**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 28 - Part 1**

**Episodes 3452–3633**

# **Episode 3452**

**Greyson**

For a moment, I just stared at Elle in confusion. *She wants to spy on Lucian? Why on earth…*

“So, sorry if this seems like a dumb question, but I kind of feel like I need to ask it—do you know what spying means?” I asked.

Her expression shifted into a glare. “It means watching someone without them knowing, learning their secrets, and then using that information to help yourself.”

“Fair enough.” I sighed. This still didn’t answer my slew of questions or concerns about why, exactly, she wanted to do this. Why was she entertaining this truly awful idea at all? “And you think spying on Lucian will help the pack because…?”

“You do not trust him. He has betrayed us before.”

“You’re right, on both counts, but I don’t understand how spying on Lucian is going to change either of those things. Besides, the Vanguard pack isn’t the threat to us they once were. We’re working on strengthening our bond as allies.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “They are not our friends.”

Of course they weren’t our friends. Not that I’d ever really liked Lucian or any other member of his pack to begin with, but once he’d started messing with Cali, any chance of genuine friendship had gone up in smoke. But still, that didn’t mean Lucian and the Vanguards weren’t valuable allies. Especially now with all that Seluna bullshit in the rearview. Spying on them didn’t feel like the right call. What’s more, sending Elle of all people over to the Vanguard palace as a spy was a disaster waiting to happen.

This was the girl I’d just lectured for nearly burning down the pack house because she didn’t know how a fireplace worked. Elle wasn’t stupid, but she was still so new to this world, to how human minds worked, that I didn’t want her anywhere near Lucian.

Plus, there was the unsettling fact that Lucian was interested in Elle, and she him. No, she needed to stay far, *far* away from everything Vanguard related. For all our sakes.

“I see your point,” I said carefully. “But things with the Vanguards have changed. I appreciate that you want to help the pack, but I don’t want you to be a spy. There are other ways to help. Not to mention, you’re selling yourself short. You’ve already helped us a lot. You don’t owe us anything, okay?”

“It is not fair.” She pouted, looking moments away from stamping her foot. “I know I can help! And Aysel wants to be my friend. I can use that to spy on Lucian. There is so much I can do, if you will just let me.”

Just like there were so many ways this could blow up in all our faces.

I tried to keep my expression neutral, tried not to show how the mere thought of Lucian getting his claws into Elle made my blood boil. “I just don’t think it’s a good idea.”

I wasn’t all that concerned about Aysel’s interest in Elle—it was probably because Elle was beautiful and mysterious. Aysel liked to surround herself with beautiful things. She also liked to learn secrets, if only to feel the superiority that came with being in the know. That was why she had Lucian’s ear without doing much to actually help run the pack, and that was why she had multiple rooms filled with more clothes than she could possibly wear in a lifetime. Elle would just be another addition to Aysel’s collection, and I wasn’t going to allow that. I wanted more for her. She deserved so much more.

But Elle clearly wanted to feel useful, so I’d need to come up with something to help her feel more involved with the goings-on of the pack.

“Are you going to stop me from making new friends, too? Even if they are not Vanguards?” Elle asked.

I tried not to sigh. This conversation was getting very old, very fast. And it didn’t take much to see where she was going with this.

“It depends,” I said. “If you recall, one of my responsibilities as Alpha is to protect each and every pack member. To make sure they’re not harmed by anything or anyone.”

“Well, what if I have a boyfriend?”

My eyes widened. “Who?”

This, I hadn’t expected. Was she dating someone? A thousand different emotions slammed into me at the thought—everything from protectiveness to curiosity to optimism to fury. I didn’t love the thought of her dating anyone. Not yet. She hadn’t been a human that long. There were still so many things she needed to learn, especially when it came to dating. Was some guy taking advantage of her?

*If this is someone from the Redwood pack…*

No, it couldn’t be anyone from the Redwood pack. They knew better. My mind flashed back to Lucian’s smug face, and I only just suppressed the growl rising in my chest. Was that what this was? Had Lucian seduced her? Was this spying thing just a ruse to allow Elle to go live in the palace with him?

But Elle just shrugged. “No. I am just saying that if I did, would you want to stop me from seeing my own boyfriend?”

My blood pressure dropped, but my head was still spinning from this conversation. *Talk about a mind fuck…*

Suddenly, I had new sympathy for every strict dad in those Disney movies Cali was always referencing. But what were they supposed to do? Just let their daughters run off and put themselves in danger because they were too naïve and inexperienced to understand what they were doing?

*Oh, Jesus Christ. I am* not *Elle’s father. She already has a dad.*

*Except he’s just a wolf. Who wouldn’t understand any of this.*

And yet I was still certain he’d rip me a new asshole if he thought I wasn’t taking care of his daughter like I’d promised.

This whole conversation was getting away from me. I wasn’t in the mood to play warden while Elle was acting like a surly teenager. I wasn’t sure I’d ever be in the mood for that.

“Do you want Lucian to be your boyfriend?” I asked bluntly.

She shrugged, but there was no missing the blush that spread across her cheeks. “I find him attractive. Cali told me it is important to be attracted to your boyfriend. But I am not trying to make him my boyfriend. I am trying to help the Redwood pack.”

I nodded. “Okay. How about we make a deal? I’ll take your suggestion seriously. I’ll really think it over, but in exchange, you have to promise not to do anything before I have a chance to make my decision. How does that sound?”

She mulled this over, then nodded. “I can do that.” But as she turned to leave, she spun back around to face me. “But I will need to know soon.”

*God. What’s that supposed to mean?*

I didn’t ask. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know. All I wanted was to get the hell out of this conversation. Elle had promised she’d wait until I decided, and I had to take her at her word. Elle wouldn’t lie to me. She was full of surprises, always had been, but that was one thing I was sure of.

As Elle walked out of the living room, I saw Xavier pass by the doorway. Oh good. He and Cali were back. Soon, I’d get my turn with Cali, and I couldn’t wait to show her what I had planned.

But first, there were a few loose ends to tie up from last night’s party.

“Hey, Xavier!” I called to him. “Come here for a second?”

He popped his head into the living room, his expression unreadable. “What’s up?”

“I have a couple questions about what happened at the party last night.”

He snorted and stepped inside. “I’d bet real money there are more than a few hangovers in Vanguard land this morning. Big Mac must’ve made a killing off her moonshine. And what the hell was in that wine they served?”

“Nothing good.” I chuckled. “I haven’t had a chance to talk to you about the Samara situation. Zeke was a fucking mess last night. And what was going on between you and Ava?”

Immediately, my brother’s expression soured. “There’s nothing going on between us, so stay the fuck out of my business.”

“Wow.” My brows rose. Had I said something wrong? I hadn’t seen his mood flip like this in a long time. “I’m not trying to pry—”

“Then don’t.”

“—I just want to know if I should be worried about Lucian taking over the Samara pack.”

“Ask Lucian. I’m sure he’d be all too happy to share all his evil plans with you.”

What the hell was his problem? These were simple questions relating to the safety of the pack. It wasn’t like I was trying to get him to gossip with me.

I scoffed. “You’re joking, right? Xavier, I asked you to take care of this.”

He shrugged. “I changed my mind.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m done being your lackey. If you want something, find someone else. I’m done.”

# Episode 3453

I stared down at the blank sheet of paper. “What the hell?”

I blinked, hard, like that was the magic trick that would make the words appear on the page. That once I opened my eyes, I’d see them and know whether or not the killing curse was still in place.

But when I opened my eyes, I was met with the same blank page I’d been staring at all this time. I flipped the page over—also blank.

“What the hell?” I repeated, loud enough that my voice filled the air around me.

This… This had to be some kind of mistake. I dropped the letter, then checked the drawer. Nothing. I even went so far as to dig around inside the drawer, just to make sure my eyes weren’t playing tricks on me and the *real* letter wasn’t hiding, tucked just out of sight.

No such luck.

There weren’t even any other envelopes in the drawer, so it wasn’t like I’d accidentally grabbed the wrong one. I looked around the study. Was there another sheet of paper in the envelope that had somehow fallen to the floor?

But there was nothing on the floor that shouldn’t have been there. No letter. No answers. Just like there had been nothing in the drawer, and nothing on the page I kept looking at. I even held the envelope up to the overhead light, in case the words had been written in invisible ink or something.

Reality kept slamming into me, over and over, no matter how hard I tried to avoid it.

The paper was blank. There were no answers. No words. Nothing.

So much nothing.

My heart pounded against my ribs like a caged animal, and my stomach churned. Oh god. I was going to be sick.

I slumped down into the desk chair, my hands crumpling the edges of the blank letter. I’d finally gotten up the nerve to find out if I could safely choose between my mates, and I was no closer to learning the truth than I had been before.

Why had Big Mac told me she was writing it down? Was this some kind of cruel joke? Big Mac didn’t share her sense of humor very often, but maybe this was it—and I did *not* find it amusing. Not one bit. I’d beat myself up about that letter. I’d agonized over opening it, my anxiety rising and rising until it reached a fever pitch, and for what? So I could stare at a blank page and hate myself even more? If this was meant to be a joke, it wasn’t funny. And if Big Mac was trying to teach me some kind of lesson, I wasn’t getting it.

If anything, the only thing I’d learned was to never trust her with something so personal ever again. I thought back to when I’d first met Big Mac. I’d immediately been so intimidated by her. She’d seemed so demanding, so uncompromising. I mean, she’d taken Jay’s eye! That pretty much said it all, didn’t it?

But even through all of that, through every hurdle we’d overcome, every argument we’d had, every lecture and dirty look she’d given me, Big Mac had never been cruel. She’d never lied to me or set me up to get hurt.

Tears pricked at my eyes, and anger burned hot and bright in my chest. *How could she do this to me? I thought we were… Well, not friends, exactly. But almost friends? I thought I could trust her.*

Apparently, I’d thought wrong.

The letter still crumpled in my hand, I stomped upstairs and pounded on Big Mac’s door. I didn’t even wait for her to answer, I just burst in.

Big Mac was sitting at her desk, a pile of paperwork in front of her. She glared up at me. “Don’t you knock?”

I shoved the blank paper at her, like the damning evidence it was. “Is this supposed to be some kind of joke?”

Big Mac raised a brow. “I thought you knew me better than that. Have I ever struck you as a jokester, Caliana?”

I ignored the question. “Then why would you do something so cruel? Do you have any idea just how hard it was for me to bring myself to do this? To face months of fears and what-ifs, and open this damn letter? And then I find it blank? What the *hell*?”

My voice rose as I spoke, eventually filling the room. Still, Big Mac didn’t look anything other than vaguely annoyed.

She sighed. “Now look at what you’ve done. I’ve lost count of my moonshine sales, and I’m going to have to start over.”

“I don’t care about any of that!” I slammed the blank, crumpled letter down on the desk. “Why would you do this?”

She fixed me with a hard stare. “Did you?”

My fury hit a wall. I blinked, suddenly confused. “Did I what?”

“Did you really face your fears?”

I scoffed. “Weren’t you listening? That’s why I opened this letter! I had to find out the truth. It scared the hell out of me, but I did it. And then it was blank, which brings me back to my original question: what the hell?”

“We’ll get to that in a second,” she said mildly. Her voice was calm, quiet. It unsettled me. Weren’t we fighting right now? Or, at least, weren’t we *supposed* to be fighting right now? “Cali, tell me why you felt you had to open that letter.”

“Um, so I can know definitively whether or not I can choose between my mates without killing one of them!” I blinked rapidly, shaking my head. “You know all this—that’s why you were supposed to write it down in the first place!”

“I did write it down. The answer is in that letter.”

“How?” I grabbed the letter off her desk and practically shoved it in her face, so there could be no mistaking the very obvious *nothing* written on it. “*Where?* I don’t see it anywhere. Hence my being pissed off. You obviously didn’t write anything down. Why are you lying to me about this?”

“I’m not lying. I did write it down—”

I scoffed.

“The problem,” Big Mac continued evenly, “is that you just aren’t ready to see it.”

If I’d thought I was angry before, now I was absolutely *livid*. Who the hell was she to tell me when I was and wasn’t ready to find out a truth that would determine the course of my future?

“What the hell is that supposed to mean? Of course I’m ready—I’ve been fretting about it ever since you gave me the letter. I wouldn’t even be here if I wasn’t ready.”

“I believe that you think you’re ready, and that this is what you want, but how many times have you flip-flopped about wanting to know the truth? That’s why I wrote it down in the first place. You’ve come to me so many times, wanting to know the status of the curse only to change your mind. Quite frankly, it was annoying. But even more than that—it showed me that you need more time than you think you do. That there are layers to this that you need to come to terms with before you can be fully prepared to learn the truth and do something about it.”

My mouth snapped shut. *She kind of has a point.* “Okay, but if you’re telling the truth, then where is the answer you allegedly wrote in this letter?”

“You’re holding it in your hands.”

Ugh, now we were talking in circles again. “I’m not stupid—there’s nothing on this piece of paper.”

“That’s because I put a spell on it.”

My eyes widened, and I dropped the letter like it had burned me. I’d had it with spells!

The witch glared at me and picked up the paper. “I felt like I had no choice. It was obvious you weren’t actually ready to learn the truth.”

“I’m not? How do you know that? That’s… It’s not for you to decide!”

“Just answer one question for me, and think clearly before you speak. Can you do that?”

My stomach tightened with dread, but I nodded.

She put her hands on my shoulders and looked me straight in the eye. “Why did you open that letter?”

“Because I wanted to know if Greyson and Xavier and I are still cur—”

“Remember,” she interrupted, “you promised to think before you answer.”

I swallowed audibly, thinking of all the tension I’d been feeling over this choice, all the anxiety and indecision, all the unending pressure, and all the fear that my inability to choose was hurting my mates. “I opened the letter because I can’t take it anymore.”

The witch nodded. “Then you’re not ready to know. When you are, the words will reveal themselves.”

My heart sank. “But how am I supposed to know when I’m ready?”

# Episode 3454

**Xavier**

The way my brother was staring at me would have made a lesser man piss himself. Fortunately for me—and unfortunately for Greyson—growing up with Silas as a father had pretty much made me immune to looks that could kill.

“What do you mean, *you’re done*?” Greyson’s voice was a low growl.

I shrugged. “You’re a smart guy. I’m sure you’ll figure it out.”

Trust Greyson to ruin the first truly good mood I’d experienced in a long while. Being forced to go to Lucian’s party and then having Ava kiss me had put me on edge, but spending time with Cali this afternoon had eased all those feelings of anger and resentment. I’d come back to the pack house perfectly content—an emotion I didn’t feel too often.

Leave it to Greyson to ruin that.

“I asked you how things are going with the Samara pack because our alliance with Lucian isn’t exactly warm these days, and you told me yourself that he’s eyeing the vulnerabilities in the Samara pack. Ava buddying up with him doesn’t help with that, either. I don’t give a shit about your personal life, but I do care that I asked you to take care of this for me, for the pack, and now what? You’re throwing a temper tantrum? Why? What the hell is wrong? Clear this up for me.”

My molars ground together so hard they creaked. If I was being honest, I was still pissed off about Gabe’s reaction when I’d asked him if he saw me as Greyson’s second. It was one thing for Armin, the fucking new guy, to make assumptions, but Gabe was one of my best friends, and he knew the Redwood pack dynamics. If he thought I was officially playing second fiddle, then clearly it was time for me to shake things up and make sure nobody else shared that perspective.

“It’s a pretty simple concept,” I said. “I’m not going to be at your beck and call anymore. Find someone else to be your messenger, your facilitator, your second. Because that’s not me—and it *never* will be.”

He raised a brow. “My second? What the hell are you talking about? Where is this even coming from?”

“Oh please.” I scoffed. “Don’t act like this conversation hasn’t been a long time coming. I’m tired of taking orders from you. I’ve let it pass for far too long, but I refuse to put up with this shit any longer.” I grinned. “Think of it as my New Year’s resolution.”

Greyson still looked confused. The asshole was so conceited that he literally couldn’t comprehend the concept of my not wanting to serve him anymore. Jesus, how had I let this go on for so long?

Greyson stepped closer, his voice dropping low again. “You do know that I’m your Alpha, right? You haven’t forgotten that, have you?”

I scoffed. “As if you’d ever, for even one fucking second, let me forget it. Yeah, I know you’re my Alpha—but that doesn’t mean I have to be your second. Find someone else to do your shitty jobs. I’m done.”

I started for the door, satisfied that I’d made my point and there really wasn’t anything else to say.

Greyson’s hand landed on my shoulder, as unyielding as steel. “Xavier, wait.”

I shook his hand off and turned to face him with a snarl. “*What?*”

To my surprise, Greyson didn’t look pissed off anymore. He just looked resolved, tired… Maybe even a little hurt?

He cleared his throat, and his expression shuttered, closing off the small glimpse of emotion I’d managed to spot. “You can hate me all you want. That’s your prerogative. But for the sake of the Redwood pack, do I need to worry about Lucian and the Samara pack? Yes or no?”

His words made me wonder how much I could ever truly hate him. I’d hated him for a long time—most of my life, actually. My feelings for him had changed somewhat over the past few months. There was nuance now, and at times I could even admit I actually cared about him.

But that didn’t mean I was going to willingly sign up to be his fucking sidekick. Sure, things between us might have evolved from subzero to lukewarm, but as far as I was concerned, he’d stolen my fucking birthright. So he didn’t get to sit there and act like I was the bad guy for not doing his job for him.

But his question was simple enough. For the pack, I’d answer it—definitely not for him.

I thought back to the party, how Ava had “fired” Zeke as Alpha and kissed Lucian. Of course, she’d also kissed me. What a mindfuck.

“Ava can be difficult to predict,” I admitted, “so the jury’s out on what she’s got up her sleeve. But I think Lucian is definitely planning to make a move.”

Greyson nodded. “Thank you.”

I turned and left without another word. Maybe the delivery hadn’t been quite as smooth as I would have liked, but I’d meant everything I’d said.

*If Greyson weren’t the Alpha, if it were someone else, would I have reacted the same way? Probably not.*

Then again, Greyson wasn’t just the Redwood Alpha—*taking my fucking job*—he was also Cali’s mate. Maybe that was what made all of this so annoying. It felt like he was trying to rip my future away and take it for himself.

Still, I felt a sense of freedom in stepping out of Greyson’s shadow, and if nothing else, that was a sign that I was on the right track. It was time to start thinking about the future—about becoming the Redwood Alpha, once and for all.

I hadn’t been totally honest with Cali when we’d talked about our resolutions. Or maybe I hadn’t been fully aware of my own intentions at the time. But my feelings—the anger, the resentment, the urgency and determination—had always been there.

I wanted to be Alpha, and I wanted Cali. None of that had changed. But this year, my resolution was to make that happen. This was the year I’d finally take my rightful place as the Redwood Alpha, a position I’d been wrongfully denied for far too long.

I was tired of playing games, of settling for less than I deserved.

This year would belong to me.

By the time I made it up to my room, I was ready to burst out of my own skin. My newfound goals and determination had only made me angrier at being denied what I wanted for so long. Jesus, how had I even let it come to this? Being Greyson’s liaison to the Samara pack for weeks, dealing with Ava and her mind games, putting up with Knox and Zeke—they should have been Greyson’s problems to fix, not mine. When I was finally Alpha, killing our fledgling alliance with the Samara pack would be the first item on my list. That sorry excuse for a pack was more trouble than it was worth.

When I’d first gotten home from my date with Cali, I’d intended to head upstairs and shower, but now I could barely stand to be in my own bedroom. I needed to get out of the pack house—seeing it reminded me of Greyson, and right now that was the last thing I wanted.

I changed into running clothes and headed back outside.

The cold air felt amazing on my heated skin, and simply being on the front porch of the house, with forest and sky stretching out in every direction, calmed that nagging sense of urgency somewhat. This was what I needed.

I broke into a jog and headed into the woods, down a more rugged trail than I normally took. Today, I wanted to push myself.

I was at least a mile away from the pack house, so deep in the woods that I had to crane my neck to catch glimpses of the sky, when I heard movement behind me. I slowed down just slightly, varying my pace to determine whether something was following me or if I was just hearing some random animal.

I hadn’t gone more than a few dozen yards before I heard the sound again, closer this time.

I had a couple of options. I could try to outrun whatever this was and avoid a potential confrontation… But when did I ever purposefully avoid a confrontation?

I slowed to a stop, turned around, and waited, ready to shift and pounce if necessary.

A few tense seconds later, Greyson broke through the trees. He came to a stop a short distance away from me.

“Great.” I snorted. “You miss me already?”

“You really think that highly of yourself?”

“Maybe. You following me all the way out here only proves my point, though. So, what do you want? Can’t I have just a few minutes to myself?”

“Take it easy. I’m not here to harass you. I just wanted to talk.”

*We’ve already done plenty of talking.*

“I said all I had to say back at the house.”

“I disagree.” Greyson took a few steps forward, closing the space between us. “What about Cali?”

# Episode 3455

Big Mac smiled as my question hung in the air between us. For once, her smile was kind. It didn’t mock me for not knowing what seemed like an obvious answer to this basic-ass question. If anything, her smile hinted at sympathy. Like she knew just how impossibly hard this was for me. How even now that I’d reached the end of my rope and wanted to move forward out of sheer exhaustion, my mind still raced with doubts. My heart still lurched with panic.

Somewhere, deep in my soul, I still absolutely *hated* the idea of choosing between the two men I loved so much.

And this new complication—this surprisingly thoughtful spell she’d cast on the letter that held the key to my future—only compounded all those doubts and fears. Because if I wasn’t ready now—after having been through hell as a result of this curse, knowing my very sanity stood in the balance, knowing it was cruel and unfair to keep both of my mates waiting for so long—then when would I *ever* be?

“That’s the big question, isn’t it?” Big Mac asked. “I don’t know the answer. But you will.”

I blinked. “But that doesn’t mean anything. How am I supposed to know? None of this makes any sense.”

“It will. In time, I’m sure this will all make perfect sense.” She patted my arm. “I can imagine how confusing all this must be for you. And while I still think you’re a gigantic pain in the ass, I also know your heart is in the right place.”

My brows rose. This was pretty much the last thing I’d expected to hear from Big Mac. *Is this… Does she have a soft side?*

“I think you need some more time,” she said. “Cut yourself some slack. You’re still recovering from Seluna and that nasty mark she left on you. And the *due destini* has been weighing you down for months now. I understand your drive to move forward, but nobody would be able to handle this any better than you have.”

Emotion filled my throat. Somehow, tenderness and empathy from this brusque witch were hitting me harder than any of her lectures and side eyes and snarky remarks ever had. “Um, thanks.”

“I’m sorry about what happened today,” she said. “I can see how you might feel jerked around by the whole letter thing, but my intention was never to hide the truth from you. It was to give you a chance to discover the truth when you want to, not because you feel you have to, and not because all this pressure you’re under is making the not knowing hard to live with. When you are ready—and I mean truly ready, when you know deep in your heart that it’s time to face your future—the words will appear.”

A new wave of tears pricked at my eyes, this time for a whole new reason. Anger was the easiest thing in the world to hide in. I could’ve decided to rant and rage about how Big Mac had done me wrong, but somehow this soft conversation about fears and vulnerabilities and self-acceptance had left me feeling cut wide open—all my weak points exposed.

“And what if—” My voice broke, and I cleared my throat. “What if I’m never ready? What if I never truly want to know?”

“Then you’ll never need to look at that letter again.” She said it without judgment. “But, for what it’s worth, I doubt that’s going to happen. You’re stronger than you think. I believe that when the time is right, you’ll be ready to learn the truth. But for now, maybe try to give yourself a break. Don’t think about all this so much.”

I shook my head. “But if I don’t choose, I’ll go mad.”

“You’ll be ready long before that happens.”

It was a strange turn of events, but suddenly I found myself wishing that I had even a fraction of the faith in myself that Big Mac had in me.

The witch turned back to her desk. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to figure out my moonshine receipts. I’m almost positive the Vanguards shortchanged me.”

“Oh, okay, sorry. Thank you,” I said, but she was already running through the figures and patently ignoring me.

Apparently Big Mac had reached the end of what she could emotionally tolerate. I had to admit, I was impressed. And I was beginning to understand how Mrs. Smith had fallen for the usually surly witch. Big Mac did have a soft side, and it was a sight to behold.

I headed back to the study, feeling exhausted and wrung out by the whole letter affair, but overall more optimistic about the future. I knew I couldn’t put it off forever, knew that I didn’t truly *want* to put the choice off, but it was a huge comfort to know that I could give myself some time to figure things out.

I slipped the letter back into its envelope and locked it back in the drawer. *Next time I unlock this drawer and open the letter, will the words finally appear?* I shook off the thought. I needed to take Big Mac’s advice and try to relax a little.

*Easier said than done…*

What was I going to do if Greyson or Xavier asked me about the letter? Shame curdled in my stomach as I imagined having to explain to my loving and patient mates that I didn’t know if the curse was still intact, because I still wasn’t ready to know. That, until the magical day when I *was* ready, I wouldn’t know the truth. And neither would they.

Then again, Xavier had just told me that he’d never pressure me to do any of that, and Greyson had said the same thing.

*Maybe they both understood what Big Mac meant long before I did. Maybe they know I’m not ready yet, too.*

That familiar urgency brought with it a dose of familiar shame, but there was relief too. For now, not knowing was still better than knowing, better than being stuck in a position where I was expected to make a choice—assuming the curse was broken.

But I couldn’t think that far ahead. I didn’t really *want* to. Because even if the curse was broken, and I was able to make my choice without killing one of the men I loved, I still didn’t know who to choose.

*Xavier and Greyson have been patient this long. Hopefully they can be patient for a while longer. I know this isn’t fair to them…*

I couldn’t see how I’d ever be able to choose between them, but if the day miraculously came when I was ready to make a choice, then the words would appear. Something about that did feel good. Knowing there would be a sign.

“Hey!” Lola intercepted me on my way out of the study. “How was your date with Xavier?”

Heat rushed into my cheeks as I recalled our tryst in the snow. “Um, it was… nice.”

“*Nice?*” Her brows rose. “What was so ‘nice’ about it?”

“We had a picnic.”

“Huh. That would be romantic if it weren’t the middle of winter.”

I smiled, thinking of Kira’s magic lantern, and then I blushed even deeper when I remembered what had happened afterward. “Xavier made it romantic.”

“Why do I get the feeling there’s more to it than that?”

I avoided her gaze, my face burning. “No idea.”

Finally, she took pity on me. “Do you want to watch a movie with me and Jay later?”

“I’d like to, but I’m supposed to go out with Greyson.”

Lola grinned like she’d just won the lottery. “Cali, are you double dipping?”

“Ew.” I scowled. “That’s a terrible way to put it.”

“It’s only terrible if you are and you’re not telling me.”

I grimaced. I didn’t want to think of anything that reminded me of the *due destini*, or… any kind of activity likely to be found at a Vanguard party.

*Speaking of…*

“So how was your first orgy?”

“Oh, it was wild. On the other side of the room, these two people were—”

I put up a hand to cut her off. “Actually, I don’t need to know. The fact that you got magically handcuffed is still more than I *ever* wanted to know.”

She laughed. “But it was fun! My only complaint is that Jay isn’t very good at being the bad cop. I was all tied up and ready for him to interrogate me, but he was so polite about it.”

*Gag. Too much info.*

I forced a smile. “I’m glad you two had fun.”

Lola and Jay had such an adventurous way of looking at the world. *It must be nice not to be a* due destini *mate, to be able to try things without being worried about how your other mate will react.*

The thought made me check my watch, and I yelped when I saw the time. “I have to get ready for my date with Greyson!”

*But will I be able to enjoy it after what Big Mac told me?*

# Episode 3456

**Greyson**

As my question hung in the air between us, Xavier’s eyes narrowed, his hands curled into fists, and for a moment, I genuinely wondered if my brother was going to attack me.

I’d followed him out here because his words had had the exact impact he’d been gunning for. I wanted to try to fix things between us, and I hoped he’d give me that chance. The problem was, I never really knew what to expect when it came to Xavier. He’d said Ava was unpredictable, but the two of them had plenty in common.

“What the hell does any of this have to do with Cali?” he demanded.

“When it’s you and me, isn’t everything about Cali?” I asked. “In one way or another?”

He scowled but didn’t argue. I took that as a sign that it was time for me to say my piece.

“Listen, I know you’ve never been happy about my being Alpha, but do you really want to drag Cali back into that fight?” I asked. “Remember what it did to her when we had the Lupo Finale? Did you ever even think of her while you were having your little temper tantrum?”

Xavier bristled at that, but I didn’t care. Maybe I needed to be a little more judicious about the roles I asked Xavier to play on behalf of the pack, but he was no saint, and I wasn’t going to walk on eggshells around him just because he’d decided to stop contributing. He needed to hear this. He needed to be reminded of everything that was at stake here.

Xavier had been way out of line before, and ungrateful for everything I’d done for him. It wasn’t all that surprising—he’d always been an entitled little shit, prone to throwing hissy fits when he didn’t get his way—but I’d learned to live with it. What I couldn’t live with was what Xavier’s outburst would do to Cali if she ever found out what he’d said.

“If you have a problem with the way I do things, acting all pissed off and not talking isn’t the way to get your point across,” I said. “It’s bad enough that someone would question my place in the pack—and it’s even worse when that person is my brother—but I’m willing to give you a pass on that, due to our unusual situation. Which we’re only in because we both love Cali.”

He rolled his eyes. “Like I need to be reminded of that. Is there a point to all this? Or are you just out here on a power trip? Because I’m not interested in playing games.”

I ground my teeth. Xavier had never been the most emotionally intelligent guy, but it was astonishing to me that he could willfully ignore the truth right in front of him; that he was so jealous, so blinded by his own ambition that at this rate, it was going to take an act of god for him to realize how his actions might affect the one person cared about.

But, of course, I couldn’t say any of that. For one thing, he wouldn’t listen. He’d probably tuned out half this conversation already. For another, I didn’t want this conversation to escalate any further than it already had. I meant what I’d said. I hadn’t come out here for a fight.

I spelled it out for him. “In case you haven’t noticed, Cali’s having a hard time dealing with the *due destini*. With the idea that she might be free to make a choice soon.”

“I know that! I’ve talked to her. You keep telling me all these things I already fucking know—”

“But have you been *listening*?” I asked. “I know for a fact you’re not hearing what *I’m* telling you, but what about Cali? Are you really listening to *her*?”

He was silent.

I continued. “She needs our support right now—more than ever. Seluna might be in the rearview, but Cali has been through utter hell over the past few weeks, and it’s going to take some time for her to get back to herself again,” I said. “That means that the best thing we can do for her right now is try to get along—if not for each other, then for her sake. You say you love her? This is your chance to prove it.”

“Cali knows how I feel about her,” he snarled. “I don’t have to prove anything, least of all to you.”

*Fucking hell.* I wasn’t getting through to him at all, was I? It was like the second he’d seen me run up, he’d put up a bunch of walls and refused to let me in. Refused to see me as anything other than the villain in his story.

Which… Fine. I’d be his villainous older brother if I had to be. I’d thought we’d gotten past that already, but if Xavier wanted to cling to the idea that I was the reason his life wasn’t going the way he wanted, that was his business. But I needed to make it crystal goddamn clear that he wasn’t to share any of that business with Cali. We’d been through this before. If we fought, she would inevitably get pulled in. She always did.

And then we’d all lose.

“You really think I’m desperate to keep you under my thumb, don’t you?” I asked.

He raised an eyebrow. “Aren’t you?”

I sighed. “For the record, you’re wrong. Yes, I’m the Alpha, and sometimes I have to act like one to make sure our pack stays safe. And yes, sometimes I have to act that way with my own brother,” I explained. “It’s not an ideal situation for me, either. Why don’t you get it? I don’t ask you to do things for the pack because I’m trying to keep you busy or because I’m on a power trip. I ask you to do those things because I trust you. I know you’ll do what’s right for the pack. I know you have certain connections and strengths that I don’t have. So instead of taking certain tasks on myself, knowing that I might not be the best guy for the job, I send *you*. If I can’t trust my own brother, then who can I trust?”

Silence settled between us as Xavier stared at me like I’d grown a second head. Finally, he shook his head. “It doesn’t feel like that.”

I frowned. “I’m sorry if I occasionally bruise your feelings, but I’ve always thought you were tough enough to handle it. Am I wrong?”

If looks could kill, I’d have turned to dust where I stood. “I can handle all your bullshit! I just don’t want to anymore. This was never something I wanted for myself, and I’m not going to keep putting up with it. What part of that is so goddamn hard for you to understand?”

“Are you planning to stay with the Redwood pack?”

Xavier’s eyes flashed. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

I moved closer, my tone dark. “Don’t be fooled by the kindness I’m offering you right now. If I have to put you in your place again, I will. And you’ll know when I do. And you won’t forget.”

A thick silence settled between us as we glared at each other. In the end, I was the first to look away.

“If you love Cali, and I believe you do, then you will stop this crap,” I said. “Fuck your ego, and put her first. Don’t make things harder for her. You don’t have to like me, but at least try to pretend.”

“Fine,” he said through clenched teeth. “I’ll do it. For her.”

“Good. I’m glad we had this little talk. Enjoy your run.”

I turned, ready to head back to the pack house and put this conversation behind me, but then Xavier’s voice broke through the silence of the forest.

“Don’t get too comfortable. If I have to take your place, I will.”

I gave him a sharp smile but kept walking away. His threat was hardly a surprise. Everyone knew Xavier was gunning for Alpha and that one day, sooner or later, he’d make a move.

But he was probably going to play along for a little bit longer, if only for Cali’s sake.

*Classic Xavier. Selfish, ambitious, and arrogant to a destructive degree.*

The only thing I’d ever seen that tempered those double-edged pieces of Xavier was Cali. At least, for now, she’d be kept out of this. That was all I wanted. She had more than enough on her plate right now without having to worry about us fighting.

But I wasn’t thrilled that I’d been forced to have this conversation in the first place. It was maddening that Xavier was questioning my role, my authority. I meant what I’d told him—if I had to kick his ass again, either in a Lupo Finale or somewhere else, I would, and I wouldn’t feel an ounce of remorse.

Cali would be upset—but that was why I’d followed my brother out here in the first place, to try to shield our mate from our petty squabbles.

I knew better than to assume we’d never reach a point where it would be impossible for me to ignore Xavier, where my role as Alpha would have to be asserted. Brutally, if necessary.

But whenever it came to that, I’d be ready.

# Episode 3457

**Violet**

*Finally, some time to relax.*

I was curled up on the couch, snuggled against Charlie and enjoying the warmth of the fire, now that the smoke had cleared from the room. The scent lingered just slightly, giving the room a somewhat woodsy smell that wasn’t at all unpleasant.

It was nice to have a quiet moment with my mate, especially after all the drama we’d been dealing with lately. No parties, no fighting with my brother or Marta—everything was peaceful and easy. Simple.

I stretched my legs out, pointing my toes before settling back against the couch with a sigh. The fire had been just this side of too hot at first, but now that some of the wood had burned down a bit, it was kind of perfect.

I felt a lot better now that Marta and I had cleared the air. I still felt like a complete ass for treating her so poorly without learning her side of the story. Thank god she was willing to forgive me. It was probably more than I deserved, after everything I’d said and done.

But things were getting better between Marta and me, and that was a huge hopeful sign. I still hadn’t seen Lilac since he’d stormed out of the Vanguard palace after trying to punch Okorie, though. His absence weighed on me, almost a tangible thing.

We needed to talk—that much was obvious. Lilac had never kept secrets like this from me before. I’d never seen him so constantly angry, and he’d certainly never been the type to escalate things to violence. As his sister, it was my job to take care of him, to set him straight and help him come to terms with him and Marta not being together anymore. But I didn’t have the energy right now. Everything had been so tumultuous for so long—was I a bad sister for wanting to enjoy just a few moments of peace?

Charlie stroked my hair, his eyelids heavy as he stared at the fireplace. “I didn’t get a chance to tell you more about the invitation to Bridgeham.”

“Oh. That’s right.” I’d almost forgotten. There’d been so much drama going on last night that Charlie’s invitation was the last thing on my mind. “Are you really planning to go back?”

He shrugged. “I guess I don’t see why not.”

“*Really?*” I sat up so I could look him in the eye. “I could rattle off a bunch of reasons. Like, for example, how we were almost killed by revenant-vampires the last time we were there.”

He shrugged. “That’s all been dealt with.”

Maybe, but there were still plenty of reasons to be wary of Bridgeham. Like the fact that it was a camp for hunters who—for the most part—hated werewolves like us.

“Why do they want you to come back?” I asked. “Do they want you to take more courses or something? Because that makes no sense—you’ve already proven what an awesome hunter you are. And I don’t love the idea of Pepperdine ordering you around. We’re supposed to be past all that.”

Charlie shook his head. “It’s nothing like that. They want me to come back to give a talk.”

My brows rose. “A talk? What about?”

“I’m not sure, but I think it’ll be like a TED Talk about hunting vampires or something because of what happened with those revenants. Maybe they want me to help inspire new recruits, since I’m a prodigy or whatever.” He winked. “They said they’d send me some more info. I’m hoping you’ll come with me?”

I hesitated. I wasn’t thrilled about the idea of going back to Bridgeham—there were too many bad memories there. And too many attempts on my life. After what Charlie and I had done for them when the revenant-vampires attacked, I was pretty sure I didn’t have to worry about any of the campers or staff trying to gut me with silver, but you never really knew with hunters.

But this was important to Charlie, and he clearly felt comfortable with the idea. I’d already put off going to Minnesota to be with his parents for the holidays. I owed him this.

I forced a smile. “I’d love to.”

A grin stretched across his face, and he wrapped an arm around me. “Thanks, sunshine. That’s such a relief. It’ll help me to see you out in the audience, sitting with my family.”

I tensed, then swallowed past the sudden lump in my throat. “Um, your mom’s going to be there?” As soon as the question slipped off my tongue, I realized how ridiculous it sounded. Of course his mom would be there to see Charlie give a fancy talk. Both of his parents would probably be in attendance. “It’ll be great to see Iris and Paul again.”

“I think so too. It’s a pretty big honor to be invited back for this.” He laughed. “I have to admit, I’m a little nervous. I gave my share of locker room speeches to jazz up the team back in my lacrosse days, but I’ve never done anything like a formal speaking engagement. Can I practice with you?”

I didn’t answer at first. I was too busy imagining all the ways this visit would provide opportunities for Iris to kill me. Everything from daggers to crossbows to silver-laced tea flitted through my mind. What was I getting myself into? Could I really go back to that hunter camp, with all of them knowing I was one of those monsters they hated and killed indiscriminately? Could I further cozy up to Charlie’s family, knowing that they had at one point hated me for being a werewolf and had blamed me for the fact that Charlie was one, too?

Were we really past that? *Really?*

“Violet?”

I refocused on my mate. “Sorry, what?”

“My talk. Can I practice with you?” he asked. “Once I learn more about it. Then you can be my test audience?”

“Oh.” Another forced smile. “Of course.”

He cleared his throat. “Should I use one of these voices?” He deepened his tone and said, “Thanks so much for inviting me here today…”

As Charlie continued with his mock speech, my mind slid back to the myriad of reasons why I should be worried about attending this talk. This was *not* how I’d wanted my new year to begin! But then again, maybe Iris had made a resolution not to kill me this year. Maybe I’d actually be perfectly safe at Bridgeham, and with Iris and Paul.

“Ugh… And I’m already freezing up.” Charlie grimaced. “What am I even supposed to talk about? Stake techniques? Weapon choice? Do you think I should make a PowerPoint?”

I was only half-listening. *Violet, this is important to Charlie*, I told myself. *And he would never put you in danger. If he didn’t think it was safe for you to go back to Bridgeham, or to meet his parents, he would never have asked you to come. You need to relax and be supportive. Everything will be fine.*

“Violet?”

I snapped back to attention. “Oh, sorry. What was that?”

His expression softened. “I’ve been talking a lot about myself—sorry about that. I’m sure you’re really worried about Lilac right now, huh?”

Guilt gnawed at my stomach. Really, I wasn’tworrying about Lilac so much as all the ways Iris could try to kill me in my sleep. But now that he’d mentioned it…

I sighed. “I don’t know what to do. He was really upset with everyone last night.”

I’d tried to talk to him last night, but once I’d learned the truth about him and Perrie and his breakup with Marta, I’d stopped defending him, and he’d become impossible to talk to. I figured the best thing I could do was give him space to cool off.

“Maybe you should talk to him, try to fix things so you’re not starting the year off like this,” Charlie suggested. “I bet he’s cooled off by now.”

“I hope so. He was just… I’ve never seen him the way he was last night. But I know he’s going through a tough time right now. You’re right. I should be there for him.” I untangled myself from Charlie’s arms and stood. “Have you seen him today?”

Charlie shook his head. “He’s probably in his room.”

Lilac should have been up and about by now—he got really hungry if he waited too long. It was well past breakfast time, and my brother wasn’t one to deny himself meals. Then again, he had seemed pretty devastated last night. Was it possible that he’d skipped a meal or two for the first time in his life? If that was the case, he was a lot worse off than I’d thought.

I checked the kitchen first and found Artemis, Rishika, and Orla sitting at the kitchen table.

“Have you seen Lilac?” I asked.

They all shook their heads. A nervous tingle slipped down my spine. I ran into Charlie in the hallway.

“I’m going to go check his room,” I said.

“I’ll come with you.”

Upstairs, we found Lilac’s bedroom door open. His bed hadn’t been slept in.

My eyes widened. “Where is he? I thought I’d seen him come home last night?”

I’d seen him come in late, and I should’ve gone to talk to him then. But he’d still looked like he was in a foul mood. None of that explained how he left without anyone seeing him this morning. Where the hell was he now?

Guilt slammed into me full force. How could I not have sought him out sooner? How could I have been so selfish?

Charlie put a hand on my shoulder. “Lilac’s a werewolf, Violet. He’s fully capable of taking care of himself.”

“Is he? He wasn’t himself last night.” I immediately started down the stairs.

“Where are you going?” Charlie called after me.

“I’m going to find my brother.”

# Episode 3458

An hour after I ditched Lola in the hallway, I was dressed and ready for my evening date with Greyson. Well, I was *physically* ready. I’d showered and styled my hair and picked out a nice outfit for our dinner. I looked the part.

Mentally, though, I was still reeling from the letter and my talk with Big Mac.

I pulled in a deep breath. *Focus on the present. On Greyson and having fun. You owe yourself that much.*

I walked down the staircase and found Greyson waiting for me by the front door. He turned to look at me as I approached, and his eyes widened in time with his grin. He liked what he saw. I did too. He really knew how to wear a suit.

I smiled and closed the distance between us before hugging him tight. “You look amazing.”

“I was just going to say the same to you.” He pressed a kiss to my forehead, then offered me his arm. “Shall we?”

I laughed and took his arm, pressing myself close to him as he led me to the car waiting outside.

I settled into the passenger seat, still grinning as Greyson pulled out onto the road. I was thrilled to get to spend this time with him, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t still thinking about the letter. There was something so surreal about being here with Greyson, heading out for a date. Like the biggest thing we had to worry about was picking the restaurant. No demons. No vampires or witches or ghosts. Nothing was going to jump out of the shadows and attack us. There was no mystery for us to solve right now.

I needed to refocus and give him the attention he deserved. *The letter doesn’t need to be resolved tonight*, I told myself. *Enjoy this time with Greyson*.

It almost felt wrong. Like I was forgetting something important. I couldn’t shake the feeling that something big was about to happen.

Greyson must have sensed the direction my thoughts were heading in, because he reached out and took my hand, twining our fingers together. “Relax. Tonight is going to be fun.”

I nodded. “I’m trying to. It’s just… Going slow like this is a pretty big change of pace, you know? Don’t get wrong—it’s a welcome change. But it’s still odd. Am I crazy for feeling that way?”

“You’re not crazy. At all. Or, if you are, I’m crazy too because I’ve been feeling the same way. Like this is a dream and I’m going to wake up and find myself back in New Orleans fighting off an alligator or freezing my ass off at Crater Lake.”

I leaned back against my seat and looked at him. “I’m sorry you feel that way, but I’m kind of glad it’s not just me.”

He squeezed my hand. “It’s not just you at all. I completely understand that it’s hard to relax after everything we just went through. We’ve been running nonstop for weeks now. Months, really. It’ll take time to turn off the stress. Just… be kind to yourself, okay?”

I nodded and pulled in a deep breath, trying to relax my muscles, to convince myself I was okay. That nothing was coming for me. It was easier said than done.

I suddenly had a new understanding and appreciation for the spell Big Mac had cast on that letter. I’d been so primed for action and hardship for so long that I’d truly convinced myself I was ready to jump in and tackle the *due destini* right away.

But I could barely relax enough to enjoy a date with Greyson. How on earth had I thought I was prepared to know whether or not I could choose between the two men I loved more than anything?

Big Mac was right. And so was Xavier. And so was Greyson. I needed to give myself some time. And some patience. And probably a truckload of kindness. I needed to trust that everything would work out eventually, one way or another.

Before I knew it, Greyson was parking in the small lot of a restaurant. It looked like an old, repurposed Victorian mansion that had been converted into a restaurant at some point. It was fancy and welcoming all at once.

Still, I looked down at my simple sweater dress. *Should I have gone with something more formal?*

Greyson walked around the car to open my door for me. He was really going all out on this date, and now that we were here, I was feeling more in the mood.

“Wow, how did you find this place?” I asked as I stepped out of the car, glancing around.

It looked like we were in a small town, nothing like the city I’d thought we were going to. I’d kind of assumed he’d be taking me to another trendy place in Portland or the surrounding areas. But this was quiet and quaint and woodsy.

He smiled. “I have my ways.”

He took my hand and led me inside. The foyer was just as grand as the exterior of the place. A giant chandelier hung overhead, casting the entrance of the restaurant in warm light.

A man in a suit was standing nearby, and he bowed his head in greeting. “Welcome, Mr. Evers.”

My brows rose at the personalized greeting. *Does Greyson know this guy? Or is this just one of those super fancy places that pays close attention to details?*

The man snapped his fingers, and two other servers appeared.

“May I take your coat, miss?” one of them asked me, while the other one took Greyson’s jacket.

“Um, sure.” I slipped out of my coat and handed it over to him, still kind of shocked by the fancy treatment. I leaned close to Greyson. “What is all this? Why is this place so fancy? I feel a little out of place.”

He winked. “I realized I’d never brought you on a really fancy date, so I’m making up for that now. And you look perfect. You’re right where you belong.”

The man in the suit led us into the main dining area, and I gasped at the sight of the middle table, decked out with candles and flower petals. It was then that I realized the rest of the dining room was completely empty. In fact, I hadn’t seen anyone other than Greyson and the wait staff since we’d pulled up.

“Where are the rest of the customers?”

“I rented out the whole space, for privacy,” Greyson said with the same casual tone he might use to say he’d had eggs for breakfast.

My jaw dropped. “*What?* You did? Why?”

“I thought it would be easier for you to relax if there weren’t strangers around.”

Tears pricked at my eyes. I’d never mentioned it to him, but I had been worried about that part of going to a restaurant. All the people, all the noise and potential threats… I blinked fast to keep the tears at bay. “This is completely perfect.”

We took our seats, and the maître d’ hurried over with what looked like a fancy bottle of wine. “This is one of our finest vintages, preselected to accompany tonight’s meal.”

He began to pour a taste for Greyson, but he waved a hand and gestured to my glass. The man seamlessly turned to me and poured me a taste. I took a small sip and almost died from joy. I wasn’t a huge wine drinker, especially red wine, but this one went down so smoothly. I smiled and nodded for him to pour more.

When my glass was full, Greyson allowed the maître d’ to fill his, then he held out his glass to clink against mine. “To us.”

“To a relaxing night.”

Our glasses clinked together, and we drank.

“I’m glad we’re getting this time, just the two of us,” Greyson said as he set his glass down.

“Me too.” I loved having this rare opportunity to just talk one-on-one, without any threats hanging over our heads, but I couldn’t stop thinking about the letter. *Should I tell Greyson about it?*

Before I could decide, he reached out and took my hand. “Now that things are getting back to normal, I can’t wait for us to move forward. Together.

I nodded. His words made my heart swell. Here I was, sitting in this fancy restaurant with my handsome mate looking into my eyes and talking about our future. It was everything I’d ever wanted, and I still couldn’t quite believe this was real.

But… I couldn’t completely lose myself in this moment, as much as I wanted to. Because there was still the letter, and a choice to be made.

Greyson frowned, and I realized he’d asked me a question.

“Sorry, what?”

“I was just asking what you were in the mood to eat.”

“Oh, um, whatever you’re having.”

He frowned. “What’s going on, love? You’re distracted. Are you okay?”

I realized with a lurch that I couldn’t just keep avoiding this topic. I took a deep breath. “I opened the letter.”

# Episode 3459

**Violet**

Charlie and I had been looking for Lilac for over an hour, and we’d had zero luck finding him. I’d checked the entire pack house, the lake, a hiking trail he and I used to frequent, and even the old pack house at the lake. My worry had officially graduated into full-blown panic—and more than a little frustration.

*Where could he be? And why would he just run off without even leaving a note?*

I was seriously considering trekking back into Vanguard territory to see if he was near the palace for some reason, but I just couldn’t see him sticking around another pack’s territory. When he’d run out after attacking Okorie, it had seemed like he wanted to get as far away as possible—not linger in unfamiliar lands patrolled by unfamiliar wolves.

Charlie met me in the woods on the hiking trail, his chest heaving. He’d been out in the woods trying to track my brother down.

“Did you find his trail?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I’m sorry. I lost it in the snow.”

I blew out a breath. “Where the hell could he be? Why would he do this?”

Charlie took my hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “We’ll find him, Vi. Try not to worry.”

*Right. Like that’s even an option.* How could I not worry? The last time I’d seen Lilac, he’d been absolutely beside himself, upset to a degree that I’d never seen before, and now he was nowhere to be found. There was plenty to be worried about.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself. Charlie was just trying to help—both me and Lilac. That was why he’d been out searching in the cold for the past hour.

“Thanks for trying,” I said, my voice thick with emotion. I started to limp down the path, and Charlie caught my arm to stop me.

“What’s going on?” he asked. “Are you hurt?”

I shook my head. “It’s these new hiking boots. They’re not broken in yet. I should’ve worn my old pair.”

“Well, you don’t have to suffer through it. Let’s go back to the pack house and change your shoes before we keep looking.”

“No! I’m not giving up the search over a few blisters.”

“We’re not giving up—we’re getting you comfortable shoes. It’ll help our search in the long run if you’re not hurting. You’ll be faster and more focused.” He was giving me that stubborn look that told me he wasn’t going to budge.

I sighed. “Fine.”

It *would* be nice to regroup. Maybe we could get some extra help searching, or perhaps being back at the pack house would spark some new ideas on where to look. We hurried back to the house as fast as my aching feet would allow. Once we were inside, I sprawled out in the foyer to tug off my boots, grimacing at the bloodstains on my socks. Fortunately, I’d heal before we had to trek back out again.

Marta was just coming down the stairs, and she stopped for a moment at the sight of us—me tugging off bloodstained socks, Charlie standing over me like the mother hen he was.

“Hey, guys,” Marta said. She gave us a big, forced smile as she approached. “Going on a hike, or just coming back?”

We might have made up, but things were obviously still pretty awkward after last night. Marta was clearly trying to put her best foot forward. I had to try to do the same.

“Both,” I blurted out, at the same time Charlie said, “We’re looking for Lilac.”

I elbowed his leg and gave him a meaningful look. *Shut up!* Things between Marta and me were still so fragile—and Lilac being MIA wasn’t her problem. But I had a gut feeling she wouldn’t see it that way.

Far too late, Charlie seemed to realize his mistake. “Oh.” He winced. “I mean…”

Marta turned her gaze on me, her eyes wide. “What do you mean, you’re looking for Lilac? Have you not seen him lately?”

“Umm…” *Crap*. “Well, no. Not since last night.”

“Wait, you haven’t seen him at all today? The day’s mostly over! Is he missing?” Marta sounded absolutely horrified by this news, and a new wave of guilt crashed into me. This wasn’t her problem, or her fault, though I was sure she wouldn’t see it that way.

I hated that there was so much tension and awkwardness between Marta and Lilac. They obviously still loved each other, and they didn’t deserve this hand that fate had dealt them.

“Yeah,” I finally admitted. “We can’t find him anywhere. But it’s okay! I’ll figure out where he went, and I’ll bring him home, and everything will be just fine.” It took everything I had to not cringe at the complete lack of confidence in my voice.

*Great job comforting her, Violet! Real convincing.*

“Where have you looked?” Marta asked.

I rattled off all the places I’d personally checked. “And Charlie went out into the woods to try to find a trail, but the snow made it impossible.”

Marta frowned. “Did you check the lookout point?”

“Wait, where?”

She hesitated, but I jumped on this new lead. I had nothing—short of walking around in the woods for miles and miles, calling Lilac’s name, I was out of options. If Marta knew of someplace he might be, I needed to know where that was.

“Marta, if you know something, please tell us. At this point, anything helps.”

She shook her head. “I don’t *know* anything, necessarily. My guess of where he went is as good as yours. But I do remember him taking me to this lookout point and saying it was important to him. Maybe he went there to think?”

With a lurch, I suddenly realized exactly where she was talking about. “Oh my god. You’re right. I totally forgot about that place.” Now that my blisters had healed, I pulled on my blood-crusted socks and shoved my feet into my old hiking boots. “Come on, Charlie. Let’s go. I’ll lead the way.” I stood, then turned back to Marta. “Um, do you want to come with us?”

She shook her head. “It’s probably best if I don’t.”

She didn’t look happy about it, but she was right. Lilac was in a sensitive place right now. If he’d gone off somewhere alone without telling anyone, there was a 99.9% chance it had something to do with his complicated feelings about Marta and his new mate bond.

*And maybe my meddling.*

Charlie and I rushed out and headed for one of Xavier’s cars. I was sure he wouldn’t mind us borrowing it, especially to find Lilac.

“I’ll drive,” I said, ushering Charlie into the passenger seat. “It’ll be faster. I know exactly how to get to the lookout point.”

We made it to the lookout point in record time, and as we approached, I could make out a lone figure sitting on a boulder, illuminated by the headlights.

“It’s Lilac!” I threw the car into park and jumped out, running over to Lilac. I took his cold hands in mine. “Where the hell have you been? You’re freezing! I’ve been so worried about you! Get in the car.”

He tugged his hands out of my grip and turned away from me.

I huffed. “I don’t have time to argue with you while you’re out here getting hypothermia. You haven’t even shifted, which would be smarter, cause at least then you’d have your fur coat!”

Now that I’d found him, the fear and adrenaline coursing through my body was coming to a head.

I stood in front of him again. “Do you know how worried we were?”

Lilac glared at me. “Chill *out*, Violet! I came out here because I couldn’t sleep last night. I needed to be away from everything so I could think.”

I barely processed his words. “Seriously? Even Marta—”

“Shut up!” he snarled. “I came out here to be alone! Don’t you *get it*?”

I blinked. Lilac had never talked to me like this. But then again, I wasn’t totally blameless here.

I pulled in a deep breath and softened my tone. “I’m sorry, Lilac. I just don’t want you to be hurt or alone.”

“Well, it’s too late. I’m both of those things.”

He sounded broken, and it physically hurt to hear him like that. I tried to wrap my arms around him, but he pulled away from me.

“What do you need?” I asked. “I’ll do anything you need. I just don’t want you to be so hurt anymore.”

He sighed. “You can’t do anything. This is all on me. I need to make a decision about what to do—that’s why I came out here. To think about all of… *that*.”

“Oh.” My brows rose. “So… Does that mean you know if you’re going to fight for Marta or choose Perrie?”

# Episode 3460

**Greyson**

I stared at Cali, my mind reeling from her confession. She’d opened the letter? Already? Clearly, I’d been wrong to assume she wouldn’t have, but I had thought it would be a while before she’d feel ready to open it.

I tried to read her face to determine how she felt about the answer she’d received. But her expression was blank.

*Is she not happy about what she found out? Does that mean the killing curse is still in play? Or does that mean it’s gone, but now she feels pressured to choose?*

I thought back to the car ride to the restaurant. Knowing she’d read the letter before our date cast everything in a new light. Was that why she was so tense? Because the letter had given her an answer she didn’t want? Or…

I shook myself. Cali was right in front of me. If I had questions about what she’d read, I could just ask.

“And how did reading the letter make you feel?” I didn’t want to pressure her to share more than she was comfortable with, either, but I’d be lying if I said the questions weren’t stacking up in my mind. I felt like I knew the answer—that the three witches, Chloe, Posie, and Lauren had broken the killing part of the curse… But now having a second confirmation would help things.

She sighed. “Confused. And kind of pissed off.”

I nodded. That… was not what I’d been hoping to hear. If I was being honest with myself, I’d been hoping that if Cali got definitive proof that the killing curse was gone, she’d immediately pick me. I believed in my heart and soul that the curse was gone, like the three witches had told me, but I understood Cali needing to know for herself. It was both mine and Xavier’s lives in her hands. She wasn’t going to take that lightly.

But I also knew that it wouldn’t work like that. Cali was tender-hearted and empathetic above all else—she’d agonize over the pain choosing me would cause Xavier, even if she knew in her heart that I was who she wanted.

I cleared my throat. “Well… I’m here to support your choice. Whatever it is.”

She shook her head. “That’s just it—I can’t make a choice.”

My heart dropped. That was definitely *not* what I wanted to hear. “Wait. What are you saying? You don’t know who you want?”

She looked up at me, her eyes widening. “No. I mean, yes, I *don’t* know. But that’s not the point.”

“Is it more than the choice? Are you saying the killing curse is still active?”

“No! That’s not what I mean either.”

“Then what—”

“The letter was blank!” she interrupted, her cheeks reddening.

Understanding rushed in. “Oh. Shit.”

She let out a breathy laugh, though none of this was funny. “I don’t even know if the curse is gone or not. Trying to even think about choosing is impossible unless I know.”

Relief flooded through me, along with a hefty dose of confusion. But at least her feelings about me hadn’t changed.

“Why would Big Mac give you a blank letter? Was it meant to be some kind of trick to get you to figure out what you want?” Even as I said it, that didn’t seem right. Big Mac didn’t play mind games with people, especially not over something so serious.

She sighed. “Apparently, the letter is enchanted to only tell me the truth when I’m actually ready. I guess I didn’t pass the test today.”

“But you opened it? Wasn’t that enough proof that you were ready?”

She shook her head. “You’d think, but I asked Big Mac the same thing, and we talked it over. She helped me realize that I opened the letter for the wrong reasons. I didn’t do it because I was ready, or because I could accept whatever the letter would say. I did it because I was afraid, and I was tired of being afraid. But I’m still not ready. According to her, this way, I can take my time. And when I’m ready to find out the truth, once and for all, the words will show up on the page.”

I blinked. That was a lot to take in. But, at the heart of it, Big Mac’s decision was actually incredibly… kind? Thoughtful? Though she could’ve told Cali about the spell beforehand.

I nodded. “Well, Big Mac is kind of pushy about things, but I agree with her on this. It seems like you still need to recover from all the trauma you’ve been through.”

A not so small part of me hated that this meant more waiting, but I knew I wanted to be supportive of Cali. That was the most important thing. Whatever she chose, even if it wasn’t me, I wanted her to be happy and at peace with her choice. And to do that, she needed time. I could give her that.

And honestly, what kind of mate would I be if I wasn’t willing to wait for her?

She nodded. “Big Mac’s spells are usually pretty airtight. So, if she says that I won’t be able to see the answer until I’m ready, it probably means I’m not actually ready yet.”

I resisted the urge to sigh in defeat. *I* was ready to move on from all this. After everything we’d been through, all the near misses, I just wanted to enjoy this peaceful time and get started planning my future with Cali. I wanted to be with her forever, and that forever couldn’t start early enough.

But she had to be ready to embrace that, too. Otherwise, I’d be an asshole for trying to push my own desires onto her. This was one of the most important decisions she’d ever make—she needed to be ready. Even if the thought of waiting even a day longer was a little maddening.

Not that I’d ever tell her any of that. She already looked frustrated and confused. I was a bit confused too, if I was being honest, but I had to follow the advice I’d given Xavier earlier. Cali’s needs had to come first right now, even if emotionally, that wasn’t always easy.

She was worth waiting for. She was worth everything. And the best thing I could do right now was remind her of that.

I reached out and took her hand. “Cali, I hope you’re not letting worry for me make you so upset. I’ll wait as long as we have to.”

The hope shining in her eyes snapped my heart in two. She really had been beating herself up for my sake, hadn’t she? “Really? You’re not mad at me?”

“Of course not.”

“And you’re not just saying that to be nice?”

A little bubble of laughter slipped out of my chest. “I mean it. I’m not mad. I understand—take all the time you need. We’ve already come this far.”

I reached forward to wrap an arm around her, and she practically threw herself into my arms.

“I don’t want to disappoint you,” she mumbled into my chest.

I ran a hand over her hair. “You could never disappoint me, Cali. I love you. I’ll always be here for you.”

She looked up at me with a smile that took my breath away. “I love you too.”

She tilted her head in a silent invitation. I didn’t need to be asked twice. I kissed her gently, then with more passion, pouring all the comfort I could muster into the kiss.

*Knowing that she loves me is all I need right now. That’s what will get me through the wait until she’s ready to choose.*

Her arms slipped around my neck, holding me so close I almost couldn’t breathe. She deepened the kiss, her lips moving frantically against mine. I gave back as good as I got, trying to imprint my love for her into each brush of my lips against hers, reveling in the taste of her mouth, her scent, the breathy sounds she made and the rise and fall of her chest against mine.

I imagined myself swiping my arm across the table, laying Cali down on top of it, and making love to her right here and now…

But that probably wasn’t what she needed right now. And maybe it wasn’t what I needed, either.

Even with how close we were holding each other, I could feel the emotional turmoil she was in. Honestly, I was feeling it too. And why wouldn’t we, with all the things we’d been through, all the things we still had to face?

I pulled back, and she tightened her arms around my neck. “Wait. No.”

I cupped her cheek. “It’s okay. We came here for a relaxing dinner. Let’s do that, and then after, we can see what we want to do. Okay?”

She considered this for a beat, her cheeks flushed. She looked so goddamn pretty. Finally, she smiled and stepped back. “You’re right.”

We fixed ourselves and settled back into our seats. Moments later, the waiter dropped off our salads and took our entree orders.

As I watched Cali pick at her salad, I gave myself a little pep talk.

*You can do this. You can wait for her. You don’t need to rush things, not as long as you and Cali wind up together in the end.*

I’d always been confident that she’d choose me—our bond was too strong, and we loved each other too much for any other outcome. But as I watched her, a horrible, fleeting thought struck me.

What would I do if she was never able to choose?

# Episode 3461

**Xavier**

I was still running.

I’d been running for miles, and probably well over an hour, trying to work off my anger from my fight with Greyson. Only, instead of burning off all that fury, all the run was doing was giving me the time and space to stew.

*Who the fuck does he think he is? I tell him I’m done being his errand boy, and his response is to ask me if I’m “tough enough” to handle some bruised feelings?*

*Fuck him.*

I dragged my claws through the bark of a tree as I raced past it. The sunlight filtering through the trees had a pale, dusky hue. It was getting late and darker by the minute. Cali and Greyson were probably having the time of their lives on their date right now, and I was still running through the forest like a fucking head case. And it was a good thing I was still running, too, because I had the sneaking suspicion that if I slowed down and stopped, even for a second, I’d rip everything in sight into pieces.

*Chill the fuck out*, whispered an annoying voice in the back of my mind. *You’re seriously overreacting.*

I ignored it. Maybe I was a little angrier than the situation called for, but so fucking what? Greyson knew exactly how to push my buttons, and it couldn’t have been more obvious that he’d chosen his words with that in mind.

And maybe that was for the best. If Greyson wanted to act all high and mighty and threaten to put me in my place, then more power to him. All it did was cement my resolution to be Alpha. I’d set that goal aside for the past few weeks, what with all the Seluna drama, but now I was more resolved than ever to take over *my* pack and be the best Alpha I could be.

It was all so clear in my mind, the path my future would take. I’d take back my birthright as Alpha of the Redwood pack, and then I’d formally ask Cali to be my Luna. She’d finally make her choice—me, obviously—and then together, we’d convince Greyson to return to his nomadic, Rogue life. He could go shack up with Maren and her kid or something—he already looked like Fenrir’s father, to an uncanny degree. Either way, he’d need to get the hell out of the Redwood pack, and maybe out of Oregon altogether. It would be for the best. I couldn’t imagine Greyson wanting a front-row seat to Cali and me living happily ever after.

Maybe I’d be magnanimous and let Greyson visit during the holidays. I could be the bigger guy—once I was the Redwood Alpha and Cali was by my side. When everything Greyson had taken from me was returned to where it belonged.

Smiling at the thought, I made a wide loop and started heading back to the pack house. My overwhelming rage had reduced to a low simmer, not much bigger than the normal amount of anger and hatred I held for Greyson at any given time.

I daydreamed about the future on the way back to the pack house and shifted back to human as I walked inside, confident both in my naked body and in the plan I’d made.

Artemis, who was just coming out of the kitchen, winced slightly at the sight of me. Then she rolled her eyes. You’d think with as much time as she spent with the pack she’d have gotten used to the nudity by now.

“Hey, where’s Cali?” I asked. Artemis hesitated, and I frowned. “Is she okay?”

“I’m sure she’s fine. She’s still with Greyson.” She shrugged, and my frown turned to a full-on scowl.

*Obviously. Do you see his car here?* I’d been so caught up in my fantasy future that I’d completely forgotten about the “date share.” *Fuck. Why the hell did I ever agree to that, anyway?*

The answer hit me immediately. I’d done it for Cali. This thought reminded me of Greyson’s oh so helpful “advice,” and I pulled in a deep breath to shake off the rage that immediately rose to a boil inside me. I’d already run enough today.

I nodded at Artemis, then went upstairs to shower and change.

So what if Cali and Greyson were on a date? She was my mate too. We’d had sex in the forest just a few hours ago. I had nothing to worry about. My bond with Cali was too strong to be threatened by whatever cliché restaurant date she had with Greyson.

*But I’m not going to think about that.*

Except that was easier thought than done.

I headed into my room with a towel slung low on my hips. I couldn’t get the thought of Cali on her date with my brother out of my mind. I needed a distraction. I grabbed my phone from my nightstand and called Colton.

He answered after a couple of rings. “Happy New Year, you cranky old bastard!”

I snorted. “Same to you, twin.”

“What’s up?”

“Oh, same old drama. The pack is good. Greyson is annoying.”

He laughed. “Well, I hear he’s actually doing well as Alpha. That true?”

“Sure, if you call getting a whole house almost getting burned down being a good Alpha.”

“Wow. Sorry, bro. That sucks.”

“It’s not like I want to waste time talking about him. What’s up with you?”

“Can’t complain! I’m good, Maya’s good. Things are going well.”

I shook my head with a laugh. “I have to admit, I miss you—even if you always annoy the shit out of me.”

“Well, brothers are a special brand of annoying. It’s in the blood.”

I laughed, but in the back of my mind, I thought back to my fight with Greyson. He was definitely annoying as shit. “Well, try to come back and visit soon, okay?”

“Of course! I’ll be sure to annoy you enough to last you a few months, so you miss me less.”

“I’ll hold you to it. Give Maya my best.”

I felt only slightly better as I hung up the phone. I really did miss Colton, and it would’ve been a lot easier to navigate certain aspects of pack politics with him here. But he was building his own life elsewhere, and from the sound of it, that life was going well. I couldn’t fault him for doing what was right for him and his family.

I couldn’t stop thinking about what he’d said—that brothers were a special brand of annoying.

It grated that I’d thought of Greyson when Colton had said it. Sure, Greyson was a gigantic pain in my ass, and he was technically my brother, but not in the same way Colton was. Greyson and I were related through blood and nothing else. Colton and I had blood and history. We’d grown up together. We’d shared a fucking womb.

Still, there was no arguing that Greyson annoyed me in a weirdly familiar way—maybe the way that only family could.

I sighed. *Fuck. I did overreact to Greyson’s attempt to give me advice. Does this mean I have to apologize?*

No. No way. Greyson’s head was already big enough. There was no way I was going to admit I was in the wrong. But… maybe I could stop being quite so antagonistic toward him. Just a little bit.

I’d often wondered how my relationship with Greyson would be different if we’d grown up together. If Silas hadn’t taken him and attempted to raise him to be his psychotic protégé, and instead Greyson had shared a childhood with Colton and me.

It was almost impossible to imagine. Greyson was nothing like Silas, and he prided himself on that fact, but I’d never have a bond with him like I had with Colton.

But recent months had given me a glimpse of what our lives could have been like if we hadn’t been raised to hate each other. We’d fought together in New Orleans and way too many times before that, and we’d had each other’s backs. And while Rishika and Artemis and Gabe and the rest were fantastic fighters, there was something nice about being able to depend on Greyson to be there for me.

I still remembered when I’d first met Greyson. He’d killed people in my pack, and I hadn’t been able to imagine him as anything but an enemy. But since then, I’d gotten to know him better. Now, I understood Greyson’s side of the story—at least a little bit. And I knew that he wasn’t my enemy. My rival, maybe. But not my enemy.

I shook my head. *This is all a ridiculous thought exercise*.

My brother and I were at odds for one very big reason: we were both in love with the same woman. There was no overcoming that, right? Yet even earlier today, we’d put our antagonism aside for Cali.

“Dinner time!” Lola shouted from downstairs. “Come eat if you don’t want to fend for yourselves!”

I pulled on my sweats and ran downstairs to join the others. Torin had made another feast, and everyone was talking over everyone else as we took our seats. I looked around the room.

*This is what I want, to be able to lead these people. To be their Alpha*.

But that would mean overthrowing Greyson. All of my anger aside, could I really do that? And if I did, would Greyson and I ever be able to have a true brotherly relationship?

I’d never imagined it was possible before, but maybe it could be done. Maybe I could have my cake and eat it too. As I dished up my plate, I wondered if, just like Cali, I had a choice to make.

I needed to decide if I could truly bury the hatchet with Greyson, once and for all.

# Episode 3462

Despite the rough start, my dinner date with Greyson was going well. The dinner was absolutely delicious, and after I’d confessed everything about the letter, Greyson had kept the topics of conversation light and easy.

Clearly, I wasn’t the only one searching for levity after the past few weeks.

We talked about when my parents were planning to go back home, and how Lola was doing with her online classes. When I told Greyson the same thing I’d told Xavier earlier, that I was thinking of going back to school, he was totally supportive. He offered to pay for it all and arrange transportation if I wanted to go back to on-campus classes.

I asked him about his mom’s wedding and whether Mrs. Smith and Big Mac would be setting a date anytime soon. When he told me Big Mac had a long-lost sister she was thinking of inviting to the wedding, my head nearly exploded. But then again, maybe I shouldn’t have been surprised. If today had taught me anything, it was that there was a lot more to Big Mac than a surly witch who loved to complain about how much of a pain in the ass I was.

I was really glad Greyson had asked me out tonight, and that he’d chosen and arranged for such a beautiful place for our date. Tonight truly felt like a real date for the first time in… Well, I couldn’t remember the last time we’d done this—maybe not since we’d been in Portland together. But even that had been bumpy at times.

This was easy. Perfect. Relaxing.

Which was why I still felt so, so guilty about confessing that I needed more time before I could learn the truth about the *due destini* curse. He’d been so understanding, but there had been no missing the disappointment on his face when I’d told him. He’d hidden it well—it had only flashed across his face for a split second—but I knew him really well by now. And I knew that it hurt him to have to wait. He’d already waited for me for so long, and now I’d just doomed him to waiting even longer, with no guarantee of who I’d choose when everything was said and done.

*Assuming I even* can *choose, killing curse or no killing curse.*

Obviously, I needed to know that I wouldn’t be sentencing one of the men I loved to death before I could move forward, but after that? I still had no idea who I’d choose. *How* I could possibly choose between them. I couldn’t imagine a happily ever after without Greyson. But I also couldn’t imagine one without Xavier.

It was… painful to think about. And I hated that Greyson felt he had to hide how he was feeling in order to make me happy. I hated that my mates were always the ones doing things to make me happy.

I wished I could make a choice, if only for their benefit so they could stop waiting around for me. But, it wasn’t that easy. No matter what happened, someone would get hurt. Hearts would be broken.

Was it so wrong for me not to be ready for that?

Before I knew it, the servers were taking away our dessert plates.

“Already?” I asked. “It’s too soon.”

He smiled. “Well, the date doesn’t have to be over yet. We can take a tour.”

“Tour?” My brows rose as I looked around. Was this whole fancy place open for a tour?

“This mansion is a local landmark. And since I rented the whole place out, I figure we can probably look around if we want.” He offered me his hand. “I heard there are interesting artifacts from the history of the family who owned the house and the surrounding area. How does that sound for part two of our date?”

I smiled. “That sounds perfect.”

I took his hand, and he led me to the staircase outside of the main dining area. A velvet rope cordoned off the upstairs from the public restaurant space, but Greyson unsnapped one end of the rope without a second thought and indicated that I should head up. He replaced the rope behind him, and we climbed the staircase hand in hand.

I looked around, taking in the Victorian architecture and decor. “I definitely prefer this kind of mansion.”

He frowned. “As opposed to?”

“The Vanguard palace. That place is like a moon-themed Met Gala meets the Louvre meets Versailles. This place… I can actually see normal people living normal lives here. Plus, I think Lucian could really use some decorating pointers.”

Greyson laughed and nodded. “Yeah, this place is definitely classier than Lucian’s. But does it have orgy rooms?”

I snorted. “I hope not. I’ve seen enough of those to last a lifetime.”

Just off the landing, we found a gigantic ballroom with gold-embossed designs on the walls. The few pieces of furniture were covered with dust sheets.

“Wow. This room is massive.” My voice echoed through the space, proving my point.

“I wish there was music. Then we could dance.”

“Maybe later.” I grinned. “I want to see more rooms!”

At first, the tour had sounded like a fun way to draw out my date with Greyson, but now I was really getting into it. I wanted to see all the rooms and learn more about the people who’d lived here. Had their lives been as grand as the mansion they’d lived in? What had they been like? How long ago had this place been a home instead of a restaurant and historical landmark?

Greyson and I continued the tour, acting like a couple of kids who’d found an abandoned house and were running through the empty rooms together. I was careful not to touch anything, but since we were the only ones up here, we pretty much had free rein to go wherever we wanted—it was a giddy feeling.

For the first time in I didn’t even know how long, I forgot about Seluna, and the *due destini*, and everything else. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been this happy. Moments like this were both precious and painful. I wished I could hold onto them longer.

I looked at Greyson, a grateful smile pulling at my lips.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I’m just thinking about how happy I am to be here with you.”

I pulled him into another room, which had been outfitted as a nineteenth century bedroom.

Greyson pointed at a plaque on the wall. “That says the furniture is all authentic from when the house was fully outfitted over a hundred years ago.”

I looked at the bed, with its lace hangings and four-poster design. It was smaller than the one I had at home, but its size didn’t diminish its elegance.

The next room we found was a gigantic sitting room that, according to another plaque, had been used for entertaining. Lots of antiques were displayed on fancy pedestals and tables, accompanied by more informative plaques. The room had the feel of a museum, but as I looked over the knickknacks on the tables—old books, jewelry, a feather quill and an ink bottle, a crystal decanter—I imagined the people who had used this space. Saw a woman sitting at the desk in the corner, writing letters. Saw a man pouring brandy from that same decanter.

There had been elaborate paintings in pretty much every room we’d visited so far, but I noticed a small unassuming painting on the wall next to a plaque. I leaned in to read it.

“This is a portrait of the lady of the house a hundred years ago,” I told Greyson. “It was considered the most prized possession of the owner of the house, as he loved his wife so much. He lost her when they were very young. She died in childbirth, and he held onto this portrait so he’d never forget her smile. Even in his old age, he insisted on having the painting in his line of sight as he convalesced in his bed, near death. And… her name was the last thing he said before he died.” Tears stung my eyes as I turned to Greyson. “It’s so romantic and sweet. He loved her so much.”

“I know how he feels,” he said. “I don’t plan on losing you. Ever.”

He leaned down, and his lips crashed into mine. The kiss was a frantic, hungry thing, like the idea of losing me drove him crazy. I kissed him back with all the passion I could muster, trying to reassure him that I was there. That we were together. That we didn’t have anything to worry about anymore.

Greyson backed me against the wall next to a thin podium, and my arm knocked into it. I broke away from his mouth as the podium started to wobble, and then we both stared in horror as a gold-plated Fabergé egg began to fall.

# Episode 3463

**Marta**

I sat slumped at the dining room table, picking at my dinner and worrying about Lilac. I’d hoped that one of Torin’s delicious meals could take my mind off my problems, but no such luck. Ever since Violet had told me that Lilac was seemingly missing, I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about whether he was okay or not. Last night had been nothing less than horrible, and I was still in disbelief about how it had all gone down. There was no way Lilac was in a good place right now, and it made it even worse that he was out there somewhere, all alone.

Dani leaned in. “How’s the chicken?”

“It’s good,” I mumbled without looking up.

*I can’t believe things are so bad between Lilac and me, now. We used to be inseparable. Literally! I hate to say it, but things were a lot simpler when Lilac was tethered to me as a ghost.*

It wasn’t that I wished Lilac was still dead. But I did miss the easy, carefree relationship we’d had back then. We’d laughed so much and razzed each other and just had a good time together. *And now look at us. We’re a mess.*

The front door opened, and I spun around in my seat to see who it was. I let out a breath of relief as Violet, Charlie, and Lilac came through the door. Lilac looked like he’d been ridden hard and put away wet, and he was still wearing his suit from the night before. His hair was a mess—though it somehow worked for him—and his tie hung loose and wrinkled around his neck.

*At least he doesn’t look hurt or anything; that’s all that matters. I’m just glad he’s okay. We’re going through something not so good right now, but I don’t know what I would do if anything happened to him.*

Lilac scanned the table, hesitating when he got to me. We stared at each other for a quick beat, then he turned to Violet, whispered something in her ear, and ran upstairs.

Violet and Charlie sat down across from me. I couldn’t read anything in their faces, and there was nothing I wanted more than to pounce on them and ask after Lilac, but I didn’t want to push it.

Mercifully, Violet said, “He’s fine. He just wants to take a shower before he comes down to eat.”

I nodded, grateful for the update. I hated that things were so broken between us that I couldn’t even ask him myself if he was all right. I wondered if we’d ever get past the awkwardness and learn to at least have a normal conversation again. At least things were getting better with Violet now.

Violet smiled. “Thanks for your help, by the way. He was right where you said he’d be. And look, I’m still sorry about last night—our fight.” She winced and threw her hands up. “I really messed up.”

I smiled, but it was a wobbly one. It was kind of odd to be reminded of how well I knew Lilac when I was trying so hard to distance myself from him. It was starting to feel like there was nothing that he or I could do that wouldn’t somehow lead us back to our failure of a relationship.

*My being so torn up over Lilac is just self-preservation, that’s all. I need to find whatever it is I need to stop me from clinging to other people for their help and protection. I have to learn to stand on my two feet so that if I lose someone important to me, I don’t just fall apart.*

More than anything, I wanted to finally take the time to work on shedding the timid, trapped version of myself who’d been locked in that haunted house for so long. I didn’t want to be that person anymore.

“So, when do they want to leave?” Dani asked Tabitha.

I perked up, stopping a forkful of food just before I put it in my mouth. “Leave? Who’s leaving?”

“Mikah and Gabriel,” Tabitha said. “Me and Dani. And maybe Adair? We’ll all go at some point, at least. Mikah and Gabe only really came here to help out and escort me to see Dani—and they’re not the type to stay in one place for too long.”

I nodded, understanding, but still feeling kind of sad. I was going to miss them once they were gone, but especially Dani. And I was enjoying getting to know Dani’s sister better. Then a strange thought occurred to me.

I looked at Dani. “But do you know when you’re going to go yet?”

My stomach dropped just at the thought of losing my good friend. Deep down, I’d always known it was a possibility. After all, Dani had been searching for Tabitha for a long time, so of course she would want to stick by her side.

Dani shrugged. “I don’t know. Right now we’re only just talking about it, but I definitely want to go wherever my sister goes. We’ve been apart for so long—we deserve some quality sister time together.” Dani reached out to squeeze Tabitha’s hand, and the sisters shared a smile.

“We need to make up for lost time. There’s so much we need to catch up on!” Tabitha said.

I suddenly felt really sad at the thought of losing one of my only friends. It was like everyone I’d formed a connection with was starting to move on without me. It wasn’t fair that I was losing so much all at once. It made me long for a more permanent type of connection—something I could count on without having to worry about some hypothetical event in the future that would inevitably tear us apart.

*Lilac and I were pretty much doomed from the beginning with his mate bond hanging over his head.* A mix of feelings rushed through me as I thought about all the good times Lilac and I had shared, and how much I would miss them. *Without Lilac, I’m so alone in the world.*

I pushed my plate away, starting to feel depressed. I was about to go up to my room when Lilac came bounding into the dining room. He sat at the far end of the table, but he might as well have been right beside me with how strongly I felt his presence. I tensed and looked down at my plate, at a complete loss for what to do.

*If I get up and leave now, then it’ll look like I’m leaving just because Lilac came downstairs.* Things were nearly unbearably awkward between us right now, and I didn’t want to make it any worse—and literally running away whenever I saw him would definitely do that.

I picked up my phone as a distraction and realized that I had an unread text message. It was from Okorie. I jerked a bit in surprise, and before I knew it, I flashed Violet a nervous look, like I’d done something wrong.

*Why did I react like that? I’m single! I’m allowed to text Okorie. We’re just friends anyway. Just like Lilac and I are now. Just friends.* Even thinking it was painful.

Almost as if Okorie had read my mind, the text read: *Hey, just wanted to say that no matter what happens, I’m glad we’re still friends.*

I smiled. Just when I’d started to think that I had no connections left in this world, Okorie had reminded me that I had at least one friend left. When I’d first met Okorie, I never would have imagined that he would one day be comforting me in the midst of a bunch of breakup drama.

I quickly texted back. *Glad we’re still friends, too.*

I waited, wondering whether he was going to text right back and then feeling a little silly for hoping that he would. I tried not to get too excited when his text came in a moment later.

*I’m actually staying in the area for a few days, on witch council business. Maybe we could grab coffee sometime? No pressure, of course.*

I was surprised, to say the least. Was he really doing this? Asking me on a date? I started to type back but then quickly deleted it. A million different responses were running through my head, and I was having a really hard time deciding which one to choose. I didn’t want to give him the wrong idea, but I didn’t exactly want to blow him off, either. I started typing something else and then deleted that, too—just as another text from Okorie came through.

*I was thinking that maybe we should have a longer talk about what I said to you last night. And about that kiss.*

My heart was pounding, now. Okorie’s confession—that he had feelings for me—replayed again and again in my head. I hadn’t said anything in response because I hadn’t known *what* to say. I still wasn’t sure how I felt about it. Okorie had started off as someone I could barely stand, and now he was the one person I was excited about, the one person I could really talk to. That was a lot of change in a very short amount of time.

I was about to text back when Lilac’s voice came from behind me.

“Hey, Marta. Can we talk?”

# Episode 3464

Greyson lunged for the egg and caught it just before it shattered on the floor. He might have been a werewolf, but he certainly had the reflexes of a cat.He and I were frozen in place as we locked eyes, both of us trying to hold back laughter, since one false move would send the egg crashing to its doom.

I was still pressed against the wall, and Greyson’s face was practically buried in my breasts when the maître d’ appeared and let out an exaggerated gasp.

“What are you *doing*?” He rushed forward and grabbed the egg out of Greyson’s hands. “This is an outrage! Do you know how special this egg is to our establishment?”

Greyson and I both straightened.

“We’re *so* sorry!” I said immediately. “We didn’t mean to almost break your beautiful egg, sir.”

The maître d’ wasn’t having it. His face turning as red as a tomato, he pointed to the door. “I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to ask you two to leave. Your dinner reservation is over!” He looked like he wanted to throw us out through the upstairs window.

I could see that Greyson was seconds from telling the guy where to go, so I took hold of his arm and gently pulled him toward the door. “Let’s go, Greyson! I need some fresh air, anyway.”

There was no way I was going to stand by and let him get into it with the maître d’—we’d already caused enough of a scene without adding a shouting match to the mix.

Greyson nodded and led the way out of the room without another word. The maître d’ was right on our heels, and he glared down at us from the landing as we walked down the stairs like two chastised children. The other servers were gathered in the entranceway, watching us with curiosity and probably wondering what all the ruckus was about.

One of the servers appeared with our jackets and held them out to us. “Thank you for coming.”

“Visit again soon!” another server added.

I glanced back toward the maître d’, who looked like he was about to say something else, and quickly ushered Greyson out of the mansion before the man could say another word. Once we were safely outside, we met each other’s eyes and finally burst out laughing, collapsing into each other’s arms.

“I don’t think we’ll ever be allowed to come back here!” I spluttered. “How embarrassing!”

“The steak was dry, anyway,” Greyson muttered, straightening his jacket. “And that Fabergé egg was hideous. We would’ve done them a favor by breaking it.”

I giggled and nodded in agreement before looking back toward the car. “Well, I guess our date is over.”

I was a little disappointed that we were ending our night so abruptly. We’d been having a really good time, and it seemed a shame to cut it short just because we’d almost broken a priceless antique.

*Why would they make a fake egg so fragile, anyway? You’d think they’d try to make it stronger than its real-life counterpart.*

“It’s not over if you don’t want it to be,” Greyson said with a sly smile. He pulled me close and wrapped his arms around me.

I looked up at him, a smile playing on my lips. “I don’t want it to be.”

I was happy that he wasn’t letting our little mishap get to him and ruin our night. It could have been way worse. If he hadn’t reacted so quickly, he probably would’ve been writing a check right now for who knew how much to pay for their precious egg.

Greyson smiled and took my hand, caressing the top of it with his thumb. “Let’s take a walk. We still have a little time before Torin’s New Year’s festivities.”

“That sounds nice.” I leaned against Greyson and dropped my head onto his shoulder. “A little quiet before the party storm,” I said with a snicker. There was no question that Torin was going to go all out tonight, especially since his original event had been bumped by the lavish Vanguard party.

“Exactly,” Greyson said as he led me down a quaint street that looked to be the main drag of the little town. Charming little shops and cafes lined the narrow street, and I liked how peaceful and serene it all was.

“This area is super cute,” I said with a satisfied sigh. “I’ll have to come back here with Lola and do some window shopping. Seems like a nice place to come for a girl’s day. I already see a few stores that I’d like to visit…”

“Oh, I know you do,” Greyson said, smirking.

I rolled my eyes and gave him a little hip bump. “*Hey*. But really, right now I just want to walk with you. It’s nice being out of the pack house for the night, isn’t it? It’s just what I needed.” I smiled up at him. “You know, that was actually the perfect date.”

Greyson grinned. “Really? Getting kicked out of a stuffy restaurant is your idea of a good date? Good to know. I’ll make a note to get us kicked out of a lot more places together. It’ll be my life’s mission.”

I snorted and gave him an affectionate punch in the arm. “No, that part I could’ve done without. It’s just been nice, being out with you and just talking about anything. There’s no major crisis hanging over our heads, we aren’t being hunted or stalked, I’m not under a demon’s spell—you know, the simple things.”

It was Greyson’s turn to laugh. “You can say that again. I’m almost a little bored with no rival werewolf gangs breathing down our necks.”

“Damn, I knew there was something missing!”

We both dissolved into laughter, and it felt really good. I never would’ve thought that I’d be able to joke about all the bad stuff we’d been through. I hoped it meant that I was on the road to moving past all of it and getting on with my life.

“But seriously, though, I agree. I like just being together like this.” Greyson wrapped an arm around my shoulders and pointed to the end of the street. “I think I see a little river or something down there. Want to walk alongside it?”

I nodded and followed Greyson down a slope toward a narrow cobblestone river walk. There were no stores in this part of the town, but there were little park benches facing the water, and the old-timey street lamps were still draped with Christmas decorations. It was the definition of picturesque, and the perfect place for an after-dinner walk.

“I was meaning to ask you a few things about the wedding,” I said. Then quickly added, “Mrs. Smith and Big Mac’s, I mean.”

Greyson chuckled. “Yeah? What about it?”

Before I knew it, I was launching into a whole to-do list. “Well, I still need to find an outfit, and who’s planning the bachelorette party, do you know? Do we need two of them? Would it be weird for me to throw a bachelorette party for my boyfriend’s mom? Would I be overstepping?” *Maybe I should just leave that to Mrs. Smith…* “Maybe I could handle the bridal shower?”

*But that feels more… familial. Not that I’m assuming I’m Mrs. Smith’s family. Not yet, at least. Wait, no, that’s not what I should be thinking about at all. That feels too much like making a choice!*

Greyson laughed and shook his head. “I can tell your mind is racing. Don’t worry about anything—nothing is set in stone just yet. I just went to talk to her to make sure the wedding was still happening this year, that’s all. Besides, there’s nothing I need to worry about when I know I’ll have the hottest girl there as my date.”

My cheeks warmed and I smiled. “I can’t wait. A wedding is a really fun thing to look forward to.”

“I agree. Something happy to celebrate with all the people we care about. I’m looking forward to it, too.” He chuckled, shaking his head. “Man, if you’d asked me a while ago if I’d be looking forward to my mother’s wedding, I would’ve called you crazy.”

“Things do change so much, don’t they?” I said wistfully. “It’s really sweet that you’re going to be involved. I’m so glad that you two finally found each other.”

“Yeah, me too. I never would’ve thought that I’d have a relationship like this with my mom. But there are a lot of things I never thought I’d want that I do want now.” Greyson looked at me intently, and it was making my heart race. He started to lean down to kiss me, but then he stiffened.

“Greyson, what—”

He shushed me and said very softly, “Someone’s watching us.”

“Who?” I whispered back, going rigid.

“I don’t know, but it smells like a vampire.” Greyson said, his teeth clenched. I could see that he was already readying himself for a fight. “On the count of three, move behind me, okay?”

“But—”

“One, two, three!” He pushed me behind him and half-shifted, just as the vampire leapt out of the shadows with its fangs bared.

# Episode 3465

I let out a little scream of surprise as Greyson pushed the vampire back so hard that he stumbled and landed on his butt.

“We don’t want any trouble,” Greyson said, though he sounded like he was ready for as much trouble as the vampire wanted to bring. I knew he could easily take on one vampire, but he seemed more interested in defusing things. It was date night—no use ruining our amazing time with a fight to the death.

The vampire stood up and dusted himself off, obviously embarrassed at having been pushed down so easily. I stepped around Greyson and finally got a good look at him. The vampire looked… young. It wasn’t just that he looked like he might have been turned in his teens or early twenties—which he did—it also seemed like he wasn’t quite used to his vampire body, yet. Like Lola when she was first turned.

*I think he’s a new vampire*,I mind linked to Greyson.

A new vampire wasn’t good.

The vampire’s eyes darted almost nervously between the two of us. It looked like he was in over his head but hadn’t admitted it to himself yet.

*I think so, too*, Greyson mind linked back. *Definitely green around the gills. That doesn’t mean I’m going to let him hassle us, though.*

The vampire puffed up his chest, deepened his voice. “I don’t like wolves in my territory!”

He bared his fangs again for good measure, solidifying my impression that he was inexperienced. Vampires definitely liked to show off their scary hardware, but they usually did it a little more sparingly and with a lot more confidence.

“Fine,” Greyson said, not bothering to hide his annoyance. His expression all but dared the vampire to try to do something about it, but he was still being diplomatic. “I didn’t know this area was claimed. Back off, and we’ll be on our way.”

If this guy knew what was best for him, he’d listen.

The vampire narrowed his eyes and got in Greyson’s face, baring his fangs again. Instinctively, I began to gather my Fae magic so that I could let it loose at a moment’s notice if things went sideways. I jumped at a strange sensation in my shoulder—almost like a phantom throb, right where the handprint was—but I ignored it as I readied myself for a fight. Big Mac had said there might be some residual sensations in the handprint scar, so I was just going to have to get used to it. At least now with the ashes in the demon world, I knew that Seluna wasn’t going to appear at any second.

Greyson jabbed a finger into the vampire’s chest and pushed him away. “Okay, buddy, let me give you some advice. If you’re going to be out here skulking around, looking for trouble, you should learn to realize when you’re well outmatched.”

“What?” the vampire spluttered. “I’m strong. Real strong! What makes you think you can take me?”

He balled his fists and planted his feet, trying to look at formidable as he could. It was comical.

Greyson sighed, and I could almost feel him trying to rein in his annoyance. “I’m an Alpha. Do you know what that is?”

He sounded like an adult lecturing a small child. Greyson’s voice was strong, but I noticed that he didn’t look tense at all—he obviously felt in complete control of the situation.

The vampire frowned. “An Alpha?”

“That’s right. I’m the Alpha of my pack, which means that a newborn vamp like you doesn’t have even a sliver of a chance against me.” Greyson took a step forward, and the vampire shrank back, finally looking nervous. “If you don’t stand down, I’ll be forced to rip you apart—which is the way any wolf would handle a threat.”

The vampire’s gaze suddenly shifted to me, his misguided bravado still in place. “Well, you’re not alone. If you don’t want your lady to get hurt, you’d better shut up and do what I say! Like I said, this is my territory, and I call the shots, Alpha or not!”

I frowned at being called someone’s “lady,” like I was a thing instead of a person. This kid really needed to grow up.

I curled my lip at him as I spoke. “This *lady* knows how to take care of herself, so if I were you, I’d take his advice and back off.”

The vampire flashed an overconfident grin, making sure to let his fangs show, of course. “Oh yeah? Prove it!”

He did a fake-out lunge, and I jerked back, my surprise making me lose hold of my magic. Before I knew it, a blast of magic burst out of me and blew up a nearby street lamp. Sparks rocketed in every direction, lighting up the entire area.

The vampire ducked into a crouch and threw his arms over his head to protect himself. “W-What the hell? What was that?”

I blinked, tearing my eyes away from the melted street lamp to look at Greyson. I fanned my fingers out and shook off the lingering tingle.

*What was that?* Greyson mind linked, his eyebrows raised.

*A mistake!* I replied. Then I turned to the vampire. “That was a warning shot. The next one won’t be.”

Greyson snorted, and I elbowed him. I couldn’t have him calling my bluff in front of this baby vamp—though it wasn’t actually a bluff. I was more than ready to light him up if he didn’t leave us alone, baby or not.

The vampire looked up at me from under the shelter of his hands. “Okay, okay, fine! Sorry! I messed up! Please don’t explode me with your magic!”

I took a step toward him, and he flinched. “Stand up,” I said, liking the confidence in my voice. *I could get used to this. Now I know why Greyson and Xavier like ordering people around all the time. It feels kind of good.*

The vampire slowly rose to his feet, flinching again when he finally met my eyes.

“Now, what did you call me again?” I asked.

“I’m sorry—ma’am!” The vampire cowered away from me, as if waiting for me to make good on my threat at any second.

I scowled. *Ma’am? That’s almost worse, but I’ll take it.* *I guess.* “Why don’t you take all this as a lesson learned and think carefully before you threaten anyone else?”

I didn’t even want to think about how this would have gone down if we’d just been some normal human couple out for a stroll. But hopefully this little run-in would make the vampire think twice before attacking anyone else.

The vampire nodded vigorously. “Yes, ma’am!”

I sighed. “Now get out of my sight. And I’d better not see you around here again.”

I did a little fake lunge at him as a bit more payback.

Without another word, the vampire turned and raced into the darkness. I turned back to Greyson, who was doubled over now, trying to rein in his laughter.

“That guy is really lucky that I didn’t hit him by accident.” I was happy that the only victim had been the street lamp, but things could have gone really badly. I stared at the mound of melted metal beside the river walk, feeling a little bad that I’d damaged the quaint serenity of the place. Still, better the lamp post than something living.

Greyson finally righted himself, tears still glistening in his eyes from all the laughter. “You’re my hero, Cali.”

I smacked him in the arm, but I felt all warm inside. “Shut up!”

It was rare for me to be the one to stand up to a threat when Greyson was right by my side. He usually took the lead, and for good reason—he was a trained fighter, and I wasn’t—but it felt nice to flip the script for once.

Greyson grinned and hooked his arm around mine. “Honestly, it was hot to see you take control like that. I like seeing how much of a badass my mate is. You had that little bloodsucker quaking in his boots.”

My body was already reacting to Greyson’s closeness, bolstered by the adrenaline that was only just starting to wane. “Oh really? Wanna show me how sexy you think I am?”

Greyson leaned close, his lips brushing against the outer shell of my ear. “With pleasure.”

Our lips were mere inches from a kiss when my phone went off.

Greyson groaned and let his forehead rest against mine. “Can’t we ignore it?”

“Sure,” I said. I leaned in, and we finally kissed, all the heat and energy from the night passing between us like electricity.

We broke apart when his phone started to ring.

Sighing, Greyson pulled out his phone and frowned as he looked at the screen. “It’s Lola.”

I took the phone from him and answered it on speakerphone.

“Where the hell are you?” Lola shouted. “You promised to be back by midnight, remember?”

Oh *shit.* We’d completely lost track of time! I looked up at Greyson. “We’re late!”

# Episode 3466

**Xavier**

After dinner was over, Gabe, Mikah, and I retired to the study for a whiskey. The house was buzzing with excitement for the coming party, and it was nice to duck away for a little downtime before the festivities began. I had a feeling that with Torin in charge, we might be in for another late night.

“So, what are your plans for after the new year?” I asked them after I’d poured a round for each of us. “You planning on heading out?”

Gabe shrugged and took a swig of his brandy. “We’re not sure. Maybe in a couple days?” He looked at Mikah, who shrugged and nodded. “We don’t want to overstay our welcome.”

“Oh, that could never happen,” I said.

I was a little disappointed to hear that they were planning on leaving at some point—it was nice being reunited with an old friend. But I also knew Gabe well, and he never stayed in one place for long. Had it been a couple of years ago, I would’ve been down to run off with him for yet another adventure, but now I liked the idea of being settled. Cali was a big part of why I was enjoying my new, stabler self. There was no way I could ever think of leaving her behind.

“I did get a message from an old contact asking me to call him back,” Mikah said. “Probably for a job.”

Gabe arched his eyebrows. “Really? Why didn’t you tell me?”

Mikah shrugged. “He called yesterday, and then we had that party to deal with. I didn’t really want to talk business. He didn’t sound rushed, so there’s time.”

Gabe nodded as he walked over and placed a casual hand on Mikah’s shoulder. It was so intimate and easy. Not a hint of pretense or hesitation. It seemed like they’d been together for eons, and they were fast becoming the type to finish each other’s sentences. Being mates with someone would do that to you.

I was happy that he’d found his mate—and I had to admit that once I’d gotten over the whole vampire thing, Mikah was a pretty good guy to have by your side. He was fierce and loyal and could hold his own in a fight, and in our world that meant everything. There was no question that he would always have Gabe’s back—which was good, since Gabe was *always* getting himself into trouble.

“Why are you smiling at us like that?” Gabe asked.

I quickly wiped the grin off my face, not wanting to weird them out. “What? No reason. I was just thinking about how you’ve always had a knack for getting yourself into bad situations. I feel bad for Mikah, having to deal with all that from now on. You’re a handful.”

Mikah laughed. “Well, the man obviously knows you very well.”

“*Hey!*” Gabe said with a scowl. He glanced at me. “Speak for yourself, wolf.”

“Touché,” I said with a chuckle. He was right. I was just as prone to finding myself mired in chaos as he was. When we’d run together, it had been ten times worse. We’d almost constantly found our backs against the wall, but we’d always found a way to fight our way out of it. It had been invigorating back then, because I’d only had myself to worry about. But that wasn’t the case anymore. I raised my glass in a salute. “That must be why we get along so well—because we’re both always one step away from total destruction.”

Gabe and Mikah raised their glasses as well.

“Never a dull moment,” Gabe said with a wink.

“You guys are always welcome here,” I said. A pack was only as strong as its warriors, and both Mikah and Gabe had shown that they were prepared to take on any challenge that might come their way. “You really came through for us with Adéluce. You’ve more than earned an honorary spot in the pack house whenever you need it.”

“Thanks, man,” Gabe said. “I really appreciate that.”

“And who knows? Maybe next time you come around, things will have changed around here.” I was ready to solidify my rightful place in the pack, and it wouldn’t be long before I started taking the steps that would get me there.

Mikah lifted a brow. “Is there something going on that we should be aware of?”

I quickly shook my head. “Nah. Greyson knows that I want to be Redwood Alpha in the long run. I only let him keep the role because we were dealing with so much bullshit that it wouldn’t have been good for the pack if I’d challenged him.”

“And now?” Gabe said.

“Now, things are getting back to normal, so…” I trailed off.

Gabe and Mikah shared a look.

“If you want me to stick around, just say the word.” Gabe drained the rest of his glass, then set it down on the desk, his eyes on mine. “Since that guy Mikah knows isn’t hustling us, there’s nowhere we absolutely have to be, so if you need us, we’re here.”

I frowned at him. “Why would you need to stick around?”

“Um, maybe because challenging someone for Alpha is kind of a big deal? You might need backup, and if I’m gone, who’s going to handle that for you? Colton’s not here,” he said. “I like Greyson and all, but you know I’ve got your back in this.”

“Thanks, but no thanks,” I said. “I’ve got this. It’s a long game, I know.”

I was happy for my friend’s support, but I didn’t know how I felt about him thinking that I wouldn’t be able to handle myself.

Gabe nodded at me, but there was a strange look on his face.

“Go ahead. I can tell that you’re dying to say something,” I said. He was clearly reluctant to just come out with it, and I was starting to worry a little about what he was going to say.

Gabe sighed. “As someone who also has Alpha blood, I have to ask if this is really something you want, or if it’s just something you think you’re supposed to do. There’s a lot to be said for just belonging to a pack and serving a key role—which you already do. Mikah and I haven’t been here all that long, but we already see that you’re crucial to the Redwood pack. Maybe that’s good enough.”

I scowled at him. I definitely hadn’t expected that. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that the Xavier I knew back when we were mercenaries together would’ve rather cut off his own arm than be Alpha of an entire pack and bear all that responsibility. It would’ve cramped your style.”

I nodded slowly, letting Gabe’s words sink in as I recalled my years on the road with him. “You’re not wrong. It wasn’t anything I wanted back then. But that Xavier doesn’t exist anymore. I’ve changed. I realize what I really want. What and who.”

Gabe smiled knowingly. “You mean Cali.”

“Of course, Cali,” I said. Always Cali. “I know she’d support me if I lead the pack. I can handle more. I want more. Haven’t you felt like you’re meant for something? That’s how being Alpha makes me feel. Besides, I’m good at it. The pack would do well with me leading the way.”

Gabe nodded, trailing his hand up and down Mikah’s arm. “Trust me, I get it. No need to explain further. I just wouldn’t be a good friend if I didn’t remind you of who you used to be. I wanted to give you a little reminder, just in case there was a part of you that still had some of those old feelings. I really just want you to be careful, dude.”

I nodded. “I will be. That’s why I’ve been taking my time with this. I’m not rushing it, and I’m trying to do it the right way at the right time.”

Mikah cleared his throat, and we both looked at him.

“What is it?” Gabe pressed.

“I don’t know if it’s my place…” The vampire hesitated, and he looked almost like he was going to tell us to forget it. “I know I’m not a werewolf…”

“Come on, say what’s on your mind,” Gabe said.

I wasn’t really sure if I wanted to hear what Mikah had to say on the matter. Mikah could be so implacable, and he wasn’t one to pull punches—but there was a part of me that was curious to hear the vampire’s thoughts on the whole thing.

“Go ahead, Mikah,” I said. “Speak freely.”

Mikah looked up at Gabe, who gave him an encouraging nod. “What if you don’t actually get to become Alpha? I know there’s a lot that goes into it, some big face-off and all—”

“The Lupo Finale,” Gabe supplied.

“Yeah, that. It’s all very politically complicated—not to mention dangerous. Anything can happen during a Lupo Finale, right?”

“Right.” I knew better than anyone just how wrong it could go, but I couldn’t worry about that right now. I knew that I would emerge victorious. “So, what are you trying to say?”

“I guess I’m just wondering what happens if things don’t go the way you want,” Mikah said soberly. “What’s your plan B?”

# Episode 3467

**Greyson**

As Cali and I floored it back to the pack house, I kept glancing at the clock in the dash and willing time to slow down, just this once. Cali was stressing in the passenger seat, and doing a little bit of backseat driving because of it. I didn’t mind—I knew she was only trying to help.

“You can get over now, Greyson. It’s all clear in this lane.” Her eyes were glued to the road, as if she were the one driving.

“I’ve got this. Relax,” I said, rubbing her thigh. “I’m driving my ass off without blowing past the speed limit. Trust me.”

“Sorry, it’s just that we’re so late! What if Torin doesn’t forgive us?” Cali moaned. “That stupid baby vamp.” She shook her head.

I chuckled. “Yeah, if we do end up being late, let’s definitely just blame it on the bloodsucker. But really, it’s all good. Torin won’t be mad. We just lost track of time.”

By the time Lola had called, it had already been well after eleven. Cali and I had raced to the car the moment we’d hung up with her.

Cali pulled out her phone and started fidgeting with it, chewing her bottom lip. “You think I should call Torin and let him know we might not make it? But then what if we call him and *do* make it? I don’t want to freak him out for nothing. We promised him we’d be there, and then we go and do this. I feel so bad. He was so excited about this party. I don’t want him to think we don’t think this is just as special as the Vanguard party.”

“He won’t, don’t worry. We’ll be home before midnight.” I glanced at the clock again and winced. We were cutting it close, but I was confident that we’d get there just in time.

“Maybe you should have shifted—that would’ve been faster—but now it’s too late. We can’t just leave the car on the side of the road… Or can we?” Cali leaned over to look out the window as if searching for a good spot to abandon the car.

“It’s going to be *fine*, love. I’ll get us there before midnight, I promise.”

True to my word, a little while later the pack house was looming before us, and we still had minutes to spare. I’d barely rolled to a stop before Cali leapt out of the car.

“Come on, Greyson! Pedal to the metal!”

Just as she was about to hop onto the porch, I grabbed her and pulled her back. I scowled at the two shadowy figures lurking on the porch. They smelled wolf-like, but I couldn’t make out their faces, and their scents were unfamiliar.

“Who are you? What do you want?” I growled. I wasn’t in the mood for any other surprises after our little vampire sighting, and I hoped that this wasn’t trouble literally standing on our doorstep.

Cali stiffened beside me as she finally saw why I’d pulled her away. A few tense seconds passed before both figures moved into the light.

“*Paige? Duke?*” Cali asked. “And you’re naked. As usual. You must have shifted to come here, so I get it!” she said quickly to cover her last statement.

“We came to see you,” Paige said. “Duke and I wanted to… talk.”

I was confused. *What the hell could these two want to talk to Cali about?*

Paige waved a hand at the house. “I didn’t realize that there would be a celebration going on. I could hear the music all the way out in the woods. I guess the Redwoods aren’t as boring as we thought.” She let out a little laugh that managed to lodge itself right under my skin and get my hackles up.

Cali and I exchanged a look.

*We’re not boring just because we turned them down for an orgy. Lucian and his friends’ tastes aren’t ours. I’m more than happy about that.*

“Do you want to join us?” Cali asked politely.

I cringed internally, hoping that they would say no. I wanted tonight to be a pack-only celebration. No stress, just good vibes and more time with Cali.

“No, that’s all right,” Duke said. “We’ll come call on you another time. We’re going to be in the area for a few days, anyway.”

I was relieved that Duke and Paige weren’t going to crash our party, but I didn’t know how I felt about this odd Alpha and his Luna sticking around.

*Our alliance with the Vanguards barely made it through last night—there’s no point making waves with Lucian’s friends.*

I forced a smile. “A shame you can’t stay,” I lied. “Hope you two enjoy your time in the area.”

They both nodded as they moved past us, shifting just before they reached the trees and then taking off into the night.

I turned to Cali as we both walked up onto the porch. “What could they want to talk to you about?”

Cali rolled her eyes. “It’s kind of a long story. I’ll fill you in after we do Torin’s midnight thing.”

I nodded, dropping the issue for now.

We went inside and were greeted at the door by Lola. She had party poppers and hats for us.

“Hurry up!” she demanded, then hustled us both into the living room, where Jay shoved champagne glasses into our hands.

Cali went to stand with her parents as everyone else crowded in and semi-separated us. Torin was standing on a chair in the center of the room, beaming down at all of us. “Okay, Redwoods! It’s almost time! Ten, nine, eight…”

I tied to shuffle closer to Cali, but then my mother came over, all smiles. “Greyson! I’m so happy you made it in time!”

I smiled back. “Just.”

“… four, three, two, one! Happy New Year again, everybody!” Torin said, shooting off his popper in chorus with the others that were going off all around the room.

I met Cali’s eyes, and she shrugged before giving her mother a kiss on the cheek.

*Thanks for getting us back in time*, she mind linked.

*It was my pleasure*,I replied.

My mom gave me a nudge. “Can your mother get a New Year’s kiss?”

“Of course. Happy New Year.” I smiled and leaned down to kiss her on the cheek.

“Same to you, Greyson. I know it’s going to be a good one.”

I looked up and saw Xavier standing at the back of the crowd with Mikah and Gabriel. I met his eyes, and he immediately jerked his head toward the study. I lifted my brow in question, but Xavier just turned and headed off.

I sighed. *I really hope this isn’t going to be another big fight. I’d like to have a good night tonight, if at all possible.*

I was trying to figure out what this could possibly be about as I slipped into the room and closed the door behind me. I contemplated trying to get ahead of things by cutting through whatever tension was about to be created, but Xavier spoke first.

“You want a drink?” He picked up a glass of whiskey and lifted it to his lips, taking a long swig.

“Sure.”

Xavier took a clean glass from the desk drawer and poured me a drink. We clinked glasses before taking a long sip, watching each other over the rims of our glasses.

“So,” Xavier finally said. “I thought about what you said, and…”

I stood there, waiting for him to continue. He was obviously having a little trouble saying whatever it was that was lingering on the tip of his tongue.

“You were right,” he finally said. He tossed back the rest of his drink.

I was shocked. “Hold on, wait just a damn minute. What did you just say?”

Xavier scowled. “You heard me.”

I thought about teasing him, but Xavier seemed on edge, and I knew I was probably treading on sensitive ground. My brother’s mood could turn on a dime, and I didn’t want to be the one to set him off, so I just nodded, wanting to follow his lead in extending an olive branch.

“Thanks for that,” I said. “And… I guess I should be more aware of how you feel about me. I know it can be frustrating for you. And no matter what I might have implied before, I know that you’d be a good Alpha, too.”

Xavier’s eyes widened in surprise. “Wow, now *I’m* wondering if I’m hearing things. Never thought I’d hear those words from you in a million years.”

I sighed and took another swig of my whiskey. “Yeah, well, you annoy the shit out of me a lot, so I don’t get many opportunities to compliment you. Older brother privileges, you know how it goes.”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “I’m not that much younger than you.”

I smiled, finally feeling like we were turning a corner. We’d been at each other’s throats for so long that I didn’t know what it would be like to actually get along. “Well, you *are* younger, so you’ll just have to accept it.”

Xavier sighed and nodded slightly. “It is what it is, I guess.”

“Does this mean that you and I can coexist in peace? Are we calling a more permanent truce?”

Xavier hesitated, pouring himself a bit more whiskey and drinking it down.

“Because I’m in if you are,” I added, holding out my hand for him to shake.

# Episode 3468

**Xavier**

I stared down at Greyson’s hand, wondering whether I should bury the hatchet and shake, or ignore my brother’s offer. This was a big gesture, and I couldn’t just shake his hand without really considering what it meant. For one thing, I was reluctant to do anything that would make it seem like I thought that he was a good Alpha. It wasn’t that I would be outright saying that by shaking his hand, but calling a truce sounded to me like I was giving up on ever becoming Redwood Alpha, and that wasn’t what I was saying at all. I wanted us to get along—mostly for Cali’s sake—but I didn’t want him to get the wrong impression, either.

Greyson sighed. “I’m not saying that you have to be my second. I just think we shouldn’t be at each other’s throats all the time. Don’t you?”

I could hear the sincerity in my brother’s voice, and a wave of mixed feelings raced through me.

I scowled at him. *Peace between us would be nice, and Cali would love it, but I hate that he’s the one who brought it up first. Yet another thing for him to throw in my face so that he can look like the bigger person—and the strong, capable Alpha he thinks he is.*

I thought back on the revelations I’d had after my call with Colton. Colton had reminded me that brothers could push each other’s buttons better than anyone else. I sighed. *Maybe I can just suck it up, just this once.*

Finally, I reached out and took my brother’s hand. “I can’t promise that I’ll stop getting pissed off at you,” I said, holding his hand tightly so that he couldn’t pull away.

Greyson laughed. “Oh, trust me, there’s no question that I’m still going to get pissed off at you, but I do trust you. With my life.” He looked me right in the eye.

I nodded. “I guess you *have* saved my ass a couple times lately. That has to count for something.”

Greyson smiled as I finally released his hand. “And speaking of this little truce between us, maybe you should go talk to Cali.”

I lifted a brow. “Really, what’s up?”

“She opened Big Mac’s letter—you know, the one with the answer about the *due destini* curse.”

I was shocked to hear that and wondered whether Greyson was going to offer anything else. When he didn’t, I urged him on. “And? What did it say?”

Greyson hesitated. “She should really be the one to tell you.”

Suddenly, there was a rock in the pit of my stomach.

*Has she made a choice? If she has, why is he being so damn calm about it? There’s no way she chose Greyson, right? She would never do that without talking to me first, would she?*

As if reading my thoughts, Greyson rolled his eyes. “It’s not what you think. Just go talk to her. She’s feeling really confused right now.”

I nodded and left the study to find Cali. She wasn’t in the living room with the others, and she wasn’t in the kitchen either. I ran into Orla in the foyer and stopped her. “Do you know where Cali is?”

“Oh, yes, she went upstairs to change out of her date outfit. I just saw her, so she should still be up there. Is everything okay?” Orla asked, her eyes searching mine.

“Yes, everything’s more than okay. Just looking for her.”

I left Orla and went upstairs. Cali was in her room, just like Orla had said. When I walked in, she was mid curse, trying to twist around to reach the zipper on her dress. She spun around so fast that she nearly toppled over, and I dove forward to catch her.

She laughed. “Hey! Thanks.”

“You need a little help with that?” I asked, gesturing at the zipper.

She gave me a sheepish smile. “Yes, if you wouldn’t mind. Lola helped me get ready, so I didn’t realize that the zipper was in such a hard-to-reach place.”

Cali turned around so that her back was to me, pulling her hair out of the way so I could reach the zipper.

I pulled it down, letting my knuckles brush against her warm, bare skin.

She shivered a little, leaning into my touch. I could see the handprint scar on her bare shoulder, and without thinking, I leaned down to kiss the now-permanent mark. I wished that I could make it disappear. I didn’t want her to have a constant reminder of what she’d gone through, but I knew that I didn’t really have a choice in the matter.

Cali shivered again. “Xavier Evers, are you trying to seduce me?”

With my lips still pressed to the scar, I smiled. “I don’t know. Is it working?”

Cali turned and linked her arms around my neck, smiling.

“You know it is,” she said breathlessly. She lifted onto her toes to kiss me, her lips sliding along mine and her tongue dancing at the entrance to my mouth, toying with going further but holding back.

My eyes darted to the bed, and I considered pulling her down onto it so we could take things further. But before the kiss could get away from us, I pulled back.

“What’s wrong?” Cali asked, frowning.

“Greyson told me that you opened the letter,” I said. The words spilled out of my mouth quickly, almost like I was afraid that saying them too slowly would somehow make the moment even more nerve-wracking.

Cali looked shocked. “Oh. I didn’t realize that was what you two went off to talk about.”

I nodded. “Yeah. Well, not just that, but it came up. I just wanted to check in and make sure you were okay.”

Cali sighed and looked away from me. “I’m a bit confused, if I’m being honest.”

I did my best to keep my expression blank, wanting to see where she was going before I allowed myself to react in any way. I had to admit, it was disappointing that she wasn’t going to be able to make a choice immediately, but I didn’t want her to know that I was disappointed. The last thing I wanted was to stress Cali out even more. My showing her that her indecision was affecting me would only hurt her more.

“Did Greyson tell you that the letter was blank?” she asked.

“Blank?” I hadn’t expected that at all. I shook my head. Now everything made a lot more sense. Cali was probably frustrated by whatever game the witch was playing. Big Mac was usually pretty straightforward for a witch, but that didn’t mean that she wasn’t capable of toying with people’s lives, like she was obviously doing in Cali’s case.

“Blank,” Cali confirmed, something else clearly sitting on the tip of her tongue.

“Are you okay? Did Big Mac give you an explanation?” I took Cali’s hands, hoping I was bringing her even the smallest bit of comfort. I didn’t want her to stress about anything now that the Adéluce/Seluna problem was taken care of. The last thing she needed was some witch to be toying with her emotions.

“It’s not quite like that. She explained why she did it,” Cali said around a sigh. “She put a spell on the letter so that I wouldn’t be able to see the truth until I was completely emotionally ready to know it.”

I sighed. “That makes sense, and it’s definitely a stunt that Big Mac would pull. I’m sorry she did that. She should’ve just told you what she was doing from the beginning.”

Cali shook her head. “It’s fine, really. Big Mac was right. I wasn’t actually ready to know. I felt so conflicted just before I opened the envelope. I don’t know what I would’ve done if it hadn’t been blank. I just don’t feel ready, I guess, and the note could tell.”

“I get it. It’s a lot, I know.” I was doing my best to be supportive and was working overtime to keep even a note of disappointment from my voice.

“I just feel so bad—I know it’s hard on you and Greyson, waiting on me like this.”

I sucked my teeth. “Oh, don’t worry about that. I can wait for you. I *will* wait for you. I’ve told you this before.”

Cali smiled brightly at me before ducking her head and looking away, seeming a little shy all of a sudden. “Thank you, Xavier. I’m so lucky that you’re my mate.”

She kissed me again, a nice, sweet kiss that made my heart rate quicken. There was nothing quite like the taste of Cali’s lips.

I tried to calm down, wanting to relax and keep the kiss light, for Cali’s sake. But in my head, I couldn’t stop thinking that I was going to get the future with Cali that I’d fantasized about, and nothing was going to stand in my way.

# Episode 3469

Xavier took a step toward me as he deepened the kiss and wrapped his arms tightly around my waist, pressing himself against me. I moaned against his lips and slid my tongue into his mouth. My eyes drifted shut, and I took a moment to enjoy the sensation of him; the softness of his lips, the solid wall of his chest, the tickle of his breath coming faster and faster as our kiss intensified…

I couldn’t imagine being with anyone but Xavier at this very moment, and I was going to take advantage of every second. I was so glad that we were here, together and safe. It felt good to have nothing hanging over our heads, and I could feel the unspoken reality of that between us.

Even Xavier’s reaction to the letter debacle had been perfect. He’d said exactly what I needed to hear, especially when I’d been so uncertain of how he would react, knowing that we’d come so close to learning the truth only to have my reservations get in the way once again.

I felt so comforted and supported by him, and I wanted to show him just how much I appreciated him. I plunged my tongue deeper into his mouth, caressing his tongue with mine so that there was no mistaking where I wanted things to go.

Xavier pulled back in surprise and looked into my eyes. “Are you sure? I know you probably have a lot on your mind, with the letter and everything…”

I nodded and pushed him down onto the bed. “Oh, I’m more than sure.”

He laughed. “Whoa, what’s gotten into you?”

“Hopefully you, pretty soon.” I winked and climbed on top of him, holding his face between my hands before I bent down and feathered a trail of kisses from his lips down to his chest, unbuttoning his shirt as I went. I inhaled his earthy scent, slid my hands down to his belt and unbuckled it, then moved back up to his lips and kissed him deeply.

“What did I ever do to deserve you?” Xavier ran a hand through my hair and then pulled me back into the kiss. Our tongues dueled for a long, heated, moment before I pulled away and caressed the side of his face, my gaze riveted to his.

“Whatever it was, it must have been pretty amazing,” I said with a smile. I got up and pulled his pants off, then did the same with his shirt and underwear.

“You’re trouble, Cali,” Xavier said, his voice thick with desire. He propped himself up on his elbows so that he could look at me head-on.

I gave him a lopsided grin as I slowly removed my clothes, keeping my eyes on his as I slowly slid my panties down my legs. I hopped back on top of him, and our lips connected once more as I undulated my hips against him.

I pinned his wrists to the bed with one hand and took his shaft in the other before pulling away to look him in the eye, my entire body buzzing with anticipation for what I had in store for him. I grazed my lips against his ear. “Let me show you just how much trouble I can be…”

\*\*\*

I woke up in Xavier’s arms with the sun shining in my face. I smiled slowly. *This is the perfect way to wake up.* I rolled over to face him and snuggled into his shoulder. I felt so warm and safe in his arms, and I’d slept more peacefully than I had in a long time.

Xavier stirred beneath me, and I felt the soft press of his lips in my hair. I finally opened my eyes and smiled up at him. “Morning.”

He smiled back. “Good morning.” He gave me a soft kiss on the lips,

*This is the kind of sweet, normal thing I’d love to do every single day.* I kissed him back, both of us laughing when the kiss quickly grew more passionate. It was like we couldn’t get enough of each other, even after the night we’d just shared.

We finally broke the kiss and, with a yawn, I sat up and stretched my arms wide. “Do you want water?”

“Yes, but I can get it,” Xavier said, flipping the covers back and swinging his feet to the floor.

I shook my head. “No, I’ll get it, I want to grab some tea anyway.”

“Okay. I’m going to jump in the shower.”

I nodded and slipped into a pair of loose sweatpants and a T-shirt. I jogged downstairs, whistling to myself.

*This is what it feels like to be carefree and content. I deserve this, and so do my mates—a chance to take some time to stop and live life without trying to survive some catastrophe.*

I bounded into the kitchen, where my mom was clearing a few forgotten plates and glasses from last night’s party.

“Good morning!” I all but sang the words.

She smiled. “Good morning, Cali. It’s nice to see you so happy this morning.”

“Yeah, it’s a great day, isn’t it?” I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt so… light.

Mom nodded and handed me a glass of water, and I took it and gulped it down.

“So, what’s your plan for the day?” I asked. I put the kettle on the stove, already going through my mental inventory of the teas we had in the cupboard.

“Just starting to pack a little at a time,” she said. “Your father, too.”

I turned to look at her. “Wait, already? It’s so soon!”

“Yes, Cali. We told you we were going back home in the new year.”

I frowned. “Yeah, but I didn’t think you meant *immediately* in the new year. Why don’t you stay a little while longer? Both Xavier and Greyson love having you here, and we have more than enough room—”

Mom squeezed my arm. “It’s really nice of you to offer, Cali, but Dad has to go back to work. And I’m anxious to get back and check on the house—to be back in my own bed. It’s time.”

I nodded. I was disappointed and sad at the thought of my parents leaving, but I fully understood that they couldn’t stay in the pack house forever—no matter much I loved having them.

She pulled me into a hug. “I’m going to miss you and Artemis so much.” She patted me on the back. “You girls will have to come back home and visit us soon, okay?”

“We will, Mom.” I held on a little longer, then pulled away to fetch the kettle when it started whistling.

Greyson came walking into the kitchen and smiled at me. “Morning, Cali. Orla.” He came over and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

I held up the kettle. “You want some tea?”

“No, I think I’m going to have a cup of coffee this morning, but thanks,” Greyson said as he approached the freshly brewed pot.

I fished a tea bag—peppermint—out of the cupboard and pulled out my favorite mug, then handed one to Greyson, too. My mother threw the rest of the dishes into the dishwasher and then sat down at the kitchen table to read the paper. I couldn’t help but notice how we were all puttering around the kitchen like a happy family.

*It’s all so wonderfully normal! I’ve been missing moments like this so much.*

I glanced up as Xavier came in, his hair still wet from his shower. For a split second, I wondered if everything was about to turn awkward. After all, I’d just spent the night with Xavier, and there was no doubt in my mind that Greyson knew it.

Xavier slapped his brother on the shoulder. “Can I get some of that coffee?”

“Sure.” Greyson pulled out another mug for his brother and filled it up.

My mouth almost dropped open in surprise. I could count on my fingers the number of times I’d seen Xavier and Greyson have such a normal, mundane interaction. Even when it came to the smallest things, they always seemed to end up at each other’s throats.

Xavier was about to take a sip of coffee, but he paused. “Lola didn’t make this, right?”

Greyson chuckled. “Guess you’ll soon find out.”

I smiled. “Wow, this is a nice surprise.”

Both of my mates looked up at me with almost identical looks of confused surprise. Then they shared a look and a nod.

“Well, we decided that a truce would be better for the pack,” Greyson said.

I nodded, almost not believing my ears. “That makes sense. You’re both super strong, capable wolves, and the Redwood pack is always better when we work together.”

“Speaking of,” Greyson said. “We should talk about the summit.”

*Summit? Oh, that council meeting that’s coming up.* Xavier had briefly mentioned it, and I was interested to learn more about what it entailed.

“Really? The summit?” Xavier said, his expression unreadable.

Greyson nodded. “Really. Let’s gather the pack.”

# Episode 3470

**Greyson**

Xavier and I waited near the fireplace while the final pack members made their way into the living room. They were all chattering among themselves—mostly talking about how much fun the past two nights of New Year’s celebrations had been—and I was happy to feel a lighter mood in the air.

I shot Xavier a sidelong glance, hoping that we were really ready to stick to a calmer path. It was new territory for us. We were so used to snapping at and undermining each other that I kind of wondered if we were capable of anything else. But we were about to find out. I’d asked him to help me lead this meeting as proof that our truce wasn’t in words only. I wanted him to feel that he was as important a part of the pack as I’d always said he was. If we were going to start fresh, I needed to trust him and take every opportunity to show a united front to the pack.

“I figured it was about time that we all came together, now that we’re finally getting back down to normal pack business,” I began, once everyone was settled.

“Hear, hear!” Jay called out, lifting his coffee mug in the air. A few other wolves joined in on Jay’s cheer, and I abruptly realized that they’d all been super stressed about the Seluna drama, too. It was probably a relief for them to be meeting about something other than planning battle maneuvers or sharing grim news about the state of the pack.

“Now that all the dust has finally settled, we have to look toward the werewolf pack summit.” I looked around the room as a more serious mood fell over the group. The pack summit was a big thing in the werewolf community, after all.

Xavier jumped in. “You all know that the Redwoods haven’t gone to a pack summit in a number of years, since we were without an official Alpha for a while.” Xavier looked at me and nodded, as if passing the baton.

“So, since this is the first time that we’ll be going in a while, I want us to prove that we’re as just as strong as ever,” I said.

It wasn’t just that I wanted to prove it—I actually felt it. We were in a better place than we had been in a long time, and I finally felt ready to solidify the Redwood pack’s place in werewolf society. We’d defended ourselves against threats that would have—and had—brought other packs to their knees. I wanted everyone to know that the Redwood pack was one of the strongest werewolf packs in the world.

Cali raised her hand. “What, exactly, is the pack summit?”

I paused, trying to think of the best answer, but then my mother spoke up.

“Back when we used to go regularly, it was officially meant to be a check-in with all the packs. It was also an opportunity to get all the wolves in one place to perform an official headcount of all the region’s packs. So much happens in the course of werewolf life, as you all know, and the pack summit is a time to take note of all that. Unofficially, it’s a place where truces are reconfirmed and where business between packs can be taken care of. If there are any problems between any of the packs, they can bring them forward for mediation. It’s really a very special event, and one that I’m happy we’re participating in this year.”

Cali nodded. “So it’s like a political convention, but for werewolves?”

I frowned, weighing that analogy in my head. “I guess so, but not nearly as stuffy.”

“Thank god,” Rishika chimed in.

Big Mac spoke up. “Yup, I make some of my best moonshine sales at the werewolf summit. Wolves like to drink.” She winked as a smattering of laughs and words of agreement rose up from the group.

“When we were kids, some of the best parties took place at the pack summit,” Xavier said.

The wolves gave a cheer at that, clearly ready for more festivities, even after our two New Year’s parties.

“But,” I cut in, “we can’t lose sight of how important it is for the Redwood pack to show that we’re strong. I don’t think that any of the local packs are going to challenge us, but I still don’t want to take any chances. We need to prove to everyone that challenging us would be a big mistake, and the summit is the perfect place to do that.”

Xavier nodded in agreement. “It’s all the more important since we’ve been absent the past few years. We need to come back strong and make an impression.”

I nodded and glanced through the group, hoping that they understood how important that part of our mission at the summit was. “So, to that end, we’re going to have to bring a substantial contingency. I’m going to work with Xavier and Rishika to determine who’s coming and who should stay back here at the pack house,” I said.

Everyone nodded their agreement, and I continued, happy that we all seemed to be on the same page. It was refreshing to talk to my people about things that actually concerned the function and image of the pack, rather than some immediate threat to our lives.

“If anyone has any thoughts or opinions on any of this, my door is open,” I said. “But for now, you’re all free to go.”

I turned to Xavier and Rishika as the group began to dissipate. I had to admit that it was a big relief to have the both of them by my side. “Of course, you two are coming.”

Rishika nodded. “Obviously you’re going to need me,” she said with a smirk.

“Jay should come, too,” Xavier suggested. “Along with Rishika, he’s come through for us whenever we couldn’t be here.”

“Agreed,” I said.

“That means Lola will be going, too,” Cali said.

Xavier and I exchanged a look before turning to face Cali.

“I’m coming, aren’t I?” Cali pressed, her gaze darting back and forth between me and Xavier.

I pondered the idea of Cali being around so many werewolves when she was so often a target for randos because of the *due destini* curse. We would need to be focused and undistracted while we were at the summit if we were going to come across the way I wanted us to.

“I’m coming, Greyson,” Cali said tightly. I’d obviously hesitated too long for her tastes. “You can’t tell me to stay behind when you’re both going. There’s no way.”

I thought about it from her perspective. She would worry while we were gone, and I would certainly worry about her, too.

*I guess she’s right. Plus, it would be nice to have her by my side as my unofficial Luna. It’ll prepare her for the day when it’s the two of us representing the pack.*

“Okay,” I finally said. “You can come, but that means Artemis needs to come, too.”

Rishika nodded. “There’s no question about that. She’d never let me go without her—trust me.”

I nodded, thinking that this was shaping up to be a good group. We would have a good mix of capable werewolves who proved that we were still a force to be reckoned with, and with two Fae and a witch or two in tow, the other packs would see that we had considerable magical capabilities at our disposal as well. “This all sounds good so far. I think the rest can be decided later.”

“Sounds good,” Xavier said as we all left the living room.

I headed back to the kitchen to refill my coffee mug, and my mother appeared shortly after. She went over to the kettle to refill her tea, but rather than leave with it, she lingered.

I turned to face her. “Since Big Mac is coming to the summit, will you come, too?”

She nodded. “MacKenzie already asked me if wanted to go, and I’m thinking about it. Those things are kind of intense. I’m trying to figure out if I’m in the headspace to go this year.”

“I get it. And yes, they are. If it makes it any easier to decide, I’d love to have you there by my side. It’s going to be my first summit as Alpha, and I’d love to get your take on things since you’ve attended so many of them in the past.”

My mother set her cup of tea down and turned to face me head-on, her expression more serious than it had been a second ago. “If that’s the case, then I need to tell you something.”

I frowned, instantly concerned. “What is it? Is everything okay?”

She hesitated, as if deciding how to say whatever was on her mind. “Yes. It’s just that, if you truly want my take on things… I don’t think Cali, Lola, and Artemis should go to the summit.”

# Episode 3471

With the meeting over and done with, I was thinking that it might be nice to start breakfast. Greyson and Xavier had to be hungry, and my stomach was growling, too. I went to the kitchen and found Greyson there talking with his mom. I was about to ask if they wanted eggs and pancakes just as Greyson spoke.

“Really? Why don’t you think that Artemis, Cali, and Lola should come to the summit?”

“Wait, what?” I said.

They both jumped in surprise and turned to me with guilty looks on their faces.

I frowned. “Do you really think I shouldn’t go?” I asked Mrs. Smith. She’d always been supportive, and I didn’t let myself assume that her suggestion was coming from a bad place, but that didn’t make me feel any better.

Mrs. Smith sighed. “I mean, I haven’t gone to the summit in a while, but it’s a very important werewolf event.” She turned to face Greyson. “I think that maybe you’ve lost sight of the fact that werewolves are very insular a lot of the time. They’re stuck in their ways, stuck on their customs, and get really weird about the prospect of outsiders knowing the ins and outs of their traditions. We have to remember that not every pack is as open or as welcoming as ours. If you arrive with two Fae and a hybrid wolf… Well, some of the traditionalists might take issue with that.”

“But I went to the Lupo Finale,” I said. The Lupo Finale had been another sacred werewolf event, and no one had mentioned anything about me staying away from that—although my mates had worried that it would be dangerous for me to be there.

Mrs. Smith shrugged. “Maybe things have changed, but we should still be careful. Greyson mentioned during the pack meeting how important it is for the Redwoods to present a strong, united front to the rest of the packs, right?”

I let Mrs. Smith’s words sink in. She seemed to know quite a lot about the summit, so if she didn’t think it was a good idea…

“If a Fae showing up with the pack would send the wrong message, then I don’t have to go.” It broke my heart to say it, but I knew how important it was to my mates that the Redwood pack got the respect it deserved. “I want things to go well for the pack there, and I don’t want to be the one to get in the way of that.”

Greyson shook his head. “Cali, you’re my mate, and that means something. I’m not going to leave you behind and hide you like I’m ashamed or something. That wouldn’t be right.”

“But what if someone gets upset at us?” Now that Mrs. Smith had brought up her concerns, I was feeling a little unsure, myself. I knew how scary and unpredictable werewolves could be, and I also knew how unreceptive some of them were to change, or anything that didn’t fit into their werewolf ideals.

A fierce expression flashed across Greyson’s face. “Then they can take it up with me. When I said I wanted to show that the Redwoods are strong, I meant *all* of us. Everyone who’s a part of this pack. That includes Fae, witches, and hybrids.”

I couldn’t help but beam at Greyson. I’d never been prouder of my mate. He was making it known that I was with him, no matter what, and he didn’t care what anyone else thought.

Mrs. Smith nodded. “That’s fair, as long as you’re prepared.”

Greyson nodded. “I’m prepared, and I’m not worried. I appreciate the advice, but I’ve made my decision.”

Mrs. Smith took a sip of her tea and nodded. “And you’re the Alpha, so I’ll respect that opinion. I’ll see you two later—I’m going to go find MacKenzie.”

“Are you really sure about this?” I asked once she was gone.

“Of course,” Greyson said, coming over to stand close to me. “I want you by my side at the summit. I’m sorry if I made you think otherwise, earlier. I just had to think about it when you first asked—your safety is always my top priority. But once I really thought about it, I couldn’t imagine *not* having you there.”

I smiled. “And I want to be by your side, Greyson.” I lifted my head and kissed him. I leaned into it, liking how slow and sweet it was. It kind of reminded me of the early days and some of our first kisses, and that sent me back to how wonderful it had felt to fall in love with him.

I pulled away with a smile on my face. “Now, what do you want for breakfast?”

Torin came walking in. “Did I hear someone say breakfast?” He grinned at us both. “I was going to make crepes. You want?” He looked back and forth between me and Greyson, excitement in his eyes.

I laughed, realizing that I was being pushed aside by someone way more experienced. “Crepes it is,” I said.

“Yes!” Greyson said before turning to give me a sheepish look. “I love your cooking, Cali, you know that. But Torin’s crepes…” He winced apologetically.

“I get it, I get it! Torin, just make sure you give me a shout when they’re done,” I said, backing out of the kitchen and returning to the living room.

I found Rishika and Artemis cuddled on the couch, talking. I walked over to them and plopped down in one of the nearby armchairs. “So, I just talked to Mrs. Smith about Fae coming to the summit.”

Rishika nodded. “She thinks it’s a bad idea?”

Artemis sat up and looked at Rishika. “Wait, do *you* think it’s a bad idea?”

Rishika shook her head. “No, not at all. But some older wolves are elitists. They don’t believe in anyone but wolves attending the summit, but I don’t buy into that crap. If I want to have my girlfriend who just happens to be Fae there, no one is going to stop me.”

She pulled Artemis into a rough hug and gave her a sexy look. Artemis laughed and pulled away, giving her a playful swat on the arm.

I watched them, smiling at the sweet gesture before giving them an eye roll. “Okay you two, simmer down. We’re talking about serious wolf stuff, here.”

“Cali, you should know by now that wolves are always ready for action.” She wiggled her brows at Artemis, and Artemis laughed again. “Especially Redwood werewolves!”

I let out a loud, exaggerated groan. “Come on! Focus!”

“Okay, okay,” Artemis said, still laughing. “So, what does Greyson think of two Fae going to the summit? Does he have any concerns?”

I smiled, remembering how fiercely supportive Greyson had been. “Greyson doesn’t have any problem with it at all. He says we’re more than welcome. We’re part of the pack, and he wants to have us by his side, since we belong there, too.” I got a warm feeling just thinking about how sexy it had been for Greyson to show his loyalty like that.

“Well,” Artemis said thoughtfully, “he’s the Alpha, so that should be that.”

“Exactly,” I said. “But I have to admit, I feel a little nervous about the summit now. I know how fast things can take a turn in a primarily werewolf environment.”

Rishika shrugged. “Don’t stress about it too much. It should actually be fun. Xavier was right about the parties—they’re epic. And it’s cool sitting in on the werewolf mediations and all that, hearing the business talks. You learn a lot.”

I gave a mock shudder. “I’m down to learn more about werewolf life, but I have to admit, werewolf parties haven’t always ended so well for me.”

I thought back to the clashes I’d had while accompanying Greyson and Xavier to werewolf events early on in our relationships—hell, even as recently as the Vanguard events. Thinking about them certainly made me understand why Mrs. Smith was worried about how it would go over, having us at the summit.

I sighed and tried my best to push the anxiety away. Rishika didn’t seem to be worried, and neither did Greyson. If they weren’t concerned, then I wouldn’t be, either. This was one of those times when I was just going to relax and go with the flow, like everyone else.

We all jumped in surprise as Adair appeared in the room. He moved so quietly that he always managed to sneak up on everyone.

“Hey, Artemis,” he said after giving Rishika and me polite nods. “It’s time for practice.”

Artemis pulled away from Rishika and got up. “Oh yeah, sorry. I forgot.”

“I need to go talk to Greyson about some pack business, anyway,” Rishika said. She looked at Artemis. “I’ll come join you after?”

Artemis nodded. “You better,” she said with a playful grin.

I realized that I should probably get going too. I got up to go, but before I could follow Rishika out of the room, Artemis grabbed my arm and yanked me back. Then she looked at Adair and said, “Cali’s going to join us.”

# Episode 3472

**Artemis**

I shot Cali a pleading look, hoping she could read the desperation in my eyes. She had to come. I did *not* want to be alone with Adair. I was grateful to him for taking the time to help me with my magic, but after how rocky our reunion had been, I felt awkward around him and really needed a buffer for our training session.

Cali nodded. “Of course, I’d love to join in on your training. Makes sense, since my own magic has been out of whack after everything that happened. Couldn’t hurt for me to pick up a few pointers,” she said brightly.

I let out an inaudible sigh of relief, grateful to my sister for coming through yet again when I really needed her.

Adair glanced between us and sighed. “Fine, come with me.”

He led us outside. I slowed my pace so he could get a little ahead of us, then I leaned toward Cali. “Sorry for springing this on you,” I whispered. “I’ll just feel better with you there.”

Cali smiled. “Oh, it’s all good. I’m happy to join in.”

Adair turned back to look at me once we were a safe distance from the pack house. “Artemis, you first.” He held out his hands, and I stepped forward and took hold of them. “Just like last time, Artemis. Focus.” Adair closed his eyes, and I did the same. “Focus, block out everything else, isolate yourself with your magic.”

I let out a breath of relief when I found my magic faster than ever. I let it surge forward, trying my best to control it so that it didn’t burst out of me like it had last time.

“Focus,” Adair muttered. “Focus. You’re almost there, I can feel it.”

I grabbed the magic and managed to hold it steady. My eyes shot open, and I strengthened my concentration, watching Adair closely and working overtime to keep my focus on my magic and nothing else.

“Good,” Adair said. “Now keep holding on to it. Get used to the feel of it. Get comfortable with it.”

“I think… I think I’m doing it!” I said excitedly. “I’ve got it, and I’m controlling it.”

Adair nodded. “Now, make a spark in our hands. Don’t think too hard about it, just feel it. You already have it in your hands, so just project it outward.”

I frowned and focused on our hands, trying to concentrate the magic there. My hands were starting to heat up, and I was suddenly worried that I was going to hurt Adair. I flinched as the feeling grew in time with the expansion of my power deep inside me. Nervous, I moved to pull back.

“Don’t break the link, Artemis. You’re almost there. Focus!” Adair said.

Heeding his words, I calmed my breathing and tried again to make a spark in our hands. My eyes went wide as an energy ball began to form between us.

“Good,” Adair said. “Now slowly identify the spot where you want it to go, and then let it loose.”

I looked around for a good target and zeroed in on a nearby tree stump. I stared hard at the stump, trying to picture the magic landing right in the center of it, and then I let it fly. I groaned when it went wide and hit a sapling a few feet away.

“Shit!” I dropped Adair’s hands and turned away from the torched sapling. I’d tried so hard, and I still hadn’t been able to do it.

Cali stepped forward. “It’s okay, Artemis. That was so good. You were so close!”

“Yeah, well, close isn’t good enough!” I snapped. “I used to have the best aim. I could hit my mark in my sleep. Now look at me.” I turned to Adair. “I want to try again. I know I can do this.”

Adair shook his head. “Take a moment to regroup, Artemis,” he said evenly before turning to Cali. “Your turn.”

Cali looked surprised. It was clear that she hadn’t actually intended to do any actual training. She’d only come along for moral support.

“Well?” Adair pressed when Cali didn’t move. “You need to improve your magic too, right? You said yourself that it’s been off lately, so let’s do it. No time like the present.”

Cali looked at me, and I just shrugged. There was a big part of me that wanted to keep going so I could prove to myself that I was just as good as I once was, but a bigger part of me was just frustrated that my magic wasn’t working like it used to. I hadn’t exactly taken my magic for granted when it was working properly, but I’d certainly never taken the time to consider what it would be like if I could no longer use it.

*I should never have made that Fae promise to Mom, and I definitely should never have broken it.* If I’d been smarter about how I handled something as sacred and binding as a Fae promise, I wouldn’t have ended up in this position.

I watched as Adair took Cali’s hands in the same way he’d held mine. Cali closed her eyes.

“Now find your magic. Take slow, deep breaths, and tap into it,” Adair said, his voice gentle yet firm. “When you find it, hold on tight.”

Cali’s eyes drifted open, and I could see the concentration on her face. “I think I’ve got it,” she said.

“Good. Now make that ball of energy, just like Artemis did. Focus. Don’t force it, just let it come.”

Almost immediately, a glowing ball of energy blossomed between them.

“Now,” Adair said, “focus and aim.”

Cali narrowed her eyes at the same tree I’d targeted.

“Now let it rip!” Adair shouted.

Cali released the energy ball, but unlike me, she hit the stump dead-on. Cali did a little jump and let out a yelp of joy.

“I did it! I did it!” She looked down at her hands, turning them over in apparent awe. She turned to me and smiled. “Artemis, I did it!”

I kept my eyes on the tree trunk, now with a burn mark right in the center of it. The frustration was bubbling up inside me, and I couldn’t push it away.

“What the *hell*?” I burst out. “This is bullshit! Why can’t I hit it? I’ve been using Fae magic for years longer than Cali has! I taught her everything I know!”

Adair gave me a long, steady look before he spoke. “And that’s your problem.”

I whirled on him, not in the mood to deal with his holier-than-thou, know-it-all attitude. “What did you say?”

Adair didn’t flinch. “I said, that’s your problem. You’re letting your anger and frustration block you.”

His words were like a splash of cold water to the face. I turned to my sister, whose smile had vanished. *Oh no, what did I do? Why did I lash out at her like that?*

“I’m sorry, Cali,” I said quickly. “Really, really sorry. I’m glad you’re doing well with your magic.”

Cali smiled. “No, I get it. It must be frustrating that you can’t use your magic like you used to. I know it was something you were proud of, something you used to be able to count on.”

“Let’s take a break,” Adair said. “Artemis, you need time to balance out your emotions. They’re not doing you any good here.”

Without another word, he turned away and headed back to the house.

“He doesn’t mince words, does he?” Cali said, when he was gone.

I sighed, wanting to blame Adair for how things had gone but unable to do it. “He’s right. I need to calm down. I can feel myself getting agitated every time I use my magic. It’s unsettling. I never used to be like this.”

“I get it,” Cali said. “I’m really sorry that your magic is still out of whack. I might have hit that target this time, but I’ve had plenty of my own issues with making my magic do what I want it to do, so I totally understand.”

I shrugged, suddenly wanting to talk about anything other than my fickle magic. “I’ll figure it out. I have to.”

I turned and stared at the stump again, trying to remember what had gone through my mind right before I’d sent out the blast. Maybe if I could remember exactly the way I’d felt when I’d loosed the wild magic blast, I’d be able to avoid ever feeling that way again and consequently fix my problem.

When I turned back to Cali, I noticed that she was wincing and rubbing at her shoulder, her face crumpled in pain.

*That’s the shoulder the Seluna mark is on… Is it still bothering her?*

I went to my sister’s side immediately. “What’s going on? Are you okay?”

I put my hand on Cali’s shoulder, and she let out a cry of pain.

My eyes widened. “This pain you’re in, Cali… It’s not the Seluna mark, is it?”

# Episode 3473

**Xavier**

I was running through the woods, enjoying it almost as much as I would have if I’d shifted to wolf form. I was using the new AirPods that I’d gotten as a Christmas gift, but I was barely paying attention to the music. I was too preoccupied with thinking through what my next steps would be, now that Greyson and I had turned over a new leaf. I had to admit that there was a lightness to my step that hadn’t been there since Greyson had walked back into my life, but that didn’t mean everything was all ironed out between us.

I wasn’t at all against my truce with Greyson, but it was certainly making me rethink my plans to challenge him for Alpha.

*We made a truce, but that doesn’t mean Greyson has to stay Alpha. I’ll have to make that point to Greyson when the time comes. There’s a good chance he’s assuming that since we’re officially on the same page now, I’ll no longer try to take his spot. If he thinks that, he’s making a mistake.*

If I played my cards right, I could become Alpha of the Redwood pack, andhave Cali, *and* somehow manage to preserve my tentative relationship with Greyson. I didn’t want to fight with my brother anymore, that much was true, but that didn’t mean that I’d given up on what I wanted for myself. I’d never really thought that I would want all three of those things—especially all at once—but here I was, thinking of them almost as if they’d already happened, and liking the way that made me feel.

I increased my speed, loving the sensation of the winter wind on my face and the burn in my muscles. There was nothing like running through the woods and letting your feet carry you as far as they could.

I caught a familiar scent on the breeze that I was still trying to place when someone tore out of the woods and angled onto the path in front of me. I shouted as I tried to avoid running into them, but I was going too fast, and they were less than a foot in front of me.

I recognized Ava just as I slammed into her, and we both went tumbling to the ground. I’d landed awkwardly on top of her, and we were staring at each other in surprise. The smallest hint of tension whipped back and forth between us for a beat or two. The last time we’d been this close, we’d kissed at the New Year’s party. If I was thinking about it, I was sure that she was, too—along with the fight we’d had afterward.

Ava pushed me off her in a huff. “What the hell, Xavier! Watch where you’re going!”

“Watch where *I’m* going?” I said, standing up and dusting myself off. “Why are you sneaking through the forest like that? You came out of nowhere.”

“Sneaking through the forest? You’re kidding, right? You’re the one blasting your music so loud that you didn’t hear me coming! Actually, you’re lucky it was me and not a hungry bear looking for some easy prey.”

I popped the earbuds out and slid them into their charging case. *I guess these AirPods are a little too good at noise-cancelling.* I offered my hand to Ava as an olive branch, and she took it and pulled herself up to her feet with a little hop.

“What are you doing all the way out here, anyway?” she asked, still a little breathless.

I took a quick look around. “All the way out here? What do you mean?”

“I mean that you’re right at the edge of Samara territory.” Ava busied herself putting her long hair into a bun at the top of her head, then dabbed at her forehead with the fuzzy wrist band she was wearing.

“Well then that means I’m also right at the edge of Redwood territory, doesn’t it?”

Ava sighed. “You got me there.”

“Anyway, I was just on a run. I’ve missed my regular morning runs the past few weeks. I’ve been… busy,” I said. That was understatement. It was funny how routines were the first things to go during times of stress.

Ava gave me a knowing look. “I was on a run, too, as you can see. Needed to clear my head.”

I suddenly remembered that she was the one who’d gotten me in the habit of going on runs to clear my head, back when we were teenagers. We used to go for runs together all the time. We’d talk and laugh and sort out any problems that we had, separately or with each other. I used to look forward to spending that time with her.

I coughed uncomfortably, extracting myself from the wave of memories that was sailing through my mind. “Well, do you want to just… keep running?”

Ava lifted a brow. “What, you mean together?”

I sighed. “Don’t make it a thing, Ava. I’m going to keep running. If you want to come, then come.”

I took off without looking back. A few seconds later, I heard Ava’s footsteps quickly gaining on me before she fell into step beside me. I sped up a little, and Ava sped up with me. Then Ava increased her speed, and I pushed to keep pace with her. We fell into a familiar rhythm, taking turns speeding up and setting a new pace.

We were sprinting shoulder to shoulder down the final stretch when we arrived at a high overlook that hovered over the vast forest below. I held up my hand to signal a break and then bent over to rest my hands on my knees while I caught my breath.

“I almost had you at the end there,” Ava said as she stood at the edge of the lookout, taking in the vista spread out before us.

I laughed. “Yeah, right. I was going easy on you! Being a gentleman, all that.”

Ava just looked at me, wordlessly calling out the fact that I was still bent over and panting. “Sure. Though I suppose I can’t say much, seeing as I’m still catching my breath, too.” She leaned against a tree and stretched her legs, looking at me over her shoulder. “If you’re out for a leisurely run, then that must mean things are finally back to normal with the Redwoods.”

I nodded and finally straightened, my eyes on the trees. I loved this time of year, and I liked this spot particularly. I realized it had been a while since I’d just come up here to take in the beauty of our woods.

Ava seemed awkward all of a sudden. “So… About New Year’s—”

I waved it away. “No, it’s fine. We don’t have to keep hashing that stuff out over and over again.” I wanted nothing more than to keep the mood light.

Ava nodded and let out a breath of relief, clearly on the same page. “So, happily shifting gears, are you guys preparing for the summit?”

I nodded. “Yes, we just started. You?”

Ava kept stretching. “You know that Knox’s trial might happen at the summit, right?”

“I’d forgotten that that was a possibility.” I glanced at her sidelong. “How do you feel about that?”

Ava shrugged. “I know he’s my cousin and all, but he’s an asshole through and through, and he deserves to face justice, so I suppose I’m fine with it.”

I nodded, thinking about how complicated it had to be to distance yourself from your family because of their behavior, but also realizing that I’d had to do the same thing in the past. *And now look how far Greyson and I have come.*

“But… It makes me think that it’s finally time to let Zeke go, for real this time,” Ava said. “I apologized after the Vanguard party for trying to oust him—and so publicly, at that—but I still feel the same way I did that night. I guess I just wanted to keep the peace.”

“Really? I know he’s not shaping up, but don’t you kind of need an Alpha to attend the summit?”

Ava nodded. “Yes, but there’s no way Zeke can represent the Samaras there, especially if we’re going to put Knox on trial. We need someone much stronger than Zeke to lead us to the summit. If Zeke goes, we’ll be a laughingstock once the other wolves get wind of how inept he is. The Samaras don’t need to take any more blows right now.”

“So, are you saying that you’re going to challenge Zeke for Alpha?”

Ava looked shocked. “What? No!”

“Why not? You’ve got Alpha blood, and you care about the Samaras more than anyone else. You’re the obvious choice for Samara Alpha.”

Ava snorted. “Except that I’m a woman.”

I shrugged. Some Alphas and werewolves would’ve been scandalized by the thought of a woman being Alpha, but I certainly wasn’t. “That’s old-fashioned thinking. Tell me, if that weren’t an issue, would you want to be Alpha?”

Ava sighed and angled herself toward the sea of trees beneath us, really thinking it over. Finally, she lowered her gaze. “No. I don’t want to be Alpha.”

I stepped close and waited for her to look at me again. “So tell me the reason. Why are you really so reluctant to be Alpha?”

# Episode 3474

**Greyson**

I’d just finished discussing pack logistics with Rishika and Jay, and I was feeling pretty good about where things stood with the pack. Morale seemed to be good, and things had stayed pretty calm while I was away, so there were no big fires to put out. We’d also figured out the plan for the summit, which was now top priority for everyone after the pack meeting.

I’d even decided how to arrange the patrols around the pack house. I’d talked to Rishika about the possibility of cutting down the shifts until we didn’t even have to do patrols at all. It felt good to know that we were making progress, and that our pack might really be able to enjoy an uninterrupted period of peace.

*Things are really getting back to normal now, and it’s about time. We all deserve to take a breather and get back to working toward what really matters—the future of the Redwood pack.*

It dawned on me that this was one of the first times since I’d become Alpha that there was no horrible threat looming over the pack, or threatening our lives. I could finally focus on building up the Redwood pack again and making us stronger so that no future threats would even think about testing us—and we would start down that path at the summit. There was no better place to assert Redwood dominance, and I planned to take full advantage.

*Maybe I should try to play the offensive instead of the defensive, like we have so often in the past. I should get some allies to join us to show that if you mess with the Redwoods, then you’re taking your life into your hands… Crap. Does that mean talking to Lucian?*

I’d been hoping to stay clear of him for a while, having gotten my fill of the princeling at the Vanguard New Year’s party. Maybe it would be more sensible to go to Mace first, or the Samaras.

*Yeah, that sounds like the better idea. Lucian can wait. If I get the other packs on board, then I can decide if I really want to shore things up with the Vanguards.*

I called Mace, and the Alpha picked up immediately.

“Wow, that was quick! Are you calling about Lucian?” Mace asked.

“What? What are you talking about?” A bad feeling dropped into my stomach. *What’s the princeling up to now?*

“Did you just talk to him?”

“No, what’s going on?”

“I just talked to Lucian, like, five minutes ago. The guy wants *another* Alpha meeting. He really must spend most of his time thinking up new ways to lure people back to his palace. Can you believe it?”

I groaned. “Oh, I can believe it. This can’t be good.”

I thought back to the last Alpha meeting that we’d had. “Tense” didn’t even begin to describe it. I was also more than a little annoyed that Lucian was being a busybody, yet again.

