**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 24 - Part 2**

**Episodes 3050–3063**

# **Episode 3050**

**Greyson**

There was no missing the scents of the Samara pack now that they were practically on top of us. I could have kicked myself for not realizing sooner that they were so close. How the hell had they avoided detection for so long?

The multitude of scents wafted over to me amid the fresh snow that fell around us.

Elle’s hackles were raised, and she was snarling as more Samaras appeared all around us, emerging from the cover of the trees. Ravi, Rishika, and Xavier all positioned themselves to attack. Elle looked like she was waiting for one move from me, and she’d mow down anyone in her path. Charlie seemed confused and shocked—he was probably just as taken aback by the Samara pack’s ambush as I was.

I ground my teeth together. *What a fucking shitshow.* We’d come out here to face Knox—not his entire pack—and instead we’d practically gift wrapped ourselves for them.

Xavier’s voice slipped through my mind. *I count about eight Samaras. I recognize a few of them, including Perrie. She’s just a teenager. I have no idea what the hell they’re thinking, bringing her out here for this.*

I scanned the clearing and came up with the same count. We were outnumbered by two, and while I normally wouldn’t have worried about those odds, right now it seemed like the Samaras had an almost insurmountable edge on us.

Rishika, Charlie, Ravi, and Xavier were the best fighters the Redwood pack had to offer, but we weren’t fighting run-of-the-mill Samara pack members. They were juiced up on that strength potion, or whatever the hell it was, which threw our odds even further out of balance.

Plus, I had no idea how Elle would fare in a fight like this. She might have been a ferocious wolf before she was changed, but she still wasn’t used to her new werewolf body. She hadn’t had a chance to test out her newfound strengths. Not to mention the tactical edge werewolves had over their more primal counterparts. If Elle wasn’t paying attention, even the weakest Samara could beat her through brains alone.

I probably shouldn’t have let her come, ultimately. I’d thought this would be simple, that she’d come along to observe only, and that it’d be easier to just let her come rather than tell her no and have her sneak after us. Like Xavier had said, she was unpredictable. And I couldn’t imagine a scenario in which that was a good thing for this fight.

And now that we were facing down a squadron of super-charged werewolves, Elle suddenly seemed so vulnerable. If anything happened to her, it would be on me.

But it wasn’t like we had a lot of choice, here. We could flee—and hope they didn’t chase us down, hope we’d get another opportunity to put Knox in his place—or we could fight.

Maybe we didn’t have a lot of options, but that didn’t mean choosing one was easy.

*Form a circle*, I ordered the group.

Snarling and growling, the Samara wolves moved closer, following the movements of the Redwoods. I recognized a few of them but didn’t have the first idea of what their names might be.

My conversation with Cali suddenly rushed to the forefront of my mind. I’d told her I’d try to avoid bloodshed, but that was pretty much off the table now. I didn’t see how we could avoid violence at this point. I’d have to ask forgiveness later, but war was war. Even Cali could understand that.

I mind linked with the Samara pack members*. If you attack, you will all be responsible for starting a pack war. Is that what you truly want?*

The Samara wolves’ only response was to crouch down. They were readying themselves to attack.

And then, in a blur, Elle burst into action. She rushed at the nearest Samara wolf, snapping at its fur as she slammed into it. From there, all hell broke loose as the Samara wolves went on the offensive and we scrambled to counter.

I tried to find Elle, to make sure she was okay, but my paws were full. I faced down a powerful werewolf who had to be magically enhanced. He was so fast I could barely track him, and he put me on the defensive almost immediately, skittering away to avoid getting my throat ripped out.

I followed the wolf’s movements, searching for a pattern. He might’ve been big and fast and mean, but every fighter had a weakness. I’d learned that early on in my underground fighting days. Now I just needed to figure out what the hell this guy’s was.

And… there! The pattern locked into place, and I knew what to do. As he continued to lunge, I continued to stay just out of reach of his razor-sharp claws and teeth. Then, I used my momentum to jump toward him when he least expected it. My teeth sank into his scruff, and I flung him toward a thick tree trunk.

The breath wheezed out of his lungs as I rushed toward him.

Behind me, the all-too-familiar sounds of battle filled the air, along with the metallic scent of blood. I slammed into the werewolf again, and we rolled across the deeply packed snow, each of us scrabbling for the upper hand.

I knew better than to look away from my opponent, but I couldn’t stop myself from glancing over to check on Xavier. He also had his hands full. He was taking on two werewolves at once and was actually managing to hold his own.

I was impressed. I was just short of having my ass handed to me by this behemoth.

*Shit!*

I snarled involuntarily when my opponent’s teeth sank into my leg. Fortunately, the bite didn’t go deep. I used the momentum of his grappling hold on me to counter, sinking my teeth into him without mercy. Fur and flesh gave way, blood filled my mouth, and his cry echoed through the clearing.

Then he kicked me off him, howled, and broke into a run.

*Fucking coward!*

I scrambled up in time to see Ravi ripping one of the Samara wolves’ throats out. Another wolf howled, and the group began to retreat.

Xavier rushed up to me. Blood was dripping from his mouth.

*We’ve got to follow them while they’re on the run. They’ll lead us to where we need to go, and then we can finish them off and find Knox.*

It’s wasn’t a great plan, but it wasn’t the worst one either. We’d already landed in one trap and managed to turn the tide. Even if the Samaras were leading us on a chase, we had proven we were more than a match for them. *Follow me, everyone!*

We broke into a sprint, following the retreating Samaras.

This time, tracking them through the woods couldn’t have been easier. Their pawprints were fresh in the snow, along with blood from their wounds. My small group of Redwood wolves had really held their own, despite being outnumbered and not having the benefit of the witch steroids. And yet they’d still managed to make the big, bad Samara wolves go running with their tails between their legs.

Clearly, there was a superior pack here, and it wasn’t the Samaras.

With that thought in mind, I picked up the pace. There was something both tempting and primal about the idea of finishing them off before they made it back to their camp, then hunting down the man responsible for causing all of this bloodshed. And that was werewolf instinct at its finest—kill or be killed. There was nothing simpler than that.

Knox was going to wish he’d never so much as heard of the Redwood pack, because I certainly had no intention of dying out here. I’d return to the pack house triumphant, and I’d hold Cali in my arms again.

And this time, I’d sleep well knowing I’d made the world a slightly less dangerous place for the woman I loved. Yes, we’d still have Seluna to deal with when this was all over, but if I could get Knox out of our lives, and his target off Cali’s back, then all of this would have been worth it.

As I closed in on the Samara wolves, I detected movement from behind a thicket of trees in my peripheral vision.

More Samaras were coming at us. I wasn’t sure how many—maybe three or four. What the hell? Had they called for backup or something?

A horrifying thought hit me. *Was this their plan all along? To lure us deeper into their territory and set us up?*

I mind linked to warn the others, but then a huge Samara wolf slammed me into a rock. Another one was ready and waiting to pin me down.

I struggled beneath their grip, looking up at the bloodthirsty faces of the wolves who wanted nothing more than to kill me. Despite my Alpha strength, I couldn’t move either of them. They were too strong, too amped up on whatever the hell was in that potion.

The larger werewolf reared back, flashing his teeth, and dove downward to tear out my exposed throat.

# **Episode 3051**

I felt like a fish out of water. But not in a quirky, narrative way. As I heaved and wheezed on the ground, trying to force my lungs to crack open and draw in breath, I felt like I was drowning on dry land.

“Just relax, Cali. Breathe,” the voice said.

Right. Because I definitely hadn’t already thought of that. With a shuddering gasp, my lungs wrenched open and I gulped down air.

“Slower. You’re going to hyperventilate.”

I cracked my eyes open to tell this person that I knew damn well how to breathe and that maybe they should try living through the last ten minutes that I’d experienced and let me know how they’d react—and froze.

A very naked Ava was leaning over me, her eyes wide. “Are you all right?”

*Oh my god. I’ve died and gone to hell.*

“Here. Try to sit up.” Ava was surprisingly gentle as she looped an arm around me and helped me to sit. I groaned at the variety of aches complaining across my body and looked around. We were in some kind of big, deep hole in the ground. Xavier had told me that Ava had gotten herself into some kind of trouble, and now it was looking very much like I’d gotten involved in that. This couldn’t be good news for either one of us.

I looked up at the edge of the hole that Blaine had thrown me into. Honestly, it was a miracle the fall alone hadn’t killed me.

*Yeah, that dude’s definitely on my shit list.*

Ava looked me over with more concern than I’d known she was capable of. “You look like hell.”

*Right. There’s the classic Ava charm.*

“Thanks,” I muttered.

“No, I’m serious. Xavier and Greyson are going to eviscerate Blaine when they see you like this.” Her gaze lingered on the blood staining my hair. “Are you hurt anywhere? Your head doesn’t look so good.”

I gingerly inched away from her. At this point, it’d be easier to tell her where I wasn’t hurting. “He knocked me out and threw me in here. Do you have any idea why we’re here?”

Ava sat back, her expression twisting like she’d just tasted something sour. “Knox turned against me. He took a wild guess that I was the one who drugged him. But I honestly don’t know what he has in store for either of us. I didn’t know you were involved until Blaine tossed you down here.”

I slowly rose to my feet, gritting my teeth against all the parts of my body that begged me not to move, and looked around. “Do you think we can climb out?”

“I’ve already tried—both as a human and as a wolf. The walls are too steep, and there’s nothing to get a foothold on. I tried using my claws, but they dug this thing so long ago, apparently, that the ground is frozen now. I don’t suppose your Fae powers include flight?”

I shook my head, then winced at the movement. “Unfortunately, no. Maybe you can give me a boost and together we can reach the top?”

Ava shrugged. “I’m willing to try just about anything.”

She walked over to the nearest wall and crouched down so I could stand on her shoulders.

*Never in a million years did I imagine Ava and I would be teaming up like this. Xavier’s never going to believe this.*

My head pulsed dully as I climbed onto Ava’s shoulders, but I did my best to ignore it. I was a little worried about hurting her, but she took my weight without complaint and stood upright. She wasn’t big, but she sure as hell was strong. It felt just as secure as standing on a brick wall.

I stretched upward, trying to grab a handhold, to get some purchase close to the edge, but the top of the pit was still out of reach.

“I can’t reach it!”

Ava carefully helped me down, and I heaved out a breath.

“There has to be some way out of here,” I said.

Panic began to creep in at the edges of my mind. As if being assaulted, abducted, and tossed into a goddamn pit in the middle of a snowy forest wasn’t enough, now I was facing the prospect of spending my last moments on earth with Ava.

This was not acceptable!

I started pacing the circumference of the pit, suddenly feeling new sympathy for tigers caged at the zoo.

My mind flashed back to Xavier calling me tiger after he’d seen my stretch marks for the first time, and tears burned my eyes. *Will I ever see him again?*

And what about Greyson? *Will he ever find out what’s happened to me?*

I felt Ava’s eyes on me as I paced, but I didn’t comment. I didn’t have anything to say to her in the best of circumstances, and this was definitely nowhere near the best.

“I’m sorry,” she said, breaking the silence that had settled between us.

I paused and frowned. “It’s not like you threw me into the pit. This is all Blaine and Knox.”

“Yeah, well, I fucked up. I wasn’t able to get the potion into the Samara wolves’ drinks—if I’d pulled that off, none of this would have happened.”

I blinked, then slowly shook my head. “No… That’s not your fault. There were a lot of factors. You shouldn’t blame yourself.” I pulled in a breath. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I believe that you did your best to help us. And that’s the most any of us can do. You have nothing to be sorry for.”

Ava snorted. “What is it they say about strange bedfellows?”

I leaned against the wall and slid down to the ground, sitting upright. “Tell me about it. It does make me wonder, though…”

“Wonder what?”

“Well, if things were different between us—and they’d have to be *really* different—do you think you and I could ever have become… friends?”

It was such a bizarre thought. The words felt wrong the moment I said them, and yet… maybe there was some truth there. Maybe, in a different world, Ava and I wouldn’t have had so much standing between us. And without that, maybe we could have been… Well, not whatever we were now.

“Hmm.” Ava sounded surprised. “I suppose if we’d met earlier, it would’ve been possible. If you weren’t so annoying.”

*By earlier, does she mean before I found out Xavier was my mate? Before the pack war? Before things between her and Xavier ended so tragically?*

I guessed she kind of had to be referring to that.

“I suppose a lot of things could’ve been different,” Ava mused. “But thinking about what might have been isn’t going to help us escape.”

“You said you tried shifting, but you weren’t able to get a foothold, right?”

She nodded.

“What if you could jump out?” I suggested, hopping to my feet. “What if you shift and use me as a springboard? Maybe you could reach the top that way?”

Ava shrugged. “I guess it’s worth a try. Either way, it’s better than feeling sorry for ourselves.” She shifted in a blur of cracking bones.

