Charlie, do not make me fucking chase you!”

He looked back with a panicked expression, stumbling over some boxes in the loading bay and sending them tumbling in every direction. I leapt over them, never taking my eyes off Violet’s missing mate. Well, he wasn’t missing anymore. That was for fucking sure.

Charlie ran like his life depended on it—which, considering how pissed off I was at having to actually chase this little shit out of that diner, might very well have been the case. To say nothing of the fact that Violet was back at the pack house mourning his absence while he was, what? Working here at this diner too?

The second Charlie hit the woods just beyond the parking lot, he shifted and raced away from me in a dark blur. There was nothing left for me to do but follow him. I had no fucking clue what was going on here—which was just as infuriating as everything else that had happened during this shitty, shitty day—but if Charlie was with Violet, then he was a member of my pack. I was responsible for him.

Not to mention that if I went back to the pack house and told Violet I’d seen her mate and *hadn’t* brought him home, I could only imagine what she’d do. Violet might have been the youngest and smallest wolf in the pack, but I’d seen her fight against Silas and the Manus Cruentae. The girl was shy sometimes, but could go absolutely feral when the situation called for it, and I did *not* want to be on the receiving end of that ferocity. To be honest, I felt a little bad for Charlie. When I caught him—and it was a *when*, not an *if*—and brought him back to the pack house, his mate was gonna rip him a new one.

I dodged a large tree branch that flew past me, no doubt hurled by Charlie in an attempt to slow me down. What the hell was going on with him? Why had he left? And what was he doing *here*, of all places? Just down the road from the pack house and working with Ava? It felt too strange to be a coincidence, but I couldn’t tell what kind of purpose it might serve for him to be allied with my former mate.

Another branch flew past me, just barely grazing my back. I snarled and put on another burst of speed. Charlie’s panting breaths joined my own, the sounds echoing through the otherwise silent forest.

If I weren’t currently fantasizing about squashing him like a bug, I might have been impressed by his strength and speed. He was clearly being driven by desperation. He must have known that I wasn’t just here to talk, that I’d be intent on bringing him back to the pack house. I couldn’t quite figure out why he was so averse to going home, to reuniting with his mate, but I wasn’t gonna let him keep running from whatever had made him leave in the first place.

Not everyone was so lucky to have a mate who loved them with their entire heart, and if that kind of committed happily ever after wasn’t an option for me, I was going to make damn sure that Violet got her fair shot.

Charlie ducked around trees, leapt over rocks and bushes, and clambered up boulders in his haste to get away from me, and with every new obstacle he faced, he did his utmost to throw double the roadblocks in my way. He was a smart bastard, I’d give him that.

Unfortunately for him, he wasn’t an Alpha, and in the end he simply wasn’t strong enough to outrun me. I slowly gained on him as we raced deeper and deeper into the forest, and with one powerful leap, I tackled him to the ground, our bodies skidding and rolling across the dirt and shrubs before coming to a stop just outside a copse of trees. Charlie immediately tried to get up, but I pinned him down, my teeth resting lightly on his throat.

I growled low, the only warning I would give him. Fortunately, he seemed to get the message. Charlie froze, and then shifted back to this human form, looking absolutely terrified.

“Please don’t kill me, Xavier!” he whimpered.

I could’ve rolled my eyes. I shifted back as well, then backed up a bit to give him some space. We stared at each other for a long beat, both panting. The kid had really given me a killer workout. I’d have to rope him into training with me when we got back to the pack house—assuming I didn’t end him here in the woods.

“What the hell was that?” I snapped. “What on earth are you doing at that diner? You know that Violet’s worried sick about you, right?”

Charlie slumped back onto the ground, his mouth twisting into a grimace. “I never meant to hurt her,” he mumbled. “She just… She doesn’t understand.”

“No, *I* don’t understand. What is going on with you? What would lead you to abandon your mate? Your new pack?”

He looked up at me, still prone on the ground. He opened his mouth to speak, but then seemed to think better of it and closed it again.

“You don’t want to cross me.” I growled. “If you tell me what’s going on, maybe I can help you. I don’t want to hurt you.”

The last little bit didn’t quite ring true, but I willed it to be. Yeah, I was pissed at the kid, but if I didn’t get a grip on my anger, I might just make things worse. Clearly something was going on with Charlie. He looked terrified.

*He’s still new to all of this*, I reminded myself. *And his transition hasn’t exactly been smooth sailing.* Maybe the battle with Silas had rattled him so much that he’d gotten scared and decided he wanted nothing more to do with this life. I honestly didn’t know if I would have blamed him—at least, not if he hadn’t broken Violet’s heart along the way. She’d already endured more than enough heartache—she didn’t need any more from a wishy-washy mate.

I took a deep, calming breath. “Violet will understand if you freaked out after the battle. It was a lot for everyone—let alone someone still finding their path in this life.”

But Charlie shook his head with a slight scowl and sat up. “That’s not it at all. I’m not afraid of a fight.”

I gritted my teeth and reminded myself not to murder him just because he was being an annoying little shit. “Then what the hell is your problem? And why are you working at a diner—a diner where Ava just happens to be working? What’s going on here?”

And then I remembered that none of us really knew anything about Charlie beyond the fact that before he’d met Violet, he’d been a college student in Minnesota. Was he caught up in something? Was that why he’d run away so willingly?

I didn’t know what the hell was going on with this kid, but one thing was crystal clear: Charlie was running scared from something. Or someone.

“I think I might have stabbed Big Mac!” Charlie blurted out.

I blinked. “*What*? No, after you left we caught the person who did it. It was Ravi. He’s confessed to it and everything.”

“Really?” Charlie asked, his voice hopeful. His whole body relaxed, and he slumped back onto the ground. “Oh, thank god.”

Wow. He must have really believed he’d hurt the witch to be this relieved. Poor kid. This was all so new to him; he had to be so overwhelmed. I stood and held out a hand to help Charlie up. To my surprise, he took it and stood.

“Okay,” I said. “Now that all that nonsense is behind us, will you come back to the pack house with me?”

My own words hit me with a weight to them. Going back to the pack house meant seeing Cali. The same Cali who infuriated me to no end, but who I loved all the same.

The same Cali who’d called out Greyson’s name when she was with me.

Was I ready to see her yet?

**Episode 997**

LOLA

I watched the moon rise through my open bedroom window, my heart in my throat. Tomorrow night, everything was going to change—for better or worse, I still didn’t know. I’d been waiting so long for Halloween. Every passing day of fighting for dominance against the wolf inside me was growing more and more intolerable. Even now, I could feel her moving just beneath my skin. Howling and scratching and snarling and whimpering. Begging for freedom.

Maybe she knew that come tomorrow night she might disappear. Forever.

When I’d agreed to try that spell to get my wolf under control, I’d been so sure that I couldn’t continue to live with half of my soul trying to take over my body. But now that I was staring that deadline in the face, I didn’t feel even remotely ready. And it wasn’t just the fear of losing my wolf, though that prospect was horrifying enough.

The entire rest of my life was at stake. If everything went well, I’d live happily ever after as a full-blooded werewolf in complete control of her wolf. No more wondering whether the shift would kill me, no more shifting at inopportune times, no more posing a threat to everyone around me—and the secrecy of my entire world. I could live my happily ever after with my pack and Jay, and I’d finally, truly belong.

But even though I still hoped for that best-case scenario, I knew better than to count on it. Nothing in life was ever that easy, was it? I mean, look how things had worked out with Cali’s curse. It hadn’t gone as she’d wanted.

If this didn’t go well, I’d lose half of my soul, my mate, my place in the pack—my entire identity. Everything that made up who I was and what I wanted and where I belonged. I drew in a shaky breath and pulled my knees up to my chest, wrapping my arms around them. This all felt too big to deal with, too terrifying to face.

How was I going to get through the spell tomorrow night?

I focused on the crescent moon, shining like a silvery beacon in the dark night. It was brighter tonight than any crescent moon had a right to be, and I could feel it whispering to me.

No, not to me. To my wolf. She was tugging at me now, urging me to shift. Attempting persuasion instead of trying to fight her way through my skin like the caged animal she truly was. I attempted to brace myself like I’d done so often lately, fighting that urge, that seductive whisper that was only amplified beneath the light of the moon.

And then it hit me.

*Tonight might be the last chance I’ll ever have to embrace my wolf, to feel the wind rushing through my fur as I race through the forest—*

And then I was in motion, shifting and bounding out my window and onto the grass just outside the house. I landed on all fours, savoring the cool ground beneath my paws for one split second before I burst into a sprint, savoring the evening air as it rushed past, reveling in the freedom and thrill I always felt as a wolf.

There was a simple, pure joy that came from giving in to my animal half.

*This could be the last time I ever feel this way.*

As soon as the thought slipped through my mind, I pushed it down. I didn’t want to spoil this moment, this night.

I hadn’t made it very far into the forest before I sensed another wolf racing behind me.

*Jay.*

I put on a burst of speed. I didn’t want him to catch me. He’d been acting like my keeper lately, always babysitting me to try to keep me from shifting, or to bring me back to myself whenever I did shift. But I didn’t want to go back. Not yet. I didn’t want to give up this feeling.

To my surprise, Jay stayed a body’s length behind me. He wasn’t trying to stop me, or to get in my way. He wasn’t even mind linking with me. Realization set in and I almost tripped over myself.

*He’s going to let me have this*.

*I love you*, I told him.

And then we ran.

We ran together in the sweet, dark night, the stars and the moon twinkling above. And in this moment, despite all the fear of what was to come, everything was absolutely perfect. The soft pine needles bending underfoot, the smell of camphor and lilac, the bubbling of a nearby stream. I felt connected to this forest, to my wolf, in a way I never had before.

*Just in time to lose it all…*

I felt tears prick my eyes, and I slowed to a lope as we reached the edge of a ridge overlooking the forest. The pack house glowed in the distance, and the reflection of the moon sparkled on the surface of the lake beyond it. There was nothing but stars and the moon above us, nothing but the quiet, gorgeous forest around us.

I shifted back to human and turned to face Jay.

He shifted as well, watching me with an expression I’d never seen before. Was he thinking the same thing I was?

“I know I’m not supposed to shift,” I began. “But what if after tomorrow, I can never do it again?”

He held up a hand. “It’s okay. I understand.” His voice was soft, wrapping me in a much-needed feeling of warmth and safety. “I know how much tomorrow means, and I know why you needed this tonight. I just… I didn’t want you to go through it on your own. You don’t have to.”

I stared at him, tears spilling down my cheeks. My perfect, loving mate, who was always so patient with me. Who was always on my side, even when I was admittedly not making all the right choices. I took a step closer to him, and then another, almost without being fully aware of it, drawn to him with almost the same inevitable power that I felt whenever I shifted without meaning to.

“I’ll always be here for you, Lola.” Jay’s voice was thick with emotion and a huskiness that curled my toes. He pressed his forehead to mine. “I love you, Aaliyah Lyn Spillane. Always.”

“I love you, too, Jay Taylor Young. Always.”

Then I reached up, wrapping my arms around his neck, pulling his lips down to meet mine. I bit his lip, hard, deepening the kiss when he gasped against my mouth. My hands glided down his chest, and I yanked at his hips, pulling his body flush against mine.

I poured every ounce of love and fear and anxiety and hope into the kiss, and he took it all and gave it back as good he got it. I wasn’t the only one afraid of what tomorrow would bring.

We were almost desperate in our need, teeth clashing, hands searching for bare skin. Jay moaned against my mouth, and his fingers twined through my hair, roughly tugging my head back. I whimpered as his lips followed the curve of my neck, stopping at my pulse. He brushed a kiss against the beating vessel, then nipped at my throat.

With a feral growl, I all but tackled him to the ground, soft with grass, then pushed him onto his back and climbed onto his lap. Air escaped through clenched teeth when my fingertips brushed against his hardening cock, and he caught my wrists in his hands.

“I want to savor you,” he growled.

His fingertips skimmed up my thighs, and my hips rolled upward as he slid a finger inside me. I gasped and bucked my hips as his fingers teased me, giving me just a taste of what was to come. I leaned down to kiss him, desperate to feel as close to him as possible. I moaned against his mouth as I came undone, crying out his name in a broken whisper.

“Yes, Lola,” he rasped, dragging his lips down my neck. “Come for me, baby.”

I pulled his slick fingers away from my center and pushed myself onto his length. His hands dug into my hips, guiding me into a rhythm as he pressed upward against me. Sweat broke out on our skin as we moved together, and my fingernails dug into his shoulders as I neared the edge.

Then Jay’s hands moved over my back, rolling us over and angling my hips with the confidence of someone who had brought me to climax countless times. What this man’s hands couldn’t do.

His hands moved through my hair as he thrust into me. Another orgasm was brewing inside me, and I felt my walls tightening around him. He grabbed a handful of my hair, using it to tug my head back, and his other hand slid down my body and nestled under my thigh, lifting it around his waist.

He devoured my mouth, thrusting deep into me once, twice, three times, until I cried out against his mouth and my body clamped down around his. Pure sensation washed over me as I shattered against him, my hips rolling against his on pure instinct. He cried out my name, and then he was lost too.

Afterward, I curled into his side, resting my head on his chest, and stared up at the stars. I looked up at my mate and gave him a soft smile. *What a perfect moment.*

And then something inside me froze. Because starting tomorrow, nothing would ever be the same again.

**Episode 998**

GREYSON

My body buzzed with adrenaline, still wound up from what had happened at Aiden’s apartment, as I sped back to Maren’s place. I had a feeling Aiden would think twice before laying a hand on Maren again.

*And if he didn’t…*

My expression clouded over at the thought. If he didn’t, I would make sure he ceased to exist.

I stopped in front of Maren’s door, giving myself a moment to cool down. I couldn’t walk into her space this worked up, not when Maren was still obviously panicked about Fenrir. My hands curled into fists as I thought about the boy. I would get him back for her. I would.

Closing my eyes momentarily, I breathed deeply until the tingling in my arms subsided and my fists uncurled. Calmer, I knocked on her door. I wanted to make sure that she was doing okay—though I knew that she wasn’t. Her son was gone, and her ex was a raging fucking asshole. But I needed to check.

I shifted on my feet, waiting for her to come to the door. A minute later, the door opened widely, revealing Maren. She was chewing on her lip nervously, her brow permanently furrowed into a look of worry. Where Aiden had hit her looked even worse than before. Fuck, everything was really weighing down on her. Not that I could blame her.

She stared at me for a moment, taking me in. Then, hoarsely, she croaked out, “You went to see Aiden, didn’t you?”

I didn’t bother replying.

Her expression crumbled.

“You did, didn’t you?” she cried out. She clutched her forehead, looking ready to fall apart at any moment. “God,” she moaned, squeezing her eyes shut. “You’re just going to make everything worse!”

“No, *he* is,” I grunted, looking at her with a confused look. How could she say that? Now that the coward was sufficiently terrified, he wouldn’t hurt her again. He wouldn’t be able to use Fenrir as a pawn. Once I lost that fight, she and Fenrir would be out of their debt, and they could leave. They could find peace.

Maren dropped her hands, her eyes taking on a hopeless, faraway look.

“I know you want to fix this, Greyson,” she said. “But the bottom line is that there just *isn’t* a solution. I got myself into this mess, and now I’m trapped.”

The porch light caught on her face, highlighting the bruise Aiden had left. Anger rippled through me. I hated seeing her like this—lost and despondent. Just looking at her bruised face… It made me want to rip that asshole into pieces.

I recognized this anger. It was the same anger I felt whenever Cali was put in danger. Raw, unabated rage.

“That isn’t true,” I said fiercely. “You—*we* don’t have to accept this.”

A surge of determination rolled through me.

“I’m going to get Fenrir back, and then we’ll find a solution,” I declared. I knew we would. I wouldn’t let her and Fenrir suffer because of a few poor decisions. No one deserved that.

“But…” Maren opened her mouth to object, already shaking her head, but I stopped her.

“No buts,” I said firmly. “I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere until we fix this.” Grabbing her arm gently, I continued. “We’re going to figure this out, one step at a time. *You* need to think one step at a time.”

A moment later, she nodded. *Good.*

I released her arm, pulling away slightly.

“First things first: the fight,” I said. “It’s almost time for us to get to the venue, so let’s head out. We don’t want to be late.”

Maren released a breath, slowly. She went inside and grabbed a couple of things, including a coat. Her previously slumped shoulders straightened with renewed determination.

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s go.”

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We ended up outside the venue. *So this is where the fight is going to be*. I surveyed the building’s plain exterior, noting the chipping paint and dirty bricks. It didn’t look like anything special, but then again, neither had the supernatural dive bar Maren had taken me to in order to introduce me to the witches. You’d never know that the place was run by a ring of Dark Fae.

Maren’s eyes darted back and forth, her entire body stiff, like a coiled spring. Now that we were here, Maren was completely on edge. It was like she expected to be ambushed at any moment.

“Stay calm,” I murmured. “This will all be over soon, and then you’ll have Fenrir back in your arms.”

She didn’t say anything, just continued to look around, tense.

“I promise,” I added softly.

Maren stilled, then nodded. Satisfied that she wouldn’t tear up the place to look for Fenrir or bring too much attention to herself with all her worrying, I led her inside. We walked into the bar and moved to the back room, where the fight was going to be held—immediately.

I caught a glimpse of Aiden, who was still bruised from my little surprise visit. He was huddled together with one of the vampires. Their heads were close— nearly touching—as they talked in hushed voices. Neither one of them noticed me or Maren.

Maren glanced in my direction, then followed my gaze. At the sight of Aiden, she huddled a bit closer. Maren was a strong woman, and I hated that seeing Aiden gave her a visceral reaction like that. My hackles rose, the desire to shift and rip out Aiden’s throat rearing up inside me again.

Who was he to touch a woman, to hurt her? I felt the deep rumbles of a growl building within me. *If I took him out like the trash he is, the world wouldn’t miss him*, I thought bitterly.

I closed my eyes, forcing my wolf to stand down. I shuddered at the effort to stay calm, to not kill him right here, right now. It was important that I stayed calm, now more than ever. I only opened my eyes again once I knew I had control. I tore my gaze away from Aiden, before my urge to end him got the best of me. I looked around, taking in the rest of the crowd. I saw quite a few vampires. I snorted inwardly. Of course a bunch of fucking bloodsuckers would be here.

As I kept scanning the place, I spotted the three witches—Posie, Chloe, and Lauren. They were off to the side, keeping their distance from everyone.

Suddenly, the entire place came to life as people began whispering loudly, the entire atmosphere abuzz with anticipation. I quickly found out why.

A *truly* enormous man stepped up to the side of the boxing ring. Even though he looked perfectly human, with one sniff I could tell he was a werewolf. Despite being tall—taller than anyone I’d seen—he was far from lean. His muscles strained against his shirt, the tattoos across his white skin stretching and shrinking with his movements. As he took off his shirt, I immediately noticed that he was in peak fighting form. There wasn’t an ounce of fat on him—just pure muscle and brute strength.

Well, great.

Maren, who’d been silent until now, tugged at my arm. She peered intently at the ring, gesturing to the man I had been assessing.

“Geez, where did Hans find this guy?” she whispered into my ear, leaning close.

I eyed him again with interest. Well, if I had to lose a fight, at least it was going look somewhat believable. A wry smile filled my face. I mean, I could’ve taken him if I really wanted to, of course, but I didn’t hate the thought that I wouldn’t have to.

A ripple of movement brought my attention back to the present. It was the witches—they were winding their way through the crowd, until they arrived in front of me. I arched my brow, waiting for one of them to speak.

“Have you given our offer any more thought?” Posie asked, breaking the silence.

I scowled as I remembered their so-called “offer”. Why would I even consider it? If I took them up on it, I’d never get to see Cali ever again—and that wasn’t worth it, not even for the curse.

“Absolutely not,” I hissed, allowing malice to drip into my voice. “It’s not even an option.”

Nearby, Maren eyed me curiously, noticing my stance and expression, and presumably wondering what we were talking about.

“Pity,” Lauren crooned. “We could have solved all of your problems.”

The more we talked about Cali, the more I ached to return to her. God, I didn’t need any more reminders of her, and this conversation wasn’t helping.

“I’m done talking about it,” I said in a clipped tone, dismissing them. “The price is too high.”

The witches didn’t give any indication they were going to leave. Instead, they just looked at me silently. Annoyance crept up inside me, their eerie silence unnerving me. Fucking hell, I didn’t need this. I had a job to do, and I couldn’t afford to get distracted. Before I could say something to get rid of them, Chloe spoke up.

“Well, it might not be the only way to change your future,” Chloe said cryptically.

The words I’d been about to say immediately halted in my throat. I swallowed, narrowing my eyes at them.

“What are you talking about?” I demanded, irritated by their vague statements and even vaguer responses.

Still cryptic and not making any sense, Chloe said, “Sometimes forward isn’t the only way.”

What the fuck was it with witches and never giving a straight answer? My face scrunched up in complete irritation as I prepared a response.

“You know what—”

BOOM!

I was thrown back—along with everyone else in the room. People slammed into walls and tables, falling onto the floor. I blinked in slow motion as my ears rang.

Blood. There was blood everywhere, as well as torn limbs and barely recognizable bodies. A burning smell filled my nostrils as I registered what had happened: it had been a massive explosion, an attack.

Slowly, everything around me started to go hazy, then dark.

**Episode 999**

ARTEMIS

I watched the water ripple slightly as a breeze skirted the lake’s surface. Beside me, Cali was lost in her own thoughts, staring outward. I briefly wondered what was going on in her mind. Probably way too much.

I could relate.

Cali suddenly twisted her head toward me, chewing on her lip. I turned slightly to face her, arching a brow. It was clear she wanted to say something.

“Why do you suddenly think that you’d be able to handle the orb’s energy?” she burst out, her face drawn with deep concern.

