**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 24 - Part 1**

**Episodes 2868–3049**

# **Episode 2868**

**Xavier**

I instinctively moved toward Ava. Shit, had she just been caught?Was our plan already going to shit?

I scanned the room mid-motion, counting the number of Samara pack members gathered. If Ava got caught in the act of drugging the potential pack Alpha right before his Iudicium, we were fucked. Not even her position as Nolan’s sister would save her now. We’d have to fight to make it out of this alive, and the odds did *not* seem to be in our favor.

I was a powerful Alpha, and Ava was a damn good fighter in her own right—she was sure as hell much more experienced than her shrimp of a cousin—but there were a lot of wolves here who I didn’t know. For all I knew, they had some ringers lined up for a situation just like this.

Ava pulled her empty hand from her pocket and twisted her full lips into a pout. “What’s your problem?”

The guy looked her up and down like she was something tasty, something he couldn’t wait to sink his teeth into. This didn’t exactly calm me. My wolf growled at the implications of the whole thing, but I didn’t care whether or not the guy wanted to fuck her. As far as I was concerned, he could just as easily be throwing that look her way because he wanted to rip her throat out for sabotaging Knox.

To my surprise—and my wolf’s irritation—the guy gestured to the dance floor. “We haven’t finished our dance yet.”

Ava’s pout smoothed out, and her muscles relaxed. “Are you sure you can handle more?” she teased.

Actually, *I* was irritated with this development too. This asshole had almost blown our plan, and all he cared about was getting his dick wet. My wolf growled louder, egged on by my own anger at the guy. Now he was full-on pissed to see someone hitting on Ava.

I blew out a breath. I didn’t have time for the mindfuck that was trying to deal with my wolf’s obsession with Ava and handling this Knox situation at the same time. I pulled in another deep breath for good measure before slowly pushing it out.

“The dance is over,” I said through gritted teeth. “Unless you want to go a few rounds with me, you need to find a new partner.”

The guy’s brows knitted together as he looked from my dead serious face to Ava’s. She shrugged helplessly, her face scrunched up in a wince like she was saying, *Can you believe this guy?*

“Next time,” she said with a sultry smile, “you get the first dance.”

After a beat, the guy nodded and finally backed the fuck off. Turned out he was a hell of a lot smarter than he looked. I let out a sigh of relief.

Ava’s voice slipped into my mind, wry and amused all at once. *I could have handled him, you know.*

I raised a brow. I did know that—but if I hadn’t stepped in when I had, who knew how long that would have taken?

*But thank you*, she added.

I nodded and turned back to Knox, who had moved away. *Fuck.*

Ava subtly jerked her head in my direction. *Stay close. We can still do what we set out to do.*

And then, with no warning, Knox jumped up onto a table in one smooth, powerful motion. We couldn’t get that potion into him soon enough. At least he’d stop doing stupid shit like this.

“Can I have everyone’s attention, please?” he called, but his voice was lost in the loud, pounding music and general roar of the crowd clustered around the bar. Predictably, nobody paid him much attention. The guy could’ve used a few lessons on how to command a room.

Ava rolled her eyes. *Pathetic.*

*He’s clearly got a magnetic personality.*

Her lips twitched. *Clearly.*

I forced my expression to stay neutral. I could rip into this guy all night long, but I had better things to do. We needed to get this over with—once and for all. And right now, that meant letting people hear their would-be Alpha sounding like a complete jackass.

I stalked over to the DJ and yanked the plugs powering his equipment out of the sockets. The music died instantly, and I dropped the end of the cords to the floor.

“Hey, what’re you—” The guy acting as DJ stopped short when he saw for himself exactly who had just cut his power. “Um…” He cleared his throat. “Never mind.”

*Wise move, kid.*

I headed back over to listen to Knox. *Let’s see what the shrimp has to say for himself.*

“Can I have your attention, please?” Even with the music cut, his voice only just extended over the sounds of the crowd. Still, it worked well enough, because one by one, all heads turned to look at him.

I snorted. *This asshole wouldn’t be able to draw a thirsty horse to a drinking trough.* If not for my intervention, he’d have been talking to the wind. Not that he’d noticed. And even if he had, I knew better than to expect him to thank me for my involvement.

“I’m so honored to be here with all of you tonight. We have so much to celebrate!” He raised his glass. “And, with all the members of the Samara pack and a few other guests, we’re here to mark what I believe will be the beginning of the Samara pack’s return to prominence!”

Around me, some of the more impressionable Samara pack members began to clap.

*Sheep. The Samara pack was never exactly known for its prominence to begin with, and Nolan wasn’t ever anything but a coward and a dick.*

Knox immediately delved into a long list of his accomplishments, everything he’d conceivably done in his life that could be considered valuable to a fragmented pack with few genuine options for leadership. After about seven seconds, I realized the kid was just repeating all the same talking points from earlier. These were literally all the same stories he’d been telling when I’d arrived.

I scoffed. *It’s probably all the shrimp has.* He was too young and inexperienced to have much more than a few moments of glory, and even those seemed pretty dubious. He reminded me of the captains of high school sports teams, the ones who peaked in high school and spent the rest of their lives talking about that big play, the winning goal, that iconic moment that had changed their tiny, pathetic lives and made them… well, slightly less pathetic.

It sounded like the pack Knox had been raised in was stable—nothing like life had been for any of the true Samara pack members.I couldn’t listen to much more of this shit. *How can this asshat possibly think he has anything to offer?*

I glanced over at Ava, who was impatiently tapping her fingers against her thigh. She wanted to get this the hell over with too. The longer we stood here, with the potion in her pocket, the more dangerous this whole situation was.

I also remembered what Ava had said. If I could convince enough of the Samaras that the Redwood pack would protect them while they took the time to find a real Alpha, we could keep them from settling for this shithead.

Maybe getting that information out there could serve two purposes: getting the Samaras to drop this loser before he even undertook the Iudicium, and providing the perfect distraction for Ava to drop the potion into his drink.

I loved happy coincidences.

I hopped up onto the table beside Knox, who flinched at the sudden movement, then did a double take.

“What the hell are you doing?” he hissed.

I gave him my most winning smile. “I have something important to tell the Samara pack.” I made sure to project, and since my voice was naturally both louder and deeper than this dipshit’s, I immediately commanded everyone’s attention.

“Before you all commit to a new Alpha, I want you to think about what having an Alpha will mean,” I said. “This isn’t something that should be rushed. While Knox may be the Alpha you’re looking for, the fact is, you haven’t looked at anyone else.”

“*What the fuck are you doing?*” Knox’s voice was threaded through with panic now, and my grin brightened.

“Since the strength of any pack is determined not only by the pack itself, but also by the alliances they form, the Redwood pack wants the Samara pack as an ally. And in order to ensure that the Samara pack has appropriate leadership, the Redwood pack is officially offering its protection until a worthy Alpha is found.”

Even as the words left my mouth, I knew Greyson was going to give me an earful when he found out. This wasn’t my call to make—at least, not according to him. But fuck him, fuck Knox, and fuck anyone who thought for even one second that I didn’t have the Redwood pack’s best interests in mind.

I surveyed the faces in the crowd. Some of them didn’t look too happy with this turn of events, but others seemed to be considering it.

Knox cleared his throat. Loudly. “We don’t need the Redwood pack to be our keeper.”

I hopped down and, as Knox blathered on about the importance of pack independence, I spotted Ava out of the corner of my eye. Her hand moved over Knox’s beer so quickly I wasn’t sure if I’d imagined it. She was that good. Not, you know, that being excellent at putting potions into drinks was a good skill to have.

She slipped her hand back into her pocket and nodded.

Okay, step one was complete. Step two was getting the idiot to actually drink it.

“—and with me as your Alpha, you will never need to look outside the Samara pack for safety, power, or prosperity!”

Knox hopped down from the table amid a mixed response from the crowd. A few of them clapped. Some seemed intrigued. Others just looked bored.

He beelined for me. “What the hell was that?”

I held my hands up. “I meant no disrespect. But the Samara pack will find its strongest Alpha if this isn’t rushed. It’s a good thing for everyone.”

“Says *you*,” he sneered.

“Xavier’s right,” Ava added. “If the pack has time to assess your strength, without rushing in, then you’ll likely end up with even more people on your side.”

He frowned, and I grabbed my beer and raised it in front of him. “To Knox. May you get everything you deserve.”

A begrudging smile tugged at his lips, and he, too, raised his drink. “To me!”

Our bottles clinked together, and Knox downed his drink.

# **Episode 2869**

The suspense was killing me.

Instinctively, I took a few steps forward, toward the wolf Greyson had just bitten, then I stopped short. Greyson had asked me not to interfere. Still, that urgency to do *something* pulsed in my veins.

I pulled in a deep breath. I was here to help, and I couldn’t do that if I just got in the way.

Instead of rushing forward and making sure the wolf was okay, I forced myself to stay still, to watch everything unfold like the spectator I truly was.

My stomach tightened as I watched Greyson stalk toward the prone wolf. I forced myself to keep watching, to not look away. To not miss a single moment of this ritual.

*Did Greyson go too far? Did he accidentally kill the wolf?*

It was easy enough to picture. Greyson was huge and strong. He probably didn’t always have a handle on his power. And the wolf… She seemed small and delicate, somehow. The knots in my belly coiled tighter.

*I really, really hope she’s not dead.*

When he reached the wolf, Greyson tilted his head down and began to lick the wolf’s bloodied wound. Then, to my amazement, the wound began to heal right in front of me. She stopped bleeding. Muscle, skin, and fur began to knit back together, until only her bloodstained fur was left to mark the place where Greyson had bitten her.

With a lurch, the wolf’s body began to spasm. Howls, yips, and whines mixed with the crack of bones, filling the eerie silence and making the whole thing about a hundred times worse. The wolf was definitely alive, but she was clearly in a world of pain.

With each twitch and cracking bone, the wolf’s body changed. Her limbs lengthened, most of her fur receded, and her snout shortened into a cute little upturned nose.

The wolf had transformed into a young woman, maybe just a little younger than I was.

“Oh my god,” I breathed.

It worked. Greyson had changed a *wolf*.

*A wolf into a human. Into a werewolf. Holy shit.*

The human formerly shaped like a wolf crawled slowly up onto her knees, clumsily, with shaking limbs. She looked around wildly, her eyes wide and afraid.

I couldn’t say I blamed her. This had to be a real trip.

As I watched the young woman, an ache tugged at my chest. Despite everything I’d just witnessed, there was something innocent about this girl. She looked beyond confused, like she wasn’t even aware of what had just happened.

*This has to be so strange to her. She spent her whole life as a wolf, and now she’s in human form.*

Talk about freaky. *I* was unsettled by the whole thing, and I was just an observer. I couldn’t even begin to fathom what the girl had to be feeling.

She staggered to her feet, legs trembling, then she hit the ground hard.

I couldn’t hold back any longer.

I rushed forward, and the wolf pack began to growl in unison. I shot them a dirty look.

*I don’t care if you don’t like me. This girl needs my help, and none of you have thumbs.*

I made it just a foot shy of where she was clambering onto her hands and knees when she growled and lashed out with her hands.

I dodged just in time. “Hey! I’m just trying to help you!”

The girl paused, seemingly confused, and it was then that I realized she probably didn’t understand me. I slowly reached into my bag and pulled out a small bundle of clothes—underwear, yoga pants, and a T-shirt. Perfect for all your “just turned into a werewolf” needs.

“I brought these clothes for you,” I said gently. “For you?”

Her eyes lit up. “Clothes? I hear of clothes.”

Phew. She knew some English. Probably from living near humans and encountering them from time to time. Smiling, I passed over the bundle. As I watched the girl wrap the yoga pants around her neck like some kind of spandex scarf, I realized I was going to have to help her get dressed.

“Hey, um… What’s your name?” I asked.

She frowned. “Name?”

My brows rose. “Right. That, um… Something that you’re called?” Nothing was registering. “Would it be okay if I gave you a name to go by? A human name?”

After a beat, she nodded.

I studied her face for a moment. She was breathtakingly beautiful, and she had to be very brave to be willing to set off on her own and become a literal were*wolf*.

Then it hit me. I grinned. “I have the perfect name for you.”

She had long, thick, flowing auburn hair that cascaded over her shoulders. Between that, her big blue eyes, and the gangly way she was learning to walk on two legs like a fish out of water, the name came easily.

“How do you feel about Ariel?” I asked.

She tilted her head to the side. “Ariel.” She seemed to be testing the shape of the name on her tongue.

Of course, her new name sounded so beautiful, it was almost otherworldly.

I beamed. “It’s perfect!”

She hesitantly smiled back. “Ariel.”

“That’s you.”

Greyson shifted back to human and came over. He looked me over and then leaned in close to murmur in my ear. “Are you okay?” He leaned back so he could study my face.

At first I was confused. Why wouldn’t I be okay? But then I realized why he was checking in on me. He wanted to make sure I was okay after watching him bite someone else.

I mulled it over for a moment. It really did suck that it couldn’t be me. But it wasn’t like Xavier had turned anyone before… that I knew about. If Greyson turned me, I’d be the second… But I also didn’t blame him. He’d done what was necessary to protect the pack—even though it had meant making a very hard call.

“I’m fine,” I said quickly before turning my attention back to Ariel, who was holding out her arm and marveling at her fingers. She clenched and unclenched her fingers, each time with a look of pure wonder on her face.

I couldn’t help but be charmed by this new girl. She seemed so sweet, so shy and innocent.

I peeled my eyes away from Ariel to look back at Greyson. “I really am fine. I mean it.”

His shoulders relaxed, just the slightest bit. Then he noticed Ariel kicking her legs out in a series of sloppy but joyful movements. She beamed with delight, seemingly enthralled by her new body.

“What did you say her name was?” he asked.

“Ariel.”

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “*The Little Mermaid*, hmm?” he said, clearly amused.

I gestured at her. “I mean, come on! It’s *perfect*. We can spell it differently, then! A-r-i-e-l-l-e!”

He chuckled and stepped forward, focusing his attention on the newest member of the Redwood pack. “You should come with us. You belong with the pack now. Are you ready?”

A catchy little tune was playing inside my head.

*I wanna be where the people are…*

Arielle took a deep breath, nodded, and turned back to the wolf pack. Each of her lupine pack members gathered protectively around her, nudging her hands with their heads. I couldn’t imagine what it was like to say goodbye like this.

Emotion was brimming in Arielle’s eyes as she knelt down to embrace both the Alpha wolf and another wolf who was standing with him—likely her parents. Then Arielle bent down to look into the eyes of some of the other wolves.

She put her hands into the air, and my throat tightened with emotion. Arielle was sacrificing her connection to her family for this. For the chance to help her father force an alliance. She was giving up everything she knew to venture into a strange, new world.

*She must want this more than anything.*

I wanted it too. For a long time now, I’d wanted the chance to be turned, to become an official pack member, and to lay the groundwork to become the Redwood Luna. But even then, would I actually move forward with becoming a wolf if it meant cutting ties with my family? I tried to imagine saying goodbye to my mother for a long time, and a fresh round of tears pricked my eyes.

*Arielle is just so strong.*

Finally, Arielle straightened, and Greyson shifted back to his wolf form. He seemed to be communicating with the other wolves, so I focused my attention back on Arielle, watching as she tried to slip the T-shirt I’d given her over one of her legs.

“Oh, let me help.” I hurried over and put a hand on her shoulder. “So that’s called a—”

Arielle whirled around, and I let out a gasp. Her teeth were bared, and her eyes were wild. With a low growl, Arielle reached out and grabbed my throat.

# **Episode 2870**

**Ava**

This was almost too easy.

I fought to hide a grin as Knox chugged the drink I’d spiked. My idiot cousin didn’t suspect a thing. I caught Xavier’s eye and saw an expression of triumph on his face. I gave him the smallest of nods, mirroring the victorious look in his eyes.

It was nice, having this shared moment with Xavier. Being a team, sharing a win. A warm, fluttery feeling spread through my stomach, a feeling that echoed all the way back to a time before the pack wars, before things had gone so terribly wrong.

To the time when I’d first fallen in love with him.

I tried not to focus on that, though. The past was just that—past. What Xavier and I had before—it was long gone. Even if by some chance we did end up together in the future, it wouldn’t be anything like the way things had been. We were different people. These were different times. And so much had happened to change us.

But for now, right here, at this shitty party with my shittier cousin, Xavier and I had pulled our plan off to perfection. It felt good to be working with him, to be on the same side, to not get those dirty, suspicious looks all the time and have him constantly questioning my loyalties.

If someone had asked me even just a few weeks ago if I thought Xavier would ever willingly join up with me, even for something as simple as pack business, I would have laughed.

*Maybe he doesn’t hate me quite so much anymore.*

My gaze slipped from Xavier to Knox and back again. The contrast really couldn’t have been any more dramatic. Xavier looked so authoritative, so strong. Especially compared to Knox, who couldn’t have been any more obviously inferior to Xavier.

Some of my giddiness dissipated. As much as I appreciate him stepping in to keep the Samara pack from making the monumental mistake of accepting Knox as their Alpha, I couldn’t help but wish that Xavier would just get over himself and step up to be the Samara Alpha.

He was born for this role. I was a natural connection to the Samara pack, enough to give him a reasonable claim to Alpha. And on top of that, Xavier was smart and strong. He was a great leader. Unlike my cousin, Xavier actually possessed the ability to lead the Samara pack out of squalor and obscurity. It wasn’t a job for just any Alpha—but Xavier could do it. I knew he could. This group of people had unique needs, and as far as I was concerned, he was the only one qualified to meet those needs.

And lately I’d felt like the two of us had made so much progress that a not-so-small part of me had been hoping he’d be ready to step into that role—with me as his Luna.

I knew I sounded crazy. And probably a little desperate. But I also knew that this—Xavier and me working together—this was how it was supposed to be. I knew it in my bones. But he was still so blindsided by Cali, so willfully focused on her and only her, that he couldn’t see it yet. No, it was more like he blatantly refused to.

But I was willing to take my time and let him come to the right conclusion on his own. For now, at least. I don’t think anyone would ever describe me as a patient woman, but when it came to getting the things—and people—I wanted? I could sure as hell try.

I believed we’d get there. Eventually.

Knox slammed down his empty glass, spread his arms wide, and announced, “Let’s get this party started!”

Everyone except Xavier and I broke into cheers as Knox and Xavier made their way down from the platform. I watched my cousin carefully, looking for any sign that the potion was working. He was walking straight, his eyes were bright, and his speech still seemed fine. So far, he seemed okay.

But if that potion was worth its salt, Knox would be tanking soon. I knew it would brand me a traitor to most of the Samaras, who couldn’t see I was doing all this to ensure our survival, but I was actually looking forward to watching my cousin be taken down a peg.

Xavier made his way over and took a seat in the chair next to me. He leaned in close and murmured, “Good work.”

A thrill slipped down my spine, along with a frisson of desire. I always felt this way when Xavier and I were this close, and now was no exception.

He glanced around the crowd. “I’ll grab us a couple drinks. What do you want?”

“A beer. Or five.”

His brow rose, and his lips quirked so beautifully it took every bit of my control not to pull him into a kiss.

“Long day?” he teased.

“Oh, you know, dealing with family is always so exhausting.”

He snorted. “Yeah, if I were related to that idiot, I’d probably want to drink too.” He stood and headed for the coolers.

Now this was a pleasant surprise. I’d been convinced he was going to head back to the pack house—and his precious Cali—as soon as we accomplished what we’d set out to do. Clearly, though, he planned on staying for a while longer.

Could it be possible that he was actually enjoying my company?

Despite my own feelings for him, it was strange to consider him feeling but anything but passive derision for me. And that was even a huge leap of progress, considering where we’d been when I’d first come back from the dead.

But then again, things had changed between the two of us. Maybe his feelings were slowly changing too. Maybe Xavier was *finally* warming up to me.

Just a little bit.

Xavier returned with our drinks a few minutes later.

*Play it cool, Ava. No need to read too deeply into this. You don’t want to freak him out and ruin all this progress.*

No, I wanted to keep giving him reasons to stay.

I smiled as he held out my drink. “Thank you.”

As he took a seat, his own beer in hand, I held my bottle out for him to clink against his. Our eyes met over the tops of our drinks, and that warm fluttering inside me intensified.

I watched his mouth as he took a sip, daring to imagine licking the taste out of his mouth.

*Keep it in your pants, Ava*.

I forced myself to take a sip of my drink—and not choke because I was so fixated on watching Xavier.

“The potion should take effect soon,” I said, breaking the silence that had settled between us. “And then the whole pack will see that Knox isn’t the right Alpha for us.”

Xavier scoffed, and I frowned.

“What?” I asked.

“I’m not interested in hearing your whole spiel about me stepping up as the Samara Alpha. I already told you—”

I held up a hand. “I’m not going to push that. It’s your choice. Always has been.”

His eyes narrowed slightly, like he couldn’t quite believe I was going to give up that easily.

And I wasn’t. Giving up, that was. But that didn’t mean I had to pressure or bully him. There were lots of ways to get what you wanted. This one required a much lighter touch.

“Seriously.” I smiled. “I won’t bring it up again. I promise.”

*At least, not until the time is right.*

He nodded, then nudged me. “Look.”

I followed his gaze over to Knox, who was standing with a group of women. He had his arm around one of them, but to my immense delight, my cousin was looking pretty damn out of it. His face was rosy, and his eyes had a glazed quality that told me everything I needed to know about his mental state.

I grinned. “This is gonna be good.”

“Why don’t we take this party back to my Airstream?” Knox suggested.

I glanced at Xavier and rolled my eyes. “It’s a classic Knox move.”

“Huh.” He took a pull from his beer. “Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

To my surprise, the women agreed to follow Knox back to his filthy trailer, but as they made their way toward it, Knox stumbled a bit, leaning even heavier on the woman he’d slung his arm around. A couple of the women exchanged meaningful glances at Knox’s state before they all disappeared inside.

When they were gone, I turned back to Xavier and raised my glass again. “To well-laid plans.”

He snorted. “To roofie-ing your cousin.”

“I’ll drink to that.” We clinked glasses again, and I took a sip, savoring the bitter flavor. “The potion is clearly working. He’s going to be weakened, and then the pack will turn on him.”

“We did good.”

I watched the firelight flicker over Xavier’s face for a moment, and my heart twisted with all of the unrequited love I held for him. “Dancing with you was nice,” I said softly.

He stiffened. “It was just a dance. Don’t read anything into it.”

I put a hand on his arm. “Xavier, I think I’m allowed to simply point out that the dance was good. Do you disagree?”

He frowned. “No.”

“I already told you that I’m not going to push you on anything,” I said, “and I mean it. Maybe it’s time we stop overthinking everything and let things just be as they are—no pressure. We can just let ourselves feel whatever it is we’re feeling.”

“And how are things between us?”

He could be so stubborn sometimes. Okay, all the time.

“I’m just saying, there’s an undeniable connection between the two of us, and we don’t always have to be at war with each other. It would be easier to just go with the flow, live in the moment. Wouldn’t it?”

Our eyes locked, and I got the distinct impression that he was listening.

“Can you do that, Xavier?”

# **Episode 2871**

**Greyson**

I heard a strangled gasp and whirled around to see Arielle’s hand wrapped tight around Cali’s throat. The newly made human’s eyes were wide, and her teeth were bared in a snarl.

*What is she thinking?!*

I ditched the wolf elders I was speaking to and darted over to Arielle and Cali.

“Stop!” I snapped as I grabbed Arielle’s hand and yanked it away from Cali.

My mate immediately hunched over with a groan, gasping for breath. Each of Cali’s coughs and wheezes went straight to my heart.

It took every ounce of self-control I possessed not to tear Arielle—and this fragile new alliance—apart.

“Arielle! You can’t do that!”

Her angry expression instantly morphed into confusion, and from behind me, I heard the wolf pack begin to growl.

Well, shit. This was already blowing up in my face. That had to be some kind of record.

*Take a breath. She doesn’t know better.* I breathed. *This is all new to her.*

Except all the deep breathing in the world wasn’t going to remove the image of her choking the life out of the person who meant the most to me.

“I… I’m sorry,” Arielle said. Her shoulders hunched forward, and even though she was very much a human woman right now, her posture reminded me viscerally of a dog who’d just been reprimanded. “I didn’t…”

She didn’t elaborate further, so I wasn’t sure if she hadn’t realized what she was doing, or if she hadn’t realized Cali was off-limits. Maybe all of it was on the table. After all, she didn’t know me or Cali or the Redwood pack. She didn’t know anything about being human. Wolf social cues had to be world’s different than human ones.

*What the hell have I gotten myself into? What have I gotten this pack into?*

I glanced over at Cali, who was beginning to straighten up. Even in the dim light, I could make out a pink ring around her delicate neck. Arielle had bruised her.

A new wave of fury poured in, and I could barely contain my own snarl.

My gaze narrowed on Arielle. “If you’re going to join our pack, you need to understand that violence against pack members is strictly forbidden. Attacking humans is completely unacceptable. *Do you understand?*”

I figured that, for now, this was likely the best approach for integrating Arielle into our world. Once she was better acclimated and had a firmer grasp of how to conduct herself, *then* we could talk about which humans she was allowed to attack. But for now, she’d be way too much of a liability if she was attacking people left and right.

I’d changed her to help solve some of the pack’s problems—not start a whole new set of problems.

My angry tone must have sent up red flags, because the wolf pack moved in behind Arielle and started to growl.

Cali tucked herself against my side, her eyes wide and locked on the wolf pack.

This was one wrong move from blowing up in all of our faces. I couldn’t afford to create any problems here.

Arielle let out a whimper, clearly upset. I pulled in another deep breath, held it until the red in my vision began to recede, and sighed.

“I know this all must be confusing for you,” I said as gently as I could. “I know this is all new. What you need to understand is that Cali and I—both of us—are here to help you. We’re not going to hurt you. You’re part of our pack now. You’re safe with us. Do you understand that?”

The wolves continued to growl, Arielle looked small and defeated, and every muscle in my body was tensed and ready to fend off an attack—to protect my mate, if needed. If things went sideways, if this turned out to be a monumental mistake, my first priority was Cali’s safety. We’d figure out the rest from there.

Then Arielle bowed her head, nodding. Though her body was human, there was nothing but animal shame in the lines of her body, in the way she avoided my gaze. A few tears slipped down her cheeks, and her chest heaved.

“I… sorry. I just… I have… got… startled,” she managed. “An accident.”

Cali’s body softened, and she slipped out from under my arm before stepping closer to Arielle. I wanted to reach out and yank her behind me, but Arielle didn’t seem to be a threat any longer. Still, I watched Arielle’s posture for any hint of aggression. I wasn’t going to let her attack my mate ever again—even if it meant destroying the fragile alliance we’d built with the wolf pack.

“I think I understand,” Cali said softly. She moved slowly toward Arielle, and her tone reminded me of one someone would use to speak to a wild animal, which was fitting. “I cannot even imagine what you must be going through right now. I should have been more sensitive to that. I should have asked before I touched you. I’m sorry.”

A small smile tugged at my lips. *Of course Cali would show compassion to the person—or wolf—who’d just tried to strangle her.*

How had I gotten so lucky as to end up mated to someone as good as Cali? Someone who literally couldn’t hold a grudge to save her own life?

*God, I love her.*

Arielle finally looked up and met Cali’s eyes. Her expression was wary, but her posture was still submissive. Clearly, she didn’t have the same deference for my mate as she did for me, which was fine, for now.

Cali pointed to the pants that still hung around Arielle’s neck in a sad imitation of a scarf. “Is it okay if I help you?”

After a beat, Arielle nodded.

Cali slowly stepped forward and began to ease the pants away from Arielle’s neck. Arielle, for her part, didn’t look terribly comfortable, but she wasn’t attacking anymore either. Cali seemed to be taking extra care to move slowly, to tell Arielle what she was doing each step of the way.

For now, the threat to Cali had passed, which meant it was time to continue my conversation with the wolves. Hopefully this near-fight hadn’t blown our alliances to shreds.

I shifted back to my wolf form, and the Alpha immediately stepped forward.

*Do we need to be concerned about our daughter?* he asked.

*Everything is fine.* I scented the air and glanced from wolf to wolf. They were clearly still on edge after I’d raised my voice at Arielle.

*Is it? Are you going to look after her, like you promised? Or is this too much to ask of you?*

I huffed out a breath. *I’ve held up my end of the bargain, and I’ll continue to do so. Will you hold up yours?*

The Alpha chuffed. *We’re creatures of honor. Of course we will keep our promises.*

*Great. Now, here’s what I need from you—to draw LIPS away from this area. They’re smart, and they’re clearly invested in what’s going on here, so you’ll need to make a big show of leaving this area. Leave very obvious tracks that indicate you’re migrating out of these woods. I don’t want there to be any opportunities for misunderstanding on their part.*

The Alpha nodded. *We understand. We’ll be sure to leave enough signs that even the human trackers will be able to pick up on them.*

The disdain in his voice told me everything I needed to know about how he viewed the LIPS team and their capabilities.

I nodded. *I’ll join up with you later down the line. I want LIPS to think that the large wolf pack has left the area too.*

I shifted back to human and returned to Cali and Arielle, who was now fully dressed in human clothes. She seemed completely out of her depth with the simple shirt and pants, tugging on the sleeves and fidgeting her legs. I’d never thought of clothes as strange before, but to a wolf, they must be—perhaps even aggravating to someone who’s never had to wear them before. *This whole situation is wild.*

“You look very human,” I said.

“These clothes… so… tight?” She looked up at me with a question in her eyes.

“Give it some time. You’ll get used to it.”

She grimaced but nodded.

“It’s time for you to go to your new home,” I said. “Are you ready?”

Arielle glanced back at the wolves, who together let out a haunting howl that echoed through the night. The skin on the back of my neck prickled at the sound—a farewell song. Emotion clogged my throat as, one by one, the wolves bounded off into the woods.

Arielle stood still, watching them go as silent tears tracked down her cheeks.

She lifted her hand to her face, touching her tears. “W-What is…?”

“It’s okay,” I said gently. “It’s normal. It’s… human.”

So many things were new to her, and I had a feeling that wasn’t going to change anytime soon.

“Follow me,” I said to Arielle and Cali, and I led them back to the car.

As soon as Arielle caught a glimpse of the car, she gasped and skittered back. “Dangerous!”

She pointed at the car, her hand shaking.

I pulled in another deep breath. I felt for her—I really did. But we’d made it about twenty feet from the place where I’d changed her, and already this situation was wearing on me.

*Imagine how hard this must be for her*, I reminded myself. *She’s basically a wild animal in a human woman’s body. Of course she wouldn’t be crazy about a car. They’re giant death machines.*

I moved in front of her and looked her in the eyes. “It’s safe for you. I promise. You’re part of this pack now, and I would never lead you into danger. You’re going to be fine.”

She looked back at the car, her eyes wide. Then, swallowing, she moved forward and stopped at the back seat door.

Cali opened the door for her and ushered her inside. “Can I show you how to use a seat belt?”

As Cali buckled her in, I sat in the driver’s seat. Cali got in and buckled up too, and I looked back at Arielle and smiled.

“Are you ready to meet your new pack?”

# **Episode 2872**

I kept glancing at the back seat as Greyson drove toward the pack house.

Arielle’s eyes were wide as saucers. She clutched her seat belt tightly, then the seat, then she curled her body around and pressed her nose to the window. It reminded me exactly like a dog going on a trip in the car. I imagined if she still could, she’d be panting with stress right now.

“Arielle?” I asked. “Are you okay?”

Her breath fogged against the window, and she lurched back, closing her eyes and clutching the seat on either side of her.

“Arielle? It’s okay. You’re safe. I know this must seem strange, but…”

She peeled her eyes open and gave me a dubious look.

*Right. This probably isn’t super helpful. Why would she believe me when I tell her everything will be okay? She’s been dropped into a world she knows nothing about! A world in which all of her life experience is telling her the exact opposite of what Greyson and I are telling her.*

I probably should have seen this coming earlier, what with her attempt to choke me out and all, but it was just beginning to dawn on me what an intensely huge undertaking this whole thing was.

*How on earth is Arielle going to transition into a world that’s totally foreign to her? How long is that going to take? And what kind of toll will it take on her to go through that kind of stressful experience?*

Sure, Torin and Artemis were from the Fae world, and they’d both adjusted well to the culture and trappings of the human world. But the Fae world wasn’t all that different from the human world—customs like wearing clothing and defusing tension to avoid violence and living in a house and using something other than your own legs for transportation were all encoded into their culture, just like they were with ours.

But to go from being a wild animal living in the forest to a human living in a house? Wearing clothes? Riding in cars, and the million other aspects of human life I’d always taken for granted? Was it even fair to expect Arielle to do all of that? To expect that she could possibly thrive in such a different environment?

*Torin and Artemis’s transition to the human world couldn’t have been more different to what Arielle’s going through.*

But still, the fact that Artemis and Torin *were* thriving gave me hope. Maybe it would take a lot longer to get Arielle up to speed. But we couldn’t give up on her. She was part of the pack now. She was our responsibility. We owed it to her to support her through this in whatever way she needed.

Arielle let out a shuddering gasp, then wheezed, then pulled in another short breath again. Was she hyperventilating?

She scrabbled with the buttons on the door, and I gasped. *Oh no! She’s going to open the door and fall out onto the road!*

I reached back to try to stop her. “Arielle, wait—”

Her hand hit the button to lower the window, and it slipped down about three inches. Arielle gasped and looked down at her hand, and then back up at the window. She pressed the button again, and once again the window slid down.

Cool air whipped through the car, blowing Arielle’s hair in every direction. The tense lines of her body seemed to relax, and she leaned closer to the window. She closed her eyes, letting the wind rush over her face.

Realization dawned as I watched her. The top of her head was hanging out of the window, and she breathed deep, no longer gasping.

Her eyes fluttered open and found me watching her. “I don’t… It’s like a trap. Needs air.”

I nodded and forced a smile. “Totally understand.”

She’d probably never been in a confined space before. Oh god, I hadn’t even thought about that. If the car was such a stressful experience, how was she going to react to living inside of a house? I had visions of an untrained puppy tearing through the pack house, wrecking everything… But in our case the puppy was a fully grown and newly turned werewolf.

*This is all going to be dicey, isn’t it? Poor Arielle, the fish out of water who wanted to make a new life for herself…*

After what felt like the longest drive of my entire life, we finally pulled up to the pack house. Greyson put the car in park, turned off the ignition, and turned to face Arielle with a very fake smile. “This is it!”

She stared out the window, her expression flat. “House.”

“Yes!” I said, infusing much more excitement into my voice than I actually felt. “*Your* house. You get to live here with us. This is your new home!”

I got out of the car and opened the door for Arielle. She’d managed to free herself from her seat belt all on her own, but she didn’t make a move to get out of the car. She just stared up at the house with wide eyes, looking totally overwhelmed.

“Do you want to see it?” I asked gently. Helping to dress her had taught me the importance of letting her choose, of not making her feel forced into anything—even something as simple as getting out of the car.

Arielle gulped. Her fingers gripped the seat.

Then Greyson came around to the side of the car and stood next to me. “We can show you the house, if you’d like?”

She looked up at him and seemed to relax. She blew out a breath. “Okay.”

He held out a hand to help her out of the car. “The pack is going to be excited to meet you.”

As he helped Arielle out, he glanced at me. I could see the concern etched into the lines of his face—clearly, he was just as worried about how we were going to make this work as I was.

Arielle didn’t seem to notice. Her gaze—determined now, rather than fearful—was locked on the house. “Ready.”

We led her into the house and found most of the pack crammed into the living room. Torin, Artemis, Rishika, Ravi, Violet, Charlie, Lilac, my mom, and Mrs. Smith were all in various stages of crafting paper snowflakes, and paper scraps were all over the room.

“Hey, Greyson, how did—” Rishika stopped short, her gaze zeroing in on Arielle. The rest of the pack members followed suit. “Erm, who’s this?”

Greyson took a breath and stepped forward. “This is Arielle. She was—*is*—the daughter of a local wolf pack Alpha. She’s going to be staying with us from now on.”

Silence settled into the room as everyone digested his words.

Ravi blinked. “Wait, you mean like—she was a *real wolf*?”

Arielle’s brows knit together, and I stepped in front of her. “She’s one of us now. That’s all that matters.”

“Um, respectfully, that is not *all* that matters here,” Rishika said. “How is this even possible? You’re saying she was born a wolf?” Her gaze narrowed slightly on Greyson. “What did you do?”

I glanced behind me, where Arielle was pressing herself against the wall.

“Greyson,” I said quietly, nodding at Arielle.

His mouth firmed when he saw her, and he turned to face the expectant pack members. “I’ll explain everything soon. I promise. But for now, we need to be welcoming to Arielle. This is all pretty new to her.”

Footsteps sounded on the staircase moments before Lola came bounding into the room. “I found the scissors!”

Arielle’s eyes went wide, and she lurched back, her head smacking against the wall. I winced at the sound, but she seemed beyond pain. She pointed at Lola with a gasp. “No! No! No! Bad!” She started breathing fast again, faster than when she’d felt trapped in the car.

*She must be smelling Lola’s vampire half.*

I couldn’t imagine that the wolves were buddy-buddy with the vampires, so Arielle’s reaction made sense.

Lola, who lacked all of that context, just scoffed. “I beg your pardon? Who the hell are you?”

Arielle skittered over to the front door, groping at the doorknob and then banging her fists against the door when she couldn’t get it to open.

Greyson rushed over. “Arielle, it’s okay. This is Lola. She’s a friend—”

“No!” she screamed, rounding on him. “Enemy! Attack?”

He took her firmly by the arm, but his tone was gentle. “Maybe you need a little more time to get used to everything.” Then he all but dragged her out of the room.

Silence settled in again in their absence, and I made to follow them out of the room. I wanted to make sure Arielle was okay. But then Lola caught up to me in the hallway. “Um… What the hell was that?”

I filled her in on the situation, and her eyes went wide.

“Holy shit,” she said. “I didn’t even know it was *possible* to turn a wolf into… well… a human.”

I nodded. “I know. It’s wild. She’s probably just freaked out by you because she’s smelling your vampire.”

Lola sniffed at herself then frowned. “Well, she shouldn’t stare. It’s rude.”

“She doesn’t know that.”

“Well, I guess we can add that to the teachable moments list, then. Is she really going to be part of the pack?”

“I think so.”

Lola whistled. “Well, she might be a little bonkers, but you’ve gotta admit she’s gorgeous. And Greyson *turned* her?”

I nodded.

Lola did a double take. “And you don’t mind that she and your mate are going to be connected now?”

# **Episode 2873**

**Xavier**

I couldn’t tear my gaze away from Ava’s eyes as I considered my response to her question. Could we just let things be? Put our past aside, our prejudices and baggage, and just… *be*?

My wolf was still definitely reacting to Ava, and there was nothing I could really do about it. I’d certainly been fighting all of those feelings for what felt like forever without any real progress. My wolf still believed she was his mate, and it didn’t seem like that was going to change anytime soon.

On the other hand, I was very much in love with Cali. *She* was my mate.

But then again, Ava wasn’t asking me if I was willing to try again. If there was a chance for us to be together. All she was asking was whether we could let things be and just go with it. Stop fighting every single step of the way and instead just… see what happened.

I had to admit, it was tempting. Fighting with Ava all the time—fighting against my wolf and his endless pool of want for her—was so fucking exhausting. Honestly, I was tired of hating her. Tired of bringing up the past. I still wanted to be with Cali. She was still the present and the future I hoped for. But a break from fighting Ava for the first time since she’d come back to life?

Hell, yeah. That sounded like the sweetest kind of relief.

But if I chose that, would I be betraying Cali? I didn’t want to let Ava into my life any more than she’d already wormed her way in. And just letting things be, as tempting as it was, seemed like nothing more than a slippery slope to even more complex feelings about the woman who had been my mate.

I didn’t want to sign up for that, either.

The word “no” was on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn’t quite bring myself to spit it out. A new wave of exhaustion washed over me as I considered keeping this fight going for even a minute more.

I just didn’t have it in me. Not tonight.

I sighed. “For tonight, I can do that.”

She smiled. “That’s all I’m asking. I think we deserve a break from the angst for a minute, yeah?”

*Oh, that’s not all she’s asking for.* She might’ve been playing coy, and she might’ve been making a real effort to make sure I didn’t feel pressured these days, but I was still very well aware of what she ultimately wanted. Just like I was equally aware that I wasn’t going to give it to her.

I could never set Cali aside to be with Ava again. No matter how my wolf felt. That window had closed on us long before I’d ever met Cali. It just wasn’t in the cards.

But for tonight, I could play her game. And not only because a break *would* be nice, but also because I needed to keep her on my side. I could kill two birds with one stone here—appease Ava, and save what was left of my sanity for half a second.

Ava lifted her glass to clink against mine. I had to admit: when she was really smiling, like she meant it, she was beautiful.

“This is a party, after all!” she said. “And we’ve done what we came here to do. We might as well have some fun.”

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The night was passing in a blur—but a good blur. Even though I’d spent the whole evening with Ava, I was having a surprisingly nice time. Ava had been keeping her word not to push me on anything—not on the two of us getting together, or me ditching the Redwood pack and becoming the new Samara Alpha—and I was finding that once all the pressure and baggage was set aside, I actually enjoyed her company.

Who would have thought?

We finished a second round of drinks, and Ava pushed her seat back before standing. “I think I’m gonna need another one of these. Do you want another?”

“Uh, sure.”

In the back of my mind, I wondered if drinking a third round with Ava was such a good idea. But it was just a few beers. I could handle it easily. Besides, tonight we were just letting things happen, right?

While she headed to fetch another round, I took in the scene around us. Some of the Samaras had called it a night already—like Knox and the harem of beautiful women he’d whisked away to that disgusting trailer—but for the most part, the pack was still going strong.

Nothing brought werewolves together like booze and a party.

Two Samara members broke off from the group and approached me.

“Hey. I’m Zeke,” one of them said, then pointed to the man next to him. “This is Hector.”

I nodded in greeting. “Hey.”

“Having a good time?” Hector asked. Beside him, Zeke kept glancing around, then back at me. Hector kept fidgeting with the hem of his shirt.

“Sure.” I kept my tone light, even though I was beginning to suspect they hadn’t come over to shoot the shit. “What can I do for you?”

Hector cleared his throat. “You said that the Redwood pack would protect us.”

I nodded. “I did.”

Just then, Ava returned, a drink in each hand. “Hey, Hec. Zeke.”

They greeted her politely before turning their attention back to me.

“And that promise of protection, is that coming straight from your Alpha?” Zeke asked.

Ava’s brow rose as she shot me a glance, and I knew what she was thinking without her having to mind link. She’d warned me about making promises that Greyson wouldn’t be happy with.

Fortunately, I didn’t give a single fuck whether or not I made my brother happy. But I did have a fuck or two to give about the fact that Hector and Zeke were doubting my authority.

*Fuck, I hate this. I should be the Alpha—not Greyson. I’m the rightful Redwood Alpha, and I shouldn’t have to answer to anyone. Especially not my brother.*

I felt Ava’s eyes on me as I coolly stared back at Zeke. “It is.”

They watched my face for a moment, clearly trying to measure me up. I must have passed the test, because after another beat, Hector nodded.

“See that you keep your word,” he said before walking off with Zeke in tow.

I rolled my eyes and took a long pull from my third beer. “That’s some company you’re keeping these days, huh?”

Ava didn’t laugh. “Xavier, did you talk to Greyson about this?”

Another wave of irritation lashed at my insides. “I didn’t have to.”

She looked down at her drink for a moment, though once again I could practically hear her thoughts, like she was saying them out loud.

I scoffed. “You think I need to ask big brother for permission.”

She opened her mouth. Then closed it. Then shook her head. “That’s really for you to decide, isn’t it?”

“Is it?”

“All I’m saying is, I can’t imagine Greyson will be too happy about you speaking for him.”

“Because you know Greyson so well, right?”

Her eyes narrowed. “I know he won’t be happy because if the situation were reversed, you wouldn’t be happy either. It’s a slap in the face for a pack member to make a call like this without their Alpha’s support.”

“*He is not my Alpha*,” I hissed. Then I sat back and took a breath. “And if push comes to shove, he’ll see that I made the right call here. He’ll support my decision. It’s not a problem.”

She looked like she was about to press for more, but then she bit her lip and nodded. “Of course.” She raised her glass again. “Cheers!”

It was a catch-22. Her avoidance of the topic was just as annoying as if she’d kept pushing it. Because I *knew* her. I knew where her mind would take this. She’d try to spin this whole thing to wheedle me into becoming the Samara pack Alpha so I’d be an Alpha in my own right and I could tell asshats like Zeke and Hector where they could shove it.

But I also knew that the fact that she *wasn’t* saying all of that was proof she really was making an effort not to push me. And I was glad she was respecting that boundary.

I smiled tightly. “Cheers.”

A woman I sort of recognized stumbled up to us. Her cheeks were rosy, her eyes a little too bright, and I could smell the bourbon wafting off her. “Xavier, it’s so good to see you again!”

I wracked my brain for a name, a memory. Anything that would clue me in to how the hell I knew this woman.

“Marissa,” Ava said. “Glad you could come.”

“Hey,” I said, glancing at Ava. “How are you?”

She looked from my face to Ava’s, her eyes sparkling. “I need you two to settle a bet for us.”

She jerked her head back toward a group of Samara wolves standing a few tables away. They were watching this exchange intently.

*So they sent Marissa over because she was just drunk enough to have the courage to ask whatever the hell they want to know.*

I smirked. “What is it?”

She grinned. “I just couldn’t help but notice that you and Ava are spending a lot of time together. You two look awfully close.” She leaned in. “Are you mates again?”

# **Episode 2874**

I stared at Lola, completely aghast. Her awful question rang in my ears, along with all of its truly nightmarish implications.

*What does she mean, Greyson and Arielle are connected?*

Maybe I wasn’t the werewolf connoisseur I thought I was, because that idea hadn’t occurred to me. Once Greyson had assured me she wouldn’t be his Luna, I hadn’t dwelled on the possibility of a different kind of bond. I thought back suddenly to the brief interactions I’d seen between Greyson and Arielle. I hadn’t thought there was anything out of the ordinary in their interactions. Sure, Arielle deferred to him, but he was the Alpha, and after spending her life as a wolf, she was naturally going to be much more attuned to those kinds of dynamics.

Nothing about this situation was *normal*, but I hadn’t thought I had anything to worry about.

And then I remembered the way Greyson’s presence seemed to calm her. How she always seemed to gravitate toward him. She’d even ended up sitting behind him in the car.

I was *not* loving this new development.

I frowned and replayed the entire night in my head. Lola had said that Arielle was gorgeous, and she was. She was lovely and lethal all at once. I hadn’t really thought twice about what she looked like. Mostly I’d just been surprised that she wasn’t more hairy as a human, since she was a were-human and all—but she really was breathtakingly beautiful.

And now that I *was* focusing on that detail, all I could think about was some painfully gorgeous woman having a special bond with Greyson.

*Arielle really is exceptionally pretty. She has that mass of hair, that glint in her eye…*

“Just when you think things are finally settling down, the Redwood pack proves you wrong,” Lola mused. “And now we have a human werewolf? A were-human? She really has no experience of living as a human *at all*?”

I shook my head wordlessly, still too horrified by the thought of Arielle and Greyson having a special connection to respond.

Lola let out a low whistle. “Greyson’s really going to have his hands full, isn’t he?”

My ever-so-helpful mind immediately flashed to Greyson—with his hands full of Arielle’s very full breasts.

*NO!*

*BAD!*

*BAD CALI’S BRAIN!*

First of all, Greyson would never do that. He was my mate, and he loved me, and he would never cheat on me. Secondly, Arielle had been a human for what? Forty-five minutes now? She had bigger things to worry about than having a crush on Greyson—which I was pretty sure wasn’t the case anyway.

Sure, Arielle was hot. But she also didn’t know how pants worked and couldn’t stand to be inside a car without rolling the window down and sticking her head out like a dog, so why the hell was I even allowing myself to get jealous of her?

I had *nothing* to be jealous about. Greyson was my mate. Arielle was just a new pack member with a very distinct set of needs.

There was no competition here.

I frowned at Lola. “What exactly do you mean, ‘connected’?”

I thought back to everything I’d ever learned about werewolves, and about the lore of werewolves turning other wolves. Where the former was concerned, I’d thought I knew a lot. But the latter? I knew almost nothing.

Clearly Lola knew something, though, or she wouldn’t have brought it up.

She shrugged. “Oh, I mean. I don’t really know. I just kind of assumed that if you’re the one to turn someone, you’re bound to them or whatever. You know, like in *The Vampire Diaries*.”

I blinked. “Do you think?”

“Yeah. It’s possible, right?”

*Oh god.* Could *it be true?*

Then I shook myself. “Lola, don’t give me a heart attack if you don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

Her eyes widened, like she was really looking at me for the first time since she’d dropped that humongous fake bombshell. “Wait, you’re not actually upset, are you? You know that Greyson would never do anything to harm your relationship. He’s, like, obsessed with you.”

She rolled her eyes slightly and made a little gagging noise, and I whacked her shoulder with a sigh.

It was hammy, sure, but there was no denying that it did make me feel slightly better.

Besides, Lola was right. It wasn’t like I had any real doubts about how Greyson felt about me. If anything, we were stronger than ever.

But even so… If Greyson and Arielle *did*, by chance, have some kind of magical connection, I wanted to know about it. Plus, I wanted to check on Arielle and see how she was settling in. I was definitely not just snooping to make sure she wasn’t hanging onto Greyson. Nope, nope, nope. Not at all.

“I’ll be right back,” I told Lola. “I want to make sure Arielle’s settling in okay.”

She shrugged. “Okay, but…” She shook her head. “I still can’t believe this—we’ve got an actual wolf who’s now a human living in our pack house? It seriously sounds too insane to be real. Like, can’t we just have a normal day for once?”

I snorted. “*That* is what sounds insane to you?”

I started to count things off on my fingers. All the things that were “too insane to be real,” and yet had become an integral part of life at the Redwood pack house.

“I’m Fae. I found my Fae sister in the damn Fae world, and I’m cursed to have two werewolf mates. You’re a vampire-werewolf hybrid, and—”

She held up a hand. “Stop. I get it. I’m just saying—I’ve never even heard of a real wolf being turned before. I’m just saying it’s unprecedented, is all.”

I nodded. “It is pretty wild.”

None of us had any idea how this was going to go, how we were possibly going to make it work, but I really did hope that Arielle wasn’t having too hard a time fitting into her new world. She deserved to feel at home.

After all, this was her home now too.

I headed upstairs to find Greyson and check in on Arielle (and definitely *not* to make sure there was no weird wolf bond stuff going down).

I found Greyson and Mrs. Smith crammed into the bathroom with Arielle.

“… and this is how the toilet flushes,” Mrs. Smith was saying. She pressed down on the lever, and Arielle jumped back with a shriek.

“Whirlpool!” she cried. Her eyes were riveted to the swirling water in a way that made me very worried about what the state of the bathroom would be when she was done using it.

Mrs. Smith gave Greyson a pointed look before smiling at Arielle. “Yes, it can be very exciting, I suppose. Let me show you the shower…”

She tugged the shower curtain aside and fiddled with the taps for a moment before the shower sputtered to life and water cascaded down from the showerhead and into the basin of the tub.

Arielle’s entire face lit up. “Instant rain!”

“Yes, something like that. Did you see how I turned it on?” Mrs. Smith asked.

Arielle lunged for the knobs and started clumsily groping at them, twisting this way and that, clearly without any firm idea of how the whole thing worked.

I stepped back a bit to give Mrs. Smith more room to work. And because with all her fumbling, Arielle was inadvertently spraying water all over the bathroom. Embarrassment began to creep in. *How on earth did I ever convince myself I was jealous of her?*

This girl was basically feral—clearly my relationship with Greyson wasn’t in danger. The pack house’s plumbing? Sure. But I had nothing to be worried about.

In the absence of jealousy, that protective surge for Arielle rushed back. It was so obvious how alien everything was to her. I had to do what I could to help her fit in.

As Arielle kept turning the shower on and off, pure delight shining in her face each time, Greyson pulled Mrs. Smith and me aside.

“I need to head out now,” he said quietly.

He didn’t elaborate, but I knew he’d been planning to join up with the wolf pack to get LIPS off their trail. Well, first *on* their trail… Then, ultimately, off the Redwoods’.

“Hot!” Arielle cried suddenly as the shower began to fill with steam, and Mrs. Smith rushed over to her.

“Are you going alone?” I asked. I didn’t love the idea of him being out there without backup.

“I’m bringing Rishika, Jay, Ravi, and Zainab along,” he said. “I want LIPS to see some of the bigger tracks so they’ll think that their real targets have left along with the others.”

I nodded, then glanced back at Arielle, who was now being dragged away from an electrical outlet by Mrs. Smith. I’d known this would be hard, but I hadn’t realized that by having Greyson change a wolf, we were essentially inviting a human-shaped disaster noodle into our lives.

*We really have our work cut out for us.*

“Cali.”

I turned to look at Greyson.

“Can you handle watching Arielle tonight?”

# **Episode 2875**

**Greyson**

As I watched my mother wrestle Arielle away from the shower knob that had turned the shower water steaming hot, I couldn’t help wondering whether or not I was making a terrible mistake.

“Just let go of it,” Sabine said, with all the exasperated patience of a parent guiding their child. Or of a saint. Hopefully she had some stamina where all of that patience was concerned, because she was going to need it. We all were.

“Of course I can handle it,” Cali said, her voice bright with a confidence I wasn’t actually sure she felt.

“Leave it,” Sabine snapped, drawing our attention back to the slow-moving disaster that was Arielle.

Arielle stepped back with a huff, and my mother pointed out the different knobs.

“This one will make the rain very hot,” she said. “Too hot. It will burn you if you’re not careful. This one makes the rain cold. Sometimes too cold.”

Arielle shrugged. “I… stay warm.”

My mother shook her head. “Your human form won’t stay warm like you’re used to. It needs more care to regulate temperature. You’ll have to pay attention and give it what it needs to thrive. Sometimes that’s hot water, sometimes that’s cold water. You can use both of these knobs together to make the water just right.” She fiddled with the knobs and then held her hand out in the shower spray to show Arielle the right temperature. “Sometimes you wear clothes to help with this. And sometimes staying inside helps too.”

Arielle frowned. “Human is weak.”

Sabine laughed. “Being human has its advantages.”

I looked back at Cali. “Are you sure you want to take this on?”

I didn’t know why I was asking—it wasn’t like I had a wealth of options. I had to regroup with the wolves to give LIPS that goddamn parade of wolves and get them as far away from the Redwood pack as possible.

But leaving Arielle in Cali’s care, as wonderful and smart and capable and well-intentioned as my mate was, seemed like a disaster waiting to happen.

“I’m sure. Between me and Mrs. Smith, I’m sure we can help get her all settled in.”

Relief swept through me. “Thank you. I’ll try to be quick. I know this is… a lot.”

*Understatement of the year.*

Cali shrugged. “We do what we have to do. Just be careful, okay?” She stood on her tiptoes and reached up to brush her lips against mine. I slid my arms around her waist and kissed her back, pouring all my gratitude and love into it.

I didn’t want to pull away, but I couldn’t risk getting too far behind the wolves. If we didn’t pull this off just right, then I would’ve changed Arielle for nothing. And I didn’t know if I could live with that.

I glanced over at Arielle and my mother one last time—I still didn’t feel right about leaving her here. She was pretty much the opposite of stable, and it seemed like I was the only one who could consistently get through to her.

But she didn’t seem prone to violence anymore. That lesson, at least, had stuck. And for now, that was good enough. Maybe once I’d put out this fire with LIPS, I’d actually have some time to address this situation properly, to stop rushing from one moment to the next.

For now, though… it was the best any of us could do.

I made my way downstairs and pulled Rishika, Jay, Zainab, and Ravi aside. “I need to speak with the four of you. Privately.”

“Can I come too?” Sage asked, Lilac trailing close behind her.

I shook my head. “I only need these four. Enjoy your evening.”

“Does this have anything to do with the new pack member?” Lilac asked.

I pulled in a deep breath. I felt moments away from losing my shit, but I didn’t want to blow up at anyone. It was perfectly natural for everyone to be curious, to want to know more about this big change to the pack.

I just didn’t have time for it. For any of it. Every second that passed was a bell tolling in my mind, screaming at me to hurry the fuck up.

“I’ll tell everyone more later, but right now I have something else I need to take care of. Have a good evening.”

Lilac and Sage nodded, acknowledging the brush-off, and headed off in the direction of the kitchen. I returned my focus to the group I’d assembled and quickly explained the impending wolf parade we were going to participate in.

“I need all of you to shift and come with me,” I said. “We want LIPS to see us migrating with the other wolves so they believe we’re moving on to another territory as well.”

Ravi grinned. “We’re finally doing it!”

The others were a little more sober and seemed to understand the stakes. We all shifted and headed off into the woods.

I picked up the scent of the wolf pack about a half-mile away from the pack house, and we put on a burst of speed to catch up.

*So what’s the deal with Arielle?* Ravi asked. *Was she really a wolf up until tonight?*

*And is she a werewolf or a werehuman now?* Zainab asked. *Since she was a wolf but now she has the ability to shift into a human? It’s so crazy. It’s hard to wrap my head around.*

I rolled my eyes. *Try being the one responsible for her transformation.*

Annoyance lashed at me with every question, but I honestly couldn’t blame them. I’d want to understand what the hell was going on too. Hell, I wasn’t sure I *did* understand what was going on.

*The truth of the matter is, I have no idea what to expect*, I confessed. *This is new territory for all of us.*

We ran hard and fast through the woods, and it didn’t take long to catch up to the wolf pack.

Suddenly, Rishika mind linked with me. *We’re not alone.*

Alarm sparked through my senses, and I skidded to a stop. The group followed suit.

I could smell someone approaching. It was a vaguely familiar scent, but I couldn’t quite place it. Then, before we could form any kind of collective response to this, a somewhat familiar wolf bounded into the clearing in front of us.

It took me a long string of seconds, and then realization hit.

*Elle?*

Her wolf had changed slightly. She was bigger now, though her coloring was the same. The other wolves immediately raised their hackles and started to growl. They’d never met Arielle’s wolf before, and I could understand how they’d immediately assume she was a Rogue, or perhaps a threat from another pack.

*Stand down!* I snapped. *It’s Arielle!*

I was so surprised to see her here, so suddenly, without any warning, that at first all I could do was marvel at how easily she’d been able to shift for the first time. I’d assumed it would be somewhat difficult for her, that shifting would be just another thing she’d have to learn. Then in the next instant, I remembered our situation.

*You aren’t supposed to be here*, I told her.

Mind linking with her was effortless, and she responded right away.

*Why I stay behind?* she asked. *You my Alpha.*

Fucking hell. *You were supposed to stay back at the house with Cali and Sabine.*

*The fairy folk girl weird.* Arielle’s lupine face twisted into something like a grimace.  *I no trust. I run from her.*

I ground my teeth, ready to defend my mate—and remind Arielleexactly where her loyalty ought to lie.

Then she added, *You go after my family, yes? I come too.*

Movement sounded in the forest, coming closer, and then my mother’s wolf skidded into the clearing, breathing hard. She looked at me and mind linked. *I’m so sorry. I turned my back for two seconds, and then she was gone. It took me a minute to pick up her trail.*

I swallowed down my frustration. *It’s okay. It’s not your fault.*

When I looked back at Arielle, I realized she was right. This was her family—she deserved to be there. So instead of wasting time fighting and trying to send them both back, I turned back toward the wolf trail we were following. *Let’s go. We need to pick up the pace if we want to catch them.*

We all took off again, and before long we reached a meadow and found the wolf pack waiting for us.

Arielle rushed forward to greet the wolf Alpha. They touched noses, then Arielle stepped back.

*Is my daughter happy? Safe?* the Alpha asked me.

*She is*. It only felt like a small lie. She was safe, in any case.

The Alpha seemed satisfied with this. *My pack is ready.*

I nodded. *Let’s head out.*

We made it only a handful of steps before Rishika sucked in a sharp breath and nudged my shoulder. I followed her wide-eyed gaze and saw Dick Wigbert stepping into the meadow, holding a gun*.*

# **Episode 2876**

**Xavier**

*She wants to know if Ava and I are back together?* My brows rose as I looked at Marissa. *Is she serious?*

The drunken, joking expression had disappeared from her face, and when I looked beyond her to the group clustered nearby, clearly waiting for my response with somber expressions, realization set in.

*Oh. They’re serious.*

*Shit.*

Apparently my status with Ava actually had some pretty goddamn big implications for the Samara pack. I guessed it made sense. Pretty much everyone knew about Ava’s and my history. That we’d been close enough back then to still have something lingering between us now. Plus, with Ava being Nolan’s sister, I *would* be the logical choice for the Samara pack Alpha.

In hindsight, I probably should have seen this coming. I’d made a big show about Knox being unfit to be Alpha, and with my Alpha blood and my history with their would-be Luna, they were probably waiting for me to step in and stake my claim.

Only, I didn’t want it. At all.

I didn’t want Knox to have it either, because he was a complete dipshit and he couldn’t be trusted, and he would absolutely run the Samara pack into the ground, which would only make my life more difficult in the long run.

But that didn’t mean I was throwing my hat in the ring to be Alpha. Not of the Samara pack, at least.

For a long moment, as the music filled the silence between the three of us, I had no fucking clue what to say. If I told them the truth—a decisive “no”—then they might not take me at my word that the Redwood pack would agree to protect the Samara pack, and then they might end up agreeing to let Knox be their Alpha, which could *not* happen.

Marissa noticed my hesitation, and probably the *oh shit* written across my face, too. “It’s just that we’ve been talking, and we’re concerned that if things aren’t good between you and Ava, then you’re not going to stick to your word.”

I frowned. “You don’t trust me.”

It wasn’t a question.

She shrugged. “I’m sure you’re a nice guy and all, but the Samara pack has been through some shit. We can’t afford to put our trust in someone who isn’t going to follow through when it counts. If things were to go sour between you and Ava, who’s to say you wouldn’t just turn your back on the entire Samara pack?”

Well, this was snowballing out of control—and fast. I’d thought Hector had taken me at my word. That he’d believed me when I’d said Greyson would agree to this. Clearly, I’d been an idiot to assume things would be that easy.

*When have they ever been?*

I cleared my throat. “I would never do that. I’ve promised you protection, and you’ll have it. This doesn’t have anything to do with Ava.”

Marissa shook her head. “You say that now, but who knows what would happen if you and Ava had a falling out? We’re willing to fall under the Redwood pack’s protection—but we need some insurance that you won’t bail on us.”

My eyes narrowed. *Translation: they won’t need to move forward with Knox right away if I give them what they want.*

“And what kind of ‘insurance’ are you looking for?” I asked.

“We need to know you’re invested in the Samara pack. In us returning to our former strength. We’ll accept your offer of protection—as long as you agree to be fully mated to Ava.”

*Well, this is a nightmare.*

I bit back a sigh. If I told them the truth—that I had no plans to ever mate with Ava again—this whole thing could fall apart. Deep inside, my wolf growled, a reminder that he would be perfectly content to meet the Samara pack members’ terms. I shoved him down. I didn’t want to deal with his bullshit right now.

I needed the Samara pack to trust me, to not make the devastating mistake of making Knox their Alpha. But Ava wasn’t my mate—Cali was. Cali was my future, and I didn’t want to betray her, even for something as small as a white lie to this random Samara.

Ava glanced from Marissa’s face to mine. “The pack doesn’t need to worry,” Ava said. “Xavier’s promise has the Redwood Alpha’s backing, and the Redwoods don’t go back on their word. You can trust him.”

Marissa’s brows rose. She seemed only somewhat mollified by Ava’s assurances. “And you two?”

Ava reached out and put her hand on my thigh. My wolf could have leaped for joy at the simple intimacy of the caress. She smiled up at Marissa. “Don’t worry. Everything is great between the two of us.”

It wasn’t a lie, exactly. But she was clearly being careful not to make any explicit mate promises, even if she was implying them.

If someone had told me that Ava and I wouldn’t be enemies after what she did to my mother, I would’ve said they were crazy.

Marissa’s expression eased into a smile. “That’s a relief. Thank you for your honesty.”

She headed back to her group, no doubt to fill them in on whether or not I was sticking around and could be trusted.

I waited until I was sure their eyes were no longer on us before I glared at Ava. “You promised you weren’t going to be pushing anything tonight.”

“I’m not.” She shrugged. “I was just trying to mollify the pack. Everything’s so fragile right now. We don’t want to do anything to spook them. Not when Knox is still dangerous.” Then she added, “Actually, I think that for now, we should at least let the pack think we might be moving toward mating again.”

My teeth ground together. *Pretending to be with Ava? Yeah, I do not love the sound of that.*

I huffed out a breath. Cali would *hate* this. How could I go through with something like this and still act like I was being completely faithful to my mate? My *real* mate?

*Ava* is *our real mate*, my wolf told me.

*Oh, give it a rest*, I snapped. *You’re like a broken record.*

But I liked to think that, even if she didn’t like it, Cali would understand that I was boxed into a corner here. Seriously, what was I supposed to do? And it wasn’t like Ava was proposing that we should actually be mated again. Only that we didn’t disabuse anyone of the notion until the pack was in safer hands.

*It’s only temporary. And it’s for the good of everyone. Blah blah blah.*

I watched Ava’s face, looking for some sign that something was amiss. Some eagerness or cunning. Some triumphant gleam in her eyes. Her expression was earnest, but even though she and I had been getting closer, I still didn’t completely trust her. We were a long way from that—assuming something like that was even possible for us.

I knew her endgame, and it was to win me away from Cali.

If I wanted to pull this off—to keep the Samara pack from throwing their lot in with that shithead Knox—then I needed to know exactly what I was getting into.

“So, for now, we act like we’re getting closer and *might* be mated again?” I clarified. “We pretend?”

She grinned. “Pretend. I promise.” She searched my face, and a crease appeared between her eyebrows. “I understand why you wouldn’t necessarily trust my motives, but right now I’m just trying to do what’s best for my pack. And I know that isn’t Knox. This is about my pack, not you and me.”

After the way she’d been pining after me for months, I had a hard time believing any of this. But she did seem earnest enough. Maybe she wasn’t lying. Even with all of her feelings for me, maybe her pack was taking precedence.

I heaved a sigh. “Okay, I’ll play along. For now.”

She smiled. “Thank you.” Then she moved in closer and let out a flirtatious little giggle.

I frowned. “What—”

“They’re watching us,” she murmured. “Play along.”

I looked around and saw that she was right. The Samara wolves were all surreptitiously glancing at the two of us, so I played along. I leaned in closer to her—trying to ignore my joyful wolf and the visceral pull dragging us together. Trying to ignore the way her mouth had never looked better.

I smiled. “It’s getting pretty late,” I said quietly. “I’m going to have to head out soon.” I needed to get out of Samara territory and back home to the pack house. To Cali.

Ava leaned in even closer. Chills slipped down my spine as her hot breath washed over the shell of my ear. “I don’t think that’s the best idea. Tonight, you should stay here with me.”

# **Episode 2877**

“And then when we turned around, she was gone!” I said.

I was pacing back and forth in my bedroom, wringing my hands and recounting Arielle’s great escape to Lola, who was sitting on my bed.

“We were just trying to show her her bedroom. You know, introduce her to sleeping on a bed, getting clothes out of the closet, and not climbing out the window—”

“The basic bedroom stuff, yeah,” Lola deadpanned. “So where did it all go wrong?”

I heaved a sigh. “We gave her some pajamas to change into—it’s really late, and she’s had a big, life-changing day, and I don’t know, I thought maybe she’d want to get some rest. So we stepped out of the bedroom for like, two seconds, and—”

“Let me guess—when you came back in, she’d already shifted and left?”

“Out the window.” I nodded. “Guess that rule didn’t really stick.”

“Are we sure that Greyson turned her? She seems to take after you,” Lola said.

I glared at her. “Ha ha, very funny.”

Lola shrugged. “I thought so,” she said. “What did you do?”

“Mrs. Smith went after her. She’s going to try to catch up and bring her home before she gets too far.” I groaned and slumped onto the bed next to my friend.

“It sounds like you’re doing everything you can, dude. Maybe try not to worry so much? Arielle is, you know, a little out of sorts and all, but if she was a wolf before she turned into a human, then she’s well suited to the forest. Maybe she just got a little overwhelmed and decided to head out to spend the night in a place where she’s more comfortable?”

“Yeah, maybe.” I rubbed my face. I could see Lola’s point. It would be the most natural thing in the world for Arielle to seek refuge in the wilderness—especially in light of all the crazy changes that had been thrown at her. I was sympathetic to that. I had to be. And I knew I couldn’t ever begin to truly understand what Arielle was going through—but that wasn’t really the issue here. “Don’t you get it, Lola? Watching Arielle was the one thing Greyson asked me to do, and I couldn’t even get through a full fifteen minutes without the whole thing going sideways!”

Lola pat my back. “Mrs. Smith went after her, right? She’s fast, and she knows her way around these woods just as well as she knows her way around the kitchen. I’m sure she’ll find Arielle and bring her home. It’s not a big deal. You and Greyson will laugh about this later, mark my words. You have nothing to worry about.”

“I hope not, but who knows what kind of trouble a newly made werewolf can get into? I mean, she could be halfway to Portland by now.” I started to hyperventilate as increasingly dark scenarios filled my mind. “I mean, at her best she’s a giant wolf, which would terrify people. And at her worst, she’s a breathtakingly beautiful feral human. Either way, she’s dangerous. She could hurt someone. She could get hurt herself. She could expose all of werewolf kind, and it would be *my* fault!”

If that happened, everything Greyson had done would’ve been for nothing. Everything Arielle had given up would’ve been for nothing. If that happened—

“Cali.” Lola squeezed my hand. “Take a breath, okay? Everything is going to be fine. Mrs. Smith knows what she’s doing. Greyson loves the shit out of you, and he won’t be upset. Besides, Mrs. Smith will probably find Arielle and bring her back before Greyson even realizes she broke out. So just *breathe*. Everything will be okay.”

I pulled in a breath, and then another. Slowly, my heartbeat settled, and the panicked haze in my vision began to recede. I sighed. “I’m just really worried.”

“I know. That’s all you’ve been saying the past half hour. But remember, Greyson and the others, along with that whole other wolf pack, are on a mission right now to lead LIPS away, so the woods should be fairly safe. And who knows? Maybe she’ll cross paths with Greyson and he’ll bring her back himself.”

I frowned as the image of a shirtless Greyson carrying Arielle through the woods—bridal style—appeared in my mind. I shook my head. “I wish you hadn’t brought up that dumb connection the two of them might have.”

Lola shrugged. “I was just saying, it’s what happens on *The Vampire Diaries*—”

“Lola, seriously?” I groaned. “That’s a TV show. I need actual information here!”

She furrowed her brow. “Well, why don’t you try to talk to someone who has actually been turned before? They can tell you whether or not they feel a connection to the werewolf who turned them.”

I thought about this for a moment, and then the realization hit me. “My dad!” My triumphant smile faded. I would have to talk to my dad in depth about my mate bond. I grimaced. “Okay, on second thought, no. That sounds like a horrible idea. And beyond awkward.”

“He’s not the only one here who wasn’t born a wolf,” Lola pressed. “What about Charlie?”

My eyes widened. “Of course!”

I tore out of the room, looking for Charlie. I thought maybe I’d seen him downstairs earlier when the group had been making snowflakes…

He was still in the living room, sitting next to Violet and working his pair of scissors over the folded paper. I beelined for him, then stopped short when I noticed Torin showing Violet his phone.

“This selfie?” he asked. “Or this one?” He looked up, and his face lit up when he saw me. “Oh, Cali! Thank the fates. I need your opinion.”

He yanked the phone out of Violet’s hand and shoved it in front of my face.

“What do you think?” He started thumbing through various pictures on his phone. His expression ranged from pouty to sultry, and the pictures seemed to have been taken at various locations.

“Um…” I couldn’t even begin to process this. “What’s this all about?”

He blinked. “To send to Kevin, obviously!” He flipped back and forth between the pictures. “My eyes really pop here, but just look how huge this one makes my bicep look. And this one, I think, captures my ingénue vibe, but this one says I’m up for anything.”

Now it was my turn to blink. “Have you been watching *Gossip Girl*?”

“That’s not the point! Which one do you think is best?”

I loved Torin. He was the brother I’d never had. But at that moment, I could not have cared less about his selfie game. I pointed to a photo at random.

“This one. It’s the winner.”

“Oh! The risky one!” His brows rose. “Are you sure?”

“It’s perfect. Kevin will love it.” I looked away from the phone and narrowed my gaze on Charlie. “Hey, Charlie. Do you have a second to talk?”

Violet frowned. “Is everything okay?”

I waved off her concern. “Of course. Everything’s just peachy. I just have a question for him.”

Charlie looked up from the snowflake, then tossed it down on the table. “Sure! Let’s talk. I’m getting way too many paper cuts, anyway.”

Violet rolled her eyes. “Again with the papercuts. You’re healing them almost the same moment you get them.”

“And they still hurt!” He turned away from his mate and approached me with a smile. “What’s up?”

I glanced around the crafts room, suddenly aware of all the eyes on me. “Can we talk privately?”

We stepped out into the hallway.

“Thanks for getting me out of there,” he said with a laugh. “If I had to cut out one more goddamn snowflake, I was going to lose it.”

I forced a smile. “Happy to help.”

“So, what’s up?”

“Um…” I started. Charlie wasn’t someone I was super close with. Obviously he was Violet’s mate and in the pack, but we weren’t BFFs. I didn’t know how to approach this question, but I was going to have to just come out with it. “When you were changed into a werewolf, was there like… a bond between you and the wolf who turned you?”

His eyes widened. “Uh… What do you mean? The wolf who changed me was a lunatic, a serial killer.” His shocked expression twisted into a deep frown. “Why would you think we’re somehow alike?”

“Oh, it doesn’t have anything to do with you. I just wanted to know if you had any feelings about the wolf who turned you. Like, do you think the Bite gave you some kind of special connection?”

He seemed to mull this over for a moment. “I guess, now that I’m thinking about it, I did feel like I understood him really well, somehow. I can’t explain it, but ultimately I think it did help me and Violet to kill the asshole.” A dreamy smile spread across his face. “Though a lot of that was Violet. She’s just incredible.”

“She sure is.”

He refocused on me. “Why are you asking?” Then understanding flashed on his face. “Oh, this is about Arielle, isn’t it?”

I nodded.

“Well, there’s really no way of saying how she’ll react to being turned—I mean, she was an animal—who knows how animals imprint on one another?” he said.

He sounded so reasonable, like he was trying to keep me from worrying, but his words sent a shudder through me.

*Oh god. Could Arielle have imprinted on my mate?*

# Episode 2878

**Greyson**

Time seemed to slow to a crawl as Dick Wigbert raised the gun and took aim. The moment stretched out long and silent. But when he fired—the sound ringing like a punch to the head—everything seemed to move into hyper-speed.

There was a snarl and a thump, and then someone was yelling through the mind link.

*Greyson!* Rishika screamed. *Greyson! It’s Mrs. Smith!*

Heart pounding, I turned to see my mother on the ground. She was breathing, but too quickly, and there was blood gushing from a wound in her side. Her eyes were open, and she looked awake, so it was hard to tell how seriously she’d been wounded, but it didn’t matter. Not now. Fury surged through me, and I turned, enraged beyond thought, and charged toward Dick. I had no thoughts in my head outside of wanting to tear this man to shreds as I sped toward him, running so fast my paws barely touched the frozen ground. Dick had been far from us when he’d made the shot, but I leapt across the distance, the others following behind.

As I ran, all I could see was red, and all I could think about was my mother on the ground, bleeding. The only thing that could help in this moment would be to rip Dick’s head clean off, and I intended to do just that. But before we could reach him, he sprinted backward and leapt onto the back of an ATV. The thing tore off, spitting out a cloud of gravel behind it. I kept running and had nearly overtaken it, but the driver moved it into a lower gear and the machine lurched forward, moving faster than we could catch.

Skidding to a halt, I howled in fury and frustration. The pack stopped behind me, and together we watched as Dick’s ATV disappeared into the shadows of the trees. He was too fast on that thing, and there was no point in going after him. Not now, at least. But this wasn’t the end. Not even close to it. And I vowed to make Dick pay for this.

Chest heaving, I bolted back to where my mother still lay on the ground. I shifted back to human and leaned down, pressing my hand against the wound. At least the blood didn’t seem to be gushing from the wound anymore, but regardless, any blood loss was too much.

“Are you okay?” I asked urgently. “Mom, answer me.”

*I’m okay*, she said, but the voice in my head sounded weak. *I’ll be fine, Greyson. It’s not serious.*

A gunshot wound was pretty serious in my book, and I watched her struggle to her feet. I put my hands beneath her, supporting her as she stood.

*We need to get going on the migration*, she said, sounding like she was trying to catch her breath. *We have a plan, and we have to stick to it.*

“I don’t give a shit about the plan right now,” I snapped. “I want to make sure my mother is okay.”

She nudged me with her nose. *That’s very sweet, Greyson, but I’ll be fine. I* am *fine. Look. I’m already healing. And watch.*

She walked around the clearing for a moment, testing out her steps. She was a little slower than normal, but she looked okay, and she wasn’t actively bleeding anymore.

*I’m fine. Now come on. The shooter is gone. Let’s get this mission over with.*

It took a moment for everyone to collect themselves after watching one of our own get shot, but after I shifted back to my wolf form, we headed into the woods to carry out the plan. We stepped through the trees as heavily as we could, trying to make our tracks as deep and obvious as possible.

I stopped and looked around. *I think we’ve gone far enough, everyone. We’ve done all we can. The wolves will go on from here, but the werewolves need to turn back now. We have to get back to the house and the rest of the pack.*

The Alpha of the wolf pack stepped toward me. *Take good care of my daughter for me, Alpha.*

I nodded, but his words rang in my head like a bell. I didn’t know how I’d managed to end up with this kind of responsibility, and I wasn’t sure I wanted it. I turned to Arielle. I had to ask one last time.

*Your family is moving on. Are you absolutely sure you want to stay with us? This might be your last chance to change your mind and move on with your pack.*

*I’m sure*, she answered in her usual, completely certain way. *This is what I want. I want to stay with the humans. I want to stay with you, Greyson. You are my new Alpha.*

I nodded, feeling a weight settle onto my shoulders. I always wanted to be the best Alpha I could, but now I felt that pressure even more. *There’s no taking this back, you know.*

*I know*, she confirmed.

*Goodbye, Alpha*, the wolf Alpha said, stopping in front of me. *You know what I expect of you.*

*I do*, I confirmed.

Arielle moved toward her parents and touched noses one last time. She watched them for a moment as they moved on, then turned back to me. *I’m ready to go.*

The Redwoods turned toward the pack house and started off at a trot. Then it lengthened into a run, then a full sprint. I kept my eye on my mom as we ran, but she seemed okay. Behind us, Rishika swept away any of our tracks, making sure LIPS would only see the retreating ones from the wolf pack.

Behind us, the wolves howled their final farewell, but they were moving, and we were moving, and their mournful noise faded as we moved farther and farther away from each other.

Lola was waiting at the pickup spot, and we all shifted back to human before getting into the car.

“No muddy paws in the car!” Lola bellowed.

There was a little hesitation with Arielle on shifting back, but she managed it and climbed into the car, looking around in amazement.

When we pulled up in front of the house, Big Mac was waiting on the porch. She rushed down the steps, her face pale.

“Sabine! You’re back, thank god.” Then she saw the blood on my mother’s side, and her face hardened. “What the hell happened to you? What did you let happen to her?” she demanded, rounding on me.

My mom sighed. “I’m fine. Will you just help me into the house, MacKenzie?”

“I can’t leave you for two minutes without something catastrophic happening to you,” Big Mac muttered. She slid her shoulder under my mother’s arm and half-carried her up the steps, fussing and shooting death glares at me over her shoulder.

I heaved an exhausted sigh and looked around. “Everyone should get inside. We’re too exposed out here. Inside, everyone.”

Glancing around, I didn’t see Arielle’s telltale red head anywhere. She must have disappeared into the house while I was getting yelled at by Big Mac. I wanted to double check on that, but before I could head inside, Cali hurried down the steps.

“Greyson! There you are! I’m so sorry about Arielle. I turned around for literally a second, and she was gone. I couldn’t go after her. She’s so fast! Is she okay? Did she—”

“She’s fine,” I assured Cali. “She just ran out to find us. She wanted to say goodbye to her family, but she’s back now, and she’s fine.”

As I spoke, Cali frowned at me. “Greyson,” she said gently, running a hand down my face. “You look exhausted. Do you feel okay?”

As soon as she said the words, the reality of them hit me. I *was* exhausted.

“I’ve had a really long day, love,” I admitted.

She cradled my cheek in her hand. “Why don’t you go inside and take a hot shower? Then get some rest, okay?”

I closed my eyes. “That’s the best idea I’ve heard all day.”

Cali reached up on her tiptoes and pressed a lingering kiss to my lips.

The kiss filled my whole being with warmth, like drinking a shot of icy hot vodka. I slipped my arms around her waist and was just entertaining the idea of inviting her into the shower with me—who needed to rest, anyway?—when I heard someone calling Cali’s name.

I pulled away from Cali and turned to see Torin waving for her.

“Cali! Cali! I have a question.” He jogged over with his phone. “What does this emoji mean?”

Cali smiled up at me and peeled herself away. “Excuse me,” she murmured, and stepped toward Torin.

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I’d managed to stay awake in the shower, but just barely, so as I stepped out and toweled off my hair, I yawned widely. Still though, the shower *had* made me feel slightly better. But as I stepped into my room, I saw something that woke me up faster than a bucket of ice-cold water.

Arielle was sitting on my bed, completely naked.

# Episode 2879

“—and all the fire emojis—see those?” I asked, pointing to Torin’s phone.

“Yeah.” He frowned. “Does that mean danger? Fire’s bad, right?”

“No.” I laughed. “Not in this context. Here, it means he thought the photo you sent was hot.”

“Oh.” Torin smiled, looking pleased. “And that’s good right? Hot?” I nodded. “Well, I think Kevin is at least that many fires hot, too. What would be the appropriate response to that?”

“Well…” I scrolled through the options on his phone. “You could go with the fire emojis back, but that’s a little unimaginative. You could do a drooling face.”

“Why am I drooling?” Torin asked, confused.

“You know, like he’s so hot you’re drooling over him?” I explained.

Torin shook his head. “I don’t think so. I don’t want him to think I have some kind of drooling problem.”

“How about a smirking face?” I offered.

“That face looks like it needs to eat some fruit and drink some water to be more regular,” Torin said decisively.

“Okay,” I said, getting desperate. “How about chili peppers? They’re hot.”

He didn’t look convinced.

“How about the letter U, then fire, chili pepper, fire, chili pepper?” I said, typing it into his phone.

Torin looked at this, mouthing the words *you hot hot hot hot*. He smiled up at me. “I like it!”

“You’re sure?” I asked, suddenly doubting the poetry of my emoji message. “I mean, it’s good, but it’s not subtle. Didn’t you just meet him?”

“Yes, I’m sure. I did just meet Kevin, but I like him, and I want him to know how I feel,” Torin insisted.

“And that’s great. No one wants to play games, so it’s great that you want to be upfront about how you feel. And I don’t want to tell you not to express how you feel, I just… wonder if you’re moving too fast. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Why would I get hurt?” Torin asked, puzzled. “Are we doing something dangerous? Is that what the fire pictures mean?”

“No, not physically hurt. Like, get your heart broken. You just… You barely know Kevin,” I pointed out. “I mean, does he feel the same about you as you feel about him?” I shook my head. “Listen, I’m not in this relationship, but sometimes it’s good to slow down a little. Get to know each other. Go on a couple of dates.”

I thought about how nervous I’d been when I’d first met Xavier. It had been hard to think straight around him—but that had also had something to do with how *insanely* attracted to him I’d been. And that had been *before* I’d found out we were mates.

Torin was nodding. “Yeah, that’s a good idea. Maybe Kevin and I can go out for lunch.”

“Lunch is a great idea,” I told him, and Torin skipped away, looking happy.

I smiled after him, happy he was happy. I knew I was always protective over Torin, but I guess it took him getting involved in a relationship to truly test just how protective I could be.

As I turned for the stairs, a thought occurred to me. It was so late already, and Xavier still hadn’t come back from Knox’s party. Where he’d been meeting Ava.

Ugh. One more thing to start worrying about.

I pulled my phone from my pocket, but there were no texts from Xavier.

*When are you coming home?*

I watched my phone, waiting for a response to my question, but none came.

Maybe he was already on his way home and my message had been hidden because he was driving.

That was probably it. I wasn’t going to worry about it. I was spending too much time worrying, and Xavier was always honest with me. I knew how he felt about me and how I felt about him.

Upstairs, I passed by Greyson’s room and was surprised to hear voices. One was Greyson’s, but one was *not*. I frowned. I’d thought he’d been planning to shower and then go to bed.

The door was partially open, so I stepped closer and peeked through the crack… An involuntary gasp left my mouth before I could stop myself.

Greyson was standing—*naked*—and Arielle was standing next to him, struggling to pull off a towel.

“What’s going on?” I demanded, pushing the door open.

Arielle succeeded in pulling off the towel and threw it to the ground. Greyson looked over at me, a plea in his light eyes.

“I need *help*.”

“Why?” I asked, baffled.

“Apparently, Arielle ruined all the clothes you gave her. Do you have something—literally *anything*—else she can wear?” Greyson asked, looking totally flustered. He was even a little flushed.

It was kind of cute to see how out of his element my mate looked, but—at the same time—I had a pretty pressing question.

“That’s all well and good, but… what’s she doing in *here*?” I asked. When Greyson shrugged helplessly, I looked at Arielle. “What are you doing in here? Didn’t you get your own room?”

Arielle furrowed her brows, confused. “Packs sleep together, yes?”

“Where are your clothes?” I asked.

She looked even more puzzled. “Wear clothes at night?”

Okay, I got what was going on here. My small spark of jealousy faded out as I realized that most wolves would probably be confused by the concept of pajamas. I scooped up the towel she’d dropped and put an arm around her shoulders.

“Humans don’t usually walk around naked,” I explained. “And we wear clothes because it can get cold at night, and we don’t have fur to keep us warm.”

Arielle still looked unsure, but she let me slip the towel around her body. I was struck once again by how beautiful she was. Her long, red hair tumbled down her back like a waterfall, and her skin was so light and even, it looked airbrushed.

“Why don’t you let Cali take you back to your room?” Greyson suggested.

Arielle turned to him, looking upset. “No. I don’t want to go. You are my Alpha. You promised my father you would look after me.”

Greyson looked at me, his eyes wide with fear. *What do we do?*

*I’ll take care of it*, I assured him. *But maybe it would help if you put some clothes on, too.*

Greyson looked down, then leapt over to his dresser and pulled on a pair of sweatpants.

“Arielle, listen to me,” I said, taking her hand. “Greyson is the Alpha of the whole pack, not just you. Not everyone in the pack can sleep with him. Now, I bet you’d love to try out some sweats.”

I gave her hand a tug and pulled her out of Greyson’s room.

“Thank you,” Greyson said quietly, looking deeply relieved.

As we headed to my room, Ravi stopped when he saw us.

“Hey, Elle, welcome to the Redwood pack. I’m Ravi.”

Arielle looked confused. “Elle? What is Elle?”

“Oh, it’s just a nickname,” Ravi said.

That didn’t seem to help Arielle.

“You know,” Ravi tried to explain, “what your friends call you.”

From the strained look on her face, I wasn’t sure if Arielle liked the nickname Ravi had given her, but after a moment she nodded.

“Elle,” she repeated. “I like this.”

Ravi grinned.

“And what is your nick-name?” she asked Ravi.

He shrugged. “Just call me Ravi.”

Arielle looked puzzled but nodded. Then she turned to me. “Do you have this nickname?”

“Yeah, it’s Cali. My real name is Caliana. But let’s get you in those sweats.” I steered Arielle away from Ravi, who—from the very happy look in his eyes—had *also* noticed how beautiful Arielle was.

“See you later, Elle,” he called after us.

When we looked back at him, he winked. And I rolled my eyes.

Back in my room, I rummaged through my closet until I found a pair of blanket-soft sweats. “Try these,” I said, handing her the grey pants.

“Elle,” she said softly, rolling the word around in her mouth. “Elle.” She looked up at me. “Will you also call me Elle?”

“Sure.”

Suddenly Elle turned, snarling, and my heart jumped into my throat.

“*Who?*” she demanded, pointing furiously.

I whipped around, trying to see who had infiltrated my room, but then I realized she was pointing at her reflection in the mirror.

“Oh my god, Elle.” I stood next to her. “Look, it’s us.” I waved. “That’s you. Elle is seeing Elle.”

Elle stared at herself in the mirror, fascinated but also suspicious. She moved her arm, waving as I had. Then she nodded.

This had to be so weird for her. She was a wolf. She must have seen her face reflected in water before, but now she was human and looked nothing like her former self.

“Maybe you should go to bed,” I suggested gently. I helped her into the sweats and handed her a T-shirt, then led her into the hallway toward the bedroom Mrs. Smith had assigned to her.

But in the hallway, Elle immediately turned back toward Greyson’s room.

“Alpha,” she said stubbornly.

I groaned. “Elle, stop.”

She shook her head. “Pack sleeps together.”

She wasn’t going to budge on this one, was she?

“Okay, listen,” I said, taking her hand. “Maybe there’s a way we can make your first night here exactly what you need.”

# Episode 2880

**Xavier**

When Ava suggested that I stay the night with her, my first impulse was to shut that shit down. Fast. But I didn’t. I’d been overhearing the Samara pack members asking about our mate status all night, and things with the pack were in such a delicate place with Knox vying so hard for leadership, so maybe I was being overly cautious, but my gut told me it was important to tread lightly here. I knew now wasn’t the time to do anything to draw suspicion to our “relationship.”

Ava was looking at me, clearly waiting for an answer. “Xavier?”

I cleared my throat. “Let’s just see how things go,” I said vaguely.

She took a breath, and it was clear to me that she wanted to press me on my non-answer, but—glancing out at the crowd around us—she must have had a similar realization. It wasn’t the time for that, and she kept her mouth shut.

My wolf wanted to stay with her, of course. I could feel it fighting inside me. At least I had a little more control over my wolf these days. I didn’t know if that was due to the change in our mate bond Ava and I had both felt after the incubus, but I was glad I had a better handle on him.

There was something else, though. Something that kept me from what would have been my response even a few weeks ago—a harsh laugh and a blunt refusal of her offer. It wasn’t just that I knew the other pack members were watching. Ever since she’d returned from the dead, my relationship with Ava had been… fraught. It was complicated, and sometimes it felt impossible to figure out. We had a lot of baggage. But something had been slowly developing between us since she’d been back, and that was an element of trust. Reluctant trust, but trust nonetheless.

I’d never thought it would happen. I mean, how could I have envisioned ever trusting her again? After what she’d done? Part of me knew I still shouldn’t. She’d proven time and again that she wasn’t worthy of my faith in her… until lately. She was trying. I could see it. Even Cali had noticed that she’d changed. Though neither Cali nor I could quite shake the feeling that Ava had something up her sleeve.

I looked up as the Airstream trailer door burst open and Knox came out, stumbling a little as he came down the steps. The women he’d gone in with were on either side of him, and all three of them looked suspiciously rumpled.

Next to me, Ava groaned. “Here we go.”

Smirking, Knox looked around his party, then headed straight for me. I noticed his steps veered a little, an effect from the potion. The women on either side of him pulled him up straight.

Ava squeezed my arm as he drew near. “Be nice.”

“Can you give us a moment, ladies?” Knox said. The blonde on the right and the black-haired woman on the left each pouted for a moment, then kissed Knox’s cheeks.

“See you soon,” the blonde promised, then both of them drifted away, disappearing into the crowd.

Knox looked at me, his eyes hazy. “I’m surprised you’re still here.”

“Yeah? And why does that surprise you?” I asked. I looked around at the sad excuse for an event. “I love a party.”

He grinned. “I thought you’d give it a good try, but realize pretty fast that I’m not going to be stopped. I’m going to be the next Alpha of the Samara pack—and you, you won’t be Alpha of any pack at all. How’s that make you feel, Xavier?”

It made me feel like I wanted to strangle the shrimp right here and now. *That* would feel pretty fucking great. But it would also probably be the start of a pack war, which I was technically here to prevent, so I kept my hands to myself, though it took effort.

Knox turned to Ava, his face twisted with displeasure. “I don’t know why you’re so friendly with him, Ava,” he said, his voice accusing.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked coolly.

“You know I don’t like him, and as my cousin, I think you should damn well respect that,” he said, a whine in his voice.

“You *would* think that. You’ve never had a mate, have you? That’s not the way it fucking works,” I snapped. I knew leaning into my mate bond with Ava was risky, but the guy was pissing me off, and I wasn’t going to sit there and let Knox spout his crap.

Knox’s eyes were red-rimmed now, but they flashed as he glared at me. “You can pretend all you want, Xavier, but I know the truth.”

“What truth?” I demanded.

“I know why you’re not the Redwood Alpha. You don’t have what it takes. You’re too impulsive. You’re a hothead, and you live in your big brother’s shadow. Must be tough.” He smirked. “And it’ll be even tougher when my cousin realizes it, too. Then where will you be? All by your damn self.”

I moved to stand, but Ava tightened her grip on my arm. She held me back, and it was probably a good thing, because I wanted to kill this asshole. My wolf and I were of one mind, and we wanted to *attack.*

But I had to think. If I attacked, Knox would use it to prove to everyone that I was exactly what he claimed—hotheaded and impulsive.

Knox was smirking even wider now. He knew he’d gotten to me, and I forced myself to take a deep breath. No. I wasn’t going to give Knox the satisfaction of attacking.

I forced a laugh. “You know what your problem is, kid?” I said, trying to look casual even though my blood was boiling. “You talk too much. Maybe you should save your criticism of me until after the Iudicium.”

Knox snorted. “I’ll pass the trial, and then if you want, you and I will have another conversation.” His eyes narrowed. “But if you’re not careful, Xavier, it’ll be our last.”

I clenched my hands into tight fists. I seriously doubted that conversation would end the way Knox was expecting.

“Shouldn’t you be making the rounds with the pack?” Ava asked, speaking into the tension between Knox and me. “You shouldn’t be chatting with us, Knox. You should be out talking to people if you want to win the trust of the other wolves.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Knox agreed with bad grace. “I’ll go do that.” And with one last glowering look at me, he moved away, arranging his face into a false smile as he moved into the crowd.

Next to me, Ava released her breath.

“Tell me, was he always this stupid, or is it just the potion?” I asked, turning to her.

She laughed. “It’s probably a combination of both at this point.” She looked at him, pathetically trying to work the crowd of pack members. “But the potion seems to be bringing out the best in him.”

“If Knox keeps this up, he’s never going to make it to the Iudicium,” I warned her.

“What do you mean?” she muttered, her eyes still on the crowd.

“I mean that if he’s that much of an asshole to everyone else, someone’s going to take offense and rip the shrimp’s throat out.” I couldn’t stop myself from smiling at that thought.

Ava shrugged, looking unconcerned. “Well, that’s fine, as long as it’s not you.”

We sat still for a moment, tracking Knox. Ava’s hand was still on my arm, and after a while she released her grip, then let her hand trail softly down the length of my arm.

“So,” she said quietly. “What about tonight?”

My wolf—still agitated by the confrontation with Knox—roared to life at her touch. And at the insinuation in her words. He was howling for me to accept her offer.

I glanced over at Knox. He was talking to a pair of pack members, but his gaze was fixed on Ava and me.

Shit.

I got to my feet, feeling restless, like I was going to crawl out of my skin. I knew I couldn’t just leave. It wouldn’t look right, and I couldn’t give Knox the satisfaction of thinking he’d managed to scare me off with his schoolyard threats.

Ava stood and stepped in front of me, her body between me and the rest of her pack. Her eyes were wide and intent on me, and when she spoke, her voice was low and urgent.

“Xavier. If you know what’s good for you and your pack, you’ll kiss me right now.”

# Episode 2881

**Greyson**

I was annoyed, but also kind of amused as I watched Cali gather everyone for—

“An all-pack slumber party!” she announced to the assembled pack members.

Okay, that wasn’t exactly what I expected. Half the group groaned, the other half looked slightly interested, but when a few shot a glance at me, I nodded, indicating that they should shut up and get comfortable.

I’d been looking forward to spending the night in my bed as much as anyone, but I was kind of charmed that Cali was going to such great lengths to help Elle feel comfortable.

“She needs to adjust to being human, right?” Cali said, walking over to me. She must have guessed how I was feeling, because she tipped her head and smiled. “So she’s not ready to spend the night all alone. Real wolves sleep as a pack, so I thought maybe we should do the same. At least for a few days, until she starts feeling more comfortable in her skin.”

I sighed. “I was kind of hoping you and I could have a slumber party. A *private* slumber party.”

Cali laughed, blushing. “I wouldn’t mind that either, but I’m not sure I could explain to Elle why I get to sleep with you and she doesn’t.”

I looked around at the pack getting settled on the floor of the living room, then down at Cali. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

She smiled up at me. “You’re not so bad yourself.” Then she moved away and grabbed Elle’s hand. “Elle, this is Sage, and this is Zainab. Ladies, this is Elle.”

Sage and Zainab waved. “Hi!”

“And this is Ravi, who you know,” Cali said, striding past Ravi as he beamed at Elle.

I watched her as she moved around the room, introducing Elle to the pack members she hadn’t met yet. Cali was so good at this kind of thing, comforting Elle, organizing the pack—all the sorts of things a Luna would do. She was a natural, and she’d make a great Luna.

Glancing over at Elle, my thoughts were still on Cali. I wished I could have turned her and made her my proper Luna. I knew I couldn’t—not yet. Not until she chose me. But regardless of when that time came, I had a lot to consider. I had to think about not only marking her as my mate, but turning her into a werewolf, and naming her my Luna. It was a lot.

I watched Elle moving with Cali. She seemed a bit more comfortable now. She smiled when people smiled at her. I just felt this massive amount of responsibility toward her, and I was glad Cali was helping her.

“White chocolate mochas for everyone!” Torin sang out as he walked into the den. My mother trailed behind him, and they were both carrying trays laden with mugs.

Torin looked like he was having the time of his life, and he walked straight over to Elle and handed her a steaming cup.

She took the cup with a look of puzzlement, turning it around in her hand. She nearly turned it upside down, but Cali stopped her and demonstrated how to drink from it.

“Like this,” Cali said, taking a sip of her own mocha.

The pack gathered around my mother, and her mugs were gone in an instant, and I stepped over to her as she moved to leave the room, probably to go for refills.

“This is really nice of you, but you should be resting,” I reminded her. “You were injured.”

“I know that, Greyson,” she said, smiling up at me. “And I appreciate you thinking about me, but I’m already healed.”  
 “You are?” I asked in surprise.

“Of course I am. I think you forget this sometimes, but I’m not just your mother, Greyson. I’m also a werewolf. I heal just as fast as you do. And it’s not like I was hit with a *silver* bullet.” She raised her eyebrows. “If I had been, we both know we wouldn’t be having this conversation at all.”

She gave my hand a reassuring squeeze and turned back to the others. She laughed when she saw Elle gulping down the mocha.

But my stomach felt as heavy as a rock. I’d been around long enough to know that it didn’t take a silver bullet every time. I’d seen pack members get injured, sometimes die. And it wasn’t like Sabine was just another pack member. She was my mother.

The concept used to feel so foreign. Mothers had always seemed like an alien lifeform to me. I’d heard of them, of course, but they might as well not have existed at all, as far as I was concerned.

But since I’d learned that Sabine was my mother, my feelings on the species had changed. I’d been… resistant to the idea at first, but I’d grown to accept it. I wasn’t a lone Rogue anymore. I had people now. I had a mate in Cali, I had my knucklehead brothers, and I had a pack. And now I even had a mother. It still surprised me sometimes, but there it was.

Even Big Mac had acknowledged it when she’d chosen to blip me out of the Vanguard palace and away from Seluna’s attempted massacre.

I had a mother now, and she’d been hurt. She could have been killed. I couldn’t imagine what it would be like to lose her now, when I’d only just found her. The thought made my whole body grow cold, all except one piece of my heart, which still burned with anger. I knew one thing: Dick Wigbert was never going to have a chance to shoot at my mother—or any pack member—ever again. I knew I’d made a pledge to Cali that I wouldn’t kill a human, but I also knew that there were exceptions to every rule.

Dick was going to pay. It was only a matter of when.

“Hey, Greyson.”

I looked down. Cali had finished her circuit of the room and was standing in front of me. “Yeah?”

She smiled quizzically. “I asked if you were having a good time?”

I shook my head, trying to pull my thoughts back from revenge ideation. “Yeah, I’m having a good time,” I assured her.

Glancing over, I saw Ravi pointing at the blank TV and gesturing wildly. Listening to him for a moment, I realized he was trying to explain to Elle what a movie was.

“Think we should worry about that?” Cali asked.

“What?” I asked. “That Ravi’s chosen to try to explain the plot to the third *Fast and the Furious* movie to Elle? I mean, why not start with the first one?”

“No. I mean, should we be worried about Ravi? He seems really interested in Elle.”

I watched Ravi for a moment longer. “No, he’s only being friendly. It hasn’t really been long since—” I stopped. *It hasn’t been long since Joss.* I tried to shake off the emotion moving in. “He’s no one to worry about.”

Cali nodded. “Yeah, you’re right. I don’t even know why I thought that,” she said, sighing. “I’m just so on edge trying to, like, micromanage everything for her right now. Is she having fun, is she learning, is any of it enough?”

I looked around. Sleeping bags and blankets had been spread out, and the pack was settling down for the night.

“You’re doing great. This was a really good idea,” I said. It was nice to watch how everyone had come together, willing to give up their beds to help the newest member of the pack adjust. It gave me a sense of pride to look around the room. I thought not only of my own accomplishments as Alpha, but of the pack itself.

Except… the entire pack wasn’t here. Xavier was missing. He must not have gotten back yet.

I stepped out of the room just as Torin, Rishika, and Tom started to construct a tent with blankets and couch cushions.

Pulling out my phone, I shot Xavier a message.

*Where are you? Is everything okay?*

I couldn’t help thinking that maybe something had gone wrong. There was no getting around it—I was worried. Knox was a wild card, and there was no predicting what he was going to do.

I just hoped I hadn’t made a mistake in allowing Xavier to go to this thing tonight.

I watched my phone for a while, but no reply came through. I slipped my phone back into my pocket. It wasn’t my nature to panic, so I was going to give Xavier more time to reply. But if he didn’t, I was going to have to find out what had happened.

I walked back into the living room, stepping over prone bodies on my way to Cali.

She’d rolled out a sleeping bag for me next to hers, and I slipped inside. Then, to my dismay, Elle squeezed in next to me, shoving Sage’s sleeping bag to the side to make room.

She smiled at me as she lay down next to me, and I realized I’d become her version of a plush stuffed Alpha—she needed me by her side to feel secure.

But… *was* it that innocent? I couldn’t help thinking of her surprise visit to my room—naked. Cali had been understanding about a very awkward scene. I just hoped she stayed that way.

Then, suddenly, Elle leaned forward and kissed me.

# Episode 2882

The moment seemed to be moving in slow motion. Elle’s mouth, pressing against Greyson’s. The surprise dawning in his eyes. The gasps from the pack members around us. I saw every detail in high definition and surround sound.

But it wasn’t really slow motion, so it was actually only a quarter of a second before Greyson backed off, breaking the kiss with Elle, and eased himself away from her.

Elle frowned, looking confused, and she moved forward, trying to kiss him again.

Something deep within me—my mate bond, no doubt—seized up. I moved without thinking, getting between Greyson and Elle to stop what was happening, but managed to roll right over Greyson in the process.

“Ow, Cali,” he muttered as my elbow prodded him in the ribs. He looked more flustered than ever.

I ignored him and focused on Elle. “Elle, you can’t do that,” I said firmly.

She looked more puzzled than ever. “What can’t I not do?”

I took a deep breath and reminded myself that she was new to all of this. All of it. I’d just had to show her how to use a *cup*, for crying out loud, so it was reasonable that she might not understand a kiss.

“You can’t go around kissing people,” I explained, knowing that the image of her kissing Greyson was going to haunt my dreams for a while. It would make a nice change from Seluna.

“I do not understand,” Elle said, shaking her head. “How else express feelings? And—I see you do this.”

“That’s—that’s different,” I spluttered, feeling my face flush.

“How different?” Elle asked.

I looked back at Greyson for help. This was getting weirdly complicated when it shouldn’t be.

Greyson—understanding—sat up and took Elle gently by the shoulders. “I know that the wolves you grew up with had different ways of expressing themselves. They rubbed noses, right? Or they bumped heads or sniffed each other. But things are a little different for us here. There are different meanings attached to the ways we express ourselves.”

“Right,” I agreed. “Kissing is something special. Usually it’s saved for mates.”

Elle stared at me blankly. “Mates?”

“Yeah—”

“You have too?” she asked.

I nodded. “For werewolves, being mated means the mates have a special connection with each other.” I wondered if I should try to explain the *due destini*, but Elle was already confused, so I decided now was not the time to get into it. If the concept of mates was confusing her already, *due destini* was like the advanced course. Let’s stick to the basics.

I looked back over to Greyson for help explaining mates, but he gave his head a small shake. Clearly he’d decided on a fully hands-off approach.

But Elle didn’t look convinced, and I wasn’t sure I was getting through to her. I turned to Lola, who was sitting nearby and had seen the whole thing. She had been the one who’d gasped.

“Will you help me out here?” I pleaded.

“Sure!” Lola said.

I looked around. Most of the pack was still watching us. “Maybe we should have this conversation with more privacy,” I muttered, and grabbed Elle’s hand.

Lola, Elle, and I walked into the hallway, though it was hard to pull Elle away from Greyson.

“Alpha,” she called, looking back at him. “My Alpha!”

“Greyson will still be here when you get back,” I said, trying to keep my cool. “But first we have to explain a few… *boundaries*.”

The word didn’t seem to hold any meaning for Elle, and Lola stopped us both in the hallway.

“Let me explain this, Cali. I can make her understand,” she said.

“Yeah? How?” I asked, dubiously.

“Come on, it’s like sixth grade sex ed class. I’ll take it slow,” she said.

“I don’t know, Lola. I’m not sure this is the best approach—”

“Shush!” she hissed. Then she turned to Elle. “Okay, Elle, when you kiss someone, it means that you like them.”

Elle’s brow smoothed out. “Yes. I like Greyson.”

Lola was undeterred by that small linguistic hurdle. “Yeah, okay, but you can like someone, and then you can *like* someone. I like Greyson, but Cali *likes* Greyson.”

“Elle likes Greyson,” Elle insisted, confused again. In fact, she looked more confused than ever.

“I’m not sure we’re getting through,” I said. “Okay, how about this. Elle, instead of kissing Greyson, maybe you can hug him instead.”

This was met with another blank look. “What means hug?”

“I’ll show you,” I offered. I hugged Lola, and Elle’s eyes went big as dinner plates.

She watched us for a moment more, then stepped forward, wrapping her arms around the two of us. “Like this? This is good? This is hug?”

I nodded as well as I could with my chin pressed against Lola’s shoulder. “It’s perfect.”

Elle released us. “Okay.” She smiled and headed back into the living room.

I watched her thread her way through the sleeping bags, relieved that I’d gotten through to her.

Lola was watching Elle as well. “That red-headed wolf newbie had better not try to *hug* Jay,” she said sourly.

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

Lola shrugged. “I’m territorial. And you can’t blame me for that. I know Jay is hot as hell, and Elle—well, she’s pretty hot, too. Did you not see how her boobs barely fit into your T-shirt?”

I covered my face with a groan. “Stop giving me things to think about that I wasn’t even thinking about, Lola.”

When I moved my hands from my face and looked into the living room, I saw Elle hugging Greyson.

Greyson looked uncomfortable, like he wasn’t sure where to put his hands.

*Why is this happening? What did you tell her?* he asked.

I strode across the room, treading on a few fingers by accident. “That’s probably enough hugging, Elle,” I said, putting my hand on her shoulder. “You’ve shown Greyson you like him, and now Greyson knows.”

Elle released Greyson and, as he sat back down, she sat down at his side.

I raised my eyebrows at Greyson. *Hugging’s better than kissing, but we still might have some things to teach her.*

*I hope you don’t think I was responsible for that kiss*, he said quickly. *It surprised me even more than it surprised you.*

*I doubt that*, I said. *But, no, of course I don’t think you were responsible. She’s confused.*

But I thought about Lola’s comments, and I suddenly wondered how Greyson felt, having someone as beautiful as Elle throwing herself at him. Though maybe he was used to it. He’d been a Rogue, after all, and he’d lived alone for a long time.

Something of my thoughts must have shown on my face, because Greyson leaned close to me.

“You have nothing to worry about,” he whispered, and moved in to kiss me.

But I moved away. I glanced over at Elle, who was watching us, and as much as I wanted to kiss Greyson, I really didn’t want to have to explain it to the new girl.

“Who’s ready for the movie?” Torin sang out, waving the remote. “It’s called *Holiday Hotel*!”

He started the movie, which turned out to be about a small-town baker who fell for a wrongfully disgraced city cop. The cop had come back to his hometown to sell his dead uncle’s farm, and as the two had their requisite meet cute, I sighed, feeling bored. I just felt like I had seen this movie—or movies exactly like it—hundreds of times before. But everyone else seemed to be enjoying it.

I leaned against Greyson, who had scrunched up as close to me as he could to distance himself from Elle on his other side.

It was funny, and I had no problem with him being close. I wasn’t interested in the movie, so I looked around at the pack. Everyone was cuddled into blankets or against each other, and after a while, Torin produced popcorn and passed it around.

It was fun, like a real sleepover, and it felt like a nice way to welcome Elle to the pack.

Halfway through the movie, I pulled out my phone and was upset to see that Xavier still hadn’t responded to my texts.

“Have you heard from Xavier?” I asked Greyson quietly.

He took out his phone and frowned at it. “No. Not yet. He didn’t reply at all.”

Worry gnawed at me as the baker and the cop danced under a Christmas light illuminated gazebo in the town square. I hadn’t been paying attention, and part of my brain wondered where the orchestra had come from.

But I was worried about Xavier, and that fear felt like a rock in my stomach. Where was he? Why hadn’t he responded to me? What if something had gone wrong?

I got to my feet, feeling agitated.

Greyson looked up at me, startled. “What’s up?”

I set my jaw, feeling determined. “I think we have to go find Xavier.”

# Episode 2883

**Xavier**

I thought fast, trying to decide what to do. My wolf desperately wanted me to kiss Ava, and I knew there was a ton of political pressure on me right now. I could practically *feel* Knox and the rest of the Samara pack watching my every move.

So, without a word, I leaned down and pressed a kiss to Ava’s lips.

The effect was instant, and my wolf threw back his head and howled with pleasure. My whole body felt like it had been set on fire. It was the kiss, it was the pressure of the pack’s scrutiny, it was the rage I still felt after my fight with Knox—it was everything. But if Knox wanted to make everything he did a show, then two could play at that game. If it was a show he wanted, then it was a show he was going to get. I could play his game so well that he couldn’t even hope to win, especially when it came to a pack.

I slid a hand into Ava’s hair and bent her back over my arm. Ava responded by leaning into the kiss and running her hand up my arms, across my shoulders, then into my hair. Everywhere she touched me seared like fire, so I broke the kiss before it started to burn out of control.

“Get into the tent,” I said, pulling away and speaking low, into her ear.

Ava looked at me, raising an eyebrow, but she didn’t argue. She stepped away and moved into the tent.

I threw one last look at Knox—who was glowering—and followed Ava into the tent, whipping the flap closed behind me.

Inside, the tent was small. The ceiling wasn’t quite high enough for me, and I had to duck down so I wouldn’t hit my head on the top. And in the enclosed space, I found myself completely overwhelmed by Ava’s scent. She filled my senses, and my wolf was overjoyed. He wanted more—more of Ava—and I turned around in the small space, on edge. I eyed the flap I’d just closed and considered opening it again, just to let some air in, but I knew I couldn’t. We would be seen by everyone, including Knox.

“I’m sorry, X,” Ava said quietly. “I know you—” She shrugged. “I just knew that everyone was looking at us, and—”

“I know,” I said shortly, cutting her off. I didn’t need her to spell it out—I knew why I’d had to do it.

She nodded and wrapped her arms around herself. “Well, you know that kissing me like that, and then sending me into the tent… You know it definitely looks like we’re about to have sex. You do realize that, right?”

*Sex*. The word made my wolf go insane with excitement, but I gritted my teeth, working to suppress it.

I crossed the small space to Ava in one stride. “It looks like we’re stuck here for the night, so here are the rules.”

Ava raised an eyebrow. “Enlighten me.”

I blew out a frustrated breath and glanced quickly around. The space was small, but just large enough for two people. And there was a sleeping bag. I pointed to it. “You sleep in that one on this side of the tent, and I’ll sleep on the other. There will be no touching, no kissing, no nothing. We will go to the Iudicium tomorrow, and once Knox has failed, you and I will be over. We can be friendly, but nothing more.”

Ava’s eyes searched my face. “So we’ll keep up appearances until then?”

“Fine,” I said shortly. “But nothing outside of that.”

Ava considered this for a moment, then took a step closer to me. “If you want them to really believe we’re mated again, then we need to do it right.”

“Right how?” I asked suspiciously.

“They’ll expect to see us being affectionate with each other, Xavier. You know how mates are with each other.” She cocked an eyebrow. “How we once were.”

This struck a chord within me, and my wolf stirred. I looked down at her lips, which were so, so close. It would’ve been so easy to lean down and kiss her again. To devour her, like I used to. Her lips parted, like she knew what I was thinking, and I watched her chest rise as she took a shallow, excited breath.

My wolf was begging me to reach for her, to cross the miniscule distance separating us, and pull her body to mine.

“And I’m sure you think I’m only saying that because I have an angle, but I also think you know that it’s just the truth. I didn’t create this lie by myself, and now it’s something we both have to deal with. Not just me.”

Fuck. She was right. I didn’t like it, but that didn’t make what she’d said a lie.

Ava laid her hand on my chest, and my wolf writhed within me.

“I know you’re doing this for the Redwood pack,” she said. “I’m not fooling myself into thinking it’s for any other reason. I want you to know that. And I understand, because I want what’s best for the Samara pack, too.”

And then, to my absolute surprise, Ava stepped away from me and toward the sleeping bag I had assigned her. She shook it out, kicked off her shoes, and climbed in.

“You better get some rest,” she commented, looking up at me. “The Iudicium will be a lot to handle tomorrow.”

I stared at her for a moment, surprised into silence. Then I sat down, still a little stunned. The ground was hard as stone beneath me. As I tried to get as comfortable as I could, I glanced over at Ava.

She gave me a small smile. “Sleep,” she instructed, then turned her back on me.

I eyed the space between us. It wasn’t much at all. I wouldn’t even have to fully extend my arm if I wanted to touch her. The tent had us practically on top of each other.

I edged as far away from her as I could and pulled out my phone.

I had messages from Cali and Greyson, which I’d been expecting. I read Cali’s first.

*What’s going on?? I’m worried about you. Why aren’t you home yet? Do you need to be rescued???*

Shit.

Okay, I had to tell her that I wasn’t going to be home tonight, but I had to do it in a way that wouldn’t make her freak the fuck out.

I shot a glance at Ava’s back, then looked down at my phone.

*I’m fine. Just some politicking with the Samaras, but it looks like I’m going to need to stay here for the night. I’m really sorry I won’t be back with you.*

Cali’s response came quickly. *It’s okay. I’m just glad to hear you’re okay. Stay safe. I love you.*

She followed with about a dozen heart emojis.

Another text came in, from Greyson.

*Guess you’re okay?*

I rolled my eyes and flipped my phone over onto the ground. I wasn’t going to reply to that. I lay down and closed my eyes. I was trying to will myself to sleep, but my senses were filled with Ava. I could feel the tug of exhaustion, but my thoughts were still racing.

After a while, I opened my eyes and stared up at the top of the tent. This wasn’t working—I just wasn’t going to be able to resist. Looking over, Ava had pushed the sleeping bag cover off of her. Her eyes fluttered open and connected with mine. She didn’t have to say anything.

I rolled over and reached for Ava’s hip. In one smooth motion I moved her toward me, and then underneath me. She responded in an instant, wrapping her legs around me as my kisses consumed her. She made a growling, moaning sound in the back of her throat, and it drove me over the edge. I rolled her on top of me and raked my fingers down her back as she straddled me, pressing into me…

A sound jolted me, and I found myself staring at the top of the tent again, suddenly awake. I looked over to see Ava still curled up on her side of the tent, her back to me.

It was a dream. Just a dream.

But what had woken me up? I sat up and looked into the darkness. I knew Ava wasn’t my true mate, but biology was biology, and my protective instincts were kicking up. I listened for the sound that had awakened me, and after a moment, I heard it again. A muffled thump. Beyond that, I could smell at least two other people nearby. Someone was out there, right outside the tent.

Quietly, so I wouldn’t wake Ava, I got to my feet. When I lifted the flap, I could see a thin strip of grey just along the horizon. It was just before sunrise. I took a deep breath of the cold morning air, but as soon as I stepped out of the tent, a bag was drawn over my head, and everything went black.

# Episode 2884

**Xavier**

I fought against the hands holding me, but whoever it was had a solid hold. So solid that I suspected there were two people involved, preventing me from freeing myself. But I wasn’t panicking—in fact, my mind was clear as I tried to deduce who this could be.

My first instinct was to assume one of the guys was Knox. That would make sense. The shrimp had it out for me, and he’d already accused me of killing Nolan and Ava. But I wasn’t picking up on Knox’s scent. In fact, I didn’t recognize the scents of either of the people wrestling with me. Whoever they were, they were strangers.

“Who the fuck—” I started, but I felt the cold, hard edge of a knife pressing hard against my back.

“You want to keep your fucking mouth shut,” someone said in a low, harsh whisper.

I didn’t recognize the voice, either.

Shit.

My mind raced as I tried to make sense of what was happening. The one thing I knew for sure was that whatever this was, it wasn’t random. I’d been seen going into the tent with Ava by nearly the entire party. There was no way I could’ve been mistaken for anyone else.

Sure, none of the guests at the Samara party *loved* me, but I hadn’t considered any of them to be enemies. And certainly not threats.

So did that mean it was someone else entirely? Could this be some kind of revenge plotted out by the princeling and the Vanguards? It was certainly a possibility.

But somehow, I doubted it. Lucian was a fool, but he wasn’t entirely stupid, and in the end, he knew that we’d saved his sorry ass from ending up as demon fodder. He wouldn’t make a move against me like that.

Maybe that meant this was an enemy from my mercenary days—I definitely had enough of those to go around. Maybe one of them was finally catching up with me, like Rocky had warned me. And then there was the disappearance of Seluna’s ashes. Was there any way this could be connected to that? Was this who had taken them finally showing themselves?

As I struggled hard, trying to get my right hand free, my thoughts went to Ava, who I’d left in the tent. Was this an attempt to get to her? Was I just the first step? My instinct to protect her ratcheted up. I knew that impulse was grounded in our old mate bond, but it was there, and strong, and undeniable. My wolf went into hyper-drive and got ready to come out, but I held back. I didn’t want to rush into anything. And there was still the knife to consider. If it was silver, I had a whole different set of problems on my hands.

*Ava! Ava! Can you hear me? Ava? Wake up!* I shouted into the mind link, but I heard nothing back. When I’d left, she’d been sleeping soundly, and whoever had grabbed me had made very little noise, which meant she was probably still asleep, completely unaware of what was happening to me.

In a distant back corner of my brain, I had the thought that not so long ago, I would have suspected Ava of engineering this—but now I was trying to protect her. How things had changed. I knew if Ava had been awake and aware, she would’ve come out to help me.

The hands gripping my wrists were strong, and I eased up a little on my resistance. I’d been in some pretty tight corners as a mercenary, and I knew from experience that if I offered less resistance, my captors might let their guard down and ease up themselves—and that was when I’d go on the offensive.

The hands on me yanked, pulling me across the uneven ground. I could tell they were pulling me across the clearing, away from Knox’s campsite. We must have made it into the woods, because someone shoved me hard against a tree.

“What do you want?” I demanded.

“We told you to shut up,” the voice snarled.

“I’m sorry,” I said, trying to sound sincere. “I’m just scared.”

I had to resist snorting. I wasn’t scared. Confused? Sure. But whoever this was, I could take once I broke out of their hold on me. Just a matter of time.

“You should be,” another voice snapped. “What the hell do you think you’re doing, trying to mock Knox?”

I had to quickly turn a laugh into a cough. Yeah, Knox didn’t need my help in that department.

Perhaps my cover wasn’t skillful enough, though, because one of the guys shoved me, and in doing so, pulled the knife away from my back. *That* was the moment I’d been waiting for. I focused on where the voice had been coming from and headbutted the guy in front of me. I had to admit, I enjoyed the crunching sound of a breaking nose and the cry of pain that followed. I felt his blood gush down my hand, and the other guy screamed in shock. He let go of my arms, and I yanked the bag from my head.

Standing in front of me were not the seasoned professional hitmen I’d imagined, but two frightened-looking dudes, both of whom were already backing away from me.

I rolled my eyes. I wouldn’t even need to shift to take care of these amateurs.

I grabbed the guy who wasn’t bleeding and pulled him around, swinging him hard into a nearby tree.

The guy gave a grunt of shock and pain—accompanied by another satisfying crunch of breaking bones—and slid down the tree, landing in an unmoving heap at the bottom.

Broken Nose held his face with one hand and kept backing away, his eyes on me. “Come on, man, take it easy. You’ve made your point, right? Enough’s enough, okay?”

“I don’t know about that,” I snarled, still advancing on him. “I’m not really in a forgiving mood.”

I’d been in a been in a bad mood since Knox had put me there, and this guy was as good a target as any on which to take out my unspent rage.

I swung hard, hitting the guy right in the jaw with a powerful haymaker. Blood squirted from his mouth, and when he dropped down to his knees on the frozen ground, I kicked him in the stomach.

The guy leaned over, gasping for air as he tried to breathe around his broken jaw. I leaned over and grabbed the back of his hair.

“I have a message for Knox. Do you promise to deliver it?” I waited until the guy nodded miserably. “Tell him to send his best next time. And remind him that even that’s not going to be good enough.”

I let the guy go and stood, taking a hard look at him and his friend, still collapsed by the tree. They were probably Knox’s buddies, trying to scare me. Well, that hadn’t worked.

Turning away, I wiped the guy’s blood off my knuckles and onto my pants. I wanted to check on Ava and make sure this failed abduction plot hadn’t involved her. Though, if it had, the end results would probably be the same. Ava wasn’t exactly the damsel in distress type, and she’d be able to put up a good fight. If anyone had grabbed her, she’d be able to handle Knox’s punks as easily as I had.

I thought about Ava as I crossed the clearing back to the tent. I trusted that her plan was going to work—that the potion would throw Knox off his game enough to increase the chances that he’d fail at the Iudicium. With or without me. Trying to rough me up wasn’t going to change that outcome.

The campsite was quiet as I drew close, and I glanced at the sky. The grey band of dawn was golden now—the sun was about to rise. I looked over at the Airstream and was very tempted to make a slight detour on my way back to my tent. It’d be nice to pay Knox a visit and thank him for the unexpected visitors to my tent. Thank him with a fist to the face—and a warning.

But that was probably not what most would consider wise, and would just cause more problems.

I headed back to the tent. I wanted to make sure Ava was okay and—hopefully—still asleep. My wolf was urging me to check on her, and I wondered if the powerful need to protect her was ever going to go away. It had survived so much. Even though so many other aspects of our mate bond had faded, that need remained as strong as ever.

I drew close to the tent and lifted the flap—and my heart dropped. Shit. The tent was empty. Ava was gone. My mind raced. Had some of Knox’s friends done something to her, too?

# Episode 2885

**Greyson**

I leaned over Cali, who was kneeling on the ground, her back to me. The flames from the fire cast a dancing pattern onto her bare shoulder and her neck. I watched the shadows rise and fall, bewitched by the moving patterns they made on her satiny skin. She was so beautiful and looked so vulnerable, kneeling there, her skin exposed.

I leaned forward, closing the tiny gap between us, and breathed in her scent. I knew she was ready for this. I knew she wanted this. And that steeled me for what I was about to do. I knew marking her as my mate was going to cause her pain. I wished there was some other way to do it, but this was it, and there was no way to protect her from it. If I could have absorbed the pain for her, I would have, but that wasn’t the way it worked.

The wolf within me stirred. He wanted to taste her blood. There was a quiet rustling as the rest of the pack members gathered, forming a circle around us.

I knelt behind her and ran my fingers gently down her neck. I watched as goosebumps sprang up in the wake of my fingers. I trailed my hand along her shoulder and felt her shudder beneath my touch.

I took a deep breath and leaned in to whisper in her ear. “I love you.”

I heard the beat of her pulse quicken at my words. She was nervous, and when I pressed my lips to the back of her neck, I felt her inhale sharply.

This amused me, and I trailed a string of kisses down her spine. She shivered, and I tightened my hold on her, then sank my teeth into her skin.

Cali groaned, but I couldn’t tell if it was from pain, or simply the pulse of feeling from the connection between us.

I could taste her blood, and my wolf was going mad with desire. I released my hold on her, and she fell back against me, her body limp. I licked my lips, tasting her warm blood, and turned her around to face me. I leaned in and kissed her, letting her taste the blood of our union.

“We’re officially mates,” I murmured between kisses. “We belong to each other now.”

She looked up at me, her eyes bright, then pulled me in for another kiss.

I leaned in, filled with so much love for her that my heartbeat quickened, but… something wasn’t right. There was something that nagged at me, and I opened my eyes just in time to see—not Cali, as I’d expected—but the dark auburn hair of Elle just as she pressed her lips to mine.

*Again?*

I jerked back in shock. What the hell was happening? I looked around wildly, trying to make sense of what I was seeing. After a long moment, my heart rate slowed down, and I remembered—I wasn’t outside, and I hadn’t been giving Cali the Bite. I was in the living room of the pack house, and from the light, I guessed it was just before sunrise.

Someone next to me moved, and I looked down to see Elle snuggled against me, curled into me like a lover.

I looked over my shoulder to my other side and saw Cali asleep next to me. That was a relief. At least she wasn’t going to have to see this.

When I looked back, Elle was awake and staring up at me.

“Did I do something wrong?” she asked quietly.

I glanced around at the sleeping pack members, then back at Elle. “Remember, you’re not supposed to kiss me,” I said, whispering, not wanting to wake anyone up.

Elle frowned, looking frustrated. “But I *like* Greyson.”

“Yeah, I get that impression. And I like you, too, Elle, but kissing isn’t the way to express that. Not for me and you, anyway. Kissing is for my mate,” I said, gesturing at Cali.

Elle didn’t look happy, exactly, but she moved closer and put her arms around me. I didn’t love that either, but I tried to relax. Cali and Lola had told her that hugging was okay, so I should try to be okay with it too—

Hang on. I looked down quickly. Why the fuck was I feeling her bare skin against me?

Fucking hell. She was naked. Completely naked, and pressed against me.

I pushed myself backward, trying to scramble away from her, but she was wrapped around me like we were in a championship game of twister.

“Why are you naked?” I quietly demanded. “Where are your clothes?”

Elle shook her head. “No clothes. Not for sleeping. I don’t like. Wolves don’t need clothes. But blanket is good,” she added, snuggling into the fleece blanket she had over her shoulders.

I’d just opened my mouth to order her to put her clothes back on when I felt Cali’s arms wrap around me from my other side. She pulled me closer, and I felt her kissing the back of my neck.

Oh, for fuck’s sake. I was trapped between the two of them now.

“Greyson,” said Cali’s slow, sleepy voice. “What’s wrong?”

*EVERYTHING!* was what I wanted to say.

I looked at Elle. “You need to get dressed,” I said as firmly as I could manage. She reached for my hand, but I pulled myself away from her grip and turned to face Cali.

Cali was awake and frowning when I looked at her. She propped herself up on her elbow and got her first look at Elle, who was still lying beside me. Naked.

Cali did *not* look thrilled about that.

“It’s not what you think,” I muttered.

“It’s probably *exactly* what I think,” Cali said. “Elle didn’t understand anything of what Lola and I told her before.”

“I’m going to have to lay down the law,” I said. “We were too gentle with her. I need to be firmer than the two of you probably were with her.”

“But the problem is that she doesn’t understand—” Cali started. She frowned, then looked over my shoulder at Elle again. “We shouldn’t be upset if Elle just wanted a friendly hug.”

Was I hearing this right? From my mate? “It wasn’t just a hug, Cali, and trust me when I tell you that it seemed more than just friendly.”

“Greyson—”

“She just doesn’t understand how humans work,” I said. “We need to be firmer, or do you want her to use tongue next time?”

I knew I had to just take a breath, but I was irritated because I felt like Cali wasn’t listening to me. I knew Elle didn’t understand; that was the whole problem. But more than all of this, I was in a bad mood. My dream about marking Cali had been amazing. It was what I’d been wanting, and to wake up kissing—or, rather, being kissed by—someone other than my mate was a shitty way to start the day.

“No,” Cali said. “I don’t want that. I really thought she understood me and Lola.”

“It’s okay, love,” I said. “And I’m sorry, we’re both new to this, I have to be more patient. But I’ll deal with Elle, okay?”

Cali nodded. “Okay.”

I got to my feet. I needed coffee, and I wanted to get away from both women for a while. But when I got to the kitchen, I heard pattering footsteps behind me, and I realized I wasn’t alone. I turned to see Elle standing right behind me. Still naked. What. The. Actual. *Hell?*

I took a deep breath, trying not to fly off the handle. “Go back to the living room,” I told her. “Find your clothes, and get dressed.”

But Elle didn’t budge. She looked at me closely. “Greyson come with Elle?”

“No,” I said firmly. “I say here,” I said, pointing at the floor beneath my feet. “You go.”

Elle shook her head stubbornly.

“Good morning, Elle,” Cali said, coming into the kitchen. She had a bundle of clothes in her arms, and she handed them to Elle. “These are yours. Put them on.” Her words were friendly, but her voice was edged with irritation.

Elle accepted the clothes and started to put them back on.

“Hang on,” Cali said, putting her hand on Elle’s arm. “Why don’t you go get dressed in the bathroom? You remember the bathroom, right?”

Elle didn’t answer, just snatched up her clothes and angrily marched away.

Cali looked up at me, her eyebrows raised. “Okay, I get what you’re saying. But what are we going to do?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. I had no idea this was going to be a problem.”

“Me neither,” Cali said, her face tense.

“I should have thought this through before I agreed. I was just concerned about LIPS and everything, but I should have researched the Bite more.”

“Don’t beat yourself up about this,” Cali said. “It’s like you said, we’re new to this… I don’t think anyone could have predicted that this would happen, but I am worried about it.” She looked up at me. “Do you think giving her the Bite made her fall in love with you?”

# Episode 2886

It was a strange question to be asking my mate, and I felt a little foolish even saying it out loud, but what other explanation could there be for Elle’s behavior? She was always hanging around near Greyson, taking her clothes off and trying to kiss him. I was no mathematician, but I could certainly put two and two together. If it wasn’t actually love, then it was at least lust—and neither of those options really appealed to me.

Greyson hadn’t responded to my question. He was just staring at me, a dumbfounded look on his face. If I hadn’t been so tense, I probably would have laughed.

“Listen, Greyson,” I started, “I hope you’re not blaming yourself for this. I know you feel like you should have known more before performing the Bite, but you did what you had to do. Turning Elle saved the pack from being found out by LIPS. It was necessary, and it was a huge win.”

Greyson shook his head. “Let’s *hope* it saved us from being found out by LIPS,” he corrected. “And as for Elle falling in love with me, that doesn’t make sense.”

“Why not?” I asked. “How else do you explain how she’s acting?”

Greyson looked uncomfortable. “I don’t know. I’m not sure *she* even knows. But humans are turned all the time, and I’ve never heard of a werewolf who fell in love with the wolf who turned them. Look at Charlie. He hates the guy who turned him. And I doubt that what Elle’s doing is out of love—”

“What is it, then?” I demanded.

“I think it’s more like instinct.” he said. “She’s clinging to me because she’s new at this. She’s not used to living as a human.”

I gave him a long look. “Wow, you’re obtuse.”

“What does that mean?” he asked.

“Have you really not noticed the way Elle looks at you?”

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

But I didn’t think I was being ridiculous. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more certain I was that I was the only one making any sense.

“Think about it, Greyson,” I said. “It all adds up. Elle always dreamed of becoming a werewolf, right? To live in the human world, and then you come along and fulfill that dream. And you not only made her dream come true, but you’re hot as hell, you’re an Alpha, you’re strong, and you’re a good person.” I shrugged. “Of course Elle would fall in love with you. Even if she doesn’t understand how human love works.”

Even saying those words left a bitter taste in my mouth.

Greyson looked at me for a moment, then pulled me close. He pressed his lips to mine. “You listen to me, Caliana Hart. It wouldn’t matter to me if every woman in the whole world was in love with me, because the only person *I’m* in love with is you.”

He kissed me again when I shook my head, feeling dispirited.

“I’m sorry you’re worried—and I can see that you are, so stop pretending you’re not,” he said with a smile. “I know it must be upsetting to see Elle the way you saw her this morning. But I’m going to take care of it.”

“What do you mean, take care of it?” I asked curiously.

“I’m going to talk to Elle and make it clear that there are lines that must not be crossed. Ever. If she’s going to be a member of this pack, she needs to learn our rules and our boundaries.”

He sounded so decisive, I let myself be comforted. “But I wonder if Elle will listen.”

“Of course she will,” Greyson said firmly. “I’m the Alpha, after all. She has no choice but to listen to me.”

I thought about this. “I know you’re the Alpha, too, and I don’t always listen to you.”

He gave me a wry smile and another kiss. “Tell me something I don’t know. Now, don’t worry. I’ll handle this.”

I wanted to believe him. I wanted to hand all my worries over to him, certain that he would handle them.

He pressed a final kiss to my lips. “I’m going to go change.”

I nodded and watched as he headed out the kitchen door and toward the stairs.

“Morning, Cali,” Torin said, yawning as he came into the kitchen. “I want to make some breakfast for Elle, but I don’t know what she’d like. Do you know what wolves eat? Should I ask Artemis to hunt down a deer?”

“Ugh, absolutely not,” I said, wincing at the thought. “And Elle isn’t a wolf anymore.”

“That’s true,” Torin admitted.

“You have to start thinking of her as a werewolf. And right now, that makes her part human.”

Torin nodded thoughtfully. “That’s true, but I do wonder if Elle is having a hard time adjusting to our foods. Maybe I should make something that would make her feel more comfortable.”

“Like what?” I inquired.

Torin shrugged. “Maybe some really rare steak? I think it might be good to introduce her to cooked foods more gradually.”

“Yeah, that’s a smart idea.” I looked at him for a moment. “What made you think of that?”

“When I came from the Fae world, I realized how much I had to learn and adjust to feel comfortable here. But as hard as that was, Fae and humans aren’t really all that different in a lot of ways. Standing on two legs, use of tools, speaking, stuff like that. And everyone in the pack was so helpful and patient with me. But Elle…” He sighed.

“What?” I asked.

“Elle was a wolf. She was living in the woods. A wild animal. And she’s only been human for a day. Less than a day.”

Something in Torin’s words struck me. He was right. Elle was in the middle of an extreme adjustment period. And while I kind of hated the idea of her having feelings for Greyson, I also had to show some compassion for what she was going through and give her room to adjust to this completely new world. It had only been a few hours since Greyson had given her the Bite. Like Torin had said, it was actually less than a day.

I thought about *The Little Mermaid*, and Elle’s namesake, Ariel. I thought about how long it had taken Ariel to adjust to the human world. I needed to be more patient.

But then I remembered that Ariel had been in love with Prince Eric, which didn’t do much by way of making me feel better.

I looked over at Torin, who’d opened the refrigerator and disappeared halfway inside.

“I thought we had a carton of eggs back here,” he was muttering. “Maybe I could do a soft scramble. I wonder if Elle ate bird’s eggs in the forest.”

I smiled as I looked at him. He was something special, and I was glad he’d managed to adjust to the human world. I couldn’t imagine what the pack would do without him. Though he hadn’t had an easy time in our world. He’d adjusted to our ways, but then he’d been forced to deal with the loss of Astrid, his best friend.

In some ways, I wondered if Elle was grieving a loss, too. The Bite might have been what she wanted, but that didn’t change the fact that she’d left her family, her pack—every wolf she’d ever known. Everyone she’d grown up with. I needed to remember that when Elle did things I didn’t like. I needed to be more patient with our newest pack member.

Elle came in at just that moment, wearing the sweats I’d given her, and the T-shirt—though that was on inside out and backwards.

Thinking about how I wanted to be patient and show more empathy, I stepped toward the girl. “Elle, your shirt is on inside out.” She stared blankly at me. “Take it off, and I’ll help you get it on right, okay?”

Elle frowned but pulled the shirt over her head. Of course she had nothing on underneath it. She’d just started messing with the shirt when Greyson walked into the kitchen. Her eyes lit up when she saw him and, dropping the shirt, she rushed toward him.

She threw her arms around him and pressed her topless self against him in a tight hug.

I saw red. My vow to be more patient was forgotten as I yanked Elle away from a thunderstruck Greyson. Holding Elle tightly by the hand, I led her out of the kitchen and down the hall, then pulled her outside onto the porch. The cold wind bit into us as we stepped out, but I didn’t even feel it as I whipped around to look at her.

Elle was straining away from me, trying to get to the door. “See Greyson! See Greyson!” she said, over and over.

I stepped in front of her, blocking the door, my long-suffering patience finally turning to anger. “Listen to me, Elle. Greyson is mine. *Mine*. Do you understand?”

# **Episode** 2887

**Xavier**

I paced around the outside of the tent in the low dawn light, using all my senses to try to pick up Ava’s scent. The scents from the wolves who’d been at the party the night before still lingered, so it was hard to differentiate, but I finally found Ava’s scent and started to follow it. My heart was pounding, and my mind was racing. Where the hell was Ava? Would Knox have put a hit out on his own cousin? I was going to kill the shrimp with my bare hands if I found out he had anything to do with this.

My wolf was on edge as I followed the trail, afraid that something had happened to Ava. The scent trail led me into the woods, and I kept my eyes open for any movement. I was just coming up on a thick patch of trees when I heard a noise on the path ahead of me.

Heart beating fast, I slipped behind a tree and waited. It was so damn early. I couldn’t think of anyone who’d be out here at this time for an innocent reason. The sun was barely visible.

Whoever it was had stopped moving. Maybe they’d caught my scent. My pulse was thundering in my ears as I backed away from the tree into a more open space. There I crouched down and shifted.

The sound of me shifting echoed like the crack of a gun in the quiet woods, and when I saw a rustle of movement in the underbrush, I leapt, crashing into the figure that had just walked into view. The person and I slammed to the ground with enough force to knock the breath out of them.

“*Xavier?*” Ava gasped, stunned. “What the hell? What are you doing?”

I looked down at her, taking her in with a quick glance. She looked fine—surprised and a little smushed beneath me, but otherwise unharmed—and I breathed a sigh of relief.

I stepped away from her and shifted back. She sat up and brushed herself off, still looking startled.

“God, Xavier. Do you do that to everyone coming back from the bathroom, or is that just for me?” she asked.

“Did you see anyone?” I asked, looking into the woods.

She was pulling leaves out of her hair, but she stopped and frowned when I spoke. “Did I see anyone? See anyone where? What are you talking about?”

“I had some visitors this morning,” I sat bitterly. “Friends of your charming cousin.”

“*What?*” Now she looked really startled. “What are you talking about? Did they hurt you?”

I snorted. “They tried. They also tried to intimidate me into backing off from Knox, but that didn’t work either.”

Ava took this in. “But you’re okay? They didn’t hurt you?” She leaned forward, her eyes scanning over me, looking for injuries. She touched my chin, tilting my face to the side.

This gave my wolf an electric thrill, and he howled his approval.

“Come on,” I said, gently pulling away from her touch. “They didn’t stand a chance.”

“Do you know who they were?”

“No, I didn’t recognize them, but if you want to find them, just look for the guy with the broken nose. He’s one of them.”

I got to my feet and looked down, wishing I hadn’t destroyed my only clothes when I’d shifted. And wishing I wasn’t facing Ava right now. Back in the before times, I’d always thought there was something enticing about Ava in the morning, when her eyes and lips were puffy with sleep. She was always slower in the morning, gentler somehow. And I could still feel that pull.

“What were you doing out here?” she asked again.

“I was looking for you,” I said, before I could stop myself.

Ava looked surprised. She studied my face. “You were looking for me?” A beat. “Xavier Evers, are you saying you were worried for me?”

I rolled my eyes and looked away. “I thought the clowns who came after me might have tried to do something to you, too.”

Ava’s expression shifted, and she looked a little offended. “Do you really think I couldn’t handle a couple of Knox’s idiot friends? After all we’ve been through together? That’s sweet of you.”

I could see the teasing expression in her eyes, and I looked away. She was right; we had been through a lot together, which made it easy to spot the game she was playing with me.

I shook my head. “I wouldn’t read too much into it if I were you.”

“But you were worried—”

“Yeah, I was worried,” I admitted. “What of it?”

She took a cautious step closer to me. “Is last night still bothering you?”

“What? Knox? No. I’m not bothered by Knox—”

“I’m not talking about Knox,” she said quickly. “I meant after. When you spent the night with me. The two of us.” When I didn’t answer, she took another step. “I think we’re past the point of pretending, aren’t we, X?”

I stared at her. “Pretending what? I don’t know what you’re talking about. We spent the night together to make sure the Samaras didn’t turn on us, Ava. That’s it. And now that it’s morning and I can get away, I’m going home. Back to my pack house.”

I turned to walk away, but Ava caught my hand. Another ripple of desire struck my wolf.

I looked at her. “You knew I was doing this for the Redwood pack. Do I need to say it again for you to believe me?”

“I believe you,” she said quietly. “But I also think that we’re not being true to ourselves.”

My wolf howled his assent to this, and my heart thundered in my chest. I knew what Ava was talking about, though I didn’t dare voice it. It was a strange fear, like saying it out loud would unleash it. If I spoke the words, my control would slip through my fingers and I’d never get it back.

No. I couldn’t let that happen. Not again.

When I spoke, my voice was a husky rasp. “We should get back.”

As we walked back to the tent, I stayed a few steps ahead of Ava. I didn’t want to look at her, not now. Not when I felt so exposed. I knew what I needed to do, and that was to stay focused on the day ahead. Not to spend time dwelling on the troubling night we’d just left behind.

We stopped just outside the tent, and Ava looked at me closely.

“You look tired,” she said. “It’s still early. Why don’t you rest for a while longer?” She held the tent flap open.

I shook my head. “No, I can’t. I’m going back to the pack house. I have some clothes in my car,” I added, remembering the bag I always kept in my trunk.

There was a flash of disappointment in Ava’s eyes before she blinked it away. “You’re leaving? The Iudicium starts in a few hours. It’s an all-day thing—”

“I know that,” I said, irritated that she felt the need to remind me.

“You shouldn’t be late for it.”

“I won’t be late. Don’t worry. I’ll be there. I’ll see you later.”

I turned away from the tent just in time to see Knox stepping onto the front step of his trailer. This was too good an opportunity, and I couldn’t resist walking toward him.

“Morning, Knox,” I said brightly.

The guy looked genuinely surprised to see me, and he stared in shock. “Xavier.”

I grinned. “Seems like it’s going to be a great morning. Perfect day for an Iudicium, don’t you think?”  
 Knox opened and closed his mouth, like a fish. “I don’t—”

“Hey, how are your friends?” I asked, conversationally. “Seems like they got themselves into a bit of trouble this morning. Of course, they’re werewolves, so they’ll heal, but there might be a few bruises. Especially to the old ego. Well, tell them hey for me, would you?”

Knox’s surprise had turned to anger, and he glared down at me. But I wasn’t worried. I knew the shrimp, and he didn’t have the guts to try to take me on, one-on-one.

But as I turned to walk to my car, Knox broke the tense silence.

“I hope you’ll be there to witness it,” he called after me. “When I become Alpha.”

I turned back with a smile. “Of course. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.” I thought about the potion Ava had given him and gave the guy a critical look. “Hey, by the way, how are you feeling this morning?”

“What do you mean?” Knox asked suspiciously.

“Well, you were partying pretty hard last night,” I said, not even trying to mask my contempt. “I was just wondering how you were holding up.”

Knox smirked at me. “Nice of you to ask, Xavier, but I’ve never felt better.”

He looked like he meant it, and I glanced over at Ava, catching her eye.

*Are you sure the potion worked?*

# Episode 2888

My fists clenched tight, and my heart slammed against my ribcage. I couldn’t believe I was doing this—confronting Elle. A werewolf and brand-new human.

*So much for me being patient and understanding.*

I didn’t feel all that guilty, though. One way or another, Elle had to learn boundaries. She had to learn what was acceptable for humans, and what looked an awful lot like her trying to move in on Greyson. I’d thought I could be gentle about it. I’d thought I could redirect her, but apparently, my own mate instincts had other ideas. I needed to make myself clear.

No kissing. No topless hugging. No smothering my mate with her perfect boobs that were way bigger than mine, no showing off her long, smooth legs that didn’t have a single stretch mark, no—

*Cali, pull yourself together!*

I pulled in a breath. If I lost my cool, chances were, this whole thing would blow up in my face. At least when I’d confronted Ava about Xavier, she’d known she needed to be careful because Xavier would probably kill her a second time if she ever hurt me. Plus, Ava was an experienced werewolf. She could be fast, strong, and deadly, but she also knew the basic rules of human society.

I didn’t have that insurance policy with Elle. She was new to all of this. New, reactive, and barely more than feral. She’d already tried to attack me before when I’d tried to help her put pants on. Would she push back now with Greyson on the line?

Good thing I had my magic. Though I didn’t want to use it. I had no desire to actually harm her; all I wanted was for her to back the hell off my mate. Wolves had mates too, didn’t they? There had to be a way I could make her understand.

Elle hadn’t moved. Hadn’t said anything. She just stared at me, her expression flat. I kind of hated it when she looked at me like that. I genuinely couldn’t tell if she couldn’t understand, or if she didn’t care what I said.

I pulled in another deep breath. *Calm, Cali. Be calm. No need to blow this out of proportion. Just be firm and clear so she knows what the boundaries are.*

I cleared my throat. “Let me explain—Greyson and I are mates. You must understand what that means, right? Nothing comes between mates. And anybody who wants to be part of this pack needs to understand and respect my mate bond with Greyson.”

Elle cocked her head to the side, then, in a blur of movement, closed the space between us and pressed her lips to mine.

I flinched, mostly because I’d been expecting her to hit me, not *kiss* me. But once I registered her lips on mine, I jumped back with a gasp, my back hitting the door, and pressed my fingers to my lips. “Elle!”

She smiled sweetly, then reached out and patted my head. I was too stunned to back away. “I understand now. Greyson is Cali mate. Cali not wolf, but still mate.”

I blinked. In the most oversimplified of terms, that was correct. But my mind had sort of gone blank. *What the hell just happened? Does she really understand? If she does understand, then why did she kiss me? Is she making fun of me?*

I wanted to see the best in people—even if the person was a wolf-turned-brand-new-werewolf—but Elle had a way of keeping me on my toes. And I didn’t love it.

I pulled in another breath. Was this going well? She wasn’t attacking me. And she was still smiling at me, waiting patiently, like *I* was the one who didn’t understand.

I forced a smile. “I’m… Um, I’m glad you get it now.”

Elle blinked at me, that smile still attached to her face.

*Maybe… I got through to her?* Something like relief slipped down my spine. This was perhaps the weirdest conversation I’d ever had with someone—nothing like I’d imagined—but there did seem to be some new understanding at work. Maybe the tough approach was what Elle needed.

*Sometimes tough love is the only way to go. Especially when it comes to my mates.*

Elle reached around me for the doorknob, and I rushed out of the way to let her go back inside. Then as her fingers closed on the doorknob, Greyson was there, pushing it open and stepping out onto the porch. His expression was just shy of pissed off.

I tensed. Were things about to get even weirder? Had Greyson seen my mini-meltdown? Or the kiss? Was Elle going to throw herself at him again? If she kissed him again, mere seconds after she’d kissed me, I was going to lose my goddamn mind.

Elle’s smile brightened as she pointed to Greyson. “Alpha.” Then she pointed to me. “Mate.”

My brows rose. *Maybe she does understand.*

Elle patted my head again, then stepped around Greyson and went back inside.

I watched her go, then turned my gaze on Greyson’s dark expression.

“How much of that did you see?” I asked.

“All of it.” His eyes narrowed. “I was keeping an eye on the whole thing.”

*Oh shit. Is he mad at me?*

I had to defend myself—for putting Elle in her place, and also maybe for being kissed by her. I wasn’t totally sure where his anger was directed. “Okay, so I know that wasn’t the nicest way to go about it, but Elle had to understand her place. And as for the kiss—”

Greyson snorted, then burst into laughter.

I blinked. “Wait… are you… teasing me?”

A brilliant smile spread across his face. “That was awesome. I mean, not the kiss. That was… a boundary violation. But you staking your claim on me…” He made a low noise in his throat and pulled me into a tight hug. His lips met mine in a deep and searing kiss. I was breathless when he broke away. “It was the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

I heaved a sigh. “Oh, thank god. I felt like I had to do something before things got even more out of hand. It’s not like I want anyone else laying claim to my mate.”

“I get it. You felt threatened. Any mate would have done the same.”

I shook my head. “It was more than that.” Guilt nagged at my insides, chipping away at my relief. “I was jealous. And angry. Maybe I overreacted a little bit because of everything we went through with Maren and Aysel… It just came out.”

His gaze softened, and his thumbs rubbed up and down my back. “I hope you know I’d never allow things to get out of hand. Elle was right. You and I are mates. And we might be in new territory with her here, but there is only one love in my life. And that’s you.”

He pulled me in for another kiss, and I leaned into it hungrily.

Gravel crunched in the distance, and I pulled away. A car was approaching. *It’s so early. Who’s coming over now?* And then I realized—it had to be Xavier.

Greyson’s gaze zeroed in on the car coming up the driveway. “I guess we should see what my little brother was up to.”

Twining our fingers together, Greyson led me off the porch and down the front walkway to meet Xavier as he hopped out of the car. Relief barreled into me to see my other mate healthy and whole, but I frowned when I realized he was wearing different clothes, which meant he’d probably had to shift.

*Did something happen?*

I knew Greyson was standing right here, but I had a strong urge to hug Xavier, to kiss him.

Greyson let go of my hand. Did he realize what I was feeling?

I rushed over and hugged Xavier. “What happened?”

He shrugged. “I might have busted somebody’s nose and given someone else a serious headache, but other than that? Not much.”

“What?” I gasped. “What the hell happened at the party? Was it some kind of werewolf fight club?”

“No, nothing like that.”

Greyson folded his arms over his chest. “Maybe you should enlighten us. What exactly happened?”

“Just had to put some of Knox’s little friends in their place,” Xavier said, which hardly provided much clarification.

“But what do you mean? What happened?” I asked, masking my impatience.

“Don’t worry about it. It was just a pathetic attempt at a power play. But the important thing is, I think Ava and I may have done just enough to knock Knox from his pedestal.”

Ava. At her name, realization slammed into me. I was so relieved when Xavier had finally answered my texts that I’d forgotten Ava was there too. Apparently not just *there*, but with Xavier. Scheming together. All night long.

*What. The.* Hell*?*

Greyson frowned. “What does th—”

“Greyson!” Rishika poked her head out through the front door. “Can I talk to you?”

Greyson looked back at Xavier. “This conversation isn’t over.”

He jogged over to Rishika, leaving Xavier and me standing alone by his car. If I thought I was angry before, when I’d laid down the law with Elle, now I was *fuming*.

“What did you do?” I asked.

“Last night, while I distracted Knox, Ava slipped a potion into the shrimp’s drink. He won’t be on the top of his game for the Iudicium.”

*Oh great, so now Ava’s going around roofie-ing people. Way to play to her strengths.*

“Hold on.” I held up a hand. “I can figure out the Iu-whatever. And slipping Knox a potion. But there’s one thing I can’t figure out: why did you have to spend the night?”

# Episode 2889

**Xavier**

After dealing with all of Knox’s bullshit, this was not the homecoming I’d been hoping for.

I looked down at Cali, who was frowning up at me, clearly expecting some kind of answer, but I didn’t know how much I should tell her. I wanted to be honest with her, obviously, but I also didn’t want to upset her.

Of course, it was looking more and more like the ship had sailed on that particular preference. I didn’t see a truthful version of this that wouldn’t end with my mate royally pissed off. And the situation with Ava and the Samara pack was so dicey right now. So much depended on this going smoothly, and I wasn’t convinced that Cali would understand. Even if I explained it all to her, even if she comprehended the whole layered shitshow, that didn’t mean she would *understand.* Not when it came to Ava’s involvement.

I couldn’t blame her for that. When I really thought about it, I wasn’t sure I knew exactly how I felt about it myself. My wolf was still drawn to Ava. There was some not-so-small part of me that believed she was my mate, and acted according to that belief. It was a piece that could not be convinced that Cali was our mate so long as Ava lived and breathed. And even then, there were no guarantees.

I’d fought against that part of myself for so long, and it hadn’t done a damn thing. That wanting hadn’t gone away. This situation hadn’t gotten any less confusing. Less maddening. I would never blame Cali for being angry with me, because I was angry with myself too.

I thought back to the night I’d spent with Ava. A night with her scent wrapped around me, her body close to mine. A night where I’d been lulled to sleep by the sound of her breathing. She’d asked me to stop fighting things for just one night.

And my god, everything had felt so normal. So natural.

My thoughts searched back further, to the kiss we’d shared. It had been for show, a way to soothe any Samara anxieties about my promise that the Redwood pack would protect them. But that… That hadn’t felt wrong either. At least not to my wolf.

“Xavier?” Cali pressed, her brows knitting. “Tell me what’s going on.”

I heaved a sigh. “The situation with the Samara pack—it’s gotten complicated.”

“I’m sure I can try and get my head around complicated.”

“Ava and I are working together to ensure that Knox doesn’t become Alpha. He’s just… the worst. If he became Alpha of the Samara pack, it would only be a matter of time before he brought all kinds of shit to our doorstep. And Ava doesn’t want him leading the Samaras either, especially considering how fragile they are. But…” I braced myself. “A big part of our plan requires that the Samara pack believes Ava and I are together again.”

I saw the moment my words landed. Cali’s eyes widened, her lips parted, and she took half a step back. “You’re doing *what*?”

I held out my hands in front of me. “I had to! It all happened so fast, and it doesn’t mean anything.”

“If it doesn’t mean anything, then why are you lying to Ava’s pack about it?”

“Okay, fair point.” I pulled in a deep breath. If Cali was going to freak out—and probably rightfully so—then I needed to be the one who stayed calm. Who settled things before they spiraled out of control. “It’s only temporary. The Samara pack as good as told me that if I wasn’t with Ava, they wouldn’t trust me, and in turn trust any of us to hold up any end of a bargain. And right now we need to be prove that we’re the strong ones so we can offer an alternative to Knox. Once Knox is out, the ruse will end. The Samaras will see that we’re true to our word, they’ll find a better Alpha, and we’ll all go our separate ways. It’ll be fine. And it’s not something you need to worry about, okay? It’s just an act.”

Cali’s mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. She shook her head, looking totally lost. I’d never felt so small as I did in that moment, knowing I was the one who’d put that look on her face.

“So…” She swallowed. “You spent the night with Ava? That’s why you were gone so long?”

I nodded. “It was just for show. You don’t have to worry about us. Nothing happened.”

The words tasted like a lie, but I swallowed them down, bitter as they were. I wanted Cali to understand that nothing that had happened with Ava meant anything. That Cali was the only woman I wanted. She was the only mate I truly cared about. But I also didn’t want to go overboard, because then Cali would just think I was trying to cover something up. Which I wasn’t.

While Ava and I had kissed, most of that was for show. I hadn’t slept with Ava again, despite countless opportunities to do so. Despite Cali herself giving me permission to get it out of my system, if that was what I needed.

My wolf stirred at the thought of connecting with Ava in that physical way. A way that would only strengthen the broken remnants of our mate bond. I shoved that down, too. I didn’t have time to try to unspool that mess.

All I knew was that I didn’t want to hurt Cali. The ship might already have sailed on that one, but I was desperate to mitigate the damage. She was the best part of my life—I didn’t want this shitshow with Knox and Ava to push her away.

Cali frowned. “So, how long are you going to have to keep this up then? Are you going to be spending more nights with her? Do we need to make a schedule, or something? She gets you every other weekend?”

Her words took on a bitter edge, and I didn’t even have it in me to be happy that she was feeling territorial.

I shook my head. “Nothing like that. Hopefully, this will all be resolved after the Iudicium. Once the Samara pack understands that Knox isn’t the right person to lead them, the most pressing threat will have passed, and Ava and I will be able to drop the act.”

Now that I’d said it out loud, though, I wasn’t actually sure if that was true. I could sense my wolf perking up at the idea of spending more time with Ava in the future, and it was entirely possible that the Samara pack wouldn’t be content to take Greyson’s and my word for it once Knox was out of the picture.

A dull throb echoed through my skull. This was a nightmare.

I was relieved to see Cali nod, and some of the bitterness leave her eyes. “I’m not crazy about the idea of people thinking that you and Ava are together, but I understand that you’re doing what’s best for the Redwood pack.”

A weak smile tugged at my lips. “Thank you for understanding it. You know I wonder how I got so lucky finding a mate like you?”

She shrugged. “Honestly? I have no idea.”

My smile faded. Strangely, I was kind of disappointed that Cali was being so understanding. Part of me wished she could’ve just forbidden me from seeing Ava, from getting involved in the Samara pack’s affairs. It would certainly have made this whole thing easier, and I wouldn’t have to parse out all of these feelings for Ava. Cali was kind and generous and beyond understanding to give me so much space to work through all of this, but I wouldn’t have minded her setting some firm boundaries either.

I shook myself. It was ridiculous to ask this of her and then be disappointed when she proved herself to be even more understanding than I would have given her credit for.

Just more evidence that she was more than I could ever hope to deserve.

I pulled her in for a tight hug, breathing in her scent. “Thank you. You don’t know how much your trust means to me.”

Cali relaxed into my arms. “I think I might have an idea.”

I let my eyes flutter shut as I allowed myself a small moment of peace. It felt so right to have her here next to me. So right, and so different from what I felt with Ava. With Cali, there wasn’t any confusion. I knew we were meant to be together.

With her in my arms, I wished the rest of the world would just melt away. *After this bullshit Iudicium is in the rearview, things with Ava will go back to feeling more manageable. They have to.*

Cali pulled back and studied my face. “So, this Iudicium. What’s the plan, exactly?”

I rubbed my face. “I’m going to be heading out in just a bit. I’m serving as a representative for the Redwood pack.”

“Is it going to be like the Lupo Finale?”

“Yes and no—they’ll be determining whether or not Knox is a suitable candidate for Alpha, and afterward there will be a vote. Every pack has their own rituals and traditions, so I can’t say exactly what will happen.”

She nodded, and a familiar determined glint shone in her eyes. “Well, whenever you leave for the Iudicium, I want you to know one thing: I’m coming with you.”

# Episode 2890

Almost immediately, Xavier shook his head. “No way. I’ve got this covered. I don’t need you coming along with me to the Iudicium.”

His reaction was pretty much the opposite of surprising, but equally unsurprising was the fact that I just didn’t care. I wasn’t asking for his permission. I was going with him. If he seriously thought I was going to stay here and twiddle my thumbs while he played this fake dating game with Ava in front of the Samara pack, he had another thing coming.

I trusted him. I really did. I believed him when he said nothing had happened and that it didn’t mean anything. Unfortunately, Xavier was only one half of the equation. The other half—Ava—I didn’t trust so much. I had no doubt she’d take just about any opportunity she could to sink her claws into Xavier, and I wasn’t about to step aside and make it easy for her to do so.

And as much as I understood all the reasons why Xavier didn’t want me to go, I wasn’t about to let that stop me.

*But*, I suddenly realized, *if I do go, then I’ll get a front row seat to Xavier and Ava being all lovey dovey… Ugh.*

And after my near explosion at Elle, I honestly wasn’t sure I could take seeing Ava throwing herself at Xavier, even if it was for the greater good, or whatever.

“Cali, I know that look. You’re coming up with some crazy scheme to make sure you end up at the Iudicium, and I’m telling you, I really think it’s better if I go alone,” Xavier said.

My brows knitted together. Did he not want me to come because of Ava? *Is he afraid that if I see the two of them together, I won’t be so understanding anymore? Or that I’ll be getting in the way of his quality time with his former mate? Is he actually keeping something from me?*

As quickly and urgently as the thoughts rose to the forefront of my brain, I shoved them back down. I trusted Xavier. He would never do anything to hurt me. And if, in some crazy twist, he actually did want to be with Ava, he would at least tell me to my face and not try to sneak around.

This situation sucked, but Xavier was honorable. That much, at least, I could count on.

It was just that where Ava was concerned, it wasn’t so easy for me to be logical. After everything I’d been through with her, I knew she always had some hidden agenda. Ava was cunning and brilliant in an evil scientist kind of way, and her connection to Xavier made her a constant thorn in my side that I just couldn’t seem to escape.

Xavier caught my hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “I can see the wheels spinning in your head. Something you wanna say?”

I shook my head. “I think you probably already know.”

He sighed. “There really is no reason for you to come along. You know that, right?”

“Well, there’s no reason for me to *not* come along, is there?”

He frowned. “Wait, what?”

I sighed. Now we were talking in circles. “I want to get a better understanding of how the packs function, and I think this could be a great opportunity for me to learn about a new facet of pack life.”

“You… want this to be some kind of educational field trip?”

“Sure.” I shrugged. “Let’s go with that.”

“Please, Cali.” Xavier’s expression was pained. “I want you to be safe, and the safest place for you is here.”

I ground my molars together. It physically pained me to think of him going off to Ava and the Samara pack alone, but…

*I have to compromise, don’t I?*

And as much as I both wanted and didn’t want to go, I knew my answer.

“Okay. I promise I won’t go.”

I headed into the house before he could respond. I couldn’t have this conversation with him anymore. We’d already said everything there was to say.

I climbed the stairs to my bedroom. *It’s probably for the best I don’t go… What does someone wear to an Iudicium anyway? Ava will probably be wearing something sexy…*

My molars groaned as I thought of the two of them together, pretending to be a couple. Ava touching Xavier. Him smiling at her.

*What is with all these women trying to move in on my mates? Ugh!*

I pulled in a deep breath, trying—and failing so, so hard—to rein in my jealousy. I shoved my bedroom door open a little harder than was strictly necessary and stopped short at what I saw.

It took a moment to process the scene, to look around my disaster of a bedroom. My bedroom, which hadn’t been a disaster when I’d last seen it. Clothes strewn all over the place, and Lola was lounging on my bed while Elle dug through my dresser.

I stepped into the room and scooped up a bandage dress that had been dropped near the door.

“Um, what’s going on here?” I glanced from Elle to Lola. Why were they in here together? The last time they’d been in the same room, Elle had been torn between running away and fighting Lola to the death. “Is everything okay?”

Lola grinned. “Oh, yeah. The two of us have worked things out. We’re friends now.”

“Uh-huh.” I looked over at Elle for confirmation, and she simply smiled.

“Friends!” she said with a nod before diving back into the contents of my underwear drawer.

*I wonder what it’s like to be normal…*

“I’m happy to hear that,” I said, grimacing as I took in the way my closet and dresser had seemingly vomited all of my clothes across the room. “And now the two of you are…?”

Lola winced. “Sorry about the mess, but Elle’s new to the whole clothes thing, and I thought it would be good for her to figure out her style. Like, is she goth? A hippy?”

I narrowed my eyes with a laugh. “And your clothes wouldn’t do?”

She flashed me an unrepentant grin. “Elle is your size, and you’ve got so many great things!”

I sighed. Honestly, Elle upending my wardrobe was the least upsetting thing that had happened so far today. *When in Rome…* “All right, Elle. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

And then Elle put on a fashion show for us, which turned out to be bizarrely fun. Her first outfit? A light pink tulle skirt, which she actually wore correctly, with a long-sleeved plaid shirt, which she wore as a poncho of sorts, and bright green socks, which were worn on her hands.

As Elle stepped out of the closet, Lola clapped. “Iconic! Now do a pose!”

Elle cocked her head to the side. “Pose?”

Lola jumped up and stood next to her, then curled her shoulders forward, lifted her chin, and stuck out her butt. “Like this!”

Unsurprisingly, Elle could strike a pose with the best of them, even when she looked like a preschooler who had dressed herself for the first time. After she modeled a couple of options, she ducked into the bathroom to change.

“Okay, so her fashion sense is atrocious, but she looks good in anything, so there’s that.” Lola laughed. “Must be nice.”

I rolled my eyes but laughed all the same. “Yeah, must be.”

This bizarre turn of events had been exactly what I’d needed after the bomb Xavier had just dropped on me.