*I was the one who was going to call a meeting. I was the one who wanted to talk about the alliance. It’s just like Lucian to pull this shit again, not giving any other Alpha a chance to make a choice without him breathing down our necks and pressuring us.*

I looked at my phone as it beeped, signaling that another call was coming through. I pressed the phone back to my ear. “Mace, I’ll call you back. The prince is summoning me.”

Mace laughed. “Okay, good luck.”

I clicked over to the other line, already preparing myself for another round of Lucian’s never-ending antics.

“Greetings!” Lucian said, so loudly that I was forced to pull the phone away from my ear. “I’d like to—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, you want to call another Alpha meeting. When?” I couldn’t handle hearing another one of his spiels.

Lucian hesitated, obviously thrown off by my getting ahead of him. He wasn’t one to hand over any kind of control without a fight.

“Oh. Yes—if you’re free this afternoon around three,” Lucian said cordially. “I’ll have refreshments and finger foods, all the trappings necessary for a successful Alpha meeting. You know how I like to do things—only the best of the best. Hope to see you there!”

I glowered at the phone as Lucian hung up. *He always has to act like he’s in charge of this damn Alpha alliance. It’s exhausting. The man has no chill whatsoever.* I sighed and slid the phone back into my pocket, willing myself to calm down and not let the other Alpha get under my skin so easily. *I’ll just have to show him that he’s not running anything I’m a part of. The Redwoods have just as much power as him and the Vanguards. Maybe more.*

I wondered if it might make sense for me to gather some of the other wolves to accompany me to Lucian’s latest meeting, which was an obvious power play that only proved how self-obsessed he was.

I looked at my watch. The meeting wasn’t for a couple of hours, so I had some time to plan. I took another deep breath. Maybe I was overreacting. I needed to be logical about the whole thing—after all, this was exactly what I wanted: an opportunity to reaffirm our alliance with the local packs. Lucian was doing all the heavy lifting, so maybe his jumping the gun was a blessing in disguise this time.

*I’ll let Lucian lead. This time. I’ll just have to make it clear that I’m not going along with this just because it’s what the princeling wants.*

I looked out into the yard, where Cali was practicing her magic with Artemis and Adair. I considered joining them but decided to let the Fae have their moment together for the time being. I was happy to see that Cali was working on her magic. She’d need to be at full strength at the summit, just in case anyone tried to start shit just because we were bringing a couple of non-werewolves along. It was really unfortunate that some werewolves were so closed-minded, but I wouldn’t hesitate to go toe to toe with anyone who needed their mind expanded a little.

I went into the living room, where Lola and Jay were chatting on the couch. My mother had cautioned me about bringing Lola, too, so I figured it made sense to get her read on things.

“Hey, Greyson,” Lola said as I came in. “Good meeting today. I think everyone’s excited about the summit, if not a little anxious about how it’ll go.”

“Thanks—that’s kind of what I wanted to talk to you about. How would you feel about coming along? You’ve gone through a lot of changes since the last time you went to a summit. Would you feel comfortable walking into a literal den of wolves?”

Lola shrugged. “I’m good with it, but are you? Do you think my being a hybrid will be an issue?”

“If it is, we’ll handle it,” I said. “We have to show that we won’t just try to fit in because we’re afraid of what other people will think. Our pack is diverse, and if anyone has a problem with that… Well, that’s just what it is—their problem. You’re coming, if for no other reason than to show that we have nothing to be ashamed of. You’re as much a member of this pack as any full werewolf.”

Lola beamed up at me. “You know, Greyson, that’s the sweetest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

I rolled my eyes. “Just make sure you get your fill of blood before we go. I don’t want you getting there and going all vamp on people—and definitively proving their point about non-werewolves attending. We want to go in strong, but we don’t want them to see any of us as a threat. That won’t go over well.”

Lola gave me an exaggerated salute. “Got it, boss!”

I let out an exasperated sigh and then went out onto the porch, thinking I’d just wait there for Cali to finish her training. I watched her where she stood, facing Adair. She had her eyes closed, and her beautiful face was set in concentration.

*I made the right choice, insisting that our blended pack goes to the summit with no embarrassment, fully representing what we stand for as Redwoods.* Things might get a little hairy, but I would protect Cali no matter what. *I’ll just tell everyone that she’s my mate, and that’ll afford her a bit of protection.*

I frowned, considering what Xavier would think of my publicly claiming Cali as my mate in a place as formal as the summit. What was said there was taken as bond, and Xavier and I had only just patched up our relationship. I definitely didn’t want things to fall apart between us at the summit, of all places.

I couldn’t help but wonder if Xavier would also make a point of claiming Cali as his mate while we were there. I realized that there was no reason at all why he wouldn’t—and also that there was no way I could let it happen.

# Episode 3475

I winced as I rubbed my shoulder. I didn’t want to admit the gravity of the pain to Artemis and get her all concerned about me, but the longer I stalled, the more it looked like she knew I was about to lie to her.

“Yes, it’s a little sore,” I finally said.

Artemis lifted a brow and pressed down on my shoulder again, causing me to cry out.

I jerked away. “Fine! Yes, I admit that it hurts like hell, but it’s not what you think, okay?” My voice wavered a little as I recovered from the pain.

Artemis crossed her arms. “Okay, so what is it? Because that happens to be exactly where your Seluna mark is.”

“It is, but Big Mac explained that there would be echoes of pain in the wound as the world rights itself. It’s nothing to be concerned about, so please don’t make a big deal out of it.”

Artemis didn’t look convinced. “Whatever you say, Cali.”

“Really, Artemis, I’m fine. I haven’t even had a Seluna nightmare since the ashes were sent to the demon world, and I’m taking that as a good sign, okay? If I have to deal with a few aftershocks until everything is totally back to normal, then so be it. I’m not worried.”

“Fine, fine!” Artemis said, lifting her hands in surrender. “But if it gets any worse, you have to promise me that you’ll tell someone.”

I nodded.

“Promise me!” Artemis pressed.

“I’ll tell someone,” I said, purposefully leaving out the words “I promise” so that I wouldn’t accidentally make a Fae promise.

Artemis sighed and relaxed. “Okay, good.”

I turned to see Greyson standing on the porch. He looked lost in thought, but also like he might be waiting on me.

“See you later,” I said to Artemis before I went to join Greyson.

*Should I tell him about my mark hurting, or would it just stress him out for no reason? I don’t want him to think that there’s anything to worry about, especially when Big Mac already told me that I should expect to feel a little discomfort from the mark every now and then.*

Still, seeing how worried Artemis had gotten made me think that I should get ahead of it by telling him the truth and letting him know that it was no big deal. That way I could control the narrative and make sure he didn’t find out by chance and overreact.

I poked Greyson in the arm. “You look like you’re a million miles away. What’s on your mind?”

Greyson looked down at me with his brow still knitted in thought. “Nothing really, just pack stuff. Nothing too serious—for once.”

“But you *look* so serious. Is something wrong? You know you can tell me, right?” We were all happy that things were less stressful than usual, but I was worried that Greyson might try to hide anything from me that could ruin the peace.

Greyson smiled down at me. “No, really, it’s nothing big. I was just trying to organize my thoughts. There’s lots of Alpha stuff to take care of now that I’m finally back.”

I nodded. “That makes sense. We were away for a while. I’m sure some things fell by the wayside while you were gone.”

“Not as many as you might think, luckily. Jay and Rishika held down the fort pretty well. Still, there’s a lot to think about and a lot of things that need my attention.”

“Well, I’m sure you have it all under control,” I said, reaching out and caressing his arm. “Do you want to go for a walk or something?”

“I’d love to, but I actually have to get ready to go to the palace.”

I was surprised to hear that. I knew how Greyson felt about Lucian—everyone did—so I’d expected him to keep a wide berth from the prince for as long as he could after the New Year’s bash. “Really? Why are you going there?”

He sighed. “Lucian took it upon himself to call an Alpha alliance meeting.”

He was about to say more when Elle popped up from where she’d been lying on one of the porch couches. Greyson and I exchanged shocked looks. We hadn’t even noticed that she was there.

“Lucian stuff?” Elle asked. “Should I come?”

“No,” Greyson said sternly. “It’s just a quick meeting. Hopefully in and out.”

Elle pouted. “But I can help!”

Greyson shook his head, his jaw set. “No. I already told you that I don’t want you around Lucian.”

I felt bad when Elle’s pout deepened. “Why do you not trust me, Greyson? Have I not proven myself?”

Greyson kept his voice firm. “I do, but I’m making my decision, Elle, and it’s final. I want you to stay far away from Lucian.”

Elle looked like she was about to burst into tears as she turned and ran off the porch. We both watched her run toward the side of the house and disappear from view.

“Greyson, did you have to be so harsh?” I said. “I think she just want to feel like she belongs, like she’s earning her keep.”

Greyson shook his head, wincing in frustration. “I’ve tried to be nice to her about this time and time again, but she won’t listen. Every time I turned around at the party, she was talking to him. Hell, she even tried to STAY BEHIND with him, Cali. What am I supposed to do if she won’t listen? She’s my responsibility, and I just want her to be safe. Lucian isn’t someone she should be around. She could get in over her head with him really quickly.”

“Okay, I get it,” I said, placing a calming hand on Greyson’s chest. I ignored how weak in the knees I got, just from touching him.

*I’ll never get over how solid his chest is. It’s like a warm slab of granite.* I shook my head. *I can’t think about that right now, I have to figure out how to fix things with Elle!*

Greyson put his hand over mine, and I leaned up to give him a quick peck on the lips.

“You go get your head in the game for your meeting,” I said. “I’ll talk to Elle.”

I left Greyson on the porch and went after Elle. I found her crying at the edge of the driveway, her face buried in her hands.

“Elle!” I called.

Elle didn’t even turn around. Instead, she just started walking away from me, wiping tears from her eyes.

“Elle, come on! Don’t cry!” I jogged after her. “You can’t just go walking down the road like this, Elle. You could get lost.”

“It does not matter,” Elle said, her voice thick. “I am a wolf. I can always find my way back.”

“Okay, fair enough.” I sighed. “You know Greyson cares about you a lot. That’s why he doesn’t want you to be around Lucian. He acts that way because he’s protective of you, and he doesn’t want anything bad to happen to you.”

“I am just trying to be a good pack member, but he will not let me!”

I paused, looking the young werewolf in the eye. “Is that really all it is? Tell me the truth—why this weird obsession with Lucian?” I recalled a conversation Lola and I had had with Elle a while ago, where she’d thought Lucian might be her mate… But we’d written it off as puppy love at the time.

*But maybe it’s not. Maybe it’s more than that…*

“Are you still attracted to him?” I asked her, hoping that she would feel comfortable enough to admit it to me if she were.

Elle finally looked me in the eye and was about to respond when a dark sedan drove up and parked in the driveway. The driver climbed out—it was a chauffeur.

The chauffeur trained his gaze on Elle. “Miss Arielle?”

Elle blinked in surprise. “Yes?”

The driver pulled a fancy envelope from his jacket pocket and handed it to her.

*I’d know that fancy embossed logo anywhere—it’s a Vanguard invitation. Oh no. Greyson’s gonna have a fit!*

Elle eagerly tore the envelope open, then frowned as she slowly mouthed the words to herself.

“Do you want me to help?” I asked, reaching for the invitation.

Elle jerked it out of my reach as she kept trying to sound out the words. “Guh—guh-reet-ingz Miss Ah-ah-re-Elle.” Elle looked up at me, her eyes bright. “Arielle! That is me!” She looked back down at the invitation and continued. “Wow-led?” She looked up at me.

“Would?” I said.

Elle heaved an exasperated sigh and held the held out the letter. “Fine! Read it for me.”

I took the letter and saw that it was written in super fancy calligraphy, which was why it was so difficult for Elle to read. I could barely make out some of the words myself. I read it over, then relayed the message to Elle. “It’s from Aysel. She’s inviting you for afternoon tea.”

At that, the chauffeur opened the door with a flourish. Without hesitating for even a second, Elle started to climb in.

I grabbed her arm. “Wait! You can’t just go to the palace! Remember what Greyson said!”

Elle pulled out of my hold. “I have to do what I think is best for the pack.”

She got in the car, and I stood there helpless, my mind racing a mile a minute. I knew that I couldn’t overpower her, and I didn’t have time to run back to the house to get Greyson. I was at a complete loss.

“Come with me,” Elle said, poking her head out the door.

I took a look back at the pack house and sighed. “Fine, scoot over.”

As I sat there beside an excited Elle, heading for the Vanguard palace, I hoped I wasn’t making a huge mistake.

# Episode 3476

**Xavier**

I crossed my arms and planted my feet, waiting for Ava’s answer. I really was curious about why Ava didn’t want to be the Samara Alpha. There was nothing quite like being Alpha and leading a pack. It was strange to me that Ava wouldn’t want to be in charge of the Samaras so she could lead them down the path she wanted to take. She loved being in charge and ordering people around, so this should have been right up her alley.

“Why does it even matter to you, Xavier? Seems to me that you would hate it if I were Alpha of my own pack.”

Rather than quickly deny it, I really took a moment to think about what she’d said. She had a point. A few months ago, it would have literally terrified me to think of Ava running a pack of her own. But I didn’t feel that way now.

Deciding to be diplomatic, I shrugged and said, “Well, I think the pros outweigh the cons at this point, right? The Samaras need an Alpha who can take care of them. You have a lot of faults, Ava, but loving the Samara pack isn’t one of them.”

Ava looked absolutely shocked. “Wow. If I didn’t know you so well, I’d think that was a compliment.”

I gave her an exaggerated scowl. “Well, don’t get used to it.”

“You know, the real reason I think I can’tbe Alpha is *because* I love the Samaras so much. It might blind me and cause me to make bad decisions. It’s different when my fuckups only affect me—but to have an entire pack subject to my whims and emotions and suffering the fallout from whatever wrong turns I might take? That’s a lot. Besides, an emotional Alpha isn’t the most effective Alpha. I think Knox taught us that.”

“You’re no Knox—and that doesn’t make any sense.” I tended to think that an emotional Alpha worked out fine at the head of a pack. Anger and a thirst for revenge had helped the Redwoods win more than a few battles, for instance.

“If it were just about power, I’d take it, believe me. But when it comes to my pack, it’s not about that. They’re the only thing I have left that I really, truly love. I’m not fucking that up too.” Ava looked angry and like she was about to cry at the same time. “You of all people know how much of a fuckup I am. You know that I—” Her voice cracked. “You know that I destroy every single thing that I touch. I refuse to do that to the Samaras. They deserve better than that. There’s nothing I want more than for them to be strong and successful—and to get to that point, they need a better Alpha than I can be for them.”

I felt a weird urge to tell her that she was wrong—that she would be a good Alpha, that she was more capable than any of the wolves in her pack and most wolves I’d met in general—but I stopped myself.

*Would I really mean it if I said it, or would I just be trying to find the easiest solution to the Samara Alpha situation?*

“I guess that’s good, huh?” I said finally. “That you know you could fuck it up if you’re not careful. That means you’ll be extra cautious.”

Ava shrugged and walked to the edge of the cliff. I followed her, taking in the view below and letting the cold breeze wash over me.

“I’m scared,” Ava whispered.

She said it so quietly and the wind was so loud that I wondered if I’d just imagined it, but when I looked at Ava, I saw a single tear roll down her cheek. She wiped it away angrily.

“Don’t think I’m saying all of this to get your sympathy, because I’m not,” she said. “I’m just trying to help you understand why I don’t want to be Alpha. Why I *can’t* be Alpha. I’m scared of what that kind of power might drive me to do. I was convinced to kill Marlene, and that wasn’t even for the Alpha position! What if I make a choice like that as Samara Alpha? What if I pull them all down with me? It’s not like anyone could really stop me—to be Alpha is to have absolute power. Whatever I said or did as Alpha would be Samara law. Someone might challenge me to a Lupo Finale, but I could tear anyone in that pack apart, easy. I’d be unstoppable.”

I nodded uncomfortably, unused to such raw, honest vulnerability from Ava. “For what it’s worth, you’re a very different person than you were when you killed… When you did what you did.” I couldn’t bring myself to say “when you killed my mom.”

Ava nodded. “Still, I’m going to do whatever’s best for the pack, and right now, what’s best is kicking Zeke out on his ass.”

I nodded, not envying her predicament in the least. “I agree with that, but we need to find another strong Alpha to take his place. You guys can’t have another interim Alpha. Whoever steps into the spot next needs to be fully committed and in it for the long haul. The Samaras are already hanging on by a thread—I don’t think you can take another massive shake-up or any more unfit leadership.”

“Preaching to the choir,” Ava said with a sniffle.

We both stood there in silence for a few moments, the air heavy between us.

“Do you have any more distant cousins or anything? Someone who doesn’t have a direct genetic connection to Knox?” I said, attempting a little joke.

Ava gave a small smile and shook her head. “No. Anyone like that is dead and buried by now.” She swiped her hands down her face, and when she looked at me again, I saw a familiar determination in her eyes. “I’ve just got to stop whining and work to find some candidates as soon as I can.”

I hesitated, wondering if I should take the step I was about to take. “When you do, bring the list to me. I’ll help.”

“Really?”

“I promised, didn’t I?”

Ava nodded and drew in a shuddering breath. “Good, okay. I’ll be in touch.”

With that, she shifted into her wolf and took off back down the trail.

I stood and stared off into the distance for a while, replaying our conversation over and over again in my head before I turned and jogged back toward the pack house.

I went inside, my head spinning with thoughts about the Samara pack’s situation and how I’d just agreed, once again, to be involved. More than that, the heart-to-heart with Ava had made me uncomfortable, and I didn’t like that.

*Every single time I try to untangle myself from her, she finds a way to ensnare me again. Though I have to admit, I don’t really sense that Ava’s doing anything underhanded this time. I should really work on giving her the benefit of the doubt if we’re going to work together on putting the new Samara Alpha in place.*

I sighed. It was all so much easier said than done. Old habits died hard; I knew that better than anyone.

I stepped into my room and pulled off my shirt, just as Greyson appeared in my doorway.

“Good, you’re home. Let’s talk really fast,” he said.

“Can this wait?” I already had enough on my mind without inviting whatever Greyson had to say into my brain.

He frowned. “No, actually it can’t. I have to leave soon, to go to an Alpha meeting at the palace.”

I winced. “Oof. Good luck with that.” I wanted nothing more than to take a shower and be alone, but it was clear that Greyson wasn’t going to leave until he’d said whatever he had to say. “So? What is it?”

Greyson walked in and immediately began to pace. “I know that we’ve come a long way and made a lot of progress, and it’s the new year and all and we’ve called a truce… But that’s why I’m having this talk with you. I want our communication to be better—I want to fully respect our truce.”

I stood there looking at my brother as he rambled on. I was a little dumbfounded by his behavior and wondering where the hell this was going. “Okay…”

“If anything, it’s *because* of our truce that I’m here right now to have this hard conversation with you.”

I was starting to get annoyed. “Will you just spit it out?”

Greyson nodded. “In order for her to be protected at the summit—to make sure that no one comes at her just because she’s Fae—I’m going to have to claim Cali as my mate and make that clear enough to everyone that there’s no mistaking it. It’s the best protection that I can think of. No one will go after her if they know that she’s an Alpha’s mate. But I also think it would be way too dangerous to reveal that she’s a *due destini* mate. You know how people get when they hear that. It invites all kinds of drama, and that’s exactly what we don’t need.”

I looked my brother in the eye, finally catching on. “Oh, now I get it. So you want me to pretend that Cali’s your mate, and *only* your mate?”

# Episode 3477

**Marta**

I was sitting on a bench in the backyard, nursing a cooling mug of tea and going over the conversation—or rather the non-conversation—that I’d had with Lilac the night before. I just couldn’t stop thinking about it, and it was starting to drive me crazy. I’d considered going for a walk to clear my head and get away from the pack house for a bit, but I hadn’t made it far before my thoughts had distracted me and I’d decided that being stationary was the best course of action.

Last night, Lilac had come up to me and wanted to talk, but then I’d gotten so flustered about the text from Okorie that I’d just hemmed and hawed until he’d said “never mind” and left. I totally regretted that, now. Who knew what Lilac had assumed that was all about? And what *had* it been about? Why had I reacted so strongly to Okorie’s text in the first place? I groaned. *Everything is shit right now! Ugh!*

I really wanted—*needed*—to talk to Lilac about how awkward everything was between us. We’d left so much unsaid, and it pained me that we’d gotten to the point where we could barely even look each other in the eye. Things had started off so great between us, and it was still a shock to me that we’d ended up here.

At the same time, I realized that I may have finally figured out what my biggest problem really was: I was stuck in this house just like I’d been stuck in the other house, but this time, it wasn’t because of magic.No, this was a prison of my own making. I was spinning my wheels and lost in indecision. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t feel comfortable in the pack house anymore, but I didn’t want to leave, since that would feel like closing the door on things with Lilac. I’d broken up with him, but I was still sticking around. That couldn’t be healthy for either of us.

*Besides, when it comes down to it, this is HIS pack house, not mine. This is where Lilac belongs. If anyone’s going to leave, it should really be me, right?*

But where would I go? What would I do? I’d spent so much time locked away only to come to the pack house, where everything was kind of taken care of for me and I didn’t have to make any big decisions. Now that it no longer felt like a safe haven, I was lost and only just starting to admit that to myself.

I sighed and took a sip of my cold tea. My thoughts were a jumbled mess, and so were my emotions. As much as I wanted to put some distance between myself and Lilac, I really hated the idea of leaving behind the group of people who’d slowly started to mean so much to me. I couldn’t exactly call them “family”—I would never make such big assumptions about my relationships with the pack members—but they did feel like a kind of home to me, and that meant a lot. It was something I hadn’t had in so long, especially with my own family being long dead. I teared up as I started to really think about how I didn’t have anywhere I belonged anymore. It wasn’t a good feeling.

I turned at the sound of someone calling my name. I quickly wiped away my tears as Dani came walking over. I definitely didn’t want to explain why I was outside crying into a mug of cold tea.

“Marta! I’ve been looking all over for you! Do you want to do a girl’s night with me and Tabby and Violet?” Dani asked.

I wrinkled my brow at the thought. *Great. Another opportunity for crushing awkwardness with my ex-boyfriend’s sister, who lit into me in front of everyone a few nights ago.* I’d made up with Violet and all, but it was still pretty awkward with her. I shrugged noncommittally.

“Oh, is it weird that I asked?” Dani said quickly. “Is everything okay with Violet? That was silly of me—I should have realized. My bad, Marta.”

“It’s not your fault, Dani, thanks for asking. It’s just a weird situation. I’m still trying to figure out how to navigate it.” *And coming up with nothing.*

Dani nodded. “Can I do anything for you?”

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “You can tell me what your plans are for after you leave the pack house.”

“Oh, you were serious about leaving?” Dani asked, clearly surprised.

“What, did you think I was joking?”

“No, I just thought it might be something you were considering… But it would be a pretty big decision for you to leave, right? Don’t you want to stick around and see if things work out?”

I shook my head. “No, I’ve made my decision. I need to go and find out who I am without all the Lilac angst. It would be nice to just be on my own for a while and take some time to clear my head. Now seems like as good a time as any. I have control over my magic now, and I’m finally in a good position to be on my own. I don’t need my hand held anymore, don’t need training wheels. I’m on my own two feet now, and I need to explore that.”

Dani shuffled her feet, suddenly looking super uncomfortable as I wrapped up my spiel.

I frowned at her. “What is it?”

“Well, the thing is… I think Tabby and I are going to stick around for a bit.”

“What? Why? I thought Tabitha was going with Gabriel and Mikah when they left?”

“Yeah, that was the plan, originally. But we were talking about it last night, and we decided it would be nice to stay in a stable place for a bit. It would be great to kind of relax together and have time with each other. We’ve been separated for so long, and it’s nice to be in a safe place like this pack house while we reconnect. Sorry to disappoint you.”

“No, no, Dani, don’t apologize. I get it.” She’d just listed off all the reasons why I’d clung to the pack house at first, aside from Lilac. “That’s great for you—for both of you, really.”

Dani kicked at the ground. “I really am sorry. I didn’t realize how serious you were about leaving. I thought it was just an idea.”

“It’s fine. You deserve to spend time with your sister, and you’re right about this being a safe, stable place.” *More or less*,I thought, thinking back to the whole Silas fight. Still the pack house had survived that—and probably would again, if necessary—so I understood why Dani felt so secure under its roof.

“And I’m sure that things will get better between you and Lilac in time,” Dani said. “I mean they *have* to, right? It’s not like they can get any worse?” She immediately winced, like she was embarrassed that she’d let the last part slip.

I forced a smile and nodded. “Yeah, right. Thanks.”

“Dani!” Tabitha called from the porch.

Dani turned to her sister, then looked back at me. “You all right out here? You should come in; it’s getting kind of chilly.”

“I will soon,” I said distractedly.

I watched Dani bound off to join Tabitha on the porch, and then they both disappeared into the pack house.

*What the hell am I going to do now? Can I really just take off on my own?* Even the thought of that scared me. I wanted more freedom, yes, but I wasn’t too keen on being completely alone to get it. *Maybe I can ask Mikah and Gabriel if I can tag along with them. No, that would be weird. They seem perfectly happy as a duo, and I don’t know them all that well. Maybe I could go with Big Mac to the summit… But then what?*

“Shit!” I stood up and started pacing. I couldn’t believe I was trapped all over again! I had no idea what to do next, who to turn to, or what the right next step was. I hated that it was all so complicated. Why did everything have to be so difficult? I just wanted a place to feel comfortable, a place where I could live and be myself without running into my ex every time I wanted to do something simple, like grab a snack out of the fridge!

I was fully wallowing in my misery now, and before I knew it, I’d picked up my phone and texted Okorie.

*Hey, do you know if the witch council is hiring?*

I waited and was relieved when Okorie texted right back.

*Why?*

*Just trying to figure out my future*,I replied.

*Oh. I definitely would NOT recommend working for them. Take it from me, they aren’t the best employers, and you only just got a handle on your powers—so I don’t think that would work out.*

I sighed. Maybe he was right. I looked down as another text came in.

*But if you’re in the mood to talk about your future, why don’t we grab that coffee? I have a proposition for you.*

# Episode 3478

**Greyson**

“Most people have already heard through the grapevine that Cali is a *due destini* mate,” Xavier said with a scowl. “So what good would it do to have you alone claim her as your mate?”

“That’s just the thing—it’s a rumor that they can’t confirm unless they ask us directly,” I said. “Werewolves are nosy as hell, but in a formal setting like the summit, nobody’s going to defy my word. If I claim her as my mate, people will follow protocol, and the traditionalists who would have an issue with a Fae present will be forced to accept her without debate.”

My little brother looked like *he* was in the mood for a debate. But what the fuck else was new?

Before he could start again, I added, “I’m sure you remember that we did this at Knox’s Iudicium for formality. It’ll just be like that again. No fuss.”

Xavier’s jaw clenched. Suppressing the urge to roll my eyes, I prepared for a big screaming match. But then, to my shock, Xavier simply nodded.

“Fine,” he said. With obvious difficulty, but he’d still said it. “If this is what’s going to protect Cali, let’s do it.”

I stared at him for a moment. *Wow*. He wasn’t even going to yell at me or give me a shove? Was he okay? Could a solid truce between us *really* be a possibility? It seemed like it right now, so I didn’t want to push it too far.

“It’s just for the summit,” I said. I appreciated the fact that he hadn’t thrown a fit. He’d done the bare minimum for Cali’s sake, though that was still a lot, by his standards. The bar was in hell here, but I had to admit that Xavier had come a long way.

He only nodded at my words, and then asked, “Is that all? Can I take a shower now?”

The conversation was over, then. Just like that. But Xavier had accepted my idea without trying to bite my head off, so this was progress.

“Yeah, we’re done,” I said. Xavier stalked off with an eye roll, and I just couldn’t help myself. I called after him, “Have a good time brooding in the bathtub!”

He flipped me off before turning the corner. I snorted, heading downstairs to make some tea, but then my phone vibrated. It was a reminder for the meeting at Lucian’s—I had to get going soon. I really didn’t want to go to the fucking thing.

“Greyson, hey,” Rishika said, interrupting my thoughts. She and Jay intercepted me the moment I climbed down the staircase, both their expressions serious. “We need to talk to you.”

Of course. Everybody needed to talk to me—all the time and forever. I hoped that whatever problem they were about to throw at me right now was of the broken heater variety, instead of the an-apocalypse-is-near variety.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“We need to talk about shifting outside of the house,” Rishika said.

I was confused for a moment. “What now?”

“We haven’t been shifting outside because of Dick and his dumb drones,” Jay said. “But we’ve been doing careful patrols the past week, and we haven’t seen another drone since the last one. I think we’re good. Can you give the all-clear for shifting in the open again?”

Full disclosure, I’d totally forgotten about the Dick problem. It had paled in comparison to Seluna and Adéluce and all the New Orleans witches. Of course, I wasn’t about to admit that to Jay. Pretending that you knew everything at all times was fifty percent of being the Alpha.

“If it’s been over a week since the last drone,” I said. “My warning to Dick probably drove the message home.”

“So we’re good?” Rishika asked.

I nodded. “I can give the all-clear to shift, but make sure you’re under the cover of the trees—don’t do it out in the open, or too close to the house.”

Jay grinned. “Perfect. I’ll spread the word!” He skedaddled, but Rishika lingered.

“Seems like we’re cleaning everything up and getting rid of all of our past problems,” she said.

I was ready to smile back at her when I got this sudden worrisome feeling. “Maybe don’t say that out loud…”

Rishika laughed. “Are you superstitious, Greyson? I’d never have pegged you as the type.”

“I don’t know what you’d call it, but I just don’t want to tempt any dark or evil thing that might be lurking out there,” I said wryly.

Rishika raised an eyebrow, so I clarified.

“Not that I’m intimidated, of course,” I said. “But it would be nice to just chill for a bit without challenging our good luck.”

Rishika chuckled, shaking her head. “Fine, I’ll be careful what I say out loud. But you can’t stop me from thinking that things are pretty nice right now.”

“I’ll do the same. Just quietly rejoice for now,” I agreed. I wished I was kidding. “I hope it stays that way.”

Rishika suddenly looked like a light bulb had turned on above her head. “Hey, you know what? We should get one of those countdown signs and have it say, ‘It’s been X amount of days since a supernatural asshole attack.’”

“No way,” I deadpanned. “That would still be tempting fate, and I’ve got enough beef with fate already.” I was talking about the *due destini*, obviously.

Rishika sighed. “Spoilsport.”

My phone vibrated. When I checked it out, it was another reminder. I couldn’t put off going to the palace any longer.

“I’ll be heading over to Lucian’s for the Alpha meeting,” I said. “Watch over the house while I’m gone.”

“Anything else?”

“Yeah. Don’t let anyone celebrate too hard over the fact that none of us are dead after all this bullshit.”

Rishika smirked, unfazed. “Sounds good.”

“Thank you.”

“Good luck with Lucian and the others.”

I huffed, shaking my head. “I’m definitely going to need it.”

\*\*\*

Showing up naked at this meeting would’ve probably looked weird, even if it was among Alpha werewolves, so I drove to the palace. Armin was the one to greet me in the foyer.

“Greyson, welcome,” he said. “Lucian and the others are expecting you in the West Wing sitting room.”

I followed Armin. I wasn’t sure how I felt about Lucian’s new second in command—it was hard to get a read on him. But at least the guy seemed cordial enough. Less of a dick than Andre, may he rest in peace. Or in hell, which was where he probably was.

Anyway, the West Wing sitting room was one of the bigger ones I’d seen in the palace. Little sandwiches and wine had been laid out. Mace was already there, hanging by the sandwiches and eyeing them suspiciously. And to my surprise, instead of Zeke, Ava was there on behalf of the Samara pack. She was standing stiffly by the fireplace, and when I greeted everybody, she only offered me a curt nod.

“Where’s Zeke?” I asked.

She shot me a peeved look. “He was unavailable.”

New drama, then. Xavier probably knew what was going on and just hadn’t told me.

“Excuse me, my lord.” An attendant walked in, rolling a massive tray with more sandwiches.

“Oh, yes!” Lucian said, sitting up slightly. He’d been lounging on an armchair like a lazy cat. “You’re going to love these, Greyson—they’re roasted duck truffle sandwiches with a pinch of purple salt from the underwater city of Atlantis!”

I blinked, trying to wrap my head around that last part, because *what the flying fuck?*

Aysel barged in, her chin lifted high. “Excuse me, but those sandwiches are for *my* get together.”

Lucian raised an eyebrow at her. “Are you having friends over, sister?”

Aysel flipped her hair over her shoulder. “I’m allowed to have a social life too, Lucian.”

There was a bit of tension between the siblings—more so than usual. What was going on this time? Had a demon tried to come between them again, or had Lucian stolen Aysel’s favorite scarf? It could’ve been anything in between.

“… and these are *my* sandwiches,” Aysel concluded, gesturing at the attendant, who shot an apologetic look at Lucian and followed Aysel out.

I picked up one of the other, apparently lesser, sandwiches, sniffing it as Aysel swept out of the room. Her long skirt flared behind her, and suddenly, I was hit with a hint of Cali’s scent.

That was weird.

I sniffed the air again, but now the only prominent scent lingering in the room was the fish sandwich. Perhaps it had been an old trail? Cali had been in the palace very recently for the party, after all. I put the sandwich back down, no longer interested in sampling it.

Lucian noticed and sighed gravely. “I know. The ones with the purple salt were better.”

“Why are we here, Lucian?” Mace asked impatiently. The man had read my mind.

“Oh, yes!” Lucian said, finally sitting up. “I think we need to talk about the summit.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Lucian cleared his throat. “It’s well known that all the packs in this area have had some… hiccups, lately.”

“That’s an understatement,” I said. “For different reasons, all of our packs were practically decimated at some point in the last year.”

Lucian nodded. “So it’s even more important that we present a united front at the summit. For safety’s sake. We should operate as an alliance, for all the assembled packs to see.”

I paused, narrowing my eyes at Lucian. “Are you saying you want to make a mega-pack?”

# Episode 3479

An attendant had escorted Elle and me to one of the palace’s three million sitting rooms. As soon as Aysel had seen me, she’d rolled her eyes and swept off somewhere, saying, “Stay here!”

*Not very hospitable now, is she? Also, where is she off to?*

Elle didn’t seem miffed by Aysel’s behavior, though. *Someone* hadn’t ever been kidnapped by a bunch of pretend-royals who’d tried to use her to host a demon, and it showed. While an intrigued Elle sniffed at the food on the coffee table, I looked around the room for a phone.

I’d realized in the car that I’d run out of the house without a jacket or my cell phone. Considering Xavier and Greyson’s eternal worry about me running off without telling anyone—where they’d gotten that impression, I had no clue—I was pretty sure it would be best for me to inform the pack about my whereabouts and tell them I was fine.

*For now, at least.*

Unfortunately, though, the old-fashioned palace didn’t have a phone in sight.

“Cali!” Elle said excitedly between bites, pointing at me with a cucumber sandwich. “This is delicious!”

I nodded and continued pacing. I couldn’t eat right now—I was too nervous. Why had Aysel summoned Elle here? Did the Vanguards have a brand-new nefarious plan going on? Were they going to let something possess Elle this time?

No, no, NO—that was in the past.

*It has to be!*

Sighing deeply, I paused and rubbed at the mark on my shoulder. It was kind of throbbing right now, probably reacting to my anxiety. I wished so badly that it would just go the hell away and leave me alone. I hated these phantom aches.

*Haven’t I suffered enough already? Like, give me a break!*

“I’m back!” Aysel walked into the room, both her hands raised as if she were ready to put on a show. No surprise there. Two attendants followed behind her with more trays of food.

Elle perked up immediately, looking excited as she eyed the delicacies. “Great!”

Aysel smiled. “I know, sweetheart, it’s so nice to have you today.”

“She was talking about the food,” I deadpanned.

Ignoring me, Aysel sat down across from Elle on a couch that looked like it belonged in a Victorian mansion. She settled herself carefully, like a queen, and picked up her tea. She’d barely taken a sip before I asked, “Okay, Aysel, what’s this all about?”

Aysel wrinkled her nose. “Caliana, if you insist on being here, you should try to enjoy yourself. At least take a seat.” She gestured to the chair next to Elle.

*Hah!* Yeah, right, I wasn’t going to sit down—I wanted to be prepared for anything.

“I didn’t come here to have fun,” I declared.

Aysel put her teacup down on the table with an angry *click!* “Then why *did* you come here, Caliana?” she asked haughtily. “Because I don’t remember the invitation including you.”

“I think it’s obvious,” I said, crossing my arms. I wasn’t about to beat around the bush here—it wasn’t like that had done me a lot of good in the past. “I’m here so I can protect Elle from *you*.”

Aysel rolled her eyes. “Goodness, this again? How many times do I have to apologize?”

My voice was sarcastic. “Excuse me for not trusting you after you and your brother repeatedly kidnapped me and tried to use me as a vessel for a demon.”

Aysel huffed. “You’re being so dramatic, Caliana! I thought we were past this!” She turned to Elle. “Elle, dear, do you feel threatened by me?”

Chewing on yet another sandwich, Elle shook her head.

“Do you like spending time with me?” Aysel continued, and I wanted to smack her.

Swallowing her bite, Elle looked between me and Aysel. It was obvious that she was nervous about the animosity in the air. “Yes…”

Aysel smiled smugly before facing me again. “See? She’s fine and happy. I’m truly only trying to make friends in the area.”

I frowned, eyeing Aysel suspiciously.

“Don’t give me that look!” Aysel scoffed. “Just because you have rejected all of my attempts at friendship, doesn’t mean I can’t try to be friends with others in the Redwood pack. After all, our packs are in an alliance—isn’t that right?”

I narrowed my eyes at the fake princess. Could this really be just a friendly afternoon tea? Was there a chance that Aysel didn’t have any ulterior motives here? Was I overreacting?

*Hmm…*

I was still skeptical but decided that it didn’t matter. At least I was here, with Elle, and I would be able to feel out what was going on. My stomach rumbled, and I realized I hadn’t eaten breakfast. Elle paused mid-bite, turning to look up at me in alarm.

“Cali,” the girl exclaimed. “You are hungry!”

With a deep sigh, I finally sat down and grabbed one of the sandwiches. At the very first bite, I realized that Elle was right—it *was* delicious. I slowly reached over and got another one. Aysel gave me a satisfied, smug smile that made me want to push her off a cliff. But at least Elle looked genuinely happy.

“You do not have to be hungry, Cali,” Elle said. And then she picked up a canape from her plate and placed it on mine. “Here, we can share!”

Well, then. Elle was adorable.

I had to protect her *at* *all costs.*

“So, Elle,” said Aysel the Untrustworthy. “How do you like being part of the Redwood pack?”

Elle smiled. “It is nice. Greyson is very nice. And there is always food at the house.”

Aysel raised an eyebrow. “And what exactly is your relationship with Greyson?” She took a casual sip of tea. Too casual, if you asked me. What exactly was Aysel’s game here? Was she STILL interested in Greyson?

*Because I’m NOT going to* *let that bullshit happen again! No more kidnapping in general, okay?*

“Greyson is my Alpha,” Elle said primly. “I respect him, and I like him.”

“Right, sure,” Aysel continued, looking as slippery as an eel. “So it’s strictly platonic between you?”

Elle frowned, slowly mouthing the word “platonic.” Her gaze slid over to me in question.

“That means you’re just friends,” I explained.

Elle nodded emphatically. “Yes! Greyson is my best friend.”

Aysel smiled like a barracuda. “That’s lovely, dear.”

I glared at her. “Why are you asking these questions, Aysel?”

Aysel played dumb. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that no matter how you try to spin it, it’s obvious that this isn’t a simple afternoon tea. What are you after?”

Aysel opened her mouth to speak, her gaze full of derision, and I just didn’t give a damn at this point. Why keep up with pleasantries when she didn’t bother to do the same?

“I really hope this isn’t about Greyson,” I continued. “How many times do we all need to tell you that it’s *not* going to happen? He’d never be interested in you.”

Aysel’s eyes were sharp. She laughed. “Oh dear, of course you’d assume that. Everything in your world revolves around you and your mates and your *due destini* curse and blah, blah, blah, *whatever*. But this isn’t about *you*, Cali.”

My anger flared at Aysel’s condescending tone. The mark on my shoulder throbbed.

“Fine,” I snapped. “Then tell me what it *is* about.”

Aysel huffed, glancing at Elle. “I’m trying to find someone for my brother, obviously!”

Elle made a weird little sound. When I turned to look at her, her eyes were wide. I glared at Aysel. “After all the bullshit that Lucian’s pulled, do you seriously think that he’s good enough for Elle? There’s no fucking way that Greyson would let her be with a man like that.”

Aysel leaned forward. Her voice was icy. “Why don’t we let Elle decide?”

I didn’t dare turn to look at her. My anger had gone up a notch, and now it was flirting with fury. I couldn’t keep playing nice here. Because the last time I’d done that, I’d been locked up and hurt in this goddamn palace. The mark on my shoulder was vibrating as a reminder, emanating heat.

“Elle doesn’t know the extent of all the horrible things that Lucian has done, Aysel. He’s—”

“He’s a changed man, and he’s my brother!” Aysel declared.

I scoffed. “Maybe you should stop clinging to your brother and getting involved in his life and get a life of your own! Or are you scared that you’re nothing without him?”

Oh.

Shit.

*I did NOT just say that!*

Only I had, and I didn’t fucking regret it. Even if Aysel’s face had flushed bright red. She let out a shrieking scream that resembled a teakettle and raised her teacup, letting it fly in my direction. I raised my hands to protect myself with a shield, my reaction automatic as my magic burst from within to block out the upcoming attack, but—

Something was wrong.

*Something’s wrong!*

My anger had become fury. My magic clashed with the emotion as if ready to pierce through it. But at the same time, the Seluna scar stabbed me with pain so intense, my body lurched forward and I dropped to the ground with a cry.

# Episode 3480

**Xavier**

After talking with my asshole older brother, I headed to take a shower. I’d already taken one this morning, but I wanted to rinse off the sweat from my run. I made the water scorching hot, and steam filled the room as I stuck my head under the spray.

I was pissed off.

It felt like I was trapped in this impossible situation where I had no goddamn choice but to let Greyson act like Cali’s “only” mate at the summit. And what made this shit even worse was that I couldn’t even be angry at Greyson, because this wasn’t his fault. At least technically.

I wished I could just go out and punch someone, but who the fuck would I start with? The traditionalists who would look at a Fae like Cali with suspicion and consider the *due destini* a scandal? The entire werewolf council, who’d invited pack leaders *and* their mates to the summit?

This whole thing felt like a never-ending loop of reminders that Greyson was the Alpha of the Redwood pack, and I wasn’t. No matter how badly I fucking wanted the position. If I were Alpha, I’d be able to make the decisions and have Cali by my side while proving to everyone that I was the one person they could always count on. The role would be perfect for me, all over.

Apart from the part where I’d be forced to meet with dickheads and play nice.

I smiled to myself at the thought of Greyson at Lucian’s ridiculous Alpha alliance meeting. Greyson hated that bullshit—he hated Lucian. And yet there he was, dealing with him day in, day out, like Lucian was an awful toxic relative you couldn’t get rid of.

My brother had to be so mad right now, and that was the silver lining to this shitty situation. Yeah, not being Alpha sucked, but at least I didn’t have to deal with Lucian while constantly trying to keep myself from killing him.

I decided that what I needed right now was a distraction—something to keep my thoughts off the summit, off Greyson parading Cali around as his mate. The only thing that came to mind was Ava. I’d promised that I would help her find an Alpha for the Samaras, to replace Zeke, and that kind of mission would be enough of a struggle to keep me distracted.

With those thoughts running through my head, I finished up in the shower. I got dressed in a T-shirt and sweats, then I made a beeline for the study downstairs. I was opening drawers and looking through files when Lola and Jay came in.

“Dude, what’s up?” Jay asked.

Lola looked miffed. “Yeah, why are you banging around in here?”

I shot her a look. “I’m not *banging around*—I’m looking for something.”

Lola eyed me skeptically. “What kind of something?”

“That damn library card that Cali has from the Obaltarion—have you guys seen it?” I asked.

“Oh!” Jay nodded toward the corner. “I think Greyson put it in the office safe.”

I punched in the code and opened up the safe. Sure enough, there it was. Perfect.

“What do you want with it?” Jay asked as I took a seat at the desk and turned on the laptop.

“I need to find Ava’s family tree,” I said. “The Obaltarion probably has a file on everyone.”

“Are you sure about that?” Lola asked.

I looked up at her. She seemed intrigued in that very *Lola* way of hers that was a little bit worrisome. I wondered if I should be sharing the Samara pack’s issues with other people, but then I remembered who I was talking to. I trusted Jay and Lola, and Jay told Lola everything anyway. I was pretty sure that since he knew about the Zeke situation, Lola was aware of it as well.

Sure enough, Lola didn’t seem surprised when I said, “I’m trying to find someone who can take over as Alpha of the Samara pack, since Zeke isn’t cutting it.”

“That’s a good idea,” Jay said.

Lola frowned, shaking her head. “Wait, so you’re trying to find another person from Ava’s family to take over? What if they turn out to be another Knox?”

“I’m just trying to go with logic, here,” I said impatiently. “I need someone with Alpha blood who’s a Samara, and that means looking at Ava’s bloodline. It’s not like there’s an Alpha database I can search to find the best candidate.”

Lola tapped her chin thoughtfully. “Hmm. Well, maybe I can help with that.”

Just to get rid of her, I said, “Sure, do whatever it is you do.”

“Okay!” Lola chirped happily and left the room with a bounce in her step.

I chose not to be worried about what she was up to and let her do her thing.

Whatever that was.

“Do you really think they’ll have genealogies of Alpha bloodlines at the Obaltarion?” Jay asked. He leaned over my shoulder to look at the screen as I tried to log in.

“I don’t really know who else would have it,” I said.

“Why don’t you just ask Ava?” Jay asked.

“I asked her already, and she doesn’t know anyone,” I said. “But I sure as fuck hope to find a long-lost second cousin or something. Ideally, one who doesn’t suck.”

Jay nodded as I typed in the code on the card. The screen brought up an error box.

“What the hell—why won’t it let me in?” Glaring between the laptop and the card, I said, “Something’s wrong here.”

“Yeah, your caps lock button is on,” Jay said and tapped on it.

“Shit, right,” I said with a huff, and I typed in the credentials again.

It was nice to have Jay around for this kind of stuff. His response to computer problems was to solve them, whereas mine was to throw anything that bothered me out the window.

“Here we go,” I said under my breath, finally logging in. Cracking my neck, I typed “Samara pack Alpha family” into the search bar.

Zero results.

“That’s strange,” Jay said. “Try ‘Samara family trees’.”

I followed his suggestion, and a bunch of articles came up about trees in the area.

“This is useless,” I grumbled.

As if the website could hear me, a pop-up appeared on the screen.

*Hello! We’re sorry you’re not finding what you’re looking for. Would you like to talk to a librarian?*

I eyed the message suspiciously. “That’s too friendly, don’t you think?”

Jay rolled his eyes. “Just click on the ‘Yes’ button.”

I clicked on it. Immediately, a chat box came up, along with the three dots of someone typing.

*Hello! This is your librarian, Steinar! What can I help you with?*

“Okay, at least we know the guy,” I said, and started typing.

*Hey. This is Xavier from the Redwoods.*

“Do you have to be so dry?” Jay asked with a snort.

“He’ll survive.” I tapped the enter button and sent the message.

Steinar’s reply was instant.

*Xavier! So glad to hear from you! How are you?*

Jesus fuck, I didn’t have time for small talk.

*Good*, I typed. *But can you help me find the family tree for the Samaras?*

“You could’ve at least said ‘please,’” Jay said, obviously fucking with me.

I rolled my eyes, just as Steinar’s reply popped up.

*Of course, let me search the archives!*

“The archives?” Jay frowned. “How long is that going to take him? From what I remember, that library was *gigantic*.”

Jay was right. Damn it, would I have to wait all day for an answer? What would I do then? Just sit around in here with Jay while he tried to teach me how to say “please” and “thank you”? I loved my friend, but I’d probably end up punching him.

“If it takes him more than ten minutes, I’m going to have to—”

I stopped talking when a new message popped up.

*I found it! Would you like the entire family tree starting 500 years ago?*

“Shit, already?” Jay was impressed, but I rushed to reply before Steinar could send me some massive file that would take a year to navigate.

*No!* I typed out*. Please do not send that all to me. I just need anyone who is still alive.*

“And not a minor,” Jay added.

“Good point,” I agreed.

“By the way, I see you used ‘please’ this time. Good job.”

I ignored the fact that Jay sounded like a proud, ball-busting dad and started typing again.

*Anyone alive and not a minor. That’s all.*

The three dots started dancing in the chat box again. A moment later, Steinar’s reply came through.

*We have Ava Reed. Knox Voss.*

I grunted, rubbing my face. “Fuck. This was a waste of time.”

I’d barely finished my sentence before another message popped up.

*And finally, we have Fletcher Adams.*

“Dude!” Jay said excitedly, grabbing my shoulder.

I stared at the name and wanted to fist-bump the air. “There’s another potential Samara Alpha.”

# Episode 3481

**Greyson**

Lucian gave one of his fake gracious smiles and said, “Oh no, don’t worry. I’m not suggesting anything as extreme as combining our packs.” He let out a chuckle. “What on earth made you think that?”

“The fact that you have a history of trying to pull one over on us,” I replied dryly.

“Oh, please, that’s in the past!” Lucian said with a wave of his hand. “I’m only making a suggestion.”

“What *is* your suggestion, exactly?” Mace asked, eyeing Lucian with distrust.

“All I’m saying is that it would be good for us to put on a temporary united front, just for the summit. To show that if you mess with one of us, you mess with all of us.”

That sounded even fishier than the mediocre sandwiches Lucian had served us.

I crossed my arms. “And how do you want us to demonstrate that united front?”

“Well, we could nominate one Alpha to speak for all of us,” Lucian said casually.

This clown had a lot of fucking nerve. But that was no news.

“No,” I said immediately. “I’m not having anyone else speak for the Redwoods.”

“Agreed,” Mace said tightly. “Only I speak for the Blue Blood pack.”

We all looked at Ava. She was still standing by the fireplace and had been silent this whole time. Her voice was low but even. “We might not have a permanent Alpha yet, but only a Samara can speak for the Samaras.”

Lucian sighed theatrically. “Then what do you suggest?”

“We’ll keep things simple,” I said. “Just make it known that our four packs are allied. Whisper it in the right ears, and the word will spread. That’s all.”

Lucian nodded. “So you do agree that we should be allies publicly.”

I looked at Mace and Ava, just to feel them out. Ava was expressionless, but she didn’t object. Mace was already staring at me, and he gave a small nod. At least he and I were on the same page.

“Yes, the alliance stands,” I said.

Lucian grinned. “Great! This is just what I wanted.”

I stared at Lucian. “What?”

Lucian chuckled. “Oh, I figured you wouldn’t go for combining our packs at the summit, but I had to ask, didn’t I?”

This motherfucker.

“Do you really have to play these damn mind games, Lucian?” I asked. “Because this is exactly why I feel like I can’t trust you with anything.”

Lucian gasped, looking wounded. The man was gunning for an Oscar. “Of course I want you to trust me!”

I raised my eyebrows. “Because *you* trust the Redwood pack?”

He nodded emphatically. “Certainly! Why wouldn’t I? As with everyone in the room, I hold you in very high esteem.”

I smiled. *Gotcha*. “So you’d allow *me* to speak for *you* at the summit, then?” I asked in a light tone. “You know, since you trust me, I could be your Alpha for the day.”

Mace let out a sound that was somewhere between a cough and a laugh.

Lucian’s expression switched from cordial to annoyed. He pointed at me, wagging his finger. “*Now* who’s playing games?”

And even though I wanted to punch him, I shrugged. “Just thought I’d show you how the tables could turn.”

I looked over at Ava. She’d gone back to not saying anything, and I wondered if that was part of her own game.

“Is everything okay with the Samaras?” I asked.

Ava’s gaze flickered over to Lucian and Mace. Then she sharply said, “We’re fine.”

Lucian smiled. “You know, my offer still stands.”

Ava scowled. “We don’t need your charity.”

“What offer, and what charity?” I asked. This was supposed to be a common alliance, not one where the two people in here I trusted least made secret deals.

“I simply offered to give the Samaras my protection,” Lucian said.

“Yeah, in a way that would make you de facto Alpha of our pack,” Ava snapped.

So Lucian really *did* want to absorb the Samaras. I’d suspected as much, what with the way he and Ava had been skirting around each other at the New Year’s party. But I hadn’t thought that Lucian would’ve straight-up offered to be their Alpha.

Obviously, I’d underestimated his ego, which was the wrong move. Expecting the most ostentatious move possible needed to become my method of operation when it came to dealing with Lucian.

I was glad that Ava had said no to his proposition—this kind of union would have created a strange and daunting precedent in the area. For one pack to absorb another… It would’ve been a clear sign of imperialism. It reminded me of Silas, though my father’s way of taking over had always been murder.

Either way, it was a big fucking *no* from me.

“The Samaras can handle their own Alpha situation, Lucian,” I told him.

Lucian spread out his hands defensively. “I was just trying to find a way for us all to become stronger before the summit.”

“No, you were playing games, just like earlier,” Ava said seriously.

Lucian sighed. “Must you always think the worst of me?”

Mace glared at Lucian. “The alliance is enough, Lucian. Nobody in this room is comfortable with you constantly insinuating you’d like more power over us. As a matter of fact, it’s disrespectful.”

The Blue Blood Alpha sounded very intense and pissed off, and like he also felt uncomfortable with the idea of Lucian taking over the Samara pack.

The princeling backed down immediately. “But of course, you’re right! I never meant for you to view any of my suggestions that way—joining packs with the Samaras was just a silly idea.”

Mace shot me a look. At least the two of us were on the same page, and that was enough for me. Lucian was too much to deal with, though, and I was ready to go home. But I didn’t want to leave Mace and Ava alone with him. Who knew what else the Vanguard Alpha would try to pull?

Before he could start talking about whatever other nonsense he had in mind, I brought up another matter.

“If we’re in an alliance, you all should be aware that I’m bringing mixed members of my pack to the summit,” I said.

Mace looked surprised. “You’re bringing Cali?”

I nodded. “And Artemis and Lola.”

“Some people aren’t going to like a hybrid around so many werewolves,” Ava said.

“She’s part of my pack,” I replied.

“I’m just saying,” Ava said.

“Does this mean you have an issue with being allied with us at the summit?” I asked. “Because you didn’t seem to care about any of that when you lived under our roof for months on end.”

The “for free and despite your past treachery” part was implied. Ava heard it loud and clear, and she scowled. “I didn’t say that.”

“Good,” I replied sharply. “So, the plan for the summit remains the same. I just wanted you all to know who I’m bringing with me beforehand.”

I knew I sounded defensive and irritated, but I wasn’t going to back down here. Other packs at the summit wouldn’t like the more “progressive” makeup of the Redwood pack, but I’d been hoping that I wouldn’t get pushback from the packs who were already familiar with us. *Especially* not from anyone in this room.

Thankfully, Mace said, “We have your back.”

Lucian waved a hand. “Of course. I love Caliana. I’m glad she’s coming—it’ll make us stand out.”

I paused, eyeing Lucian. The man was just begging for a black eye when he talked about Cali that way. “My mate is not a circus attraction, Lucian. We’re going to have a huge problem if you decide to stir the pot at the summit just to get clout, or for your own entertainment.”

“Oh, Greyson.” Lucian smiled indulgently. “All I’m saying is that Caliana is a special young woman, and her presence will set us apart. After all, we have magic on our side.”

“The *Redwoods* have magic,” I clarified.

Standing up, Lucian nodded and smiled some more, slapping me on the back. “Yes, and we’re allies!”

My bullshit tolerance had just reached its peak for the day. I was contemplating punching Lucian in that smug mug of his to put him in his place when I heard a cry echo down the hallway.

I knew that cry.

I knew that sound of pain, and my instincts went haywire immediately.

“Cali?”

I ran to the door and flung it open, racing down the hallway and toward the source of the ruckus. Her scent was suddenly everywhere, and I tore the door open—

Cali was sprawled on the floor, with Aysel standing over her.

What had happened? Why was she here? How the fucking *hell* hadn’t I realized that she was here? What had Aysel done to her?

So many questions and no answers.

And then I was forced to recall that no matter how hard I tried to keep a grip on myself, my wolf found all these civilized rituals between werewolves ridiculous. We were all just animals, and my wolf knew nothing about diplomacy. He knew blood and violence.

And when Cali was threatened, it was much easier to forget my humanity.

“Get the hell away from my mate!” I snarled.

# Episode 3482

**Marta**

I’d called a cab to drive me to the city. I was supposed to meet up with Okorie, and I was agitated enough that the probability of my wrecking one of Xavier’s cars by accident seemed high. Everybody kept saying that Xavier had too many vehicles to miss one, but I didn’t want to make a bad impression on one of Cali’s mates.

The fact that she had *two* of them was still a little too much to wrap my head around. Though it wasn’t like I couldn’t imagine having feelings for two men at once. There was Lilac, of course. And then Okorie…

Okorie was something else. Different. New. I wasn’t sure how I felt about him.

What kind of proposition could he have for me? What did he want to talk to me about? Because the word “proposition” had many possible interpretations, and some of them made me think about our kiss. How good it had felt. How electrifying.

The whole thing was playing on a loop in my head, and I couldn’t stop it.

By the time I arrived at the café, my cheeks felt flushed and I was a ball of nerves. So that was great. I told myself I could do this, smoothed my hair, and walked inside. Okorie was sitting at a table already. He immediately spotted me and smiled and waved, all casual and friendly.

Okorie. *Friendly!*

His energy made my nervousness skyrocket. Along with the fact that he was looking really hot in his teal button-down shirt. But no—I couldn’t be thinking like that! I was meeting up with a friend, and I had to remind myself that and stop…

Whatever this was.

*Right?*

Plastering a smile onto my face, I walked over to him and sat down. A little too brightly, I said, “Hey! How are you?”

He rested his elbows on the table, leaning forward. *Toward* me. He was still smiling, and he looked so at ease, I suddenly got irrationally annoyed. Here I was, practically made of jitters, and he was just sitting there, looking so… normal.

“I’m good,” he said with a shrug. “How have you been?”

“Fine,” I replied tightly.

He arched an eyebrow. Oh, god, he’d noticed that my tone was weird. Was it obvious that I was nervous? It was obvious, wasn’t it?

“So,” he said, glancing over at the server. “Do you want to order something to drink?”

Usually I’d drink a coffee, but considering how wired I was, it would probably make me skyrocket to the moon. Awkwardly, I grabbed the glass of water in front of me and took a sip. “I think I’ll just stick with water for now.”

I let the glass go, but before I could sit back, Okorie reached across the table and took my hand. His touch was soft yet firm, and so intense that my stomach did somersaults.

*Oh, crap, crap, crap! What is this?*

“You can relax,” he said, his voice even. “I’m not going to bite.”

For some absurd reason, which had to do with the fact that I was apparently secretly unhinged, I imagined him following that up with, “Unless you want me to.”But he didn’t say that, and my face was now on fire anyway.

“Is it so obvious that I’m nervous?” I asked morosely.

“Every word that’s come out of your mouth feels off,” he said. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to make this awkward, or—”

I groaned, bringing my hand—the free hand that Okorie *wasn’t* holding—to my heated forehead. “No, it’s not you, you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Because I’m really trying to be on my best behavior here,” he muttered, his voice dropping, his gaze dropping to our joined hands on the table. “Do you want me to let go?”

The answer to that was a loud, definite *no*.

Because even though I felt like I didn’t know what to do with myself right now, him touching me didn’t feel awkward or off. Not at all.

Taking a deep breath, I shook my head.

He smiled again, and my heart was working overtime.

“It’s not you,” I said. “I’m just being weird because things at the house are weird. With Lilac and all that.”

Okorie leaned back in his chair slowly, and now he did pull his hand away.

I decided I didn’t like that.

“Right,” he said. “You kind of mentioned that earlier, in the text. I was surprised.”

I bit the inside of my cheek, nodding. “I guess it would be surprising for me to suddenly ask you about jobs at the witch council.”

He shrugged. “A little bit, but I get it. You want to find something to do for yourself. To figure out what you want to do with your life, for your future.”

I traced my thumb over my wrist, the spot he’d touched earlier. It felt more sensitive, somehow.

Taking a deep breath, I said, “I mean, I don’t know how to get a job or whatever. It’s been over forty years since I’ve looked for one. You’re the only supernatural I know with a formal job. Maybe I should try to make moonshine like Big Mac?”

He laughed, leaning closer across the table again. My eyes followed the movement before dropping to his mouth. I couldn’t look away from his lips as he spoke.

“Well, why rush it?” he said. “Why not just see the world?”

I swallowed, meeting his gaze again. “That sounds amazing, actually. Especially after being trapped in a haunted house for so long. I just don’t know where I’d start.”

He shrugged. “I’d say start more local. Explore the area around here. There are a bunch of cool sights in this state alone. And then the Pacific Northwest in general.”

I fiddled with the hem of my sleeve. “Yeah…”

What I didn’t admit to him was that it was scary to think of doing all that on my own. The thought of being alone again was daunting. Nevertheless, I allowed myself to give Okorie a piece of truth.

“I don’t only want to see the same state I’ve been in the past few weeks. I want to see the world in general. I want to live…” I paused. “I guess I want to live like I was never trapped.”

Okorie held my gaze, and then he took my hand again. When he spoke, it sent chills down my spine. “I have no doubt you’ll achieve anything you put your mind to.”

It was lovely to hear that. To feel like someone believed in me.

“What are you going to be doing, now that you’re done with the job for the witch council?” I asked. “Where did you go when you finished up with Dani and me?”

“I’ve just been catching up with friends in the area. Couch surfing.”

“That must be amazing,” I muttered. “Just being able to go anywhere you want, whenever you want.”

He smiled. “It’s fun.” He squeezed my hand, and I felt myself flush at the continued contact. He noticed.

“Am I making it weird again?” he asked.

“Not at all,” I said immediately. I looked at our joined hands, then met his gaze again. My voice cracked. “Am *I* going to make it weird if I tell you that I thought you actually invited me here to talk about the kiss?”

Okorie tilted his head. The back of my neck felt tingly when he glanced at my mouth. “I’d be lying if I said I haven’t been thinking about it.”

I swallowed roughly. “Oh?”

“Yeah. I liked it a lot.”

His admission made me suck in a breath. “Me too.”

He leaned closer. “But I get that things are complicated for you…”

I shook my head. “No. I’ve decided that they’re not complicated anymore.”

He lifted a brow. “What do you mean?”

“It feels like—like Lilac and I are just torturing ourselves and each other by not being clear about this breakup,” I said quietly. It was bittersweet to say those words out loud, but they were an honest realization. Lilac and I had shared something special, something that had ended up defying the laws of nature. But it wasn’t the same anymore.

It felt broken.

Okorie watched me as I paused and processed.

I liked the way he looked at me.

I went on.

“That’s part of why I was asking about a job with the witch council,” I said. “I don’t just want to leave to see the world—I need a clean break from Lilac. And that means not being in the same house as him twenty-four seven.”

Okorie nodded slowly, then I saw his lips twitch in half a smile. “That makes me feel more confident about my proposition, then.”

His “proposition.” The reason why we were here.

I leaned forward, so intrigued I thought I’d burst. “What is it?”

Okorie’s eyes locked with mine. His voice was deep and even. “When I leave this time, Marta, why don’t you come with me?”

# Episode 3483

I winced as the pain burned through me. Why the hell wasn’t it going away? Was it time for me to panic? Because it sure felt like it!

“Cali! I didn’t even hit you, I aimed the porcelain at the floor!” Aysel rushed to me, looking… *actually worried?* What on earth?

“It’s not the teacup,” I grunted out.

I gripped at my shoulder, applying pressure to the pain as if that would make it stop. Suddenly, the door burst open.

Greyson’s voice was a roar. “Get the hell away from my mate!”

*Oh shit, oh crap, oh SHIT!*

I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d seen him so furious. And that said a lot, considering everything we’d been through recently. It felt like this was the cherry on top, and Greyson had just reached his limit. He looked at me first, as if to make sure I was breathing through the pain, and then he just… *charged.*

“What the fuck did you do to her?” Greyson snarled and darted forward, ready to grab Aysel and—*what* was he going to do?

“Greyson, stop!” I shouted, just as Mace—when did Mace get here?—grabbed Greyson and hauled him backward.

Aysel jumped away, her eyes wide and her hands raised in defense. “I didn’t touch her!”

I realized that Aysel had seen it too—that menace in Greyson, the full-on predator vibes. And then a shocked Lucian was helping to hold Greyson back as well.

“Greyson, Aysel didn’t do anything!” I finally managed to choke out.

His gaze flickered to me again, and that seemed to calm him. He shoved Lucian away, then Mace, then he dropped to his knees next to me.

“What happened?” His voice was a gruff whisper. I opened my mouth to speak, but the pain in my shoulder was so sharp that I whimpered.

“What’s going on in here?” Lucian demanded, looking around before his gaze settled on—*Elle*. I realized that this entire time, she’d been devouring sandwiches like nothing was going on.

*SERIOUSLY, Elle?*

“I swear, I didn’t do anything!” Aysel declared, and Lucian glared at Greyson.

“Greyson, if you ever threaten my sister that way again—”

Greyson sprang to his feet and got all up in Lucian’s face. Through gritted teeth, he said, “If you or your sister dare threaten my mate again, Lucian, this diplomacy bullshit will go out the window. The shit you’ve done to Cali—”

“That is in the past! How many times do I have to apologize?” Lucian snarled.

At the same time, Mace rubbed his face and groaned, “There’s too much fucking baggage in here.”

And then Ava screamed, “EVERYONE SHUT THE HELL UP!”

Her wail was so piercing that everybody froze. But Greyson’s eyes were fixed on Aysel, and he still looked like he was ready to throttle her.

*And here I thought Xavier was the unhinged one!*

The pain had lessened substantially. Pushing through it, I gripped Greyson’s arm. Partly for support as I stood up, partly to hold him back.

“It wasn’t Aysel,” I said again. “I just fell.”

Greyson stared. “You just fell? How?”

I paused. If I told him the whole truth, then he’d have questions about the mark. In front of everybody. I didn’t want to do this right now, and to my surprise, it was Aysel who stepped in.

“We just had the floors mopped; there must have been a wet spot, and Cali fell. The flooring is all marble, very hard, and the impact must’ve hurt her knees,” she said.

She’d recited the lie so effortlessly that I was impressed. And then suspicious. What was her game this time?

I couldn’t read her face when she locked eyes with me and kept talking. “My apologies. I should have made sure the room was safe for guests.”

It didn’t seem like Greyson was buying it. But he must have noticed that I didn’t say anything, and I knew the questions would come later.

Lucian shot a glance at Greyson. “It was simply an unfortunate accident, then. We are allies, after all. No need for dramatics.”

Greyson clenched his jaw. The irony of Lucian calling someone else dramatic didn’t escape me, either. Lucian stepped forward, then, smoothing his clothes and his hair before staring at Elle.

The girl had finally stopped eating, just so she could track Lucian across the room. Me crying out in pain had been a blip on her radar, but Lucian’s royal ass showing up had definitely caught her attention. *Should I be offended?*

“Sister…” Lucian spoke to Aysel while still staring at Elle. “You didn’t say that these were your guests.”

Aysel smiled stiffly. “I didn’t realize I needed you to approve my guests.”

“Of course not. I just would have wanted to say hello.” His gaze flickered to me. “You know how I adore Caliana.”

I scowled at Lucian’s purposeful exclusion of Elle. And I noticed that Elle’s face fell as well.

*Oh, boy.*

“What did you want with Cali?” Greyson asked. He still sounded furious, but thankfully more like his normal self. Controlled.

“I guess I can’t even have a casual ladies’ luncheon anymore without one of you Alphas questioning me,” Aysel said with a huff. She looked over at Ava. “No offense for not inviting you.”

“I really don’t give a shit,” Ava deadpanned.

“I wasn’t actually invited either,” I said. “It was just Elle.”

At that, Lucian’s eyes narrowed. He cleared his throat. “Well, why don’t we just combine parties if we’re all here? You ladies have cookies.” He stepped forward and picked one up, taking a bite. “But let’s go back to my sitting room. The floor there is… safer.”

He turned on his heel and retreated back to his room.

Without a word, Ava followed him. Mace shot a look at Greyson and then followed as well, shaking his head. Elle jumped up to hurry after them, not even sparing us a glance.

*Something is still going on between Elle and Lucian*, I mind linked.

Greyson nodded curtly and made a move to follow Elle. But then he paused and faced me, pulling me gently into his arms. Shooting a scathing glance at Aysel, he asked, “Are you sure you’re okay, love?”

He wouldn’t leave the room if I didn’t reassure him.

*It’s over now, I promise. We’ll talk about this later*, I mind linked. Out loud, I said, “Yeah, I’m fine. Go make sure Elle doesn’t get in trouble. I’m right behind you.”

With one last glare at Aysel, Greyson walked out.

When everybody else was gone and it was just Aysel and me in the room, I crossed my arms. “What was that all about? I asked.

Aysel was casually picking up the tray of sandwiches—to bring with her to Lucian’s quarters, I assumed. “What do you mean?”

I glared at her. “Why did you lie about how I fell?”

“You wanted me to tell them that you clutched your shoulder, the same one with the Seluna mark?” She put the sandwiches down. “Would you like me to go tell Greyson right this instant, perhaps?”

I grabbed her arm before she could go after Greyson. “It was just phantom pain, Aysel.”

She rolled her eyes. “Whatever.”

I didn’t let her go. “I still think something odd is going on with you and your brother. He started to act extra weird when he saw Elle.”

Aysel sneered, yanking her arm free. “If you must know, I believe there is something between my brother and your new pack mate. But he’s in strong denial about it—I suppose he’s still hurt over his ex-demon-lover. So I’m just trying to give both of them a shove in the right direction.”

“Oh my god, you cannot possibly be playing matchmaker for Elle and Lucian, Aysel!” I said, shaking my head. “I told you, he’s not right for her—for obvious reasons!”

If Greyson heard about Aysel’s plan…

*Should I tell Elle that Greyson would hate it if she got together with Lucian? Would that discourage her? Ugh, no, this is* so *not my business!*

And yet I couldn’t keep my mouth shut.

“Your brother is NOT boyfriend material, Aysel,” I continued, cutting her off before she could speak. “He’s shady and untrustworthy, and he’s got a romantic past that’s worse than a serial killer’s. Do you understand?”

Aysel pressed her lips together. Jesus, was she about to cry? I couldn’t deal with this.

“I just want my brother to be happy,” she said in a low voice. “Is that so bad?”

I frowned, crossing my arms. “You shouldn’t push them together like this. Let Lucian make his own decisions.”

Aysel groaned. “My brother doesn’t know what he wants!”

“And you know what’s best for him?” I scoffed. “I’m sorry, but you don’t make the best choices, either.”

Aysel’s eyes narrowed. Was she about to chuck the tray of sandwiches at me, too? I’d like to see her try—I’d already saved her from Greyson once, and he didn’t seem in a particularly stable mood.

“*Fine*,” Aysel said sharply. “Let’s talk about choices. Why aren’t you telling your mate about the mark?”

I peered at her. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Aysel tapped her chin thoughtfully. “Something isn’t adding up here, Cali. Was what happened earlier really just phantom pains, or is there more going on with the Seluna mark?”

# Episode 3484

I was shocked by Aysel’s words. I shook my head. “No, Big Mac told me there would be phantom pains. That’s all it was.”

Aysel raised an eyebrow. “Phantom pains shouldn’t hurt you that much. It looked like you were in real agony earlier.”

“Since when do you care if I’m hurt?” I snapped.

“I don’t,” Aysel retorted. “But I have to know if Seluna is still around. She already got her hooks into my brother. She’s the reason why he’s so messed up now.”

I glared. “You mean even more messed up than usual?”

Aysel’s eyes flashed dangerously. “You may distrust Lucian, but he isn’t the monster you make him out to be. Seluna did a number on him—she controlled him as if he were a puppet, and he hasn’t gotten over it. I refuse to let my guard down if she’s still around. My brother’s been through enough.”

I took a deep, deep breath and fought to process Aysel’s words. The pretend princess had many flaws—like, a million—but she’d always been loyal to her brother. It was a questionable loyalty to an extremely questionable person, but I couldn’t deny it. She needed to get a grip, though.

“I think you’re forgetting the most important thing, here,” I said. “If Seluna was still around, I’d be the first person to be worried about it.”

Aysel frowned, eyeing me skeptically. “Are you sure about that? I’ve been reading up on PTSD, and you could be in denial, like a defense mechanism.”

I flinched back, Aysel’s words making my stomach twist. Was she implying that I was ignoring the mark? Actively? Why would I do that? Why would I put us all in danger all over again?

*Because you’re scared, Cali…*

No. *No*—that couldn’t be it, and Aysel had crossed the line yet again.

“You don’t have the right to question me, Aysel,” I said, anger bubbling up inside me all over again. “You and Lucian are the reason all this happened in the first place!”

Aysel huffed, throwing her hands up. “I’m just trying to make sure that we’re all safe! But fine, you do whatever you want, and I’ll make sure my brother is okay.”

With a final glare, she stormed off after the others. Like *I’d* been the one to offend *her*.

*Wow. WOW.*

I had to work hard to keep myself from shooting a blast of magic at her back. How fucking dare she imply that I was keeping secrets on purpose? How dare she talk to me as if this entire thing wasn’t her and Lucian’s fault? Besides, she wasn’t right about me being in denial!

*I am NOT in denial*, I thought sternly.

Though wasn’t that exactly what someone in denial would say?

Groaning, I rubbed my shoulder and tried to push Aysel’s accusations from my mind, to no avail. I had to see Greyson—just being around him would make everything better. I headed toward the next room where everyone else was, but then I noticed a different door to the left. It was open, revealing a powder room.

My shoulder still throbbed slightly, so I ducked inside. I closed the door, locked it, then let out a deep breath. I could do this. I could look at the mark—I’d done it a million times before. I pulled my shirt down to inspect my shoulder, and even though the angle was awkward, it didn’t look any different.

*Well, then. What now?*

There was still a strange ring around the mark, but it was the white of a scar. It wasn’t bright red, like it had been when it was active. That had to mean that it was dormant and everything was fine.

*Or at least that everything* will be *fine.*

But that pain… Aysel was right about that. It had been searing. Almost as strong as when the mark had been active. Could it be active? No. Of course not. We’d done what we were supposed to do—sent Seluna’s ashes to the demon world. We’d worked too hard and gone through too much for it all to have been in vain.

Seluna was gone.

*But that pain…*

I needed to tell Greyson everything ASAP. I couldn’t ignore it or lie, because that would mean doing exactly what Aysel had accused me of. I stared at my reflection in the mirror, fixed my outfit, and took a deep breath.

*I’m doing this.*

Nodding at my reflection, I left the powder room and rejoined the rest of the group. The second I entered the sitting room, Greyson looked up, his gaze locking with mine.

*There you are*, he mind linked.

With three strides, he met me at the door and pulled me into a hug. I had to swallow down the urge to bury my face in his chest and start sniffling.

His voice as soft. “I was about to come looking for you. Are you feeling better?”

And then he mind linked, *Do you want to talk about what happened earlier?*

The way he looked at me made it hard to hide anything from him. It would’ve been foolish to even try.

“Are we done with the meeting?” I asked, glancing over at everybody else. “Can we go home?”

Greyson nodded. “Of course. Let me just tell them that we’re going and fetch Elle.”

I watched as Greyson walked over to Elle. She’d been laughing at some kind of joke that Lucian had made that nobody else found amusing. My stomach panged with anxiety.

*Of all the people in the world, does she really have to like that man? Give me a break here!*

“Elle,” Greyson said in a calm tone, “it’s time to go home. Come on.”

Elle’s smile vanished. She looked up at Greyson with a frown. “Really? So soon?”

Greyson kept his tone firm. “Elle, the meeting is over, so we have to go. Now.”

Elle shot him an annoyed look and sighed. I expected her to argue, but in the end, she just nodded. Thank god.

“But, Greyson,” Lucian said, “you don’t have to leave just because the meeting is over. We’re having a good time.”

Greyson turned steely eyes on Lucian. “I have pack matters to deal with at my own house.”

Aysel stared at me with a strange glint in her eye. Like she knew that her advice and accusations had affected me. I avoided her gaze to keep myself from accidentally blasting her for being so freaking infuriating.

“Let’s go,” Greyson said, reaching out his hand to Elle.

She stared at it for a moment, and I wondered if she’d throw a fit now.

But in the end, she just took it, and we all left together.

\*\*\*

“I do not know why you do not trust me to spy on Lucian,” Elle said with a huff, crossing her arms.

We were in the car. Greyson was driving, I was in the front seat, and Elle was in the back, glaring at both of us.

“I told you it’s not happening, Elle,” Greyson said. “Just drop it.”

She pouted. I would’ve laughed if this whole thing hadn’t been so messed up. Elle kept saying that she wanted to spy on Lucian, but at the same time, it was very obvious that she was into him.

“Elle, did you really want to stay behind to spy, or do you just like being around Lucian?” I asked.

She pouted harder. “It is not my fault he is pretty.”

Oh, *lord*.

“Elle,” Greyson said patiently. “We’ve all told you that he’s not a good man. You know I don’t trust him.”

Elle threw her hands up. “Yes! And that is exactly why I should spy on him!”

I shot a look at Greyson. He shook his head, glancing at Elle through the rearview mirror. “I’m not doing this right now. The conversation is over.”

Elle rolled her eyes and looked out the window, scowling. Greyson sighed and shook his head again, reaching over to hold my hand.

*How are you feeling?* he mind linked.

*I’m not sure*, I replied.

*What happened in that room with Aysel, love?* he asked gently.

I considered telling him the truth right now, but I decided that it wouldn’t be the smartest thing to do while he was driving.

*Let’s talk when we’re home*, I replied.

The moment we got to the driveway, Elle stormed out of the car.

“Elle, wait!” I called, worried about her behavior.

She paused at the front porch, turning to look at me. “What? I am still hungry!”

I stared at her, baffled. She’d eaten so many sandwiches at the palace—*how* could she still be hungry?

“Uh,” I said, “there are potato chips in the cupboard?”

Elle grinned and rushed into the house.

I shook my head dubiously, turning to face Greyson. “That girl is—”

Greyson didn’t let me finish. “What happened in the sitting room, love? Why did you fall?”

His expression was so grave and worried that I realized I couldn’t stall any longer.

“There was pain,” I admitted. “In my shoulder. I wanted to believe it was phantom pains, but it was so intense, and I’m just…” I swallowed, feeling my eyes burn. When I spoke, my voice cracked. “I’m scared, Greyson.”

Greyson reached for my hand and squeezed it. “I’m right here.” He was calm, but I could see the storm in his eyes. His voice was soft as he reached for my shoulder. “Let me see?”

I shook my head. “I already checked. It looks the same.”

He swallowed. “Okay. We need to do something about this.”

“If you’re thinking Big Mac again, what more can she do for us?” I asked. I hated the panicky note in my voice. “She’s already looked at the scar and told us everything she knows.”

Greyson took my hands, staring deep into my eyes. “You’re in pain, love. I can’t ignore it. We need to stop this, and Big Mac might be able to help.”

I offered a shaky nod. “You’re right. But I have a different person in mind.”

# Episode 3485

**Xavier**

“I’m gonna find this guy and talk to him,” I told Jay. I jotted down the name in my phone and then shot Steinar a quick thank-you message without Jay even having to tell me. I was feeling genuinely thankful. And pretty fucking hopeful, for once.

“What are you going to say to him?” Jay asked.

“I’ll bring him to the area to talk about whether he might want to be the Alpha of the Samara pack.”

Jay crossed his arms over his chest. “What if he says no?”

I frowned. “Let’s feel him out first. There’s always the chance that we won’t like him enough to back him up as a potential leader for the Samaras, anyway.”

Jay seemed thoughtful. “My question stands either way. If he can’t be the Samara Alpha, what do we do?”

“I’m glad you asked that, my love,” Lola said, sauntering back into the room. She looked very pleased with herself.

“What’s going on?” Jay asked as Lola casually pushed my laptop out of the way and placed hers in front of me. Definitely taking over. I’d have told her to take a step back, but I was intrigued.

“I have come up with a list of Alpha alternatives for you, Xavier, just in case your long-lost cousin connection doesn’t pan out,” Lola told me.

I eyed the screen in front of me. Lola had made a spreadsheet, complete with profile pictures, ages, locations, hobbies, favorite movies… She’d figured all this out in just a few minutes. What the hell?

“How did you get all this information and find all these Alphas?” I asked. I was both impressed and a little annoyed that I hadn’t been the one who’d thought to make a list first.

“I have my ways,” Lola said cryptically.

Her tone of voice and smug expression spelled out trouble. I crossed my arms over my chest. “You have to tell me, Lola. I’m not going to get into another situation where there’s an unknown Alpha in the area.”

She pouted. “But I can’t simply reveal my sources! It’s not—”

“Tell me how you found these Alphas, or I’m not using your spreadsheet,” I said.

Lola pouted some more and turned to Jay. He raised his hands. “Hey, you know Xavier. He’s not changing his mind.”

Lola sighed. “Fine. But you have to keep an open mind.”

I squinted at her. This was definitely suspicious. “Okay…”

Lola cleared her throat. “Well, you see, there’s this website that I found.”

I frowned. “What kind of website?”

Instead of answering, Lola tapped on the mousepad, brought up her browser, and clicked on a tab. Immediately, a bright, splashy homepage appeared. The bright red banner spelled out the words “ALPHA MATCH”.

For a long moment, nobody spoke.

I was pretty sure that Jay wasn’t even breathing.

Slowly, I said, “Lola, is this an online dating site for werewolves?”

“Technically, yes,” she replied sheepishly.

I rubbed my chin, trying to wrap my head around this. “But how can this kind of site even exist?” I thought back to the virginity website Colton and Lola had put Cali up on. How did Lola always find this stuff?

“It nothing too extreme,” Lola rushed to explain. “It’s a normal dating site, too—there are lots of humans on it. But if you know the code, then you can tell who the werewolves are.”

“That still doesn’t explain how you found it,” Jay said. His expression was completely unreadable.

“Oh,” Lola said cheerfully, “it’s all from this dark web forum I follow, for tech savvy werewolves.”

I exchanged a look with Jay. He now looked alarmed.

“Since when are you a part of that?” I asked her.

“Why are you so surprised?” Lola countered, rolling her eyes. “You know I’m into hacking and computer stuff.”

I scoffed. “So you just had to join a dark web werewolf forum? How did we get from Point A to Point B?”

“I wanted to stay up-to-date with what’s going on in the werewolf world,” Lola said seriously. “I’m only trying to help, here.” She turned to Jay and stuck out her lower lip. “Jay, baby, you know I’m trying to help, right?”

Jay sighed and nodded.

I rubbed my face with both hands and shook my head. “Okay. Show me this code.”

Lola grinned, her spirits instantly lifting. She started using the mousepad to navigate the site and show me each section of someone’s profile.

“See here? There are tags that people can choose for their profiles. And if someone chooses the right code order of three specific tags, then you can tell they’re a werewolf. It’s a tree, a dog, and a barbecue. But they have to be in that specific order.”

That didn’t sound like a bulletproof system to me.

“What if a human accidentally chooses those icons in that order?” I asked.

“Oh, you can just feel them out, like this,” Lola said, clicking over to a profile.

Jay sounded alarmed. “Wait, you actually made a profile on this dating website?”

Lola chuckled, shooting him a sly grin. “Don’t worry, babe, I used stock photos.”

“But why?” I asked.

Lola rolled her eyes. “So I could message the Alpha candidates, duh.” She clicked to her messages, and a bunch of conversations she’d started with each candidate popped up. Her messages were so casual and realistic, it freaked me out a little.

“How do you know they’re all Alphas?” I asked.

“You can indicate that on your profile, like whether you smoke or have kids or whatever else.”

“So when the humans on the site see this Alpha tag, they think… what?”

“That it’s just one of those douchey human guys who calls himself an ‘Alpha.’” Lola rolled her eyes.

I shook my head. “This is all too much.” I started to click through the last profile to exit, but I accidentally swiped left on some random guy.

“Hey!” Lola exclaimed. “You’re messing up my algorithm!”

Jay gave her a look. “You shouldn’t care about a dating site algorithm. You already have a mate.”

Lola scoffed. “Jay, this isn’t real! I just have to keep up appearances so these guys don’t think they’re being catfished!”

I knitted my brows together. “Isn’t that exactly what you’re doing, though?”

Lola waved a hand. “That’s a minor detail. Look at all the potential in here, Xavier. I’m telling you, it’s a great idea.”

I exchanged a look with Jay. He was scowling, but he still said, “I hate to admit it, but she might have a point.”

I accepted my fate, at least for now, and started scrolling through profiles.

“I don’t think this is…” I stopped talking. Froze entirely.

Because staring back at me from the screen was a shirtless Mace. He was posing on a hiking trail, looking back at whoever was taking the photo. He was doing this thing with his face that gave me a whole *Zoolander* “Blue Steel” vibe. A posed, very cringey kind of thirst trap.

Jay let out a choked laugh.

“Oh, wow,” Lola said, blinking slowly. “Mace, honey, *no*.”

“Okay, let’s just start with the guy I found through the Obaltarion,” I said and closed the laptop. “And then if we need your list, we’ll…” I made a vague gesture toward the cringe-attack that was that website. “Figure it all out.”

Lola huffed. “Don’t be such a prude, Xavier!”

I rolled my eyes and was about to respond to that totally fucking unreasonable accusation when Artemis knocked on the open door.

“Xavier, I was looking for you,” she said. Her face was pale. “You might want to come out to the living room. Cali needs support.”

I sat up immediately. “What’s going on with Cali?” I asked, following Artemis.

Artemis shook her head and gestured ahead. Cali was sitting cross-legged on the living room floor, Torin running his hands over her shoulders. She looked so out of it that something panged in my chest.

“Cali—”

Greyson stepped in front of me, his expression dark. “Let Torin work on her.”

I glared at my brother. “What the hell is happening? Is she okay?”

“Keep your voice down,” Greyson said sharply. “That’s what we’re trying to find out. Her mark flared up.”

*Her mark flared up.*

The words made me sick to my stomach. *No*. No, this couldn’t be happening. I’d returned the ashes. I’d fought so hard. We were done with Adéluce and with all this Seluna bullshit.

We. Were. *Done*.

“Let me talk to her,” I told Greyson.

“As long as you stay calm,” he said in a low voice.

I wanted to shove him out of the way, but he was right. I nodded and took a step forward. Not too close. “Cali, baby, I’m here…”

She opened her eyes, looked up, and offered me a small smile. She looked so sad and broken that it hurt.

“Here we go,” Torin muttered. He leaned closer and held his hands over Cali’s shoulder.

She winced, and I made another move to go to her. This time, Artemis held me back.

“Let Torin do his healing thing, Xavier,” she said. Her entire face was tense. I didn’t argue. It wasn’t the time.

I crossed my arms over my chest, feeling antsy as I stared at Cali. What was wrong with her? Why did she look so tired? This couldn’t be fucking happening again. I should never have let her out of my sight—shouldn’t have let myself get distracted by the Samara drama, should have only focused on Cali’s recovery.

I was furious at myself.

The living room was quiet and tense, everyone watching the healing ritual. And what felt like a year later, Torin finally stood up. Still sitting on the floor, Cali opened her eyes and looked up at him.

“Is that it?” she asked hopefully. “Did you finish healing the mark?”

Torin shook his head. “No. I can’t heal it.”

# Episode 3486

**Greyson**

My ears were ringing, but I kept my voice calm. “What do you mean?” I asked Torin. “Why can’t you heal it? What’s wrong with her?”

I reached for Cali to help her stand and pulled her closer. I could feel her hand shaking. Her face was pale, and the unfairness of it all was a punch in the gut. If I could’ve taken her pain and made it my own, I’d have done it in a heartbeat.

“Let me explain,” Torin said. “I believe I can’t heal it because there’s nothing to heal.”

Cali squeezed my hand as I fought to wrap my head around this. “Wait, really?”

“Is that a good thing?” Cali asked quietly, her eyes wide.

Torin smiled finally. He looked more hopeful than nervous, now. “I think it’s good. It feels like a scar. When I tried to use my healing abilities, it didn’t work because the mark is already healed.”

Cali let out a shuddery breath, looking up at me with relief. “So it really was just phantom pain.”

I didn’t speak—I couldn’t. I just pulled her in for a hug, breathed her in, and told myself that this too would pass, and then she’d be okay. At some point, she’d have to be okay, because I was *this* fucking close to holding a grudge against the entire universe.

“Xavier,” she whispered, and I realized that she’d pulled away to look at my brother. I let her go reluctantly. The two embraced as Cali muttered, “Thank god. I was ready to have a panic attack. I’ve been so worried since we left the palace.”

“You’re sure about this? A hundred and ten percent?” I asked Torin. I tried to keep my expression and my voice light. After the chaos at the palace, Cali needed as calm an environment as possible.

“I swear to you that it’s just a scar,” the Fae said. “That’s what I felt, at least—there’s nothing physically wrong with Cali at all.”

I nodded, gripping Torin’s shoulder and squeezing. “Thank you.”

He smiled again, a rueful one that showed relief too. I was so goddamn grateful for him. After what had happened at the palace, after I’d seen Cali so pained, I’d expected the worst.

“What happened?” Xavier asked Cali. “Were you at the palace with Greyson? Why did you feel pain?”

Cali looked over at me.

“Why don’t you explain things to Xavier?” I said. “I want to check on Elle.”

She nodded. “That’s a good idea.” She started by mentioning Aysel inviting Elle over for tea.

As Cali started filling Xavier in, I went outside. I knew my mate was worried about Elle as well. It had been obvious, back in the car. And even though Elle had seemed pretty angry at me, she hadn’t shown any animosity toward Cali, so at least there was that.

The truth was, I owed Elle a longer conversation about what had happened and why I wanted her to stay away from Lucian. I had to nip this in the bud. Lucian couldn’t be trusted, no matter what.

When I got outside, I spotted Sage and Zainab doing some light sparring practice.

“Have you seen Elle?” I asked. The two of them paused, exchanging a pointed look.

“She was heading around the back, last we saw her,” Sage said.

“Yeah,” Zainab agreed. “She looked kind of pissed, though.”

“Said something about us being out of chips, but I think she was mad for another reason,” Zainab said, eyebrows arched.

Well, then. That was just great.

After thanking the girls, I headed to the backyard. I really hoped that Elle was still close to the house. She knew she wasn’t supposed to wander too far alone, but she’d seemed very angry earlier, so I wouldn’t put it past her. I just hoped she hadn’t done anything foolish.

I didn’t want to be a dick about this, or act like a disgruntled middle-aged dad, but she was making that super hard for me. I wondered if I should just go back into the kitchen and bring out some snacks—try to bribe her with food. Obviously, that idea was ridiculous, so I disregarded it.

When I found her standing at the edge of the forest kicking at sticks, I was relieved. “Elle!”

She looked up, saw me, and immediately turned to walk into the forest.

Still mad at me, then.

Should’ve brought the snacks.

“Elle!”

She didn’t turn back. I sighed before breaking into a jog to catch up with her.

“Elle, I’m talking to you!”

She didn’t reply. In fact, she just started running, so I had to run too now, and no matter how many times I called her name, she kept trying to avoid me, running faster and faster. When she realized that I was about to catch her, she shifted and sprinted off at full speed.

I couldn’t allow this to go on.

Letting out an annoyed grunt, I shifted as well and ran faster, catching up in seconds. I overtook her, pinning her to the ground. She yelped and growled, but I wasn’t going to let this slide.

*Elle!* I mind linked, frustrated. *You can’t just ignore me—what are you doing? You know you’re not supposed to go out running alone!*

Her eyes flashed with anger and indignation, and she pushed me off and rolled to her feet. *I do not want to talk to you right now! I am mad at you!*

Right. On the upside, she was being honest?

*That’s why I came to find you*, I mind linked. *I thought I should explain myself to you.*

Even though Elle was in her wolf form and couldn’t cross her arms, the way she was standing reminded me of the gesture.

*I just want you to stay safe, and Lucian is not safe*, I continued. *Why can’t you trust me when I say that?*

Elle huffed. *Why can* you *not trust me to be around him? I am not weak!*

*It’s not you I don’t trust*, I said patiently*. It’s Lucian.*

Elle shook her head. *No, you think I cannot take care of myself. That is why I cannot go on runs alone, either.*

*If you want to go for a run, let’s go for a run*, I said. Clearly bargaining now.

Elle peered at me, her gaze sharp. *Answer me first*, she mind linked. *Everybody keeps saying that Lucian is not a good man, but you are still allies with him. What happened? Why am I not allowed to be around him? I want the real reason.*

The question Cali had asked Elle in the car came back to me.

*Why do* you *want to be around him?* I asked. *This is about more than just spying for the pack, isn’t it?*

Elle broke eye contact. I could feel that she didn’t know how to answer. Or she was contemplating her answer. Either way, the way she paused, the way she wouldn’t meet my gaze, meant that some of her anger had deflated.

*We should just run*, she said.

She took off, and I went after her. She probably needed time to think through her feelings. Or her answer. Either way, I could give her that time.

We ran through the forest, the speed and wind working their magic to make me feel lighter. I appreciated the break from the fight. I didn’t like fighting with Elle. It felt wrong.

We broke out of the forest by a creek, and Elle waded in. She shot a look over her shoulder and swiped at a small fish, splashing water at me.

*Are you still mad at me?* I asked.

She let out a huff. *Maybe.*

*Tell me what you’re thinking, Elle*, I said. *You have to explain to me why this is so upsetting for you.*

Elle looked away again. Her silence was unnerving. She finally said, *I think I like him! But you hate him. And I respect my Alpha. So it hurts me!*

I went rigid. This was the last goddamn thing I’d wanted to hear. I’d told myself that Elle had been thinking of this entire thing as a game. Just happy-go-lucky Elle wanting to play spy or be around a man she found aesthetically pleasing. Just in a superficial, fun way.

But she’d just said she liked Lucian.

She’d said that the fact that I hated Lucian *hurt her.*

This wasn’t superficial at all.

I’d underestimated the situation, and I wanted to kick myself for it.

*Is this connected to when you first thought he was your mate?* I asked carefully. *I thought we’d established that that wasn’t the case.*

Elle scoffed. *How do you know? You do not know my feelings!*

If we were human, I’d have started banging my head against a tree.

*I just wanted to explain to you that you haven’t been a werewolf for that long*, I told her, trying to keep my composure. *You might be mistaking physical attraction for a mate bond.*

*When will I know if it is the real thing, then?* she asked stubbornly.

*I’m not sure*, I said. I was being honest here. *You just need to live a little more and get more experience.*

Elle stared at me. *Fine. If I need experience, will you give me that experience?*

I paused. *What do you mean?*

And then Elle said, *Me and you can just have sex.*

# Episode 3487

After I told Xavier everything that had happened, I was pretty worried that he was going to storm over to the palace and try to fight Aysel. If *Greyson* had wanted to go on attack mode, Xavier was probably imagining sending both Aysel and Lucian to the guillotine.

“Xavier?” I murmured.

He pressed his eyes shut and took a deep breath. I was ready for the eruption.

*Here it goes…*

But when his eyes opened, Xavier didn’t shout. He looked like a beautiful, haunted, Byronic hero—very Heathcliff vibes—but he did *not* shout.

“Cali,” he said. He sounded strangled. “I want to tell you to never get into a car with a stranger, but I just…” Xavier paused. He looked at a loss. My *god*. I’d broken him. He couldn’t even get mad anymore.

*That’s kind of a success, though, isn’t it? Hah!*

“I didn’t have a choice,” I said. “Elle was going off with them—should I just have let her go without any supervision?”

He shook his head. “No. You’re right—you were trying to protect a member of our pack.”

I pointed at him. “Thank you! Exactly!”

Xavier stared at me. He rested his hands on my shoulders. “But I just wish you’d called us or something. You get that, right?”

“I wanted to, but they didn’t have a phone anywhere, and I couldn’t just ask for one from Aysel—she would’ve just said something to piss me off even more,” I explained. “I know it wasn’t the safest thing, but I *am* okay. I promise.”

Xavier stared at me some more. He looked like he was holding his breath. Then, he said, “And you swear that you’re not in pain anymore?”

I nodded emphatically. “I swear.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “If you ever feel any kind of pain, tell us. Any kind of pain at all.”

I snorted at that. “Literally? What if I stub my toe?”

Xavier leaned closer. Suddenly, he didn’t look so tortured and brooding. “Then tell me, and I’ll kiss it better.”

I choked out a laugh and shoved him. “Xavier! Gross—that’s my feet!”

He smirked, glancing down at them before pulling me into his arms. “I love your feet. I love all of you.”

I grinned up at him and nestled closer. His scent was soothing, and the fact that he hadn’t threatened to tear Aysel’s head off was actually pretty nice as well. It meant that I didn’t have to worry about him starting a pack war over a flying teacup.

I felt much better after talking to both my mates. Steadier. But above everybody else, I had Torin to thank for that. He was a great healer, and he knew what he was doing. If he said that I was fully healed, then I was fully healed. I was so grateful to him for giving me that peace of mind.

“We’re so lucky to have Torin here,” I said, looking up at Xavier.

He nodded, smiling, then leaned down to brush his lips over mine. The kiss was brief, soft and tender, and it made me feel all warm and cozy inside.

“You know what?” Xavier said against my mouth. “I actually have some free time right now. Do you want to—”

“Hey!” Jay’s voice interrupted us. I looked over Xavier’s shoulder, and Jay gave me a wave. “Very glad you’re okay, Cali,” he said.

“Thank you,” I said, smiling.

“What are you guys up to?” Jay asked. “Xavier, you want to do some more research on that dude we found?”

I looked between them, a little consumed. “That dude you found? What would you need a dude for?”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “Samara Alpha drama. It’s a lot.”

I actually didn’t feel like asking questions right now. Talking about anything related to Ava could wait.

“I get it,” I said, breaking my embrace with Xavier. “Well, you go do that, and I’m going to go upstairs and change.”

Xavier looked like he wanted to argue. But after sharing a look with Jay, he nodded. I kissed him on the cheek, then I headed upstairs. I made a beeline for my closet and looked for my coziest sweater and sweatpants. After picking out my clothes, I plopped back down onto the bed to pull off my pants.

The moment I took a seat, though, I realized that I was… actually pretty tired. That wasn’t surprising, after the past couple hours. My stress levels had been through the roof the entire time. Sighing, I leaned back against my pillows and looked up at the ceiling.

A smile formed on my mouth. I was just so very, very relieved that Torin thought I was fine. I really had let Aysel get into my head earlier. I’d been so convinced that the pain in my shoulder was something more. But now, thinking back on it, I was wondering if the pain had truly been that bad, or if Aysel had just gotten into my head.

*Dammit, Aysel, you just love fucking with people’s minds.*

I huffed, glaring up at the ceiling. I was determined not to let the Vanguards scare me anymore. I knew that I could take them. I could blast them, *and* I could be as rude to them as they were to me and get away with it just like they did. And if worse came to worst, I could just tell Xavier that Aysel had made me stub my toe, and he’d go on a rampage.

*Oh, no, that’s not funny. I can’t joke about things like that!*

Okay, maybe it *was* a little bit funny.

Smiling to myself, I felt my lids getting heavier. The events of the morning had probably been even more exciting than I’d originally thought. I felt exhausted, suddenly, and decided that perhaps a quick nap was what I needed to get rid of the last of this nagging anxiety.

*I can relax*, I thought. *I need to learn how to relax and let go of this constant fear that something horrible is about to happen to me.*

The last thing I pondered before my eyes closed was that perhaps it was time to ask Kira for another meditation session…

\*\*\*

I knew that it was a dream the moment I found myself walking around the pack house. I was actually having a lucid dream, and it was new and fascinating. Could I make myself fly?

*That would be fun!*

I tried to jump but landed heavy on my feet. I looked around, alarmed, but thankfully there was nobody around to witness my dream faux pas. And anyway, it was *my* dream—I was allowed to be a dork in here without feeling silly. There were no witnesses, anyway.

Or were there?

“Hello?” I called out. My voice echoed back at me. I frowned. This dream was hella weird. I kept walking and walking. *Should I wake myself up?* Weren’t you supposed to be the one in control in lucid dreams?

As I was walking down the hallway, I noticed a door that felt like it was meant to be opened. I walked through it, and suddenly I was outside.

*What is this? What the hell? I didn’t ask to be outside!*

Had I accidentally just walked into the yard? I looked around, expecting to see the pack house, but everything had changed.

I was in the gardens at the palace.

*Oh, come on! SERIOUSLY?*

Why on earth was I here even in my dreams? Maybe it was because this place was the source of all my stress? I was pretty sure I’d heard somewhere that dreams were your brain’s attempt to work through problems.

I looked around, prepared to see Aysel coming at me with a teacup, but there was silence all round. Just beautiful flowers and paved alleyways and gorgeous trees. The palace was actually kind of nice when there was nobody trying to have an orgy with me or bothering me about being a *due destini* mate.

*Imagine that!*

I walked through the gardens, reached the courtyard, and expected to see Lucian’s ostentatious new statue. But instead…

It was the Seluna statue again.

*NO!*

I let out a gasp and stepped back. What the hell was that doing here? My heart pounding, I looked around. I waited for monsters or demons or zombies—any kind of attack. But it was still quiet. There was still nothing.

*This is just a dream*, I reminded myself. *Just a dream. And I can beat it.*

I *would* beat it.

I’d already defeated Seluna, so I allowed myself to take a step closer to her statue. Could this be symbolic? Could my subconscious be asking me to face my fears and let go of them in real life?

I could do that.

I could be brave.

In many ways, I wanted to believe that I’d been brave all along.

I straightened my shoulders, staring at the Seluna statue as I approached. It wasn’t real. None of this was real—it was a dream, and Seluna was dead, and my mark was healed.

*Just touch the statue*, I told myself. *You can do it. You’re not scared.*

I needed to prove to myself that I wasn’t scared anymore.

*I am free.*

At least, I needed to be.

I reached out my hand, ready to touch the marble—

The statue moved.

The eyes opened, and Seluna’s stone lips parted.

“HELP ME!” she screamed.

# Episode 3488

**Greyson**

I stared at Elle, shocked. I couldn’t believe what she’d just said to me. Had I heard her right? I really hoped I hadn’t.

*She wants us to have… SEX?*

I cleared my throat. “Elle, we’ve already discussed this. Cali is my *mate*. That means that I’m not going to be doing anything like that with you—or anyone else. No kissing or anything like that. And *definitely* not sex. I wouldn’t do that to Cali.”

Elle nodded. “Good.”

“*Good?*” I repeated. I was lost.

“I like Cali, and I would not want you or anyone else to hurt her feelings. I knew that would be your answer, Greyson Alpha, but I had to push you.”

“You did?” I said warily.

“Yes. I might not be experienced like the other Redwood wolves, but I am not a flower that gets frostbite,” she said, her face puckering into a stubborn frown. “I am tough, and I get mad that the pack sees me as some naïve little girl.”

I nodded. “I can understand that. I think sometimes we forget about all your experience as a wolf, or we discount it. That’s not fair to you.”

“No, it is not fair,” she agreed. “I know how people around here feel about the Vanguard pack, and my interest in Lucian is not exactly ideal for the pack. That is exactly what I am struggling with. I want to do what is best for the pack, but what if what is best for the pack is not best for me?”

I ran a hand through my hair. The truth was, I felt for her. I was sympathetic to what she was asking, because I’d been in that position myself.

“Being part of a pack means that sometimes you have to make some sacrifices, Elle,” I explained. That was true of everyone in the pack, but especially the Alpha. “I think you need to let go of your feelings for Lucian—whatever they are, and however difficult or painful it will be to close that door.”

Elle looked like she wanted to argue with that but thought better of it and closed her mouth. She was quiet for a moment.

“I think I will go for a run. Alone,” she added when I opened my mouth to suggest she go with someone. She raised an eyebrow. “I have earned this, Alpha.”

I didn’t argue with that. Elle had been with us for a while. She knew the woods—better than any of us—and she understood the potential dangers, so I didn’t object as she headed for the trees. As she disappeared into their shadows, I wondered if I’d gotten through to her. She was smart—smarter than I had given her credit for when I’d first met her—but parsing feelings and emotions was hard. *I* was still working on those skills, and I’d been a human all my life.

I gave my head a frustrated shake. I was fully pissed off at this latest situation, and I blamed Lucian for it. The guy was always up to something—always stirring the pot. He was a drama queen, and whenever things got too quiet, he just invented some Shakespearean-scale tragedy so he wouldn’t get bored. But the princeling never liked to be the bad guy, so that always had to be someone’s else role. And that was exactly what was happening now.

Elle seemed to have accepted what I’d said, and her reaction had been thoughtful and insightful, but I figured it was just a matter of time before she became angry and resentful toward me. She was in a tough position—she was still learning what it was to be a human. She was trying to sort out her feelings, while I already had a mate. It was easy enough for me to tell her what to feel and who to be attracted to, but in the end, it was going to be her decision. It would have to be.

The air was cold, and my breath came in frosty puffs. I turned and headed toward the house. I raided the laundry room, grabbing a pair of black joggers and a grey T-shirt from the dryer. As I pulled them on, I wondered what the hell I was supposed to do about the situation with Elle and Lucian. I wished I had even a tiny clue about where to start with them.

I didn’t really know if Elle fully understood the mate pull, or if her interest in Lucian was just infatuation. Though there was a chance I still wasn’t giving her enough credit. I had a habit of doing that. Elle was incredibly smart, but her being interested in Lucian—never mind *involved* with him—was inconvenient at best.

But at least she realized that.

As I stepped back into the kitchen, I saw my mom sitting at the table. She was holding a mug of tea and gazing thoughtfully out the window, but she looked over at me when I walked in.

“Hello, Greyson.” Her smile faded. “You look upset. Is everything okay?’

“I don’t know,” I said, heaving a gusty sigh as I fell into the chair next to hers.

“What is it?” she asked.

“It’s this situation with Elle and Lucian,” I admitted. “It’s just a mess, and I’m not completely sure how to move forward with it.”

My mom nodded. “I have to admit that I’m no fan of Lucian myself. There’s too much history there. But do you mind if I offer a little advice?”

“Not at all,” I said. “I’m open to all suggestions at this point.”

“You can feel however you want feel about Lucian and his pack, but if he and Elle really are mates, then you can’t prevent them from being together. Look at you and Cali,” she pointed out. “Nothing was going to stop you. Not even Xavier. It was your decision to pursue the mate bond. Elle still has a choice. But you have to let them figure it out.”

“I know,” I said heavily. “I know you’re right. But that doesn’t mean I *like* any of this.”

“I realize that,” my mother said with a small smile.

“It’s just that before I turned Elle, I promised her father that I would look out for her. I promised him that I would take care of her.”

“And you are—”

“But do you realize how hard it would be to do that if Elle ended up falling for Lucian?” I shook my head. The thought of Elle and Lucian together made my stomach roil.

“You know, I really do think Lucian has mellowed out a little, since he almost married a demon.”

I stared at my mother in shock. “You have *got* to be kidding me—”

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding,” she said, chuckling. “I’m sorry. That wasn’t nice. I know this is hard for you, stepping back and giving up control of a situation where you think you know best.”

“I *do* know best,” I growled.

“But for Elle’s sake,” my mom went on, ignoring me, “you *need* to step back. You need to act like you’re not the Alpha. Not in this. This is what all parents face at some point, Greyson. This is how children learn. They make their own decisions—and sometimes their own mistakes—and they learn from them.” Her expression turned sad. “I never got that chance with you. I never got to watch you learn and grow.”

“Thanks to Silas, my childhood wasn’t like most people’s,” I added with a wry smile. But when I saw that there were tears in my mother’s eyes, I leaned in an gave her an impulsive hug. “Hey, it’s okay. I still turned out okay, didn’t I?”

She hugged me back, hard. “I couldn’t have asked for a better son, Greyson.”

I pulled away from the embrace and leaned back in my chair. “I think I need to apologize to Elle.”

My mom didn’t say anything, but I could tell she agreed.

I sighed. “I’ll talk to her when she gets back from her run.”

My mom patted my hand. “I think that sounds like an excellent idea.”

The doorbell rang, and I got to my feet.

“Thank you,” I said, bending to brush a kiss onto my mother’s cheek.

“That’s what mothers are for.”

I walked to the door, and when I opened it, I found Armin standing on the step. He was dressed in what looked like a formal butler’s uniform, complete with white gloves. He was holding a gleaming silver platter, and on the platter was a letter. I could see Elle’s name written in looping calligraphy.

“Oh god,” I groaned. “What the hell is this?”

Armin cleared his throat, and when he spoke, his voice was detached and formal, like he was reading from a script. “This is the official declaration of Prince Lucian of the Vanguard pack’s intention to court Miss Arielle of the Redwood pack.”

# Episode 3489

It felt like my heart was going to beat out of my chest as I leapt backward, desperate to get away from Seluna. I screamed and swore, then lifted my shaking hands to blast her, but before I could, my panicked brain finally surged into action and I realized that Seluna couldn’t attack me. She seemed to be trapped inside the statue.

Horror was still coursing through me, but I calmed down enough to look closely at the figure. Her eyes and lips were moving, and she was talking, but she wasn’t coming at me.

Baffled, I lowered my hands but not my guard. “What do you mean, you need help?” I asked.

*This isn’t real, this isn’t real, this isn’t real*…

The part of my brain that was thinking clearly kept reminding me of this. This wasn’t reality—this was just some crazy, mixed-up dream.

“*You’re* to blame,” Seluna hissed at me. “For all of this. Can’t you see that? You and that damned *due destini*!”

“*What?*”

She narrowed her eyes. “No wonder you don’t want to choose between Xavier and Greyson, Caliana—how nice it must be for you to have them *both* at your beck and call.”

I shook my head. “That isn’t—”

“They’ve both proven that they’re willing to die for you, haven’t they?” she continued, ignoring my interruption. She grimaced, looking disgusted. “What a *waste*. You don’t deserve them. Either of them. You’re too much of a coward, Caliana.”

Hot tears streamed down my face. “I love them both,” I gasped out. “I don’t want to hurt either of them, and I’m not a coward.”

I shook my head. This was stupid. Why was I doing this? Why was I arguing with a *dead demon*?

Anger surged through me as I stepped forward, getting right up into Seluna’s statue-like face. “You have no power over me anymore. Do you hear me? Your cursed ashes are gone. Forever. They’re in the demon world, where you can *rot* *for eternity*.”

Seluna’s eyes flared with fury—coal black one moment, then burning red the next. Then they burst into flames. I had to step back as the heat grew intense. My shoulder began to ache and burn. I gritted my teeth against the pain.

“How sure you seem to be about me when you can’t even be sure about yourself,” Seluna jeered. “But you’re right about one thing, Caliana. I *will* exist for eternity. I will live forever. I will never be gone.”

I shook my head. “No. That’s not true.”

She smiled at me, cruel and ice-cold. “And at the rate you’re going, dear one, you’ll never, *ever* be rid of me.”

When I woke up, the sound of Seluna’s high, cruel laughter was still echoing in my ears. I was drenched in sweat and shivering as I sat up, gasping, looking around my darkened room.

*It was a dream. It was just a dream.* I repeated that to myself as I waited for my heart rate to return to normal. It seemed to be taking a long time, so I breathed in through my nose and out through my mouth, trying to remember the meditation techniques Kira had taught me to relax.

*It was just a dream. I’m in the pack house. I’m safe. Seluna isn’t here. She’s dead. I’m safe.*

I closed my eyes, trying not to think back to the dream, but I couldn’t stop myself. I went over the beats in my head, trying to determine if the dream had been real in the way my past Seluna dreams had been real. Or had it just been the trauma response Big Mac and Vander had warned me about? Had it just been a nightmare?

Truthfully, I didn’t know how I was supposed to tell the difference.

I got to my feet and padded to the bathroom. I wanted to splash some water on my face, and it felt good to rinse off the layer of cold sweat. I twisted to check my shoulder in the mirror. It had hurt like hell in the dream, and I worried that it had somehow gotten worse, but to my relief, it looked exactly the same.

I stared into my eyes in the mirror. Why had this happened? Why had I dreamed about Seluna? Could it be guilt, because I’d killed her? If it was, that was absurd. I had absolutely nothing to feel guilty about. Seluna was a demon who had tried to kill me on multiple occasions. She was merciless and brutal, and she’d gotten what she deserved.

Or was it something else? Was it guilt because it had taken so much effort from so many people to return Seluna’s ashes to the demon world? Xavier had lost a whole year of his life, for crying out loud.

Vander had said there would be residual effects, and it looked like they were right, because Seluna was gone and here I was, *still* messed up.

I padded back to my bed and tried to lie down again, but my sheets were still damp with sweat. I sat up and—restless—got back to my feet and headed downstairs.

At the bottom of the stairs, I caught sight of Greyson standing at the front door. He was just closing it, and he looked annoyed. He was holding a letter with beautiful, looping calligraphy on it.

“What’s that?” I asked, curious.

“It’s an invitation from Lucian,” he said distastefully. “It’s for Elle.”

Oh no. Not again. I had a sinking feeling in my stomach that whatever that letter contained wasn’t going to be good. No wonder Greyson looked distracted.

He dropped a quick kiss on my head as he headed into the study. “I’ll see you soon. I have to go figure something out.”

I nodded, watching as he walked into the office and shut the door behind him. I knew he had a lot on his mind, but I was disappointed that I couldn’t talk to him about my dream and seek some comfort in his arms. Still, just seeing him helped wash away some of the dream’s aftertaste.

Maybe something to eat would finish the job. When I walked into the kitchen, Artemis was standing at the island, holding a mug of coffee.

“Cali, hey, there you are. Listen, I’ve been thinking that *you* might be a good person for me to do some magic practice with—” She cut herself off and gave me a quick, piercing look. “Are you okay?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine.”

“Cali?” she said, clearly not buying it.

“I had a weird dream just now,” I admitted. “About Seluna. It kind of freaked me out, actually.”

“Oh no, really? That’s sucks, Cali. I’m sorry.” She put her mug down and walked over to put her arm around me. “Do you feel like telling me about it?”

I shook my head. “Thanks, but I’d really rather just forget about it. Seluna’s gone, and I want to keep it that way. After what she did to me, she doesn’t deserve to be remembered.”

“That’s very true,” Artemis agreed. “And I like that attitude, Cali. Just put her out of your mind. Don’t let her take up space there. She doesn’t deserve it.”

“Yeah.” I nodded. That was what I wanted. It was the actual *doing it* that was the hard part.

“Okay, well, I’m going back outside to practice my magic. You can come if you’d like a distraction,” Artemis offered.

“I don’t know,” I said, unsure. I thought of the handprint and the pain I’d felt the last time I’d tried to use my magic. And—dammit—despite my best efforts, I just couldn’t shake the image of Seluna’s eyes bursting into flames from my head.

“No, thanks though,” I said. “Maybe I’ll come out later.”

“No problem,” Artemis said breezily. “But remember, Cali, practice makes perfect.”

I watched as she sailed out the back door. She was right about that, and I probably could stand to get some practice in—though I’d still be a long way from perfect. But that could wait until I felt more sure of myself.

Unbidden, Seluna’s jeering about my mates came into my mind. I hadn’t liked to hear it, but she had been right about one thing, at least. There *were* certain advantages to being a *due destini* mate. If I couldn’t get comfort from Greyson right now, maybe a hug from Xavier would do the trick. I had a feeling it would, so I set off to look for him.

I found him by the front door, putting his shoes on.

“Are you going somewhere?” I asked, frowning.

Before he could answer, Lola came bounding down the stairs behind me.

“Cali!” she called.

“What’s up?” I asked.

She slid to a stop next to me, hooking her arm through mine. “Get your coat and shoes, girl!”

“Where are we going?” I asked, baffled.

She grinned, her eyes gleaming. “We’re going to stalk the next Samara Alpha.”

# Episode 3490

**Xavier**

That stopped Cali, and she stared at Lola, stunned. “*What?* What are you talking about? Is that some kind of joke?”

I looked up at her and noticed that behind her shock, she seemed a little edgy. I wondered if there was something up with her. But before I had a chance to ask, Jay came out of the living room.

“Lola, there you are. Are we going?”

Lola turned to Cali. “Jay and I are going with Xavier to go deal with this Samara sitch. You should come.”

“Wait, what Samara sitch?” Cali asked, holding up her hands to stop everyone. “What are you guys talking about?”

“There’s another potential candidate for Samara Alpha—” I started.

“The guy’s name is Fletcher,” Lola put in, apparently unable to keep herself from interrupting.

“Okay,” Cali said slowly, “that’s fine, but where are you going? Why do you have to do it?”

I winced. “I agreed to help out. We’re not doing much, just going to… *observe* the guy.”

Cali raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Fletcher doesn’t know that he’s a candidate for Samara Alpha,” I explained.

“So why are you even bothering him?” she asked.

“We’re just going to go check him out,” I said. “See what he’s like. They’ve had a bad run of Alphas, and I want to get a feel for this guy before they move forward. If he’s like Knox or Zeke, then I just won’t tell him he’s eligible—no harm, no foul.”

Cali took this in. “And what if he’s *not* another Knox?”

“Then we loop Ava in and see if she approves,” Jay said.

Lola grinned. “Think of this as Alpha speed dating.”

I groaned. “No. Let’s not think of it that way. Ever. We’re just going to check this guy out, that’s all.”

“So? What do you say?” Lola asked Cali.

She shrugged. “Okay. I’ll come.”

\*\*\*

The mall seemed more crowded than usual, which seemed strange, seeing as it was *after* New Year’s.

“Everyone’s returning presents,” Lola said, looking around. “Or using gift cards.”

“It’s really crowded,” Jay commented as a group of fast-walking senior citizens bumped into his shoulder, one after another.

I grinned and laced my fingers through Cali’s. “I like being here with you,” I said quietly, leaning close to her.

“Me too,” she said. “It’s nice, getting out of the house.”

She looked more relaxed, which I was glad to see. I had been worried about how she’d react to being roped into the Samara Alpha quest. I wished Jay hadn’t brought up Ava, but when we were talking about the Samaras, there was really no way around it. Ava was the deciding factor, and if she didn’t think Fletcher could handle being Alpha, then that would be that.

“Is everything okay?” I asked. “You seemed a little stressed, earlier.”

She nodded. “I was, a little, but it’s nice being out. Just being around people reminds me that there’s a wider world out there, and the whole universe isn’t all danger and curses.”

“Good,” I said, leaning down to drop a kiss on her head. “I want you to feel safe all the time, Cali. I’m glad you came along. You didn’t hesitate to help when Lola asked.”

She shook her head. “Of course not.” She looked up at me in surprise. “I know this is important to you, so it’s important to me. Of course I’d want to come. But how do you know this guy is here at the mall?”

“We found him on LinkedIn, and he works at a store here,” Lola said.

Cali rolled her eyes. “Lola, remember what I said about *ethical* hacking?”

“Hey, it’s not hacking if the information is publicly available,” Lola retorted. “Which this totally was.”

“It’s still a violation of privacy,” Cali argued.

“How?” Lola asked. “If he didn’t want people to know where he worked, he shouldn’t have put it on his profile.”

“But that profile is supposed to serve a specific purpose,” Cali pointed out. “It’s supposed to be for networking, so he can find other, better jobs. Not so we can spy on him and drop by where he works. That’s totally inappropriate.”

“The fact remains that the information lives on his publicly accessible profile,” Lola said imperiously. “I did nothing illegal or even unethical to find it. All I did was google the guy’s name. If that’s hacking, then I’ve got some news for literally everyone in the world—”

“What’s the store called again?” I asked, looking around.

“East Coast Tides,” Lola supplied, abandoning her argument with Cali. She pointed past the frozen yogurt stand. “It’s right over there.”

We stopped in front of the store. It was a clothing store, with displays of mannequins wearing sweatshirts and artfully ripped jeans in the windows. It wasn’t exactly my taste—the clothes seemed to be trying a little too hard—but I reminded myself that I wasn’t here to shop.

I put an arm around Cali; I was glad to have her by my side. Having her with me on these kinds of missions turned everything into an adventure instead of a chore. I smiled when she looked up at me, but as soon as we walked into the store, my smile turned into a grimace.

“Holy shit,” I muttered. “What the hell happened in here?”

Jay was coughing too hard to answer.

Cali wrinkled her nose. “Yeah, it’s kind of strong.”

It was times like these that made having extra-strong werewolf senses a real pain in the ass. It wasn’t just *strong*—the store smell like a cologne bomb had gone off. Like they’d gotten a shipment of bottles and then smashed every single one of them on the floor. The smell made my eyes water, and I blinked, trying to clear them.

“Okay, I think we should split up,” I said, trying to breathe through my mouth and ignoring the cologne taste at the back of my throat. “Look for this Fletcher guy. And if you see him, for fuck’s sake, *be casual*.”

“Why are you staring at me?” Lola demanded when I glared at her.

“Remember, we’re just here to see what kind of person he is—not to interrogate or intimidate him,” I said pointedly.

Lola crossed her arms. “And what if he talks to me first? What am I supposed to do? Ignore him?”

I rolled my eyes. “Just be smart about it. Be casual; don’t give anything away.”

“Don’t worry about it, Xavier,” Jay said, grabbing Lola’s hand. “We got this.”

I watched as he and Lola strolled away. Then I took Cali’s hand and did the same. I tried to ignore the cologne—and the headache it was causing—and after a while, I kind of stopped noticing. Cali, who didn’t know what Fletcher even looked like, was browsing through the men’s jeans, and after a while, it started to feel like we were just another couple out shopping.

“Hey, how about this for you?” Cali said, picking up a dark flannel shirt from a display rack.

I shrugged. “I actually kind of like it.”

“Take it and hold it up. I want to see how it would look.” She gave me a critical look, then checked the tag. “I wonder if they have a bigger size. It’s long enough, but your shoulders are too broad for this one. Excuse me?” she said to a passing clerk.

“What can I do for you?” he asked, his voice bored. Then, when he saw me, he did a double take.

“I was wondering if you had this shirt in a bigger size,” Cali said.

The guy looked at the shirt, then at me again. “Hey, are you looking for a job right now? Because we’re hiring, and you’d be great here. We only hire certain types, and you definitely have the physique.”

“Oh, uh, thanks, but I’m not really looking right now,” I said.

The guy looked me up and down. “Okay, well, if you change your mind, come back anytime. And no,” he said, glancing back at Cali, “we don’t have that in a larger size.”

Cali turned to me, smirking, as the guy walked away. “Too bad,” she said. “You’d be great here.” She glanced toward the guys standing shirtless at the front of the store. “You’d be a sensation, Xavier.”  
 I caught her around the waist and tickled her ribs until she gasped. “And you’d be cool with that?”

“No!” She laughed. “Don’t you dare! I’m the only one who gets to take pictures of you shirtless.”

“Good, let’s keep it that way,” I said, leaning down to give her a kiss. She was all warm, and I loved the feel of her hand against my chest. I’d needed this with her; even if it was surrounded by some stupid Samara bullshit, I was glad to spend this time with Cali like this.

We wandered toward the women’s clothes. I was about to suggest we go look for Jay and Lola when someone grabbed my arm and hissed in my ear.

“*Who sent you?*”

# Episode 3491

**Greyson**

Walking into the study near the front of the house, I shut the door behind me. I needed to think before I made my next move. I sat down behind the desk and looked down at the letter. It seemed to have a lot of weight to it. The paper of the envelope was thick, and the wax seal on the back was intricate—the wax had multiple colors marbled into it. It definitely seemed fancier than the other letters we’d received from the Vanguards, all of which had seemed pretty fancy to me at the time.

I looked again at Elle’s name, spelled out on the front in looping script. I’d have felt a lot better if the thing had been addressed to me, or to Xavier—or to basically anyone in the pack but Elle.

A sweet, cloying scent emanated from the letter, making me wrinkle my nose. I was no expert, but I thought I recognized the smell of gardenias. I shook my head. How could Lucian think that would appeal to anyone other than his grandmother?

I flipped the letter over in my hand. I knew I shouldn’t open it, but I *really* wanted to. In theory, I knew what was inside this letter. Lucian inviting Elle to *court* him, but what that meant to Lucian was a mystery. Whatever was inside—whatever Lucian had planned for Elle—was something that I needed to be aware of.

But I thought about what my mother had just told me about taking a step back. Elle deserved some space, and I would hate to give her the impression that I was spying on her.

I stood from the desk and walked to the window, where I could see out onto the porch. Armin was still standing there, waiting stiffly in the January cold. I’d told him that Elle was out, and that I had no idea when she would be back. I’d been hoping he would take the hint and hit the road, but no dice.

“I was told to wait for a response,” was all he’d said.

Whatever. I turned away from the window. It would make no difference to me if Armin stood on the porch all day and all night.

I tossed the letter onto the desk and paced the length of the room, thinking hard.

What had Armin meant when he’d said the word *courting*? Though I supposed that was really Lucian’s word. That sounded like something Lucian would say, the pretentious bastard. I knew what it meant—the old-fashioned word for dating, or something. That definitely fit Lucian’s style. Which I guessed meant that Lucian wanted to date Elle. There was a chance it was nothing more than that, but it still didn’t answer the question that pressed on my mind: the question of mates.

I thought about what I’d seen between Lucian and Ava at his New Year’s Eve party. When I’d seen them making out in the pool, they’d seemed pretty hot and heavy. Did Lucian’s interest in Elle mean that his interest in Ava had waned? That actually wouldn’t be so bad. With Lucian and the Vanguards no longer dancing around the idea of absorbing the Samara pack, it would probably be easier to navigate the Samara situation in general.

I tapped my fingers on the desk, trying to make a decision. It was unusual for me, but I felt uncertain, so—for the moment at least—I slid the letter into one of the drawers. It could wait there until I figured out what to do. That done, I headed upstairs to shower.

I stripped off my clothes and turned on the faucet. I stepped in, and as the hot water beat down on my head, I let my mind drift. Maybe it was the water, but it drifted right to the first time I’d seen Cali naked. We’d been at the hot springs, and it had changed my life.

Okay, so she’d been in my brother’s naked arms at the time, but I tried not to think about that part. It was a memory I would always hold in my heart. Not because she’d been naked—though that image always made me smile—but because of the way she’d held my gaze. In that moment, the balance of my world had shifted.

I shook my head. I wasn’t going to be able to avoid my Lucian and Elle problem by daydreaming about Cali.

I flipped the lever and doused myself with icy water as punishment, then stepped out and toweled off. I threw on clean jeans and a T-shirt and grabbed a sweatshirt, then headed back downstairs.

The letter was still burning in my mind when the front door opened and Elle walked in from her run. She was naked, of course. I gritted my teeth. She must have passed Armin on the way in, which bugged me. And even more than Armin, I hated the idea of Lucian ever seeing her like that—and I didn’t care if it was normal for werewolves.

She caught my eye, and I walked over, holding out my sweatshirt. She hesitated for just a moment, then accepted it and pulled it on.

“Listen, Elle, I wanted to talk to you about what we discussed earlier.”

Elle peered up at me without replying.

I sighed and passed a hand through my wet hair. “I’m sorry for the way I came across—telling you what you should do and everything. I get that you’re probably dealing with a lot right now. I’m sure you have a lot of conflicting feelings about Lucian and the Redwood pack. I’m sure it’s confusing, and I don’t want you to feel like I’m trying to control you, but I hope you understand that it’s a sticky situation to navigate.”

Elle nodded, though she still didn’t speak. She went to move past me, but I stopped her.

“Listen, Elle,” I started reluctantly. “You should know, Lucian sent you a letter.”

This stopped her. She turned, and I saw that her eyes had lit up.

“I want to read it,” she said, holding out her hand. “Where is it? I want it. It is my letter.”

“Yeah,” I muttered. “Right. Come on,” I said, gesturing for her to follow me.

I led her to the study, then opened the drawer and pulled out the letter. When I turned to hand it to her, I couldn’t read the look on her face, but when I gave her the envelope, she practically tore the thing in half in her haste to get it open. Which—to me—meant that she was *way* too eager to see what Lucian wanted.

The whole pack had been working with her to help her learn to read, but as she scanned the letter, her brows drew down into a frown.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She handed me the letter, shaking her head. “The writing is too curly. I cannot read this.”

I took the letter and looked at the calligraphy. Whoa, she wasn’t kidding. It *was* super hard to read. I cleared my throat.

“*To Miss Arielle of the Redwood pack. I, Lucian of the Vanguard pack, do hereby announce my desire to embark upon the process of courtship. I approach this endeavor with intentions both honorable and pure*.”

I tried not to roll my eyes at this. I would bet my life that Lucian had never had a pure thought in his life. All the guy ever thought about was himself and his own needs.

Elle was still frowning. “What is this courtship, Greyson?”

“It’s kind of like dating,” I explained.

Elle’s eyes went wide. “Will Lucian want to bring me a deer?”

“What?” I asked, baffled.

“Will he go *hunting* for me?”

It took me a moment, but I realized that Elle’s frame of reference for dating was skewed toward her experience with a real wolf pack. I thought she thought she understood what dating was, but I didn’t think she actually understood the concept of what it was to *go on a date*.

“No, I don’t think there’s going to be any deer or hunting,” I said. “Dating for people means that they spend some time together, find out more about each other.”

Elle stared at me. “Why?”

“To see if you like each other,” I said.

“But… I already like Lucian,” Elle said.

I gritted my teeth and looked back down at the letter. “*I anxiously await your response to this letter, and will not rest until I hear that you will allow me this greatest honor.*”

I managed to not gag as I read.

“*Yours truly and forever, Prince Lucian*. Oh, hang on, there’s a P.S.”

“What is a P.S.?” Elle asked.

That seemed like too much to explain. “There’s just another message. It says that Lucian’s going to come over here later if you accept.” I looked up at Elle. “Are you going to accept?”

# Episode 3492

When I heard the stranger’s harsh voice, I whipped around to look at Xavier, my heart pounding. The guy who’d spoken to him looked like he had a strong grip on Xavier’s arm—and he was shirtless. That actually felt like the weirdest part. It was *January*. And we were in the *mall*. Why was this guy in the mall *shirtless*? I thought fast: whoever he was, he had to be either deranged or so full of himself that he thought it was cool to walk around showing off his abs—which were, in fairness, rock hard.

Xavier’s expression was cold, and as he looked down at the guy’s hand on his arm, I was worried that he was about to snap and tear the guy to pieces.

*Xavier?* I asked nervously. *What’s going on?*

*Relax*, he said. *This is our guy.*

*What? Really?* I asked, confused. But then I looked at the shirtless guy again and realized he had an employee lanyard hanging around his neck. When I looked closer, I saw that it listed his name as *Fletcher*. Oh! This was the guy! *That* was what Xavier meant!

“Who sent you?” the guy repeated, looking angry and upset. “Tell me! Was it Vinnie? Cameron? Who was it?”

Wow, this guy had a lot of enemies, if he didn’t even know who might be after him. That didn’t seem ideal for a potential Samara Alpha candidate. That pack probably didn’t need that kind of trouble. It had plenty of problems already.

Xavier glanced down at the guy’s lanyard, as though double-checking his name. “Hey, Fletch, relax. No one sent me. You must have me mixed up with someone else.”

“I did, did I?” Fletcher asked dangerously.

“Sure. We don’t know any Vinnie or Cameron. I’m just here, shopping for clothes with my girlfriend.” Xavier leaned down and pressed a kiss to my lips. “Isn’t that right, babe?”

I felt my cheeks warm with a blush. It was cheesy as hell, but I kind of loved hearing Xavier call me his girlfriend. Not mate, which had all kinds of supernatural implications. Just *girlfriend*. It sounded normal, like the relationships regular people had, where they had date nights and took long weekends away and split the utility bill.

I smiled up at him. “That’s right.”

Fletcher looked between us for a moment, then took a step back, releasing Xavier’s arm. “Oh. Okay. Sorry about that. I guess I did get you mixed up with someone. Um.” He looked uncomfortable. “Just let me know if you have any questions or need another size.”

We watched as he hurried away, then I turned to Xavier.

“You handled that really well,” I said. “You stayed very calm. I’m impressed.”

He stared at me for a moment. “What, did you think I was going to kill the guy?”

“I don’t know. Maybe,” I muttered.

Xavier laughed. “Hey, it could still happen. But it probably won’t. That wouldn’t do the Samaras any good. They’d still need an Alpha.” He looked around the dim, strongly scented store. “We should find Jay and Lola. Let them know that we have eyes on Fletcher.”

“Oh, yeah.” I looked around. “They can’t be far. Unless Lola’s trying something on. She can kind of be hard to manage, once she gets going. Oh, wait, there they are…” I trailed off as Jay and Lola came closer. They were walking toward us, holding a huge bundle of clothes between the two of them, but I knew who was really responsible. “Lola, what is all that?” I asked.

“Oh, Cali, you should see it! They have a great sale section,” Lola gushed. “I wanted to show you this super sexy shirt I found. It’s a crop, but it’s got this kind of off-the-shoulder thing going on—”

“You know, we didn’t actually come here to shop,” Xavier said with a sideways glance at the armloads of clothing.

Lola shrugged. “Well, yeah, I know, but we *are* here, and I figured I might as well get a few things, right? I’m trying to look natural. Like you said, remember?” She turned to me. “And it’s fifty percent off the *sale price*! I mean, I’d be losing money if I *didn’t* buy this stuff!”

“Amazing. Well, while you were shopping, we found Fletcher,” I said.

“Really? No way. Where?” Jay asked, looking around.

“The shirtless guy,” Xavier said, nodding toward the front entrance.

Lola looked over and snorted. “Oh my god, of course that’s him. The shirtless greeter guy with the hot abs. Why not?”

Jay gave her a sideways look that made her laugh again.

“Of course, Jay would make a much better greeter,” she added. “Way hotter.”

Jay leaned over and kissed her. “I know you’re just saying that, Lola, but it’s true.” He struck a sudden dramatic pose, hands on his hips, narrowing his eyes seductively and sucking in his cheeks so his high cheekbones were even more prominent. “Maybe I’ll pick up an application on the way out.”

Lola started to giggle, and the sound was contagious. I started to laugh, too, but Xavier looked grave. His gaze was still on Fletcher, who was now moving across the store. He leaned over to speak to someone behind the counter.

“The guy seemed pretty paranoid, actually, which doesn’t seem like a great start. It sounds like he might have some enemies, too, which also isn’t a great sign,” Xavier said, looking tense.

“Yeah, he seemed worried about someone named Vinnie, and another person, Cameron,” I added.

Lola took this in. “Hmm. I might be able to figure out who Cameron and Vinnie are by snooping around on his Insta.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “That might land in the realm of ethically icky. Remember?”

“Oh, Cali,” Lola said, rolling her eyes. “Relax a little. He puts it out there.”

That didn’t mean we had to *look* at it.

We all looked over at Fletcher, who had gone back to his place by the door. And, as luck would have it, at that moment, he happened to look back at us.

*Dammit.*

We all froze, which looked particularly conspicuous. Fletcher must have thought so, too, because he narrowed his eyes and marched toward us again.

“We need to talk,” he growled at Xavier. He looked around furtively. “But not here. Not out in the open. There’s no telling who might be listening.”

“Then where do you want to go?” Xavier asked.

Fletcher nodded toward a door near the back. “Stockroom. Back there. Follow me.”

Xavier followed as Fletcher started toward the door, but Lola stepped closer to me.

“Okay, Xavier was right. The guy *does* seem pretty paranoid,” she whispered.

“I know.” I looked around the quiet store. “Who could be listening?”

We followed Fletcher into the back room, which turned out to be a small, windowless room lined with cardboard boxes and with a ladder propped up in the far corner.

He closed the door and rounded on us. “Okay, so we’ve got what? Two werewolves, a vampire, and—” He narrowed his eyes at me as if trying to figure me out, then shrugged. “And you, whatever you are.”

“Um, actually, I’m a vampire-werewolf hybrid, thank you very much,” Lola corrected primly.

Fletcher didn’t look impressed, and he crossed his arms over his bare chest. “Okay, if Cameron didn’t send you, then what is this? What the hell do you want from me? Why are you stalking me?”

I swallowed nervously and checked the room for cameras. Was this guy going to make a scene right here in the store? I thought back to Xavier’s casual comment about killing him. But that had just been a joke, right?

Xavier smiled easily. “Hey,” he said in a friendly voice, “we’re not stalking anybody. We don’t want any trouble, man. You’re taking this the wrong way—”

“Oh, am I?” Fletcher snapped. “Just like I got confused, earlier? What are you doing here? Tell me. You must be after me, but why? I didn’t do anything, okay? I told Cameron it’s all over.”

I frowned. Was Cameron Fletcher’s ex? Or was he, like, the boss of some job that had gone horribly wrong? Could this shirtless dude be in the mob? Who knew what he did outside of his time here at the store, when he was just out there, wearing shirts and getting into trouble? He *was* a werewolf, after all, and in my experience, werewolves did tend to lead pretty interesting lives. My imagination started spinning, creating a whole shadow life for Fletcher where he operated as werewolf double agent for the mob and the FBI.

Xavier was still giving Fletcher that friendly smile, and he stepped closer now, putting his arm over the guy’s shoulders. “Hey, listen, you can relax, man. We’re not here for any of that.”

“Then why *are* you here?” Fletcher wanted to know. “And tell me the truth this time.”

Xavier raised an eyebrow. “Ever heard of the Samara pack?”

# Episode 3493

**Xavier**

As I stood waiting for Fletcher to respond to my question, I watched his face carefully. I was looking for it, but I didn’t see any recognition in the guy’s expression. But maybe he was just really good at hiding it? He was pretty paranoid about this Cameron character, so it would probably make sense for him to play things pretty close to the vest. Which wasn’t necessarily a bad trait to have as an Alpha. Discretion was key, so that could actually be a good sign.

Then Fletcher glared at me. “I *knew* you weren’t really shopping.”

Lola huffed and held up her armful of clothes. “Uh, *not* true.”

I shot her a sideways look, and she rolled her eyes.

“I’m just saying,” she muttered. “I *am* shopping.”

Fletcher shook his head. “The Samara pack? Who’s that? Never heard of them.”

Really? The guy really didn’t know? “It’s a pack, just like it sounds like. You obviously know we’re werewolves—how can you not know what a pack is?” Okay, so maybe we weren’t off to such a great start after all.

Fletcher shook his head. “No, man, I’m not in a pack. I’m a Rogue. You know what that is?”

“Yeah, I know what that is,” I growled. “I’m not a fucking idiot.”

“Well, I’m a Rogue,” he repeated, narrowing his eyes, “along with everything it implies.”

I glanced at Jay, who just shrugged.

Looking back at Fletcher, I sighed. “So you’re not in a pack, and you’ve never even heard of the Samaras?”

That was surprising because he was still a werewolf who lived in Oregon. There weren’t all that many packs here, and the Samara pack was practically in this mall’s backyard. I wasn’t sure I believed him, but I had to go with what he was giving me.

Fletcher shook his head. “No.” He hesitated for a moment. “And you’re really not here because Cameron sent you?”

I laughed. “Definitely not.”

It was a strange moment. I was annoyed and kind of disappointed, but now that everyone’s cards were on the table, I felt better, and Fletcher was visibly relaxing. I shot a glance at the storeroom door, wondering if anyone was going to wonder where one of the shirtless greeters had gone and come looking for him. But for now, the door stayed closed and the room was quiet.

“Okay,” Cali said with a shy smile. “Elephant in the room—who *is* Cameron?”

I was wondering the same.

Fletcher’s smile disappeared in an instant, and he stiffened.

“I’m just wondering,” Cali said quickly. “You really don’t have to tell us if you don’t want to. It’s not a big deal.”

I disagreed on that point—if we were going to vet Fletcher as a potential Samara Alpha, we needed to know about all the skeletons in his closet. Anyone who could potentially pose a threat. We didn’t need another Knox situation. But luckily, I didn’t have to press, because Fletcher shook his head and began to speak.

“No, it’s fine,” he started. “It’s not a huge secret or anything. Just kind of a classic crazy ex-boyfriend story.”

“One of *those*,” Lola said with a groan. “We’ve all got a story like that.”

Jay shot her a questioning look but didn’t ask.

Fletcher nodded. “He and I dated for a few months, but things didn’t work out. Fine, right? That happens. But we didn’t end on the best of terms, and things got kind of messy at the end, and I’m just a little paranoid.”

I sighed. If that was all there was to the Cameron thing, I wasn’t really in the mood to hear the guy’s romantic drama, but I supposed I needed to be patient. Not one of my finer qualities. I glanced over at Cali, who was listening to Fletcher with a sympathetic expression on her face. I was glad she was here with me. She was much better at this than I was.

“What do you mean, things didn’t end well?” she asked, tilting her head. “What does that mean?”

Fletcher’s expression darkened in an instant. “It just went south when—” He stopped himself and shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. The point is that Cameron is dangerous.”

“It’s always the bad boys,” Lola noted, hugging her armload of clothes.

Fletcher’s eyes widened. “Right?”

She nodded sagely. The fuck did she know about bad boys?

Okay, well, it wasn’t ideal, but a disgruntled ex was manageable. I didn’t know what kind of trouble Fletcher was in, but this felt like something we could handle. I mean, how much was it going to take to convince this ex-boyfriend to piss off?

Even so, I was still on the fence about Fletcher. First impressions were touch and go, but I still wasn’t sure if this guy was Alpha material. It wasn’t that he was afraid—sometimes fear was warranted, and anyone who pretended otherwise was a fucking idiot. But if Fletcher was cowering from a grumpy ex-boyfriend, what did that mean for the bigger picture? How would he handle running a pack when things got rough? I thought about everything we’d come up against over the past year. It had been a lot, and all of it had been worse than a bad breakup. How would a guy like Fletcher cope if he was faced with a threat like Silas and his revenants? I couldn’t bear the idea of handing the Samara pack another Alpha like Zeke—a sheep in wolf’s clothing.

Still, I wanted to be fair, and it was too early to completely rule the guy out.

I wanted to tread carefully. I wasn’t sure how much to reveal at this point, so I decided to focus on what we knew about Fletcher.

“Listen, Fletch, we don’t know much about you, and I don’t know how much you know about your history, but we found you on the family tree for the Samara pack’s Alphas,” I told him.

“I don’t like that,” he said quickly.

I frowned at him. “I don’t understand. How can you say you don’t like the Samara pack when you just said a second ago that you’d never even heard of them?”

Fletcher shook his head and held up his lanyard, which was bouncing against his bare chest. “What does this say?”

“What?” I asked, baffled.

“It says *Fletcher*, man. Not Fletch. I don’t like Fletch. Don’t call me that.”

“Okay,” I said slowly.

Fletcher’s expression was dark. “I had a bully in grade school who called me that. I don’t like it. Just don’t call me Fletch, okay?”

I had to fight not to groan—this guy was way too sensitive—but I nodded, playing along. “Sorry, man—*Fletcher*. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“It’s fine,” he said, letting his lanyard fall again. “Thanks for understanding.”

I glanced at Cali, then Jay, wondering what to say next. They looked a little taken aback, too. I let my mind run through what I knew, and what it all meant.

If Fletch—*Fletcher*—was a Rogue, and had friends and ex-boyfriends who were Rogues as well, then that could prove problematic for the Samaras. If word got out to the wider werewolf pipeline about the unstable Samara Alpha situation, then the pack could be completely overrun by power-hungry Rogues. God knew there were plenty of those kinds of bastards running around out there. And that would make the Lupo Finale in Thor’s Well look like some kind of crazed Thanksgiving flag football game.

I ran a hand through my hair, feeling frustrated as hell. I was stressed and worried, and mad as fuck. This wasn’t even my pack, but somehow this had turned into my problem. Thanks for that, Greyson and Ava.

Still, beneath the sharpness of my irritation, I knew that it would be better for all the packs for the Samaras to find a suitable Alpha and to stabilize. Keeping that pack safe made all the packs in the region safer. We were better able to defend ourselves when we were all strong.

I looked Fletcher over. He *looked* strong, and he had a good leader vibe. Vibe wasn’t enough, though, and I needed to know if this dangerous ex was the only thing that might keep us from exploring him as a viable candidate for Samara Alpha. That he was a Rogue wasn’t as big a deal. Greyson had been a Rogue, too.

Fletcher pulled out his phone and looked at the time. He cleared his throat. “Listen, I gotta get back to work before they notice I’m gone.”

I wasn’t done. “We should talk more,” I insisted.

Fletcher looked hesitant. “I don’t know…” he said, heading toward the door that led back to the store.

“We need to talk more,” I pressed.

His hand on the doorknob, he paused and rubbed his jaw. “Okay, listen. I have a break coming up. Meet me in the food court—over by the hot dog on a stick place. In twenty minutes.”

I nodded. “We’ll be there.”

# Episode 3494

**Greyson**

I could see the indecision on Elle’s face. And I understood it. She wanted to go out with Lucian, but she knew how I felt—she knew that I didn’t like Lucian, or the Vanguard pack. And she was right. There was a big part of me that wanted to snatch the letter from her hand, tear it to shreds, wrench open the door, and throw the pieces at Armin. I wanted to tell him to go and tell Lucian to fuck right the hell off. My hands curled into fists as I fought to hold back the impulse.

But I thought back to the conversation I’d just had with my mother, about taking a step back from Elle and her—I hated to even think it—*relationship* with Lucian. As much as I hated to admit it, my mother was probably right. I had no experience with this kind of thing, but I had a feeling I should probably trust my mother on this one.

As hard as it was, I needed to accept the fact that Elle was going to have to figure out her next move all on her own. If I kept trying to put my foot down, I was going to keep coming across as an ass. But—worse than that—if I kept pushing, I would risk losing Elle, who was becoming a strong, valuable member of the Redwood pack. That was the last thing I wanted. And to lose her to *Lucian* of all people? No way.

I took a deep breath. “It’s fine if you want to accept,” I told her, hoping I didn’t sound awkward. My words to my ears sounded stiff and rigid. “And I meant it when I apologized.”

Elle nodded and looked down at the letter. “But I am nervous, Greyson. I really do not know what this means.”

“You should just go with your gut, Elle,” I advised—going against my own gut as I spoke. “What are your instincts telling you to do? Do you *want* to say yes?”

She looked up at me and nodded, her eyes wide. “Yes.”

I forced myself to smile. “Then okay.”

I held out my hand for the letter, and when Elle handed it to me, I saw that there was a response card included in the same thick paper. I refused to allow myself to roll my eyes, though I really wanted to.

I handed Elle the card. “Yes or no,” I said, pointing. “Just circle one.”

She took the pen I offered and circled *yes.* Then she looked up at me with a questioning gaze.

“What do I do next?” she asked. “How do I tell him?”

“You need to give this to Armin. He’s waiting on the porch. I’ll go with you,” I said.

We walked to the door, where the guy was still waiting. When I opened the door, I felt myself grow resentfully impressed. Had the guy even *moved* while he’d been waiting? From his unmoving body to his stiff expression, he reminded me of the guards at Buckingham Palace.

Timidly, Elle put her response card on Armin’s silver platter.

Armin turned to Elle and bowed his head. “My prince sends his thanks.” He walked stiffly down the stairs and across the snowy yard, then disappeared into the trees.

Elle turned to me. “Thank you, Greyson,” she said. Her expression was nervous. “I hope you do not feel mad at me for accepting the offer from Lucian.”

“I’m not mad at you,” I assured her. That part was true. I wasn’t mad at Elle, but I sure as hell wasn’t happy with Lucian. “It’s not a problem.”

She smiled, clearly pleased, and headed into the house. I sighed as I looked after her. I guess I couldn’t blame her for being excited. In her mind, she’d just been invited on a date—with a prince. It was like a fairy tale. Thick books of fairy tales were the first thing she’d started reading on her own when Jacqueline had been teaching her, and she’d gotten really into them.

Lucian of the Vanguard pack was hardlyPrince Charming, but I wasn’t going to be the one to break the illusion for her. Not until I had to.

I scrubbed a hand across my jaw, feeling a day’s worth of beard, and headed back inside and into the kitchen. I needed something to eat, but I’d settle for some tea. Maybe what I really needed was just a moment to myself.

The kitchen was blessedly quiet, and I filled the kettle and put it on the stove to boil. I pulled out a tea bag and dropped it into a mug I pulled from the clean dishwasher. Then I stood, my eyes on the winter day out the window, waiting for the water to boil.

“Greyson.”

I looked over to see my mom come into the kitchen. “Hey. I’m just making some tea. Do you want some?”

“Sure. I just passed Elle in the hall. She looked over the moon. What happened?” she asked.

I pulled another clean mug from the dishwasher. “She just accepted Lucian’s request to court her.”

My mom raised an eyebrow. “To *court* her?”

“Yeah.”

“That sounds very romantic, I guess.” She thought for a moment. “Though I can’t recall ever hearing that word used in casual conversation. Like, *ever*.”

“I know.”

She gave me a keen look. “I assume you’re okay with this?”

I shrugged and grabbed the kettle from the stove as it began to whistle. “I’m not,” I admitted, “but I’m trying to follow your advice and let Elle sort this out herself. Though that doesn’t mean I’m going to let her go it completely alone. I’m going to keep kind of a gentle, guiding hand on the reins.”

My mother smiled and accepted the cup of tea I offered her. “That’s good, Greyson. Oh, there’s something else. I meant to tell you earlier.”

“What is it?” I asked, taking a drink of tea.

“The dance lessons. Could you do tomorrow?”

Oh shit, the dance lessons for our mother-son dance at the wedding. “Yeah, I think tomorrow should be fine.” I smiled. “I’m looking forward to it. I liked dancing with you at the New Year’s party.”

“Wonderful,” she said with a smile. “I’m going to go tell MacKenzie.”

She took her tea and she headed upstairs. I had to wonder why things had to be so last minute around here, but I knew I should probably just be glad that there were no demons to fight.

I was just adding a spoon of honey to my tea as Gabriel and Mikah walked into the kitchen.

“Hey, Greyson,” Gabriel said, grinning at me. “What’s up, man?”

“Hey,” I said. I was glad to see them. I knew I could be guaranteed a drama-free conversation with Gabriel and Mikah. “What have you two been up to?”

“Just taking a walk,” Mikah said.

“Admiring the property,” Gabriel added with a smirk. “Nice place you got. Be a shame if anyone let a vampire up in here,” he added, giving Mikah a nudge with his elbow.

Mikah rolled his eyes. “We’re trying to figure out our next move.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard some chatter that you might be leaving. Any of that true?” I’d sort of hoped it wasn’t. I’d come to really like Mikah and Gabriel. They were an unlikely couple, for sure—Mikah was so calm and steady, and Gabriel was such a wildcard—but somehow they made it work. I could see why Xavier and Gabriel had remained friends for such a long time, and I was glad that they had. Gabriel and Mikah had both been great assets while we were in New Orleans.

“Well, we don’t currently have anywhere we *need* to be,” Mikah said, “but we don’t want to overstay our welcome.”

“Come on,” I said, shaking my head. “You wouldn’t be overstaying anything. I really appreciate what you’ve done—we all do. You risked your lives to help Tabitha and Cali.”

“What? That little scuffle?” Gabriel joked. “We’ve faced worse. Once, there was this guy people called the Machete of Maine, which was weird because he definitely had a Boston accent. Anyway, he’d already killed the informant who’d dragged me there, and he was coming after me with his machete, which was just dripping with brain matter—”

“*Okay*,” Mikah said, cutting off Gabriel’s story. “I’m sure Greyson doesn’t need to hear that, Gabe.”

I laughed. Listening to them was like listening to an old married couple, but I liked it. “I’m sure Gabriel has a lot of stories he could tell.”

He smirked. “Don’t let Mikah’s cool exterior fool you—he’s got some stories, too. He’s one badass vamp.”

“I’m sure he is,” I said, looking down as my phone pinged with a message. It was an email, and the subject line read “OFFICIAL SUMMONS: WEREWOLF PACK SUMMIT.”

*Here we go.*

I opened the email to read the message.

*Werewolf Pack Summit*

*Location: Hells Canyon*

*Your presence is requested.*

# Episode 3495

**Xavier**

We headed toward the food court—or we tried to. Lola insisted on making a stop at a huge makeup store on the way over. But when we finally got to the food court, the smell of French fries and fried chicken was so overwhelming that I wondered if I’d rather go back to the cologne bomb clothing store. All in all, my senses were taking a beating.

“Okay, where is this guy?” I asked when we’d taken a seat near the hot dog on a stick stand.

“There he is,” Cali said, nodding. She grinned. “At least he has a shirt on this time.”

Lola sighed. “What a shame.”

Jay shook his head. “I’m sitting right here.”

Lola laughed.

I rounded on them. “Listen, jokers, we have to make a strong case if we’re going to go forward with this guy. Can you all at least *try* to keep it serious while we talk to him?”

“Fine,” Lola muttered.

Jay nodded. “You got it.”

“Hi,” Fletcher said, stopping in front of our table.

“Have a seat,” I said, gesturing to an empty chair.

He looked at it, then shook his head. “Not here.”

I rolled my eyes. “*You* told us to meet you here.”

“Too exposed,” was all Fletcher would say.

“Fine. Where do you want to go?” I demanded. I was starting to lose my patience.

“Follow me,” Fletcher said, and he took off. He walked us through the crowded food court and toward a back hallway.

The hallway itself was dimly lit, and it didn’t seem to have any doors leading off it. At the end, there were a set of double doors that said “Emergency Exit Only.” Fletcher opened them anyway and led us outside to a tiny loading area. It was quiet and cold and completely devoid of people.

“Okay,” he said, turning to us with a sigh of relief. “Now we can talk safely.”

He looked at me so expectantly that for a second, I was stumped, wondering where to begin. I didn’t exactly know what I wanted to say. I still didn’t want to reveal that the Samara pack I’d mentioned didn’t have an Alpha. I didn’t know enough about Fletcher to trust that he wouldn’t go blabbing that information to every Rogue he knew.

“We’re here on behalf of the Samara pack,” I began, figuring this was neutral enough. “They’re calling back people who have lineage connected to the pack. They want it to be united again.”

Fletcher took this in, mulling it over for a moment. “So you’re a Samara pack member?” He looked around. “You all are?”

“No.” Jay and I spoke at once.

“For the sake of the Samaras, you can consider me their spokesperson,” I explained.

Fletcher frowned. “Hang on. I’m confused. You’re a spokesman for the pack, but you’re not part of the pack? Are you… like… pack lawyers?”

Lola—apparently forgetting what I’d said about staying serious—giggled at this.

“Do we look like lawyers, buddy?” Jay asked.

Fletcher gave us a wary look. “I have to be honest with you guys—this all sounds a little weird.”

I needed to get the guy to believe us, but at the same time, I didn’t blame him for being suspicious. I probably would’ve been too, in his position. A bunch of strangers show up one day at your work, they know your name, and they start talking to you about a pack they have no connection to. I’d have probably told us to take a hike.

But then it hit me. I *did* have a connection to the Samara pack.

*Cali, I have to do something, and I need you to trust me.*

Cali glanced at me. *I do trust you, Xavier.*

I turned to Fletcher. “I’m mated to one of the Samara pack’s most powerful females—Ava.”