I pursed my lips and looked away, considering her words. How could I best explain it to Cali? I knew she’d be worried about me no matter what. Try to find her Cali way of fixing things. After a moment, my gaze flitted up to meet hers.

“It’s something I’ve been mulling over for a while,” I finally said, drawing out my words. “I first got the idea after the battle, but I wasn’t sure. And afterward, there was so much going on that it never seemed like the right time to bring it up. You know, *due destini*, curses, and all that.”

Cali broke eye contact, staring down at the floor. She was silent, clearly unsure what to say.

I settled back into my seat, facing the lake once again. Honestly, I should have seen it earlier— that I might be the only one truly capable of handling the orb. But up until now, it had just seemed so fantastical that I didn’t think it could possibly be true. Now? Now, I *knew* only I could control it. It was a Dark Fae item. This I was increasingly certain of.

I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with the crisp autumn air. I had to just come clean with it.

“The Kollector,” I started, the words thick and slow in my mouth. “He once told me about something called the sphere…”

The lake blurred in front of me as I was drawn into a memory from long ago…

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The Kollector stood in front of me, giving me a charming smile. “Thank you Artemis,” he purred. His voice sent a chill down my spine. “For bringing me the blood ruby.”

He took my hand in a cold grip, and I resisted the urge to snatch my hand away. “Come,” he said. With his steps a little faster than usual, he led me to the front of the room. He sat down on the ornate armchair, gesturing for me to do the same.

“Sit,” he instructed, his eyes aflame. “There’s something that I’m looking for, and I need your help.”

I sat, uneasy about the intensity in his eyes. I leaned forward, noticing that his leg was jiggling slightly. He was more intense than ever, which didn’t necessarily bode well. I had a feeling that whatever this item was, it would be worth a lot of money. If it meant I could be free of him, I didn’t care who I had to get through to procure it.

Once he was sure he had my undivided attention, the Kollector began.

“The trees have told me about a sphere,” he said. “An ancient magical weapon, the most powerful our world has ever seen. Have you heard of it?” His voice became feverish as his eyes blazed brighter. I shook my head. I’d never heard of such a thing.

He leaned forward toward me. It took everything in me to not move back. “It has the power over life and death, and the power to corrupt minds. If properly wielded, the holder will be all-powerful.”

I nodded, keeping my features schooled into neutrality. My mouth suddenly went dry as I imagined the Kollector, able to control life and death itself. It was a terrifying thought—but the money… If he wanted this, how much would he pay me to get it?

“Where is it?” I asked, gathering details. The more information I had, the sooner I could get started. The prospect of money was too enticing. “How can I steal it?”

I figured that was what he wanted me to do. That was what I always did for him: steal.

“That’s the thing,” the Kollector said, his eyes dimming slightly. “There’s been no sight of it for centuries now.”

I snorted to myself. *Great*, *sounds easy then.*

“If it’s that powerful, then maybe it’s been destroyed already” I said. If finding it was impossible, I didn’t want to waste my time. Even if it did exist, it would be near impossible to find.

The Kollector immediately shook his head. “That’s impossible,” he said. “It can only be destroyed by a Dark Fae with a pure heart.” And then he let out a deep, bellowing laugh, his brows lifting. “Can you imagine that?” he asked. “An oxymoron if ever there was one. Dark Fae or Light Fae, they’re all corrupt, every single one.”

I didn’t comment. The Kollector was keeping the Fae war going from both sides. He benefitted from the exact corruption he helped create. He didn’t need some sphere to do that.

“Why are you looking for the sphere now, then?” I asked. “If it corrupts minds, won’t it just corrupt yours as soon as you have it?”

The Kollector’s gaze clouded over—he was clearly annoyed by my questions. He laughed nastily, adopting a harsher tone.

“As a Dark Fae, I have some natural immunity, since it was made by ancient Dark Fae,” he said. “I should be able to fight off its influence.” Suddenly, he pinned me with a look, his eyes narrowing. “Don’t think *you* have the power to do it, girl,” he warned.

It took everything I had not to roll my eyes. It wasn’t as if I even cared enough to try—as long as he paid me, I didn’t dare meddle with the objects he had me collect. Or the people.

A beat later, he added, “If I get my hands on the sphere, I’ll be unstoppable, all-powerful. There would be no one able to challenge me.”

He’d win the war. Everything would be his.

An involuntary chill went down my spine at his words. I might not have given two shits about what happened to people anymore—unsurprising when you were in pure cynical survival mode—but the idea of an unstoppable Kollector was chilling. Even to me.

The Kollector eyed me, an alarmingly innocent smile spreading across his face. He was truly a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

“Can you imagine how I’d reward you if you were the one to deliver to me such an artifact?” the Kollector crooned.

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I gasped softly as I finished telling Cali the story, jerking back to the present. I bent over, pressing my forearms against my thighs, taking deep breaths.

“Artemis?!” Cali asked, alarmed.

“I’m fine,” I said. I just needed a couple of moments to gather myself. Revisiting my time with the Kollector… It was never exactly pleasant. I almost didn’t recognize that version of myself anymore.

Swallowing audibly, I straightened. That version of me had only cared about making enough money to eat that day. She hadn’t cared about the way she made that money. She hadn’t cared about how many people she hurt. She just hadn’t cared. She had just wanted to be free of that tyrant.

I glanced at Cali who wore a look of complete concern. My expression softened as I realized that this sister of mine had already changed me so much. A bittersweet smile filled my face as gratitude flooded me. Cali had broadened my world, opened me up to a softer side of myself. She had unlocked the part of me that cared—about others, about people.

“I’m fine,” I said. “I promise. Just not too fond of the Kollector and any memories with him.”

Cali nodded. “But he really talked about that? A ‘sphere’ with the power over life and death? The power to corrupt minds?”

“I swear.”

She stared at me, her eyes wide and her expression incredulous. “That’s got to be the orb!” she exclaimed, enunciating each word.

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, that’s what I’m saying,” I said dryly.

“So it originally came from the Fae world?” Cali asked, still trying to piece everything together. “And it’s possible that only a Dark Fae with a pure heart will have the power to resist its call?” She shook her head, giving me a little smirk. “Well shit,” she drawled, sarcasm lacing her voice. “We’re fresh out of luck, then, huh?”

I reached over and gave her a little shove, chuckling. Cali responded in kind, both of us caught in a rare moment of pure happiness.

All of a sudden, Cali sobered up, her laughter stopping abruptly. I quickly quieted down as well.

“What exactly does that mean?” she asked, looking me in the eye. “Even if you were able to resist the orb because you’re part Dark Fae, how would it be destroyed? Where would you take it?”

I sighed in frustration, rubbing at my face. “I don’t know,” I said, shaking my head. I hated that I didn’t have the answers. “All I know is that it’s too much of a coincidence for the items *not* to be one and the same.”

In the end, the Kollector had sent me to capture a phoenix instead, and he’d never brought the sphere up again. So, there was no way for me to be sure. But I had a *very* strong feeling that the orb and the sphere were the same thing.

And if I was right, nothing good would come of it.

“If they are the same,” I continued, “then there’s no way you and Big Mac can take care of this on your own. We need more help. More *Fae* help.”

Cali looked at me quizzically. “What does that mean?”

“I think…” I breathed, slight dread pooling in my core. “I think it means that I need to go back to the Fae world.”

**Episode 1000**

I gaped at Artemis, not quite sure I’d heard her right.

“Whoa, hang on,” I said, eyes wide. “You want to go *back* to the Fae world?”

Artemis nodded, her expression determined. I let out a choked sound as I shook my head vehemently. The Fae world needed to be our last-ditch option, not our first thought. There was a freaking war going on there! There was no telling what the orb, or the sphere, or the Golden Globe—*whatever* it was called—would do.

“In case you’ve forgotten,” I reminded her, giving her a pointed stare, “we’ve got a Fae on speed dial—you know, our *mother?* And what about Torin and Astrid? I mean, I know they’re really into *Nailed It!* right now, but I’m sure they’d help us.”

Artemis cocked her head, as if she was just remembering them. “Oh,” she said. “Right. But they’re Light Fae.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Sometimes, Artemis could be really… *dense*.

“But what about you?” I asked.

Artemis blinked, clearly caught off-guard by my question. “What about me?”

“You’re Dark Fae and Light Fae,” I pressed, stating it matter-of-factly. “I mean… your dad, our mom? Does Fae magic work that way?”

“Yes,” she said. “I am.”

“But in the Fae world,” I said. “My—*our*—grandma gave me this stone to detect Dark Fae.”

Artemis looked at me quizzically, clearly lost. “And?” she probed.

“*And*…” I started, “it didn’t work on you.”

My shoulders slumped at the realization. I was getting nowhere with this. I broke my stare-off with Artemis, focusing on the lake as it glowed under the setting sun.

“It probably didn’t account for any Light-Dark Fae, Cali,” she said. “It’s not very common. Not with the way the war is going back there.”

“And what about your blood?” I asked. “When you tried to heal Xavier from the silver trap?”

Artemis shrugged. “It didn’t do anything.”

Could Artemis being both Light and Dark Fae really give her a leg up with the orb? I felt fresh out of ideas, but I didn’t like the thought of her trying to take this thing alone. Not if what the Kollector said was true and the only person who could handle the orb was a Dark Fae with a pure heart.

We sat in silence. Finally, I glanced over at her. Artemis’s lips were pursed into a thoughtful pout, her brows furrowed. Her eyes had adopted a faraway look, like she was puzzling through something—something important.

“What are you thinking?” I asked.

Artemis startled, sliding her gaze toward me. Realizing I’d been watching her, she shrugged again. “We should ask Mom about the sphere,” she said. “Just in case she knows something we don’t.”

Oh. Duh. Why hadn’t I thought of that?

“I mean,” Artemis continued, clearly thinking through all our options, “*I* hadn’t even heard about it until the Kollector brought it up. Mom’s Fae. She might know something more that I don’t.”

“True,” I said.

“Yeah,” Artemis agreed. “We have to start somewhere.”

In a flash, I pulled out my phone from my back pocket and opened up our mom’s contact. Pressing on the camera icon, I FaceTimed her.

Almost immediately, the screen was filled up by our mom’s smiling face—she was clearly thrilled to see us.

“Oh, my girls,” she murmured, nearly tearing up. “How are you? It’s been too long since our last call.”

“Hey Mom,” I said. “We wanted to ask you about something.”

“Are you both eating enough?” Mom demanded, peering closer through the phone. “Cali, you’re looking a little stressed. Is it from that curse? Oh, that reminds me, what’s happening with that?”

“*Mom*!” I interrupted. At this rate, Artemis and I would never get a word in, so I had to take matters into my own hands. “There’s too much to get into with the curse, but I’m not in any danger anymore.”

Well, technically that wasn’t true, but there was no need to worry my mom. Or for me to go all doom and gloom in that department. I softened as I glanced at her face. She’d already been through so much, I didn’t want to burden her with anything else. So I plastered an artificial smile onto my face and lied.

“We found a solution at the library!” I exclaimed brightly, knowing Mom wouldn’t stop with the questions until she was satisfied. I ignored the little side eye Artemis threw me. I’d explain it to her later.

“Oh, thank goodness,” Mom breathed, dramatically falling back on the couch she was sitting on. She opened her mouth to say something else.

“Yes, it’s great,” I said quickly, before Mom could get a word in. “But actually, Artemis and I called because we have a question.”

Mom straightened, brows raised. “What is it?”

Artemis took the phone from my hand, bringing it up to her mouth. At that angle, the camera had a full view of Artemis’s nostrils. I giggled to myself.

“Did you ever hear anything about something called ‘the sphere’?” Artemis asked loudly, painfully enunciating each word, as if our mom wouldn’t be able to hear us.

Laughter built up in my throat at how ridiculous Artemis sounded and looked, but I forced myself to keep it down. Technology was so *not* her friend. I just silently looked on, listening to what they had to say.

“The *sphere*?” Mom asked apprehensively.

“Yes,” Artemis responded, each word still loud and slow. “All-powerful weapon, can bring back the dead, seeps into your mind like an evil whisper.” Artemis peered down at the camera. “Ringing any bells?”

My mom’s eyes went as wide as saucers. “That’s powerful Dark Fae magic, girls,” she said accusingly, her voice high-pitched with concern. “What are you two getting into?”

I snatched the phone back from Artemis.

“Er, we’re just, uhhh,” I stammered, trying to fix the mess Artemis had caused. “Research! Artemis… She’s teaching me all about the Fae world.” I nodded to myself. Yes, that sounded plausible. Kind of. “You know,” I drawled out, waving my free hand. “Getting in touch with our ancestors. Family project. Good stuff, really.”

Mom seemed unimpressed, her eyes still narrowed with faint suspicion. But the way she’d reacted earlier, and her expression right now… I could tell that she knew something.

“So,” I pressed, keeping my voice chipper. “Do you know it?”

Frowning, my mom slowly said, “It’s funny you should bring that up.”

Artemis perked up, coming closer.

“Kadmos spoke of it often,” Mom said. “At the height of the war, there were whispers that the sphere would be the one thing powerful enough to end the fighting once and for all, and Kadmos was determined that he should be the one to find it.” Her voice got quieter. “He seemed to think that he was the only person with the power to use it safely, though it seemed far too dangerous a risk to me.”

Well, fuck.

Mom shook her head, like she was trying to shake the bad memories from her mind.

“But it was always more of a story than anything else,” she concluded. “I wonder what the Fae world would be like now, if he’d been able to locate it.”

I shot Artemis a look, my eyes wide. There was no way all of this was a coincidence.

Noticing my look, Mom frowned again.

“This isn’t anything you girls should be discussing,” she warned. “It’s far too ugly. There’s so much about Fae heritage that is wonderful.”

She shifted her attention to Artemis, who was still beside me.

“Artemis,” she called out. “Have you told Cali about all of the wonders of our world? The beauty?”

Artemis’s lips formed a thin line. “In my experience, the Fae world didn’t offer much wonder or beauty.”

Mom’s mouth popped open, sadness filling her eyes. It was like she’d been punched in the gut.

“Just out of curiosity,” I said, jumping in before my mom could say anything else. “This sphere, how would one destroy it?”

Mom promptly forgot about Artemis’s statement and pinned me with her worried look. *Shit*. I wasn’t exactly doing a good job of keeping her worry-free.

“What is this all about?” Mom demanded, stress lines forming on her forehead. “The sphere certainly doesn’t even exist. Even if it once did, there’s been no sign of it for hundreds of years. It’s nothing that you girls need to be worrying about.”

“But what if we already… have it?” I blurted out.

“YOU *WHAT*?” Mom screeched, her eyes wide as she clutched her chest in panic. She leaned forward.

“Smooth,” Artemis muttered under her breath, giving me a glare.

“It’s totally fine, we’re fine!” I assured. “It’s just—well, we’ve got this orb thingy in the house,” I said hastily, trying to de-escalate the situation. “An orb that can bring back the dead, and that seems to make people awful to each other. We have to get rid of it, that’s all. No biggy.”

The phone dropped from Mom’s hands, toppling to the floor. I winced at the sound of the impact. Well, that hadn’t worked.

“Mom?” I called. “Hello?”

A moment later, her face filled the screen once more, panic firmly in place. I grimaced as I noticed the vein on her head throbbing. She was *so* not calm.

“Girls, listen to me,” Mom urged, her voice low. “You need to get out of that house. Don’t pack a bag, just leave. Immediately.”

**Episode 1001**

XAVIER

I breathed out slowly, frustration building up inside me. I leaned against the diner building’s wall, crossing my arms as I listened to Charlie drone about how he didn’t need me and how he was doing fine and how it would be best for me to go…

God, at this point, I wanted to throw him in the trunk of my car and drive him back to the pack house, just so I wouldn’t have to listen to this bullshit.

“Look, this isn’t necessary,” Charlie insisted, his voice scratchy. “I don’t need any help. Like I said earlier, I just can’t come back.”

I shook my head for what had to be about the thousandth time. He didn’t understand how a pack worked.

“Too bad,” I grunted, narrowing my eyes at him. “You’re coming back with me, and you’re going to explain what’s going on to your *mate*. What you’re doing isn’t fair to Violet.”

Charlie’s face twisted with what looked like frustration. Looking upward, he threw his hands up in the air, blowing out a breath. A moment later, his arms fell to his sides as he met my eyes again. He opened his mouth a couple of times, his hands curling into fists. He looked like he wanted to argue—if he wanted to start something, I was more than ready to oblige.

I pushed away from the wall, straightening to my full height and giving him a warning look.

Charlie held my gaze for a moment but then decided against it, knowing it was pointless. He uncurled his fists and released a slow breath. Pushing past me with slumped shoulders, he led me back through the diner to the back.

“How’d you find this place?” I asked.

“Ava,” he said simply.

“Wait, hold up,” I said, my brows lifting in surprise. “You’re living with *Ava*? *Ava* helped you find this place?”

Charlie avoided my stare, mumbling, “It’s complicated.”

“Yeah, obviously,” I said, still baffled. How did that bitch fit into all of this? “You’ve clearly lost your mind. Let me explain something to you, Charlie: Ava isn’t someone you can trust.”

I sighed. What business did she have helping him? Someone who was mated to a wolf in my pack. He was part of my pack. *My* pack.

“Just get your shit, and let’s go,” I told him.

Shit, this place was so tiny, I felt enormous. I surveyed the place, noticing the lack of stuff. A small twinge of sadness hit me, but it left as quickly as it came. In normal circumstances, I probably would’ve felt really bad for Ava. Living in the back room of an already shitty diner? But no fucking way would I give her that satisfaction.

“I don’t want to go back,” Charlie said in a low voice. “I *can’t*.”

“Give me one good reason why you can’t,” I growled. “Then maybe I’ll listen to you.”

I was met with silence.

Sitting down, I waited for Charlie to finish packing up. God, what was taking this kid so long? He had a backpack at most.

All of a sudden, the door opened and a figure came in. Ava.

She was dropping her keys on the table by the door when she suddenly froze at the sight of me. For a second, her face lit up, her expression tinted with hope.

“Xavier?” she said tentatively, her voice soft. “What are you doing back here?”

“I’m not here for you, Ava,” I said coldly, realizing what it probably looked like to her. I couldn’t risk her thinking the wrong thing. “I’m here to take Charlie back home—where he belongs.”

Immediately, Ava became guarded, narrowing her eyes at me.

I scowled right back. “I don’t know why or how you two teamed up out here—”

“I was helping him,” she scoffed, her face twisting up into something ugly. “He was scared and alone and was going to sleep who knows where.”

I glared at Charlie who said nothing. “He belongs with our pack,” I growled at Ava.

Ava’s face fell. “And I don’t,” she said. “I get it, Xavier.”

*Good.* That was what a traitorous liar like her deserved.

“You know that you don’t.” I injected malice into my voice, hoping that it would drive the point home.

Ava looked away, her shoulders caving in. She let out a sigh, not saying anything.

“I don’t belong with the Redwood pack, either. Not right now.”

I swung my gaze toward the source of the voice—Charlie. I glared at him, annoyed at how annoyingly stubborn and careless he was being.

“You can keep repeating that,” I bit out, my voice hard, “but your mate crying on the couch, waiting for you to come home, says otherwise.”

I shifted my gaze downward, noticing that Charlie was holding a packed duffle bag. Thank god. I stood up, ready to leave. Even though my whole body tensed up at the thought of what had happened with Cali in the laundry room, I still wanted nothing more than to go back to her.

“That’s that,” I said gruffly, leaving no room for conversation. “It’s time to go.”

Charlie sighed, his face set into a miserable expression. “Fine,” he ground out. “Just give me a second to go to the bathroom.”

Without waiting for an answer, Charlie dropped his duffle bag and marched toward the bathroom. What the fuck had happened to make him run away like this? And from Violet? None of this was making sense.

I scrubbed a hand across my face and rolled out the tension in my shoulders. I noticed Ava was still standing there awkwardly. Suddenly, I realized that we were very, very alone.

Ava lifted her face until her eyes met mine. “You don’t have to go right away, you know,” she told me. “Do you want some dinner?”

For a second, all I could do was stare at her. Was she crazy?

“Dinner?” I said flatly, sarcasm bleeding into my voice. “Seriously?”

Ignoring my reaction, Ava moved in closer, placing her hand gingerly on my chest. I could feel her warmth through my shirt. I glanced down at her hand. It was so small, pressed against me. So delicate.

When I didn’t push her off, Ava moved a bit closer.

“I hate the way things are between us, Xavier,” she said softly, her voice filled with longing. I stared into her eyes, which teared up with emotion. “I know everything in our past is so complicated, but I really am making an effort to move forward, to be a new person.”

I broke our eye contact and looked around the room. It really wasn’t much to show for anything. It was as shitty as the diner. Then I thought about her job as a waitress. How she was working as one was beyond me. I softened slightly.

There was a chance she was telling the truth. I met her eyes, which shone brightly under the dim lighting. It really did seem like she was trying to start a new life, an honest life.

Ha. Maybe.

My back went rigid as I steeled myself against the thoughts of Ava’s supposed newfound innocence. None of this—*none* of it—could make up for all that she’d done.

“It’s too late,” I said harshly, my body tingling with increasing anger.

Unfazed by my reaction, Ava softly whispered, “I love you, Xavier.”

*I love you, Xavier*. I was instantly reminded of how she’d said those words as Cali—my *real* mate—to… to *trick* me into sleeping with her. I stared at her in disgust and anger as I thought about how she’d used me, used those words against me. She had no remorse, none at all, about manipulating me. She hadn’t changed. She’d never change.

Before I knew it, I had her up against the wall, her wrists pinned underneath my hands. My vision spotted with red as hot anger rolled through my body. In this moment, I hated her. I hated her and everything she’d done to try to destroy me. I hated everything she’d done to get between Cali and me.