“We’ve still got a ways to go with her, don’t we?”

I nodded. Now that was a massive understatement. It was cute and kind of funny that she didn’t understand the finer points of wearing clothing, but the reality was that Elle understood very little about the human world. She had so much to learn, and I didn’t even know where to begin with it all.

“How are we going to be able to teach her everything she needs to know?” I asked. “I can’t even really imagine how she must be feeling here in a place that’s so different from what she’s used to. Is there some kind of Tottenville for werewolves? Some kind of school where she could learn the basics?”

Lola shrugged. “Don’t ask me. I have no idea. I’ve never heard of anything like that, but then again, I’d never heard of Tottenville before I was turned into a vampire, so what do I know?”

I sighed. “There’s just so much for her to learn.”

Elle stepped out of the bathroom. Her face was creased with concern, and I wondered how much she’d overheard. Our eyes met, and she gave me a bright smile. “It’s okay. Greyson teach me. I learn from Greyson.”

I frowned. Greyson and Elle getting more one-on-one time?

*Hell no.*

“You know what?” I blurted out. “I’ll be your mentor, Elle. I’ll help you learn to be human.”

# Episode 2891

**Greyson**

Rishika wrung her hands together as we stood outside of the study in the living room. Her face was almost expressionless, but I could sense something was on her mind. She bit her lip, as if holding back.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“I’m worried about LIPS,” she confessed finally.

“How so?”

She took a deep breath. “After what happened with Mrs. Smith and that LIPS Dick guy, I think someone should be checking in to make sure that we pulled off our plan. If the wolf march didn’t fool LIPS into leaving Redwood territory, then that’s something we should know sooner rather than later. Especially if one of them has a gun and is willing to use it.”

Rishika’s thoughts echoed my own, and fury burned white-hot in my chest as I recalled the horrifying moment when my mother had been shot. Whether LIPS had taken the bait and followed the wolf pack away from here or not, Dick wasn’t long for this world.

*I need to take care of him at the soonest possible opportunity.*

But I’d keep that to myself. I didn’t want Rishika taking matters into her own hands. Besides, if anyone was going to end that asshole, it would be the Alpha.

I’d already left an anonymous tip with LIPS themselves about someone who’d been shooting at some wolves in the hope that would stir up some trouble, but I was sure it wouldn’t be enough to get Dick out of our lives for good. It didn’t feel like enough. It wasn’t.

But Rishika’s suggestion was a good one. We needed to know if it was safe to shift or not, and the sooner we had that information, the better.

“What exactly are you proposing?” I asked.

“I just want permission to go scope out the scene, to try and gauge whether or not LIPS are buying that the wolves have moved on. I’ll go scope it out myself and report back to you.”

I hesitated. I didn’t love the idea of Rishika going out alone, especially with some gun-crazed scumbag potentially roaming the woods.

“I don’t think more wolves on the scene will help our case,” I said. “Rhonda has agreed to go, but a sighting would probably make it difficult to continue to make that case.”

She nodded. “Which is why I was planning to go out as a human. I’ll take Artemis with me too, so I have backup. We’ll go check it out together and report back to you as soon as we can.”

I mulled this over. “As long as the two of you are really careful. I wouldn’t want you to risk being caught. How would we explain why you—someone LIPS would recognize as a human they’ve met before—would be prowling in the woods around their research station?”

But if Rishika didn’t shift, it would still be good to have someone on the scene. It would be good to confirm whether or not Rhonda had followed my instructions and actually headed out. If she hadn’t, I was going to have to deal with her myself, which I definitely didn’t want to do.

Rishika shrugged. “What can I say? I’m an outdoor enthusiast?”

I snorted.

“We’ll be careful. I promise. If all goes well, they won’t even know we were there.”

I nodded. “Go check it out, but don’t linger, and come back right away.”

“Got it.” She rushed off to find Artemis.

I glanced out the window with a sigh. If it wasn’t one thing, it was another. Alphas didn’t get days off.

Through the window, I noticed Xavier standing on the front porch. *Right. There’s another conversation that needs to be had.*

I was curious to hear how things had gone with the Samara pack without potentially holding things back for Cali’s benefit. Plus, I needed to know what was going on with Knox and the Iudicium.

As I stepped out onto the porch, I found Xavier staring out over the lawn. *He must have a lot on his mind. I’ve been standing here a whole ten seconds, and he hasn’t made one snarky comment.*

I cleared my throat to announce myself. “So, what did you and Ava do?”

My brother jolted out of his reverie and spun on his heel to look at me. “What?”

“Before Rishika pulled me away, you told me that you and Ava did something. You seemed to think it would keep Knox from being the Samara Alpha. What was it?”

“Oh.” His shoulders relaxed. “Ava managed to slip a sedative potion into Knox’s drink while I distracted him. It was like taking candy from… well, someone handing out candy.” Xavier scoffed. “That kid is in over his head, but that head is too far up his own ass for him to realize it. In any case, he won’t be performing his best at the Iudicium.”

My brows rose. *Wow, Xavier really has it out for this guy.* Then the other piece of this information settled in. “Wait, a potion? You’re saying she roofied him to sabotage his performance?”

“Yeah. Not that his chances of succeeding were high to begin with.”

I waved him off. “Where did she get the potion?”

He shrugged. “She picked it up from some black-market witch—and I already saw it take effect, so I don’t think we need to worry about Knox all that much.”

That much, I agreed with. Suddenly, Knox didn’t seem like the most important thing to worry about at all.

“What witch?” I pressed. “Where did Ava meet up with this witch?”

Xavier frowned. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It definitely *does* matter. Do you really not see that the idea of Ava working with a witch is potentially dangerous?”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re getting worked up about nothing. Ava’s on our side on this, remember?”

To be honest, I wasn’t so sure. I hadn’t known Ava as long as Xavier, but I’d learned pretty early on that the only side Ava was on was *Ava*’s side. Some might’ve called her a survivor, but I tended to think of her as a parasite. She glommed onto whoever or whatever she thought would help her get closer to her goals, which all tended to involve my brother.

Which was why it was so maddening that he wasn’t picking up on the threat she posed.

“And you really trust her?” I asked.

“Are you even listening to me? She’s *on our side*. We both want the same thing there: to ensure that Knox doesn’t become the Alpha of the Samara pack.”

I slowly shook my head. “Sure, for the next day, we’re all on the same side. But I don’t think you’re actually thinking this all the way through. Think about it beyond the Iudicium. You believe we’re on the same side as Ava right now, but what about down the line? Don’t you see that the Samara pack working with a witch could put us in danger?”

“*We* work with a witch. Hell, we’ve got like five of them now, plus four Fae.” Xavier scoffed. “You know what? I don’t have time for this bullshit right now. I’ve got to get ready for the Iudicium.”

I watched my brother’s body language. The way he was avoiding my gaze, his quick defensiveness. Suddenly, I got the distinct impression that my brother was keeping something from me, and I didn’t love that.

Not one bit.

“About that,” I said. “I’m going to the Iudicium too.”

He shrugged. “Great. Maybe you can be the one to tell Cali that going isn’t a good idea.”

“Wait.” My eyes widened. “Cali’s going?”

“Who the hell knows, honestly. She insisted she was going, and I convinced her not to. But knowing Cali, it’s fifty-fifty that she’s going to show up anyway. That’s why it wouldn’t hurt to have some backup. Maybe if we’re both telling her to stay here, she might actually stay. We don’t need to drag her into this.”

“No, we don’t.” I frowned.

Like Xavier, I didn’t quite buy that Cali had given up so easily. She was nearly impossible to convince once she’d made her mind up about something. Her tenacity was a strength, but it was just as strong as her stubbornness, which had made me want to rip my hair out on more than one occasion.

Xavier turned toward the house. “I need to go get ready.”

He moved to walk past me, but I grabbed his arm. “Are you really sure that Knox won’t pass the Iudicium?”

I understood that he was all in on trusting Ava, but he was thinking like a mate. I was thinking like an Alpha, and I wasn’t nearly so willing to blindly trust someone who had stabbed us in the back more times than I could count.

And I definitely wasn’t comfortable with the idea of Ava working with a witch who was dispensing magical potions.

*There’s no guarantee that the witch doesn’t hate the Redwood pack, or that the potion won’t make Knox stronger. We’re going down this path based on Ava’s words alone.*

Then another, more horrifying idea occurred to me.

*If Knox does get through this, are we going to have not only a volatile Alpha to deal with, but a magical arms race between packs?*

# Episode 2892

Elle gave me that same dubious look that I didn’t love. “Greyson,” she repeated, her voice flat. “I learn from Greyson!”

Once again, I ground my teeth together. Taking a deep breath, I forced some brightness into my tone. “That’s what I’m saying, Elle. Greyson is the pack Alpha. He’s got a pretty packed schedule. He doesn’t have time to teach you everything you need to learn, but I do. So you and I can work together!”

Lola watched me, her brows creased with suspicion. She knew me well enough by now that there was probably a zero percent chance that she didn’t suspect I was doing this out of a desire to prevent Greyson and Elle from getting cozy.

Which, to be fair, was *exactly* what I was doing.

I ignored her, focusing my gaze on Elle. “Do you understand?”

She shrugged. “Okay!”

Then she turned back to my drawers and started rummaging through my clothes again. I was pleased with myself, with this small win—until I thought about just how much work Elle still needed.

She barely knew how to wear clothes. She couldn’t sleep in her own bed alone at night. She was hugging and kissing people left and right, which was maybe fine if the other person was fine with it. She still didn’t know how to shower or get cleaned up without half destroying the bathroom. She barely spoke English, though she was picking things up…

*Okay… I may have just bitten off way more than I can chew.*

Practically reading my mind once again, Lola sidled up to me. “I’ll help you,” she said quietly, as Elle continued her deep dive of my underwear drawer. “It’ll be a fun project.”

I watched as Elle pulled out a lacy thong that left almost nothing to the imagination. She held it out in front of her with a confused frown. “Clothes?”

Next to me, Lola snorted. “Barely.”

I rolled my eyes. As much as I didn’t love Elle digging through my underwear drawer, I especially didn’t love the mental image I got of her *wearing* said underwear. With her curves, and the fact that through some kind of clothing witchery, she and I were roughly the same size, I knew she would look a million times better in my own lingerie than I ever could.

I shook myself and approached Elle. “Okay, first lesson: you can’t just go digging through peoples’ stuff. This is my room, and these are my clothes.”

She gave me that same blank stare, holding out the thong between us. “Yours?”

Heat rushed into my cheekbones. It *was* mine, but I’d never worn it. I’d bought it a while back, but when push came to shove, I’d never felt comfortable wearing it—certainly not in front of anyone, which was kind of the whole point. Other than no panty lines, I guess.

Still, I nodded. “Um, yeah. It’s mine.”

Elle frowned again, and I realized suddenly that wolves probably didn’t have much of a concept of ownership.

I reached out and gently took the thong from her hand. “Mine.”

Fortunately, Elle took this in stride. She didn’t lash out or seem to get angry when I took the underwear from her. Instead, she tilted her head to the side. “Where’s mine?”

“Huh.” I considered her request. “That… is a fair point, actually. It’s not like you came to the pack house with any belongings.”

Lola jumped in. “We’ll have to take her to the mall!”

Suddenly, my bedroom door swung open, and I jumped back with a gasp as Torin poked his head in. “Did someone say they were going to the mall?”

“Torin!” I pulled in a deep breath. “Can you try knocking next time?”

“Sorry!” He flashed me an apologetic grin as he stepped inside. “So, who’s going to the mall?”

“We are,” Lola said. “Elle’s going to need some clothes of her own.”

“Well, that’s perfect! I’m going on another date with Kevin, and I’m going to need to step up my game. I need to find something that will really dazzle him. The first date went well, but that doesn’t mean I can rest on my laurels. He liked my sweater the other night, and this time around I really want to wow him.”

My eyes widened. The lovestruck expression on his face was both adorable and a point of concern.

*I hope Torin doesn’t get his sweet little heart trampled.* It was clear he was already head over heels for Kevin, which didn’t necessarily bode well. They hardly knew each other—they’d only been on one date, for god’s sake.

*I hope he’ll listen to me and take things slow.*

Torin did so much for the pack. Beyond all the times he’d literally brought us back from the brink of death, he also cooked for us, and planned fun activities for us. He’d become the glue that kept our pack together. He’d buoyed our spirits up as we faced one obstacle after the other.

When I thought of all that, it made a lot of sense that Torin wanted something happy of his own, and I couldn’t bring myself to burst his bubble.

“I’d love to go to the mall with you,” I told Lola and Torin. “But we’re going to have to go tomorrow.”

“Really?” Lola asked. “Why? Are you doing something?”

“Er, well, no,” I said. “But that Iudicium thing for the Samaras is tonight.”

She frowned. “A what now?”

Satisfaction fluttered in my chest as I realized that Lola didn’t know what it was either. *I’m not the only one out of the loop!* “It’s something the Samara pack is doing to vet a new Alpha, I guess? Like, a trial or something for him to prove himself?”

“Huh. And they’re picking a new Alpha *tonight*?”

I nodded. “Well, in theory, at least. I don’t really know what’s going on there. It seems like, as far as the Redwoods are concerned, we just want to make sure this guy, Knox, isn’t selected. Apparently, he’s the worst.”

Already, that sense of satisfaction was disappearing. There was still so much I didn’t know about all of this. So much Xavier hadn’t told me. *Maybe I shouldn’t have stormed off like that.*

“And you’re going to this thing?” Lola asked.

“No, not exactly,” I said. “Xavier made me promise not to.”

Lola’s eyebrows furrowed. “Then why can’t we go?” she asked. “Because you’re going to be busy worrying about another pack all night?”

“Look, it doesn’t matter. Tomorrow is just better,” I said. “Elle, Lola,” I started, “can you—”

“Oh!” Torin strode toward Elle, grabbing an emerald-green top off the floor. He held it up to her front. “This would look absolutely amazing on you!”

Elle’s lips curved up into a small smile. “Amazing?”

“Yes! You’ve got the perfect coloring and shape for it.”

As they kept chatting, I realized that I’d gone about this all wrong. *I* wasn’t the perfect person to teach Elle about the human world, and neither was Greyson. *Torin* *should be her teacher. He’s perfect.*

After all, the human world had once been new and scary to him as well.

I decided to let them linger for a while longer.

“I’m going to get a hamper,” I told Lola as Torin took Elle on a guided tour of my closet. “You guys are free to hang out in here as long as it’s not a disaster when I get back, okay? We need to clean this up.”

Lola saluted me. “We’ll do our best.”

“Do better than that!” I called back as I headed out of the room. I faced forward and ran smack into Greyson. “Oh, what are you doing up here?”

“I’m going to get ready for the Iudicium. We’re heading out soon. You should get ready too.”

My eyes widened. “Wait, I thought I wasn’t allowed to go?”

He smirked. “Has that ever stopped you before?”

I opened my mouth. Then closed it. At least one of my mates seemed to have finally caught on. “Fair point.”

His smirk grew into a full-on grin. “I know you want to go, and initially I disagreed with that,” he said. “But I’ve been thinking about it, and it might be a good idea for you to join us. It will help us present a strong, united front for the Redwoods.”

I grinned back. “Really?”

He nodded.

Greyson thought that having me there would show strength in the pack? I couldn’t stop the butterflies in my stomach. There was a time when me at a pack event meant accidentally fighting people with spatulas, but I knew so much more than I did back then.

*But will Xavier be upset that I’m coming? He really didn’t want me anywhere near the Iudicium. Or maybe he just didn’t want me to see him with Ava.*

For that matter, *I* didn’t really want to see that. But the alternative—being left behind and left out of something that could affect the future of the pack… I couldn’t handle that either.

Greyson’s smile disappeared. “There’s a whole lot riding on what happens tonight, so you’ve got to keep your wits about you, okay?”

I nodded. “I understand.” I’d be representing the Redwood pack tonight, during an event that could spell trouble between the Redwoods and the Samaras. “I’ll be careful.”

“I mean it,” he pressed. “We need to make sure that nothing goes awry tonight. So if you seriously want to come—”

“I am!” I said. “I’m coming with you.”

“—then I have one condition,” Greyson said with a note of finality. “While we’re there, you cannot leave my side.”

# Episode 2893

**Greyson**

Cali did a double take. “Wait, you want me to stay by your side the *whole* night? Why?” Her confused expression shifted to one of alarm. “Is it going to be dangerous?”

“I don’t think so,” I said, though knowing it was always a possibility. “I would never knowingly put you in danger, but I can’t guarantee that you’ll be just as safe at the Iudicium as you would be if you stayed home.”

It was a risk I was taking, asking her to come. But it stood true that if she did come, it would look like a united Redwood pack and would position me as a solid Alpha. And I didn’t want to frighten her, but there were too many variables involved with tonight’s event to be one hundred percent certain that her safety was assured. Hence the rule to stick close to me all night.

“But I thought this was going to be some kind of meeting? Are you worried that it’s going to turn into a fight, or a Lupo Finale, or something?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think a Lupo Finale is on the table tonight. And no, I don’t think a fight will break out either. At least, not one that would involve you.”

She frowned. “Okay, then what are you so worried about?”

“Nothing specifically, it’s just good for us to go in with eyes wide open,” I explained. “I’m actually going to be bringing a small group to represent the Redwood pack, too. The Samara pack has been significantly weakened, but it’s better that we make as strong an impression as possible. We don’t want them to get the wrong idea and try something stupid. We have to show them it wouldn’t be smart to mess with us.”

“I guess I never realized how important appearances are when dealing with other packs.” She shook her head. “I mean, the Vanguards, sure. They’re all pomp and circumstance. But it was never like this with the Blue Bloods.”

“The Blue Bloods are our allies,” I reminded her. “The Samaras fought for Silas, and they paid the price. We have an uneasy peace with the Samara pack right now, and tonight we’ll be feeling each other out. Seeing if we can be considered allies in the future, or if they’ll present a threat. A lot of it will depend on whether or not they go with Knox, but some of it depends on us presenting a strong front—a reminder that the pack can be a powerful ally or a formidable enemy. That’s where you come in.”

Her brows rose. “And coming with you?”

He nodded. “You might not officially be the Redwood Luna, but everyone knows that we’re mated, so it’s important that we show a united front.” He hesitated for a moment before he added, “The Samaras need to believe that Xavier and Ava are on good terms, and sticking by my side will help sell that story too.”

Cali’s expression faltered for a moment, but she nodded and smiled up at me. “Of course, Greyson. You know I would do anything to help you and the pack.”

My heart swelled with love for Cali. I couldn’t even imagine how difficult it would be for her to see Xavier and Ava like that and have to act like it didn’t matter to her. I honestly wouldn’t have blamed her if she’d chosen to stay home tonight. But the fact that she was willing and wanting to help spoke volumes about her loyalty and selflessness.

I took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “You’re more important to the pack than you will ever understand—with or without Xavier and me. Never forget that.”

A sense of want nagged at me. *I wish she really was my Luna. Officially.*

I swallowed the feeling down. Cali was my Luna in every way that truly mattered, even if it wasn’t official. For now, that was more than enough.

She squeezed my hand back. “Of course I’ll stay by your side tonight. I’ll be proud to represent the pack with you.”

I pulled her in close and kissed her. God, how did I get so lucky? To be mated to someone so generous and brave? So kind and loyal? I poured myself into the kiss—all my love, all my gratitude—as I gently pressed her back into the wall.

Her tongue slipped into my mouth, and I lost myself in the taste of her—the little sighs that slipped through her lips, the scent of her that wrapped around me. I could have spent hours, days, a lifetime there, pressed against her, just kissing her, savoring her.

If only we had time for that.

Regretfully, I broke away from her mouth. Her lips were swollen now, just begging me to pick up right where I’d left off. I dropped a sweet kiss onto her forehead. “Meet me downstairs in five. We’ll be heading out soon.”

I headed to my room, forcing my thoughts away from my mate and onto the task at hand. I needed to get into the right headspace if I wanted to project the strength of an Alpha and show Knox and the Samaras what a real Alpha looked like.

My thoughts returned to my brother and how easily he’d waved Ava and her witch contact aside. *Is Xavier going to be upset about my plan to bring Cali?*

Even if he was upset, it wouldn’t matter. Xavier would just have to deal with it, and if he actually thought about it, he’d know it was the right move politically. Just like the little show he and Ava were putting on.

I changed quickly and then headed downstairs, where the Iudicium group—Xavier, Jay, Sage, and Ravi—was ready and waiting. A few seconds later, Cali came down, and Xavier’s eyes went wide.

“I’m ready,” she said.

“No,” Xavier said. Then he looked at me, “I thought you agreed with me that she wasn’t coming?”

He was pissed, but when wasn’t he?

“And as Alpha I’ve decided it’s better if my mate is there alongside me,” I said. Xavier and I stared at each other, and I watched as my brother clamped his mouth shut. Good. We didn’t have the time to argue about this. I turned to the others. “Are you ready to head out?”

The group all nodded, and I moved toward the front door just as Rishika and Artemis stepped out of the living room.

“Wait, are you guys coming too?” Cali asked.

Rishika shook her head. “We’re doing some LIPS recon.”

“Be careful,” I said. “And make sure nobody sees you out there.”

“We’ll be discreet,” Artemis said.

Cali frowned. “Are you sure that’s safe? What about what happened to Mrs. Smith?”

“We can take care of ourselves,” Rishika assured her.

“And if we run into Dick,” Artemis added with a dark smile, “he’ll be the one in danger. I can promise you that.”

I rolled my eyes. “I agreed to this on the condition that you keep a low profile. Don’t take any risks. If you run into any trouble at all, just get the hell out of there and report back to me. Deal?”

Artemis frowned. “You were more fun when I first met you.”

Rishika smirked but nodded at me. “Deal. We’ll be back soon.”

They headed out ahead of us, and I watched them go, hoping to hell that they weren’t going to run into trouble. But there wasn’t a more formidable team for a scouting mission than Artemis and Rishika. For now, I had to trust them, and focus on my next task.

I turned back to the group. “Remember, we’re going as observers only. I don’t want any of you starting anything.”

Once again, I let my gaze linger on my brother. He avoided my gaze.

I sighed. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

The drive over to the site of the Iudicium was short, and we stepped out of our cars to find the Samara pack in high spirits. The atmosphere almost felt like a festival, with people milling around outside Knox’s Airstream and sets of tents, grilling and drinking. I could practically feel the anticipation in the air.

As we approached, Ava broke away from a group clustered around a grill and hurried over to us. She made a big show of wrapping Xavier in a tight hug.

Next to me, I felt Cali tense.

*Here we go…*

Ava released Xavier and turned to me. “Thank you for coming. All of you.” She looked around the group before returning her gaze to me. “I know you must be busy with pack business.”

I could feel the nearby Samara pack members watching our interaction.

*Showtime.*

I smiled at Ava. “I wouldn’t miss this.”

A young Alpha with a very noticeable strut made his way over and puffed out his chest. This had to be Knox.

He stuck his hand out to me. “It was good of you to come. I guess after today, you and I will be getting to know each other a little better.”

I took his hand and shook it. Knox’s grip felt a bit lackluster. Was that the potion? Or was he just not as strong as he looked? I tightened my grip and felt him flinch, though he tried to play tough.

*This kid is in way over his head.*

“Good luck,” I said simply.

He smirked. “I don’t need luck.” Then he strode off to reunite with one of the groups standing around drinking.

*Well, he sure seems to think he’s got the win in the bag.*

“Excuse me, Greyson Evers?”

I shifted my gaze to the two men approaching.

“I’m Hector,” one of them said, “and that’s Zeke.”

“It’s good to meet you.”

They exchanged a look, and Hector stepped forward. It was then that I noticed a small group of Samaras forming behind them.

“Xavier told us about the Redwood pack’s commitment to the Samaras, but we need to hear it from the Alpha himself,” Hector said. “Is he on the level?”

I froze. *What the hell did my brother promise them?*

# Episode 2894

My eyes widened as I watched Greyson’s reaction to Hector’s question.

*Oh no. Xavier, what did you do?*

Clearly, Xavier was not quite “on the level,” because I was pretty sure he’d made some kind of promise to the Samaras—a promise that affected the pack—and hadn’t bothered to mention it to his brother.

Greyson glanced at Xavier, shooting him a subtle but extremely dirty look. I knew what that look meant. Xavier was going to hear *all* about this later.

But for now, Greyson had more pressing issues to deal with, like assuring the Samara pack clustered in front of us that we were united and strong and certainly wouldn’t make promises we couldn’t keep.

*This is off to a great start…*

My heart sped up as I watched the faces of Hector and Zeke’s group. I *really* hoped they weren’t picking up on the tension rolling off Xavier and Greyson in waves. Though how anyone with a pair of eyes could miss it was beyond me.

Greyson, as it turned out, had been right to think all of this through so carefully. We were here to observe, and to remind the Samaras that there were potential consequences to choosing the wrong Alpha, but now I had a much better understanding of the Samara pack’s response to us. They were looking for strengths *and* weaknesses, feeling us out just as much as we were them.

And we couldn’t let them see how fractured we were capable of becoming. How could we possibly present ourselves with any sort of pride at a trial that was designed to help pick a new Alpha when our own Alpha situation was so fraught?

Desperately, I tried to mind link with Xavier. *Please work. Please work. Come on…*

*Xavier? What did you say?* I asked.

I hoped he could hear me.

*Cali?*

His voice was faint, little more than a whisper. *Yes! I got through! What did you say to the Samara pack?*

*What I had to. I promised the Samaras that they’ll be under the Redwood pack’s protection if they don’t select Knox as their Alpha.*

With that information in mind, I tried to reach out to Greyson. Like with Xavier, it felt like trying to shout across an ocean.

*Greyson! Greyson can you hear me? Xavier was just trying to keep our pack safe. He was trying to establish us as allies.*

Greyson’s brow furrowed, and I knew he was surprised to hear my voice too. I quickly filled him in on the situation, and he glanced over and gave me a grateful smile.

He cleared his throat and turned to Hector and Zeke. “Of course I plan on honoring the Redwoods’ commitment to the Samara pack.”

Hector and Zeke both sighed in relief.

“Thank god,” Hector said.

I smiled slightly. *Look at that conflict resolution! And no fighting required.* This really felt like growth.

As Hector and Zeke went back to partying with the other Samaras, Greyson turned to the Redwood group.

“Head out and mingle with the Samara pack,” he said quietly. “We want to maintain friendly relations with the pack. The more open they are to hearing our thoughts about their Alpha candidates, the better. Keep your ears open to see what everyone thinks about Knox—but don’t be too pushy. Remember, we’re not supposed to have an agenda here. We’re here to watch, listen, and hopefully make some useful connections. Got it?”

The group dispersed, and Greyson caught my arm before I could move away. “Stay close to me, remember, love?” he murmured.

His breath washed over the shell of my ear, and a pleasurable little shudder went down my spine. *Right. Time to put on a show.*

I nodded, but that little bubble of pleasure popped when I saw Ava whispering something into Xavier’s ear. She giggled and grinned, and then my stomach bottomed out as Xavier laughed right along with her.

*Oh my god! Can she not just, like, get off him for five seconds?*

Ava placed a hand on Xavier’s arm and began to lead him away, probably off to mingle with some other soul-sucking werewolf harpies—like attracted like, after all—and I was momentarily taken over by a visceral need to rush over and shove Ava off him. Maybe just go the extra step and rip her entire arm off for good measure.

Then Xavier leaned into the touch, and my steps faltered.

As it turned out, watching one of my mates flirt with another woman “for the greater good” was a lot easier in theory than in reality. I’d known it would be a deterrent from coming, but I clearly hadn’t realized how awful it would feel.

I sucked in a breath. *It’s not real. It’s just a show. He loves me, not her. He wants* me*.*

But as much as I tried to console myself, I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the two of them. From the beautiful and nauseating picture they made. From just how comfortable and natural Xavier looked while playing lovey dovey with Ava.

“Hey.”

I looked up at Greyson, who was watching my face with a furrowed brow. He gently pulled me aside, far from any prying Samara eyes.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I swallowed, then nodded. “I’m fine.”

Now wasn’t the time to get into my jealousy with Greyson. That wasn’t fair to him in the slightest. I needed to shake it off.

He didn’t look even remotely convinced. “I know this is hard for you, and I wish it wasn’t. Really, I do. But you’ve got to stop staring at Ava and Xavier, okay? With their history, those two are on thin ice already, and we don’t want the Samara pack to get suspicious about what’s going on between the two of them.”

I’m *suspicious about what’s going on between the two of them!*

Then I noticed just how tense Greyson was. Every muscle in his body seemed coiled and ready for action. We’d already had a misstep the moment we’d arrived. We couldn’t afford any more mistakes.

I tore my gaze away from Xavier and Ava and heaved out a breath. “I’m sorry. I’ve got this.”

Greyson nodded, but he still walked me in the opposite direction of Xavier and Ava. We stopped by a group of Samaras who were sitting around a campfire, drinking beers and chatting. Ravi was there, and of course he was chatting up some of the ladies.

Jay and Sage were standing with a few Samaras, conducting what looked like a deeply intense rock-paper-scissors match.

The mood was celebratory, but I could still feel the undercurrent of tension in every interaction. After everything the Samara pack had been through recently, they needed a win. But Knox, from what I gathered, was not that. And everyone knew that today could determine the entire future of the pack—for better or worse.

We took a seat at the campfire, and a couple of the Samaras nearest to us introduced themselves as Ryan and Mikhail.

Hector was nearby too, and he moved closer to speak with Greyson. “Thank you again for agreeing to protect the Samara pack until we’re more settled. I know things between our packs have not always been peaceful, and you are very gracious to offer assistance anyway.”

Greyson nodded. “I’m hoping our packs can have a fresh start.”

It was so interesting to see Greyson in this role—the politicking Alpha who made no promises, but tried like hell to avoid conflict.

Hector smiled briefly at Greyson before standing and taking in the crowd. “Are we ready to get this show on the road?” His voice boomed across the clearing, and everyone immediately quieted down.

My heart skipped up into a new rhythm. What was going to happen next?

“Everyone, gather round!” Hector called, and all of the groups milling through the area moved in closer. I couldn’t help noticing Ava and Xavier standing only a few feet away, their fingers entwined.

*When was the last time he held my hand like that?*

I ground my teeth.

*Focus, Caliana! Tonight isn’t about you and Xavier.*

Hector turned to Greyson. “Would you be interested in giving Knox the oath?”

Greyson nodded. “It would be an honor.”

I leaned in and whispered, “Oath? What oath?”

He gave me a small smile and shrugged.

“Do you know what to do?” I asked.

His smile widened, and he whispered, “I’ll figure it out along the way.”

As Hector announced to the group that Greyson, as the visiting Alpha, would be performing the oath, Greyson stood and moved to stand next to Hector. He looked so powerful and sexy. I really didn’t mind this more political version of him.

Hector took a seat, and Greyson cleared his throat. “Knox, step forward.”

The crowd parted for Knox to make his way through. He was smiling smugly, but there was a tension to his muscles that told me he wasn’t quite as confident as he looked.

“Today, you stand before us to embark on a trial to prove yourself worthy of the mantle of Alpha,” Greyson began. “It is a position that requires everything. Responsibilities that never end. While it is seen as a position of great power, an Alpha is more servant than king.”

He let that sit with Knox for a moment before continuing.

“As Alpha, you would serve your pack until you were no longer able to do so. And as such, that pack has the power to decide whether or not you are capable.” A glint came into Greyson’s eyes. “Whatever decision the pack makes today must be abided by. If you fail, you must leave immediately, and you will no longer have any claim on the Samara pack unless there were ever to be a Lupo Finale. Do you agree to these terms and swear this oath?”

# Episode 2895

**Xavier**

Greyson’s little riff at the end of the oath took me by surprise. *Wow, I had no idea my brother was so eloquent.* I snickered at the thought, but that wasn’t the part of Greyson’s speech that surprised me.

The sense of finality at the end of his speech—half warning, half promise that if Knox failed tonight and the decision was made that he was unfit, there was no turning back—*that* was what gave me pause. And, considering the looks on the faces of the Samara pack members gathered around, they were a little unsettled by that part too.

But nobody spoke up in opposition. Nobody pushed back against Greyson, even though they absolutely would have been well within their rights to do so. Greyson might have been an Alpha, but he was the Redwood Alpha. He didn’t necessarily get to make those kinds of calls.

*Apparently the Samaras are more desperate for leadership than I thought.*

I glanced over at Knox, their would-be fearless leader. His brow was furrowed, and he looked… concerned? Worried? Apprehensive? In any case, it was disgusting, and further proof that Baby Boy needed to grow the hell up before he tried playing with the adults.

Unsure was the absolute last thing a pack Alpha should ever be. Lives depended on them staying calm and resolute, weathering all sorts of situations and making one hard call after another. He was so out of his depth that it was beyond laughable.

Knox straightened up and puffed out his chest. Was he going to object to Greyson’s terms? That was just what we needed—a power struggle between Alphas of different packs before the Iudicium even got started.

But in the end, he just smiled. It was that same smug smirk that always made me want to smash his face in. “I agree to the terms.”

I blew out a breath. *This might be even easier than Greyson and I hoped. Knox is so clearly not pack Alpha material.*

I wasn’t even worried about him passing the Iudicium. And now, thanks to my brother’s quick thinking, when Knox had to leave town after this whole scheme blew up in his face, he’d be out of our hair by nightfall. We could finally move on with our lives, and the Samara pack would be free to find an Alpha candidate who wasn’t actively terrible.

Ava leaned in to my side and murmured, “That was a brilliant move on Greyson’s part, but I still don’t see Knox going quietly if things don’t work out the way he’s hoping.”

My wolf stirred to life at the sensation of Ava’s warm breath washing over my neck. Per fucking usual. My wolf was like a goddamn tracking beacon—if he was coming to life, Ava had to be nearby.

I tried to focus on what she was saying instead of thinking about the way my wolf was begging me to claim Ava and make her our mate one and for all.

“Let’s see how that works out for him,” I whispered. I certainly wouldn’t turn down the opportunity to knock him down a peg or ten.

I felt a pair of eyes on me, and I scanned the crowd. Most everyone was looking at either Greyson or Knox. All but one person.

Cali stared back at me. Her expression was neutral, but I knew she couldn’t be pleased to see Ava and me keeping up this act. I hated that I had to do this in front of her. And I hated the way Greyson had her protectively tucked into his side even more.

So this was the other half of the ruse, then—I was with Ava, and Greyson had his Luna. I ground my teeth together. This was getting so much more complicated than I’d ever thought it could be. I wished I could smile at Cali, or give her some kind of signal that everything would be okay. That Ava didn’t mean anything to me, and as soon as this was over, I was going to take her into my arms and never let go.

But of course I couldn’t. The Samara pack was watching Ava and me with undisguised skepticism. I’d hoped that Hector going straight to Greyson for reassurance about the Samara pack’s protection would ease the pressure and scrutiny on Ava and me. Apparently, that wasn’t the case. The Samaras still viewed us as their ticket to safety.

*Cali understands why I’m doing this. She knows I’d rather be here with her.*

“Hello?” I turned back to Ava to see her frowning. She lowered her voice. “Do you really believe Knox is going to abide by that oath?”

I shrugged. “He’s going to have to.”

She took my hand and pulled me away from the group, her face pinched with anxiety. “Do you think we did enough with the potion? I mean, what if he somehow passes the trial? What then?”

*Oh, she’s genuinely worried.* I hadn’t realized how worked up she was about the possibility of Knox somehow pulling this off. And it *was* a possibility, but that didn’t mean it was likely.

I shook my head. “There’s no way he’s going to prove himself. That weenie is anything but Alpha material, and the rest of the pack will see that all for themselves soon enough.”

Ava sighed. She didn’t look reassured by my confidence at all. “You shouldn’t underestimate him. We both know he’s no pack Alpha, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t dangerous.”

“I do know that.” I rubbed my face. Could we go back to the part where we were celebrating Knox walking into the verbal trap Greyson had set for him? “But I honestly don’t think I’m underestimating that kid. He’s not cut out for this.”

She nodded, seeming only slightly mollified. “Okay. We should rejoin the others.”

We headed back to the group and joined a couple of Samaras who were standing on the outer edge, waiting for the action to begin. I recognized a couple of them—Knox’s lackeys were back to witness his big defeat.

I noticed them bristle as we approached, and I grinned, gesturing to one of them. “Your nose is looking better.” And it was. He was lucky werewolves healed so quickly, or else I would’ve left a good shiner.

I felt Ava’s eyes on me as the guy stared daggers at me. I wasn’t afraid. These assholes weren’t a threat to us.

The guy stepped forward. “We didn’t need you here today. This isn’t your pack, and we don’t need your help.” His gaze slid over to Ava, and his scowl deepened. “And what the hell are you doing with this guy, anyway? He’s not even in our pack.”

Ava’s brows rose as she looked him over. All of her worry was gone, replaced by the kind of cool look that could freeze a guy in his tracks. The look of someone who knew they had every right to be there. The look of a future Luna.

“And how long have you been in this pack anyway, Blaine? Hmm?”

He huffed. “Once Knox is Alpha, things are going to start changing around here.” His gaze lingered on Ava, but not her face.

I growled. For once, my wolf and I were in agreement.

“I’m going to be the second in command here,” Blaine continued. “So I’d recommend you play nice with me.”

Ava shrugged. “We’ll see how things work out.”

Completely undeterred, he stepped closer to her, so he was staring down his nose at her. “Yeah, we will see, won’t we? And if you come to your senses and choose to be with a real man, let me know. I know exactly how a woman like you should be handled.”

My wolf’s fury peaked at Blaine’s obvious ogling. I stepped in front of Ava. “Back the fuck off.”

The other lackey—Tanner, I thought his name was—glanced nervously from me to Blaine. “Hey, man. You know she’s off limits.”

Blaine scoffed. “Shut the fuck up, Tanner.”

He was about to turn away, but I grabbed his arm and got in his face. “I don’t think you heard me. Stay the hell away from Ava unless you want me to find some new parts to break.”

Blaine’s nostrils flared as he stared at me, and for a moment, I honestly didn’t know if he was going to lash out or not. If I was being honest with myself, I kind of hoped he would. Then he jerked his arm out of my grip and stomped away with his spineless little friend trailing behind him.

I slipped a protective arm around Ava, and she leaned into the touch.

She looked up at me with a grin tugging at her lips. “You make a damn good white knight.”

I tightened my grip—I honestly wasn’t sure who was running the show right now, me or my wolf, but I couldn’t ignore that instinct that screamed at me to protect her. “Just stay away from that guy, okay?”

Ava studied my face, her expression soft. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you weren’t acting right now.”

# Episode 2896

I stood next to Greyson in the middle of the group of Samaras. It kind of seemed like everyone was just standing around now.

“So… Um… What’s coming next?” I asked Greyson, keeping my voice low to avoid ruining the moment. If that was even possible when everyone was literally just standing there, waiting for something to happen.

Greyson opened his mouth to speak, but before he could say anything, a loud *crash* exploded through the air.

I whipped around to see Hector standing next to a huge gong. *Where the heck did he even get that?* I could have sworn that thing had *not* been there before. I was pretty sure I would have noticed a huge, old-timey gong set up next to the beer cooler.

Silence rippled through the group, and Hector nodded solemnly. “It is time. Everyone, follow me and we will begin the Iudicium shortly.”

He strode off toward the tree line, and as the group started to follow him—Greyson and I staying close on his heels near the front of the group—I noticed two familiar people emerging from behind an Airstream.

Xavier and Ava.

*What were they doing back there?*

I frowned when I saw the expression on Xavier’s face. There was an intensity there, but I couldn’t quite get a read on it. He didn’t seem to notice that the group was moving, and he was staring at Ava as she walked in front of him.

*Seriously, what were they just talking about? And what were they doing back there anyway, so far away from everyone else?*

I thought they were supposed to be putting on a show for the Samara pack, but if they were sneaking off together, how exactly were they supposed to do that? I thought Xavier didn’t like her, that he was only going along with all of this so that the Samara pack would feel comfortable refusing to let Knox lead.

But maybe that wasn’t the whole picture. Maybe there was something else happening there. Something Xavier wasn’t quite so reluctant to be a part of.

Jealousy burned in my chest as Ava stepped close to Xavier. There was an intensity in her eyes that matched his, and all I wanted to do was run in there and shove one of the gigantic barbecue grills between them. To keep them apart, regardless of how bad it might look—

Greyson gently nudged my arm, and I realized I was outright staring at Xavier and Ava again.

This whole ruse was proving to be a lot harder to maintain than I’d thought it would be, and for the record, I had *not* assumed it would be easy.

Still, I shook myself and fell into step with Greyson as the rest of the group followed Hector into the woods. It was showtime now, and I needed to play my part. I didn’t want to get to the end of this and find out that Knox had somehow become Alpha because I’d done something to screw things up.

I leaned in to Greyson. “Where are we going?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” he admitted, his voice low. “But there’s going to be a series of challenges that Knox will have to overcome to prove himself to the pack.”

My brows rose. “Challenges? Like what? Wrestling a bear?”

He laughed. “Honestly? It could be. It all depends on what the Samara pack has put together. There are no set rules for this kind of thing, so the trials tend to be tailored more to the specific potential Alpha and the needs of their pack.”

We walked a bit farther into the woods until we broke through the tree line into a wide meadow. I frowned in confusion. I’d been expecting to see something more. Maybe some kind of gauntlet, or something from *American Ninja Warrior*. But all that lay before us was a beautiful meadow and a frozen lake.

Hector stopped and waited for everyone to group around. Once everyone was situated and silence had finally set back in, he said, “Knox, step forward.”

Knox broke free from his group of friends and strode forward to greet Hector. Smugness was practically pouring off the guy. I’d never seen someone who looked so self-satisfied in my entire life, and I was well acquainted with Lucian and Aysel.

*I kind of hope he loses just so he can get knocked down a peg or two.*

“Are you prepared to undergo the challenges?” Hector asked.

Knox nodded, smirking now, like he thought this whole thing was some kind of joke.

Hector turned to face the group. “The Iudicium is designed to put a prospective Alpha to the ultimate test. The role of Alpha is not one to be taken lightly; it requires great commitment to one’s pack, wisdom to lead through difficult times, and a willingness to give everything you have to see your pack succeed. Similarly, the Iudicium will put Knox’s strength, agility, and decision-making to the test. Once the trial has begun, it cannot end until the Alpha fails or succeeds. Complete commitment is required of those who attempt it, and in order for Knox to be successful, he must give everything he has to completing this trial.”

This made more sense. Sort of. It was obviously heavy on the metaphor, but I could see the value in testing a prospective Alpha using a series of litmus tests that required similar skills to actually leading a pack.

Hector continued, “The challenges are thus: Knox will be asked to run through the forest, cross the frozen lake, and hike to the summit of a bluff. He must complete these trials alone—with no help of any kind.”

*Oh. Well, that’s… kind of underwhelming?*

Knox nodded and cracked his knuckles. “Let’s get this show on the road. I’ve got a pack that needs an Alpha.”

I turned to Greyson. “That’s it? He’s gotta take a run and do some hiking? Bear wrestling would have been a way better idea.” Nerves bubbled in my belly. I knew what was at stake here if Knox succeeded. “How is Knox going to fail this?”

I eyed him anxiously. He certainly looked muscular and super fit—even for a werewolf.

“I’m beginning to doubt that he won’t be able to do any of this,” I whispered.

Greyson, for his part, didn’t look all that concerned. “My guess is there might be some unexpected wrenches thrown into the mix.” He dipped his head lower so his lips ghosted against the shell of my ear, sending chills down my spine. “The potion should have weakened him considerably.”

“I know that.” I pointedly ignored the tiny voice in my mind that reminded me of Xavier’s and Ava’s roles in getting Knox to drink that potion. “It’s just that he doesn’t seem to be showing any signs of weakness.”

He shrugged. “Time will tell. But for now, try not to worry about it. All we can do is deal with whatever’s coming next.”

*Try not to worry about it? That’s a nice thought. If only that advice were actually possible to follow.*

Before I could mull any of this over further, Hector raised his voice again, so he could be heard across the meadow.

“Do you understand what’s expected of you?” he asked Knox, who nodded impatiently.

“I’ve taken the oath. I’m strong. I’m ready to do this.” Knox glanced off to the side, and I followed his gaze to Xavier. Knox was staring him down with an expression so ugly it made my hackles rise.

*If Knox wants to mess with one of my mates, he’s going to have to go through me first.*

Next to me, Greyson chuckled softly. I looked up at him, confused, and then I realized he’d seen me glaring at Knox.

He leaned down to murmur in my ear. “Don’t worry, love. Xavier can take care of himself.”

I forced myself to stop staring at Xavier and Knox and look up at Greyson instead. Despite all this crazy Alpha nonsense going on, he actually looked pretty relaxed. I had no idea why or how he could possibly feel that way right now. It really looked like Knox was unlikely to fail.

I leaned in. “Greyson, what happens if he loses? Do you really think he’s just going to leave?”

*What if Knox is named Alpha and then he declares war on the Redwood pack?* I gulped. We’d *just* finished a pack war, and defeated a literal demon. We needed a *break*, not to get thrown into another conflict. And the poor Samaras… They needed a leader who would help them rebuild and recover. Knox, for his many obvious strengths, didn’t seem to be that kind of guy.

Greyson slipped an arm around my shoulders and pulled me into his side. “You don’t need to worry. Everything will work out. You’ll see.”

I pulled in a deep breath and forced my tense muscles to relax.

Hector raised a hand, and the group fell silent. Knox, standing next to him, was tensing and stretching like a sprinter at the starting line.

Then Hector dropped his arm and bellowed, “Let the trials begin!”

# Episode 2897

**Xavier**

Ava and I had barely made it back to the fringes of the crowd when the Iudicium began and all hell broke loose. The crowd cheered and screamed and followed along as Knox took off sprinting into the woods. Jay, Ravi, and Sage all passed by as the group broke into a jog to keep up.

On the outskirts as we’d been, Ava and I were still ushered along, stumbling as the throng pressed in.

This was a part of the Iudicium I’d forgotten. The spectacle of the whole thing. We’d follow Knox throughout his entire trial. This was essential to prevent people from cheating, but it also engaged the crowd.

I glanced through the throng to see Knox sprinting across the meadow. From my vantage point, it was difficult to make it out for sure, but it looked like he was moving through an obstacle course of sorts.

Ava grabbed my arm and pulled me to the edge of the group, where we were less likely to be crushed and tripped and plowed into. For the first time since Hector had started the trial, I felt like I could breathe.

I jogged alongside her and tried to focus on Knox’s progress—or, hopefully, his lack thereof—but Ava’s words from earlier were still echoing in my ears. Before Hector had interrupted our conversation with his giant-ass gong, Ava had suggested that my protective instincts were motivated more by my actual feelings than by our need to put on a romantic and united front.

She believed I had feelings for her. Or, at least, she was beginning to wonder. I wished I could definitively say that I didn’t have those feelings for her, but since when had anything ever been cut and dried between the two of us?

I glanced over at her. She seemed absorbed in following Knox, and probably for good reason. Nobody had more to lose with Knox being the Alpha than Ava did. Part of me wished we could talk about what she’d said earlier, and another part of me was more than content to forget all about it. To pretend it had never happened in the first place.

She grabbed my arm and pulled me away from the group. “Come with me.”

“What are you doing?”

It wasn’t until after I’d asked the question that I realized I hadn’t tried to pull my arm from her grip.

She smirked. “I’ve got a better vantage point than running with the group.”

I allowed her to lead me away from the pack, and we quickly scrambled up a little cliff, where we could look down on the whole meadow and the surrounding forest. Up here, we could see everything Knox was up to without having to compete with the group.

I nodded in approval as I scanned the meadow for Knox. “Good call.”

I tried to track Knox and the group’s motions through the meadow, and then Ava pointed. “Oh, there they are!”

I noticed the crowd of people first, and then the lone man running some thirty feet ahead of them. Well, thirty feet and gaining.

I frowned. Knox was moving way too fast for my comfort. How could he even be that fast with the potion we’d dumped into his drink?

*Maybe this is just proof that the potion was the right call. If this is his pace while he’s drugged, I’d hate to see how fast he is sober.*

“When is Knox going to slow down? Does that potion have a delayed effect or something?”

She just shook her head and held up a hand. “Everything is going according to plan. Just wait.”

Then I heard little bursts of air explode nearby, and I looked around in confusion. What the hell was going on now?

Ava pointed to the tree line below us, where about ten pack members were sitting amongst the branches with little dart guns in their hands. They shot volley after volley of darts in Knox’s direction, and he scrambled and hopped back and forth to avoid getting hit.

*Okay, so his reflexes aren’t terrible.*

This was just getting worse and worse.

I looked back at Ava. “Did you know this was coming? You should have filled me in.”

She shrugged. “Every relationship needs a bit of mystery, don’t you think?”

Her tone was light and unaffected as she studied the sprawling forest below us, tracking Knox and the larger group, and occasionally shouting encouragement to those in the trees trying to take Knox down.

I, on the other hand, was frozen in place, completely thrown by the sudden relationship talk. How could she say shit like that so casually, and then move on and act like nothing had happened? *I* was supposed to be the cold and unaffected one here, not the other way around. I needed to get control of this situation, and fast, before I did or said something I’d regret.

“I was acting back there,” I said.

She turned to me with a frown. “What?”

“That whole thing with Blaine. It was an act for the Samara pack members. I meant what I said last night, about how this isn’t for real and there isn’t going to be any kissing or touching or…”

Was she even listening to me? Ava looked completely focused on Knox. She pointed down into the meadow. “He’s almost out of the woods.”

I forced myself to stay calm, to pull in a deep breath and try a hell of a lot harder to focus on the task at hand. I glanced down below, tracking the movement of the meadow to a place near the tree line.

And then I found Knox.

He seemed to be slowing down, and I watched, shock and satisfaction twining together inside me, as Knox stumbled and then slammed face-first into a tree. He hit the ground hard.

It wasn’t anywhere near hard enough to knock him down for the count, but it had to have hurt.

*I hope someone got that on video.*

I blew out a breath, and relief began to seep into my belly. *The potion must be working. About damn time.*

I turned my attention back to Ava. “I just want to make sure we’re still on the same page with this whole fake being mates again thing.”

My inner wolf snarled at the word “fake.” He didn’t believe Ava was fake *anything*.

I shoved him down as far as I could and tried to focus on the situation. “Because that’s what it is,” I pressed. “It’s all fake.”

She looked me up and down and shrugged. “If you say so.”

Before I could protest, she grabbed my hand—my wolf leaping at the touch—and pulled me along. “Come on! We’ve got to get moving. Knox is out and heading to the lake, and I don’t want to miss this! Follow me—I’ve got another good vantage point.”

I wasn’t sure I was ready to keep running through the woods with Ava, but I couldn’t bring myself to say no. Mostly because refusing to keep track of Knox through the Iudicium would inevitably bite me in the ass later on.

“You were right,” Ava said as we headed toward our next vantage point. “Knox does look pretty strong out there.” She grimaced. “Maybe I should have doubled the dose? Werewolves are fast metabolizers, after all.

Once again, she looked genuinely worried and upset, and once again I felt both halves of myself leaping to try to cheer her up.

“We’ve still got a ways to go,” I reminded her. “There’s no need to get worried right now.”

We passed another vantage point, and I watched as Knox burst out into the meadow. He glanced back for a moment, bending in half to catch his breath.

“See?” I pointed toward our victim. “He’s getting tired.”

Ava squeezed my hand in response, and it hit me with a jolt that we’d been holding hands for… how long now? The entire walk? I hadn’t even noticed it. The whole thing just felt so natural.

I dropped her hand like it had just electrocuted me and pointedly searched the area below for Cali. I wanted reassurance that she was okay, and far enough away from the action that she wasn’t in danger. Plus, every step forward with Ava had me rushing back to Cali. I knew she loved me, but I felt the need to reassert my love for and connection with her.

“Keep watching,” Ava said.

Knox had taken another look behind him before darting off toward the frozen lake again.

From above, I saw Greyson running out into the clearing with Cali snuggled on his back. I couldn’t bear to look at it.

Ava squeezed my arm. “He’s heading onto the lake.”

The rest of the Samara and Redwood packs spilled out onto the lake as Knox bolted directly onto the sheet of ice.

He made it maybe fifteen feet before a loud *crack* rent the air and Knox fell through the ice and disappeared beneath the surface of the water.

My eyes widened. *Shrimp’s down. But* *is he out?*

# Episode 2898

**Greyson**

Cali’s gasp tickled my ear as Knox plunged through the ice of the frozen lake. She scrambled off my back to stand beside me, craning up onto her tiptoes to get a better look.

“Did that really just happen? He fell in! Is he going to come back up?” she asked breathlessly, panic evident in her voice.

I quickly shifted back to human, wishing I had an answer for her. I examined the jagged hole in the shimmering ice from afar, but then as I glanced around at the rest of the Samara pack, I realized that no one else looked overly concerned—almost as if Knox’s fall was meant to happen.

“Greyson,” Cali said, grabbing my hand and craning forward even more to get a better look. “He’s been under for a long time…” She turned a frantic gaze my way, and I knew she was fearing the worst.

I, on the other hand, wasn’t struggling as much as Cali was. *Good riddance. He can stay down there for all I care.* It wouldn’t be such a bad thing if Knox never made it back to the surface. Quickly, I dashed that thought away, touched as always by Cali’s soft heart. It was no surprise to me that she was upset at the thought of even someone like Knox coming to harm.

I spotted movement near another small hole in the ice a few yards away, and I nudged Cali’s shoulder and pointed it out to her. It was Knox. His head shot up above the surface of the water as he took in a gulp of air. Then I spotted other small holes in the ice just like that one, all the way across the lake to the other side.

“This must be part of the challenge,” I said to Cali. “He’s supposed to cross the lake, but they never said that he was meant to do it on top of the ice.”

Cali seemed to relax somewhat once she saw Knox’s head pop up out of another one of the holes. He took in huge gulps of air before plunging back down.

“I don’t get it,” Cali said. “If he makes it through this and gets to the other side, does he automatically get voted in or something?”

I scanned the group of Samaras watching nearby. They were all bunched together, locked in discussion about Knox’s performance so far. I couldn’t quite make out everything they were saying, but snippets reached me from time to time, and it was mixed bag so far. There was no question that the Samaras had created a formidable challenge for Knox, and I respected them for it. They wanted him to prove himself, and he would—or he’d die trying.

“It probably won’t be that simple,” I said. “The pack will talk it over before they make any final decisions.”

I spotted Knox’s head popping out of yet another hole about midway through the lake. *Not as easy as you thought it would be, huh, kid?* I couldn’t help but be amused by the memory of Knox’s smug attitude earlier.

“If that were me, I’d already be across the lake,” I said.

Cali followed my gaze and shook her head. “No, I’m so glad I didn’t have to watch you do something like this. I’d be so worried. I’d probably have my eyes covered the entire time.”

I laughed and wrapped an arm around Cali’s shoulders. I couldn’t help but notice a few stares from the Samaras as I did so, and I swelled with pride as they looked between Cali and me.

*This is perfect, being here with Cali like this. There’s no question in anyone’s mind that we’re together and the Redwoods are united.*

It was so rare for me to get an opportunity to truly feel like I had Cali all to myself. It was nice to show her off without my brother standing on her other side, for once.

“Trust me, love. Like I said, if it were me out there, I’d be done already. You’d blink and I’d be standing on the opposite bank waving at you.”

Cali laughed, her eyes gleaming up at me. “Well, aren’t we full of ourselves?”

“Yes, *we* are,” I replied, happiness welling up inside me. “I’m an Alpha. Should I pretend that I wouldn’t shred this challenge? To appear less—”

“Conceited? Arrogant? Smug?”

I laughed. “I’m glad to finally know what you think of me.”

“Oh, stop.” Cali giggled and gave me a playful swat on the arm. Her smile disappeared as Knox’s head popped through another hole. His skin had gone a bit pale, with a bluish tinge, and he spluttered as he came up. “Honestly, I’d hate having to watch you do this. It would literally drive me insane if it were you out there.”

The moment of levity over for the time being, I tore my gaze away from the competition and turned to face Cali. “You don’t ever need to worry about me. I’m always going to be here for you, love. Always.”

I leaned down and placed a kiss on her lips, unable to stop myself from wrapping my arms around her waist and pulling her close. I intensified the kiss just a bit before pulling away and looking into her eyes.

*It feels so good having her here by my side, basically as my Luna. It feels so good. So right.* I caressed the side of her face, which was a little chilly in the crisp air, and smiled down at her. *It doesn’t get any better than this.*

I pulled away slightly as I spied movement on a nearby cliffside. I squinted and could just make out that it was Ava and Xavier, watching Knox’s trial from above. I glanced down at Cali. She was still in my arms, but her attention was back on Knox and his slow journey across the frigid lake.

*Thank god she’s watching Knox instead of seeing what I’m seeing.*

If I wasn’t mistaken, it looked like Xavier and Ava were holding hands up there, and there was no doubt in my mind that Cali would get upset if she saw it. She was being very understanding about Xavier and Ava’s ruse, but there was no reason for them to be up there holding hands—and out of the view of anyone in the Samara pack, at that.

Even though I knew that Xavier and Ava were just pretending to be mated for show—and that I’d encouraged him to keep that relationship cordial—a big part of me couldn’t help but wish it were all happening for real.

*Everything just seems so much simpler this way. Xavier back with Ava. Me with Cali. So right.* I allowed myself a few wistful moments of imagining how life could be. *Cali, my official Luna. Just married. Just the two of us…*

I pulled myself out of that fantasy as quickly as it started. It was just a pipe dream. For now. Xavier’s feelings for Ava were really complicated, and the entire situation was painful for Cali. There was no use thinking that things would somehow just fall into place if Ava and Xavier did get back together—which was a long shot, at best. I knew my brother, and despite whatever he had going on with Ava, there was no way he was going to just let me have Cali.

I was broken out of my reverie when Hector started waving his arms and shouting, gesturing for the group to come closer to the lake.

“What’s he saying?” Cali asked.

I didn’t get a chance to answer and only had just enough time to grab Cali’s hand as the other spectators surged around us. Before I knew it, we were swept away with them as they rushed to the lakeside. Hector started corralling people toward the far side of the lake, right where Knox would end up if he succeeded. And from the looks of it, that was a big if. I chuckled to myself as Knox’s head splashed out of yet another hole and he coughed and struggled to tread the icy water and gather enough breath to plunge back into the depths.

I suddenly felt Cali stiffen as Xavier and Ava slipped in to join the group. They looked fairly cozy, but I was more focused on why Hector had called us down to the lake. I took another look out at the lake, where Knox seemed to be struggling even more. We all watched his form under the ice, scrambling to find the final hole, but his head just kept bonking up against the underside of the ice.

“Oh my god,” Cali said, hiding her face in my shoulder before hazarding a glance back out at the lake. “He’s going to drown!”

*We should be so lucky…* I didn’t like having such dark thoughts about someone, even an asshole like Knox, but I couldn’t deny how much easier things would be for the Redwood pack if Knox were out of the picture.

Cali’s grip tightened on my arm, and she looked up at me, her gaze boring into mine. “Greyson, you have to save him!”

# Episode 2899

I watched Knox bonk his head up against the ice over and over again, unable to find the next hole—his next breath of air. The crowd, which had been pretty chatty before, went silent as everyone focused on Knox’s struggle. After a few moments, his form sank so low beneath the ice that I couldn’t see him anymore, and my heart started to race.

*He must be terrified. I would be.* I could practically feel the icy water in my own throat. *What’s he thinking right now? Is he panicking? Calm? Determined, or on the verge of giving up?*

I squeezed Greyson’s arm again, keeping my voice low and level. “Greyson, *please.* You have to get him out of there. He’s got to be running out of air!”

Looking around, I noticed that none of the Samara were moving forward to help Knox. They clearly weren’t on the same page as me, and I didn’t get it. Did they not care about him? At all? I understood that they wanted to find the best Alpha for the job, but Knox was still one of their own. Didn’t they care whether he lived or died?

“Cali,” Greyson said gently. “I can’t interfere.” Then Greyson’s voice came to me via mind link. *This is Knox’s battle to fight. He knew the risks when he signed on for this, and it certainly isn’t our place to get in the way of that.*

*But Ava and Xavier have already interfered. How is that fair?* I asked. Our mind link seemed to be getting stronger the more we used it, and I was happy that we were able to have a private discussion free from the judgement of the Samaras. *So that’s it, then? Everyone is ready to just let him die if he fails? No one will step in?*

My voice sounded shrill even in my own head, but I couldn’t help it. I wasn’t interested in watching a man freeze to death and/or drown right before my eyes, and it was unsettling to me that the others didn’t seem to care one bit.

Greyson stepped closer and put a warm arm around my shoulders. *No one will step in. That’s the way it is, Cali. I didn’t make the rules, but I understand them and respect them. It’s the way it has to be. This isn’t our pack. The Samaras need a strong, capable, resilient Alpha. Knox has to prove himself. If he can’t, he’ll suffer the consequences.*

I took a deep breath and tried to let the warmth of Greyson’s body calm me, but I couldn’t shake the urgency in my voice as I mind linked back. *That’s insane. If this goes wrong and they have to rescue him, surely he’ll be disqualified—but at least then he could just go off and find his own way. He doesn’t need to die! What will that prove?*

When Greyson mind linked again, his voice was deep and strong in my mind. *I’m sorry, love, but that just isn’t the way this works. I know it doesn’t make much sense to you, and it might even seem barbaric, but I promise you that it’s this way for a good reason.*

I wanted to say more, but I could see that it was hopeless. I buried my face in Greyson’s shoulder, unable to watch any longer. Greyson’s hold tightened around me, and I was grateful for the comfort. I could barely breathe, and I couldn’t stop imagining Greyson or Xavier under that ice, fighting for their lives.

The group was no longer silent. They were murmuring to each other, their voices urgent and resolute. I couldn’t pick up the details of every conversation, but from what I could hear, no one was discussing how they were going to save Knox. Greyson was right. This was what the Samara pack wanted from their Iudicium: victory or death.

I could feel the steady beating of Greyson’s heart, and though it was starting to calm me down, I couldn’t get the image of Knox’s head banging against the ice out of my head. I closed my eyes tight as my panic returned.

*No matter what Greyson just told me, I can’t believe that he would just let someone die right in front of us. He’ll rescue Knox if it really comes to that—I know it!* The thought comforted me slightly, though the image of Knox’s struggle still played through my mind as the crowd’s murmuring intensified.

I gave Greyson a questioning look as a loud reaction suddenly rose out of the crowd. He looked back at me, and we held each other’s gazes for a few smoldering moments before Greyson finally let out a breath. “He’s out.”

I exhaled in relief and finally looked back at the lake to see that Knox was starting to pull himself out of the last ice hole. He looked absolutely exhausted as he scrambled to grab hold of the lip of the frozen lake, and I hated to see him struggle as he fought to pull himself free of the icy water. I knew that Knox was terrible, but watching anyone go through that much difficulty—in the face of an icy death—was hard for me. No matter how much of a smug asshole he was, I didn’t think he deserved to die.

I glanced around at the group, half expecting someone to dart out to give him a hand, but no one moved a muscle. They all just stood watching him with blank stares until Knox finally managed to wrench himself out of the hole and up onto the ice. He lay there panting, his arms wrapped tightly around his body.

*Is he okay?* Then I noticed the plumes of steam rising from his body, and I gave Greyson a wide-eyed look.

Greyson chuckled. “Don’t worry about Knox. Wolves run hot, love.”

“It is done!” Hector yelled. “Knox has completed the task.” Despite his proclamation, the look on Hector’s face didn’t suggest that he was impressed with Knox’s performance. “Gather around for the final event!”

*Another event? Wasn’t sending him through a treacherous icy obstacle course enough?*

Thank goodness I would never be subjected to any of the Samara pack’s little tests, which seemed more like death sentences. I’d learned time and time again that werewolves valued power and endurance in their Alphas, but I still couldn’t understand why they would risk sacrificing one of their members just to prove that they were tough enough. There had to be another way. I wondered if the Redwood pack would resort to tactics like this if the situation called for it. I shuddered at the thought.

*There’s no way Xavier or Greyson would allow one of our pack to risk their lives like this. We actually care about each other’s well-being and safety.*

But we had an Alpha. They didn’t.

The group circled up, leaving Knox panting and exhausted on the ice. I couldn’t take my eyes off him, nervous that he still might not be out of the woods. It had to be pretty dangerous to be in ice-cold water for that long—werewolf or not. No one else was paying even a shred of attention to him, though.

*They can’t even give him a blanket or something? Dry clothes? Werewolves might run hot, but this pack is as cold-blooded as they come.*

“Attention, everyone!” Hector yelled over the clamor of the crowd. “For this final event, we will need a participant from the crowd. Our next event will be a simulation designed to test how capable our potential Alpha is of looking after his pack. We have created the optimal situation to determine whether or not Knox really has what it takes to lead the Samara pack into a new era of growth and prosperity!”

One of the members I’d encountered earlier—Zeke—stepped forward. His gaze fell right to me. “Maybe we could use the Redwood Alpha’s mate?” he suggested, a slight smile playing across his lips.

Greyson stepped in front of me, laughing, though his eyes had narrowed into slits as he stared Zeke down. “Absolutely not. She stays with me. She’s not here to play Samara games.”

Greyson’s voice was indisputably Alpha, and a current of heat raced down my spine as a warm feeling gathered in the pit of my stomach. Greyson always radiated an air of power and dominance, but at moments like these, it was all I could do not to rip his clothes off right then and there. He was so damn sexy, and I was happy that he’d put the kibosh on whatever Zeke was trying to pull. I was curious about the process, but I wasn’t at all jazzed at the idea of playing a role in any of their deadly games. Watching was bad enough.

Zeke swallowed thickly and nodded. “Of course, Greyson, I meant no disrespect.” He put up his hands and stepped back into the crowd.

Relieved that things hadn’t escalated between the two men, I watched as a douchey-looking Samara wolf stepped forward with his chest puffed out. He pointed right at Ava. “It should be her.”

# Episode 2900

**Xavier**

I narrowed my eyes at Blaine as he leered at Ava, his finger coming dangerously close to touching her. The guy was fast becoming one of my least favorite people.He’d failed in his attempt to take me out at Knox’s bidding, and now he was making it his life’s work to get under my skin.

I stepped forward until I was inches away from Blaine, forcing him to drop his arm and step back. “Absolutely not,” I said through gritted teeth. I looked Blaine right in the eye, daring him to challenge me.

Blaine looked right back with a smug smile on his lips. “Why? Is she too good to participate? If the Redwood pack and its allies are too good to involve themselves in the affairs of the Samara pack”—he cast a pointed glance around at the group—“then what the fuck are you doing here?”

I balled my fists at my sides as my wolf began twitching in fury. The way that Blaine was looking at Ava made me want to shift and rip the guy’s throat out right where he stood. *Then we’ll see if you’re so smug while you’re bleeding out on the ground.*

“You heard what I said. No fucking way—”

Ava laid a hand on my arm and stepped forward. “I’d be happy to do it,” she said easily to Blaine.

I stared at her for a long beat, but before I could say anything, Hector jumped in.

“Then that’s that. Ava, follow me.”

Before she could go, I grabbed her arm, pulling her back. “What are you thinking, Ava?”

The Samaras all gathered around us weren’t helping my pissed-off mood, and it was getting harder to remember to keep my cool. I decided to switch to mind link so that the others couldn’t tell we were arguing, though our body language alone certainly made that obvious.

*There are plenty of other people here who could have volunteered!* I said. *Didn’t I just tell you to stay away from Blaine and not play into whatever mind games he’s trying to pull? Why would you up and walk into one of his traps like that?*

Ava gave me a steady look as she listened to me, her expression unreadable. *Xavier, let me do this. Besides, it won’t be Blaine up there on the bluff free climbing with me, it’ll be Knox.*

*No, Ava, I’m sorry, but this isn’t the hill to die on. I know you care about the Samara pack and that you’re invested in its success, but you can help in other ways, without playing Blaine’s games. The guy’s a tool! He just pointed you out to fuck with you, and me. He can’t be trusted, and you certainly shouldn’t let him feel like he got one over on you.*

Ava narrowed her eyes at me. *I understand perfectly well that Blaine’s bad news, but I can take care of myself.*

*Ava, I know better than anyone how strong you are, you don’t need to prove that to me. But this isn’t strong, it’s foolish!*

Blaine wasn’t to be trusted, and I knew that Knox and Ava were family, but I didn’t trust him, either. He’d made it clear that he hated me and that he hated Ava’s association with me, and I didn’t want Ava to get caught in the crossfire.

Ava was getting pissed now, too. *I’m not some wilting flower or damsel in distress, Xavier. I appreciate your input, you know I do, but I know what I’m doing. You’re not thinking straight, anyway. If I’m the one up there with Knox during this trial, I can help ensure that he doesn’t succeed. Don’t you get that?*

I stared hard at Ava. *So, what, are you saying that you’re going to kill him?*

Even the thought of that gave me pause. I wanted Knox out of the way as much as she did, but I didn’t want her to risk her life to ensure it. Ava was strong, but Knox was desperate for power and to prove himself. I wasn’t convinced that he wouldn’t take Ava out if she got in the way of what he wanted.

Ava waved that aside. *No, I’m not going to kill him. He’s my cousin. I know in my heart that he’ll be a terrible Alpha, but I don’t want him dead. All I’m saying is that I can help craft the narrative if I’m the only one actively involved. Some of the people here might not like Knox all that much, but if he wins this thing, they’ll bow down to him. I’m the only one standing in the way of letting that happen.*

I frowned. *I get the logic in that, but I hate the idea of letting you go up there on your own with someone you don’t trust.*

I couldn’t help the way my wolf felt about Ava. Invested. Protective. It was strange to admit that my wolf’s feelings flowed in that direction, but it was the truth, and right now my wolf was struggling with seeing her walk right into harm’s way.

Ava’s expression softened. *Listen, I get how you feel, but I can tell you’re coming around to the idea. I know as well you do that Knox is an asshole, but he’d never hurt me. It’s better that I’ll be up there with him instead of anyone else, trust me on that. This is what I have to do to protect my pack and make sure that we get off on the right foot. We might not get another chance, and I can’t let Knox ruin it. That’s why I have to be the one to ensure that this goes the way it should, and that Knox doesn’t win today.*

I was still frowning at Ava, but I couldn’t help but be a little impressed with her determination. It was clear that she was willing to put herself right in the line of fire to do what she thought was right, and begrudgingly, I respected her for it.

“Don’t worry about me,” Ava said quietly. “I’ll only be gone for a little bit.”

Ava turned to leave, and my wolf leapt at the idea of her walking away from me. Before I knew what I was doing, I took her by the arm and spun her into a tight hug. She tensed with surprise at first, but after a few seconds, she melted into it. I held her for a long beat, breathing in her scent, relishing her warmth, silently wishing that she’d back out of this and let some other Samara go up there with Knox.

Ava suddenly laughed as she eased out of my arms. “It’s not like I’m going off to war, Xavier.” She gave my arm a little squeeze, and with that, she walked off.

I was surprised at myself as I watched her go. I could see the other Samaras glancing between us, and I kept telling myself that all of that had just been for show… But in my heart of hearts I knew the truth. I hadn’t been thinking about anyone else or whether they were watching us at all, I just hadn’t been able to deal with Ava walking away from me. *And walking right into danger while I just stand by and watch.*

I sighed and watched Ava talking to Hector in preparation for the final trial. I was so engrossed in trying to catch every word of what they were saying that I was startled by Greyson and Cali coming up to me. For some reason, I couldn’t bring myself to meet Cali’s eyes. I was still completely disorientated by my wolf’s feelings for Ava, and I didn’t want Cali to see even a shred of turmoil in my eyes.

Greyson took me by the arm and pulled me aside, making sure we were out of earshot of everyone.

“Do you really think it’s a good idea to let Ava volunteer for the last task?” he asked me.

I saw the distrust on my brother’s face and felt protective of Ava once again. I swallowed my own misgivings about Ava participating—because of her safety, not because I thought she was launching some intricate plan to help Knox succeed. “Actually, I think it’s a great idea.”

“Really? Because I don’t,” Greyson shot back.

“Don’t you see? Having Ava up there will give us a built-in escape hatch. Let’s say Knox hits this last trial out of the park. He’ll return to the group, and they’ll deliberate, but then we’ll have Ava there to manipulate the Samaras’ opinion of how it all went down—and how Knox actually performed. She can help cast doubt where no one else would be able to.”

Greyson frowned as he studied me closely. “And you really believe that’s her goal? To ruin Knox’s chances? To help us?”

I was starting to get irritated. It was one thing for Greyson to question Ava, but it was entirely another for him to question me and act like I needed to explain myself—and my intuition about her—to him. “Of course that’s her plan. What is it that you’re suggesting, Greyson?”

Greyson looked over at Hector and Ava, who were now walking away from the group. “I’m just saying, Xavier, there’s always a possibility that things won’t go the way we want them to. And think about it—what’s in it for Ava if her cousin becomes Alpha?”

# Episode 2901

I looked back and forth between my mates as their conversation grew more heated and hostile. They’d started off pretty neutral—well, as neutral as Greyson and Xavier could ever be with each other—but now they were getting in each other’s faces, and I was afraid of where things might be headed.

I took a quick look around to see if anyone had noticed what was happening between the two most senior members of the Redwood pack. I was relieved to see that everyone was pretty preoccupied. Knox was still recovering on the riverbank and preparing for the next trial, Ava was busy speaking with Hector, and the rest of the crowd was buzzing with excitement about Knox’s next test.

I hazarded another glance at Xavier and Greyson. Things didn’t seem to be cooling down between them, and I moved a little bit closer, just in case things escalated further and I needed to get involved.

*Thank god no one’s paying attention to us, because the Redwood pack sure as hell doesn’t look united right now.*

“Why are you even bringing this up in the first place?” Xavier said. “I already told you, Greyson, Ava wants the same thing we do—to make sure that Knox doesn’t become Alpha. You want to doubt that, be my guest, but I’m not going to start questioning our allies.”

“Are you even listening to yourself? This is Ava we’re talking about, and after everything we’ve been through with her, I don’t think I’m being unreasonable to question exactly where her loyalties lie,” Greyson shot back.

*You and me both, Greyson.* Ava had done so much to try to get back into the Redwood pack’s—and Xavier’s—good graces, but I still didn’t trust her for a second. As far as I was concerned, she hadn’t proven anything to me but that she would do anything to get Xavier back—and that alone ensured that I would never trust her.

“I know right where Ava’s loyalties lie. With us,” Xavier said, his jaw set.

“You mean with you.”

Xavier was getting even more steamed, and Greyson’s last comment seemed to push him over the edge.

“You’re the one who told me to keep her close, brother,” Xavier hissed.

I flinched at that revelation. *What? Greyson is the one behind Xavier and Ava’s little lovey-dovey show?* I’d seen the hug that Xavier and Ava had shared just before she’d gone off to speak with Hector, and ever since, I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about the expression that Xavier had had on his face while they’d embraced. It hadn’t looked like acting to me. I shook my head, trying not to read too much into it. There was no point in me getting insecure about Xavier and Ava’s relationship now, as it wouldn’t serve any purpose but to stress me the hell out.

*Besides, Greyson DID tell Xavier to keep Ava close… It’s not like Xavier’s doing anything wrong, or betraying me in any way.* I knew how Xavier felt about me; he proved his devotion and loyalty to me every single day. A small voice piped up inside my head. *But you don’t know how he really feels about Ava.*

I forced my attention back to my mates, just as Greyson raised both his hands. “I’m not trying to argue here, Xavier. I’m just asking a question.” His expression softened a little, but he was clearly still on edge, and so was Xavier.

“Ava’s been clear about what she wants,” Xavier said curtly.

*No kidding. She’s been more than clear about what—or rather who—she wants*,I thought bitterly. I flashed back to how pleased Ava seemed to be about her and Xavier’s little deception. She was definitely enjoying it way too much. There was no question that Ava was hoping that she and Xavier’s little act might turn to reality.

Jay came jogging over. “I was looking for you all. The final trial is about to start…” He trailed off as he looked between Xavier and Greyson, who were still in each other’s faces. “Is everything okay here?”

Xavier and Greyson gave each other a long look before Greyson stepped aside and smiled at Jay. “Of course.” He turned and moved back toward the rest of the group, Xavier following close behind.

I turned to follow them, Jay falling into step beside me.

“Erm… So what was that back there?” Jay asked. “That looked a little, how should I put it? Intense.”

I heaved a loud sigh. “Trust me, you don’t want to know.”

I looked up at my two mates where they were walking a little ahead of us, and I couldn’t shake the uneasy feeling in my stomach. I hated when the two of them were at odds. I could see both their perspectives, and they both thought they were doing what was right. *Not that either of them can see that right now.*

I hoped that Knox’s last task went smoothly—though not too smoothly. I didn’t want Knox to succeed. The Redwoods already had enough trouble without inviting an overzealous Alpha with a chip on his shoulder into the fray.

I gasped when I reached the front of the group to see Ava lying on the ground as Hector tied up her ankles and wrists.

Xavier pushed forward to the front of the group. “Is this really necessary?” he thundered, his eyes blazing.

*Xavier is being so protective of her, and I’m not loving it. Not at all.*

Ava looked up and smiled. “I’m perfectly fine, Xavier.”

Blaine, the douchey guy from before, gave Xavier a charged look. Xavier caught it and took a step toward him with a murderous glint in his eyes. Greyson reached out and put a calming hand on his brother’s arm, but Xavier didn’t look the least bit composed as he all but chest bumped Blaine.

“If anything happens to her, I’ll know who to blame,” he hissed.

Blaine said nothing, but there was no mistaking the challenge in his eyes. He didn’t look the least bit sorry for having volunteered Ava for the trial. The animosity between the two men was almost palpable, and my stomach twisted at the look on Xavier’s face. I’d seen it many times before, but that had always been when I was in danger. Seeing him stand up for Ava the way he always stood up for me was making me queasy. I just wanted this whole thing to be over!I was done with the Samara pack, and more importantly, done with Ava. I wanted to get back to our pack house and get back to focusing on what was important: the Redwood pack.

Finally, Xavier backed up to join the rest of the group as Hector tightened the knots on Ava’s restraints.

*This is way more intense than I expected*, I thought as I looked down at Ava. *No wonder Greyson wouldn’t allow me to do it.*

I wondered if the final task was going to be way more dangerous than I’d even imagined, and a bitterly jealous thought slipped into my mind.

*If anyone’s going to be in danger, better it be Ava than me.* Quickly, I chided myself for even thinking something like that. *Cali, come on. That’s no way to think about anyone. Even Ava.*

Finally, Knox appeared. Though he was no longer blue and shivering, he still looked to be in less than peak condition. His youthful face was tight with exhaustion, and his eyes were bloodshot. I glanced at Ava where she sat tied up on the ground. *The potion she gave him must be working. He looks rough.*

Hector pointed to a summit on a mountainside, jutting up from the meadow. “Knox, listen carefully. You are tasked with getting the volunteer to the summit safely. This final test is symbolic of the weight you will have to carry, should you be chosen to lead the pack. Are you ready?”

Knox met Hector’s eyes, his face hardening into a mask of determination. “I’m ready.”

Hector nodded, and Knox burst into action. He grabbed Ava and slung her over his shoulder before taking off in a sprint. I was surprised by his speed. I hadn’t thought he had that in him. My mouth dropped open as I watched him start scrambling up the mountain faster than I would’ve ever thought possible—especially after the intensity of the last trial. I turned to Greyson and saw that he looked surprised as well. I was starting to get nervous.

*Maybe Knox is going to pull through this thing after all.*

The group was starting to clamor again, impressed with Knox’s performance. He looked like a gladiator, hefting Ava up the side of the mountain. He was moving so fast, and he was so agile, finding footholds and handholds with amazing accuracy as he pulled himself up the side of the mountain.

The crowd gasped at a small explosion on the mountain—a burst of snow—and everyone gasped as Knox lost his footing and flailed for purchase. He scrambled and scraped, reaching to find an outcropping to grab onto, but there didn’t seem to be any to be found.

Knox fell backward off the mountain, and Ava went tumbling right down with him.

# Episode 2902

**Xavier**

My wolf snarled as I watched Knox and Ava topple off the mountainside as if it were occurring in slow motion. *I can’t believe this is happening—and so quickly, too.* I wanted Knox to fail—but not like this. Not with Ava’s fate chained to his.

Knox was scrambling desperately to grab hold of something, anything, that would stop his fall as Ava tumbled off his shoulders…

I hated how helpless and out of control I felt, watching from below with the others. It didn’t feel right. Before I could even think it through, I took a step forward, intending to sprint up to the mountain to make sure that Ava was unharmed. They hadn’t made it far, but that fall could still kill them both depending on how they landed. Before I could even get close, I felt a hand on my shoulder, stopping me. It was Jay.

“You know we can’t interfere, Xavier,” he said quietly. “That goes against the pack creed. We’re here to observe and to offer our support, not to influence the outcome of the Iudicium.”

At that moment, I didn’t care about the stupid rules or the creed. All I knew was that my wolf was pushing me to dash to Ava’s aid before it was too late. Determined, I tried to shake off Jay’s grip, but he held tight.

He tilted his head around me at the others, whispering, “We need to keep a low profile here, and we can’t obviously interfere with the Samara pack’s process. Think, Xavier. How would it look for you to go bounding to Knox and Ava’s aid? It would smear the entire goal of the Iudicium. Think!”

I stifled a growl. I knew Jay was right, but as I squinted at the mountainside—which looked quiet and serene now, as if nothing had happened—I felt an overwhelming burst of impatience. It went against my nature to just sit by and not act when someone might need my help. I glared at Blaine, daring him to meet my gaze. This was all his fault. I knew that Ava had insisted and that she had to be at Knox’s side through all of this, but that didn’t mean I was just going to stand by and watch her die.

“I can’t just sit here doing nothing,” I growled at Jay as I kept eyeing the mountainside. “Ava might be injured, or worse. She might need our help.”

Jay shook his head and gave me a sympathetic look, but his hold on my arm tightened. “No, you’ve got to cool it. Ava volunteered for this, and she can take care of herself.”

I was starting to get pissed off. *Why does everyone think they know better than me?*

“She’s tied up, for fuck’s sake! How is she supposed to take care of herself when she can’t even use her arms or legs?”

Images of Ava flooded my head, flashes of her tied up and buried in the snow, struggling, calling out for me….

Jay studied me, a thoughtful look on his face. “So. Things have gotten pretty bad with Ava, hmm?”

I was still staring at the mountain, desperate to catch any movement, any sign of life. *This is why I didn’t want her to do this! Dammit, Ava, why didn’t you listen to me?*

“What do you mean by that?” I asked Jay, only barely registering what he’d asked.

Jay dropped his voice low so no one else could hear. “I didn’t realize that things between you and Ava had gotten to this point.”

Not looking at Jay, my attention still on the mountain, I said, “I still don’t quite catch your meaning.”

*What was that? Is that her?* I squinted at the bit of movement I’d seen on the mountain, hoping that it was Ava recovering from her fall, but I quickly realized that it was just a bird taking off from a branch.

Jay sighed. “Don’t be stupid, Xavier. I think you know exactly what I mean. Why didn’t you tell me earlier how close the bond between you and Ava had become?”

I didn’t want to get into this with him right now. Not when Ava’s life could be hanging in the balance. I knew how I felt about Ava—and more importantly, how I felt about Cali—and I didn’t need another lecture. “I didn’t tell you because there’s nothing to tell.”

*I’m being defensive, but I don’t care. This isn’t the time or the place to have this talk. I can’t even think straight right now with Ava up there, maybe hurt, or worse.* I could feel Jay’s dubious gaze on the side of my face, but I ignored it, my eyes still riveted to the mountain.

I sucked in a breath as Knox emerged from a snowbank with Ava firmly on his back. I was rocked by the flood of relief that flew through my body. *She’s okay. She’s not hurt.* My wolf was jubilant as Knox started climbing again. He was moving a bit slower now, but he was still making his relentless push for the summit with Ava perched solidly on his back.

The Samaras let out a cheer as Knox leapt sideways from one precarious handhold to another, landing expertly and smoothly like he scaled mountains in his sleep. I frowned, my concern for Ava now eclipsed by worry that Knox was actually going to pull this thing off. From the looks of it, he climbed perilous, snow- and ice-covered mountains in his spare time. Looking at him now, it was surprising that he’d fallen at all.

Knox did another impressive move, launching himself into the air to catch a handhold that had appeared to be too far out of his reach. The Samaras cheered again.

*How the hell can he pull off moves like that with Ava’s potion in his system?* She’d been so confident that the potion would debilitate him, but there he was, making his way up the treacherous mountain and making it look easy. Not to mention that he’d looked just shy of death warmed over before he’d even started up the mountain.

I didn’t want to, but I couldn’t help but think back to what Greyson had said about trusting Ava, about knowing whether or not she was really on our side. As I watched Knox scale the mountain with increasing ease, I couldn’t help but feel a flicker of doubt.

*Did Ava really give him the potion, or did she just tell me that to trick me? But why? Why would she do that?* Once the thoughts took hold, I couldn’t help but parse them out a bit. *What would Ava gain from having Knox as the Samara Alpha? Is she playing me again?* As quickly as the doubt reared its ugly head, I pushed it down. *Things with Ava actually feel different this time. She’s really a changed woman… Right? She wouldn’t lie to me about something like this, would she? She really doesn’t want Knox for Alpha—right?*

My wolf stirred within me, agitated by my doubts about Ava. I cursed under my breath, annoyed that I’d let my brother get into my head.

*This is Greyson’s fault! I can trust Ava this time around. I can just feel it. It’s not like it was before. It’s different this time. We understand each other, and Ava’s changed.*

The group fell silent as Knox made his way higher and higher up the mountain. He was moving with impressive speed and sure feet, his earlier fall a distant memory that clearly hadn’t shaken his confidence. He and Ava were nearly obscured by a swirl of snow as they made their way toward the summit, but Knox didn’t even seem to notice that the snow was there. He was clearly in the zone, and he was edging closer and closer to victory as each second ticked by.

I held my breath as Knox reached a particularly precarious stretch right before the summit. I silently urged him toward the safest route as I simultaneously realized how absurd it was for me to be doing that. *I can’t believe I’m cheering for that self-righteous asshole!* Our goal was to make sure that Knox didn’t complete the tasks, but now that Ava was involved, well, I felt differently. It was strange to feel so torn, but I couldn’t help myself.

*I have to root for him to succeed, because in this case, failing would put Ava’s life in danger. I don’t know what I’d do if she died up there.*

After a few tense moments, Knox finally pulled himself to the top of the mountain. He put Ava down, and the Samaras cheered and clapped, fists pumping in the air. Knox swiftly cut the ties binding Ava, and they both waved down at us from the summit. I stiffened as Knox and Ava hugged, basking in Knox’s victory.

Hector stepped to the front of the group and held up his hands. “It’s official! Knox has completed the Iudicium!”

My heart fell. *Shit.*

# Episode 2903

**Artemis**

I turned the radio station dial on the car radio, and Rishika glanced over at me and laughed.

“If you change that station one more time, I’m going to scream.” She flashed me a pained smile that drove her point home. “You have a lot to learn about human radio. There are like, five stations that are any good, and the rest are boring talk radio and sports stuff. Changing the stations a million times isn’t going to change that.”

“Okay, okay, I get it!” I laughed. “Sheesh.” I clicked the radio off and laced my fingers with hers. “Maybe I can sing for you instead?” I cleared my throat as if preparing to belt out a few notes.

Rishika groaned dramatically and held up a hand to stop me. “Please spare me. I’ve heard you sing in the shower before.” She gave me a quick weary glance before returning her gaze to the road ahead. “I think I’m good, babe.”

I reared back in my seat in mock offense. “I’m insulted. I’ve been gracing you with all of my shower performances, and you have the audacity to complain?” I knew I was a horrible singer, but it was funny that it was all coming out right now.

Rishika gave me a look. “Well, if you bothered to learn any of the lyrics to the songs you insist on singing at the top of your lungs in the shower, then maybe I wouldn’t complain.”

“What, you don’t like all my super creative interpretations of your favorite songs? Don’t you like when I make up my own choruses and change the melodies entirely? Humans could use a little Fae creativity.” It wasn’t that I didn’t know some of the songs, it was just that I liked my versions better.

“To put it plainly? No.”

“Point taken,” I said with a smirk. “Note to self: Rishika is a stickler when it comes to music.”

I snorted as Rishika shot me a serious look before sticking her tongue out at me.

As we sped down the road, I let out a breath and relaxed. It was nice to be one-on-one with Rishika like this, out on the open road. It was the type of quality time that I hadn’t realized we needed, and I was enjoying every second of it—despite the circumstances. I leaned back in my seat and let the brisk wind whip through my hair, loving how free and unencumbered I felt.

I glanced at Rishika, affection for her welling up inside me. “I know we’re on an important mission for the pack here, but it’s really nice to be alone with you away from the pack house. Like, actually *alone.*”

“You can say that again,” Rishika said with a sigh. “That place is so chaotic that sometimes I can barely hear myself think.”

“Yeah, and there’s always so much drama there. Who ate all the bread? Who opened a cursed box?” I said. “Not that I *mind* the drama so much—it’s still a lot less drama than I had in my former life—but opportunities for the two of us to sneak off on our own have been few and far between, lately.”

I squeezed Rishika’s hand again, and she squeezed back. A nice, pleasant moment of silence passed between us. I liked that we didn’t always have to talk, and that our silences were never awkward. I was lucky to have Rishika. She was smart, capable, strong, and someone who I’d learned a lot from since leaving the Fae world.

“I wonder if we have time to pull over and have a little fun before we get down to business?” I asked tentatively, knowing that my girlfriend might be in one of her moods where she was laser-focused on the goal at hand. I was focused on what we had to do, too, but I wasn’t at all averse to making a little pit stop.

Rishika perked up suddenly and pointed. “Look, the LIPS camp is right over there.” She pulled off the road and parked, then turned to look at me. “Remember, we have to be discreet. We don’t want anyone to see us.”

I sighed, visions of a potential vehicular dalliance with Rishika fading from my mind as I got out of the car and tried to get my head back in the game. We had a mission ahead of us, after all. LIPS was a true threat, and getting them out of our woods was essential for the safety of the pack.

“Stay low,” Rishika said as we both entered the woods.

“Always,” I replied.

I followed Rishika deeper into the woods, letting her take the lead. I loved seeing her in action, tracking her target, her body taut with anticipation. I felt safe with her by my side, like we could take on anything that came our way.

“By now they should have tracked the ‘migrating’ wolves and gotten the hell out of Dodge, but we still need to be careful,” Rishika whispered. “There might still be some stragglers in the area.” She paused for a moment and scanned the woods before continuing forward.

*Stragglers, huh?* I thought about Mrs. Smith coming back to the house after being shot by that guy Dick Wigbert. *What kind of name is Dick Wigbert, anyway?* I narrowed my eyes. *I wouldn’t mind coming face-to-face with that asshole.*

The thought crossed my mind that since I’d never seen him before, I wouldn’t even know him if we stumbled across him right now, which was a little unsettling. But, truth be told, if this guy lived up to his name, I could probably figure out pretty quickly if it was him.

“I can tell what you’re thinking,” Rishika said suddenly. “I’m pissed about what happened to Sabine, too, but remember, this is just a recon mission. Greyson doesn’t want us getting involved in any action.”

I sighed. “I know, I know.”

Rishika suddenly reached back and grabbed my arm. “There!” she whispered.

We peered through the branches at the LIPS camp. I spotted a few vehicles of varying sizes, but otherwise the entire place seemed empty. *They sure cleared out fast. Good.*

“They used to have a few more trailers, and there were these little open-air research stations set up all over the place. I don’t see any of those now. And check out the ground.”

She pointed, and I saw multiple tracks crisscrossing each other in the dirt and brush.

“Looks like there’s been a lot of recent action that cleared up pretty quickly,” I said.

Rishika nodded, looking relieved. “They must have packed up and left when they saw the wolves parading out of here. That woman Rhonda did her job. Greyson’s going to be so relieved that it worked. Maybe we should poke around a little? Make sure it’s really all clear? Then we can report back.”

Before we could make a move, we both froze at the sound of a car approaching. Without saying a word, we both shrank back into the brush, making ourselves invisible.

*Okay, it’s definitely hot working shoulder to shoulder with Rishika like this, especially when we’re so in tune with each other.* I quickly cleared all the thoughts from my head and trained my eyes on our visitor. I knew that anything could happen, and I needed to be ready for it.

A truck pulled up beside the trailer, and a man climbed out, speaking loudly into his cell phone. Rishika and I exchanged a glance just as the man finished up saying, “Yeah, I just got back to the camp. Most everything’s all cleared out.” He went silent, listening to whoever was on the other end. He frowned. “I know you think that, but there’s still something that just isn’t right, here. I know it. It’s unnatural. A migration—especially of that magnitude—at this time of year? Never seen anything like it. I have the distinct sense that something’s up.” He listened again, his expression growing more and more agitated. “I don’t care. I’m not going anywhere until I get to the bottom of this.” He ended the call and shook his head before spitting on the ground.

He glanced around the area, and both Rishika and I both froze as his gaze swept in our direction and stopped right where we were hiding. He seemed to narrow his eyes and lean forward to get a better look.

*There’s no way he can see us, right?* I held my breath as he shifted his stance. It really seemed like he was staring right at us, zeroing in on us, even.

*Don’t worry, Artemis,* I told myself. *He can’t see us. We both hid really well, and quickly, too. There’s no way he knows we’re out here.*

I was trying to reassure myself, but from the look he had on his face, I wasn’t so sure that we were as well hidden as we’d first thought.

Then, to my horror and disbelief, he took a step toward us, his brow furrowed. He paused for a second before taking another step.

“Can I help you two?” he called out warily.

# Episode 2904

**Greyson**

I craned my neck and stared up at where Knox and Ava stood perched on the summit. Even from way down here, I could see the jubilation on Knox’s face as he held up a fist in triumph. Some of the Samaras were excited too, and they whooped and whistled and cheered for Knox’s victory. My heart had sunk into my stomach the moment Knox had scrabbled to the summit with Ava on his back, but I’d been careful not to give too much away. I didn’t need the Samaras to think that I was wishing ill on them or their possible future Alpha.

*Well, shit. He did it. Just our luck.*

I swallowed my bitterness and glanced over at Xavier. He was watching Knox and Ava as well, his expression unreadable. I wondered if he’d finally given any thought to what I’d said about Ava. Other than their little fall at the beginning due to the rigged explosion, Knox had scaled that mountain like a pro. I didn’t know what Xavier was thinking, but Knox certainly hadn’t looked like a man sabotaged to me.

“Some potion,” I huffed under my breath. “It obviously didn’t do what it was supposed to do, and now we’re going to have to go through with the whole voting process.”

It would have been a hell of a lot easier if Knox had failed, but there was nothing we could do about that now. *Hell, it probably wouldn’t even have felt right if things had been that easy.*

Cali looked up at me. “What now, Greyson?”

I shook my head. “Now we see what the Samara pack decides.”

I hated seeing the worry in Cali’s eyes, especially because of a little twerp like Knox.

Cali took a look around at the Samaras, most of whom were talking excitedly about Knox’s performance. We could both hear snatches of conversation as the pack mentioned all the moments when they’d thought Knox had failed, only for him to break through to the other side, victorious. Did he have more people in favor of him now because he passed? Or in doubt because of how much he struggled? *Probably not. People love to see an underdog push through.*

Cali gave me a nervous glance. “Some people seem to be pretty taken with his performance.”

I sighed. “I know.”

“So, what do we do about it?” She bit her lip. “From the looks of it, he’s got the vote in the bag.”

I shook my head again and lowered my voice even more. I didn’t want the Samaras to catch wind of our disappointment, which would cause trouble that we weren’t quite in a position to deal with. “There’s nothing much we *can* do until the Samaras come to a decision.”

Hector raised his hands and quieted the commotion. “Now that Knox has passed the Iudicium, it’s time for the Samara pack to deliberate and make a final decision about his fitness for the position of Alpha of the Samara pack.” Hector reached down and picked up an ornate box that clearly had some ritualistic importance for the pack. He opened the box to reveal a collection of paper. “Each of you will receive a piece of paper. By midnight, each and every member of the Samara pack will cast a paper into the box with their blood if they approve of Knox as Alpha, and leave it blank if they do not and would like to continue the search. This is an important day for our pack, so I urge you all to take this seriously and give your decision an appropriate degree of consideration.”

The Samaras all nodded their understanding.

“Now,” Hector continued with a big grin, “let the debate begin!”

The group dispersed into small circles once they’d migrated back to the center of the meadow. I could hear several of the Samara pack members talking about how surprised they were that Knox had passed the Iudicium. It was hard to read their tones since I wasn’t speaking directly to them, and I couldn’t tell if their surprise was good or if they were concerned about having Knox as their Alpha.

*If I were them, I’d need more than a few strongman exercises to determine whether someone was fit to lead my pack.* The Iudicium was difficult and trying, yes, but it didn’t test for things like humility or even intelligence, both of which Knox was severely lacking.

I glanced back at the mountaintop and saw Knox beginning to make his way down with Ava. I sighed. *That is one highly punchable, smug asshole. The kid was already full of himself, and now that he’s passed all the trials, he’s going to be so much worse.*

“Are you worried?” Cali asked, watching me closely.

“Nah. Even if Knox does become Alpha, I can handle him. Even if there’s a witch on Knox’s side and he wants to play with magic, I have more—and undoubtedly better—witches, period. I mean, we dealt with Lucian, didn’t we?” It was a small comfort to realize that Knox wasn’t half the force that Lucian was. Him taking over the Samara pack wasn’t ideal, but I didn’t predict it being much more than a nuisance. Hopefully. If his ego didn’t get in the way.

Cali seemed to consider this for a moment. “True. Good point.”

“All I’m saying is that no, this isn’t the outcome we wanted, but we’ll be fine no matter what happens.”

This seemed to put Cali at ease, thankfully. I didn’t want her to worry about this—that was my job.

I snuck a glance at my brother. *The real problem might lie with him.*

He’d deny it, but he’d gotten sucked into the Samara pack politics because of Ava and their not-so-broken mate bond. The outcome of who became Alpha was tied to him now. I didn’t envy him. In fact, I felt sorry for him. Handling all this couldn’t be easy, but when it came right down to it, Xavier was the only one who could deal with it.

As Alpha, my main priority was managing relationships between the Redwoods and the Samaras, should Knox become Alpha. I wasn’t in the mood to deal with another errant Alpha, but that was what an Alpha had to do, and I was up to the challenge. I would do whatever had to be done, but this wasn’t my fight. Not right now.

*Well, maybe I’ll have to help Xavier with this whole Ava predicament anyway, if Knox gets involved. If Knox tries to make any kind of move against my brother, I’ll have no choice but to show him what a real Alpha looks like.*

Knox was probably on top of the world now that he’d passed the Iudicium, but I wouldn’t hesitate to knock him off his pedestal if his inflated ego caused him to cross the line in any way that threatened the people I cared about.

Cali took me by the hand and tugged me over to where Ravi, Sage, Jay, and a very distracted-looking Xavier were seated around a campfire.

Sage glanced around and, seeing that the Redwoods were momentarily alone, she said quietly, “That didn’t quite go according to plan, did it?”

I shook my head and sat down on a log with Cali. The fire felt good, and Cali and I stretched out our arms to warm our hands. It had been a long day, and it wasn’t even close to finished. “No, not exactly.”

Ravi looked over at the Samaras as they bustled around, buzzing with excitement. “Looks like they’re setting up for a party.” He gestured toward a couple of Samaras carrying out kegs, setting up tables and building a massive bonfire. His eyes lit up. “Ooh, is that beer pong they’re setting up over there?” It looked like he was seconds from jumping out of his seat to go start a game.

I shot Ravi a look. “Come on, man. This is serious business.”

*Must be nice to be able to worry about partying at a time like this.* I quickly chastised myself for having that thought. Being Alpha wasn’t always easy, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.

Ravi nodded. “Of course, of course. Say no more.” He settled back down.

“But it might not be the worst idea to mingle,” I added. Part of being Alpha was allowing my pack to relax, even during those times when I couldn’t, and our pack—and Ravi in particular—had been through a lot recently. They deserved to let off a little steam.

Ravi perked up immediately. “Oh, hell yeah, mingle time. I’ll mingle the fuck out of this thing. I’ll go grab us some drinks. And I might take a little stroll around to the beer pong setup to make sure they’re following regulations. You know, for business reasons.”

With that, he stood up and hurried away.

I looked at Xavier, who gave me a dark look as I said to him, “Now, let’s see how the Samara pack is going to vote.”

# Episode 2905

The party was in full swing, and Ravi was the mingle ambassador we didn’t know we needed. Though, I supposed someone had to be. He passed me a beer, and I wrinkled my nose at it. *Gross. Why do people love beer so much?* I was about to ask Ravi as much when I saw Xavier getting up from his place at the campfire. *I want to talk to him.*

This would possibly be my last opportunity to talk to him alone tonight. Ava hadn’t gotten back yet, and I assumed that when she did, Xavier would have to keep pretending to be all over her for the rest of the night.

*But is it pretending?* It was that little voice in my head again, and it wasn’t letting up.

*Shut up, stupid subconscious!*

I drifted over to his side. “Are you getting a drink? I’ll go with.”

Xavier gave me a crooked smile as I put my beer into his hands. My heart melted just a little as I looked up at his handsome face, and I felt a little giddy just being next to him.

“I’m hoping they have something other than beer around here somewhere—like wine coolers or something.” I was trying to keep the tone light. Xavier had been brooding ever since Knox had passed the Iudicium, and I didn’t want to cause him any more stress.

Though Xavier was smiling at me right now, I could tell his head was a million miles away. Maybe his mood was all due his disappointment over Knox’s victory, but a small part of me had definitely noticed that his bad mood had started right when Blaine had volunteered Ava. He’d looked like he wanted to pummel Blaine right then and there, all because of Ava.

*His over-the-top reaction… Was it all really an act? Or was it something more? Was he really that worried about Ava? Did he act so protective over her just to sell their relationship to the Samaras, or was it real?*

*Subconscious, shut UP!*

Shaking those thoughts aside, I reached out tentatively to mind link. Maybe it had repaired a bit more now too. *So, do you know what happened?*

Xavier, distracted, replied after a short pause. *What do you mean?*

I felt a rush of relief that our mind link connection was smoother this time around. Thank goodness. Big Mac must have been right about just giving it some time to heal after Seluna’s tampering. Thinking of Seluna momentarily reminded me of her missing ashes. Yet another bubble of anxiety surrounding that whole mess rose in my stomach, but I pushed it aside. *One crisis at a time, please…*

I reached out to Xavier again via mind link. *The potion, I mean.* I watched him closely, feeling a small stab of betrayal as I recalled that Xavier had worked with Ava without telling me right away. I didn’t like that they were essentially keeping secrets, but I couldn’t dwell on that right now, either. *Wasn’t the potion supposed to weaken him so that he couldn’t compete in the Iudicium?*

Xavier looked pissed for a second, and he looked off into the distance as if replaying it all in his head, but his gaze was soft and open when he looked back at me. He shook his head and sighed. *I have no idea what happened. Your guess is as good as mine, unfortunately.*

*Was it… expired or something?* I pressed. *Did it maybe wear off too quickly?*

Xavier stopped walking and shook his head harder this time. “I told you, I don’t know,” he said, no longer speaking via mind link.

I stopped walking, too, taken aback by his tone. I suddenly felt like I was about to burst into tears.

Just like that, my worries about what was going on between him and Ava intensified.

Looking immediately horrified with himself, he moved in close to me. “I’m sorry, Cali. I didn’t mean to snap at you. I’m really, really sorry.”

He did look genuinely sorry. His gaze bored into mine, pleading and repentant.

I nodded, still feeling shaken. *He must really be pissed, to lash out like that—but it has to be about more than Knox potentially becoming the Samara Alpha.*

Xavier took a quick glance around before pulling me aside. I looked around too, remembering Greyson’s warnings about not blowing Xavier and Ava’s cover in front of the Samaras. Luckily, everyone was too busy partying to notice the two of us together.

“Fuck, Cali, I’m sorry. I just have a lot on my mind right now—” he huffed, rubbing at his neck, “but I shouldn’t be a dick to you.”

“Thanks,” I said, trying to calm the quiver in my voice. “I know how frustrating all of this must be for you. I know you’ve been working hard to try to prevent Knox from becoming Alpha… And I can only imagine how it feels, to have him one step closer.”

I didn’t add that Xavier had been under way more stress than this before, and he hadn’t acted this way toward me.

Xavier nodded and then looked away, his jaw pulsing as he clenched his teeth.

Unable to help myself, I asked, “Is that really what’s bothering you most?”

Xavier’s gaze flickered over to meet mine. “Of course. What else would it be?”

His expression was completely blank, and I almost believed him. Almost.

I hated to push the issue, but now that I’d gotten started, I just couldn’t stop myself.

“Ava,” I blurted out.

Xavier frowned. “You know why I’m acting the way I am. I just explained it. Why would it be about Ava?”

Xavier crossed his arms over his chest, clearly on the defense. Thankfully, though, his tone held none of the bite from earlier.

“That’s just it, though. I was watching you two today, and it didn’t look like it was all for show. I saw the way you looked at her, Xavier.”

It was almost as if my mouth had taken on a life of its own. I knew that Xavier was on edge—that much was painfully obvious—but after the way he’d been acting with Ava before she’d gone up the mountain with Knox, I couldn’t help but prod. I had to know if my worst fears about him and Ava were coming true. I hoped with every shred of my being that they weren’t, but if I was being honest with myself, it wasn’t looking good.

Xavier huffed out a frustrated breath. “I don’t know what to tell you, Cali. I’ve already told you why I’m doing what I’m doing with Ava. I’m not sure what else there is to discuss.”

Now I was starting to get frustrated. I didn’t want to be the nagging, jealous girlfriend, but after everything I’d seen go down between him and Ava, I felt like I had way more questions than answers. There was no way I could leave this alone, not right now, not until I got to the bottom of it.

“What I want you to tell me, Xavier, is how you actually feel about Ava. Did something happen or change to make you… feel differently about her? About me?” I almost didn’t want to hear the answer, and I braced myself. “I know that things between you and Ava are… complicated… but if your feelings have… well, *become* feelings, I want to know.”

He might not have been keen to have the conversation, but I didn’t care anymore. He owed me an explanation if there was one to give.

Xavier stepped close. “Why are you pushing me on this?”

“I’m not trying to push you, and if you don’t want to answer, that’s fine.”

*It won’t be fine. I’m lying to him right now. If he doesn’t answer, if he doesn’t tell me the truth right now, nothing will be fine.*

There was no doubt about it—I’d seen the connection between Xavier and Ava change. It was no longer what it used to be. For one thing, Xavier used to barely be able to stomach Ava’s presence, and now? Now, he was doing way more stomaching—he was worrying about her, touching her, sticking up for her the way he usually stuck up for me. He was trying to tell me that it was all an act, but it really didn’t seem that way to me, and I couldn’t let it go.

“What I know,” I continued, “is that there’s something there between you two now. I can see it.”

Xavier took another step toward me. “Cali, why are you doing this?”

“Doing what? Asking you tell to tell the truth?”

“No, that’s not what you’re doing,” he said. “You’re trying to see things that aren’t there. I don’t really know what it is you want me to say, but I know who it is that I really want.”

With that, Xavier closed the rest of the distance between us and kissed me.

# Episode 2906

**Xavier**

I kissed Cali hard, desperate to convince her—and myself, though I was trying hard to ignore my need to do that—that she was the one I really wanted. My only true mate. The only one I wanted.

It was working.

While I was there with her, kissing her and feeling her warmth and taking in her scent, it was easier to convince myself that she was the only one for me, the only one I cared about. Ava seemed a million miles away, and the only person who mattered was Cali in my arms. I was showing her that she had nothing to worry about, that I would never choose Ava over her.

I wrapped my arms around Cali to pull her tightly against me. *This feels right. Cali is my person, my mate, the love of my life, and the only woman I want to be with.*

I leaned in and slid my tongue into her opening mouth. She kissed me back, a low moan escaped her lips as she wrapped her arms around my neck. For a moment, the entire world fell away and there was no one but us. Pressed up against me, she felt familiar, comfortable, and real. I hadn’t realized how much I’d missed this.

*Needed her.*

My wolf reveled in the kiss too, and I let myself fall headfirst into the moment. If we weren’t at this stupid Iudicium, I could have her the way I needed. The way we both desperately wanted. I’d take her to my room and undress her—slowly, agonizingly for both of us. I’d kiss every inch of her soft skin, leaving her trembling, *begging* me.

I’d pull her soaked panties off last before I spread her legs wide and dipped my tongue deep inside her. I could almost feel her hands running through my hair—pulling at it if she was good—while I drank in the warmth between her legs. I’d tease her until she pleaded with me, and then I’d make her come over and over again until she couldn’t even think straight. I’d do whatever it took to let her know that I worshipped her, that I loved her, that she was the one I chose.

I deepened our kiss, all but devouring her as I picked her up, needing to stifle my groan as she squeezed her thighs around my hips. Cali gasped at the contact and *fuck*, all I wanted was to be in bed with her. Every sound she made was driving me wild. I wanted to take her—here and now—

Cali and I sprang apart at a sudden noise behind us.

Reality crashed over me as I turned and locked eyes with Blaine.

*Fuck.*

Blaine looked like a kid in a candy store as he looked back and forth between me and Cali. There was no question that he’d seen what had been going on between us, and there was no question that he wasn’t going to let me live it down. I was supposed to be with Ava. That’s what we’d told the Samara pack.

*Everything’s backward.*

I looked back at a wide-eyed Cali and immediately reached out to her via mind link. *Don’t say anything to him.* *Go find the others, I’ll find you later.*

I didn’t want her to get mixed up in anything that involved this Blaine guy. He was the absolute worst. I’d handle him.

Clearly picking up the urgency in my tone, Cali nodded and slipped past Blaine, shooting me one last panicked look before she dashed off to join the Redwoods at their fire.

Blaine watched her go with a pervy look on his face, obviously checking out her ass as she passed by. I growled at him, and he trained his gaze on me, his satisfied smile deepening.

“Interesting,” he said. “Very interesting.”

I stepped toward him, wanting to rip him apart for staring at Cali like that. It was enough that he’d thrown Ava into harm’s way, but now he was ogling my mate, right in front of me—he fucking had a death wish.

Blaine grinned at me. “I bet there would be quite a few Samara pack members who’d be quite interested in hearing about your torrid affair with your brother’s mate.”

Blaine smiled wolfishly and met my gaze head-on, as if daring me to do something about it right then and there.

It chafed me to hear Cali described that way, but I was in no place to correct him, so I held my tongue—and my fists—as he continued.

“Everyone’s been going on and on about how you and Ava have had such a beautiful reconnection, that you two are this golden couple who have transcended all the odds. But it looks to me like things aren’t going so well after all, hmm?”

I glared at Blaine, using every bit of my resolve to keep from lunging at him and tearing him to shreds. This wasn’t the time or the place to teach him another lesson, and no matter how much I wanted to shut him up, I had to handle this situation delicately. One wrong move would send this entire night in the wrong direction, and we couldn’t afford for that to happen.

“I’m sure my good friend Knox will be fascinated by all this, seeing as Ava’s his cousin and all, and he already doesn’t think you’re good enough for her. Wait until I go tell him that he was more right about that than he even knew.” Blaine turned to leave, throwing a glance at me over his shoulder as he did so. He whistled, shaking his head. “Your *brother’s* girl! Cold-blooded, man.” He smirked again and left.

I stood there staring after him, my blood boiling as I pictured myself shifting and ripping his throat out before he could talk, but I knew I had to keep my cool. I couldn’t risk attacking Blaine right now and causing a war between our packs, so instead of chasing Blaine and making him eat his words, I went to find Ava.

*I have to tell her what happened so she’s not taken by surprise when it comes out.* And there was no doubt that it would come out. I’d given Blaine all the ammo he needed, and he’d be stupid not to use it.

When I rejoined the rest of the group, I saw that Knox and Ava had just returned from the summit. They both looked tired, but happy, and they were surrounded by a few excited Samaras who could barely wait their turn to give their congratulations to Knox. I recognized Marissa among them, the woman who had asked if Ava and I were really together again.

Without missing a beat, I strode over to them and pulled Ava into what I hoped looked like a loving hug.

“We’ve got a problem,” I whispered in her ear.

Knox came over and smirked at me. The next person who did that was going to get it wiped off their fucking face.

I gritted my teeth. “Congratulations, Knox. Well done.” *Too bad you didn’t drown in the icy lake, but you can’t always get what you want.*

“Oh, thanks, man. You know, I thought it would be a lot harder.” He shrugged and flashed me a bored look, as if he’d just spent the afternoon flipping channels on the couch, or something. Marissa and her little friends started giggling amongst themselves.

I could tell that he was ready to lord his win over me, but I stopped him before he could get going. “Excuse me, Knox, I need to talk to Ava. Alone.”

Without waiting for a reply, I pulled Ava to the side.

Ava looked concerned. “What do you mean we have a problem? What happened? Is everything okay?”

*Why do I feel so weird about having to tell her this?* “I—we—Cali and I—we—Blaine caught us making out just a little bit ago.”

Ava’s eyes flashed with displeasure. “Really? In the middle of this party? Need I remind you, Xavier, that this will determine the future of my fucking pack?” she said. “What the hell were you thinking? How could you be so stupid? Do you understand that now we’re running the risk of the Samara pack being spooked about our relationship?”

“Of course I do,” I snapped back. “Why do you think I even told you?”

She huffed. “Our past is bad enough without throwing this into it. The Redwood protection angle was crucial, and our relationship was the only reason the Samaras trusted you and the Redwood pack in the first place!” Ava pinched the bridge of her nose. “Good job, Xavier. This could be the straw that leads to them voting for Knox. I hope you’re happy.”

I sighed, feeling a little miffed about Ava’s tone, though I knew she was right. “I’m well aware that I fucked up. I’m not in the mood for a fucking lecture. Let’s get to the important part. What do you think we should do about it?”

# Episode 2907

**Ava**

I looked up at Xavier, working overtime to swallow my anger at him—and my jealousy. *I can’t believe he could be so stupid. Why is he so obsessed with Cali?*

I took a deep breath and let it out. I didn’t have time for petty jealousy, not when the Samara pack’s destiny was hanging in the balance. What I needed right now was a solution, not more emotion and frustration over the never-ending saga of Xavier and Cali.

“You need to kiss me again,” I said simply.

Xavier frowned. “Kiss you?”

I sighed, annoyed that he was being so fucking dense right now. *He’s the one who asked what I thought we should do about it, and now that I’ve told him, he’s playing stupid?*

I rolled my eyes. “Obviously we need to look affectionate and happy—now more than ever, thanks to what you’ve done. We have to convince the Samara pack that we’re stable and in a good place. So, *kiss me*.”

I crossed my arms and waited, hoping that he was finally firing on all cylinders.

Xavier looked down at me and then moved to give me a little peck on the lips.

*That won’t do at all, will it, X?*

I wrapped my arms around his neck, catching him by surprise, and pulled him in for a more passionate kiss. Our lips connected and, despite everything that had happened and the reason why we were kissing in the first place, I felt my body react to him. It was inevitable. Whenever we kissed, fake or not, it was like a series of electric currents zapped to life inside me. I’d kissed other people, and while those kisses had been nice enough, they’d *never* felt like this.

*Why would he even want to kiss anyone else when what’s between us is so undeniable? Why can’t he feel this, too?*

Then, I felt him wrap an arm around my waist, pulling me closer until our bodies were melded tightly together.

*Unless he* can *feel it?*

After a few fiery beats, I pulled away, feeling dizzy and hot despite the cold.

*Dammit, Ava, why do you let him have this kind of control over you?*

I hated that he could affect me so deeply, even after everything he’d done to make sure I knew that I was no match for Cali, his *real* mate. Since this whole roleplaying exercise with Xavier had begun, I been working hard to keep my emotions in check and make sure that I didn’t end up getting my heart broken… But that was getting harder and harder to do, and kisses like the one we’d just shared, fake or not, weren’t helping matters.

There was a twist in my stomach as I thought about the last couple of times we’d hung out. Things had felt different between us somehow, more *real*… But clearly that had all just been an act on Xavier’s part.

*I should have known better to than to hope that he would ever get over Cali. He’s head over heels about her, and no matter how much I want it, he’s never going to see me the way he used to.*

I couldn’t read the expression on Xavier’s face, but I definitely saw a few Samaras nudging each other and giving each other knowing glances at our little display.

*Good. Drink it in. He’s mine… ish.*

The kiss might have gone over just the way I wanted it to, but there was no trusting Blaine to keep what he’d seen to himself. Blaine had it in for Xavier and the Redwood pack, so I was sure that the little problem Xavier had so helpfully introduced hadn’t gone away just yet.

I scanned the party and spotted Knox standing over to the side with his gaggle of lackeys, including Blaine. *Shit. He’s probably already blabbed to Knox about the stupid half-Fae.*

I headed toward them, smiling tightly. “Congratulations again, Knox, on conquering the Iudicium!”

Knox smiled at me, apparently fully recovered from his earlier exhaustion. He had a drink in his hand and smile on his face, and he was all puffed up and fresh from regaling his groupies with tales of his heroism during the trials.

“Thanks, cousin,” he said. “And thank you for being such a good volunteer—you were light as a feather.” He gave me a wink. “Just so you all know, things are going to change around here once I’m confirmed tonight.” He slapped Blaine on the back. “And I’m psyched to know that I’ll have my second in command here right by my side as I lead the Samara pack into a bright future.”

*Great. Blaine’s his second in command, now.* Blaine was clearly not the type of guy who handled power well, so it was concerning that Knox was even considering giving him any. Putting a power-hungry creep in any type of important position was a big no-no.There was no doubt in my mind that Blaine would start abusing his power as soon as he could.

Knox smiled at me. “Ava, as my family, you’ll never want for anything ever again. I have plans to rebuild this pack to its former glory.”

I smiled a widely as I could manage, but my insides were tangled with dread. I wanted exactly that for the Samara pack, but I wasn’t at all convinced that Knox was the person to bring it about. From what I’d seen, he didn’t have the temperament for it—despite his performance in the Iudicium. There was so much more than the physical stuff in being a good Alpha, and I wasn’t sure that Knox had all that it took to do the job well. The Samaras couldn’t afford to make any missteps in leadership, not when we were still so vulnerable.

“Ava,” Knox said, turning away from his fans to face me head-on. “Tell everyone about that avalanche I dug us out of.”

I laughed. *Hardly an avalanche.* “It was an impressive performance.”

*How had he had the strength to do it at all? That damn potion should have taken care of him—and his massive ego. What gives? Why didn’t the potion weaken him?*

I could feel Blaine’s eyes on me. He’d been watching me the entire time, with a strange look on his face that I could only describe as barely contained glee.

*What a douche this guy is. Ugh. Who gets excited about telling someone that they’ve been cheated on? More or less.*

“You know, Ava, you missed a whole lot while you were up on that mountain,” Blaine said, making sure to project enough so that everyone could hear his loud mouth. “You should have seen the view from here. In fact—”

Before he could say another word, I grabbed Knox by the arm. “I’d actually like to have a word with my cousin alone, if that’s all right.”

Blaine spluttered, thrown off kilter by my swift interruption. “Wait a second, we were all just about to start a drinking game.” He held up his red Solo cup lamely, gesturing to the beer pong table a few yards away. “Plus, I was in the middle of saying something!”

“You sure were, and a drinking game sounds like so much fun, but I insist, Blaine. I just have a little something I’d like to discuss with Knox, first.” I dragged Knox aside, and he grinned down at me.

“You know, that really *was* something, wasn’t it? Or rather, *I* really was something. I can’t imagine that a single Alpha hopeful has performed that well in an Iudicium for centuries, and if they have, I haven’t heard about it.” He held up his arms and flexed his biceps. “I feel so strong, like there’s nothing I couldn’t do, no challenge I couldn’t topple. It was a difficult thing they called me to do today, and I smashed it!” He did a fist pump. “You know, I think my entire life has been building up to this moment. This is my destiny.” He put a hand on my shoulder. “I don’t expect you to understand, but I’ve been dreaming about this day for my entire life, and now that it’s here, it feels like, for the first time ever, everything is falling into place.”

I was a little taken aback by how earnest he was being, and he really seemed sincere. If I wasn’t mistaken, I thought I even saw a little glint of moisture in his eyes. *Is he about to cry or something?* I was surprised by a small flicker of guilt for not believing in him.

*He really does seem like he wants to do right by the pack… Maybe I made a mistake by not believing in him?*

Knox went quiet as he studied me with a thoughtful look on his face. “You know, Ava, I’m glad you pulled me aside. There’s one thing that’s really bothering me, and I want to run it by someone I trust.”

I looked at him, confused. “What? What is it?”

He leaned in close. “I think someone tried to sabotage me.”

# Episode 2908

**Artemis**

Rishika was frozen in place right next to me as the man continued to stare at us. Greyson had said his name was Dick, and from what I’d gathered, the name was *more* than appropriate.

I felt a smirk tug at the corners of my mouth before recalling Greyson’s directions about not being seen. Well, it looked like we had already failed step one.

Rishika squeezed my hand, her voice a whisper. “Be careful. That’s the guy who shot Mrs. Smith.”

My fingers itched to reach for my belt, grip the dagger hidden there, and throw it straight at this goblin of a man. Mrs. Smith was one of the nicest people I’d ever met—I actually liked her. And I barely liked anyone.

But, unfortunately, Greyson had also said not to cause trouble, so I supposed Dick would live to see another day. A pity.

“I’m sorry if we startled you,” I told the man, making sure to offer a polite smile. “We were just hiking and got curious when we saw the abandoned campsite.”

“Right,” Rishika rushed to add. “We didn’t expect to see anyone out here in this part of the woods.”

The man looked between us, and it suddenly occurred to me that he probably liked what he saw. I contemplated tearing his eyes out as he walked over to us and said, “I didn’t expect to see anyone out here, either. Allow me to introduce myself—my name is Dick Wigbert the Third.”

The pompous way he spoke reminded me of Lucian, which made my dislike of him climb to new heights. Murder continued to look like the best option, but I reminded myself of Greyson’s words.

*Don’t cause trouble.*

The Alpha was a spoilsport.

“Are you two ladies camping, or just passing through?” Dick asked conversationally. He appeared to be friendly, but I could tell it was an act. He gripped the rifle slung over his shoulder, and I realized that this had to be the gun that he’d used on Mrs. Smith. It was large enough to cause damage.

I’d cause him damage, the little—

“Just passing through; like we said, we’re hikers,” Rishika said, but Dick had his gaze fixed on me. He realized that I’d been staring at his gun.

“You two should be more careful. It’s not safe to wander the woods,” he said, his nose wrinkled with disdain. “Especially two young women like yourselves.”

Dick’s condescending tone made my blood boil. I wanted to blast him to oblivion. He reminded me of the Kollector, and that made things even worse. My jaw clenched automatically when he stepped closer and kept staring.

“I didn’t catch your names, though. I believe a proper introduction is in order, so—”

“If it’s so dangerous out here,” Rishika interrupted, “then why are you roaming around?”

He gestured at his gun, snorting. “I have one of these, sweetheart.”

This disgusting ogre thought he could patronizingly call *my* girlfriend “sweetheart” and live to see another day? Okay, warnings from Alphas or no warnings, I was going to—

“Artemis,” Rishika spoke under her breath and gripped my wrist tight as I blurted out, “Are you carrying a gun around because of the wolves? Is that it?”

Dick’s eyes narrowed. “I didn’t say anything about wolves. Why would you say that?”

I’d gotten angry, and I’d slipped up. This wasn’t good, but Rishika was ready to cover for me.

“Why else would you need a gun? It’s either wolves or bears, and since it’s in the middle of December and most bears are hibernating, it must be wolves,” she said.

Instead of appeasing the man, though, his suspicion grew. “You seem to know an awful lot about wildlife.” He reached for his gun slowly, as if he thought I wouldn’t notice, and asked, “Just who are you two?”

“You don’t want to do that,” I snapped, stepping in front of Rishika.

His hand froze before he could touch the rifle. He glared. “Why are you here, kid? Did someone from reconnaissance send you?”

He must have meant some team of his from LIPS. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I kept my eyes on the muzzle of the rifle as Dick took a step back. I couldn’t be certain about the cocktail of emotions in his face. All I knew was that this was *not* going according to plan.

“Anyway,” Rishika said quickly, “sorry we intruded, we’ll be on our way back to the trail.” She took my hand and tugged at it, her eyes wide as she told me, “Let’s go.”

Dick’s voice was gruff. “You both know I can’t let you do that.”

Rishika was levelheaded, but I knew she had her limits. Her tone dropped as well when she asked, “Are you threatening us?”

“I’d rather think of it as me protecting myself,” he said sharply, gripping his gun and aiming it straight at us.

My anger was pushed aside by worry. In my limited time in the human world, I had realized that there was nothing worse than a scared person with a weapon.

I saw Rishika’s hands turn into fists, and I knew that her wolf had to be going haywire at the obvious disrespect. She was fearless, and if Dick pushed too hard, she could try to shift or something, just to scare him off. That couldn’t happen for a million and one reasons, so I had to be the calm one here.

It wasn’t a role I liked, but for Rishika, I’d do anything.

“I don’t think we understand,” I said, trying to sound and seem afraid. Raising my hands, I said, “Can’t you see we’re unarmed? Do we *look* dangerous?”

Dick paused. He gazed from Rishika to me and then back to Rishika—his eyes lingered on her a beat too long, and that was the moment I was looking for. I leapt at Dick, slamming into him. He yelped like a dog as I knocked him to the ground, fighting to throw a punch.

He was no match for me, of course.

Hand-to-hand combat was my area of expertise, not to mention I was younger and faster. In seconds, I had a dagger pressed to his neck, and I used my other hand to toss Dick’s gun to Rishika.

Now, he truly seemed scared.

“Who are you?” he rasped.

Rishika knelt down, aiming the gun at him. “Why were you threatening us? What are you trying to hide, Mr. Wigbert?”

There were beads of sweat gathered on his forehead. “What are you going to do?”

Rishika’s face was cold. “I haven’t decided, but it sure seems like you were going to shoot us. Maybe we should do the same?”

Dick shivered at Rishika’s words. I looked up at her. “Rishika—

She growled. “He *threatened* you!”

Well, then. That was arousing. But also worrisome, because Rishika’s wolf wasn’t having a good time, and this could get derailed in an instant.

“Hold on!” I said. “I have a better idea.”

It had been a while since I’d tried using my Fae magic to change someone’s mind. It had been weak lately, but I didn’t want Rishika to kill Dick, and at this point, it looked like she was angry enough to do it.

I knew she’d regret acting impulsively later—killing Dick would only make things worse with LIPS. And Greyson had gone to great lengths to get rid of these people without any bloodshed. He’d even turned the real wolf Alpha’s daughter so LIPS would go away, and I couldn’t let a moment of fury ruin everything.

“Trust me,” I whispered to Rishika. She still looked furious but nodded curtly, just as Dick said, “You cannot harm me. Do you have any idea who I am? I could—”

When I turned to him, Dick stopped speaking. I focused on the man, stared into his eyes, and fought to pierce through his mind.

“Mr. Wigbert,” I told him in a calm voice. “Everything is fine. I’m going to get up now, okay? You’re going to apologize for scaring us, and then you’re going to pack up and leave this area, without remembering anything about what happened here. Do you understand?”

The man had fallen silent, his eyes wide as he looked at me. I could feel the magical link between us. My power was gaining momentum, strength. And even if it wasn’t at a hundred percent, I hoped it wouldn’t betray me right now.

It was all I had to work with.

“What’s going on?” Rishika asked gruffly.

“We’ll know in a minute…” I trailed off, then stood up and released Dick. He looked a little dazed, so I helped him to his feet. “Do you have something to say?” I asked.

He blinked in confusion. Then he stammered out, “I—apologies, I was just getting ready to leave, but wanted to make sure you were careful. There are things in the woods…” He looked around, his expression distant.

Without another word, he headed back toward his campsite.

I grinned, relieved. “It worked!”

Rishika looked puzzled. “What worked?”

“My magic is back,” I said, but she still looked lost. That was weird—Rishika knew I was Fae, obviously. “It’s part of my power, remember?” I explained. “I made that man forget what happened—”

“What? What are you talking about?” Rishika grabbed my hand, looking alarmed as she gazed into the forest. “And what are we doing so far from the pack house?”

I snorted, thinking for a moment that she was kidding.

But Rishika’s confused expression never wavered, and my heart sank as a thought hit me.

Had my magic affected Rishika too?

# Episode 2909

I’d been looking for Xavier after the kiss debacle, feeling anxious and guilty. Good times, overall. I finally spotted him grabbing a beer, and I inconspicuously—I hoped—drifted toward him.

*Are you sure this is a good idea, Cali? Blaine’s already seen you kissing Xavier—talking to him would only add fuel to the fire.*

I made a good point, but would I listen to myself? Of course not. Either way, I needed to figure out what our line of action should be at this moment, because my anxiety levels were through the roof.

“Hello, it’s me again,” I said awkwardly, and reached for a beer.

Xavier raised an eyebrow and stopped me. “We both know you don’t like beer.” He picked up a can of flavored water that I hadn’t noticed earlier and handed it over to me.

Our fingers brushed, and I felt a jolt rush through me at the barest contact, memories of our kiss flooding my brain. My cheeks heated, the urge to pull him close intensifying. Xavier’s dark gaze told me he knew exactly what I was thinking.

*I really have no shame, do I?*

“Thanks,” I said quietly, looking away from him.

He did the same, and we stood there ignoring each other… extremely badly. Taking a sip of my drink, I kept my gaze straight ahead and nowhere near him. I whispered, “About what happened with Blaine…”

“Don’t worry about it,” Xavier replied in a low voice before bringing the bottle of beer to his lips. “My only regret is that I didn’t do more than break Blaine’s nose when I had the chance. I’ll handle the situation.”

I stood there, my heart pounding, wondering if “handling it” would involve more Ava. I kept that to myself, because I’d already done enough damage for one night. I couldn’t allow my insecurities about Xavier’s ex to threaten the Redwoods.

*I have so many regrets right now! So many!*

I really shouldn’t have insisted on coming to this event in the first place. My presence had only made things more complicated for my mate.

“Hey,” Xavier muttered. “I can feel you stressing out from here. I told you, I’ll deal with Blaine.”

He sauntered away, looking as hot and brooding as ever, and I wanted to run after him so badly. But at the same time, I wanted to ask him how the hell was he going to stop Blaine from spilling what he’d seen? Maybe it was too late anyway. Maybe people were already talking about me and Xavier eating each other’s faces, and that could affect the vote in a bad way.

*I messed everything up, didn’t I?*

Okay, I needed to do damage control, like, yesterday. I had to talk to Greyson, give him a warning just in case. Of course, that meant I would have to tell Greyson that I’d been kissing my other mate during the party, even though I had officially/unofficially been invited here as Greyson’s date.

*Oh my god, this is a mess.*

No matter how I approached this, it was bad news all around. The only good thing was that Greyson knew how to deal with bad news, and would never *really* get mad at me.

*He’s a saint!*

That perhaps was going a little too far, because Greyson definitely did not *look* like a saint. He was standing by the bonfire, looking all tall and authoritative and vaguely dangerous, even when he smiled diplomatically. That was a whole lot of authority there, and it was making me feel some type of way, which only added to the explosive cocktail of conflicting emotions inside me right now.

I made a beeline for him, but as I got closer, someone blocked my view of Greyson. Hector pulled him to the side, and my stomach dropped.

I reached out via mind link. *Greyson, can we talk?*

He looked around for a moment and spotted me, his face calm. *Sorry, love. Hector’s asking me about something.*

I nodded, pretending to be totally okay with this, when I was totally not. Was Hector telling Greyson about the kiss? I had to be the one to tell him, prepare him—just so he’d be able to deal with the possibility of the Samaras getting mad over this, and also because my being honest would make the incident less upsetting for him.

*He’s gonna be upset anyway, isn’t he?*

Grumbling over this whole tangled situation, I headed over to Jay and Sage. They were watching Ravi, who was speaking to a woman from the Samara pack.

“… you know what?” Jay was saying to Sage. “I have faith in Ravi—he can be pretty charming when he tries.”

Sage rolled her eyes. “That’s what I’m saying. He can be charming, but he shouldn’t be. He’s still getting over his heartache because of Joss. It’s too soon. The last thing we need is his rebound stirring up trouble because he decided to sleep with someone from a different pack.”

“Oh, don’t be so paranoid. Being with someone else could be the best way to move on,” Jay noted. “What do you think, Cali?”

“I suppose that in the end, it doesn’t matter what we think,” I said. “It’s Ravi’s decision.”

Jay chuckled, pointing at the scene. “Doesn’t matter. Looks like he’s striking out anyway.”

I watched as the woman who Ravi had been chatting up rolled her eyes and moved off. I was kind of offended on Ravi’s behalf—yes, he could be a little annoying, but he was a good, reliable person and quite handsome and a great fighter, so—

“You owe me five bucks,” Jay told Sage, smirking.

I gasped. “You guys made a bet? Jay, I didn’t expect that from you—it seems wrong in so many ways.”

Jay gave me a serious look. “I can’t be Mr. Nice Guy all the time, Cali. It takes a toll on a man.”

I literally had no idea if he was kidding or not. Either way, he accepted the five dollar bill that Sage begrudgingly gave him. While that was going on, though, I reminded myself that I had much, much bigger things to worry about right now.

“Do you guys have any idea which way the vote is going to go?” I asked, looking around. “How do the Samaras even vote?”

“They vote with their blood,” Jay said.

I grimaced. “Must everything involve blood? And how does that even work?”

“If the Samaras approve Knox,” Jay reminded me, “they put a blood mark on the paper and deposit it in the lockbox.” He gestured to a table, where Zeke was sitting with a lockbox.

Sage sighed long-sufferingly. “They have until midnight. This is going to take *forever*.”

I checked the time. They did indeed have a few more hours, which increased the likelihood that Blaine would develop loose lips syndrome. How could Xavier possibly stop him from tattling?

“Do you two have any sense of how the pack is going to vote?” I asked.

Sage shrugged. “Not my pack, not my people. How should I know?”

“But based on the response Knox got when he finished the challenge, it doesn’t look good,” Jay said.

That wasn’t what I’d wanted to hear, but it was obviously true. Despite everything, Knox had impressed the pack. Could I influence them against him, somehow? Maybe talk to them? Spread the word that Knox wasn’t Alpha material?

*I’m not exactly the best at manipulating people, but I’ll try my best for a higher cause, dammit!*

My musings were interrupted when I spotted Blaine talking to Perrie. At least he hadn’t joined Hector and Greyson as they’d talked, but what on earth was he telling Perrie now?

“You wanted to speak with me?” Greyson sauntered over, his face unreadable. Did he know? The suspense was killing me!

“Right, yes, I wanted to talk to you.” I pulled him to the side, away from Jay and Sage, and then blurted, “What did Hector want?”

“Some more reassurance about the Redwood pack offering protection to the Samaras if they don’t select Knox tonight,” Greyson said.

“That must mean not everyone is Team Knox, right?” I asked hopefully.

Greyson shook his head. “Don’t read too much into it—Hector is just one of many.”

I nodded, but I wasn’t really listening, still trying to figure out how to tell him…

Greyson’s eyes narrowed a little. “Is there something you’re not telling me?”

*Get on with it, Cali!*

In a low voice, I told him everything about the kiss with Xavier. With every word, I felt worse. Greyson had told me to basically be his date for tonight, and instead of honoring that like I’d originally intended, I’d gone ahead and made out with Xavier. And gotten caught while I was at it.

*For shame!*

Greyson’s stoic response surprised me. “This won’t be a problem. There are going to be a few pack members who came here today ready to reject Knox. Their minds were never going to be changed. And there are also those who are starry-eyed about Knox, and who would vote for him no matter what. I’m afraid we’ll just have to wait and see.”

I swallowed roughly. If Greyson was upset, he hadn’t shown it. He didn’t blame me either, as ever, and that just made me feel even worse.

“Maybe we should try and persuade some of the voters?” I asked.

Greyson shook his head. “We should all stay out of it. We don’t want to make waves. As boring as this is, we need to stick it out until it’s over.”

“I get what you’re saying, but raising doubts about Knox couldn’t hurt, right?” I asked, whispering. “It seems better than standing around doing nothing, feeling horribly guilty over kissing Xavier when I was really supposed to be your date, so—”

I stopped talking when someone came over and Greyson, his face still unreadable, was pulled away to talk pack business. I was watching him moodily when I suddenly heard a shrill female voice.

“Cali!”

Startled, I turned to see Perrie stomping over. She got right in my face and growled, “How dare you!”

# Episode 2910

**Xavier**

I eyed Blaine from across the campfire. He kept shooting glances at me while he talked with his little group of buddies—Tanner and the rest of the Knox Club. He was acting like a fucking child, and I’d bet anything that the asshole was only *acting* like he was gossiping about Cali and hadn’t really said anything about catching her and me red-handed.

Either way, though, Blaine and his posse weren’t allowed to vote, because they weren’t members of the Samara pack—they’d arrived with Knox. That was a relief and had me thinking that I could perhaps ignore the whole thing, at least for now. But then I saw a familiar face, a younger teen wolf—Perrie, I thought she was called—stomping over to Cali.

She was flailing about, and my wolf rose up at the sight of anyone approaching my mate with negative intent. Was Cali in trouble? Had that motherfucker Blaine tattled? The urge to intervene was immense, and when I looked over at Blaine, the dickhead was smirking. What had the little shit said?

My jaw clenched. I gripped my beer bottle hard enough that I had to consciously make myself relax before the glass broke. With Blaine’s—and the entire Samara pack’s—eyes on me, I knew I couldn’t go over there and get between Cali and Perrie. I was supposed to be *Ava’s* mate—at least in the eyes of the Samaras. And if I stuck up for Cali, it would only add credence to whatever accusations Blaine was putting out there.

I was stuck here, my hands tied, while Greyson could just walk over and defend *my* mate. My stomach churned at the thought, possessiveness rearing its ugly head.

“If you keep staring like that over at Cali, people are going to ask questions.” Ava’s voice was low and harsh in my ear. I was startled but didn’t show it. When I turned to face her, there was a jealous fire in her eyes that made my wolf stir. Honestly, the motherfucker was driving me up the wall.

“We have a problem with Blaine,” Ava said, glaring.

“I know all about it,” I said coldly. “But I have no regrets about kissing the woman I love.”

Ava’s eyes narrowed. Now she was *really* mad. That made two of us, then.

“You don’t have to repeat yourself, you know,” she said in a low tone. “You and Cali, mates forever, hearts galore, whatever.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Whatever, huh?”

Ava smiled, but it was razor sharp. Blinding. I hated how beautiful she was. Hated it.

“I know I can’t change it, so I don’t give a damn about you loving Cali right this second,” she whispered. “What I care about is the Samara pack, and Knox, who has his suspicions about—” She cut herself off and picked up a beer as a few pack members passed by.

The moment they were gone, I muttered, “What kinds of suspicions?”

I tried to read Ava’s face, but it was blank now that we had an audience. A second later, a couple more Samaras moved in to grab drinks. Ava gripped my arm and pulled me aside.

The moment we had more privacy, she murmured, “Knox suspects someone tried to sabotage him.” She stood close to me, way too fucking close, to whisper in my ear, and my wolf whined for a taste. I pushed down all his urges and fought to clear my head.

“How much does Knox know?” I asked.

“No idea. He only told me he’s suspicious and vowed that as soon as he’s Alpha, he’s going to look into it. And make whoever tried to sabotage him pay.”

So glad to know things could, in fact, get worse.

“If it gets out that the Redwood pack actively interfered with another pack’s business, we’ll be fucked,” I told her. “Greyson could have a huge situation in his hands.”

“You don’t think I know that? Why else would I be telling you?” Ava said in that same low voice, the effects of which I fought to ignore.

“Does he suspect you?” I asked.

“I don’t think so,” she said quickly. “But at this point you have to know that I would never expose *your* role in all this, even if I did get caught.”

My wolf growled at the thought of Knox turning on her.

“You don’t think so, but you’re not certain,” I hissed. “So, what—if Knox accuses you, you’re just going to take all the blame? Who the hell knows what he’ll do if he finds out his own cousin betrayed him?”

Ava actually rolled her eyes, as if this weren’t a big deal. She looked so fucking arrogant, it was both sexy and infuriating.

“I doubt Knox will ever figure it out,” she said. “He was suspicious of me, but I’m pretty sure that’s in the past. The fact that he confided in me shows that.”

I swallowed down a growl. Knox was young, sure, but we’d seen plenty of atrocities committed by young werewolves. Revenge was a slippery slope, and being a barely controllable hothead was never a good thing.

“If Knox did ever realize you stabbed him in the back, though, it would make the betrayal that much worse,” I whispered.

Ava raised an eyebrow. “Technically, the only person who knows what happened is you. So if you don’t tell Knox, I’m in the clear.”

I scoffed under my breath, shaking my head. “I’d never tell Knox anything. He’d have to go through you to get to me, anyway.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “What do you mean?”

“Just that there’s no evidence connecting me to the potion—except you,” I said.

She gave me a look that could’ve turned a man into stone. Her voice was barely audible, but still sharp. “So you think I’d betray you? After everything we’ve been through, you *still* believe that?”

The truth was that I doubted Ava would do something like that at this point. We were in a semi-truce/tentative alliance, plus I could tell she still had hopes that I’d leave Cali for her one day. Until those hopes were extinguished, Ava wasn’t going to betray me. Simple as that.

It felt like I was stringing her along on some level, like I was constantly using her to get what I needed, but that couldn’t have been further from the truth. We were both trapped in this mate bond, and if my wolf had his way, I’d be pushing her down onto the grass and tearing off her clothes right the hell *now*.

I may not have liked that fact, but I couldn’t deny the truth of it. Mate bonds didn’t care much for logic.

“I know you won’t betray me. And if Knox ever goes after you, he’ll be sorry,” I told her gruffly.

She tilted her head, the gentle slope of her neck taunting me. “Look at that. You’re actually worried about *me* now. Refreshing.”

I ignored the way Cali’s presence hung over us and looked away, taking a sip of my beer. Ava just came even closer to me, her arm brushing against mine as if it were the most normal thing in the world. But none of this felt normal.

“You don’t have to concern yourself with my well-being,” she whispered. “Knox wouldn’t turn on me. I bet he’s already suspecting you, just for fun—he’s looking for any excuse to go after you.”

I mulled over her words. If Knox defied the odds and became Alpha, it could be easy—*easier*—for him to convince the Samara pack to attack me. If the little dick got it into his head that I’d tried to sabotage him during the Iudicium, there was no telling what he’d do—especially if he ever gained any real power.

I looked over at Knox, my hands clenching into fists. I still couldn’t believe the shrimp hadn’t died during the trials.

“How’s he even alive, though?” I asked Ava. “Even without the potion, the trials should have been too much for him.”

“The trials would be difficult for anyone.” Ava nodded seriously.

I frowned, eyeing her. “Not everyone. I’d have completed them, no problem.”

Ava laughed. “You really think so?”

I scoffed. “Of course. I’ve gone up against armies.”

Ava smirked, resting her hand on my shoulder. “Well, maybe someday you’ll have the chance to prove that.”

I paused. What was that supposed to mean? Why would I ever take part in the Samara Iudicium? I was about to ask her when she spoke up first.

“Actually,” she murmured, looking around once more to make sure we weren’t heard. “Now that we’re talking about this, there’s something else that’s bothering me…”

I stared. “What is it?”

She leaned closer. My wolf whined, and Ava murmured, “Like you said, the trials were extremely hard—only a seasoned werewolf would be able to easily complete them. Knox, on the other hand, is young and doesn’t know strategy. He hasn’t trained vigorously, or experienced any life-or-death, high-intensity situations. But you know what he said to me?”

I scowled. “What?”

“That finishing the Iudicium should’ve been *easier* for him,” Ava whispered. “What the hell do you think he meant by that?”

# Episode 2911

I was confused. I had no idea why Perrie was mad at me, but her raised voice had already garnered some looks from people nearby.

I didn’t think I’d done anything to offend her specifically, so maybe she knew about my kiss with Xavier and was pissed on behalf of her good friend Ava?

*How the hell do I get myself into these kinds of situations?*

This would’ve been funny if it weren’t so annoying, actually. Greyson and Xavier had both told me to chill and lie low, but of course a drama magnet of my magnitude couldn’t do that. I was pretty sure I could go anywhere in the world—the tiniest island in the Mediterranean, the most boring town in the entire U.S., even fucking Antarctica—and somehow trouble would find me like a hungry bloodhound.

*It’s a curse.*

“You know exactly what you did!” Perrie exclaimed, wagging her finger at me.

“I really don’t know what you’re going on about, but I’m sorry for whatever it was,” I said earnestly. “It wasn’t intentional.”

Perrie scoffed, and I assumed that being a bad liar had caught up with me yet again. What came out of her mouth next, though, was entirely unexpected. “So you, your little friend, and her mate stalking me wasn’t intentional?”

I was really confused now. And surprised. So this had nothing to do with Blaine and the kiss? *What?* What was Perrie even talking—oh.

*Ohh!*

“You mean the coffee shop?” I asked Perrie. The time that Lola, Jay, and I had gone over to spy on Ava when she’d met up with Perrie felt like a million years ago. I’d almost died at least twenty times since then.

“Of course I mean the coffee shop!” Perrie snapped. “You and your friend and the weird hot pirate were stalking me!”

That had been Lola’s idea, not mine, but I wasn’t about to throw my BFF under the bus. We were partners in crime, after all.

“I’m really sorry about that,” I told Perrie again. “It was all just a misunderstanding. And it all turned out okay—aren’t you excited about bringing the pack together?”

Perrie’s eye twitched. “Are you kidding me right now?”

“What do you mean?” I chuckled nervously. “I think it’s great that the Samara pack might be coming back together—I wish all of you well.”

Perrie glared at me. “Keep your little postcard wishes to yourself and stay the hell away from me. Don’t even look at me. I want nothing to do with you or your stupid pack. Ever.”

Perrie finished her sentence with a shoulder check that almost made me lose my balance. I huffed as she sauntered away, shaking my head. Had Knox just gained a vote out of nowhere? Just because Perrie disliked me? Had I just made things worse for Xavier and the Samara pack relations?

*Where is Xavier, anyway?*

I had barely finished the thought when I spotted him stepping out from behind Knox’s Airstream. With Ava. My heart dropped. They were both so tall and dark and intimidating that I felt like groaning at the matchy-matchy look of them. I couldn’t wait until this latest Samara drama was over—Xavier would probably stop hanging around Ava so much then, right? *Right?*

I had to talk to him about what had happened with Perrie, warn him about her hostility, but Xavier headed in the other direction, and it was Ava who turned to face me. Her gaze was pinned to me, her face serious as she strutted in my direction.

*Damn*, I thought. *First Perrie, now Ava. This night can’t get much worse.*

She’d better not be coming over to yell at me. I hadn’t even done anything! Other than my being mated to Xavier, there was nothing for Ava to be mad about. And if this was about kissing Xavier, then I wasn’t going to let her make me feel guilty. Perhaps the timing had been bad—*perhaps*—but nothing Ava said or did was going to change how I felt about Xavier.

Also, after all the shit she’d pulled to get Xavier back into her pants, it’d be ridiculously hypocritical for her to judge *me*. But perhaps Ava was strutting over to tell someone else off. Perhaps she knew nothing about the kiss.

I looked around—conspicuously, because I wasn’t good at being subtle—and spotted Jay. He was talking with Sage, potentially arranging another bet, which was a little worrisome—since when did Jay dip his toe into the dark side? Anyway, maybe Ava was coming over to yell at Jay. Could she somehow be feeling threatened by his bromance with Xavier? Had she gotten that unhinged?

I’d been giving Ava the benefit of the doubt, the truth was, but the look on her face right now was alarming. Not that I was spooked, only I was a little, so I decided to dip out, thanks very—

“Where do you think you’re going?” Ava gripped my arm and whirled me around.

Her rudeness made me boil, and I forgot everything else. “The bathroom. What’s it to you?”

“The bathroom is the other way,” Ava snapped. “I saw you look at me and then run. Are you scared, Cali?”

I huffed. “I wasn’t running—I just felt like turning my back on you, because you’re annoying. How about that?”

Ava’s nose scrunched.

I gasped back, mocking her. I refused to be intimidated—I’d recently stood my ground with Elle, who was feral and unpredictable. Ava was a piece of cake in comparison.

*Honestly, though, why are these girls buzzing around my mates like horny bumblebees? Get a hobby.*

“Whatever,” Ava snapped. “The point is, we need to talk.”

I frowned. “About what?”

“Not here,” Ava told me with an icy smile. Gripping my arm again—she sure loved getting handsy—she pulled me away from the others.

I looked around for Greyson and Xavier, but I couldn’t see them in the crowd. I doubted Ava would try anything violent, but I’d feel better if my mates were aware.

I was about to mind link when Ava suddenly turned to face me, her expression dark. “What are you even doing here?”

“I came with Greyson and Xavier,” I told her. “*Obviously*.”

She scoffed. “I know that, obviously, but why did you come? You’re not a Samara—hell, you’re not even a werewolf. This is none of your business.”

I glared at her. “The minute you involved my mate in this mess, you involved me. I’m looking out for him. You know we at least have that in common.”

Ava’s sour expression softened. Slightly. Sighing, she shook her head. “I know we’re never going to be best friends—”

“We can’t be friends at all, period,” I said. “We’re like Elena and Katherine.”

Ava gave me a dry look. “What?”

“From *The Vampire Diaries*?” I asked, disbelieving. Did she have no idea what I was talking about? I was turning into Lola now with all these references.

“Just stop talking,” Ava said, raising her hand. She looked like she was in actual pain, so I spared her. “I’m going to talk, and you’re going to keep your mouth shut, you feel me?”

I rolled my eyes and gestured for her to continue.   
“The point here is that we’re both connected with Xavier, so—”

“You don’t need to remind me,” I said, gritting my teeth. I wasn’t going to stay silent for whatever this was supposed to be. I’d probably accidentally blast her if I heard the words “my mate bond with Xavier” come out of her mouth.

Ava took a step closer to me, her hands fisted. “Xavier agreed to help me deal with Knox, and there’s nothing you can do about that. He wants to help me, because we are connected that way.”

Her words were a jab that cut through me. They were the damn truth.

“I’ve risked everything to make sure that my pack, the Samara pack, isn’t handed over to my reckless, conceited cousin,” Ava continued. “But thanks to you, there’s a good chance that Knox will become Alpha. And that threatens not only my pack, but Xavier as well—is *that* what you want?”

I choked. “Of course not,” I said, meaning it. “I—what did I even do?”

She huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. “Let’s start with that stupid kiss then? Hmm? Yeah I bet you remember that, don’t you?”

Shit. I knew that had been a bad move, but I wasn’t about to admit that to her. “Xavier is my mate, so it’s my right. Besides, *he* was the one who initiated it.”

The moment the words were out of my mouth, I regretted them. Ava’s face took on a very familiar predatory expression, and she leaned in closer. Her pale blue eyes gleamed with fury. And then she hissed, “I’m serious about this, Cali. If you mess up my pack with your stupid *due destini* nonsense, you and I are going to have a major problem. Got it?”

# Episode 2912

**Greyson**

I’d been watching Cali from the corner of my eye while dealing with Samara pack politics. It felt like letting her out of my sight for more than ten minutes was going to activate some sort of explosive mechanism that would get her into trouble.

My girl was a magnet for it.

“… the area has changed,” Zeke was saying. “The Samara pack’s land has shrunk—I’m sure you’ve noticed that.”

He’d been anxiously going on about this for a minute or two, so I decided to give him my full attention and push him along before we spent the entirety of the night here. “You can get to the point, you know,” I said. “I promise I don’t bite. Not unprovoked, at least.”

He pressed his lips together. “I know that accepting the Redwood pack’s protection could come with certain strings… Especially when it comes to land and territory expansion.”

I levelled him with a stare. “If you’re worried that I’m going to seize more of your shrinking territory in exchange for my protection, I can reassure you that that’s not going to happen.”

Zeke’s expression remained dubious. “It’s what always happens, though.”

I shook my head. “I’m not interested in any imperialistic bullshit. That’s not me.”

“You’re not your father’s son, then,” Zeke noted.

Bringing Silas into any conversation was guaranteed to piss me off, but I didn’t let it get to me. The man wasn’t looking for a fight, I could tell. Zeke’s pack was vulnerable, and he needed help, so I took a deep breath and focused on that. Instead of telling him to fuck off.

“Silas wanted to build a massive pack without caring how he got it,” I said. “He saw slaughter and all kinds of sick violence and intimidation tactics as the way to retain his power. He’d do anything. That’s not my M.O.”

Zeke paused. “What kind of Alpha are you, then?”

“If you bother me, I’m going to fuck your shit up. If you help me, I’m going to be grateful. If you ask for my help, I expect respect. It’s pretty simple. And in the end, if I’m honest, I just like minding my own damn business,” I said.

Zeke nodded. He looked appeased, at least. “That sounds… honorable, I guess.”

I scoffed, shaking my head. “Just don’t test me.”

Zeke looked like he was about to smile but then thought better of it. “I know you were the one to kill Silas. And you did spare Lucian…”

The thought of Lucian made me want to shake my head in disdain. Talk about being self-absorbed and destroying everyone around you for your own horrible reasons. Speaking of self-absorbed, though, we had another candidate when it came to preening like a useless peacock. Knox, if he was chosen, would be insufferable in that department.

My guess became a certainty when the asshole jumped onto a table and downed a shot, yelling, “Victory, baby! Did you all see how fucking good I was?”

A world of *nope*. And pain. I was in pain just looking at how ridiculous this guy was.

“What do you think about Knox?” I asked Zeke.

Zeke shrugged. “He’s really determined to become Alpha.”

“I’m not asking how you’re going to vote,” I clarified. “My question is: do you really think Knox has what it takes?”

Zeke took a deep breath and looked at Knox, who downed another shot like a frat boy on steroids. Charming.

“Knox is the only one who pushed to be Alpha,” Zeke finally said.

“You want to know my thoughts?” I asked.

He raised an eyebrow. “I thought you said you liked minding your own business.”

Instead of telling him that no matter what I did, trouble always found me—much like it did Cali—I smiled sharply. “That was before you guys wanted my protection.”

“Touché.” He glanced at Knox. “So tell me then: what do you think about him?”

“*Anyone* else would be a better fit,” I said honestly.

Zeke shifted in place. He wasn’t disagreeing. “If Knox does become Alpha, though…”

“What?” I asked.

“Would you consider sponsoring the Samara pack’s house? It did burn down during the trouble with Silas.”

I eyed him carefully. “You want *money* to rebuild the house? That’s what you’ve wanted to talk to me about from the beginning, isn’t it?”

Zeke’s expression remained calm as he nodded. At least he wasn’t lying to my face. Sponsoring their house could be used to my advantage, in theory—I’d enjoy some leverage over the Samara pack, kind of like a landlord. But it could also backfire. They could become resentful that a non-Samara was holding the purse strings. All in all, I didn’t want to get involved any more than necessary.

But to Zeke, I said, “I’ll think about it.”

Zeke offered an earnest thank you and walked away. I was about to go look for Cali when a large hand clapped me on the shoulder. I turned around to see Knox, looking like a cocky baby rooster.

“How come the Redwood Alpha hasn’t bothered to congratulate me yet?” Knox asked haughtily. He was at least a couple of inches shorter than me.

Brushing his hand off, I asked, “What should I congratulate you for?”

Knox puffed up his chest. “I won,” he declared.

I had to laugh. “You don’t win the trials, you complete them. You barely survived a competition in which you were the only competitor.”

He scowled. “But—”

“The way I see it, there’s nothing to congratulate you for unless you become the Alpha,” I said, keeping my tone light. I was going for the ribbing older brother tone, but I knew he wouldn’t like it.

Knox bristled. “You mean *until* I become Alpha.”

I clapped him on the shoulder. Maybe a bit harder than necessary, just to see him flinch. “You’re showing off too much, kid. Don’t count your chickens before they hatch.”

I squeezed his shoulder before leaving. He glared daggers at me.

“When I’m Alpha,” he called after me, “your little song and dance about protecting us will be moot.”

Snorting, I walked away just as Xavier came up to me. Clearly irritated, he pulled me to a quieter corner. “We have a fucking problem, Greyson,” he hissed after looking around to make sure we weren’t being watched.

“You mean other than Knox being Knox and you kissing Cali in plain view?” I asked in a low voice.

He scowled at me. “I wasn’t being funny.”

“Neither was I,” I said. “What’s wrong?”

“Knox suspects someone did something to interfere with his performance,” Xavier whispered, ignoring my comment. “He said it should’ve been easier for him.”

I frowned. He was right, that was an actual problem. “What the hell does that mean?”

Xavier nodded. “Exactly. Seems like a pretty weird thing for someone to say who’s normally the physical embodiment of a wet wipe, doesn’t it?” he said. “Ava didn’t know what the hell he meant either.”

Ava. Of course. They did say that blood was thicker than water. Could she be in Knox’s corner?

“Ava looks cozy with Knox,” I noted. “He did hug her at the top of the summit.”

Xavier’s jaw clenched. “You don’t have to worry about Ava.”

I spoke evenly. “I’m just being realistic. She’s done shit in the past, so I don’t fully trust her. Never have, likely never will.”

“That’s not—”

“Let’s not lie to ourselves here, Xavier,” I said, cutting him off. “You might not be able to see things the way I do because of your mate bond. You get that, right?”

Xavier’s glare got fiercer. “Ava’s not a fucking problem. How many times do I have to explain this to you?”

I scoffed. “Well, if you’re wrong, don’t come crawling back to me to help fix your shit.”

Xavier shook his head bitterly. “Why do I ever bother to tell you anything? You just never fucking listen.”

He stormed off. For fuck’s sake, did he always have to have such a short fuse? I was exhausted. And then my phone rang, and it was Lola, so everything instantly became slightly worse. Why in the hell would *Lola* call me instead of Jay? He was her official problem-fixer, and I did not have time in my calendar to deal with Lola right now.

Then again, what if it was an emergency?

Lola could be annoying, but she was Cali’s best friend, and a part of the pack. She could be nice, sometimes. She’d called me a drama king once, though, which was untrue, because *Xavier* was the drama king.

“Lola?” I said after picking up. “Why are you calling me? Is everything okay?”

She didn’t answer right away, which wasn’t good at all. And then there was a crashing noise in the background.

“Lola?” I said again. Now I was actually getting concerned. Was everything okay at the pack house? “Can you hear me? What—”

“Greyson!” she squealed. “You need to send Cali home ASAP!”

# Episode 2913

“Okay, just stop,” I snapped, glaring at Ava. “I’m not going to sit here and let *you* talk to *me* about the *due destini*—it’s something that has literally defined my mates’ and my lives in ways you could never have any idea about. You have *no* fucking right to—”

Ava pointed at her chest. “In case you didn’t notice, your curse is ruining *my* life too.”

I scoffed. “Well, whatever you say isn’t going to change how I feel about Xavier. So save your breath.”

Ava rubbed her temples, huffing. “You’re not a werewolf, and you weren’t raised in a pack, so you don’t understand what true pack loyalty is. But your presence here is seriously putting everything at risk for the Samaras. Do you understand that?”

“You’re right, I may not be a werewolf,” I said, “but I’ve been through enough to understand. I don’t need you to explain anything to me.”

Ava sneered. “If that were true, then you never would’ve come here tonight. Do you have any idea how much danger you’ve put Xavier in?”

I laughed. Slightly hysterically. “You mean because of the kiss? I guess I’ll have to repeat myself—it was *Xavier* who kissed *me*. You can’t just sit there and absolve him while presenting me like some sort of evil temptress—that’s so problematic, I don’t even know where to begin.”

Ava blinked at me like I was nuts. She was clearly allergic to social commentary.

“What the fuck are you even talking about?” she demanded. “What I’m telling you is that Knox already blames Xavier for what happened to the Samara pack, to my brother Nolan, so—”

“Okay, and Silas did all that! Not Xavier. Shouldn’t you be the one trying to explain that to Knox? You are his cousin after all.”

“It doesn’t matter that Knox is wrong about Xavier,” Ava said through gritted teeth. “The point is that he’s got that impression stuck in his thick head. If he suspects that Xavier and I have been trying to deceive him, Xavier will be the first one Knox goes after.”

I frowned. It made sense. Damn her.

Ava raised her hands in exasperation. “Not to mention, Knox suspecting Xavier or me would pit one Samara against another, and I’m not about to allow that. I need the Samaras to unite, and part of that entails them believing that Xavier and I are together and happy, so—”

“So what?”

“So you’d better stay away from him,” she hissed.

I gaped at her. “Seriously?”

“You heard me,” she said. “Can’t you keep your hands to yourself for just one night?”

“I don’t know—can you?” I mocked.

Ava bit the inside of her cheek. Her voice dropped further. “This isn’t about which mate Xavier is with—it’s about rebuilding my pack, something that’s more important than you. Something you will never understand.”

I’d had just about enough of Ava’s nonsense. I was getting ready to throw my fizzy passionfruit-flavored water right in her goddamn face when Greyson’s voice startled me. “Everything all right here?”

I turned to look at him as he gazed between us, eyebrows arched. He looked so cool and unbothered. I definitely needed some of his chill, so I instantly moved closer to him.

Ava gave him a sharp look. “I was just explaining to Cali how important it is to keep Knox believing that Xavier and I are back together. That would entail Cali *not* sticking her tongue down his throat for the time being—don’t you agree, Greyson?”

*Oh my god, I’m gonna kill her.*

Greyson didn’t react to her words. “I’m pretty sure Cali understands what’s happening. It’s why she’s here with me.”

“But—”

“Forget about Cali—what you should do is focus on your pack and what’s going to happen if your airheaded cousin wins the vote.”

Ava glared at him, then glanced at me. And then she kept her mouth shut and stepped away.

“I’m sorry!” I said. “Oh my god, she just pulls something out of me! I’m sorry she said what she did—”

“Love,” Greyson cut me off, resting his hands on my shoulders. “Don’t let Ava get to you. Just stay away.”

Easier said than done. “She’s the one who came to me,” I mumbled.

He stared at me. “Well, she was right about one thing—that kiss shouldn’t have happened.”

I eyed him carefully. I hated that Ava had brought up the kiss that way. She just couldn’t stop creating rifts between me and Xavier, could she?

“Greyson,” I said, “I’m sorry. I promise I didn’t mean to disrespect your position in all this.”

“Let’s not focus on what happened,” he said calmly. “You need to go to the pack house right now, anyway.”

I was shocked. “What? And do exactly what Ava wants?”

Greyson remained serious. “No, this has nothing to do with Ava, but I am going to need you to stop freaking out over her,” he said. “This has got nothing to do with her. It’s about Elle.”

Wait, what? Now I was confused.

“But I left Elle with Lola and the rest of the pack,” I said.

Greyson shrugged. “Lola called. She wants you to come back. She didn’t elaborate, but she was very insistent, so I have a feeling that she’s in over her head.”

Greyson’s face remained all cool and smooth and vaguely *I’m-the-Alpha-I-give-orders*-y, but I had to wonder: was Lola really having problems, or was Greyson using that as an excuse to send me home, away from the Samaras and Xavier?

I hated suspecting Greyson like this, but I could tell that he didn’t like me kissing Xavier. And it wasn’t like I could blame him for it—I knew I’d be pissed, in his position. But why wouldn’t he just be honest about it? Could this be his way of dealing with what had happened?

“I can see the wheels turning in your head,” Greyson said softly.

“I guess…” I trailed off.

“Don’t worry, love. There’s nothing you or anyone else can do at this point—the vote will happen with or without us. You should go home. We’ll talk later.”

I frowned. “Okay.”

He leaned closer, looking like he wanted to hypnotize me with charm alone, and took my hand. His voice lowered to a smooth rumble. “You know I feel responsible for Elle. You’re the only person I fully trust to look after her.”

I squinted at him, trying to keep my head clear. “And that’s the only reason you want me to leave?”

“Yes. And I’ll have the others go back with you. I’m the Alpha—I’ll see this thing through.” He cupped my cheek, his grey eyes fixed on mine. “Okay?”

“Okay,” I said, sounding breathless.

It was ridiculous, but I was definitely charmed, and I wouldn’t have minded staying like this for a while. He kissed my cheek, then the corner of my mouth. I couldn’t stop myself—I kissed him fully, gripping the front of his shirt.

“Be careful,” I murmured a moment later.

He chuckled, shaking his head. “I can take care of myself. I promise I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

Not liking the idea of leaving him, I reluctantly started toward the car. At least Greyson had said that all the other Redwoods would return to the pack house as well, which meant Xavier would be with me instead of Ava.

When I reached the car, though, Jay, Sage, and Ravi were there, but not Xavier.

“I’ll go get him,” I told Jay, but he blocked my way.

“Xavier is staying here,” Jay explained. “Greyson asked him to.”

I frowned*. But seriously*, I thought, *is Greyson just trying to separate us? He said that he’s the Alpha and he would stick around to see if Knox is voted in. So why does he need Xavier? Does he have some sort of grand plan that I’m not aware of?*

I reminded myself that I had to trust Greyson. He was *Greyson*, for god’s sake.