Fletcher narrowed his eyes for a long moment, taking this information in. Then he nodded slowly. “Why didn’t you lead with that? I guess that makes sense, then. I can see why you’re involved.”

I was relieved to hear Fletcher say that, but I looked over at Cali, wondering how she was reacting to what I’d just said. I hated to play the Ava-mate card, but I hadn’t known what else to do. There was so much at stake, and it felt like we would’ve lost Fletcher completely if we hadn’t been able to prove we had some skin in the game with the Samaras.

Cali was looking at Fletcher, her expression unreadable.

*I’m sorry about that*,I told her. *I needed this guy to trust us more.*

*It’s fine*, she said quickly.

But there was something in her eyes—a flicker of doubt—that made me think it wasn’t actually okay at all.

Great.

Fletcher shrugged. “I mean, I guess I’m open to this. I’d like to know more about where I come from. I’ve never been a part of a pack. Not that I can remember, anyway. I’ve always been more of a nomad. I’d like to meet this Ava person, and the rest of this pack my line was once a part of. However many decades ago that was.”

“That’s great, man,” I said. And I meant it. “We can arrange a meeting with the Samaras whenever you think you’re ready for—”

“There’s one problem,” Fletcher said.

“What?” I asked.

He shifted on his feet, looking uncomfortable. “I told you about my problems with Cameron. Where I go, that follows, you know? I don’t want to bring that trouble to the pack.”

Cali shot me a look. *Do you think this is even worth it?* she asked. *He seems so reluctant. Not to mention skittish as hell.*

I gritted my teeth. *I’ll handle this.*

I needed this meeting to happen between Fletcher and Ava. That was as far as I could take it. From there, *they* would have to move it forward. I didn’t know if this guy was Alpha material, but he’d been diplomatic, and I appreciated that he was showing genuine concern about endangering the rest of the pack with this ex-gone-bad situation. An Alpha looked out for his pack, so that wasn’t a bad instinct.

“We can probably help you with the Cameron situation,” I said.

“Yeah?” Fletcher asked, his eyes brightening. “That would be great, actually. It’s been a real pain, having that hanging over my head—”

“But only if you agree to meet with Ava,” I added. I needed to stay focused on why I was here, and it wasn’t to get this guy out of a jam.

Cali shot me a wide-eyed look, and I realized I needed to smooth over my demands a little.

“That way, you can feel things out for yourself,” I added, trying to sound casual. “Get to know the Samara pack a bit more. Connect to your roots. All that… *stuff*,” I finished, only just managing not to say “crap.”

Fletcher nodded. “I like that. It does sound good and all, man, but I’m still worried about Cameron. You just don’t understand. We had a *bad* breakup. You don’t know what I’m dealing with here.”

Little did he know I could imagine quite a lot as far as “bad breakups” were concerned.

“Okay, why don’t you tell me more about him, then?” I said, starting to feel annoyed. Cameron was a ghost in everything Fletcher said, so it was probably time I found out more.

Fletcher opened his mouth to answer, but before he could, his alarm when off. He pulled out his phone and shut it off.

“Shit, that’s the end of my break. We only get fifteen minutes, and then the shirt comes off again. I have to head back.” He looked up. “Maybe we can meet up again later? I can tell you more about Cameron? That’d be good, actually. It’ll give me more time to think.”

“Think about what?” Cali asked.

“This,” Fletcher said, gesturing vaguely. “This is a lot. I’m taking a real chance even meeting with you guys.” He stopped suddenly, like he’d only just realized the gravity of what he was doing.

Shit, was he going to change his mind?

Sensing this, Cali reached out and took his hand. “Hey, I know you have reasons to be cautious about this, Fletcher. Even fearful. But I can vouch for Xavier. I would trust him with my life. And I have.”

My whole body warmed at her words, and my heart seemed to swell with love.

“If Xavier says he can do something about Cameron, then he can and he will,” she went on.

Fletcher seemed to consider this for a long moment. “If Cameron even knew I was talking about him…” He looked around anxiously.

“He won’t find out,” Cali assured him.

“Xavier’s as good as his word,” Jay chimed in.

A little taken aback by this, I looked over to Jay, who nodded.

Fletcher took a deep breath, deciding. “Okay. I’m going to be at the speedway on Palumbo later.”

I nodded. “Then we’ll be there, too.”

But as Fletcher turned to hurry back inside, I had to wonder if the shirtless model was actually going to have the balls to show up.

# Episode 3496

Fletcher disappeared through the doors, and, when I shivered in the cold loading area, Xavier gestured for us to follow him back into the mall.

I spotted Fletcher on the far side of the food court, heading back toward his store.

“Maybe we should grab something to eat,” Lola suggested, looking around at the crowded tables.

“I’m not really that hungry,” I mumbled. I was still feeling weird and shaky after hearing Xavier call Ava his mate. Obviously, I knew all of that was still true, but that didn’t mean I had to ever get used to it. Or like it. And I’d never heard him say it like that—so bluntly, out loud, to a stranger. It had hit me harder than I would have thought.

“Thank you for helping me convince Fletcher to meet us later,” Xavier said quietly, stepping close to me.

I nodded. “Do you really think we should go to that speedway?”

Xavier looked at Jay, who shrugged.

“I don’t see why not,” Xavier said.

“Yeah, I agree. I mean, I like shopping fine, but there’s just something exciting about the idea of going to a speedway,” Lola added, her eyes bright.

Jay narrowed his eye suspiciously. “Have you ever even been to one?”

Lola laughed. “No, but it sounds like fun.”

Xavier looked edgy. “You know we’re not out here to have *fun*.” He eyed Lola and the shopping bags she had laddered up her arms. “Like this trip to the mall wasn’t supposed to be about shopping.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “You also got what you needed. Not everything has to be a binary choice, Xavier.”

Xavier looked at Jay, but Jay only shrugged.   
 “Hey, you know I support you, but I’m not getting in between you and my mate. I’m not suicidal,” he said helplessly with a wry grin.

Xavier shook his head, annoyed. “We need to get more information on Fletcher, and maybe some intel on this Rogue, Cameron.”

“I wonder if Cameron will actually show up tonight.” I thought about how worried Fletcher had seemed to be about the possibility.

“Whoever this Cameron guy is, he’d be an idiot to try anything in a public place like the speedway. Besides, there are a lot of us. We’ll easily have the numbers to take him if he does,” Xavier reasoned.

“That’s true,” I admitted. I was Fae, they were all wolves, and Lola had her vampire thing going on. How difficult could this thing be?

I thought about how we’d done something similar for Harlow. Was this our thing now? Casual intimidation?

“We should head back to the pack house,” Xavier said. “We can rest up and—”

“*No!*” Lola exclaimed.

We all looked at her in surprise.

She smiled sheepishly. “I’m hungry. I want to get some food and do some more shopping. My dads gave me a gift card for the holidays. And we’re here now, we might as well.”

Xavier didn’t look convinced, but Jay glanced at his watch and shrugged.

“It’s not the end of the world,” he said. “We do have plenty of time to kill before we have to be at the speedway. And I could use a new pair of sunglasses. I lost mine somewhere.”

“I could… also do with a shopping trip,” I said, thinking it might be fun to look for something new.

Lola took my hesitant interest for wild enthusiasm and grabbed my arm. “Come on!”

She pulled me across the food court and up to the Great Fries stand, where she ordered a large plate of steak fries for us to share. Then we were off, stopping at Nordstrom, three shoe stores in a row, another makeup store, and a small clothing store.

We were going through a rack of dresses when I looked up at Lola with a smile. “I forgot what this felt like.”

Lola looked over at the velvet dress I had in my hands. “Yeah, velvet is nice, but kind of fancy. Are you going to the Oscars or something?”

I shook my head. “No, not the dress. Just going out, having fun. Even if Xavier says that’s not why we’re here, I’m glad we’re doing it.”

She smiled. “Me, too. And I think you should try this on.” She held up a dress—an epically short blue bodycon with cold shoulders.

My eyes went wide. “Lola, that thing’s going to show more than it covers.”

She stared at me. “Um, yeah. I know. That’s the point. Xavier’s wolf is going to go crazy when he sees you wearing this.”

She waggled her eyebrows in a way that was supposed to be suggestive but was actually so stupid it made both of us laugh.

“Come on. Just try it,” she urged. “We’re having fun, right?”

“Right,” I said, taking the dress. It *would* be fun to try it on, so I headed to a dressing room.

But when I took off my shirt, I happened to turn, and when I caught a glimpse of the Seluna scar in the mirror, my high spirits crashed. That was all it took for me to remember reality and everything that came with it. How could I ever expect to feel normal when that *thing* was always going to be on me, marking me? Reminding me of how *not* normal I really was?

“Cali!” Lola sang out. “I’ve brought more dresses for you to try. How does that blue one fit?”

I shook my head and pulled my shirt back on, then opened the door to the dressing room. “I don’t know. On second thought, I don’t think I want it. I’m going to head out and grab a drink from the coffee cart outside the store, okay?”

Lola looked a little surprised. “All right, meet ya over there.”

I headed out before she could ask any questions, and when I stepped into the mall’s thoroughfare, I found Xavier waiting on a bench.

“What are you doing out here?” I asked, walking toward him.

“Waiting for you.”

“I thought you were with Jay.”

He rolled his eyes. “I was, but I couldn’t stand waiting around while he tried on literally every pair of sunglasses in that hut. Jay’s my friend, but I have my limits.”

I smiled. “Well, I’m glad to see you. Walk with me to get a drink?”

He nodded, and we walked over. There was no line, so I stepped right up to the girl running the cart.

“An iced caramel macchiato,” I said. “A large, please. Xavier, do you want anything?”

He shook his head.

When the girl managed to tear her eyes away from Xavier, she smiled at me. “Coming right up.”

We stepped to the side, and I noticed that Xavier looked at little uncomfortable.

“Hey, relax. She’s not the first girl I’ve seen check you out,” I said, laughing.

“No, it’s not that,” he said. “I was just thinking… I know you said it was okay, but I saw how you reacted to my comment about Ava being my mate.” He shook his head. “I should have given you more of a heads-up that I was going to say it, but I was trying to think on my feet. I didn’t want to lose Fletcher.”

“I know that. Don’t worry about it,” I said quietly.

Xavier took my hand. “But I do worry about it,” he said, leaning toward me. “What I said was a tactic to convince Fletcher, Cali. Nothing more.”

I nodded. “I know.”

“And once all this Samara Alpha business is handled once and for all, I’ll finally be able to walk away from it, and we can go back to focusing on just the two of us.” He squeezed my hand. “That’s what I want. More than anything.”

I smiled. “That’s what I want, too.”

It was, and hearing Xavier say that really put my mind at ease. It had been upsetting to hear him talk about Ava as his mate—even though they still technically *were* mated. More upsetting than I would have thought possible. I knew I was probably still feeling sensitive because of the nightmare I’d had where Seluna had taunted me about having two mates. Add that to meeting Fletcher under such strange circumstances, and I guess I was feeling a little edgy.

“Cali? Iced caramel macchiato?”

The girl from the coffee kiosk was holding my drink out, and I took it with a thanks. But as soon as I grabbed it, I realized she’d been *really* generous with the whipped cream.

“Uh, did you order whipped cream with a side of coffee?” Xavier asked, eyeing the drink.

“Shut it,” I muttered.

Xavier laughed and dipped his finger into the cream, then painted a mustache on my upper lip.

“Xavier!” I squealed, laughing in spite of myself. “Oh no!”

Between the laughing and the nearly impenetrable cream, I managed to spill the iced drink down my sweater.

“I’m sorry,” Xavier said, still chuckling.

I glared at him. “Just hold this, will you?” I said, shoving the sticky cup at him.

I grabbed the hem of my sodden sweater and pulled it off, but my sticky fingers managed to grab the tank underneath, and before I knew it, I was standing in the middle of the mall—topless.

# Episode 3497

**Greyson**

As I stared down at the screen of my phone, my first thought was: *How the hell did the summit council people get my email address?*

Was it really from them? It was *possible* that it was a fake, but it definitely looked official.

“Hells Canyon,” I said out loud, running a hand through my hair.

Gabriel whistled. “Hells Canyon?”

“Yeah. You know it?” I asked, looking up.

“Sure. I once captured this killer who’d escaped down there. It was by the Snake River in Hells Canyon. I disguised myself as a fishing guide.”

Mikah looked surprised. “You know how to fish?”  
 Gabriel stared at him. “What? No, I don’t have a clue. Mikah, I wasn’t *actually* a fishing guide! I was trying to catch a killer! Were you even listening to the story?”

“What’s this about Hells Canyon?” Ravi asked, walking into the kitchen.

“That’s where the summit is,” I said. I looked back down at the email. “‘All attendees much register online in advance. Tents are provided on a first come, first served basis.’” *So, bring my own tent, I guess.* I didn’t want Cali to be stuck out in the cold. “And then there’s some stuff about prepping for the weather.”

I scanned down to where the email talked about how it was January in Oregon, and basically not to be an idiot about it.

“Then there’s the clause about there being no unsanctioned pack violence for the duration of the event.” I shook my head with a snort. “It’s like a werewolf didn’t even write this thing.”

“What do you mean?” Ravi asked, pulling himself up onto a counter stool and reaching for an apple from the bowl in the center of the island.

“Think about it, man,” I said. “When that many werewolves get together in one place, it can lead to all hell breaking loose.”

Ravi shrugged and bit into the apple. “I guess that’s why they chose that location, right? Hells Canyon seems like a fitting gathering place for werewolves.”

I looked up. “I guess I’m going to register.”

“Man, now I want to come, too,” Gabriel said with a grin. “Hells Canyon, a bunch of werewolves, tents on a first come, first served basis… That sounds like a good time. Think of the chaos.” He leaned close and looked over my shoulder at the email. “And what’s that about a mixer?” he asked, pointing.

I hadn’t noticed until he pointed, but I immediately rolled my eyes. “You’ve got to be freaking kidding me. ‘The Redwood pack has been nominated to co-host one of the mixers.’ *Mixers?*”

“There’s a hyperlink with more information,” Gabriel said.

“I can see it,” I muttered, clicking on the link.

It took me to a website with more information about the summit. It looked like a standard convention website, with information about reservations, policies, and events. I navigated around for a moment and had to admit that it looked pretty legit.

The Werewolf Pack Summit had been held for hundreds of years, but I had to imagine it hadn’t always been like this. It looked as though summit meetings had now entered into the high-tech era. I supposed it had just been a matter of time.

I clicked on the link for “Past Summits,” and it took me to a gallery of photos of werewolves hanging out around fires, drinking, helping each other pitch tents, and speaking seriously.

Then, with a sinking feeling, I clicked on the “Events and Mixers” link.

“‘Each day of the summit will feature a brand-new array of talks, workshops, panels, and break-out sessions,’” I read out loud. “‘Each night will give attendees an opportunity to let down their hair and throw back their heads to howl at the moon, with mixers and gatherings to encourage inter-pack friendship and continued cooperation.’”

Gabriel and Ravi high fived, earning a glare from me.

“I don’t want this whole thing to just be a party. I’ve had my fill of parties after the Vanguard New Year’s Eve fiasco.” I shook my head. “I thought the pack summit was supposed to be more serious, but… I don’t know. Maybe I was wrong. Or maybe it’s changed this year.”

“Find which mixer you’re in charge of,” Gabriel urged.

“‘Full Moon Fever,’” I read dully. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

But Gabriel was laughing. “I like it! It has kind of a sexy vibe to it.”

“And I look like the kind of guy that knows how to plan those things?” I asked doubtfully.

“What do you serve at a mixer?” Ravi asked. “I don’t know if I’ve ever even been to one… Do they offer any suggestions?”

I glanced through the site. “I don’t see any suggestions, but I think it’s just another word for a party. You know, finger food and booze. Regular stuff.”

If I had to provide stuff for a party, maybe I could get Big Mac to give me a family discount on her moonshine. That had been a big hit at the last party.

I shook my head. “I’m going to get the pack registered. Gabriel, I bet you could go if you wanted to. Sneak in.”

“Being the only Rogue at the Summit is a pass from me,” he said. “And Mikah too. A vampire is an even worse idea.” Yeah, a vampire at a werewolf event? That would certainly be something. Something not *good.*

I looked at the website again. The registration process seemed straightforward, but with all this new stuff they’d added, I wondered exactly how many people were going to be at this mixer. The Summits were usually crowded affairs.

The point of these summits was to present a really strong face as a pack, and I wanted to take a strong core team who would be committed to doing just that. If I took too few members, that could backfire. But if I took too many, it could turn into a shitshow.

“See, I don’t think a mixer *is* a party,” Mikah was saying. “I think it’s a different kind of get-together. More civilized, quieter music, wine—no hard liquor.”

“That’s crazy,” Gabriel said, shaking his head. “The point of a mixer is to *mix*, right? How are people supposed to do that with just wine? Come on.”

“I’m with Gabriel,” Ravi said.

I left them to debate the semantic differences of mixers versus parties and went to find Rishika. I spotted her in the living room, reading a book.

“Hey, I got an email about the summit,” I told her.

“Oh yeah? Where is it?” she asked, putting her book down.

“Hells Canyon. Would you find out everything you can about the place?”

She nodded. “Sure thing. I’ll let you know what I dig up.”

“Thanks.” I turned toward the study, thinking I should sit down and start making a to-do list, but I paused when I heard a knock on the front door.

When I opened it, I found Lucian standing on the porch wearing a perfectly tailored suit and tie, and shiny leather shoes. They were spotless, and looking out at the slush-covered front yard, I had to wonder if he’d levitated over here.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I asked bluntly. Then I remembered the letter. “Oh, right. You certainly wasted no time—Elle *just* sent her response to your letter.”

“Greyson, only a fool delays in matters of romance,” Lucian said with his usual royal affect, but I could tell he seemed nervous despite all the bravado.

I managed to not roll my eyes at this, but it was a true struggle. I looked the guy over warily. I still didn’t know what game he was playing here. He looked sincere enough, but I didn’t buy it. I’d known Lucian for too long and seen him pull too much shit to be able to trust him at all.

“Elle’s not ready yet,” I said shortly.

“By all means, I’m more than happy to wait for her.” He smiled up at me. “Greyson Evers—for that woman, I would wait here until the sun ceased to shine and the moon ceased to glow.”

I stared at him. “Yeah, I don’t think it’s going to be that long. Maybe, like, fifteen minutes.”

“Fine,” he said. “Now tell me, are you going to invite me in, or shall I stand out here?”

I pulled the door open. “Just come in and sit down,” I said with bad grace.

Lucian stepped into the foyer, and I gestured toward the living room.

“Have a seat or whatever. I’ll tell her you’re here.”

“I admit I’m glad you answered the door, Greyson,” Lucian said, turning to look at me.

“Oh yeah?” I asked warily. “Why is that?”

“I could use your help with Arielle,” he admitted.

I scoffed, ready to say *absolutely not*. It was bad enough that I was stepping back and letting this happen—there was no way I was going to encourage this, on any level. But Lucian didn’t seem to notice the look on my face, and he kept talking.

“Arielle is such a unique woman, and I’m overwhelmed by the idea of courting her. I just want to ensure that I’m doing it right, and I want to observe all the proper formalities—”

“What the hell are you talking about, Lucian?” I asked, tired of listening to him talk like he was in a nineteenth century romance novel.

He looked at me, beaming. “We shall require a chaperone for this, our first date. Will you do the honors?”

# Episode 3498

A wave of horror slammed into me.

*Oh my god. I’m basically flashing the entire food court!*

Heat rushed into my cheeks, and I tried to jerk my sweater back on—at least to get the protection of my tank top, if it wasn’t too saturated with sugary coffee—but the whole thing was a wet, soaked mess that smelled like coffee (nice) that dripped onto my skin (not so nice) and sort of bundled up in a way that made it almost impossible to pull back on without taking the time to pull both items of clothing off entirely, separate them, maybe wring them out, and try to put them back on individually.

In my mortified, panicked state, I couldn’t even begin to process that. Every millisecond that I couldn’t get the stained, sloppy fabric over my head was another millisecond that I was exposed with practically the whole mall looking at me and laughing.

And they *were* laughing—that wasn’t my imagination.

People around me snickered or snorted under their breath. It was strange—normally the food court was awash in a dull roar of sound, but it was like the entire place went still the moment I accidentally exposed myself. I heard every sound. Every gasp. Every hushed “oh my god!” and “oh shit!” and “poor thing.” They were clearly embarrassed for me, which didn’t actually make me feel even a little bit better.

“Take it off!” a man yelled suggestively from across the food court. Xavier growled and moved to help me wrestle my clothing back on.

“I’m trying,” I whimpered. “It’s just all stuck together.”

He yanked at the mess of fabric, but all it did was accidentally jerk my arm out of the tank top/sweater combination entirely, exposing my entire left side, shoulder, and arm.

“Oh my god!” A woman from a nearby table gasped. “I love your tattoo! Where did you get it?”

A whole new wave of horror slammed into me. It wasn’t a tattoo. She was talking about the Seluna mark. Like it was something I’d chosen for myself. Like it was a fun, pretty design and not a constant reminder of one of the most traumatic things that had ever happened to me, one of the darkest times in my life, and something I was still trying to come to terms with.

I’d have preferred to run naked through the entire fucking mall rather than let some stranger see my Seluna mark and act like it hadn’t taken so much from me. My shoulders curled forward, and hot tears pricked at my eyes.

Xavier went into full-on protector mode, curving his body around mine to shield me as best he could. I noticed he was focusing on covering my shoulder more than anywhere else, and my heart swelled. He understood exactly what was most important to me right now.

“It’s none of your fucking business!” he snarled at the woman.

She gaped. “I was just complimenting her!”

“She doesn’t want your fucking compliments right now.” He tugged off his coat and wrapped it around my shoulders. Some of my tension loosened. It was a palpable relief to have the Seluna mark covered for now, even if I still hadn’t managed to pull my shirt and sweater back on. I tugged the fabric off my other arm and let it fall onto the food court table with a wet slap, then tightened Xavier’s coat around me.

“Hey!” the guy from across the food court called. “I was enjoying the show!”

“Show’s fucking over,” Xavier snapped with enough authority that the entire food court rippled into dead silence. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen him so angry, especially around a bunch of humans.

*Please don’t pull a Tony.* The shouting guy might’ve been an asshole, but he didn’t deserve to die just because he was a chauvinist pig.

The attendant at the coffee cart approached, looking apologetic. “Here’s a new coffee. On the house. I’m so sorry about your shirt.”

“Um, thanks.” I tried to smile as Xavier escorted me away.

Once we were out of view of the food court, I took a long pull from my coffee and sighed. “Sorry about that. I think I might have overreacted a bit back there.”

Xavier put his arm around me and pulled me close. “You have nothing to apologize for. All those assholes back there should be apologizing to you.” He growled again, clearly still pissed off.

I wasn’t exactly pleased myself, especially with the guy who’d seemed to enjoy the show I’d given him. I really didn’t want to think about it. As it was, I’d have a hard time showing my face at this mall ever again.

“I’m just surprised,” I said. “Given my experience with werewolves, I should be much more comfortable being almost naked,” I tried to joke. It fell flat, but Xavier smiled anyway.

He stopped me with a hand on my arm and brushed his lips over mine. “You have no idea how goddamn sexy you look in my coat, do you?”

I looked down at the bulky fabric that dwarfed my frame. “Are you sure about that?”

“Mm.” He pulled me in close. “Never been more sure of anything in my life.”

I smiled.

“How about we get some donuts to go with your sweater?” he joked.

I groaned, but I couldn’t help laughing. “Too soon.” I looked down at the tangled sweater/tank top lump in my hands. “I can’t really wear this now, can I? It’s a soggy mess, and it smells like coffee, and I’m sticky from just holding it, and your coat is way too big for me, by the way.” I pulled in a breath. “People are going to laugh at me.”

“Hey.” He looped an arm around my waist. “You shouldn’t care what those assholes think. They’re idiots, and they’re cruel. I think—no, I *know*—you’re sexy as fuck. And if we weren’t in public, I’d take my sweet time peeling you out of that coat.”

I smiled. “Really?”

He nodded. “I bet you taste amazing right now. Coffee and Cali, my two favorite flavors.”

He was sweet, and it helped me feel just a tiny bit better about the whole thing. I grimaced at the sticky sweater in my hand. “What am I going to do? I don’t want to carry this around all day, or keep wearing your coat like a poncho.”

“I’ve got a solution: let’s do what Lola and Jay are doing—go shopping.”

We stopped at one of my favorite clothing stores, and Xavier squeezed my hand as we headed to the women’s section. “Just pick out whatever you want,” he said. “You can wear it out of the store.”

I shook my head. “You don’t need to get me anything.”

“I want to. Plus, if you keep waltzing around in my coat, I’m not going to be able to control myself.” He winked. “So put me out of my misery and find something you like, okay?”

A rueful smile tugged at my lips. “I’ll do it, but only to put you out of your misery.”

I headed over a rack of sweaters and started flipping through the options. At this point, any sweater that wasn’t soaked with coffee was a good one, but there *were* some really cute options.

*I think I actually have a gift card for this place…*

I pulled out a sweater in a soft shade of pink. “I’ll try this one on.”

“I’ll show you to the dressing rooms.”

“Oh, I know where they—”

He brushed another kiss over my lips. “I want to *help*.”

We passed the register on the way to the dressing rooms, where some Karen was going off at the cashier. Something about her coupon being expired. In any case, the woman was taking up all the oxygen in the room, so it was no surprise when we made it to the dressing rooms and found nobody there.

I headed into the first dressing room I came across. Xavier tried to follow me in, but I held up a hand to stop him. “Hold it. We might get in trouble. Remember the last time we went into a dressing room together? We got in trouble.”

He shrugged. “Nobody’s going to notice.”

He pulled me into the dressing room and closed the door behind us. A split second later, he was on me—his lips, his hands, his chest pressed against mine…

“I guess… I should wear your coat more often,” I said breathlessly when we broke apart.

He kissed a hot trail down my throat, tugging the coat off and letting it pool on the floor. “Fuck, we’d never leave the house.”

Laughter bubbled up in my throat, but it died there when I caught the reflection of the Seluna mark in the mirror. Panic and horror replaced any lust I’d been feeling, but I tried to cover. I pushed Xavier out of the dressing room with a smile. “I’ll be right there. Give me two seconds. I’ve already embarrassed myself enough for one day.”

I closed the door on him and turned back to the dressing room. My stomach clenched with unease as I thought of seeing the Seluna mark in my last dressing room foray with Lola.

I slipped the new sweater over my head. Footsteps sounded close by, stopping right next to me.

*Xavier. I should have locked the door.*

I tugged the sweater down and turned to face him, and a gasp slipped through my lips.

It wasn’t Xavier. It was Seluna.

# Episode 3499

**Greyson**

I blinked at Lucian. *He wants me to* what*?*

He had to be joking, right? *Who the hell asks for an escort to go on a date?* It wasn’t like Lucian made a habit of asking for things. He certainly hadn’t asked before holding a meeting with the Alphas, or commandeering our New Year’s Eve plans, or kidnapping Cali all those times.

But the stupid princeling looked one hundred percent serious. “Will you be our chaperone?” he pressed. “I want to do things properly. I was serious about my intentions to court Miss Arielle, and I cannot court her without a chaperone.”

“I appreciate that you’re taking this seriously,” I said, though privately I wasn’t sure I appreciated anything Lucian-related right now. “But this isn’t the nineteenth century. If you want to date Elle, and she wants to date you too, then you don’t need an escort. Are you trying to recreate one of those historical romances? Do you think you’re that grumpy guy from *Pride and Prejudice*?”

“Fitzwilliam Darcy is a fictional character, whereas I am standing in front of you with a very serious desire to court a member of your pack, so no.”

I blinked. “Fitz—who?”

It seemed to require every ounce of Lucian’s self-control not to roll his eyes. “The *grumpy guy*.”

“Oh.” I shrugged. “Well, my point still stands. If you want to date Elle, that’s between the two of you, and it’s really not my place to get involved.”

The words were almost physically painful to push past my tongue. I had to recall my mother’s advice, over and over and over again. All my instincts and personal experience with Lucian screamed at me to get him the hell away from Elle, to throw him out on his ass and tell him to never so much as look at her again.

But my mom was right. It wasn’t my place to interfere, and making Lucian taboo could only worsen the situation. Elle was persistent in her own way, and she’d already expressed interest in Lucian. I had no doubt that if I stood in her way, I’d only be making things worse.

“But you’re her Alpha,” Lucian protested.

“And if I had reason to worry about her safety, or if this was somehow a pack matter, then I’d get involved.”

Lucian just shook his head. “I’m afraid I can’t take no for an answer. Your trust in me means a great deal, but I can’t in good conscience court Arielle without a chaperone. It wouldn’t be proper.”

*We’re going in circles, here.*

It wasn’t Lucian I trusted, and I was fairly certain his conscience—if he even had one—was anything but good. Still, this wasn’t my place. How was I supposed to give Elle the space to pursue a personal relationship if I was babysitting the two of them?

*Oh. Actually, this arrangement might not be so bad.*

Now that I thought about it, chaperoning was actually a simple solution to my reservations. I wouldn’t trust Lucian alone with a pet goldfish, much less a member of my pack. I hadn’t wanted the two of them alone to begin with. This way, I’d be able to see firsthand what Lucian was really up to. I’d be able to keep tabs on his behavior toward Elle without actually getting involved.

*I can be like the Trojan horse. The original. Not the condom.*

I wasn’t rushing to sign up to chaperone their entire relationship, if that was the kind of thing Lucian was looking for, but I might not get a better chance to figure out what the hell his game was.

“Fine.” I nodded. “I’ll chaperone, but only if Elle approves.”

Lucian’s face lit up. “Fantastic! I’m so glad you’ve finally seen reason.”

*Right. Reason.*

My own smile was strained. “What can I say? You convinced me.”

Just then, Elle came down the stairs.

Lucian’s jaw dropped, a breath rattled out of him, and he swept into a low bow. “Lady Arielle, you look the very picture of feminine radiance.”

I did a double take, both at Elle and at Lucian. Lucian had been a pompous asshole from the moment we’d met, but this was taking things to a whole new level.

*Did he have a stroke or something? Maybe his giant dick statue crumbled and he was hit in the head with a bit of stone?*

Not that I wasn’t also surprised by Elle’s appearance. She was wearing a long-sleeved grey dress that hugged her curves and offset the golden-red of her long hair. *For someone who prefers to run wild through the woods, Elle looks like she could be a fashion model.*

I could see now why Cali was jealous of Elle from time to time, especially when she’d still been adjusting to human behavioral norms. No wonder Lucian found her “interesting.”

Seeing her like this, less the half-wild new human and more of a woman in her own right, I was more convinced than ever that playing chaperone was the right call for now.

Elle was surprisingly capable—something all too easy for me to forget—but Lucian was a powerful Alpha and much more conniving than he let on. I still couldn’t shake the feeling that every time our paths crossed, it was all part of some elaborate scheme, and Lucian was already several moves ahead of me. I wouldn’t abandon Elle to fall into whatever trap the princeling might have laid.

She stopped at the foot of the stairs, her brows pinching in confusion. She looked from Lucian, who was still folded in half in his deep bow, to me. “Lucian? Already?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but the princeling snapped upright with a smile. “I’m afraid I couldn’t wait once I received your acceptance, and now I’m glad I didn’t. You look… breathtaking. Like a full moon in a starlit August sky.”

Elle blinked, and I resisted the urge to gag.

*Fucking hell, the guy is laying it on thick. Is she seriously going to fall for this Jane Austen shit?*

Lucian had the market cornered on being a fancy asshole, but he really wasn’t doing a great job impressing me with his “courting” skills. Then again, I supposed I wasn’t the one he was trying to impress.

*At least he’s not using a British accent.*

Elle’s confusion only seemed to deepen, and she looked to me for help.

“He’s here for you early,” I said. “Are you okay with that?”

She nodded. “That is fine.”

Lucian jumped in again. “Wonderful! I’m so pleased that you’re amenable to my visit, Arielle. If you’d like, perhaps we can go somewhere to talk? And maybe enjoy some finger foods?” He added the last bit with a questioning glance my way. Because apparently playing chaperone also meant I’d be providing snacks.

I groaned but nodded toward one of the dens. As they headed in, my mother left the room, and she met us in the hallway. She looked Lucian and Elle over before smiling. “I see someone has a visitor.”

I sighed. “Lucian, I’m sure you’ve met my mother, Sabine. Lucian is here to visit with Elle.”

“And your son is being our chaperone—so there’s no need to worry about my intentions,” Lucian said, puffing out his chest.

*What the fuck…?*

To my mother’s credit, she acted like this *wasn’t* the craziest shit she’d seen all day. “It’s very good to see you again, Lucian.”

The princeling and Elle continued into the den, and I turned to my mother. “See what I’m putting up with, here? It’s a bad idea, right?”

She laughed. “Probably. But you still need to be neutral and stay out of it.”

“I’ll try. Do you think you could bring some snacks over while I keep an eye on them?”

“Sure thing.”

I rejoined Lucian and Elle in the den. The princeling was sitting across from Elle, his attention absolutely riveted to her in a way I hadn’t seen him behave with anyone but Seluna. Which, now that I thought about it, didn’t exactly bode well for their budding courtship.

“It’s so wonderful to see you again, Arielle. I haven’t been able to think of anything else at all since we last saw each other. And might I say, you look even more lovely than I remembered.”

Elle, for her part, seemed reserved in the face of Lucian’s flattery. Maybe even a little confused. She kept fiddling with the long skirt of her dress, and I wondered if she was on the verge of tearing it off and running into the woods.

I wouldn’t have blamed her. Lucian was so full of it, it was a wonder she’d managed to stay in the room this long.

She kept stealing glances at me, sitting at the other end of the room. Each time she looked my way, her brows knit tighter together and her shoulders curled forward. She looked deeply uncomfortable—not that Lucian had noticed.

“Sorry,” I said, interrupting his speech. “Elle, is something wrong?”

“I am just confused,” she confessed. “If this is a date, why are you here? I thought you wanted to let me go on a date. If you are here too, is this like what you do with Cali and Xavier? Am I a *due destini* mate?”

A beat of shocked silence rippled through the room before Lucian laughed—loudly. Too damn loudly.

I pulled in a breath. “I’m not on this date with you. I’m just chaperoning, which means I’m staying nearby to make sure that…” I hesitated, trying to figure out how to explain this concept to Elle without inviting more questions. “I’m here to make sure everyone is comfortable. Lucian asked me to stay, because he wants you to be comfortable. I’m not here to interfere with your date, so just pretend I’m not here.”

My mother came in with a tray of finger sandwiches and fruit. *Thank god.*

“Allow me to help you with that.” Lucian stood to take the tray and set it on the table in front of Elle. “This looks divine—a spread worthy of the Vanguard palace.”

*Look at the princeling, trying to impress everyone with his manners.* It would’ve had a much better chance of working if he hadn’t made our lives a living hell for the past few months.

“I’m glad you like it. Enjoy.” My mom gave me a warm smile before slipping out of the room.

“Greyson, would you like a sandwich? Perhaps some of these delightful grapes?” Lucian offered.

“Nope.” I stayed where I was—pretty much as far away from the couple that I could get without actually leaving the room.

Elle turned to Lucian. “Why do you want to go on a date with me?”

Lucian set down a grape, wiped his hands daintily on a napkin, cleared his throat, and then dropped down on one knee. “Because you, Arielle, are my mate.”

# Episode 3500

I jumped back with a gasp, then slapped my hands over my mouth. *Seluna again? Why the heck won’t she just leave me alone?*

Then I realized with a lurch that Seluna wasn’t in front of me—she was behind me. I spun around and skittered backward, only to realize I was surrounded by mirrors. And my terrified reflection was surrounded by Selunas. In a room like this, the real Seluna could’ve been anywhere.

My magic swelled inside me, like I was already subconsciously prepared to blast Seluna into another dimension. I reined it in—I couldn’t go around blasting the whole department store.

A light tapping sound caught my attention, and I swiveled around again and let out another gasp. This time, I was too shocked to try to suppress it.

Seluna was staring back at me from the other side of the mirror. And not only that—she was pounding on the surface of the mirror.

I backed away until I hit the dressing room wall. What the hell was this? Had I managed to stumble across the one dressing room in the world that also served as a portal to… what? The spirit world? The demon world?

Seluna’s eyes locked with mine. “*HELP ME!*”

She banged on the mirror like her life depended on it, but it didn’t give. Despite all her strength, the flimsy dressing room mirror didn’t so much as crack. Still, terror coursed through my veins, and I sidled toward the dressing room door, my back still pressed against the wall.

A scream was ready to tear its way out of my mouth when the door suddenly swung open, knocking me toward Seluna. I stumbled and braced myself, preparing to be sucked into that awful mirror realm, but then a pair of warm hands wrapped around my arms. I forced my eyes open, only to see Xavier standing in front of me.

“Cali, what’s wrong?” he asked.

I blinked rapidly, my breath coming in short gasps. “Don’t you s-see her?”

He frowned and looked around the dressing room and its various mirrors. “I just see the two of us.”

It was then that I realized Seluna was gone. The only thing staring back at me in the mirror was my reflection, and Xavier’s.

*What the hell was that? Another hallucination? Or… Or was that really Seluna?*

My stomach dropped. Neither explanation was good. Seluna was dead, and her ashes had been delivered to the demon world. I wasn’t supposed to be having hallucinations anymore. She wasn’t supposed to be able to contact me. Was this just one of the echoes Big Mac had talked about?

It didn’t feel like an echo. It had felt *very* real.

Xavier turned back to me, searching my face. “You’re pale. What happened? Who’s ‘her’?”

I swallowed loudly, unsure if I should say anything. What could I even say? “Sorry, I thought Seluna was talking to me through the mirror”? I didn’t really know *what* had happened. If I could trust my own senses. I didn’t want to worry him when I didn’t even know if there was anything to worry *about*.

I forced a smile. “I, uh, saw myself in the sweater and it surprised me. Classic Cali, am I right?”

His brows knit together. He wasn’t buying it. “How about I stay in here with you while you finish up?”

“Oh, you don’t have to—”

“I insist.”

Relief rushed through me. I didn’t want to make a scene or worry him, but I also didn’t want to be alone in here again. I’d already seen enough of Seluna to last several lifetimes.

I turned back to the mirror and let out a shaky breath. The only thing staring back at me was my own reflection, and I realized belatedly that even though I’d been wearing the new sweater for several minutes now, I still hadn’t taken a proper look at it.

*Right. That’s what I’m supposed to be doing right now. Trying on a new sweater that’s not soaked through with coffee.*

It was strange to think that only a few minutes ago, my near-flashing in the food court had been the worst thing to happen to me today. The thing I thought I’d never be able to live down. I’d forgotten all about it the second I’d seen Seluna staring back at me.

*Focus, Cali!* I snapped my eyes shut and pulled in a deep breath. *Don’t think about Seluna! Just look at the sweater. Do you like it or not?*

A hand rested on my shoulder, and I flinched, my eyes popping open. It was just Xavier. Of course it was just Xavier.

His thumb brushed over where the Seluna mark stood out on my shoulder, his skin separated from it only by the knit fabric of the sweater. “Is this what’s bothering you? Is that why you wanted me out of the dressing room?”

I forced another smile. “No, I kicked you out because I know what happens when the two of us wind up alone in a dressing room together.”

His reflection smirked at me in the mirror, and I watched and felt him pressed a kiss to the side of my throat. “I think that’s all the more reason why I should stay. Maybe you should try on a few more sweaters? Give me a private fashion show?”

“I, um…” I let out a breathy, weak laugh. “That sounds…”

Awful. It sounded awful. Not because I didn’t want to have a good time with Xavier, but because I absolutely hated the idea of spending any more time in this dressing room, in front of these mirrors, than I absolutely had to. Just looking at the mirrors during this conversation had me wincing and on edge.

“I think this sweater will do the trick,” I finally said. “Why don’t we try to find Lola and Jay?”

“Cali.” He gently turned me to face him and cornered me against one of the mirrors. “What’s really going on? I came in here, and you acted like you’d seen a ghost. What aren’t you telling me?”

I sighed. I hadn’t fooled him at all. He was just being patient with me, waiting for me to tell him eventually. “It’s really nothing.”

“You’re upset. It’s not nothing.”

“I don’t want you to worry,” I hedged.

“Why don’t you let me decide that for myself, huh?” He tilted my chin up so our eyes met. “Tiger, talk to me.”

“I just saw Seluna,” I blurted out.

His brows rose. “In here?”

I nodded. “In the mirror.” I told him what I’d seen—the way she’d been pleading for help and pounding on the other side of the mirror. “I don’t know what’s going on. If she’s even real. Why would she want my help? Doesn’t she hate me?” I shook myself. “Isn’t she supposed to be dead and gone? Why am I still seeing her?”

He shook his head. “I wish I knew. Here. Show me your shoulder.”

I turned around, and he tugged down the neckline of my sweater to examine the scar.

I watched his face in the mirror, but he didn’t seem surprised by what he saw.

He lifted his eyes to meet mine. “It doesn’t look any better, but it doesn’t look any worse either. Maybe it was just the shock of seeing it from so many different angles?”

I bit my lip. “Yeah, maybe.”

He righted my sweater and turned me to face him again. “I’m not discounting what you saw, but I think we’ve both learned that if it’s something worth worrying about, it will eventually reveal itself. All the more reason why you need to come to me if it ever happens again, okay? You don’t need to try to carry this on your own. I’m here for you. Always.”

I threw my arms around him, grateful for his undying support. I brushed a kiss over his lips and smiled. “I think I’ll buy this sweater. It looks nice, right?”

Amusement shone in his eyes. “I think I like you better without it, but yeah. It’s nice.”

I playfully slapped his chest, and as we headed to the cashier, he stopped by a rack of men’s jeans. “I wouldn’t mind getting a few more pairs. I lost some of mine in New Orleans.”

“Oh, maybe you can try them on right here, right now,” I teased.

He grinned and started gyrating his hips while one hand slipped down to unbutton his pants. “Be careful what you wish for.”

Heat rushed into my face. He’d called my bluff, all right.

“Okay, stop. Stop!” I caught his hand before he could pull down his zipper. “What if someone sees?”

He shrugged. “Let them.”

Despite the embarrassment painting my cheeks, laughter bubbled up in my chest. Already, I was feeling better. This was much more like the fun Xavier and I used to have when we went out together. I wanted more of that in my life.

Maybe, in time, the Seluna thing would finally fade away and leave us in peace.

*Will I ever really have peace?* “Peace” was basically a foreign concept by now, but I had to believe that I would have it eventually. That my life wouldn’t be like this forever.

“I’m paying for this.” He tugged the sweater out of my grip. “Is there anything else you want?” He waggled his eyebrows at me. “Maybe some lingerie I can rip off later?”

I blushed all over again. “Let’s just go pay.”

On the way out of the store, Xavier texted Jay. As we crossed the exit threshold, an alarm blared. Xavier and I looked around in confusion.

*What’s happening now?*

A mall cop rushed over and grabbed Xavier’s arm. “Caught you at last!”

# Episode 3501

**Greyson**

Lucian’s declaration made me lurch out of my seat, though I probably shouldn’t have been surprised.

I knew Elle had expressed having mate feelings for Lucian, but I hadn’t ever been sure if those feelings were real, or if Elle had any concept of the difference between a mate feeling or simple attraction. With as little real-world experience as she had, I’d never been able to shake my doubts about the depths of the feelings she’d claimed to have for Lucian.

Beyond that, I’d never known if the feelings were one-sided or not. It wasn’t as if Lucian and Elle really knew each other in any meaningful way. Their paths had crossed a few times, but was that enough for them to feel a mate bond surfacing?

Then again, it wasn’t terribly unusual for werewolves to form a mate bond at first sight. To sense that connection right from the start. Maybe this was my fault for not taking Elle’s feelings seriously.

Either way, the fact that Lucian was, at this moment, down on one knee declaring Elle his mate changed everything.

*Fuck. What if they* are *mates? What is that going to mean for the Redwood-Vanguard alliance? And for Elle’s continued presence in this pack?*

I’d promised her father that I’d watch over her. How would I be able to do that if Lucian whisked her away to go live with the Vanguards?

I glanced from Lucian’s lovestruck face to Elle. How was she taking all this?

Her cheeks were a little redder than they’d been a moment earlier, but she didn’t say anything. Her expression had barely changed. Unlike me, she didn’t look surprised by this news.

My stomach tightened as I watched Elle’s reaction. She didn’t look over the moon about Lucian’s declaration. Did that mean she didn’t want him after all? Should I step in? Ask Lucian to slow his roll?

My mother’s voice slipped through my mind. *Don’t interfere—you’ll just make things worse.*

But it wasn’t easy, staying on the sidelines. Being stuck watching this play out was almost painful. Especially as Lucian pulled in a breath and continued with his (clearly) rehearsed speech.

He took Elle’s hand in both of his. “I couldn’t hold it in any longer! From the moment I laid eyes on you, I felt this instant connection. You’re so beautiful, Arielle. So intriguing. A mystery wrapped up in a lovely forest rose. My breathtaking enigma.”

I couldn’t stop myself from making a face. *God, how can she tolerate this?*

Lucian still wasn’t done.

“You and I, we’re meant to be. We’re fire and ice—what with my lovely blond hair and your striking flaming locks. You could be the perfect Luna for the Vanguard pack. Certainly, I’ve known my share of werewolf females, but never in my life have I felt a connection to one like I do with you. It is destiny that you and I have crossed paths. Fate has decreed we are meant to be together, to lead the Vanguard pack into the future. Our souls are already as one.”

It was taking every ounce of self-control I possessed not to simply call bullshit on this and haul Lucian out of the house. Was Elle seriously falling for any of this? Lucian had basically said the same thing about Seluna, and look at how that had turned out.

*Maybe he’s one of those guys who simply loves to be in love.*

That didn’t bode particularly well for Elle. How did she feel about all of this? She still hadn’t made a peep. Her face wasn’t showing happiness or revulsion, or even confusion. *What’s going on in her head?*

Lucian must have taken Elle’s silence as an invitation to keep monologuing, because he pulled in another deep breath. “Additionally—”

“Lucian.” I cut him off. “How about you give Elle a chance to respond? I’m sure you’ve given her a lot to think about.”

*There. How’s that for diplomacy?*

“Oh. Yes, certainly,” Lucian said, looking chagrined, an expression I’d rarely seen on his face but wouldn’t have minded seeing more of. “Of course, Miss Arielle. I would love nothing more than to hear your thoughts. As my mate and Luna, your feelings would always be foremost—”

“Lucian,” I said. “You’re still talking.”

“Right.” He smiled, though it looked more like a grimace. “I await your thoughts, my darling.”

*Is he nervous? Or is he just this unaccustomed to not being allowed to ramble to his heart’s content?*

Elle’s brows drew closer together, a sure sign that she was thinking seriously. “Lucian, what are your expectations, if we are mates?”

“Allow me to stop you right there, my forest rose. There’s no question, Arielle—”

“Call me Elle.”

“Oh.” His smile broadened. “Of course. *Elle*, we are mates, and that’s an unbreakable connection, a bond we cannot ignore. For the remainder of our lives, we will be the one true match for each other.”

“And what does that mean? What would my life as your mate be like?”

“Well… It means that you’ll live in the Vanguard palace. You’ll have endless wealth at your fingertips, and servants at your beck and call. You’ll stand by me as I rule over my pack.”

She nodded but didn’t look convinced. Elle had one hell of a poker face when the situation called for it. “How can I know for certain that you are a good Alpha?”

*Well, that one’s easy. He’s not.* I kept my lips sealed. *Stay out of it, Greyson. Let Elle make this choice herself.*

Lucian’s chest puffed out. “As the prince of the Vanguards, I oversee the largest, wealthiest pack in the area. That proves that I’m a good Alpha.”

I couldn’t believe he was still holding onto that royal title. He could call himself a prince from sunup to sundown, but it wouldn’t change the fact that he was just another pack Alpha.

“What about our pups?” Elle asked. “Would you be a strong Alpha for them?”

My brows rose. I hadn’t realized Elle was thinking so far ahead; that, in addition to considering whether Lucian was worthy of being her mate, she was also evaluating him as a potential father. Hell, I hadn’t even known that she wanted children.

Lucian’s expression sobered. His trademark pompous airs disappeared as he considered her question. After a beat, he nodded. “I will,” he said, with all the solemnity of a vow. “Nothing is more important than protecting, raising, and preparing the next generation. I will be strong for our pups, Elle. I’m in great shape. One of the strongest Alphas you’ll ever meet, and that’s a fact. And any children we have will be princes and princesses. They’ll be under the protection of the pack and will have all the benefits of its many resources. They will be strong, just like me and you.” His lips curved up into a smirk. “And I suppose it’s worth mentioning that I come from a virile, esteemed line of werewolves.”

*And there’s the Lucian I know and hate.*

“Are you interested in having children soon?” Lucian asked. “I wouldn’t mind a little Lucian Junior running around, myself. A boy to raise up in all matters of the Vanguard—”

Elle put up a hand to stop any further babbling. “This is a big decision.”

*I couldn’t agree more.*

“I do agree with you,” Elle continued. “A mate is for life, and I do not know how werewolves do it—it seems like there is some magic involved—but to me, it is not magic. It is survival. And for that reason, I will only ever have pups with a wolf who is strong enough to ensure our survival.”

Lucian nodded, taking her words in. “I promise you—”

She held up a hand to shut him up again. “I am not finished. I know you and I have a connection, but I cannot tell yet if it means we are meant to be mates. For me, a connection is not enough. And this connection is one I do not fully understand. I am not ready to make a decision yet.”

A smile tugged at my lips. I’d never been prouder of Elle, and I realized I hadn’t given her nearly enough credit. All this time, I’d been worried about her running off with Lucian and getting caught up in the romance and whimsy of it all—that he’d say a few pretty words and she’d be snared in his web, mate or not.

But that wasn’t who Elle was. That wasn’t how she’d been raised to view families and mate bonds. Elle was practical—and rightfully so. As a pup, she’d learned the life-and-death importance of choosing a mate and following an Alpha who was strong, who made wise decisions that benefited the pack. Pomp and circumstance meant absolutely nothing to Elle.

Lucian nodded, clearly disappointed by her response. With the way everyone in his life either bowed down or fawned over him, it had probably never even occurred to him that she’d turn him down.

“I understand. I will give you all the time in the world to make your decision,” he said gently. “That’s why I’m here. That’s why I wish to court you—to give you a chance to feel our mate bond. To explore it together. Will you allow me to keep courting you?”

# Episode 3502

**Xavier**

I looked the mall cop up and down and let out a laugh. “Let me guess. Did a guy named Jay put you up to this? I’m going to make him pay.”

The cop wasn’t laughing. Or smiling. Or doing anything except glowering at me like I was public enemy number one. His grip on my arm tightened. “You need to come with me—your stealing days are over.”

I jerked my arm out of his grasp—very easily, I might add—and put my hands up in front of me. “What, aren’t you going to cuff me first?”

This was such a fucking joke, whether the cop was laughing or not. No human could make me go anywhere I didn’t want to go, especially not a goddamn mall cop. The guy’s crime beat was probably nothing but teenage shoplifters and people doing weird shit to mannequins.

“Fine.” The cop reached for a pair of handcuffs and held them out in front of me.

I stopped laughing. A growl rippled its way up from the depths of my chest. “Try it, and I’ll rip your face off.”

The cop blanched.

“Okay!” Cali stepped smoothly between us. “Clearly, there’s been some kind of misunderstanding. Xavier wouldn’t steal anything.”

“Right.” The cop rolled his eyes. “Show me your bag, then, if you’re so sure.”

Brows creasing, Cali passed over the bag holding my jeans and Cali’s stained sweater and tank top. She was wearing the sweater I’d bought her. I didn’t blame her for doing what Paul Blart asked, but I still fumed at the fact that this was happening at all.

*Who the fuck does this guy think he is, to accuse me of being a thief?*

The cop dug out a pair of jeans, showing us the alarm tag still hooked through the denim. “If you didn’t steal it, how do you explain this?”

“Fucking hell,” I muttered. This asshole was actually being serious. He really thought I was some kind of menace to the good people of the mall. *Asinine* didn’t even begin to describe it. I dug around in my pocket, whipped out the receipt, and shoved it in the cop’s face. “Obviously, they forgot to remove the alarm tag. I bought these jeans literally three minutes ago. Go ask the clerk if you don’t believe me.”

The cop shook his head. “What, do you think I’m stupid or something?”

“I don’t think you want me to answer that.”

I felt Cali’s eyes on me, heard her groan quietly. But I wasn’t going to play nice with a guy who had clearly decided—despite all the evidence to the contrary—that I was a criminal.

His eyes narrowed. “You can fake those things. I’ve seen it.”

“I seriously doubt you’ve seen anything remotely close.”

“I’m going to need you to come down to the office.”

He reached for me with the handcuffs in one hand, and I stepped back with a snarl. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Xavier,” Cali said, gently but firmly taking my arm. “Why don’t we just cooperate? Find out what this is all about? I’m sure it’ll be faster.”

“Fine.” I’d go down to that damn office, but only so we could get this over with. I glared at the cop. “You’re making a huge mistake.”

“We’ll see about that.” The cop didn’t look fazed. Another mistake, considering the fact that I could’ve ripped him from tip to taint in half a second if I’d wanted to.

He led us to the security office. He was smart enough to not try to cuff me again, and if I had to guess, Cali’s presence was the only reason why things hadn’t gotten ugly. He was counting on her to keep me in line.

*We’ll see how that works out for him.*

“Sorry, but why are you so insistent that Xavier is a thief?” Cali asked. “I can vouch for him. I was there when he bought those jeans. That receipt is real. We could even just go back to the store. I’m sure they would vouch for us.”

“And how do I know that you’re not just an accomplice?” The mall cop looked her up and down. “The stores have been hit by a serial thief, and it’s my job to apprehend the criminal. We’re talking hundreds of dollars of merchandise being lifted left and right. It adds up.”

That was a worthy enough cause, I supposed, but it didn’t change the fact that this cop had the wrong guy. And he was willfully ignoring that inconvenient little fact.

“Why do you think I’m your thief?” I asked. “That receipt and the word of the clerk should have been enough to put a stop to this.”

“You match the description.”

“What? Do you have security footage proving all of this?”

He stared on ahead as we continued our way to the office. “I’m not at liberty to reveal my sources.”

My fingers curled into tight fists. *Who the hell does this idiot think he is? Magnum PI?*

Cali put a calming hand on my shoulder, and her voice slipped through my mind. *You don’t have anything to worry about. We’ll get this all sorted out, and punching a mall cop isn’t going to make things go faster.*

I heaved a sigh. *Maybe not, but it would sure help me feel better.*

Finally, we arrived at the security office. I took in the small, terribly lit room. There was barely enough space for the three of us to stand, and it didn’t hold more than a desk, a few chairs, and a filing cabinet.

The scent of onions and the snack wrappers scattered over the top of the desk made my nose wrinkle. The place was fucking disgusting.

“Take a seat,” the mall cop said. “I’m going to have to call the police.”

“How about we review the evidence first?” I drawled as I sat. “I’d hate to accuse you of making a false arrest. You’ll never get promoted to lieutenant that way. If malls have that.”

Cali elbowed me.

He glared at me again but turned on a video screen. “Fine. How do you explain this?” Security footage played on the screen, showing a man walking out of a store we’d passed on the way to the office. The guy in the video clearly had something tucked under his jacket.

Cali glanced at me with a frown, then looked at the cop. “Sorry, who’s that?”

The cop pointed at me. “It’s you, obviously! And there’s more footage of you lifting things from other stores too. We’ve got you dead to rights.”

My vision went red. First, I was almost certain the mall cop didn’t have the first fucking clue what that even meant. Second, I didn’t have time for this shit.

I got up with a huff. “He looks *nothing* like me.”

I towered over the cop, jabbing my finger at the screen.

“That guy is a foot and a half shorter than me, and he’s got a shaved head,” I said. “How could you possibly think we look anything alike?”

He eyed me. “You could be wearing lifts and a wig.”

“Does this look like a wig?” Cali gently tugged on my hair.

I slammed my booted foot down on the desk, sending snack wrappers flying everywhere. “You want me to take these off?”

Fuck. I wished I could shift and scare the shit out of this guy, make him regret ever wasting my time, but that’d just cause more problems, and Cali wouldn’t be happy about it.

The cop finally looked from me to the footage still playing on the screen. He frowned, his brow creasing like it was only *just* occurring to him that he might have the wrong guy.

“There might have been a… misunderstanding.”

I lunged at him, and he backed away.

“Xavier, enough.” Cali pulled me back.

“A *misunderstanding*?” I growled. “You were ready to call the cops on me when you had no fucking proof I was the shoplifter.”

“Can we go?” Cali asked.

The cop nodded, wide-eyed. “Sorry for the inconvenience,” he squeaked as Cali led me out of the office.

“What a fucking joke,” I growled. I’d only come here to take care of this never-ending Samara situation, and random shit kept sidetracking me. Hell, I wouldn’t have been surprised to learn that Fletcher had arranged this himself.

We met up with Jay and Lola, who had texted us while we were dealing with that stupid cop. Lola was sporting a new faux leather jacket and pants. “What do you think? Will I blend in at the speedway later?”

Cali smiled. “You look great. I’m so excited. I’ve never been to a racetrack.”

“We should head over there soon,” Jay said.

“Yeah, let’s get the hell out of here,” I muttered.

On the way out, Cali told them the story of my near arrest, and Jay had the audacity to laugh. The bastard.

“Do you want to invite Ava to this thing?” he asked. “If that guy Cameron shows up, another wolf on our side wouldn’t hurt.”

I sighed. “Fine. Two birds with one stone, I guess.”

Jay and Lola got in the car, but Cali hung back.

She turned to me. “I have a question for you, and please just be honest,” she said. “Are you going to have to pretend to be Ava’s mate?”

# Episode 3503

Initially, I hadn’t wanted to bring up the Ava mate thing to Xavier, especially knowing that he was still upset after everything that had just happened with that crazy mall cop, but it had been grating on me. I’d been completely blindsided earlier when Xavier had told Fletcher that he was mated to Ava, which I guess wasn’t entirely a lie. Still, the whole thing had left a bitter taste in my mouth. If we were going to go through that all over again, I needed to know, to prepare myself for that ugly situation to play out in front of me all over again.

*Only this time, Ava will be there too. Oh joy. Everyone’s favorite person.*

Xavier must have seen how uncomfortable I was—not that I was trying to hide it.

“I only said that so Fletcher wouldn’t wonder why some random guy was coming up to him and talking about the Samara pack,” he reminded me. “We need to get a firm idea of whether he’s going to be the fit we’re looking for, and that means keeping him on a need-to-know basis.”

“I know all of that. I understand why you said it, and why we need to keep this lie going. I just… I don’t want to get caught off-guard again. You lied before, but Ava wasn’t there at the time. What’s going to happen when she shows up at the racetrack? Are you two going to pretend you’re mates? Are you going to have to kiss her? How far will this go?”

I grimaced at the idea of Ava and Xavier playing house, just to convince this Fletcher guy that nothing sketchy was going on. Obviously, something sketchy *was* going on—Xavier had found the guy’s name on some list. We didn’t know the first thing about him, and yet we were, feeling him out to take on the role of Samara Alpha. If *I* was this skeptical about the whole arrangement, I could only imagine how Ava would feel when she found out.

Which brought me to my second problem: Ava. Ava and Xavier, in particular, playing lovey-dovey to keep this ruse going. I couldn’t just assume that Ava would be on board with it, but since when had she ever turned down the chance to be with Xavier, even for the sake of a ruse?

I hated the mere thought of them doing that—even if it was necessary for the survival of the Samara pack.

“Hey.” Xavier moved closer and wrapped his arms around me. “I’m going to tell Fletcher what’s really going on here, and there definitely won’t be any kissing Ava. Knowing her, she’s not going to be pleased that we’ve been looking into Alpha candidates without her. But even if she wanted to kiss me, I still wouldn’t do it. You’re the only person I ever want to kiss.” His lips dropped down to mine as proof, warm and firm.

My heart fluttered, and I leaned into the kiss, savoring it. Now that I was here with Xavier, my arms locked around his neck, I felt a little silly for questioning him.

*All of the lies are for the Samara pack. He doesn’t want Ava. He never has. He loves you, Cali. You have nothing to worry about.*

The passenger side window rolled down, and Lola shouted, “Get a room, you two!”

Xavier broke away from my lips, rolling his eyes as he looked back at Lola. “I’d say the same to you, but I remember what happened last time the two of you got a room. Sorry, I left the handcuffs back with the mall cop.”

Lola gasped. “That was *one* *time*!”

Xavier laughed and turned back to me, letting go of my waist. “Are we good?”

I took a moment to catch my breath. “Sorry, you’re right. We’re good. I guess I’m a little shaken up by the Seluna thing. I’m probably not thinking straight.”

“We don’t have to go to this meeting. If you’d rather go home and get some rest, I completely understand. We can meet with Fletcher another time.”

I frowned. “I thought finding a new Samara Alpha was important.”

“It is, but not as important as you.”

My heart melted at his words, but I shook my head. “I appreciate your concern, but that’s not necessary. Besides, I’m excited to find out what it’ll be like at the speedway.”

He smiled. “Oh, it’s loud, and it reeks of exhaust. What could be better?”

A short while later, we’d made it to the racetrack and were walking up the cement stairs of the speedway grandstand, trying to find our seats. Race cars revved their engines as they took their positions at the starting line, and the people filling the stands screamed and cheered.

*Xavier really downplayed the noise. And the smell.*

The race hadn’t even begun, and already I could barely hear myself think over the noise. The overpowering scent of exhaust was borderline nauseating. I breathed through my mouth to try to mitigate the smell and tried not to think about how toxic all the fumes must be.

Next to me, Lola was in her element, standing up and screaming alongside the other fans like she’d spent her whole life attending races at the speedway. “GO GREEN CAR!” she shouted.

I looked up at her, my eyes wide, and she grinned before plopping back down into her seat.

“The pack should consider getting a race car!” she shouted over the din. “Something metallic purple! We can have a Redwood race team—I’ll be the driver.”

Jay leaned in from Lola’s other side to join the conversation. “Great idea!”

*Terrible idea.* “I’ve seen you drive!” I shouted back at Lola. “You might be a better fit for the demolition derby!”

On my other side, Xavier shook his head. “I don’t want the pack getting involved in racing—I wouldn’t be able to afford the insurance. My cars have already seen enough accidents.”

“How are we going to find Fletcher?” I asked. The stands were full of people and chaos. I doubted I’d have been able to find Xavier, Lola, and Jay if they hadn’t all been sitting right next to me.

I wasn’t worried about finding Ava. I had no doubt she’d appear, just like she always did.

*Don’t let her presence bring you down. Remember what Xavier said—this is all for the Samara pack. Xavier wouldn’t have anything to do with her if he could avoid it.*

I focused on the race, which wasn’t hard as it overpowered all my senses. But after the scare in the dressing room, I was all too ready for a distraction.

“We should let Fletcher find us,” Xavier said. “If the guy is worthy of being an Alpha, he should be able to track us down.”

“I don’t know,” Jay said. “That might be asking too much. Maybe we should look around for him.”

Xavier groaned. “I’d rather drink a beer and watch the race, but fine.” He turned to me. “Are you going to be okay by yourself?”

Lola shot him a scandalized look. “Excuse me? I’m right here!”

I laughed. “I’ll be fine.”

Xavier and Jay headed off to look for Fletcher. My stomach clenched. *I hope they get back before Ava arrives.* I didn’t know if I had it in me to entertain her while we waited for the guys to come back with Fletcher.

“Oh! I have a new favorite car!” Lola pointed to a black car with blood-red bat wings painted on the hood. “Number seven! It’s like a vampire on wheels.”

I scanned the lineup. “I prefer number twelve.”

She grimaced. “A unicorn? I should have guessed!”

“What? I like the colors.” The car *did* have a unicorn painted on its side, though. “What’s not to like about that?”

“Everything.” Lola turned to look at me. “Are you okay with Ava showing up? I know Jay threw that out before anyone had a chance to make sure you were comfortable with it.”

“Honestly? It kind of sucks,” I admitted. “But if it will bring an end to all this Samara drama and keep Ava at her own pack house, I can put up with her for a few hours.”

I looked around the stands warily. *Is Ava here already? Has she spotted us?*

“Do you think Fletcher is going to work out as Alpha?” Lola asked. “He really doesn’t seem the type.”

“It’s a little too early to tell. We’ve only just met him.” I sighed. “And Ava will have to approve of him.” Which seemed pretty damn unlikely.

The announcer came over the loudspeaker. “Ladies and gentlemen, the race will begin shortly, but first we have to select the lucky winner of the starting flag raffle!”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

Lola shook her head. “No idea.”

The announcer went on. “Each of you was given a ticket at the entrance, and one ticket number will be selected. The holder of that ticket will be given the rare opportunity to wave the starting flag and signal the beginning of the race!”

The crowd went wild around us, and I peered down at the starting line. There was even more exhaust down there from the idling cars. *Hard pass.*

The number was called, and Lola looked down at her ticket. “Dammit. I wanted to wave that big flag! I have the leather pants and everything!”

I looked down at my ticket and gasped. “Oh no.”

I had the winning number.

# Episode 3504

**Xavier**

I heard the announcer calling the winning number, but I couldn’t have cared less. I didn’t even bother to check my ticket. My mind was focused entirely on finding Fletcher in the wild, cheering crowd.

*He’d better not have flaked out.* Then again, doing so would pretty much prove that he wasn’t Alpha material. If he no-showed, we’d be able to scratch his name off the list and never speak to him again. It was a nice thought, but it’d still piss me off if he stood us up. If all this effort came to nothing, then I’d have wasted precious time chasing after a shirtless loser, which really wasn’t fucking acceptable. All of this Samara Alpha bullshit had already turned into a major time sink. I’d be furious if we ended up with nothing to show for all this effort.

I scanned the crowd for Fletcher. *Where the hell is he? I want to get the hell out of here.*

Admittedly, I wasn’t in the best mood after that mall cop had tried to arrest me. What a fucking idiot. Anyone with a working pair of eyes would’ve seen that I wasn’t the shoplifter they’d caught on camera. I’d had a fucking receipt, for god’s sake.

Part of me wanted to make a detour back to the mall when this was all over and throw a fit until that asshat lost his job. If he was going to start calling the cops on anyone he felt like, he was a liability to everyone who set foot in that mall.

*Ugh…* Just thinking about it made my molars grind together so hard they creaked. *Where the fuck is Fletcher? He’s the one who wanted to come here.*

Normally, I found the speedway to be a pretty fun place. All the people were obnoxious—especially as the races dragged on and everyone got more and more wasted—but the cars, the exhaust, the no-holds-barred competition… That stuff, I liked.

But I wasn’t here to enjoy myself. I was here trying to fix the mess that Zeke made of the Samara pack, though I was privately beginning to wonder if it was even possible to save what was left. Nolan had driven the pack into the ground, Knox had stomped on the few remaining pieces, and Zeke was failing to be the glue to keep the pack’s broken shards together. Maybe the Samara pack was cursed. Maybe it was too far gone. A lost cause.

But… no. I couldn’t think that way. If we gave up on them, then nothing would stand in the way of Lucian absorbing the remnant Samaras into the Vanguard pack, and if that happened, Greyson would never let me hear the end of it.

I scanned the crowd again with a huff. If this shithead ended up wasting my time, I was going to do some bodily harm. I didn’t want to be here. I wanted to be home, with Cali, maybe snuggled up on the couch in front of a fire—anything to help her get over the weird Seluna thing in the dressing room. Because she was definitely *not* over what she’d seen. That much I knew for sure.

Jay sidled up to me. “Do you think we should worry about this Cameron guy? Not that we can’t handle a Rogue or two, but it could complicate the whole Alpha thing.”

“One step at a time,” I said. “If Fletcher’s a good match, I’m not going to hold a jealous ex against him.”

Jay laughed. “Yeah, that’d be the pot calling the kettle—oh. Sorry.” He grimaced at my glare.

He wasn’t wrong. Things hadn’t exactly been smooth sailing with Ava. But there was one big difference between Fletcher and me—despite my history with Ava, I would’ve made a great Alpha.

*No*, I thought. *I* will *be a great Alpha.*

I still wasn’t totally sure how Greyson would factor into everything, but it did feel like my time was approaching.

A round of cheers burst through the stands.

Jay nudged my shoulder. “Trouble at two o’clock,” he said under his breath.

I scowled. “What the hell is that even supposed to mean? You know I always get confused when you use clock positions for directions.”

Jay rolled his eye and gestured toward the stands. Ava had just entered the speedway and had paused to look over the crowd. She was easy to spot. Even though she was short, she tended to stand out. She was beautiful, poised, alluring. She had a way of making everyone else fade into the background.

I wanted to slap myself. *Where the hell did that come from?*

Jay raised his hand to wave her over, but I caught his arm. “Why don’t you go look for Fletcher, or find some refreshments?” I said. “I want to talk to Ava alone.”

Jay knew better than to argue with me on this. He just slapped me on the back and headed off. I leaned against a column, watching as Ava looked around. I was suddenly hit with the memory of our kiss on New Year’s Eve. I was looking right into her eyes, and I felt that same pull that had haunted me since her return from the spirit world.

*“I had no choice, Ava. You broke my heart. You know that, right?”*

*She got choked up. “Xavier, I’m so sorry, I—”*

*I didn’t want to hear her apologies. My mother couldn’t come back from the dead. Not*

*like Ava had. I cut her off and simply said, “Bottom line, you can trust me.”*

*Ava didn’t speak.*

*Her burning gaze still locked with mine, she lifted onto her toes and kissed me.*

*I’d seen her leaning toward me, read the intention in her eyes. I knew exactly what was going to happen, and I knew I should stop her. But I didn’t. I let her lips crash against mine, and let mine kiss her back.*

*Maybe this would finally give me the closure I needed. The closure we both needed, the closure I’d thought we’d gained during our first goodbye kiss. But something about that kiss had still felt unfinished. Before that kiss, I hadn’t yet allowed myself to admit what she’d done to me. That she’d broken my heart. She’d fucking shattered my entire being into pieces the moment she’d killed my mother.*

*Now, she knew.*

*But as our lips moved together, I was hit with a jolt. I was pinning her to the wall in the hallway, my hand grasping her jaw to keep her tilted up to me. Her hands were on my shirt, gripping me tightly as she opened her mouth to me.*

*Instead of closure, it was like the door standing between the two of us had been fucking ripped open.*

*All those feelings I’d once had for her—the emotion, the need, the desire and longing… They all came rushing out.*

*I knew I needed to pull away, that this wasn’t how things were meant to play out, but I couldn’t bring myself to leave her. I couldn’t stop that kiss. No matter how much I knew I had to. How much I wanted to.*

*It was as if, for that heady string of seconds, we were fused together.*

“Xavier!”

Jay’s voice snapped me back to the present and away from the memories that had been weighing on my mind, my heart.

“I found Fletcher!” he called.

For a moment, I felt disoriented. Lost between past and present. Between my rekindling feelings for Ava and the love I had for Cali.

*You need to let this go. Let Ava go. Stop thinking about that night.*

Things between Ava and me were over, just like I’d told Cali. I needed to get my shit together and act accordingly.

And then, far too soon, Ava was standing in front of me.

Her brows knit together as she stared up at me. “You okay?”

I shut that wave of confusing feelings into a box in the furthest corner of my mind.

“I’m fine,” I said gruffly.

“Okay.” She shrugged, looking around. “So, where’s this guy you want me to meet?”

“He’s right there.” I pointed to Jay and Fletcher, who were making their way toward us.

“He looks kind of familiar,” Ava said. “I swear I’ve seen him somewhere before.”

“You ever been to the East Coast Tides store at the mall?”

Recognition dawned in her eyes, and she turned her gaze on me. “Is that the shirtless guy? You think a shirtless mall model is the right pick for Samara Alpha? Are you shitting me? Is this some kind of joke to you?”

I put my hands up. “Just keep an open mind, okay?”

Jay and Fletcher were getting closer.

I caught Ava’s arm to make sure I had her full and undivided attention. “Fletcher doesn’t know about the Alpha thing. So play it cool. We’re here to feel him out.”

“But he doesn’t know why.” She frowned. “Why not?”

“I thought it might be too much for the guy to process. He’s a Rogue. Just give him a chance.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You told me I could trust you.” Our kiss flashed through my mind as she added, “So I will.”

I nodded, and then there was no more time to talk, because Jay and Fletcher had arrived.

“Ava, this is Fletcher,” I said. “Fletcher, this is Ava. A member of the Samara pack.”

Suddenly, Jay pointed at the speedway. “What the *hell* are Cali and Lola doing out on the track?”

# Episode 3505

**Greyson**

I wasn’t cut out to be a chaperone. Mostly because it was boring as hell. Mostly because it involved Lucian.

I walked a few paces behind Lucian and Elle as they strode around outside the pack house like some kind of historical couple. When we’d all stood to go outside and continue their “courtship,” Lucian had offered Elle his arm. Then, when she’d just stared at it in confusion, he’d chuckled, called her “droll,” and showed her how to loop her arm through his. They’d been walking around outside for half an hour by now, and it didn’t seem like their little stroll was going to be over anytime soon.

I wasn’t surprised, necessarily, that Elle had agreed to let Lucian continue their so-called courtship. I *was* surprised by the seriousness with which she was approaching the whole situation, and more than a little relieved. But Elle had been intrigued by Lucian since they’d first crossed paths, and that fascination had only grown with time. As much as I hated to admit it, it was entirely possible, if not likely, that they were in fact mates.

Now, it was just a matter of discovering what Elle was going to do about it—namely, waiting to see if Lucian passed her test and proved himself as a “strong Alpha.” And in the meantime, I felt less like a chaperone and more like a servant as I followed behind them.

*Maybe that was Lucian’s plan all along. Maybe this Jane Austen bullshit is just a ruse to make me subservient to him while he spends time with Elle.*

Lucian wasn’t an idiot. In fact, he was much cleverer than I was comfortable with, strictly speaking. I wouldn’t have put it past him to slip in a power play, just for the fun of it.

As they walked on, Lucian waxing poetic about how he’d have an entire garden built at the palace in Elle’s honor—“a wild and beautiful place to honor my forest rose”—I thought about my brother and how we’d nearly come to blows because he’d thought I considered him my second.

I had new sympathy for how maddening it could be to watch someone wield power over you, but I also had to wonder if the assessment that Xavier was my second wasn’t far off. Maybe there was some truth to it. After all, I was the Alpha, and everyone else in the pack wasn’t. I had the privilege and burden of wielding power that they didn’t possess, of making decisions that they couldn’t.

It wasn’t all good times and power trips, like Xavier seemed inclined to believe. But we were a werewolf pack—someone had to be in charge, and others had to do what needed to be done.

But being a chaperone? That wasn’t really something that actually required *my* presence, was it? I could outsource that responsibility. Especially now that I was sure Elle could handle herself—and Lucian, if it came down to it. I’d wanted to keep an eye on the princeling, to make sure he didn’t take advantage of Elle. I wasn’t worried about that anymore. Elle was far more shrewd than I’d given her credit for. She asked a lot of pertinent questions, and I seriously doubted she was going to run off with the princeling.

Plus, if Lucian was going to keep this Regency romance vibe going, then there was nothing to worry about. So far, their linked arms were the most contact they’d made with each other, save for the occasional pat on Elle’s hand.

Nearby, I spotted Ravi returning to the pack house after a run. I flagged him over.

“Hey,” he panted, eyeing Lucian and Elle with a raised brow. “What’s up?”

“I need to go take care of some pack business,” I explained. “Can you keep an eye on Elle and Lucian? Make sure Lucian behaves himself?”

“Like be their chaperone?”

I nodded. “Exactly. Let me know if anything comes up. Everything’s been very PG so far, so I think it’ll be fine.”

“Sure. No problem.” Ravi fell into step behind Elle and Lucian, and I wasted no time jogging back toward the pack house. The sooner I got some space from the princeling and his weird, archaic courting rituals, the better.

As I headed up the porch steps, I realized belatedly that I probably should have given Elle a proper heads-up that I was tapping out, but I hadn’t wanted to get sucked into any more Lucian nonsense. Knowing him, he’d insist that the pack Alpha be present to chaperone. And I just… really didn’t want to do that.

Besides, I trusted Elle. And Ravi. Everything would be fine.

I waved at Ravi from the front door, gave him a thumbs up, and hustled into the house before Lucian could notice my absence. I stopped short when I saw Torin pressed against the kitchen window, watching Elle and Lucian with far too much interest. Was this regular Torin obsessive behavior, or was something actually happening out there?

I leaned over his shoulder to see what was going on. Lucian was pontificating, gesturing wildly with his hands, while Elle listened with the same stoic attention she’d been giving him from the moment he’d shown up on our doorstep.

*Poor Elle. She’s a hell of a lot more tolerant than I am.*

“Why are you spying on the princeling and Elle?” I asked.

Torin span around, an *oh shit* expression written across his face. “I wasn’t spying!”

I raised my brows.

“Okay, I *was* spying. But I’m dying to know—is there going to be a royal wedding?” His face lit up with an excited grin.

*Oh hell no.*

“Let me stop you right there,” I said sternly. Torin’s face fell. “There isn’t going to be a royal wedding—for many reasons, the least of which is that Lucian is no more royal than you or me. He’s just another Alpha. A rich Alpha, sure, but not royalty. And… however this goes between him and Elle, I doubt either one of them would ever follow human wedding customs.”

“Fair enough.” Torin sighed. “Lola told me that in England, they have a huge celebration when a royal gets married. It’s like that too in the Fae world when two high society families have a wedding. I was looking forward to planning one.”

Torin and his parties. I should have known. “Maybe you should keep your party planning skills focused on my mom’s wedding? That’s a celebration you can really count on—and it’s coming soon.”

“Oh, don’t you worry about that.” He waved off my concern. “That wedding *will* be magical, and that’s—well, it’s not a promise, but it’s a certainty. I guess. Since Big Mac is a witch and all.”

I forced a smile, though his words filled me with anxiety. Torin had a tendency—or, you know, a feverish *need*—to go overboard. It was… a liability. And the last thing I wanted for my mother’s wedding was for things to go sideways because of some magical malfunction. She deserved the perfect day, and the pack deserved some peace.

“A nice, simple, non-magical wedding would be fine.” I patted Torin’s shoulder and headed out of the kitchen before he could argue.

I headed into the study, realizing that I still had to figure out just what the council was expecting me to do for the mixer. I knew what to expect from a normal mixer—back when I’d been a Rogue, I’d been invited to a few corporate mixers by some of the women I was dating—but stuffy corporate affairs weren’t the same as parties designed specifically with werewolves in mind. And there was rarely anything normal about the council. If I hadn’t been blindsided by Lucian and his chaperone request, I’d have had some kind of plan in place by now. But instead, I’d wasted hours babysitting.

I took a seat at the desk, weighing the pros and cons of calling one of the council members to ask what they were expecting from this mixer. I wouldn’t have trusted most of them to tell me the weather report, but there was one council member, an Alpha I’d met a few years ago, whom I trusted to play straight with me.

Rishika came in and dropped a heavy file on the desk in front of me. “Here you go!” she said with a smile.

“Um… Thank you? What is it?”

“I finished my research on Hells Canyon, just like you asked. Everything you need to know about the venue is in there.”

I eyed the thick folder. Obviously, she’d put a lot of work into gathering this intel, but I wasn’t thrilled by the idea of reading through it all. “How about you give me an overview?”

“As you know, it’s a popular tourist location, and it features the deepest river gorge in all of North America…”

She went on, mostly sharing information I already knew. I’d been to Hells Canyon, and I was very familiar with Oregon in general, but I didn’t want to curb her enthusiasm.

I nodded. “It’s a great place for the summit.”

She frowned. “Isn’t this what you wanted to hear?”

“You did a great job. I don’t really know what I wanted to hear—I still haven’t figured out this whole mixer thing.”

She cocked a hip against the side of the desk. “Well, have you noticed that we’re co-hosting the mixer with another pack?” She grabbed the folder and flipped through it with ease. “The Nightshade pack.”

Vague recognition nagged at my memory. “The Nightshade pack. Yeah, I’ve heard of them. Who’s their Alpha?”

“Some guy named Dayton.”

Realization hit, and I grimaced. “Shit.”

That was a name I hadn’t heard in a long time—and one I’d hoped never to hear again.

# Episode 3506

“Aren’t you glad I talked you into this?” Lola shouted over the roar of the engines.

I smiled, but privately I wasn’t sure I was pleased with this turn of events. I’d only agreed to follow through with my winning ticket when Lola had offered to come down to the track with me. And then I’d been stuck watching while Lola had flirted with the official to convince him to allow us both to wave the flag *together.* I still wasn’t sure how we were going to pull that off, and I wished, for perhaps the millionth time in the past few minutes, that I hadn’t been the “lucky” winner.

*I don’t even like this! It’s loud, and the exhaust fumes are nauseating, and we’re only here to arrange a meetup for stupid Ava and Fletcher!*

“Come on, Cali! This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!” Lola was grinning from ear to ear.

*I’m glad one of us is excited to be here.*

I knew Lola had only pretended to be interested in the official, but I doubted Jay would find it very amusing. Good thing he and Xavier were busy with Fletcher—and Ava. *Ugh.*

As we stood on the track, Lola waved and winked at the official, who was beaming at her from the sidelines.

“Do you think I’ve developed the ability to do vampire mind control?” she asked.

There was no way anyone could’ve heard us over the roar of the engines—*I* could barely hear us. I shrugged. “I think it’s much more likely that the official agreed because he likes the way you look in those leather pants.”

“They’re *pleather*, thank you. Cruelty-free.” She glanced at the still-smiling official and grimaced. “And ew. He’s old enough to be our great-great-great-grandfather. As if I’d ever do Jay dirty like that.”

I glanced up at the grandstand, looking for a familiar face in the crowd. *Have Fletcher and Ava shown up yet?* I wanted to go home, sooner rather than later. Maybe under different circumstances, I’d have enjoyed myself here at the race, but right now, it was all too much for me.

The announcer’s voice cut through the noise. “The lucky winners have taken their place at the starting line—how about we introduce them?”

The crowd cheered their assent, and I flinched.

“We have to be introduced?” I asked. I didn’t care about any of these people. I didn’t even want to be here. Why did I have to be introduced to any of them?

“Come on, spoilsport. It’ll be fun!”

The official approached us with a microphone. He held it out to me, and I hesitated for a beat before accepting it. What should I even say?

“H-Hi,” I said into the microphone. “I’m Caliana Hart.”

My voice echoed across the speedway, and I passed the microphone over to Lola.

*If Xavier didn’t know where I went before, he definitely knows now.*

“And I’m badass Aaliyah Spillane!” Lola bellowed, her voice low and deep and throaty, like she was playing a wrestler on TV. “And this goes out to the love of my life, Jay. I love you, baby—”

The official yanked the microphone out of her hands with a scowl. “That’s enough. Okay, you two, watch the lighters. When they change from yellow to green, wave the flag.”

I looked around. “Um, where are we supposed to stand?”

“Stay right where you are until the last car passes you.”

I blinked. We were standing in the middle of the track, facing a wall of roaring cars. This was literally the last place on the track I wanted to be. “A-Are you sure?”

“This is amazing!” Lola was practically jumping up and down with excitement. “It’s just like that scene in *Grease*, right before Danny wins the race!”

I grimaced. Not only did I not share her enthusiasm, the comparison didn’t bring me any comfort. “That was a movie,” I pointed out. “This is real life.”

“Good luck, you two.” The official headed back to his safe spot, off to the side of the track. Why couldn’t we wave the flag from there? That seemed like a perfectly good spot to start the race. Maybe the drivers would have to crane their necks to see the flag waving, but wasn’t that inconvenience worth not putting a human life in danger?

*Or a half-human life?*

How ironic would it be for me to have faced one monster and villain and demon after another, only to get turned into roadkill now?

“Cali, you’re shaking.” Lola looked me up and down, her brows knitting. “You’re a super powerful Fae. What’s so scary about a few cars?”

My stomach churned, and my throat went dry. Lola was right. This *should* have been be a piece of cake. The speedway had people come down here all the time to wave the flag. And clearly, people weren’t getting killed left and right, or they would have been shut down.

What *was* I so afraid of?

I kept my eyes glued to the lights, so I didn’t have to see the roaring cars getting ready to bear down on us. The red light turned to yellow, and I broke out in a cold sweat.

*What if one of the cars loses control?*

*What if there’s a crash?*

*What if I’m just far enough off the center spot that someone hits me?*

Together, Lola and I waved the flag, and an absolute explosion of noise and smoke slammed into me. I screamed as the cars screeched forward, blowing by within inches of Lola and me. Exhaust fumes filled my nose, making my scream end in a gag. Lola was jumping up and down and screaming with excitement. I almost felt my spirit leave my body.

*This is terrible! How can she like this? How does* anyone *like this?*

I slammed my eyes shut, waiting for the cars to breeze past me. I would’ve killed Lola immediately if it had been possible. If my body hadn’t been frozen in place by fear.

*I’m never coming to a speedway again.* I’d face down the Fae world, revenants, and even a few gator shifters before I set foot anywhere near this racetrack ever again. *Please don’t let me die this way!*

“You’re not dying. Not yet,” Xavier said to me. “Not if I can help it.”

I thought he had to be mind linking with me, that I’d formed a connection with him in my fear and horror. And then I felt his hand, warm and broad, take mine, and I peeled my eyes open. He was here. Talking to me. Which meant that I’d probably been screaming all those things I’d assumed were just thoughts.

*Great. Now everyone knows I’m a chicken, too. This day just can’t get any better.*

“Come on.” Xavier tugged me toward the side of the track. I realized then that all the cars had passed. They were now out on their loop. I’d survived.

“Oh, thank god,” I mumbled, my knees going weak with relief.

Xavier kept pulling me along until we were clear of the track. “You’re supposed to walk away after the last car peels out, or you’ll get run over when they come back around.” He smiled. “Not that I’d ever let that happen to my mate.”

“Oh.” I was too overwhelmed to come up with more of a response. Lola was standing off to the side too, pretending to be interested in whatever the official was telling her. I scowled in her general direction.

*Lola seemed to have no problem getting off the track. How did I not realize the last cars had passed? And why didn’t she tell me, or come back for me?*

I turned to Xavier. “How did you find me?”

He laughed. “I heard you on the PA. Thought I’d come and give you a hand.” He caught Lola’s arm with his free hand and dragged her toward the stands. “Jay’s waiting for you.”

The official blew Lola a kiss as Xavier dragged her away, and she sighed.

“The mind control thing clearly isn’t working,” she said.

Xavier glanced at me. “Do I even want to know?”

I shook my head and tucked myself into his side. “Probably not.” I was still shaking with residual adrenaline. “Have Fletcher and Ava arrived?”

“Jay’s with them now,” he said. “Let’s go back and make sure everything is going okay.”

We filed back into our seats, and I couldn’t deny the rush of relief I felt at seeing Ava. It was, perhaps, the first and only time I’d ever felt that way, seeing her. But if she was here now, that meant my ordeal on the track was over. And I was never, ever going back down there as long as I lived. Xavier could find someone else to enjoy the speedway with.

*Lola would probably jump at the chance to come back.*

We settled into our seats, and Fletcher turned to Xavier, his eyes narrowed. “Let’s cut the bullshit. What’s the real reason you want me?”

# Episode 3507

**Xavier**

My brow furrowed as I looked between Ava and Jay. *What the hell happened while I was gone?*

I’d left them alone long enough to go make sure Cali was doing okay down on the track—even from our spot in the stands, she’d looked kind of peaky when the race was getting ready to start. All up, I’d only been gone for a couple of minutes. How the hell was my plan unraveling already?

Ava glared at me, and her voice slipped through my mind. *Whatever you’re thinking, we didn’t do anything. Fletcher figured it out on his own. Good job—the guy’s not a total idiot.*

*A clear improvement on the last three Samara Alphas, then*, I shot back.

She shook her head with a huff. Ava couldn’t—and wouldn’t—argue that Knox and Zeke weren’t fit, but she still held a soft spot for her late brother. I had to admit, he’d been a better Alpha than his successors. But then again, that wasn’t saying much.

“Seriously,” Fletcher pressed. “What the hell is going on here? I find it hard to believe that you’re all part of some kind of pack recruiting team—I might be a Rogue, and I might be out of the loop, but I’ve never heard of anything like this.”

I pulled in a deep breath. “It’s not—”

He cut me off. “Are you guys a pyramid scheme? Because I’m not selling any makeup or weight loss shakes or ugly fucking leggings.”

Ava groaned. “We’re not a pyramid scheme.”

“Fine. An MLM, whatever.”

“We’re not one of those, either,” she said.

“Okay, are you a cult, then?”

*Dear god. I might have to kill this guy, just so he shuts the fuck up.*

*I’ll help*, Ava said. *Great job picking our next Alpha, by the way.*

My teeth ground together. I hadn’t even realized I’d mind linked to her until her voice had slipped into my mind.

“We’re not any of those things,” I said as evenly as I could. “You don’t need to worry about that. We’re just trying to strengthen the Samara pack. Rebuild it. It needs strong members like you.”

Fletcher scoffed. “And why would I want to join a loser pack?”

“I beg your pardon?” Ava looked ready to explode, and Fletcher held up his hands.

“I mean, with all due respect, being a Rogue isn’t always easy, but it does have its perks,” he said. “If I’m going to give up my Rogue ways and pledge my loyalty to a pack, I’m not going to pledge myself to one that’s going the way of the dodo bird.”

“The what?” Lola asked.

“He means to say that the Samara pack is on the verge of extinction,” Jay explained.

“We’re not—” Ava stopped herself and shook her head. “Forget it.”

She mind linked with me. *This guy is an idiot* and *an asshole. I’m done.*

She stood up to walk away, but I grabbed her hand. *Ava, take it easy. This might not be a great first impression, but we need to give him a chance.*

I didn’t understand why she was making this so much more difficult than it had to be. It felt like she’d shown up intent on turning Fletcher down before she’d even met him. I’d sunk way too much time into this for her not to give him a proper chance.

I turned to Fletcher. “The Samara pack isn’t on the verge of extinction, and they’re not losers, either. Show some respect.”

He looked from me, to Ava, and finally to Cali. “When we met, you told me that other girl was your girlfriend. But then you told me Ava was your mate. If Ava’s your mate, then why did you rush down to the track to rescue Cali? Why are you treating her like she’s the one you’re mated to?”

Beside me, Cali tensed. Ava’s lips tugged into a small smirk.

Lola dove right in. “Well, it’s kind of a funny story, actually; they’re a *due*—ow!” She glared at Jay. “Why’d you pinch me?”

“Sorry. Had a spasm.”

*Thank you, Jay*. I loved Lola like a sister, but she was terrible at thinking before she spoke—about anything. My mate situation with Cali and Ava was personal and, more importantly, it didn’t have anything to do with why we were all here.

I sighed. “That’s very complicated, and there’s no reason to get into it right now. It’s not relevant to our discussion.”

“Right. Our discussion.” Fletcher’s eyes narrowed. “You still haven’t told me what that’s all about either, so let me make this easy for you. Either you tell me what this is really about, or I’m leaving.”

I swung an arm around his shoulders. “Sure thing. Let’s go for a little walk.” I turned back to Cali and the others. “I’ll be right back. Fletcher’s right—we haven’t been fully open about why we sought him out.”

I led him away from our seats, to the aisle that cut through the stands. All around us, the crowd was still screaming and cheering. I had no idea who was winning the race. I frowned when I saw Ava follow us out into the aisle, but it wasn’t worth it to try to send her back. Our window with Fletcher was closing—fast.

“I’m not a member of the Samara pack,” I said. “I’m a member of the Redwood pack.”

He frowned. “I’ve heard of you guys. So why are you all into the Samara pack?”

“Because I agreed to help Ava. We’re… friends. Allies.”

*The kiss on New Year’s Eve might say otherwise*, a dark voice in my head said. I shook it off. It meant nothing. *Don’t fucking think about it.*

“You could’ve just told me that,” Fletcher said.

“If we had—if some random guy from another pack had come up to you and asked you to help the Samaras—would you have agreed to meet with me?”

He shrugged. “Probably not.”

Ava hustled up and inserted herself right into our conversation. “The truth is, the Samara pack needs an Alpha.”

“Okay…” Fletcher looked puzzled. “And what does that have to do with me?”

Fury spilled into me, and I mind linked with Ava. *What the hell did you just tell him that for? You’re going to scare him off! This whole thing was set up so we could feel him out, ease him into the idea—not straight-up ask him if he wants the job!*

Her eyes locked with mine. They were cold with determination. *If this spooks him, then he’s not much of an Alpha, is he?*

I glared at her, then turned to Fletcher. “I guess the cat’s out of the bag. We did the research, and you’re not only a Samara by blood—you’re also an Alpha.”

“An Alpha?”

I nodded, and Fletcher burst out laughing.

“Oh my god! Do you really expect me to believe that? Me? Have Alpha blood?” He cackled. “What a fucking joke! Are you going to tell me I’ve got a throne to inherit, too?”

Ava sighed and mind linked with me again. *That settles it. He’s a jerk, and this is a waste of time.*

*You’re being too judgmental. You haven’t even given him a chance.*

*I have. I just don’t like him.*

I bit back a growl. *You barely know him! It’s like you decided from the moment you showed up here that you were against this whole thing. You haven’t given it a real shot.*

*Someone has to be the skeptic! You’re ready to hand over the Samara pack to this guy, and you don’t know him either. You pulled his name from some list—you’re basically cold calling from the Yellow Pages and asking him to be Alpha!*

Fucking hell. She was unbelievable. *What the hell do you want me to do? You keep coming to me for help, begging me to help your pack, but then you shit on my attempt to help! What the hell do you want from me?*

*You* know *what I want from you, Xavier.*

“Wow.” Fletcher chuckled, completely interrupting. “So it’s true, then. You two *are* mates.”

“What makes you think that?” I growled.

“Weren’t you just mind linking? Only mates can do that as humans.” He looked back toward where Cali was sitting with Lola and Jay. “You’re right. It must be complicated.”

I wanted nothing more than to pound the knowing smile off this guy’s face, but I held back. Unlike Ava, I still hadn’t given up hope that we could make this work. What choice did we have?

“Let’s talk hypothetically,” I said. “*If* you could become the Alpha of a pack, would you consider it?”

But Fletcher wasn’t looking at me. He was looking *past* me, and his eyes had gone wide with fear.

*What the…?*

I turned to see a big, menacing guy stomping toward us.

“C-Cameron,” Fletcher gasped out. “What are you doing here?”

Cameron put an arm around Fletcher’s shoulders. “Hey, Fletch. Who are your friends?”

# Episode 3508

Ava had joined Xavier and Fletcher’s conversation, and now I couldn’t stop myself from glancing over at them.

Lola nudged me. “Do you want to go to Xavier?”

I sighed, feeling a little embarrassed. “Is it that obvious?”

Lola snorted. “Yup.”

I huffed. “I don’t want to be some sort of clingy girlfriend that needs to watch over her man twenty-four seven, but—

“I’m not gonna sit here and blame you, babe,” Lola said, shaking her head. “It’s rarely good news when Ava’s involved in anything.”

Both Lola and I paused, turning to look at Ava. She seemed serious and, of course, wildly suspicious.

“I know she’s here for Fletcher and the Samara Alpha situation,” I mumbled, “but I can’t just *forget* her interest in Xavier.”

Lola scoffed. “Of course not. Since we can’t get rid of Xavier, we should poison her.”

I choked. “Lola!”

Lola casually added, “I’m just saying. Xavier may say they’re done, but we both know that a mate bond can’t be simply brushed off.”

I shook my head. “It’s not that I don’t trust Xavier—it’s Ava who gives me pause.”

Lola shrugged, waving a dismissive hand. “Anyway, let’s go get some food. It might help get your mind off things.”

“I’m not hungry, but—”

Lola wrapped her arm around mine. “But you still need to come with me everywhere when we’re in public because it says so in the Bestie Rulebook.”

I snorted, shaking my head. “Fine.”

“Jay, baby,” Lola said, turning around to poke at Jay—he’d been excitedly talking about the race with some other random dude. “We’re going to get food—do you want anything?”

His face lit up. “Wouldn’t mind a couple of hot dogs, some fries, and another beer.”

Lola gave him a pointed look. “Should I just order everything on the menu?”

Jay laughed. “Hey, you asked if I wanted anything, and I’m hungry!”

“I was just trying to be nice, and he milked it for all it was worth,” Lola told me testily as we headed for the concession stand.

I raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t that what you always do with him?”

Lola looked alarmed. “Oh my god, you’re right. A taste of my own medicine!”

I couldn’t keep myself from laughing. Being around Lola was the best distraction.

“By the way,” she added, “I was serious about having the pack sponsor a race car.”

“I doubt that’s going to happen,” I said, looking ahead. The line for the concession stand was just a few feet away. “Greyson would probably look at you like you’ve lost your mind.”

Lola shrugged. “He always looks at me like that, so whatever.”

“Hey, those are the girls with the starting flags!” someone called, startling me.

Hovering to the side, a large group of men were staring at us with intent. *Ugh*. Lola rolled her eyes at them as they called, “Aren’t you girls gonna give us a smile?” and, “Looking good, ladies!”

There was some wolf-whistling then, and I got creeped out real fast. Lola ignored them and pulled me forward to the concession stand line as she grumbled, “Jackasses.”

I looked over my shoulder, toward where I thought Xavier, Ava, and Fletcher were. I couldn’t see any of them—they were too far away.

“How do you think things are going with Fletcher?” I asked Lola. “I hope this Alpha situation works itself out ASAP.”

Lola raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Do you think it’s going to be that easy? They just met the guy!”

“I just want it to be over with,” I said. “Fletcher becoming the Samara Alpha would resolve the problem, and it would also keep Ava from dragging Xavier into her pack business.”

Lola pursed her lips together. “He could have declined to help her, you know. It’s not like she’s forcing him at gunpoint.” Lola’s words made my stomach pang. But before I could fall into an internal spiral, she rushed to add, “Though I’m sure Xavier’s only helping Ava because Greyson asked him to. Things need to be peaceful in the area, for the pack’s sake. It’s just politics, babe.”

I nodded, letting out a breath. “Right…”

*Just politics*, I repeated to myself.

“I don’t want you to worry, though,” Lola said, resting a hand on my shoulder. “If Fletcher doesn’t work out, I have more Alpha names on my list.”

Before I could ask Lola exactly how she’d made that list, we were at the front of the line. Lola recited her order, and we took a step to the side to wait.

“So, when you say you have a list,” I started, “what do you—”

“Can we buy you pretty girls something to drink?” said a nasally male voice.

I turned to see the guys that we’d passed over earlier. If they’d been staring before, now it had turned into a full-blown leering. I was so agitated from having “seen” Seluna in the dressing room earlier, and the whole Ava/Xavier situation, that dealing with this guy right now was just the cherry on top of today’s messy cake.

“We’re not thirsty,” I said through gritted teeth. He wasn’t done, though—he had the fucking nerve to step closer to me and get all in my space. He was at least a foot taller than me.

“Maybe you’re hungry instead?” he said with a glint in his eye.

I felt like gagging.

“Seriously?” Lola scoffed. “That’s the best you can do?”

Lola’s posture was alert, and I knew that that meant trouble. She was halfway to Angry Town, and if these assholes weren’t careful, she’d explode in public.

I placed a hand on her shoulder, trying to calm her. “Lola, let’s just—”

The guy laughed loudly. “You’re a feisty one, aren’t you?”

Oh, god. That was the worst thing he could’ve said.

“You have no idea,” Lola said with a sharp smile, moving between him and me. If this guy had more than one brain cell, he would’ve realized that he was talking to an apex predator. But, of course, no such luck.

Laughing, he gestured at us to his friends. “Check them out, guys, we got a couple of live ones here!”

Seconds later, the rest of the group surrounded us. Lola looked like she wanted to cut a bitch, and the possibility that she’d just lose her shit and shift was very much on the table. She could be so unpredictable.

“You’ll leave us alone if you know what’s good for you,” Lola declared. The men laughed, but I knew she was one hundred percent serious. And deadly.

*Okay, this is bad*, I thought with a hint of hysteria. I tried to look over someone’s shoulder—was Xavier aware of this? Though he wasn’t the right person to call in this type of situation. He was probably even more impulsive than Lola, when he was angry.

“Order for Lola?” the concession stand attendant called.

With her chin lifted high, Lola grabbed my hand, led me out of the chortling men’s circle, and picked up her order.

“Let’s just go back to Jay,” I whispered.

She nodded, but then—

“What’s the rush, sweetheart?” The same guy from earlier blocked our way.

*You have GOT to be kidding me!*

Okay, then. Now I was angry as well.

“I’m not your sweetheart,” I snapped, “and if you don’t get out of my way, *my* sweetheart won’t be happy. He used to kill people for living, you know.”

I couldn’t believe I’d just said that out loud, but the stunned look on the asshole’s face was reward enough. I grabbed Lola’s hand, ready to walk away—

The son of a bitch put his hand on my shoulder.

*Oh, no. He REALLY wants to get blasted into a million pieces, doesn’t he?*

“Hey!” I barked, yanking myself away from his grip, just as Lola stepped between us with a glower.

“Keep your dirty hands off my friend!” she hissed, glaring up at him.

The guy sneered, pretending to shudder in fear. “Or *what*?”

Lola’s jaw clenched. “You asked if I wanted a drink, right? Well, I’m not thirsty, but you look like you could use a beer!”

And with that, she threw a beer at the asshole’s face.

*Great. JUST GREAT!*

Not gonna lie, I loved seeing that, but now we had to go. I said as much in Lola’s ear, grabbing her hand and pulling—until I realized that these ridiculous bastards had surrounded us again.

*Seriously?* I thought. *What the actual fuck?*

I considered blasting them with my magic, but we were in public. Though Lola seemed to be at the end of her rope, and shifting or fanging someone was absolutely back on the table.

“You’ll be next if you don’t take your asshole friend and leave us alone!” she screamed.

Her shout caught people’s attention—now there were spectators eyeing us. I considered mind linking with Xavier, but that would only make matters worse. He wouldn’t think twice about defending me, and who knew how far he would take things?

“Just leave us alone, and nobody gets hurt,” I told the beer-soaked guy.

“Too late for that!” he snarled and made a move to grab Lola’s arm.

“What the hell is *wrong* with you?” I shouted and darted to block him. At the same time, Lola fully lunged at the guy.

“Eat shit and die!” She snapped her teeth in his face, and my stomach dropped—*oh my god, PLEASE NO FANGS!*

“Security!” A group of large security guards had pushed through the crowd and separated us from the men.

“I’m gonna bite your fucking head off!” Lola snarled while a guard tried to hold her back. At the same time, the beer-soaked asshole and his posse kept pointing at us and saying stuff like, “They started it!” and, “We were just being friendly.”

“They were creepy disgusting stalkers who kept sexually harassing us!” I shouted in the guard’s face, just to drive my point across. Unfortunately, though, the guard did not appreciate it.

He looked at Lola and me, then the men as we all shouted at each other.

Then he shook his head and declared, “That’s it! All of you, get the fuck out of here.”

# Episode 3509

**Xavier**

Cameron was a big Rogue, but nothing I couldn’t handle. Fletcher, on the other hand, seemed at a loss. The man we’d thought could become the Samara Alpha looked nervous while Cameron kept a firm arm around him, like he was a possession.

“We’re having a conversation here,” Ava told Cameron, cutting to the chase. “Can you give us some space?”

Cameron eyed her. His face was definitely punchable. “Who are your new friends, Fletcher?” His tone was calm, but there was an obvious undercurrent of threat. The dude had “bully” written all over him, trying to be intimidating and looking for a fight. If that was what he wanted, I’d be all too happy to accommodate him.

“Xavier, Ava,” Fletcher started, “this is my… friend, Cameron.”

Cameron did not look happy at Fletcher’s use of the word “friend.” I noticed the way his grip tightened on Fletcher’s arm. Before he could say anything, though, I stepped in.

“I’ve heard about you, Cameron,” I said.

His gaze narrowed. “What have you heard?”

Ava’s icy blue eyes flashed with irritation. *Take it easy,* *Xavier*, she mind linked.

Ignoring her, I raised an eyebrow at Cameron. “I’ve heard that you’re not worth talking about, so why don’t you just go watch the race?”

Cameron’s narrowed gaze turned into a full glare. “Why don’t *you* watch your fucking mouth?”

Fletcher laughed nervously, looking between Cameron and me. “Okay, both of you stop it—there’s nothing to get upset about. I’m just talking to Xavier and Ava.” He faced Cameron. “Can you just give us a few minutes, please?”

Cameron’s glare shifted from me to Fletcher. He moved his hand from Fletcher’s shoulder to his arm, grabbing tightly. “You trying to get rid of me?”

Fletcher sputtered. “What? No! This has got nothing to do with you, I swear!”

Fletcher’s voice and face were panicked. He was a big, muscly guy, yet in front of Cameron, he was acting like an ant for his ex-boyfriend to crush.

I was reaching my breaking point.

Who the fuck did Cameron think he was, trying to intimidate his way into our conversation? We didn’t have time for this—we needed to find a solution for the Samaras, and what was happening right now was not fucking helping. Fletcher’s cowardice wouldn’t do much to sway Ava in his favor. If he had any chance of being Alpha, he needed to let go of his reservations and stand up to asswipes like Cameron.

“We don’t have time for your bullshit,” I snapped at Cameron. “Back the fuck off, okay?”

Cameron bristled, whirling toward Fletcher. “Is he your new boyfriend?”

“N-No!” Fletcher stammered. “We’re just—”

“Jesus Christ,” Ava interrupted, staring at Fletcher as she pointed at Cameron. “Why can’t you just tell him to leave you alone?”

Fletcher peered at her in shock, as if the possibility of that had never occurred to him.

Cameron, on the other hand, burst out laughing. “Ah, you two must not know Fletcher very well. He’s not exactly the kind of guy to stand up for himself.” He wrapped a possessive hand around Fletcher’s shoulders again. “That’s why he has me to look out for him.”

“Fletcher doesn’t need guys like you to look out for him.” I glanced at Cameron’s grip on Fletcher. “Let him go.”

Cameron gave me a sardonic smile. “What’s going to happen if I don’t?”

Stepping closer, I snarled, “You’ll regret it. I *guarantee* it.” I locked eyes with the son of a bitch, lowering my voice when I spoke. “I’m well aware of how this bullshit works.”

Cameron scoffed. “Yeah, right, this is—”

“Fucking ridiculous,” Ava declared, cutting him off. “Both of you, stop wagging your dicks around. We have important business to take care of!”

Cameron turned to her with a sneer. “You’d better shut your mouth before I…”

Cameron’s voice faded into the background when I heard Lola’s voice echoing somewhere behind me.

“You’ll be next if you don’t take your asshole friend and leave us alone!”

And then, just seconds later:

“What the hell is *wrong* with you?”

Cali’s voice.

Cali was in trouble.

“Xavier, what—”

“Hold on,” I told Ava, hurrying toward the commotion. It *had* become a commotion now, with bystanders talking loudly about the screaming. And then, all of a sudden, I spotted Lola and Cali, with two security guards towering over them.

What the *fuck*?

I pushed my way through the crowd, fuming at the thought of something happening to Cali while I was dealing with that jackass Cameron.

“Xavier!” Jay’s voice came from my left. A moment later, he was by my side as we both rushed toward the girls.

*Cali!* I mind linked. *Are you okay? I’m coming!*

She didn’t answer.

“What the hell happened?” I asked Jay.

He seemed at loss. “No idea—I just heard shouting and saw Lola arguing with someone.”

I quickened my pace and reached the security guard who was hovering over Cali like a fucking scarecrow.

“What the hell is going on?” I asked, grabbing his shoulder to turn him around.

Cali choked, her eyes wide. “Xavier!”

The man was startled. Glaring at my hand on his shoulder, he said, “Unless you want to join the girls, you’d better release me.”

I gritted my teeth together. “If *you* want to live, you’d better let go of my girlfriend.”

“Oh my god!” Cali gasped out, shoving me.

At least the motherfucker had let her elbow go, but now he turned to me and snapped, “Are you *threatening* me?”

“Of course he’s not!” Cali blurted out, wide-eyed. “He’s just concerned about my safety, it’s—”

“All of you,” the guard said, glaring at all four of us, “*out!*”

Of course he called for backup like a coward, and now we were all escorted outside. But at least I could hold Cali’s hand.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She nodded. She looked frazzled, and I hated it.

“What happened?” Jay asked Lola. He’d taken the words right out of my mouth.

Lola shot a sharp look at the security staff. “We stood up to some guys who repeatedly sexually harassed us, and now we’re being thrown out.”

My anger flared, and I pulled Cali into my arms. “Did anyone—”

“Nobody hurt me,” Cali said quickly. “It was just a bunch of jerks.”

I looked over my shoulder, scanning the crowd. “Where are they now?”

I was looking forward to breaking all their heads.

“They’re being taken care of,” said the same guard who’d snapped at me earlier.

“I don’t understand—*we* are the victims here,” Lola said. “We shouldn’t have to leave.”

Jay agreed with Lola, glaring at the security team, but they weren’t having it. Two of them opened the back door and herded us out.

In the end, the same dickhead who’d threatened me said, “Don’t come back.”

He slammed the door behind us.

And I was fucking *furious*.

“I can’t believe this happened!” Lola crossed her arms over her chest. “I was having fun in there!”

I gave her a look, fighting to control my temper. “And I was trying to deal with Fletcher and his asshole ex.”

Cali let out a huff of frustration. “Shit, I’m so sorry, Xavier. We ruined your mission. It wasn’t—”

“Excuse me?” Lola scoffed. “We didn’t do anything wrong!”

“She’s right,” I said. Which was shocking, because Lola being right about something was a whole other weird thing, all on its own. “You were only trying to defend yourselves. In fact, let’s go back in there—you can show me those motherfuckers who dared to bother you, and I’ll—”

“We are not going back inside,” Cali declared. “We can’t become a spectacle, Xavier!” She glanced at Lola. “What if someone accidentally shifts?”

I needed to go back in, though. Not only to deal with the sons of bitches who’d dared to mess with Cali, but also because I didn’t like the idea of Ava being stuck with Cameron and Fletcher on her own. Not that she wasn’t a good fighter, but I wanted to keep an eye on the situation and hand Cameron his ass. I had been the one to tell Fletcher that I would handle his crazy ex, anyway, but now I’d gotten kicked out. This wasn’t how this was supposed to play out.

As if he could hear my thoughts, Jay said, “We can sneak back in, Xavier. Who’s going to notice?”

Lola got this gleeful look on her face and nodded eagerly. “I love the sound of that!”

“Baby?” I asked Cali, taking her hand in mine.

She gave me a determined nod. “You came here to talk to Fletcher. That’s what we’re going to do.”

I leaned in and gave her a peck on the mouth before all four of us headed toward the main entrance. I was about to ask Cali for more details about the jackasses who’d fucked with her and Lola—just in case I spotted them in the crowd—when I heard a loud voice behind us.

“Hey, we’re not done!”

I turned around to see Cameron.

He exited the track, followed by an annoyed Ava and a nervous-looking Fletcher.

“You and me,” Cameron said, pointing at his chest, then in my direction. “What do you say we have a race of our own?”

# Episode 3510

**Greyson**

“How do you know Dayton?” Rishika asked, raising an eyebrow at me.

“I don’t *know* Dayton,” I said. “I *used to* know him. A long time ago.”

She crossed her arms over her chest, both eyebrows raised now. “I don’t like whatever’s going on in your face right now, though. Who is Dayton, exactly? Does the pack have to worry about him?”

I groaned internally. “I haven’t had any contact with the guy since I was a Rogue. But things between us were… complicated.”

Rishika leaned forward, squinting at me. “Was there a woman involved?”

I frowned, eyeing her suspiciously. “How did you know that?”

She snorted. “Call it an educated guess. I’ve heard stories about you. You had quite the reputation before meeting Cali.”

I scoffed, shaking my head. “It was all blown out of proportion.”

Rishika just stared at me.

I cleared my throat. “Okay, so perhaps some of it is true. But I’m not exactly proud of all that.”

“What about Dayton?” Rishika asked.

“I was at a bar, and I hooked up with a woman…” I paused.

Rishika looked unimpressed. “Did you two fuck in the bathroom?” she asked dryly.

“Of course not,” I said with an eye roll. “Who do you take me for?”

Rishika stared some more.

I pressed my lips together. “It was the parking lot.”

Rishika nodded mock-seriously. “Right, huge difference there.”

“Anyway,” I said, moving along, “turns out she was seeing another guy.”

Rishika gave me a knowing look. “I assume that other guy was Dayton?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” I said. “I tried to explain that I had no idea she was with him, but he wasn’t buying it. He wasn’t an Alpha at the time, but he sure acted like one.”

“Hotheaded, possessive, ready to resort to violence?” Rishika asked, counting the characteristics on her fingers.

I wasn’t about to argue or tell Rishika “Not All Alphas.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Things between us got ugly very quickly. But I was just passing through, and I didn’t stick around to escalate things.”

Rishika looked thoughtful. “Did you ever hear from the woman again?”

My smile was wry. “No. It’s messed up to admit that I can’t even remember her name now. I just have a fleeting memory of her. I didn’t often stick around long enough to get involved in people’s lives. I was a Rogue, after all,” I said. After what had happened with Maren, I’d stopped letting anyone in.

Cali had changed that completely, of course.

“You don’t have to explain,” Rishika said with a shrug. “I get it. And actually, there’s a chance that you have nothing to worry about, right? You said it yourself—it was a long time ago. Maybe Dayton won’t even remember.”

“That’d be great,” I said. “The last thing we need is an Alpha with a grudge while we’re at the summit.”

Rishika’s tone was playful. “You know, you seem to have a way of pissing off your exes’ partners—Aiden’s not a member of your fan club, either.”

“That’s their problem,” I said seriously. “It’s not my fault they’re a couple of dipshits with tiny dicks.”

“Of course,” Rishika said, mimicking my tone.

“And anyway,” I continued, “I’ve changed. I have Cali, she’s my mate—she’s all I want. I’d never go back to that kind of life.”

“I’ll say.” Rishika scoffed. “If you ever dared mess around behind Cali’s back, Artemis would use you for target practice.”

“I have no doubt,” I said, snorting.

“So what do we do about Dayton?”

“We’re not going to worry about him,” I said. “I want to focus on the mixer situation.”

Rishika nodded. “Let me know if you need me to do more research.”

I glanced at the huge-ass folder she’d given me. That was way more than enough. I thanked Rishika, and when she was gone, I sighed. Things were going to be complicated enough at the summit without a personal beef between two Alphas causing problems. But it was possible that Rishika was right—perhaps too much time had passed for Dayton to care. That was what I wanted to believe.

Either way, I’d deal with the situation when I had to. There was no need to overthink it beforehand. I had other things to focus on, namely the thick pile of papers that Rishika had brought me.

“Hey!” Ravi’s voice was accompanied by a knock on the door. “Lucian’s getting ready to go.”

Right. There was that, too.

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on the desk. “How did the rest of the ‘courtship’ go?”

Ravi walked in and took a seat across from me. He looked *very* into it as he started recounting the tale. “Well, Lucian and Elle walked around the property, first on the west side, then the east. Lucian stopped on occasion, took Elle’s hand, and told her she was as magical as the ocean under the moonlight, as fragrant as a meadow in spring, as mesmerizing as the sunset in Santorini, as stunning as a—”

“I think I get the picture,” I said curtly.

Ravi chuckled. “Oh, come on, I think they’d make a cute couple!”

That was actually the last thing I wanted to hear. “Ravi, it is a truth universally acknowledged that Lucian is fucking problematic, to say the least.”

Ravi cringed. “Okay, I get it—he did channel a demon and try to sacrifice Cali’s soul or something. But it really looks like he regrets all that and has turned over a new leaf. He’s just—”

“Full of himself? Pompous? A full-blown narcissist who cares only about his own fake-royal ass?” I asked, eyebrows arched.

Ravi choked out a laugh. “Damn, you went hard there.”

And that was nothing in comparison to how I really felt. I was uneasy about the idea of Lucian and Elle as a couple—that wasn’t news. I was no fan of Lucian for obvious reasons, but even if Lucian had suddenly become a fucking saint with completely honorable and sincere intentions, the whole thing just didn’t sit well with me. Even if Elle was happy to explore things with the princeling.

“… it was kind of cute, though,” Ravi said, still talking in the background. “Elle seems so smitten, and Lucian even took off his coat and draped it over a puddle to make sure she didn’t get mud on her shoes, so I think—”

“Thank you, Ravi,” I said, cutting him off. “I appreciate you helping me out, but there’s no need for a play-by-play.”

Ravi nodded earnestly.

My poor nerves.

\*\*\*

When I got outside, Lucian and Elle were on the porch, waiting for me. While staring into each other’s eyes. Good *lord*.

I cleared my throat. Obnoxiously, just to step on the moment.

“Greyson!” Lucian’s eyes flickered toward me. “Thank you for allowing me the privilege of spending time with Elle.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and grunted in acknowledgement. If only for Elle’s sake. She looked a little bit flushed, and pretty content. Which was annoying, because Lucian was annoying.

“Did you have a good time, Elle?” I asked.

She nodded shyly, offering a small smile.

I felt like letting out a long-suffering sigh.

“I really do appreciate your cooperation, Greyson,” Lucian said, actually bowing to me. Of course he’d do that. Then he turned to Elle and bowed to her as well, before reaching for her hand and bringing it to his lips. I could actually *feel* his saliva coming into contact with her skin when he kissed the top of her hand.

Seriously, someone kill me.

Or him.

Definitely him.

I recalled how I’d felt the numerous times the ridiculous princeling had tried to hit on Cali in the past. Rage had been at the forefront of my emotions, along with a permanent struggle to keep it in check.

But when I saw Lucian with Elle, the emotion was more like distrust, and a consistent irritation that kept growing like a spiky cactus. A cactus that I would hopefully shove up Lucian’s ass, in the end.

Meanwhile…

“I will pick you up at eight, my darling Elle,” Lucian said with a smile. He made a move to leave when I let out a laugh that wasn’t really a laugh. It sounded like a groan mixed with a sarcastic chuckle and a “what the motherfuck did you just say?”

“What’s happening at eight, Lucian?” I asked. “I wasn’t aware there were any plans on the table.”

“Why, of course there are!” Lucian chirped, like an excited peacock.

I needed a rifle.

“I am taking Elle out on our first official date,” Lucian declared happily.

My stomach clenched. First of all, seeing him so happy was disgusting, and I did not recommend allowing anyone under the age of eighteen to witness such a disturbing spectacle. Second, what the fuck? Another date? So soon?

“Elle,” I said, turning to her. “Is that what you really want?”

# Episode 3511

It took me a moment to realize that the large guy confronting Xavier had to be Cameron, Fletcher’s ex. But what the hell was he talking about? A race with Xavier? What kind of race? Like, running to that tree up ahead and back?

*Is this how werewolves settle their differences? What are they, five-year-olds?*

“… unless of course you’re too chicken, Xavier,” Cameron finished. He was definitely the bully in this scenario. And then, of course, Xavier snarled, ready to charge forward. I immediately stepped between them, trying to wrap my head around the situation while feeling like a kindergarten teacher.

“Okay, what’s going on right now?” I asked Xavier.

He scoffed. “Cameron wants to get his ass kicked, and I’m all too happy to oblige.”

I eyed Ava. “Did you have anything to do with this?”

She shrugged. “Nope. They’re both being jerks.” She glanced at a nervous-looking Fletcher. “This isn’t even why we came here.”

I rubbed my temples before looking up at my mate. “I need to speak to you alone. Now.” I grabbed his hand and pulled him away.

At the same time, Cameron laughed sardonically. “Aw, Xavier! Do you need to get permission from your girlfriend to play with the big boys?”

“You son of a—”

I yanked on Xavier’s hand and whispered, “*Ignore him*.”

Xavier emitted a totally normal low growling sound that reminded me of an engine until we were a few feet away from Cameron and the others. The probably could still hear us—werewolf hearing and all—but I didn’t care about that. I just needed a moment, here.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “How did we get here?”

“I promised Fletcher that I would take care of his crazy ex problem. I’m not backing out,” Xavier said stubbornly.

“I haven’t forgotten, Xavier, and I know this is important,” I said. “But is racing the best way to do it? Do you even know anything about racing?”

Xavier nodded. “I know enough. I can handle it—I’ll set the stakes and go from there.”

“But—”

“You have to trust me, baby,” he said, taking my hand. “I know what I’m doing.”

I swallowed audibly. “I’m sure you do, but… racing? Can’t you just talk things out? Maybe arm wrestle? What about a paintball tournament?”

Xavier’s expression remained grave. “None of that is going to put an end to Cameron’s bullshit. And I have to deal with him once and for all if there’s going to be any hope of Fletcher taking over as Alpha. Don’t you want me to help the kid?”

There was no more room to argue.

I nodded, sighing. “Of course. Fletcher needs to be safe.”

When we got back to the others, Xavier glared at Cameron.

“We can race, but I want to make something clear,” he said. “When you lose, you’re going to get the hell out of here and never bother Fletcher again.”

Cameron laughed. What a jackass.

“I know I’m going to win,” he said cockily. “And when that happens, you’re going to apologize publicly for meddling in other people’s business.”

*Oh, god*, I thought, cringing. *That would be so humiliating for Xavier!*

Despite that, though, Xavier agreed. I had to admire his commitment.

Then he mind linked with me. *Cameron’s pretty sure of himself. If he weren’t such an asshole, he’d probably make a better Samara Alpha than Fletcher.*

My response was wry. *I don’t think being any kind of asshole is a positive trait for an Alpha, Xavier.*

“What kind of race are you going to have?” Lola asked, looking intrigued. Of course she’d love this—she thrived on chaos.

Cameron raised an eyebrow, and Xavier shrugged.

“Fuck if I care,” he said. “We can run on foot, drive cars, or race motorcycles—choose your weapon.”

“Um, excuse me?” I hissed, tugging on Xavier’s sleeve. “Why did you mention weapons? There won’t be any weapons, right?”

“No, Cali, it’s okay,” Xavier said soothingly, patting my arm. “Also, werewolves heal, remember?”

Lola gasped. “But wait, I love weapons! You could have a duel and fight for Fletcher’s honor! Like, Cameron, you’re the abusive husband that literally nobody likes, and Xavier is the knight in shining armor, but, like, super broody!”

Fletcher’s whole face had turned bright red, by the way.

“Lola, no,” Jay said quietly, pulling her back, while Cameron rolled his eyes and said, “No sword bullshit. My buddy works here—he can hook us up with a couple of dirt bikes.”

“Like I trust a buddy of yours,” Xavier said sharply. “I’ll pick my own bike.”

“Fine by me.”

Xavier nodded. “Let’s get this over with.”

“I’ll be Xavier’s second,” Jay announced as we all walked around the outside of the speedway.

Lola squealed and linked her arm around Jay’s. “Baby! I love that journey for you.”

I sighed. “Jay, I think it’s been established that this is not a duel.”

“But what if Xavier can’t race for some reason?” Jay asked.

Xavier scoffed. “Nothing’s going to keep me from racing.” He paused, then, turning to me. “Unless you really don’t want me to.”

I didn’t want anyone to race—or duel. But I also knew that things could be settled in much worse ways. Sometimes it felt like Xavier was always one step away from snapping and killing someone, like he’d done with Tony. It was actually a miracle that he hadn’t casually killed Lucian yet. But anyway, I didn’t want my mate to murder Cameron in cold blood. Even if the guy was a certified piece of shit, judging by the way he treated Fletcher.

“Just promise me you’ll be careful,” I muttered.

Xavier leaned down and kissed my cheek. “I promise.”

\*\*\*

As Xavier, Jay, Lola, and Cameron discussed the rules, I walked over to Ava. She’d been brooding in a corner, watching everything like a hawk.

“You’ve been very quiet throughout all this,” I commented.

She gave me a pointed look. “I knew how this would play out—I’ve seen too many confrontations between Rogue werewolves. Once their mind is made up, there’s no way to stop the pissing contest.”

“But aren’t you worried about Xavier?” I asked.

Ava snorted. “I’m pretty sure Xavier can take care of himself. Didn’t you know that he used to ride dirt bikes?”

I frowned. “No…”

“So he hasn’t told you,” Ava said with arched eyebrows. “And you couldn’t have known, otherwise—you didn’t know Xavier when he was younger. Not like I did.”

Her condescending tone and all that braggy sarcasm in her face begged for me to blast her. Just raise my hands and send off a bomb of energy to shut her up.

*Cali, no!* I chided myself. *You cannot start a fight with Ava right now!*

Ava took my boiling silence as a sign to continue.

“I hope you’re not going to try to stop them,” she said, her gaze fixed on me. “Do you realize how important this is? Right now, Fletcher is all the Samara pack has.”

I bristled. “I’m well aware of how Xavier is risking his life to save your pack, Ava. I don’t need to be reminded.”

She rolled her eyes. “My god, you’re so dramatic. He’ll be fine.”

I huffed and turned to look at Fletcher. He’d been standing back from the others, biting his nails and looking like a buff version of Bambi. *God*.

“Do you really think Fletcher would be an improvement on Zeke?” I asked quietly. I didn’t want to sound judgmental.

“I do have my reservations,” Ava admitted. “But this situation with Cameron is making it hard to discern what Fletcher is really made of. I imagine assholes like Cameron can wreak havoc on one’s self-confidence.”

I paused, processing her words. Ava was right, and I had to give her credit—at least she was being fair-minded about this. And I reminded myself that even though Xavier was risking himself here, it was for a good cause. Fletcher shouldn’t have been trapped in this fucked-up situation with Cameron.

“Let’s go see what’s going on,” Ava muttered.

When we got to the garage area, Cameron was telling his mechanic buddy—*yuck*—about the race.

The mechanic looked between Xavier and Cameron. “These two will do just fine.” He revealed a couple of beat-up motorcycles and gestured outside. “There’s a dried-up riverbed just around the back—you can race to the dam and back.”

When we arrived at the location, Xavier climbed onto the bike and revved it up. It belched smoke and backfired. Cameron did the same with the other bike, and then the mechanic handed something to him. He clapped Cameron on the back as Cameron put whatever that was in his pocket.

*No, but seriously*, I thought. *What was that?*

“Give me a kiss for good luck,” Xavier said, interrupting my thoughts.

With a sigh, I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulled him close, and pressed my lips against his. Stroking his cheek, I murmured, “I believe in you.”

He gave me a crooked grin, and my heart pounded.

“Stop canoodling—we’ve got a job to do!” Lola exclaimed and pulled me back.

“What kind of job?” I asked, confused.

“Since we’re now experienced race starters, we’ll be starting the race, of course!”

A moment later, she and I were in front of the two racers. Lola was beaming and ecstatic, while I felt like a crushed beetle. So that was nice. I mimicked Lola when she held up her hands, fighting the uneasy feeling that was building inside me.

Xavier locked eyes with me through his helmet.

*Don’t worry, baby*, he mind linked. *It’ll be fine*.

The bikes roared and revved, kicking up dirt as Lola started the countdown.

“Three. Two. One. GO!”

And the race began.

# Episode 3512

**Xavier**

I opened up the throttle, and the wheels tore into the dirt. After a quick last look at Cali, I raced ahead with Cameron in tow. I knew Cali was worried about me, but that wasn’t anything new. The feeling had to be a normal state of mind for her by now. But I couldn’t blame her—we’d been through a lot of shit, and she’d gotten jumpy.

Right now, though, she really didn’t need to worry. I knew I could do this.

Not only was I an excellent bike rider, but I’d been in my share of dirt bike competitions. The sensation was familiar—the wind whipping against my skin, the adrenaline coursing through my veins when I sped up. But then there was a rumbling noise from the bike, and it suddenly felt pretty unsteady. As I tried to get a feel for it, the results weren’t all that encouraging. The machine wasn’t much, by any means, and I hoped it wouldn’t fall to pieces on the way to the dam.

When I glanced to my side, Cameron was there—keeping up with me, his expression smug. Part of me wished that we could have done this like proper werewolves. The guy was big and mean-looking, but I had faced far, far worse. I had a feeling Cameron was all about putting on a good show but would crumble easily. Silas, Letifer, Seluna, Adéluce—there was no way this schmuck would’ve come out alive after facing those kinds of threats.

My thoughts came to a sharp halt when my bike hit a hole. I gripped the handles tight and managed to regain control just in time. Better stay focused here—I couldn’t let my own confidence get the better of me. Winning was the only option right now, if only to get rid of Cameron so that Ava and I could fully assess Fletcher’s merits.

As it stood, I wasn’t too into the guy. But I was willing to give him a second chance—things would be much clearer once his ex had been dealt with. As for Ava—I had no idea how she felt about Fletcher. Was there a chance that she’d given up on him already?

No, I doubted that—she wouldn’t have let me go through with this if she had. She would’ve just rolled her eyes at me and told me this was a waste of her time. Instead, she was out there, waiting to see what happened next. That meant that she was intrigued by Fletcher for some reason or another, and I could call that progress.

I was keeping my thoughts focused on the road and the goal, careful to avoid any other holes, when suddenly I felt a drop of water on my nose. Fuck, had it started to rain? I glanced at Cameron—we were still going head-to-head, and my plan was to let him think he had the upper hand before I gave it my all as we approached the finish line.

We steered off the road in unison, our bikes jumping into the air as we soared over the bank and hit the dried riverbed. More and more water drops landed on me, on my helmet and in my eyes, the rain starting to intensify, making it hard for me to see. But I was no worse off than Cameron—we were both going to have to fend for ourselves.

I was glad the weather wasn’t colder. Not only would snow and ice have made the race more treacherous, but I could also picture Cali shivering by the side of the road like a baby duckling—one who’d run off into the snow to make sure I was okay at the first sign of trouble. I should have left her my coat. Hopefully she would shelter in the garage. Did she have her gloves and scarf with her? I couldn’t fucking remember.

“Is this the best you can do?” Cameron shouted through the chaos of the rain, picking up speed and moving past me. I rolled my eyes and leaned forward, speeding up as well. A few feet up ahead, there was a fallen tree right in my path, and the son of a bitch wasn’t giving me room to skirt it.

Gritting my teeth, I jammed on the brakes, fishtailing as I swerved around the tree. The precious seconds I lost allowed Cameron to pull farther away, but I sure as hell wasn’t about to let that stand. I raced forward, opening up the throttle all the way. The debris kicked up by Cameron’s tires struck me in the face, and the rain had gotten so heavy now that it was difficult to see.

It wasn’t wise to go this fast right now, but Cameron was ahead, and I had to take the risk and win this. Ava was counting on me, and the survival of the Samara pack could depend on the outcome of this fucked-up little game. Besides, even if nothing came out of Fletcher trying out for Alpha, I would still have humiliated a scumbag, and that was good enough in my book.

This was going to be easy, after all. I was closing in on Cameron in no time, and I knew I’d be passing him at any moment.

But suddenly, swift movement caught my eye. In my peripheral vision, I saw Cameron reach into his pocket and throw something on the ground. The adrenaline coursing through my veins turned into fury when I spotted what it was.

*Nails.*

“Son of a bitch!” I cursed, swerving to avoid them. Too late—one of them ripped into my front tire, and the already unsteady bike was now vibrating even worse. This useless bastard had resorted to dirty tricks, but was I really that surprised? If you couldn’t win fair, cheat. His buddy the mechanic must’ve helped him—he and I were going to have a talk after I was done with this bullshit.

“You piece of shit cheater!” I shouted at Cameron as he laughed, riding ahead. “You think that’s going to stop me?”

The front tire might’ve been losing air, but the riverbed was soft dirt, and I could withstand the jarring as the tire bounced harshly off the ground. I gunned the engine again, closing the gap between us. I made sure to stay out of Cameron’s direct path to avoid the debris and any other fucking tricks he had up his sleeve.

When I finally pulled up alongside the bastard, I shouted, “Nails won’t save you, you fuckin’ weasel! Ever heard of winning fair and square?”

Cameron’s eyes narrowed, and then he swung his bike even closer to mine. He lifted his foot and tried to reach over and kick me, trying to knock me off my ride. The little bitch sure had a lot of goddamn nerve.

With one hand still holding the handle, I reached for his leg with the other. He let out a yelp of fear when I grabbed at him. I was ready to twist his leg and throw him the fuck off his bike when I saw a giant boulder looming up ahead.

This was my opportunity.

Grinning, I let the bastard go with a shove, gunning the engine to shoot ahead. I missed the boulder by inches, but Cameron couldn’t say the same. I heard him cursing behind me, struggling while the rain started to come down in sheets. The front tire was still giving me a hard time, so I’d slowed down a little, which was pretty bad.

I had to put distance between us before Cameron got his footing. How many other dirty tricks did he have up his sleeve? I didn’t want to have to find out. How much farther away was that damn dam?

“Missed me?” Cameron’s voice was accompanied by the screeching sounds of his bike as he pulled up alongside me. *God dammit*. The asshole pulled a chain from his bike’s saddlebag, and my heartbeat accelerated when I realized what was about to happen.

“You motherfucking coward!” I shouted, but that didn’t give Cameron pause.

He swung the metal at me, and I had to use all my balance and strength to keep my jittery bike upright. I grabbed onto the handles harder, fighting not to get knocked off by the impact of the chain as it hit my arm and side. But my fury grew, and when Cameron tried to swing at me with the chain again, I was ready. With one swift movement, I grabbed the piece of metal.

“Having fun?” I snarled, pulling at the chain as we both rode off.

“Let the fuck go!” he screamed.

I laughed, pulling harder. “You’re not cheating your way through this, you little bitch!”

Cameron growled, fighting to yank back the chain, and me with it—

Suddenly, the ground gave out from underneath us, and we both tumbled over the edge of the dam.

# Episode 3513

**Greyson**

Before a wide-eyed Elle could respond, Lucian spoke up again.

“Of course, I expect you to serve as chaperone, Greyson!” He nodded vigorously. “Especially since you did such an outstanding job earlier.”

If Lucian thought compliments were going to butter me up, he had another thing coming.

Suppressing an eyeroll, I turned to Elle. “Is this something you really want, or is Lucian just being himself, here?”

Elle looked confused. “Himself?”

I took her gently by the elbow and turned her back on Lucian. Keeping my voice calm, I said, “You know, doing that thing he always does, steamrolling everyone into doing what he wants?”

“I beg your pardon?” Lucian’s voice was annoyed.

“Excuse us, this is a private conversation,” I deadpanned, glancing over my shoulder. Lucian grumbled but didn’t continue to argue. At least he’d realized he didn’t have the upper hand here. Even that was progress for someone as cocky and delusional as he was.

Unfortunately, though, Elle didn’t seem to view him that way. Pressing her lips together, she looked at the ground, and I reminded myself to do my best not to hurt her feelings.

“Elle?” I prompted softly. “What do you think?”

“I would like to go on the date…” She looked up at me hopefully. “But only if my Alpha agrees to chaperone.”

I would’ve preferred to poke my eyes out rather than do anything to encourage this ill-advised romance. But at the same time, I forced myself to remember what my mom said—let Elle figure things out for herself. I had to trust Elle and make sure she stayed safe while also respecting her wishes. I had to be the bigger person.

I’d spent years bullshitting my way through life, but this took the cake.

“Well?” Lucian said, sounding eager. “What say you?”

We both turned to face him. “I will chaperone one last time,” I told Lucian. “But only if Elle truly wants to go on this date with you.”

Elle gave a shy smile, looking between Lucian and me. “I do.”

Lucian lit up. “Wonderful!” He clapped me on the shoulder as if we were best buds. “Many thanks for accommodating us.”

He bowed to Elle yet again and made a move to leave when I realized something.

“Hey, where are you going to be taking Elle?” I asked.

Lucian paused and turned to look at me. He was wearing a mischievous smile that had me *immediately* worried. “It’ll be a surprise, of course. Only the best for my darling Elle!”

He bowed at her for a fucking third time,then skipped away like a kid in love.

This was a problem. Lucian in general was a problem, of course, but Lucian plus a surprise was a problem within a problem. His surprises were usually a mixed bag, at best.

“A surprise?” Elle said quietly, her eyes wide as she looked up at me. “What could it be?”

“You never know, with Lucian,” I grumbled. “Could be a bathtub full of diamonds, or swimming with sharks, or anything in between.”

Elle’s eyes went impossibly wider. “*Sharks?*”

“Don’t worry, Elle,” I rushed to reassure her, leading her back into the house. “I’ll be there to make sure you’re not put in harm’s way.”

She clapped her hands. “But I love sharks!”

I blinked. “What?”

“They are like the wolves of the sea!” She grinned.

How the fuck could I argue with *that* logic?

“I will go get ready,” she said excitedly, and made a move to strut upstairs.

I held her back, clearing my throat. “Right, let’s have a little chat first.”

“About what?” she asked as I led her to my study.

“You said you had a good time on your walk with Lucian, but I need you to be completely honest with me here,” I said. “Can you do that?”

She frowned in confusion. “I never lie.”

“Sure you don’t,” I said. “But since you like Lucian”—for some reason—“you might forgive him for doing something that bothered you without telling me.”

Elle was now extra confused. “He did not do anything to bother me.”

I wanted to groan and bang my head against the desk. I wished Cali were here—perhaps she would’ve been able to explain why Elle had to be cautious around Lucian. She knew what he was capable of firsthand, after all. But how the hell did you narrate the mess that was Seluna to a girl who’d only become human a few weeks ago?

“Let’s take it from the top,” I said, starting again. “Can you tell me why you want to go on a date with Lucian?”

Elle seemed puzzled by the question. “Because it is a date. And I have never been on a date. I want to experience one.”

“Sure, but why Lucian?” I asked, trying to be patient here. “Are you sure you understand what dating is all about? Especially with Lucian?”

Elle shrugged. “Lucian is nice. He talks a lot, but that is okay because I am still learning how to speak better. And I think he is pretty. I told you that before.”

“Yes, right, sure,” I said swiftly, waving a hand. “But Lucian—”

“Lola says that when we think someone is pretty, it usually means they are attractive to us,” Elle told me seriously. “So I think Lucian is attractive.”

Lucian’s good looks didn’t matter here. His foolish and obsessive ways were the problem.

“And I like it when he holds my hand,” Elle went on, “and when he smiles. He has a nice smile. Do you think so too?”

I thought I wanted to have a drink by the fireplace while contemplating the decisions that had led me to this place in my life. That was what I thought.

“Greyson?” Elle said when I didn’t reply. “Do you not want me to go on the date?”

When I met Elle’s gaze, she looked cautious. I told myself to get a fucking grip. It was clear by now that Elle didn’t like it when I treated her like she couldn’t handle herself. I knew it would be easy to put my foot down, but this could also be an opportunity for my mom’s advice to pay off.

Continuing to spend time with Lucian would give Elle a chance to really see with her very own eyes what a blowhard, self-indulgent princeling he was. In the end, all I would have to do would be sit by and watch him sabotage himself.

With those thoughts in mind, I offered Elle a smile. “I want you to do what will make you happy. And since you want me to, I’m happy to be your chaperone.”

Elle’s entire face transformed with joy. “Thank you!” She rushed around the desk and gave me a tight hug, which made me laugh in surprise. “Okay, I have to go get ready now!”

This was the second time she’d said that in the past few minutes. I now realized it didn’t sound right.

“Elle, it’s way too early, you have plenty of time to…”

I didn’t finish my sentence. Elle was already gone.

I sat back into my chair, rubbing my face with both hands. The thought of forbidding Elle from seeing Lucian danced around in my head again, but it just seemed too dangerous—Elle was loyal, but she was also stubborn enough to lash out, if pushed. I was really trying my fucking best here, but at the same time, I couldn’t shake the feeling that letting her explore this thing with Lucian was a bad idea, despite my mother’s advice.

What would Elle’s father make of a werewolf like Lucian? Would he blame me for letting Elle anywhere near the princeling? And what if Lucian was right? What if Elle *was* his mate? I couldn’t be faulted for that, but I wasn’t about to shirk my responsibility when it came to Elle. But if they were actually mates, and I hoped to hell they were not, I would have no choice but to accept Lucian.

He was just so fucking *infuriating*.

For example, why couldn’t he just tell me where the date was? I suspected I wouldn’t be able to go in sweats, but I also wasn’t crazy about the idea of dressing up. I had shit to do, and I wanted to be here when Cali and Xavier got home, to find out what was up with the Samara situation. Lucian’s goddamn courtship was taking up too much of my time.

Shaking my head, I headed upstairs, just as Ravi was climbing down.

“Hey, how did things go with Lucian?” he asked.

“Lucian and Elle are going on another date,” I said. “A more serious one, apparently, and I have to tag along.”

Ravi looked intrigued. “Oh, I could fill in for you!”

I sighed. “You can’t. I promised Elle I would be the chaperone. Can you text me when Cali gets back, though?”

Ravi agreed. I thanked him, then headed to my room to get ready early. Might as well. Feeling uninspired, I inspected my closet with a scowl. Seriously, what the hell was I supposed to wear? Did it even matter, though? Knowing Lucian, he’d probably put on a bedazzled three-piece suit and take Elle on a hot-air balloon ride.

My phone rang, interrupting my thoughts. It was an unknown number.

“Hello?” I said after picking up.

There was a gruff male voice on the other end of the line. “Is this Greyson Evers?”

“Yes,” I said, frowning. The voice didn’t ring any bells. “Who is this?”

There was a long pause. And then the caller said, “Long time, no see. It’s me, Dayton.”

# Episode 3514

I was huddled together with Lola, Jay, Ava, and Fletcher in the bay of the garage. How much time had passed since Xavier had left? I kept checking my phone until I finally turned to the mechanic.

“How long is this race?” I asked. “Shouldn’t they be on their way back by now?”

The mechanic shrugged. He seemed pretty shady to me. “They’ll get back when they get back.”

I gave the mechanic the sternest look I could muster. “I’m sorry to say it, but that’s not very helpful.”

He didn’t look intimidated at all. “What am I supposed to do? Ain’t my fault it started raining.”

I took a deep breath and looked away.

Lola squeezed my hand. “Hey, it’s gonna be okay.”

My voice was a hushed, panicked whisper. “*Will it*, though? And at what cost, Lola?”

Lola leveled me with a stare, resting both her hands on my shoulders. “I know that you’ve been struggling with catastrophic thinking lately—”

I laughed nervously. “Who? Me? Anxiety? What?”

“—but that’s normal,” Lola continued in a soothing tone. “You’ve been through a lot of shit, and you’re constantly expecting the worst. I’m also pretty sure you’re deeply traumatized and pretending everything’s fine, when it’s clearly not.”

I swallowed audibly. “But what if something catastrophic *does* happen? What if Xavier just—”

“Cali, Cameron is just a blip on Xavier’s radar. Your mate went to the demon world and back—kind of. He’s a mercenary, an Alpha, and one of the best fighters I’ve ever met.” Lola remained patient with me. Knowing her, she was really making an effort.

“I know he’s all those things, and they only make me worry more, because Xavier’s not afraid of anything and doesn’t take care of himself,” I declared. “He’s willing to take risks that no one else ever would, and when he’s in danger—”

“Cali, seriously,” Jay said calmly. “What’s the worst thing that could happen? He gets injured? So what? He’ll heal. You have to chill—this is routine for Xavier.”

Lola nodded. “Exactly. There’s no real reason for you to worry.”

“Oh my god!” I rubbed my face, groaning. “You can’t tell me not to worry! That’s a surefire way to make me feel the opposite!”

“I’m sorry I dragged Xavier into this,” someone said behind me. I turned to see Fletcher. He’d approached us and had clearly overheard the tail end of the conversation. He looked worn down and freaked out, and that made me feel weirdly vindicated.

“See?” I told Lola. “I’m not the only one who’s worrying!”

Lola sighed.

“I tried to warn Xavier that my ex was crazy,” Fletcher said mournfully. “I’m sorry you had to find out firsthand.”

“Sure, Cameron’s dangerous,” Jay said conversationally. “But is he more dangerous than a demon?”

Fletcher looked bewildered. “Come again?”

“Oh my god, Jay!” I huffed, shoving Jay. “The fact that Xavier can deal with dangerous situations doesn’t mean that a less dangerous situation couldn’t be dangerous for him! Do you know how Hercules died?”

Jay opened his mouth and paused. “Are we talking about the Greek demigod, or a real person?

“The demigod, of course!” I said. “He was eating fish, and a bone got stuck in his throat, and he just choked to death. All those monsters, he killed them all, but that fish bone was his damnation!”

Lola frowned. “None of this sounds right.”

I ignored Lola and grabbed Jay’s arm. “Don’t you see? Cameron is the fish bone, and Xavier is Hercules!”

Lola kept frowning. “I’m like a hundred percent sure that’s not how Hercules died.”

“Yeah, me too,” the mechanic said. Of course he’d been eavesdropping.

“This is the most ridiculous conversation I’ve ever heard,” Ava declared from the other end of the garage.

I shot her a fed-up look. If the end goal here was to help the Samara pack, Ava should’ve been filling Fletcher in. *Not* making snarky remarks about the brilliant stories I cooked up to make everybody else as anxious as I was about Xavier’s safety.

Gesturing at Ava, I told Fletcher, “Have you had a chance to talk to Ava? If you have any questions about the Samara pack, she’s the one to ask.”

Fletcher nodded seriously, and—

*BANG!*

The explosion came from far away, but I was vibrating with so much stress that I felt it in my fucking bones. The rainy sky flashed orange, and my heart pounded.

“What was that?” I breathed.

The mechanic stepped out into the rain, tilting his head like he was listening hard. “Shit,” he mumbled. “They better not have fucked up my bikes.”

I grabbed his arm. “What do you mean by that?”

The mechanic frowned. “It sounds like they crashed.”

I stopped breathing. I looked out into the rain—the visibility was shit, but if I sat still right now, I knew I’d probably fucking explode.

“Xavier!” I screamed, and then…

Well, and then I ran out into the rain.

Obviously, I wasn’t thinking very clearly, but what was I supposed to do? Just sit there and wait? I didn’t think so! I’d been so sure that this was a bad idea—that it would all go up in flames. Quite possibly literally. Why had I ever agreed to let them race? Xavier had asked me to trust him, and I did—or at least I’d said that I did.

*Now it feels like I was just lying to myself…*

“Cali, what the hell?” Lola was shouting from behind me. “Where are you going, you lunatic?”

“You’ll get sick, and then Xavier will be super pissed at me!” Jay called.

Ava and Fletcher called my name as well, but I only stopped when Lola grabbed me by the arm and dragged me back. Once we were back in the garage, the mechanic gave me an alarmed look. “Let me offer you all a ride before this one loses her shit again.”

Who said causing a scene wasn’t effective?

A moment later, the mechanic pulled up in a beat-up old jeep. We all piled in, soaking wet.

“You have to hurry,” I told him.

He huffed. “Hey, I can only go so fast—the transmission on this thing is a bitch.”

I couldn’t argue with that. The jeep sputtered and bumped along the road, and I was almost thrown out when we turned down the bank and hit the riverbed. The roof was torn, and rain was hitting everyone in the face. The mechanic suddenly started swerving left and right, tossing me straight into Ava.

She was not amused.

“Put a seat belt on,” she said dryly.

I was too annoyed, frustrated, and worried to deal with her shit right now. “What the hell is wrong with you? Aren’t you freaked out about Xavier?”

Ava looked away, crossing her arms over her chest.

Helpful.

“Can you guys smell smoke?” Jay called.

The rain was still falling heavily, but the scent of smoke did fill my nose. My stomach churned as the vehicle slowed down.

“Why did you stop?” Lola asked the mechanic, alarmed.

“I can’t tell where the dam is,” he said. “There’s too much rain; visibility is terrible.”

“I’ll find it,” I declared, jumping out of the jeep in a very “fine, I’ll do it myself!” kind of way. Fueled by determination and nerves, I raced ahead, ignoring the rain until I spotted the dam, despite the horrible visibility. I stopped at the edge—there was smoke mixed in with the rain, and down below, I could see the smoldering remains of the bikes.

“Xavier!” I screamed, just as Lola and Jay ran up to me.

“What’s happening?” Lola asked.

“Xavier, I—” I choked out. “I have to get to him, he could be hurt!”

“Cali, wait!” Jay shouted, but I didn’t listen.

I ran along the edge of the dam, looking for a way down.

“There’s an old ladder halfway down!” the mechanic shouted and pointed in that direction.

I spotted the rusted top of the ladder and started to go down, despite Lola and Jay’s protests. The rain made the rungs slippery, and I nearly fell a couple times, but I didn’t give a damn. I had to see Xavier, make sure he was okay. Only that would ease the feeling of dread inside me—this utter conviction that something horrible had happened or was about to happen.

The image of the smoldering bikes haunted me.

*Just a little closer…*

And then I slipped again, cutting my hand.

“Fuck!” I shouted, letting the rain fall over the wound before I wiped it on my clothes.

*Sure, that’ll totally protect me from tetanus!* I thought sarcastically, fighting hysteria.

When I finally reached the bottom, I tripped over the rocks, but I didn’t fall. I ran toward the bikes, bracing myself for what I might find. The rain was falling, but the scent of smoke was thick. Every breath felt like a struggle. I was panting, my chest heaving and hurting.

As I approached the tangled mess, I slowed down.

*He’s fine, Cali*, I told myself. *He’s fucking fine, he can heal, and you’re making a fuss for no reason! Stop freaking out!*

Easier said than done.

“Xavier?” I called.

No response.

I spotted a prone figure on the ground, underneath one of the bikes.

“Xavier!” I screamed, racing toward him.

But then I realized it was just a dead tree under the ruins.

“What the hell?” I choked out, looking around.

Xavier and Cameron were gone.

# Episode 3515

My heart was racing.

*What the hell? If they survived the crash, where could they have gone?*

Lola and Jay came running over, both of them muddy and soaked to the bone, just like me.

“What’s going on?” Lola asked, looking around. “Where’s Xavier?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered, fighting tears.

*I’m up here!* Xavier’s voice flooded my mind.

My heart swelled. I turned to Lola, grabbing her by the arms. “He just mind linked me! He’s alive!”

Lola raised her eyebrows at me. “Of course he’s alive, he’s a werewolf.”

I ignored Lola and her logic—since WHEN was she the reasonable one here?—and wildly spun around. I fought to see through the slashing rain. Finally, I spotted Xavier when Jay pointed upward.

“There they are!” he shouted.

Xavier was hanging from the side of the dam with one hand, fifty feet above us. He was holding Cameron by the jacket collar in his other hand.

*Oh, my god! This does NOT look good!*

Running over, I yelled, “Hang on! We’re gonna help you!”

That was what I told him, but honestly, I had no idea how the hell we were going to get him down. As if he could hear my thoughts, Jay said, “He should drop Cameron, shift, and claw his way up. The Rogue is deadweight.”

“But what about Cameron?” I asked.

“He won’t die or anything, just be in a tremendous amount of pain from the fall,” Lola said with a shrug.

“I got a rope!” the mechanic was yelling from the top of the dam. I was so thankful for the immediate solution to the problem that I felt my tension ease. But of course, that didn’t last.

“Hey, guys?” Xavier shouted. “I’m not sure how much longer I can hold on!”

I was shaking all over, and it wasn’t just from the rain. I wished I could use my magic to help, but how? It wouldn’t do any good to blast them.

“We have to go back up,” I told Lola and Jay. “Help with the rope and pull them up!”

Jay shook his head. “No, you go—Lola and I will stay down here in case we have to shift and break Xavier’s fall.”

Jay’s confident tone made me feel just a smidge better. But only a smidge.

*Hold on*, I mind linked, rushing to the side of the dam. *Please, please hold on!*

*Be careful*, he replied as I slipped my way up the ladder. I finally got to the top, just as the mechanic, Fletcher, and Ava brought the rope to the edge. I watched, panting and shivering in the rain as the mechanic tied one end to the bumper of his beat-up jeep, and Fletcher and Ava fed the rope down. I joined them and peered over the edge to spot Xavier.

*You’re going to be okay*, I mind linked. *I’m not letting you get hurt!*

He shot me a smile as he looked up at me through the rain. *It’s fine*,he replied. *Even if I break my legs or back or something, I’ll heal. It’ll be a fun story to tell the grandkids.*

I wanted to start screaming. So I did. “*A fun story to tell the grandkids?*”

Xavier actually laughed at my reaction. UNBELIEVABLE.

“We should tie a couple of loops at the end of the rope so Xavier can put his foot in one, Cameron’s in the other, and then we can pull them both up,” said the mechanic.

“Hurry the fuck up, this maniac thinks this is funny—I doubt he’s strong enough to keep holding me!” Cameron shouted, his gaze flickering to Xavier.

Xavier’s amusement turned into irritation. He shook Cameron, hard enough for the other werewolf to yelp. “Shut up, or I’ll drop you on purpose!”

Running on autopilot, I helped the mechanic tie the loops, then watched as Fletcher and Ava lowered the rope. Xavier grunted and struggled to slip his foot into a loop, almost losing his hold on the dam several times until he finally made it.

I recalled Jay’s earlier suggestion, and part of me did wish he’d just let Cameron go. Xavier would have no problem climbing back up if he wasn’t weighed down by Fletcher’s horrible ex. And Xavier might’ve been laughing about getting hurt and breaking a few bones, but the image of the decimated bikes told me that the fall would be extremely painful.

*How long would something like that take to heal? What if Xavier breaks his neck? Would that heal too? Could werewolves die from that?*

While I went down the anxiety rabbit hole and got ready to help pull the rope, Lola and Jay were whooping and hollering from below.

“You’re doing great, Xavier!” Jay shouted. “And don’t worry, we’ll be here if you fall!”

“We’re gonna save you, Xavier!” Lola yelled. Then she added, “Can’t guarantee I’m gonna help Cameron, though—I don’t know him, but I can already sense he’s the worst!”

Cameron growled at her. But before he could say anything, Fletcher peered over the edge.

“She’s right, you know! You *are* the fucking worst!” he suddenly shouted at Cameron. “See what you’ve done? *This* is why I don’t want to be with you. You’re reckless, you take too many stupid chances, and you always let your emotions blind you!”

“Shut the fuck up!” Cameron snarled.

“No!” Fletcher shouted back. “I hate what we’ve turned into!”

On the one hand, I was shocked and proud to see Fletcher standing up to Cameron. On the other, this was probably not the best time to be arguing.

“I love what you’re doing right now,” I told Fletcher quickly, taking hold of the rope, “but how about you hand Cameron his ass when my mate isn’t dangling over the void, hmmm?”

Fletcher seemed to snap out of it and nodded curtly. He turned to the mechanic, glancing at the rope that had been tied to the jeep’s bumper. “Why don’t you turn on the car and drive? That’ll definitely help.”

The mechanic shook his head. “The jeep will probably fall apart—it’s on its last legs.”

Just like the bikes he’d given Xavier and Cameron.

*Is this guy a mechanic or a junkyard dealer?*

Fletcher went to hold the rope near the bumper and make sure the car didn’t literally break apart. I stayed at the forefront, right next to Ava, and we both grabbed the rope. The mechanic peered over the edge.

“Are you ready?” he called.

Xavier scoffed. “I’ve been ready for ages—get us the hell out of here already!”

“I can take your place and pull, kid,” the mechanic told me.

My jaw clenched. “I can handle it.”