Her wide eyes searched mine frantically as the quick beats of her heart filled the silence of the room. This close, I could see the pulse of her arterial vein in her neck. One quick snap of my teeth and she’d be gone—for good this time.

I leaned in closer, taking in the sweat that glistened on her collarbone, highlighting the smooth curves of her skin. My gaze flicked predatorily over her face, which was flushed. Whether with desire or panic, I couldn’t quite tell.

My gaze roamed down full, pink lips. It crossed the planes of her face and took in the slenderness of her neck. Her scent… I breathed it in deeply. I met her gaze. God, that look in her eyes…

I leaned in even closer.

**Episode 1002**

GREYSON

I blinked rapidly, my vision slowly pulling itself out of the darkness. My throat felt rough, dry. I coughed a couple of times, clearing the debris that had settled in my mouth. The back of my head pulsed with heated pain as I finally came to. The explosion… It must’ve knocked me out momentarily.

My back was pressed against the wall and my ears were still ringing. I used the wall for support as I stood. Slowly, the smoke started to clear, the ringing in my ears subsiding with it.

As the ringing in my ears began to clear, the horrified screams and wails of the people in the bar replaced it.

I rubbed my hands against my eyes in an attempt to clear my vision—and the fog that seemed to take up permanent residence in my mind. It was no use. This place was fucked, and I would be too if I didn’t act fast.

I dropped my hands to my sides and looked around groggily. People of all ages were trapped underneath debris from the blast, while others were running around with bloody wounds. Some lay on the floor, lifeless. Others were crying out in pain, feeling for a lost limb. We were in hell. There were so many people hurt…

I suddenly became hyperaware of my surroundings. *Maren*. Where was Maren? I needed to find her.

Ignoring the throbbing in my head, I pushed and fought against the throng of people fleeing the chaos. Frantically, I searched the sea of faces.

*Where is she? Where is she?*

Finally, I spotted her, lying unconscious in a corner. *No, no. Fuck, no.*

I raced over to her, not caring who I trampled along the way. I could feel my heart in my throat, pounding fast and hard as fear gripped me. She had to be alive, she had to be.

I knelt down next to her, gingerly pressing my ear against her nose, praying that she was still breathing.

*Inhale, exhale.*

Relief flooded through me. She was still alive. Alive, but unconscious.

Without hesitation, I scooped her up, balancing her across my shoulders while I gripped her hands and legs. My body hunched over ever so slightly because of the added weight on my back. I rushed outside, knowing that the building likely wasn’t structurally sound. The explosion would’ve weakened this place—at this point, it was probably just moments away from collapsing. Whoever had done it had really intended to do damage.

Once we were outside, I set Maren down, making sure to be gentle. As I placed her on the ground, she stirred, blinking awake. I dropped down to my knees, cradling her head. She looked up at me, confused and disoriented.

“Greyson?” she croaked, her voice scratchy from the smoke.

I touched her cheek softly, making my presence known.

“You’ll be fine now,” I whispered. “You’re fine.”

I helped her sit up, only letting her go once I was satisfied she’d be able to hold herself up. Sirens filled the night air, bringing my attention back to the smoking building. I could still hear the moans and wails of the people trapped inside with no way to get out.

I knew what I had to do.

“Stay here, and stay still,” I ordered Maren, pinning her with a look. “Don’t move.”

Without waiting for her response, I got up and started making my way back toward the building. Vaguely, I heard a voice in the background, calling to me.

“It’s not safe!” someone cried out. “The building might fall!”

I ignored whoever that person was, not bothering to assure them that I would be fine. There were people stuck in there, and I was stronger than most. I knew I could help them—even if it was just one person—until help came. I knew Cali would’ve done the same.

My heart jerked as I thought about Cali. If she’d been here, I was positive she would’ve already been in the building, dragging wreckage off survivors—maybe she was rubbing off on me. I couldn’t help but be comforted by the thought.

But as I got closer to the building, the grim sight immediately cleared my mind of any thoughts of Cali. I didn’t have time to think about her, or anything else—not right now.

I plunged back into the dark chaos, the smoke still filling the air. I waved my hands in front of my face, trying to get a better look and figure out where I was needed.

As I picked my way through the building, I heard a familiar voice cry out.

“Lauren!” the voice screamed.

I swiveled to the right.

“Chloe!”

I rushed forward, following the sound until I came across a lone figure hunched over something. It was one of the witch sisters—Posie. And her two sisters, Lauren and Chloe, were lying motionless, pinned underneath a huge beam that had come down during the explosion. I swore under my breath, urging myself to get to them faster.

Posie was desperately trying to pull the beam away from her sisters, probably too hysterical to use her magic. I took in the size of the beam, following its length with my eyes. It nearly touched both sides of the room. Even if Posie had been in the right state of mind to use her magic, it would have taken everything she had to move it.

Posie turned toward me as I came up beside her. Her eyes were wide and wild, filling with tears as panic overtook her.

“Please,” she begged, sobbing. “Please help me! I need to get them out of here!”

The walls of the bar groaned as more debris fells from the walls and ceiling. We needed to get the fuck out of here.

Posie jumped, her body trembling.

“Please,” she cried. “Everyone’s shouting that the building is about to collapse!”

I didn’t say anything. I just leapt into action, determined to get all three sisters out of here alive. The heat of the building was almost suffocating, and the smoke burned my lungs. Still, I fought through it all, positioning myself at the far end of the beam. I reached down, grasping both sides. Then, using all my strength, I slowly pulled the beam up.

My body ached at the weight, but I held fast. I lifted the beam higher, just enough for Posie to drag her sisters out of the way.

Once I saw that Posie had pulled Lauren and Chloe away from the beam, I dropped it with a thud. My body was slick with sweat, and my chest heaved from the effort.

I raced over to where Posie had dragged Lauren’s and Chloe’s still forms. Posie was frantically trying to pick up a still-motionless Chloe, but she was failing. For the first time, I noticed the gash on Posie’s leg and realized that she was too weak and injured to carry even one of her sisters.

I pushed Posie away and grabbed Chloe and Lauren, balancing one on either shoulder.

“Follow me!” I shouted at Posie, hoping she’d able to hear me through the chaos.

Posie grabbed a fistful of my shirt, staying close as I cleared a path toward the door. I tried to ignore the painful sight of the dead and severely injured people around us. The building groaned again, its weak walls trembling.

*Shit.* We needed to get out—right now. I walked faster, no longer paying attention to my surroundings. My vision tunneled as I focused on getting outside.

Then, suddenly, I was greeted by the harsh, bright streetlights and the open air. I gulped in the fresh air as Posie moved out from behind me, releasing her hold on my shirt.

We’d made it out. We were safe. And not a moment too soon.

Dust and small pieces of debris rushed out as the building collapsed behind us. Posie and I stumbled forward, shoved by the sheer force of the building’s fall.

Fuck.

Seconds. We had avoided being crushed by sheer seconds.

I walked forward, emerging from the smoke with both Chloe and Lauren still on my shoulders. I was met with claps and whistles as the crowd that had gathered on the street cheered.

Someone called out, “He’s a hero!”

No I wasn’t. It was what anyone would do.

What Cali would have done.

Ignoring the crowd, I moved away from the rubble, gently putting the two women down on the street. Posie dropped to her knees beside them, just as Chloe’s and Lauren’s eyes fluttered open. Posie cried out in relief, looking up at me.

“You saved our lives,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. “All of our lives.”

I shifted on my feet, feeling awkward. I waved her off.

“It was nothing,” I said. “I’m glad you’re all okay.”

Posie stood up, her eyes never leaving mine.

“It’s not nothing,” she insisted, unrelenting. “You’ve saved our lives. We owe you a debt, Greyson Evers.”

I broke away from her gaze, searching for Maren. Fuck, had she moved? I’d specifically told her not to.

“It’s fine,” I said dismissively, not really paying attention. Was Maren taken by Hans? Or by Aiden? “No debt needed. We’ve already established that you three don’t have anything that I want.”

In a flash, Posie snatched my arm, tugging it aggressively. I slid my gaze toward her, surprised by her sudden strength.

“You don’t even know what it is that you want,” Posie said, her voice low. “Not yet. But when you do figure it out, come find us. We’ll be waiting.”

**Episode 1003**

I honestly couldn’t believe how dramatic my mom was being. Seriously, was this some kind of bad *I Know What You Did Last Summer* thing?

“*Mom*,” I groaned, feeling like I was fifteen again, dragging out the word. Because she just didn’t *understand.* I wasn’t a kid anymore. I’d dealt with bigger and badder things than I’d ever let my mom know about—seriously, I needed to make sure Artemis never told her about the whole Silas and Demeter battle thing. Because if my parents ever found out about it, they might haul me back to Minnesota and never let me go.

“Mom, we’re all safe and we’re making sure no one’s acting under the orb’s influence,” I tried to assure her, but I could tell by her expression she wasn’t buying it.

“Caliana, listen to me!” she shouted, the worry in her tone scaring me. “If the sphere is really there, if we’re talking about the same thing, then you are in grave danger. You *need* to get out. I’ve never heard of a way to destroy it. The best thing you can do is save yourselves by getting out of its presence. Get far enough away that there couldn’t even be the *possibility* you could be under its influence. Now.”

“Okay,” I sighed, exasperated. “We will.”

“Promise me, Cali,” Mom urged, leaning in close to the screen—a gesture that usually made me laugh. But now it just made me feel scrutinized, like a bug under a microscope. I’d already messed up with the orb once. What would my mother say if she found out about that?

“I’m sorry, Mom,” I forced myself to say. “You’re… you’re breaking up. I think the connection is bad, but we’ll talk soon, okay?” And then I hung up.

So now I could add *terrible* *daughter* to the growing list of things to feel guilty about.

“What do you think?” I asked her, trying to deflect away from my genius decision to hang up on my own mother. “Is she right to be this worried? Should we be running out of here?”

“Orla hasn’t been around magical things for a long time,” Artemis reasoned. “She’s probably just lost her nerve. If the orb really is the sphere, then we have a responsibility to get rid of it. We can’t just leave it lying around for someone to find.”

I nodded. I didn’t love that Artemis had just called our mother soft, but I knew there was a more than likely chance she was right. I just wished that Xavier were here. Or Greyson. Both of them would have been ideal.

Why were my mates always so emotionally unavailable in times of crisis? Honestly, this was becoming a bit of a pattern.

“What are you thinking about?” Artemis asked, studying my expression critically.

“Nothing!” I blurted out, not wanting to let her in on my mind’s latest annoying tangent. “Just—we need to tell Big Mac about this.”

Luckily she was easy to find, as she was in the living room with Mrs. Smith. They were working on a big puzzle of the Portland city skyline, with all of the pieces laid out on the coffee table in front of the couch. Mrs. Smith was holding her chin in her hand as she studied the puzzle. They had all the edges laid out and connected, but the middle still eluded them.

“I think we should split the pieces up by color,” she mused to Big Mac.

“I think I could wave my hand and the whole thing would assemble perfectly,” Big Mac replied, raising an eyebrow.

“Hey,” I interrupted, taking a seat next to them. Big Mac eyed Artemis and me suspiciously. I tried not to bristle under her gaze.

“Are you back to explain how you plan to take the orb and dispose of it with your Dark Fae magic?” Big Mac asked, looking at Artemis.

“Not exactly,” I answered for her. I filled her and Mrs. Smith in on everything Artemis had just told me about the sphere. But Big Mac seemed completely unmoved by the new information.

“That’s a terrible idea,” she told us, once I paused for air. “Artemis might be a Dark Fae, but she’s still practically a child.”

Artemis grimaced, tensing up like she was ready for a fight. That was the last thing we needed, a Fae-on-witch fight in the middle of a very explode-able house. Thank goodness Big Mac seemed to notice this and softened just the smallest bit.

“No offense,” she offered, as if that changed anything. “But the safest thing to do is get rid of it. After I cast Lola’s spell, I’ll do it myself. But Artemis, you’re welcome to come along.”

“Whatever, witch,” Artemis scoffed, rolling her eyes before she left the room in a huff. I watched her go, feeling bad for not defending her more. I just didn’t know who to trust in all of this—there were so many conflicting opinions.

“That’s exactly the kind of childish behavior I was worried about,” Big Mac muttered, once Artemis was out of earshot. “If you two think I’m going to just hand over the most powerful magical object I’ve ever encountered to a couple of silly girls, you’ve got another thing coming.”

“Hey,” I barked, unable to keep my objection to myself. “We’re hardly ‘a couple of silly girls’. You know that.”

But Big Mac silenced me with a hard look. “After the horned moon, I’ll leave with the orb,” she told me in no uncertain terms. “If you want to join me, I won’t stop you. As annoying as you both are, I can’t say you don’t have the potential to be useful, every once in a while.”

“Wow,” I threw back sarcastically. “Thanks so much for the glowing recommendation.”

Even though I knew my little comment was rude and wasn’t helping mend fences, I couldn’t help but make it. I was sick and tired of Big Mac treating me like a kid. I wondered if this was how Violet felt all the time—shoved aside and never consulted.

But as frustrating as this was, I was clearheaded enough to understand that this was still our best option.

“Enjoy your puzzle,” I mumbled, before leaving Big Mac and Mrs. Smith to it.

I checked my phone again, desperate to know where Xavier was and when he’d be coming back. I had been so sure that this time he wouldn’t be away for long. All the patience I’d been employing in an effort to give him space was wearing thin.

Despite my worries about things being wrong between us, this distance was eating at me. I knew I wouldn’t have any peace of mind until I made things right. I wondered if Xavier felt the same way, or if he was better at shutting it out than I was.

Calling him couldn’t hurt, right?

Maybe he’d want to hear from me. If I called and told him I wanted to make things right, there was a chance it might be exactly the push he needed to come home.

Head full of steam, I burst through the door and out onto the porch. I called Xavier and waited, listening to the phone ring and ring, anticipating the sound of his voice on the other end of the line.

“Hey, it’s Xavier. Leave a message.”

I hung up, cursing under my breath. Just my luck.

But then I heard voices, or more accurately, giggling. Who could possibly be having fun at a time like this?

I crept further down the lawn to investigate, half-indignant at the idea of anyone having a good time right now when everything was so tense and awful, and half-overjoyed at the fact that *someone* here was happy. Maybe I could join them. Seeing someone actually smile might make all of this feel more bearable.

So imagine my surprise when I realized the fun I’d heard was being had by Artemis and Rishika. They were sitting cross-legged next to each other, surrounded by a circle of pumpkins. Pumpkins Rishika was teaching Artemis to carve.

I stopped, hidden behind a few trees, curious to see what the two of them were doing together. Because it looked awfully flirty…

I watched Artemis hollow out her pumpkin, a look of intense concentration on her face. And then, out of nowhere, she shoved her fist inside, grabbed a handful of pulp, and shoved it under Rishika’s nose. The usually stoic Rishika squealed as she leaned as far away from my sister as possible.

But she was also laughing hysterically. They both were.

My cheeks hurt from smiling so wide. This was really good for both of them. I wished I’d seen it sooner. Rishika was patient and kind, more than able to deal with Artemis’s quirks. She was a great teacher, so she’d be good at acclimating her to this world. And Artemis was the kind of fiercely loyal person Rishika deserved to have on her team. Especially after having been a Rogue for so long.

“Hey!” I called, wanting to observe their dynamic up close.

Rishika and Artemis turned to me, both still laughing, the light sparkling in their eyes. But then they saw something over my shoulder that made them freeze.

A second later, I heard screaming and the sound of feet pounding against the dirt, coming right at me. I whirled around to see Torin, racing out of the woods at top speed, screaming at the top of his lungs… and with blood spurting from the place where his left arm should have been.

**Episode 1004**

XAVIER

Charlie moped next to me in the passenger’s seat. He had his hood up, and he was staring out at the landscape despondently. As if I couldn’t already tell that he didn’t want to be here.

But I didn’t particularly care what he wanted.

Mostly because I was still thinking of the moment I’d had with Ava earlier. I’d been seconds away from killing her, furious over every betrayal. But as I’d gotten close to her, something had made me freeze.

She was still Ava…

And something had just *given way*, and I’d found myself unable be mad at her anymore. Because she was just a person. Just Ava. The girl I’d grown up with. My first love. My best friend. In that moment, it had been easy to remember the good times.

And I’d felt this path opening up, like there was suddenly this option to start down a road toward forgiving her, toward letting her back into my life—and maybe toward even more than that.

But I’d pulled myself out if it. Just like I was going to try to put the memory of the moment out of my head now. I shook my head, like that would clear it.

It had been one tiny moment, surrounded by a million others where I’d remembered everything she’d done to me. The memories made me wince as they all came rushing back. She’d killed my mother, impersonated my mate, and even though she had eventually sided with us in the battle against Silas, it was only after she’d almost joined the bastard himself. I wouldn’t forget again.

I heard Charlie’s phone ringing and felt myself sigh with relief. A distraction. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him pull it out of his pocket. The caller ID read: MOM.

Charlie scowled and shoved the phone back into his pocket, more emphatically than he needed to. Clearly there was no love lost there.

“Charlie.” I tried to sound as patient as possible. “If you need to talk to your parents, go right ahead. It’s not like I’m gonna listen in.”

But Charlie didn’t respond. He just crossed his arms and let the rest of the drive pass in silence. Fucking teenagers.

By the time we finally pulled into the pack house driveway, Charlie had slumped all the way down in his seat. I could tell he was dreading facing Violet.

I’d given him every chance to talk about it. The kid was on his own at this point as far as I was concerned.

As I got out of the car, hoping I wouldn’t get roped into any more teen drama, I heard a massive commotion down by the lake.

*What now?*

I wondered if I’d have to pull more keyed-up werewolves off of each other, thanks to the orb. But as I jogged over, prepping myself to be stern and use what Cali called my “scary voice”, I saw what was actually going on.

I froze. Torin was running around the lawn, screaming bloody murder and—quite literally—bleeding profusely from the place where his left arm used to be. The grass beneath him was stained red.

Cali, Rishika, and Artemis were all watching in horror and covered in a faint sheen of blood spatter. Cali and Artemis were screaming, and Rishika was shouting, trying to get everyone to calm down. It was complete chaos.

What the hell had happened here?

Just as I was about to tear into a sprint to assess the danger, Torin stopped running and turned to the women with a dramatic flourish, threw back his head, and started laughing. He clutched at his stomach with his remaining hand, like this was all just too much for him.

“HAPPY HALLOWEEN!” he cried jovially.

Cali, Artemis, and Rishika’s jaws all dropped in unison as they gaped at him. Off to the side, Astrid stepped out of the woods, clutching her own stomach as she laughed.

“Sage and Zainab told me all about this delightful holiday of yours!” Torin explained, grinning from ear to ear. “Astrid and I figured we’d help set the spooky mood!”

Astrid waved her arm in a circle and fluttered her fingers, restoring Torin’s arm and cleaning all of the—apparently fake—blood off the ground.

Despite my annoyance, I let out a relieved sigh. As annoying as it was that these Fae tourists had caused this commotion, at least nothing was actually wrong. The last thing I needed after Silas and the attack on Big Mac and the *due destini* curse was some mysterious danger lurking in the woods.

Artemis, however, felt differently. And Cali looked positively murderous.

“You ASSHOLE!” Artemis screamed, charging at Torin and tackling him to the ground. “You scared the shit out of me!”

I scurried over to pull the two of them apart, but before I could, Cali spotted me. Her eyes widened in surprise, and she leapt at me. I wondered if she was going to greet me with a kiss, but instead she whacked me on the shoulder. Hard.

“Ouch,” I grumbled.

“Where have you been?” Cali cried, eyes flashing with anger. “I was worried sick over you!”

So much for a warm welcome. I sighed, thinking of all the various things I could catch Cali up on if I wanted to. But given her mood, maybe now wasn’t the best time.

“We need to talk,” she practically growled, only proving my point.

“You’re right,” I admitted. “But not here.”

“Yes, *here*,” Cali snapped. “I’ve waited long enough for an explanation from you.”

Between this and finding Charlie and seeing Ava, I’d had enough interactions with stubborn people to last me the rest of the year. And even though Cali’s expression told me there was no getting out of this interaction without a fight, I figured I could at least pick the venue.

So I scooped Cali up off the ground and threw her over my shoulder, then set off toward the pack house.

“What the hell?” Cali shrieked, smacking my shoulder in a weak form of protest. I looked over my shoulder and caught a glimpse of her face, bathed in moonlight.

She was so beautiful. I could tell she was sad, annoyed, and eager for an explanation. And given the way she looked—and the feel of her body against mine—I was desperate to give her that and more. Even if I was still pissed about her saying Greyson’s name back in the laundry room. I wondered if I’d ever be able to fully get over it.

But even so, I just didn’t have it in me to be mad at her right now. She was Cali. Beautiful, soft, kind Cali.

I carried her all the way up the stairs, earning a few confused looks. Once we got to her room and I’d shut the door behind us, I set her down on her feet and braced myself for impact.

“Xavier, I’m so sorry,” she blurted out, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “I need you to know that—”

Ah, hell. So much for restraint.

I crashed my lips into hers. It wasn’t exactly wise, but no one had ever praised me for my self-control. I hadn’t figured out how I felt about what she’d said. But even if I didn’t know how to deal with that, I did know one thing.

I wanted her.

And I was always going to want her.

And fighting it was too damn hard.

Cali melted into my arms. She felt so warm and pliable and *mine.* Because no matter what she’d said in the laundry room, I was the one doing this to her. I was the one making her moan by scraping my teeth against her throat. The one making her nipples pebble under my fingertips. The one who had her grinding against my thigh, almost mindless in the search for pleasure.

“Xavier, please,” she moaned as I pushed up her shirt and ghosted my lips between the valley of her breasts and down toward her belly button. I kissed her just above the waistband of her leggings before I tore them off, leaving her fully exposed underneath me.