“Hop in,” Jay said, and gestured at the car.

With a sigh, I obeyed.

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On the way to the pack house, I tried to imagine what Elle could have done to warrant Lola asking for help. I’d called and texted Lola to ask, but she hadn’t replied. Surely, whatever it was that Elle was up to, it couldn’t be that bad. Lola was just prone to dramatics.

That impression was crushed when Torin rushed out of the house the moment we parked in the driveway. “Cali!” he bellowed, waving at me. “Hurry!”

Eyes wide, I raced up the porch stairs. “What’s going on?”

“The living room!” Torin pointed frantically.

I heard a commotion, and then Lola screaming, “No! You put that down, right this instant!”

I stepped into the living room, and a second later a cushion flew straight into my fucking face.

“Ouch,” I said, rubbing my nose before I looked around.

I gasped.

*Oh. Shit.*

Elle was running wild, trashing the living room.

*What the hell is going on?*

# Episode 2914

Elle grabbed a lamp and growled at me. I thought we’d become kinda-friends, but apparently that was in the past.

“Cali!” Lola gasped, her reflexes lightning-fast as she pulled me down behind the couch for cover. “She’s going to kill us!”

I scoffed. “I’m sure you’re exagge—”

The lamp flew right over our heads and crashed into the wall. Lola arched her eyebrows at me.

I swallowed audibly. “Okay, what the hell happened? Everything was fine when I left!”

Elle kept rearranging the living room into a chaos mojito while Lola told me, “I have no idea. We were in the kitchen when suddenly she went wild and started throwing things!”

I gasped. “Shit.”

Lola nodded vehemently. “Yeah, shit is right! I chased her in here, and she’s been like this ever since. Nothing I said could get her to stop—she almost hit me with a frying pan!”

I winced. “I’m sure she didn’t mean—”

Lola hissed, “She meant it, all right!” She pointed at her face. “I’m too beautiful to die with a frying pan imprint on my face, Cali! This has to stop!”

I waved Lola off, looking over the couch cautiously. Elle was slamming a chair against the ground repeatedly, as if it had personally wronged her.

“Something must have triggered this reaction,” I told Lola, retreating behind the couch again. “What were you doing in the kitchen?”

“*Nothing!*” Lola said, throwing her hands up. “Torin was making us a snack when Elle decided to use us as target practice!”

I frowned. “That’s weird. Torin couldn’t have done this to Elle—he’s the gentlest soul I’ve ever met.”

Lola sneered. “Ha! Tell that to Elle!”

I peeked behind the couch again, only to find Elle swinging from the chandelier. Well, then.

“Elle?” I called.

In response, she just yanked the chandelier down to the ground and stomped on it while snarling.

*So. This is objectively bad, huh?*

I had to figure things out before Elle destroyed the entire house. Or, even worse, accidentally hurt someone. I turned to Torin, who had ducked for cover with us, and decided to investigate further.

“What kind of snack were you making?” I asked.

“Just grilled cheese sliders,” Torin said defensively. “Who doesn’t like those? I was just about to heat the pan when she started doing all—*that!*”

He gestured over the couch, toward the space where Elle continued her, uh, redecorating efforts.

Meanwhile, I tried to picture the scene in the kitchen. Torin, Lola, Elle, grilled cheese sliders being prepared… And then, I had an idea.

“Wait, did you light the stove?” I asked.

Torin looked lost. “How else could I heat the pan?”

My eyes widened as the realization settled. “Remember when we were in the third grade and we learned about forest animals? Bears, pumas, wolves?” I asked Lola.

She looked at me like she wanted to bang her head on the wall. “Oh my god, what the fuck are you even talking about right now?”

“It’s the *fire*!” I hissed, pointing at the kitchen. “Aren’t a bunch of wild animals frightened of fire? It could be that the fire from the stove frightened her!”

Torin and Lola stared at me, wide-eyed.

Determined, I took a deep breath. “Elle?” I called, much louder this time. “I want to talk to you, to help you, but only if you stop throwing things. Okay?”

Elle remained silent but stopped thrashing around. At least that meant she’d heard me. Cautiously, I raised my head above the couch and faced her. She was holding the remains of a pillow, panting.

“It’s okay,” I said in a lower tone, raising my hands in a soothing gesture. “It’s just me.”

Elle swallowed roughly, still shaking. She didn’t let go of the cushion.

“Everyone here is so sorry to have upset you,” I whispered, gesturing at Lola and Torin, who were peeking over the couch. “We didn’t know you were scared of the fire. There’s no reason to fear it, I promise.”

Elle shook her head vehemently. Her eyes watered as she whispered, “Fire is bad. Burned forest. Killed…” She sniffled. “Killed friend.”

I felt gut-punched. Humans were the fucking worst. No joke or further comment.

“I’m really, really sorry,” I murmured, standing to my full height. “Forest fires are bad, but this is different.”

Torin piped up, “I was only trying to cook some food for you. I meant no harm, Elle.”

Elle stared at him suspiciously as I added, “That thing in the kitchen is called a stove. It cooks food with heat. We can control the fire—it won’t hurt anyone. You can trust me, Elle. You can trust all of us.”

Elle looked between Lola, Torin, and me, her chest still heaving. I took a deep breath and walked closer to her. She watched my every move, but when I reached to take the shredded pillow from her, she didn’t stop me.

“Do you trust me?” I asked in a low voice.

Swallowing, she nodded. I gave her a smile—with no teeth, in case she saw that as a threat—and held out my hand for her to take. When she did, I murmured, “Let me show you something.”

She cautiously followed me into the kitchen, but she tried to pull away the second the stove came into view.

“Fire!” she yelled, but I didn’t let her go.

“It will only be a little fire. I’ll show you how to use it—okay?”

Trembling, Elle watched as I turned on the stove. The second the flame ignited, she hissed and jumped back. She was getting ready to bolt when I said, “Wait, look at this!”

I turned off the stove with a single flick, and Elle gasped.

“See?” I turned the knob on and off. “I can control the fire. It’s okay.”

Elle had stopped shaking. Her eyes were wide—curious, now. She came super close to me—literally zero sense of personal space—and stared at me with huge eyes. “Can I try it?”

The first time she turned on the stove, she flinched, but then she figured out how high and low worked and looked… mesmerized.

“Wow,” she breathed, offering me a tentative smile.

Then Torin ruined the moment when he enthusiastically said, “I can teach you how to cook!”

Elle instantly frowned. “No.”

Clearing my throat loudly, I wrapped an arm around Elle. “Maybe we should go upstairs? You can try sleeping in a bed tonight.”

Elle squinted at me, hesitating for a moment. “Pack sleeps together…”

“Right,” I said. “But you just fought your fear of the fire and showed you can be brave. Can you be brave tonight again and sleep in a bed?”

Elle nodded seriously. “I am brave. I will sleep with Greyson.”

*Oh my god, not this again, please.*

“No,” I said firmly.

Elle frowned. “Yes. Greyson. Smells good.”

“He does, but no Greyson for you,” I said, my tone strict. “Greyson is off limits. He’s my mate, remember? We talked about this.” I pointed at my chest. “Greyson sleeps with me.”

Elle looked like she remembered. She nodded again. “Greyson no sleep with me.”

*Oh, thank the lord*,I thought, glad we’d gone over that.

“Exactly,” I said cheerfully. “Let’s go upstairs now.”

Elle seemed content, resting her cheek on my shoulder as we walked into the hallway. She could be pretty sweet when she wasn’t trying to feel up my mate.

“Everything’s going to be okay,” I told her. “You’ll sleep in a bed, and then—”

The front door burst open, and Artemis barged in, followed by Rishika.

“Cali!” Artemis rasped.

I was alarmed, looking between the two women. “What? Is someone hurt?”

Elle frowned. “Hurt?”

“Elle, I need you to go upstairs to your room, okay?” I said. “Can you do that for me?”

She paused for a moment, then offered yet another nod and sauntered upstairs. I instantly rushed over to Artemis, who was patting Rishika down. I rarely, if ever, saw my sister like this, so whatever had happened, it couldn’t be good.

“Seriously, what’s going on?” I asked.

“Get Mom,” Artemis said sharply. “And Torin. All the Fae!”

“I’ll go get Orla!” Torin called from somewhere behind me before rushing upstairs.

“Seriously, what’s happening right now?” I asked Rishika.

“I have no idea,” she said, puzzled. “She’s been like this the whole way home—she won’t stop fussing over me.”

Artemis’s hands were trembling. “Rishika thinks everything is okay, but it isn’t.”

“What is that even supposed to mean?” I asked, confused.

Artemis rubbed her forehead. “It’s—it’s all my fault!”

“What’s your fault?” Mom asked right then, looking alarmed.

Artemis looked around, then gestured to one of the studies. “Not here…”

The moment we were alone, she said, “We confronted the guy who shot Mrs. Smith, and things got a little out of hand. Greyson had told us to keep a low profile, but he threatened us. And I didn’t want to go against Greyson’s orders, so I…”

“What?” I urged.

“I used my magic.”

I choked. “You *blasted* one of the LIPS people?”

Artemis shook her head. “No—I used my other magic.”

I exhaled in relief. “Okay, what did you do, exactly?”

“And what happened afterward?” Mom asked.

“I used my magic to convince Dick Wigbert to leave the area,” Artemis said.

“And did it work?” I asked.

Artemis nodded. “Yeah. That’s not the problem.”

“Oh my god,” I said, huffing. “Then what *is* the problem?!”

“I accidentally used my magic on Rishika, too,” Artemis burst out. “We have to undo it. Can you help me?”

# Episode 2915

**Greyson**

I finished off my beer, watching as the Samara pack went to vote. I couldn’t be sure about the results, but at least they were going through the process. I was itching to have this taken care of tonight, so I could just be done with it.

In the meantime, I checked my phone to make sure that Cali and the rest of the pack had gotten home without any shenanigans. Jay had texted me.

*Everything’s okay here at the house. The stove scared Elle, but she’s fine now.*

*Sounds good. Thanks for going back*, I replied*. Text or call me if anything goes wrong.*

Jay replied with a thumbs up, followed by a sparkly heart. I raised an eyebrow. I hadn’t thought we were on a sparkly-heart-basis, but hey, I’d take it.

Another text arrived.

*oh, my b*

I snorted, shaking my head as I pocketed the phone. At least now there were fewer Redwoods around to keep tabs on. And, of course, I was thrilled that Cali wasn’t here anymore. Knowing Elle, she’d keep Cali busy for a while, which in turn would keep her from worrying too much about Xavier and me.

I looked around for my annoying little brother—hopefully he’d stayed close to Ava. Not only to keep up the appearance of happily-ever-after mates, but to watch out for Ava’s potential bullshit. Until this whole thing was resolved, I couldn’t simply trust that she wasn’t playing both sides.

Both of them had vanished. They had to be together, doing god knew what. Not that it was any of my business, but was Xavier being honest when he said he wanted nothing to do with Ava? Because for someone who said he wanted to get rid of her, he sure got himself into plenty of situations where he ended up spending a lot of alone time with her.

Just saying.

I knew it would break Cali’s heart if Xavier got back with Ava, though. I’d be there to mend it, but that was a fucking shitty thing to even think. Hurting Cali was not how I wanted to end up as her mate. Pain should never come hand-in-hand with being with me.

Xavier had better not be doing anything foolish right now behind Cali’s back. Especially not after reassuring her that nothing was going on with Ava. That would be the worst thing of all, and I wasn’t going to let it happen—not on my watch. Throwing the beer bottle into a recycling bin, I was about to go look for my brother to make sure there wouldn’t be even more problems, when my phone vibrated.

*Maren.*

I decided to get this over with and not let the call go to voicemail. I needed answers about Seluna’s ashes. Besides, I reasoned, Xavier wouldn’t betray Cali. My wolf didn’t trust Xavier’s wolf, so that was instinct speaking, but logically I knew that Xavier wouldn’t do anything to fuck things up.

Stepping away from a group of Samaras, I answered the phone.

“Maren,” I said. “What’s up?”

“I got your message. The one asking about people from our common past,” she said in that smooth voice of hers. “I think I have a pretty good idea about who would want to cause trouble for you right now.”

“Who?” I asked, my mind racing through the possibilities.

Maren’s voice dropped. “Aiden.”

My jaw clenched instantly. “Did he hurt you? I fucking swear, if that son of a bitch did anything to you or Fenrir…”

It took a brief moment for Maren to answer, but it felt like forever. Aiden was the worst kind of man—an abusive coward who screamed and shouted whenever he didn’t get his way.

“It’s not as bad as all that,” Maren said calmly. “He hasn’t done anything—it’s what he *wants* to do that’s made me call you.”

I started pacing. “What is it?”

“He’s talking about moving to Vermont,” Maren said. “He wants to take Fenrir with him. Without me.”

I stopped dead in my tracks, my stomach churning. “He wants to take him away? What the fuck? Is he even allowed to do that? Isn’t there, like, a supernatural judge or something who deals with custody battles?”

The thought of Fenrir being separated from Maren simply because Aiden felt like moving across the fucking country made my blood boil. He had no right to do something like that. He was barely a father to the kid already, how would Vermont change that?

Maren took in a deep breath. “Nothing’s been decided yet.”

“Keep me posted,” I said gruffly. “If there’s anything I can do, don’t hesitate to tell me.”

Maren’s tone softened. “I know.”

“I mean it, Maren. Fenrir belongs with you. He’s a good kid. Aiden shouldn’t even be around him at all. Ever.”

She stayed silent. Then she said, “I know you hate Aiden. That’s why I thought he could be the guy who’s targeting you.”

“What about a vampire, though?” I asked. A vampire’s scent had been the one lingering at the scene, after all. “Can you think of any vampires from our past who might be looking to cause problems for me right now?”

“I can’t remember anyone,” she said, “but I’ll think about it.” She paused. “Are you in trouble?”

“Not yet,” I said. No need to alarm her. She had enough shit going on. “Thanks for your call, anyway.”

My stomach was still throbbing when we ended the call. Aiden was up to some bullshit that made my blood boil, but that didn’t mean that he was involved with the theft of Seluna’s ashes. I’d hoped it would be someone from my past. That would’ve made it personal, and put an end to the damn mystery. I wondered if Xavier had any updates about this.

Where the hell was my brother, anyway?

Pissed off, I looked around for Xavier again and finally spotted him by the barbecue. With Ava making eyes at him, of course. He needed to deal with that.

“I have something to discuss with my brother,” I said, walking over to them.

“What is it?” Ava asked.

“Nothing that concerns you. Pack business.”

I made sure to sound serious instead of outright hostile. In theory, I had no reason to be angry at her right now. Thankfully, she didn’t argue with me, even though she looked unhappy to be excluded. Tough shit. It wasn’t my job to please Ava.

Xavier was the one who’d taken up that task, it seemed.

“You’d better go check on your cousin,” I told her. “See how he’s doing.”

Ava rolled her eyes. “I can take a hint, Greyson.”

“It wasn’t a hint.”

“What’s going on?” Xavier asked the moment we were alone. “They should be collecting the votes soon.”

I shook my head. “I know—I’m not here to talk about Knox.”

Xavier scowled. “What is it this time?”

“Maren called.” I quickly explained how my call with Maren had basically been a bust, then asked, “What about you? Any word from any of your contacts?”

“Nothing new to report, but I’m still waiting to hear from a few,” he said.

“If we don’t figure this out, Xavier…”

His expression darkened. “I know. I hate to think what’s going to happen if we don’t get the ashes. Cali needs—” He swallowed roughly, looking away. “She’s got to stay safe.”

At least this was something Xavier and I would always agree on. Cali was our priority. And even if Xavier had whatever thing going on with Ava, that diseased mate bond that was confusing his wolf, I reminded myself that Cali was the one for him too.

Un-fucking-fortunately.

“What do you plan to do if Knox becomes Alpha?” Xavier asked, changing the subject.

“I’ll pray for the Samara pack,” I said dryly.

Xavier scoffed. “Funny, Greyson.”

“Am I laughing?” I said. “Seriously, the kid is just that—a kid. Pompous and self-absorbed. He’s got three brain cells, and they’re all focused on tooting his own horn. That’s got nothing to do with being a good Alpha.”

Xavier nodded. “At least we agree on something.”

Cali was another thing we agreed on, but I didn’t mention that. Instead, I said, “I know. Being on the same page as you feels wrong.”

He elbowed me. I elbowed him back harder. The punk elbowed me a third time, and I didn’t continue with this bullshit, because if it were up to Xavier, we’d be here for hours elbowing each other like a couple of petty toddlers.

“All jokes aside,” I said, “we’ll have to keep an eye on the guy. If he tries to cause trouble between our packs, it will be a fatal mistake. I’m not afraid of him, obviously, but he’s a nuisance, and the Redwoods deserve a break after everything that went down with Seluna.”

Xavier raised an eyebrow. “Another thing we agree on.”

“This just keeps getting worse,” I deadpanned.

Xavier laughed, elbowing me yet again, because he had a fucking death wish.

“Attention, everyone!” Hector shouted. “The votes are in!”

# Episode 2916

**Xavier**

“That was quick,” I muttered to Greyson even as he scowled at me.

We both eyed Hector carefully as he recapped the voting process. The idea that we’d soon know whether Knox was Alpha suddenly felt like an added weight on my shoulders. I’d known that this was coming, but that didn’t make it any easier.

I searched the crowd until I spotted Ava. Her pale blue eyes met mine, and I felt my stomach twist. My thoughts went to the conversation I’d just had with Greyson—was there a chance that *Ava* would know who’d stolen Seluna’s ashes? She and I had a long history, and she knew plenty people from my past who could’ve come back to haunt me.

Come to think of it, *she* was someone from my past who’d come back to haunt me. Ava was my ex, but she was still my mate according to my wolf’s eyes. Could she have betrayed me in such a way, just to get back at me for choosing Cali?

*No.*

No, Ava hadn’t stolen Seluna’s ashes. As I held her gaze, my gut throbbed with certainty—she couldn’t have done it. I broke her gaze and looked over at Greyson, who was still staring at Hector as the man recited pack numbers and the total number of votes. I knew how Greyson would react if he knew what I was thinking right now.

He’d say that I was a goddamn idiot who kept putting his faith in Ava.

But Greyson didn’t know Ava the way I did. The way I sometimes wished I didn’t at all. My history with Ava remained, a dark cloud hovering over me, but it didn’t change the past that we shared. We knew many of the same people, so even though I felt like there was no way she’d stolen Seluna’s ashes, I now wondered if she had any ideas about who could’ve taken them.

I wondered if she’d help me with this, even if it was about Cali.

“… at this time,” Hector was saying, “we will tally all of the votes and come back to announce whether we have a new Alpha!”

The moment his little speech ended, there was vague cheering, accompanied by some grumbles. It looked like a pretty mixed response.

“The reactions are evenly split,” I muttered to Greyson.

My brother’s expression was neutral, but I could tell that he was suppressing a glower. “For now.”

“Let’s not worry until it’s official,” I said. “Until then, this is nothing but speculation.”

Greyson nodded, but my attention was already split when I saw Ava walk in. She looked around, seeming nervous when Knox shot her a wave. I couldn’t exactly blame her. She was the one who’d risked the most by double-crossing Knox. She had the most to lose.

This wasn’t my pack—it was hers.

“I’ll go get another beer,” Greyson said when Ava was only a few steps away from me.

Her gaze was fixed on mine, and I could see the worry in her eyes, the anxiety. She went straight for a hug the moment she got close enough, and I didn’t push her away. I kept up with the ruse for the sake of the Samara pack.

But my wolf couldn’t seem to get this was a ruse. He was too busy rejoicing being in her presence.

Her arms wrapped around my torso from the side. My own arm came over her shoulder instinctively as she looked up at me, our coming together so natural that it ached. This was wrong.

But it felt so right, my wolf tried to reason with me as I ground my teeth.

It didn’t take long for Ava to notice my clear discomfort. “Are you worried?”

I forced myself not to stare at her lips, ignoring all the messy feelings coursing through me. “Should I be?”

Ava stared. “Well, at least you know I voted to trust the Redwoods.”

The way she looked at me felt heady, her scent lingering under my nose, her warmth almost overwhelming. My grip on her tightened, and I couldn’t stop myself from fully embracing her now, both arms around her as she rested her chin on my shoulder. I could feel everyone’s eyes on us, and I knew we were putting on a show, but the realness of it could easily become heavy enough to knock me off my feet.

I wouldn’t let it.

“I didn’t ask how you voted,” I said quietly.

“I assumed you’d want to know,” she whispered.

I shrugged. “Didn’t doubt it.”

I had a gut feeling that Ava wouldn’t vote for Knox—a certainty, similar to the certainty I felt that she hadn’t taken the ashes, and hadn’t tried to help Knox at all. But at this point in time, there was a question on my mind that I couldn’t ignore. I hadn’t even thought of it as a possibility before this moment.

“What are you gonna do if Knox does become Alpha? Where will your loyalties lie?”

“You shouldn’t have to ask,” she said. She looked indignant, almost, and made a move to let go.

I didn’t allow her to break our embrace. “I still want an answer.”

She pressed her lips together, her words a harsh whisper. “Everything I’ve done so far has been to protect you. To prevent Knox from starting a pack war.”

I clenched my jaw. “Right. The last time we had a pack war that involved the Samara pack, it didn’t end so well for my mother. Or you.”

Ava flinched. When she attempted to break the hug this time, I let her. But then she rested her hands on my chest, sliding them upward, her touch so tender it made my wolf howl. Her voice was soft, making the hair at my nape stand to attention.

“Last time, I was pushed into putting my pack loyalty above my mate. I will never make that mistake again,” she said.

I couldn’t help but believe her. My wolf gave me no room for doubt. Since she’d come back, my first instinct had always been to protect her, even while distrusting her. And after she’d helped us so much, in so many ways, it was starting to feel like all the things that had come between us seemed less important than what was developing between Ava and me right now.

I had no fucking idea how I dared to feel that way, how I *could* feel that way while loving someone else. Nevertheless, I knew that in the end, no matter what Ava said or did, I could never forget Cali.

Cali was the one I was meant to be with.

Cali was my one true mate.

“I’ve done so many things, tried so hard to earn your confidence again, Xavier,” Ava murmured. Her touch burned, distracted my mind, but I needed to keep a level head. “Can you give me your trust?”

The thing about Ava was that she knew me too well. She knew that no matter what I did, a verbal reassurance of the way I felt was going to be the most difficult thing to get from me. An admission of trust would carry the most weight, and that was what she wanted. Right now, though, I couldn’t give it to her.

I’d been burned too many times to let my guard down completely.

“Time will tell,” I replied.

Ava’s eyes glistened. I didn’t mention my mother, but her ghost hovered between us. Ava’s touch didn’t waver, though. “The others are still watching. No matter what happens, you have to know that I will always choose you,” she whispered, leaning forward to softly kiss my cheek.

My physical reaction to her was as tortuous as ever. But she was right—the Samaras wouldn’t stop staring. I knew Ava wanted to keep up the façade, but this also had to be an excuse for her to rile up my wolf. The way she rubbed my shoulders was a fucking testament to that.

I was about to ask if she was enjoying herself when my phone buzzed.

“I have to take this,” I told her, taking a step away from her.

The moment she stopped touching me, a sense of relief washed over me. I reached for my phone, wondering if it was Cali checking in. The second the thought entered my mind, guilt hit me like a wave all over again. Even harder this time.

I vowed that when this whole thing was over, I’d draw a line with Ava.

When I checked my phone, though, it wasn’t Cali’s unanswered call or message that I saw. One of my old associates, Marvin, had texted me. He was one of the people I’d reached out to about any old foes of mine—anyone who could have stolen Seluna’s ashes. Maybe Greyson’s idea to dig around in our pasts had been right, and Marvin had a clue.

I’d sent him the picture of the medal I’d found at the crash site. He was my only hope at this point, really, since I hadn’t been able to remember where I’d seen it before—not even with Kira’s help. The magic that had been put on the thing was strong enough to conceal my memory of it.

*Where did you find this medal?* Marvin had asked, in response to the picture.

*Does it matter? I found it, that’s all you need to know*, I typed back. *I thought it might be connected to someone from my past. Someone who’s seeking revenge.*

Marvin’s response sent a chill through me. A reaction I rarely had to anything, ever.

Ava noticed instantly. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

I looked at the text again.

*You have to stop, Xavier. Whatever you’re doing, let it be. Your life depends on it.*

# Episode 2917

**Artemis**

Cali swallowed audibly. “I’m not sure how we can undo something like your manipulation magic.” She looked between Rishika and me. “Going in there, dealing with Rishika’s mind of all things… I mean, that kind of magic is way above my paygrade.”

I scowled. Cali was quite the pessimist, all of a sudden. Then again, I couldn’t blame her for her reaction—I wasn’t exactly known for looking on the bright side, either.

“Is what I’m asking even possible, though?” I asked, looking between Mom and Torin.

Torin shrugged. “I’ve never tried to reverse any of my own magic—I wouldn’t ever try it with my healing power. Why would I?”

We all turned to stare at Mom. She crossed her arms and peered at me. “It might be possible, Artemis. But it’s kind of risky.”

“Risky how?” I asked urgently. “Would it hurt Rishika?”

Rishika sighed. “Artemis—”

“No, I mean it,” I said. “If it’s something that could hurt you, it can’t be an option.”

“Rishika won’t be hurt,” Mom rushed to explain. “But trying to undo your magic presents too much of a risk, given your original target. If we reverse the spell on Rishika, it might be reversed on Wigbert as well. Which means he’d remember everything that led to you using your magic on him in the first place.”

Rishika shook her head. “Okay, then that’s definitely not an option.”

This was all my fault. It felt so wrong to have done this to the girl I cared for. “I’m so sorry, we should just—”

“No,” Rishika said firmly. “For the pack’s sake, we can’t.”

I swallowed. “I knew you’d say that.”

Taking my hand, she said, “I might not remember exactly what happened, but I can recall Greyson’s orders. And of course I trust your recollection of what happened with Dick, so…”

“So what?”

“Babe, I don’t think we need to go to any extreme lengths just so I remember a stupid encounter with a human,” Rishika said with a shrug. “It’s all good.”

I couldn’t believe she didn’t care that I’d done something so *invasive* to her. Even if it hadn’t been on purpose. I felt so horribly guilty. I used to destroy armies of all sorts of creatures and not bat an eyelid, but now that I’d hurt Rishika, I just wanted to lie on the floor and—gods forbid—start crying.

“I’m inclined to agree with Rishika,” Mom said. “It was an accident, and Rishika doesn’t appear to be any worse for wear.”

Torin and Cali both nodded in unison.

“Mom’s right. Everything is fine now—you’re back home safe!” Cali’s cheerfulness was back in full force, but I was too stressed to appreciate it.

“If you and Rishika are both feeling okay, we should consider the matter settled for now. Okay?” Mom asked, resting her hands on my shoulders.

I glanced at Rishika, who gave me an encouraging look. I thanked everyone, and they trickled out of the room.

The moment I was alone with Rishika, she said, “You’re cute when you worry.”

I shook my head. “I’m a terrible monster who attacked your beautiful brain!”

She wrapped her arms around me. “Look, we both know it wasn’t on purpose—please don’t feel bad.”

“But I do!” I said. “I hate that I did this to you—it feels wrong.”

She gave me a small smile, tracing my cheek. “Hey, it was an accident. But for right now, I don’t think this is a battle we need to fight.”

“But I love fighting all the battles all the time,” I said earnestly, and now she really laughed. I poked her chest. “This isn’t funny!”

She leaned closer, her palms moving to the sides of my neck. Her voice dropped to a husky whisper that made me shiver. “Your constant urge to fight is one of the things I love about you.”

I blushed. That was definitely something only Rishika could bring out in me.

“Besides,” Rishika added, “look on the bright side—it’s not like you made me forget who you are, or our relationship, or how amazing we are together. We’re all good.”

“I guess… I guess that’s a good point.” I smiled a little, and she smiled back.

She was so beautiful, it hurt to look at her sometimes.

“I’m okay. I promise,” she murmured, leaning in to brush her lips over mine. “I’m just happy you’re here, with me, and we’re both safe.”

I’d been really worried; I hadn’t known how deeply my magic had affected Rishika. And the fact that I’d put a spell on a second person without even trying was a disturbing truth, all on its own. Since when was I unable to control my magic?

It was a little scary, actually.

But Rishika’s lips were warm against mine, insistent, and when she coaxed my mouth open with the tip of her tongue, I melted against her. I held her tight, my hands moving downward from her waist, and she chuckled at my eagerness.

“Hold that thought,” she said with a sly grin. Then she went over to the door of the study, locked it with a flourish, and sauntered back to me. “I feel like I should show you exactly how okay I am.”

I snorted, rolling my eyes. “What a line.”

Tilting her head, Rishika nodded behind me. Her voice got lower. “Get on the desk, Artemis.”

I hated being ordered around in general, but when Rishika’s tone took a slightly authoritative turn? I was all for it. I did what I was told, spreading my legs for Rishika to stand between them, and when she started kissing down my neck, everything else faded away.

“You always smell so good,” she said against my collarbone after taking off my shirt and bra, and I did the same for her, eager to see her, to touch more of her. In her bra and shorts, she started trailing kisses from my neck to my breasts, making me lean back on the desk.

When she dropped to her knees and reached my belly button, I was quivering, gripping the sides of the desk tightly.

“Do you think we should be doing this here?” I whispered, my voice cracking.

Rishika looked up at me, eyes full of mischief as she lowered the zipper of my pants.

“If you’re worried about getting caught, you’d better be quiet…”

She licked under my navel, and my hips bucked.

I scoffed at her words, shaking my head, and she smirked up at me, so gorgeous and incredible. I felt so lucky to be with her. To have someone who loved me like this, so easily, even when my magic became a burden—even when I did things that made no sense, things that would’ve scared off anyone else.

But Rishika was fearless.

And when she lowered my pants and nibbled the inside of my thigh, I moaned so loudly I had to stifle it with my hand. The sound was fully covered by an even louder one, though.

The door suddenly burst open, making us both jump.

“What the—” I cut myself off, pulled my pants up, and hurried over, closing the door. “What on earth was that?” I asked Rishika, my chest still heaving.

Now fully sitting on the floor, all casual, she shrugged. “Lock’s probably faulty. A breeze must’ve pushed it open.”

I narrowed my eyes at the door. “I suppose so…”

How else could I explain it opening randomly? I locked the thing again, pulled at it. The lock held.

Rishika’s brows knitted together when she saw that. She got to her feet and walked over, tried the doorknob herself. “Huh. I must not have locked it all the way.” She turned to me, looking down at my bare chest. “Probably too eager to get to you.”

I snorted, but she didn’t even smile. She grabbed me, pushing me up against the door, her earlier soft kisses replaced by a different kind of kiss—all-consuming, devouring, with a bite to it that made my knees buckle, my heart pound so hard I knew she felt it in her hands as she touched me. A burst of energy pulsated through me, the connection between us thriving, and this kind of vibration felt somehow familiar, but oddly new at the same time.

*WHOOSH!*

A cool breeze brushed against my heated skin, and both Rishika and I broke apart, startled all over again, but it didn’t stop there—the wind rose up and charged against the closed windows, shattering the glass.

“Shit!” Rishika rasped, grabbing my sweater from the pile of glass on the floor. She did the same with her own shirt.

“What the hell was that?” I asked as we quickly got dressed.

“Hello?” I heard Cali’s voice from outside the door, and then the pounding started. “Is anyone in there?”

Zipping up my pants, I unlocked the door. There was a crowd outside, with Cali in the front. Her eyes were wide.

“We heard a noise! Are you okay?” she asked, pushing through.

And then she saw the broken glass.

“Oh my god!” Cali shrieked. “Were you attacked?”

Even though she’d been startled earlier, Rishika seemed calm now. She reached out to hold my hand. Her touch was steadying. “There was a strange breeze, and then the windows shattered. I don’t think anyone attacked us.”

“Seriously?” Cali demanded, gesturing at the glass. “A little breeze shattered all the glass in the windows?”

“Well, when you put it like that… But we weren’t doing anything,” Rishika said evenly. “We were just kissing.”

Torin waggled his eyebrows. “Must’ve been one great kiss!”

The strange feeling I’d had just before the windows exploded invaded my mind. I hated the way my voice shook when I spoke. “It felt like when I do magic, but that makes no sense… I didn’t use my magic.”

“You did,” Mom said gravely. “But you didn’t mean to.”

I swallowed roughly. “What?”

“I know what’s going on, Artemis,” Mom said in a quiet tone. “Your magic’s overflowing.”

# Episode 2918

Artemis and I stared at our mom.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, baffled. “What do you mean by *overflowing*?”

“Just what it sounds like. Artemis’s magic is overflowing, like if you overfilled a glass and water started gushing over the sides. She’s got too much of it right now, and she can’t control it.”

Artemis shot a worried look at Rishika.

“So, what can she do about it?” Rishika asked, her voice tense. “She has to be able to control her magic eventually, so how do we get her magic back down to a more manageable level? There *is* a way to do that, right?”

“Of course,” Mom said, her voice gentle. She stepped toward Artemis. “You need to regain control, sweetheart.”

This confused me, and I suspected it confused Artemis, too, because she looked up at Mom with a frown.

“I don’t understand this at all. Are you saying it was my magic that broke the windows?” She shook her head. “It was a weird thing to have happen, but I don’t think it was anything I did.”

“Why not?” Mom asked.

“Because I would have known if I’d used my magic,” Artemis answered firmly.

Mom shook her head, her expression kind. “Not necessarily.”

“Of course I would—”

“Not if your magic is overflowing, like I think it is,” Mom continued. She smiled. “But you should focus on the positive. Your magic is back! Which is incredible.”

Mom’s face practically glowed as she spoke. She looked so relieved about Artemis’s magic being back that it reminded me it had been her Fae promise that had compromised Artemis’s magic in the first place. We hadn’t been sure it would ever come back.

“That’s true,” I said, feeling relieved too. “You’ve got it back, Artemis! You must be so relieved to have both of your magics back again.”

But Artemis didn’t look relieved. Her frown only deepened. “No, I’m not. I mean, what’s the use of either of my magics if I can’t control them?”

“Artemis—” I started, but she wasn’t listening to me.

“This is awful. It’s a disaster. I’ve already accidentally hurt Rishika—”

“Hey, I thought we covered this,” Rishika said quickly. “Everything’s fine—”

But Artemis wasn’t listening to her, either. “I mean, this could spin completely out of control. I already *am* out of control. Who knows what else I could do? I didn’t even know I used my magic this time; what about next time?”

She stopped talking and looked down, avoiding looking at anyone. Mom, Rishika, and I exchanged worried glances.

“Artemis,” Rishika started, her voice soothing. “Don’t worry so much. We’ll figure this out.”

Artemis shook her head. “No,” she said coldly. “I could be dangerous. You all know it, you’re just not saying it. I could be dangerous to everyone in the pack house if I’m walking around shooting out magic left and right with no way to control it.”

She stopped for a moment, thinking, then shook her head again.

“I didn’t even *know* I was the one who broke the windows, for gods’ sake,” she said. “What happens next time?”

“You don’t need to assume the worst right away,” Mom started.

Artemis looked up at her. “What happens if I hurt someone next time? I could have hurt someone *this* time. How could I ever forgive myself?”

None of us spoke for a moment. We’d probably all wondered the same thing, in one situation or another, and the question silenced us.

“I think it’s best if I leave for a while,” Artemis said, her voice sounding far away. “Until I get myself under control.”

“*Artemis!*” Rishika cried. “You know you don’t need to do that!”

“That seems a bit dramatic,” I added.

“I think you’re putting the cart before the horse,” Mom said.

I hated the thought of Artemis going off on her own. She’d spent so much of her life alone, and I didn’t like to think of her ever doing it again. “The best place for you right now is here, with your pack. We can help you.”

But Artemis shook her head, her expression distant and stoic. “No. I’ve made up my mind, Cali. I’m not going to risk your safety, or anyone else’s. I don’t think any of you should be around me right now. I’m too unpredictable.”

Rishika shot an anguished look at Mom and me. It was clear we all wanted her to stay. We wanted to help her. But it was also clear that Artemis wasn’t going to listen to us. Not about this. She’d spent so much of her life going it alone, and it seemed like she wanted to do that again.

“You don’t need to decide anything right this moment,” Mom said gently, putting her hand on Artemis’s shoulder. “It’s late, sweetheart. We should all get some rest, and we can talk it over in the morning. We can make any decisions then.”

Feeling alarmed, I looked over at Mom. I wanted Artemis to sleep on this, of course, but I also knew that Artemis wasn’t likely to change her mind. She usually didn’t, after she’d made a decision.

But Mom looked back at me, and the message in her eyes was clear: *just wait*.

So, I kept my mouth shut and looked at Artemis, wondering if she was going to at least agree to stay overnight.

Artemis hesitated, looking unsure. “I don’t know,” she said slowly. “I don’t like the idea of saying here any longer.”

“Why not?” Mom asked.

Artemis looked at her, and there was a flare of desperation in her eyes. “What if I do something in my sleep?”

“You’ll be fine overnight,” Mom soothed, pulling her into a side hug. “You just need to relax. You’re so tense, and that’s not helping anything. The best thing you can do for overflowing magic is de-stress. Do some meditation, anything to help you relax, and you won’t be a danger to anyone.” She looked at Artemis. “Will you do that for me? Please, Artemis?”

Artemis looked up at Mom, then at me, then at Rishika. All three of us were looking back at her with identical pleading looks. We just wanted her to be safe and looked out for.

She sighed. “Fine. I’ll stay tonight.”

I sighed with relief, and Artemis frowned.

“But *just* tonight,” she amended sharply. “And that’s it. I’m not spending another day here, putting you all in danger. I’ll leave first thing in the morning until I can figure out how to get my magic back under control.”

Mom gave me a fast look.

“That’s fine,” I said quickly. “You can go, but only after we’ve all talked this over. Deal?”

Artemis hesitated again, and I wasn’t sure she was going to agree, but finally she nodded. “Fine. Deal. I’ll stick around long enough to talk. But that’s it.”

“Understood,” I said, putting my hands up in surrender.

“Come on,” Rishika said, holding out a hand to Artemis. “Let’s go get some sleep.”

Artemis didn’t take Rishika’s hand, but she did fall into step with her, and they headed out the door.

“I’m not going to say with you tonight,” Artemis murmured as they walked into the hallway.

*Ouch*. I could only imagine what must be going through both my sister’s and Rishika’s heads at that. I knew all too well how hard it could be to be away from the person you loved when you thought you were the one causing all the problems in their life. And lucky me, I often worried about that with two people.

I watched them as they disappeared around the corner, moving too far away for me to hear Rishika’s response. I sighed again. My head ached with tension. I knew Artemis liked to handle her problems by herself—and I didn’t blame her, since it was all she’d known for most of her life—but I’d thought she’d been getting more comfortable sharing part of herself with the rest of us. This could be a big problem, and I just hoped Artemis was going to still be at the house in the morning.

Mom took my hand. “I can see the tension in your face, sweetheart,” she said gently. “I know this is hard, but try to relax if you can. We’ll talk to Artemis in the morning. She’ll feel differently after a good night’s sleep, and we’ll talk her out of leaving. So will you try not to worry?”

I was about to open my mouth to tell her that I was already worried and likely to stay that way when my phone dinged with a text notification. I pulled it out of my pocket and sucked in a breath when I saw that Greyson had sent me a short message:

*The results are in.*

I stared at the message until my eyes burned, my heart rate speeding up when I saw the three dots appearing and disappearing as Greyson typed.

And typed.

And typed.

… and typed.

My anxiety was spiking as I stared down at my screen.

*Dear god, just tell me!* I thought to myself.

Finally, my phone vibrated in my hand.

*It’s Knox. He’s the new Samara Alpha.*

# Episode 2919

**Xavier**

“Gather up, everyone!” Hector called, looking around. “The decision has been made.” There was a beat of silence before he went on. “Knox has been voted our new Alpha!”

His voice was loud and declamatory, but it was flat and without emotion. He didn’t sound excited, and his face and dark eyes betrayed no emotion.

A stunned silence met his announcement, then—after a long moment—Blaine let out a whoop and started to clap.

“*Yes!* YES! That’s my *man*! YES! Knox! Is! *Alpha!*”

I looked to see Knox smiling and the toadies he always seemed to have surrounding him looking excited and celebrating alongside him. They yelled and pumped their fists and clapped each other on the back, looking pleased, and just so damn smug.

But I couldn’t help noticing that there were several Samaras who looked decidedly *less* enthusiastic to hear Hector’s news. I watched as a couple of them shot each other wary glances, and even Hector looked pretty grim for someone who’d just announced the new Alpha of his pack. Such announcements were usually met with celebration by the whole of the pack, but this seemed rather subdued. A few people looked downright worried, even angry.

*Except* for Knox and his lackeys, of course, who were jumping out of their skins in celebration.

After a few more moments of that, Knox broke free of his group and moved forward, striding toward the front. He moved in front of Hector and smiled broadly.

“Thank you to everyone for making the right call. I intend to restore the Samara pack to its former glory. This is a fresh start! For all of us! And you know what comes next.” His smile widened. “Now, you step forward and pledge your loyalty to the Alpha. Who is me.”

I *hadn’t* known this was coming next, and I was surprised. Asking the pack members to pledge their loyalty was traditional, but it usually didn’t happen *immediately* after the Alpha was decided. But I supposed Knox was anxious to get that part done, hoping it would cement his position in the pack.

Blaine, Tanner, and a knot of Knox’s other friends rushed forward and lined up in front of him.

“Loyalty isn’t something that is given easily, but it’s the most important crap in the world, bros,” Knox started.

I rolled my eyes and shot a glance at Ava, but I was surprised to see that she was watching Knox and looking pale as a ghost.

“Are you okay?” I asked her, but I had a feeling I already knew the answer.

Ava sighed and looked at me. Her worried expression twisted into a wry half-smile. “I just hope you meant what you said about protecting me.”

My wolf stirred at her words. Whatever else I thought, my wolf was certain—he would always protect Ava.

“Of course I meant it,” I said.

Ava nodded and turned back toward Knox. We both watched silently as a few other members of the Samara pack moved forward into the line forming in front of Knox. They looked reluctant as hell, but they were doing it.

Ava shook her head. *How could he have won? It doesn’t make any sense. That potion was guaranteed to weaken him, but he seemed fine. Totally fine.*

*I don’t know*, I responded*. I can’t explain it either. Do you think the potion could have been tampered with or something?*

*I don’t know.*

I thought for a moment. *We’re sure he drank it, right? I saw you put it in, but he did drink it, didn’t he?*

*I’m sure*, Ava said firmly. *I watched him do it myself. And he seemed kind of out of it immediately afterward, remember? We both saw him stumbling around like an idiot.*

Knox *had* been stumbling, and he’d seemed hazy.

*That’s true*, I conceded.

*Remember how he said that it should have been easier?*

I snorted a laugh*. Knox always has been a cocky little bastard.*

But Ava shook her head. *I think it was more than that.*

I looked over at her quickly. *What do you mean?*

*I’m not sure. I can’t really explain it, but I have this feeling that he did something before the Iudicium to try and up his chances of succeeding. I can’t prove anything yet.*

*What could he have done?* I wondered.

Ava frowned. *I don’t know. But I know when something is up, and believe me, I think this was far from a fair fight.*

When I looked over at Knox, he was puffed up like a rooster strutting through a henhouse. He looked so smug as he stood before the line of Samaras pledging their loyalty to him, it was almost criminal*.* If smugness were a crime, I would have called the cops on him.

*We can’t do anything about that*, I said. *I think you might be right—it sure as hell would explain a lot—but there’s nothing we can do until we have proof.*

*What kind of proof?* Ava asked.

*Literally* any *kind of proof would be something. But right now, we’ve got nothing. We can’t convince anyone of anything because of your gut feeling.*

*So what do we do?*

I thought about this for a moment as I watched members of the Samara pack move slowly forward. *I think the best thing to do is to pretend to welcome Knox.*

*Xavier—*

*We can’t have any inter-pack tension right now. You know that, Ava.*

She sighed. *I guess I do. But now I have to pledge my loyalty to Knox, and you know that, too.*

I looked at her and nodded. *Yeah, you do.*

I could see how reluctant she was to do this, and she didn’t make any move toward Knox. My thoughts went to Greyson’s comment about her—that we couldn’t rule out the possibility that Ava was secretly working for Knox. And that that was why the potion hadn’t worked, because Ava was going to get something out of Knox being Alpha and had helped him. I knew why Greyson had asked the questions, but I also knew that I trusted Ava.

But maybe not so much that I was *totally* ruling out those possibilities. I knew I needed to keep an eye on her—and a firm handle on my emotions.

As if I’d called him, I felt my wolf stirring. He didn’t like the idea that I didn’t completely trust my mate, but I shoved those feelings back down as Ava stepped toward the line in front of Knox.

I stepped with her, supporting her in my pretend role as her mate. There was no way on earth I’d ever pledge anything to Knox, but luckily no one would expect me to.

When Ava reached the front of the line, Knox smiled broadly as Ava stepped toward him. He shot me a smugly triumphant glance before he spoke.

“Kneel, Ava.”

I didn’t like the way Knox’s lackeys—who were still loitering—looked at Ava as she went down on her knees. Their eyes were hungry, and they roved up and down her body.

But Ava ignored them and focused on Knox, who had started into his dumbass pledge.

“—and do you pledge to me you will fight by my side against all foes, and stay loyal to me even when things look bad?”

I had to grit my teeth to keep myself from rolling my eyes. I supposed this was his version of “for better or for worse.”

But Ava was gamely going along, and she bowed her head.

“Yes.”

When she rose again and stood next to me, Knox looked between us.

“You know, Ava, I’ve thought it over, and I’m going to permit you to continue to be with your mate, even though he’s in a different pack.”

My hackles went up in an instant. Knox was going to *permit* Ava to be with me?

I started to step forward, planning to give Knox a piece of my mind, but before I could, Greyson appeared at my side, putting a warning hand on my shoulder. I looked up, surprised to see him materialize at my elbow. He gave his head the smallest of shakes, and the message was clear: don’t interfere.

My hands curled into tight fists at my sides, and I gritted my teeth so hard my head ached, but I stayed quiet as Ava smiled blandly back at Knox.

Knox looked more smug than ever, and I glowered at him. Ava was right. I was more certain of it than ever. Knox had done something to help himself get through the Iudicium, and I was going to get to the bottom of it. And then I was going to kick that loser to the fucking curb.

“Well, welcome to the Samara pack, Ava,” Knox said obnoxiously to Ava, whose family *was* the Samara pack.

But Ava just smiled in a tight way and moved aside as Knox yelled, “NEXT!”

As Knox continued to lord over the line in front of him, I glared at him. He was enjoying the power—that much was clear. But that was fine. He needed to enjoy it while he could. It wouldn’t be his for very long.

# Episode 2920

**Greyson**

As Xavier and I got back to the pack house, my thoughts were yet again on my brother and Ava. I’d seen Xavier’s reaction to Knox’s dig at Ava during the loyalty pledge, and I couldn’t get it out of my head. He’d responded so protectively—like a mate. Xavier kept telling me that he had the situation with Ava under control, but I had my doubts about that. I saw the way he looked at her.

Even tonight, as we were leaving, their goodbye had been quick, but somehow wistful. Like he wished he didn’t have to say goodbye to her.

Walking into the pack house, the place was quiet, and I was relieved as hell to see that everything looked calm. I’d been slightly concerned about the Elle fiasco that Lola had called to tell me about—or any of the other million ways things could’ve gone wrong while I was away—but everything looked fine. I knew Cali would get things with Elle under control.

Still thinking about Ava, I stopped Xavier at the door. When I put my hand on his arm, Xavier looked up, surprised, like he’d forgotten I was there.

“What?” he asked.

“How are you doing after all of that?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” Xavier said gruffly.

I raised an eyebrow. “You sure about that?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Xavier demanded.

“I know the whole thing with Ava’s got to be pretty complicated…”

At my mention of Ava, Xavier’s expression darkened. “I’m not getting into this with you again,” he said coldly. “I’m fine.”

But I doubted it. He didn’t look fine. He looked miserable, and I didn’t envy his position. All this stuff with Ava was clearly taking a toll on him.

“How long do you think you’re going to be able to keep up the ruse?” I asked.

Xavier looked pissed. “As long as I need to.”

I frowned, which seemed to piss Xavier off even more.

“What? You think I can’t handle it?”

I sighed. “No, man, that’s not what I’m saying.”

All I was *actually* doing was trying to take an interest in my brother’s well-being, but of course that wasn’t how Xavier was interpreting it.

“I’m just saying I know this is hard for you,” I said. “And if you need an out, I can help.”

Xavier’s eyes narrowed. “I’m not going to need your help. I’m handling this myself. Isn’t that what you told me to do?” he added snidely.

And without another word, he shook free of my hand and headed inside.

I watched him go and shook my head. “All right then, if you say so.”

As I walked through the house, I braced myself for seeing Cali and her inevitable thousands of questions. I smiled to myself, imagining her haranguing me for details about what had happened. Just thinking about her made me excited to see her, and I looked around, but she was nowhere to be found.

The kitchen was empty when I checked it, but when I caught sight of the time on the stove, I realized that she was probably asleep—it was late. I glanced into the living room as well, just to check. Cali wasn’t in there, but my mother was sitting on the couch, and seeing her gave me a twinge of alarm. My thoughts had been elsewhere tonight, but I realized I hadn’t heard from Artemis or Rishika in a while. I frowned. They were supposed to check in. Hell, they should’ve been back by now.

“Is Rishika around?” I asked my mother. “Or Artemis?”

She looked up. “Oh, hello, Greyson. Yes, they’re here,” she said, but there was something tight in her voice that rang an alarm bell for me.

“Is everything okay? Did something happen?” I asked quickly.

She took a shallow breath. “They ran into Dick Wigbert—”

A jolt of anger forked through me at the mention of the man who’d shot my mother. “They did? Where? What happened? Rhonda told me everyone was clearing out.”

“Rishika said that it looked like everyone was clearing out. He was the last one left.” She hesitated for a moment. “And… Well, I suppose I have to tell you this: he pulled a gun on them.”

My whole body went cold at her words. “What happened?” I asked, fighting to keep my voice even.   
 My mom shook her head. “Artemis was able to modify his memory with her magic, and they got out of there safely. Everything’s fine.”

There was a lot to take in, but my first thought was that if Artemis had controlled Wigbert’s memory, that meant she had her magic back.

“And what about LIPS? And Wigbert?” I asked.

“The last of them moved out of our woods. Dick included,” my mom said. “So everything’s okay.”

I was relieved to hear that LIPS was no longer lurking around, but I shook my head. “No. As long as Dick Wigbert is still out there, we’re not okay. That man’s a lunatic. He pulled a gun on humans, not just wolves. He’s dangerous and a threat to us, no matter what he remembers. And if Artemis’s magic on him wears off the way Rhonda’s did…”

I gritted my teeth. One thing was for sure: Dick was going to have to be dealt with.

“I don’t disagree with you, Greyson.” My mom looked worried. “But I just don’t want you putting yourself in any more danger. Frankly, I’d just prefer it if everyone in this pack stayed away from him, and the rest of LIPS.”

I opened my mouth to argue this, but she put up her hand, stopping me.

“No, I don’t want to hear it. We just came off that whole thing with Seluna. It’s enough. I understand the impulse, but I want you to just let it be. Tangling with humans is a way to get us all into a mess.”

I could see the worry on her face, and I figured she probably thought I was going to rush off and do something rash. I smiled at her, trying to look reassuring.

“You’re probably right,” I said, but I didn’t mean it. There was no way I was going to rest easy until I’d taken care of Dick Wigbert.

“Anyway, how was the Iudicium?” she asked, putting a bookmark into her book.

“It was… eventful. But it looks like Knox is the Alpha of the Samara pack now,” I said ruefully.

My mom frowned. “Really? Is that going to be a problem?”  
 “I fucking hope not.” I sighed, leaning against the door frame. Then I gave my head a shake. “No, it’s not going to be a problem,” I amended, more firmly. “I can handle it.”

And I could—as long as things didn’t implode.

My mom accepted this and nodded. “Everyone is asleep, and you look exhausted yourself. You go right upstairs and get some rest.”

I grinned at her. “And what about you?”

She smiled back and held up her cross-stitching ring. “I still have some wedding research to do. Don’t you worry about me,” she added, waving me away.

“Good night,” I said, and, as I headed upstairs, I realized that I was completely exhausted. I really should have gone straight to bed, but I was still thinking of Cali. Her beautiful face flashed into my mind, and I couldn’t help myself—I needed to see her before I could relax enough to go to sleep.

I headed down the hallway toward Cali’s room, but I paused in front of Elle’s door, which was open. I peeked in and saw that Elle was in bed, along with Jay and Lola. They were snuggled together in their pajamas, each wrapped in their own fleece blankets against the cold of the winter night, but it looked like Jay had been pushed over to the edge and was barely hanging onto his bit of bed.

These little slumber parties to help Elle get used to human life probably couldn’t last forever, but it was nice that people were willing to help her out, and it made me smile to see my pack pulling together.

I headed down to Cali’s room and eased her door open. She was asleep on her bed, looking peaceful, a beam of moonlight shining through her window onto her face.

I stepped toward her and looked down at her, marveling at the beauty of her face. It was relaxed and calm, and her mouth turned up just slightly, as though she was dreaming about something pleasant. I hoped she was.

She’d kicked her covers down around her feet, and the room was cold, so I reached down and pulled them back up, covering her gently. Then I leaned and pressed a soft kiss to her forehead.

I’d tried to be as gentle as I could, but she stirred beneath the pressure of my lips, and her eyes fluttered open. She smiled up at me.

“Hey,” she slurred sleepily.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I didn’t mean to wake you. I just wanted to see you before I went to bed.”

I pressed another kiss to her forehead and was about to head out when she reached up and grabbed my wrist in a surprisingly firm grasp.

“Will you stay?”

# Episode 2921

When I woke up in the morning, I was wrapped in Greyson’s arms, and for a sleepy moment I was confused about what I was doing there. Then the memory came back to me—he’d appeared in the middle of the night, and I’d asked him to stay with me.

He had kicked off his shoes and slipped under the covers with me, wrapped me in his arms, and immediately fallen asleep. And—exhausted—I’d followed him. With him cuddled around me, I’d slept like the dead, for which I was grateful. I’d been in desperate need of a good night’s sleep.

I turned in his arms so I could see his face, which was close to me in the cool light of the winter morning. He was so handsome, it still took my breath away. I looked at the light hair falling across his arm, his thick eyebrows, and his strong jaw, now shadowed with blond stubble.

But, as if he could feel the pressure of my gaze, he stirred and opened his eyes. He smiled sleepily at me.

“Morning,” he said, stretching long.

I cuddled back into him. “Good morning,” I murmured.

I’d always loved waking up beside Greyson, but I was especially grateful now, because I’d just passed another night without Seluna making an appearance in my dreams. There was something about having Greyson there with me that kept the nightmares at bay.

“So what ended up happening last night?” I turned to Greyson. “I want to hear all the details about Knox getting voted in.”

Greyson groaned, covering his eyes with his arm. “Come on. I don’t want to hear that guy’s name so early in the morning.”

“Fair enough,” I laughed.

Greyson moved his arm and looked up at me, his eyes blazing. “Especially where there are so many *other* ways to spend our time.”

I laughed again as he pulled me down to him, but the smile slid off my lips as he pressed a kiss to them. My whole body flared to life, and every bit of sleepiness vanished. Heat flooded through me as I slid my body along his, feeling myself melt against him.

He ran his hands up the sides of my legs and slipped them under my T-shirt. I shivered against his touch as his thumbs brushed the undersides of my breasts.

His tongue flicked against my lips, and I opened my mouth, anxious to let him in—to let every part of him into me.

I was completely focused on Greyson, so when my door crashed open, it caught me completely by surprise.

Elle sprinted into the room. “*Greyson!*” she cried, beaming.

She looked at us for a moment as we struggled out of the tangle of sheets, and I pulled my shirt back down and straightened my mussed hair, but she didn’t seem to register that we were flustered, or that she’d walked in on something. She launched herself onto the bed and grinned up at Greyson. “Alpha’s back!”

I was taken aback to find Elle *literally* in the bed I was sharing with Greyson—and reflected for a moment that I’d actually thought living with Colton was hard. At least he’d never gotten into bed with Xavier and me.

Some of what I was feeling must have shown on my face, because Greyson took one look at me and pushed slightly back from Elle.

“Yes, I’m back. But remember, you need to knock when you want to come into a room, okay?”

Elle frowned up at him. “Knock?” she asked, confused.

Greyson sighed and looked up at me. Elle followed his glance, and her sunny smile faded away.

She looked crestfallen as she looked up at me. “Human lessons?”

I nodded. “Yep, knocking is a human lesson we definitely need to tackle.”

Having a plan seemed to cheer her up, and Elle brightened. “Good! Human lesson! And today, mall!”

Oh crap, that was right. The mall.

Elle bounded off the bed and headed for the door. “*Torin!*” she bellowed, way too loud for this early in the morning. “Torin!”

Greyson turned to me, confused. “Human lessons? Do I want to know?”

I got up and pulled open a dresser drawer, hunting for a sweatshirt for the cold morning. “Yeah, I was thinking we needed to do something to help Elle get used to human life.”

Greyson smiled as he watched me move around the room. “That’s really sweet of you, love.”

I nodded, but I kept to myself the part about conducting the human lessons to help ensure that Elle would stop catapulting herself into Greyson’s bed.

I was halfway to the shower when a thought struck me: I’d promised Elle we could go to the mall, but I couldn’t go anywhere today. I had to help Artemis with her overflowing magic and—more importantly—make sure she was doing okay.

Stepping quietly down the hallway, I knocked lightly on Artemis’s door.

Rishika appeared after just a moment and stepped into the hall, closing the door behind her. “Artemis is still asleep,” she informed me, guessing what I’d come to ask.

“Sure, it’s still early. Listen, I was supposed to go to the mall today with Elle, but I’m going to tell her that I can’t go. I’m going to stay with you and wait for Artemis to wake up so we can talk to her,” I said.

“I talked to her last night,” Rishika said quickly. “She says she’s not going to leave. Not yet, at least.”

“Really?” I asked. “She said that?”

Rishika nodded. “She’s going to take today to think everything over and try to calm herself down. There’s not going to be anything to do here. You should go to the mall. We can all talk when you get back.”

I hesitated. “I really want to make sure Artemis is doing okay, and—more importantly—that she doesn’t disappear on me.”

“I’ll make sure Artemis doesn’t go anywhere,” Rishika said firmly. “Trust me. Go to the mall. We’ll talk tonight.”

I hesitated a moment longer, then shrugged. “Okay. Tonight, then.”

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A lot of people ended up being interested in a trip to the mall, so when we stepped out of the car and into the parking lot, Elle was there, along with Torin, Lola, Jay, and Jacqueline.

Elle’s eyes went wide as saucers as we approached the building, and I glanced around. We were in a densely packed part of town. There were buildings and apartment towers everywhere, and the only trees were the scrawny kind that grew limply from sidewalk squares. This wasn’t the kind of environment a wolf would ever willingly wander into, which meant it was brand new for Elle.

Feeling a wave of compassion, I tucked my arm through hers.

“Just stick with me, Elle,” I said. “You’ll be fine.”

Elle looked nervous, and she shot me a grateful look as we headed inside.

“So I have this second date with Kevin coming up,” Torin said as we walked toward the sliding doors, “and I’m determined to blow him away. I’m thinking of getting something bold and colorful.” He stopped talking as we stepped inside, and he took a deep breath of the warm, perfumed air of the mall. His whole face lit up as he looked around, practically swooning.

He turned to Elle, his face shining. “This place is amazing! You’re going to love it here, Elle. Trust me.”

Elle held on tight to me, looking overwhelmed by the lights, smells, and sharp, tinny Christmas music blaring from every speaker. But she looked curious, too, and her eyes darted around, taking everything in.

She pointed to a pet store with fish swimming in an aquarium in the window. “Look!”

“Fish,” I explained, and she frowned, taking in their wildly bright colors.

“Oh my god!” Torin raced over to the window of the store. “Look at this color! It’s amazing! It’s like the ocean!”

He was gazing at a mannequin dressed in a turquoise sequined top and jeans.

I stepped toward him and looked at the display. “I think that color would look great on you. Let’s see if we can find something for you in that color.”

“I love it,” Torin said in an awed voice.

“Listen, I’m going to head out, go do my own thing,” Jacqueline said, sounding bored. “I’ll see you later.”

There was a brief moment where it felt we might all be splitting up. Jay and Lola walked over to look at a shoe display while Torin continued to gaze at the sequined top.

I looked around for Elle, but she was standing nearby, examining a row of bubble gum machines, so I turned back to Torin. “You know we can probably find that color somewhere else, too.”

Torin looked hopeful. “You think so?”

I nodded and glanced over at Elle again, just to check on her—but she was gone. I turned quickly and looked around, but Elle had disappeared. *Shit.*

# Episode 2922

**Xavier**

I looked over at Ava, whose dark hair pooled beneath her as she peered up into the canopy of trees surrounding us. The grass was soft beneath us as we lay in the center of the meadow, surrounded by forest on all sides. She turned to look at me, a smile on her beautiful face, and leaned close, pressing a kiss to my lips. I pulled her close and slipped my hand beneath her shirt, feeling her satin-soft skin and the delicate outline of her spine under my hand.

She leaned her head back, sighing with pleasure, and I moved my kisses down to her neck, then her collarbone.

Her hands went to my waist, unbuckling my belt and unzipping my pants, the back of her hand casually brushing my hardening cock. Everything in me was saying *yes, fuck yes.* Especially my wolf, who was howling a song of pleasure. Being with her—feeling her body press hard against mine—just felt right, and I shifted so I was hovering over her, trailing kisses down her chest as I pulled up her shirt with one hand.

Ava clearly agreed with the direction I was taking, because she ducked out from under her shirt and pulled mine off, so our skin pressed together. Heat surged through me as I pulled off her jeans and ripped away her panties in one quick motion. But just as she put her hand to my boxers, a distant alarm bell began to ring in my head. It was just a flicker of unease, but it was enough to make me pause.

I pulled away and looked around. We were in the middle of a forest, but I didn’t know *which* forest. I had no idea where we were, and the meadow didn’t look remotely familiar. The colors around me were strangely vibrant—almost unnatural, like a filter with too much color saturation. It seemed to almost sparkle, like it had been covered with a layer of varnish.

My heart was starting to pound, and I felt anxiety creeping in. Where was I? What was going on?

“Xavier?” Ava asked.

When I looked down at her, I could see that her face was creased with what looked like genuine concern. My wolf howled at the way the light was falling across her beautiful face—and her fully naked body—and for a very charged moment, I almost ignored the warning in my head and leaned down to kiss her again.

But before I could, another wave of worry washed over me.

I shook my head. “This isn’t right.”  
 Ava frowned, confused. “I don’t understand.”

“I shouldn’t be here.” I looked out at the trees surrounding our flower-strewn meadow, and the dark shadows between the trees seemed almost black against the vibrant color of the forest. There was something strange about how perfect this spot was—almost sinister. I couldn’t shake the feeling that there was danger lurking.

Squinting into the shadows, I could have sworn a face swam into view, and my stomach tightened. I was looking for this person—I knew I was. I narrowed my eyes even further, but I couldn’t make out any features. The face was strangely blurred.

I got to my feet. I needed to get closer to see this person in the shadows, but Ava grabbed my hand and held me in place.

“Where are you going, Xavier?” she demanded. “I don’t understand. Why are you acting this way, right after you made me your Luna?”

*My Luna?*

I sat up straight in bed, my heart racing.

“Fuck!” I hissed, hitting the bed.

That shadowy face in the forest was the person I’d been looking for—the owner of the saint medal and the person who’d stolen Seluna’s ashes—and I’d woken up before I could catch them, or even really see them.

Desperate, I lay back down and closed my eyes, trying to will myself to fall asleep and back into my dream. Maybe it was crazy, but I had this gut feeling that I’d be able to remember who it was, if only I got the chance to investigate my dream.

But it was no use. I was fully awake now, and the dream was gone. I groaned in frustration and opened my eyes, looking up at the ceiling. I wracked my brain, trying to recall any details of the shadowy face I’d seen in the woods, but it was useless. There was nothing left in my memory but a blur.

I thought about the ominous text I’d gotten about not pursuing the person who’d stolen the ashes.

*Let it be*, the text had said. *Your life depends on it.*

But that wasn’t going to happen. I wasn’t about to stop. That just wasn’t an option. Cali was depending on me, and there was no way I was going to give up now.

The thought of Cali filled me with an uneasy feeling, considering the dream I’d just had about Ava. When Greyson has asked me about Ava, I hadn’t wanted to let him know how conflicted I was about her, so I’d said I was fine. But I wasn’t fine. And I had to admit that if I was having dreams about Ava being my Luna, it was possible that I was in over my head.

My wolf threw back his head and howled at the thought of Ava as my Luna, but I tried to ignore it.

I put my hands over my face with a deep sigh. This thing with Ava was getting out of control, and I was going to have to think of a way to extricate myself from the situation. *Soon*.

I thought this over for a moment, thinking about the ways that could be possible, and cycling through the other thoughts I had cycloning around inside me: the threat of Knox as Alpha, Ava, Cali, Seluna’s ashes and where they could be…

Fucking hell. I couldn’t stand lying down for one more instant. I threw the covers off and got to my feet, the hardwood floors freezing beneath my bare feet. I looked around, shivering slightly in the cold morning air. I had to do something active—right now—or I was going to go crazy.

I threw on some sweats and headed downstairs. I needed to find Cali, first and foremost. We hadn’t had a chance to talk after I’d gotten back from the Iudicium, and there was clearly a lot for us to talk about. It was obvious Cali hadn’t been happy to see me role-playing with Ava, and I wanted to reassure her about where my heart really lay.

My stomach gave an odd twist, like I was nervous to talk to her about it, but I shoved the feeling away.

Cali was on my mind, so I was disappointed to only find Greyson downstairs.

He was standing in the kitchen, making a cup of tea when I walked in.

“Where’s Cali?” I asked him.

“She and Elle went to the mall,” he said. “Took about half the pack with them, too.”

“Right. Okay,” I said slowly, looking around. I was going to have to rework my plans.

Greyson dropped a spoon of honey into his cup. “Have you heard anything from Ava yet this morning?”

My walls went up in an instant.

“No,” I said dryly, walking away from Greyson and toward the window. It was a beautiful day outside, cold and clear. The sky looked burnished blue, and the clouds that had blanketed it for weeks were gone. It would be a great day for a long, *long* run, and that sounded like exactly what I needed to clear my head.

“Did you hear whether LIPS moved out?” I asked, turning to my brother.

“Yeah, I guess they did. For now, at least,” he added darkly.

I nodded. “Well, in that case, I’m going for a run,” I said, reaching for the door.

“Xavier!” Greyson called after me. “You still need to be careful out there. The people running LIPS may be gone, but we still need to confirm that there are absolutely no drones out there.”

I rolled my eyes. “I can handle a few drones.”

I slammed the door behind me and had shifted before I left the porch. I sprinted into the woods and ran—hard. *This* was what I needed. I’d always needed this kind of physical exertion to help me feel more grounded, and it had always helped me think. Which was funny, because when I ran, I just let my mind go blank for a while. But it never failed—whenever I got back, whatever problem I was trying to work out always seemed to be much simpler.

But just as I leapt over the frozen remains of a small creek, I picked up a strange scent. I stopped in my tracks and looked around, immediately on edge. Someone was here—someone who didn’t belong.

And just as I started to wonder who it was, Blaine’s wolf moved out of the shadows and stepped in front of me.

# Episode 2923

“You guys!” I said, looking desperately around. “*Elle’s gone!*”

“What?” Lola cried, running toward me. “What are you talking about?”

“What part of *gone* wasn’t clear?” I asked, my voice shrill.

I was furious with myself. I couldn’t believe I’d taken my eyes off her. *Here!* At the mall! Where there were literally thousands of places into which she could disappear.

“Where did she go?” Torin asked, looking around.

“I don’t know,” I said. “She was *just* here. I looked over at her a second ago! It doesn’t make any sense!”

I was starting to feel hot, and panic was starting to set in. I remembered Elle back at the pack house, throwing furniture around with her preternatural strength. That would be hard to explain away, and it wasn’t worth imagining the kind of havoc she could wreak here, if she put her mind to it. I knew Elle didn’t *mean* to be violent, and she probably wouldn’t intentionally hurt anyone, but if she got spooked by something, who knew what could happen?

I could picture it now: Elle at the police station, being interviewed in one of those little rooms with the two-way mirrors, and spilling the beans about *everything*—how she used to be a wolf, the werewolves she lived with now, everything. The police would freak out, it would end up on the news, werewolves everywhere would be exposed and forced to go into hiding—total chaos, and all because I’d lost track of Elle for thirty seconds at a mall.

“*Cali!*” Lola snapped her fingers in front of my face. “Hey! Are you with me?”

I snapped back to reality and looked around. The mall was crowded with people. I shook my head, feeling hopeless. “How are we ever going to find her here?”

Jay and Lola shared a glance, and I was surprised to see that they looked… amused?

“What?” I asked, looking between them. “What am I missing?”

Jay put his hand on my shoulder. “Cali, you’re with a bunch of wolves, remember?”

“So, what does that matter—” I started, but stopped when Jay put his finger to his own nose. “*Oh*, right,” I said, smiling weakly. I felt pretty ridiculous for forgetting that wolves were great at tracking, but I shook it off. “Let’s go find her.”

“Sure thing,” Jay said with a smile.

He started off, leading the way through the crowd and trying to look normal as he tracked Elle’s scent through the masses of people. We’d been moving for about ten minutes when he stopped and pointed. “She’s there!”

We were standing on a balcony overlooking the first level of the mall, and Jay was pointing downstairs into the food court. As I scanned the crowd, I caught a glimpse of Elle’s deep red hair. For a moment I felt relief flood through me, but that turned back to anxiety when I saw that Elle was clutching a large tray of food and seemed to be in the middle of a heated argument with the guy behind the counter at Panda Express—who looked pissed.

“Oh no,” I moaned, and sprinted down the escalator, pushing past a dozen people. I dodged through the food court and hurried over to Elle. “Are you okay?” I asked her breathlessly.

The Panda Express guy glared at me. “No, she’s *not* okay.”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“She’s trying to leave without paying for her food,” he said coldly, pointing to Elle’s tray.

Elle looked agitated, and her gaze darted between the Panda Express guy and me. “Pay? What does ‘pay’ mean?”

She looked at me helplessly, and the Panda Express guy looked at me with an expression that said very clearly that he thought Elle was nuts, but I forced a smile back at him.

“Sorry about this, she’s—um—not used to the pay-at-the-front kind of restaurant,” I hastily explained.

The guy looked unimpressed. “I don’t care what she’s used to. She still has to pay!”

I looked down at Elle’s tray and saw that she’d jammed basically everything that would fit onto her tray. Shrimp and chicken skewers and every type of noodle they had. It looked like enough food for the whole pack, but I gritted my teeth and dug into my purse.

I pulled out Xavier’s credit card and shoved it at the guy, who took it with a sour expression.

“You’re lucky I didn’t call security on her,” he sniped as he ran the credit card through the machine. “Your friend needs to get her shit together.”

“I’ll explain that to her,” I muttered as I grabbed the credit card and the receipt, then ushered Elle away. We’d just grabbed a table when Torin, Jay, and Lola found us in the crowd.

“You can’t just run off like that,” I said, dropping into the seat across from Elle.

Elle had speared an enormous piece of beef and broccoli on her fork, and she shoved it into her mouth. “Smelled meat,” she mumbled around her food.

I sat back with a sigh. She’d just taken five years off my life, but she wasn’t wrong. The food court *did* smell good—and was that an Auntie Anne’s in that far corner? I could really go for a pretzel and a Diet Coke.

But I needed to focus—I knew Elle hadn’t meant to do anything wrong, but I had to make sure I was clear. For the future.

“From now on, you need to stay close to us, okay?” I said clearly.

Elle looked at me. “Stay close to the pack?”

I nodded. “The pack.”

Torin had looked a little nervous when he sat down, but with us all in agreement, he appeared to relax. He looked down at Elle’s tray.

“You’ve got more than one person could eat, girl,” he said, picking up a fork. “Can I?”

“Yes, eat,” Elle said generously, shoving the tray toward Torin. “Everyone, eat.”

Lola and I grinned at each other, grabbed forks, and dug in. We ate until what felt like an impossible amount of food was gone, then, stuffed, Jay looked around.

“What now?” he asked.

After Elle’s escape act, I was ready for a quiet afternoon, so I was about to suggest we head back to the pack house, but Lola’s face lit up, and she spoke before I could.

“Makeovers!” she squealed, looking at Elle.

Elle looked confused, but intrigued. “*Make-over?*”

Lola nodded. “Totally.” Her eyes ranged over Elle’s beautiful face and hair. “You’re so gorgeous, it’ll be super fun. Right, Cali?” she asked, looking over at me.

I groaned internally. Elle *was* gorgeous—she definitely didn’t need any help in that department—but makeovers didn’t sound like a lot of fun to me. But I didn’t want to be a party-pooper, so I smiled. “Sure.”

Elle looked at me curiously, then shrugged. “Okay. Me too.”

We threw our trash away and headed across the large mall toward the Sephora. On the way over, Torin chattered away happily about his date with Kevin.

“I think sometime I’d like to do one of those escape rooms with him,” Torin said. “It just sounds kind of thrilling. What do you think, Lola?”

As Lola answered, I felt a funny prickling on the back of my neck. I looked over my shoulder and caught sight of a guy standing still, watching Elle closely as we walked by. I kept my eyes on him as we passed, and I felt my heart rate kick up when he fell into step behind us. My senses were on high alert. Supernatural or not, this guy had clearly honed in on Elle and was now following her. Was he dangerous? Should I call security, or just ask Lola and Jay to take care of it?

Before I could make a decision, we arrived at Sephora and stepped inside. The air was close and thick with perfume, and Torin grabbed Elle’s hand and the two of them dropped into chairs before the mirrors at the front of the store.

I turned to look for the guy, and I felt a little better when I realized he hadn’t followed us into the store. That was good. Maybe we’d lost him.

“What can we do for you folks today?” said a woman in a black T-shirt, walking over to us. She looked between Torin and Elle. “Makeovers?”

“I’m going to pull some makeup for this one,” Lola said, pointing to Elle.

“So we’ll start with you,” the woman said, turning to Torin. “Let’s start with a primer.”

Torin was picking up the small boxes and opening the palates with wide, amazed eyes. “I don’t know much about this… How does all this work?” he wondered. “Is it like decorating cupcakes?”

The woman laughed. “Yeah, kind of.”

I let my shoulders relax a little as I watched Torin enjoying himself. But everything tensed again when I caught sight of a familiar face. It was the guy who’d been following us! Now he was hiding behind a lipstick display and leaning out just far enough to stare at Elle. He wasn’t just looking at her—he was *staring* at her with so much intensity that my hackles went up.

I marched right over and stopped in front of him.

“*Hey!*” I said sharply. “Why are you following us?”

# Episode 2924

**Xavier**

I stared at Blaine, completely taken aback to see him out here. I’d imagined that the Samara pack would be sticking close to their land so they could celebrate their new Alpha. The post-announcement party was a fairly traditional part of the Alpha process, and it could last for days.

*What the hell are you doing here?* I demanded.

Blaine didn’t answer right away, but as he moved toward me, I could see that he had his hackles up. Hostility radiated off him in waves.

*I’m on a run*, he said shortly. *That’s allowed. It’s a free world, isn’t it?*

His dismissive tone put my teeth on edge.

*We both know this is Redwood land, man*, I growled.

*Is it?* he asked contemptuously. *Guess I ran a little further than I thought.*

I gave him a long look. *Did Knox send you out here?*

Blaine laughed, the sound overly loud in my head. *I gotta say, man, it’s starting to sound like you’re obsessed with my Alpha, you know what I mean? Like Knox spends as much of his time thinking about you as you clearly do about him. I know this might surprise you, but not everything’s about Xavier Evers.*

Blaine’s attitude was really starting to piss me off.

I took a step closer to him*. You’ve got it backward, man. Knox isn’t worth my time. I just don’t like unwelcome wolves in my territory*.

I couldn’t help but notice that Blaine had dodged my question, which made me feel fairly certain that Knox *had* sent him. But why? Knox was unpredictable, but this made me extra wary about what game he was playing.

Blaine smirked, his eyes flashing. *It sounds like you’re getting angry, Xavier. You trying to get me to fight you? This time as wolves?*

The last part came out as a growl, which made it sound like a threat. I didn’t like that, and I took another menacing step closer.

*You looking for a fair fight this time?* Blaine pushed. *Wolf to wolf?*

Holy shit, this guy was good at getting under my skin. He seemed like a total clown, but he was a fucking genius when it came to pissing me off.

*I could kick your ass in whatever form we’re in*, I snarled back.

Blaine didn’t seem to like that, and he narrowed his eyes. Then he charged me, knocking into me with the force of a charging bull. But I was ready and had braced for it.

This made him bounce backward onto his ass, and he didn’t seem to like that either. He jumped back to his feet, snarling and snapping his teeth. He charged again, changing course at the last moment so he hit me from the side and dug his claws into my ribs.

The pain burned hot as fire, and I let out a furious snarl as I shoved him off me. Then I gave him a vicious kick with my back legs. All the air left him in one hard gasp, and while he fought for air, I took a swipe at his muzzle that sent him tumbling to the ground.

He whimpered in surprise and pawed at his face. He looked shocked by the blood.

*If you know what’s good for you, you’ll stay the hell out of Redwood territory. You hear me?* I growled.

It took all my self-discipline to stop myself from going in for the kill. If it were fully up to me, I’d have ripped the guy’s throat out, but I knew that wasn’t an option. No matter how satisfying, it would only kick up trouble with the Samara pack.

*And you tell Knox that if he sends anyone else onto my land, I’ll be sending them back to him in a fucking body bag. You got me?*

Blaine looked up at me, and his gaze seemed less sure. There was a long gash from the corner of his eye to his mouth that was bleeding freely, so the pain was probably part of that, but he still managed to grin up at me.

*Xavier Evers, you think you’re so fucking smart, but you don’t understand what’s really going on here. You have no idea.*

*You’re not all that deep, dude. I understand perfectly*, I snarled, baring my teeth at Blaine, who flinched. *And I hope you understand that I don’t want to ever see you around here again. Got me? Now get the fuck out of here.*

Blaine got to his feet and stretched. He was clearly trying to look casual, but I saw him cover a little wince, which made me happy.

*You should think about chilling out, man. You’re too tense. Bet you get that a lot, huh?*

*Get the fuck out of here*, I said flatly. I wasn’t interested in Blaine’s life tips.

He gave me a small smile, still managing to look smug as hell. *Oh, I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other soon enough.* He shrugged his shoulders. *One way or another.*

Now what the hell was *that* supposed to mean?

But before I could respond to this little cryptic goodbye, he bounded off into the woods and disappeared.

I frowned after him. My thoughts spiraled. What the hell was Knox playing at?

It could be literally anything, and I knew I could make myself crazy trying to figure it out, so I shook my head and turned, starting to run in the opposite direction to the one Blaine had taken.

I ran for another ten miles, but my thoughts were as muddled as ever. The peace of the run was ruined, and there was no point in keeping going. I needed to talk to Greyson about Blaine’s little visit—and the run wasn’t doing me any good—so I turned and headed back to the pack house.

I shifted as I climbed the porch steps, and I was almost at the door before I saw Greyson sitting on a deck chair, sipping a cup of tea.

“We’ve got a problem,” I said, turning to him.

Greyson groaned. He was sitting back in the chair and looked like he might have been having a pleasant morning before I’d showed up. But he looked over at me. “What’s going on now?”

“While I was running, I came into contact with Blaine, from the Samara pack.”

“What’s he doing on our land?” Greyson asked.

“Exactly what I asked him. He didn’t have an answer. I think Knox sent him,” I said.

Greyson frowned. “Why would he do that?”

I shrugged. “Who the fuck knows, but Knox is always up to something, and Blaine was real dodgy about it when I asked him straight up if he was here on Knox’s orders.”

Greyson sighed. “Okay. So we don’t know exactly what Knox is trying to do here, but we have to get to the bottom of it. If Knox is planning on antagonizing the Redwood pack just for the hell of it, we need to make it clear that we’re not going to stand for that shit.” He paused for a moment. “You need to talk to Ava.”

My wolf—who loved this idea because he was a masochist—leapt with excitement when he heard Ava’s name. I quelled the feeling and nodded. “Fine. I’ll call her.”

“No, not a call,” Greyson said. “You need to meet with her in person. This needs to be done face-to-face.”

“Why?” I snapped. “What does it matter?”

“It’s too easy to lie over the phone. You need to look her in the eye for this.”

I frowned. I didn’t like the idea of having to spend time with Ava after the dream I’d had about her. It felt like Knox was causing me nothing but problems—he was the reason I had to be involved in this ruse with Ava at all. Fuck that guy.

“Hey.” Sage poked her head out the door and smiled at us. “This just came for you,” she said, holding up an envelope. She looked at the envelope critically. “It looks like it’s from the Vanguards.”

Greyson and I looked at each other. *Shit. What now?*

Sage handed the envelope over, and Greyson broke the elaborate wax seal on the back. The card inside was the thick, creamy cardstock favored by Lucian, and was instantly recognizable as being from the Vanguards.

Greyson quickly scanned the card. “It’s from Lucian. I’m invited to an Alpha dinner tonight.” He kept reading. “All Alphas in the immediate area will attend. So Knox and Mace and the rest of them will be there. I’ve got a plus one for my Luna, and Lucian’s made a note that Cali should come.”

I tensed at this.

Greyson looked up at me. “Well, this is it.”

“What’s it?” I snapped. The arrival of the invitation had put me on edge.

Greyson raised his eyebrows. “This is your chance to talk to Ava without Knox.”

# Episode 2925

Even as I stepped forward, getting right in the face of the guy who’d been following Elle, my mind was racing. Who the hell was he? Nerves started eating away at me, and I wished Xavier or Greyson were with me. Both, preferably. Anyone who was as interested in Elle as this guy seemed to be was bound to be trouble.

But the guy looked a little surprised by my intensity, and he took a startled step backward.

“Well?” I demanded.

The guy pointed at Elle, who was looking at a large makeup brush that she’d picked up from the makeup artist’s gear. She was using it to put blush on her arms while Lola tried to stop her. The rest of the Sephora staff just looked baffled.

“That girl,” he said, looking at Elle. “The redhead. What’s her name?”

I narrowed my eyes and crossed my arms over my chest. “That isn’t any of your business,” I said sharply.

“No, I just want—”

“I don’t care what you want,” I snapped. “She’s not interested in randos, so why don’t you just move right along?”

The guy stared at me for a moment longer, with a puzzled, almost amused look on his face, then he pulled a business card from his pocket. He handed it to me, and I looked down at it, reading quickly.

*Joel Crawford, Model Recruitment*

*Powers Models, LLC*

“That’s me,” he said, pointing to the name. “I’m Joel, and I’m with Powers Models, and I think your friend over there could be a huge star.”

I looked over at Elle, who was using a tube of lipstick to draw on her face like a football player.

“*Her?*” I asked, perplexed.

Joel Crawford looked at Elle, his eyes going misty as he stared at her. He seemed captivated by her, and he nodded. “Yeah, her. There’s just something special about her. Something wild.”

I snorted a laugh. “Well, I’ll give you that.”

“Will you introduce me?” Joel asked eagerly. “I’d just love to talk to her. Take her out for coffee or a drink, discuss her options. Maybe we can even get some headshots done. Hell, I’d settle for some Polaroids if that’s all we’ve got. Do you know if there’s a Best Buy in this mall?”

Joel was clearly enthusiastic, but I was not. This was not good. I had *known* something like this was going to happen—Elle was just way too gorgeous for her own good.

“No, I can’t introduce you,” I said, cutting Joel off mid-sentence.

“Why not?” he asked, baffled.

“She’s not interested. Sorry,” I said, not feeling remotely sorry.

“But how do you know?” the guy persisted. “Have you spoken to her about this? Are you her manager or something?”

“No,” I scoffed. “I’m just a friend.”

“Oh!” Joel’s face brightened. “So she’s not repped by anyone yet. That’s great.” He looked past me, and his eyes went dreamy again, so I knew he was looking at Elle. “It’s hard to believe no one has snatched her up yet. She must have been hiding herself away somehow, for no one else to have noticed her. I can just see her on the catwalk, or the cover of French *Vogue*. She could run any town she set foot in.”

I looked at Joel, then at Elle, then back at Joel.

“Listen,” I said with a frown. “She’s really not interested in modeling. Trust me on that.”

There was no way Elle even knew what the concept was.

But either Joel wasn’t listening to me, or he chose to ignore me, because he moved to step closer to Elle. Lola looked up and, seeing me looking unhappy, stepped forward to help, blocking Joel’s path. She shot me a questioning look, and behind her I could see Jay, too. Torin had looked up and, seeing what was going on, stood from his chair.

“I said *no*,” I said firmly.

Joel looked around, taking in the crowd blocking his pathway to Elle, and put up his hands. “Okay, okay. Message received. But keep that card, and ask her to call me if she ever changes her mind. Or even if she’s just interested in trying it out.” His gaze slid back to Elle. “She’s a real diamond in the rough.”

I was feeling sour as I turned my back on Joel Crawford and made my way back to the group, who had lost interest when Joel walked away and were now clustered around Elle.

“Cali! Look!” Lola said happily. She spun Elle around in her chair, and I was surprised to see that she actually looked great. Lola had chosen great colors for her, and she looked less feral than she usually did. She looked pulled together—if you ignored the blush on her arms.

But when I smiled, the gesture was tight and forced.

“You look great,” I told her stiffly.

Elle smiled back at me, then looked at herself in the mirror. She looked confused, and she got to her feet, leaning in to get a better look. She seemed confused about her face and started to rub the red lipstick from her lips.

“Feels weird. I want off,” she said, rubbing her lips on the back of her hand.

Lola sighed, sounding defeated. “Fine. Maybe makeup was a little advanced for her.”

“You guys, has everyone forgotten about my date outfit?” Torin piped up, his voice plaintive. He looked around at us all. “I need to get something before we leave here, and I need help.”

Elle had wandered away, and before I answered Torin, I looked over, checking in to see that we hadn’t lost track of her again, but Jay was next to her. He was shadowing her as she walked up and down the aisles of Sephora, looking stunned by all the colors.

“Hey, who was that guy you were talking to?” Lola asked me, leaning toward the mirror and putting on a coat of bright pink lipstick. “I stepped in because you looked like you needed to make your point a little clearer, but who was he?”

I groaned. “He was a model recruiter.”

Lola looked over her shoulder at me, startled. “A model recruiter? What did he want?”

“He was interested in Elle—”

Lola’s face lit up. “That’s so cool! She should do it.”

“Lola!” I exclaimed. “What are you talking about?! You know that’s totally impossible! Elle can’t hold down a job! Any kind of a job. She can barely even speak yet. She doesn’t understand the basic structure of our economy. How is she going to get a job?”

“Yeah, I get that,” Lola said with a shrug. “But it’s still pretty cool.”

I frowned, trying to get at what about this whole thing was making me feel so weird. “He didn’t think I could be a model.”

Lola looked at me for a moment, then laughed. “Cali, you’re like well under the minimum height. As beautiful as you are, I don’t think runway modeling is in your future, girl.”

“Whatever,” I muttered. I knew Lola was right, but it didn’t make it fair, or make me feel any better about it.

“Okay, ladies, let’s go!” Torin said, pulling Lola and me out of the store. Jay followed behind us all, keeping a close eye on Elle as we walked.

We walked down the long mall corridors until Torin found a store that looked promising.

“Oh! Let’s try this one!” he said, leading us inside. “I’m just so excited to see him again,” Torin gushed as we all scoured the racks, looking for something that would suit him. “We’re going out to dinner again. I wanted to go rock climbing, but I don’t think he’s ever been and was nervous to try it. I’ll work on him yet.”

Elle sidled up to stand next to me as I looked at a rack of coats.

“What is *date*?” she asked quietly.

“Oh, um…” I paused, wracking my brain, trying to think of the best way to explain this to her. “Well, it’s when you go out to do something fun with someone you like, to see if you might want to keep spending time with them.”

Elle frowned at me. “*Go out?*”

Ugh. This was harder than I’d thought it would be. “It’s like figuring out if you want to be mates with someone.”

Elle’s expression cleared with this explanation. “*Oh!*” she said, happily, finally understanding. She turned to Torin. “Kevin is your mate.”

Torin’s face lit up like a shaft of sunlight. “I hope so!” he said happily.

Torin was clearly happy, but I winced at his words. Torin was just so invested in Kevin already, and I still didn’t know Kevin well, nor did I know how he felt about Torin. I was just worried that he was going to get his heart broken.

“Torin doesn’t *know* if Kevin his mate,” I explained to Elle.

Elle looked confused. “How can he not know?’

“Torin has to spend more time together with Kevin before he knows whether or not they really want to be mates.”

Elle took this in, thinking hard. “So.” She looked up at me. “Wolves can *become* mates?”

# Episode 2926

**Greyson**

From the look on his face, I could see that Xavier wasn’t totally onboard with the idea of going to see Ava tonight. And I couldn’t blame him for that. I even felt bad about it—even though he wasn’t talking to me about it, I knew the guy was suffering through some kind of conflict about his former mate, and they *had* just spent the night together. It was probably hard to think about seeing her again so soon, but I didn’t see an alternative. Ava was our person on the inside of the Samara pack, so if she could really be trusted—and was on our side—then we needed to find out what she’d heard from Knox. We needed all the information we could get.

He was going to have to suck it up.

“What do you think?” I asked.

Xavier hesitated a moment longer, then nodded. “Fine. I’ll go tonight.”

He turned and headed back into the house, looking grim.

I looked down at the invitation with a gusty sight. To say I wasn’t in the mood to go to a dinner party at the Vanguard palace would’ve been a *vast* understatement. I never wanted to see that place ever again. I’d been hoping our paths had diverged at last, and I wouldn’t have to see Lucian or Aysel ever again.

The last time I’d seen it, the palace had been a shambles, with whole wings decimated by Seluna’s wrathful anger. So why would Lucian want to host anything now, so soon after some pretty scary shit had gone down on his watch?

And—come to think of it—how the hell did Lucian even know about Knox becoming Alpha of the Samara pack in the first place? It had literally *just* happened, and it wasn’t like any of the Vanguards had been at the Iudicium.

I tapped the invitation against the arm of my deck chair. There were a few possible answers, and I didn’t love any of them. I didn’t like the possibility that the Vanguards and the Samaras were communicating with each other without my knowledge.

I looked down at the spiraling calligraphy on the card. There was a big part of me that just wanted to toss the invitation in the trash and pretend I’d never received it. Just ignore it all and skip the dinner… But I knew I couldn’t do that. If the Alphas in the area were meeting, then I needed to be there. I needed to be in the loop about what was being discussed, so—like it or not—I had to go. But that plus one was a joke. There was no way in hell I was bringing Cali back into that mess.

Turning in my chair, I glanced over my shoulder into the pack house. I could see Rishika in the kitchen, speaking to Orla. They were sitting at the table with mugs of tea in front of them. The sight of Rishika reminded me of what she’d said about LIPS being gone and the information I’d gotten from my mom.

I trusted Rishika—probably more than almost anyone else in the pack—but I just had to be completely sure. I knew Rishika wouldn’t lie to me, but I couldn’t know that they hadn’t missed something without checking myself. And before I left the pack house again, I needed to confirm that the pack would be safe from any outside threats. Especially with Xavier gone as well.

And now we had the Samara pack running around—doing who knew what—so I needed to make sure there were no more pesky researchers in the woods, stomping around, looking for werewolves.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and dialed Rhonda’s number. Then, thinking better of it, I headed down the deck steps and away from the house. I didn’t need anyone hearing this conversation.

“Greyson!” Rhonda picked up after only two rings. “I’m so glad you called. I was hoping to hear from you.”

I groaned internally. She’d greeted me like a friend, and the last thing I wanted was to build some kind of relationship with this woman. I didn’t want her to think I was at *all* interested in working with her. On anything.

So I kept it curt. “Is LIPS out of the area?”

She must have clocked my tone, because when she answered, she was all business. “Yes, we’re gone. We’ve removed all personnel and equipment from the area. I made sure to do everything you asked us to do.”

“And the drones?” I pressed, still not satisfied.

“The drones are gone, too,” Rhonda confirmed. “LIPS left no means of information collection behind.”

“And Dick Wigbert?” I asked, my tone icy. “I know he was around last night.”

“What? Well, he’s not there now,” Rhonda said quickly.

“Where is he?” I demanded.

“He’s here with us. He left with us, too, but he said he had a few things he had to collect and clean up last night.”

I’d been pacing along the frozen ground, and I stopped, my fists clenched hard at my sides. I didn’t disbelieve Rhonda, but I had to know for sure. “To confirm, Dick Wigbert is out of the area, and with you, correct?”

“That’s right,” Rhonda said.

“Did he say anything to you?” I asked.

“Like what?” Rhonda sounded confused.

“Anything at all. Anything… unusual?”

Like that a Fae had used memory magic on him and how he’d pulled a gun on two women? Anything like that.

“No,” she said, her tone still baffled. “He didn’t say anything. He seemed to be business as usual. Actually, he was all excited when he got back.”

“About what?” I asked cautiously.

“About a new project he wants to work on. It seems he’s always onto the next thing. That’s just how he is.”

I frowned. I didn’t like the sound of that, considering his last project had been to capture wolves, but maybe it would be good to have him move on to something else.

“You know, I don’t know how he positions himself within LIPS, or how he presents himself to you all, but you should know—he’s not a good guy.”

There was a pause from Rhonda’s end. “What do you mean?”

“He shot at one of the wolves,” I told her.

Rhonda gasped. “Oh my god, that’s horrible!”

She sounded genuinely horrified, so I went on.

“And he pulled a gun on humans. He’s dangerous. To you and everyone else at LIPS,” I said.

There was a pause, and when she spoke, I could hear that her voice had started to shake. “I heard about the wolf being shot. But it was reported by Dick as a kill from a poacher. He said the shot scared the rest of the wolves off.”

“It wasn’t a poacher,” I told her with certainty. “Dick’s the one who did it. He’s a threat to everyone—humans and wolves. And if he heads this way again, you have to tell me.”

Rhonda didn’t answer right away. “Okay. I will,” she finally said. “You can trust me, Greyson.”

“You’d better,” I warned, “because you know what’s at stake otherwise, don’t you?”

“Yes, I know,” Rhonda confirmed.

“Good,” I said, and ended the call.

I slipped my phone back into my pocket. I was glad Rhonda and I were on the same page, and now that I knew LIPS had been neutralized, that was at least one crisis out of my hair. I ran a hand across my jaw, feeling the stubble, and tried to think of what else I needed to get done today before I left for the dinner party. But I was interrupted by a voice from behind me.

“Greyson? Do you have a minute?”

I looked around and saw Big Mac standing on the deck, looking over at me. I was surprised to see her, and—it had to be said—a little alarmed. She never seemed to seek me out unless there was some kind of problem that needed solving. Or she wanted to yell at me.

“Yeah, I’ve got a minute. Is everything okay?” I asked warily.

She rolled her eyes. “You can calm down, Greyson. There’s nothing wrong.” She paused and thought for a moment. “Well, nothing new, at least.”

“Okay, what’s up?” I asked, curious.

Big Mac looked me up and down, then frowned. “You don’t look ready.”

I stared back at her for a moment, trying to figure out if this was some kind of weird test. “Ready for what?”

“Didn’t Sabine tell you?” she asked.

Now I was baffled. “Tell me what?”

Big Mac gave an angry huff and gestured sharply. “Come on. You’re coming with me. Get some shoes on, we’re leaving.”

“Leaving for where?” I asked, thoroughly confused now. “Where are we going?”

Big Mac had turned to go back inside, but she stopped and looked at me over her shoulder. “Shopping. You’re taking me to try on outfits for the wedding.”

# Episode 2927

I stared at Elle for a long moment. Becoming mates? What was she talking about?

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“How are werewolf mate chosen?” she asked. She glanced at Torin. “Spend time with? Like with Kevin?”

“Um, no, not exactly,” I said. “Just because they’ll spend time together doesn’t mean they’ll become mates.”

“Then how?” she pressed.

I glanced around, like I was going to find the answer written somewhere in the mall’s neon signage. “I don’t know, it’s just a feeling you get when you’re with someone. You just know. Kind of an instinct?”

I hoped “instinct” was a concept Elle could understand.

But she frowned. “I do not understand. Kevin *will* become Torin’s mate, yes?”

I ground my teeth together and glanced quickly around, checking to see if the normies shopping for jeans and purses were listening to this potentially very strange conversation.

“No, it’s different for Torin and Kevin,” I explained, trying to stay patient.

“Why is it different?”

“Well, to start with, they aren’t wolves,” I pointed out.

Elle’s face was grave, and she nodded, seeming to understand. “Not wolves.”

“And Greyson is a wolf, and he is *my* mate,” I reminded her.

I couldn’t help but feel a little frustrated. I thought I’d already explained all this to Elle—especially the part about Greyson being mine—and I’d *thought* she’d understood it then. But she clearly hadn’t, and that worried me slightly.

Elle nodded again. “Your mate.”

I was relieved to hear her say it out loud—maybe this time she finally did understand—and started to turn back toward Torin, but stopped again when she asked another question.

“Where is *my* mate?”

Shit. This question seemed above my pay grade, and I wasn’t sure how to go about answering it. For one thing, I had no idea if Elle even *had* a mate. Would her mate be a wolf? A human? A werewolf? There were a lot of possibilities, and the answers had my head spinning.

So I decided to take the diplomatic route. “I’m sure that if your mate is out there, Elle, you two will find each other.”

Elle looked at me thoughtfully, and I hoped to god that what I’d said was true. If she did find her mate, then maybe all this confusion with Greyson would finally clear up, Elle would be happy, and we could all move forward.

I just hoped Elle didn’t get a crush on Xavier in the meantime.

Still looking pensive, Elle wandered away from me, toward Torin, who had a few pieces of clothing laid across his arm—options for his date look. I really hoped Elle had finally grasped what I was saying to her, but it was hard to tell.

Torin stepped toward the dressing room, and Elle followed, trying to go into the little cubicle with him, but Torin smiled and gently pushed her back out, making her wait outside.

And as I looked at Elle, I remembered that the whole point of coming to the mall in the first place was to try to find some new clothes for her. She needed some. All she had were hand-me-downs from other pack members, and I didn’t think she’d changed out of the clothes she’d been wearing since she’d been turned. They were starting to get a little smelly.

“Hey,” I said, moving over to her. “We should pick out some things for you.”

“*Yes!*” Lola cried, hurrying over to us. “Let’s find something!”

Elle looked a little overwhelmed, but she nodded, and it didn’t take long before Lola and I had a huge assortment of jeans, shirts, and dresses for her to try on.

“This is enough?” Elle said, looking a little startled as she saw the pile of clothes in my arms.

“Don’t forget about these!” Lola called, waddling over with an even larger stack. It looked like she’d favored bright colors, and the clothes in her stack looked like a rainbow had exploded.

Elle swallowed hard but nodded. “Okay.”

We ushered her into a dressing room and left the clothes for her. As I shut the door, I just hoped she remembered how to put clothing on.

“*Ta-da!*” Torin said, pushing open the door to his dressing room. He was wearing a dark green bomber jacket over a turquoise sequin shirt. His jeans were charcoal grey and fit him like a glove.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“Torin!” I cried. “Oh my god, you look great!”

“You really do,” Lola agreed.

Torin turned to Jay. “What do you think?”

“You look great, man. Everything fits, and I really like how all the colors go together,” Jay said, smiling at Torin. “Kevin’s a lucky man.”

“But wait!” Torin said, grinning. “There’s more.” He ran a hand down his chest, and the sequin shirt flipped from the turquoise sequins to an electric green and yellow tone.

Either way, he looked pumped about it. “Can you believe this? I’ve ever seen anything like this before!”

His excitement was contagious, and I laughed. “It’s really cool, Torin.”

“And you like it? I look good?” he asked, sounding suddenly nervous. He turned in a circle, so we could see the outfit again. “You think Kevin will like it?”

“You look fantastic,” I assured him.

Torin smiled. “Great. I like it too. But I think I might try another outfit on. Can’t have too many choices!”

I was beginning to wonder if that was true and what time—if ever—we were going to get out of this mall, when Elle came out of her dressing room.

She was wearing one of the dresses I’d picked out for her—an ocean-blue dress with an accidentally *too* plunging neckline—and I sucked in a breath. Elle had been breathtaking in her regular, overly average clothes, but she looked absolutely *transcendent* in the dress. She moved toward us, holding out her arms.

She looked down at herself, then up at us. “Okay?”

Lola’s eyes were as big as dinner plates. “Um, yeah, that looks pretty good.”

“I’d say,” Jay added. Lola nudged him with her elbow.

Elle’s beautiful face broke into a happy smile. She twirled around, making the light fabric float out around her legs. “I like the way it feels. Like wind. Better than pants.”

I nodded, trying to ignore the sharp stab of jealousy I felt, looking at Elle. It was irrational—Elle couldn’t control how she looked. She hadn’t *wanted* to be insanely beautiful, and it was crazy of me to feel upset about it.

I watched her dancing around in the dress for a moment longer, then turned to Lola. “Okay, so she’s a dress girl. Now we know. We can work with that.”

“Excuse me?”

We all turned to see an older woman approaching us, looking a little nervous.

“Yeah?” Lola asked warily.

“Your friend,” the woman said, pointing to Elle. “I think she looks familiar. Is she an actress?”

Elle heard the question and turned, confused. “Actress? What is actress?”

*Come on!* Strangers were approaching her now to tell her how beautiful she was? That she looked *famous*?

“No, she’s not an actress,” I said.

“A model?” the woman pressed.

“No,” I said. *Not yet, anyway*, I thought to myself.

“Is she one of those people on the Instagram, or the TicTap? An influencer?” the woman asked, reaching for the phrase.

“Nope,” I said, starting to feel a little edgy.

The woman shrugged, smiling at Elle. “You just have that look, I guess. You’re so beautiful. You’re practically glowing. Like sunshine.”

Elle smiled back at her, and I couldn’t help but think I could have skin like that if I’d spent the first twenty years of my life running every day and never eating any processed foods.

“I’m just a human girl,” Elle said, twirling in her deep blue dress again.

The woman looked completely enchanted by Elle, which was good for us because she didn’t question the “human” comment. The woman walked away smiling, practically stumbling into a display of hats because she couldn’t take her eyes off Elle.

Lola was looking at Elle with a critical eye. “I like it, but I think they had this dress in another color that might suit her even better. Don’t you think, Cali?”

“What?” I asked, having lost interest in the whole getting-Elle-dressed process.

“The teal green one. I think that would look even better on her. It would bring out her eyes. Would you go grab it, Cali?” Lola asked.

“Sure,” I huffed. Now I was running errands for Elle? This was quickly turning into a Cinderella story, and I didn’t like it. Did that make me one of the evil step-sisters? I needed to chill out.

I kept my mouth shut and moved toward the rack where I’d gotten the blue dress. The dress *did* come in teal green, but there was only one extra small left, so I grabbed it. But it wouldn’t come out. I tugged, and something tugged from the other side.

“What in the world—” I said, and I craned my neck so I could see who was on the other side of the giant rack.

But the person who was holding the teal green, extra small cocktail dress was the last person I’d expected to see.

“*Aysel?*”

# Episode 2928

**Greyson**

I stared at Big Mac like a deer caught in headlights. *She wants me to take her to try on clothes for her wedding? This might be my most challenging task yet.*

I’d rather fight a Lupo Finale and a horde of demons than take Big Mac shopping. *But* she was marrying my mother. And she was also kind of scary in general. As much as I wanted to do literally anything other than go on this shopping trip with her, I also had a feeling I couldn’t turn her down.

But that didn’t mean I couldn’t still try to wriggle my way out of it.

I cleared my throat. “Is this something that needs to be done right now? I have a meeting to attend this evening, and it’s really important. The wedding’s quite a ways off, right?”

“It is, but you have to be fitted, and what if I can’t find something? I need to make sure there’s time for everything that could go wrong along the way.” At my raised brows, she added, “I know. It’s a lot. If it were up to me, if I were just marrying myself, I wouldn’t even bother. But I want to make the day special for your mother.”

“And I appreciate that.” I sighed. “I want her to have the perfect wedding day too. But can’t this wait just a little longer?”

The witch’s expression flattened out. “You owe me. Practically everyone in this pack owes me for all the spells and wards I create, and since you’re the Alpha, you’ve got no choice. You’re coming. Unless, of course, you’d rather give up an eye or something else as payment for services rendered?”

*Holy shit.* Big Mac wasn’t messing around. But why was she so determined that *I* had to be the one to go with her? There had to be at least ten better candidates for this task in the Redwood pack alone. I was no good for something like this, but it was also a monumental waste of my goddamn time, which I couldn’t tolerate.

“What about Cali or Lola, or even Orla?” I suggested. “They’d probably be better equipped to help you with this.”

Big Mac shook her head. “I want you to come with me. You won’t argue. You won’t try to talk me into something I don’t want—and I know you’ll be looking out for Sabine’s best interests. And at the same time, I know I can trust you to be honest and let me know if I choose something that’s going to make me look like an idiot. That’s the bar here. Do you think you can handle that?”

I pulled in a slow, deep breath as I weighed my options. If I really wanted to, I could put my Alpha foot down. Tell Big Mac she didn’t have the authority to order me around, and that we could discuss any issues of payment if that was really a problem for her. But I really didn’t want to do that.

For one thing, it seemed like a dick move. And for another, Big Mac was going to be my step-mom. The thought was wild, and I struggled to wrap my head around it most of the time, but it was the truth. It wasn’t like she was going away anytime soon. I was going to have some kind of relationship with this woman, whether I liked it or not. It was better to put my best foot forward. And maybe this could even be a chance to get to know her better, if that was even possible.

I sighed. “Okay. Let’s go find you a wedding dress.”

“Outfit,” she corrected me with a smile. “And I’m so glad you’re seeing things my way.”

And that was how we ended up in one of my cars, on the way to a wedding boutique. Even though it was my car, Big Mac drove, and I found I didn’t mind. It gave me a chance to think, and I had a lot to think about.

First of all, there was the matter of Lucian calling the local pack Alphas together. That situation had “impending disaster” written all over it. There was a chance it could just be a big party to welcome the shrimp as the new Alpha of the Samara pack, but Lucian never did anything out of the kindness of his heart. There had to be an ulterior motive at work.

And trying to parse out what the hell that might be made my head throb. One might have thought that after literally unleashing a demon, Lucian might take a step back and not meddle so goddamn much.

But then again, he wouldn’t be Lucian if he wasn’t stirring up shit.

And then there was the fact that Knox was probably the least qualified Alpha I’d ever met in my life—and I’d seen some pretty shitty Alphas. Like Nolan. Lucian also came to mind.

“Have you made any progress recovering the demon’s ashes?” Big Mac asked, breaking the silence that had settled between us for the last ten miles or so.

I shook my head. “I’m sorry to report that we’re no closer than we were before.” *There’s one more problem to think about.*

“Remember what Vander said: Cali and Dani are going to have big problems if the ashes aren’t sent to the demon world.”

“Believe me, I don’t need to be reminded. I’m well aware.” I shot her a glance. “If you have any ideas, I’m open to them.”

Her fingers tightened on the steering wheel. “I wish I did.”

“I’d hoped it was someone from my past—or even Xavier’s—who was responsible for stealing the ashes. At least then we’d have somewhere to start. We’d have a motive or *something*. But we’ve got nothing. There’s still a chance to hear from someone, but so far… nothing. And the thing I don’t understand is why. Whoever stole them must have had a reason—and if it was something as simple as wanting a ransom, then why haven’t they reached out to make their demands? Why haven’t we heard from whoever the hell this asshole is?”

“It must not be for money,” Big Mac said. “It has to be for some other reason. A reason they don’t want you to know.”

We pulled up in front of a boutique suit shop, and I frowned. “What are we doing here? I thought we were finding you a wedding dress? I have plenty of suits.”

She rolled her eyes. “The suit’s not for you. It’s for me.”

“Oh.” Suddenly, this whole thing made a lot more sense. “You know, I did always kind of imagine you in a suit. Does my mom know?”

As far as I knew, Sabine’s only requirement was that Big Mac’s wedding attire not be black. Though, she’d probably be on board with whatever Big Mac felt comfortable in, whatever the color.

The witch shook her head. “I didn’t tell her exactly what I’m thinking, and right now I’m still feeling it out. That’s probably why Sabine was so fixated on it. She doesn’t always love surprises. But it’s one of the reasons why I wanted you to come along. Sabine would try and talk me out of it if it looked awful, but I’m not very interested in a dress. Or maybe I will be. Who can say?”

I shrugged. “It’s all good with me. Whatever you want to wear is cool.” I wanted to tell her that I literally couldn’t have cared less what she wore to her wedding, but, again, I was trying *not* to be an asshole to my future stepmother.

“Great.” She turned off the engine and stepped out of the car. “Let’s get this over with.”

*Yes, please.* I needed to get back to the pack house ASAP so I could prepare for the Vanguard meeting. *Should I bring Cali?* That could be another way to suggest to the other packs and their Alphas that Cali was my Luna without making her one officially.

We entered the shop, and the attendant beelined for us. Well, for *me*.

“Welcome, sir,” he said. “What kind of suit are you looking for today?”

I shook my head and pointed at Big Mac. “It’s for her. She’s getting married.”

The attendant recovered quickly. Clearly, he didn’t want to risk losing a sale. “Wonderful! Ma’am, may I show you some of our most popular wedding styles?”

He whisked Big Mac away, and I sank into a plush leather chair, watching as Big Mac turned down everything the attendant suggested.

*That guy is gonna earn the hell out of his commission.*

After some back and forth with the attendant, Big Mac finally found a suit she liked enough to try on. It was simple and dark with a splash of deep purple.

*Well, it’s not fully black, so there’s that.*

Big Mac stepped into the dressing room to try the suit on, and the attendant sidled up to me. “May I ask how you know the bride?”

“She’s marrying my mother.”

“Oh! Well, your mother’s fiancée has very, very expensive taste. Perhaps you’d like to purchase a matching suit?”

Before I could even begin to shut this guy down, Big Mac called out, “Greyson! Come here.”

I’d never heard her sound so panicked, so I hauled ass out of my chair and over to the dressing room. She yanked me in and shut the door behind me. Big Mac was wearing the suit jacket.

“We’ve got a problem,” she said as she turned around to show me the back of the jacket, which had split at the seams.

# Episode 2929

My jaw dropped.

*What the hell is Aysel doing here?*

Of all the places in Oregon, she’d shown up on the one day my friends and I decided to go to the mall? I hadn’t thought she was someone who set foot in a mall. Yet, here she was.

“Are you following me?” I asked.

Aysel laughed. “Is everything always about you? Believe it or not, we royals enjoy shopping just as much as the regular people. I need some clothes that haven’t breathed the same air as Seluna.”

A shudder slipped down my spine. If I never heard that name again, it would be too soon.

Belatedly, I felt a flash of irritation at her attitude. After everything she and her brother had put me through, stalking me to the mall didn’t really seem outside the realm of possibility.

“Guess I didn’t picture you as the type to buy something off the rack,” I said.

She smirked, then eyed the dress in my hands. “Is that for you?”

“I, um, n-no. It’s not.”

She nodded. “It’s for the best. It’s a beautiful dress—too beautiful for you. We must never let the things we own upstage us, after all.”

*Who the hell just goes around saying stuff like that?*

I ground my teeth together so hard my molars creaked. “The dress is for a friend, actually.”

Aysel looked over my shoulder, her brows lifting in understanding. “Are you referring to the stunning, drop-dead gorgeous werewolf who’s been hanging around Greyson? You must feel very confident about the strength of your mate bond. Anyone else would feel threatened, allowing someone so breathtakingly beautiful to come within ten feet of her mate.”

My mind scrambled for a response that a) wouldn’t invite further questions about Elle, and b) would leave my dignity intact. I came up empty. Yes, Elle was gorgeous. The kind of gorgeous that made people look twice. And yes, I was… me. Nowhere near her level of beauty.

But Greyson and I had talked about this already. Sort of. I didn’t need to feel insecure. Elle’s beauty didn’t have anything to do with me, and it certainly wasn’t a threat to my mate bond with Greyson.

And, more importantly, I didn’t want Aysel learning anything else about the newest member of the Redwood pack. I could only imagine the chaos that would unfold if Lucian learned the truth about Elle’s origins.

“Her name is Elle.” I frowned. “And how do you even know about her?”

Aysel shrugged. “As princess, it’s my business to keep up with everything happening in the neighboring packs. Now, aren’t you going to introduce me?”

Honestly, there was nothing in this world I wanted to do less than introduce our still-feral new pack member to the sociopath “princess” of the Vanguard pack, but I also didn’t want to look petty, or make this into a bigger thing than it needed to be, so I nodded.

*Here’s hoping Elle doesn’t do anything too embarrassing.*

Ha ha. Yeah, right.

I led Aysel over to Elle, who was standing in front of a full-length mirror, staring at herself and making faces.

“How… cute,” Aysel said.

I cringed.

“Elle, this is Aysel. She’s from the Vanguard pack.”

Elle’s eyes widened when she caught Aysel’s reflection in the mirror, and she spun around to face us with a huge smile. “So pretty.”

And then she, I shit you not, reached out to pet Aysel’s hair.

“Well, aren’t you simply charming!” Aysel smiled as she casually stepped out of Elle’s reach. “And you’re very pretty, too.”

My lips thinned. Right. Like I needed any more reminders of just how pretty Aysel was. I doubted Aysel needed them, either.

Aysel took a slow lap around Elle, like she was Meryl Streep’s character from *The Devil Wears Prada*, and Elle was a model she was sizing up. The action put my nerves on edge. I couldn’t even begin to assume what Aysel’s angle was here. Did she just want to stick her nose into Redwood affairs so it’d be easier to meddle and try to control us? Or did she consider Elle a rival, somehow?

Either way, the thought of Aysel—and her brother—knowing Elle’s origin story made my stomach churn.

“You don’t look familiar,” Aysel said. “What pack are you from?”

“From the—”

“She’s the newest member of the Redwood pack,” I blurted out, scrambling for an answer. “She just joined from another pack.”

That was explanation enough, right? And it was the truth, so Aysel couldn’t even accuse us of trying to lie to her.

I should have known better than to think Aysel would just let the whole thing go. “Oh, welcome.” Aysel smiled again. “What pack were you a part of?”

Once again, Elle made to answer the question, and I butted in to save us all. “You won’t have heard of it. She’s from the east coast. She’s a transplant, our Elle!” I laughed, and it sounded so fake it took every ounce of self-control I possessed to not grimace.

Aysel scoffed. “I’m a princess. I know *all* the packs.” She turned her attention back to her appraisal of Elle. “Are you from the New England Morning Star pack? Wait, no. You must be from the Umbra pack, yes? I’ve met many members from that pack, and you look like you could be their kin.”

I groaned. *Oh my god, Aysel. Just let. It. Go.*

“Yes! That one. The Umber—”

“Umbra,” Aysel corrected.

“Right. The Umbra pack. Elle decided the east coast wasn’t suiting her, so she came out west. And she joined the Redwoods.”

“Great story,” Aysel deadpanned. She seemed annoyed that I kept butting in on her little interrogation, but I couldn’t have cared less how she felt.

*Maybe if I keep annoying her, she’ll just go away. Forever.*

“What wasn’t suiting you about your home pack?” Aysel asked. “Did you come out to look for your mate?”

I thought about Elle’s infatuation with Greyson, and Lola’s suggestion that she’d “imprinted” on him. *Yeah, no.* I needed to shut that shit down fast.

“She’s just visiting for a while,” I said. “She’s the daughter of Greyson’s distant cousin.”

Aysel’s eyes narrowed. “His cousin? From the Umbra pack?”

I pasted on a smile and shrugged. “I guess they do things a little differently over there.” I shoved the dress into Elle’s hands before Aysel could ask any more questions. “Why don’t you try this on?”

Elle gasped and ran her hands over the material. “So pretty!” She took it and ran toward the dressing rooms.

“Wait!” I called after her in a panic, because that was always how it seemed to go with Elle. Life with her was one continuous, never-ending disaster.

She skidded to a stop, nearly toppling over a mannequin.

“I’ll go with you,” I said. It was a good excuse to get out of further conversation with Aysel, but my bigger concern was that Elle was somehow going to trash the dress while trying it on. “Excuse me, Aysel. It was good seeing you.”

She smirked. “Oh, I’m sure it was.”

*Ugh…*

Lola and Jay chose that moment to join us, and Lola looked at her wide-eyed. “What are you doing here?”

“I find it interesting that everyone is so curious about me,” Aysel mused. “I guess that’s one of the many wonderful things about being a princess. Everybody wants to know what I’m doing.” She turned and headed toward a rack of clothes.

Hopefully that was the last we’d see of her for a long time.

“I don’t understand why someone like Aysel would shop in a department store,” Lola said. “Her clothes always look custom made.”

I was inclined to agree—much as I hated to compliment anything about Aysel, including her clothes. But shopping at a mall just seemed… beneath her. I thought again about my knee-jerk reaction to her presence.

*Is she here to spy on us?*

“Um… Elle is going into the dressing room by herself,” Jay pointed out. “Shouldn’t someone be with her?”

Lola volunteered. “I’ll do it. I feel like I’m actually making progress with her, which is great!”

Jay and Lola headed off in pursuit of Elle, leaving me alone to search for more clothes. I kept stealing looks at Aysel. Right now, she was holding up a dress in front of a full-length mirror. The same mirror Elle had been making faces in.

*What is she doing here?*

Aysel and Lucian combined had more clothes than I’d ever seen. Probably enough to clothe a whole town. And, as Lola had pointed out, none of their clothing looked like it came from a mall.

Aysel turned on her heel and started heading back in my direction. I ducked my head, but it was too late. She’d seen me.

*Crap.*

She sidled up to me and started browsing through the racks. “So, Caliana, I’m assuming you’re here to buy a dress for dinner tonight?”

I blinked. “Dinner?”

“Oh.” Aysel shrugged. “You probably missed the invitation, since you’re here. It’s a little Alpha business. Don’t worry—no more surprise demonic ceremonies.” Her casual reference to the way her brother had given my body to a demon made me want to rip her in half. “But you do have to come. Lucian always lets me have a private party with the Lunas. You *will* be there, right?” She glanced beyond me, to the dressing rooms. “And why not bring Greyson’s cousin, too?”

# Episode 2930

**Xavier**

I paced in my room, pissed off. Word had passed around the pack about the Vanguard invitation for Greyson *and* for Cali. I hated the idea that that stupid Vanguard invitation had included Cali. Where did Lucian get off with that?

The whole thing just irritated me to no end. I hated the idea of Greyson potentially dragging Cali back to the place that held so many bad memories for her. Where that fucking asshat Lucian had literally unleashed a demon on the world. It was bad enough that Greyson was going at all, that he was representing the Redwood pack as its Alpha.

*Fuck him.*

I was an Alpha wolf too—just not the Redwood one. Not yet, at least. I should be going to that meeting. I should be the one rubbing elbows with all the other pack Alphas and trying to figure out what fresh hell Lucian was getting all of us into now.

But instead of doing what I’d been born to do, I had to go see Ava again and deal with this never-ending Knox bullshit. Apparently, this was going to be my responsibility for-fucking-ever. On top of that I had to figure out, somewhere along the way, whether or not I could truly trust her.

It wasn’t like I hadn’t wrestled with this question before. Hell, I’d been wrestling with it from the moment she’d walked out of that mirror and started fucking up my life. And it pissed me off to no end that I still didn’t have an answer.

If Ava were anyone else, I would have killed her all over again ages ago. She wouldn’t still be around, toeing the line between friend and foe, confusing my wolf and generally driving me batshit crazy.

I didn’t want to see her tonight, or any night. And the fact that Greyson had told me to go only made the whole thing worse. The fact that he was exerting his position as Alpha by giving me that order. He didn’t have to order me around like I was his fucking errand boy.

Of course, my wolf was all in for the mission. As far as that lovesick idiot was concerned, any excuse to see Ava was valid. I hoped to hell I didn’t run into any problems with my wolf. Shifting issues were the very last thing I needed to deal with right now.

I had to be completely focused tonight. I’d been wary of the Samara pack ever since the pack wars had torn apart our alliance with them, and that wariness hadn’t faded with Nolan’s death and the pack’s disintegration.

But now that Knox was leading the pack and Blaine and his playground bullies were officially Samara pack members, I felt like I was entering enemy territory.

And we all knew what werewolves did to those who trespassed on territory that wasn’t their own.

I could handle Blaine and his stooges, if push came to shove. I’d been in far more dangerous situations and had made it out alive. But I was gonna breathe easier when this task was over.

*At least the shrimp won’t be around to irritate me. Greyson will get to deal with that shithead tonight. Lucky him.*

I thought back to what Greyson had told me, that he wanted me to read Ava’s face in person, to see if I thought she was being truthful.

He knew all about the shit I was dealing with. He’d told me to deal with it, but kept sticking his nose in it anyway. My brother thought he was acting like an Alpha, but all he was doing was micromanaging every aspect of pack life.

If he actually trusted my word, and my connection to Ava, I wouldn’t have to go and “read her face in person.” I knew Ava better than anyone, and I’d be the first to admit there were plenty of credible reasons to doubt her, but my gut instinct—and my wolf—was telling me that Ava was being sincere.

As I took a seat on the edge of my mattress, I thought back to that dream I’d had. How close Ava and I had been. In that dream, I’d just made her my Luna. I’d *chosen* her.

It wasn’t just a wild dream that had appeared out of the blue—it meant something. And it was driven by the messy feelings I had for her. The whole thing was complicated—a series of layers and feelings that included my love for her and the fact that she’d killed my mother. How I resented her presence in my life, but my wolf still considered her his mate. How I’d forgiven her for what she’d done. How I was tired of hating her. How some small part of me trusted her.

It wouldn’t be such a stretch, then, to think I’d be able to love her again. That there could be a day when I’d choose her.

Or at least, it wouldn’t have been impossible in a world without Cali.

As long as I had my mate—my true mate—any kind of future with Ava was off the table.

At least with Cali, my feelings were simple. I loved her. She and I were mates—plain and simple.

With Ava, it was this whole other knotted thing. I didn’t even know where to begin untangling it, or if I even wanted to.

I blew out a breath and shoved the sexy part of the dream from my mind. I scanned my bedroom and stopped on the saint medal sitting on my dresser.

The medal I’d asked about, and had been told to forget.

I picked it up, and a piece of my dream flashed through my mind. Not of Ava, but of the mysterious figure, the person who’d been watching from the shadows of the woods. I had no doubt there was a connection there. I felt it, deep in my bones.

*Maybe I should try talking to Kira. She can try her magic again, and maybe it will jar my memory just enough to bring that face out of the shadows.*

With my fingers wrapped tight around the medal, I left my room and searched for Kira. I found her in the kitchen, brewing a cup of tea.

She took one look at me and asked, “What’s wrong?”

My brows rose. “It’s that obvious?”

She just smiled. “What’s bothering you?”

I quickly explained the non-Ava part of my dream. “It’s been nagging at me. I feel like I know the person I saw in my dream, but I just can’t remember them. Can you do that memory spell again?”

She frowned and looked down at her mug. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to mess around with your memories for a second time.”

“But—”

“Why don’t you close your eyes and tell me exactly what you saw. Maybe it will come to you naturally?”

I sighed. This wasn’t the response I’d been hoping for, but why the hell not?

I closed my eyes and thought back to the dream, careful to leave out the parts about Ava. “I’m walking through the woods. Alone. I can sense someone watching me.”

“Good,” Kira murmured. “What else?”

“I turn around, and I see someone hidden in the shadows.”

“Call out to them. Tell them to show themselves.”

I felt like an asshole, but I played along. Keeping my mind fixed on the image of the woods and the lurking shadow, I called out, “Hey, you. Show your face, you coward.”

Then, to my shock, the figure started to move toward me and step into the light.

My heart pounded. This was it. The person responsible for stealing Seluna’s ashes was about to expose themselves.

Then the figure stepped into the light and lowered their hood.

I could see their face, but they had no identifying features whatsoever. It was like looking at a mannequin.

“Who are you?” I demanded.

And then the dream collapsed, flitted out of my mind, and I was back in the kitchen with Kira. I blew out a breath. “Fuck.”

She took a sip of her tea. “I’m guessing you were close to seeing their face?”

“Maybe? Except they didn’t have one.”

“Hmm. Hopefully it’s just a matter of time,” she said. “If it’s someone you know, eventually you’ll be able to see some details, something that will help you solve this.”

Great. More waiting. “Thanks. Sorry to bother you.”

She shook her head. “There’s no need to apologize. I think this memory will come back to you in time. You just need to be patient.”

Had she met me? “Yeah, I don’t know if I have time to do that.”

I headed back to my room. Why did I even bother? Being so close and then falling short had only worsened my already shitty mood. It was like the shadow figure’s identity was on the tip of my tongue.

I checked my phone. The old contact who’d tried to warn me off hadn’t responded to my text. No leads there, either.

I set the medal back on my dresser, and my phone buzzed with a text.

Ava.

The sexy dream flashed into my mind, and I pushed it away as I grabbed my phone to read her text.

*I’ve been invited to the Vanguard party tonight.*

*What the hell is Lucian up to?* I wondered. *Was he inviting everyone but me?*

I texted Ava back. *He’s only inviting pack Alphas. How do you fit into that? You’re not even a Luna.*

*Aysel invited me, not Lucian.*

Ah. There was one question answered, at least.

*You can’t trust either of them*, I warned her.

*I know. I’m not going. I want to talk to you about Knox. I’m worried my cousin is planning to start a war.*

# Episode 2931

**Greyson**

Well, this was a situation I’d never imagined myself being in.

I stared at the split seam in the jacket, which ran from just beneath the collar to halfway down Big Mac’s back. It wasn’t just a little tear in the fabric. For all intents and purposes, the jacket was ruined.

As I took in the catastrophic damage to the jacket, I remembered suddenly what the attendant had said. Big Mac had expensive taste.

This material did look expensive. And tricky to repair.

A knock sounded at the dressing room door.

“Is everything okay?” the attendant asked.

“Yes!” I called back. “We’re just, um, discussing the suit. If it’s a good fit for the theme.”

I had no idea what the fuck I was talking about.

“Send him away,” Big Mac whisper-yelled.

Some part of me couldn’t help but find this funny. Here we had a powerful witch who had faced down demons, vampires, evil ghosts, revenants, and Rogue werewolves, and she was terrified of a torn suit jacket? What the hell was going on in her head? Worst-case scenario, she could always enchant the salesman, right?

“Don’t worry,” I said softly. “I’m sure it happens all the time. We’ll just tell—”

“We’ll tell no one,” she snapped. “I’m going to fix it. I won’t have these people blaming me and charging me for a suit I never even got to wear properly. And it’s their fault, anyway—the sizing is completely off. Here I thought that by going to a suit store, I’d finally get a fit that made actual sense, but no.”

I blinked as she went on a long rant about the impossibility of women’s clothing sizes. About eleven seconds in, I cut her off. “How long am I supposed to stall for?”

She scoffed. “I just need the guy to not come in for a second. Why don’t you go block him out with that gigantic body of yours? Do you think you can handle that?”

“He won’t come in unless we say it’s okay,” I reminded her. “Also, you’re a witch. Can’t you just fix it really fast?”

She gave me a pointed look.

“Oh. Right. That’s what you’re trying to do.”

She yanked off the jacket, tearing it a little further in the process, and shoved it into my arms. “Hold this.”

I held out as far as I could in the enclosed space, and she ran her hand over the torn seam, muttering something under her breath in a language that was definitely not English. I watched, mildly impressed, as the seam knitted itself back together.

“There you go. Good as new.” I chuckled. “And now that you’ve both damaged and repaired it, you don’t have a choice anymore. You need to buy this one.”

Big Mac scowled. “You must be joking.”

“It’s a sign,” I insisted. “This jacket has been marked by magic. Wouldn’t it be bad luck to put it back? You’d probably be cursed. Or the poor, unsuspecting person who actually buys it. Either way, it’s not in good taste to just let it stay here, lying around, waiting for its next victim.”

She scoffed as she tugged the jacket back on—this time with a seam strong enough to support the stretch. “Don’t you dare lecture me on curses, Mr. Gets-A-New-Curse-Every-Week. You still don’t know the first thing about them. This jacket is perfectly safe for anyone to wear. You’re just trying to rush things along.”

“Mm. Fair enough.” I shrugged. “But seriously, it looks good. My mother would be a fool not to marry you. Especially in that color.”

Her scowl softened. “Do you really think so?”

“I do. Though, I suggest you try one that’s one size larger, just in case.”

She eyed herself in the mirror, adjusting the jacket here and there so it sat across her shoulders, like it was made to. “I’m trusting you on this. I don’t want to do anything that will distract from the wedding. From your mother. I want her to have the best day of her life—and I’m definitely not going to be the one who ends up standing in the way of that.”

“Is that why you were panicking? Because you’re worried the jacket will be distracting?”

Her eyes narrowed. “I wasn’t panicking. I just don’t want to do anything to screw things up. Sabine has a vision for everything. This isn’t supposed to be just any outfit, it has to be whatever she wants.”

“But what about you?” I asked. “Do you have a vision for it?”

Big Mac shrugged. “Just her at the end of the aisle.”

*Wow. She really does care about my mom. Deeply.*

I knew Big Mac was in love with my mother, but it was still a little amusing to see the prickly witch deferring to my mother’s preferences for the wedding. Normally, Big Mac seemed like a sort of island. She took care of herself, and her own opinion was the only one that seemed to carry any kind of weight.

That clearly wasn’t the case any longer. At least, not where the wedding was concerned.

I considered giving Big Mac a hug and telling her she didn’t have anything to worry about, that my mother loved her as she was, and their wedding day would be great no matter what. But I held back. Big Mac would only allow so much emotional stuff before retreating into her tough shell. It was best to simply take what she’d offered—plus, it wasn’t like I was going to open up and spill all my feelings to her either.

*God, no. Anything but that.*

“My mom will love it as long as you do,” I said simply. “You should wear this.”

She looked at herself in the mirror again and, after a beat, Big Mac nodded. “I think I will.”

I stepped out of the dressing room to face the waiting attendant. “We’ll take the suit.”

“Wonderful!” The attendant beamed. “And perhaps a few extra shirts? Or some ties?”

I agreed to look at the ties—more to move things along than anything else. I tried to picture my mom and Big Mac at the altar, and I picked out a tie that seemed to go along with the vision I had.

When Big Mac came back out, the attendant exchanged the jacket for a larger size. It was a perfect fit, and the shop’s tailor marked the suit for alterations.

As we approached the register, I glanced over at Big Mag. “Let me buy the suit. Consider it an early wedding present—and a way to say thanks for everything you’ve done.”

She hesitated, then nodded. “Thanks. But you still owe me.”

Of course I did.

And then, just like that, the tedious errand we’d both been dreading was over, and Big Mac now had a lovely suit to wear to her wedding. And Big Mac and I now had an uncomfortable shared experience that we’d forever be too embarrassed to talk about.

*Just like a real family.*

“Can you drive?” she asked as we headed to the car. “My head is killing me.”

“Sure.” I settled into the driver’s seat as she took the passenger seat. “I didn’t know that using your magic gives you headaches.”

“It doesn’t. Shopping does. I hate it—even when it’s for my own wedding.” She groaned, pressing her fingers to her temples. “But at least this time, I’m coming out with something and don’t have to go back.”

I thought about mentioning the need to go back for the fitting and alterations, but now didn’t seem like the right time.

“Close your eyes and lie back,” I said. “You’ve exerted yourself enough for one day.”

I checked my phone. I still had enough time to get back and change for Lucian’s Alpha party. Thank god. I didn’t particularly love the idea of dressing up to go spend the evening with Lucian of all people, but at least I wouldn’t be going alone. I turned on the ignition, and we began the journey back to the pack house.

I still had to tell Cali about Lucian’s invitation. Hopefully she was back from the mall by now, and Elle hadn’t done anything to cause a lockdown. I knew better than to hope that this outing had gone smoothly. Elle was still so new to everything—I couldn’t imagine a visit to a place as busy as a mall would have been anything but a disaster.

Hopefully a small, controlled disaster.

For a moment, I considered calling Cali to check in and tell her about the Vanguard party, but that seemed like a conversation we should have in person. I couldn’t imagine she’d be thrilled about returning to the Vanguard palace. It seemed like every time we promised her she’d never have to go there again, we all got pulled into some new scheme.

With any luck, this would truly be the last time.

I glanced over at Big Mac, who was reclining in the passenger seat. Her eyes were still closed, making her look only a tiny bit less intimidating than she normally did.

I couldn’t believe this woman was going to be part of my family.

*When will Cali and I get married?* I knew from those visions and dreams I’d had of our future together that marrying her would make me the happiest man on the planet. *What will Cali wear to our wedding? I doubt it’ll be a suit.*

I smiled at the thought.

Suddenly, Big Mac’s voice pulled me out of my reverie. “I’ve been thinking about Dick Wigbert. When are we going to kill him?”

# Episode 2932

I was completely blindsided.

Aysel was having a party at the Vanguard palace tonight? And *Elle* was invited?

My first impulse was to scream, *No!*

My mind filled with images of Elle running around the Vanguard palace with the same sense of disastrous wonder she applied to every other aspect of her life. I saw her ripping down curtains, knocking over centuries old sculptures, diving straight into the ritual pool, and generally pissing Lucian off with her lack of impulse control and basic manners.

And much as I actually wouldn’t have minded Lucian being pissed off, the last thing we needed was for his anger to be directed at the Redwood pack yet again. We’d gone, what? A whole week without playing some elaborate and hateful mind game with the self-titled prince of the Vanguard pack?

Better to see how much longer we could keep that streak going.

Plus, since when did the Vanguards ever throw a *real* party? Whatever this event was tonight, I would bet everything I owned that it was going to be over-the-top fancy and super fucking weird.

Elle wasn’t ready to handle that. I wasn’t sure *I* was ready to handle that.

Aysel was staring at me, wide-eyed. And it was then that I realized I’d actually been shouting that “no” out loud.

*Whoops.*

She scoffed. “Oh my god, Cali. It’s just a party. Nothing to lose your mind over. Honestly, you could loosen up.”

Yeah, I’d heard that one before. A flood of memories rushed in, of Lucian kissing me in that milk bath, of the Seluna statue coming to life, of the ten thousand ceremonies I’d witnessed there, all the fighting—oh, and that time Lucian and Aysel had locked me up and dosed me with truth serum.

How could I ever trust these people? They were just lucky I wasn’t trying to convince Greyson and Xavier to wipe them out. Especially now, when they were weak after Seluna had ripped through their ranks. I couldn’t imagine it would take much convincing on my part. Xavier and Greyson had just as much of a bone to pick with the Vanguards as I did.

But, for the sake of having, like, an entire week without having to fight for our lives, I held back. I didn’t want to do anything that might spark another conflict with the Vanguards, not even saying no to this bogus party invitation.

But Elle wasn’t ready for this. She hadn’t even been introduced to the concept of a party like this yet. She couldn’t handle a night with the conniving Vanguard pack breathing down her neck, trying to manipulate her into giving up something that would give them the upper hand.

And even if Elle weren’t such a huge liability right now, did I even want to go back to that place?

It was an easy no, honestly. If I never went back there again, it’d be too soon. But, again, I still didn’t know what the purpose of this party was. Did Aysel want me at the party? Or was Lucian pulling the strings again?

A new, concerning thought slipped into my mind. *Has Greyson already agreed to go?*

Aysel had said this event was an Alpha thing. Would Xavier be going too?

I hated that Aysel had put me on the spot, and I didn’t want to look clueless, but I also didn’t know how to answer her.

And I really, *really* didn’t want to go.

I scrambled to come up with some excuse. “I, um, I need to talk to Xavier and Greyson about this, I think. We might have plans. But regardless, Elle won’t be able to make it.”

“Oh, that’s a shame.” Aysel pouted. “But perhaps we should let Elle make that decision? It would be quite an experience for someone like her to visit the Vanguard palace. We don’t let just *anyone* in.”

And yet, I’d been invited more times than I could count. Was I supposed to feel honored?

Lola strolled over with Elle, who was wearing the dress.

My stomach tightened when I saw her. She looked like she’d just stepped out of a fashion show. All around us, the other customers and salespeople were staring at Elle like she was a movie star or something.

I could only imagine what would happen tonight at the Vanguard palace if Elle was walking around in that dress, garnering that much attention. *Yet another reason why she needs to stay home tonight.*

Aysel smiled. “You look absolutely stunning. You have to come to the palace tonight. To a party. Would you like that? Have you ever been to a royal party?” She smirked, like she knew what Elle’s response would be.

If Aysel was expecting Elle to be over the moon at the royal invitation, she was going to be disappointed. Elle just frowned. She looked confused by this offer more than anything else.

“Greyson will be there?” she asked.

Aysel nodded. “Of course he will. He’s an Alpha. All the pack Alphas will be in attendance.”

Elle seemed to think this over. “Okay.”

I grabbed her arm. “We’re not done yet. Let’s go try on some more clothes!”

Lola nodded, then glanced at Aysel with a suspicious look. “We have some serious shopping to do. Later.”

“Looking forward to seeing you tonight, Caliana and Elle!” Aysel called out as we hurried away.

*My god. She is relentless.*

I steered Elle as far away from Aysel as possible.

“What is a palace?” Elle asked.

I groaned. Of course we wouldn’t be getting out of this so easily. “It’s a place you never want to go to,” I snapped.

“I seriously can’t believe Aysel’s stirring the pot again,” Lola said as she fell in beside us. “Why can’t she just leave us all alone?”

I sighed. “I wish I knew.” A permanent break from the Vanguards would be nothing short of amazing.

“I couldn’t help overhearing,” Lola said, keeping her voice low, though Elle was probably still close enough to hear her. “Are you going to go?”

I grimaced. “I really don’t want to.”

I glanced over my shoulder to see Aysel at the register. She completed her purchase and left. Thank god.

At least now I could get a break from the incessant small talk.

Elle pointed to a lingerie set hanging on the end of a rack. “What is that?”

The set was hunter green, and my mind helpfully informed me just how amazing it would look on Elle.

“A nightmare,” I deadpanned.

We rejoined Torin as he was wrapping up his shopping for his date. He’d purchased a whole new outfit—along with a few accessories he believed would really “bring the ensemble together.” With that done, we finally headed back to the pack house.

On the drive back, Torin was practically bouncing in his seat with excitement. “I can’t wait to show Kevin my new look. I’m going to totally blow him away. He won’t know what hit him!”

He continued to hype himself up about his date, but I was only half listening. My mind kept replaying my interaction with Aysel. And when I wasn’t silently seething about Aysel’s comments, I was thinking about her fixation on Elle. How Aysel had thought she was so charming, so beautiful. How she’d immediately glommed on to the new werewolf.

I couldn’t have cared less who Aysel hung out with—as long as she stayed away from Redwood pack members—but her response to Elle rubbed me the wrong way. And it wasn’t just Aysel. Elle was so beautiful that *everyone* was drawn to her. Everyone wanted to be her friend. Even though she was basically feral. Nobody could see that past her long red hair and alabaster skin and perfect hourglass body.

I didn’t want my jealousy to mess up my budding friendship with Elle. I’d promised to help her through this transition, after all. But it was hard when everyone around us was fixated on her beauty.

The only comfort I had was that I knew Greyson wouldn’t be tempted by Elle. And she’d shown zero romantic interest in Xavier, so that was one less thing to worry about.

We finally arrived home, just as Greyson and Big Mac stepped out of one of Greyson’s cars.

Greyson’s expression was dark, which set my nerves on edge. What had happened while I was gone? Did it have anything to do with the Vanguard invitation?

Elle rushed over to Greyson and hugged him.

“At least she didn’t kiss him,” Lola joked. “Progress, right?”

Torin held up his new jacket for Greyson and Big Mac’s approval. “What do you think?”

The witch just shook her head and walked inside. Jay, Lola, Torin, Jacqueline, and, eventually, Elle followed after her.

I moved closer to Greyson. “Is everything okay?”

He pulled me into a hug. “I had to take Big Mac shopping for her clothes for the wedding.”

*Oh. That must be why he looks so serious.* I savored the feeling of being in his arms for a moment, then I remembered my own concerns. Specifically, Aysel.

I eased myself out of his arms. “Is there a party—”

“How do you feel about attending a party at the Vanguard palace tonight?” he asked, cutting me off. Then his eyes widened when he realized what I’d been about to ask him. “Wait, how do you know?”

I told him about my run-in with Aysel at the mall.

Greyson groaned. “I really wish you hadn’t found out about it that way, but now that the cat’s out of the bag…”

I bit my lip. “What if I say no?”

# Episode 2933

**Greyson**

I tried not to show my dismay at Cali’s response. The truth was, after what the Vanguard royalty had done to her, she had every right to turn down Lucian’s invitation. For my own part, I would much rather keep her at the pack house than bring her along. Nobody even knew what the purpose behind this so-called Alpha meeting was. For all I knew, we’d be walking into a Red Wedding situation, and there was no way I wanted Cali anywhere near something like that.

I had to assume that Aysel and Lucian weren’t stupid enough to plan some sort of coup by inviting all the Alphas and Lunas over. But then again, this was the Vanguard pack, and they had a habit of pushing the boundaries of safe assumption.

But despite all my reservations about tonight, I wanted Cali to know that even after everything we’d been through with the Vanguards and Seluna, I still wanted her at my side. I still valued her above all else, and I wanted to show the Vanguards and any other packs—including the Samaras—that the Redwoods were as strong as ever. That they were led by a proper Alpha and his mate, and that anyone who dared to fuck with us would end up a pile of ash.

I wanted to present a united front—just like we had at the Iudicium. And while I completely understood Cali’s reservations, I also still believed that this could be the best approach. Alphas like Lucian and Knox only understood one thing: power. And if we wanted to stay off their radar, we had to show them that we weren’t worth messing with. I had hoped that after Lucian had unleashed a demon on the world, and the Redwoods had gone to war against him and emerged victorious, that message would be loud and clear.

But you never really could tell what penetrated the princeling’s thick skull. Maybe it’d take a couple attempts to make sure he got it, loud and clear.

But I also wanted Cali to feel comfortable. I would never force her to do something like this if she didn’t want to.

“It’s your choice,” I finally said. “I would never make you do something you don’t want, and I know the Vanguard palace isn’t exactly your favorite place. But I think, if we’re considering what’s best for the pack, going together as the pack Alpha and his mate will send a message.”

She grimaced. “I don’t like the idea of returning to the literal demon’s lair.” She shuddered.

“I know, love. And I know it’s political, but that’s the impasse we’re at right now. It’s just like the Iudicium,” I said. “If I’m being honest, there’s nothing I want more than to face the leaders of all the other packs with you at my side. But again, it’s up to you. Do you want to go?”

“If going together paints a stronger picture than you going alone, then yes. I’m coming.” A small smile tugged at her lips. “And there *is* something nice about the idea of going with you as your mate.”

I felt my lips curving up in response. “I’d like that. So we’ll go tonight and see what this is all about.”

She nodded. “It’s a date.”

That really made me smile.

I started to lead her into the house. “How did the trip to the mall go? I’m imagining a montage of disasters?”

She rolled her eyes and laughed. “With Jay, Lola, and me combining efforts, we managed to handle it. But there is something else—Aysel invited Elle to the party tonight.”

“She what?” I stopped short. “Why?”

“I don’t know. Lola thinks Aysel’s just trying to stir the pot. I wouldn’t put it past her.”

That sounded right. Even after the Seluna debacle, it seemed Aysel was still looking for opportunities to sink her claws into the Redwood pack. Maybe she was just as slow as her brother when it came to learning who she shouldn’t mess with.

“Okay, but why did she only invite Elle?” I asked.

Cali scoffed. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe it has something to do with Elle being beautiful, and the way everyone and their dog thinks she should be a supermodel?”

I blinked. “What are you talking about? Are you…” I fought back a laugh. “Are you *jealous*?”

“Oh, I definitely am.”

I wasn’t sure what threw me more—the fact that my brave, beautiful mate was jealous of a brand-new werewolf who was learning how to be human, or that she was admitting it so flippantly. “Love, you have nothing to be jealous about. Elle’s still more wolf than human at this point. And I love you. Only you.”

I tilted my head down and brushed my lips against hers. I didn’t know what else I could do to reassure her, but she needed to know how essential she was to me. She was everything. And nobody could compare to Cali—not anyone.

She poured herself into the kiss, and when we finally broke apart, we were breathless.

“I love you too,” she said. “What do you plan to do about Elle? Do you think she should come to the palace?”

I laughed. “Are you serious?”

“Oh, thank god.” She heaved a breath. “I didn’t want to assume what your answer would be, but I agree. Allowing Elle to come would be a mistake. She’s just not ready. It would be…”

“A complete and total shitshow?”

“I was going to say a disaster, but yeah, that works too.”

I nodded. “Like I said before, she’s more wolf than human right now, and there’s no reason to drag her into the Vanguard drama. The situation is already fraught without introducing the fact that you can change a wolf into a werewolf. Who knows what shit would happen if that became common knowledge?”

“And I don’t want her anywhere near Aysel, either,” Cali added. “Elle’s too innocent—Aysel would have her wrapped around her fingers in half a second.” She smiled. “I’m glad we’re on the same page.”

“Let’s go inside—we need to get dressed for the party if we’re going to make it there on time.” I looked her up and down. “Feel free to wear something sexy. I want to make every Alpha jealous.”

Heat dusted her cheekbones, and I couldn’t resist wrapping her in my arms again. Having her at my side tonight, attending this meeting as my mate, was everything I’d ever hoped for. I couldn’t wait for all those Alphas to see the team we made.

We headed inside to see Torin showing off his new date outfit, which was a little loud for my tastes, but he looked good. Plus, if it made Torin happy, and this Kevin guy liked it, then who was I to complain? Not like I was a fashion icon with my jeans and T-shirts.

Cali leaned over to whisper in my ear. “I’m a little worried about Torin. Do you think he’s moving too fast? It’s only the second date.”

I shrugged. “I honestly can’t see anything we say or do slowing Torin down. It’s best to let him sort it out for himself. Plus, the guy deserves a bit of sunshine. He’s been through a lot.”

Xavier rushed over, clearly happy to see Cali. Naturally, he completely ignored me. “How was shopping?”

At that moment, Elle bounded over and stopped in front of me. “Bought dress.” With the dress slung over her arm, she started shimmying out of her leggings.

“Elle, wait,” Cali said gently. “You have to change your clothes in your room, remember? Lola will help you.”

Lola appeared and took Elle’s arm, leading her upstairs. That whole situation was reason enough for Elle not to come with us tonight.

Xavier turned his gaze on me. “Everything’s set for tonight.”

Cali frowned in confusion. “Is Xavier coming to the palace too?”

Xavier grimaced and shook his head. “I’m going to meet with Ava.”

An awkward silence set in between us, and I cleared my throat. “I asked him to go. Knox will be at the Vanguard event tonight, which means Xavier will be able to talk to Ava and see what he can find out about Knox’s plans.”

Cali looked miserable to hear this news, and Xavier didn’t look too happy about it either. I sighed. I didn’t want this turning into another fight. I wanted to believe that what we were all doing tonight was nothing more than pack business.

And if having Cali by my side came as an added bonus? All the better.

“Everyone, get ready,” I said.

“Everyone?” Xavier frowned. “Where’s Cali going?”

Cali glanced at me before turning her gaze back on Xavier. “I’m going to the Vanguard palace tonight,” she said quietly. “With Greyson.”

My brother’s eyes flashed as he turned on me. “How could you allow that?”

I knew this was a flashpoint for Xavier—that not only was he upset about Cali going with me, he was also pissed off that I’d ordered him to go meet with Ava. But that was just how it had to be.

“Just worry about Ava and the Samara pack,” I told him. “Let me handle the Vanguards. I’ll be by Cali’s side all night. Nothing will happen to her.”

“You’re damn right nothing’s going to happen to her,” he growled. “Nothing’s going to happen to her because I’m not going to let her go.”

# Episode 2934

**Xavier**

I wanted to slam my brother against the wall and beat his idiotic head in for acting like it was fine to play with Cali’s life.

But I knew *she* wouldn’t like that, so I just managed to hold myself back.

I also knew that Cali’s name was on the invitation from the Vanguards, that she was essentially being treated like our Luna. But that didn’t mean she should actually go. That fucking place was a nightmare—especially for Cali. How could he not see that? It was where she’d had to go to perform those creepy ceremonies with Lucian, where he’d tricked her into allowing a demon to possess her, where she’d been forced to fight Seluna alone.

How could Greyson think this was okay? The Vanguards had hurt Cali in a way that nothing else ever had. She’d changed because of Lucian and his fucking cult and all the shit they’d done to her, to all of us.

I ground my teeth together so hard my molars creaked. “What the hell could you possibly be thinking?” I demanded.

Greyson was cold as ice. “You need to cool down.”

Naturally, this had the opposite effect. Did anyone ever really “cool down” when they were about to lose their shit? Since when did telling someone to calm down actually do jack shit to change their behavior?

I fucking hated it when Greyson tried to use his position against me. When he went all Alpha on me, like I wasn’t an Alpha in my own right. Like I was his bitch, and I just had to do whatever he told me to.

“It’s stupid to bring Cali. Do you seriously not get that? Have you forgotten what she went through in that hellhole?”

“Of course I haven’t forgotten,” he snapped. “But this isn’t something we should be arguing about. *I’m* the Redwood Alpha, and Cali is my mate. Cali decided for herself that she wants to go to the event tonight. She and I should be there, representing the Redwood pack.”

Fucking unbelievable. My brother was using the Alpha-mate crap to cover the real reason why he was bringing her. Now that I knew they were both going to the Vanguard palace, his motivation couldn’t have been clearer: Greyson was pushing me into Ava’s willing arms while he was trying to keep Cali for himself. I couldn’t believe it had taken me this long to catch on.

I sneered. “You think you’ve got this all figured out, don’t you?”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m going to get ready.”

He headed upstairs without further comment. I fucking hated it when he did this—treated me like I was a kid or someone beneath him. Someone not worth his time to talk to.

“This is bullshit,” I snarled.

“Xavier, stop it,” Cali said. “I’m capable of making my own decisions. I decided to go, and honestly, you’re not going to stop me.”

I turned my gaze on her. “Cali, I’m not upset with you. I know you didn’t do anything wrong.”

Her expression was steely. “I know I didn’t,” she said. “Greyson didn’t either.”

How could she possibly think that? Even if he hadn’t ordered her around the same way he had with me, he’d still asked her to return to the place where she’d been traumatized how many times? It was a dick move at minimum, and at worst he was parading Cali around in front of a bunch of potential threats. There was nothing about this that was even a little bit okay.

“I guess we’ll have to agree to disagree on that.” I sighed. “And I don’t want you getting caught in the middle. I’m sorry I acted like that. I just think it’s a really bad idea for you to go back to the palace. It’s not safe for you there. I don’t understand how Greyson could possibly ask you to face that place again.”

“I know,” she said, her voice soft. “But if things were different, if you were the one going, would you still not want me to go? You can’t have it both ways.”

I groaned. I knew she was right, but I knew that my answer wasn’t going to be acceptable for her. “That’s different. I can look out for you. Keep you safe.”

“Greyson can too.”

“I just… I can’t… Greyson *won’t*…”

I floundered around, searching for some kind of legitimate excuse, and kept coming up blank.

“I don’t want anything to happen to you,” I finally said.

She moved closer and tilted her head up. She brushed her lips against mine sweetly, briefly, before stepping back. “I love that you’re worried about me, Xavier. I don’t know what Lucian’s purpose is, and I don’t really want to think too hard about it, if I’m being honest. But at least this meeting tonight isn’t about the Redwood pack, or Seluna. And I can take care of myself.” She took my hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “You have to trust me, Xavier. Just like I’m going to trust you to go see Ava.”

Shit, she was right. Cali couldn’t have been pleased that I’d be spending time with Ava tonight—she was just handling that displeasure with a hell of a lot more control.

She was giving me the benefit of the doubt. The least I could do was give her the same. Even if this whole thing was only happening because Greyson was a grade-A asshole.

I looped an arm around her waist and kissed her. “I trust you like nobody else. We’re both in positions we don’t want to be in, but we can get through this. Forgive me?”

She smiled. “I’ll think about it.”

My phone buzzed in my pocket, another text. I wanted to ignore it, to focus entirely on Cali. But what if it was my old contact with an explanation for the warning?

“Sorry.” I stepped back just far enough to slip my hand into my pocket. “I need to check this.”

Naturally, it wasn’t my contact. It was Ava.

I moved to slide my phone back into my pocket when Cali’s fingers looped around my wrist.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

I hesitated, and then realized I was being a goddamn idiot. I’d literally just told Cali I trusted her, and already I was acting like a guilty lover hiding secrets. Enough was enough. Either we trusted each other, or we didn’t. And she’d just told me that she trusted me.

“It’s a text from Ava.”

“Oh. What’s she want?”

I glanced at the text as quickly as possible. “It’s the address for where to meet tonight.”

I’d thought we were going to meet at Knox’s pitiful excuse for a pack house, but Ava wanted to meet at a bar. I sent her a thumbs up and slipped my phone back into my pocket.

“I should probably get ready,” Cali said.

“Me too.”

I watched as she headed upstairs to her room, then went up myself after a beat.

Why would Ava want to meet at a bar? To nobody’s surprise, my wolf didn’t seem to mind this choice of venue one bit. The idiot.

Cali and the Vanguards consumed my thoughts as I showered. *I swear to god, if Greyson lets anything happen to Cali, today will be his last day as Alpha. And on earth.*

I was getting dressed when a knock sounded at the door and Jay strolled in.

“I heard about Cali going to the Vanguard thing,” he said. “I guess that explains the pissed-off look on your face.”

“I’m not exactly thrilled, but I’m trying to roll with it. She opted to go, so I have to back off.”

Jay nodded. “And you’re off to see Ava?”

“Strictly for research.” I tied my shoes. “She was with Knox all day, so she might have some insight into what he’s up to. I know she’s worried that the shrimp has some kind of Napoleon complex and is going to declare war on the Redwood pack, so we have that to look forward to.”

Jay rolled his eyes. “I still can’t believe the Samaras voted that guy in. He’s such a tool. Not that Nolan was much better, but at least he didn’t have to *act* like an Alpha to convince anyone.”

I snorted. “Knox is trying awfully hard. I still haven’t figured out how he managed to not only survive the challenge, but earn enough votes to become Alpha. He’s not even likable—who in their right mind would vote for him?”

“So, what’s going to happen tonight?” Jay asked. “Maybe I should come along and just sort of hide in the shadows? I’m not saying Ava can’t be trusted,” he added with his hands raised in front of him, “but maybe she’s being followed, by that Blaine guy or someone else. It could be some kind of trap.”

“Huh. I hadn’t thought of that.” I shrugged. “Sure. You can come with me.”

“I’ll get ready—give me a few minutes.”

He hurried out of my room, and I finished dressing. When I stepped out of my room I ran into Cali, who looked absolutely amazing.

I caught her arm and then used my arms to box her in against the wall.

“Xavier, I have to leave,” she said, her cheeks flushed as she laughed. “What do you want?”

I leaned in close and whispered, “I wish I could get you out of that dress right now.”

# Episode 2935

Oh my god. Xavier was going to kill me. But, like, in the best way possible.

My heart pounded against my ribs like a caged animal, and butterflies were zooming around my stomach. He was so close, just inches away. It would’ve been the easiest thing in the world to tilt my head forward and brush my lips against his. To forget the Vanguards and Ava and everything else that was pulling us away from each other.

What was so important about tonight, anyway?

Xavier watched me with a sly grin, the kind that made me melt and tingle all over. Then he leaned in again, and his lips brushed my neck.

“You can’t…” I mumbled, trying and failing to stay focused on the task at hand. “You know Ican’t do this right now.”

“I do,” he said simply. “I just want to give you something to think about when you leave.”

Oh, I doubted I’d be able to forget it if I tried. Already, my heart was pulsing in time with the ache between my legs. An ache I was more than confident Xavier would be all too happy to help me take care of.

He stepped back, then moved out of the way to let me pass. I slipped by him, my face burning.

I felt all kinds of self-conscious as I carefully walked down the stairs. I didn’t wear heels very often, but tonight seemed like the right time to do so. Greyson had told me to dress sexy, and with a little help from Lola, I’d tried to do just that.

Judging by Xavier’s reaction, I’d succeeded. But it was one thing to appeal to my mates—they still wanted me even when I didn’t look my best. Having a bunch of Alphas eyeing me tonight was a whole other thing.

I knew they all *looked* like human men, but they weren’t. They were werewolves, and there was a certain… animalistic quality to their interactions. I knew what they were capable of. Especially where the Vanguard pack was concerned.

I had to be on my guard, yes. I couldn’t allow them to fool me or hurt me again. But I also *wanted* to look strong to them. To show them they hadn’t beaten me. That I’d defeated Seluna herself, and I could defeat any of them should the need arise.

Sexy and powerful was the look I was going for tonight. Hopefully I’d managed to come close.

I held the banister in a white-knuckled grip as I made my way downstairs. I pushed the Vanguards out of my mind. They already spent way too much time there, living rent free. More time than they deserved.

*I can do this. And I won’t be alone. Greyson will be with me the whole time.*

And after all, I wanted to be a Luna, didn’t I? If I was going to be part of this pack, and the mate—or Luna—to its Alpha, it meant showing up where and when I was needed, not only to the events that I wanted to. If that meant playing nice with the Vanguards for one evening, so be it.

I reached the landing, and Torin gawked at me, wide-eyed. “Wow. You look…Wow.”

Heat rushed into my cheeks all over again. Torin was speechless. That had to be a good sign, right?

I waved him off. “Oh, stop.”

Then Greyson came into the room and stopped short when his eyes landed on me. After a beat, his lips curved up into a sensual smile. “You’ll be the envy of the ball.” He held out his arm. “Shall we?”

I allowed him to usher me out of the house, and it wasn’t until we reached the porch that I really got a full look at him in his suit. “You look great. Maybe *you’ll* be the envy of the ball.”

He laughed. “Challenge accepted. May the most enviable person win.”

We got in the car, and I glanced back at the pack house. Xavier was standing on the porch, watching us as we prepared to leave.

I smiled at him and waved goodbye, and he cracked a small smile in return.

I remembered what he’d told me in the hall, and the car suddenly felt a few degrees too hot. Guilt twisted in my stomach alongside the longing. I shouldn’t have been thinking about Xavier when I was here with Greyson.

*Focus, Cali. You’ll need to think with your upstairs brain if you want to get through tonight.*

I was about to close the passenger door when Elle burst out of the house, sprinted past a shocked Xavier, and shouted, “Greyson!”

He groaned. “What now?”

She rushed over to the car, and it was then that I realized she was wearing the dress we’d bought at the mall. If I’d felt super sexy earlier, now I felt just sort of okay-looking. Elle had never looked more like a cover model.

Greyson got out of the car. “What do you want?”

She threw her arms around him, holding tight even as Greyson tried to free himself from her embrace. When he finally managed to break away from the hug, she looked at me. “No kiss, no kiss.”

“Elle, I need you to calm down,” Greyson said. “Why are you here?”

She pointed at him. “Go with Greyson.”

He looked at me, his eyes pleading for help, and I got out of the car and hurried over. “Elle, you can’t go with Greyson.”

She ignored me, of course, and repeated insistently, “Go with Greyson.”

Moments later, Lola came running up. “Sorry! Elle pulled a fast one. She slipped by while I was getting her something less… sexy?” She grabbed Elle’s arm “Come on. Let’s get you inside.”

“Go with Greyson!” she cried, thrashing in Lola’s grip. “Go with Greyson!”

“You can’t go with them!” Lola told her. “Now come inside. We’ll do another fashion show.”

Once Lola dragged her into the house, I turned to Greyson. “Can we go?”

We got in the car and pulled out of the driveway before Elle could make another escape. Silence settled between us, and Greyson cleared his throat.

“You’re giving me that look that makes me think I’ve done something wrong.”

I flushed. Of course he hadn’t done anything wrong at all. I was just being a crazy mate. It was Lola’s words that were wrecking my head. All that talk of how sexy Elle was. Why *wouldn’t* Greyson think it too? I knew everyone else did.

“You’re absolutely right, though,” he continued. “Elle is nowhere near ready to appear at the palace.” He leaned over and twined our fingers together. “Remember, no matter what happens tonight, you’re here as my mate. And that means I’ll protect you, keep you safe. I’m damn sure that Lucian won’t be stupid enough to try anything reckless. I think I drove that point home the last time he and I spoke.”

My sour mood lightened a little bit at his confidence. Maybe tonight wouldn’t be all that bad. I just had to show up, look sexy, and stick to Greyson’s side. Easy as that.

*And don’t forget about steering clear of Aysel and her schemes.*

That one could end up being a bit harder, but I felt confident I could pull it off. I settled back in my seat, still holding Greyson’s hand, and tried to mentally prepare myself to see Lucian again.

So much had happened since I’d last seen him, and if I was being honest with myself, I didn’t actually want to see him ever again. He’d hurt me too many times, broken my trust beyond repair. Seluna was a demon, but I knew now that Lucian was a monster in his own right. And it had nothing to do with his being a werewolf.

I pulled in a deep breath. *I can do this*. *It’ll be okay.*

I hoped that being back at the palace wouldn’t make me have more Seluna dreams.

As we drove, I noticed Greyson kept glancing at the rearview mirror. I turned back to look beyond the rear windshield, but all I saw was a wall of darkness. I sat forward again. “Is something wrong?”

“I’m just a little jumpy. I keep imagining we’re being followed, but every time I look, there’s nothing there.”

I looked back again, and again, I saw nothing.

I bit my lip. *Could someone be following us? Maybe whoever stole Seluna’s ashes?*

Greyson rested a warm hand on my thigh. “Relax. It’s probably nothing.” He turned down the private road that led to the Vanguard palace. “We’re almost there.”

We slowed as we approached, and my eyes widened when I saw that Lucian had managed to rebuild the entrance and the guard station already. And somehow, the whole palace looked even more pretentious than it had before.

“Wow,” I said.

Greyson nodded. “It sure is something.”

He parked the car and leaned over to kiss me.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

I pulled in a deep breath and nodded. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

We exited the car, and a growl sounded nearby before something leapt out of the darkness in front of us. It was a werewolf.

I backed into Greyson with a gasp, and the wolf let out a howl—then shifted into its human form.

A human form we knew very well.

Elle had followed us to the palace.

# Episode 2936

For a moment, I just stood there. Completely shocked. Here we were, in front of the Vanguard palace, and Elle was here, stark naked.

*She must have been the one Greyson thought was following us!*

In some ways, I kind of wished it *had* been the person who’d stolen the ashes, no matter how scary or powerful they might have been. At least then, I’d have had the first clue of what to do. But here, on Lucian and Aysel’s territory, with a naked feral human standing in front of us, I didn’t have the faintest idea of how to proceed.

Laugh? Cry? Scream at the top of my lungs until my head exploded?

They all sounded like pretty viable options, honestly.

Greyson looked pissed, though I could tell he was trying to stay calm. “Elle, what are you doing here?”

She pointed to him, her expression both hopeful and defiant. “Go with Greyson.”

He blew out a breath and turned to me. “I guess that message about staying back at the pack house wasn’t well-received.”

I wasn’t so quick to agree. In general, Elle seemed to be putting in an honest effort to acclimate to the human-werewolf world she’d been thrown into, but it wasn’t out of character for her to be stubborn and to persist in doing what she wanted—especially when Greyson was involved.

“We have to do something. She can’t be here!” I hissed.

“Okay, what do you want to do? Turn around and drive back?”

“Yes!” I nodded. “Let’s do that. We have to take her back home, where it’s safe. Where she can’t make a scene. We both agreed she’s not ready for this, and she’s doing a beautiful job of proving us right. Plus, you know, she’s… freaking naked!”

I gestured at Elle, who was scratching her shoulder. And though she was probably the most beautiful human the planet had ever seen, there was something distinctly animalistic about the gesture.

Greyson nodded and took Elle by the arm. “Come on. We’re taking you back to the pack house. You shouldn’t have come.”

She tugged her arm out of his grip. “Stay with Greyson! I stay!”

“Oh my god,” I muttered. I headed to the car to look for something to cover Elle. There was an old T-shirt in the trunk. It was Greyson’s size, so on Elle it would at least cover the bare essentials.

I slammed the trunk shut and brought it over to Elle, who was still arguing with Greyson.

“Here, Elle, put this—”

Before we could finagle the wolf-girl into the shirt, a smooth, feminine voice carried over. “I’m so glad you could all make it.”

*So much for getting Elle out of here undetected*, I thought as I swallowed the last of my anxiety and turned around, knowing full well who I’d see when I did.

There was Aysel in all her regal, royal glory, dressed to the nines and looking every bit the princess she claimed to be.