Ava eyed me with skepticism. “You sure about that? Those two are at least four hundred pounds of muscle combined.”

Every other emotion inside me was overshadowed by aggravation. I was not about to back down, certainly not to Ava. There was no way I was going to let her take all the credit for saving Xavier. He was my mate, and I had to help him.

“Worry about yourself,” I said curtly. “I’ve got this.”

Ava rolled her eyes at me as the mechanic gave us instructions. “Pull slowly and steadily—don’t jerk!”

There was an endless buzzing in my ears after that. I grabbed the rope and dug my heels in, but the ground was muddy, slippery from the rainfall. Ava and I took one step back, followed by another, each one bringing Xavier closer to safety.

My palms and the muscles of my arms were immediately burning, struggling under the werewolves’ weight. I fought to keep up, but this didn’t look good. Had I made a mistake by refusing the mechanic’s help? Had I let my pride interfere with sound judgment?

*Yes, Cali, you IDIOT!*

It was too late now. I recalled when I was a kid, and we’d played tug-of-war, and I’d always been determined to be as strong as everyone else. I was still acting like that dumbass kid, which really wasn’t great right now. And then, everything got worse.

“Hold on!” the mechanic shouted, running to the edge. “The rope is starting to fray!”

“Then hurry!” Xavier shouted.

I grunted, every muscle in my body protesting as Ava and I took another step back. Of course, she wasn’t straining like I was. She was a werewolf, and I was not. I couldn’t stop the eternal twinge of jealousy in my chest.

“You’re almost there!” Fletcher shouted. He’d switched positions with the mechanic and was now looking into the dam. He knelt down in the mud and extended his hand over the edge. “You can do it—just a few more feet!”

My whole body ached as I fought to pull and pull and pull and—

*SNAP!*

All of a sudden, the pressure in my aching muscles eased.

The rope had broken.

# Episode 3516

**Greyson**

It really was Dayton on the phone—I recognized his voice, now. There was a slight Southern twang to it.

“You remember me?” Dayton asked.

I decided to go all out and poke around to see his reaction. “How could I forget? You practically tried to kill me.”

“I’m sure there’s a long list of people who had the same goal back then,” Dayton said coolly.

He wasn’t wrong about that, of course. But I wasn’t about to give him the satisfaction. Rishika had said that Dayton might’ve forgotten about what had happened in the past, but this phone call didn’t feel innocent at all. My guard was definitely up.

“What do you want, Dayton?” I asked calmly.

“How are you doing? Didn’t expect you to ever be an Alpha.”

“Likewise,” I replied. “Now, if you’re done with the chitchat, do you want to tell me why you’re calling?”

“Didn’t you read the summit itinerary? Looks like our packs are co-hosting the Full Moon Fever mixer.”

Dayton’s tone was suspiciously non-murderous. Maybe even friendly. Normally, I would’ve tried to smooth things over in the name of diplomacy and unity and whatever bullshit, but I was pretty sure that being polite right now would mean my head on a platter. I had to maintain an air of hostility with Dayton, just to make sure he knew I would never let my guard down around him.

“I know about the party thing,” I said. “I saw it on the email.”

Dayton snorted. “Any idea what the hell that’s supposed to mean? ‘Full Moon Fever mixer’—that’s a little on the nose for werewolves, but who am I to judge?”

I was in full agreement, but I wasn’t about to laugh at his little joke. I didn’t trust any part of what was happening right now.

“If we’re co-hosting,” I said, “what exactly do you want from me?”

“I was wondering if we should come up with a plan to make sure we cover everything and don’t do anything twice.”

“Right,” I said wryly, “because our preparations can’t be identical, but they also can’t clash with each other.”

“See? You get it. Maybe this won’t be a total disaster.”

I couldn’t believe I was talking about hosting a party with a guy who’d tried to bite my head off. Then again, I *had* allowed Elle to go out with the aggravating narcissistic princeling. Apparently, I could never say never about anything in this life.

“I’m still working on my plans for the mixer,” I said. “I’ll let you know.”

“You’d better get moving, man,” Dayton said casually. “We don’t have a lot of time.”

My voice was sarcastic. “So first you try to kill me, and now you’re trying to micromanage me. I’m not sure what’s worse.”

“Take it easy—I’m not looking for a fight here,” Dayton said in a way that made me think he was *definitely* looking for a fight.

I scoffed. “You know what? If you’re holding a grudge here, then I—”

“Greyson!” Elle popped up in the doorway, looking stressed out. “I need your help! Which one of these should I wear tonight?” She held up two outfits—a tiny little red dress, and a long one with a super risqué neckline.

There was no way in hell I’d let Lucian see her in that kind of attire.

“Neither,” I said. “They’re not for you.”

Elle scowled, eyeing the dresses while Dayton snorted in my ear. “Sounds like you’ve got your hands full. You’ve always been a ladies’ man, after all.”

I had a sudden flashback of Dayton taking a swing at me, claws extended, when he’d found out that I’d slept with his girlfriend. I’d been in bar fights before, but there was something about this guy that had felt unhinged. Which was what made his current calm demeanor feel very wrong. This simply could *not* be a friendly call about the mixer.

“If there’s one thing I want you to remember, it’s that you need to stay out of my business,” I said. “Get that?”

Dayton chuckled. “You gotta chill, man.”

“Greyson!” Elle groaned, stomping her foot. “If you do not help me with my dress, I am not going to wear anything to the date!”

I was pretty sure that Elle wasn’t fucking around. Dayton laughed gleefully at her words while I told her, “Just a second, I’m coming.”

“I’ll bet you are,” Dayton said in a cocky tone that made me clench my jaw. “Sounds like you’ve got more than your hands full.”

My voice dropped. “I don’t know what kind of game you’re playing, but I need you to remember that I’m onto you.”

I hung up and turned to Elle. Taking a deep breath, I reminded myself to stay patient with her. At the same time, there was a little voice in my head that said I should *not* give in to her when she stomped her foot and got all demanding—but it was too late now.

“Why don’t we take a look at what you have in your closet?” I said, standing up from my desk.

Elle was still frowning. “What is wrong with what I picked out?” she asked, following me out of the study.

I glanced at the flimsy fabrics she was holding and growled. “*Everything*.”

Elle pouted, thrusting out her chin. “Why are you being mean to me? You are my Alpha and my best friend, and Lola said that best friends are not supposed to be mean to each other!”

The situation was so fucked, I couldn’t even blame Lola. I paused, rubbing my face before I faced Elle. Composing myself, I said, “Sorry. I didn’t mean to snap at you. I was just on a call with some asshole—I shouldn’t take it out on you.”

Elle nodded, patting my arm. “I forgive you. Now, be nice like you usually are, and tell me what to wear.”

Leading Elle upstairs, I said, “Of course. I’ll help you find something more appropriate.”

Perhaps a burlap sack. The less appealing I could make Elle to Lucian, the better.

Which was a messed-up thought to have, because that wouldn’t be fair to Elle. And knowing Lucian, he’d probably present Elle with a gown of his own choosing.

This was such a fucking mess.

“Let’s take a look,” I said once we arrived at Elle’s room.

Her closet didn’t have much in it. She’d acquired a few pieces of clothing since she’d moved into the pack house, and she had borrowed clothes from Lola, Dani, and some of the others who had a similar body type—though she was taller than Lola, and that presented a challenge, because something that was normal length for Lola would reveal most of Elle’s legs.

And we did not want that.

“I tried to get Rishika to help me,” Elle continued, “but we could not agree on anything. I think she likes beige too much.”

I didn’t have any thoughts on beige, but I wasn’t sure I was going to be much better at dressing someone up.

I went through Elle’s clothes as she kept talking. “I want to look the best I can for Lucian—he is always so nicely dressed! If you were Lucian, what would you want to see me wear?”

Sudden nausea hit me at her words.

“Let’s just find something that’s classy and elegant, but also not too formal.” I pulled out a dress, a long, sleek one I was sure I’d seen Lola wear with heels. If Elle wore flats, it would be fine, lengthwise. “What about this one?”

Elle crossed her arms over her chest, sticking her tongue out. “Not fancy enough.”

I sighed and looked up at the ceiling, wishing for a higher power to save me.

And then my prayers were heard.

“Is there something I can help you two with?” I heard my mother’s voice from behind me, and my relief was immediate.

“Yes!” I blurted out, spinning around to face her. “Can you help Elle find a suitable outfit for her date with Lucian?”

My mom smiled at Elle. “Of course. I’m more than happy to.”

Elle smiled back—at least she wasn’t going to throw a fit—and I walked past my mother, squeezing her shoulder. “Thank you. I have to go to my own room to find something to wear myself.”

“Hold on a minute, this will only take a second,” my mom said, rummaging through Elle’s closet at an alarming speed. “Aha!”

She pulled out a long-sleeved purple dress that was snug at the waist and flared at the hips. Not too short, with a neckline that was a little low for my tastes, but at least it wasn’t obscene.

“What about this one?” my mom asked Elle. “The color will look gorgeous with your hair and eyes, Elle.”

Elle looked at the dress with interest. “This is very pretty.”

“Greyson?” My mother looked at me expectedly.

I tried not to make my tone begrudging, but it was hard. “Sure.”

Elle grinned, picking up the dress. “I will go try it on!”

She skedaddled into the bathroom while my mom took my hand and led me out of Elle’s room. Once we were in the hallway, she said, “I know you’re unhappy about Elle and Lucian, Greyson. But if they truly are mates, have you thought about whether there’s anything you could do to prevent Elle from leaving the Redwood pack?”

# Episode 3517

**Xavier**

*SNAP!*

The rope broke, and then I was free falling into the void, cursing my own dumbassery. Why the hell had I insisted on saving an asswipe like Cameron?

Cali’s screams pierced my ears, and in the next three seconds, all I did was fight to grab the side of the dam again. Cameron was, of course, still holding onto me, not even fucking attempting to save his own ass.

When he and I had ridden over the dam and started free falling, I’d managed to grab both the side of the hole *and* Cameron while our bikes exploded far below. The son of a bitch pretended to be a badass, but it was now clearer to me than ever that he was just a cowardly little bitch. Why couldn’t I just let him slip right now? The dude was a cheater and had tried to sabotage me during the race at every turn, so why should I give a fuck about him breaking his neck?

Was I getting soft?

Had being with Cali made me more human?

The thought disgusted me—I was a fucking werewolf. And when I became Alpha of the Redwood pack, I would have no room to allow my feelings to distract me.

But the truth was, I’d known that Cali would’ve expected me to do all I could to help Cameron, and now I was paying the price.

“Xavier!”

Cali’s scream echoed through the rain, accompanied by the rope suddenly jerking taut again. We’d only slipped down a few feet, bumping against the dam before slamming into the side.

Cameron grunted at the impact, but at least he didn’t start fucking whining.

I could taste my own blood and wondered if I’d broken my jaw. I spat the taste out.

“Hey!” Cameron barked. “Watch what you’re doing!”

I rolled my eyes. What a fucking drama queen. Above us, over the edge, I heard Ava’s growl. Had she shifted when the rope had snapped so she could grab the frayed end? I had no time to ponder that—we were being pulled up, slowly at first, then faster. Within seconds, the edge of the dam was within reach.

I grabbed hold and pulled myself up over with a huff. This was not how I’d imagined today would go.

“Get the fuck out of the way!” Cameron barked from behind me.

I turned to glare at him. “Better watch your tone, asshole, I just saved your life!”

I considered kicking the bastard in the face, sending him to the bottom just to make a point. The only thing that saved him was a wild-eyed, panicked Cali, rushing to my side.

“Xavier!” she shouted, grabbing my arm to help me roll away from the edge. Sniffling, she hugged me tight. Her voice was shaking, along with her whole body. “I was so worried, oh my god—are you okay?”

I wiped the blood from my chin and smirked up at her. She looked so worn and worried under the rain, but to me, she was as gorgeous as ever. “I’m going to live, so you’re in trouble…”

She let out an incredulous chuckle. “How can you joke right now?”

I shook my head, snorting. “I’m fine, baby, I promise.”

Grumbling about me almost giving her a heart attack, Cali helped me to my feet. Once I was finally upright, I spotted Ava. She let the frayed rope slip from her teeth, then she shifted back to human and made eye contact with me.

“I assume you saved me from falling?” I asked her gruffly.

She shrugged. “Not a big deal.”

Her hands were fists at her sides, and I knew Ava. I could just fucking tell from a single look that she was far more upset than she was letting on. My wolf stirred on the inside, the feel of his worry jarring me. Ava was naked, soaking wet in the pouring rain, and definitely cold. She looked so vulnerable, almost fragile, and she’d just saved me from a lot of painful injuries.

It was hard to hate her right now.

“Here,” I said, taking off my coat to give it to her.

She took it without a word, avoiding eye contact. I reasoned with myself that whatever my wolf felt didn’t matter. If nothing else, giving Ava a coat to cover herself would help put Cali at ease. She didn’t do well with nudity, and Ava’s nudity would make her extra uncomfortable, because Ava just made her uncomfortable in general.

I turned to face my mate and found her watching as Cameron flopped to the ground at our feet. Scowling, I looked down at Cameron. He’d looked much more menacing when he’d been grabbing Fletcher’s shoulders, all sure of himself. Now, he looked like a wet puppy—only not cute.

“You two are a fucking mess!” the mechanic said, sloshing over. He reeked of wet werewolf. “Who’s going to pay for my bikes?”

I laughed. “Won’t your insurance cover it?”

The mechanic growled. “What insurance?”

I gestured to Cameron. “Ask him; he’s the one who chose to race.”

The mechanic glared down at Cameron, pulling him up so he could start berating him. The argument kept going on in the background as Lola and Jay appeared at the top of the ladder.

“Fuck, Xavier!” Jay grabbed me and pulled me into a hug. “Stop trying to be a daredevil—Cali freaked out so badly, we had no idea what to do!”

My stomach clenched at Jay’s words. I turned to look at Cali as she argued with Lola and Jay, saying that she hadn’t freaked out at all, and everything had been totally fine. Of course, I could tell she was lying. Her lips were blue, and she was getting chilled—she’d been out in the pouring rain for a while now. I pulled her into my arms, hoping to warm her up.

“We have to get out of the rain,” I said.

“Everybody get back in the jeep,” the mechanic said with a grunt. “I’ll drive you back to the garage.”

Cali shivered against me as I embraced her. I already regretted giving my coat to Ava. *Fuck*. Once we got into the car, I forced myself not to look at her. With the jeep acting up at every turn, we bounced our way back to the garage. A few moments later, we piled out and into the shelter.

“We should go back to the pack house,” Cali said, nodding emphatically. “Everybody is soaking wet and cold.”

“Right…” I shot a glance over my shoulder. “But first, I have to clear something up with Fletcher and Cameron.”

Cali’s eyes flashed in warning. “Do not start a fight, Xavier. And no more races. Ever.”

I pressed my lips together to hide a smile at her strict tone. “I can’t promise, but I’ll do my best.”

Cali huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. “Seriously, Xavier? You scared the crap out of me!”

I shook my head. “It was fine. Besides, if you’d told me what to do, like, a month ago, I’d have been pissed at you. Now I’m willing to consider following your advice. Isn’t that cool?”

Cali gave me a wry look. “So what? You want a medal for contemplating the idea of being less reckless?”

I kissed her cheek, then her mouth, stroking her arm. “I love you. It’s all good.”

With Cali’s long-suffering sigh following me, I headed over to Fletcher and Cameron. The two of them seemed to be in a heated conversation, and I was ready to step in when Ava blocked my way.

“Thank you for the coat,” she said, peering into my eyes.

It was obvious something was bothering her, just from the way she paused.

“Are you good?” I asked.

Her voice was quiet, her eyes downcast. “Don’t ever do that again, Xavier. If you do, I’ll let you fall.”

My throat tightened. I knew she meant it. Her worry was real.

“Thanks for saving me,” I said. I owed her that much. Looking over my shoulder, I said, “And Cameron, I guess. Though I think it would’ve been fine if he’d cracked his skull going down.”

Ava snorted.

“What are we going to do about Fletcher?” I asked her. “Is it worth pursuing this?”

“I’d already ruled him out, but I’m a little more on the fence after seeing him stand up for himself and chew Cameron out before,” she said.

“Good,” I said. “You should. Considering he’s related to you somehow.”

Ava glared. “He’s practically a stranger. He’s no Nolan,” she said, then flicked her hair behind her shoulders. *Of course, no one could hold a candle to her homicidal brother.* “Anyway. I just told you I was on the fence. It’s not much, but it’s something.”

I nodded. “Fine. I’d hate to think this whole drama was a waste of time. But before we can officially consider Fletcher, I need to clear something up.”

Ava eyed me skeptically. “What?”

I gestured for her to watch and headed over to Cameron and Fletcher.

“… I’m sick and tired of you trying to control me,” Fletcher was saying, his voice loud, angry. “It’s over. For good!”

Cameron huffed. “But I fucking love you! And you—”

I grabbed the bastard roughly, pulling him away from Fletcher. “Fun and games are over, Cameron. Are you going to hold up your end of the deal and leave Fletcher alone?”

# Episode 3518

Cameron looked at Xavier for a moment, then burst out laughing.

“Something funny?” Xavier growled.

“Yeah, you,” Cameron said, gasping with laughter. “You’re joking, right?”

Xavier’s eyes flashed with anger, and I was scared things were about to escalate, so I stepped forward, trying to get between them.

“Xavier, this rain is freezing. I want to get back to the pack house,” I said, trying to get him to focus on me.

Cameron shook his head. “I’m not going to *hold up* anything, man. We never finished the race.”

I rounded on him, fury welling up in my chest. “Allow me to remind you that if it wasn’t for Xavier saving your ass, you would have died, *man*.”

“Oh, trust me, that can still be arranged,” Xavier snarled.

I shot him a warning glance. *Please don’t make things worse*, I pleaded through the mind link.

I turned back to Cameron. “The least you can do after that is stop harassing Fletcher, who’s made it totally clear that he doesn’t want anything to do with you. It might hurt or whatever, but that’s the way it is. That’s what Fletcher wants, and you have to respect that.”

Cameron’s smug smile began to fade, until finally it was gone completely. He glared at all of us. “Fine. Whatever. Like I fucking care. You’re all a bunch of losers, anyway.”

Quick as a flash, Xavier shoved his shoulder and then stepped after him as Cameron stumbled backward. “If I find out that you’ve gone back on your word, I’m going to find you, dickhead, and I’m going to make you regret it—”

“Okay, Xavier,” I said, grabbing his arm and pulling him back before he murdered the guy. “I think you got your point across.”

Cameron got his feet back under him, flipped us off, then turned on his heel and stalked off into the rain.

“Fucking idiot,” Xavier muttered.

I could tell it was hard for him, just letting Cameron walk away, but he shook his head, letting it go.

I shivered and wrapped my arms around myself. “Okay, can we please go home now?”

Xavier hesitated. “Yeah, I just need to settle things with Fletcher and Ava.”

“Does that have to happen right now?” I asked.

“I’m sorry,” Xavier said. “No, I can take you home first.”

“Can’t you settle things with them back at the pack house?” I asked. I wasn’t crazy about the idea of having Ava come home with us, but if it finally put an end to all the Samara drama once and for all, then it would be worth it.

“Yeah, I could probably do that,” Xavier said. “I’ll go tell them.”

On the ride back the pack house, I couldn’t seem to warm up. Xavier had turned the heat up as high as it would go, but I just couldn’t seem to get the warmth to sink in.

“Ugh, can we roll down a window or something?” Lola asked, fanning herself with her hand. “It’s so stuffy in here. I feel like I’m going to pass out.”

“Please don’t turn it down,” I said, my teeth chattering. It was just from being out in the rain, I was sure. My clothes were still damp, and I couldn’t warm up. Once I got home and took a hot shower and got into dry clothes, I was sure I’d be fine.

Xavier shot me a sidelong glance. “Are you okay, Cali?”

“I will be, once we get home,” I managed to say.

I turned to look out my window, glancing back to where I knew Fletcher and Ava were following in the car behind us.

“Do you think Ava will accept Fletcher as the Samara Alpha?” I asked.

Xavier looked grave. “I’m not sure,” he said quietly. “I know she wasn’t impressed with him at all until he finally stood up to Cameron and showed some backbone.”

“Yeah, but was that enough to convince her?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Honestly, I have no idea.”

I took this in. If Fletcher didn’t become the Samara Alpha, who would? And how much longer was it going to take to find the right candidate? I didn’t say any of that out loud, because I knew the topic was already stressful enough for Xavier. But I did worry about it. I just didn’t want Ava to have any more reasons to be around Xavier.

It was bad enough that she’d ended up saving him and Cameron from falling into the dam, but then when she’d been standing there naked and he’d given her his coat…

I gritted my teeth. It had been the right thing to do, of course, but I still didn’t like it.

Then, as though he’d heard my thoughts, Xavier reached over and took my hand. He brought it to his lips and kissed my cold skin.

“I know it’s been hard, but things will get better soon. If it’s not Fletcher, it’ll be someone else. I’m sure we’ll be able to find someone. Maybe even someone with a lot less baggage.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, maybe.” Then I shivered again.

Xavier looked over at me with a frown. “You’re still that cold?”

“I’m okay,” I said, but I was shaking properly now.

He shook his head. “You should be warming up. It’s roasting in here.”

“Tell me about it!” Lola said from the back seat.

“I’m fine,” I said shrugging off the concern. “I’m just soaked. I need to change.”

When we finally made it back to the pack house, Xavier opened my door and put his arm around me, helping me inside.

We’d just made it into the house when Ava and Fletcher pulled up.

Xavier looked at them over his shoulder. “I should tell Greyson what’s going on with Ava. He should probably be there for the talk we’re going to have with Fletcher.”

I looked up at him in surprise. But I was glad that he’d suggested it, and that he seemed to want to work with his brother, rather than against him.

He saw the incredulous look on my face and rolled his eyes. “Don’t read too much into that.”

“What do you mean?” I asked innocently. “I’m not reading anything—”  
 “I’m just trying to do what’s best for the pack—and getting an Alpha for the Samaras would help cement the safety of all the packs in the area.”

“Got it,” I said. “I won’t read anything into it. I promise.” I shivered again. “I think I’m going to go get some tea.”

“Good idea,” Xavier said.

We headed into the kitchen and found Rishika standing at the counter, eating grapes and looking down at her phone.

“Hey,” she said, looking up.

“Hey. Where’s Greyson?” Xavier asked as I grabbed the kettle from the stove and filled it with water.

Rishika rolled her eyes. “Oh, you’re going to *love* this. Greyson went out.” Her eyes widened. “As a *chaperone* for Elle’s date with Lucian.”

Xavier laughed. “What?” he asked in clear disbelief. “Are you kidding me?”

Rishika shook her head, laughing too. “I am not. It was a sight to see.”

“Man, I would have lovedto have been here,” Xavier mused. “And I love that Greyson had to do that. I’ll bet he’s hating his life right now.”

“Oh, you can bet on that,” Rishika said, giggling.

I frowned as I set the water to boil. I didn’t think any of that sounded funny at all. I didn’t like the idea of Elle getting involved with Lucian in any way—not after the hell he’d put me through. But at least Greyson was there—he’d be sure to look out for Elle.

I shivered again, and my teeth clattered together.

Xavier looked over at me, his face creasing with worry. “Skip the tea, Cali. You should go upstairs and take a hot bath. Get out of those wet clothes and put on some pajamas or something.” He stepped toward me and rubbed his hands up and down my arms, trying to warm me up. “I’ll come up and check on you as soon as I’m done with Ava and Fletcher.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea.” I turned off the burner under the kettle. “Good luck with that. Oh, and you should probably give Ava something to wear while she’s here. Besides your jacket.”

Xavier made a face as I headed out of the kitchen and up the stairs. In my room, I peeled off my still-damp clothes and realized that my hands had started shaking.

“Dammit,” I muttered, closing them into fists. I was just so, so cold. It felt like the cold was winding around my bones.

I flipped on the water in the bath and turned it to hot. Steam started to fill the bathroom as the tub filled, and I dropped my pants and panties to the floor, impatient for the tub to finish filling.

When it was halfway full, I decided it was good enough and stepped in, then yelped and pulled back in surprise.

Despite the steam that was filling the room, the water felt ice-cold.

# Episode 3519

**Greyson**

I sat back on the seat next to Elle. I had wanted to drive, of course—I always preferred to have my own wheels, in case I needed an exit strategy—but the princeling had sent a car. Though it hadn’t surprised me, I had to wonder if it was purely a romantic gesture for Elle’s sake, or an insurance policy to ensure that she actually arrived for their date. Either way, it meant I’d ended up in the back seat without a way to bail, which I didn’t love.

In any case, I was glad my mom had helped Elle pick out an outfit for the date. Elle looked happy with it, but it wasn’t too sexy. That was the way I wanted it. I didn’t want Lucian getting the wrong idea about where this date was heading.

“Where are we going?” Elle asked, for the third time

“I still don’t know,” I reminded her. “Lucian wouldn’t tell me, either.”

I rubbed the bridge of my nose, thinking about what I’d discussed with my mother—about the possibility that Elle might leave the pack. She’d told me I needed to be prepared for that outcome, but I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. As awkward as Elle could be sometimes, I’d grown used to her, and I really liked her. I enjoyed having her as a member of the pack. She was smart and resourceful and deeply loyal. She knew the woods better than anyone else, and she was scrappy as hell in a fight. But I knew what my mom had meant, so I turned to look at Elle. She was learning more about the human world every day, but I knew there were still things she didn’t know, and I wanted to make sure she understood all the elements of the mate bond before things with Lucian could go any further.

“Listen, Elle, I want to talk to you.”

She looked over. “About what, Greyson?”

“If you and Lucian *do* happen to recognize your mate bond, you know what that would mean, right?”

She frowned. “I… do not know.”

“It would mean that you would have to leave the Redwood pack and join the Vanguards. Are you okay with that?”

Elle thought about that for a moment. “I do not know. I know that the Redwoods do not always like the Vanguards. Sometimes they have problems with them”

Saying that we had “problems with the Vanguards” was putting it lightly, but I kept that to myself.

Elle frowned. “I guess it makes sense that I would join my mate’s pack—but why could Lucian not join the Redwood pack? Join *his* mate’s pack?”

“Well, that is possible,” I admitted, “and sometimes it happens. But since Lucian is the Alpha of his pack, I doubt he’d want to leave. He likes…” I needed to say this carefully. “… being in charge.”

Elle nodded. “I am still figuring all this out,” she admitted. “Maybe I will know more after my date.”

“Maybe,” I muttered. I looked up, suddenly realizing that the car had stopped.

We were in front of a gated driveway, which opened to let us through. We drove up a driveway, passing a number of shiny, expensive cars parked along the way—a Tesla, a vintage Rolls-Royce, a Porsche Cayenne, and even a bright red Bugatti Veyron.

Finally, the car stopped at the entrance to a building with a large wooden door. There was no name or any identifying sign to hint at the building’s purpose. There was only a number—545.

“What is this place?” Elle asked, looking out the window at the building.

I shook my head. It was a large building, brick, with wide windows and a sharply sloping roof. “It’s either a private home or some kind of club.”

Elle frowned at me. “A *club?* Someone is going to hit me with this building?”

I shook my head. “Not that kind of club.”

The car door opened, and Elle stepped out. I followed her, and an attendant immediately materialized at our side. He was dressed in a black suit and held a large black umbrella over our heads, shielding us from the pouring rain.

He stayed with us as we moved toward the entrance.

“We’re here to see Lucian—” I started to say, but the attendant interrupted as soon as we got to the door.

“I would like to be the first to welcome you, Miss Arielle and Mr. Evers. The prince is expecting you. He is waiting for you in the lounge.”

“He’s not a prince,” I said, but the attendant didn’t respond. He’d already opened the massive oak doors and was moving into the foyer of the building.

Elle looked back at me, her eyes wide. “Why is Lucian always so fancy?”

“Because he’s always trying to impress everyone,” I answered bluntly. “I know this is a lot to take in, but try not to let it distract you, okay? Judge Lucian based on who he really is, not who he wants you to think he is.”

Elle frowned, looking confused by this advice.

“Just focus on *him*, okay?”

She nodded.

The foyer was grand, with high, lofted ceilings, hand-laid wooden floors, and large oil paintings on every wall. Our footsteps echoed as the attendant led us across the foyer to another large door. He pushed it open.   
 “The lounge,” he announced.

Inside, we found a large, well-appointed room. There was a bar on the far end of the room and small round tables set near the fireplace. The room was inviting, lit with warm, welcoming light. I had to admit, Lucian *did* go all out to impress. The room was full, and the small round tables were occupied by people who looked unmistakably wealthy. Their clothes gave them away—they just had that look of quiet wealth about them. I assumed they were the owners of the cars we’d seen parked out front.

None of this surprised me, nor did the fact that all eyes turned toward us, checking out Elle and me as we crossed the room toward a corner table, where Lucian was rising to his feet.

He was dressed in a three-piece suit—complete with vest and matching pocket square—and he stepped forward and reached for Elle’s hand.

“You look exquisite,” he breathed, scanning her body. “I’m so pleased that you agreed to come. You can’t know how happy you’ve made me.”

I zoned out. I’d heard Lucian’s flowery flattery too often to believe it, or to even be interested in it. I just hoped Elle was savvy enough to see through it.

I glanced around the lounge at the people gathered at the other tables, wondering who they were. I wondered if there were any other supernaturals present. I couldn’t sense any other werewolves—other than Lucian and Elle—and was relieved to note that there didn’t appear to be any vampires, either. Even after spending time with Lola, Jacqueline, and Mikah—vampires I actually liked—I tended to prefer it when vamps weren’t around.

“Greyson?”  
 I glanced over. Lucian was looking at me, a questioning look on his face. I had the feeling he’d already asked me a question, though I hadn’t been listening.

“What?” I asked, not bothering to pretend I’d been paying attention.

A flicker of irritation passed across Lucian’s face. “I was just asking if you’d had the pleasure of visiting Club 545 before today?”

“No,” I said flatly. “It’s not really my cup of tea.”

“No?” Lucian asked politely.

“Not really. I’d rather hit up a good whiskey bar,” I told him.

Lucian laughed, apparently thinking I’d made some kind of a joke. “The club has some very exclusive whiskey, of course. Just ask for whatever you’d like, Greyson.”

If Lucian kept giggling like that, I was going to need more than a shot or two to get through the night.

“Are we going to have dinner?” Elle asked.

“I’m sorry, I should have told you the plan right away,” Lucian gushed. “Yes, we’ll be going into the dining room shortly. As soon as my other guest arrives.”

I looked over at him in surprise. “What other guest?”

I’d thought this was supposed to be a date between Lucian and Elle. That was why I’d been dragged along, for crying out loud. If someone else was coming, why couldn’t *they* have chaperoned this train wreck?

But just as I was about to press Lucian for more information, he glanced over my shoulder at the door, and his face lit up.  
 “Ah! Here she is now!” he said, waving.

I turned to see Aysel standing in the doorway. She smiled when she saw Lucian and walked toward us, fairly glowing in the warm golden light of the lounge. Aysel was always beautiful, but she seemed particularly radiant tonight, dressed in a sleek, dark blue gown. It moved on her like water and made her blue eyes look nearly indigo.

I rounded on Lucian, furious. “No. This is *not* a double date.”

# Episode 3520

**Xavier**

I had taken Ava and Fletcher into the living room to talk, but Fletcher couldn’t settle. He was up, pacing the room, going over the events of the night with what appeared to be utter disbelief.

“—and then you and Cameron raced, and then—BAM—right over the dam. And you would have fallen, but Ava”—he glanced over at her—“stopped you. And it was raining the whole time! And then Cameron just took off. I can’t believe he took off. You stood up to him, and he finally got scared enough to leave me alone. After all this time—”

“Yeah, it was wild, Fletcher. Now will you just sit?” Ava snapped, annoyed. “We have business to discuss.”

She was sitting on the couch, dressed in a random assortment of clothes Lola had grabbed for her. Lola had been all too happy to help Ava get covered up when she’d come into the pack house still wearing only my jacket. Ava was now wearing an oversized sweatshirt I suspected had belonged to Jay at some point, a pair of orange and black stripped leggings, and a pair of fuzzy boots. It was all kind of random, but somehow Ava still looked hot in it—which pissed me off.

That wasn’t how I wanted to feel about Ava, and it was annoying that I couldn’t stop myself from thinking it. Besides, I didn’t need any distractions right now—this meeting was supposed to be all about pack business. Maybe I was just edgy. I was anxious as hell to get this Samara business wrapped up once and for all. I wanted to go upstairs and check on Cali, make sure she’d followed my advice and was taking a hot bath. I hoped that would be enough to warm her up and stop her shivering. How she still hadn’t recovered from standing in the rain was beyond me, but it worried me, too.

Fletcher still hadn’t sat down, and my impatience got the best of me. I stood from my own chair, blocking his progress across the floor. “Let’s not beat around the bush any longer, okay? Are you interested in becoming the Samara Alpha or not?”

Ava looked up at me with a wry grin. *I like your “hit the nail on the head” approach*, she said. *No more bullshit, right?*

Fletcher thought for a moment. “It *is* tempting.”

“We’re not trying to tempt you,” Ava said dryly. “Either you’re interested or you’re not. You can’t be half-Alpha. That’s not how it works. It’s a commitment.”

Fletcher nodded. “I know that,” he said quietly. He rubbed his forehead. “When you first explained it all to me, I was pretty apprehensive. Honestly, I thought you were joking. I mean, I already have a career.”

Ava stared at him. “As a shirtless retail model? Just to be clear, that *is* the career you’re talking about?”  
 “Hey, it’s a stepping stone,” Fletcher said defensively. “I’m not going to be shirtless forever! Someday I’m going to be assistant manager of that place, and then the sky’s the limit.”

“Okay,” I groaned, not liking where the conversation was headed. “If you *did* become Alpha, then that would be your career. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, I know, which is why I’ve been careful about not answering too quickly. At first, I didn’t even know if I had what it took to be Alpha.” He shook his head. “All that abuse I took from Cameron really shook my confidence.” He looked up at me. “But when I saw how you stood up to him, I was really inspired. I mean, if you could do that for me—some guy you barely knew—then I could sure as hell do it for myself.”

“That’s true,” I agreed. “And you did. Eventually.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I did. And I have you to thank for that. So thank you for standing up to Cameron, and for giving me the confidence I needed. It really means a lot.”

“Sure,” I said gruffly. “No problem.”

Fletcher turned to Ava. “I know you have your doubts about me, Ava, but I’ve thought about it—I’ve really thought about it—and I think I can be the Alpha the Samaras need.”

Ava looked back at him for a long moment. Then she turned to me, and I could see in her eyes that she wanted to know what I thought.

I nodded. *He has Alpha blood, Ava. Maybe it needed a bit of prodding to come to the surface, but it’s there.*

Ava considered this for a moment. Then she got to her feet and stood in front of Fletcher. “You think you can be the Samara Alpha?”

Fletcher was taller than her, and bigger than her, but Ava had a commanding presence. Still, he looked her right in the eye, without flinching. “No. I *know* I can.”

She held his gaze for a moment without blinking. “I need to talk to Xavier before we decide anything,” she said, turning away.

She jerked her chin toward the hallway, indicating that I should follow.

“I’m still not sure about him,” she said, turning on me.

I nodded. “I get that,” I admitted. “I’ve got some questions about this sudden blast of self-confidence, too. But I’ve been to hell and back to get you your Alpha, and now he’s here, and he’s willing, and it’s not like you’ve got a lot of other options lined up.”

She nodded grimly. “Yeah, I get that.” She was quiet for a moment. “And I want you to know how much I appreciate everything you’ve done.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Does that mean you’ll accept Fletcher as your Alpha?”

She gritted her teeth. Then she nodded. “Yeah. I will. And I should be able to get the rest of the pack to back him.”

“Yeah? Okay. Then that’s settled,” I said, glad I could finally wrap this up. “Let’s go tell him.”

I turned toward the living room, but Ava put a hand on my shoulder, stopping me. When I turned back, her eyes were intense.

“You must be glad,” she said.

I frowned. “Yeah, of course I’m glad. Why wouldn’t I be? This is what we both wanted, right? This is what you needed.”

She nodded. “Yeah. It must be a huge relief for you. You can finally wash your hands of all this.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Of the Samaras. And of me.”

“I don’t—you’re being dramatic,” I said quickly. “I mean, it’s not like we’ll never see each other again, Ava. We’re bound to cross paths. Our packs share borders, and we’re part of the alliance—”

“That’s not what I mean, and you know it.”

I stopped and looked her in the eye. “I know what you mean,” I admitted.

And she was right. There *was* a huge feeling of relief, knowing that there would be no more stress over Ava, and no more friction with Cali because of her. That was a good thing, and I knew I should’ve been shouting at the top of my lungs—overjoyed that it was all over. Finally.

But I didn’t feel that way. At all. All I felt was an emptiness.

The feeling bothered me more than I wanted to admit. I was done with Ava. This was what I’d wanted since she’d come back from the spirit world.

I cleared my throat. “Listen, Fletcher is going to be a big improvement over Zeke and Knox, that’s for damn sure.”

For some strange reason, and without really thinking about it, I took a step closer to Ava, closing the already narrow gap between us.

She turned away, as if to avoid contact with me. “I should go let Fletcher know what we’ve decided.” She glanced up, but not at me. She was looking somewhere over my shoulder. “Tell Lola thanks for the clothes. Let her know I’ll return them once I get back to the pack and introduce Fletcher.”

She stepped away from me, into the living room, and I heard the low murmur of her voice as she started speaking to the man who would be her new Alpha.

I listened to the sound for a moment. This was for the best, I reminded myself. Of course it was.

Before I could give it any more thought, I turned toward the stairs and headed up. I wanted to check on Cali.

When I knocked gently on her door, I wasn’t expecting her to answer—I figured she was still soaking in a hot bath, so I wasn’t surprised when my knock was met with silence. But I *was* surprised when I opened the door and found her sitting on the bed, wrapped in her bathrobe, staring blankly at the wall.

“Cali?” A chill tingled up my spine as I stepped quickly into the room. “What’s wrong?”

# Episode 3521

I looked up, startled out of my daze.

“Xavier?” I mumbled, my voice muffled against his shoulder. I hadn’t even noticed that he’d come into the room until he’d pulled me into his arms. But now that he was there and wrapped around me, nothing had ever felt so good. I slipped my arms around him, hugging him back.

“Why aren’t you in the bath, getting warm? You’re still shivering,” he said, holding me even tighter.

“I tried,” I admitted. “But then something happened.”

Xavier pulled away from me just enough that I could see his frown. “Something happened? In the bath? What do you mean?”

I thought back to the shock of cold water on my legs when I’d stepped into the bath—like stepping into an icy lake—and shivered hard. I felt my chest tightening with fear. “I think something’s wrong with me,” I whispered.

Xavier pulled back and looked at me, his expression very serious. “What you are talking about, Cali? What’s wrong?”

“I can’t stop shivering,” I admitted. “I’m so cold. And then, when I stepped into the tub, the water felt icy.”

Xavier frowned and pulled me close again. “Cali, you were out in the rain for so long. I should have gotten you inside so much sooner. That was my fault. Of course you’re chilled to the bone. That’s why you’re still shivering.” He rubbed his hands up and down my arms, creating friction in an attempt to warm me up.

“But what about the water?” I nearly wailed.

He hesitated for a moment, like he was thinking about it. He looked down at me. “Is it possible that you spaced out and accidentally filled the bath with cold water instead of hot?”

I thought for a moment. “I don’t think so,” I said slowly. “I could have sworn there was steam rising from the tub.”

“But maybe the windows were just icy from the cold outside?” Xavier suggested. “That’s probably what happened.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I murmured, though I wasn’t fully convinced.

He pressed his hand to my forehead. “It doesn’t feel like you have a fever.”

I pressed into his hand, closing my eyes and enjoying the comfort of his skin on mine.

“Okay, get up.”

I opened my eyes in surprise. “Why?” I asked, getting to my feet.

He put his hand to my waist. “The only way to cure you of this mysterious ailment is to examine you myself.”

I felt heat pool in my cheeks as I blushed. “Xavier Evers, are you suggesting we play doctor?”

He smirked. “I admit, my medical skills are somewhat limited, but I do have some experience with making you feel better.”

“Is that right—” I started, but Xavier kissed me, cutting me off mid-sentence. His lips were warm, and it felt as though their warmth was spreading through my body.

He pulled back slightly and kissed his way to my ear. “Why don’t you let me draw you a new bath?”

“Okay,” I agreed easily to this. After that kiss, there wasn’t much I wouldn’t have agreed to if offered by Xavier.

He smiled. “I promise to use hot, *hot* water.”

I rolled my eyes as he stepped away from me and walked into the bathroom. He turned on the water and let it run for a while, checking it regularly with his hand, making sure it was indeed hot. Steam rose up again, filling the bathroom and clouding the windows.

“Feel it for yourself,” he invited me.

I hesitated. The water *looked* hot, but what if it was an illusion? I was so cold, and I didn’t think I’d be able to stand it if the water was cold, too.

But when I dipped my hand into the tub, it felt warm. I closed my eyes, letting the warmth sink in.

Xavier put his hand on my waist, untying the belt of my fluffy robe, and I didn’t protest when he slipped it off my shoulders and let it fall to the bathroom floor. He held my hand as I stepped into the water, pausing for a moment to acclimate to the temperature.

He was watching me closely. I knew he was making sure I was all right, but the intensity of his gaze reminded me of the first time he’d seen me naked. I thought of how embarrassed I’d been about my stretch marks, and how at ease he’d made me feel in my own skin. I didn’t quite know what it was, but there was something about the look in his eyes now that reminded me of that moment.

I sat down, then slid my body down, submerging my shoulders in the water.

“How does that feel?” he asked anxiously.

I frowned.

“What?” he said quickly. “What is it? Why are you frowning. What’s wrong?”

He put a hand in the water, feeling for himself, and I grabbed his arm.

“Something’s missing.”

He looked confused. “Missing? Do you want bubbles? Salts? More hot? More cold? What’s missing?”

I pulled him toward me. “You.”

“What?”

I smiled. “You need to be in here with me.”

He stopped, and for a terrible moment I wondered if I’d just read the moment all wrong. But then he smiled back at me.

“Oh, well, I think I can probably fix that.”

I relaxed. “I hope so.”

“Maybe I should undress first.”

My face burned like lava, and I nodded wordlessly.

He straightened to his full height so that he towered over me as I sat in the bath. I felt my eyes widen as he slowly removed his shirt, then let it fall to the floor. He was going slowly—achingly slowly. He was teasing me—I could tell by the smirk on his face. And I loved it.

He looked down as he unbuckled his belt, then pulled it all the way out and dropped it before he started on his pants.

“Xavier,” I moaned, but that only made him laugh.

He unbuttoned the fly of his jeans, then let them slide down his hips and to the floor. He slid his fingers beneath the waist of his boxer briefs, hesitated for a long, sensual moment, then slid those off as well.

I looked him up and down, drinking him in. And when he slid into the tub behind me, it felt like the temperature spiked. Warmth enveloped me, and as he slid his legs into place next to mine, I marveled at how quickly he’d been able to pull me out of the darkness I’d been starting to feel. I’d been so scared and felt so alone, but he was able remove all doubts, just by being near me.

It had always been like that with Xavier. Ever since I’d met him, his presence had steadied me in a way that had always surprised me.

After these past few weeks, I’d been starting to wonder if I would ever feel normal again. It had seemed so out of reach for so long. But now, with the ashes finally dealt with and the Samara Alpha issue possibly soon-to-be resolved, maybe life was finally going to take a turn for the better.

That was what I’d been thinking, anyway. But it wasn’t until now, sitting in the bath with Xavier—with his arms around me and his lips on my neck—that I finally believed it. I finally had hope that things were getting better.

I leaned back into him as he kissed my ear then made his way down my neck to my shoulder. I closed my eyes as his hands slid down my hips and across my belly. He slid them down my thighs, and I pressed into him, heat pooling between my legs like lava.

“Oh, Xavier,” I breathed, and I heard his breath catch.

My back was pressed against his chest, and I felt his heart racing. It made me smile. Xavier was so strong, and so dominant in bed, so it always amazed me that *I* could have such an effect on him.

But then he slid his hands behind my knees, grabbing the backs of my thighs, and the smile slid off my face. Every thought emptied from my mind as his fingers dug into my flesh. The water was warm, but it was nothing compared to the heat that coursed through me.

He kissed my ear softly, then nibbled it a little harder, then flicked his tongue against the shell. I arched against him, moaning at the barrage of sensation.

“Fuck, Cali,” he growled. “You’d better watch it. You keep grinding me like that and I’m going to make you sorry.”

I pressed harder against him. “Maybe that’s exactly what I want,” I panted.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Water splashed over the sides of the tub as Xavier yanked me underneath him with a growl, straddling me and kissing me so hard, it was like I was being devoured. But I wanted it. I opened myself up, ready to be consumed.

# Episode 3522

**Greyson**

When Aysel looked at me, and then Lucian, she looked genuinely shocked. “Wait, didn’t you tell Greyson that I was going to be his date tonight?” she asked her brother.

“*What?*” I snapped, fury clawing its way up my chest. “No. Absolutely not. No one said anything to me about a *double date*. Forget this.” I grabbed Elle’s hand. “Let’s go. We’re leaving.”

I’d had enough Vanguard bullshit to last me a lifetime. I certainly didn’t need any more tonight.

“Greyson, I want to stay,” Elle started to protest as I pulled her toward the door.

“Greyson!” Aysel said, a laugh in her voice. “You can stop.”

I whipped around and found her giggling. Lucian was grinning at me, and I finally realized that she’d been pulling my leg.

“Oh, *thank god*,” I said with a relieved sigh. “You got me. I really fell for that.”

Aysel’s smile slipped a bit. “You don’t have to act so relieved, Greyson. Would going on a date with me really be such a horrible thing?”

“I have a mate, remember?” I said, getting testy again. “So, yeah, it *would* be horrible and wrong and—”

“God, Greyson, lighten up, will you?” she said, grinning. She gave my shoulder a playful shove. “I’m just teasing.”

She was going to give me whiplash with all her jokes, but I managed to smile and let go of Elle’s hand.

“And Arielle,” Aysel said, turning and looking the girl up and down. “Don’t you look nice? You too, Lucian.” She leaned in and gave her brother an air kiss, their faces not even getting within a foot of each other.

Lucian looked around happily. “I’m glad everyone is finally here,” he said. “I’m anxious that we all follow proper courtship protocol.”

“Proper courtship protocol?” I repeated. “What the hell are you talking about? Is that actually a thing? Is there a rulebook for dating that I don’t know about?” I shook my head. “Lucian, why don’t you try just having a normal date tonight?”

Aysel trilled a laugh. “Greyson, I thought you knew my brother better by this point. You know nothing Lucian does is ever normal.”

Lucian smiled. “Thank you very much, Aysel. That’s very flattering.”

“Are we going to eat?” Elle asked. It was the second time she’d brought it up. She must have been pretty hungry.

Lucian smiled at her. “Of course. Now that everyone is here, we can proceed to the dining room.”

He stuck out his arm, offering it to Elle. She slipped her arm through his, and together they walked into the next room.

I was hungry, too, so I was about to follow when Aysel put her hand on my arm, stopping me. “Greyson, before you go, can I ask you something?”

“Sure, what’s up?” I asked, looking over at her.

She raised an eyebrow. “What do you think about this?”

“About what?” I asked, trying to follow her line of thinking.

“About Arielle and my brother.”

I hesitated. I wasn’t sure how to answer her question, or how upfront I wanted to be with Aysel. She was a Vanguard, after all.

She smiled, like she could guess what I was thinking. “It’s okay, Greyson. I want to hear the truth. I really want to know what you think.”

“Well…” I started slowly, figuring I’d just keep it vague and try to avoid a direct answer. “I guess I’m kind of on the fence about it.” I frowned. “Why are you here, exactly?”

“It was Lucian’s idea,” Aysel confessed. “He’s smitten with your Arielle, but I think he’s worried that I might not be quite as taken with her. Though I’ve assured him that I like her. So, that’s why I’m here. I’m a chaperone like you, but I suppose an unofficial one.”

I took this in. “I wonder if this whole date setup is just an excuse so Lucian can put on a show.”

“What do you mean?” Aysel asked.

“You know, to show us what a perfect couple he and Elle are.”

Aysel looked at me keenly. “Do you think they’re perfect?”

I had to hand it to the woman—she was like a dog with a bone. When she wanted to know something, she didn’t let it drop.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” I admitted. “I have a lot of concerns—a lot of them based on my less than perfect relationship with your brother. And your pack. Besides that, I’m not sure Elle’s ready to commit to a relationship.”

Aysel nodded. “I’ll admit that I have reason to be concerned about Lucian, especially when you remember that his last romantic interest was a demon—”

“I remember,” I muttered bitterly.

“But you should know,” Aysel said, looking at me again, “Lucian and I both have concerns about Elle, too.”

“What kind of concerns?” I asked, feeling defensive. What about Elle could be so *concerning* to the delusional “prince” and “princess”?

“Well, if things work out between them, Elle will become Lucian’s Luna,” Aysel pointed out.

I grimaced. The thought of that made my stomach roil, but I swallowed hard, trying to look neutral. “I suppose I can understand why Lucian would want to be cautious, then. That’s reasonable.”

Aysel nodded. “So we can both look out for our own interests. Agreed?”

“Sure. Anyway, maybe we should head in there,” I said, nodding toward the dining room. “We don’t want to leave them alone for too long.”

“I suppose not,” Aysel said, patting her flawless hair.

I offered her my arm, just as Lucian had done for Elle, and Aysel rewarded me for the gesture with a brilliant smile. Together, we headed into the dining room.

The room was long and narrow, with a gigantic table. The thing looked like it could seat about a hundred people, though there weren’t that many there.

Elle and Lucian were seated near the door, leaning toward each other, deep in conversation. When Aysel and I joined them, they barely looked up and didn’t seem to have noticed that we’d been delayed.

“—and that’s why *family* is the basis of the whole operation,” Lucian was saying to Elle. “Any pack’s foundation is going to be limited or improved by the strength or weakness of its founding family. And that—of course—is why the Vanguard pack has nothing to worry about in that respect,” he said, looking smug.

“Oh, Lucian,” Aysel chided as a butler appeared and pushed in her chair. “Why are you boring Arielle by bragging about our bloodline? Surely there’s something more interesting to talk about. Perhaps literally anything else.”

“No, I like to hear it,” Elle insisted.

That was hard to believe, considering it had sounded so fucking boring, but I knew Elle was telling the truth. She was too honest to pretend for the sake of someone’s ego. If she’d have preferred not to listen to Lucian, she would have told him so—bluntly.

That was one of the things I liked best about Elle—you always knew what you were getting with her.

Lucian turned to his sister excitedly. “Aysel, do you think Aunt Hattie would approve of Arielle?”

“I don’t see why not,” Aysel said slowly, though I got the sense she was working hard to be diplomatic. “Though we both know how insufferable Auntie can be, brother.”

“Insufferable how?” I wondered, curious.

Aysel rolled her eyes. “In as many ways as possible. Elitist and condescending, for a start.” She turned back to Lucan. “I think the best thing would be to not introduce Arielle just yet.”

“No, of course not,” Lucian said soberly. “No, I’m not ready to do that yet. There are still too many questions to be answered.”

I narrowed my eyes warily. “Questions, huh? What kind of questions are we talking, here?”

“Oh, well, you know how it is, Greyson,” Lucian said, turning his full charm offensive on me. “You and Elle know so much about me—about my pack and my royal lineage—”

I snorted back an ill-concealed laugh at this, but Lucian pretended not to notice.

“—but I know so little about Arielle. And I’m sure there’s so much to learn!”

“What do you want to know?” I asked, still wary.

“Everything!” Lucian said, his blue eyes wide. “Absolutely *everything*. As I was saying, family is so important, and bloodlines and lineage really do matter, no matter what the critics tell you. Some would say,” he added pointedly, “that they are the things that matter most of all.”

I was growing uneasy with this line of questioning. I didn’t like where this was headed.

Elle picked up the sterling silver shrimp fork next to her plate and looked at it, baffled. “What do you want to know about me?” she asked.

Lucian leaned across the table toward Elle. “*Everything*, darling!” He reached for her free hand, which was lying on top of the snowy linen tablecloth. “Tell me, when can I meet your family?”

# Episode 3523

**Xavier**

*This* was why I had worked so hard. *This* was why I had risked everything to find an Alpha for the Samaras. All that effort had allowed me to be here, with Cali. Not just for sex—though I was nearly out of my mind with want for her—but because I loved her. I wanted to be with her forever. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. I wanted to please her in every possible way.

And I was aiming to try right now.

She arched up as I kissed the inside of her thighs. She was panting now, her eyes hazy and unfocused. That was what I wanted. All the worry and anxiety she’d been feeling when I’d first entered the room were gone. We’d had weeks of fear, and trouble after trouble—hell, we’d had *months* of it—but that was in the past. In this moment, we were free. There was nothing chasing us, nothing threatening us. Nothing mattered but the two of us.

“Xavier,” she moaned as I swirled a finger inside her. “Oh god, Xavier! I’m so close.”

She dragged her fingernails down my wet back, bucking against my hand.

“How close?” I asked, pausing, watching as she writhed with the agony of pleasure.

“So fucking close! *Please!*” she begged. Her eyes were wide, and her cheeks were flushed pink. She looked so kissable, half-submerged in the water. So fuckable. “*Please, Xavier!*”

“That’s what I like to hear,” I murmured, then braced myself so I could bury myself inside her. Water sloshed out of the tub with every powerful thrust, and I grabbed her hips, pulling them up, positioning them, reminding her that she was mine.

“Oh, yes! YES!” She had her hands braced on the sides of the tub, and she wrapped her legs around my waist, pushing me in even deeper.

“Cali,” I gasped, feeling myself edging toward completion. “Oh, fuck. Fuck. FUCK!”

“Oh, GOD! YES! YES!”

Water was splashing everywhere, and Cali was screaming and clawing at my back and my shoulders, her eyes screwed shut as she climaxed. The way she tightened around me pushed me over the edge, and I came hard enough that I saw stars.

I collapsed on top of Cali, and together we lay panting for a long moment. The waves of the bathtub settled, and after a moment, the only sound was the steady dripping of water from the tub to the tiled floor.

I stood up and stepped out, then helped Cali to her feet. I wrapped her in the thickest towel on the rack. It was twice as large as a normal towel, so it wrapped around her twice. She looked pink, like she had *finally* warmed up—maybe from the bath, maybe from our… physical exertion.

Grabbing a towel for myself, I put my hand on the small of her back and guided her back into the bedroom. She climbed onto the bed, and I pressed a kiss to her lips.

“Come on in here,” she murmured, sliding beneath the comforter, holding the corner back in an inviting way.

She didn’t have to ask me twice. I slid in next to her and wrapped my arms around her, relief flowing through me when I felt the warmth of her skin.

“Do you need anything?” I murmured.

She shook her head and smiled up at me. “What could I need? I think everything I need is right here with me.”

Warmth spread through me, and I kissed her again. “There’s going to be a lot more of this,” I assured her. “I haven’t even told you the good news, yet.”

“What is it?” she asked, her face brightening.

“Fletcher is going to be the Samara Alpha,” I told her. “He agreed.”

“That’s great,” Cali said. “Though I guess I’m a little surprised.”

“About what?”

“That Ava agreed to it. To Fletcher, I mean,” she said. “She didn’t seem too excited about him before. You didn’t really either.”

“I didn’t know if she was going to agree,” I admitted. “But it’s not like she has a bunch of other options. I think she got that in the end. But the point is,” I went on, “that I don’t have to worry about that anymore. And neither do you.”

Cali kissed me. “That’s great, Xavier. I know how much that means to you—”

“Hang on,” I said, pulling back so I could see her clearly. “I want to make something really clear, Cali. I didn’t go through all that for the Samara pack just so that *I* could rest easy.”

Cali frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I did it because I wanted to remove anything that might interfere with or distract from moments just like this one,” I said, holding her a little tighter. “Moments when it’s just the two of us, at peace.”

“*Oh*,” Cali said, her eyes wide.

“This is what I’ve been trying to achieve since I met you, and I think—*finally*—we might have reached that point.”

Cali’s gaze darted quickly to the side. I could see that she was a little unsure.

“I know the whole choice thing is still out there,” I said, trying to ignore the fear and anger I felt when I thought about it, “and I’m not trying to minimize what that’s going to mean for us. But what I’m saying is that with the Samaras finally out of our hair—along with Ava—I can finally focus all my attention on you.” I kissed the end of her nose. “Which is what I’ve been working toward.”

She smiled, and I felt her muscles relax as she sank into my arms. “That sounds great. Thank you for all the work you did. I know it wasn’t easy.”

“Let’s not even talk about it anymore,” I said. “I’m focusing on you, remember?”

She giggled. “I remember.”

“In fact, is there anything you need? What about that tea you were wanting?”

She thought for a moment. “Yeah, tea would kind of hit the spot. But you don’t have to—”

“I’ll go get it now,” I said, getting out of bed. “You wait here.”

But Cali sat up. “No, actually, I’m feeling a lot better. I’ll come downstairs, too.”

I stepped into the bathroom and grabbed my wet clothes from the floor. “Okay. Get dressed, and I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”

She grinned. “Deal.”

I headed into the hall and to my own room, where I tossed my wet clothes into my hamper and pulled open a dresser drawer. I dug around until I found a pair of dark grey joggers, then pulled on a black T-shirt before I headed out the door and down the stairs.

The house was quiet, and I hoped that was because people were out doing nightly patrols. Cali was already in the kitchen when I stepped in, wearing a pair of grey sweatpants and a cropped sweatshirt. She’d pulled her wet hair up into a messy bun on top of her head, and her cheeks were still pink.

“Hey,” I said as she grabbed the kettle from the stove. “What are you doing?”

She paused and looked around warily. “What? What am I doing?”

I laughed. “I told you I was going to make the tea.”

“Oh.” Cali rolled her eyes. “I know, but I promise, I’m fully capable of making myself a cup of tea.”

“I know that, but it’s beside the point,” I said. “I *wanted* to make it for you.”

“Do you want a cup?” she asked, reaching into the cupboard for a mug.

I thought about it for a moment. “I think I’m more in the mood for a beer, actually.”

I pulled the mug out of Cali’s hand, then gently pushed her into a seat. I pulled an Earl Grey tea bag from the cupboard and dropped it in, then grabbed the honey from the cupboard.

“I wonder when Greyson is going to be back from his chaperone duties with Elle,” I said, glancing at the clock over the stove.

“I know; it’s getting late,” Cali noted, an edge of worry to her voice.

“I hope they’re not out too late. I want to tell Greyson about Fletcher.” I turned and grabbed the kettle as it started to whistle. “And I might want to gloat a little,” I admitted.

“Xavier,” Cali said, rolling her eyes. “I’m going to get you that beer.”

She slid off her stool, but just as I was stirring in a spoonful of honey, I heard her gasp.

“Cali?” I said, turning quickly.

She stumbled back from the fridge, the beer in her hands dropping to the floor. The can busted open and spilled all over the floor, but she didn’t even flinch.

“Cali?” I stepped toward her. “What’s wrong?”

She opened her mouth to speak, but before she could say a word, her eyes rolled back and she collapsed into my arms.

# Episode 3524

**Greyson**

Elle and I were silent on the drive back home. Angrily silent. But we were angry for different reasons. Elle was fuming because I’d insisted that we leave. I had to, after Lucian had started going on and on about bloodlines and lineage, then starting yapping about meeting Elle’s family. I knew she was pissed at me, but I didn’t care.

*I* was pissed because Lucian had kept at it, trying to get Elle to answer his questions about her family, her parents, her distant relatives—all the dumb shit he cared about. But he couldn’t know the truth about where she had actually come from. There were just too many things that someone with that knowledge could expose her to.

Finally, Elle turned her glare on me. “So, you are ashamed that I was a wolf before?”

“*What?*” I asked, surprised. She raised her eyebrows expectantly. “No, Elle, I’m not ashamed. That’s not it at all.”

She shook her head stubbornly. “I am proud to have real wolf blood in me. My family is strong. My pack is respected. Why should Lucian not know the truth about me? Why should everyone not know the truth?”

I rubbed my forehead with a frustrated sigh. “I know you’re proud, Elle, and you have every right to be. But you have to understand that it’s too early to open to up to Lucian like that.”

“Why?” she asked, frowning harder.

“You can’t assume that everyone’s going to be as understanding and accommodating toward you as the Redwoods have been. And I promised your father that I would protect you.”  
 “I know that.” Elle huffed, sounding irritated. “How could I forget it? You never let me.”

She angled herself away from me, crossing her arms and staring out the window.

“Listen,” I said, softening my tone. “I’m not ashamed of who you are. I’m proud. I just want you to slow down, Elle. I want you to get to know Lucian better before you open up about your past. I know you like him, but I’m not ready to trust Lucian yet, and I don’t think you should be either.”

Elle glowered at me over her shoulder. “Do you not trust *your* mate?”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course I trust Cali, but this is different.”

“It’s not different to me,” she said, turning away again. “And this isn’t fair.”

When we pulled up to the pack house, the car hadn’t even come to a full stop before Elle opened the door and jumped out. She stormed across the frozen drive and into the house, slamming the door behind her.

I sighed and stepped out of the car. I needed to go after her. I didn’t want to leave this unfinished between us. It was complicated, but I had a feeling I shouldn’t have been quite so hard on her. As hard as it was for me, I had to respect the awful fact that she actually had feelings for Lucian, and she was envisioning a future with him.

But when I got to the door, Xavier was waiting for me.

“Come with me,” he demanded, grabbing my arm, his face pale and tense.

I tried to pull away from his grasp. “What’s going on? Let go, man—”

But Xavier didn’t let go. “I was about to call you.”

“Why?”

“It’s Cali.”

My heart felt like it had stopped beating. “What’s going on?”  
 Xavier turned to look at me, and I could see the fear in his eyes. “It’s bad.”

“Where is she?” I said. “Take me to her.”

We headed up the stairs to Cali’s room, and when Xavier opened the door, I saw Cali lying on her bed, pale and covered with blankets. The room itself was stiflingly hot and buzzing with a low humming noise. I looked around and saw half a dozen space heaters plugged in, all running at full blast.

“What the hell is going on?” I demanded. Then, without waiting for an answer, I stepped to Cali’s side and dropped down. “Cali?”

She didn’t respond.

I looked at Xavier. “Is she sick? What the hell is happening?”

Xavier looked miserable. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?” I snarled.

“She just collapsed in the kitchen. I don’t know why. She was fine. She’d been feeling cold from being out in the rain, but she took a bath and warmed up. She said she was feeling better, and then she just…” He shook his head. He looked like he was either going to cry or punch through a wall.

I turned back to Cali and took her hand. “She feels okay,” I said, almost to myself. “Warm, but not feverish. She was cold before? What the hell was she doing standing out in the rain?” I demanded, looking at my brother again.

“We were dealing with a situation,” he snapped. “I got her out of there as soon as I could, but she was having a hard time warming back up.”

“But she did, right?”

Xavier nodded, his eyes blazing. “Yeah. I warmed her up.”

Fuck. I heard what he wasn’t saying, loud and clear. I got it. While I’d been out playing chaperone, Xavier had been here, hooking up with Cali.

To be fair, I probably would have done the same thing if our positions had been reversed, so it probably wasn’t totally fair to blame either of them.

“But she said she was feeling better,” Xavier insisted. “She was up, she got dressed… I thought everything was fine—but she just kept complaining about being cold.”

I frowned. “I don’t know what that means.” I shook my head. “Did you ask Big Mac or Kira? We should get a witch. Maybe it’s some kind of spell?”

The last thing we needed was some kind of dark spell on one of our pack members—but this wasn’t just *any* pack member. This was my *mate* we were talking about, and the thought that there might be a spell on her filled me with freezing fear. I looked down at Cali’s pale face. The woman I loved was shivering and unresponsive, and I didn’t know why.

“Of course I did. Big Mac’s on her way,” Xavier said.

“Do you think she needs to go to a hospital?” I asked.

“What? A hospital?” he asked, looking surprised.

“I know, but what if she needs actual medical attention?”

“For a spell?”

“If it’s making her sick, maybe a doctor could do something.”

Xavier considered this, his face lined with worry. “I really don’t know,” he said uncertainly.

I didn’t know either. But Xavier was looking at me, waiting for me to make a decision, and not for the first time, I felt the weight of being the older brother settle heavily onto my shoulders. Even though he would never admit it in a million years, Xavier was waiting for me to make the decision here. He was looking for answers and expecting me to give them. But I couldn’t. I didn’t know what was going on, and I felt as hopeless as Xavier. And it pissed me off.

“I’ll go check on Big Mac,” I said, standing up again. I needed to be doing something, even if it was only looking for the witch. “I’ll see what’s taking her so long.” Xavier nodded.

She was in her room when I knocked on the door, grabbing things off of shelves and out of drawers.

“What?” she asked, looking irritated as always.

“We really need you to check on Cali. She’s not okay, and I—” I broke off, overwhelmed at the possibility that my mate could be seriously ill.

She nodded. “I was just grabbing a few things I might need. I don’t know what I’m walking in on,” she said. “I’m ready. Let’s go.” We quickly walked back to the bedroom.

“Sure is hot in here,” she said when we stepped inside.

Xavier was gone, but he returned a moment later, Torin trailing behind him.

“I thought we could use him,” Xavier said, by way of explanation.

I nodded.

Torin looked down at Cali anxiously. “Of course I’m happy to try a healing spell, but it’s always harder when I don’t know what’s actually wrong with the person. It makes it difficult to target the healing.”

“Well, then let’s try to find out,” Big Mac said, stepping toward Cali’s still form. The witch stood over her and passed her hands over Cali’s body, just above the blankets.

Big Mac closed her eyes and spoke quietly to herself, the sound almost like a song.

I felt like I was going to crawl out of my skin. It was torture to do nothing but just stand by and watch, but I was praying that Big Mac would tell us that whatever was wrong was something we could fix. I couldn’t stand seeing Cali like this.

But when Big Mac was finished, she took a step back, her expression grave.

“Well?” I asked.

Big Mac only shook her head.

I shot a glance at Xavier, who looked scared as hell.

“What’s wrong with her?” I asked the witch.

Big Mac sighed. “It’s what I feared.”

# Episode 3525

I was just so cold. It was like my blood had been replaced with ice. The cold was deep within me, chilling me to the core, and all the blankets and space heaters weren’t even coming close to penetrating the chill. It was cold enough to be painful, and I felt wracked by it.

Where was I? I wanted to open my eyes. I wanted to talk, to tell someone what was going on, but I couldn’t seem to move. My teeth were clamped together. Every muscle in my body felt like it had been turned to stone. The only thing I could seem to do was shiver, and *that*, I couldn’t stop. My brain felt slow, but I struggled through my thoughts, trying to put the pieces together. I couldn’t see anything, but there were voices. I could hear them in the distance, but they were low and muffled. I couldn’t make out any words.

God, my head hurt so badly. My body ached, and I wanted to relax my muscles, my jaw, my fists, but I just couldn’t. It felt like I didn’t have any control at all. I couldn’t tell where I was, or even remember how I’d gotten there. The last thing I remembered was being in the kitchen with Xavier. We’d both just gotten dressed. He was making me tea, but he wanted a beer. I’d just gotten up to get one from the fridge, but then something had happened. I remembered watching helplessly as the can slipped from my hand. I hadn’t been able to hold it or stop it as it fell. Then it had hit the floor and burst open, and everything had gone dark.

*Open your eyes, Cali. Open your eyes*, I told myself. I tried to sit up, but I couldn’t move. It felt like I was actually frozen, like I’d been encased in a block of ice. But that couldn’t be. That was ridiculous. It made no sense. I was still at the pack house… Wasn’t I? Was this a dream? Was I even awake?

I needed to get up. I needed to open my eyes. I needed to figure out what the hell was going on, but I couldn’t. I listened hard—the voices were growing closer and more distinct. Using all my energy, I tried to listen, tried to identify the voices.

Someone was speaking fast, the sound quick and nervous. Was that Torin’s voice? I heard what I thought was Greyson’s low rumble, then Xavier’s bass voice answering. Then another voice, this one higher—was that Big Mac?

Were they actually nearby, or was I just imagining it? It wouldn’t have been unusual for me to dream about Xavier and Greyson, but Torin? They *had to* be here, so what were they talking about? And why were they here? Where even *was* here? Had something happened?

Slowly, the shivering began to subside, and the cold gave way to a welcoming warmth. My muscles began to relax, and I let out a deep sigh of relief.

The warmth spread through me quickly, and I was finally able to open my eyes. When I did, I saw that I was in my bedroom. But how had I gotten here?

I met Torin’s eyes, and he looked startled.

“Oh! She’s awake! Greyson! Xavier! She’s awake!” he called quickly.

I wanted to tell them that I hadn’t been sleeping, but my jaw still felt tight, and I was having trouble forming words.

An instant later, Greyson and Xavier appeared on either side of the bed, each taking one of my hands.

“Hey there,” Greyson whispered, looking grave.

I could only offer a weak smile.

Big Mac stepped up behind them, looming over me. “How are you feeling?”

I swallowed hard. “What happened?” I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

Big Mac’s expression was dark. “That’s what we’re trying to figure out. I want you to sit up, Cali. Can you do that?”

I wasn’t sure if I could, and I struggled, but I finally managed to prop myself up with the help of Xavier and Greyson on either side of me.

Once I was up, I smiled victoriously up at Big Mac, but she didn’t return the gesture. She looked deeply troubled, which wasn’t at all comforting. Something had to be wrong.

Summoning all my strength, I took a deep breath. “What’s going on? I need to know the truth, no matter how bad it is.” Of course, I was really hoping it wasn’t bad at all, but the look on Big Mac’s face was a little worrisome.

“Did you have another dream about Seluna?” she asked.

I hadn’t been expecting this question and was taken aback. “Oh. Sort of… Why do you ask?”

“Big Mac thinks that whatever is going on is somehow related to Seluna,” Xavier said.

Confused, I looked up at him. “But how can any of this be?” I asked. “You returned the ashes. That’s supposed to be it, right?”

Big Mac sighed. “That was what I thought. I believed that once the ashes were returned, you would gradually recover from all the ill-effects. But, seeing you like this…” She shook her head. “I’m not so sure anymore.”

My heart started to race. “Am I going to *die* from this?”

Big Mac shook her head. “No, no, nothing like that. I don’t think so, anyway.” She thought for a moment. “It’s like when you’re no longer exposed to a pathogen, but you already have the disease. Just because you’re not being actively exposed to the source of the virus, doesn’t mean your body no longer has to fight off the virus that’s already invaded your body.”

“Oh god,” I breathed, starting to feel panicked.

“The source is gone, yes, but the recovery is going to slower and more complicated than I originally thought. And it’s going to have its share of ups and downs.”

I looked to my mates and saw the worry on their faces. I hated this—hated that I was putting them through more of this. They were always worrying about me.

“Are you feeling better now?” Big Mac asked, looking at me carefully.

I nodded. “Yeah, I’m feeling better. I’m not shivering anymore. I probably don’t need all these blankets,” I said, pushing a few off. “I’m actually getting a little too warm.”

This made Torin beam. “Oh good! Maybe my healing is working after all.”

He reached over and helped me move the blankets to the side. They were heavy, and once they were gone, I swung my legs over the side of the bed.

“Cali, be careful,” Greyson warned. “Here, let me help.”

He put his hand under my arm and helped me as I got unsteadily to my feet.

I looked at Big Mac triumphantly. “You’re wrong. Look! I’m on the upswing!”

Feeling even more energized, I did a little shuffling tap dance to prove my point.

Big Mac raised an eyebrow. “That’s good, but you still need to take it easy. Remember, everything that goes up invariably comes down. And that goes for you, too, missy.”

“That’s enough, Little Miss Sunshine,” Xavier growled.

Big Mac glared at him. “I just want all of you to temper your expectations of what’s possible. I’m glad Cali’s feeling better, of course.”

Xavier snorted. “You have a funny way of showing it.”

Big Mac seemed to swell with fury. “Listen here you little—”

“Stop, please,” I begged, trying to intervene before their argument could escalate. “You shouldn’t be fighting over me. Or at all. And all this talk of doom and gloom—look!” I said, holding out my arms. “I’m feeling better. That has to be a good sign, right?”

“Maybe it would help you to try some more of Kira’s meditation techniques,” Torin suggested. “They helped you last time, didn’t they?”

“Yeah, they did,” I agreed. “That might be helpful.”

“I’ll let her know,” Torin said happily.

“Great.” If this was what Big Mac thought it was—if it was like I was fighting a virus—then I knew I was going to need to fight it with everything I had. I was just so sick and tired of being afflicted. “It’s time to fight back,” I said emphatically.

Greyson grinned at me. “I like your spirit, love.”

“You’ve got the right attitude, all right,” Xavier agreed. “And I’m going to be here to help you in any way that I can. Okay?”

His eyes glittered, and I felt my cheeks warm, remembering how he had helped me *get warm* earlier. Xavier must have been remembering too, because he winked at me.

“Fine, fine,” Big Mac said. “This is all good and fine, but I’m hoping no one has forgotten about what I said before. This is going to come in waves. Ups and downs.”

“What are you saying?” I asked warily.

She rolled her eyes. “I’m saying that you should enjoy this moment, Caliana, because it won’t last.”

“What does that mean?” Xavier asked gruffly.

Big Mac looked grim. “It means that you can expect things to get worse before they get better.”

# Episode 3526

**Xavier**

Big Mac spun on her heel and stormed out of the room. I glared after her, glad she was leaving. Why did she have to say shit like that, anyway? Cali was feeling better—couldn’t the witch just let her enjoy this moment of triumph? She’d been feeling horrible, and then Torin had helped, and now she was feeling like her regular self. That was a fucking win, in my book.

“Cali, I want to help you do some meditation, too,” Torin said, turning to her.

“Yeah, okay,” Cali said, clearly willing. “Anything to avoid feeling like that again. Self-care will become my middle name.”

Torin laughed and sat down on her bed, then patted the spot next to him. “Okay, sit. Let’s start with some easy guided meditation, and then we’ll explore what works best for you.”

“Maybe Xavier and I should leave you two to get started,” Greyson said. He turned to me. “I think we can leave her in Torin’s hands for the moment. You and I have some things to discuss,” he added pointedly.

I nodded but made a point of leaning in to press a kiss to Cali’s lips before I went anywhere. “I’ll stay with you, if you want.”

She smiled up at me. “Thank you, but I think I’d like to give meditation a shot. It helped before; maybe it’ll work again.”

“I can stay,” Greyson said, changing his tune now that I’d made the my offer.

Cali smiled at him, too. “Thank you, but really I’m okay. Torin and I are just going to meditate for a while. You two should go.”

I headed out and led the way down the hall with Greyson on my heels. My room was closest, so I opened the door, and when he followed me inside, I closed it behind him.

Greyson turned to me. “Are you comfortable with what Big Mac said back there—that things are going to get worse for Cali?”

“Am I *comfortable*?” I repeated. Then I snorted. “No, I’m not comfortable. What the hell do you think? But do you have any ideas about what we can do about it?”

He shook his head. “No. That’s why I wanted to talk. I was hoping we could brainstorm.”

I rubbed my jaw. “Listen, I appreciate that you think we can work together on this, but neither one of us has any idea what we’re dealing with. And Big Mac wasn’t what you’d call *helpful.*”

“You didn’t help at all,” Greyson said. “You shouldn’t have agitated her.”

“Oh, yeah, okay. Like it’s hard to agitate Big Mac,” I shot back.

“Still, I think we should go apologize to her, see if we can get her to tell us anything more.”

I huffed. “Fine. But I want it on record that I didn’t do anything that I need to apologize for.”

“Duly noted,” Greyson muttered, then headed out the door.

We found Big Mac in the living room, sitting in a chair and staring into the fire, brooding.

She didn’t look up when we walked into the room, and I was surprised to see the worried look on her face. She’d been annoyed when she’d left us, and I’d half-expected to find her fuming—foaming at the mouth because of what I’d said. But she wasn’t. She just looked anxious.

But when she caught sight of us, her eyes narrowed. “What do you want?”’

Ugh, this was a waste of time. She clearly wasn’t going to help us or give us anything more than her usual gruffness—and then some, judging by the look on her face. Witches be witches. I guess that was just how it went.

“Big Mac, we wanted to tell you that we’re sorry,” Greyson said. “We didn’t mean to seem like we weren’t supportive. We only want to help.”

She stared at us for a minute. “Don’t you think that’s what *I* want, too?”

“Of course—” Greyson started, but she kept talking, speaking over him.

“Do you think you’re the only people who care about Cali?” she demanded.

I was startled by her vehemence, and even more so when she turned away and stared into the embers of the fire.

“I really am sorry, Big Mac—” I started to say, but Greyson put a hand out, signaling for me to stop. His eyes were on the witch.

“Big Mac?” he asked slowly. “Is there something you’re not telling us?”

“I don’t know what else to do,” she said, her voice a whisper. “I’ve tried everything I can think of to help that girl, but no matter what I do, it isn’t enough to stop the pain and suffering she’s being put through.”

I wasn’t sure what I could say to that. And—holy shit—was that a *tear* on Big Mac’s face? I shot a glance at Greyson, who looked similarly stunned. This was a side of Big Mac we didn’t usually see, and we weren’t used to it at all. Seeing how torn up she was about Cali made me regret everything mean or impatient I’d ever thought or said to the gruff witch.

After a silent moment, Big Mac cleared her throat and shook her head. “The smoke from this damn fire,” she said, wiping her eyes. “Someone needs to open the flue.”

She could cover all she wanted, but I knew better. I understood the frustrated, hopeless feeling she was enduring better than she could ever know.

“Big Mac,” Greyson said, “I know that we don’t say this nearly enough, but we all appreciate everything you’ve done for this pack. You do more than any of us really know, I’m sure, and there’s no explanation that can justify why we’ve gone so long without telling you that. Nobody here wants to blame you for what Cali’s going through, and no one thinks less of you because you can’t make it stop. We’re all baffled. We’re all frustrated. But we all want the same thing, too—to help her. I hope you haven’t been feeling like this is all on you, because it’s not. This is a pack problem, and we’re all going to keep looking for answers.”

“Absolutely,” I chimed in. “And we’re not going to stop until whatever’s happening is gone for good, and Cali is fully recovered.”

Big Mac didn’t say anything. She didn’t even acknowledge that she’d heard us.

“Is there anything *we* can do for *you*?” I asked hesitantly.

She looked over at me. “Actually there is.” Her gaze went to Greyson. “You’d better make sure you learn those wedding dance moves.”

“What?” Greyson asked, understandably confused by this sudden turn in the conversation.

She narrowed her eyes. “I want Sabine to have the best wedding that’s ever been, and if either one of you does anything to screw that up—”

“We won’t,” I said quickly, holding up my hands in surrender. “We’re not going to be doing anything but cheering both of you on.”

Big Mac gave a brisk nod, got to her feet, and marched out of the room.

I watched her go, then looked at my brother. “So, did we do it? Are things better now that we had that talk? Is that fixed?”

Greyson shrugged with a sigh. “Fuck, I hope so.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Hey, I keep meaning to ask—whatever happened with the Samara thing?”

“Right, right,” I said, shaking my head. “I meant to tell you as soon as you got in, but I got distracted.”

He nodded. “Understandable. For a minute there, I forgot what a shit time I had tonight. At least that’s one good thing.”

“Anyway, the Samara Alpha search is potentially over.”

“Really?” Greyson looked surprised.

I nodded. “There’s this guy, Fletcher Adams. He’s in the running now to be the new Alpha of the Samara pack. Ava’s somewhat on board—she wants to vet him a bit more, but she might introduce him to the pack.”

Greyson clapped me on the shoulder, looking pleased. “That’s great. And a relief. It was nerve-racking, having that pack out there as vulnerable as it’s been. Who knows what could have happened if Rogues had gotten wind of it?”

“Tell me about it.”

“Well, as soon as Fletcher’s met some of them, and presuming all goes well, I want to meet him,” Greyson said.

“I’ll leave that to you, man,” I said, shaking my head. “I did my part—and then some. I’m done dealing with the Samaras. This is pack business, Greyson, and as Redwood Alpha, it’s on you.”

That was probably the only time I was going to like saying that. But Ava was being picky about this Fletcher guy, and I just hoped to fuck it worked out. The last thing I wanted to do was be looking for someone else.

Greyson shot me a smile. “No problem. I’ll take care of it. Thanks again for heading things up with Fletcher. It’s good to have it moving along.”

I nodded. “Sure.”

Greyson moved to leave the living room, but then he stopped at the door and looked back at me. “In the meantime, what should we do about Cali?”

# Episode 3527

**Marta**

When I woke up in the morning, I lay still for a long time, thinking. It was early—I could tell that the sun hadn’t fully risen yet. I lay there wondering what time I’d finally managed to drift off to sleep the night before. It had been a bad night—I’d tossed and turned for what had felt like the whole night, trying to make up my mind.

Now, it was morning. The sky was still a pre-dawn grey, but I knew the new day had come. And I kept replaying Okorie’s offer to join him. When he’d asked, I’d blurted out *yes.* That I *would* go with him when he left.

And when I’d said it, he’d smiled. When he smiled, it was like the sun breaking through the clouds during a storm. He did it so rarely, but whenever he did, I always found myself wishing he would do it more often.

But I hadn’t really thought it through. I’d answered almost on instinct, still hurting from what had happened between Lilac and Perrie at the New Year’s party. My mind was on that—and on the kiss I’d shared with Okorie. So answering him in the affirmative had been an in-the-moment, impulsive thing, and I’d been fretting over it ever since. And it certainly wouldn’t help me fix things with Lilac. It was one of the reasons why I’d agreed to leave the pack house so impulsively—I just couldn’t cope with it anymore.

Lilac had found his mate and was already spending time—and kisses—with Perrie. I didn’t want to just sit around feeling jealous. And, honestly, I wasn’t even sure if that was what I *was* feeling. I was sad, and deeply, deeplyconfused. My heart ached—of that I was certain. And it seemed to me that getting away from the pack house would be the easiest way to put literal and figurative distance between us. Getting away and out on my own would give me a chance to heal and explore and learn—to do all the things that spending fifty years trapped in Bert’s house had kept me from doing.

My phone dinged, and I reached over to grab it from the bedside table. The message was from Okorie, and I opened it.

*Hey, on my way. You almost ready?*

I hesitated for a moment, then forced myself to respond.

*Yep! I’m packed!*

This was a lie. I hadn’t even started yet. Not that I had much anyway. But I needed to gather what I did, so I hopped out of bed into the chilly morning air and pulled a suitcase from my closet.

I moved around the room, gathering my belongings. It didn’t take long; I didn’t have much. It was funny—for someone who’d lived such a long life, I sure didn’t have much to show for it.

But that was going to change. Once I was out on my own, I could get a job, buy my own things, and finally find a place to call home.

I paused as I pulled my sweaters from the dresser drawer. I used to dream of doing all those things with Lilac, and the realization that that particular dream was over made my heart ache.

It was foolish, maybe, but it made me smile every time I thought of it—how I’d always believed that the two of us were meant to be.

Only we weren’t. Because now, he had a mate. And despite everything he’d told me, that had changed everything.

I dropped my sweaters into my suitcase and looked around my room. It was a small room, but cozy, and I’d always loved it. I’d felt safe here, and I knew I would miss the house. It was the first place I’d lived—ever—where I’d felt free to come and go. Even before Bert’s house, I hadn’t had that freedom in my foster home.

Though we *had* been more limited when we’d been actively attacked by revenants. I thought back on that time—and how brave Lilac had been. Everyone in the pack had been brave, and they’d all come together to fight. I was going to miss that sense of community. I would miss everyone here. Everyone had been so kind to me, welcoming me into this new world. But now it was time to go out and explore the rest of the world.

I wondered how big a part Okorie was going to play in that world for me. We’d left so much unresolved, after our kiss. He had been right, of course. I *did* need time to get over Lilac, and to figure out my feelings. But what if those feelings didn’t include Okorie? Would he understand that? Or what if it took time for me to figure them out, and he grew impatient with me? What if he found someone else, too?

*No*. I shook my head, frustrated with myself. I needed to stop thinking like that. I was getting away ahead of myself. Talk about putting the cart before the horse. I hadn’t even finished *packing* yet.

I turned to the closet and grabbed the dress Lola had given me, and my other coat. In the bathroom, I grabbed my toothbrush and wrapped it in a tissue. That was it. No jewelry, just the shoes I’d wear out of the house on my feet, and my winter coat.

I looked at the time. It was still so early, but I knew Okorie would be arriving soon. I went to the door, but before I reached for the knob, I took one last, long look at my room.

Then I opened the door and peeked cautiously out into the hallway.

The house was quiet, which was hardly surprising. Everyone was probably still asleep. Which meant that I was going to have to be extra careful as I left—werewolves had such sensitive hearing. So I tiptoed toward the stairs, which should have been easy, but my suitcase kept banging against my legs. I kept pausing, listening hard, making sure I hadn’t woken anyone up.

I was halfway down the stairs when I heard her voice.

“Weren’t you even going to say goodbye?”

It was Violet.

I froze in my tracks, consumed by a wave of guilt. When I turned, Violet was standing at the top of the stairs, looking down at me. But I didn’t speak. What was I supposed to say?  
 She looked at me for a moment longer, then came down the stairs and took my suitcase from my hand. “We can talk in the study by the front door,” she whispered.

I nodded miserably, then followed her down the stairs and into the small office. I felt like a condemned prisoner awaiting my sentence as she shut the door behind us.

“Well?” she asked, rounding on me.

I swallowed hard, fighting back the tears I felt welling up in my chest. Then I stepped forward and threw my arms around her.

“This is exactly why I didn’t say goodbye,” I mumbled. “I knew if I did, I wouldn’t be able to walk out that door. I’m going to miss everyone so much.”

Violet hugged me back. “I understand,” she said softly.

I pulled back so I could look at her properly. “Will you tell Lilac for me? Will you explain?”

Violet looked grave. “I will, but I wish you would reconsider. I know that things with my brother have made living here hard for you, but—”

“I think leaving will be best,” I said.

“Best for who?” Violet asked, frowning.

“Best for Lilac, for one,” I said. “He’ll be free to explore his mate bond. And you won’t be stuck between us. And I’ll be free to explore the world without being under the thumb of some petty, vengeful poltergeist.”

Violet nodded, then kissed my cheek. “Please tell me where you are when you get there, and let me know that you’re safe.”

“I will. I promise,” I said. Tears pooled in the corners of my eyes as I looked at my friend. “I’m going to miss you.”

I hugged her again, and she held me tight. Then I stepped back and took my suitcase from her side.

“Okorie will be here any second,” I said. “Thank you, Violet.”

“For what?” she asked, wiping tears from her cheeks.

“For everything,” I said simply.

I was ready to go. My heart was breaking, but I was ready to step out into the cold light of morning and see what came next.

But when I opened the study door, Big Mac was standing in the doorway, looking like hell.

I stepped back, startled. “You scared me!”

She looked at me for a moment, then her gaze flicked down to the suitcase in my hand. She stepped in front of me, blocking my way. “No.”

I took a deep breath. “This isn’t easy for me either, Big Mac. Please don’t make this any harder than it has to be.

She looked unmoved, standing as solidly as a stone column. “You can’t leave like this.”

# Episode 3528

I rolled over with a groan, squinting against the light. I’d spent all night tossing and turning, it felt like, and now sunrise was gradually brightening my bedroom, even with the blinds shut.

*I didn’t sleep at all last night*, I realized with a groan. I’d been up all night, my mind spinning with increasingly terrible possibilities for what might be happening to me. I rolled onto my other side and buried my face in my pillow. Maybe, if I could just fall asleep, I’d still be able to get some rest. It was still early. Maybe I could squeeze in a power nap?

I pulled in one slow breath after another, forcing myself to relax. To sink into my bed. To let go of everything that was weighing on me.

I wouldn’t think about seeing Seluna in the mirror. Or how horrifying she’d looked pounding on the glass, begging me to help her. I wouldn’t think about the mark on my shoulder, or how awful I still felt. Or—

“Ugh!” I screamed into my pillow. This was useless. I wasn’t going to get any sleep. Not tonight. Or this morning, or whatever the heck the time was now.

I sat up and huffed out a breath, finger-combing my hair out of my face. For better or worse—mostly worse—I was up now. Maybe the best thing I could do at this point was make the most of it.

I climbed out of bed and padded down the hallway, heading for the stairs. But the more I walked, the farther away the staircase felt.

*What’s going on?* Was I just tired and out of sorts from not sleeping? Or was the staircase actually *moving*?

No, it couldn’t be that. That was impossible, even by Redwood pack house standards. *I’m just exhausted and out of it. Staying up all night imagining worst-case scenarios probably has that effect.*

I walked faster, but the staircase still evaded me. And when I put on a burst of speed, my feet lurched beneath me and I nearly face-planted. I scrambled to put one foot in front of the other. It felt like the floorboards were moving under my feet in the opposite direction, like some kind of wooden treadmill.

Something was wrong, but I could barely stay upright, much less try to figure out what was causing all this. I was full-out sprinting, just trying to make it out of the damn hallway!

But the speed was too much, and I hit the floor hard*.* Pain zinged up my hip from the impact, and I had no way to prepare for the floor to slant and send me sliding back. My body was about to slam into the wall when suddenly the world righted itself and I was standing upright, dazed but unharmed, staring at a closed, heavy wooden door I’d never seen in the pack house before.

The crack beneath the bottom of the door emanated an unearthly glow. I didn’t know what was on the other side, but I knew I wouldn’t like it.

*Hard nope.*

I stepped back and tried to turn away from the door, but the floor rumbled beneath me. I stepped back toward the door, bracing myself against it to stay upright, and the rumbling immediately stopped.

Frowning, I stepped back again. The rumbling resumed without missing a beat. I moved closer to the door again, and it stopped.

*Crap. I’m not getting out of here without opening that door, am I?*

I pulled in a breath and reached out, my hands shaking as I wrapped my fingers around the knob. *Here goes nothing…* I yanked the door open.

Light spilled into the hallway, and through the doorway I saw a beautiful, bright meadow. My jaw dropped.

*Way to keep me on my toes, creepy magic door.*

The meadow was so serene and peaceful, full of lush trees and colorful flowers and grasses. It was like something out of a fantasy painting. I stepped through the doorway, pulled forward by a need to see the meadow in its full glory.

Birds sang the sweetest song I’d ever heard, something richer and more melodic than anything I’d ever encountered in the human or Fae worlds. The sun was bright overhead, and pleasantly warm. The wind blew gently through the tall grass and flowers, carrying a sweet scent that made my muscles uncoil.

I pulled in a deep breath and let my eyes flutter shut as I breathed in the scent of the meadow, soaking up the sounds. My fingertips trailed over the soft petals of a flower.

*This place isn’t bad at all.* I opened my eyes and looked around. *But where is it? And where am I? Was that door some kind of portal?*

Then I noticed a figure at the far side of the meadow. I squinted, trying to make them out.

“Hello?” I called out.

The figure didn’t answer, and I still couldn’t identify them from so far away.

I strode toward them, but with every step I took, my stomach tightened. My hands started to shake again, and the fine hairs on the back of my neck rose. Something was wrong…

No, not something. Some*one*. That person, the figure, whoever they were, they weren’t safe. I knew it on some deep, cellular level.

Still, I couldn’t stop myself from moving forward.

“Hello?” I called out again. “Who are you? What are you doing here?”

Still, they didn’t reply. And then, as I approached them, I realized why they hadn’t responded.

It wasn’t a person at all. It was a statue.

My eyes widened, and the breath rushed out of my lungs. “No…”

It was Seluna’s statue.

*How the* hell *did this get all the way out here?*

And what was this horror show of a statue doing out here in this perfect, idyllic meadow? Except, why wouldn’t it be here? This whole thing was already weird AF, and since when did the universe allow me to have nice things?

I approached the statue and stared into its cold, unblinking eyes. I half-expected them to move, like the eyes on creepy paintings in haunted houses. But they didn’t. They were still, sightless, unresponsive. Just like the rest of the statue. Just like *any* statue was supposed to be.

I knew I should leave it alone. Knew that I could turn around and head back to the meadow, enjoy the beauty and peace of this place and *not* engage with the creepy demon statue that was probably there for the sole purpose of torturing me.

But I didn’t leave it alone. Call me a glutton for punishment. I reached forward and touched the statue’s foot. It was cold, just like how a statue was supposed to feel, and I let out a relieved, shuddering breath.

“It’s just a statue,” I said. Nothing more.

And then Seluna’s cold, stone mouth opened, and she let out an ear-splitting scream.

I fell to the ground with a cry, my hands pressed over my ears. It was the worst sound in the world. It reverberated through my bones, made me feel like my brain was bleeding. And then, even though the scream didn’t stop, Seluna’s voice echoed in my mind.

*It’s not over! It’ll never end for you. You’ll never be free of this unless you help me! This isn’t right! This isn’t right!*

The voice in my head combined with the statue’s screaming was so loud that it took me a while to realize I was screaming too. My throat was raw, and my eardrums felt like they were about to burst from the sheer pressure of Seluna’s screaming.

I thrashed around in the dirt, begging for it to end—

And then I fell. Down, down, down, until my body hit something hard. I lashed out, my arms and legs tangling with something. The breath stuttered out of my lungs, and I peeled my eyes open.

I was on the floor, in my bedroom at the pack house, wrapped in my blankets, which were damp with my sweat.

I blinked in confusion, looking around. It was early in the morning, and through my open blinds, I could make out the sun rising over the treetops.

*Is this real?*

It sure felt real. My hip and shoulder ached, probably from the impact of my body hitting the floor. I was sweaty and breathless.

*I’m okay. I’m in the pack house. I’m safe. It was just another bad dream.*

I lifted my hands to rub the sweat on my face and flinched when something gritty scraped against my cheeks. I looked down at my hands, at the dirt smudged across my palms, and gasped.

*What the hell? No! The dream wasn’t real! It was just an echo!*

Seluna was gone. Wasn’t she?

But even as the thought flitted through my mind, I recalled Seluna’s words. *You’ll never be free of this unless you help me.*

My stomach sank, and I knew in that moment that the dreams were never going to end.

*Am I going to have to live with this forever?*

# Episode 3529

**Marta**

I reluctantly followed Big Mac into the kitchen. I’d kind of been hoping for a lowkey exit from the pack house, and it had taken me so long to even work up the nerve to leave that I was worried about what Big Mac would say. I didn’t want her to kill what little momentum I’d gained. If I lost my nerve, I worried I might never leave, no matter how much I needed to.

Still, Big Mac had been a help and mentor to me during one of the scariest times in my life. I respected her enough to hear her out.

The witch leaned against the counter and studied me silently. As the seconds dragged on, I shifted from foot to foot. I didn’t know what this was about, but I didn’t like the serious look on Big Mac’s face.

Finally, she broke the silence. “I thought better of you, Marta. I didn’t think you’d sneak out of the house like a thief in the night without saying goodbye to anyone.”

I blinked, and my jaw dropped. Shame coursed through me, and I lowered my head. She was right, wasn’t she? I was so scared about saying goodbye that I was trying to avoid it altogether.

These people had taken me in and fed me and gave me a home. They’d helped me feel safe for the first time in decades—and I’d intended to sneak out and just leave a note?

*Talk about cowardly.*

Big Mac sighed and walked around the counter so nothing stood between us. She placed her hands on my shoulders, her touch firm and warm and gentle. For the witch, who wasn’t known for her displays of emotion or affection, it was practically a hug.

“I get why you need to leave,” she said. “I see what’s happening between you and Lilac. It can’t be easy. But I’d have thought you’d at least say goodbye to me.”

My head snapped up at that. *Wait. She’s upset that I didn’t say goodbye to her specifically?*

Emotion clogged my throat. That… That sort of changed things. Yes, Big Mac had been my mentor at times, before Okorie had come along. But she’d always been so gruff and distant. I’d honestly thought she wouldn’t care if I didn’t say goodbye.

But she did care. And that knowledge left a happy sort of glow in my chest.

“I’m sorry. I will miss you. So much.” I leaned forward to hug the older woman, then hesitated. Maybe that wasn’t what she wanted? She was being warm and very sentimental by Big Mac standards, but that didn’t mean she wanted a hug. *Maybe I should respect her boundaries—*

She smiled. “Come here.” Then she wrapped me in a tight, warm, quick hug. It was one of the best and most efficient hugs I’d ever received. She patted my back once—just this side of too hard—before releasing me and stepping back. “If you’re not at my wedding, you’re not going to like the outcome.”

I laughed. “Don’t worry. I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Wherever you go, know that you can always call me. Okay?”

I smiled and nodded. It was nice, to have a person I could turn to even when I wasn’t living with the Redwood pack. To have a support network of sorts. *Is this what it feels like to have a family?*

I started back toward the foyer, intent on apologizing to Violet, but then the sound of feet shuffling on the stairs caught my attention. The little hairs stood up on the back of my neck, and I knew without turning around who it would be. I glanced toward the landing to see Lilac, his eyes still heavy with sleep, coming down the stairs.

He frowned, and at first I thought it was just because he’d seen me and was still angry, but then I realized he wasn’t looking at me. He was looking *beyond* me, at my suitcase.

Lilac cleared his throat. “What the hell is going on?”

Violet stepped forward. “Marta is—”

I held up a hand to stop her, and she fell silent. I was the one leaving, and—like Big Mac had said—I needed to be the one to tell people. It wasn’t right, sneaking out like these people didn’t deserve the common courtesy of a goodbye.

“I’m leaving,” I said.

Lilac’s frown deepened, and he rushed down the rest of the stairs. “Where are you going? For how long?”

I sighed. “Come on. We should talk.”

We stepped out onto the porch for some privacy. It was still kind of chilly outside, even with my coat on. Lilac didn’t have one at all. Violet, ever the mind reader, hurried out after us and pressed Lilac’s coat into his hands.

She pinned me with a glare. “Say goodbye to me before you leave.”

I nodded.

Lilac stood in front of me, his arms crossed. “What’s all this about?”

It was best to pull the Band-Aid off right away. “I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you earlier. I kind of only just made the decision yesterday. But I need to leave. I can’t be here right now.”

His face fell. “Is this because of Perr—” He cut himself off, and his lips twisted, like he’d just tasted something bitter.

I shook my head. “That’s not the whole reason. But yes, I do think you need time to get to know your mate without me around to confuse you. It’s not fair, otherwise. How can you give your bond with her a fair chance if I’m living in the same house?”

“How is it fair for you to leave? This is your home, Marta. I don’t want you to feel like you have to give it up for me.” He looked absolutely horrified by the idea.

I smiled. “I’m not giving it up. I’m just… taking some time away. Giving you space to get to know Perrie is only part of why I’m leaving. The other reason is because I need to see the world.” I laughed at myself. “I know it sounds so hokey, but it’s true.”

“You’re going to travel?” His brows knitted together. “Where are you going? How long will you be gone?”

“I don’t know. That’s the beauty of it, I think.” He still looked confused, so I elaborated. “I was stuck in that house for decades. Trapped, while the world passed me by. And after Violet and Charlie saved me from Bert, I came here. And I’ve stayed here. Become a de facto pack member. But I never really asked myself if it was what I wanted. There’s a whole world out there. So much to see. So much to learn and experience. And I don’t want to miss it again. I want to finally figure out how to live a life that’s just for me.”

He seemed to mull this over, and after a beat, he nodded. “Okay, if that’s what you really need. I want it for you too. All I’ve ever wanted was for you to be happy.”

Tears burned in my eyes. I knew he meant it. Things had gotten messy between us, but that mess had come from a place of love. A place of caring. This was exactly why I’d fallen for Lilac in the first place. No matter how sad something made him, no matter how badly he was hurt, he was always there for the people he loved.

“Can I hug you?” I asked, my voice breaking.

He nodded and stepped forward, wrapping me in his arms. I rested my head on his shoulder and breathed him in, trying to memorize the shape of him so I could carry it with me, no matter where I went.

The quiet moment was interrupted by the sound of tires crunching on gravel. Okorie was pulling up.

I sighed and stepped out of Lilac’s embrace. “Thank you—for everything.”

He nodded. “When you feel more settled, call me? Let me know how you’re doing?”

I smiled. “Sure.”

The front door opened again, and Violet stepped out, pulling my suitcase along behind her.

“Are you sure you can’t wait?” she asked. “Say goodbye to everyone?”

I shook my head. If I had to say goodbye to everyone, I’d never leave. It’d be too hard. And ultimately it wasn’t goodbye, not forever.

“Okorie has some kind of schedule, and we have to leave early to make it to our next destination,” I explained. “Can you say goodbye to them for me? And thanks?”

She nodded, and I threw my arms around her.

“Bye, Violet.”

“Bye.” She sniffled. “I’ll see you soon, right? Don’t be a stranger.”

“Never.” Violet had saved my life. She was the best friend I’d ever had, that I could remember. I was really going to miss this place and these people, but I knew this was what was right for me right now.

Okorie stepped out of the car but stayed next to it, giving me the space to say goodbye. If Lilac was upset by the realization of who I was driving off with, he didn’t say anything.

*He’s trying to be supportive*, I realized.

I pulled in a deep breath, took my suitcase by the handle, and walked out to Okorie. He loaded it into the trunk, and I climbed into the passenger seat. When I looked back, Big Mac had joined Violet and Lilac on the porch.

I waved goodbye, my heart in my throat, as Okorie backed the car out of the driveway. Then I watched in the rearview mirror as the Redwood pack house and the people I loved so much grew smaller and smaller, until only Lilac was visible on the porch as we drove away.

# Episode 3530

**Xavier**

I dried my face with a towel, then set it on the counter and headed into my bedroom. Urgency tugged me through my morning routine—I needed to get moving, to figure out how to help Cali. Sure, Big Mac had said it was likely that she was naturally recovering from the Seluna “illness,” whatever the hell that meant—I didn’t really get the whole magical viruses and antibodies thing, but my mate was suffering. I didn’t have time to waste on health metaphors. I needed to do something, to help her, to free her from this Seluna business once and for all.

Greyson and I had spent a great deal of time brainstorming last night, but neither one of us had come up with a solution. It was maddening as hell—one unexpected and awful thing after another.

Cali should’ve been free of Seluna after we’d broken the demon’s possession. And then, when that hadn’t worked out, she *at least* should’ve been freed by the demon bitch’s death. And we all knew how things had turned out with the ashes—my mate had nearly died. It had nearly killed *all* of us, retrieving those ashes and dumping them in the demon world where they belonged.

And now, here we were, with Cali still seeing that demon, still being tortured by the memory or the lingering essence or the trauma or the virus or whatever the fuck else Big Mac wanted to call it—but whatever the label, this situation was unacceptable.

Cali needed to be free, and she needed to be free *now.*

Fortunately, I had a new idea.

Vander wasn’t a healer, but they knew all about the balance of nature, which had been affected by Seluna’s ashes. So, by that logic, shouldn’t they have some insight into all of this? Not that we had a lot of options—Big Mac was doing her best, but where she was concerned, we’d been going off little more than theories for a long time now. Maybe Vander would be able to give us something more concrete to work with.

At minimum, I figured it was worth tracking down the Keeper of All Nature and asking for help. What could it hurt? As far as I could tell, our only other option was waiting this out, seeing if Cali developed Seluna “antibodies,” or whatever.

Which, again, was not fucking acceptable.

I pulled on jeans and a T-shirt and strode across the hallway to Cali’s room. It was early still, barely past sunrise. She’d probably be asleep. But that was fine. I could still peek in on her and make sure she was okay, especially since sleep had proven to be less than restful for her lately.

When I slowly opened the door, I was surprised to find her pulling a sweater over her head. She was already washed up and ready for the day.

I pushed the door open and approached her. “Cali? What are you doing up so early? How are you feeling?”

I lifted a hand to touch her forehead, like she had a flu bug or something. It was an instinctive move to care for someone who was sick. Maybe Big Mac’s virus theory had sunk in a little more than I’d thought.

But Cali’s grave expression stopped my hand before it could make contact. I dropped my hand down to my side, and my heart dropped along with it.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Is Greyson awake? I should tell you both at the same time.”

My stomach clenched. Well, that response was the opposite of comforting. What the hell else had happened to her since yesterday? Was it impossible for the universe to give my mate a fucking break? Even for just one night?

Protective fury roared inside me, but I managed to tamp it down. I wanted to prod her for more information, to find out what happened during the night, but she meant it—whatever news she had, she wanted to tell us both at the same time.

I nodded. “If he’s not awake already, we’ll wake him up.”

We went to Greyson’s room, and I knocked hard on the door. I’d meant what I’d said about waking him up. I pushed the door open before Greyson had a chance to answer. My brother wasn’t asleep—he was standing in the middle of his bedroom, wearing only a towel.

His brows rose. “Can I help you?”

I rolled my eyes. “Throw something on. Cali has something to tell us. It’s important.”

He scowled at me, but his expression changed as his gaze shifted to Cali when she entered the room. Concern immediately bloomed across Greyson’s face. He beelined for her, reaching for her.

“Love, what—”

She waved him off. “Get dressed first, then we can talk.”

My brother raced around the bedroom in record time, and in a few seconds he’d pulled on a shirt and jeans. His hair was still wet and mussed from the shower, dripping down onto the shoulders of his shirt.

“Okay, what’s going on?” he pressed.

“I wanted to tell you both something,” she began, looking grave.

Greyson’s eyes skittered over to me, his expression a clear, *What the hell is going on now?*

I nodded toward Cali, indicating that he should listen. I didn’t know any more than he did.

Cali sucked in a breath. “I…”

“Why don’t you sit down?” Greyson interrupted. “You look like you’re going to drop at any second.”

He was right. The bags under her eyes were deep and dark. It looked like she hadn’t slept all night.

Cali nodded and sat on a chair in the corner of Greyson’s room, ignoring the shirts scattered all over it. “I had another dream,” she finally said.

I rushed to her side, taking her hand. “A dream about Seluna?”

She nodded, then, grimacing, shook her head. “Yes… But not exactly.”

Greyson frowned. “What do you mean? Was it another echo? Like Big Mac said?”

She slowly shook her head again and stared down at her hands. My brows knitted together as I followed her gaze. Her hands looked perfectly fine to me. At first, I’d been worried I’d see scrapes or blood or something. But no, they were perfect. Unmarred.

I knelt down next to her and gently took one of her hands. “What is it about the dream that has you so spooked?”

She looked up at me. “Seluna told me that it won’t end unless I help her. But I don’t know what she meant. And… I sort of had one of these… these *visits* before, too.”

Greyson swallowed audibly. “Maybe it’s just your kind nature projecting? You always feel bad when a life is taken. I know Seluna’s death has weighed on you, even beyond the effects of the ashes. But you don’t have anything to feel guilty about. It was Seluna’s life or yours. You did what had to be done—”

She shook her head. “No, it’s not that. Seluna was hurting people I loved. I know why she had to die. But this feels different. She feels… desperate.”

I frowned. I didn’t like the sound of this. The way Cali was talking about it, it was like she believed Seluna was still around. But I’d returned those ashes myself. Well, I’d personally seen to it. I knew they were gone, dumped back where they belonged. I could still remember the pull on the outskirts of the demon world. Hell, I’d probably never forget it.

“Cali, Seluna is gone for good,” I said. “Whatever this is, we can figure it out. But I don’t want you to feel like she’s going to hurt you.”

“You don’t understand. It’s not just a feeling. When I woke up, there was dirt on my hands.”

I looked over at Greyson, who looked just as confused as I felt.

“In my dream, I was in this meadow, and I fell and got dirt on my hands,” Cali continued. “And when I woke up, the dirt was still there.”

My heart clenched. This sounded very eerily like the old, powerful Seluna dreams. The ones where Cali would wake up with injuries or scratches. The ones that had given her the mark on her shoulder.

“Okay… Maybe there’s an explanation for that, too,” Greyson suggested. “Was there anything by your bed that could’ve gotten dirt on you?”

She frowned. “You don’t believe me?”

“Of course we do.” I shot Greyson a glare, then turned my attention back to Cali. “Don’t worry. I have an idea. I’m going to find Vander and see if they can help.”

Her eyes widened. “You think they might have more answers?”

I smiled. “It can’t hurt to ask.”

She nodded. “You’re right. I shouldn’t wallow. When do we leave?”

Leave? She wasn’t going anywhere, not when we barely knew what was going on with her. I’d meant that *I* would find Vander. But before I could reply, a sharp, jaunty knock sounded at the door, and Mrs. Smith poked her head in.

“Greyson? I hope you’ve found your dancing shoes!”

We all turned toward her, our eyes wide as she sauntered into the room, decked out in a flowy dress.

She grinned at her son. “It’s time to get our groove on.”

# Episode 3531

**Greyson**

I got to my feet and approached my mother. Guilt twisted my stomach. *Dammit. Dance lessons are today.*

My mother shot me a look. “Don’t tell me you forgot.”

“All right, then I won’t say anything,” I admitted.

Her face fell, which made me feel about a million times worse. “Oh. Well, do you not want to go anymore?”

She looked devastated by the possibility. It hadn’t fully occurred to me until now just how much it must have meant to my mother, to have these dance lessons together. To do a mother-son dance at her wedding.

*Dammit*. Cali’s dream couldn’t have come at a worse time. I was trying to build a strong relationship with my mother, to make up for all the time we’d lost. And part of that was agreeing to these dance lessons.

Did I want to take the class? Not particularly. But did I want to do a mother-son dance at her wedding? Of course. And more importantly, I *did* want to make her happy. To give her some positive memories of the two of us, since god knew they were few and far between. This was important to her, and she was important to me. It was that simple.

And yet, it wasn’t. Because now I felt torn. Cali was suffering, and I needed to be there to help her, didn’t I? It was what any mate worth his salt would do. I looked back at Cali, who looked much steadier now. The quiet devastation had been wiped from her face, though I suspected that was more for my mother’s benefit than anything else.

She stood. “You two should go to your dance class. We’ll figure this out.”

I frowned. “But what about you?”

She laughed. It fell flat, to my ears at least, but I loved her beyond imagining for trying so hard to make this choice easier for me. “I’ll be okay for a few hours. You promised your mom, and I don’t want to be a burden on the wedding planning.”

She wasn’t going to take no for an answer, I realized. I looked at Xavier. “Watch after her?”

And my brother, asshole that he was, just rolled his eyes. “I always do.”

*Little shit.* He wasn’t the only one who watched over Cali. He didn’t have to act so goddamn smug about it.

I didn’t have time to bicker with him, so I turned to my mother and pasted on a smile. “Give me ten minutes to change and get ready.”

The others all filed out of the room, and I hurried to change into slacks and a button-down shirt. If my mom was dressed to the nines for our class, it wouldn’t do for me to show up in sweats.

If I was being honest with myself, I wished the dance lessons could’ve taken place on pretty much any other day. I hated being pulled in so many directions. But Cali was right—I’d promised my mom, and Xavier was going to be busy trying to contact Vander. We had our roles, and now we had to play them. Maybe by the time I got back, Xavier would have some idea of what to do.

*Everything with Cali will be okay—one way or another.*

It wasn’t like we hadn’t figured out more ominous stuff in the past. We could figure this out too.

With that small pep talk playing in my mind, I hurried down to the foyer to meet my mother, forcing a bright smile onto my face. “I’m ready!”

Big Mac, Cali, and Xavier were also waiting. The smile Cali had when she’d left my room had disappeared, and she looked sad.

“What is it?” I asked, rushing over to her. Had something else happened in the past ten minutes?

“It’s nothing big,” Cali said. “Big Mac just shared some news—Marta left. I wish she’d said goodbye.”

I frowned. “Okay, well, when is she coming back?”

“I don’t think she is,” Big Mac said. “At least not for a while. She went off to travel with Okorie.” She glanced at my mother. “I did get her to promise to be there for the wedding.”

“Ah, I suppose she was never going to stay with us forever.” Still, my mother looked just as disappointed as Cali.

I was taken aback myself. I’d had no idea Marta wanted to leave the pack house for good. But I wasn’t the kind of Alpha who forced people to stay if they didn’t want to. If Marta felt her time with the Redwood pack had come to an end, then that was her choice.

I sighed. “Well, if she’s with Okorie, at least she’ll be safe.”

Big Mac nodded. “I think it’s what she needs. Some time and space to figure things out. She’s been alive a long time now—longer than most of the people in this house—but she’s never truly had much of a chance to live.”

Cali nodded. “Hopefully that can change for her now.”

“Fair enough,” I said. Big Mac knew Marta much better than I did—I trusted her judgment where the young medium was concerned. I turned to my mother. “Are you ready?”

She smiled. “You bet!”

I held out my arm for her, and she laughed as she took it and let me lead her out to the car. It was a quick drive to the dance studio, and it was easy enough to make small talk with my mom on the ride over. We talked about the weather, how nice the holidays had been thanks to Torin’s efforts, and how she was stressing over the menu for the wedding.

“I bet Torin would also love to help with that,” I suggested. “Or Tom. I know he and Orla are planning to leave soon, but I’m sure he’d be happy to help however he can.”

“That’s a good idea. Tom, I mean.” She laughed. “Don’t tell Torin I said this, but he’s sort of the reason why the menu’s becoming so stressful. He’s so prone to going overboard on these kinds of things, and it’s already a challenge to create a wedding to fit both MacKenzie’s and my sensibilities. How do you create a menu that pairs classic elegance with—”

“Bootleg whiskey and moonshine?” I offered.

She slapped my arm playfully. “I wouldn’t go that far, but yes, that’s pretty much my point. Torin’s last suggestion was moon-shaped pastries with sparklers sticking out of them, ‘combining werewolf aesthetics with a nudge toward magic.’”

“Dear god.” I laughed. “I hope you let him down easy.”

When we arrived at the studio for our class, we were met with a room full of people, spinning and jumping around. A class was already in progress. Hopefully it wasn’t the one we’d signed up for. I wasn’t a bad dancer, but I couldn’t help cringing as I watched the dancers lift their partners above their heads. That wasn’t a move I wanted to do with my mother.

My mom chatted with the receptionist, who held out forms for us both to fill out and sign.

I skimmed it. There was a whole legal release section I had to sign that said any injury I incurred during the class wouldn’t be held against the studio.

*Shit. How involved is this dance class? Am I supposed to be Swayze in half an hour?*

I leaned close to my mom. “Are you sure this is a good idea? This form talks about bodily injury.”

She laughed. “They have to have that. It’s just legal jargon. Plus, we’re werewolves. I think we can handle a dance class.”

I sighed, thinking of all the things I still had to do for Cali and the pack. *Do I really have time for this?*

Still, I’d promised my mom that we’d do this together, and I didn’t want to let her down.

“You’re done?” the receptionist asked, looking at me expectantly.

I quickly scribbled my signature on the form and handed it over.

My mom took my arm. “This is going to be so much fun!”

I smiled. “Let’s do this.”

Just then, a man flounced down the hallway toward us. What he lacked in height, he more than made up for in vocal volume. His tight black pants offset the flowy white top tucked into them, and he had the shiniest shoes I’d ever seen.

“Hello, hello, you must be Sabine!” the man gushed.

My mom turned to him. “Yes, you’re Martín?”

Martín leaned in to air-kiss my mother on either cheek. “Yes, yes, that is me! We talked on the phone! I am going to make you a graceful dancer for your wedding day!” He turned to me. “And this must be the handsome son!”

Before I could stop him or avoid it, Martín leaned forward and air-kissed me on each cheek too. All I could do was blink in surprise.

Martín took my mom’s and my hands, folding them into the crooks of his elbows, and started leading us down the hallway. It was awkward, with the height difference, and the fact that I was almost certain I’d never in my entire life held a man’s arm like this. But it seemed like it’d be rude to snatch my hand away, so I allowed Martín to lead me.

“We’ll start with waltz basics, and maybe do some salsa and tango,” Martín was saying.

My head spun at the thought. But as we stepped into the room to join the beginner’s class, I stopped short, staring in horror at a couple on the other side of the room.

*Maren? Mace? What the hell are they doing here?*

# Episode 3532

My fingers tapped on the countertop as I waited for the kettle to boil. I tried to focus on the rhythm of the water beginning to bubble, and how I was going to spend the rest of my day. Maybe I could have breakfast with Xavier, or spend some time practicing magic with Artemis…

But again and again, my mind jumped back to my dream, to the dirt that had caked my hand when I’d woken up, to Seluna’s warning—no, her *promise*—that this wasn’t over. That it would never be over unless I helped her.

*What am I going to do?*

A hand landed on my shoulder, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. I spun around to find Xavier standing behind me.

His smile was gentle. “I think the kettle’s boiling.”

It was then that I realized the kettle had been whistling for… I didn’t know how long. I turned to take it off the burner and turn off the stove.

“Cali.”

I slowly turned to face Xavier again, and he waited until I’d turned all the way around to reach out and take my arms.

“It’s going to be okay,” he said.

I nodded, knowing that was the response he was hoping for. Still, I couldn’t help but feel like people had been saying those words to me too often lately. Like I was eternally some kind of damsel in distress, always stuck in some dire situation or another.

It was exhausting. For me, and for my loved ones. We all needed a break. I just wanted a bit of peace and quiet for once. A chance to rest. A chance for my mates and my sister and my parents to stop looking at me like I was moments away from breaking.

Was that so much to ask?

When this year had begun, I’d had so many goals, so many hopes for things to change. I remembered what I’d told Xavier during our New Year’s date, when I’d confessed to wanting to go back to college. That felt so hopelessly naïve, now.

How could I possibly go back to school if the ghost of a demon was haunting me? What if Seluna targeted one of my classmates? I shuddered at the thought.

As long as she was hanging over me, I had no hope for any kind of future. At least, not one that I wanted.

Xavier’s voice broke through my thoughts.

“Sorry,” I said. “What?”

“Do you want me to contact Vander?” he repeated.

I nodded. “Yes, I think it’s a good idea… even if it’s kinda our only idea at the moment.” Anything to feel like we were making progress. Anything to get my mind off the dream.

My mom walked into the kitchen. “What’s this about Vander?”

Xavier and I shared a look. Should I tell my parents about this? They were just about to go back home. They were getting their lives back. I didn’t want to worry them, especially when I still didn’t know exactly what was going on.

What if Big Mac was right? What if all of this was just an echo? What had she called it? My body’s antibody response to Seluna’s virus? What if I worried them over nothing?

But even as I thought it, in my heart and in my bones, I knew there was something more at work. This wasn’t over. Seluna wasn’t gone.

My mother’s eyes narrowed. “I can tell you’re trying to figure out what not to tell me. So just spill it.”

I sighed. She was right—there was no point in trying to keep her out of the loop, was there? My mother knew me better than just about anyone, except maybe Xavier and Greyson. And if this did turn out to be something significant, she’d want to know.

“We just want more information on the residual Seluna effects,” I said carefully. “We figure Vander might have a better perspective, since the Seluna ashes were connected to nature.”

And, if I were being honest, I was desperate for some reassurance from Vander. They’d said before that this would pass, but clearly, it hadn’t passed yet. I wanted—*needed*—an update. Some more information to help guide me through whatever fresh hell Seluna was heaping on me now.

My mom nodded. “Okay, that makes sense. And I do support doing research and being educated on this stuff. I’ll help you contact Vander.”

Xavier’s brows rose. “You know how to get in touch with them?”

“No, but the trees might.”

“Oh!” I brightened. “That’s right! You can talk to the trees! That’s a great idea.”

Mom smiled. “I’ll let you know what they tell me.” She kissed my cheek and headed out of the kitchen.

I turned to look at Xavier. “Okay, so what now?”

My mom had been a huge help, but now the distraction she’d represented was gone. I was back to square one. Exhausted and worried. Stuck in this game of hurry up and wait—wait to hear back from the trees, wait to find Vander, wait to see what Seluna would do next…

I was so, so sick of it.

“What about a date—” Xavier began but was cut off when his phone started ringing. He frowned down at the name on the screen. “Fuck.”

My brows knitted together. “Who is it?” I leaned over to look at his phone and saw Ava’s name flashing on the display. “What does she want now?”

“Who the fuck knows?” He answered the call. “Ava, what do you want?”

It was probably petty, but I appreciated just how annoyed he sounded, and how he wasn’t hesitating to let Ava know about it. To remind her where she stood.

*Yeah, definitely petty.*

But, tired and worn thin as I was, I couldn’t bring myself to try to be nicer about it. Hopefully Xavier could put an end to this conversation fast, and then we’d be able to talk more about that date. I was desperate for a new distraction.

Xavier frowned at whatever Ava had told him. “No, you can’t reject him… *Why?* Because it hasn’t even been a day!”

He flashed me an apologetic look and walked out of the kitchen to continue his conversation. I frowned.

*I thought the whole Samara thing was taken care of. Xavier almost died in that damn race, helping Fletcher and the Samaras. What’s Ava complaining about now?*

I tried to calm myself, to not let my exhaustion and frustration spiral into something darker, but I couldn’t help being annoyed. I’d been hoping for some time with my mate, but now Ava was getting in the way of that with her pack drama, just like she always did.

*It’s like she has a sixth sense.*

I started back toward my room. Maybe I could just watch a movie or something. It wouldn’t take my mom that long to hear back from the trees, right?

I stopped short when I spotted Lola and Elle, eating breakfast together in the dining room and laughing. *Maybe I’ll join them.*

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“Oh, I was just teaching Elle what a meme is,” Lola explained. “She kept calling it a me-me.”

Elle frowned. “It looks like that written down.”

I smiled. “That’s fair.” I already felt better, just being around them. “Oh, I’ve got some great memes on my phone. I’ll show you.”

I was moving to take a seat at the dining table when Lola caught my hand.

“You okay?” she asked.

My smile dimmed. “Yeah, of course.”

She stared at me expectantly. “Cali, I’m your best friend—I can tell when you’re out of it.”

I sighed. “Can we please just have a fun girls’ day or something? I don’t want to talk about serious stuff.”

Lola nodded. Thankfully, she seemed to understand my need for a distraction was more important than her need to know what was going on. “A girls’ day it is! Elle, you in?”

Elle smiled. “Sure. What is a girls’ day?”

Lola jumped to her feet. “Oh, you’re about to find out. First up is face masks. I’ll go grab them!” She raced upstairs to gather her skincare supplies.

I looked over at Elle, who was frowning in confusion.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Why would a girls’ day need masks? Do we want to hide our identities?”

“Huh?” I blinked. “Oh, no. Not those kinds of masks. These are like… cloth? I think. And they’re good for your skin.”

She looked down at her shirt, still clearly confused. “Cloths are good for skin?”

I grimaced. I was totally botching the explanation, but I’d never really understood the difference between serums and toners and emulsions and all the stuff Lola talked about with such ease.

“Just trust Lola,” I said.

Lola finally returned, her caddy of skincare in one hand and a letter in the other.

“What’s that?” I asked, pointing at the letter.

“That Armin guy was on the porch when I came down the stairs. He gave me this for Elle.”

Elle’s eyes lit up, and she jumped up to snatch the letter from Lola’s hand. After ripping open the envelope, she sighed, frowning. “The letters are curly again.”

I reached for the letter. “May I?”

Elle nodded.

I skimmed the letter. “It’s from Lucian. He wants you to come over. Again.”

“Oh. Great! I will get ready, then? Should I mask my face first?” she asked, looking at Lola’s caddy.

But I wasn’t nearly as enthusiastic as Elle was about the invite. I frowned as I set the letter down. *Would Greyson be okay with this?*

# Episode 3533

**Xavier**

I’d said it before, and I had a feeling I’d say it a hundred more times—fucking Ava. Fucking Samaras. I’d never asked to deal with their bullshit, and yet I just couldn’t seem to stop getting sucked back into it.

I paced back and forth in one of the studies as I listened to Ava list all the reasons why she already hated Fletcher. It was *day* *fucking one*, and she’d already written him off.

“And he spent over an hour in the bathroom. Why? What was he doing there? It’s not even his bathroom.”

I rolled my eyes. “What the hell does it matter what he was doing? That doesn’t mean he wouldn’t be a good Alpha.”

“It’s a question of *time management*, Xavier,” Ava pressed. “And whether I need to disinfect the place now.”

I was ready to pull my hair out. It seemed like Ava was trying to find *any* reason to reject Fletcher. She’d already made up her mind about him. Which was just… beyond baffling to me. *She* was the one who’d insisted on finding a replacement for Zeke. She’d been the one to set all this in motion.

And I’d been the one to go through all the effort of finding this guy. I’d risked my life. I’d dealt with a petty, sociopathic ex, that death trap of a motorcycle race, and that fucking power-tripping mall cop—all so she could toss Fletcher out like day-old garbage?

Fuck that.

“Ava, it’s been *one* day. Can you please just try to get to know him before deciding he’s not a good fit?” And before making it *my* problem. “Give him a chance. A real chance.”

She sighed. “I’m not going to just accept him because he conveniently fell into our laps.”

“Convenient?” I repeated, gritting my teeth. I thought back to the motorcycle race and all the literal pain I’d gone through, trying to free Fletcher from Cameron. “There was nothing fucking convenient about it.”

“Didn’t look that way to me. It sure seems like you guys unearthed him in a hurry.”

“Fucking hell, Ava. I thought that was what you wanted! You come to me and declare Zeke unfit and ask for my help, so I find you an Alpha. A viable option. But that’s still not enough, is it?” I scoffed, shaking my head.

This whole situation was getting out of hand. When I’d told Greyson I’d help stabilize the Samara pack, try to keep them from joining up with the Vanguards, I hadn’t realized it was going to turn into a full-time job. It wasn’t even my pack! And Ava—she wasn’t my mate anymore. Not in any way that mattered. This shouldn’t even have been my business, much less my job.

Ava’s voice softened. “I’m sorry. I appreciate the effort. I do. But I’m just not convinced Fletcher’s the one.”

“*The one*.” I snorted. “Are you just using this as an excuse for something?”

Silence filled the line for so long, I wondered if we’d gotten disconnected. Finally, she responded, her voice low and dangerous. “What are you implying?”

Fuck. Now I’d put my foot in it. I rubbed a hand over my face. “Nothing.”

“Bullshit. Come on, Xavier. You’ve never held back with me before. Just say it.”

*In for a penny…* I might as well just follow through and spit it out. “Are you just trying to find a reason to keep working with me on this?”

Ava’s laugh set my nerves on edge, made my molars creak. “Good god. Your ego is so huge, sometimes I don’t know how you manage to walk upright. No, Xavier, this has nothing to do with you. It’s about the pack. It’s always been about the pack.”

I knew *that* was a lie, but I wasn’t going to go there. Cali was going through hell, and every second I wasted on this phone call was a second I could’ve spent with my real mate.

“Well, what other reason do you have for immediately giving up on this guy without giving him a chance?” I pressed. “I get that you’re protective of your pack, and it’s to your credit, but it seems to me the best thing you can do for the Samaras is *not* throw away what might be their only viable option.”

“I’ll do whatever it is I want.” She huffed. “And if he turns out to be a dud, that’s on you.”

She hung up before I could reply. I sighed, letting my head hang down. Already, a headache was blooming between my temples.

*Dammit, Ava.*

But she was going to give Fletcher a chance. At least for now. Which meant the Samaras weren’t my problem right now. Hopefully not at all, anymore.

I headed off to reunite with Cali. She’d seemed so out of sorts this morning, and I didn’t want to leave her alone.

She wasn’t in the kitchen, and after looking around, I found her in the dining room with Lola and Elle… arguing over a letter?

Elle was trying to yank the letter out of Cali’s hands, but Cali held it out of reach.

“Will you please just listen to me for one minute?” Cali asked.

“No! It is my invitation!” Elle snapped. “I get to say yes or no.”

She was practically on the table now, trying to get any kind of leverage she could to reach Cali’s outstretched arm. She knocked over one of Torin’s fancy New Year’s centerpieces, and Lola had to dive to catch it.

“Careful, Elle!” Lola said.

“Give me the letter,” she growled at Cali.

“Just listen to me!” Cali insisted, holding the letter out of reach with one hand and pushing Elle back with the other.

My lips twitched at the hilarious sight, but I figured it’d be best to get the situation under control sooner rather than later.

“Hey!” I shouted.

They all went still and turned to look at me as they slowly untangled themselves.

“Can I have a moment with my mate?” I asked.

Cali’s shoulders relaxed, and she looked at me, her eyes shining with gratitude.

Elle scowled and stepped back. “Fine, but don’t lose that letter!”

She stomped out of the room, and Lola hurried after her.

I tried not to laugh as I approached Cali, who was still sitting at the table. “What was that about? What’s in the letter?”

She held it out to me, and I scanned it. An invitation for Elle to visit Lucian at the palace.

I groaned, shaking my head. “The guy’s persistent, I’ll give him that.”

“And Elle really does seem to like him,” Cali said. “But I can’t just let her go without asking Greyson what he thinks first, right?”

I nodded. “Do you want to call him?”

She seemed to brighten at that. “Okay, yeah. Maybe he won’t mind.”

I pulled out my phone and called my brother, putting the call on speakerphone.

“What’s going on?” Greyson said. Music blared in the background of the call.

I winced and immediately lowered the volume.

“Hey! Is everything okay?” he asked. “Is Cali okay?”

“I’m here.” She moved closer to the phone. “I’m fine.”

“Our not-so-favorite Alpha is trying to ask Elle out again,” I explained.

Greyson groaned. “So soon? They *just* went out.”

“What do you want us to do?” I asked.

“I can come back.”

“No, don’t abandon your mom,” Cali said. “We’ve got this covered.”

Greyson seemed to hesitate, and then a loud voice bellowed, “Great job, Mace and Maren!”

I blinked. *What the…?*

Cali’s face told me she was just as surprised as I was.

“Are Maren and Mace there with you?” Cali asked.

“It’s a long story,” Greyson said. “Are you sure you don’t need me to come back?”

There was no missing the desperation in my brother’s voice.

“No, it’s fine,” I said easily, feeling sadistic glee at the idea of forcing my brother to stay at the dance class. “It’ll keep until this afternoon. We’ll make sure Elle doesn’t run off on her own.”

“Ugh, fine.” Greyson sighed. “See you later.”

He hung up, and I couldn’t smother my laughter at his annoyed tone.

Cali punched my shoulder. “Don’t laugh at him. He’s doing something nice for his mom.”

“I know, but it’s just hilarious to think of Greyson trying to be all twinkle toes at a dance class.”

She rolled her eyes. “He’s a good dancer.”

“Oh, is he now?”

Cali huffed. “I’m just stating a fact. You two will never stop ribbing each other.”

I just shrugged, then let my gaze travel over her face. “How are you feeling? Better?”

She nodded. “Actually, I am. Lola helped a bit. And I was distracted by the Elle thing.” She paused. “So, um, how’s Ava?”

I winced. “She just wanted to complain about Fletcher, but I talked her down. It’s fine.”

“Oh, okay. I just… I guess I thought that was finished.”

I sighed. “Believe me, I wish it was.” I reached out to cup her cheek. “But I’m here now. I’m focused on you. All the way.”

She smiled. “I don’t mean to sound so needy.”

“No way. I’m always willing to drop everything for you. You know that.”

“Thanks. It feels nice to know that I can always depend on you.” She leaned in to peck me on the cheek, but at the last second, I turned my head so she kissed my lips. She leaned into me, deepening the kiss, and I poured all my love into it, all my devotion, everything I felt for her. Only for her.

Footsteps sounded in the doorway, followed by a feminine, “Oh!”

We broke apart to see Orla standing in the doorway.

“Oh, Mom.” Cali blushed. “Um, hi. What’s up?”

Orla cleared her throat. “I just came to let you know that I’ve made contact with Vander.”

# Episode 3534

**Greyson**

“*And* one, two, three, two, two, three,” Martín called out. He’d just taught the steps for a standard waltz, and I was already struggling to keep up.

Not that waltzing was hard. I could count to three—I’d even waltzed a couple of times before, here and there, with ladies who were into that kind of thing. But there was just so much swimming around in my mind. Whatever was going on with Cali, Lucian inviting Elle over for a date, and, oh yeah, Maren and Mace dancing perfectly in time just a few feet away…

*What a mindfuck.*

“What was that phone call about?” my mom asked, adjusting her hand positions on my bicep and torso as I fumbled through the set again.

“Just pack stuff,” I grunted. “Nothing important.”

Except, how long would it be before it became *very* important? Lucian seemed obsessed with Elle. How many times a week did he really need to see her? How many times a *day*? I appreciated that Elle had a good head on her shoulders about all this—surprisingly so, considering her limited experience with human life—but I hadn’t realized that being Lucian and Elle’s chaperone was going to turn into my part-time job.

“Ouch!” My mom winced as I stepped on her foot.

“Sorry.” I stepped back, completely out of time with the waltz now. It wasn’t the first time I’d stepped on her foot during our lesson, and, if I was being honest with myself, it probably wouldn’t be the last.

“It’s okay.” She gave me a pained smile and limped a little for the next couple steps.

*Dance class is really off to a great start. My head’s barely in it, my heart* definitely *isn’t in it, and my feet are only in it enough to cause my mother bodily harm.*

It was everything I’d ever wanted from a mother-son dance class.

I hated that I was so distracted, but I didn’t know how to turn the thoughts off. I was still the Redwood Alpha, even during this class. There were still things that required my attention and care—to say nothing of Cali’s struggle with Seluna.

It was *a lot*. Normally I was a decent dancer, but my head was so scrambled that I couldn’t even make it through a simple waltz with my mom holding up her end of the dance and Martín counting out every damn beat.

I glanced over to where Maren and Mace were dancing in the corner. Maren’s prowess on the dance floor didn’t surprise me—we’d gone dancing once or twice back when we’d dated, and she was the kind of person who was good at pretty much everything she tried. Mace, on the other hand…

I watched him twirl Maren into a dip, then ease her back up and continue the dance without missing a beat.

*I didn’t know he had it in him.*

I’d gone over to say hi and had started to make some Very Awkward small talk with them, but then class had begun and there wasn’t time to talk.

It was a shock, seeing them here together. On a date. How had that happened so quickly? Mace had asked me about Maren not that long ago, and now they were at a dance class together? There was a level of comfort in their body language that made it seem like this wasn’t a first date. But hadn’t Mace been on that weird werewolf dating site Lola had found? How long *had* they been dating?

The questions were just piling up.

I couldn’t stop myself from looking over at them again and again.

*Probably because it’s so damn awkward that they’re here. And I’m here. With my mom.*

When I’d told Mace he was free to ask Maren out, I’d never imagined we’d all accidentally end up at the same place. That I’d *see* the date play out.

*That’s all it is. Just the surprise of seeing them here.*

The music ended, but Mace’s hand lingered on Maren’s waist. My eyes narrowed. *The dance is over. Why is he still holding her like that?*

Martín clapped his hands. “Okay, let’s try something else. Salsa!”

*Dear god. Anything but that.*

I’d seen salsa dancing before, and there was no way in hell I’d be able to get my hips to move like that. It was physically impossible. At least in this setting. Get me Cali and a drink, and maybe then we’d be talking.

I’d tried to put on a cheerful facade, but my mom patted my hand. “Just try your best.”

I forced a smile, ignoring the way my molars creaked. *Great. My own mother doesn’t think I’ll be able to pull this off.*

Unfortunately for everyone involved, I had just enough ego to want to prove her wrong.

I forced myself to focus on Martín as he slowly showed us the steps. Using the wall-to-wall mirrors, I tried to mirror the movements and was looking way too stiff. I was tense—there was no other way to describe it. My muscles didn’t want to move how they were supposed to.

Finally, Martín turned on the music. “Okay, beautiful people! Here we go—five, six, seven, eight!”

I took a deep breath, trying to shake off all my thoughts. I watched the mirror and moved my body the way Martín had shown me. For a moment, things were picking up. I felt more in the swing of things.

But then my eye wandered, and I saw the reflection of Maren and Mace dancing smoothly. Perfectly. He added another little spin to their dance, then dipped her. Her laugh rang out through the studio, even above the music. The sound grated on my nerves.

“Greyson,” My mom said. “You’re squeezing my hand too hard.”

I blinked and realized my fists were clenched tight around my mother’s hands. I immediately loosened my grip. “Sorry.”

She sighed. “Are you all right? Do you just want to go home?”

“No,” I lied. As miserable as this was, it was important to her, and I didn’t want to fuck it up. Well, fuck it up any worse. “I’m sorry,” I said again, my tone gentler this time. “I’m just a bit distracted by what’s going on with Cali.”

Her expression softened. “Of course. Really—do you want to go home?”

I shook my head. “No. I’ll be fine. I promise.”

She nodded but still didn’t look convinced. We muddled our way through another couple of sets, and Martín came over to watch.

“Sabine, great lines!” he said. “Greyson, try to loosen your shoulders.”

I frowned. “What does that even mean?”

He moved closer and put a hand on my shoulder and pushed. “Loose. *Loose*.”

All I could do was scowl. That was like telling someone to just be happy.

“And try to move your hips more to the side,” he added.

I tried to follow his instruction, but all that did was make me stumble to the left, pulling my mother with me.

“No, no. Like this.” And before I could stop him, Martín grabbed my hips and started dancing behind me, pushing and pulling my body back and forth in some kind of crazy-ass three-way dance-slash-puppet show.

My cheeks heated, and my muscles stiffened with discomfort. In that moment, I would have gladly wrestled an entire pod of gator shifters rather than stay in that weird-ass dance configuration.

“Loose, *loose*,” Martín kept telling me. Over and over again. Right in my ear.

I made the mistake of glancing over my shoulder, and found Maren and Mace watching and laughing together.

*Fuck.*

“Okay, I think I’m probably loose enough,” I said, stepping out of Martín’s hands. “Thanks for trying.”

And then I realized the entire room was staring at me. This dance class was a nightmare from which I couldn’t awaken. We really couldn’t have done this at any other time? Though, knowing the pack, no time was ever going to be good for this sort of thing.

Martín frowned, then went to turn off the music. “Okay, maybe we need to try a different strategy. Mace and Maren, can you come here?”

I scowled as they approached. If it were up to me, I would’ve just scheduled private lessons at this point with my mom. Maybe that was still an option…

“You are all friends, no?” Martín asked.

“Yes?” I offered up. Mace and I hadn’t always been friends, and I wasn’t sure whether I would describe Maren and me that way, but that was beside the point now.

Mace glanced at me, hesitating a moment before nodding. “Um, yeah.”

Martín nodded. “You two are such naturals. I wonder if you can help these two get the feel of the rhythm?”

“Sure?” Mace said, glancing at Maren, who hadn’t said a word. She just stared at me with a look I couldn’t begin to decipher.

Martín clapped again. “Wonderful! Now, switch partners!”

He turned on the music again, and before I could object, Mace had spun my mother away in a graceful turn.

Maren stepped up to me and held out her hand. “I guess we’re partners now.”

# Episode 3535

“You found Vander?” I asked my mom, my eyes widening. Finally, some progress! “How long will it take to get to them? Can we go now?”

She held up her hands. “Slow down. I didn’t think it was a good idea for you to go traipsing around so soon after the Seluna stuff, so I asked the trees to ask Vander to come here.”

Beside me, Xavier nodded. Of course he approved of Vander coming to us—it was the option that kept me here, under everyone’s watchful eye. The option that presented the least risk.

I couldn’t help my flash of annoyance. I felt like I was being babied—which was humiliating—and the fact that my mom and my mate seemed to be in agreement about it only made that feeling worse.

But what was I going to do? Tell my mom to go back to the trees and tell Vander *not* to come to us? In addition to being safe and convenient for me, their visit would be safe and convenient for everyone else involved. It’d be stupid to argue, so I kept my mouth shut.

Moments later, a crack erupted outside, and I rushed to the window to see what was going on. Vander had appeared in the yard.

*Well, that was quick.*

I hurried outside, Xavier hot on my heels.

“Thank you for coming so quickly!” I said.

Vander nodded. “The trees said it was urgent. Is everything all right?”

My mom appeared behind me. “Oh, no. I’m sorry if I made it sound that way. We just wanted some advice.”

Vander’s eyes narrowed. “Advice? What do I look like, a human therapist? Believe me, you wouldn’t like my hourly rate.”

Xavier stepped forward. “No, we know that. This is about the Seluna situation. It’s… gotten bad again. We were hoping you might have some insight.”

Vander nodded. “Continue.”

“I’ve been having… visions? Hallucinations? Visitations?” I grimaced. It sounded kind of stupid when I tried to explain it, but I needed to get it all out there before Vander changed their mind. “I don’t really know what they are, but Big Mac believes they’re residual side effects from the mark Seluna left on me. And I’ve started seeing Seluna again—outside my dreams. She’s threatening to keep showing up until I agree to help her. And then, last night, she visited me again in my dreams. And when I woke up, the dirt that I was kneeling in *in my dream* was still on my hands. Like some part of it wasn’t just a dream. And since we’ve been hitting so many dead ends, trying to treat this like a Seluna problem, we thought maybe we’d see how the balance of nature has shifted since we got rid of the ashes. Maybe there’s a different way to approach all this.”

Vander listened intently, then seemed to mull everything over. “Big Mac’s theory is interesting. I’ve noticed that nature still isn’t completely balanced. It’s frustrating that it’s taking so long.”

“Do you think that could mean something bad?” Xavier asked. “Or is it just taking its sweet-ass time, and everything will be okay eventually?”

“I don’t know,” Vander said. “I don’t think Seluna is still active—I would’ve felt that shift in the balance. But her… *essence* might still linger. Like a stain on cloth that needs a few washes to get out.”

I frowned. As if it wasn’t bad enough being told I needed to recover from my “demon virus,” now I was being compared to a piece of dirty laundry? *Are there any Seluna-related metaphors that* don’t *make me feel like crap?*

“I’m sorry, but I believe there’s nothing to do but wait,” Vander said. “Time is the best healer. I know this isn’t an easy thing to endure, but it will get better. You just need to be patient for a while longer.”

My heart dropped. *Be patient? I’ve* been *patient! I’ve been waiting to be free of Seluna for weeks now! Months, even! Patience isn’t the issue. It can’t be.*

Vander turned to go, but I lunged forward and grabbed their arm, desperate to stop them from leaving. They hadn’t done anything to help. I was still stuck. Still exhausted and terrified.

They frowned and looked down at my hands. I let go.

“Please,” I breathed. “The dreams are so intense. I can’t sleep, and I can’t even trust myself when I’m awake. I can’t keep going like this. Is there anything that might help? Any kind of natural remedy?”

Vander thought for a moment. “There is the Shard of Catholicon.”

I blinked. “The shard of… Catho-what-now?”

“The Shard of Catholicon was lost ages ago,” my mom said, shaking her head.

“Yes and no. The artifact as a whole no longer exists,” Vander said, “but pieces of it were scattered.”

I sighed. “Another treasure hunt. Great.”

*And our last one went so smoothly…*

“Wait, back up,” Xavier said. “You’re saying that this Shard thing can heal her?”

My mom shook her head. “It’s not a universal healer. It’s a charm that connects to Fae energy. It works to sort of… balance us.” She looked at me. “Think of it as a Fae pain management charm.”

I laughed. “So this Shard is like Fae Tylenol?”

“I guess.” Mom smiled. “But much stronger. If we can find a piece of it for you, it should be able to to give you some relief.” She turned to Vander. “If I’d known pieces of it still existed, I might not have had to trouble you.”

Vander shrugged. “I’m happy to help where I can.”

“This sounds great,” Xavier said. “Where can we find a piece?”

“I’ve heard rumors of one in the human world,” said Vander. “I believe it’s currently in the possession of a warlock who collects such things. His name is Steve. I’ve heard he’s rather… eccentric.”

“Okay, so we just go and ask this Steve guy for the piece?” I asked. “It’s just that easy?”

There had to be more to it than that. If my time in the supernatural world had taught me anything, it was that there was no such thing as an easily obtained rare magical artifact. There had to be some hoops to jump through. Or some terrible price to pay. Or both.

Vander shrugged. “I’ve told you everything I know. Find Steve, and you will find a piece of the Shard. The rest is up to you.”

*Of course it is.*

“Thank you,” I said. “This is the best lead we’ve gotten yet. We really appreciate it.”

Vander nodded, then turned around and disappeared.

I turned toward the house and started inside. “Okay, let’s go find out where this Steve guy lives.

Xavier chased after me, beating me to the porch. “Wait a minute. You’re not coming with us.”

I scowled. “I beg your pardon?”

“Cali, I can’t—”

I cut him off. “I’m sorry. I must have misheard you. Because I could have sworn you just told me I couldn’t come with you to talk to Steve. But I must have been mistaken, because you’d never tell me I can’t come along to find my own very much-needed Fae painkiller. You know, the one thing that might be able to give me some quality of life while I wait for Seluna to get the hell out of my head?”

Xavier wisely didn’t say anything. Less wisely, he looked to my mom for backup.

She stepped forward. “Honey, if everything you told Vander is true—”

“Why wouldn’t it be true? Do you think I’m lying?”

“No.” She put her hands up. “I’m sorry. That came out wrong. What you told Vander… That’s a really difficult thing to have to live with. Maybe it’s best for you to try to rest up and let Xavier take care of this. I’m sure he can handle a quick errand.”

I scoffed, shaking my head. I didn’t even know where to begin—the fact that my mother and my mate were treating me like an invalid, like I couldn’t even help myself, or that they seriously thought they could decide whether or not I was going to help find the Shard piece.

“You heard Vander,” I said. “This Steve guy is weird. Plus, he’s a warlock. Xavier could use some backup.”

“I think after dealing with alligator shifters, I can handle one weird old warlock,” he said.

“No. No way. This isn’t happening. I’m going!”

He crossed his arms, and my mom followed suit, the two of them presenting a united front against me.

*Traitors.*

“Look, I understand that you’re both trying to protect me, but this is about *me*. If something is wrong with me, you can’t just leave me behind. I deserve to know what’s going on with my own body!”

Xavier sighed heavily, and for a split second, I was sure I’d gotten through to him. Then he shook his head. “I’m sorry, Cali. I love you, but you’re not coming.”

# Episode 3536

**Greyson**

I’d thought muddling my way through a dance class with my mother while my ex and another Alpha watched was the worst way this day could go.

I was wrong. This was much worse.

I tried to focus on my steps—I still hadn’t loosened my hips enough for the salsa. I stared down at my feet instead of up at Maren, but I kept losing the count. On the bright side, I was taking painstaking efforts to *not* crush her feet like I’d crushed my mother’s. So at least I didn’t have that specific level of awkwardness to worry about.

Yet.

“Fuck,” I muttered as I fell out of rhythm. If I couldn’t pull it together, Martín was never going to leave me alone. I’d hear his voice crooning, “Looser, *loose!*” in my dreams for the rest of my life.

“You’re not going to get any better with that posture,” Maren said.

I scowled and finally looked up at her. She was smiling at me, one of those barely controlled smiles that meant she was trying very hard not to laugh. I remembered that look from our time together, and I wasn’t thrilled to see it again now.

“I don’t really know this dance.” I sighed.

“Me neither,” she said. “But I seem to recall you not being a bad dancer.”

I snorted. “Thanks.”

Being this close reminded me of those old times going out with Maren. They certainly hadn’t been salsa dancing or even the waltz that we’d done. A bit more, ah, inappropriate for the current audience.

She nodded. “Forget salsa for now.”

“Thank fuck,” I breathed, then my lungs froze when she took my hands and put one on her waist. She cradled the other in her own hand, and my muscles locked up. Crazy as it might have sounded, I was actually trying *not* to touch her.

She laughed. “It’s just dancing, Greyson. I know you have a mate.”

I blew out a breath. It was impossible not to notice that she hadn’t mentioned Mace at all. “I’m being weird, aren’t I?”

She nodded. “Just a little bit.”

I was doing a hell of a lot better than I thought, if that were the case. Because this situation was a hell of a lot weird. Maybe I was actually *under*reacting.

*Probably not.*

I winced. “I have to say, I never imagined tagging along on my ex’s first date.”

She seemed to be holding back laughter again. “It’s not a date. Not officially.”

I frowned. “What is it, then? How many dance classes do you go to like this with your friends?”

“We’re just spending time together. Getting to know each other. I can’t really move too fast with anyone when I have Fenrir to think about.”

*Fair point. Also, why do I care who she goes to dance classes with?* If I wasn’t careful, I was going to make myself look like a jealous ex. Which I wasn’t. Obviously.

I pulled in a breath and nodded. “How is Fenrir doing?”

A smile spread across her face. “Good. My friend Nina is watching him.”

That was good. I remembered that she had that support system. It was good Fenrir had one too, and other adults he could count on.

“So, what *do* you think of Mace?” I asked.

“He’s kind. And he makes me laugh.”

I couldn’t disagree with that assessment. Mace and I didn’t always see eye to eye where pack matters were concerned, but he was a good Alpha and a good man. “He’s dependable, too.”

Her lips twitched. “Are you vouching for him?”

I frowned at the thought. Like I was trying to set them up or something. Playing wingman for another Alpha while he tried to woo my ex. But now that I thought about it, if I *had* to think of people who could make Maren happy, Mace would probably be on the list.

“Maybe,” I finally said.

Maren nodded. “I’ll take that into account. I know you would never say that lightly.”

And then I realized that sometime during our conversation, my muscles *had* finally loosened up. I hadn’t stepped on Maren’s feet once. I’d fallen into the rhythm of the dance steps, and I’d stayed there.

My mom’s laugh echoed through the studio space, and I turned to see Mace twirling her across the dance floor.

*Wow. My mom has some moves.*

*You need to step up. You can do better than this.* I concentrated again. I wasn’t going to be the reason my mom got embarrassed during our mother-son dance. No, I was personally going to make sure that nothing happened to embarrass her at all.

Martín came over and smiled. “Good, good! You are much looser, Greyson!”

I forced a smile. *If I never hear the word “loose” again, it’ll be too soon.*

But it was nice, not fucking this up. I knew how important our dance would be to my mother on her wedding day, and it was a comfort to know I was actually capable of it. It’d be so humiliating to screw up a basic dance with everyone in the pack watching.

We switched partners again, and my mom smiled at me, like she was impressed with my ability to stay in time with a simple set of steps. “Wow, you seem like you’re more relaxed!”

I smiled. “I am.”

Martín clapped his hands. “All right, beautiful people. That’s the end of today’s lesson! I look forward to seeing you next time!”

*Oh shit. I have to come back here and do this again?*

My horror must have been written on my face, because my mother laughed. “Don’t worry. We can hold off on the weekly dance classes. But maybe just one more before the wedding?”

I nodded, relief flooding through me. “Deal.”

We waved goodbye to Maren and Mace, and I led my mother out of the studio and drove us back home. I was just parking the car in the driveway when Cali stormed out of the house.

*What’s happened now?*

She stopped at my side of the car and scowled down at me, her arms crossed.

I carefully opened the door, mindful not to hit her with it, and stepped out. “What is it?”

“Tell Xavier he’s wrong.”

He was almost always wrong about *something*, but I was hesitant to agree without knowing what was going on.

“What’s he reacting to?” I asked.

“We have a lead on a charm that could help Cali’s symptoms,” Xavier said, having followed Cali out of the house. “The Shard of Catholicon.”

Oh. “That’s great,” I said. “Where is it?”

Cali shook her head. “You’re missing the point!”

“Okay? What’s the point?” I asked.

“The *point* is, I’m going. Xavier seems to think otherwise, but it’s not up to him.”

*Oh…*

The puzzle pieces clicked together. Xavier was being protective of Cali, trying to take care of this lead without dragging her into it. Probably because she was in such rough shape right now.

And, as much as I would have loved to tell Xavier he was wrong *and* be a hero to Cali, I couldn’t do either of those things. Xavier had made the right call. He’d probably done the exact same thing I would have done, in his position.

“Come on!” Cali pressed. “I’m fine! I can drive a few hours to pick up a stupid charm that pertains to my own well-being.”

“Except, we don’t know where we’re going or who we’ll be meeting,” Xavier said.

“I think he’s right,” I finally said. “It might be safer—”

Cali cut me off, shaking her head. “Have I not proven myself to you two yet? Have I not saved your lives *several times*?”

“You have,” I said carefully, “and I know you’re strong, but until we know that you have the Seluna symptoms under control, it just might be smarter not to throw you into unknown situations. What if the symptoms hit at a time when you needed to defend yourself?”

Xavier crossed his arms. “Exactly.”

Cali scowled at my brother, and I was relieved not to be the target of her anger right now, though she was clearly pissed at both of us. Without another word, she stormed back inside.

I turned to my brother. “What the hell happened while I was gone?”

“I just said that I don’t want her to go. I think she’s overwhelmed by all the stuff going on. I don’t think it’s a good idea to add this burden to her shoulders, too.”

I frowned. “I’ll go talk to her.”

I headed inside. I knew Cali was capable—*more than*—but from the sound of it, there were still a lot of unknowns about this situation.

I spotted Gabriel and Mikah on the couch. They had a clear view of the hallway, and I hated the idea of having an audience for this, but since when was I getting what I wanted today?

“Cali.” I stopped her before she could storm up the stairs. “Listen, can we just talk this through some more?”

“Yeah, like how about the fact that we don’t even know where Steve lives?” Xavier piped up from behind me. “We have to do some research first. You can help with that, if you want.”

I gave him a look. *Not helping, dude.*

Cali rolled her eyes. “Oh, great. So I’m good enough to do a Google search?”

Gabriel walked over. “Hey, I’m sorry to get involved in your domestic, but did you just say Steve? Weird guy? Makes charms?”

Xavier frowned. “Yeah.”

“I know him,” Gabriel said. “And you do *not* want to mess with that guy.”

# Episode 3537

**Violet**

I sighed as I folded a pair of jeans and looked down at Lilac. “If you’re going to mope on my bed, can you at least move over? I need some room to fold laundry.”

He wordlessly rolled over to the edge of my mattress, and I sighed again. He’d been like this all day. Moping. Inconsolable. Depressed. And kind of sloth-like.

I’d suggested he watch a movie, take a walk, or go do some guy stuff with Charlie. But all my brother wanted to do was lie on my bed and be sad.

I was already over his moping, but what was I supposed to do? I was sad that Marta had left, too—and it had only happened hours ago. I tried to remind myself to be sympathetic. Lilac was still in love with the medium, and in addition to breaking up with him, now she’d left the pack house, and none of us knew when or if she’d ever come back.

It was an objectively sucky situation. But also, if Lilac didn’t get up soon, he was going to end up with bedsores.

Plus, I was kind of hoping to spend some time alone with Charlie today. There was still so much we needed to discuss about him going back for a TED Talk at his hunter camp. Like anything else hunter-related, there were a hundred different layers to work through. Was it safe for him to go? Was it safe for me to come watch him? On a scale of one to being poisoned by a silver dagger, how upset were his parents about him being turned into a werewolf?

And then there was the whole part where he wanted to go and felt honored to be invited, and I viewed the situation as nothing more than a disaster waiting to happen.

But obviously I couldn’t talk to Charlie about *any* of that with this sad-sack clinger—whom I loved with my whole heart—lying around.

I cleared my throat. “Maybe we could—”

Lilac lifted his head from my pillow. “Nope.”

“You don’t even know what I was going to say!”

“Doesn’t matter.”

I was stuck in a loop, trapped by Lilac and his inability to deal with his emotions. And it was starting to feel an awful lot like my brother was taking advantage of my goodwill.