I stripped down as well and rolled her over onto her stomach. Almost like she could read my mind, she got up on all fours, waggling her hips. I ran the tip of my cock through her glistening folds, shuddering at how wet she was for me already.

I slid inside her, groaning at the heat. She arched her back for me, moaning loudly. I loved her like this, uninhibited. It reminded me of that night in my tent at the Lupo Finale.

“Xavier, you feel so—” She cried out as I thrust into her as hard as I could. I decided that if she was forming complete sentences, then I wasn’t fucking her hard enough.

I covered her body with mine, like a dragon guarding his hoard. She was mine. All mine. I pushed into her over and over again. I gripped her hip hard enough to bruise while I used the other hand to strum at her clit, finding just the rhythm to make her fall apart on my cock.

I felt her clench around me as she screamed into her pillow.

“Louder, baby,” I ordered, wrapping her hair around my fist and tugging. “Let me know you like it.”

“I do,” she insisted, looking over her shoulder at me, her lips bruised and her hair mussed. “I—” She couldn’t get any further as she gasped in pleasure, her moans becoming unintelligible.

Finally, after I’d made her incoherent enough to be exceptionally proud of myself, I let myself come inside her, the wave of my release crashing over me as I rolled us over onto our sides.

I looked down at her as she nestled in my arms, boneless and content. She looked gorgeous, and she felt even better. But still… The moment didn’t feel as perfect as I had wanted it to.

I still couldn’t get the sound of her moaning my brother’s name out of my head.

And for the first time, as I looked down at her, I wondered… Was Cali not being my full mate enough for me?

**Episode 1005**

GREYSON

I woke up slowly, last night’s events coming back to me jumbled and out of order. I was in Maren’s spare room. After the explosion last night, I’d gotten her out of the chaos as quickly as I could. It had been very clear that there wasn’t going to be a fight after that. Plus, I didn’t want to stick around in case whoever had bombed the place decided to pick off survivors.

Maren had fought me on it the whole way home. She was nearly inconsolable over Fenrir, and I couldn’t blame her. Her child had been taken away, and she’d done everything right to get him back, and *still* things had gone wrong. Eventually, I’d been able to remind her that the fight had been rescheduled for the next day.

Well, tonight, now, actually.

Fenrir would be okay until then. And Maren had needed rest, so that was what she got. After everything she’d been through, it seemed like the least I could get her.

As I lay there, my eyes adjusting to the bright sunlight streaming through Maren’s curtains, I couldn’t stop thinking about the cryptic things the trio of witches had told me. Both before the explosion and after it. At first, I’d though their whole palm reading routine was totally full of shit. But what if they were right?

What if there was another future for me? A future where the curse could be broken and I wouldn’t have to agree to never see Cali again?

I had to tamper down the swell of hope that invaded my chest, making my heart beat double time. I hated it. Nothing in this life was easy. Believing that a group of witches could find the solution to my problems would be dangerous. Because if I honestly believed they could do something that would let me see Cali’s face again… Well, there wasn’t a thing I wouldn’t do for them.

I almost wished they hadn’t said anything.

I’d planned to move on, but now they’d opened the door I’d intended to nail shut. How was I supposed to start a new life for myself if there was even the faintest chance…

I shook my head, trying to clear the thought from my mind. I’d been around the block enough to know that witches were not to be trusted—they were notorious tricksters, and therefore were always to be used as a last resort. They always had their own agenda.

But no matter what I told myself, I couldn’t help but start to imagine a future where I could be with Cali…

And suddenly she was underneath me, wet and open, and writhing on my tongue. I had my arms wrapped around her thighs as I licked at her greedily.

*“Oh,” she sighed as I sucked her clit into my mouth. “Oh… Alpha-bear.”*

*I hummed at the sound of her pet name for me falling out of her mouth. It made me swell with pride. I was hers. She was mine. Only I could make her feel this way.*

*I flattened my palm over her stomach, holding her down even though her hips bucked against my face as she tried to find her release. But I wanted to draw this out. I wanted her warm and relaxed and wet for me. I ground my hard cock into the mattress, looking for some kind—any kind—of relief.*

*Patience wasn’t easy for me, either.*

*I slid two fingers inside her with ease. Curling and uncurling, pumping gently, feeling the warm, wet heat of her clench around me. Each whine, swallowed groan, and breathy sigh I pulled out of her made me hungrier for more.*

*I looked up at her. Her hair was mussed, her mouth wide open in a silent scream. She was bathed in sunlight that streamed in through the open window. The palm trees cast shadows across her body, shading and illuminating parts of her, almost at random. I could smell the salt water on the air even though we were a few minutes’ walk from the beach.*

*“Fuck, Greyson,” Cali gasped out as I found a spot inside her with my calloused fingertips. “Right there, please don’t stop, please keep going, don’t stop—”*

*And then she was coming, clenching around my fingers and screaming into the hand she’d clapped over her mouth. I stroked her gently with my tongue, coaxing the aftershocks out of her as she shook with the enormity of what she’d just felt.*

*“Ready for me, love?” I asked, planting a kiss on her inner thigh.*

*She nodded lazily, barely able to hold her head up. I loved her like this, drunk on pleasure. So at ease in our bed.*

*I spread her thighs apart, holding her wide open. I pressed myself inside, slowly letting her adjust to me—letting myself adjust to the maddening, spine-liquefying joy of being inside her.*

*Once I was fully inside her, I clenched my teeth so hard I was afraid they’d chip.*

*“Love, you feel—”*

*“You too,” she sighed, looking up at me with wide, adoring eyes.*

*I grabbed her hands, interlacing our fingers as I started to thrust. Cali’s heels dug into my back as she matched my rhythm. I lost myself in her. Whether it was seconds, minutes, or hours, I didn’t know. But I had her. And she had me.*

*And soon I was groaning into her neck, my hips stilling as I came inside her, her fingernails biting into my biceps as she found her release as well.*

*Afterward, we just lay there, listening to the sound of our ragged breaths slowing down. I pulled the sheets up around us and felt them stick to my sweaty skin. But I didn’t mind.*

*Cali burrowed into my side, and I wrapped my arms around her as I closed my eyes and sighed, ready to drift off to sleep with her cheek pressed right up against my heartbeat.*

*After one second of peace, I heard two pounding pairs of feet and the sound of the door bursting open. Two kids with matching grey eyes rushed into the room, bouncing on the bed and climbing over our bodies like they were reaching the summit of Kilimanjaro.*

*“Mama! Papa!” the girl squealed.*

*Our alone time over, Cali and I made room for our kids. I grabbed my son, tossing him up into the air before tucking him under my arm and listening to him laugh. Cali ran her fingers through our daughter’s long hair.*

*My heart swelled at the sight of them all crammed into my bed. Cali and my children. My family…*

At that point, I forced myself to snap out of it. I sat upright in bed and massaged my temples, as if I could knead the images I’d just conjured out of my brain. What the hell had *that* been?

It had felt so vivid.

I wasn’t much of a daydreamer. I’d had them before, of course, but they were never that vivid, and they never ended like *that.* Whatever had just happened felt really different. I hesitated to think they were *magic*.

Before I had too much time to think about it, Maren knocked softly on my door.

“Come in,” I croaked, almost too eager for the distraction.

She walked in, head bowed. Her bruises from the day before were still healing. I winced at the sight of them, hating that she’d been subjected to that kind of violence.

“How are you feeling?” I asked, lifting my head from my hands.

“I had a bit of a headache when I first woke up,” she admitted. “But I don’t think there’s anything serious to worry about.”

She set a cup of coffee on my nightstand and perched on the edge of the bed, careful not to touch me.

“I’m just so worried about Fenrir.” The words seemed to bubble out of her mouth, like she couldn’t control them. “What if the fight doesn’t go as planned? After what happened last night, who knows if something else will delay it again? I have to get him back.”

“Maren.” I held out my hands and spoke in a low, calm voice. “I’m going to lose the fight, just like we talked about. Your Fae promise will be fulfilled, and you’ll get him back. I swear.”

“Thank you.” She sighed. “I know none of this has been easy, and it’s not what you signed up for, but I appreciate it.”

I nodded. But honestly, the witches were still at the forefront of my mind. The idea that I could have a future with Cali like the one I’d just seen… Maybe once I sorted out whatever the witches intended, I’d be able to go back to the pack and claim Cali as my mate officially.

We could start moving toward whatever it was I’d just imagined. A real life together.

But I wouldn’t feel right leaving to see Cali without making sure Maren and Fenrir were settled. Maren wasn’t able to protect herself from Aiden and those mystical mob guys. And I might not have been Fenrir’s dad, but I knew what it was like to be a young werewolf without any good role models.

And then the obvious solution because startlingly clear.

“Maren, I know this is your life and your decision,” I started, not sure how she’d respond, “but I think I know a way to help you out, beyond just losing this fight—if you’re willing to listen.”

“Feels kind of rude not to listen with all that build up,” she joked with a weak smile.

I huffed a little laugh, enjoying the warmth and camaraderie between us. It was nice not to be alone. To be around a family, even if it wasn’t mine. I shook the images of my dream out of my head, although Cali’s face still lingered.

“Aiden’s bad news,” I said. “I know he’s Fenrir’s dad, but if I leave you here after losing the fight, you’ll still have him and the mob to deal with. Neither of whom you can trust.”

Maren’s jaw clenched. I could tell she didn’t like hearing this, but she also didn’t object. Maybe because she knew it was true, even if she didn’t like hearing the words out loud.

“But the Redwood pack could protect you,” I said. “They could keep you safe, *and* they could teach Fenrir what it means to be a wolf.”

“No.” Maren cut me off. “I’m sorry, but I’m not sure that’s the right thing...”

“It’s not optional, it’s about both of your safety,” I said, bristling. “Look, I’ll ask you one more time—do you and Fenrir want to come with me to the Redwood pack?”

**Episode 1006**

VIOLET

The birds were chirping, the sun was streaming through my curtains, and there I was, lying wide awake in bed. Pretending that the world was normal and not a weird, confusing, painful place full of mates who just disappeared on you and then came back but wouldn’t talk to you, then refused to sleep in your room, and were now just wandering around somewhere in the pack house like they weren’t even your mate at all!

I rolled over, mashing my face into my pillow and letting out a muffled groan. I was beyond pissed at Charlie.

After all of that, he still hadn’t even *tried* to explain what happened. Why he’d just disappeared on me, where he’d gone, why he’d come back… I had felt so connected to him just a week ago, and now? Now, it was like there was a stranger sulking around wearing a face I’d gotten really used to associating with everything good in my life.

All I knew was that Xavier had found him and forced him to come back. And when he’d walked back into the pack house, he’d smelled like Ava. The same traitorous wolf who’d impersonated Cali and slept with both of her mates. BOTH OF THEM!

My stomach twisted at the thought. What if she had slept with Charlie, too?

Embarrassment and shame enveloped me. Charlie had told me he was fine with the pace we were moving at. That he didn’t want to push me. But had he just said that to be nice?

Whenever I talked to someone who’d actually *had* sex, they always said the same thing. “Sex isn’t actually that big a deal.”

But from where I stood, it felt like a pretty huge freaking deal. If Charlie was so pent up from our relatively chaste courtship that he’d run into the arms of a psychopathic, lying murderer, then sex had to mean way more than I’d thought it did. He was supposed to be *my* mate.

But maybe he just thought of me as a child, just like everyone else in this house. My hands clenched into fists as I fumed.

Everything sucked.

Just a little while ago, I’d had it all. A perfect mate, a safe pack. I’d finally turned eighteen. I’d actually been looking forward to Halloween (now that it was no longer an ominous day when we were all possibly going to die). I’d already picked out a couple’s costume for me and Charlie.

We were going to be Sebastian and Flounder from *The Little Mermaid*. Which might not have seemed like a traditional couple’s costume, but I’d always shipped them—even if Disney didn’t have their shit together enough to actually make it canon. But thoughts of how cute Charlie would be in a crab costume would have to remain just that. Thoughts.

I rolled out of bed with a groan, unable to lie there wired with anxious energy for one second more. I’d done enough waiting and worrying. I needed to talk to him.

I slipped downstairs, trying to move as quietly as I could. I shivered in my nightshirt and shorts, but I didn’t want to go back and change, too scared that I might lose my nerve.

I found Charlie asleep on the couch, bathed in the early morning light. He looked so peaceful. Not to mention absolutely drop-dead sexy.

The little details made my breath hitch in my chest. The way his hair fell in his eyes, and the soft sound of his breathing… I felt drawn to him. His pull was practically magnetic.

I snuck up to him quietly and crawled in next to him under the covers. He felt so warm against me. Every reason I’d had for being pissed at him seemed to melt away, thanks to the heat of his body next to mine.

He blinked himself awake, barely able to focus on me he was so sleepy. His brows furrowed when he saw me, and I felt my heart drop a little. Was he upset at seeing me?

“What are you doing here?” he asked, clearly disgruntled. But at the same time, his arms wound around my waist, puling me against the warm furnace of his chest in a possessive gesture that made my heart sing.

Screw Ava—*I* was Charlie’s mate. And we were together now. Maybe everything didn’t have to be so complicated. He was touching me, we were alone, and everything about him was driving me crazy. His eyes, his arms, his heat, his *mouth*…

I placed my hands on his chest and pressed my lips gently against his. Something about the feel of his lips against mine made me hyperaware of everything. Of how vulnerable I felt right now, like I’d just flung myself off a building and was waiting for Charlie to catch me.

Because what if he didn’t want me anymore? What if wherever he went, whatever had changed… What if it had made him stop wanting me?

But then he shaped his lips to mine and yanked me closer, making the smallest noise in the back of his throat. An almost-growl.

No one else was awake yet. We had the living room all to ourselves. All I could hear was the sound of our breathing. I was so excited that he seemed to want this. Seemed to want *me.* I decided not to waste another second.

I threw my leg over him, straddling his hips. Charlie flattened a palm against my lower back, under my shirt so I was flush against him. There wasn’t an inch of space between us, but still, I wanted to be closer.

I twisted my hands in the hem of his shirt, still shy about this part. Undressing him. Sure, we’d seen each other naked multiple times before we’d even kissed. But stripping him, removing the layers of fabric between us, it was still so new. It made me feel so desperate.

Which I was.

I wanted him, desperately.

I leaned back and pulled off my shirt, tossing it to the side. I looked down at him, intoxicated by the look in his eye. His pupils had swallowed the warm brown irises I’d become so fond of. His lips were parted in surprise.

“I’ve missed you so much,” I sighed, almost completely robbed of breath. “I’ve hated being away from you. I…”

But there weren’t words for it. I ripped his shirt off and let my hands run over his perfectly muscled body. Charlie’s hands stayed on my hips, but I found that I didn’t want them there. I wanted them everywhere.

I put my hands over his and slid them up my body.

“Please,” I breathed. “I want you to, if you want to…”

“I want to,” he insisted, proving it by palming my breasts.

I shivered as he thumbed at my nipples. Yeah, we were on the couch, and we were technically still in the middle of a fight, but I wanted it. Even if it wasn’t perfect. I wanted him so much. I never wanted to smell another wolf on him, only me.

I gasped when Charlie managed to flip us over on the narrow couch. The sight of him between my thighs made me squirm. I knew my underwear was soaked, and I wondered if he could feel the wetness through my panties.

Charlie covered my body with his, pulling the sheet over us so that we were in our own little world. Nothing else was real.

Somehow, I managed to shimmy out of my shorts. I reached for the waistband of Charlie’s boxers, eager to feel him. I didn’t know if I wanted to go all the way just yet, but just the thought of feeling him against me, hot and hard…

But then Charlie froze. I blinked up at him. His brows were furrowed, and the look in his eyes was so sad it made me physically ache.

“Violet.” His voice sounded strangled and for a second, I wondered if I was putting too much pressure on his chest, keeping him from being able to breathe. Was that possible? But then he kept talking.

“No,” he told me, shaking his head. “We shouldn’t.”

That threw me for a loop. My breath hitched in my chest, tight and raw.

*We shouldn’t?* We were mates! By definition, this was exactly what we *should* be doing. I felt confused and embarrassed and even a little angry.

“Why not?” I asked, hating how whiny and childish I sounded. “We’re mates. I’m never going to be with anyone else, and… I want to be with you. *Please.*”

The last word slipped out of my mouth. I hadn’t meant to say it. Hadn’t meant to let him hear how desperately I wanted him, how much of my happiness was riding on this relationship working. I didn’t want to be one of those needy girls begging for her boyfriend’s attention.

Wasn’t this supposed to be easy?

But then I thought of the pairs of mates around me. Cali and Xavier, Lola and Jay, Cali and *Greyson.* None of those relationships seemed particularly easy, either.

“I can’t,” he murmured, not even making eye contact with me. “I just can’t.”

“But—”

“There are things about me you don’t know.” his voice took on an edge, and I could tell something was upsetting him. I just didn’t know what it was. “Things you wouldn’t understand. If you knew, you’d hate me.”

I felt my stomach drop.

This had to be about Ava. He wouldn’t have smelled that strongly of her unless they’d spent a fair amount of time together. If they’d…

What else apart from cheating could make someone hate their mate?

“Can you just try?” I implored him. “Just talk to me. Maybe I would even understand. There’s…”

I felt a lump forming in my throat, and I knew I had to talk fast before the tears started coming. I wished I could be more mature, that I could control my feelings. But I just didn’t know how to do it when they were this strong.

“There’s nothing you could say that would make me hate you,” I told him, looking him right in the eye and feeling like nothing else existed. “You’re my mate. We’re both each other’s person. That’s how it works.”

But that must not have been enough for Charlie, because he just looked back at me, incredibly sad. His lower lip trembled and before I knew it, he’d burst into tears.

“I’m so sorry, Violet.” He sobbed into my shoulder as I wrapped my arms around him. “I’m so sorry. I’m not who you think I am. I’m… I’m a vampire hunter!”

**Episode 1007**

I woke up with my cheek pressed to Xavier’s chest, cocooned in his warmth. I enjoyed the weight of his arms around me, anchoring me to the ground, keeping me from spinning out.

For a moment, everything felt perfect; like I was just where I needed to be. Safe and sound in the arms of my mate, enjoying the steady rise and fall of his chest. Bathed in golden sunlight. Together and at peace.

But then I thought back to the night before. Memories of Xavier’s hands on me made my cheeks heat up. But that wasn’t all I remembered. I’d been so relieved to see Xavier, and so grateful he’d seemingly forgiven me for my laundry room mishap. But now that I actually thought about it, he hadn’t actually *said* anything.

He hadn’t forgiven me—or if he had, he was keeping it to himself. He hadn’t said anything about understanding why I’d made that mistake. He hadn’t told me not to worry anymore or assured me that things were okay between us.

And now that I really thought about it, after the sex he’d been quiet and distant. Not at all his usual post-sex self. I thought about the playfulness and the cuddling I’d gotten accustomed to. The recapping of what we’d just done. But all those little teasing assurances were noticeably absent now. Despite Xavier’s arms around me, I suddenly felt cold.

I glanced up at him. He looked so peaceful. It would’ve been easy to pretend that nothing was wrong. But I knew that wasn’t right. Ignoring a problem like this would only make it worse.

I stretched out, yawning loudly and theatrically. I hoped that I could wake him up “by accident”, and then we could get to talking about the state of things between us. After all, if he’d slept with me he couldn’t be *that* mad, right?

But he didn’t budge. He was out like a light.

So I did something I wasn’t hugely proud of.

I inched up so my mouth was next to his ear and I could feel his steady breaths tickling my shoulder. And then I coughed. Loudly.

He twitched, and I moved back to his side, snuggling back into his embrace. Xavier groaned and put up a hand to shade his eyes from the bright sunlight piercing through our curtains.

“Oh, hey.” I turned toward him, making sure to keep my eyes wide and innocent-looking. “Did I wake you? I’m sorry, I just have this little cough…”

I trailed off and made a show of clearing my throat. Xavier blinked back at me blearily, clearly still drowsy. I decided to take advantage of his silence and charge ahead. I sat up, leaning against the fluffy pillows, and took a deep breath.

“But now that you’re up…” I gave a little shrug. “I think we need to talk.”

Xavier rubbed the sleep from his eyes. “Talking is for afternoon Xavier, not morning Xavier,” he mumbled. “Cali, for once let’s sleep in.”

He closed his eyes and rolled over onto his side, but I wasn’t having it. I coughed loudly—and possibly too theatrically—again. He rolled over to face me and opened one eye. An invitation of sorts.

“It’s just that…” I bit my lip, worrying over my choice of words. “We didn’t really address what happened before we… And I feel like it’s important to talk about—”

Xavier cut me off with a loud groan. Clearly, he didn’t agree that this was something important for us to talk about. He rolled out of bed.

“Right now, what’s important is that I get in the shower,” he grumbled as he trudged over to the bathroom and shut the door behind him.

I stared at the closed door, lost and unsure what to do next. But before I could decide, the bedroom door burst open and I turned to see a hideous demon with purple skin leap into my bedroom, neon yellow eyes bulging out of his head, fangs bared. I screamed and pulled the sheets up around myself.

I wasn’t sure if I should be terrified someone might have seen me naked for half a second, or if I should be rearing up in my full glory to slap my new “demonic” intruder. I rolled my eyes and growled.

“Not NOW, Torin!”

Astrid followed him into the room and undid the glamour almost immediately, revealing a very gleeful Torin, who beamed at me and held out a hand.

“Treat!” he demanded as he thrust his empty palm under my nose.

“What?” I asked, completely bewildered.

Torin’s brow furrowed. He looked me up and down judgmentally, like I was an idiot. He pointed to himself and Astrid.

“Trick,” he said slowly, giving me “Me Tarzan, you Jane” vibes. “Now…” He pointed at me. “Treat!”