*This is a nightmare. Maybe if I pinch myself—*

“Ouch,” I muttered under my breath, glancing down at the spot on my arm I’d just pinched. No luck. Aysel was still here, and she looked absolutely delighted with the scene she’d just walked in on.

“Elle’s not staying,” Greyson said.

“Stay with Greyson!” she argued.

Aysel laughed. “I don’t know why you’re all making such a fuss. I invited Elle, and she’s here now.” Her gaze traveled appreciatively up Elle’s body. “Perhaps she didn’t quite understand that when we host a gathering, formal attire is usually required, but I’m sure we can find something for Elle.”

“Hold on,” Greyson said. “Elle doesn’t belong here.”

“Why not?”

Greyson, of course, didn’t answer. He couldn’t answer that without giving away way more information than we were comfortable sharing.

Aysel frowned, then turned to me. “You’ve been shopping with her. You know Elle’s taste. You should come with us and help her choose something.”

“Aysel,” Greyson gritted out. He was trying so hard to keep his temper in check. “We appreciate your generosity, but we’re not—”

“Welcome!” called out an all too familiar voice.

My muscles locked up a second time, but this time with something closer to fear than dread. I pulled in a breath. *You’re safe, Cali*, I told myself. *Nothing can hurt you here. Certainly not Lucian.*

I’d blast him myself before I ever let him hurt me again.

I forced myself to meet his eyes. He gave me a nod in greeting before turning his gaze on Greyson.

“I have a few Alphas I’d like you to meet.” Then his gaze drifted to Elle. “Oh, who’s this?”

“This is Elle,” Aysel said. “She’s Greyson’s cousin.”

Greyson did a double take. “What?”

Panic rushed through me, and I mind linked with him. *Just play along! I’ll explain everything later!*

I pasted on a smile. “That’s right. She’s Greyson’s *distant* cousin. From back east.”

Greyson didn’t look thrilled with this new development, but he didn’t say anything. I kind of wished he would, if only to help me sell the lie.

Lucian held out his hand for Elle to take. “Charmed. I’m Prince Lucian of the Vanguard pack.”

After looking to Greyson for confirmation, Elle hesitantly offered her hand to Lucian. He bowed his head and kissed the back of her knuckles, and she recoiled. “Not Greyson! No kiss!”

That same old jealousy reared its ugly head. *Are you kidding me? She’s not supposed to kiss Greyson, either!*

I pulled a deep breath in through my nose and shoved the feeling down. I had bigger problems right now than Elle’s weird attachment to Greyson.

Lucian smirked at her response. “There is something positively *wild* about you, Elle. I do believe I should relish the chance to get to know you better.”

If only he knew.

Lucian turned his attention back to Greyson. “Shall we?”

Greyson’s voice slipped through my mind. *Keep an eye on Elle.*

*I will.* And I hoped to hell that Elle wouldn’t make that impossible. The very last thing we needed was her barging in on some secret Alpha meeting so she could stay joined at the hip with Greyson.

I took Elle’s hand and followed Aysel into the palace. Greyson and Lucian veered off in another direction almost as soon as we walked in.

Elle’s eyes were wide as they took in the opulent palace. “Very big,” she noted.

Aysel glanced over at Elle, her expression calculating, then looked back at me. “Is English not her first language?”

“Um, no, it’s not.”

“Hmm… Let me guess. Parlez-vous français?” she asked Elle, who looked at her like she’d just grown a second head.

Aysel switched to German, then Spanish before I cut her off.

“It looks like you’ve fixed the palace up since last time,” I said brightly. “It looks… even more fancy than before!”

Translation: the interior had officially crossed the line from opulent to ostentatious.

Aysel smiled, her brows lifting in surprise. “Oh, you noticed?”

We climbed the grand staircase, and Aysel told us all about the art they’d recovered from the battles and the new pieces they’d brought in from the “family vault.” Because of course they had a vault. It was probably chock-full of antiquities they’d gathered over the years.

I couldn’t help but notice that every single person we passed did a double take when they saw Elle. I was hit by another twinge of envy.

*At least one of us is dressed.* I’d promised Greyson I’d keep an eye on Elle, and I was determined to do just that. Thank god Seluna was gone and there were no more demons here. That would’ve been way too much for us to worry about.

Besides, how much trouble could Elle really get into? All she’d wanted was to stick with Greyson, and now she was. So maybe she’d behave from here on out.

Maybe.

We arrived at one of the many dressing rooms in the palace, and Elle gasped at the sight of all the clothes hanging on the racks.

“Pretty!” she cried.

She jerked her hand free from mine and started flipping through the hangers.

Aysel’s brows lifted as she watched Elle paw at her clothes. “Greyson’s cousin is very… excitable.”

I laughed. *Oh, you have no idea.*

I joined Elle and gently pulled a halter top and a pair of shorts out of her hands. “Let’s try something more formal, okay?”

I found a dark blue slip dress and pressed it into her hands. “What about this?”

She pulled it on and then rushed over to the full-length mirror to admire herself. She did look good, and the dress had the added benefit of covering her up a bit.

“You look wonderful,” Aysel told her. She glanced at me. “Excellent choice, Caliana.”

Now that Elle was taken care of, I wanted to rejoin Greyson. He was stuck with Lucian and all the other Alphas.

“So, what’s going to happen tonight?” I asked.

“It’s a celebration.”

“Of what, exactly?” At Aysel’s confused expression, I added, “Often when the Vanguards say it’s one thing, it turns out to be something else. I’d rather not be surprised.”

She laughed. “There’s no secret plan. My brother is over his Seluna-is-really-a-demon depression and is having this party to welcome the new Samara Alpha. Neither Lucian nor I have had a chance to meet him.”

I sighed. “Well, don’t get your hopes up. Knox isn’t exactly your typical Alpha.”

Her brows rose. “I look forward to learning more about him.”

“Why don’t we go rejoin the others?” I suggested. “Elle, come—”

“Caliana, you can stop lying to me.”

I looked at Aysel, my eyes widening. “Excuse me?”

Aysel smirked. “We both know Elle isn’t Greyson’s cousin.”

# Episode 2937

**Xavier**

I was not looking forward to going to the bar tonight. My wolf, on the other hand, was counting down the seconds until it was time to leave. If it were up to him, we probably would have left ages ago. Of course, if it were up to him, a lot of things would’ve been very different.

The whole thing was fucking unsettling. It seemed like my wolf was only getting more and more excited by everything, and that behavior was raising a ton of red flags for me. I’d hoped that things were settling down between us—me, my wolf, and Ava—especially since the mate bond with Ava had taken a pretty hard hit from the incubus. For a while, it had seemed like maybe that was the case. That the bond had been weakened. That maybe, just maybe, I could one day break free of it.

But now it felt like the bond was gaining strength. Like it was healing from whatever the incubus had done to it. I knew I could ask Big Mac about it, but she was always so prickly about anyone asking her for anything, and I didn’t feel like losing an eye today, *or* dealing with her sanctimonious bullshit. Plus, I didn’t like talking about Ava with anybody—much less someone like Big Mac, who’d judge me the whole time.

I pulled in a deep breath and headed downstairs. I’d need to get moving soon if I wanted to meet Ava on time. And the sooner I met with her, the sooner I could leave.

*It’ll be fine. You have nothing to worry about.* Ava and I had reached some sort of agreement concerning our mate bond, or at least it felt that way. Yes, we had this *thing* between us, and it probably wasn’t going away anytime soon, but Ava knew how I felt about Cali. She knew that my feelings for Cali would never change.

*But if they’re never going to change, then why did I have that dream?*

I shoved that thought away. Dreams didn’t have to mean anything.

Jay met me on the front porch. “Ready?”

I nodded. “Thanks for coming along.”

“Not to worry. You won’t see me, but I’ll be there.”

“I owe you one. I know this is a big ask.”

“It is,” he said with a smile. “But I know you’d do the same for me. Besides, what keeps you safe, keeps the pack safe.”

Sometimes I felt like Jay was a better friend than I deserved. This was definitely one of those times. He was loyal and supportive to me, but he was also bound to the Redwoods and never failed to help protect the pack.

*It’s a shame he doesn’t have Alpha blood. He’d make one hell of a leader.*

“I guess I won’t see you there, then.”

Jay smirked and gave me a salute, and I headed to the garage. It had been a while since I’d taken my motorcycle out for a spin. Riding reminded me of shifting, of racing through the woods with the wind rushing past and the power that accompanied that kind of speed.

It would be inconvenient to shift and head to the bar with a change of clothes, but this was the next best thing.

I revved the engine and took off, heading toward the meeting place.

I glanced around every so often on my journey to the bar. Jay had been true to his word—I didn’t see him anywhere. If he hadn’t told me he’d be sticking close, I’d have had no fucking clue he was nearby.

I might have been able to pick up Jay’s scent if I hadn’t been driving so fast, but that kind of defeated the purpose of riding a motorcycle. And I was driving into a headwind, anyway. For now, I’d just have to trust Jay to keep his word, which I knew I could do.

I could count on one hand the number of people in the world I trusted implicitly, but Jay always made the cut.

My mind kept skipping back to the sight of Cali in that dress that had hugged her in all the right places. God, I’d wanted her so badly. If she hadn’t had to run off to play Alpha/Luna with Greyson, and I hadn’t had to meet with Ava, it would have been the easiest thing to pull her into my room and take her right then and there. And judging by how affected she’d been by my presence, I liked to think she would have welcomed something like that.

It was a damn shame that it hadn’t been possible, that we’d both had responsibilities to attend to, but I was looking at it like a rain check. Sooner or later, we’d get our chance to pick up where we’d left off.

*I hope she wears that dress again.*

I smiled at the thought, allowing myself to imagine all the ways I’d drive her crazy before I finally made her come undone, again and again. By the time I finished with her, she’d have forgotten all about my brother and his desperation to have her all to himself.

My smile dimmed, then disappeared completely as I pulled up to the bar.

It was a typical roadhouse joint: old, worn wood walls, neon beer signs, and a row of motorcycles and cars parked around it with no parking lines.

It reminded me of when Ava and I had been mates, before the pack war had broken out. A place like this would have been one of our favorite haunts, and I wouldn’t have thought twice about meeting her here.

But a lot had changed since those days, and now a place like this made me wary. I couldn’t let my guard down for a second. Ava must have chosen this place for a reason, and though I was fairly certain I could trust her to at least not try to kill me, I was remaining cautious.

I parked my bike and headed in, passing a group of tough-looking bikers.

“Nice bike,” one of them said.

I nodded. “Thanks.”

I pushed open the door and paused in the doorway to take stock of the place. A few patrons looked up at me, but nothing seemed out of place. I spotted Ava sitting in a booth against the far wall.

My wolf stirred at the sight of her. She looked so small, sitting there by herself. That same old urge to protect her kicked in, and I paused for another string of seconds, breathing deeply.

*Get your shit together, Xavier. Now’s not the time to lose control.*

If Ava noticed my hesitation, she didn’t say anything as I approached. She just smiled and slid over to make room for me on the padded bench next to her. I decided to play it safe and take the seat across from her. Where Ava was concerned, there could never be too much distance.

My wolf growled his disagreement.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey.” I looked her up and down. She looked like she’d taken her time getting ready today. Maybe a little too much for a place like this. Her hair was smooth and curled slightly at the ends, and she’d put on makeup.

She was sexy as hell. My wolf knew it. I knew it. There was no point in denying it, even if it was going to make the rest of the evening intolerable.

“You brought your bike,” she said.

I shrugged. “Why not? It’s a good night for it. Plus, it fits the theme.” I gestured at the bar.

“Mm. Do you remember that road trip we took down the coast? We rode your bike all the way down to the Santa Monica Pier. That was so much fun.”

I remembered the trip—and the way she’d gripped me around the waist and pressed herself against me as we drove. But I hadn’t come here to reminisce. And I didn’t want to waste time on the past. We weren’t those people anymore, and we couldn’t go back to that, even if we wanted to.

“What’s the deal with Knox?” I asked. “You said you were worried about him starting a war—why? What did the shrimp do? Other than cross into Redwood territory unannounced and uninvited?”

Her eyes tightened, but she kept her expression neutral. “Do you want to order a drink first?”

I shrugged. I could definitely use something. I flagged down a waiter and asked for something strong.

Ava smiled next to me. “I thought we could at least enjoy ourselves for a few minutes.”

“Don’t get the wrong idea—I’m not here to enjoy myself.”

Once again, my wolf strongly disagreed.

She patted the bench next to her. “Sit by me then.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re facing a wall. It would be better to have both of us looking out at the bar, just in case. Or are you afraid you won’t be able to control yourself sitting so close to me?”

I hated to admit it, but she was right. It was Basic Defense 101—always have a wide perspective of the room.

I slipped in beside her, and her scent engulfed me almost immediately, driving my wolf wild.

“So, what’s going on with—”

Ava stiffened beside me.

I frowned. “What’s wrong?”

She didn’t give me an answer. Instead, she grabbed me by the face and pulled me into a sudden and powerful kiss.

# Episode 2938

I stood there frozen and staring at Aysel while my mind raced. I was absolutely horrified that I’d just been caught in my lie. I had no idea what to do.

*Do I admit it? Or do I double down? Should I snap at her and tell her it’s none of her business, or would I just look guilty and caught?*

I let out a laugh that I hoped sounded light and unbothered. “What are you talking about? Elle is definitely Greyson’s cousin. She’s just not from around here; she’s from the Umbra pack, remember? So that’s why she might seem a little strange, and why you don’t recognize her.”

*Please just buy it, Aysel, I don’t feel like doing this with you right now.* It was annoying, being raked over the coals by the woman who’d been actively pursuing one of my mates.

Aysel narrowed her gaze and stepped forward, boxing me in. “You’re a horrible liar, Caliana. When are you going to learn that about yourself? Do you really think that I’d be so stupid as to think that beautiful girl who looks nothing like Greyson and has been throwing him googly eyes all night is related to him?” Aysel snorted. “Also, I knew you were lying at the mall, so just give it up already.” Aysel put her hands on her hips and looked me right in the eye. “Sometimes you have to admit that you’re caught, and right now is one of those times.”

“Okay, fine.” I huffed. “I lied. Are you happy now?”

I was sure that catching me in a lie had just made her day. It was something else she could lord over me and use as a reason why I wasn’t good enough for Greyson. It burned me up that she was acting all holier than thou. She was the one who’d paid a warlock to curse Greyson and me into being repulsed by each other. What kind of werewolf tampered with someone else’s mate bond like that, anyway? Weren’t mate bonds supposed to be sacred in the werewolf world? Apparently Aysel—and Lucian for that matter—didn’t get that memo.

Aysel flashed me a coy smile. “Why yes, yes I am.”

Honestly, I was relieved that the secret was out and that I didn’t have to keep pretending. “So now that you know, what are you going to do with the information? Go tweet it to everyone you know?”

I could see it now, Aysel alerting all her followers that I couldn’t be trusted. She’d probably tag Greyson in the post.

Aysel laughed. “No, of course not. I’m merely going to enjoy the little foot-in-mouth thing you have going on. It’s quite entertaining.”

I glared at her.

“I am curious about something, though. If Elle isn’t French or from across the country, where *is* she from?” Aysel crossed her arms and got that penetrating look in her eye again.

My mouth went dry. *She just won’t quit, will she? This isn’t even any of her business!* I slid my gaze over to Elle, who was busy investigating a reflection of light in the window glass. *She really is kind of like the* Little Mermaid *sometimes, isn’t she?*

I crossed my arms. “That’s none of your business, Aysel, but if you must know….” *Come on. Think, Cali. Think! What can you say that’ll fool Aysel’s built-in bullshit detector?* I didn’t know why I was even trying to think of something. If Aysel already knew my lying face, then I was pretty much done for.

*No! I have to rally so I can protect Greyson. The Vanguards can’t know the truth. It will only blow up in our faces, and I don’t want to be the one responsible for that.*

Aysel had shown herself to be pretty observant—especially when it came to me—but there had to be a way for me to throw her off, even if my poker face needed a little work. There was no way Greyson wanted to advertise that Elle was a real wolf who he’d turned into a werewolf. He hadn’t told me explicitly to keep on a lid on it, but it just felt like something I should keep on the down low. It might give people ideas, or it might set people against Elle—who knew how werewolf brains worked, sometimes? I didn’t know how I was going to pull it off, but I was going to try my best to be nonchalant about the whole thing.

“So…” Aysel pressed, looking eager to hear whatever I was about to say.

*Here goes…* “She was a Rogue who just turned up at the pack house one day. We aren’t really sure where she came from, and she hasn’t told us yet. We haven’t pushed it.” I looked at Elle, who was now knocking on a painting on the wall as if she expected the people in the portrait to respond. “We’re just trying to be respectful, and to be there for her during this time.”

Aysel nodded slowly, fascinated. Her shrewd look was gone, and now she was simply watching Elle—who now had her nose pressed against the painting, sniffing it.

I wondered if Aysel was buying *this* lie so easily because I’d admitted to the other one. *I should be so lucky…*

“A Rogue, then… Huh. Interesting.” Aysel nodded slowly, her gaze still on Elle.

I nodded. *Phew, crisis averted.* I had no clue what the Vanguards would’ve done with the truth if I hadn’t managed to mislead Aysel, but I was sure it wouldn’t have boded well for us.

Aysel laughed. “The Redwoods sure do have a knack for taking those in, don’t they?”

“Sure?” I said slowly, wondering if that was supposed to be a dig. I couldn’t pretend to know how an elitist like Aysel felt about werewolf issues, Rogues included. I didn’t understand the Vanguard pack structure well enough to know if they had any former Rogues in their ranks—or if they even allowed such a thing.

“Well, that was a lot more boring than I was hoping it’d be. Elle, darling, let’s go to our little party, hmm?” Aysel held out her hand to Elle, who looked at the chunky, expensive rings on Aysel’s fingers with interest before she took it.

I sighed. *Bullet dodged.*

As Elle and I followed Aysel back to the party, I heard the clutter of dishware in the distance. *Is that where Greyson is?* I craned my neck around a corner to see, but before I could catch anything, Aysel pushed open a set of double doors and ushered us inside.

“Here we are, ladies.” Aysel swept her hand out in front of her, presenting the well-appointed room to us with a flourish.

I’d never been in a parlor before, I didn’t think, but this certainly was one. It looked like something straight out of a Regency romance.

*How is it that there are always new rooms in this place that I’ve somehow never seen before?*

The parlor was decorated to the Vanguard standard—clusters of velvety love seats and armchairs, tea tables, sterling silver tea stands, and delicate-looking white and gold flatware. It all looked every expensive and had a complete teatime vibe. I had to admit that they’d outdone themselves, once again. The Vanguards were a strange, dangerous nuisance, but they did know how to set up a party—now if they could only learn to stop holding their guests at said parties against their will…

Elle walked into the parlor with her mouth open in awe. She looked closely at every inch of the place and then started poking at one of the couches, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“You can sit, if you want,” I said.

Elle plopped down and started to bounce a bit—and then a lot more—and then she was all but leaping up off the seat.

“Fun and comfortable.” She gave an appreciative nod.

I gave her thumbs up. *At least she has no idea she’s in a high-pressure situation.*

Aysel gave Elle a strange look, then returned her attention to me. “We have anything you might want—any tea you can imagine, scones, ten different types of jam, French tea cookies, et cetera.”

“Great…” I looked around, realizing how empty the room was. “When are the others coming?” Aysel had made it sound like there were going to be a lot more people there—hence her urgency to get us to the “party”—but right now there was just the three of us.

Aysel’s face faltered for a moment. “Um, well…”

Aysel had a look on her face that I’d never seen before. *Is she being…* awkward *right now?* Then it dawned on me.

“We’re the only ones who showed up?” I demanded.

Before Aysel could answer, there was a loud thud, causing us all to jump. Then there was shouting, followed by another thud, louder this time.

We all looked at each other, our eyes wide as I pulled in a sharp, startled breath. “What the hell was that?”

# Episode 2939

**Xavier**

Initially, I was surprised by the kiss, but my wolf was basking in it. Ava slid closer, closing the small gap between us, and my heartbeat went into overdrive. She wrapped her hands around the back of my neck and kissed me back. I couldn’t ignore how warm and soft her body felt molded against me, and my wolf was lapping it up.

For a moment, I couldn’t think about anything else but Ava. My wolf was in complete ecstasy, so much so that it seemed to have taken over my body and my mind. I wasn’t lost in thoughts of why she was doing this right now, and I didn’t—couldn’t—push her away. If anything, my wolf wanted her closer. I wasn’t even thinking about what Jay would say.

*This isn’t his business. This is between me and Ava. We’re the only ones who understand what’s going on between us.*

My wolf had completely taken over. He had wanted this ever since I’d laid eyes on Ava when we’d walked into the bar. Now my wolf’s hunger for Ava was being sated, finally, and there was no way I could stop it now.

Despite myself, I deepened the kiss. I leaned back against the booth and pulled her along with me, pulling Ava so close that she was damn near in my lap. I wove my fingers through her hair then slid my tongue deep into her mouth, crossing a boundary I’d never thought I would cross again. This was how we used to kiss a long time ago, and it wasn’t lost on me where kisses like this used to lead.

My wolf growled within me, and I bit Ava’s bottom lip, hungry for more. *Demanding* more. I grabbed Ava’s leg and slung it over my lap as I pulled her closer. She gasped softly against my lips as she straddled me, her thighs locking onto my hips. It was like we were the only two people in the world.

My mind clouded even further as my wolf urged me to take things to the next level.

*The bathroom can’t be very far. I could take her in there, and we could finally try to quench whatever this thing is that’s surging between us.*

My wolf reeled at the thought of finally taking things to the point of no return with Ava, and my own resolve weakened even more as Ava dragged her fingernails down my chest, the soft cotton of my shirt the only thing standing between having her skin on mine. She was brimming with an urgency I understood completely.

This wasn’t good.

Someone cleared their throat loudly, and Ava and I broke apart to see a waiter staring at us. Almost at the same time, a thread of reason pushed through the heat of my wolf’s desires, and the fire raging between us finally subsided.

“I’ve got those drinks you ordered,” the waiter said as he sat the glasses in front of us with a little smirk on his lips.

I was never so happy to see a damn drink in my life.

“Thanks,” I said, my voice hoarse.

Even as the waiter left, there was still the issue that Ava was in my lap. As my wolf howled in protest, I lifted her up and returned her next to me in the booth. She adjusted her shirt that had rode up and cleared her throat.

*This is NOT why we came here*, I told my wolf, *and this is NOT what I plan on doing tonight.*

I stuck a straw into my drink and started nursing it, trying my hardest not to look at Ava. I was worried that if I did, she’d have the doe-eyed look of hers and my wolf wouldn’t be able to resist it—and I needed to resist it—and then we’d be back in a lip-lock in seconds flat.

I took a quick look around for Jay, hoping that my friend wouldn’t give me too much shit later for what had just gone down between me and Ava. *I doubt I’ll be that lucky. If he saw that, he’s going to let me have it.* I was surprised that no one had yelled the quintessential “get a room” at us. My wolf stirred at the thought of doing just that.

“Why did you do that?” I asked without looking at her. *Why the fuck did she kiss me out of nowhere?* “We don’t have to keep up appearances right now; the Samara pack is nowhere around.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ava give her long hair a flip.

“Sorry,” she said, though she didn’t seem all that sorry. “I thought I saw someone I recognized—someone from the pack.” She gestured to a couple people across the bar, playing pool. “I would never have done that otherwise.”

“None of them look familiar to me,” I said, scanning the area.

“I know—it was a mistake. My bad.”

I took another sip from my drink. “A likely story.”

Ava glared at me. “It was an honest mistake, X. I thought you were putting a little more trust in me these days. If I really just wanted to seduce you, I don’t think I’d have to use a trick like that.” Her cheeks went red. “But that’s not why I came here.”

My wolf had already reacted to her statement, and he wanted to see what she had in store for her little seduction, but I pushed against it. I’d already done enough—now wasn’t the time to let my mind go in that direction. If we started up again, I wasn’t sure that I’d be able to stop my wolf from taking it to the next level.

“I agree, that’s not why we’re here,” I said. “So, Knox? He’s been Alpha for less than twenty-four hours and you already think he’s trying to start a war with the Redwoods?”

“I know it sounds crazy, but yeah, he could be. Other than what you mentioned about running into Blaine on Redwood land—and Knox being the reason he was there—I know that Knox has it out for you, based on some conversations we’ve had. He really thinks that you’re the one who tried to sabotage him during the Iudicium.”

*Well, he isn’t wrong. Maybe the shrimp is a bit more perceptive than I gave him credit for.*

“The guy doesn’t like me—that’s been clear from the day we met—but that doesn’t necessarily mean he’s trying to start a war. It just means he has a vengeful side, just like Nolan. But I’ll tell you one thing—if he fights anything like the lackeys he sent to try and take me out, then I can take him with one arm tied behind my back. It’s not going to start a war, its going to start giving him a bruised ego.”

I wasn’t afraid in the least, but I knew the pack didn’t need any more trouble right now. Luckily, I didn’t think this was as much of an issue as Ava thought it was.

Ava didn’t look convinced. I knew that she had to be struggling with her pack loyalty and the mate bond between us, which couldn’t have been easy. I sighed and took another deep drink from my glass before turning to look her in the eye. “I know that you’re looking out for me, and I appreciate that, but I don’t think you need to jump to any conclusions right now—unless of course that conclusion is that Knox is a raging asshole.”

Ava smirked.

“That’s what he is,” I continued. “No question about it. But he isn’t making any other moves against me, trust me on that. If he were smart, he’d be using you to get to me.”

“I wouldn’t do that to you,” Ava said quickly.

In my gut, I knew that to be true. “Knox would have to start making more serious moves than just trespassing on Redwood territory. I’m not happy that Blaine was skulking around where he shouldn’t have been, but in the grand scheme of things, that’s not such a big deal. The Redwoods can handle some overconfident trespasser, believe me.”

I thought about all the other trespassers we’d had on our property as of late. We had a lot of practice getting people out of our hair, and the Samara pack would be no different. If push came to shove, we’d destroy them in no time, especially in their current vulnerable state—but I didn’t mention that to Ava.

“Okay, I get it. If you’ve got it under control, then I’ll relax,” Ava said with a sigh, and finally took a gulp of her own drink.

“Good. If things change and you actually hear Knox put a mark on anyone—any of our pack members, even Greyson—then we’re in trouble, and I won’t hesitate to kill him. As far as it stands now, Knox is focused on me, and I can handle that.”

“Got it,” Ava said. She sipped from her drink again, and I found myself staring at her pink lips.

Quickly, I looked away, searching the room for any sign of Jay. I didn’t see him, but my eyes did lock with someone else that I recognized. Immediately, my wolf jumped right into protection mode. It was Tanner, one of Knox’s little minions.

I leaned close to Ava. “You were right.”

Ava gave me a confused look. “About what?”

“You did see someone from the Samara pack here. We’ve been followed.”

# Episode 2940

**Greyson**

Cringing, I watched the third large painting fall from its place on the wall and hit the ground with a loud thud. *Never a dull moment in this place, I swear…*

Lucian was hysterical as he pointed at the displaced art. “These are priceless, not to mention that they’ve been in my family for generations! Why were they not properly secured?”

“I’m sorry, your highness!” the attendant said. “These were just put up again during the renovation, and—”

“Clearly! And as we can see, the job wasn’t done well!” Lucian smacked a hand on his forehead in exasperation.

“Come on, Lucian, lay off the poor kid. The thing’s intact,” I said, carefully cutting out what I wanted to say. *Get a fucking grip.*

*Why did I think that coming here would be a good idea? It’s just as crazy and stressful as always.*

Thus far, Lucian hadn’t convinced me that he’d learned a single thing from the whole Seluna debacle, and that was a pity. If anything, he seemed to be more on edge and brattier than ever before, and that was saying a lot since the princeling had been the epitome of entitled and insufferable from the moment I’d met him.

Lucian took a deep breath and pasted a stiff smile onto his face. “You’re right, Greyson.” He turned to the attendant. “I apologize for my tone, but this must be taken care of immediately.”

“Right away, sir!” the attendant said.

We all turned as the door opened suddenly, and I was surprised to see Cali, Aysel, and Elle enter the room with concerned looks on their faces.

“Is everything all right in here?” Cali asked, just as Aysel gasped and ran toward the fallen paintings.

“What *happened*?” Aysel said dramatically, dropping to her knees in front of them. “These are priceless, not to mention that they’ve been in our family for generations! What’s the meaning of this?”

Lucian ducked his head in exasperation and pinched the bridge of his nose. “The dullards failed to mount the paintings on a stud! I’ve never had to hang a painting in my life, and even *I* know that you have to do that to make sure it’s secure. You just can’t find good help these days.”

I winced at Lucian, then turned to look at Cali, just the sight of her making me feel calm and content. I walked over to her and pulled her into a tight hug, burying my face in her hair and breathing her in. I kissed the top of her head.

“Everything’s fine,” I said. “Just a cosmetic issue, as you can see.”

*I wish you could stay here with me*, I mind linked.

*Me too. Aysel’s party is a bust. It’s just the three of us.*

*But with Knox coming…*

*I know.* She physically sighed against me. *I’ll stick with Aysel.*

*Thank you, love. I’m not quite sure how it’s all going to go down on the Alpha side of things.*

I wasn’t planning for a fight, but from what I had seen of Knox so far, I couldn’t be sure that things wouldn’t swing in that direction, and there was no way I was going to have Cali in the middle of that. She’d already been through enough.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Lucian said loudly. “How rude of me for not greeting you the second you arrived!” Lucian started toward us. “Caliana! I apologize for being so rude! Thank you so much for joining us this evening.” He gave a dramatic bow and held out a hand.

Cali looked at me, and then with one arm still linked around my waist, she placed her hand in Lucian’s. I felt my hackles raise as Lucian pressed his lips to the top of Cali’s hand. Then he straightened, still holding onto her hand, of course.

“Thank you so much for coming, my dear Caliana. I was worried that you’d never return to the palace after all that nonsense with Seluna.”

*Nonsense? Seriously? This guy’s an idiot.* I’d only invited her because of the political side of things. I didn’t want to offend Lucian, who—as the whole painting thing had demonstrated—could be set off by just about anything these days. It wasn’t that I was afraid of incurring his wrath, I just wasn’t in the mood for any more conflict with the man. He was insufferable.

I held Cali a little tighter, and she seemed to relax into me.

“Really, it’s not that big a deal,” Cali said. “No problem at all. I’m glad I could be here.” She gave Lucian a stiff smile.

“No, no—believe me. I understand the trauma, the hurt you went through here at Seluna’s and my hands. I’m so, so sorry, and if there’s absolutely anything you ever need, Caliana, please know that I am at your disposal.”

I couldn’t help but find Lucian’s statement interesting. *Is he essentially aligning himself with the Redwood pack as an ally?* I mulled that over, not sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Lucian was just so damn volatile… But given the whole Knox situation, maybe it wouldn’t hurt to have Lucian on our side.

All in all, I was glad that Lucian had apologized to Cali. I looked at her, trying to read her expression as she considered Lucian.I thought his apology had sounded sincere enough, but Lucian was good at that sort of stuff—smoothing over the messes he made without really changing his behavior.

Cali looked up at me as she replied to Lucian. “Uh, thanks! That’s, uh, super thoughtful of you.” She pulled her hand out of Lucian’s grasp, and I felt a spike of pride.

*That’s my girl.*

Lucian nodded at Cali, then seemed to notice Elle for the first time. “Oh, I’m so sorry! So rude of me to have ignored you.”

Aysel suddenly clapped her hands. A flicker of exasperation appeared on her face before she tore her gaze away from her brother to look at Cali and Elle. “It’s time for the ladies to go back to our tearoom. You boys have fun in here!”

Cali gave me a hug, and I could tell how reluctant she was to leave my side.

“It’ll be okay,” I said into her ear. “We’ll be back home at the pack house before you know it.”

Cali nodded and kissed me, letting her lips linger for a bit—but not as long as I would’ve liked. I wanted more, and I wished that we were alone together enjoying each other’s company rather than dealing with pack politics at the Vanguard estate. This was the last place I wanted to be right now, but duty called. I only hoped that this would go smoothly so we could get out of here quickly and without incident.

I watched Cali disappear with Aysel and Elle, missing her already. Seconds after they’d left, there was a knock on the door. An attendant rushed to open it, revealing Mace and Knox.

Without missing a beat, Lucian darted over to greet them—ever the gracious host.

“Welcome, welcome! I’m so happy to receive you here at the new and improved Vanguard palace!” Lucian said as he stepped aside to allow Knox and Mace to enter.

I greeted Mace with a big hug. “Nice to see you, man. How’re you doing?”

“I’m managing,” Mace said. He gave a little half smile.

“Good, I’m glad to hear that.”

Mace looked loads better than he had right after Pip’s death. Things had been pretty touch-and-go for Mace for a minute there. I was certain that the wound from all that was still healing, but at least he’d gotten to a place where you couldn’t see his grief written across his face.

I turned to greet Knox, giving him a strong handshake instead. It was definitely a power move, but Knox was new and still needed to learn what it was to be an Alpha.

“Thank you all for coming,” Lucian said. “I thought that since we have a new Alpha in the area, it made sense for all four of us to get together so we could discuss the matters that relate to all our packs—”

“I want to thank you, Lucian, for putting this together,” Knox interrupted. “It really means a lot to the Samara pack to have someone as notable as you and the Vanguard pack acknowledge us so soon after we’ve reformed.”

I stifled an eyeroll. It was clear that Knox was trying to suck up to Lucian, and it was even clearer that Lucian was absolutely loving it.

“Come, come, let’s all have a seat!” Lucian said, ushering as toward a large table set with hors d’oeuvre and bottles of wine that I didn’t plan on touching.

We all sat down, one Alpha on each side. I was sitting directly across from Knox, who smirked as we made eye contact.

Knox looked to Lucian. “Now, let’s get this thing over with. What the hell do you want to talk about?”

# Episode 2941

I was already missing Greyson’s warmth as I followed Aysel and Elle back to the parlor. *I wish I could’ve stayed with Greyson.* It seemed kind of silly that I couldn’t stay at his side, given that he would most likely just tell me everything that happened, anyway. Hell, maybe I could’ve helped broker peace between him and Knox, since he was concerned about how things would go once he arrived.

Like Greyson, I wasn’t in the mood for another conflict with another pack, and I would do anything to stop us from getting into one with the Samaras—even though I knew that Greyson would be able to handle things if we did. That wasn’t the point, though. I wanted to relax and enjoy a little bit of normalcy with my mates for once without having to deal with a life-or-death situation hanging over our heads.

Once we were seated, Aysel came and offered Elle and me some of the scones and sandwiches. They looked delicious, and my stomach rumbled, but the last time I’d had food and drinks at one of the Vanguard shindigs, they’d been laced with something, and I wasn’t interested in losing my faculties again. Granted, this felt like a different kind of party, but I couldn’t help but be a little wary. *Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.*

Elle definitely didn’t share my misgivings.

“It is a sandwich?” She gestured to the tower of food on a tray.

“Yeah, sandwiches and scones,” I said. “They’re good.”

Elle took one of the sandwiches and two of the scones and started shoving them into her mouth. She was eating like, well, a wild animal.

Aysel gave Elle a curious look before leveling the tray right at me, making eye contact. “Caliana?”

Reluctantly, I took a cucumber sandwich. Satisfied, Aysel returned the tray to the table and poured tea into the cute little cups before sitting down.

“Mmm. It’s good,” Elle said, finishing her first scone as Aysel delicately sipped her tea.

*This is hella awkward.* What were we even supposed to talk about? Aysel and I literally had nothing in common, except that we’d both been terrorized by a demon in this house. *Oh, and that we’re both in love with Greyson—though for Aysel it’s more of an infatuation and not real in the least. More of a delusion, really.* Greyson and I had true love and a real mate bond, nothing like the weird obsession that Aysel had with him.

I started to nibble at my sandwich. “This is really good, Aysel.”

“Oh—I’m glad you like it. The cucumber is organic and ethically grown. I think we flew it in from a cucumber farm down south that’s all the rage right now. And the dill is super exotic, we had it sourced from Italy… Or was it France? Anyway, not only is it good, but it’s good *for* you. I assure you that you’ll never have a better cucumber sandwich in your life. Also, the bread…”

I was trying to nod along, only half interested and barely following. She was talking a mile a minute, and the subject matter wasn’t particularly riveting. The sandwich was good, though. It didn’t taste like it had been laced with anything, but maybe it was… Who knew when it came to the Vanguards? I looked at Elle, who was now tearing into her sandwich, having devoured the two scones. She seemed to be enjoying the food, at least.

Soon, Elle moved on to the tea, and my mind wandered as she tried to pick up the hot cup. She struggled to loop her fingers through the little handle and seemed seconds away from pouring the hot liquid into her lap.

*How can I explain tea to her? Maybe the same way I explained it to Torin? Hot leaf water?*

“UGH!” Aysel said suddenly.

I jumped, my attention back on the princess, who rolled her eyes and dropped her head back as if she were falling asleep.

“This could NOT be more boring!” Aysel sighed and set her teacup down hard on its saucer.

I wasn’t sure what to say to that. I wasn’t psyched about being here either, but at least I was trying to be polite instead of making an excuse to get the hell out of here and join Greyson in the other room—or better yet, go home to the pack house.

“The only reason I wanted to have this party in the first place was because I wanted to actually have something to talk about. Do you really think I *enjoy* talking about sandwiches? Exotic dill isn’t even a thing!”

“Well…” I spluttered. “You sounded really convincing.”

It was surprising to see the princess lose her composure like this. She was usually so measured and calculated. It was clear that the whole Seluna thing had really done a number on her life as well.

Aysel leaned forward. “I. Want. *Gossip*.”

“What’s gossip?” Elle asked, munching on another scone.

Aysel stared at her with a stunned look on her face. “*What’s gossip?*” She looked at me, her eyes wide. “Is she serious? She can’t be serious.”

I smiled nervously and shrugged.

There was no use making an excuse for Elle in this instance—I wasn’t really supposed to know her very well, after all. Besides, if I said anything that wasn’t true, Aysel would probably call me out on it immediately, and I wasn’t in the mood to tap dance around her follow-up questions.

Aysel turned back to Elle. “Gossip is only the greatest thing known to human and wolf kind. It’s a way to find out interesting information about people—especially the kind that they wouldn’t want you to know, which makes it all the better. That’s mostly what people do when they get together like this.” Aysel looked at me. “I’m sorry, I still can’t get over this. Does she *really* not know what gossip is? How long was she a Rogue for?”

Elle swallowed her scone and said, “Gossip? Like having two mates?” Elle gestured at me, and I wanted to sink down through the floorboards.

*For a person who’s only just heard of gossip, she sure knows how the hell to do it…*

Aysel clapped her hands in pleasure. “Yes, Elle! Exactly! You *do* get it!”

I groaned. *How did this conversation go from having nothing to do with me to being all about the* due destini*? This curse is certainly a gift that keeps on giving.*

Aysel turned to me. “So, have there been any new developments with your little… predicament?”

*There are plenty, but I’m not about to tell you about any of them.*

I’d never mention the whole Xavier and Ava thing to her, and I definitely wasn’t going to tell her about Greyson and those misunderstood kisses from Elle.

I picked up my own teacup. “No, not really. Same old, same old.” I took a sip of tea and averted my gaze.

“You’re lying again,” Aysel said simply.

I could feel myself going red. I wasn’t sure what to say now, but there was no way I was going to talk to her about my mates.

“What about you?” I said quickly. “Tell me about all the redecorating… And whatever else you’ve been doing here.”

I seriously could not give a flying fuck, but anything to take the focus off of me.

“It’s been a nightmare!” Aysel huffed. “Thank you for asking. Between those LIPS people trying to buy the house and people coming in and out to clean, I haven’t known peace or a good night’s sleep in I don’t *know* how long. The gallery where Seluna died is still in such disarray. I haven’t been back in there since Greyson came by to pick up the ashes.”

I tensed. “Are you ever going to clean it up?”

Aysel nodded. “Now that I think about it, someone did stop by to do that. Some professional that Lucian hired—though he hadn’t mentioned anything about it to me. They were sort of strange, if I’m being honest. Very serious, no nonsense.”

Alarm bells started clanging in my head as Aysel continued.

“They said they had to go into the gallery, and that they’d take care of everything. I think they were, like, some kind of psychic, but Lucian was pretty tight-lipped about who—or what—they were. I just told them to do whatever they could to get rid of the bad energy in there.”

“You’d never seen this person before? Did you ask Lucian about them?”

“Like I said, Lucian was pretty vague about them. Plus, half the time he doesn’t even remember what he had for breakfast. The person went in and dusted, cleansed the air, and left.”

“What did they look like?” I pressed. Was this person related to whoever took the ashes? If that were the case, we might finally have a lead that was worth something. “Do you have cameras installed?”

“Of course! With all the valuables and antiques and ancient paintings everywhere, we’d be stupid not to.”

*Bingo. This could be exactly what we need to track down the thief!*

“Aysel, you need to take me to see that footage right now!”

# Episode 2942

**Xavier**

*Tanner’s over there by the pool table. Did the asshole come alone?*

I pulled Ava close again, trying to ignore the little gasp she made. I didn’t like that she was afraid, and my wolf was immediately on edge and primed to do whatever it took to keep her safe, if needed.

I turned to her. “Look over by the pool table, but don’t be obvious about it. I’m pretty sure that’s Tanner—that’s his name, isn’t it?”

Ava casually glanced over there, and her expression changed. *I knew it was him*, she mind linked. *I thought I might’ve been wrong.*

*You weren’t*, I replied. *He followed you. Knox had to have sent him here; that’s the only reason why he’d be here.*

Now, Ava’s comment about Knox wanting to start something with the Redwoods seemed a little more feasible. I didn’t know why else he’d be making it so clear that he had a problem with me—and therefore with the pack. Still, I hoped Knox wasn’t looking to take things to that level. I was in no mood for another pack war, and I was sure my brother felt the same, but if Knox forced our hand and we had to take the Samara pack out, we would do it with no problem.

They weren’t making the best first impression as a newly formed pack, that was for sure. It was almost laughable that Knox would be working so hard to get on our bad side, given how vulnerable the Samara pack still was. If they really thought they could take us, maybe they should just get their asses handed to them.

Ava snaked her hand up my arm and grabbed my shoulder tightly. I felt her body tense next to mine. *Blaine’s here, too. What the hell?*

I swore under my breath, instantly in a bad mood.

*That guy’s such a useless tool*, I mind linked to Ava, trying to keep myself from hopping out of my seat and confronting both of the idiots right now.

*It’s okay*, Ava said. *As long as they stay over there, we’ll be fine. Lucky for us, the bar is so loud that I doubt they would’ve heard anything we said—and they would’ve seen the kiss. They probably just think we’re on a date or something. No harm, no foul.*

Ava was probably right, but the fact that these guys were obviously keeping tabs on me—which was probably the real reason why Knox had had Ava followed—annoyed the shit out of me. I didn’t like being fucked with, and I disliked them fucking with Ava even more. Knox hadn’t been in power for even twenty-four hours, and he was already out of control and overstepping, trying to assert dominance that he certainly didn’t have.

Before I knew what I was doing, I was out of the booth and heading toward the pool table.

“Xavier!” Ava called out after me. “Get back here! What are you doing?”

I ignored her, coming up on the pool game just as Tanner leaned over with his cue to take a shot.

“Hey,” I said, my voice gruff but even. I decided to play it cool until I had no choice but to turn things up a notch. Blaine and Tanner flashed me a surprised look, as if they hadn’t thought I’d actually come up to them. “What are the odds of us running into you two here tonight? Small world, huh?”

I rocked back and forth on my heels, trying to appear calm and collected when I was anything but. *These guys really have no idea who they’re messing with.*

Tanner looked jumpy as hell. “Oh, well this is the best bar in the area. We come here all the time, so it’s not that much of a coincidence.” He stood up straight and tried to puff up his chest to hide his obvious nervousness. It wasn’t working.

I nodded slowly, making it clear that I didn’t believe a word he’d said. “Oh, is that so? Just wanted to grab a beer with your buddy here?” I shot a sidelong glance at Blaine.

Tanner nodded, his gaze darting over to Blaine for assistance that his friend didn’t look too keen on providing. Tanner was obviously the weakest link in this little duo, and he knew it. Too bad he was looking to a fellow weak link like Blaine for guidance and support. Neither one of them was lieutenant material, and Knox would learn that the hard way.

Blaine smirked. “Good to see you, Xavier.”

He definitely had a better poker face than Tanner, but that was because he had such an inflated view of himself that he didn’t realize he was just as weak as his friend—whether he showed it outwardly or not.

I cracked my knuckles. *How many times am I going to have to kick this guy’s ass before he loses that stupid smirk?* I wanted to wipe it off once and for all, and if he kept following me around and getting in my way, I was sure I’d get an opportunity to do just that sooner rather than later.

“Hey, Ava,” Blaine said as Ava joined me at my side.

“Is there a problem here?” she asked. “Xavier and I were just out on a date. We wanted some alone time together.”

Blaine nodded. “Yeah, but Knox gave us orders to tail you.”

Ava seemed surprised by that, or at least was making it look that way. “Why?”

Tanner piped up. “To protect you.”

I bellowed a genuine laugh. “You’ve clearly never met Ava. She could easily beat either one of you guys in a fight—hell, even if you two tried to double-team her. In fact, she could probably do it with both hands tied behind her back. Ava’s not the type to need protection.”

My wolf growled internally as if to say, *Unless I’m the one doing the protecting.*

Blaine leaned on his pool cue. “That might be so, but you might have heard that someone tried to sabotage Knox during his Iudicium. With that in mind, Knox thought it best to put out groups that will protect his biggest assets. Family is everything to him, so of course he’s going to do whatever it takes to protect his cousin. I’m sure you get that. She is, after all, precious cargo.” Blaine gave Ava a lascivious look that turned my stomach.

Unable to help myself, I shot Blaine a disgusted look. Ava stepped in closer to me.

*Good*, my wolf growled.

“There’s nothing for you or Knox to worry about. Ava is perfectly safe in my hands… So unless there’s a separate issue that you two aren’t being forthcoming about?” I stared them both in the eye, waiting for them to finally say outright what they were hinting at.

Blaine and Tanner exchanged a look.

I waited a beat. “What, you don’t think that *I* tried to sabotage Knox, do you? Is that what your little stunt was about this morning, coming into Redwood territory?”

I stepped in close to Blaine, nudging Ava behind me. I didn’t quite know where things were headed, but I didn’t want her to get caught in the middle if fists started flying. At this point, you could’ve cut the tension in the air with a knife.

“Xavier,” Ava said warningly.

“No, I want to know, Ava. Does the Samara pack think that I messed with Knox?” *Come on, admit it. Get it out in the open so we can hash this out once and for all. And once I’m done with you two, I’ll go straight for your Alpha. He needs to be taught a lesson, and I have no problem being the one to do it.*

Blaine cocked his head to the side, the smirk still playing on his lips. “Do you *think* you should be a suspect?”

*Oh, so this is how they want to play it?* It didn’t matter to me—I was obviously smarter than the two of them. They’d basically just admitted that I was suspect number one. Not news in the least. “It doesn’t matter what I think, and I don’t care about what Knox thinks. But unless you two want to confront me about something or start something, I guess I’ll get back to Ava and the two of you can go. Oh, and I’ll be sure to bring her home to wherever the hell she wants to be once we’re done.”

Blaine narrowed his gaze as his grip visibly tightened around his pool cue. “No. She’ll be coming home with us. Strict orders from the Alpha.”

Blaine waltzed toward me with the pool cue still gripped in his hand.

*He’s trying to meet me eye to eye, but he’s just not tall enough.* It was my turn to smirk. “You *are* trying to start something. Well, I’m sure you know me well enough by now to know I’d be more than happy to finish it.”

# Episode 2943

**Greyson**

*Get this thing over with?* I was genuinely surprised by Knox’s tone. I wasn’t sure if it was because the guy was only twenty-one or what, but he’d gone from kissing Lucian’s ass one second to being rude the next. Knox was a piece of work, that was for sure.

*I’m definitely interested in seeing how Lucian is going to take this.*

I shot a glance at the prince, who was seated at the end of the long table. There was a beat where I actually thought Lucian might tell the kid off, which would have given me some sweet satisfaction. But to my surprise, Lucian started laughing.

*What the hell is this? The prince chooses right now to be all cool and collected about blatant disrespect?*

“Oh my, I like you!” Lucian said, pointing at Knox.

*Oh god, please no.* Lucian and Knox getting along and forming some sort of alliance would be a horrible—and dangerous—combination. Both of them lacked the self-awareness to know how absolutely ridiculous they were, and that wouldn’t bode well for the Redwoods. I could see it now, them getting a bug up their ass about some imagined slight that the Redwoods had committed against them. Then they’d join together and storm our pack house without a second thought. I shuddered at the thought of having not one, but two trigger-happy packs in our orbit.

“I respect a man who gets right to the point,” Lucian continued as his laughter died down.

Knox smiled, but I couldn’t help but notice that it didn’t quite reach his eyes. It was clear that Knox had thought being Alpha would have excluded him from events like these, and that he wouldn’t actually need to interact with other Alphas like this.

*Well, if the guy wants to be an island, he won’t get very far, and that suits me fine. Just as long as Lucian doesn’t take Knox under his wing. That could be a big problem.*

“In Vanguard tradition, we meet with other packs in the area. It might sound archaic to you all, but the Vanguard pack has been around for such a long time, and we do rely on our customs as a guide for other packs to follow.” Lucian smiled around the table, swelling with pride.

I groaned internally. *It’s just like Lucian to figure out how to brag about his pack while also trying to seem focused on uniting the four Alphas’ packs.*

“In the past, the Vanguards would hold these ‘brain trusts,’ if you will, and have the relevant Alphas meet monthly to discuss important matters. It was an integral part of keeping the werewolf community strong and getting ahead of any petty arguments that might arise between us.”

Mace cleared his throat. “Are you implying that you want all of us to have an alliance?”

I could tell that Mace was about as skeptical about the whole thing as I was.

I nodded in agreement. “Seems like it.” I narrowed my eyes. “What would that entail, exactly? And I would assume that even in this alliance, the Vanguard pack has final say in all affairs?”

I glanced back at Knox, thinking about the potential magical arms race, and the competitive vibe that was rolling off the kid in waves. We could find ourselves in a dick measuring contest between the packs in no time if we weren’t careful. The Vanguards hadn’t really shown themselves as the types to play nice with other packs, and Knox was showing the same behavior—though he didn’t have the numbers and resources Lucian did, which made him a lesser threat. But he was a threat all the same.

“That’s certainly on the table, and it’s exactly what I’m proposing,” Lucian said brightly. “We’re the principal Alphas of the Oregon packs. We’re the most important people in the state that no one even knows about.”

I snorted. *Lucian is really on a roll today.*

“It’s true!” Lucian said. “We determine the balance in the supernatural world. Who else keeps the vampires in check? Who else keeps the humans safe from any supernaturals that could harm them? Who else makes sure that the werewolves stay at the top of the food chain and maintain our safety and security? I’ve watched all of you closely, and you’ve got what it takes to keep this delicate balance in check and ensure everyone’s safety.”

Mace leaned forward on the table. “Lots of fancy talk from the Alpha that tried to summon demons into his own pack.”

*Tell me about it.* He’d just put the entire world—supernatural and otherwise—in the type of danger that the world was not prepared to face, and now he was bragging about how tight a ship he ran?

Lucian waved Mace off. “Oh, but we resolved that. The Vanguard and the Redwood packs. Together.” Lucian smiled over at me.

*Wait, did Lucian just wipe a tear from his eye? Yes. I think he did.*

Mace tapped the table with his knuckles and sat back in his seat. “I don’t know. I’m not sure I like this. I’m all for an alliance, but I don’t like the idea of having to answer to any of you.” Mace made eye contact with me. “No offense.”

I shrugged. “None taken. I understand exactly where you’re coming from.” I turned to Lucian. “The packs in this area lead pretty separate lives as a rule, and I think everyone kind of likes it that way. Oh, and let’s not forget the pack war that broke out between us all. It made things pretty volatile, and we’re only just beginning to shake off our petty grudges about that.” I shot Knox a look. “And even if we did agree to work together, we would still need the approval of all the packs.”

Mace nodded in agreement. “Yeah, it’s not as simple as the four of us sitting down tonight and singing kumbaya. We’d need to make sure everyone was on board with this, or it could cause more issues between us all.”

Lucian nodded. “You both make good points, and I understand your hesitation, but don’t you see? Those are the exact reasons why an alliance would be so beneficial. We wouldn’t have to worry about pack wars in the future—not if we were all working together and on the same page. Most arguments and disagreements and wars break out over lapses in communication and petty disagreements—which an alliance would help eliminate.”

I cleared my throat. “I hate to ask this, Lucian, but where is all this coming from? What’s suddenly making you want to be friends with all of us? I had the impression that the Vanguard pack was pretty set in its ways and thought it was the most powerful pack on its own—that it didn’t really need anyone else. And weren’t you actively trying to absorb other packs?”

*Not to mention drugging us, kidnapping my mate, and forcing us to see you naked and everything in between not so long ago.*

Lucian nodded. “Yes, that was certainly the Vanguards’ past… methodology. But recent events have shown me the importance of having a strong alliance. Had the Redwood pack not stepped in to help with our, ahem, demon problem, I’m afraid that there might not have been a Vanguard pack still in existence.”

I was surprised to hear that. I hadn’t gotten the impression before that Lucian had been too thankful for our intervention. He’d even seemed a little angry that we’d come between him and his vicious demon bride, to tell the truth.

“So… you’re remorseful about all of that?” I said slowly.

Lucian looked at me, not quite nodding. “I understand now, better than I ever did before, the importance of having other people on your side.”

*That’s the most… normal thing Lucian may have ever said.* He hadn’t quite agreed with me outright, but this was Lucian we were talking about. Baby steps. And he might have been turning over a new leaf, but I still wasn’t getting the warm and fuzzies about this whole alliance thing. We had such a tense history with the Vanguards that I wondered if we’d ever be able to trust each other enough to form anything resembling an alliance.

“It’s an interesting idea you’ve presented here today,” I said. “But I would have to bring it to my pack before making any decision about whether this is the right move for the Redwoods right now.”

“Same,” Mace said.

I stole a glance at Knox, who hadn’t said much.

Lucian nodded at Mace and me. “Of course, of course. I get it. I’m open to negotiation around all the details—things like how much and when we could all meet, what things would be up for discussion and what would stay under each separate pack’s review, all that. But I do think that coming together in this alliance would be in everyone’s best interest.” Lucian leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. He had his patented self-satisfied look on his face. “So, does anyone have any questions?”

Knox finally broke his silence. “Yeah, I do. What happens if we break the alliance?”

# Episode 2944

I followed Aysel down the hall to the Vanguard control room, where Aysel said they monitored all their camera footage. I was nervous. I wasn’t sure what I expected to see in the footage, but I was hoping that the person who’d come to tend to the gallery might be a link to whatever had happened to the ashes. Up until now, we hadn’t had much luck in determining what had happened during the Courier’s fateful trip to the demon world, and I was starting to worry that we’d never figure it out.

*And if this person isn’t the link we’re looking for, then worst-case scenario, we’ll just be right back where we started with no real leads beyond the saint medal that Xavier found at the crash site.*

I tried to stay positive and took in a deep breath as Aysel unlocked the door. This whole thing was a stroke of unexpected luck, anyway, so I told myself that I wouldn’t get too down if it turned out to be another dead end.

“Here we are!” Aysel said breezily. “The control room! The place where we watch all the magic happen.” She chuckled to herself.

The room certainly lived up to its name. It was full of panels and buttons and levers and wall-to-wall screens. There was a single chair sitting in front of what looked like the main control area.

“Whoa,” Elle said as she spun around, taking the place in. She looked both terrified and mesmerized. “Big and bright!”

“This looks like something straight out of an evil villain’s lair,” I said.

“What?” Aysel gasped. “How do you mean?”

“You know, with all the cameras all over the palace and a control room like this with one single chair where someone can watch everything that’s happening?” I wasn’t surprised in the least that the Vanguards had a setup like this. It was very on brand for them.

Aysel looked at the chair. “Oh! Well, there are usually more chairs, but they’re actually out getting reupholstered at the moment. Out with the old and in with the new, you know?”

*Sure they are.* I could totally picture Lucian or Aysel in this room, sitting in the chair and stroking a cat while laughing maniacally. They’d thrown too many parties and were way too manipulative for this place *not* to be used pretty similarly to the way I imagined.

*I wonder how many times I’ve been spied on from this very room?* I decided not to go there—there was no point. I liked to think that by now, we had a new and different understanding with the Vanguards about boundaries—though I wasn’t counting on that.

Aysel sat down in the chair and cracked her knuckles. “I’m pretty sure I know how to work this thing,” she said, gesturing at the control panel.

*Oh, I’m sure you do.* “Great. Do you think you’ll be able to pull up the footage from when that person came by and went into the gallery?”

I had my fingers crossed. If this panned out, I knew that Greyson and Xavier were going to be so excited that we were that much closer to resolving our Seluna issue.

Aysel furrowed her brow with concentration. “I should be able to…”

She leaned forward, muttering to herself as she started hitting different buttons on the touch screens and turning a few old-fashioned-looking dials that looked strange next to the more state-of-the-art parts of the panel.

“We were there!” Elle said, pointing to one of the screens and clapping her hands in glee. I looked at the screen, and sure enough, she was pointing at a screen that showed the tearoom.

I nodded at her. “That’s right, Elle. That’s where we were.”

“How?”

“Um…” *How do I explain something like this to her?* “There are these things called cameras, and they send images to this screen, so that even if you’re not in the room, you can see what’s going on in there.”

“Why?”

“Because maybe you want to see what’s going on even if you’re not there, to make sure nothing bad is happening.”

“Why?”

“Because sometimes people do bad things when no one’s looking.”

“Why?”

I was grateful when Aysel interrupted us. “Okay, I think I’ve got it!”

Elle and I watched as Aysel dimmed all the monitors on the wall except for one.

“This is the footage from right around the time the person came over and I ran into them,” Aysel said. “I remember it because I’d been having a crisis about my wardrobe, and I couldn’t take it anymore, so I was heading outside for fresh air.”

“We don’t need the color commentary,” I said. Between her and Elle, I was starting to lose my patience.

“My goodness Caliana, if I wasn’t in such a generous mood, I’d find a way to curb that insolent tongue of yours this evening. But”—she smiled, and I realized maybe I needed to rein in my impatience—“I can see you’re stressed, so I’ll forgive you. This once.”

I decided not to touch that comment—I needed to stay on her good side until I saw the footage.

Aysel pressed a button on the screen in front of her, and the video started to play.

“This camera shows us at the door,” Aysel said as the image of the palace’s grand entrance filled the screen. A few seconds later, it showed Aysel opening the door. She was standing right in front of the person, blocking them from the camera. Then, as soon as the person came in, a bunch of attendants hustled by carrying something so big that it blocked everything out.

“What about the gallery door?” I asked. “Could the cameras have gotten a better look there?”

“Let’s see.” Aysel hit a couple of buttons and pulled up footage from the camera in front of the gallery.

I watched on pins and needles, hoping that this would be better than the last bit. At first, there was just footage of the attendants walking through the halls, moving stuff around. It was clear that they were all still cleaning, but no one went through the gallery door at any point. Then, suddenly, the gallery door was hanging wide open—and it was like I’d blinked and missed how it had gotten that way.

“Wait, can you rewind that? When did the door open? And who opened it?” I asked, feeling a little freaked out.

Aysel shook her head slowly. “I’m not sure.”

“It open fast!” Elle added.

“It sure did, Elle,” Aysel and I said in near unison.

“Wait just a second.” Aysel’s brow furrowed with concentration as she rolled back the footage.

“Play it at half speed this time,” I said.

“You got it.” Aysel hit a couple of buttons, and the footage played slowly.

We all watched as the attendants went by again, slowly doing their work. Then, suddenly, a blurry figure appeared on the screen and approached the gallery door. It happened so quickly. First the blurry person was there, and then it was gone and the door was wide open.

“You both saw that, right?” I asked. I leaned over Aysel and ran the footage back. I paused it on the blurry figure and pointed. “Do you recognize this person at all?”

“What, you mean that blur? You can’t be serious.”

I shot Aysel a look. “Just humor me and look closely for a second.”

Aysel leaned forward and squinted at the screen. “I can kind of make out the outline of a blazer here, I think.” She started gesturing at the screen like she was doing the weather. “And I remember that it had elaborate gold buttons somewhere around here…”

“So, you remember their outfit but not their face? Can you tell if that’s them or not?”

Aysel turned to glare at me. “Yes, of course I remember the outfit over the person, but that’s definitely the jacket.”

“Enhance image, computer. Enhance!” I yelled at the control panel.

“What the hell are you doing?” Aysel asked, blinking at me.

“I don’t know! That always works in the movies, I figured I’d give it a shot.”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, Caliana, but we’re not in a movie. This is real life.”

“Real life, Caliana,” Elle repeated.

*Great, now even Elle is ragging on me. Aysel is not a good influence.*

I sighed and dug my fingers into my temples. I was starting to feel frustrated and on edge. I felt like we were so close to something, but not close enough. I pressed play on the footage again, and we all watched as the door opened. I let it play through to when the door shut again, and then I paused it. The blur was back on the screen, but this time, I could make out just a little more.

“Is that a face?” I said. “It kind of looks like a woman, maybe, but with this weird haze around it, it’s hard to tell.”

Elle started to growl, pointing at the screen. “Dangerous.”

I didn’t like the sound of that at all. I looked at Aysel. “We need to figure out exactly who this is, and we need to do it right now.”

# Episode 2945

**Artemis**

I was sitting out on the back deck, breathing in the cool, crisp air and trying my best to clear my mind, or do whatever the fuck it was that Torin had suggested earlier when I’d asked him about meditation. I hadn’t been interested in trying that sound meditation thing he’d done with Marta, Cali, and Dani again, but I’d figured some good, old-fashioned, normal meditation might be just what I needed. Torin had been more than happy to help and had given me all the tips and tricks he had in his arsenal. It had all sounded very useful and beneficial when he’d explained it, but in the end, I felt like I was just sitting there.

*And I’ve been doing that for what feels like an eternity.*

I wanted to get a clear head so that I could get in touch with my magic. I wanted to bring the “overflow,” as Mom had called it, under control. I didn’t want there to be any scenario where I could hurt Rishika, or my family, or anyone in the pack. I needed to get my magic under control—and fast.

*Okay, Artemis. Focus.* I shook my head and closed my eyes, deciding to give this whole meditation thing another go. As I tried to “focus on my breathing,” I felt myself getting pissed off. I jumped up from my seat.

“I can’t do this!” I yelled.

The whole thing was just making me feel like I needed to punch something. *Hey, maybe that would actually help. Maybe taking my aggression out on something will eliminate my surplus magic. Problem solved.*

I started looking around for something to punch, but then I remembered the night before, when the door had burst open because of my little overflow problem. I faltered.

*Maybe punching stuff with my magic all out of whack would be the opposite of a good idea. It seems to be tied to my heightened emotions, so it could definitely backfire.*

Feeling frustrated and hopeless, I sat back down in my seat. *If I can’t meditate and I can’t punch my way out of this, then what the hell am I supposed to do?*

I was considering taking a walk through the woods when the door opened and Rishika came out onto the deck with a steaming mug in each hand.

“Hey, how’s it going?” she asked, kissing me on the cheek.

“Horribly,” I grumbled. “I don’t know how people do this sort of thing. I mean, mediation is all the rage, right? People swear by it, but it’s not helping me at all. Meditation is supposed to calm you down and make you all chill, and I think it’s doing the exact opposite for me. I feel like breaking something.”

“Okay, well let’s not do that,” Rishika said, giving me a look. “I don’t know, Artemis. There has to be a way to get to the bottom of this. Maybe we could ask Okorie? He seems pretty knowledgeable about a lot of stuff.”

I waved that idea off. “I’d rather not. He’s a warlock, and I’m Fae. It’s way different.”

With my luck, I’d take a piece of Okorie’s witchy advice and make everything worse.

“Okay, fair enough. I know you like to take care of problems yourself and you like to be proactive about it. Meditation is good, but you’re hardly the ‘sit and wait patiently’ type, so the kind of meditation you were trying to do may not be right.” Rishika sipped from her cup and looked out into the distance. She looked calm and serene, but I knew that the wheels were turning in her mind as she tried to come up with a solution for my problem.

“That’s an understatement. I might be the one person in the world who should *never* meditate,” I said with a sigh.

Rishika offered me one of the mugs, and I took it, but my eyes never left my beautiful girlfriend’s face. I suddenly felt an overwhelming need to protect her and keep her safe, and I couldn’t help but feel a little uneasy about how close she was to me in my current state.

I scooched away from her. “You should be careful around me. I’m not sure when my magic might up and overflow again. I’d hate for you to get hurt because my magic’s all messed up.” My mood was getting darker by the minute. “And this is obviously a great time for Cali to go off to some dinner party. Right when I need her most.”

“Come on, Artemis, you know you don’t need Cali to solve this problem for you—though it’s always nice for you two to have a chance to bond. You’re strong, and this is your magic, and you finally got it back. That counts for something, right? I’m sure it’ll all click into place soon. You just have to get used to it again.” Rishika took a sip of her mocha, a thoughtful look on her face. “Besides, you shouldn’t be worrying about me, anyway. We slept in the same bed last night, didn’t we?”

“Yes, but I wouldn’t call what I did sleeping.” I hadn’t slept a wink, in reality. I’d tossed and turned and pretty much been wide awake all night, hyper aware of every little move I made and every little move Rishika made. Eventually, I’d managed to fall asleep, but I didn’t even remember when. It hadn’t been for all that long, I knew that much, and I’d woken up when Rishika had gotten up to start her day.

Rishika put a hand on my cheek and stroked my skin. I flinched at the contact at first, but then I relaxed into it. “You look exhausted, Artemis. Why don’t you come inside and try to take a nap? That might be exactly what you need if you didn’t sleep all that well.”

“Sure, you’re probably right. It’s not like this meditation thing is working out, anyway. Maybe some normal sleep will do the trick.”

I got up and followed Rishika back into the pack house and up the stairs to our room. I put my untouched mocha on the side table and crawled into bed, propping myself up against my pillows and closing my eyes as Rishika pulled a blanket over me. I lay there trying to sleep, trying to slow my breathing, trying to stop my mind from racing. *This isn’t working.*

“Nope, this is just as bad as meditation. I just can’t get my mind to slow down.”

“I’m sorry to hear that… Is there anything I can do?” Rishika asked.

“No, I don’t think so. Like you said, this is on me.”

“Sure, but I could maybe make you more comfortable or something?”

“No,” I said. “I know you’re not worried about my magic, but I am. I want you to be careful and stay a safe distance away from me, as much as you can. I don’t want you to end up hurt.”

Rishika looked surprised. “You’d never hurt me.”

“Correction—I’d never hurt you on purpose, but who knows how my magic might react? You saw what happened back there at the LIPS camp. I didn’t mean to wipe your memory, but I did. Not to mention the little magical accident I had later that evening.”

Rishika moved closer to me on the bed. “You might not have been able to fully control your magic yesterday, but you definitely didn’t hurt me. The magic wasn’t anywhere near me, and look, I’m okay, aren’t I? I think you’re blowing all of this out of proportion.”

“I don’t know…” I wasn’t convinced. I hadn’t hurt her *those* times, but who knew what could happen if I didn’t get my abilities under control? *I love this woman with all my heart, and the idea of anything happening to her is just… awful.* I didn’t even want to think about it. I turned to face Rishika. “Can I tell you something?”

Rishika nodded. “Anything.”

I took a deep breath. “I secretly hoped that my magic would never come back.”

Rishika looked confused. “I find that hard to believe. It was always such a big part of you.”

“Sure, but it’s the magic that I share with my father, Kadmos. I thought that maybe, if it never came back, I wouldn’t be as disappointed if I never got the answers I needed about my father—you know, if I never managed to find Adair, that is. If none of that worked out, it wouldn’t matter, because I wouldn’t have anything left of Kadmos anyway. No constant reminders of him.”

Rishika took my hand. “I had no idea, Artemis. I’m so sorry.”

Artemis shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. The reality is, my magic is back, and the last thing I want is to hurt you.”

Rishika closed her eyes and leaned forward as if to kiss me, but I reared back. My heart was beating fast.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Rishika. I don’t know what I would do if anything happened to you—if I were the reason you ended up hurt…”

“Stop worrying so much, babe. You won’t hurt me. I know that you can control yourself. Why don’t we prove that right now?” Rishika said. Then she closed the distance between us and kissed me.

# Episode 2946

**Greyson**

What a bold question for Knox to ask. Why was he so focused on what would happen if someone broke an alliance that we hadn’t even formed yet?

*Is that what’s on his mind? How he can ruin the alliance before it even gets off the ground?*

I thought back to how Xavier had attacked Blaine earlier that morning, after he’d crossed into our territory. Maybe Lucian had inadvertently ruined Knox’s plans to come at the Redwood pack—if his minion’s little encroachment was any indication.

“Why do you ask, Knox? Is that on your agenda?” I asked. There was no use beating around the bush. If Knox wanted to torpedo the alliance before it started, then there was no point in forming it in the first place. Everyone’s cards needed to be out on the table so we knew where we stood before we took a step as big as this.

“No,” Knox said coolly. “But it seems like it only makes sense to have rules about what happens if something gets broken. If there are no consequences, then what’s the point of working together to keep things in check? If we don’t want our packs to be one big free for all, then there need to be guidelines, period.”

Mace shrugged, and Lucian nodded.

“As far as I’m concerned, if any alliance I’m in gets broken, it means no second chances. That’s it. If a pack breaks the alliance, that pack is out. And depending on what the offense is, it could mean wiping out that entire pack for good.” I knew that I sounded harsh. Truthfully, I couldn’t imagine killing off an entire pack or anything close to that, but it was all the better in my opinion if I sounded like I was capable of such a thing. *Knox needs to know that he’s playing with the big boys, now.* “Either the offending Alpha is taken care of by us, or, who knows? Maybe that Alpha’s pack might turn on him. Does that seem fair to everyone?”

“Sure, sounds good to me,” Mace said. “With stakes that high, it’ll encourage us to take the alliance seriously and think twice before doing anything to jeopardize it.”

Lucian nodded his agreement as well. “Well said, Mace, Greyson. Tough, but fair.”

I locked eyes with Knox. *Come on, kid. Are you itching to defy me, or will you fall in line and make all of this a lot easier for us?*

“Yeah,” Knox said. “I agree with that.”

“Okay, well that settles it,” Lucian said as he stood up. “Follow me.”

Lucian led us through the palace to a billiards room. The princeling picked up a pool cue, and we all gathered around while Lucian proceeded to separate us into teams—Lucian and Knox were on one team, and Mace and I were on the other. I wasn’t in the mood for games, but in the spirit of our burgeoning alliance, I decided to keep my mouth shut and go with the flow.

Lucian busied himself setting up the billiard balls and then readied himself to take the break shot.

“Great question earlier, Knox,” Lucian said as he took the shot, sending the balls scattering. “So good to get these nasty things out in the open first so we can take care of them. But now, on to something a little more exciting. A little birdie told me that the Samara pack doesn’t have a pack house. Is that correct?” Lucian paused to study the table. “Looks like we’re stripes, and you two are solids,” he said, standing back and chalking the tip of his pool cue as Mace lined up to take his shot.

“That’s right,” Knox said. “The house burned down during Silas’s return.” Knox’s gaze flickered my way before he trained his eyes back on the table.

“Good one,” I said to Mace as he sank two balls in quick succession. I was doing my best to stay engaged. I wasn’t the biggest fan of pool (despite playing decently), or the Vanguard palace, or anyone in this room save for Mace. I just wanted to get this over with and get back to Cali and the pack.

Lucian nodded. “Ah, yes. Silas—he was Greyson’s father, correct?”

It was my shot now, and I glared up at the prince as I concentrated on getting the five ball into the right corner pocket. I called out my move and then made it. I didn’t love pool, but I was good at it. I looked at Lucian as I moved around the table to prepare for my next shot.

*The little prince just couldn’t help making that little dig, could he?* It wasn’t like I’d ever cared for Silas, and I certainly wasn’t anything like him. *I never will be, either.*

“Yes, Silas was my father,” I said. “A father who, I’ll remind everyone, I killed. My brothers and I took care of that threat, with help from the Blue Blood pack.”

Knox shrugged. “Well either way, the Samaras got lost in the thick of it.”

I could feel my gears starting to grind. Still, I made my shot, hitting the ball just a little too hard in the process. It nearly bounced off the table and straight at Knox. I definitely would’ve said it was an accident if it had smacked him in the balls.

“And that was the fault of the Samara Alpha at the time, let’s not forget,” I said. “Seven ball, corner pocket.”

“You mean Nolan Reed,” Lucian added.

“Yes. Nolan chose sides.” I made my shot, and the ball rolled smoothly into the pocket. “He double-crossed us, and Silas killed him. That’s not our fault. And weren’t you the one, Knox, who was just talking about breaking alliances?”

Knox’s little perma-smirk faltered, and I felt good for a moment.

“So, it would be fair to say that the Redwoods should help finance a new pack house for the Samaras?” Lucian asked. “Nice shot, Greyson,” he said as I sank another one.

I felt thoroughly put on the spot. I recalled Zeke asking me about sponsoring a new pack house. I’d been right to assume that Zeke, and potentially other Samaras, blamed the Redwood pack for their predicament. *Or, more specifically, they blame me.* I leaned down to set up another shot, but this time I missed.

“Nice run,” Lucian said, readying his shot.

I’d told Zeke from the Samara that I would think about helping with the Samaras’ new pack house, but now, in the moment, with Knox’s smug little face staring back at me, I suddenly wasn’t in a generous mood. “No. The Redwoods will not sponsor a new Samara pack house. Their old pack house is gone because of Nolan’s decisions. Surely Nolan must have put some money away that his sister can access somehow—a Reed family trust or something of the sort. It’s not like the Samaras are a completely new pack with no foundation.”

“Good point,” Lucian said as he made three shots in a row.

“But, if you hit someone with your car, you’d be responsible for those damages, wouldn’t you?” Knox said. “How is this situation any different? If your power-hungry father hadn’t come back, our pack house, our Alpha—my cousin—might still be here.”

Lucian whistled, his eyes on the table. “Another good point.”

I shot another glare at the princeling. *Never change, Lucian. Never change.*

“Maybe some sort of compromise could be made,” Mace said. “But, when it comes down to it, I agree with Greyson. The Samara pack house burning down was Silas’s doing. I hope we aren’t all to be held accountable for the sins of our fathers.”

Lucian winced for a moment, then nodded as he lined up another shot.

“Nolan must have had something set up,” Mace continued. “Every Alpha knows that the unthinkable might happen to them, or to the pack or any of its assets—and as such, any Alpha worth his salt has a contingency plan in place for those sorts of situations. Things shouldn’t be so dire that a pack with needs of its own has to pay for another pack’s house.”

“I don’t know what you’re trying to say about Nolan, but he was definitely worth his salt, as you put it,” Knox hissed. “And respectfully, Mace, I disagree.”

I looked between the two men, who were now standing stock-still and staring each other down. I could tell they were seconds from a full-fledged argument.

“Listen, there’s no need for us to be at each other’s throats just yet. There’s plenty of time for that,” I said.

Lucian barked a laugh.

“What I said is final. I’m not paying for anything for this kid.” I looked Knox in the eye. “You’re an Alpha now—just like you wanted. With all due respect, maybe you didn’t really stop to think about what being an Alpha really means. Either way, not my problem. It’s yours. Figure it the fuck out.”

We all turned at a knock on the door. An attendant who I hadn’t even realized was in the room rushed to open it, revealing Cali.

“Hey, everyone, so sorry for interrupting.” Her eyes met mine. “Can I borrow Greyson for a moment? It’s urgent.”

# Episode 2947

**Xavier**

I was ready for a fight, so much so that I was hoping that Blaine said yes so that I could have the satisfaction of kicking his ass again—this time with an audience. If we got into it this time, I’d make sure that he never forgot what I was capable of. Then he’d definitely think twice about challenging me again.

Blaine took another step forward and nudged me with his pool cue. “You talk a big game.”

I clenched my fists, getting even more pissed off. “You and I both know from experience that I don’t just talk. I’ve beaten you enough times for you to have figured that out by now, whether you want to admit it or not.”

*I don’t get it, does this guy like getting his ass handed to him, or what?*

Blaine poked me with the pool cue again, and Tanner looked like he was going to say something but decided against it. Blaine sniffed. “You’re not as tough as you think you are. It’s obvious that you’re the type to let your anger get the best of you. That’s what we normal folk call a weakness.” Blaine flashed his patented smirk.

I almost laughed in his face. If I had any weaknesses at all, anger wasn’t one of them. If anything, my anger had helped me to get everything and anything I wanted: justice, vengeance, money, power, respect—everything. Besides, these days, I had more control over my anger than ever.

“You don’t know the first thing about me,” I said. “So you really shouldn’t be so cocky as to think you’d win in a fight. And may I remind you that we’re two-zero right now? Or did I hit you so hard last time that you forgot?”

Blaine prodded me with the pool cue once again, and it took everything in me not to yank it out of his hands and crack him over the head with it. “Two-zero, for now,” he said.

He moved to poke me again, and this time I did grab it, pulling him close. “If you do that one more time, I’m going to shove this thing so far down your throat that… Well, you know the rest.”

Blaine did a mock shudder. “Ooh, so angry, aren’t you? You should really talk to someone about that before it gets you into trouble.”

Now I was really ready to fight. I didn’t care about the consequences anymore. *This guy needs to shut the fuck up, and I’m happy to be the one to make him do it.* I wasn’t too angry to control myself—far from it. Blaine simply needed to be put in his fucking place.

Suddenly, a pair of hands came between us, wedging up apart.

“Back it up, both of you,” Jay said. He lowered his voice. “There are humans here. If you’re going to fight, take it somewhere else.”

I pushed Blaine back, and he lost his balance and tumbled onto the pool table. Without waiting to see if Blaine wanted to retaliate, I turned to Jay and Ava.

“Let’s go,” I said. Then I turned back to Blaine, who was still righting himself, and Tanner, who was standing by looking like he was in over his head. “And if you two even think of following us, I promise I’ll make you regret it.”

Without another word, I followed Jay and Ava out of the bar. I took one last glance back at Blaine and Tanner, who were now in the middle of a heated argument.

Once we were outside and a safe distance away from the bar, Jay stopped us.

“What the hell was that all about?” he asked.

“Apparently Knox has Ava under watch,” I said.

Ava snorted. “My cousin seems to think I need bodyguards.”

“Had you seen those two before?” I asked Jay.

Jay nodded. “Yup, I had an eye on them from the moment they came in. They didn’t do much before you confronted them—they were watching you two, of course. Otherwise, they weren’t talking about much else other than pool, so I didn’t get a good read on what they were really up to.”

“Figures,” I said.

“Jay, thank you for stepping in. The last thing I wanted was for a fight to break out between Xavier and those guys,” Ava said.

I gave Ava a look. “It wouldn’t have been a bad thing. It would’ve just shown them how green they are and given them second thoughts about stepping up to someone like me—not to mention that it would have showed Knox’s ass.”

“Yes, but then it also would’ve given Knox even more of a reason to dislike and suspect you,” Ava said. “The more things come to a boiling point between everyone, the worse things could get. I don’t want that—and neither should you. I don’t want Knox to get even bolder and go after you directly, X.”

I snorted. “As if he could.”

“Xavier, *please*. I warned you on purpose so that we could avoid a war, not so that we could kickstart one.”

“I agree with Ava,” Jay said. “A pack war is the last thing any of us needs right now. We’re still fresh off Silas and Letifer and Seluna. We need to take a breather, not only for the Redwoods’ safety, but for our morale as well.”

“I know where you both are coming from, trust me, but I’m not the one trying to instigate this. Knox is.” I was only answering the challenges that Knox kept sending to my doorstep. If it were up to me, I wouldn’t ever see Knox’s face again, let alone get into a pack war with the measly Samara pack. I had more important things to focus on, like spending time with Cali.

For a moment, the three of us were silent.

“Well,” I finally said. “We talked about what we needed to talk about, so let’s just get the hell out of here and leave those two clowns behind.”

“Sounds good—except we never paid the bill. Just give me a second,” Ava said, turning to head back inside.

I had the sudden impulse to go with her—my wolf was all but pushing me to her side.

“I should go with you,” I said, before I even knew the words were leaving my mouth.

“Thanks, but I’ll be okay. It’ll only take a minute, and besides, it’s better for you not to go back in and start things up with Blaine and Tanner again.”

She turned to go, and I struggled to hold myself back from running to catch up with her. With effort, I managed to calm my wolf and stay put in the parking lot with Jay. I watched Ava until she disappeared back inside the bar, then I turned back to my friend, who had both eyebrows raised.

“You want to talk about all of that?” he asked.

I suddenly felt uncomfortable. “About all of what?”

Jay shook his head. “Dude. Don’t play around right now. I saw that kiss between you two. Is that really what things have been like between you? It was intense, to put it lightly.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said. “If you’re implying that I’ve been going around kissing Ava, you’d be wrong. We did that as a cover.”

Jay nodded. “Right. A cover.” He shook his head and looked away.

“Come on, don’t do this, man. It was a cover. She thought she saw someone from the Samara pack, and she kissed me so they wouldn’t get suspicious. That’s all. And thank god she did, since there actually were Samaras there spying on us.”

“I’m sorry, Xavier, but is that really all it was?” Jay’s expression was hard to read. “That kiss was… hard to watch.”

I sighed. “I’m not sure where you’re going with this. I already feel bad enough about my feelings for Ava and this whole reignited mate bond and all the confusion it’s creating. I don’t need you making me feel worse about it.”

“Come on, you know that’s not what I’m trying to do. But… It didn’t look fake, and I’d be a bad friend if I didn’t point that out to you. I just know how it would affect Cali to see something like that.”

That hit me right in the gut. “I would *never* do anything like that in front of her.” I paused. “Except… Fuck. I guess I already kind of have.”

The kisses at the Iudicium were pretend for sure, but this one… I knew there’d been a pull between us. Shit. Jay was calling me out—and he was right. I was lucky Cali wasn’t here this time around. I had to get my shit together.

“It’s not me—it’s my wolf who wants Ava, who’s drawn to her,” I told him, trying to explain, but it sounded like an excuse. “There’s no denying that.”

“Listen, I don’t know, man. I just wanted to check in and see where your head was at with all this Ava mate bond stuff.”

I gritted my teeth. “Thanks, but I don’t need you to check in on me. I know what I’m doing.”

“Really? Because the Xavier I know would want me to check in,” Jay said. He crossed his arms and regarded me. “Are you coming back to the pack house with me, or are you staying with Ava?”

# Episode 2948

“Sorry about interrupting,” I said to the other Alphas in the room. “I just need Greyson really quickly. It’ll just be a minute.”

When Greyson stepped out into the hallway, he looked a little confused. “What’s going on?”

“I’m sorry to pull you away from that, but I really need to talk to you,” I said quickly, grabbing his hand and leading him down the hall, away from the open door of the billiard room, where Lucian, Knox, and Mace stood.

“Is everything okay?” Greyson asked, immediately tense. “Cali? Did any of the Vanguards try anything?” He looked around. “Where’s Elle?”

I could see he’d gone into Alpha mode, and I pulled his hand harder, trying to get him to move. “No one tried anything. Elle’s fine. I’ll explain on the way.”

“On the way to where? Cali,” he said, pulling his hand back, “I’m in the middle of something right now. Can whatever you have to tell me wait? We’re trying to find solutions for a number of issues, though I’m not sure how much more of Knox and Lucian I’m going to be able to take.”

He did look miserable, and I couldn’t imagine enduring a night with those big personalities all in one room.

“I’m sorry you have to do this, but this meeting is important. You said so yourself,” I reminded him.

“I know I did.” Greyson sighed ruefully, running a hand through his hair.

“How are the other Alphas reacting to Knox?” I asked.

Greyson shrugged. “I’m not sure about that. Mace is a hard read, and Lucian’s always playing some kind of three-dimensional chess, so it’s tough to tell. But where are you taking me?” he asked, apparently only just realizing I’d been pulling him along the hallway as we spoke.

I took a deep breath. I needed to explain why I had to take him away from something so important. “I saw something.”

Greyson frowned. “Saw what?”

“Something on the palace security footage. Some*one*.” I hesitated for just a moment, my heart thumping. “I think it might be the person who took the ashes,” I told him.

Greyson looked shocked. “*What?* How do you know?”

“I don’t,” I admitted. “It’s a gut feeling, but I think I’m right.”

“So Lucian had information about those ashes this whole time and just never bothered to tell me?” Greyson fumed. “*Dammit*. I knew we couldn’t trust him. That rat bastard.”

“Honestly, I don’t even know if Lucian knows anything about it,” I said.

“What do you mean?” Greyson asked.

I shook my head. “When you see the recording, you’ll know what I mean. It’s really hard to see. Even Aysel had no idea what she was looking at.”

Greyson stopped in his tracks. “Wait a second. *Aysel* knew about this?”

“The thing is, I don’t think she did,” I said. “She seemed genuinely surprised when we watched the footage.”

Greyson’s expression darkened in way that felt so dangerous, I felt my heart rate kick up.

“I swear,” I said, tugging him along again, “you’ll understand when you see it. Just come with me. You’ll be back schmoozing before you know it.”

“If they’re so hard to see, why do you want me to look?” Greyson asked.

“What if you recognize them or something?” I asked, “Maybe they’re someone you came across when you were a Rogue?”

When we made it to the security room, Elle’s face lit up when Greyson walked in. She rushed to him, wrapping her arms around his waist. And if that wasn’t bad enough, I saw that Aysel had looked over when he’d walked in as well. She sauntered toward him.

“Hello, Greyson,” she said, her voice a purr. “Welcome back.”

The look in her eyes was a clear invitation, and it pissed me the hell off. If Aysel was looking at him so suggestively just to anger me, then it was working like a charm. I tried to center myself. Aysel was nothing more than an annoying fly when it came to Greyson’s and my mate bond.

“Why are we here?” Greyson asked.

“Camera is important,” Elle said with a nod. “But I do not know…” she paused, seeming like she was trying to find the right word. “… why?”

I nodded, pointing at the video monitor. “Aysel, will you turn it on?”  
 Aysel turned on the recording, and we all leaned forward, straining to see shapes in the blurred footage.

I glanced over at Greyson as he watched, and I could tell that he was seeing what the rest of us had seen. But did he know who it was? Could we be on the right track to getting these stupid ashes back?

“Pause it right there,” Greyson told Aysel. He leaned in, narrowing his eyes, and studied the blurred image closely.

Aysel shifted from foot to foot, looking annoyed. “Can someone *please* tell me what’s going on, and why the hell this is supposed to be so damn interesting? I don’t know what the rest of you think, but this isn’t my idea of a good time.”

No one answered her, which seemed to piss her off even more.

“This is *my* house,” she reminded us. “I have a right to know what’s going on.”

“Quiet,” Greyson said, holding up a hand to silence Aysel. He looked closer at the image, his nose practically touching the screen.

Aysel didn’t like that, and, with a huff, she shut off the monitor.

I rounded on her, my heartbeat pounding in my ears. “Why the hell did you do that?”

Aysel folded her arms, her jaw set. “Because whatever it is that you’re looking at happened in *my* home. And given that my brother was very recently tricked by a demon—with some disastrous results—I want to know if there’s something dangerous going on around here.”

Aysel was a pain in the ass, but I supposed she had a point.

Greyson straightened and looked over at her, his expression grave. “Well, considering it is your house and all,” Greyson said, “when did you or your brother invite a vampire into the house?”

My eyes went wide. “*Shit.*”

Of course. *Of fucking course*. I should’ve known it was a vampire the first time I saw the footage. I should’ve recognized the way the blurry figure moved, so similarly to the way Rafe, Jacqueline’s stalker, had looked on the video from the drones.

A vampire. That’s who had the ashes? But why?

Aysel turned the monitor back on and looked at the frozen frame, clearly confused.

Elle’s face scrunched, like she was smelling something rotten. She pointed to the screen. “That is a vampire? Like Jacqueline? Like Lola?”

“Well, yes… But no,” I said unhelpfully. I didn’t think I had the ability to explain the very nuanced differences between vampires, so I kept it simple. “Jacs and Lola are *good* vampires.”

Elle nodded, then looked back at the monitor. “This one is bad?”

“Yeah, basically,” I said.

Aysel looked at the monitor and snorted. “It can’t be a vampire. I would *never* let a vampire into my house. Neither would Lucian. We’re not crazy.”

*That* was debatable.

Greyson pointed to the screen. “Well, *someone* let that vampire in.”

Aysel’s hackles seemed to rise. “It wasn’t *me*,” she said defensively. “And why won’t you tell me what this is all about?” She looked around at all of us accusingly. “If you don’t tell me right now, I’ll erase this!”

I grabbed her wrist. “Aysel, you can’t!”

She yanked her arm out of my grasp. “I can do whatever I want!”

“Take it easy,” Greyson said. “Aysel, listen to me. I don’t know for sure, but I suspect this vampire might be interested in Seluna.”

The color fled Aysel’s face in an instant. All the indignation drained out of her, and she looked terrified. “Please tell me you’re joking, Greyson.”

If I’d had any lingering questions about Aysel’s involvement in the disappearance of Seluna’s ashes, they were gone. It was clear the princess was legitimately frightened by this news.

Greyson shot another look at the monitor and shook his head, looking grim. “I know there’s not a lot to go on here, but I want you to take a really close look, Aysel. Now that you know it’s a vampire, do you recognize them?”

Aysel’s face was white as a sheet of paper, and she shook her head. “I told Cali all I know about it. They were just someone who was supposed to rid the gallery of the bad karma left behind by Seluna’s visitation.” She took a shuddering breath. “Both Lucian and I hate bad karma. We can both feel it. We’re extra sensitive to those kinds of vibrations.”

“But who is it?” Greyson pressed.

Aysel spoke through gritted teeth. “I don’t know. I really don’t.”

Greyson looked back at the monitor and didn’t say anything for a long moment. It was quiet in the security room, the only sound the regular beeps of the equipment.

“Greyson?” I ventured.

He looked over at me, then at Aysel. “You might not know who this is, but maybe my brother does.”

# Episode 2949

**Xavier**

I looked back at the bar, still feeling punchy. I didn’t trust Blaine and his little sidekick, Tanner, and my thoughts were with Ava, who’d gone back in alone. I was worried they’d do something to her. I knew Ava could take care of herself, and they’d said before that they’d never do anything to hurt her because she was Knox’s cousin, but I didn’t completely buy that. I’d been around long enough to know that family bonds didn’t always hold up. And I didn’t need to look much further than my own father to find evidence of that. He’d been more than willing to hurt me and his other sons. And if I was looking for an example of a dysfunctional family, I could just look at the shitty relationship I had with Greyson—my own brother.

Next to me, Jay sighed, clearly annoyed.

“Are we going to stand out here all night?”

“You got someplace else to be?” I asked.

“Yeah, kinda,” Jay admitted. “Lola’s probably in bed, and I’d rather be with her watching the ID channel than waiting in the cold outside some random bar.”

I opened my mouth to reply when I saw Ava coming out of the bar.

“You can take off. I’m going to go with her,” I told Jay.

He looked startled by this. “Really?”

“Yeah. Just to make sure she makes it back home safely,” I added quickly.

Jay hesitated, like he was going to say something, then changed his mind and just nodded. “Okay, then.” He clapped me on the shoulder. “I’ll see you at home. Goodnight, Ava,” he called as she walked toward us.

She smiled. “’Night, Jay.” She watched him walk away, then looked over at me with a smile. “I’m surprised he’s leaving. I thought he was our steady third wheel.”

Jay’s reaction had left me feeling weird, and I wasn’t in the mood for jokes.

“Did Blaine or Tanner give you any more trouble in there?” I asked, nodding toward the bar.

Ava shook her head with a laugh. “Blaine knows better than to try me, and if he didn’t, he does now after your little speech.” She hooked her arm through mine and leaned close—and I didn’t pull away.

My wolf was stirring as I led the way to my motorcycle—he liked the closeness. But as I slung my leg over the bike, I gave my head a sharp shake and reminded myself to focus.

Ava slid onto the motorcycle seat behind me, and I noticed she allowed for some distance between us, which I was grateful for. I didn’t need another reminder of how close we were to each other. More than just physically.

But as soon as I started the bike and peeled out onto the street, Ava was jerked backward by the momentum, and I heard her give a little gasp of surprise.

I was about to tell her to hold on tight, but she’d figured that out for herself and was already pressing close to me, her body melding against mine. The heat from her body made it feel like I was standing with my back against a bonfire. She tightened her grip around my waist, and I felt her lay her head against my shoulder blades.

Shit. Well, so much for my wolf not getting distracted.

We drove down the quiet streets, the winter wind whipping around us. I liked riding my bike late at night when the streets were empty, though I hadn’t done it in quite a while. It usually accomplished what a run did. I usually liked to go out alone in both cases, but I didn’t mind having some company tonight.

Even though I was enjoying the ride, I kept my eyes on my mirrors, making sure Blaine and his toadie weren’t following us. I’d sent Jay home, so I knew I wouldn’t have him to help me if things went sideways with those clowns, but I wasn’t worried. I knew I could take care of Blaine and his little pal Tanner by myself. Hell, I could do it with one arm tied behind my back. And I’d meant what I said before—it wasn’t like Ava was useless in a fight, either.

But—though Blaine was stupid—I doubted he’d be stupid enough to follow me, so I wasn’t surprised to see only empty streets in my rearview mirror. I’d made myself pretty clear.

Ava was leaning against me, and her hair was blowing all around us. When it gusted forward, it tickled the bottom of my chin. Her scent was everywhere, making it hard to concentrate on the road, and making my wolf feel *wild*.

*I’m sorry about what happened back there*, Ava said.

*What do you mean?* I asked quickly, thinking about the kiss. We’d already discussed that.

*Blaine and Tanner ruined what could have been a fun night.*

*It’s fine*, I said shortly. *I wasn’t there for fun. I was there to find out about Knox.*

That was true, but… I thought again about the kiss we’d shared. I thought about how I’d suspected Ava had been lying about being followed—just using it as an excuse to kiss me. But it turned out she hadn’t been lying, and if there was anyone who wasn’t being honest about that kiss, it was me. Yeah, it had been a cover, and yeah, I’d played along, but I also hadn’t stopped kissing her when I could have.

My fucking wolf. He thought he controlled me.

In that moment he might have.

When we got back to the Samara campsite, I looked around the quiet clearing. It looked a little different than the last time I’d been here. In addition to Knox’s sad little Airstream trailer, there were now several more tents and the evidence of fire rings near each tent, like the residents were setting up for a while. Clearly word had spread that the Samaras were back, and the pack members who’d left after Nolan’s death were returning.

I cut the engine of the bike, and the clearing rang with the silence it created, but Ava didn’t hop off.

“We’re here,” I said, stating the obvious.

Ava took the hint and slid off the bike, letting her hands brush down my chest as she let go of me.

“Thanks for the ride—” she started, but then she stumbled on a rock and lost her footing. She fell, and—instinctively—I grabbed her around the waist and pulled her into me.

We locked eyes.

After a charged moment, Ava gave a breathless laugh. “You must think I’m so clumsy.”

The thing was, Ava wasn’t clumsy—at all. She was like a cat, always landing with her feet under her. Which made me wonder, had she done that on purpose, knowing my instinct was to protect her?

I didn’t say anything in response to that, and for a moment there was a silence that started to feel a little awkward.

“Do you want to come have a drink or something?” she asked. She gestured toward her tent and smiled. “I know it’s not exactly drinks at the Plaza, but…” She trailed off.

I looked at her tent, then back at her. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. I should probably get back to the pack house.”

Ava shrugged. “That’s too bad. Thanks to Blaine and Tanner, we never got a chance to finish our drinks at the bar.”

“Maybe another time,” I said, trying not to mean it.

Ava tipped her head and studied my face. “Will there be another time?”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

She took a step closer to me and lowered her voice to a whisper. “Now that Knox is Alpha, are we going to keep doing this?”

A wind blew up at that moment, gusting around us, and Ava hugged herself, shivering slightly. Even I felt colder, now that Ava wasn’t snuggled against my back.

“I don’t know what we should do,” I admitted. We’d started pretending to still be mates to strengthen Ava’s position in the pack and disrupt Knox’s plan to be Alpha, but Ava was right—Knox was Alpha now.

But I still didn’t trust Knox at all, and I was worried about what was going to happen to Ava in the pack. Cousins or not, if Knox was able to prove that Ava had been the one to spike his drink and try to sabotage him, her life could be in danger.

I thought for a moment. “We should probably keep up some of the ruse,” I finally said. “If Knox and the rest of his lackeys know you’re connected to another pack, that might protect you. And if we suddenly stop seeing each other completely, Knox might start to question things.”

“Knox wouldn’t be the only one asking questions,” she said with a rueful smile. “You know how gossipy packs are.” She sighed and looked thoughtful. “That makes sense, X, but is it what *you* want?”

“What do you mean?” I asked gruffly.

Ava gave me a searching look. “Do you want to keep pretending?”

“I just said I think it would be for the best, and give you more protection—” I started, but Ava spoke over me.

“What I’m asking you, Xavier, is whether we’ve actually been pretending at all,” she said. “Do you want this? Us?”

# Episode 2950

“I want a copy of this footage,” Greyson said, his eyes still on the monitor. “All of it.”

Aysel still looked shaken, but she collected herself. “I’ll get it to you, but I can’t do it now. I’ll have one of the attendants figure it out and send it to you. We should go now,” she added, and led the way out of the security room.

Did Aysel really not know how a USB drive worked?

“Where are we going?” I asked as she shut the door behind us, itching to just get the footage myself. I knew how technology worked, unlike Aysel.

“I’ll take you back to Lucian. I’m sure he’s wondering where you’ve gotten yourself off to.” She smiled up at Greyson as she fell into step next to him, and I sighed.

It was bad enough reminding Elle to stay away from my mate, but to have Aysel around—drooling over Greyson—made it doubly hard. I wished she’d stayed behind, but the way she was looking at Greyson made me certain she was going to stick to him like glue.

It was one thing dealing with Elle—I felt like I could cope with that. She was new to human relationships, and Greyson was right. She was probably doing her best to handle everything. Aysel was another matter entirely. She knew exactly what she was doing. The woman was cunning, and she couldn’t be trusted.

My insecurities rising, I quickened my pace to catch up to Greyson and took his hand as we walked down the hallway.

Aysel led us down hallway after hallway, and I shuddered. I was haunted by the memories of running through here, fighting for my life and the lives of my mates. I was trying to keep it together, but seeing footage of the room where Seluna had turned my mates and others into statues—the room where I’d killed her—was traumatizing. Sure, Aysel was annoying, but it was really seeing that room… It had rattled me more than I wanted to admit.

And now there might be a *vampire* involved? I trusted that Greyson knew what he was talking about, but I didn’t understand. Why would a vampire be interested in Seluna’s ashes? It made no sense. Come to think of it, why would *anyone* be interested in a dead demon’s ashes? Aside from us, but it was more out of necessity than anything else.

I was so deep in thought that we’d traveled almost all the way through the palace before I looked up. We were rounding a corner, and I glanced over my shoulder to check on Elle.

I stopped in my tracks. Crap. Where was she?

“Elle!” I called turning back the way we had come. “Elle?”

There was no answer.

Aysel smirked. “Seems your *cousin* has run off,” she said to Greyson. Then she turned to me. “You’d better go find her. Who knows what kind of trouble someone like Elle might get into?”

Her tone made the advice sound like a threat, and I glared at her. I wasn’t sure what I should do. I hated the idea of leaving Greyson in Aysel’s clutches, but I did need to find Elle.

“It’s fine,” Greyson said softly. “Go find Elle.”

“That’s a great idea,” Aysel said brightly. “And when you find her, you can bring her back into the tearoom so we can *dish*.”

That was the last thing I wanted to do, but while I was in this palace, I knew I had to dance to the Vanguard tune.

I smiled. “Fine.”

Greyson leaned toward me. “Sorry about this, love, but I do have to go finish up with the other Alphas. They’re waiting for me.”

“I know,” I said. “Go. Hang in there.”

He gave my hand a squeeze, then he and Aysel walked around the corner.

I turned around and set off the way we’d come, looking for Elle. As I looked down every hallway and into every alcove, I kept wishing I could pick up Elle’s scent, the way werewolves could. Tracking Elle probably would’ve been easy for Aysel, and the thought made me all the more irritated. Because—even though she could have done this quickly—she’d just *had* to send me off on this quest so she could accompany Greyson back to the meeting. How convenient.

As I stepped into a small antechamber out of which four hallways branched, I sighed. The Vanguard palace was enormous, and finding one woman inside it was a huge, huge task. Elle could’ve been literally anywhere.

I chose a hallway and started down it, picking up my pace as I moved.

“Elle!” I called as I hurried. “Elle? Can you hear me?”

There was no answer, but I kept calling and listening as I moved. I reached the end of the hallway, which branched into another. I turned and kept running. But gradually I slowed to a stop and looked around.

I recognized where I was. A chill ran down my spine when I realized that I was heading down the hallway toward the gallery.

I stopped before the door and looked up at it. It was dark and massive, and I knew I should just turn around run. But… then again, maybe I shouldn’t. I’d been haunted by this place, and seeing it on the footage had rattled me… But maybe going inside would bring some much-needed closure. Maybe I just needed to confront it again, not let the fear control me.

Without even realizing what I was doing, I opened the door. I looked into the dimness around me. Not much seemed to have changed since I’d been here last, when I’d killed the demon. I remembered everything from that day so vividly—where Greyson and Xavier had stood, frozen as statues.

The air around me was still and unmoving, and even though I knew Seluna was dead, the presence of something evil still seemed to hang in the air.

A chill passed through me, and I chafed my arms, suddenly cold. I stepped toward the spot where Seluna had burned and looked down at it pensively. If only the ashes of the demon were still there. But they were gone—of course—and the marble floor was spotless.

My heart pounded hard, thundering in my ears. I knew that if we didn’t get those ashes back, Dani and I were doomed.

I was suddenly hit by a powerful flashback, and I dropped to my knees—Seluna towered above me, and around me my mates and my pack were helplessly frozen. I could taste the fear in the back of my throat, strong and bitter, and I could feel the weight of the sword in my hand. The sword I’d used to kill the demon.

I was spiraling, terror coursing through me, when—out of nowhere—a hand grabbed my wrist. I screamed with fear and fell back, shaking with dread. I held my hands up, ready to blast the cold, dead Seluna with my magic—but I slowly realized it wasn’t Seluna. The demon hadn’t grabbed me from the grave.

It was Elle.

Her face was worried as she tugged me to my feet. “Feels bad in here. We need to go.”

“What are you doing here, Elle?” I asked her, trying to catch my breath.

“I come to find you. To save you,” Elle said.

“It’s okay,” I assured her. “I’m not in any danger. I was just… imagining things.”

But Elle wasn’t convinced. She kept tugging on my arm, trying to get me out of the gallery.

“You must go now. We will go together,” she said.

I looked at her, startled. I wondered why she was reacting so strongly to this room. She’d still been a wolf when all of this had gone down, and she’d had no contact with Seluna—and none with Lucian until tonight. Sometimes I wondered if Elle had been better off before, as a wolf. The werewolf world seemed so much more dangerous than the world of wolves. That seemed a lot more straightforward.

Outside the gallery, Elle pulled the door closed behind us.

“I was looking for you,” I finally managed to say to her. “Why did you leave? Did you know I was looking for you?’

But Elle didn’t answer. She straight up ignored me, seemingly more interested in pulling me farther away from the gallery.

“Go back to Greyson,” Elle said emphatically. “Now.”

I would’ve liked nothing more. A hug from Greyson would’ve erased all the horrible vibes I’d gotten from the gallery. That was exactly what I needed. But I couldn’t have it. I’d told Aysel we’d meet her in the tearoom.

Which was miserable. Honestly, I almost would’ve preferred to go back into the gallery, but I’d made Aysel a promise. Ugh.

As we walked through the palace, I started to wonder what Greyson was doing. I wondered if the mighty Alphas had come to any kind of agreement. Wasn’t that what this was all about?

I paused as we reached a spot where two hallways branched. I was suddenly feeling a little disoriented, and I needed a moment to look around.

“Is this even the right way?” I asked.

Elle looked around too. “Why are you stopping?”

I was about to tell Elle that we were probably lost, but before I could say anything, I was hit with such a powerful, painful headache, I doubled over. My hands went to my head as I dropped to my knees and screamed in pain.

# Episode 2951

**Artemis**

Rishika had framed kissing her back like it was some kind of a challenge, but it wasn’t. Kissing her always felt like the most natural thing in the world. I threaded my fingers through her hair, arching up toward her. I wanted this, but there was a part of my mind that I couldn’t turn off, even with the amazing distraction.

I shook my head. “I don’t want to hurt you,” I whispered.

“And you never will,” Rishika assured me, in that way she had like everything was already decided.

I dove back into her, taking the lead as I climbed on top of her. I wanted her, but I also wanted to prove to myself that this was okay—that *I* was okay. But deep in my heart, I knew it was a risk.

At the same time, Rishika had been right—despite my fears, my magic hadn’t hurt her last night. It was possible this was all up in my head, and—as I felt Rishika shiver beneath me as my hands made their way down to her breasts—I knew I didn’t want to be in my head.

I slid my hands up her smooth sides. I wanted to be slow, to really savor her, but Rishika had different ideas. She gripped me hard, slipping her hands up under my shirt. I did the same to her, and when I felt her nipples under my palms, I stopped breathing. She slid one thigh between both of mine, and my whole body moved with a deep shudder of pleasure. I closed my eyes and grabbed her hand. I kissed her fingers, then moved them down to a place I knew. The stroking of her fingers filled me with a deep sense of hunger, and I moved against her, bucking and rocking, losing track of everything until I came, gasping her name.

Afterward, I looked up the ceiling, amazed. My whole body tingled, and I couldn’t stop smiling. I’d been hoping for the best, and my magic hadn’t done anything. I’d been able to control it. I felt good about that—I felt good in a few other ways, too.

Rishika rolled close and kissed the corner of my mouth. “You look relaxed.”

“I am,” I chuckled. “Thanks to you.”

Risked laughed. “Well, I’m glad I could help.”

I rolled toward her and let her wrap her arms around me. I felt good—hopeful—and like things were going to be better from now on.

I must have dozed off for a moment, but when I jerked back awake, Rishika was fast asleep and the room was silent. I stared up at the ceiling again, my heart racing. The post-coital glow had faded, and now I was left with the anxious worry that my magic might accidentally do something in my sleep. And Rishika was so close. I knew Rishika had said my magic couldn’t hurt her, and while I trusted her, I didn’t trust myself.

My thoughts spiraled. I knew if I woke her up, Rishika would talk me down and remind me of all the times I’d been able to control my magic—but I couldn’t force Rishika into the role of keeping all my worries and negative thoughts at bay. She was asleep. I couldn’t shake her awake and force her to play therapist. It wasn’t fair to her, and I didn’t even want that for myself.

But here I was, and the dark thoughts were growing, crowding out all the rational parts of my brain.

I couldn’t stop the thoughts, so I closed my eyes—squeezing them shut—and tried to will myself to relax. I tried to think of sleep. I even tried counting sheep, which Cali had once told me humans did to relax, but nothing worked.

There was something inside me, and it was stirring, almost like it was waking from slumber.

Was that my magic?

I got to my feet and padded to the bathroom. I turned on the cold water and splashed some on my face, then stood for a moment, my hands braced against the counter, and tried to control my rapid breathing.

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked myself aloud, into the mirror.

There was no answer to that question, but I thought I could sense my magic beginning to bubble up.

I gripped the cold marble of the counter even harder. Was I going to explode? Was I going to erupt like a volcano?

I was starting to sweat, and fear raced through me. I had to get out of here. *Now*. I couldn’t take the chance that my magic might harm Rishika—or anyone else in the pack house.

Trying not to let the panic overtake me, I slipped on a pair of shoes and walked quietly past the sleeping Rishika to my bedroom door. I could feel the magic surging within me—it felt like electric pulses—and, as I headed into the hallway, I prayed I wouldn’t run into anyone. I didn’t think I could handle people at the moment. I was too volatile—who knew what could happen?

I could feel power surging into my fingertips, and I tried not to cry out. I was terrified, but I was also furious with myself. I should have followed my first instinct when my mother had explained that my magic was overflowing. I’d known then that I needed to run away. It would have been better for everyone.

I only hoped I hadn’t realized my mistake too late.

I paused when I got downstairs and listened hard. There was a voice speaking. It was the middle of the night—who was awake?

I tiptoed toward the living room and found Torin passed out on the couch, a cooking show still playing on the television. I thought about turning it off but decided against it. I didn’t want to risk waking Torin and having to explain what I was doing. Hell, I didn’t even know what would happen if I touched the television. And the sooner I was out of the pack house, the better off we’d all be.

My thoughts were nothing but a panicked muddle, but one thing I knew for sure was that I had to shield Rishika from danger.

*Dammit!* Just thinking of Rishika did something to me, causing my magic to churn in a terrifying way. I thought of my mother’s description of my magic, of it being like an overflowing glass of water. I felt like I was holding the glass, and it was about to tip, spilling everywhere.

I raced toward the door, and my magic surged, blasting the door open with such force that it pulled away from the top hinge. I raced outside.

The cold night air hit me like a slap in the face, and I shivered. I hadn’t been prepared for how cold it was. I thought of my coat, hanging in the closet in my room. Maybe I should have grabbed it when I’d grabbed my shoes. But no, that would have woken Rishika for sure.

I had to deal with the cold and get away from the pack house. What if my magic started acting like Cali’s, and I started blasting things?

My one consolation was that Dani wasn’t with me. With her power to amplify magic, the two of us together would’ve been disastrous.

Shivering, I wrapped my arms around myself and headed for the woods. I wished I had my jacket, but more than that, I wished I could find a way to calm myself. My mom had said that agitation would only make the problem worse, but it was too late to slow my racing heart rate. No, relaxation wasn’t an option. The only thing I could do was get far enough away that I couldn’t hurt anyone, no matter what happened.

I knew I should keep running, like I’d planned to do. But… I’d promised Cali that I wouldn’t. And I hated the idea of running from Rishika. I wasn’t an expert on relationships by any means, but even *I* knew that running away wasn’t what you did to the person you loved.

But how could I stay? How could I stay close to Rishika when I could hurt her?

As I reached the tree line, I looked back at the pack house. The house was silhouetted by the night sky. It looked big and welcoming. It looked like home.

I tried to control my breathing, which was accelerating. After a moment, I finally got it under control. I was leaving. I wouldn’t hurt anyone, as long as I was out of there.

The magic churning within me slowly began to subside, and my breathing returned to normal. I could feel myself moving back into control.

Then, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I quickly looked around, then up. For a moment, there was only darkness, and then—out of nowhere—a small light appeared.

*A wisp!* But what was it doing here?

The wisp was circling over my head. I watched it as it moved closer, then held my breath as a voice whispered into the cold night air.

“The answers you seek about Adair will come at a price…”

# Episode 2952

My head was swirling. I moved through the darkness, and though I could feel that my eyes were wide open, I couldn’t see a thing. Not a shadow, not a shape, not a pinprick of light.

Then, without warning, I was enveloped in brightly burning flames. The light was so bright and so sudden, it stung my eyes. I screamed in fear, but after a moment I realized the flames weren’t hurting me. They were only licking at my skin, harmless.

But just in front of me, and rising snake-like from the pit at my feet, was Seluna. She was half flesh, half skeleton, and her eyes seemed to burn with the fires of hell.

“Caliana,” she hissed, the sound twisting through the bright, hot air. “Caliana, look around you. Take it in. This is your doing.”

*No.* I shook my head. This wasn’t real. This was a dream, another illusion from a dead demon.

“I destroyed you because you attacked us. *You!* This is *your* doing!” I screamed.

“But look upon me,” she spat, holding out her arms, from which the flesh hung in clumps. “I am *not* destroyed!” She reached toward me with a twisted, rotting hand.

Terrified, I stumbled back, tripping over my feet, and fell. But I didn’t hit the floor. I kept falling into an endless, pitch-black vacuum. I reached out, trying to grab onto something—*anything*—but there was nothing there. There was nothing anywhere.

Then, just when I’d given up hope, I crashed onto the cold stone floor of the gallery.

I sat still for a moment, trying to get my breath back, but when I looked up, I gasped again. An army of demons surrounded me, and they started to march toward me, led by Seluna’s rotting corpse.

I scrambled to my feet and summoned my magic, then shot a blast toward the demon. My aim was true, and I hit Seluna right in the chest. She exploded into what looked like a million slithering black snakes. They hit the ground with wet, slimy thuds, and her anguished scream slowly morphed into the plaintive howl of a lone wolf.

Suddenly, I was staring up at a wolf, who was growling down at me. Horrified, I ran away, down the hall, but I was struggling. I couldn’t catch my breath. And as I rounded a corner, I stopped.

“*Elle?*”

Elle, in her wolf form, approached me cautiously. Behind her, I saw a charred pit in the wall where my magic had blasted it.

Holy crap, my magic must have almost hit Elle.

Heart pounding, I held out a hand. “I’m sorry,” I said soothingly. “That was an accident. It’s okay. I won’t hurt you, Elle…”

My vision began to fade as I felt Elle’s fur rubbing against my hand.

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I had the sensation of being carried, but I couldn’t be sure if I was dreaming. Nothing felt quite real. I heard the murmur of voices and saw the flickering of lights from behind my eyelids. After a moment, I felt myself being lowered until I rested against something soft and cushiony.

Where was I? It seemed important that I should figure that out. When I tried to sit up, the room dipped and swung, and I quickly leaned back again.

A cool hand pressed against my forehead. Was that Greyson? I nearly started to cry—I needed him so much.

But when someone spoke, it wasn’t Greyson’s voice I heard. It was Aysel.

“She doesn’t feel feverish,” she said. She paused. “But she looks like shit.”

Behind my closed eyelids, I rolled my eyes.

I sat up again—more slowly—and the room stayed in one place.

“Thanks for that, Aysel,” I said grimly.

I looked around, trying to will the room into focus. I was in the tearoom.

“How the hell did I get in here?” I asked, frowning. I was trying to piece the last few minutes together, and the effort was making my head ache.

Aysel gestured to Elle, who was standing at the foot of the sofa, still in her wolf form. “Elle came in with you on her back.” She frowned at me. “What the hell happened to you?”

I ran a hand through my hair. “I guess I passed out.”

Aysel narrowed her eyes. “Yes, I gathered that. I was more hoping you could tell me *why.* The last thing I desire right now is you accusing either myself or my brother of drugging your, or casting more curses upon you.”

Elle shifted back to her human form, and she stood fully naked in front of me. I closed my eyes. Great. A naked supermodel. Just what my self-esteem needed.

I shook my head. “I’m not accusing anyone of anything,” I assured Aysel.

Very carefully, I swung my legs off the couch, planting my feet firmly on the floor. I gave a thin groan, waiting for the room to stop spinning.

“So what happened, then?” Aysel demanded, looking bad-tempered. I understood what she was upset about. Considering our recent past, it probably wouldn’t do her pack any good to have me passing out all over her palace.

But I didn’t answer her question right away. I thought I knew what had caused my fainting spell—it had been another Seluna dream. I remembered going into the gallery—being *drawn* toward it, as if it were a magnet. And then everything went blank. I wondered if this latest episode had been triggered by being here, in the place where Seluna had died. Or if that didn’t have anything to do with it at all, and I was just going to have these visions with increasing intensity, forever.

I felt myself deflate at the thought. These episodes were so upsetting and so taxing—I couldn’t stand the thought of more.

Aysel was growing impatient, and she tapped her foot on the hardwood floor. “Well? What happened to you, Caliana? It isn’t normal to pass out like that.”

I looked up at her, but I was hesitant to start explaining. I didn’t know how much I wanted to tell her.

“Listen,” I started slowly. “Even though Seluna’s dead, there are some… lingering aftereffects.”

Aysel seemed to consider this for a moment. “You know, I—um—never thanked you for saving me. And my brother. And everyone else.” She looked down at her feet, which she’d stopped tapping. “I’m sorry you’re still having issues from that. That does not sound… pleasant. And I can’t blame you for hating my brother for bringing the demon back.”

Bracing myself on the arm of the couch, I got cautiously to my feet. “I don’t hate anyone, Aysel,” I said. “I was angry, but I’m past that now. I just want to feel normal again.”

Aysel looked at me. “Do these aftereffects have anything to do with Seluna’s ashes?”

I fought to keep my expression neutral and cover my shock at the question. I wondered how much Aysel knew about the missing ashes, but I kept quiet, hoping she’d volunteer the information.

She did.

“I know that Greyson came looking for them afterward. I just wondered if there was something that needed to be done with them to finish everything, and that was why he wanted them.”

I took this in. So she didn’t know they were missing… Or did she?

Either way, the case of the missing ashes wasn’t something I wanted to get into at the moment. Not when I was still feeling so weak.

Aysel looked at me critically. “Is there anything you want? Something to drink?”

I glanced over at the still very naked Elle. “Can we get her another outfit?”

“Sure,” Aysel said with a rare genuine smile. “But is there anything *you* want?”

“Honestly, I just want to go home. It’s been a long day.”

Aysel nodded. “I’ll have someone bring clothes for Big Red over here, and we can go see what’s going on with the Alphas.”

She led the way out of the tearoom.

“I think they should be wrapping up soon, but honestly, who knows?” she said. “If they’re not, I can always drive you home. But I’ll bet they’re almost done. Unless Lucian has started monologuing. He tends to do that when he has a captive audience.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed that,” I muttered.

“Well, only one way to find out,” Aysel said as we reached the door of the meeting room.

She knocked on the thick oak door, and we waited in silence.

When there was no answer, Aysel rolled her eyes. “They won’t mind if we barge in.”

Maybe I should have stopped her, but I was anxious to see Greyson and to feel his arms around me, so I stepped into the room after her.

But inside, the three of us looked around in surprise. The room was empty. Aysel and I looked at each other, baffled, and I knew we were thinking the same thing.

Where the hell had everyone gone?

# Episode 2953

**Greyson**

Irritation crept up my spine, and I did my best to keep it from showing on my face. I’d wanted to get Lucian alone so I could grill him about the vampire I’d seen on the security footage—the same vampire he’d apparently invited into his home—but that opportunity hadn’t presented itself. Lucian was playing lord of the manor with Knox and Mace, and there was no way I was going to talk to him about the vampire in front of Knox.

I’d come here tonight to learn some things, and the night had been educational in one particular way: I was now absolutely certain that Knox couldn’t be trusted. He was rash, impulsive, completely irrational, full of himself, and just an all-around pain in the ass. That he was now the Samara Alpha was deeply unfortunate. I felt for the rest of the Samara pack, who had to put up with him.

The meeting of the Alphas was mostly done—we’d all said what we’d come to say—but instead of wrapping up what now felt like a giant waste of time, Lucian was taking us on a little jaunt through his palace, promising a surprise at the end.

But I’d had it with surprises, and if I couldn’t talk to Lucian alone, then there was nothing else I needed here. I didn’t need an alliance with the Samara pack. Hell, while Knox was the Alpha, I didn’t *want* an alliance with them. And I wasn’t so sure I wanted one with the Vanguard pack either, but if forced to choose, I’d take Lucian and his eccentric ways over Knox. At least Lucian seemed to care about the welfare of his pack… to some degree.

At least I had Mace. He and I saw eye to eye, and I knew I could always count on the Blue Blood pack.

“And these paintings are all original oils, part of the family art collection. They’re all Italian paintings—da Vinci, Titian, Caravaggio—but we have some of the Dutch masters in the east wing, including a late Vermeer. They’ve been in the family for generations, though the National Gallery has been hounding us for years about selling.”

We turned a corner, and Lucian pointed to an ornate fountain in the center of a small atrium.

“That is Calacatta marble. Custom created for the palace by Venetian artisans. We flew them over. It cost a fortune, of course, but it really suits the space.”

I rolled my eyes. I suspected this guided tour was for Knox’s sake, as Mace and I had been to the palace before, but I doubted the art history lesson was having an impact on Knox. Oil paintings and Venetian artisans weren’t likely to impress that clown. In fact, my guess was that the only thing that *did* impress Knox was a mirror.

Lucian led us to a staircase that wound downwards in a sharp spiral. The steps were steel, and it looked like it might lead to a dungeon. I followed him down with a sense of unease.

But at the bottom of the stairs, Lucian turned and smiled warmly at us. “Not even Aysel is allowed in here.” He paused. “Well, I have invited her in a few times, but she’s always refused.”

I shot a glance at Mace, who was looking at Lucian with a stony expression. He looked like was ready to call it quits, and I couldn’t blame him.

With a flourish, Lucian opened the steel door.

I wasn’t sure what I’d been expecting. Another art gallery? A torture chamber? A giant statue of Lucian? I’d thought nothing in this place could surprise me anymore, but somehow Lucian had managed it. He’d opened the door to—of all things—a bar.

Knox stepped inside and looked around. “You have a secret bar?”

Lucian shook his head. “It’s hardly secret, though it is exclusive.” He gestured for us to walk forward, and he stepped behind the dark maple bar and opened a cabinet. It was stocked with dozens of bottles of whiskey.

“I am a connoisseur of many things—beautiful art, beautiful homes, beautiful women—but whiskey is something I truly treasure.” He held up a dusty bottle. “This one was distilled when Napoleon was just a boy.”

I stifled a sigh. Would Lucian’s pretention *ever* end?

“Do you have a preference?” Lucian asked, turning to us.

“Yeah, I prefer beer,” Mace said shortly.

I chuckled, loving that Mace was thoroughly unimpressed by Lucian’s ostentation. Mace’s straightforwardness was one of the main reasons he and I had managed not to kill each other over the years.

Knox was looking around the dark wood paneled room, trying to look casual but failing to cover his jealousy. And—knowing as I did that Knox was camping out in a trailer at a campground—I could understand where that envy was coming from, but damn, if it didn’t make me smile just a little.

“How did you manage to get all of these?” Knox asked. “Some of them have to be pretty hard to get, right?”

Lucian’s eyes lit up, and I was suddenly certain he was about to launch into another of his self-aggrandizing speeches, so I tried to cut him off before he could get started.

“I’ll have the Echo Mountain,” I said, pointing to a dark bottle. “I like whiskey, but that’s one I’ve never seen before.”

Lucian smiled. “That’s because I had it custom distilled. I’m sure you’ll enjoy it.”

He poured the amber liquid into a crystal glass and pushed it across the bar toward me.

“Mace, I’m sorry, but I don’t stock the whiskey room with beer. Perhaps you might enjoy this.” Lucian poured a drink for Mace, who accepted it with bad grace. Then Lucian turned to Knox. “And what about you, young Alpha?”

Knox leaned forward over the bar, scrutinizing the labels. “Which is the strongest?”

I chuckled to myself. Said like a stupid 21-year-old. If only that was all he was.

Lucian was a gracious host—giving only a slight smirk in response to the question—and picked out a bottle. He poured a measure and handed it to Knox. “This will put some fur on your mane, Knox.”

He poured from another bottle for himself and lifted his glass. “I’d like to propose a toast. To the Alphas, and the mutual success of our alliance, and our packs.”

Next to me, Mace made an irritated noise, but he clinked his glass along with the rest of us.

I took a drink of the whiskey Lucian had poured. It was very smooth and had a warm, velvety finish. I looked at the glass, impressed. I had to hand it to Lucian—the princeling knew his whiskey.

Mace took a drink of his, made a face, and put the glass down on the bar.

Knox threw back his whole drink—downing it in one swallow like a shot—and immediately choked.

I could barely hide my smile as I watched Knox’s discomfort. It was difficult for us to get drunk, but even werewolves could feel the burn of strong alcohol. If only I’d had a match handy, I could’ve made one of my problems vanish in a puff of smoke.

Lucian reached across the bar and slapped Knox on the back as he coughed. “Well, this is usually a sipping whiskey, but I do like to see a man drink. Do you want another?”

“That,” I said loudly, “is a great idea. I think the newest Alpha deserves another round.”

Knox shot me a glare, but he was too cocky to refuse, and when Lucian handed him another drink, he did the same thing again. With the same result.

Mace was looking at Knox with ill-concealed contempt. “I think we should probably call it a night. I want to get back to my pack house before it gets much later.”

“Fine, fine,” Lucian said, smiling. He looked around at the three of us. “I’m glad we were able to share this moment, gentlemen. I hope that it will lead to a great unification.”

I looked at Lucian for a moment, wondering what he could mean by unification, but I was anxious to get out of this place and didn’t feel like getting into anything more with Lucian tonight.

As we headed back up the stairs and down the hall, toward the front entrance, Lucian clapped Mace and Knox on the back in an overly familiar way.

“It’s great to see my Alphas getting along,” he said jovially.

I laughed at that. “*Your* Alphas?”

Knox made a sound like he was about to throw up and put his hand over his mouth.

“Lucian, you’re such a good host—do you happen to have a barf bag for the Samara Alpha?” I asked, enjoying Knox’s discomfort.

Knox turned to glare at me, his dark eyes flashing. He hung back behind Lucian and Mace, then he reached out and grabbed the front of my shirt.

“Let me make something clear,” he growled, his voice pitching low so only I could hear. “As long as your brother is breathing, we will *never* have an alliance.”

# Episode 2954

**Xavier**

Ava was looking up at me, her face pensive, waiting for my response. I wanted to tell her that being with her had been all make-believe, and that the feelings she and I had been pretending to have for each other were nothing more than fantasy.

But it wasn’t true. My wolf knew better. That was the thing about wolves—they didn’t know how to lie, or pretend. My wolf only knew what he wanted, and right now, he wanted Ava.

My gaze slid sideways to her tent. It was so close. It would be so easy to follow her into it and let nature take its course.

That was what my wolf wanted, but I—the man with the rational brain—wasn’t so easily swayed. I knew I had genuine feelings for Ava that had nothing to do with my wolf. But I also knew that I had no intention of ever acting on them. At least, not any more than I already had. That wasn’t the kind of man I was.

I’d only been a teen when Ava and I had been mated, and I’d thought she’d be with me for the rest of my life. The end of that had been tragic and traumatic. It had been so damaging, I’d truly thought I’d never get over it. I’d thought I’d never be with anyone ever again, and I hadn’t cared. I’d felt like loving someone was too much of a risk. Colton had been worried about me, and he’d tried his best to help, but it hadn’t been until I’d met Cali that I’d felt that connection again. That true, deep in my bones, soul connection. And Cali was the only mate I ever wanted, for the rest of my life.

I knew that clear as day, and if it hadn’t been for my wolf, there would’ve been no problems at all. But… my wolf did exist, and he was howling for Ava. It frustrated the hell out of me. I’d never felt so at odds with that part of myself, and I couldn’t figure out why he was doing this to me. I knew I had a connection to Ava, but I was mated to Cali, too. Surely my wolf knew that. So why wasn’t my wolf fighting as hard for Cali as he was fighting for Ava?

“Oh, Ava, it’s you,” an older man said, passing by. “I didn’t recognize you for a minute in the dark.” He pointed to a small campfire in front of his tent. “Would you mind keeping an eye on that for me? I need to head into the woods to see a man about a horse.”

“Sure,” Ava said, giving the man a small smile. “Don’t worry about it. We’ve got it.”

“Thank you, dear,” he said, and shuffled off toward the trees.

Ava waited until he’d disappeared into the darkness, then she looked back up at me. “You don’t have to answer. I don’t mean to put you on the spot, X, and I can see in your eyes that you don’t even *have* an answer.” She tipped her head and looked at me for a moment. “Or maybe you do, but you’re worried about telling me the truth.”

She took my hand, and my wolf threw back his head and howled in response to her touch. I tensed, but instead of leading me toward her tent, she steered me toward the abandoned campfire.

“What are you doing?” I asked warily.

“I think we should talk,” she said.

“*Talk?*” I repeated. “About what, exactly?”

She smiled. “Yeah, talk. No agenda. No games. Just the two of us—talking.”

She sat on one of the logs someone had pulled toward the fire, though I remained standing. I was always taller than her, but seeing her sit reminded me how small she was. Everything about her was fine and delicate, like a piece of fine china. And I’d always loved her face in the glow of a fire—the way the light danced across her skin had always looked like magic to me. I remembered watching her when we were young, completely transfixed by her beauty.

Some things never changed, and I shook my head, realizing I was staring at her again.

“I’m not going to stay,” I said, fiddling with my keys. “I said I’d take you home, and I’ve done that.”

Ava shook her head. “Xavier, don’t walk away from this—”

“From what?” I demanded.

She sighed. “There are things that need to be said—”

“Listen, Ava, I get it. We have a mate bond. I know that. It’s been keeping us together. But it’s the *only* thing that’s been keeping us together,” I said shortly.

Ava’s eyes widened, and I saw a flicker of pain pass across them. She looked away from me, into the fire, and took a shuddering breath. There was a long beat of silence where the only sound was the crack and pop of the fire.

“I think you’re wrong,” she finally said. “There’s more to us than the mate bond. There always was.”

I curled my hand around my keys so their sharp edges dug into my palm. I could see that my words had hurt Ava, and I dropped down to my knees next to her, wanting to comfort her. Or was it my wolf who wanted to comfort her?

My impulse was to put my arms around her and pull her close—let her rest her head on my shoulder—but I pushed that down.

“What is it that you really want, Ava?” I asked. “This thing between us, is this really all about reuniting the Samara pack, or was that the convenient excuse to get us together?”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“You know, get me to play hero to your pack and force me to stay in close contact with you due to our alliance? Don’t tell me it didn’t cross your mind.”

Ava looked at me for a long moment, then dropped her gaze to the ground. “What do you think?”

“I think I want to hear it from you,” I said.

She took a deep breath. “If I’m being totally honest, X, it was probably a little of both.”

I wasn’t surprised to hear that.

Ava looked up at me. “Why did you agree to help?”

My throat suddenly felt dry. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, did you help me because you wanted to make sure the Samara pack wouldn’t grow to be a threat, or was that an excuse to keep me close?”

I didn’t answer for a moment. Why *had* I helped? It had all begun as a muddled plan to lure Ava away from the Redwood pack by rebuilding the Samara pack. But now that was done. The Samara pack was back, and I was still here, sitting beside her, my wolf wanting her more than ever.

And why had I stayed by her side during this whole mess? Why hadn’t I just let her deal with the Samara pack—and with Knox—on her own? She could have handled it.

So was my answer the same as hers? A little of both? Protecting her, *and* keeping her close? I had started down this road to get Ava out of my pack house and out of my hair, but—if anything—it had only brought us closer together.

Could it be that that had been my goal all along? To end up here, with my mate?

*No*. I couldn’t allow myself to think that way, even if—deep down—I knew there was more truth to it than I wanted to believe.

I felt suddenly wired, and my hands started to tingle. Anxious to be doing anything, I grabbed a stick and jabbed at the fire, sending up a shower of sparks into the night air.

“Beautiful,” Ava murmured, looking at the sparks.

I turned toward her as she spoke, my hand accidentally brushing against the side of her thigh. Her eyes widened at the touch, and the back of my hand burned with it.

When I looked up at her, the firelight was reflected in her dark eyes, making them glow. Looking at her, I remembered how much I had loved her. I remembered everything we’d once had. The whole world had felt like mine for the taking when Ava had been by my side. I’d been *certain* the future would be bright. Had that future changed? Had it been lost? Or… had it been with me the whole time? Lurking in the shadows all along?

My wolf was stirring within me. He was growling, begging me, pushing me.

The world had fallen away. The night and the tents and the campfire were just a distant memory. I was leaning forward, and all I could see was Ava, with sparks in her eyes.

*Ava is our mate. We love her. Are we going to turn our back on her? Are we always going to deny ourselves what we really need? Ava is right here. She is ready and willing. Just waiting for us to take what’s ours. So do it!*

# Episode 2955

I looked around the empty room in confusion. Where could Greyson and the rest of the Alphas have gone? This wasn’t great—they could’ve gone anywhere, and the palace was *huge*. It seemed to grow bigger every time I visited, though I supposed that could’ve had something to do with my spending every visit either chasing someone around the place or running from someone.

But after her initial confusion, Aysel wasn’t fazed at all by the empty room. “I suppose my brother took them all on a tour.” She smiled at Elle. “My brother is very proud of the palace.”

I knew that to be true from past experience, but it didn’t make me feel any better. My head was still aching from the visitation, and I was exhausted.

“Well,” Aysel started, glancing up at the clock over the mantle, “I could get you two a car to take you back to your pack house, if you want?”

I glanced at the time, too. It was late, and I wanted to get home, but there was no way I was leaving this place without Greyson.

Even Elle looked worried. “And Greyson?” she asked.

Someone brought Elle a pair of sweats and a sweatshirt, and as she got dressed, I was about to ask Aysel to have some of her attendants do a sweep of the palace, but I stopped myself when I heard Lucian’s laugh from the hallway.

He walked in with one arm slung around Mace, who looked bored and deeply annoyed. They were followed by Knox and then Greyson, whose frown turned into a smile when he saw me.

But the smile faded as he walked over to me.

“Hey, are you okay?” he asked immediately.

I had no idea how he could tell just by looking at me, but it warmed my heart that he was worried. But I didn’t want to explain what had happened—not in front of everyone—so I only shook my head.

“Just a headache,” I said.

Up close, I could see that Greyson looked tired too, and he was clearly looking for any excuse to put an end to the night. “I’m going to take you and Elle home.”

I was relieved to hear him say so, but Lucian, who had overheard, looked disappointed.

“But I haven’t even shown you the upper floors yet,” he said.

“Oh, I think we’ve seen enough of the palace to last us for a while,” Greyson said. “But thanks for the party, and for the whiskey. We’ll have to have you over the Redwood pack house sometime soon.”

Lucian smiled blandly at this, and I had to wonder if Greyson was joking.

“If you must leave, a very good night to you, Caliana Hart,” Lucian said, kissing my hand with a flourish. “And to you, too, Elle,” he said, kissing her hand as well.

He and Aysel walked all of us into the main hallway and out onto the porch, Mace and Knox included. As soon as the prince and princess had disappeared back inside, Mace spat into the rosebushes.

“That certainly was an experience. I gotta get home and drink a beer. Gotta wash that whiskey taste of out my mouth.” He shot a disdainful look at Knox, then headed for the steps.

“I don’t know about that one,” he muttered to Greyson as he passed, tipping his head back toward Knox.

But Knox didn’t notice. He was too busy introducing himself to Elle, and very obviously trying to flirt, but the result was clumsy. Thank god. A connection between these two was the last thing we needed happening.

“I’m an Alpha, you know,” he said.

Elle looked at him with the frown she wore when she didn’t understand what was happening. I wondered if I should intervene. To protect Elle from Knox, of course, but also to protect Knox from Elle. She was a wildcard, and there was no telling what she might do.

I stepped toward her and put a protective arm around her shoulder.

Knox looked at me for a moment, then winked at Elle. “Hey, see you around, okay?”

“Okay?” Elle repeated.

He smiled and turned to Greyson and Mace, who were still standing near the steps. “Later, dudes.” Then he shifted and, with a dramatic howl, leapt off the porch and ran into the woods.

Greyson and Mace watched him for a moment, then burst out laughing. Mace leaned over, heaving for breath between fits of laughter.

“Shit, man,” he said, trying to breathe, “I haven’t seen anyone pull that kind of stunt in a long time. He sure does try awfully hard, doesn’t he?”

Greyson shook his head, his smile turning rueful. “Maybe a little too hard.”

I looked over at him quickly. What had he meant by that? Had something happened with Knox during the meeting? I knew Xavier couldn’t stand the guy, but Greyson hadn’t said much about him, and I hadn’t been sure how he felt.

Greyson turned to shake hands with Mace. “Let’s stay in touch about the Samara pack. We’re going to want to keep an eye out.”

Mace nodded. “Agreed. Goodnight,” he said to Elle and me, then he shifted and headed off.

“Can I shift too?” Elle asked, grabbing the bottom of her sweatshirt to pull it off.

“No!” I said, quickly, batting her hand away. “We’ll drive back.” I’d had enough of naked Elle today, and I didn’t want her to show up at the pack house naked, either.

Greyson looked back at the palace, then shook his head, like his mind was elsewhere.

“Let’s go,” he said after a moment and, putting his hand on the small of my back, led Elle and me toward his car.

“How’s your headache?” he asked.

“Oh,” I said, putting my hand to my head. “It’s gone, actually. But I am tired.”

Greyson opened the car door for me. “I’ll have you back home in no time.”

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Walking into the pack house, I was glad to be home, but I was still a bit worried about going to sleep. Was I going to be terrorized by another Seluna dream? The very thought made me shiver with fear.

“Hey, uh, Greyson,” I said, grabbing his hand before he could go deeper into the house. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

He raised an eyebrow. “What?”

I hesitated. I knew I should tell him about what happened in the gallery, but knowing and doing were different things. With a deep breath I explained what happened—the vision, the way Elle found me… I flicked my eyes up at him and tried to gauge his reaction.

“Cali—”

“I know,” I said quickly. “I should’ve told you right away, but with Aysel and Lucian there… I’m sorry.”

Greyson shook his head and pulled me into his arms. “I should be the one apologizing. I’m so sorry that happened to you, love. Are you okay?”

“Better now.” I wrapped my arms around him and breathed him in. “I think it was because I was in the room. I guess it was a stupid idea to think going there could bring me some kind of closure.”

“It wasn’t stupid,” he said, kissing the top of my head.

“What do you think we should—” I started asking when suddenly Elle appeared next to us. I yelped. “Oh my god, where did you come from?!”

Where I felt exhausted, especially after recounting everything to Greyson, Elle seemed to be the opposite.

“I want to run,” she told us.

I looked up at Greyson. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

Elle didn’t seem to care what I said as she headed toward the back door.

Greyson sighed, and we started following the new werewolf. “She’s probably feeling overwhelmed by tonight. It *was* a lot to take in.”

“That’s true,” I murmured, watching as she paced in front of the door, shaking her hands out. How did she have so much energy still? “I can’t imagine what she must be thinking right now. She’s only been a human for a few days. I’ve been a human my whole life, and I’m always overwhelmed by the Vanguard palace.”

Greyson looked thoughtfully at Elle. “Maybe she *should* go for a run. A long run will probably do her some good.”

“You should go with her,” I suggested. “She shouldn’t go alone.”

Greyson looked at me like I’d just suggested he drop everything and do the Macarena. “I’m not leaving you here alone, not after what you just told me.”

I waved this off. “I’m okay now, really. I don’t like the idea of Elle going out alone and maybe something happening to her…”

“*Cali*—"

“*Greyson*—” I countered.

He crossed his arms. “Why do I get the sense you’re not going to let this go?”

I pressed a finger to my lips. “Hmm, not sure where you’d get that impression.”

“Elle, we’ll go for a run,” Greyson said, calling to her. She all but lunged for the door. “I’ll see you in the morning, love?”

“Yes, please.”

He leaned over and pressed a kiss to my lips. “Better go then,” he said, pulling away as we heard the door open and Elle dash out.

I watched him run after her with a smile. Then I headed toward the stairs, and I noticed a light on in the living room. I peeked in to see Torin asleep on the couch, the television still on.

I turned off the TV and spread a blanket over his sleeping form, then I headed up to bed, hoping I’d be able to sleep as soundly as Torin.

In the hallway, I stopped in front of Xavier’s room. The door was partway open, and I could see that the room was empty. Xavier wasn’t home yet. Knowing that he’d gone to see Ava, I wasn’t happy to see that, but I trusted him. With her, who knows what could’ve happened to keep him out so late?

I headed to my room, washed my face, brushed my teeth, and then pulled a silky-soft oversized T-shirt over my head. Then I flopped onto the bed with a gusty sigh. Every limb ached like I’d run a marathon, and my body felt heavy with exhaustion, but my mind was still moving fast. I could tell sleep wasn’t going to be easy for me to find. Not after everything that had happened tonight.

I closed my eyes, and just a moment later I heard the door open. Could Greyson have come back from his run so soon? Or had I managed to fall asleep, and it was actually hours later?

I opened my eyes to see Xavier stepping into the room.

“Xavier?”

I started to sit up, but he crossed the room, pulled me into his arms, and kissed me.

# Episode 2956

**Xavier**

Kissing Cali—holding her tightly in my arms—was all I wanted. It was all I needed, and I pulled her even closer, drinking her in.

In the darkness, roused from sleep, Cali had been surprised for just a moment, but now she wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me back. Then, after a moment, she pulled away slightly.

“Is everything okay?” she asked, murmuring the words against my lips.

I pulled back so I could see her beautiful face and smiled at her. “Never better.” I kissed her again, softly. “I just missed you. Was everything okay at the Vanguard palace?”

Cali smiled and kissed me. “Oh, you know how it is there. It was weird, but I’m happy to be home. And I missed you, too.”

Her words were like a balm to my soul. My wolf had been *insistent*—pushing me toward Ava—and when she’d questioned me about us and our bond, I’d really had to ask myself if I was denying myself and my wolf what we needed.

But, being here with Cali, the truth was apparent. I had what I needed—and that was Cali. She was what I needed, *and* what my wolf needed.

My wolf was stirring now, excited by Cali and urging me toward her—not toward Ava. Had my wolf *finally* knocked it into his head that he also had the mate bond with Cali? Judging by the way I could feel him growling and snarling for more of her, it sure felt like it. *Finally*. That had been a long time coming.

Being with Cali felt so right, so true. There wasn’t anything hidden between us. There was none of Ava’s careful planning and manipulation. Cali never needed to do that to me. Our bond held me to her, not her machinations. Our mate bond was stronger than anything. Cali was the one for me. She’d brought my wolf back when no one else could. There was no one in the world like her.

I pulled her close again and kissed her, sliding my kisses down to her neck. Then I slipped into the bed next to her.

“I’ve been wanting you so bad,” I whispered against her skin. “Every time I think of you, I feel like I’m going to lose my mind.”

Cali made a low sound in the back of her throat as I pulled off her T-shirt, revealing her perfect body. I kissed the top of each breast, smiling as she gasped at my touch.

“It’s been too long. It’s time to remind you that you’re mine, tiger,” I whispered, “and I’m yours.”

I kissed her again, coaxing her mouth open.

With a moan of pleasure, she wrapped her bare legs around me, tugging me close and rocking against me. Every inch of her skin felt burning hot, like she’d been set on fire from my touch. Her hands moved down my arms, caressing my muscles until she reached between us. Her fingers found the button of my jeans, and she started fumbling, trying to undo it. My cock strained against my jeans as she struggled to get them off me.

“Finally,” I groaned as the button came undone.

Urgently, I shoved off my jeans and then removed my shirt before diving back into her soft skin. My hands eagerly cupped her breasts before my mouth descended onto her nipples.

Cali gasped at the contact, and my cock twitched at the sound. I began moving my way down her body. When I kissed the inside of her thighs and then lightly bit her skin, she sucked in a breath. I could smell her arousal mixing with mine.

“Are you already wet for me, baby?”

“Yes,” she breathed. “I want you.”

“Not yet.”

I pushed myself between Cali’s legs, opening her up to me. She still had her panties on, and that wasn’t going to do, but I couldn’t wait. Over her panties, I licked her, needing her to fill my senses, needing to hear her moan. Her fingers tangled in my hair, and I grabbed her thighs to keep her open for me as she turned to putty. She was so wet, and I needed to taste her. I dug my fingers into the lace of her panties and ripped them away.

“Fuck these,” I muttered, tossing the scraps away.

Immediately, I found her clit—kissing, sucking at her until her legs started to shake. The more I licked her, the harder my cock got. I was about to slide a finger inside her when she sat up.

“Kiss me. *Please.*”

She urged me toward her and then kissed me hard and fast. As we kissed, her hand went down to my cock and stroked it. I groaned against her lips. I could *taste* the desire on her tongue. I knew she’d been wanting me as much I’d been wanting her, but if she wasn’t careful, she was going to make me come early.

Not knowing how much longer I was going to be able to last, I moved her hand away and, slipping my hands behind her knees, I yanked her flat on the bed. Cali looked up at me, her eyes lidded with desire and lips swollen.

Inside, my wolf *howled.*

“I’m going to fuck you until you scream my name.” I sounded more wolf than man as I used the tip of my cock to circle her clit. “Do you understand?”

She looked up at me, her eyes now wide, and she nodded. “Yes,” she whispered.

This was what I needed to hear, and I pushed into her, finding her sex warm and slick with want. The level of my arousal felt brutal as I pumped into her, and Cali wrapped her legs around my back and arched, taking more of me into her. The action only encouraged me, and I growled, grabbing both her hands in one of mine and holding them clasped over her head as I drove my cock into her, again and again.

When she started to pant, I reached down with my free hand and rubbed her clit, softly, and watched with pleasure as she started to shake beneath me. She was shattering beneath me, and I felt the wave rising in me.

“*Cali*,” I growled, letting go of her hands and bracing my hands on either side of her.

“*Xavier*,” she cried out.

Hearing my name began to send me over the edge. Cali tightened her legs and drove me in even deeper, and I clutched her hard as I climaxed. She kept her hips rocking as I slowly came back down to earth.

Cali was breathing hard, like she’d just been sprinting, and she looked over at me. “That was… *Wow*.”

“Yeah,” I breathed, rolling off of her.

“Like… *Wow*. What brought that on?” she asked. Then she laughed. “Not that I’m complaining, but seriously, what was that about? What got into you there?”

I rolled onto my side to face her. “You. *You* got into me.”

“Technically,” Cali said, laughing, “that’s not quite what happened.”

I shook my head, grinning. “I love you.”

Cali smiled back. “I love you, too.”

I pushed a lock of dark hair behind her ear. “I know I haven’t been around much recently.”

She nodded. “You’ve been busy.”

“I had to deal with all the Samara pack stuff, but I want you to know how much I love you, and that I’m never going to leave you. This is where I belong,” I said, slipping my arm around her waist and pulling her close. “This is where we both belong.”

Cali smiled at me, and I felt a sense of peace settle over me. My wolf wasn’t fighting me anymore, and for the first time in a long time, it felt like we were both on the same side.

I took Cali’s hand and kissed the tip of each finger. “I know you’ve been worried about Ava and me—”

“No, Xavier, it’s okay. I wasn’t worried, exactly. I never doubted you,” she said.

“Just let me finish, Cali,” I said. I took a deep breath. “I’ve had to spend a lot of time with Ava recently, had to pretend that the mate bond between us still meant something to me. I saw that it hurt you to see it, and I’m sorry about that. I was doing what I felt I had to do for our pack and for the Samaras, but I never meant to hurt you. I should have done a better job of reassuring you.”

“Xavier,” Cali said softly.

But I wasn’t finished. “I should have done a better job of letting you know that you’re the only mate I care for.”

She was quiet for a moment, and in the pale moonlight I saw that her eyes had grown bright with tears. “I guess there were some times when it was hard to see you with Ava,” she admitted. “But I knew what you were trying to do, and in the end, I always believed in you.”

“Yeah?” I asked.

She nodded with a shy smile. “I know you, Xavier. Maybe better than you know yourself. And I know that our love is strong. It’s strong enough to withstand anything.”

I was nearly overcome with relief and happiness. That was how I felt too, and I was glad to hear Cali say those words.

I pressed a gentle kiss to her lips. “I love you, Cali, and I promise that I’m never going to put you in that position again. Okay?”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I want you to know—Ava and I are done.”

# Episode 2957

**Greyson**

I sprinted after Elle as she raced for the tree line. “Elle, wait!” I called after her.

She stopped running and let me catch up to her. Luckily, she hadn’t shifted yet.

“Greyson?” she asked. “What is wrong?”

“Don’t shift just yet,” I told her.

She frowned, looking annoyed. “Why not? I want to shift and to be my wolf. I want to run.”

“I know,” I said. “We will, but I want to check in with Sage first. She’s been on patrol. Can you hold on for just a minute?”

She didn’t look happy, but she nodded.

I figured it didn’t hurt to kill two birds with one stone. Check in with Sage and then take Elle out for the run she so desperately wanted. I’d already caught Sage’s scent, and I headed into the forest, following the trail until I found her heading back toward the pack house.

She stopped when she saw me and shifted back to human. She looked surprised, and she shot a glance at Elle. “Hey, Greyson. Is something wrong?” she asked.

She looked nervous to have been sought out like this, so I smiled to put her at ease. “Just checking in. Anything to worry about out there?”

*Like Dick Wigbert lurking somewhere?*

Sage nodded, understanding. “No, not at all. I did a complete circuit around the property, and it’s just raccoons, the occasional hare. No humans, no outside wolves. The property is clear.”

I was glad to hear it. I’d been worried that—despite Rhonda’s reassurance—LIPS might have lingered.

“And that means no Dick Wigbert, right?” I asked, wanting to confirm.

Sage scowled at the mention of his name. “No, no sign of that asshole either. Not as far as I could tell. And Zainab and I drove past the LIPS camp yesterday when we went into town to get groceries… Maybe we were being a bit paranoid, but can’t be too careful. The area was completely empty. Nothing left.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” I said.

“I wish he *would* show his face around here, though,” Sage said darkly. “I have a message I’d like to give him.”

“Agreed.”

Next to me, Elle made an impatient sound. “Greyson? Can we run?”

I nodded and turned back to Sage. “I’m going to take Elle out for a run—she’s got some energy to burn off. Maybe we’ll do the next patrol.”

“Okay. Ravi will be glad to hear it. That means he’ll be able to sleep a little longer.” Sage raised her eyebrows. “He needs it. I’ll let him know.”

Sage headed toward the pack house, and as soon as she was out of sight, Elle broke away from me, shifted, and started to run.

Laughing a little at her eagerness, I shifted and ran after the young werewolf. I couldn’t blame her for wanting to run, especially after the day we’d just had. If it had been hard for me, I could only imagine how weird and confusing it must have been for Elle. And, as always, it felt good to be in wolf form. Simpler. More straightforward. All the pretending and planning and politicking I’d had to do with the Alphas tonight was tossed aside as I sprinted through the cold night air. *This* was who I was. There was an unimpeachable truth to this—being a wolf, running through the woods.

I caught sight of Elle’s red coat just ahead of me and reflected that the only thing that could’ve made this moment better would be if it were Cali running with me.

But that was a matter for another time. Right now, I had my hands full with the wolf I’d just turned. I couldn’t let myself fantasize about what it would be like to share this with Cali. Not yet, anyway.

Ahead of me, Elle broke into a clearing and slowed, eventually stopping at a stream to drink.

I joined her and took a deep drink of the icy-cold water.

Elle looked up at the sky—velvet black and studded with diamond stars—and threw back her head and howled. The sound was plaintive.

*Elle, are you enjoying being a werewolf?* I asked her.

*Enjoy? What does that mean?* she asked.

*Do you like it?* I asked. *Is it what you wanted?*

Elle nodded. *Yes, being a werewolf more fun.*

*Being a werewolf* is *more fun*, I corrected.

*Is more fun*, she repeated. She thought for a moment*. Like I would say Greyson* is *Alpha.*

*Yup, you’ve got it.*

We were quiet for a moment, listening to the sounds of the winter forest at night.

*What did you think of the Vanguard’s house?* I asked her.

*Aysel is nice*, Elle said.

I wasn’t so sure about that claim, but I kept it to myself. *Who else is nice?*

*Cali is nice*, Elle offered.

*Yes, she is*, I agreed.

*Greyson is nice. Lucian…* She trailed off. *I am not sure about Lucian. Knox is not nice*, she said, more emphatically, shaking her furry head. *I do not enjoy Knox*.

*You’re not alone there*, I assured her. *Besides Knox himself, I’m not sure who* does *like Knox.*

Which raised a question I’d been wondering about for a while. No one did seem to like Knox, not even his own pack—with the exception of a few of his friends. Which made me wonder how the fuck he’d been voted in as Alpha. The math just didn’t add up.

But I didn’t have time to dwell on this question, as Elle was ready to run again. We took off, but this time I took the lead, and we circled around the property, conducting the patrol I told Sage I’d cover.

When we were done, I turned back to Elle. *What do you think about heading back?*

*Why can we not run more?* she asked.

*I love to run, Elle, and I’ve enjoyed being out here with you, but I’m tired. It’s been a long day.*

Elle hesitated for a moment, but she didn’t argue. She only nodded*. Okay, Alpha.*

As we headed back toward the house, I briefly wondered if she could give the rest of my pack some lessons on listening to the Alpha.

As we neared it, I heard the sound of someone approaching. It was Ravi, heading out for his patrol shift.

He waved when he saw us, and Elle and I shifted back to human.

“Thanks for letting me get a little extra sleep,” Ravi said with a yawn, rubbing a hand through his dark hair. “I needed it. Though I’m really glad we’re allowed to shift again.”

“You and me both, man,” I agreed.

“It’s so much easier now that we don’t need someone acting as a freakin’ doorperson all the time.” Ravi looked over my shoulder. “How’s she doing?” he asked, tipping his chin.

I turned to see Elle, sniffing a tree. “Fine, just finished a run.”

“That’s good. I feel like adjusting would be really hard. I kind of liked that pack slumber party; it was nice being with everyone. Except when Sage kicked me in her sleep. I don’t know how Zainab sleeps next to her. She’s vicious.”

I laughed. “Elle’s doing well, I think. Better than I’d hoped.”

“That’s good,” Ravi said, his gaze still on Elle.

“She’s still a little diamond in the rough, but we’re making progress. I think she’s going to be fine.”

Ravi clapped his hands. “Welp, I’d better get out there. This place isn’t going to patrol itself.” He started to walk toward the forest but then stopped and turned back. “Hey, I heard the news about Knox. Is the Samara pack going to be a problem for us? Should I be watching for him in the bushes?”

I thought back to what Knox had said to me when we’d been walking out of Lucian’s whiskey bar. Drunk and clearly not thinking, he’d grabbed me and made threats about Xavier.

I shook my head. “No, I don’t think the Samaras are going to be a problem.”

“That’s good—” Ravi started.

“But Knox is a different story,” I finished.

Ravi grinned at me. “Well, if you need any help with that, sign me up. I’d love a chance to kick that little prick’s ass.”

That made me chuckle. “If an ass-kicking becomes necessary, I’ll be sure to let you know.”

“Deal,” Ravi said. Then he shifted into his wolf form and headed into the forest.

“Elle!” I called, turning toward the redhead.

She didn’t seem to hear me, so I walked over and tapped her shoulder.

“Elle, let’s go.”

Thankfully, she agreed, and I led her back to the house. We were just heading up the porch steps when the door burst open. Elle jumped as Big Mac stepped onto the porch, a hunting knife clutched in one hand and a wild look in her eyes.

“Elle, go inside,” I said, not taking my eyes off of the witch.

“That’s a good idea,” she said, and without a word, Elle slipped past her and went inside.

“Big Mac, what the fuck is going on?” I growled once we were alone. “What are you doing?”

She looked down at me, still brandishing the knife. “I know where to find Dick.”

# Episode 2958

*Ava and I are done.*

Xavier’s words echoed in my head. I stared at him, my heart pounding. “But that’s—I mean, that’s incredible, but *how*?” I asked, sitting up. “Did you find another way to unmate?”

Xavier looked away, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed. He shook his head. “No. It’s not like that. I just know that no matter what my wolf wants, you are the only woman for me.” My cheeks heated up when he turned to me and said, “I just need you to know that I’m not going to let Ava try to sway me.”

“That’s actually what I’ve been telling myself, to push through this whole situation with you and her pretending to be together,” I said, sighing in relief. “But it’s better hearing *you* say it.”

He tucked my hair behind my ear, smiling a little.

“Does that mean you no longer have to fake being in a relationship?” I asked.

Xavier frowned. “That’s still kind of complicated. Even though I know I don’t want to be with Ava, she risked a lot trying to help us prevent Knox from becoming the Samara Alpha.”

I swallowed roughly. “And if you and Ava stop pretending to be mates…”

“Then Knox and his buddies might become suspicious of her,” Xavier said, finishing my sentence. “So, for now, I’m going to let her claim that we’re still together.”

“I get it,” I said quietly. “I don’t like it at all, but I get it.”

“I just want you to remember that it is truly over between Ava and me,” Xavier muttered, stroking my arm. “That there’s no doubt in my heart that I’m with you. Only you.”

My heart soared at his honesty. Apparently, all I needed to feel less insecure was a bunch of sweet nothings and declarations of love. I’d already known that he was mine, but being here with him, staring into his eyes as he eased my worries… It was amazing.

*Also, I’m so easy! My god, all he has to do to butter me up is be thoughtful—which is not his usual M.O.—and I’m just happily toppling over like a fat cat waiting to be petted.*

Fat cats lived great lives, though.

“I trust you, Xavier,” I said. “I’ve trusted you all along, but I know how much your wolf obviously wants to be with Ava. I know how intense a mate bond can be, so I didn’t want to pressure you.”

“You never pressure me,” he whispered, caressing my cheek. “I just love you. You’re the love of my life.”

His touch burned. I couldn’t keep myself from leaning closer to kiss his beautiful mouth, pouring all my love and care into that kiss. It was soft and tender and so real that I felt it head to toe, a shiver running through me.

When our eyes met again, I whispered, “Thank you for starting this conversation, Xavier. I know how difficult it is to have two mates. It’s why I didn’t want to force you to make a choice—especially after everything I’ve asked from you.”

*Everything I’ve asked when it comes to Greyson, and being with both of you, and having sex with both of you, and claiming both of you* *without making a decision. Because I really* can’t *make a decision!* I mentally added. Thankfully I didn’t need to say any of that uncomfortable stuff out loud, because Xavier seemed to realize exactly what I meant.

“I get it,” he muttered.

“Mate bonds are intense, tricky things,” I said. The next words came out with difficulty, but I had to say them. Just for my peace of mind. Just because I couldn’t force Xavier to do what I hadn’t managed.

*I hate everything, but here goes…*

“It would be hypocritical of me to ignore the way you feel about Ava,” I continued. “So if something does end up happening between you and her…”

“No,” Xavier said, shaking his head sharply. “That will never happen. I promise you. I am committed to us and our relationship. You’re the one I want, that’s what I’m telling you, Cali.”

*Yes, but I’m not the ONLY one your wolf wants*, I felt like saying*. Though who am I to judge when I can’t extend the same “courtesy” to you? I love Greyson as much as I love you, so…*

*So* I had to stop this and follow Xavier’s lead. There was no reason to think about Ava anymore, or let her get in the way of our relationship. There was no point in dwelling on all these messy, conflicting feelings I had about the *due destini*, when I really couldn’t do anything to stop any of it.

“I understand,” I said, looking into his eyes. “I’ll try my hardest to stop bringing Ava up and just be in the moment with you. It’s honestly all I want—this angst and jealousy BS is *really* not part of my brand at all, you know?”

Xavier chuckled, his dark blue gaze piercing as he stroked my cheek with the back of his hand. “It’s one of the reasons I love you.”

I nestled closer, smirking. “What else do you love about me?”

He mirrored my expression. The rare softness in his eyes, in his tone, made my heart go pitter-patter. “You’re smart and charming and hilarious. You’re kind, and caring, and even though I used to find those two qualities annoying when all I wanted was to snap someone’s neck and just move along—”

I was both horrified and amused, so I playfully smacked his arm. “*Xavier!*”

“—now I just think they’re something to admire. Something to love, just like I love you,” he finished.

I turned into goo as he leaned forward to kiss my shoulder, then my neck, my chin… And then his mouth brushed over mine.

“That was so sweet, Xavier,” I whispered, sniffling a little. “So unlike your usual brutish approach, really.”

He huffed in fake offense. “I can show you brutish, if you like.”

I squealed when he nipped at my neck and pushed me back, climbing on top of me. I instantly opened my legs for him, dragging him in for a hard kiss. My body was alight at our contact, at the way he devoured my mouth. His skin brushed up against me, and I just pulled him closer, thinking how lucky I was to be here with him.

Thinking how amazing it was to be loved by my mate.

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After round three—or four? Or five? Maybe six? I’d lost count—werewolves had no real refractory period—Xavier was passed out, sleeping. I just stared at him, lying in his arms, feeling all warm and fuzzy after our conversation. I also took in how absolutely gorgeous he was, which in turn made me thirsty.

Both figuratively and literally.

I reached for the water glass on my nightstand, but then I realized it wasn’t there. Making sure not to disturb Xavier, I got up, put on my sleep shirt, and tiptoed out of the room. As I walked down the hallway, I saw an open door and peeked inside. I spotted Elle there, sleeping peacefully next to Sage, Zainab, and Ravi. They had laid out sleeping bags and looked like one huge, adorable puppy pile. It warmed my heart.

I was so relieved that Elle had been getting along with the pack, and that she was tired after the run with Greyson. That had to be good—for all of them. And even though Elle confused me a whole lot, and annoyed me when she wanted to kiss Greyson, I was happy for her, and appreciated how loyal she was to Greyson and the pack. If the last few months had proven anything, it was that we needed people who were willing to fight for the Redwood pack.

Smiling to myself, I tried to remain as quiet as possible as I headed to the kitchen. I didn’t even turn on the lights. But when I turned the corner, I crashed into someone, letting out a muffled scream.

I was about to blast the intruder to oblivion when a familiar voice whispered, “Cali?”

Panting, I blinked slowly, my sight adjusting to the dark. I recognized Dani’s features, the shape of her face, and exhaled in relief. “Dani?”

“Oh, thank god,” she muttered. “I thought you were a demon or something.”

*Oh no*, I thought. *Is Dani still having a rough time with the dreams, like me?*

Going back to the scene of the crime tonight, to the damn Vanguard palace, probably hadn’t helped me. Now that I’d run into Dani, though, I realized I should tell her about the blurry figure. But first, I had to check in with her.

“I just wanted to get some water. Are you okay?” I asked in a low voice as we reached the kitchen.

She slid the door closed behind us. “Just startled,” she mumbled.

Pulling the water jug out of the fridge, she avoided my gaze. I saw a chopped-up apple on the counter, which made me think Dani had been here for a while. After finishing my glass of water, I eyed her as she sat across from me at the kitchen table.

She still wasn’t looking at me.

Cautiously, I asked, “Dani, have your dreams started up again?”

# Episode 2959

**Greyson**

“I know where to find Dick,” Big Mac repeated, still standing there at the house’s threshold with a knife in her hand.

I’d thought I’d put this conversation to bed. I’d also assumed that Big Mac would be in bed by now, but apparently that was too much to ask.

“Is there a particular reason why you’re lurking in the dark waiting for me and holding a knife?” I asked. “Are you ready to go find Dick right now and chop his balls off or something?”

“Oh, this old thing?” Big Mac said casually, twirling her knife. “I was just cutting fruit. You shouldn’t always think of the worst-case scenario, Greyson.”

“And you shouldn’t be talking about hunting people down while holding a giant butcher knife,” I said wryly. “That kind of sets the mood for what you have in mind.”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. Lowering her knife, she mumbled, “You’re being so *sensitive* about this.”

“How am I being sensitive about this?” I demanded. She raised an eyebrow, and I continued. “I’m just trying to be cautious, as the Alpha. We went to great lengths to avoid a slaughter—I literally turned a wolf into a werewolf. I can’t just jump into violence right now when she’s my responsibility.”

Big Mac huffed. “All I wanted to really tell you here is that I did a tracking spell and I know where Dick is. Just a few hours north of here, barely.” She took a step closer, her gaze sharp. “We need to take care of this problem once and for all, Greyson.”

“Right, sure, that doesn’t sound bloodthirsty at all,” I deadpanned. “Does my mother even know that you want to kill Dick?”

Big Mac frowned. “No. Sabine has no idea about what I want to do.”

“Perhaps that’s another reason why we shouldn’t do anything rash. Which is what I already told you, back in the car. Do you like it when I repeat myself, or—”

“You’d better cut the sarcasm, Greyson,” she snapped. “I’m not one of your puppies.”

I scoffed. “But you *are* going to be my stepmom. I think it’s a rite of passage for us to fight.”

Big Mac rolled her eyes so hard I thought they’d jump out of her head. “Why are you being so difficult? Dick needs to die. He fucking shot my fiancée, and I refuse to let him ruin our lives.”

“Wait a second—”

“*No*,” she interrupted. “I’m not waiting for anything. Sabine was in danger, your *mother* was in danger, and if you’re not going to do anything about it, then I will.” She huffed, her voice lowering as she added, “I’m always the one fixing things in this pack, anyway.”

That actually stung a bit, but I knew she was right.

“It’s true that you’ve done a lot for the Redwood pack, MacKenzie,” I said evenly. “And I’ve always appreciated that. I’m very grateful for it, despite everything.”

She glared at me. “Then why won’t you just let me do what I think is right? It’s like you can’t even—”

“I don’t want you to get hurt,” I blurted out.

She paused, staring at me. “What?”

I took a deep breath. “I don’t want you to get hurt. I almost lost my mother. I don’t want to risk losing you too. Am I asking too much here?”

My words seemed to have some sort of impact—thank god. At least she no longer looked like she was about to gut me like a fish. Progress?

“I’m not fragile,” she said kindly. As kindly as Big Mac could possibly get, really. “You know what I’m capable of. I can take care of myself.”