*If only she could stay shifted all the time, so I don’t have to look at her stupid perfect naked body.*

I braced myself against the wall of the pit. “Show me what you’ve got.”

Ava backed up, then paused, seemingly waiting for some cue from me.

I nodded. “I’m ready.”

She rushed forward and leapt onto my shoulders with her gigantic wolf body. I nearly collapsed from both the pain and the weight of her wolf form. Her claws cut into my shoulders as she lunged upward and scrabbled up the side of the pit.

Clumps of dirt tumbled downward and fell on me as Ava tried to claw her way to the top. Ultimately, though, she fell short—and how did that phrase go? What comes up must come down?

The breath was knocked out of me for the third time in one day as Ava came crashing down on top of me.

She immediately shifted back to human, but she didn’t get up. “Are you okay?”

I looked up at her with a wheeze. Her naked body was pressed against me. I didn’t know where to look, where to put my hands. “Can you get off me?”

“Sorry!” She rolled off, and I turned my gaze to anything but her.

“I’m banged up,” I said, “but I think it’s worth trying again.”

She shook her head. “It’s no use. I still won’t be able to reach the top. Seems like we’re really stuck.” A shiver ran through her frame, and I saw goosebumps rise on her skin. Apparently, naked human Ava wasn’t immune to the cold like she was in her wolf form.

*But if she shifts back, we won’t be able to talk… Hmm… That could be a good thing.*

“You can sit with me,” I offered. “I’ll share my coat.”

And that was how I ended up snuggled up next to Xavier’s first mate with my coat wrapped around the two of us. Ava was still shivering.

*If we’re still here when night falls, we’re going to freeze to death.*

The crunch of snow at the top of the pit caught our attention. I looked up. “Hello! Is anyone there? Help!”

There was no response.

I shrugged out of my coat, leaving it wrapped around Ava, and stood. I cupped my hands around my mouth, ready to shout again when suddenly a snake tumbled down from the edge and hit me in the face.

*WHAT FRESH HELL?*

I drew in another breath to scream, and then I realized it wasn’t a snake.

It was a rope.

# **Episode 3052**

**Greyson**

*This is it. Everything’s come down to this.* I was going to die here, in the snow, far away from the woman I loved.

Everything moved in slow motion as the Samara wolf lunged toward me, his fangs flashing. I couldn’t move, couldn’t free myself. Couldn’t defend myself against what I knew would be a fatal blow.

And instead of focusing on that attack, my mind flashed back to all those moments with Cali, a montage of laughter, tender moments, and the fantasy of the life we’d have together that I’d been clinging to for so long.

*At least I got to spend some of my time on earth with her.* The last few months had been one challenge after another, but thanks to Cali, they were easily the best of my entire life. I might’ve been dying, but I had no regrets. There weren’t a lot of people in the world who could honestly say the same.

I knew, in my heart, that Cali would be okay. She’d mourn my loss, of course, but Xavier would take care of her. He’d protect her. And maybe it was better this way. Because now she wouldn’t have to choose.

She could be happy, whole. No longer torn between my brother and me.

After all this time, all this fighting, all this desperate hope for that perfect future with my mate, I finally understood. This was how it was supposed to be. How it had to be.

It was meant to be me.

The Samara wolf’s teeth sank into my neck—and then, in a blur, something slammed into both of us and my attacker went flying. Another blur flew over me in pursuit of the wolf who’d almost killed me.

*Elle.*

She’d saved my life. And now she was ripping into my attacker, looking every bit the feral beast she was. I scrambled to my feet to take out the wolf who’d been pinning me down. The shallow bite the Samara wolf had left in my neck was already starting to close. I reared back and slammed the wolf into a rock, knocking him out. When I turned to help Elle with my attacker, she was already standing over his body, her mouth dripping red.

She mind linked, *Are you okay, Greyson?*

Any worries I had about Elle holding her own in this fight vanished. She was as strong and as fast as any of the other Redwood wolves, and a hell of an asset to this pack, and I, for one, was grateful to have her at my side. If she hadn’t been here, I probably would’ve been the one bleeding out on the ground.

I owed her. Big time.

*Yes*, I replied. *Thank you.*

Now that the threat of death had been put off for a little longer, I looked around to take stock of the fight. Nearby, Xavier had subdued his two attackers and was in the process of cornering another Samara wolf. Ravi slammed someone into a tree, and they crumpled to the ground, unconscious, while Rishika had another wolf pinned to the ground.

This clearly wasn’t shaping up how the Samara wolves had expected, and some of them were trying to make a run for it. Charlie went after one of the deserters, pinning them to the ground, and biting their throat until they went limp with submission. We weren’t done with them—not even close.

I stalked over to the wolf pinned beneath Rishika’s paws. He was breathing hard, and his fur was stained with blood. Whoever this guy was, he’d be an easy kill. But, as tempting as it was to put an end to anyone who tried to hurt me or one of my pack, I had to remind myself I wasn’t out to kill the Samara pack. I was trying to *save* them.

I mind linked with Rishika. *Restrain the wolf, but don’t kill him.*

Then I mind linked with the trapped wolf. *You have two choices here. You can help us get Knox, or you can die. Which will it be?*

*You don’t understand*. The wolf whined. *I can’t just turn against my Alpha.*

I nodded toward the werewolf Elle had killed. *Is this what you want? More death? I get that it’s rare for a pack member to turn against their Alpha. I know it’s not in your nature. We all take oaths of loyalty, and we mean to follow them. But does Knox truly deserve your loyalty?*

*Our hands are tied. Knox is still the Samara Alpha.*

I didn’t miss the way he’d sidestepped the question. I bit back a growl and addressed all of the wolves via mind link. *I don’t want to kill any more of you. That was never my intention in coming here. All I wanted was to remove Knox as Samara Alpha. My pack and myself are fairly certain that Knox didn’t win the Iudicium through honest means. He’s not worthy of being your Alpha.*

Several of the wolves exchanged glances at this, and surprise seemed to ripple through the Samara ranks.

One of them cocked his head. *Are you accusing the Alpha of cheating?*

*I won’t claim to have any concrete proof yet*, I admitted, *but I very strongly suspect it. Let me ask you this: can any of you honestly claim that Knox wouldn’t stoop to that level?*

None of them replied. No surprise there, seeing as half of them were either doped up on the same potion Knox had taken, or they knew enough about it to be suspect. I had to hand it to Knox—if he had one attribute that might be considered positive, it was that he didn’t hide just how much of a fucking asshole he was. He might have cheated at the Iudicium, but he didn’t seem to be trying to hide any of his witch connections, or his willingness to amplify his power with magic.

I might’ve been here to unseat him, to hold him accountable, but it was Knox’s own actions that had alienated his pack.

*No one would fault any Samara wolf who turns against Knox*, I added. *He’s unfit. You all deserve a better leader.*

The group was quiet for a moment, then one of them stepped forward.

*Thank god*, I thought.

*We will help you.* *What do you want us to do?* he asked. *We know that Knox and his closest allies have been boosting themselves with something, but it’s that inner circle...*

Through the mind link, I said, *It’s okay. We just need help* *finding Knox’s location—and we don’t want to run into any more ambushes. Can you lead us to Knox’s campsite safely?* The wolf nodded.

I looked to the rest of the pack. *Do you object with the plan?*

One by one, each of the Samara wolves said no. Music to my ears. This was what we needed. The Samaras who were turning against Knox that weren’t in his inner circle would give us the edge over him. We had more strength in numbers now.

My brother’s voice slipped through my mind. *Are we really going to trust them?*

I knew it was risky to believe that they’d help us, and riskier still to let them lead us through the woods. But I didn’t want to slaughter them. Even one Samara death was more than I’d planned for. I’d promised Cali I wouldn’t kill them.

*I think, right now, it’s our best option. We want Knox—not to fight our way through the whole pack. Knox is the target, the head of the monster. If we want to keep the Samara pack as a future ally, this is our chance to lay the foundations.*

Xavier was silent for a moment, then he finally nodded. *It’s your call. You’re the Alpha.*

I half-expected him to add, *For now.*

Xavier addressed the crowd. *Right now, you’re not part of the Samara pack, or the Redwood pack. Together, we’re something else, and we’re working to stop a senseless war driven by an unfit Alpha. I expect all of you to act honorably and to obey Greyson’s orders. Does anyone have a problem with that?*

The group collectively shook their heads.

*If all goes as planned*, I added, *this war will end today. Now let’s get moving.*

*Since when does anything you do go as planned?* Xavier asked.

I ignored the dig and approached the Samara wolf who’d been the first to switch sides. *It’s your show.*

*Knox isn’t far.* He turned and began to lead us through the woods, and I mind linked with the Redwood wolves.

*Be on alert—if you sense that any of the Samaras are having second thoughts, subdue them quickly, or… do what you have to do.*

We trudged through the snow for maybe a quarter mile before we reached a clearing. The Airstream was parked off to the side, but for all intents and purposes, the site looked abandoned.

I rounded on the Samara wolf with a growl. *Where the hell is everyone?*

# **Episode 3053**

I looked over at Ava for confirmation that she was seeing this too. She looked every bit as stunned as I felt.

I couldn’t believe it. “Someone’s trying to help us,” I said, my voice barely more than a whisper.

Ava blinked at the rope hanging over the edge of the pit. “Sure seems that way.”

That made me do a double take. “You don’t think this is good news?”

She shrugged. “We’re stuck in a pit in the middle of a forest. I wouldn’t put it past Knox and his buddies to try to play mind games.”

“Okay, sure.” I sighed. “But look at it this way: we’re stuck in a pit in the middle of the forest. Do we really want to be picky about our opportunities right now?”

“Fair enough.”

I looked up at the edge again. “Besides, it might be Greyson or Xavier. Maybe they’ve finally found us. Xavier!” I called up. “Greyson! Are you there?”

There was no response.

*Huh. Maybe they’re trying to be discreet, to avoid attracting the wrong kind of attention.*

I tried mind linking with them, but there was only silence there too.

“Someone’s up there. Someone had to have thrown that rope. And there’s only one way to find out who it is.” I grabbed the rope and was about to try to hoist myself up the side of the pit when Ava grabbed my arm.

“Wait. This could be a trick.”

“I thought we just agreed that anything is better than freezing to death in this pit?”

She ignored me and grabbed the rope, pulling it taut and putting her weight into it to make sure it was secure.

I grabbed the rope back from her. “I’ll climb first.”

Her brows rose. “And what if my cousin is up there with his squad? What will you do then? Your magic doesn’t seem to be doing much for you right now. And even if it were working, could you take on multiple amped-up werewolves?”

I hesitated. I hated to admit it, but she had a point. Ava was a werewolf—even if she wasn’t on whatever steroid potion Knox and the rest of them were taking, she’d still stand a better chance at fending them off than I would.

And she was right about both points. My magic wasn’t exactly up to par right now. With my head wound and the magical storm wreaking havoc on my powers, any attempt to use my magic would probably backfire.

But there was another issue at play. I didn’t want Ava to ditch me here, at the bottom of this pit. Despite our shared situation and the fact that we needed to help each other to survive this, could I really trust that Ava wouldn’t climb out, pull up the rope, and leave me behind?

I kind of hated that I even considered Ava capable of something like that, but experience had taught me to be cautious, especially where Ava was concerned.

I tightened my grip on the rope. “Thanks for the offer, but I’m going to go first.”

Then, I started pulling myself up the side of the wall, using my feet to ascend one step at a time. It was easily the most physically difficult thing I’d ever done. My shoulder was on fire as I moved my grip up the rope, and every muscle in my body screamed in protest.

*How the hell did Mulan do this? She must have had abs of steel.*

It was settled. When I got out of this freaking pit—*when*, not *if*—I was going back to Artemis, and she was going to whip me into shape. It had been more than proven to me by now that if I wanted to keep up with all the crazy-ass situations that kept getting thrown my way, I needed to improve my fitness.

The bottoms of my shoes skidded up the side of the wall, and I slipped down the rope a couple inches. My palms screamed from the rope burn, and every other part of my body begged for relief, but I held on and breathed. I was going to make it to the top. If *I* could do it, Ava would have no trouble following after me.

I still had no idea what I was going to find at the top. *Seriously, who throws a life-saving rope down to people trapped in a pit without announcing themselves? Talk about being lacking in basic etiquette*.

I didn’t even know where we were, beyond somewhere in the expansive Oregon forest. But dying in a hole in the ground wasn’t exactly an acceptable option. So I kept climbing. I was nearly halfway up the side of the pit now, with dirt falling down onto my face as I struggled to keep pulling myself up.

I dared to glance down at the bottom. Ava was watching me, her face creased with concern and her arms crossed. She looked like she didn’t believe I was going to make it. She was still wearing my coat and nothing else, and I kind of hated how she was able to pull that ridiculous look off.

I couldn’t wait to prove her wrong. I might not have been a werewolf, but I was strong in my own way. And I could do this.