He tilted his head, suddenly looking concerned.

“Am I doing this wrong?” he asked. “Because I really want to get this right. Sage was telling me about all the different varieties of treats, and I’m hoping to get one of each. Candy first, of course—the sweet and delectable packaged stuff. Next, the candy corn, like the candy from before, but this stuff tastes like corn, I guess? I’m less excited about that, to be honest. After the corn, a candy*bar*, which is like—”

“Torin, I’m from the human world,” I said, cutting him off impatiently. “I know what candy is. And I hope you get as much as your heart desires. But to answer your questions—yes, you’re doing it wrong. Trick-or-treating is for kids, not adults. And you definitely don’t terrify your unsuspecting friends when they’re alone in their rooms by infringing on their privacy.”

“Oh,” Torin mumbled, bowing his head. I could tell I’d hurt his feelings. As always, Torin was just caught up in a new and exciting thing he’d just discovered. I guess the rest of us took Halloween customs for granted. It wasn’t his fault that to his Fae sensibilities this was the greatest new holiday in the world.

It was wrong to punish him for just being himself.

“I’ll explain the right way later, okay?” I offered, giving him a smile. “But right now, I need to get dressed.”

“Okay, Cali.” Torin nodded, giving me a weak smile. “Sorry for bothering you.”

“You didn’t. I’m sorry for yelling,” I replied. “Happy Halloween.”

“Come on, Torin.” Astrid grabbed her friend by the wrist and tugged. “We gotta go eat a bunch of pumpkin-flavored things. And I really wanna try this thing called a pumpkin spice latte. You promised.”

And with that, they were gone. And I was alone again, staring at the door Xavier had shut behind him.

I couldn’t believe it was actually Halloween, the day we’d all been planning for and worrying about for so long. And even now, with Silas defeated, it still felt monumental. I couldn’t even imagine how Lola was feeling. I felt a twinge in my chest at the thought of her.

I should have checked in with her more in the days leading up to this. I’d just gotten caught up in everything with Xavier. Not to mention worrying about Greyson, and if he’d come back—or if he even *could*, right now.

I threw on some clothes and made my way to Lola’s room. I was going to get a handle on how she was feeling and offer to give her whatever kind of day she needed. Maybe we’d go shopping or out to get mani-pedis. Anything to take her mind off the spell Big Mac would be performing later.

But Lola wasn’t in her room.

I headed downstairs for breakfast. When I reached the foot of the stairs, I couldn’t help but laugh. The whole first floor of the pack house had been transformed into a tacky Halloween store display window. Everywhere I turned I saw skeletons, cobwebs, fog machines, and cardboard coffins. It was so elaborate, I assumed it had to be Astrid’s work.

I crossed my fingers and hoped that Torin loved it. I vowed to try and get him some candy before the day was over, to mend fences.

As I moved through the spookiness, I saw Charlie and Violet having a heated conversation in the living room-turned-graveyard. I did my best to pass by without bothering them. I was so happy that Charlie was finally back, but it was clear the two of them had a lot to talk about. I crossed my fingers that Violet’s mate drama would be easier to deal with than mine. She deserved something easy in her life, and I’d really thought that she’d gotten that with Charlie. I hoped this was just a temporary bump in the road.

I ran into Artemis in the kitchen. She was sitting at the kitchen table and devouring a stack of orange pancakes—pumpkin-flavored, I assumed.

“Morning,” she grunted, through a full mouth.

“Astrid and Torin?” I asked, gesturing toward all the decorations.

“Who else?” she asked, rolling her eyes.

I laughed, enjoying the fact that my sister was a Scrooge for Halloween. But before I could enjoy Artemis’s mood for too long, Jay ran up to us, his eyes wide with panic.

“Have either of you seen Lola this morning?” he asked, breathless.

“No,” I said with a frown. “She wasn’t in her room when I checked—I assumed she was with you.”

He shook his head, clearly dismayed. “Lola’s gone,” he said, like he was only just realizing it himself. “And so is her stuff. Guys, I… I think she ran away.”

**Episode 1008**

I gaped at Jay. “How could you let Lola run away? Halloween is tonight—her spell is *tonight*!”

He glared at me. “You think I don’t know that?”

“Why aren’t you hunting her down, then? You should be able to track her!” I exclaimed. “Last time I checked, you were a werewolf!”

Artemis rolled her eyes. “Lola is a grown woman, Cali. Maybe you should respect her decision.”

I scowled. Who’d asked Artemis to chip in with her unhelpful comment? “You don't understand,” I said. “Lola’s like a sister to me.”

Artemis raised an eyebrow. “And I’m your actual sister.”

“That’s not the—”

“The point is that she obviously didn’t tell either of you that she was leaving for a reason,” Artemis interrupted. “Probably because of the way you’re both acting right now.”

“I don’t think you understand how friendship works. Probably because you’re very new to it,” I told Artemis, mirroring her snooty tone. “I need to know where my friends go when they run off!”

“That sounds very clingy,” Artemis said, but I ignored her. I really didn’t have time for this nonsense with her. I had to find Lola right now.

“Do you have any idea where Lola might be?” I asked Jay. “Could she have gone to Duluth? She told me she might.”

Jay rubbed his forehead, clearly frustrated. “I hope not. She can’t control her shifting, and that’s a major problem. She’s also had issues with controlling her temper lately—there’s no telling what trouble she might get into.”

Jay looked beyond concerned. Meanwhile, Artemis inspected her nails and yawned. *Oh my god, Artemis! Read the room!*

“We won’t let Lola get into any trouble, I promise,” I told Jay. I immediately regretted my promise, but I was already in too deep. “We should look in her room. Maybe there’s a clue there or something.”

“That’s actually a great idea,” Artemis said. “That’s the first thing I do when I’m tracking someone.”

I stared at my sister. “Do you really think sarcasm is what we need right now?”

Artemis shrugged sheepishly. I wanted to scream, *“Thanks for the help! NOT!”* But now was not the right time to start a fight with her.

We all headed upstairs to Lola and Jay’s bedroom. Everything was a gone—Lola had gathered all her stuff, even the freaking hangers. What could she have been thinking? I knew that she was worried about tonight, about being stuck in her human body. But running away and scaring all of us to death wasn’t going to change anything.

“Hey, she left this!” Artemis picked up a thong from the bed. “I’m not sure why, though. A slingshot is always useful. Especially when you’re running away in the unknown and a million supernatural or human creatures are out to get you.”

I made a gesture for Artemis to stop talking and making things worse. Jay looked like he was ready to be sick. “I don’t understand why Lola would leave in the first place.” He turned to me, looking desperate. “We’re mates. Why can’t she trust me? I love her more than anything in the world… I’ve told her that so many damn times.”

Jay was getting more upset, his eyes even began welling up. I hugged him. “It’s going to be okay,” I said. “We’re going to find her, we always do.”

Of course, at that point Artemis decided to pipe up. “Maybe we should spend less time wallowing and more time tracking Lola down. How about that?”

I glared at my sister, who probably deserved a “Worst Timing Ever” award.

“Listen, you annoying—”

“No,” Jay said, cutting me off. “She’s right. I’ll follow Lola’s scent out of here and find out which way she went.”

I followed Jay around the room as he sniffed. Artemis looked at us both with a weird expression on her face, but I ignored her. After Jay checked half the room, I asked, “Well? Did you find anything?”

Jay gave me a flat look. “I’ve only just started.”

Artemis snorted. I flipped her off.

“Is that a human form of greeting?” she asked, looking genuinely curious.

“Yes, it’s exactly that,” I said, smiling sweetly. “You should walk around with your middle finger raised all the time if you want to be friendly.”

Artemis seemed to be processing that very seriously while Jay kept sniffing around the room. This was taking forever. “Would it help if I found something of hers?” I asked Jay. “Like an old shirt?”

Jay huffed. “I KNOW what my mate’s scent is, Cali! And if you stop bugging me, I might actually be able to find it.”

I flinched back. *Oh wow*, I thought. *If normally sweet Jay is snapping at me, you know things are very, very bad*.

Artemis pulled me close to her. “Let Jay do his werewolf thing.”

I took a step back, resigned. Both Artemis and I watched as Jay kept sniffing around the room. Suddenly, he perked up and quickly headed out.

“Wait!” I scrambled after him as he moved downstairs and toward the front door. He paused, glaring at the door.

“She went this way,” he said. His expression was thunderous.

My eyes widened in surprise. “You mean she went out the front door and nobody noticed?”

Artemis huffed. “Are you serious? Lola is not a criminal. She can move about as much as she wants without anyone asking her where she’s going.”

“This is a house full of werewolves where everyone is all up in everyone’s business,” I said. “Excuse me for thinking it’s ridiculous that nobody saw her. Also, you’re not helping.”

“And you are? All you’re doing is whining while Jay does all the work.” Artemis arched an eyebrow at me. I was about to send her a Fae energy blast, because I did not appreciate her attitude, but then Jay spoke up.

“I’m going outside,” he said, and headed out of the house. Shoving each other and bickering, Artemis and I followed him while he searched the yard. He sniffed the air one more time and turned to me. “I think Lola went to the road.”

My stomach dropped. “Do you think she hitchhiked?”

The second the words were out of my mouth, images of Lola being picked up by some stranger, a serial killer, flashed through my mind. *How could she do this to me?* I thought.

I was too emotionally fragile to deal with a murdered friend. She was all I had. Well. Apart from an annoying sister and two mates who still vaguely wanted to kill each other over me, she was all I had!

Ours was the only relationship I had that I felt certain about, even during the bad times. She’d been there for me through everything. She was my best friend.

I had to find her. *Now.*

“Wait!” Artemis called after me as I started running toward the road. A moment later, she blocked my way. “Where are you going? You think she’s just going to be sitting around in the middle of the road waiting for you?”

“I need to do something, otherwise I’m going to lose my shit!” I exclaimed.

Artemis raised her eyebrows at me. “So this is your version of staying calm?” Before I could tell my sister that I did not appreciate her smartass comments, she added, “Maybe we can take the car—I can drive.”

My life flashed before my eyes at the reminder of Artemis driving us to the mall. My response was a massive, loud, “NO!”

Artemis was offended, of course. “The accident wasn’t my fault,” she said. “If anything, I did my best, considering the circumstances.”

I squinted at her, internally screaming and debating whether I should start *actually* screaming at her, but then Jay spoke up. “I’ve got her scent! She went this way!”

I turned to see Jay dash toward the road. Artemis and I scrambled to keep up, but Jay was much faster.

“I should have had a wolf when I was in the Fae world,” Artemis said as we ran behind him, not even breaking a sweat. “It would have been really useful to have them help me track runaway miners.”

“Glad to see where your thoughts are right now,” I said, breathing hard already.

“Thanks,” Artemis said casually.

Some people really had no appreciation for the nuanced art of sarcasm.

As we kept running after Jay, who was getting far ahead, I was struggling to keep up. On the other hand, Artemis was—as always—cool as a cucumber, looking like she was ready to shoot a sports commercial.

“Hey,” Artemis said, pointing in Jay’s direction. “Where’s he going?”

Jay had veered off the road and into the woods.

*Oh god,* I thought. *What is it this time? Could Lola have gone this way? Why?*

I anxiously raced to catch up, shoving branches away from my face. A moment later, I froze.

Jay was kneeling beside Lola, who was slumped against a tree. I gasped, rushing forward to kneel at her side. It didn’t look like she was breathing. Fear coursed through me.

“Is she dead?!”

**Episode 1009**

LOLA

I was dreaming. I knew I was, because everything was beautiful.

I was walking down the aisle on my wedding day.

Jay was waiting for me beneath a flowery arch. He looked gorgeous in his tuxedo; it had been tailored to perfection. The way he smiled at me made my heart flutter.

This was the happiest day of my life. The day I’d been waiting for since I’d met Jay all those years ago.

I felt all eyes from the pack on me and looked down at my dress. It was a cream color, the fabric flowing and sparkling, with small embroidered flowers. It was the most fabulous thing I had ever worn, hands down. I’d somehow managed to outdo myself.

When I reached Jay under the arch, he softly took my hand in his and stared into my eyes. “You’re so beautiful,” he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. “I can’t believe you’re all mine… I love you more than anything in the world, Lola.”

My heart mirrored Jay’s every word.

Sniffling and wiping her eyes, Cali straightened the back of my dress, helping me take my position next to Jay. As the maid of honor, she was wearing a little crown that I had chosen for her. She looked lovely in a turquoise dress. “I’m so happy for you,” she whispered in my ear.

“We’re gathered here today to honor this beautiful couple…” Mrs. Smith started the ceremony as the officiant. She wore a sleek red suit, looking imposing and regal.

I glanced over at my dads, sitting in the front row. They were both wiping tears from their eyes, smiling at the same time. Such sweethearts.

“If there is anyone present who objects to the union of these people before us, speak now,” Mrs. Smith said.

Jay and I looked at each other, grinning. *How silly.* After all, who could possibly object to such a wonderful and meaningful marriage? This was fate at its best. Jay and I were completely perfect for each other. Anyone could see that.

“Look!” said one of the guests. I turned toward the murmuring crowd, and at the end of the aisle, I saw the large wolf bearing down on us, snarling.

It was *my* wolf.

My heart was racing in both alarm and fear. The cloud of happiness I’d been in was ruined. What was my wolf doing?

“Lola,” Jay said cautiously. “What’s happening right now?”

Before I could reply, the wolf menacingly moved up to face me “What are you doing here?” I breathed.

Still growling low in its throat, the wolf mind linked with me. *I’ve come to say goodbye.*

I felt dizzy, suddenly. What was that supposed to mean?

“Lola,” Jay said, touching my arm. “Can you hear me?”

Feeling like my chest was about to break open, I waved him off. “Not now! Can’t you see something’s wrong with my wolf? It…”

I didn’t have the time to finish my sentence. The wolf leapt away from me and raced off.

The sight of it leaving me made me feel like someone was tearing part of my heart out.

“NO!” I screamed. “No, wait! Come back!”

I gathered up my wedding dress and started to run after it, but Jay grabbed me by the arm. “Lola! You have to wake up!”

Gasping, I opened my eyes.

Jay had his arms wrapped around me. Instead of feeling secure or loved, though, I felt claustrophobic. “Let me go!” I slapped his hands away, frantically trying to get up. “My wolf! I have to get my wolf!”

When I looked around, though, I realized that I wasn’t at my wedding. I was in the woods by the side of the road, and I was talking complete and utter fucking nonsense.

How the hell had I gotten here?

“Lola!” Cali ran up to me with Artemis in tow. “Are you okay? I thought you were dead!”

I frowned, confused. “*Dead?* Do I look dead?”

Artemis looked at me up and down. “Maybe a little.”

I turned to Jay, gasping. “Jay!”

Jay squeezed my shoulder. “Don’t listen to her. You look beautiful, as always.”

I knew he was indulging me, but I still pulled him in for a relieved hug. He tenderly kissed the top of my head, then my cheek. “You freaked me out, babe,” he said. “What are you doing out here?”

I sniffled. “I’m not sure…” Suddenly, a memory flashed through my mind. Bits and pieces started to come back. “Wait… I was walking along the road, when I started to feel a little dizzy. I had flashes of my wolf, and it made me want to shift…” I looked up at him, swallowing roughly. He looked so worried. “But I didn’t do it, because I knew that you wouldn’t want me to.”

“Sweetheart…” Jay caressed my cheek. “And then what happened?”

“I decided to rest for a little, hoping it would pass. And then the next thing I knew…” I glanced between Jay, Cali, and Artemis. “Jay was telling me to wake up, and then you guys were here.”

Jay trailed his hands all over me, examining my body with a soft frown. “She must have fallen,” he said to the others. “Are you hurting anywhere?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so. I’m tired, but I feel okay.”

Cali stared at me, her eyes searching. “Where were you going, though? Do you remember that? Do you remember why you left the house?”

Jay shot Cali a look. “We’re not doing that right now,” he muttered. “I just want to get Lola back to the pack house.”

Cali didn't have time to object, because then Jay picked me up bridal style. Despite the messed up situation, I couldn't help but smile. *Bridal style*, like my dream.

“I’m okay,” I said. “Keep carrying me though.” I wrapped my arms around his neck and snuggled closer to him, and he snorted, kissing my forehead.

“I’m so confused. How did this happen?” Cali mumbled as she and Artemis picked up my stuff. I wanted to be a jerk about this and snap at her, but she was right.

Sometimes, everything in my head felt like too much.

All four of us started back toward the house. But even as I took comfort from Jay’s arms, my throat was dry. I felt shaky, disoriented from the dream. Had it just been a dream, or had it been an omen? Should I tell Jay about it?

“I was so worried to see you gone,” Jay mumbled in my ear. “Please don’t do that again.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“I know that you’re not in total control of yourself,” Jay said. “And I know that you're under a lot of stress. I just wish you could trust me. Do you have any idea how much I love you?”

The truth was that even during the times when a weird part of my brain was insecure about what would happen next in our relationship, I didn’t doubt Jay’s love. “I love you too,” I said, brushing my lips over his.

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“I’ll go get you something to eat,” Jay said before heading to the kitchen. He’d settled me down on the couch, and Cali fluffed the pillow behind my back.

“There,” she said, looking satisfied with her work. She sat down next to me, crossing her legs primly. And then she stared at me. “Now that we’re all comfy, will you tell me what the fuck that was all about? Why did you run off? *Again?*”

“This conversation does not have anything to offer me,” Artemis stated and walked straight out of the living room. Kind of rude, but I felt too exhausted to care.

I turned to Cali, my lips pressed together. “I’m so sorry about worrying everyone. I’m pretty freaked out about tonight; I guess that’s why I left…”

Cali squeezed my shoulder. “Are you going to do it though? The spell…”

“The spell needs to happen,” I said, “but I’m still really worried about losing my wolf. I even had a dream about it just now.”

“Really? What kind of dream?” Cali asked, alarmed.

As I explained, her brow furrowed. “I’m really sorry about this, Lola,” she said. “I wish there was something else we could do, another solution, but—”

“We both know there’s nothing else. That’s why I’m freaking the fuck out,” I said, my voice trembling.

Cali moved her arm over my shoulders, kissing my cheek. “I promise that whatever happens, I’ll stick by you. You know that, right?”

“Thank you,” I said. I knew she was speaking from the heart, but that still didn’t ease my anxiety.

I didn’t want to lose my wolf.

“Here you go,” Jay said, walking back into the living room. He was holding a plate with a sandwich and some sliced apple. He placed it gingerly on my lap, and then both he and Cali stared at me until I took a bite. They kept at it, watching me chew like I was about to explode any minute.

“Are you feeling any better?” Jay asked after I drank some water.

I stared at his kind, handsome face. My pulse started to quicken. “If you really mean what you said, about loving me, you’ll have to stay with me even if I lose my wolf. You know that, right?”

Jay gave me a squinty look. “Obviously. Was there ever any doubt about that? Also, haven’t we talked about it a million times?”

I bit my lip. “I guess…”

“I want you to stop worrying.” Jay shook his head at me. “Besides, even if you do lose your wolf, I can always turn you.”

For a second, I was struck. Why the hell hadn’t I thought of that? It would have saved me bucket loads of angst!

“It doesn't work like that,” a familiar voice said. I looked up to see Big Mac standing by the entryway.

“Why is she here?” I asked, my voice small. I’d wanted to avoid the witch until tonight.

Jay winced. “I asked her to come. To make sure you were totally okay.”

I glared at him. I knew he meant well, but come on!

Big Mac sighed, stepping into the room. “Like I was saying. It doesn’t work that way. Once the spell is cast, you must accept the outcome. No funny business.”

Cali scowled. My sister in arms! “But what happens if he does try to turn her after the spell? If she becomes human?”

Big Mac stared at me. “Then Lola will die,” she said coldly.

**Episode 1010**

VIOLET

I couldn't believe my ears. Charlie stood there, staring at me with this vulnerable, lost expression on his face.

“Seriously?” I asked. “After everything the two of us have been through, why would you think I’d be upset to learn that you're a vampire hunter?”

Charlie blinked at me. He wiped the tears from his eyes. His full lips were pursed, and for a moment, I was distracted. But then he said, “I don't think you realize the ramifications of what I’m saying. I—”

“No, I get it. It’s a shock, of course, and I never imagined that would be your secret, but…” I shook my head, squeezing his shoulder. “It's not like you’re a *werewolf* slayer—*that* would have been messed up. But you kill vampires.” I chuckled awkwardly. “Nobody around here even likes vampires, so it’s not a big deal.” I looked at him hopefully and kept my hands on him. The compulsion to touch him was constant. “Is that why you left?”

“When I ran off, I thought I was a homicidal maniac,” Charlie said in a low voice. “I thought that I was the one who tried to kill Big Mac… I hated that I could’ve done that to someone in your pack. I thought that I could’ve hurt her, I could’ve hurt you as well, if I was that far out of control—”

I cut him off. “But you *didn’t* stab Big Mac.”

He groaned, rubbing his face. “I know that now—Xavier told me. But I didn't know back then. I just thought I was endangering you and your pack, and I… I hated myself for it.”

My poor, stubborn, adorable, precious, sensitive Charlie. I wanted to kiss and cuddle and smack him at the same time. “You realize that you could have just talked to me about all this, right? Instead of running off? I could *never* hate you, Charlie.”

“That makes one of us, at least,” Charlie said. “Because I sure as hell don’t know how I feel about myself. What am I even supposed to do now? Should I start randomly hunting vampires?”

For a moment, I thought he was kidding. But Charlie’s expression was weirdly panicked, as if his entire new world was too much for him to grasp. Things didn’t need to be so hard, though. I could always help him.

“Before you do anything else,” I said, “you should start trusting me. We can't keep going like this.” I caressed his cheek, my fingers trembling against his skin. “Whenever you feel the urge to run away from your problems, you need to remember that you can always talk to me. We’re mates. That’s just the way it is.”