“I know you’re powerful,” I said. I was about to be very honest, because I had no other choice. “You have been stabbed before, though, and that was in the safety of our own house. If anything worse ever happened to you, I’d never forgive myself. I’m the Alpha—I’m responsible for your safety. And I guess this *is* me being sensitive about this, but I don’t give a damn. It’s how I feel.”

Big Mac looked at me, blinking rapidly, looking thrown. Like she was very unused to being taken care of, which made sense. When was the last time someone other than my mother had given a damn about her?

Well, *I* gave a damn about her. A lot of damns, actually.

In the end, she sighed. “Fine. I won’t go after him right now.”

I had to swallow an exhale of relief. “Thank you for—”

“But the longer we wait,” she interrupted, “the worse it could get. What if he tries something again?”

“Artemis used her magic on his memory,” I reminded her. “That should buy us some time to figure out what to do about Dick without having to resort to killing.”

Mainly because I’d promised Cali not to kill any human if I could avoid it. I wanted to keep that promise, but I also knew that I had a responsibility to my pack. Then again, another thing that I knew was that I—deep down, even though I wouldn’t admit it to Big Mac—really wanted to rip Dick’s head off for hurting my mother.

All in all, I had a lot of feelings about this situation. It was a fucking mess.

“As an Alpha, I’ve learned to trust my pack,” I told Big Mac. “So what I’m going to do for now is trust in Artemis’s magic. I’ll figure out a way to handle the Dick situation. I want to. Know that.”

Big Mac scowled. But at least she didn’t immediately run off to commit murder. “You know where I stand on this. If you end up needing my help, then you let me know.”

I was a little surprised Big Mac would *volunteer* to help me. Usually it was us nagging for her assistance. But of course, this was a different situation—she really had it out for Dick.

“I’ll keep you posted,” I said.

She went back inside while twirling the knife with expert flair. Subtle. Not.

I sighed deeply, shaking my head. I was exhausted at this point—maybe I needed to go to bed too. Find Cali. Maybe kiss her a little to forget all my worries, though that seemed impossible. There were always too many problems plaguing my pack.

I looked over at the dark woods and thought about the Samaras. They were now under the leadership of a hotheaded young Alpha with a vendetta against the Evers brothers. Plus, Lucian remained a thorn on my side. I would never fully trust him, but killing him would only invite more trouble.

And finally, cherry on top, I still needed to find whoever had stolen those ashes.

I wondered, not for the first time, exactly why I’d ever asked for this Alpha gig. I was genuinely trying to remember. It was so much responsibility, a constant headache. When I’d been a Rogue, I’d only had myself to look out for—those had been simpler times.

They’d been lonelier times as well, though, I realized. As a Rogue, I never would’ve been there for my mother’s wedding, or helped Big Mac with her outfit shopping today. Despite the million—billion—drawbacks, now that I had a pack, I felt more complete than I had before. This was where I was meant to be. With my family, and with Cali.

It was why I was Alpha.

I just had to remember that when things got frustrating and helpless. Nodding to myself after that little pep talk—we all needed one sometimes—I entered the house. It was completely dark and quiet, but I noticed that the light was on in the kitchen.

I frowned. Who could be awake at this hour? I cracked the door open and looked inside—it was Cali and Dani. There was an odd tension between them that made me frown. It deepened the moment my eyes met Cali’s.

*Greyson, help me!* she mind linked, looking panicked. *I don’t know how to tell Dani about the blurry figure! I kind of got my foot in my mouth asking her if her dreams started up again… And I don’t want to freak her out even more than she already is!*

I gave Cali a curt nod and focused on Dani.

“What are you two doing here in the middle of the night?” I asked, walking in and closing the door behind me.

At least Dani didn’t look scared at the moment. “I couldn’t sleep.”

Shooting another look at Cali, I noticed a cutting board of roughly chopped apple slices. I picked one up and took a bite, just to appear cool about this and buy some time. Then, I said, “I actually wanted to talk to you, Dani.”

She stared at me, her cheeks slightly flushing. “Me?”

I nodded. “I have everything under control, so I don’t want you to worry…”

She swallowed audibly. “But?”

“But we might have a lead on who took the ashes,” I said.

Dani’s eyes widened. “Really? Who?”

I turned to Cali, who scrambled to hold up her phone toward Dani. “Here’s a photo,” Cali said. “It’s pretty grainy, but it’s all we’ve got until we’re sent the other footage.”

“We were hoping you could help us identify who this vampire is,” I said as the young witch squinted at the screen. “Do you recognize them?”

# Episode 2960

Dani squinted at the screen, frowning in what seemed to be deep concentration. Then her eyes shifted up to me. “Figure? Don’t you think that’s a little generous?”

I blinked. *Oh my god, did sweet Dani just roast me?*

I stared at the photo—okay, I’d taken a picture of the footage Aysel had shown me, and it had already been blurry to begin with. But you couldn’t tell me that that grainy weird thing wasn’t a figure. It definitely *was* a figure!

“Unfortunately, Aysel remains annoying,” I told Dani, “so low quality resolution is all I have right now. I’m talking about this guy.” I pointed at the blurry shape in the middle of the screen. “You can kind of see a face, can’t you?”

Dani squinted again. “You mean that smudge? I thought it was your thumb getting in the frame.”

I scowled at her. “I’m not an old grandpa trying to use a camera for the first time. This is clearly a face. That’s the nose!” I pointed at a darker shadow among the lighter shadows.

Dani just shrugged. “It looks like a blur to me. Did a blur steal the ashes?”

I huffed. “Well, obviously not.”

*I can’t believe I’d been so worried about talking to Dani about the figure*, I thought. *She’s just standing here, making fun of my photography skills instead of freaking out.*

Greyson cleared his throat, stepping in. “Anyway, at least we have a lead now.”

Dani turned to him, looking much more spooked all of a sudden. “Yeah, but how much closer are we to actually finding the ashes?” She was gripping the edge of the table tightly, and I realized that perhaps Dani hadn’t been roasting me on purpose earlier.

*It was just a defense mechanism, wasn’t it?*

“Dani, are you okay?” I asked. “You never really answered me about the dreams…”

The way Dani’s face fell gave me my answer. Now, she just looked scared. “I did—I did have a weird dream tonight. That’s why I was down here in the kitchen. I was too scared to go back to sleep.”

I exchanged a look with Greyson before reaching out to hug her. “I’m so sorry—we’ll do everything we can to find the ashes and be rid of Seluna for good.”

“I know you’re trying,” she whispered, hugging me back tightly. “And I don’t really think you’re bad at taking photos… Sorry about that.”

I chuckled, feeling a little bit like crying when I faced her again. “Maybe we should do that meditation thing with Kira again? Last time it really helped. It should at least keep our dreams at bay a bit while we figure out how to find the blur.”

Dani sniffled, nodding. “That makes sense.”

“We’ll deal with this,” Greyson said in a calm voice, for both of us to hear.

I stared at him, and something about his presence put me at ease.

“We’ll speak with Kira tomorrow,” I told Dani. “What do you need right now?”

Dani gazed between Greyson and me, fiddling with her hands. She looked almost guilty when she muttered, “I just don’t want to be alone right now.”

I was about to offer to let Dani sleep with me when I remembered Xavier snoozing in my bed. My gaze shifted to Greyson. Even though my two mates had been pretty great and understanding lately—and Greyson had pretty much been that way for a while now—I didn’t want to force him to see Xavier in my bed right now.

*Especially not right after I’ve had sex with Xavier…*

An idea suddenly popped into my head. “Actually, would you like to sleep with a few others from the pack in what I would like to call the ‘communal’ sleeping room?”

Dani smiled a little. “That sounds nice. Like a sleepover.”

I grinned back. “Exactly.”

I walked upstairs with her and helped Dani settle in next to Sage, whose face was all scrunched up as she made a hooting sound in her sleep.

“Hope you don’t mind snoring,” I whispered in Dani’s ear.

Looking amused but relieved, Dani shook her head. After I placed a sheet over both Dani and Sage, I walked out of the room, closing the door softly. Greyson was waiting outside, leaning against the wall.

I gazed up at him nervously, and he just looked so at ease I didn’t know what to make of it. What the hell was I supposed to say next? *Well, I’d love it if we spent the night together, but I’m already spending it with Xavier, so ha ha ha—how awkward is* this *conversation?*

“Good night, love,” he murmured, before my thoughts could spiral further. He smiled softly, leaning down to kiss me on the cheek. “Sleep well. I’ll see you in the morning.”

*Why did I just get a cheek kiss instead of the lips?*

As I watched Greyson’s retreating back, it hit me. He must’ve realized that Xavier was in my room. Hell, he’d probably used that super sniffing werewolf nose of his to do it, which was a whole other ballgame I really didn’t want to process.

Bottom line, Greyson had taken a step back, because he was like that. I wondered if the Petty Olympics between the two brothers were truly over, but either way, I felt very grateful for Greyson. He knew I wasn’t in a good place right now with the nightmares and everything else, and he was prioritizing my peace of mind.

I was lucky to have someone who loved me so much.

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When I woke up the next morning, Xavier was gone, probably off on a run. Feeling more at ease, I took my time taking a shower and getting ready. It was a new day, and I believed that taking charge of my life in general would help with my anxiety.

*This is it*, I thought, nodding at my reflection in the mirror. *I’m going to investigate this blur and get rid of these Seluna dreams for good.*

I knew that Greyson and Xavier were on it, but I couldn’t just sit on my hands. Especially after seeing how upset Dani had been last night. I could handle the dreams myself, but Dani was different—she was younger, and I hated the idea of someone I cared about going through that pain.

I nodded at my reflection one last time, full of determination, and then I hurried downstairs. I needed to find my mates so we could start planning what our next steps would be, going about identifying this blur.

When I got downstairs, though, the only people in the kitchen were my parents. Dad was whistling by the stove, cooking breakfast, and Mom was sipping a mug of coffee at the counter. They both said good morning and smiled brightly when they saw me, driving the warm fuzzy feelings inside me home. It all looked so sweet and domestic and normal. Almost like when I was younger.

A moment later, Mrs. Smith came in as Dad poured me some coffee. She was carrying an armful of ingredients.

“Are those for your white chocolate mocha?” I asked.

“Always,” she said with a grin. I was so relieved that she was okay after the Dick debacle. That man was literally such a dick, though. Murder was not the answer, sure, but he was definitely testing everyone.

“Can I have some when it’s done?” I asked, taking a seat next to my mom.

“Yes,” Mrs. Smith said, “but you have to be patient. Magic takes time.”

“As a Fae, I can attest to that,” Mom teased from next to me. I smiled, looking between all three of them. I really wished I could hold on to this sweet feeling of family and holidays.

*I know that I was supposed to take charge today*, I mused, *but maybe it’s okay to just slow down for a second and appreciate the small things?*

Just then, Greyson walked into the kitchen, greeting everybody. His hair was still wet from the shower, and the shirt he wore hugged his shoulders just right. I bit my lip.

“How did you sleep?” he asked a moment later, after giving me a quick kiss.

Mom instantly got hung up on that. “Is everything okay?”

I shot Greyson a dirty look. *Now look what you did!*

“I’ll go get some coffee,” he said innocently and skedaddled.

I shook my head at him and turned to my mom. I hated to disturb this happy family feeling, so I kept some of the truth to myself. “It’s fine—just stress dreams. So much to do to prepare for the holidays!”

Mom sighed at my words. “You really are an adult now, helping to co-host a big family holiday and all that.” She wrapped an arm around my shoulders, squeezing. “I used to think you’d stay my little girl forever…”

“I’m happy to have all of you here where we can celebrate the season together,” I said. The moment the words were out of my mouth, I realized that we *needed* to have a good family Christmas. It was practically essential after all the bullshit we’d been through.

“Good morning, everybody!” Torin bellowed. He marched into the adjacent living room, carrying an armload of presents. He plopped them down under the tree and clapped his hands. “Announcement! Our Secret Santa exchange will take place today, at four o’clock! Do not be late!”

He spotted me from across the room and winked.

I instantly broke into a cold sweat.

*Oh, shit! I never got Xavier or Greyson anything!*

# Episode 2961

**Xavier**

I’d gone on a run, just to ease my wolf. He’d been acting high-strung this morning, as per usual. At least the finicky son of a bitch wasn’t acting out after my night with Cali. He felt committed to her, just like *I* felt committed to her. I felt invigorated, like my head had cleared up, like everything between us had fallen into place.

Cali had sensed our connection as well, and that was the best thing of all.

I even dared to hope that my wolf had finally fallen in line. At least it seemed that way, since he hadn’t protested or made me yearn for Ava in the past few hours. Things were looking up, and I felt freer than ever. I refused to believe that this was all an illusion, that everything would come crumbling down soon.

I wanted to start planning for the future again.

I wanted to think about taking over as Alpha, making Cali my Luna, returning to my original plan and path before Ava had come back from the dead, Seluna had popped up, and a million other catastrophes had attacked. In fact, if the *due destini* killing curse was truly over and done with, then Cali could finally make her choice.

I wouldn’t pressure her about deciding, though. Because I knew that Greyson wouldn’t pressure her, and I was trying this new thing where I didn’t act like a dick. Perhaps, though, if I took care of those ashes, and finally made sure that Cali was fully free of Seluna, then she would be ready—emotionally *and* mentally—to take that leap and find out if there was any lingering risk of killing one of us when she made her choice.

Being truly free to decide would mean her picking me—for real this time. Forever. I could just imagine it—we would be completely together, without any outside forces affecting our relationship. Of course, realistically, there were still things standing in our way—Greyson, gross—which would have to be handled at some point.

Bottom line, I just couldn’t see the three of us staying in this situation for decades to come.

I refused to consider it.

And even though I wished that the resolution of this messed-up love triangle could happen immediately, I had to remind myself that I’d promised Cali that I would be patient. I knew I needed to truly prove myself to her when it came to chilling and suppressing my inner asshole. And also when it came to Ava.

I knew I could be the mate that Cali deserved.

It was the only thing that made sense to me.

The only thing I needed.

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I got back to the house an hour later. Everybody seemed to be awake, even if they didn’t want to be. Torin’s Christmas music was so loud it would’ve alerted a whole village. When I walked in, he was bustling around with the others in the living room, organizing a bunch of presents.

His face lit up. “Xavier! There you are!”

“Does the music really need to be so loud?” I asked.

“We need to get into the holiday spirit!” he exclaimed, grabbing innocent bystander Mrs. Smith and twirling her around.

She let out a laugh, patting Torin’s cheek. “You are a wonderful dancer, Torin, but I have to stir the mocha or it’ll burn.”

Torin’s eyes fell on me again as Mrs. Smith danced back to the mocha. He reached out for me with a huge smile. “Xavier! Do you know how to dance the Macarena?”

“Nope,” I declared, and moved toward the kitchen in super speed. I used my werewolf abilities to escape the man, but he deserved it. I wasn’t going to be pulled into a dance. I had *some* dignity left.

There were a bunch of people in the kitchen, rambling about and eating, but one person caught my eye before anyone else. Cali, sitting at the bench, scrolling furiously through her phone. I drank a glass of water and watched her, but she didn’t look up.

Interesting.

Strolling over to her, I leaned closer as she kept on scrolling. I couldn’t see exactly what she was looking at, because her hair was in the way. When she still didn’t notice me, I smirked and leaned even closer, muttering in her ear, “Hi.”

“Ah!” Cali let out a squeak and turned off her screen immediately. “Oh my god, you scared me half to death!”

I raised an eyebrow. “What’s up? What were you looking at?”

“Nothing. Butter,” she blurted out.

I frowned. “You were looking at butter on your phone?”

Cali nodded vigorously. “Yeah, there are so many… artisan brands…”

I tilted my head to the side, taking her in. Seriously, since when did Cali care about butter? What was she really doing?

“Need to find the right one…” Cali trailed off, chuckling awkwardly. “You’d never guess it was quite the industry, would you?”

I squinted at my mate. I had a feeling that Cali was up to something. It was written all over her face.

“What?” she asked innocently.

I shrugged. “Just wondering when you got obsessed with butter.”

She huffed. “I’m not obsessed! I’m just looking at it—aren’t I allowed?”

I snorted at her outrage. “Of course. Have fun with it.”

“Thank you,” she said primly. “I will.”

Grinning, I kissed her cheek just as Greyson walked in. He was carrying a bag of sugar cane from the pantry. Handing it over to Mrs. Smith, he turned to look at me. “Where you been, little brother?”

I bristled. Who the hell did my brother think he was to keep tabs on me?

“Just out for a run, *bro*,” I said, annoyed.

Greyson rolled his eyes. “That’s fine. I was just curious. Thought you were dead or something.”

I scoffed. “Sorry to disappoint.”

Greyson didn’t even snort at my comment, though. That was weird, actually. He walked over to me, looking serious. His voice was low when he spoke. “I wanted to talk to you about something,” he said, then he glanced at Cali. “*We* need to show you something, actually. It’s important.”

Confused, I eyed Cali.

“Uh, yeah, Greyson’s right,” she said. “Unfortunately, it has nothing to do with dairy.”

*Come on*, she mind linked, then gestured for Greyson and me to follow her into one of the side studies.

The moment the door closed behind us, I asked, “What’s going on? Is it Knox?”

Greyson shook his head, crossing his arms over his chest. “No. It’s about whoever took the ashes.”

My hands clenched into fists. I’d destroy the motherfucker. “Do we finally know who it is?”

“Not yet,” Cali said. “But we have a photo of them.”

“Show me,” I said gruffly. “Does anyone recognize them?”

Cali cringed. “Not exactly.”

I scowled. “What do you mean, ‘not exactly’?”

Cali held out her phone, sighing. “See for yourself.”

I stared at the screen. It was just a blurry figure. What the fuck? Not helpful. “I literally just see a smudge. This is horrible quality.”

“Not you too, Xavier!” Cali groaned. “It’s not my fault the picture is grainy—and actually, if it’s a vampire, it’s probably protected from being recorded or whatever! Vampires don’t even have reflections.”

I paused, nodding. “You might be right.”

I looked at the photo again. I was about to just hand the phone back when something pricked at my mind. Like a word that was just on the tip of my tongue. I stared at the photo harder—it really was just a blur of pixels. Shadows of shapes that *maybe* formed a face. I couldn’t even really tell if it was a man or a woman.

I had a nagging feeling, though, that there was *something* about this figure that I recognized.

“What is it?” Cali asked, squeezing my arm. “Do you see something? Do you recognize them?”

“Not sure,” I muttered. “I can’t explain it, but I’m starting to feel, like…”

“What?” Greyson asked.

I looked between my brother and my mate. “Like this strange sense of dread. It’s been creeping up on me ever since I found that saint medal.”

Cali fell silent. I hated seeing her worried like this.

“Don’t worry,” I said, handing over the phone. I’d learned years ago to follow my instincts, and this situation would be no different. “I’m going to get to the bottom of this, Cali. There’s something more going on here—I just don’t know what.”

“What happens next, then?” Greyson asked, scrutinizing my face.

“I need to find a way to remember. There’s something blocking my memory, still, and that’s the worst sign that there’s something bigger at play here,” I said.

Greyson slowly nodded as Cali stared up at me with wide eyes. “What are you going to do, Xavier?”

“I can’t keep stalling or doubting myself. I need answers right now,” I replied matter-of-factly. “I have to go see an old associate of mine. His name is Marvin.”

# Episode 2962

“So you *do* recognize the face here?” I asked. “You can make it out?”

Xavier frowned. He looked so frustrated, I wanted to give him a hug. “Not exactly. It’s just—there’s just this feeling I’m getting when I look at it. I can’t remember, but there’s some recognition there. Magic didn’t help me, but maybe Marvin can. It’s worth a try.”

I felt hopeful now. If Xavier had at least some recollection of this figure, then that would mean we were one step closer to figuring out *why* they would have stolen the ashes.

“At least we have a lead now,” I commented, and Xavier reached out to hold my hand.

His voice was gruff. “If this person is someone I know, if this has anything to do with me, I promise I will deal with them. You don’t deserve this bullshit.”

Greyson nodded, adding, “I’ll go with you, Xavier.”

That wasn’t a bad idea, was it? Xavier would have backup, so that was an upside. But then again, if this little trip proved to be a risk, it would mean that *both* my mates would walk straight into danger. *Shit*. I didn’t want that.

Before I could start spiraling, though, Xavier told Greyson, “Marvin isn’t a threat. He’s just someone who might have some information. One of us always needs to be at the pack house anyway, especially with Knox and the Samaras acting up.”

“That makes sense,” Greyson said.

Yeah, it did make sense, and Xavier was tough, but it wasn’t like he was invincible. Nobody was. If I started thinking that way, though, I would literally never let anyone leave the pack house.

Taking a deep breath, I told Xavier, “Be careful, okay?”

“Of course,” he murmured as I leaned up to kiss his cheek.

The moment he was gone from the room, I turned to Greyson. My heart was still pounding, and I was pretty sure he could hear it. Still, though, I pretended I wasn’t stressed out. “What should we do now?” I asked him.

“We’ll just have to wait and see what Xavier finds out,” he said. “We’ll deal with this, love, like we’ve dealt with everything else. Don’t forget that.”

His calm tone soothed me, but that didn’t last. A shout from the kitchen made both Greyson and me jump.

“Torin!” Mrs. Smith screamed. “Oh my god, why did you turn the burner up so high?”

“I’d better go help with that,” Greyson said, eyebrows arched. Before leaving the room, he leaned down and kissed the top of my head. “Trust Xavier. He knows what he’s doing.”

A moment later, I was all alone with my thoughts. Breathing deeply, I told myself that Greyson was right. I needed to trust Xavier to complete this task. He was invested in this, in my well-being, so I was certain that he’d do his best to help me out.

I’d told myself that I would take charge today, yeah, but right now it looked like the smartest course of action would be to wait for Xavier’s updates. I was feeling anxious about hovering here while Xavier was out acting like a superhero, but I knew it was for the best.

Besides, trusting Xavier to find more information didn’t mean that I was a useless hairball who wasn’t doing anything. My mates and I were a team, and believing in your team was the number one rule of, well, being a team.

*Cali, chill out, dude*, I told myself*. Just relax!*

Easier said than done.

Shaking my head at myself, I walked out of the study just as Lola barreled down the stairs. She gasped when she saw me. “Tell me there’s still mocha left!”

“I think so. Although some of it might be burnt,” I said.

“I don’t care,” Lola said with a dark expression that left no room for argument. “I need my sugary shot of caffeine.”

“After you get your caffeine,” I said, “do you think you can help me with a mission?”

Lola’s eyes widened. “A secret mission?”

“Is there any other kind?” I said seriously.

“Stay here, I’ll be right back!” Lola said in a low voice before hurrying into the kitchen to grab a mug.

I hovered by the doorway, watching as Greyson helped his mother try to salvage half the pot of mocha. He looked so handsome and authoritative that I felt my cheeks flush.

“No, Torin,” he was telling the Fae. “I need you to take a break right now.”

Mrs. Smith shooed Torin away, and I felt pretty bad for him. But then Greyson allowed Torin to look inside the pot, and things got better. My mate definitely seemed pretty occupied with things here. And Xavier was off on his errand…

*Which means I actually have a perfect window of time to go grab presents for them!* I thought triumphantly.

“Okay, I’m ready.” Lola walked over to me a moment later, looking all conspiratorial.

I grabbed her arm and pulled her into the hallway.

“What did you get Jay for Christmas?” I asked in a whisper.

Lola frowned. “*That’s* our secret mission? I hoped we were going to, like… fight vampires or something.”

“Nope. I have to get my mates’ Secret Santa gifts.”

“I thought we’d already talked about this!”

“I forgot, okay?” I said. “And I feel horrible about it already. Everything’s stressful for me right now, so time is of the essence! What did you get Jay?”

Lola sighed. “I got him the heart mugs that link together—remember?”

Ugh, that was good. “That’s really fucking cute.”

Lola grinned. “I know.”

“But I can’t get two versions of linking heart mugs for Xavier and Greyson, Lola,” I declared. “That doesn’t work for me.”

“Yeah, that would be awkward.” She chugged the mocha, hissing as she burned her tongue. “Let’s just go to the mall and see what they have. I’m sure we can find something.”

“We’d better,” I said. “Because otherwise, this is going to be a disaster.”

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A few hours later, I had found zero presents. And I had nobody to blame but myself, which was the worst part.

“Cali,” Lola said patiently. “You need to stop freaking out like this—I really don’t like it, and that says a lot, considering I’m supposed to be the dramatic one.”

“Everything’s so unoriginal,” I said mournfully, ignoring her comment. “Back massagers and shirts and scarves—those are not romantic, Lola! Not like your heart cups!”

What made the situation even more frustrating was that I knew that both my mates had rigged the Secret Santa to have me, which meant they both had some kind of plan to get me a gift. A thoughtful, super sweet, nice gift that I couldn’t reciprocate, because I was a monster!

“You could get them wallets—”

“I can’t get them fucking wallets, Lola,” I said in a low, strangled voice. “They love me, and I get them wallets? Oh my god!”

Rolling her eyes, Lola picked up two shirts that said “Thing 1” and “Thing 2.”

“What about these? Like, ‘Mate one’ and ‘Mate two’?”

“They’d kill each other, Lola,” I said wryly. “Besides, it doesn’t work that way.”

“Good point,” Lola said, giggling.

She was the least helpful best friend in the entirety of the universe. I shouldn’t have brought her with me. It was already mid-afternoon, and I had nothing.

*Fuck, what if I don’t find anything at all? What if I go home empty-handed? This is a nightmare! Why the hell am I so bad at this?*

I suddenly recalled that I’d gotten my parents “IOU coupon books” when I was a little girl. With things like “breakfast in bed” and “foot massage,” which they’d pretended to cash in for a couple weeks after Christmas, but they’d really never made me do all the tasks I’d promised. Could I do an IOU gift for Xavier and Greyson?

*No, focus Cali!* I told myself. *That only works when you’re nine!*

I was no longer a nine-year-old. I was an adult and a horrible-at-gift-giving girlfriend. I’d completely forgotten to buy presents, and now the Secret Santa event had arrived, and I was out of ideas. I was a useless bag of flesh and was about to start melting from embarrassment and shame and—

“Oh my god, I can just hear you spiraling—it’s all over your face.” Lola huffed, resting her hands on my arms. Her tone was strict. “We’ve got this. I promise you’ll find gifts.”

“I’m a failure,” I said, sniffling.

Lola shook her head, squeezing my shoulders reassuringly. “None of that! You’ve been through so much lately. The boys would understand if you couldn’t find them a gift on time. Real Christmas isn’t for a few days, anyway, right?”

“But I want to get them something now,” I mumbled. “I don’t want to ruin the game, you know? Everyone seems to really need it after all the Seluna bullshit.”

Lola sighed, moving her arm over my shoulders and nudging me to move with her. “Let’s walk through the mall some more. We haven’t been to the other side yet.”

With a sigh of my own, I followed along. I was still pouting, looking around, feeling helpless, when—

*Oh my god!*

My eyes widened when I spotted a store window a few feet away.

“Wait a second!” I ran over, dragging Lola with me. “This is perfect!”

# Episode 2963

**Greyson**

I held the big vat my mother had used to cook the mocha. Meanwhile, she raved and ranted about the unfairness of it all.

“Look at it!” she bemoaned. “All that delicious chocolate at the bottom—it’s burnt! *Wasted!* This is what happens when I take my eyes off it for a second.”

I liked mocha as much as the next person, but I wasn’t about to wear black to mourn its death. Sabine was usually so mellow that it was kind of a shock to see her in such a state. I made sure to accept the gravity of the situation, though—the way she saw it, at least.

Forcing my face into a neutral, semi-sad expression, I said, “It’s too bad.”

Sabine started again just as I caught sight of Xavier from the corner of my eye. He’d showered and gotten dressed and seemed to be digging around for his car keys.

“—from the start!” Sabine was saying. “Because if I don’t, we won’t have—”

“Could you give me a minute?” I asked, gently interrupting her. “I need to check in with Xavier about something before he goes.”

Sabine blinked up at me as if some sort of realization had settled in. “Of course, go ahead. I honestly don’t need any more help here.”

“Okay. Just let me know if I can do anything else.” I leaned in and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek before hurrying after Xavier.

I caught him outside just as he was ready to get into his car. “Are you sure you’ll be fine dealing with this Marvin guy alone?”

Xavier glared. “Why won’t you just trust me on this?”

A fair question since I’d told Cali to trust him.

“I’m just saying that if he has a connection to whoever took the ashes, things could get dicey.”

Xavier scowled. “I don’t need a babysitter, Greyson.”

Praying for patience, I put my hand on Xavier’s shoulder. In an even, serious tone, I said, “I know you can handle this, and I know how much you care about Cali. I trust both your strength and your feelings. But I’m just telling you that if you want backup, I’m here for you. That’s it.”

Xavier blinked at me like a goldfish that had gotten lost in its bowl. I knew it was still a new-ish thing for him and me to be in sync about things, but it was obviously the best for everyone. For the pack, and for Cali too. We were just more effective when we worked together, and I didn’t want Xavier to forget that.

Gruffly, he finally said, “I understand what you mean now. But yeah, I got this. Thanks, though… I guess?”

I snorted, letting him go. “Don’t forget to check in.”

Xavier rolled his eyes as he climbed into the car. “Holy shit, how are you this annoying?”

“Right back atcha,” I said, watching as he pulled out of the driveway and sped off like a grumpy teenager.

I had to laugh at his final irritated reaction. Things between us would never completely change, but I wasn’t sure if I wanted them to. I couldn’t imagine myself being BFFs with Xavier. Bickering was good for the soul, in my book. Plus, I was his older brother and the Alpha, not his buddy.

Nevertheless, either way, making this kind of effort was important. The Alpha in me knew that being on good terms with Xavier was the right thing to do for pack unity. And if it helped me get a little closer to my little brother, then that wouldn’t be a bad side effect.

So far, it had only been entertaining.

With a smirk, I went back into the house. Looking around the living room where everybody was doing one thing or another, I realized Cali had vanished.

“Hey, Rishika,” I called. “Did you see where Cali went?”

“She told Orla she and Lola were going to the mall,” Rishika replied seriously. She always knew everything about everyone, and I appreciated that.

What I didn’t appreciate was my mate walking out that door without even saying goodbye. Didn’t I deserve a goodbye? Also, hadn’t they just been at the mall with Elle? How frequently did girls need to go to malls?

I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d gone to the mall. Too many people.

Frowning, I shot Cali a quick text.

*All good?*

She answered right away*. Just busy, see you soon xoxo*

Oh, wow. That was a top-notch brush-off. I knew it when I saw it—I’d used that kind of weapon with women for years on end before committing to Cali. I didn’t even get an emoji or an exclamation point from my mate, though, so that was a little suspicious. Normally she’d send me at least five heart emojis. What on earth was she up to? It couldn’t be anything dangerous—there was nothing dangerous left for her to do right now.

At least Cali was with Lola. Which I realized was probably more problematic than not, because Lola was usually unhinged, but at least Cali wasn’t alone. And she’d told her mom that she was at the mall, so there was no reason for her to lie.

I took a second to judge myself for being so paranoid and then decided to chill. There was no reason to worry about it. I was so used to worrying about shit, though. Like, now that Cali wasn’t here and Xavier was off on Seluna ashes duty, what was I supposed to do?

Perhaps I should try to figure out this Dick Wigbert issue. I had promised Big Mac, and she was constantly ready to go on a murder spree. I respected that, but it could cause problems. I decided to go look for her—she was probably lurking by her witchcraft station in the garage, away from everybody and their loud Christmas joy. That seemed about right.

Before I could seek out the witch, though, I saw Elle barreling down the stairs, already half shifted.

“Whoa there, Little Red,” I said, blocking her path. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Going for a run!” she announced.

I crossed my arms over my chest, shaking my head. “Not alone, you’re not.”

Elle grabbed my hand and squeezed. “Come with me! Like last night.”

Sticking around the house to do Wigbert-related work no longer seemed like a good idea—not with the way Elle was looking up at me, jumping from foot to foot. She seemed antsy. As an ex-feral animal, she probably wasn’t used to lying around in bed all day. She had a lot of energy to burn.

“Fine. A quick run won’t hurt,” I told her, and she nodded decisively. And it had been a good way to release some tension last night.

I walked through the house with her and paused by the closet at the front door. I took off my shoes and put them inside, then my shirt. No use ruining another shirt. Elle watched me carefully and mimicked my every move.

But then she seemed to get impatient and literally stripped completely. She stared at me, looking super proud of herself, puffing up her chest. I had to laugh at her expression, and she just smiled at me, even when I shook my head. It made sense—if werewolves didn’t care about modesty, then an actual ex-wolf would give even less of a damn.

Just as I finished taking off my jeans, Elle said, “Run!”

And then she’d already shifted and taken off.

“Hey, wait!” I called after her as her wolf howled. It sounded like a laugh. I snorted and shifted myself, racing after her.

I caught up with her easily, and it was actually really nice. It cleared my mind a bit. I used to run for fun all the time. But when LIPS was here, they’d ruined that. Doing this with Elle right now, though, reminded me how much I’d missed it.

It was almost like Elle being around was a blessing in disguise—a feral girl who helped me recall the simple things I loved about being a werewolf. I was grateful for that. She was a good kid.

*Race to the river?* Elle mind linked me.

*Why not?* I replied.

The second I sped up, she did too. I heard her laughter through her mind link, and the sense of freedom she felt was infectious. I leapt over a log instead of going around, every muscle in my body feeling taut and strong as I looked down at the ground. The feeling of jumping so high filled me with elation and adrenaline.

Elle yipped in excitement, charging forward—it was very clear she knew this forest like the back of her paw, and I was actually enjoying exploring it with her after everything with LIPS. It was new, somehow, because Elle was carefree in a way I had never been.

This moment tapped into what I’d yearned for when I was younger—just to race through the forest with my pack mates for no reason but the joy of it. I hadn’t even had a real pack for years, but everything was different now. I was grateful to Elle for reminding me, and honestly, there was a part of me that was glad to have her around.

*Greyson!* she mind linked, laughing again. *Catch me!*

My wolf snorted, about to run faster when suddenly a strange scent crossed our path. I slowed down, trying identify it, but Elle raced forward. A moment later, as I sniffed the air, I heard her splash into the river. And then her delighted voice was in my head again.

*You lost!*

I made sure to keep my tone even but firm. *Elle, come back. There’s something strange in the forest. I can smell it.*

*Me too.*

She ran straight back, thankfully following direction. She lifted her nose, scenting the air. I went rigid when the realization settled in.

*It’s a vampire*, I mind linked.

Elle shook her head. *No, a witch!*

# Episode 2964

I was feeling pretty good about the gifts I’d picked up for the Secret Santa exchange. I’d ordered presents for both Greyson and Xavier for actual Christmas day, but they hadn’t been delivered yet, so I’d have to keep an eye out for them. The last thing I needed was my mates accidentally stumbling upon my presents after the delivery guy dumped them on the front porch.

“You seem relieved to be done with this,” Lola said, nudging me with a smirk.

“I’ll say,” I mumbled, huffing. “I feel like I need to reward both of us for surviving this chaotic afternoon. Let’s go get a drink from the food court. Maybe some Cinnabons? My treat.”

Lola’s face brightened. “Aww, you know Cinnabon is the way to my heart—thanks, girl.”

I linked my arm through Lola’s, grinning. The mall was super crowded with a lot of last-minute Christmas shoppers—I was judging all of them, and myself as well—but I didn’t even mind the huge line to get our treats. I had found the perfect Secret Santa gifts, and all was right in the world.

“I can’t believe we found a place to sit,” Lola said when we spotted a small table at the edge of the food court. “The mall gods have blessed us.”

As she rambled on about the crowd and started eating her Cinnabon, I placed the bag filled with my precious gifts on the ground right next to my feet. I didn’t want it on the tiny table, in case some of the sticky cinnamon roll frosting dripped. Probably from Lola’s side. She looked so cute and perky as she devoured the thing that nobody would *ever* have guessed that she was half vampire, half werewolf.

“This brings back memories,” I said as we ate. “Remember when we’d go shopping together just to get away from campus? That remains the most scandalous thing I’ve ever done.”

Lola snorted. “Skipping class is like a rite of passage, Cali, you little goody-two-shoes. Besides, that feels like years ago.”

“Even though it’s just been a semester,” I noted. “If you’d told me back then that I’d end up with not one, but *two* boyfriends, I would’ve laughed in your face.”

Lola drank a huge sip of her vanilla milkshake. “What about all the near-death experiences and the magic?”

I scoffed. “Equally as unbelievable as me having two boyfriends.”

Lola snickered. “I kinda miss college sometimes, though.”

“Me too,” I said. “How did you leave things with your dads?”

“We’re good,” Lola replied. “I do want to finish school eventually. It’s just that the supernatural world has been so busy lately—it’s not like either of us could focus.”

I winced in agreement.

“Anyway,” Lola continued, “my dads are trying to be understanding. Oh, and I promised I’d do Christmas stuff with them in the city! I’m supposed to have lunch with them tomorrow, actually. Do you want to come?”

“I’m not sure if I’m in the most sociable mood right now, what with the ashes missing, the Samaras lurking, and LIPS being LIPS,” I said wryly. “But I’ll let you know, thank you.”

“I totally get it,” Lola said seriously. “I don’t want to stress you out even more.”

As Lola and I finished up our cinnamon rolls and cleaned our hands with wet wipes—literally the only way to get the frosting residue off—I sighed. “I just feel like I need a break, you know? I’m really hoping that maybe the LIPS and Samara situations won’t continue to be so fraught. It’s very—”

“Samara situation?” a familiar harsh voice said from behind me. “What do you mean by that?”

*Seriously?* First Aysel, now Ava? What was it with the mall and me stumbling upon my sort-of sworn rivals?

When I twisted to face her, Ava was standing there with her arms crossed, shopping bags clutched in her hand. Perrie stood behind her, arms also crossed in an almost identical pose. It was like I’d entered a parallel universe where *Mean Girls* was the only movie in existence.

“First of all, eavesdropping is rude,” I said. “Second, I was just saying that the Iudicium was really stressful, and I’m glad it’s over for now.”

Ava gave me a mocking smile. “I’m so happy that the struggles of my pack are something you can so easily dismiss and ignore.”

“That’s not what I meant!” I said defensively. “I just—”

“You know, you should mind your own business and keep to your own pack,” Ava said, marching closer to me, Perrie in tow. “You shouldn’t talk about things you don’t understand. You’re not even a werewolf.”

I gave her a stern look. “I’m obviously not a werewolf, but I’ve done everything I can to help the Samaras come back stronger, like go to the Iudicium.”

*And it’s not like it’s been easy for me to watch Xavier pretending to be your mate to hold the peace together.*

Ava’s eyes flashed. She leaned onto the table, her voice lowering. “Yes, didn’t you have fun at it? It was great being there with my mate and you with yours, wasn’t it? Greyson, I mean.”

*Why, you annoying little—*

I stopped myself from finishing that sentence. Even in my head. I wanted to argue with Ava, get into a full-blown fight because why not, but I didn’t want to make a mess for Xavier. Not ever, but especially not after last night. Besides, it wasn’t like whatever I told Ava would help with anything. We were never going to get along, and that was that.

*Look at her, though… There’s something going on with her.*

From this close up, I could see that there were bags under her pale blue eyes. And even though she remained disgustingly gorgeous, she also looked absolutely exhausted. Was this about Knox? Had he been acting out and making things difficult for everybody in the Samara pack? For those who hadn’t voted for Knox—much like Ava—there had to be a lot of uncertainty right now.

*Or is Ava upset because of Xavier? Because that would definitely make sense.*

I decided that I wasn’t going to contemplate this further. Nope.

“We should just go,” Perrie said, pulling on Ava’s arm. “They’re not worth it.”

“I could say the same about you,” Lola huffed at Perrie, standing up. She looked over at me and picked up her bags. “We shall be leaving first!”

Perrie glared at Lola but said nothing. Ava rolled her eyes and made a move to leave, but Lola and I were going in the same direction, so we all ran into each other like two different hives of opposing bees. Our bags dropped to the floor in a heap, and I automatically blurted out, “Shit, sorry!”

Damn my parents for giving me such excellent manners. This was Ava’s fault, clearly. All of it.

“Watch where you’re going,” Perrie snapped at me.

Lola glared at her. “You’d better watch your tone, sweetheart, or else—”

“Lola,” I said firmly. “No.”

Ava rolled her eyes, picking up her bags. “It’s fine, let’s just go.”

I watched the two of them saunter off.

Lola shook her head, huffing. “Well, that was interesting.”

I frowned as I watched Ava retreat. I was obviously not a fan of her as a person, but I couldn’t help but think about the state of the Samara pack under Knox. What kind of leader was he really turning out to be? Ava’s and Perrie’s demeanors didn’t indicate anything good.

*Should I say something to Xavier about seeing Ava here and my speculations about what’s going on at the Samara pack with Knox? Is everyone as irritable as Ava? Perrie certainly was.*

This wasn’t just harmless drama—this was about figuring out if Knox could pose any kind of threat to the Redwoods. But Knox’s attitude seemed like something Xavier might already know about, and I didn’t want to push him into getting even more involved with Ava’s life.

The night before, he’d told me that we were more solid than ever, and I didn’t want him to feel like I was doubting him by mentioning her and the fact that she’d just reminded me they were still mates.

*Perhaps it wouldn’t hurt to mention the Samara situation and get some updates, though*, I internally conceded. *There.*

“You’ve been silent for a whole minute,” Lola told me, her eyes squinted suspiciously. “What kind of evil plan are you cooking up?”

I scoffed. “Hardly evil. I’m afraid Ava will live to see another day.”

Lola pouted. “Bummer.”

I let out a wry laugh at my friend’s disappointment, nudging her. “Let’s just head back. I think I’m done with the mall for today.”

“Same—you got me the best present of all, anyway,” Lola said breezily.

I raised an eyebrow. “Which was?”

“Cinnabons, baby!”

I snorted at her enthusiasm.

“Hey, don’t forget your shopping bag,” she said. “We went to a lot of trouble to find those gifts.”

“Right!” I rushed to pick up the bag…

And frowned. Why did it look different? Smaller than before?

*What the hell?*

I untied the red ribbon to see inside, and my heart dropped.

“Is everything okay?” Lola asked.

“No!” I said in a strangled voice. “This isn’t my bag!”

# Episode 2965

**Greyson**

I lifted my nose to scent the air again and realized that Elle was right. The vampire smell lingered, but there was also a distinct note of something else in the air. Witchcraft. If I really thought about it, Big Mac and Kira did have a distinct scent to them the way werewolves did—I was just so used to it at this point, and Elle wasn’t. This smell was like that, but it wasn’t either of them—that I knew.

A vampire *and* a witch, just fucking hanging around in the woods around the pack’s property. Great. How the hell was that even possible?

Could it be that they were working together? Roaming about with nefarious intentions? Indebted? I doubted they’d come over for a fucking picnic date or something. This couldn’t be a coincidence—the vampire and the witch had to be connected.

But how come the patrols hadn’t caught their scent? Had they only just arrived? The trail was still pretty fresh, so perhaps that was why—maybe the vampire and the witch had waited for a gap between patrols to do… whatever the fuck it was they wanted to do in my territory.

I wasn’t going to let this fly.

If this whole thing did have anything to do with the missing ashes, I needed to follow the trail. I couldn’t miss a chance to find the person—or the fucking vampire and witch—who could be involved in that. I needed those ashes to help Cali.

*We’re following the scent*, I told Elle. *Stick to my side and stay quiet. We don’t want to reveal our presence if we don’t have to.*

Elle nodded without a sound, as if the gravity of the situation had hit her. It was good to see her listen to direction. She was a step behind me as I followed the scent.

It led toward Samara land.

*Fuck…*

So this was inconvenient. I was at least halfway certain that we’d have a problem with the Samaras if Elle and I were caught as wolves on their land. I knew Knox wouldn’t be hospitable about it—he was a dick that way.

But the alternative was letting the vampire and the witch walk away, and that didn’t sit well with me. Cali’s haunted expression flashed through my mind, and my decision was made. These assholes needed to be caught, and there was a huge chance that their presence was related to Seluna. The demon’s ashes needed to be retrieved in order for my mate to be free.

This was a risk I was willing to take.

*We’re going into hostile territory*, I told Elle. *I need you to focus and stay by my side at all times. No noise. Okay?*

She nodded seriously. Together, we moved through the forest, staying on alert. For the next ten minutes, I followed the vampire/witch scent closely, and it felt like I was getting nearer by the second. Suddenly, though, I lost the scent.

Scowling, I backtracked, still making sure that Elle was by my side. Once I found the end of the trail again, I picked up the scent once more.

And then I lost it again.

What the *fuck*?

*Disappeared*, Elle told me. *There is* *no more trail.*

I nodded. I realized that this probably meant that the witch had blipped them or something of the sort. And if that were the case, the vampire and the witch were definitely working together. This was pretty fucking bad news. I needed to get back to the pack house pronto. I had a sudden fierce need to call Cali and check in on her.

*Let’s go home*, I told Elle. *Quickly and quietly.*

I raced back toward Redwood territory with Elle right next to me. I was proud of her for being disciplined, but this time, our run through the woods didn’t include any of the joy I’d felt earlier. It was tainted by yet another fucking problem, and as was the case with most of our problems, it could prove fatal.

When we got to the pack house, I refocused and shifted back to human. Elle followed my lead, not uttering a word. She just kept staring at me, and I realized that she could likely sense my unease. This was both good and bad, but I wasn’t about to contemplate it at the moment.

I grabbed my pants from the front closet and pulled them on, then picked up the rest of my clothes. Elle didn’t bother to get dressed—she just scooped up her clothes and carried them, following me into the house.

I’d normally have tried to explain to her that she should at least put on her shirt, but I was in a bit of a hurry. If Elle wanted to roam around naked, who was I to suppress her natural inclinations when I had much deadlier things to worry about?

“Big Mac, I need to speak with you!” I called, climbing up the stairs. “Kira, you too!”

Both witches came out of their rooms a moment later. Big Mac narrowed her eyes at me. “What is it this time?”

Meanwhile, Marta and Dani, followed by Lilac, Charlie, and Violet, stuck their heads out of their rooms, looking curious. This suited me just fine.

“Good, you’re all here,” I said. “The more witches we have, the better.”

“What’s going on?” Kira asked me, frowning.

“A witch and a vampire were lurking around our territory, very close to the house. Their presence here could have something to do with Seluna’s ashes,” I said, cutting straight to the chase. “Elle and I just followed their scent, but they must have blipped somewhere. Is it possible to track them?”

Everybody started to mutter.

Big Mac’s expression turned grim. “How long ago did they blip?”

“Not sure. The scent of the witch felt kind of fresh, but that was an hour ago at least,” I said.

Big Mac exchanged a look with Kira before she shook her head at me. “Too much time has passed. Any residual magic that’s left might not be strong enough to let me track them.”

“What if we do the spell together?” Kira asked.

“We can try, but I don’t know if it’ll work,” Big Mac replied, huffing.

“Can you please just try?” I asked.

“I can help too,” Dani blurted. Everybody turned to look at her. Her cheeks were flushed as she added, “I feel like my magnification powers could give the spell a boost.”

Big Mac raised an eyebrow. “What about Okorie?”

“I don’t think he’ll mind me using my powers like this, not with the progress I’ve been making,” Dani said. “Plus, if this is about the ashes, then I want to do whatever I can to help you find the people who took them.”

I nodded, looking around at the witches. “Let’s go.”

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I led everybody into the forest, with Charlie tagging along. He was mumbling something along the lines of, “It can’t hurt to have a hunter around if there’s a vampire out there ready to attack you guys.”

I thought there were already too many people going, but I wasn’t about to stop Charlie from trying to help. He meant well. Nevertheless, this whole thing felt a little too wholesome for my liking—it was like I was leading a field trip out into the forest.

Elle still hadn’t even gotten dressed.

“Why don’t you shift?” I asked her.

She stared up at me. “Really? I am allowed?”

I nodded, and she immediately did. It didn’t hurt to have someone in wolf form at the ready anyway, just in case of an attack. We had to be ready for anything. Finding these supernaturals was crucial. A witch and a vampire lurking this close to my pack house without anyone noticing could be considered an *emergency*, actually.

When we finally reached the spot where the scent trail ended, I turned to the witches.

“Be careful,” I told Big Mac, Kira, and Dani. “We’re not on Redwood land anymore.”

“Let’s do this,” Kira told Big Mac. Together, they spread out a map of the area. Then they joined hands with Dani and started muttering all together, their voices very low. Eerie. I noticed Elle’s cautious expression as she watched them.

And then it was over.

Big Mac opened her eyes and shook her head. “We’ve got nothing.”

This was bad.

“Can you try it again?” I asked.

They tried it. Nothing again.

“The magic is too faint for us to be able to track exactly where these people went,” Big Mac told me.

“It’s true. Even with Dani’s magic, there’s just not enough of a trace,” Kira added. “Or someone did a very good job covering their tracks.”

This was really, *really* fucking bad.

Shaking my head, I said, “Thank you all for trying. Let’s just head back into Redwood territory before the Samaras realize we’re here.”

Before anyone could move, though, Elle started to growl into the forest.

I smelled them before I saw them.

“Well, well, well.” Sneering, Blaine stepped out from behind a tree, Tanner following. “Why are you Redwoods trespassing on Samara land?”

# Episode 2966

“Shit!” I looked around the crowd. Ava had vanished. “We have to catch up with her! She must’ve taken my bag by mistake!”

“Or maybe she did it on purpose,” Lola said with a dark expression.

“What?” I shook my head. “Why would you say that?”

“Because she was in a bad mood earlier when she talked to you. Plus, she is literally the worst and enjoys your suffering,” Lola declared.

I could feel a headache gathering at my temples. This was clearly a side effect of Lola’s nonsense starting to make sense.

“She’s a lot of things, but I’m not sure about a gift stealer,” I said. “And no matter what actually happened, we have to find her!” I started in the direction that Ava and Perrie had walked off in, Lola a couple of steps behind me.

“Do you see them?” I asked.

“No, but I can smell them,” Lola said, looking very pleased with herself.

“Oh, thank goodness,” I breathed, holding my best friend’s hand tightly as she wove through the crowd. I was so lucky to have her here with me.

“Aha!” Lola exclaimed, pausing by a bookstore. “There you are, you—wait, no.” She frowned, sniffing the air again as she backtracked. “That’s wrong, they didn’t go in here.” Lola led me toward the exit, then, grumbling things like, “Of course Ava didn’t go to a bookstore!”

Lola was a drama queen, but the truth was that her general outrage toward the woman who wanted to take my man soothed me. It was the little things that solidified a friendship, you know? My warm fuzzy feelings didn’t last, though.

“This door goes to the parking lot,” I said, looking around wildly. “Is there a chance they’ve left the mall all together?”

My fears were confirmed when Lola stopped at an empty parking space. She scowled. “Sorry, babe. Those horrible werewolf-shaped hyenas drove off.”

“We have to go find them,” I said, grabbing Lola by the arm. “I need those presents, Lola! I need them—they’re so precious to me!”

Lola raised her eyebrows. “Okay, Gollum’s bride, but how about we go back to the store and buy more presents?”

“Those were the last ones,” I said anxiously. “Remember? The sales associate said I was lucky to come in when I did!”

Lola cringed. “Right. This is very bad, then.”

“Don’t say that!” I exclaimed. “We don’t even know where they went, what direction or—”

“Honestly, they probably just went home,” Lola said. “We could try going by the Samara camp before we go back to the pack house. What do you think?”

I paused. Then I looked up at Lola, holding her hands in both of mine. My voice was low and reverent. “I think you’re a beautiful genius. I’d be lost without you.”

Lola simpered. “That’s so sweet of you to say. Am I allowed to kill Ava now?”

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“You need to stop joking about killing Ava or putting her on a deserted island or dropping her into a cornfield without a phone,” I said, looking out the car window as Lola drove. “It’s no longer funny, Lola.”

“I think it’s perfectly hilarious, and Artemis would agree with me,” she said seriously. “Also, it’s your fault I’m feeling so aggressive—you’ve fed me too much sugar today.”

I scoffed, she rolled her eyes, and then I said, “I think we should keep going north—I kind of know where the Samara camp is.” I paused. “Though I’ve always used the woods to get to Knox’s Airstream, not the main road.”

Lola snorted. “No worries. If we can get close enough, then I’ll be able to follow their scent. That would be much more helpful than us ‘going north.’ Where even is north?”

“I have no idea,” I conceded.

“Then why did you say it?” Lola asked, laughing.

“It just sounds like it’s right, I don’t know! Also I’m nervous that Ava has the bag and maybe looked in it,” I blurted out.

Lola raised an eyebrow. “So you agree with me, then?”

“What if she threw it away, Lola?” I asked, vibrating in my seat. “Or did something to my presents? She must have opened the bag, right?”

“Of course she opened it,” Lola deadpanned. “She’s burning everything as we speak, dancing evilly around the fire. Naked.”

“*Lola*.”

“Just kidding!”

I groaned. “This is a nightmare.”

Lola sighed deeply, and I did the same. I’d been so happy earlier, thinking that my gift-giving worries were over. Now they were back and even worse somehow, because they involved Ava. I didn’t want to have to deal with her right now.

“Let’s leave the car here,” I instructed Lola when I spotted a familiar sign on the road.

We parked and started making our way through the woods to the campsite, Lola in the front, finding the scent, me a couple of steps back, holding Ava’s bag. I made sure to shut up just so Lola could focus. I was relieved when I saw a familiar clearing.

“I think we’re going in the right direction,” I said. “I feel like Knox had his Airstream parked near that stream a few days ago.”

Lola nodded, sniffing the air. “I smell wolves. I don’t recognize their scent, but that’s a good thing.”

“It is?”

“Of course,” Lola said with authority. “It means that they’re definitely not Redwoods. So they’re probably Samaras, you know, since we’re on Samara land.”

I blinked. “Since when did you get so good at tracking?”

Lola shrugged. “Sometimes, when I’m not hypnotized by his rugged good looks, I listen when Jay speaks.”

For the next few minutes, I followed my friend through the forest, until Lola paused. She wrinkled her nose as she sniffed again.

“What’s the matter?” I asked anxiously.

“This must be a mistake, or an old scent,” Lola said. “I could’ve sworn I smelled Greyson for a second.”

I frowned. “Are you sure?”

“Very.” Lola nodded. “He has a distinct scent for an Alpha. Very pleasant, actually—you should be proud.”

“But what would Greyson be doing here?”

Lola hummed thoughtfully. “Maybe it’s just residual, from when he came to the Iudicium…”

She didn’t sound entirely convinced, and that wasn’t good. I had no idea what to do with it, though, so I shoved it to the back of my mind. Holding my tongue and my anxiety, I followed Lola for the next few minutes, until we *finally* arrived at the camp. I saw that airhead Knox’s Airstream, and even spotted a couple of Samaras I recognized from the Alpha vote.

“We’re in the right place,” I whispered to Lola.

“Where’s Ava?” she whispered back.

“Hey! What are you two doing here?” said one of the older werewolves, stepping forward. He didn’t look aggressive, but he didn’t look happy to see us either. He scowled at Lola, actually. “You smell weird for a wolf. What are you?”

I could just *feel* Lola bristle, so I instantly stepped in. “We were wondering if Ava is here?”

“Why do you want to know?” the man asked.

“Ava and I are… acquaintances,” I managed. I wasn’t about to claim friendship. Fuck no. Besides, there was no way Ava would back that up. “I was actually here the other night. Maybe we met?”

The werewolf squinted at me. “I’d remember meeting a human.”

I was about to say that I wasn’t human—thanks VERY MUCH—but it just wasn’t worth the verbal battle.

“I’m just here to exchange shopping bags,” I told him. “Ava and I mixed them up accidentally at the mall.” I held up the bag that Ava had left behind to prove it.

The wolf sniffed in the bag’s direction, then nodded.

“She’s over there,” he said, gesturing toward a tent at the far edge of the camp.

With Lola staying a few steps back—I knew I needed to do this alone—I walked toward the tent, just as Ava came out. She glared at me, obviously having smelled Lola and me before she’d seen us. “What the hell? You followed me? Can’t you just leave me alone?”

I almost laughed at that. Ava was the one who’d accosted me in the food court. But anyway. Right now, I needed to make sure my bag was safe.

“I’m here because our shopping bags got mixed up,” I told Ava in as neutral a tone as I could manage. “I just wanted to bring yours to you and get mine back.”

Ava gave me a suspicious look. Did she think I was fucking with her? Before my patience could run out, though, Ava thankfully turned into her tent and came back out with my shopping bag. It looked unmarred, and I let out a breath of relief.

“Here you go,” I said, holding out Ava’s bag so we could do the swap and I could finally be free.

But Ava wasn’t done. “These are really stupid gifts, by the way. Hope they’re not for your mates.”

Her derision made me want to fucking throttle her. I grabbed my bag from her hand and shoved hers into her arms. “That’s none of your business.”

Ava smiled, clearly pleased that she’d gotten under my skin.

*Oh my god, I want to smack her! She’s just—UGH!*

I wondered if Lola was right, and all the sugar we’d consumed today was making me aggressive. Or if it was just Ava being an asshole. Either way, I wanted nothing more than to get out of there. I was about to do just that when the door to the Airstream burst open.

“Oy!” Knox bellowed. “Samaras, gather around!”

Ava looked on alert. “What’s happening?”

“We’ve got Redwood trespassers!” Knox shouted. “It’s time to show them what we’re made of!”

# Episode 2967

**Xavier**

Portland was as busy as usual this time of day. Marvin’s office building seemed even shabbier than the last time I’d seen it. I hadn’t called ahead, because there was a chance that Marvin wouldn’t be too happy to see me. Barely anybody was ever happy to see me, honestly.

It wasn’t like I’d ever been paid to *get along* with people.

I’d been paid to get rid of them.

I’d been away from my old mercenary life for a bit now, and Marvin and I had been far from best friends in that world. I barely had *any* friends in that world, save for Gabriel. I walked into the building, all my senses on alert in case anyone decided they were up for a fight. I recalled the old stained carpet in the hallway, the eerie quiet of the scenery. The elevator had been “OUT OF ORDER” for what seemed like years now.

The last time I’d been in this building, Colton had had my back. I got a weird feeling of homesickness at the thought of my brother—I missed him, actually. The two of us were a spectacular team. We could enter any kind of hostile area and remain confident in our combined powers. Right now, though, without my brother, I felt exposed and vulnerable.

It was a feeling I despised.

The blinking eye of a security camera caught my attention. Interesting. That looked new. I hadn’t warned Marvin about my arrival, but technology had probably just ratted me out. Unfortunately, there was nothing I could do about that right now. I could only move forward.

I spotted the scarred old door at the end of the hallway and rang the buzzer. Marvin used to have a secretary who decided who to let in—time to see if she was still working for him and hadn’t gotten tired of his shit. A moment later, finally, I heard the buzzer and pushed the door open.

When I walked into the room, I didn’t recognize the middle-aged woman sitting behind the desk. Marvin’s old employee had apparently dumped him, and this was a new hire. She clearly had no idea who I was. That was good, in a way, because she wouldn’t warn Marvin that I was here.

“How can I help you?” the lady asked, looking up at me through her huge glasses.

“I’m one of Marvin’s old friends,” I told her. “Is he in?”

She frowned. “He’s busy.”

The corner of her mouth twitched, and I realized that she had to be lying. Had Marvin told her to keep me out of his office, then? That security camera must’ve given me away.

“I’ll just let myself in,” I told the woman curtly.

She gasped. “No, sir, you can’t—”

I pushed the door open despite the woman’s protests and came face-to-face with—

Nothing. The desk was empty. The room was quiet. When was the last time Marvin had been here?

I turned to face the lady, raising an eyebrow. “I thought you said he was busy—not that he’d left. Where is he?”

She opened her mouth to speak, but then I heard a thud and a muffled “Oof” from the bathroom.

“Ah,” I said under my breath. “There he is.”

I kicked the door open—just for flair, which I was pretty sure Colton would have approved of, the showy SOB—and saw Marvin. He was struggling to climb out of the window and onto the ledge.

“Leaving so soon?” I asked, grabbing him by the waistband. I yanked him backward and onto the floor. Marvin landed on his butt by my feet, hissing in pain at the impact.

I raised an eyebrow. “What’s up, Marv? Not happy to see an old friend?”

Marvin looked up at me, panting, dazed. He blinked slowly, as if to clear his vision. His expression became confused. “Oh hey! Xavier Evers, wow! I thought you were someone else.”

Was this guy for real?

“Come on in!” Marvin said, jumping up to his feet. He grabbed me by the shoulder and led me back into his office as if I hadn’t just caught him climbing out the window, half his ass hanging out of the room. The dude had always been kind of weird and eccentric, though, so I figured I’d let this one go.

“Can I offer you some coffee?” Marvin asked happily, gesturing at an old pot of coffee that looked like it’d been sitting in the machine for a few hours.

“I’m good,” I said.

“Good,” Marvin repeated, taking a seat behind his desk. He leaned back, the chair creaking as it strained. He stared at me, twiddling his thumbs before he said, “So, what can I do for you? Are you looking for another job? Dusting off the ol’ merc gear?”

I took in his casual expression and wondered who, exactly, he’d been running from earlier.

Before I could reply, he added, “Oh, there’s a rogue vampire that the vampire council of Las Vegas wants caught and brought back for judgement. Pays really good. You’d be great for that—only problem is you can’t kill the dude, it’s like a—”

“I’m not back in the game,” I said, cutting him off before he could offer more sordid details. “I just have a question for you.”

Marvin’s face lit up. He leaned forward, looking intrigued. “I’m always down to sell information—that’s the easiest thing ever. What are you looking for?”

“Cut the bullshit. You know what I’m looking for,” I told him firmly.

Marvin squinted. “I have no idea what—”

“I’m not playing, Marv,” I snapped. “I sent you that photo of the medal the other day, and you said that I should let it go. I know you’re not telling me everything about this.”

Marvin instantly flinched, fear flooding his expression before he forced it away. He shrugged. “I’ve already told you everything I know.”

I scoffed. “And why do I think that’s not true?”

Marvin shrugged again, standing up. “I can’t help it if you don’t believe me.” He walked over to the door and opened it for me. “I have another appointment now. You should get going.”

I stood up as well, walking over to slam the door shut again. The room’s walls vibrated, and Marvin squeaked the second I stepped forward.

Backed up against the wall now, he said, “What’s your problem, man? I thought we were old friends!”

I peered at him, grabbing him by the lapels of his shirt. “If this is about money, just tell me how much.”

“What do you mean?” Marvin stuttered.

“Didn’t you just say you’re always game to *sell* information?” I asked. “Come on—I know you can’t say no to money. Just tell me how much this is worth to you.”

Marvin shook his head nervously, his gaze moving around the room. His voice cracked when he told me, “It’s not about money.”

I sneered and named a price. Double what I’d usually have offered. Marvin’s eyes widened—greed was his biggest sin—but then he shook his head. Again.

“Seriously?” I scoffed. “Then how about…”

The second number had Marvin gasping out loud like a scandalized grandma. But then, as if it actually pained him, he gritted out, “No. I can’t. This is bigger than money.”

I was so shocked that I let the dickhead go. I’d never, not once in my life, known Marvin to turn down such a big sum. Hell, *anyone* would’ve been tempted by that much money. This had to be an even bigger deal than I’d thought.

This had to be dangerous enough to cost someone’s life, and it was connected to whoever had stolen Seluna’s ashes.

*Shit.*

If money wasn’t gonna work, I had no other choice than to be… honest. Not my preferred method of operation, but it would have to do.

“Listen, Marv,” I said, “I’m going to be real with you. This is my number one priority right now. I need to find out who owns that medal. It’s a matter of life or death.”

“But if I tell you,” Marvin whispered, shivering, “*they’ll know*.”

Marvin’s face had turned a pale shade of green that alarmed me. This was really fucked up—I’d never seen the dude so scared.

“If you tell me, then I will make sure they can’t hurt you,” I said.

Marvin winced. “You can’t. You don’t understand how powerful their reach is.”

I gave him a look. “Even powerful people can die. You know what I’m capable of, Marv.”

He gulped. Paused. Then he muttered, “Do you promise? If I tell you, then you’ll kill them?”

“I give you my word,” I said. I meant it, too. Whoever this was had it out for the love of my life. Cali was in danger, and I’d do anything in my power to protect her. It felt like I was just getting her back after the whole Ava mess—I wasn’t going to lose her, not for anything.

Killing whoever had done all this felt like the only natural outcome.

And if it helped me out with Marvin as well, who thankfully cared more about his life than any amount of money in the world, then all the better.

“So?” I asked impatiently. “Do we have a deal?”

Taking in a shaky breath, Marvin nodded. “We do. I’ll tell you who it is.”

# Episode 2968

**Greyson**

I groaned at the sight of Blaine and Tanner heading toward us.

*Oh, great. It’s Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dickhead.*

I wanted to reason with them, to explain that we weren’t trespassing on Samara land so much as following the threat that had presented itself on Redwood territory, but then I noticed Tanner already had his phone out, and his thumbs were moving over the touchscreen. Was he messaging someone?

I glanced back at the Redwood party. “Big Mac, Kira, and Dani, stand behind me, Elle, and Charlie. Now.”

“You might just wanna turn tail and run,” Blaine said. “Backup is already on the way.”

“We’ll stay,” I said.

He shrugged. “Guess you’re about to see how you like the newly reformed Samara pack, then.”

Fucking hell. This macho song and dance was too much, and I was an Alpha. We clearly weren’t here to attack them. Didn’t they have anything better to do than play fucking border patrol? Like maybe trying their hands at huffing silver?

Much as I wouldn’t have minded reminding these two of their place, starting a pack war wasn’t on my to-do list. Especially since I’d already gone to great lengths to make sure we avoided one. “Is there a problem here?”

“I’d say so. You’re trespassing on Samara land.”

“Actually, we were chasing trespassers on *our* land. They crossed over here, and we were in pursuit.” I glanced at the woods around us. We still had a chance to pick up the trespassers’ scents and follow the trail, but by now it would be almost impossible to catch them. They were fast; they had the element of surprise.

And these two Samara shitheads were getting in our way.

Blaine scoffed. “A likely story.”

The wind carried a bevy of scents our way. Several wolves were approaching—at least half a dozen.

Next to me, Elle growled in warning. Shit, our barely-tamed werewolf rampaging through the Samaras was the very last thing I needed right now.

I mind linked with her. *Don’t do anything unless I tell you to. Do you understand?*

Her shoulders curled forward, and her ears laid flat against her head. *Yes.*

Charlie leaned in. “This is getting dicey. What’s the plan here?”

“We’re going to have to try to reason with them.”

Charlie snorted. “I’ll be ready to shift, then.”

I couldn’t say I disagreed with his approach. At this point, fighting seemed a hell of a lot more likely than defusing the tension through discussion. Especially with Knox as the Alpha.

Knox stepped through the tree line, moving with an arrogant swagger that made me want to take his throat between my teeth. Ava followed close behind him with a few other wolves—only the loyal cronies, though. I had to assume this was a good sign. A sign that, even if the Samara pack was being led by a crazy asshole, his views might not necessarily be indicative of the pack as a whole.

Then the breath stuttered out of me as Cali and Lola emerged from the forest behind the Samara wolves.

I mind linked with Cali. *What the hell are you doing here? I thought you were at the mall?*

She stopped at my side, standing between Charlie and me. *We had a run-in with Ava and were at the campsite when Knox heard about the trespassers. Are you okay?*

*I’m fine.*

Lola joined up with Charlie and Elle, facing down Knox and his posse. I glanced over at Ava. What was she going to do here? I knew how she felt about the new Alpha. But if Knox gave the order, would she actually attack us?

“You need to respect the border of our land,” Knox said. “The Samaras are stronger than ever, and we *will* enforce our right to take care of trespassers.”

It took all of my self-control not to roll my eyes. Instead, I pulled in a deep, calming breath. “Like I already said, we’re only here because a witch and a vampire were trespassing on Redwood land and the scent led us here. As it’s a safety concern for both of our packs to have a rogue witch and vampire running loose, I assumed we were within our rights to pursue them. This is bigger than pack boundaries, Knox.”

For a split second, Knox looked taken aback, and I was stupid enough to hope that I was getting through to him. That maybe he was going to put aside his ego and make a meaningful contribution to the pack he was so gung-ho about leading.

But then Knox’s brow furrowed, and he stepped forward. His swagger was back. “You really think I’m gonna fall for that? The Redwoods are gonna learn to respect the Samara pack, and I’ll make sure the lesson sticks this time.”

The Samara wolves behind him—with the notable exception of Ava—started whooping in excitement like they were spectators at a boxing match.

*Fuck. I’m really gonna have to kill this asshat, aren’t I?*

“Go stand with Big Mac, Kira, and Dani,” I said to Cali, then I squared my shoulders and faced Knox down. If he wanted to fight, I’d have to make the choice of whether or not to beat that baby face of his into the ground. If he weren’t an Alpha, it wouldn’t even have been a question. He’d already have been bleeding on the ground.

But Knox *was* an Alpha, and I didn’t want to create any more problems with the Samara pack.

“We should take a step back,” I told him. “Lucian still wants us to have an alliance.”

“I’m sure he’ll understand.” Knox shrugged. “This is an issue of defending land. That’s a basic right of any werewolf, to defend their property.”

I almost rolled my eyes. The kid was talking like he was fighting off an invading horde, not a small group of peaceful neighboring pack members.

Knox stepped forward, getting right up in my face, which triggered Elle. She leapt forward with a snarl to put herself between us, and Knox jumped back, half shifting and lashing out at Elle with his claws.

Before his claws could make contact, I stepped between them and effortlessly shoved him back. The kid fell right on his ass, and the clearing went silent with shock.

Knox jumped up with a growl and pushed me back. He sort of just bounced off me, but his friends acted like he’d just sucker punched me.

“Show that Redwood Alpha who’s boss!” one of them cried.

“Get him, Knox!”

“There’s no room for Redwoods on our land!”

I held up my hands and even took a step back. It would have been the easiest thing in the world for me to smash that idiot into the ground, but we couldn’t feed his ego. We couldn’t have another pack war.

But it was too late.

Knox full-on shifted into his wolf.

Elle was still on edge beside me, practically thrumming with restrained aggression. She was going to go after Knox if I didn’t act fast, and if she and Knox got into it, that might be something we’d never be able to take back.

I shifted too, and mind linked with Knox. *This isn’t necessary. The Redwoods do respect the Samara pack’s land, but this was an immediate issue that could affect both our packs.*

Knox didn’t even respond. He couldn’t have cared less who was in danger—he couldn’t see around his own gigantic, bruised ego. He charged at me, and I jumped out of the way, luring him away from the witches and the other Redwood pack members.

I mind linked with Elle again as Knox went on the offensive. *Do* not *jump in. Stay there. Protect Cali.*

Maybe if I gave her a job, she’d be slightly less of a loose cannon.

Knox was strong and fast, but his attacks were clumsy and impulsive. I saw them coming from a mile away, so it was easy to dodge, or to parry his blows so that he slid off my back instead of biting my face. At the rate he was going, he was going to hurt himself before he actually landed a hit on me.

Unfortunately, Knox wasn’t my only problem. More Samara wolves were pouring into the clearing, drawn by the sounds of fighting. Since when did they all support him?

Knox charged at me with a feral snarl, and I batted him away so hard he slammed face-first into a tree trunk. He crumpled into a heap at the foot of the tree, dazed.

Finally, Ava stepped forward. “Enough!”

I looked around at the Samaras who had gathered to watch the fight. Those who hadn’t supported Knox as Alpha looked absolutely disgusted by his display.

This was my chance. It was time to put an end to this bullshit.

I shifted back to human and addressed the other werewolves. “As Alpha of the Redwood pack, I can promise that none of my wolves would ever come onto Samara land to do any of you harm. But if you do not want to ally with the Redwood pack, then speak up now!”

# Episode 2969

**Xavier**

Marvin was a cowardly little worm, but at least his morals were as flexible as ever. I waited for him to give me the name of the person who owned the medal. One second dragged into nearly ten, and all Marvin seemed to be doing was sweating through his shirt.

“Marvin,” I snapped. “The name. Now.”

He gulped. “You promise—”

“Fuck—yes! I promise I’ll kill the sons of bitches so they’ll never know you snitched on them. Now tell me the fucking name before I decide to get my intel somewhere else.” I raised my eyebrows in warning. “And let me tell you right now, you do not want to be the guy who sends me on another fucking errand. Got it?”

“I got it!” he cried. “I got it.” Sweat slipped down his face in thin streams. “The name… The name this is all tied to… It’s… It’s Duquette.”

The name pricked at my memory, and I stepped back.

Marvin hunched forward and let out a relieved breath. “Oh my god,” he whimpered. “What have I done?”

I ignored his sniveling. It was anyone’s best guess how this guy stayed in business. All this bitching and moaning couldn’t exactly inspire confidence. That name, though. It meant something. I knew it from somewhere… I just didn’t know exactly where I’d heard it before.

I racked my brain. *Duquette… Duquette…*

Then it hit me. I’d had a job back in my mercenary days involving a family with that last name. I’d gone to some shady estate where I’d been given the task of tracking the family down. I’d trailed them for days—a man, his wife, and their young child. And then, when I’d found them, I’d reported back to the man who’d hired me.

It was the easiest ten grand I’d ever made. A simple surveillance job—just like I liked it. All I’d needed to do was give up the family’s location and walk away with my cash.

What had happened after that, what the guy had done with the information I’d given him, I had no idea. It wasn’t my problem, or my responsibility, to care about that family once the job was done. And up until now, I hadn’t spared them a second thought.

*So what the hell does that have to do with what’s going on now?*

And why would a small family terrify Marvin so much? Even now, when I’d backed off from my threat, he still looked like he was going to be sick. Like he regretted telling me what he knew—even if it had saved his life.

For now, at least.

I thought back to that job, trying to find any other connections to the clusterfuck we were in now.

*Victor.*

He was the one who’d given me that job in the first place. And Victor was also the former associate whom I’d just been informed was dead.

*This does smell rotten. No wonder Marvin’s about to shit himself.*

“Help me put the pieces together. How is the Duquette job connected to this threat?”

Marvin shook his head. “I don’t know.”

I sighed. This lead wasn’t going to amount to much if I couldn’t figure out what the hell it meant. “Okay, what about Victor? Do you know who hired him to broker that job?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t say any more!” He held up his hands. “I’ve already said too much, and if I tell you any more, I’ll end up just like Victor.”

I grabbed him by the collar. “I can put you in the ground with Victor too,” I reminded him.

“Then do it.” He trembled, and I’d never seen anything so disgustingly pathetic in my entire life. “Better you than them.”

*Fuck.* This was a dead end. If threats and money couldn’t get Marvin to spill any more information, then there was no point being here. I shoved him back and stalked out of the shop.

On the drive back to the pack house, I kept mulling over the Duquette job. It couldn’t be a coincidence that the name was coming up now, when someone had stolen Seluna’s ashes and was putting my mate’s life at risk. The theft wasn’t some random act.

I just didn’t know why they’d done it.

There was one thing I knew for sure: if I’d had even an inkling when I’d accepted that job that it would come back to bite me in the ass years later and threaten not just me but my *mate*? I would have reconsidered the whole thing.

I blew out a breath and tightened my grip on the steering wheel. I was missing too many pieces to put this all together myself, but I’d done that job solo. Colton hadn’t been with me, so I couldn’t call him for help now.

But maybe that was a blessing in disguise. At least I could rest easy knowing that, whatever the hell was going on here, it wasn’t going to ripple out and hurt my brother too.

I thought back again to the specific tasks I’d been given when I was hired: track, survey, and report back. I hadn’t hurt anyone on that job—though I’d never been naïve enough to assume that nobody had ended up hurt as a result of my involvement.

Whoever had commissioned that surveillance job must have done something pretty fucking shady if I was being targeted for my involvement all these years later.

I grimaced a little as I remembered that I’d never even asked what would happen to the family once my part was done. I’d assumed the people who hired me wouldn’t just sit on the intel, but I also hadn’t given enough of a shit to even bother asking.

And it wasn’t like the people I’d worked with in my mercenary days were the salt of the earth, either. They were shady, twisted people doing shady, twisted shit. They’d probably wanted something from Mr. Duquette. Maybe they’d even tortured him to get what they wanted, and now Duquette was seeking revenge on the people involved.

*Starting with Victor…*

But hiring a witch and terrorizing us? Stealing Seluna’s ashes? That just seemed overly complicated when all it would really take to get revenge on me was a silver bullet and a window of opportunity. What kind of game was this person playing?

I tapped my fingers on the steering wheel. I still had more questions than answers, but this was a step in the right direction. I had a name. I had a past connection to that name. It wasn’t exactly a fucking treasure map, but it was a decent starting point. Maybe I could track down the Duquettes again and have a little chat with them.

So that was the plan, then. I’d find them again, and then I’d figure out what was actually going on here.

If they had the ashes, I was going to make them pay.

Then I remembered the kid. *I’ll have to be careful about that*. I wasn’t exactly a stand-up guy all the time, but I did have a personal rule not to hurt children or get them involved in my jobs. So I’d start with the father. Isolate and question him, then go from there.

I just wanted this to be over. I wanted to get back to Cali, to make sure she was okay. Being away from her, even for a day, was making me antsy. And I fucking hated that it was looking more and more like someone from my past was responsible for the missing ashes.

Because that meant, in a roundabout way, that all the pain Cali was being put through was my fault.

I could only imagine how Greyson was going to react when I filled him in on what Marvin had told me. I didn’t relish the idea of getting a lecture, but I knew I had to be honest with him, if only so he’d know where I’d gone today and why.

Plus, I wasn’t going to let anything—not even my own pride—get in the way of retrieving those ashes. Not when Cali’s life was on the line.

*I love*—

Something slammed into the hood of the car, and I lurched forward, then careened onto the shoulder of the road. Dark smoke billowed out of the hood as I wrestled with the steering wheel, trying like hell to keep from crashing into one of the giant trees lining the road.

When the car finally lurched to a stop, I punched the wheel with a snarl.

*Fuck!* Another *ruined car?*

I reached for the door handle, but it wouldn’t budge, so I twisted my body to the side, kicked it open, and climbed out.

My car was completely ruined. I reached for my phone so I could call the pack house, but then suddenly a sharp pain lanced through my skull.

I dropped to my knees with a groan, grabbing my head. The air smelled like burnt toast.

And then a voice whispered in my head. *You and your mate will pay for what you did. I’ll make sure of it.*

# Episode 2970

I waited—heart in my throat—to see how the Samara pack would react to Greyson’s declaration. It was a smart move, if a bold one. Knox was clearly out of control, so putting the choice in the pack’s hands—rather than Knox’s—might be the best way to defuse the situation.

*This could also blow up in Greyson’s face—and officially start a pack war.*

I swallowed roughly. “Come on,” I whispered. “We can’t afford new enemies…”

Knox shifted back to human, sporting a quickly rising bruise on his forehead from where he’d run into the tree trunk. It would heal soon enough, probably before the bruise even had a chance to really set in.

I doubted his ego would repair itself so quickly.

He puffed out his chest. “*I’m* the law on Samara land. This is my call, and my call alone. I’m the one who will ultimately decide who our allies are!”

Some of Knox’s cronies cheered at his posturing, but Hector, Zeke, and some of the other pack members frowned. They looked absolutely disgusted with their new Alpha’s behavior. Ava, for her part, looked like she wanted the ground to open up and swallow her whole.

Elle had stepped in front of me while Greyson fought Knox, and I brushed past her to take Greyson’s hand. She looked at Greyson for confirmation, and he nodded. She stepped down.

I squeezed his hand and mind linked, *What do you think the odds are that this will go our way?*

He squeezed back. *Honestly? I have no fucking clue. Knox is like a loaded cannon operated by a toddler.*

*But it doesn’t seem like his whole pack is backing him. If push comes to shove, do you think they’ll move against him?*

*I doubt it. A pack always rallies behind its Alpha in the end.*

Ava stepped forward and laid a hand on Knox’s arm. Her voice was quiet enough that only Knox, Greyson, and I could hear her. “Maybe we shouldn’t be wasting our energy on them. The Redwoods are nothing to us, and they’re too self-involved to be a threat. We should be focusing on rebuilding our pack rather than warding off our neighbors.”

My brows rose, but I didn’t say anything.

*Does she actually believe any of this? Or is this just a way to placate Knox?*

I sincerely hoped she didn’t believe that, but it wouldn’t be out of character for her to belittle us even after everything we had done for her, and for her pack.

But this wasn’t my fight, and it wasn’t about what Ava or Knox thought about the Redwood pack. This was about avoiding another war.

Knox frowned and looked down at Ava’s hand.

*Come on… She’s given you an out. Take it.*

Knox looked back at his friends, who were watching him expectantly. Most of them were already poised for violence, fists cracking, shoulders drawn back, knees already bent to spring at opponents—they *wanted* an excuse to fight. They couldn’t have cared less about the consequences a fight like that would bring—they just wanted blood.

Redwood blood, to be specific.

“Knox,” Ava pressed. Her voice was still whisper-soft. “They’re a waste of our time. Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

He jerked his arm out of her grip, and for a split second I was convinced he was going to attack. Then he turned to face the gathered Samara pack members. His voice boomed through the clearing. “I’ve decided that the Redwoods are a waste of our time! They are nothing to us!”

His friends burst into cheers and applause. I fought to keep my expression neutral, but I was absolutely disgusted. *They’re acting like Knox is some kind of hero. Because it’s so heroic to almost start a pack war and then back down at the last second.*

And, of course, he was stealing Ava’s words and acting like they were his own. That wasn’t all that surprising, though. Knox was nothing if not self-indulgent and self-important, and I’d come to expect this kind of behavior from him.

Knox returned to his friends, and they all slapped each other on the back, like they’d just come home from some kind of big battle.

*Are they pack members, or football teammates?*

Slowly, Knox, his cronies, and the rest of the Samara pack headed back to their camp.

Ava hung back, waiting until her fellow pack members had disappeared. She turned to Greyson. “We need to be careful. Next time, I might not be able to control him like this.”

So, it had all been a bluff, then. I was relieved and, if I was being honest, a little impressed with Ava. I hadn’t been able to tell the difference, and neither had Knox.

*How much has she been doing this? Managing Knox and trying to keep him from driving the pack into the ground?*

It wasn’t something I’d ever considered Ava capable of achieving, but she was definitely carrying the Alpha’s share of mental and emotional labor for her pack.

“How bad is it?” Greyson asked. “Do you have to keep him leashed often?”

She pursed her lips, and her gaze slid over to me and the other Redwoods. She obviously didn’t want to expose the full extent of her struggles with Knox in front of mixed company. And that apparently included me.

Honestly, it kind of hurt. Sure, we had our differences, but after everything I’d done to help her, she seriously didn’t trust me with this?

Though, to be fair, I didn’t exactly trust her either.

Greyson picked up on Ava’s hesitation and nodded. “We’ll be in touch with you soon.”

She nodded and hurried back toward the camp.

“Wolves, let’s shift and get the hell back to the pack house,” Greyson said before shifting back to his wolf form. I climbed onto his back along with Dani. Marta climbed onto Charlie, Elle carried Big Mac, and Lola took Kira.

In a blur of movement, we started racing back toward the pack house.

I reached out to Greyson through our mind link as I wrapped my arms around his neck. *What were you doing out in the woods?*

*We think we got a lead on what the blur could be—and the ashes. There’s a vampire working with a witch.*

I gasped. *Are you serious? Did you see them?*

*No*. Frustration bled into his tone, but I felt nothing but excitement. Finally, we had a lead. We were that much closer to finding out who’d taken those ashes.

We still didn’t have anything concrete, which wasn’t great. But still! Progress!

Finally, we got back to the pack house. The riders dismounted, and the wolves shifted back to human.

“Maybe we can scout the woods around the house for more clues?” Charlie asked.

Dani looked up at Big Mac, hope shining in her eyes. “Is that possible? If we… If we find some sort of trail or clue, can we use it to track them?”

My heart ached for her—and for me. Dani and I were in this together, and I knew she had to be just as anxious as I was. Her life was on the line too, if we couldn’t find those ashes.

“I can try to cast a spell that allows me to sense any unfamiliar magic,” Big Mac said. “But right now, that’s the best I can do.”

“No, that’s great,” Dani said quickly. “I’ll help.”

The witch nodded and gestured for Dani to follow her inside. “Let’s get some supplies.”

Kira went with them, and I turned to Greyson.

“What should we do now?”

“I’ll talk to Rishika about increasing the patrols around the house, and let the entire pack know that we’re specifically looking for a vampire and a witch working together.” He sighed. “I think, right now, that’s the best we can do.”

“Do you think it’s possible that more people are working with them?” I asked. “What if they have other wolves in the area as allies?”

My heart began to race. *How many people could be working against me and my mates?* I was trying not to take this whole situation personally, but it was honestly hard not to. Why would any of them want those ashes if not to directly hurt me or one of my mates?

“Love, take a breath.” Greyson wrapped an arm around me and kissed my forehead. “We’ll find the people responsible. I promise.”

I wished his reassurance was all I needed. *How deep does this conspiracy go? It seems like every time we learn something new, the problem just gets bigger and bigger.* What the hell was I supposed to do with that?

I pulled out of Greyson’s embrace. “Do you know where Ava got the potion she used on Knox?”

He frowned. “Why would you want to know that?”

“Because if Ava got the potion from an unknown witch, it could be the same one who’s helping the vampire.”

# Episode 2971

**Xavier**

I felt like my head was going to explode. And not in your run-of-the-mill headache way, either. I swore I could feel my skull creaking and threatening to shatter. My breath hitched, and I dropped to my knees. Tiny rocks and road base bit into my palms as I gasped for air that just wouldn’t come.

That same voice slipped through my mind, oily-dark and dripping with malevolence.

*You tore my world apart. I will do the same to you.*

I shuddered out a gasp and shaped my lips around the words I was trying to speak, but I couldn’t get enough air in to make more than a breathy grunt. The pain in my head was searing, almost blinding, and my stomach threatened to rise up my throat.

*This pain will feel like nothing compared to what I have planned for you and your mate*, the voice promised.

Fuck. This hurt. It was possibly the most agonizing thing I’d ever experienced, which was saying something. But I’d take this pain a thousand times over before I let whoever the hell this was lay a single finger on Cali.

“L-Leave her a-a-alone,” I wheezed. “If you w-want me, come and g-get me.”

The voice laughed, and the pain thundered through my skull like an echo. *Oh, that’s no fun. Seeing you in pain like this? I think it might be my favorite thing. Why would I deprive myself of a new way to torture you by leaving that precious mate of yours out of this? And understand this, Xavier—this pain is just a taste of what’s in store for you.*

I coughed until the metallic flavor of blood filled my mouth, but still I couldn’t gulp down a single breath of air. The pressure in my head was building, the pain mixing with the magical strangulation. My vision blurred, then whited out completely. I felt the blood vessels in my eyes pop.

My wolf was a snarling monster inside me, determined to fight this new threat. To tear it apart. But I could barely think, let alone shift or mount an attack. Even though I was standing in the open air, next to the smoldering wreckage of my car, I was trapped.

*Look for the ashes all you want*, the voice said. *You’ll never find them.*

Then, just as quickly as the attack had begun, it lifted. I could breathe again. My vision flickered back, and I pulled in one huge gulp of air after another. My throat burned like I’d just swallowed a mouthful of hot coals, and my head still pulsed with aftershocks, but I didn’t stop.

I might not get another chance like this.

I leapt to my feet, looking around to see if my attacker was anywhere close by. But I couldn’t smell anything over the billowing smoke coming out of my car. Moments before the attack, I’d smelled burnt toast. I couldn’t pick up that trace anymore, either because the witch had gone, or because they’d cloaked their scent. Not to mention, the attack on my lungs and throat could have fucked up my senses.

I rubbed my face, blinking rapidly as I took in my surroundings. The witch was cloaked—either that or she was completely in the wind. I was standing by my car in the middle of a ditch, dirt smudging my hands and the knees of my jeans.

Aftershocks still pulsing through my skull, I climbed out of the ditch and shifted into my wolf.

I had to get back to the pack house, and fast. If whoever had attacked me *did* have the ashes, then I wanted to get to Cali’s side as soon as possible. I wasn’t going to let them touch her.

The journey home passed in a blur. Despite everything that witch had done to me, and the pain that still thrummed through my head like it had its own heartbeat, I’d never run so fast in my life. Whoever this was, they had plenty of power at their disposal, and they had a hard-on for making me suffer.

I had to regroup with the pack, had to warn Cali and make sure she was safe. Protect her from whatever they had planned, because she seemed to be at the center of their plot to make me suffer.

Beyond the sheer gall it took to straight up attack me when I wasn’t expecting it, the fact that they were also targeting Cali just showed how well they knew me. That they’d done their research, which didn’t bode well. And while that might’ve been all well and good for them, bringing Cali into this mess had sealed their death warrant, as far as I was concerned.

Nobody threatened my mate and lived—just ask Tony.

I shifted when I hit the pack house porch. Sage was just walking out of the house, and she smiled when she saw me. “Hey, Xavier!” Her brow pinched in confusion. “Wait, didn’t you have a car earlier?”

I brushed past her, heedless of her small, indignant shout as I left her standing on the porch. “Cali?” I called as I stepped inside. “Cali, where are you?”

My mate appeared at the top of the stairs, her eyes wide. “Xavier? What’s wrong?”

I didn’t hesitate. I leapt up the final few steps and wrapped my arms around her, breathing in her scent. She was safe. She was okay. That witch hadn’t touched her.

“Xavier, what’s going on?” she asked again, easing herself out of my arms. “What happened? And why do you smell like smoke?” Her voice rose with each question, concern lacing her tone.

*Shit. I’m freaking her out.* I pulled in a deep breath. “I don’t mean to worry you. I just really…” I sighed. “Needed to see you. To hold you in my arms.”

Her brows knit together. “You know that doesn’t exactly answer my question.”

Greyson made his way up the stairs behind me. “What’s going on? What happened in the city?” He sniffed. “And why do you smell like oil and burned rubber?”

“I found out who might be targeting us.” I glanced around. We were standing in the middle of the stairwell, where anyone could hear us. “Let’s talk privately.”

I headed into my room, and Cali and Greyson followed. I pulled on a pair of pants while Greyson closed the door.

“I met up with Marvin, and he had some information for us. A name.”

Greyson’s brows rose. “A name?”

I nodded. “Duquette.”

“Is that supposed to mean something to me?” Greyson asked.

I ground my teeth. This information was vital for the pack and for keeping Cali safe, and therefore worth sharing with Greyson, but I didn’t relish the thought of confessing to my brother that I was the reason why Seluna’s ashes had been stolen.

“The name is attached to an old job I completed a while back. Some random family. From the sound of it, they’re out for some old-fashioned revenge.”

I hated admitting my connection to all of this, but it was what it was. And it didn’t matter in the long run, anyway. I was going to find this person and end it—it was the only way to move forward.

“Were they witches?” Greyson asked.

I frowned. “What makes you ask that?”

“There was a witch on our land today—and a vampire. We think they were working together, and that they might be involved in the ashes theft.”

Huh. This was all starting to come together. “It was definitely a witch who took the ashes. The witch also made me crash my car. They threw something at the hood. It came out of nowhere—and there was nothing I could have done.”

Cali gasped. “Is that why you smell like smoke? Oh my god!” She rushed forward and started patting my arms and chest. “Are you hurt anywhere? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. I’m fully healed.” I caught her hands and kissed her knuckles. “Whatever spell this witch cast on me, it hit like a ton of bricks. Made me feel like I couldn’t breathe, so I was helpless while they delivered their love note of doom. But they definitely have the ashes.”

Her eyes widened. “They admitted to having them?”

I nodded, and she pulled in a deep breath.

“I mean, this is good, right?” she said. “Now we’re one step closer to finding the ashes.”

“We need to find this family. The Duquettes,” Greyson said.

I nodded. “That’s what I was planning on doing next.” There was a mean edge to my voice, but I didn’t care. This was my investigation, not Greyson’s, and he needed to stay in his own goddamn lane. “I remember they were living somewhere in the Bay Area when I found them for that job.”

Greyson nodded. “That sounds like a good start.”

“I’ve got a handle on this. I’m just keeping you in the loop. I’m going to make this right myself.”

“You don’t have to do this alone.”

I scoffed. I didn’t want to have this conversation with Greyson. He didn’t understand my side of things. The only thing that was going to feel good, ultimately, was finding whoever had attacked me—whoever had stolen the ashes and put a target on Cali’s back—and putting them in the ground.

“Everyone!” Torin’s voice boomed from downstairs. “It’s Secret Santa time!”

# Episode 2972

I looked from Xavier to Greyson. Things were moving in a direction that nobody wanted, and both of my mates seemed beyond tense. But at least we had a lead. A couple of them, really. We knew a witch and a vampire were involved in the theft of Seluna’s ashes, and this Duquette family was likely wrapped up in this somehow too.

The nearly ever-present anxiety was still thrumming through my veins, but I felt a little more grounded now that we had a plan of action.

And I wished, more than anything else, that we could *focus* on this new plan instead of going downstairs for a holiday celebration.

I mean, Seluna’s ashes were missing, Xavier had just been attacked by a witch, Greyson had barely staved off a full-on pack war with Knox while hunting down the witch and vampire who’d been trespassing on Redwood lands.

And now Torin was calling us down to do Secret Santa.

*Whiplash much? If I’m honest, I don’t think I’m in much of a holiday mood.*

“Hello!” Torin called from downstairs. “Where is everyone?” I knew, despite my own feelings, that I didn’t want to disappoint Torin when he’d been working so hard to make Christmas special for the pack.

Setting aside my anxiety, I grabbed both of my mates’ arms. “All of this can wait, right? Even for just a little while? We might as well go spend some time with the rest of the pack.” When Greyson and Xavier both still looked reluctant to participate, I gave each of them a pointed look and added, “The pack needs this. We have to go downstairs.”

Neither of them seemed willing or able to argue with that, and they both followed me downstairs. We stopped on the landing, taking in the living room with wide eyes and slack jaws.

Torin had a flair for the dramatic, and he loved celebrating. We all knew that. Even in the darkest of times, Torin could be counted on to be a source of joy. He was extra as hell and didn’t care who knew it.

But now… Torin had taken celebrating to the next level.

A giant gingerbread house—well, a gingerbread castle, really—took up most of the space on the coffee table, and the couches and Christmas tree were glittering with fake snow. A fire crackled merrily in the fireplace like something out of a Hallmark movie, and a life-size cutout of Rudolph was taped to the wall.

Even Torin himself was in top holiday form. He was dressed up like Santa, beard and hat and red coat and all. Every time a pack member entered the room, Torin bellowed out, “Ho, ho, ho! Welcome to Christmas Town!”

Despite all the reasons why celebrating didn’t feel quite right, I found myself smiling as I walked into the living room. How could I not smile with so much holiday cheer around me?

Even Greyson and Xavier had eased up a bit, and their rigid exteriors had softened. Dared I say it? They seemed to be getting into the Christmas spirit.

Nearly the entire pack was in attendance: my parents were sitting on the couch together, sipping hot cocoa; Lola and Jay were handing out candy canes; Charlie, Violet, Dani, Marta, and Lilac were crouched close to the Christmas tree, examining the gifts; and Artemis and Rishika were drawing shapes in the fake snow on the mantle.

*It seems like everyone else is in the Christmas spirit! I think I’ll join them.*

I took a seat next to my mom, who held out a mug of cocoa from a tray on the end table. “Torin’s orders,” she said with a smile. “Nobody’s going without hot cocoa during Secret Santa.”

I grinned. “Well, if it’s Torin’s orders…” I took a sip and sighed. This was such a nice change of pace.

Moments later, Mrs. Smith came in, dragging along a grumbling Big Mac, who looked like she’d rather cut off her own arm than participate in the holiday festivities. Still, the witch was a good sport, and she ultimately allowed her fiancée to pull her over to the tree.

Elle came in, confusion etched into her face. “Why you sitting around dead tree?”

“Oh.” I realized that, in the rush of everything else Elle had to learn, we’d forgotten to teach her about the holidays. “We’re celebrating! Have some cocoa.” I pointed her toward the tray of mugs on the end table.

Once everyone had filtered in, Torin turned to face the group. “Thank you so much, everyone, for indulging me in these holiday festivities. I know you all must have realized why I started cooking so much: I needed it to help deal with my grief.” His throat bobbed. “I know Astrid would have wanted me to have a life full of joy, and so I devoted myself to bringing joy wherever I could. But it’s grown beyond that, and now I hope this celebration can be a way to bring everyone together. And I hope, in tribute to the person who gave up so much for us, that this celebration will bring joy to each and every one of you.” His eyes shone as he lifted his mug. “Happy Secret Santa, everyone.”

“Happy Secret Santa, Torin,” I replied, along with several other pack members. A few happy-sad tears slipped down my cheeks. It was such a lovely speech, and this event was even more special now that I knew it was a tribute to Astrid.

It took Torin mentioning it for me to realize that Astrid’s death hadn’t happened all that long ago. It felt like years had passed, since so much was always happening around here, but in reality, it had only been a couple months.

Torin had been absolutely devastated when she’d died, and understandably so. Losing someone you loved wasn’t something you just got over. You just learned to live with it—I imagined it wasn’t all that different from living with the *due destini*, in that regard.

Still, I was grateful that Torin had come so far. That he’d found a way to feel joy himself and to provide it for others.

I sipped my cocoa, more determined than ever to join in on the holiday fun. *This is going to be the best damn Secret Santa ever.*

Ravi stepped up to Torin and patted his shoulder. “We’re all here for you, man.”

“We love you, Torin!” Lola cried, her arm around Jay.

“And your cookies!” Lilac added, earning a glare from both Marta and Violet.

Greyson stood as well, giving Torin a small but genuine smile. “We all count ourselves lucky to have you in the pack.”

A few rogue tears slipped down Torin’s cheeks—and mine—and he swiped at his face. “I promised myself I wasn’t going to cry…”

My dad hopped up and wrapped his arms around Torin, followed by Jay and Lola, then me, and soon everyone except Big Mac was in the group hug, with Torin at the center.

*How fitting, seeing as he’s the glue that holds this whole pack together.*

Mrs. Smith pulled Big Mac in, and the Redwood pack hug was complete. I smiled to myself. This was exactly what I needed: to be around all the people I loved. With these people at my side, I could get through anything, even tracking down this witch who’d stolen Seluna’s ashes.

I looked over at my mates, and they smiled back at me.

Maybe everything would be okay.

“All right.” Torin sniffed. “We have to get to the games, or I’ll just keep crying all night.”

We all laughed and took our seats again as Torin approached the Rudolph cutout on the wall.

“It’s time to play Pin the Nose on Rudolph!” He pointed to the cutout, which was missing its signature red nose.

“I’ll go first!” Violet said, standing.

Torin blindfolded her, then spun her around. As she staggered around blindly, the red nose in her hand, I realized Torin had taken the name of the game seriously. A long metal pin was sticking out from the end of the nose.

*Oh, this might not end well…*

Elle leaned in to me, her gaze on Violet. “This a ritual?”

I laughed. “No, it’s just a game.”

“Game? Like pounce and chase?”

“Sort of. Humans have come up with lots of ways to have fun.”

Elle frowned as she watched Violet lose her balance and stagger sideways into the wall. “Blind and dizzy is fun?”

I shrugged. “In a way. Maybe you can try it?”

She nodded, suddenly resolute. “I go next!”

Moments later, Violet pinned her nose on Rudolph’s butt, and laughter echoed through the room. After she’d pulled the blindfold off, she laughed too. “It’s harder than it looks!”

Elle jumped up to take her turn.

Greyson leaned in and whispered, “I’m happy to see you smiling like this again.”

I nodded. “This is a much-needed break.”

By now, Elle was blindfolded and weaving dizzily around the room. With a groan of frustration, she tugged down her blindfold.

“That’s cheating,” Torin said. “We need to spin you again.”

Elle replaced her blindfold with a groan, and Torin spun her a second time. She seemed way dizzier now, bumping into the tree and then spinning around.

And then, her arm outstretched in front of her, with the pinned nose pointing outward, she raced right toward me.

# Episode 2973

I let out a cry. “Elle, wait, no—stop!”

But there was no stopping the train wreck that was our newest pack member, or the long pin she was pointing straight at me.

I tensed as I waited for her to make impact, but before she could slam into me, Greyson reached out and grabbed her around the waist, lifting her off her feet. I stumbled backward and fell right on my ass, the warmth of the fireplace crawling up my spine.

“Greyson, stop!” Elle protested, fighting against his hold on her.

He set her down and tugged off her blindfold to let her get her bearings. “I think the game is over for now.”

After witnessing the near disaster of trying to play the game in such a crowded room, the rest of the pack seemed to agree with Greyson’s decision.

“No copay,” my dad said to me, a twinkle in his eyes. It was something he’d said to me when I was still a rowdy kid. It was a warning to be careful so we wouldn’t end up in the doctor’s office. Then of course everything with my mom had happened, and he hadn’t made the joke again for a long time. Something about hearing it—even if it was corny and depressing about the healthcare system—made me happy. We were lucky now that with Torin around and the wolves healing so fast, we didn’t really need a doctor anyway anymore.

“Okay, then!” Torin stepped up and clapped his hands to get everyone’s attention. “That was fun—and short—but mostly fun, right? Our next order of business is cutting up paper snowflakes. I want this place to be a winter wonderland.”

Several pack members seemed significantly less amped about that activity.

“Isn’t that kind of… boring?” I heard Sage ask Ravi.

I forced a smile and said brightly, “Fun! Torin, I love that idea.” But it was also becoming clear that not everyone wanted to do organized activities together. “But, um, what else do you have planned? It’s great to have lots of options for people to explore.”

He seemed to perk up at my interest. “Well, we have a custom hot chocolate station. And a cookie decorating station. That one has a competitive piece to it: whoever makes the best cookie wins! And I made a mix of holiday music for us to listen to, or even sing along.”

I was pretty sure this group would rather cut out snowflakes for the rest of their lives than participate in even one holiday music sing-along, but I kept my tone excited. “Torin, you’re done so much! There’s so much to choose from—why don’t we all just choose which activity we want to do?”

He gave me an easy smile. “Sure! Everyone, choose your activity!”

Several pack members flashed me grateful looks as they dispersed around the room. Some of them beelined for the hot chocolate station, and others went to the kitchen table where the cookie-decorating station had been set up.

I decided the hot chocolate was calling my name, so I headed over to doctor my cup, adding cinnamon, a candy cane, and whipped cream.

*There. That’s nice and festive!*

“Is that for me?”

I laughed and turned to see Xavier standing behind me. “If you want it. I can make myself another.”

He nodded, and I passed over the mug. He took a big sip, then lifted his head.

I giggled. “You have a whipped cream mustache.”

He tried to lick it off. “Better?”

I snorted. “Um, you missed a spot. Lean down.”

He followed my instructions, leaning close, and I wiped at his foamy mustache with my thumb, then licked the whipped cream from my finger.

Xavier’s gaze darkened. “Are you sure there’s not more?”

My cheeks flushed. “Maybe,” I teased. “Let me just check.”

I leaned forward, and he captured my lips. He tasted like whipped cream and cinnamon and smooth cocoa with a hint of peppermint and something that was all Xavier. After a beat of our lips moving in tandem, he tried to pull me closer, but I danced out of his reach.

“That’s all you’re going to get for now.” I winked at him and started making my own hot chocolate to replace the one I’d given him. Cinnamon, whipped cream, and a candy cane had been a pretty delicious combination.

“Hey.” Xavier sidled up to me. “I wanted to apologize for getting so hotheaded before. I just want you to be safe, and I hate that there’s someone out there taunting me. Taunting *us*, putting a target on your back.” He frowned. “I hate that something I did is putting you in danger, and beyond finding that witch and taking them out, I don’t know what else to do.”

I set down my mug and cupped his cheek. “I know, thank you,” I said. “And hey, we’re in this together. We’ll figure it out.”

A small smile tugged at his lips, and he looked up at the ceiling. “Too bad Torin was stingy with the mistletoe decorations. That’s always the best part of any holiday party.”

I snorted. “You’re definitely going to get put on the naughty list.”

He looped his arms around my waist. “As long as we’re on the list together, you won’t hear any complaints from me.”

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

“Oh really?” he teased. “You didn’t mean that at all?”

“Okay, maybe I thought about it *a little bit*, but this is a party, and we’re going to stay here and celebrate with our family.”

“We’re going to finish this later.”

“If you’re good.” I smiled, and he rolled his eyes.

“Tiger, you know I’m always good.”

His tone set my blood to simmering, and for a moment I sort of regretted my decision to stay downstairs.

Then Lola called out, “Torin, when can we open our presents?”

And just like that, my lust evaporated—and anxiety rushed in. It was already time for Secret Santa?

In some ways, it felt like ages since Torin had suggested the idea. I’d been looking forward to this, preparing for it, for so long that I almost couldn’t believe the time had actually come. But I also wasn’t sure if I was ready to share my gifts with my mates.

*What if they hate their gifts?*

Torin and Lola were both so loud that their voices echoed across the bottom floor of the house, even though they weren’t in the same room.

“That’s supposed to be the grand finale!” the Fae shot back.

Lola, over at the cookie-decorating station, pouted. “But I’m impatient! I want my present!”

Violet, Charlie, and Lilac were also decorating cookies, and they, along with Lola, started chanting, “Pres-ents! Pres-ents! Pres-ents!”

Xavier turned to me, amusement shining in his eyes. “Are you sure you don’t want to escape all this? It’s not too late.”

I snorted. “I’m sure.”

After only a little bit more begging, Torin caved and everyone moseyed back into the living room for the gift exchange.

Just like earlier, Torin stood at the front of the room, addressing the pack. “The rules are that everyone was supposed to get a present that reminded them of the person they’re giving it to. So, once you open your present, you should guess who gave it to you! That way it’s more personal!”

Lola stepped forward. “Me first!”

Then she practically dove into the huge pile of presents, sifting through them until she found the one with her name. She tore into the wrapping paper with the same gusto I’d seen her use on particularly rare hamburgers.

Her gift was a snow globe featuring a tiny rendering of Duluth, Minnesota’s aerial bridge. It was cute, and surprisingly accurate.

Lola looked around, and her gaze zeroed in on my mom. “Mrs. Hart? Were you my Secret Santa?”

“Yes!” Mom smiled. “I wanted to give you something that reminded you of home. Where both of our families are from.”

Lola grinned and looked down at the snow globe again. “It’s perfect.”

I felt my lips curving up in response. My presents were perfect too—or at least, I thought they were. Each gift was unique for each of my mates and had been chosen with care.

*I can’t wait to see their faces when they open their gifts!*

Marta volunteered to go next, and her gift, a book on pop culture of the 80s and 90s, was from Violet. They laughed over some inside joke about Pat Benatar, and we moved on. Everyone seemed so happy, so content to just be part of the festivities. After everything the pack had been through lately, it was easy for me to forget what it looked like when everyone was so happy.

“Okay, Greyson. You’re up next,” Ravi said.

Greyson shrugged and looked through the pile until he found his gift. He’d started to tear open the silvery-blue wrapping paper when I let out my second gasp of horror of the night. There was something terribly wrong happening here. Or, about to happen.

Because Greyson was holding the wrong box. I must have mislabeled my mates’ presents! *Shit shit shit!*

Greyson was opening Xavier’s gift!

# Episode 2974

I didn’t think. I didn’t hesitate. Both things not unheard of for me.

I just lunged forward and grabbed the box.

“No, not that one!” I blurted out.

Greyson frowned, clearly confused. He held the box tightly, even though I tried to yank it away from him, and we ended up playing an awkward game of tug-of-war.

“It has my name on it,” he said, clearly confused..

*If only he knew…*

“It’s not yours!” I cried.

“Cali, you’re ruining the surprise!” Torin groaned, clutching his red Santa hat. “Now he knows you had him!”

Greyson knowing I was his Secret Santa was currently the least of my worries—no offense to Torin or the work he’d put in to make this event wonderful for everyone.

“I’m sorry, but I mislabeled them. This is all my fault, so if you could just—” I let go of the box locked in Greyson’s grip and searched around in the pile for a gift marked for Xavier. I’d been in such a rush to wrap them… I couldn’t believe what a stupid mistake this was. Once I found it, I yanked the label off, accidentally tearing some of the wrapping paper as I went, and handed the box to Greyson.

He gave me back the box with his name on it, and I pulled that label off too before presenting it to Xavier. It was a little rumpled now, but at least the right gifts were with the right people.

Both of my mates looked at me in complete confusion. Their brows furrowed in identical ways, and I was reminded once again that these two were brothers, though they still didn’t like to admit it.

Greyson seemed to put the puzzle pieces together first. His confusion seemed to shift to resignation. “You had both of us?”

Xavier frowned, quick on his brother’s heels. He turned to me. “Really?”

“Um, yeah,” I lied. “It just worked out like that.”

I glanced around nervously. The question was fair, I supposed, but how could I explain this situation in front of the entire pack? The whole fiasco with both of them asking Torin for me and then just giving them to me. Torin had panicked, I had panicked. It was what it was.

“It was my mistake,” Torin stepped in. “I miscounted, and since you and Greyson were the ones affected by the miscount, I asked Cali to help me.”

I smiled as relief rushed over me. *Thank you, Torin.* “I’m always happy to help.”

Both of my mates looked down at their respective gift boxes, seemingly at a loss.

“Okay, now that the mystery is solved, are you guys going to open your presents or not?” Lola demanded. “We’ve got to keep the show on the road here.”

And with that, Xavier and Greyson started opening their gifts in tandem. Neither one of them looked very happy about it.

I tried not to look completely and totally devastated by this turn of events. I was so proud of the gifts I’d found and chosen for each of my mates, and I’d gone through so much to get my presents back from Ava today. And now, because of my stupid labeling mix-up, both of my mates were pre-disappointed. It was inevitable it seemed, and I understood, but that didn’t mean it didn’t suck too.

Xavier finished opening his present first, and his expression softened as he looked down at it. He smiled, looking genuinely pleased with the gift. My racing heart began to slow as he opened the smart watch’s box, starting to check everything out. He connected the navy bands to the watch’s face.

“I know you don’t have anything to track your runs,” I said. “So I thought this might be good for that.”

“It’s perfect. Thanks, Cali.” He leaned forward to give me a kiss on the cheek, and when I turned to Greyson, he was opening his gift too. His box was blank on the outside, so he popped it open.

“It’s beautiful,” he said, taking the watch out. He put the leather band on his wrist. It looked good on him.

“It’s a classic piece,” I explained, feeling nervous now. Why had I gotten both of them watches? “It has the lunar phases and everything on it… It seemed like an Alpha-y thing to want to know about.”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “This is great, thank you, love.” He kissed my other cheek, and relief rushed over me.

Crisis averted. Everything had been figured out, and my mates seemed to love their gifts. Maybe this Secret Santa exchange wasn’t such a disaster after all.

If they were happy, I was happy.

Silence set in for a beat before Jay piped up. “My turn?”

Everyone laughed, and the gift exchange continued. Thank god for Jay and his knack for breaking awkward tension. He opened his gift—the heart mugs Lola had told me about. After him was Jacqueline.

While the gift exchange continued, I took a seat on the couch between my mom and Artemis.

“Are you okay?” Artemis asked. “You looked upset for a moment.”

“I’m fine.” I smiled. “I was nervous they wouldn’t like them. But I’m great, really. Life has gotten a tad complicated, but I’m figuring it all out.”

Mom patted my hand. “They were both very nice gifts, dear.”

“Thanks.” I’d worked very hard to make sure of that, and I was glad that someone outside of my mate bonds could see that. “I just hope they still feel special… I just panicked about getting them both something so I got them… the same thing.”

Oh god.

“I’m sure they love them, sweetheart.”

I tried to smile. “Thanks. I’m happy you’re here, Mom.” I took Artemis’s hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Both of you.”

Mom’s face took on a faraway expression. “I wouldn’t have missed the holidays with my daughters.”

Her words were exactly what I wanted to hear, but something in her tone made me pause. “Wait, what does that mean? *Would* you have missed the holidays for some reason?”

Mom shook her head. “No, of course not. But we do have to go home at some point.”

My stomach bottomed out. “Home?”

“We’ve decided that we’ll be heading back to Minnesota in the new year.”

Artemis’s jaw dropped. “You’re leaving?”

I understood the feeling. For some reason, I’d sort of just assumed my parents would stay here forever, especially now that my dad was a werewolf and technically a member of the Redwood pack.

“We considered staying,” Mom said, “but we have our own lives to get back to. We can’t keep working remotely forever. And I’ve been talking with Sabine about it, and she told us there are cases of werewolves who have traveled far from their packs without being considered Rogues. Tom will forever be a part of the Redwood pack if he wants to be, but he’ll be fine with me in Minnesota.”

I nodded. “I get it.” And I did, as disappointed as I was by this news. “That just means we’ll need to make sure this is the best holiday season ever.”

“Cali!” Torin called me back over. “It’s your turn to open your present.”

Mrs. Smith stood up. “Actually, before we finish the gift exchange, Torin, we have a surprise for you.”

He blinked. “But that’s not on the schedule.”

She laughed. “That’s why it’s called a surprise.”

Heat rushed into Torin’s face, and Mrs. Smith reached behind the couch to pull out a large, square box. She carefully set it down in front of Torin. “This is from everyone, to say thank you for leading the charge on all the holiday cheer. We truly don’t know how we’d manage without you, Torin. We’re so lucky to have you with us.”

His eyes took on that teary shine again as he stared at the wrapping paper. “You’re all… too kind.”

“Open it, Torin!” Lola called.

He peeled back the wrapping paper and let out a delighted gasp. It was a bright red stand mixer. “This is amazing!” he cried. “I’ve been wanting one for so long! Now I don’t have to hand mix everything, and I can make even more cookies even faster!”

Mrs. Smith chuckled. “I guess that means this present is kind of for everyone, then. We do love your cookies. They might even be better than mine.”

Torin made his way around the room, individually thanking each pack member and giving them all a hug.

“You knew about this?” he asked as he pulled me into his arms.

“I did! And I’m so glad you like it.”

“Like it? I *love* it!”

I laughed as he squeezed me tightly. He released me and wiped at his eyes again. “Okay, Cali. It’s your turn.”

I stepped up to the tree to pick out my presents from the small pile that was left. I already knew they were going to be from Xavier and Greyson, but as I picked up both of the small boxes, I realized that *they* might not have known they both had me.

*How am I going to do this?*

I really didn’t want to cause any more embarrassment around these Secret Santa gifts, so I tore both boxes open simultaneously. That way, I’d get this over with faster, and I wasn’t faced with the prospect of technically “choosing” anyone.

I noticed absently that, beneath the wrapping paper, the boxes looked identical. I didn’t think much of it until I opened each box and saw what lay inside.

It was a necklace. They were *both* necklaces, and—

Jacqueline snorted. “Oh my god. They’re identical!”

# Episode 2975

**Greyson**

*What the hell?*

I scowled at the identical gift boxes in Cali’s hands—and the identical gifts inside each of the boxes. This was a nightmare.

*How the hell did Xavier buy the exact same necklace I did? It’s not like we were in the city at the same time.* A new, infuriating possibility settled in. *Did that asshole spy on me?*

I turned to him, a fire blazing in my eyes, and he scoffed. “At least we know one of us has good taste.”

My molars ground together. “I bought my gift first.”

“How can you know that? You don’t know when I bought mine.”

I pulled in a deep breath and tried to remind myself how it would ruin Secret Santa, and maybe the holiday season altogether, if I murdered my brother right now. Still, that inconvenient fact seemed fairly inconsequential.

*It’s one teeny tiny little case of murder… Would that really be so bad?*

Cali cleared her throat and smiled at each of us in turn. “Greyson, Xavier, these are perfect. Thank you so much. You both know me so well! It makes so much sense, because you’re both so in tune with me! I’ll wear both necklaces—together.”

“Like a jewelry *due destini*!” Lola said, and laughter rippled through the room.

I wished I found this whole thing half as funny as everyone else seemed to.

“Like I said,” Cali added. “It’s very fitting.”

Her smile looked a little forced, as did the enthusiasm in her voice. But I was sure she was just trying to avoid the kind of knock-down, drag-out holiday fight I’d just been fantasizing about.

I forced myself to take another breath and smile back. This wasn’t the gift exchange I’d envisioned, and it grated on me to no end to have to share the spotlight with my brother *again*. But I wasn’t going to ruin this for my mate. She deserved only the best—and I wasn’t going to be the asshole who let his own ego stand in the way of that. Nobody wanted to see this devolve into a battle of testosterone, and as the Alpha, it was my responsibility to de-escalate situations like these when they arose, not make them worse.

I smiled, and to my surprise, I meant it. “I guess it is pretty perfect after all.”

Two watches, different. Two necklaces, the same. That all seemed fitting somehow. Inevitable.

Xavier was silent, and his expression bordered on broody, so I elbowed him in the side.

He grumbled, his eyes on Cali, “As long as you’re happy, I’m happy.”

The entire room seemed to collectively release a breath.

Torin stood. “I think we need more Christmas music! Anyone need a refill of cocoa?”

He flipped on some jazz covers of Christmas carols, and everyone got back to enjoying the party, which was exactly what they were meant to be doing.

I sidled up to Cali with a grimace. “I’m sorry, love. I didn’t mean to react like that.”

She shook her head. “No, *I’m* sorry. I think I made this a big issue by agreeing to be both of your Secret Santa. I just wanted to make sure that I wasn’t inadvertently making a choice, you know?”

I nodded. Even though I believed the three witches’ assertion that the killing curse was gone, I understood that Cali wasn’t so ready to believe that was the case. And I couldn’t blame her. If I thought a decision of mine had the power to kill her, I’d want irrefutable proof it was safe, and in the absence of that, I’d be careful too.

I looked down at the matching necklaces clutched in her hands and looked at my watch. The shiny face of it glittered with the holiday lights. “Do you want me to get you a different gift? I’d be happy to return—”

“*No!*” She clutched both of the necklaces to her chest, her eyes wide. It might have been the cutest, most endearing thing I’d ever seen. “No, of course not. I do actually love them—even if Lola’s not wrong about the *due destini* crossing my mind when I saw them, I mostly just thought it was fate. That I have these two amazing mates who love and understand me better than anyone else.”

I nodded. “I just want you to be happy. And if you’re truly happy with these necklaces, then that’s all I need to know.” I leaned in and kissed her cheek. “I’m going to grab a drink. Do you want anything?”

She shook her head. “I’ve still got some hot cocoa.”

After promising to be right back, I headed into the kitchen and beelined for the mulled wine simmering on the stove. I needed a drink—something a hell of a lot stronger than hot cocoa.

I was glad Cali loved her gifts, and I wasn’t lying when I’d said that was all I needed to feel content with things. But the whole gift exchange had still been a shocking reminder that my brother and I were both vying for Cali’s attention at all times. Even when we were on the same side—say, fighting whoever had stolen Seluna’s ashes—we’d never be completely allied with this rivalry between us.

Because, at the end of the day, I just wanted to have Cali all to myself. And I knew Xavier felt the same way.

I poured myself a mug of mulled wine and blew over the top of the rim. This fucking *due destini*… It was always standing in the way of me fully connecting with my brother. Of living the life I wanted. All I’d ever wanted was to have the normal, happy, family life I’d been denied as a kid, but as long as Cali was torn between two mates because she was magically mated to both of us, I was stuck.

I remembered my old dreams, the ones the witches had sent me, where Cali and I were living peacefully together. We were building a life together, and Colton and Xavier were there too—part of our family without competing for my mate’s affections.

And this damn *due destini* kept rubbing it in my face that, even after all this time, I was no closer to achieving that dream.

I took a sip of wine. *Snap out of it*, I told myself. *It’s the holidays, and nobody wants a broody Alpha. Fuck, I don’t* want *to be so damn broody either.*

Cali’d said she just wanted to focus on holiday fun for tonight, and I wanted to support that. To give her everything she wanted. Everything she deserved.

Xavier stepped into the kitchen, and I watched him pause, like he hadn’t realized I was going to be in here, and now that he’d seen me, he was considering leaving.

I held out my mug as a peace offering. “Wine?”

He snorted. “God, yes.”

I poured him a mug and passed it over. “Let’s just put this necklace thing behind us.”

“You’ll notice I’m not the one bringing it up now.”

I had to hand it to my little brother—he truly had a knack for getting under my skin.

*Don’t take the bait.*

Xavier took a long sip from his mug. “Charlie mentioned there was some kind of issue with Knox while I was gone. What was that about?”

I grimaced. With the holiday drama, I’d nearly forgotten about the close call earlier today. Fucking Knox and his ego. The kid was gonna get people killed.

“He’s trying to assert his dominance any chance he gets,” I explained. “I’m not exaggerating when I say we came this close to starting a new pack war today.” I held my thumb and forefinger a couple of inches apart.

“Shocking,” he deadpanned.

I nodded. “If it gets any worse, then it’s going to be an issue.”

He nodded, now looking distracted.

“Ava was actually the one who talked him down,” I added, carefully watching my brother’s face. “I think she’s got more power over him and the Samara pack than she lets on. You might want to reach out to her, keep her close. Make sure she’s still on our side.”

He grimaced.

“It’s for the pack,” I added.

“Fine,” he said with a groan. “I’ll text her. Do you think Knox is going to make any kind of move anytime soon?”

“It’s hard to say. I don’t think so. Right now, Knox is all bark and no bite. But he’s got a few lackeys that seem to be really egging him on. And his ego is dangerous, so we really should be keeping an eye on the Samaras if we can.”

He nodded. “I’m already doing that, but I’ll work with Rishika on bolstering the patrols close to the Samara border.”

Glasses clinked in the nearby living room, and I realized everyone else must have rejoined the party. “We should probably get back in there.”

We returned to the living room in time to see my mother stand up and clink her glass again.

“We have an announcement!” Her free hand sought out Big Mac’s, and their fingers linked. Everyone looked their way, waiting for the news. “We’ve picked a wedding date!”

# Episode 2976

Everyone gasped in excitement at Mrs. Smith’s announcement. I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t thought for a split second that it was going to be horrible news. We’d been having quite a bit of that lately, but yes! This was good. This was positive. We needed this so badly right now.

“When’s it gonna be?” Ravi called.

Mrs. Smith looked down at her fiancée with a smile. “Our wedding will be next year in the spring! Just ironing out all the details, but picking the season was the hardest part.”

“My requirement was it isn’t sweltering outside,” Big Mac said.

Mrs. Smith smiled. “And I didn’t want to wait until fall or winter.”

“Neither did I.” Did I detect *Big Mac* blushing?

Another round of cheers echoed through the room. I was so thrilled for them. Big Mac and I might have our differences at times, but I couldn’t think of two people more deserving of happiness than her and Mrs. Smith.

“Wait!” Torin cried. “I have something for this!”

He raced out of the room with a speed I hadn’t known he possessed and came right back bearing a bottle of champagne. He popped the cork, and foam sprayed everywhere. Everyone held out whatever glass they had available, and Torin did a lap around the room, filling people’s mugs and glasses.

Then he held up the mostly empty bottle. “A toast! To the happy couple.” Mrs. Smith was practically radiant, and Big Mac seemed like she was actually enjoying attention for once. “May your wedding be everything both of you have ever dreamed of!”

We all raised our glasses and took a drink. My face hurt from smiling so much, and I didn’t mind one bit. This was the exact kind of news we needed a lot more of.

Elle sidled up to me. “What is a wedding?”

I considered her question for a moment. It was a fair one—as far as I knew, while wolves did have mates, they didn’t conduct lavish ceremonies to celebrate that bond.

“A wedding is a celebration that happens when two people decide to commit to be with each other forever.”

Her brow scrunched. “So… mates?”

“A version of that. Kind of. For humans. Or whoever wants, I guess.”

“When was your wedding with Greyson?”

Her question took me completely by surprise, and I almost choked on my cocoa. It shouldn’t have, but considering her framework, I could see how I’d missed the mark in my explanation.

*Of course she’d jump to that conclusion—she knows Greyson and I are mates.*

My cheeks heated. “Um, we haven’t really had one. A wedding, that is. It’s not… It’s not like that.”

She cocked her head. “Not like…? I am confused.”

How did I explain this? Technically speaking, Mrs. Smith and Big Mac weren’t mates. But that didn’t make their wedding, or their relationship, any less valid.

“A wedding isn’t a requirement for mates,” I said slowly. “It’s… a fun celebration, and you can certainly choose to have one with your mate, but you don’t have to.”

Elle frowned. She seemed even more confused now than before. “Why not?”

“Well, it depends on a lot of things, I guess. It’s a big step to take, and some people—some mates—uh, don’t feel they want or need to marry to have a good relationship.”

Elle blinked. “Why not?” she asked again.

Oh god. I was stuck in a time loop. Why had I volunteered to be her mentor? It was one thing to teach her how to tie her shoes, but explaining the social, emotional, fiscal, and civil nuances of a wedding to someone who had no baseline understanding of any of it was so out of my comfort zone it was laughable.

To say nothing about the *due destini*, and how one of the reasons I wasn’t married to Greyson was because I was in love with his brother too.

Jacqueline must have seen me struggling, because she tapped my shoulder. “I’ve got this.” She turned to Elle. “So there’s this patriarchal tradition in this country… Oh, let me explain patriarchy first.”

*Thank god.*

I snuck away from that awkward discussion to go congratulate the happy couple. I hugged each of them in turn.

“I’m so happy for both of you!” I smiled. “Do you need help with the planning at all?”

“We’re still working out the details,” Mrs. Smith said, “but we’ll let you know if we need any help.”

Artemis pulled me aside. “So, how are you feeling about Mom and Tom leaving?”

My smile dimmed. “Honestly? I wish they weren’t,” I said. There’d been a time when I wanted my own space, but that was before they were actually talking about leaving. Now I was kind of hoping they’d stay here forever… “They have their own lives they want to get back to. And that’s back in Minnesota.”

She frowned. “Is it even safe for them there? When I was in Minnesota, there was plenty of danger, and they wouldn’t have us there to help protect them. Are we supposed to let them just go live their lives in danger?”

She did have a point. A very fair point.

“We can’t keep them locked up, even for their own safety. And the problems we had before seemed to be following me, you, and my mates around. So maybe if it’s just Mom and Dad living a somewhat normal life, they’ll be fine?” I shrugged, not knowing the best thing to do. But now I was definitely thinking about Dad going to get gas and running into vampires or something. “If anyone can go back to living like normal humans, it’s them. Remember, I spent twenty years thinking Mom was a normal human.” I smiled. “They’ve got this.”

She didn’t seem convinced, but I didn’t think I’d be able to convince our parents to stay now that they’d decided to leave.

“We’ll go visit them,” I added. “And we can call and check in on them any time.”

Artemis nodded, seemingly more satisfied with this arrangement. “I think I’m still going to talk to Mom about starting a small weapons arsenal at home. Just in case.”

My smile widened. “Great idea,” I said. Then before she could walk away, I reached and grabbed her hand. “Hey, Artemis?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m really happy you’re my sister,” I said. “We’re lucky to have you in this family.”

She’d been so prickly and closed off when we’d first met, but now I knew just how deep her capacity for love was. She was my sister. I would do anything in the world for her.

Her cheeks reddened. “I never really thought I was the kind of person who could embrace a family, but I’m happy I’m here now too.”

“It looks good on you. Happiness. Having a family.”

She rolled her eyes at me. “You are so sappy sometimes.”

“But you love me,” I teased.

“Yeah, yeah, I do,” she said. Then she paused for a moment, thoughtful. “There’s still part of my family I need to find. I’m no closer to locating Adair than I’ve ever been.”

I squeezed her hand again. “I’m sure you will soon.”

She sighed. “But first I have to get my magic fully under control. It’s getting better, but I’d rather be totally certain before undertaking such an in-depth task.”

“Artemis!” Rishika called, holding two cups of cocoa. “Come pick out your toppings.”

Greyson came up to me and wrapped an arm around my waist. “You’re still going to be my date to the wedding, right?”

I grinned. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Xavier came over, and I tensed. We’d only just dodged a jealous fight. I didn’t want to jump back into that situation. Fortunately, Xavier didn’t mention Greyson’s arm wrapped around my waist, though I had no doubt he’d noticed it.

“I just heard back from one of my past mercenary contacts. He goes by the name Slugger,” he said, keeping his voice low with so many other pack members in close proximity. “They’re going to check in on the Duquette family for us. We should hear back from them soon.”

“Wow, that’s great,” I said. “I actually had another idea, too, that we could try.”

Both of my mates looked worried about this development, and I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Not *every* idea I came up with ended in disaster. Just some of them.

*Okay, maybe several.*

“We still don’t know anything about that witch Ava hired, do we?” I asked. “I brought it up with Greyson earlier, but then we got sidetracked with everything else and Secret Santa and all. But I think it could really be something. An unknown witch really isn’t a good thing.”

Xavier grimaced. “You want me to talk to Ava about it.”

It wasn’t a question.

“You’re going to talk to her anyway, right?” Greyson pressed. “Can’t you ask her a bit more about her witch contact?”

“Sure, fine. But I can’t promise she’ll be in the mood to disclose her contacts, even to me.”

I tried not to think about what Ava *would* be in the mood for, at least where Xavier was concerned. “It’s worth asking, don’t you think?” I asked. “And I appreciate you being willing to do that.”

His eyes met mine. “You know I’d do anything for you.”

The intensity in his gaze made my stomach flip-flop. It was the exact look he always gave me right before he kissed me. But obviously, he wasn’t going to kiss me with Greyson’s arm still around me.

Still, this was great progress from just a few weeks ago, when Xavier wouldn’t have hesitated to kiss me in front of Greyson, if only to rile his brother up.

“I’m lucky to have you both.” I smiled, touching the double pendants laying against my breastbone. Maybe Artemis was right. I was sappy sometimes, but that was okay. “I feel safer knowing you’ll always have my back. No matter what.”

Suddenly, the doorbell rang, and Torin jumped up. “Maybe that’s the carolers!”

Jacs groaned. “Oh my god, please no.”

“Did you actually hire carolers for us?” Lola asked.

“I’ll get it.” I eased out from under Greyson’s arm and went to the door. When I opened it, all the breath stuttered out of my lungs. It wasn’t carolers.

Lucian smiled. “Hello, Caliana.”

# Episode 2977

**Greyson**

I followed Cali to the foyer as she opened the door. Not because I was thrilled with the prospect of carolers on my doorstep, but because I was the Alpha and needed to be aware of everyone who came to the house, especially when my mate was the one answering the door.

When I saw who was on our doorstep, I rushed forward to shield Cali. *Goddammit. Carolers would have been an improvement.*

“What the hell are you doing here?” I snarled.

Lucian’s eyes widened, and he glanced over my shoulder into the house. “Oh, are you having a party? And you didn’t invite me?”

My lips thinned. “It’s private. Redwood pack only.”

“Fine.” He rolled his eyes. “Anyway, I didn’t come here for a party.”

“Allow me to repeat myself, then: what the hell are you doing here?”

“It’s private,” he said simply. “I need to speak with you. Alone.”

Part of me had to admire Lucian’s guts—or his arrogance—showing up at the Redwood pack house alone after everything he’d done to us, crashing our party, and then standing on my doorstep and demanding to speak with me like he had every right to be there.

Did it piss me off? Of course it did. But there was just something so Alpha about the gesture that it gave me pause. I didn’t want to invite him in. If I had a choice, I’d never speak to this asshole again.

But my hands were tied. And, I realized belatedly, if Lucian was going to the trouble of visiting us here rather than simply summoning me to the Vanguard palace, something had to be wrong.

“Fine. Come in.” I glanced at Cali. “Go back to the party, okay, love?”

*I don’t want to leave you alone with him*, she mind linked.

*I’ll take care of him. Don’t worry.*

She frowned, clearly not loving the decision, but she did as I asked and headed back into the living room. I had no doubt she was telling Xavier and Rishika about the Alpha who was darkening our door.

I led Lucian to the study and closed the door behind him. “Well, we’re alone. What is it you want?”

He glanced around the study before turning to face me. “I had a surprise visitor today. Knox wants me to kick you out of the Alpha Alliance.”

“Fuck,” I swore. It was bad enough that he’d tried to pull me into a full-on fight earlier. Now he was tattling to Lucian? “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I don’t want there to be infighting with my Alphas when our alliance is still so precarious.”

I scoffed. “We’re not *your* Alphas. This alliance isn’t official yet.”

*And even if we were taking the time to really consider it, you’d have a lot more convincing to do, princeling.*

Lucian sighed. “Fair enough. The truth is, you and your pack helped me out when I was blinded to the truth about Seluna. I’m man enough to admit that I might not still be Alpha of the Vanguard pack if not for your help. I wanted to return the favor and let you know that you have a potential enemy right on your border.”

“This isn’t news to me. I think every wolf this side of the Rockies knows Knox hates me and my pack. Earlier today, he almost started a pack war over his ego and prejudice. So while I appreciate the heads-up, I’m just waiting to see what kind of move he’s going to make.”

“He’s an impetuous pup, isn’t he?” Lucian shook his head. I was surprised by the comment. “While the Alpha alliance might not be official, I’m seeking to bring the packs together as a way to make up for the strife I’ve caused with my past behavior. I want to try to repair the damage caused by Seluna and her demons, to help ensure peace between the packs.”

*Oh my god. He actually means it.*

It seemed like the princeling had come a long way. Not that I was ready to trust him yet, if ever. I still wouldn’t put it past him to pull some kind of trick on me the moment I let my guard down, but this certainly felt like progress.

“Thank you.” I nodded. “I appreciate you trying to help, but it’s important you realize that the issues between the Samaras and the Redwoods existed long before you and Seluna arrived. We’ve fought them before, many times. I hope we won’t have to again, but I don’t know if I can see us becoming friendly with them.”

*Or you.*

“Fair enough. Even if the Alpha alliance isn’t official, I’m here to unofficially promise my help if it comes to a direct conflict between the Samaras and the Redwoods.”

I paused. “Wait, are you saying you want us to be allies?”

“Temporarily,” he clarified. “At least where this potential conflict is concerned. I am not a big fan of that young Alpha. I don’t get a good feeling from him.” He smirked. “He was too much of a kiss-ass at my dinner. I know Alphas like that—all they want is to use you for their own benefit and stab you in the back at the first opportunity.”

“Hmm. Sounds like someone else I know.” Lucian was still very much on my shit list, but I had to admit that he had good judgment, if only in this matter. I held out my hand. “I’ll accept your help. *Temporarily.*”

He took my hand and shook it. “I’m glad we finally understand each other.”

*Am I really getting along with Lucian right now?*

Things were changing faster than I could keep up, but I wasn’t cocky enough to turn down the help. Knox was too unpredictable, even with a fairly weakened pack behind him, and the Redwoods could still use allies to help handle that threat. And if we had the full might of the Vanguard pack behind us, Knox might think twice before throwing another temper tantrum.

“Let me see you out,” I said. I walked him to the door. “I’ll be in touch.”

Torin poked his head out of the living room. “Greyson, would your guest like to stay for some eggnog?”

Lucian scrunched up his face at the mention of eggnog, and I shook my head. “He’s too busy to hang out with us.”

Lucian nodded, and then his gaze drifted to Elle, who was walking past us on her way to the kitchen. “Actually, I could have one glass…”

“No.” I shoved him out and shut the door on him.

Cali, Xavier, Rishika, and Jay rushed over and started speaking over each other.

“What the hell did he want?” Xavier asked.

“Does he know something about the ashes?” Cali asked.

“I’ll increase the patrols on our borders,” Rishika said. “He shouldn’t be able to just stop by whenever he wants without us knowing.”

“Are you going to kick his ass?” Jay asked.

I held up my hands to silence them. “For now, the Vanguards are offering their allyship when it comes to our issues with the Samaras.”

Xavier’s eyes widened. “Are you sure?”

“Can we really trust their word on that?” Rishika asked.

Jay nodded. “That sounds good to me. The Samaras won’t stand a chance against us *and* the Vanguards—hopefully that will force Knox to calm his shit.”

I nodded. “My thoughts exactly.”

“We can’t trust Lucian and the Vanguards,” Xavier said. “How many times have they pretended to be our friends only to screw us over? Usually by trapping Cali at that fucking palace and using her for some evil plan.”

Cali shuddered at the reminder. “And Lucian really didn’t say anything about the ashes?”

Dani came over, her eyes wide at hearing Cali’s question.

“What? The ashes? Lucian? What’s going on?”

Her anxious voice, along with everyone else’s opinions, was starting to draw a crowd.

“No, nothing was said about the ashes,” I said.

Slowly, the pack was trickling out of the living room to join the conversation in the hall.

This was getting out of hand.

My mother whistled loudly, and silence settled in. “Everyone, quiet down! We need to stop talking over each other and listen to Greyson.”

I flashed her a grateful smile before addressing the group. “First, let’s move to the living room so you’re not all crowding into the foyer.”

Once everyone settled back into the living room, I cleared my throat.

“Knox is becoming more of a threat,” I said. “Some of you know about the skirmish that happened today on the Redwood-Samara border. Knox is looking for an excuse to start a pack war. And after we went home today, he sought out Lucian to try to rile up the other packs against the Redwoods.”

Xavier scowled. “How about I go show Knox who the real threat is?”

I shook my head. “We can’t move against him directly. He’s officially the Alpha of the Samaras now. If we instigate anything against him, then that means that the whole Samara pack can retaliate. We could easily kick Knox’s ass, but I’m not risking our pack over that spoiled little shit. And the Samaras shouldn’t have to pay with their lives because their leader values his ego over his pack.”

“Then maybe an alliance with Lucian and the Vanguards is the safest bet,” Jay said, “just to show strength in numbers?”

Artemis shook her head, crossing her arms over her chest. “No way. You can’t trust someone who was so recently your enemy.”

Dani, Marta, Xavier, and a few others nodded at this. Clearly, there was a bigger rift here than I’d thought.

“I don’t want to force any of you into a situation you think is unnecessarily dangerous. So, as Alpha, I will call a vote. And we have to agree that whatever the result of the vote is, it’s final.” I waited a moment while everyone nodded in agreement. “Good. Now, whoever wants to ally with the Vanguards, raise your hands.”

# Episode 2978

**Xavier**

An uneasy feeling blossomed in my stomach as I eyed the rest of the pack. They looked as stunned as I felt. I didn’t trust the Vanguards as far as I could throw them, and I couldn’t help but feel like Lucian might be playing at something by mentioning his little alliance idea. It wasn’t sitting right with me. I didn’t understand why we were even considering it. It hadn’t been that long since the Vanguards themselves were gunning for the Redwood pack, so it seemed suspicious—and frankly unbelievable—that Lucian would have such a quick change of heart.

*Why is Lucian feeling so damn cooperative all of a sudden? He wants an alliance with us now after suggesting a pack-wide alliance yesterday. So out of character. He has to be up to something, and I, for one, am tired of his games.*

Lucian always had some kind of agenda—that was more than clear after the dealings we’d had with him. Even if I couldn’t quite figure out what his angle might be with this whole Redwood-Vanguard alliance thing, I knew there was one.

An image of Knox’s dumb, smirking face filled my vision, and I scowled. *Maybe Lucian just sees how volatile Knox is. Maybe that’s why he’s doing this.* *Or, maybe Lucian wants this alliance because without the Redwoods, he’d still be lip-locking with a demon.*

I could tell that the rest of the pack was equally torn. There were all sorts of side conversations going on, pack members squabbling with one another about what the best decision was. That was a shocker in and of itself. I would’ve thought that we’d all be on the same page about how untrustworthy and toxic the Vanguards were, but clearly that wasn’t the case.

“We’d be idiots to trust them! What, are we going to pretend like all the bad—and frankly crazy—stuff they did before never happened?” Sage said to Jay, incredulous. “Please. My memory isn’t nearly that terrible.”

Jay held up his hands, trying to soothe Sage. “Hey, mine isn’t either, and I’m not saying we forget all the shit they’ve pulled. I’m just saying that even though the Vanguards might be a little unstable, Knox is the real threat here. He’s our biggest concern right now, hands down. Besides, we wouldn’t have to be allied with them forever, just until the Knox threat has passed.”

Greyson looked around the group, frowning. “Enough,” he barked. “Like I said, if you want to ally with the Vanguards, raise your hand.”

I kept my hand down firmly at my side—but a bunch of hands shot up into the air. I snorted, shaking my head. *Are they really that easily swayed by that princeling? He’s a snake and always will be. If we do this, we’ll just be getting close enough for him to lash out and bite.*

Unfortunately, it looked like it was going to be a tie.

Greyson did a formal count and then confirmed it. “It’s an even split.”

Mrs. Smith piped up, her eyes on Greyson. “But you haven’t voted yet.”

The entire pack looked to Greyson for his decision, and I felt a pang of annoyance at Greyson having the final say. *But he* is *the Alpha.* It chafed at me, but there was nothing I could do about it. At least not yet. I only hoped he would do the right thing.

I crossed my arms and waited with the rest to see which way Greyson was going to go. *Come on, brother. Use your head for once. Reject those Vanguard assholes. They don’t deserve to be allied with us.* If I were Alpha, I would’ve given a resounding “hell no” to Lucian and his little attempt to get all buddy-buddy. The decision would’ve been easy for me. The Vanguards weren’t to be trusted, and it would be foolish to make any promises to them.

Greyson stood in silence for a while, his jaw pulsing in thought. Finally, he cleared his throat. “I know the pack has had its issues with the Vanguard pack in the past.”

I couldn’t help but snort in disgust. *Issues? I wouldn’t call kidnapping Cali, trapping us in his palace multiple times, and unleashing a demon on us “issues,” but I guess.* I didn’t like where this was going.

“But,” Greyson continued, “as it stands, Lucian hasn’t given us any indication that he’s being untruthful.”

Greyson made sure to look every pack member in the eye as he spoke. A couple of pack members frowned and opened their mouths to protest, but Greyson held up a hand, silencing them.

“I understand your distrust and your reluctance. I get it more than anybody, but in this instance, I believe Lucian.” Greyson held up his hand again to stopper a wave of protests. “And I’ll tell you why. Lucian is the same person he always was. He only has his pack’s best interests in mind, and that’s why he wants to ally with us. It would be foolish for us to turn down such a willing ally.”

*Not as foolish as getting close to that asshole, brother.*

“Knox is trouble, and yes, I have my concerns about the Vanguards, too. But the Redwood pack is strong. We can protect ourselves. We are smart enough to know when allyship is in the best interests of our survival, and this is one of those times. Lucian needs *us*. Not the other way around. In fact, he needs us so badly that he’s thinking of his own selfish interests by trying to form this alliance with us. So, taking all of that into account, I have to say that an alliance with the Vanguards is our best move right now. As the strongest pack, we will stay in control of the situation.”

Sage and a couple of other pack members threw dubious looks at each other, but they quickly fell in line. Greyson was their Alpha, after all—they might not have agreed with him whole-heartedly, but they were on board and would trust in his decision, no matter what.

*But I’m not so sure about this decision. Bad move, brother.*

“We’ll keep our eyes and ears open around the Vanguards. If any of you sees anything remotely suspicious, come to me right away. Just because we’re allied with them doesn’t mean we’re going to trust them enough to let our guard down,” Greyson said. “I hope you all understand my decision, and if you don’t, I’m happy to talk about it further—but my word will stand.”

I was getting more annoyed by the second. I wanted to drag my brother aside right then and there to try to talk some reason into him. *Why would he do this? The Redwood pack is strong enough to take on the Samara pack solo if we need to. They aren’t even a real threat! We don’t need the Vanguards to go up against them!*

Already, the pack had absorbed the decision and seemed happy to move forward under their Alpha’s direction. Mollified, they started to disperse and pick up all the discarded wrapping paper and leftover craft supplies that had been strewn everywhere. Some had already moved on to talking about the gifts they’d gotten, the tension of the moment forgotten. I didn’t blame them. I wished that I could just take this decision in stride like them, but they didn’t know Lucian like I did.

With the pack distracted, it was the perfect time to confront Greyson. I pulled him aside to a quiet corner out of earshot of everyone and wasted no time in letting him know that I wasn’t on board with his decision. “Greyson, do you seriously think that allying with a pack that was recently out for our blood is a good move?”

Greyson rolled his eyes. “I appreciate your counsel, brother, but I sure as hell don’t need it. I know what I’m doing. I told the pack that it was a good move, the right move, so that’s that.”

I frowned at him. *I know you’re dumb, but you can’t be this dumb.* “Are you serious? Their Alpha summoned a goddamn demon. A demon that inhabited Cali’s body and still haunts her to this day, I might add. Lucian is not to be trusted, and he for damn sure isn’t ally material. Why can’t you see that?”

Greyson held up his hand. “Despite what you think, I didn’t just make a snap decision. I’ve thought this through. Lucian is unstable, there’s no question about that, but that’s exactly why we need to keep him close for now. The last thing we need is Lucian becoming an issue again with everything else we’re dealing with. Don’t *you* see *that*?”

*Shit. He’s making sense.* I sighed, still frustrated but not quite sure where to aim that frustration. Of course, I would never tell Greyson that he was right. He had a big enough head already.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a quick movement outside the window, just beyond where Greyson was standing.

*What the hell?* I’d only caught the quickest glimpse of it, but it looked like a shadowy figure had just slipped by. I jolted. *Could it be the vampire connected to the Duquettes?*

# Episode 2979

I didn’t think I’d ever seen so much torn-up wrapping paper in my life. It was everywhere—and every time I turned around, there was yet another pile to tackle.

*I guess this is my first time opening gifts with this many people. It used to be just me, Mom, and Dad.* I did a quick survey of the chaotic, post-Secret Santa party scene. *My god, it looks like a hurricane swept through here.* It was going to be a pain to clean up, but it had been a sorely needed moment of levity for the pack when we needed it most.

Everyone else seemed to have moved on from our little vote quickly enough. They were all busy cleaning up while chattering about the gifts they’d received. Torin had already escaped to the kitchen to set up his mixer, and I could hear it whirring—probably with nothing in it. Mom and Dad were talking to Big Mac and Mrs. Smith about how excited they were about them choosing a wedding date.

“Our own wedding was a pretty magnificent affair,” Dad said. “Lots of flowers, beautiful cake…”

I listened in a bit, but I was distracted. How could I not be after the bomb that Greyson had just dropped? *An alliance. With the Vanguards.* Xavier hadn’t been happy about his brother’s decision. I’d seen it all over his face as soon as Greyson had started talking after the vote. Part of me understood where Xavier was coming from. After all, I’d been at the center of almost all of Lucian’s antics, and I knew firsthand how cold-blooded and untrustworthy he could be.

No matter what we did to get away from them, it seemed like the Vanguard pack always found a way to slide back in. The idea of spending any more time with them than was strictly necessary made me shudder. *If I never saw any of those assholes again, it would be too soon.* Aysel was still a pain in the ass—even when she wasn’t actively pursuing Greyson. Would I have to deal with her more now, too, since we were going to be allied with her pack?

Still, I could see where Greyson was coming from, too. He was just trying to do whatever it took to keep the pack safe—even if it involved us dealing with people we normally wouldn’t.

Xavier had pulled Greyson off to the side right after the pack meeting, and I kept glancing at them, hoping that they weren’t arguing. It was okay for them to disagree—it was inevitable, really—but they needed to learn to discuss things without going for each other’s jugular.

*They both want what’s best for the pack; hopefully they can each see that.* As their mate, and mate to the Alpha, I would step up however they needed me to. I would support both of their feelings in the matter, since I knew that both sides had good reasons for how they felt.

*Something’s up.* Greyson looked particularly heated for a moment, and I panicked, picturing the worst. *Should I go over and check on them?*

Before I could take a step, Xavier jumped—clearly alarmed—and moved toward the window. I stopped cleaning and watched him. The look on his face instantly made my hackles rise. Then, without a word to anyone, Xavier raced out of the room and out onto the back porch.

Greyson and I locked eyes. He looked as confused as I was. We ran after Xavier and found him standing on the deck, staring out at the empty yard. He didn’t even look at us when we came out, busy scanning the horizon over and over again. He walked off the deck and out into the yard, still not saying a word, his head moving slowly back and forth as he stared out into the night.

“What’s going on?” I asked, stepping up beside him.

Xavier looked around again, his face tight as he sniffed the air.

Greyson and I shared another baffled look before Greyson spoke. “Xavier, what is it? Do you sense something?”

Xavier still didn’t meet his eyes. He wouldn’t take them off the yard. “I thought I saw something through the window.”

“What?” Greyson said. He was on high alert now too, and he started searching the yard like Xavier. “There’s nothing out here.”

A few pack members had trickled out behind us, obviously intrigued by our speedy exit.

“Nothing out where?” Lola asked as she pushed to the front of the group.

I turned to her and shrugged. Her guess was as good as mine.

Greyson frowned at Xavier. “I’m going to need you to start talking.”

Xavier didn’t answer right away, and he did one final scan of the area before turning back to face Greyson. “Forget it. Just thought I saw something.”

He moved to head back toward the house, but Greyson put a hand on his arm, stopping him. It was clear that Greyson wasn’t appeased in the least. “You saw something? What kind of something? You brought half the pack out here with your behavior, so why are you brushing it off? It sure seemed like something important. So, what the hell was it?”

Xavier was starting to look annoyed. “Seriously, it was nothing.”

Greyson shook his head. “I don’t believe that for a second. I know that there’s a vampire and a witch out there somewhere, so if you saw something near the pack house, I need to know.”

Xavier just stared at him.

“And if you’re not going to say shit,” Greyson said, his voice tight, “then I want to get a patrol out here ASAP.”

Greyson turned to Rishika and Sage, who’d stepped forward without Greyson having to say a word.

“We’re on it,” Rishika said.

Xavier shook his head. “That’s not necessa—”

Greyson shot him a biting look.

I knew what Greyson was thinking. *Why in the world would Xavier not be concerned if he thought he saw something?*

Greyson nodded at Rishika and Sage. “Thank you. Go do a lap around the perimeter and report right back if you sense anything unusual—but don’t go looking for trouble.”

They both nodded and headed off, shifting just before they reached the trees.

Xavier returned Greyson’s hard stare. “Fine. They can patrol all they want, but they’re not going to find anything.” Without another word, he pushed past Greyson and went back into the house.

Greyson and I shared a look. And once again, I knew we were thinking the same thing. *What’s going on with him?*

The rest of the pack lingered on the porch to wait for Sage and Rishika to return. I wanted to stay and wait with them, but I couldn’t shake how weird Xavier was acting. I needed to check on him.

“I’ll go talk to Xavier,” I said to Greyson. “He’s more likely to talk to me than… well… you.”

“You don’t need to do that,” Greyson said. “I can handle my brother.”

“I know that, but just let me try. If I don’t succeed, then I’ll tap you in.”

“Are you sure? This is kind of my mess. I’m happy to clean it up.”

“No, I got this.”

“Okay. Well, come get me if things don’t go as planned.”

I left Greyson and went into the house to find Xavier. I found him in the living room gazing out of the window with a strange expression on his face. I walked up behind him and placed a hand on his shoulder—and he all but jumped out of his skin.

“Cali!” He sighed. “Hey, sorry, I was zoned out.” He relaxed and put his hand over mine.

“Are you okay?” I asked. I didn’t know the last time I’d seen him so jumpy—if ever.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Sorry for scaring you like that. I just thought I saw—” He shook his head. “It was nothing.”

I frowned. He looked exhausted. “Do you want to talk about it?”

*He’s being so strange.* I was starting to wonder if the whole Knox-Vanguard thing—and, more pertinently, the Ava situation—was starting to get to him.

Xavier shook his head. “No. Not right now, I don’t.” He turned away from me and looked back out the window.

Then a pang of realization hit me. He hadn’t had a moment to really relax in ages. He’d been bouncing from one fire to the next with no real break in between.

*No wonder he’s burned out. Everyone needs a little R&R sometimes—even a werewolf.*

I thought about how important it was for me to get down time with Lola at the mall, or to spend time with Torin binging Netflix shows. Xavier never really got to have those kinds of small respites—and it was taking its toll.

I studied his tired but handsome face, and a warm feeling flooded through me. *I know just how to take his mind off everything.*

“I know what you need,” I said without thinking.

Xavier looked at me. “Oh? What do you mean?”

I was starting to get really excited. “You and I need to get away from all of this, and have some time, just the two of us.”

# Episode 2980

**Xavier**

Cali’s suggestion came as a pleasant surprise, especially when I saw how excited she was about the prospect of us getting away together.

“What exactly do you mean, Cali?” Before I knew it, I’d drifted off, imagining Cali and me “getting away from it all.” I fell into a fantasy of the both of us on a beautiful beach somewhere, lounging by the waves and sipping cocktails. I pictured Cali in a skimpy red swimsuit, her beautiful body glistening in the sun. No distractions, no pack drama, and most importantly, no Greyson. Just the two of us enjoying each other without anyone interrupting us or bothering us about one problem or another. Heaven.

I shook my head, clearing away the fantasy. *It’s ridiculous to even fantasize about something like that. It’s not like we’re in any real position to take off and go on an actual vacation.* No. I had my work cut out for me right now with everything going on with Knox and the Seluna ashes thief. Time away just wasn’t in the cards right now.

“You know, get away from it all, just the two of us,” Cali said.

“What on Earth are you talking about? Are you serious?” I was trying to stop myself from getting too giddy about the idea. *There’s no way we could do that… Could we?*

Cali grinned up at me, tickled by my confusion. “I *mean* that you and I need to go on a date.”

“A date?” I barely remembered what a date was, it had been so long.

Cali nodded quickly. “Yes, like a real date. We’ve been so wrapped up in everything for so long, and you’ve been gone so much, dealing with the ashes and the Samara pack and…” Cali paused for a moment, no doubt trying to decide whether or not to mention Ava’s name.

*You want to say that the two of us could use some reconnection after all the Ava stuff, but you won’t.*

Obviously deciding to steer clear of even speaking Ava’s name, she continued. “I just think we could both stand to blow off a little steam. So? What do you think?”

I took a moment to really consider the idea. *Me and Cali. On a date. Like normal people.* Cali was looking up at me, waiting. She was so eager, and her face was shining.

I smiled down at her. “I think that sounds amazing.”

It maybe wasn’t the best timing for a little “us” time, but then again, maybe this *was* the best time. Besides, when would there ever be a *good* time? There was never a dull moment in the pack house, so we needed to snatch whatever time we could and let the chips fall where they may. After all, I’d been so wrapped up in my worries and trying to protect Cali that I hadn’t been able to make time for her—the one person I loved more than anything.

*What’s all this fighting for, if not Cali?*

I was warming up to the idea more and more. Maybe taking a little time to clear my head would be good for me. After all, I was starting to get a little jumpy. I was still feeling stupid about freaking out over the shadow I thought I’d seen in the window. When I’d stepped outside to check what it was, I’d known instantly that it was nothing at all. There’d hadn’t even been a scent on the breeze to indicate that anyone was around.

I needed to get a handle on myself if I was going to effectively protect Cali and the pack. I was starting to feel a little paranoid, and that wasn’t good. If I didn’t get a grip, I could end up doing something stupid that would put Cali in danger. I’d already leapt to that unlikely conclusion when I’d thought a Duquette, or one of their agents, was lurking outside.

*Maybe taking a little time to relax will actually keep me from getting too in my head, which would be good for everyone.* With a clear mind, I’d be able to focus on how to really tackle everything we were dealing with head-on. But even as I thought this, doubt crept in. *But if I go off with Cali before getting a start on all of this, could things end badly?*

Cali was still beaming up at me, all excited and beautiful. There was no time to overthink it any further, not with her giving me that look. *I guess I’m in. How can I say no to that face?* I was starting to relax, despite myself.

“I’m definitely in.” I pulled her in for a hug. “Spending some alone time with you *does* sound like exactly what I need.” I pulled back and looked her in the eye. “So, what did you have in mind?”

Cali’s face fell a little. “Well… I hadn’t gotten that far yet.”

I grinned at her, my heart lightening by the second. “Okay, well, leave it to me. I’ll think of something for us to do. How does tomorrow sound?”

Cali grinned. “Perfect—except for one thing. This was my idea, so *I’m* going to be the one making the plans, got it?”

“Oh, really? You’re taking control?” *I like where this is going…*

“Yup, you get to be surprised this time.”

Cali linked her arms around my neck and pulled me in for another hug. I melted into her and closed my eyes, finally relaxing and marveling at the wonder that was Cali.

*How is it that she knew exactly what would make me feel better right now?*

I breathed her in, already feeling like we were the only two people in the world. I liked that feeling and wanted more of it.

We both turned at the sound of Greyson and the rest coming back in from the porch.

*I can’t wait for our date. No interruptions, no pack shit, just the two of us.*

Reluctantly, I let go of Cali, and she went off to chat with Lola.

“It was all clear out there,” Rishika announced. “Nothing to worry about—exactly like you said, Xavier.”

“Good,” I said, noticing how relaxed the pack looked as they filtered back inside. They were back to chattering about the Secret Santa party and Christmas and their gifts. I was happy that my little freak-out hadn’t completely ruined the Christmas spirit.

Torin rushed past. “Thank goodness, Rishika. I don’t have time for any more supernatural nonsense. There’s still so much I need to do.” He ran into the kitchen. “And it’s high time that I find out just how many cookies this mixer can put out in one go,” he said under his breath.

I watched him, amused for a moment by how quickly the pack was able to shift gears. I was happy for it. It was no use wallowing in stress in the small moments when it wasn’t necessary.

I turned to see Greyson standing right beside me.

“I know Cali needed to talk to you, but I need to, too. What was all of that about back there? You alarmed the entire pack, and for what?” Greyson crossed his arms over his chest and faced me head-on.

*Leave it to my brother to completely kill my vibe.* I didn’t want to tell Greyson the truth: that I’d been afraid. He would never let me live it down.

“I told you in the end that it was nothing,” I said. “You’re the one who insisted on sending out patrols and getting everyone all riled up and on the defense.”

I turned to leave, but Greyson put his hand on my shoulder.

“Xavier, if there’s something—anything—that you’re worried about, I need to know.”

The truth was that I’d thought the shadowy figure was one of the Duquettes, or someone on their payroll, coming for Cali—but I didn’t want to get into that with my brother right now. “Like I said, it was a false alarm. I’m tired and thought I saw something when obviously, I didn’t. What more do you want from me? Want me to make something up?”

Greyson stared at me for a long time before he finally nodded and moved off.

If I was being honest, I was still a little rattled. *Clearly the whole Duquette threat is getting to me. It’s about time I do something about that.*

I spotted Big Mac talking with Mrs. Smith in the corner. I went over to them, hoping that Big Mac was in a good mood while simultaneously knowing that wasn’t going to be the case.

“Oh god, what do you want?” Big Mac asked as I approached.

“Can we talk for a second?” I asked, ignoring the daggers she was shooting at me with her eyes.

“Do I have a choice?” Big Mac grumbled. She turned to Mrs. Smith. “I’ll find you later, Sabine, duty calls.” She rolled her eyes and followed me out into the hall. “So, what’s wrong this time? I know you don’t care, but you just pulled me away from discussing floral arrangements.”

I snorted. “Then it sounds like I did you a favor.” I sighed and looked her right in the eye, getting down to business. “I need your help finding the Duquettes.”

# Episode 2981

I was sitting in the kitchen with Lola, both of us watching with rapt interest as Torin dumped a bunch of flour into his new mixer with fervor. Humming Christmas tunes to himself, he cracked a bunch of eggs with one hand and dropped them one by one into the bowl, then he powered up the mixer, his face shining with excitement.

Suddenly, flour flew everywhere. Lola and I squealed with surprise and then melted into laughter, ducking for cover as the flour billowed through the kitchen, covering everything in a layer of white dust, including Torin.

He stood there blinking in shock for a few beats. “Whoops,” he said, frantically turning off the mixer. “I think I turned it on too high.”

Lola and I said nothing, too busy smothering our laughter at how dismayed Torin looked. Lola hurried over to show Torin the settings.

“You have to start slow with these things,” she said, still holding back her laughter. “This thing has lots of power that you’re not used to yet.”

“Ooh, I like power. I’m going to be a beast with this thing once I get a hang of it,” Torin said, already back in good spirits. He went to work with his towel, dusting off the counters and table and already pulling out more eggs and flour to use.

I sighed and looked around happily as I moved back to my seat, wiping a pile of flour off my chair before I sat down. Torin had the holiday music on full blast, and the pack house was buzzing with holiday cheer as people milled around, tinkering with their presents and talking among themselves. Everything felt unusually peaceful, and I loved it. It was so rare for everyone to be able to relax and enjoy each other’s company without the overwhelming threat of certain destruction or the like. Our Seluna problem wasn’t completely resolved, and Knox was definitely still a problem, but for now, I was content to push all that out of my mind and fully enjoy a rare calm night of celebration with the pack.

Lola came back over and nudged me in the side. “What are you thinking about? You’ve got the biggest, stupidest grin on your face right now.”

I laughed. “I dunno. This is just nice, I guess. I just love this time of the year. You know that.”

Lola studied me closely. “I mean, yeah… Who doesn’t love Christmas?”

I laughed again. “Okay, okay. Fair. I’m also a little excited because I’m going on a date with Xavier tomorrow.”

I was smiling so hard that my cheeks hurt. I couldn’t believe we were actually going to do it—spend some long overdue time together. I couldn’t stop fantasizing about how great it was going to be. It was all I’d really been able to think about since Xavier had agreed. He’d looked skeptical at first, and I’d almost thought he was going to say no—which I would have understood, under the circumstances—but I was ecstatic that he’d said yes.

Lola reared back in surprise. “Really? Xavier doesn’t strike me as much of a ‘date’ guy.”

I nodded. “Exactly! That’s why I’m so excited.” I leaned close to Lola and lowered my voice. “I’ve been so worried about his stress levels, lately. He’s just seemed so… strained. This date will be the perfect thing for us. Just some time for us to reconnect and enjoy each other’s company without anyone getting between us.”

“After the whole Ava thing, you mean?” Lola arched an eyebrow at me.

I rolled my eyes, annoyed. “I don’t want to talk about her. Besides, this isn’t about her. It’s about me and Xavier.” Ava was in the past. Xavier had assured me of that, and I believed him.

Lola nodded. “Sure…”

I gave her a playful whack. “Stop raining on my parade.”

Lola put her hands up in pseudo-surrender. “Fine, fine.” She grinned at me. “So… Where are you two going?”

I beamed. “That’s the best part. I get to plan the outing.” It was nice to take control—which was rare thing when dating two Alphas.

“Ooh, so do you need some suggestions?” Lola’s eyes brightened, and she was already pulling out her phone and scrolling through a list of the current hotspots. “This is where I excel.”

“No, no—I’m perfectly capable of finding a fun date night for the two of us. I’ve actually already got a great idea. There’s a cabin not too far that we’ve passed a couple of times before while driving, but it’s actually on Airbnb, too. It’s the perfect place for a quick getaway—right near the pack house in case there’s trouble, but just far enough away to… you know…”

“I see what you’re getting at,” Lola interrupted. “A place where no one will hear your screams.” She gave me a conspiratorial grin.

“No, that’s not what I said.” I was blushing, just a little. “Xavier will like that, right? Should I think of something more, I don’t know, flashy?”

Lola shook her head. “Don’t overthink it, boo. Xavier will love anything you want to do with him, and you know it.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

I sighed and sat back in my seat, scanning the room again, feeling content. Everyone was in such a light mood, and it was definitely rubbing off on me.

I spotted Rishika and Artemis sitting together in the corner, their heads bent over a present. Suddenly, Artemis reared back in laughter. I smiled to myself. *It’s nice to see my sister looking so cheery so soon after the whole magic overflow thing.* I frowned. *But is that whole situation really resolved?*

I got an uneasy twinge in my stomach, suddenly remembering how Artemis had been talking about leaving the pack house and dealing with the overflow thing on her own. That was the last thing she needed to do, and I needed to make sure that there was no chance of that happening—not right now, when everything was feeling so right with all of us.

*I’d be totally devastated if Artemis left.*

I got up and made my way over to Artemis, then plopped down beside her and Rishika.

“Cali!” Artemis called out, looking pleased. “Look at this thing.” She held up an intricate knot she’d tied with some of the leftover ribbons from the gift exchange. “Cool, right?”

I nodded, but I was distracted by my mission. “So… How have you been feeling lately?”

Artemis gave me a look, obviously picking up the serious tone of my question. “Fine? What’s going on?”

“I mean, how are you feeling about your magic?”

“Ah.” She was serious now. “I don’t know. I’ve been ‘meditating’ or whatever,” she said. “But I’m fine, don’t worry about it.”

“You told me you were taking that seriously,” Rishika said, giving Artemis’s arm a squeeze.

Artemis threw a fond look at her girlfriend. “I am, I am… But I’m just not so sure that it’s *doing* anything.”

*Hm, well, I understand how that feels.* “But you’re going to keep at it, right?”

“Right. You know me, I don’t give up easily.”

“Good… And you’ll be doing it here? I mean, with the pack?” I asked.

“Yes, here, with the pack.” She narrowed her eyes. “You don’t need to worry about me, Cali. I’m not going to run off without saying goodbye.”

I frowned. “Without saying goodbye? That sounds like you’re still thinking about leaving!”

“Oh my gods, I can’t say anything,” she said.

Rishika threw an arm around Artemis’s shoulders. “Is there something going on here that you’re not telling me?”