I looked up again. I could see the rim of the pit, just a few feet away. I was closer to the top than the bottom, now.

*I can make it. I can do this!*

I reached up the length of the rope and grabbed on tight, using the leverage of both the rope and my feet braced against the wall to hoist myself up higher. The rope groaned, and some of the fibers snapped up above me.

*Shit! The rope’s wearing thin!*

I tried to hurry, tried to scramble up the last few feet, but the rope couldn’t take the pressure. It snapped, and then I was falling, falling, falling. I screamed and clawed at the air, trying to find anything to slow my descent.

*This is how I’m going to die.*

Instead of slamming into the cold, hard ground, I bounced off a soft fur coat.

Ava.

She *caught* me.

I rolled off Ava’s wolf and onto the ground. The broken length of rope lay nearby.

Ava shifted back and slipped my coat back on. She must have shrugged it off before she’d shifted.

“Thanks—”

She cut me off. “You can thank me when we get out of here.” She picked up the rope, eyeing the frayed end. “I wouldn’t be surprised if this was my cousin’s doing. What better way to break someone’s spirit than to give them hope that they can escape?”

My shoulders slumped. “I was so close to getting out… Now we’re right back where we started.”

She shook her head. “Not so fast—look.” She pointed to where the remainder of the rope hung from the top, then gestured to me. “Get on my shoulders again. Let’s see if you can reach it.”

I didn’t stop to argue. The walls of the pit were closing in on me, and my need to get the hell out of there bordered on desperation. It didn’t help that I couldn’t feel my frozen, rope-burned hands anymore. We couldn’t spend much longer out here in the cold without taking some measures to warm ourselves, and while I’d never felt quite so warm and fuzzy about Ava before, I still didn’t relish the idea of spooning with her wolf for warmth.

I bounced up and climbed onto Ava’s shoulders. *Holy hell, she’s strong!*

She lifted me up like I weighed nothing, and I stretched upward for the rope. It was still just out of reach, the frayed ends brushing my fingertips.

There was only one solution: I was going to have to launch myself up to grab it. I couldn’t fail this time, and if I missed, I would definitely fail. Maybe Ava would think fast and save me again, but I didn’t like the idea of being any more indebted to her. It was one thing to have my mates step in to save me—having Ava do it was completely different.

I pulled in a deep breath. One jump, and I’d have a way to free myself from Knox’s trap.

Suddenly, I remembered that this wasn’t the first time I’d been kidnapped by the Samara pack. Nolan had kidnapped me too, when he was Alpha.

*It’s getting to be a tradition.*

Maybe I’d been thinking about the Samara pack the wrong way. Maybe they weren’t so inherently good after all. I was reminded of how Xavier had been ready to take them all down, despite Greyson’s preference that this not escalate into all-out war.

In some ways, Xavier’s approach made a lot of sense.

I brushed that thought off. I couldn’t condemn an entire pack because of a few bad apples. Besides, I had something more pressing to focus on.

“Any luck?” Ava asked.

“I’m going to have to jump.”

I felt her muscles tighten below me.

“On three,” I said. “One, two, three!”

I launched myself upward and missed the rope completely. I fell back onto Ava’s shoulders, my knees threatening to buckle.

She grabbed my legs to steady me. “Try again.”

I counted out again, then lunged upward. This time, I managed to grab the rope with one hand. I dangled there, several inches above Ava’s shoulders.

“Come on, Cali! You can do this! Get us the hell out of here!” Ava called.

Summoning all my strength, I grabbed hold of the rope with my other hand and slowly, painfully pulled myself up the side of the pit. When I reached the top and climbed over the lip, I collapsed onto the snow, my chest heaving. I was going to feel that climb for a *long* time.

A voice cut through my thoughts. “What the hell took you so long?”

# **Episode 3054**

**Xavier**

I pushed past Greyson and the others and stormed toward the seemingly empty Airstream. I half-expected Knox to be holed up in there, hiding out while everyone else did his dirty work. It would’ve been the most on-brand thing for that little shithead to do—channeling his inner Nero.

I clawed the door open, ready to rip Knox to pieces, but there was nobody inside.

*Fuck. Now where is he?*

I couldn’t rip the bastard’s throat out if I didn’t know where he was.

Unsurprisingly, the inside of the trailer was absolutely disgusting. Wrappers and empty beer cans were scattered about, and both the sink and the garbage can were overflowing. If the health department ever caught wind of this place, they’d shut it down and call it a public health hazard.

It was kind of shocking, actually, that anyone could see the way Knox lived and still choose him to lead them. If this alone didn’t convince the Samaras not to keep Knox as their Alpha, what would? Everything about him reeked—*literally*—of incompetence.

Maybe we were wasting our time here. Knox might’ve been an arrogant, idiotic little shithead, but he didn’t hide who he was. Aside from cheating in the Iudicium, he had actually proven to be very straightforward in his dealings, which meant the Samaras had to have a pretty goddamn clear idea of who they’d placed in control of their pack.

And the fact that he was still leading them troubled me. If they still backed him when squalor and violence were his default settings, was anything we set out to do today going to move the meter for the Samara pack?

I exited the trailer to let Greyson know our target had flown the coop. My brother was asking the Samara wolves who’d led us here if they had any clue where Knox was.

Nearby, Charlie, Elle, and Rishika were looking around, presumably searching for more clues, or anything else that could help lead us to Knox’s location.

Anxiety itched just beneath my skin. *Is it possible we’ve been set up again?*

I blew out a breath and growled. This was such bullshit, and I didn’t like one bit of it. If I could’ve gone back in time, I would have taken Knox out long ago, before he had the chance turn into the gigantic pain in the ass he was today. I’d certainly had more than my fair share of opportunities to make the world a better, Knox-free place.

My brother mind linked with me. *Do you smell anything?*

I drew in a deep breath. It was easy enough to pick up the variety of wolf scents nearby, and, beyond that, I caught an older, colder scent. Perhaps one that had been affected by the snow. It was hard to discern who or what the scent belonged to. It was entirely possible, if not probable, that I was just catching the scent of the old Samara pack.

Suddenly, Charlie growled and shot into the forest, followed closely by Elle.

*Charlie! Elle! Stop!* Greyson commanded as Knox and a handful of other wolves stepped out from behind the trees.

Adrenaline and euphoria pumped into my brain the moment my eyes met Knox’s. Finally, the little shrimp was coming out to play.

*Must be tough, taking a break from having everyone do all your work for you.*

This little bastard wasn’t fit to lead, wasn’t fit to breathe the same air as any of the rest of us. I couldn’t wait to rip him in two.

I stood alongside Greyson. *This is it. We can take him.*

*Hold on.*

To my shock, Greyson shifted back to human. I growled at him, making sure he knew I disapproved. Greyson didn’t even turn around.

*What the fuck is he doing? Is he trying to get himself killed?*

Greyson’s voice slipped through my mind. *You’re my backup here. Shift back, and we’ll address him together.*

I wanted nothing more than to tell Greyson to go screw himself, but instead I bit my tongue. When this mission had started, I’d agreed to follow my brother through it to the end. I just hoped he knew what he was doing.

I shifted back to human and immediately felt vulnerable. If Knox were to rush at either Greyson or myself using his superior wolf speed, my brother and I wouldn’t stand a chance. We’d get pinned to the ground and have our throats ripped out before we could possibly defend ourselves.

Greyson stopped a few feet away from Knox. “We need to talk.”

The little shit growled in return, and I tensed, ready to shift back and fight at the slightest provocation.

To my relief, Knox shifted back to human as well, and grinned. It was unhinged and creepy as fuck.

“If I’d known we were having company, I would have prepared a better welcome.” Knox looked beyond Greyson to the other Samara wolves. “How can you dare to turn against me, your true Alpha? Don’t you know that’s punishable by death?”

“This charade has gone on long enough,” Greyson snapped. He focused his gaze on the Samara wolves who weren’t standing behind Knox. “Take a good, hard look at your so-called Alpha, everyone. Knox has lost it. Hell, he never really had it. He’s using drugs to fight because he doesn’t have it in him to win the old-fashioned way.”

I looked over at Knox to see how he was taking this news, and dear god did he look even more batshit crazy than before. His appearance certainly wasn’t doing him any favors. He was wild-eyed, twitching, and snarling.

The dude was fucking *tweaking*.

I laughed. “Do you see it now? Your Alpha is a drug-addled loser.”

“Watch your mouth!” Knox snarled.

I moved toward him. Enough of this.

*Let me finish this, right here, right now.*

Greyson was there in a heartbeat with a hand on my arm, holding me back.

I scoffed. “What the fuck are you doing? Let me at him. You can’t reason with a madman.”

The other Samara wolves were starting to back away from Knox. Now that we were here and asking them to stand as witnesses to all this, it was clear that they could see the shape their fearless leader was in.

*Maybe they’ve finally had enough.*

I couldn’t say I blamed them.

Part of me was just the teensiest bit disappointed that we were attempting to solve this with words. I’d been steeling myself for a fight against this little shit for so long, and now I was just supposed to let it go?

Hell, no. The little shrimp was mine! He’d been mine for ages now, long before he’d ever made a move on Cali.

One by one, the Samara wolves who were gathered for the confrontation shifted back to their human forms.

I’d never seen Knox so furious before. He looked like he was one bad experience away from a full-on aneurysm. “What the hell are you doing? I command you to remain wolves and fight against the Redwood scum!”

I laughed. “Maybe it’s time to hang it up, Knox. You’ve lost the pack. If you’re not careful, you’re going to lose a hell of a lot more than that.”

It was then that I noticed the two wolves closest to Knox hadn’t shifted back yet. They were holding their ground, yet they were so outmatched it was fucking hilarious.

*Look at those sheep, following their leader right off a cliff!*

“You’re traitors!” Knox screamed at the Samara wolves. “Do you hear me? Traitors! I’m your Alpha—you will show me the proper respect, or you will face the consequences!”

*I think we’ve passed the point of no return. Fucking great.*

If that was the case, it was out of our hands. Nothing else could be done. It was time to take out Knox for good. We both lunged forward, but Knox was ready, and he and his two support wolves lunged toward us.

They were so fast and powerful that Greyson and I had to dive to avoid their attack, all of us shifting as we went.

Within seconds, I was going toe-to-toe with Knox, while Greyson was wrestling with the other two.

This time, I was prepared. I knew Knox would be stronger than he was supposed to be, and I wasn’t going to let him catch me off-guard again.

We snarled and rolled, each of us clawing and snapping, neither of us gaining the upper hand. I slammed Knox against the Airstream and pinned him to the ground.

He struggled to free himself, to throw me off him, and it took all of my strength to restrain him.

*This little bastard is such a goddamn pain in my ass.*

I mind linked with Knox. *You don’t know how long I’ve wanted to do this.*

I opened my mouth, ready to clamp down and tear him apart, but then Knox calmly replied.

*If you kill me*, he said, *you’ll never see your mates again.*

# **Episode 3055**

**Artemis**

I peered out through the cracks in one of the pack house’s many boarded-up windows and blew out a sigh. I hated that Rishika was out there, facing down Knox and his squad of super-powered werewolves.

I knew Rishika and the others were more than capable of facing this challenge. Even Elle had a wild, feral edge that I could only assume would come in handy in a fight. But it wasn’t easy to stay back while the woman I loved was out there, marching into the unknown.

*I should be out there with her, watching her back.*

How many times had Greyson and Xavier mentioned how capable I was in a fight? A few silver-tipped crossbow bolts, and I could take out Knox and his cronies myself before Rishika ever had to cross their path.

I pulled in another breath, searching for something like calm. *This is part of werewolf life. They often have to fight their enemies, even if that means fighting other werewolves. Is it really any different from what I faced in the Fae world? Or with the wolves before now?*

If I were to replace the Kollector with the band of unhinged werewolves who’d been making our lives miserable, it was more or less the same thing. And as a leading force in the Redwood pack, Rishika was a logical choice to join the attack. This was her fight, not mine. Not yet.

Right now, the best I could do was hang back and hope everything worked out.

Which, for the record, was my least favorite thing to do. I was going to fucking stab someone.

“Hey.” Jay approached me, a mug of mocha in his hands. “How are you holding up?”

I thought he was going to offer it to me, but then he took a large sip, leaving a white chocolate mustache on his upper lip. I tore my gaze away from his face and peered back outside. “I hate this. I’m used to being the one to go after my prey, not sitting and waiting. Bounty hunters aren’t defensive. It’s our job to take the fight to the target, to neutralize them. Waiting around has never been my thing.”

He nodded, then took another sip. His mocha mustache grew. “I get it, but Greyson wouldn’t have left the pack house to pursue Knox if he didn’t think the pack was one hundred percent safe. That means he’s relying on us to keep everyone safe.” He nodded toward the window. “Maybe we’re not out there confronting who knows what, but we still have an important job to do. And there’s still a chance the fight could come here.”