Charlie took my hand. His touch was soft, gentle. I could feel it from my fingertips to the tips of my toes. The way he looked at me was full of emotion. I was so relieved to see him acting like his usual self instead of the cryptic man he’d been before he’d left me.

“I’m so sorry I ran off,” he muttered. “I’m so sorry I didn’t trust you, or what we have together. I just feel so lost, and I don't want to burden you with all my problems. I don’t think it’s fair to you.”

“If I had a problem, wouldn't you want me to talk to you about it?” I asked. “Wouldn’t you want me to trust that you’d be there for me?”

“Of course,” Charlie said softly.

“Then why is it so hard for you to understand that it goes both ways?”

Charlie paused. “I guess I'm not used to that. Sandi was my first real girlfriend, and we talked, but not about… supernatural things. I just...” He shook his head. “I don't want to be a burden for you—”

My heart was breaking for him. “Charlie, that’s not—”

“Sometimes, I don’t know what to think,” Charlie continued. “My parents told me that they’ve spent my life trying to protect me from monsters. And now that I’m a werewolf, how can I look at them in the eye? How can I not think that I’m one of the monsters that they’ve been chasing all their lives?”

I felt shaken hearing Charlie talk like that. I moved to drop his hand, but he just gripped mine tighter. But still, I had to ask. “Does that mean you think I’m a monster? That all werewolves are monsters?”

“I’d *never* think of you as a monster,” Charlie said quietly. “But my mom and dad think vampires are monsters…” His expression was bitter. “And it’s not only vampires. They think all supernaturals are monsters. I doubt they’re going to have any sympathetic feelings toward any.”

I put my game face on and stared at him. “Look, Charlie. There is nothing similar between a werewolf and a vampire. First of all, vampires are dead and werewolves are alive. They literally drink people’s blood, and they also smell like rotting flesh. And!” I exclaimed. “They have no reflection—what’s up with that? They turn into bats—”

Charlie gaped. “For real?”

I huffed. “Okay, I don’t know, but still. They’re just plain creepy! I’m a werewolf, and I’m not creepy, am I?”

Charlie looked at me up and down. Shakily, he said, “Not creepy. Just pretty.” Before I could blush at his words, he added, “Silas was a monster, though.”

“There are monsters in every species,” I said seriously. “Humans aren’t even exempt from that.”

Charlie sighed, rubbing his forehead. “I had no idea there were any kinds of magical species up until recently, though. I didn't know vampires, werewolves, or witches existed. And now I'm a werewolf, and my parents are vampire hunters, like it’s some sort of family legacy, and now what? Am I supposed to follow in their footsteps? Everything is so fucking insane that—”

“Wait…” I frowned. “Did your parents say that you’re supposed to do that?”

Charlie stared at me, wide-eyed. He was opening his mouth to speak when the door opened and Xavier walked out onto the back porch. “Are you guys good?” he asked.

I wasn't feeling good at all, actually. This was a mess, through and through. I glanced between Charlie and Xavier. “I think I need some air,” I said. “Just a walk to clear my mind.”

Without meeting Charlie’s gaze, I headed out into the yard. The breeze felt cool against my heated cheeks, but my mind was reeling. I was worried—not just about Charlie, but about the both of us.

I used to think that we’d made it through the worst of things, now that Silas was gone, and that Charlie and I would have the time to get to know each other—to develop a relationship like mates were supposed to do. But Charlie didn’t trust me, and now he didn’t even trust himself.

He’d come back, yet everything was still complicated and twisted. Seeing Charlie earlier had felt so amazing—being with him, kissing him—but now everything was taking a turn for the worse again. It made my heart ache.

“Xavier’s a good guy.” Charlie’s familiar voice came from a couple of feet behind me. I turned around to face him. He had his hands in his pockets and was shuffling his feet on the ground. He had come down from the porch to join me on my walk.

I wasn’t sure if I wanted his company, though. My head was spinning too much.

“I know that,” I said, a little too sharply. “When Lilac was alive, Xavier was like a big brother to us.”

Charlie fell quiet, staring down the ground. He looked like a kicked puppy. I took a deep breath, instantly feeling bad. “I'm sorry I snapped at you.”

“I’m the one who should be apologizing,” he said. “I snapped at you before I dumped you and ran away. We’re not even close to being even.”

Charlie was trying to joke, but I could see that he was hurting. Sighing, I closed the distance between us. “I know that you're going through a lot,” I said. “But you don't have to deal with everything alone. You’re never going to be a burden to me. The only thing that hurts me is when you shut me out.” I looked up at Charlie, searching his gaze. “I can’t keep doing this if you keep turning me away.”

“Every time I lied to you,” he whispered, “I could feel my whole body physically protest. It made me sick.”

“Then don’t do it again,” I said, reaching out to stroke his shoulder. “I don't know what to do to make you understand that I’m here for you. That you can share things with me, even the scary things. If you can’t do that…” My chest ached as I kept talking. “What do you want to do?”

Charlie covered my hand on his shoulder with his. “What do you mean?”

Fighting not to tremble, I said, “Your parents asked you to go back to Minnesota. They want you there, with them. I don’t know if it’s to make you hunt vampires, or because they miss you, but they did ask you to go back home.” I paused. “What are you going to do?”

Charlie’s expression was haunted. He examined my face, then slowly removed my hand from his shoulder. He opened his mouth to speak, but then he looked away.

I was filled with dread and longing as I realized that there was a chance I was about to lose my mate. “Charlie?” I said hesitantly. “Do you *want* to go back?”

**Episode 1011**

“*Excuse me?*” I screeched. “What do you mean, Lola will die?”

Big Mac gave me a flat look. “Once the spell is cast, if Lola turns human, then her body will reject a wolf bite.”

Well, that was *unacceptable*. “But why would that happen?”

“Because she can’t have her cake and eat it too,” Big Mac said. “Lola would die from the bite, without turning—just like if a regular wolf bit her.”

“I’m not asking for the whole cake, I’m just asking to be a werewolf and not to die!” Lola said, aghast. “This isn't fair!”

Big Mac crossed her arms over her chest. “I suppose it’s not, but magic isn’t always fair. In fact, it’s unfair more often than not.”

I scowled. “Are you sure about this? Maybe we should get a second opinion?”

Big Mac glared at me, so I gathered that was the wrong thing to say. “Don’t doubt me.” She turned to Lola, peering at her. “I’m not here to babysit you. You know what’s at stake. I’ve always made that clear, and honestly, it’s getting tiring telling you the same things over and over. By the end of tonight, you will either be a werewolf, or you won’t.”

“I know…” Lola said in a small voice. “I was just hoping—”

“There’s nothing to hope about,” Big Mac said curtly. “Either you do it, or you don’t.” She walked out of the room, leaving me there with a Lola who looked like she was about to start either crying or screaming.

“Lola,” I said. “I understand how difficult this is, but there doesn't seem to be any way around it. If you don’t go through with the spell, your shifting problems will only get worse. They could kill you.” I remembered the way Lola had attacked me, without even recognizing who I was. That might have been the orb, or it could’ve been all this stress. “Or make you hurt someone else.”

“I know,” Lola choked out. “I just fucking can’t, I—UGH!” She stood up and stormed off upstairs.

Well that could’ve gone better.

“I’d better go talk to her,” Jay said with a sigh. “She’s going to need all the support she can get, heading into tonight.”

Jay was always there for Lola. They were definitely the first couple I’d ever shipped, even back when I thought Jay was Lola’s online boyfriend, Ant. But what about how he felt? This had to be weighing on him.

“What about you, though?” I asked. “How are you coping with all this?”

Jay shrugged. “I told Lola that I’ll always love her, wolf or human, and I meant it the dozens of times I’ve said it. I hope she understands that and stays safe.”

*My heart!* I thought, sniffling. Jay had always been so supportive. Lola was lucky to have him.

“Are you seriously crying right now?” Jay asked me, eyebrows raised.

“No,” I said vehemently, wiping away a single tear.

He chuckled, rolling his eyes as he pulled me into a hug.

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Jay headed off upstairs after Lola, and I went to the kitchen for some water. Xavier was just climbing up the stairs, returning from the basement. His expression was severe.

*Oh, no*, I thought. *I know that look, and it’s not a good look. Is he still mad about the Greyson thing? Or is this about pack business?*

“Hey,” I said cautiously. “Were you talking to Ravi?”

Xavier leaned against the wall. “Yeah.”

So verbose. I was getting flashbacks to the time when he’d speak to me one word at a time. “So? Have you decided what to do?”

Xavier shrugged. “That depends on Ravi. We’ve given him options. Not that he necessarily deserves them.”

“Losing Joss has hit him hard,” I said. “Don’t forget that he’s been through a lot. And we have the orb to contend with.”

Xavier’s expression remained blank. “We’ve all been through a lot. That’s no excuse.”

My mate didn’t seem to be in a charitable mood. Not that that was typically his style with anyone other than me. He still didn’t seem to want to talk about what had happened, but at least he hadn’t lost his shit at me for saying Greyson’s name while we… you know. Even though he would’ve had every right to.

“What options did you give Ravi?” I asked, hoping the answer wasn’t too awful.

“Ravi wanted to challenge Greyson for Alpha—”

I gasped. “*What?!*”

Xavier stared at me. “Let me finish.”

“Is that what you want? To have Ravi go after Greyson?” I asked, alarmed.

“I doubt Ravi would have much of a chance against Greyson, Cali,” he said. “And the pack doesn’t need that kind of drama right now.”

I paused, impressed with Xavier for being so level-headed. We *definitely* didn't need another Lupo Finale right now. Not with what we’d been through.

“So what did you tell him?”

“Ravi’s already shown that his loyalty to the pack is questionable, so I told him that if he withdraws his challenge and stays out of Redwood business, I’ll let him go.”

“Huh,” I said. “That seems like a good deal. Has Ravi agreed?”

“He’s thinking about it, but I’m pretty sure he will,” Xavier said.

I looked at Xavier. He stood there, all stoic and beautiful, with this regal air about him, and a certainty that made me feel like he was rock solid. Reliable.

“What?” he asked, eyeing me.

“I’m just so proud of the leader you are. You could have killed Ravi if you wanted to. But instead, you did the right thing.”

Xavier smirked at me. He looked like his normal self, like I’d never made everything painfully awkward between us. I was so relieved when he reached out and pulled me into a hug. “Are you crying?”

“*No*. I just…” I hugged him tight. “It’s an emotional day. I'm just so happy about your decision, and Jay has always treated Lola so well, and in general it’s just so good to see men not being horrible jerks.”

Xavier let out a low chuckle against my hair. He kissed my forehead, and then he leaned forward to plant a little peck on my lips. “You’re a trip, you know that?”

The moment was so sweet that I didn't want to focus on anything negative or complicated right then. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Xavier said, giving me another kiss.

“I’ll find you later, there’s something I need to check up on,” he said, giving me one more quick kiss on top of my head.

As he headed off, I heard laughter coming from outside, and went out into the yard.

The first thing I saw was Torin wiping water from his face. He was standing next to a barrel with Artemis, Rishika, and Astrid. They seemed to be having the time of their lives. Astrid and Torin especially seemed to be beyond excited.

*Good thing they’re seeing some fun things in the human world, and not just werewolf battles,* I thought. *We need to make a good impression.*

“Are you guys bobbing for apples?” I asked.

“Yes!” Torin exclaimed. “I want to go again, I almost had one!”

Astrid raised her index finger like a stern first grade teacher. “You get one chance per turn. And now it’s my turn.”

“Who made *you* the boss?” Torin demanded. “I was so close to getting that apple—I can’t let the barrel defeat me!”

As the two started to argue, both offering very compelling arguments that made no sense, I smiled. With everything that had been going on, I had almost forgotten that Halloween was supposed to be silly.

Rishika pointed at me, smirking. “How about you give it a shot?”

“How 'bout no?” I said, snorting. “I don't want to get my hair wet. I just washed it this morning.”

Artemis rolled her eyes at me. “Seriously? It’s just water. You know, what you washed it in this morning?”

“Not all of us look like we’re in a shampoo commercial when we have wet hair, Artemis,” I said pointedly.

“What is she even talking about?” Artemis asked Rishika.

Rishika smirked, giving her a once-over. “She means you.”

Artemis’s cheeks turned a little pink. Was she blushing right now? Was my older sister *blushing?*

I was about to tease her when she said, “Cali might look like a wet rat, but she’s still cute. She’s just not very coordinated.”

I had never been so unfairly attacked.

“I’ll have you know, I'm perfectly capable of grabbing an apple with my mouth,” I declared.

“Prove it, little sister,” Artemis said.

*Okay, she did NOT just say that to me!*

Astrid and Torin had actually stopped fighting, and were looking between Artemis and me.

“I will,” I said, and stepped up to the barrel.

“Cali! Cali! Cali!” Torin started a rhythmic chant, but Astrid elbowed him.

“Let her focus!” she said.

Determined, I eyed the apples one by one to find my perfect target. I pinned down a nice big red apple and leaned right in. I bit down on the apple, nailing it on the first try and not even getting wet.

*Ha!* I thought, victorious. *That’ll show Artemis!*

But as I started to lift my head out of the water to show them, something pulled back on the apple.

*What? What was that?*

My jaw clenched on the apple, and my head was jerked under the water.

**Episode 1012**

GREYSON

I was jogging around the neighborhood. I’d told Maren it was my way to relax before the fight. What I was really doing, though, was scanning the area for any suspicious activity. I had to make sure we weren’t being followed or watched.

This was my territory, and if any assholes thought they could just barge in and threaten someone who was under my protection, they had another thing coming.

At least Maren was safe in my apartment for now.

Of course, that didn’t stop me from feeling fucking furious about the way things had evolved. The only good thing about my run-in with Aiden was that it had helped me refocus. If I was going to make tonight’s fight with the mob’s choice look like a real bout, I’d have to land a few believable hits, and now I was pissed off enough to do just that. I couldn’t believe that son of a bitch thought he was a big man for hurting Maren. Bastards like him, like Silas, needed to be wiped off the face of the earth.

Losing, even if it was on purpose, would make me look weak, but it would mean that Fenrir would be safe. I was willing to let my pride take a hit or two. But this was only a short-term solution, like I’d told Maren time and time again. I still had to convince her to come with me to the pack house.

She was against it, of course. I wasn’t surprised by her reaction.

She was Fae, and I was basically inviting her to come over and hang out with a pack of werewolves. Our species didn’t naturally mesh together, so the reluctance was normal. But her son? He was a werewolf as well, not only Fae, and Fenrir needed to have the werewolf experience. I couldn’t imagine what it would be like for him to grow up without being exposed to that. Without someone to guide him, how was the boy supposed to know about shifting and all the other things that werewolves had to learn to survive?

I couldn’t remember the first time I’d shifted, but I knew that I’d done it in a pack, surrounded by others who understood and could help me. I had no idea how traumatic shifting could be if you didn’t have someone there for you as an anchor who understood what you were going through. I wanted to be that anchor for Fenrir—especially considering his real father was a real piece of shit. Didn’t seem like Aiden was the mentoring type.

That wasn’t Fenrir's fault. None of this was. Like it hadn’t been my fault or Xavier’s or Colton’s that we’d had a father like Silas. I couldn’t just walk away from this situation without at least trying to make things better for the kid.

Even if his mom and I had a bad history, he shouldn’t be the one to pay the price. He shouldn’t be the one to carry the weight of all the adults’ mistakes. And since his own father could be dangerous and wouldn’t be there for him, I had to stand up and do the right thing, for once.

Cali would approve.

After circling the area at least five times to make sure it was secure—I didn’t half-ass anything—I headed back to my apartment. I found Maren pacing in the living room, biting her nails. She turned to face me when she heard the door close. It was obvious that she was on edge about the kid.

Hell, I felt the same, and he wasn’t even mine.

“Have you heard anything?” I asked her.

“No,” she said miserably.

I nodded. “That’s actually good. It means that nothing’s changed, and the deal is still on.”

Maren stopped pacing to stare at me. “I love how you talk like there’s some sort of kidnapping manual.”

“There’s no manual, but I know how to deal with shitbags—and how they usually behave,” I said. Moving closer to her, I reached out to rest my hand on her shoulder. The gesture seemed to ease some of her jittery energy. “I’m going to get Fenrir back.”

She looked up at me with watery eyes. “Thank you, Greyson. I know this can’t be easy for you. I also appreciate you offering to take us to your pack house, but…”

“You haven’t changed your mind, have you?” I asked.

Sighing, she shook her head. “No.”

Maren was too stressed to make a decision right now. But maybe once she got the kid back, she’d be able to reconsider. Or I’d manage to convince her what was best for the kid. Because I, of course, knew best. Without even being blood-related to Fenrir.

I was probably getting a little too attached, but I wasn’t about to admit that.

As if I didn’t have an elaborate plan to bring her and her child to my werewolf lair where I’d have an army to protect the kid, I told Maren, “I’m going to go get some water for you.”

She nodded, and I walked into the kitchen. I pulled the water bottle from the fridge and poured some into a glass. Suddenly, my entire body seized with an intense sensation.

An image, wild and vivid like a daydream, invaded my brain.

*I was at the pack house, sitting on the back porch. From the yard, a car pulled up and Colton and Maya stepped out. She was holding a newborn baby, cooing at it while Colton stared at them both adoringly.*

*“Cute, but screams a lot,” Colton said about the kid. “Just like Maya.”*

*Maya managed to roll her eyes and laugh at the same time at Colton’s words. He turned to call out to an older kid to be careful by the lake. Meanwhile, Cali, looking radiant, rushed up from the yard with two little kids who yelled, “DADDY!” They both landed on my lap, hugging me. I could feel the weight of them, even in the fantasy; I could hear their laughter vibrating in my ears. An immense happiness swept over me as I hugged them back.*

*And then there was Xavier and Ava, coming out of the house, followed by Marlene. “It’s so beautiful!” she was saying, gushing over the engagement ring on Ava’s finger.*

*Xavier had gotten her that ring.*

*“What do you think, Greyson?” Ava asked me. She held up her hand for me to see it, but I couldn’t focus on admiring the ring. Cali and Xavier, standing behind Ava, were sharing an intense look… What was that about? I didn’t like it. It made a visceral part of me rebel, aching to claw its way out, up to the surface.*

*My chest was throbbing, suddenly.*

*Trying to keep my cool, I mind linked with Cali.* You okay?

*Cali jumped, as if she’d been caught doing something wrong, and broke eye contact with Xavier. She turned to me, her cheeks flushed, her eyes wide as they locked with mine.* Yes, *she replied.*

*But no matter what she said, my chest was still aching.*

“Greyson?” Maren was speaking to me, was shaking my shoulder—here, in real life. The daydream vanished, and I choked.

“Are you okay?” Maren asked me, her expression concerned.

I looked around. The vision of Cali had faded entirely, but my pulse was still racing. I looked around the kitchen to ground myself before facing Maren again. “How long… How long was I like that?”

Maren gave me a cautious look. “Just a few seconds.”

I rubbed my forehead, then my whole face. Seconds? How the fuck could it have been seconds? It had felt like minutes. Like I’d been in another lifetime.

“Here,” Maren said, pulling me toward the kitchen table. “Take a seat. I'll get you some water.”

How the tables had turned. I’d been trying to take care of Maren, and now she had to babysit me because of a weird daydream. This was the second time I’d been hit by one of those—whatever they were. Could they be visions? But they made no fucking sense. Maybe this was part of the *due destini* curse?

“Here you go,” Maren said, placing a glass of water in front of me. She waited until I’d drunk it all to ask, “Are you going to be okay for the fight?”

I wanted to tell her that I would be fine. She was living a nightmare, losing her child, and the last thing she needed was more things to worry about. But truthfully, I couldn't fucking *not* be troubled about this. I knew how these fights worked. There was a whole lot of money riding on the idea that I was going to win tonight. And when I lost, those who’d bet against me were going to win big.

But what would happen if I was hit by one of these damn visions right before the fight started? I couldn’t control my reaction to them—or when they suddenly appeared and overwhelmed the fuck out of me. What if I went all spacey and the mob held that against me—not to mention Maren and the kid? I didn’t give a fuck about me, I knew I could survive a lot of things, but what would happen to Fenrir then?

I turned to Maren. She looked at me, her expression apprehensive.

“Greyson,” she whispered. “What are you thinking?”

Taking a deep breath, I asked her, “What would happen if I couldn’t fight?”

**Episode 1013**

I was being forced underwater. There was literally something dragging me down into the water and as much as I was trying to break free, it wouldn't budge! How much longer would I be able to hold my breath? And why the fuck wasn't anyone helping me?

I could hear Artemis, Torin, and Astrid, chattering on like I wasn't dying right before their eyes. Was this seriously going to be the end for me? Was I going to drown in a Halloween apple-bobbing barrel? What kind of ridiculous death was that? After surviving trolls and vampires and psychopathic werewolves, that kind of demise would just be the *worst*.

“*Cali...*”

Huh? Where had that voice come from? It sounded much more crisp and clear than the voices outside the barrel.

“*Caliana,*” the voice said again. With growing dread, I realized it was the orb. Its voice was clearer than ever as it spoke right inside my ear, underwater.“*Why haven’t you accepted my offer, Caliana?*”

*Oh great!* I thought. *This thing wants to chat while I'm basically dying!*

I fought to answer the orb, but the apple was still in my mouth and wouldn't move. It was like my teeth had been glued to it, and any attempt to scream for help was ruined. I struggled to mind link with the orb, but it was no use.

I was completely and utterly frozen.

“*What is it going to be, Cali?*” the orb continued. “*Do you want to die here, bobbing for apples? Or do you want to break the* due destini *curse once and for all?*”

I wanted to cuss the orb out for asking such ridiculous questions with such obvious answers, but it was kind of hard to do that when I was running out of oxygen and getting woozy. I hadn't been this afraid for my life in what felt like a while, so the only thing I could do right then was nod my head at the orb’s words.