“*No.* Could you both stop?” Artemis ducked her head a little, and Rishika and I both looked at her hard. She suddenly seemed a little cagey, like she was holding something back. I couldn’t for the life of me figure out what it might be.

Artemis looked back and forth between us and sighed, shaking her head. “It’s nothing. There’s already enough to worry about.” She pointed at me. “And you don’t need to start fishing for new problems.”

I put my hands up. “I’m not!”

“You are, but that’s just who you are.” Artemis said. “Look, I’m fine, Cali. I’m going to work on my little magical problem, and that’s all you two need to be concerned with.” Artemis turned her attention to me. “Rishika has made it perfectly clear that I’m not going to be allowed to do this on my own, so I’ve resigned myself to that.”

I looked between Rishika and Artemis. Artemis was looking at Rishika like she hung the moon. I took a beat to marvel at how great that was. When I’d first met Artemis, she’d been so damn prickly that I couldn’t have imagined her being in this type of relationship. Just the thought of how far my sister had come made my heart swell.

Rishika pecked Artemis on the lips. “That’s right, we’re all in this together.” Rishika stood up. “I’m going to go get us some cocoa.”

Once she was gone, I turned to Artemis. “So, it seems like things are better than ever with her, huh?”

Artemis didn’t answer right away, her eyes soft as she watched Rishika go. “Sometimes when I’m with her, I can’t even believe that someone like her wants to spend all their time with me.” Artemis’s eyes started to shine as she got emotional. “The other night, Rishika was telling me—”

Artemis didn’t get a chance to finish her thought as all the lights went out with a loud *pop*, plunging us all into darkness.

# Episode 2982

**Xavier**

Big Mac frowned at me, her face scrunched up in confusion. “The Duquettes? Who are they, and what the hell do they have to do with anything that’s been going on lately?”

I knew that asking Big Mac to get involved in the whole thing was risky, but I couldn’t wait for my contact, Slugger, to get back to me about the family. He was taking too long, and I needed to do something right now. It killed me to be just sitting around waiting while the family and whoever they had working for them were moving around and possibly plotting on us.

*Who knows how much longer it might take for him to get back to me? Or what if the guy ends up dead or something? Then where will I be?*

I sighed, deciding to tell Big Mac just enough. “The Duquettes are a family I got mixed up with back when I was a mercenary. I just need to know where they are right now. I have reason to believe that the medal we found belongs to them.”

“And *why* do you need to know where they are so badly?”

I paused for a moment, not really wanting to get into the whole thing with her. “I just need to know. That’s all.”

Big Mac looked suspicious, but after a few moments, she finally sighed. “All right, sure. I can cast a tracking spell using the medal now that you’re certain it belongs to the Duquettes. But it didn’t work last time when we tried to track where the medal had come from. Keep that in mind. Do you happen to have anything else of theirs? That might give us a better shot.”

“I wish I did, but no.” We had so little to go on, and I was so tired of this whole thing dragging on. Just thinking about Seluna reminded me of why we were in this whole predicament with the ashes in the first place. Lucian and the Vanguards. The people my brother had just decided to ally with. I shook my head, dashing out those thoughts. I needed to focus right now.

“Fine,” Big Mac said. “I guess I’ll just try again, then. Follow me.”

We were just about to head upstairs when the lights clicked off, throwing us into darkness. In a matter of seconds, the festive mood was gone and everything slipped into chaos. People were wandering around, asking each other what was going on.

“Is something about to go down?” Ravi asked me.

“I hope not,” I said, distracted. I was just as on edge as everyone else. *Is the pack house under attack? Maybe I wasn’t wrong after all about that shadowy figure, and now they’re here. Where’s Cali?* My heartbeat quickened with every breath I took. If I couldn’t get to her before someone else…

Before the panic could really take hold, I heard Artemis’s voice call out miserably. “I’m sorry, that was me. I don’t know what happened, but everyone can calm down. It’s okay!”

Greyson’s face appeared suddenly in a beam from the flashlight he was holding. “Everyone good?” he asked. Once everyone was accounted for, he went around handing out flashlights as Artemis kept trying to calm everyone down.

“There’s nothing dangerous going on.” She let out a sigh that was laced with frustration. “It was just me. Unpredictable Artemis and her unpredictable magic.”

The tension drained from my body as one of the flashlight beams panned over to where Cali was sitting safely beside Artemis—who looked absolutely horrified with embarrassment. We all knew that Artemis was having issues with her magic, so I was able to believe wholeheartedly that there was no outside threat.

*You know your life is crazy when you’re happy to learn that a power outage has been caused by your mate’s sister and her “overflowing” magic and not something more sinister.*

“Let’s get the lights back on,” Greyson said. “Ravi, come down to the basement with me so we can check the fuses.”

Someone tossed me a flashlight, and I clicked it on, nearly jumping when I realized that Big Mac was still right in front of me. She had a bored look on her face, as if nothing had even happened.

“Come on,” she said. “We don’t need light for what I have to do. Follow me.”

I took one last glance at Cali before I started up the stairs. I knew now that there was no real danger at play, but I’d been so terrified for a moment that I wasn’t going to be able to protect her. It took me a moment to actually calm down enough to shift my mind toward what Big Mac was about to do.

*Everything’s fine. Cali’s safe, everyone’s safe. It was just Artemis and her magic going haywire. Nothing to worry about.*

I let out a deep breath as I followed Big Mac upstairs.

“Get the medal and meet me in my bedroom,” she said once we reached the landing.

“On it.” I turned and rushed to my bedroom.

My heart was still racing after the power outage, and I shook my head. *Cali is so right. I really do need to relax, or I’m going to end up having a heart attack.* It was strange for me to be so touchy, and I didn’t like it.

I grabbed the medal and rushed to Big Mac’s room. She’d set up a ring of candles and had a bunch of heady incense burning in the sconces on her walls. It was a proper witchy scene, and so, of course, Big Mac looked right at home. She seemed relaxed and serene, completely unfazed by the unexpected darkness. I passed her the medal, and she placed it in the center of the circle of candles.

“Sit back and let me work,” she said.

I snorted at her self-importance, but not too loudly—I didn’t want to piss her off. I did as I was told and backed up against the wall, watching as Big Mac raised her hands and started chanting. I held my breath, waiting for something to happen. A few moments passed, but Big Mac was just standing there stock-still with her hands up.

*Nothing’s happening. This is fucking anticlimactic.*

Finally, Big Mac dropped her hands. She frowned in confusion and shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

I moved closer. “What do you mean? Did you learn anything?”

She looked so confused that I was starting to worry. *Are the Duquettes already closer than I thought?* I tensed up again as all sorts of dark scenarios started running through my head.

Big Mac shook her head. “No, what I’m saying is I didn’t learn anything. Nothing happened.”

I grimaced. “Well… Did you do it wrong?”

Big Mac glared at me. “Are you being serious right now? Did I *do it* wrong?” Big Mac took a big step back and thrust her hand at the circle of candles. “Go ahead, be my guest. You take over. Show me how it’s done, big bad Alpha. Clearly you don’t need my subpar skills after all.”

I held up my hands in surrender. “No, I’m sorry—I just meant… I mean… Why didn’t it work?”

“Weren’t you listening? I just told you, I don’t understand what happened. The spell should have worked, but instead all I got back was a big old nothing. I don’t get it.”

“Could that mean the Duquettes are dead?” I was starting to feel hopeful. That would be the best-case scenario, as bad as that sounded. “Maybe my contact didn’t tell me the truth. Maybe if it were some kind of misdirection—”

Big Mac shook her head again. “No, I don’t think so. Even if they were dead, I still would’ve been able to sense that they were in the spirit world. There would have been something. I’m getting nothing.” She gave me an uneasy look. “This was different. It was more like… like they’d evaporated or something.”

“Evaporated?”

“Yes, or like they never existed in the first place. It’s kind of like how I felt when I tried to trace the medal before, but this time nothing actually backfired.”

“So you found nothing?”

Big Mac cut her eyes at me. “How many ways can I tell you exactly that? No, Xavier. I found nothing. Nada. Zip. Zilch. Big old goose egg.” She narrowed her eyes at me. “You going to tell me what this is all about now?”

I shook my head. “I think there could be a connection between the Duquettes and the ashes going missing, but I’m not sure yet. One thing I do know, though, is that the Duquettes existed.”

Big Mac frowned and shook her head as she returned her attention to the medal glinting in the middle of the candles. “None of this makes any sense.”

I was getting more alarmed with every second. None of this felt right to me. In fact, it was all starting to feel very, very wrong.

*Where the hell* are *the Duquettes, and how the hell am I supposed to find them if they don’t want to be found?*

# Episode 2983

**Greyson**

Balancing on a ladder, I had my flashlight clamped between my teeth as I unscrewed one of the many bulbs that had been blown out by Artemis’s magic and replaced it with a new one. *One down, a dozen to go.* It was a tedious job, but at least we weren’t sitting in total darkness anymore.

I moved my ladder around and made quick work of replacing the rest of the blown-out lightbulbs around the house. *I’d much rather change a few lightbulbs than deal with the type of threat that could blow out all of the electricity in our house before launching an attack at us.* I was relieved that an innocent bit of errant magic was to blame for our little surprise power outage.

Bathed in the light from the new bulb I’d just replaced in one of the living room ceiling lights, I climbed down from the ladder.

“All good!” I called out. I caught sight of Artemis sitting on the couch. She still looked pretty stunned and miserable. Cali was right by her side, watching her sister with a concerned look on her face.

“I didn’t mean to do that,” Artemis said as I walked over to join them. “I was so happy, and I just wanted to tell you about Rishika and… I wasn’t even worked up or anything.”

“It’s fine, okay? No one got hurt—except a few lights, and a few door hinges… But nothing serious. Ravi even said that the fuses weren’t even fried or anything. Like Greyson just said: all good!” Cali patted her sister’s shoulder and pulled her into a quick hug.

Artemis didn’t look consoled. “Yeah, for now.” She leaned forward and hid her face in her hands.

I felt for Artemis, and I really didn’t want her to beat herself up over this.

“Cali’s right. It was no big deal, and everyone’s still standing. I’ll just keep some extra lightbulbs stocked up until you get a handle on your magic again.” I made a mental note to buy a few extra fuses, too. We hadn’t blown any this time, but if this happened again, we might not be so lucky. As far as I was concerned, it was a small price to pay to support Artemis in any way I could until she got better. “No harm, no foul. Really.”

Artemis didn’t say anything, and didn’t look particularly reassured. She just dropped her head and looked down at her hands where they sat clasped in her lap. I was in the middle of trying to come up with something I could say to really make her feel better when Lola came up behind me.

“Hey, has anyone seen Elle?” she asked.

We all took a moment to glance around the room. “No. Why?” I asked.

“She was standing right next to me when the lights went out, and she screamed—it seemed like she might have freaked out a little bit. I wanted to make sure she didn’t run off or anything, but I guess I failed…” Lola gave a sheepish shrug.

Cali was immediately alarmed, and she shot up from the couch, frantic. “She could be anywhere by now!”

“Calm down, Cali. She couldn’t have gotten far.” I paused and lifted my nose into the air, sniffing until I was able to single out her scent. “She’s just upstairs. I’ll go check on her.”

“I’ll go with you,” Cali said. “She must be so afraid. I feel so bad for her.”

I kept my nose on Elle’s scent as we made our way upstairs. Fairly quickly, I tracked her down to her room. I knocked and opened the door slowly, but when we stepped inside, she was nowhere to be found.

I took a few more quick sniffs and then pointed at the closet. “She’s in there.”

Cali stepped toward the closet and lightly tapped on the door. “Elle?”

“Cali?” Elle’s voice was low and wavered a bit. “Cali, is that you?”

“Yes, Elle. It’s me. You can come out now. Everything’s okay.”

“The lights went out.”

“Yeah, the lights stopped working, but we’re fixing it.”

“How can I help to fix the lights?”

Cali, obviously not wanting to get into the intricacies of electrical engineering, paused to think about how to explain it. “Um… See, lights work because of this thing called electricity—”

Cali let out a loud sigh, clearly not sure how to continue. She opened her mouth, but I stepped in.

“Elle?” I’d barely even gotten her name out of mouth before the closet door flew open and Elle leapt into my arms.

“Greyson!” She wrapped her arms and legs around me and buried her face in my neck. “The loud sound was very scary.”

Ahh, so it had been the sound, not the fact that the lights were out. Made sense since we generally had really good eyesight in the dark. I gave her a pat on the back.

Cali gave me an annoyed look as I carefully extracted myself from Elle’s tight embrace. “I know, I know. It was surprising and a little frightening, but like Cali said, everything’s okay now. You can come back downstairs.”

Elle looked completely reassured as she stared up at me. “Okay.”

Without another word, she bounded out of the room and down the stairs.

“*Seriously?*” Cali said as soon as Elle was gone.

I laughed. “Don’t take it so personally. I’m the Alpha and the one who turned her, of course she’d take me at my word. She trusts you too, don’t worry.”

Cali sighed. “Fair enough.” Then a concerned look crossed her face, and she wrinkled her brow. “We really do need to work on easing Elle into the human world. I’m trying my best, but it’s hard. If she keeps running off like this, we aren’t going to be able to keep her safe. Next time we might not be so lucky, and she might actually run out of the house and into the woods. We’ve got to get her acclimated so she’s not so skittish about everything.”

“Agreed. How are your ‘being human’ lessons going with her, anyway?”

“She’s still got a ways to go, as you can see. So far, Lola and I have only really taken her to the mall. That went as well as it went.”

I nodded. “Well, maybe tomorrow the two of you can sit down and try to walk her through a lot of this stuff?”

I was grateful to Cali for taking responsibility for bringing Elle up to speed. Elle was like a sponge, soaking up each and every experience she encountered in her new human world—but not all of those experiences would be pleasant, and hopefully Cali would be able to find a way to make Elle understand that.

Cali just looked at me with a weird expression on her face. “Tomorrow? I don’t know if I can do tomorrow.” She tore her gaze away from mine and looked down at the floor, digging the toe of her shoe into the carpet.

“Why?” I asked, intrigued. “What’s happening tomorrow?”

Growing more awkward by the second, Cali sighed. “Um, Xavier and I are going to take a little bit of time to ourselves tomorrow.”

I was surprised, but I worked overtime not to show it. I wanted to show Cali that I respected her bond with Xavier, even if I didn’t like it—or rather, hated it. “You mean… like, you’re going on a date?”

Cali nodded quickly, then looked away again.

I couldn’t help the stab of jealousy that hit me in the stomach, but I knew that I had no business getting on her case about it. With considerable effort, I pushed all the negative feelings down and gave Cali a tight smile. “Great. That might do Xavier some good. He’s seemed kind of off lately.”

Cali frowned. “I’ve noticed. I’ve been worried about him, actually. With everything going on with Seluna’s ashes and Knox… Ava…” She trailed off, looking upset. “We just don’t get to spend much time together one-on-one—and he never takes any time off to smell the roses, so hopefully this date will be a big help for him, help him clear his mind a bit. He deserves it.”

I hated seeing Cali so troubled… but I still didn’t love the idea of her and Xavier going off somewhere together, even if it was to give him some much-needed cheering up. I wanted so badly to ask her what they were going to be doing, but I knew it was none of my business. More than that, there was no doubt in my mind that knowing every sordid detail of their plans would hurt more than help. I shoved down the urge to question her and tried to ignore my discomfort with the entire situation.

*When will I get used to this? Will I ever be able to handle the thought of her spending time alone with him?* I looked down at Cali, the bad feelings rising back up to the surface, despite my best efforts to stop them.

My jealousy spiked quick and hard again, dominating my thoughts. *It’s not like Cali and I have had a ton of one-on-one time lately, either.*

I looked Cali in the eye.“What if you and I spent a little quality time together tonight?”

# Episode 2984

I grinned up at Greyson. “Quality time, huh? What exactly do you have in mind?”

I could already feel a rush of heat surging through my body, and I stepped a little closer to my mate.

Smirking, Greyson took a quick glance around Elle’s room, then swept me up into his arms. I threw my head back and laughed, happy that my revelation about my date with Xavier hadn’t soured the vibe between us. It’d been why I hadn’t mentioned anything to him.

“I didn’t have time to plan a big date or anything, but I’ll see what I can do,” he said as he carried me back to his room.

Greyson’s tone was light and teasing, but I felt a little guilty knowing that he was referencing my date with Xavier tomorrow. *I hope he doesn’t get too in his head about that. Hopefully he understands that my going to spend time with Xavier doesn’t take away from how much I enjoy being with him.*

Thoughts of Xavier fell out of my mind as Greyson laid me down on his bed and then crawled up beside me. He held me close and slowly ran his fingers through my hair.

“This is more than enough for me, Cali.” He stopped talking and buried his nose in my hair, taking a deep breath. “Well, it’s not. I can never get enough of you.”

I snuggled against him, enjoying his warmth. “I agree.”

“But after everything we’ve been through the past few days, just being with you feels like heaven to me.”

I brushed my lips against his softly before going in for a proper kiss. I slowly slipped my tongue into his mouth, and he exhaled against me, a groan rumbling deep in his throat. As if I’d lit a fire in him, he rolled me over so that he was on top of me, then he pinned my hands to the bed and ran a trail of kisses from my lips down to my chin and then to my neck. He kissed me slowly there, then dragged his tongue up along the fevered flesh just behind my ear.

“This is all I want,” he whispered.

“Me too,” I breathed. I arched against him, my eyes open and staring at the ceiling as his lips dipped lower, across my collarbone. His breath tickled the tops of my breasts for only a split second before he moved up and pressed his soft, warm lips against mine once again. This time, he was the one to coax my mouth open as he pressed his body press down against me. He rolled his hips against me ever so slightly, and I wrapped my legs around his waist as he deepened the kiss.

“You make me feel so safe,” I said during a break in our kissing. I ran my hands up and down his taut, wide back. I closed my eyes for a moment and sighed, feeling his muscles flexing beneath his shirt.

“Same,” he said, a smirk playing across his lips. He gave me another quick kiss on the lips, then shifted a bit so his weight was half on me and half on the bed. He slung a leg across my middle and nuzzled his face into the crook of my neck. “You smell so good, love,” he said sleepily. “You know that?”

Before I could answer, we both drifted off to sleep.

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I woke up to sunlight streaming in through the windows. I took a deep breath and then let it out slowly, pleased with how refreshed and calm I was feeling. *I didn’t even have any creepy dreams or anything!* With a luxurious stretch, I yawned and glanced over beside me—and was disappointed to see that Greyson wasn’t there. I checked my phone and saw a text from him about letting me sleep in.

*He must be dealing with Alpha things. I hope he’s being careful.*

I sighed and snuggled deeper into the covers for a moment as I thought about how nice it had been to fall asleep in Greyson’s strong arms the night before. I felt all warm and fuzzy for a moment before I realized that today was my date with Xavier. I got excited all over again and jumped out of bed.

*It definitely wouldn’t be the best start to our day if Xavier woke up and found me here in Greyson’s room. That would never be good in the reverse either…*

I pulled on my clothes and went to my room, my mind buzzing with ideas about what to wear.

*I should probably put on something cozy, and bring something outdoorsy, too. Oh, and of course some sexy lingerie for later…* I couldn’t wait to see the look on Xavier’s face when I got him to the cabin. *I really, really hope he likes it.*

A knock on my door pulled me out of my daydreams. Xavier poked his head in with a grin on his face. “How’s my girl?”

I grinned back at him and held up a few of the outfits I’d been trying on. “You’ve got great timing. I was just deciding on how I should dress today.”

Xavier sauntered in, his gaze dragging over the outfits. He smirked when he saw the lingerie. “What’s going on here? Trying to keep me guessing on what it is we’re doing? Just what do you have planned?” His eyes were still on the lingerie.

“I’m afraid you’re going to have to just wait and see. Those are the rules.”

Xavier moved to the window and stared through it, his expression unreadable. For a moment, I was a little nervous. He looked pretty distracted.

“You still up for the date?” I asked.

His attention snapped back to me, and he flashed a warm smile. “What? I wouldn’t miss it.”

My excitement rose as I put on the more outdoorsy outfit and checked myself out in the mirror.

“Are you ready to go then?”

My stomach growled. “What’s the rush? No breakfast?” Truthfully, I’d pictured our date being more of an afternoon thing, for some reason.

Xavier’s smile widened. “Don’t worry about that. I know you’re running the show today, but I’ll make sure you’re fed.”

I loved seeing him in such high spirits after everything that had happened over the last few days. I gave myself a mental pat on the back for thinking up the date idea. “Okay, well in that case, I’m ready.”

“Perfect,” Xavier said.

He took my hand, and we made our way downstairs and out onto the back porch. Even though Greyson had reacted surprisingly well to my being tied up with Xavier today, I was relieved that we didn’t run into him on our way out. I didn’t want to throw our little excursion in his face, no matter how cool he was being about it. I thought back to the nice evening we’d shared, entangled in each other’s arms. *At least he and I got to spend a little alone time together, too.*

“Just so you know, it might be a little bit of a hike to get to our destination, but if you shift…”

Xavier was way ahead of me, and without missing a beat, he shifted into his wolf form. I hopped onto his back and he sped off into the forest. I clung to him, enjoying the speed and the feel of the wind in my hair and getting more excited the farther we got from the pack house.

“Left up here!” I called out, shouting the directions into Xavier’s ear.

*Where are you taking me, Cali?* Xavier mind linked.

*You’ll just have to wait and see.*

I sat back and enjoyed the ride. I’d gotten so good at keeping my balance on my mates’ backs that I could actually enjoy myself. I took a moment to take in the beautiful, crisp winter morning air. After a little while, snow began to fall, quickly transforming the forest into a beautiful winter wonderland.

I sighed and leaned forward, linking my arms lightly around Xavier’s neck. I was feeling so free and relaxed and happy as I directed him toward a clearing that held our adorable little cabin.

“We’re here!” I announced.

Xavier came to a stop in front of the cabin, and I slid off his back. I was even more pleased with the cabin now, seeing it up close. I was excited to make this our home away from home for the night.

Xavier shifted back. “Are we staying here?”

Suddenly a little nervous that I’d made some gross miscalculation, I nodded. “Yeah… I remembered us passing by it some time ago, and I always thought it was kind of cute. So when I found it on Airbnb, I thought it was a sign.” I looked up at him. “Do you like it?”

“Yeah, it’s great.” Xavier grinned and pulled me into a kiss. “I can’t wait to go inside—and I know the best possible way to really get this date started.”

# Episode 2985

**Greyson**

My mother had snagged me as I was heading downstairs for an early breakfast, and now she was leading me into her bedroom after insisting that I come and take a look at something.

“Greyson, I need you. It’s really important. Come with me, okay?” She took me by the arm and guided me back toward the bedroom, her expression unreadable.

“What is it, Mom? What do you want me to see?” I was slightly worried—she seemed so insistent, and I wasn’t getting the best read on what could possibly be wrong with her. “Mom?”

“This,” she said, reaching under her bed and bringing out a big… scrapbook? She sat down on the bed and patted the spot beside her. I sat down just as she opened the book—which appeared to be some kind of wedding planning mega book. “Now that MacKenzie and I know when the wedding is happening, I want to talk to you about the wedding itself. I’ve put quite a bit of thought into this…”

*No kidding*, I thought as I eyed the huge, bulging book. It looked like she’d been compiling it for a long time. I wondered if the book even predated Big Mac, as strange as that sounded. It was just so… big.

“And I just want to make sure that we do everything right.” She looked up at me and took my hand. “The wedding is about me and MacKenzie, of course, but it’s also about family. For me, family means you, Greyson. I want you to be a part of the wedding, and I want you to feel involved.” She patted my hand and gave me a warm smile.

I nodded. I was already going to walk her down the aisle, but then I looked down at the big book under her hand. Slowly, I understood as my eyes scanned the book, which was brimming with fabric swatches, checklists, receipts, and signed contracts. I didn’t think I’d ever seen anything so elaborate (and meticulously organized), and just the sight of it was starting to make me feel a little overwhelmed. I tried to imagine Cali sitting with a book like that and trying to get me to pitch in. The thought caused a warm feeling to rise inside me as I pictured our wedding day, and how perfect it would be. My mood brightened a bit, but I was still feeling a little out of my depth.

“I’m happy to help, of course, but I have to say that I don’t think wedding planning is exactly my forte.” I pointed at the book. “Besides, it looks like you have everything well under control.”

She laughed. “Of course—I’m not expecting you to do the planning or anything. I just wanted to know how you felt about doing the mother-son dance at the reception.” She gave me a pleading look mixed with uncertainty, and my heart went out to her.

I squeezed her hand. “I would be honored.”

*Why would she doubt that I’d say yes to such a simple request?*

I knew our relationship was still developing, but honestly,I’d been expecting her to ask me something like this. There’d been a time in the not-so-distant past when I never would have pictured any of this happening. Now that it was, I was excited. I couldn’t imagine not being at my mother’s side as she walked down the aisle to marry Big Mac (of all people). It would be good to spend a nice moment together.

“Greyson, you don’t know how happy this makes me.” She leaned against me, and I pulled her into a quick hug.

“I’m glad.” I let out a breath. “But I guess I’d better start brushing up on my dance moves.”

For a moment, I was lost in an image of Cali and me dancing at my mother’s wedding. She was going to look so beautiful all dressed up, and I was kind of excited to get cleaned up and snazzy myself. Now I just needed to make sure that I felt comfortable with dancing so I didn’t make a fool of myself. It wasn’t like I danced every day—or even every year, for that matter.

“You and me both!” She laughed and gave my arm a squeeze. She looked much lighter now than she had when she’d first asked me to join her. I was happy that she’d gotten that off her chest—and that it had been such a simple request.

Before we could say anything else, Elle came bursting into the room, her eyes bright and shining as she looked back and forth between my mom and me. I was working overtime not to crack up laughing. Her complete lack of self-awareness reminded me so much of Colton that it was uncanny. They both had the “in my own world” thing down pat.

Elle beamed at me. “Go for a run?” She nodded her head, as if urging me to say yes.

I glanced at my mother, who smiled at me and waved me off. “Yes, go! I’ve got plenty to do here.” She pointed at her massive wedding book.

I stifled a shudder. I was excited about the wedding and couldn’t wait to see the end product of all of my mother’s planning, but I was still reeling from seeing all the work that was going into it behind the scenes. It seemed beyond daunting.

As my mom bent back over her scrapbook, I turned and grinned at Elle. “All right. A run sounds good.”

I followed Elle downstairs, looking forward to shifting and cutting loose out in the woods. Enjoying the freedom of being a werewolf was another thing that had slipped through the cracks with all the recent conflicts, and I was happy that Elle was inadvertently helping me to get back in touch with that part of my life. I’d never thought that my life would be so affected—in a positive way, so far—by changing Elle into a werewolf. She was a handful, yes, but she was shaping up to be less of a burden and more of an interesting challenge.

As soon as we were outside, we both shifted and took off into the woods. I couldn’t help but notice that on the way through the pack house, I hadn’t spotted Xavier or Cali anywhere.

*I wonder if they’re already off on their date…* The thought sent another jealous stab through me, but I forced myself to shake it off and focus on Elle. She was even more energetic than usual this morning, and she was positively exuberant as she bounded through the trees.

We rounded a corner, and I caught a whiff of something.

*Stay close, Elle*, I said. *There are humans around.*

I assumed the unfamiliar human scent belonged to hikers or the like, but I still wanted to be cautious.

Elle stopped in obvious confusion and immediately shifted back to human.

*What is she doing?*

“Humans,” Elle said, standing there naked among the trees. She pointed to herself. “Now I am human too.”

I could sense that the humans were getting closer, and I could only imagine what would happen if they came across a naked woman alone in the woods with a massive wolf at her side.

*No, Elle*,I mind linked. *Shift back—now!*

“But… We meet the humans! As humans?” Elle said, confused.

I shook my head. *Not these humans, Elle*, I said. *Shift, right now!*

“Yes, Alpha,” she said in her sweet, innocent voice.

I let out a sigh of relief as she shifted back. *Good, Elle. Now follow me!*

I turned and took off back toward the pack house, glancing over my shoulder ever so often to make sure that Elle was following close behind and not veering off course.

*I guess that wasn’t a super close call*, I thought to myself. *But Cali’s so right. There’s still so much that Elle needs to learn before she can be trusted to go off on her own.* I sighed. *I can’t look after her 24/7, but I need to do better.*

There were going to be so many times when I wouldn’t be there to give her an order as Alpha. I was going to have to put Sage or someone on her tail to make sure that there was always a pack member with her whenever she wanted to go out on one of her runs—and I had to make sure she knew how to listen to them, as an order from me.

We made it back to the pack house in no time, but as we crossed the lawn, I bristled as a familiar scent caught my attention. *Ava.* She was sitting on the porch, waiting for Xavier, no doubt.

I picked up my pace and loped over to her, shifting just as I took a step onto the porch. I didn’t bother with any pleasantries. “What are you doing here, Ava?”

Ava’s expression was grim. “There’s trouble brewing.”

I waited, wondering what fresh new hell we were about to be thrown into. When Ava didn’t offer anything more, I prodded her. “And it’s a day ending in Y. What *kind* of trouble?”

The concern on Ava’s face intensified. “Knox and his friends are planning something. Something big.”

# Episode 2986

**Greyson**

I stared at Ava, expecting her to say more, to give me a few more details. She just looked back at me expectantly, as if waiting for me to lead the conversation.

*Okay, so she’s not going to make this easy for me. Great.*

“So what’s he planning, exactly? A birthday party? A flash mob… A fight club? What?”

Ava shook her head and bit her lip. “That’s just it, Greyson. I don’t know exactly what it is. I only know that he’s up to something.”

I sighed, annoyance creeping up inside me. It would’ve been great to know something concrete about what Knox was up to for once. Up until now, everything with the fresh new Alpha had been speculation and loose suspicion, and Ava was only bringing me more of the same. “Ava, I already know that Knox is trying to make moves, that’s not news to me. What exactly did you hope to accomplish by coming here?” *Other than seeing Xavier*, I thought to myself.

Ava narrowed her gaze. “I was hoping to talk to Xavier, actually, but he isn’t here, and no one in the pack house seems to know where he is.”

*Bingo.* “Ava, I’m the Alpha, so when it comes to information like this about a possible threat to the Redwood pack’s safety, I’m the one you need to inform. Not my brother. Do you get that?”

Ava nodded and looked away.

“So, did something specific happen that makes you think whatever Knox is planning is more imminent or dangerous than we imagined? Did you overhear something?” It wasn’t that I was afraid of Knox—far from it—but I knew from experience that when stupid people snatched even a shred of power, it went to their head in no time. It was all too common for them to make a rash decision to assert themselves and hurt innocent bystanders in the process. That was the last thing I wanted—especially if that innocent bystander ended up being Cali or one of the pack.

Ava shook her head. “No, I wouldn’t have had the opportunity to overhear anything. Knox has closed himself off in a tent and will only see his friends—Blaine, Tanner, and the others. Whenever anyone else from the pack tries to come near, he just tells them to leave him alone because he’s busy working on Alpha business.” Ava sighed and rolled her eyes. “As if he even knows what true Alpha business is.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” I said, mostly to myself. “Seems like he’s set up some kind of war room.” I could see him now, pacing around like a maniac and riling up his group of dull yes-men. *Ava’s right about that. It’s pathetic how little he knows about what it truly means to be an Alpha.*

“Exactly. Knox and his little lackeys have… I don’t know how to put it. They’ve been in a weird mood. They seem really intense and cagey. The only thing I’ve gotten wind of is that they’re pissed off about how you showed Knox up with that confrontation earlier. He’s itching to try and put you in your place.”

I nearly laughed out loud but managed to hold it back. “I’d like to see him try.”

I studied Ava closely, trying to gauge how much of her story to believe. I still didn’t trust Ava one bit, no matter how convinced my brother seemed to be about her loyalty to the Redwoods. For all I knew, Ava could actually be here on Knox’s orders to stir up additional distrust and trouble. *Though I have to admit, she does seem to be genuinely concerned—even if all of that concern is probably reserved for Xavier alone.* That was the one thing that gave her even a shred of credibility in my eyes. Her absolute devotion to Xavier couldn’t be denied.

“Tell me, Ava. Why are you so invested in helping the Redwood pack, anyway? It’s not like we have the best history with you—and we certainly haven’t always gotten along all that well.” I watched her closely, trying to suss out whether she was really being genuine—and if she might admit what I suspected.

Ava was cool as a cucumber, as usual, and stared right back at me like I was stupid for even asking the question. “You know why. Xavier. I don’t think that’s rocket science, Greyson. I don’t want a repeat of what happened two years ago, that’s all.”

*You just don’t want to die again.* Though I supposed I couldn’t really blame her for that.

“I also want to protect the people in my pack who didn’t ask for Knox. Some of us just want to live and not be involved in a bunch of recklessness because our new Alpha has shit to prove.”

This time I could tell that she was really being truthful, which set my mind at ease about whether she was really working against us—but also set off alarm bells in my head. *If Ava realizes that Xavier is never going to choose her, who knows what she might do?* As much as I disliked the thought of it, it had become even clearer recently that Xavier was all in with Cali. Ava might have felt a shred of hope during their little ruse about what might remain between the both of them, but it wasn’t going to happen. I’d told Xavier to keep her close, and if he didn’t do that… Well, there was a chance he’d be creating a ticking time bomb. I shook away those thoughts and set them aside. That was a problem for the future. The pressing problem of the moment was finding out exactly what little Knox was up to.

“Are you sure you don’t know anything about Knox’s actual plans? There’s nothing I can really do about any of this unless I have concrete information.”

Ava nodded. “I get that. If I hear anything at all, I’ll come to you.”

I nodded. “You should probably get back to the Samaras. You need to stay close so that you have a chance to hear anything that’s worth hearing. Not to mention that Knox was having you followed, so someone could be watching you. That would make things worse for a lot of people, and I don’t think you want that.”

“No one followed me,” Ava said, even though her eyes were combing the woods. She paused and then peered back into the pack house. “You don’t know when Xavier’s coming back? I was really hoping to talk to him.”

I shook my head. “I have no idea where he is right now.” *Or where Cali is…*

Ava, clearly disappointed, said, “Well, I guess I’ll get back, then.”

*That’s for the best.*

She walked toward the woods, but before she disappeared into the trees, she turned back to face me. “If I were you, I’d make sure the Redwoods all stay close, and are ready for anything.”

“Well, you’re not me, and advice like that might serve your cousin better than it does me.”

Ava nodded and left.

I stared after her, wondering what I should do about her incredibly vague warning.

*Should I contact Lucian?* *But then what would I say, exactly? I don’t have any more information to give him than what Ava gave me—which was essentially nothing we didn’t already know.* Besides, I didn’t need Lucian. If Knox wanted to play big bad Alpha and come at the Redwoods in “retaliation,” then he could be my guest. I could kick Knox’s ass in my sleep. My pack had gone up against far worse things than some stuck-up asshole with something to prove.

I sighed as I went inside to find Rishika. *Never a dull moment when you’re an Alpha.*

“Hey, Greyson, what’s up?” Rishika said as I came upon her in the kitchen, talking to Ravi.

“Not much. I just want to get a few patrols going. The Samaras might try something stupid, but if they try anything, we’ll annihilate them.”

Rishika gave a grim nod.

“No red alert—yet,” I said quickly.

“Got it,” Rishika said, already moving off to go gather a group.

I stopped Ravi as he moved to go with her. “Did you see Xavier leave?”

Ravi shook his head. “No, sorry.” He turned and rushed off to catch up with Rishika.

I searched the pack house until I found Lola. “Hey, you seen Cali?”

“Nope,” Lola said quickly. “I didn’t see her leave. But she’s… uh…”

“On a date,” I finished for her. “I know.”

I pulled out my phone. I needed to get in touch one of them and get them back to the pack house ASAP, just in case. There was no doubt in my mind that Xavier would protect Cali no matter what, but Xavier was alone, without the safety and protection of the pack behind him.

I dialed Xavier’s number and listened to it ring. Finally, it went to voicemail. *Shit.* I didn’t even want to imagine why he wasn’t answering his phone, but I couldn’t dwell on that right now. I hung up without leaving a message and called Cali instead, waiting as the phone seemed to ring endlessly with no answer.

# Episode 2987

“So, I guess you were right about not needing to worry about breakfast,” I said as Xavier and I put the final touches on our massive breakfast spread. I made a mental note to thank Torin for sneaking in all the groceries before we arrived.

Xavier grinned at me as he plated a stack of pancakes. “This was definitely one of your better ideas.”

I gave a little bow as I set a bowl of fruit salad on the table before I grabbed a pitcher of OJ from the counter and set it down between two steaming serving dishes of eggs, bacon, and hash browns. “Aw, it was all worth it just to see the look on your face. I made sure to get all our favorites.” I gestured to the food as my stomach gave another big growl.

Xavier laughed. “Will your stomach ever forgive me for making you wait for breakfast?”

I giggled. “I absolutely refuse to let you apologize for this. It’s all good, really.”

We sat down to eat in front of the raging fire, and I grinned at him.

“This *was* such a good idea, right?” I said.

Xavier laughed and pulled me in closer so that we were cuddled up in front of the flames, which framed our amazing breakfast feast perfectly. “So, what do you want first? A little fruit?”

Without waiting for my answer, he plucked a bunch of grapes from the bowl and held them over my lips like he was a servant feeding his mistress. I held back a laugh as I opened my mouth and took a grape between my teeth.

“That’s it, use your tongue,” Xavier said huskily.

I made a show of using my tongue to urge the grape into my mouth, then I tugged it free from the vine and chewed it, reveling in the sweet and sour flavor. When I was finished, I licked my lips and sat back in my seat as if waiting for his next offering.

“Pancakes?” He lifted his fork and brought it toward me, and I opened my mouth for the syrupy morsel.

I was in heaven. The cabin was barely a mile away from the pack house, and yet it felt like the real world and all of its problems were a million miles away. *It’s a shame that we don’t get to spend time together like this more often.*

“Now it’s my turn to feed you,” I said. I plucked a chunk of melon from the fruit salad and I popped it into Xavier’s mouth—and he nipped at my fingers playfully as he took the tender fruit.

“More,” he said.

I fed him a few more pieces of fruit before I moved to the potatoes. “Something savory, now?”

“Sure, as long as there’s something sweet to follow.” Xavier slid a finger into the waistband of my jeans and yanked me close, his gaze boring into mine. “Is there?”

“Is there what?” I asked, my breath quickening in my throat.

“Is there something sweet to follow?” He leaned forward and pressed his lips to mine. I could taste the fruit on his tongue, and I collapsed against him, excited for what the day had in store for us.

I pulled away before things could get too heated, and Xavier feigned disappointment as he dug into his food. “I’m a patient man, happy to wait for my dessert.”

“But people don’t eat dessert after breakfast,” I said with a laugh.

“Oh, I’m going to eat dessert, all right.” He gave me a look that took my breath away.

As we finished up, I took a look around the beautiful cabin. “So, what should we do first? We have to take advantage of this place.”

Xavier put his fork down and laughed. “I’ve got an idea. How about I show you?”

He kissed me again, this time with more intensity. He rose to his feet and brought me up with him, and, without pulling his lips away from mine, he walked me closer to the fire and laid me down on the soft, shaggy rug.

“Mmm, but we haven’t even had any of the croissants yet…” I said in faux complaint as he maneuvered himself between my legs.

“I’m sure we’ll work up an appetite for them later,” he said softly. He nuzzled his nose into my neck and then down into the cleavage of my shirt, his lips warm and moist against my skin. “You smell amazing.”

“Thank you,” I said. I yanked his shirt free of his jeans, untucking it and pulling it over his head in one smooth motion.

“Impressive. I always did appreciate how you undress me like a pro.”

“I’ve always been good at unwrapping gifts,” I purred. I shifted and pushed him onto his back, then straddled him. I unbuttoned my shirt slowly, keeping my eyes on his. As I slid my shirt down over my shoulders, Xavier’s breath caught in his throat.

“You’re so damn beautiful, Cali. I wish you could see yourself, how the firelight makes your hair sparkle, how flushed your lips are from kissing.” He sat up and pressed his chest against mine, then leaned down and planted a trail of warm kisses over my bare breasts.

I pulled his face up to meet mine and kissed him hard, our bodies smashed together, our tongues dueling, his hands pressed flat against my bare back as we writhed against each other.

“Take these off,” I said, yanking at his belt.

“You don’t have to ask me twice.” Xavier unbuckled his belt and pulled his pants down, then threw them to the side. “You next.”

Rather than wait for me to wriggle out of my jeans, he unbuttoned my fly and then shifted so that I was on my back on the floor again. He pulled my jeans off, trailing kisses up and down my legs as he did so. He pulled my panties off next, and then he climbed on top of me, our naked bodies warm from the fire and buzzing with anticipation.

We kissed a bit more, sliding our bodies together in the firelight.

“I want you,” Xavier whispered against my lips before placing a gentle kiss on the tip of my nose.

“Then have me.”

Xavier reached down between us, preparing to do what we’d been anticipating from the moment we’d stepped into the cabin, but suddenly Xavier stiffened and pulled away.

“Xavier, what’s wrong?”

He didn’t answer, but his entire mood had shifted. He jumped up and moved toward the window, pulling his pants back on as he went. “Cali, put your clothes on, now. There’s trouble.”

“O-Okay,” I said, breathless with panic as I shrugged back into my shirt and slid my jeans back on. “What’s going on?”

Before Xavier could answer, I heard shouting coming from outside. “We know you’re in there!”

My heart stopped. “Who’s that?”

Xavier met my gaze, his expression a mixture of fiery anger and disappointment. “It’s Knox’s lackeys.”

Doing up the last of my buttons, I joined Xavier at the window and saw Blaine, Tanner, and maybe three others I didn’t recognize pacing around the yard. I almost ducked back down from the window when I saw Blaine turn to face us, pure malice in his gaze.

“Fancy seeing you two here,” he said with a smirk. “And all alone, too.”

I grabbed Xavier’s arm as fear raced through me. I knew that normally, Blaine wouldn’t pose any trouble to Xavier, but we were outnumbered. *Blaine’s right. We’re all alone.*

“What are they doing here?” I hissed at Xavier, keeping my eyes on the men.

Xavier had his eyes riveted to Blaine as well. “I don’t know, but I’m sure it isn’t good.”

“So, you coming out, or are we coming in?”

Panic sliced through me. “What are we going to do?”

I grabbed my phone out of my pocket, thinking that we needed to let Greyson know where we were.

“Shit, no service,” I said as I stared at the screen.

“Don’t worry, Cali, I think I can handle a couple of punks like these.” Xavier gave me a quick kiss on the forehead. “We’ll be out of here in no time. I’ve beaten these guys plenty of times before at this point. What I want right now is for you to stay down and away from the windows.”

“But, Xavier—I don’t think you should go out there. There are so many of them! You’re outnumbered! I don’t doubt that you can take them on, but I could blast a few of them with my magic and even out the odds a little bit.”

“No, Cali, I don’t want you involved, not after what happened with Seluna.”

That tugged at my heart. *He knows how badly that affected me… How killing her haunts me to this day. He’s trying to protect me. As always.* “I love that you want to protect me, Xavier, but I want to protect you, too. You get that, right?”

Xavier nodded, his expression grim.

“Good, then I’m going to listen and stay out of the way, for now, but if there’s any sign that things aren’t heading in a favorable direction, then I won’t hesitate to blast those assholes.”

He grinned. “And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

As he went outside, I couldn’t help but wonder if he was walking into a trap. He’d told me to stay low and away from the window, but there was no way I was going to stay that far away from the action. I stood glued to the window as I watched Xavier stride toward the men.

“You stalking me or something?” he said as he approached.

Without a word, Blaine and the others shifted into wolves, snarling as they advanced on Xavier.

# Episode 2988

**Xavier**

Blaine, Tanner, and the rest of Knox’s little friends were so fucking insurmountably stupid. how many times did I have to teach them the same lesson? Had they not learned anything in the past couple of weeks? Well, if they wanted another round of concussions and scars, I was happy to oblige them.

It didn’t seem like they were leaving me much of a choice, anyway.

They were ridiculous, of course, but Cali was inside the cabin behind me, and they’d just ruined our impromptu date. She’d be ready to blast them with her magic if they got too close, but the point was that I didn’t want to put her in that position in the first place.

She shouldn’t have to protect herself. We’d signed up for a nice day in the woods, and instead we had these assholes banging on our door.

“Really?” I cocked my head. “You’re going for an ambush? Finding me alone in the woods like a bunch of cowards? Is it because you know you wouldn’t stand a chance against the entire pack?”

The wolves growled in response as they continued to advance on me. I didn’t shift yet—knowing that would rile them up, and it had the added benefit of showing them I wasn’t scared of their little intimidation tactic. I wanted to humiliate Blaine, so I stared at him only and said, “A whole group of wolves against a single human. How does it feel to be such a fucking coward?”

That did it.

Blaine howled and pounced at me, his teeth bared, claws outstretched. I dodged the attack with ease and shifted, jumping over Blaine to lunge for another wolf who attacked me at the same time. Their plan was obvious—pile onto me, overwhelm me, go for the kill.

Did these douchebags *really* want to kill me? Did they have any idea what that would mean for pack politics? It seemed to me that they had a single collective brain cell, and even that seemed to flicker in and out of commission.

Their intentions didn’t matter either way, of course. There was no chance in hell they could hurt me—I was dodging them with ease, one of after the other, leaving them bleeding and humbled. The plan was for them to tire themselves out—like fucking toddlers.

At this point, I was annoyed, because they were just wasting my morning and taking away from the solo time I was supposed to have with Cali. They were like a swarm of tiny fruit flies that just wouldn’t leave me alone.

*If you think you’re going to win, you’re wrong*, Blaine mind linked as I shoved Tanner back. Blaine’s words were so absurd, I actually laughed, and then—

I was tackled from behind.

*Not so cocky now!* Blaine hissed, snapping his teeth near my ear. I rolled my eyes, turning to bite at Blaine’s paw to ease his hold on me and kick him off—pretty standard stuff. When my teeth sank into his skin, I expected him to flinch back and whimper like the baby werewolf that he was. But this time, shockingly, that wasn’t his reaction.

Blaine growled and slammed me into the ground with a kind of shocking force I’d never, not once, seen him display. What the fuck? That was… *different*.

The surprise wore off quickly, my reflexes kicking in, and I used my tail to whack him in the eyes, distracting him long enough that I managed to shove him off me. I regained my footing as Blaine and his lackeys formed a circle around me.

*What hell is going on with you?* I asked him, point-blank. Because this wasn’t normal. Blaine didn’t *look* normal, come to think of it. His wolf’s eyes were bloodshot, and the muscles of his back were somehow more robust since the last time I’d faced him.

*You think you can humiliate me and get away with it?* he snarled.

The hint of something unhinged in his expression made me feel a little uneasy. But that didn’t matter, obviously—I’d faced worse things than Blaine in my past, and I was certain that I would face worse things in the future. Whatever was going on with Blaine, I would deal with it.

*You’re making such a fuss*, I said. *If you wanted a rematch, all you had to do was ask. When I win today, it’s gonna be three for three!*

Blaine howled and charged at me again. I leapt over him and ran straight for one of the sturdiest trees around. Using it to do a flip and land right on Blaine’s back, I sank my teeth into his shoulder. That normally would’ve been enough to flatten him—just my canines digging into skin and tearing a gaping wound—but now he managed to shake me off, the force of his blow unprecedented.

It became a pattern, after that. Not only for Blaine, but for his lackeys as well—we fought, and I used the same moves that had knocked them out in the past, but this time they were barely affected. Their fighting style had changed entirely, as well. They were far more confident.

Especially Blaine—had the asshole gone to fighting school overnight? I had fought with Blaine before, knew how limited his abilities used to be, but that wasn’t the case anymore. He had done something to himself, I realized, something to even out the playing field. And whatever that was, it meant he was no longer the pathetic little weasel I had trounced previously. I had no time to contemplate things further, though—I was in danger of getting tired, while Blaine and his group kept coming at me.

I kicked one of them in the throat, the other in the groin, and when I tossed them both against Blaine like bowling balls, he yelped. He hadn’t had the time to recuperate, so I charged at his neck, slamming him to the ground, faceup. It was jarring to realize that I was actually straining to hold him down.

*There’s something wrong with you, I can feel it*, I snarled*. Tell your little pals to get the fuck out of here, and let’s settle this man-to-man*.

Right on cue, I felt jaws snapping next to my ear, and then someone sinking their teeth into my shoulder. It was a mirror of my earlier move against Blaine, copied to a T. But before I could process how the fuck it was possible for these idiots to be imitating my fighting style, the rest of the wolves began to pile in.

All their eyes were bloodshot.

Their strength had multiplied.

And above all, they suddenly knew how to fight.

Either way, I needed to lead them the hell away from Cali before she decided it was high time she came out from the house to help me.

*You pathetic little runt*, I hissed in Blaine’s head. *If all of you want to fight me all at once, then you’d better catch me first!*

I broke away from the ring of wolves and sprinted into the woods, away from the house and Cali. She must’ve been watching the fight this entire time, so I knew she was going to freak out now. Better than her jumping into the fray, though.

I sprinted forward, planning to both lead them away and give my wounds time to heal. I was going to need my strength to beat these guys, but there was no way in hell that I wouldn’t win.

*Running scared, Evers?* Blaine mocked.

I didn’t even dignify that with an answer.

*Once we finish with you, we’ll go back for your mate. That only seems fair, doesn’t it?*

His words made me pause and round on him, roaring.

*If you mention my mate again, I’ll rip your throat out.*

Killing someone from another pack would start a war, obviously. But what these assholes were already doing would justify a war, anyway. And at this point, I was pretty sure that that was what Knox wanted, and why the bitchy little shrimp wasn’t even here.

*Which mate are you talking about?* Blaine asked mockingly. *Cali? Or Ava? Because it seems to me that you’ve got them on rotation.*

I didn’t want to play Knox’s game, but Blaine’s disrespect made me see red. With a howl, I tackled him with so much force that we were shoved backward several feet. He clawed at my shoulders as we ended up tumbling down a snowy hill. The cold and the impact shook me up, but I didn’t allow myself to get distracted, landing blows on Blaine the entire time, until we landed at the bottom.

We separated, jumping apart.

I was about to attack again when an odd glint in his bloodshot eyes made me pause. There was definitely something abnormal about him. His wolves started to descend the hill, coming to join their joke of a general.

*There’s nowhere for you to go, Xavier…*

His voice was a hiss in my head. I growled and took a step back, ready to charge, when my foot caught nothing but air. I hazarded a quick glance behind me and realized there was nowhere for me to go. I was standing on the very edge of a cliff.

# Episode 2989

The second Xavier started running into the woods, Blaine and his wolves following him like bloodthirsty hyenas, it felt like my brain was about to explode.

*No, this can’t be happening.*

I stumbled toward the exit and outside, desperate to catch up to the fight. I’d been itching to jump into the fray the entire time I watched those dickheads attack my mate, but I’d tried my best to keep my promise to Xavier, to keep myself safe.

But that was out of the question now.

“Xavier!” I screamed into the forest, my breath coming out in puffs of cold air. There was no sound anywhere, my mate and the wolves long gone, the animals around all frightened away from the presence of so many ferocious predators.

*I have to find them!*

I spotted bloodstains on the ground, and I followed them, running out into the snow as fast as I could. My stomach lurched at the sight. I’d noticed Xavier was injured earlier—could the blood be his? I would blast those monsters to oblivion for hurting him.

*Focus, Cali!* I told myself*. Find them first, get angry later.*

At least the winter wonderland vibes around the forest were on my side. The werewolves’ paw prints were huge—I didn’t even have to pause to spot them. The path was obvious as I ran, and thankfully I didn’t encounter any huge obstacles on the way.

*I’m coming, Xavier!* I mind linked.

I ducked under a tree and continued running, but then I heard Xavier’s voice in my head. It sounded like a broken record.

*Cali… don’t…*

Why couldn’t I hear him clearly? Also, *don’t*—*what*? Don’t come? That was out of the question. How could I leave him out there to fight for his life without trying to help? These fuckers had no idea who they were messing with!

*I didn’t survive Seluna just to let my mate get ambushed by a bunch of psychopathic werewolves.*

I kept running, still grateful for the obvious pawprints, but then they suddenly ended at the edge of a hill. My stomach dropped. I paused, panting, looking down at the slope. The marks in the snow indicated a struggle, like something had tumbled down and across. Something huge and wounded, because there was blood there as well.

*Don’t let it be Xavier’s blood*, I begged internally.

It felt good to be in the “anger” stage of my predicament. Hopefully “fear” would hit me *after* I blasted the evil Samaras away from my mate. In the meantime, though, I needed to figure out how to get down this hill. The snowfall was pretty mild right now. But if I just slid down, I’d risk spraining an ankle or something—I was gifted like that—or accidentally jumping into the fight at an inopportune moment.

I needed to think.

*Think, Cali! You’d better think like—*

I had to think like a fighter. Not a werewolf who had size and strength on their side, but a Fae. A Fae like—well, like my sister. Artemis’s skills were approximately a hundred times deadlier than mine, but we were the same size, and we both had offensive magic. I forced myself to focus and remembered that Artemis sometimes fought in werewolf battles while using a vantage point.

I looked up at the trees.

*Bingo!*

But wait—no. I couldn’t climb a tree. I didn’t have Artemis’s bow and arrow to shoot anyone from up there. Drat. What the hell was I supposed to do now? Also, it wasn’t like I was very good at climbing trees, was I? I probably shouldn’t try it and hurt myself in the process, not when—

A wolf’s yelp in the distance cut off my thoughts. Was it Xavier? My heart was pounding, my fingers numb from the cold while rage and adrenaline burned inside me. I wasn’t gonna let them hurt my mate, and that was that.

Determined—and at this point not giving a fuck—I decided to just go down the hill. Carefully. *Ish*. I held onto tree trunks and slowly slid down, because the danger of snapping my neck remained, and I just couldn’t allow myself to die that way.

*It’s gonna be fine!* I thought as my shoes dug into the snow, as my palms felt raw while I grabbed onto a stray branch. It was gonna be just—

*CRACK!*

The branch broke, and I slipped a ways down, letting out a horrible scream that was the exact fucking opposite of subtle. Panting and frantic, I dug my heels in to stop myself from going further down, wrapping my arms around a large tree trunk.

I was breathing hard, my pulse thundering in my ears. I couldn’t feel my hands, my feet, my lips. All I knew was that I was a fucking moron who’d just screamed and made her presence known.

*This is* not *what a fighter would do, Cali! You know nothing about tactics, goddamn it!*

Still panting but with my neck decidedly not broken, I looked around. I was still alone…

I blinked, clearing my vision. No. I was definitely not as alone as I thought.

Teeth—that was the only word throbbing in my brain when I faced the wolf. The *were*wolf, given its size. Its footfalls were so soft in the snow that I would never have heard it. I was actually lucky I’d seen it. Its eyes were bloodshot and ominous, with an eerie quality to them that I’d never seen in the Samara pack before.

I had no idea what the fuck was going on with Ava’s pack, but I wasn’t gonna die today.

*Not today, Satan!*

“You better not come any closer!” I shouted. “I’ve got magic, and I’m not afraid to use it!”

At least I wasn’t lying. Entirely. I had a much better handle on my magic than I had in the past, but the thought of engaging in a one-on-one fight with a werewolf still made me shudder. Suddenly, all the rage I felt was cloaked by fear—an icy kind of feeling that reminded me of the last time I’d fought someone, just the two of us.

Seluna.

I had killed Seluna. I’d used my magic, and I’d driven the sword into her, and then—

*No! Don’t think about it, don’t!*

The sounds of flesh and bone cracking, Seluna’s shock, her pain and horror and my own as well, when I realized that I was alive, but I had killed her. I had killed to survive, but that didn’t make the fact of it any less horrifying.

I thought Lola would disagree, that she would say that I was only defending myself, that I needed to remind myself that I deserved to live, even if that meant someone else dying. Especially if that someone was a literal fucking demon who’d been torturing me.

But my guilt didn’t listen to logic.

And as I stared into the wolf’s eyes, I thought that if I made the first move right now, I wouldn’t be any better than Blaine, who’d started this mess.

“Stay back,” I commanded. “Don’t make me hurt you!”

The wolf made a sound like a laugh. He continued to come closer. His breath fogged the air, and I could see the blood dripping from his jaws. Was that Xavier’s blood? Was this Blaine’s wolf, or one of the others?

I didn’t know—didn’t care, actually, because the reminder of what they’d done to my mate made me feel less guilty. Less afraid, and just angry enough all over again to position myself to blast him when he attacked.

He *would* attack. I could feel it.

“Get the fuck away from me before I—”

I lost my footing, and my breath caught as I slipped again and slid down the cliff once more—only a couple of feet, but that was enough. In a blur of motion, the wolf lunged at me, going for my foot, its teeth digging into my calf and ankle, so deep that I screamed. The pain was searing, white-hot as he dragged me down the hill with him as if I were a piece of dead meat.

He wanted me dead.

“No! You sick son of a bitch, let me go!”

The fury was back full-force. I couldn’t let Xavier see me like this and put himself in danger to save me. With a shout, I used all the strength I had left to sit up as the bastard dragged me, and, in one motion, I blasted him right in the face.

And I didn’t even feel guilty about it.

“I warned you, you asshole!” I screamed and blasted him again after he cried out, but thankfully he let go of my foot. I wasn’t about to wait for him to attack again. The impact of my magic sent him flying down the hill, rolling as if he were nothing, and I thought—

I thought, *That’s what you get.*

As terrifying as the thought was, considering who I was and who I wanted to be, it felt right. Not for too long, though—the adrenaline wore off only seconds later, and I stumbled back into the snow, moaning in pain. The bite was searing, agonizing, and I felt myself getting weak.

*I shouldn’t close my eyes! I can’t fall asleep, that’s not right, that’s not…*

The sky was white. The snow fell on my cheeks, more rapidly now, icy water that made me shiver. I forced myself to look down at my leg, lying there all mangled and bleeding. Was it broken? Was there a piece missing?

The sight of the blood made me sick.

*Seluna bled like this, remember? I was the one who made her bleed…*

My head felt hot, heavy and dizzy. I could do nothing but fall back into the snow. The world was spinning, fading, and I told myself to stay away, but *no*. It wasn’t working.

*No, I don’t want to die like this.*

The next time I forced my eyes open, I was surprised to see Greyson over me. It looked like he was really with me. And he looked perfect, all illuminated in the white glow of the snow. I wanted to reach out to him, to ask for his help, to ask him how he knew to get here so quickly, but I couldn’t speak. And what was more distressing was that Greyson didn’t seem to move.

A horrible thought invaded my mind. Was he really here? Or was I hallucinating?

# Episode 2990

**Greyson**

There were splatters of red on the snow, all around Cali where she lay on the ground. The trail of blood started from the wound on her leg and moved to her right hand that was stained with it, trailing up to her head as if she’d tried to touch it.

There were dots of red on the snow, all around Cali’s face.

A bloody halo.

I rarely, if ever, experienced terror, but I knew that this was what it felt like.

Thankfully, Lola had the Airbnb’s address in her email; with the rest of the pack behind me, I’d followed Cali to the cabin before the scent of her blood had led me here. My mate’s eyes were closed, but I could hear her heartbeat, and that was what I needed to stay sane.

For now.

“Cali.” I breathed her name, dropping to my knees, scooping her into my arms. “I’m here, I—can you hear me? What happened?”

She half opened her eyes and squinted for a second, then closed them again. “Greyson…”

She sounded raspy—unlike herself. She was cold, pale, fragile, and she smelled—she smelled like another wolf. *Not* a Redwood. My gaze fell back to her leg, and I reached to slide the torn fabric to the side. Cali groaned in pain as I realized that this wasn’t just any wound…

One of the Samara wolves had *bitten* her.

I saw red.

Rage was a tricky emotion for me—and a rare one, at that. Rage reminded me of my father, and I had sworn never to be like him. But when I tapped into that place, it was hard to let go. It was hard to ignore that the Samaras could be so blatantly defiant as to attack the mate of an Alpha.

To *bite* the mate of an Alpha.

There would be hell to pay.

“Stay with me, love,” I said. My voice sounded rough, as if I was suddenly no longer myself. As if I were someone other than the level-headed Greyson everybody counted on. I had no room for anyone else right now—just Cali, who groaned when I took her shoe off.

I tried to be gentle, but she whimpered in pain.

“I need to try to stop the bleeding,” I said. “I’m so fucking sorry…”

That was true. I was sick with how sorry I was. I’d done this time and time again—I’d let someone hurt her, whether that be Lucian, or Seluna, and now the Samaras. What the fuck kind of mate was I? How the hell could I live with myself when Cali kept getting hurt, and I just kept fucking letting it happen?

This was a nightmare.

Cali’s blood was sticky, making the fabric of her jeans stick to her skin, the coppery scent of it making me sick. She whimpered as my cold fingers fumbled to tear off the fabric, thoughts racing in my head.

A wolf bite meant one thing: the lupus sputo had been passed into her body through her wound. The lupus sputo that could either kill her or turn her into—

*No.*

“Is it bad?” she croaked. “It hurts like it’s really bad, Greyson, and I’m…” She shivered. “I’m so cold…”

She was bleeding too much.

Before anything else, I needed to stop that.

“I know, love,” I started. “I’ll fix everything, but I need you to focus on me, okay?” I tried to sound soothing, but I knew I was begging. “Tell me about an embarrassing thing that happened to you.”

Cali actually laughed a little at that, coughing as her teeth chattered. “There’s a big selection to choose from…”

“I want to hear everything,” I said. I tied the strip of fabric above the bite mark to stop the rush of the blood, then I wiped it clean with another strip to see the damage. The bite marks were deep enough in her leg to cause all sorts of damage.

“Well, when I was six, I thought a bumblebee wanted to be my friend…”

Cali continued to babble on about a flower crown and a pet bumblebee, slurring slightly and a little incoherent, but that was fine. I needed her distracted so I could get the lupus sputo out. The process was crucial, with the two horrible alternatives burning in my head all over again.

*If I don’t fucking fix this, there’s a chance Cali will turn at the next full moon, and we have no idea what that means for her as a half-Fae.*

*If I don’t fucking fix this, she might just bleed to death.*

First step, I had to suck out the lupus sputo. I leaned down and put my lips over the bite marks, gathering poisoned blood and the werewolf’s saliva before spitting it out. She squeaked and hissed every time I went in, but I just urged her to go on with her story, which got more and more incoherent.

By the time I was done, the bumblebee was in love with a wolf, and the snow all around me was marred with Cali’s blood. Her wound looked less inflamed after I wiped it down again, but it still hadn’t stopped bleeding.

“I’m gonna shift and lick your wound now, okay?” I told her. “Just to help with the healing process.”

Cali squinted at me before shivering, nodding, muttering something like, “The grey wolf is the prettiest one, did you know that?”

I laughed under my breath, at this point internally screaming while trying to pretend that everything was okay. I shifted into my wolf and licked at the massive wound. I hoped the mate bond would do its magic, and the skin would start to heal.

*Stay with me, love*, I mind linked. *Hold on for me.*

Her eyes were closed as she muttered, “The bumblebee loves the grey wolf…”

Her skin was so pale, it looked one with the snow. I could just tell she was seconds away from passing out. I licked at the wound again and again, but—

It was too deep, and our bond connection wasn’t stopping the bleeding.

The mate bond wasn’t enough to save her.

*I* wasn’t enough.

*Rishika!* My mind link was a shout. *Where’s Torin? Who’s carrying him? I need him now!*

*They’re coming, I can see them!* Rishika replied.

A second later, Lola appeared with Torin on her back and Artemis running behind them.

“Cali!” Torin gasped and slid off the wolf, rushing toward my mate. “I got this,” he told me gruffly and immediately raised his hands over Cali’s leg, his eyes focused, his fingertips glowing faintly blue.

I had to go find the wolf who’d done this, and I had to go find Xavier—those were the Alpha’s responsibilities. But I couldn’t just leave without making sure that Cali was gonna be okay. I just *couldn’t*.

My sanity depended on it.

I exhaled sharply when I saw the wound start to close up. The healing was rapid after that, and when my eyes met Cali’s again, hers were open and alert.

I could breathe again.

*Get going*, I told Rishika*. I need at least half of us down the hill.*

Rishika nodded and followed direction, and I turned back to Cali. She was still pale, but she gave me a smile as Torin continued working on the wound. I nuzzled her cheek, her neck, trying to soothe her—and myself too.

“Hey, I’m okay, don’t worry,” she whispered in my ear, sinking her fingertips into my fur.

*I love you*, I mind linked.

She sniffled, shivering. “I love you too. So much.”

*Hang in there. I’m going to go deal with whoever did this to you*, I said.

She shook her head, her eyes wide. “I’m okay, Greyson—I promise. Please don’t put yourself at risk. Everything’s fine…”

I clenched my jaw. *Who did this to you?*

“I—I don’t know. One of the Samara wolves,” she whispered.

*Where’s Xavier?* I asked.

“Xavier went down the hill,” Cali said quietly. “Blaine and his friends ambushed us.”

*I’ll take care of them*, I told her.

“Greyson, no,” she rasped. “You can’t kill any of the Samaras, it might start a war!”

*One of them bit an Alpha’s mate*, I told her calmly. As if that explained everything.

To me, it did.

“Greyson!” she called after me, but I didn’t respond.

I didn’t listen.

My rage was deathly silent in my head, getting bigger and bigger until I felt it across every inch of my skin as I raced down the hill.

*Samaras to your left!* Rishika shouted.

I looked around, saw the other wolves in the trees, and snarled. *What are you waiting for, you cowards?*

Three of them attacked me at once. I sliced and clawed my way through them, noting the scent of each one—none of them smelled like Cali, so I didn’t kill them. They seemed much stronger than I’d initially thought, though. I knew that Xavier had fought Blaine before, even while Blaine had been shifted and Xavier had remained *human*. So their current power, the fact that they could put up so much of a fight, made no sense.

After shoving the last one off me, I looked around, couldn’t see Xavier or smell him, but then—

Another scent hit me.

Blood.

*Cali’s* blood.

I recognized the wolf. Tanner. One of Blaine’s friends. A reckless young werewolf who laughed in my face and mind linked, *Well? Is she dead?*

*No*, I replied. *But you’re about to be.*

I threw myself into the fight, charging straight at him. I went for his eyes, his stomach, all vulnerable spots to weaken him fast so I could deliver the fatal blow. The gashes were so deep he was bleeding everywhere, and yet—he held his own. His strength didn’t match his physique, so something…

Something was wrong here.

Either way, I didn’t give a damn. I slammed him to the ground, my claws at his throat. He was choking, his eyes wide as the air left his lungs.

And then, I said, *You’re done.*

I roared, opening my mouth to rip his throat out, when—

Two bodies jumped on my back—two at once, the pain of their claws searing as we all rolled down the hill. We stopped at the edge of a cliff, and I growled, jumping up to face them.

The wolves who’d tackled me were Knox and Blaine.

Tanner was nowhere to be seen.

My eyes were fixed on Knox.

*If you don’t call off your wolves…* I bared my teeth. *You realize what you’re doing, right?*

Knox’s cocky smile tickled my rage. *I’m fully aware.*

The wind shifted, the snow starting to fall even harder, and suddenly I caught Xavier’s scent. I looked around, and he was nowhere, until…

I spotted a place at the edge of the cliff, the marks there, where it looked like someone had slipped down.

With a growl, I faced Knox. *What the hell did you do to my brother?*

# Episode 2991

I felt my strength returning as Torin continued to heal me. His brows were furrowed, eyes closed. The blue light leaking from his fingertips was warm, soothing, but this was the longest he’d ever had to work to heal a wound on me. I could actually feel my skin stitching itself back together.

Focusing on that wasn’t my priority, though.

*Greyson? Greyson!*

My mind link didn’t go through—Greyson, along with the majority of the pack, had gone down the hill. I was out here with Torin, Lola, and Artemis. Artemis had her bow ready, scanning the woods. Lola’s wolf sniffed the air, in battle mode as well. They were ready to fight, and I…

*Well, I’m ready to fight too!* I thought. *Almost!*

I winced as Torin finished healing the last of my wound. “There,” he whispered.

The skin had finally sealed back up. It looked like nothing had ever happened, if you ignored the smudges of blood on my skin. The freshly fallen snow had covered most of the blood on the ground. I sat up and put a hand on Torin’s shoulder.

“Thank you,” I croaked. “I don’t know what I would’ve done without you here. I felt the mate bond starting to heal the wound after Greyson tried to speed up the healing process, but the bleeding…” I shook my head, sighing. “It was too much.”

Torin’s eyes glistened at the corners. “I would never let anything happen to you, Cali. You’re my best friend.”

He pulled me in for a hug. I thought about Astrid, and how she’d been Torin’s friend too, his best one, and how he still mourned her. I hugged Torin tight, fighting away tears as well.

“Everything’s gonna be okay,” I told Torin, just to hear myself say the words.

Still sniffling, Torin broke the hug, picked up the shoe that Greyson had taken off and offered it to me. I put it on. Torin, along with Artemis, offered me a hand to stand up. I needed it—I was still a little unsteady.

“Go easy,” Artemis told me.

Even though I felt stronger now, I was still a bit woozy, and putting weight on my foot made nervous at first. That was over quickly, though, and when I realized that everything was in working order, I exhaled in relief.

“It’s fine,” I said. “I’m fine.”

Torin and Artemis offered encouraging smiles, while Lola’s wolf let out a happy yip. I looked around, feeling invigorated. “Well, then—what’s next? I should find Xavier, actually, because—”

“Absolutely not,” Artemis scoffed, her expression hardening in an instant. “What in the world makes you think that any of us”—she gestured at herself, Torin, and Lola—“would let you jump back into the fray after an injury like this?”

I frowned. “I’m healed now, thanks to Torin, so it’s a non-issue! Besides, my mates are fighting, and I’m going to be alongside them. There’s no way I—”

Artemis stepped forward, her face full of authority. “No. You’re not going anywhere. This is not up for debate, Cali.”

“Seriously?” I asked, my voice rising—my anger too. It was laced with despair. “How can you expect me to just hang out while my mates are in danger?”

“I’m your sister—”

“That’s right, you’re my sister, *not* the boss of me! I’m going to find Greyson and Xavier, and you can’t do anything about it!”

I started to walk down the hill, turning my back on Artemis, when Torin appeared beside me, his eyes wide. “Cali, please—I don’t think it’s a great idea either. The fact that the wolf bit you and left you to die says a lot about their intentions. They want you dead, don’t you see?”

Lola blocked my way, growling.

I huffed. “Lola? You too?” I spun around, looking at the three of them. “I can’t believe you guys are treating me like I can’t do anything—I was the one who killed Seluna, remember? What the hell do I need to do to prove to you that…”

I trailed off, realizing that something was wrong. Artemis had her bow drawn, with an arrow notched in it. Torin had stepped in front of me and was looking over my shoulder, and Lola—she wasn’t growling at me, she was growling *behind me*.

I turned around to face the wolf who had attacked me earlier, coming up the hill. If I wanted to fight, it seemed like I would have the opportunity. I suddenly felt afraid, though, which was ridiculous. When would I become immune to the emotion?

*He wants to kill you*, a voice in my head said as the wolf stared me down.

“If you know what’s good for you,” Artemis called to him, “you’ll turn around right now. We’ve got you outnumbered.”

Lola’s wolf growled again, to highlight Artemis’s point, but the wolf continued to advance. He had wounds all over, deep gashes, broken, bleeding skin. He was in a bad state.

When he shifted back to human, I realized who it was.

Tanner.

“This isn’t a bluff!” Artemis shouted in that cold voice of hers, and as Tanner walked forward, she shot out an arrow that hit right before his next step. “The next one is going in your heart. And I’m going to enjoy it too.”

Tanner stopped walking, his cold expression suddenly turning apologetic. “You don’t understand,” he rasped. “I have orders from Knox!”

I blinked rapidly, baffled. “Am I supposed to be feel sorry for you about that, then? You almost killed me! You tried to drag me down this hill!”

“Exactly,” Artemis said, aiming at his heart. “It would only take one arrow, and then—”

“No!” Tanner pleaded as Lola growled. He picked up the arrow from the ground. “You just don’t get it—I’ve always been the one who has to prove myself to Knox. I’ve never been the strongest one, and I—” He stared at me. “I took this mission because I knew it would finally prove that I’m capable. That I’m worthy of a high-ranking position in the pack. I’m not just a fallback guy, I’m—”

“A kid who believes that killing Cali is the ticket to being one of Knox’s evil generals?” Torin asked, his eyes wide with horror.

I felt horrified as well. More horrified than angry, and I had no idea what that said about me.

“I have no choice,” Tanner said.

Artemis notched another arrow. “That’s not really our problem, is it?”

Lola growled louder, snapping her teeth.

Artemis glanced at her and said, “I know.” She stretched the bow, aiming at Tanner. “I’ll make sure the arrow goes through his eye first. Then we’ll torture him for a while, cut off his hands and feet before—”

“Artemis!” I shouted, just to stop her nightmarish tirade, before I turned to Tanner. I was shaking, a million conflicting emotions running through me as I told Tanner, “Things don’t have to go this way, you don’t have to do what Knox tells you to do! And you’re outnumbered, don’t you see?” I gestured at Artemis, at Lola. “This isn’t going to end well for you.”

Tanner’s apologetic expression vanished. The horrible glint in his eye made my breath catch. “Isn’t it, though?”

In the blink of an eye, faster than I’d expected, he shifted back to his wolf form, just as another massive beast came lunging at Lola. Artemis roared and turned her arrow on the closest wolf, but it was too late—

The second wolf slammed into Lola and Artemis at once, its power so outrageous that both of them fell back.

“ARTEMIS! LOLA!” I screamed, still stunned by what I was seeing—how the hell was that thing so strong?

A roar made me turn again, and there was Tanner, advancing toward me fast, hatred in his eyes.

*You didn’t survive Seluna to die like this, Cali!* I screamed inside my head and raised my hand to channel my magic.

It wasn’t working.

*It’s not working, it’s not working, it’s not—oh my GOD!*

I was still weak. The blood loss must’ve been too much, and I felt like such a fucking idiot for wanting to fight before. Tanner ran toward Torin and me with barred jaws, like a vicious monster set to kill.

“Cali!” Torin shouted, pulling me backward, his arms around me just as Tanner’s eyes bored into mine. He howled and jumped, aiming straight at me, and all I could think about was my mates.

“*No!*”

The word was spoken in a low voice that vibrated through me, but it wasn’t me who’d said it. The voice came from right beside me. One moment Tanner was lunging, and the next he fell to the ground, writhing and squealing with agonizing pain as his old wounds were ripped open and new ones appeared on his skin.

*How the fuck is this happening?*

I shouted the question out loud, looking around only to see Torin, his hands raised, his eyes wide open and focused on Tanner. Purple light gleamed through his fingertips and streamed toward the wolf, who whined and screeched until—

Tanner stopped moving.

His body, gruesomely sliced up, just lay there, frozen.

Dead.

“Torin…” Breathless, trembling, I turned to my friend. My voice cracked. “What did you *do*?”

# Episode 2992

**Greyson**

Knox’s laugh came via mind link. *I didn’t do anything to your brother. Why would you even think that?*

*Cut the shit*, I snapped. *I know you went after Xavier—I know my brother was right here, his scent is everywhere.*

Knox’s wolf looked over at the cliff. *It seems like he took a little bit of a tumble. But how, or whose fault that would be, who can say? It’s a blizzard out here, so I’m sure it was an accident.*

This child had no idea that I was *this close* to murdering him in cold blood.

I reminded myself that the Samaras were still healing from Silas’s war. That I needed to give them the benefit of the doubt. That not all of them had voted for Knox, and I shouldn’t put them through an Alpha’s death all over again.

It just wasn’t the right thing to do.

Cali would want me to do the right thing.

*This isn’t a game, Knox*, I told the son of a bitch. *Call off your pack members, and the Redwoods won’t have to finish this fight.*

Knox laughed again. He really had a death wish. *Xavier’s always been the one to start shit, Greyson*, he said*. It’s obvious he has an issue with me being Alpha, and he’s notorious for getting in the middle of pack wars, anyway.*

*What the hell is that supposed to mean?* I growled.

Knox’s wolf snarled. *He killed my cousin unprovoked!*

*Unprovoked?* I shouted. *Are you fucking kidding me?*

Knox’s wolf snarled again, and I snapped my teeth at him.

*I’m not about to go into semantics with you, and I’m fucking done speculating about who started the fight today.*

*It was Xavier! He—*

I didn’t let him finish. I stepped closer, and when I did, Knox shut the fuck up. *Forget about Xavier for a second. One of your men bit* my *mate today. An Alpha’s mate, Knox, bitten by a rival pack’s wolf, and we both know he’d only dare to do that if it was under your orders. We both know it’s the most grotesque thing anyone could do. What do you have to say about it?*

Knox paused for a moment. As for me, I was stalling at this point. Knox, I would kill. I’d already spared Lucian after he’d harmed my mate, and if word came out that I was a little *too* compassionate, every pack in the motherfucking continental US would think that the Redwood territory was fair game. Not even the fact that I’d murdered my own father, the most monstrous werewolf of all time, would be enough to keep them away.

On the other hand, there were the rest of the Samaras to consider, especially those who hadn’t voted for Knox. Ava, too—she had to be on our side, and it was now clear as day that she’d been right about Knox being unhinged and plotting something huge against the Redwoods.

At my command, all the Samara wolves could be slaughtered in minutes, but I knew that senseless slaughter couldn’t be my M.O. It had been Silas’s, so it couldn’t be mine.

*I’m giving your pack one last chance*, I told Knox. I said “your pack” because this chance was about his pack—not him. He was done for. He just didn’t know it yet*. Call them off. Tell them to leave, to stop attacking the Redwoods. All the packs were just on the brink of a potential alliance. Are you sure you want to mess that up?*

Knox’s wolf scoffed. *You messed that up the second the Redwoods came onto Samara territory unannounced!*

I couldn’t believe this goddamn toddler. No, that was even an insult to children. *Are you serious? Are we back to talking semantics? Because if that’s it, then the scorecard would say that Blaine crossed into Redwood territory first, not the other way around. I have all the right in the world to tear your throat out right now!*

*You’re a fucking idiot if you don’t see what all this means!* Knox’s wolf growled. *I’m a new Alpha, and I need to take a stand when we’re defied! I won’t earn their respect otherwise!*

*You will never earn their respect*, I said sharply. *Because you’re not worthy of it*.

Knox’s wolf showed me his teeth. *I swear to god, Greyson, if you cross me again, it’ll be the last thing you or your pack ever does.*

*Wrong*, I said. *This ends now.*

Before Knox could speak, I attacked. I slammed him to the ground and bit into his shoulder, bitter blood pooling in my mouth as Knox howled. A second later, his lackeys arrived, a crowd of them jumping on top of me at once, dragging me away from their leader.

The fight didn’t go how it was supposed to.

It was me against four of them, but these were untrained kids, and I shouldn’t have had any problem fighting them. And yet, these werewolves were fast—almost ungodly fast. Like Tanner had been. I’d never seen anything like it. And as many hits as I managed, as much blood as I shed, they only kept coming back for more, as if they knew they would heal too fast and they were trying to tire me out.

Knox had *strategy*.

That realization was so goddamn jarring, so surprising considering who he was, that it made my blood run cold.

*What the fuck have you done to your wolves?* I rasped at Knox, and he laughed, and after that—

He looked away.

Suddenly, all his wolves started to retreat like cowards. This was suspicious, but at this point, I couldn’t pull back. I couldn’t let the disrespect stand, so I called out to the pack.

*Redwoods! Go after the Samaras, but be careful—Knox’s allies have enhanced strength!*

The pack howled in response, charging forward with me as we ran after them.

But the Samaras were faster, too.

How the hell were they outrunning us? Sage was the fastest sprinter I’d ever seen, and yet not even she was managing to catch up.

*They’re getting away*, she said, panting.

I fought to wrap my head around this. The Samaras suddenly had strategy, were stronger than normal, healed faster than normal, and now they were faster too?

What the *fuck*?

Running after them right now seemed like a lost cause, so I called it off. Rishika’s wolf breathed sharply next to me after we halted.

*I know what you’re gonna ask*, she said. *Cali is with Artemis, Torin, and Lola.*

She knew me well.

*What about Xavier?* I asked.

Rishika shook her head, and my stomach dropped.

*We need to find my brother!* I called out to everyone. *He might’ve gone over the cliff. Follow me, and watch your step.*

The wind and snow were getting so bad that it was difficult to see anything. The last thing I needed right now was a damned whiteout. I fought to send a mind link out to my brother. I dreaded that he was at the bottom of this thing, knocked out. He would freeze to death if I didn’t make it to him on time.

I refused to let him die like that. I’d probably die myself afterward from the guilt.

*Xavier!* I shouted. *Can you hear me? Can you—*

*Greyson?* Xavier’s voice finally echoed in my head, and I came to a halt.

*Xavier! You’re alive!*

I gritted my teeth when he said, *Obviously. Took you fucking long enough to find me.*

*The mind link works the other way too, asshole. Why didn’t you call for me?* I demanded. I wasn’t used to being so furious, but it had been a constant state for me this past hour. *Where are you? Are you hurt? Are you bleeding?*

*I’m just hanging out,* Dad*. Don’t worry*, Xavier scoffed.

Right. Sounded like just the right thing to do in a blizzard. I huffed. *If you don’t stop being sarcastic right now—*

*Why?* Xavier said. Sarcastically. *You’re not the only one around here who can pull it off.*

I ignored his comment, because we had no time for bullshit.

*Did you fall over the cliff?* I asked. The vicious wind made it so hard to see anything, or pick up a scent. *Did you break something? Are you healing?*

*I didn’t fall*, Xavier said. *At least… not all the way.*

*Then where the hell are you?* I asked.

The wild shifted all of a sudden, the stream of falling snow changing direction. I could now see down the cliff.

Xavier was hanging from the side of it. In human form. Holding onto a rock.

Shit.

*You could hurry up any time now*, Xavier said casually. *It’s so fucking cold out here that I’m pretty sure my balls are trying to climb up inside my body.*

I took a deep breath and prayed for strength and patience and all the good things that were currently overshadowed by my anger and worry.

Turning to the pack, I asked, *How the hell are we going to get Xavier up here?*

# Episode 2993

**Xavier**

So this was cool. A little too cool, Greyson would’ve said.

Like, perhaps cool enough to be called *freezing*.

See? I could do sarcasm pretty well, too. Especially when I was in mortal danger.

I’d never been a rock climber or anything like that, so I was trying to keep my composure here. I doubted anyone would go rock climbing in a freak blizzard like this one, anyway. I could feel my grip slipping, and I tried to readjust, but the snow kept bombarding me.

*Any day now!* I mind linked back up to my brother, ignoring how my voice sounded more high-pitched than normal.

I was an Alpha, dammit. I couldn’t get nervous. Everything would be fine—I wasn’t sure how Greyson and the others were going to pull me up, but they just needed to get creative. They’d been given brains for a reason, and that reason was to save my ass from a blizzard.

I just couldn’t fathom dying because fucking *Blaine* had pushed me off a cliff.

That would be ridiculous. Freakish. As freakish as that asshole’s sudden strength. There was something wrong with that, one hundred percent. What could Blaine have done to make that happen? I had no idea, but I was certain that if I hadn’t slipped because of the snow, Blaine would’ve been toast. And dead. Dead toast.

Fighting to keep my shit together, I gritted my teeth against the cold, fighting to hold onto the wet rock. What the *fuck* was taking Greyson so long? I sure hoped Cali didn’t know what was going on with me, because I knew she would’ve probably jumped down here to “save me,” and killed herself in the process.

I loved her so much.

*Hold on*, Greyson said. *We might have found a way to get down below*.

*What?* I asked. *That’s not going to help me much, is it?*

I craned my neck, but I couldn’t see how far down the bottom was because of the weather. I didn’t want to find out, anyway. Cats were the ones who always landed on their feet—the saying did not apply to werewolves.

*I don’t know what your plan is*, I told Greyson. *But it’s dumb. I’m gonna try to do this on my own.*

*Stay where you are, Xavier!* Greyson ordered.

The second he gave the order, I was certain that there was no way that I’d listen to whatever the hell he had to say. Ignoring him, I decided to move. My footing was slipping, and I couldn’t keep dangling here doing nothing.

I squinted, fighting to see the rocks peeking through the snow on the side of the cliff. I moved cautiously, taking the ice into consideration. I got my hand on a rock up above, and then I pulled myself up. I had a good hold on the rock, and my feet found their grip. Okay, maybe this wasn’t so bad.

I could get up this way, no thanks to my brother. It would be fine. It was just f—

*Fuck!*

The second I made my next move, my feet slipped, my hands suddenly the only thing keeping me from falling down. I spent a few seconds dangling against the cliff, just like when I’d first fallen and caught myself after shifting back to human.

Growling, I pulled myself up, my muscles straining. I fought to get my footing once more, but I slipped again and again. I had no choice but to hoist myself up with my arms alone. Not the way I’d imagined spending my solo time with Cali, but I needed to fucking make the most of it. It was that, or die.

With a huff, I reached for another rock, and this time my hand slipped as well. I was hanging by one hand now, the wind blowing against me, the snow hitting my skin like shards of glass, and my feet just couldn’t fucking cooperate.

I’d be fucked if I couldn’t get a good hold on the rock again. Preferably with both hands.

*Xavier!* Greyson mind linked. *Let go!*

I laughed. It had to sound manic, but at least nobody would hear it through the insane wind.

*Let go? That’s what I’m trying NOT to do, you ass!* I mind linked back.

Greyson’s voice was calm when he spoke next, which was annoying. I hated it when he got all cool and shit. *We’re at the bottom, Xavier.* *When you fall, we’ll be here to catch you.*

That was when I heard a few howls and yips from down below. It was the pack. The whole pack was down there to catch me. That felt… like an intense trust fall, no? I snorted, still feeling a little delirious as I tried to grab onto the rocks again. It was so slippery now, and I realized I had no choice.

I needed to trust my brother.

*Fucking hell.*

I took a deep breath before I let go of the rock. The drop made everything stop—my false bravado, my fear, my anger, only shadows of it remaining as the wind and snow surrounded me. I was alone, numb, isolated in white, but this didn’t feel like a fall toward certain death.

Because Cali was with me.

Cali was always with me, one true love and all. The memory of her laugh, her eyes, her touch wrapped me up in a cocoon of warmth, and I thought, *Shit, I might die today, but hey, at least I enjoyed the fall that—OOF!*

Oof. For real.

I had landed, fucking plummeted hard enough that my whole body jerked, but the fall hadn’t been harsh or painful. I was on something soft, solid, and *alive*. Blinking up at the white sky, at the falling snow, I looked around and choked.

The pack.

They’d caught me.

If I were less of an Alpha, I’d definitely have gotten mushy.

*Look at them, setting me down gently…* What the fuck? I wasn’t fragile, but damn, I—*maybe* I needed that right now. The gentleness.

A bunch of them shifted back to human once my feet touched the glorious ground, and Ravi rushed to me first.

“We did it!” He whooped, slapping me heartily on the back. “Did you fucking see that?”

Jay came up next, grabbing me by the shoulders, draping an arm around me. “You good?”

He was smiling. I just nodded, and everyone whistled and whooped.

Greyson, in human form as well, sauntered over. Casually, he said, “Nice fall.”

“Good catch,” I said.

We stared at each other for a moment. This was where I’d normally have said something asshole-ish, but I just couldn’t right now. My tongue felt heavy, and my eyes—they felt scratchy? That was weird. It had to be all the wind and snow.

Greyson extended his hand, then, interrupting my thoughts.

I said nothing, just reached out and clasped it. I wasn’t sure who did it first, but a second later, I was hugging my brother. But not for too long. Of course not. Just a quick bro hug. I had almost kinda died, but he and the pack had kinda saved me, so a hug was fine under these circumstances. *Whatever*.

Greyson cleared his throat after breaking it off. “You sure you’re okay?”

I nodded. “Where’s Cali?”

“She should be with Lola, Artemis, and Torin, back up top,” Greyson said.

“Let’s go.” I didn’t want to be away from her for another second. “She came after me while I fought with the Samaras, didn’t she?”

Greyson said, “Yeah. But there’s more. She was bitten.”

I was enraged. “By who?”

“Tanner,” Greyson replied, then quickly added, “I took care of the lupus sputo, and then I had to deal with Knox, but it was Tanner.”

“I’m going to kill that fucker,” I said through clenched teeth.

“In time,” Greyson agreed. “But we need to be careful. Something is up with those wolves. They’re super strong and fast now. It has to be a spell of some sort, right?”

“I have no idea,” I said. “But there’s definitely something up with them.”

Greyson shook his head, his expression severe. Looking around, he called, “We’re getting up to the top the same way we came down! Ravi, I want you in the front. I’ll take the back.”

Ravi shifted first, and everybody else followed. He led us through a narrow uphill passage that, a few moments later, brought us to the top of the cliff. The second I set foot on solid ground, I sprinted ahead. I had to find Cali right the hell now.

I picked up her scent, Greyson a few feet behind me as we both ran toward her, along with the entire pack. We spotted the group of four a few minutes later, standing there in the snow, but they weren’t alone.

There was a human body on the ground.

Tanner.

Dead.

Good. One less thing for me to do.

Shifting back to human, I called, “Cali!” Rushing to her, I knelt down on the ground next to her, holding her cold hands in mine. She looked so pale, but she was alive. “You okay?”

She nodded, her teeth chattering from the cold. I pulled her into my arms, and she clung to me, her eyes darting between my face and a spot somewhere to my right. Greyson stood there, staring at the dead body.

“What happened?” he asked, his voice even.

“We can talk about it somewhere else,” Artemis said quickly. “Cali’s getting way too cold.”

I nodded in agreement, but my mind was going haywire. One of the Samaras was dead. Not the new hotheaded Alpha—that could’ve been dealt with when it came to regional werewolf politics, and considering the Samaras’ turbulent past—but one of Knox’s friends. While Knox was alive to avenge him.

The realization finally settled in, along with all the consequences.

I looked up at Greyson. “If we thought things were bad before, they’re about to get worse.”

# Episode 2994

*If we thought things were bad before, they’re about to get worse*

Xavier’s words echoed through my head, and I swallowed roughly. How could anything get worse at this point? Things had never felt worse! We’d been in “worse” territory ever since the Vanguards had shown up and everything had happened with Seluna. Hell, even *before* that.

“What is that supposed to mean?” I asked Xavier, shivering in the cold. At least the snowfall had slowed down, and I could see him clearly.

“When Knox finds out one of his own is dead,” Greyson answered for his brother, “he’s not going to take it lying down.”

*That… makes sense*, I thought. A new wave of dread filled me, and I hugged Xavier that much tighter. He still hadn’t spoken, and Greyson bent down to stare at us both.

“Cali?” he asked gently. “What happened? How did Tanner die?”

I opened my mouth to speak but paused. I didn’t quite know how it had happened myself. My gaze fell to Torin. He was leaning against a tree trunk. He hadn’t spoken in a while.

Torin, the gentlest soul I’d ever met. For some reason, it hurt to look at him right now, yet I couldn’t tear my eyes away from him. Xavier and Greyson followed my gaze.

“I did it,” he said quietly.

The wind had stopped howling, and everybody in the pack had fallen silent. Greyson and Xavier wore matching shocked expressions. I couldn’t blame them. That was what I’d felt as well, after witnessing the kill. It was unlike anything I’d ever seen.

When I’d asked Torin what he’d done, he’d withdrawn into himself.

*Somehow, that hurts the most*, I thought with a shudder.

“But how?” Xavier asked, breaking the silence first. “You’re a healer.”

Torin glanced at Xavier, then back down at the ground. “My magic can heal people, but it can also work in reverse. I can open up every wound someone has ever had, and for werewolves… Well, werewolves all get in a lot of fights, don’t you?”

The image of all those wounds opening up invaded my head, and I had to swallow a gasp.

*I can’t believe someone as sweet as Torin could possess such a power…*

That was what made it all the more jarring. Torin seemed to feel the same way, because his jaw twitched before he shook his head and added, “I don’t enjoy doing it. Ever. It’s really quite horrible for the person I inflict it on. It’s horrible for me too, and I…” His voice wavered for a moment, but then he looked up from the ground.

He looked straight at Greyson. When he spoke this time, his tone was strong.

“In the Fae world, in the war, I had to do things to defend myself and Astrid. I might not be proud of them, but I did what I had to. Tanner was going to kill us—I had no doubt about that.”

Greyson stared back at Torin, waiting for him to continue.

The Fae’s determination faded at the Alpha’s silence, and he rushed to add, “I did what I needed to do to protect Cali, Artemis, Lola, and myself. I never meant to—”

“Of course.” Greyson rushed to speak the second he realized that Torin had misjudged his silence. “You did the right thing. We’re grateful to you—all of us, Torin.”

“You’re the reason we’re alive. Thank you,” Artemis said, squeezing his hand. Lola took Torin’s other hand, and the two of them hugged him. This was why he’d been withdrawn until the rest of the pack had arrived. He’d felt guilty.

I understood completely.

Making a mental note to talk to Torin later, in private, I looked between Greyson and Xavier. “Artemis is right. Torin is the only reason we’re alive. There was another wolf, one that surprised Lola and Artemis and gave Tanner time to come at Torin and me.”

*Tanner was after me, specifically*, I thought bitterly. *Torin would’ve just been collateral damage, like my best friend and my sister.*

Torin, sweet Torin, had been in danger because of me, and the realization burned.

“Did you recognize the other wolf?” Xavier asked, staring at Lola and Artemis.

“No,” Artemis said.

“Me neither,” Lola said. “But I’m certain I’d recognize the scent. The wolf hightailed it out of here after Torin used his magic.”

Artemis grinned. “He looked terrified.”

Rishika snorted at Artemis’s remark. Greyson shot her a look, and she covered it up with a cough.

“The point here is there’s a witness on their side of things,” Greyson said. “There is no doubt about who made the kill.”

Greyson sounded tense, and that was never a good thing.

“Either way, we’re done here,” Greyson continued. “We’re going back to the pack house, and we won’t stop for anything.”

“What are your orders once we arrive in Redwood territory?” Rishika asked.

“Patrols out at all times,” Greyson replied. “Once Knox finds out about one of his own going down, he’ll aim to retaliate.”

“What’s our line of action?” Xavier asked.

“We won’t give them time to plan an attack,” Greyson said sharply. “We’ll come up with our own plan and act ASAP. The Samaras have gone way too far. It’s not going to stand.”

There were murmurs of agreement among everybody in the pack. Greyson shared a nod with Xavier, gave me an intense look, and then shifted. Everybody else followed his lead.

“I’m so sorry for all this,” Xavier said, pulling me tighter into his arms. “I never meant for you to get involved, I—”

“They would’ve come after me one way or another,” I whispered.

Xavier frowned. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

I hesitated for a moment before saying, “Tanner implied he had a mission to come after me, assigned by Knox.”

Xavier went rigid. His eyes flickered over to Greyson’s wolf. The two of them shared a furious look that made me hold my breath.

“This is going to be Knox’s last mistake,” Xavier told me quietly, the rage making his voice shake.

I wanted to tell him, *Xavier, no—I don’t want you or Greyson to get yourselves into danger because of me!* But I knew that was bullshit. Danger was already knocking on our door, and it wouldn’t go away until we’d extinguished it.

I couldn’t believe war tactics were my life now.

*Everyone, let’s go*, Greyson mind linked.

I climbed onto Xavier’s back.

Nobody spoke a word the entire trip home.

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The pack house was still in shambles from Artemis’s magic burst the night before. At least the fireplace was working, and I could warm up with Xavier in the living room. Greyson and the others were in the kitchen area as he ordered out the patrols.

Xavier sat up all of a sudden, the blanket falling off his shoulders. “I’ll lead one of the patrols on the outer rim of our territory.”

I was surprised, but not really. This was Xavier.

I felt slightly numb as Greyson leveled his brother with a stare. “You sure?”

“Of course,” Xavier said sharply. “If the Samaras want to come for us, I’m going to stop them.”

Greyson nodded, looking around. “I need all of you to be careful. These werewolves are juiced up with… *something*. Magic, probably.”

“That won’t stop us from blocking their attack,” Xavier said.

“I know,” Greyson said. “I just need you all to be aware of the change in the dynamic. Go for their eyes—they’re bloodshot. They must be more sensitive now.”

There were nods all round.

Xavier turned back to me, giving me a kiss on the top of my head. His voice was soft as he looked into my eyes. “I’ll be back as soon as I can. Just stay safe.”

I sat up and hugged him, smiling sadly. “That’s my line.” He snorted into my hair, and I took in his warmth. “Sorry about our date, Xavier.”

He faced me, smiling back as he caressed my cheek. “You don’t have to apologize for anything.” He gave me one more kiss, then headed out the door. I watched him, tongue-tied, as he walked out into the blizzard that was raging all over again. He shifted into his wolf, and my chest ached.

*What the fuck am I supposed to do now?*

I’d had a warm shower to avoid hypothermia, and changed my clothes, but it wasn’t like I could just lounge by the fireplace all day. I needed to busy myself and tidy up the house after my sister had destroyed it, actually. Great idea! I was the queen of great ideas, the one and only—

“Cali?”

I twirled around to come face-to-face with Greyson. He just stood there, looking worried and beautiful. My god, I was going to burst into tears.

“Can we talk?” he asked gently, putting his hand on my back.

Not trusting myself to speak, I nodded. I followed him into one of the studies, and once the door closed, his arms enveloped me. I hugged him back, and he exhaled against my ear, his breath warm and soothing.

I could’ve stayed like this forever.

“I was so worried when I found you. You were bleeding so badly…” He didn’t finish his sentence, just held me tighter.

“I thought I was hallucinating when I saw you,” I whispered. “Like, either the blood loss was getting to my head, or I’d already died and you were a mirage. But hey, at least you found me, even in the afterlife.”

He faced me and tenderly wiped my cheeks. I realized that I’d actually been crying, because I was a wuss, even when I tried to joke and pretend everything was fine.

Nothing was fine.

“I’ll always find you, love,” Greyson said, his voice raspy. “I’ll always come help you, no matter what.”

*And* now I was just crying even more.

I wiped my tears with the sleeve of my sweatshirt quickly as he jokingly added, “Just next time, tell me where you’re going.”

I winced. “You’re right. I should have told you where Xavier and I were. A quick text, something.”

He nodded, sighing. “I was so relieved I found you in time and got the lupus sputo out.”

His words gave me pause*. In time?* Did Greyson actually get there in time, though? I really had no idea how long I’d been lying on the ground...

“Greyson?” My eyes were wide when I looked up at him. “Are you sure you got all of it out? Is there a chance I could turn?”

# Episode 2995

**Greyson**

“No,” I told Cali firmly. “There’s no chance that you could turn. I made sure to take all of the lupus sputo out of your system. I’ve done it before, remember?”

Even though we’d barely known each other, I’d felt that she was my mate. But I’d had no idea what was going on back then. This time had carried more weight, because she was the one for me, and we both knew it.

“Oh, right.” Her eyes widened. “You’ve sucked werewolf-infected blood out of me before.”

“That’s a charming description,” I said wryly.

She waved me off. “Can you actually be sure that I won’t turn, though? Because if—”

“Hey,” I interrupted her, gently cupping her cheek. “You’re okay. Torin healed you already, and that’s the most important part.”

“Okay,” she breathed, melting into my touch.

“And even if there’s a chance that I’m wrong, I’ll be by your side to help you navigate everything.”

She squinted at me. “So there *is* a chance that you’re wrong.”

I pressed my lips together, sighing. “A miniscule chance. Tiny. The size of a flea. Even smaller.”

Cali hummed thoughtfully. At least she looked much less panicked now, and she wasn’t crying.

“Would it be so bad if some of the lupus sputo remained?” she asked suddenly. “We’re not even sure if I would turn anyway, because I’m half Fae.”

I stared at her, trying not to frown. “Do I detect some excitement in your tone?”

“I mean…” She looked shifty. “I’ve always wanted to turn, right?”

I’d known that. And I had always loved the fact that she wanted to be a wolf, just like me. But the other part of my brain sounded the alarms, and ignited that same undercurrent of rage. How the *hell* did another wolf *dare* to try to turn *my* mate?

It was enough to make my blood boil.

“The lupus sputo is out,” I said. “There really shouldn’t be a chance.”

Because if there *was* a chance that Cali would turn because of another wolf’s bite…

I wanted to be the one to turn Cali if that were even possible, so I despised the possibility of some random evil asshole doing it. *Despised.*

“What are you thinking, Greyson?” Cali asked.

“Good things,” I lied. “Don’t worry about anything,” I added, stroking her cheek. “Right now, we should just focus on how you feel and take everything one step at a time.”

Cali sighed, hugging me again, her nose nuzzling my neck. “How did things get so messed up again?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “It’s like there’s a higher power that fiddles with our lives just for fun.”

Cali chuckled, looking up at me. She looked so sweet and soft that I couldn’t stop myself from leaning down to kiss her forehead, her nose.

“I’m going to take care of everything,” I muttered against her mouth. “I promise. I’ll make sure things don’t escalate further, or hurt any of the Redwoods.”

She looked at my chest, her pretty lips pursed. “What about the Samaras? I know that not everyone wanted Knox to be the Alpha… What about those people? What if they get caught in the crossfire?”

I’d expected Cali to say this. Of course. Tilting her chin up so she’d meet my gaze, I said, “I’m going to do everything in my power to keep things from getting out of control and devolving into something no one wants. I’d never kill an innocent.”

“I know,” she whispered.

I stared at her for a moment, trailing my fingertips over her neck, at her pulse point. The steady drum of it, her warmth, the feel of her, the fact that she was alive… It all grounded me. She was here. She hadn’t bled to death. I hadn’t lost her.

I filed the fear of it away in a drawer in my brain labeled “Do Not Open,” shooing it away even though it tried to haunt me. On some level, it already did. Fear and rage could be intertwined, but I preferred it when my rage was under control.

I preferred it when I didn’t risk becoming my father.

“You know I love you, right?” I asked.

She smiled. “I love you too. Always.” She got on her tiptoes and wrapped her arms around my neck, her lips brushing over mine. Her kiss was tender, soft, but when her mouth parted and she melted into me, I wanted more.

I picked her up, bringing our faces to the same level. She squeaked my name in surprise before wrapping her legs around my torso. I locked one arm under her ass, keeping the other at her back to hold her up against me.

“Comfortable?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

Laughing, she leaned down for another kiss. Her eyes were bright, carefree. She was happy, and that was all I needed. I opened up my lips for her, let her lead because she wanted it, her mouth sliding over mine again and again. Her thighs were spread over my abs, and with every kiss, she writhed at just the right spot to find a little friction.

Feeling wanted was the best thing in the fucking world.

I pushed her up against the wall, groaning when she gasped into my mouth. She was so damn hot it made me woozy. Now I was the one to deepen the kiss, and then—

A knock on the half-open door startled me, and my mate squeaked. Fighting not to snicker at the sound, I—safely—dropped Cali to her feet. She was breathless, and she got so embarrassed when we noticed my mother standing there.

Talk about a boner killer.

“Sorry to interrupt! I didn’t know Greyson wasn’t alone,” Sabine said sheepishly before turning to me. “I wanted to talk to you.”

And it couldn’t wait, huh?

“Right!” Cali blurted. “I’d better—” She waved an awkward hand, looking all flushed. “Better go help the others clean up.”

“Be careful with any broken glass,” I called after her.

I could just *hear* her rolling her eyes as she turned down the hallway. “Greyson, I’m not a child, I—*shit*!”

“Cali?” I made a move to go check on her, but my mom shook her head, smirking.

“I’m fine, but I almost stepped on broken glass,” she grumbled. “I won’t be taking questions at this time, thanks.”

My mom and I exchanged a look before quietly laughing.

“So, what’s up?” I asked Sabine.

“I wanted to know how you were doing after everything with Knox,” Sabine said, her expression growing serious. “I can’t imagine finding Cali bleeding in the forest was easy…”

I fought the horrifying image away and cleared my throat. “It’s—fine. Or, not fine, but it’s going to get there.”

My mother rested her palm on my arm. “What’s your next move?”

“Not sure,” I said. “But I need to figure it out quickly. Knox must know by now that Tanner is dead, and he’s going to retaliate. The good news is that we have someone on the inside, and she can keep us posted.”

Sabine frowned. “You really think you can trust Ava?”

“She did tip me off about what happened today,” I said. “And even if she didn’t know how everything was going to go down, having that warning still helped.”

Sabine raised her eyebrows. “True. And she’s attached to Xavier, of course…”

“As long as my brother and Ava don’t go up in flames, we have an insider,” I said. “We could try to defuse the situation from the inside.”

Pretty messy to think that the plan depended on my little brother remaining diplomatic instead of a dick. But it was what it was.

“And if Knox tries to make things worse?” Sabine asked. “He seems like someone who will want an eye for an eye.”

“Who’s to say I’m not like that as well?” I said.

Sabine stared at me.

“At this stage, it’s only natural,” I continued. “The kid ordered a hit on my mate—he had her *bitten*. He’s aware that I’m coming for him. Xavier, too. He’s got two Alphas out there who want him dead, and he knows it. I bet it’ll drive him nuts, waiting for us to strike.”

“Are you sure about this?” my mother asked.

At least Tanner was on the ground already. I would always be grateful to Torin for that.

“Either way, whatever Knox attempts next, it won’t be successful,” I told Sabine. “We have more witches than he could dream of. Fae. Vampires. We have a pack that’s fully loyal to each other. He can’t compete.”

Smiling, my mom reached up to stroke my cheek. I was new to this kind of motherly tenderness and care, but I had grown used to it. I had learned how soothing it could be, and that made me feel better altogether.

“I’m here for whatever you need,” she said.

I took her hand in mine, squeezing. “Thank you.”

A moment later, Sabine headed into the living room to get involved in the cleaning, and I went upstairs to get dressed. I headed to the bathroom to wash off any leftover splashes of Cali’s blood that had lingered on me. I forced myself to forget about the blood, forced myself not to think of how pale she’d looked on the snow.

I preferred to think of her laughing and holding me and kissing me, like she had earlier.

Just as I was ready to go back downstairs, my phone rang from the nightstand. I checked it out, surprised to see that it was Maren. I hoped to hell everything was okay with her and Fenrir. I quickly picked up, but she spoke before I could.

“Greyson? I need you.”

# Episode 2996

**Xavier**

I let Rishika lead the patrol, with Zainab in the middle while I covered the back.

While I *stewed* in the back.

I hadn’t been there to protect Cali when she’d been bitten, and she’d been bitten on *my* watch. While on a date with me. I’d promised her romance, and what she’d received instead was fucking attempted murder. I felt like shit over it. Meanwhile, Knox thought he could get away with all this bullshit. For real.

I wanted to tear his heart out and shove it in his mouth.

Graphic, but true.

Our pace was steady, as it was meant to be for a patrol—just so we could take in every inch of our territory border, the side closest to the Samaras. The snow was still steadily coming down, but there was less wind now, at least.

*We should split up*, Rishika said once we reached a boulder that we always used as a meeting landmark.

*Good idea*, I agreed.

A moment later, the three of us split off, going in different directions—I’d taken the north, the closest part of our territory to the Samaras. I actually hoped that one of them would dare to come onto our land after what had just happened.

I itched to kill in a way that I knew Cali wouldn’t approve of. But sometimes I was more predator than man, and there was fuck all that I could do about it. We couldn’t keep giving the Samaras the benefit of the doubt. At this point, it was embarrassing—and laughable, given the way their Alpha behaved.

Knox wanted to attack Cali.

He wanted to go after the heart of the Redwood pack directly, so I would have to tear theirs out.

I would enjoy it, too.

*All clear*, Rishika mind linked.

*Clear from me too*, Zainab said.

*Same here*, I replied.

A moment later, we returned full circle and met at the boulder once more.

*The weather might be slowing them down*, Rishika said. *We’re probably safe for now.*

Zainab nodded. *Even patrolling out in this blizzard is getting to be a bit difficult as it gets colder.*

*We’ll patrol as much as we need t*o, I said. I sounded harsh, but I didn’t give a damn.

Rishika nodded. We continued with the process, following the border path, noses and ears alert. We kept quiet, like we were supposed to, but then…

*This is boring*, Zainab said.

*Knox almost killing my mate is boring?* I asked, an undercurrent of threat in my tone.

Zainab rolled her eyes. At least she wasn’t easily intimidated. *Of course not. Knox needs to literally die. But patrolling without talking is boring when we know there’s no way we’ll hear them in this weather anyway.*

I looked over at Rishika, who seemed amused. Then I sighed. *The hell you wanna talk about?*

*What about what the freaking Samara pack did to themselves?* Zainab asked, sounding annoyed. At least she had a point about that. It had definitely caught my attention, too.

*They were much stronger than normal, yeah*, I said.

*Stronger and faster!* Zainab said. *To the point where Greyson felt he had to warn us about it. Fighting them was so weird, like they were on fast forward or something.*

*It’s probably some kind of spell*, Rishika said.

*I had the impression that the Samaras weren’t well-trained at all, so imagine my shock when they were all, “Surprise, bitch, we can fight!” today*, Zainab grumbled. *I consider myself a strong wolf, at least I used to think so—*

*You* are *a strong wolf.* Rishika cut her off firmly. *You’re a great fighter. But the Samaras cheated. They’re not normally strong or fast. It’s magic.*

Zainab huffed. *It’s not fair is what it is*.

*Exactly*, Rishika said. *Just have a real fight, like a wolf. These are the actions of a coward, but I’m not surprised. Knox* is *a coward.*

*I’d never fought them before today, though*, Zainab said moodily. *I wonder if I’d be good enough—*

*Of course you’d be good enough; you know your shit*, I interrupted. There was no room for doubt here*. I know the Samaras’ normal fighting style, and today wasn’t it. They’re doing something supernatural, otherwise we would’ve kicked their asses, no question.*

That seemed to appease Zainab, at least. Then she said, *Blaine definitely didn’t* look *as strong as he was.*

*When I faced off with him*, *he had super bloodshot eyes*, I noted.

*Yes*, Rishika chimed in. *I saw quite a few bloodshot eyes as well. It reminded me of steroids or something.*

*Magical steroids*, Zainab added.

I shook my head. *We can’t be sure. But the point is that Knox has obviously boosted his pack with something. We just have to find out what.*

Zainab nodded, and I wondered if Ava might know what Knox was using. I wasn’t sure what kind of dynamic was happening in the Samara pack right now, though. But if Knox found out that Ava had been giving the Redwoods information, or double-crossing him in any way, we could lose that. I wasn’t sure the likelihood, but it could put Ava in danger. Knox was unpredictable like that.

My wolf reacted at the thought of losing *Ava*, though.

Just Ava.

It was a feeling he knew all to well—a feeling that terrified him. He’d gone through agony when she’d fallen, and he didn’t want to go through that torment again. He thrashed and whined and raged at the thought, to the point where I had to bite the inside of my cheek, cause some pain to distract him.

*It’s not going to come to that*, I told him. I told myself. *She’s going to be okay.*

I said it so I could believe it, too.

Zainab had fallen silent, obviously processing. We were almost done with the first lap, and I mind linked with both of them again. *We should do the round again. With the snowfall, we don’t want the Samaras to use it to cover up their tracks.*

I nodded behind us to show them that the snow had already rapidly covered our pawprints. The other two agreed instantly, and we started to round the house to go back out. Zainab was still not talking, and for that I was grateful.

I needed to focus, even if we were just running the same path we’d already completed. There were no tracks anywhere, though, and that was alarming. This was a major whiteout—I’d never seen anything like it before.

I wondered if Vander knew about this.

*Wait!* Zainab’s voice pierced through my thoughts. I rolled my eyes, not so eager for more small talk, but then she said, *I caught a scent!*

All three of us froze.

*Samara?* Rishika’s voice came next.

*I think so*, Zainab said. *Doesn’t smell like a Redwood, anyway.*

All three of us looked around, while Zainab’s snout pointed to the left.

And that was when my eye caught something moving in the woods, rushing across tree branches and rocks and everything else that was covered in snow, bounding through, so fucking fast.

*I’ll handle this!* I told the others, positioning myself in front of Rishika and Zainab.

I was ready for this fight.

In fact, I was fucking eager for it after what Knox had done to my mate, after Blaine’s ambush. I just hoped it was either of them. Those fucking sons of bitches wouldn’t know what—

*No.*

It wasn’t any of them. I took in the scent and calmed down.

*Stand down*, I told Rishika and Zainab. *It’s Ava.*

The other two sniffed the air. Zainab nodded first. *It’s Ava. She just smells so much like a Samara, so that was my first impression.*

Zainab was right—Ava did smell like a Samara, and my wolf fucking hated it.

*Are we sure Ava’s still a friend, given what just happened?* Rishika asked. *How do we know Knox hasn’t realized she’s been snitching? Maybe he’s sent her over to be a double agent or something.*

Rishika’s words hit me like bricks. I did not need to start getting paranoid about Ava’s alliances at this point—it would only test my patience and composure, and I already didn’t have much of either.

*Just let me deal with Ava*, I told the other two gruffly.

I looked over at the trees, where Ava continued to move toward us at the same speed.

*It’s me, Ava*, I mind linked*. There’s no danger*.

I expected to see her wolf slow down. After all, she trusted me, in theory.

In theory, I was her mate, and my wolf trusted *her*.

But Ava continued through the snow toward me.

*Ava*, I repeated. *It’s me, Xavier. Slow down!*

She didn’t. She leapt through the blizzard and tackled me before I could force my wolf to realize that she could possibly pose a threat.

*You son of a bitch!* Her voice was a hiss in my head. *Is it true? Did you kill Tanner?*

# Episode 2997

I was in the kitchen with Lola. She was on the countertop, screwing in a lightbulb. I was on the floor, sweeping up some glass that we hadn’t gotten last night.

“It’s pretty quiet here,” I muttered to Lola.

“It’s because most of the wolves are on patrol,” Lola replied, shaking the lightbulb next to her ear. “They’re a noisy bunch.”

*Can’t argue with that*, I thought. Any wolves who weren’t on patrol were just literally walking in circles around the house, ready for some sort of attack. Or sleeping. I didn’t know, exactly—I was just certain that the Fae, along with my dad, were the ones on cleanup duty. It was okay that way, because Artemis seemed to be much more comfortable letting us deal with it.

“How are you two doing?” Mom asked, walking into the kitchen.

“I don’t know,” Lola said with a smirk. “How many supernaturals does it take to screw in a lightbulb?”

Mom snorted, pointing at Lola. “She’s in a good mood.”

“No, seriously,” Lola said, scowling at the lightbulb. “This is kinda hard.”

I shook my head, turning to my mom. “We’re fine.”

Of course, “fine” was relative. I hadn’t explained to my mom exactly what had happened during the Samara fight, but she’d been worried after she’d noticed that I was missing half my freaking pants. I’d settled her down as much as I could, saying things like, *Don’t I* look *okay?*

Of course, the trap here was that looking okay didn’t mean that I *was* okay. But who was okay around here? Nobody! Especially lately. Even Greyson looked shaken, and Greyson was never shaken. That was bad, actually. Greyson being shaken. But he’d seemed okay earlier, too, so…

*But what does* “okay” *even mean?*

It meant that we were alive. Alive enough to make out in the study with an abundance of tenderness and horniness, so at least we had that going for us… I guess.

“… make sure you’re not walking around barefoot, Cali,” my mom was saying in the background, and my attention refocused on her. “The broom won’t do the job fully—I’ll vacuum later.”

I waved her off. “I’ll do it, no worries.”

Just then, Dad called, “I need a lightbulb!”

Lola raised an eyebrow at my mom. “See? I told you more than one supernatural is necessary.”

Laughing, my mom walked out of the room. Disposing of the glass in the trash, I told Lola, “Thanks for making my mom forget she saw me with half a pair of pants today.”

Lola squinted at the lightbulb that was now actually working. “Oh, please. Your mom’s still thinking about it. Just secretly.”

That did sound like my mom.

“Sorry you two went from one mess to another,” Artemis said from the doorway. She stepped into the kitchen, looking like a scolded child.

“This mess is picking up broken glass,” I said. “The other mess was literally almost dying. I’m pretty sure that one was worse, and I feel grateful and lucky that you two came out to help me.”

Artemis snorted, offering a sheepish shrug. “Please, I’m certain you would’ve figured something out.”

I shook my head, fighting not to get mushy all over again, like I had with Greyson earlier, when I’d exploded hearts and tears all over him.

“No,” I said shakily, looking up at Lola too. “I have no idea what would’ve happened without the two of you. Thank you.”

“Aw!” Lola jumped down from the countertop. “No problem, bestie. Group hug!”

She pulled both me and Artemis into a hug. Artemis rolled her eyes, but I chuckled, any upcoming tears forgotten. Someone was missing here, though.

“Do you guys know where Torin is?” I asked.

“I think he’s somewhere downstairs,” Lola informed me. Then she jumped back up on the countertop and looked at Artemis, “Hey, wanna help me change a lightbulb?”

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“Torin! I was looking for you,” I said after finding him in one of the downstairs bathrooms, mopping the floor. “How are you doing?”

He brightened when he saw me, a small smile on his face. “I’m fine! Do you need this?” he asked, offering the mop to me right away.

“No, I—I just wanted to talk to you,” I said. “Thank you for what you did. I’ve never seen anything like that.”

Torin swallowed convulsively, fiddling with the mop. “I’m sorry you had to witness it. I know it’s pretty… intense.”

I shook my head, reaching out to squeeze his shoulder. “Don’t apologize. You *saved me*. I’m so grateful to you.”

His eyes flickered up, and when he looked at me, he seemed lighter. My heart squeezed in my chest.

*My poor, sweet Torin! Gah!*

“So how are you doing, really?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” he said with a sigh. “Like I said, it’s not the first time I’ve done that. The Fae war had its moments, and now…” He started dabbing at the floor with the mop in the same place, looking guilty. “I just feel so bad that I caused more issues for the pack by doing that. I know Greyson wouldn’t blame me, but—”

I shook my head. “Torin, no. Greyson is honest.”

Torin winced. “He acts all tough and strict, but he cares about everyone’s feelings, doesn’t want to upset us. And with everything going on with that guy Knox, what I did with Tanner—I know it’s not going to help. Xavier already said so—things are only going to get worse. And that’s…” Torin’s voice cracked. He sniffled. “It’s because of me.”

*Oh my god!*

I squeezed Torin’s shoulders. “Hey, look at me.”

When Torin did, I earnestly said, “Tanner was a dead man walking. Greyson or Xavier would’ve killed him anyway after what he did to me, so you shouldn’t feel guilty at all. You were brave. You saved us, Torin.”

He swallowed. “Are you sure?”

“Of *course*,” I said. “Knox is pushing us. His choices as Alpha led the people in his pack to that fight. It’s not your fault.”

Torin shrugged, still looking sad.

*Break my heart, why don’t you?*

“Torin, I’m telling the truth, I promise,” I said. “Plus, you’re part of the pack. The Redwoods would’ve made the Samaras pay if something had happened to you instead of Tanner. We love you, Torin. *I* love you.”

He looked up at me, his eyes huge and vulnerable. “I love you too.”

I pulled him into a hug, whispering, “Thank you. Really. Seriously.”

When we broke apart, I was wiping my tears with my sweatshirt all over again.

Torin whispered, “Please don’t cry… I’d do anything to protect you. You’re my best friend.”

“Oh my god, Torin! How am I *not* supposed to cry after that?!” I fake-scolded him.

He laughed as we both used a bunch of tissues to blow our noses.

After that was over and we hugged again, I asked, “Actually, have you seen the vacuum?”

“I saw Elle trying to use it upstairs.”

That should be interesting.

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Elle was upstairs, playing with the vacuum. Sort of. I watched her while she tentatively inched toward it like a scared cat, flicking the on switch and freaking out immediately once it started working. She jumped and squealed and immediately turned it off.

I raised an eyebrow. “Everything okay?”

She exhaled in relief. “Cali!” She pointed at the vacuum, frowning now. “There is a monster inside. It is not for cleaning like Jacqueline says.”

I laughed. “No monster. The vacuum is just a tool. It uses air to suck up dirt and other things. To clean. Do you want me to show you how it works?”

Elle squinted at me. “Okay.”

I turned it on, and Elle jumped away again. I left it on, though, pointing at it as I moved it back and forth across the carpet.

“It is not scary?” Elle shouted over the noise.

I smiled. “Nope, not scary.” I turned it off and moved it toward Elle. “You want to try?”

Elle shook her head. “No. I will watch.”

I snorted, muttering under my breath, “If she’s Ariel, I guess I’m Cinderella.”

Elle frowned. “What?”

“Nothing—there’s just some stuff downstairs we can tidy up with this, okay?” I said.

“Okay!” Elle said.

I was about to lug the vacuum downstairs when Elle asked, “Is it true?”

I turned to face her. “Is what true?”

Elle walked up to me. “Will you turn into a wolf too, at the next full moon?”

I immediately felt a tinge of sadness. My discussion with Greyson earlier had only reminded me of how much I wanted to be a wolf one day. I loved being Fae, especially as I was getting more comfortable with my magic, but being the mate of two wolves…

*Let’s just say it’s something that never leaves my mind.*

Elle nodded seriously. “If you do, I will teach you to be a wolf, like you are teaching me to be human.”

She was so cute, though.

“I’d like that,” I said, smiling. “But I’m not actually going to turn into a wolf.”

Elle frowned. “Why not?”

I was about to tell her that Greyson had prevented it, but I was pretty sure that explaining the lupus sputo and sucking on wounds wouldn’t exactly be an easy conversation with Elle. Probably. At least I didn’t feel comfortable with it, so there!

“It’s just not happening,” I said simply. “Hey, why don’t we go do that cleaning with the vacuum?”

Elle shrugged. “Eh.”

We headed downstairs, and I plugged the vacuum in. “You see, there’s—”

*CRACK!*

The sound was loud. A second later, all the lights shut off for a moment, then flickered back on.

“What happened?” Lola shouted from the kitchen. “I just finished changing this darn lightbulb! It better not break!”

I looked around for my sister. “Artemis?”

“I didn’t do it!” she called out defensively.

*CRACK!*

Elle gasped and pointed outside. “Air monster!”

“Wait, was that thunder?” I wondered. “During a blizzard?”

Almost in response, the lights went out completely.

# Episode 2998

**Greyson**

The lights cut out just as I registered the urgency—almost desperation—in Maren’s voice. Now we’d lost power? Holy shit. It was just one thing after another.

But I had to focus—one thing at a time.

“What’s going on, Maren?” I asked quickly, blinking into the sudden darkness. I figured it had to be related to Fenrir. What else could she be so worried about?

“It’s Aiden,” Maren said.

Of course it was Aiden.

“What happened?”

“He just came by the house and started to pack Fenrir’s things. I tried to stop him, Greyson, but you know how Aiden is, he doesn’t like to be told no—”

“Maren,” I said, cutting in, “slow down. You’re talking really fast.” She was panicked, I could hear it. “What are you talking about? You know Aiden can’t just come in and take your son. And he definitely can’t take him out of the state without the mother’s consent.”

It wasn’t like I was an expert on custody law or anything, but I knew at least that much.

“Greyson…” Maren’s voice trailed off, and there was a muffled thump on the other end, like the phone was shifting as she moved around. “I know all that. Aiden wouldn’t have a leg to stand on if we were taking this to court, but that’s not what’s happening here. He doesn’t care about the legality of all this. And it’s not like the custody courts were really built with Fae in mind. What am I going to do?”

I took her point on that. I sighed and pushed a hand through my hair. “Is there any way to talk to Aiden, get him to see reason on this?”

Maren’s voice was muffled again as she answered, like maybe she was cradling the phone against her shoulder. “I don’t know, Greyson. The last time I told Aiden no, it didn’t go so well.”

I didn’t like the sound of that.

“What does that mean?” I asked quickly, my blood starting to heat at the thought of anyone doing anything to Maren—especially a clown like Aiden. I didn’t trust that guy for a damn second.

“Nothing, that’s not important now,” she answered hurriedly. “I just need your help. Aiden’s trying to take Fenrir now. *Now*, Greyson, not in a few days’ time. He’s here, and he’s trying to take my son.” Her voice was nearly shaking with fear.

*Fuck.* I looked around the pack house. Pack members were cleaning up and sweeping glass—recovering from our last disaster. I didn’t blame Maren for being worried, but—between this situation with Knox and the Samara pack and the blizzard—Aiden’s timing was pretty shitty.

“What do you need me to do?” I asked.

There were more muffled sounds from Maren’s end. What *was* that? What was going on on her end?

Then Maren spoke, her voice more urgent than ever. “I just need *you*, Greyson. Get here as quickly as you can. Please.”

Then she hung up.

I stared down at the suddenly blank screen of my phone. Shit. I had no idea what I was supposed to do. I cared about Maren—of course I did—and I had a soft spot for Fenrir. I knew they were vulnerable right now and that Aiden was no good, but I had responsibilities here, too. I was the Redwood Alpha, and I couldn’t just go running off to help Maren right now. Leaving my pack at this moment would be a bad, bad idea—I just knew it.

I blew out a breath. But Maren had reached out to me, which she never did. When she’d left the pack house, I’d told her to call me if she needed anything, but she never had asked me for anything, which made me want to help out, but how? I was just in a tough spot.

As I tapped my phone against the palm of my hand, thinking hard, Torin spoke, calling over from the window.

“It’s getting really bad out there.”

I looked over to where he, Sage, and Ravi were huddled over by the window, watching the storm. I glanced past them out the window and felt my eyes widen—the window was pure white with snow. It was snowing harder than ever, and Torin flinched when there was a huge clap of thunder, so loud it seemed to shake the glass. An instant later the yard was illuminated by a flash of lightning as bright as noontime sunshine. Everyone closed their eyes against the sudden, blinding light.

Torin gasped. “Lightning in a snowstorm? That happens?”

“Sometimes,” Ravi admitted. “It’s called thundersnow.”

Torin shook his head. “I’ve never seen that before.” He looked back out the window. “Thundersnow,” he said softly.

I looked down at my phone, thinking about Maren, then back out the window. In a way, it was a relief. It was like my decision had been made for me. The weather was way too bad for me to get to Portland tonight.

I sent her a message. *Storm is getting worse. I’m not making it tonight, but Aiden won’t either. Hang tight. I’ll call you tomorrow and check in. Talk then.*

I slipped my phone back into my pocket and glanced around the living room. I’d been so wrapped up in my own thoughts that I hadn’t noticed the rest of the pack had been trickling into the room. They did that in times of tension—gathered close, like a pack of real wolves. And with the lights still out and the storm raging, they were clearly nervous.

I knew something had to be done, so I stepped forward to take charge of the situation. “Okay, I want everyone to gather up all the candles we have in the house. Let’s get them in a central location so we can ration them out.”

“I can start a fire,” Sage offered.

“That would be helpful—” I started, but I was interrupted when Torin gasped dramatically.

He leapt to his feet. “The *fridge*!”

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Half an hour later, everyone who wasn’t on patrol was gathered in the living room, and even I had to admit it was pretty cozy. Sage had built a roaring fire, there were candles burning, and Torin had scavenged everything from the fridge he didn’t think would survive the power outage and had arranged it into a massive feast on the coffee table.

“Eat, everyone!” he was urging. “Everyone needs to eat this before it goes bad. We’ve got goat cheese, strawberries, meatballs, sausages, and those devil eggs Tom made yesterday.”

“I think they’re called *deviled* eggs,” Sage corrected.

“Well, whatever they are, they need to be eaten, and I even found some fancy toothpicks, so eat up!”

People were eating, drinking semi-warm beer, lounging, and talking, and I was glad to see they’d calmed down since I’d demonstrated a little leadership. I smiled as I watched the pack. Ravi was making a s’more, and Torin—inspired—had speared what looked like a quarter of a ham and was trying to roast that over the fire too.

But as I glanced out the window and saw that the storm was turning into a whiteout, I felt a rumble of anxiety. There was almost no visibility now, and Xavier, Rishika, and Zainab were still out on patrol.

Cali stepped next to me, and when she looked at me, I could tell she was thinking about it too. She eyed the windows nervously. “Have you heard from Xavier at all?”  
 I shook my head, and her frown deepened.

“Are they going to be okay out there?” she asked, and I could hear the fear in her voice.

I felt another twinge of fear myself, but I nodded firmly. “They’re going to be fine,” I said decidedly. “Xavier and Rishika are more than capable of taking care of themselves. Zainab, too. They’ll make it back here just fine.”

Cali bit her lip and stepped toward the window, squinting into the blizzard. “I know they’re capable, but how will they even be able to know where they’re going in this storm?”

I stepped after her and stood behind her, my body pressed against hers. She leaned back, seeming to want the comfort.

“What if they’re lost out there somewhere?” she asked. She was worried and starting to spiral—and I couldn’t blame her.

The storm was bad—visibility was low, if not impossible. I trusted Xavier and Rishika and Zainab, but they were wolves facing the strength of the elements, and I could feel my own fear for them ratchet up as I watched the snow swirl outside the window. This was possibly the worst storm I’d ever seen. Lightning lit the sky, and thunder rattled the windows. Inside the pack house, it was cozy and warm, and it just felt wrong for me to be standing here when they were out there.

I looked down at Cali’s panicked face and felt my resolve harden.

“Don’t worry,” I said firmly. “I’ll go bring them back.”

# Episode 2999

**Xavier**

My brain seemed to be having a hard time catching up with what was happening as Ava and I tumbled around in the snow. But my body instinctively knew what to do, and with a growl I pulled myself on top of her and pinned her to the ground.

*What the* hell*, Ava?*

Ava’s face was furious, and when she spoke her voice was a hiss. *What the hell,* Xavier*? What were you thinking?*

*What was I thinking about* what*? What are you talking about?* I demanded.

*Tanner? Knox’s friend? Fuck, Xavier! Don’t you realize how precarious our situation is right now?* she spat. She shook her head*. God, this is such a typical Xavier move. I can’t believe I didn’t see it coming. Just charging in and doing whatever the hell you want without thinking first. And to hell with everyone else—*

She looked like she was going to keep raging, but I finally managed to get a word in edgewise.

*Just stop for a second and listen to me*, I said. *Would you listen to me for one fucking second? I didn’t kill Tanner.*

Ava’s fury seemed to pull up short, and she frowned, confused*. What?  
 I didn’t fucking kill him. Someone else did. It wasn’t me.*

*You didn’t?*

I shook my head.

*Well, who was it, then?* she asked.

I kept my mouth shut. I wasn’t going to tell her that it was Torin who’d killed Tanner. If Ava had come charging at *me* ready to do battle, I had no idea what her next move would be. And I liked Torin. The Fae was part of the pack—an honorable member. Torin was family now. I wasn’t about to sic Ava on him. And anyway, he’d killed Tanner to protect Cali. I owed him, and I wasn’t going to repay him by ratting him out to Ava.

I shook my head and rolled off her. *It doesn’t matter who did it. The asshole is dead, that’s what matters. But I assume this intel you got about me killing Tanner came from Knox, and that’s what sent you flying over here, ready to rip my head off?* I added bitterly.

Ava nodded slowly, and I felt my anger rising.

*And you* believed *him? Why didn’t you just fucking ask me what happened before you came charging at me?* I demanded.

Ava looked even more sheepish now. *I—I didn’t know. I didn’t understand your side until now. I didn’t know what to believe. Tanner was dead, and I just thought*…

I could see that she looked genuinely sorry, and part of me couldn’t help but feel bad for her. I knew she was stuck between a rock and a hard place—caught between me and her pack. As hard as this was for me, I knew she was having an even harder time. But I couldn’t bring myself to say any of that out loud.

*Yeah, well, Knox lied*, I said shortly.

*I’m sorry*, Ava said earnestly. She shook her head, looking frustrated with herself. *I should have realized that he was lying. He’s clearly trying to drive a wedge between you and me. I really am sorry I jumped to conclusions.*

I looked at her closely, studying her face. *Yeah, well, maybe next time you should stop and think before you run off and start making wild accusations. We both know how carefully you need to be treading right now. In fact, maybe it would be better if you tried to stay out of Knox’s business completely.*

Ava looked at me in disbelief for a moment, and then she scoffed. *That’s impossible. You have to know that’s impossible, Xavier.*

*Why?* I asked.

*You know he’s keeping a super close eye on me right now. Because of you.*

I looked at her again, noticing the tension in her face. She looked tired, like she hadn’t been sleeping. She probably hadn’t. I softened a little, trying to remember how hard she was working to keep all the balls in the air.

*I know this is hard for you*, I said, more gently than I felt like being. *We just need to be extra careful right now.*

*I know*, Ava said quietly.

The moment between us grew charged, and I thought Ava was about to speak again when I suddenly heard Rishika’s voice.

I’d all but forgotten that she and Zainab were also here, but there they were, looking between Ava and me with expressions of wary confusion.

*So—um—we good here?* Rishika asked carefully. She nodded upward at the leaden sky. *The storm seems to be getting worse, so we should probably keep moving.*

I glanced upward and frowned to see how fast and thick the snow was falling. Now that I wasn’t being attacked by Ava, I had time to notice that I could hardly see Rishika and Zainab, even though they were barely a couple of feet from me.

*You need to get back to the Samaras before they realize you’re gone*, I said, turning back to Ava. *And we need to get back to our pack house right now, before we get stuck out here.*

Ava nodded and seemed to be about to say something in response, but before she could speak there was a clap of thunder, so loud it made my ears ring. My whole body felt like it had been rocked by the vibration of sound, and an instant later there was a flash of blinding light and a fork of lightning hit the trunk of the tree arcing directly above us.

All around me the wolves began to howl as dazzling light from the sparking fire filled the clearing. The wind howled around us as Rishika, Zainab, and Ava all backed into me, looking out, eyes open for the impending threat. I was trying to look everywhere at once, trying to figure out what had just happened. The tree that had been hit by lightning seemed to be illuminated from within, and there was a strong acrid smell mixing with the wet, wild smell of the snowstorm. Then the brightness dimmed a little and I could see that the tree was—amazingly—still standing. But now there was a wide seam up the length of the tree, and fire burned from the inside.

We all stood still for a moment, watching it in amazement.

*Did you see that?* Rishika asked me.

*I saw it*, I answered slowly*.*

I couldn’t tear my eyes away as the fire licked the charred bark. The fire surged from within the tree like a mini hell. It looked almost biblical—like some kind of omen—and I felt a chill shiver up my spine as I stared at it.

Then there was another roll of thunder, so loud my teeth rattled in my head. Another fork of lightning struck. It didn’t hit the tree again, but it landed nearby, and I could feel the electricity crackling in the air around me.

I tore my eyes away from the tree and looked around. The storm was getting worse, and if we didn’t get out of here, things might start getting bad. Trees were going to start falling soon, and with the wind blowing the way it was, being out here surrounded by these huge pines, we were in real danger.

I turned to Ava. There was no way I was going to be able to send her all the way back to the Samara pack in this storm. Not alone. The snow was obscuring the paths and the markings that made the woods familiar, and the strong wind was messing with the sense of smell we all used to help navigate. If she got turned around, she’d be lost. She’d freeze. No, we were going to have to stick together.

In any case, we weren’t going to have to worry about a sneak attack from Knox on our way back. Even that guy wouldn’t be crazy enough to start something in this storm—though I’d probably consider braving this blizzard for a chance to take Knox out myself.

*You can’t go back alone*, I said to Ava.

She frowned at me, looking confused. *What are you talking about? You just got done telling me I had to get back before someone noticed I was gone.*

*The storm—*

*I’ll be fine*, she said quickly.

*Stop, Ava*, I said firmly. *Look around. This is really, really bad. You want to go back to a fucking tent? To your cousin’s stupid fucking Airstream that’s going to blow away in this storm or better yet get struck by lightning?*

*Xavier—*

My wolf howled at her protests. Why was she being so damn difficult right now? Between the blizzard and the burning tree, he was on edge. He knew Ava was in danger—I did too—and it was making him crazy.

I gritted my teeth and looked her right in the eye. *Ava, stop. I’m not going to fucking say it again. You’re coming with us.*

# Episode 3000

I couldn’t tell if I was more relieved or terrified at the thought of Greyson going out into the storm after Xavier. I was worried about Xavier—*out of my mind* with worry—but I didn’t know if Greyson going after him was the best option. It was bad enough that Xavier was out there, but the thought of both him and Greyson gone from the pack house in the middle of a snowstorm sounded horrifying.

I bit my lip, thinking hard, wondering if there was anything I could do that would be helpful. Maybe I could go along. I’d probably feel better if I was actually *with* Greyson, but knowing him, it seemed pretty unlikely that he would let me come along. And I didn’t think my Fae magic would be of any use against the howling wind and snow.

As a kid I used to read the *Little House on the Prairie* series over and over, and the memory randomly floated back across my mind as I looked out at the snow. Laura and her family were always getting stuck in blizzards out there on the prairies, and to avoid getting lost, they would tie one end of a rope around their waist, then the other end to the house. That way they could venture out to milk cows or something, but still make it back to the house. I didn’t know if we had any rope (and we definitely didn’t have any cows), but I thought maybe sheets could work. Maybe we could tie them around our waists and go out looking for Xavier, but still make sure we could make it back to the pack house.

I wondered wildly how many sets of sheets we had in the house. The answer was probably a lot, and I was pretty sure I could get Torin to help me braid some kind of sheet rope, but I just didn’t know how practical that was going to be.

I looked up at Greyson. “Do you really think you should go out there in this storm?” We both looked out the window. “You’re probably right—I’m sure Xavier and Rishika know how to find shelter out there.”

“They do,” Greyson admitted, but he shrugged. “But with the Samara threat still out there, I’d just feel better with everyone here.”

“Yeah, me too,” I said softly. I twisted my fingers as I looked out at the swirling snow. The wind was blowing so hard it looked like the snow was falling sideways. “I just don’t want you to go out there alone.”

“I’ll go.”

“Me too.”

I turned in surprise. I hadn’t realized anyone had been standing close enough to hear our conversation, but Artemis and Sage were both standing there, looking decided.

“You’re sure about that?” Greyson asked. “It is pretty bad out there.”

“I’m sure,” Artemis said without hesitation. “Rishika’s out there.”

“Zainab, too,” Sage added. “I’m going.”

My heart went out to them. Of course they were concerned. Their girlfriends were out there, too.

Greyson smiled and looked down at me. “See? With these two coming along, we’ll be back before you know it. We all will be.”  
 I could tell he was just saying that to make me feel better, but it worked. It did make me feel better that they were all going together, and I smiled up at him.

“You hold down the fort for me while we’re gone, okay?” he said, and started toward the door.

Unable to stop myself, I followed after him, and just as he opened the door onto the screaming wind and whipping snow, I grabbed his arm, stopping him. He turned in surprise, and I threw my arms around his neck. I pressed my lips to his, kissing him with all the urgency I felt coursing through me. The wind swirled around us, but I didn’t feel the cold as his arms encircled me, pressing my body to his, responding to my kiss with every need of his own.

“You be safe, okay?” I whispered breathlessly, finally pulling away.

He nodded. “I promise,” he said, and stepped out into the storm.

He shifted as soon as he stepped outside. Sage followed first, shifting immediately. Then came Artemis, who hopped onto Sage’s back. The snow was so heavy that Greyson’s grey wolf seemed to disappear almost immediately, and my heart sank. I hated not being able to see him. Especially after the fight earlier in the day, which still had me shaken.

I just hoped that Knox and the rest of the Samara pack were snowed in, too, because the idea of Greyson—or Xavier—running into any of them in the middle of this storm was too terrifying to think about.

But Greyson was right, and I needed to trust him. He knew what he was doing, and he was going to be back before I knew it. At least I hoped so. I absolutely hated being stuck while the people I loved were in danger.

“He’s going after them?”

I jumped when I heard the voice over my shoulder, and I turned to see Torin looking out at the snow.

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“In *this*?” he asked. He looked as worried as I felt.

I gave him a wobbly smile. “He’ll bring them back. They’ll be back before you know it.”

Torin didn’t respond to that, just stared past me, out into the snow.

He looked so worried, I felt like I had to say something encouraging. “I’m not worried about it,” I said, lying through my teeth.

Torin still didn’t move, and I figured a change of subject was probably in order.

“I’ve never seen a storm like this before, and I’m from Minnesota—”

There was another loud crash of thunder, and I flinched as the lightning struck. I could tell from the static in the air that it had hit somewhere close, and I hoped to hell that wherever it was, Greyson, Artemis, and Sage had been nowhere near it.

My attempt at conversation died with this, and Torin and I both stood for a long moment, staring out at the storm.

“Hey!” Jay called, striding over. He slammed the door and rounded on us. “What are you two doing? You’re letting the snow in!”

Torin seemed to shake himself out of his thoughts and smiled sheepishly. “Sorry, Jay.” He turned to me. “Cali, come back to the living room. There’s still a lot of food we need to get through.”

I glanced over at the coffee table and couldn’t help but laugh. Torin seemed to have added more food to the feast, and it was going to take the pack days to get through it all.

Torin seemed to regain his good humor, and as we headed back into the living room, he clapped his hands. “I was thinking that since we’re all stuck here, we should play a game or something to distract ourselves.”

“What kind of game?” Ravi asked.

“I read about this game called Truth or Dare!” Torin said excitedly.

I looked over at Torin’s sweet, eager face and swallowed back the response I had on the tip of my tongue. I was too on edge to even think about a game right now, and I didn’t want to be distracted, but I couldn’t bring myself to hurt Torin’s feelings.

Besides, as I looked around, I saw the rest of the pack start to perk up a bit at Torin’s suggestion, and I realized that maybe the others did need to distract themselves. We were all worried about the pack members out in the storm, but there was nothing we could do from here, so a distraction probably wasn’t the worst idea.

I dropped into a chair. “Okay, I’m in.”

Ravi—who was sitting on the floor, closest to the coffee table feast—groaned. “Truth or Dare? Seriously? Are we in middle school?”

Torin’s face fell a little. “Okay. It doesn’t have to be Truth or Dare.” He jumped up and moved to the bookshelf, where he grabbed a book. “Maybe we could do a dramatic reading. You know, I could be Darcy and Lola could be—”

Ravi groaned again. “Reading novels to each other? Are you kidding me?”

Torin looked lost. “No? That’s not good?”

“I appreciate the ideas, but that’s grim, man,” Ravi said, shaking his head. He jumped to his feet. “I’ll tell you what we need!”

He ran out of the room. We could hear him rummaging around in the kitchen, opening and shutting cabinets. A moment later he reappeared, his arms full of bottles of liquor from the kitchen.

“What we need is to let off a little steam,” he said, moving the platters of food around to make room for the bottles on the coffee table. “We’ve all been through hell lately, with the ghosts and the possessions and the rest of that shit.”

Once the bottles were unloaded, he grabbed one and held it out to the group with a wide, mischievous grin.

“Who wants to start?”

# Episode 3001

As Ravi clinked down the liquor on the table, a couple of pack members moved toward it like they were magnetized.

“After the day we’ve had, letting loose sounds like the perfect idea,” someone said from behind me.

And maybe they were right about that, but I was nervous. There were a lot of reasons for my anxiety—for one, I felt weird thinking about getting drunk in front of my parents, and for two, I didn’t really like alcohol—but there was more to it than just that.

“Do you really think this is such a good idea?” I asked, addressing Ravi, and the group in general.

Ravi—who was already setting up a row of shot glasses on the table in front of the bottles—grinned up at me. “I’m the one who suggested it, so obviously I think it’s a *fantastic* idea.”

“Ravi, I really don’t know,” I said, still feeling wary. “Xavier and Greyson and all the others are out there in that storm. We still don’t know what Knox is planning.”

“Yeah? And?” Ravi asked.

“And I just think it’s probably a good idea if we all keep our wits about us,” I finished.

Ravi gave a snort of laughter. “I don’t know about the rest of these guys, but I know I always fight better when I’m a little loose. It’s like I stop second-guessing myself.”

“*What?*” I gasped. “You fight *drunk*?”

Ravi laughed. “Relax, Cali. I was just kidding.” He shrugged. “Mostly. Listen, I’m not saying we should all get smashed, I’m just saying we’re stuck here anyway, and I’m not about to listen to Torin read me some goddamn novel out loud like we’re a bunch of Dickensian orphans waiting for our gruel. We don’t have TV, and we don’t have Wi-Fi, but I don’t want to think about the fight we might be facing if Knox gets it into his head to be even more of a dick. I just think it would be nice to take a second and not think about werewolf problems at all.”

I frowned, and Jay spoke as he poured a shot of whiskey.

“I mean, Cali, we are snowed in here. And we are werewolves. A little drink isn’t going to hurt us. Plus, it’s not like the Samara pack is operating under different weather conditions or anything. It’s kind of a snowstorm détente.”

“I guess so,” I said slowly.

Ravi looked at me, and, seeing the look on my face, his grin softened. “We’ll start slow, just to relax a bit. And if Greyson comes back and tells us the apocalypse is galloping toward us, I promise you we’ll brew a pot of coffee.”

“Okay,” I said with a sigh. I looked around and noticed that the rest of the pack was looking at me, watching my conversation with Ravi. I remembered Greyson telling me to hold down the fort while he was gone, and I realized they were all looking at me like they would follow my instructions if I ordered them not to drink.

This was a strange feeling, and it made me realize that I really did hold some kind of sway here at the pack house. I wasn’t technically the Alpha’s Luna, but the role I played was kind of… Luna-esque? I didn’t bear the Luna mark, but the pack still looked to me to lead, and that made me feel good.

I also noticed that every face turned to me looked tense and worried, and I realized that Ravi had been right about everyone having a rough day. A rough *few* days. Hell, it had been a rough few *months*, and they did deserve to let loose.

Jay was right, too. We *were* snowed it, and it wasn’t like the Samara pack was going to be able to fight their way through the snow just to ambush us.

I looked around with a grin. “As long as we don’t let it get out of hand.”

The pack cheered, and Ravi poured himself a shot, filling the glass so full it nearly spilled over the sides.

He held it aloft. “Since this was my idea, I guess I’ll get this started,” he said, and threw back the whiskey in one gulp.

The pack cheered again, whooping and hollering nearly louder than the wind was blowing outside the window.

I found that I couldn’t stop grinning, and Lola—using her data—started playing her party playlist through a set of wireless speakers she’d brought down from her room.

“I’m at forty percent, but once my phone hits twenty percent, I’m turning the music off,” Lola warned. “So enjoy it while it lasts!”

People drank and kept eating, but even with the music, it didn’t feel quite like a party. No one really spoke or mingled, and people gripped their glasses tightly as they looked out the window at the storm. There was a strange, manic energy in the air—almost as charged as the electricity from the lightning outside. And despite Ravi’s promise to take it easy and just start drinking to relax, people were pounding back shots like they were trying to forget something. Which they probably were.

After a few songs, Jacqueline picked up Lola’s phone.

“If we’re going to listen to music, it can’t be this,” she said waspishly.

“Shoot me, please,” Torin said, holding his shot glass out to Ravi, who was pouring.

Ravi laughed. “That’s not really what people say, man, but I like it.”

“It’s fine that we’re drinking, but couldn’t we at least play a game *while* we’re drinking?” Torin asked plaintively.

Ravi nodded. “That sounds fair enough.”

I’d been feeling bad that all of Torin’s ideas kept getting shut down, so I went back to one of his earlier thoughts. “How about Torin’s idea of Truth or Dare? But with booze,” I added quickly, as Ravi started to roll his eyes.

And it worked. Ravi grinned.

“All right! You’ve convinced me,” he said. “I’m in! I’ll go first. I pick dare.”

And before anyone else had a chance to say anything, Jaqueline spoke.

“I dare you to streak around the house,” she said with a devilish grin.

Everyone whooped at this, and Ravi smiled. He shrugged, downed another shot, and started to strip. He did it slowly, dramatically, waiting until he was sure he had everyone’s attention before he pulled off another article of clothing.

When he’d finally pulled off his boxers and flung them into the laughing crowd, he posed—fully nude—until Jaqueline yelled at him.

“Outside, Ravi! Around the house!”

I wondered for a moment if I should stop this, or at least try to rein it in. It really wasn’t safe outside in the storm. But before I could do anything, Ravi gave Jaqueline another smirk and dashed to the door. As he ran outside, everyone rushed to the windows to watch him as he ran. He took his time—hamming it up as he ran the perimeter of the house—stopping to do sets of shimmies whenever he saw a face in the window. He leapt onto his hands and walked upside-down past the window where Jacs was standing.

When he finally made it back to the porch, he was red-faced and laughing. He did a backflip in the snow, then sprinted back inside as everyone laughed and cheered.

Back inside, Ravi did a theatrical bow before reaching for his clothes.

“How was it out there, man?” Jay asked him.

Ravi shrugged, grinning. “Out there? In that dusting? It was nothing.”

Jay laughed and clapped Ravi on the back. “I guess they don’t call it liquid courage for nothing.”

Elle—who had been quiet most of the night and watching quietly from the corner of the room—perked up at this.

“*Liquid courage?*” she repeated. Her eyes lit up as she looked at Ravi, then at Jay.

I was about to ask her what was so interesting about Jay’s joke, but I was distracted when Lola looked around and yelled, “Who’s next?”

Jay grinned at his mate. “Looks like someone’s volunteering! What’ll it be, babe? Truth or dare?”

Lola thought for a long moment. “Truth.”

Jay rolled his eyes and groaned dramatically. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“What?’ Lola asked.

“Truth is so boring!” Jay said.

Lola looked irritated. “It’s one of the options, Jay! I’m allowed to choose it. You’re so weird about this game.”

“I just like to keep it interesting,” Jay insisted, winking.

As I listened to Jay and Lola bicker playfully, I could feel myself relaxing. The storm was raging outside, but the house was warm and cozy. We had candles, a fire, music, food, and each other. I was just settling back in my seat when out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of Elle in the kitchen. She was holding a bottle, and as I looked over, I realized with a start that it was a bottle of vodka. She was about to put it to her lips when I leapt to my feet.

“Elle! *No!*”

# Episode 3002

**Xavier**

Facing into the wind felt a little like dying. It was sharp as a knife, and every step took a Herculean effort. Even without looking, I knew that the face of every wolf behind me was grim and set. No one was speaking. There was nothing to say. We just had to keep moving, so we kept our heads down and just put one foot in front of the other. Then again. And again.

I looked up every now and then, just to ensure we were going the right way and we weren’t wandering underneath any of the most precarious trees.

*Xavier, are you sure about bringing Ava back to the pack house?* Rishika asked carefully.

I sighed. *I don’t have a choice. Leaving her out here alone would be putting her life in danger. You know that.*

There was a long enough pause from Rishika in response to this that I could practically hear the, *And would that be such a bad thing?*

My wolf felt angry at the thought, but I tried to shove that down. The storm was too wild, and I didn’t have the time or the energy to be pissed at Rishika, or to think about anything but getting us all back to the pack house safely.

And getting back to Cali.

Shit.

I groaned to myself. When we got back there, Cali was going to see Ava with me. And Cali and I were in such a good place right now. Finally. Having Ava there had the possibility of throwing us off-track again.

There was a big part of me that wished Ava hadn’t come along at all to complicate everything, but that didn’t matter now. It was too late now to do anything about that. Besides, Ava had been helping us out a lot recently, and there was no way I was going to leave her to die in this thundersnow.

*Hey, Xavier, are you sure we’re going the right way?* Zainab asked.

*What do you mean?* I asked quickly.

*I’ve been trying to track our route, but it’s too complicated. Between the snow and the wind, it’s basically impossible for me to get my bearings in this weather.*

*Okay… And?* I asked.

*And what if we’re just going around in circles?*

I looked around quickly and was unnerved to realize I actually didn’t really know where we were. The snow was obscuring the path completely, and I felt anxiety settle into my belly like a stone. But I had to keep it together—I didn’t want to worry them.

*Yes*, I said with a certainty I definitely *wasn’t* feeling. *We’re going the right way.*

Even as I spoke, the wind picked up, blowing harder than I would have thought possible, and I just hoped to hell my instincts were right and we *were* going the right way. Suddenly, a gust of wind blew a familiar scent my way, and I whipped around in surprise.

*Greyson?*

Greyson’s grey wolf bounded forward, as if materializing out of nowhere. He must have blended in perfectly with the snow. Behind him Sage came running, with Artemis sitting on her back.

*Thank god*, Greyson said as soon as he saw me. *I’m glad I found you. We were looking. And you’re not too far from the house. I was worried you might have gotten turned around in this storm and gotten lost.*

I’d have been lying if I pretended that I wasn’t a little glad to see Greyson and a rescue crew, but I hated the implication that I needed any help from my brother—now or ever.

*Yeah, I know*, I said shortly. *And we were heading that way. We would have been just fine without you.*

*Yeah, sure.* Greyson snorted, not fooled for a moment. *You guys look like you’re doing great out here. Not like you’re lost and half frozen at all.*

He looked around at the group, his gaze landing on Rishika and Zainab, but when he saw Ava, he stopped and his eyes narrowed.

He glanced quickly over at me. *What the hell is she doing here?* he demanded.

I groaned internally. *It’s a long story*, I said, not wanting to get into it at the moment. *But she was out here alone, and we couldn’t just leave her, so she’s coming with us.*

Greyson shot a look at me. *You sure about that?*

I bristled. *What the hell does that mean?*

*It means, what makes you so sure no one sent her out here to do just this?*

*Just what?* I asked, starting to feel angry.

*To “be alone,” so you’d take her in and she could infiltrate the house*, Greyson said.

I shook my head, annoyed again. *No, it was nothing like that.*

*You’re sure—*

*I’m sure*, I said quickly. *She just needs somewhere safe to stay.*

Ava couldn’t hear what Greyson and I were talking about through the mind link, but she must have guessed at some of it, because she stepped toward us.

*I’m sorry, Greyson*, she said. *Xavier and I got caught in the storm. It’s worse than I thought it was going to be when I left, and he said I could take shelter with the Redwoods. I’ll be gone as soon as the storm passes.*

Greyson looked at her for a long moment. *Actually, that’s fine*, he finally said. *I have some questions for you.*

Before I could ask Greyson what the fuck kind of questions he had for Ava, he turned and mind linked to all of us.

*Follow me back to the pack house. We’re not too far now.*

We all started into the swirling snow and howling wind. I saw Sage flinch as a gust of wind blasted across her eyes, then tuck in next to Zainab for some protection.

I caught up to Greyson. *What kind of questions do you have for Ava?* I asked.

Greyson didn’t even look at me, so focused on navigating through the storm. *We’ll talk when we’re back at the house*, he said gruffly.

*Greyson—*

*Xavier, I’ve got four pack members to shepherd back to safety, and right now that’s all I’m going to focus on.* His voice was sharp.

I didn’t keep pressing, but I did keep thinking as we trudged through the snow. What information did Greyson need from Ava?

I was starting to shiver when the pack house suddenly emerged from the haze of snow, looking like a frosted gingerbread house or something. The windows were dark, which meant the power must have gone out, but the flickering light from the living room meant that someone had lit a fire, and I couldn’t wait to get my ass in front of it.

As we drew closer, the door flew open and a small figure sprinted into the storm. I shifted back to human just in time to catch Cali as she flew into my arms.

“You’re back!” she breathed, half crying as she tightened her arms around me. “I was so worried.”

I hugged her back, hard, loving the warmth of her. But I knew she was probably freezing, and I laughed. “You shouldn’t be out here in the cold,” I said gently.

Cali glanced over at Greyson, who’d also shifted back and was stepping toward the house.

She put a hand on his arm. “Hey, before you go in, you should know that we have a slight issue.”

Greyson’s face tensed. “What?”

“It’s not a disaster or anything,” Cali said quickly. “It’s just that Elle may or may not have drunk a lot of vodka…”

Greyson stared at her, blinking when the snow flew into his eyes. “*Vodka?*”

“She should be fine,” I said. “She’s still a werewolf. It would take a lot of vodka to do anything to her.”

Cali winced. “Yeah, but it was, like, a *lot* of vodka. And she’s never drank before, so we could probably use some help with that situation.”

Greyson groaned and ran a hand through his hair. It was wet with snow. “I’ll deal with it,” he said, and headed inside.

“Sorry!” Cali called after him.

She smiled in welcome at Rishika, Artemis, Sage, and Zainab, who were all moving past us and into the house, but Cali did a double take when she saw Ava.

Her eyes shot to me. “Ava’s here?” she whispered urgently. She sounded surprised and a little upset, but I was glad to hear she didn’t sound angry or accusing.

I glanced back at Ava, who had paused and was standing uncertainly as the storm swirled angrily around us.

“Let’s talk about this inside,” I suggested. “We all need to get out of this.”

Cali pressed her lips into a thin, tense line, but nodded. “You’re freezing,” she said, putting her hand to my chest. But she sounded distracted, and her eyes tracked Ava’s movements as she walked past us and up the steps, into the house.

I couldn’t read the expression on Cali’s face, and my heart sank. I’d loved the welcome I’d had from her, but was Ava’s appearance going to send our relationship into a nosedive?

# Episode 3003

Xavier and I followed Ava into the house, and I watched the reaction from the rest of the pack as she stepped inside. The laughter and happy chatter died away immediately as everyone noticed her standing in the hallway. As one, all eyes turned to her and stared, clearly confused.

And I understood their confusion. What the hell *was* Ava doing here, in the middle of a storm?

Xavier seemed to understand the silence too, because he stepped forward and addressed the pack. “We ran into Ava when we were out patrolling. The storm is getting pretty bad, so she’s going to hang with us until it passes.”

His announcement was met with dead silence—the only sound was the crackle of the logs in the fireplace. It was clear to me that no one was happy about this development. Given the recent trouble we’d had with the Samaras—and the history we had with Ava—no one fully trusted her.

Xavier heard the ringing silence as well, and made an irritated sound. “She’s no danger to us. She’ll be gone as soon as the storm passes.” He turned to Ava. “You should go find something warm to put on.”

Ava—who had obviously been clocking the weird vibe—nodded, seemingly grateful for an excuse to disappear. As she ran upstairs, the rest of the pack fell into quiet murmurs—probably all about her.

Xavier turned to look at me. “Can we talk?”

“Sure,” I said.

He put his hand on the small of my back and led me up the stairs, then into his room.

“Listen,” he said, turning to me once we were inside, “I’m really sorry about having to bring Ava here. It happened just like I said—we ran into her on patrol, and I knew she couldn’t make it home, but I know it’s hard for you to see us together—”

“Hang on,” I said, interrupting. “Sorry. I still don’t understand. What was she doing out there in the first place? Why was she on our land?”  
 Xavier sighed as he opened a drawer for a pair of sweats and pulled them on. “It’s kind of a long story, but the short answer is that Knox manipulated her into thinking it was me who killed Tanner. She came after me because she thought I was trying to start something. I wasn’t of course—it was all a Knox mind game. But”—he looked out his window—“the storm is really bad, and she was caught in it. I couldn’t just leave her to make her way back to Samara land alone. We couldn’t even navigate. Everything’s white. She could have died out there. I’m sorry, Cali…”

“Hey,” I said, shaking my head. “Don’t apologize. I understand.”

Xavier looked at me, surprised. “You do?”

I sighed. Of course I had a hard time seeing Ava and Xavier together; he wasn’t wrong about that. It drove me kind of crazy, if I was being honest. I never liked being reminded of their connection, but I’d never would have wanted him to leave anyone alone in the woods in the middle of a storm like this. Not even Ava.

“Yeah, I do. I know why you brought her here. I wouldn’t have expected you to do anything else.” Then another thought occurred to me, and I frowned. “But what do you think Knox is going to do when he finds out that she weathered the storm here with us?”

I felt a chill shiver up my spine that had nothing to do with the weather. The memory of seeing Blaine and Tanner confronting Xavier was still enough to terrify me—though it was strange to think back to that date Xavier and I had been on. It felt surreal to remember it now—it felt like it had happened a lifetime ago.

“I know you can handle him, but I just hate the idea of you putting yourself in Knox’s crosshairs again. He’s got it out for you, Xavier.”

Xavier rubbed his face tiredly. I could hear the scratch of the five o’clock shadow on his jaw against his palm.

“Well,” he admitted, “I’m guessing Knox won’t be happy to hear about it, if he finds out. The guy doesn’t understand how to be an Alpha. I don’t even know if he understands how to be a werewolf. He just doesn’t get how mates work. You hang out—you’re together.”

I felt a sharp sting of pain at Xavier’s words. When he said *mate*, he meant Ava. Of course, I knew what he meant. Knox and the rest of the Samaras believed that Xavier and Ava were still mated, and it was important to keep up that fiction, but it still hurt.

Xavier had just pulled on a sweatshirt and was shaking his head. “He’s just such an idiot. At this point, he sees Ava being with me in any capacity as some kind of betrayal to him, but there’s nothing we can do about that now. She’s here, and she can’t leave in this storm. We’ll just have to deal with it when the storm passes.”

He sighed again, and I could see that he looked completely exhausted. My heart ached for him, and I took a step toward him.

“Everything’s going to be fine, you know that, right?”

Xavier looked at me, surprised. “You’re really not mad about Ava showing up here?”

“I’m really not,” I assured him. And I meant it. “How could I be mad at you? This has been hard on me, but I know how hard it’s been on you, too. It’s not like you asked for any of this with Ava or the Samaras or the two mates thing. I can see that you’ve been dealing with so much lately. I just wish I could do something to make this all easier for you, Xavier.”

Xavier gave me a long, searching look. It was so intense that I started to grow a little self-conscious and shifted nervously.

“What?” I asked, smiling a little. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

He reached out and brushed a gentle finger down my cheek, the touch like the whisper of a breeze. “Even after all this time, Cali, I still can’t believe how *good* you are.”

“Xavier,” I said, my face flushing. “I’m not.”

“The whole way back to the house, I was so worried about you being upset with me—”

“Stop,” I said quickly, moving toward him. “I don’t want you to talk like that. You don’t have to worry about that. Not on top of everything else you’re dealing with. I mean it.” Another step closer to him. “We’re in such a good place together, despite everything, and at this point I’m not even remotely worried about Ava.”

I hadn’t thought about it before I’d said it, but as the words left my mouth, I realized that they were true. It was incredible to me, but they were true. I wasn’t worried about Xavier and Ava. I was stressed about what this ruse with Ava and the Samaras was doing to Xavier, but I wasn’t worried about Ava as competition. I wasn’t jealous of her. I knew how Xavier felt about me. I knew he loved me more than anything else. He’d said as much, and everything he’d ever done had backed that up.

I didn’t doubt him for a moment.

It was incredible, actually. It was so freeing to let go of the jealousy I’d once felt toward Ava, and my heart felt so light, I smiled up at Xavier.

“Listen to me. It really is okay,” I said.

“Yeah?” he asked, still a little wary.

I nodded. “As long as we’re good, I’m good.”

Xavier looked down at me for a moment, then bent quickly and kissed me, the movement impulsive and fast and filled with passion. I melted into the kiss, letting his tongue plunder my mouth, letting him bend me back over his arm. I loved being kissed by Xavier, and I loved kissing him back.

He was smiling as he pulled away from me. “Oh, we’re good, tiger,” he said softly, his voice almost a growl. “Very good.”

My whole body thrilled with his words, and the promise of his tone of voice. I was so relieved he was home and so glad to be back in arms, I threw my own arms around his neck and kissed him again. I ran my fingers through his dark hair and tugged. This made him growl again, and he moved his kisses from my mouth to my jaw, then down my neck.

I let my head fall back with a contented sigh as he found a sweet spot just behind my ear, but as my eyes drifted lazily open, I saw that Xavier hadn’t closed the door behind us when we’d come in, and a pair of eyes were staring in at us.

My heart pounded wildly as I locked eyes with Ava.

# Episode 3004

**Greyson**

The pack had gone quiet when Ava had walked in, but that was Xavier’s problem, not mine. *My* problem was Elle, and that was problem enough. Cali had told me she’d had too much to drink, and I went looking for her, wondering what that might look like.

I found her in the kitchen, sitting at the kitchen counter with Lola leaning over her.

“Hi there,” I said warily as I walked toward them.

Elle looked over blearily, but when she saw me, her eyes lit up.

“The Alpha’s back!” she said. She tried to get off the stool to greet me, but Lola pushed her back into place.

“Someone want to tell me what’s going on here?” I asked. “How did this happen?”

Lola sighed, but before she could answer, Elle managed to get to her feet and tottered over to me, smiling and brandishing an empty bottle of vodka.

“Alpha Greyson! I drank the courage!” she slurred happily,

I stared at her, confused for a moment. But more than confused, I was alarmed as hell. I grabbed the bottle and rounded on Lola. “Did she drink *all* of this?” I demanded.

Lola flinched slightly, looking uncharacteristically sheepish. “Well,” she started, hedging, “for the record, it wasn’t completely full when she started. At least, I don’t think it was—”

Elle interrupted Lola’s explanation by burping loudly. She was standing so close, I could smell the sour scent of the vodka on her breath.

My hand tightened angrily around the empty bottle as I frowned at Lola. “What the hell were you all thinking? Letting her drink like that? Letting her drink at all! She’s never had alcohol before!”

Lola frowned back at me. “It’s not my fault, Greyson!”

“Whose fault is it, then? Who should I be yelling at? Why were you partying, anyway?” I demanded.

She rolled her eyes. “We just thought after the day we’ve had, we could all use a little break. And I guess Elle snuck off with the bottle when we weren’t looking.”