I grimaced. He had a point. And I really hated it.

“It’s weird,” I admitted. “You’re not an Alpha, and I’m not even a werewolf, and yet here we are.”

He smiled. “Like I said, Greyson has faith in us. Let’s not take that lightly.”

I peered out the window again, my stomach sinking as I thought again of what Rishika might be facing. “Do you ever worry about Lola when the two of you are apart?”

He laughed. “Oh, I worry about Lola even when we’re together. She’s, um… a bit of a wild card. I don’t know if you’ve noticed.”

For the first time since I’d been left to guard the house, I felt the shadow of a smile tugging at my lips. “I have.”

“I know this is hard for you, and I’ll be the first to admit that it doesn’t really get easier. It seems like we’re always facing down one threat or another. But that’s one of the reasons why I love being in the pack.”

My brows rose. “Because it never gets boring?”

He shook his head. “I’d love to be bored. What a luxury. Actually, I meant, here in the pack, it’s never just you alone. You can count on everyone.”

I smiled again. “That’s a very nice thought.”

He turned on his heel. “I’d better go check the rest of the windows to make sure they’re blocked up. You should probably take a break, get something to eat. We don’t know how long we’re going to be on watch. Take advantage of the quiet while you can.”

“Jay?”

He stopped and turned back to face me. “Yeah?”

I touched my upper lip. “You have some mocha…”

He wiped his face with a grin. “See? I can count on you, too.”

He headed off, and I decided to follow his advice. I wasn’t hungry, but he still had a point. I couldn’t just stand here glued to the window, waiting for Rishika to reappear. Besides the fact that it would drive me crazy, it was also a waste of time. And if things did get hairy, I wanted to be rested and ready.

I headed to the kitchen, where Big Mac was huddled around the table with Mrs. Smith and Kira, who was looking a lot more like herself.

“I don’t know what to do about this magic problem,” Big Mac was saying. “I’ve never experienced anything like this before.”

“I’ve heard of such things,” Kira mused, “but I’ve never experienced it firsthand, either.”

“What about the storm?” I interrupted. “It seems to be quieting down. Maybe our magic will return?”

After watching the others try and fail to use their magic, I’d been reluctant to try mine. It had already been on the fritz before the storm. I hated not being able to control my magic, and I didn’t want to experience anything like that again if I could avoid it.

Mrs. Smith looked tense. She was probably worried about Greyson, even more than I was worried about Rishika. After all, Greyson was her son. I couldn’t even imagine what it would feel like to watch your child go off to fight.

“We could experiment,” Big Mac suggested. “Maybe some aspects of our magic are less affected than others.”

Kira nodded. “I’m willing to give it a try, but we should probably stick with lesser spells. We don’t want to cause any problems, or make things worse for ourselves.”

“I’ll leave the magic to you witches,” I said, and headed out of the kitchen. I wanted to find Cali and talk to her, see how she was doing. This had to be difficult for her—both her mates were out there.

But when I looked around, Cali was nowhere to be found. She wasn’t upstairs in her room, or her mates’ rooms. She wasn’t in the bathroom. She wasn’t in the kitchen, the den, the library, the living room, or the basement.

*Where the hell did she go?*

I peeked outside quickly, but I just couldn’t imagine her heading out there right now, with the weather being so inhospitable. I circled back to the den, where Tom was teaching Torin how to play a board game.

“Can I move this way?” Torin asked, picking up a black token that looked a little bit like a castle turret.

Tom shook his head. “Try a pawn instead.”

“Have either of you seen Cali?” I asked.

“I thought she was with you,” Tom said.

“I haven’t seen her since before Greyson and the others left.” I glanced back toward the staircase. Maybe she was upstairs and I’d missed her somehow.

Lola was coming down the stairs, so I asked if she’d seen Cali anywhere.

“Nope. She’s not upstairs.”

My stomach sank. Cali wasn’t usually this difficult to find. Usually she was being loud somewhere.

I asked around the pack house, but nobody had seen her. Then I thought back to the last time I’d seen her. She’d been talking to Greyson before he’d left. Had she impulsively decided to go with him and the others? It wouldn’t have surprised me—my sister tended to put herself in the middle of the action, whether or not that was the smart thing to do.

Tom and my mom rushed up to me. “Have you found her? We can’t find her anywhere in the house.”

I headed for the front door. “Let’s try outside, then. Maybe we locked her out when we boarded up the house?” It was a far-fetched idea, but this was Cali we were talking about.

I pulled the wood off the door with Tom’s help and pushed the door open. The wind was picking up, and the cold bite in the air made my eyes water. I looked around. If Cali was outside, she was buried under a foot of snow.

I’d helped bring her back from the shed, but where would I even look for her now?

I scanned the area again, and something on the porch caught my eye. I rushed over. It was a mug.

Behind me, Tom gasped. “That’s the mug Cali was using.”

Next to it, dark stains marred the snow, along with a patch of red that I would’ve known anywhere. Blood.

My heart raced. Had someone attacked Cali?

I rushed inside and grabbed my coat.

“Hey, where are you going?” Jay asked.

“To find my sister.”

I slipped on my coat, slung my bow over my shoulder, and headed for the door. Big Mac stepped into my path.

“Don’t even think about trying to stop me,” I said.

She shook her head. “I’m not. But before you go, I have a gift for you.”

# **Episode 3056**

**Greyson**

I pinned one of Knox’s lackeys to the ground while Rishika handled the other. The guy was so obviously doped up. His pupils were dilated, and he thrashed under me with wild abandon. Still, I managed to keep him pinned. Whatever the hell these wolves were taking, it seemed to be driving them a little crazy.

*Stay the fuck down,* *or you’re gonna end up missing some important pieces—like your throat*, I growled.

He finally stilled beneath me. Good. It was long past time for someone to put these amped-up wolves in their place.

I glanced over at Xavier, who had managed to subdue Knox. I’d expected to see nothing more than a bloodied husk, but Knox was still very much alive. Why hadn’t Xavier killed him right away?

My brother was growling, holding Knox down. His body shook with barely repressed violence. All this time, Xavier hadn’t been able to shut up about how much he wanted to kill Knox. About what a relief and a pleasure it would be for him to take “the little shrimp” out. So why was he holding back now? Was it because Cali didn’t want us to kill him? Or was something else going on?

My stomach sank, and I mind linked with Charlie. *Keep an eye on this, will you?*

I slammed the wolf I had pinned against the ground so hard I heard his bones crack.

*Don’t get any ideas*, I told him. *This guy’s one of the best killers I know.*

I started toward where my brother had Knox pinned, and I only made it a few steps before Xavier’s voice slipped through my mind. *Knox says he’s kidnapped Cali and Ava. If we don’t let him go, we’ll never see either of them again.*

I paused for a moment but continued forward. *This sounds like a sad attempt to save his own ass. Cali shouldn’t be anywhere near here—I made sure she was staying at the house.*

The Ava part gave me pause, though. We had plenty of reasons to believe her end of the deal hadn’t worked out so well for her, and I was almost certain that Knox wasn’t lying about that. She must have gotten caught, and then her cousin had taken her to punish her—and Xavier, by extension.

After all, I couldn’t think of anyone else reckless enough to risk a kidnapping in a storm like this.

If Xavier noticed the way I skimmed over Ava, he didn’t comment on it. *What should I do?* he asked.

I hesitated. I knew Xavier wasn’t so heartless where Ava was concerned. There was still too much between them for my brother to completely write off his first mate. I didn’t want to throw Ava’s life away if we could avoid it—for multiple reasons. But I also wasn’t going to upend our entire plan just to protect her.

But Cali? Cali was another story altogether. And she was the one person on this earth I wasn’t willing to risk.

*I swear to god, if Knox laid a hand on her, I’ll kill him a hundred times over*, Xavier growled.

*Are we sure he’s not bluffing?* I asked.

Xavier shrugged. *The little prick’s made a move on her before. At this point, nothing seems too idiotic for him.*

I looked down at Knox, who was still pinned beneath Xavier’s massive paws. *We’re not interested in playing mind games with you.*

*Are you saying you don’t believe me?* he asked.

*Why would we? You offer no proof.*

Knox nodded at Blaine, who was growling underneath Rishika. *Ask him. He’s the one who took your precious half-Fae.*

My teeth ground together, and the sweet vision of me ripping out his throat filled my mind. But I couldn’t kill him. Not yet. Not until I knew for sure that Cali was safe.

I shifted back to human and stalked over to Blaine, resisting the urge to go for his throat. “Answer quickly,” I snarled. “Did you go near my mate? If you so much as *touched* Cali… What did you do with her?”

He shifted back as well and spat out a mouthful of blood. He flashed his bloodstained teeth in a deranged grin that sent a chill rippling down my spine. He looked just as unhinged as Knox, just as likely to revel in violence and horror.

“I think it’d be easier to say what I didn’t do to her,” he said.

My vision went red, and I lunged toward him and wrapped my hands around his throat. “I will pop your head off like a fucking champagne cork if you don’t answer my question. And my brother”—I pointed over to where Xavier was pinning Knox— “will rip that little shit’s head off and use it as a goddamn soccer ball. So, one more chance, asshole. Where. Is. Cali?”

“Aw, don’t you worry about her. She’s perfectly fine. Stashed her somewhere safe,” he said.

“You’ve got about ten seconds left to live if you don’t tell me exactly where she is.”

“A hole in the ground. It gets pretty cold—good thing she has her jacket on.”

It wasn’t a bluff. The fucking idiot still wasn’t smart enough to know just how much danger he was in. How I was going to rip him limb from limb for what he’d done to my mate.

*He might not be scared now, but that’ll change soon enough.*

I squeezed hard enough that Blaine gagged and choked. I watched his eyes widen, his face purple. And it wasn’t until blood vessels started bursting in his eyes that I released him. “How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

“Cali was on your pack house porch,” he rasped, “drinking some horribly sweet-smelling drink when I whacked her on the head.”

I could picture it now. Cali standing on the porch, drinking a mocha from her favorite mug. I’d seen her use it countless times. And she’d have had no idea what was in store for her, that she was about to be taken. Hurt. Trapped in a fucking hole in the ground.

The image was too much to bear. I exploded. My hands locked around Blaine’s throat, and I used it as leverage to slam his head against the ground. I wanted to snap his neck, to slam his skull into the snowy ground until it was nothing but a gruesome stain on the snow.

But I couldn’t—not until he led me to Cali. Not until she was safe in my arms, exactly where she was meant to be.

I dragged him up by his throat, ignoring the way he choked and sputtered, and turned to Knox. “You’re both going to take us to Cali, or I will kill every member of your pack, one by one, and save both of you for last.”

I could feel the horror rippling off everyone in the clearing. Let them be horrified. Anything that happened now was on Knox and Blaine. Those pieces of shit had crossed the line for the last time.

“Shift back to human,” I barked at Knox. “Now.”

At least that way, if Knox tried anything, he wouldn’t have the advantage of his wolf form. And he *would* try something. Clearly, the little shrimp had lost what little reason and sense he’d still possessed.

Even after we found Cali, Knox was too dangerous to be allowed to continue.

Knox shifted back, and Xavier shoved him forward before shifting as well.

Knox sneered. “You believe me now?”

Xavier grabbed him and shoved him against the Airstream. “Shut up and start walking.”

Knox started trudging through the snow, and I gestured for Rishika, Charlie, Elle, and Ravi to follow.

Xavier sidled up to me. “That was a little dramatic, wasn’t it?” he asked, his voice low. “Not that I’d mind killing off the Samaras one by one, but still. I thought you were going for a more benevolent vibe here.”

I shook my head. “I meant every word. If Knox hurt Cali—”

“You don’t have to say it. We’re on the same page there.”

I realized then just how difficult this had to be for my brother. I was worried sick for Cali, but both of Xavier’s mates were missing now. I felt bad for Ava, and if she didn’t make it out of this because she’d tried to protect both the Redwood pack and the Samara pack from Knox, it would be a damn shame. I was almost starting to like her. Almost. But ultimately, I didn’t hold any kind of strong feelings for her. Xavier’s situation couldn’t have been more different. He hadn’t said much about Ava being in jeopardy, but I knew better than to assume it was because he didn’t care.

But now wasn’t the time to question my brother about his feelings toward his first mate. At the end of the day, Ava had tried to help us, and we owed it to her to try to return the favor. But no matter what, Cali would come first.

“How much farther?” I asked Knox. The day was waning, and the temperature was dropping. Coat or not, Cali wasn’t built to survive out here in the cold for long.

Knox pointed ahead. “It’s just over there.”

Xavier and I slowed. It was the old Samara pack house, or what was left of it. I could still smell the smoky remains.

Xavier rushed over to a clearing in the snow where there was a large, deep pit. I joined him at the edge and looked in.

The pit was empty.

Xavier rounded on Knox with a snarl. “Where the *fuck* is she?”