“It’s almost lunch time. Do you want to go out?” I asked. “We can go to your favorite diner.”

He shook his head miserably. “I took Marta there, once. She loved the omelet.” He buried his face in my pillow with a groan.

I rolled my eyes. This was going to be impossible. If Lilac’s strategy was to get over Marta by avoiding all the places they’d gone together, he’d need to leave Oregon altogether. I was tempted to remind him of all the time Marta had spent here in my room, if only to get him to leave.

But, no. That wouldn’t be kind. Also, it probably wouldn’t work anyway. I was half-convinced that nothing short of the jaws of life would separate my brother from my bed.

I set the laundry basket aside and took a seat next to Lilac’s prone form. “Okay, listen. I’m sorry to have to do this, but you kind of suck right now. You need to get a grip.”

He stiffened, then sat up and glared at me. “I’m heartbroken, Violet!”

*Really? I had no idea! You’ve only been groaning and sighing every thirty seconds for the past three hours!*

Instead of unleashing the snark, I nodded. “I know you are, and I’m sorry you’re hurting. But you and Marta broke up days ago. You had to know she was going to make a change eventually. It wasn’t fair to assume she’d stay in her ex-boyfriend’s house while he was newly mated to someone else.”

His lower lip pouted out. “But this is her home. She didn’t have to leave everything behind.”

“I know.” I understood where he was coming from, I really did. Marta was more than just Lilac’s first love—she was the one who had believed in him so much that she’d literally brought him back to life. That wasn’t a bond that was easily broken. “Call me an optimist,” I continued, “but I’m sure Marta isn’t out of our lives forever. I think she just needs some space to figure things out. And some of those things have nothing to do with you. It’s not personal—and the best thing you can do now is try to move on and be happy without her. Be happy *for* her.”

To me, Marta leaving was like going off to college or whatever. She was moving on to a new stage, but that didn’t mean our paths wouldn’t cross again.

Lilac shook his head. “I’m not going to give up on her.”

I resisted the urge to groan. “Are you sure that’s a healthy mindset?”

“What else am I supposed to do? I still love her so much.”

“Yeah, but Marta didn’t leave because she doesn’t love you. Part of the reason she left was so you could figure out your mate situation. If you just dig in your heels and keep fixating on her, you won’t be helping anything. All you’ll be doing is making yourself miserable.”

“Now that Marta’s left, I’m just supposed to try to be happy with Perrie?” He laughed bitterly. “I don’t want her, no matter what my wolf tells me. I’ve already tried everything I can to figure out a clean way out of this, but every time I’m around Perrie, it’s like my wolf pulls me back in. I hate it. Perrie’s nice and all; I’ve got nothing against her. But she’s not who I want to be with. So I’m sorry that I can’t just buck up and fall for my mate like everyone seems to expect.”

Guilt nagged at my stomach. This was something I couldn’t relate to. I’d known Charlie was my mate at first sight, and I hadn’t been attached to anyone else. Falling for him had been the easiest thing in the world—his crazy hunter lineage aside.

“That sounds really hard,” I conceded. “And you’re right—not many werewolves understand what it’s like not to want the mate bond. I’m sorry if I’ve made this harder for you.”

*Maybe Lilac could talk to Xavier about this. Isn’t he still technically mate-bonded to Ava? Maybe he has some tips on how to resist the pull. But then again, Xavier always gets this really angry scrunchy face anytime someone brings up Ava. So maybe not.*

Lilac shook his head. “It’s not your fault. I know you just want me to be happy. Believe it or not, *I* want me to be happy, too. You think I like spending the whole day dragging you down?” He sighed. “I wish I’d never met Perrie.”

“But you have. Maybe you could try to get to know her? That’s what Marta wanted for you when she first broke up with you. She was trying to be supportive of this aspect of being a werewolf. Don’t you think it’s worth a shot? If it doesn’t work, then it doesn’t work. But you’ll never know if you don’t try.”

“I don’t want to be a werewolf anymore if it means letting go of Marta.”

A wave of dread washed over me. I remembered all too well what it had been like when Plum and Lilac were separated, how upsetting it had been to Lilac. I knew that, on some level, Lilac was being melodramatic. But I also couldn’t help but worry that he might try something drastic.

I needed to help snap him out of this before he did something stupid.

“Okay, but what if you just *try* to get to know Perrie? Like, just see what it’s all about. Maybe being around her more will, like… desensitize you to her? And you can figure out if what you really want is Marta, or to explore your mate bond. Maybe avoiding her isn’t how you break free of this.”

He frowned, but I could tell he was considering my suggestion. “Okay… Maybe. And then when Marta is done with her trip, I can really prove to her that she’s the one I love.”

I winced but forced myself to nod. “Yeah, sure. That can happen. Maybe.”

Lilac was oblivious to my skepticism. He looked like a whole new person—brighter and more resolved than he’d been in days. “Okay, I can do this! Get to know Perrie, get used to her presence, and then convince my wolf that we want Marta. This is easy. I’ve got this.”

He pulled out his phone.

“Who are you calling?” I asked.

“Perrie.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean—”

But it was too late. “Hey, Perrie, it’s Lilac,” he said, putting the phone on speaker. “I was just wondering if you want to get coffee or something and, like… get to know each other?”

Perrie was quiet for a long string of seconds. “Are you asking me out on a date?”

# Episode 3538

**Greyson**

Cali was mad at me. At Xavier, too, but who gave a shit about that?

Of course I believed that she could be helpful to any mission, but right now, what I needed above all else was for her to just kick back and relax. And that wasn’t going to happen if she came with us when we headed out to get that charm from this Steve guy.

If Gabriel—who got himself into danger just for funsies—knew the warlock and had warned us not to fuck with him, then the situation was much messier than I’d expected. I had to gather more information here.

“What do you know about Steve?” I asked Gabriel. “What’s up with him?”

“That’s a good question.” Mikah stared at Gabriel, his expression as serious as ever. “How do you even know this man, Gabriel?”

Gabriel shifted uncomfortably, and Xavier noticed. Smirking, he quipped, “Oh, this ought to be good.”

Rolling his eyes, Gabriel said, “It’s nothing. I met Steve a long time ago, when I was young and impressionable. We dated for a bit.”

Cali eyed Gabriel, frowning. “I wouldn’t have thought you were ever impressionable.”

Gabriel nodded. “I know—I’m so much wiser now, it’s hard to see me as anything other than a badass.”

“I’m not sure if *wise* is the word I’d use,” Mikah deadpanned.

I rushed to move the conversation forward before we fell into a debate over Gabriel’s questionable character traits. “So you dated Steve—I guess it didn’t end well?”

Gabriel paused for a moment, glancing at Cali. Then he said, “Steve had an interest in Fae that grew into an obsession. So yeah. Kind of a turnoff.”

Cali blinked in alarm. “What does that mean? Is he some kind of Fae expert?”

Gabriel snorted. “He likes to think he is.”

Xavier looked like he was trying not to laugh. “Wait, so what does having a Fae obsession even mean? Did he, like, kidnap them and pull their sparkly wings out, or what?”

Cali huffed. “That’s an urban myth, Xavier—Fae don’t have wings!”

I turned to Gabriel again and asked, “What happened next?”

“Things came to a head when Steve tried to go to the Fae world and nearly killed us both. Then we broke up,” Gabriel said with a shrug.

Mikah raised a single eyebrow. “What a pity.”

Xavier snorted. “Damn, no wonder you have an aversion to the Fae world.”

“I have an aversion to the Fae world because it’s the Fae world,” Gabriel said, scoffing. “I’m not Fae—and neither is Steve. I prefer to mind my own goddamn business and keep my ass out of a place where the fricking trees talk.”

Mikah crossed his arms over his chest. “I just think it’s *so* funny how you’ve never mentioned Steve before, though.”

“That means he doesn’t think it’s funny at all,” Cali whispered to me, just as Gabriel snorted and said, “I’m allowed to have a past. How many of your exes have I had to hear about?”

Mikah snorted. “Adair doesn’t count! Steve, on the other hand, is apparently someone you dated while you were young—”

“—and impressionable,” Cali added seriously.

“And he sounds like a creeper,” Mikah continued.

“Which is probably why Gabriel dug him,” Xavier said.

That made Mikah look even more annoyed. Gabriel made a snarky comment about Mikah being jealous, Mikah denied it very loudly, and then I realized that this wasn’t fucking working.

“Okay!” I barked, stepping between them. “Stop this. We need to focus here. Gabriel—what do we need to know about this guy, and how can we get the charm from him?”

Gabriel shot one last annoyed glance at Mikah and turned to me. “It’s been a few years, but Steve lives outside of Eugene. He’s a little on the paranoid side, and from what I’ve heard, he’s still obsessed with Fae.”

A paranoid, Fae-obsessed warlock. Great vibes right there.

Cali looked up at me, her gaze sharp. “Now I *really* should go with you. I’m Fae, and if he’s obsessed with them—”

“Then that’s all the more reason that you *shouldn’t* go,” I told her calmly.

“Exactly,” Xavier agreed.

“*Or* I could come over and charm him with my Fae wiles,” Cali declared.

The mere thought of that was enough to make my blood pressure rise. I fucking adored this girl, but she was going to turn my hair grey.

Gabriel—who wasn’t actually very wise, no matter what he said—disagreed with me. “That’s so fucking devious, Cali. I love it!”

Cali raised her eyebrows, pointing at Gabriel. “See? He thinks it’s a great idea!”

“Gabriel’s judgement is questionable, though,” Mikah deadpanned. “Didn’t you hear the part where he dated a warlock with a Fae fetish?”

“Young and impressionable—I said what I said!” Gabriel waved a hand around.

“Cali, we can’t have him see you and get all obsessed,” Xavier said.

“Lucian’s obsession with you didn’t end so well, so I really feel it would be best if you stayed back,” I added, just as Cali was about to protest again. “Xavier, Gabriel, and I will go to get the charm.”

“Me too,” Mikah piped up, shooting Gabriel a look. “I’m *very* interested in meeting Gabriel’s ex.”

Gabriel narrowed his eyes at Mikah. “I know what you’re doing.”

“What am I doing?” Mikah asked innocently.

Gabriel looked at me, then Xavier, then back at Mikah. “All of you better not judge when you meet Steve—like I said, I was young, okay?”

“I would never fuck with you,” Mikah said, patting Gabriel’s shoulder with a rare smile that I could only categorize as gleeful.

Gabriel rolled his eyes, and I said, “Everyone go get ready—we’ll leaving ASAP.”

Gabriel and Mikah bickered their way to their room. With a glance at me, Xavier kissed Cali’s cheek and dipped out, clearly leaving me to do the dirty work. I was left alone with an annoyed Cali. I had to fix this before we went on this trip.

“Do you have something you want to say to me?” she asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

Sighing, I rested my hands on her shoulders. “I hope you understand why we don’t want you to come, love. In addition to dealing with a Fae-obsessed warlock, if your condition should worsen while you’re in the pack house, Big Mac and the others can look after you.”

Cali stared at me, pressing her lips together before letting out a huff. “That makes sense.”

“Thank you,” I muttered, pulling her into a hug.

She started out stiff but melted into it a moment later. “You smell so good, it’s hard to stay mad at you.”

I chuckled, and she nuzzled my chest for a moment. Everything was much better now, but suddenly I heard loud steps from the staircase. Looking up, I spotted Elle barreling down, all dressed up in one of the other fancy outfits my mother had picked out for her.

“Where are you going?” I asked, before I recalled what was up. Cali had called me during the dance lesson about Elle getting an invite from the princeling.

“To the palace, of course!” Elle said with a hair flip.

Fucking hell.

“I thought you took care of this?” I said to Cali, eyebrows arched.

“I tried, but Elle refused to decline the invitation,” Cali replied. “She’s not a child, Greyson. I feel uncomfortable infantilizing her.”

I shook my head. “She can’t go to the palace on her own. You know she can’t.”

Cali swallowed audibly. “I know, but—”

Elle huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. “Do not talk about me like I am not here!”

“Elle, you have to postpone your date with Lucian,” I said.

She frowned. “It is too late, I already accepted. And it would be rude to change my plans.”

“You have no choice,” I said, making sure to stay calm. “I won’t be able to chaperone you. I’m going with Xavier to get a charm that will help Cali with the bad dreams she’s been having.”

Elle looked at Cali, pressing her lips together. “I am sorry you have bad dreams.”

Cali looked surprised. “That’s sweet of you to say, Elle, thank—”

Elle turned to me. “I am already dressed, so you go find the thing that will help Cali, and I will go to Lucian alone. He is possibly my mate, so why do we need to have a chaperone? Did you or Xavier have a chaperone when you were courting Cali?”

Okay. Since *when* had Elle become a goddamn lawyer?

“It wasn’t my idea to have chaperones, Elle. It was Lucian’s, so—”

“So someone else can chaperone,” Elle said stubbornly.

I opened my mouth and closed it. Cali rested her hand on my shoulder. “Maybe Rishika or Ravi?”

Elle shook her head and pointed at Cali. “What about you? You know Lucian, you know the palace, and I trust you.”

My gaze darted to Cali’s in alarm. “That’s not going to happen. Last time you were there with Elle, your mark started hurting. I don’t think—”

“Greyson.” Cali cut me off, her expression determined. “I’m not going to Eugene with you guys to meet Steve, so I am free to help Elle.”

Elle made a low-pitched squealing sound. “Thank you, Cali!”

Cali smiled at her. I felt my stomach drop and shatter on the fucking floor. “This is a bad idea, love.”

Cali looked up at me, her smile vanishing. “Why, Greyson? Are you too scared to let me go?”

# Episode 3539

**Xavier**

“I’m ready to go!” I called, climbing down the stairs.

I wanted to get to Eugene ASAP, get the charm, and help Cali recover. She’d looked so weak earlier that I’d felt like shit. When I got to the hallway, though, Cali looked far from sick—she was glaring up at Greyson, all huffy and irritated and actually pretty confident. She’d seemed to accept the fact that she wasn’t coming to Eugene, but when I stopped to listen in, I realized that the alternative was just as fucked up.

“Elle wants me to chaperone her date with Lucian, so that’s exactly what I’ll be doing,” Cali declared. “I can’t just sit in the house all day and wait for disaster to strike. I’d lose my mind!”

As I marched over to them, I thought *I* was about to lose my mind when I heard Greyson sigh and say, “Okay. Go with Elle.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I grabbed my brother by the arm, pulling him around to face me. “Do you really think it’s a good idea for her to go to the palace in her condition?”

“I’d rather she didn’t, obviously,” Greyson said in that composed way of his that made me want to punch him. “But it’s not like Cali will be far away from the pack house, and Lucian and Aysel have access to help if she needs it.”

“Hello?” Cali waved her hand in my face, her voice rising. “I’m right here, you know! Don’t I have a say in this? You two don’t get to make my decisions for me.”

“I already said you should go with Elle, love,” Greyson said in an appeasing tone, and Cali turned the force of her glare on me. Great. Now *I* was in trouble?

“It’s your decision, of course, but I just don’t want you to go to Lucian’s. It’s not safe,” I said.

“If Cali says she is fine, then she is fine,” Elle announced, wrapping her arm through Cali’s. “I will protect her and make sure she is okay, because she is my friend.”

“Thank you, Elle—that’s very sweet,” Cali said. “Also, I love your dress.”

I turned to glare Greyson. “Now look at what you fucking did!” I mumbled.

He gave me a cold look and didn’t say a word, which pissed me off even more. As for Cali and Elle, they were talking about how nice Elle’s—or Lola’s, apparently—dress was. They’d already made up their minds, and together they seemed stubborn enough to move a mountain.

Still, that didn’t excuse Greyson’s attitude. He should’ve put his foot down when Cali had said she’d go with Elle. He was too fucking soft when it came to making the hard choices. One more reason why I should be Alpha. But that was a problem for another day.

“Greyson’s mom told me what shoes to wear! Do you like them?” Elle was asking Cali when I tuned back into the conversation.

“Yes, they’re very—”

“Fine,” I said gruffly, cutting Cali off. “You can go with Elle.”

She paused, raising an eyebrow at me. “Seeing as I am not a toddler, I wasn’t asking for permission.”

I had to take a deep breath and remind myself not to be an asshole.

“Of course,” I said before turning to Elle. “Don’t let Cali out of your sight.”

Elle nodded, but Cali scoffed. “Excuse me? You have it backward. I’m the chaperone, so I’m not supposed to let *Elle* out of *my* sight.”

“While you two talk that over, I’m going to go get ready for Eugene,” Greyson said and patted my shoulder, sauntering away.

What a dick.

After he left, and while Elle admired herself in the hallway mirror, I pulled Cali aside.

“I’m sure you already know that this is a really bad idea, Cali,” I said calmly. I was at the end of my rope and trying for my best “Diplomatic Greyson” imitation. “Can’t Elle and Lucian wait until all this charm stuff is settled? If things go smoothly, we’ll be back from Eugene in no time. Why not put the date off for a day or two?”

“Come on, Xavier—just look at her.” Cali gestured over at Elle, and we both turned to see the young wolf. Elle was preening in the mirror, smiling to herself and posing, smoothing out the skirt of her dress like a kid before her birthday party.

I hated this.

“Do you really want to put a pin in Elle’s happy balloon?” Cali continued. “Don’t you remember what it’s like when you’re just getting to know someone? How exciting it is?”

That hadn’t been the case for us, though. When I’d first met Cali I’d been fighting to resist her, trying to scare her off. But deep down I’d known all along that I was done for. I’d wanted her the moment I’d set eyes on her.

And then I realized something.

If Elle was that besotted with Lucian, if she and Lucian had even a fraction of the connection that Cali and I had, this whole situation was like a runaway train. There’d be no stopping them.

I sighed dejectedly and tugged on Cali’s wrist. Even if she was annoyed, she let me embrace her, and that made me feel like everything would be okay.

“I want you to promise me something, baby,” I said. “Just a regular promise, not a Fae one.”

Cali looked up at me expectantly.

“If anything doesn’t feel right, if you start to feel any worse, you will call me, end the date, and bring Elle back to the pack house. There’s no reason to risk—”

Cali shut me up in the only way possible: a kiss. It was quick but full-on, the pressure of it searing. I held her tighter, breathing a little quicker when she broke it off and whispered against my lips, “I can take care of myself, don’t worry. If Lucian is up to anything, I will call him out and the date will end.”

I nodded. “Good. I’ll never trust Lucian.”

Cali laughed, breaking our embrace. “If anyone has a reason not to trust Lucian, it’s me. That’s why I want to go with Elle. Keeping an eye on her is important to me.”

I gave her another quick kiss. “How are you feeling now? Better? Worse?”

“Just a little tired, nothing to worry about,” she said, patting my shoulder. Elle skipped toward us just then, tugging on Cali’s arm.

“Can we go now?”

Cali gave her a fond look. “I have to get dressed first.”

Elle seemed confused, looking Cali up and down. “But you *are* dressed.”

“Not to be your chaperone. I can’t do that in sweats and a T-shirt, so you’re going to have to be patient for a bit till I get ready,” Cali said.

I thought that Elle would throw a fit over that, like I’d seen her do with Greyson and basically every time something didn’t go her way. But for Cali, she just shrugged and said, “Okay, I will wait over there.” And then she walked back over to the mirror to check herself out again.

“That was surprisingly easy,” I commented.

Cali grinned, and I gave her the once-over.

“For the record, I think you already look hot,” I said. “Way hotter than Lucian’s eyes deserve to see. Wouldn’t want to overshadow Elle when you change, huh?”

Cali snorted, glancing at Elle. “I doubt that’s going to happen.”

I smirked, pulling her close again. “Now you’re just fishing for compliments.”

Cali rolled her eyes, chuckling as Gabe and Mikah walked up to us.

“Everybody ready?” Gabe asked.

“Just waiting for Greyson,” I replied.

“Xavier!” Artemis’s voice suddenly echoed behind me. I turned around to see her standing by the kitchen door, peeling an apple with a way-too-big knife. “Let me know if there’s any trouble in Eugene with that Steve guy.” She glanced at Cali. “I’ll do anything to help my sister get rid of those nightmares.”

Mikah squinted at Artemis. “Were you here when we were talking about that earlier?”

“She spied on us,” Cali said matter-of-factly. “Bounty hunter habits die hard.”

“I used to get paid to be stealthy,” Artemis said, continuing to peel her apple in a vaguely threatening fashion. “I also noticed how you got spooked when you heard the name Steve, Gabriel.”

Gabe scoffed. “Spooked? What? Who? *Me?*”

Cali gave Gabe a skeptical look. “You did seem almost afraid of Steve when you first heard us talking about him.”

Gabe laughed. “Fuck no, that wasn’t fear—Steve’s weird ass isn’t scary. Not exactly. It’s just that he’s a little… difficult to relate to.”

I didn’t say it out loud, but I was glad to hear that. I could deal with “weird.” It was “menacing” that brought in the problems—we’d had enough run-ins with that kind of warlock. I remembered getting blasted by Charon, and it was something I’d prefer to avoid in the future.

“Everyone ready?” Greyson asked, walking over. We all agreed, and Greyson turned to Cali. “When are you and Elle leaving?”

“Soon,” she said as he pulled her closer.

I looked away, suppressing an eyeroll while Greyson hugged and kissed her. He got all soft, murmuring in her ear, “Anything you need, let us know. The pack will be on standby in case anything happens and you need someone to get to the palace right away. Please be careful, and keep me updated.”

“You two do the same,” Cali said, stepping back to look between my brother and me, her expression serious. “And you, Gabriel—stay out of trouble.”

Gabe grinned. “Can’t make any promises.”

Cali turned to Mikah. “Mikah, I think you’re the only one here I can trust. Take good care of them.”

“The day I need a vampire to take care of me is the day I call it quits,” I said, joking.

Mikah shot me a glare but didn’t say anything.

So dramatic.

After giving Cali one last kiss goodbye, I followed the others out to the driveway.

“It should take a few hours to get to Eugene,” Gabe was saying as we piled into my car. His voice faded into the background when I looked over my shoulder to see Cali. She was watching us from the front porch, and even though the color was back in her cheeks, I didn’t know how long that would last. This charm had better fucking work.

If it didn’t, I had no idea what we were going to do.

# Episode 3540

I waited until Xavier’s car was out of sight before I turned and went back inside. My thoughts kept going back to Gabriel’s face when he’d been talking about Steve. Could the warlock be more dangerous than Gabriel’s quirky description of him? Xavier and Gabriel were close—close enough that Xavier’s friend wouldn’t say anything to freak me out, or make me put my foot down about my mates going to Eugene. Had Gabriel downplayed the threat for my benefit?

*Or you’re being paranoid again, Cali!* I thought to myself, shaking my head. *You have GOT to stop this before the stress makes you explode!*

Easier said than done.

And then, of course, there was our little trip to the palace.

“*Cali!*” Elle’s voice was whiny. She’d been waiting by the door, and the moment I walked back into the house, she grabbed both my hands. “Please please *please* go get ready!”

I pressed my lips together. “You’re really excited about this, huh?”

Elle nodded emphatically, and I suppressed a sigh before making a beeline for my room. Despite the fact that I’d agreed to take Elle to the palace, I of course didn’t think it was a good idea. Nothing that involved Lucian was ever a good idea. But I could tell that not letting her go and getting in her way would only cause trouble, so keeping an eye on her was the best solution. Being a chaperone was the perfect way to accomplish that.

Going through my closet, I contemplated what to wear. Weren’t chaperones supposed to be discreet? I assumed something neutral would do the trick. I picked out a few options and threw them on the bed, pausing to consider the merits of pants versus a skirt. We were going to Lucian’s, after all, and the last thing I needed was Aysel offering a snarky comment about my outfit.

I was frowning at the thought of that insufferable fake princess when I heard Artemis’s voice behind me. “Are you going somewhere?”

I turned to see her leaning against the doorframe, her eyebrows arched.

“I thought you eavesdropped on our conversations, earlier?” I asked.

She snorted, shaking her head. “I stopped paying attention after I was sure that you wouldn’t be going to Eugene.”

Still going through my clothes, I said, “Well, I might not be going to Eugene, but I will be chaperoning Elle on her date with Lucian at the palace. We’re leaving after I get dressed.”

Artemis walked into the room, her face painted with alarm. “You’re going *where*? Do your mates know you’re doing this?”

“It took some arguing, but they’re well aware, and they agreed.” Her expression darkened, and I groaned. “Artemis, come on! Don’t tell me you’re going to try and stop me?”

“Oh no,” Artemis said sharply. “In fact, I want to join you.”

I blinked in surprise. Artemis was no fan of Lucian’s, and the murder-friendly look in her eyes was alarming. “What? Why?”

“Elle might be mated to him, right? So two heads are better than one. Given Lucian’s track record, two heads might not even be enough,” Artemis said.

“I get that, but Lucian hasn’t done anything suspicious when it comes to Elle,” I said.

“He hasn’t done anything *yet*,” Artemis emphasized, raising her index finger. “I vote we chop his hands off and feed them to mountain lions as a precautionary measure.”

I gasped. “Artemis!”

“What?”

I leveled her with a stare. “Artemis, it was Lucian’s idea to have Greyson chaperone their first date. Lucian might be a thorn in our side, but if Elle is really his mate, I don’t think he’d want to harm her.”

Artemis scoffed. “That doesn’t mean he doesn’t want to harm *us*! He could be setting us up, getting the Redwoods to let their guard down before his real plans are revealed!”

After everything that had gone down with Lucian, and how depressed he’d been after Seluna, Artemis’s theory was a little out there. So out there that not even my catastrophic thinking had picked up on the possibility.

I crossed my arms, eyeing her speculatively. “Are you telling me everything here? Is there perhaps another reason why you want to come that’s got nothing to do with Lucian?”

There was a hint of awkwardness in Artemis’s expression. “No! I—”

“It was my idea,” my mother said from the doorway. “I asked Artemis to go with you.”

I raised my eyebrows at their solemn expressions. “Mom, seriously? Why were you two talking about me behind my back?”

She walked in and closed the door behind her. She then reached out to hold my hand. “Tom, Artemis, and I are worried about you, honey. We’d hoped that the Seluna problems would have gone away by now, but it’s clear that you’re still being affected. We just want to make sure you’re safe, and I thought Artemis could help keep an eye on you.”

Artemis looked a little guilty. “It’s just that I have a lot of knives and would be able to make good use of them if Lucian bothered you. Sorry I lied.” Artemis was shifting from foot to foot, and I felt a sudden surge of fondness toward my sister. The two of us had come a long way.

“I’m not upset,” I told Artemis. She lit up, and I had to smile. “I really appreciate your concern.”

“But you’re mad when Greyson and Xavier worry about you,” Artemis commented.

“That’s different,” I said. “The two of them drive me up the wall. You two are just—family. That’s what families are for, right?”

Mom held out her arms for me, and I gave her a hug.

“Now, will you let Artemis co-chaperone?” she asked.

I snorted, breaking the embrace to face her. “I think that might be overkill—it wouldn't be fair to Elle. She deserves a chance to spend time with her mate, no matter what we think of him. It’s awkward enough that she has to have a chaperone at all, and having two will only make it worse.”

Mom sighed. “I suppose that makes sense. You’re very sweet to be looking out for Elle like this.”

Artemis nodded, and I felt all mushy inside. This was a nice moment, and I cherished it.

“I don’t want you to worry,” I told Mom. “Since you’re going back home, you’re going to have to trust that I can take care of myself.”

Mom glanced over at Artemis. A look passed between them—Artemis was the least subtle person I knew, so I was certain something was up.

I eyed them both, my eyes narrowed. “Okay, what aren’t you telling me?”

Mom’s expression was serious. “Tom and I have decided to postpone our departure.”

“But I thought Dad had to get back to work,” I said. “You both have lives in Minnesota, and the house needs upkeep, and—”

“It’s only postponed, not canceled,” Mom said. “We want to stay until you’re fully recovered.”

“Mom, no,” I said, shaking my head. “You can’t just put your lives on hold for me! It’s not necessary, I’m fine—”

She placed both her hands on my shoulders, cutting me off. Her voice was calm, yet her expression meant business. “It won’t do any good to argue with me right now, Caliana. We’ve made up our minds, and there’s no way your father is going to change his, no matter what.”

I sighed, giving up. “I get it. Thank you for staying. I actually really love having you guys here.”

Maybe I was being selfish, but ever since Artemis had joined the family, I loved the comfort and security of living with my parents and sister. Two Fae, one half-Fae, and a werewolf—we were an unconventional bunch, but being around my family made everything better a lot of the time.

“We love being here with you too, honey,” Mom said.

“I hope the charm works and the nightmares go away,” Artemis said.

I fought to stay positive. “I hope so too. Though we won’t know for sure until Greyson and Xavier return with it.”

“They always take such good care of you—it’s sweet,” Mom said with a sigh.

“Indeed,” Artemis said. “Except when they’re trying to tear each other’s heads off.”

I told Artemis not to joke about stuff like that, she said she wasn’t joking at all, and Mom reminded us both that I had to get ready. She gave me another hug and walked out, just to let me get back to it. Artemis still lingered, though, eyeing me up and down.

“One more time, one last chance—do you want me to come with you? You know that I’m really good at watching without being seen,” she said. “The werewolves didn’t even realize I was spying on them, earlier.”

I smirked, shaking my head. “Artemis, this isn’t a bounty hunt. It’s just a date.”

Artemis rolled her eyes. “Same difference. Just call me if—”

“I know, I know, everyone keeps reminding me! My phone is fully charged, and I will call if there’s trouble.” Before Artemis could get into it again, I held up a grey dress for her to inspect. “Do you think this is chaperone material?”

Before Artemis could answer, we heard clopping outside, followed by a strange sound.

My sister frowned. “Was that… a horse whinnying?”

“What the *hell*?” I muttered.

We both rushed to the window as a carriage with four horses pulled up to the house.

# Episode 3541

**Violet**

Lilac was pacing back and forth in his room like a maniacal beetle.

“I should cancel this date! No, it would be too weird to cancel right after asking her out—who does that? Is this who I am now? A coward? Or would *not* canceling make me a coward? Oh my god, this is—”

I clapped my hands, loud enough to startle him into a pause. “Okay, stop!”

“Stop what?” His eye twitched. “I’m just trying to think, here!”

“You’re thinking very loudly, and you’re not even making any sense,” I said. “There’s no reason why you should feel guilty about going on a date with Perrie.”

“But I can’t help it!” my brother—he *was* my brother, and I was stuck with him—whined. He dropped into a chair with the dramatic flair of a Victorian mother who had unwed daughters of age.

I took a deep breath. I had to try to comfort him, otherwise we’d both be stuck in this room forever. Sharing a womb with this boy had definitely been questionable decision on my part.

“Everything’s going to be okay, Lilac,” I said. “Perrie accepted your invite. Things will move forward and work themselves out.”

“But I feel like I’m using her, like she’s part of an experiment where I already know the outcome!” He flailed his hands before pointing at himself. “I love Marta, and nothing’s going to change that.”

“You can’t be sure about that, Lilac,” I said patiently.

“I *can* be sure.” He scowled, speaking with the authority of someone who definitely hadn’t realized what it meant to be mated to someone.

“Well, you were also sure that you weren’t going to do *anything* with Perrie, and then you ended up kissing her on the dance floor.”

Lilac gasped, deeply offended, and I rushed to continue before he started yet another tirade.

“I’m just saying that sometimes life happens!” I added. “You can’t control everything, and despite what you believe about you and Marta, you won’t know anything for sure until you give Perrie a chance.”

Lilac jumped up and started pacing again, biting his nails. “At least she’s not a serial killer. What would I have done if my mate were a serial killer?”

I rubbed my temples. “That’s not the point here, Lilac.”

“What *is* the point, then?”

My voice got louder. “*The point is,* this is like someone declaring that their favorite restaurant has the best pizza in the world when they haven’t tried pizza from anywhere else.”

Lilac stopped pacing, clearly appalled. His normally deep voice got high-pitched. “Pizza? Are you suggesting that Marta is *pizza*?”

I cleared my throat. “That may not have been the best analogy, but I just want you to explore your feelings a little before you make up your mind. It’s also not fair to Perrie to not try and see if there’s something there. You have a mate bond—that’s something that shouldn’t be brushed off.”

Lilac groaned, rubbing his face. “Even if we are mates, I don’t feel anything romantic toward her! Shouldn’t I feel something other than the urge to kiss her when she suddenly gets too close?”

It was like talking to a wall.

“For the millionth time, Lilac, we’ve discussed this!” I said. “The fact that you’re not feeling anything more is exactly the reason why you need to go on a few dates with her. Just to get to know her, to figure out if this could be something.”

“But what if—”

I raised my hand to stop him. “If Perrie really is your mate, I suspect you will start to feel something for her. That’s just how things usually work out.”

Lilac fell back into the chair, letting out a groan. “But I’m not sure that’s what I want! I’m not ready to feel something for someone new when the woman I *do* feel something for just walked out the door and out of my life. It seems wrong to think about falling for my mate.”

It felt like Lilac wasn’t listening, or I wasn’t getting through to him. Either way, we weren’t on the same page. Was it possibly that he was just be contradicting me for sport right now, because we were siblings and he knew I’d tolerate his outbursts? Or was this because I, as someone who was happily mated, couldn’t align myself with his perspective?

Regardless, at this point, I was certain he needed to talk to someone other than me.

“This”—I gestured between us, standing up—“isn’t working, so we’re going to get some other opinions.”

I grabbed him by the arm and pulled him up and out of the room.

Of course, he did not like that.

“How about no? I don’t want to talk about my problems with everyone in this house!”

I shushed him. “Not everyone, but how about my mate? Charlie had to sort out some issues when we met—he was dating Sandy, remember? He might have some good insight.”

Lilac gave me a wry look as I dragged him down the hallway. “I don’t think Charlie’s human teenage love affair can be compared to Marta literally bringing me back from the dead, Violet.”

I huffed. “Lilac, you have to work with me here!”

We found Charlie downstairs with Jay. Charlie was holding up a dartboard, and Jay was throwing darts at him.

I gasped at the sight. “What are you two doing?”

Charlie shot me a cheeky grin. “What does it look like?

And then Jay’s dart hit the board.

I took a deep breath to calm myself and spoke up again. “Can you two stop? This isn’t safe! I’d rather my mate doesn’t end up like Swiss cheese, and I need your help.”

Jay paused, looking intrigued. “Help with what?”

I pointed at Lilac, who was standing next to me, scowling. “With that.”

\*\*\*

After I was done filling in Charlie and Jay, there was a pause. Jay turned to Lilac, clearing his throat. “You know, finding your mate and getting to know them is an important part of being a werewolf.”

Charlie nodded, wrapping an arm around me. “I knew Violet was the one the moment I saw her.”

My heart fluttered at his words, at his touch. I’d felt the same when I’d first seen Charlie jogging. But, unfortunately, we weren’t here to discuss our relationship.

“I don’t feel that way about Perrie, though,” Lilac said quietly, staring at Charlie.

“You’re only taking her out on a date, dude. It doesn't have to mean anything more than that,” Charlie said.

“And as long as you’re honest with each other, there are no expectations, and no reason to feel guilty,” Jay added.

I didn’t know if Lilac hadn’t started pacing yet because Charlie and Jay were guys, or because he’d needed to hear the same advice from someone else. Either way, he mulled it over. Finally, he said, “I’m willing to try…” He glanced at me. “If anything, it will get my sister off my back.”

I huffed, shoving him. “Really? You’re the one who’s fretting over this, not me!”

I tried to shove him again, but Jay got in the middle. “Let’s focus on the date,” he said. “Where are you taking Perrie?”

Lilac’s eyes widened before he groaned. “Oh, jeez. I asked her out for coffee, and I don’t even really like coffee.”

“How about you take her out for a movie?” Jay suggested.

Charlie nodded. “And then dinner? Or maybe you could go on an adventure, like skiing?”

“Or bowling!” I said. I did love bowling.

“Actually,” Jay said loudly, fishing something out of his pocket. “I have the perfect idea.” He pulled a card out of his wallet and presented it out to Lilac.

I couldn’t believe my eyes.

“A gift certificate for Chuck E. Cheese? What are they, six?” I asked. Even though my brother’s maturity levels were questionable, to say the least.

“I think it would be fun,” Jay said with a shrug. “I did someone a favor, and they gave it to me. Lola refuses to go, so it’s all Lilac’s if he wants it.”

Everybody turned to look at my brother, who blinked like an owl. “Um…”

I sighed. “Keep the coupon, Jay. Lilac, why don’t you just ask Perrie where she would like to go?”

Charlie blinked in surprise. “That’s actually a great idea.”

Lilac gave me a dark look. “I hope Perrie doesn’t recommend a coffee place.”

“Okay, then, good talk,” Jay said, patting Lilac on the shoulder. He stood up and grabbed the dartboard. “Charlie, it’s my turn to hold the board while you throw the darts.”

Charlie kissed my cheek and stood up. I immediately missed the warmth of his touch, but I wasn’t about to watch this nonsense.

“This is a bad idea, and someone’s going to get hurt,” I told them both seriously.

“It’s all in good fun, baby!” Charlie called after me as I led Lilac out of the living room.

I winced when I heard the dart strike the board, followed by Jay’s loud voice. “Hey, be careful! I don’t want to lose my one remaining eye!”

I wondered if Lola would approve of this dangerous little dart game. You never knew with her. Shaking my head, I turned to my brother. He hadn’t said a word in the past minute.

“So, are you good?” I asked, pausing in the hallway.

Lilac swallowed convulsively, shaking his head. “I can’t do this, Violet. I’ve made a huge mistake.”

# Episode 3542

**Greyson**

“What else should we know about Steve before we meet him?” I asked Gabriel. “I don’t want any surprises.”

Gabriel glanced at me from the front seat. Xavier was driving, and Mikah was sitting next to me in the back. He was looking out the window and seemed lost in thought, but I was sure he was listening to everything we said.

“I’m not really sure where to begin,” Gabriel said.

I raised an eyebrow. “The beginning?”

I could’ve sworn Mikah snorted. Definitely listening.

“Okay, it started like this,” Gabriel said. “I met Steve when I was recovering from a job that proved to be more difficult than we’d expected.” He shot a look at Xavier. “You remember the Canary Boys?”

Xavier’s jaw clenched. “Been trying to forget, thanks for bringing them up.”

“What happened?” Mikah asked, curiosity apparent in his tone.

Xavier scoffed. “Not only did they almost kill Gabriel, they also smelled like a garbage truck.”

“Shit, right!” Gabriel shuddered. “And the noises? Do you remember the random cat noises? Like, who the fuck does that?”

“And *why*?” Xavier demanded. “So fucking creepy for no reason, it’s—”

“It’s probably best if you two get your asses out of memory lane, because we’ve got work to do,” I said, cutting in. “I was asking about Steve.”

Xavier snorted. “When did you get so uptight, Greyson?”

I shot him a sharp look through the rearview mirror. “We need to get that charm, brother. Do I really need to remind you what’s at stake?”

Xavier’s gaze turned into a glare. “I know.”

I turned to Gabriel and started again. “Steve. What happened?”

Gabriel nodded curtly, sobering up as he got back on track. “Steve helped me recover after that job. We sort of started hanging out after that, mostly just as friends. But he was super into me, dude. It was wild.”

I shot a glance at Mikah. He was back to looking out the window, but now the scowl was obvious on his face. He was definitely paying attention.

“Wild how?” I asked.

Gabriel shrugged, oblivious to the annoyance rolling off Mikah. “Just… a lot. It might have been because he’d never really hung out with a werewolf before.”

I tried to wrap my head around the idea of them as a couple. “Since Steve’s so weird and intense, what got you into him?”

Gabriel gave a chuckle. “Dunno, man—it was kind of exciting to hang out with a warlock. He’d do magic shit all the time to impress me. He was an awkward flirt, showered me with gifts all the time—I still have a watch he gave me, somewhere. It had diamonds and shit on it.”

Xavier arched his eyebrows, giving Gabriel the side-eye. “How long were you two together?”

Gabriel shrugged. “Not too long. It never went beyond a few kisses.”

I glanced at Mikah. If he’d seemed annoyed before, now he was on the edge of deep displeasure. This wasn’t good. I really fucking hoped that whatever jealousy he was experiencing right now wouldn’t cause a problem when we tried to get the charm. If this vibe he had going on escalated, I’d need to remove him from the situation.

If you’d told me yesterday that I’d have to deal with Gabriel and Mikah’s relationship drama, I would’ve laughed in your face.

“Oy!” Gabriel suddenly shouted, startling the hell out of me. “Take the next turn!”

He was yelling at Xavier, gesturing wildly, and I had no idea what was happening.

“What are you doing?” I demanded. “I thought we were going to Eugene.”

Gabriel scoffed. “We are, but you can’t expect to just go up to Steve and have him hand over the charm. He’s a warlock, after all.”

I groaned internally, rubbing my face. If warlocks were anything like witches, Steve was going to want something in return. Jay had lost an eye for Lola—if I had to do the same for Cali to be safe and finally free, it would be a small price to pay.

In the meantime, my dumbass little brother had some other ideas.

“We could just offer Steve a wad of cash,” he said casually.

“Or we could offer to spare his life.” Mikah finally spoke up, his face as blank as usual. I really fucking hoped he was kidding, but I wasn’t sure.

At least Gabriel seemed amused. “Oh, come on!” He laughed. “Steve’s fine—I’m pretty sure it won’t come down to that. The only problem with him is that he’s super hardcore about ‘Fae rules.’”

Xavier frowned. “The fuck’s that supposed to mean?”

“We’ll have to give him something that’s Fae powerful in exchange, and special,” Gabriel explained. “Cash isn’t going to work.”

I was skeptical here. “What does a warlock know about Fae rules anyway, though?”

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “Steve *thinks* he knows everything Fae, so the best plan is to play along with the weirdness.”

“He sounds like a delight,” Mikah deadpanned under his breath.

Gabriel snorted at his mate’s comment. Was he enjoying Mikah’s jealousy? Or was Mikah not even jealous at all?

“So what do we have to give Steve?” Xavier piped up. “What does ‘Fae powerful’ even mean?”

Gabriel smirked. “In Steve’s case, probably something shiny.” I could swear I heard Mikah let out the *tiniest* scoff as Gabriel gestured head. “That’s why I’ve put us on this little detour. Go across when we get to the intersection—there’s a little shop just down the road. We should be able to find something there.”

I didn’t think this was going to work, and I remained fully willing to sacrifice an eyeball.

“What kind of shop sells ‘Fae things,’ anyway? And how do you know if Steve will like your trade-off?” I asked Gabriel.

“You’ll see,” Gabriel said with a grin.

We finally pulled up in front of some kind of new age gift-slash-healing shop. I let out a long-suffering sigh. How many of those establishments were in Oregon? Seemed like everywhere we went, we ran into one. I could just smell the patchouli already.

“Before we go inside, I need to know if the place is run by a warlock or some other supernatural,” Xavier told Gabriel. “I don’t want any surprises.”

Gabriel shook his head. “Dude, it’s fine—the owner is just a wrinkly human hippy.”

Xavier and Gabriel took the lead as we entered the store. Mikah was next, and I covered the back. Sunlight reflected off the crystals and other rocks on display. I had no idea what to look for, so I stepped back, examining the space.

“Make it quick,” I told Xavier in a low voice. “We have to get going and get back home ASAP.”

Xavier nodded, not arguing for once. The patchouli scent had probably messed with his head. He, Mikah, and Gabriel started roaming while I hung out by the door to observe traffic. I’d meant it when I’d said I wanted to get this over with. This whole Seluna thing was taking too long, and Cali needed to finally take it easy after everything she’d been through. The idea that she was still hurting and anxious was fucking killing me.

And then there was the Elle and Lucian situation.

Despite being tired, Cali had insisted on going to the palace with Elle. One of the main reasons I’d agreed to that was because I’d told her she couldn’t come with us to see Steve. She’d already been pretty upset with me, and I’d forced myself to put my worries aside and compromise. I really hoped that the charm would help her.

“Look at these!” Gabriel said enthusiastically, waving something in Xavier’s face.

As Mikah silently stared at both of them in a way that reminded me of a judgmental cat, Xavier asked Gabriel, “What’s so special about them?”

“They’re created with the blood of an ancient Fae,” Gabriel explained. “They’re said to possess the spirits of powerful Fae ancestors.”

“What are you talking about? That’s a bunch of bullshit,” interrupted a gruff voice from behind the counter. The human, I presumed. “They’re quartz crystals and are good for various ailments, but that’s all.”

Gabriel waved the old man off. “Right, doesn’t matter.” He turned to Xavier, winking. “What’s important is that Steve will fall for it.”

While Gabriel paid for the crystals and Mikah continued to brood while looking around the store, Xavier walked over to me. I could suddenly feel the tension rolling off him. It was as if he’d been suppressing it in the car in front of the others.

“What?” I asked, my voice low.

Xavier glanced over his shoulder at Gabriel, shaking his head. “Gabriel seems to think that this is going to work. But what if it doesn’t?”

I stared at my brother. “What are you saying?”

Xavier’s eyes narrowed. “You know what I mean, Greyson. What if Steve doesn’t give us the charm? What should we be prepared to do if the warlock doesn’t fall for our plan?”

# Episode 3543

Armin, dressed in some kind of footman outfit, looked between Elle and me.

“The Prince wants Miss Arielle to have the full fairy-tale experience. Hence, a carriage.”

I looked behind Armin, at the horses who had actual tiny little crowns on their heads. Poor creatures. As for Armin, he looked constipated and humiliated in his foofy, old-timey clothes. I almost felt sorry for him.

Elle, on the other hand, was delighted.

“Yay!” She jumped, clapping her hands together. “I have never ridden a horse before; I wonder what that is like!”

*Oh no you don’t*,I thought, grabbing her by the sleeve before she could charge forward and leap onto a horse’s back.

“I’m sure you’ll get the chance to ride a horse soon,” I told her. “Lucian can arrange that.”

The second I said Lucian’s name, the horses whinnied, which was weird, and Elle got this starry-eyed look on her face, which was unfortunate.

*Deep sigh.*

A moment later, we were seated in the back of the carriage. Elle was bouncing with excitement, looking out the window and marveling at every little thing, even though she’d seen these woods a million times before.

*Oh, to be young and in… love? With Lucian?*

I shuddered at the thought.

“Do you think this is how Lucian always travels?” Elle asked me, gesturing at the carriage. I didn’t know if I was imagining this, but I could’ve sworn that the horses whinnied again the second she said his name.

“I doubt it,” I said. “Pretty sure he uses a car—he has lots of them. Or he shifts into wolf form to get around.”

Elle nodded. “I like shifting too.” She grinned, touching the leather of the carriage seat. “This is so nice, though.” Facing me, she added, “I am glad I am here with you. Thank you for coming with me.”

Unexpectedly, she leaned over and gave me a tight hug. Her hair smelled like Lola’s favorite vanilla shampoo. I didn’t know if it was the Seluna bullshit or nearly dying like thirteen million times recently, but the moment was so comforting that I suddenly felt like sniffling.

“Of course,” I said, patting her back. “You can always count on me.”

Elle faced me. “Greyson did not want you to come with me, though. He did not want either of us to come.” Her green eyes narrowed slightly. “Do you think Greyson is jealous of Lucian?”

The horses whinnied. My laughter sounded like a whinny too, because I was graceful like that. Elle gave me a funny look, and I explained, “I seriously doubt Greyson is jealous of Lucian. He’s *Greyson*.”

Elle paused at that, as if to process what it meant to be Greyson, who was practically perfect in every way and had metaphorical sparkles surrounding him at all times. Then, she nodded. “You are right. *Lucian* is probably jealous of *Greyson*.” She eyed me. “After all, he is mated with you, and you are the best.”

I snorted, shaking my head. “That’s very kind of you to say, but I have a feeling Lucian has moved well past his infatuation with me. If he’s right and you are his mate, then he’s going to be focused on you.”

Elle seemed to like that answer. She nodded primly, smoothing her skirt. “Yes. I would not want my mate to be interested in anyone else but me. Because then I would be very mad and sad.”

I thought about Xavier, Greyson, and me in the middle.

Letting out a sigh, I muttered, “Ain’t that the truth.”

\*\*\*

Soon after, we arrived at the palace, coming to a stop by the entrance. Armin hopped down and opened the carriage door for us. Elle was grinning from ear to ear.

“Miss Arielle,” he said, clearing his throat. “Welcome to the Vanguard estate. Master Lucian is expecting you.”

The horses whinnied at the sound of his name again. Probably to remind me that everything around here made no sense.

“Thanks for the ride, Armin,” I said. At the same time, Elle let out a gleeful cry, jumped out of the carriage, and moved to run toward the entrance.

“Elle!” I grabbed her by the arm before she could bolt. In a low voice, I said, “You have to be cool—don’t seem too excited.”

Elle frowned, her nose scrunching up. “Why? I want to see my mate.”

I knew the feeling all too well, so it was a little hard to dismiss her excitement. But we had to keep a level head here and be cautious. This was fucking *Lucian*—kidnapping girls used to be his favorite hobby.

“I get it,” I told Elle, “but I think it’s best not to rush into this. Take your time, process the way you feel, and don’t jump into things. Okay?”

Elle’s frown softened. I’d fully expected her to throw a fit and scream that I just didn’t understand anything, but that didn’t happen. Did she reserve those kinds of dramatics for Greyson? Was I her chosen favorite? Regardless, I was going to keep telling myself that, because it did wonders for my ego.

“Okay,” she finally agreed. “We will go inside together.”

With our arms linked, we climbed the stairs, and an attendant welcomed us to the foyer.

“Elle!” Lucian’s voice echoed across the massive space. He’d entered from an adjoining room, making moon eyes at Elle. “My darling beauty, how wonderful you look!” He took her by the arm, his excitement clearly through the roof. “Did you enjoy the carriage ride?”

Elle nodded shyly. “Yes, very much.”

“Lovely!” he bellowed, shooting me a distracted glance. “Oh, Caliana, hello.”

Before I could even reply, he’d moved along, leading Elle into a large room while saying, “Now, darling girl, let us discuss our plans for the day!”

I followed at a slower pace, feeling like a third wheel. Or a plant that the two of them would probably keep ignoring for the next couple of hours in favor of staring into each other’s eyes. At least Lucian hadn’t seemed bothered that I wasn’t Greyson.

*I wish I’d studied up on being a chaperone*, I thought. *How close am I supposed to stay to the couple? Should I sort of linger in the background like a phantom? And what am I supposed to do if Lucian does something that I don’t like? Should I intervene?*

I scoffed to myself.

*You bet I’ll intervene! He’ll have to be at his best behavior at all times, otherwise—*

“I thought Greyson was supposed to be the chaperone.” Aysel’s voice interrupted my thoughts.

I turned around to look at her. Her face was expressionless. Was she disappointed she wouldn’t have the opportunity to gawk at her former obsession this fine afternoon? I couldn’t tell.

“Greyson couldn’t come,” I said, feeling a little defensive. “He’s the Redwood Alpha and has better things to do than play chaperone.”

Aysel smirked. “So he sent you to play instead?”

My first urge was to tell her to go to hell and leave me alone, but I held my tongue.

Before I could say anything at all, she continued. “Doesn’t matter. My brother is so smitten with Elle that he didn’t even notice you.”

Real talk: how many more of Aysel’s veiled insults was I supposed to put up with before I blasted her? Because I felt like we were reaching the quota here, and my patience was running thin.

*You can’t start a fight right now, Cali*, I reminded myself. *You’re here for Elle.*

“I’m glad Lucian has eyes for Elle only,” I told Aysel coolly. “Besides, the last time he paid any kind of attention to me ended up being my worst nightmare, so I wouldn’t want a repeat.”

Aysel completely ignored my comment and pointed at Lucian and Elle. He was showing her a book with dried wildflower samples, and she was taking everything in. “Look how cute they are together. Simply precious.”

I had to begrudgingly admit that Aysel was right. Elle was glowing. Lucian was laughing, smiling, his eyes fixed on her. That had to mean something.

“You don’t have to watch them like a guard dog, you know,” Aysel went on. “My brother’s intentions are pure.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Lucian could just be putting on an act.”

Aysel rolled her eyes. “My goodness, will the Redwoods ever get past the Seluna thing? It’s obvious that the Vanguards have moved on.”

Anger bubbled up inside me. “I’m sure it’s easy for you. You aren’t still being bothered by the demon.”

Aysel’s eyes widened. “What? I thought everything was settled—is there still a problem? If so, I…” She paused, looking awkward. “I apologize. Again.”

The urge to blast Aysel still lingered, so I wasn’t about to entertain her attempts at… whatever this was. Friendship? Small talk? Fuck if I knew. Bottom line, I didn’t want to get into it with her. My mates were going to fetch that charm, and then this nightmare would be over.

It had to be.

“It should be resolved soon,” I told her.

Aysel nodded. “I hope so. If things progress with Lucian and Elle, I want relations between the two packs to be strong.”

*Sure*, I thought wryly. *Greyson and Xavier love Lucian and want to be BFFs!*

“I wouldn’t hold my breath, if I were you,” I told Aysel. “Past grievances are hard to let go of.”

She frowned, just as Lucian and Elle tittered along and moved into the next room, out of my view.

“Excuse me now, but I have to catch up with them,” I said. Because regardless of what Aysel said, I *would* be a guard dog.

*I am a German shepard and a pit bull in one!* I thought. *I am the biggest, baddest—*

“So how come I never saw you until recently, dear Elle?” Lucian was asking as I entered the room. “Tell me about your pack.”

My stomach dropped. Before I could say a word, Elle said, “My father is a wolf.”

# Episode 3544

**Xavier**

Per Gabe’s directions, I pulled up in front of a house with an arched, gated entrance. Reflection balls, garden gnomes, and winged statues led the way to the door. I snorted, shaking my head.

“This guy really *is* Fae-obsessed,” I commented.

Gabe raised an eyebrow. “Dude. Be nice.”

I rolled my eyes, and we all got out of the car. Greyson and Mikah were silent as Gabe took the lead. His voice was low as we approached the door. “Let me do the talking. Steve can be a little guarded with people he doesn't know. We don’t want to scare him off.”

Greyson nodded. “Fair enough. We may only have one chance to get that charm—we don’t want to blow it.”

When we reached the door, there was no doorbell. Just an actual bell, and when Gabe rang it, it was so loud that I had to cover my ears and grit my teeth. Not a great start. I heard footsteps on the other side of the door, and I could sense that someone was looking at us through the peephole. And then—

*Click!*

*Click!*

*Click!*

Those sounds went on for a while, and after what felt like a lengthy amount of time to unlock a dozen locks, the door swung open.

Steve, I presumed, was bearded, of unidentifiable age, and dressed in a flowing robe. He was heavily adorned with silver rings, amulets, and a flower crown to pull the entire look together. Had we pulled up to a Renaissance faire by mistake?

“Surprise!” Gabe said, beaming.

The guy’s eyes went wide. “*Gabriel?*” Laughing, he grabbed Gabe and pulled him into a crushing hug. Way too fucking friendly if you asked me. “So good to see you! Where have you been? You haven’t changed a bit!”

Steve went on and on, not letting Gabe go. His grip on Gabe’s shoulders was tight, his smile gigantic as he took him in.

If I had noticed all that, I was pretty sure Mikah had as well. I stole a glance at the vampire. His frown was deep, brow furrowed. For someone who was usually expressionless, this was a lot. He was clearly uncomfortable—maybe even pissed off.

My impression was solidified when Mikah cleared his throat loudly. Gabe, who’d been talking with Steve as if none of us were here, was startled back to the present.

“Oh, right!” he said, laughing as he patted Steve’s shoulder. “Let me introduce you to everyone. Steve, this is—”

Steve raised a hand, interrupting. “I don’t use that name anymore.”

Gabe chuckled. “For real? What should I call you, then? Steven?”

Steve didn’t laugh at Gabe’s teasing tone. In a serious voice, he said, “It’s Ganfael now. Call me Ganfael.”

Nobody spoke for a moment. Greyson, in particular, was blinking at the man like he wasn’t sure if this was real life. Personally, I didn’t give a damn.

“Steve, Ganfael, Princess Aurora—I’ll call you whatever the fuck you want,” I said, breaking the silence. “I just need to get this over with.”

Ganfael looked shocked. Gabe shot me a glare before laughing nervously. “Dude, shut up!” He turned to Ganfael again and said, “Ignore my asshole friend—he’s just kidding.”

I wasn’t, but whatever.

Ganfael seemed to buy it. His gaze flickered from me to Mikah. Checking him out, he asked Gabe, “And who is your handsome friend?”

Mikah, looking as enthusiastic as an undertaker, replied immediately. “I’m Gabe’s mate.”

Steve—sorry, *Ganfael*—seemed confused. But then he smiled. “Glad to meet you.” He turned back to Gabe and asked, “To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?”

“We actually need some assistance, Steve,” Gabe said before correcting himself. “Ganfael, I mean. I told the guys that you’re an expert on Fae, so you’d be the perfect person to help us.”

Ganfael beamed. “You bet your ass I am!” He stepped aside, gesturing at his house. “Welcome to my humble abode!”

Gabe and Mikah entered first. Greyson was about to go in next when I grabbed him by the arm and whispered, “What the fuck has Gabe gotten us into?”

“No idea, just play along,” Greyson whispered back. “If we can get the charm without any trouble, great. If not, we’ll take it by any means possible, just like we talked about. Either way, we’re not fucking leaving this place without it.”

I nodded, and we both went inside.

I was immediately hit by the scent of dampness and moss. It was as if we’d entered the forest after a rainstorm. The house was illuminated by candlelit sconces. A fire burned in a stone fireplace, and there were pewter goblets and crystals everywhere. This place reminded me of a hobbit-hole, only with a higher ceiling.

“Would you like something to drink?” Ganfael asked jovially.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“It’s the elixir of the Fae, of course!” he announced, and went to pour several cups of a frothing blue liquid. I frowned. I’d been to the Fae world. Why hadn’t I heard of this thing?

Ganfael handed us each a cup before sitting on a chair that was made from branches woven together, like a throne of sticks and twigs. I fully expected Gandalf to make an appearance any minute now.

“So,” Ganfael said, “how can I help?”

“Just give us—”

Greyson cut me off immediately. “Let Gabriel do the talking, Xavier,” my brother said curtly before nodding at Gabe. “Go on.”

I frowned as everyone turned to Gabe again. Greyson squeezed my shoulder and gave me a look, and the two of us stepped back from the group.

“What happened to playing along?” he whispered low enough that only I could hear.

“I *was* playing along! I was going to ask him to give us the thing!”

Greyson stared at me pointedly. “We all agreed to let Gabriel do the talking.”

I frowned. “Gabe is too friendly. What if Ganfael decides he’s still into him and then there’s drama with Mikah? He might be a vampire, but he does love Gabe.”

Greyson and I turned to look at Mikah. He was looking at Ganfael and Gabriel with an expression that made me think me of an executioner, about to let the guillotine blade fall.

Greyson shook his head as if to clear it and said, “They’ll be fine; let Gabriel do his thing.”

Gabe was definitely in his element. His full attention was on Ganfael.

“… pretty chill, you know? And then, get this. We have a Fae friend—”

Ganfael gasped. “A real Fae friend?”

Gabe nodded emphatically. “Very real, totally awesome, and she needs a Fae artifact for a ritual.”

Ganfael blinked. “A real ritual?”

Was he going to keep repeating everything Gabe said? I felt like grabbing a fly swatter and going at him. Mikah seemed to share my sentiments, sniffing his drink as if it were poisoned.

“… and the guys were going on about it, this and that and blah, blah, blah, till I was like, shit, I know a Fae expert who could help us!”

Ganfael gasped again, pointing at his chest. “That’s me!”

I sniffed the liquid in my own cup. It smelled like marshmallows. How bad could it be? Really fucking bad, I realized after I took a tiny sip. It might have smelled like marshmallows, but it tasted like shit. I tried not to gag and put the drink down as Gabe finished explaining the situation. Greyson had abandoned his cup as well, clearly not a fan of this alleged Fae brew either.

“You’ve certainly come to the right place,” Ganfael told Gabe, looking pleased. “I know more about Fae and the Fae world than anyone else.”

I eyed the man. “You’ve been to the Fae world, then?”

Ganfael hemmed and hawed. “I’ve done a lot of research and talked to other leading experts…”

Right. So this guy was like the drink he’d offered—frivolous and full of shit. I kept that to myself before Greyson could run interference again. I could tell that my brother was thinking the exact same thing, though.

And then I realized that if this guy was a charlatan, his so-called charm could be a fake as well. Cali’s recovery depended on this trip, and this didn’t look good at all. What the fuck would we do if he couldn’t help us? What were our alternatives?

I considered saying as much to Greyson, but he was watching Gabe and Ganfael like a hawk, as if waiting for the escalation. A moment later, Gabe delivered.

“I knew I could count on you, man!” He clapped Ganfael on the shoulder while Mikah glared. And then, he said, “So I was thinking, actually—remember that charm you found while we were going out? What it was called?”

Ganfael leapt up immediately, spilling his drink as he flailed about. He looked among us, his eyes narrowed. “You came here for my Shard of Catholicon?”

His reaction was not fucking encouraging at all. But we all nodded.

Ganfael’s expression hardened. “If that’s the case, you’ve made the trip in vain. There’s no way I’m giving it to you.”

# Episode 3545

“My father is a wolf,” Elle said.

I immediately started screaming inside my head. *Shit, no! FUCK NO!*

“Elle!” I rushed into the room, laughing nervously. “There you are!” Sitting down by Elle’s side, I turned to Lucian. “Apologies, Lucian. I know you value tradition, and I was supposed to stay nearby as chaperone, but I was greeting your sister and then—”

“No matter.” Lucian waved me off, his eyes gleaming as he faced Elle again. “Dearest Elle was just telling me about her father.” He squinted. “A wolf, you say? How interesting…”

Elle opened her mouth to speak, but I laughed nervously again, shaking my head. “Elle doesn’t mean that literally, Lucian. After all, aren’t all werewolves wolves of some sort?”

Elle looked like she wanted to say something—*again! Oh my god!—*but then, thankfully, she fell into a confused silence.

Lucian’s blue eyes were pinned to her. “Elle, dear. Where are you from, exactly?”

Elle glanced at me, and I immediately took it upon myself to answer.

“It’s just that Elle’s group has been living off the grid, you know?” I blurted out the first plausible explanation that popped into my head. “That’s why you and the others haven’t heard of them. They’re a real get-back-to-basics kind of pack, living out in the wild and all that. In fact, it’s less of a pack and more of a group of Rogues. So they don’t even have a pack name for you to have heard of.”

Lucian paused, taking in my words. My heart pounded. Would he buy this excuse? Elle remained silent, and I wondered what she was thinking. Did she realize she’d made a mistake, sharing her secret with Lucian? Had she *wanted* to share the truth with him, or had it just slipped out? I had no idea what was going on in her head, but at least she didn’t seem upset or anything.

Suddenly, Lucian laughed.

“Well, I’ll be damned!” He slapped his knee, turning to Elle. “That must’ve been interesting, indeed.” He gestured around. “Forgive me for saying this, darling, but I can’t imagine giving up my wealth to survive on nature alone.”

Elle gave him a polite smile, and I was so relieved. I’d freaking lied my ass off, and Lucian had bought it. Greyson didn’t want anyone outside the pack to know that he’d turned Elle, and I intended to keep the secret. Thank god I’d been able to intervene just in time—I couldn’t let these two out of my sight again.

*The last thing we need is Lucian getting fixated on Elle for all the wrong reasons and treating her like a fucking experiment.*

“Can you imagine Aysel in the wild?” Lucian was still wildly amused. “She’d certainly never be willing to live without a hot shower, designer clothes, and champagne.”

“Right,” I said, pursing my lips. “Because designer clothes and champagne are the bare necessities.”

“Precisely!” Lucian exclaimed, my sarcasm flying right over his head.

“Anyhow, to each their own,” I told Lucian. Diplomatically. Greyson would’ve been so proud. “As for Elle—”

Lucian interrupted me in a voice so loud, I flinched in surprise. “Elle, my darling Elle!” He took her hand with a flourish and gave her a brilliant smile. “I swear to you on my royal title that you shall live like a queen if our match is a true one!”

I didn’t have much faith in a promise like that, but Elle beamed at him. “Will I be Queen Elle?”

Lucian laughed. He turned to me and said, “She is so very charming. A diamond in the rough.”

I nodded, but all I could think was that I really hoped Lucian had believed all my lies.

“Actually,” Lucian said, standing up and buttoning his jacket, “I want to show you something special, dear. Follow me.” He took Elle’s hand and led her away. I of course immediately followed, because I’d learned my lesson.

“Where are we going?” Elle asked, looking intrigued.

“I’ve never taken anyone outside the pack here.” He glanced back at me. “Not even Caliana has seen this. A grand surprise, I’m telling you.”

Elle grinned. “I like your surprises.”

In my experience, Lucian’s surprises were rarely a blessing. More of a threat. I reached for my magic, just to make sure it was there in case I had to strike, and followed the other two.

“I promise you, you’re going to love this,” Lucian told Elle.

“But what is it?” Elle asked, vibrating with excitement. “Are we swimming with sharks?”

I blinked in alarm—*SHARKS?*—and ruefully recalled that Lucian did have a bunch of pools. *Shit*, that actually seemed like a possibility, didn’t it?

But then, thankfully, Lucian laughed and shook his head. As we walked down a massive hallway, he told her indulgently, “No sharks, darling. Take another guess.”

Elle’s eyes were wide. “Are we chasing butterflies?”

“Nope, guess again.”

“Is it a horse? I would love to ride a horse!”

“Not a horse, but that could be arranged in a heartbeat, dear.”

“But what is it, then?” Elle asked, tugging on Lucian’s arm insistently.

Despite myself, I had to admit that I was curious now as well.

“Here we go…” Lucian paused gravely and pushed open a large red door.

I was stunned when it revealed a dark theater space.

*Oh, wow!*

Elle, on the other hand, didn’t seem impressed. “What is this?” she asked with a frown. “Why is it so dark?”

Lucian tapped his heel on the floor, and a row of lights appeared across the velvet carpet.

“Be patient, darling, and trust me,” Lucian said. “I guarantee, you’ve never seen anything like this.”

He took her hand and led her to a box seat, and I followed, feeling awestruck. I couldn’t believe Lucian had his own theater. And yet I did believe it, because this was freaking *Lucian* we were talking about.

“Settle in; it’s starting soon!” Lucian smoothed Elle’s skirt after she took a seat, and Elle looked very pleased. If he’d been any other man, I would’ve found the whole thing bizarre but adorable.

*It’s still a little adorable… God dammit, Lucian!*

This was what he did. He invited us in and created a false sense of security and then—

“Master Lucian, we’re ready,” a voice said, and I was startled. The attendant had appeared out of nowhere, bowing in front of us.

“You may proceed,” Lucian said with a casual wave of his hand.

The attendant bowed for a second time and slipped away.

“What is happening?” Elle whispered in my ear.

“I have no idea,” I whispered back. “Maybe a play?”

Elle’s eyebrows scrunched up. “What is that?”

Music suddenly blasted, and both Elle and I jumped, startled.

A man stepped out into a spotlight on stage and bellowed, “Welcome, one and all! I hope you enjoy the show.”

Elle tugged my sleeve. “What are they showing? There is nothing but a dark curtain.”

I was about to explain what a play was when the man bowed and the spotlight went dark. The music continued, and the curtain dramatically rose, revealing an artisanal Cirque du Soleil.

“Oh, wow,” I muttered, stunned as a troupe of impossibly fit, gorgeous performers ran onto the stage. Elle gasped when they started climbing ropes, twisting into impossible shapes, and flying through the air.

Lucian noticed her reaction and smirked. “Welcome to my circus, dear.”

Elle blinked slowly. “Circus?”

He took her hand and sighed. “There’s so much I want to teach you about life, about the world. I hope you will give me the opportunity.”

I rolled my eyes in the dark while Lucian started to explain to Elle what a circus was. She looked more confused by the second. Even more so when Lucian added, “These are more than mere acrobats—they are also trained thespians.”

“Thespians?” Elle repeated the word, turning to me. “What are those?”

I opened my mouth to answer when suddenly the music lowered and a beautiful young woman walked onto the stage. “O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?”

Elle was immediately distracted when a young man appeared on the tightrope above the woman. “Juliet, my love!”

Elle leaned forward, her eyes wide with amazement as the two actors launched into a variation of *Romeo and Juliet* with acrobatics.

Lucian glanced at me before his gaze settled on Elle. He was clearly happy to see her enjoying herself. And even though I still had many reservations, there was part of me that was happy for her. This was the usual over-the-top gesture from Lucian, but at least it didn’t involve demons. Something inside me eased, and I leaned back into my chair to watch the show.

*Wait, why is there a man dressed in black doing cartwheels?*

I was having a little trouble following the action on stage. This wasn’t the version of *Romeo and Juliet* that I remembered, though I admittedly was hardly a Shakespearean scholar. Either way, this was definitely entertaining.

*This might be Lucian’s least dangerous surprise of all time.*

Soon enough, a fight broke out between the Capulets and the Montagues, and the action built as they flew through the air, wielding swords and shouting insults. The music soared at the same time, lights flickering dramatically. Smiling, I turned to Elle to see her reaction.

She was no longer in her seat.

*Oh, shit!*

“Elle!” I shouted.

Too late.

She climbed at the edge of the box, jumping off the balcony and onto the tightrope.

# Episode 3546

**Greyson**

“You came here for my Shard of Catholicon?” The warlock glared at us after we nodded. “If that’s the case, you’ve made the trip in vain. There’s no way I’m giving it to you.”

I tensed up. This was exactly what I’d been worried about. Steve—or Ganfael or whatever—looked angry now. He felt threatened, which in my experience was never a good thing when it came to warlocks. They were fussy, explosive, and very easily offended. Just like witches. *No offense, Big Mac.*

There was a huge possibility that we would have to take the charm by force.

Xavier was already growling low in his chest, of course. That was what my brother did best. I grabbed his shoulder to keep him still.

“Hold on,”I whispered. “Give Gabriel a chance to convince him.”

“I can convince him mys—”

“With *words*,” I hissed.

Xavier eased up slightly, but I knew it wouldn’t take much to set him off.

“Dude, relax,” Gabriel said mildly, waving a hand. “We’re not planning on taking anything. Would I ever do that to you? We go way back, man.”

Ganfael paused. He stared at Gabriel through narrowed eyes.

“We came here to make an exchange. Let’s just talk,” Gabriel said with a wink.

I felt the wink was unnecessary, but either way, it worked. Ganfael looked intrigued, sitting back down. “You should’ve said that at the start.”

Gabriel gave a teasing huff. “Didn’t think you’d snap at me. I’m kinda hurt, not gonna lie.”

Well, then. Gabriel was really fucking good at this.

“Sorry for yelling,” Ganfael told him. “People often come to me wanting something, and they try to take what they want without offering anything in return. That’s not how warlocks roll. And unfortunately for those who persist, they learn the hard way.”

“Why would you ever think that *I’d* do that, of all people?” Gabriel asked, pulling out all the stops. “After all, we’re still buddies, aren’t we?”

Ganfael smiled, patting Gabriel’s shoulder. “Of course! I never forgot about you.”

I flicked my gaze over to Mikah. He looked like he’d happily bite down on the warlock’s neck, given the chance. I hoped we’d be able to resolve this quickly, before things went south.

“So, what have you brought to trade?” Ganfael wagged an index finger at Gabriel. “It had better be highly valuable, because the Shard of Catholicon is one of my most prized possessions.”

Smirking, Gabriel said, “I promise, you won’t be disappointed.” And then he produced the crystals and other items we’d picked up at the store. Ganfael looked so impressed that I felt the sudden urge to start laughing.

“Well, well, well…” Ganfael eyed the items, scrutinizing each piece carefully before asking Gabriel, “Where did you acquire these?”

The werewolf’s face was the picture of innocence. “They were given to me by a half-Fae in exchange for a mercenary operation to help rescue her brother.” He raised his hand in a “halt” motion, his expression serious. “I’m sharing the truth with you because you’re a friend. You know how confidential my work is—I can’t go into more detail than that.”

I had to give it to Gabriel, he could bullshit with the best of them.

And Ganfael bought it immediately. “Yes, yes,” he said, examining the pieces, “I can just tell that they are valuable—I can feel the Fae magic emanating from them!”

Gabriel chuckled, slapping Ganfael on the shoulder while he looked at us. “Didn’t I tell y’all that my guy knows what he’s talking about?”

No comment.

Sidenote: Mikah was goddamn *stewing* right now.

“I think we can do some business,” Ganfael said with a satisfied nod.

I suppressed a sigh of relief. Finally.

“Can we see the Shard?” I asked. I needed to make sure the warlock really had it.

“Of course,” Ganfael said with a smile. “I’m a man of my word, after all.”

He raised his hands, mumbling something that I didn’t catch. The air shimmered, and I was immediately on edge. I felt Xavier and Mikah stiffen as well, and then a second later, a cabinet flew open and a cloth-bound item floated over to Ganfael’s open hand.

“Awesome!” Gabriel grinned. “You haven’t changed a bit—you always loved to impress with your magic.”

Ganfael shot Gabriel a smirk.

Meanwhile, Mikah was gripping his coffee cup so tightly I was pretty sure it was about to break. Not in a million years would I have expected this levelheaded vampire to be so intense about anything, ever. But having a mate changed things, apparently even for him.

The cabinet shut, and Ganfael carefully began to unwrap the Shard. At the same time, he asked, “Do you have any idea what the Shard of Catholicon is?”

“Nope,” Xavier said.

“I was only told to get something ancient and powerful,” Gabriel said.

Ganfael nodded gravely. “It is indeed both those things—the Shard of Catholicon goes back centuries. It is the only known surviving piece of its kind in the world.”

“Piece of what?” Xavier asked with a frown.

Ganfael glared at him. “Do you mind? I’m telling a story here—I was just getting to that.”

Xavier rolled his eyes while Ganfael continued.

“It is a precious artifact, you see.” The cloth had been removed to reveal a shard of ornate, colored glass. The warlock held it up for us to see. “It comes from the palace of a Fae queen who died during the siege of Antiquon.”

This intrigued me. Cali came from an elite Fae bloodline—was there any connection between Cali’s family and this queen?

“But what’s so special about this Shard besides its age? And the fact that it’s broken?” Xavier asked.

Ganfael shot him another offended glare. “*I was getting to it*.”

Xavier glared back. “Then *get to it*.”

Ganfael let out an annoyed huff before continuing. “Legend has it that before the queen died, she transferred her magic into the palace itself.” He held the glass up to the light. “This Shard contains that magic. True, beautiful magic that has survived through the eons. An immortal piece of history.”

This story was interesting and all, but I wondered what the likelihood of it being true was. This warlock could be full of shit, for all we knew. I wondered if anyone else was having similar doubts.

“That’s fucking amazing! You’re such an awesome storyteller,” Gabriel said, grinning.

*Okay, that answers my question as far as Gabriel is concerned.*

Ganfael gave Gabriel a bashful look.

Mikah put his cup down on the table with a loud clutter, his expression blank. We were lucky that he hadn’t murdered the warlock yet.

Gabriel seemed oblivious, though. Or at least he pretended to be. Breezing by, he said, “Anyway, do we have a deal? My ancient crystals for your ancient Shard?”

He reached for it, but Ganfael pulled back.

“There are things that must be discussed first,” he said seriously.

I sighed. Why couldn’t anything be easy?

“What do you want to talk about?” I asked.

Ganfael carefully wrapped the Shard back up in the protective cloth and used his magic to send it back into the cabinet. He gathered Gabriel’s crystals and nodded officiously.

“Follow me.”

Xavier was staring at the cabinet. I figured he was thinking the same thing I was.

“We should just grab it,” he muttered only to me. “Grab it, run out. What the fuck’s he gonna do?”

As much as I wanted to agree, I had to pull him away.

“We don’t know if he’s got a magical security system,” I replied. “This is a warlock we’re dealing with. We have to be careful. Plus, you don’t want Gabriel to get in trouble.”

“I think he’s already in trouble with Mikah,” Xavier commented.

I rolled my eyes. “It’s going to be fine. He’s just being friendly to help us out.”

I yanked harder, and a grumbling Xavier finally tagged along with the rest of the group. We followed Ganfael through a small door that opened to a back garden. It was decorated like the front but more intense. It was like *Peter Pan* meets *Lord of the Rings*, and it looked absolutely nothing like the Fae world. Ganfael clearly had no idea what the fuck he was talking about. Was anything he’d said about the Shard true?

“What are we doing out here?” Gabriel asked.

Ganfael placed the crystals on the ground and gestured at them. “Stand in a circle around them.”

Gabriel let out an impatient hum. “Dude, you know I like your energy, but we really need to get back to our Fae friend. Is all this necessary?”

For the first time since we’d arrived, Ganfael looked at Gabriel without tell-all interest. In fact, his expression was cold.

And in that moment, I knew we were fucked.

“This *is* necessary,” Ganfael said in a sharp voice. “Because I know you’ve all been lying to me from the moment you showed up at my door. And I’m going to use these crystals to cast a spell that will force you to tell me the truth about why you’re here.”

# Episode 3547

“Elle!” I screamed, but NOPE!

Elle didn’t even answer. She was on the freaking tightrope, balancing on it without a care in the world. This was my first time as chaperone, and I’d already blown it.

*Pretty sure Greyson wouldn’t consider acrobatics part of keeping Elle safe, Cali!*

“Oh, my,” Lucian said, sitting up in surprise. His eyes wide and dazed, he breathed, “What is she doing?”

I chuckled nervously, because I was a nervous person, and this girl was going to give me fucking grey hair at age twenty-one. “I’ll take care of it; don’t worry,” I told Lucian, grabbing the band from my wrist to tie back my hair.

Lucian blinked. “Caliana, I don’t think—”

Too late, I’d already hustled to the edge of the balcony. “Elle, stop!” I shouted.

She still didn’t turn around, just stood there, swaying on the tightrope. She looked down, as if being fifty feet off the ground was the most interesting thing she’d done recently. When *I* looked down, on the other hand, my breath caught.

*It doesn’t have a safety net! OH MY GOD!*

My heart was hammering, my palms were sweating, and I was pretty sure I was experiencing a hot flash, all at once. I tried to reason with myself—Elle was a werewolf, right? She would probably survive the fall, but what if she got really badly injured? What if the pain was terrible?

*What about the PAIN, CALI?*

My anxiety had come out to play, and this was bad. I couldn’t even look down anymore—it was making me feel dizzy. In the meantime, all Elle had done was take a few steps forward, balancing like this was totally normal. The actors had paused their performance to stare at her in awe.

“Elle, please!” I called yet again. “Come back here!”

Finally, the brat responded.

“But they were fighting!” she said, the pout obvious in her voice. “They should not do that! I want to help so Romeo and Juliet can be together!”

“Oh my god!” I said, raking my hands through my hair. “The fighting isn’t real, Elle! They’re actors—they’re pretending!”

Elle paused. She glanced over her shoulder at me. “Pretending?”

“Yes!” I nodded. “They’re actors, and actors get paid to play make-believe and show us a story. We call that a play. This”—I waved at the acrobats, who were now watching us with expressions that ranged from disbelief to amusement—“is a play! A weird variation of a very famous play. It’s all fake!”

Elle huffed, taking another swaying step forward. “I do not believe you! They were fighting with swords and saying mean things to each other!”

Good god, this was a nightmare. Why would Elle NOT believe this was real? She’d never been to a play before, and everything was new to her.

“Elle, it’s supposed to seem real,” I called, “but I’m telling you, it’s not!”

Elle shook her head stubbornly and took another step out onto the tightrope.

“Jesus fucking Christ.” I huffed under my breath, lifting my skirt to fully climb onto the balcony’s edge. I forced myself not to look down, because that would mean getting dizzy, stumbling and falling, and probably dying.

*This is NOT how I wanted to spend my evening!*

“Elle, please,” I said, reaching out my hand. “Hold onto me, and I’ll help bring you back. It’s going to be okay!”

But Elle didn’t seem all that worried.

“This is fun, actually,” Elle said with a giggle, and started swaying dangerously back and forth.

*God dammit, this girl is going to be the death of me!*

I was standing on the balcony edge, and Elle was just a few feet ahead. I debated actually stepping onto the rope. Would that be such a horrible idea? Only an inch or two, with one foot, just so I could reach her—

*Cali, no! This is madness!*

Too late, I’d decided to do it now. I took a step, doing my best to keep my balance. My flat shoes were not made for tightrope walking, let me tell you that. And when I made the mistake of glancing down, dizziness hit me.

*Okay, maybe this wasn’t such a good idea…*

I flinched backward to return to solid ground, and that was it.

I lost my balance and tumbled off the rope like a very stupid bag of potatoes.

*SERIOUSLY, CALI?* I screamed inside my head. *IS THIS HOW YOU DIE?*

I screamed on the outside as well as I flailed through the air. One of the performers in a lower box tried to grab me, but he just missed. I screamed some more and braced myself for the inevitable impact, and the price I’d have to pay for being a massive dingus who didn’t acknowledge her weaknesses. A werewolf like Elle might’ve been able to survive a fall like this, but not me.

*I wish Greyson were here…*

That was the last clear thought I had. The memory of how he’d saved me when I’d fallen out of a window at that barbecue. His fur had been *so* soft, warm, and comforting.

“CALI! NO!” Elle was screaming my name, and I closed my eyes.

*This is it, then*,I thought*. The final release of death. Pretty anticlimactic. Like, I thought it would be Seluna or Silas that would end me, and instead I just get a normal fall? So sad!*

I hoped my mates would eventually be okay without me.

“CALI!” Elle kept screaming, and I waited for my face to meet the floor, then…

I was stopped by a strong pair of arms, dropping into their embrace instead of hitting the floor.

*Wait… What’s happening?*

Alarmed, I opened my eyes to see Lucian. He’d caught me so effortlessly that I gaped.

“How did you know to come downstairs?” I asked, gaping in shock.

Lucian chuckled. “I had a feeling tightrope walking wasn’t one of your skills. I jumped down when I saw that you weren’t doing so well. Are you feeling okay?”

I couldn’t shake the dizziness I felt, so I refrained from answering.

“Is Elle okay?” I asked throatily.

Lucian looked up. With a smile, he said, “Elle seems to be a gifted tightrope walker.” He eyed me again. “You, on the other hand, don’t seem so great.”

“No, I’m—”

The world spun.

The lights vanished.

*What… What’s happening to me?*

This felt wrong. I was unconscious, but I was still aware of myself. I could feel Lucian’s arms holding me, and flashes of extreme cold and extreme heat. I couldn’t open my eyes, and my shoulder was aching, like I was being squeezed by Seluna herself.

*Cali!* Xavier’s voice said.

*Cali!* Greyson added, both of them calling out to me at the same time.

I fought to answer, but my mouth won’t form the words. *Greyson! Xavier! Help me!*

I opened my mouth to silently scream when a huge pit of fire opened up in front of me. With a maniacal laugh that didn’t sound like him, Lucian lifted me up.

*No, stop! PLEASE STOP!*

He threw me toward the fire as my pleas for help echoed inside my head.

\*\*\*

When I opened my eyes again, I didn’t see fire.

Just Aysel.

I was no longer in the theater—I was in Aysel’s bedroom.

“How’d I get here?” I rasped. My throat felt like it was burning.

Without a word, Aysel offered me something to drink. I gulped it down, but the fire burned just the same. I was disoriented, couldn’t get the room to stop swaying. It was like I was still on the tightrope, with my shoulder throbbing along with my head.

*What’s happening to me?* I thought. And for some reason, that question was ten times more terrifying than falling from a tightrope.

“How are you feeling?” Aysel asked calmly.

To my shock, she looked genuinely concerned. I had no idea what to say. I couldn’t fake being fine—Aysel would know. I couldn’t fool her, not right now.

“I must have motion sickness from being on the tightrope,” I whispered.

“I heard about that. Good thing you’re not planning to become an acrobat,” she said, helping me sit up.

“How long have been in here?” I asked, looking around the room.

“Not long,” Aysel said with a shrug. “My brother had you brought here after you passed out and asked me to watch over you.”

My eyes were burning. How fucking humiliating.

*Is this who I am now? Just forever haunted?*

“Did Elle get down from the tightrope okay?” I asked hoarsely.

“Elle managed beautifully,” Aysel assured me. “And she impressed some of the performers. If she ever wants to join their troupe, she’ll be welcome.”

I looked around. My shoulder was pounding—my heart and head as well. My surroundings were no longer shaky, and I realized that Elle wasn’t here.

*Oh my god… What if something happens to her? I’m supposed to protect her!*

“Where’s Elle?” I asked, fighting away panic.

“Relax,” Aysel said with a pat on my hand. “She’s with Lucian, and she’s fine—I have no interest in her at this time. You, on the other hand…”

I gulped, taking in Aysel’s calm expression. “What do you mean?”

Taking a deep breath, she said, “I’m much more interested in learning what’s really wrong with you, Caliana.”

# Episode 3548

**Xavier**

I glanced quickly at the others. I didn’t have to ask them to know we were all going to be on the same page here.

“Ganfael, what are you talking about?” Gabe said, managing to sound deeply offended. “We didn’t come here with any ulterior motives.”

The warlock snorted and shook his head.

“Come on, man,” Mikah reasoned. “We came to make a trade, that’s all—”

“We need the Shard,” I growled, starting to get really fed up with all of this.

Ganfael raised his hands and began to chant. The chant was low and mumbled, but as he spoke, the crystals began to shift slightly. Then, as I watched, they rose a little off the ground.

What the hell was that? They shouldn’t have been doing that. The hippy at the shop where we’d gotten them had told us they were nothing but rocks. I was starting to get nervous. Were we really going to be able to fool a warlock with rocks?

Ganfael frowned, and his hands—still raised in the air—clenched into fists. He seemed to be struggling, but he kept chanting. Then, without warning, the crystals shot into the air and exploded into tiny pieces.

We all ducked to avoid being speared by flying shrapnel, and Ganfael rounded on us.

“You said they were ancient,” he snapped.

“They *are* ancient!” Gabe shot back. “They’re fucking crystals, man. You think they’re manufacturing them?” He frowned. “At least they *were* crystals, until you smashed them.”

Ganfael glowered at us. “They were destroyed because they weren’t given to you by a Fae. Which means you *lied* to me,” he snarled.

“Hey!” I shouted. “*You’re* the one who said they held Fae magic when we showed them to you. That’s on you, man.”

Ganfael looked caught off-guard by this point. “Maybe I was picking up on some… errant Fae magic from some of my collection,” he spluttered.

I rolled my eyes. It was clear this guy was full of shit, but he still had the Shard, and we needed it.

“Listen,” Greyson said, stepping toward Ganfael. “We can still offer something in exchange. We really need that Shard.”

Ganfael shook his head. “I’m not doing anything until I hear the truth.” He crossed his arms over his chest, looking like a stubborn child.

“Come on, man—” Mikah started.

“And if you’re not willing to tell me, then maybe I’ll just take care of it on my own,” Ganfael went on.

“What does *that* mean?” Gabe demanded.

Ganfael shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe I’ll just conjure up my own truth spell.” He grinned nastily. “Which one of you is going to go first?’

“Fine,” I said. If it was going to satiate this blowhard, then I was willing to just get it over with. How bad could a truth spell be, anyway? It wasn’t like I was hiding anything. And there was nothing I wasn’t willing to do for Cali.

Ganfael gestured to where the crystals had been laid out before they’d exploded. “Take your place, then.”

“Xavier,” Greyson said quietly as I went to move toward the warlock. “Are you sure you want to do this? We don’t even really know this guy.”

“I’m *not* sure,” I muttered, “but I’m tired of playing games. Let’s just do what he wants and get the fucking Shard already—”

I hadn’t even finished my sentence before I was hit by a jolt of pure magic. It rocketed through me like electricity, and for a moment, I couldn’t breathe. Every nerve ending felt alive with pain, and then—a second later—it was all over. I swayed on my feet, feeling like I’d been drugged. I blinked, but it took so much effort that I wondered vaguely if I was going to bother doing it again. Maybe this hadn’t been such a good idea after all.

Ganfael’s voice floated toward me. “Why do you need the Shard of Catholicon?”

I’d been hoping I’d be able to resist the spell and offer up some kind of reasonable alternative explanation, but now I could tell that was going to be impossible. The spell was strong, and it was drawing the truth from me, suppressing my efforts to conceal it.

“We need the charm to help my mate—Cali,” I slurred. “She’s half-Fae. She has to recover from a demonic possession.”

Ganfael lowered his hands, releasing me from the spell, and I nearly fell to my knees. As it was, I leaned over, panting.

Ganfael glared at all of us. “Why didn’t you just tell me that?”

“Well, now you know,” Greyson said shortly. “Can we have the Shard?”

“Absolutely not,” Ganfael said.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Gabe muttered, shaking his head.

“I told you before that I’m not going to simply start giving away my prized possessions. And now that you’ve attempted to deceive me…” He shook his head, as though this was hurting him as much as it was hurting us.

I looked up at him. “We were only doing it to protect our mate. That’s why we’re doing all of this!”

“I don’t care,” the warlock shot back. He thought for a moment. “I want to meet the half-Fae.”

“No way,” Greyson said.

“Fucking forget it,” I snapped, speaking at the same time.

I glanced toward the house. I knew Ganfael was hiding the Shard in there, inside a cabinet. It was just sitting there—waiting.

Thinking fast, I rubbed my eyes. “Man, I’m beat! Must be the aftereffects of the spell.”

“Yeah?” Ganfael said, sounding suddenly worried. “Yeah, that can happen. Especially with a powerful warlock casting the spell.”

“Yeah, absolutely,” I said, nodding. “I’m just going to head to the bathroom.”

Ganfael barely looked at me as I walked away. He’d turned back to Greyson and was shaking his head as Greyson outlined how much we needed the Shard.

I stepped inside Ganfael’s house, which felt quiet and still. I looked around for a moment—I *was* moving slowly, still groggy from that damn spell—but I knew what I needed to do. I strode over to the cupboards and looked at them carefully, trying to remember which cabinet held the Shard.

When I was almost positive, I pulled it open. Or I tried to. The things wouldn’t open.

“*Dammit*,” I hissed, bracing my feet. I pulled harder, and finally the cabinet door popped open—and off its hinges.

“Fuck,” I swore. I looked over my shoulder, my heart beating fast. I just had to pray that Ganfael had been far enough away he hadn’t heard. I grabbed the Shard in its cloth wrap, slid it out, and shoved it into my pocket.

There was a rumble behind me. They were coming back in.

My heart rate was through the roof as I hurriedly replaced the door on the cabinet. I finally got it to stay, though it hung unevenly. Hopefully Ganfael wasn’t the most observant of individuals and he wouldn’t notice that his cabinet had gone wonky until we were gone.

Walking quickly toward the bathroom, I slipped inside just as the rest of the group entered the house. I could hear the rumble of voices outside the door. I waited a reasonable amount of time, then flushed the toilet and stepped back out into the house.

Greyson glanced over at me. “Feel better?”

I sidled closer to him. “I’ve got it.”

“What?” he asked, clearly confused.

“I’ve got it. The Shard. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

“Are you *kidding* me?” Greyson hissed.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the Shard to show my brother. Then the thing began to move. It trembled in the palm of my hand, and after a moment, pulled itself free and ripped away from me. It flew toward Ganfael, who caught it easily.

“You dare try to *steal* from me?” he snarled.

I looked down at where my hand was bleeding from holding the thing. Then I looked back up at Ganfael, glaring. “It’s not like you gave us a choice!”

“A choice to *steal* from me?”

“You know we need it!” I exploded. “We’ve made that perfectly clear. And we’re not leaving without it!”

Ganfael was still glaring, but he didn’t respond for a moment. He seemed to be thinking about this. After a moment, he spoke, and his voice was less angry—but more cunning. “I’m a reasonable warlock. If you truly do need it that badly, then you need to bring me the half-Fae.”

“We’ve already told you that’s not going to happen,” I said coldly.

“Then bring me another!” Ganfael said sharply. “Any Fae will do. And until you do…” He paused and looked around, then a sly smile stretched across his face. “Until you do, I will keep Gabe as collateral.”

“What the hell are you talking—” Mikah started, but he didn’t have a chance to finish.

Ganfael snapped his fingers, and a second later, crackling bands of electricity wrapped around Gabe.

# Episode 3549

I looked at Aysel for a long moment, thinking hard. Truth be told, I didn’t want to tell her anything about my condition, or the real reason why I’d fainted. Why would I? She and her brother had gotten me into this whole mess in the first place.

Aysel seemed to sense my reservations. “Whatever it is, Caliana, I’m sure I can help.”

“I don’t know…” I said hesitantly.

“Well, whatever you’ve been doing to fix whatever’s wrong clearly isn’t working,” she said, a little coolly. She raised an eyebrow. “I can still see the mark on your shoulder.”

I sighed. I had to admit that she was right about that. Nothing *was* working. That was the problem. Nothing we tried seemed to work. That was why Xavier and Greyson were off god knew where, chasing some warlock.

“Okay, I’ll tell you.” I rubbed my eyes. “I can’t remember how much you already know about what happened with Seluna,” I admitted.

“Not much,” Aysel said. “Last time we spoke, you mentioned your various possession-based afflictions, but you were quite vague. I didn’t believe you then—for the record—and I’m not about to believe you this time if you tell me this is nothing but some kind of phantom pain. This isn’t the result of phantom pain.” She leveled a look at me. “And if you try to tell me otherwise, I’ll give you some *real* pain.”

I flinched and pulled back, suddenly scared, but then Aysel’s expression cracked into a wicked smile.

“Kidding,” she said with a small laugh. “You Redwoods are all so jumpy. So easy to spook. I am just joking, but I do want you to tell me what’s going on—”

She stopped speaking as the door to her room opened and an attendant entered, bearing a large silver tray laden with a teapot and cups.

“The tea you asked for, your highness,” she said quietly.

“Thank you. Just put it there,” Aysel said, pointing to a side table. “Tell me, Aubrey, has there been any word from my brother?”

The young woman nodded. “The Prince has requested that he and Miss Arielle not be disturbed.”

That set off an alarm in my head, and I looked quickly at the attendant. “What? They’re *not to be* *disturbed?* What the hell does that mean?”

I tried to push myself upright, but I was too weak. My arms gave out, and I fell back onto the pillows with a groan.

“Caliana,” Aysel said, rolling her eyes. She helped me get situated and comfortable again and tucked the blanket around me. “Don’t be so dramatic. Nothing will happen to Arielle while she’s with my brother. She’s fine.”  
 “You’re sure?”

“Positive,” she said firmly. “Now, tell me everything.”

I didn’t quite know where to start, so I just went back to the beginning. I told Aysel everything. All about the initial possession and the dreams and the pain and the mark. How it had appeared, how it had changed over time, and how it seemed to sap my strength. I told her how hard we’d worked to get the ashes back and take them to the demon realm—

“But even that doesn’t seem to be enough. The witches in our pack tell me it’s like I still have this… Seluna virus inside me,” I said, laying my head back on the pillows. Just talking about it was making me feel exhausted. “It feels like she’s always going to be with me.”

Aysel looked grim. “I can’t say I’m surprised. I knew that bitch Seluna wasn’t going to just die and fade away like any other creature. She just has staying power—like a damn cockroach. Every time you think she’s gone, she just pops up again.”

I chuckled. “That feels like a pretty apt description.”

It was oddly comforting to have Aysel know everything and seemingly understand.

“I am sorry you’re going through this,” she said.

“Thanks. I suppose it will have to go away at some point. It’s just a residual effect. The aftereffect of the world being off-balance. I guess it’s just a matter of time.”

But Aysel didn’t look comforted by this. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, looking over at her.

“I don’t know if a residual effect can leave dirt on your hands,” she said.

I looked down at my palms, remembering how freaky that had been. I had to admit that Aysel had a point. I’d thought the same thing, but I wanted to believe otherwise.

“You know, Seluna is a master deceiver,” Aysel went on. “She’s fooled us before. Who’s to say she’s not fooling us now? I mean, why would she ask for *your* help, Caliana?”

I shook my head. “I really have no idea. That struck me as really weird, too.”

Aysel looked me over carefully. “You know, I wonder if Seluna really ever left your body.”

“*What?*”

“I wonder if she’s just hiding out in there.” She leaned close to me, looking into my eyes, scrutinizing me closely.

I leaned away. “Hey, if I were still possessed, I think I’d know it, okay? I’m sure Seluna’s not hiding out anywhere.”

Aysel pursed her lips. “Maybe. But we have to be sure. And I’ll help you.”  
 I narrowed my eyes. “Why?”  
 She sighed. “I understand why you might still have some doubts about me, Caliana. And about Lucian and the rest of the Vanguards—”

“You could say that,” I muttered under my breath.

“But we’re anxious to gain your pack’s trust. Remember, you’re not the only person who was hurt by Seluna. Her sorcery almost destroyed my brother—and our pack.”

That was true. I supposed Aysel had her own axe to grind with Seluna after what she’d done to Lucian.

“So if I can help you *and* protect my brother from any more of Seluna’s bullshit, then I’m going to do it.”

The thing was, I wanted to believe Aysel. I wanted to have someone to turn to and an ally in fighting this thing. I’d downplayed Seluna’s grip on me to Xavier and Greyson because I didn’t want to worry my mates, but I was scared. There just seemed to be no end to what the ghost of this demon could do to me. It would be a relief to have someone on my side who knew the whole story—and how serious it really was.

But *Aysel*?

We did have a fraught history, but she seemed sincere now, and I *did* need someone. If Aysel could help me, then maybe it was worth a try. And it wouldn’t have to be some long-term partnership. If Greyson and Xavier were successful in finding the warlock, then maybe everything would go back to normal—*ish*—soon enough, anyway.

My thoughts went to them, wondering where they were and when they would return. Hopefully it would be soon, and I wouldn’t have to rely on Aysel for anything.

Aysel got to her feet and started to pace the room. She was quiet and seemed to be thinking hard.

“We’re going to have to figure out how to reach out to Seluna,” she mused. “We’ll have to find a way to tap into your subconscious.”

“Tap into my subconscious?” I repeated. “I don’t know about that.”

Aysel stopped pacing and rounded on me. “Oh, I see. You’d rather wait around until you pass out from the pain again and Seluna makes another unwelcome appearance?”

I shifted on the bed. I couldn’t deny that the woman had a point, but the idea of purposefully reaching out to Seluna was terrifying. I’d spent so much time trying to avoid her completely, the thought of going out and looking for her filled me with dread.

Some of this fear must have shown on my face, because Aysel’s expression softened. She strode toward me and sat down next to me on the bed, putting her arm around my shoulders.

“I know this must be unbearable for you, Caliana. But I really am sincere about this. I do truly want to help you overcome this. We—my brother and I—bear some responsibility, and I want to do whatever I can to make up for that.”

“Some responsibility” seemed like a massive understatement, but I kept that to myself. Aysel was trying to help, so it wasn’t the time to be a jerk about the past.

Aysel stood again, switching gears completely. Her gaze darted around the room as she began to lay out a plan. “So, what can we do to make contact with Seluna directly?” she wondered.

“Hey, Aysel,” I said. “There’s just one problem with that idea.”

“What?” she asked, turning to me.

I raised my eyebrows. “Seluna is dead. Remember?”

Aysel rolled her eyes and waved her hand, as though trying to waft away my absurd objection. “Oh, Caliana, be serious. When has being dead ever stopped anyone?”

# Episode 3550

**Greyson**

Mikah moved so fast, I didn’t even have time to react before the vampire had Ganfael by the throat. Hell, I didn’t even have time to breathe. The warlock gasped for air as Mikah leaned toward him, his long, lethal fangs exposed.

“You have one goddamn second to release Gabriel, or I’m going to drain every fucking ounce of blood from your body. Do you hear me? There is no way in *hell* I’m leaving my mate behind,” Mikah snarled.

Ganfael was gasping for air, but he still managed to speak. “Then I guess you don’t want the Shard,” he sputtered. “Kill me, and you’ll never have it.”

I was freaked out. Mikah was usually the coolest head in our little group—I knew I could always count on him to think situations through clearly without jumping to any rash decisions—so it was unnerving to see him fly off the handle like this. He was usually so diplomatic, but not now. Now, he was throttling the warlock and *seething* with anger. I was worried he was going to snap—not that I would have blamed him for it. I understood how he felt. Ganfael should’ve known that he couldn’t just threaten someone’s mate and expect to walk away like nothing had happened.

But it was a tough situation for me, because of the fact was that we *needed* the Shard.

“Mikah,” I said quietly, stepping to his side. “Hey, cool down. Nothing’s going to happen to Gabriel. We’re right here. We won’t let anything happen.”

Xavier had moved to Mikah’s other side, and together we managed to make him let go of the warlock’s neck.

“*Release him!*” Mikah demanded, still glaring daggers at the warlock. “*Now!*”

“Forget it,” Ganfael said, massaging his neck with a grimace.

“Okay, everyone needs to just calm down,” I said, trying to keep my voice even. I was feeling pretty agitated myself, but I really didn’t want this whole thing to spiral out of control. Emotions were running high, and I could see things going bad—fast.

“Why don’t you put those fangs away, Mikah. And Ganfael, just release Gabriel while we talk this out,” I suggested. “I think we can reach some kind of compromise if we just *talk* to each other.”

The warlock looked at us for a moment, then raised his hands. He waved them in a complicated pattern, and the electric ropes binding Gabriel disappeared.

Gabriel stumbled forward, gasping for air.

Mikah rushed to his side, holding him up. “Are you okay?”

Gabriel nodded, and when he caught his breath, he answered. “I’m fine. I’m okay. That was like being wrapped in a static blanket. It was weird.”

“This fucker was demanding you—” Mikah started, shotting a deadly look at Ganfael, but Gabriel waved a hand.

“I heard everything. And I’m fine with it.”

“*What?*” Mikah demanded.

Gabriel nodded. “It’s fine. I’ll stay here with Ganfael until you get back.”

“No fucking way,” Mikah growled.

The vampire looked so unhinged, I was worried that a fight was going to break out. This was a disaster. We were wasting time talking about logistics and who was staying where with whom. We needed to get the Shard and get back to Cali. What if her condition worsened while we were gone?

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “Ganfael isn’t going to hurt me, Mikah.” He shot a wary glance at the warlock. “Right? I mean, we used to go out. We’re old friends.”

“I’m not sure that’s working in your favor,” Ganfael said dryly. He nodded at Mikah. “Your new guy is clearly jealous.”

Mikah glared, then turned to Gabriel. “Fine. If you’re staying, then I’m staying, too.”

“Nope,” Ganfael said, shaking his head. “No way. No vamps. That’s a house rule.”

“Why?” Xavier asked. “What do you care?”

Ganfael shrugged. “I just don’t like vampires.”

Mikah lunged toward him, but I grabbed his arm just in time, holding him back.

“What’s wrong with vampires?” Gabriel asked. He was starting to get pissed as well—Ganfael had started in about his mate, and Gabriel wasn’t going to stand for that.

“Oh, well, I’ve had a few problems with vampires in the past,” the warlock said vaguely.

I didn’t say so, but I wasn’t exactly surprised to hear this. It seemed that most supernaturals had issues with either witches or vampires—usually both. But I suspected that Ganfael would have said he didn’t like vampires just to piss off Mikah, no matter how he actually felt.

It seemed to be working.

“So, do we have a deal?” the warlock asked. “I get to spend some quality time with Gabe while the rest of you rabble go off and bring me back a Fae.” He smiled. “You do that, and the Shard is yours.”

I turned to Xavier. “What do you think?” I asked quietly.

Xavier narrowed his eyes at Gabriel. “Why are you asking for a Fae, man? What do you plan on doing with them?”

Ganfael’s expression softened almost instantly. It took on a dreamy—almost rapturous—quality. “I just want to *learn* from them.”

“Learn what?” I asked dubiously.

“*Everything!* It will help my research, and help me learn to embrace their culture. Their habits, their food, their dialects—everything.”

Xavier turned back to me. “This guy’s full of shit.”

“Listen, you’re not wrong, but what’s the harm here?” I said quietly, turning my back on Ganfael so he couldn’t see me. “So he wants to spend a few hours talking to a Fae and learning what they eat for lunch or whatever; who cares?”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “Why can’t he just read a fucking book about them?”

“Oh, I have,” Ganfael replied, stepping toward us. He’d clearly been listening to our conversation. “In fact, I’m currently *writing* one.”

“Is that right?” I said warily.

“Yes, a spiritual guide about the Fae,” the warlock said proudly.

I swallowed a groan. Xavier was totally right about this guy—he was full of shit. I ran a frustrated hand through my hair. This Shard—whatever the hell it was—had better be worth all this trouble. Actually…

“How do we know your Shard is even the real deal?” I asked, turning back to the warlock. “How do we know what you’ve got isn’t some cheap knockoff?”

Ganfael looked offended. “You have my word.”

“Like that’s worth anything,” Mikah spat. He was still furious, and his eyes were black with rage.

“Do you have any actual proof?” I asked. “Any evidence that this Shard is actually the charm you say it is?”

Ganfael thought for a moment. “Perhaps.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Xavier demanded.

The warlock turned his gaze on my brother. “Bring me the Fae, and then you’ll know.”

“You’ve got to be—”

“If you want the Shard that badly,” Ganfael sang, “then you should be at least willing to take a chance.”

I ground my teeth. I didn’t like any of this, but I didn’t see what choice we had. Until we learned of another charm that might help Cali, this one was all we had.

“So?” Ganfael asked again. “Do we have a deal?’

“We have a deal,” I ground out.

“No,” Xavier said quickly. “No way.”

“What?” I asked. I was getting tired of going around and around about all of this.

“There’s no way we’re going to turn Cali over to this guy, Greyson!” Xavier said, looking astonished. “Come on! What are you thinking?”

“What are *you* thinking?” I countered. “We don’t have to bring him Cali. Are you not remembering all the *other* Fae we have living with us? Orla? Artemis? Torin? Adair?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t go with Adair,” Mikah said. I was relieved to hear that he sounded more like his old, reasonable, rational self when he spoke.

“Why not?” I asked.

“He’s been in hiding,” Mikah pointed out. “For a while. And he’s wanted by the Fae court. It could be pretty dangerous to take him out in public. I doubt Adair would do it, anyway. He’s pretty risk averse and not really the type to take one for the team.”

That was true as hell. I didn’t *dislike* the guy—not exactly—but Adair had made it clear that he looked out for himself.

“Okay,” I said slowly. “That leaves Orla, Artemis, and Torin.”

“Artemis told me she would do anything to help Cali,” Xavier said. “She’s Cali’s sister. Maybe we could ask her to do this—give her a chance to make good on that offer.”

I thought about that for a moment. “It’s a good thought. And we know she’d be safe.” I glanced at Ganfael. Artemis was a skilled fighter, and I had no doubt she’d be able to take the warlock down if it came to that—though I hoped it wouldn’t.

“Okay,” I said, nodding. “Artemis. That works.” I looked around, then pointed out the one fundamental problem with this plan. “But how do we get her here quickly enough?”

# Episode 3551

**Lilac**

I looked around the small café. It was warm enough inside that condensation was forming on the windows. It was very quiet, and the only other customers were looking down at books or laptops. It felt surreal to be here and even more surreal to be waiting for Perrie. I still wasn’t sure if I’d made the right decision, but Violet had insisted I go. I loved Violet, but good lord she was pushy.

So now I was waiting. I’d been the one who’d invited Pierre, but now I felt strange, waiting for her. On some level, I was glad—I would have felt terrible standing her up with no explanation—but it was also so complicated. I was fresh off my breakup with Marta, and seeing her actually leave had left me feeling pretty hollow. It was like when I’d first gotten my body back after being a ghost for so long. I just felt strange and out of place and like I didn’t know what to do with my hands.

I swallowed hard. Why was I even here? This was such a bad idea. And why the *hell* had I suggested a *coffee shop*? I didn’t even like coffee! The only coffee I could stomach was Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mocha, and the smell of this place was making me feel nauseous. Though, that might have been my nerves, too.

Maybe I should just get some water.

But I didn’t get up. I kept my eyes on the door, waiting for Perrie to show up.

I knew I should give this a chance. I’d seen how great a mate bond could be. Violet and Charlie had their problems, but their bond was unbreakable. And if this was my chance to have that for myself, then I knew I should be open to it.

But… what about Marta? Marta and I had—or *used to have*—a connection so powerful it had literally brought me back from the dead. How could anything else compare to that? No matter how strong the mate bond was, how could it compare to that? It just didn’t seem possible… But maybe it *could* compare. I’d sometimes felt like it could.

“Oh god,” I groaned. I was exhausted from thinking about all this, and I put my head down on the table. I just wished I could disappear. Maybe I could call Kira and ask her to blip me home.

“Lilac?”  
 I opened my eyes when I heard my name and saw Perrie standing above me. She was wearing a cropped red puffer jacket, and her cheeks were pink and flushed from the cold outside. She looked *really* cute.

I got quickly to my feet. “Hi—I mean—hey,” I said, waving awkwardly.

I was unbearable, but Perrie smiled, and I felt warmed by the sight of her. Of their own accord, my eyes traveled downward, to her lips, which were the same bright red color as her jacket. I had a sudden flash of memory of the kiss we’d shared at the Vanguard party.

Yeah, that had been… something. My body suddenly felt warm, and everything tingled. The kiss hadn’t been planned, of course, but it had felt—

I felt guilty even thinking of it, but it had felt *great*. Different from Marta’s kisses, but good all the same. I remembered it like it had just happened, and now I couldn’t get the memory out of my head.

Blinking, I looked away from her pretty face. I needed to think clearly and be more objective about this. I couldn’t let her appearance and my attraction to her skew my judgement.

Hang on. I’d waved, but was I supposed to do something else to greet her? Shake her hand?

No, no handshakes. Should I hug her? Holy crap, was I supposed to *kiss* her?

I was starting to feel a little panicked, so I leaned forward to kiss her on the cheek. I’d seen people do that on TV, and it seemed like a good compromise. But I misjudged the distance and ended up giving her a weird air kiss.

Oh my god, I wanted to die. I was so bad at this.

My cheeks burning like lava, I gestured toward the chair on the opposite side of the table. “Do you want anything?” I asked.

She shrugged as she unzipped her jacket. “I don’t really like coffee. Maybe I’ll just have a hot chocolate.”

I laughed.

“What’s funny?” she asked, frowning.

“It’s just funny that I suggested this place for us to meet. I don’t really like coffee either. Just these epic mochas that one of my pack mates makes. But I think that’s mostly hot chocolate with a dash of coffee.”

Perrie laughed too.

I walked to the counter and ordered two hot chocolates.

“Coming right up,” said the guy behind the counter.

“Thanks.”

I stepped back and leaned against the windows, glad that I could have a brief break to collect my thoughts. But I didn’t really take advantage of the time. My eyes kept straying over to Perrie. She was really more than cute—she was gorgeous.

She caught me looking at her and smiled. Head flooded my face, and I turned away, embarrassed. Then I wondered if she was looking at me because she thought *I* was cute.

I had to calm down. I was being insane.

I took a deep breath and looked around the café again. My eyes landed on the beanie-wearing barista behind the counter who was making our hot chocolates. My eyes were on him as he moved around fetching cups and steaming milk, but I wasn’t really watching him. I was thinking about the conversation I’d had with Violet about this date. She’d told me I needed to try to get to know Perrie, which meant that I was going to have try to engage her in an actual conversation.

But how was I supposed to do that? I’d started talking to Marta when I was a ghost, and in the beginning, I hadn’t even realized she could hear me. Our conversations had just… developed. I hadn’t needed to think about it. It had been like shifting into wolf form—super easy, as long as you did it without thinking. It was when you got to thinking about all the steps that it became completely impossible. That was how people ended up half-shifting and getting stuck with a tail for a week.

I swallowed hard, wishing I’d made some notes about conversation starters or questions I could ask. I was forgetting what humans talked about. What if I sat down and just totally blanked?

“Lilac!”

“That’s me,” I said, taking the two cups from the barista. “Thanks.”

“Enjoy,” he said with a grin.

I walked the drinks over and slid into the chair across from Perrie.

“Thanks,” she said, taking the cup. She looked at it for a moment. “I was actually surprised to hear from you.”

“Were you?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yeah, when you left the party without saying goodbye, I thought you might have been upset. You know, because we kissed.”

I nearly choked on my hot chocolate, but I managed to swallow the magma-hot liquid. “I wasn’t upset,” I said, clearing my throat. “I was just a little confused, I guess. I’m sorry I left without saying goodbye. That was… weird of me.”

Perrie nodded and took a drink. The song playing over the café’s speakers ended, and another one began.

“*Oh!*” Perrie’s face lit up. “I love this song.”

“Do you?” I asked, surprised. “I love it, too. I love the drumline.”

“Me, too,” she said with a smile. “That’s actually why I used it in my video.”

“I didn’t know you made videos,” I said.

“Really?” She pulled her phone from the pocket of her coat. “Oh, I love doing it. Here’s the one I just made with this song.”

She handed me her phone, and from the first frame, I was mesmerized. It was a mix of cool images, all of them eclectic and unexpected. It was well edited, so the visuals seemed to move with the music.

“That’s really cool,” I said as the video ended. “I had no idea you were so talented.”

Perrie looked down at the table. “Oh, that’s nothing.”

“Are you kidding? That’s so cool!” I insisted. “I actually love making videos, too.”

“Really?” She looked up hopefully.

I was kind of floored. Maybe Violet had been right—I had to wonder what else Perrie and I had in common.

As I handed the phone back to her, I knocked my hand into her cup, knocking it over. Some of the hot liquid poured out, and I jumped up.

“Sorry!” I said quickly.

“That’s okay,” she said, looking a little flustered and trying to move out of the way before it spilled onto her lap.

“I’ll go grab some napkins.” I’d just started to stand when my phone rang. I looked distractedly down at the screen, and when I saw the name, I froze in my tracks.

It was Marta.

# Episode 3552

Aysel’s ominous words seemed to hover in the air above me. I didn’t like any of this, but I *especially* didn’t like the idea that someone who was dead could do anything to hurt me. Whether it was possible or not, it was just too spooky to think about.

Except I didn’t even have to think about it. I could just remember. That was *exactly* what Letifer had done. He’d been dead—all the revenants had been dead—but that hadn’t stopped them from wreaking havoc on our pack. From causing real wounds—and deaths.

Still, I had to think clearly. This was Aysel’s theory—and it was starting to sound like a conspiracy theory. I’d heard from sources far more reliable than Aysel that what was happening to me was just the magic stirred up by Seluna settling back down.

But my shoulder *did* ache. It didn’t hurt, exactly—it felt more like an echo of pain. It was enough that I was curious about what Aysel was suggesting. And even willing to try out some of her ideas—whatever the hell those might end up being.

I was finally feeling better, so I pushed myself upright. “I should probably get back to my chaperoning duties. That *is* why I’m here.”

Aysel shrugged carelessly. “I guess. If you really want to.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”  
 “I mean that knowing my brother, there are probably things happening downstairs right now that neither of us want to see—or even think about.”

I had to stop myself from physically gagging. “I hope not. And anyway, that’s all the more reason to go check on Elle. So… thanks for helping me,” I finished awkwardly. It still felt weird to have Aysel by my side in anything like a supportive role.

The princess nodded. “I’ll ask around about things, see what I can find out. We’ll talk later.”

“Yeah, uh… okay. Sounds good.”

I swung my feet to the floor and walked toward the door. I wanted to find the attendant who’d brought the tea—who’d told us that Lucian had asked not to be disturbed. It was—after all—my job to disturb them.

But the first person I came across was Armin. He wasn’t in his carriage footman clothes but had changed into the stiff suit he usually wore. He usually kept pretty good track of Lucian, so I caught up with him as he strode down a hall.

“Hey, Armin, have you seen Lucian?” I asked.

Armin stopped and turned to me. “The last I knew of their whereabouts, the Prince and Miss Arielle were out in the garden.”

“Great, thanks,” I muttered, turning toward the back ballroom. I remembered that it had doors that led out to the garden.

I stepped out into the cold night and looked around. I didn’t see anyone, but after a moment I heard voices. I moved forward, trying to see around the tall shrubs that seemed to be everywhere. I’d walked into a sort of hedge maze, which was absurd. When had they added this thing?

It was freezing and I shivered in the cold, but I followed the voices, moving toward them. Then I rounded a corner and stopped in my tracks. Through a sort of arched doorway of hedges, I could see Lucian and Elle, and they were standing in a very close embrace, pressed against the garden wall.

I stood there frozen for a long moment. Elle and Lucian were *very* close. It looked like they were about to kiss.

Shit.

My face burning with embarrassment, I stepped aside to hide in the hedges. I had no idea what I was meant to be doing in this situation. Was I supposed to interrupt? Should I let this play out? What was the policy for chaperones in moments like this?

All I knew was that I was standing—hidden—just a few feet from where two people were having a very intimate, very private moment, and I hated feeling like a lurker.

“You know, I’ve never seen a woman so beautiful as you, Arielle,” Lucian said huskily. “I’ve been all over the world, my darling, and I’ve been with dozens of women, maybe hundreds—”

I rolled my eyes. Was he trying to be romantic? Why was he talking about all the other women he’d been with? Okay, maybe this wasn’t so bad. It didn’t sound like a kiss was going to happen after all.

“—but none of that matters anymore. Not now that I’ve met you.” He took a deep breath. “I truly believe you’re my mate, Arielle.”

Yeah, sure he did. He’d also thought Seluna was a moon goddess, so maybe he should be a little more critical of his own judgement.

“You really believe that we are mates?” Elle asked.

Lucian leaned even closer to her, pressing his body against hers. “Yes,” he breathed, “I do believe that. With my whole soul, I believe that. I’ve never wanted to kiss a woman as much as I want to kiss you…”

He leaned forward, closing the small gap between them, and threaded his fingers through her hair. He was so close, he was breathing on her. They looked like the cover of a romance novel come to life.

My face was flushing, and I was sure I was bright red. What the hell was I supposed to do? Was I supposed to stop them?

Lucian—still all seduction—pulled back and looked at Elle, his hand cradling the back of her head. “Oh, Arielle, I want you so badly. My whole body *yearns* for you. I *ache* for you. You have no idea the things I want to do to you. *With* you.”

Oh my god. I had to get out of here. This was an absolute nightmare. But could I just *leave*? I was the chaperone! Was I supposed to *stay?*

I had this sinking feeling that if Greyson had been doing the chaperoning, there was no way things would have ever gotten as far as this. He would have shut this all down long ago.

But Greyson wasn’t here, so I was going to have to do that. *I* had to stop them.

But just as I psyched myself up to make my presence known, Lucian leaned forward and kissed Elle. Open mouth and all.

My eyes went wide, and I braced myself—but Elle pulled back, breaking away from the kiss almost as soon as it began.

*Oh, thank goodness. Good for you, Elle!*

Lucian looked a little startled. “Arielle, didn’t you enjoy that?”

“Yes,” Elle said shortly.

A smile spread across his handsome face. “Good. Then let’s do it again.”

Elle didn’t speak, just put her hand on his chest, holding him back.

Lucian frowned. “Arielle, I’m confused—if you want to kiss me, you should feel free to.”

He leaned back in to kiss her again, but Elle shook her head. “No, it is not that easy.”

Lucian’s gaze took on a hard edge. “Is this about Greyson? Is he why you won’t kiss me?”

Wait, *what*? What in the hell did *that* mean? Why would Lucian ask about Greyson like that? Was there something going on that I didn’t know about?

My gaze went to Elle, waiting for her response to the question. I wanted to know what Greyson had to do with any of this.

Without meaning to, my brain flashed back to the conversation I’d once had with Lola, where she had been speculating on whether Greyson turning Elle had created a bond between them. And I knew Elle had tried to kiss Greyson—on more than one occasion.

Was there anything else I didn’t know about?

No, it couldn’t be. I gave my head a hard shake. I shouldn’t think like that. Greyson wasn’t like that. If anything had happened, he would have told me.

Damn all this shit. Why was I even doing this? I was just trying to do someone a favor, and now here I was, having doubts about my mate.

I hated all of it.

Elle was shaking her head. “No, no, nothing like that. This has nothing to do with Greyson.”

“Doesn’t it?” Lucian asked sharply. “I know how Greyson Evers feels about me. It’s no secret that the Redwood Alpha is no fan of mine.”

He was right about that.

Lucian went on. “But I had hoped that by having Greyson chaperone one of our dates, he could see for himself the nature of our relationship. I wanted him to see with his own eyes the connection that you and I share, Arielle.”

Elle’s expression was hard to read in the shadows of the hedge, but I could see that she was looking down.

Lucian took a deep breath, regaining his composure, and, back in seduction mode, he put a finger beneath Elle’s chin and lifted it until she was looking into his eyes.

“Tell me, Arielle,” he said, his voice like velvet. “Do you have feelings for the Redwood Alpha because he turned you?”

# Episode 3553

**Xavier**

Greyson looked stressed. He ran a hand through his light hair, which was already standing on end. “This is bullshit. If we go back to the pack house to get Artemis and bring her back here, it’s going to take way too long. It’ll be hours before we can actually get the Shard, and Cali…”

“I know,” I muttered. I knew the stakes. Our mate was in pain, and a single fucking *second* of that was unacceptable. We didn’t have time to spare, here. “I was thinking about that, too. Even if I shifted and ran, it would still take too long. There has to be another way.” I thought for a moment. “I wonder if we could get Kira or Big Mac to blip Artemis here?”

Greyson raised his eyebrows. “That’s an idea. And I don’t see why they couldn’t. Big Mac might be willing to do it. I know she was pretty broken up about not being able to help Cali more—I think she’d be willing to help, given the circumstances.”

I wasn’t so certain about Big Mac’s generosity. “That might be true, but I have a better relationship with Kira. I think I’d rather ask her. She tends to be more cooperative, anyway.”

Greyson shook his head. “I don’t care who we call, just as long as we call *someone*. How about this, I’ll try Big Mac—”

“And I’ll try Kira,” I finished, picking up what he was putting down.

Greyson and I stepped away from Ganfael and the rest of the group into the next room—a small, office-type space with a bookcase and a chair. I pulled out my phone and dialed Kira’s number. I was worried I wasn’t going to be able to get ahold of her, but luckily, she picked up after the second ring.

“Xavier? What’s up? Where are you? Is everything okay?”  
 I sighed. “Yes and no.” I looked over at Greyson. “I got Kira,” I said to him.

He nodded.

“Kira, we’re in Eugene, and we’ve got a bit of a situation,” I began.

“Oh,” she said. “I don’t know if I like the sound of that. What kind of a situation?”

“We need one of the Fae to come up here,” I said bluntly.

“One of the Fae? Why?” she asked, sounding baffled.

“I know, it’s weird. It’s hard to explain, but we need the Shard, and the warlock who has it is obsessed with the Fae. And, wouldn’t you know it, he’s not willing to give us what we need until we bring him one to talk to.”

“Oh god, okay,” she said slowly. I could tell she was wondering what any of this had to do with her.

“So I need a favor from you.”

“I’m listening,” she said, though I could hear the wariness in her voice.

“I need to talk to Artemis about this first, but if she agrees, would you be able to blip the two of you up here to where we are?” I asked. “I need her here fast.”

“Yes,” Kira said immediately, without a moment’s hesitation. “I can do that, no problem. Just send me the location pin, and I’ll be ready when you are.”

“Thank you,” I said gratefully. “Really, thanks. Is Artemis around? Can you put her on?”

“Yeah, she’s in the kitchen. Hang on.”

There was a beat of silence, and I heard muffled voices as Kira walked into another part of the house.

“Hello? Xavier?” said Artemis. “What’s going on?”

“I need you to come up here, Artemis. There’s this warlock here who’s obsessed with Fae, and he won’t give us the Shard unless we—”

“Yes.”

I was stumped for a moment. “What?”

“Yes, I’ll come,” Artemis said simply.

“You don’t even know the whole situation,” I cautioned. “Maybe you should let me—”

“It doesn’t matter. This is for Cali, right?”

“Right.”

“Then I’ll come,” she said. “I meant what I said earlier, Xavier. If you need my help, then I’ll help.”

“I know, but you have to understand what you’re getting into,” I said. “This guy seems… Whatever he wants a Fae for, it seems pretty sketchy.”

“Have you forgotten who you’re talking to?” Artemis asked incredulously. “I was a *bounty hunter*, Xavier. I hunted people for a living. For years. The stories I could tell would make your hair curl. I’m pretty sure I can handle some weirdo warlock.”

I didn’t argue any more. She was probably right—she could handle anything that came her way—and I needed her help. “Great. Well, we need you here as soon as possible. Kira’s agreed to blip you here.”

“Sounds good to me,” Artemis said stoutly. “I’ll just get my knives, and I’ll be ready to go.”

“Okay, I’m going to send Kira the location. See you soon.”

Artemis ended the call, and I turned to Greyson.

“They’re coming as soon as I send Kira the location.”

Greyson nodded, and I sent Kira the message with our coordinates. We waited in silence for a moment, and then there was a whoosh of wind and a loud pop. I looked around, and Kira and Artemis were standing in the middle of the room.

Artemis looked around, her eyes quickly taking everything in. She met my eyes and nodded. “Hey.”

“Thanks for coming,” Greyson said.

“Of course,” she said shortly.

Kira met my eyes and nodded. I nodded back.

“Where’s the warlock?” Artemis asked.

“In here,” I said, nodding.

We walked back into the main room, and Ganfael gasped when Artemis walked in.

“Oh, she is *glorious*!” he gushed.

Okay, that was a fucking weird thing to say.

Ganfael’s eyes were bright. “I can’t *believe* her. She’s so beautiful! It’s like looking at an angel. And absolute *angel*. I would know she was Fae if I passed her on the street. I would just be able to tell. She just *glows*.”

I glanced at Artemis, whose expression was stony. Ganfael was clearly not making a great first impression.

He stepped forward, grabbed her hand, and bowed over it. “I am honored to meet you, m’lady.”

Artemis scowled and snatched her hand back from him before he could kiss it. “Okay, I’m here. Now what the hell do you want?”

Ganfael seemed wildly unconcerned by her less than warm demeanor—and the fact that he hadn’t gotten to kiss her hand. That worked out in our favor, actually. Artemis wasn’t going to cater to his weirdness, but he didn’t seem to mind. Maybe he was too starstruck.

“Well, I’m holding a gathering for local Fae, and I have an empty spot at the table. I would be so honored if you would fill it,” he said enthusiastically.

Greyson and I exchanged glances. This was the first we’d heard about a party. I looked at Artemis, wondering how she felt about this plan.

She looked wary and hesitant, but she finally shrugged. “Fine. Sure. Why not?”

“Oh!” Ganfael clapped his hands. “I am *thrilled*. There’s so much to prepare!”

He scurried off to his desk in the corner and began to rifle around, looking at papers and notebooks.

The rest of us gathered into a quick huddle.

“Okay, I’ll stay here with Artemis in case this guy tries to backstab us or run off to Vegas with her or something,” Greyson said.

Artemis shuddered. “Don’t even joke.”

“Do you think he’s going to let you stay?” Gabe asked, glancing at Ganfael in the corner. “He didn’t seem that pumped about the idea, before.”

“Yeah, there’s only one extra seat at that dinner table, and you’re not Fae, pretty boy,” I said wryly.

Greyson rolled his eyes. “I’llworry about that. The rest of you need to do some thinking.”

“About what?” Gabe asked.

“You need to figure out how we’re going to take him down if he does decide to betray us or delay giving us the Shard.”

“And how the hell are we going to do that?” I asked sharply.

“Carefully,” Greyson said.

“That’s for damn sure.” I shot a glance over my shoulder at the warlock. “This guy seems annoying as fuck, but powerful. Which is the worst combination.”

“Well, he’s a Eugene local, isn’t he?” Kira put in, piping up for the first time.

We nodded.

“Yeah, he is,” Gabe said slowly. “Why?”

Kira turned to me. “There’s a witch here in town—the one who cast the spell on the sedative potion for Knox. Maybe she knows something about this guy,” she said, tipping her head toward Ganfael. “Something that could help us out.”

I considered this. “That’s not a bad idea. It’d be good to know a little more about this Fae fanboy—other than who he used to date,” I added, shooting a glance at Gabe, who grinned.

Greyson nodded. “Okay. Good. Then it’s decided. I’ll stay here with Artemis—”

“And I’ll go see a witch about a weakness.”

# Episode 3554

I just stood there, frozen. I had no idea what to do. Was it possible that I’d actually heard Lucian correctly? He *knew* that Elle had been turned by Greyson? How in the world could he possibly know that? *I’d* never said anything to him about it—but I didn’t know about the rest of the pack.

I looked over at Lucian and Elle’s intimate embrace with a fair amount of anxiety. How was Elle going to respond to that?

For the moment, apparently, she wasn’t. She was just standing there, wide-eyed but silent. It seemed like she didn’t know whatto say. That was actually really good. It needed to stay that way, because Elle was a terrible liar. She was so blunt and straightforward about everything that crossed her mind that if she said anything in this moment, I knew it would be the bald truth. It was actually one of the things I admired most about her—and liked best. I was a terrible liar, too, so it felt like we were kindred spirits in that way.

But I knew that Greyson didn’t want the Vanguard pack to know about Elle’s past, so it was going to have to stay that way. Even if Lucian suspected that Elle had been turned from a wolf—or maybe even from a human—it was going to need to remain a suspicion. We couldn’t confirm anything.

Then Elle opened her mouth to respond.

Shit, shit, shit.

Okay, now I was going to have to do something.

So without another thought, I leapt through the hedge, the branches scratching at my arms and tearing at my clothes as I went. The scratches stung like fire, but I knew I knew it would hurt way more if Lucian learned the actual truth.

I tumbled through the hedge and nearly bumped into Lucian and Elle, who both looked at me in unveiled shock.

“Hey!” I said, trying to sound breezy while I gasped for air and stumbled backward, struggling to stay on my feet. “There you two are! I’ve been looking for you for a while. It’s hard to be a chaperone when you keep sneaking off like that,” I finished, wagging my finger at them.

Still breathing hard, I brushed the dirt off my clothes and pulled a couple of leaves out of my hair.

“So, should we head on back to the parlor?” I asked.

“I’m afraid not,” Lucian said, still looking stunned by my sudden appearance. “Arielle and I were in the middle of an important and *intimate* conversation, Caliana. So if you wouldn’t mind—”

“Oh, I don’t mind!” I said loudly, cutting him off. “And you don’t mind me! I’ll just be right over there, chaperoning. Just like you asked me to,” I added with a toothy smile. “Sorry I got so overwhelmed by the performance back there. I don’t know why the strobe lights bothered me so much, but my headache is totally gone now.”

Lucian’s jaw was set. “Caliana, I don’t care about any of that right now. Right now, I’m looking for answers.”

“Answers?” I repeated.

“Yes,” he said coldly. “Answers that maybe you possess.”

I swallowed hard. “Answers about what?”

He raised an eyebrow. “About Arielle being turned.”

“Turned into what?”

“Turned into a werewolf, of course.”

“*What?*” I asked, trying to sound scandalized by the question.

Lucian didn’t look like he was buying my performance. His tone became no-nonsense. “I suspect that Greyson turned Arielle into a werewolf. Is this true?”

Elle opened her mouth to answer, and I thanked my lucky stars that I was a fast talker.

“*No*,” I said quickly before Elle could make a sound. “Why would that be true? Elle’s a werewolf we let into the pack because she wanted to be in a real pack. She was a Rogue, living in the woods with other Rogues. She’d been there for years. That’s why there are some things about modern life that she’s still trying to adjust to,” I said smoothly. I looked at Elle. “Right, Elle?”

Elle looked surprised, but after a moment, she closed her mouth and nodded.

When I looked back at Lucian, I couldn’t tell if he’d bought what I’d said.

He shook his head. “Caliana, you do me a disservice.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I am conceited, not stupid. I know that not everything is as it seems. And I know there is a connection between Greyson and Arielle that goes beyond that of an Alpha and a pack member.”

What the hell did *that* mean?

*No*. I gritted my teeth. I had to stop thinking that way.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, shaking my head, “but maybe this is our cue to leave. It’s getting late.”

Lucian narrowed his eyes. “This conversation is *not* over, Caliana. But yes, perhaps it is for the best that you take your leave.”

I breathed a sigh of relief.

Lucian turned to Elle and kissed her cheek. “Until next time, my love.”

\*\*\*

Armin had found the time to change back into his disturbing footman’s costume before he escorted Elle and me back out the carriage, and I really wished I didn’t have to look at him. But I wasn’t sure where else I *could* look. I felt awkward sitting next to Elle, and I wasn’t sure what to say. I didn’t want to start talking to her about Lucian’s questions, because Armin was too close. He would hear everything if we started talking. But we were going to have to talk about it at some point.

“We kissed.”

I looked over in surprise. Elle was looking out the window at the dark night. I wasn’t sure how I should react to her admission. Should I be excited? Scandalized? Grossed out? I definitely felt the latter.

“Oh,” I said uncertainly. “Did you… like it?”

Elle nodded, still not looking at me. “Yes. Very much.”

Dammit.

“But it does not matter how I feel,” she went on.

“What?” I asked, confused. “What are you talking about? Of course it matters.”

Elle shook her head. “It does, but it does not. Lucian may be—how do you say? Oh, yes—sexy.”

“Okay, just for the record, *I* don’t say Lucian’s sexy,” I pointed out.

She continued as if I hadn’t spoken. “But that is not enough to overrule my loyalty to the Redwood pack. Greyson is my Alpha, and that matters more than being sexy. Lucian may be my mate, but I need a strong Alpha. And if that cannot be Lucian, then that is that.”

Whoa. I stared at the woman in shock. She’d gotten all that from *one date*?

“I wonder if the mate bond would allow for that,” I said quietly.

She shrugged.

Internally, I was taken aback by Elle’s decisiveness. There was no hand-wringing with Elle, no uncertainty. I envied that. I wished I felt as certain about my mates, and as firm in my ability to make a decision. But it didn’t actually work in my case, because Xavier and Greyson were both strong Alphas, so Elle’s logic wasn’t really transferable. And—more importantly—Elle wasn’t a *due destini* mate.

“How do you know that walking away like that would make you happy?” I asked.

Elle looked at me. “There is not only one way to be happy, Cali. I will get to know Lucian, but if he is not Alpha enough, I know what I will do, and I will be happy with my choice. I will be happy with whatever the decision is, because it will be *my* decision.” She looked back out the window. “There is no use in thinking any more on it.”

I stared at her in open-mouthed wonder. Was this it? Was *this* how I needed to start thinking about my own decision? To reframe the question and remember that no matter what I did, a happy outcome was possible? That if I did finally choose, even though it would be excruciatingly painful in the short-term, choosing would make the lives of both Xavier and Greyson easier and happier in the long run?

My mind started to spin as I literally rethought everything I’d been sure I knew. So much of my angst about the *due destini* and the choice between my mates stemmed from the inevitability of misery once the choice had been made. But maybe Elle was right. Maybe it was just about making a choice and living with the results.

I thought about this the rest of the way home, and when we made it back to the pack house, I practically ran inside. Without even taking off my coat, I immediately went into the study. I found the key and opened the locked desk drawer. I grabbed the letter and looked at it, very conscious of the weight of it in my hand. The room was quiet around me as I stared at it, wondering if I should open it again.

# Episode 3555

**Lilac**

As I stared down at my phone, it felt like I was dreaming. It felt like the ground was shifting beneath my feet. Seeing Marta’s name on my screen was *not* what I’d been expecting today.

Should I answer the call? My mind spun. Of course I *wanted* to answer it—my instinct was to answer it—but I was on a date with Perrie, and now my ex-girlfriend was calling? Wasn’t that some kind of first date red flag? Wasn’t that *the* first date red flag?

Okay, so maybe this was less like a dream and more like a nightmare. I mean, honestly, I’d been wanting to talk to Marta, but the timing of this couldn’t have been worse.

But I couldn’t just *not* answer it. What if Marta was calling because she was in trouble, or she needed me for something? I couldn’t just ignore her.

“You can answer that. I’ll grab the napkins,” Perrie said, getting to her feet as spilled hot chocolate spread across the tiny café table.

Her departure was heaven sent, and I took the moment alone to answer the call.

“Hello? Marta? Can you hear me?”

My heart was beating wildly in my chest, but I didn’t hear her voice. I didn’t hear any voices at all. There was the sound of shuffling, then some wind, then a distant rumble. The rumble was a voice, but it wasn’t Marta’s. I frowned. I recognized that voice—that was Okorie’s voice. He spoke for a moment, then he laughed.

Okay, that was weird. I hadn’t even known Okorie *could* laugh.

Then I heard Marta. I heard her laugh.

The sound ricocheted through me like a bullet, damaging everything it touched. It felt like I was going into shock. My ears rang, my hands felt cold, and I felt dizzy. In that moment, one thing was clear—Marta hadn’t meant to call me. The call was a mistake. Clearly.

My hand was shaking as I ended the call. As I set my phone on the table, I felt a lot of things, but most of all I felt like a fool. I took a deep breath, trying to pull myself together before Perrie got back to the table. I’d known the breakup with Marta wasn’t going to be easy—we were too connected for it to be painless. I hadn’t even wanted it. I loved Marta. I *had* loved her. Fuck. Even thinking that hurt.

I had to try to let this go. Not just for Perrie and the possibility of a mate bond between us—I had to let it go for myself. I was a mess. My hands were still shaking. My throat felt dry, and I was sweating. It was like I was coming down with the flu. I couldn’t keep doing this. I didn’t want to be so hung up on Marta that I couldn’t eat, couldn’t drink, couldn’t sleep. It was just too painful. And for what? Marta had made it clear to me what she wanted—and that wasn’t me.

I didn’t want to feel this pain, but I knew there was no way around it. Not now. Not yet. I just had to live through it, because that was how pain worked. That was the worst thing about being alive again—I felt everything again. The good and the bad.

I looked down at my phone, thinking. I wondered if the accidental butt-dial had been some kind of cosmic sign. The universe showing me that it was really time to move on.

I didn’t know if that was what that had been, but now wasn’t the time to ponder that thorny question—or any of the others racing through my brain. I slipped my phone back into my pocket and started mopping up the spilled hot chocolate. Perrie returned and dropped more napkins on the spill.

“Who called?” she asked.

“Oh, just my sister,” I said, trying to sound casual.

Perrie stopped wiping and looked me dead in the eye. “She must have told you something pretty serious.”

I shrugged. “No, it was just her being annoying.”

Perrie was still looking at me. “Then why do you look like you’ve seen a ghost, Lilac?”

“I *was* a ghost,” I said without thinking.

Perrie raised a brow. “What?”

I grimaced. “Okay, that was such a stupid thing to say.”

“Then why did you say it?” she asked.

I thought about the question. “Well, for one thing, it’s actually true. I was a ghost, and then Marta—” I stopped myself. “Okay, that was another stupid thing to say.”

Perrie nodded, looking somber. “Was that who called? Marta?”

I stared at her, stunned. “Was it that obvious? Or are you psychic or something?”  
 She gave me a small smile. “I’m definitely *not* psychic. I don’t think you need to be to tell when someone is still hung up on their ex.” She gave me an even look. “I don’t know you that well, Lilac, but I suspect that you are. She *is* your ex, right? Marta?”

I winced. Just hearing her say it made it feel more real. “Yeah, she is. I’m sorry. I should have told you about all this upfront.”

“It’s okay,” she said. She sighed. “So, you’re freshly broken up. Which means that you’re on the rebound, right?”

I hated that she’d put it that way, but that didn’t make her wrong.

Perrie gathered all the napkins in front of her. It looked like she was trying to keep her hands busy, and she didn’t look up at me as she spoke. “The thing is, I don’t want to be someone’s rebound, even if that someone is my mate.”

“I—I’m not sure what to say to that,” I said. Everything she was saying hurt—a lot. “I’ve never been in this situation before. This is my first rebound.” I tried to smile. “I hope it’s my last.”

Perrie looked up at me, then took my hand. I was surprised by how firm her grip was, though her skin was satin soft. “I know this whole thing between us—the mate bond or whatever it is—is confusing.”

“Yeah,” I breathed.

“The truth is, we don’t know that much about each other. We haven’t had the time to learn the important stuff. Or even the unimportant stuff.”

I nodded, but I was bracing myself. I was certain Perrie was ramping up for the “letting you down easy” speech I’d seen people give on TV. I couldn’t say I was exactly surprised, and I probably deserved it. I was too focused on Marta to give Perrie the attention she deserved. I should have been more open and honest—like Violet had encouraged.

“The fact is, you’re cute,” Perrie went on.

*That* startled me. I hadn’t been expecting that. “You’re cute too,” I said stupidly. “And I’m not just saying that. I remember the first time I saw you during that battle with Knox. I felt something, and I was sure there was a connection. But it looks like I’m not going to get the opportunity to see if there’s more to it. Just another thing I’ve screwed up.” I got to my feet with a sigh. “You don’t have to do the speech. I get it. I was hoping things could have worked out, but you’re probably right. I’m still getting over my ex—”

“Hang on,” Perrie said, frowning up at me. “What are you doing?”

“What?” I asked, flummoxed. “I’m—”

“Are you… Are you breaking up with me?” she asked, her cheeks flushing.

“*Breaking up?*” I repeated. I was flabbergasted. “How could we break up? We’re not together! You just got done saying that we barely know each other—how the hell could we be breaking up?”

“Lilac…” She shook her head.

“I get it,” I said. “I do. And if that’s what you want, then I understand. I’ll go.”

I felt a tightness in my chest as I spoke, like unspent sobs were clustering there. I felt a sadness descending on me. This was just too hard. First Marta, and now Perrie. Maybe I wasn’t cut out for this. For dating, for love. Maybe I’d missed the window where I was supposed to learn how to do all this stuff—communicate and support and be willing to be supported. I’d been dead while I was supposed to be getting good at being a boyfriend, and now I was never going to be able to learn. It all just felt so hopeless.

Perrie crossed her arms, looking annoyed. “If that’s what you want, Lilac, then that’s a shame.”

I stared at her, baffled. “I don’t understand,” I said. “What’s a shame?”

“It’s a shame you want to end things,” she said.

“Why?” I asked, still barely following the conversation.

She looked up at me, meeting my eyes. “Because I was about to ask you if you wanted to go on a second date.”

# Episode 3556

**Greyson**

Having finally agreed on our plan, Xavier, Mikah, Gabriel, and Kira headed out of the house, leaving Artemis and me alone with Ganfael.

The warlock was still over at his desk, shuffling through his papers and making notes, muttering about his gathering. “Everything just needs to be perfect,” he said to himself.

“What the hell are we going to be walking into here?” I wondered aloud.

Artemis shrugged. “It really doesn’t matter, does it?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

She glanced over at me. “Come on, Greyson. Between you and me, we’re going to be ready for anything. And if there are other Fae present, we’ll probably be fine. We’ll just have to watch our backs.” She gave me a wry smile. “Fae can be crafty.”

“Like I don’t know that,” I muttered. I rubbed my head, wondering for a moment if I should have thought to call Maren instead of Artemis.

The speed of the impulse rocked me. Why had I thought of Maren? Would she have even agreed? Artemis was obviously the right choice for this—Cali was her sister, and she wanted to help—so why had I thought of Maren?

Was I just trying to get her away from Mace?

Great. Now I was remembering seeing them together at that dance class, and I was annoyed all over again. And I was annoyed that I was annoyed. I knew it shouldn’t have bothered me, but I couldn’t help it. I didn’t like that they were together, and so damn soon after what had happened with Aiden. And so soon after Mace had spoken to me about it.

I knew I’d given Mace my blessing to pursue Maren—not that he really needed my permission. Maren was a grown woman and could make her own decisions. But—in my opinion—it just all seemed a little fast for both of them to be jumping into a new relationship.

And anyway, Mace had only met Maren because I’d asked him to come help with the Aiden situation. And what the hell had they been talking about with all that “hanging out” bullshit? It had obviously been a date. With dancing.

Everything about it just pissed me off.

I let out a frustrated sigh. I knew I had yet to fully address these angsty feelings that seemed to be lingering, but frankly, I didn’t want to. I didn’t know what kind of door that would be opening, but I did know that I didn’t want to see what was behind it.

“Hey!” Artemis snapped her fingers in front of my face.

“What?” I asked, batting her hand away.

“Earth to Greyson,” she said, sounding annoyed. From the look on her face, it probably wasn’t the first time she’d tried to get my attention. She nodded toward Ganfael, who was looking over at us. “It’s happening.”

“What?”

Ganfael gave us a tremulous smile. “The gathering is starting.”

“Terrific,” I grumbled.

“Right this way,” he said, waving us forward.

We followed him through the house, which had low ceilings and narrow hallways, but was weirdly sprawling. It just kept going as we walked through it.

“Why does this feel like a house from a fairy tale?” Artemis asked me quietly.

“I don’t know,” I muttered, ducking beneath a low doorframe.

“And why is there so much… stuff?” she asked, looking around.

There *was* a lot of stuff. Small tables were scattered everywhere, loaded with piles of rocks and acorns. There were bowls filled with bottlecaps and weird-looking coins. Spent candles were everywhere, and the whole house was stuffed full of old-fashioned furniture. It *was* like a house from a fairy tale—the kind of house a grown human man might possess, *thinking* it was how fairies lived.

Artemis looked disgusted, and I couldn’t help but smile. If anyone could see through the warlock’s idea of the Fae world, it was Artemis.

Ganfael led us through a pair of doors to a small garden. It seemed to be in the center of the house, like a courtyard, and there were doors leading off to other areas of the house. The garden was filled with wildflowers and rosebushes. I looked around critically. It was like an overgrown version of a grandmother’s house, but Cali’s Fae grandmother’s house was a lot nicer than this. This was like a cheap, amusement park version.

“What the fuck is this?” Artemis asked, leaning close to me.

“The Fae world?”

Artemis looked horrified. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

We crossed the courtyard and headed into another wing of the house. There were people gathered there, and we looked around as we walked in.

“They’re all Fae,” Artemis whispered. “Why did he need me?”

“I think he has a fetish,” I said, then cleared my throat. “Unfortunately.”

Artemis’s nose curled. It was certainly strange to be here with all Fae. I remembered only too well what it had felt like to be the only non-Fae in a group, back in the Fae world. It hadn’t been a feeling I’d enjoyed and wasn’t one I’d hoped to revisit.

Ganfael gestured to a long table situated along the back wall. It was covered with a white cloth and piled with trays of food. There was a punch bowl on the end filled with what looked like wine, and it bubbled up like a fountain.

“Please,” he said, “help yourselves. But do be careful. You wouldn’t want to eat the wrong thing and be stuck here, would you?”

He giggled, and Artemis rolled her eyes.

“What?” I whispered.

“If humans eat food in the Fae world, there’s a chance they could get stuck there. It’s a whole thing, but don’t worry about it,” she said, waving her hand dismissively. “This guy’s a fraud.”

That might’ve been true, but I didn’t want to find out what Gafael might have put in the food, so I decided to avoid eating or drinking altogether. Just to be on the safe side.

A man approached us then—a Fae, from the look of him. He was tall with dark hair and had a regal bearing.

“Hello. My name is Stavros. How do you both know Ganfael?” he asked.

“We don’t,” Artemis said drily. “We’re only here because he has something we need.”

Stavros nodded, apparently understanding. “I see. Ganfael is a crafty one. He once tried to make a deal with me for my sword, but I declined. Ganfael can be quite convincing when he wants to be.”

Artemis raised her eyebrows. “Sword? What kind of sword?”

Stavros laughed, as though he was used to that kind of attention. “It is hand-carved athame steel, set with Fae-mined rubies. The only one like it in any world.”

Artemis’s eyes went wide. “Seriously? You have the *Athame Sword*?”

Stavros looked amused. “You’ve heard of it?”

“Of course! Can I see it?”

He thought for a moment, his eyes dropping to look Artemis up and down. “That could be arranged, if you so desire.”

I could have gagged. The guy was so obviously flirting with Artemis, but she didn’t seem to notice. How could she not tell?

“It’s a rather *large* sword,” Stavros was saying. “Some say *too* big, but that’s just for those who can’t handle it.”

Artemis nodded, clueless. “Yeah, it’s all about balance. If the craftsmanship is on point, the scale shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Yes,” Stavros said suggestively. “Quite. Now, I do see someone I must say a quick hello to. I will be right back.”

As he walked away, Artemis turned to me, her eyes alight. “Greyson, I *need* that sword.”

“You *need* to stop flirting with that dude and focus on what we’re doing here,” I countered. “Namely, appeasing this Fae-obsessed warlock and getting the Shard for Cali.”

Artemis frowned. “Isn’t that what I’m doing?” She looked around. “I’m at this stupid gathering just like Ganfael wanted. I’m talking to the other Fae, like he wanted.”

“*Flirting* with them,” I corrected.

She made a face. “I am not.”

“Well, you might not be, but he is. He asked you to look at his *sword*, Artemis.”

She threw up her hands. “Because he actually *has* a sword, Greyson! A Fae sword made from athame steel! You have claws, so I get that a sword doesn’t hold the same appeal for you, but it’s a really big sword and—”

She stopped mid-sentence, and her eyes widened.

“Oh shit. Yeah, that was innuendo, wasn’t it?”

I nodded. “Yep.”

“Fuck.” She shook her head. “Living in the human world has dulled the hell out of my senses.”

I couldn’t help it—I laughed. So far, this gathering had been nothing impressive. I had to wonder why Ganfael had wanted everyone here.

And then—as if on cue—the warlock appeared at the front of the room, holding a chalice.

“Thank you all so much for coming!” he said, gesturing for everyone’s attention. “This is so exciting for me. You truly do not know how thrilling it is for me to be in the presence of so many beautiful Fae. Now.” He looked around. “I am sure you are all wondering what tonight will bring. I can promise you, it will be exciting!”

A murmur ran through the crowd.

“Tonight, we will all be going back to where we belong!” Ganfael dropped a travel bag onto the buffet table, right between the cheese platter and the fruit. “Tonight, all of us will transport back to the Fae world! For good!”

# Episode 3557

My hands were shaking. I just couldn’t take my eyes off the letter. I wanted to open it. I felt like I was on the brink of something. My conversation with Elle had unlocked something in my head, and I wondered if I could ever go back. Talking with her had made the idea of making a choice seem so much less scary. Not easy, exactly, but possible. Maybe. Whatever I did, it wasn’t going to stop me from being in love with two men. I had a feeling that was forever. But maybe—just maybe—if I knew whether or not one of them would die if I made a choice, that would help.

The study was so quiet, I could hear the pounding of my pulse in my ears. The envelope felt heavy. I was pretty sure that if I opened it, the words would appear. Wasn’t that what Big Mac had said? That they would only appear when I was truly ready to make a choice?

My heart was beating like a hummingbird’s as I slipped my finger beneath the envelope flap. And then I stopped myself.

Was I doing this for the right reason? I *thought* I was, but I also was doing it because of my conversation with Elle. Because Elle had said that it was easy to make a decision and stand by it. That was fine, but was that the *right* reason? I wasn’t sure, because it didn’t feel like I was doing this because *I* was ready to make a choice.

I got that it made a kind of logical sense. It might make life easier if I did make a choice and moved forward with that choice—like Elle. But I wasn’t Elle. And it wasn’t going to do me any good to try to pretend to be something I wasn’t.

My mind spun as I looped through the arguments in my head, over and over. It felt like I’d been running a marathon around a donut. What I kept coming back to was that my mates deserved to know—they shouldn’t have to live through the agony of my indecision. I knew it would hurt—there was no way around that. But it would also be liberating. A decision would *crush* the heart of one of my mates—but I knew that heart could heal. And if I didn’t decide, then all I was doing was holding both of their hearts prisoner. It wasn’t fair to either of them.

I flipped the letter over in my hands. I knew I was going to have to make a choice someday, but I also knew that day wasn’t today.

I put the letter back in the drawer and locked it.

I just wasn’t ready.

Slipping the key into my pocket, I looked out the window at the cold night. I wished I could talk to someone about this—someone who was in a similar situation. But I was the only living *due destini* mate that I knew of. I used to be able to talk about this stuff with Lola, but I’d sort of weaned myself off that after she’d advised me to let Xavier and Ava “bang it out.” She’d also suggested that I kiss Greyson—only to later claim she hadn’t meant it—so talking to Lola about this wasn’t really an option anymore. I tapped my fingers against the desk. I couldn’t talk to my mom about it, either. We had a good relationship, but did I really want to talk to my own mother about my mate drama?

There was just something about that idea that felt way too awkward.

Which left Artemis. That was a possibility. I’d always appreciated my sister’s ability to tell it to me straight—whatever *it* happened to be. And Artemis understood things of a supernatural nature, which the *due destini* was, so I headed off to look for her.

But I couldn’t find her anywhere.

I came across my mom in the kitchen, where she was sitting at the table with a cup of tea, looking out the window. “Mom, there you are.”

“Cali, hello,” she said, blinking at me. It looked like she’d been staring out the window for a while.

“Have you seen Artemis?” I asked.

My mom’s face froze. “Oh, Cali, I thought you knew.”

“Knew what?”

“Artemis has gone to help Xavier and Greyson,” she said.

I stared at her, shocked. “*What?* She went after the warlock?”

Mom nodded, and I started to pace the length of the kitchen.

“I don’t like this at all. I don’t like that she’s there. Why is she there? They told me I didn’t need to go, so what’s changed? What’s going on that Artemis suddenly has to be there? That doesn’t seem good at all—”

My mom stood and put a hand on my shoulder, stopping my anxious pacing. “Cali. Artemis is fine. She’s with the others, and she’s *Artemis*. She’s got a good head on her shoulders—and probably a dozen knives hidden in her clothes.”

“I know that,” I said, “but I still don’t like it.” I rubbed my head. “Thanks for letting me know.”

Mom nodded, then pulled a twig from my hair. “Was there something you wanted to talk about, sweetheart?”

I shook my head. “No, thanks, Mom. I’m good.”

That wasn’t true, of course. I *wasn’t* good, but I didn’t know what good it would do to set all my anxieties loose on my mom, so I headed upstairs. I wanted to change my clothes. My sweater was a mess—stuck through with sticks and leaves from my fall through the hedge. Besides that, it just kind of smelled like the palace—that strangely sweet scent that pervaded the place. I hated it and wanted to toss the sweater into the hamper as fast as possible.

I was just about to head upstairs when I caught sight of Mrs. Smith in the living room. She was sitting in a wing chair in front of the fire, her gaze out the window, and as I watched, she wiped her eyes with a tissue.

“Mrs. Smith,” I said, hurrying over to her. “What’s wrong?”

She looked over at me in surprise. “Oh, Cali.” She smiled. “Nothing’s wrong. It’s just some dust.”

I hesitated, unsure. “You’re sure about that?’

She nodded. “Of course.” She patted my arm. “I’m fine, dear.”

I stood, still feeling uncertain, but it was clear she wasn’t going to say anything more. I headed upstairs, wondering if there was something going on around here that I should know about. But when I reached the top of the stairs, I forgot all about that, because Lola *slammed* into me.

“Lola!” I exclaimed, stumbling back. “Watch out!”

“There you are!” she cried, her eyes alight.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“It’s girls’ night!”

“What?” I asked, baffled.

Lola grabbed my arm and hauled me down the hall. “We’re having a girls’ night, silly! We totally deserve it.”