I sighed with frustration and turned to Elle. I looked at her carefully, trying to gauge how drunk she really was. On closer inspection it looked like she might only be tipsy, and maybe not as disastrously drunk as I’d thought. After all, even if her first drink ever had been half a bottle of vodka, werewolves *could* hold their liquor.

“Okay,” I said, putting a hand on her shoulder. “You had the liquid courage, and now you have to have the sleep. You need to get up to bed so you can sleep all of this off.”

Elle frowned at me. “I do not want to sleep,” she said firmly. She snatched the empty bottle back from me, her eyebrows drawn down with anger. “I drank the courage,” she insisted. “Now I am braver. I can help you with the Samara pack.”

I stared at her, confused. I had no idea what she was talking about. What the hell did drinking a liter of vodka have to do with bravery? Who had she been talking to? But before I could ask any of these questions, Ravi came into the kitchen.

“Hey, Greyson, there you are. About the Samaras—what’s your plan?”  
 I turned to look at Ravi and saw he was holding a red plastic cup in his hand. So *he* had a drink too. I could feel my frustration rising.

“Just a second,” I snapped at him.

I could only deal with one batshit crazy thing at a time, so I turned to Elle. “You get upstairs and into bed. And make sure you drink a lot of water before you fall asleep. It’ll make you feel better in the morning, believe me.”

“But I’m not tired!” she protested immediately, reminding me so much of a rebellious teenager that I almost smiled, despite my angst. The thing was, Elle getting drunk wasn’t great, but it was probably bound to happen at some point. At least she’d done it while she was here at the pack house and safe with us.

“No sleep,” she repeated, shaking her head hard.

It was time to play my ace. “I’m the Alpha, Elle,” I said firmly, “and you’re going to bed. No arguing.”

This did the trick, and Elle clapped her mouth shut on her protests.

“Okay,” was all she said.

“Finally,” Lola said gratefully, and started to trundle Elle out of the kitchen and off to bed. “Get moving, girl.”

“Elle, hang on,” I called after her. I held up the empty bottle. “No more of this, okay?”

Elle looked at the bottle, then at me. “Okay.” She shrugged. “I will listen to you, Alpha.”

I sighed as she and Lola headed out of the room, relieved that Elle’s road to sobriety hadn’t been any more dramatic.

But when I turned to look at Ravi, I felt my relief drain away, to be replaced with anger.

I pointed to the drink in his hand. “So, while I was out looking for missing pack members in a blizzard, you guys decided to throw a party? Seriously?” I asked incredulously, waiting for an explanation.

Ravi shrugged, looking unconcerned. “It wasn’t *exactly* a party.”

“What would you call it then?” I asked.

He smiled. “Just a way for the pack to blow off some steam.”

I stepped into the hall and looked around at the pack house. I could see more empty liquor bottles—clearly Elle wasn’t the only one finishing drinks off—piles of beer bottles, and stacks of red solo cups everywhere.

Looking back at Ravi, I tipped my head. “Explain to me why this isn’t a party, again?”

Ravi grinned his mischievous grin. “Well, for one, we didn’t *call* it a party. Labels ruin the vibe.”

I shook my head, but as I walked back toward the living room, I found the pack still gathered there, whispering among themselves. The storm was still raging outside, and they seemed tense and worried. I assumed they were still talking about Ava’s sudden arrival and what that mean for relations with the Samaras. As annoyed as I was about everything, I had to admit that Ravi probably wasn’t wrong about the pack deserving a little break.

“Hey, Greyson, man,” Ravi said. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s fine,” I said quickly. It wasn’t fine—not exactly—but there was too much going on to keep pushing the whole “why the hell were you drinking while the Alpha was out saving pack members during a dangerous storm?” thing. The best thing to do was probably to just let it go.

Ravi nodded, then eyed me again. “But seriously, Greyson, what’s the plan with the Samaras? I just want to be ready.” He nodded toward the windows, which were covered in frost. “Obviously I don’t think they’re going to be trying anything until all of this dies down, but then what?”

He was asking a totally reasonable question, but for some reason it was making my head hurt to think about it. It felt like this day had been going on for fucking eons, and I hadn’t had a chance to take a deep breath even once. All I wanted to do was to crawl into bed—preferably with Cali—and fall into a deep, deep sleep. But I was the Alpha of this pack, and we had problems, so that wasn’t an option at the moment. I tried to shove the thought of rest out of my mind and force myself to focus on Ravi’s question.

Though apparently, I had paused long enough that Ravi felt like he had to keep pushing.

“They attacked us, man. In our own territory. It’s just driving me crazy, you know?”

I knew. I felt the same way, and listening to Ravi’s complaints, my blood started to boil. Ravi was right—they’d attacked us on our land. Not only had they gone after us on our own territory, they’d gone after *Cali*. That was unacceptable, and it was making me furious all over again just thinking about it.

Suddenly I became aware that the rest of the pack had stopped whispering. They’d gone completely silent and were all listening hard to my conversation with Ravi. I didn’t blame them. If Ravi thought things were up in the air, so did the others.

Ravi gave me a long look. “We aren’t just going to sit back and take it, are we, Greyson?”

Before I answered that, I looked around the room. Every eye was on me and looked serious as hell. They all looked angry, and there was a thick tension in the room. We’d been attacked, and everyone here knew it. And they were pissed.

They wanted my direction. I had to give it to them.

“Greyson?” Ravi asked.

I shook my head. “No, we’re not just going to sit back and take it.”

“What are we going to do?” he asked.

I looked over at him, feeling more sure than ever. “We’re going to war.”

# Episode 3005

**Ava**

It felt like my feet were frozen to the floor as I stared at Cali. My whole body seemed to have turned to stone, even though every instinct I possessed was telling me to turn away.

Xavier had his back to me, so he couldn’t see me, and was very involved in kissing his way down Cali’s neck with a passion that made me feel like I was going to be sick. Not just sad, but physically sick, like I could throw up at any moment. My throat felt tight, and white-hot jealousy clawed at me like a monster trying to climb out of my chest.

After a moment, I realized I had stopped breathing and was getting light-headed. Not wanting to humiliate myself by passing out on the floor, I sucked in a tortured breath and wished like hell I hadn’t peeked through the cracked open door as I walked down the hallway. I’d just been headed to one of the guest rooms to look for some warm clothes when I’d seen it, and it was just a strange instinct that had made me do it. When I’d seen someone inside the door, I should have moved away, but it was too late now. I had seen it, and there was no way to un-ring that bell. It was clear from Xavier’s body language that he was totally engrossed in Cali. I should know—I was one of the few people literate in that body language.

Of course, ever since I’d come back from the shadow world to find that Xavier had mated with Cali, I’d known that he loved her, but the knowledge had been somehow abstract. At least that was how I’d managed to keep it. I’d known she was his mate, but I hadn’t had to see evidence of that right in front of my own eyes—not for a while, at least—and it hurt way more than I’d anticipated.

I knew I should just move away from the door, but it was like my legs had turned to lead. I felt dizzy, like I was going to pass out—and then I saw Cali’s eyes on mine. She had seen me, and her brows drew down in a frown.

Shit.

She lifted her hand from Xavier’s shoulder and waved her finger gently, almost like she was scolding me, and the door shut quietly, leaving me all alone. After a stunned moment, I realized that Cali must have used her magic to shut the door, leaving me locked out in the hallway, knowing that Xavier and Cali were on the other side, doing god only knew what. They were together, and I was alone, and the loneliness hurt so badly I thought I was going to cry.

I forced my feet to move away—to continue down the hall to the guest room—and closed the door behind me. I leaned against it, looking into the empty, darkened room as my eyes stung with tears. Slowly, I slid downward onto the floor.

In the logical part of my brain, I knew it was absurd to feel so betrayed by what I’d just seen. Xavier had always been clear about his feelings for me, and for Cali. He’d agreed to go along with the ruse to fool Knox and the Samaras, but he’d never made me any promises. He’d never given me any indication that his attachment to Cali had changed in any way. But still… The last couple of days, it had felt like something had changed between us. I couldn’t exactly put a finger on it, but it had felt like we’d really been speaking to each other for the first time in a long time. Really been listening to each other. Like our connection had strengthened. I’d foolishly started to allow myself to hope that someday—*someday*—maybe things could be different…

I gave my head a hard shake. No. That was stupid, and I was a fool for thinking it was even possible. The image of Xavier kissing Cali’s neck sprang back into my mind, and tears welled up again. I blinked hard, but the image stayed. It was burned into my head, and I had a feeling I’d never be able to forget it. An ache, so fierce it felt like I was being punched in the chest, radiated through my body. I couldn’t remember a time when I’d ever felt so lonely. I rubbed my arms, almost wanting to claw right out of my skin.

Where did I belong? It used to be with Xavier, but it was clear that wasn’t true anymore. The Samara pack had always been mine, but even that didn’t feel like home anymore—at least not when Xavier wasn’t there. And judging by the way every member of the Redwood pack had looked at me when I’d walked through the door, it was clear that I wasn’t welcome here either.

I dropped my head into my hands in the darkness and thought about how quickly I’d been willing to believe Knox when he’d told me that Xavier had killed Tanner. Why was that? Was I trying to push Xavier away, before he could do the same to me?

I thought of the look in Xavier’s eyes when he’d asked me why on earth I’d believed Knox over him. He’d just looked so… betrayed. He’d looked hurt and confused, and now I wondered if I’d just ruined everything I’d carefully repaired with him by being so damn quick to believe Knox over Xavier. I felt like I’d been painstakingly rebuilding the foundation of my relationship with Xavier, and the fact that I might have ruined it again made me feel more miserable than ever.

With a shuddering sigh that felt like it came from the depths of my soul, I drew my knees up to my chest and raised my head so I could look out the window. The snowstorm cast a strange, grey light outside, making it look almost bright, though I knew that the snow was making it impossible to see. Even so, I wondered if it would be better if I just left. I could brave the storm and disappear right out of everyone’s lives. I couldn’t stand the thought of facing Xavier after what I’d seen between Cali and him.

I was mulling over that ill-formed plan when there was a soft knock on the door.

I got to my feet hastily as the door cracked open and Greyson appeared.

“Ava? Can we talk?”

Quickly, I wiped my eyes, remembering that Greyson had said he had some questions for me.

I took a deep breath, trying to compose myself and steady my voice, then stepped forward and pulled the door all the way open.

“Yeah, what’s up?” I said almost naturally.

Greyson wore a pair of jeans and a black T-shirt, and when I opened the door, he gave me a long, searching look. He was carrying a candle, which threw shadows onto his face and made him look even more imposing than usual—and he usually looked pretty damn imposing. I truly believed Xavier deserved to be Alpha of this pack, but even I had to admit that Greyson fit the role, and I could feel myself shrinking back as he eyed me.

I wasn’t too proud to admit it—the guy intimidated the hell out of me.

He stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.

“Whose side are you really on?” he asked without preamble.

I stared at him, confused. “What?”

“You heard me,” he said shortly. “Or do you need me to repeat the question?”

“I heard the question, I just don’t know what you mean,” I clarified. “I’ve told you a million times, Greyson, I’m on your side.”

He narrowed his eyes. “I guess I’m going to need to hear it again.”

I sighed. “What do you want me to do, swear a blood oath?”

A muscle in his jaw twitched. “Just tell me again how committed to the Redwood pack you are.”

I was committed to Xavier, but even thinking of that reminded me of seeing him kissing Cali, which made my stomach twist painfully. But I wasn’t going to say all that to Greyson, and the details weren’t important anyway. So I just said, “Very. For the last time, Greyson, I’m with the Redwoods.”

It was hard as hell, but I forced myself to maintain eye contact with him. It was giving me a headache, but it felt like a test, and after a moment he nodded, so I must have passed.

“All right,” he said. He passed a hand through his hair, and up close I could see he looked exhausted.

“I have another question for you,” he said.

“Go ahead,” I said, pulling open a dresser drawer and digging around for a pair of sweats.

“You need to tell me something,” Greyson said. “Knox is taking something to boost his strength. Something unnatural.” He leaned closer, his eyes blazing, and he looked as fierce as I’d seen him. “What is it that they’re taking?”

# Episode 3006

I watched with satisfaction when Ava’s face disappeared as my magic shut and locked the door. Xavier hadn’t even noticed her there, and I drew him closer, wrapping myself around him and grinding my hips against him until I felt him grow hard against me. Xavier was *mine*, and now Ava had seen it. It was *me* he loved, and her nosiness had let her see that with her own eyes. Whatever their history, he didn’t love Ava the way she wanted him to. Not anymore.

Xavier made a low, growling sound in the back of his throat and pushed me, guiding me back until he was pressing me into the wall. He pushed his body against mine with enough pressure that I could clearly feel his hard-on through my jeans. It was *me* he wanted, and my whole body warmed with that thought—but there was something nagging at the back of my thoughts.

I let my mind mull it over for a moment as Xavier slipped his hands beneath my shirt and cupped my breasts. The sensation of his hands on me made it hard to think, but after a moment I realized what it was that was bothering me: it was the look of utter devastation on Ava’s face as she’d looked at Xavier and me together. I’d always known Ava was possessive about Xavier, but the way she’d been looking at us made me sure it was more than just straight-up jealousy—Ava was still completely in love with Xavier. And to my total surprise, I found that I felt sorry for her. Was that even possible?

Now that I wasn’t burning with jealousy about her connection with him—because I was confident Xavier was all in with me and no longer had those feelings for Ava—and could think straight, I realized that Ava’s position was really pretty pitiful. She didn’t have a family—her only brother, Nolan, had been killed when he’d betrayed us, and I didn’t know if there was anyone else out there. Xavier used to be her mate, but now he wanted to distance himself from her. Her pack was in shambles, and the naked pain I’d seen on her face made one thing crystal clear to me: despite everything that had happened between them, Ava had been very much holding onto the hope that Xavier would still choose to be with her.

My whole body was burning for him, but I couldn’t stop my thoughts from racing. Xavier must have noticed that I’d gotten distracted, because he pulled back enough to look down into my face.

“Hey, are you okay?” he breathed.

I gave my head a little shake, feeling annoyed with myself. Here I was—with Xavier, kissing him—and I was thinking about *Ava*? What was wrong with me?

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said, smiling up at him. “Totally fine.”

I moved to kiss him again, but Xavier pulled back, his eyes searching my face.

God, what was going on with me? I shouldn’t have been thinking right now, not when there were so many good things to *feel.*

I let my smile turn suggestive and pressed my hips against his. “I’m *completely* and *absolutely* fine,” I purred, but before I could reach his lips, there was another giant *BOOM* of thunder. It was accompanied by a flash of lightning that lit up the room, and I jumped and clutched him tightly.

We looked at each other, surprised for a moment, and then we laughed.

“Okay, if that’s what happens when I lie, then I guess I should admit I’m a little distracted.”

Xavier’s expression gentled, and he pulled me into a hug. “That’s fair enough. There’s a lot going on right now.” He held me close for a moment, and when he spoke, he murmured the words into my hair. “I really appreciate how understanding you’re being about all this. It just makes this so much easier on me, but I know it’s a sacrifice for you.”

Again, my thoughts went to Ava, and the despondent look on her face when she’d seen us together. I felt that uncomfortable and unwelcome pang of pity again, but I couldn’t seem to push it away. It was a sacrifice for me to let Xavier go around pretending he was still mated to Ava. It was a sacrifice for Xavier, too. But it was also a sacrifice for Ava. And one she might not even have realized she was making. She had fallen back in love with Xavier, which might not have been in her plan to bring her pack back together.

I gave my head another shake, trying to rid myself of thoughts of Ava, and looked up at Xavier.

“I’m happy that it feels like the two of us are finally on the same page. It feels like it’s been a while,” he said with a grin. “Even if a brewing pack war with the Samaras might make a habit of crashing our dates.”

I groaned, and Xavier’s expression grew more serious. His gaze trailed over my face, and he lifted a hand, tucking a stray lock of hair behind my ear. I could tell something was troubling him.

“What?” I asked after a long moment.

He shook his head, his blue eyes flashing in the darkness. “Nothing. I mean, everything, I guess. It’s just this moment.”

“What about it?” I asked.

“I wish I could live in this exact moment with you forever,” he said quietly. “Just the two of us, alone together.” He shook his head slowly. “It’s all I’ve ever wanted, Cali.”

My heart pounded and when I looked up at him; it seemed to skip a beat. He was so handsome—even in the darkened room, the angles of his face were strong and sharp, and he nearly took my breath away.

“It is pretty perfect, isn’t it?” I whispered.

“Yeah,” he breathed, and leaned in to press a kiss to my lips.

I’d opened my mouth to his exploring tongue, but the achingly perfect moment was broken when we heard a squeal from outside the door.

I tensed, and after an instant, I realized why.

“Oh god, it’s Elle,” I said, stepping away from Xavier and reaching for the door.

“What’s going on?” Xavier asked in confusion, probably—reasonably—wondering why I was abandoning him for Elle at this exact moment.

“I was so excited about you being home, I totally forgot,” I said quickly.

“Forgot what?” he asked, still baffled.

“Elle got drunk during a game we were playing, and I promised I’d help Lola deal with her. I should probably check on her.”

Xavier nodded, finally understanding, and grinned. “As interested as I am in seeing how a newly minted human is dealing with her liquor, I think I’ll leave that one to you.” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I should probably go check on Ava and make sure she’s not making any waves with the pack.”

My pulse thrummed when he said that, and I wondered if Ava was going to say something to Xavier about seeing us together, but before I could say anything to him about it, he was out the door.

I stepped out after him and saw that Lola was standing in Elle’s doorway, looking desperate.

“Elle, would you please get into bed. *Please?*” she begged.

I joined Lola in the doorway, and when she saw me, she nearly started to cry with relief.

“Oh, thank god you’re here, Cali. This girl is impossible, you know that, right? She was bad enough sober, but drunk she’s like a freaking gremlin. Look at her!” she cried, gesturing toward the bed.

I looked and saw Elle, who had stripped off every piece of clothing she had except for a pair of bright-red underwear, which she’d jammed onto her head like a hat. She was bouncing on the bed—stark naked—and looked completely blissed out. It was like I’d stumbled into a frat-house porno.

But when she looked over at me, her face lit up with excitement. “Cali!” she cried, and bounced off the bed.

She ran toward me—standing way too close—and grabbed my hands. I tried to ignore my instinct to snatch them away and tried not to look at her completely perfect body (like, what the actual hell was up with this girl? Her skin looked like it had been professionally airbrushed! This was not normal).

“Cali!” she said again, her face alight with excitement.

“You seem to be having a good time, Elle, but let’s get you settled down, huh,” I said, trying to smile at her.

“Something has happened to me!”

“You mean apart from getting wasted for the first time?” I asked. “What else happened?”

Her eyes sparkled. “I have found my mate!”

I had not been expecting that. “*What?*” I shouted, floored.

Lola’s eyes widened. “Really? Who is it?”

I shot Lola a glare. This was not the moment to take this kind of nonsense seriously. Clearly, Elle was just drunk.

But Elle just smiled, looking excited to be asked. She looked between us for a moment, and her eyes went wide and dreamy. “*Lucian.*”

# Episode 3007

**Xavier**

I felt like I was practically flying down the hall. It was strange to feel so good when so many things were going wrong, but even with all the curses, and demonic ashes, and all the shit we still had to deal with with the Samaras and the Vanguards and who knew what else, knowing that Cali understood about what was going on with Ava and me filled me with relief. And I was so impressed with Cali’s maturity—this wasn’t an easy situation, but she was being so understanding of it all, and I could tell she’d really meant it when she said she wasn’t going to be jealous of Ava anymore. Her saying that to me was a massive weight off my shoulders—knowing that my relationship with Cali wasn’t going to be in jeopardy because of this crazy Samara ruse made me feel on top of the world.

My thoughts were light with relief, but they started to turn dirty as I thought about what I’d just left with Cali, and where it could have gone if we hadn’t been interrupted. If I tried, I could still feel the soft curves of her body beneath my hands, and the pressure of her mouth against mine. I knew she was somewhere dealing with Elle, otherwise I might’ve just turned right around and grabbed her, locked the door, and picked up right where we’d left off.

But all those thoughts flew from my mind as I reached the door of the guest bedroom where Ava was staying, because—behind it—I heard more than one voice.

There was a low rumble, then the sound of Ava answering. “Seriously, I really have no idea.”

I heard the low rumble again, but this time I could understand the words, and I recognized the voice.

“Well then, you’d better find out,” Greyson said sharply.

Without bothering to knock, I pushed open the door and looked quickly between the two of them. “What’s going on in here?”

Ava shot me a quick look, then looked away. Her expression was strained and upset, but somehow unreadable, and before I could say anything to her, Greyson spoke, answering my question.

“I was just in here asking Ava if she knew what Knox and the rest of those Samara jokers are taking to get juiced.”

“Oh yeah, their eyes,” I said, remembering the strange, bloodshot look of them. They’d all looked like they’d been up for days on end.

Greyson nodded. “Yeah, those strung-out eyes, not to mention their speed and their strength. We know those guys. You know they shouldn’t be able to outrun us, and we’ve scrapped with them enough to know they shouldn’t be able to out-fight us, so it’s obvious that something is going on.”

“Absolutely,” I said with complete certainty.

Greyson looked back at Ava. “They’re clearly using something, and before we go to war, we need to know what we’re up against.”

I stared at Greyson. “Hang on, did you just say before we go to *war*?” That was the first time I’d ever heard him say that with such finality.

Greyson looked at me and nodded. “Yeah, I did. I’ve told the others already. Knox and his lackeys attacked us on our territory and tried to kill the Alpha’s mate. That’s an act of war, Xavier. You know that. We *have* to respond. We don’t really have a choice.” He glanced out the window, which was still a mass of swirling white as the blizzard raged on. “We can’t go now, but when the storm dies down, we’re going after the Samara pack.”

Ava’s eyes widened at his words, and she glanced at me. We locked eyes for a moment. She looked surprised by this news, but I wasn’t. Not really. Greyson was right. What Knox had done was an act of aggression at least, and a declaration of war at most. After being attacked on our own land, it wasn’t like we had the option of just ignoring it and hoping it wouldn’t happen again. We either went to war, or we’d lose the war before we fought. That was how the Samaras would see it, and that was how the other packs would see it. Which meant we didn’t have a lot of options. In many ways we’d shown restraint in not declaring war days ago. Ava had probably been the only thing in the way of that decision.

I looked over at Greyson. “You’re right.” I knew he’d recognized the weight of my agreement, since I so rarely gave it.

Greyson nodded. “I’m not going to let Knox or anyone else hurt anyone else in the Redwood pack.” His gaze flicked over to Ava, who was sitting on the bed, her whole body tense. “Or the Samara pack,” he added.

Ava swallowed. “What do you mean by that?” she asked hoarsely.

“I know a lot of the Samara pack members didn’t want this conflict, Ava. This wasn’t what they signed on for when they agreed to re-form the pack, and I don’t have any problem with members of your pack who want to defect to avoid fighting a war that Knox started all on his own.” Greyson’s grey eyes darkened. “As long as Knox is taken out, I don’t see any reason for unnecessary violence.”

The room was quiet, and his words hung in the darkness between the three of us.

I glanced over at Ava. I could tell from the flash of her eyes that she was upset about this prospect, but she kept her mouth shut. That was Ava all over—she held her cards close and didn’t reveal her feelings until she was sure what her move was going to be.

Greyson looked at her. “Obviously, we’re going to need you.”

“To do what?” she asked.

“To figure out exactly what Knox and the others are taking to get them all juiced, so we can figure out how to fight back effectively.”

Ava nervously flexed her hands on the bed. “It’s like I told you, I really don’t know what they’re up to or what they’re taking—”

“Well, we need you to find out,” Greyson said firmly.

She swallowed hard. “What I *can* tell you is that Knox and his little circle keep to themselves. They don’t really talk to anyone else in the pack, and it’s hard to keep an eye on anything they’re doing. They know what they’re doing, and they’re doing it on purpose. They’re trying to be sneaky.”

Greyson frowned as he took this in. “You’re going to need to go back to Knox—”

“I’m telling you,” Ava insisted, “they’re not going to tell me what’s going on—”

“—and tell him that things with Xavier fell apart,” Greyson went on. “Act like he betrayed you or something, and you’re all torn up about it.”

I clocked another strange look twisting Ava’s face at this, but even though her hurt was obvious, there was still something unreadable behind her eyes.

“Tell Knox that you’re out for vengeance.” Greyson seemed to be thinking fast. “That guy is self-absorbed enough to believe you if you tell him he’s the only one you can trust with this. He’ll be your most trusted ally if he helps you take Xavier out. Maybe this will be enough for him to bring you into his inner circle, and you can get close enough to figure out what he’s taking and how to fight it. Then when we’re ready, we can attack.”

I frowned. I didn’t like the sound of this at all. “So, let me get this straight: you’re throwing Ava into an actual wolf’s den—all alone?”

Greyson looked at me warily. “Xavier, Ava’s perfectly capable of taking care of herself. As I’m sure you know better than anyone.”

This felt like a jab, but I couldn’t quite tell where he wanted it to hit, so I ignored it. I did know Ava could take care of herself, but I still didn’t love the idea of sending her back to the Samaras and throwing her into this thing on her own. But as I racked my mind trying to figure out any other way, I could see that Greyson was probably right. Knox fucking hated me, and convincing him that Ava’s relationship with me had fallen apart was probably the only way Knox would ever trust her enough to tell her anything remotely useful.

But still, I was worried.

I turned to Ava, whose face was shadowed in the dim room. “Are you comfortable doing this?”

She didn’t look at me at all. She just looked up at Greyson and nodded. “I’ll do it. I’ll go.”

This didn’t make me feel any better. What the hell was going on with Ava? Why was she being so weird? Those Samara guys had looked fucking *strung out.* They’d been strong and fast and frankly scary as hell. This was going to be a dangerous mission, and I wanted to make sure she knew what she was getting herself into.

I stepped toward Ava and put my hands on her shoulders. Then I bent down and looked her in the eyes. “Do you think you can do what Greyson asked? Do you truly think you can convince Knox that we’re over?”

# Episode 3008

**Xavier**

My wolf growled at the mere idea of pretending to break things off with Ava—even though our relationship hadn’t been real in years.

I ignored him. He wasn’t protesting as much as I’d worried he might, and, again, Ava and I were fake mates. Well, fake in all the ways that actually counted. We might’ve had this annoying bond between us, but we weren’t in love.

So no, our pretend relationship didn’t mean jack shit to me.

My wolf growled at that thought, too. The fucking idiot.

Whatever personal fallout might come from our “breakup,” it would be worth it. This situation—and avoiding an all-out pack war—was so much bigger than Ava and me. The Redwood pack was being threatened, and if we didn’t put a pin in this bullshit with Knox, it wouldn’t take long for the whole thing to snowball out of control.

It wasn’t about Ava and me at all.

Plus, there were certain advantages to ending our “relationship.” Namely, the fact that it would put more distance between us. The wider the gap between me and my first mate, the closer Cali and I could ultimately become. It was the logical choice, in so many ways.

I just hoped Ava was feeling up for it.

She snorted. “Of course I can convince my cousin that we’ve broken up. After all, we’re not really together, are we? None of this is real,” she said, her eyes flicking toward me. “I’m not so much convincing anyone as I am going back to reality.”

I wasn’t sure I believed that she was feeling so casual about our “breakup.” I knew her better than that, and she and my wolf tended to be in agreement about our mate bond. I couldn’t so readily believe that she would give that up. Things might have settled into something resembling peace between Ava and me, but I had a feeling she was still holding out hope that we’d have a future.

Could she actually be ready to let go of that hope? Or was she just trying to save face in front of Greyson and me?

*And does it really matter either way?*

I’d been ready to make a final break with Ava for a long time now. Pretty much ever since she’d walked out of that mirror and become a gigantic pain in my ass all over again. But breaking those ties now would have the added benefits of helping me finish off Knox *and* clear the path for me and Cali.

It was a no-brainer.

I liked where Cali and I were, and I couldn’t wait to enjoy a future without Ava muddying things up. But if Ava could help me put an end to whatever Knox was up to, I was going to take that help without reservation.

I scoffed, crossing my arms. “Of course I know we’re not really together.”

I watched her face for some sign that she was hurt by my words, that they impacted her in any way at all. Either she wasn’t hurt, or she was hiding the pain well. But it didn’t matter. I hadn’t let her feelings stand in my way yet—now seemed like a shitty time to start worrying about them.

“Good,” she said simply.

“I’m glad we’re on the same page.”

“Yeah, this is all very warm and fuzzy,” Greyson said, inserting himself back into the conversation. “But time is of the essence, so whatever you have to do, do it.” He turned his gaze on Ava. “You *have* to regain your cousin’s trust, so do whatever it takes to make that happen.” Then he looked at me. “The same goes for you. If push comes to shove, I believe we can defeat Knox with or without Ava’s help, but it would be better for everyone if we have that inside information to guide us.”

“I know,” I grunted.

Irritation lashed at my stomach. I wasn’t a fucking idiot. I didn’t need Greyson to spell it out for me. And seeing as how Ava and I were the ones actually putting ourselves on the line here, I especially didn’t need Greyson riding me.

Ava looked out the window. The world was still painted white with the blizzard. “Judging by the storm outside, there doesn’t seem to be any rush. Nobody’s going to be doing anything today. We have time to figure out a plan.” She yawned and headed for the door before Greyson grabbed her arm.

My wolf snarled, and I told him to shut his fucking mouth.

Ava shot a pointed glance at the hand on her arm before looking up at Greyson, her brows rising. “Yes?”

“I want a plan in place before the storm breaks—not after. We have a chance to get the upper hand here, and I’m not going to lose it.”

“I’ll come up with one.” She shrugged, which looked a little less carefree with Greyson’s hand still on her arm. “Don’t worry.”

His eyes narrowed. “It’s my job to worry.”

Her eyes slipped over to mine. “You’re the Alpha.” She eased her arm out of Greyson’s grip and left the room.

Greyson watched her go before turning to me. “Don’t blow this.”

“There’s nothing to blow. Ava and I haven’t been in a real relationship in ages. She killed my mother, remember?” I snapped. And maybe Ava and I had come to a place of relative forgiveness, but it didn’t change the fact that our relationship was broken beyond repair. Not that I even wanted to try to mend it. “So, yeah. Don’t worry. This whole time, we’ve only been pretending to make things easier for the Redwood pack, which you already know. You’re welcome, by the way.”

“You might be pretending, but I’m not so sure that Ava is.” He gave me a pointed look.

“Shut up, Greyson. I’ll handle Ava, so you can go ahead and remove that giant stick from your ass.”

Much to my disappointment, he didn’t take the bait. “I hope you know what you’re doing. There’s a lot riding on this.”

I scoffed. “I’m well aware of what’s at stake here, thanks. I don’t need to be reminded. Instead of nagging me, maybe you should start thinking about what we’re going to do when the snow clears. What’s the plan?”

Again, my brother didn’t take the bait. He was getting boring in his old age.

“We need more information on Knox before we attack,” he said. “We both know Knox and the Samaras are taking something to give them an edge in battle. Until we know what that is, and how to mitigate its effects, there’s no point in rushing in blindly and risking our pack.”

“We’re not going to face them, then.”

He shook his head. “Make no mistake, we *will* bring the fight to them. But first I have to make sure we won’t be at a disadvantage. I want to know what we’re up against. This won’t be like the pack wars of our father—this will be over before it begins. But if Knox is using something to help him, we need to neutralize it so it’s an even playing field. I’m not sending our pack in to get slaughtered.”

That I understood. Putting our pack needlessly at risk would be stupid.

“It makes sense that Knox would use something—he’s got to know that the Samaras are no match for the Redwood pack. That’s why they’re dosing, because they know that otherwise, we’d kill them.” I huffed out a laugh. “But it doesn’t matter. Even if they think they can take us, I’m confident we’ll still kick their asses.”

Greyson nodded. “I have no doubt about that. Plus, we do have Lucian in our back pocket if we need him, but I’d rather not,” he said. “And, again, I want this one piece of information before we send in the pack. It’s an unknown variable, and it could easily prove deadly. Knox and his goons can get ripped to shreds for all I care, but I don’t want any Redwood pack members, or any of the innocent Samara pack members, getting hurt in the process.”

*That’s what Cali would want both of us to do*, I realized. She’d want us to preserve as many lives as possible. Hell, she’d probably want to keep Knox alive too, but that ship had sailed, as far as I was concerned.

It was such a fucking joke that Knox—a goddamn pack Alpha—was knowingly cheating. For all his bluster and cockiness, at heart he was still just an Alpha wannabe.

“There is one person you’re putting at risk,” I pointed out. “If Knox finds out the truth, Ava could get killed.”

“And that would be unfortunate, but that’s not really my problem. She agreed to this.”

“I thought you said you didn’t want any innocent Samaras to get hurt.”

“You think she’s innocent?”

I bit my tongue. Honestly, no. But it wasn’t that simple. It never was with Ava.

Greyson’s eyes bored into mine. “Do you have a problem with this?”

# Episode 3009

My jaw dropped so low that for a second, I thought it might have fallen off of my face. “You… You think *Lucian* is your mate?”

Elle nodded, smiling dreamily. And drunkenly. She was still very not used to alcohol, which I couldn’t fault her for.

But I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry or scream or vomit. Elle and Lucian were *not* mates. They couldn’t be mates. For about a thousand reasons—the main one being that I couldn’t imagine a universe cruel enough to tether a sweet, naïve person like Elle to someone like Lucian.

No, it wasn’t possible, and I needed to make sure that Elle understood that.

I turned to Lola. “What on *earth* did you say to her?”

She held her hands up in front of her. “Hey, I didn’t put that idea in her head, I promise. I was only trying to get her to go to bed.”

“Lucian *is* my mate, right?” Elle’s lips curved up into a hopeful smile.

“NO!” Lola and I shouted in unison.

Her smile disappeared, and her brow creased. “Why not?”

Once again, I was struck absolutely speechless. *Uh, maybe because he’s a pompous asshole? Because he tried to use me as a body bag for Seluna? Because he’s icky and he’s always got something awful up his sleeve and we can’t, under any circumstances, trust him? EVER.*

Lola snorted. “She’s really got a type, doesn’t she? First Greyson, now Lucian. Who’ll be next? Knox?”

Elle looked like she’d just tasted something bitter. “No. Knox is not mate worthy of anyone.”

“Okay there, Elle. Let’s just slow down, okay? Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.” I pulled in a deep breath, trying to find some semblance of calm when really all I wanted to do was shake the girl until all the warm, fuzzy feelings for Lucian fell out of her brain. “A mate bond is… very special. And very rare. It’s a strong connection between two mates—and it can’t be forced. You can’t make someone be your mate just because you think they should be.”

I thought of Ava and her messed-up ties to Xavier, but I pushed that away. That was way too complicated to be thinking about right now. *I* could barely wrap my head around it most of the time—Elle had no chance. Plus, it wasn’t going to help me convince her to forget about Lucian. For all I knew, bringing up the *due destini* would just give her free reign to think any random guy could be her mate, whether he was attached to her or not.

But Elle already looked even more confused. “Does Lucian have mate? Are you Lucian’s mate?”

“No!” I grimaced. “Never. Not in a million years.”

Beside me, Lola burst out laughing.

Then Elle pointed at Lola. “Lola is Lucian’s mate?”

Lola immediately stopped laughing. “Um, *yuck*. Jay is my mate.”

Elle cocked her head. “Jay is Alpha?”

“N-No,” Lola sputtered. “Not every mate bond is going to include an Alpha.”

“Elle, why do you think Lucian is your mate?” I asked. We were in danger of veering off topic here.

“Because he is.”

*Well, I can’t argue with that logic.* Lola snickered again. I sighed and tried to think of an example. Something to make this more concrete and understandable for Elle.

“It took me a while to realize I’d found my mate,” I said. “It wasn’t a sudden revelation that I just had one day. Though, that *is* kind of how it happened for Charlie and Violet.”

Elle nodded. “It can be very fast?”

“For me,” I continued, as if I hadn’t heard her, “it was a slow burn… I was drawn to them with an undeniable pull.” I turned to Lola. “Was it love at first sight with Jay?”

She snorted. “Not at all. I thought Jay was gross. But then again, I was just a kid. And he was a boy. All boys were disgusting back then. But somewhere along the way, we fell in love—”

“Have you ever even spoken with Lucian?” I asked. “Had a real conversation with him?”

“Yes. At the party.”

I’d been at that party too, and I didn’t remember seeing Lucian and Elle together in any kind of meaningful way. What, had she seen him from across the room and decided he was handsome and rich enough to be her mate?

*Maybe she’s more like Ariel than we thought.*

“Elle, do you want to kiss Lucian?” Lola asked.

Elle grinned, and I shuddered at the thought of the two of them kissing. Lucian as a mate or significant other wasn’t something I’d wish on my worst enemy, much less someone like Elle. I was the only one in the room who’d actually kissed Lucian—multiple times, actually—and every instance was something I’d rather forget.

“What?” Lola shrugged. “I’m just saying, maybe underneath that princely exterior he’s a demon-loving dickhead, but he looks hot, and you can’t deny that, Cali. Maybe Elle finds him attractive.”

“Even if she does, that doesn’t mean they’re mates. What about feelings?” I looked at Elle. “Do you even like Lucian?”

She stared back at me blankly. “I am confused. What is *like*?”

“See? She has no idea what a mate is!”

Lola shook her head. “You don’t have to like someone for them to be your mate. Look at how long it took for Colton and Maya to stop trying to kill each other and even admit they had the hots for each other. In fact, they might still be trying to kill each other, for all we know. No ‘like’ required.”

“Okay fine, you have a point there. But I have to believe that Colton and Maya are the exception. Maybe it’s naïve, but I have a much more romantic notion of mate bonds.” I pointed at Elle. “And she deserves that kind of mate bond.”

“Fair enough.” Lola looked Elle up and down. “Maybe this isn’t about mates at all. Maybe her body’s changing and she’s just experiencing being attracted to someone as a human. Maybe we can get her one of those books with lots of pictures about the female body and hormones and stuff. My dads got me one when I was a preteen. It was very helpful.”

“Maybe.” I grimaced, trying to imagine how we would ever talk to Elle about maturation. “But I don’t think she’s ready for that yet. She can’t even read.”

“Oh, I am *not* reading that to her.”

“Maybe we won’t have to.” I turned to Elle, who had been watching our conversation with a confused-slash-drunk-slash-dreamy expression. “You shouldn’t rush into finding a mate.” I thought about my own mates. “But when you do find them, you’ll want to kiss them. And you’ll want to be with them all the time. You’ll know.”

She frowned. “How?”

“It’s like when you’re hungry and you need something to eat—” Lola began, but I cut her off. The last thing we needed was for Elle to go around “tasting” everyone.

“You’ll just know.” I smiled. “You’ll feel it all over. But there’s no reason to think Lucian is your mate just because you think he’s handsome, or because he’s an Alpha or something.”

Elle lit up. “So my mate could be out there?”

I sighed, suddenly exhausted beyond words. “Elle, it’s late. You need to get some rest. Don’t drink any more vodka, and try not to worry about finding a mate, okay?” I led her back to her bed. “We can talk about this more when you’re sober.”

“Sober?” she asked.

Lola laughed. “It means not drunk.”

“And maybe put on some sweats. It’s cold tonight.” And even though it *was* cold, that wasn’t why I told her to get dressed. I just didn’t like the idea of Elle running around naked, kissing everyone in the pack. Especially Greyson. And Xavier.

Lola and I finally managed to tuck her in.

“We’ll check on you later,” I said.

When Lola and I stepped into the hallway, she asked, “Have you tried explaining the *due destini* to her?”

I groaned. “She can’t even wrap her head around having one mate—how could we possibly explain to her that I have two?”

“Good point. But maybe, since she’s expressing interest in other people, we should give her the Talk.”

“The talk?”

“No, the *Talk.* Teaching her about sex. The birds and bees, that stuff.”

There was nothing in the world I wanted to do less than try to explain human sex to Elle. Hell, I had only really figured sex out recently, but Lola and I were the logical choice. “I guess we can do that. It would certainly be better if we explained it to her than if we left that task to Greyson.”

Lola laughed. “I’d pay money to see that.”

We headed downstairs and passed Jay, who was coming up.

Lola grabbed him. “Speaking of mates…” She kissed him soundly.

When they pulled apart, Jay looked surprised. “Um, thank you?”

“Do we know yet when the power’s coming back on?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No idea. The storm’s still raging.

“Ugh. I wish it’d just move on already.”

“Not so fast. Things are going to get worse once the snow stops.”

I frowned. “Why?”

“Didn’t you hear? Greyson’s declared war on the Samara pack. We’re attacking as soon as the storm lifts.”

I gasped, all thoughts of Elle and Lucian fleeing my mind. “*What?*”

# Episode 3010

**Greyson**

My brother shrugged. “I have no problem with putting Ava in harm’s way if it will help defeat Knox.”

I wished I believed him. But I guessed it didn’t matter whether or not I believed him, because I didn’t have any alternatives. And neither did Xavier. If he had a problem with risking Ava, that was too bad. His feelings weren’t going to change our plan, or the fact that Knox was a threat that needed to be dealt with before this situation snowballed any further out of control.

I knew Xavier understood that, even if his feelings were pulling him in another direction. Knox had gone after Cali. That was unforgivable—grounds for a declaration of war all on its own. Despite whatever mixed feelings Xavier might’ve had for his former mate, he would always put Cali first.

I didn’t always know whether or not I could trust my brother, but I knew that where Cali was concerned, there was nobody in the world more trustworthy.

“I guess we understand each other, then,” I said.

He nodded. “Great. We done here?”

He didn’t wait for me to respond before heading to the door, but I stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. “If you saw what Tanner did to Cali—if you saw the blood—you wouldn’t have any doubts about what we have to do to Knox.”

Xavier shrugged off my hand. “I don’t have any doubts about that little shit. If you hadn’t agreed to take him out, I would have done it myself—with or without your support. He’s a pain in the ass, and he’s only going to get worse. The sooner he’s six feet under and stops poisoning the Samara pack, the better.”

He headed out of the room, and I felt my lips curving up into a smile. Xavier had always been hotheaded, especially where Knox was concerned. He’d hated the little bastard from day one, and it had taken considerable effort on his part to even pretend to tolerate him. So the defiance didn’t surprise me one bit.

But my brother had had ample opportunity to kill Knox since he’d come to Oregon, and Xavier had managed to hold himself back. In my view, there were only two possible reasons for him to restrain himself: he either didn’t want to escalate the already existing friction between the Redwood and Samara packs by being perceived as an aggressor, as we were viewing Knox now, or Xavier didn’t want to risk Ava getting hurt.

The first line of reasoning would’ve been a pleasantly surprising and calculated move from my normally impulsive and destructive brother. But it didn’t seem as likely as the second option, and that was what gave me pause.

If my brother’s loyalties were torn between doing what was best for the Redwood pack and protecting Ava, then he was more of a liability than a help. I hated to even think it, but Knox attacking Cali had shifted some of Xavier’s priorities. It had reminded him what was really most important to him, so perhaps some good had come from that terrible event.

All I could do was hope the change in Xavier’s priorities was permanent. Because if Ava’s duplicity was exposed to the Samara pack—and it was likely that it would be—we couldn’t afford for Xavier to have doubts. Not when it came time to mount our attack.

I pulled in a deep breath. *You can trust Xavier. You have to.*

We were all in this together now, and if we wanted to make it out together, we’d have to watch each other’s backs.

I noticed several other pack members huddled together. They were no doubt discussing the impending fight. The energy in the pack house felt quiet, but charged. Tense. Like the calm before a storm.

I headed over to listen in.

“I say we launch a surprise attack,” Rishika said. “The snowstorm is the perfect cover. Knox and the others would never predict it.”

“Yeah, we can mow down their tents! They’ll be helpless. Nowhere to go, no place to hide,” Zainab said.

Ravi shook his head. “But we’ll be in the exact same conditions they’re in. It doesn’t exactly give us an edge when the snow’s too deep to walk through. How effectively could we possibly fight in these conditions?” He gestured at the storm that was still raging outside.

I appreciated that they were trying to plan ahead and contribute to the upcoming fight, but I knew I needed to weigh in as Alpha before any of them got too attached to one idea or another. As the leader of the pack, I alone would ultimately decide what course of action to take.

Sage noticed my approach. “What do you think, Greyson? Should we attack right now or wait out the storm? I can see the pros and cons to each.”

“I can, too,” I said gently. “But let me be clear: we’re not going to attack the Samara pack.”

“Wait, what?” Ravi frowned. “They as good as declared war on us!”

“So did you!” Sage said.

I held up a hand. “Yes, but we’re not going to attack them until we know what Knox and his goons are taking to enhance their strength. Running into a fight without that information would mean taking unnecessary risks—potentially deadly ones. And I’m not willing to risk that. To risk any of you. *When* we fight them, it’ll be on a level playing field.”

“But what if they come to attack us first?” Sage asked. “They want a pack house of their own. If we wait, doesn’t that give them the opportunity to ambush us here?”

“It’s not likely.” I shook my head. “First of all, bringing the fight to our home gives them a tactical disadvantage they wouldn’t have if they fought us in the woods, or on their own turf. They know, if push comes to shove, we could always hole up in the house and have one of the witches create a barrier. And in the meantime, they’d still be stuck outside in the storm. It’d be a huge tactical blunder for them, which I don’t want to affect us if we can help it. As long as we stick together, and don’t put ourselves in danger by giving the Samaras a chance to catch us off-guard, we’re better off waiting.”

Rishika seemed to process this, then nodded. “I see your point, but I have to admit I’d still love to surprise them. I can just imagine the looks on their faces,” she said dreamily.

“I know.” I smiled, despite myself. “You’re all skilled fighters, and we’re going to make Knox pay for what he did. I promise, you will all have a chance to collect. But not until the storm is over.”

And as soon as it was safe to travel, Ava would leave the Redwood pack, go back to the Samaras, and find out what Knox and the others were taking. And with a little luck, things wouldn’t go to shit from there.

Ravi stepped forward. “I think I speak for the others when I say that we’ll back you, Greyson. Whatever you decide, whenever you want to fight—we’ll do what you tell us.”

I nodded. “Your trust means everything to me.”

Knox had made a monumental mistake in attacking Cali. Now we were united against him, and our solidarity was a hell of a lot stronger than what I’d sensed in the Samara pack during the Iudicium. Knox had his gang of cronies backing him, but he didn’t have the full support of the pack. He was far less secure than he thought he was. And that would be his undoing.

I cleared my throat. “Remember, this fight isn’t against the entire Samara pack. It’s against their leader and those who support him. Once Knox and his enablers are dealt with, I believe the Samara pack will be ready to elect a new Alpha, and things will improve. We have to think so. There’s no need for this to turn into a full-on pack war.”

Ravi shrugged. “At least he’s not a *demon*.”

Sage and Zainab nodded, grimacing at the reference to our last fight.

Rishika scoffed. “Demon or not, Knox will pay for what he did. He’ll never know what hit him.”

“I’ll keep you all informed if the situation changes,” I promised. “For now, I suggest you all get some rest. We couldn’t patrol right now if we wanted to. Take advantage of this forced down time—once the storm lifts, it might be a while before you can rest again.”

Ravi and Rishika headed toward the stairs with Sage and Zainab close behind, all of them arguing whether Rishika or Ravi was the better fighter.

I headed over to the window and tried to peer through the sea of white. *When is this storm going to let up?* Even with my enhanced vision, I couldn’t see out past the porch.

It was possible Knox was out there, waiting to launch an attack, but still doubtful. Knox was stupid, but unfortunately, he wasn’t *that* stupid.

I noticed Cali’s reflection in the window and turned to face her. “Hey.” I smiled. “I’m glad to see you.”

Cali wasn’t smiling. She stormed up to me with a scowl. “Greyson, call off the war.”

# Episode 3011

I trembled as I waited for Greyson’s answer.

After Jay broke the news about Greyson’s plans, I’d rushed to find him. In the back of my mind, I hoped this was some kind of misunderstanding, or even a bad joke. That Jay had been wrong, or that he’d misconstrued Greyson’s words.

And then I’d heard Ravi and Rishika arguing over who would be the strongest fighter in the war against Knox and the Samaras, and I’d felt hollowed out with shock all over again.

I needed to hear it from Greyson, to understand just what the hell he was thinking. But he wasn’t confirming or denying. He wasn’t saying *anything*!

“Well?” I pressed. “What are you waiting for? We can’t go to war. You have to call this off. Unless…” I looked at him hopefully. “Unless there is no war and I’ve been terribly misinformed?”

He pursed his lips. “Well, ‘war’ is a strong word…”

“Oh my god!” I gasped. “So that *is* what you said. That’s what you told the pack, isn’t it? You said that as soon as the storm lifts, we’re going to war against the Samaras?”

He looked trapped. Like he would’ve preferred to be anywhere else, talking about any*thing* else.

“Yes,” he conceded. “That’s what I said. You were attacked Cali, what am I supposed to do? If I’m honest with you, I actually want to rip their fucking spines out of their bodies, so this seems like a much more level-headed approach.”

I rolled my eyes. These Alphas and their big feelings. It was surprising they hadn’t wiped themselves out by now, all things considered.

“I get that you were angry—and worried and probably afraid—but I thought we were partners. I thought we made decisions like this together. I may not officially be your Luna, but aren’t I *kind of* your Luna?”

He smiled. “Yeah, you are.”

“And, yeah, *I* was the one who was attacked. If there’s any talk of revenge happening, shouldn’t I be a part of that?”

I said the words gently, but I’d still never seen Greyson look so ashamed. He looked to be at a complete loss for words, and I could tell that he hadn’t considered this from my point of view.

“I… I’m sorry, love. I never wanted to make you feel like I was doing something behind your back. This wasn’t a secret I kept from you, and I never wanted you to feel excluded from this decision. I just thought…” He heaved a sigh. “I thought you would agree.”

“Agree to a pack war? How can you possibly think I’d be on board with that?”

He shook his head. “It’s not a war against the Samaras. It’s a war against Knox and his followers. And I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings, I really am. But he went after you, which is its own kind of declaration. And there’s no excuse for it. Nothing is going to stop me from killing him.”

My jaw dropped. “You don’t mean that.”

He couldn’t mean that. Surely he wasn’t so cold as to be planning to murder Knox as soon as the storm passed.

I watched his face. It was as beautiful as it was impassive.

*Okay, maybe he does mean it.*

I shuddered at the thought of Greyson killing anyone, even Knox. I wanted the guy to get what was coming to him; I wanted justice. But not like this. Never like this.

“This is how things are in the werewolf world,” he said gently. “You know that, love. You might never get used to it, but Knox knew exactly what he was doing when he went after you. He tied my hands—and now there’s only one way to deal with him.”

“Right.” I scoffed. “I don’t understand your world because I’m not a werewolf. So I should just sit back and let the Alpha do what he thinks is best, is that it?”

“Not at all.” He shook his head. “That doesn’t have anything to do with it, and I hope you know I wouldn’t ever say something like that to you. I would never even *think* it. I value the perspective you bring to the pack, Cali. Your kindness, your empathy. These are all wonderful strengths. But we grew up in different worlds, and right now I need to handle things like a werewolf—not like a human.”

“We might have grown up in different worlds, but we’re in the same world now.” I took his hands, my eyes pleading. “There has to be some way to avoid this.”

He moved closer, his expression softening. “If it were the other way around, if Knox had tried to kill me, if he’d *hurt* me like he hurt you, wouldn’t you want revenge, or justice?”

I paused. I knew the answer to his question, and I didn’t like it. The truth was, I’d been in all kinds of situations like Greyson had described—where his life had been at risk and I would have done anything to save him. Even if that meant taking a life.

After all, it wasn’t that long ago that I’d killed Seluna.

But that was different. It had happened in the heat of battle, with lives hanging in the balance. If I hadn’t killed Seluna, I would have lost everything. The *world* would have lost everything.

What Greyson was talking about was cold, premeditated murder. Sure, Knox had hurt me. But I was fine now. We were all fine. Kind of.

I pulled in a breath. “This doesn’t sound like justice. And maybe it’s naïve of me to think that, but—”

“No. It’s not naïve. I know you’re a caring person and want the best. But is there something else that’s behind this?”

I thought back to that horrifying moment when Seluna had turned my mates into statues. How bloodthirsty I’d been. All I’d wanted was revenge. To rip her apart for thinking she could come into our world and take everything and everyone that was important to me. So I had killed her—and sure, those lives had been hanging in the balance, but even then, I’d felt conflicted ever since.

“Killing can’t always be the answer,” I finally said. “It’s true that you and Xavier are werewolves, and I’ve chosen to be part of that life. But I’m still dealing with Seluna—we’ve only just begun to try to put her behind us, and now you’re getting ready to go to war? When Seluna was harnessing the power of the *due destini* from me, I had this vision of both of you dying.” My voice broke, and I cleared my throat. “I don’t ever want to experience that again.”

He looped his arms around me. “I’m sorry you had to go through all of that. But we didn’t have a choice: we either had to deal with Seluna, or die. Knox might not be as big a threat, but he’s still dangerous. He’s proven it. And he’s only going to get worse. He’s not afraid of starting a war—a real one—and he’s not afraid of coming after you. I can’t let him do that. I won’t.”

The conviction in his voice sent a chill down my spine. And I knew, in that moment, that nothing I said or did would change Greyson’s mind. Knox had tried to have me killed, and for Greyson, that was unforgivable.

“This isn’t going to be like the pack wars that Silas created,” he explained. “Don’t think of it as a war. Think of it as a coup. We’ll be in and out as fast as possible, and we’ll be smart. Once Knox and his followers have been eliminated, the Samaras will choose a new, better Alpha, and we can put all this ugliness behind us.”

“And what if things don’t go according to plan?” I asked.

“We have allies if we need them. The Blue Bloods and even the Vanguards will be on our side. But I doubt it will come to that. Call it war, a coup, a fight—I’ll do my best to keep it contained to Knox. This will not be an all-out pack war. Knox is nothing like Silas, or Letifer, or Seluna.” Greyson lifted my chin. “I promise, everything is going to be all right.”

All I could do was look into his eyes. Fear and love and anxiety and horror had wrapped themselves around me, and I was too overwhelmed to speak. If we went to war, or started a coup, there would be no going back. And there were so many ways this could blow up in our faces. So many ways members of the pack could be hurt or lost.

What if, when everything was said and done, I looked back at this moment and knew it had all been a mistake?

Greyson pulled me into his arms. “I meant what I said,” he whispered. “Everything will be okay. At the end of the day, Knox is just another werewolf—and not a very competent one. We’ll be fine.”

His lips brushed against mine in a gentle caress, but I needed more than that. I needed more than his reassurance. I needed his strength.

I slipped my arms around his neck and pulled him in for a deep kiss.

# Episode 3012

I never wanted to stop kissing Greyson. I pressed myself against him, deepening the kiss. He groaned against my mouth, tightening his arms around me. I felt like a sponge; like, with every moment our bodies pressed together, I was drawing power and confidence from him.

Things hadn’t been the same since Seluna. *I* hadn’t been the same since Seluna. Even though I’d faced terrible, scary things before, something inside me had snapped the day I’d killed her. I could still feel those broken pieces jangling around inside me every day, reminding me how cruel this world could be.

And now Greyson was talking about going to war with Knox. About killing another pack Alpha in cold blood. And he was doing it for me.

And amidst all my disgust and horror and fear, I understood. I understood—at least in some small way, werewolf or not—where Greyson was coming from.

Because I had done a very similar thing for him. And my life hadn’t been the same since.

Was that going to happen all over again? If Greyson killed Knox, we couldn’t take that back. There’d be no returning to before. And what would happen then?

But no. I wouldn’t think about that right now. I clung to Greyson, drinking him in and biting his bottom lip to deepen the kiss.

“Cali,” he groaned against my mouth. His hands sank into my hair, angling my head right where he wanted me. “God, I fucking love you…”

Greyson kissed me with the desperation of a man wandering in the desert who’d just found an oasis. He kissed me like he’d die if he stopped. Or—

Or *I’d* die if he stopped.

My heart slammed against my ribcage, and I made a keening sound at the pleasure-pain emotion that slipped through me. My defenses were paper-thin. If I let him go, he’d be free to go off and fight Knox. If I let him go, I could lose him. If I let him go, we could never go back to this moment, right now, where every second ended and began with Greyson. His hands in my hair. His taste on my tongue. His breath in my lungs…

I’d never felt so close to him, and yet so close to losing him forever.

I believed everything he’d told me. Truly, I did. I believed him when he said this was the only way, that this would be a coup—a skirmish—and then it’d be over.

But I couldn’t stop thinking of the horrific vision I’d had of his death. So I tightened my arms around his neck and pressed him against the wall. Kissing was good. Kissing kept him here. Alive. In my arms.

Greyson gave back as good as he got, and soon his hands were sliding down my sides, gripping my hips and pulling me even closer against him. Our bodies were flush, and yet I still couldn’t get enough.

When we came up for air, Greyson was panting. “This is why I fight.” He dropped a line of kisses down my jaw. “To have a lifetime of moments together.”

He caught my lips again and turned us around so my back was pressed against the wall, and then we picked up right where we’d left off. Greyson’s kisses become hungrier, needier. The hand gripping my hip slid down to the back of my thigh and lifted it to wrap around his hip.

I gasped when the hard length of him pressed against me.

“*Greyson*.”

He nipped at my throat. “Do you feel how much I need you, love?”

I nodded, gasping. “Yes.”

My hands slipped underneath his shirt, exploring his chiseled muscles. He was just too perfect. And somehow, he was all mine. I couldn’t wait to savor every last inch of him—

“I FOUND A GENERATOR!”

We froze as Zainab’s voice boomed through the house.

“DOES ANYONE KNOW HOW THIS WORKS? WHERE DOES THE GAS GO?”

Greyson’s head dropped to my shoulder, and he chuckled. “Perfect timing, as usual.”

He made to step away from me, but I held on tight. “Not yet. Nobody’s looking for us. Can we just stay here for a little while longer?”

I wasn’t ready for this moment to be over. I wasn’t ready to let him go back and face all the danger that was waiting for him. Even just a few seconds more to savor him, to enjoy the quiet of this moment and cling to him—even that would help me feel like things would be okay.

Greyson kissed my forehead. “I hate to break things up, but a generator could get the water flowing again and restore some heat. I don’t want you and the other non-wolves to get cold.”

“One more, then,” I pleaded. “For the road.”

He smiled, then his lips dropped to mine, hot and hungry and ratcheting up my need so much it felt like Zainab had never interrupted at all.

When he pulled away, I was breathless. “Wow.”

Greyson grinned. “If we can get the generator going, you and I can have a hot shower together later.” He winked. “Everything’s going to be okay, love. Trust me.”

And with that, he left me alone. I watched him go, musing over the two very distinct sides that made up Greyson’s personality. On the one hand, he was the tough-as-nails Alpha, and on the other, he was the man who’d just left my lips still tingling from his demanding touch.

Greyson was a good Alpha, and a strong leader. The pack was better off with him at the helm, and I was proud of him and loved him all the more because he took such good care of the pack. But I’d be lying if I said the part of Greyson I was *in love* with was the Redwood pack Alpha. I loved all of Greyson, of course. He was my mate. But when he was just Greyson, instead of the Redwood Alpha… That was when he made me weak in the knees.

That was also when he *wasn’t* declaring war on other pack Alphas in an attempt to defend me.

I sighed. *I hope this opposing balance can survive the challenges ahead—if not, I could lose him altogether.*

The clacking of my teeth pulled me out of my gradually darkening thoughts. I was shivering so hard my teeth had started to chatter.

*Must be colder than I thought.*

Kissing Greyson had made me forget all about the power outage and the blizzard raging outside. He had a way of making me forget things like that—he always warmed me up.

*Maybe I’ll go to bed, and if I’m lucky, the storm will be over by the time I wake up?* I wasn’t prepared for the wave of dread that slammed into me. *But then again, the storm might be the only thing preventing a war right now.*

I couldn’t go to sleep. I couldn’t miss Greyson leaving to fight. What if I woke up and—

No. I wouldn’t let myself think of that. Or worry about it. For now, I had to focus on the present. On what was right in front of me.

It was all I could do.

I headed downstairs and found several pack members gathered in the foyer.

“What’s going on?” I asked, alarmed. I looked out the window. The snow hadn’t let up yet. They couldn’t be heading out to face Knox already.

“We’re gonna go help with the generator Zainab found in one of the garages,” Sage explained. “It’s really old, and we have no idea how to get it to work.”

My dad was with them, and he flashed me a smile. “Fortunately, I know a thing or two about generators. What true Minnesotan doesn’t?”

“Good luck,” I said, my teeth still chattering.

I headed into the living room, where a fire was roaring in the fireplace. The heat might not have been working, the power might’ve been out, and the snowstorm was still raging outside, but the fireplace did a decent job of warming the room.

I took a seat in the chair closest to the fire, rubbing my arms. *I wish Greyson or Xavier were here with me.*

There was just something romantic about the fire. I didn’t want to be here alone.

Suddenly, Torin came racing by. “Don’t fix it without me! I want to learn about electricity!”

“Torin,” I called to him. “Since when are you a handyman?”

He paused and glanced my way. “Desperate times, Cali. Anything to get the fridge up and running again, or I’m going to have to move everything we didn’t eat outside.”

“Good luck!” I laughed and leaned back and closed my eyes, letting the warmth of the fire sink into my bones. Suddenly, I felt the couch sink down next to me.

I turned to face whoever it was, a smile tugging at my lips as I opened my eyes.

*Oh.*

It was Ava.

I straightened. “Is there something you need?”

She stared into the fire for a long string of seconds before nodding. “We have to stop this war from happening, and you’re going to help me.”

# Episode 3013

Was I dreaming? Had I actually fallen asleep in the warmth of the fire after all? Because *that* made a hell of a lot more sense than Ava coming up and asking me to help her stop the pack war.

“What?” I looked around the room, half-expecting someone to jump out from behind a curtain and tell me this was all some kind of elaborate prank.

There was nobody around besides me and Ava, in front of the warm, cozy fire. Like we liked each other or something. The group who’d been heading out to help with the generator was gone.

I turned back to her. “Are you being serious right now? Does Greyson know about this? Does Xavier?”

If my bringing up Xavier bothered her, she didn’t show it. She shrugged one delicate shoulder and coolly said, “No.”

I shook my head. The whole mysterious vibe she was going for sure wasn’t helpful. “So, wait. Walk me through this please. Why are you coming to me first? Xavier and Greyson have a lot more power behind them here than I do.”

Her brows rose as she gestured to me. “Isn’t stopping things you think are bad kind of your trademark move? Like, you don’t take no for an answer and before anyone can stop you, you go off on your own and throw yourself into dangerous situations because you think you know best?”

I honestly didn’t know whether to be flattered that she’d noticed all of my hard work, or offended by the way she was characterizing it. *Is it a compliment or a dig? With Ava, who can really tell?*

I shook my head. “Is that your way of asking if I want this war to happen between the Redwoods and the Samaras? Because of course I don’t. I don’t want anyone getting hurt on either side, and definitely not because Knox was stupid enough to try to attack me.”

“Good,” she said shortly. “I don’t either. For once, you and I seem to be on the same page.”

*We seem to be on the same page about a few things*, I thought. *Xavier, primarily*. But that wouldn’t have been a very nice thing to say, and Ava was being uncharacteristically… not viciously cruel?

In any case, I didn’t want to give her a reason to change her tune when this was the most civil conversation we’d ever had.

I couldn’t help but think back back to that kiss she’d seen Xavier and me share. *Should I apologize?* I’d never really done anything so rude or scandalous before, and I could see how she might view it as vicious and cruel.

*Yes, Ava and I are clearly on the same page in a lot of ways.*

Still, I ultimately decided against apologizing. It would’ve set a strange precedent, first of all. Xavier was my mate, and even if their situation wasn’t quite… ideal, that didn’t mean I needed her permission to be with my mate.

Also, she’d kissed Xavier in front of me in the past.

*Or was it the other way around?* I shook my head. *Focus, Caliana!*

I’d decided a while back that I wasn’t going to worry about Ava and Xavier anymore, and I really didn’t want to backslide on that.

“Hello?” Ava pressed. “Just so I’m aware of what I’m getting into here, are you usually this spacey?”

I ignored the dig. “Okay, so you want to stop it too. Do you have any ideas? We’re talking about your cousin and your pack, after all. You’ve got the insider information.”

She nodded. “I’m aware. More aware than you’ll probably ever know.”

I had to try to stop being so offended by every sentence that left Ava’s mouth. I was reading far too much into everything she said, and it wasn’t going to help either of us.

“I don’t mean to be rude, but what I’m saying is, you weren’t here for the pack war,” she said. “You don’t understand just how explosive the whole thing was.”

“Okay,” I begrudgingly agreed. “Fine. I don’t know. But you can tell me. It’ll be a lot easier for me to help you if I have a better understanding of what we’re up against.”

My stomach twisted at the thought of what Ava might tell me. She wasn’t wrong, of course. I *didn’t* know what it had been like back then, when the packs had been torn apart and wolves had been pitted against other wolves. Even people they loved.

Discussing this with her didn’t make me feel any better about what I’d been discussing with Greyson only a few minutes ago. It also served as an annoying reminder that long before I was even a blip on Xavier’s radar, he’d been with Ava. They’d been mates. And they had been perfectly happy.

Before the pack war had torn their mate bond apart. Before they’d torn *each other* apart.

“The pack war did more than just pit pack against pack,” she explained. “It caused friction between members of the same packs. Suddenly, nobody knew who they could trust anymore. Even people you’d known and vouched for your whole life became suspect. And under those conditions, violence reigned.” Her eyes took on a faraway look. “So many wolves suffered. On all sides. In every pack.”

She turned her eyes on me, her voice taking on a raw edge.

“I don’t want to go back to that, Caliana. Ever again. You think fighting Seluna was bad? Or Letifer and the revenants? Or Silas? None of those come close to the devastation and havoc a pack war can wreak. Because even if you survive the war and come out in one piece, nothing is ever the same again. You’ll carry those scars for the rest of your life.”

I looked down at my lap. I could only assume she was thinking about everything the pack war had taken from her. How she’d killed Xavier’s mother, and he’d turned around and killed her in revenge. How that war, and the decision she’d made, had ruined everything.

*No wonder Ava doesn’t want to revisit that. I doubt Xavier wants to go back to it, either.*

“For what it’s worth, Greyson assured me that this isn’t going to be like that pack war.”

Ava scoffed. “While it’s nice that he thinks that, nobody can predict the direction a pack war will take. Once you light a fire, it’s too late—you can’t blow it out, and you can’t tell it where to burn. This struggle between the Redwood and Samara packs could die with Knox… or spread far and wide and engulf everyone. All over again.” She swallowed. “I don’t want that to happen, Cali. And I’m going to stop it before it’s too late. Greyson asked me to help him with the coup, but… I don’t want to do that either.”

I frowned. Greyson hadn’t told me about bringing Ava in on his plans. Not that I was going to share that detail with her.

*I’m sure Greyson had his reasons.* Still, my stomach twisted as I thought about Greyson and Ava plotting together—and me being left out of it entirely.

“He wants me to spy on my cousin,” she added. My confusion must have shown on my face, but to my surprise, she didn’t seem to want to rub my face in the secret she had going with yet another of my mates. “He asked me to find out how Knox and the others had so much strength, so the Redwood pack can defeat him. They want to kill him, and I don’t want to help them do that.”

*Where does Ava’s loyalty lie? Is she trying to protect Knox? Or is she on our side? Or, at the very least, Xavier’s side?*

I hadn’t considered this before, but suddenly, joining forces with Ava to stop the war from happening took on a whole new meaning. What if, in the end, I was really only helping the Samara pack?

“So if you don’t want to help Xavier get rid of Knox… you think Knox should be Alpha, then?” I asked tentatively.

Ava snorted. “No. God, no. He’s the worst thing that’s ever happened to the Samara pack, except for Silas, maybe.” She sighed. “It might seem crazy to you, but I also don’t want to see my only cousin killed. A lot of people think he’s similar to Nolan, and I suppose in a lot of ways, he is. But he’s still all I have. I want to help the Redwood pack, I do. But not if it will kill my only remaining family.”

I mulled this over. I hated to admit it, but Ava had a point. And I couldn’t blame her for wanting to have her cake and eat it too.

All Ava wanted was to exist in a world where she could have her pack and Xavier, but that wasn’t necessarily possible. And then there was the whole *due destini* thing, of course.

Maybe in a perfect world that would’ve been something Ava didn’t have to navigate, but this world was far from perfect.

“So, I hate to be *that* person, but Knox did try to have me killed,” I said.

“I know. And I honestly won’t blame you if you don’t want to help,” she said plainly. “You have every right to want Knox dead. I guess I figured you might be the better woman in this situation.”

I thought again of my conversation with Greyson, how learning that he was planning to kill someone had made my skin crawl. Justified or not, I didn’t want Knox to be killed.

“So… Will you help me stop this fight before it’s too late?” Ava asked.

I nodded. “Of course I will. What do you have in mind?”

“Will you use your Fae magic to wipe Knox’s memory?”

# Episode 3014

My eyes widened. “You want me to wipe Knox’s memory?”

I didn’t know what I’d been expecting when Ava had asked me to join forces with her to stop the impending war, but it wasn’t this. Now that I thought about it, I’d been pretty sure she’d ask me to try to convince Greyson not to fight or something.

But instead she wanted me to use my Fae magic, which could be unpredictable on my best days.

Ava nodded. “It’s pretty straightforward—if Knox doesn’t remember his feud with Xavier, then he has no reason to go after the Redwood pack. And then he won’t be a threat to anyone.”

“That’s all good in theory, but there’s actually nothing straightforward about it.”

Her brow creased. “Why not? Haven’t you wiped people’s memories before?”

“I have,” I conceded. “But it’s not something I can easily turn on and off. It’s intricately tied to my emotions, and while I am emotional right now, the last time I did it, it wore off. So even if I got it to work the way you’re hoping for, and Knox didn’t catch on and kill me before I had a chance to use my magic in that capacity, it could still wear off. My magic, and this technique especially, is far from foolproof.”

“Okay. So, you’re useless.” She sat back and blew out a breath. “Can we have Artemis do it?”

I gritted my teeth at her snark. “First of all, I have many talents. And secondly, Artemis still doesn’t have a handle on her power. She’s been trying to regain control since she lost it, but it’s been known to backfire. She’s even hit Rishika with it, and her memory took a while to recover. I’m assuming you don’t want to have to worry about friendly fire.”

“I think it’s worth the risk.” She shrugged. “Unless you’ve got a better idea?”

I frowned, trying to think. I wasn’t much of a military strategist, and nothing was coming to me. I shook my head with a sigh “I can’t agree to something on Artemis’s behalf. This is her decision to make, and since her magic is overflowing, there could be larger repercussions. Things that we could never plan for. Maybe we all forget what we’re doing. Maybe she blasts us to pieces. Maybe she turns Knox into a tree. It’s really all over the place right now, and I don’t think you want to be playing with that.”

While I sympathized with what Ava was going through, I couldn’t help thinking this plan was just waiting to blow up in our faces. What would happen when Knox got his memory back? And even if that wasn’t a concern, I certainly wouldn’t want to be there when Artemis unleashed her magic on Knox, and I had to assume that if Ava allowed herself the time to really think it over, she wouldn’t want that either. Not to mention even if we managed to wipe Knox’s memory, that didn’t mean we’d wipe his cronies’ memories. Someone could still manage to remind him.

Ava blew out a breath. “Fine. What about the other Fae? What about your mom? Or Torin? We can have one of them do it.”

I shook my head again. “They don’t have that kind of magic.”

She scoffed. “Oh my god. What good is it to have so many Fae around if you guys can’t actually do what I need you to do?”

“Hey.” I scowled. “I’m here. I’m trying to help you. Have a little respect.”

“Sorry.” She sighed, slumping back against the couch. “This is just so maddening. I can’t just sit around and do nothing. If Knox is killed, I need to be able to say I tried to prevent it. If I do nothing, if I just allow it to happen, then it’s on me. I might as well be the one ripping his throat out.”

I grimaced at the imagery—and the reminder that Greyson was probably going to end up with that particular job.

More than trying to protect Knox, I didn’t want Greyson to be in a position where he felt he had to kill another wolf. I’d do anything I could to make sure that didn’t happen—if only I actually knew what to do.

“For what it’s worth, I think you’re trying to do the right thing here,” I said gently. “And I’m right here with you. I’d do anything I could to prevent the war. But we don’t have to rush into anything, or commit ourselves to a subpar plan. As long as the storm is blowing, we have time.”

Ava looked out the window. Sure enough, the storm was still going strong. She turned back to me. “That’s all well and good, but once the storm ends, then what? How are we going to stop Greyson from killing the last family I have?”

I sighed. “I wish I knew.”

I felt for Ava—as shocking as it was to admit it. With all the bad history between us, I’d kind of thought we’d always be on opposite sides, but clearly Ava came to me because she knew we both wanted the same thing: to avoid bloodshed.

*It’s almost like we’re friends. Or maybe frenemies?*

Either way, we’d come a long, long way since we’d last crossed paths, and I was proud of both of us for being open to change, and for being more accepting of each other than I’d ever anticipated.

Not that Lola was going to have to worry about being pushed out of the top tier of friendship by Ava. I was sure she and I would never be cozy, but at least now we could have a conversation without wanting to choke each other.

At least… for longer than a few minutes.

That was still a huge amount of progress.

Ava actually reminded me of Maya. She and I hadn’t exactly been best buds when we’d first met, either. But Maya had only been pretending to hate everyone, and she hadn’t slept with my mates. She also hadn’t been cursed by a witch to look like me and used that to play mind games with my mates.

So, no. We weren’t besties. But still, I felt a little empathy. Ava was a person, and all she wanted was to protect her loved one. How many times had I been in her shoes?

One question lingered in the back of my mind: did I really want to team up with Ava? I could still work with Ava without liking her. We could tolerate each other and work toward the common good, and when everything was said and done, we could go right back to the way things used to be.

“Forget it.” Ava sighed. “I’ll figure it out myself.”

She got up, but I grabbed her wrist. “I didn’t say I wouldn’t help you. All I’m suggesting is that there must be something we can do that doesn’t involve my magic. Have you considered talking to the witches about this?”

She laughed. “I’ve had enough dealings with witches. They’ve never turned out well for me.”

She headed off, leaving me alone with the fire and the thousand or so questions spinning in my head.

I blew out a breath. I wished I could think of something, anything, to solve this issue. But this situation didn’t exactly sit well with me, either. Even if Ava and I came up with a foolproof plan to get Knox to… well, stop being himself, we were ultimately planning to do something that wasn’t in line with what Greyson wanted. And I knew Ava would take the fall for that.

*Is there something I can do with my Fae magic that won’t make things worse?*

It was so frustrating. Artemis and I were capable of so much, and, if I was being honest, part of me was still fueled by Ava’s dig about Fae. Sure, she’d apologized, but it still ticked me off.

I could always blast Knox myself, but that would either kill him or piss him off and make him even more interested in killing me. So, nothing good there.

And as far as wiping Knox’s memory… My track record wasn’t great. Phil still didn’t remember the memories I’d taken, but my trick hadn’t worked on Rhonda. Though that situation had been different. I was so full of emotional turmoil—who’s to say it would happen again?

No, this plan had to be foolproof.

Still, Ava had come to me. And I was still enamored enough with the idea of being the pack Luna and taking on pack responsibility that I wanted to help.

*Should I tell Xavier about my conversation with Ava?*

It probably wouldn’t hurt.

I ventured out of the warm living room and found Xavier and Jay in the kitchen.

“How’s the generator coming?” I asked them.

Xavier shrugged. “We should know soon enough.”

“That sounds like my cue to go check.” Jay left us alone, and I didn’t waste a moment.

“I just had an interesting conversation with Ava,” I said.

He snorted. “I’ll bet. I’m sorry she’s here. Was she bothering you?”

At this exact moment, I wasn’t sure I agreed, so I dodged the question with one of my own. “Is there a way to prevent the pack war entirely?”

His eyes widened. “At this rate? Unlikely. Why? How do you think we might do that?”

I was about to launch into a full explanation when I suddenly remembered what Ava had said about dealing with witches.

It was like a lightbulb going off in my head. “Could we give Knox the potion you and Ava gave him for the Iudicium again?”

# Episode 3015

**Greyson**

I stood in the shed with Tom and watched him blow a solid inch of dust off the top of the old generator we’d dug out of storage. Dust motes flew through the air in a thick cloud, and he sneezed four times in quick succession.

“Sorry,” I said reflexively. “It’s, uh, pretty old.”

He sniffed. “That’s an understatement, if ever I’ve heard one. This thing looks like it’s from the first half of the last century. Does it even still work? Did it ever work?” He chuckled.

I shrugged. “I’ve never had to use it before.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” He brushed more dust off the top. “My folks used to have one kind of like this. It was pretty essential for getting through those Minnesota winters. If the guts aren’t completely shot, I should be able to get it running, but it might take some time.”

Ravi, who was crammed into the small space with us, snorted. “Can’t Torin just heal it?”

Nobody laughed, and Ravi’s cheeks went pink.

Tom glanced at me. “I need a screwdriver. Flathead.”

I rushed over to the tool bench to get it for him and passed it back over to him. From there, I went back to feeling very useless as I watched my mate’s father begin to take the machine apart. I probably could have sorted this out myself, with a lot of time, but I was glad Tom was here to help. But it did feel a little strange to be the Alpha of this pack, but essentially be demoted to tool boy. Still, if Tom got the damn thing up and running, I wasn’t going to complain.

Tom popped a hose off the side of the generator and squinted at the interior. “The fuel filter’s clogged. That’s probably why it’s not working. It’s going to have to be cleaned out, and we can try to get it running from there.”

“And if it’s not the fuel filter?” I asked.

He shrugged. “We keep tearing into it until it’s either fixed, or we know it’s beyond repair.”

*Awesome. Just how I wanted to spend my time during a historic blizzard.*

“I’ll clean the filter,” Torin volunteered.

Zainab, who was also part of Operation Generator, pulled up a YouTube video on how to clean a fuel filter, and Ravi stepped in to help as well.

The three of them seemed to have it under control, especially with Tom supervising, and I hated standing around, feeling useless. There was nothing for me to do here, so the best thing I could do was give them space to work.

“Good luck, guys. If you need anything, I’ll be inside.”

I made it to the doorway of the shed when Tom called out to me. “Hey, Greyson, can we talk?”

My brows raised, but I couldn’t exactly say no. This was Cali’s dad, after all. “Um, sure.”

He joined me at the doorway, hopefully far enough away that we wouldn’t be overheard by the group working on the generator. Zainab and Torin were both terrible gossips.

The storm was still going strong, and the world outside was painted violently white, but at least it wasn’t thundering. We watched the snow whip by for a moment before I forced myself to break the silence. “I imagine you’ve seen your share of winter storms.”

He laughed. “Actually, yeah. I remember a really bad rainstorm from my childhood. My cousins and I got trapped in a treehouse in my grandparents’ yard. We had to sleep on the floor of the treehouse, even though it really wasn’t waterproof. Helluva storm.”

I chuckled, and we descended into silence once again. I felt itchy under the collar. What did Tom want to talk about anyway? And why was he stalling? That didn’t exactly fill me with confidence.

“A storm isn’t like a war,” he finally said, and immediately understood. “This pack war I keep hearing about—is this going to be like World War Three?”

I huffed out a dark laugh. “We already went through that with Seluna.”

Tom didn’t seem to find this funny. “So, what are you saying? World War Four? Are werewolves always at war, or is this just a Redwood thing?”

I sighed. “I get it. I know you’re worried about Cali and Artemis getting caught up in this.”

“I am.” He nodded. “Orla and I are planning to go back to Minnesota, and we won’t be able to ensure their safety. I was hoping that we could enjoy ourselves after the holidays, but now I’m not so sure. We’re both going to worry, you know? How can we go home and pick up with our lives knowing what our daughters are facing here?”

“I understand. But let me be clear: I will do anything and everything I possibly can to keep everyone safe—especially Cali and Artemis. And for what it’s worth, I don’t truly think this will turn into a war.”

“I appreciate that,” he said evenly. “But did anyone think that the assassination of an archduke would set off World War One? Nobody knows what will happen. I know you love Cali, but I wonder if maybe, since Orla and I are going home anyway, it might make more sense to bring Cali and Artemis with us, get them out of harm’s way.”

My instinct was to snarl at him for even thinking of taking my mate away from me, but I fought it back. Nothing Tom was saying was unreasonable. He was looking out for Cali, just like I was. And there was some sense in what he was suggesting. In Minnesota, Cali would be far away from Knox and his cronies and any fallout from the war. But the thought of sending her away set my nerves on edge.

“I suppose that’s a question for Cali to answer for herself,” I finally said.

Tom laughed. “I think I know how that will go down. She loves you and Xavier. She won’t want to leave. That used to be a difficult thing for me to wrap my head around, but I get it now.”

*It hasn’t been an easy thing for* me *to wrap my head around, but that’s a topic for another day.*

“I know you’re speaking out of love for your family,” I said, “and I’m not going to stand in the way of that. If Cali agrees it’s for the best she goes with you, then I won’t get in the way of her decision.”

He smiled. “I’m waiting for the ‘but’…”

*But it’s unlikely she’s ever going to agree to ditching the pack*, is what I wanted to say, but I didn’t need to say that quite so bluntly.

“There’s another side to this,” I said evenly, choosing my words carefully. “I’ve done everything I can, time after time, to keep Cali safe. I’ve protected her from my own deranged father, from Letifer, from Lucian and Seluna. Things haven’t always worked out smoothly, but she’s here and she’s healthy and she’s whole. I’ve kept her safe—we’ve kept each other safe. And I think there’s value in that.”

Tom nodded. “Please don’t think I’m not grateful for everything you’ve done for Cali, or that I’m trying to tell you how to manage affairs in your pack. I’m not—but I’d be lying if I said I can leave here feeling good about my daughter playing a part in some pack war.”

“You want to protect her. I get it. The thing is, I want to protect her too. And if she goes back to Minnesota, I won’t be able to do that.”

His brow creased. “I hope you’re not implying that I can’t protect my own family.”

“Oh, not at all.” I laughed. “You’re a werewolf. Orla’s Fae. You can more than handle yourselves and protect the people most important to you—including your daughters. But have you ever considered that your daughters might not need as much protection as you think? Cali is strong and brave and coming into her powers. And Artemis…” I chuckled. “She’s a one-woman army. Have you considered the fact that they might be needed here?”

Before Tom could reply, Zainab shouted, “The filter’s clean! Now what do we do?”

Tom headed back to the group after giving me a lingering look. “Now we reassemble it and fire it up.” He put the filter back on the hose. “Torin, pull the starter.”

Torin gave it a yank. The generator sputtered and then died.

*Maybe it’s too much to expect this old piece of junk to actually work.*

“Come on, Torin,” Tom said gently. “This time pull with everything you’ve got.”

Torin took a deep breath, then tried again. The generator roared to life, and within seconds, the ceiling lights flickered on.

“Great work, everyone!” I shouted over the sound of the generator. “Looks like we’ll have water and heat soon enough.”

Ravi, Torin, and Zainab all clapped each other on the back.

“Let’s go heat up some mocha!” Torin suggested, and they all headed back into the house.

Tom fiddled with the generator. “All we have to do is refill the tank before it runs out.”

I nodded. “Thank you.”

“About what you said earlier… I’m not crazy about leaving Cali and Artemis, and I think you’re right that they might be needed here.” He frowned. “But there is one other thing. About the fight with the Samaras… If this war truly breaks out en masse, how far is it going to go? And when will it stop?”

# Episode 3016

**Xavier**

I frowned. Cali wanted to give Knox the same potion we’d given him for the Iudicium? Where the hell was this coming from?

I had a feeling I wasn’t going to like the answer.

The question was on the tip of my tongue when the light suddenly flickered on. The house erupted in cheers.

“Hot water! Heat! Wi-Fi!” I heard Sage cry in delight.

Cali’s lips twitched. “I guess they got the generator working.”

A shadow of a smile tugged at my lips too, but I focused on Cali’s question. “Do I even want to know why you’re asking about this?”

She shrugged. “Just trying to keep people from getting hurt. Maybe instead of worrying about whatever Knox is taking to give himself an edge, we can take that edge away.”

The pieces were starting to click together in my mind. I remembered what Knox had told Ava, how that little shit had expected winning the Iudicium to be a piece of cake. “It’s all starting to make sense,” I realized, thinking out loud. “Knox expected to win the Iudicium easily because he was already taking a potion to make himself strong—the same potion they used when they attacked me. That’s why I had such a hard time fighting them.” That bastard had been cheating all along.

If there’d ever been any undeniable evidence that he was unfit to be Alpha, this was it.

Cali cocked her head. “What are you talking about?”

I pulled her into my arms and kissed her forehead. “You’re a genius.”

“I… Thank you? I still don’t understand.”

“The Samaras used something to make themselves strong,” I explained. “But whatever it is, the potion that Ava got clearly reduced its effectiveness. Knox barely completed the Iudicium. But if it wasn’t for the potion, he would have cleaned up.” I grinned. “Don’t you get it? We *can* use that potion to cancel out whatever Knox and the others are taking.”

I thought back to when Knox had been dosed. How the potion had definitely affected him, just not as much as Ava and I had been hoping it would. We’d expected him to be laid out completely, but he was still able to muddle through the Iudicium.

Back then, I’d thought Ava’s potion was a dud. Now I knew better. It had worked just fine—we just needed to up the dose.

“You think my plan will work?” Cali asked.

“Not only do I think it will work, I think it will ensure that we can rid ourselves of Knox and his stupid friends once and for all. He’ll be reduced to his regular lame-ass werewolf self, and that’ll be the end of it. And him.” I could barely contain my excitement. I’d been wanting to take that little shit out for a long time now. But this time around, watching him lose his edge, watching him panic and struggle and fight—knowing he was going to lose…

Oh, it was going to be so sweet.

Cali frowned. “Wait. What do you mean, ‘rid ourselves of Knox’?”

I blinked “What do you think?” I laughed again when she didn’t respond. “Come on, Cali. This is brilliant. It’s exactly the break we’ve been hoping for. The upper hand that will give us an edge.”

“*Seriously*, Xavier?” she spluttered, shaking her head. Now she was mad at me? What the hell?

“I’m sorry—do you *want* Knox to keep trying to kill you? He signed his own death warrant when he made a move on an Alpha’s mate. He knows it as well as everyone else does.”

“Ava came to me, asking me to help her stop this before it became a full-on pack war. And the whole reason she came to me in the first place was because she doesn’t want her cousin to be killed!”

I frowned. *Ava knows better than that.*

“You know how I feel about senseless killing,” Cali continued. “And going after Knox and taking him out in cold blood—it fits the bill.”

I pulled in a deep breath, reminding myself to stay calm. Reminding myself that Cali had been raised human and ultimately, she would never be on board with this aspect of werewolf life. Ava, on the other hand, should have known that there was no saving her cousin now—but that was a whole other conversation for another time.

“How can you possibly think of his death as senseless?” I asked. “Do I have to remind you that Knox tried to kill you? There’s nothing senseless about this. It’s revenge. Hell, it’s *preventative*. Think about it that way—he’s already made his intention to take you out clear. He’s not going to stop until he gets what he wants, or we put him in the ground. Maybe it’s not how you prefer to handle conflict, but this is a core principle of being a werewolf. You see a threat, you take it out.”

“But—”

I held up a hand. “I don’t want to keep arguing about this with you. We’ve had this conversation a hundred times before, and clearly we’re no closer to being on the same page. Knox has to be taken out. Period. If only to prevent future bloodshed.”

“You say that, but killing Knox would cause bloodshed, too. Why can’t we use the potion to drug him and unseat him without killing him? We can prevent a war that way.”

“I’m sorry. I’m really not trying to argue with you, but I just don’t see how that would work. Once the potion wore off, Knox would go right back to his original plan. If we drug him but don’t take him out, all we’d be doing is prolonging the inevitable. And who knows? Maybe after that, we’d lose our window to take him out. He might get smart. Or less stupid, I guess. Half measures might only make things worse.”

Cali looked absolutely devastated.

I sighed. “I’m going to do what I have to do, but I promise I will do everything in my power to make sure there’s not excessive bloodshed, okay?”

“But Ava—”

“—knows Knox is dangerous. I understand her wanting to protect her family, but she’s also a werewolf. She knows just as well as I do what consequences Knox is going to have to face. Just leave this to me, okay? I’ll take care of everything.”

“And what if I don’t want you to?”

I gently lifted her chin so she had to meet my eyes. “It’s already happening, unfortunately. I don’t think the Samara pack as a whole is a real threat to us. We’ve survived far worse. But Knox tried to have us both killed, and he’s not going to stop with one attempt. That makes this personal. I promise I will think about this more, but for now, you should get some rest. There’s nothing any of us can do while the weather’s like this.”

Cali’s shoulders slumped, and she eased herself out of my arms. “Fine.”

She headed upstairs without another word.

I sighed. I hated seeing her so unhappy, especially when she was unhappy with *me*. I wished there was another solution here, but this just wasn’t the type of thing you could compromise on. Either Knox lived and continued to be a gigantic and dangerous pain in the ass for the Redwood pack, or he died and several of our problems were solved. I knew where I stood. Despite all of Cali’s misgivings, everything inside me was telling me to go with the latter option.

At the end of the day, this was all Knox’s doing. He was the one who’d instigated everything. He wanted to play Alpha, but he didn’t want to take responsibility for his actions, like any Alpha worth a damn.

I saw Ava standing in the doorway, watching the storm rage outside.

Now was as good a time as any to talk.

“Hey.” I sidled up to her. “I need to talk to you about the potion you used on Knox during the Iudicium. Do you have more of it? Or can you get more?”

She didn’t look away from the window. “I think it’s time I go back to the Samara pack.”

“Are you kidding? Go back to what? This is one of the worst storms we’ve ever had, and your mighty Alpha’s pack house is an Airstream. The rest of the pack is living in tents—including you. Do you really think those tents will survive this? What are you going back to?”

She still wasn’t looking at me. “If I don’t get back, Knox might get suspicious.”

“You won’t have to worry about that much longer. I have a plan—or, rather, Cali came up with it. I know you two talked.”

“Then you know I don’t want to kill my cousin.”

A retort was on the tip of my tongue, but I held it back. I wanted to remind her that Knox’s death wasn’t a variable. It wasn’t up for discussion. The little shrimp had dug his own grave the moment he’d tried to kill Cali.

“I know how you feel,” I finally said.

“I doubt that.” She finally turned to face me. “So, what’s this plan of yours?”

“You got that sedative potion from a so-called black market witch. Can you take me to her?”

# Episode 3017

I mulled over my conversation with Xavier as I headed upstairs. Maybe it was naïve, but I’d really been hoping he’d see things from my perspective. That he’d think about using the potion and realize that killing Knox wasn’t the only solution. And instead, he’d been absolutely jazzed about using the potion to *help* kill Knox.

*Maybe I should have seen that coming.*

Around here, the Samara Alpha was public enemy number one.

But there still had to be a way to solve this without killing Knox. I just hadn’t thought it all through yet. Maybe once I talked to Ava about it, she and I could figure out how to use the sedative potion to stop the war—and any unnecessary bloodshed.

*How weird is it that Ava and I are even on speaking terms, let alone teaming up together to save the day?*

If someone had told me that Ava and I would eventually put our baggage aside to work together, I would have laughed and laughed and laughed. And yet, here we were, trying to save her cousin. Trying to prevent a war.

And, strangely, we seemed to be the only two people involved in this who considered non-violence an option.

As I headed down the hallway, I noticed light spilling out from underneath Elle’s half-closed door. I sighed. I really hoped she wasn’t still up, dreaming about Lucian. I couldn’t handle any more near-crises right now.

When I poked my head in, I saw Elle curled up on the floor, fast asleep. She was even wearing sweats like I’d asked, though it looked like one of her arms hadn’t quite made it through the sleeve.

*Thank god she finally fell asleep. Does Lola know she’s out?*

I glanced around the lit bedroom. Elle had probably fallen asleep before the generator had kicked in and didn’t know the light had been switched back on.

I grabbed a blanket off the bed and covered Elle. Hopefully she wouldn’t have too bad a hangover in the morning. I turned out the light and stepped into the hallway, quietly closing the door behind me.

Greyson was just making his way up the stairs. His expression was somber, but when he saw me, he smiled.

He gestured to the light in the hallway ceiling. “I guess you know the generator is working.”

“I do.” I smiled. “Thank you.”

“You should thank your dad. He’s the one who knew what to do. It might take a while for the heat to catch up.”

I stepped closer, swiping some dust off his cheek. “Guess we need to dust the shed a little more often, huh?”

“Guess so. I’d better go wash off. Want to join me?”

Something warm coiled tight in my belly. “I’d like that.”

He took my hands and led me into his bedroom. He shut the door behind us, then immediately caged me in with his arms, planting his palms against the door on either side of my head. “You know you don’t have to stay here, right?”

I blinked. I didn’t know what was more confusing, that Greyson had pulled me in under the guise of a hot shower and was now wanting to talk, or that *this* was the subject he wanted to discuss.

“What?” I frowned. “I told you I wanted to join you.”

He shook his head. “I don’t mean right now. I mean, you know you don’t have to stay here, in the pack house, right? You could go somewhere until this stuff with Knox is over.”

I snorted. “You’re joking, right? Leave all of you to deal with Knox? Where would I even go?”

“Minnesota, maybe?”

It was then that I realized he wasn’t bringing this up on a whim. He’d been thinking hard about this. I just didn’t know why.

“Why would I go back to Minnesota right now? And even if I wanted to, I couldn’t with this storm,” I said. “But I’m not about to run and hide, Greyson, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

He leaned in closer, so his nose brushed against mine. It was distracting to have him so close while we were trying to have a serious conversation.

“You don’t want to know what I’m thinking right now,” he said huskily.

Heat rushed into my cheeks. *Why is he acting like this? One second he’s arousing as fuck, and then he’s trying to convince me to leave? Why?*

I cleared my throat. “Greyson, what’s going on?”

He smiled, but it disappeared almost immediately. He pushed off the wall, freeing me from his overwhelming presence, then he walked over to the window and looked out at the snowbound yard.

For a moment, I just watched him. *What on earth has gotten into him?* He looked somber, joyless and weighed down. I had to assume he was thinking about the upcoming conflict with Knox. He was the Alpha, and my mate—there was so much pressure on him to act accordingly. To face this threat. To protect everyone and everything that mattered most to him.

I approached him. “I don’t think staring out the window is going to solve any of your problems.”

His arm slipped around me. “How do you know I have problems?”

“Doesn’t take a genius.”

He finally turned to face me. “You know I love you, right? And I would never do anything to hurt you?”

I frowned. Him saying things like that wasn’t exactly comforting. “Should I be worried? You’re talking like you’re about to tell me something bad.”

A chill rippled up my spine, and his expression softened.

“Are you cold?” he asked. “I told you the heat would take a little while.”

He grabbed my hand, and the warmth of his skin sent little shivers down my arm. He kissed each and every one of my fingers.

“How about we get you warmed up?” he said. “The water heater should be ready by now.”

I still didn’t love the look in his eyes, or the tension coiled between his shoulders. My instincts were screaming that there was something he wasn’t telling me. Something important. But I pushed all that aside.

I wanted him, and, more than that, I wanted a break from all the worry, the tension. Even if it was only for a little while.

I followed him into the bathroom, and he turned the shower on. Hot water poured out of the showerhead, and steam began to fill the small space. Greyson pressed me against the wall as his mouth descended onto mine.

Our clothes were tugged off in a hurry. Especially Greyson’s, which were coated in a thick layer of dust. Then he picked me up like I weighed nothing and carried me into the shower. The water was just this side of too hot, and I hissed a little as I turned down the temperature.

“Better?” he asked, his mouth hot and wet against my throat.

“Much better.”

His mouth descended on mine again, and it was like we were picking up right where we’d left off earlier. Barely concealed desperation fueled our movements. He kissed me like it was the last time we’d ever get to do it, like he was trying to memorize the feel of my lips against his, like he was trying to brand himself onto me.

In no time at all, his cock was hard and needy, pressing into my belly. My head spun with desire, and I knew that if he reached between my legs, he’d find me slick and throbbing.

“Please,” I moaned against his mouth, grinding against him. “I need you.”

Greyson let out a muttered curse and lifted me up again so my legs wrapped around his waist. He pressed me against the cool shower tile, a strong contrast to the hot water bearing down on my shoulders and the even hotter man between my legs.

His cock slotted against me, and I reached down to guide him inside me. He slid in slowly, not stopping until he was seated inside me.

My head tipped back as I gasped as Greyson’s lips descended on my throat.

“You are so fucking perfect,” he growled, nipping at my collarbone as his cock slid out of me before sliding deep once more. He fucked me slowly, deeply, each thrust hitting something inside me that made stars burst in my eyes.

It was all I could do to keep myself wrapped tight around him as my pleasure crested and I shattered against his skin, his name a cry on my lips.

As we got out of the shower and started drying off, Greyson’s dark mood descended again. Another shiver rippled down my spine, and he wrapped me in a big, fluffy towel. “Here.”

I shook my head. “It’s not the temperature. I’m worried about you.”

His arms wrapped around me tight, and I savored the feeling of him pressed against me again, even in this simple way. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

I didn’t believe him. I couldn’t shake the feeling that he wasn’t telling me something. I backed out of his embrace, and our eyes locked.

“Greyson. If something was wrong, you’d tell me, wouldn’t you?”

# Episode 3018

**Xavier**

“So, what’s your plan to get the black market witch to work with us?” Ava asked. I heard a tinge of hope in her voice.

I paused, feeling a little hesitant all of a sudden. There was no doubt that I needed Ava’s help, but I couldn’t get my brother’s concerns about Ava’s loyalty out of my head. While Ava had been hesitant about revealing the witch’s name before, the stakes had changed—and surely Ava realized that. I saw no reason to keep my plan a secret, and there was no reason for her to keep the witch’s name a secret any longer, either. We needed to come together to solve our Knox problem—by any means.

I took a deep breath, deciding to lead with the part that might appeal to Ava most. “If we get the witch on our side, you won’t have to worry about finding out what Knox and the others are taking.”

I didn’t even let myself process my own relief about keeping Ava out of Knox’s crosshairs. I knew that if it came down to Ava and the pack, the pack would take precedence—but I didn’t see why I couldn’t try to protect Ava if possible.

Ava sighed. “Did you come up with this new plan because you’re worried about me?” She crossed her arms and flipped her hair over her shoulder, her eyes on me the entire time.

I didn’t answer right away, knowing that this was one of those moments where I needed to choose my words carefully. There was more truth to what she’d said than I would ever admit to her, but I wasn’t in the mood to get into it right now.

*I need her help—that’s what’s most important—even if we don’t fully align on what to do with her cousin. I can’t get into an emotional back and forth with her when we have a battle to prepare for.*

“You said you wanted to avoid a pack war,” I said finally. “So that’s what I’m trying to do, isn’t it?”

Ava’s face fell. It was obvious that she’d wanted a more direct answer.

*I told Cali that things with Ava were done, but does it make sense for me to risk losing Ava’s help by telling her that despite our lingering mate bond, there’s nothing between us? There’s no world in which that’ll end well. She might have turned over a new leaf, but this is still Ava we’re talking about.*

All that really mattered was that I was committed to Cali, and that was that. I needed to be careful not to blow it with Ava completely, but I also didn’t want to give her any false hope. I had to be smart about the situation, or risk sending our entire advantage over Knox crumbling down.

“Look, Ava, we all have an interest in stopping Knox, right? And we might have a way to do it. We can use the sedative potion from before to neutralize whatever drug Knox and the others have gotten their hands on.” I paused for a moment, recalling how difficult the fight had been against Knox and his friends. A big part of me still felt that the Redwoods could take on Knox and his boys even if they were hopped up on some performance-enhancing potion, but I didn’t want to risk it. I agreed with my brother.

“And will using this potion make it so he doesn’t die?”

She was still on this? “Look, whatever happens to him is what he’ll have earned by being an asshole,” I said. “But this could give him a better chance of survival.”

I was mostly saying it for her benefit. Knox, even cut down a few notches with the potion, might still do something to get himself killed. It was just a reality.

“Do you think the witch will work with you again?” I asked. “Is she open to working with other werewolves?”

Ava mulled over my words.

*Good, she’s listening to me.*

“The witch will work with anyone who can pay her,” Ava said with a shrug. “She’s not exactly the morally upright type.”

“Perfect. The shadier the witch, the better the chances she’ll double deal. Maybe the witch was paid to help Knox, but if what you say about her is right, I suspect she’d be willing to turn against him if the price is right.” It was easy to believe that the witch had no loyalties—the jury was out on whether I’d ever met a single witch who did.

“I have no idea if Knox used the same witch. Whatever he’s doing, he’s keeping it well under wraps. Also remember that Knox spent a lot of time in California, so who knows who he might have come into contact with there?”

“I remember, but none of that matters. We just need the sedative potion. So, can you help make that happen? This is the only way we can be sure we have the even playing field we need to take Knox out.”

Ava bit her lip and stared at the floor before slowly looking up at me once more. “I’ll help—but we can’t do anything right now because of the storm.” Ava looked out the window and frowned.

I followed her gaze. The snow wasn’t letting up even a little. “I know it’s not pretty out there, but I wonder if it might be worth going out in it anyway.” The snow was bad, but I was busy turning our options over in my head, trying to decide what posed the bigger risk: going out into the elements, or letting Knox use the cover of the storm to get a jump on us. “I just can’t shake the feeling that Knox could be waiting for the moment the storm eases up to attack. I would feel a hell of a lot better if we had the potion in hand before that.”

“Yeah, and just how do you plan on getting there? Tanya lives in Eugene.”

I took a moment to picture how me might be able to make it work. “We could shift and work our way through the mountains…”

“In this storm? We’re both strong werewolves, sure, but there are still some things that we just can’t do. It would suck to finally have a way to beat Knox, only to get taken out by the biggest snowstorm of the century.”

“Why the sudden change of heart? You’re the one who only moments ago was ready to book it out of here to return to the shrimp.”

“I might still do that,” Ava said cryptically. She looked out the window again, and I could all but see the gears turning in her head as she considered whether or not she’d be able to make the journey.

*It’s best for her to stay here. I need her help finding Tanya, and the snow looks like it’s only getting worse.*

After a few beats, I finally spoke. “You’re right, we should wait out the storm.”

Ava opened her mouth to speak, then shut it as if thinking better of it. A few seconds later, she came out with it anyway. “I’ll do whatever you want, Xavier, but I want you to understand that this isn’t the way I wanted things to go. Still, I never supported Knox’s insistence on becoming Samara Alpha, and I still don’t—so I’ll see this through.”

“And what happens after you see it through? What do you expect to happen once Knox is…” I hesitated, stopping myself from saying the word “killed.” Ava might not have been Knox’s biggest fan, but her feelings for her cousin were complicated, and I didn’t want to tread on that. I needed to know she understood what could still happen. “Once Knox is stopped,” I finished.

Ava looked off into the distance, as if considering the prospect of a Knox-less Samara pack for the first time. “I don’t know… I suppose I’ll try to reorganize the pack, choose another Alpha.” She wrinkled her brow, already looking majorly stressed about it.

“And who do you have in mind?” After what we’d gone through with Lucian and now Knox, I wanted to be as informed about the next Alpha candidate as possible.

“Hell if I know. No one comes to mind, really. Hector is the only one who could even come close to filling those shoes, and he still doesn’t have what it takes. Maybe he could do it in the interim, until we figure out who the real fit is?” Ava shook her head and let out a breath, clearly overwhelmed.

I understood why she was so torn up over it. It was a big decision, one that dictated the success and power of a pack. I couldn’t help but think about how much I wanted to be Alpha. *The role isn’t for everybody, that’s for sure. It’s something you have to want. Something you really have to pursue.*

I laughed. “Is there anyone else you can think of?”

Ava fell quiet. Once again, she started to say something, but didn’t. She turned to face the window.

*She’s really having a hard time with this.* “I’m sorry to put you in this position, Ava, but you have to think about this now. Once all of this is over, Knox won’t be a threat and you’ll be free to rebuild the Samara pack, to make it what you’ve always wanted it to be. It’s something the pack clearly wants—and it’s what you want, too.”

A flash of lightning lit up the room, followed by another clap of thunder. Ava flinched, and my wolf stirred to life—and I had to work to fight off my wolf’s urge to comfort her.

“So, it’s settled,” I said. “You’ll stay here tonight, and we’ll leave first thing in the morning.”

# Episode 3019

I was starting to get really nervous. My mouth was dry, and I held my breath, waiting for Greyson’s answer. The silence between us stretched on for so long that I started to wonder if he was going to answer at all.

*Maybe I shouldn’t have asked that question… Besides, if something’s really wrong, he would tell me, right?*

I liked to think that Greyson and I had reached a point where there wasn’t anything he wouldn’t feel comfortable sharing with me—but my question had come out instinctively and caught him by surprise. I felt really bad for asking him—I didn’t want him to think that I didn’t trust him—but he was acting weird, and I had to know what was on his mind.

*He’s kind of reminding me a bit of the old Greyson, the man he was when we first met.* That Greyson had been brooding, mysterious, never one to put all his cards on the table. He’d been so tight-lipped about everything, then—his plans, why he’d returned to the pack house, and everything in between. I knew now that his past reticence had been because he’d been trying to protect the pack by hiding things—things like how Silas was still alive and trying to make a comeback.

*He has to have learned his lesson about being too secretive by now. I do like strong, silent Greyson, but I don’t know if that version of him is the best thing for the pack—or for me.*

I didn’t quite feel like he was hiding anything as big as the return of Silas, but I knew there was something. I just wished that he would come out with it so I didn’t have to prod him like this.

Greyson caressed my face with the back of his hand, then pushed my hair behind my ear. “Of course I would tell you, love,” he said. “I would never hide anything from you. You know that.”

*You sure about that?* I couldn’t read his expression, no matter how hard I tried. It was the same look I’d seen a million times before.

“So you mean it? Nothing new is going on? No new plot to kick off the apocalypse?” I held my breath again, waiting. I didn’t know what I would do if there was anything else going on—we were dealing with enough as it was.

Greyson threw his head back and laughed. “No, no, nothing like that—luckily for us. But I’ll be sure to tell you if anything thing happens that does start the apocalypse—which in our world is a very real possibility.”

We melted into laughter, and I started to feel like I was maybe reading too much into his mood. *Maybe he’s fine after all, and I was just overthinking things*. I had to trust that he would tell me if there was anything really, really wrong. We’d been through too much together not to trust each other. *I just know him so well now that I can always tell when there’s something on his mind…* I had to shake it off. I couldn’t dwell on it any longer. The only real option I had was to trust Greyson, right here, right now.

I sighed and sank into his arms once more, moving around a bit to get settled in his embrace. I closed my eyes and tried to calm down, but no matter what, I couldn’t shake the weird feeling in my stomach. My mind wouldn’t stop churning with worries about Greyson, and what trouble might be on the horizon for us.

*There’s no way I’m going to be able to go to sleep without some help, and I know just the thing.*

I popped up and out of bed, causing Greyson to rear back in confusion. “Whoa, where are you going?”

“To get some herbal help,” I said quickly, already tying on my robe.

Greyson arched an eyebrow at me in confusion. “Herbal help…?”

“Tea—herbal tea,” I said, blushing.” I’m going to go down to the kitchen and make a cup.”

Greyson nodded, his gaze drifting down my body. “Well, hurry back.”

I glanced down and realized the robe wasn’t tied tight enough and was slipping down my shoulders. Greyson stretched toward me and kissed me. My toes curled as he deepened it. I was definitely having second thoughts about leaving him…

Then he broke the kiss and said, his eyes lidded, “Hurry back, love.”

I nodded drunkenly. We shared a lingering glance before I slipped out of the room and went downstairs.

Adjusting my robe, I was just about to turn into the kitchen when I spotted Xavier and Ava standing together in the living room. *Were they talking just now? About what?* No matter how far Xavier and I had come—and how far Ava and I had come, for that matter—I still couldn’t get used to seeing them sharing anything that even looked like an intimate conversation. I absolutely hated it, in fact.

Ava turned away from Xavier and headed for the stairs, stopping short when she saw me.

“Hey,” I said as she passed.

Ava gave me a slight nod before going upstairs.

I went over to Xavier, who was still staring out the window and looking like he was a million miles away.

“Hey, what was that about?” I wondered if Ava was already hard at work trying to get Xavier to stop the war from happening.

Xavier shrugged as he turned to face me. “Ava and I are going to go meet a witch tomorrow—Tanya.”

*What? Was not expecting that… And he’s being so matter-of-fact about it, too.* “Wait, who?”

“The black market witch who gave Ava the sedative for the Iudicium—your idea. It was a good one.”

I could feel myself blushing. “Really?” I absolutely loved being an asset to Greyson and Xavier when we were facing down trouble.

Xavier nodded, a crooked smile on his face. “Really. I’m hopeful that it’ll be just the thing we need to put an end to Knox’s shrimpy reign.”

I was a little surprised. “Wait, Ava’s going to help? Is she on the same page as you?”

“I’m not sure what that means.” Xavier looked at me with interest.

“Well Ava made it clear to me that she doesn’t want Knox to be killed.”

“Did I say anything about killing anyone?” Xavier shot back.

“How else am I supposed to interpret ‘put an end to Knox’?”

“Well then, I think you know exactly what I mean.”

I didn’t like how flippant he was being, and I suddenly got a hollow feeling in my stomach. I’d made it pretty clear to both my mates that I did not approve of killing—at least if it could be avoided. But I also knew what Greyson had told me—that werewolves handled things a lot differently than humans. I knew my mates had done some pretty dark stuff to survive, but still, the thought of it sent a chill racing down my spine.

*Surely Ava didn’t agree to killing Knox… Or was she lying to me the whole time?* I couldn’t see why she would—what advantage would it even give her? Ava had sought out my help before she’d agreed to help Xavier. Maybe if I’d agreed to use my magic, she and Xavier wouldn’t have decided to go see the witch.

*Shit. Maybe I should’ve agreed right then and there—especially since we’re on the same page for once. Still, it’s Ava. It’s just so weird to think about us collaborating—even if it’s for a good cause.*

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Xavier asked, tipping my face up to his and looking me deeply in the eyes. “And don’t say ‘nothing.’ I can tell something’s bothering you.”

“It’s Ava… She asked me to use my magic to make Knox forget about the feud. I turned her down.”

Xavier’s expression softened. “That’s for the best. I wouldn’t let you get close enough to that asshole to even try it.”

“But maybe the witch can do the same thing? Could she cast a spell or create some sort of potion that would make Knox forget? Something permanent?” The more I thought about it, the more perfect it sounded. If Knox didn’t know he considered the Redwoods enemies, maybe we could avoid bloodshed altogether.

Xavier sighed and shook his head, his jaw set. “I’m not willing to take that chance. Magic like that has a way of backfiring, and it wouldn’t change the fact that he tried to kill you. The best thing we can do now is stop Knox by whatever means necessary.”

I nodded slowly, still not too keen on the idea of Xavier and Ava going to visit a witch together. Alone. But I could tell that there wasn’t much I’d be able to do to stop it. I also didn’t want Xavier to feel like I still had doubts about him and Ava—even though I kind of did.

*Chill out, Cali. Xavier made it clear that the whole Ava thing is over. We’re in a good place, now.*

Xavier smiled. “You worried about me, or what?” he asked in a teasing tone.

“Always.” I beamed up at him as he pulled me close. “You told me there was nothing left between you and Ava, and I believe you. But now that there’s a witch involved… Well, I’m not going to let you and Ava go alone.”

# Episode 3020

**Xavier**

I woke up just as the sun was coming out over the horizon, my mind instantly snapping into gear. *Today’s the day we take out that fucker Knox once and for all.* I rolled out of bed, pleased that the snowstorm had finally let up a bit sometime during the night. I didn’t want anything to get in the way of what we had to do today. Knox had to pay for what he’d done to Cali, and I was excited to get on the road to doing that.

I dressed quickly and went downstairs. Ava was waiting for me, and she looked just the same as she had last night. *She doesn’t look like she slept a wink.* I wasn’t surprised she’d suffered a sleepless night. If what Cali had said was true, Ava had a lot on her mind. If I were her, I wouldn’t have slept much either.

“Good morning,” I grunted on my way over to the coffee maker.

Ava nodded at me and then stood by silently as I made coffee. She arched an eyebrow at me, clearly impatient. “Aren’t you ready to go?” She gestured outside. “The storm has let up a bit. We should get going before it decides to start up again.”

“Yeah, I saw.” I glanced out the window. The snow had calmed even more and seemed to be just blowing around now instead of falling from the sky. *That bodes well for us. We might make it to that witch in once piece after all.* “We’ll get going soon—we’re just waiting on someone else.”

Ava looked taken aback. “Who? Cali?”

I laughed. *Of course she’d think of Cali.* “No, someone else.”

Right on cue, Kira came walking in. She looked like she could’ve used a few more hours of sleep. She yawned, her eyes brightening when she spotted the coffee pot. “Oh good, you’re making coffee. I’m going to need it for our little impromptu trip.” She took a seat at the kitchen table and dropped her head onto her arms. “I just can’t seem to wake up.”

Ava rounded on me. “What’s going on? Why is Kira coming?”

“Because it’s a good idea to bring a witch to see a witch, don’t you think?” I didn’t dare mention that it was Cali’s idea. If I was being honest, I’d also thought Cali was going to volunteer herself to come along, but with the snow and Knox having it out for her, that just wasn’t an option. In the end, she’d surprised me by suggesting one of the witches. Kira was the natural choice—I wasn’t in the mood to be tongue lashed on the way, so Big Mac was out. I also knew that Kira would say yes, where Big Mac would either say no or start asking what she’d get in return after complaining about how we were always bothering her.

*No thanks. Not in the mood for all that today.*

Ava turned to Kira with a look in her eyes that I couldn’t quite place. *Is she upset that she’s not going to be alone with me?* If that was the case, it only solidified the choice to bring Kira along in the first place. *But… this is still a little weird.* I thought back to Kira’s awkward confession about her feelings for me. *I guess I’m travelling with my own official crush brigade.*

Kira and I were fine now, thankfully, but the jury was still out on Ava. I was going to have to be careful with her and expertly toe the line so I didn’t give her the wrong idea.

“We’re all going,” I said, my eyes on Ava, who looked like she was trying to keep herself from flying into a frustrated rage. “It’s settled. With Kira on the journey with us, we can blip there and not waste time traveling in the snow.”

Kira yawned and motioned to the coffee pot. “Just give me some of that coffee, and then we can be on our way.”

“Coming right up,” I said, pouring a cup for her, and then one for me.

“You’re a lifesaver, X. So, tell me, who is this witch, exactly?” Kira asked as she inhaled the aroma wafting up from her cup.

I looked to Ava, who piped up quick. “Tanya Tsarsko.”

“Heard of her?” I asked Kira. “I thought you might have, given that she’s supposedly on the black market—and I know that the underworld used to be your stomping grounds when you were still with Iñigo.”

Kira repeated the name a few times, between sips of her coffee. “I’m not sure, but maybe I’d recognize her if I met her in person. Or maybe not.” She rolled her eyes. “I met so many people while working for Iñigo that they all kind of started to blur together. Any idea what her specialty is?”

Ava shook her head. “Don’t know. I found out about her through my brother. He went to see her once and raved about her. Said she was pretty no-nonsense, and effective, too. Thought I’d give it a try, since I always had her name in the back of my mind—but I wasn’t sure if she was still in Eugene. I checked it out and got lucky. She’s still there.”

Kira nodded. “So… She does things that someone like Big Mac—or me—would refuse to do?”

Ava shrugged. “I don’t know about her full menu of offerings. All I know is that I trust her because my brother swore by her abilities. Nothing more.”

I was ready and willing to go see Tanya, but the thought of engaging with yet another strange witch wasn’t exactly sitting right with me—mostly because being bedfellows with a strange witch almost never turned out well.

“Honestly, Kira, if you could make the sedative potion for us instead, I’d much rather be indebted to you than some black market witch,” I said.

Kira thought about it. “I probably could, but my specialty is healing potions. I don’t know how good I’d be at making something with the opposite effect.”

“Come on, Kira. I’ve seen what you’re capable of. I know you could make something that would work if you put your mind to it.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence—but without knowing exactly what Tanya uses, it would take a lot of trial and error on my part to figure out how to make the most effective potion… And I don’t think that’s an effective use of our time if the Samaras are planning to make a move on us at any moment.”

“You have a point,” I grumbled. The idea of Big Mac or Kira handling the sedative potion was not only less complicated, but I trusted them—more or less. However, I had to agree wholeheartedly with Kira on one thing: we didn’t have the time.

“Sorry, I would do it if I thought I could come up with a real gamechanger really fast, but I know my limitations,” Kira said. She threw back her head and downed the rest of her coffee, then dropped her cup into the sink. She definitely looked more awake now than she had when she’d first appeared.

“No, I get it. If this Tanya person can provide exactly what we need for a price, I’ll gladly pay it.” I drained the rest of my coffee and sat my cup on the counter, feeling hopeful. “All right, let’s go.”

“Let’s!” Kira held out a hand to each of us.

I took one hand and eyed Ava as she took the other.

“I’ll never get used to this.” I closed my eyes and braced myself for the blip—which came quickly.

When I opened my eyes, we were in Eugene—the desolate, snowy outskirts, but Eugene all the same. *I should have had more than coffee this morning. I’m starving.*

“I’ll lead you all to Tanya’s shop,” Ava said, already leading the way through the snow-covered sidewalks.

I pulled out my phone and texted Cali to let her know that we’d made it okay.

The only other people around were shopkeepers busy clearing the sidewalks in front of their stores. The wind was still blowing like crazy, which was making their jobs way harder.

“We’re here,” Ava said as we approached an unmarked door down an alleyway not far from where we’d blipped. Ava did a special knock on the door, and I stood back, waiting for it to open.

“You’re sure this is the right place?” I asked after we’d been waiting for a while.

“Yes, it’s the right place,” Ava said.

“Maybe I should just break the door down,” I said.

“Maybe you should think of something that won’t piss her off before we meet her,” Ava snapped.

“It wouldn’t work anyway,” Kira said. She leaned close and ran her fingers along the surface of the door. “There’s a magical seal binding this entrance—unless Tanya opens the door willingly, we’re going to have to break the seal if we want to get in.”

# Episode 3021

I woke up early, feeling refreshed and well rested despite my worries about Xavier. I grabbed my phone and let out a sigh of relief when I saw that Xavier had texted only a few minutes ago. It was uncanny that he’d texted me just as I was thinking about him. *My body must have felt it when Xavier left the pack house.* I was relieved that they’d made it to Eugene safely, and I hoped that everything went smoothly for them there. I reread Xavier’s text: *Be back soon!* I really hoped that was true. I wasn’t feeling any better about his little trip in the cold light of day.

I pressed my eyes closed, trying not to think about what would happen after Knox’s inevitable death. I shivered at the thought of it. *If this witch comes through, we might be able to avoid that altogether. I’d rather this not end in death.* As much as I wanted the plan to work out, I still couldn’t help but worry about Xavier going to meet some witch we’d never heard of, especially after what had happened in Portland with Charon and Lakini. To say that witches were unpredictable and dangerous was the understatement of the century. I didn’t want Xavier and the others to run into anything they couldn’t see coming.

Greyson looped an arm across my breasts and pulled me close, and my mind finally stopped racing. I let out a satisfied groan and snuggled against him.

“Why are you awake so early?” Greyson asked around a yawn. He squeezed me tight and planted a kiss on the top of my head.

“Xavier, Ava, and Kira have gone to Eugene to find that witch. I’m a little on edge about it.”

Greyson’s expression darkened. “That’s not what I agreed to with Ava.”

“Yeah, I know. I should’ve told you when I came back to bed. I definitely thought about filling you in, but you were sleeping and I didn’t want to wake you. Besides, it’s Xavier’s place to tell you that, right?”

I was on edge all over again. I stupidly hadn’t predicted that Greyson might not be as on board with our plan as I had thought.

Greyson nodded. “Right. It was definitely his place to tell me. He knows how things work.” Greyson was clenching and unclenching his jaw, clearly not happy about Xavier running off without telling him. “But what I don’t get is why he took it upon himself to undermine my plan.”

“Don’t put all the blame on Xavier. It was kind of my idea. You should blame me.”

“I’m not going to blame you—this is classic Xavier. He’s always looking for ways to defy me, and this was just another perfect opportunity for him to do what he always does. If you hadn’t brought the plan to him, he probably would’ve found some other way to disrespect me.”

“Are you upset with me, Greyson?” It sure seemed that way. He’d pulled away from me and was now sitting up in bed and looking deep in thought.

“No, I’m not upset with you. I just wish someone had told me about this little change—I’m the Alpha. I don’t like being in the dark about things that affect my pack. This isn’t what I wanted to wake up to, if I’m being honest.” Greyson heaved a sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Do you think the plan could work? Or did I just make things worse?” I’d been so pleased with myself, and Xavier had seemed so excited about my idea. I still couldn’t believe that it hadn’t crossed my mind that Greyson might not be on board, but I should’ve known.

“I don’t know, Cali. Dealing with witches is always risky. There’s no telling how their little mission might shake out.”

“I know that, and Xavier said pretty much the same thing. But at least Kira’s with him. She should be able to sniff out any red flags pretty quickly.”

Greyson didn’t say anything. I could tell he was way more annoyed than he was letting on. He hopped out of bed and glanced out the window. “The storm is letting up a little.”

I sat up. “Does that mean Knox might attack?” I was worried that Greyson might want to attack first, before Knox could get the jump on us.

“Who knows what Knox will do? The only predictable thing about Knox is that he’s unpredictable. Who knows what’s going through that kid’s head? Certainly not me, not that I’d even want to. I’d consider hitting him first, except I’ve lost one of my best fighters to a witch hunt in Eugene.” Greyson cursed under his breath as he started getting dressed.

*Okay, he’s definitely upset.* “I could text Xavier and tell him that he needs to come back—”

Greyson shrugged that off. “No, it’s too late for that. He’s made his choice. I don’t want you to shoulder the blame, since I know you were just trying to help, but next time you should run something like that by me first. I don’t like it when things start slipping out of my control.”

“And I should have known that—I should have thought it through before I got in the middle of things. I was just reacting to the whole threat of you and Xavier… killing Knox. Ava came to me, and she was concerned about Knox—he’s her cousin, after all. Asking her to be involved in killing her own family is a lot. I felt for her.”

“I know you didn’t mean it,” Greyson said, leaning over and giving me a peck on the lips. “It is what it is. Since we’re both up, why don’t we go down and see what it’s like outside? Meet you downstairs?”

“Yes, sounds good.”

I watched Greyson go, still feeling foolish for having helped to widen the rift between my mates. *Who knew it would blow up in my face like this? I was only trying to save a life and eliminate our problem at the same time.* I sighed and then got up and dressed, wondering if all would be forgiven by Greyson if the plan happened to work. *He has to want to avoid a fight as much as I do. He can’t want to put the pack through all that, right?*

I joined Greyson in the kitchen where a few of the others were gathered, getting coffee and talking about the storm.

My dad came walking in with a shovel propped on his shoulder. “I’m going to go try and clear the porch.”

“Why are you up so early, Dad?” I asked, tickled by how bundled up he was, and the determined look on his face.

He smiled at me. “I smelled the coffee, truth be told. That’s one of the best ways to wake up when it’s cold and snowy outside.”

I followed him to the door. The snow had blown against it, and it took a couple of hard pushes before we were able to get it open.

I shivered as the frigid wind rushed in. “Brr. It’s still freezing out there.”

The snow might have finally let up, but it was still blustery. I stepped halfway out onto the snowbound porch as my dad went right to work clearing the mounds of powder away. I couldn’t stop thinking about Xavier. The weather wouldn’t bother him half as much as it did me, but I still wished he hadn’t gone to Eugene.

“Piece of cake—but it might take a bit,” Dad said as he chucked clouds of snow over the railing and down into the yard.

“You’re an expert,” I said distractedly.

I looked back into the kitchen, feeling a little on edge. Despite Greyson’s assurances, I could sense that he was upset with me. I stepped back inside, stomping the snow off my boots and staying on the rug so I didn’t track water all over the place and get on Torin’s bad side.

Greyson, Rishika, and Sage were sitting off to the side, discussing patrols. I could see the stress written across Greyson’s face, though I was sure no one but me noticed. He was all Alpha as he spoke to the others, his words confident and sure.

I lingered near the door. “What do you do when you know you did something to upset Mom?” I asked my dad in a hushed voice.

He moved his shoveling closer to the door so that he could hear me better. “I apologize and try to set things right,” he said with a shrug. He followed my gaze to Greyson. “What? Did you two have an argument?”

I shrugged. “It’s probably no big deal. It’ll be fine, I’m sure.”

“Stop!” Zainab shouted as she came rushing up. “Stop shoveling!” She turned to Greyson. “Did you send more patrols out last night?”

“No, I didn’t,” Greyson said, walking over to join us. “Why do you ask?”

Zainab pointed to the porch steps. “Because we had a visitor last night.”

There were long scratches in the wood, clear as day. There was nothing other than a wolf that could have left them. I was surprised none of us had noticed them before now.

Greyson leaned over to get a closer look. “This is new, and they’re not ours. Someone else was here.”

# Episode 3022

**Xavier**

*Should’ve known there’d be some other bullshit to get through in order to make the meeting with this witch happen.* I heaved a loud sigh and rolled my eyes, trying not to let my frustration take over.

“Break the seal? Great. And just how the fuck are we supposed to do that?” I looked at the door. “It looks like a plain old door to me… I’m still thinking that breaking it down will take care of the seal or whatever.”

I cracked my knuckles, ready to do just that. I took a step back and was preparing to launch myself at the door when Kira reached out and placed a hand on my chest.

“Like I said before, I wouldn’t advise it. You might not be able to *see* the magic, but trust me, it’s all over the damn thing.” Kira stepped forward and trailed her finger along the door in a circular pattern. “If you tried to take this thing down it might blast you back—and we don’t know how strong that blast might be. The last thing we need is you getting severely injured.”

“I thought you had the whole healing magic thing in the bag?”

Kira gave me a look. “Ha ha. Good one. My magic wouldn’t work fast enough if the blast were as devastating as I think it might be. But if you want to take the chance, be my guest. Far be it from me to challenge an Alpha.” Kira waggled her eyebrows at me.

I sighed again. “I get it, no kicking the door down. So how do we break it, then? And what if she’s not even here?”

“And what if she is? This is the only place I’ve ever dealt with her. It’s all we have to go on right now,” Ava said. “Like you said, we came all the way here—though it literally took us seconds—so we might as well see this through.”

I looked around for another way in—a window, a hatch, anything—but there was nothing but brick and more brick. The place was like a fortress, which made sense if Tanya was used to getting mixed up in werewolf wars.

“It’s almost like a witch’s riddle,” Kira said. “It’s a good thing I came along. I just need a little time to figure it out, and then I should be able to get us in.”

“Well, it’s not such a good thing if you can’t solve it,” I grumbled.

Kira glared at me. “Of course I can solve it.”

“Okay, then do it.”

“Would you rather do it yourself?” Kira said, her mouth in a tight line. “Since you’ve got it all figured out and think it’s so simple? Be my guest.” Kira stepped back and waved her hand at me, urging me toward the door.

*Wow, she’s been hanging around Big Mac too much.* I held up my hands and stepped aside. “Okay, point taken. Have at it.”

“Wait a second,” Ava said, stepping between us and the door. She grabbed me and pulled me away from Kira as the witch went back to studying the door. “What’s your problem, anyway?” Ava asked.

I made a face. “Seriously? You failed to mention that Tanya’s door is magically sealed. I guess that wasn’t the case when you came by before?”

Ava rolled her eyes at me. “Obviously not, or I would’ve told you about it. I barely know this woman, and I’ve only dealt with her once. I’m not a part of her loyalty program or anything.”

“Sorry if I’m just a bit frustrated that we pretty much came here for nothing. If we hadn’t brought Kira along like Cali suggested, we would’ve been shit out of luck *and* wasted time making our way through the snow to get here.”

I looked back toward where Kira stood examining the door.

A strange expression flickered across Ava’s face, and she chuckled. “Oh, so it was Cali’s idea for Kira to come? I should have known. Anyway, you said it yourself—Kira’s a competent witch. She’ll figure it out.”

“Every second we spend here means more time for the Samara pack to make a move on mine. I’m sure you’re probably thrilled about that,” I said.

After the way she’d reacted to Kira joining us, I had a feeling Ava’s only real mission was to get as much alone time with me as possible. She was probably hoping that we could pick up where we’d left off, but that was over, and although I couldn’t outright tell her that, I wasn’t going to do anything that might lead her on her make her hopeful about our future when we really didn’t have one.

Ava shot me a confused look. “Thrilled? Why would I be happy about this? The Samaras are in just as much danger as the Redwoods—if not more. If we don’t figure out how to stop Knox, he might take things out on the Samara pack, too. This isn’t just about you and Cali, Xavier, though I’m sure that’s hard for you to believe.”

“Sure, but it’s also true that you pulled me and one of the Redwood witches away from the pack house. Could that be so we won’t be able to attack Knox?” I didn’t even know if I believed that, but I was frustrated and looking for somewhere to vent my frustration. I wanted to be back home with Cali. Who knew what could be going on back at the pack house while I was here, pacing around in front of a seemingly abandoned witch’s den. Knox could be leading a charge of his wolves as we were standing around here. The idea set me on edge.

Ava rolled her eyes. “Now you’re being ridiculous. The whole point of this is to stop Knox and prevent a war. And maybe you’re not thinking straight, but it wasn’t even my idea to involve Tanya in the first place—or does that not fit your ‘Ava’s the villain’ narrative?”

I shook my head, not wanting to get too deep into that argument. “Well, it’s all a moot point now, since it doesn’t even look like we caninvolve Tanya. We came all this way just to sit here in an alley freezing our asses off because we can’t get inside. Just my luck.”

Kira shushed us. “If you both would kindly shut up, I’m trying to focus here.”

I crossed my arms and kept my mouth shut, thinking better of sending a biting remark back her way. She was already taking a lot of cues from Big Mac, and if I pushed her too far, she might just refuse to help altogether—which would cost us even more time.

Ava and I watched as Kira moved her fingers along the door, sparks of bright white magic dancing out from her fingertips and across the surface. Her lips didn’t stop moving as she muttered spells under her breath, too low for us to hear. Before long, the door began to light up in the swirling pattern that Kira had traced before.

*Huh. Never seen anything like this before. Witches always seem to have something up their sleeves.* The snow around the door began to melt, and with a whoosh, the door unlocked.

“Shit, is that it?” I said. “Did you do it?”

Kira placed her hand against the door. “I broke the seal, but I can’t make any promises about what we’re going to find inside. Are we sure we want to do this? Barging into a witch’s den uninvited?”

“I wouldn’t be here if I weren’t sure. Step aside.” I was irritated with everyone and everything right now, but I still wanted to be the first one to go inside, just in case Kira’s misgivings were right. Cautiously, I pushed the door open and walked through.

My eyes quickly adjusted to the dark interior—and it was exactly the type of place I’d pictured a black market witch dwelling in. There were skulls, bones, and jars of murky stuff stacked up against the walls. *I don’t even want to think about what’s in those jars—or whose skulls those are, for that matter.*

“Anybody home?” I called out as I led Ava and Kira deeper into the stuffy room. There was no answer. “We’re wasting time,” I hissed. “The place doesn’t look abandoned, but I don’t think anyone’s here.” I rounded on Ava. “Where else could she be?”

“God, Xavier, are *you* at home all the time? Sheesh. It’s not like Tanya knew we were coming. This is where I met her before, so I assumed she’d be here. That’s it. It’s not like I hang out with the woman and know her schedule—so how the hell would I know where she is?”

“Fine,” I said tightly. I pushed past Ava and took a look around. I noticed that there was a door standing partially open in the back. As I made my way toward it, I picked up a strong scent. I stopped short and put a hand out to stop the others. “There’s someone in there.” I paused to listen for a moment before I pushed the door the rest of the way open. The first thing I saw was a figure hunched over a desk, and it wasn’t moving. “Hello? Tanya?”

The figure didn’t respond. *Shit. Is she dead?*

# Episode 3023

**Violet**

I stared at the email on my phone, then out at the windy, snowy mess outside my window. I didn’t know if I was going to have the heart to tell Charlie that our flight to Minnesota had been canceled due to what the email from the airline had called “an unprecedented snowstorm.” That was the perfect way to describe it.I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d seen so much snow—if ever.

I reread the email, wondering if I’d missed anything. *I understand that it’s too bad out to fly right now, but it’s weird that they would just completely cancel the flight rather than just delay it until the storm blows over.* I scrolled back up to the top and sighed. *Nope. Canceled. Period.*

We were going to get a refund and all, but I didn’t care about that, and I doubted Charlie would either. I needed to figure out the best way to break the news to him. He’d been so excited about spending the holidays with his family, and I’d enjoyed seeing him that excited. I was still a little nervous about Iris, but we’d made some strides since we’d first met, so I figured it wouldn’t have been that bad. That didn’t mean I was looking forward to spending the holidays with her—at all—but I’d made peace with it and was hopeful that we’d be able to repair our relationship even further. The holidays had a way of putting people in a good mood, after all.

I stood up and paced a bit before staring down at the bag with Iris’s gift in it. I’d agonized over picking just the right thing for days, and now I wasn’t even going to be able to give it to her. It was an antique that Charlie and I had found while out shopping with the others. I’d looked at so many things, and this was the only thing that had really stood out to me—and it had gotten Charlie’s seal of approval. I’d planned to win some major points when I gave it to her. *Maybe we could still send it in the mail?* That probably wasn’t a good idea either, since the mail was probably moving slow because of the weather as well.

“I always take for granted how great indoor plumbing is,” Charlie said as he came out of the bathroom. “We’re lucky Zainab found that generator last night, or we’d be screwed.” He started at the look on my face. “Hey, is something wrong?”

I slammed my phone down onto the bed. “Nope, nothing! Everything’s fine!”

Maybe I’d let him enjoy the rest of his day before dropping the bomb on him. He looked so happy and excited right now, and I didn’t want to be the one to ruin that.

Charlie narrowed his gaze. “Come on now, sunshine, do you really expect me to believe that?” He sat on the bed beside me and gave me a playful push on the shoulder. “What’s bothering you?”

I sighed, knowing that I just needed to come out with it. It wasn’t like I could hide it from him for long, anyway.

I held up my phone so that he could see the email. “Our flight got canceled.”

The disappointment on Charlie’s face was palpable, and my heart dropped. Even though I had absolutely nothing to do with the flight being canceled, I still felt so bad—like my ambivalence about seeing Iris had somehow triggered this turn of events.

“Maybe we can figure out another way to get there?” I said. “Maybe we can try another airline and use our refund to buy another ticket, or look into a train schedule… Do trains do well in the snow? Or maybe—”

Charlie took my face between his hands and stopped my rambling with a peck on the lips. “It’s okay, Violet, really. I wanted to see my parents, of course, but I was actually already thinking of canceling the trip.”

I was shocked. “Really? Why?” *And why hadn’t he told me? It would have saved me a lot of anxiety.*

“Because of everything that’s going on with the Samara pack. I didn’t want to bring it up to you because I saw how excited you were about going to Minnesota. I didn’t want to totally dash your dreams.” Charlie reached out and gave my shoulder a squeeze.

I swallowed as another stab of guilt hit me in the gut. *Excited isn’t the word I’d use to describe how I felt about going to Minnesota, but I guess Charlie doesn’t need to know that.*

“Well, that’s why I didn’t want to tell you about the email,” I said. “You were so excited, too. It broke my heart when I saw that we weren’t going to be able to go. I know how much you were looking forward to it.”

Charlie shrugged. “I know it’s not the ideal outcome, but it’s for the best, ultimately. I’d feel bad about running off and leaving Greyson at a time like this. Maybe it was all meant to work out this way.”

“I know, but I’m sorry all the same.”

Charlie gave me another kiss. “Don’t worry. I’ll break the news to my mom. She’ll understand.”

We both turned at the sound of a commotion coming from downstairs. Somebody was calling Charlie’s name. He grinned. “See? They need me.”

I followed him out into the hall and down the stairs, wondering what the hell was going on. I had a feeling that whatever it was, it wasn’t good. With all the Samara stuff happening, it seemed inevitable that things were going slip out of control pretty quickly. Pair that with the craziness of the weather, and we’d be in for a pretty complicated face-off if it came down to it.

Zainab grabbed Charlie as soon as we cleared the stairs and immediately pulled him toward the back door. “Charlie, we need your hunter skills.”

“Uh… Okay…” Charlie said, allowing Zainab to maneuver him into the kitchen, where Greyson, Rishika, and a few others were sitting around with tense looks on their faces.

“I can’t believe this shit. Wolf claw scratches on our porch. Who could it have been?” Greyson said to Rishika. He looked like he was seconds from blowing a gasket. “I bet it was Knox, or one of his brainless lackies.”

Rishika didn’t look too happy, either.

“What’s going on, are we under attack or something?” My heart was already racing. I’d been through a lot of intense stuff with the Redwood pack, but it wasn’t something you got used to. There were plenty of people my age who never had to even think about gearing up for a deadly fight with a rival werewolf pack—but even so, I wouldn’t have changed who I was for the world.

Zainab shook her head. “No, don’t think so… At least not yet. But we’re thinking that someone might have been spying on us, and whoever it was got a little too close for comfort. The snow is making it difficult for us to pick up a scent to track, which is why we need Charlie’s help. As a hunter, he’s got a heightened ability for tracking, which will really come in handy at a time like this. His hunter senses combined with his wolf senses should be the key to finding out who it was.”

Charlie started toward the porch, but I stopped him.

“I’m coming with you,” I said. “There’s no way I’m going to let you take on a rogue Samara all by yourself. And if someone’s messing with the Redwood pack, well, I’m not going to just sit around and do nothing.”

It was clear that the Samaras weren’t good at minding our boundaries, and I was all too happy to show them why that was a grave mistake.

“Great,” Charlie said. “The two of us should be able to track down anyone who dared come to the pack house uninvited. We make a great team—like Sherlock and Watson!” He winked at me. “Solving crimes, tracking down clues, comparing notes and discussing our theories while puffing on pipes…”

“Um, so which one of us is Sherlock and which is Watson?”

Before Charlie could answer me, Lilac pulled me aside. I was surprised to see him.

“It’s a little early for you, isn’t it?” I asked.

Lilac didn’t laugh, which was unsettling. He looked completely serious, and I quickly realized that this was one of the rare moments when Lilac meant business. Somehow, it was always concerning when a person who typically joked around all the time was in a bad mood.

“Whoa, what’s the matter? Is everything okay?” I took a moment to play back everything that had been going on in the pack house lately, trying to remember if there was anything that might have put Lilac in this type of mood.

Lilac opened his mouth to answer but then thought better of it and pulled me farther away from the others until we were out of earshot.

“Lilac, you’re starting to worry me. What’s all this about?”

Lilac faced me head-on and looked me right in the eye. “Are you trying to get Marta to break up with me?”

# Episode 3024

**Greyson**

Charlie’s face was a mask of concentration as he examined the scratches. I wasn’t sure if he was going to be able to track their source any better than I could, but I had to use every available weapon in the pack’s arsenal.

I was doing a good job of hiding it, but as soon as I’d laid eyes on the scratches, rage had started to boil inside me. *Whoever had the balls to invade my territory is lucky the snow smothered their scent.* They’d gotten close. Too close to the pack. Too close to Cali. They could have easily just invaded the pack house, though I was certain they wouldn’t have gotten away so clean if they had.

*If Knox or any of his followers are behind this, they’re going to pay.*

Part of me wanted to grant Knox a little surprise visit and put an end to all of this, once and for all. The snow was an obstacle, but it hadn’t stopped whoever had dared to step onto our porch.

“I just don’t see the point,” Rishika said. “If they were trying to be sneaky, why leave behind the scratches? And why come here in the first place? Do you think they were scoping out the pack house for a planned attack?”

“Could be,” I said. “Though it seems like a lot to go through just to peek through a window or two. I should have had Big Mac put up a ward—anything to make it harder to get to us.” I felt exposed right now, and that was not a good feeling to have in our current situation.

Artemis joined Charlie in examining the claw marks. “Maybe they wanted us to see it. To scare us, make us feel vulnerable. Make us look over our shoulders. Get us jumpy enough that we’d start doing something stupid that would expose us.”

“Well, it didn’t work. I don’t feel vulnerable in the least. All I feel is rage.” If their mission had been to shake me up, it hadn’t worked. Now all I wanted was to find whoever had done it and tear them apart.

Ravi punched a fist into his open palm and looked out toward the woods, his eyes narrowed. “If we find out one of the Samaras is behind this, I want you to know that I’m ready to kick some Samara ass—no hesitation.”

I nodded at Ravi. “I appreciate that. I know the pack will back that up.”

Like Ravi, I felt like a Samara was behind this whole thing, but I was trying not to rush to judgment. *Things aren’t always as they seem.* A new wave of annoyance rose up inside me, crashing against my anger over this newest violation. *Hell of a time for Xavier to run off to try to prove himself—or whatever it is he’s doing. I need him here right now.*

“Even if it is the Samaras,” I said to Ravi, “I’m not going to attack just because it’ll feel good. I’m going to be smart about it.”

“I think we should try to track a little farther out,” Charlie said, finally pulling his gaze away from the scratches.

“Same. We’ll be right back,” Artemis said.

“Got it. Do as much tracking as you can, but don’t go too far, and make sure you don’t cross over into Samara territory by mistake. I don’t want to risk you two having to take the entire pack on all by yourselves.”

“Even though I’d love to,” Artemis said, her expression dark. She ran into the house and reappeared with her bow strapped to her back. “Just in case,” she said with a wink.

“I’m going with you,” Violet said.

“You’re not really going to send the three of them out there, are you?” Cali asked me, her voice laced with worry.

“They’ll be fine as long as they don’t wander into Samara territory,” I said. I hated that Cali was having such a hard time with all of this, but we had no choice. We had to make a move, and right now, the most important thing was finding out who’d crossed the line last night.

“We can take care of ourselves,” Artemis said to Cali. “A Fae and two werewolves are no one’s easy target. Trust me on that.”

Cali didn’t say anything as we watched the three of them head out, slowly making their way through waist-high snow drifts. It was a sobering sight to see, them marching off to do what they had to in order to protect our pack.

“What happens if this is a trap?” Cali said after a long silence had passed between us. “What if the Samaras are just trying to split us up so they can attack?”

“That would be a grave mistake,” I said. “Though I’d feel a lot more confident about our chances if Xavier hadn’t decided to take an unauthorized road trip.”

I winced, immediately regretting what I’d said. I could see the hurt on Cali’s face. *But it’s the truth.*

“It’ll be okay,” I said. “It’s a simple reconnaissance mission. Nothing they haven’t done hundreds of times before.”

“Then why did my sister take her bow with her?”

“She’s being smart. Would you rather she be out there unarmed? Let’s not pretend that there isn’t a chance they’ll run into danger out there—be it from the Samaras, a Rogue, or whoever might have decided to pay us a visit last night.”

I looked at Rishika.

“Why don’t we set up a line of defense?” I suggested. “Clear out some of the snow and dig some trenches? They may not stop the Samaras, but it’ll certainly slow them down and make it harder for them to attack—or catch us by surprise.”

Rishika nodded and squinted her eyes, like she was picturing it. “I like it. Should we add some spikes to the bottom? Give them a little welcoming gift?”

“I guess a few little pointed stakes wouldn’t hurt,” I said. I clapped my hands together and faced the pack. “Everyone, pitch in and help Rishika dig some trenches. We’re going to show those Samara assholes who they’re fucking with.”

There was a little cheer as the pack sprang into action.

“So, does that mean I can help, too?” Cali asked, biting her lip.

*You’ve already done enough by encouraging Xavier to take off.* There was no way I would say that to Cali, though, no matter how true it was. “Nah, you don’t need to help—it’s cold out, and there are plenty of pack members working on it already. They’ve got it under control.”

“I’m not a weakling, Greyson. And who knows? Maybe I can use my magic to help things move a little smoother.”

There was no use arguing once Cali had her mind set on something, and besides, I knew she was trying her best to make up for the whole “convincing Xavier to go to Eugene when he should’ve been right here with the pack” thing. “Fine. Help. Dress warmly, though. And don’t get lost in the snow. There’s a lot of it out there.”

“I’ll be careful.” She rose onto her tiptoes and gave me a quick peck on the lips before heading inside.

I headed out into the snowy yard. I could still see Charlie, Violet, and Artemis heading for the woods. Charlie and Violet shifted and bounded a bit ahead of Artemis. They almost looked like they were enjoying themselves, despite the mess we were all in. *I wonder if they’ve picked up a scent yet.* I took a quick look around the yard. The pack was hard at work, most of them in wolf form as they worked to dig out the shed so they could get to the shovels inside.

Ravi and Rishika shifted back as they walked over to join me, both out of breath but looking like they weren’t having too bad a time.

“Phew, that’s hard work,” Ravi said. “You think that maybe it would be easier just to shift and dig the trenches using our claws?”

“Hell if I know. Digging is digging,” Rishika said as she shifted back and kept clawing at the snow around the shed.

Despite the threats lurking around us, I realized that in any other situation, it would’ve seemed like we were all just enjoying a fun little snow party.Everyone let out a cheer once the shed was uncovered, then Sage disappeared inside and emerged with a rack of shovels that she began to hand out to the pack.

Cali came back out, and I smiled. She was bundled up appropriately, though her cheeks were already a little red from the cold. “I’m pretty sure that I can blast out a trench or two,” she said.

My smile widened. I loved how Cali was always ready to help, no matter what. Even still, I couldn’t stop worrying about her getting too involved in the war that was brewing. The last thing I wanted was another Tanner situation. That had been too close for comfort. The only thing that brought me solace was the fact that right now, she was only trying to help, and I needed to let her, for both our sakes.

Cali bounded out into the yard, already rubbing her hands together and looking a little too excited about blasting the snow. “Stand back, everyone!” she yelled, raising her hands.

Before she could do anything, Ravi started yelling and pointing off down the snow-covered path. “Someone’s coming!”

# Episode 3025

**Charlie**

My confidence was building by the second as we made our way through the snow-covered woods. It felt good to be stalking around in wolf form with my mate by my side, both of us tuned in and on the prowl.

With all the LIPS stuff going on, it had been dangerous to simply exist as a werewolf. Now that that was over, I was all too happy to take advantage of roaming freely through our woods once again—despite the circumstances. Not to mention, I was totally feeling the winter-wonderland vibe that the woods had going on right now. There was nothing quite like fresh snow.

*I might be enjoying the snow a little too much… Especially considering the fact that this snow is the reason why I won’t be seeing my family for the holidays.*

Even though I was kind of enjoying myself, I made sure to stay sharp in case we ran into anything we weren’t expecting. It might have felt like a little trip through the woods, but I knew better. It meant so much to me that Greyson had trusted me enough to let me lead the tracking party.

*I just don’t want to let the pack down. I’m not just a werewolf, I’m a hunter, and I can be a real asset to the pack. It’s time for me to prove myself.*

It was even better that Violet was by my side and would get a firsthand glimpse of my abilities. I always jumped at any opportunity to impress Violet, who was such a force to be reckoned with in her own right. I wanted her to be proud of me—all of me.

Like Lola, I was an unusual supernatural mix—and it gave me an advantage.

*Hunter. Werewolf. Ass-kicker.* I chuckled to myself. *Violet would tease me to no end if she heard me call myself that.*

Whichever part of me I ended up relying on more today, I was sure that both sets of abilities would allow me to track down the werewolf who’d been spying on the pack house. I had the ultimate edge in this situation, and I planned to use it.

I took a quick look over my shoulder to make sure that Artemis was still following close behind. She was. I shouldn’t even have bothered checking. She was the ultimate badass—down to the way she was moving through the thick snow with minimal effort.

*I had such a weird conversation with Lilac earlier*, Violet mind linked suddenly.

*What about?* I took a quick glance at Violet as she came up beside me and matched my gait.

*For starters, my own brother accused me of trying to break him and his girlfriend up*. *Can you believe that?*

That was actually surprising to hear. *Really? Well, are you?*

*CHARLIE!*

*What? It’s a fair question!*

*No, of course I’m not!*

*Okay, okay. So what did you tell him?*

*I told him he was crazy to even think that. Why in the world would I do that? I like Marta. Honestly, I’m their biggest fan. Why would I try to drive a wedge between them?*

*I like Marta, too. They’re good together. Has Marta said anything to you?*

*A little… maybe when I accused her of cheating on Lilac with her mentor.*

*Violet, that’s literally the definition of driving a wedge between people.*

*But we cleared it up! Marta and I are good now, but what Lilac said came out of nowhere. He wouldn’t just up and accuse me without a reason. Maybe they’re having trouble and Lilac’s trying to look somewhere to place the blame. I feel bad for him… But maybe I can help.*

*After what you’ve told me, I would say it’s better if you don’t get involved*, I said.

*But he’s my brother! Of course I have to get involved! It’s not a big deal. I’m just going to have a chat with Marta when we get back. There must be a reason why Lilac’s blaming me.*

*Bad idea, Violet. You should let them figure it out. Whatever might be going on, it’s between Marta and Lilac.*

*Ugh, fine.*

She was agreeing with me, but I could tell that she was going to talk to Marta anyway. *You didn’t even make that sound convincing, sunshine. Do what you want. I know you always do. I’m your mate, so I’ll pick up the pieces like always.*

Violet nuzzled me. *Of course you will.*

I let out a yelp of surprise as I walked right into Artemis. She’d gotten ahead of us at some point and had come to a dead stop. She crouched down and pulled an arrow from her quiver before aiming her bow with one eye closed and the other squinted and staring straight ahead.

Following her lead, I strained to listen and lifted my nose into the air to see if I could pick up any hint of danger on the cold breeze. It didn’t take long to see what Artemis was responding to: there was another scratch in the base of a nearby tree. I sniffed hard, hoping to pick up a scent.

*Dammit, the cold and the snow are making it so hard to pick up anything useful out here.*

Artemis pointed to the woods ahead. “Whoever it was, they went that way.”

I nodded my agreement.

*If we keep going that way, we’ll end up in Samara territory*, I said to Violet.

*Exactly where Greyson told us NOT to go*, Violet responded.

Artemis started forward, but I nipped at her ankle, stopping her.

“It’s okay, I’m just going to look,” she said, her voice low.

I didn’t like it, but I supposed that we could maybe go just a little farther. We just needed to be careful. Luckily, I didn’t need to shift and tell Artemis that—she was a pro.

Artemis stepped forward, her bow steady in her hands. She took a few steps before stopping and waiting, listening, and then taking a few more steps—her bow still aimed and ready to fire.

*It’s probably not a coincidence that the tracks are leading right back to the Samara camp, huh?* Violet said.

*Definitely not. Even if we lose the remaining tracks, this is a pretty good sign that they belong to a Samara. Who else would be out here in the middle of a storm like this?*

*We should let Greyson know*, Violet said.

*Maybe… But I wish we had a little more definitive proof, first. Maybe we should do a quick sweep of the area to make sure there are no signs of any other werewolves? I don’t want to make a false accusation, not with the situation as tense as it is. There’s way too much at stake right now.*

There was no way I wanted to be responsible for starting a pack war with bad intel.

I nipped at Artemis again and gestured with my head for her to follow me. She hesitated for a moment, taking a quick look back in the direction of the Samara territory before finally giving in.

I led the way, keeping my nose in the air and my eyes sharp. Gone was the light feeling of before. Right now, I was on high alert. *If there’s a surprise out here, I want to be the one to encounter it first.* There was no doubt in my mind that Violet and Artemis could hold their own and were as badass as anyone, but there was no way I was going to let Violet charge ahead into a trap, or whatever kind of danger might be lying ahead of us. I needed this whole thing to go smoothly. I didn’t take getting a mission from the Alpha lightly.

We began our patrol, sweeping through the area just alongside the Samara border. I kept my senses sharp and my mind clear. I needed to be ready for anything, and at that moment, I felt like I was.

It didn’t take long for me to spot something just up ahead. Just like that, my brain clicked back to my training at hunter camp. *Pay attention and take in every detail. Even if it doesn’t seem like it matters.* A low branch on a tree nearby was bent, as if something had just brushed against it. I slowed down to take a closer look, and Violet and Artemis slowed down behind me. I could see their breath billowing in the cold air, and I suddenly longed to get Violet back home, safe and warm in the pack house. But first, we had a job to do.

I looked just below the bent branch, and sure enough, I could make out another werewolf claw mark in the tree trunk. *They probably did it while trying to steady themselves against the storm.* The winds were strong even now, and walking through snow this deep had probably kept the intruder off balance the entire time.

My senses were heightened as I paused to listen, my nose still to the air. I concentrated, trying to isolate even a hint of a strange scent lingering on the breeze. Luckily, the snow had made the woods silent, which would make it that much easier for me to pick up anything that didn’t quite sound right. My hunter senses were out in full force, and it was like I could feel the woods in my bones. *Something’s not right.*

I turned to Violet. *We need to grab Artemis and run! We’re about to be ambushed!*

# Episode 3026

**Xavier**

I’d no sooner taken a tentative step toward the slumped figure before me than I was hit by the strong stench of bourbon.

I turned to Ava. “Is this your witch?”

Ava nodded slowly. “Yeah, that’s Tanya. What’s wrong with her?” Ava leaned forward to get a better look.

“I’m not sure—”

My words were cut short by a loud snore. The witch had a glass in her hand, and there was an empty liquor bottle on the floor at her feet.

“She’s not dead,” I said, kicking the bottle. “She’s passed out drunk.”

The witch stirred and then sat upright with a jerky movement. The glass in her hand crashed to the floor but somehow didn’t break, and an alarmed look crossed her face as she tried to focus on us. It took her a while, but she finally zeroed in on Ava.

“Oh, it’s you. What are you doing here?” she slurred. “No refunds!”

“No—that’s not why I’m here. I brought you some business,” Ava replied.

Tanya burped and wiped her mouth with her sleeve. I wasn’t sure whether or not she’d even registered what Ava had said. In fact, she looked like she was seconds away from passing out again.

*Just great. We finally get to the witch, only to find her hungover as fuck.* I couldn’t believe that our only hope for defeating the little shrimp rested in the hands of a wasted witch. *Can a drunk witch even be trusted? What if she bungles the spell and accidentally makes Knox stronger, or something?*

Tanya tried to get to her feet, but it wasn’t going very well, and she collapsed back into her chair a few times before she finally managed to stand. “What the hell are you doing in here? How in the hell did you get in here?” she slurred.

Kira stepped forward. “I broke the seal.”

Tanya narrowed her eyes. “You what… Oh, so you’re a witch. How could you betray a fellow witch like that? And for what? A couple of rude werewolves?” Tanya shook her head and yawned. “For shame!”

“Listen, I don’t want to spend any more time here than I have to. Did you make a deal to help the new so-called Alpha of the Samara pack? Knox?” I asked.

“Knox? What kind of name is Knox?” Tanya stumbled backward and plopped back down into her chair. “Knox or not, I can’t reveal my clients. That information is protected. I have morals, you know. Listen here, wolfy, do you know how many people barge in here demanding this, that, and the other? Too many to count! And I’ll tell you the same thing I tell them—cool it, or I’ll turn you into a frog!” Tanya slapped her leg and cackled.

I clenched my fists. The little patience I had was long gone, and I wasn’t the least bit amused by the drunk witch comedian’s antics.

I looked at Kira. “Can’t you do something? Like cast a sobering spell or something?”

Kira shook her head. “That’s not a thing. If you want Tanya sober, you’re going to have to wait until she’s sober.”

“Yeah, I don’t think we have time for that.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I may have had a few drinks, but I can still cast a spell. Piece of cake! So what do you lot want? A love spell? A spell to make this one grow a sense of humor?” Tanya jabbed a finger at me, and it was all I could do not to flip my lid.

No doubt sensing my rising frustration, Ava stepped in. “We need another dose of the sedative potion you made for me before.”

“Or, if it’s easier for you, you could just give the recipe to Kira and she’ll take care of it. Then we’ll get out of your hair so you can get back to your… bourbon,” I said quickly.

Tanya laughed. “I’m sorry, do I look like a cooking show? I may be drunk, but I’m not stupid. My spells are my secrets. The audacity of you, asking a witch to give away her proprietary information like that.” Tanya slurred the last part of her sentence so badly that it took me a moment to realize what she’d said. “If you want me to cast a spell, then it’s going to cost you.”

I stepped toward her, unable to keep the menace out of my voice. “We can pay.”

Tanya looked up at me, her eyes suddenly going wide with fear. “You’re not—it couldn’t be.” She cowered in her chair. “Are you… Colton Evers? The mercenary?” She got up quickly from her chair, causing it to clatter to the floor. She backed away quickly. “Don’t hurt me! Don’t hurt me! I did what Ava wanted! It’s not my fault if things didn’t work out as planned.”

I chuckled. *She really must be drunk. How dare she mix us up?* Either way, I decided to play this to my advantage. I advanced on her and boxed her in, enjoying this sudden turn of events. Clearly Tanya thought I was a mercenary sent to exact some sort of revenge. Far be it for me to correct her. “Tell me, Tanya, have you worked with mercenaries before?”

“Sure. I mean, I work with all kinds. I don’t judge. Only inclusive witchery going on here.”

“No, of course not. You’re just in this for the money. No questions asked.” A thought began to form in my mind. *She knows about Colton, and she knows that he’s a mercenary. What else does she know?* “Tanya, have you ever done any business with the Duquettes?” She didn’t answer right away, and I studied her face, looking for any sort of tell.

“No… The Duquettes? You sure do know a lot of people with strange names. Sorry, never heard of any Duquettes. Who are they?”

I narrowed my gaze at her. As far as I could see, she was telling the truth. “They’re from my past, and I’ve been trying to locate them.”

“Like I said, never heard of them.”

I stepped closer. “I’m going to need you to think harder. It’s really important.”

Ava pulled me to the side. “What are you doing? Who the hell are the Duquettes? We’re not here for that. We’re here to get the potion and get the hell out of here. Remember your whole ‘stop wasting time’ mantra from before? Let’s just get what we came for and go.”

“Fine, fine,” I said. Ava was right, and Tanya really didn’t seem to have the slightest idea about who the Duquettes were. “So, how much for the sedative potion?”

Tanya looked less afraid now. She slid out of the corner I’d backed her into and returned to her desk. “That depends. How much more do you need?”

“We need enough to neutralize another spell that’s giving Knox and a few others some sort of strength enhancement. Unless, of course, you can just neutralize it yourself, right here and now,” Kira said.

Tanya glared at Kira and jutted her chin out. “That would require me to admit that I’ve worked with this Knox person, and like I told you before, I don’t rat out my clients. Maybe I should cast a spell that fixes all your ears, since clearly you didn’t hear me when I said that the first time!”

I gritted my teeth, wishing that she would be more forthcoming—but it wasn’t like I could just beat the information out of her, as tempting as it sounded.

“Anyway, you’re in luck. I can make the potion.”

“Finally. Do it. We’ve already spent enough time here, and we need to get going.” I had no idea what was going on at the pack house, but even if things were all quiet on the home front at the moment, I still didn’t want this to take all day. The longer I was away from Cali, the more I longed to get back to her. If anything went down, I wanted—no, I *needed*—to be there to protect her.

“You’ve got to be joking,” Tanya said. “Listen here, big dog, it’s not like I have bottles of sedative potion just sitting around in the back collecting dust. All my spells are made to order, and they take time to make.” Tanya turned to Kira. “Haven’t you taught your little werewolf friends anything at all about how witchcraft works?”

Kira sucked her teeth. “Not all of us work the same way you do.”

Tanya reared back in faux indignation and splayed a hand across her chest. “Well *excuse* me! Sorry, if I’d known I was going to be in the presence of the boss witch in charge today, I might’ve cleaned the place up a little. I’m sorry that I wasn’t born with a silver spoon in my mouth like you obviously were! Classist much?”

Kira looked like she was about to lunge at Tanya. “Wait just a goddamn minute—”

“How. *Much?* And how long is this going to take?” I was over this, and every second we spent here was another second I wasn’t where I wanted to be—right by Cali’s side.

Tanya waved me off. “Details, details. We’ll get to the timing, and as for the cost, I can just add it to Ava’s tab.”

I balked at that, not quite wanting to be in debt to Ava. There was already enough tying me to her, and I didn’t need anything else. “That’s not going to work for me. I’ll assume Ava’s debt. So tell me—what do you want?”

# Episode 3027

Thrown by Ravi’s warning, I sent a short blast of magic right into a snowbank just as a tall figure blazed toward us on a pair of skis. They came swooshing to a stop, spraying a cloud of snow all over everyone.

After I’d wiped all the snow from my face, I took in the sight of the beautiful, athletic woman standing before us. “Vander?”

They’d pushed their snow goggles up and were now beaming at me. They weren’t even breathing hard. “Hey, Cali, how’s it going?”

“Uh, good now,” I said. I was relieved that it was Vander and not some Samara asshole here to start trouble.

“We’re fine,” Greyson said. “A little busy, preparing for something. What are you doing here? We were two seconds from attacking you.”

Vander frowned. “What do you mean? What’s going on?”

I shot Vander an apologetic smile. “We’re in a tough situation with another pack, so we’re all a little wound up.”

Vander shrugged. “You werewolves are always in tough situations, so no surprise there. I wanted to check in; how goes the search for the ashes?”

Greyson and I exchanged a glance, and I cleared my throat. “Not, uh, the best… But we’re still looking for them!” I said, trying to sound positive. With everything going on with Knox and Xavier and the Samaras, I’d somehow managed to push the ashes out of my mind for the most part. Well, that wasn’t entirely true. I still thought about them during every quiet moment I had—especially when I really got to thinking about the strange footage we’d gotten from the Vanguard palace… The person who’d taken them had been *right there*.

Vander sighed. “I had a feeling that was the case. That’s a shame.”

“Yeah, it is.” Greyson turned to face the pack, who were milling about and watching Vander with interest. “Everyone, get back to work digging those trenches!” Greyson called out. “Cali and I will be back in a minute.”

Greyson turned to me as he sent a mind link my way. *Let’s talk about this inside. I don’t want to have to explain Vander to everyone, and we need to get those trenches built.*

*Got it*, I replied as I followed Greyson and Vander back to the house.

“Wow, this is way more snow than I expected,” Vander said. “It really feels different when you’re all the way down here.”

“It kind of caught us by surprise,” I said. “I’ve never seen a snowstorm this bad.”

“Well… You might want to get used to it,” Vander said.

“What do you mean?” Whatever Vander meant, it wasn’t good. In fact, it sounded downright ominous.

Great.

“I mean that this is something that you and your packmates should get used to. In fact, it’s just the beginning.”

A chill raced down my spine. “What do you mean? The beginning of what?”

It *was* the beginning of winter, more or less, but I had a feeling that wasn’t what Vander was talking about.

We came to a stop on the porch, and Vander pointed to the snow drifts surrounding us. “All of this is a response to the unbalanced world. This isn’t just a snowstorm—far from it. This is a classic case of magic spilling out and wreaking havoc on the natural world. This isn’t normal by any stretch, and it won’t be frequent, but it will keep happening. Could get worse as time goes on. It might even spread around the world.” Vander had a faraway look in their eyes. “Could you imagine a snowstorm like this in Hawaii? Australia? The deserts of Africa? It would wreak complete havoc on our entire ecosystem.” Vander gave their head a wistful shake. “Not good. Not good at all.”

I gasped. “All of this is because of Seluna’s missing ashes?”

As if the entire Seluna situation wasn’t already bad enough, now she was the reason why we were being pummeled by snow? And it was only the *beginning*?

Vander shrugged. “When the world is out of balance like it is right now, weird shit happens. Simple as that. Seluna was a demon and not of this world. The longer she remains here, the longer all this upheaval will continue.”

“But it wasn’t our fault. We weren’t the ones who stole Seluna’s ashes—we were trying to return them!” I was starting to wonder if the person who’d stolen the ashes had any idea about the effect it would have on the world at large.

“I’m not blaming you, Cali. Nature doesn’t point fingers, after all. Nature wants only one thing. Balance.”

I nodded, wanting to feel better, but I didn’t. Vander might not have been blaming me outright, but I still felt plenty responsible for the state of things. “But I’m the one who killed the demon and left her ashes behind. It doesn’t seem fair that the whole world should suffer because of one quick decision I was forced to make,” I said. “And besides, haven’t demons died here before? What makes her so damn special?”

“That might be true, Cali, but nature isn’t about fairness. Seluna forced her way into this world; it’s not only her death to blame. But now, it’s about keeping the balance, and right now, the balance is off enough to cause all of this.” Vander waved a hand around at the snow-filled scene, spread out around us in every direction. “Snow as far as the eye can see. I can feel the wrongness of it all in the air,” Vander said in a low voice. “The world is in crisis.”

*Shit*. This was all my fault.

“Excuse us, Vander, I need to talk to Cali for a moment,” Greyson said.

Vander shrugged. “Sure, be my guest.”

“I’m sorry about all this,” I said as soon as we were on our own. “I’ve made a complete mess of things.” No matter how much I tried to help, sometimes it seemed like I only served to complicate things further.