# **Episode 3057**

I wrapped my arms around Ava’s wolf neck as we followed Hector and Zeke through the thick, snowbound forest. They had been the ones to toss the rope down, though I still didn’t understand why they hadn’t announced themselves or tried to help us when the rope had snapped.

*These Samara wolves are something else.*

And yet here I was, dependent on three of them to get me through the forest. The worst part was, I was once again relying on Ava for help. But there was no way I could keep up with the wolves without riding on one of their backs, and I had to admit it was nice to be warm again. Between getting my coat back and feeling the heat radiating from Ava’s wolf body, I was actually able to feel my hands for the first time in a while.

It might’ve been a pain in the ass to have to keep asking her for help, but it had its perks. And as much as I still had reservations about teaming up with Ava, it wasn’t like I was going to trust Hector or Zeke instead.

*Speaking of, how do I know that this isn’t all a part of Knox’s plans? The two of them could be in on it.*

Though, the more I tried to figure out a way for this to be part of some bigger betrayal, the less any of it seemed to make sense.

“Where are we going?” I asked, breaking the silence that had settled between us. As the only non-werewolf, I was completely out of the loop. “Wouldn’t it be better to head back to the pack house and tell the others we’re fine?”

Hector lurched to a stop and shifted back to human before turning on me with a pained expression. “Like I explained before, if Knox finds us, he *will* kill us. You haven’t seen what he’s become, what he’s capable of. He’s a monster, and we have to get as far away from Knox and his supporters as possible.”

I couldn’t tell if he was annoyed or panicking or both, but either way, he was speaking to me like I was a child. That would have been bad enough, but setting aside my annoyance with their tone, their plan didn’t make any sense to me. And I had to focus on staying alive, regardless of how they spoke to me.

*How on earth is trudging through the snow a better plan than regrouping with our allies?*

I frowned. “Why should I believe you? How do I know you’re not leading us back to Knox as part of some sick game?”

He groaned. “Don’t be ridiculous. If you want to stay out here and freeze to death, I won’t stop you. But if you want to stay alive, you’ll come with us and you’ll stop slowing us down.”

I scoffed. “Seeing as how my life is on the line here, I think I deserve to be in the loop.”

Zeke shifted as well. “We’re the ones who threw that rope down to you. Why would we do that if we were on Knox’s side? We could just as easily have left you there to rot.”

“Right, the rope that almost killed me when it broke. I’m definitely feeling confident in your ability to keep me safe right now.”

Hector growled. “We didn’t know the rope was going to snap. We thought we were helping you.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “It would have been *very* helpful to know you two were at the top of the pit. Or, I don’t know, maybe if you took a more active role in pulling us out, we could have saved time and would have already arrived at whatever destination you have in mind?”

Suddenly, Ava shook me off her back, and I went tumbling into the snow. She shifted back to human. “It isn’t doing any of us any good to stand here arguing, so let’s get a move on.” She pinned me with her gaze. “Whether we believe them or not, we need to get away from Knox as quickly as possible.”

I stood up and brushed the snow from my clothes. *Did she really have to dump me in the snow like that?*

I had to admit, though, there was some logic to Ava’s argument. “I guess standing around here isn’t all that different from being trapped in a hole—we still need to escape from Knox.”

“Then it’s agreed?” Zeke asked. He pointed ahead. “If we keep going, I know of a cabin we can hide out in while we figure out our next move.”

I nodded, then turned to Ava. “If it’s all the same to you, I’d prefer not to be dumped on the ground like a piece of garbage. Next time, some warning would be appreciated.”

Ava rolled her eyes. “Don’t keep arguing, and there won’t be a next time to worry about.”

She shifted back into her wolf form, and once again I climbed onto her back.

*If I ever get out of this, the only wolves I’ll ever ride on again will be Xavier and Greyson.*

We continued toward the cabin, and I clutched Ava’s fur, pressing myself against her back to soak up the warmth of her body. I couldn’t be sure, but it seemed like the snow was starting to fall heavier again.

I’d never thought I’d be grateful for Ava’s fur, but here she was—the only reason I wasn’t literally freezing to death right now.

We came to a dense copse of trees when Zeke lurched to a stop again.

*What’s going on?* I looked around, confused. *Is he going to lecture me again? I was quiet this time!*

Then I heard the voices. They were close enough that I could hear them, but far enough away that I couldn’t quite make out what they were saying. The wolves crouched down, and I rose up on Ava’s neck, just enough to peer over her ears.

*Who could possibly be out here?*

Then a shrill, angry, and horribly familiar voice echoed through the trees. *Knox*.

Hector and Zeke must have recognized the voice too—they had werewolf hearing, after all—because they started to back away. Ava had started to slink backward too when I heard another voice. Blaine. The guy who’d kidnapped me.

A chill rippled down my spine, and it had nothing to do with the cold. My mind flashed back to Blaine’s harsh voice and the violence he’d shown me, the threats he’d made while he’d carried me, half-unconscious, and then dumped me in the pit with Ava.

There was nobody in this world I wanted to run into less than those two—but especially Blaine.

“Run,” I whispered to Ava.

She took another step back, then paused and cocked her head, like she was listening to something I couldn’t hear.

*We don’t have time for this! We need to get away!*

I was ready to grab her fur and yell “mush!” when another angry, familiar voice echoed through the trees.

*Xavier!* My heart raced, and my stomach tripped over itself. *We found my mate!*

I hopped off Ava’s back and raced through the snow toward the voices. The snow was deep, and the going was slow. I stumbled every few feet, but I wasn’t going to let that stop me. I wasn’t going to keep running away when my mates were here.

Ava followed behind me with an ease that would have annoyed me if I hadn’t been practically jumping for joy. Within a few moments, we broke through the tree line, and I saw Xavier, Greyson, Rishika, Ravi, Elle, and Charlie standing with a group of Samara wolves, Blaine, and Knox.

*Well, isn’t this a happy reunion?*

Behind me, I could hear Zeke and Hector rushing to catch up to Ava and me.

Xavier had Knox on the ground and was punching him and screaming. “Where the hell is she?”

Then Greyson grabbed Xavier’s arm. “Look!”

“Greyson!” I cried. “Xavier!”

I stumbled through the snow as my mates rushed toward me, tripping into Xavier when he got close. He didn’t seem to mind. He wrapped his arms around me and showered my face with kisses.

“Cali, thank god. Cali,” he whispered.

Greyson joined us, and I broke away from Xavier, too overcome with emotion to speak as Greyson pulled me into a hug. “I was so worried about you, love,” he whispered.

Ava cleared her throat. “No need to worry about me. I’m perfectly fine. Thanks for asking.”

I looked back to see that Ava, Hector, and Zeke had all shifted back to human to greet everyone. I could see something that looked startlingly close to relief in Xavier’s eyes as she glanced over at Ava.

*Of course he’d be glad to see her alive, Cali*, I thought

Strangely, I was completely okay with that.

I looked around at the wolves clustered together. I recognized the Redwood pack members, of course, but there were several wolves I’d never seen before.

“Are they from the Samara pack?” I asked Greyson. “Why are they here with you two?”

Knox let out a deranged, furious scream. “Enough of this bullshit!” He broke away from the others and rushed toward Hector and Zeke. “You fucking traitors!”

Hector and Zeke scrambled backward as Knox shifted mid-stride and pounced on Hector, knocking him to the ground.

My scream echoed through the forest as Knox clamped his teeth down on Hector’s neck and tore out his throat. Around him, the freshly fallen snow turned a deep crimson as Hector’s life ebbed away from him.

# Episode 3058

Shocked and horrified, I watched as Hector coughed up globs of bright red blood. Knox still had his teeth locked around Hector’s throat and was whipping him back and forth as Hector let out shrieks of pain.

“Isn’t anyone going to help him?”I started to rush forward, but Greyson held me back.

“Cali, no,” he said, his voice firm. “Stay out of this, it’s dangerous.”

“But…” I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to scream at Knox to stop, but I was too afraid that he would turn on me next with even the slightest provocation.

*This is so horrible. Hector was a strong wolf and a good person… He doesn’t deserve this!*

Knox wasn’t letting up for a second. He snarled as he bore down harder on Hector’s neck, his mouth covered in the blood that was still gushing from it.

Zeke let out a shout of alarm and despair at the sight of his friend suffering on the ground, but like the others, he kept a wide berth from Knox, who looked like he might lash out at anyone who dared to get close enough.

“They’re… coming for you…” Hector gurgled out, just before his head fell limply to the side.

“He’s dead!” I shrieked, before I knew what I was saying. I couldn’t believe it. Knox had just killed one of his own wolves without even giving him a chance to explain himself. *How cold-blooded can you be?* I was shivering violently, and I couldn’t tell if it was from the cold or the shock of what I’d just witnessed.

Xavier and Greyson stepped forward, both half shifting as they went. Elle and Rishika, both in wolf form, stepped out in front to form a line of protection between the Redwoods and the Samaras. Elle let out a growl as she set her sights on Knox, and Ravi and Charlie came up and flanked me protectively, their eyes on Knox as well, as if daring him to come near.

“We have to attack now, before he knows what hit him,” Xavier said quietly to Greyson.

My heart started to race at the thought of Xavier and Greyson going up against Knox after what he’d just done to one of his own. “No! You can’t!” I whisper-yelled. “He’s all hyped up on whatever potion he’s taking. You saw what he did. He’ll kill you!”

Greyson squeezed my hand and turned to Knox, letting my hand slip away as he stepped forward. His eyes were cold and hard when they landed on Knox. “Give it up, Knox. Your entire pack is against you, and you’ve got nowhere to run. Is this a fight you really want? It’s only going to end one way. I can guarantee it.”

Knox growled and bared his fangs, his eyes on Xavier and Greyson.

Xavier clenched his fists and took an angry step forward, and I grabbed his hand. “Xavier, what did he say?” There was no way I could hear it, since I could only mind link with my mates.

Xavier turned to face me, his eyes hard. “Let’s just say he didn’t take Greyson up on his offer.” Xavier looked back at Ravi and Charlie. “Keep her safe.” With that, he broke away from me and went to Greyson’s side.

Both of my mates looked intimidating and fearless as they faced off against the Samaras. Knox, Blaine, and a few others stalked around in front of them, their eyes wild from the potion surging through their systems. I did a quick headcount and realized that we had more wolves on our side, including a few Samaras who seemed to have aligned themselves with the Redwoods and were standing with us. But we had no idea how many of Knox’s minions had taken the magical steroid potion, so there was no way to know whether we had any real advantage.

Knox threw his head back and howled. As if on cue, the Samaras leapt forward, and in a split second every single Redwood had shifted into wolf form. I was in a sea of giant wolf-bears, and it was a surreal sight to see. Only Charlie remained at my side, and I realized that they all must have coordinated via mind link.

I had to fight not to cover my eyes as the Redwoods and Samaras tore into each other. Snow flew in every direction as the terrifying battle unfolded. Teeth and claws were a blur around me as they sliced into flesh on both sides. The air vibrated with snarls and howls, mud and blood splashing up as one werewolf or another was flung to the ground and pinned beneath strong paws. I couldn’t make sense of who was winning or losing, and that alone was enough to terrify me.

I held up my hands, preparing to use my powers to help. Unlike last time, when it had felt like it was burning me from the inside, I could feel my magic filling me up. I pulled on it now that the storm was gone, but my aim was still off, and I ended up blasting a tree and setting it on fire—which drew Xavier’s attention as he and a Samara took vicious swipes at each other.

*Cali, don’t try to help. Run!* Xavier mind linked.

Charlie bent down so that I could climb onto his back, and we raced away through the forest. We hadn’t gotten very far when a wolf pounced on us from behind and sent us careening into a tree. I flew off Charlie’s back and tumbled to the ground. Pain shot through my body as I struggled to get up and regain my bearings.

Charlie growled as he faced off with the Samara wolf, who I didn’t recognize. I wanted to help, but my magic felt like hot sparks beneath my skin. It almost felt like if I tried to shoot, I’d hit Charlie by mistake.

After a few painful attempts, I finally rose to my feet. My head was still throbbing, and so was my shoulder, and I sagged against a tree, knowing I probably shouldn’t stay stationary for long. I hadn’t seen a hint of that Samara wolf before he’d hit us, and now I was hyperaware of the woods around me, fearful that there might be more enemies lurking in the snowy shadows.

I was torn between following Xavier’s order to run for safety and going back to help my friends. I knew they were all great fighters and could hold their own, but the Samaras had such an advantage with whatever they had pumping through their veins, so there was no telling how things might shake out.

Charlie and the wolf were circling each other, growling low in their throats with their fangs bared. Charlie leapt forward to attack, but the wolf was too quick and countered by leaping on top of Charlie and pinning him to the ground. The wolf snapped its teeth ferociously, trying with all its might to take a bite out of Charlie’s throat. To his credit, Charlie was holding him off pretty well, but the wolf was relentless, and I didn’t know how long Charlie was going to be able to keep him at bay.