I shook my head, trying to process this onslaught of information. “I’m not sure if I do, Lola. My mates and my sister are out right now, dealing with a warlock on my behalf. I’m not sure if I should be sitting around with a face mask on. It just doesn’t feel right.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “It’s not going to do them any good for you to just sit around here and fret.”

“I guess,” I said slowly.

“Exactly! I want to eat some over-buttered popcorn and dish out some giant plates of gossip.” She grinned at me as we hustled down the hall. “I heard a rumor.”

“What rumor?” I asked warily.

“I heard that Elle kissed Lucian.”

I stared at her. “How did you hear that?” It had only *just* happened! What kind of gossip pipeline did Lola have?

“I want to hear all the details,” Lola gushed as she pulled me into her room.

I groaned and dropped down onto the bed.

There was a knock at the open door, and Tabitha stuck her head in. “Has anyone seen Adair? I can’t find him.”

“I just got back,” I offered helplessly.

Torin passed by the bedroom holding a giant bowl of popcorn, and Lola leapt to her feet. “Stop, Torin!” He stopped, and she grabbed a handful of the popcorn.

“Have *you* seen Adair?” Tabitha asked him.

“I saw Big Mac and Adair step away together,” Torin put in, munching on the popcorn. “Try the back study.”

“Thanks,” Tabitha said, grabbing a handful of popcorn and turning to chat with Torin.

Lola raised an eyebrow. “Well *that’s* interesting,” she said, keeping her voice low.

“What’s interesting?” I asked, not following.

“*That*,” Lola said, nodding toward Tabitha.

I rolled my eyes. “Lola, what the hell are you talking about? What about her?”

She laughed and popped another piece of popcorn in her mouth, shrugging. “Do you think Big Mac is cheating on Mrs. Smith with Adair?”

# Episode 3558

**Xavier**

My stomach sank as Tanya’s warehouse came into view. I wasn’t exactly thrilled to be seeing her again. The last time we’d crossed paths, she’d walked away with one of my memories—my payment for the potion I’d ended up giving Knox.

What would Tanya ask for this time? Another old memory? Or would her price this time around actually cost me something tangible?

Gabe headed for the door, ready to pull it open, but then Kira threw out a hand. “Wait. It might have a protective charm.”

He shrugged. “So?”

“So, a decent protective charm can knock you on your ass. Believe me, I’ve been hit by them enough times to know better. It’s not fun.”

“Fair enough.” Gabe stood back and allowed Kira to take the lead. She raised her hand near the door, her brow furrowed in concentration.

“What’s she doing?” Gabe asked.

“Checking for a charm,” Kira said without turning away from the door. Her shoulders dropped, and she sighed in relief. “No magical seal.”

Slowly, carefully, she pushed the door open, and we all crowded around to peer inside. The interior of the warehouse was dark, ominous.

*This bodes well…*

“Tanya?” Kira called. Silence answered back, and she turned to look at me. “Maybe she’s not home?”

“She’d better be,” I growled, moving past Kira and stepping into the warehouse. As soon as I was fully inside, I was hit by a strong scent. It wasn’t a scent I recognized, though. Was it something to be wary of, or just a quirk of Tanya’s warehouse?

I turned to Gabe. “Can you—”

A low growl cut me off, followed by the rattle of chains, and I turned back toward the belly of the warehouse as a snarling Doberman pinscher lunged toward us.

“Fuck!” I stumbled back, my body a protective wall in front of Kira as the dog barked. He crouched down and then full-on lunged, ready to do his job and protect the place. Fortunately, the chain he was attached to cut him short, and he stopped less than a foot away from us, still snarling and barking.

Gabe shifted only his hand and moved around me, ready to attack the dog with his clawed hand. “Sorry, boy. We’re not dog food.”

“Wait.” Mikah pushed forward. “I’ve got this.”

And then, to my utter shock, he held his hand out to the snarling, vicious monster like it was a tongue-lolling golden retriever.

*And that’s how Mikah lost a hand…* I didn’t see how this wouldn’t end with an injured vampire and Gabe murdering Tanya’s guard dog, but that was Mikah’s mistake to make.

I tensed, ready to pull him back when the dog inevitably attacked, but it didn’t. The Doberman stopped growling, lowered its head, and licked Mikah’s outstretched hand.

“Good dog,” Mikah cooed, scratching its chin.

Gabe’s hand shifted back. “Huh. I guess dogs like vampires.”

“Not vampires,” Mikah said, still scratching the dog into a relaxed stupor. “Dogs like me. Being a vampire’s got nothing to do with it.”

“Enough pet talk,” I snapped. “We didn’t come here to play with dogs. Where the hell is Tanya?”

Every second that passed without a clear bead on our objective was another second Cali would have to go without the Shard. And that wasn’t fucking tolerable. She’d already waited so long. She’d already given up so much as a result of this Seluna nonsense. The fact that we even had to go on this fucking goose chase to find leverage on Ganfael was maddening.

“Let’s fan out and search,” Gabe suggested.

“If the dog hasn’t alerted her that we’re here already, I doubt we’re going to find her here,” Mikah pointed out.

That was exactly what I was afraid of. “Everyone, look around,” I barked.

The Doberman growled at my tone, and I speared him with a look, snarling low. Its ears went back, and it whimpered. Mikah patted its head, and we split up to poke around the warehouse.

A handful of minutes later, we had the proof of exactly what I’d been worried about.

Tanya wasn’t here, and I had no fucking clue where to look for her. It wasn’t like black market witches put listings on Yelp.

“God dammit,” I cursed. “This is a huge waste of time. We need to get back to Ganfael’s. If I have to, I’ll rip the Shard from that warlock’s grubby hands.” *Maybe I’ll rip his esophagus from his throat too, just for good measure.*

Kira patted my shoulder, apparently undaunted by the promise of murder in my eyes. But then again, she’d known me for long enough now that it really shouldn’t have surprised her.

“Your bravado is admirable as always, but I don’t think it’s going to be that easy,” she mused. “For all of that warlock’s posturing and obsessive behavior, I can tell he’s got a lot of magic. He’s not someone to take lightly.”

“Great.” She was right, but what the hell were we supposed to do? Cali needed relief. She needed that Shard. And Ganfael needed a reason to let it go. If he was as powerful as Kira suspected, we’d still need a hell of a lot of leverage to get him to give up the Shard—at least without making some sort of creepy marriage deal between him and Artemis.

*Like she’d ever go for that.* I laughed at the thought. The only thing better than ripping that warlock to pieces myself would be watching Artemis do it.

We left the warehouse the same way we’d come in.

“Now what are we supposed to do?” I asked as we stepped outside.

“You don’t know any of her other hangouts?” Mikah asked.

I shook my head.

“So she really could be anywhere, then.” Gabe shrugged. “Maybe we should have called first. Saved ourselves the trouble of coming all this way.”

I scoffed. “I’ve dealt with Tanya before—believe me, she’s not the type for a meet and greet.”

“Are you looking for Miss Tsarsko?”

We all turned to look at a grubby-looking guy. *How the hell did he sneak up on us?*

“She isn’t here,” he added unhelpfully.

“No shit,” I grumbled.

“Do you know where she is?” Mikah asked.

The guy’s eyes narrowed. “I do… But it’ll cost you.”

Of course it would.

I reached into my pocket. “How much?”

The guy looked over at my car. “That yours?”

My eyes narrowed. “I’m not giving you my car.”

“I’ll show you where she is if you give me a ride,” he offered.

I didn’t love the idea of this guy sitting on my leather seats, but since we had literally zero other leads, it was probably worth the risk.

*I can always have the car cleaned.*

I nodded. “Let’s go.”

We piled into the car.

“How far are we going?” I asked.

“Not far,” the guy said from the back seat. “Turn right at the corner.”

Already, his grungy smell was stinking up my car. *This had better be worth it.*

He guided me a little farther through the streets and pointed to a dive bar with a broken neon sign.

“Sarlig Tan?” Gabe asked.

“Supposed to be Starlight Tavern,” the guy said. “But that sign’s been busted for as long as I can remember.”

I stopped the car in front of the bar and turned to the guy. “We literally drove fifty feet. We could have walked. Why didn’t you tell me where we were going?”

He shrugged. “I’ve got bad arches. Any chance you know a good podiatrist?”

I ignored him and killed the engine. “She’d better be in there.”

We piled out of the car.

“I wouldn’t go in there,” the guy said. “They say it’s haunted.”

“I’m not afraid of ghosts.”

“Suit yourself. Thanks for the ride.” The guy crossed the street and disappeared into an alley.

Mikah looked the front of the dive bar up and down. “I think I know why the guy thinks the bar’s haunted. It’s for supernaturals. I can smell them—werewolves, vampires, witches, and a few Fae.”

I shrugged. “There’s only one person here I’m interested in speaking with.”

Nobody paid any attention to us as we entered the bar. The place was as run-down on the inside as it looked on the outside. The stale scent of beer and grime overpowered everything, and it was so dark in here that even *my* senses were put to the test.

Kira nodded toward the bar. “Tanya’s over there.”

Sure enough, Tanya was there, slumped over her drink.

“Sit tight,” I told Gabe and Mikah.

Kira and I headed over to the witch.

“Tanya,” I said by way of greeting as we approached. She didn’t respond. “Tanya.”

Still, she didn’t so much as twitch. How drunk was she? And how useless was a drunk witch to us? Finally, I kicked her stool, and she jerked upright, glaring at Kira and me in turn.

“Wolf guy. Xander something,” she said, staring blearily at me.

“Xavier Evers,” I corrected her.

She snapped her fingers. “That’s the one. I see you brought your witch. What do you want?”

I slipped onto the stool next to hers. “We’re looking for dirt on a warlock named Ganfael, aka Steve. Do you know him?”

She grunted. “Oh, yeah. I know him. Hard to forget someone like that. But the bigger question is, what are you willing to give up for me to help you?”

# Episode 3559

“Umm… I beg your what?” I asked Lola, absolutely flabbergasted. This was *not* where I’d imagined this conversation going, though now that I thought about it, I wasn’t exactly sure what I’d been imagining in the first place.

Still, this *wasn’t* it.

“I’m just saying! He’s hot, if a little prickly, and so is Big Mac. They already have something in common—”

I cut her off before she could entertain this insanity for even a second more. “First of all, I’m a million percent positive that Big Mac would *never* cheat on Mrs. Smith, and even if, by some crazy chance, she did, she would *not* choose Adair to be the person she cheated with!”

Lola shrugged. “Why not? He’s pretty attractive for an older guy.”

I blinked. *Am I really going to have to spell it out for her? And why is she so hung up on Adair’s looks, anyway?*

“Exactly,” I said. “Adair is a *guy*. Big Mac likes women. So again, even if she were to cheat—which she would *never*—some Fae guy isn’t going to be at the top of her list. So do you really think this is happening, or are you just bored?” I sighed. “Do you even realize how irresponsible it is to go around and spread ugly rumors like this? That’s how real problems get started. You might not remember all the rumors that flared up about me being a *due destini* mate, but I do.”

Lola winced, throwing her hands up in front of her. “I do remember, and I’m sorry. I was probably responsible for a few of those. But you’re right—I got carried away. It’s just that werewolves love gossip, and the truth is, it’s getting kind of boring around here.”

“Boring?” I repeated, my voice somewhere between a whisper and a shriek. “You think things are *boring* right now?”

“Well…” She shrugged. “I mean, kind of. I didn’t get to go to New Orleans like you did.”

“Well, I’m sorry my almost dying wasn’t exciting enough for you!”

She had no idea what real boredom was. Or what I’d have done to have real boredom in my life—it was something that had been pretty much absent since my mom had gotten sick. Since I’d met Xavier and been pulled into this crazy world.

I wouldn’t go back to not knowing my mates or about my Fae heritage or Lola being a half-werewolf, or to a time when I didn’t know about Artemis, or Torin, or even Big Mac. My new life in the supernatural world had given me a lot, and I wouldn’t give up any of it, but it had cost me *everything*.

Now, instead of worrying about midterms, or getting a job after college, or whether or not the cute guy in my class liked me back, I had to worry about choosing between my two mates, and a potential killing curse. Or, if that wasn’t exciting enough, there was always the part where I was being haunted by a demon, or an echo, or a stain on the dirty laundry of my soul, or whatever the metaphor of the day was.

*How about the whole* Pride and Prejudice *vibe Elle and Lucian have going on? What part of* that *isn’t exciting? Or the big pack summit coming up!*

“Sorry,” Lola said again. “That came out wrong. And you’re right—you almost dying was pretty exciting.”

My eyes narrowed. “The wrong kind of exciting.”

“Okay, but back to my point—why else do you think Adair and Big Mac went off together and left Mrs. Smith in tears?”

I shook my head. “There are literally thousands of perfectly reasonable explanations for that—and none of them include infidelity.”

Big Mac might’ve been prickly and hard to get to know, but anyone with a pair of working eyes could see just how devoted she was to Mrs. Smith. And if that changed, I had every bit of faith that Big Mac would be honest about it and not sneak around with Artemis’s uncle.

Lola smirked. “And I just gave you the most obvious one.”

“Oh my god. *Stop* it with the affair theory!” I snapped.

Violet just happened to walk in right at that moment, and her ears perked up. “Who’s having an affair?”

*Lola wasn’t wrong about one thing—werewolves do love to gossip.*

“*Nobody* is having an affair!” I snapped.

I stopped short at the pained look on Tabitha’s face. Didn’t they realize they were talking about the man Tabitha was in love with?

“Excuse us.” I grabbed Tabitha by the arm and led her out of the room. “I’m so sorry about that. They don’t mean any harm—when you live in a big house all together, it’s easy to get lost in the stories and forget you’re talking about actual people.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about that.” She gave me a weak smile that wasn’t at all convincing. “I think you’re right. While Adair and I are still figuring things out, I’m more worried about him disappearing than having an affair with Big Mac or anyone else.” She eyed me. “Do you think Mrs. Smith would know anything about what Adair and Big Mac were talking about?”

“We can certainly ask her.” I stopped short, remembering the tears Mrs. Smith had been trying to hide earlier.

“What is it?” Tabitha asked. “What’s wrong?”

I hesitated. Suddenly, I wasn’t so sure if Lola’s theory was quite so laughable. Was *Mrs. Smith crying because of Big Mac cheating? Was that why she was trying to pass off the tears as a reaction to dust?*

It had to be such an awful feeling to admit to anyone, including yourself, that your fiancée was having an affair…

*No, Cali!* I shook myself. *Lola is already buying into a million ridiculous rumors. She doesn’t need me to encourage her by doing the same.*

There had to be some simple, rational explanation. Or, at least, something simpler and more rational than an affair.

I forced a smile. “It’s nothing. Um, how are things between you and Adair? Is there anything in his recent behavior that might offer a clue about what he and Big Mac are doing?”

“I’m worried about him,” she admitted. “Not that he’s done anything bad, but he has to be so careful because of the Fae court. It can make things tough to navigate between the two of us—that was what kept us apart for so long in the first place—but there’s no way Adair would have an affair. If he wanted to be with someone else, he’d show me the respect of telling me.”

I nodded, my stomach tightening at her mention of the Fae court. We’d run into quite a lot of trouble with them in New Orleans. What if that trouble followed Adair back here?

*That’s probably exactly what he’s worried about*, I realized. *Maybe he’s asked Big Mac to help him sort that out?*

We found Mrs. Smith in the kitchen. The scent of popcorn wafted through the air.

“Hi, girls.” She smiled as we walked in. She held out a big bowl of popcorn. “I just made a big batch. Do you want some?”

My eyes widened. *Wow. She seems so cheery now! It’s hard to believe she was crying just a few minutes ago.*

“Um, sure.” I took a few kernels and popped them in my mouth. Mrs. Smith’s cooking was always extraordinary, no matter what she was making. “Have you, um, heard from Big Mac lately?”

“Not in the last hour or so. Why? Is something wrong?”

“Oh, it’s just that…” Ugh, I hated to even bring it up, but there was no turning back now, was there? “I just noticed you were crying earlier. I thought that maybe… Well, I don’t really know what to think.” Heat rushed into my cheeks.

*God, Cali. Could you be any more awkward while prying into her personal affairs?*

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Mrs. Smith shook her head. “I was a little embarrassed earlier. It wasn’t dust that caused me to tear up, like you’ve probably guessed. It was this.” She pulled an ivory card out of the pocket of her sweater and passed it over to me. “It’s the save the date card for our wedding.”

I turned it over in my hands and gasped. A picture of Mrs. Smith and Big Mac with their arms around each other took up most of the card. “You two look so beautiful! And happy! How’d you get Big Mac to smile like that?”

I wasn’t going to say it to Mrs. Smith, but I was pretty sure I could count on one hand all the times I’d seen Big Mac smile.

Mrs. Smith laughed. “MacKenzie’s a lot more open when she’s with me.”

I looked down at the card again. I could see why it had made Mrs. Smith cry—I felt a little bit like crying too, just looking at it. But I couldn’t deny the huge wave of relief that washed over me. Now I could definitely shut down any further rumors about Big Mac and Adair.

*Seriously, that’s gotta be one of Lola’s worst ideas.*

Tabitha cleared her throat. “Um, do you have any idea why your fiancée left with Adair?”

# Episode 3560

**Greyson**

I immediately bristled at Ganfael’s declaration. *Going to the Fae world? No fucking way. That was* not *part of our deal.*

And he damn well knew it.

I approached him, careful to keep my tone just this side of polite. Cordial. One thin, icy layer away from pissed off. “We did as you asked—we brought a Fae to your party.”

He nodded. “I remember, and I so appreciate the introduction to the lovely Artemis. More than you’ll ever know.” His wide smile gave me the chills.

*I… don’t* want *to know.* And I was more than a little uncomfortable with the implication. Artemis could handle herself, but that didn’t mean I was okay with her starring in whatever passed for a mental porno in this weird-ass guy’s head.

“But we’re not going to the Fae world,” I pressed.

“I think you may be overreacting,” he said easily.

“I disagree. This is completely out of the question.”

Artemis stepped forward. “What did you mean, we’d be going for good? I have no intention of stepping one foot into the Fae world, and I’m certainly not sticking around there. My family is here in this world. My life is here. I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Exactly,” I added. “You’ll have to change your plans, because we’re not going anywhere.”

One trip to the Fae world had been more than enough for me. If I went back, Cali’s grandma might extend some small amount of resources to keep her forces from killing me, but everyone else in the Fae world who came across a werewolf wouldn’t hesitate to try to turn me into their new wolfskin blanket.

I’d thought the supernatural world that lived here alongside the humans was cruel and brutal. It was fucking snack time at a preschool compared to the Fae world. I’d never go back willingly. Like Artemis, my family was here. I couldn’t leave Cali, or my mother, or the pack. I’d even miss Xavier, pain in the ass that he was half the time. Colton, too.

Plus, Artemis had just barely connected with her long-lost uncle. *Her* connections to the Fae world, to her ancestors and heritage, were all here. She’d be devastated to lose that connection with her family after she’d been alone for so long.

“Relax.” Ganfael waved us off. “You may change your minds before the end of the evening.”

Before either Artemis or I could summon up a response, he waved to someone across the party and flitted off to make the rounds.

Artemis sidled up to me with a quiet snarl. “I wouldn’t mind stabbing him a few times. Really. I wouldn’t even feel bad.”

The feeling was mutual. “Unfortunately, we still need him.”

“Do we though?” She sighed. “Why can’t we just murder him? Then we’ll have full access to all of his artifacts, including the Shard. I bet every person in this room would thank us for services rendered.”

“Believe me, if I wasn’t a hundred percent sure that going with cold-blooded murder would blow up in our faces, I’d be all for it.” I gave her a small, rueful smile, and she rolled her eyes. If we didn’t still need Ganfael alive, able-bodied, and on our good side, I’d have been sorely tempted to rip his throat out. “I know it’s difficult, but we need to play along until we have the Shard safely in hand.”

“I suppose there’s always after. I won’t give up hope.”

I stifled a laugh. “It’s good to have things to look forward to. Now, remember, the deal was that we have to attend this party. And we’re here. We’re fulfilling our end.”

“Maybe.” She shrugged. “Technically, that’s all true, but we’re dealing with a warlock here. We can’t trust him—especially not to keep his word.”

I nodded. “So we agree. Once we have the Shard, we’re out of here.”

I glanced across the room, sizing up the crowd Ganfael had gathered. Were they as enthusiastic about going to the Fae world as their obnoxious host? I had to assume not—any Fae with an ounce of self-preservation had to realize they were better off on this side of the portal. Still, they were all here for a reason—Ganfael had gotten them all to attend his stupid party. Somehow.

It was entirely possible that Artemis and I were on our own here. We couldn’t and shouldn’t count on any of the partygoers to back us up.

Stavros glided over, looking Artemis and me up and down. “You two make a stunning couple.”

I nearly choked on my own spit. Next to me, Artemis burst out laughing.

*Thanks for the show of confidence.* I rolled my eyes as I tried to compose myself.

“We’re not a couple,” she explained.

“Hmm.” The Fae man’s full lips twisted in displeasure. “You two would make such beautiful children.”

Artemis stopped laughing, then pretended to gag. And because I *wasn’t* an asshole, I tried not to let her see me grimace. I was about as attracted to Artemis as I was to Rishika—I recognized that she was empirically beautiful, but I felt less than nothing for her.

I could still remember that horribly awkward kiss we’d shared at the whiskey bar in Portland. How we’d both recoiled. How for both of us, it had felt like kissing a family member. It boded well for the future of our friendship but had been the final nail in the coffin of anything more.

Artemis was pretty—beautiful, even—but there was nothing between the two of us, and there never would be. And seeing as how I was mated to her sister, we were practically family. And then there was the whole part where Artemis was in love with Rishika.

Stavros moved closer to Artemis, his expression bordering on a leer. “Are you still interested in seeing my sword, then?”

I groaned. *Seriously? How is this dude for real? Is he really going to continue down that ill-fated, disgusting, sophomoric path?* At the rate he was going, Stavros was going to have to up his game if he wanted to generate interest from anyone, let alone Artemis.

She winked at me and then put on what I could only describe as a seductive smile as she hooked her arm through Stavros’s. “I’d love to see your big sword.”

“Wonderful! I can’t wait to show you.” He tried to lead her away from the party, but she stood firm.

“Later.” She promised with a wicked grin. And the fucking idiot ate it up.

I tried not to laugh. I hated that Artemis felt she had to do this—hated even more that I was stuck in the front-row seat to her seducing this asshat—but I had to admit, she was damn good at it.

Artemis gestured to Ganfael, who was clustered with some other people from the party. “Do you have any idea why he wants to go to the Fae world? It’s a pretty unusual thing for a warlock to set his sights on, don’t you think?”

“I suppose so,” Stavros conceded. “But then again, he’s an usual warlock.”

“It’d be a risky journey for him,” I pointed out. “There’s no love lost between the Fae and the witches.”

“And while that may be true for most Fae and witches, Ganfael is different. He’s not just obsessed with Fae like Artemis and myself. He’s actually a big name in the Fae world.”

I blinked. “Really?”

Artemis seemed similarly surprised by this news. She clearly hadn’t heard of Ganfael, despite having spent her entire life in the Fae world.

I looked over at our host, who was pontificating on what looked like an elaborate Fae headdress. *How on earth does an ass like that have a big name? In the Fae world or any other world?*

“It’s been a while since I’ve been back to the Fae world,” Artemis admitted. “What interest do the Fae have in Ganfael?”

Stavros looked around before lowering his voice. “Truth is, Ganfael will be lauded as a hero if he crosses into the Fae world.”

Artemis’s brows knit together. “A hero?”

“And what heroic act has he done for the Fae?” I asked.

Stavros shook his head. “Not all Fae. Just the Dark Fae. He’s helped them in their war against the Light Fae.”

“Oh really?” Artemis said sharply—too sharply. “And how has he been helping them, exactly?”

Shit. This was getting personal for her.

Stavros frowned. “Perhaps I shouldn’t be telling you this.”

“Relax.” I forced a lazy smile. “We’re impartial. We live here, remember? We don’t care who wins or loses some war in the Fae world. We just want to understand our host better, see where he’s coming from.”

This seemed to appease the Fae man, because he looked around again and asked. “Have you ever heard of a brilliant mastermind named the Kollector?”

Artemis let out a choking sound, and it took all my self-control to keep from laughing.

“Brilliant” wasn’t exactly a word I’d have used to describe the Kollector. “Dead,” for instance, might’ve been more accurate.

“I guess you’ve heard of him?” Stavros pressed, reading our reactions.

Artemis collected herself quickly. “I’ve heard of him. What does the Kollector have to do with Ganfael?”

# Episode 3561

“I believe Adair needed MacKenzie’s help with something,” Mrs. Smith said in response to Tabitha’s question.

Tabitha’s brow furrowed. She really was worried.

“Do you have any idea what that help might involve?” I asked. “Anything you can tell us would be so helpful.” I nudged Tabitha’s shoulder. “She’s been worried about him.”

Mrs. Smith’s expression softened, and she nodded at Tabitha. “I can understand why. He seems to carry a heavy burden. Unfortunately, I don’t know why he sought out MacKenzie, or what she’s doing to help him. She didn’t say, and it didn’t occur to me to ask. I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay, but… why wouldn’t you ask?” said Tabitha. “Aren’t you engaged? Does Big Mac normally not tell you what she’s up to?”

“We are engaged. And if she thinks it’s important for me to know something, she tells me, or I ask her. But not always.”

“But why wouldn’t you tell each other where you’re going and what you’re doing?” Tabitha pressed. “You’re deeply committed to each other—shouldn’t you be a part of every part of each other’s lives? Or at least be kept up-to-date?”

Mrs. Smith nodded, seeming to understand what Tabitha was asking—and that this wasn’t a criticism of her relationship with Big Mac so much as a broad question about adult relationships.

I had to admit, now that Tabitha mentioned it, I wondered myself why Mrs. Smith didn’t seem to know or care what Big Mac and Adair were doing. If my mates did something with someone new to the pack house, I’d want to know why. And where they were going. I’d want to know everything.

“I understand your point of view,” Mrs. Smith said gently, “but when you’ve found the person you know you’re going to spend the rest of your life with, when you know for certain you’ve found that one special person, then you trust them. You don’t want to smother them, make them feel like you’re watching their every move. You need to give each other space. MacKenzie and I have that. We trust each other. And really, there are pieces of her life that aren’t my business. And that’s okay. The reverse is true as well. We may be getting married, but that doesn’t entitle me to involve myself in every aspect of her life, nor should it. I have my own life to live alongside her. Does that make sense?”

I mulled over her words. *I do trust my mates—but I can’t deny there’s a certain amount of comfort in knowing where they are and what they’re doing. If they’re safe.*

Tabitha nodded. “I guess so.” She gave Mrs. Smith the same weak smile she’d given me earlier. “It sounds amazing—being with that one person, having that level of trust. I hope I can have that someday.”

Mrs. Smith reached out and patted her arm. “You will. But, again, I’m sorry I can’t tell you more about what MacKenzie and Adair are doing. Have you tried calling her?”

“Oh my god.” I slapped my forehead. “Why didn’t I suggest that in the first place? I feel like such an idiot.”

“I’ll call her.” Mrs. Smith pulled her cell out of her pocket and dialed Big Mac’s number. A minute or so later, she ended the call and shook her head. “The call went to voicemail.” She frowned. “But I’m sure they’ll be back soon.” She smiled at Tabitha. “MacKenzie is a powerful witch. She’ll take good care of Adair.”

“Thanks anyway,” Tabitha said, and headed for the door. I followed after her.

“If I hear from MacKenzie, I’ll let you both know,” Mrs. Smith called after us.

I paused at the door. “By the way, if you hear any rumors about Big Mac and Adair…”

Mrs. Smith’s brows rose. “What kind of rumors?”

*Oh god. I’ve done it now…*

But it felt wrong to not warn her. Lola had a lot of lovely qualities, but her love of rumors—both starting them and spreading them—didn’t make the list. I’d rather Mrs. Smith heard it from me than someone a little less discerning about fact and fiction.

I laughed uncomfortably. “Well… saying it out loud makes it sound even more ridiculous.”

Understanding dawned on Mrs. Smith’s face, and she burst out laughing. “Really? I knew you had a sense of humor, but this is too much.”

“I know. It’s ridiculous.” I tried to laugh right along with her. “But… I thought you’d want to know.”

“Yes, thank you.” She was still chuckling, wiping at her eyes. “I appreciate the heads-up. I haven’t laughed that hard in a long time.”

“… kay.” I followed Tabitha’s lead and left the room. “Well, I guess an affair is officially off the list,” I tried to joke.

“Guess so.” Poor Tabitha just looked miserable—even more worried than before, if that was possible.

“I’m sorry we weren’t able to find out what they’re up to,” I told her. “But Mrs. Smith is right. Big Mac is a powerful witch. She’ll make sure nothing happens to him.”

“I know.” She sighed. “I guess I’m just… I don’t know. Feeling antsy. We still don’t know where he is or what he’s doing. I hate not knowing.”

“Mrs. Smith says you just have to trust him. I think she’s right. She’s had a lot of experience with relationships—she probably knows more about how to have a good one than everyone else in this house combined, except maybe my parents.”

*Okay, now I’m just rambling.*

I made my mouth close and let Tabitha speak her piece.

“I do trust him,” she finally said. “Or, at least, I want to trust him. I know he’d do everything in his power to keep me safe—even if it meant leaving me alone.” She gave me a pained smile. “But that’s not the same thing as trusting him with my heart.”

“It’s not.” I could relate to that. There had been a long period of time when I’d known I was physically safe with my mates, but hadn’t known if I could trust them in all the other ways that mattered.

“We just haven’t known each other as long as Mrs. Smith and Big Mac have. And I’m worried that I’m going to wake up one day and he’ll have decided to run off. Just like he did before.”

I frowned. “I can’t imagine he’d do that. I saw the way he was with you in New Orleans. He was single-minded in finding you, and once he did… Your safety was all he cared about.”

“I remember.” A small smile tugged at her lips. “But that’s just the problem. He’d break my heart a thousand times if it meant ensuring my safety. Especially if he’s worried the Fae court has found him again. They’re still looking for him, and he’d do anything to keep me away from that world.”

I sighed. “Okay, fair point. But I’ve seen the way he looks at you. I can’t believe he’d run off and leave you behind. Sure, he wants to keep you safe, but he also wants to keep *you*. He’s risked everything to protect you, to stay here with you. You two might not know each other as well as Mrs. Smith and Big Mac, but you know each other well enough to know you care for each other. And that matters. Just… try not to worry, okay? I’ve learned there’s often a perfectly good explanation for the things we don’t understand.”

I leaned in to hug her, and to my surprise, she wrapped her arms around me too.

“Thanks, Cali.”

“Anytime. Now, we should get back.”

We rejoined the group of girls, which had grown significantly and now included Violet, Elle, Sage, Zainab, Jacs, Dani, and Rishika.

Lola rushed forward. “Did you learn anything?”

I held up a hand. “Enough rumors. We spoke to Mrs. Smith, and everything’s fine.”

Tabitha headed over to sit with Dani. I hoped Adair came back soon—I hated seeing her so miserable.

“Fair enough.” Lola sighed. “Elle was just telling us about her date.”

That, I didn’t need to hear about. I’d been there.

The front door opened, and Tabitha’s eyes locked with mine.

*Could that be Adair? Or maybe Xavier or Greyson?*

We moved toward the door in unison but realized Lilac had returned home when he walked past. Tabitha slumped back into her seat, and Dani wrapped an arm around her.

Violet practically lunged at her brother. “Hey! How was your date?”

This, of course, caught Lola’s complete attention. “*Date?* With whom?” she nearly screamed.

“Um, Perrie,” Violet said. “From the Samara pack.”

Lilac glared at Lola over his sister’s shoulder. “It’s none of your business.”

Lola was undaunted. “Did you kiss?”

Violet rolled her eyes. “Please stop harassing my brother.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Leave the poor guy alone.”

I could only imagine how difficult this all had to be for Lilac, trying to see if things could work with the mate he’d never asked for while he was still hung up on Marta. A red-faced Lilac stomped off before Lola could interrogate him more.

Lola started loudly brainstorming locations for Lilac and Perrie’s next date while Violet scolded her, and I looked over at Tabitha, who still looked really bummed out.

*I wish there was something I could do to help her feel better.*

But seeing her worry only reminded me of my own. I checked the time. *When will Xavier and Greyson be back? Are they okay?*

I had to assume they would’ve contacted me if anything bad had happened, but it still couldn’t hurt to check in, could it?

I’d started to text them when a new message popped up on my display. My heart leapt—

But the message was from Aysel.

*I know how to contact your inner demon.*

# Episode 3562

**Xavier**

I stared at the drunk witch. What was I willing to give up? As jarring as it was for her to already be talking about payment, it was a damn good question.

What *would* I give up to get leverage on Ganfael? To make sure Cali got the relief she needed?

An impulsive answer was on the tip of my tongue. *What wouldn’t I give up?* Cali meant everything to me, and it was a special kind of torture to have watched her suffer all this time, knowing I couldn’t do a damn thing to help her.

But that wasn’t how this worked. I couldn’t pay Tanya in sentiment, or devotion to my mate. She also didn’t take cash. The last time I’d dealt with this black-market witch, it had been to purchase a sedative potion to slip to Knox. Ava had been with me, and we’d paid together—with a memory. A joint memory from a happy time when we were mates together.

There were plenty more where that memory came from, because—as difficult as it was to believe sometimes—there was once a time, a long time, when Ava and I had been happy together. But I wouldn’t miss them. Tanya could take a whole batch of those sun-kissed memories of Ava, and I wouldn’t so much as bat an eye.

“Take your pick of my memories,” I told her.

She gave me a lopsided smile. “I did pretty well with the last one I got from you.”

I blinked. “What does that mean? What happened to it?”

Now that I thought about it, I’d never wondered what the hell she did with the memories she took. I kind of assumed they ended up in some kind of repository, maybe, like something from a fantasy movie. Or maybe Tanya got off on taking memories from others and watching them play out herself. Like a personal NFT or something.

She downed the rest of her drink—neat whiskey, if I had to guess.

“I got a fair price for it,” she said.

My brows rose. “I thought you wanted it for yourself.”

“Why would I possibly want to keep one of your memories?”

I shrugged. “Who bought it? What value could there be in it?”

She shook her head. “I’m not going to tell you that. It would be in violation of my client ethics.”

“I didn’t realize you had ethics. Aren’t you a black-market witch?”

She glanced down at her empty tumbler. “Everyone has their own code.” She leveled me with a look. “And their own price for services rendered. So, what do you want me to do with this guy? You want me to hex him? I could always turn him into a snail. Though, that’d cost you more than just a memory.”

I rolled my eyes. She was more drunk than I’d thought. “Don’t you remember? I *just* told you I want dirt on Ganfael.”

She frowned and looked back down into her empty glass.

Just like back in the warehouse, each second nagged at me as it rolled into the next. We were wasting time.

“Can you help me or not?” I demanded. “You can take another memory if that’s what you want. I’ve got loads more like the last one you took.”

Tanya straightened. “I actually wouldn’t mind a more recent one. What about a memory of your mate?”

“Hell no.” The response flew out of my mouth before I really had a chance to think it over, but I didn’t see myself changing my mind. I wanted Cali to have relief, and I’d make sure it happened, even if Tanya wasn’t of any help to us. But one thing I wouldn’t do was give up even a single moment of the time I’d spent with Cali. She was my everything. She’d helped bring back my wolf. She’d enriched my life in a thousand different ways. I wasn’t going to give up a single second of the time we’d spent together.

“You sure about that?” she asked.

“You can have every last memory I have with Ava, but I’m not giving up anything—good or bad—that involves Cali. Forget it.”

She shrugged. “Either way, the price should match the request. You sure you don’t just want a hex? It’s a lot cheaper.”

I pulled in a breath to try to hold on to the last shreds of my temper. It didn’t help. I was ready to fucking throttle the witch until she got the concept through her fucking skull. “How many times do I have to explain—”

Kira put a hand on my arm to stop me, her gaze focused on Tanya. “We’re just here for some dirt on Ganfael. Nothing more.”

Gabe and Mikah chose that moment to interrupt our deal in the making. I didn’t care—the way things were going, I was going to walk out of here with nothing, because the fucking witch was drunk off her ass and couldn’t hold two thoughts in her head at the same time.

“Is there a problem?” Mikah asked.

Tanya’s face split into a smile. I had to do a double take. I’d never seen her smile before.

Her cheeks looked like apples as she fixed her gaze on Mikah. “You’re cute.”

Gabe casually put a hand on his shoulder. “He is cute. And *taken*.”

“Fine.” Tanya sighed and glanced at me. “How about you refill my glass a few times and I’ll tell you what you’re here for.”

“Seriously?” I frowned. “That’s it? That’s all you want?” No memories, no promises—just liquor?

Maybe our luck was finally turning around.

Tanya held up her glass and flagged down the bartender. “Another round. Keep ‘em coming.”

Still, I wasn’t convinced she was going to be able to help all that much. I could smell the whiskey wafting off her. What information could she possibly have in her current state?

But then again, it wasn’t like we really had a wealth of other options. And I’d do anything, follow any lead—no matter how dubious its source—if it would help Cali.

The bartender refilled her glass, but Tanya caught his arm. “Actually, leave the bottle.”

“Lady, I’m not—”

She pointed to me. “Put it on his tab. I’m thirsty.”

The bartender looked to me for confirmation, and I nodded. *Why the hell not?*

He left the bottle next to her newly filled glass, and I turned my attention back to Tanya once he walked away. “Now, what about Ganfael?”

She held up a finger while she downed all the whiskey in her tumbler and then reached for the bottle.

I grabbed her arm to stop her. “You can have the rest *after* you tell me what you know.”

The last thing we needed was for her to pass out without giving me anything usable. I had no idea what kind of alcohol tolerance witches had—Big Mac certainly seemed able to hold her liquor with the best of them.

Tanya, I wasn’t sure. She’d seemed drunk when we’d arrived, and with another glass down her gullet, our window of opportunity probably wasn’t going to stay open for long.

“Well, Ganfael is obsessed with the Fae.”

I snorted. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Like what?”

“Like… does he have any weaknesses I can exploit? I told you I need dirt on him. Leverage. What do you know about him that fits that criteria?”

She smiled. “He likes Fae artifacts.”

*Jesus fucking Christ.*

I turned to Kira. “This is a waste of time. And liquor.”

I moved to leave, but Tanya added, “And there are some artifacts he treasures more than others.”

I froze and turned back to her. “Such as?”

The witch busied herself with refilling her glass. “This is gonna be empty soon,” she said meaningfully.

Kira reached over the bar, grabbed another bottle, and slammed it down in front of Tanya. “You can have this one too—if you explain what you mean. What artifact are we talking about? Does he have it in his possession?”

“There’s a blue ring that he wears—it’s some stupid-ugly thing.” Tanya rolled her eyes. “I wouldn’t be caught dead wearing it, Fae or not. But to Ganfael, it’s some Fae status symbol. It sets him apart from humans, even warlocks. It’s like a security blanket, only it reminds him of his self-importance whenever he needs a boost. If you can get that ring off him, he’ll probably give you whatever you want in the hope of getting it back.”

I glanced over at Gabe, Mikah, and Kira. They all looked intrigued by this new information.

*That’s not half-bad.* Maybe I needed to give Tanya more credit—drunk or not, she could still dish out useful dirt in a pinch.

“And you’re sure he’d do anything for this ring?” I pressed.

She nodded. “Absolutely. To him, it’s a sign he’s practically Fae, the idiot. His whole identity is wrapped up in that gaudy thing. There’s probably nothing he wouldn’t do to get it back.”

“Well, thanks. That’s actually helpful. Enjoy your liquor.” I nodded to the others. “We should get back and get this information to Greyson and Artemis.”

If they could get a head start on getting that ring, we’d be that much closer to getting the Shard and getting Cali the relief she needed.

We headed for the exit, but Tanya grabbed my arm and pulled me back. “I think I should warn you,” she said. “What goes around comes around.”

I frowned. Her eyes were barely focused now. She was probably a few sips away from a blackout. “What are you talking about?” I asked.

She shook her head, her attention returning to the bottle. “Not what. Whom.”

# Episode 3563

**Artemis**

My head nearly exploded all over the party guests.

*The Kollector—brilliant? A mastermind?*

I wanted nothing more than to skewer Ganfael with each of my knives—one by one, slowly, until the only words he knew how to say were “please” and “Artemis” and “I was wrong.”

I already didn’t like this guy. He pretended to be Fae, he was standing in the way of us getting the Shard for my sister, and he was also just sort of obnoxious. And now he was supporting the Kollector? Ganfael *admired* him? How could anyone admire that awful man? He’d made so many people’s lives hell—including my own—and for what? Just because he could. To show off his power.

The more I learned about Ganfael, the more I despised him. Of all the Fae in this room, I was almost certain I was the only one who’d actually met the Kollector. Who knew how evil and corrupt and cruel he’d truly been.

*And wouldn’t Ganfael be so pleased to learn that my sister’s the one who killed him.* A smile tugged at my lips. Oh, I wished I could rub that little detail in his face. That the great and brilliant mastermind had been destroyed by a half-Fae still coming into her magic.

But I couldn’t tip my hand. We needed that Shard, and I wasn’t leaving here without it.

“The Kollector devoted his life to serving the Dark Fae in their righteous war with the Light Fae…” Ganfael droned on.

I hated this crap. I knew firsthand that the Kollector had been playing both sides against each other. He hadn’t wanted *anyone* to win. After all, there was no profit in victory, but there *was* money to be made over an endless war.

“Many consider that great Fae to be a hero and a revolutionary…”

*I can’t do this. I can’t listen to another lie about that horrible, wretched man.*

I reached for the knife hidden at my waist but stopped when Greyson casually put a hand on my arm and shot me a meaningful look. Not for the first time, I wished I could communicate telepathically like he and the other wolves could. I’d have told him all about why anyone who supported the Kollector—hell, Ganfael seemed to *worship* him—deserved to have their throat slit.

*It’d be easier to get the Shard if this obnoxious warlock were dead.*

But I didn’t have to mind link to understand the message in Greyson’s expression. It was a clear, “Don’t fuck this up.”

Fine. I dropped my hand and released a breath as Ganfael continued to wax poetic about the Kollector’s many good deeds.

“Though the Kollector met an untimely end, he died fighting for what he believed in. He was brave and selfless—seeking only to enrich the Fae world he loved so much.”

I resisted the urge to gag. The only accurate part of that statement was the bit about the Kollector dying—and even then, had it really been untimely? He’d had it coming.

“The Kollector was exactly the kind of man I try to be,” Ganfael finished, puffing out his chest. “Though I know I will undoubtedly fall short of the mark, I still endeavor to leave a lasting mark on the Fae world in my own way.”

A terrible realization set in as I watched Ganfael puff himself up like a peacock, all the while feigning humility. *Is he trying to flirt with me?*

*Ugh, disgusting.* Bile roiled in my stomach, but I pulled in another breath and tried to play along.

“I heard that he supplied arms to both sides,” I said.

Ganfael waved that off. “Those are just vicious rumors fabricated by his enemies.”

It took every ounce of self-control I possessed to not roll my eyes. Pretty much everyone had hated the Kollector. That was a *fact*, and he’d had enemies on both sides.

*Because he was a piece of shit.*

Greyson must have sensed I was nearing the end of my rope. “So how do you tie into all this?”

“As you might have guessed, I believed in what the Kollector was doing. So, I made some… arrangements… in order to carry on his vision.”

I couldn’t stop myself from glaring. This guy was getting shadier by the minute. “And what’s in it for you?”

He gestured broadly to the room. “They adore me. I support the Dark Fae, and they support me. And when they achieve victory, I will be rewarded for my dedication and service.”

“So… you’re doing this for riches,” I stated. He wasn’t special—just another greedy warmonger. *Gods, I want to see him burned alive. I’ll light the pyre.*

Ganfael scowled and shook his head. “No, not for money. I care not for personal wealth. What I’m seeking is glory. Adoration. My status in the Fae world will make me a legend. I’ll be just like the Kollector.”

I thought of the last time I’d seen that awful Fae in life—when he’d been turned into a pile of ash—and I smiled. “You should be careful what you wish for.”

Ganfael’s brow furrowed. “What?”

“Oh! I think I see someone we know!” Greyson cut in. “Please excuse us.”

He grabbed my arm and whisked me away. “Listen, I get that you want to rip that guy to pieces, and I understand why. But you have to be careful.”

I sighed. “I’m sorry. I probably went too far—”

“You think?”

“I can’t just stand by and listen to someone—*anyone*—go on about how they hero-worship the Kollector. He was twisted and evil and cruel and didn’t care about a single soul on this earth other than himself.” I blew out a breath, and Greyson’s brows rose.

“Feel better?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Not really.” I wasn’t going to feel better until I was back home with the Shard safely in hand. “So, what’s our play? I’m *not* going back to the Fae world, and we’re no closer to getting that Shard.”

Just then, Greyson’s phone buzzed. He looked down at the display. “It’s Xavier.” He scanned the text, then looked up at me with a smile. “He said we need to get a blue ring. We can use it as leverage—if we can get it from Ganfael, we’ll be able to ask him for anything in exchange for its return.”

“Great.” I looked around. “A blue ring. Where would he keep it?”

“If he really cherishes it that much, it’s probably locked up somewhere. Maybe in another one of the cabinets? Like the one he keeps the Shard in?” He headed in that direction, but I reached out and grabbed his arm to stop him, my gaze locked on our host.

“Or maybe it’s so cherished that he wants to show it off.” I nodded toward Ganfael—and the bright blue ring on his pinkie finger.

Greyson’s eyes widened. “What do you think the chances are that he has a second blue ring?”

I shook my head. “Unlikely. That’s the one. I know it.”

A guy like Ganfael—an outsider obsessed with all things Fae and seeking adulation from my people—wasn’t going to miss an opportunity to show off at a party. Why lock up his most prized possession when he could use it as a status symbol?

“It would’ve been a hell of a lot easier if the ring was in a cabinet,” Greyson mused.

“I disagree.” I casually flashed one of my knives. “I can cut the whole finger off and be out the door before the first drop of his corrupted blood hits the floor.”

He grimaced. “That’s a terrible idea.”

“I don’t think so. It couldn’t be simpler. Ganfael has the ring. We want it. So I'll take it.”

“Along with his finger?”

I shrugged. “Consider it payment for making me listen to his speech about the Kollector.”

“No.” Greyson shook his head. “We’re not doing that. Ganfael may be a contemptible prick, but he’s still a powerful warlock.”

“And I’m no pushover. I have my Fae power”

“And how well has that been working for you lately?” He gave me a pointed look. “And don’t forget—we’re in a room full of Fae. We don’t know whose side they’re on. If you attack Ganfael publicly, this could turn into a bloodbath.”

“If they have any Fae pride,” I growled, “they’ll hold him down while I sever his finger.”

“Excuse me!” Ganfael bellowed to the room at large, clapping his hands. “My special guest has arrived!”

He pushed past the group to greet someone at the doorway.

Greyson craned his neck to try to get a look. “I wonder who it is?”

Ganfael hugged his guest then turned to the rest of his guests. “Please welcome Lysander.”

I froze. I recognized this guy. He was a member of the Dark Fae court—one of the ones who’d attacked Rishika and me in New Orleans at the underground Fae marketplace. And if I recognized him, there was no doubt he’d recognize me.

I grabbed Greyson’s arm. “You need to get me out of here.”

# 

# Episode 3564

I shuddered at Aysel’s message. She wanted to contact my inner demon? I didn’t even want to *have* an inner demon.

*Now that I think about it, I don’t want an* outer *demon, either. Zero demons is the exact number I’d like to have.*

And why was Aysel texting this to me? This seemed like something that was better discussed over the phone, right?

I texted her back. *What are you talking about?*

Three dots appeared in our thread, then she responded. *I think Seluna is speaking through you. If we can connect with her, I think we can find out exactly what she wants from you. Maybe she’s not all that different from a normal ghost. Maybe if we give her what we want, put her spirit to rest, she’ll leave you alone for good.*

I’d participated in séances before—with Marta—and had hated them. It wasn’t natural to speak with the dead, to make connections across worlds. I could only imagine how much more awful it would be to try to make a connection with a demon spirit. If that was even what Seluna was.

I had no intention of trying to contact Seluna. Besides, I’d been through it before, and it had been terrible.

*I don’t want to contact her*, I replied. *And even if I did, it’s not like we could just call her up. She’s dead.*

Or, at least, she was supposed to be. And our resident medium had just left the pack house, maybe for good.

*I’m not doing another séance*, I added.

*Another?* Aysel asked. *Actually, never mind. You’re missing my point.*

I rolled my eyes. *Which is?*

*I’m not suggesting a séance. The key is to use hypnosis.*

I frowned. *Hypnosis?* I wondered. *Like when some guy with a pocket watch waves it in front of you and says, “You’re getting very sleepy”?*

That made even less sense than trying to conduct a séance with a spirit from the demon dimension. How could hypnotizing me—assuming that hypnosis was even real, which… big assumption there—allow us to contact Seluna?

Was Aysel just messing with me? Was all of this just a way for her to pass the time, or something?

*You’re joking, right?* I messaged.

*Why would I be joking?*

*Because the only time I’ve seen “hypnosis” was when my parents took me to a magic show and the magician claimed to hypnotize someone from the audience. It was all really creepy and amazing until my dad revealed that the audience member was really a plant who secretly worked for the magician. Hypnosis isn’t real.*

Aysel sent over the eyeroll emoji before adding, *You shouldn’t judge hypnosis based on a fake magician*. *It’s real, when done correctly, and more importantly, it could really help with your Seluna problem.*

I grimaced. Even now, it didn’t escape me that the only reason I even had a “Seluna problem” was because of Lucian, and even somewhat because of Aysel. She’d enabled everything he’d done to me, after all. It was nice, sort of, that she was reaching out to help me, but I wouldn’t have needed help at all if the Vanguard Alpha and everyone who followed him had never wronged me in the first place.

My phone buzzed again, and I saw another text from Aysel pop up in the thread.

*If you’re willing to be hypnotized, we might be able to reach Seluna.*

I scoffed, shaking my head. *Who would be hypnotizing me?*

*Me. I have several books on the subject, and I’ve watched two TED Talks. I’m sure I won’t mess it up.*

I blinked. Aysel really knew how to comfort a person. *Have you ever actually successfully hypnotized anyone before?*

*A distant cousin, once.*

My brows rose. Maybe this wasn’t such a ridiculous plan then, if she actually did know what she was doing.

*Why did you hypnotize them?* I asked.

Those three little dots appeared, then disappeared, then reappeared and disappeared again. Finally, she responded.

*It didn’t turn out very well. I don’t want to talk about it.*

My jaw dropped. “Seriously?” I whispered under my breath, not wanting to draw attention to myself.

Aysel texted again. *But I’ve studied a lot more since then. I can do it. I know it’ll go better this time. Using hypnosis, I can unlock your mind and reveal memories you never even knew you had. Will you give it a shot?*

Um, hard pass. Like, the hardest of hard passes. There was no way in hell I was going to let Little Miss “I tried it once, and it didn’t go so well” do anything to my mind. Especially not with both of my mates away. This was a disaster waiting to happen, and if anything went wrong—which, let’s face it, it probably would—I’d want Xavier and Greyson there to help me.

*And if they come back with the Shard and it gives me some relief, I won’t need Aysel to swing a pocket watch in front of me at all*, I thought.

Still, I was curious. What if Aysel was onto something? Could hypnosis help me? I’d always thought it was just another fake magic shtick, but maybe, like so many other kinds of magic, it could be useful when done right. I used to think fortune tellers were fake and ghosts weren’t real.

Now, I knew better. Who was to say the same wasn’t true with hypnosis?

My phone buzzed with another text from Aysel. *I can be there in no time. What do you say?*

I bit my lip as I tried to craft a response that wouldn’t offend her. As weird as it was, I did appreciate her reaching out and offering to help. And I didn’t want to hurt her feelings.

*Maybe a rain check?* I asked. *I need to think about it more.*

*My door is always open*, she replied. *In the meantime, I’ll keep looking for anything else that might help.*

*Thank you.*

I breathed out a sigh. The more I thought about the mere concept of Aysel trying to hypnotize me, the happier I was to have put her off. There was no way I’d let Aysel practice on me. If anything, I’d find a real hypnotist.

*The only thing worse than Aysel messing around with my brain would be if Ava offered to do it.*

Lola nudged me. “Are you going to text all night, or are you going to join us?”

Before I could respond, she peered over my shoulder at my phone. “Hypnosis?”

I put my phone away. “Do any of you have experience with hypnosis?” I asked the group.

“A friend of mine quit smoking because of it,” Zainab offered.

I thought back to what Aysel had said about unlocking my mind. *Seluna stuff aside, could it help me figure out what to do about the* due destini*?*

“Why are you suddenly interested in hypnosis?” Lola asked.

“Um, I saw a TED Talk on it,” I blurted out. “I was just curious if it was actually real.”

I didn’t want to lie to Lola, or anyone else, but I wasn’t ready for the group to dissect this idea for me. Nor did I want them to know the full extent of how Seluna was wearing on me. Hadn’t Lola just complained about things being boring? I wasn’t going to be the one to rain on that parade.

Violet passed me a glass of rosé as the girls started debating the virtues of hypnosis.

I looked down at the pink wine in the glass. I’d always thought rosé was one step away from vinegar, but it was nice to be with my friends. I looked over at Tabitha, who still seemed somber, and I was reminded again of how my mates and my sister were out there dealing with a warlock, all so they could help me. The idea of enjoying myself tonight felt… wrong. It wasn’t really appropriate, considering everything else that was going on.

I focused on the conversation again and did a double take at the sight of Elle impersonating Lucian.

“I am a prince, you know. The richest and most powerful prince! I do not know how to wash a dish, but that is okay because dishes are for peasants!” she declared in a deep voice that was absolutely spot-on.

I couldn’t help laughing. Elle was so perceptive, and I was glad that she saw Lucian for his true self. That she’d made up her mind about him.

But if Elle and Lucian really were mates, it might not be so easy for her. The mate bond could complicate things, cause her to misinterpret the pull between the two of them. As romanticized as mate bonds were, simply having one didn’t mean either member of the bond was in love with the other.

*I just hope I don’t have to chaperone for them again.*

I took a sip of wine, then immediately spat it out back into the cup. It tasted horrible. I looked up and saw all eyes suddenly on me. Crap.

“Why is everyone staring at me?” I asked nervously. “Did they all see that?”

Lola’s eyes sparkled, and, as she began to respond, her face began to melt.

I screamed.

# 

# Episode 3565

**Artemis**

Greyson wasn’t budging. He was every bit as big and strong as he looked.

“We need to go,” I whispered.

He shook his head. “Not yet.”

“No, you don’t get it—”

“Artemis, we’re not leaving here without the Shard.”

“I know what’s at stake!” I growled. “Will you please just listen to me? I can’t stay here. We need a new plan, and we need it now.”

He looked utterly flabbergasted. “What the hell has gotten into you?”

“I fought Ganfael’s guest, Lysander, at the Fae marketplace in New Orleans. He can’t see me—or our cover will be blown. He knows I was looking for Adair.”

Greyson looked over at the Dark Fae, his brow furrowing, then casually shifted his body in front of mine to block me from view. “Take a breath.”

I blinked, my stomach roiling with panic and fury. “Did you seriously just tell me to—”

“I get why you’re worried, but we came all this way to get that Shard. We can’t give up now. You’re right, though—we need a new plan. And I’ve got one. I’ll distract the new guy—Fae always seem so fascinated by werewolves. While I keep him occupied, you get the ring.”

I reached for one of my knives. “I’ll make it quick.”

Greyson cursed, grabbing my arm again before my fingers could wrap around the knife. “Can’t you try something a little less dramatic? And violent? Something not as likely to blow up in our faces?”

“Fine.” I groaned as another idea came to me. Ganfael was clearly obsessed with Fae, and he *had* asked Greyson to bring a Fae to his party. And when I’d met him, he’d tried to flirt with me.

I could use that—as awkward and disgusting as it was. I’d hate myself, and I’d probably need to take a thousand showers later, but it would be worth it if it meant we could get the Shard for Cali.

I nodded. “I’ve got this. Don’t worry.”

“Wait. What exactly do you have in mind?”

I put a hand on my hip, thrust out my chest, and gave him my best sultry smile. “I’m going to seduce that disgusting asshat.”

Greyson groaned. “Okay, that idea might be even worse than the other one.”

“Always a critic. At least it’s an idea. You won’t let me cut his finger off—what else am I supposed to do?”

“I don’t know, something between committing assault and being a honeypot?”

I frowned. “This doesn’t have anything to do with honey.”

He shook his head. “Never mind. The point is, it’s a terrible idea.”

“Okay, do *you* want to go seduce Ganfael instead?” I crossed my arms. “Since violence is off the table and we’re trying to avoid attracting attention from anyone else here, we’re running low on options.”

The big bad Redwood Alpha looked ready to throw up.

“I thought so,” I said. “You go distract the Dark Fae, and leave the rest to me. We’ll have that ring in no time.”

I hung back, out of Lysander’s direct line of sight, watching as Greyson approached and effortlessly drew him into conversation. Moments later, Greyson was leading him out toward the garden.

In all the time I’d spent with werewolves, especially with Greyson as the head of the Redwood pack, it was easy to forget how effective he could be at persuasion and manipulation. As the pack leader, Greyson focused on diplomacy and keeping his pack strong and defensible. But now, all alone, he was utilizing a whole different skill set. Maybe it was from all the time he’d lived as a Rogue.

*I have to hand it to Greyson—he can hold up his end of things. He would’ve made a hell of a bounty hunter.*

Once Greyson and Ganfael’s guest of honor were out of sight, I headed for our host. I hated Ganfael on a level usually reserved for people I knew better, but this wasn’t the first time I’d had to use seduction to disarm someone. When strength and intimidation had failed me in my bounty hunting days, seduction had been my go-to backup.

It had worked just about every time. I’d never given it much thought, never asked myself if it was right or wrong. It had just been another weapon in my arsenal. But even I had to admit that it was going to take a hell of a lot of acting to pull this off.

There wasn’t a single thing about Ganfael that I didn’t find repulsive.

I sidled up to Ganfael and stole a glance at the blue Fae ring. “I’ve been hoping to speak to you alone,” I said, my voice low.

His brows rose. “Really? I was getting the impression you didn’t like me much.”

Okay, so he wasn’t quite as oblivious as he let on.

I pasted on a smile and poured it on thick. “Forgive me—I’ve lived here in the human world for so long. I’ve forgotten what it’s like to speak with such a handsome man who clearly knows so much about my world.” I glanced up at him from beneath my eyelashes. “Am I correct in assuming you’re just as knowledgeable about how to treat a Fae woman?”

Ganfael’s throat bobbed. “Um…”

Hook, line, and sinker.

I put a hand on his shoulder and leaned in closer. “Is there somewhere we can talk more… intimately?”

Heat rushed into his face so fast, I thought for a moment he was going to pass out. “Um, of course! I…” He cleared his throat. “I have much knowledge I’d love to share with such an intoxicating creature.”

It took everything I had not to gag. Instead, I kept that smile glued to my face. *Keep your eyes on the prize. Get the ring, so we can get the Shard, so we can help Cali. That’s the objective.*

I allowed Ganfael to take my hand and lead me away from the party and to a door just down the hall.

“I hope this isn’t too forward,” he said as he pushed the door open.

I braced myself to see his bedroom, but instead, the room beyond was a parlor. It reeked of cigar smoke.

He closed the door behind him and led me over to a small loveseat. “Shall we sit?”

I took a seat beside him, placing one hand on his knee. My other hand lingered near my knife. “Finally, we’re alone.”

“Mm.” He reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “I meant what I said before. You truly are an intoxicating creature.”

*And you truly are a disgusting pig.*

I batted my eyelashes at him, pretending to be flustered by the compliment. “I value a man who admires a Fae like myself. It’s been so long.”

“And admire you, I do.” He leaned in, his eyes drinking me in. “I’m sorry, but I can’t take my eyes off you. You’re so beautiful. So otherworldly. Perfect in every way.”

Gods, I wanted to poke his eyes out. I smiled instead. “You’re too kind.”

“I’m pleased that we seem to have recognized each other’s strengths so quickly. You, a lush, untamed beauty. Me, full of strength and prowess. What a match.”

I squeezed his thigh. “I do love a strong man.” Slowly, carefully, and sensually, I moved onto his lap and straddled him. I let my mind wander to Rishika, imagining it was her lap I was sitting on, instead of this disgusting warlock I was trying to seduce. It was the only thing that kept the smile on my face.

Ganfael looked up at me, leaning in so our lips were mere inches apart. The soothing image of Rishika was swept away by his breath on my face.

I pressed a finger to his lips. “Let’s not rush this. Let’s savor it.”

I reached for his hand and brought it to my mouth. My lips dragged over his index finger until the whole thing was in my mouth. Ganfael looked like he was going to have a heart attack, but he didn’t stop me. I kissed and sucked and licked each finger, working my way down to his pinky.

*I really should have just started with the pinky… This is for Cali. It’s worth it.*

I stilled when I felt the ring against my teeth. I clamped down and tugged—the ring was stuck.

Ganfael grabbed my wrist, his eyes wide. “What the hell are you doing?”

I tried again to pull the ring off with my teeth, reaching for the knife hidden at my waist. I couldn’t leave this room without that ring—I had to get it, no matter what.

His free hand wrapped around my neck, and he tried to push me off his lap. I slipped down his thighs, grabbing at his shoulders, and bit down *hard*. Bones crunched, and blood spurted into my mouth, along with the ring. And his pinky.

I leapt off him as he jumped up in shock. “Give me that ring, you Fae bitch!”

As I turned to make my escape, the door burst open and a guy moved to block my way.

# Episode 3566

**Greyson**

What the hell was taking Artemis so long?

I kept glancing around the room while I pretended to be interested in the Dark Fae Lysander’s *many* ruminations on the war. He’d hardly taken any prompting at all. A carefully phrased question here and there, and he was practically on autopilot. All I had to do was nod every so often and look minimally engaged. Not exactly a huge test of my subterfuge skills. The guy wanted someone to talk at.

And as the time dragged on, a quiet sense of worry burrowed its way beneath my skin. Where the hell was Artemis? This *was* taking a long time, right? Unless this Lysander was so boring that listening to him had actually warped my sense of time?

I never should have let Artemis go through with her awful seduction plan. If anything happened to her, Cali would never forgive me. Getting the Shard would mean nothing if we didn’t bring Artemis back with us safe.

The Dark Fae droned on. I’d stopped listening a while ago, but even standing here keeping him occupied was beginning to wear on me. How could I keep him busy while I searched the house for Artemis? The place wasn’t that big. She and Ganfael had to be around here somewhere.

I didn’t know anyone else here, so it wasn’t like I could set him up with someone else and have them babysit him…

*Maybe if I put him in front of a mirror, he won’t know the difference?*

No, that idea was worse than Artemis seducing Ganfael.

“Greyson!”

Xavier, Gabriel, Mikah, and Kira rushed toward me, and I waved them over.

Lysander’s expression lit up. “I had no idea Ganfael had invited so many werewolves! How extraordinary.” His brow furrowed as he glanced around. “Where is he, anyway?”

“This is my brother, Xavier,” I cut in. I didn’t want him thinking about Ganfael at all right now, and I definitely didn’t want him asking questions. “And this is Gabriel, Mikah, and Kira.”

Ganfael eyed Xavier and Gabriel appreciatively before turning back to me. “Is every werewolf in your pack so big?”

Xavier and Gabriel shared a look, and I kept my expression neutral as I explained. “We’re Alpha werewolves. We, uh… tend to run a little bigger.”

Lysander’s eyes widened. “I’ve always admired Alphas. To wield so much innate power and command so much respect… What a gift.”

“Yep.” I grabbed Gabriel’s arm and hauled him forward. “And Gabriel here would love to answer all your questions about Alphas. I bet he’d also love to hear your war stories.”

“Wonderful!”

Gabriel looked at me like I’d just stabbed him in the back.

“Just keep him busy,” I whispered. “We’re close to getting the ring.”

*I think.* Or, at least, I hoped.

Gabriel cleared his throat and smiled at Lysander. “Before you ask, yes—my wolf is even bigger when I shift…”

With the Dark Fae occupied, I grabbed Xavier’s arm and led him away.

“Did you get it?” he asked.

“We located it,” I said carefully, “and Artemis and I have a plan to get it.”

He scowled. “So you *don’t* have it. What the hell have you been doing all this time?”

“Keep your voice down,” I hissed. “Believe it or not, we’re trying to be discreet while we get the ring.”

“So what is this plan of yours, anyway?”

I grimaced. “I had to keep that guy”—I nodded toward the Dark Fae—“busy while Artemis went off with Ganfael to get the ring. He’s wearing it. But it’s been a while, and they haven’t come back. I’m getting worried.”

“Dammit.” Xavier sighed. “I’ll look for them. It won’t do us any good to get the ring if we lose Artemis in the process. Cali will never forgive us.”

“I’ve been thinking the same thing.”

“Do you have any idea where they went?”

I winced. “Artemis’s plan was to seduce him in order to get the ring off him… So my best guess is they’re in his bedroom?”

Xavier went still. “Are you shitting me?”

“I wish I were.”

“You let her try to *seduce* a dangerous warlock?”

“Hey, you don’t *let* Artemis do anything. She does what she wants. And she was confident in this move.” And seeing how the only other plan she’d had was cutting off Ganfael’s finger, seduction still seemed the wiser option. “But the point is, we might start by looking in the bedrooms.”

Xavier growled under his breath. “So, what? Best-case scenario, we interrupt her seduction attempt, and worst-case scenario, she’s in trouble?”

“I don’t think there’s anything but worsts in this situation.” I sighed. I hated to admit it, but Xavier was right. I should have tried harder to persuade her to let this plan go.

“Why do I get the feeling we’re going to have to resort to something more persuasive? Do you really think this crazy plan is going to work?”

I shrugged. “I have my doubts—not that Artemis isn't capable of seducing a blowhard Fae-obsessed asshole, but we don’t know much about Ganfael. He could be smarter than he seems.”

“We’d better hope he’s not more dangerous, too.” He growled. “What a huge waste of time. We should have just taken the Shard by force—then we’d be done with this horror show.”

I didn’t want to waste any more time arguing, but taking the Shard by force was the last option, as far as I was concerned. I hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

I nodded toward a hallway off from the main room. “Let’s start there.”

“THAT’S A FUCKING LIE!”

Xavier and I froze and spun around, watching—along with everyone else at the party—as Gabriel grabbed Lysander.

“You don’t know anything!” he snarled.

I doubled back to break it up before things got nasty. “Hey, cool it, Gabriel.”

*What the hell is going on? Can I not leave this guy alone for ten minutes?* It wasn’t like Lysander had been hard to keep occupied when I was talking to him earlier.

Mikah pulled Gabriel away from the Fae, and Xavier stepped in front of the pair, looking ready to commit murder.

The Fae, on the other hand, just smoothed down his shirt. “Your friend is a bit hotheaded, isn’t he? Is that common for werewolves?”

I plastered on a smile. “It can be. We’re, uh… passionate. You’ll have to forgive him.”

“Fair enough.” Lysander shrugged. “I was only asking for information about a cowardly fugitive who is wanted back in the Fae world. I don’t suppose you know of a Fae named Adair?”

I looked him straight in the eye. “Never heard of him.”

“It seems your friend has.” Lysander nodded back at Gabriel, whose chest rose and fell with barely suppressed fury. I understood that he cared about Adair, that Gabriel was protective of him. But if he outed us for having connections to Adair, that wasn’t going to help anyone.

I shot Gabriel a pointed look before turning back to the Dark Fae. “I’m not sure what set him off—we don’t get involved in Fae politics.”

Lysander studied my face, then nodded. “Perhaps it was a misunderstanding.”

I wasn’t buying it. If this Fae was Ganfael’s guest of honor, and he’d branded Adair a traitor, and he had even an ounce of common sense, he wasn’t going to brush Gabriel’s response off so easily. After all, Gabriel had as good as tipped him off. Why else would he react like that if he didn’t know Adair?

Xavier was heading for the door when a couple of Fae slipped in front of him, blocking his path. And then I realized he wasn’t the only one the Fae were closing in on. Gabriel, Mikah, Kira, and I were all being approached by the Fae in the room, targeted and singled out.

This was exactly what I’d been trying to avoid.

I put my hands up. “We don’t want any trouble. We’re guests here, same as all of you.”

Lysander’s eyes narrowed. “Why are you here? You say you don’t involve yourself in Fae politics, and yet you’re here tonight, among the Fae who are determined to change the tide in the war.”

“We’re here because Ganfael invited us. I do apologize if a few feathers were ruffled tonight. We mean no harm.” I decided to try laying it on thick. “I suspect being around so many powerful Fae has us a bit on edge. We’re not used to sharing a room with so many other powerful beings.” I laughed. “How about we all have a drink and forget this ever happened?”

Surprisingly enough, the compliment seemed to work. There was some grumbling and more than a few suspicious looks, but the Fae slowly dispersed.

I let out a breath and turned back to Lysander. “Can I get you a beer?”

A loud scream echoed from another room, and my blood went cold.

*Artemis. Shit.*

I turned as she came dashing into the room, her face bloodied. She stopped and spat something out of her mouth. The other Fae jumped back in horror as a severed finger hit the ground.

Then she pulled something else out of her mouth—the blue ring. “Got it! But I think we’d better go.”

# Episode 3567

All the girls reacted to my scream. Rishika and Lola leapt to their feet, looking around wildly.

“What’s happening?” Rishika asked.

Lola knelt down in front of me to look into my eyes. “Hey. I’m right here. Are you okay? What’s going on? Are you in pain?”

I sucked in a shallow breath as horror rattled through me, left me breathless. But as I kept breathing, something in my vision shifted. I blinked. Everyone looked normal now. Nobody was melting.

Wordlessly, I looked down at the rosé. *How strong is this stuff?*

“Cali, you’re scaring me.” Lola gently touched my arm. “Are you okay?”

I nodded and forced a shaky smile. “I… I’m sorry. I thought I… I thought I saw a mouse,” I lied.

Sage squealed and jumped on her chair. “A MOUSE?”

Rishika frowned. “You’ve fought vampires and revenants and just about everything else, but a mouse scares you?”

Sage grimaced. “Duh! Don’t you know how diseased they are?”

“How did a mouse even get in?” Violet asked. “Most animals know to stay away from the pack house. They smell us and keep their distance.”

Lola looked at me, her brow furrowing. “Are you sure you saw a mouse? I think we would’ve smelled it too.”

Already, my lie was falling to pieces. I shook my head. “Maybe it was a bug or something, then? Either way, I’m okay. Sorry for the false alarm.”

“Okay, but was it a bug or a mouse?” Sage asked. “I need to know!”

I sighed. “A bug, probably.” I scanned my brain for something harmless. “One of those house spiders.”

Violet blanched. “You saw a spider the size of a mouse?” She looked around, her eyes wide, and lifted her legs onto her seat so they weren’t touching the floor. “Did you, um… Did you see where it went?”

I just couldn’t win. “Sorry, no. It was there and then it was gone. I might even have imagined it.”

Violet didn’t look at all comforted, but Sage at least sat back down in her chair.

“Come on, ladies!” Lola said, looking around the room. “Most of us here are strong werewolves, and the two who aren’t are powerful witches.” She smiled at Dani and Tabitha. “We can handle a mouse, or a house spider, or anything else that comes our way.”

I pulled in a deep breath as Lola continued with her pep talk. “I’m gonna go to the bathroom,” I mumbled to anyone who was listening. “Excuse me.”

I used all my self-control to walk—not run—to the bathroom. As soon as I made it inside, I shut and locked the door behind me and leaned against it. The meditation Kira taught me rushed to the forefront of my mind.

I breathed slowly and deeply for a few long seconds. *Just slow down. Everything is fine.*

When my heart stopped trying to break through my ribcage and my stomach stopped heaving, I went to the sink and splashed some water on my face. Then I grabbed a towel and wiped it off.

The water was cool, and my mind was a little calmer. I felt better. Felt like myself.

*What even was that?* *Another hallucination?* I grimaced at the implications and shook my head. *No*. *Must’ve just been a reaction to the stress of the day.*

A lot had happened, what with my mates being off looking for a magical artifact, chaperoning Elle’s date, and Aysel’s hypnosis nonsense.

I was fine. Just a little overwhelmed. Nothing to worry about.

I set down the towel and looked at my reflection in the mirror. I got a glimpse of my pale face and the dark circles beneath my eyes before my face started to melt.

My heart tripped over itself, then skipped up into overtime.

“Don’t panic,” I told myself. “Don’t panic.”

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, holding the counter with a white-knuckled grip.

*This is all in your head. It’s not happening. It’s not real. You’re safe and whole, and you’re not melting.*

*This is just PTSD and magic. And it sucks. But it’s not real.*

“Get a grip,” I whispered. “You’re here, you’re safe. It’s not real.”

But it was easier to tell myself something over and over than to actually believe it. Even as I whispered all those reassurances, my heart slammed against my ribcage. It grew harder and harder to catch my breath. My stomach twisted so violently I thought for a moment I was going to be sick all over the counter.

I wished Greyson and Xavier were here. They might not have been able to stop… whatever this was, but I always felt safer with them nearby.

I forced myself to open my eyes. My face wasn’t melting anymore, but now Greyson and Xavier were staring back at me from the mirror. I glanced behind me, though I already knew they weren’t physically here with me. I was alone.

This was just another hallucination.

I looked back at them in the mirror, some strange combination of hope and dread weighing down my chest.

“Don’t worry, love,” Greyson said. “You’re going to be all right.”

Xavier nodded. “Just focus on your breaths. One at a time. Count to ten.”

Hallucination or not, it was the comfort I so desperately needed. I followed Xavier’s advice, closing my eyes and breathing through a full count of ten. When I finished counting and opened my eyes, my mates were still standing there, looking at me.

I knew they weren’t real, but I still spoke to them. “I’m sorry about the letter. About the *due destini*. I’m sorry that the *due destini* brought about this whole Seluna mess, and so many other problems in the past. It’s all my fault.” Tears pricked at my eyes. “I wish the mate bond could just override this curse, but it doesn’t seem to work like that.”

These were all the things I’d longed to tell my real mates but had never been able to bring myself to say.

“Don’t think that way,” Greyson said.

“We knew what we were getting into,” Xavier added. “You’re worth every fucking second.”

It was exactly what I wanted to hear—the perfect combination of words to comfort the unease hooked deep in my chest. I wished they were really here, that they were really saying all this.

But it worked. I felt a little better, and none of our faces were melting. I looked like myself again—rattled, maybe, but not like weird painting with sagging cheeks and dripping eyes.

It felt like years had passed since I’d left the living room to hide out in the bathroom, but when I returned, the girls were still there. Like it had been just a few minutes—not an exhausting eternity.

I slumped down next to Lola and rested my head on her shoulder. “I might need to just go to bed.”

“What?” Lola turned to look at me. “No, no. We’re just getting started! What about the nail polish train later? And the blackhead peels? I’ve got a whole self-care itinerary worked out!”

I gave her a weak smile. “That sounds like fun, but I’m just so tired and worried. I don’t think I could enjoy myself, and I don’t want to bring everyone down.”

“Okay, then.” She hugged me. “But if you need anything, we’re here. Okay?”

I nodded. “Thanks, Lola.”

Still on the couch, I tried to brace myself for the act of going upstairs to be alone again. To sleep alone again. If I was seeing things that weren’t there when surrounded by other people, what would happen when I was alone?

But that was silly. I wasn’t alone. Everyone was here. And even if I went up to my room, I’d only have to call for help and people would come running. And Xavier and Greyson would be back soon.

*Maybe I can stay awake for them…* I blinked sleepily. I didn’t know if I had the strength to stay awake another minute, let alone wait until they came back, whenever that would be.

I thought back to the meeting with Vander, how they’d said that it took time for magic to return to a balanced state. How Big Mac had pretty much said the same thing about my own recovery. That it would take time.

But I didn’t know how much more I could take of this weird balancing act. If the Shard didn’t work, if it didn’t help me feel normal while the magic settled, maybe I’d be forced to reconsider Aysel’s offer.

I mean, hypnosis was crazy, but so was trusting the magic inside an old shard of glass. At least hypnosis was a concept from the human world.

I felt my eyes flutter shut. I was still on the couch, falling asleep against my will while the girls chatted around me. I felt safe, though, surrounded by people.

I was on the brink of drifting off when Jay, Ravi, and Charlie’s raised voices made me lurch awake.

I blinked sleepily. “What’s going on?”

Jay rushed into the room. “Battle stations, everyone—there’s a Rogue outside.”

# Episode 3568

**Xavier**

I stared down at Ganfael’s severed finger. *Gross.* The presentation left a lot to be desired, but I had to give it to Artemis for doing whatever it took to get the ring.

Gabe came up beside me. “We’ve got to get out of here,” he said, his voice steady as he eyed down the other Fae, who were still recovering from the shock of seeing Ganfael’s finger in the palm of Artemis’s hand.

Seconds later, Ganfael came running in, cradling his bloodied hand. “Stop that Fae!”

Artemis had dropped the finger and was now holding the blue ring in one hand and wiping the blood off her chin with the other. Ganfael looked like he was seconds from blasting Artemis with magic.

I grabbed a chair and swung it at Ganfael. It caught him in the shoulder and he flew back, slamming into another Fae who’d come running in, his nose dripping with blood. While the Fae recovered, I grabbed Artemis and pulled her out of the fray. I wasn’t about to let anyone take that ring from her. We’d come too far to lose our only bargaining chip.

Greyson was facing off with a Fae who was lobbing bolt after bolt of magic at him. The Fae was relentless, but Greyson was fast. He easily dodged a barrage of bolts, rounded on the Fae, then slapped him across the face, sending him stumbling into a wall.

“Get Artemis out of here!” Greyson said as he turned to face another approaching opponent. “I’ll do what I can to hold them off!”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Artemis said. She rounded on Ganfael, who was looking at her with murder in his eyes. “We came here to get the Shard, and I didn’t go to all this trouble just to turn and run away.”

“Agreed,” I said, keeping my eyes on all the Fae in case they made any sudden moves. “We can fight our way out of this if we have to.”

“Maybe,” Gabe said, “but the odds are heavily against us. Ganfael’s pretty powerful, and the Fae definitely aren’t on our side.”

Kira came running over. “I can blip us all out of here to safety,” she said. “Just give me a minute to prepare.”

Artemis shook her head. “Don’t even try, not without the Shard! We came here for it, and we’re leaving with it.”

“Artemis is right. We have to get the Shard, or all of this will have been for nothing.” I turned to Ganfael, who still seemed a little shocked by the fact that he was down a finger.   
“I guess we really don’t have any choice but to fight.” I squared off against the Fae with the bloody nose, who was running toward me.

Ganfael blasted that Fae out of the way, then turned to me and Artemis. “Stop! Stop! Everyone stop!” He raised his hands, and every window and door in the place slammed shut and turned to stone. Ganfael, obviously having overcome his loss, stepped toward Artemis menacingly, holding out his good hand. “Hand it over. Now. And maybe I’ll let you all live.”

I scanned the room, hoping to find at least one exit, but there was nothing. Ganfael had sealed the place up tight. Even if we wanted to escape, we couldn’t. There was no way out, and even if Kira tried to blip us, we’d be leaving without the Shard. We were stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Ganfael flicked his wrist and used his magic to move his severed finger toward him.

I smiled darkly at him. “You want this?” I said, putting my foot down on the finger to stop its progress.

“I don’t give a flying fuck about my finger,” Ganfael said. “I just want the ring.”

With another quick flick of his wrist, he directed his magic toward Artemis and began to pull the ring from her hand. She held on tight, struggling to keep hold of it. It was glowing now, and Ganfael’s magic was obviously getting stronger by the second, since she was really having a hard time keeping hold of it.

I turned and lunged toward Ganfael, only to slam into an invisible barrier. Stunned, I crashed to the floor.

“Artemis, you have to fight him off!” I shouted breathlessly.

“I’m trying!” Artemis said.

Gabe rushed to her side and grabbed onto the ring to help, but Ganfael’s power was too strong, and soon they were losing their grip.

*I have to do something, or we’re going to lose the ring—and with it, any chance of getting the Shard.*

I got up, swiped the finger off the floor—gross—and hurled it at Ganfael. It smacked him right in the temple, and he jumped back in shock. His magic was only interrupted for a second, but that was enough for Artemis to regain control of the ring. I rushed to her side, along with Gabe, Mikah, Greyson, and Kira. We were all backed up against the stone wall that used to be a door. Even though we had control of the ring for now, Ganfael was recovering fast, and things were starting to look a little grim.

“Got any ideas?” I asked Greyson.

“We can start with this,” Kira said. She magicked a shimmering shield in front of us. “I won’t be able to keep it up for long, but it’s something.”

We all turned to face Ganfael and the other Fae, who were closing in.

“Give me the ring,” I said to Artemis.

“I don’t know… I went through a lot to get this.” She spat a glob of blood onto the floor.

“Trust me,” I said to her.

“Fine.” Artemis handed it over.

Ring in hand, I turned to face Ganfael. “How about we make a deal?”

Ganfael was now holding his severed pinky finger and looked like making a deal was the furthest thing from his mind, unless that deal involved killing us all before rushing off to get his finger reattached.

“I’m not in the mood to play games,” the warlock spat. “I want my ring, and now, I also want your heads.”

“Fine,” I said. “If that’s the way you want it.” I turned to Kira and held the ring out to her. “Destroy it.”

Everyone gasped, and Ganfael’s eyes were smoldering as he looked at me. “You wouldn’t dare!”

“Are you willing to take that chance? Test me. See if I’m bluffing or not.”

“What the hell are you doing?” Greyson hissed at me.

I grinned at him. “Just a little bartering.”

“You have no idea what you’re doing!” Ganfael yelled. “That ring is irreplaceable. It’s an artifact! It’s clear that you have no idea what you have in your hand, or you wouldn’t be toying with the idea of destroying it. So that begs the question—what does a werewolf pack want with a ring they don’t even understand?”

“You’re right. I have no idea what this thing is, but that doesn’t matter. It’s useless to me, but obviously it’s valuable as hell to you. So… maybe you’d like to make a trade for it.”

“Not on your life!” Ganfael snarled.

“Kira…” I held the ring out to her again, and she lifted her hands like she was about to strike it with magic.

“Wait!” Ganfael shouted. “What do you want?”

“The Shard of Catholicon. That’s all. If you give it to us, the ring is yours, and we’ll get out of your hair. If you don’t, well…” I gave Kira another look.

The Fae murmured something to Ganfael, but he shook his head. “This is madness! I won’t negotiate with this—this—*dog* over my own possessions!” Ganfael looked at me, his eyes flashing. “There’s no way in hell I’m agreeing to that!”

I stared back at Ganfael, wondering if he might actually hold out and call my bluff. *Cali is all that matters, here, not a pissing contest with a warlock. I need to do whatever it takes to get the Shard.*

“Listen, Ganfael, we’d only need it for a while. Think of it like a library book—we’ll take it now, but we’ll return it to you, good as new. Eventually.”

Ganfael’s face folded into a scowl. “I’m not running a library of Fae artifacts!” He sent a burst of magic spiraling our way, and it exploded against the shield. Kira groaned on impact as she strained to keep the barrier intact.

“I don’t know how much longer I can hold this thing, Xavier,” she hissed.

A wicked smile spread across Ganfael’s face. “That shield will crack after another good hit, and they can’t defend themselves against all of us!” he said to the Fae. “Attack!”

“Why would you listen to a pretentious warlock like him! He isn’t even Fae! I thought Fae had more dignity than that!” I shouted at Ganfael’s minions.

The Fae hesitated for a moment, and my heart leapt.

*Yes! I got through to them!*

But then they attacked.

# Episode 3569

“A Rogue, outside?” Just the idea of it had me rattled. Any mention of Rogues always brought up all kinds of worries, especially after everything we’d been through. “Are we being attacked?”

The pack house was so vulnerable at the moment with Greyson, Xavier, and the others away helping me, and who knew where Big Mac and Adair had run off to?

“I don’t know, but we all need to assemble,” Rishika said, immediately taking charge. “I’ll go warn the others.”

There was a bit of commotion as word spread. Soon, everyone had gathered in the living room—an army of supernaturals.

“All right, everyone, this could be a threat, or it could be nothing, but either way, follow my lead,” Rishika said as she led the way to the door.

As I fell into step behind her, Lola grabbed me by the arm. “I thought you were tired,” she said.

“I am, but I’m a part of this pack, and I’m not going to hide behind any excuses. I’m strong enough to join the rest of you, and I can probably even provide some defense with my magic if things get really bad.”

“Fine,” Lola said, letting me go. “But if you feel like it’s too much at any moment, you have to back off.”

I nodded my agreement and turned to follow the others.

“Ravi and I picked up the scent while on patrol in the western perimeter,” Jay said. “We gave chase, but the wind shifted suddenly and we lost the scent.”

Lola looked excited. “I can smell blood!” Her eyes were shining with anticipation.

I couldn’t help but wonder when she’d last fed. I hoped that her bloodlust wouldn’t kick into overdrive, though she’d gotten really good at keeping it in check. It was a far cry from when she’d first been turned and had been dealing with vampire heat along with a huge appetite. It had been immediately after she’d first turned that she’d drunk my blood. I shuddered at the memory. My bestie had definitely come a long way.

Even though I’d told Lola that I wanted to help, there was a part of me that was worried I’d get in the thick of things, only to have the Seluna mark strike me useless at the last minute.

I went up to Rishika. “Do you think I should come?”

I really trusted Rishika’s opinion, and though I wasn’t sure if I would back down if she told me I shouldn’t, I still wanted her take on things.

Rishika paused and looked at me. “Honestly? If anything were to happen to you and Xavier and Greyson weren’t here…”

“They’d have everyone’s heads,” Lola finished for her.

“No, that’s not true!” I said. Even as I said it, though, I knew that Lola was right. Xavier and Greyson were so protective of me that they would probably chew everyone out if anything went wrong. But I still wanted to believe that they weren’t that predictable.

“It is,” Lola deadpanned. “Haven’t you been paying attention? If Cali suffers, we all suffer.”

I wasn’t in a position to argue, but I still didn’t want my friends to go up against any threat without my help.

“I’m coming,” I said, grabbing my jacket. “And nothing’s going to happen to me, so none of you have to worry about Xavier and Greyson.”

Outside, it was dark and still. There wasn’t any sign that anyone was around at all. It felt kind of eerie. Once again, I wished that I had werewolf senses that let me see and hear clearly in the darkness. It was unsettling to know that I wouldn’t be able to see the danger coming if something was actually stalking us.

Rishika gathered Jay, Ravi, Sage, and Charlie to her side. “We’re going up ahead. The rest of you stay back here at the house with Zainab. If there’s any sign of trouble, protect each other. You all know the drill.”

Rishika and her group shifted and raced out into the woods. I hoped they’d be all right. Things seemed quiet right now, but I knew how quickly that could change. I remembered how formidable Ryker had been during the Lupo Finale, and how terrified everyone had been when they’d thought that Greyson was a murderous Rogue. He’d proven that he wasn’t, but I’d learned that when it came to Rogues, you could never quite predict what you were going to get. They were either focused on living life on their own terms without interference with other wolves, or they were the exact opposite and made it their job to terrorize any pack they came across. It was a mixed bag, for sure.

“Violet and I are going to circle the perimeter of the house,” Zainab said. “Everyone else, stay vigilant.”

“And I’ll stay on the porch and keep a look out,” Lola said. “No one’s going to get past me.”

“Do you want to come inside?” my mother asked me. “It’s cold out, and I know you’re not one hundred percent just yet.”

I shook my head. “No. I’m going to stay here, too. I want to help if I can.”

There was no way I was going to let my family and friends face this on their own. It might not be anything at all, but if it was, they would need me.

I closed my eyes and gathered my magic. I wanted it to be at the ready in case something caught us by surprise. Calling my magic had become a familiar feeling, and I liked how it felt moving around inside me. It made me feel powerful and capable. It hadn’t always been this way, and I was grateful to have reached a point where I felt more like an asset than a liability. I was confident that if whatever was out there did manage to make its way to the house, I would be ready.

Our group stayed close to the house while we stared out into the darkness for any sign of whoever Jay and Ravi had found. Time passed, nothing was happening, and I was getting pretty cold. I clapped my hands together, trying to warm them, and stamped my feet. This sort of thing was definitely a lot easier during the warmer months.

Jacqueline yawned. “This is getting boring.” She turned back toward the house. “Call me if something fun happens.”

“Yeah, I think it might have been a false alarm,” I said, turning to head back in with her. I stopped short at the unmistakable sound of a wolf howling nearby.

A different kind of chill raced down my spine as I readied myself, pulling my magic even closer. The howl came again, and it sounded closer than before. It was more than a howl—it was a mix of yips, growls, and other wolfy sounds, all echoing through the darkness.

A wolf tore out of the trees, running right for the house at a fast clip. The Redwoods were right on its heels. The wolf looked injured and was limping just a little, but when it came to werewolves, that didn’t really mean a damn thing. They could fight and function through injuries that would put anyone else down for the count. I planted my feet, ready to blast it if I needed to.

Suddenly the wolf stumbled and fell, shifting to human as it tumbled to the ground and lay there, not moving.

I gasped as I stepped forward a little to get a better look. “It’s just a kid!”

It was a young teenager, and he was bleeding profusely.

*Why isn’t he healing?*

I ran toward him as everyone yelled for me to stop, but I didn’t listen. As I approached, I heard him begging for help. His breath was coming in short, hard gasps, and he was writhing as if in intense pain.

Rishika and the other wolves skidded to stop nearby and circled the downed Rogue.

I held up a hand to them. “Stop! It’s just a kid.”

I stepped closer, finally able to see how badly injured he was.

“Help,” he whimpered. “Help me, please.”

I crouched down and draped my jacket over him, just as Jay shifted back to human.

“Jay, we have to help him!” I said. “I think he’s hurt really bad!”

Jay shook his head. “Cali, we don’t know who he is or what he’s doing out here. He’s a Rogue. For all we know—”

“I don’t care. He’s obviously not a threat to anyone right now, and he needs our help. Besides, you’re not in charge,” I said.

“No,” Jay said, his jaw tight. “But I’m looking out for the best interests of the pack, on behalf of the Alpha. That’s what we’re all doing.”

I shook my head. “I’m basically the Luna of this pack, aren’t I? We’re helping him, and that’s that.” I turned back to the shivering teenager. “What’s your name? Who are you?”

He opened his mouth to reply, but then his eyes rolled back in his head and he passed out.

# Episode 3570

**Artemis**

I kicked one of the Fae in the chest as he came at me, then I twisted out of the way of his counterattack. He was relentless and was still coming at me with his fists flying until a blast of magic sailed between us, narrowly missing my head and exploding against the wall behind Kira. The witch yelped and dove for cover as Ganfael unloaded volleys of magic at her.

The fight was in full swing, and it was clear that many of these Fae were loyal to Ganfael—though I couldn’t for the life of me figure out why. Fae were powerful in their own right, so I didn’t understand why they would align themselves with someone like him.

I spat on the floor again and winced in disgust. The taste of his blood was still bitter on my tongue. *What I wouldn’t give for a glass of water right now…*

Greyson and Gabriel shifted, snarling as they faced off with the Fae. I grabbed my knife and slashed one of the Fae as another came around to grab me from behind, pinning my arms to my sides. I struggled against his hold as he lifted me off the ground. The Fae I’d slashed had regrouped and was trying to attack, but I kept kicking my legs out to hold him back. I finally managed to twist out of the Fae’s hold, but he instantly caught me in a headlock and tried to yank me down to the floor.

I was trying to pry his hands away, but the Fae had a good grip, and I was losing my air supply. My vision was darkening, and my head was pulsing, but I was still fighting, determined not to go down easy. A thud shook me to my core, and the Fae’s grip finally loosened. He crumpled to the ground, and I went down with him, choking and gasping for air. I looked up and realized that Xavier had clubbed the Fae in the back with his fists. He’d come to my rescue just in time, as I’d been right on the brink of passing out.

Xavier hopped over me and the fallen Fae, then coldcocked the Fae in front of me, sending him crashing into a table.

“Come on!” Xavier said, reaching down and lifting me up from the floor. “Stay sharp, they mean business.”

“Thanks,” I rasped, still trying to catch my breath. My throat was aching pretty badly, and it kind of hurt to swallow, but at least I was back on my feet.

“We need to get that Shard!” Xavier said, glancing at Ganfael, who was sending out beams of magic that Kira was doing her best to keep from hitting the group. Ganfael was throwing so much at her that she couldn’t even throw back any attacks, she could only concentrate on blocking and deflecting, and I could tell she was losing steam.

“We do, but Ganfael’s not going to make it easy,” I said. “He’s wearing Kira down.”

Xavier’s eyes flashed. “If nothing else, I’m going to make him pay for delaying Cali’s recovery. She shouldn’t have to suffer just because this asshole isn’t good at sharing.”

“You took the words right out of my mouth,” I said.

Xavier put the ring in his mouth and shifted to wolf form before lunging at Ganfael. The warlock had just shot another powerful blast of magic at Kira that smashed against her shield and launched her back against the wall with a sickening crack. Kira slumped to the ground as a Fae with a dagger ran toward her.

I leapt up to stop him, but I tripped over Gabriel, who was tearing into one of the other Fae. I hit the ground right at the feet of the guy I’d punched while escaping Ganfael’s bedroom. Knowing that I needed to attack him before he attacked me, I scrambled to my feet and launched myself at him. I caught him by surprise, and we wrestled to the ground in a tangle of flailing limbs.

We were almost evenly matched, but he had a bit of an edge and was obviously a little more used to scuffling on the floor than I was. I was doing my absolute best to subdue him, but it wasn’t easy. All the while, the other Fae was still heading for Kira with his dagger at the ready.

*I have to help her! She’s not recovering fast enough to defend herself!*

I was twisting and straining against the man’s hold as we both battled to get the upper hand, but I wasn’t making much headway. Thankfully, Gabriel tossed aside the Fae he’d been fighting, then he and Mikah lunged at the dagger-wielding Fae and took him down before he could hurt Kira. Satisfied that Kira was fine for the moment, I turned my full attention toward getting myself out of the mess I was in.

*This guy is Fae! How could he be so foolish as to believe Ganfael’s bullshit about the Kollector? Why are any of these Fae listening to him? Does he have something on them?*

I gathered all the strength I had, and with one swift movement, I finally shifted my weight fast enough to pin the man down. He was struggling to get free, but I noticed he was only using defensive tactics. He’d had many opportunities to strike out at me but had taken none of them, only blocking my blows and never throwing any of his own. I didn’t get it, but I wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

*There’s something familiar about him, but I can’t quite put my finger on it…* There was too much going on for me to stop and search my memory. I could already see out of the corner of my eye that Ganfael and his minions were regrouping and holding Gabriel, Xavier, and Greyson at bay.

With no small amount of effort, I managed to hold the man steady. “Be still, or I’ll break your nose again,” I hissed.

Without a word, the Fae tossed me away and bolted down the hall. I took off after him, determined to keep him from escaping. As far as I was concerned, anyone who carried on in the name of the Kollector had to pay. There was no way I was going to let him—or anyone else—spread the Kollector’s madness around outside the Fae world.

The Fae took a sudden turn into a darkened den, and I followed.

“I’m warning you, I’m not going to stop until you give up!” I flashed one of my knives, but the Fae said nothing. He simply took a defensive stance and watched me closely.

I circled around him and then made my move, but at the same instant, I was hit with a blast of magic that sent the knife flying from my hand. I dropped to my knees, my head spinning. I was stunned as the Fae stepped closer, an energy whip crackling in his hand. I did a double take. *There’s only one Fae I know who can command his magic like that. No wonder he looks familiar.*

“Adair?”

The air in the room took on a strange shimmer, and the man morphed into Adair. I was stunned.

“How? What…?” My mouth was literally hanging open.

Adair held out a hand to me. “I had a little help from Big Mac. She used a spell to disguise me.” He rubbed the blood from his nose. “You have one hell of a right hook, by the way.”

“You’re lucky I didn’t bring my bow,” I said.

Adair smiled. “I know.”

I took his hand and let him hoist me to my feet. “Why are you here?”

I was still trying to make sense of everything and still a little stung from the magic whip.

“Somebody had to keep an eye on you,” he said with a shrug.

I was thrown by that. *My uncle came to look out for me.*

“Biting people’s fingers off?” Adair made a whistling sound. “Wow.”

I shrugged. “I’ve learned to do whatever’s necessary to get the win. Besides, he didn’t give me much of a choice.”

Adair’s smile widened. “I like the way you think. So, I guess the whip blew my cover?”

“It did,” I said. I could still feel its waning effects reverberating through my body. “You don’t see something like that every day.”

“Maybe one day I’ll teach you how to do it. They do come in handy.” He gave the whip a quick snap before it disappeared into thin air. “Then you won’t have to keep biting people’s fingers off.”

There was a loud crash. The fighting was still going strong in the other room.

“I have to get back,” I said. “We weren’t exactly winning this fight, last I checked. I have to help the others and get the Shard.” I turned to leave, and Adair followed me, but I stopped him. “You can’t go back in there. There’s a Dark Fae from the court—one of the ones I ran into in New Orleans. He’ll recognize you for sure.”

Adair and I were just beginning to make headway, and I didn’t want him to die before we got a chance to see if we could actually get along.

Adair’s expression darkened. “Then I guess I’ll just have to kill him.”

# Episode 3571

I pressed my fingers to the boy’s throat to make sure he was still breathing and let out a sigh of relief. He was alive.

“We need to take him inside,” I said. “He’s hurt and might have hypothermia.”

I didn’t like the look of the slight blue tinge to his skin, and while he was definitely breathing, it was faint.

Jay rolled his eye. “He might be a kid, but he’s also a werewolf. He’ll heal. We can’t just bring Rogues into the house without knowing what they’re up to. For all we know, he got hurt while staking out the house and planning an attack.”

“He’s in no state to do anything to us right now, either way,” I said. “If we just leave him, he might heal—or he might die out here, cold and alone. Do you really want that on your conscience?”

Jay was just being cautious, and I respected that, but there was no way I was going to just leave a child out in the elements to die—and there was no doubt in mind that that was exactly what would happen if we didn’t intervene.

“You know it’s the right thing to do, don’t you, Jay?” Lola asked as she came down from the porch to join us. “I think it’s the right risk to take.”

Jay looked conflicted as he turned to Rishika. “What do you think?”

Without hesitation, Rishika said, “Bring him in.”

I wasn’t surprised. Rishika was a badass and all, but she was just as caring as she was strong. It was no wonder Artemis loved her.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Jay grumbled as he scooped the kid up and took him inside.

“Put him in my bedroom,” I said as we all filed back into the pack house. “So he’ll be comfortable.”

Rishika shook her head. “No, that might be too risky. We’ll do what we can for him, but we shouldn’t let our guard down.”

“I’ll watch over him,” I said. “I’m not worried.”

“But I am,” Rishika said. “Your mates would flip if I let you do this and something happened to you, so no. You can watch over him, I don’t have a problem with that, but the kid is going in the basement. That way, he’ll be separated from the rest of the pack in case something goes wrong.”

I considered arguing with her, since my association with the basement wasn’t the greatest. Elle had been put there fairly recently when Adéluce had been trying to control her, and Greyson had been confined there when he’d had the mark of Letifer. All in all, it wasn’t the best environment for recovery. Still, I understood where Rishika was coming from. We didn’t know the boy at all, and Jay’s point was valid—he might’ve been injured, but he *could* still pose a threat to the pack.

I decided that getting him into the house had been enough of a victory that I could let this one go. I followed Jay and the others down into the basement. I felt bad as Jay placed him on a cot in the room with silver chains. It looked more like a prison cell than a place to nurse someone back to health. Jay reached for the chains, and my eyes went wide.

“Jay, you can’t be serious,” I said. “He’s just a kid.”

Jay let out an exasperated sigh. “Xavier was a kid once, too. So was I, so was Greyson—hell, so was Silas. Do you have any idea how strong a kid like this could be?”

“Sorry, Cali, but I’m with Jay on this one,” Rishika said. “Adolescent werewolves don’t have as much control over their impulses as adults, which means they’re a bit more dangerous. They can be really terrifying. Imagine a werewolf going through puberty, all full of angst and hard to deal with. It’s not pretty, and we’re already taking a really big risk as it is.”

Everyone groaned at the thought of Xavier and the others going through puberty, but I was lost in pleasant thoughts about what my mates had been like as young werewolves. I could see Xavier in particular being quite a handful.

“Okay, you’re probably right,” I said with a sigh. “But I’m going to stay down here with him until he wakes up. I hate the idea of him waking up chained in a strange place all by himself.”

I winced as Jay clamped one of the chains around the boy’s thin ankle. It was nearly too big for him, but I guessed that was better than it being too tight and hurting him. I didn’t know why I felt so responsible for this strange kid, but I wanted to do whatever I could to help him. The others were being cautious for good reason, but I couldn’t imagine that he would try to attack us once he learned that we’d taken him in to help him. He’d most likely be really grateful.

“Someone get Torin,” I said. “Maybe he can heal him enough to stabilize him. Then we’ll learn exactly what his story is.”

“I’ll go get him,” Sage said.

Rishika hovered over the boy, examining his wounds. She shook her head.

“His injuries are pretty awful,” I said with a wince. “I can only imagine how much pain he’s in. Who would do such a horrible thing to a kid?”

“Someone tried to kill him, and they almost succeeded,” Jay said evenly. “The big question is, why?”

“Maybe he deserved it,” Jacs said. “Maybe he’s not really a sweet innocent boy. Maybe he’s a wanted killer on the loose. Billy the Kid was just a kid, too.”

“I think we’re getting a little ahead of ourselves,” I said. “We can’t judge him before he wakes up and has a chance to explain himself.”

Torin came running in and put a hand to his mouth in shock when he saw the boy lying on the cot. “What happened to him?”

“We don’t know yet, Torin, but we’re hoping to find out once you heal him. Do you think you can help him?” I asked.

“I can try.” Torin wasted no time looking the boy over, his face set in concentration. “He’s in pretty bad shape. I hope I’m not too late.”

He immediately went to work, closing his eyes and summoning his Fae magic, the faint blue light that he hovered over the boy’s wounds.

I stood by and watched, thinking about how I’d had to take charge and act like a Luna. I hadn’t even hesitated, and that made me feel good. I imagined that had to be what it was like to be a real Luna—a role I truly hoped to take on one day. It was at times like this that I really felt I would be the best Luna the Redwood pack could have.

*But that would require me making a choice, since there’s no way I can be Luna with two mates.* I thought about the letter in the study, and how I still wasn’t ready to find out whether the *due destini* curse was active or not—and whether I could indeed make that choice without any consequences. *I won’t be able to choose anytime soon. I’m still too afraid to find out if I even* have *a choice.*

Still, it counted for something that I was mated to the two strongest Alpha males in the pack. The others had to respect what I said, whether I was their official Luna or not.

“We have to take action,” Rishika said. “Jay has a point. Someone wanted this kid dead, and that somebody could still be hunting him.” She turned to face the pack. “I’m going to send a couple of teams out to scout the area and make sure this kid hasn’t brought any unwelcome visitors our way.”

Hearing this, my heart started pounding.

*Was Jay right all along? Did I just talk everyone into inviting something bad to come after the pack?*

But I couldn’t worry about that right now, and luckily, Rishika was on top of things. With her in charge, I hoped that we’d be able to stop any threat before it could hurt the pack.

The teams formed and went out to patrol the perimeter, leaving me, Torin, Ravi, and Rishika alone with the kid. I was grateful that the entire pack wasn’t still here. If the boy came to, it would be terrifying for him to wake up surrounded by a bunch of strangers.

After what seemed like an eternity, Torin stepped back from the boy and wiped the blood from his hands with a cloth that Rishika handed him. “The wounds are healing, but he’s lost a lot of blood. It’ll be touch and go from here. I’ve done all that I can.”

I sandwiched the boy’s cold hands between mine, trying to warm them up. Almost immediately, his eyes snapped open, and he looked around wildly.

“Where am I?” he croaked. “Who are you? Where’s Julia?” He caught sight of the chain around his ankle and started to panic. “What’s going on?”

I held tight to his hands and tried to calm him down. “Take it easy! You’re hurt, but you’re safe now.”

The boy shook his head, his eyes wide with fear. “No, you don’t understand. I’m not safe, and neither are any of you. They’re going to kill you all.”

# Episode 3572

**Greyson**

The Fae in front of me was trying his damnedest to slice me to ribbons with a dagger, and he’d come dangerously close to doing just that way too many times for my comfort. I ducked another swipe and latched onto his arm, grappling with him and trying to aim the tip of the dagger away from me. I couldn’t hold back the jarring memories of Maren trying to attack me with a similar weapon—I still had the scar, and I didn’t want another one.

I dug my teeth deep into the Fae’s arm and the dagger clattered to the ground. The Fae wrenched away from me, holding his arm and screaming in agony. I turned just as Stavros charged at me, brandishing one of the biggest swords I’d ever laid eyes on. Luckily for me, the sword was so large and heavy that it was beyond unwieldy. It was obvious that Stavros was in over his head and not a trained fighter, since the sword was wielding him rather than the other way around. His weapon was useless in a fight like this, and I was happy he was too inexperienced to know that.

I quickly leapt up and knocked the sword out of his hands. The man shrieked as the sword hit the ground. Afraid of getting sliced by the razor-sharp blade, he jumped out of the way and crashed right into the Dark Fae. Both collapsed to the ground in a tangle, and I took a moment to search the room for Artemis. I felt responsible for her, and I knew that Cali expected me to look out for her. I’d brought Artemis along, and I needed to bring her back to the pack house unharmed.

I reached out to Xavier via mind link. He’d just cornered a couple of terrified Fae and looked like he was about to lunge at them to take the final blow. *Xavier! I don’t see Artemis anywhere. Where did she run off to?*

*I have no idea*, Xavier replied.

Ganfael suddenly screamed as Kira hit him with a powerful blast of magic. The warlock sailed through the air and landed at my feet. Wasting no time, I threw all of my weight on top of him, pinning him to the ground. It would’ve been so easy to end this right then and there, and I was very tempted to do just that, but I knew that I couldn’t. After all of this, we were no closer to getting the Shard, and we needed Ganfael conscious if we wanted to get our hands on it.

I shifted back to human as the warlock struggled to break free of my hold.

“This is a losing battle, Ganfael,” I said. “Why not just put an end to it by handing over the Shard? Simple as that.” Ganfael squirmed, and I tightened my grip. “I hope you’re starting to see reason. This is all getting a little out of hand, don’t you think?”

Ganfael didn’t answer right away. He took a quick survey of the battle still going on around him. We’d finally made headway and had the upper hand, and I could tell by the look in his eye that he knew it.

“Okay!” Ganfael said. “Fine! But give me the ring!”

“You’ll get the ring as soon as you hand over the Shard.” I finally had the warlock right where I wanted him, and I wasn’t going to budge. Everything we’d done here today had been for Cali. If the Shard could help Cali cope as magic balanced out, then I needed it. There was no other option. There was nothing I wouldn’t do to protect Cali, to defend her, to make her life easier.

*I love Cali more than anything in this world, and if I have to take out a warlock, Fae, or anyone else who gets in the way of my doing what I need to do for my mate, then I will. This warlock can throw temper tantrums about his ring and the Shard all he wants, but he isn’t going to stop me from getting what I need to help Cali.*

Ganfael was so laser focused on his obsession with Fae that he was clueless about anything and everything else. He had no idea of the power of a mate bond, the power of love, or the lengths an Alpha werewolf would go to for his mate. Cali was everything to me, and unless she was safe and happy, *I* wasn’t safe or happy. It was as simple as that.

“So, what’ll it be, Ganfael?” I demanded. “Are you ready to end all this by giving us what we came for?”

“Fuck you! Give me my fucking ring right this instant!” Ganfael shouted, thrashing in my hold. “You took something that doesn’t belong to you, and I want it back! You don’t get to hold my ring hostage to get something else that you have absolutely no claim to! You might be able to throw your weight around with others, but that shit doesn’t fly here!”

*This guy just won’t give up!* It would have been impressive if it weren’t completely frustrating.

I turned to Kira. “If he doesn’t cough up the Shard in ten seconds, blast him into a pile of ashes.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” Ganfael spat.

“Don’t test me,” I replied, really starting to wonder if he was really going to hold out on me. “I’m not bluffing. Kira won’t hesitate to blast you. Ten, nine, eight—”

“All right, all right!” Ganfael said. “I’ll get you your damn Shard, but first I need to see the ring to make sure it’s still in one piece.”

I figured that was a reasonable enough request. I slackened my hold just a little as I addressed Kira again. “If he so much as blinks, I want you to blast him.” I turned to Xavier, who shifted and knocked two Fae’s heads together like something straight out of an action film. The Fae both slid to the ground, knocked out cold.

“I can’t do that,” Xavier said.

“We had a deal!” Ganfael said.

I scowled up at my brother. “Xavier, we’ve got him right where we want him. Where’s the ring?”

Xavier smiled. “You’re going to have to wait a bit to see it.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” I asked, completely confused.

“I swallowed it,” Xavier said.

“What?” Ganfael snarled.

“What the—Are you serious right now?” I hoped that he was just pulling my leg, but judging by the look on his face, he wasn’t.

“Hey, I didn’t do it on purpose!” Xavier said. “It happened while I was trying to stop one of his goons from bashing me in the head.”

Ganfael had gone absolutely apoplectic, and I had to stop myself from smiling. There was something funny about the situation—and how unbothered my brother was about the whole thing.

Xavier knelt at Ganfael’s side. “I guess you’re going to have to wait until… Well, you know.”

“You idiot! You asshole! I’m going to disembowel you!” Ganfael was going bonkers, and it was getting harder to keep him restrained. “I’ll turn your insides out to get that ring! You have no idea who you’re playing with!”

I slapped Ganfael hard across the face. “You’re not going to turn anyone inside out. Just give us the Shard, and we’ll return them both to you once we’re done with it. No harm, no foul. Or maybe a *little* foul.”

Xavier and I shared a quick chuckle.

Ganfael fell silent and glared at both of us. “I guess I have no choice.”

I smiled. “Finally, the warlock has seen the light!”

I released Ganfael, and he immediately moved away to put distance between us.

“I have to use my magic to produce the Shard,” Ganfael said.

“Don’t worry,” Kira said. “I’m keeping an eye on him.”

Ganfael frowned in concentration, and then, in a flash, the Shard appeared in the palm of his hand—the one with the missing pinky. Reluctantly, he handed it over. “Now, when can I have my ring back?”

Xavier grinned at him. “Any time you want,” he said. And then he spat the ring out into his hand.

I couldn’t help but laugh. My brother could be a real dick, but I had to admit that it was amazing to see Ganfael squirm.

“You—you lied!” Ganfael spluttered.

“Yup,” Xavier said.

Ganfael lunged for the ring, and Xavier tossed it to me. Ganfael came running toward me, reaching for the ring, but he wasn’t fast enough. I’d already thrown it back to Xavier. We went back and forth for a while until I took the ring and held it clenched in my fist.

“Relax. You’ll get them both back as soon as we’re done with the Shard,” I said.

Ganfael stomped his foot. His face was so red that he looked like he was about to explode. “And just howlong will that be?”

I shrugged. “No idea.”

That was when Ganfael lost it. He shoved Kira to the ground and turned toward me, magic crackling at his fingertips. I braced myself as a massive surge of magic shot out from Ganfael’s hands.

# Episode 3573

The panic in the boy’s eyes was palpable. I tried to calm him down, but I wasn’t feeling so calm myself, all of a sudden.

“What do you mean, ‘they’re going to kill us all’?” I asked him. He’d said it with such certainty that I was really worried. I knew I’d never live it down with Jay and the others if I’d literally brought death to our front door. My palms went slick with sweat as I imagined our pack having to fight off a threat that I was directly responsible for.

“Yes, explain,” Rishika said. “Is someone following you?”

The boy didn’t seem to be listening. He was trying to get up, but the chain was holding him back.

I placed a hand gently on his shoulder to hold him down. “Relax, you need to rest. You’re badly wounded.”

The boy was growing agitated. “I can’t stay here! Let me go! I have to get to Julia!” He made a sudden move, then fell back onto the bed in pain. “She’s waiting for me! I have to go meet her! If I don’t show up, she’ll think I abandoned her!”

“Okay, okay, calm down. First, tell me who Julia is,” I said.

He hesitated for a moment before saying quietly, “She’s my girlfriend. I was supposed to meet her at the park nearby, but…” He trailed off, his eyes brimming with tears. “But I didn’t make it.”

I glanced at Rishika, wondering what we should do. I felt so bad for the kid. He was clearly having a really hard time. It probably didn’t help that he was in a strange place, chained to a cot. I knew that we weren’t holding him prisoner and had only chained him up for our own safety, but it probably didn’t look all that much like we were helping him at the moment.

“I need to check on the patrols and fill everyone in on what we’ve learned from him so far,” Rishika said. “Are you okay to stay with him, Cali? Maybe try to get more details on who or what is ‘going to kill us all,’ if you can. We need to be prepared. Ravi, you guard the door.”

Rishika gave the teen one last lingering glance before she left, taking Torin with her.

I realized that Rishika was giving me a chance to talk with the boy uninterrupted before she jumped to any conclusions, and I appreciated that. She took her role in the pack very seriously, and I didn’t want her to regret backing me on bringing the kid inside.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

The boy just looked at me, his mouth pressed into a straight line.

“I’m Cali,” I said. “I live here in the Redwood pack house.”

The boy’s eyes widened. “Cali? Are you the Luna here?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer. It wasn’t *not* true, but it wasn’t quite right, either. But I wanted him to feel safe and secure, so… “Yes, I’m the Luna here.”

This seemed to calm him a little. “My name—my name is Russell.”

“I’m glad to meet you, Russell. Can you tell me what’s going on?” His words of warning were still echoing in my head, and I’d read between the lines of what Rishika had requested. I needed to make sure that we were safe, by any means necessary.

He looked a little nervous. “It would be for the best if you just let me go.”

“We’re not keeping you prisoner, and you’re free to go whenever, but we do need to know what happened to you. You’re pretty banged up, and somebody obviously did this to you. A few seconds ago, you said that someone was going to come kill us. Why? What pack are you from?” I didn’t want to think that he could be on the run from any of the packs that we knew, but I couldn’t be sure. Werewolf packs were complicated.

Russell stared at the chain on his leg for a few moments before he spoke. “I’m not a pack member. I run with a group of Rogues. We don’t have an Alpha or anything like that. I just started dating this girl—Julia—and she belongs to a pack based in California.”

I was shocked. “You came all the way from California?”

Russell looked away. “I had no choice. They chased me—attacked me. I just ran without thinking.”

“Who?” I asked, as gently as I could. “Who attacked you?”

My blood was already boiling. I hated how cruel werewolves could be to each other. There was a lot to admire about werewolf culture, and the Redwood pack had shown me just how human werewolves really were, but hearing stories like this reminded me that not every wolf was like my mates or our pack mates. There were some vicious, awful werewolves out there, and Russell had obviously run afoul of some of them.

“Julia’s pack. They said we had to stop seeing each other. We were planning to run away together… And, well, I guess her Alpha found out.” He pulled at the chain and looked at me with a pleading glint in his eye. “You said you’re not keeping me prisoner, but I’m chained to a cot. You have to take this off and let me go. Julia’s out there waiting for me, and I have to go to her. She might be in danger, and I don’t know what they’ll do once they catch up with us.” He let out a breath. “But maybe it’s for the best that I don’t find her. What if they hurt her because of me?”

He was tearing up again, and I pulled him into a hug, not knowing what else to do.

Russell collapsed against me, his body shaking with sobs. “We didn’t want to hurt anybody. We just really love each other and wanted to be together, no matter what. I didn’t think that it would turn out this way!”

I patted his back. “It’s okay, Russell. It’s going to be okay. You’re safe here. We won’t let anyone hurt you.” I pulled away from him and looked him in the eye. “How old are you?”

“Fifteen,” he stuttered, through his sobs.

“You’re just a baby!” I pulled him close again, wrapping my arms around him.

*How could anyone want to harm such a young boy? All he’s guilty of is loving someone!*

“I don’t know what to do,” he sobbed. “I’m so scared.”

“Where are your parents? Are they alive?”

He nodded. “Yes, but they don’t want me to see Julia, either. Everyone’s against us.”

I couldn’t help but think of Charlie and Violet, and how much Violet had gone through because Iris hadn’t accepted her. They were on better terms now, but I knew that the scars from that time still remained.

*Why can’t everyone have parents like mine? Sweet and supportive and understanding.*

I sighed and pulled away again, considering the situation. Russell didn’t seem like a threat at all. I knew that it was a big risk, but I wanted to remove the chains. He was right—if he wasn’t a prisoner, we couldn’t very well keep him locked up like one.

I looked him in the eye. “I’m going to release you now, but you have to promise me that you won’t try to hurt anyone or try to run. If you do, my pack won’t react kindly, and neither will I.”

Russell nodded, wiping the tears from his eyes. “I promise.”

Hoping that I wasn’t being played for a fool, I unlocked the chains.

“Thank you so much, Cali.” He sniffled. “So many adults in my life don’t trust me. It’s nice to finally meet someone who does.”

“It’s nothing, Russell. How are you feeling?” His wounds seemed to be healing up pretty nicely. Torin had come through once again. “Are you hungry? Not only is Torin a great healer, but he’s also a great cook—he learned from my dad. I’m sure he could whip you up something good.”

“I’m sore, but I’m feeling better,” he said. “And yes, food sounds great. I haven’t eaten in days.”

I helped him off the cot and to his feet. He was still a little unsteady, and I put an arm around his shoulders, trying to comfort him. I wondered what Xavier and Greyson would think of this situation, and what they would have done in my place. I knew that they always put the safety of the pack first, but they were also compassionate.

*I’m sure they would have done the same thing if they were here. How could they not? Puberty and complex teenage emotions aside, he’s just a kid and should be protected.*

“So, Russell, tell me more about this pack that’s after you. How many of them are there? Do you think they followed you this far?”

Russell shook his head. “I wish I knew, but I’m not sure. I slipped away from them by jumping off a cliff—there was nowhere else to go—and I’m not sure how long I was running before I collapsed. Everything’s kind of a blur.”

“Well, you’re lucky you collapsed here,” I said. And he really was. There were miles of woods surrounding us. It was actually a wonder he’d stumbled across us.

The boy stopped and looked up at me. “It wasn’t luck. I was looking for the Redwood pack. I was looking for *you*.”

# Episode 3574

**Xavier**

I saw the magic sparking at the end of Ganfael’s fingertips and instinctively hurled myself between him and Greyson, just as he loosed a huge burst of magic. My last thought before the magic struck me was, *Why do I always feel the need to stick my neck out to save my brother’s sorry ass?*

The magic exploded against me, sending me flying across the room and plowing into Mikah and Gabe. The three of us tumbled to the floor in a tangled mess. I rolled around on the floor for a few seconds, trying to collect myself. The wind had been knocked clean out of me.

“What gives!” Mikah said, wincing in pain. “Boy, does that guy suck!”

“Tell me about it,” Gabe moaned.

All I could think about was how I was going to rip that warlock to shreds as soon as I got my bearings.Ignoring the pain, I scrambled to my feet and tried to launch myself right at Ganfael—but I couldn’t move. I was completely immobilized. I looked around and saw that no one else could move, either. We were all frozen in place. It was like the entire room was under some sort of spell. Even Ganfael was rooted to the spot, which was strange, since I assumed that it was his magic that had caused this.

“Are you kids done playing?” a voice boomed through the stunned silence. “Because if not, I can leave you like this for a while until you get it all out of your system.”

Big Mac appeared out of thin air in the center of the room. She lowered her hands with a flourish, and I stumbled forward and struggled not to fall flat on my face. I wasn’t sure whether to thank her or throttle her.

“Where the hell did you come from?” I asked.

She shrugged. “That doesn’t matter. What *does* matter is that I’ve been watching to see how things progressed. I wish I could say I was surprised by how quickly things devolved into chaos.”

“What didn’t you help sooner?” I asked, furious. I didn’t like her toying with us like that. Witches always seemed to do things according to their own timeline, and that drove me crazy.

“Why? I thought you all had it figured out—my mistake,” Big Mac said with an eyeroll. “I could leave, if you like? Let you handle things from here?”

My anger at Big Mac drained away almost as quickly as it had formed. There was no use getting mad at someone who didn’t care one iota whether you were annoyed or not—and besides, how could I stay mad at her? She’d defused a very explosive situation and probably saved all our asses. Her timing could have been a lot better, but I’d take what I could get when it came to Big Mac.

Big Mac fixed her gaze on Ganfael. “Why are you being such a jerk, Steve? What gives?”

Ganfael flashed her an angry look. “My name is not Steve! It’s GANFAEL!”

“Oh. My bad, Garfield,” Big Mac said.

“GANFAEL! Garfield? *Really?*”

“Whatever. All you had to do was loan them a simple charm, and they would’ve been gone hours ago—and you’d still have your pinky intact. Why’d you make such a big deal out of it?”

“Because it’s mine!” Ganfael spluttered. “Does there need to be any other reason? I don’t just lend my treasure out to strangers because they show up and try to strong-arm me!”

Greyson laughed. “Oh? And just how did you acquire the Shard? How did you acquire all of your Fae riches?” Greyson flipped the ring in the air and caught it. “I’m sure that all of this stuff was someone else’s before you got your hands on it, and I don’t doubt that you did a little strong-arming of your own.”

I had no idea what all of this was about, but I couldn’t have cared less.

“Why are we standing around chatting? Let’s just take the Shard and get the hell out of here!” I wasn’t convinced that Ganfael didn’t still have more tricks up his sleeve. I was over the whole scene, ready to get back to Cali and help her recover. I didn’t have time to stand around listening to the saga of dueling witches. I gestured to Greyson. “Let’s go.”

“Where’s Artemis?” he asked, taking a quick look around.

“Shit, Artemis. I totally forgot. Being blasted with magic has a way of doing that,” I said pointedly, wondering if Greyson was going to thank me for any of this. I wasn’t going to hold my breath. “I’ll go look for her.”

“I’ll come with,” Gabe said.

We went off to find her, looking in room after room.

“I can’t believe how much Fae stuff this guy’s acquired,” I said as we walked into yet another room lined wall to wall with Fae trinkets.

“I’ve seen this type of hoarding behavior before,” Gabe said. “You remember that vampire in Tucson? The one that had Ryan Reynolds paraphernalia everywhere? Weird.”

I winced as I recalled how absolutely crazy, and a little scary, that vampire’s house had been. “Can you imagine how Ryan Reynolds would’ve felt to see all that?”

“Not good. Probably would’ve gotten a restraining order against him,” Gabe said with a chuckle.

“And that would’ve been the right move. Hold on, what was that?” I paused when I heard whispers coming from behind a closed door. “That sounds like Artemis,” I whispered. “Who’s she talking to?” I put my hand on the knob. “Be ready,” I told Gabe.

I whipped the door open to see Artemis talking to someone who was standing with their back to me. Without missing a beat, Artemis launched a knife at me that I only just managed to duck before it sailed over my head and embedded itself in the wall behind me. “What the hell, Artemis? Whose side are you on, anyway?”

Gabe chuckled behind me. “She’s a beast with those knives, man.”

Artemis shushed us. “Come in and close the door! Hurry up!”

I did as I was told, just as the man turned to face us. I leaned back in surprise. “Adair? What are you doing here?”

“Shush!” Artemis said. “Not so loud! Sheesh.”

I snapped my mouth shut and stared between them, confused. *First Big Mac and now Adair? Who else is going to show up? Vander?*

“Where’s MacKenzie?” Adair asked.

“She’s in the other room, but she’s a little busy keeping the Fae and the warlock in line.” I looked at Artemis. “Good news is, we have the Shard. We can go.”

I started toward the door with Gabe in tow, but Artemis stopped me.

“Adair can’t leave,” she said. “Someone from the Dark Fae court is out there, and they’ll recognize him.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” I was still confused.

Artemis rolled her eyes. “Yes! We need Big Mac to redo the cloaking spell she used to disguise him.”

I groaned. “Why can’t anything ever be easy?”

“No worries, I’ll go get her,” Gabe said, before slipping out of the room and closing the door behind him.

“I’m curious,” I said. “I understand why Big Mac cares about the success of this little mission, but Adair, why are you here?”

“Family,” he said simply.

A look crossed Artemis’s face at his response, and suddenly I understood. Adair had come for Artemis. Their relationship had had a rough start, so I was happy to see that things were improving between them.

Before long, Gabe came back with Kira in tow.

Adair looked concerned. “I asked for MacKenzie.”

Gabe shrugged. “It’s like Xavier said—Big Mac is busy keeping the peace out there.”

“And I assure you, I’m more than capable of casting the spell,” Kira added. She waved her hand and in seconds, Adair’s face had morphed into someone else’s.

“Ooh, nice, you should keep that one,” I said with a chuckle. “It’s definitely an improvement.”

Gabe laughed, but Adair only stared back at me, not looking the least bit amused. Artemis didn’t look like she found it all that funny, either.

“Okay, tough crowd, I see,” I said. “Anyway… Let’s get going.”

“Wait a second,” Adair said. “What about Artemis? Lysander will recognize her, too—if he hasn’t already.”

“Artemis, keep your face hidden, and I’ll do what I can to hide you from the Dark Fae,” I said. She was Cali’s sister, and Cali would never forgive me, Greyson, or anyone else who’d accompanied us here if anything happened to her.

We rejoined Big Mac and the others, who were standing by the door, ready to leave. Big Mac must have been doing overtime on her “making peace” job, since she’d even convinced Ganfael to turn the windows and doors back to their original state so that we could actually leave the house.

Ganfael and his Fae accomplices were talking among themselves on the opposite side of the room. Ganfael still looked absolutely pissed—which warmed my heart.

“Let’s go,” Greyson said. He held out the Shard so I could see that he had it safely in his possession. “Mission accomplished.”

“All in a day’s work,” I said, clapping him on the back.

I opened the door, and we all started to file out, but then someone grabbed Artemis by the shoulder and whipped her around. It was Lysander. *Where the hell did he come from?* “I knew I recognized you!”

# Episode 3575

“What do you mean, you came looking for me?” I asked, puzzled.

*Maybe he’s a little confused. He did lose a lot of blood. Does that make people delirious? There’s no way he could know me… Right? I’ve never seen this kid before.*

“I learned that there was a Luna in Oregon who had the power of love, and that Luna is you!” Russell said. “I’m so psyched that I found you! This changes everything, don’t you see?”

*Is this boy concussed? He did say he jumped off a cliff. A Luna with the power of love? I’ve never even heard of such a thing.* I was all for love, but I certainly didn’t have power over it—though that certainly would’ve been nice. I wondered if Russell could tell that he was confusing the hell out of me. He had a goofy smile on his face, and I was starting to think that the kid had developed a little crush on me. *That’s ridiculous; he’s way too young! Besides, isn’t he in love with Julia?*

“So, is it true? Are you the one?” Russell asked, his eyes shining.

I was getting more confused by the second and was contemplating running upstairs to fetch Torin to do some more healing—this time on his brain.

“Am I the one what?” I asked, bracing myself for the answer.

“The *due destini* mate,” Russell said, his voice full of awe. “You’re the *due destini* mate, right? Please tell me you are.”

I gasped. “What? How do you know that?” I immediately regretted my response, but he’d caught me by surprise.

Russell’s entire face lit up. “So it’s true? You are a *due destini* mate?”

I realized that it was probably too late for me to lie my way out of this. The kid was looking at me like he’d just met Santa Claus.

“Yes,” I said with a sigh. “I am.”

Russell clapped his hands in excitement and then pumped a fist in the air. “I knew it! I knew it the moment I saw you. I can’t believe it! A real live *due destini* mate, standing right in front of me!”

“Why’s that so important to you?” I’d never seen anyone so excited about meeting a *due destini* mate, though Aysel could’ve given him a run for his money. She’d been excited to meet me, too, though she’d been a *lot* more subdued about it than Russell.

“Because now I can fix things with Julia! Now I don’t have to worry! This is great!”

I paused. “You think being a *due destini* mate gives me some kind of special love power?”

Russell nodded hard. “Yes, I know it does. That’s the reason why I came all this way. And now that I’ve made it this far, you have to help me!” He clasped his hands in front of his chest. “Please! Won’t you help me?”

“Russell, thank you, I’m really flattered, but I’m not who you think I am.” I was starting to feel a little uneasy. I didn’t quite know what this kid thought I was capable of, but I hated having to be the one to rain on his parade.

It was Russell’s turn to be confused. “You’re not? But you *are* the *due destini* mate, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but… But—”

“Then that means you can help me! Help me be with Julia, and I’ll swear my undying allegiance to you! We both will!”

“Slow down for just a second, Russell. You have to stop thinking about the *due destini* as being some wonderful, powerful thing. It’s not. It’s a curse.”

Russell frowned. “But… Aren’t you mated to two Alphas?”

*I am really not eager to discuss all this with a kid I just met.* “Yes…”

“And don’t you love them both?”

“Yes,” I said weakly. *Little do you know, kid, that’s the whole problem.*

“Then how can that be a curse? It sounds amazing!”

“Trust me on this—I’m not really sure how to explain it properly, but it’s not all it’s cracked up to be.” I helped him back down to sit on the cot. He was healing up, but I didn’t want him to overdo it. “While you’re right about some things—it *is* really wonderful to have two adoring mates I love equally. But it’s also a curse, because one day, I’m going to have to choose between them. And if I don’t make that choice, I’ll go mad. But if I choose one, I’ll break the other’s heart. It’s not the best position to be in, believe me.” I thought about the letter sitting in the drawer upstairs, waiting to reveal its message once I was ready to receive it. I still didn’t even know if my choice would have fatal consequences. “It’s also possible that if I choose one, the other will die. Does that sound like a good situation to you?”

Russell’s face fell. “I hadn’t thought of it that way, I guess.”

“I’m sorry I don’t have better news. I really wish the *due destini* could’ve been what you were hoping for.”

Russell shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. You’re still a *due destini* mate, and that means you can help me. So, will you?”

“There’s nothing I want more than to help you, Russell, but what I’m saying is that I don’t have any special powers. I wish I did, but I don’t.” That wasn’t entirely true, of course, but I wasn’t about to reveal that I was half Fae. Who knew what else Russell would expect if I revealed that little tidbit?

Russell didn’t seem to have heard me.

“Julia will be so happy when I tell her!” He jumped up. “I have to go find her before they do.” He started out of the room, but I pulled him back.

“Listen, Russell, I really admire your devotion to Julia. It kind of reminds me of the way my mates and I are with each other, but I still think the best thing would be for you to first tell my pack everything you know about the other Rogues. Once we have a better idea of what’s going on, my pack will have no problem helping you find Julia—and we’ll even help protect you both.”

Russell’s expression brightened again. He was clearly the excitable type. “Okay, I’ll tell your pack mates everything I know. When can we start?”

“Why don’t we get you something to eat first?” The kid had gotten so excited about the *due destini* that he’d forgotten how hungry he was. At least he was healed enough to stand on his own two feet, now. Torin would be happy to see that he’d done a bang-up job getting him back to tip-top shape.

“Okay, sounds good,” Russell said.

“Wait here just a second,” I said.

I ducked into the gym in the next room, where I knew the boys kept spare workout clothes. I brought them to Russell, and he got dressed, chattering about Julia the whole time.

“Russell, I’m curious—is Julia your mate?” I figured that she had to be, since the boy had risked life and limb just to see her, but you could never be sure when it came to werewolves. I couldn’t help but think about Marta and Lilac. They’d been inseparable and had really seemed to care about and love each other, but Marta still hadn’t been Lilac’s mate.

Russell started blushing and ducked his head. “I don’t know. I think so. I wish I was with Julia every minute of every single day.” He looked up at me. “Does that mean that we’re mates?”

“It’s a good sign,” I said. “But it’s not a guarantee. Mates are drawn together by a mate bond.”

Russell nodded. “Yeah, I know about that, but how do I know if I have one with Julia?”

“That’s not something I can answer for you. Only you can figure that out.” I thought about how I’d been drawn to both my mates. From the moment I’d laid eyes on them, there had been this unmistakable magnetism that I’d never felt before. It was the epitome of “when you know, you know.” I thought about a way to explain it so that Russell would truly understand what I meant. “I guess it’s like falling in love. You’ll just know it when you feel it. It’s a very special connection, and it doesn’t feel like anything else.”

We both turned at the sound of feet pounding down the stairs. Ravi came bursting in, his eyes widening as he took in the scene. “What the hell… Why isn’t he in chains?”

“It’s okay, Ravi,” I said, placing myself between him and Russell. “He needs our help, just like I thought.”

Ravi stepped past me, took the chains, and secured the cuff back around Russell’s ankle.

“Ravi, what are you doing?” I demanded. “He’s just a lovesick kid who needs help straightening stuff out! Why are you doing this?”

Ravi was usually so levelheaded, so I was surprised that he was acting this way. I was about to throw my acting Luna weight around again, but the look in Ravi’s eye stopped me cold.

Ravi looked between me and Russell, his eyes flashing as he spoke. “Why? Because he lied to us, Cali. He lied about everything.”

# Episode 3576

**Artemis**

I slapped Lysander’s hand away. “Don’t touch me!” How the hell wasn’t he harmed by Big Mac’s blast? He must’ve avoided it. Of course someone from the Dark Fae court would know how.

It was just my luck that he had noticed me just as we were finally about to escape from Ganfael’s house. To tell the truth, I would’ve been surprised if our escape had gone smoothly. Nothing had been easy since we’d walked through the warlock’s door, so why would this be any different?

Undeterred, Lysander grabbed my arm. “Did you really think you could get away?”

Xavier shoved him. “Take your hands off her before I rip your face off.”

Lysander turned to Xavier. “This isn’t any of your concern, wolf, so back off before I change that!”

Discreetly, I reached for my knife, but my hand found nothing but an empty sheath.

*Shit. I accidentally threw it at Xavier, and it’s still in the wall!*

That was okay. I didn’t need a weapon to smack this guy around. He was going to regret opening up this particular can of worms.

The Dark Fae turned away from Xavier, and his eyes bored into mine. “Have you been to New Orleans lately? Answer wisely.”

I shrugged. “Not that I recall.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Don’t play games with me. You were there. I saw you. I’ll be very displeased if you force me to ask you again when it’s so obvious that you were there.”

I laughed. “Sorry, but you might want to get your eyes checked.” I was happy that Kira had been able to cast the cloaking spell on Adair with enough time.

*Better me being caught than Adair. I wouldn’t want this guy to have the satisfaction of tracking him down.*

“Is there a problem?” Greyson asked.

“Not really,” I said, keeping my voice nonchalant. “Just a little case of mistaken identity. This guy thinks he knows me. I’m trying to tell him that I’ve never seen him before, but he’s having a little trouble coming to terms with that. I’m trying to make him see reason.”

“That’s because you’re lying. I saw you there, and there’s nothing you can say to convince me otherwise.”

“Listen, I understand your frustration, but you really do have the wrong girl. I’ve been told that I have one of those faces that everyone confuses for someone else, so that’s probably what this is. Now, we’ll just be on our way—”

“I’m not confused in the least. You were in New Orleans looking for Adair. I’d know your face anywhere. I don’t know if you forgot, but Adair is wanted by the Dark Fae court, and it would be for the best if you and your friends cooperate. Don’t get in our way—it won’t end well for you. The Dark Fae aren’t to be crossed.”

“Dark Fae? In case you haven’t noticed, we aren’t in the Fae world, which means you have no jurisdiction,” I said.

“Justice knows no bounds,” he hissed. “The Dark Fae’s reach extends as far as it needs to go to bring people like Adair back to face the high court. Don’t stand in the way of that. Admit that you were there, and then I’ll decide what to do with you.”

Adair came walking over, clearly pissed. It was strange to see him looking like himself but not himself at the same time.

“She’s coming with me,” he said. “I suggest that you walk away while you still have legs.”

I looked back and forth between my uncle and Lysander, hoping that this wasn’t about to turn into another knock-down, drag-out fight. I didn’t want to be the reason why we didn’t get the Shard to Cali.

*But how can I get out of this? This guy just won’t let it go! If only I had my damn knife!* I took a quick look around, searching for alternatives… and then I saw Stavros’s massive sword lying on the floor just behind Lysander. *Couldn’t have planned that better myself. Stavros may not have known what to do with it, but I certainly do.*

I shifted my gaze. “Don’t worry; I’ll handle this,” I said to Adair. Everyone hit me with questioning looks and, in that moment, I wished that I had mind linking abilities so that I could tell them not to worry. My adrenaline was pumping, but I wasn’t scared. I’d fought for my life plenty of times, both inside and outside the Fae world, and I’d been in tighter squeezes than this. I was hoping to put an end to this latest roadblock as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, everyone was just going to have to trust me.

“You know what?” I snapped my fingers like something had just dawned on me. “My bad, I *was* in New Orleans. I was looking for Adair. My mistake. I’ve been traveling a lot lately, so it must have slipped my mind. Don’t worry, I’ll tell you everything.”

Adair was looking at me in shock, then his eyes narrowed. I looked back at him, willing him to read my intention on my face. He didn’t know me all that well yet, so it wasn’t lost on me that he might think I was really about to give him up. Even Greyson and Xavier, who knew me much better, looked shocked. The other Fae were murmuring too, surprised by the turn of events. Obviously, I was a great actress.

Lysander gave me a skeptical look. “Yes, that sounds like a good idea. Why don’t we talk?” He moved aside to let me step back into the house.

I took one step and then rolled to the floor, grabbing the sword just before I rolled back to my feet. I felt a sudden sharp pain in my back, but I pushed through it and thrust the sword at Lysander, running him through and pinning him to the wall. The sword was heavy, but I handled it easily, letting its weight work with me rather than against me.

The entire room fell quiet until the belligerent Dark Fae broke the silence. “You’re going to regret this.”

“Maybe, maybe not, but either way, you won’t be here to see it,” I spat, just as he quivered and died.

“What have you *done*?” Ganfael screamed. He rushed over to Lysander, who was now slumped against the wall.

Greyson grabbed me by the arm. “We need to go, now!”

All hell broke loose as we all ran out of the house. I winced at the sharp pain in my upper back. *What is that?* I reached up to find a sharp dagger buried between my shoulder blades. Grimacing, I pulled it out, gritting my teeth against the pain.

“What happened?” Greyson asked when he saw the bloodied blade in my hand.

I tossed it away. “It’s nothing.” That wasn’t quite true, but what was the use of making a big deal out of it? We just needed to get back to the pack house, and everything would be okay. I just wanted to get the Shard back to Cali as soon as possible.

“Are you sure?” Adair asked, worry creasing his features. “You’re looking a little pale. Do you want to stop for a second? Let me take a look at that,” he said, motioning to the wound.

I smiled at him. “No, no, I’m fine. Just a scratch. Barely nicked me.”

I’d been stabbed, but as far as I could tell, Lysander’s attempt to kill me first had been a total failure. It hurt like hell and probably would for a few days—but with Torin’s magic touch, I’d recover in no time. Lysander, on the other hand, hadn’t been so lucky.

*He won’t be threatening anyone else ever again. One less person hunting down Adair, thank god.*

I took one last look at Ganfael’s house as we booked it away from the place. Stavros was standing in the doorway, and I couldn’t resist shouting, “Thanks for the sword; it works really well!”

I made a slashing motion, wincing at the pain in my back. I didn’t care about the pain—it was worth it to see the pure rage on his face.

“Everyone ready?” Big Mac asked as she and Kira prepared to blip us back to the pack house.

Moments later, Kira had blipped away with Mikah, Gabriel, and Xavier. I was feeling a bit light-headed as Big Mac rounded the rest of us up. Before I could even prepare myself, Big Mac had blipped Adair, Greyson, and me back to the pack house. I let out a breath of relief once we were back in familiar surroundings, but the pain in my back had definitely intensified.

“That was a really brave thing to do,” Adair said, as soon as we’d all recovered from the blip. “You really know your way around blades.” He looked almost proud of me.

“Thanks,” I said breathlessly. I was about to say something else when another wave of sharp pain spasmed through my body, and I collapsed into Adair’s arms.

# Episode 3577

**Greyson**

I was in the middle of thanking Big Mac for coming through for us in such a big way at Ganfael’s when I heard a loud gasp. I turned around in time to see Artemis collapse into Adair’s arms. I spotted Artemis’s bloodstained back and wondered if she’d been lying about the severity of her wound. It was just like Artemis to downplay how hurt she was.

Adair was shaking her gently and trying to revive her, but he wasn’t having any luck. She was out cold.

“Torin!” I shouted as we carried her into the living room and laid her out on the couch.

“What happened?” Xavier asked as he came running in. “Is she all right? She said she was okay—was that not the truth?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “She must have been stabbed during her fight with that Dark Fae and tried not to make a big deal about it.”

“The Dark Fae stabbed her all right, but it’s not the stab wound itself that’s hurting her,” Adair said. “The dagger was laced with poison. That’s a common Dark Fae tactic. The poison is extremely potent, so we have to act fast.”

Adair looked like he wanted to say more, but instead, he just dashed off to the kitchen and came back with a wet rag that he draped across Artemis’s forehead.

Artemis was so pale, and she wasn’t moving at all. If not for the slight rise and fall of her chest, I would’ve thought she was dead. I shuddered, thinking back to how I’d been poisoned when we’d fought the Manus Cruentae. I’d thought I was going to die, and I’d been so weak I could barely hold my own head up. I wondered if this was anything like that, and I hoped for Artemis’s sake that it wasn’t.

“Where are the witches?” Adair asked, taking charge. “They might be able to counteract the poison, but we have to do it quickly before the poison travels.”

Orla came running in and stopped short when she saw Artemis lying unconscious on the couch. She rushed up and knelt at her side. “What happened? Is she okay?”

Xavier and I looked at each other, frozen. That was a question we really couldn’t answer, and I knew that neither of us wanted to lie to her or give her false hope.

“Tell me! Is she going to be okay?” Orla pressed, her gaze jumping from me to Xavier and finally to Adair.

Adair slowly shook his head. “I don’t know yet, Orla, but we’re going to do everything in our power to help her through this. We have a lot of capable people in this house. I’m sure we’ll figure something out.”

I appreciated Adair’s words, and hoped that he was right.

“Where’s Cali?” I asked. “She should really be here right now.”

I wasn’t looking forward to her seeing Artemis in this state, but she still needed to know what had happened.

Torin came running in, and his eyes widened at the sight of the blood smeared on Adair’s hand. “What is *up* with all this blood tonight?” he demanded.

“What? What do you mean by that?” I asked, instantly on high alert. “Torin, what do you mean?”

Torin didn’t answer me. He was already kneeling at Artemis’s side, looking her over. Torin was really good at fixing physical wounds, but I had a feeling that when it came to poisoning, the witches were probably going to have to take the lead. Still, that didn’t mean Torin was just going to stand idly by. He was already brainstorming with the witches about what to do next.

Big Mac and Kira were hovering over Artemis while they discussed their plan of action. Their discussion was heating up as they went back and forth, trying to pinpoint which spell would work best against Dark Fae poison.

“Did you get the Shard?” Orla asked breathlessly.

I had it in my hand, and I gave it to her. “Yes. Here it is. Do you think it could help Artemis?”

Orla sighed. “I hope so.” She placed it in Artemis’s hand and wrapped her fingers around it.

Adair leaned down to whisper in her ear. “Hold onto this, niece.” Adair turned to look at us, his expression somber. “The Shard will help slow the effects of the toxin until the witches have decided on their approach.”

“Where the hell is Cali?” I asked. “This is her sister; she needs to be here.”

Sage came forward. “Greyson, Cali’s downstairs with the boy.”

“The boy? What boy? I have no idea what you’re talking about.” But I didn’t wait for her to explain. I got up and raced to the basement. I could hear Cali and Ravi arguing about something, and I followed the sound of their voices to one of the back rooms.

“You can’t trust this kid, Cali.” Ravi was saying.

“His name is Russell, and why not? I don’t have any reason not to!” Cali shot back.

*Who the hell is Russell?* I entered the room and saw Cali and Ravi standing next to a kid shackled in silver. Cali’s eyes lit up when she saw me, and she ran up to me.

“Greyson! I’m so glad you’re back! You won’t believe what’s happened!” She looked tired and wired at the same time.

“Greyson, we have to deal with this kid!” Ravi said. “It’s not safe for him to be here without restraints. Please tell Cali that.”

I didn’t have time to unravel whatever was going on. I grabbed Cali and ushered her toward the door. “You need to get upstairs right now.”

“But he’s just a kid, Greyson! He wouldn’t hurt a fly!” Cali was saying as Ravi shook his head. He had a grave look on his face.

“Cali, listen to me; it’s Artemis. She needs you.” I said. Whatever was going on with the boy could wait. One of our own was in trouble, and we needed to focus on that.

All the color drained from Cali’s face. “What? Is she okay?”

I hustled her upstairs. “She was injured. She was stabbed with a poisoned dagger. We have all hands on deck to heal her, though.”

I didn’t want to worry Cali, and I was hopeful that whatever Orla and Adair were doing was helping.

We entered the living room, and Cali gasped at the sight of her sister lying motionless on the couch. I took a quick look around, trying to read the room. Were things better? The same? Worse? I couldn’t immediately tell. The only thing I knew was that Artemis looked relatively unchanged, and her skin was still ghostly pale.

*Shit! I never should have let her go for that sword, but Artemis is always so in control that I thought she knew what she was doing. I should have done more. Please let her pull through this.*

Xavier came over to me. “Did you hear about this kid they found?”

I nodded distractedly, my eyes on Cali as she all but crumpled to the ground at Artemis’s side. “Yeah, I saw him. Who is he, and why is he chained up in our basement?”

Xavier shrugged. “I don’t know yet. Lola mentioned something about them finding him on the brink of death. They took him in to try and save him.”

I pondered that, wondering if it was true. “If they were trying to save him, why is he chained up down there like an animal?”

“Beats me,” Xavier said.

Jay came walking up. “We took him in because Cali insisted,” he said. “But we chained him up just to be on the safe side. He’s young, yes, but he’s still a werewolf, and you know how we can be.”

I immediately thought of Fenrir and how Maren was going to have her hands full with him. He was young now, but he was going to be a teenager in no time. I’d hoped to be there to help Fenrir through it, but with Mace in the picture now, I wasn’t so sure that I’d be needed—or wanted, for that matter.

“Anyway, we checked out the kid’s story, and he said he was being chased, but when we went to scout the perimeter after we brought him in, we couldn’t find any tracks but his,” Jay said.

Ravi came up from the basement. He shot a worried glance at Artemis before turning to me and Xavier.

“The boy’s lying to us,” he said. “We don’t know why, though. No idea what he’s hiding, but he’s hiding something, that’s for sure.”

I looked at Cali. She was the reason why the kid was here in the first place.

*I’m the Alpha, but Cali’s my mate. She has such a big heart. I can’t blame her for wanting to help.*

To Cali, he was just a defenseless kid. I doubted that she’d thought for even a second that he could be up to something. That wasn’t in her nature. She always tried to find the good in people. I was proud of her for making a hard choice to help someone in need.

“Cali acted like a real Luna about it,” Jay said with a smirk. “I wasn’t too keen on the idea, but she stood her ground. It was kind of scary.”

I smiled, liking the sound of that. I clapped Ravi and Jay on the shoulder. “You all did good, bringing the kid in, and it was smart to take precautions.”

“Thanks. So what should we do now?” Ravi asked. “Should we kick him out?”

# Episode 3578

I took Artemis’s hand, my eyes prickling with tears. Once again, someone I loved was suffering because they’d wanted to help me. To save me.

*It feels like my weaknesses will be everybody’s damnation…*

When Mom had told me that Artemis had gone to get the Shard, I’d been terrified that she’d get hurt. And now my biggest fear was here, mocking me, declaring loud and clear that this was all my fault.

“Artemis,” I whispered, squeezing her hand.

Her eyes flickered open. When she saw me, she smiled, and somehow that made me feel ten times worse. “Cali…” She trailed off, her voice cracking. “Are you okay?”

I refused to talk about myself right now.

“I need you to focus on getting better, okay? You’re hurt, but we’re going to fix this,” I said. “I know you’re going to be okay, Artemis.”

Her eyes were glazed over and unfocused as she looked over my shoulder. “Where’s Rishika?”

That was a good question—where *was* Rishika? Normally, Artemis would freaking sneeze and Rishika would pop up with a tissue a second later. Where could she be right now?

“I’ll go find her,” I told Artemis. “I’m sure she’s not far off, probably—”

The door bursting open interrupted me. Rishika marched into the room, her gaze wild until it settled on Artemis. She sucked in a breath, rushing to drop to her knees by Artemis’s side, grasping her other hand. Her voice was loud but shaky. “What the hell happened?”

I blurted out the truth. “Artemis was poisoned while trying to get the Shard for me.” The confession didn’t make me feel any better. Because when Artemis shook her head weakly and said, “Don’t blame yourself, Cali,” the tears I’d been holding back pushed through.

I quickly wiped them away—*don’t make a scene, don’t make a scene, don’t make a scene*—and clambered back to my feet. Everybody kept getting hurt because of me, and that was a fact. I needed to be part of the solution to this fucking mess, or I didn’t know how I would live with myself.

“I told you I’d fix this,” I said to Artemis hoarsely. I looked at Rishika. “I’ll do anything to help my sister recover. Whatever it takes.”

Rishika’s face was expressionless, as if she was frozen, numb. Her tight grip on Artemis’s hand, though, told another story. She looked up at Torin. “Why aren’t your healing powers working?”

“They are,” Torin whispered, “but the poison had already traveled quickly throughout her system. The Shard is slowing the spread, but it seems all I can do is the same—slow it down and help alleviate some of her discomfort.” His eyes glistening, he looked between Rishika and me. “I’m so sorry.”

Rishika didn’t speak, but I had to do something. After all, I was the one at fault, here—not Torin. I hugged him tight, and his answering embrace made me feel like he was holding back sobs as well.

“I know you’re doing all you can,” I said in his ear. “We’re lucky to have you here with us.”

Torin shook his head and said he was sorry again. I didn’t reply, because I knew I’d start fucking sobbing. *Don’t cause a scene, don’t cause a scene, don’t cause a scene*, was on repeat in my head, followed by, *All your fault, all your fault, all your fault.*

This was all my fault.

Breaking my embrace with Torin, I looked over his shoulder and spotted Adair and my mother talking quietly in the corner.

“Go to them, Cali,” Rishika said. Her eyes fixed on Artemis, she added, “Go see what they’re saying. I’m staying with her.”

My hands shaking, I walked over to Mom and Adair. My mom wasn’t crying, but I’d never seen her so pale—not even when she’d been sick enough that I’d needed to go to the Fae world to save her.

“What can we do?” I asked as calmly as I could. “There must be something that can heal Artemis.”

“I’ve dealt with Dark Fae poisons before,” Adair replied. His face was blank, but I saw his jaw tick when he spoke. “I’ve recovered from my share of attempted poisonings, actually. And what’s happening to Artemis… Chances are it’s being caused by the petals of the abeara plant.”

“I’ve never heard of it,” I said.

“We know of a possible antidote,” Mom told me quietly, reaching for my hand.

I avoided her touch. *I don’t deserve the comfort.*

“Why aren’t you getting the antidote, then?” I fought to keep my voice low, but the urge to yell kept building. “Why are you just sitting here talking? We should be *doing* something.”

“We all want to help; you know that,” Mom said in a hushed tone. She didn’t let me step back this time—she hugged me tight, and I realized I was shaking so badly that it was making her shake too.

“Adair and I are trying to figure out how to find an abeara plant,” Mom added.

Breaking the hug, I asked, “But you said the poison is made of the abeara? How would more of it help Artemis?”

“The petals are used for the poison,” Adair explained, “but the roots can be used for the antidote.”

“Let’s find the plant, then. Where do we look?” I asked.

Mom pressed her lips together, shaking her head. “We’re not in the Fae world, Cali. Things are different here. *Plants* are different here.”

“Then let’s *go* to the Fae world! We can get whatever we need to help her there, or if it’s the demon world we have to visit, I’ll go there too. Whatever it takes to heal Artemis, I swear I’m going to—”

“None of that will be necessary,” Mom told me, holding my gaze. “I’m going to use my magic to help locate a relative of one of those plants.”

“Will that work?” I asked.

If I sounded desperate, it was because I was.

“I don’t know,” Mom said. “But there’s only one way to find out.”

I felt like laughing. Hysterically. Raking my hands through my hair, I quietly scoffed. “So what? We’re going to look for a plant that *might* help? And we don’t even know if it’s the right one? Isn’t there any other solution that’s, you know, *less* vague and terrifying?”

Adair stared at me. His eyes were cold. “I wish there was. Nonetheless, I’m confident that we will be able to help Artemis. We have to.”

Adair’s certainty did nothing to ease my nerves. I felt like I had to focus on my breathing, because otherwise, I’d fucking implode.

I watched silently, feeling like tearing my hair out, while Mom and Adair spoke to Rishika and Artemis, telling them about the antidote that might heal Artemis. *Might*.

*All your fault, all your fault, all your fault!*

This was all my fault.

“I’ll come with you,” Rishika said, her tone matter-of-fact. She made a move to stand, but my mother shook her head. Artemis didn’t seem willing to let go of Rishika, either—she was still holding her girlfriend’s hand.

“Stay with Artemis, Rishika,” Mom said. “Keep her comfortable. She needs you here right now. Adair and I will handle this.”

“I’m coming with you,” I declared.

“Cali—”

“There’s no way I’m staying back,” I interrupted, my eyes darting between Adair and my mother. “The boys wouldn’t let me go after the Shard, but this is my sister we’re talking about. I’m coming. End of discussion.”

Mom’s eyes were glistening. With a deep breath, she said, “Are you sure this is what you want right now?”

Was she kidding? If I stayed back, I’d start banging my fucking head against the wall!

“We almost lost Artemis once before,” I said hoarsely. “I’m not going to let that happen again.”

My mother’s calm expression was tainted with pain. “Of course. I understand how you feel better than anyone, sweetheart. I thought I lost Artemis when she was born, and that’s a feeling I’ll never forget.” She looked at Adair and said, “Cali’s coming with us.”

He nodded. I wanted to hug my mother, but I feared I’d start sobbing. Artemis had her eyes closed, Rishika and Torin hovering over her, as Mom, Adair, and I left the room. I opened my mouth to ask where we were going to start, but then Jay blocked our way in the hallway.

“Where are you going?” he asked, looking alarmed. “What if the boy isn’t lying? What if there are Rogues out there and all three of you are in danger?”

Adair didn’t even blink. “I can handle a few Rogue werewolves. Orla and Cali will be safe with me.”

I glanced at my mother, turning my hands into fists to keep them from shaking.

*The last thing I need right now is to endanger my mother because of a bunch of fucking Rogues!* I thought, my brain going a mile a minute. *It’s already horrible enough that Artemis is lying there because of me—what if something happens to my mom during the trip?*

Again, it would be all my fault.

And I’d lose my fucking mind.