“*You need to remember the deal, Cali,*”the orb went on. “*Help me and I will help you. Do you accept?*”

I nodded again, my head pounding from the pressure and agony of drowning.

*Please!* I thought. *Anything for this torture to fucking end!*

Instantly, the force holding me down released. FINALLY! I yanked myself out of the water, gasping for air. Quickly, I lost my balance and fell to my knees.

Astrid, Torin, Rishika, and Artemis all stared at me, looking weirded out.

“You’re only supposed to hold an apple, not eat it,” Artemis told me, her eyebrows raised.

Torin screwed his face up in disgust, pointing at the barrel. “Ew, gross!”

I looked in the direction he was gesturing at. The apple that I’d bit into was crushed, turning brown.

Astrid wrinkled her nose. “I’m not going after her.”

Torin nodded very seriously. “Me neither!”

I was panting, trying to compose myself after my literal near-death experience, and these people were worried about apple-bobbing. Why weren’t any of them helping me stand? Was this a *joke* to them?

Fighting to control my breathing, I asked, “Why didn't you help me?”

Torin frowned. “I thought you were supposed to get the apple by yourself?”

I was so pissed off that I forgot I’d just survived an actual traumatic experience. I stood up on shaky feet, glaring and all four of them. “I’m not talking about the goddamn apples! I almost drowned in there and nobody noticed! Why didn't you guys help me?”

Torin, Astrid, Rishika, and Artemis shared confused looks. Artemis spoke slowly to me, like she wasn't sure I was all there in the head. “Is that some kind of human Halloween thing? Pretending you’re drowning? In a barrel?”

I couldn't believe this was happening! What could possibly make my friends so oblivious to the fact that I had almost died, right in front of their eyes? How did my own sister—who was generally obnoxious but who actually seemed to love me—not getting what I was telling her right now? It was like some sort of spell had been cast to…

“OH MY GOD!” I exclaimed, realization dawning. I grabbed Artemis by the arm and pulled her away.

“What’s wrong with you today?” Artemis asked me, alarmed. “Did you eat too many of those tiny child size bars as a Halloween celebration?”

“It’s the orb!” I hissed. “The orb pulled me under the water, made you guys ignore me, and then threatened me! It threatened me into agreeing to help it! And I agreed!”

Artemis froze, gaping at me. “You did *what*?”

I glanced at the other three people standing around the barrel. Thankfully, they were chatting among themselves and not paying attention to us. “I agreed to help it because I had no choice,” I explained to Artemis. “But I’m not really sure what I’m supposed to be helping it with…”

Artemis looked like she wanted to smack me. Or hide me somewhere where nobody could ever find me. I wasn't sure if that was a good thing, like she wanted to protect me, or if she was just fed up and didn’t want to deal with me anymore. Could’ve been either.

“Do you realize how bad this is?” Artemis asked me, in an almost alarmingly calm voice. “Please tell me you didn’t *promise* to help it?”

I thought for a moment. “I’m actually not sure…”

“*Cali*.”

“Okay!” I huffed. “Things were so hectic! I was drowning, what do you expect? A detailed play by play?”

Artemis put her hands on my shoulders. “Cali, I need you to think very carefully. Did you or did you not promise anything to the orb?”

I took a moment to think. My mind went back to that horrible barrel, and I slowly remembered. “I’m pretty sure all I did was agree. No promises.”

Artemis exhaled in relief. “Thank the gods.” She paused for a moment, eyeing me. “You should take this as a warning, though. For some reason, the orb is trying to make you do something, and we both know that whatever it is, it can’t be good. You need to be more cautious.”

I scowled. I didn’t like it when Artemis spoke to me like I was a little kid. I knew what I was doing! Sort of.

“It's not like I was seeking out the orb, okay?” I grumbled. “I literally almost drowned in there—a little more sympathy would be great.”

“I know,” Artemis mumbled. And before I could say anything else, she grabbed me and pulled me into a bear hug. “Feeling better now?”

“Not really.” That was what I said, but I still hugged her back.

“Well, that’s fine. At least you’re alive.” Artemis let go and patted my shoulder. “Should we tell Big Mac about all this?”

I thought for a moment. Big Mac wasn't exactly enthusiastic about me and Artemis helping her move the orb. I shook my head at Artemis’s words. “I don't think we should talk about this to anyone. At least not yet.”

“Okay,” Artemis said. “But you have to be careful—especially after what Mom told us about the sphere. Whatever the orb is up to, it can’t be trusted.”

“Oh no!” Astrid yelled from behind us. “My shoes got wet!”

Both Artemis and I turned to see the two Light Fae dumping out the apple-bobbing barrel.

“We should refill it and try again,” Torin said. “I know I can get an apple!”

Just then, Xavier came out of the house. He pointed at the doorstep, frowning. “Who put fake spider webs on the front door?”

Rishika looked at the ground like it was suddenly fascinating, and Torin started whistling, but Astrid said, “Zainab and Sage did it. Doesn’t it look nice?”

*Right*, I thought. *That’s exactly why Xavier is scowling at it.*

“What are you going as to the party?” Torin asked Xavier happily.

“What?” Xavier asked flatly.

“What costume are you going to wear?” Torin asked. He seemed genuinely interested in Xavier’s answer. “Are you going to go as a troll? Or maybe a unicorn? I love unicorns!”

“I’m not getting dressed up as anything.”

“Aw, Xavier!” I said. “Where’s your Halloween spirit?”

Xavier shot me a look. “I’ll leave the dressing up to you. I have other things on my mind.”

For a moment, I imagined him as Superman. Or Thor. Whoa. That was *really* working for me. But then Astrid said, “I can make Xavier a unicorn glamour. It would be very easy!”

She started to raise her hand, ready to do some magic. I had to cover my mouth to hide my laughter. Xavier was the most un-unicorn-like person to ever walk this earth.

“You’d better stop,” Xavier told Astrid sharply, and Torin pouted.

“But you have to dress up!” he said. “Maybe you can go as a wolf?”

Xavier’s severe expression broke into a literal wolfish grin. *Uh-oh.* “Do you really want to see me as a wolf?”

Torin clapped his hands in excitement. “Yes! That would be amazing!”

Xavier wasn’t in the best mood, and I didn’t trust that he wasn’t going to try to rip Torin’s head off, but before I could step in to stop this very bad idea, he shifted. Torin jumped back, startled but excited. “Incredible!” he squealed.

There was a tiny gasp from behind us. Whirling around, I spotted a young child, dressed as a vampire, standing with a pumpkin pail and staring directly at us.

**Episode 1014**

XAVIER

My wolf growled at Torin, hoping to scare him into shutting up. How could the Fae think that I’d get dressed up for Halloween—as a unicorn, of all fucking things?

Maybe charging at him as a werewolf would make him realize that he wasn’t supposed to ask me dumb questions like that. Was it the most mature response in the world? No. But as I advanced toward him, ready to make a show of it, I noticed that everyone was staring past me. I looked over my shoulder and saw…

A kid with a pumpkin pail.

*Fuck.*

He must have seen me shift.

Without a word, the kid started running in the other direction, his tiny feet slapping on the ground. I shifted back to human, ready to go chase after the annoying, nosy kid, but then Cali blocked my way.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, grabbing my shoulder.

I pointed out the kid, who was still running. “He saw me shift!”

Cali stared at me like I was insane. “Wait, Xavier! You can’t chase him—you’re naked! How would it look for a naked man to chase after a young boy?”

Shit. She had a point.

“I’ve got this,” Astrid said seriously. She moved her hands in a weird fairy way, and I started to feel warmth all over my body. I looked down, and a second later, I was covered in something fluffy and white. With pink glitter.

It was a unicorn costume.

What. The. *Fuck*.

Cali’s eyes went wide before she burst out laughing. “Oh my god!”

I glared at Astrid. “Get me the fuck out of this. *Now*.”

Astrid sighed dramatically—she really was Cali's friend—and glamoured me into normal clothes.

Cali pouted. “I liked you better before.”

I arched an eyebrow. “You mean naked?”

She blushed. “No, I mean as a fluffy unicorn.”

Snorting, I rolled my eyes before eyeing the spot where the kid had vanished. I was about to go after him when Rishika planted herself in front of me.

“Maybe we don’t have to be worried about the boy?” she asked. “Who’s going to believe that the kid saw a real werewolf? It’s Halloween. Everyone will be wearing costumes today. He’d literally be the boy who cried wolf.”

Artemis came up to Rishika, nudging her with a grin. “Yeah, maybe we don’t have anything to worry about.”

I looked between them, eyebrows raised. They looked pretty cozy.

“Who cried wolf, what?” Torin asked.

“It’s just like the fable where Peter was screaming and—”

“Why was the kid here by himself, though?” I asked, cutting Rishika off.

Cali stopped talking and frowned. “That actually *is* odd. What kind of parent would let a kid go trick-or-treating by himself out here? He seemed really young, too.”

“That’s the part that’s bothering me,” I said.

Both Artemis and Rishika seemed a lot less certain about their theory now.

“These woods have been pretty empty except for the pack,” I added, ignoring the Fae. “So where the hell did that kid even come from? The house is pretty remote.”

Cali looked at Artemis and Rishika. “That’s true.”

Rishika shook her head. “Kids get into all kinds of trouble without their parents knowing.”

“Excuse me,” Astrid interrupted. “Wasn’t someone saying something about *Pin the Bone on the Skeleton* earlier? What was that again?”

Torin raised his hand excitedly. “Yes, tell us! I want to know all there is to know about this brilliant, unnecessary holiday!”

I had to stop myself from commenting on his enthusiasm. Being snarky with the person who had saved our lives multiple times—including during an actual battle—wouldn’t be a good strategy. Besides, Torin meant well—somewhere between his obnoxious comments and questions that kept coming every two seconds. I knew that.

“I'm heading inside,” I told Cali. “Need to get some real clothes.”

“I’ll find you later!” Cali called after me. I wondered why her hair was wet, but then I remembered the barrel with the apples. My mate had spent the entire morning fixing her hair and whining about getting it right, and now she’d just sacrificed it to play with apples in a barrel. Typical Cali.

Snorting, I paused at the entryway, shooting one last look toward the woods. Where had that kid come from? Even if the rest of the pack thought the incident wasn’t that weird, I couldn’t help but feel something was amiss.

Tucking the feeling to the side to dwell on later, I walked upstairs to change into normal clothes. The glamour had already faded away. I looked at myself in the mirror before glancing through window. Cali seemed to be deep in conversation with Artemis.

If I wanted to try and have a good time with her tonight—considering the fact that it was Halloween, which she seemed to enjoy—I realized it would be best not to have Ravi’s decision hanging over my head.

I’d given Ravi a choice. It was time for him to decide.

I found him looking out the basement window.

“So?” I asked. “What’s it going to be?”

Ravi slowly turned to me. His expression was severe but calm. “I won’t call for a Lupo Finale. I had no real interest in becoming the Redwood Alpha, anyway.”

“Then why did you start all this?” I asked.

“The only reason I was going to challenge Greyson was to have legitimate means and reason to kill him,” Ravi said coldly.

“I can understand that…” The memory of Cali shouting Greyson’s name when she came flashed through my head. My jaw clenched. “You're not the only one who’d like to kill Greyson.”

Ravi didn't comment on my words.

“Are you going to unchain me?” he asked, holding up his bound wrists.

I went ahead and released him. As he rubbed his wrists, I asked, “What are your plans now?”

He shrugged. “Not sure. Joss and I were planning on going Rogue together. Maybe I’ll try that for a while.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. The situation was fucked. Ravi had no excuse for his behavior, orb or no orb. But even I couldn’t deny that Joss had been an important member of the Redwood pack. A skilled, smart woman. The pack would miss her.

“Thanks,” Ravi said.

I frowned. “What for?”

“You could easily have had me killed for what I did. But instead, you spared me. I’ll always remember that.”

As Ravi headed upstairs, I called after him. “If you decide you want to come back one day and become a member of the pack again… You should know that you’re welcome here.”

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I put the silver chains away, hoping that I wouldn’t need them ever again. I was done with drama and murder and mayhem. I was looking forward to just chilling for a while, with Cali in my arms. When I got upstairs, I noticed that her bedroom door was ajar. I caught a glimpse of her getting undressed.

I paused silently by the door, enjoying the view for a moment. Her back looked so elegant, her skin smooth and spotless. Instantly, I wanted to run my hands and mouth all over her. It was such an automatic response, despite everything we were going through.

Knocking on the door, I walked in. “Hope I'm not interrupting.”

Cali squeaked and turned to face me. She grabbed her robe to cover herself, which was funny. As if I hadn't seen every inch of her up close, time and time again.

“Xavier!” Her tone was almost scolding. “You spooked me!”

I smiled the most wicked smile I could pull off. “Trick or treat?”

She snorted as I closed the door behind me. Her hands dropped from around her chest, and now her robe was open just enough. I kept glancing between her face and her body.

“You're really not supposed to scare people, you know,” she said.

I snorted. “It’s Halloween.” I fiddled with the front of her robe. “What are you doing?”

“I *was* changing into my costume,” she said with a sly smile.

“Oh? You gonna show me?”

Her cheeks were flushed. She was gorgeous. I couldn't keep my eyes from trailing to her mouth to her collarbones and down. When she was like this it was so easy to let any of our old issues melt away.

“I wanted to surprise you,” she said, pressing her lips together.

I smirked, tugging at the belt of her robe. “Surprise me now. Put it on. Let me see.”

She was all flustered. “Okay, if you insist. So bossy.”

I shook my head at her, smirking. She went to her closet, reached inside, and held up a Tiger onesie for me to see. For real.

“Amazing,” I said, chuckling.

She grinned, still blushing. “I put some thought into it.”

Boldly, she dropped the robe, revealing her naked body. For a good five seconds, I couldn’t look anywhere else, even as she stepped into the costume and started to zip it up.

“Can you help with the zipper?” she asked.

As much as I loved her funny little tricks, I had something else in mind. I moved her hand over mine, stopping her from covering herself. Our eyes locked.

Her scent was fucking intoxicating.

And I wanted her as badly as ever. It was the only thought I allowed myself.

Just her and me, with nobody else in between.

“I thought you wanted to see me wear my costume,” Cali murmured, biting her lip.

“I’m changing my mind,” I said.

“But what about—” She cut herself off.

I knew what she was going to say anyway. What about her saying my brother’s name? What about us? Were we okay now?

What I knew was that I wanted to make her forget her own name, let alone anyone else’s.

I smiled, tugging at the zipper. “I’d rather see the real tiger.”

**Episode 1015**

My stretch mark insecurity had been a thing of the past for a while now.

I looked up at Xavier in a way that had to be sexy enough for him, because he swallowed roughly and pulled the zipper down, pushing his hands underneath the fabric.

“Nope,” I said, pushing his hands away. “No touching.”

He eyed me, licking his lips. The sight of him went straight to my—heart. And other pounding parts with a lot of nerve endings.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his voice gruff and shaky.

Knowing that I could turn him on so easily was a huge power trip. It made my insides shake with anticipation, with desire. But I knew I didn’t deserve this from Xavier, not after what had happened last time.

“Xavier,” I said, my pulse beating quickly, “I’m really sorry about what happened in the laundry room.”

“Yeah?” he asked, his features unreadable. “How sorry?”

“W-what?”

“Show me how sorry you are, tiger.”

Heat swept through me. He wanted to play it like this?

Okay.

I grabbed him by the neck of his T-shirt, tracing his chest before pushing him back onto the bed. He looked up at me, his gaze alight with amusement when I growled seductively. Or at least, I thought it was seductive. He seemed to agree, though, because he reached up and pulled me onto his lap.

He made a move to pull me in for a kiss, but I shoved him back down, tilting my head. “You want to see the real tiger?” I asked, already breathless.

Xavier nodded, obedient in a way he rarely was, and I rewarded him with a devouring kiss. He squeezed my waist and parted his lips for me to lick into his mouth, his hips bucking upward. He felt so incredible underneath me that my body was shaking.

“You can look, but you can’t touch,” I teased, panting against his mouth.

“That’s not fair,” he choked out as I pulled my zipper the rest of the way down. I undressed slowly before standing up to remove the whole thing. He watched the entire time, a small, wicked smile playing on his lips.

I slid off my underwear too, and then just stood there.

I stood there—bare, stretchmarks and all—and my skin tingled under his gaze, under the warmth of his approval, under his lust and need. I felt heated, burning for him all over, my thighs quivering as I presented myself to him.

To my *mate*.

“Can I touch now?” he asked, his eyes trailing over every inch of bare flesh.

“Only if you beg for—” I was cut off, squealing as he grabbed my hips and pulled me onto the bed. He flipped us over, his thick thighs landing on other side of my waist. He held both of my hands in his and I whimpered, thrilled to be at his mercy.

“You never answered my question, though,” Xavier said, smirking.

“What question?” My heart was pounding, its rhythm as dizzying as the sight of him, so close to me.

He leaned closer, his hot breath brushing at my mouth. “Trick or treat?”

I grinned, breathless. “Treat?”

Xavier laughed, low and raspy, and kissed first my upper lip, then the lower. He sucked on it, nibbling as he reached between my legs to part and trace me with his fingertips. I swallowed roughly, whimpering as he rubbed where I needed him, sucking on my neck at the same time. He kept going, whispering in my ear. “Being with you is always a treat, Caliana.”

His words made my hips buck upward, chasing the pleasure he so wanted to give me. He kept finger-fucking me, mouthing at my neck, kissing me deeply until I toppled over the edge. And then, with a single flick of his wrist, I was shaking all over his hand.

“Fuck,” he rasped, flipping me onto my stomach.

I was pulsating, still shaking when he thrust inside me—one sharp stroke after the other. He pulled me upward, my back to his front. He grabbed my hand and put it between my legs.

“Touch yourself,” he growled. “Let me feel you…”

I moaned, moving backward to meet his thrusts. I ached for the pounding sensation of him inside me, and I chased the pressure greedily. It was so easy for me to come when he worked me over like this, hitting all the right spots, all the time.

Afterward, he turned me until I was face up, flipping me on the mattress. He was stroking himself as he knelt between my legs, and my heart was pounding. I sat up, leaning forward, staring at his hardness and licking my lips.

“That’s my girl, fucking gorgeous,” he said, twisting my hair into a ponytail. He led my movements as I used my mouth on him, sucking and licking. His body was heaving, grunts escaping him. Knowing that I could give him this kind of pleasure had me feeling dizzy, delirious.

In an instant, he was easing me off of him and pressing me into the bed beneath me. His lips found mine in a hungry kiss. My tongue flicked against his as his hands roamed, pinching my sensitive nipples. I moaned into his mouth before finding my voice to say, “Please.”

He smiled against my skin. “You want me?”

“*Yes*.” I nodded, feeling blissfully delirious.

Xavier pushed inside me and it took all I had not to shatter immediately. We found our rhythm together, and Xavier’s fingers found my nipples again. The orgasm inside me built until it couldn’t be contained anymore, and I cried out. And when Xavier came inside me moments later, I moaned out his name, shivering. “*Xavier*.”

I clung to him, a dreamy smile on my face. He looked so content and happy. I hoped hard that this—the way he was right now, tender and playful—meant that he had gotten over the laundry room mishap. That Xavier had forgiven me.

I itched to talk to him about it again, to promise to him that it had meant nothing. That it had just been a dumb mistake. But I knew Xavier by now. If he was going to talk about it at all, it wouldn’t be because I bugged him. That technique did not work on him. It worked on Artemis and occasionally Greyson, but not him.

He stared down at me, brushing my cheek with the back of his hand. “Let’s go take a shower,” he said, smiling.

I squinted at him. “That doesn’t sound all that innocent.”

He chuckled. “That's because it’s not,” he said, leaning down to bite the spot where my neck met my shoulder. I squirmed, letting out a moan or a laugh—a maugh?

*Not your best pun, Cali,* I told myself, cringing.

Xavier stood up and headed off to the bathroom. “Waiting for you to join me,” he called over his shoulder.

I snorted, shaking my head at him. “Let me stretch for a moment!”

I heard his laughter and then the sound of the shower running. Smiling to myself, I rolled over onto the sheet, where Xavier’s spot was. I loved his scent, the warmth left there from his body. I closed my eyes, relishing the feeling…

And suddenly, a sharp ache invaded my chest.

It felt like terror.

That same fear I’d felt when I’d thought that I was going to drown in that damn barrel.

*It’s the orb,* I thought, panicked. *The orb is threatening me.*

It had said it could break the curse, and Xavier’s veins *had* faded. But had it really been the orb that had saved him? Or had it been something else? Should I put my trust in this mysterious, dangerous object? Because that didn’t sound right to me.

The only thing I knew for sure was that the orb had a lot of power. And that didn’t make it trustworthy—if anything, it made it even more problematic. Whatever I decided to do, I needed to be careful. And for the love of god, I definitely needed to *NOT* promise anything to a supernatural magical artifact like that.

“Cali!” Xavier called from the shower, interrupting my thoughts. “I’ve started without you!”

Werewolves just didn't stop, did they?

Forcing myself to stop thinking about the damn orb, I was slipping out of bed to join him when there was a knock on the door. I grabbed a sheet before the visitor barged in, like people tended to do around these parts.

Sure enough, Lola bounded in a second later. She looked more anxious than usual, and that was a feat. Then, of course, Xavier decided it was a great idea to call me again. “Cali! Are you coming or not?”

“Lola’s here!” I called back.

Lola looked at the sheet wrapped around me and the messed up bed. “Guess I’m interrupting something?”

“What’s going on?” I asked, flustered and fumbling.