*I can’t just run away and let Charlie and the rest of my friends get hurt. Not if I can do something to help.* Thinking fast, I picked up a rock and hurled it at the Samara wolf, using just a sliver of my magic to propel it forward. The rock dinged off the wolf’s head, dazing him for a second.

That was all it took for Charlie to get the upper hand. He leapt up in one slick, impressive move and pinned the wolf to the ground, growling ferociously as he took a bite out of the wolf’s neck.

*This might be the way I can help.* I took off through the forest, my eyes on the treetops in search of a suitable perch. I gathered a few rocks as I went, and as soon as I found a tree with low enough branches and a good vantage point, I climbed up. From about midway up in the tree, I could just make out the edge of the battle.

Rishika’s wolf was fighting a huge Samara wolf who had the same wild, drugged eyes as the rest. Rishika was usually unbeatable on the battlefield, but she was having a hard time. The wolf was advancing on her quickly and rebuffing every attempt she made to attack. I closed one eye and took aim at the Samara wolf’s head. I threw the rock a little off course, but with a little nudge of the magic that I was using to drive it forward, I was able to get it back on track.

It hit the wolf right between the eyes, giving Rishika the split second she needed to get the upper hand. I pumped my fist in the air in celebration, then quickly scanned the battle for any sign of Xavier or Greyson. I really wanted to help them. Worry for my mates filled my belly, as it always did whenever they were fighting. I wanted to mind link with them, but I knew that would only distract them during the fight, and that was the last thing I wanted.

Finally, I caught sight of Greyson facing off with Blaine. Blaine was moving so fast that Greyson couldn’t pin him down. Panic and dread raced through me when I spotted the huge gash on Greyson’s flank. Without wasting another second, I chose the largest rock in my collection and threw it at Blaine with the full force of my magic. Unable to control it like I had the last two times, my magic backfired and launched me back against the trunk of the tree. I grappled to keep hold of the branch I was sitting on, but I lost my grip and fell onto the hard packed snow beneath the tree.

“Oof!” The wind flew out of me, and I closed my eyes, overcome by pain. My ears perked up at the rumble of a low growl.

I looked up to see Knox staring right at me, stalking toward me, his teeth bared.

# Episode 3059

I caught sight of the fight raging on beyond Knox as he growled at me. Greyson had managed to gain the upper hand and, with one smooth maneuver, he grabbed Blaine by the neck and tossed him to the side. Then, as if sensing that I was in trouble, he turned and looked right at me.

*Run, Cali, now!* he mind linked. *Get out of here! It’s not safe for you! Go!*

Before Greyson could race over to me, Blaine leapt on top of him again and knocked him to the ground. I made to move toward Greyson, but Knox growled again, and I stayed right where I was. Even though I wanted to see how Greyson was faring against Blaine, I knew that I had to stay focused on Knox. After seeing what he’d done to Hector, there was no doubt in my mind that he was capable of anything and would have no qualms about killing me right then and there.

*Why is he so fixated on me, anyway? Why did he kidnap me in the first place? Why is he cornering me at all?* Then it occurred to me—it was to get to the boys.

“What do you want with me, Knox?” I yelled at him, even though I knew he wouldn’t be able to respond since he was still in wolf form. “If you think getting to me means you’ll get to my mates, I’ve got bad news. All you’ll do is piss them off. And I’d hate to be in your paws when they get to you if you so much as scratch me.”

I was hoping to distract him, knowing that there was nothing I could say that would change his mind.

My magic was still too out of control for me to be able to use it effectively, so attacking Knox with it was out. But if no one else could get to me, I was going to have to fight back. I had no other choice.

*Whatever Knox thinks of me, I’m not defenseless. I fought back against Letifer and the revenants, and I took Seluna out single-handedly. I can defend myself against some ‘roided-up Alpha if I have to.*

Even though I didn’t want to hurt or kill anyone, I knew that I had to defend myself in whatever way I could—even if that meant I had to do the unthinkable. I reached down inside myself and tapped into my magic, just in case. It still felt out of control, but I knew that I might not have any choice but to use it regardless. I lifted a shaky hand and planted my feet, preparing myself in case my magic backfired like it had last time. Just before I could let off a blast, another wolf raced out of the woods and straight at me.

*Oh no, is it one of the drugged-up Samaras?* I took a fearful step back and braced myself for a fight before I realized that it was Ava. She wasted no time wedging herself between me and Knox, growling and baring her teeth as she faced off with her cousin.

*I can’t believe she’s protecting me!* If someone had told me even a day ago that Ava would be throwing herself between me and her cousin to save my life, I would’ve laughed. We’d come a long way, and I was thankful for her intervention. Not only was she keeping Knox away from me, she was also ensuring I wouldn’t have to make the hard decision about whether to spare Knox if it came down to it.

Ava and Knox were circling each other and growling back and forth, and I wondered if they were mind linking. If they were, the conversation didn’t seem to be going very well. What little hope I had that they wouldn’t start fighting was dashed when Knox leapt forward with his teeth bared. He nearly latched on to Ava’s throat, but she jerked out of his reach just in time. Ava rammed her flank against me, pushing me backward and farther away from Knox.

*Was that an accident, or did Ava do that to protect me?*

I didn’t have time to wonder for long before I was forced to scramble back as the two wolves tore into each other, snarling and thrashing around in the snow. Ava was doing her best. She’d managed to get a few blows in on Knox, but he countered with lightning speed every single time, giving her right back what she gave and then some. Both wolves were bleeding, but Ava was bleeding way more than Knox and looked like she was seconds away from collapsing into the snow.

*I need to do something, or Ava might lose this fight.* I took a deep breath and threw out a bolt of magic, but I missed the fast-moving wolf and once again sent a magic bolt slamming into a nearby tree, setting it aflame.

The firelight helped create an eerie scene as Knox pinned Ava to the ground and hovered over her, his teeth bared and inches from her neck. Ava was fighting to get out from under him, but Knox had one of his humongous paws on her windpipe, and she was losing steam fast.

*What’s wrong with him? Would he really murder his cousin just because she dared to defy him? Is Knox truly that far gone?*

I gathered my magic again, hoping I’d be able to control it this time and not accidentally hit Ava. With as much concentration and precision as I could muster, I let my magic fly once again, and this time the blast hit its target, sending Knox sprawling onto his back into the snow. He lay there dazed as Ava jumped up and stood over him, but to my surprise, she didn’t attack. Instead, she shifted back to human.

“What the hell are you doing?” I yelled. “Now we’re both sitting ducks!”

Ava shook her head and looked at me. “I can’t do this anymore.”

My heart dropped. *Holy shit, is Ava about to switch sides? Don’t tell me I misjudged her this badly…*

I took a step back, getting ready to run in case Ava decided to join forces with Knox. I wouldn’t be any match for the two of them together if my magic kept acting up, but there was no way I was going to let Knox take me again, either. I reached inside and tried to grab onto my magic once more, but instead of coming at me, Ava walked closer to Knox, who was still trying to recover.

“I’m not going to fight you like this, cousin. This isn’t the way the Samara pack does things,” Ava said, holding up her hands as she got closer to him. “This is not what I pictured when we got back together. The Samaras are better than this—why can’t you see that?”

Knox lifted his head and looked at her, growling and baring his teeth as if he were going to attack her, just like he had Hector. But to my surprise, he shifted back to human as well. Using the tree beside him for leverage, he struggled to his feet, obviously still disoriented from my blast.

“You’re a traitor!” he spat. “There’s no need for me to listen to a traitor!”

He looked at Ava with hate in his eyes, and I was worried that he was going to bum-rush her at any second.

“You’re wrong. I’m no traitor. I’m still loyal to the Samaras, and that will never change. I fought harder than anyone for this pack to be together again, but what you’re doing is not what the true Samaras want, no matter how much you delude yourself into thinking that it is. The Samara pack won’t survive your tactics, cousin, and if we’re destroyed again, then we’ll be gone for good. We’ll never recover from this, and it’ll be all your fault. Is that what you want? To go down in werewolf history as an Alpha who completely demolished his own pack? As a failure?”

Knox looked completely enraged by Ava’s words, and I got even more worried for her. She was standing too close to him for my comfort, as I was sure the magical steroids he’d taken were making him stronger even when he was in human form. Ava had been spot-on with her statement, but Knox wasn’t in the right headspace to listen to anything resembling reason, and I was afraid he was going to lunge at her at any second.

I rubbed my head where Blaine had hit me. It was still throbbing. *What a coward, attacking me when I wasn’t looking.* I hoped that Xavier and Greyson were giving Blaine what he had coming.

It was obvious that the Samaras didn’t mind taking cheap shots, and mentally, I warned Ava to be careful, even though I knew she couldn’t hear me.

To my surprise, Knox didn’t attack. Instead, he narrowed his eyes at his cousin and sneered. “I just want to finish what Nolan started!”

# Episode 3060

**Ava**

*Finish what Nolan started? He’s GOT to be joking.*

“Are you kidding me? Nolan wanted to kill Cali and Xavier to avenge my death! You don’t give a crap about me—you just threw me in a pit, not an hour ago! So don’t pretend what you’re doing and what Nolan did are even on the same playing field. And this Fae”—I gestured to Cali—“is inconsequential, so I don’t get why you’re so obsessed with her!”

Cali was standing right behind me, and I could see the shock on her face at my words. She didn’t get it. Sure, it was insulting, but it was meant to be. I was trying to defend her, however backward that might seem. But if Knox thought she was important, if he thought she mattered, he’d never let her go. All the better she looked pissed off, really.

Why was I even bothering to try defending her in the first place?

I couldn’t deny that if Cali were out of the picture, Xavier and I would have no barriers to being together. The old me would’ve been happy to put Cali in harm’s way and let the chips fall where they may, but I knew I couldn’t do that. *That’s not who I am anymore. I have to show everyone that I’m not who they think I am—no matter how much easier it would be to let Knox take Cali out once and for all.*

Knox scowled. “It’s not just about revenge for what happened to you anymore. The Samaras have been shamed by the Redwoods over and over again, and we need to take our pride back! If you really gave a shit about the Samaras, if you were actually loyal, you’d get that!”

I almost laughed. “That’s bullshit, Knox, and you know it. You just wanted a cause to rally the other Samaras around you. You knew that the only way that someone like you could become Alpha was if the Samaras thought the future of their pack was being threatened. You used their fear and our vulnerability to weasel your way into a position that you don’t deserve, that you aren’t ready for. Not to mention that Xavier and the Redwoods have supported the Samaras getting back together from the beginning.”

“That’s a lie!” Knox screamed. He was practically frothing at the mouth, and his pupils were super dilated.

*He really has lost control.* I was prepared to shift back to my wolf at a moment’s notice. I really didn’t want to kill my cousin, but he wasn’t really giving me much of a choice. I narrowed my eyes at him. “You crossed the line the moment you cheated at the Iudicium. You broke sacred werewolf law just to get your revenge. That’s not the way a true Alpha behaves. You’re just using the Samaras for your own selfish reasons. You don’t really want what’s best for them. If you did, then you’d quit all this right now!”

I wasn’t going to take my eyes off him for a second. I’d really called him out now, and Knox was so unhinged that he looked like he might pounce at any second.

“They don’t know what’s best for them!” Knox screamed, spittle flying out of his mouth. “Only I do! Not you, not your beloved Redwoods—me!” Knox was pacing back and forth, his face was flushed red, and his eyes were completely bloodshot. “I’m in charge here! I’m the Alpha!”

“Not for long,” I said, my voice low.

Knox took a step forward. I could see his jaw pulsing and his muscles clenching and an angry vein rising in his neck. He looked absolutely terrifying. “I’m going to make it my new mission to tear you and your little world apart! I’m going to kill your mate, and as for you? Well, maybe I’ll just kill you again! You’re nothing but a traitor!” He spat on the ground in front of me. “If only Nolan could see you now.”

*That’s it.* I stepped forward, nearly bumping his chest with mine. “You shut the fuck up about my brother. You don’t even deserve to speak his name! You didn’t know him, not like I did. Nolan wasn’t who you assumed he was, not at the end.”

“A lot of good it did him, seeing as he’s dead now,” Knox hissed.

I saw red.

I lunged forward, shifting. Knox shifted at the exact same moment, and we collided in midair, all teeth and claws and savage howls and savage swipes fueled by pure hate. I let my anger guide me as we fought again in the snow, even more intensely than before. I was so mad that all I could think about was tearing him apart piece by piece, and for a while, I was doing a good job of it. I managed to avoid all his strikes and even caught him on the left flank, drawing blood.