“The threat is real, Adair,” Jay was saying in response to the Fae’s dismissal. “I’m sure you can handle one or two Rogues, but what if there are a lot of them and they attack all at once? The risks are…”

Jay’s voice faded into the background. My heart was pounding, but I breathed through the anxiety and looked around. Xavier was talking to Ravi and Greyson in the living room. Without pausing to second-guess myself, I marched up to them.

They stopped talking the second I approached.

“We’re going to look for the antidote,” I declared. “Which one of you is coming with us?”

# Episode 3579

**Greyson**

For a brief moment, I was stunned by how assertive Cali looked. I recalled what Jay told me earlier—how Cali had been acting like a Luna. She looked like it, too—there was something more to her than her usual stubbornness.

I liked it.

“I thought we agreed that nobody should be going out.” Ravi spoke up immediately. “Not until we finish checking out the kid’s story.”

Cali huffed. “He has a name. It’s Russell.”

Ravi arched his eyebrows. “That’s what he *says* his name is.”

“I believe him,” Cali said curtly, her shoulders squared as she stared up at Ravi. “But even if I didn’t, that doesn’t change the fact that my mom, Adair, and I are leaving to go get the antidote for Artemis.”

Xavier started, “Cali—”

“What?” she snapped, turning to my brother. “My sister is gravely injured. I refuse to sit around and wait for her to get worse.”

“Torin is helping her,” Xavier said gruffly.

Ravi stepped forward. “And if the kid is telling the truth and there really are Rogues out there, it could be dangerous—”

“Ravi, I’ve almost died at least a hundred times in the past week alone,” Cali said. “I know what it means to be in danger, and I know that this is a risk worth taking.” She stared at Xavier. “Torin won’t be able to hold off the poison indefinitely, Xavier.”

This was yet another life-or-death situation we were dealing with, but I had to hide a smile. There was a strong sense of pride blooming inside me as I watched Cali hold her own. She’d always been courageous, and she rarely changed her mind after it was made up—even when her decisions were reckless. But this was different.

There was something different about her today, and my wolf could taste it in the air.

“Greyson?” Ravi looked at me helplessly, clearly realizing that there was no way he could sway Cali. “Why aren’t you saying anything?”

I nodded at him before turning to my mate. Her eyes were fiery as she stared up at me, as if daring me to contradict her. I wasn’t going to do that, though.

“I have to deal with the Russell situation,” I said, “but I don’t want you and the other Fae to leave without a werewolf.”

“I’ll go,” Xavier said.

Before I could suggest taking Rishika instead, Cali told Xavier, “Get ready, then. The sooner we get going, the sooner we can find the antidote.”

Her words set things in motion. Ravi grumbled something and headed to the kitchen. Xavier hustled off upstairs. Orla said, “I’ll go tell Tom,” and left. Adair nodded, turning on his heel to head in the direction of Tabitha’s bedroom, no doubt to let her know as well.

Cali didn’t blink, didn’t even breathe until everyone was gone. Suddenly, it looked like the weight of her words, the power of her decisions, was a little too hard to carry.

She looked up at me, pressing her lips together. “Artemis…”

“It’s going to be okay, love. I know you’ll fix this,” I whispered, pulling her into my arms. She clung to me tightly, her nails digging into my biceps. I could feel her heart thundering. She breathed quickly, stress bleeding out of her.

And when I finally felt that her steadiness had returned, I faced her. “I want you to know that you did the right thing by bringing in the kid—”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Russell, I mean,” I said, correcting myself. “Great work, there. It was very Luna-ish of you.”

She swallowed audibly. “You think so?”

I cupped her cheek, trailing my thumb across her chin. I thought about her taking charge, about her standing next to me like a leader, and my heart was already racing. Staring into her eyes, I murmured, “You made a tough decision. Like a Luna. And if I’m being honest… it’s kind of sexy.”

The soft look in Cali’s eyes was overcome by annoyance. Smacking my chest, she hissed, “Seriously? How can you think like that right now? I expect more from you, Greyson!”

Her words made me feel guilty, because she was right. But some things were hard to control. Gripping her wrist before she could smack me again, I pulled her closer. “I know—your sister is in danger, and I’m really sorry. That was just, uh, a wolf thing.”

She paused, narrowing her eyes at me. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“My wolf loves the thought of you being my Luna,” I said, swallowing. “Just the idea of it can sometimes make my instincts go haywire.”

She stared at me blankly for a moment. And then the color returned to her cheeks, and she took a deep, calming breath. “That makes sense… in a completely inappropriate way.”

*Inappropriate* was an understatement. Right then, I wanted nothing more than to push Cali up against the wall. Then I’d kiss her hard, put my hands on her in a way that would mean ownership, and tell her that she’d better fucking take care of herself on this dangerous mission, because I’d lose my mind if anything happened to her.

But since she definitely wasn’t in the mood for any of that, I shoved down all my urges and spoke calmly. “I’ll miss you.” I gave her a little peck on the lips. She responded and stroked my back, so I knew we were okay. “Artemis will be fine,” I continued. “You’ll be with Adair and Orla—they know what they’re doing. Don’t be long, and please be careful.”

“What about Russell?”

Of course she would ask that. She was always thinking of everybody but herself.

“I’m going to talk to Russell,” I said. “But I won’t jump to any conclusions. I promise to talk to you before making a decision about him. I’ll wait for you to come back, and for Artemis to get back on her feet. Okay?”

“Thank you,” she breathed, cupping my cheek before giving me another brief kiss. *Very* fucking brief. I wanted to glare at the wall that had personally wronged me by not acting as an upright bed for Cali and me, but I refrained.

She made a move to turn away but paused. “Russell is hungry, actually. You have to give him something to eat.”

She clearly had no idea what she was doing to me right now. Just by being direct. By not saying *maybe*. She’d just told me what to do, because she knew she was right, and that was it.

Before I could control myself, I reached for her hand and pulled her close again. She looked a little surprised but didn’t step back, just held onto me. I wanted to kiss her like I’d never kissed her before, feel all of her against me, up against that goddamn wall.

Instead, I ignored my wolf and said, “I like this. Being able to share and talk pack stuff with you.” Staring into her eyes, I trailed a finger across her cheek. “You’re going to make a great Luna, love.”

Cali’s inhale was sharp. She opened her mouth to speak, but I shook my head.

“Go save your sister,” I said, letting her go. “I know you can do it.”

She nodded, gave me one last kiss on the cheek, and then walked away, her chin held high. I loved the sight of it. After everything she’d been through, Cali needed this boost of confidence, and I was so glad she’d found it.

I really wished I could go with her right now, but I was the Alpha, and I had to attend to pack business first. Shaking my head, I started walking down the hall. Ravi joined me.

“Heading down to talk to the kid?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yes. Russell.”

“I’m coming with you,” Ravi said. “We need to see if we can poke some holes in his story.”

“Thanks, but I’d rather talk to Russell one-on-one,” I said. “You should go get Sage and tell her to stay up here and let me know if anything changes with Artemis. And to let me know the second Cali and the others get back. I want you outside on the perimeter of the house.”

“Sounds good,” Ravi said with a serious nod. “Be careful with the kid, by the way. He knows how to play on your sympathies.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Ravi. I can handle a teenager.”

Ravi shook his head. “Just saying—don’t believe him too easily.”

I kept Ravi’s words in mind as I grabbed some food from the kitchen. A few minutes later, I was down in the basement, hesitating outside the door. I could hear the boy crying softly. I felt a little sick at the sound—he really was just a kid.

I really fucking hoped that Ravi was wrong and the boy wasn’t lying. Cali wanted to help Russell, so I did too, but this was a tricky situation. While I wished Cali were here, I was also glad she wasn’t. There was a chance I’d have to be a hard-ass about this, just to make sure we weren’t being scammed.

When I opened the door, Russell looked up with a yelp. Sniffling, he quickly wiped his tears away, as if pretending it had never happened. He was just a boy, and he was in chains. It was hard to witness, even for me.

Silas had put me in chains, once.

This wouldn’t fucking do.

“Relax,” I said, and took off his shackles after putting the plate down on a nearby table. “I’m sorry for locking you up, but safety comes first.”

Russell didn’t speak. He eyed the food, swallowing roughly, but didn’t make a move toward it.

“Is Cali here?” he asked hoarsely. “I really want to talk to her, to let her know I’m not lying. Everything happened the way I said it did.”

I took a seat, staring at the kid. “Start at the beginning. Tell me everything.” I gestured at the plate. “You should eat, too.”

Russell paused, wrapping his arms around himself in a defensive posture. “I’m not hungry.”

I raised my eyebrows. “I’m pretty sure you haven’t eaten in a long time.”

“No.” He paused. “Not since I left California. Julia probably hasn’t had anything to eat either.”

“I assume Julia is your girlfriend?” I asked.

Russell nodded.

“I get it,” I said. “But starving isn’t going to bring her any comfort. Why don’t you take a seat, eat, and tell me everything, starting from the beginning?”

A moment later, Russel was sitting across from me, ravaging the food. I didn’t hide my smile. He suddenly paused, looking up at me. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” I said.

His voice was low but clear. “What’s it like, being part of a *due destini*?”

The question hit me like a punch to the gut. I jumped up, knocking the food over.

“How the *hell* do you know about that?” I growled.

# Episode 3580

An extremely important mission was afoot, and nobody had voted for me to stay home. Not that that would’ve stopped me. I needed to save Artemis.

*All your fault, all your fault, all your—*

No.

*No*.

I had to get a fucking grip. I looked ahead—Xavier and Adair were in the front, leading the way into the forest. My mom and I walked quietly a few feet behind. I heard Xavier’s voice and tuned in to their conversation.

“… Russell is his name. I didn’t get a chance to ask him any questions—everything I know, Jay told me. He’s just a kid, but I don’t know if we should trust his stories. Jay and Ravi think we should be careful with him, and I agree.”

*There it is, the Russell defamation!* I thought, frowning. *I should go and tell Adair that the kid has done nothing wrong, that he’s just…*

A sigh from my mom interrupted my train of thought, and I realized that Russell’s defense could wait—my mom needed comfort right now. This entire walk, she’d been stopping, sighing, and looking back toward the house, even though it was now completely obscured by the trees.

“I wonder if she’s okay,” she murmured. My heart lurched.

*No crying, Cali!*

No fucking crying.

“Artemis is going to be fine,” I told my mom, wrapping an arm around her shoulders to help her move forward. “She’s with Torin and both the witches. And the Shard. She’s in good hands.”

Mom nodded. “I know. I just hate leaving her…”

“Are we going the right way?” Adair’s sudden question startled both my mother and me. She flinched, staring at him as he said, “Well?”

All the color drained from my mom’s face. She looked around, as if she’d just remembered she was supposed to be the one guiding us. My stomach dropped when I realized that she looked lost. Adair seemed to realize the same thing.

His voice became sharp and impatient, an obvious demanding edge to it. “Orla. *Which way?*”

My mom flinched, and I bristled. “There’s no need to talk to her like that, Adair.”

*Seriously, why does he have to be so…* mean*?*

Adair, of course, completely ignored me. He stomped over to my mom, his eyes fixed on her. “We can’t do this without you, Orla. Don’t go to pieces.”

“I know,” Mom snapped. “I’m not going to pieces—I’m trying to get my bearings.”

“You said you were up for this,” Adair said harshly. “Get a grip!”

“Hey!” I snapped. “Back off and watch your tone—this is my mom you’re talking to.”

Mom huffed, clearly agitated. “I *am* up for this. Of course I am! My daughter is *poisoned*.”

I glared at Adair. “Take a step back, Adair. Right now.”

“This isn’t a—” Before Adair could finish his sentence, Xavier pulled him away.

“You need to give them some space,” Xavier said. “Chill out, man.”

Adair scoffed. “Chill out? That’s rich, coming from you!”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “What the fuck’s that supposed to mean?”

Adair’s tone was sardonic. “It means you’re the biggest hothead I’ve ever met.”

Xavier growled, they started arguing, and I was ready to go all Luna on Adair’s ass if he didn’t chill like Xavier said. I’d done it once today—I could do it again.

*Try and stop me!*

Mom started shaking her head. “No. Adair is right.”

I scowled. “He’s rude and mean and—”

“But he’s right,” Mom repeated. “We need to be focused on getting the plant. I’m sorry. I know how difficult it is for you to see your sister sick like that.”

“I don’t want you to blame yourself here, Mom. Artemis got injured while trying to help me, and I’m just trying not to let the guilt overwhelm me. All we can do right now is try to fix this.”

For a moment, we embraced. It felt so good to have here with me right now.

“I wish I could be as strong as you,” she whispered.

“What?” I looked at her, stunned. “I wish *I* were as strong as *you*! You’ve been through so much in your life, and look at you, always fighting.”

Mom gave me a small smile. Taking a deep breath, she took my hand. “Maybe we can be strong together. Draw courage from each other.”

I hugged my mom again, holding her tight. “That’s what I want as well.”

She nodded determinedly and said, “Okay, let’s find that plant.”

Before I could say anything else, she marched over toward Xavier and Adair, who were fighting like a couple of roosters with very similar dispositions.

“… serious? It’s obvious!” Adair said sharply.

Xavier scoffed. “And what do *you* know?”

Adair scoffed right back. “From what I’ve heard, you used to be so out of control that—”

“Adair!” Mom’s voice was loud, cutting off the Fae. Both the men flinched in surprise. “No more fighting. Like you said, we need to find the plant, and everything else is just a waste of time,” she told them. “I need to consult with the trees.”

Xavier looked like his usual hot, grumpy self, but he didn’t say anything. Adair didn’t either. They exchanged a glare before nodding. Mom had made them shut up so easily—truly a huge feat, that—and now I was intrigued to see what she would do next.

I recalled the first time I’d learned that trees could communicate, back when I’d visited the Fae world, where things like that seemed normal. Here, though, in the human world, only my mom could talk to the trees. How amazing was that?

“How is she going to do this?” Xavier asked gruffly, eyeing my mom with interest.

“Let’s just watch,” I whispered.

Mom stopped before a thick patch of woods.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Xavier muttered, “That’s too many trees. Shouldn’t she just pick one? Should I start knocking on the trunks to see who answers? If you want me to smack one of them—”

I gripped his arm to stop him before he went ahead and punched a tree. I knew he was fully capable of something like that. “Xavier, no. Let my mom do this.”

She studied several trees while the rest of us stayed silent. Even Xavier. Finally, she approached a twisted, aging tree and raised her hands. I watched as she concentrated, staring at the tree.

*Is the tree going to talk? Will it be like a wind chime in the leaves? The suspense is killing me!*

There was no noise, though. Instead, a glow started to grow, starting at the base of the tree and extending out into the forest. Small, luminescent mushrooms, looking like lights on an airport runway, led off into the distance.

It was gorgeous.

*My mom really is amazing*, I thought.

“This is it,” she said, turning to look at me. “All we have to do now is follow the trail.”

“I’ll go first,” Xavier said. “I’ll scent the air and figure out if there are any threats. Just to be safe.”

“Good idea,” I said.

He leaned in, gave me a side hug and kiss on the side of my head, then started walking.

“I’m coming with you to keep an eye on the mushrooms!” Mom called, rushing to catch up to him.

Adair and I brought up the rear, just the two of us.

*Well, well, well*, I wanted to say. *Look who it is! Mr. Tough Guy, who’s rude to people’s mothers!*

Adair was brooding and quiet, but what else was new? That was him most of the time. I wished I understood him better. But even Tabitha admitted she wasn’t sure about Adair, and they were together.

Safe to say, when he broke the silence, I was so shocked I almost jumped.

“I’m sorry I was hard on your mother.”

I was even more surprised now, but I forced myself not to show it. I wasn’t about to congratulate him for doing the bare minimum.

“I know you’re worried, but that doesn’t give you the right to be rude,” I said coolly. “I’m not going to let anyone talk to my mom like that. Is that clear?”

Adair stopped. In the darkness of the forest, illuminated only by the moon, I saw a glint in his eyes as he stared at me.

*God*, I thought, *did I go too far? I don’t regret a word I said, though.*

Just as I was torn between apprehension and annoyance, Adair’s expression changed. He gave me the smallest hint of a smile before moving ahead without saying another word. Huh.

*Is this progress?*

I wasn’t sure. But Adair didn’t seem to be all bad. And since he did seem so worried about Artemis, hopefully she’d be able to forge a better relationship with him in the future.

At least now, it seemed like they had a chance.

*But first, save Artemis!*

I rushed to catch up with the others. Mom and Xavier had stopped at the edge of a clearing. The mushroom trail led to the center of it, then ended.

“Over there,” Mom said quietly.

We all marched forward and stopped at a bunch of bushy plants. My heart was pounding.

“Is that it?” I asked.

Adair nodded.

“Yes,” Mom said. “It’s the same plant family as the abeara.”

“What are we waiting for, then?” Xavier—clearly rivaling Adair when it came to impatience—huffed. “Let’s grab some and get back.”

He reached to grab for them, but then my mom gripped his forearm.

“No,” she said sharply.

Xavier looked confused. “I thought you wanted the plant?”

“We do,” Mom said with authority. “But the plant must offer itself to us.”

“What?” Xavier demanded.

“Shh!” I wrapped my arm around his while Mom knelt down. Enraptured, I watched as she waved her hands over the plant. The ground around it began to bubble, and then…

The plant uprooted itself.

I gasped.

“Wait, *what*?” Xavier said again. This time, he sounded genuinely shocked.

“Thank you,” Mom said quietly, then gently picked the plant up. Adair offered another small smile, and then Mom said, “We can go now.”

We all stared at her, and I couldn’t stop grinning.

“That was amazing, Mom,” I said. “Xavier, wasn’t that—”

Xavier froze, his entire body going rigid. “Everybody, get down!” he hissed, immediately moving to stand in front of me like a shield. “I smell a wolf.”

# Episode 3581

**Greyson**

The moment the boy shrank back in terror, I got a fucking grip. I wasn’t here to intimidate someone half my size. I was *not* that kind of Alpha.

I wasn’t my father—but the shame remained.

It sliced through me, an immediate reaction that came right after my outburst, one instinct overcoming another. I was glad that Cali hadn’t been here to see me lose it so easily. I wasn’t supposed to crack like this—I *never* used to crack like this. But we’d been through so much shit recently that I’d gotten jumpy.

I had to take a step back.

And then I did that, quite literally, because this kid had retreated into a corner, looking like he wanted the earth to open and swallow him whole.

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” I said, softening my tone. “But I have to know how you know about Cali and the *due destini*. This is important, Russell.”

“I learned about Cali from Julia,” he squeaked.

“How’d Julia find out?” I asked.

Russell paused.

I stared at him. “I’m not going to hurt you, or her. You caught me by surprise, is all. I would appreciate it if you answered my questions.”

Russell nodded, swallowing roughly. Slowly, as if measuring his every step, he took a seat back at the table. His voice was low. “I don’t know for sure. But Julia said she heard about the *due destini* from one of her pack members.”

This wasn’t good. Gossip was *never* fucking good.

“Which pack is she from?” I asked.

“The Bitterfang pack, in California.”

I mulled the name over. I’d never heard of them. Clearly, my silence made the kid antsy.

“I’m really sorry if I did something wrong,” he blurted. “Hope you’re not going to blame Julia!”

Now I felt even *more* ashamed. Jesus fucking Christ.

“I’m not going to blame Julia, or you,” I said. “I’m only trying to understand.”

And to my understanding, this was a problem. News about Cali had obviously spread beyond the Oregon packs, and to know that a random California pack and a bunch of Rogues had been actively talking about her was a huge red flag.

Couldn’t the universe just… *chill*, for a moment?

Did my mate really have to be in constant danger?

“What are you thinking?” the boy whispered.

He still looked scared shitless, and that wouldn’t do. I needed to find out more about where this kid came from, and his girlfriend’s pack. Basically, after almost scaring Russell to death, I had to regain his trust.

“I’m thinking about the way life changes,” I said, starting to clean up the scattered food. “I’m the Redwood Alpha now, but I used to be a Rogue, too.”

Russell’s eyes went wide. “I’ve never heard of a Rogue becoming Alpha. Was it because of your love for Cali?”

Seeing the moon-eyed look on the kid, I realized that he wanted the fairy-tale version of events. But why *had* I become Alpha? First, it had been to protect my family—namely my idiot younger brothers, whom I loved for some reason. But then, I’d met Cali. I’d been caught so off-guard, my feelings one fucking explosion after the other, that her presence had almost thrown off my entire plan. Letting her go, though, had never seemed like a true option.

“It’s not that simple,” I told Russell. “Love can achieve a lot of things, but you still have to be smart about what you’re doing. We’re werewolves—there are dangers out there that can affect us and our mates.”

Russell frowned at that, nodding.

“Why did you seek us out?” I asked.

Russell gulped. “The *due destini*… It’s powerful.”

“But what’s it got to do with you?” I asked.

“The group of Rogues I was part of,” Russell started, “they loosely refer to themselves as the Pit Bulls. And they don’t really believe I have a mate bond. They think that I’m way too young to really know, that I’m out of my mind to think Julia is my mate.”

“Why?” I asked.

Russell sighed. “She’s basically the princess of the Bitterfang pack.”

Oh, great. This sounded like a mess already.

“So you pissed off the Bitterfang Alpha?” I asked.

Russell nodded. “I guess so. He’s Julia’s father.”

Well, then. This kid was screwed. One hundred percent. Nothing got an Alpha’s blood boiling more than a boy who was after his daughter.

“Julia ran away to be with me,” Russell muttered. “But if her father finds her before I do, I’ll never be able to see her again.” He folded his hands on the table. When our eyes met, it was clear as day that he was tearing up.

Please no.

“You won’t let that happen, will you?” he asked, his voice cracking. “Julia’s all I have—I’ve never loved anyone as much as I love her! Without her, I’ll be all alone, and her dad…” He choked up. “Her dad doesn’t understand. Her dad won’t let her be with me. You’re my only hope.”

And now there was a tear. Two, three, many tears. But there was no way in hell I was going to commit to helping him. The last thing I needed was to get between a daughter and her Alpha father. That would be asking for trouble.

Maybe he did have a mate bond, but if I stuck my nose in another Alpha’s business randomly like that, it could cause an actual pack war. Plus, I’d only heard one side of the story. Also, this kid was, what? Like, twelve?

“How old are you, Russell?” I asked.

“Fifteen,” he said, wiping his eyes.

Like I said. Twelve.

As if he could hear my thoughts, he said, “But my love for Julia is real. Being young doesn’t mean I don’t know how to love! I’d die without Julia—she’s the reason my heart beats!”

God. We had ourselves a poet here.

“And that’s—that’s why I came to you,” Russell said hoarsely.

I squinted at him. “Why?”

He nodded, suddenly all determined. “Because I heard that the Redwood pack believes in love. You have a *due destini* trio, and you know how powerful love is. You have the strength to help me, and you understand what’s at stake here.”

I felt like letting out a wary sigh. Back when I’d been a Rogue, there was no way a speech like this would’ve moved me. But now, I had Cali, and I *did* believe in love. I believed in doing anything for the woman I adored. As long as Cali was happy, I was happy.

So Russell wasn’t all that far off.

“You’re not talking—why aren’t you talking?” Russell said, blinking rapidly as if he was about to start hyperventilating. “You don’t believe me? Why wouldn’t you believe me? I’m telling the truth!”

“Slow down,” I said calmly, shaking my head. “I’m not necessarily doubting your version of events. But there are other Redwood pack members here who are questioning what you’ve told us.”

Jay and Ravi. Both of them had experience with combat and pack politics, so I couldn’t just disregard their instincts. Cali, of course, believed that Russell was a pure baby wolf pup, and that was part of the conflict here.

“I don’t understand,” Russell said, standing up and shaking his head. His expression was alarmed. “Why would I lie about something so important?”

The list of answers to that question was a mile long. Even if this kid had nothing to do with any of the pack’s old enemies, he could be a seemingly innocent spy working for a new foe. The pack summit was approaching, so the timing of his appearance was another red flag. Werewolf politics meant the waters were forever muddy, and a single wrong move could have a huge ripple effect.

“Are there any Rogues or members of the Bitterfang pack out there looking for you?” I asked.

Russell swallowed roughly. “Yes.”

If that was true, the pack was putting itself in danger by keeping him here.

He looked so scared, though.

He looked sincere, and it was hard to ignore my instinct to protect someone who seemed so vulnerable. I’d been his age, once. I hadn’t found my mate, but I’d still felt lost in so many ways. Even though I was trying to remain neutral, it was hard not to feel for him.

“I’m telling the truth,” he repeated shakily. “Please, *please* believe me.”

But what if I did believe him? What if Ravi and Jay were wrong, and Cali was right? Then what? Hide him here and wait for the Rogues or the Bitterfang Alpha to attack? And Russell was a minor, which made everything even worse.

“You have to give me time to think,” I told the kid.

He choked, standing up in one swift motion. He looked both desperate and outraged. “We don’t *have* time! If you don’t believe me, I can prove it!”

My eyes narrowed the second he made a move toward the door.

“I’ll go find Julia,” he said. “You can ask her!”

In a flash, I blocked his way to the exit and reached for the chains.

I didn’t raise my voice this time, but my tone was still firm. “You’re not going anywhere.”

# Episode 3582

**Xavier**

I reached for Cali, keeping her behind me as I scanned the forest. I didn’t recognize the strange wolf’s scent.

“Is it a natural wolf?” Cali whispered. “Could it be someone from Elle’s pack?”

“It’s definitely a werewolf. Not close enough to eavesdrop on our conversation, but still, they’re trespassing on Redwood territory.” My jaw clenched. “Whoever they are, they’re not allowed to be here.”

Adair appeared on my other side. “Should we track them down?”

Adair was pretty much an asshole, and extremely rude. Which I didn’t vibe with when I wasn’t in the mood for bullshit—and I was never in the mood for bullshit. But at least he could fight, and he would never chicken out of a dangerous situation. We needed to think strategically here, though.

“I don’t want to do anything that could put Cali or Orla in harm’s way,” I told him.

Cali squeezed my arm. “We can defend ourselves, Xavier.”

“Of course you can,” Adair said in a monotone, staring at Cali. “We’re just trying to figure out our plan of action here. What do you think?”

I could tell Cali was pleasantly surprised—Adair had just called her capable and asked for her opinion. I frowned. Maybe I should start doing that more, if it got that kind of reaction out of her.

“We need to get back to Artemis,” Cali said, looking up at me. She did have a point, there.

“Best to avoid the wolf for now, then,” I said. “We can organize a search and destroy mission when we get back to the house.”

That wouldn’t be good news for anyone, but it had to be done.

“I agree with both of you,” Adair said seriously. “We need to get the plant to Artemis right now.”

“Are we leaving, then?” Orla asked in a hushed tone.

“Just a moment,” I said. I listened hard, looking the area over once more. I didn’t see or hear anything weird. But there was a chance the werewolf was closer than I originally assumed, masking their scent in some way as they prepared to attack.

“Could this werewolf have anything to do with the kid you’ve got locked up in the basement?” Adair asked all of a sudden.

“You mean Russell?” Cali said.

I sniffed the air again. Sure enough, I could detect Russell’s scent lightly on Cali. Fuck. Adair’s theory held some weight. Could it be that the kid had been telling the truth? That there were werewolves out in the forest waiting for him? If these were the Rogues whose group he’d been part of or the pack of the girl he was in love with, would they blame Cali for Russell’s quest to find her?

We had to deal with this, ASAP.

“I’m going to shift, lead the group, and keep an eye out for any threats,” I muttered. “I need you all to stay back and stay alert. I’ve only scented one werewolf, but that could change. There could be more.”

With a flick of his wrist, Adair produced a massive electrified whip. “That won’t be a problem.”

He had his faults, sure, but at least he was effective.

I turned to Cali, reaching for her hand. There was fear in her eyes as she said, “I need you to be careful, Xavier.”

*Everything’s going to be okay*, I mind linked.

I gave her a kiss on the cheek before shifting and scenting the air again. My wolf vision allowed me to see more clearly, and that was a major help. Following the path that had brought us here, I led the group back toward the house.

I moved forward, keeping my eyes and ears attuned to any changes around me. The wolf’s scent didn’t fade, and I paused.

And then I turned to look behind me.

There was a pair of eyes in the trees, gleaming in the darkness.

My heartbeat accelerated immediately, a low growl rumbling through my chest.

“Xavier?” Cali whispered. “What’s wrong?”

I went back, circling Cali and her mother before settling directly in front of them. Adair got my drift and immediately covered the back of the group. At the same time, a large wolf stepped into the clearing. If he wanted to get to my mate or Orla, he’d have to get through me. Good luck with that.

His eyes gleaming, the wolf settled back on his haunches and glared at me.

*Where is the boy?* he snarled in my head. I wondered if this was an Alpha.

Either way, I didn’t give a shit.

*There is no boy among us*, I replied. *You’re not a very good tracker if you can’t figure that out. And you’re trespassing on my pack’s land.*

The wolf snarled—loudly, this time. Orla let out a surprised noise, and I took another step forward.

*I can smell him on you*, the wolf mind linked. *You came into contact with him!*

*We come into contact with a lot of people*, I replied. *You’re going to have to be more specific.*

The wolf advanced slowly. He was large, with huge teeth, but I wasn’t worried.

*The boy belongs to us*, the wolf hissed. *He has wronged my Alpha, offended him. He has to pay for what he’s done. That’s why we’re here. We’re going to bring him back.*

I caught the “we.” This guy was either bluffing, or there were others like him out here, just far enough away that I couldn’t catch their scent.

*You came all the way out here to threaten a boy?* I scoffed. *No wonder you can’t find him—he’s probably scared shitless and vanished from the face of the earth by now.*

The wolf growled, digging his claws into the ground. At the same time, Cali mind linked, *What’s going on?*

*The wolf wants Russell*, I replied.

Immediately, I realized I’d made a mistake.

“You can’t have him!” Cali called out angrily. “We won’t let you hurt him!”

Cali had basically just confirmed the wolf’s suspicions about us sheltering the kid. Shit. Cali seemed to realize her error, because she gasped when the werewolf cocked his head and gave us a fangy grin. His voice was like nails on a chalkboard in my head.

*I can hurt whoever I want.*

And then he lunged toward us.

Blocking him was a no-brainer—Cali and Orla were behind me, and I had to make sure they were safe. But before I could perform my signature evade-and-attack move, there was a loud cracking noise. Adair’s energy whip.

It flew right over my head, striking the wolf and knocking him back.

To my surprise, though, the motherfucker recovered quickly, as if energized by the violence. I lunged immediately, smashing into him, my claws digging into his legs. We rolled across the ground, snarling, biting, but I knew I’d soon gain the upper hand.

“Xavier!” Cali was shouting, clearly worried. I hoped Adair would have enough sense to tell her to stay back. I could handle this asshole—this fight was basically fucking routine for me.

Sure enough, in just a moment, I had the wolf pinned to the ground, snapping my teeth over his face.

*You know what happens to werewolves who trespass on Redwood territory?* I mind linked. *We tear their fucking throats out.*

I opened my mouth to demonstrate, but then the asshole said, *The girl you have with you is pretty.*

I was distracted for a single second when he mentioned Cali. It was enough for him to jam his claws into my shoulder and slip out from under me. Son of a fucking bitch!

I howled, ready to pounce on his back and get this over with, but then I looked forward.

Cali was running toward us.

All the air left my lungs.

The wolf growled, charging at her, and then she raised her hands, her expression determined.

*BANG!*

A violent purple blast flew from her fingertips and hit the ground in front of the wolf, tearing it up. Dirt flew into my eyes, and the wolf was knocked back like a ragdoll. I cursed and snarled as I fought to blink the dust from my vision. But the bastard had already recovered.

He was charging toward Cali, who stumbled back.

The rage I felt was so potent, I could taste it.

“Cali!” Orla screamed. She shot her hands out, and a wall of thornbushes rose up. The wolf jumped, barely clearing the top of it. He landed on the other side and kept charging toward Cali. Orla kept trying to use the vines to grab the wolf, but he continued to dodge them just in time.

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*… I ran ahead, but I was still having trouble seeing.

*CRACK!*

I knew that sound—Adair’s energy whip. Through still-foggy vision, I saw the wolf falling backward, yelping from the impact. This was my chance. I didn’t give a fuck about my blurry sight. It was bad enough this wolf wanted to hurt a child, but to threaten *my* *mate*?

There was no mercy to be had.

This guy was dead on arrival.

The moment he landed on his back after Adair’s attack, Orla conjured up thick vines that wrapped around his limbs and held him in place. Then I was there, pouncing on him. Before he could play any kind of mind games, I opened my mouth and attacked, sinking my teeth into his neck. My mouth filled with bitter blood as the werewolf choked out a growl and went limp at my feet.

He tasted fucking disgusting.

I spat the blood out, shifting back to human form as Cali raced up to me. She looked pale and shaken, but she was fine.

“Xavier!” she gasped out. “Are you okay?”

I wiped my mouth and spat on the ground. “Yeah. Let’s get the plant back to your sister before this guy’s friends show up.”

Cali stroked my face, then wrapped her arm around mine. We started to walk back, but then I paused again.

“Hold on,” I whispered. “There’s someone coming.”

# Episode 3583

I swallowed my fear. After what had just happened, I was running on pure adrenaline. Xavier held my hand tightly, keeping me behind him as we crouched behind a large bush. He was drenched in blood and completely naked after shifting and mauling that wolf to death...

All to save me.

As he scanned the tree line for trespassers, I wished I could just wrap him up in my arms, share some of my warmth with him. Even though werewolves ran hot, it was still January in Oregon. How could he not be cold right now? I was wearing, like, thirteen layers and still freezing my ass off. I was also pretty sure that him being naked in front of my mom would’ve been super awkward if not for our current probably-life-or-death situation.

*Oh, god… Will the danger ever end?*

I glanced behind us and saw the wolf’s lifeless body on the ground. It had all happened so quickly that I hadn’t even had time to think. But I told myself that Xavier had had no choice but to kill him. The moment the werewolf had tried to attack me directly, his fate had been sealed.

Xavier had been pretty non-murder-y lately, but he had his limits. Considering everything that had transpired lately, and how people kept trying to kill me or hurt me or eat me, I probably should’ve been grateful that he hadn’t gone on a rampage earlier.

*Ahahaha the bar is so low it’s in hell! But also, how can I blame Xavier?*

With Xavier’s instincts on high alert right now, whoever had decided to approach us would probably meet a similar fate. Could it be one of the dead wolf’s friends? He’d mentioned his Alpha… Had he come with an entire pack?

*I… do not like that possibility.*

Even with Xavier and all our Fae magic, we would probably be overpowered by a whole pack. My heart beat even faster at the thought. It had been racing this entire time. I eyed Xavier—his eyes kept scanning the woods, his jaw clenched tight.

*Is the intruder still coming toward us? Can you smell them?* I mind linked.

Suddenly, I heard loud footsteps. I didn’t need to be a werewolf to hear the distinct rustle and snap of twigs when someone came way too close for comfort. My stomach dropped. Xavier immediately stood up, and at the same time, a tall, broad figure stepped out of the darkness and into the moonlit clearing.

“Is everything okay?” Ravi asked.

*Oh my god!* I screamed inside my head. *RAVI? He scared the shit out of me!*

Before Xavier could speak, I huffed. “What are you doing here, Ravi?”

He blinked at me. “Jeez, what’s with the tone?”

“Xavier was in a super violent headspace and could’ve accidentally killed you,” I said. “*And* you spooked us!”

“I wasn’t afraid,” Adair deadpanned.

My mom sounded sheepish. “It was okay…”

Xavier snorted. “Cali, I would’ve scented him before attacking, so—”

“I know,” I said. I looked at Ravi. “And I thought you were guarding the basement door?”

“Greyson sent me out here. I was trying to retrace Russell’s steps to see if I could find anything to corroborate his story. And then I heard a fight,” he said. “What happened?”

“Gruesome murder happened,” I said.

Xavier gestured behind him. “Russell’s story checks out. There’s a dead wolf back there who was trying to hunt the boy down.”

Frowning, Ravi walked a few steps past us. He stopped, eyeing the dead guy. “Do you know who he is?”

“Didn’t have the time for a meet and greet,” Xavier said sharply. “The guy went after Cali.”

“Can we talk about this later?” Adair asked impatiently. “My niece needs us.”

I was taken aback for a second. Adair calling Artemis his *niece*? Had he ever referred to her like that before? Ever? I wished she could’ve been here to hear it—I was certain she would’ve liked it a lot.

“We should get going, yes,” my mom agreed. She didn’t seem surprised by Adair’s words, which was interesting. “Stalling isn’t helping.”

“And it’s still possible that the dead wolf didn’t come out here alone. He mentioned an Alpha,” Xavier said. He turned to my mom, Adair, and me. “I’ll shift, and you can each ride on someone’s back, okay?”

“Wait,” Ravi said. “What about the body?” He gestured at the dead wolf on the ground, but I didn’t look. I didn’t think I’d ever get used to seeing dead bodies.

“What do you mean?” Xavier asked with a scowl.

Ravi raised his eyebrows. “We should at least try to hide the body. If the guy came here with friends, they’re going to come looking for him. Why make it easy for them?”

“Fuck,” Xavier said under his breath, rubbing his face. “I should’ve thought of that.”

I swallowed nervously. Xavier *should* have thought of that.

“Xavier,” I whispered. “Are you okay?”

He shook his head and turned to me, pressing his lips together. “I don’t want to let you go back home without me.”

There was something raw in his voice, in his expression, that threw me off. I realized that we’d all been acting like what had happened in New Orleans was in the distant past, but I could feel the events of the past couple of weeks—of the past month, with Seluna and everything—weighing on us. Xavier seemed shaken, which was rare for him, but I told myself that I shouldn’t be sad over it.

It was only proof that Xavier was human, and he cared.

“I’ll be okay,” I said. “We’re not that far from the house.”

“Besides, Orla and Cali will be with me,” Adair spoke up. “You don’t have to worry.”

Xavier stared at me. “Are you sure, baby?”

I looked between Xavier and Adair. The Dark Fae was matter-of-fact and stern, and he’d used his whip like it was second nature, earlier. I knew I could take him at his word.

“It’s all good,” I told Xavier. “Besides, I have my magic, too.”

He nodded, taking a deep breath. “It’s settled, then. Ravi and I will take care of the body, and you take the plant to Artemis.”

My stomach twisted at the sound of my sister’s name. I squeezed Xavier’s hand, and he pulled me into a tight hug. He gave me a brief, hard kiss that I felt all over.

“Everything will be okay,” he whispered. “Promise.”

I wanted to believe him so badly. His skin was warm under my fingertips, and I realized—again—that he was naked out here.

“I should leave my coat with you,” I said. “You’re going to catch a cold.”

He raised an eyebrow, looking suddenly amused. “Cali, your coat would barely cover one of my shoulders.”

This would’ve been funny if I hadn’t been so stressed out.

I kissed him one last time, then we turned to head back to the house. Adair led the way, pausing every so often to listen and watch. Mom stayed silent, cradling the healing plant against her chest as if it were a treasure. It did feel like a treasure to me.

By the time we reached the house, I was an anxious mess.

“I’m going to check on Artemis, let her know we have the antidote,” I told my mom the moment we entered the house.

She nodded somberly. “I’ll be in the kitchen—I need to prepare a paste with the plant’s roots.”

Adair nodded, and without a word, he followed me into the living room.

Torin jumped up the moment we entered the room. “Where’s the plant?”

My sister was lying still, the Shard in her hand, while Rishika stroked her hair gently. My heart hammering, I quickly explained that my mom was making the paste. Adair was standing at the doorway, watching Artemis. Why wouldn’t he come any closer?

*Is he… afraid?*

I had no idea why that thought popped into my head. It was absurd to think that someone as powerful as Adair would be scared of anything. Right?

“How is she?” I asked Rishika.

Rishika’s eyes didn’t leave Artemis’s face. Her voice was gruff. “About the same.”

Footsteps caught my attention, and a moment later, my mom appeared in the doorway. She was carrying a small dish filled with a dark paste.

She looked at Adair. “I need your help. Are you up for it?”

Adair only nodded, and they stepped inside together. My mother’s calm was oddly heady, flooding the room. I held my breath and watched her, enthralled by her steadiness.

“Turn her on her side,” Mom said to Rishika, who nodded and obeyed.

I grimaced at the sight of Artemis’s wound. It was gruesome.

“I’ll hold the dish, and you spread the ointment,” Mom told Adair.

Adair’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he spread the paste on Artemis’s wound. My sister moaned softly, stirring.

I gasped, turning to my mother. “Is that a good sign?”

All I could think was that there was nothing I wanted more in this world than to see my sister sit up and smile right now.

But before Mom could speak, Artemis shuddered, moaning in agony…

And then she started convulsing.

# Episode 3584

Artemis was writhing around, her eyes flickering open and shut, guttural moans leaving her mouth as though the pain she was experiencing was truly excruciating.

*Something’s wrong!*

My thought was a scream, and then I realized I’d said it out loud.

“What’s happening to her?” I demanded.

Adair was frozen, breathless, and I couldn’t smother the urge to fucking shove him into action.

“Adair! Why aren’t you doing anything?” I shouted. My throat felt raw and my chest was throbbing, but at least Adair looked like he’d been awakened.

He turned to Rishika and gruffly ordered, “Hold her down.”

Wide-eyed and shaking, Rishika did as she was told. She was a werewolf, the only one of the three of us who could physically restrain Artemis. But that didn’t stop me from moving closer, the urge to touch my sister unlike anything else.

“No!” Adair blocked my way, his eyes sharp. “Stay back.”

“What’s wrong with you?” I fought to push past him, furious. “Why are you just letting her suffer? This is killing her!”

Adair grabbed me by the shoulders, his grip so solid that I couldn’t imagine getting him off me without blasting him away. “It’s okay,” he told me calmly. “This is just her body’s reaction to the antidote. She will push through it and be fine.”

I panted, my gaze darting to my mother. There were tears streaming down her cheeks, but she still said, “He’s right. Come here, Cali.”

She pulled me into a hug, and I let myself be pulled. She held me tightly, and I held her back, my ears ringing, entire body racked with shivers as I watched Artemis convulse. A wish echoed through my head, over and over.

*Please be okay, please be okay, please be okay, please be okay—*

And then…

*All my fault, all my fault, all my fault, all my fault, all my—*

For what felt like a lifetime, but was probably only a minute, Artemis moaned and ached. Rishika held her down, whispering soothing words, her dark eyes glistening when Artemis’s spasms peaked.

And then they abated.

I held my breath as Artemis’s own breathing slowed and steadied. Still shaking, I turned to my mother, who wiped her eyes and smiled.

“It’s working,” she whispered.

*It’s working*, I repeated in my head. *It’s working, it’s working, it’s working.*

Mom let me go to walk up to Adair. He was kneeling by Artemis’s side, right next to Rishika, who was still holding her. Mom squeezed his shoulder and spoke again, her voice louder this time. “It’s working, Adair.”

He almost flinched at my mother’s touch. Standing abruptly, he cleared his throat, pulling away from Mom’s hand. “I knew it would,” he said. “I’m glad you were able to locate the plant.”

Without another look at Artemis, and to my astonishment, he stepped out of the room.

“What the *hell*?” I said in a low voice. “Doesn’t he want to see Artemis pull through?”

Before Mom could answer, Artemis let out a huge gasp. My heart dropped, but when I looked at her, her eyes were open. She was still pale, still slightly shaking, but she was better.

*She’s going to be okay…*

Tears trickled from my eyes when Artemis’s confused gaze locked with mine. “What happened?” she asked, looking between Rishika and me. “How’d I get here?”

My voice cracked when I replied. “You were poisoned.”

Artemis let out another gasp, this one of pure surprise. Rishika leaned in, stroking my sister’s hair, kissing her cheek. Artemis’s attention was immediately on her, and Rishika wiped the corners of her eyes quickly.

“Don’t ever do that again,” she whispered.

Artemis swallowed roughly, reaching for Rishika’s hand and holding it tight.

The relief that washed over me was incredible, and my mom seemed to be feeling the same way. She sat by Artemis’s side, leaning down to kiss her forehead. Gently, she said, “Everything’s fine. You’re out of danger now.”

Artemis sniffled before she looked around the room, as if she suddenly remembered. “Where’s Adair?”

Mom and I exchanged an uneasy look. What the hell was I supposed to say? “Adair dipped out because he’s just weird and intense like that”?Because I couldn’t believe that he didn’t care—not after everything that had happened.

“He left because there are too many people in the room, and it’s best for you to rest,” Mom said, smoothing things over like I never could when I was feeling shaken. “I’m sure he’ll come talk to you later.”

*Hah*,I thought. *I wouldn’t hold my breath*.

Of course, I didn’t tell my sister any of that, because I didn’t want to upset her. Regardless, Adair was a hard one to figure out. One moment I wanted to smack him, the next I thought he was decent.

“I need more space to heal that nasty wound. It’s going to take a minute,” Torin suddenly said. I’d been so scared that I hadn’t noticed him hovering behind me. He still looked shaken as well, but much less so than before. When he walked past me, I squeezed his shoulder encouragingly. A moment later, with Rishika and my mom taking a step back, he raised his hands over the wound.

Slowly but surely, the gash glued itself together under Torin’s soft glow.

There was a lump in my throat as I watched.

“We’re so lucky you’re here, Torin,” I whispered, hugging him.

He offered a soft smile.

I walked over to Artemis and gingerly hugged her as well. “I’m so glad you’re okay—I don’t know what I’d do otherwise,” I whispered.

Artemis smiled a little, squeezing my hand.

“It may take a few hours for the toxins to be flushed out of Artemis’s system.” Mom eyed my sister. “The best thing you can do is get some rest.”

For once, Artemis didn’t complain. “Sure thing. I’m exhausted.”

Rishika chuckled at the ease of Artemis’s admission. Mom kissed my sister’s forehead again, taking the Shard from her hands. “You shouldn’t be needing this anymore, either.”

“I’ll take her upstairs,” Rishika said. A moment later, the two left the room with Artemis cradled in Rishika’s arms.

I plopped down into a chair, my heartbeat finally slowing.

*My god, that was A LOT*, I thought, letting out a long breath. *And it doesn’t feel like it’s over, either.*

We had a terrified boy in the basement, there was a dead wolf out in the woods, and my sister was recovering from a Fae poisoning. Would things *ever* feel normal around here? Normal by normal standards, not Redwood pack standards.

“I think it’s time to fix you now,” Mom said quietly, handing the Shard over to me.

And then I remembered that, apart from all of the above, there was also my own predicament to consider. *Yay! Not.*

Sighing, I took the Shard and inspected it. I hadn’t had a chance to look at it before. Was this really what all the fuss was about? I wasn’t sure what I’d expected, but it looked like an old piece of glass.

“What am I supposed to do with it?” I asked my mother, holding the Shard up to the light.

Before Mom could answer, I felt a strange tingling starting from my fingertips and moving upward. Nearly dropping the Shard in surprise, I choked out, “Damn, it’s like this thing has a heartbeat!”

“It’s an ancient piece of broken glass,” Mom informed me. “It’s buzzing with magic, honey. All you have to do is keep it on you.”

I eyed the thing suspiciously. “How? Do I just use it like a teddy bear while I sleep? Because it’s all sharp edges and doesn’t seem that cuddly…”

Torin chuckled, and Mom shook her head. She snapped her fingers, conjuring up a piece of thin green cord that looked like the vein of a leaf. Gently, she took the shard and fastened it to the cord. “You’ll wear it like a necklace. Think of it as an amulet.”

“Oh, now it’s actually kind of cute!” Torin commented. “Like a stylistic choice.”

“True.” I smiled, picking up the necklace to put it on.

“I’ll do that.” Greyson’s voice flooded the room.

I twisted around and met his eyes as he walked toward me, always graceful, his every step purposeful. Taking the Shard necklace from my hands, he gently draped it around my neck, leaning closer to me as he fastened it. There was something so intimate about this, about the way he looked at me, that I felt a warmth spreading all over me.

“Well,” Mom chirped, straightening her blouse. “Torin, honey, why don’t you come with me—I need you to help me with something in the kitchen.”

“Sure!” Torin smirked, waggling his eyebrows at me before following my mom out of the room.

I snorted, and Greyson smiled before saying, “Your mom is very perceptive.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him close. “Why do you say that?”

His deep voice was hoarse. “Because she left us alone when she realized I wanted to do this.” He leaned in, brushing his lips over mine.

I moved up onto my toes, clinging to him, melting into the kiss and wanting more. After everything that had happened, I needed this. I needed his hands on me and the way he—

Stopped kissing me.

*Excuse me? I was enjoying that!*

“How does it feel?” he asked gruffly.

Flustered, I blurted out, “Your kisses are always amazing.”

He laughed, shaking his head. “I appreciate that, love, but I meant the Shard. Is it doing anything?”

I blushed. Furiously.

*Cali, you horny moron, of course he was talking about the Shard!*

“I don’t feel anything,” I said. “Perhaps just a little buzzing…”

But that could’ve been because Greyson had just kissed me. Just saying.

He looked all thoughtful and regal as he said, “I suppose we should give the Shard some time to work, then. I talked to Adair and heard what happened in the woods with that dead wolf, by the way.”

I swallowed audibly. “Xavier—”

“I know.” Greyson nodded curtly. “That wolf was trespassing, and he threatened you. Xavier did the right thing. I’ll talk to him about what to do next when he gets back.”

“Did you talk to Russell?”

“I did.” He stroked my cheek. “I don’t want you to worry. I put the chains away, and I don’t think the kid is a threat.”

I grinned widely, relieved. “He must be feeling so much better.”

Greyson nodded, swallowing. “I told him I’m going to look for Julia.”

I gasped. “Greyson! That’s incredible of you!” I reached up to hug him—

A sharp pain emanated from my shoulder.

*Oh, god, not again! PLEASE, not again!*

“What’s wrong?” Greyson asked, alarmed.

My shirt felt restrictive, my skin burning. I groaned, the pain piercing me as I choked out, “It’s my… my shoulder again! Something bad is happening!”

# Episode 3585

**Xavier**

Ravi and I, both of us shifted, were digging a hole in the middle of the woods. The ground was frozen, making our job difficult. Under other circumstances, this would’ve been ridiculous to watch—two giant-ass wolves, digging around in the snow. But this was far from fun, and the dead body just three feet away from us was testament to that.

*Thanks for doing this*, I said to Ravi. *I fucking hate digging.*

Ravi snorted. *It’s no big deal. This affects the pack, so I want to help.*

Ravi was a good beta. He kept an eye out for everybody in the pack, and took initiative without overstepping. When I became Alpha, I was going to remember the way he’d handled himself in this situation.

*I think it’s deep enough*, Ravi said, hopping out of the hole. He looked down at me over the opening, one ear flopping forward. *It looks deep enough from up here, too.*

I dug a couple of more inches to the right, settled back to inspect it, and nodded. *Good.*

I joined Ravi at the top a moment later, and we dragged the body forward. He pulled on one of the dead wolf’s legs, and I pulled on the other. I made sure not to dismember the guy, because I really didn’t need any more of his blood in my mouth. Yuck.

After some pushing and shoving, we finally dropped him into the hole, and I heard the loud crack of bones breaking.

Ravi and I exchanged a look.

*At least he’s already dead*, Ravi said.

*Yup*, I agreed.

*The kid was right, then*, Ravi said as we started filling in the hole. *There really were people out here looking for him, and I didn’t believe a word he said.*

Ravi sounded apprehensive, almost regretful. But I shook my head.

*Forget about it*, I replied. *You did what you should’ve done. After all we’ve been through, it would’ve been stupid to just take some random person’s word without question.*

Ravi’s wolf nodded. *That’s what I thought. The whole situation seemed shady, especially with the wolf conference so close. But Cali disagreed and defended Russell. She got so mad at me. Did you see?*

I shook my head. *Cali wanted to protect the kid. You were right not to believe Russell, and she was right to want to protect him.*

Ravi’s wolf paused. *So, we were both right?*

*Pretty much*, I replied. *To be honest, I’d probably think the way you did. Can’t ignore the way Cali feels, though—she’s pretty intuitive.*

Ravi started shoving dirt into the hole with me again. *It’s weird when she gets mad. Sometimes it’s like, “Haha, look at Cali, she’s mad again, she looks like an angry kitten!” But this time it was like, “Oh, shit, Cali’s mad!” There was something different about her.*

I shrugged. I hadn’t been there to witness what Ravi was talking about, but after the time I’d spent with Cali, I knew I hated it when she got mad at me. Which was, admittedly, often. Then again, I didn’t mind it when she was worried about me and grumbled over it. That was kind of adorable and sexy. Different situations.

The body was almost entirely covered in dirt in no time.

*What should we do once we’re done here?* Ravi asked.

More than anything, I wanted to go back to the pack house to see Cali and check on Artemis. But what I wanted to do was at odds with what I needed to do.

I looked out into the woods, sniffing the air.

*What are the chances that this guy came here alone?* I asked Ravi.

*Pretty low*, he replied. *We could take a wider look around. If there are others, we should be able to pick up their scents.*

*That sounds like standard procedure*, I mused. *But what if there are more than a few?*

*We can make sure our surveillance is stealthy*, Ravi suggested. *If it’s only one or two of them, we can confront them and deal with them like you dealt with this one.* He gestured at the hole.

Cali certainly wouldn’t be happy if our territory turned into some kind of trespasser cemetery. But it would probably be a good warning for anyone else who decided to fuck with us.

*If we encounter more people than we can handle*, I said, *we leave quietly, get some backup, and hunt them down.*

Ravi’s eyes gleamed in the darkness. *Sounds good to me. It’s our territory, after all.*

That was the whole point here, actually. The dead wolf had attacked us, but even if that hadn’t happened, I would’ve been justified in killing him. Werewolves knew they risked death when they trespassed in another pack’s territory. Even Rogues knew that it was an unwritten rule. When that wolf bastard had trespassed on my land and dared to go after my mate, it had been the equivalent of committing suicide.

*This looks good*, Ravi said after we smoothed off the ground around the burial site. *Though they’ll still find the body if they come close enough.*

*Yeah*, I said. *The scent of his blood is all over the place. But it’s better than leaving it in the open so close to the pack house.*

Ravi and I agreed on how much farther from the pack house we’d go to check the territory for other intruders. We separated to sweep a larger area, still staying close enough to mind link. My thoughts kept going back to Cali and Artemis. But being out here in the wild, looking for potential threats, was still a thrill.

I was in wolf form, running through the forest, hunting like a predator. The pack’s mentality—*Greyson’s* mentality—was always more about defensive posturing. We never acted as aggressors or instigators. But right now, this was what we needed to do. What *I* needed to do. The bitter taste of blood that lingered in my mouth, and that wolf’s attempt to kill my mate, were having an intense effect on me. If I came across anyone who wasn’t a Redwood right now, there would be as good as dead.

This was no longer about Russell. It was about our territory, and everything that mattered to us.

Ravi and I slipped through the woods, pausing every now and then to listen, to draw in the scents. I was contemplating how much farther we’d have to go when I picked up the trace of a foreign scent and paused.

*You got anything?* I asked Ravi.

*Nothing from here*, Ravi replied. *I’ll come to you.*

I stopped by a thicket of trees, drawing in another breath. There was something familiar about this scent, but nothing that I could readily identify. I heard leaves crinkling behind me, and a moment later Ravi appeared, trotting up next to me.

*Right here*,I said.

Ravi scented the air, his nose twitching. *Marissa?*

I frowned internally. *Isn’t she with the Samara pack?*

No wonder the scent seemed familiar.

*Why would she be out there, though?* Ravi wondered.

*We’re not far from Samara territory*, I pointed out. *And we’re all allies, so Marissa wouldn’t need permission to pass through our land.*

Ravi seemed to be contemplating that when I picked up another, far more familiar scent.

Ava.

*What are you doing out here?* I mind linked. I knew she was close enough to hear.

And then Ava appeared from behind a crop of trees, Marissa in tow.

My wolf stirred at the sight of her, as ever. I ignored him.

*Luckily for you, we recognized your scents*, Ava said coolly. *Or you might’ve been breathing your last breath right now, Xavier.*

I scoffed, shifting back to human. “I doubt that would’ve been the outcome.”

Ava rolled her eyes, and then everybody else shifted back to human as well.

I noticed a weird kind of tension emanating from Ravi when he spoke. “Hey,” he said, his eyes fixed on Marissa. “Didn’t expect to see you here.”

I raised an eyebrow at the way he was staring at her. Damn. Was there something going on there?

“Why are you on Samara land?” Ava asked, capturing my attention again.

I looked at her. Even in the half-light, I could make out the contours of her body. But I wouldn’t let that distract me.

“This is Redwood territory, Ava,” I said with a huff.

Eyebrows arched, Ava walked closer, her head held high and proud. She stopped before me, as if sizing me up, and pointed to a gnarled tree behind me. “That’s the boundary,” she said. “You crossed it and apparently didn’t even realize. Why?”

She had a point. I wasn’t going to admit it, though. Instead, I cut straight to the chase. “We had a trespasser.”

Ava’s eyebrows went up in surprise before she frowned. “So did we.”

# Episode 3586

My head throbbed in time with my shoulder. The handprint burned, and as frightened as I was, I was also fucking furious.

*Are you kidding me? WHEN WILL THIS END?*

“Wasn’t that damn Shard supposed to help?” I held onto Greyson with one hand, tugging on my shirt with the other, suddenly feeling suffocated. “I can’t—I can’t breathe, I—”

Without a word, Greyson ripped my shirt at the neckline. The sound of the fabric tearing and the way he grabbed and turned me to face the other direction left me startled.

“I need to see the handprint,” he said gruffly. “Just to see what we’re dealing with this time.”

My heart pounded so loudly it echoed in my ears. Greyson didn’t say a word for the longest moment. I could feel the heat of his body right behind me. Just his heat, nothing else, and then—

Wait.

*Wait*.

My shoulder was no longer burning. Just as suddenly as it had arrived, the pain had vanished.

“What’s happening?” My voice was low. I hated how anxious I felt, how hopeful I sounded, how terrified.

“It’s—” Greyson started speaking, but he cut himself off.

That was so unlike him that I had to crick my neck to look. “What is it?”

Greyson’s voice was soft but it dropped like a bomb. “The handprint is gone.”

I knew Greyson wouldn’t joke about this. My thoughts were a mess of, *Is this real?* and, *This can’t be real!* and, *Oh my god, PLEASE LET IT BE REAL!*

“Is it—is it really better?” I spluttered incredulously. “Could the Shard have worked that fast? *How?*”

“I can barely see any trace of it,” he said, making me face him. There was so much hope in his eyes that it took my breath away. “What’s remaining has returned to its original size, and the circle is completely gone. How are you feeling?”

My heart was beating so fast, I thought it was going to explode.

“There’s…” I swallowed. “There’s no pain.”

And I felt… relieved? Free?

*Free*.

“It’s like weight’s been lifted,” I whispered.

Greyson’s smile was so gorgeous, it made me feel like I could fly.A ridiculous squeal of delight erupted straight out of me, and I jumped up to hug him. He laughed, a husky, happy sound, and then he kissed me, hard enough to make my knees buckle.

I grabbed onto him, ready to deepen the kiss—

“Cali!”

Mom’s voice was loud enough to startle me. Breaking the kiss, I choked when I looked over Greyson’s shoulder and saw her walking into the room. When she spotted Greyson and me, she looked confused. “Cali? I heard you cry out—are you okay?”

Greyson was still holding me, and a good chunk of my shirt had been torn off.

*Talk about bad optics, amirite?*

“Mom! Uh, we…” I swallowed audibly. “We were just—”

“The Shard appears to be working,” Greyson cut in, smiling wide.

My mom burst into tears. They were happy tears, though, and that knowledge made everything a hundred times better.

“You’re okay,” she breathed before wrapping me tightly in her arms. With Greyson not letting go either, this turned into an awkward three-person hug, but I wouldn’t have had it any other way. I had doubted myself for so long, felt trapped for so long, that this felt like a brand-new world of possibilities.

“Oh, a group hug!” Torin’s excited voice came from the doorway. He ran inside and joined us, squeezing himself into the pile.

We all laughed, and my mom whispered that she loved me as we all embraced.

“I love you too,” I whispered back, sniffling.

“Me three!” Torin said over my mom’s shoulder. “But what’s this about?”

I managed to extricate myself and turned to show everybody my shoulder and the downsized Seluna mark.

Torin gasped. “The Shard worked! I have to go make something special for the occasion!” He kissed my cheek, hugged me again, and walked out the room, yelling, “It’s baking time, baby!”

Mom laughed at Torin before she turned to me again. Glancing at my torn-up shirt, she said, “While Torin works on that, why don’t you go change your clothes, honey? I’ll go find your father and tell him the good news.”

I couldn’t help but hug her once more before she left. “Thank you for helping me.”

“I’m just deliriously happy that both my daughters are safe and sound.” Her voice was thick with emotion. “Considering what’s been going on, I think that’s a major achievement.”

I was still smiling after Mom left. Greyson was doing the same, standing there in all his glory, and I grabbed both his hands. Looking up at him, I breathlessly said, “I can’t believe this is happening.” And then, as my excitement started blooming like fireworks, my voice started rising. “Should I tell Artemis? Should I go find Lola? Lola has to know! Everybody has to know! I have to go tell everyone right now! Oh my GOD, YAY!”

I let him go, ready to run out of the room to make my announcements, but then Greyson scooped me up unceremoniously. I went, “*Oof!*” in surprise, but then wrapped my arms around his neck.

Casually, I said, “Cool beans, but what are you doing?”

“As much as I’m enjoying the view,” he said, glancing down at my bra, “we have to do what your mom suggested and get you a shirt. You wouldn’t want to run around like that, would you?”

I scoffed. “Honestly? I’m so happy, I don’t even care.”

He laughed, starting to walk through the house with me in his arms. “You might think differently later, so let’s avert the crisis.”

I was about to protest—*What crisis? I never freak out over minor things!*—when Greyson dipped his head down and kissed my neck. I was immediately distracted.

“I would like more kisses there, please,” I informed him primly.

He laughed against the skin of my collarbone. The sound felt like a vibration, and it was enough to make me vibrate as well. Greyson smelled amazing, and I felt so safe in his arms.

His lips brushed the shell of my ear, the spot behind it, the place where my neck met my shoulder, and I squirmed closer to him. He kept kissing me and nuzzling me and whispering things like, “I’m so happy for you,” and, “I love you so much it makes me feel invincible.”

By the time we got upstairs, I was melting and achy. It felt like the only thing left for me to do today was rub myself all over him. But when we actually got to my room, Greyson just kissed my mouth once, unceremoniously dropped me on the bed, and went to check out my closet.

I blinked in shock as he asked, “What shirt do you want to wear?”

Here I was, trying not to pounce on him like a wild animal, and he was talking about *shirts*. All I could think was why the HELL was HE still wearing a shirt? Did… Did this man not realize what he’d done to me with those neck kisses and sweet talk?

*Um, hello? Why hasn’t he tried to get me naked yet?*

“This red is pretty. But maybe the olive green would be nicer?” he asked wholesomely, entirely oblivious to my inner turmoil. “It looks great with your eyes.”

“Let me see it up close,” I said, only to lure him in.

He walked over and showed me the shirt, falling into my trap.

*Mwahaha!*

“That’s a nice one,” I said, pulling him closer. “I just realized something, though.”

He nodded seriously. “You like the red better, don’t you?”

“No, I like *you* better,” I breathed, glancing at his mouth. Sliding my hand down his chest, I said, “I haven’t thanked you for all your help, getting the Shard…”

“After you tell everybody about the handprint, you’ll have all the time in the world to thank me,” he said with a smile, giving me a quick kiss before heading back to the closet.

I gaped at him.

*What the hell is happening right now? Greyson usually picks up on my vibes in, like, three seconds!*

I realized I’d have to do something drastic to drive my point home. But I needed to be super smooth about it. Like, very smooth. And tonight, I felt confident enough to pull that off.

I felt free.

“That’s cute,” I said when he presented me with another shirt. “I’m not in the mood to get dressed right now, though.”

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “But you said you wanted to go tell everybody about the handprint.”

I slid off the bed—I became super graceful when turned on, apparently—and pulled off the rest of the ripped shirt that was hanging around my neck.

“I’ve decided that telling everyone can wait,” I said, using the torn fabric as a rope around his neck to pull him to me. “I’m in the mood for something else right now.”

See? I could totally be smooth. And finally—FINALLY, THANK YOU—Greyson got the hint.

His gaze darkened, arms coming to wrap around me. His voice was feathery against my lips. “What are you in the mood for?”

I gripped the back of his neck and pulled him toward me, leaning up at the same time to kiss him full on the mouth. No ifs or buts, just a hard kiss that said I wanted him so badly I was shaking. He groaned into my mouth, lifting me off the floor.

I wanted to shout “VICTORY!” at the top of my lungs.

“No clothes at all seems like a better idea,” he rasped, breaking off the kiss.

“No clothes, you and me. Let’s celebrate.” Grinning, I kissed him again before dropping to my feet and tugging him back to the bed.

“No,” he said, grabbing me again, this time to lift me up onto the dresser. He stared into my eyes, his voice scorching me like wildfire. “I need you like this, right now.”

He dropped to his knees in front of me and tore my leggings off in one quick motion. Gasping, I grasped the edges of the dresser, fighting to stay upright, my chest heaving with anticipation. I was trembling, my heart pounding so hard the feeling spread all over me before it settled between my legs. Greyson stared up at me and hitched both my thighs over his shoulders. When he kissed the crook of my knee, his hot breath sent shivers through me.

And then, with a wicked smile, he whispered against my skin. “Let’s celebrate, love.”

# Episode 3587

**Greyson**

I would never get enough of Cali. Her body was shaking under my mouth, her hips arching upward, her hands locked in my hair. The sounds she made were music in my ears. To feel her like this, to feel like her hunger matched mine, was fucking heaven.

I was so grateful that she was feeling better.

“I love you so much,” she whispered afterward, her eyes heated. She pulled me up from my knees, and I was so fucking turned on, I felt woozy.

I kissed her again, devouring, and reached to take off what little was left of her clothes.

“Wait,” she said breathlessly. “I want to return the favor.” She glanced behind me, offering a cheeky little smile. “Get on the bed.”

She was being playful, very much herself, but the way her words came out like a command made my heart rate jump to the fucking stratosphere. I recalled how she’d taken charge while I was away earlier, acting like a Luna*. My* Luna.

“Look at you, giving orders. Seems like it’s a theme, today.” I smirked, walking backward to drop down on the edge of the bed.

My throat constricted as I watched her kick off her socks and take off her bra, her eyes locked on me the entire time. Her voice was low and a little bit shaky, like this was brand new to her, but her teasing words hit me like a goddamn meteor.

“Well, you asked for a Luna, didn’t you?” she said.

I was gripping the sheets tight enough for my knuckles to hurt, and she hadn’t even fucking touched me yet. And it felt… It felt like she knew what she did to me when she dropped to her knees in front of me, looking warm, wanton, gorgeous. Then she reached for my zipper with no hesitation. She was just taking what she needed, and that was me.

My pleasure.

I was so hard already that when she touched me, wrapped her hand around me to stroke, I almost jumped off the bed. I couldn’t stop the broken groan that escaped me. It felt like I was losing my fucking mind when she licked, teased, and guided the tip between her lips.

Her eyes, dark and stunning, were glued up to me, watching my reactions. Watching me curse under my breath and tell her how fucking good she was to me.

I reached to caress her cheek, my hand trembling. “Fuck,” I choked out. “That’s it, so pretty.”

She glowed under the praise, took more of me into her mouth, worked herself up to it and me into a fucking frenzy. And when she started to suck, I knew there was no way in hell I was going to last. I was fucking done for just seconds later, and when I told her I was going to come, she didn’t move an inch. Her eyes gleamed instead, almost like a dare, and I thought I was going to fucking die.

And then I did. Metaphorically speaking.

She licked at me afterward, watching me like she was enjoying herself. When she reached to touch between her thighs, still on her knees in front of me, my already scrambled brain caught fire.

“Come here,” I breathed, pulling her onto my lap. She let out a sound of surprise before my mouth crashed into hers. The sound turned into a moan, her whole body buzzing with it as I traced down low to find her so wet it made me light-headed.

“Are you enjoying yourself, love?” I asked, and she whimpered, nodding, gasping when I slipped my fingers inside her. “You want to come again?”

I started working her over, and she said *yes*. *Yes*, again and again, her hips twitching in time with my hand. I was fully hard once more in seconds, and she felt it, touching me, reaching for me.

“You want to come with me inside?” I kissed the shell of her ear, my grip on her waist tightening, and another fucking *yes* from her crashed over me. She lifted her hips and slid down on me, the glide so smooth it killed me, her lips parted, her eyes glazed.

I made a move to flip us over, but she gripped my wrists and pinned them to the mattress. She was playing, a sexy smile on her mouth, but my instincts went haywire, my wolf howling on the inside. Even though I knew her physical strength was nothing compared to mine, her show of dominance drove me nuts.

“There’s my Luna,” I whispered.

The best part of it all was that it felt like she was fucking loving this, too. She rode me hard, rubbed up against me right where she needed to, licked and bit at my neck. She came so sweetly, so fast, that it pushed me over the edge as well.

“I love you,” she whispered in my ear.

Kissing her forehead, her cheek, I said it back twice.

We showered afterward, and she looked so happy. I called her cute, and sexy, and so beautiful it sometimes hurt to look at her. She blushed and rolled her eyes at me, but I knew she loved it.

I washed her hair and kept kissing her neck, because that had seemed to really work for her while we’d been climbing up the stairs earlier. I had a plan here—I always had the same plan, really. It was very straightforward. And sure enough, when we got back to the bedroom, our bodies still wet from the shower, she kissed me full on the mouth again.

“How do you want this?” I rasped. She fell back onto the mattress. Again, no hesitation.

My brain short-circuited when she arranged herself on all fours and looked over her shoulder. I didn’t need to be told twice, or to be told anything at fucking all. I leaned down and licked from the apex of her thighs to her tailbone, felt her shudder and pitch forward with a moan.

I arranged us the way I wanted, then slid inside. I pulled her back, her back to my chest, one hand around her throat, the other at her waist, squeezing hard to lead her hips back to mine.

“Look how fucking gorgeous you are,” I breathed in her ear, tilting her chin.

Her closet door was wide open, the mirror inside looking back at us both. She gasped when she saw herself, her eyes widening before they flickered to my face in our shared reflection. And then she made a sound that I felt to my core.

I brushed my mouth against the spot where her shoulder met her neck and whispered, “Look at how much I need you, at how amazing you feel.”

She was writhing, whimpering, driving her hips backward to meet my thrusts, one hand gripping my forearm.

I took her other hand and slid it down between her legs. “Make yourself come, love. Take what you want.”

And she did.

My thrusts kept building, my mate’s body fucking *melting* all over me as she furiously worked her fingers between her thighs, her sounds driving me out of my mind.

And when she shuddered and seized, her body twitching and crashing back into mine, her wild gaze locked with mine in the mirror, I whispered in her ear.

“That’s it,” I breathed. “That’s my Luna.”

\*\*\*

I held Cali afterward, the warmth of her body making me feel like this was all I could ever need. We would be such an amazing couple, moving into the future. Me as Alpha, and Cali as my Luna. There was nothing I wanted more in the entire goddamn world. My wolf was preening at the thought, every instinct settled and soothed. And when I looked at Cali, I felt so much love that it felt like my heart could crack under the pressure.

But what *she* said was, “How do you plan on finding Russell’s girlfriend?”

The vision of Cali as my Luna and all my warm fuzzy feelings got smacked right over the head by her question. Squinting at her, I asked, “Why are you thinking about that right now?”

She squinted back. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

I raised my eyebrows, keeping my tone light. “I thought I did some of my best work today, but what you’re thinking about right now is the runaway twelve-year-old’s girlfriend?”

Cali’s shoulders shook with laughter, which I appreciated. Grinning, she stroked my cheek. “First of all, Russell is fifteen. Second, I *was* thinking about you, Greyson. Russell’s talk about the power of love made me wonder if that’s why my shoulder is healing. Could it be that we take love for granted, but it affects us in more ways than we can imagine?”

Well. That was so sweet, it made me want to bury my face between her legs and never come up for air.

“I never take your love for granted,” I murmured, bringing her palm to my mouth. I kissed the center of it, then her fingertips, rejoicing at the sound of her little sigh. “I have no doubt that the way I feel about you makes me a better man, though.”

Cali’s eyes were bright. When she spoke, I loved how soft her voice was. “I hope it does. You’ve certainly made me a better woman.”

She nestled closer to me, her fingertips brushing across my chest. “I do hope you’ll be able to help Russell find Julia, though… Poor kid.”

“There are a few things I’m going to have to look into,” I said. “I want to help the boy, but I also don’t want to drag the pack into some kind of family feud.”

Cali’s eyes widened. “Family feud?”

“That’s what it looks like. I spoke to Adair, heard about how Xavier killed that wolf who was hunting Russell. This whole thing could blow up in our faces if we’re not careful,” I said.

“Thank you for being honest with me. I know you’ll do all you can,” Cali said, kissing my chest before fully settling against me. She was half on top of me now, and I didn’t have a single complaint.

Wrapping my arms around her, I smiled and closed my eyes.

This moment was perfect.

Cali started to doze off in my arms, and soon she was asleep, breathing softly. Of course at that moment someone had to knock on the door. I detangled myself from Cali, who luckily hadn’t woken up, grabbed a towel, and went to the door.

*This had better be important.*

When I opened the door, the perpetrator was none other than my annoying little brother.

Typical.

Xavier peered past me and at Cali, asleep in bed. His jaw clenched. He shifted his hardened gaze to me, his tone icy. “Get dressed, Greyson. The *Alpha* is needed downstairs.”

# Episode 3588

**Xavier**

I was *fuming*. Anger welled up in my chest like lava in a volcano, and I felt like I was going to blow. My fury was white-hot, and so powerful it made me wonder if I should get outside—away from others—until it had a chance to cool a little. I just couldn’t fucking believe it. While I’d been off taking precautions to protect the pack, Greyson had taken advantage of my absence by sleeping with Cali. I knew it was a fucked-up situation, and I didn’t blame Cali—the *due destini* wasn’t her fault, and I knew it was ripping her apart—but Greyson was a dick. It wasn’t fair, and I was pissed.

It took everything I had not to punch through a wall, but I remembered that I was in my house, and I stopped myself. It was just so infuriating. It was like this all the time—it felt like Greyson only wanted to be Alpha when it was convenient for him, or when it made him look like a hero. But the moment there was trouble—the moment the Samaras needed a new Alpha to maintain their status as a pack, the moment there was a clear and present threat to the pack, the moment there was *actual work* to be done—it all fell on my shoulders. And *I* did it. *I* got it done. Just one more reason why *I* deserved to be Alpha.

I paced the hall impatiently, growling to myself at the memory of Armin calling me Greyson’s second. Just one more example of the fucked-up dynamic between the two of us, and how much I hated it.

Greyson stepped quietly into the hallway, pulling the door shut behind him.

I narrowed my eyes. “I assume Cali is feeling better,” I snapped. “The Shard must have done what it was supposed to do.”

Greyson didn’t answer that, and there was a beat of awkward silence where we both just stared at each other.

“What’s going on? Why did you need me?” Greyson asked.

“Get fucking real. I don’t *need* you at all,” I snarled. “But the pack does need an Alpha. And for the moment, that’s you.” I let the implication hang in the air for a moment before I continued. “We have a visitor.”

“Who?”

“Someone asking about the kid. He approached Ravi and me on our way home—nonviolently—and we escorted him here,” I said. “Seems like we all have a lot of trespassers lately.”

Greyson sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “This is exactly why I didn’t want the pack getting involved—”

“Yeah, well, it’s a little late for that,” I shot back. “We’ve already got one dead werewolf on our hands because of all this. Good news is, unlike him, this guy didn’t take the offensive approach. He seems far less bloodthirsty—but obviously, we should keep our guard up.”

He nodded. “We definitely will, now that you’ve brought someone here only because they were nonviolent once.” He glared at me and clapped a hand on my shoulder. “But don’t worry, if they try to attack us because of your stupidity, I’ll take care of it.”

Everything in me wanted to slap his hand away—but I restrained myself. If my brother wanted to play it cute, I could play along—up to a point.

As we headed downstairs, Greyson shot a look at me. “Does this person know that Russell is here?”

“Couldn’t say. He’s being really evasive,” I said. “Not volunteering a lot of information, which was why we kept him close.”

Greyson nodded.

Halfway down the stairs, I added, “I ran into Ava out in the woods—”

“Our woods? What was she doing out there?” Greyson asked, looking surprised.

“She was out tracking a trespasser who passed through both our territories,” I explained. “She hadn’t found him, so our visitor could be her trespasser, or it could be that Ava was tracking the same werewolf who’s now rotting six feet under.” I shook my head. “Or maybe there are more out there that we don’t know about.”

Greyson took this in. “I suppose there’s only one way for us to find out.”

I was tempted to tell him that there was one way for *him* to find out. I would’ve preferred to leave the work to him and go check on Cali, even if she and Greyson *had* just…

I couldn’t even think about it. I still had the taste of werewolf blood in my mouth, and it was making me nauseous. I needed something to wash it away. I would’ve loved to down a whiskey or two—or three—to get rid of the aftertaste. *And* the thought of Greyson and Cali together. Really, a few whiskeys would’ve solved a bunch of my problems.

But I didn’t get a drink—I walked with Greyson to the door. We stepped outside into the cold night air, where we could see the guy where I’d left him at the tree line.

“If this guy tries anything—”

“You don’t need to fucking tell me what to do,” I snapped at Greyson. “This isn’t my first rodeo.”

Greyson shot me a glance but didn’t respond as we approached the visitor who stood on the back porch. “There something I can help you with?” Greyson asked him.

The visitor turned, regarding us. “As a matter of fact, there is.”

“And what’s that?” Greyson asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I understand the Redwood pack has recently taken in a young boy.” He paused and gave Greyson an even stare. “I’ve come to collect him.”

Greyson returned the look. “And you are…?”

“I’m a werewolf; name’s Vishal,” he said, offering his hand.

I looked the guy over. Tall, dark hair, dark eyes, olive skin. No tattoos or anything else that made him stand out, though I did notice a crudely drawn pit bull on the guy’s jacket. I’d never seen that before.

Greyson took Vishal’s hand. “Greyson Evers, Alpha of the Redwood pack. This is my brother Xavier.”

Vishal nodded at both of us. “Nice to know you. I’m sorry to bother you and your pack, but it’s important that I collect the boy and return him to his parents.”

The guy was sure talking a good game, but I was highly skeptical that he had Russell’s best interests at heart. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but there was just something about the guy that wasn’t sitting right with me.

Greyson must have felt the same way because, though he smiled at the guy, he said, “We’d love to help, but the boy isn’t here.”  
 A cold wind blew around us, and Vishal’s eyes narrowed infinitesimally. It was for just the briefest moment, and if I hadn’t been looking closely, I could’ve missed the look entirely. An instant later, his face was impassive again.

“I get why you’d be reluctant to hand the boy over,” he said with a smile. “After all, we all want what’s best for him, don’t we?”

“*Do* you?” I demanded, scowling at the guy.

Vishal’s smile slipped for just a moment before he hitched it back into place. “Of course I do. Why wouldn’t I? He’s a member of our… group.”

Greyson’s brows drew down. “And what group is that?”

“We’re Rogues. We call ourselves the Pit Bulls,” Vishal said.

I snorted to myself. That stupid name explained the shitty drawing on the guy’s jacket.

Vishal glared at me. “You think there’s something funny about a missing kid, man?”

“No, I don’t think so, but is the boy really lost?” I asked evenly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Vishal demanded.

“Is he lost, or is he running away from something?” I asked.

Vishal stopped fighting to keep the friendly look on his face. “Listen, I don’t know what kind of lies that kid has told you, but Russell’s just a boy. He needs to be with his parents. And if you just turn him over, I’ll see that he’s returned safely.”

Without waiting for us to respond, he started to move around us, heading for the pack house.

Moving as one, Greyson and I stepped in front of him.

“What the hell?” he demanded.

“Don’t take one more step,” I growled.

Vishal looked between the two of us for a moment. “I’m confused,” he said, his gaze landing on Greyson. “Aren’t you the Alpha? Isn’t that what you told me? Isn’t this *your* decision?”

My hands balled into fists. I was clenching them so tightly, pain radiated up my arms and into my shoulders.

“You’re mistaken,” Greyson said. His voice was even and almost calm, but it was edged with razor-sharp menace I didn’t think Vishal could miss. “Russell isn’t here.”

The guy’s dark eyes darkened even more, until they were like tiny chunks of coal.

“He was here some time ago,” I added, “but he left. I guess your timing is off, man.”

“You know, I don’t think it is,” Vishal said coldly. “And I think you’re going to discover that you’re the ones making a mistake.”

“And how’s that?” I asked, not taking my eyes off him.

His eyes narrowed again. “If you don’t hand the kid over, you’re going to have one hell of a problem on your hands.”

# Episode 3589

When I woke up, even before I opened my eyes, I reached across the bed for Greyson—but I only found empty air. The bed was empty, and my mate was gone.

I sat up and blearily looked around. The room was dark, and I was confused. I tried to piece everything together with my sleepy, slow-moving brain, and for a long moment I wondered if everything that had happened had been a dream. Had I just imagined it? But then my eyes adjusted to the darkness, and I saw the torn shirt on the floor. My heart pounding, I leapt to my feet and hurried to the bathroom where I twisted around to look into the mirror. Could it be?

I blinked in shock. It was gone. The circle had vanished, and even Seluna’s handprint was barely visible. I picked up the Shard hanging around my neck and looked at it in wonder. Was it possible? Was this really happening? Could this piece of glass really be responsible for all this?

Closing my eyes to think, I tried to remember what Vander and my mom had told me—that this wasn’t a cure, but it would help manage the effects. I opened my eyes and looked at my pale face in the mirror, wondering what exactly that was going to mean for me. How long would the Shard keep working? Would it keep things under control for long enough that the residual effects of Seluna’s magic would have time to work themselves out of my system completely, and I wouldn’t need anything else? No more charms, no more spells?

The thought filled me with hope. Maybe there was a chance that I would finally feel like myself again. I turned to the shower and had just reached out to turn the water on for a quick rinse-off when I caught movement out the bathroom window. I looked closer and saw Xavier and Greyson outside, speaking to an unfamiliar man. Their expressions did not look happy—it looked like they were arguing.

Abandoning the idea of a shower, I grabbed a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt from the dresser and pulled them on quickly, my heart racing. The sight of my mates arguing always filled me with anxiety, and adding a stranger to the mix never helped. The last stranger who accosted us hadn’t made it out alive, and though I knew Xavier hadn’t had much of a choice, I always wanted to prevent a bloody outcome when possible.

I hurtled down the stairs and threw open the front door. The cold air blasted my exposed skin, but I didn’t stop for anything. I made my way across the lawn toward the three men, and my heart pounded when I heard Russell’s name on the stranger’s lips.

I walked up behind Xavier and was just about to step up to stand next to him when he put a hand on my waist, stopping me, keeping me behind him. I looked at him, then at the dark-haired stranger. I had never seen him before, and he was looking at Greyson and Xavier with a furious expression, but when he saw me, his demeanor changed in an instant.

The angry flash in his eyes disappeared, and his face relaxed into a smile. “Well, it appears there’s been a simple misunderstanding.”

“There’s been no misunderstanding,” Xavier said flatly. His hand tightened on my waist. “The boy isn’t here. I don’t know what else to tell you.”  
 I looked up at Xavier in surprise. What was he talking about? Had something happened? Had they kicked Russell out? I couldn’t believe either of my mates would do something so terrible—and hadn’t Greyson told me earlier that he was going to help Russell? It didn’t make any sense. What had happened while I’d been asleep that had made him change his mind so completely?

*What happened?* I mind linked to Xavier. *Where is Russell?*

*He’s fine,* he said back.

There was a long pause, and in the silence, I could practically hear the tension crackling through the air. It was cold outside, but my cheeks burned in the quiet between the three men. What had happened while I’d been asleep? And what the hell was happening now?

I shifted on my feet—uncomfortable—and then the wind shifted. Our visitor’s eyes locked onto mine, his lip curling into a snarl.

“You lied to me! I can smell him from your damn house,” he growled, rounding on Greyson. “You *lied*!”

Without waiting for a response, he lunged at Greyson. I was knocked back as Xavier jumped between them. I stumbled back, but I managed to catch myself before I fell. I stood there staring—stunned—as the three men grappled and punched and dodged. The stranger—whoever he was—was strong, and he was holding his own against my mates.

I stared at them, scared and anxious and getting angrier with every passing moment. I was confused and terrified, and I felt an angry surge of magic building in my chest. I balled my hands into fists, but that didn’t seem to help. I could feel the magic crackling in my fingers as my nails dug into my palms.

The stranger dodged a punch from Xavier and aimed one at Greyson, managing to land it with force. I raised my hands without thinking and hit the guy with a blast of magic. He let out a choked noise and was knocked back. He slammed into a tree with enough force that I heard the wood splinter, and then he lurched forward, falling to his knees.

He stayed there for a long moment, breathing hard. It looked like he was trying to catch his breath. Then he looked at me, a small smile lifting the corners of his mouth. “Who are *you*?”

Greyson stepped toward him and—grabbing the back of his leather jacket—yanked him to his feet. “*Go!*” he hissed. “And don’t you ever come back here again,” he added, shoving the stranger toward the woods.

He stumbled a few steps before he righted himself and whirled around to face us, glowering, his eyes like burning coals.

“When the shit hits the fan, don’t say I didn’t warn you,” he snarled.

“Get the fuck out of here,” Xavier spat.

The stranger’s gaze landed on me. “This isn’t over. Next time, I won’t leave until I get what I came for—”

Xavier took a threatening step toward him. “I’m going to give you some free advice, man—get the hell out of here while you still have the option.”

The stranger took one last look at me, and I took an automatic step back. There was something about his eyes that felt colder than the night air on my skin. It was dangerous and menacing, and it made me shudder.

Then the guy turned, shifted, and ran away, disappearing into the snowy woods.

“I think we should hunt him down,” Xavier ground out, still staring after him.

“I think we should go inside,” Greyson said, putting his arm around my shoulders. “It’s freezing out here.”

I’d started to shake—half from the cold, half from fear. My mind was reeling, and I was still trying to make sense of what was happening. So, when Greyson pulled me gently toward the house, I stopped him and stepped out of his embrace. “No, hang on. Where *is* Russell?”

“He’s downstairs, where it’s safe,” Greyson said.

“Oh,” I said, nodding. It was slowly occurring to me that I had jumped to the wrong conclusion. Of course Russell was here. Greyson had said he was going to help the boy. How could I have ever doubted him?

“I’m sorry,” I murmured. “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Let’s get inside,” Greyson said again.

I walked through the door but turned in the foyer to look at him. “I didn’t mean to start a fight.”

Xavier had followed us in, and he smiled at this. “You may not have meant to start it, but you sure as hell ended it, Cali. That was a nice touch with the Fae magic. That really threw him off. The asshole never knew what hit him.”

But Greyson didn’t smile, and he didn’t look pleased with the way things had ended. “I wish you hadn’t had to get involved at all.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Xavier asked. “She was great. Did you see that jackass fly? Bet that’s never happened to him before.”

“I know Cali was great. Vishal knows it, too. That’s the problem,” Greyson snapped back.

“What is?” I asked, not following.

Greyson looked grim. “Come on, don’t you see? Now that Vishal knows what you’re capable of, he’s never going to underestimate us again.”

# Episode 3590

**Artemis**

I stopped and looked down at the rocky ground, scanning for the footprints I’d been tracking. The sun was high in the sky, casting long shadows in the thick Fae woods, which made it hard to see the tracks in the wooded undergrowth. Scrubby plants grew across the path, obscuring the ground.

I passed a hand over my eyes, feeling exhausted. I didn’t know how long I’d been following the tracks—I only knew that if they led me to the person who’d made them, I’d be rewarded with a large bounty. Which was something I knew I could use.

So I kept going. I walked slowly and quietly—as was my way—until I put down my foot and heard a jarring *snap*. The sound cut through the air like a knife, and I felt something powerful clamp onto my leg. I fell to the ground as pain rocketed through me, and I grasped uselessly at the iron trap that had closed around my ankle. In the tiny part of my brain still capable of conscious thought, I was furious with myself for not having noticed the trap before I stepped into it. I’d encountered thousands of these traps in the past without stepping into one—I couldn’t believe I’d been so careless.

The pain moved through me like white-hot fire. It was nearly overwhelming, making it hard to think. I knew I would die if I didn’t get the trap off and treat the wound—and soon. I struggled against the metal, but as I did, a shadow fell over me, blocking out the sun.

Desperate for any help at all, I looked up—into the cold, dead eyes of the Kollector. His face was scarred with burns, and when he smiled down at me, he revealed black, rotting teeth.

“Artemis,” he hissed, his voice curving around my name like a snake. “I’ve been waiting for this moment. What is it they say about revenge?”

Fear clutched me as he drew a long knife from his belt and raised it high over his head. My body braced for the impact, I screamed—

And then sat bolt upright, awake and sweating.

My heart pounding, I looked around the dark room, trying to get my bearings. Clarity came slowly—I wasn’t in the Fae world at all. I was in my room, in the pack house. I was safe.

Rishika rushed in from the bathroom, wiping her face with a towel. “Artemis! Are you okay?”

I took a shaking breath and tried to regain my composure. “I’m fine. I just had a nightmare.”

Rishika looked concerned as she sat beside me on the bed. She wrapped me in her strong arms and pressed a kiss to my cheek. “It’s okay. God, after what you’ve been through, a nightmare or two shouldn’t be surprising. I’m just sorry I wasn’t here with you when it happened. I left for two minutes.”

I slipped my arms around her and hugged her back. “You’re here now. That’s enough.”

Rishika’s chuckle rumbled in her chest. She kissed my cheek again, then her kisses moved to my lips. Adrenaline was still pumping through me, and I responded readily, grasping her tightly to me.

“Hey,” she breathed, pulling back for a moment. “Are you sure you’re well enough?”

I grinned. “Well, there’s only one way to find out.”

I pulled Rishika’s lips back to mine, shifting a little on the bed so I was pressing her down into the mattress.

I felt her hands slide down to my waist and slip beneath my T-shirt.

“Your hands are cold,” I said with a laugh, but I didn’t try to move away from them.

“Your skin feels like fire,” she murmured, her mouth against mine.

I believed her, because my whole body *felt* like fire. The fear that had been coursing through me was gone now, replaced with the kind of arousal I’d gone my whole life without—until I’d met her.

I’d just slung my leg over her hips to straddle her when we both froze.

“Did someone knock?” Rishika asked, confused.

“Whatever,” I said, leaning down to kiss her again. “Who cares?” *I* didn’t care. I could’ve happily spent my whole life like this—just lost in Rishika’s arms.

There was another knock, this one unmistakable.

Rishika slipped out from under me. “Come on.”

With a sigh, I rolled off her, and we both tried to straighten our clothes and look like we’d been up to… Well, basically anything *other* than what we’d actually been up to.

But before either of us could reach for the door, it opened, and Adair looked in.

“Sorry,” he said quickly. “I was just checking to see how Artemis was, and she looks like she’s okay, so I’ll just—” He started to close the door.

I looked at him, surprised—and a little embarrassed that my stoic uncle clearly knew what Rishika and I had just been doing.

Rishika jumped to her feet. “Adair, wait!” He paused, and Rishika looked panicked, like she hadn’t thought the whole thing through. “I need to—um—get something from downstairs. Why don’t you come in and keep Artemis company?”

Adair looked uncomfortable with the suggestion, and I was about to tell him that it was fine and that he was free to go, when Rishika stepped toward him and gently pushed him into the room. She winked at me from behind his back, then closed the door behind her as she left.

Great.

There was a beat of awkward silence between us before Adair half-turned to me, his eyes on the wall over my shoulder.

“Tabitha insisted that I check on you.”

“Oh,” I said flatly. Then, “Is that really why you’re here?”

He ignored the question. “Are you feeling better?”  
 I opened my mouth to tell him I was feeling fine, but I stopped myself and really thought about the question. In all honesty, I hadn’t had a chance to think about it. How *was* I feeling? Now that I thought about it, I realized I *was* feeling better.

“Yeah,” I finally said. “I’m doing okay.”

He nodded, his gaze still distant. “That’s good. I’ll be sure to tell Tabitha. She was worried.” He moved to the door, but he hesitated before he reached for the knob.

I was about to ask if there was anything else he wanted to ask me when he turned and walked back toward me. I stared at him in shock as he came to my bedside, leaned in, and gave me the stiffest, most awkward hug I’d ever experienced.

I was shocked by this unexpected move, but before I could do or say anything in response, he pulled away.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” he said gruffly and hurried out the door, closing it behind him.

It opened again a moment later, and Rishika walked back in, her eyes wide with expectation.

She flopped down next to me on the bed. “Well, that was quick. How did it go?”

I smiled and shrugged. “Let’s just say our relationship is a work in progress.”

She laughed. “I’ll take it. And I’m glad you had some time to talk to him.”

“Yeah, that was nice, thanks,” I said slowly. I narrowed my eyes. “You said you were going downstairs. You definitely didn’t have time to make it there and back. And you said you needed something. Where’s the *something*?”

Rishika laughed. “Okay, you’re off duty, detective.” She shook her head. “You saw right through me, didn’t you?”

“It wasn’t that hard,” I said wryly.

She laughed again. “I just thought it was important for the two of you to have a chance to talk—without an audience. You know how Adair is.”

I sighed. “I know.”

Rishika slid into place next to me and wrapped her arms around me. I was feeling tired again after all the excitement and nestled into her, savoring the warmth and comfort. In all my years spent alone in the Fae world, hunting and searching and scavenging, I’d never envisioned this moment, or this girl. Not in my wildest dreams.

“Do you want to tell me about your nightmare?” Rishika asked quietly after a long time.

I thought about it for a moment. “I don’t even really remember it now.”

“You don’t remember what was so scary?” she asked, hugging me close.

“I was back in the Fae world.”

“Really?” she asked, surprised.

I nodded. “I was tracking someone, but I’d lost the trail. I was trying to find it, I think, and then I was attacked by the Kollector.”

Rishika was quiet for a long moment. “Artemis?” she said quietly.

“Yes?”

“Do you think it means something?” she asked. “The dream.”

I shrugged. “Maybe, but what *could* it mean? I know the Kollector is dead. I’m not worried about him.”

“I mean… maybe that you’re not totally *done* with the life you had before?”

I furrowed my brow, not sure what she was getting at.

“Artemis,” she said, then shifted so that I was facing her, and her dark eyes looked into mine. “Do you want to go back to the Fae world?”

# Episode 3591

**Greyson**

When I opened my eyes, it wasn’t yet dawn. I could see the grey sky through the window of my room, and I knew the sun hadn’t even begun to rise. I was tired, but not surprised that I was awake so early. I hadn’t slept well. After the visit from Vishal, I’d been too restless for a sound sleep. I should have warned Cali before I’d gone downstairs with Xavier last night. I hadn’t wanted to wake her—she’d only just fallen asleep in my arms, and I’d been thrown off. I hadn’t expected my brother to knock on the door, and it had been awkward as hell. I just hadn’t been thinking straight.

We all knew that our situation was complicated—we’d all accepted the way things were with Cali—but it didn’t make encounters like last night’s any easier to swallow. And it had been clear as hell that Xavier had been pissed at me.

Whatever. Better he was upset with me than with Cali. I could take his ire. I’d been practicing my whole life.

But I should have warned Cali what was going on. It would have kept her *and* her powers from being seen by Vishal. But now the cat was out of the bag, and there was no putting it back in.

Rubbing a hand across my eyes, I groaned. I knew I wasn’t going to be able to get back to sleep, so I swung my legs out of bed and got to my feet. The house was quiet as I headed downstairs, and then down to the basement. When I opened the door to the small room, Russell was asleep, his lanky body curled into a ball on his cot. He’d kicked his blanket off, and as I reached down to pick it up, I looked at the sleeping kid. I couldn’t help it—I felt bad for him. If Vishal was any indication of what Russell’s home life was like, then yeah, the kid was going to need our help.

I crouched down by the cot and put my hand on his shoulder. “Hey, man, wake up.”

It took him a moment, but he opened his eyes and sat up. He looked around, like he was trying to remember where he was.

“Have you found Julia?” was the first thing he said when he turned to look at me.

“No, we haven’t. I wish we had,” I said gently. “That’s why I’m here, actually. I need to know more about her so I know who I’m looking for. What she looks like, where we might find her, anything like that.”

Russell rubbed his eyes and looked thoughtful. “I think it would be easier if I could go with you to look. Maybe I’d be able to find her.”

I shook my head. “I think that’s a bad idea.”

“Why?” Russell asked.

I hesitated for a moment. “Someone came looking for you last night,” I started. “Someone named Vishal. He said he wanted to take you back to your parents.”

Russell’s eyes went wide, and he suddenly looked pale and scared. “You didn’t tell him I was here, did you?”

I could see the terror in his eyes, and my heart went out to him. I put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “No, I didn’t tell him anything, Russell, but he didn’t believe us when we said you weren’t here. He left, but I think he’ll be back,” I told him honestly.

Russell shook his head. “Vishal can’t be trusted.”

“Yeah, I got that impression. We all did.” I looked the kid in the eyes. “But what I don’t understand is why you’re afraid of your own group. These Pit Bulls.”

Russell’s expression hardened. “They cast me out when they found out who I was in love with. They said it was a phase, that what Julia and I have isn’t real. I tried to explain to them what her situation is like, but they wanted nothing to do with it. So I ran. But my parents weren’t happy, so now Vishal and the other Rogues from the Pit Bulls are trying to bring me back, even though that’s the last place I want to be.” His voice sounded hollow, now.

I looked at the kid for a long moment, and I finally understood his position. This kid really had nowhere to go. And I knew when I explained this to Cali, she was going to insist that we do everything we could to help him.

I ran a hand through my hair with a sigh. “I’m really sorry you’re going through this, kid. We’ll do everything we can for you. We’ll protect you as best we can. I don’t know what I’ll do if your parents actually come here to fetch you, but I guess we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

I didn’t mention the dead werewolf Xavier had buried in the woods—I figured the kid didn’t need to know everything.

“Okay, let’s talk about Julia,” I said. “What can you tell me?’

Russell’s gaze went hazy. “Well, she’s beautiful. Dark hair, blue eyes. She’s got a voice like an angel…”

I listened patiently, but I wasn’t particularly interested in his lovestruck description. I was more interested in information that was going to help us track the girl.

“Okay,” I interrupted, “what about the journey you took after you fled? Tell me about the cliff you jumped off, and where you were supposed to meet up with Julia.”

**\*\*\***

When I left the basement an hour later, I had a better idea of where to start looking for Julia. It wasn’t much, but I knew more than I had before.

I headed up to the kitchen and found Xavier standing at the counter with a cup of coffee.

“Morning,” I murmured.

Xavier managed a nod in my direction. “How’s the kid doing?” he asked, after a drink of coffee.

I shrugged. “Good as can be expected, I guess. He’s really anxious to find his girlfriend.”

Xavier nodded.

I reached for a mug and poured myself a cup of coffee. “I’m going to see if I can confirm the kid’s story—and get a lead on Julia. I’m going to ask Elle to join me.”

Xavier nodded in agreement. “She’s the best tracker we’ve got.”

“Yeah, and it’ll help her feel more like part of the pack.” I took a drink of coffee. “I want you to stay here.”

“Why?”

“We both know that that Vishal guy isn’t going to just walk away because we asked him nicely. And now that he’s aware that Cali’s Fae, who knows what he and the Pit Bulls are going to do?”

I was expecting pushback from Xavier on this—he was usually so anxious to get out in the field and do the work himself—so I was surprised when he just shrugged.

“Okay.”

I was grateful for the easy acceptance, but I was still about to ask why when Cali walked into the kitchen and Xavier’s face lit up.

Ah. *She* was why.

He walked over to her, and I fought not to roll my eyes.

Whatever. I needed Cali to be safe, and I knew my brother would defend her, no matter what.

“How are you feeling?” I asked her.

She grinned at me. “See for yourself.” She lowered the side of her robe, revealing her shoulder and the noticeably less-visible handprint.

Xavier eyed her skin. “I can’t believe it. That stupid charm actually worked. All that trouble, and it’s finally paying off.”

“It looks great,” I said with a smile. I was deeply relieved. I had been secretly worried that the handprint was going to reappear, maybe even come back more pronounced than before. That was just how our luck had been running, lately, but it looked like things were taking a turn. *Finally*.

Cali lifted the Shard and kissed it, still smiling. “This is my lucky charm.”

I slipped my arms around her and hugged her close. “I’m glad. Keep it close, okay? I’m going to go check out what Russell just told me.”

Cali’s smile slipped. “Alone? You’re going out by yourself?”

“No, I’m bringing Elle.” I smiled down at her. “I’ll be fine. I promise.”

I stepped away, and Xavier slipped an arm around her.

“I’ll be here,” he told her, and she smiled up at him.

I turned, leaving the two of them alone, and headed off to find Elle. She was in the library, frowning down at a book. But when I explained what I had planned, she snapped it shut.

“Yes, Alpha Greyson!” she said, looking excited. “I will go!”

I packed us a backpack with some clothes just in case, and then moments later, the two of us were in wolf form, running through the woods at full speed. My mind was always clear when I ran, and I used the time to shuffle through my concerns—they were starting to mount once again, and I wondered if I’d be able to solve them all before we got caught up in another pack war.

# Episode 3592

As I watched Greyson leave to go look for Elle, I was glad that he wasn’t going to go looking for Julia alone. I knew he could take care of himself, but Elle was a good tracker, and she knew the woods better than anyone. Plus, she looked up to Greyson and knew what needed to be done. I knew I could trust her to watch his back.

When my stomach rumbled, I realized I hadn’t had breakfast yet. I looked around, wondering if there was any fruit, but Xavier was already pulling out a chair at the table.

“Have a seat,” he instructed.

“What?” I asked, confused.

“I’m going to make you a breakfast feast,” he announced.

“Really? Why?”

He shrugged as I sat down, pushing my chair in for me. “You deserve it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Come on,” he said. “You defended the pack house last night against that guy who came looking for Russell, and you’ve been cured of all the Seluna crap. That’s reason enough to celebrate.”

I touched my hand to the Shard. “I’m not cured,” I reminded him. “This thing is like Fae Tylenol. It addresses the symptoms, not the cause.”

“Well, I’ll take it, for now,” Xavier said. “As long as you’re feeling good, I’m celebrating. And you should, too.”

I laughed. “Maybe you’re right.”

“Of course I’m right,” he said. “Now, how about breakfast?”

He opened the fridge and started pulling food out, piling it on the counter—a carton of eggs, juice, milk, jam, and sausages. From the freezer, he pulled out hashbrowns and frozen fruit.

“How about a smoothie?” he asked with a grin.

“Sure,” I said. “That sounds great.”

He was going kind of overboard, and I wondered if it was because I’d been with Greyson the night before. It might have been, but it was still nice that Xavier wanted to pamper me, so I didn’t try to talk him out of it.

“Good morning.”

I looked over at the doorway as Lola stumbled in, yawning and rubbing her eyes. “Morning,” I said.

“Something smells good in here,” she said hopefully. She looked over at Xavier, who was standing at the stove. “Any chance you could make enough for three?”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m not a short order cook.”

“Come *on*,” Lola wheedled.

“Fine,” he muttered, flipping the sausages in the pan.

“Thank you, Xavier,” she sang. She dropped into the chair next to mine. “How are you doing?”

“Great,” I said, grinning.

She looked surprised. “Really?”

I nodded. “The charm worked.”

She gasped. “Are you serious?” she squealed. “That’s so great! Oh, we are going to have the girliest day ever to celebrate! I’m going to go tell Jacs and Dani and Tabitha and everyone!” she said, getting to her feet.

But she didn’t even make it to the door before she ran smack into Artemis.

Lola stumbled back a step. “You and Rishika are coming too!” she cried, then sprinted out of the kitchen.

Artemis looked at me, puzzled. “Coming to what? What was she talking about?” She looked around. “Something smells good.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll make some for you, too,” Xavier said, before she could ask.

I walked over and slipped my arms around him, squeezing him tightly. “You’re the best. Did you know that?”

“I did know that,” he said. He reached around and kissed the top of my head. “But it’s still good to hear.”

I could only eat about half of the plate Xavier made for me, but by that time, more of the pack had gotten up and wandered into the kitchen, and Ravi was more than happy to take my leftovers.

When I pushed back from the table, Artemis was heading upstairs. I followed her, thinking about taking a shower and getting dressed for the day, but I stopped when she paused in the hallway.

“Cali?” she said. “Do you have a minute?”

“Sure,” I said, a little confused. I waved her into my room, and when she shut the door and turned to me with a grave look on her face, I started to worry. “Artemis? What’s wrong? Didn’t the abeara paste work?”

“No—I mean, I’m fine. I’m feeling almost a hundred percent. No, it’s not that. It’s…” She paused for a moment.

“What?” I pressed.

“Rishika asked me if I want to go back to the Fae world,” she said.

“She did?” I asked, surprised.

Artemis nodded. “Yeah. Would you… Would you ever consider it?”

“Wait, are *you* considering it?” I asked, shocked.

“I mean, I told Rishika absolutely not,” Artemis said.

“And was that the truth?” I asked.

She passed a hand over her eyes and started pacing. “I thought it was, at the time. But I’ve been thinking. It’s not that I *want* to go, I’ve just been wondering if I *should* go.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I mean that I spent almost all of my life in the Fae world—is it wrong notto want to go back?”

I thought about that for a moment. “Are you feeling homesick?”

She shook her head. “No, it’s not that. It’s something else. It’s like, I’m worried that if I don’t go back, I’m going to lose part of myself. I’m going to forget my roots. Or get sick like Mom did.”

I nodded slowly. “I understand what you’re saying.” I paused for a moment. “Have you talked to Mom about this? If anyone could understand how you feel, it would be her.”

“No, I haven’t talked to her about it. And I don’t know if I will,” Artemis admitted.

“Why not?” I asked.

Artemis gave me a look. “She almost died because she didn’t go back to the Fae world, Cali. I think that’s some important context.”

I nodded slowly. “Listen, I told our grandmother that I would go back to visit. I’m not ready to do that just yet, but maybe we can plan something.”

“Yeah, we could do a visit,” Artemis said, speaking mostly to herself. “I wonder if Rishika would want to join us.” She looked over at me. “Thanks. Talking about it helped. I’m not going to worry about it anymore.”

She walked out, and I looked after her, wondering what it would be like to return to the Fae world. I did want to see my grandmother—like I’d promised her I would—but I was wary of going back. And I wondered if there was a chance that Artemis would decide to stay there for good.

I looked out the window at the bright winter morning and thought about Greyson and Elle, somewhere out in the woods. I wondered how they were doing. Probably fine, knowing those two.

With a sigh, I headed into my bathroom and turned on the shower.

There was a lot to do today, so I made the shower quick, then pulled on clean jeans and a wool sweater. After that, I headed down to the basement. I wanted to talk to Russell. I figured he had to be hungry, and probably worried about Julia. At least Greyson had agreed not to keep the poor kid chained up anymore.

I stopped in the kitchen and made up a plate of food from what had turned into Xavier’s breakfast buffet, then headed downstairs to the basement. When I got to the room where he was staying, Russell looked up, his face brightening when he saw me.

“Is that for me?” he asked, eyeing the plate.

“Of course,” I said, handing it to him.

I sat on the only chair in the room and watched as he wolfed down his breakfast. He was just a kid—only fifteen—and he was dealing with so much. It was a tragedy, and it filled me with sadness.

When he’d cleaned every last bit of food from the plate, he looked up at me, a little sheepishly. “Thanks for the food. I’m sorry that I’ve been so much trouble. I didn’t realize that coming here would cause so many problems.”

I shrugged. “Oh, the pack is used to trouble,” I said lightly. “I just wish there was something we could do for you. We have people out there right now, trying to find Julia, but I wish I could do something.” I thought about it for a moment. “Do you think it would help if I talked to your parents? Maybe if they came here—”

Russell, who’d been slumped back against the wall, sat bolt upright, his eyes wide with fear. “NO!”

I stared at him, confused. “What?”

“It’s just that my parents don’t understand. They think that this is just a silly fairy tale, a phase. And that I’ll grow out of it. They don’t *get it*,” he said. “But Julia’s parents in the Bitterfang pack are even worse. To them, *anyone* experiencing *due destini* is an abomination because you’re mated to two wolves, which goes against their traditions.” He shook his head, his expression grave. “If *they* met you, they’d kill you.”

I was shocked. “What? Are you serious? Does the whole pack think that?”

He nodded grimly.

“I—I don’t understand,” I spluttered, my mind spinning.

The other packs in the area who knew about my mates and me being caught up in the *due destini* had never expressed that opinion. They didn’t always understand—couldn’t, really, without experiencing it—but they’d never called me an *abomination* or tried to *kill* me over it. Which made me wonder…

I was about to attend the Werewolf Pack Summit with a bunch of packs I’d never met before. If they knew about the *due destini*… would they try to kill me, too?

# Episode 3593

**Greyson**

The woods were cold and quiet as Elle and I raced through them. We were headed toward the area I thought Russell had been describing when he’d told me about where he was supposed to meet Julia. There was one cliff in particular that I had in mind, but it was still quite a ways off. It made me wonder if he and this Julia person had given their plans much thought.

*I have picked up the boy’s scent*, Elle said, mind linking as we ran.

I lifted my nose and sniffed the air. Now that she’d pointed it out, I could smell it, too.

*Nice job*, I said, feeling pleased. The scent verified what I’d already suspected—Elle was a superior tracker, and Russell had been telling the truth.

That was good. It meant we were on the right trail. Maybe Jay and Ravi hadn’t picked the right direction when they’d gone out looking for his trail, earlier. Or maybe they just weren’t as good as Elle. Well, there was really no *maybe* about it. She’d picked up that scent even before I had.

Now that she had pointed it out, I could smell it, but there was something else in the air, too. Something familiar.

Elle scented it as well. *Someone else is out here, following Russell*, she said.

That was unnerving. I focused, trying to concentrate on the scent. It took a bit, but after a moment, I was sure I recognized the scent as belonging to our unwelcome visitor from the night before—Vishal.

*I know who it is*, I said to Elle. *And it’s not good.*

*Are we going to have to fight, Greyson?* Elle asked. She sounded excited.

*I hope not*, I said. *That’s not what we’re doing out here. We’re here to confirm Russell’s story and—if we get really lucky—to find Julia. Though that might take a minor miracle.*

Elle didn’t respond to that, and I glanced over at her.

*Are you disappointed?* I asked her. *Did you want to fight?*

Elle shook her head. *I will do whatever my Alpha asks of me*, she said simply.

That was Elle in a nutshell. Loyal, dependable, and low drama. It was hard not to like her when she said things like that. *Some other pack members would do well to adopt the same mindset. Namely, Xavier.*

As I looked at the path ahead, I spotted something. It was small and brown, but it wasn’t a rock. It almost looked like a wallet.

When we drew closer, I saw that it *was* a wallet. I tried to flip it open with my snout, but it wasn’t the most articulated appendage. Frustrated, I shifted back to human and picked it up with my hands.

When I flipped it open, I saw Russell’s photo staring back at me from an ID in the pocket.

I could feel Elle’s eyes on me, and it reminded me that she was still in her wolf form, and I was now just a naked human man. And—given her recent infatuation with me—that probably wasn’t the ideal situation.

I swung my pack off my back, glad that I’d thought to bring our clothes. “Elle, why don’t you shift back too?” I said, unzipping the pack and pulling out a pair of jeans for myself.

She shifted and shook out her hair, then caught her clothes as I tossed them to her. It was strangely awkward to stand there with her and pull on our clothes. It felt weirdly intimate, which was unexpected, and not really logical. I’d been shifting for as long as I could remember—I was used to being naked and being around other naked people—but right now, it just felt a little strange.

When we were dressed, I showed Elle the wallet.

“This belongs to Russell,” I explained. “He must have lost it when he was running.”

I snapped the wallet shut, anger flaring as I thought of the boy—hurt after his fall, fearing for his life—losing this as he was being hunted down by Vishal. It just wasn’t fair.

Elle looked around. “I wonder where the cliff is.”

“I think we’re close,” I said, scanning the trees around us. “Let’s just stay in human form and walk the rest of the way.”

Elle looked disappointed, but I’d need my fingers if we found anything else that might be useful. I also needed them to look through Russell’s wallet.

I slipped out the ID card and looked at it closely. It listed an address in Gilroy, which I knew was a small town in California. That was another element to Russell’s story that checked out. Going through the rest of the wallet, I found a couple dollar bills, some crumpled gas receipts, and a single condom.

I smiled as I pulled out the small foil-wrapped package. It didn’t feel like long ago that I’d been a teenager myself and kept a condom in my wallet, too. Mine had expired before I’d had a chance to use it.

“Greyson? What is that shiny thing?” Elle asked, pointing to the condom just as I started to slide it back into the wallet.

I stopped and thought about how I wanted to answer. I knew I could just tell her it was a balloon, but that seemed ridiculous. Maybe the truth would be the best option, here. Why not?

“It’s a condom, Elle. They’re for—”

“Oh, I know what they are for,” Elle said, much to my surprise.

“How do you know?” I asked in disbelief.

“Lola told me,” she explained.

“Of course she did,” I muttered.

Elle nodded. “I think Russell is smart for carrying one.”

“That’s true,” I said slowly. Mostly, I was just relieved that I didn’t have to give Elle The Talk. I was going to have to thank Lola for that.

I slipped the condom back into the wallet and dropped it into my pack. When I kept moving down the path, Elle fell into step next to me.

“I think you are the best Alpha,” she said after a long moment.

“Oh, thanks,” I said in surprise. “I’m not going to argue with you, but why are you telling me that?”

She shrugged. “Lucian.”

I stared at her, confused. “What about Lucian?”

“I do not think he would be doing what you are doing,” she said. She said it simply, the way she said almost everything. As though it were a fact—and I supposed it probably was. Lucian probably *wouldn’t* have been doing this, in my position.

I needed to be delicate. “How are things going with Lucian?”

“They are not,” she said bluntly.

“What do you mean?”

“He is not an Alpha like you, and I want my mate, and my Alpha, to be like you,” she said, looking over at me.

“Oh. Thank you, Elle,” I said with a smile. In all honesty, I was pretty relieved to hear her say that. I’d been trying my best, but I didn’t think I’d ever be able to accept her and Lucian as a couple.

It looked like my mother had been right: Elle had figured things out without any meddling from me.

She stopped abruptly. “What is that?”

I stopped too, and I followed her gaze upward… to a cliff face. It was a good fifty feet up, which—if Russell was telling the truth—would definitely explain some of his injuries. According to the pack members who’d found him, Russell had been pretty beat up. A fall like that would hurt even the strongest werewolf, and Russell was just a kid.

“Let’s look around,” I said. “Try to find some sign of Russell’s impact.”

Elle nodded and started to look. A minute later, she found something. “Blood.”

I walked over to where she was pointing and saw smears of dried blood on a rock. I looked up at the cliff, then down at the rock. Yet another thing to back up Russell’s story.

“We should scale the cliff,” I said.

“As wolves?” Elle suggested hopefully.

I tried not to smile. “We can do it in human form.”

She nodded, and we started climbing. The path I found was narrow and overgrown and so steep I nearly lost my footing a couple of times. The snow was thin here, so it was just the gravel and dirt under our feet, slipping as we climbed.

When we reached the top, the view was incredible, but I barely glanced at it. I looked down at the forest floor, which seemed so far away now. I tried to imagine what it had been like for Russell when he’d reached this point, knowing that he couldn’t go back—

A scream rent the air, and I turned around just in time to see part of the ledge crumble and Elle slip off the edge of the cliff.

# Episode 3594

**Xavier**

I swung the axe up high over my shoulder, then brought it down, splitting the log cleanly in half. When we’d moved the pack out to my house, Greyson had suggested that we buy firewood, but I’d told him to go to hell. I’d always chopped my own firewood, and I liked doing it. It was good for me, too—it was like a gym membership and a therapist, all in one.

As I worked, I saw Torin open the back door of the house, hurry out onto the porch, and grab an armful of wood from the protected pile I kept stocked up there. I watched as he disappeared back inside, and it occurred to me that Torin was burning through a hell of a lot of the firewood I had stored. I guess it made sense—Torin had a thing for fires. He lit one in every room he was in, and he would always build one back up if it started going out.

It sounded nice, actually, and for a moment I allowed myself to think of sitting in front of a roaring fire with Cali. Just the two of us—alone, maybe with some dinner, or just a couple of glasses of wine. But unless I took Cali away to a cabin or everyone else in the pack suddenly disappeared off the face of the earth, there was literally no hope of being alone in the pack house. There were just too many damn people in there, always up in everyone else’s business.

I moved the chopped wood to the side and placed another log on the wide chopping stump. Just thinking of the crowded pack house made me think about becoming a Rogue. Even during my mercenary days, I’d always technically belonged to a pack, but I had to admit that I could see the advantages of being completely on your own.

The back door opened again, and Jacqueline walked out. I groaned as she spied me across the yard and strolled over.

“Good morning, Xavier,” she said, her usual smug smile in place. “Why in the world are you doing *manual labor*?” she asked, looking around in dismay.

I rolled my eyes. “Someone’s got to do it.”

“So why don’t you get Big Mac or Kira to do it with their magic?” she asked.

“I guess I could,” I admitted, “but what would the witches want in return? That’s how magic works, you know. Besides”—I split the log on the stump—“I like doing it.”

“Really? Why?” Jacqueline asked, arching an eyebrow.

I shrugged. “Feels good.”

“Okay,” she said slowly, clearly not believing a word. “Whatever turns you on, Evers.”

She shook her head and left.

I moved another log into place, lifted my axe, and let gravity and the power of my muscles do the rest. It was satisfying to watch the blade of the axe slice cleanly through, then watch the two halves tumble to the ground. It was also a useful outlet to channel the lingering resentment I was feeling toward Greyson after last night—*and* this morning.

Honestly, I didn’t want that shit to fester. I knew it would be bad for all of us. Making breakfast for Cali this morning had helped—but then, like everything else around here, it had turned into a pack activity. It had been far from the breakfast for two I’d wanted.

I set another log in place and pictured Vishal’s face on top of it, then let my axe fall. Now that felt even better.

When I set another log in place, I listened to the sound of the axe breaking through the surface of the wood and imagined it was the sound of Vishal’s neck snapping in my hands.

“Aren’t you cold?”

Cali’s voice broke into my thoughts. I glanced at her, wiping sweat from my forehead as she walked over.

She scanned my body, then refocused on my face. “You could put a shirt on,” she said with a small smile.

I rested the axe on my shoulder. “Yeah, but if I were wearing a shirt, I wouldn’t be able to do this.” I struck a lumberjack pose with the axe, flexing my chest muscles.

She laughed and moved like she was going to hug me, but she stopped herself as she drew close. “Wow, you really are sweaty.”

“‘Chop your own wood and it will warm you twice,’” I quoted. “Someone said that. You want to give it a try?” I asked, offering her the axe.

“Sure,” she said gamely.

She took the axe, and I moved to stand behind her, putting my arms around her and my hands over hers.

“Okay, you want to bring your arms up like so,” I said, guiding her body, “and then down like this—”

We brought down the axe, and it hit the log dead center, splitting it in half.

“It worked!” Cali squealed, thrilled. “That was fun. I want to do it again!”

So we did it again.

“Now I want to try it on my own,” she said, and she nearly managed to split the log cleanly. It only took another try before both pieces tumbled to the side of the stump.

She grinned at me as she paused to catch her breath. “I like that.”

I returned her smile. “You must really be feeling better.”

She nodded. “I am. I feel like my old self now.” She dropped down to sit on the splitting stump and looked back at the house. “Have you had a chance to talk to Russell?”

I shook my head. “No, not yet, but I was planning on going down there later.”

“I talked to him before,” she said thoughtfully. “I hope Greyson finds Julia.”

Her expression grew dark and worried.

“What is it?” I asked, crouching down beside her. “Did something happen?”

“I’m just worried about the summit,” she admitted.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” I assured her. “It’s just an excuse for a bunch of packs to meet up, party, and blow off steam. The leaders make a bunch of bullshit pronouncements and declarations, and everything stays exactly the same.”

She nodded slowly. “I’ve just been wondering if… if maybe it would be better if I didn’t go.”

I hesitated. I didn’t love the idea of Cali going to the summit as Greyson’s Luna, but I knew how much she wanted to be a Luna and represent the pack.

“Where is this coming from?” I asked.

“That I’m a *due destini* mate,” she admitted. “And apparently there are people who think I’m an abomination. People who would try to kill me if they met me. What if we go to the summit and there are more packs that feel the same way?”

I felt my defenses rise. Who the fuck would dare think that about my mate? But Cali looked scared enough already, so I kept my anger in check and wrapped my arm around her. “That’s ridiculous. You’re not an abomination—you’re a miracle. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

She looked over at me, her eyes bright with tears, and I wiped one away as it trailed down her cheek.

I took her hand and kissed it gently. “You’re my miracle, Cali. Before I met you, I was lost. But you healed me—you made me whole.”

Cali leaned into me and pressed her lips to mine. “You’re my miracle, too, Xavier.” She wrapped her arms around me and hugged me tight. “But what about the other packs? If the Bitterfang pack thinks that about me, who’s to say there aren’t other packs out there that would think that, too? This secret of ours obviously isn’t as secret as we thought.”

I pulled back so I could look her straight in the eye. “You listen to me, Caliana Hart. No one would dare lay a finger on you. The Bitterfangs can talk all they want, but no one would dare do anything to a pack Luna. And besides that, I would never let anything happen to you. And Greyson wouldn’t either,” I added begrudgingly. It was true, of course—I just didn’t like thinking about him in reference to Cali if I could help it.

She sighed. “I know, I know.”

“So why do you still look worried?” I wondered.

“I know you’ll look out for me, but…” She shook her head. “I just don’t want to cause trouble with any of the other packs at the summit.”

Anger rose up in my chest. “If anyone even looks at you the wrong way,” I growled. “I’ll set that asshole straight.”

My hand twitched, and I grabbed the axe without thinking. I swung it hard, driving it into a nearby log hard enough that the wooden handle snapped off the blade.

Cali gasped.

I turned to her, my eyes blazing. “I’ll go after anyone who threatens my mate, Cali, and I don’t care how many fucking pack wars I start in the process.”

# Episode 3595

**Greyson**

I acted purely on instinct and didn’t hesitate for an instant—I jumped, extending my body and reaching for Elle’s plummeting form. I barely caught hold of her wrist, but that was enough to stop her fall. Her momentum dragged me forward, pulling me to the edge of the cliff, but I fought my way back, using my free hand to grasp rocks, snow-covered bushes, saplings—anything to keep us from going over the edge.

“Come *on*,” I gritted out as my hand slid down the length of a thorny branch.

I gripped harder and finally managed to stop sliding forward. With a grunt of effort, I pulled Elle back up over the precipice, and she landed hard at my side,

“*Fuck*,” I breathed, dropping to the ground. I leaned back, panting for breath. That had been too close. *Way* too close. I shook my head, even as it started spinning. What would I have said to Elle’s father if I hadn’t been able to catch her? If she had fallen to her death? I had taken on a responsibility when I’d turned Elle, and the weight of that responsibility had never waned.

“Thank you for catching me, Greyson,” Elle said, putting a hand on my arm.

I looked over at her. “You good?” I asked, still breathing hard. She seemed pretty calm.

She shrugged. “Yes. I am fine.”

I wondered if she really was. She looked collected, though her face was pale.

“Are you afraid to admit that you were scared, Elle?” I asked her, confused.

She shook her head. “No, no. It is not like that. I was never scared.”

“You weren’t?” I asked, eyebrows raised. I didn’t quite buy that.

“No. I knew you would catch me,” she said simply.

I stared at her, flabbergasted. “Are you serious? That could have ended *really* badly, Elle. Do you know how lucky we both were just then?”

She frowned. “That was not luck. I was saved because you are a strong Alpha. Not because of luck. That is why I want to be mated to a strong Alpha. So my mate will always be there when I need him. Isn’t that how it is supposed to work?” she asked.

I looked down at my hands, noticing the deep scratches from my desperate grasping. Blood was starting to seep out, and I wiped it on my jeans. “I guess it is. But being in the right place at the right time isn’t always possible.”

Elle didn’t look convinced. “No, but you find a way,” she said firmly.

I got to my feet and held out my hand. Elle took it, and I helped her up. I brushed the dirt from my clothes as she did the same. As she pulled brambles off her sweater, I thought about what she’d just said and felt a little twinge of guilt. Mates *were* supposed to be there for each other, and I wasn’t with Cali—though I certainly wanted to be. But if something were to happen to her right now, I wouldn’t even know, never mind be there for her. Not like Elle believed a mate should.

“Greyson?”

I looked over to see Elle peering up at me curiously.

“Yeah? What’s up?” I asked, trying to focus my thoughts again.

She raised her eyebrows. “Should we keep looking for Julia?”

Once again, I was astonished by Elle’s focus and resistance. She was a hell of a tracker and a pack member—I really hoped she found the Alpha mate she was looking for. She deserved nothing less.

“Yeah, let’s get moving,” I said.

We started looking around on the cliff’s edge—walking more carefully this time. Russell had told me he was supposed to meet Julia in the spot where they thought it was supposed to be neutral—not controlled by any pack. It’s true that there were pockets of areas that weren’t covered by anyone, but I doubted that Julia would still be there regardless. If she hadn’t already been re-captured by her pack, she probably would’ve gone looking for Russell. Or maybe she was in hiding.

Either way, I had a feeling Elle and I would be returning to the pack house alone, and coming back to a very disappointed Russell. I knew he was anxious for us to find Julia, but I wasn’t a magician. I couldn’t just make the girl appear out of nowhere.

I pointed to a place a little ways away. “That’s where Russell said he and Julia were supposed to meet. It’s a place where three local pack territories meet—Redwood, Blue Blood, and Samara. Humans around here call it Three Devils Point. I guess we could start there,” I said with a shrug. “We could shift—”

Elle didn’t even let me finish speaking before she started stripping down.

“Elle.” I laughed as she threw her shirt to the ground.

“Greyson,” she said seriously, “I love being human, but I love running through the woods even more.”

“All right,” I said with a chuckle. I grabbed her clothes, then shoved them—along with my own—into the bag. I slung it onto my back, and we shifted again.

I led Elle along the edge of Redwood territory. It was habit, but it didn’t really matter. I wasn’t too concerned about crossing over into Blue Blood or Samara land. The Redwoods were in good standing with both packs. For now.

Elle lifted her nose for a moment, then took off, racing ahead. She’d picked up a scent, and I ran after her.

*Take it slow*, I told her. *We don’t want to lose the scent*.

We came to a small stream, and I instantly recognized it. We’d reached Three Devils Point—this part of the woods was a kind of no man’s land. There were no rules here, because no one pack really controlled the area. I sped up to close the gap between Elle and me. The place seemed quiet, but I didn’t want us to get separated.

Elle stopped and looked around, clearly confused. When I drew level with her, I understood why—the scent she’d been following hadn’t disappeared, but had been joined by more. A lot more. I was picking up a mix of scents—too many to identify. I lifted my nose in the air and sniffed, but I couldn’t nail down anything specific.

Clearly this was a popular path, but how could that be? Who used it? And why?

I had no idea.

Elle circled around, trying to pick up a familiar scent, widening the circle as she moved, keeping her nose to the ground.

Her attention was entirely focused on finding the right scent, so I kept my eyes open, scanning the surrounding pine trees, watching for movement. I was keeping an eye out for any visitors—friend or foe. I was definitely worried that Vishal and his Pit Bull friends could come looking for us.

I wasn’t looking for scents, but I picked up the smell of burnt wood—an unmistakable sign of campers. But no, that wasn’t right… No campers would purposefully spend a night in this place—it was too remote. We were too far away from the popular hiking trails that humans enjoyed, and werewolves avoided.

*Elle!* I called.

Looking up, she trotted over to me, and together we walked toward the source of the burnt wood smell. Sure enough, I found an extinguished campfire about a hundred yards from where we’d been standing.

*Someone was here*, Elle said, lifting her nose to sniff. *A female wolf*.

I pressed my paw to the fire. It was as cold as the ground. Whoever had been here had left hours ago. It was luckily alone, but it was old. She could’ve been here hours ago and gone now. It wasn’t strong enough, and it might not be enough to go off of to find her. Shit. But we had to try.

*Okay, we’re going to follow the female’s scent*, I told Elle. *If it’s Julia, then there’s a chance we could catch up with her, and we have to try.*

Elle agreed easily, and we started walking, following the scent. Then, after a few hundred yards, another scent joined the first. And this one was familiar.

I paused, thinking. Blue Blood territory wasn’t far from here, but I knew that as reliable as my nose could be, people could be plenty tricky. I wanted eyes on whoever it was.

Then I picked up yet another scent, this one also familiar. One I’d smelled quite a few times and knew it well. But what was she doing here?

Ahead of me, Elle had stopped moving. Her body was still as a statue—only her eyes were moving, and they were focused on the woods ahead of us. As I watched her, she slowly dropped into a defensive crouch.

On instinct, I did the same, and my body tensed as two figures slowly emerged from the shadows.

Ava stepped into the morning sunshine. “Are you looking for me?”

# Episode 3596

**Xavier**

Looking back, I realized I *might* have misspoken—or maybe spoken a little too strongly—because it took me a long time to convince Cali that I wasn’t going to go out and intentionally start a pack war to defend her honor. Even when she’d headed back inside, she hadn’t looked completely convinced.

I’d worked hard to convince her that I wasn’t planning to do anything, but the reality was that I absolutely would if it was clear that I needed to. I knew it was a reckless idea—and maybe an even more reckless thing to say—but I’d meant what I’d said about Cali: she was the most important thing in my life. And if a thousand werewolves had to die so I could protect her, then so be it.

Alone again in the January wind, I took my time stacking my freshly chopped wood next to the shed. When I was done, I eyed the massive amount I’d chopped—the pile was well over my head—and reminded myself to tell Torin to cool it with the fires in every room, every single night. And if he couldn’t tone it down, I was going to give him the axe and tell him to chop the wood next time. I could chopping some wood, but I wasn’t a fucking machine.

I put the axe back in the shed and, as I headed inside, my thoughts went back to Cali and my idea of being with her in front of a roaring fire. *Alone*. Maybe I’d been onto something before—a few just the two of us. A fire in the fireplace, mulled wine, and no one else around the pack house trying to interrupt us… Didn’t we deserve some time alone?

How I *wanted* some time alone with her.

The kitchen was packed when I stepped inside. I’d lost track of time, but it looked like it was lunchtime—pack members were crowded around the table, eating and talking, joking, and yelling at each other from across the room. The sound echoed, bouncing off the high, beamed ceiling and giving me an instant headache. The place was crowded and loud, and as I edged my way through, I became more determined than ever to have my own Cali time.

The thought made me happy, and I was smiling as I turned the corner toward the stairs and ran into Big Mac. She stepped back, her frown deepening.

“Watch it,” she muttered. “I’ve got wedding business on the brain. You don’t want to mess with me.”

“Hell, Big Mac, I *never* want to mess with you,” I admitted. “But there is something I wanted to ask you.”  
 She actually smiled, looking relieved. “Of course! What do you need?”

I hadn’t been expecting that reaction, and it threw me off. “Sorry, but you *want* to help?” I asked warily. “Why?”

She rolled her eyes. “Anything would be better than wedding planning. It’s all tablecloths and caterers and what music we should be walking out to.” She waved her hand dismissively. “That’s just not the way my brain works. So, yeah, I’ll help you. What do you need?”

I looked around. Lunch seemed to be wrapping up, and pack members were starting to stream out of the kitchen. I pulled Big Mac into the office near the front door.

“The Shard seems to be helping Cali,” I started.

“Yeah, so she says,” Big Mac said.

“So how long is it going to *keep* helping?” I asked. “How long will it keep working?”

Big Mac shrugged. “That’s not really my area of expertise.”

“I know, I know,” I said. “But you still understand these things a hell of a lot better than I do—”

“Obviously,” she muttered.

I ignored her. “I’d like to get some alone time with Cali—here or elsewhere—but I won’t suggest it to her if you think there’s a chance the charm could fail.”

Big Mac thought about that for a moment. “Well, from what I understand, the charm should prevent things from getting worse.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“The idea is that it’ll help her while the balance of nature has time to return to normal,” the witch said.

“Okay,” I said slowly. “I guess I was hoping for something a little more definitive.”

“If you’re asking me if it’s safe to take Cali away for a few days, I have no idea,” she said shortly. “I’m sorry, but I can’t make that promise. But she does seem to be in much better shape, so you’ll probably have your answer sooner rather than later.”

“Yeah, but—” I started, but I was interrupted when Mrs. Smith leaned into the open doorframe.

“There you are, MacKenzie. Have you decided?”

Big Mac groaned. “No. I’m still looking.” She turned to go but shot a glance at me over her shoulder. “Take my advice, Evers—when it’s your turn to get married, *elope*.”

I laughed. “Understood. Thanks.”

I would elope with Cali right this minute if I could. But when she chose me, we were going to celebrate with a huge wedding—how else were we supposed to let everyone know that we were together forever? But I was getting ahead of myself.

Right now, I was just thinking about a few days away, and I wanted to make up my mind about going. Maybe instead of a remote mountain cabin, I would book a hotel room and shower Cali with gifts. We could make a special night of it. And then if something did go wrong, at least we wouldn’t be stranded out in the woods somewhere.

I left the office and had almost made it to the stairs when I remembered that I’d promised Cali I would check in on Russell. She wanted me to make an effort to talk to him, so I headed downstairs.

I found the kid in his room-slash-cell, pacing anxiously.

“So you’re Russell,” I said, stepping into the doorway.

He looked up quickly, alarm clear on his face. “You’re not Greyson…”

“Nope,” I said. “Better. I’m his brother.”

Russell seemed to release some of the tension in his face. “Do you know if he’s coming back with Julia?”

I stifled a groan. “Listen, Russell,” I started carefully, “I think you might need to lower your expectations here. I know what you’re hoping for, and I hope Greyson comes back with Julia, too, but looking for her out there is like trying to find a needle in a haystack. And in this case, we’re talking about a needle that might not want to be found.”

“She’ll be looking for me—”

“Yeah, but she’s *not* looking for Greyson. She doesn’t even know him,” I reminded him. “And she’ll probably be wary of any strangers.”

The kid huffed and dropped down to sit on his cot. “This is so messed up. I knew I should’ve gone out with him to look for her. Greyson didn’t want me to go, but I should’ve made him take me. I hate the idea of Julia alone and scared out there.”

He looked so worried, I really felt for him.

“Sorry, kid. I’m sure this sucks, but Greyson and Elle are going to do the best they can.”

Russell looked up at me, his eyes wide with fear. “What if her pack has already found her? What if they already got her—”

“Stop,” I said, cutting him off before he started to spiral. “You have to try to have some hope, okay? My brother’s a pain in the ass, but he’s good for his word.”

That was true, as much as I hated to admit it.

“He and Elle are great trackers, and I know they’re going to do their best to find Julia.” I clapped the kid on the shoulder. “Just try to hang in there.”

Russell nodded miserably.

I turned to leave, but paused at the door and looked back. I wondered if I should say anything to him about the werewolf I’d killed and buried in the woods. I wasn’t sure. I still wasn’t convinced that we could trust the kid—not completely. He seemed earnest enough, but you just never knew. And anyway, he was just a kid. Fifteen. I might’ve been used to seeing and talking about death, but that didn’t mean the kid was. Cali was only just beginning to understand werewolves’ attitudes toward death. I didn’t know the kid’s family or how he’d been raised—I had no idea what he’d experienced, and hearing about the dead werewolf could easily make him panic. Even more than he already was.

So I left it alone.

“I’ll see you later,” I said, and headed upstairs.

Talking with the kid had now been checked off on my list of things to do, so I let my mind turn to something more fun. I decided to find Cali and float the idea of a luxury hotel stay, but I only made it to the top of the stairs before Jay appeared and grabbed my arm.

“What’s up, man?” I asked, surprised.

His grip on my arm was tight. “We’ve got trouble.”

# Episode 3597

I’d heard the commotion from my room, and I made it downstairs just in time to see Jay pull Xavier toward the front door. I’d seen a group of people arriving at the pack house from my window, and now—seeing the urgency on Xavier’s face—I felt my heart rate speed up. I didn’t know who this group was, but I was worried. I’d been on edge since that werewolf had paid us a visit the night before. I knew Greyson hadn’t been happy that I’d used my Fae magic in front of him, but I was more than willing to do it again, if I had to.

A few other pack members were already following Jay and Xavier out the door. Rishika and Artemis joined me as I moved with the group.

“Who’s here?” Rishika asked, looking around.

“I’m not sure,” I murmured, walking over to Xavier.

*And that’s the problem.*

He’d moved to the top of the porch steps, and was looking out at a group of about a dozen people, gathered on the slushy front lawn. I scanned their faces, wondering if Vishal was among them. But no one looked familiar to me, and no one had that crude pit bull sketched on their jacket.

“Who are you?” Xavier bit out, his eyes narrowed. “What do you want?”

A woman stepped forward and smiled up at him. “We’re members of the Bitterfang pack, from California.”

I stiffened immediately and stepped behind Xavier, trying not to be seen. This was the pack Russell had told me about—the pack led by Julia’s *due destini*-hating parents. The pack that thought I was an abomination. Was that why they were here? Had they come to kill me?

I glanced up at Xavier, thinking about what he’d said when we were outside chopping wood. Namely, that he was willing to start a pack war to defend me. I’d gotten upset when he’d said it—I’d hate to be the cause of anything like that—but I certainly didn’t like the fact that this pack had shown up so unexpectedly.

Xavier seemed less than happy about it, too.

“You’ve come a long way,” he said flatly. “What do you want?”

A man moved up to stand next to the smiling woman. “I’m Lance,” he said. “Are you the Redwood Alpha?”

I watched as Xavier’s hands balled into fists at his side. Lance couldn’t have known it, but he’d made a bad move. The topic of the Redwood Alpha was a sensitive subject for Xavier and definitely not a great conversation starter. Shit. This already wasn’t going well.

“What do you want?” Xavier asked again, ignoring the question.

“We’re here looking for the daughter of our Alpha. Her name is Julia,” Lance said.

Xavier frowned at him, doing a good impression of total confusion. “And why do you think the daughter of a California pack’s Alpha would be in a pack house in Oregon?”

“We followed her scent,” Lance said smoothly.

It was then that I knew they were lying. They couldn’t have followed her scent here, because she wasn’t here. If anything, they would’ve followed Russell’s trail.

Xavier’s shoulders had tensed, and he took one step down the porch steps—one step closer to Lance. “I hate to disappoint you, seeing you’ve come so far, but there’s no one named Julia here. Never has been.”

Lance’s mild expression hardened. “I hope you’re not covering for her, Redwood.”

“Excuse me?” Xavier asked, his voice knife-sharp.

“Julia is young. Impressionable. She’s made a foolish and ill-fated decision to run away. Her parents are desperate to get her back,” Lance said, gentling his voice.

Something about this bugged me, and I stepped forward, pushing past my fear of this pack.

“Why did Julia run away in the first place?” I asked boldly.

Lance shifted his gaze to me. “Are you the Luna?” he asked, looking me over.

I hesitated, not sure what to say. If I said yes, then they would know I was the *due destini* mate they’d heard about, and I didn’t want them to know that about me. On top of that, Xavier was standing right next to me—I didn’t want to rub my being Greyson’s sort-of Luna in his face.

Xavier took my hand, his eyes still on Lance. “She’s with me. Now answer her question. Why did Julia run?”

Lance shook his head. “The girl was foolish. She believed that a Rogue could be anything other than what they are. Pitiful. Unworthy of a pack princess like her. She ran to be with one of them. But his crowd is dangerous.”

“What makes them so dangerous?” Xavier asked carefully.

“We believe they’re responsible for the disappearance of one of our own,” Lance said, sounding angry for the first time.

I swallowed nervously, thinking of the dead werewolf, but didn’t let myself look up at Xavier. I didn’t want to give anything away.

He kept his cool. “That’s too bad. When did your pack member disappear?”

“Last night,” Lance said. “He was out tracking for us—following the young Rogue’s scent—and he never came back.” He looked back into the woods. “Some of our pack are still out there now, looking for him.”

I followed his gaze into the dark trees. I thought about Greyson and Elle out there, tracking Julia. Were other members of the Bitterfang pack were out there too? What if they ran into each other?

Xavier was clearly fuming but trying to keep it together. “Sorry, man. It’s always hard when a pack member goes missing. But I haven’t seen this Julia girl.” He looked the Bitterfangs over for a moment. “Tell me where you’re all staying. That way, if she does show up, I can send word.”

I gave him a look out of the corner of my eyes. I assumed he was lying to them—I doubted Xavier would ever tell them anything.

“We’d appreciate that,” Lance said with a smile. “We’re camping a few miles south of here.”

Xavier returned the smile, but it was a cool smile, devoid of lightness. “South of here, you say? Are you aware that you’re camping on Redwood territory?”

“We had no idea,” Lance said easily.

*He’s lying.*

Xavier raised a brow. “I could have you killed for trespassing. You know the law of land, don’t you?”

Lance looked completely unfazed by this threat. “Surely the Redwood pack can see that there are extenuating circumstances, here. We’re looking for one of our own, and the life of a young woman is at stake. What could be more important than that? Besides,” he added, almost reproachfully, “it would be a shame to start a pack war over something so small.”

The phrase “pack war” set off alarm bells in my head, and a knot formed in my stomach. Was a pack war what Xavier wanted?

“Are you threatening us?” Xavier snarled, taking another step down the porch stairs. He was towering over the Bitterfang wolves, his blue eyes sparking with fury. “What kind of pack comes into my territory without permission, camps on my land, and *threatens* me?”

The Bitterfang pack moved on the soggy lawn, closing ranks. Their faces were hard, like they were ready to fight.

Behind me, I heard the Redwood pack doing the same.

Then, as if on cue, Greyson emerged from the woods with Elle at his side. And, to my surprise, Ava and Mace were with them, too.

He looked around in confusion. “What the hell is going on?”

My palms started sweating. Had they found Julia? Was she with them? Oh god, I’d wanted them to find her, but now I was praying that they hadn’t. If she appeared with them now, there would be no stopping all hell from breaking loose. But then I realized it was only the four of them, and I sighed in relief. They must not have found Julia. Still, I had no idea why Ava and Mace were with them.

Every eye turned to Greyson as he walked over and joined Xavier on the porch steps.

“Care to fill me in?” Greyson asked his brother.

“This is the Bitterfang pack,” Xavier said, jerking his chin toward Lance and his gang. “They’re from California, and they’re up here looking for a missing girl. But in the meantime, they’ve decided to threaten us with a pack war.”

A slow smile spread across Greyson’s face as he turned to look at the Bitterfang wolves. “Well, that would be a mistake, wouldn’t it?”

“Are *you* the Alpha?” Lance demanded.

“Yes, I am,” Greyson said. He spoke slowly, taking his time, asserting his dominance over the situation. “What’s all this about?”

“We lost a couple of pack members and wanted to know if you’d found them,” Lance said, his voice hard as a large gust of wind came through. The trees rattled, making everything that more eerie. There was no pretense of friendliness, now. “We’re looking for the daughter of our Alpha, and—”

A pack member with long blond hair stepped forward. He was looking around, his nostrils flaring. He pointed savagely at Xavier. “Lance, he’s carrying Erick’s scent!”

# Episode 3598

My eyes widened as Lance turned to the wolf who had made the accusation, his expression deadly serious. “Are you certain the scent is coming from *him*, Jonnathan?”

I tried to school my expression as they looked back at our little group. My looking guilty wouldn’t help things.

*Erick has to be the werewolf Xavier killed.*

But all the same, I really, really hoped our dead werewolf wasn’t the same one the Bitterfang wolves were talking about, but I didn’t like my chances.

Jonnathan scented the air, his eyes finally narrowing on Xavier. “Yes. *Him*.”

Both he and Lance snarled and stepped forward, and I instinctively stepped in front of Xavier. Nobody was going to hurt my mate while I could stop them. Still, I couldn’t help the shiver of fear that slipped down my spine—not only for myself, but for the entire Redwood pack.

*Is my fear about starting a pack war coming true?*

Xavier’s voice slipped into my mind. *I can handle this. Don’t worry.*

He gently pulled me back behind him as he stepped forward to meet Jonnathan with a smile. “Maybe your senses aren’t so good?”

“You *reek* of Erick,” Jonnathan growled. “Don’t you dare try to lie to me.”

“Who the hell does this guy think he is?” one of the other Bitterfang wolves muttered.

I could see the discontent, the quietly simmering bloodlust, spreading through the strange pack like wildfire. If we didn’t put a pin in this situation, defuse it somehow, things were going to get out of hand.

I summoned my magic, letting it build as the tension between the two packs rose. I was no werewolf, but hopefully a well-aimed blast would help if things got out of hand. Maybe it could stun the Bitterfangs and make them think twice about attacking us.

I didn’t want to start a pack war—that was the very last thing we needed right now—but I wasn’t about to back down and let these trespassers attack my mates.

“What the fuck have you done with Erick?” Lance demanded. “Tell me now, and I’ll consider going easy on you.”

Greyson stepped up next to Xavier. “You’re out of line. Coming onto Redwood territory without permission, coming to our pack house and accusing us of killing a member of your pack? Just who the hell do you think you are?”

Lance’s eyes darkened. “We never said he was dead.”

*Oh crap.*

If the Bitterfangs had been angry and distrustful before, now they looked downright murderous.

*Oh no. Shit…* This was just getting worse and worse. Was there any way to defuse the tension now? I didn’t know the Bitterfang pack, but I knew enough about werewolf packs in general to understand that they didn’t take violence against their own lightly.

If Erick *was* the guy Xavier had killed, and the Bitterfangs figured it out, there would be no avoiding a war.

To his credit, Greyson managed to somehow keep his cool. He shrugged. “It’s what you implied, isn’t it? I doubt you’d have come all the way out here if you weren’t convinced that some tragedy had befallen one of your pack members.”

“Then why can we smell him?” Lance growled.

“Maybe we came across him—after all, this is *our* territory. If Erick was here, regardless of what happened to him, he was trespassing.”

I tensed at Greyson’s words. Could he have sounded any guiltier? He was a bit of thinly veiled language away from revealing that Erick had been murdered.

I pulled in a deep breath. *Stay calm, Cali. Let Greyson and Xavier handle this. If the Bitterfangs see how nervous you are, it definitely won’t help matters.*

“We’re going to look around,” Lance declared.

“Like hell you are,” Greyson said flatly. “This is Redwood territory. You won’t take one more step without my express permission.”

“Or what?”

Greyson flashed his teeth in a feral grin. “I promise—you don’t want to find out.”

Silence settled over both packs, so thick and tense that I felt the hairs rise on the back of my neck. I stepped toward Greyson, reaching for him—to do what, I wasn’t quite sure.

I froze when Lance turned his gaze on me, his eyes narrowing. With a lurch, I suddenly remembered that Xavier had told Lance he and I were together. I pulled my hand away from Greyson and casually stepped back behind the protective wall my mates had formed in front of me.

Julia might’ve been enamored with the idea of my being a *due destini* mate, but that didn’t mean the rest of her pack would feel the same way. It would probably be for the best if I avoided drawing any attention to my *due destini* situation. It seemed like the Bitterfang pack already had plenty of reasons to hate the Redwoods without adding in superstition.

“It would be a grave mistake to take one more step toward our pack house,” Xavier said. “We outnumber you.”

Lance hesitated. His anger and need for dominance were almost palpable, but in that moment of hesitation, I saw that his fury was losing momentum. Good. Hopefully he was smart enough to retreat.

“My brother’s being kind,” Greyson said. “Get the fuck out of here. If your pack member trespassed on our land, I’m sure he was dealt with appropriately. As you might deal with an aggressive trespasser on your own land. What are you going to do about it? Because from where I’m standing, you’re still on *our* land.”

Lance turned his glare first on Greyson, then on Xavier. There was so much hatred in his eyes that it made me want to shrivel up and die. I knew one thing for sure: Lance was the last person I ever wanted to come across in a dark alley.

“This isn’t over,” he promised darkly before leading the Bitterfangs away from the pack house. But then he stopped after a few steps and spun around. “If we find out you or your… *pack*… have anything to do with Erick’s disappearance, we’ll be back. It’s not trespassing if you have something that’s ours and won’t return it.” I shuddered. They were talking about Julia like she was a *thing*. “You’ll wish you’d never crossed our path.”

“Oh, I already wish that,” Xavier muttered.

But Lance wasn’t done. “Who knows…” His gaze shifted to me. “Maybe one of your pack members will go missing. An eye for an eye, and all that.”

Xavier’s voice dropped to a low, guttural growl. “Get the fuck out while you still can.”

With one last glare, the Bitterfang pack members finally retreated into the woods. Greyson immediately turned to Rishika, who hadn’t moved from her spot on the porch.

“We need patrols around the house and in the woods. Make sure those assholes leave our territory.”

I waited until the Bitterfangs had disappeared behind the tree line and were far out of earshot, even for a werewolf, before turning to Xavier.

“What happens if they find the body?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

I hated myself for even asking the question. For how my views on murder had changed, for the way I was viewing a dead body as a liability instead of a person deserving of respect.

*Being part of the Redwood pack has definitely changed me.*

Xavier shrugged. “I don’t care. If they do find the body, it’ll be because they’re still trespassing. We’re still in the right, here.”

“Are you sure about that?” I asked softly.

He took my hand. “Cali, Erick tried to attack you. My mate. On our pack’s land. It was well within my rights to do whatever I felt was necessary to protect you. Even the werewolf council would agree that the asshat deserved what he got.”

“He’s right,” Greyson added. “But all we can do is see what they do next. If they trespass again, we act accordingly. They’re clearly violent. If they attack, we end it. They seem more the type to take matters into their own hands.”

“I hope they do.” Xavier smiled. “There’s plenty of room for more graves out there.”

That was exactly what I was afraid of. I shuddered, imagining yet another forest full of dead bodies. I’d seen it when Silas had waged his pack war, and again when Letifer had raised the dead. I didn’t want to see anything like either of those things ever again, but it seemed like Xavier almost relished the idea of another pack war.

“Why would you want that?” I asked.

“Nobody wants a pack war,” Greyson said sharply. “Xavier, tone it down.”

Xavier laughed. “I’m just saying, we should be prepared to do whatever’s necessary.”

“A pack war won’t be good for anyone,” Greyson retorted. “Or have you already forgotten what happened with Silas?”

His smile disappeared. “As if I could ever fucking forget.”

“Stop!” I snapped. “Both of you.”

Xavier was probably still bothered by the fact that Greyson and I had been together earlier, and I wasn’t about to allow *another* source of antagonism to spring up between them.

“How about instead of beating each other up, you figure out what to do about Russell and Julia?” I added.

“The Bitterfangs are ready to rumble over this bullshit,” Xavier said, his tone dark. “The best thing we can do now is take care of Russell.”

# Episode 3599

“Um, what’s *that* supposed to mean?” I demanded, looking at Xavier.

A crease appeared between his brows. “What do you think it means?”

“Are you planning on killing Russell? Isn’t one dead werewolf enough?” I shook my head. I couldn’t believe this was happening. I’d always known Xavier didn’t hold the same respect and reverence for life that I did—it was a constant source of tension between us. And I was sure no small part of his worldview had been shaped by growing up as a werewolf. Werewolf culture was very different to human culture. Much more ruthless.

I knew that Xavier had that in him. But I knew he also had compassion.

Xavier looked almost hurt by my question. “I hope you don’t seriously think I’d kill a kid.”

“What the hell am I supposed to think?” I demanded. “You and Ravi have been talking about him like he’s a problem to get rid of!”

“Well, let me ease your mind, then. I’d never kill a kid.”

And then, as I let out a relieved breath, I was suddenly struck by the memory of Xavier learning about René’s death. Xavier had been so upset, so guilt ridden—the same feeling that was now washing over me.

*I should’ve known better. I should’ve known he’d never hurt a kid.*

“I’m sorry,” I said in a rush. “I’m just worried. First there was Vishal showing up, and now we’re got the Bitterfangs to worry about. I don’t want another pack war. I don’t want anyone else to die.”

I was worried that Xavier would be angry with me, but he just wrapped an arm around my shoulders and gave me a squeeze. “It’s okay. I know everyone’s emotions are running high right now.”

I couldn’t help but notice that Xavier didn’t apologize to Greyson, or even make an effort to reconcile with him. But I felt foolish for expecting it. Greyson and me being together seemed to have made Xavier’s emotions run pretty damn high too, but that didn’t seem like anything he was interested in addressing.

“What I meant was, we should take care of Russell by finding Julia,” Xavier explained. “I mean, those Bitterfangs seem like a bunch of a psychopaths; who knows what they might do to Julia?”

Greyson nodded. “Going by the interaction we just had with them, she might be in real trouble. I’m not going to let either of those kids get hurt.”

My heart swelled. I knew Xavier and Greyson had both had awful childhoods, having Silas as a father. Knowing that they’d suffered, and knowing how antagonistic things still were between them, it meant the world to me to see them band together to protect Russell. Given the ability to choose between this side of their dynamic and the side that inevitably bubbled to the surface whenever they started fighting for dominance—over the pack, over each other, over *me*—I’d choose the gentler protectors in a heartbeat.

Like always, they seemed to get along better when they could agree on pack business.

“I’m all for helping Russell,” Xavier said. Then he added, “*Assuming* what he told us is true.”

“I believe the kid,” Greyson said. He pulled a wallet out of his pocket and flipped it open to reveal Russell’s ID. “I found this out in the woods. Russell must have lost it when he was running. In any case, his story checks out. Elle and I found the cliff where he fell. There were signs of struggle and impact, and it all fits his injuries.” He sighed, flipping the wallet shut. “And now we have two unwelcome visits from werewolves interested in Russell and Julia. Those two have brought a world of trouble down on themselves.”

“All they want is to be together,” I said. “I don’t understand why that’s such a bad thing. It seems like the Bitterfangs are the ones blowing everything out of proportion.”

“Maybe.” Xavier shrugged. “But either way, these are the cards they’ve been dealt, and now we’ve been sucked into the game too. Again, I think we should help them, but I’d be lying if I said I was thrilled about helping a couple of kids play out werewolf *Romeo and Juliet*.”

“As long as it doesn’t *end* like *Romeo and Juliet*, that’s all I care about.” I turned my gaze back to Greyson. “Did you and Elle have any luck finding Julia?”

He shook his head. “There wasn’t much to go on to begin with. We ran into Ava and Mace briefly, but they hadn’t seen anyone. But Julia’s scent—if it was hers—was way too light. Not strong enough to make a difference. I don’t have the first idea where she might be. I have to assume she’s not far—but even that’s more of a hunch than anything else.”

I sighed. “The poor girl could be anywhere.”

I remembered when I’d followed that wisp at the Lupo Finale, when I’d thought I was being hunted. I’d felt so frightened and alone. So vulnerable. So exposed. So helpless. Julia might’ve been a werewolf, but she was still very young to be alone in a strange place. And who knew how many other wolves were after her?