Greyson cupped my face between his hands and pulled me close. “Stop blaming yourself, love. I’m sorry that Vander had to show up like this, but you heard what they said. You’re not to blame.” Greyson pulled me into a quick hug before holding me at arm’s length and looking into my eyes.

“There’s a part of me that knows that, but the truth is, I’m the one who killed Seluna. Me. No one else.” No matter how I turned it over in my mind, it always came back to me. I couldn’t believe that I was the catalyst for the world going haywire. It was almost too much to fathom.

“Yes, you killed Seluna, and that’s a good thing. That demon had to be stopped. Imagine what the world would be like if you *hadn’t* killed her. She probably would have raised her demon army, and we’d all be dead by now. It could have been a lot worse.” Greyson bent down and picked up a handful of snow. “At the end of the day, it’s just a snowstorm. So the world’s a little out of balance right now—we’ll just set it back. No big deal.”

“You’re being so nonchalant about it, but I don’t know if I believe that. It’s only snow right now, sure, but Vander said that this is just the beginning.”

Greyson took my hands in his and planted a kiss on my knuckles. “Look at me, Cali. We’re not going to stop looking for the ashes. We have a clue, and we’re going to follow it to wherever it leads us. We will get those ashes back.”

I sighed and looked out at the snow. What had seemed kind of beautiful before now just seemed menacing and foreboding, a reminder of the damage Seluna had done. “I hope you’re right.”

“I *am* right. We’ll return the world to its natural balance, I promise. This isn’t just your burden to carry, Cali. It belongs to all of us.”

I knew he was being nice and trying to comfort me, which was a good thing, but I still felt responsible. “Thanks, Greyson—I appreciate that. But I can’t stop wondering why I couldn’t have just killed Seluna outright without reducing her to ashes—ashes that were eventually stolen right out from under us.”

“We’re not going to figure that out today—and besides, we need to deal with one issue at a time. Our immediate problem isn’t the snowstorm. It’s that shrimpy excuse for a Samara Alpha that we need to worry about right now. As soon as that’s over, we’ll focus all of our attention on hunting down those ashes.”

“Okay,” I said. There was always so much going on, but Greyson was right. First things first—we needed to neutralize the Samara threat.

We returned to Vander, who smiled as we approached.

“Hi again, you two. So, anyway, I just dropped by to give you a heads-up. The sooner you return those ashes to the demon world, the better.”

“We’re on it. We have a clue, and we’re following it up.” I shot Greyson a glance as I said that last part, and he gave me a reassuring smile. “But in the meantime, what else should we expect? Typhoons? Tornadoes?”

“Yes and yes, and maybe something else entirely. It’s really anyone’s guess,” Vander said flippantly.

I was starting to get frustrated. I appreciated their warning, but they were coming at us with yet another problem, and with no solution in sight. “I don’t get it, Vander. You’re all knowing, right? The Keeper of All Nature and all that. So why can’t you just locate the ashes for us?”

# Episode 3028

My body started shaking as I waited for Vander to answer. Could they find the ashes? They were being cryptic enough about everything the ashes might cause in the world, but you’d think as the Keeper of All Nature they might have a general idea. Besides, we needed all the help we could get…

I really freaking hoped they were in a helpful mood, because all I felt right now was useless. We’d lost the ashes and couldn’t seem to find them, but perhaps with Vander here, this almost impossible task would become less of a nightmare.

When Vander’s gaze locked with mine, though, I realized that my quest was still doomed.

“I’m sorry to say I cannot interfere with something like this,” Vander said, sighing ruefully. “As ever, I have to stay a neutral party in the activities of mortals, wolves, and all other beings. I’m more a guard than a soldier. Even warning you, I’m pushing the boundaries of what I’m supposed to.”

At this point, I didn’t think of Vander as a guard—more like an extremely glorified messenger. Why did Vander need all that power when they didn’t even use it?

“So you have no clue, zero, about the ashes? No pointers to give us?” I asked impatiently.

“I have no idea where they are, Caliana.” With a comforting squeeze of my hand, Vander added, “If I were able to search for the ashes for you, I would. I hope you believe me when I say that.”

I pressed my lips together. “I do.”

Eyes growing suddenly intense, Vander leaned forward. “I know that this isn’t an easy task, and it’s not one that should have been put on your shoulders—”

“I’ll say,” I grumbled.

“—but now that you’ve been chosen, you cannot fail.” Vander raised their index finger, still staring me down. “All of nature is depending on those ashes returning to where they belong.”

“Right,” I said, feeling a little sick. “So no pressure?”

Vander snorted, their earlier intensity fading. “You’re always a hoot, Caliana.”

“Nothing like an imminent apocalypse to get a girl joking,” I said, cringing.

I felt Greyson’s hand on my shoulder, squeezing.

“This isn’t just Cali’s task alone,” he said, his voice even. “The Redwood pack will fully support her every step of the way.”

I looked up at Greyson’s serious face as Vander said, “Indeed. At least there’s that.”

*Which might just mean that we’re all going to die*, I added internally with a wince.

“Anyway, I’ll leave you to your task.” Vander looked up at the sky. “Meanwhile, I hope you’re prepared to weather the rest of the storm.”

I blinked. “What is that supposed to—”

*NOPE, too late!*

Vander was already skiing away—with a whole lot of swagger, I might add.

“What did Vander mean by *the rest* of the storm?” I asked a serious-looking Greyson.

My mate cleared his throat, looking up at the cloudy sky. “I don’t know. Sometimes words mean things, and sometimes they don’t. No need for anyone to freak out.”

I turned to him slowly, eyebrows arched. “Did you give me that bullshit response just to de-escalate *my* imminent freak-out, Greyson?”

He looked innocent. “No. Maybe? Are you feeling better?”

“I’m fine.” I huffed. “But we have no time for chitchat. If the storm is coming back, which it obviously is because the literal Keeper of All Nature just fucking told us so, we need to finish these trenches in case Knox tries to strike.”

I was flailing around like an angry squid, and Greyson sighed. “Love, I don’t think digging is your forte in any way, or—”

“I know what I’m about!” I stormed off—*storm, get it? Oh my god, we’re all gonna die!*—and headed back to the others. I picked up a shovel and started shoveling with a vengeance.

*No, but seriously*, I thought, stewing over my conversation with Vander, *I* cannot *believe that those damn ashes are literally affecting the climate of the whole world! I literally started a supernatural climate change!*

I used to think that billionaires who burned down rainforests would be the ones to bring about the end of the world, but no. It was me! Snowstorms were no fucking joke, either—what if the climate madness kept getting worse, spreading all over? Many towns wouldn’t have the infrastructure to deal with something like that.

People could get stuck out there, get hypothermia, lose limbs, die… If anyone got hurt because of this magical weather freakishness, I would never forgive myself. Never. I would die unforgiven, I—

I was stabbing the snow with enough menace that the shovel slammed into a rock and broke in half.

“Fine,” I hissed at it. “Be that way!”

I muttered the words through panting breaths, my whole body shaking. I could feel pressure climbing inside my chest, my throat, begging to be released. *No*. I couldn’t explode now—I needed to be strong for the pack, to prove that I had what it took to be Luna, to make Greyson proud, to make Xavier proud.

*Relax, Cali! Deep breaths, relax, it’s fine, it’s…*

It wasn’t fine. The pressure kept building—from my heaving chest through to my trembling fingertips, and suddenly, I couldn’t hold it in. I made no sound, but my magic *did* scream on the inside. It burst out of my hands when I held them up over the ground. I closed my eyes but could somehow still see. It was an out-of-body experience, like I was there to observe myself, as if I were a spectator of my own power.

It was terrifying.

It was *exhilarating*.

When I opened my eyes again, the pressure was gone, and there was a huge divot in the ground, a jagged but deep trench.

*Oh my god, did I just do it? Was I just useful?*

Breathing through my nose, I was shaking my head to clear it when I caught sight of Ravi, Rishika, Sage, and Zainab staring at me. I told myself to be cool and shrugged.

“I guess this one’s done. Sorry it’s a little bumpy,” I said.

Ravi nodded emphatically, wide-eyed. *He better not be worried about me…*

“That’s, um—it’s actually perfect,” he said quickly.

I nodded with determination. “All right, where should I make the next one?”

The four of them exchanged another worried look—that was actually getting on my nerves—but then I felt Greyson’s hand on my arm. “Cali, we should talk.”

Not “love.” *Cali*. His expression was strict enough that I momentarily didn’t protest as he pulled me through the trees to a more private space. When I realized he’d taken me away from the others, probably to coddle me, I yanked my arm away.

I did NOT need coddling, dammit!

“Hey, I was working!” I said. “What’s your problem?”

He stepped into my space, tilting his head. There was something so authoritative about him right then that my first reaction was to swallow roughly. I realized he’d been indulging me earlier, and now he was done playing.

“You need to stop repressing your feelings about this, Cali,” he said. “I can tell you’re upset. *Everyone* can tell you’re upset.”

I scoffed, crossing my arms. “I said I’m *fine*!”

He raised an eyebrow. I scowled. Sighing, he reached out to take my hand, his motion gentle. Small snowflakes were starting to fall around him, settling in his hair and lashes, and that wasn’t fair at all. He looked like some sort of majestic snow god.

*How* could I continue to be unreasonably rude to a majestic snow god?

“I promised that we’d find the ashes together, and I intend to keep that promise,” he told me in a low tone. “I’ve always done my best to protect you, and I’m not going to stop now. I’ll never stop being there for you, love.”

The gentle understanding in Greyson’s face and voice, all that care, tickled the back of my throat. A different kind of pressure built up inside me—this time behind my eyes, and then…

I started crying.

All the stress and fear took over as I wept like the annoying little loser I was. But Greyson didn’t seem to mind—he just pulled me into a tight hug, running a hand over my back.

He was exceptionally good at comforting people.

When I pulled back and faced him again, his expression was soft. He wiped away my remaining tears and muttered, “As soon as we can, I’m going to do everything in my power to find those ashes. You believe me, right?”

I nodded, sniffling as I lifted onto my toes to kiss his cheek. He smiled, and it was so gorgeous and devastating, I felt like my heart wanted to break right the hell out of my chest. I wrapped my arms around his neck, still on my toes, kissing his lips. I kissed him with every emotion that bubbled up inside me, the good and the bad, and he responded to it, holding me tight, making me woozy with every—

*CRACK!*

Thunder crackled above, and we broke off, panting. When I looked up, I realized that the snow was so thick around us that I couldn’t even see the forest anymore.

*Oh shit*, I thought. *The storm* is *back.*

# Episode 3029

**Violet**

*What are you talking about?* I asked my mate. *Ambushed by who?*

Charlie’s wolf stared at the ground. *Werewolves.* *I’m not sure if there’s one or more. The snow’s already covering the prints. But I can definitely smell remnants of their scent, and they’re not Redwoods.*

I walked up next to Charlie’s wolf, leaning down toward the spot that he’d been sniffing.

*You’re right*, I told Charlie. *This scent doesn’t belong to anyone from our pack.*

I nudged Artemis, and she nodded in understanding, her lips a thin line. She pulled her bow from her shoulder, holding it at the ready.

“These assholes won’t know what hit them,” Artemis said under her breath, her eyes sharp as she scanned the area.

Charlie shook his head, though. *The snowfall is so fast, it’s covering the tracks. We won’t be able to follow them.*

I thought for a moment. *We should at least do some reconnaissance of the area to see if we can find any more clues as to who these wolves are and where they went. This is still Redwood land—if the wolves doubled back toward the pack house, then we need to be ready.*

Charlie nodded gravely. *That sounds like something a sneaky coward would do, so it would fit well with Knox’s MO*. He glanced over at Artemis. *I’ll fill in the Fae.*

Charlie shifted back to human and explained my idea to Artemis in a low voice. She watched him, her gaze steely. I hoped the next wolf she encountered had already signed their will, because her face spelled out the words “bloody murder.”

“Let’s meet back here in fifteen minutes, whether we find anything or not,” Artemis said.

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Splitting up from your team was never easy. I was a good fighter, I knew that, but patrolling and investigating were two very different things. I wanted to be helpful, to find something to report to the pack, but it proved to be extra difficult with all the snow covering the area.

I was proud of Charlie’s skills at tracking, though—it came naturally to him, just like hunting. He’d joke that it was all part of his bloodline, but that actually had to be true. Plus, despite being extremely problematic, he’d admitted to me that hunter school had helped him with his skills.

Anyway, bottom line, I wasn’t mediocre at tracking, and I also had Charlie, who was very good at it, so I could work with that kind of arrangement.

*Did you find anything?* I mind linked, looking around at the white forest.

He sounded far away when he replied. *No, but I’m going to check over this ridge.*

No way in hell I’d ever think to check out a *ridge*.

*Violet!*

Charlie’s voice burst inside my head with an intensity that made the mate bond shiver. Charlie was in danger, and a burst of adrenaline coursed through me as I raced toward him.

*Charlie, I’m coming! Are you hurt? Did you fall? Charlie!*

For a second, he didn’t speak, and I just followed his scent and the energy of the mate bond throbbing through the air. But then he said again, *Violet!*

He sounded much closer, and I rushed forward, my heart pounding as I mind linked back to ask him how he was, what had happened, if one of the Samaras had caught him. My tirade was cut off when I came to a giant tree with big gnarled roots still sticking out of the snow.

The scent of my mate’s blood was rich in the air, making me freeze.

I kept quiet, forcing my breathing to calm as I looked around. I half-expected to see an enemy wolf jump out of the thickening snow to attack me.

*Charlie?* I called. I sounded shaky in my head.

No response.

But then, suddenly, a whimper.

I gasped, racing to the other side of the tree. The land dipped down, and if I hadn’t been looking at the ground to spot my mate, I might’ve missed the steep drop. My head started throbbing when I spotted Charlie just below me, lying on his side, his leg at an unnatural angle. There were some cuts from the fall as well. The scent of blood was even more intense here.

*Charlie!*

His wolf whined again as he stared up at me. *I’m right here, sunshine.*

My throat closed up, and I scrambled down to him. On this side of the tree, I could see way more of the roots as they twisted around to form a strange kind of alcove. The snow was getting so heavy that I could barely see two feet in front of me, but Charlie’s scent was enough to guide me.

*Are you having any difficulty breathing? How are you feeling?* I asked him, my voice cracking.

*I’m gonna be okay—I just fell, and it hurts like hell*, he replied.

Worry tightened around my heart. I finally reached him, bumping his nose with mine before saying, *We should get into the shelter of the roots so I can see your wounds. I’ll help you stand, okay?*

His wolf nodded, and I lowered my head for him to steady himself. Then he leaned on me as he hobbled toward the cave-like structure. The moment we got out of the snow, Charlie fell back with a hiss.

*Try to stand still*, I said soothingly, nuzzling his leg.

He let out a loud yelp at the contact, his wolf shuddering.

*Yep, that’s broken*, I said, cringing.

Charlie groaned*. I can feel it healing, but it’s slow.*

Alarms went off in my head. *The snow is getting worse, though—we can’t stay out here like sitting ducks for Knox and the Samaras to find.*

Charlie tried to stand but hissed, falling back down. The sight of him made me wince, the idea of him being in pain making me feel wounded as well. I couldn’t let anything bad happen to my mate. I needed to protect him, if it was the last thing I did. We had to get out of here, right now, but Charlie couldn’t heal, and I didn’t know how I could ever—

I got an idea.

*I’ll try to speed the healing process along*, I told my mate.

Charlie frowned. *What’s that supposed to—*

He yelped again the second I licked his wound. He flinched away, but the space was too small for him to put distance between us.

*Charlie, I promise it’ll help*,I said. *Trust me.*

Charlie’s breaths were ragged. With clenched teeth, he said, *Okay. Do it.*

I licked the wound again and again. *God*, I hoped I was doing this right—we couldn’t get stuck out here! Even though this shelter was good for now, it wouldn’t protect us from a full-on snowstorm, not to mention the enemy wolves that could come sniffing around now that Charlie was too hurt to fight.

I couldn’t let that happen.

After all the madness we’d gone through with the hunters and Zachery, I refused to let my mate be in danger.

It wasn’t an option.

*I think…* Charlie’s voice was ragged in my head. *I think it’s working, Violet. It doesn’t hurt as much.*

The relief I felt was a godsend. I kept licking the wound, taking in Charlie’s scent. The gesture was oddly intimate and primal, dipped in feeling. I focused on the sensation of it—the intimacy, the thought of how much I adored Charlie, and I hoped so hard that the mate bond would pull through and help us both.

*I think it’s better*, Charlie said gruffly a moment later.

I stepped back, as if breaking through a fog, the link between us vibrating with both our scents. I looked down at the wound. It had stopped bleeding.

*You should test it*, I said.

He shifted back to human and stood up. Taking a deep breath, he took a small step. No wincing. He stared at me, grinning. “I can walk on it!”

I was hit by a massive wave of relief. Shifting back to human too, I practically ran to him and gave him a tight hug. “You’re gonna be okay!”

He chuckled in my hair, whispering, “Thank you. I love you so much.”

I sniffled, facing him. I was about to kiss him when a familiar scent invaded my nose. We both spun around to see Artemis hanging out by the entrance, her eyebrows arched.

“Finally found you two. I thought you were in trouble!” she exclaimed. “I cannot believe you just took a break to smooch!”

I blushed. “We didn’t—”

“I thought you both were—”

“Artemis.” I cut her off before she could get derailed, pointing at Charlie’s still raw leg wound. “Charlie fell. I was licking the gash to help him heal.”

Artemis blinked, realizing. “Okay, that makes more sense,” she conceded. “Now, let’s get moving—the storm is really bad, and if we wait too long we won’t be able to find the pack house again.”

A few moments later, we were out of the shelter, and both Charlie and I had shifted. I was about to tell Artemis to get on my back when Charlie mind linked, *They’re here.*

My blood ran cold.

I gazed around and spotted two distinctly wolf-like shapes through the thick snowfall. I bumped my head against Artemis’s shoulder. She instantly climbed onto my back. All three of us started running away, Charlie in the front. The snow was getting thicker, so much harder to navigate. My breathing was heavy as I watched Charlie fight through every step.

And then there was a howl in the distance.

And then another one, much closer.

*Stay behind me, I won’t let them touch you.*

Charlie’s voice vibrated in my head, and I shuddered.

“We have to go faster!” Artemis exclaimed.

But it was too late.

Suddenly, two wolves emerged from the snow, and we were face-to-face with members of the Samara pack.

# Episode 3030

**Xavier**

I scowled at Tanya. “How exactly do you expect Ava’s debt to be paid back?”

Tanya offered a lazy smile. *Fucking witches, man…* “There are many ways to pay a witch, as I’m sure you know.”

My mind flashed back to Big Mac taking out Jay’s eye. I sure as fuck wasn’t about to let Tanya do that to Ava. Not only because my wolf would go on a rampage if that happened—he unfortunately found Ava’s eyes to be quite pretty—but also because this heathen thought she could toy with us. With *me*, an Alpha werewolf.

My aggravation only grew.

“You told me that I had time before I had to pay my debt,” Ava said through clenched teeth.

“That was before you showed up again with a mercenary, demanding more potion,” Tanya said.

“First of all, watch your tone,” I snapped. “Second, I said I’ll take on Ava’s debt for her. How much money do you want?”

Tanya scoffed. “For a potion like this, I don’t want mere money.”

Eyebrows arched, I looked around her shabby office. “Really? You don’t need money?”

Tanya’s face twisted into a frown. “Ava’s debt was a memory.”

My eyes narrowed. “How does that even work?”

Tanya stared at Ava. “I will just choose a memory to take from her.”

The thought gave me the heebie-jeebies.

“Why the fuck would you want a *memory*?” I asked Tanya. When she shrugged, I turned to Kira. “Have you heard of this happening? Trading a memory to a witch?”

Kira’s expression was grim. “It’s definitely been done. I’ve never exchanged memories for magic, but I know others who have done it.”

I glanced at Ava. She seemed pale. Shaking my head, I asked, Kira, “Does it cause any issues or damage?”

“It’s pretty safe to do,” Kira said.

Pretty fucking creepy was what it was, but anyway. Better than an eye.

I turned to Tanya. “Fine. I’ll take on the debt.”

Tanya looked between us, eyebrows arched. “Agreed.”

“So, for both batches of potion, you’re going to take two memories?” I asked.

Tanya got this shifty look on her face that made me want to do something to terrify the shit out of her. “I normally would, but you two are mates…”

My wolf growled. Ava stared at the ground. I glared at Tanya. “And? What does that have to do with anything?”

“What I want is a shared memory between two mates. It’s more… potent,” Tanya said.

I had to suppress the urge to growl. “How do you know we’re mates?”

“I can read your auras. You’ll be surprised what a witch can see with a little nudge to lower her inhibitions.” She shot a look at the empty liquor bottles as if they were a great help, instead of a one-way ticket to bad decisions. “So, do we have a deal?”

Paying this witch with any kind of memory I shared with Ava would mean delving into my messy, complicated past with her. Ava and I had just gotten onto steady ground, and I hated the possibility that we could ruin it by bringing up all the dirt and baggage between us. The Redwoods still needed her if we were going to have any chance of fighting Knox, so keeping things smooth would be best. Not to mention I’d just gotten back onto solid ground with Cali, too.

This whole thing was just not good.

“Can I just give you money?” I asked Tanya. “Name your price—I can pay you enough to last you a year.”

The witch shook her head. “Nope. I want a memory. And I want one even more now that it’s clear how reluctant you are to give it.”

*Fuck*, I thought. *I just trapped myself, like an asshole.*

I glared at her. “I liked it better when you were scared of me.”

Tanya rolled her eyes, and Ava nudged me. When I faced her, she mind linked, *Sorry, but I don’t think we’re going to get anywhere if we don’t just pay her.*

I sighed, glancing at Kira. She looked pissed off, peering at Tanya. But she didn’t stop me from doing this, so I guessed that was all the reassurance I’d ever get.

“Okay,” I told Tanya. “We’ll give you one shared memory, but make it quick.”

Tanya grinned. “Lovely!” She rubbed her hands together, gesturing to the two chairs facing the cluttered desk. “Take a seat!”

Begrudgingly, Ava and I obeyed. After sitting down, I looked over at Kira and said, “Make sure Tanya doesn’t do anything shady.”

Kira nodded, crossing her arms like a guard. I appreciated her fervor. She was the only thing standing between us and a drunk witch wiping out our brains. Probably.

I didn’t fucking like this.

“Sit still,” Tanya said, coming around behind us. She placed a hand on both our heads. “And now, just relax…”

I scoffed. How the fuck was I supposed to relax with a witch rooting around in my head? I opened my mouth to tell her just that when suddenly—

Darkness.

My stomach dropped, no ground under me, no air, no sound.

But a moment later, when I opened my eyes…

There was light everywhere.

Ava and I were by a pond, and I was lying down, my head in her lap. The day was warm. The air smelled like the spring, like flowers, like her. We weren’t even speaking, just sitting there together.

I glanced over to my side and saw a yellow flower poking out of the high grass. *Huh*. That was pretty. I reached out and snatched it, holding it out to Ava like some sort of weird little prize that I knew she’d love. She looked down at me, smiling as she took it, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

“You know this is a weed, right?” she teased.

I pretended to be offended, just to see her laugh. “I see you’re just set on ruining the moment.”

She laughed, shaking her head. Her fingertips, feather soft, traced my cheek. “That’s impossible.”

I grinned, sitting up. Leaning closer, I glanced between her eyes and her lips. The sun gave her a glow that had my heart racing.

“Then let’s not have it end.”

She offered me another smile that made my stomach twitch. And then she leaned in, her mouth a breath away from mine…

The darkness returned.

The feeling of warmth, of belonging, of calm slipped away. I reached for it, fighting to hold on to that time in my life, fighting to recall this pure, innocent love that was rooted deep within me, the sappy, happy memories that I used to avoid thinking about.

And now, one of them was pulled away from me.

When I opened my eyes again, it was with a gasp.

I was back in the cluttered office.

My heart felt heavy, aching with that same feeling of peace I’d left behind. The lingering glow of it made my whole body tingle. It was the echo of what I’d once felt, the sweetness of a first love that was now dead and gone, yet the ghost of it still haunted me.

Even if I had decimated the emotion into a million bloody pieces.

When I turned to Ava, I saw her wipe at her eyes. *Really*, *now?* *Crying*? Forcing myself not to wince, I looked away.

This was so fucked.

“That was great,” Tanya said, her voice satisfied. “This memory is going to be very powerful indeed.” Sitting at her desk again, she held up a vial filled with glowing liquid.

That must be our memory. I could still feel the moment in my own mind, so she must have essentially made a copy of it. My hands turned into fists at the realization. “What are you even planning to do with that?”

Tanya smiled like a shark. “That’s not something that concerns you.” She locked the vial away in a safe behind her desk, her movements quick and sharp. She faced us and steepled her fingers. “Now, let’s get down to business.”

I ignored the way my heart still ached, as if longing for what it had lost but could still recall, despite everything.

Refusing to look at Ava and all the things she used to mean to me, I stared at Tanya.

“Now we want the potion that you made for Ava,” I told the witch. “As much of it as you can make.”

Tanya nodded. She took out what looked like a chemistry set with lots of tubes and vials and liquids. Then she pulled out a metal lockbox that contained two dozen vials of different colored liquids. I watched her move as she took every step—she wasn’t even fucking measuring things as she made the potion.

The silence in the room was deafening. I still didn’t even glance at Ava.

Minutes later, Tanya picked up a flask and held it under the bottom of the set to let all of the liquid pour into it. It filled up the flask quickly, every drop falling straight in. She held it out to me with a grin. “Here you go.”

I frowned. “That was quick.”

Tanya shrugged. “I know what I’m doing.”

I took the flask, still frowning. “Thanks. I guess. This had better fucking work.”

Tanya snorted. “You’re welcome. And it will.”

As we all stood up to leave, she picked up another liquor bottle. I had no doubts about what she’d be doing next. After Kira and Ava had left, I paused by the door, facing Tanya again. “Do you ever work with vampires?”

My question had to do with the witch and vampire scent we’d tracked on Redwood territory. I didn’t know how I’d expected Tanya to react, but her shrug took me by surprise.

“Yeah,” she said. “I work with anyone who will pay me.”

“Have you left the city at all lately?” I probed.

Tanya snorted. “I haven’t left the city in years. Nature is disgusting. Pollen everywhere.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. Should I trust her? She looked calm either way, and I doubted she’d be such a smooth liar while drunk. Shaking my head, I stepped outside.

The moment we were out of the building, I looked up the sky. It was snowing again.

I still hadn’t made eye contact with Ava.

Focusing on Kira only, I said, “We have to get home before the storm gets worse.”

Kira nodded sharply. “Of course.”

She took both Ava’s and my hands and closed her eyes, concentrating. I followed her lead, waiting for the familiar swooping motion of the blip to hit.

A minute passed, and nothing.

I started to feel the cold of the snow seeping through my thin coat. I opened my eyes to stare at a pale-looking Kira.

“What’s happening?” I asked impatiently. “Why aren’t we going?”

Kira swallowed audibly, wide-eyed. “It’s not working. I can’t use my magic.”

# Episode 3031

“The storm’s only going to keep getting worse. We have to make sure everyone’s back inside the house,” Greyson said in a louder voice as the wind picked up.

“Hopefully I’ll survive in the meantime,” I said wryly, wrapping my arms around myself, my teeth chattering in the cold. Greyson snorted, opening up his coat and pulling me right into it.

*Oh*, I thought. *Much better!*

I nestled close to him as we briskly walked back to the area where the trenches were located. The others were already packing up the shovels, definitely done digging for the day, and Greyson called, “Leave behind anything you can’t carry! Getting inside is our priority!”

The wind and the snow got worse in just seconds, and I could feel the cold piercing through my clothes, my skin. I was so thankful for Greyson’s body heat and the ease with which he pulled me forward.

We all trudged through the snow—which was now coming up to my thighs, by the way—while Ravi kept shouting things like, “Did you see how quickly the snow piled up?” and, “This storm is unreal…”

*Gee, Ravi*, I thought, my anxious thoughts going back to my conversation with Vander. *Rub it in, why don’t you?*

The moment we were inside, Greyson said, “Ravi, Sage, bring in more firewood to dry out in case we need it.”

“Oh my goodness, are you kids okay?” Mom and Dad rushed over, Torin following, all three of them wearing matching worried expressions.

“We thought you’d get stuck outside and turn into popsicles!” Torin exclaimed with a gasp.

“We’re fine,” I reassured them. “It’s going to be fine.”

*… Though not entirely fine until we find the ashes*, I added mentally.

I shuddered, but thankfully everybody must have thought it had to do with the cold, and not the growing sense of dread inside me. Fun times! Dad wrapped a blanket around my shoulders, Mom said she’d turn up the thermostat, and Torin said something about making hot chocolate.

At the same time, Greyson was directing everybody to prepare the house—to get candles and clean water and other things I never would’ve remembered without writing them down.

“Is there enough gas in the generator to see us through another storm?” Greyson asked Zainab, who replied in the same serious tone.

I tuned everything and everyone out just to keep my shit together, and walked up to a window. The snow was thick. I swallowed, thinking about Xavier. He was in the city—things were probably better there, right? Like, we usually got a lot more snowfall here.

*Plus, he’s with Kira*, I reminded myself. *They can blip back as soon as they’re done, and they can always find shelter in the city.*

My thoughts were joined by a frown the second I realized that that would mean Xavier having to stay in a hotel with *Ava*. Though it wasn’t like I could do anything about that right now, was it?

*I trust Xavier*, I told myself. *I trust him.*

Either way, I didn’t have the luxury of obsessing over him when we had to make sure that everyone from the pack was safely inside the house. At the same time, we had to keep an eye out just in case the Samaras did something completely fucking stupid, like try to attack in the middle of a snowstorm.

*Because that sounds exactly like Knox.* I huffed. *He’s such a—*

I gasped, my train of thought crashing when I noticed shadows approaching from the edge of the forest. Those had better not be goddamn Samaras…

“Greyson!” I called. “There’s someone outside!”

Greyson, Zainab, and Rishika all rushed over to join me by the window. Greyson stood the closest to me, his arm brushing with mine. The heat of him, his mere presence, was grounding.

“Great,” Zainab grumbled. “So much for all the work we did on our trenches. The snow will fill them up and the enemy will cruise straight past them!”

“It’s not the enemy,” Greyson said, his eyes dark as he stared outside. “*Look*.”

The shadows solidified to reveal Charlie and Violet, with Artemis on Violet’s back.

“Artemis!” I ran to the front door to fling it open. The three of them rushed into the house. Artemis stumbled back when I threw my arms around her, hugging her tight.

“Oh my gods, Cali, I can’t breathe!” She shooed me away as if I were a fly—so rude!—and griped, “By the way, was anyone going to mention there were more trenches? We practically face-planted into one.”

“Sorry… I might have accelerated the trench creation process…”

“So you almost killed me,” Artemis deadpanned.

Huffing, I smacked my sister’s arm just as Mom arrived, wrapping us both in her arms while telling us how worried she’d been. Despite the fact that my sister was occasionally annoying, I was beyond ecstatic to have her and my entire family here, protected, right along with the pack.

“Shh, you’re gonna be okay.” Violet’s voice pierced through my thoughts. I noticed that Charlie was still in wolf form, half-limping as Violet pated his side.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, moving toward them just as Torin appeared as well.

“He had a bit of a fall,” Violet said nervously, looking between Torin and me. “The wound is still healing.”

“That’s nothing, I’ll treat the break and he’ll be as good as new.” Torin pointed upstairs. “Charlie, you’ll be most comfortable in your room. Should I ask Greyson to carry you? Because I definitely can’t…”

Torin trailed off when he saw Charlie limping toward the stairs.

“Okay, then! Let’s do this.” Torin nodded decisively, following the wolf.

“Why don’t you go upstairs and get some clothes on to warm up? A hot shower would help, too,” I told Violet.

Violet shook her head, taking a shuddery breath. “I have to tell you all something first.”

“What?” Rishika asked, offering Violet a plush blanket, warm from the fireplace.

“We ran into Zeke and Hector,” Violet said, wrapping the throw around herself.

“And what did they want?” Greyson’s voice was grave behind me.

Violet shook her head. “It wasn’t like that. They were being nice.”

Rishika raised an eyebrow. “Nice?”

“As nice as the Samaras can be, I guess. They were warning us,” Violet said quietly.

I glanced out the window, back toward the woods, a twinge of fear pinching my stomach.

Greyson glowered. “What kind of warning?”

“They didn’t outright say it,” Violet said. “They seemed… I don’t know, kind of torn between their loyalty to the Samara pack and their disapproval of Knox as Alpha.”

“Zeke never liked Knox,” Rishika said, nodding.

“The two of them implied that we should use the storm to prepare ourselves.” Violet looked up at Greyson, wide-eyed. “Because once the snow is gone, the Samaras will be on the move.”

*Oh, great! This is just GREAT!* I screamed inside my head, my hands shaking.

Greyson growled, low and ominous. “If it’s a battle they want, that’s what they’re gonna get.” His head snapped toward Rishika. “Make sure everything’s ready for the attack. As soon as the storm is over, we’ll be expecting them.”

I watched, heart pounding, as Rishika nodded and headed off, Artemis in tow.

The Seluna nightmare had barely finished, and with her ashes out in the open, we didn’t exactly have closure there. But either way, yet another war was heading to our doorstep. Again.

I had expected it. I’d seen it coming, obvious as it was, but that didn’t mean I wanted to fucking accept it.

*Why does it have to be like this?* I wondered, my throat tightening.

“Everyone, listen up!” Greyson clapped his hands, his gaze steely as he scanned the room. “After Rishika’s briefing, I want the whole pack to rest. Don’t exert yourselves unnecessarily. We need to be at full strength to take on the Samaras, especially if they’re using a magical booster. We all saw what they can do, and it’s not pretty.”

Everybody fell silent, the tension thick in the air.

But then:

“Is this really the only way?”

My voice was soft, breakable. Greyson stared at me. “Cali, we can’t just let Knox roam free. You and I have talked about this again and again, and it’s not a—”

“But why should it come down to a battle?” I asked. “Hector and Zeke reached out to us, and that means some of the Samaras disagree with Knox’s warmongering. The two of them risked a lot to even hint at a warning to Violet and Charlie, so it—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Greyson said in an even tone, shaking his head. “We can’t depend on there being wolves other than Hector and Zeke who disagree with Knox and are willing to do something about it. Knox is erratic because of the unknown booster he’s taking, but ultimately we have no idea what Knox is doing or saying to the other Samaras to keep their loyalty. And regardless, Knox and his cronies alone have already proven to be a threat.”

I suppressed a shudder at the memory of Tanner attacking me on Knox’s orders.

“Whatever Knox is taking right now has made him and everyone closest to him stronger, faster, and much more unpredictable.” Greyson looked around the pack. “He needs to be stopped.”

“Has Xavier checked in at all about his mission to see the witch? Maybe he’ll have some good news for us?” I asked Greyson after every pack member had headed off to their posts.

I was torn between hope and smothering, suffocating worry.

“Let me check,” Greyson said, reaching for his pocket. He frowned when he saw his phone’s screen.

I leaned over him, noticing a bunch of missed calls. “Has Xavier been calling?”

“No,” Greyson said slowly. “It’s… Maren.”

The moment he said his ex’s name, I almost choked on my own spit. “Why on *earth* would Maren be calling you?”

# Episode 3032

**Greyson**

I realized I’d never explained what was going on with Maren to Cali. I obviously hadn’t kept it a secret on purpose, I’d just never found the time for it when I had Knox to deal with, and the ashes, and then there was Cali getting almost murdered and/or turned into a wolf thrown into the mix as well.

It was a lot*.*

“Well?” Cali asked, crossing her arms over her chest. Was she jealous? She really couldn’t be jealous right now. I’d thought she was too worried about everything to be jealous.

Then again, Cali was notorious for feeling many things at once.

And then exploding.

“There might be an issue with Fenrir,” I replied honestly.

Cali’s expression was unreadable. Anything related to Fenrir brought back memories of what she and I had gone through, all the stress and the genetic testing debacle, until we’d finally had it confirmed that I wasn’t Fenrir’s dad.

My dream of starting a family was with Cali, and Cali only, but I couldn’t help but feel a protectiveness over Fenrir. He was a good kid.

“What happened?” Cali asked, her voice calm. “Is he okay?”

“His entitled asshole of a dad wants to move and take him with him. Maren doesn’t want to be parted from the kid, obviously, so—”

“*What?* That’s horrible!” Cali said. “Wait, how do you even know all this?”

I still couldn’t read her expression, so I rushed to add, “Maren told me when I called her to indirectly inquire about the theft of Seluna’s ashes. I’d asked if she had any idea about anyone from our common past wanting revenge on me. She doesn’t really have a social network to depend on, so she ended up reaching out to me. Not everyone knows about all the issues between wolves and Fae. It’s just…” I paused. “Me, I guess.”

Cali broke eye contact, fiddling with her hands as she nodded slowly. Was she mad at me? No, she couldn’t be mad at me, could she? I hadn’t really done anything but, like—well, I guess if I were in her shoes, I wouldn’t want her to have a really close friendship with one of her exes. Would I? Outside of the whole *due destini* problem.

But this friendship was platonic, and Cali knew that. But feeling uncomfortable wasn’t out of the question, and I would never want to inadvertently hurt my mate because I had some sort of emotional bond with—

“What are we going to do?” Cali finally said, interrupting my internal rambling. “We have to make sure Fenrir is okay.”

I breathed slowly, relieved by her reaction. Of course my girl would prioritize Fenrir’s well-being over everything else.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “Werewolves are very protective of their kids.”

With Silas being an exception, obviously.

“So it’s kind of hard to completely disregard Aiden’s desire to keep Fenrir somewhere close,” I added.

Cali looked confused. “We care about Aiden’s feelings, then?”

I scoffed, “No way. It’s just that Aiden’s feelings make sense, that’s all. But the idea of Fenrir being taken away from his loving mother just because Aiden has decided he wants to play house isn’t acceptable.”

Cali nodded. “For sure. You’d better call Maren back—it’s weird that she didn’t leave a voicemail after all those calls.”

I leaned down and brushed my lips over hers. “Thank you for this, love. I’m lucky to have you.”

“I know,” Cali said casually, sliding her hands up my chest. “I’m the best.”

I smirked. “Especially when you encourage me to call my ex…”

“Don’t get used to it,” she said, chuckling at my teasing. It felt good to get through to her like this, even though I knew she was freaking out about the ashes, and Knox, and everything, ever.

I leaned down to kiss her again, but she covered my mouth with her index finger. “Call Maren, and I’ll go help my mom and dad in the kitchen. They said something about making food for everyone while there’s still electricity.”

“True,” I said. “The pack needs to eat and build their strength if Knox is going to strike soon.”

Both our smiles had faded now, reality sinking in. Cali stroked my arm before walking away, and I just watched her, my chest aching. I’d have done anything to protect her.

Anything.

I just hoped there was no more trouble around the corner right now. Taking a deep breath, I called Maren back. I told myself that I shouldn’t be worried—that Fenrir was fine, and Maren was only calling because she’d heard about a revenge plot against me.

She picked up on the first ring. “Thank god, Greyson. Are you coming?”

My earlier thoughts were shattered. This had to be bad, and Maren sounded like she was about to cry. Before I could reply, she spoke up again.

“I still can’t find them,” she said, her voice cracking. “Greyson, I swear to god, if he just grabbed my son and took off—I have no idea what I’ll do!”

“The storm is really bad out here; I can’t even leave the house,” I told her. There was no need for her to know about Knox’s imminent attack—it would help with nothing. “Have you called anyone else?”

“I’ve been calling Aiden all afternoon, and he’s not picking up,” Maren said with a sob that broke my goddamn heart. “I’m so scared. I have no idea what Aiden will do next. What if he just decides I can’t see Fenrir again, or—”

“Hey, hey,” I said, fighting to comfort her. “He can’t do that. The kid will ask questions. It’s possible that they’re safe at Aiden’s apartment in Portland and they just don’t have good service.”

“I can’t just sit around waiting and hoping,” Maren said harshly.

“Aiden is an asshole, but not to Fenrir,” I told her. “You were the one who told me he loves the kid—that’s the reason why you’ve allowed him to spend time with Fenrir, right?”

Maren whispered, “Yes. But this is fucked up anyway. How dare he do this to me?”

Anger made my jaw clench. I wasn’t gonna let it win right now. “I know, Maren. I hate that I have to tell you this, but don’t go out in this storm. It’s too dangerous.”

“You can’t ask me to wait!” Maren snapped. “I’ll do anything to find my son!”

I knew she was right.

I knew that everything I said was bullshit when her kid was missing.

And then, it hit me.

“Maybe there is something we can do,” I said.

“What?”

“We can reach out to some of the other packs—my friend Mace,” I said. “We can put out feelers that way to watch for a wolf coming through the area potentially with a kid. Kind of like a supernatural Amber Alert.”

“That’s exactly what we need,” Maren said, sounding relieved.

I gave her Mace’s number.

“If they give you any problems because you’re not a wolf, just use my name,” I told her.

“Thank you, Greyson,” Maren said, breathing sharply.

And then she hung up.

I told myself that I shouldn’t freak the fuck out right now. Fenrir was okay. Not even Aiden could’ve been dumb enough to pick up Fenrir and leave the city during a freak snowstorm. When I’d said that the two of them were probably holed up in Aiden’s apartment, I’d meant it.

It had to be true.

Shaking my head to clear it, I walked over to the kitchen to where Cali was stirring a huge vat of chili. “That smells amazing.”

She held out a spoon for me to taste. “So? Is Maren okay?”

I nodded. “Fenrir is missing with Aiden, and I told her what steps to take next. I hope that the storm has created a misunderstanding, and Fenrir is somewhere nearby. Aiden doing this is stupid and reckless, but going out in the storm and risking his son would make it even worse.”

Instead of this being a literal kidnapping. I refused to think of that possibility. What it would mean.

“We’ll have to check in on her, make sure the kid is found,” Cali said, nodding decisively.

The urge to kiss and hug her struck once again. But the moment I leaned down, she said, “And you still haven’t heard from Xavier?”

Well, then. The best way to further ruin the mood was to mention my brother. But actually…

Where the fuck was he?

Why weren’t he and Kira back yet?

“Hold that thought,” I said, reaching for my phone again. I called Xavier, but he didn’t answer. Then I shot him a text.

“Well?” Cali asked impatiently.

“Nothing,” I said, scowling. Then I turned to where Big Mac was sitting at the dining table, eating a bowl of chili.

Without even looking up, the witch said, “What do you want?”

“Do you think you could just magically check on Kira and Xavier somehow?” I asked. “They should be back by now.”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “I’m not some magical GPS, Greyson. Plus, your brother’s little medal burned my map when Kira used it.”

I gestured outside. “We’re just worried because of the storm.”

Big Mac offered a long-suffering sigh. “*Fine*. I’ll do a spell to find out how far he might be, but I won’t know the exact location.”

“That works,” I said.

She closed her eyes, obviously trying to focus. The lights flickered, and I cursed under my breath. Was the electricity going to go out again? I huffed. “Maybe this isn’t the right—”

*BOOM!*

I grabbed Cali and pushed her behind me instinctively, ready for an attack, when I realized—

Big Mac’s bowl of chili had exploded in her face.

There was red-brown goop all over her.

*What. The. Fuck.*

I blinked at Big Mac, stunned. “What the *hell* just happened?”

# Episode 3033

**Xavier**

I scowled at Kira. “What did you just say?”

“I said, I can’t use my magic,” Kira told me impatiently.

“How the fuck does that work?” I asked. “Are you out of batteries or something?”

Kira huffed. “I can’t blip, Xavier, it’s not—”

“We need to get home,” I said sharply. “I never would have left the pack with the threat of the Samaras looming if I knew I wouldn’t be able to get back quickly. Do you understand?”

Kira glared at me. “Seems to me that *you* don’t understand. This isn’t something I can control—it’s like static interference, forbidding me from using my magic.”

“So it’s gone?” Ava asked, looking confused. And worried.

“I can sense my powers, their energy; they’re right here,” Kira explained. “But they’re just not working…” She looked up at the sky, frowning. “It’s like an atmospheric interruption.”

I huffed. “What the fuck is that even supposed to mean?”

Ava huffed. “Yeah, that’s crazy!”

I shot Ava a look. “Hey, don’t be rude—Kira’s the only reason we got here quickly.”

Ava scoffed. “Didn’t you just snap at her too?”

“She’s my friend—I’m *allowed* to be rude to her,” I said seriously.

Ava rolled her eyes while in the background, Kira deadpanned, “This is all so healthy.”

“Look, I’m sorry, but”—I turned to her again, scowling—“what does magic static interference mean?”

“It’s like when televisions had antennas, and if there was a big storm, the picture would go all blurry,” Kira explained. “Get it?”

I blinked. “So storms affect magic? How come I’ve never heard this before?”

Kira shook her head, looking both frustrated and worried, which was extremely bad news for everybody all around. “No, not normal storms. But something feels different about this one. Like it’s *not* natural.”

It sure wasn’t. It couldn’t be, because if I’d learned anything over the past few months, it was that when something huge and supernatural happened in the area, it would affect the Redwood pack. We just couldn’t catch a break.

“We have to go back home right now,” I said, looking between Ava and Kira. “On foot.”

A few moments later, both Ava and I were shifted, and Kira had climbed onto my back. She’d pulled the hood of her jacket up, and even though I doubted it would truly help with the cold, it was better than nothing. She clutched the potion flask, shivering from time to time as we ran through the storm.

The snow was so thick and slippery that I had to work hard to keep my footing. I didn’t want to go too slowly, but I knew that if I fell down, it would hurt Kira, and that was the last thing we needed right now. I had to get us all back to the pack house quickly and in one piece.

I had to see Cali, make sure she was okay.

Ava, in the meantime, looked pretty chill as she ran right by my side. She was all casual about it, since she wasn’t carrying anyone and didn’t have to worry about them slipping and breaking their necks. It was a little annoying, actually, how fucking fantastic her wolf looked in the snowfall, all regal and shit.

Though unfortunately, far from annoying, my wolf found it pleasing.

I was glad to have Ava by my side right now, though. Because if we ran into any Samaras, I knew that she’d be there to have our backs. The thought gave me pause—I realized I was thinking of Ava as a true ally. I wondered if I felt this way because of the memory I’d just been forced to relive. It was as if the residual feelings of puppy love were making me think better of Ava than I should.

I knew I could never completely let my guard down with her, though. The fear of her betrayal could never go away. But it was true that Ava had been pretty consistently on our side lately, and I had been working with her without anything completely horrendous happening as a side effect. She’d done a lot to prove herself to me and the Redwoods, and she’d been very open and honest about her motivations, like wanting the Samaras back.

*Over there!* she mind linked, pushing forward.

We started to climb up the mountain pass that led home, though we still had a long way to go. We moved quickly through the storm, Kira grabbing at my fur. I refocused on what had happened today, processing.

*Do you really trust everything Tanya said to us?* I asked Ava.

Ava shot me a sideways look. *Her last potion worked; there’s no reason why this one won’t.*

*That’s not really what I was thinking about*, I said. *What do you really know about her? Do you think Tanya could be working with the vampire who was stalking the pack house?*

Ava’s thoughtful hum vibrated inside my head. *I don’t know. Why are you even asking around about vampires and that weird family anyway?*

I frowned, feeling caught. *None of your business.*

*What was their name? The Dumonts or something?* Ava asked, sounding intrigued.

I’d said too much. Ava had no business knowing what was going on with Cali and Seluna’s ashes and this mysterious family from my past life. Even though I knew she wouldn’t betray us when it came to the Samaras, I’d never believe that she wanted the best for Cali.

I couldn’t afford to slip up—not now, not ever, even if I was feeling a little too comfortable with Ava at the moment because of that memory. The intimacy of it, the peace and warmth and comfort… This gentle love that both of us had fucking killed, one way or another.

I needed to forget about all that sentimental bullshit. It wouldn’t do me any good. It would’ve been better if Tanya had taken the memory altogether.

*I asked Tanya about vampires because they’re always a threat to our pack*, I told Ava, evading.

She scowled. *If there’s a coven in the area that’s a problem, I need to know too. I have a pack to worry about as well.*

Fuck. I needed to backpedal*. No, it’s not an active problem*, I lied. *There was just the one, passing through. I’m only asking around as a precaution.*

Ava didn’t say anything. She probably wasn’t convinced. I used to be a better liar than this, but going through a storm with a shivering witch on my back didn’t bring out my best deception skills.

It wasn’t like Ava could be suspecting anything about Seluna, though—right? Like, she just knew something about a vampire now, that was it, and she didn’t have to learn more about our business. Ava would never actively harm Cali, especially since she could imagine the consequences, but that didn’t mean we were BFFs, sharing each other’s every secret.

Greyson would throw a fit if Ava found out about Seluna’s ashes, anyway.

Not that I gave a shit about what my older brother thought, but this time, he made sense.

Which was rare, but it did happen sometimes.

A loud rumbling and a *crack!* interrupted my thoughts. Kira gripped my fur tighter, gasping.

“What the hell was that?” she rasped. Her shivers had gotten worse over the past few minutes, as the wind and snow became more and more intense. She wasn’t having fun back there, that was for sure. I wished I could mind link with her to tell her that everything would be okay. There was no reason for her to worry, or—

*CRACK!*

The sound was louder this time, and Ava’s wolf flinched.

*What the hell was that noise?* she asked, alarmed. She looked around. I did too. But before I could say anything or even fucking think, I turned and saw it.

*Avalanche!* I howled, shoving Ava with my snout to push her forward before I took off running. Kira gripped onto my fur for dear life, her hold borderline painful, and let out a scream.

“We’d better not die today, Xavier!” she shouted, as if I could fix this. As if she was counting on me, even though I knew very well that this was beyond my control.

Adrenaline coursed through me, leaving behind a bitter taste in my mouth. The danger was real, and it wasn’t an enemy I could fight.

Nature was something bigger than all of us.

My heart pounding, ears ringing, I breathed harshly and raced through the forest as fast as I could. Ava was hot on my heels, her wolf zigzagging through the chaos of the storm, racing quickly enough that our paws barely sank into the snow.

We did our best, we ran like hell, but still…

It wasn’t enough.

It just wasn’t enough.

Suddenly, I couldn’t hear anything. I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t focus, and I couldn’t—

I couldn’t run.

Everything went into slow motion as a huge waterfall of heavy snow landed on top of us, burying us alive.

# Episode 3034

“Oh my god!” I screeched, grabbing a bunch of paper towels to offer to Big Mac. “Are you okay?”

Big Mac glowered, wiping herself down. “Yeah. Just confused as to why I have goddamn beans in my hair.” She looked up at a still-shocked Greyson. “I don’t know what happened.”

“Did you do it wrong?” I asked morosely, which earned me a glare from the witch.

“Of course I did!” she snapped. “You think I wanted to explode my own chili in my face?”

She had a point there. Big Mac was the most capable witch I knew.

“Something’s wrong,” I muttered, looking between her and Greyson. “Something’s happening, but what?”

“How the hell should I know?” Big Mac demanded. “I did the spell right, but when I reached for my magic, it’s like the wires got crossed somehow. This has never happened to me before!” She got up from the table, making a disgusted sound as she scraped chili off her cheek.

“But Xavier and—”

“Xavier and Ava will have to fend for themselves,” Big Mac cut me off. “They have Kira with them; it’ll be fine. They’re not completely useless, anyway.” She looked at Greyson, who was scowling. “Excuse me. I have to go take a shower and get the beans out of my hair, thanks.”

Greyson and I watched as the witch stomped off. He was still silent, and that spooked me the most.

My voice dropped. “Big Mac not being able to use her magic could be a huge problem if we end up fighting the Samara pack. Right?”

“Let’s not jump to any conclusions there,” he told me somberly.

I grabbed his arm, squeezing as I mind linked, *Do you think there’s something bigger going on? Could this have something to do with the ashes?*

Greyson leveled me with a stare. *Again, let’s not jump to conclusions. This could be a coincidence*.

I scoffed, squeezing his arm even harder, yanking it a little too. My mind link was a hiss. *Greyson! Coincidences don’t really happen to us anymore!*

Greyson reached for my wrist to release my grip from him, holding my hand. I knew he meant for the gesture to be soothing, but it wasn’t working.

“I know you don’t want to admit that this is connected to Seluna’s ashes,” I whispered. “I know you want to protect my feelings, because I’ve already freaked out like ten times over the past couple of days. But I can handle the truth, Greyson.”

He shook his head, pulling me closer. “I can’t tell you what I don’t know for sure. If Big Mac’s magic going haywire has anything to do with nature being imbalanced because of the demon’s ashes, there’s only one person who could confirm that theory.”

“Vander,” I said, shaking my head. “I have no idea how to call them, though. Or if I even could with this huge storm happening. It’s not—”

*THUD!*

A thundering clatter out front made me squeak like a ridiculous mouse.

“What the fuck is it this time?” I asked.

“Greyson!” Ravi’s voice, then my dad’s, repeated Greyson’s name, and my mate grabbed my hand and marched toward the foyer. My heart was pounding, and when I saw Ravi, I gaped.

*He looks like a snowman! Oh my god.*

No, but really, Ravi was covered in snow. Head to toe. He was literally dusting himself off into a bucket that my dad had brought over.

“At least I got the firewood, huh?” Ravi said ruefully.

“What happened here?” Greyson asked.

“Are you okay?” I added, looking outside. My stomach dropped when I realized that it looked pitch-black outside the windows. Had the storm done that?

“We’re fine,” my dad told me before turning to Greyson. “Ravi was returning to the house when he noticed that the snow was coming loose from the roof. I pulled him in just before all the snow fell—it’s blocked off the entire porch, and the front of the house.”

“So we’re trapped inside,” Greyson said, eyebrows arched. “Not by some enemy, but by the snow.”

“The snow *is* the enemy, Greyson!” Ravi said empathically.

I stepped over to the window, and HOLY SHIT! My dad was right. It wasn’t pitch-black because of the storm, but because the windows were entirely covered.

“We’ll be okay,” Greyson said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “We don’t have to go outside anyway, so—”

Dad shook his head. “The snow has nowhere to fall now. It’ll just keep piling up, and that could make the whole entire roof cave in.”

Torin’s voice was a squeak behind me. “What? How is that possible?”

Dad’s face was grave. “It’s possible. Trust me, I grew up in the Midwest—snow is really heavy.”

“Okay, we’ll fix this,” Greyson said matter-of-factly. “We can all grab some shovels to try to dig ourselves out and get a good look at the house.”

Greyson had his game face on, which was usually super hot and meant he was ready to fix every problem ever. But this wasn’t simple. “But what if Xavier and Kira blip back and they can’t even get into the house? What if they’re trapped outside?” I asked anxiously.

Greyson rested his hands on my shoulders. “Cali, I need you to let me deal with this. I’m sure Xavier will be okay. Kira is a really capable witch with a lot of power to tap into. Remember when Xavier said she once accidentally killed over a dozen werewolves who tried to attack them?”

Oh my god.

“We both know Kira won’t let anything happen to Xavier, love. Think about it.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I said, taking a deep breath.

“We’ll dig as fast as we can,” he said.

I shook my head. “I was able to blast a trench in seconds earlier.”

Greyson frowned. “Do you really think that’s a good idea?”

“But what’s gonna happen if we don’t do anything about the snow right now?” Torin asked urgently.

Dad shook his head. “I’ve never seen a blizzard this intense. With the rate of the snowfall, though, I assume it’s going to get bad faster than anyone can imagine.”

As if on cue, the lights flickered.

*Are they trying to tell us something?* I thought frantically. *ARE THEY?*

“Zainab,” Greyson said, “get the generator.”

As Zainab rushed away, I told Greyson, “We don’t have time to wait—you heard my dad. I need to at least try…” I took a deep breath. “I want to try blasting the snow. I’ll go easy at first, I promise.”

“I can’t believe I’m agreeing to this,” Greyson said, offering a tense sigh. I felt his eyes burning holes into the back of my head as I opened the door. There was a wall of snow in front of me. A WALL.

*Damnit, Cali, don’t chicken out now!* I thought to myself*. You have to do this!*

Taking a deep breath, I raised my hands and focused. I tried to reach for my magic, and it felt a bit… hot. Like I was holding my fingers over the flame of a candle. That wasn’t how my magic usually felt. But my powers were connected to my emotions, right? Maybe things felt weird because I was so worried about Xavier and Kira.

Not Ava, of course.

I scoffed internally, pushing the thought away. I focused on the snow, concentrating as I gently pushed forward, energy seeping out of my fingertips and toward the snow. Finally, a small divot was created, big enough for me to pace through.

*Success!* I thought. *Kind of!*

Emboldened, I walked through the tunnel…

But it stopped at about four feet out.

*How anticlimactic.*

I looked over my shoulder. Greyson watched me from the foyer, looking calm when I knew he was anything but.

“I’m going to try to blast through more of the snow, okay?” I called.

As if in response, thunder rumbled in the distance. Greyson’s eyes flickered up to the roof. “This isn’t safe, Cali. Maybe they should just dig now—you got us a really good head start.”

Another rumble overhead followed his words, like snow falling onto the roof of the porch. My body shuddered at the impact. My breath caught, the sound that came out of my mouth reminding me of a small animal’s yelp.

“That’s it!” Greyson said, his voice loud and sharp now, his composure gone. “Get out of there, Cali—we’re going to dig manually.”

I shook my head. “If the roof of the porch is straining, then it’s only a matter of time until it’s the whole house! I can do this!”

Greyson looked actually angry now—full Alpha mode—but before he could say anything else or reach out and grab me, I went for my magic again. It felt even hotter now, like it could’ve singed me if it were a physical entity.

*I’ve never been able to feel it so completely like this before*, I thought, alarmed. *But I’ve heard Big Mac and Kira talk about their magic in that way—maybe I’m just getting more advanced?*

Or maybe I was just a fucking idiot.

Either way, I had to help the pack, and I had to help Xavier. I was doing this. With Greyson calling my name in the background, I pulled on my powers, ready to push through a bigger blast of energy. I turned toward the porch, hoping to blast some of the snow off to the side of the house.

But instead of it moving forward, I felt my power reverse course, heading away from the porch and—

*Toward me.*

The realization of what was about to happen was terrifying.

*Oh no… OH NO!*

“Greyson!” I screamed.

And then, I had no voice at all.

There was snow everywhere. I went flying into it, the cold hard and stinging with menace as I was catapulted into the storm.

# Episode 3035

**Xavier**

I was pinned down to the hard ground, every limb numb. The cold seeped past my fur and skin, straight into my bones. If *I* was feeling so cold, I couldn’t even imagine how horrible Kira felt. There were tiny rays of light streaming through, though, so at least I knew where the surface was, even if it felt really far away.

But where was Kira?

*Kira! Can you hear me? Where are you? Are you hurt? Are you—*

I stopped screaming inside my head when I remembered that no, she couldn’t fucking hear me. I was in wolf form.

“Shit shit shit,” I said between my teeth after shifting back to human. The cold actually hurt like a son of a bitch. It reminded me of my little dangling adventure on that cliff the other day. At least I knew I couldn’t die from this, though.

But I wasn’t so sure about Kira.

“Kira,” I breathed her name, scared to shout right now in case more snow fell on me. It felt so heavy on top of me. I wiggled around, fighting to release myself, trying not to think of the possibility that Kira had been crushed.

*We’d better not die today, Xavier!* was the last thing she’d said to me before the avalanche had struck.

When I finally managed to break free and turned around, I saw her. She was only a couple of feet away, in a small domed pocket of air in the snow. It was shaped like a tiny igloo, with her as the only occupant. Her knees were pulled up to her chest, her arms still stretched out like she was trying to hold on. She looked peaceful, like she was sleeping, but her lips were blue and I couldn’t hear her breathing.

I was goddamn terrified.

I shifted back into my wolf and crawled toward her. Her breathing was shallow, I realized, but it was there, and I nudged her with my nose. She was completely frozen and didn’t respond. Wrapping myself around her, I prayed that my body heat and fur would be enough to keep her from getting hypothermia. She probably already had hypothermia, though, so really the goal here was for her not to die.

I didn’t have many friends, only Jay most of the time and Gabriel when he was around, but I thought of Kira as my friend. We weren’t as close as I was with Jay or Gabe, but still, we’d saved each other so many times. I pressed my nose to her face, hoping my breath would warm her up. I wrapped my large wolf body around her, fighting to shake her awake just as I heard Ava’s voice in my head.

*Xavier, are you okay?*

I realized I hadn’t thought of Ava at all for the past few seconds, and a weird kind of guilt flooded me. I ignored it.

*Where are you?* I mind linked back. *We’re trapped. Are you hurt?*

Now that my wolf was reminded of Ava’s presence, he obsessed over her. I was suddenly just as worried about Ava as I was about Kira and myself. It was disturbing, but I couldn’t stop.

*I’m digging through the snow*, she said. *It’s kind of working, but I’m not sure if I’m digging out or deeper into the snowdrift.*

I let out a huff. *I can’t dig right now. I have to keep Kira warm.*

*I’ll try to find you*, Ava replied, and I felt a glimmer of hope. Turning to Kira, I nudged her cheek again with my nose, and this time, she mumbled something. I nudged her for a third time, emboldened. She gasped, her eyes fluttering open.

Before I could feel any better, though, I realized that Kira’s pupils were dilated, her gaze unfocused. She let out a groan of pain, pressing a hand to her head. It came away covered in blood, and I realized that one of the rocks or sticks from the mountainside must have hit her during the avalanche.

Fuck.

I let out a weird sound that was probably a whimper—I’d never admit it—and she slowly turned to me. She realized that I was cuddled around her, then nodded slightly.

“Thanks,” she whispered.

I hated not being able to mind link with her.

I nuzzled her again, hoping that would at least convey that I was here for her, and no, she wasn’t going to die today. Her eyelids started to get droopy again, though, and I couldn’t let that happen. If she had a concussion, it would only get worse that way.

I growled to keep her awake, and her eyes flew open in surprise and confusion. “What the fuck?”

I bumped her forehead with my nose. Realization dawned on her.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered in a broken voice. “It’s just so hard to keep my eyes open.”

I growled again.

She offered me a weak smile, her teeth chattering from the cold. “You’re always so bossy…”

If I could’ve bossed my way out of this avalanche, I definitely would have.

*What’s going on?* I asked Ava. *Are you out yet?*

*I think I smell fresh air*, Ava replied. *I’m not sure though.*

*Hurry up*, I said impatiently. *Kira’s fading.*

*I’m trying, Xavier!* Ava said, a twinge of despair in her tone.

*I know*, I replied, breathing sharply. *I know.*

Ava was doing her best, and I needed to do mine as well. I couldn’t just sit around Kira like a fluffy fucking pillow, waiting for her to succumb to her head injury or hypothermia. I decided to start digging—carefully, so as not to harm Kira.

She winced when I pulled away and shifted my weight, but she didn’t say anything when I started to paw at the snow. At first, it worked, slowly but surely. But the second I tried to speed up, a rumble came from overhead. The snow cracked a little above us, a couple of pieces falling in.

Part of our air pocket caved in.

*Kira!*

I watched, horrified as a huge piece broke free right over Kira. She just lay there, staring up at it, wide-eyed and shaking. Growling, I dove over her, using my wolf’s huge body to shield her from the snow. I took the impact with a grunt, and Kira shuddered.

“I th-think,” she sputtered through her shivers, “you should stop digging…”

She was right. I couldn’t risk it. The whole place could collapse on top of us.

*I’m out!* Ava’s voice in my head gave me a new sense of hope.

*Okay, now dig us out*, I said instantly.

Ava fell silent.

*What’s the matter?* I asked, scowling internally.

*This avalanche runs the whole side of this cliff face*, Ava said slowly. *I don’t know where you are.*

*Can’t you just start digging next to where you were?* I asked.

*That’s the thing—from the outside, I have no idea where I was inside the avalanche, or where you could be*. Ava sounded like she was panicking.

I looked down at Kira, who was blinking sleepily, looking pale, her teeth chattering.

*Ava, I need your help*, I said, my voice cracking. *We have to get Kira out of here right now. She’s our responsibility; we can’t let her die because we decided to go on a fucking mission in the middle of a—*

Ava cut me off. *Maybe we can use the mate bond?*

I paused. *What are you talking about?*

*Just trying to tap into our mate bond. Maybe it could help us find each other. It’s worth a try.*

The last thing I needed right now, after remembering our lovey-dovey pond times, was to acknowledge my mate bond with Ava. No fucking way.

But then Kira let out another pained moan, and I shifted gears instantly.

*Fine. Whatever that means*, I said. *Let’s try.*

*You need to reach out to me through the mate connection to let me know where you are—so I can* feel *where you are*, Ava said.

I took a deep breath, closing my eyes as I fought to do as Ava asked. I allowed my wolf’s instincts to come front and center for once without fighting them, and sure enough…

A second later, I could sense Ava’s fear and worry for me.

I could sense how much she still loved me, and the thought of it made my chest hurt.

*I think I know where you are*, Ava said, her voice quiet.

I nuzzled Kira, curling tighter around her as I made sure she stayed awake. In what felt like minutes, I heard the sound of digging.

*Ava?* I mind linked.

But instead of a response, some of the snow above us broke free. I moved on reflex, ready to shield Kira again.

*Are you okay?* Ava asked. She was panting.

*Keep going*, I said.

Kira’s eyelids were still droopy, but she nestled closer. I had no idea how much longer I could keep her warm, but thankfully, Ava had an answer. When the snow next to my head fell away, I looked to my left and saw Ava’s wolf.

She’d found us.

The relief I felt to see that Ava was okay made me dizzy. I ignored the feeling and mind linked my thanks to her before turning to Kira. Grabbing her gently by the coat collar, I dragged her out of the snowdrift as she kept shaking. The snow caved in behind us, filling the air pocket we’d been in.

That had been really fucking close.

The chilly wind was a welcome distraction—like, at least we were on the surface here. I shifted back to human, checking Kira’s pulse. It was slow, but at least she hadn’t fallen asleep. Shaking her shoulder, I asked, “Can you ride on my back again? I need you to hold on long enough for me to get you to Torin. Okay?”

Kira nodded, her whole body shaking, her gloved hands in fists, but her eyes seemed much more alert now. I was ready to shift when, suddenly, I realized something that made my stomach drop.

Kira’s hands were empty.

Where the hell was the potion flask?

# Episode 3036

I felt like a sack of frozen potatoes, hurled into the snow. At least I’d survived the fall, so yay for small victories, right?

*RIGHT?*

This was so fucked up. *I* was fucked up. I’d been such an idiot, to think I could do this—instead of clearing the snow, all I’d managed to do was blast myself far enough away to get lost!

*Where even AM I?*

“Stupid stupid stupid,” I hissed and forced myself upright, shivering and actually feeling like I’d probably die from the cold. I had no idea where the house was—I couldn’t even see it through the blizzard.

I started to walk back toward where I *thought* the house was, but my sense of direction was shit right now.

*Greyson!* I mind linked, shouting internally. *Greyson, you were right, I was wrong, I regret everything forever!*

Silence from my mate. My heart was pounding loudly, so at least that wasn’t frozen yet, and then…

*Cali!* Greyson called for me, but his voice was muddled in my head. Like he was super far away. *Where are you? We’re coming to get you!*

*I have no idea*, I replied. *I can’t see anything!*

I wrapped my arms around my torso, shivering violently. I didn’t even have my thick winter jacket on, or my boots—just a heavy sweater and a pair of sneakers. Every single one of my mistakes came back to taunt me. I’d have punched myself in the face for being such a massive moron, but I was too fucking cold.

*Focus on my voice, love*, Greyson said. *Follow it back to me.*

That was easier said than done, because the storm was disorienting me, and something was making Greyson’s voice sound… staticky. Big Mac had explained it as a magical interference earlier, and then my magic had also gone haywire.

I stopped dead in my tracks.

*Vander said the storm is being caused by magic*, I thought, *so it has to be messing with everyone’s magic! Oh my god, this must be why Xavier and Kira haven’t blipped back yet. Kira’s magic isn’t working either!*

I should’ve realized this much sooner, when I’d sensed that my powers felt off. But I’d let my worry for Xavier get in the way of reason, burning off whatever working brain cells I had. I needed to grow out of being an impulsive asshat and stop putting myself into these kids of horrible situations. I couldn’t even feel my fingers, toes, or nose anymore. If I froze to death out here, it would be my own damn fault.

*Oh my god, Cali, wallowing in the middle of a storm is NOT helping with anything*, I scolded myself. *Pick up your feet!*

There was a bit of a problem with that idea, though. If I headed in the wrong direction, then I’d end up further away from Greyson and the house. But if I didn’t move at all, then I’d just be a sitting duck in the middle of a snowstorm.

*What if I find some sort of landmark, though?* I mused as my teeth chattered. *I’ll try that, and if it doesn’t work—I’ll have to trust the others to find me. They’re better equipped than I am right now.*

I sucked it up, called myself a loser one last time, then slowly started wading through the snow. I shivered, coughing and feeling like a human popsicle as I looked around and held my hands out. Visibility was bad, but perhaps I’d find a familiar tree or a rock.

Or hopefully the front porch, but no such luck.

*Wait…*

I finally noticed a shadow of a shape in the storm that reminded me of a house—a tiny house. I traced the side of it with my fingertips, and it felt like tree, but it wasn’t one.

*It’s the shed! Oh my god, yes!*

I felt for one of its windows and pushed it open, rushing to fall through.

“Ouch!” I groaned when I hit the floor. At least I was no longer standing in the middle of a storm. Was this—dare I say—finally a victory for me?

Of course, the notion of victory was relative when I was still shivering from the cold. Cursing my choices yet again, I reached out to Greyson via mind link.

*Greyson! Where are you?*

His reply came like a broken radio station.

*Cali—are—can’t—if—*

And then, I started shouting inside my head.

*Greyson, I’m in the shed. The shed. I’m in the shed!*

I said the words over and over again, sitting on the floor with my arms wrapped around my knees, swaying back and forth to gain some warmth. I had no idea if he could hear me or not, but I couldn’t give up. I couldn’t give in. I couldn’t be the person who’d shoved a sword through Seluna, survived a werewolf bite, and then died from hypothermia just because I’d been too reckless to recognize all the obvious dangers.

My eyes felt too numb to cry, but I sure as fuck would’ve been crying if I could. All I wanted right now was Greyson’s arms around me. I could just imagine it—the warmth of him around me, his soothing words in my ear, all his love and tenderness.

*Greyson, please… Please come find me…*

Suddenly, I did get warmer, and I did get the sense that Greyson was there. I could feel him all around me, breathing against my skin. I was probably delirious and hallucinating from the cold, so that was the good stuff. Was this glowy sweet feeling part of hypothermia?

*Cali…*

The howling wind was saying my name. How was that possible, though?

*Wait, it’s not the wind! It’s someone calling my name!*

“Greyson,” I croaked, fighting to stand up, but my legs were shaking too much.

*Cali!*

I heard my name again, and then the door swung open, revealing Greyson’s wolf. He was a massive warm shadow, and he yelped when he saw me, running to my side.

“Greyson,” I mumbled through frozen lips, still sounding like a strangled frog, and he shifted back to human. He looked like a haunted man, whispering my name, opening his arms to hug me as I hissed, “What are you doing? You’re going to freeze to death!”

He didn’t even dignify that with a response—just grabbed and gathered me in his naked arms, his delicious body heat seeping into me. He held me tight, all his hard muscle like a furnace against me, his intensity making me breathe again. I was alive, and this was what heaven had to feel like.

“Cali’s right,” said Artemis’s voice. I looked over Greyson’s shoulder, and I was so damn glad to see her. “Shift back to wolf form so you can carry her to the house.”

Greyson let go, his hands reaching to cup my face as he pushed my hair back. He kissed my forehead, my nose.

“It’s okay, you found me,” I whispered.

His voice was gruff when he spoke. “You’re going to be the death of me.”

“I’m so sorry,” I croaked.

He hugged me tight, kissing my cheeks again, and I wanted to sob into his arms. When he turned into a wolf, his eyes were still dark with fear, and some other emotion. But he was here, and I could breathe again.

After wrapping me in a winter coat, Artemis helped me onto Greyson’s back and sat behind me. I felt just a smidge better, and then I noticed the rope around Artemis’s waist.

*They used this to avoid getting lost in the blizzard!*

At least *one* of Orla’s daughters had a lick of sense.

“Of course you thought of that,” I muttered, snorting. “You’re the smart sister.”

Artemis smirked, looping part of the rope around my wrist.

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We followed the rope back to the house. Once we were back inside, my parents crowded me against the door, hugging me and telling me how worried sick they’d been and scolding me for scaring them half to death, all at once.

I was so relieved I felt a tear or two fall down my cheeks.

“I’m taking you upstairs for a warm bath,” Mom declared, no nonsense. “And I’m accepting no objections!”

I didn’t dare offer one. Greyson watched me, his gaze intense.

*Stay here*, I told him. *The pack needs you. I’ll be okay with my mom.*

With a sigh, he nodded.

*Poor Greyson.*

A few moments later, Mom and I were upstairs. When I sank into the warm water, it almost felt like it burned my skin. I was still so frozen from the outside that there was actual steam at the contact. I moaned in relief as it warmed my limbs, sinking into the water up to my chin.

“Better?” Mom asked.

“Better,” I said, sniffling. “Sorry I worried you guys.”

Mom patted my head. She rarely got aggravated, but I’d definitely pushed her buttons today. “Just stay there, sweetheart. I’ll go bring you some hot tea so you can warm up faster.”

“Thank you,” I muttered, closing my eyes.

*I survived! Again!*

I’d probably been a cat in a past life. Which made sense, seeing as I kept getting into trouble and surviving it. Also, I liked warm things and places. Like the bath—it was so very warm. Perhaps too warm, actually. Hot, almost.

Too hot.

*Scalding.*

“Oh my god!” I hissed, my eyes flying open as I jumped out of the tub. I almost slipped on the tile, gripping the counter so I didn’t fall. I was panting, my skin aching, the burning not stopping even though I was out of the tub. The entirety of the horrid sensation was centered on my shoulder blade.

The feeling was suddenly all too familiar.

*No! This can’t be! No no NO!*

Letting out a cry of pain, I turned my shoulder to the mirror so I could see.

My eyes widened as I watched a bright red handprint appear on my back.

Just like Seluna’s.

# Episode 3037

**Xavier**

We were fucked. Again.

Couldn’t catch a break, really.

“Fuck,” I repeated the word under my breath as I dove into the snow to search for the flask.

Ava’s wolf yipped, snapping at my flank to stop me. *What the hell are you doing?*

I faced her, panting. “Kira doesn’t have the potion anymore. I need to find it—without it, all this was for nothing.”

*That’s insane*, Ava mind linked. *It’s still snowing so much, there could be another avalanche!*

I shook my head. “I don’t care, it’s—”

Her voice was loud inside my head*. There’s so much snow, Xavier! How could we possibly find it? We should just go home for now and come back!*

I couldn’t believe this was my life, but I had to push through. I had no choice. “I’m finding it right now.” I turned around and started to dig furiously.

Already, I couldn’t feel my fingers.

“What the hell…” Kira’s voice came from a few feet to my right. At least she’d maintained consciousness. I saw her watching me with a confused frown, her eyes squinted.

“Why exactly are you digging through the snow naked?” she asked. “Your limbs and other dangly parts might fall off from frostbite, just saying.”

My chest heaving, I faced her. She was being a sarcastic little shit, so I gathered she was okay. “I have to find the flask,” I explained hotly. “It was lost in the avalanche.”

Kira shook her head drowsily, reaching into her inner jacket pocket. Pulling the potion out, she said, “I put it there for safe keeping. I’m not an amateur, you know.”

I let out a breath of relief, reaching out to grab her arms and pull her up. “How’s your head?”

She blinked slowly. “Bleeding? I guess?”

I checked the wound. It wasn’t bleeding anymore. Her blood had probably turned into ice, anyway. “Are you feeling sick?” I asked.

She shook her head with a wince.

“We have to get home. Can you hang onto my back still?” I asked.

Kira nodded woozily, but she stumbled the moment I let her go.

I gritted my teeth. “This isn’t going to work.”

“Just leave me out here to die,” Kira said, groaning. The dramatics were probably a side effect of her concussion. I was about to tell her to shut the hell up with that nonsense when Ava shifted back to human.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’ll ride on your back with Kira, make sure she doesn’t slip off,” Ava said.

Kira gasped, her teeth chattering as she swallowed hard and eyed Ava. “You’d do that for me? *Naked?*”

“You can’t be naked in a fucking snowstorm, Ava,” I said with a frown.

“I run much warmer than her,” Ava said, determined. “Just run really fast.”

Despite being pretty worried about Ava’s ass freezing, I was impressed by her selfless offer. It was true—as a werewolf, Ava would probably be okay for a while, even in naked human form. But it would be very uncomfortable for her.

She was right—I needed to get back to the house ASAP.

Shaking my head at everything, I shifted back to my wolf. Ava helped a drowsy, slightly delirious Kira climb on as well, and then she did so herself, wrapping her arms around Kira. Probably partially to share warmth and partially to hang on.

I couldn’t see much as I ran through the woods, so I used my sense of smell and a werewolf’s instinctive sense of direction, which had always been useful when I was a mercenary. That was the only way I’d find my way around this storm. I kept checking in with Ava to make sure they were okay back there, and Ava wasn’t too affected by the cold. She sounded like she was struggling, but not like she was losing her strength.

I wondered how she’d explain being out in this storm to Knox. When I asked her, she said, *I’ll figure something out.*

*Do you have a plan for how to give the potion to Knox and his cronies?* I asked next.

*We have meals together as a pack all the time. Knox insists on it so he can keep tabs on us. It’ll be easy for me to pour some potion into their drinks*, she replied.

*You have to be careful*, I said.

*Why? You worried about me?* There was an edge to her tone.

I hated the idea of Ava having any influence over me, but I couldn’t lie to either of us right now*.*

*Of course I am*, I said. *I’m not a monster. I don’t want you to get hurt.*

Ava stayed silent, and I wondered if I’d just fucked up, admitting too much. I didn’t want to lead her on or give her the wrong impression. Especially because I’d claimed Cali once more and felt more committed to her than ever.

I didn’t actually want to hurt Ava’s feelings with my rejection, though. Not anymore. That hadn’t been the case in a while. However, I did want it to be clear that Cali was my one and only mate.

*I mean*, I continued, *you need to stay safe so the plan can work. We have to take care of Knox, for the good of the Redwoods and the Samaras.*

Ava finally replied. Her voice was quiet in my head. *Of course. I can take care of myself, anyway. You know me, I’m a survivor.*

I ignored the way my stomach throbbed at her words.

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“Are we there yet?” Kira’s words came out in broken breaths as her teeth chattered, her whole body trembling. She kept slipping in and out of consciousness, but at least her concussion didn’t seem to be too bad.

I could feel that we were getting closer to the pack house—the pull of it, the gravity. The trees started to get thicker, and the snow wasn’t as blinding as it had been on the mountain pass. I was grateful for that.

*Cali?* I tried to mind link with my mate.

No reply. We weren’t close enough for that to work, then. But if Ava and I had been able to use the mate bond to find each other, I could do it with Cali as well. The thought of solidifying my connection with Cali after what had happened with the Ava memory today made me want to gone home more than ever.

*Cali, can you hear me?* I called for her again and again.

No response.

But I did feel something, like static in the air. What was that? Could it be affecting my mind linking capabilities? Was this the same static that had kept Kira’s magic from working earlier, stopping us from blipping?

Did this mean I was close to the pack house, or was something else going on?

I sped up when I saw the familiar shape of the house far ahead.

*Hang in there, we’re almost home*, I told Ava. *I’ll go faster now—make sure Kira doesn’t slip off.*

I got Ava’s affirmative and proceeded. We were close to the pack house—we were here, and I raced forward with all my strength, ready to—

*PLOP!*

I stepped on air and went tumbling down. I fought to keep my balance so the two women on my back didn’t fly off, and I ended up surf-sliding down an incline and into a shallow ditch. What the actual hell was this?

*Who put this here?* Ava demanded, sounding frantic. *What’s going on?*

I had the same question. Anyone who fell down here could’ve gotten seriously fucking hurt. I was about to start growling in frustration when I picked up a scent. Zainab? Then another—Ravi? And finally, I smelled Cali.

Did they dig this? Why?

God, it had to be a trench. Probably to protect the house against the Samaras.

The realization made me shake my head. I couldn’t believe I’d just gotten caught in my own pack’s trap. That was the embarrassing cherry on top of a horrible day cake. There was no way I was going to tell Greyson what had happened.

*Are you two okay back there?* I asked Ava.

*Just fine, only a little shaken up*, she replied. *Can we PLEASE just get inside?*

*Sure thing. We’re almost home now*, I replied.

I couldn’t exactly fault her, what with her being naked in a ditch and all. I started to climb out carefully, in case there were more traps within the trap, because Greyson was crafty that way. I could feel both Ava and Kira shivering on my back, so I didn’t want to take any chances. Suddenly, though, the wind shifted, and I picked up another scent.

It wasn’t the Redwoods.

I ducked down, holding my breath.

*Someone’s out there!* Ava said*. Could it be Greyson looking for you?*

I shook my head. *It’s nobody from my pack.*

Ava fell silent. I stayed in the ditch, creeping along the bottom, following the scent until I spotted a wolf emerging from the storm.

I recognized it.

It was a Samara wolf.

*Oh shit!* Ava said with a shudder. *It’s Blaine.*

# Episode 3038

**Greyson**

I sat at the long wooden table in the kitchen, nursing the mug of white chocolate mocha my mother had pressed into my hands. I’d tried telling her I didn’t want it, but she wouldn’t hear it. You’d think the thing cured all ailments the way she talked about it sometimes.

“You need to warm up the inside before you can even try to warm up the outside,” she’d said firmly.

I had tried to explain to her that I was fine, but she seemed to need to fuss over me. She was probably pretty worried about me, going out into the blizzard like that, so I just shut my mouth and drank the mocha.

Shooting a glance into the hallway and toward the stairs, I wondered how Cali was doing and if she was feeling okay. I thought maybe I should go up and check on her, but before I could, Elle charged into the kitchen and dropped into the seat next to mine.

She looked at me with an intense stare but said nothing.

“What?” I finally demanded, fed up with her. “What do you need, Elle?”

She shook her head. “I do not understand why everyone is inside when maybe there will be an attack,” she said, looking troubled.

I sighed. “There’s a storm raging out there, Elle. We have to stay put until it lets up a little. People aren’t able to navigate out there, and I don’t want anyone getting lost. We can’t survive out there for very long without shelter.”

“Why?” Elle asked.

“Because we get cold, especially if we have to shift back to human. That’s how people get frostbite,” I explained.

Elle didn’t look remotely convinced. “No, no, that makes no sense. Wolves survive in snow. We survive the cold. Be a wolf!”

I understood what she meant. If we all shifted into our wolf forms—and stayed that way—we could withstand the cold temperatures indefinitely, just like her pack had done.

Elle looked frustrated with my lack of response. “*Do something!*”

It was a strange position to find myself in. I hadn’t expected to hear from Elle on the subject of pack politics, and it was clear that she wanted to go on the offensive.

I frowned. I had no idea how to explain to her that sending my whole damn pack out into a blizzard was an unnecessary risk.

I ran a hand through my hair. “This just isn’t how we do things, Elle. It’s not tactical.”

“I do not know this word *tactical*, but we should not let bad wolf attack pack. You must *attack*, Alpha! We are not weak!” Her cheeks had started to burn with passion as she spoke.

The conversation was frustrating, mostly because I kind of agreed with Elle. I wished I *could* send my pack out to show Knox who ran this land, and get revenge for what he’d tried to do to Cali.

But then I remembered what Cali had asked of me—that there be no unnecessary bloodshed. It was like Cali was my human conscience. She was the angel who sat on my shoulder, reminding me there was a better way.

“Maybe that’s how you did things as a wolf,” I said to Elle, “but we’re not full wolves. We’re werewolves. We have to live in the human world, too, and we have to think differently about how to do things. That’s why we’re teaching you about our ways.”

Elle’s frown deepened. “You are not acting like Alpha now, Greyson!” she yelled at me, then stormed out of the kitchen.

“Fuck me,” I grumbled, leaning back in my chair, the mug of mocha forgotten. I was angry and frustrated. I knew that Elle was just trying to help, but I didn’t need her in my face right now. There was a once-in-a-generation blizzard going on outside the house—I couldn’t deal with the Samara attack plan right now. Besides, I was too worried about Cali to really concentrate on much else.

I looked up as Orla stepped into the kitchen.

“How’s Cali?” I asked, jumping to my feet.

“She’s cold,” Orla said with a shrug, “but she’s warming up. I’m just here to get her some tea.”

“I can make it,” I said, stepping toward the cupboard, but Orla stopped me.

“That’s fine, Greyson, you sit down. It’s good for me to have something to do. I need to keep my hands busy.”

She rummaged around for a clean mug, but when she turned back around, there were tears in her eyes.

“Thank you for saving my girl, Greyson,” she said, looking up at me.

“Of course,” I said hoarsely. “I’d do anything for her.”

Orla gave me a watery smile and nodded.

I coughed, feeling a little uncomfortable. I wasn’t used to all these emotions. How did Cali’s family deal with this kind of thing? Was I supposed to give Orla a hug? Or maybe say something more comforting?

But before I could do anything, there was a bloodcurdling scream, and Orla and I raced for the stairs.

I took them two at a time—Orla hot on my heels—and ran for Cali’s room on instinct. I flung the door open and found her in the bathroom, standing in front of the mirror with a towel wrapped loosely around her. Her hair was sopping wet, and there was a great deal of water on the floor, like she’d gotten out of the tub in a hurry.

But the worst part of all was her eyes, which were wide with terror.

Heart pounding, I looked around the bathroom, searching for the intruder who’d made Cali scream. “What happened?” I demanded.

Cali was panting, and when she looked over at me, her face was pale. “It’s back.”

I stared at her for a moment. “What’s back? What are you talking about?”

Cali moved so I could see her back. “*This.*”

“Fucking hell,” I breathed, my eyes glued to the handprint burned onto her shoulder blade. It was just like the one from Seluna, and the sight of it filled me with fear.

“Are you hurt, sweetheart?” Orla asked, her voice hushed.

“No, I’m okay. It burned a bit, but it doesn’t hurt now.”

“How did this happen?” I asked. “Did you see Seluna again?”

Cali shook her head. “I was just sitting in the bath, and it happened.”

“What happened in here?” Torin asked, coming to the door. “I heard a scream.”

“This,” Cali said, turning so Torin could see the handprint. “Can you do anything about it?”

Torin frowned and stepped forward. He put his hand over the print, trying to heal it.

Cali let out a low hiss, as though this pained her, and I stepped toward her and gripped her hand.

“What can this mean?” she asked quietly, her face scared. “Why is she still doing this to me?”

Anger flooded through me as I thought about this demon terrorizing my mate from beyond the grave.

“We’ll take care of it,” I assured Cali. “And then we’ll take care of the ashes so that Seluna can’t ever hurt you again.”

Cali nodded, but she gripped my hand tight, and I could tell she was still shaken.

I tried to moderate my own emotions so I didn’t hurt her, but I was so angry I felt like I could punch through a wall. I’d thought we were over this shit with Seluna. That with Seluna dead, at least she wouldn’t be able to physically hurt Cali anymore. I hated that I wasn’t able to just erase Seluna’s existence from the world.

But I was going to. As soon as I figured out who’d taken those damn ashes.

“It’s going away,” Torin said. I looked, and sure enough, he was healing it. “That has to be good, right?”

Maybe. Or we were dealing with a whole other beast now. It’d been an ordeal to get rid of the handprints last time, and it didn’t sit well with me that it was easy this time around.

I pulled Cali in for a hug and felt her breathe a sigh of relief against me.

“I’m so sorry this happened,” I whispered, kissing her forehead.

“It’s okay,” she said quietly. “I’m just glad we took care of it.”

“Let’s head downstairs,” I said. “Get something to eat. You’re probably exhausted from everything today, but we should get some food in you.”

Cali nodded in agreement, and Orla produced a thick robe to replace the towel Cali had wrapped around her. Cali put the robe on, and I took her hand and led her downstairs. I didn’t want to let go of her just yet.

But we weren’t even halfway down when Cali let out a startled cry, stopping still.

“Cali! Are you—” I didn’t even get the words out before she let out another cry, but this one was anguished and full of pain.

Her hand went to her shoulder again, and, heart beating hard, I pulled back the collar of her robe.

“Shit,” I gasped.

There, on the porcelain skin on the back of her shoulder, was the red handprint.

# Episode 3039

**Xavier**

I ducked lower, letting the thick snow cover us, glad of it for the first time since the damned blizzard had started.

*What the fuck is Blaine doing here?* I asked, mind linking with Ava.

*I have no idea, but he can’t be up to any good*, she said, her voice tense. Maybe he’s checking to see if the Redwoods are mobilizing.

The wolf was moving away from the tree line and closer and closer to where we were hiding. I knew what I wanted to do—I wanted to attack. I wanted to take Blaine out. Fury at what the Samaras had done to Cali flowed through me at the sight of him. But I knew that wasn’t possible—not with an injured Kira and a human Ava on my back. So I just watched Blaine, frustration and agitation clawing at me—I hated just sitting there, not being able to do anything.

Silently, we watched as Blaine slipped back into the forest.

Without a word, Ava slipped off my back and onto the snow.

*What are you doing?* I snapped.

“We need to separate,” she said, speaking quietly. She glanced around. “Blaine can’t find us together. If he keeps looking, it’s only a matter of time until he does, and right now, we’re sitting ducks hiding in this trench. You know that, X.”

I did know that.

“The snow and the wind are the only things masking my scent, but that’s not a guarantee. The wind could change at any time.”

*What about Kira?* I asked.

“We’re close enough to the pack house for you to get her back there by yourself.” In the pale light, Ava looked worried. “We have to remember the bigger plan. I need to keep Knox’s trust so I can slip him the potion before he and his friends try to attack the Redwoods.” She shook her head. “You know they can’t have that crazy magic steroid advantage over you, or it’ll be like shooting fish in a barrel.”

I looked around. I knew Ava was right—about all the things—but there was something about this blizzard that felt weird, and I didn’t want to let her go out into it alone. Not even as a wolf.

The sound of her shifting cracked over the howl of the wind, and an instant later, her wolf stood before me.

*Be careful*, I said. *Execute the plan.*

Ava nodded and gently took the flask of potion between her teeth. Then she turned, climbed out of the trench, and sprinted into the snowstorm. I tried to look after her, but she was swallowed by the whiteness almost immediately.

At the tree line, Blaine started to pace along the edge of the woods, scanning the land.

Fuck. Even if I couldn’t attack the joker because I was carrying Kira, I didn’t have to just sit there and let the Samara wolf stalk my damn house.

I started forward, wanting to follow after Ava so we could confront Blaine together, but I had to get Kira back to the pack house quickly. No matter how much I wanted to attack him, I had to help her. She was more important.

I raced toward the house, hoping she was hanging in there.

When I got there, I stopped, staring in shock. Drifts of snow completely surrounded the house. When the hell had that happened? There was a small, narrow tunnel up the porch, and I realized I’d have to crouch down to get my massive wolf form through it.

I was baffled, but I was home, and relieved. I could get Kira some help, and I was finally back with Cali.

I shifted back to human and was able to carry Kira in my arms. But, when I muscled open the front door, it opened on total chaos. Pack members were racing around, some toward me, yelling my name. Others were running toward the staircase where Cali was lying, held in Greyson’s arms.

I looked around in shock. What was happening?

“What the hell is going on?” I demanded, striding toward the stairs. Cali looked pale.

Orla looked up at me, noticing me for the first time. “Xavier! I’m glad you’re here—"

“Cali’s shoulder,” Greyson started. “The handprint—”

“What’s wrong with Kira? We’ll take her.”

I looked over to see Rishika and Sage, reaching for the witch in my arms.

“What happened to her?” Sage asked.

“She likely has a concussion,” I said, my eyes back on Cali. She looked like she was about to cry. “What the hell did you let happen to her?” I demanded, looking over at Greyson, my voice a growl.

He flushed red. “I didn’t *let* anything happen. It’s that goddamn Seluna mark. It’s back.”

It felt like my heart had stopped. No, it couldn’t be. Not this. This couldn’t be happening again.

It was the ashes. It had to be.

Guilt filled me like poison. Those ashes had been taken because of me. Because of my damn connection to this whole Duquette business—whatever the hell that was. I was going to have to get the ashes back. I had to fix this. *I had to.*

Greyson was holding one of Cali’s hands, but I took the other and looked into her terrified eyes.

“I am going to do everything I can to fix this,” I assured her.

She nodded, but she looked exhausted. “Where were you?” she asked quietly. “I was so worried about you.”

I shook my head. “You shouldn’t have to worry about me right now.”

I half expected Cali to argue with me on that. She was so protective and strong-willed. I would have *loved* for her to argue with me at that moment, but she only nodded.

“Okay. We can talk later.”

She struggled to her feet—with help from Greyson and me—and started down the stairs again.

Orla rushed forward. “Sweetheart, let me help you.”

Cali leaned gratefully into her mother, and together they headed down the stairs.

Greyson rounded on me. “Where the hell were you, man?”

His tone was almost accusatory, and I bristled.

“I was out doing exactly what I said I would, that’s where the hell I was. I went to see that witch and got more potion to take care of Knox and his clown friends. And it’s a damn good thing I did, because I almost ran into Blaine on the way back here, which means the Samaras are getting bolder.”

“Fuck,” Greyson muttered, frowning. He shook his head. “Maybe Elle was right. *They’re* not waiting for the blizzard to end before they attack—maybe we can’t buy any more time.” He looked up at me. “Do you know what Blaine was up to? Is he still around? In the area?”

I pushed a hand through my mussed hair. “I don’t think so.”

“You’re sure?” Greyson asked.

“No, I’m not sure, but I saw him turning back.”

“Fuck,” Greyson breathed. He looked pissed. “Was he just scouting?”

I shrugged. I hated that I didn’t have any answers to his questions, but I just didn’t—I was as much in the dark about Blaine’s visit as Greyson was. “I don’t know, but I do know we need to do something about this situation, and fast. We can’t just let the Samaras get away with this shit. They’re coming onto our land whenever the hell they want. They’re attacking us—we can’t let them walk all over us.”

“I know that,” Greyson said, looking frustrated. “Is Ava going to enact the plan we talked about, like she promised?”

I nodded.

“Do you think she’ll actually do it?” Greyson pressed.

This time, I felt my anger flare and realized my reaction was almost defensive. I thought of what happened out there in the blizzard, and how much Ava had helped me with Kira. I thought of how I would probably still be stuck in that avalanche of snow if it hadn’t been for Ava and her quick thinking. Part of me wanted to tell Greyson to go fuck himself, but another part of me knew why he was asking. He needed to know the answer to this question in order to make an effective defensive plan. He needed to know if Ava was on board.

I gritted my teeth and nodded again. “She’ll do it. She’s on her way right now. I trust her to do this.”

Greyson looked at me for a moment, then nodded. “Okay.” He glanced toward the windows that flanked the doors, then back at me. “If the Samaras aren’t going to wait out the blizzard, that changes things for us.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Well, we might need to move up our timeline.”

I took this in, then nodded. “Yeah, that makes sense. I hate fucking sitting here. If we keep doing it, I’m going to lose my mind.”

“Then it seems we’re in agreement,” Greyson said. His grey eyes looked cold and determined. “We’re going to attack the Samaras first.”

# Episode 3040

My mom and Artemis helped me into the kitchen and sat me down at the long table. Mrs. Smith appeared as if from nowhere, holding a steaming bowl of soup, which she set before me.

“Chicken noodle,” she said with a smile. “It’s good for what ails you.”  
 I smiled my thanks. I didn’t think I had the strength to speak yet. I felt so worn out after being stuck in that blizzard, and the pain from the burned handprint on my shoulder had sucked away the very last of my energy. I was trying to keep it together, but I was sad, angry, and struggling not to feel completely hopeless. Why was this happening to me? What was going on? Why wouldn’t Seluna just leave me alone? Was this her way of punishing me for not cooperating with her when she’d demanded it? Was it punishment for killing her?

Or was everything coming from some other source? Was there someone *else* behind all this? Could it be whoever had taken the ashes? But that didn’t seem to make any sense, and it didn’t answer any of my questions. Whoever it was, why would they want to punish me? Why would they want to do any of this to me? I knew I’d made some enemies since I’d entered the supernatural world, but I couldn’t think of anyone who hated me enough to orchestrate this kind of long-term torture.

I realized that I was spiraling, and my breath had grown shallow. I was starting to hyperventilate as the anxiety coursed through me. I was so afraid—of everything—and it was making me lose control. I tried to focus on my breathing. *In and out*. Easy. *In and out*. The last thing I wanted to do was freak out my family, and I could see that my mom and Artemis were still staring at me, concern lining their faces.

I gave them a wobbly smile, picked up my spoon, and took a small, slow sip of soup. I wasn’t at all hungry, but I forced myself to swallow. And as I did, I tried to think through all the facts I did know.

The handprint had hurt when it had appeared, but it didn’t seem to be affecting me like the other ones had. It didn’t burn constantly. And though I hadn’t tried to sleep yet, I was praying the dreams wouldn’t return. The pain of the handprint was bad, but it was nothing compared to the torment of the dreams.

I wished I could do another one of those meditation sessions with Kira. I’d been skeptical at first, but it had really helped me.

Oh god, *Kira.* I swallowed a mouthful of hot soup. She’d been hurt when Xavier had come in with her. A concussion, he’d said. I just hoped the witch was okay.

Torin walked into the kitchen with Big Mac at his heels. He beelined for me. “Cali, how are you doing?”

“How are you feeling?” Big Mac asked.

Holy shit. That was a bad sign. I had to look completely *wrecked* if Big Mac was looking at me with so much sympathy on her face. Even the gentle tone of her normally gruff voice freaked me out.

“I think I’m okay,” I said, trying to look it.

“I could always give you another dose of healing magic, if you think you need it?” Torin asked, moving toward me.

I shook my head. “No. Thank you, though. It only worked for a little while, and I don’t want to feel the burn of the handprint reappearing again. That was really painful.”

Big Mac frowned. “Let me take a look at it.”

I nodded, and Big Mac pulled down the back of my robe so she could see my shoulder. She gave a low hum of disapproval.

“I still have some of that dust I used before—the stuff I used to read the aura of your curse. The one you have with Greyson.”

“Which curse?” I mumbled sarcastically, feeling overburdened by how many of those I seemed to attract.

“Does it matter? It worked,” Big Mac said. “Do you want to try doing that now?”

I hesitated. Of course I wanted to know what was going on with me, but I thought of how my magic had backfired into the snow, and then how Big Mac had exploded the chili. I trusted Big Mac, but there was something weird about this storm, and I didn’t want to be exploded.

But I did need to know what the hell this handprint meant.

“How do you feel about your magic right now?” I asked, looking up at Big Mac.

I held my breath, waiting for her to yell at me for questioning her, but the witch only nodded.

“I get why you’re asking,” she said, “but this would hardly use any magic. It’s just a light reading. I’m sure I can control it.” She glanced out the kitchen windows. “Even now.”

I took a deep breath. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

“Cali, sweetheart, are you sure?” my mom asked.

I nodded. “Yeah, I’m sure. I would rather know what’s happening within myself than not. Especially now, when there are so many other uncertainties.”

Big Mac pulled a small pouch out of the pocket of her jeans. She murmured a spell and blew the dust at my face.

I coughed and felt the dust surround me, just like it had the last time. I hoped this was going to work. I really didn’t want a repeat of what had happened the last time Seluna had imprinted her hands on my skin. Or, if that *was* going to happen, I wanted to be prepared.

But I was scared, and my heart pounded wildly in my chest. If I was being honest with myself, I had to admit that I’d barely survived Seluna the last time.

I couldn’t think like that, I reminded myself sternly. I was strong enough to handle this. I had to be. I didn’t have any other choice.

The dust cleared, and I looked up into Big Mac’s face. She was still for a moment, then she hummed.

“Well, it’s not exactly the same as before,” she said vaguely.

I frowned at the non-answer. “How so?”

“There’s a shadow of the signature from Seluna, but it’s almost dark.”

“*Dark?*” I asked.

She nodded. “It’s like the faintest whisper of Seluna’s magic. Like an echo of what was left behind after she died.”

I clenched my hands into fists to stop them from shaking. “So you’re sure Seluna is still dead?”

Big Mac nodded. “Yeah, that I’m sure about. She’s dead. Whatever this is, it wasn’t created by a living entity.”

“Um, that doesn’t sound good either,” I said with a frown. “How can someone dead cast a curse on me?”

She sighed, annoyed. “I don’t really know, I’m not an expert on demons, but this curse wasn’t cast in the way you’re thinking.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I keep trying to tell you, it’s a shadow spell, like the remnants of the spell cast on you before.”

“Like spell leftovers?” I asked incredulously.

Big Mac ignored me. “I think that whatever is affecting our magic is making these shadow spells rise up again.”

This was all my fault. I thought about what Vander had said about the storm, and how until the world was back in balance, things were only going to get worse. Everyone’s power had been affected because of this storm, which was happening because I’d lost Seluna’s ashes. Maybe this was my punishment. Maybe I deserved this.

I felt tears welling up in my eyes, but I swallowed hard and willed myself not to cry. Not right now, in front of Big Mac of all people.

I cleared my throat. “Is there any way for us to get rid of the handprint?”

“Does it hurt?” the witch asked curiously.

“Not exactly, but in the past when I’ve had it, it came with some pretty messed-up dreams. I don’t want that to happen again,” I said.

Big Mac glanced at my shoulder again and rubbed her eyes. “To be honest, this kind of magic is new to me. I can’t really tell how anyone other than the person responsible can get rid of it. But…” She trailed off, and there was something strained about her expression. Like she was unwilling to keep speaking.

“But what?” I asked when she didn’t go on. “What is it? What were you going to say?”

Big Mac’s mouth twisted, and she looked angrier than ever. “We need to figure out what’s actually causing this handprint to rise up again.”

“Yeah, I know that,” I started, baffled. “But what were you—”

“We need to figure it out,” Big Mac went on, “because until we rid you of it, this shadow magic aura will remain with you.”

My heart dropped. “What does that mean?” I whispered.

“It’s going to continue to drain your essence,” she said darkly. “Indefinitely.”

# Episode 3041

**Ava**

The snowstorm raged around me as I ran, but I barely noticed. I was going over the plan in my head, making sure I didn’t miss anything. I couldn’t afford to make any mistakes. I needed to hide the potion flask as soon as I got back. I needed to keep it safe until I gave it to Knox and the others.

The snow was obscuring all the normal landmarks I used to navigate, but when I picked up the scent of the Samara pack, I knew I was getting close. As angry as I was at Knox, I was still worried about my pack, and I hoped they were all weathering the storm well. There wasn’t much shelter, and I hoped everyone’s tents were holding up.

When I made it to the clearing, I saw that the members of the pack out in the storm were all in their wolf forms. Which made sense when I thought about it. If they’d stayed in their human forms, they’d all be freezing their asses off, even in their tents.

I stopped at the edge of the camp clearing. I needed to hide the flask before anyone saw me with it, so I dug at the roots of a tree until I had a hole deep enough to bury it. I dropped the flask in and covered it with dirt, then snow. Only then did I move into the clearing.

*How’s the pack holding up?* I asked when I came across Zeke.

He looked a little surprised to see me, but he nodded his furry head. *Fine, as long as we’re all in our wolf forms. Let’s just hope the temperature doesn’t continue to drop.*

*Where’s Knox?* I asked, looking around. I didn’t see his wolf anywhere.

Zeke laughed. *Oh, the king? He’s in his Airstream, the only place in camp with heat.*

I could hear bitterness in Zeke’s voice as he spoke. I wanted to press—to find out the source and how deep it ran—but I decided it wasn’t the time. I didn’t want to make anyone suspicious of me. Even Zeke, who seemed to be on my side when it came to my disapproval of Knox’s Alpha methods.

I trekked across the snowy clearing to the Airstream. *Knox. Hey, open the door, will you?*

A moment later, the door opened and Knox looked out. He was bundled up in a thick winter parka and a hat, and he frowned when he saw me. “Where the hell have you been?”

*Can I come in?*

Knox gave my wolf a distasteful once-over and shook his head. “Not like that you can’t.”

I sighed. I shifted to my human form and immediately started to shiver in the icy wind. I moved to step into the Airstream, but Knox blocked my way. It pissed me off, but I knew I had to keep it together, so I only raised a brow at him, trying to look impatient and nothing more. He finally stepped aside, still imperious, and let me enter the trailer.

The inside was warm and dry, and I was grateful to be out of the wind. I grabbed a blanket from the couch and wrapped it around myself as I sat down.

Kenny, Zipper, and a few other Knox hangers-on were gathered in the trailer, and they stared at me as I came in. Only Blaine was missing from their little crew.

Dammit. I needed them all together to give them the potion.

Knox towered over me, looking bigger than he normally did in his parka. “Ava, you better have a very good answer to this question: where the hell have you been?”

I shrugged, trying to look nonchalant. “I was breaking things off with Xavier. Officially.”

Zipper frowned at me. “In the middle of a snowstorm?”

“Why wait?” I asked. “I hated that I had any connection with that damn pack. I needed to get rid of the extra weight.”

Knox and the others were staring at me, and I was starting to wonder if maybe I’d laid it on a little too thick. But then Knox spoke.

“So that’s it then?” he asked curiously. “You broke things off with your mate?”

“Yeah,” I answered, feeling all eyes on me. “I did.”

There was a strange pain in my heart as I spoke the words. I remembered a time when I really *had* been asked to turn against the Redwoods—and against Xavier. Back then, I’d sided with my pack without any hesitation, and I’d regretted it ever since.

This time was different. It was going to be different. I kept repeating that to myself, as a comfort.

Knox was studying my face closely, and I felt my heart rate tick up. I wondered if he believed me.

But then he grinned. “That’s right, cousin! Get rid of that Redwood asshole.”

I relaxed a bit as the rest of Knox’s friends laughed along with him.

“So, what have you done to make sure the rest of the pack survives the storm?” I asked, looking around the trailer. There was a pot of hot chocolate on the stove, and Knox and all his friends were well bundled up.

“Oh, everyone’s fine,” Knox said dismissively. “Samaras are tough.”

I stared at him. “Wait, does that mean you haven’t done anything to make sure everyone has enough food? Firewood?”

Knox shrugged. “We’ve got food in here for a few people, and the rest of the wolves can hunt. It’ll be good for them. Help hone their skills for battle.”

I flexed my hands into tight fists, trying to keep myself from scowling. If I’d had any doubts about my plan, they were now completely gone. Knox was a liability and a danger to the pack, and I was more convinced than ever that I needed to follow through.

I took a deep breath and gave Knox a bright smile. “What about me? Can you spare any food for your cousin?”

Knox’s smile faded. “Sure,” he said slowly. “As long as you promise not to eat too much. We have to ration.”

I looked around the Airstream at the empty cans of soda and bags of chips. The trashcan was overflowing with junk food wrappers. These guys didn’t seem to be very concerned about rationing, but I kept my mouth shut.

Knox had just moved toward the tiny kitchen when there was a banging on the door, and it swung open into the storm.

Blaine stepped into the trailer in his human form. My heart hammered in my chest. *I hope he didn’t sense me out in the woods earlier*. I didn’t think he had. I was good at covering my tracks. And at least I finally had the whole gang here to slip them the potion.

“Blaine!” Knox said, looking over. “What did you find out?”

Blaine rubbed snow out of his hair. “It’s exactly as we suspected—the Redwoods are hiding in their little house like a bunch of wusses. They’re all gathered together around the fire, telling stories or some shit. Anyway, one big strike should take them all out.”

Knox gave a whoop of excitement that made my ears ring. Zipper jumped to his feet and punched the roof of the trailer.

“Are you going to attack as soon as the storm lets up?” I asked.

Knox laughed. “No way. We’ll use the blizzard as cover. We’re attacking tonight. We’re stronger, faster, and all around better than them. We can kick their asses in a landslide!”

He held up a glass of amber liquid, and the rest of his crew reached for their own glasses. Every glass contained the same liquid. They clinked their cups together and chugged the drink down like rowdy frat bros.

My heart dropped. Oh god. This was happening so much faster than I’d thought it would. I had to give them the potion.

I’d turned toward the door when Knox called after me.

“Ava, where are you going? Didn’t you want to stay for dinner?”

“Yeah, I just need to grab something from my tent real quick,” I said and dashed out into the storm, shifting into my wolf as I went.

I raced to the tree and dug up the flask as fast as I could, but before I could get it back to camp, I heard the approach of another wolf.

Dammit! I couldn’t get caught out here, digging up a flask. This looked too suspicious. So I took the flask between my teeth and raced into the trees.

The wolf behind me followed, running after me.

Fuck.

I tried to speed up and lose whoever it was, but the other wolf appeared suddenly, blocking my path. It was Blaine. Kenny and Zipper followed him, flanking me.

Then Knox sauntered out of the trees and toward me.

Dammit.

*Hey, guys. I got some special liquor for us to toast with before the battle*, I said, trying desperately to bluff my way out.

Knox stepped toward me, his bloodshot eyes flashing dangerously. *I know exactly what’s in that flask, Ava. And I know exactly what it does. Don’t lie to me. I know about what happened at the Iudicium. Why don’t we be totally honest with one another? I’ll start. I know it was you who tried to sabotage me.*

# Episode 3042

**Greyson**

It was strange, and kind of funny—now that I’d decided we would go after the Samaras, I felt far more confident over the whole affair. I was in my element.

The first thing I knew I wanted to do was make a battle plan, but before I did that, I needed to make sure the Samaras were still in their old camp. With all their movement in the woods and around our pack house, there was no way of knowing what the hell they were up to, or where they’d ended up. It was possible they’d moved camp.

So I was going to go out and double check, and I headed for the door.

“Greyson, hang on,” Xavier said, striding toward me, pulling off his shirt. “I’m going too.”

“I’ll be faster if I just go alone—”

“No, screw that. I’m coming. I’ve got too much skin in this game,” Xavier said, overriding my protests. “Just as much as you do, if not more. Knox has had a bone to pick me with me since he came on the scene. He’s pissed at me for what happened to Nolan even though I’ve told the piece of shit it was Silas. Besides, whether any of us like it or not, it’s me who has the connection with Ava—and she’s our inside man.”

I couldn’t argue with that. “Fine,” I said reluctantly. “But it’s just the two of us.”

“I want to come, too,” Elle said, hurrying out of the living room and toward us. She’d clearly been listening to our conversation and, as she neared us, I could see that she looked determined.

“That’s not a good idea, Elle,” I said. “We have to be quick, and really stealthy.”

Elle looked stubbornly up at me. “I will go with Alpha. I know woods best.”

I glanced over at Xavier. “That’s probably true. And she’s probably survived a lot of storms out in the woods.”

He nodded. “Then it might be good to have her along. It’s pretty bad out there.”

Pulling open the door, I looked out at the storm. It was still raging, but it did seem to be waning a little. That was good. We only needed a small window.

“Elle is cooped up too much in house. Elle needs run,” she finished, and she looked so distraught about it, I was hit with a wave of guilt.

I was supposed to be taking care of her, but I’d been so wrapped up with everything else going on, I hadn’t even given any thought to how hard it had to be for her to be stuck inside the pack house during the storm. And anyway, Elle had supported my idea to attack during the storm, so ultimately, I nodded.

“Okay, you can come too, but that’s *it*. We can’t have the whole pack coming along. We need to keep the group numbers small, and I want to make sure we’re leaving enough wolves here at the pack house to protect it in case Knox and the Samaras pull something while you and I are gone,” I said, looking at Xavier.

Xavier nodded. “Agreed.”

“Who wants mochas?” a voice sang out.

I looked up to see my mom walking toward us with a tray of mochas, but she stopped short and her smiled faded when she saw the three of us standing around like we were in a war room.

“What’s going on?” she asked, frowning.

I hesitated. “We’re heading out to do some reconnaissance on the Samaras,” I admitted.

My mother set her tray down on the slim hall table and looked at us, a troubled expression on her face. “*Now?* Is that a good idea in this storm?”

I understood why she was asking—the storm was still blowing, and she was probably worried—but I nodded. “It is. I’m the Alpha, and this is what I have to do to protect the pack, even if it seems risky.”

My mother sighed. “And is this really *only* about the pack?”

I scowled, but she had me fixed with that mom stare, and I knew I couldn’t lie to her. “I suppose part of it is needing to make sure the Samaras can never hurt my mate again. They *attacked* her. I can’t let that go. I can’t let them think they can almost kill her and get away with it.”

My mother nodded gravely. “I understand, and I don’t disagree, but…” She shook her head. “I don’t want this need for revenge to overtake you, Greyson. The way you were with Dick Wigbert… I know MacKenzie wants revenge against him, too, but I worry about the people I love letting a need for vengeance overtake their good sense.”

“This is different,” I said quickly. “This isn’t a vengeance mission. There are other reasons to attack the Samaras right now.”

She gave me a long look, then nodded. “Then—if you really think it’s what’s best for the pack—we’ll stand behind you. And I’ll be right at the front. But make it quick, so we can move on from this.”

I nodded, and Xavier, Elle, and I all turned toward the door.

“Hey, I was just looking for you guys.”

I turned to see Cali coming down the stairs toward us. She looked at us, her gaze resting on me and the half-open door.

“Wait, where are you going?” she asked.

I shot a quick glance at Xavier. He just shrugged, silently acknowledging that we’d been caught, and now we were going to have to come clean.

But he didn’t offer any explanation, and with a grimace I realized that Xavier was laying all the responsibility of this mission at my feet.

With a sigh I turned to Cali. “We’re going out.”

“*Out?*” Cali frowned. “In this storm? Where could you possibly be going?”

“We need to find out where the Samara pack is—”

“No!” Cali shouted, not even letting me finish. “You can’t go out in this storm! Greyson, I’ve been out there. It’s not safe!”

“I know you’re worried,” I said soothingly, “but this is really important.”

“Why can’t it wait until the storm dies down?” Cali demanded.

“We can’t just sit around and wait for Knox to make his move. He came after you already, and he’s already proven he’s willing to kill you. And whatever he and the rest of his wolves are taking is a game-changer. We need to strike first.”

Cali looked like she wanted to argue, but she clamped her mouth shut. Finally she spoke, though the words were tight, like she was struggling to speak. “Fine. I know nothing I can say will change your minds. I just…” Her eyes grew bright. “I just want you to be as careful as possible. Please.”

I stepped toward her and looked her right in the eye. “I promise you. I will come back to you.”

“I’ll keep him alive,” Xavier added.

I snorted, but Xavier had broken the tension, and with a parting smile for Cali, I headed outside.

Cali stood in the doorway, and I gave her one last look.

*I love you*, I told her as I shifted.

I thought I saw her nod, but an instant later, Elle and Xavier had shifted, too, and the three of us sprinted into the forest We tried to move quickly through the still falling snow, but quietly, too. As quietly as possible.

I was keyed up, and I had to remind myself that this was just a reconnaissance mission. But—that said—if I saw an opening to take out Knox, then I was going to take it. With most monsters, cutting off the head usually stopped the whole beast, and I hoped that would be the case with Knox.

We slowed down as we picked up the scent of the Samara wolves.

*We have to be careful*, Xavier said. *Ava is still enacting her plan, and we can’t give her away.*

I nodded and started moving even more slowly through the trees.

*I’m picking up Ava’s scent*, Xavier said.

I looked over at him. *You’re sure it’s fresh?*

Xavier was quiet for a moment while he thought. *I can’t tell, not with all the snow. It’s covering up everything else.*

He moved forward, his nose to the ground, trying to pick up more details about the wolves. *There were multiple wolves here. I can smell them.*

*There was a fight*, Elle added.

*How do you know that?* I demanded.

*Can smell blood under snow*, she said simply.

For all my refined werewolf senses, there must be something about being a natural born wolf that made Elle’s sense that much sharper. I was glad she had forced my hand in bringing her along.

Xavier stepped forward, too, nosing the ground to pick up something shiny that had been buried in the snow. He held it between his teeth.

*What is that?* I asked.

*It’s the flask with the potion*, he said quietly. He looked around. *But I don’t sense Ava nearby. Something must have gone wrong with the plan.*

# Episode 3043

As I headed upstairs and back to my room, I took a deep breath. I wasn’t going to worry about Greyson, Xavier, and Elle. They were smart. Elle knew the woods like the back of her hand, they knew what they were doing, and they had all promised me they would be careful. So it was totally fine that they were going out. In the middle of a snowstorm. To search out an aggressive pack.

Oh god.

I knew they’d gone with a plan, and I wanted to trust it, but even when we had a plan, things still had a way of going awry.

But it wasn’t going to do me any good to worry about them, so I gave my head a little shake. They were gone, and there was nothing I could do about it. I was still at the pack house, and I had my own issues to worry about.

Part of me wondered if I should have told Greyson and Xavier about what Big Mac had just told me—about Seluna’s shadow magic draining my essence. Whatever the fuck *that* meant. Nothing good.

I’d meant to tell them—that was why I’d been coming to find them—but I’d been distracted when I’d seen them heading out. And I didn’t want to distract *them* with my issues when they needed to focus. Spying on the Samaras in the middle of a blizzard was going to take some concentration. I knew that a good Luna put her own needs after the needs of her pack, and what the pack needed right now was for Xavier, Greyson, and Elle to have a successful mission.

So, for the time being, I was just going to keep Big Mac’s news to myself.

I’d just lain down on my bed when there was a soft knock at the door.

“Come in,” I said, sitting up.

Artemis appeared at the door, and my mom stepped in just after her.

“How are you feeling?” Artemis asked.

“I’m fine,” I started, lying through my teeth. But I stopped myself. I wasn’t fine, and I was going to have to speak to someone at some point. I trusted these two completely, so it might as well be now. I heaved a deep sigh. “I’m not good.”

My mom made a small gasping noise and hurried to my side, dropping down next to me on the bed. “What’s wrong, sweetheart? Is it the mark on your shoulder? Does it hurt?”

I shook my head. “No, that’s fine. But Big Mac did a kind of aura test on me, and she said that Seluna’s magic is still with me—her shadow magic. It’s still with me, even though she’s dead. And if we don’t restore the balance to the world, I’m going to have to keep dealing with the consequences.”

Artemis shook her head, her expression dark. “That’s bullshit. I can’t believe this is happening all over again.”

“I wonder if there’s something that can be done to clear the aura,” my mom murmured, speaking more to herself than anyone else. “Maybe I can come up with something.” She looked up at me. “And we have Torin, as well. Maybe he went about the healing wrong, earlier. Maybe we have to heal the aura, not the skin.”

I looked at her, feeling hope spring up for the first time in days. “Maybe. I wonder if that’s possible. Last time we did the aura dust thing, it seemed like there was no way to fix it.”

My mom thought about this for a moment. “Still, it’s worth a try.”

I nodded. “Yeah, it is. Thanks, Mom.”

My mom pressed a kiss to my forehead. “Maybe you should get some rest, sweetheart. You look exhausted.”

I looked down at my hands in my lap. “I’m kind of scared to go to sleep,” I admitted hesitantly.

“Why, Cali?” my mom asked, smoothing my hair behind my ear.

“The nightmares. I don’t want to have those again. What if they come back, just like the handprint did? And now with Kira out of commission, I can’t do any of those meditations to keep them away.”

Tears welled up in my eyes, and my mom drew me into a hug.

“You can’t think like that, Caliana. You can’t keep yourself up at night worrying about all the what-ifs. You just have to take care of yourself.”

I knew my mom was right, but I was so scared. And I needed to tell my family about the ashes. I’d been holding it in for so long, but it was an important piece to this puzzle.

“There’s something I need to tell you,” I started. “When Seluna died, something else happened.”

“What?” Artemis asked, frowning.

“Do you remember when Greyson brought back the ashes, and the shed had a bit of a pyromaniac moment?”

“Yeah,” Artemis said slowly, and my mom nodded.

“It’s because Seluna’s ashes were in there, and still volatile. They’re still somehow tied to me, and we were trying to get them back into the demon world. Xavier, Greyson, and I were trying to handle it, but then the ashes were stolen, and we have no idea who took them. So the handprint could be just the beginning.”

I trailed off as tears streamed down my face. It felt like I was being haunted by so many curses—Seluna and the *due destini*. And I didn’t know when any of them would end.

“I’m just so tried of worrying about these curses and when they’ll make me lose my mind. I just wish I could go back to being normal.”

My mom gave me a sad smile. “Oh, sweetie, you’ve never been anything as boring as normal. You’re special.”

I stared at her for a moment, then I smiled, laughing through my tears. “Yeah, maybe. Maybe it would be all right to be a little less special, though.”

“We’ll all do everything we can to make sure you aren’t harmed by these demons, Cali,” Artemis said fervently. “And if there’s anything I can do to get those ashes back, I’ll do it.”

I gave my mom and my sister a watery smile. “Thank you. Both of you. I’m really glad I have you both on my side.” I was still scared, but I felt better having opened up to them.

“If you want your dad and me to stay a little longer, we will,” my mom offered.

“God, I hope this won’t be drawn out that long,” I said with a shudder. “I just want to hold on to hope that we’ll figure everything out soon.”

My mom nodded encouragingly. “That’s the spirit.”

Then, in my head, I heard Xavier calling to me using the mind link.

*We’re back, Cali.*

I jumped up and raced for the stairs, leaving my mom and Artemis staring after me in confusion.

“Cali!” my mom called. “What’s going on?”  
 “The boys are back!” I cried happily, and hurried down the stairs.

Xavier walked through the door just as I hit the foyer, and I jumped into his waiting arms. I was so glad he was back, and safe.

After a moment, I pulled away from Xavier and hugged Greyson hello.

“Wait,” I said, pulling away from Greyson now. “How are you back so fast? Did you get everything you needed?”

Greyson frowned. “We should gather the pack. I only want to have to explain this once.”

That didn’t sound good.

Five minutes later, the whole pack was gathered in the living room. Greyson stood in front, and he looked around somberly.

“The Samaras have moved camp. It looks like they moved as soon as the snow let up, which isn’t a good sign.”

“What did you find?” Sage asked.

“We canvassed the area closer to the pack house and didn’t find any sign of them having set up any kind of a temporary war camp close to us.”

This was met with silence.

Finally, Rishika spoke up. “What do you think they’re planning?”

“We’re not sure,” Xavier said. He stood next to Greyson and held up a steel flask. “But our plan to neutralize their magic booster has failed.”

I looked at the flask in his hands. “Is Ava okay?”

I didn’t like Ava, but I also didn’t want anything to happen to her. I knew Ava didn’t want things to go this far, either. She didn’t want a war. She wanted all of this stopped.

Xavier shook his head, and I could see he looked anxious. “I don’t know.”

My heart went out to Xavier. This had to be hard on him.

“What’s the plan now?” Ravi asked, getting right to the point.

“We always knew that the plan with Ava and the potion wasn’t a guarantee. There were a lot of moving parts. But we know we have to go on the offensive, because Knox is going to fight dirty. He’s already proven he’s more than willing to do dishonorable things, so we can’t give him the chance.”

“The Redwoods are ready,” Rishika said, her voice firm. “We’ll attack whenever you give the signal.”

“Hang on,” I said, anxiety coursing through me. “If the Samaras are super strong from their wolf steroids, or whatever the hell it is, how exactly are we going to beat them?”

# Episode 3044

**Xavier**

I raised an eyebrow at Cali. “Now *that’s* a great question.” I turned to Greyson. “What *is* our plan to fight them now that they’re all amped up?”

My thoughts couldn’t help but go to Ava, despite not wanting to. She was with the Samara pack right now—what would this mean for her? My wolf wanted to run out of here and act. He’d tear anyone apart who hurt her.

I pushed the thoughts down, waiting for Greyson to respond.

“Are we going to fight them knowing what they are?” Ravi asked. “Just let them kick our asses?”

“What about magic?” Violet put in. “Maybe that would help?”

Cali shook her head. “I wouldn’t count on it. Everyone’s magic has been pretty up and down lately. As demonstrated by the chili incident. And the snow incident. There have been a few incidents.”

“Maybe we could do some covert operations,” Jay suggested.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Like, guerilla warfare style,” Jay said.

“We could do all that,” Lola pointed out, “but none of it negates that wolf steroid they’re all juiced up on. When the rubber meets the road, they’re still playing dirty.”

“But if magic is wonky right now, could that have any effect on the potion they’re taking?” Charlie asked.

Every eye turned to Big Mac, who was sitting in a wingback chair near the fireplace. She scowled and shrugged. “How the hell should I know? The dust I used to measure the aura worked fine, so whatever’s happening with everyone’s magic probably just has to do with freshly cast spells. And Fae magic seems to be affected, too. That’s all I’ve noticed, so far.”

There was a general murmur as everyone took this in.

“I know what I’d do if I was Alpha,” I announced loudly.

“What?” Jay asked.

“I’d take out Knox. I’d isolate him from the rest of the pack so there’s no one to lead them. The dissolution of the pack will just take care of itself from there.” I glanced at Greyson. “Remember what we were talking about—about cutting off the monster’s head?”

Greyson nodded. “I remember.”

“That makes sense to me,” Jay said. “Even if Knox is super strong on whatever shit he’s on, we can take him down if there’s a bunch of us working together.”

“Hang on,” Cali spoke up, “I don’t like that idea if it means killing anyone. Even Knox.”

“I know that’s how you feel,” Greyson said wearily, “but sometimes we have no choice. It’s like with Silas, or Letifer, or…”

He trailed off, but Cali’s face went pale, and she finished the sentence for him.

“Or Seluna?” She swallowed hard. “Look what my killing her has gotten us,” she said, her voice going high and tense.

She was obviously upset, and I stepped toward where she was sitting on the couch. But before I reached her, she held up her hands.

“I’m fine,” she said shortly. She took a breath and gave her head a quick shake. “If this is really the only way to prevent more bloodshed, then I’ll go along with your decision.”

Greyson nodded. “Good. Then that’s the plan.” He looked around. “We’ll try to separate Knox from his loyal followers and take him out. Once he falls, the others will too.”

Everyone gave a murmur of assent, and the meeting was over. The pack got to their feet and headed out of the living room, heading upstairs or into the kitchen.

“Rishika, Jay, you two stay behind,” Greyson said. “We need to make a plan to send out a small scouting group to find out where Knox is. He’s likely at the Airstream, but the storm could have forced him and the others out.”

“I’ll go,” I said quickly. “I know the Samara land better than most from my time with Ava.”

Greyson nodded. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

It was a strange moment of total agreement between us.

“Okay, I’m going to go get ready,” I said. “And then be ready to take the group out.”

Everyone nodded, and I headed upstairs to my room, wanting a quick shower before going back out into the cold. But when I opened the door, Cali was inside. She looked like she’d been pacing, but she stopped and turned when I walked in.

I took a deep breath and stepped forward, ready to explain why we’d chosen to go with a plan she was so clearly opposed to. I knew she hated anything that involved killing anyone, but I think she forgot that sometimes it was a necessary evil in the wolf world.

But I didn’t have a chance to say anything. To my surprise, Cali stepped forward and looked up anxiously into my face.

“I’m here to check on you,” she said.

This stopped me. “What?”

“I want to make sure you’re okay.”

Baffled, I frowned down at her. “To make sure *I’m* okay? Why would you be asking me that? I should be asking you,” I said, remembering how upset she’d looked at the pack meeting.

She nodded. “Yeah, I was upset, and I still don’t love the plan. But I know that this is what the supernatural world sometimes demands, and I want to live in this world. So I’m trying to suck it up and just deal with all my feelings about killing people. But I can do that on my own time.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I can’t let my personal feelings about this hold you back. And I can’t let it affect what happens to the pack when I know Knox is dangerous,” she said, worry creasing her face.

“Don’t worry about Knox,” I said soothingly. “That’s not your fight.”

Cali sighed. “Are you going to go out with the others to look for him?”

I nodded, and Cali looked down at her feet. It was clear she didn’t like that, but—like she’d just said—Knox was dangerous. What choice did we have?

“I’m leading the scout team, but I’m going to be fine. Just like before.”

Cali looked up at me. “And what about Ava?”

“What about her?” I asked, trying to keep a neutral expression as my wolf howled inside me to go out and find her.

“She had the flask with the potion, but now we have it. Doesn’t that mean something happened to her?”

I thought about this for a moment. “I guess it does, but Ava’s a strong wolf. I’m sure she’s fine.”

Cali bit her lip. “But is she?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“What if Knox found out what she was doing?” Cali asked.

This question hadn’t occurred to me, and my wolf reacted protectively at the thought. If Knox harmed even a hair on Ava’s head…

“I know that I haven’t always been her biggest fan, but Ava’s been good at helping the Redwoods deal with the Knox situation. She’s really put herself on the line.”

I listened hard as she spoke. I knew that none of this was easy for her to say, and I thought before I answered.

“She told you she didn’t want this fight to happen, right?” I asked.

“Yeah, and why would she?” Cali said. “Her pack has been torn apart once already. For once, I’m on the same page as Ava. Which is weird. And I’m worried about her. Which is also weird. But no matter what issues there have been between us, I don’t want her to get hurt. Ava doesn’t deserve that.”

“No,” I said slowly. “She doesn’t.”

It was a genuine surprise to hear Cali speak like this. Something of my thoughts must have shown on my face, because Cali flushed.

“I know, it’s weird, but I’ve really come to much more of an understanding about Ava. I’m not worried about her anymore. There was a time when I was really insecure about you and her, but I’m not anymore.”

“How do you feel about her now?” I wondered.

“Now I just feel sorry for her,” Cali admitted. She winced. “I know that doesn’t sound super nice, but—Ava has no one. Not even her cousin. And if we kill Knox, she won’t even have her pack.”

“You’re worrying too much, Cali,” I said quietly. “I know what you’re saying, but if everything goes well, then Ava will be safe, too.”

Cali took a shuddering breath and nodded. I leaned down and pressed a kiss to her lips. My wolf howled in approval at this, and I didn’t blame him. Maybe it was the quiet of the room or the knowledge of what I was about to face, but that kiss just felt so good. I pulled her close, and Cali just melted into me, her body molding to fit mine. I could feel the tension she was carrying in her shoulders as I ran my hands up her back, but her kiss was full of passion and urgency. And I knew why.

I was certain we would win against Knox, but every time there was any kind of a battle, there was always the risk that one of us might not come back. We all lived with that fear. And knowing that, I also knew that this kiss with Cali—any kiss with Cali—couldn’t be taken for granted.

# Episode 3045

The way Xavier was kissing me—deeper and deeper, plunging his tongue into my mouth while holding me tightly against him—made me feel like things were about to get dirty. *Fast*. He pulled me into his lap, and I gladly straddled his hips. His hands locked me into the position, and it was all I had not to ask him to stay. But before I could, he pulled away.

“Let’s not,” he breathed. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“*Hurt me?*” I asked, confused. My brain was befuddled by lust, and lagging behind the conversation a bit. “How would you hurt me?”

“The handprint,” he said, running his fingertips gently across my back, avoiding the handprint. “I know that took a lot out of you—on top of everything else today.” He pressed a kiss to my forehead. “I just want you to be okay.”

I wanted Xavier—badly—but I knew he was probably right, as much as I hated to admit it. I took a deep breath, trying to cool myself down. “And I don’t want to distract you. Not when you’re about to leave on this mission.”

He shook his head. “You’re not a distraction, Cali. You’re the whole reason.”

I frowned. “What do you mean? Reason for what?”

“Reason I do anything—everything,” he said. “You’re my compass.”

I wasn’t expecting this response at all, and it took my breath away for a moment.

“I love you, Xavier,” I said when I could speak again. My face flushed warm.

He smiled and brushed a finger down my cheek. “I love you too. I don’t want to leave you, but I have to do what I have to do.”

“I know.” I leaned over and kissed him, my love for him swelling up in my chest.

“I’ll be waiting for you when you get back,” I said quietly. “With open arms. But for now, I’m going to let you get ready.”

I kissed him one last time, then left the room. I closed the door quietly behind me and stood for a moment in the hall, silently praying he’d come back soon.

Then I headed downstairs, where I found Greyson in the living room, speaking in a low voice to Artemis, Jay, and Lola.

“—and you’ll need to make sure the wolves staying behind don’t let up on any of the defenses. We can’t let up while I’m out scouting with the others because a Samara attack is imminent. We might need to increase our surveillance, just in case. We don’t want to make ourselves vulnerable.”

I dropped onto the couch next to Artemis and listened as Greyson and Rishika went over the patrol schedules.

“What exactly is going to happen after this scouting group finds Knox?” I asked when they’d finished.

Greyson pushed a hand through his light hair. “We’ll separate Knox however we have to from his loyal followers. But given the fact that Knox and his guys will all be juiced up, if we need reinforcements, we’ll have to call for backup. Artemis and Torin will be set up on the second floor with their bows to take out any wolves who might attack from long range.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, thinking through the plan. “And how is the extraction crew going to get close enough to Knox to get him away from his pack?”

“We’ve got some ideas, but we’re just going to have to figure out that part of the plan once we see the lay of the land,” Greyson said simply.

“And what about Zeke and Hector?” I asked.

“What about them?” Greyson responded.

“Didn’t they warn Charlie and Violet, earlier? Maybe they’ll help you and Xavier—especially if it means avoiding a war between the packs.”

Greyson frowned as he considered this. “It’s a possibility,” he said slowly, “but we can’t depend on it. At the end of the day, Zeke and Hector are still Samaras, and whether they want this war or not, there’s no telling how deep their loyalty runs.”

“I know,” I started, “but if they disagree—”

“There are a lot of wolves out there who see their Alpha as symbolic of their whole pack. Which means they’re loyal to their Alpha, even if they don’t always agree with his choices.” Greyson thought for a moment. “But I wouldn’t reject the possibility that Hector or Zeke might end up siding with the Redwoods. Knox has demonstrated that he’s a terrible leader for that pack, and those two seem smart enough to see that.”

Greyson looked over at me, and I saw that the expression in his eyes was sympathetic.

“I know you’re looking for a way to get through this without killing anyone,” he said. “I know the thing with Seluna freaked you out, so if we can get some of the Samaras to side with us, then I’m open to that. As long as their goal is the same as ours: to remove Knox from power.”

I nodded, feeling relieved that Greyson hadn’t dismissed my suggestion outright, and that he was at least willing to try to reason with the members of the Samara pack.

I just had to hope that those members—and maybe others—would agree with Greyson. I really wanted there to be a way to remove Knox as Alpha without anyone having to resort to violence.

But I also wasn’t naïve enough to forget how the supernatural world worked, and how quickly things could go sideways during covert operations.

And at the end of the day, I’d rather have my mates free to defend themselves than have them out there with their hands tied behind their backs when things got bad because of my moral hang-ups.

“Okay, defensive strategy meeting over,” Greyson said, standing up from his chair. “And while I’m gone, Jay’s in charge around here.”

Jay pumped his fist in pretend victory, which made Lola laugh.

“Alpha for an hour,” she said. “I guess I’ve always been attracted to powerful wolves.”

“And the rest of you can now address me as ‘Oh Captain, my Captain,’” Jay said imperiously.

The rest of us laughed at this, and I was glad to have the chance to stretch my face into a smile. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d done it.

Greyson shook his head, looking half-amused, half-annoyed. “I’m going to get a glass of water.”

Getting to my feet, I followed him into the kitchen.

“Do you want something?” Greyson asked, opening a cupboard. “Tea? Something to eat?”

“No, thanks, I’m fine,” I said. “I just wanted to thank you.”

“For what?” he asked, his brow wrinkling.

“For caring enough about my concerns to change your plan.”

He filled his glass under the faucet. “Your concerns are valid, love, and you make a good point. If there’s a way to resolve this without any bloodshed, then that’s what I want, too.”

“Really?” I asked.

He nodded and took a long drink of water. “You provide very good council, Cali. You bring up lots of things we don’t think about, or don’t give ourselves a chance to think about. You’re going to make an amazing Luna one of these days,” he said with a smile.

I felt myself glow with pride at his words, and I rose up on tiptoe. He still had to bend a little, but I managed to kiss his cheek.

“I don’t want you to worry about me and the others when we’re gone, okay?” he said. He finished his water and slid the glass into the dishwasher. “We’ve got this. Most all of us have experience with missions like this, and with tracking people across much longer distances. We’re all professionals—or at least semi-professionals.”

I leaned against the marble countertop. “I’ll try not to worry, but I’m not going to make any promises.”

Greyson stepped toward me and took my hands in his. “I want to finish all this stuff with the Samaras so we can focus on you, love.”

“What?” I asked, taken aback. “What are you talking about?”

His grey eyes searched my face. “I know you’re worried about the handprint coming back. I want this thing with the Samaras done with so we can figure out this issue with Seluna once and for all.”

Understanding now, I nodded. “But don’t rush anything. I don’t want you getting hurt because you’re thinking about my problems. I’ve got them handled for now,” I said, though that wasn’t strictly true.

Greyson must have sensed this, because he gave me long look. “You sure?”

I nodded. “I’m sure. I’m going to talk to Kira about it. Torin says she’s doing really well, and healing up fast.”

“That’s good news,” Greyson said. He smiled down at me and leaned in like he was going to kiss me, but before he could reach me, Rishika, Charlie, Ravi, Elle, and Xavier tromped into the kitchen.

“It’s time to go,” Xavier said as they came in. He looked at Greyson. “You ready?”

# Episode 3046

**Ava**

My head throbbed with intense pain, and as I opened my eyes into sudden consciousness, I tried to think through what the hell was going on. Then it came back to me—someone had coldcocked me from behind.

*Fucking coward.*

I glanced around, trying to collect as much information as I could, though it felt like my brain was processing it achingly slowly. I wasn’t out in the snow anymore. I was still freezing my ass off, but I was lying on a wood floor. A warped, burnt wood floor. Around me were the burnt remains of the Samara pack house. Shit.

I started to sit up, but a voice behind me made me freeze.

“Well, about fucking time,” Knox snapped.

I sat up quickly and jerked around, but the sudden movement made my head spin dangerously. Whoever had hit me must have gotten me pretty hard. But I gritted my teeth and mustered my wits.

“What the hell, Knox? What’s your problem? Why’d you knock me out and drag me here?” I demanded.

Knox glared at me. “You can quit it with the innocent act, Ava. I know everything.”

Shit shit shit. My stomach dropped, but I knew the only defense I had was denial, so I couldn’t give in. And Knox probably didn’t actually know anything—he was probably just trying to scare me into a confession. I just couldn’t believe he had any actual proof.

“Listen, Knox, I don’t know what kind of game you’re playing here, but I don’t want any part of it,” I said, putting up my hands.

Knox’s bloodshot eyes flashed, and he lurched toward me. “I know you were the one who slipped me some kind of potion,” he hissed. “It weakened me during the Iudicium.”

I shook my head, but that was a mistake. It made me so dizzy, I thought I was going to throw up. “I would never do that,” I managed. “You’re my *cousin*, Knox. You’re my flesh and blood. We’re family. You’re bringing the Samaras back together, exactly what my brother would want, and that’s all I’ve ever hoped for since coming back.”

“Exactly. So why the fuck would you sabotage that, Ava? For your mate? For your stupid fucking mate? Clearly your blood isn’t so thick.” Knox paced away, but when he rounded on me, I could see he looked more than angry—he looked enraged. “You’re jealous of how powerful I’ve become. Jealous of how everyone wants me as their Alpha, and everyone wants to follow me. I have something you can never have,” he spat furiously. “The Samaras would never let a *woman* lead as Alpha.”

I scowled at his words. He wasn’t wrong, but he was using those words as a weapon. I didn’t like it. The rule against female Alphas was antiquated at best—and Lunas were more than just a way for an Alpha to get an heir—and backward as hell at worst. But leading the pack wasn’t even something I wanted. Not for me, anyway. I had wanted it for my brother.

Knox was just trying to get under my skin—that much was clear. I remembered complaining to Nolan and Knox when I was younger about the lack of female leadership. I’d probably even mentioned it to Xavier, back in the old days. But Knox was delusional if he thought the only reason I didn’t want him to be Alpha was because of jealousy.

“I don’t feel that way anymore,” I said. “I just want what’s best for the Samaras.” My voice broke as I said this, because—despite all the lying I’d been doing—that part was completely true. Restoring my pack was all I’d ever wanted.

Knox stopped pacing and lunged toward me, shoving his face into mine. “Nothing you say will make me believe you, Ava. Not now, and not ever again. And I know exactly how to handle a traitor like you.”

He snapped his fingers, and Kenny, Zipper, and Blaine all stepped forward. They were all in human form, and they picked me up. I struggled against them, but their hands held me like iron shackles. Whatever was juicing them up was making them very, very strong, and I was no match for it.

“Come on, Zipper,” I said, looking into his face. “Don’t do this.”

Zipper scowled angrily at me. “Shut up,” he snapped.

I was still fighting hard, but he and the others walked me toward what had once been the wide backyard of the house. There was snow everywhere, but I realized there was one section of the yard that had been cleared.

As the guys walked me closer, I could see that the area hadn’t just been cleared of snow—someone had dug a deep pit in the hard ground. I looked into it—it had to be at least twelve feet deep, and my eyes widened at the sight of it.

I was surprised to see the rest of the Samara pack gathered around the pit, though I saw that some of them looked deeply uncomfortable. Almost as though they’d been gathered there against their will.

Hector and Zeke were there, standing side by side, and they looked at me with dark, worried eyes. A couple of pack members wouldn’t even look at me—their eyes were averted, looking down into the hole.

I looked, too. It was so deep—too deep to have just been dug. This would have taken time. Which meant that Knox had had this prepared in advance. It had been waiting for him, and he’d had someone actively keeping it clear of snow. It was almost like he’d known he would have to punish someone.

I looked around desperately. “Can’t you see what he’s doing here?” I called out. “He’s going to rule this pack with martial law! We can’t let him!”

“Shut the fuck up!” Knox spat, and slapped me across the face with so much force that it took my breath away. “Traitors don’t have the right to speak to the pack! You should have stayed loyal, Ava! You could have picked us—your pack—but you chose your stupid mate and his weak-ass pack! But you bet on the wrong horse, girl, because soon the Redwoods are going to be obliterated by the new, stronger Samaras!”

The guys had hauled me right to the edge of the looming pit, and when I realized they were really going to throw me in, I started to struggle in earnest. I had to get the hell out of here.

I half shifted to my wolf form and used the element of surprise to yank myself out of Kenny and Zipper’s iron grip. For a half-second I considered racing into the forest, but I decided against it. I would never make it—I was surrounded.

I spun around to face Knox, who was red in the face.

“Why won’t you fight me one-on-one?” I demanded. “Are you scared of little old me? Afraid a *woman* might beat you?”

Knox growled and stepped toward me. When his lackeys moved to grab for me again, he held up his hand, keeping them at bay.

“I’ll gladly take you on, dear cousin, but I have to warn you—this time I’m not holding back.”

“That’s fine by me,” I hissed, and without waiting another instant, I leapt on him, clawing at his face.

My claws dug into his flesh, and I saw him wince, but he batted me away as easily as a mosquito. I felt my shoulder pop with the force of his blow, and I went flying. I landed hard, and Knox was on me in a second. He pinned me to the ground and put his arm across my throat, choking me.

“Why did you do this to me?” he bellowed. “We are *family*! Family should be there for each other!”

I gasped and clawed at Knox’s arm, but he didn’t budge.

“What did you mean?” I managed, my voice a choked whisper. “What should have been easier? Tell the truth, Knox—did you cheat during the Iudicium? Did you take whatever potion you’re obviously still on?”

Knox bared his teeth and snapped at me. He was practically foaming at the mouth, and it was clear he was barely suppressing his desire to rip my throat out. He looked insane—his eyes were so bloodshot, they were more red than white, his skin was yellow and sallow, and he was pouring sweat despite the freezing temperature.

“I did what I had to do,” he snarled, “to make sure the best Alpha was chosen for the pack.”

I dragged in a tortured breath. “So you did cheat,” I gasped out.

Knox’s face flushed even darker, so he looked nearly magenta with fury. “It doesn’t matter that I cheated!” he screamed, spit flying from his mouth. “It doesn’t matter! I’m the Alpha now! And you all have to obey me!”

He looked completely deranged, and without another word, he picked me up and flung me into the pit.

# Episode 3047

I stood in the doorway and watched until Xavier, Greyson, Ravi, Rishika, Elle, and Charlie had all disappeared into the swirling snow.

I knew it would be useless to worry about them—there was nothing I could do from the pack house—but I also knew that I wasn’t going to be able to stop myself from worrying about them.

“Cali?”

I looked over to see that Violet had appeared at my elbow. “Hey, what’s up?”

Her expression was sympathetic. “Maybe we should keep ourselves busy making the defensive plan?”

It suddenly occurred to me that Violet had to be worried, too. After all, Charlie was her mate, and he was also part of the extraction crew.

I gave her what I hoped was a brave smile. “That’s a great idea.”

I followed her down the hall, and when I glanced into the living room, I saw that Sage, Zainab, and Lilac were busy boarding up the tall windows so no one could try to use them as an entry point.

We kept walking to the kitchen, where I found Artemis at the counter, sharpening her knives. Big Mac, Marta, and Dani were standing together at the stove and looking into the largest pot we had. Steam was billowing from the pot, and there was a strong, acrid smell in the air, which made me think the pot held a potion of some kind.

“Is that a potion?” I asked, alarmed by the sight of it. “Is that smart? I mean, couldn’t the magic backfire and, like, take us allout?”

Big Mac looked over at me and rolled her eyes. “Calm down, girl. It’s not a potion, it’s just regular science.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“My moonshine happens to be pretty flammable,” she explained. “And we figured it could come in handy as fuel for small explosives if we need some to use against the Samaras.” She shrugged. “If it comes to that.”

“Oh, okay,” I said. It was strange that hearing her explain that they were just making bombs made me feel butter, but I liked that plan better than magic.

Torin came rushing into the kitchen just then, his arms full of protein bars. He handed one to everyone as he moved quickly through the room. “Eat up, everyone! You need to keep your strength up!”

“What kind do you have?” Dani asked, peering over.

“Almonds, one with no nuts for allergies, one that’s completely vegan, and this one that has nuts and chocolate.”

Dani thought for a moment. “No, thanks.”

When he turned to me, he looked crestfallen, so I took a bar even though I really didn’t want one. This had the intended effect, and he smiled, looking pleased, like he was relieved he could help at all.

Lola was at the kitchen table, and I walked over to where she was sitting with Jacs, looking over a pile of chains with rusted handcuffs.

“—do you think that if we drank the blood of a wolf on magic steroids, we’d feel the effects of the steroids, too?” Jacs was asking casually.

Lola looked up at her, horrified. “I don’t know. Why?”

“Why not?” Jacs asked, shrugging. “It’s a fair question.”

Lola shook her head. “There’s no way that would work.”

Jacs shot her a mischievous grin. “Well, there’s only one way to find out.”

“What’s happening here?” I asked, breaking into the conversation just as it looked like Lola was going to blow her top. I gestured at the chains on the table. “What’s this?”

Lola sighed. “These are left over from the experiments Emmett did while he was here. They’re the restraints he used on infected wolves. They’re supposed to be really strong, so that the sick wolves couldn’t break free and start rampaging around.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “So why do you have them out?”

“We figure if Knox is brought back alive, we need a way to contain him,” Lola said.

“Oh, that makes sense,” I said, but made a mental note to make sure I wasn’t the one on handcuff duty.

I wanted to get away from the chains, so I headed out the back door. Jay was standing on the back porch with my dad, and they were in the middle of a conversation.

“—I just think that the trenches we dug are probably all filled in with snow by now.”

“Do you think we should redig them?” my dad asked.

Jay looked out at the snow. “I don’t think it’s going to be worth it, not if the snow keeps up like this.”

My dad followed his gaze and looked thoughtfully out at the snow. “I wonder if we should go back to your spike idea. That really wasn’t bad at all.”

The door behind me opened, and Lola stuck her head out. “Jay, Mrs. Smith wants to talk to you.”

“Yeah?” Jay asked.

“I think she wants to make sure everyone’s eating enough so they’re at full strength.”

Jay nodded. “Okay. Coming.”

He and Lola headed in, and I stepped over to my dad.

“How are you doing, Dad?” I asked, taking his hand. “Do you need anything?”

My dad smiled at me. “I’m fine, pumpkin.”

Guilt was coursing through me like poison. I couldn’t help but feel that I was responsible for bringing my parents into this dangerous world.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” I said quietly.

“For what?” he asked, frowning.

I gestured vaguely. “For all of this.”

He shook his head. “You don’t have to apologize, Cali. I’m a wolf now, too. This is my world as much as it is yours.”

“Do you really feel that way?” I asked, surprised.

He nodded. “I do. And I love this pack like my own family, now. I’m grateful to have all of them in my life.”

I smiled. “I’m really glad to hear that, Dad. I’m glad that you’ve connected with the pack like that. I was worried for a while there that you and Mom would never approve of Xavier and Greyson. But it’s different now. It’s like we’re all family. A real family.”

My dad nodded. “I was a little surprised myself at how ready I was to embrace everyone. It’s going to be bittersweet when your mom and I head back home. And I’m glad that you’ve found people who are always by your side, pumpkin, but…” He trailed off, his expression troubled.

“But what?” I asked.

He hesitated for a moment, then shook his head. “Nothing. It’s not worth discussing now. I just know that one day, you’re going to have to make a choice. And whatever choice you make, I’m always going to stand by you. You’re my little girl.”

My throat had gone tight, and I felt tears burning in my eyes. I stepped toward him and wrapped my arms around his middle. I was glad to have such an amazing father.

He hugged me back for a long moment, then gently pulled away. “I’m going to go inside and see if Torin needs any help on snack duty.”

Dashing tears from my cheeks, I nodded. “Okay.”

I didn’t follow him in. I stayed on the porch for a moment, trying to pull myself together before I went back inside. But as I stood out there alone, looking out at the snow as it blew sideways across the white-covered landscape, I wondered if I had made a mistake. My thoughts were racing, and anxiety was creeping in again. Maybe I shouldn’t be alone.

What was happening to Greyson and Xavier right now? Where were they? Were they safe? Had they found the Samara pack yet? What if they’d been attacked? And what about this storm? It seemed weird and magical—could it have affected them somehow?

I could feel myself starting to spiral, and I gave my head a firm shake. I couldn’t do this. I couldn’t let my fear take over. I needed to keep it together—not just for myself, but for the rest of the pack, too. They were looking to me for leadership, and I needed to be strong.

I’d just turned to go back inside when I heard a noise behind me. It was coming from the yard beyond the porch, but I couldn’t tell what it was. All sounds were muffled, and I narrowed my eyes as I looked out into the blizzard.

“Who’s there?” I called out, but the wind seemed to whip my voice away as soon as I spoke. I waited for the wind to die down for a moment and tried again. “Hello?”

There was no answer, but the sound came again.

Or I thought it did. It was hard to tell. Maybe I’d just been imagining it.

Maybe I had been, but my heart was racing as I turned back toward the house. I reached for the door and yanked it open, intent on rushing back into the warmth of the pack house, but before I could, something hard and cold hit me from behind. An instant later, blackness consumed me.

# Episode 3048

**Xavier**

For the first time in what felt like far too long, I was in my element. I’d been itching to take down this little shrimp for so long, and *finally*, my patience was paying off. Of course, it would be even better if I were leading the attack rather than Greyson, but I wasn’t going to let that small detail get me down.

I was finally going to smash that shithead’s face in. Nothing could ruin my mood.

Even though the storm had let up, the going was still difficult. I pushed through snowdrifts higher than my haunches, but I kept moving quietly and carefully. The last thing I wanted was a repeat of what had happened with Kira and Ava. One avalanche was more than enough.

My brother’s voice slipped through my mind. *Be on the lookout for any sign that might lead us to the Samaras.*

*Yeah, yeah.*

I didn’t need reminding. What I *needed* was to come face-to-face with Knox and rip his fucking throat out. Put an end to that sad excuse for an Alpha before he caused any more trouble, or put anyone else I loved in danger.

I knew Cali wouldn’t be thrilled about it. Despite the fact that the asshole had tried to have her killed, she still didn’t want us to kill him. She still thought his life had value when that piece of shit would have had her killed a thousand different ways if it were up to him. I loved her for that—her compassion. Her empathy. How earnestly she wanted to believe that the world was a kinder place than reality had proven it to be.

But as much as I loved her, Cali wasn’t a werewolf. She didn’t understand the customs and culture that came with inter-pack conflict. She didn’t understand what it meant for someone to go after your mate, the non-removable target that it put on your back. Hell, even if I changed her right now, she still wouldn’t understand how fundamentally Knox had crossed a line. One he couldn’t come back from.

Greyson might’ve been thinking of this as a pack war, but it didn’t go that far for me. This was about Knox. He was a cancer on the Samara pack, and we were going to remove him. Pack wars, by nature, were largely impersonal fights. This couldn’t have been more personal. I was going into this thing with one thing on my mind, and one thing only: Knox.

*Do I have to worry about you being distracted with Ava being MIA?* Greyson asked.

I couldn’t hold back the instinctive snarl that rumbled through my chest. Still, it was a fair question. I *was* worried about Ava. The blood and abandoned potion flask didn’t exactly bode well for her.

My wolf growled again at the thought of Ava being injured.

*Save our mate*, he snarled at me.

Maybe Greyson was right to be worried about me, if my wolf and I couldn’t get on the same page.

But this was just one more reason to finish off Knox. I could stamp out a parasite, find out what had happened to Ava, and please both myself *and* my wolf. A win-win-win.

Not that I’d ever admit any of this to Greyson. He might’ve been the Redwood Alpha—for now—and hell, I might even claim him as my brother on occasion, but he didn’t get a say where Ava was concerned. That was my shit to deal with, and I didn’t appreciate him sticking his nose in.

*You should be more worried about Elle*, I said. *You want to micromanage someone, start with the pack member who’s still basically feral. She is unpredictable, and that could be a huge liability in this fight.*

*I’ll worry about Elle*, he replied easily. *You worry about keeping your focus where it should be.*

As we neared the old Samara camp, I tried to mind link with Ava. But she was either too far away, or the dense, deep snow was making it difficult for us to reach each other.

*There is a third option. She could be dead.* I shoved the thought aside. I didn’t want to linger on it, for a multitude of reasons. But mostly, it was too ridiculous to think of. We still had the mate bond. I could feel it, stronger than ever—for better or worse. If she’d been killed, I would have felt something.

We slowed as we approached the old campsite. The mere sight of it pissed me off. It was yet another reminder that Knox had been able to get away. If my brother had just listened to me, Knox would have been dealt with already. We wouldn’t even have been on this wild goose chase.

*When I’m Alpha, I won’t be taking weak half measures.*

Charlie paused and nodded up ahead. *I can see what looks like a trail, but I’m not sure if it’s recent or old.*

Greyson scented the air, then turned his gaze back on the group. *Everyone, circle the site. See if you can pick up anything fresh, anything that might lead us to the Samara pack’s new location.*

Ravi, Elle, Rishika, and Charlie spread out, moving cautiously through the snow.

I didn’t move. There were more than enough bodies spread out in a search. If there was a trail to be found, they’d find it. Instead, I listened and mind linked to Greyson, *This is a perfect spot for an ambush.*

*You’re not wrong*. *But I think if the Samaras were truly waiting for us, they would have attacked already—plus I would hope that Charlie would have seen some sign of them.*

*I hope so too. Either way, I’ll be ready.*

Miss an opportunity to bust some Samara heads? Hell no.

I looked around from my watch post, breathing deeply to try to draw in any scent at all, but I kept coming up empty.

Charlie chuffed at us and nodded again. *I found a path.*

We all converged on his location, and there they were—small, faint ridges in the snow that indicated the Airstream had been moved. A light blanket of snow was falling again, and I glanced up at the grey-white sky.

If this snow got any heavier, we were going to lose what few tracks we’d managed to find.

*This is the only lead we have*, Greyson said, addressing the group. *I think we should follow it and see if it’ll take us to the Samara pack’s new location. I can’t imagine they could have gone far—the snow alone would have made it too difficult.* He nodded at Charlie*. Take the lead. Everyone, be on your guard. We don’t know what lies ahead.*

As I fell in line behind Greyson, I allowed myself to imagine what it would be like if our positions were reversed. What it would be like if I took charge of the pack.

If I were Alpha, we wouldn’t even have been here, because I would’ve already ripped Knox’s fucking throat out. But just as a mental exercise, I considered what I would’ve done if I were in Greyson’s shoes at this moment.

I probably would’ve done just what Greyson was doing now, but they would’ve been my orders, not his. And that made all the difference in the world.

*When this latest crisis is over, it’ll be time to move forward with my plan to become the Redwood Alpha.* It was probably long overdue at this point. How long had it been since Greyson had backed out of our Lupo Finale? I wanted a chance to face him fair and square, to get it out in the open and make sure everyone knew who the real Alpha was.

Of course, I couldn’t very well jump into that immediately once we were done with Knox, because we still had to recover Seluna’s ashes, but it was something I needed to start planning for.

As we continued deeper through the snowbound woods, Charlie kept stopping and starting again. *Sorry, it’s getting more difficult to find the tracks.*

We started up again, and I thought I heard the whisper of a voice in the back of my mind.

I paused. *Ava?*

The woods were silent, save for the huffing of the other pack members. I pulled in a deep breath and tried to focus. I mind linked again.

*Ava?*

Once again, I got no response. *Maybe I just imagined her voice.* Maybe it was because my wolf wouldn’t stop thinking about her.

Greyson looked back at me. *What’s wrong?*

*It’s nothing.* I kept walking before my brother could give me another lecture about staying focused. It definitely didn’t look good that we’d barely made it a mile and already Ava was distracting me.

Having phantom voices in my head—whether they were real or imagined—was not going to help.

Elle’s growl drew me away from my thoughts. We came to stop as we all turned toward her. She was scenting the air and staring out into the woods to my left.

I followed her gaze—something was moving behind the tree line.

Rishika growled, and I swung around to see what she was reacting to.

*Shit.* So much for flying under the radar. Wolves made their way out of the trees, snarling, eyes blazing. We were surrounding on all sides by Samara wolves, and there was no way out.

# Episode 3049

When I came back to the world, all I felt was pain. My head throbbed, my shoulder burned, my neck was sore, like I’d lain on it wrong, and I felt a dull ache across my ribcage.

I slowly blinked my eyes open, wincing at the bright, flickering light in front of me.

*Where the hell am I?* I certainly wasn’t at the pack house. With a groan, I pulled myself into a sitting position. The snow had melted, and a campfire was burning just a few feet away—the source of the bright light that was making my skull pulse. It had been fed recently. The flames reached high into the air, and swirls of smoke drifted upward, occasionally blowing in my face and making my headache a thousand times worse.

I swallowed against my dry, parched throat and looked around. Nobody was here. I was all alone… Except I wasn’t. I felt a certainty, a deep instinct that connected with the prickling sensation on the back of my neck.

I wasn’t alone. Someone was here. Watching me. But try as I might, I couldn’t hear or see anyone.

“Xavier!” I called out, my voice hoarse from disuse. “Greyson?”

Nothing answered back but the crackling of the fire.

I tried to mind link with my mates. *Greyson? Xavier? Can anyone hear me?*

Once again, I was met with silence.

With a groan, I climbed to my feet. The world around me spun for a moment, and I squeezed my eyes shut, pulling in deep breaths as I tried to stay upright. The pulsing in my head reached a fever pitch.

When everything stopped spinning, I cracked my eyes open and heaved out a breath. Exhaustion and pain threatened to pull me under again, but I fought against them. I still had no idea where I was or how I’d gotten here. Plus, I probably had a concussion of some kind. Weren’t people with concussions not supposed to sleep?

A chill slipped down my spine, so I inched closer to the fire. It only took a couple steps for the heat to become too much. It licked across my skin, and the smoke burned my eyes. I tried to cover my eyes and back away—only I couldn’t move back. All I could do was keep walking, step by step, closer and closer to the bonfire.

The smoke was so dense, I choked on it. Ash filled my mouth, and my vision blurred with hot tears. My shoulder ached along with the rest of me. The foul scent of burnt flesh filled my nostrils.

I drew in a breath to scream, but instead, a cackle of laughter ripped out of my throat as I stepped into the fire. White-hot agony burned across my skin, my nerves, my muscles and bones as I was slowly consumed by the flames. And still, I kept laughing until I could no longer breathe.

Until my body turned to ash.

My eyes snapped open on a gasp that turned into a rattling wheeze. Blood blurred my vision, and what little I could see seemed to rhythmically pitch from side to side. Instead of that searing, bone-deep heat, I was cold and wet and shivering.

I blinked slowly as I came back into consciousness. Disoriented, I tried my best to bring myself back to reality. *Focus, Cali!* I told myself. I gave my head a small shake and tried to get my bearings. There was trail of footsteps and the rhythmic crunch of snow around me. A masculine scent that I wasn’t familiar with. And pain. Bright, sharp pain that lanced across my skull with every lurch, and an echoing dull ache across my ribs.

And then it hit me. I was being carried through the snowy woods. But by whom?

I tried to speak, but my mouth was dry. It was taking all of my strength just to stay conscious. I didn’t have it in me to make my voice heard.

My body was draped over someone’s shoulder, fireman style. Strong arms held me in place by my legs, and my body bounced with each step.

“Greyson?” I rasped, my voice no louder than a whisper. “Xavier?”

Blaine’s harsh voice cut through the quiet of the snowbound forest. “Keep your mouth shut—you don’t want to make things worse for yourself.”

Horror rocked through me, and adrenaline poured in. I threw my head back with a scream. “Help me!”

Blaine lurched to a stop and swung me around like a ragdoll. My bones rattled as he shook me, hard. “I told you to shut up,” he hissed. “Nobody can hear you out here, and you’re just pissing me off.”

I weakly pushed at his grip on my shoulders, at his chest, but it was no use. He physically overpowered me even when I was in top form, and right now I’d never been further from that. His hold on me tightened to the point that I was sure bruises would bloom when he let go.

“Stop struggling!”

I tried to summon my magic. I didn’t care what shape I was in—I would blast this guy into another dimension just to get him away from me. But I couldn’t feel it. Couldn’t reach it. My head was bleeding and throbbing, and I couldn’t think clearly for long enough to find that well of power inside me. What the hell had this guy done to me? And how had I ended up with him anyway?

My mind flashed back to me standing on the porch. I’d thought I’d heard something in the yard, and it had creeped me out. I’d been on my way back to the safety of the house when pain had thundered through my skull, and then there’d been nothing but darkness and silence.

*Blaine must have snuck up on me and knocked me out. But why? Where is he taking me?*

“If you don’t stop this *right now*, I’m gonna—”

I gathered up what little saliva I had in my mouth and spat in his face. I didn’t care what his threats were. There was no way I was going to make this easy for him. I lashed out at him with my hands, clawing at every inch of exposed skin I could find, then kicked at his legs. But it was no use.

He just slapped me so hard my vision flickered, then threw me over his shoulder again and kept marching me through the snow like I was nothing more than a stuffed animal.

“My mates are going to hunt you down!” I growled. Whatever reservations I had about killing Knox didn’t apply here. If I could’ve killed him right now, I would have.

He laughed. “Your mates aren’t going to be able to help you. Chances are, they’re already dead.”

Ice poured into my veins. “What are you talking about?”

*He has to be bluffing. He’s trying to scare me. And dammit—it’s working!*

“By now, your mates will have been ambushed by Knox and the others. They’re sitting ducks, and then my pack will tear yours apart.”

I didn’t believe him. I *couldn’t* believe him. Greyson and Xavier and the others were experienced—and at times, vicious—fighters. They wouldn’t be stupid enough to walk into a trap. And even if they were ambushed, they’d fight their way out. No, Blaine had to be lying to me. Or he was just that cocky. Either way, his threats weren’t worth listening to.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Oh, you’ll see soon enough.”

I tried to look around the forest as Blaine kept walking. I had to get my bearings, even though it was hard to reorient myself with the pulsing pain in my head. I knew we were in the woods somewhere—genius, Cali!—but I was being held nearly upside down, and most of what I could make out was snow.

Yet there was something familiar about this place. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it, but I was pretty sure I’d been here before.

If only I knew what Blaine had in store for me. I could only imagine it was something truly horrific, befitting of him and Knox. I tried to summon my magic again so I could blast him away from me and try to make my escape, but the harder I reached for that well of power, the worse the pulsing in my head became.

My stomach lurched and threatened to heave itself up.

“If you don’t put me down, I’m going to throw up all over your back.”

He let me roll off his shoulders, and I hit the ground hard. Pain zinged up my side, from my hip to my shoulder, and the breath sputtered out of my lungs.

He smiled down at me. “Is that better?” His pupils were dilated, and his smile looked unhinged.

I bit back a groan as I crawled onto my hands and knees. I reached for my magic again, but the more I tried to harness it, the worse I felt. The world began to spin, and I tumbled forward into a pool of darkness.

I was only dimly aware of Blaine lifting me up and slinging me over his shoulder again. I couldn’t fight it this time. I drifted in and out of consciousness, punctuated by each lurching step he took through the snow.

Then, suddenly, the rhythm stopped and I was falling, falling, falling—

*Thud*.

The air rushed out of my lungs as I hit the ground. I thought for sure I was alone, trapped, but I whirled around when I heard a soft voice call my name.

“Cali?”