Then, almost on a dime, the tide shifted and Knox was too quick for me. His attacks grew more precise and deliberate, and they came at me in quick succession. He was really putting his muscle into it now, and he drove me further and further back. He slashed me in the shoulder, opening up a deep, gushing wound, and I howled in pain. I began to limp backward, trying to get out of Knox’s reach and failing miserably as he caught me with another swipe that landed dangerously close to my throat.

*I’m not going to be able to beat him one-on-one—he’s too strong.* I tried to back away, but there was nowhere to go; he’d backed me right up against a tree trunk. *Shit. I’m cornered!*

Knox loomed over me, snarling and curling his lip so that both of his long, sharp canines were exposed.

*Goodbye, cousin. I wish I could say that I’ll mourn you, but that would be a lie. No one will, traitor. You should have stayed dead!* he said, just as he launched himself at me.

I tensed and waited for the final blow, but just before he made contact, he was thrown back as if he’d hit an invisible wall.

The air was shimmering around me, and I spotted Cali standing right at my flank with her hands in the air. Her face was drawn tight with concentration as she created a magical shield around me. I gasped as a mix of emotions raced through me: shock, gratitude, relief, and everything in between.

Knox slid to the ground, kicking up a mound of snow in his wake before he slammed into a tree. He was finally knocked out this time—or at the very least stunned. He wasn’t even moving. *But who knows for how long? He’s so strong, and whatever he’s on probably makes him recover quickly!*

I shifted back to human as I turned to look at Cali. Before I could stop myself, I asked, “Why did you do that?”

Cali frowned. “What do you mean? You were in trouble. Did you want me to let him kill you?”

I shook my head. *You hate me, that’s why I’m surprised. You’d like nothing more than to have me out of the way so there’d be no one to come between you and Xavier.* I knew that I should say thank you, but the words were stuck in my throat, and I just stared at her.

Cali nodded at me with a knowing glint in her eye. “I know. You don’t have to say it.”

I scowled at how presumptuous she was being, even though she was right.

We both turned at the sound of a growl that sounded dangerously close. I cursed myself for getting distracted with Cali. I spun around to face whatever was coming, shifting just as Blaine jumped on top of me from behind and pinned me to the ground, his teeth closed around my neck.

I howled in pain and struggled underneath him, trying to get away before he closed his jaws any tighter. I could barely breathe as it was. I strained and struggled and twisted, but I couldn’t move. He was too strong.

Cali screamed as Zipper ran toward us and jumped, shifting to human in midair and grabbing Cali by the hair. She toppled to the ground, and Zipper took off, dragging her through the snow by her hair. I could see Cali trying to get off a shot of her Fae magic, but it was clear that she couldn’t get the right angle to hit him.

*Let me up, you asshole!* I mind linked to Blaine. He only clamped his teeth down harder, enough to cause damage but not enough to kill me. Just beyond Blaine’s shoulder, I saw that Knox was back on his feet and standing just behind Blaine. In that moment, I knew there was nothing I could do to fight back.

*I can’t believe I’m going to die again… And at the hands of my own pack.*

Xavier came running up, and his gaze went back and forth between me and Cali. He slid to a stop and stood there between us, Cali screaming at Zipper to let her go, me struggling against Blaine’s hold, and he looked like he couldn’t decide what to do.

I could hear Knox’s mind link to Xavier. *This is it, Evers. Which mate are you going to choose?*

# Episode 3061

**Greyson**

I raced up to join Xavier, mind linking as I slid to a stop beside him. *What’s going on? Where’s Cali?*

*Zipper has her*, Xavier replied. *But Blaine is about to kill Ava.*

I could hear the frustration and anguish in Xavier’s voice, so I decided to help him make one of the hardest decisions he’d probably ever been faced with. *I’ll get Cali, you take care of Ava!*

I could hear the struggle now that I was closer, and I raced off in the direction of Cali’s shrieks just as Xavier leapt forward and attacked Blaine’s wolf from behind.

I saw Zipper straight ahead of me, and I sped after him as he sprinted through the trees, dragging Cali by the hair. Anger sliced through me, nearly clouding my vision.

*I’m going to make him pay for that.*

I gained on them quickly and let out a growl as I latched onto Zipper’s arm. He screamed in pain and released Cali, but I still didn’t let go. I dug my teeth in deeper and deeper, and Zipper wailed as his blood spurted into my mouth.

“Greyson!” Cali shrieked, scrambling away from us.

*Close your eyes*, I mind linked to her.

*Why?*

*Cali, just do it. Close your eyes.*

Cali’s eyes finally fluttered closed. With a savage jerk, I ripped Zipper’s arm off and tossed it away. It landed in the snow with a satisfying thud.

Zipper let out a scream of agony and fell into the bloody snow, immediately passing out from the pain.

*Come on*, I said to Cali, nuzzling her. *I’ll carry you to safety.*

Cali nodded and climbed onto my back. She was obviously shaken, and I could tell that she was doing her best to avoid looking at Zipper where he lay passed out only a few feet away.

I trotted into the trees and reached out to Xavier via mind link. *Report?*

*Kind of busy*, Xavier replied breathlessly. *Ava and I are trying not to get killed by Blaine and Knox. You know, the usual.*

I was torn. I wanted to help my brother, but there was no way I was going to carry Cali back toward danger.

*We can’t leave now! The pack needs us!* Cali said. *I can control my magic well enough. We need to help them—we* have *to help them!*

I wanted to argue with her and tell her that it wasn’t a good idea and that I just wanted her back safe and sound at the pack house, but I knew better than to underestimate Cali. So, ignoring every alarm bell clanging in my head, I raced back to the battle.

It didn’t take me long to realize that our side wasn’t doing very well. The Samaras were a force to be reckoned with thanks to whatever they’d taken, and they were overpowering the Redwoods.

Zeke and Ravi were facing off against Kenny, who even now was running circles around them and taking bites out of them only to dash out of the way as soon as they tried to counter. Both wolves looked like they were on their last leg and were limping in the deep snow, their fur covered in blood.

Rishika was busy guarding Charlie, who appeared to be unconscious, as two Samaras advanced on her with their teeth bared. She snarled and lashed out at them as soon as they got too close, but it wasn’t going to take long for them to gain an advantage.

In the middle of it all, Knox and Xavier were battling it out while Ava faced off against Blaine. Ava and Xavier were holding their own, but I knew from experience that the tables could turn at any moment.

We were at that critical point where we either had to push through or face defeat, and I couldn’t let that happen. The Redwoods had been through too much and gone up against too many powerful forces to fall at the hands of a fledgling pack with a sadistic idiot for an Alpha. I had to do whatever I could to get us back on an even playing field. Without another thought, I jumped into the fray and pushed Knox away from Xavier.

*What the hell are you doing here, brother?* Xavier demanded. *Why did you bring Cali back into this? It’s not safe.*

*So I can save your ass—our asses! It’s not looking too hot for us right now, and you need all the help you can get!*

Xavier didn’t get an opportunity to reply as one of the wolves that had been advancing on Rishika and Charlie leapt onto him and dug their claws into his back. Xavier yowled and twisted around, trying to toss the wolf off, but he held on tight, and it looked like he was about to go for the back of Xavier’s neck.

“Xavier!” Cali shouted, shooting a bolt of Fae magic that barely missed the Samara wolf’s head. Xavier finally managed to throw the wolf off, but the Samara pounced again, and both wolves wrestled on the ground, going for blood.

Knox was facing me now, breathing hard but looking like he could do this all night. *I’m going to kill you and your mate in one blow*, he mind linked.

I growled and stepped close to him. *If you touch her again, I’ll rip your throat out.*

Knox laughed. *I’d like to see you try.*

He dove at me, and I turned to avoid the hit while using my body to protect Cali, who was still on my back. There was no way I’d really be able to engage with Knox in the way I wanted while Cali was still riding me.

*I’ll climb off!* Cali said. *Don’t worry about me!*

*No, I’m not going to let go of you now that I have you safe.*

Cali gave a half-hearted laugh. *Safe? Right smack in the middle of battle?*

*Just hang on, I’ll take care of him!* I kept my eyes on Knox, who was circling me now, obviously trying to find his next point of attack. I didn’t doubt that he might try to go directly for Cali next.

*No, Greyson, you can’t fight him like this. Not while he’s on that potion*, Cali said, her words tinged with worry. She started to climb off my back, and I spun around to stop her. At the same moment, Knox bit down on my shoulder. I let out of howl of pain as blood poured out of the wound and splattered into the snow.

“Greyson!” Cali shouted.

*Greyson!* Xavier mind linked, tossing the wolf he was fighting into a tree. The wolf lay there, either stunned or dead. *Hang on, I’m coming!*

I was still reeling from the pain and could see Knox turning to bite again, but then a bright light flashed in the air, accompanied by a loud pop. I paused and stumbled, momentarily blinded by the burst of light. Spots floated through my vision, and I backed up into Cali.

*Was that you?* I asked her. *Was that your magic?*

*No*, Cali answered, sounding as disoriented as I was. *No, that wasn’t me. I didn’t do that.*

Then we heard a familiar voice. “Need some backup?”

“Artemis!” Cali cried. “Where did you come from?”

“There was no way I was going to let these Samara assholes kidnap my sister and not do anything about it!”

*Greyson!* Jay’s voice came to me via mind link. *You good?*

He appeared with Lola, Sage, Zainab, Violet, and Lilac at his side.

*I’m good, Jay, thanks.* I breathed a sigh of relief as the other wolves all came to flank me, and Rishika, Xavier, and Ravi converged with them. Once again, we felt like a powerful, capable pack, and I was finally starting to feel like we might have a chance.

“What was that bomb thing?” Cali asked Artemis.

“A flash bomb that Big Mac, Marta, and Dani cooked up,” Artemis said proudly. “It was pretty amazing, right?”

Knox was still disoriented from the bright blast and was stumbling around in front of us, shaking his head to try to clear his vision.

*That was cheating!* Knox mind linked. *You fucking cheated!*

I laughed. *And you’d know all about that, wouldn’t you? What with your kidnappings and potions and cheap shots.*

Knox made a sloppy dash toward me, trying to attack even though he was still clearly semi-dazed from the flash bomb, which had gone off right in his face. I easily jumped out of the way and pinned Knox to the ground as he thrashed against me, growling ferociously and royally pissed off.

*I’m going to kill you, your mate, your brother, your entire family! I’ll hunt down every Evers and everyone you love and kill them all. I’ll make it my life’s work to destroy your bloodline!* Knox mind linked. *Fuck you! The Redwood pack is done. There’ll be nothing left by the time I’m done with you. And then I’m going to burn your pack house to the ground!*

*You have to end him. It’s the only choice here*, Xavier said.

*I know. There’s no other way.*

I opened my mouth and was about to make the killing strike when a howl rang out through the forest. It was loud, distinct, and had every wolf stiffening in recognition.

“What’s going on?” Artemis asked, but no one answered.

*I know exactly what that howl means*, I thought, just as a pack of Elder wolves emerged from the forest, walking slowly but purposefully with their heads held high. I’d only ever seen them once before, when I was a very young boy. The Elder wolf council didn’t show itself very often, and the fact that they were here now was a wonder in itself.

The lead Elder wolf broke off from the rest and approached, his gaze drifting around the group of stunned wolves as he mind linked, *We’ll take it from here.*

# Episode 3062

I watched in utter confusion as every wolf stood frozen in place, staring at the pack of huge wolves that had just emerged from the forest.

*What’s going on?* I mind linked to Xavier. I’d never seen anything like it—even the Samaras had paused their vicious onslaught to watch the approaching wolves. I couldn’t immediately make out anything that differentiated these werewolves from the others, but it was clear that they were a big deal.

*It’s the Elder wolf council*, Xavier answered. *They only show up in times of crisis. Or when they fucking feel like it.*

I scowled. *Then why haven’t they come to help before? Like with Letifer or Seluna? Those were pretty big crises.*

Going up against the Samaras was basically our tamest conflict so far, so why had they decided to get in the middle of things now? It didn’t make a bit of sense.

Xavier ducked his head, as if thinking. *I don’t know. No one is allowed to question the Elder council’s decisions. It’s fucked. Maybe it’s because Seluna and Letifer weren’t werewolves.*

*Then what about Silas? He was a werewolf*, I said.Silas had been a larger threat to all of werewolf-kind than Knox could ever be, so it was strange that the council had apparently looked the other way while we were fighting for our lives against Silas and his army of revenants.

Xavier didn’t seem to have an answer for that one. I looked back at the Elder wolves, unsure whether to trust them or not—especially since I’d never met them before. There was no way to know whether they would really have our pack’s best interests in mind. I watched them with suspicion as they approached Greyson, clearly mind linking something to him, as he stepped back and allowed Knox to get up.

Knox struggled to his feet, clearly worn out and shaken up. I was surprised when he didn’t attack Greyson the first chance he got—not that he looked like he could do much damage in his current state.

I was still on edge, but I was relieved. At least the presence of the Elder council had stopped the fighting—for now.