“I’ve been looking for you everywhere,” Lola said, an edge to her tone.

“I, um… I was trying on my costume.”

Lola saw my costume in a heap on the floor. “Right,” she said. “Well, you don’t have time to play dress up right now.” She seemed to be barely holding herself together. “I need your help gathering some stuff.”

“What kind of stuff?” I asked.

“It’s for Big Mac,” she said. “We’re doing the spell right now.”

**Episode 1016**

GREYSON

Maren and I stood outside a shady warehouse.

“I don’t like this,” she said.

“Why not? I'm loving it,” I replied sarcastically.

Maren gave me a sharp look. “I can’t believe they’re actually holding the fight here. Especially after the bombing last night.”

“I checked things out as we drove in. They have a lot of added security,” I said. “I guess this is a chance we’ll have to take if we want to get Fenrir back.”

Maren opened her mouth to speak, but then two fierce-looking bouncers walked up to us. We got looked over and then were sent toward the ring. I eyed the area, scanning every corner until I spotted an exit. I leaned toward Maren. “I want you to go stand there,” I whispered. “In case something bad happens.”

*In case, you know, there’s another unexplained explosion that tries to decimate the place.*

She nodded silently, looking devastating and devastated. Shaking my head with a sigh, I started walking toward the lockers, but then Maren gripped my forearm. I turned to look at her. Her eyes were huge, peering at me.

“Whatever happens tonight…” She paused. “Thank you for helping me. You’re a good man, Greyson.”

I doubted that, but I wasn’t about to start a debate now. I nodded curtly and walked away. Whatever I thought about myself, it did make sense for her to be grateful. She had to know that I was doing this for the kid. Not for her.

I entered the locker room and quickly changed into my shorts, considering my opponent from last night, the tall, gigantic guy. At least he was a big one, so my loss wouldn’t look suspicious. Gamblers starting to ask questions wasn’t going to get Fenrir back, it would only make things worse. I had to watch myself. Of course, under normal circumstances, I would have been able to defeat him easily enough—werewolf or not.

I wasn’t cocky saying that; it was just the truth. I could go toe to toe with anyone, anytime. And after Silas, nothing fucking scared me during a physical fight. A physical fight was something I could control—unlike the pain I felt when Cali, or someone innocent, got hurt.

I would go fifty rounds with Godzilla if it meant Cali staying safe.

Thinking about Cali wasn't going to do me any good right now, though. I hoped to hell I wouldn’t have another dream-spell or whatever in the next fifteen minutes. I just couldn’t afford to zone out in the ring, not with the fucking mob watching us. One day, when the kid was safe and Maren was free, I would find Hans and his motherfuckers and kill each and every one of them. Just because I could. Just because they thought they could play with a kid like a pawn.

Silas had tried to do that with me and my brothers; we had taken care of him all right.

As I approached the ring, I felt everyone’s eyes on me. I glanced over and saw Maren, waiting anxiously right where I’d told her to. It was kind of funny, the way she listened to me. Cali probably would’ve been in the ring. Not in a bikini to count the rounds, no. She would’ve been standing close enough to see every little bead of sweat on me. She probably would’ve tried to take down the giant I was going up against on her own, without even caring about any of the rules.

Of course, Maren had her son to worry about, so she couldn't be reckless like that. And I knew she could be tough as nails—a great, cunning fighter. If what was happening was fucking stressful for me, I couldn’t even imagine how messed up it must feel to her. I just hoped she could keep it together until this damn thing was over, and we had the kid back.

I would get Fenrir a million rocks to befriend or kick, as long as we got him back.

I climbed into the ring and nodded to my cornerman—a guy who looked like he’d fought a hundred fights and lost every one. I couldn’t relate. I looked around, taking in the sounds and the space. I’d never imagined I’d find myself back in the ring again, but there was a part of me that felt right at home.

I scanned the crowd, and I remembered some of the faces from last night. I wondered who was betting on me to win, because they were about to be cheated. I knew I'd be pissed if a guy who looked like me went down like a limp noodle. It made me a little uneasy, knowing that my first fight was going to go down like this. But then again, it would be worth it.

I just needed to make this shit believable.

I needed to lose, without looking like I wasn’t trying.

A loud creaking sound interrupted my thoughts. I saw one of the side doors open, and then two beefy dudes and Hans brought Fenrir out. At least he didn't look scared. Or hurt. Thank god. He looked around curiously, his big eyes taking in the scene until they landed on me. He frowned, before his expression shifted in recognition.

The kid waved at me then, and my fucking heart broke.

I raised my hand, waving back. Then I locked eyes with Hans, who glared at me. This was a not-so-subtle reminder of what was at stake. I shifted my gaze to Maren—she was watching Fenrir from across the room, a pained look on her face. She looked like some sort of sad, angelic painting, her skin glowing under the lights.

“It’s starting!” someone screamed. The crowd was full of nervous energy at the arrival of the second fighter. I turned to see my opponent, who had just arrived.

I frowned.

A small, rangy-looking guy climbed into the ring, wearing a satin fight robe with a giant red ‘C’ on it. He glared at me, and I wasn't sure what was happening. No shade to short fighters, but I could probably blow on this guy and make him fall down. What was this nonsense? Where was the big guy from last night?

Weirded out, I turned to my cornerman. “Who’s the Cabbage Patch Kid?”

Looking bored, the cornerman said, “He’s known as the Crusher. He’s your opponent.”

“The Crusher?” I blinked in shock. “What does he crush? Ants?”

The cornerman shrugged. I looked at the guy, who snapped his teeth at me. Was this a Napoleon syndrome thing? Like when Chihuahuas thought they were big guard dogs?

“This must be some kind of a joke,” I said. “Where's the guy from last night?”

“Your original opponent was injured in the blast, so they booked the Crusher.”

I pointed at the Cabbage Patch Kid-slash-Chihuahua. “Him? Seriously?” Who the fuck was going to believe *I* would lose to some half-pint with a name like *the Crusher?*

The cornerman shrugged again. “Not my problem.”

Fucking irritated, I spotted Hans in the crowd. The son of a bitch put a hand on Fenrir’s shoulder while he stared at me. His cold expression said it all.

I had no choice.

I just hoped I could make this convincing. And if I managed that, I definitely needed to go into acting. I’d already be eligible for my Academy Award.

After we were both announced, and the crowd actually laughed at the Crusher's introduction, I eyed Maren. She looked shaken with worry, but I nodded at her.

And then I turned to face the Crusher.

My stomach tensed, because just behind him, I noticed the three witches. The sisters. They were staring at me from the crowd, peering right into my soul or whatever. I couldn't believe they were here.

Everything about tonight was weird. Nothing was sitting right.

“Ready, set—” the referee said. The bell dinged, signaling the start of the fight.

At the same time, the crowd went wild, and the Crusher came at me without any hesitation. He actually was tougher then he looked, which was the only good surprise of the night. But still, he was no match for me.

I purposefully let him hit me a few times, and I fell down a couple, just for the crowd to go wild and for the Crusher’s confidence to go up.

I just fucking needed this to be as believable as possible.

Fenrir’s life depended on it.

This went on for two rounds, and I reminded myself to lie low.

When the third round arrived, and the whistle blew, I told myself that this was it.

I was supposed to go down now.

The Crusher came at me, with a whole lot of menace and some murderous intent, so I couldn’t help myself—I instinctively dodged his punch. When I came back up, though, it was swinging. I accidentally hit the Crusher in the chin…

With my head.

I didn’t even punch the dude, but it was enough.

I watched, stunned, as his eyes rolled back.

A second later, he faceplanted onto the ground.

Panting, I stared at his unconscious face, panic running through me. I’d fucking hit the guy by accident, and now he was completely knocked out.

*Fuck.*

**Episode 1017**

LOLA

Cali and Jay joined me, Big Mac, and Mrs. Smith a little ways away from the house.

I looked back and saw the Halloween string lights turning on in the distance. The house looked gorgeous. Celebratory. I wished I could just be there and enjoy the party in a costume with a drink in hand. I wished I didn’t have to deal with this spell.

I wished it would all be over sooner rather than later, because I *wanted* it to be, so badly. My love for Jay was the only thing that could compare to my desire to find my wolf, my full wolf. It was something strong, a sensation that made me feel certain, confident that I needed to be the best version of myself.

I couldn’t postpone this any longer.

It was now or never.

It was my life we were talking about, my future. And I needed to fight for it, like I fought for everything.

“Ready?” Big Mac asked me, while Mrs. Smith took a few steps back.

I stared at the witch. She had her usual serious but calm expression. The fact that she had agreed to help me was actually something that made me feel lucky, despite all her whining and judging and the fact that she was pretty fucking mean at times. It felt good to have her on my team.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m ready.”

Cali sniffled, and I turned to look at her. I pulled her into a squishy hug and she hugged me back, like always. Like she meant it. “Thank you for going to that stupid library with me and helping me with this. I owe you.”

“That’s what friends are for,” she said. “I love you, Lola. I’m here for you, always and no matter what.”

“I love you too,” I said, sniffling myself now. We hugged each other some more until Big Mac cleared her throat.

“Let’s move on to the next one,” she said. “We don’t have all night.”

I let Cali go and turned to Jay. He hugged me tight, and I inhaled his scent deeply. Would this be the last time I smelled his scent like this? Anxiety was making me freak out, making me jittery with nerves, but I couldn’t run away this time.

I needed to do what was best—for me, and for my future with my mate. The one I loved, the one who was always there for me. Even when I was being a massive pain in the butt. I looked up at Jay, and he caressed my face.

“Everything’s going to be okay,” he said.

“Hopefully I’ll be a werewolf,” I whispered in his ear.

“You know I’ll love you anyway.”

I felt all weepy to hear him say that. He looked so sweet and tender that my heart was fluttering. He tilted my chin up and brushed his lips over mine, once, twice. I held him tighter, taking comfort in the perfect feeling of his embrace.

“Ahem.” Big Mac cleared her throat for a second time. “I’m not getting any younger here.”

Glancing between Cali and Jay, my best friend and my mate, I suddenly felt a lot more settled than I had in weeks. Taking a determined breath, I stepped forward, staring at Big Mac. “So? What's next?”

“According to the spell,” Big Mac said, “you need to strip down, and spread the herbs you picked in this circle. Then you lie down naked and state your name.”

I raised my eyebrows, looking at her dubiously. “That’s it? That’s what all the fuss is about?”

Big Mac’s mouth turned into a thin line. “There’s some other stuff too. Don’t get too cocky.”

“I’m really *not* feeling cocky right now,” I mumbled.

Jay gave me one of his beautiful smiles. “Go on. I’m here.”

Cali nodded encouragingly. “Me too.”

My throat was thick with nerves and emotion. Shakily, I removed all my clothes and lay down on the grass. My pulse racing, I watched as Big Mac walked around me, sprinkling the herb mixture in a circle. I squeezed my eyes shut, shivering. I was really fighting to control my panic and fear.

*Don’t be afraid*, I told myself. *Be strong, like your wolf.*

Big Mac spoke up, interrupting my musings. “Okay, the circle has been created. No one should cross it for any reason during the spell.”

I dug my fingertips into the grass. The earth felt cold but soft, comforting in a way.

Big Mac’s voice sounded sharp, even to my ears. “Please say your name.”

Sheepishly, I said, “Um, Lola.”

I held my breath. A breeze went by, and I jumped, covering myself. I looked up at Big Mac, my eyes wide. “Was that it?”

“No, obviously,” Big Mac said flatly. “Try your full name?”

I swallowed roughly. “Aaliyah Lyn Spillane.”

That was the name my mother had given me before she’d given me up for adoption without my biological father knowing. But when he did find out, he’d only adopted me into the pack because I was a liability. It’d been so long since I’d thought of either of them.

My father had died in the Pack War, and really, I’d barely known him. He’d had someone else raise me. He’d taken me into the pack, but practically discarded me because I was a hybrid, and hybrids were traditionally killed. We were considered useless. We were considered pariahs. *Less*.

Well, after tonight, that would change for good. One way or another.

“That’s it,” Big Mac said. “That’s your real name.”

I breathed deeply as Big Mac began to chant. Her voice was melodic, low and gruff. Almost hypnotizing. I stared at Cali, grateful my best friend was here. She’d never made me feel underestimated or unloved. I turned to Jay after that. He was looking at me with a mixture of care and worry. His eyes felt like magnets on me. I’d always felt that he loved me. Even during the times when I’d been quite simply out of control, he had stuck by me with the kind of patience I’d never imagined a partner could possess.

I could hear both his and Cali’s breaths; I could count them, along with my own. I wasn’t sure if being so hyperaware of everything was because of the spell or because of my own anxiety. All I knew was that, apart from the chanting and my companions’ breathing, I could feel every piece of grass, hear every bug, and smell all the trees. I could hear laughter coming from the house, and the sound the Halloween light bulbs made as they flickered on and off.

Sniffling, I stared at Big Mac. She kept chanting, but I wasn’t sure if anything was actually happening. The urge to flee hit me, but I smothered it. Not only for myself, but for Cali too, who had been so patient with me, and for Jay, who always made me feel accepted and cherished. My eyelids were starting to get heavy, Big Mac’s voice like a rhythmic drum in my ears, when suddenly—

It felt like my skin was on fire.

The fire spread, vivid enough that it turned into tiny little bites all over me—like I was crawling with ants. I was so shocked and terrified that I started coughing, breaking down.

At the same time, Big Mac’s voice got louder as she chanted.

I felt like screaming, but I couldn’t. I felt like turning to Cali and Jay, but that seemed suddenly impossible. I was pinned into this horrible sensation, and then suddenly my body convulsed, starting from the tips of my toes and reaching up to my head. My eyes felt like they were burning. I could see the horned moon peeking out above the trees, and all I could think about was that this had to be a mistake.

This had to be killing me, because the pain was unlike anything else.

Even while I was hurt from shifting—it was nothing like this.

This was a fucking nightmare, and I was frozen inside it, shaking and burning at the same time. I could hear Jay calling my name; I could hear Cali shouting, but both their voices were getting further and further away, like I had fallen into a well and couldn’t climb out.

“STOP!” I finally managed to scream, and then—

Everything stopped.

All I could hear now was my own breathing, my own heartbeat. My heart was beating so fast that I thought it was going to burst out of my chest and run away. I looked around, frantic, shaking. I was faced with Big Mac, who stared down at me, her gaze calculating.

“How do you feel?” she asked seriously.

Fighting to breathe, I looked around again.

I was in the forest.

The spell was finished.

Cali and Jay were here for me.

*I had survived!*

I looked at Jay, who seemed more worried than I’d ever seen him. But I could fix that.

I closed my eyes, breathing deep, and tried to shift. To show him that I’d made it, and we could now be together, could run together as wolves, like true mates…

But nothing happened.

*Nothing happened.*

I gasped. “OH MY GOD…” I stared at Big Mac. “I’m *human?*”

**Episode 1018**

GREYSON

The roar of the crowd was deafening as the Crusher went down. I stared down at the small man in his nylon shorts, stunned. This couldn’t be happening. Maybe the guy had just slipped.

“Get up,” I ordered, but the Crusher didn’t move a muscle. He was out like a light. I closed my eyes for an instant, trying to block out the chaos from the crowd, then I bent and pulled the guy up, trying to get him to stand, but it was no good. All one hundred and fifty pounds of him was dead weight in my arms. It was like trying to hold a wet noodle. Frustrated, I let him crash back to the mat.

“ONE! TWO! THREE! FOUR!” The ref pushed me aside so he could stand over the Crusher as he began to count.

I scanned the crowd, looking for Maren. She was staring at me, her face a mask of horror. I watched her dark eyes flick down to the Crusher—lying prone on the mat—then across the room to Fenrir. I followed her gaze and locked eyes with Hans. He smiled at me—a slow, cruel smile—then drew a finger across his wide throat in a slitting motion.

*Fenrir*. I had to get to him. I moved toward the ropes, but the crowd was pressing against them, blocking my exit. A few people were pulling the ropes apart, climbing onto the mat. It didn’t matter—the crowd didn’t matter—I *had* to get the kid.

From out of nowhere, a hand grabbed my wrist and pulled me back. I looked around wildly. It was the ref, and he was yanking my arm up.

“Winner and CHAMPION!” he yelled, holding my arm in the air. “Winner by KNOCKOUT!”

There was another surge of sound from the crowd.

“It was an accident!” I yelled, but no one seemed to hear me over the cheers and boos from the crowd.

I searched the swarming mass of people and saw Maren on her feet, tears streaming down her face. She was surrounded by too many people—she was blocked in—but she was screaming for Fenrir, fighting against the surging crowd to get to him.

But Hans was already standing, and his beefy associates had Fenrir by the arms, and they were pulling him away, out the doors.

I shook free of the ref’s grasp and took a step toward them, but my cornerman grabbed my shoulder and yanked me close.

He pointed a gnarled finger at the still unconscious Crusher. “You just signed your own death certificate, kid.”

“What?” I snapped.

The guy looked up at me, his red-rimmed eyes grave. “You’d better get the fuck out of here if you want to save your skin.”

I pulled free of his grasp. I didn’t give a damn about my own life—my only thought was to save Fenrir. I had to get to him, but—as I looked out across the warehouse—I knew there was no way. There were too many people. The place was swarmed. There was only one thing to do. I had no choice, so, with a bone-snapping sound, I shifted.

The effect was instantaneous, and when I leapt down from the ring onto the floor of the warehouse, the crowd parted like the Red Sea.

“*WEREWOLF!*” someone screamed, the sound a shrill whistle in my ear.

But I ignored it. I only had one thought: get to Fenrir. I shot toward the doors where Hans had been heading.

I couldn’t see Maren—I couldn’t imagine what she was going through. And I was certain she blamed me. How could she not?

As I neared the doors, two tall, lanky men approached me and I slowed. I took them in quickly, growling. They were vampires—I recognized them from the bar Maren had taken me to that first night, when I’d met the witch sisters.

The two vamps hesitated for just a moment, then charged me. I easily dodged one, then slammed into the other. They were slim, but fast as lightning and hard to get a hold of. And they recovered quickly. As soon as I slammed one down, he’d jump right back up, holding a chair, ready to come at me again. I was just about to dispatch one of them when I felt the searing pain of a bite on the back of my neck. I twisted around and wrenched the guy off, tossing him onto the floor like a blood-sucking ragdoll. I leapt on top of him and was just about to rip out his throat when, out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of the witch sisters. I looked up to see all three of them, still in their seats, staring at me like they were watching a show.

My lapse in concentration cost me, and the vamp beneath me sank his teeth into my front leg. I yelped in pain and the sisters looked at each other. As one, they closed their eyes and began to speak. No, not speak—chant. Their voices were low and the language unrecognizable. As they chanted, they raised their hands high in the air.

I tore my eyes away from the strange sight and looked down at the vampire beneath me, who had started to laugh, my blood dripping from his fangs. I growled, but that only made him laugh harder.

“Don’t you get it?” he asked. “You’re not getting out of here alive.”

Then I felt it. The sharp, searing, white-hot pain. *Silver*. I twisted around to see a dagger sticking out of my side, and Maren standing above me.

Her eyes were wide and wild with rage and her face was streaked with tears. She was beyond anger, beyond hysteria—she looked feral. “You betrayed me, Greyson!” she screamed, her voice gone, barely a rasp. “You *betrayed* me!”

The sound of her ruined voice hurt worse than the silver, and I rolled off the vampire and onto the cold concrete floor. I could feel the poison spreading through my veins like fire. Around me, the club was starting to flicker, and the sound was starting to fade. It came in and out, like a badly tuned radio. I tried to fight through it, tried to push myself up—I had to get to Fenrir—but I slid back down to the floor. I knew what was happening. My consciousness was slipping, and in just a moment, it would all be gone. Even now, everything had gone dark. All I could hear was Maren, screaming for her son.

Everything was darkness.

And then I opened my eyes.

I was in my human form, and I was climbing into the ring. I put my hand to my side, feeling for the puncture wound, but there was nothing. I twisted around to look, but the skin was whole and smooth. I looked at my cornerman, who nodded at me. My eyes went to the side door as it opened. Hans walked in, along with two beefy dudes who were leading little Fenrir. I frowned as I watched them take their seats.

*What the hell is happening?* I looked around the club. Everyone was talking excitedly, taking their seats, placing their bets. Everything was just as it had been before the start of the fight. I shifted my gaze over to Maren—she was watching Fenrir with a pained look on her face.

I looked over as another door opened and the Crusher entered the club, walking toward the ring. I turned to my cornerman, baffled. “What the fuck?”

He frowned, misinterpreting my confusion. “He’s your *opponent*. You gotta fight him. That’s why we’re here,” he explained slowly, like I might be a little slow on the uptake. He tipped his chin toward the skinny fighter. “You know the guy?”

“Yeah… kinda,” I said, still baffled. “I mean, I already knocked him out. But it was an accident.”

“What?” The cornerman eyed me warily. “You okay, kid?”

*No*. That was what I wanted to say. *No, I am definitely* not *okay*. My life had just gone into rewind, and I had no idea what the hell had just happened.

The scratchy sound of the mic came over the speakers. “Let’s introduce our fighters for tonight: in the red shorts, we have THE CRUSHER!”

The Crusher was met with mild applause.

What was going on? This wasn’t exactly what happened before. But when was “before” anyway? Had I hallucinated the entire thing?

“And in the blue shorts, we have GREYSON!”

There was more applause for me—I was clearly the favorite to win.

My eyes went back to Maren, who was leaning forward, her whole body visibly tense. She looked just as I remembered her looking—and then I saw them: Posie, Lauren, and Chloe. The witches. Sitting in the crowd, staring at me. Suddenly, I was hit with a flash of memory. I’d won the fight and Fenrir was taken. The witches had been chanting something, their hands in the air, just before Maren had stabbed me.

*What the hell had they done?*