The apparent lead Elder wolf stepped forward and shifted to human. He was an older man with a regal bearing, and every wolf kept their eyes on him. He took a cloak from a wolf behind him and wrapped it around his shoulders, then raised his voice to speak. “For those who don’t know me, I am Samson Cesaries, head of the werewolf council. As there are non-wolves here, I will speak outside of mind link, so that all may hear.”

I was at least grateful for that; I hated being left out. If they were about to make any sort of decision about how we were going to move forward with Knox, then I needed to be able to hear every single word of it.

“The council has been made aware of the struggles between the Alphas in this area. It has escalated to the point that it has started to involve those outside of the werewolf community, and it is for that reason that the council has decided to step in.” His gaze came to rest on Artemis and me—the only two human-form people in the clearing, other than him.

“How did you hear about what is happening here?” I asked. I kind of wished they’d shown up sooner—maybe before everyone had started fighting to the death.

Samson dragged his gaze over me, obviously taking my measure. “We were contacted by a wolf named Hector. Is he here?” Samson looked around the crowd of rapt wolves.

My gaze found Hector’s body lying in the snow, and my heart dropped. I couldn’t help but envision Hector’s last moments as he’d fought for his life against Knox.

*Poor Hector. He just wanted his pack back. This must be what he meant when he told Knox that someone was coming for him.* Even in his last moments, he’d done everything he could to keep the Samara pack safe. *He didn’t deserve to die like that. The only person who deserves that sort of end is Knox himself.*

Samson followed my gaze and gave a slight nod. “Since our witness is no longer able to give his testimony, is there anyone else who will be willing to speak on what has been happening here?”

Greyson shifted back to human. “I will speak, sir, if you will allow it.” He gave a deferential bow, then lifted his head to meet Samson’s gaze.

Knox shifted, too, already putting up a fight. “That’s not fair! A representative from the Samaras should be able to speak, too. There are two sides to this, and I demand to tell my side!”

Samson nodded. “As you stand accused, you cannot speak on your own behalf.” Samson lifted his gaze to look around at the werewolves surrounding him. “Is there anyone here who will speak for Knox or his allies when it comes time for the trial?”

Knox looked around at his “friends,” and not one of them shifted to human, sending a clear message that they didn’t want to lie to the council.

“Traitors!” Knox spat. “You’re all just a bunch of traitors! I am your Alpha! Show some respect!”

Still, none of the other wolves stepped forward.

Ava shifted back to human. “I will speak as a representative of the Samaras.”

“And stab me in the back while you’re at it,” Knox growled.

Ava hit him with a hard stare, then continued. “I’ll only tell the truth as it was told to me. Some of it by you, Knox.” She gave Knox a meaningful glance before turning back to the Elders.

That seemed to shut Knox up. He snapped his mouth shut and stepped back, obviously realizing that he was done for.

Greyson cleared his throat. “With respect, Elder, the Redwoods are handling this matter. We were just about to deliver justice for all the wrongs that Knox and his allies have committed.”

Samson nodded regally. “It is now out of the Redwood pack’s hands. The council will decide what kind of justice Knox will face.”

Greyson clenched his fists, obviously pissed at being brushed off by the Elder. I understood his frustration. He’d been handling matters on his own for a while now, and it had to be hard to have someone get in his way, someone he couldn’t just eliminate from the equation like he could Knox—though even that was proving difficult.

Xavier shifted back to human and faced the Elder. “Your justice wouldn’t include the possibility of letting him live, right?”

Samson frowned at Xavier. “Are you questioning the will of the council?”

“We aren’t,” Greyson said quickly. “But we have been here in these woods with the Samaras, and we’ve witnessed what Knox has done and what he’s capable of. We honestly believe that if Knox is allowed to live, he will never stop trying to come after the Redwoods. He must be dealt with so that we don’t have to live our lives looking over our shoulders.”

I stood by, watching Samson and my mates going back and forth, hating that they were essentially speaking about an execution. I never would have imagined that I would be standing by, listening to people discuss whether someone deserved to live or die. Still, I hadn’t been lying when I’d told Greyson that I understood why Knox had to die. I wasn’t so naïve to think that all people were capable of listening to reason. At the end of the day, if I had to choose between my loved ones and one of our enemies, I would choose my loved ones every single time. My mates, my family, my pack were everything to me, and there was nothing I wouldn’t do to protect them.

“We have already said that we will hear testimony from both sides before we determine Knox and his allies’ sentences,” Samson boomed, letting his gaze drag over each and every wolf standing before him. “Is that understood?”

“This is ridiculous! A sentence? For what? For protecting my position? For reforming the Samara pack into what it deserves to be? For demanding respect from those who would see us ruined?” Knox said, looking right at my mates. “I broke no laws!”

“The Redwoods know that the council is wise!” Greyson interrupted, yelling to be heard over Knox. “But I worry about what will happen if we delay in taking care of him while we have him right here in our hands.”

*Greyson is right… Where will Knox be while the council doles out this “justice” Samson keeps talking about? Will Knox just be free to roam, or will he be imprisoned? What if he tries to take revenge on me and my mates? And what if he just convinces the council that what he’s done is right and they let him go?*

I didn’t even need to wonder what Knox would do if he were released. He’d waste no time bringing all his chaos and anger right back to the Redwoods and Samaras. It would be a nightmare.

“Are you saying that you’re not willing to turn him over to us?” Samson said.

“And if we’re not?” Xavier replied.

Samson looked Xavier right in the eye. “Either give Knox to us, or the Redwood pack will be banished.”

# Episode 3063

**Xavier**

*Banish us? Samson can’t be fucking serious. Is he seriously threatening us after everything the Redwoods have done to protect this region from every threat under the sun? We even tried to help the Samaras rebuild their pack, and this is the thanks we get?*

We’d done our part as upstanding werewolves and respected other packs’ rights to thrive, even when we had no obligation to. All that, only for the council to show up out of nowhere and make demands and threats after being absent through so much?

This whole thing was a perfect example of why I didn’t trust people who sat up in their ivory towers while others struggled below them. Cali was right: the council *hadn’t* come to offer their help when we were fighting Silas—which was proof enough that the council was super secretive and weirdly selective about what they deemed important enough to warrant their attention.

*Now they’ve just barged into our woods talking about some sort of trial that’ll do nothing but keep Knox from getting exactly what he deserves: death. They have no idea what we’ve been through, or the threat that Knox is to the stability of werewolf packs everywhere.* The council probably thought they were being “fair” and “just,” but all they were really doing was giving Knox a chance to talk his way out of punishment—or to make his escape.

*Bullshit. They let the Redwoods do all the heavy lifting, chastise us as if* we’re *the problem, and then set it up so that they can take all the credit as our “saviors.” Give me a fucking break.*

I was getting angrier by the minute, and I had to work overtime to keep my mouth shut and not give Samson and his council lackeys a piece of my mind. I was angry and annoyed, but I knew the rules as well as any other werewolf here, and I wasn’t in any position to defy the council outright at a time like this. Still, I made a vow to myself to keep a close eye on whatever the council decided to do with Knox. There was no way I was going to let anyone get in the way of me protecting my mate and my pack—and Knox was a proven threat to both.

“Fine, you’ve made your point,” Greyson said to Samson. “Take him.”

Samson smiled and gestured to a few of his underlings, who shifted to human and stepped forward to grab Knox, Blaine, and the other allies. They put rubber gloves on their hands and quickly wrapped silver bindings around them.

“Get these off me!” Knox yelled around screams of pain as they tightened the bindings. “It burns!”

“I hope it kills you.” I spat at Knox as Samson’s underlings took him away. Silver poisoning was actually too good a death for an asshole like Knox.

“We will do our due diligence in this matter, but let this stand as a warning,” Samson said. “Do not upset the order.”

Samson waved off the rest of his attendants, and we quietly watched them slip back into the forest. Almost like they’d never even been there. Once Knox was gone, no one seemed to know what to do with themselves. The remaining Samara wolves stayed in wolf form, but none of them attacked. What were we supposed to do now? They’d taken the fight right out from underneath us.

Ava was the first to speak up. “I understand that Knox told you all certain things, but I hope that you’ll all stick around so we can talk about our pack now that the poison is gone. We really need to figure out what to do next. Together.”

The Samara wolves lowered their heads as if to nod, then took off into the forest. Only Ava, Zeke, and the Redwood pack were left. Zeke shifted back to human form along with all the other Redwoods who hadn’t yet, and then we all gathered together. There was definitely a somber feeling in the air, but there was also an unmistakable thread of relief running through the group. We hadn’t lost any Redwoods, and no one had been critically injured. Even though the council had come at the eleventh hour and stuck their nose where it didn’t belong, we’d still come out okay.

“What *is* going to happen to the Samara pack?” Cali asked me, Ava, and Greyson.

I wasn’t quite sure how to answer that question. All we’d really been focused on up until this point was getting rid of Knox, not what to do next, or what it would take to rebuild.

Ava spoke up. “We’re going to try to pick up the pieces, first. Figure things out. Maybe we’ll get an interim Alpha. This time around, things are going to be different—that much is for sure—especially when it comes to how decisions are made. I’m going to take choosing the next Alpha as seriously as maybe any pack ever has. We can’t have another incident like this—we wouldn’t survive it.”

“Could *you* be Alpha?” Cali asked Ava.

Everyone flashed Cali a surprised look—especially me and Ava. I was shocked that Cali would ever think that Ava could be a good Alpha, but Cali looked completely serious.

“I don’t see the big deal,” Cali said simply. “Ava obviously fights for the Samara pack. Why can’t she be Alpha?”

“Because it is always a male Alpha,” Zeke explained.

Cali scowled, and I could see her about to begin a tirade about the sexism of it all.

“There are packs that are open to having female wolves in leadership roles, but even then, it’s not as simple as thinking that someone would be best for the job,” I said. “It’s all super complicated and archaic.” In the Redwood pack, I wouldn’t have ever minded a woman being Alpha, and I wouldn’t in the future either… If I didn’t want to be Alpha, myself. I looked at Ava, who lowered her head, not speaking up or outright stating that she didn’t really want the role of Alpha. I turned to Zeke. “Maybe you could take over in the interim?”

Zeke looked shocked. “*Me?* Well, yes, I suppose that would work. It would be a good way to honor what Hector wanted for the pack. In the meantime, we can take our time looking for someone to help guide the Samaras in the right direction. We’ll need someone fit for the long haul, someone who really understands how to be a good Alpha.”

“Well, it’s decided, then,” I said. “At least for now.”

We were all about to move off and go our separate ways when Ava caught me by the arm.

“Can we talk?” she asked.

I shot Cali a look, thinking about how much I wanted to just escort her home safely, but I could tell from the look on Ava’s face that she really needed to talk to me. “Sure. Are you upset that I implied that you didn’t want to be Alpha? Was I wrong? Do you?”

Ava shook her head no. “No, no, you were right. I don’t want to take on that role in the pack, but that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about.”

*I hope it’s not about what I think it’s going to be about.* “What’s this about, then?”

“Thank you,” Ava blurted out. “I know it was probably hard for you to choose to save me during the battle back there. So thank you for choosing me.”

I suddenly felt really guilty. The only reason I’d chosen to help Ava was because I’d known that Greyson was going to help Cali. If there had even been a possibility that Cali would’ve been harmed, I wouldn’t have given saving Ava a second thought.

*Should I keep that from her? No, that would be wrong. I can’t keep manipulating her feelings just to keep her loyalty in check. That’s not fair to her.*

Over the last week, I’d truly learned to trust Ava, and with that in mind, I knew I needed to be able to tell her the truth. Besides, Cali was my real, true mate, and I needed to be consistent about showing that.

“I’m happy that you’re safe, but I also knew that Greyson was going to protect Cali,” I said.

Ava blinked in surprise, and her smile fell. In that moment, she looked absolutely devastated. I was shocked at how bad I felt about her being this upset. I realized then that I was way past the place where I wanted to actively hurt Ava—that part of me was long gone. I started to say something else, but Ava waved me away.

“Oh, yeah, of course. I knew that,” she said quickly. “I still just wanted to let you know that I appreciated the help. That’s all. I’m glad that we’re in a place now where we can have each other’s backs. Also, I’ve known for a while that you were done… That things between us, whatever there was, is gone. I felt you pulling away, and I understand why—Cali is your mate. I don’t want to jeopardize what we have, and I’m good with keeping things the way they are and just being a part of your life right now.”

“Actually, it might be best for us not to talk for a while, just to make a clean break,” I said.

Ava looked surprised again at my words, and a little sad, but she just nodded and walked away. I went to join Cali, who’d moved away when Ava had taken me aside so that we could have a little privacy.

“Is everything okay with Ava?” Cali asked.

“It’s fine.” I linked an arm around Cali’s waist. “Let’s go home.”

I led Cali back toward the pack house, all the while ignoring my wolf howling inside me.