Part of me almost wished Russell’s story *was* a lie, if only because then, there wouldn’t be a girl out there alone and in danger.

“Maybe the best thing would be to take Russell out and see if he can help locate her,” Xavier suggested. “He’d know her scent. He might pick up on clues that no one else would think twice about.”

It was a logical approach, but I still grimaced. I’d seen firsthand how scared Russell was, and bringing him out into the open would only expose him to the Bitterfang pack. They’d get a fresh trail to use to hunt him down. He’d be an easy target, and I wouldn’t put it past them to try to kill him the moment they got the chance, whether he was being escorted by Redwoods or not.

“Getting the kid involved in the search *would* help,” Greyson mused. “Julia’s clearly in hiding and doesn’t want to be found by the wrong pack out in the woods. Getting Russell involved might make her come out of hiding. But it’s risky. Either way, it’s not going to be easy.”

“Why don’t we ask our allies for help?” I suggested.

Neither of my mates seemed thrilled with this idea. I understood why, but at the same time… We had to do something, didn’t we?

Xavier shook his head. “What could they possibly offer?”

I frowned. “How about some backup, since we’ve got enemies from two different groups of werewolves scouring our woods for Julia and Russell?”

Greyson was a bit more tactful. “I’m just not sure we should bring others into this. We’ve kind of had this thrust upon us, and we’re dealing with it, but would it really be fair to ask other packs to get involved? It’s not their business, or their responsibility.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “What’s the point of forging alliances if we never actually take advantage of them?”

Greyson smiled at that. “Fair enough.”

I gave Xavier a pointed look, and he reluctantly nodded. “What do you have in mind?”

“We can ask the Blue Bloods, the Vanguards, and…” I hesitated, then reluctantly continued. “… and the Samaras to help search for Julia. Between the four of us, we can cover a lot of ground and send out enough pack members to make any trespassers think twice about messing with us.”

“Not the Vanguards,” Greyson said. “Lucian would just make a mess of it, and nobody trusts him and his pack anyway.”

Xavier nodded emphatically.

“I guess I can’t argue with that,” I said.

Xavier looked around. “Speaking of the Samaras, has anybody seen Ava?”

“And Mace?” Greyson added. “Where did they go?”

I looked around too. I’d almost forgotten that Mace and Ava had been with Greyson when he’d returned. *Where* did *they go? I didn’t even see them leave.*

Not that I minded Ava leaving. I was careful to keep that to myself, though.

Ravi piped up. “They stepped away when the Bitterfangs started getting confrontational. Do you want me to find them?”

“Don’t bother,” Xavier said.

I knew why he’d turned down Ravi’s offer—he could just mind link with Ava. I hated that they were still capable of mind linking, that they still had enough of a mate bond for it. Hopefully someday, every remnant of their bond would be gone for good.

A few moments later, Ava and Mace appeared from around the back of the house.

“Where the hell did you go?” Xavier asked.

Ava flicked her eyes toward him. “We didn’t want to agitate the Bitterfang situation more, so we stayed back.”

“Thought it was best given the circumstances,” Mace added.

“Thanks for that,” Greyson said, but I couldn’t tell whether he meant it. He began to explain the plan for finding Julia, but Ava cut him off.

“There’s an issue with the whole search and rescue plan,” she said.

*Crap. Really?*

“What’s that?” Xavier asked.

“I have Julia.”

# Episode 3600

**Xavier**

I rolled my eyes. *Is Ava playing another of her games? What the hell does she mean she “has Julia”?* I didn’t know why I was surprised—when *didn’t* Ava make things harder than they needed to be?

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Why didn’t you say anything about Julia earlier? We were together last night; you think that might have been the time to mention it?” I grimaced, regretting the words as soon as they left my mouth.

*Why the hell did I just say that in front of Cali? And why’d I have to phrase it like that?*

It was bad enough that I’d mind linked with Ava in front of Cali—there was no missing the way she’d tensed up. The distance in her gaze. As if that hadn’t put me deep enough in the doghouse, I’d just had to go and open my mouth and make things worse. And given how bad my words had sounded, it’d probably bring out the same old insecurities in Cali that Ava had such a goddamn knack for yanking on.

Ava huffed. “I didn’t tell you about Julia because there was nothing to tell.”

I frowned. “But you said—”

Mace cut me off. “Ava didn’t find Julia until after you and her spoke.”

I resisted the urge to scowl at him. How did he know more about this situation than I did? And when had he and Ava had a chance to buddy up over this teen drama we’d been thrown into?

“Marissa and I were out looking for an intruder,” Ava reminded me.

Cali sidled up to our group, her eyes wide. “Is Julia okay?”

“As well as a kid can be in her situation. She’s scared as all hell,” Ava said, a rare bit of empathy flashing in her eyes. “It wasn’t easy to get her to trust us.”

I bit my tongue against the retort that was on the tip of my tongue. *She didn’t want to trust you, huh? What an astonishing surprise.*

After all, I knew better than anyone else that trusting Ava often came with a steep cost.

“How’d you find her?” Greyson asked. “We’ve been looking all over, trying to pick up a scent to track, and we found nothing.”

“We didn’t find her—she found us. Marissa and I couldn’t find anything specific when we went out, either. There were a lot of old scents, some potential leads, but nothing concrete or recent enough for us to believe it was worth following. We went back to our encampment after our run-in with Xavier.”

I eyed Mace. “And how do you fit into this?”

“I also detected an intruder on my lands, heading over the border to Samara territory. I went over to the encampment to give them a heads-up,” he said.

“And what did Zeke have to say about that?” I asked.

Mace grimaced. “I spoke with Ava directly.”

My brows rose as I turned my gaze on Ava. “Why wasn’t Zeke involved in this?”

She scoffed. “Really? *Zeke?* We don’t have time for me to talk about our failed interim Alpha right now.”

“Of course not,” I grumbled.

I noticed that she hadn’t mentioned Fletcher at all. She might not have been ready to admit it to herself, but Ava was the Samara Alpha in everything but name. And that was probably exactly how she liked it.

“You were telling us about Julia,” Cali pressed.

“Right.” Ava nodded. “Mace and I were talking when this frightened kid walked out of the woods, asking us for help. I’ve been keeping her safe at the Samara encampment ever since. Figured it was for the best, at least until we had a better idea of what was going on. It sounds like these two kids have stirred up a lot of trouble.”

“And the Redwoods are stuck cleaning up the mess,” I muttered.

Cali shot me a look, then turned back to the group. “We should bring Russell to Julia right away. I know he’s been worried sick about her since they were separated. They’ve both been scared to death, but now we can finally give them some good news.”

She started for the house without waiting for anyone to react.

“Cali, wait.” I caught her arm. “Where are you going?”

“We have to tell Russell the good news,” she said. “He needs to know that the love of his life is safe. He’s going to be so relieved—this is exactly what he’s been wishing for.”

“You’re right,” Greyson said. “I’ll go with you.”

They headed off toward the house, and Ava moved to follow them. I caught her arm.

“We need to talk,” I said.

I shot Mace a look that clearly demanded privacy. It took the guy a moment to catch on, then he said, “Oh! Um… Now that I think about it, I have a few questions for that Russell kid myself.”

He jogged after Greyson and Cali, leaving Ava and me alone.

I waited until the unlikely trio had disappeared into the house before rounding on Ava. “Why did you wait so long to tell us about Julia?”

“I was planning to tell you, but then the Bitterfangs showed up. I didn’t want to risk them catching Julia’s scent on me, so I made myself scarce. I may not be the nicest person in the world, but there’s no way in hell I’m giving her up to those assholes.” She crossed her arms over her chest and sniffed. “Why? Did you think I was up to something shady?”

I shrugged. “When *aren’t* you up to something shady?”

“You should know me better than that by now,” she retorted. “*Of course* I’m going to protect an innocent girl.”

“I guess I don’t think of you as the sentimental type,” I hedged. Maybe once upon a time, back when things had been good between us, she’d been more into romance. But it didn’t seem to be her thing anymore.

“All she did was fall for the wrong guy,” Ava said. “Maybe I can relate.”

I couldn’t read her expression, but that was a thread I was sure she didn’t want me to pull on.

“It was kind of you to help her,” I conceded. “But I don’t understand why Julia would go to the Samaras for help. No offense, but your pack is a mess right now.”

Ava glared. “She was exhausted, hungry, and frightened. Besides, you met her pack. I’m sure even you can figure out why she might want to get away from that—no matter how *messy* the alternative might be.”

“I get it, but why you? Why would she trust your pack?”

She scoffed. “Not everyone has trust issues like you do.”

“This isn’t about us.”

She raised a brow, clearly disagreeing with my assessment, but she didn’t pursue the matter. “Besides,” she said instead, “Julia didn’t come to the Samara pack. She came to me.”

That made even less sense.

“She came to you specifically? How’d she even know about you?”

“She thinks I’m the *due destini* mate in the area.”

“You?” I laughed. “Guess she should’ve done her homework.”

Ava, on the other hand, didn’t seem to find the situation remotely funny. “Julia isn’t that far off the mark, is she? You and I are basically experiencing a sort of *due destini*.”

“Not at all,” I said coldly. “You are *not* a *due destini* mate. You’re only mated to one person.”

“That’s true,” she conceded. “But I was actually talking about you. After all, you’re the one with two mates.”

“Don’t keep flattering yourself,” I snapped. “You are only in my life because you keep insisting on barging into it, but make no mistake: Cali is my one and only mate.” Nothing grated on me like Ava reminding me that I was still bound to her, that I couldn’t fully give myself to Cali as long as this… this *whatever the hell it was* with Ava was still alive and kicking. “So how about we stop talking about *due destini* and mates? It’s not like we’ve had a great experience in that area.”

She shrugged. “We can stop talking about it, but that’s not going to change anything. I know we’ve gone through plenty of ups and downs in this life and the last—but I also know that since I returned from the dead, there’s been at least one moment when you liked kissing me.”

Immediately, and against my will, my mind flashed back to our New Year’s Eve kiss and all the feelings it had stirred up inside me—the hope I’d felt, and the closure I’d never gotten. I’d started that night intending to finish it at Cali’s side, and yet Ava had been the one I’d kissed. And the worst part was, some part of it had felt *right*.

*But that was a mistake.*

I huffed. “This conversation is pointless. Let’s just focus on the task at hand. This is about Russell and Julia—it has nothing to do with you and me. I’m tired of rehashing what should be ancient history.”

I started to leave, but Ava grabbed my hand. “No. Look me in the eye and tell me: can you forget about me? Can you really do it?”

# Episode 3601

**Greyson**

Cali stopped at the basement door and turned back to face Mace and me.

“Would you two mind if I talked to Russell first?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Go for it.”

I’d never particularly wanted to get involved in the young lovers’ problems in the first place. If Cali felt differently and wanted to help, I was all too happy to get out of the way and let her. This was much more her forte.

There was no one on earth I trusted more than Cali. She was kind and empathetic and thoughtful—I knew she’d be able to say the right thing to alleviate Russell’s worries and give the poor kid the boost he probably needed. Cali had always been much more sensitive toward others than I’d ever been.

“Have at it.” Mace waved Cali off. “But when you’re finished, I still want to talk to the boy myself.”

Cali nodded and headed down to the basement.

I turned to the Blue Blood Alpha. “Coffee?” I asked.

It couldn’t hurt to give Cali some extra time with Russell—the kid would probably pass out when she told him the news about Julia.

“Sure.”

As I led Mace into the kitchen, I couldn’t help but ask the question that had been nagging at the back of my mind for days now.

“So… Dance classes with Maren?” I asked. “I didn’t realize you two were planning to be on the next *Dancing with the Stars*—though you might want to shelve that idea, with those two left feet of yours.”

The joke fell flat, even to my ears, but asking Mace—in a roundabout way or not—about his relationship status with my ex was just plain weird and uncomfortable. I needed something to ease that innate awkwardness.

“If I remember correctly, you were the one struggling with the steps,” Mace said with a small, teasing smile.

I was too relieved that he was playing along to care that he’d caught my embarrassing display at the dance class. I shrugged. “I was distracted; you know how there always seems to be something for an Alpha to worry about. But my mother’s getting married soon, and it’s important to her that we dance together at least once.”

“I imagine once will be all her toes can handle.”

I snorted as I poured us each a cup of coffee.

“The dance class *was* a little weird, as far as first dates go,” Mace admitted. “But I’ve never been the ‘just get coffee and talk about the weather’ kind of guy. I hope it wasn’t too awkward for you, seeing us together like that.”

I recognized his comment for the olive branch it was. He didn’t owe me a single detail about his time with Maren, and yet he was talking about it anyway. Attempting to clear the air and be transparent. Mace was being incredibly cool about this.

I, on the other hand, was being pretty much the exact opposite of cool. I couldn’t help but feel protective of Maren, even though I had no right to be. She wasn’t mine to protect. I knew Mace was a good guy—that he’d respect her, would never hurt her. And yet I’d be lying if I said that the memory of them together at that dance class didn’t make my stomach lurch.

Not that Mace should feel like he had to worry about my feelings. They weren’t relevant. I didn’t get a say in this.

“I said I was cool with it,” I reminded him, forcing a small smile. “That hasn’t changed.”

The words tasted like a lie, but I ignored that. Would I have felt any differently if Maren were seeing someone else? Was my issue with Mace in particular? Or had things changed somehow, now that I’d seen them together firsthand?

I didn’t know.

*It doesn’t matter. Maren deserves to be happy, and Mace can make her happy. I can’t stand in the way of that.*

I needed to get a fucking grip.

Xavier walked into the kitchen with Ava close behind. Anyone with a working pair of eyes could’ve seen the tension simmering between them. Tension that seemed even more intense than usual. But that wasn’t my concern, and my brain was already sufficiently distracted by useless relationship shit. Xavier and Ava weren’t my business, and if there was a problem, it was Xavier’s to deal with—as long as whatever was happening between them didn’t screw up the shaky alliance we’d managed to form with the Samaras.

“How’d the kid take the news?” Xavier asked.

“I don’t know yet. Cali’s talking to him right now.” I turned my gaze on Ava. “I think we should bring Russell to Julia instead of the other way around. It’ll be risky either way, but at least we know Julia is already at a safe location, and we can protect Russell if we end up having another run-in with either the Pit Bulls or the Bitterfangs.”

“Quite the Alpha move; very pragmatic,” Xavier deadpanned.

Xavier’s mocking tone was pretty much my least favorite sound in the universe, and today I had exactly zero patience for it.

“Says the guy who made an already shitty situation a thousand times worse by *killing* that Erick guy,” I said curtly. “How long do you think it’s going to take the Bitterfangs to come after us for that? Pack wars have been started over less.”

I didn’t have to like that we were involved in this mess to see the merit in helping two lovers be together—but now, in addition to harboring the kid who’d caused so much trouble, the entire Redwood pack had a target on its back because we’d killed one of the Bitterfang wolves. And our run-in with Lance and his cronies had made one thing very clear: the fact that Erick had been executed for perfectly justifiable reasons was irrelevant. Once the Bitterfangs realized we’d killed their pack mate, they’d be out for our blood.

Xavier scowled. “What the hell was I supposed to do? Lie down and let the guy attack Cali? Is that what you want?”

I growled. “You know that’s not something I’d ever want, so you can leave Cali out of this. If you want to be mad at me, fine. But you could have at least thought about the consequences before you went and ripped that wolf’s throat out.”

“What makes you think I didn’t?” Xavier countered.

“Are you two done?” Ava demanded. “We have to deal with Russell and Julia; get this sorted out and make sure they’re safe. The longer the two of you are caught up in your little pissing contest, the more time we’re giving the Bitterfangs and the Pit Bulls time to figure things out.”

“Fair point,” I said, a little begrudgingly. I agreed with Ava, but I wasn’t thrilled that she’d felt the need to tell us off. My only comfort was that Cali hadn’t been here to see my stupid little spat with my brother.

Ava might not have been an Alpha, but she was still an important member of the Samara pack, and beyond that, she’d been both friend and foe to us in the past. I didn’t love her seeing into the inner workings of our pack—aka my brother and me squabbling. I didn’t want to give her any more ammunition to use against the pack than she already had.

“Hey.” Rishika strolled into the kitchen, back from patrol. “We’re almost positive the Bitterfangs have left Redwood land. For now.”

“Good. I’ll take it.” I blew out a breath. We needed the reprieve, no matter how temporary. We had to make the most of every second the Bitterfangs spent away from our territory. “Rishika, I want you and Ravi with us when we bring Russell to the Samara encampment to reunite with Julia.”

“Wait, what?!”

“It’s a long story,” I said.

Rishika shook her head. “So that’s where she’s been hiding.” Rishika sighed. “Wow.”

“I’ll come with,” Mace offered.

I nodded. “I appreciate it. Let’s go talk to Russell, get him up to speed. We don’t have any time to waste.”

“I’ll go tell Ravi,” Rishika said, then left the kitchen while Mace, Xavier, Ava, and I headed downstairs.

When we reached the basement, my ears pricked up at the sound of sobs and sniffles. *What the hell is happening now?*

I hurried into Russell’s room and found him sobbing in Cali’s arms. She looked up at me.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “They’re tears of joy.”

Russell pulled away, wiping at his face. “When can we go to see Julia? Will you take me? I need to let her know I’m okay, that we’re both safe.”

“We’ll take you,” I said, nodding at the group standing behind me. “I’m preparing a team to go with you and keep you safe.”

Cali hugged the boy. “See? I told you we’d help.”

“Thank you so much.” He turned to me. “Is Cali coming too?”

Xavier and I exchanged a look. We’d both learned the hard way not to make decisions on Cali’s behalf. Since the Shard seemed to be working reliably, and we’d have a full team of capable werewolves traveling with us, I had no issue with her coming along. Xavier didn’t seem bothered by the idea, either.

I shrugged at Russell. “You’re asking the wrong person.” I turned to Cali. “Are you coming with us?”

# Episode 3602

My brows rose. Greyson was asking my opinion? He and Xavier were letting me make this call for myself without trying to tell me what to do?

I hadn’t missed the way they’d looked at each other when Russell had asked if I was coming along to help reunite him with Julia, and I’d been fully expecting both my mates to immediately slam on the brakes and nix the idea.

I hadn’t been able to go with them to retrieve the Shard, and Xavier had put up a fight when I’d decided to go with my mom and Adair to find the antitoxin for Artemis. But now that we had not one but two dangerous groups trespassing on our land and stirring up trouble, I was suddenly allowed to make the choice for myself?

*They must be confident about the strength of the escort team Greyson is putting together*, I realized. *They must think a confrontation is unlikely, too, with the Bitterfangs gone for now.*

My mates’ confidence should have comforted me, but I honestly wasn’t sure how I felt about going along. I wanted to help, and I wanted to see Russell reunited with Julia, but the thought of running into the Bitterfang pack again made me break into a cold sweat. I didn’t know what would happen if they discovered I was a *due destini* mate. They already hated our pack for helping Russell, and after our earlier encounter, they assumed we had something to do with Erick’s disappearance—which we did. Plus, I was a half-Fae, and not all werewolf packs were as accepting and inclusive as the Redwood pack.

With those marks already against me, and the Bitterfang pack’s own superstitions and prejudices against the *due destini*, would they even hesitate to kill me if our paths crossed and they found out the truth?

Greyson’s voice cut into my spiraling thoughts. “Actually, it’s probably better if you do come with us, Cali.”

“I agree,” Xavier said. “If Lance or Vishal come back, it’ll be better if you’re with us.”

Russell turned an anxious gaze on me. “Will you come?”

I wanted to be there for Russell. He was so sweet and naive. I hoped Julia really was safe and sound with the Samara pack. This could be a beautiful reunion for the two young werewolves.

I glanced over Greyson’s shoulder, to where Ava was standing between Mace and Xavier, watching me expectantly. I would never be Ava’s biggest fan, but I honestly couldn’t believe that she’d lie about Julia being with the Samaras.

Ava was a lot of things—a lot of really terrible things—but I didn’t think she was completely heartless. I was sure she’d felt compelled to help Julia.

I turned back to Russell. “I’d be happy to come, but I’m not sure if it’s the best idea.”

His arms tightened around me, and he looked so much like a lost little kid that my heart broke. “But I need you! And Julia would be over the moon to meet the *due destini* mate! If you come with us, I’m sure it’ll help us feel like we made the right choice, that everything we’ve been through mattered.”

Still, I hesitated. “Your love matters, no matter what. I don’t need to be there to make that true.”

“But it’ll be a good omen to have you there,” Russell insisted. “It’ll help us move past all this ugliness.”

I glanced over at Xavier and Greyson, who both looked concerned. Russell’s words sounded nice in theory, but I still couldn’t get past the ugliness of the *due destini* myself. I couldn’t even open the letter and see whether I had the potential to kill one of my mates or not.

*Maybe if Russell can find the bright side of this horrible situation with Julia, then I can too.*

“Okay.” I smiled weakly. “I’ll come.”

“Cali, it’s your decision whether you want to come or not. Don’t let anyone pressure you,” Greyson said. “But we’ll have our strongest players out there escorting Russell, and if Lance or the others come back, we’ll have wolves waiting to ambush them before they can think about getting near the pack house.”

“Plus, didn’t you see what she did to Vishal last night?” Xavier pointed out to Greyson. “She knocked the crap out of him with her magic. She should come along because she can help protect Russell, too.”

My smile brightened. It felt good to hear Xavier acknowledge my abilities.

Greyson nodded. “Oh, I know.” He looked at me. “I never meant to imply you’re not capable. I was speaking from a safety standpoint, but Xavier’s right. You’re safer with us, but we’d all be safer with you, too.”

I nodded. “I understand. I’m nervous about it, but I want the best for Russell and Julia.” I pulled in a deep breath. “And if my coming along can help them in some way, then I want to do it.”

Greyson nodded. “It’s settled, then.”

I smiled at him. “Yes, it is.”

I knew it was hard for him to watch me put myself at risk. Xavier was probably worried too, but he was being supportive. At least the pair of them weren’t fighting about it.

We headed upstairs while Greyson gathered the escort team in the foyer.

“I need a unit to escort Russell from here to the Samara encampment,” Greyson said. “We’ll want to stay spread out, not make it too obvious what we’re doing if the Bitterfang pack is somehow still around and keeping tabs on our movements.”

I looked around the group: Xavier, Rishika, Jay, Charlie, Ravi, and Zainab. The big guns. Not to mention Greyson, Ava, Mace, and myself. We wouldn’t be easily overpowered.

Greyson turned to Russell. “Under no circumstances should you disobey an order from any of us. Your life and Julia’s might depend on it. Do you understand?”

Russell paled but nodded. “I understand.”

Greyson patted his shoulder. “We’ll get you to Julia safely.”

We headed out of the pack house with Ava leading the way, and the group shifted once we were outside. I climbed on Xavier’s back.

I mind linked with him. *I appreciate what you said in there about me being capable. And helpful.*

*I meant every word*, he replied easily.

That warm, fuzzy feeling slipped through me again. It hadn’t been all that long since Xavier had been constantly insisting I stay home. Maybe then, he hadn’t trusted me to defend myself—and considering the terrible shape I’d been in while being tortured by the remnants of Seluna’s curse, he might have put his foot down with good reason—but things were clearly different now.

I’d proven myself against various enemies, and I’d also proven that I was physically much more capable than I’d been before. The Shard was doing its job. I was stronger now. I knew it, and clearly so did Xavier.

I hoped that I could only inspire more confidence the more I was able to help the pack during crises like this.

We moved cautiously through the woods but didn’t run into any threats. As we approached the Samara encampment, I climbed off Xavier’s back and stuck close to Russell. I didn’t want to be seen favoring either of my mates, just in case we’d been followed out here.

Besides, Russell looked like he could use the support. The poor guy was so anxious to see Julia, he looked like he was going to break into a sprint at any moment.

We broke through the tree line and reached the Samara encampment. Pity nagged at me as I took in the ramshackle collection of RVs and tents. The Samaras were still recovering from all the damage Silas had done. They had little money, it seemed, and no pack house. Beyond that, their Alpha situation was still up in the air. They were a sorry sight, and I wished there was more we could do to help them get back on their feet.

But even with all those factors stacked against them, as we entered the encampment, there was a strong sense of community. There were communal campfires and picnic tables and clothes strung out on clotheslines.

*Where’s Zeke?*

It was surprising—and yet also not—that he hadn’t been involved with the Russell-Julia situation, considering the potential risk to the Samara pack.

*Is he even here?*

I remembered Ava’s disdain when Xavier had asked about Zeke. Maybe he’d left when Fletcher had joined the pack? It was hard to keep up with the revolving door of Samara Alphas. Especially since Ava was clearly the leader, here.

The wolves all shifted back to human, and Russell looked around excitedly, his voice breaking with emotion. “Where is she?”

“Julia’s waiting for you over here,” Ava said, leading us toward what had once been Knox’s Airstream. It was kind of her to put Julia up in the nicest place the Samaras had, which admittedly wasn’t saying all that much. But still.

Ava opened the door and headed in first. I heard muffled voices, and then a teenage girl poked her head out.

Russell gasped. “*Julia*.” He said her name like a prayer. He rushed over to her, and the two embraced.

Tears stung my eyes, and I leaned into Xavier, who put an arm around me. I was glad I’d come along and been able to see something good come out of all the heartache these two had been through.

Suddenly, Julia broke away from Russell, and her expression hardened. “You never should have come.”

# Episode 3603

**Greyson**

My eyes widened. *What the hell?*

We’d just gone through all this trouble to reunite these teen lovers, going so far as to literally put our lives on the line to protect them, and now Julia was saying Russell *shouldn’t have come?* My teeth ground together as frustration bubbled up inside me. This was just fucking unacceptable.

Russell’s mouth twisted, and his brow furrowed. “What… What do you mean? Of course I came.”

She threw her arms around him again and held on for dear life. *Talk about mixed signals…*

“You’ve put yourself in danger just by being near me,” she said, her arms still wrapped around him. “My parents will never stop looking for me. They’ll never stop blaming you for me leaving. It’s not safe.”

He eased himself out of her arms. “I don’t care. I love you. It doesn’t matter what your parents think. They’re wrong. And now that we’ve finally gotten away, nothing is going to keep us apart.”

This time, they met in the middle for an embrace, and Russell tilted Julia’s head up to capture her lips in a sweet kiss.

It was adorable, if a little sickly sweet for my taste. I averted my gaze. I hadn’t trekked through the woods and put my life on the line just to have a front-row seat for a teenage PDA fest. I glanced over at Cali. Tears shimmered in her eyes, and it looked like she was eating this whole thing up. Considering she’d been the one to make it all happen, in a way, I was glad she was getting the happy ending she’d been hoping for—and that she’d gotten to see the fruits of her labor.

Unfortunately, though, this story was only just beginning. We’d managed to find and secure both of the teens, and they’d been reunited, but what now?

Russell and Julia were still holding each other tight, probably whispering sweet nothings in each other’s ears. I glanced at the escort group, the members of which all seemed to be experiencing varying levels of amusement.

This was a win, that much was true. But this was far from over. I hated to burst their bubble, but there were a bunch of Bitterfang pack members out there looking for these two. I was pretty sure Julia’s family would try to kill Russell on sight.

And in the midst of all of that, I was painfully aware that I’d put my own pack at risk to help these star-crossed lovers. The Bitterfang pack could count their reasons to go to war with us on one hand, but each of those reasons was probably more than enough justification for a hotheaded psychopath like Lance. The longer we cast our lot in with the teen lovebirds, the greater the danger to all of us would be.

I pulled Xavier and Cali aside. “Any suggestions on what we should do now?” I asked.

“Won’t the allied packs protect them?” Cali asked.

“Up to a point,” I said vaguely.

“On that note, I have a few questions. Hold on.” Xavier turned to the young couple. “Sorry to interrupt, but we have some important things to talk about,” he said. “So, uh… Could you disengage for a second?”

Blushing, the teens broke apart. I fought the urge to laugh. Xavier was a hell of a cockblock when the situation called for it—something I knew all too well.

“Um… What’s going on?” Russell asked.

“I get that the Bitterfang pack wants you dead,” Xavier said, “but just how dead are we talking, here?”

“Xavier, don’t say it like that,” Cali said.

Xavier shrugged. “I’m just trying to gauge the situation. Do they *actually* want to kill him, or do they just want to run him off?”

Cali shot Xavier a sharp look. “Those are both awful options! What does it matter?”

“Uh, it’s a pretty important distinction,” Xavier said.

“Xavier’s right,” I said. We didn’t have time to debate. We needed to figure out the severity of this situation, and what it realistically meant for the two kids now that they’d been reunited so far from home. If the Bitterfangs had a bounty on Russell’s head, that would be one thing. If they just wanted him far, far away from Julia and were trying to scare him off, that would be something else entirely. And, like Xavier had said, it was important to understand the difference.

I just wished my brother had been a little more tactful in his approach.

“I’m almost certain my father would kill Russell if he got the chance,” Julia said. “In fact, he might even kill me too.” Her shoulders hunched as she wrapped her arms around herself. “He thinks I’ve shamed the family. And… Well, where I come from, that’s just not done. Russell’s not the only one in danger, here.”

Cali shook her head. “It’s just so horrible.”

It *was* horrible. Evil and cruel and reprehensible. But it was still very possible. Images of my own father flashed through my mind. Silas had been willing to destroy entire packs and kill every member of his family to get what he wanted.

Just because someone was a father didn’t mean they gave a damn about the family they were supposed to protect.

“Tell me more about your dad, Julia,” I said. “He’s the Alpha, right?”

She nodded. “He’s very protective of the pack. He’s vigilant about protecting us from outside threats, but he can also be ruthless about anything he perceives as an internal danger to the pack.”

“Like his daughter running off with a Rogue,” I finished.

She nodded. Russell wound an arm around her and hugged her to his side.

“Malakai is more than protective,” he said. “He’s ruthlessly obsessed. He’s a control freak—a dictator. And he believes it’s his right to inflict his will on the Bitterfang pack, no matter the cost.”

“He pushes us,” Julia added. “The pack, I mean. We train constantly, nonstop. There are stories of pack members disappearing after they failed to live up to my father’s expectations. Everyone’s terrified of him and his inner circle, so they just do as they’re told.”

“Even your mother?” I asked, though at this point, I was honestly afraid to hear the answer.

Julia shook her head. “She didn’t used to be like that, but like everyone else, she was forced to prove herself to him. And in order to keep him, she had to *keep* proving herself. Now, she’s almost as driven as he is. He’s poisoned her mind. She’s different now.” Julia sniffed, and seemed to be trying to hold back tears. “She’s not my mother anymore.”

I nodded. “Believe me, I get it. I know what it’s like to have a parent like Malakai. Xavier and I both do. And you did the right thing, getting away from him.”

“Silas Evers.” Xavier snorted. “Father of the Year.”

*Ha.*

I looked from Julia’s face to Russell’s. “You both ran away so you could be together. Where were you running to? Do you have a plan?”

“We’re going to Chilliwack,” Russell said.

I’d never been there, but I recognized the name. It was east of Vancouver, a decent distance from the Bitterfang territory in California.

“Why Chilliwack?” I asked. “Most runaways dream of going to Hollywood or New York, don’t they?”

“When I was with the Pit Bulls, we crossed paths with a Rogue who was from Chilliwack,” Russell explained. “There’s a sanctuary there that we were going to check out. A Rogue commune. We think we can find refuge up there.”

Xavier snorted. “A Rogue commune? Sounds like a werewolf pack to me.”

I winced again at Xavier’s complete lack of tact. “I’ve never heard of anything like that, and I was a Rogue for a long time,” I said gently.

A dark possibility occurred to me. What if this Rogue had been exaggerating—or worse, just plain lying? I’d met all kinds of Rogues during my travels. Some were honest, and others lied as easily as they breathed.

Russell scowled at Xavier. “Even if the commune doesn’t exist, Julia and I will find our own way.”

I looked away. *These kids are so naïve…*

But calling them out wasn’t going to help anything. It’d probably just make them double down.

“That’s great and all, but what about the threat you two are facing right now?” Xavier pressed. “If you start heading for Chilliwack, the Bitterfangs and god knows who else will almost certainly track you down.”

“He’s right,” I said. “There’s no avoiding it—they’re going to come after you. So unless you figure out what to do here and now, you’re going to be in trouble down the road. And you’re clearly not equipped to make it to Canada if you only made it this far. Russell, you would have died if my pack hadn’t found you.”

“We’ll protect you until you think of a plan,” Cali cut in. She looked at me for confirmation. “Won’t we?”

Before I could answer her, Julia and Russell rushed forward and hugged her.

“Thank you so much!” Julia said.

“You really are a dream come true!” Russell gushed.

Mace looked at the trio and cleared his throat, nodding at the teens. “We need to separate them.”

# Episode 3604

“Separated?” I burst out. Could Mace be serious? “But they just found each other!”

“I know,” Mace said. “And I feel bad for suggesting it, believe me, but the Bitterfang pack is going to come back to search for these two. They’re not going to stop as long as they have reason to believe the kids are sticking around, and like Xavier said, they don’t stand much of a chance getting to Canada on their own. So, what’s the long-term plan here?”

Russell huffed. “We’re not kids.”

“Hush, the adults are talking,” Xavier said, turning his attention to Mace.

I frowned and elbowed him. “Be nice.”

Xavier just rolled his eyes. Russell and Julia were under enough stress, and we didn’t need Xavier to be sassy on top of it.

“All I’m saying is we can’t keep putting our packs in danger over this,” Mace continued. “I want to keep helping you two, but the last thing any of our packs need is to go to war with some hotblooded California pack over a family affair that’s not really our business.”

Russell sighed. “I know. And I don’t want that for you or your packs either. I never wanted to put any of you in danger—I just knew the *due destini* mate was in the area, and it seemed like the right place to be.” His gaze shifted to me. “I feel so lucky that I actually stumbled onto your house. It feels like fate. Like this is where Julia and I are supposed to be.”

He linked hands with Julia, and they smiled at each other.

Heat rushed into my face, and I didn’t know whether to feel honored or embarrassed. Maybe a little bit of both. Russell hadn’t really made his awe of *due destini* love known in front of other people before, and now I felt everyone’s eyes on me, like they were waiting for me to react. *Geez, talk about awkward…*

“It’s lucky that you found help when you did,” I said carefully.

And they *were* lucky. Lucky that Russell, a Rogue wolf, had stumbled across one of the few packs that wouldn’t kill him on sight. A pack with its fair share of misfits. And Julia—she’d stumbled across Mace and Ava. Well, finding Mace was lucky, while Ava… was Ava. Could’ve been worse, at any rate.

There was a lot of luck going around where these two kids were concerned, but I wasn’t convinced any of it had anything to do with the *due destini*. And I didn’t want any of the others thinking I was showing off in front of these very impressionable teens. I was happy to help them, glad that they were both safe. But as far as the *due destini* went? I hoped it kept its cursed magic far away from the pair of them.

Russell must have seen the hesitation and embarrassment on my face because he added, “You tried to tell me the *due destini* is a curse, but I don’t think that’s right. I found Julia. We’re together, and we’re both safe.”

“Just like Romeo and Juliet,” Ava said dryly. “How’d that turn out?”

I glared. Did she have to be such a Debbie Downer? Russell and Julia were in an impossible situation, and they were trying to find the upside wherever they could. Was that so wrong?

Or maybe Ava was only acting this way because I’d gotten involved. Maybe she was jealous of that reverence Russell and Julia were showing me, or maybe she just plain hated me. Either way, I didn’t care. She’d done a good thing, keeping Julia safe, but now that the teens were reunited, she could either help or get the hell out.

“Anyway, I don’t want anyone to get hurt, so now that Julia and I are together again, we can be on our way,” Russell continued. “We’ll continue with our original plan.

Mace held up a hand. “Slow your roll, kid. It’s really not that easy anymore. We’re all in this now, and the Pit Bulls and Bitterfangs know it. You running off to join a commune isn’t going to eliminate that threat. The truth is, if you two head off into the sunset, all of us here could face the consequences. We’re all accessories to your little… *tryst*, now.”

Russell’s jaw dropped, and he made a little squeaking noise.

*Guess he never thought of it that way.*

I sure hadn’t.

I stepped forward. “But we’re happy to help you out.”

“I agree with Mace. At least partly,” Greyson said. “We’re all in this together now, but I don’t think it’s useful to split the kids up.” He eyed Mace. “If they stay together, we won’t have to spread out our resources to protect them. We’ll be a single unit, with strength in numbers.”

“But that’s exactly what the Bitterfangs will expect,” Mace countered. “If we split up, it gives us an edge. They’ll have to split up as well to find both kids, and they’ll have to face us on two fronts. That way we won’t be putting all our eggs in one basket.”

Zainab stepped forward. “Why don’t we take the fight to them? It sounds like they’ve already made it clear that they blame us for everything. Why not just nip the problem in the bud?”

My stomach lurched. I didn’t like the direction this conversation had taken. They were making it sound like a pack war was inevitable.

*Are they really advocating for an all-out pack war? They can’t be, can they? They can’t have already forgotten what the last one was like.*

“We’re talking about Julia’s and Russell’s families,” I reminded them. “We can’t just attack them unprovoked.”

“You’re saying what happened today *wasn’t* provocation?” Xavier asked, his brows rising. “Or how about when that guy Erick tried to kill you?”

“And you took care of him,” I said.

“For now.” Xavier shook his head. “There’s no way the Bitterfangs are going to forgive that—no matter what happens with Romeo and Juliet, here.”

I looked to the two teens for backup. “Be honest. For all the issues you’ve had with your families, surely neither of you wants to see them killed?”

Julia and Russell looked at each other for a long string of seconds before Julia turned her gaze on me. “We just want to live our lives. We don’t want to hurt anyone—and we don’t want anyone to get hurt because of us.”

Of course they didn’t. They were just two kids in love. Two young people who wanted to be together.

*No matter what happens with the Bitterfangs and the Pit Bulls, we have to help these two.*

Greyson sighed and turned to the kids. “Fine. We’ll go with Mace’s plan, then. Until we figure out a better solution, we need to keep you two apart.”

“No.” Julia gripped Russell’s hand tight. “Please don’t separate us. There has to be another way.”

“It’ll only be temporary—just until we figure out a real plan,” Greyson said, regret lacing his voice.

“So, should we roll a dice?” Xavier asked. “Toss a coin to see which pack takes who?”

I winced. I loved Xavier, but sometimes it was stunning how oblivious he was. *Doesn’t he see how distraught Russell and Julia are?*

“I’ll take Julia back with me,” Mace offered. “No offense, Ava, but the Blue Bloods are in better shape, and we’ve got stronger defenses.”

Ava shrugged. “I can’t argue with you there. The Samara pack doesn’t even have the protection of a real Alpha.”

*Wow. Has Zeke gotten even worse since I last knew?*

In some ways, I pitied Ava. Her pack had been a mess since Nolan’s death. And Zeke was just a hot mess. After everything they’d been through, it was honestly impressive that there were any Samaras left at all—and that they’d managed to cobble their pack back together into something even vaguely functional.

“It’s settled, then. We’ll bring Russell back to our pack house,” Greyson said.

I was glad Russell was going somewhere he knew, and I’d personally make sure he didn’t end up stuck in the basement again.

I turned to Julia. “Are you okay with this?”

“I wish I could stay with Russell, but I understand that things are dangerous right now. We’ll figure it out.” She smiled weakly, and I gave her an impulsive hug.

“Thank you for believing in us,” I said.

I knew what it was like to be in love and to have it feel impossible to live out that love. I didn’t want anything to happen to either of these kids.

Both teens turned to the group and thanked everyone.

“We really are so grateful,” Russell added.

I smiled, happy that we were helping them. It made me feel proud to be a Redwood. Hopefully, with the help of the allied packs, we’d be able to put all of this behind us soon.

Suddenly, something moved in the corner of my eye. I glanced at it.

*Is that a wisp?*

# Episode 3605

**Xavier**

While Cali said goodbye to Julia, I sidled up to Jay and Ravi to discuss logistics—namely, how we were going to protect these kids and the Redwood pack against potentially the entire Bitterfang pack, as well as the Pit Bull Rogues.

“What if they have allies, too?” Ravi asked. “We’re operating on the assumption that it’s going to be us and, if needed, the Blue Bloods and the Samaras against the Bitterfangs and a few Rogues, but we have no reason to believe they won’t call for backup just like we’ve been doing.”

The same concern had crossed my mind, and my gaze slid over to Cali across the room. At this point, a pack war was very much a possibility. And yet, with how bloodthirsty the Bitterfang wolves had seemed, I kind of doubted their ability to put together a formidable strategy. That sort of thing required more patience and forethought than the wolves I’d met today seemed capable of.

I shook my head. “If they wanted to showcase their strength, they would’ve done it already. Their Alpha, Malakai, isn’t even here, and Julia’s his daughter. I bet the Bitterfangs aren’t nearly as strong as they’d like us to think they are.”

It was strange to me that it was apparently a huge fucking deal that Julia had run off with Russell, and yet her own father couldn’t get off his ass to bring her home. Instead of coming after her with the full strength of the pack Alpha, he’d sent a group of thugs to take care of things for him. Thugs who clearly had no rules to govern their conduct while they were wandering far from home.

*Malakai’s probably afraid to leave his pack*, I mused. *I bet he’s worried that someone would turn against him, try to stage a coup in his absence.*

Based on how Julia had described her father, I wouldn’t have been surprised to hear that things were a little shaky back home in Bitterfang territory. It was all well and good to rule with an iron fist, but it was a hell of a lot harder to keep control of a pack if you were a total prick. Werewolves respected pack dynamics, but we weren’t robots, or sheep. An Alpha had to earn their pack’s respect—and keep it. Sometimes fear did the trick, but more often than not, oppressive Alphas found themselves ousted, either through a Lupo Finale or outright mutiny. Werewolves typically didn’t tolerate abuse.

My father had been a notable exception to this rule, but fortunately, the world could only produce so many people like Silas. Malakai might’ve been an oppressive asshole, but I was sure he was no Silas.

*How the hell did Julia end up so sweet… and naïve?*

Colton, Greyson, and I certainly hadn’t managed to hold onto any softness throughout Silas’s A+ parenting. Any kindness or goodness we’d managed to foster had been hard-earned, and nurtured over time by other people, like my mother and Cali.

Still, Julia and Russell seemed perfect for each other. They were in love, good-natured, brave bordering on reckless, and nearly oblivious to everything else. The perfect combination for a pair of star-crossed lovers.

It was unfortunate that their families were too caught up in their own problems to see what they’d lose when all of this was said and done. Maybe one day, Russell and Julia would be a little more clued into the ways of the world. Those kids didn’t know the half of what the rest of us had learned.

I knew firsthand how horrible the world could truly be. If Silas had been running the Bitterfang pack, he wouldn’t have *threatened* to bring the whole pack—he would’ve brought the whole pack without a second thought and killed everyone who stood in his way. And he would’ve done it with a smile.

If we weren’t dealing with that kind of psycho, then this was probably all just a bunch of dramatic bullshit. I understood that the kids were in love, but weren’t their families tired of all the drama, the chase, the search? Was it really worth all that to try to keep these two apart? If an Alpha’s ego was hurt because his daughter was in love with the “wrong” person, then he had bigger issues to worry about.

Ravi sighed. “Fair enough.”

“Let’s hope things don’t get more complicated,” Jay said. “For all our sakes.”

Ava walked past, and Jay gave me a look.

“What?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Nothing. Just wondering how things are going between you two.”

Ravi’s brows rose. “Xavier and Ava?”

“*Shut up*,” I hissed. “Both of you. There’s nothing going on between Ava and me. Got it?”

I couldn’t believe Jay had brought that up—and in mixed company—but I wasn’t about to give him the earful he deserved in front of Ravi.

Ava paused next to us. “Xavier, do you have a minute? I’d like to talk with you about something.”

“I bet you do,” Ravi muttered.

I shot him a glare that promised murder.

He cleared his throat. “Um, because you’ve got pack business, I mean.”

Jay elbowed him, and Ravi stopped talking. Good thing too, because if he’d said one more stupid thing, he’d have found himself looking for a new pack.

I turned my attention to Ava. “What do you need?”

Given our last conversation, I wasn’t exactly thrilled to be speaking to her again so soon. All I wanted to do was put all this in the rearview—her comments about our bond, her questions about my feelings, all of it. There was no room in my life for that bullshit.

“It’s about Fletcher,” she said. “And it’s private.”

“Fine.” I sighed, and we moved away from the escort group, walking through the tents until we’d gotten a good distance away. “Are you going to surprise me and tell me you’ve actually decided to consider Fletcher as a viable Alpha, given that we all just agreed that your pack is incapable of protecting a single person?” Ava grimaced at the dig, but I didn’t stop. “Or are you going to tell me the same thing you’ve been telling me from the moment you met him—that you don’t want him to be Alpha?”

She crossed her arms. “Are you finished?”

“For now.”

Ava rolled her eyes. “I’ve been talking to Fletcher, and I’m willing to give him a chance.”

*Oh.* That was… not what I’d been expecting to hear.

A small smile tugged at my lips. “It’s about time.”

“And given that we might be asking him to *lead* us, I want you to help me test him.”

My smile disappeared. I should have known it wasn’t going to be that easy.

I scoffed. “Sorry, but I’m not putting my neck on the line just because you want an excuse to spend time with me.”

She stared at me, her gaze hard. “This is about the pack.”

“I *know* that’s not what it is.”

She shook her head. “Sometimes it amazes me you can walk, dragging that huge ego around. You act like you’re a pack Alpha, but it’s just that—an act. Maybe you should try being honest with yourself.”

She turned to leave, but I caught her arm and yanked her back.

“What the hell does that mean?” I demanded.

“You couldn’t even be honest with me earlier,” she snapped. “Xavier Evers, always so stoic, you never know what he’s thinking. But being out of touch with your emotions isn’t a positive trait, Xavier. It doesn’t make you as strong as you think it does.”

I blinked, stung by her words. Not that I’d ever admit it. “What did you want me to say earlier, Ava? That I still love you? That I think we could have a future together? I didn't say shit, because I’m trying to protect you from the truth.”

She laughed bitterly. “Oh, that’s rich. You’re trying to protect me? You’re trying to protect yourself. That’s always who you try to protect, whenever you’re not caught up in Cali.”

“Leave her out of this,” I snarled, getting in her face. “What do you want to hear? That I’ve always wanted you? That there have been times I’ve wanted you since you came back from the spirit world? That I hate that part of myself? And that if I ever gave in to whatever’s left between us, it’s because I fucking hate myself? Is that what you want to hear?”

Ava didn’t respond, but there was no missing the pain flashing in her eyes, or the hitch in her breath. I felt an echo of her pain in my own chest, and I ground my teeth together.

Without saying another word, she turned and walked away.

The ache in my chest intensified as I watched her go. I knew I’d been hard on her, but it had been necessary. The words had needed to be said.

So why did I feel like shit?

Tanya’s warning echoed through my mind. *What goes around, comes around.*

Had she been warning me about Ava? We *did* seem to be in an endless cycle. All I wanted to do was go on a run and rid myself of some of this energy, but instead, I headed back to the others, shoving my hands in my pockets. I froze when my fingertips brushed against something cold and hard.

I pulled the thing out of my pocket and stared down at it in confusion. I was holding a medal.

# Episode 3606

I blinked. *Are my eyes playing tricks on me? Is that really a wisp? It could just be a trick of the light, right?*

I didn’t know what to do. In my experience, when a wisp showed itself to you, it was because it had an important message or something to reveal to you. You were supposed to follow it wherever it led. And as a Fae, my connection to wisps was stronger than most.

Except now wasn’t really a good time. We were in the middle of this *Romeo and Juliet*-slash-allied pack thing. Russell and Julia were saying goodbye, and we were about to escort Russell back to the pack house. Also, wandering off into the woods alone right now probably wouldn’t be the smartest move. We didn’t know if there were still Bitterfangs or Pit Bulls lurking around. Honestly, I didn’t even want to know what the wisp had to show me. I had enough on my plate, thank you very much.

I looked around at the group gathered by the Airstream. *Is anyone else seeing this?*

It didn’t look like it. In any case, nobody seemed to be paying the wisp any attention.

*Can a wisp take a raincheck? Can I ask it to come back later? Or never?*

“Cali?”

I turned away from the wisp and found Julia standing behind me.

“I just wanted to thank you for your kindness and generosity,” she said. “I know you’re the reason why Russell’s still alive and has the support of the Redwood pack. You saved him, and you’re protecting him. He’s the most important person in the world to me. I’ll never be able to thank you enough. You’re not only beautiful, but you’re so good and thoughtful. Your mates are so lucky to have you.”

*Wow. That was unexpected.*

Heat rushed into my face. “If I ever need a self-esteem boost, I guess now I know where to go,” I joked.

Julia smiled. “I meant every word. You’re just as wonderful as Russell and I had hoped.”

“Okay, okay.” I held my hands up in front of me. “Enough with the compliments. I appreciate your gratitude, but I only did what anyone else would’ve done in my shoes.”

She shook her head. “No, trust me. Not all werewolves are like the Redwoods, and I have a feeling you have a lot to do with the goodness and generosity of your pack.”

*This girl is the sweetest person I’ve ever met in my life!*

I smiled and shook my head. “The pack is the way it is because of Greyson and Xavier. They’re good men. Good leaders. They should get the credit.”

“And they’re your mates,” she countered, her tone teasing. Clearly, she wasn’t inclined to leave without drenching me in compliments. “But you’re right. They *are* good men, and I’m glad Russell will have their protection.”

“Mace is a good man, too,” I told her. “And his pack is strong. We’ll all do whatever we can to keep you two safe.” A promise rushed to the tip of my tongue, but I held back. I didn’t want to accidentally make a Fae promise that I wouldn’t have the power to keep.

Of course, I *would* do everything in my power to keep them safe from the Bitterfangs and the Pit Bulls, but my power alone might not be enough. And where Fae promises were concerned, it was better to stay on the safe side.

A few moments later, Russell and Julia said a tearful goodbye, their arms locked around each other. Tears slipped down their faces, and Julia kissed Russell gently.

“I’ll see you soon, okay?” I heard her whisper.

It was one of the sweetest and most devastatingly heartbreaking things I’d ever seen. I couldn’t wait for this to be over so they could finally be together, like they deserved. Soon, the local packs would be safe from the Bitterfangs and the Rogues, and these two lovebirds would be able to build the life of their dreams together.

But for now, all they could do was wait. It was actually pretty relatable. I’d done a lot of yearning for a happily ever after since I’d learned about the *due destini*, and I was doing a lot waiting of my own these days.

“We’ll get you both new phones so you can stay in contact, okay?” I said.

They nodded, smiling at me weakly.

“Thank you, Cali. We owe you,” Julia said.

“You don’t owe me anything,” I said. “I just want you guys to be happy.”

The teens said their final goodbye, and Mace led Julia away. Russell stayed close to me as the werewolves shifted and we began our journey back to the pack house. I climbed onto Xavier’s back again for the return trip, and I couldn’t help but feel relieved.

I hadn’t missed Xavier walking off with Ava to have a private conversation. I didn’t know what they’d talked about, but they’d both come back looking pretty tense. I was full of questions, but I was also afraid of the answers. Sometimes it was better not to know things. And where Ava and Xavier were concerned, ignorance really was bliss.

Still, the feel of him beneath me made Ava seem unimportant.

We were moving through a thin section of trees when I spotted the wisp again and froze.

*What the hell is it trying to tell me?*

I didn’t understand why it was showing itself to me. What message could it have? Could it be something about the Bitterfangs? Was our pack in danger?

I mind linked with Xavier. *I think a wisp is following me. I’ve seen it twice, now.*

*Maybe it’s just a trick of the light, with all the snow*, he suggested. He didn’t sound worried, and maybe he was right. I’d wondered the same thing myself when I’d first seen the wisp. I glanced back again. No wisp.

If it *was* a wisp, and it wanted anything important, it would make itself known to me again. I didn’t have to worry. Right now, I could just enjoy the ride back to the pack house, and the feeling of triumph from reuniting Julia and Russell and keeping them both safe.

But I couldn’t shake the uneasy feeling in my gut that something was wrong. I wasn’t sure why. Sure, there were lots of what-ifs to worry about, but right now, everything was fine. So why was I feeling this way?

I pulled in a deep breath, then reached up to clutch the Shard. I closed my eyes and tried to recenter myself. Magic flowed into me from the Shard, leaving a tingling sensation in my hands. It gave me hope, and a sense that everything would be okay.

We made it back to the pack house and hurried Russell inside. Immediately, Ravi and Rishika headed back out to make sure we hadn’t been followed.

“Thank you again,” Russell said as the rest of the group shifted back. “I know you’re all going out of your way to protect me. It’s a very generous way to treat someone you’ve just met, and I really appreciate it.”

“Of course.” I smiled. “We want to keep you and Julia safe.”

The others nodded in agreement.

Russell moved to head back down the basement, but I stopped him.

“Wait,” I said. “We know you’re telling the truth, now. You can sleep in a real bed tonight.”

His eyes widened. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

I smiled as I led him upstairs and brought him to an empty room. It had been Marta’s, but she was gone, and she’d taken most of her things with her, so the room was pretty sparse. It’d be okay if Russell stayed there for a little while, right?

*I wonder if Marta’s ever going to come back.*

I missed her already, though I knew she’d had her reasons for leaving. I hoped that wherever she was, she was happy and finding what she was looking for.

“This is amazing, Cali. Thank you,” Russell said.

He really was a good kid. I didn’t understand why Malakai was so hell-bent on killing him.

*He really is an awful Alpha.*

“Just settle in,” I said. “Do whatever you want. You can borrow clothes and anything else you need from the pack—they’ll all be happy to help you. This is your home away from home, got it?”

He nodded, smiling. “Got it.”

“And if you give me a second, I’ll get you the best white chocolate mocha you’ve ever had.”

“That sounds amazing.”

I headed downstairs to the kitchen and pulled a couple of mugs out of the cupboard. Suddenly, I felt a presence behind me and spun around. Just outside the kitchen window, I saw it again: the wisp.

I moved closer to the window, squinting to better make it out.

“*Come to me, Caliana*,” a voice whispered.

My hand went slack, and the mugs shattered on the floor as my blood ran cold.

I knew that voice.

It belonged to Seluna.

# Episode 3607

**Greyson**

While Cali was helping Russell get settled, I reconvened with Rishika, Ravi, Jay, and Xavier on the front porch to talk security. Ravi and Rishika’s quick patrol hadn’t turned up anything—no scouts had followed us either to the Samara encampment or back to the pack house.

But after my conversation with Russell and Julia, I wanted to make sure the pack understood the very real threat that the Bitterfangs and Pit Bulls posed—not just to the teenage lovebirds, but to our pack. And to Cali. It was bad enough that we’d gotten mixed up in a family feud that didn’t concern us, but now we were in the crosshairs of some potentially very dangerous people.

“Keep our security tight,” I said. “These people are impulsive and violent. We can’t underestimate them, or the threat they pose to us. They’ve trespassed on our territory before, so they’re already more familiar with our land than I’m comfortable with. We can’t allow them to trespass again. If a tree falls in Redwood territory, one of us had better be there to hear it.”

Jay and Ravi moved off to discuss plans for patrols and other potential security measures, and Rishika pulled Xavier and me aside.

“Have you considered moving Cali out of the pack house?” she asked. “I heard about the Bitterfangs not liking *due destini*. Won’t it bring down a whole different kind of trouble if they figure out who she is?”

I nodded. “I’ve been thinking the same thing. And between protecting Russell and Xavier killing a Bitterfang, we’re already got a lot of trouble coming our way. I’m not thrilled about any of it.”

“I told you before, it was him or Cali,” Xavier said with a shrug. “I think I made the right choice.”

“I don’t disagree,” I said mildly. “But it’s still a complication. I want to help Julia and Russell, but not at the cost of the pack’s safety, or at the cost of Cali.”

“Well, it’s too late for the pack. We’ve got a target on our back, regardless,” Xavier muttered. “It might not be too late for Cali, though.”

I sighed. “Based on what the kids have said, and our own experiences with them, we know the Bitterfangs are aggressive. What we don’t know is how far they’ll go to prove a point. If they can’t get hold of Russell or Julia to punish them, then could they set their sights on the *due destini* mate who inspired them?”

Xavier’s expression was grave. “It seems possible.”

*If not downright likely*, I thought to myself.

Rishika shook her head. “I’ve got a bad feeling about all this. There’s not a single aspect of this that bodes well for us.”

I grimaced. That was *not* what I wanted to hear. If Rishika, my most capable fighter aside from Xavier, didn’t feel good about this, then I had to trust her instincts.

I gestured for Ravi and Jay to come back over. “We need to hit surveillance and patrols hard for a while. Keep me updated if you find anything.”

The other wolves nodded.

“Anything you need,” Ravi said.

It felt good to have their support—and to take charge, despite all Xavier’s snarky comments earlier. If we were on the cusp of a pack war with the Bitterfangs, at least I knew I had the full support of my pack. And I had Cali’s support, too. There had been a time, not that long ago, when Xavier and I had both been a bit skeptical about involving Cali in pack business because she wasn’t a wolf, but that had changed.

Elle stepped forward, and I did a double take. I hadn’t even realized she was on the porch with us. “I have an idea.”

“I’m all ears,” I said.

“I know you might not like it, but I think it could be good to send Cali to stay with the Vanguard pack until the trouble has passed.”

Xavier scowled. “Absolutely the fuck not. We’re not sending her out there alone ever again. Not after all the shit they’ve pulled.”

His mood had shifted from zero to sixty in seconds, and he was practically foaming at the mouth with the need to protect our mate. I gave him a stern look and willed him to chill the fuck out.

I turned my attention to Elle, who seemed unbothered by Xavier’s outburst. Maybe she knew him well enough by now not to worry about his mood swings. But then again, she’d always been fairly apathetic about my brother in general.

I schooled my features and kept my voice calm, though I was just as surprised by Elle’s suggestion as Xavier was. I had no clue why Elle thought it was a good idea. She knew enough about the Vanguards’ history with our pack and with Cali personally to understand that they weren’t people we looked to for refuge.

“You’re right,” I finally said. “I don’t like that suggestion.

She sighed. “The Bitterfangs do not know Cali is the *due destini* mate, and if she went to the palace, she could be protected there. Lucian has a lot of werewolves who are loyal to him, and a lot of resources. Plus, the Bitterfangs have not interacted with the Vanguards. It could be a good hiding place.”

The idea of sending my mate off to hide with people who had harmed her so badly in the past was enough to make me relish poking holes in Elle’s suggestion. “We don’t know for sure whether or not the Vanguards have interacted with the Bitterfangs. They just might not have mentioned it. The Blue Bloods and the Samaras both had intruders on their territory—the same could be true of the Vanguards. And I thought you didn’t think Lucian was a good Alpha. Why would you want to send Cali to him?”

“This has nothing to do with Lucian being a good Alpha.” Elle shrugged. “It is about me trying to be a good wolf to my Alpha and protect his mate at all costs.”

*Well, when she puts it that way…*

A small smile tugged at my lips. Elle had been a surprise from day one, but she was really coming into her own these days, and I truly appreciated her loyalty. I only hoped to remain worthy of it.

“I’ll think about it,” I said.

There was no way in hell I’d send her there, and Cali would never in a million years agree to go to the palace, anyway, but Elle meant well. Her suggestion deserved respect, even if it wasn’t the right call.

Xavier and Rishika stepped aside to set up a patrol group, and I headed back inside. Between my brother, Rishika, Jay, and Ravi, pack security would be tight. The Redwoods were in good hands.

As I padded down the hallway, I thought more about Elle’s suggestion. Cali aside, she’d actually brought up a good point.

I needed to talk to Lucian about everything that had been going on, even though it was the very last thing I *wanted* to do. But we were supposed to be allies, and that meant he needed to be made aware of the threats we were facing. Just like it’d be good for me to know if the Vanguards had experienced any strange encounters in the past couple days.

And I was the only one who could talk to Lucian about any of this. As Elle had rightly pointed out, I was the Redwood Alpha. This was my job—pain in the ass though it was. Hopefully Lucian wouldn’t make things even more difficult, though I had little reason to trust him. Last I’d checked, everything the Vanguard Alpha touched turned to shit.

I headed into the kitchen and found Cali bent over with a broom and dustpan. She seemed to be cleaning up broken pieces of ceramic.

A question burst to the tip of my tongue, but before I could ask it, shouting echoed from outside, and Jay burst into the house.

“Strange wolves approaching,” he called.

*Well, shit. Are the Bitterfangs back already?*

Cali’s head snapped up. Worry was etched into her face. “Who are they?”

“I don’t know,” Jay said. “Nobody recognizes them.”

I nodded. “I’ll be right there.”

Jay headed back out, and I moved to follow him but stopped myself and turned back to Cali. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. “I dropped a couple of mugs—nothing to worry about.”

“Okay. Stay inside.”

Thankfully, she didn’t argue, which made me wonder if there was something more going on than a couple of broken mugs. I’d have to ask her about it later.

When I reached the front porch, I saw two wolves slowly approaching, surrounded by a Redwood escort.

“Stop!” I called out in my most authoritative Alpha voice. “What are you doing on Redwood land?”

The two wolves looked at each other, then shifted back to human. They were both women, and something about them seemed familiar, though I was certain I’d never met them before.

One of the women stepped forward with a glare. “Give us back our son!”

# Episode 3608

I busied myself with picking up the broken shards of mug scattered across the floor, feeling torn. I hated that I hadn’t been completely truthful with Greyson. No, I hadn’t flat-out lied, but I hadn’t told him the real reason why I’d broken the mugs, either.

*He has a lot on his plate right now without me worrying him. How would he have taken it, knowing that I dropped them because I heard Seluna’s voice? At least I thought I did… But how is that possible? Why would a wisp have Seluna’s voice?*

None of it made any sense to me. I glanced out the window and was relieved to see that the wisp was nowhere to be found. Could I have imagined it?As much as I wanted to believe that the wisp had been nothing but a figment of my imagination, I couldn’t forget how I’d seen another wisp while riding on Xavier’s back a bit ago—one that Xavier hadn’t seen.

My mind shifted to our visitors. I wondered if they were Bitterfang wolves.

*I hope not. That pack is bad news, and I know that Xavier and Greyson are going to do whatever they can to hold them off—which means that things could get ugly.*

I’d told Greyson that I would stay inside, and his tone had suggested that he wasn’t open to compromise—and I couldn’t blame him. Things were tense at the moment, and if the visitors were who I thought they were, I knew that things could get even more dangerous.

“Shoot,” I hissed to myself, remembering why I’d come to the kitchen in the first place—I’d promised to get Russell a white chocolate mocha. He was probably wondering where I was.

I threw open the cupboard and grabbed another mug—only to drop that one too when the wisp reappeared outside the window. *Crap.* I stared at the wisp where it hovered above the tree line, almost like it was taunting me. I wished that I could ignore it, but I had a feeling that it wasn’t going anywhere. Its persistence was a little unusual.

The mug had cracked in half, and I distractedly tossed one half in the trash, trying to ignore the wisp—but it was no use. I could feel it hovering there, almost like it was looking at me. On the plus side, at least it wasn’t speaking to me like it had before.

I picked up yet another mug and filled it with white chocolate mocha, then hurried upstairs. As much as I wanted to pretend that the wisp wasn’t there, I couldn’t stop thinking about it. Its image was burned into my brain. I touched the Shard, wishing it was strong enough to repel whatever was happening right now. I just wanted things to be fully normal again, but clearly not even the Shard could make that happen.

I went into Russell’s room to find him curled up asleep in the bed with the curtains drawn. The poor kid had had a rough couple of days. I sat the mug down and pulled one of the heavy blankets over him. I stared at him for a few seconds, feeling a pang of affection for him. He was just a kid. There was no way he should have been going through all of this just because he was in love. What harm could he do? Why was Julia’s father blowing this all out of proportion? Why couldn’t werewolves chill out every once in a while?

I sighed and headed for the door, only to stop short when Russell began to mumble something. I paused to listen.

“Julia… Julia… I… Julia…” He was talking in his sleep and had a smile on his face. He was dreaming about her. At least he wasn’t having a nightmare on top of everything else he’d been through over the past few hours. It was nice to think that his love for Julia was serving as a kind of protection for him right now, when he needed it most.

Smiling, I slipped out of the room, closing the door quietly behind me. I didn’t want to wake him. He deserved to get some rest, and he deserved some pleasant dreams, too. As I made my way down the hall, I saw something in the window at the far end of the long corridor. I slowly approached the window, hoping that it wasn’t what I knew it was. It didn’t take long for me to see it—the wisp flickering in the distance.

I marched up to the window. “Go away!” I said in a loud whisper. “Now’s not a good time!”

My ears pricked up at the sound of raised voices outside. It sounded like arguing. *Maybe the pack needs my magic outside.* I turned back to the window to see that the wisp was still there, dancing defiantly in the air. “You’ll have to wait. My pack needs me.”

I turned away and headed back down the hall, but my feet felt heavy all of a sudden, like I was walking through thick mud or quicksand. Every step took a massive amount of effort, and I was slowing down bit by bit. The wisp was trying to pull me back toward it. That had never happened before—and I was a little freaked out by it. When it got so bad that I could barely lift my feet to walk, I paused. I noticed then that the house had grown eerily quiet—even the talking from outside that I’d heard only a few moments ago had stopped.

*Weird. It’s not like it’s the middle of the night. It shouldn’t be so quiet in here… Is everyone still outside with Greyson?* I suddenly felt guilty. *I should be there! This is my pack, too! I have to be there in case things really do go badly.*

It wasn’t entirely accurate to call me the Redwood Luna, but it wasn’t entirely inaccurate, either. I was meant to act like the Redwood Luna, and that meant I needed to be there during any and all of the pack’s important moments. If nothing else, it would be good practice for the pack summit.

Fighting against the resistance I was getting from the wisp, I took a step toward the stairs. I stopped cold when a voice called out to me.

“*Caliana!*”

I gasped. The voice was soft, almost like a whisper, but it was coming from right behind me. I didn’t need to turn around to know it was the wisp. It was impeding my movements and trying to force me to follow it, and now it was calling out to me.

I shook my head and slapped my hands to my ears. “No! This isn’t the time! I have to go be with my pack. They need me!”

I hummed, trying to block out the voice while fighting to break free of its hold, but it wouldn’t stop. The voice only got louder.

“*Caliana! Caliana!*”

Finally, I stopped and turned around. “What? What do you want?”

The wisp was there, hovering, glowing even brighter than before.

The voice called out to me again. “*Caliana, come to me! Come to me now!*”

“Who are you?” I whispered, wishing that it would just leave me alone, but knowing there was no chance of that. It was literally forcing me to face it, to pay attention to it.

“*Come to me!*” the voice hissed.

I felt a strong pull toward the window, but I stood my ground. There was no way I was going to stand here and be ordered around by a voice in my head, not when my pack needed me. If I was ever going to be their Luna, I couldn’t let anything keep me from doing what was right by them—least of all some random wisp.

I turned back toward the stairs, but suddenly the hallway seemed endless, and the stairs had stretched impossibly far away. I suppressed the urge to scream. *What is happening to me right now?* I’d seen many wisps, but none of them had ever done anything like this before.

I turned back toward the wisp, my surprise and fear quickly replaced by anger. “What do you want? Why won’t you leave me alone?”

This time, there was no response, just a weighty silence that made me even more uneasy than the voice had.

“I’ve had enough of this!” I burst out.

I turned back toward the stairs, which were now a normal distance away again, and ran down them. I grabbed my coat from the closet and headed for the front door, but in the blink of an eye, I was standing in front of the back door instead.

*How the hell did I get here?*

I shrugged my coat on and stepped outside. I could hear the voices rising up from the front of the house again, but now they sounded distant, echoey.

The voice returned. “*Come to me, Caliana. Come to me!*”

I couldn’t resist any longer. I turned and started toward the wisp.

# Episode 3609

**Xavier**

Things had reached a fever pitch, and now we were damn near in a standoff.

*That escalated quickly. As usual.*

I looked at my brother, who seemed unperturbed by the Rogues standing on our lawn. The two women had to be the parents Vishal had mentioned. Pit Bulls. They didn’t look all that intimidating to me. I was certain we’d be able to take them on if they tried to make a move against the pack. I took a small step forward, almost itching for a fight.

*It would be a big mistake for the Pit Bulls to try to take us on. They’re outnumbered, and we’re much stronger. Anyone who threatens our pack threatens Cali, and I’ll do anything to protect her.*

“Give us our son!” the woman repeated. “We’re here for Russell, and that’s it. This whole mess is none of your business, so give us our son and end all of this foolishness! We want him home! He’s just a boy, and you strangers have no right to keep him!”

The woman’s eyes were almost red with anger, and her partner was eyeing the pack house like she thought she might spot Russell any minute, bound and gagged and pressed against a window.

“Russell doesn’t want to go home right now,” Greyson said.

The second woman stepped forward, and the Redwood wolves growled and tightened ranks.

“He’s a minor,” she said in an even voice. “You cannot keep our son from us. His place is with his family, not with some backwoods pack. Bring him to us so we can see with our own eyes that he’s safe.”

I snorted. “From what we can see, he’s a lot safer with us than he is with you.”

Their eyes flashed in unison as they turned their attention on me.

“You left him out there on his own about to be attacked by the Bitterfang pack and left for dead,” I said.

“That’s not true!” one of the women hissed. “We want nothing more than to protect Russell. Are you a parent? Do you know what it’s like to raise a teenager? Something tells me you don’t. He’s just a boy who’s being foolish—but he’s our son, and we love him. We will protect him. You’re just standing in our way and getting in the middle of something that doesn’t concern you!”

“And what about the girl he loves?” Greyson asked.

The women looked at each other.

“What about her?” said the one who’d spoken first. “She’s not our concern. We want our son. We want Russell.”

I stood there, wanting to argue but understanding why they were here in the first place.

*They’re the kid’s parents, after all. But, they’re also part of the problem, and one of the reasons why Russell’s in this bind in the first place.*

I walked over to Greyson and leaned close to whisper in his ear. “We can’t just hand Russell over to them.”

“I know,” Greyson said. “We made a promise to Russell and Julia that we’d keep them safe. If they don’t care about Julia, then they’ll separate the two of them, and it could put them both in a whole lot of danger.”

“Not to mention that the Bitterfangs will be back here sooner or later to look for Russell, and they won’t believe us if we say he left,” I added. “They’ll most likely rain down hell on us if they think we’re lying to them. We could take them on, no problem, but do we really want to get wrapped up in a fight and put our pack in danger over something that isn’t even really our issue?”

I cared about what happened to Russell and Julia, but I also cared about giving our pack a reprieve after everything we’d been through lately. We had enough on our plate without fighting someone else’s battles.

“And we don’t even know for sure that these are Russell’s parents,” Greyson said.

“Exactly,” I said. “This could all be some sort of trick. We can’t hand the kid over to a couple of strangers who claim to care about him when they could be part of the Bitterfang pack for all we know.”

“This isn’t up for discussion! Give us our fucking kid!” one of the women called out.

“Calm down, Joan,” the other said, placing a calming hand on her arm.

“No, Paris, I won’t calm down! I’m tired of this! These wolves think they know what’s best for *our* son?” She turned back to us. “Give him to us *now*!”

“I think you should listen to Paris and calm down. You’re just going to have to wait,” Greyson said. He leaned in close to me. “We need to talk to the kid, get his take on this. Let’s see if he knows who these women are and see what he wants to do.”

I nodded. “Right. It’s ultimately his decision, after all.”

In the back of my mind, I knew that Russell was so far gone in puppy love that he probably wasn’t thinking all that straight. There was no way he was going to go with any option that separated him from Julia, and that was exactly what these two women wanted to do. He’d just gotten her back—there was no way he was going to be pulled away from her again.

“Jay, keep an eye on things. Xavier and I are going to go check in with the kid,” Greyson said.

We headed upstairs to find Russell fast asleep. I kicked the bed, and Russell jolted awake.

“What’s going on?” he asked, rubbing his eyes.

“Get up and take a look out the window,” I said.

Russell got up, yawning. He looked a little fearful as he approached the window.

“Do you recognize either of those women?” Greyson asked.

Russell leaned close to the glass, and then his eyes went wide, and he ducked down.

I raised an eyebrow at him. “So, you do know them?”

Russell nodded, looking pale. “They’re my parents.”

“So, they were telling the truth,” I said.

That kind of complicated things. If these were the kid’s parents, how could we rightfully keep him from them? Like they’d said, he was a minor. Still, I couldn’t help but think about how much of a danger Silas had been to Greyson, Colton, and me. Just because they were his parents didn’t mean they had his best interests at heart.

“No, no, no! What are they doing here? No! How did they find me?” Russell was panicking and had his arms wrapped tightly around his stomach, his eyes darting wildly back and forth.

“My guess is Vishal,” I said. That was the only explanation. The wolf had just been here and had said he was acting on the kid’s parents’ behalf. Of course he’d wasted no time telling them exactly where he was, even though we’d denied it.

Russell had gone even paler at the mention of Vishal. “No! I can’t go with them! They’ll only try to keep me away from Julia! They think that this whole thing is just a phase, that our love isn’t real, but that’s not true. I love Julia more than anything in this world! I know I’m young, but I know how I feel. You can’t let them take me!”

This piqued my interest, and almost as if he’d read my mind, Greyson asked, “What do the Pit Bulls think about mates and the *due destini*?”

“They think it’s nonsense! They think it’s just a story.”

I took this in, breathing a little easier. I could deal with people thinking it was just a load of fantasy. That wasn’t as dangerous as people thinking it flew in the face of everything werewolf kind stood for. That was where the trouble started. At least the Pit Bulls weren’t out to kill Cali. *Progress.*

“I know this isn’t what you want to hear, but your parents are asking to see you,” Greyson said. “They want you to go with them.”

Russell shook his head hard, his eyes wide with horror. “No! I don’t want to see them, and I’m not going anywhere without Julia!”

He skittered back over to the bed, taking care not to be seen through the window.

“I know that, kid, and we understand. But those are your parents, and I don’t think they’re going to leave without at least making sure you’re safe,” I said.

Russell flashed me a pleading look. “Can I just… wave at them from the window? That way they’ll know I’m okay.”

I rolled my eyes. “Respectfully, kid, that’s the stupidest thing that I’ve ever heard.”

“Enough, Xavier,” Greyson hissed.

“Don’t tell me ‘enough,’” I hissed back, a wave of annoyance cresting within me. I could say whatever the hell I wanted, and I dared him to do anything about it.

Still, I knew this wasn’t the time to get into it with my brother, so I calmed down and turned my attention back to the matter at hand—just as we heard one of the women shouting outside.

“The Pit Bulls aren’t going anywhere until we have Russell! Bring him out right now!”

I stepped up to the window and peered down into the yard, just in time to see more wolves step out of the trees.

# Episode 3610

I was making my way through the backyard as the shouting out front intensified. I wanted to turn around—it seemed like something was going down—but I couldn’t resist the pull of the wisp. I’d never felt a wisp’s pull so strongly before. While that was freaking me out enough, I had to admit that I was curious… Why was this one behaving so differently from all the others I’d encountered?

I zipped my coat up to my neck against the biting cold and followed the wisp as it danced through the trees, leading me deeper and deeper into the woods. In the back of my mind, I knew that this wasn’t the smartest move. I was getting farther and farther from the pack house, and I was all alone. There was no doubt in my mind that my mates would not be happy about this, but it felt like my feet had a mind of their own.

I steeled myself against the fear rising inside me.

*It’s not like I’m helpless. I can feel my magic right at my fingertips, and I can protect myself if I have to.* I conjured it up quickly just to make sure. I wanted it to be at the ready if something unexpected happened. I could feel the warmth of it crackling inside me, and it felt good to know that it was right there if I needed it. *I hope to hell I won’t need it, but if I do, I’m more than ready to use it.*

That Pit Bull Vishal had found out the hard way just what I was capable of. I could have hurt him a lot worse, but I’d held back. I hadn’t wanted to kill him, just give him a warning and a little taste of what he’d be up against if he decided to go toe to toe with the Redwoods. I wasn’t about to let some Rogue stalk up to the pack house and intimate us, and neither were Xavier and Greyson.

I slowed as I got even deeper into the forest. I had to be cautious, since there’d been so many strange wolves wandering around lately. I didn’t want to be caught by surprise. My magic was ready, and I felt confident about my ability to use it, but that didn’t mean I wanted to walk right into a hostile pack of wolves. The Bitterfangs had definitely given the impression that they were going to stay close and keep an eye on our pack. I swallowed hard. If they found me out here all alone, there was no telling what might happen. They’d seemed like an exceptionally unfriendly and dangerous pack, and I had no desire to go up against them alone.

*I should have brought Artemis along. The two of us together are unstoppable. She’s such a good tracker and has such good instincts, she would know immediately if someone was stalking us.*

Unfortunately, I hadn’t had time to think of that—the wisp’s pull had been so strong. The only thing that had been on my mind was going after the wisp and figuring out why it so desperately needed me to follow it.

I spun around, suddenly wondering if I should go back. Just as I took a few steps toward the pack house, the wisp called out for me again.

“*Caliana! Caliana! Come this way! Not much farther now!*”

I bit my lip, uncertain. I didn’t want to wander too far from the pack house. Magic or not, that just wasn’t a good idea with everything that was going on. No one even knew I was out here. I took a quick look around, trying to get my bearings. I was pretty deep in the woods, but I was vaguely aware that I was still in sight of the pack house. Since I’d met Xavier and Greyson, I’d had a chance to explore a large swathe of these woods, but this part still felt new to me… Or at least different to the parts I was used to. Like any woods, there were so many trees, but these trees seemed different, somehow… Taller? Thicker? I couldn’t quite put my finger on it.

I turned back around as an uneasy feeling rose in my stomach. I was almost afraid to keep looking back the way I’d come, since it might confirm what I was beginning to fear: that I’d left the pack and the pack house far behind. That I hadn’t stayed as close as I thought. That I’d somehow wandered farther than I ever had before.

I looked up at the wisp where it hovered above me, waiting.

*But that can’t be. I’ve only been following the wisp for a short while. There’s no way I’m that far away…*

“*Caliana! Caliana! Come to me. Don’t turn back, now. You’re almost there!*” The voice was a comforting force this time, and a bit of my anxiety melted away. This time the voice didn’t sound like Seluna’s. Had it sounded like her earlier? Or was I just hearing things? I would’ve known the demon’s voice anywhere, and right now this wasn’t it.

*Is there a connection between the two voices? Maybe something linked to Seluna, but not quite* her*?*

Again, I began to wonder if I’d imagined Seluna’s voice before. It certainly made me feel better to think that I hadn’t actually heard her calling out to me. I didn’t even want to consider the implications of that. There was nothing I wanted more than to be through with Seluna forever.

There was a small clearing ahead with a cluster of rocks, but something about it gave me pause.

*How come I’ve never seen this area before? Is that why the wisp brought me here? Is there something in the rocks that it wants me to see?*

That seemed to be the case. The wisp had stopped moving and was now just hovering above the rocks, and as I slowly moved toward it, I felt a strange tingling sensation emanating from the Shard where it was lying on my chest.

*Why is it reacting now? Does all of this have something to do with the aftereffects of returning the ashes, or is it something else altogether?*

I approached the rocks and looked down at them, half-expecting to see something revelatory in their craggy sides. I leaned in close to examine them. They just looked like regular old rocks to me. Why would a wisp bring me here to look at a pile of rocks? I stood up straight and looked around, feeling frustrated all over again. I was supposed to be with my pack right now, but instead I was out here on a wild goose chase.

“Why did you bring me here?” I called out, but the wisp was nowhere to be seen.

The sky above me had turned a deep shade of purple, and the trees were shimmering like there was a veil around them. *Is this a dream?* I slowly turned around, taking in the woods around me and feeling really, really cold all of a sudden. There was no way this was a dream. I remembered dropping the mugs, talking to Greyson, leaving Russell’s room…

*This is real, but why does it* feel *like a dream?*

“*Welcome, Caliana.*” One of the rocks broke free of the cluster and hovered a few feet above the others. *What the* hell*?*

“*Remove the Shard necklace, Caliana, and place it upon the rocks*.”

I touched the Shard, and it felt electric and hot against my fingertips.

*I probably shouldn’t take this off, right? My mates and the others went through so much to get it for me. And anyway, why would the wisp bring me here only to ask me to remove the one thing that’s protecting me?*

Something about this didn’t feel right. I tightened my grip on the Shard as the voice rang out again, encouraging me.

“*Lay it upon the rocks and free yourself, Caliana.*”

I felt something—or someone—pulling at the necklace, only to glance down and realize it was my own hand.

*Have I lost control of my body? What’s going on here?* For a terrifying moment, I wondered if I was once again under Seluna’s control. The thought sent a sliver of icy fear racing down my back. *No, this is different. I can resist.*

I ripped my hand away from the Shard, letting it drop back down and rest against my chest. I let my hands fall to my sides, just as the hovering rock crashed to the ground with a loud crack.

“*You can’t ignore me forever!*” the voice hissed. “*You don’t* have *forever!*”

The voice echoed and bounced off the trees, seeming to come at me from all sides.

I stumbled back as the strange, shimmering, veil-like atmosphere fell away to reveal trees and the forest as I knew it. I turned at the sound of approaching footsteps, still feeling a little off-balance and frightened by what had just happened.

*Is it Greyson? Xavier? Did someone follow me out here?*

Two rough hands grabbed me from behind and turned me around. I bit back a scream as I came face-to-face with Vishal.

# Episode 3611

**Greyson**

I didn’t like having a bunch of Rogues lingering outside the pack house, especially with the Bitterfangs lurking around as well. It looked like the calm that the Redwood pack had finally found was about to come to an end. With wolves like these in our territory, a war—not even necessarily involving the Redwoods—could break out at any moment, right on our front lawn. And if that happened, we’d have to get involved.

*It’s clear that the Bitterfangs aren’t going to give up their pursuit of Julia, and we could get drawn into their conflicts if we’re not careful. That’s not what I want, but we might not have a choice.*

There was a big part of me that wanted to wash my hands of the whole thing. We didn’t need to bring any random trouble to our doorstep—we had enough of our own. But a bigger part of me knew that we had to help Russell and Julia by any means necessary. My own troubled family history ensured that I couldn’t turn my back on someone like Russell, no matter how much the logical side of me wanted to. Helping the two young lovers was the right thing to do. Cali had underscored that. She wasn’t our official Luna just yet, but she was *my* Luna, and I respected her word and her wishes. I just had to figure out a way to get us out of this without bloodshed.

“Stay here, and don’t come downstairs or go to the window for anything,” I told Russell, who looked like he was seconds from a nervous breakdown.

I gritted my teeth, angry that the Pit Bull Rogues and the Bitterfang pack were so blinded by their own agendas that they didn’t care about the distress they were causing the two children they claimed to care about so much.

“I won’t,” Russell said, then he quickly burrowed under the covers, hiding his head.

Xavier and I went downstairs, and I had to ignore the thread of tension lingering between us. There was no time to address it now. It was better for both of us if we kept our heads in the game.

“I’m going to check on Cali,” I said to Xavier. She’d been acting a little strangely earlier, and I wanted to make sure that she was safe.

I made a beeline for the kitchen, and my heart fell when I saw that she wasn’t there. I spotted a few pieces of broken mug still on the floor, as if she’d missed them while cleaning up.

“What happened here?” Xavier asked as he came up behind me.

“Where the hell did she go?” I muttered, almost to myself.

“What? You don’t know where she is?” Xavier said, his voice already laced with anger.

I whirled to face him. “Do *you*?”

Xavier gritted his teeth as if biting back a response and started toward the living room. “She has to be here somewhere. She wouldn’t go outside alone, would she? Not with all this shit going down; there’s no way!” He turned to face me when we found the living room empty. “Shit. This is all your fault! I thought you were keeping an eye on her. You’re constantly breathing down her neck—except when it really matters, apparently!”

“I was dealing with the Pit Bulls,” I snapped. “Don’t you dare put this on me. Like it or not, we share responsibility for Cali, so this is as much your fuckup as it is mine!”

“Oh yeah? Or maybe you’re just in over your head, brother. You’ve got Rogues and hostile packs crawling all over the woods, a scared kid upstairs, and now our mate is missing. If I wasn’t here, this entire place would be in ruins—it’s clear you’re incapable of multitasking.”

“You’ve got a lot of nerve—” I took a deep breath and pulled myself back. “You know what? We don’t have time to stand here arguing. We need to go find her.” I was even angrier inside than I was showing on the outside. “Shit! Why would Cali leave right now, of all times? She agreed to stay inside! How did she even get out without anyone noticing?”

“It’s Cali,” Xavier said with a sigh. “Maybe she’s still somewhere in the house.”

“Maybe, but why would she leave all those pieces of broken mug behind? She was either distracted or she left in a hurry.” I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was very wrong. Then a thought hit me. “What if she didn’t leave of her own accord? What if someone took her?”

Xavier’s eyes darkened. “Fuck. Do you think… Do you think that one of those Bitterfang assholes could’ve snuck in here while we were focused on the Pit Bulls out front? We were pretty wrapped up in Russell’s parents. What if they used that as a distraction?”

Panic was welling up inside me, and I couldn’t think of anything but finding Cali as soon as possible.

“What if it was all a coordinated move between the feuding groups?” I asked. “We don’t know these wolves at all. We have no idea what lengths they’d go to.” I wanted nothing more than to go off and search for Cali, but there was still the matter of the Pit Bulls out front to deal with. “We have to take care of those Rogues,” I said, noting the strain in my own voice.

“Right,” said Xavier. “I’ll go find Cali, since you’re the one who lost her. Maybe it’s best if you concentrate on one crisis at a time.”

I glared at my brother, wishing he could just lay the fuck off. “Just go find her.”

I wasn’t going to waste another second squabbling with Xavier. The important thing was that Cali was safe. Nothing else mattered. If Xavier wanted to use it as yet another example of my not being fit for Alpha, so be it. I knew the truth.

Xavier started out the back door. “She went out this way; I’ve got her scent.”

I watched him go, feeling another surge of anger at the position the Bitterfangs and the Pit Bulls had put me in. All I wanted was to go find Cali, but Alpha duty was pulling me in another direction, and I had to leave it to Xavier for now.

I turned and headed back out toward the front of the house, my mind racing.

*Maybe Xavier was right. I can’t blame anyone but myself for losing track of Cali. I can’t blame* her*—there has to be a reason why she went outside after agreeing not to. Whatever it was, it can’t be good.*

I peered through the screen door and glared at all the unfamiliar wolves peppering our lawn. I had to get them out of here as quickly as possible. With Cali gone, my priorities had shifted, but this still had to be handled.

“Help!” That was Cali’s voice.

I burst through the door, knocking it off its hinges and leaping off the porch. I immediately spotted Cali standing between two werewolves, one of whom I recognized. Vishal.

“Let her go right now, and you might leave with your heads intact,” Xavier said as he came around from behind the house and joined me.

“Listen to my brother. This isn’t going to go in your favor, I promise you that,” I growled.

I noticed then that Vishal was partially shifted and had a claw pressed against Cali’s neck. Anger surged within me as I read the absolute terror in her eyes. I wondered who I needed to negotiate with. They were Rogues, which meant there was no Alpha to run things.

“Let her go!” Xavier snarled, his eyes shifting.

I put a hand on my brother’s chest. “Keep your cool, brother. Let’s think this through.”

*Don’t worry, Cali*, I mind linked. *He’s not going to hurt you, love—I’ll kill him before I let that happen. We’ll get out of this.*

“Is this what you want?” I said, looking each and every one of the unfamiliar wolves in the eye. “You come onto our territory, making demands and threatening one of our own. Is this the way you want things to go? Because it’s not going to end well for you.”

I noticed that neither of Russell’s moms had voiced the slightest protest about Cali being used as collateral. *One more strike against them…*

“Keep them talking,” Xavier said. “I’ve got this.”

He started to back away, toward the house.

“What are you doing?” I hissed at him, my eyes riveted to Vishal and Cali.

“If they’re going to do that to Cali, then we’ll just do the same to Russell,” Xavier said.

I finally turned to look at my brother. His eyes were still shifted and churning with anger. I knew that he was only thinking of Cali, but I couldn’t let him use the kid like that. If Xavier had been thinking clearly—which he wasn’t, right now—he would never even have considered doing something like that.

“Leave Russell for now,” I said, my voice strong, leaving no room for negotiation. “We can handle this another way.”

Xavier huffed but stayed put.

“We’ll make this very simple for you,” Vishal said. “Give us the boy, and we’ll give you the girl.”

# Episode 3612

Greyson’s mind link was encouraging, and I truly trusted that he wouldn’t let anything happen to me, but I hated that I’d put myself in this position. Not that it had really been my choice. The wisp situation had been so strange and overwhelming. It had never been like that before, and it had been so hard to resist—literally. I thought back to the hold it had over me while I was in the pack house. It had all but forced me to follow it. Then, with everything that happened in the woods and the voice trying to get me to remove the Shard, I’d been so distracted that Vishal had easily caught me by surprise. I hadn’t even had a chance to use my magic on him. He’d moved so fast and before I knew it, had pressed his claw to my throat so hard that if I’d made even the slightest move, it would have punctured my throat.

“It’s just that simple, Alpha. You give me Russell; I’ll give you the girl. Why make it harder than it has to be? You don’t even know the kid,” Vishal said. “Is he worth all this? Is he worth her life?”

I didn’t like the sound of this deal one bit, but I could see that Greyson was considering it. He would’ve done anything to protect me. It occurred to me that I was practically one of Greyson’s only weaknesses at this point, and that made me sad. Greyson had once told me that I was Xavier’s weakness, but now I realized it was true for the both of them. Whenever I was a part of the equation, they always lost their footing.

A dark thought crossed my mind. *What if my hold over them continues to be exploited over and over again, just like it is right now? Like it always is? It never fails. I’m constantly being held over their heads as a bargaining chip. Will it ever stop? Will it always be this way?*

I already knew the answer to that, no matter how much I wished it weren’t true. Things would likely always be this way; that was the way of the supernatural world. And being mated to not one, but two Alphas only added to the danger. Their enemies would always see me as an easy avenue for hurting my mates. The three of us would be put to the test this way over and over again. Greyson and Xavier loved me, and I loved them, so this would continue to be a pattern. There was no escaping it.

*I don’t want them to have to bend because of me. I don’t want to be the reason why they lose the upper hand at times like this. I want to make them stronger, not weaker. But how? How can I break this cycle?*

I wouldn’t have traded this life for anything, and I’d accepted the risks that came along with it, but moments like this still royally sucked.

“Oh, did I forget to mention that my offer is only good for the next thirty seconds? If you don’t decide what to do, then we’ll decide for you.” Vishal slid his claw across my throat. “So, what’s it going to be? Because believe me, I’d be all too happy to slit her throat. I beg you not to push me. It won’t end well for you,” he said, throwing Greyson’s threat back at him.

I yelped and tried to pull away, but Vishal dug his claw in deeper, nearly breaking the skin.

“Uh-uh, don’t move, little Fae. I can’t promise my claw won’t slip.” He looked up at Greyson and Xavier. “And we wouldn’t want that, would we? So what’s it going to be?”

Greyson opened his mouth to speak, and I waited, bracing myself for him to take the deal. I knew that he was going to do it—I could feel it in my gut.

*I can’t let that happen. I can’t be the reason Russell gets hurt.*

“Stop!” I shouted. “Greyson, don’t take the deal! Don’t do it! Don’t give them Russell!”

Vishal’s grip on my arm tightened until it hurt. “No one asked you, Fae!” he hissed into my ear. “Shut your mouth, or I’ll shut it for you!”

I struggled, ignoring the pain of his claw at my throat. Vishal and the others weren’t to be trusted. Even if Greyson handed the kid over, who was to say that they were actually going to release me? Maybe the other Rogues and Russell’s parents would’ve been open to holding up their end of the deal, but I’d blasted Vishal the other night, and I didn’t know the guy. Who knew whether he would waste an opportunity to make me pay for it. And did we really want to give Russell back to these Rogues? How could we live with handing him over to someone like Vishal?

I looked at Greyson. *Please, don’t do it, Greyson. Don’t give in to this lying jerk!*

One of the other Pit Bulls, a woman, spoke up. “Please. We don’t want to hurt anyone. We just want our son back. That’s all.”

*So, that’s one of Russell’s parents. Does that mean Vishal is Russell’s dad? No, that can’t be right. He said before that he’d been sent to get Russell back for his parents. Maybe he’s like an evil uncle or something. Poor kid.*

“Vishal, listen to them,” I said breathlessly. “No one wants to see Russell hurt. I know we only just met him, but we care about him and want to do what’s best for him. If you let me go, we can talk and figure something out.”

I sucked in a breath as Vishal pressed his claw deeper into my throat, finally drawing blood—and making me angry in the process. *Shit*. I guess that tactic wasn’t going to work, huh?

“Quiet!” Vishal growled.

“You’re making a mistake,” Xavier growled.

“A big one,” Greyson said, his voice low with menace.

I looked back and forth between my mates. They were edging closer to us inch by inch, and I was afraid that a pack war was about to break out right before my eyes. The Pit Bulls weren’t technically a pack, but that didn’t matter. The outcome would be the same—two opposing wolf forces, locked in a deadly clash, with me in the middle.

“If you hurt me, my pack won’t stop until every single Pit Bull is dead. Is that what you want?” I asked.

“Didn’t I tell you to shut up?” Vishal spat. He turned his attention back to Greyson. “Time is running out, Alpha. Tick tock!” He pressed his claw harder against my throat, sending a trail of blood running down my neck.

“STOP! Stop this right now!” It was Russell. Everyone froze and looked at him as he ran out onto the porch. “Don’t hurt her, Vishal.”

“Russell, no! Go back inside!” I said, and Vishal shook me hard.

“If you say one more word, I’ll make good on my threat!” Vishal said.

I clamped my mouth shut, but I was worried—not only for Russell’s safety, but also because he could let it slip that I was the *due destini* mate in the area. I didn’t know what all the Pit Bulls thought about *due destini*, but if it was anything like how the Bitterfangs felt, that wouldn’t bode well for me.

“Russell, just come here!” the woman said. “We’re your parents—we love you; we miss you.”

She linked arms with another woman, and they both looked up at Russell, their eyes glimmering with tears.

“No!” he shouted. “I’ll never go back with you. Not without Julia!”

One of the women scoffed and shook her head. “Don’t be ridiculous! You’re only fifteen! You’re making a bigger deal of this than it is. This girl is just a crush, nothing more. Don’t throw away your life—your family—for her.”

Russell shook his head sadly. “You just don’t understand because you never listen! Julia and I could be mates, just like the two of you!” He turned to Vishal. “No matter what happens with me and Julia, I’ll never return to the Pit Bulls if you hurt Cali. She’s done nothing but be good to me. She and this pack helped me when I was hurt, tried to protect me. If you hurt them, I’ll never, ever forgive you.”

I felt Vishal’s grip loosen slightly, and I made my move. I gathered my magic and blasted him with my magic shield. I stumbled back, just as something bright soared past me and hit the ground. It was an arrow. Vishal froze, looking down at it.

I turned to see Artemis standing on the roof with her bow raised and another arrow already nocked. She took aim at Vishal, her eyes locked on him. Not a position I’d want to be in. “Take one step toward my sister, and the next one goes in your heart.”

# Episode 3613

**Xavier**

At that moment, the burning arrow smelled better to me than a grill full of barbecue. Just seeing the look on Vishal’s face was enough to make me feel all warm and tingly all over, despite the cold. I dashed forward, grabbed Cali, and pulled her close, locking my arms around her cold frame. I finally let out the breath I’d been holding from the moment I’d realized Vishal had her. I was so glad to have her back safe where she belonged.

“I hit him with my shield,” Cali said. “I didn’t know what else to do.”

“It’s okay,” I said, palming her head and pressing her cold face to my chest. “You did good. It worked.”

I locked eyes with Vishal, who looked mad enough to murder everyone in sight. *Too bad he can’t do a damn thing. Not now that Artemis has him in her sights.* It was the look that he gave Cali that really put me over the edge.

“Don’t test her aim,” I said to him, looking from Artemis to Vishal. “She never misses.”

Greyson turned to face the shocked Pit Bull Rogues. “Looks like the tables have turned,” he said with a cold smile. He strolled closer to Vishal. “The question is, what to do about it?”

I had a few ideas. Part of me wanted to make Vishal pay for what he’d done. I’d seen him pierce Cali’s neck, and it had taken everything I had not to shift and rip his throat out. The only thing that had held me back was the knowledge that he would’ve made good on his threat and killed Cali if I’d made a move. So I’d waited, biding my time, and Artemis had come and saved the day.

*I wouldn’t mind if Artemis sent a burning arrow through Vishal’s chest, anyway. In fact, I’d break out the marshmallows.*

“Nothing has changed,” Vishal snarled. He waved his hand, and even more Rogues came stalking out of the woods, shifting into wolves and howling.

“Just how many Pit Bulls are there?” Cali gasped out. “They’re everywhere!”

“Stop right there!” Artemis said. “I have more than enough arrows to take out each and every one of you, and I’m quicker than you think. Try me.”

The Pit Bulls hesitated, and I did a quick head count. We were pretty much evenly matched, though I was pretty sure that if we fought, there’d be far fewer Pit Bulls left to count afterward.

“I’m not just going to stand by and watch while you all kill each other,” Cali said. “There has to be a better solution than an all-out battle.”

I shrugged, not sure if that was the case. “They’re acting on emotion, not thinking rationally. But you’re right. No matter what happens, a battle will put Russell in grave danger, not to mention the rest of the pack—and you.”

There was no way I was going to let Cali get hurt—especially by the likes of the Pit Bull Rogues.

“I can take care of myself,” Cali said defiantly. “I can help protect you and Russell.”

I knew that Cali was strong, and her magic was a force to be reckoned with these days, but things could spiral out of control quickly, and I knew better than anyone how quickly your fortunes could shift in the thick of battle. I didn’t want to take the risk that Cali or Russell might get injured—or worse.

*There are no guarantees and no rules when you’re fighting for your life. I’ve got to get Cali out of here. She shouldn’t have been put in this position to begin with. If a fight really does break out, she could get in over her head in no time.*

I took Cali’s hand and was about to escort her back to the house when I caught sudden movement out of the corner of my eye. Not even a second later, all hell broke loose. The Pit Bulls were running toward the pack house, Artemis’s threat not enough to deter them from going for blood. These were Rogues, after all. They had no leader, no one to keep them in line. They acted on their own passions—their own bloodlust—and were probably hungry for a fight.

I shoved Cali behind me as I shifted and leapt to tackle a Pit Bull who was charging straight for us with their teeth bared. Cali raised her hands and sent a surge of blinding magic toward Vishal, just as Artemis let her arrow fly. Cali’s magic knocked him back, and Artemis’s arrow tore his sleeve, missing its mark.

I growled and tossed the Rogue aside with a whip of my neck before circling back toward Cali, ready to defend her from anyone who dared to get close to her. I tore into a Pit Bull who came running straight for her, using my paws to trample them before tearing into their neck with my teeth, only letting go once they were down for the count.

Chaos was unfolding around us as werewolf matched off against werewolf in a flurry of teeth, claws, growls, and sprays of blood. Artemis’s arrows were raining down, picking off Pit Bull Rogues, but there were so many that I worried she might not be able to make as big a dent as she’d thought. I saw Greyson barrel into two Rogues, sending them flying back. They recovered quickly and went for Greyson again. He did his best to hold his own as one flanked him and the other went straight for his throat, missing only by an inch.

*I have to get Cali out of here. It’s way too dangerous for her to stay here, and it’s only going to get worse.*

Even if the Pit Bulls didn’t know that she was *due destini*, they had to know that she was of great importance to the pack—why else would Vishal have held her as a bargaining chip?

*Get on my back, now!* I mind linked to her, hoping that she’d pay attention to me in all the confusion. Just as I’d feared, Cali was right in the thick of things, and had set her sights on a Rogue who was going after Sage. I was about to take off toward her when I was bulldozed from the side. I skidded across the frozen ground, struggling to get my bearings and fight back.

I was nearly back on my feet when the ground began to quake and I was ripped away from my attackers and pulled toward the house along with every other Redwood, all of us hooked by some unseen force. The Pit Bulls were being pulled in the opposite direction, back toward the woods.

*What the hell is happening? Is Cali okay?*

I was being twisted and tumbled around, and I struggled to get my eyes on her. When I finally did, I saw that she was being pulled back toward the house, just like the rest of us.

“Enough!” Big Mac’s voice cut through the chaos like a knife. She raised her hands, and a protective barrier formed around the house, separating the Redwoods from the confused Pit Bull Rogues.

We were all a little shaken up and were getting back on our feet as Big Mac’s voice rang out again. “Do any of you wolves have any idea how hard it is to plan a wedding with a senseless fight raging outside? I can barely hear myself think! Cut it out!”

I was finally on my feet, though my head was still spinning after being sucked through the air like a plastic bag on a breeze. I was about to complain that Big Mac should have given us a warning, but the look on her face stopped me cold. There was no way I was going to argue with her right now—especially when she’d just gotten Cali out of harm’s way, along with all the rest of us.

I watched as a few of the Pit Bulls tried to test the barrier, only to be blasted back onto their asses. None of the Redwood wolves dared to test it. We knew better. This wasn’t the first time Big Mac had used her magic to protect the pack with this kind of barrier.

Greyson shifted back. “Get Cali and get inside!” he yelled at me.

I didn’t need him to tell me that, butI bit back an insult. This wasn’t the time or place, but soon it would be, and I was going to let him have it. I swallowed my anger and headed toward Cali, who looked a little dizzy and out of sorts—just like the rest of us. *Why does my brother insist on ordering me around, especially when it comes to Cali? Doesn’t he know that I’m constantly trying to protect her, at any cost?*

I quickly shifted back and grabbed Cali’s hand, pulling her into the pack house, passing a shell-shocked Russell on our way.

“Stop it! We can’t just leave him out there—didn’t you see the look on his face? He’s scared out of his mind!” Cali snapped, struggling against me as I pulled her deeper into the pack house and away from the door. “Russell needs us, Xavier. We can’t just leave him at a time like this!”

I cornered her. “Cali, we will deal with Russell in a minute. First, I want to know what the hell you were doing out there in the first place!”

# Episode 3614

I could tell by the look in Xavier’s eye that he meant business, and that I wasn’t going to be able to escape without giving him an explanation. I didn’t blame him. He and Greyson had made it clear that they were worried about the threats in the woods, so it made sense that he was confused about why I’d ignored their warnings and gone outside anyway.

Xavier leaned in close, his eyes boring into mine. I was pressed up against the wall, and he had me boxed in with his hands on either side of my head. “Cali, you knew it wasn’t safe for you to go out there, but you did it anyway. You put yourself in danger. Why would you do that? You had us worried sick when we couldn’t find you. We didn’t know what might have happened, if you’d been hurt, or worse…”

I hesitated, wondering how much to tell him. That wisp had been unlike any I’d ever encountered before, and I was still trying to make sense of it. I knew I should be straight with my mates about what had happened, but they already had enough to worry about without me adding to the pile. I couldn’t stop thinking about all they’d gone through to get the Shard. Artemis, too—she’d almost died! I didn’t want to bring up the fact that something weird was going on and that it might have something to do with the Shard that they’d risked so much to get. We’d all been so happy that the Shard seemed to be counteracting the Seluna aftershocks, but it was obviously not ideal if it was bringing on a new slew of issues.

*Maybe all of this is happening because the Shard is such a rare item. Maybe I’m just being targeted by Fae who want it for themselves. It’s* their *relic, after all, and that warlock had to have wanted it for a reason. How did he get his hands on it, anyway? He had to have stolen it…*

The warlock was obsessed with Fae objects—maybe he’d murdered someone to get his hands on it, and that caused it to be cursed or something? I didn’t know if that was a thing, but I’d learned time and time again that anything was possible.

*Does that explain the weird wisp? A Fae could have used it as part of a plan to get the Shard.* The more I thought about it, the more my theory made sense: someone had used magic on the wisp to trick me into handing over the Shard.

I took a deep breath as my mind spiraled deeper into theories explaining why the wisp had tried to take the Shard.

“Cali?” Xavier pressed. “What’s going on with you? Answer me! Why were you outside? You knew how dangerous it was out there. We’ve got all kinds of strange wolves coming at us from all sides. Why would you go out there and put yourself in harm’s way like that?”

“Because I saw a wisp!” I blurted out.

Xavier mulled this over. “Like the one you saw while we were running back from the Samara campsite?”

I nodded slowly. “I think so…”

I was about to explain the strange pull I’d felt when I heard Greyson’s voice coming from outside.

“Xavier! Get out here!” Greyson shouted.

Xavier pushed off the wall and gave me a kiss.

“We’ll finish this later. Apparently, my Alpha brother needs me,” he said bitterly. He rolled his eyes as he headed out.

I watched him go, not sure what to do. Now that Big Mac was shielding the house, there was no immediate danger—thank god—so I figured I should go talk to Russell and make sure he was okay. I was about to head out to the porch, where I’d last seen him, when I saw that Torin had already taken the boy under his wing. He’d given him some sort of pastry that was covered in icing and oozing with filling. Violet was there, too, and they were talking to him, clearly trying to cheer him up.

I hung back, going back to thinking about my conversation with Xavier.

*He’s not going to drop this. I know him. I need to get more answers about the wisp before he finds me again. And who better to ask than my mom? Maybe she can shed some light on the whole thing.*

I went looking for her and ran into her and my dad just as they were coming in from the porch.

“Cali!” Mom pulled me into a tight hug. “We were just coming in to look for you.”

I hugged her back, and my father enveloped us both in his arms. “We’re so glad you’re okay, honey. It looked touch and go for a minute there,” he said.

“I know,” I said, feeling so grateful that they’d delayed their return to Minnesota.

I pulled away, feeling a flash of awkwardness. I wanted to talk to my mom alone since this was Fae stuff, but I didn’t want to just kick my dad out. It wasn’t like I didn’t value his advice, but when it came to Fae stuff, I wasn’t sure that he’d be very helpful, and I didn’t want him to worry unnecessarily. I gave my mom a look, and, obviously taking the hint, my dad cleared his throat.

“Torin wants to cook one of his traditional post-battle banquets—I think I’ll go help him get a head start,” he said. “And I think I’ll check on the kid, too. We passed him on the way in, and he looked pretty shaken up.”

“Honey, that sounds like a wonderful idea,” Mom said, planting a kiss on his cheek. “I’ll come find you soon, okay?”

“Okay!” Dad gave both of our arms a squeeze before he headed off.

Mom took me by the arm and pulled me into the living room.

“Is everything okay? Is something going on? Or rather, is something *else* going on?” she asked with a shake of her head.

“Yes,” I said with a sigh. “But I’m not exactly sure where to start.”

“Start at the beginning, sweetie.”

“There was a wisp,” I said, trying to figure out how to tell her everything she needed to know without worrying her. In the end, I just told her everything that I remembered, right down to the hovering rock and the urging voice.

My mother took it all in, her brow knitted as I relayed the story. “This wisp, you’re sure that it asked you to take the Shard off?” she asked.

I nodded, instinctively putting my hand on the Shard. “Yes, it definitely wanted me to take it off, and it definitely felt like it was compelling me to do it—it was almost like I lost control for a second.”

My mother shook her head and looked down at the floor. “That’s not good,” she said softly.

My stomach dropped. “Really?”

I’d known that there was something not right about it all, but it was still jarring to hear my mother confirm it.

“I’ve never heard of wisp asking anyone—let alone a Fae—to do something like that. Just like anything, there are good wisps and neutral wisps, and some are downright mischievous, but they usually just lead a Fae to something or have a message to deliver. They usually aren’t so… commanding. That’s the part that worries me. The fact that it lured you there to that spot… No. I don’t like this at all.”

“Mom, you’re scaring me,” I said, still gripping the Shard. I could feel the faintest vibration against my fingertips as I touched it.

“I’m sorry, honey—you know that I don’t mean to scare you—but this is just highly irregular.”

“I know. But I don’t get it. Why would this happen to me? Why would this sort of wisp seek me out?”

My mother shook her head. “I don’t know.” Her eyes fell to the Shard, and her expression darkened just a little. “But it could be because of the Shard. I’m certain that warlock—Steve, was it? He likely had run-ins with Fae while trying to get his hands on it. It’s a powerful, rare object, and I can imagine that he didn’t come by it without difficulty. He was certainly doing everything in his power to hold on to it. There’s no doubt that something like that would draw a lot of attention.”

I swallowed roughly. “That’s not good. We already have enough attention on us as it is.” I sighed. “I’ve never had any of this happen to me before.”

“I know, sweetheart. I wish I had a definitive answer for you. The only thing I know for sure is that this wisp wasn’t behaving normally, and honestly, I’m not convinced that it was a wisp at all.”

I shivered. It had certainly looked like a wisp, but if I really thought about it, that was where the similarities ended. Nothing it had done had followed the pattern of my past wisp experiences.

“But what could that mean, Mom?” I asked. “If it wasn’t a wisp, then what was it?”

My mother took a deep breath and hesitated, as if she didn’t want to say what was on the tip of her tongue. But then she did, and I wished she’d decided not to speak after all.

“Cali,” she said, “I believe someone conjured up that wisp to go after you.”

# Episode 3615

Now I was completely thrown. “Did I really fall for a fake wisp? If so, that would explain why it felt like something was wrong—because something *was* wrong. I can’t believe this is happening!”

My mother shook her head. “Let’s not think the worst just yet. I’m only guessing about this, Cali, but I’d had a lot of encounters with wisps, and what you’re describing doesn’t sound right at all.”

“If someone *did* conjure this wisp, who or what would do that?” I touched the Shard. “Am I right to be suspicious of this thing? Maybe I should take it off, just to be safe.”

Mom reached out to still my hand. “I think the Shard and the so-called wisp are two entirely different things. I believe the Shard is helping you—I saw it with my own eyes. It even helped slow the Dark Fae poison in Artemis.”

I relaxed a little, letting my hand fall away from the Shard. “You’re right. I *have* been feeling better since I put it on. If I take it off, I wonder if I’ll end up worse than I was before?”

Mom pulled me into a hug. “Don’t worry about that, Cali. Just keep it on for now, okay?”

“Okay. But what do I do if another wisp appears?” I thought about how the wisp had seemed to overtake my body and alter reality. What would happen if it came after me again?

“Then come get me as soon as you see it,” Mom said decisively. “Will you do that?”

“I’ll try, though I have to wonder how I’ll be able to tell whether or not it’s a real wisp next time.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “Either way, if you see a wisp, come get me and we’ll figure it out together, okay?”

“Thanks, Mom,” I said, hugging her again. I closed my eyes and leaned into her embrace. I felt better just knowing that my mother wasn’t panicking. I pulled away and sighed, trying to stay positive. “I’m going to go check on Russell and see how Dad is doing.”

“Okay, honey. But remember, if you catch a single glimpse of that wisp—or any wisp—you come and get me.”

“I will, Mom. I promise.”

I left my mother to go find my dad and Russell. I was trying to keep my mind clear, but I couldn’t stop replaying what had happened in the woods in my head. Being grabbed and threatened by Vishal had been terrifying, but what would have happened to me if he hadn’t grabbed me? What could I have done with that wisp?

I was busy getting lost in a sea of what-ifs when I remembered something that Xavier—or possibly Greyson—had once told me: don’t worry about what has happened, or what might have happened. Move on and think about what lies ahead.

I decided to follow that advice. For now.

I found Russell and my dad huddled together in one of the studies. I paused in the doorway, listening.

“Don’t worry, son, the pack is here for you and will help you through this. It’ll all be okay.” My dad hugged Russell, and the boy clung to him.

“Thank you, Tom. That really makes me feel better. I was so scared; I didn’t know what was going to happen. I thought that Cali or my moms might get hurt!”

“I know, but thankfully we have good people here, and we won’t let anything happen to the people you care about—if we can help it,” my dad said. “We’ll do everything we can.”

He stood up and smiled when he saw me standing in the doorway.

I smiled at Russell, and my dad led me away from the study.

“Dad, you’re always so good at making things okay,” I said. “You have a knack for it.”

“It’s one of those rare dad talents, I guess,” he said with a crooked smile. “So, how did your talk with your mom go? Well, I hope?”

“You know Mom; she always has all the answers.”

Dad grinned. “She sure does. She’s an amazing woman—but you already knew that, didn’t you?”

“I did,” I said with a chuckle. “So, how’s Russell holding up?”

His smile fell. “I feel for the kid, I really do. Maybe he’s right and Julia’s the love of his life, or maybe his parents are right, but the bottom line is that they need to discuss it—but not until they cool down.”

I sighed and glanced back at the study. “I know, but I’m starting to wonder if that’ll ever happen. I’m worried that Russell’s going to be forced to go with them against his will.”

Dad nodded slowly. “I know, but that’s life. Sometimes parents have to make tough choices for their kids. If you ran away, don’t you think I’d want you back? No matter what? Why do you think we didn’t try to stop you from going back to Oregon with Xavier after you’d only known him for what, a few weeks?”

I was a little surprised to hear this. We’d never really discussed it before. “Because I was happy?”

“Yes, but we also didn’t want to lose you. Imagine if we’d said no and forbidden you from going with him. You would’ve gone to Oregon anyway, and who knows when we would have heard from you again?”

“Dad, no—that never would’ve happened.”

He gave me a skeptical look. “It happens all the time. Obviously, it worked out this time—there’s a lot of love between you and Xavier—but I’m sure you can see how it looked at the beginning.”

“That’s fair,” I conceded.

“Ultimately, parents want what’s best for their kids. I’m sure that Russell and his parents will work things out.” He gave me a kiss on the cheek. “Now, where’d you leave your mom?”

“In the living room—but aren’t you on banquet duty with Torin?”

“No. Apparently, Violet told him that there shouldn’t be any banqueting until there isn’t a pack of Rogues being held back by a barrier in the front yard. Torin and I agreed.”

I watched him hurry off to rejoin my mother, thinking about how lucky I was to have parents like them. I shuddered to think that I could have been stuck with parents like Russell’s or Julia’s—parents who were so lost in their own wants that they didn’t have time to think about what their kids wanted.

I turned to see Xavier and Greyson coming back inside. I realized that I was going to have to answer for why I’d gone outside with the Pit Bulls and Bitterfangs roaming around. Xavier was going to ask—there was no doubt about that—and Greyson wasn’t going to let it drop, either.

“Cali!” Greyson said, pulling me into a quick hug and kissing me on the top of the head. I couldn’t help but notice that Xavier rolled his eyes and looked away. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

“Yeah, Big Mac certainly broke up that fight at record speed,” I said.

“Tell me about it. My back still feels a little tweaked from her stunt,” Xavier grumbled.

“Let’s go somewhere private to talk?” I suggested.

“Of course. You lead the way,” Greyson said.

I took them to one of the studies and shut the door. Taking a deep breath, I turned to face them both. “I just want to apologize. I’m sorry that I got captured by Vishal.”

Greyson shook his head. “Why are you apologizing for that asshole? It wasn’t your fault.”

“No, but I shouldn’t have gone out there in the first place. It’s just…” I hesitated, wondering how much of the story I could bend without turning it into a full-blown lie. “… I went outside because I was following a wisp. I know I shouldn’t have done it, but I did. I talked to my mother about it, and she thinks it’s fine, but I just wanted to let you both know.”

“You told me before that you saw a wisp—and I think you were about to tell me something else about it when Greyson interrupted.” He glared at his brother. “What was it?”

“Oh, nothing much,” I said blithely. “Just that it led me out into the woods and that I wanted to follow it, since it really seemed like it needed to show me something. I thought it might be important, or else I would’ve ignored it. But then Vishal showed up, and that was that.”

I hated leaving out some—well, *all*—of the key details, but there was no way I was going to tell them about hearing Seluna’s voice. I definitely wasn’t going to tell them that the wisp had urged me to take off the Shard, and I sure as hell wasn’t going to tell them that my mother thought the wisp had been acting strangely and might have been conjured by someone with unknown motives. I knew exactly how they’d react to information like that, and I wasn’t ready to worry them—not yet.

*Shit. I’m keeping a lot from them. There’s so much that I’m not telling them—which means that there’s a hell of a lot that could really spell trouble. I don’t like this at all. What am I going to do?*

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that I might have gotten mixed up in something bad. Too many suspicious things had happened all at once for it to be pure coincidence. Still, I couldn’t make myself tell them everything. I just couldn’t.

I swallowed roughly as I looked into my mates’ eyes. *Do they know I’m lying?*

# Episode 3616

**Greyson**

“That’s it, that’s why I was out there. Again, I’m sorry,” Cali said, her eyes darting quickly down to the floor. “I hope you both understand why I did what I did.”

The only thing I understood was that she was lying. I knew her too well.

*There has to be a reason why she’s keeping the truth from us, but what is it? It’s not like her to lie. Not to me.*

I wanted to press her harder to figure out what she was hiding, but there was already so much going on that I didn’t know if I had the bandwidth to take on anything else at the moment. I’d drop it for now, but I wasn’t going to forget. Whatever was going on, I was going to get to the bottom of it.

I looked at my brother. *Maybe she’s trying to keep Xavier in line?* I thought to myself. *He’s so impulsive… Perhaps she’s worried that if she tells the truth, Xavier will do something rash and make matters worse. It wouldn’t be the first time.*

As much as I wanted to question Cali further, I clung to the hope—the belief—that she would open up to me later when we were alone. I knew that Cali always wanted to prevent strife between us, and to avoid putting us in a position where we would have to risk our lives for her, but I didn’t care about any of that. I’d risk my life in a minute if it meant I could save Cali from even a minute of suffering. She should’ve realized by now that any attempt to keep her mates from putting their lives on the line to protect her was futile.

“I promise I won’t run off again—or at least if I do, I’ll let you know beforehand,” Cali finished, meeting our eyes once again.

I glanced at Xavier, wondering if he could see straight through Cali like I could. Xavier was a lot of things, but stupid wasn’t one of them. *He has to know that something’s up with this story. He knows her almost as well as I do.*

“So… I guess I’ll go find Artemis and thank her for the arrows,” Cali said, already heading for the door. “Sorry again.”

With that, she was gone.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Xavier said, “You know she’s lying, right?”

I nodded slowly. “Yeah, but she must have her reasons. If she doesn’t bring it up again on her own, we’ll have to push her.”

Xavier nodded but didn’t say anything else on the matter. He sighed. “Guess I’ll go check on the witch barrier situation. Make sure it’s holding.”

He left the room without another word.

*Speaking of the barrier…* I went looking for Big Mac and found her in the living room with her head stuck in a wedding book full of Post-it Notes. She was cursing under her breath and massaging her temples. Her head snapped up as I approached, and she looked like she would’ve shot laser beams at me from her eyes, given the opportunity.

“Oh, I should’ve known that none of you would leave me alone, even after I saved your asses. Planning a wedding in a pack house is impossible!” She slammed the book shut, and it felt like the floor rumbled under my feet. “What do you want now?”

Her mood was epically foul, but I had no choice but to bother her. I had questions.

“How long do you think the barrier will hold?” I asked, getting right to the point.

“I don’t know. As long as my magic holds out. It feeds off my energy. When that’s gone, the barrier goes.”

I remembered back when Big Mac had erected a similar barrier during our fight against Letifer and the revenants. We’d all been trapped in the pack house, and I didn’t want to put the pack through that again—especially in a case like this, where we were only peripherally involved in the fight. Though right now, we were standing right in the crossfire.

*At this point, it would be way easier just to hand the kid over to his parents. If this were Fenrir, wouldn’t I just hand him over to Maren? Of course I would… But if it were Aiden doing the asking, I wouldn’t even think about it.*

There was no easy answer. Russell’s parents only wanted their son back—and I understood that. Were they really responsible for Vishal taking Cali hostage? One of Russell’s moms had spoken out and said that she didn’t want anyone to be hurt, but could I trust that? It was so hard to know what was what when you were dealing with a pack of Rogues. Who was to blame?

“Hello? Earth to Greyson? Did you hear me? I was saying that we’re not trapped like last time, if that’s what you’re thinking. We can leave any time we want.”

I looked at her, confused. “What? But there’s a barrier.”

I thought back to the way the Pit Bulls had been knocked back when they’d tried to break through.

“Yeah, but it’s a one-way barrier, meaning we can leave, but once we do, there’s no coming back in.”

I sighed. “That’s not all that helpful. Being trapped in or out is a pain in the ass. Either way, we’re trapped. There’s not much of a difference.”

Big Mac heaved one of the biggest sighs I’d ever heard, and that was saying something. She stood up. “I could let you back in.”

“Then why didn’t you say that?” I growled.

Big Mac narrowed her eyes. “Because that would require me to let the barrier down. And do you know what that means? That means you and your new friends out there would have equal access to the house.”

“Shit. This is such a mess.”

“Fine! Why don’t I dissolve the barrier right now, and you can all tear each other to shreds? Maybe *then* I’ll get a little peace and quiet!” She looked up at the ceiling like she was really considering it. “I’ll just make a new barrier to protect me and Sabine, and the rest of you can do whatever the hell you want. Sounds good to me—what do you think?”

She made a show of lifting her hands as if preparing to cast a spell.

“Okay, okay!” I said. “I get it. Basically, we have protection, or we don’t.”

“Well, it sounds like you finally do get it. Yes. And it takes a lot to keep the barrier up, so put it to good use while you can, okay?” she said, her voice softening just a little.

“Thanks, Big Mac. I’ll leave you to it.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” she said, settling back down in her chair and slamming the wedding book back open.

As I moved through the house, I could already hear grumbles from the pack about being locked up. Again.

*I’m going to have to address this… and the fact that there are still Rogues out there trying to get to Russell.*

On top of everything else, now I had to worry that the pack might get sick of being contained, especially if there wasn’t an end in sight. I knew they were prepared to protect Russell, but I wondered how long it would be before they wanted to hand the kid over so they could go on with their lives.

“Everyone, get down here!” I yelled. “Pack meeting in the living room, right now!”

I leaned against the wall, watching everyone trickle in. Once everyone was settled, I got right down to business.

“I just want to make it clear that we will *not* be handing Russell over,” I said bluntly. “I want to end this as much as the rest of you, but that’s not the way. He doesn’t want to go, and I’m not going to force him. I know all too well what it’s like to deal with horrible parents.”

“That’s the thing.” Russell sniffled. “My moms aren’t bad people—they’re good, and I love them—but they just don’t understand me. It’s breaking my heart.”

“Then maybe it’d be best to mediate between you,” Cali said, her voice strong. “Maybe if we just have a calm conversation, we can find some kind of positive work-around.”

I smiled at Cali, loving the way she was taking charge and showing up as a force within the pack. It was kind of a double-edged sword, though, seeing her take to a leadership role like this. On the one hand, it made me happy to think that she would be a good Luna, but on the other, it reminded me that she couldn’t actually be my Luna with the *due destini* and her fear of choosing hanging over our heads.

“That sounds good, but it would never work,” Russell said. “My moms are so dead set against me being with Julia that I don’t think they’ll agree to anything other than me leaving with them. And leaving Julia behind.”

“Russell, maybe that’s not true,” Cali said. “Perhaps they’re just trying to look out for you, and they have it all wrong. Do they know Julia? Have they ever met her?”

Russell shook his head. “No, they’ve never even said two words to each other.”

Cali’s eyes brightened. “Then that’s perfect. We’ll just have to introduce Julia to your moms!”

# Episode 3617

“This is such a good idea!” I continued. “If your moms meet Julia, then they’ll see for themselves how nice and sweet she is, and they’ll finally understand what you see in her. They might even approve!”

I couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought of this before. If Julia was even half as sweet as she’d seemed when we’d met, then how could Russell’s parents *not* like her? My idea had been inspired by my conversation with my dad, and I couldn’t see how it wouldn’t work. Parents wanted their kids to be with good, kind people, right? Julia seemed to be all that and more. What would they be able to hold against her if they finally met her and saw how amazing she was?

My excitement waned a little when I saw the looks on my mates’ faces. I was going to have to win them over if I wanted to put my plan in motion. I just hoped it wouldn’t be too difficult. We didn’t have much time to spare, and we needed a solution fast—something other than fighting until only one side was left standing.

“Maybe…” Russell said, seeming as skeptical as my mates.

“I’ll mediate the whole thing,” I said quickly. “Hell, I could even go out and talk to your moms first, on your behalf. I’ll give it to them straight, tell them there won’t be a resolution without some kind of compromise—namely having a simple conversation with Julia. What’s the harm in that? I can’t see why they wouldn’t agree. So, Russell, would you like for me to do that? I’m happy to go test the waters.”

Russell finally seemed to perk up a bit. “You’d really do that for me, Cali?”

“Of course!”

“That’s all well and good,” Greyson interrupted, “but right now, we have to address the bigger issue—Vishal could have seriously injured you, Cali. He took you by force. That can’t fly. He has to pay for what he did to you.”

I touched my throat and felt the sting of the wound where Vishal had dug his claw in. There’d been so much excitement, and my adrenaline had been pumping so hard after the fight that I’d nearly forgotten about it. Now the memory of those tense moments came crashing back.

“Despite the possibility of heartache for Julia and Russell, we have to get our priorities straight,” Greyson continued. “I don’t want anyone putting themselves in harm’s way—especially not you, Cali.”

“But, Greyson—”

“Cali, I know you mean well,” Greyson interrupted. “Talking to the moms is a nice idea, but in order to have them meet Julia, someone would have to bring her here—and that would be dangerous for everyone involved, considering the gang of Rogues outside itching for a fight. And don’t forget that we have to think about Julia’s pack, too. This is a lot more complicated than just arranging a meet and greet with Russell’s parents.”

I was starting to worry that Greyson was going to shut the entire thing down before we even tried. This was probably going to be one of those rare times when he and Xavier saw eye to eye.

“Will you at least agree to let me talk to the moms?” I pressed.

“Cali, no!” he said. “It’s not safe. We know that. Even if I agreed to it, once you go through the barrier, you can’t get back in. We’d have to drop the barrier to let you come back, and then we’d lose its protection and put everyone in danger. It’s too risky.”

“That settles that,” Xavier said decisively.

*Just like I thought. They’ve decided to team up and block the sole possibly non-violent solution.*

I tried to keep my cool and wracked my brain for another approach to get them to agree.

Artemis stepped forward. She still had her bow strapped to her back. “What if I went out with Cali? My arrows would come in handy if things got out of hand.”

“Artemis, I appreciate that, but you don’t have enough arrows to take all of those Rogues,” Greyson said. “Though I know you’d put up quite a fight.”

“But this could really work!” Lola interjected. “My parents didn’t like Jay until they really had a chance to sit down and talk with him. Now they love him!”

“Eh, I’m not sure they LOVE me,” Jay said. “In fact, I’m not even sure they like me. ‘Tolerate me’ is probably more apt.”

“That’s not true, Jay! They love you! I know it!” Lola said.

Jay shook his head and smirked. “Whatever you say, babe.”

“Listen, I understand your hesitation,” I said, approaching Greyson and Xavier as Jay and Lola kept arguing. “I don’t want to put the entire pack at risk, either. So what if I talk to the moms *through* the barrier?”

Greyson and Xavier looked at each other, mulling it over. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Greyson nodded. “Fine, okay. We’ll try it your way.”

“Yes!” Russell said, pumping his fists in the air. “Maybe I can go with Cali?”

I could see how eager he was to reconcile with his parents, and it warmed my heart. I wondered if his fear of them was a little overblown, because of the circumstances. His parents probably weren’t all that bad if they’d raised a good kid like him. Still, I didn’t want to complicate things.

“Why don’t I go talk to them first?” I said. “That way I can get a sense of how receptive they are to the idea. Would that work for you?”

Russell nodded quickly. “Yes, anything to get me and Julia back together—with my parents’ support.”

I smiled at him, feeling like this could really work. This would only be a half-victory—there were still the Bitterfangs to contend with—but still, baby steps. “Okay, then it’s decided. My mates have given the okay, and we can do this without putting the pack in danger.” I took Russell’s hand. “I’m going to do everything I can to persuade them. I promise.”

I didn’t want to give Xavier and Greyson a chance to change their minds, so I rushed to the front door and opened it. Immediately, the Pit Bulls stood at attention. They all moved forward to line up against the barrier, and I swallowed audibly as I approached, hoping that everything was going to go as planned.

Greyson and Xavier were right behind me, and I could sense their tension. There were way more Pit Bulls than I’d first thought. One of them smacked the barrier, not hard enough for it to reverberate and bounce him off, but enough to send magic rippling across the barrier with an electric-sounding crackle.

I took a deep breath, reminding myself that I was safe and that the barrier was there to protect us. Big Mac wasn’t one to cast a half-assed spell. Regardless, the barrier couldn’t protect me from the intense stares that each and every Pit Bull was throwing my way—especially Vishal.

I approached the edge of the barrier and waved.

“Hey, it’s me again.” I immediately felt stupid, but I couldn’t let that shake my resolve. I cleared my throat. “I’d like to talk to Russell’s parents, please?”

Two werewolves broke free from the others and stepped forward.

“What?” one of the women snapped. “Unless this is about you giving our son back, we don’t want to hear it.”

“I know that you’re both upset, and that we got off on the wrong foot with all of this. I just wanted to come to you both with a sort of peace offering.”

There was a ripple of conversation among the Pit Bulls. Vishal snorted like he couldn’t believe what he was hearing, but I ignored him—and everyone else—and kept going.

“Russell wants to give his parents the opportunity to meet Julia. She’s what this whole fight is about, and I think that if you both took the time to meet her and talk with her, then you’d see what she and Russell have together.” I paused, waiting for some kind of response. When none came, I cleared my throat again and kept going, hoping they couldn’t hear the hint of nervousness in my voice. *Tough crowd…* “I got the chance to see Russell and Julia together, and I have to say that it really seems like they have a lot of love and respect for each other. I know they’re young, but I’m sure all of you can remember being young, too, and how it felt to have your first love.”

Russell’s moms exchanged skeptical looks.

“And you’re sure this is what Russell wants?” one of the women finally asked, her expression unreadable.

I let out a breath. *Now we’re getting somewhere.* “Yes, this is what he wants. There’s nothing he wants more than for you to give Julia a chance. He really, really loves her. I know you both want what’s best for him, and that’s why you’re resistant to this, but I think that if you take a moment to really see what your son wants—what he needs—we’ll all come out of this better than before. So give it a chance and meet her. Do you think you can do that?”

The two women whispered to each other for what seemed like forever before they finally turned back to look at me.

“We agree,” they said in near unison. “We’ll meet her.”

*Yes! I did it! I DID it! I can’t believe it! I may have actually just stopped a pack war!*

The friendlier-looking of the two women spoke up, halting my internal celebration. “But we have one condition.”

My heart went cold, and my pulse began to race. “What’s that?”

“Russell has to be there, too.”

# Episode 3618

I paused. My very first thought was that bringing Russell along to his parents’ meeting with Julia was the best solution. After all, he wanted to see Julia more than anyone. But it was one thing to be with Julia one-on-one, and another to have his parents watch their every move. Especially parents who didn’t want their son to be with Julia at all.

Trouble really seemed to have a habit of finding me. At least this time it was for a good cause.

“I’ll go talk to Russell about your suggestion,” I told his moms.

“Why can’t we talk to him directly?” asked the one on the left.

Her tone wasn’t hostile, and that was good enough for me. As long as the barrier was up, everything would be fine. It wasn’t like they could snatch him up against his will.

“I’m going to ask him about that too,” I said. Both Russell’s parents nodded curtly after exchanging a look. I walked past my mates—Xavier was unsurprisingly scowling, Greyson was unsurprisingly poker-faced—and said, “I’ll be right back.”

I found Russell watching through the window. He looked so young. I felt this cloud of protectiveness overwhelming me at the sight of him. When he turned to face me, he reminded me of freaking Bambi.

*My heart!*

“What’s going on?” he asked anxiously.

“Would you be willing to be there when your parents meet Julia?” I asked.

The kid looked shocked before his face split into a huge smile. “Wait, did they really agree to meet her?”

“Yes, they—”

“Of course I’ll come!” He started waving his hands around excitedly. “I’d do anything to see Julia again! And if my parents want to see her too, that means… It means that things might not be as bad as I thought!”

As he kept rambling on about how happy he was that his moms had changed their minds, the possibility that Russell’s parents weren’t monsters became more of a certainty. It sounded like they were even *nice* in comparison to Julia’s father. I was still grateful for the magical barrier Big Mac had put up, though. Even if I did feel that Russell’s parents cared about him, I still wasn’t so sure that they wouldn’t just grab him and run.

Russell was still prattling on excitedly. “So I can talk to them right now?”

“I don’t see why not,” I said, and he immediately bolted past me and toward the door.

“Hey, wait!” Fighting to catch my breath, I ran after him and blocked his path. “Please try to temper your expectations, okay? Your parents barely agreed to talk—try not to push things too much.”

He nodded emphatically. “Right, sure, thanks!” And then he dashed outside.

*Did he hear a word I just said, or…?*

A moment later, Russell was up against the barrier, and I was back with my mates. In an attempt to maintain my dignity, I hadn’t tried to run after Russell this time.

Xavier was still scowling, watching the kid with his moms. Greyson’s face was no longer blank, though.

“That does *not* look like a kid who’s scared of his parents,” he said, eyebrows arched.

“Yeah,” I said. “He didn’t hesitate at all when I asked him to talk to them…”

All three of us watched as the two women placed their hands on the barrier as if to touch Russell. As the three of them talked, there were pained looks on their faces.

“They sure don’t seem like the monsters Russell originally made them out to be,” I muttered.

Xavier was still scowling. He’d been wearing the same expression for the past fifteen minutes, but it was a very sexy expression, so I’d allow it. Meanwhile, Greyson shook his head, as if lost in thought.

I looked up at him. “What?”

His tone was dark. “I feel like the Bitterfangs won’t be so easy to deal with.”

I swallowed, remembering the things that Julia had said about her father, about her pack. How the Bitterfang Alpha wanted Russell dead for seducing his daughter, and how he wouldn’t hesitate to kill Julia for running away and shaming their name.

“Do you think there’s a chance Julia’s overreacting, like Russell was?” I asked.

Greyson shot a look at Xavier. Xavier turned to me, shaking his head.

“Russell never actually said his parents were monsters,” he admitted begrudgingly. “He just said they didn’t understand him. It’s obvious the Bitterfangs are the bigger threat, here.”

“Especially if it’s true that they’d want to harm you just because you’re a *due destini* mate and that goes against their fucked-up values,” Greyson added. His gaze was hard.

My stomach throbbed, and silence fell over the three of us.

*Don’t think about the danger, Cali*, I told myself. *You have to help these kids.*

At least it really did seem like Russell’s parents cared about him. I’d told Russell not to get his hopes up about them meeting Julia, but here I was, doing the same thing.

Just then, the kid came running over, a huge smile on his face. “I talked to them and explained everything! When can we go meet Julia?”

I opened my mouth to reply, heartened by the kid’s happy expression, but Greyson spoke up first. “That was easy. You made it seem like you were terrified of your parents, Russell—did something change?”

Russell blinked in surprise. “Um, no? I told you they were good people, but they just didn’t understand me. They didn’t want me to be with Julia, and I…” Russell clasped at his chest, as if he were in physical pain. “I just couldn’t deal with that.”

Greyson eyed him. “But now they *do* understand you?”

Russell sobered, nodding. “I guess? They’re at least ready to listen. I think they’re super scared the Bitterfangs will kill me if I run away with Julia. Like, terrified.”

Well, then. Wasn’t THAT just swell?

“Anyway, when are we leaving to go see her?” Russell asked eagerly.

Greyson shook his head. “We need to figure a few things out first, Russell.”

Xavier snorted. “More than a few.”

“What do you guys think about all this?” Greyson asked once he, Xavier, and I were alone.

“I’m not ready to trust the Pit Bulls,” Xavier said immediately. “They may see this as a chance to get their son back against his will and start a fight with our pack. Russell could turn into an excuse to start a war with us and claim our territory.”

Greyson nodded. “That’s a possibility.”

I was shocked. “No, it’s not! Didn’t you see how Russell was with his parents? No one can fake that kind of emotion.”

“This is werewolf politics, Cali,” Xavier said. “The Pit Bulls know we’re watching them, testing them. I’ve seen people lie for a lot less. We need to be careful.”

“We should agree to a neutral gathering place for Russell’s parents to meet Julia,” Greyson said. “And we need to have enough Redwoods with us in case the Pit Bulls try anything, or if we run into the Bitterfangs.”

“Do you really think that’s necessary?” I asked nervously.

“Russell’s moms may love their son, but these are Rogues we’re dealing with, and Vishal threatened you, Cali,” Greyson said, his voice unwavering. “And if everything we’ve heard about the Bitterfang pack and their Alpha is true, we could end up with a major problem on our hands. Besides, as soon as we take Russell and Julia away from their safe houses, both kids will be vulnerable. They’ll need protection.”

“We should ask everyone to meet at Three Devils Point,” Xavier said. “It’s neutral ground, and we can easily get back to our territory from there.”

Xavier and Greyson talked strategy for another minute or two, and I hoped they were simply trying to cover for the worst-case scenario. More than anything, I wanted a happy ending here, and that meant Russell and Julia reuniting without any danger in sight.

When we returned to the barrier, Russell’s parents were looking almost hopeful.

“We will join our son and meet Julia,” the one on the right said.

“I’ll escort him personally,” I told them.

Greyson started to explain the details of the meeting while Xavier took my hand, pulling me closer. His voice was low. “You did great out there, baby. You managed to get everyone to talk and agree on something instead of trying to start a war.” He smirked. “Which is probably what I would’ve done, no questions asked.”

I snorted at his words, shaking my head while he hugged me. This felt really good, actually—like I’d acted the way a good Luna was meant to.

*This is what I call character development, folks!*

After Greyson finished talking with Russell’s moms, the Pit Bulls began to recede into the woods. Russell was prattling on to Greyson about how excited he was for Julia to meet his moms. Greyson sighed and nodded.

I suppressed a smile when I realized that he looked like a long-suffering dad.

“I’m really happy for you,” I told Russell, giving him a hug.

But when I looked over his shoulder, Vishal was still lingering at the barrier. My stomach dropped when I remembered the feeling of his claw at my neck.

With his dark eyes fixed on me, Vishal said, “We’ll see you at dusk.”

# Episode 3619

**Xavier**

I noticed Vishal hovering by the barrier like a fucking creep. He’d said something to Cali as she’d hugged Russell. The moment we got back inside the pack house, I pulled her aside. I tried not to sound angry or worried, but I pretty much failed.

“What the fuck did Vishal want?” I asked. “Why did he look at you like that?”

Cali sighed, looking both uncomfortable and exasperated. “Xavier, chill. He just said he’d see us at dusk.”

I crossed my arms. “That sounds like a threat to me.”

Cali gripped my arms, looking up at me. “Don’t make a scene over this, please. I know you’re upset about what Vishal did, but we need to keep our cool here.”

I nodded, but all I could think was that I wanted to kill Vishal for attacking Cali. Depending on how things went down, I could still get the chance, and I couldn’t fucking wait. Right now, though, I wanted to ask Cali about the wisp. I had to give her a chance to tell me the truth about how she’d ended up in the forest, where that asshole had gotten to her.

“You know, when Vishal found you—”

She cut me off. “Please, I don’t want to talk about this anymore, okay?” She grabbed my hand and pulled me to the living room. “Come on, let’s see what Greyson’s saying to the others.”

Realizing that the wisp thing was going to have to wait, I followed her. Greyson had reassembled the pack and filled everybody in. Apparently, some people would be part of tonight’s meeting, and others would stay back.

“We can’t leave the pack house vulnerable,” Greyson was saying. “There’s a chance that the pack is the real target here, and this is some kind of elaborate scheme to trick us for some reason or another.”

“This whole thing is suspicious, for sure,” Ravi said. “Especially so close to the pack summit.”

“But what about the barrier?” Sage asked. “Won’t that protect the pack house?”

“It will, but it’s putting a strain on Big Mac to keep it active,” Greyson said. “And the barrier also means that whoever goes out won’t be able to return until it comes down.”

So once we were on the other side of the barrier, we’d be on our own. I had no problem with that—wouldn’t mind taking down a few Pit Bulls and Bitterfangs along the way if necessary. But I didn’t like the idea of Cali being exposed like that. Then again, she *had* handled Vishal pretty well. His face when she’d blasted him had been fucking *priceless*.

“Why are you smiling?” Cali whispered, tugging on my arm.

I pushed the image of Vishal being knocked on his ass out of my head and cleared my throat. “Nothing. I’m just proud of how you brought all this together.”

Cali smiled back, blushing a little, and I wrapped an arm around her and kissed the side of her head.

“So the Bitterfangs are really threatening to slaughter a fifteen-year-old boy?” Mikah asked, speaking up. “And they would harm their own daughter too, just because she disobeyed them and ran away?”

“We can’t be certain, but all clues so far point to yes,” Greyson said evenly. “They consider the *due destini* an abomination as well. They cite their ‘traditional values’ as a reason for senseless violence.”

Rishika’s voice was quiet, but everybody heard her. “Sounds like Silas to me.”

Silence fell.

“More like a discount Silas,” I said, breaking the quiet. “He would’ve already burned everything to the ground.”

The pack murmured their agreement.

“That’s why we can’t turn our backs on the kids—if anything bad happens, it’ll be their blood on our hands,” Cali said, looking at everyone. “They’ve done nothing wrong. They just love each other.”

Greyson nodded, his jaw clenching. “We’re protecting the kids here, but there’s more to this. I get the sense that the Pit Bulls and Vishal aren’t going to back off, even if we do give Russell back to his parents.”

“So we’re basically trapped,” Ravi said with a scowl. “We’re risking a pack war, no matter what.”

“The moment we let Russell in this house and killed the Bitterfang trespasser, it was done,” Greyson said. “We’re in too deep, but I know we’re strong enough to come out on top.” His gaze flicked up to me. “Like Xavier said, this is nothing compared to Silas.”

As the conversation continued, everyone in the pack house agreed to move forward with the plan and protect the two young lovers. As for Greyson, I had to hand it to him—when the pack needed to work together, they did. Not that I thought he was doing a *fabulous* job as Alpha, but at least he was handling this situation well.

After all other questions were answered and the gathering was adjourned, Greyson pulled me aside. “Who do you want with you at the meetup?”

I eyed him. “You’re asking me?”

“We need to work together on this,” Greyson said. “The Pit Bulls are going to be there, and there’s a chance the Bitterfangs will pick up Julia’s scent and drop by for a surprise visit. I want to make sure you’re comfortable and confident with our team. Do you have any preferences?”

Greyson directly asking for my advice was an interesting development after all our talks about who was in charge. I’d take it.

“Rishika,” I said. “Jay, of course. I trust Jay with my life.” Greyson nodded, and I looked over at Gabe and Mikah. “I want Gabe to come along, too.”

I expected Greyson to push back, to eliminate Gabe from the list because he wasn’t a pack member. But my brother just nodded again. “As long as he agrees, I’m game.”

I snorted. “Of course he’ll agree. Gabe *lives* for this kind of adventure.”

“Fair enough,” Greyson said. “I’ll leave Ravi in charge of the pack house, so I’ll go talk to him and Big Mac about the barrier.” He paused, shaking his head. “She won’t be happy about keeping it up for that much longer.”

“Good luck with that,” I said sarcastically.

Greyson rolled his eyes, walking away. I thought back to our conversation about my being his second. He’d just asked for my advice and basically done all he could to make me feel like his equal. We hadn’t even fought.

This was really fucking weird.

Still processing, I walked past Cali and squeezed her shoulder, overhearing some of her conversation with Jacqueline and Lola. Lola was looking pleased, Jacqueline was looking sour, and Cali was going on excitedly about the power of love.

“True love always wins!” she said. “And I’m sure these kids will be together forever.”

Lola squealed. “I know! It’s so wonderful!”

Jacqueline’s voice was sarcastic. “Hopefully they’re using condoms. I’m pretty sure Russell isn’t ready to become a father.”

I walked away, not willing to touch *any* of that. I didn’t necessarily share Cali’s rose-colored view of love, but I was glad she believed in it. I would never admit it to anyone other than her, but the truth was that her tender heart was one of the reasons I loved her.

Gabe, in the meantime, had some other thoughts.

“Would you run away from everything you knew just to be with me, babycakes?” he was asking an unimpressed Mikah as I approached. Glad to see he was having fun with this.

“I assume you’re willing to join us at tonight’s little rendezvous?” I asked him.

Gabe grinned. “Are you kidding me? Nothing could keep me away. Not even my mate.”

I turned to the vampire. Mikah shrugged. “I’d rather Gabe stayed here, but I know my mate is stubborn and thrives on this kind of work.”

“*Chaos*,” Gabe corrected. “I thrive on chaos, baby.”

I eyed the vampire. “You know, if it makes you feel better, you can come along too.”

To my surprise, he shook his head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. Adding a vampire to an already fraught werewolf situation might make matters worse. This is the first time I’ve felt comfortable with a werewolf pack, and I don’t want to cause any new problems for the Redwoods.”

“That’s a good point,” I said. “Very perceptive.”

Mikah gave me a dry look. “I get paid to be perceptive. I’m a detective.”

I pressed my lips together. “Too bad you’re also a vampire.”

Mikah didn’t smile at my joke.

Gabe chortled and leaned forward, resting his head on Mikah’s shoulder. “Aw, it’s okay—I think being a vampire gives you a special kind of charm.”

“Hopefully the deadly kind,” Mikah deadpanned.

I realized that this was their version of flirting, so I decided that it was time for me to make myself scarce. Clearing my throat, I said, “Anyway. Gabe, see you in a bit. I’ll go get ready.”

I turned around to walk away, but then I suddenly remembered the medal I’d found in my pocket. Frowning, I slipped my hand in, almost illogically hoping that the thing had vanished. Of course, that didn’t happen. When I felt the medal’s cold surface, I snuck a look at it.

Just seeing it made me uneasy—there had to be some explanation for its presence. Until I figured it out, though, nobody could know about this. We already had enough shit to deal with.

“Oy!” Gabe’s voice boomed right beside my ear. He slapped an arm around me, startling the shit out of me. “Whatcha got there?”

# Episode 3620

**Greyson**

I hoped my brother appreciated the effort I’d made to include him in the planning of tonight’s expedition. As long as Xavier ultimately understood and accepted that I was Alpha, I didn’t mind sharing some of my decision making.

It wasn’t like he was entirely horrible to deal with. Half the time, he could be a decent strategist, even though I wasn’t about to tell him that directly. His choices for the meeting had been sound, and I hadn’t been surprised when he’d suggested that Gabriel come along as well. Gabe was a skilled fighter and a cunning escape artist.

I would’ve suggested him myself, but I’d purposefully left Gabriel out of my own list. I’d figured it would be better to let Xavier think he’d made that choice. Being a strong Alpha meant stepping back every once in a while—and that strategy worked particularly well when people made the choices you already had in mind. Just saying.

Xavier had seemed appeased, overall. But despite the “working together” thing we had going on at the moment, I had a feeling that my brother would never fully accept me as Alpha—he wanted the position, and that wasn’t going to change. The fact that he’d suddenly decided to play along was suspicious, actually. I had no idea about his motives, but I would take his compliance for as long as it lasted.

Hopefully, he wouldn’t murder me in the meantime.

“Amazing! I’m so happy for him!” Cali’s voice reached my ears. When I turned into the hallway, I found her rambling about true love with Lola.

She looked so happy about the way things were evolving in the Russell situation that I didn’t have the heart to burst her bubble. She seemed entirely unfazed by the way Vishal had attacked her earlier, and she hadn’t mentioned the wisp situation again. I didn’t say it out loud, but the fact that she seemed to have accepted danger as part of her life made me sick.

With these thoughts twisting inside my head, I went into one of the studies and pulled out my phone to call Mace and fill him in on the plan. Once I explained the situation and the upcoming meeting, he said, “Are you sure?”

I swallowed. Russell’s parents were being cooperative so far, but the Bitterfangs seemed like a whole other issue. Julia’s terror about her father, along with the way Lance had spoken about her, was triggering all sorts of alarms for me. It was hard to ignore the feeling of rage and dread the situation conjured in me.

Besides, Cali was dead set on protecting these kids. The fact that she hadn’t wanted me to start a war with Lucian after he’d hurt her, but was willing to risk that very thing in order to help two innocent strangers… It said a lot about her as a person. This was her choice, and I accepted it.

I owed it to her, in a way. I hadn’t protected her from Seluna, and Lucian was still alive, so this was the least I could do.

“We’re in too deep,” I said. “I’m not sure about anything, but this is the best we’ve got right now.”

Mace didn’t speak for a moment. Then, he said, “We’ll be there with Julia at dusk.”

I thanked him and hung up. With that done, I needed to settle one more thing before heading out to the meeting tonight. Cali was still talking with Lola, grinning from ear to ear. Our earlier conversation about the wisp came back into my mind, front and center.

Why did she feel the need to lie to Xavier and me about what had happened to her in the forest? Something was amiss, here. And even though Xavier and I had agreed to let her come to us when she was ready, I couldn’t fucking help myself. I had to do a little digging.

It wasn’t that I didn't trust Cali. I was just worried that her secret—whatever it was—was something that I’d need to know in order to protect her tonight. And since Cali wasn’t telling me the truth, I’d have to go to the only person she’d spoken to one-on-one, earlier.

There was no way Orla hadn’t gotten the truth out of her daughter.

Orla was in the kitchen when I found her, making tea. She smiled and offered to make me a cup as well. I declined, and then she raised an eyebrow at me. “Did you want something else, dear?”

“Can I talk to you about Cali?” I asked in a low voice.

Orla immediately looked alarmed. “Is something wrong?”

I glanced over my shoulder, just to make sure nobody was listening, and then I gestured for her to follow me into the study. A moment later, she was closing the door behind her, and I sat at the desk.

“I hate going behind your daughter’s back,” I said, “but I’m worried that Cali is hiding something from Xavier and me because she doesn’t want to upset us.”

Orla looked thoughtful as she took a seat across from me. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about, Greyson.”

“I hate putting you in this position, and I don’t want you to break Cali’s confidence,” I rushed to say. “But before the meeting tonight, I have to know what happened with Cali and that wisp. Something was off about that story when she shared it with Xavier and me. I could feel it. Am I wrong?”

Orla sighed deeply, nodding. “I appreciate your candor and concern for my daughter, Greyson. You’re right—I’m not going to betray Cali's confidence. But I also wouldn’t keep something from you if I thought that doing so would put Cali in danger.”

My knee was bouncing under the desk. I had to keep myself from drumming my fingers against the wood. Showing Orla how nervous I was wouldn’t do me any good. I had to get the information I needed without looking like I was about to fucking burst from the stress.

In the end, I settled on a quiet question. “Should I be worried? Cali’s being a little evasive about what happened.”

Orla smiled softly. “It’s just a Fae thing—I can tell you that much. I promise that if it turns into more than that, Cali will tell you herself. And if for some reason she doesn’t, I will. I trust you with my daughter’s life, Greyson.”

Orla had a way of putting people at ease. I appreciated that.

“I hope that whatever it is—‘Fae thing’ or not—Cali will eventually tell me on her own,” I admitted. “I don’t want her to feel like she can’t talk to me.”

Orla shook her head. “Sheltering you when she thinks it’s appropriate only shows how much she cares for you. Thank you for always thinking of Cali, for always doing all you can to protect her.”

I stood up at the same time as Orla, shaking my head. “It’s the least I can do.”

She smiled up at me, stepping closer, and—yup, she was gonna hug me. I hadn’t expected that at all. When her arms wrapped around me, though, it felt pretty good. Being accepted and appreciated by Cali’s mom was deeply, instinctively important to me. Orla considered me worthy of her daughter, and that was no joke.

“I know that you love my daughter,” Orla said. “And that she loves you. And I’m sure that when the time is right, she will tell you everything you need to know.”

I was still smiling when we left the study. Orla returned to the kitchen, and I was about to follow for that cup of tea when Ravi blocked my way.

Raising an eyebrow, he said, “What are you smiling at?”

I immediately put on a serious Alpha face.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“I’ve already sent out some patrols to keep an eye on the interior perimeter of the barrier, just in case the Pit Bulls try anything or the Bitterfang show up again,” he said.

I clapped him on the shoulder—Ravi was being proactive, taking the threat seriously. “Good work. Keep at it.”

Ravi nodded, then headed outside. I made a move toward the kitchen, still after that cup of tea, when I ran smack into Artemis.

“I’m coming with you to Three Devils Point,” she declared. “And I’m not going to take no for an answer.”

Judging by Artemis’s tone, I believed her. I knew that when it involved Cali, Artemis would never take no for an answer. Besides, having Artemis with us would certainly make for a more formidable team. Her surprise rooftop maneuver earlier had been impressive and well-timed.

“Sounds good. You should join us before we leave,” I said.

Artemis shook her head. “I think you misunderstood. I’m coming with you, but I’m not going to *be* with you.”

I paused, squinting at her. “So you’ll be there, but also *not* be there? Is this a weird Fae thing?”

Artemis gave me a wry look. “I’m going to be following you while remaining invisible, just in case you need a secret weapon—like the rooftop. Following people undetected is my area of expertise.”

I nodded. “Yes. Like a cat.”

She rolled her eyes. “If you’re going to compare me to a feline, please go with a tiger.”

“Right, sorry,” I deadpanned. And then I frowned. “Wouldn’t you be in danger traveling by yourself, though? What happens if the Bitterfangs or the Pit Bulls see you?”

Artemis scoffed. “If they even realize I’m there, we’ll already have a problem.”

I snorted at her words just as Ravi came bursting back inside.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Ravi’s expression was thunderous. “Lucian’s approaching the barrier.”

# Episode 3621

I was in my room debating what to wear for tonight’s meeting—I had to look SUPER tough—when I heard people yelling downstairs about someone approaching the pack house.

*Huh? Who is it? Did the Pit Bulls change their minds?*

I considered going to check on Russell but ultimately decided to keep him out of this as much as I could. He got a little dramatic when he was upset, and as much as I loved his rambling monologues about how much he loved Julia, they could get a bit distracting when you were marching into danger.

“Shit shit shit…” I repeated the word under my breath as I barreled down the stairs and out the front door. It wasn’t the Pit Bulls I saw, though. Greyson was in the yard, near the barrier.

With Elle.

And his arms were wrapped around her.

*Ha ha ha, what is happening? What is happening? WHAT IS—*

“Greyson! What are you doing? Unhand Elle right this instant!” Lucian’s voice echoed through the woods, and my head whipped in the other direction. The supposed prince was marching toward the barrier, looking mighty annoyed as he glared at Greyson. Whose arms were *still* wrapped around Elle.

“I have to talk to him!” Elle huffed, and I finally realized that she was trying to break free from Greyson’s grip so she could go through the barrier and reach Lucian. She was struggling, but not too hard, actually. Greyson was holding her, and I—

It would’ve been a lie to say that I wasn’t bothered, seeing them so close. The way Elle’s fingers dug into Greyson’s muscular forearms, and the way he was holding her tight against him… It all looked so damn *intimate* that it made my stomach churn.

*Cali, come on! You shouldn’t feel this way!* I scolded myself. *This doesn’t mean anything!*

“Elle, if you go through the barrier, you won’t be able to get back in,” Greyson was telling her loudly as I hurried over. Meanwhile, Lucian was rapidly approaching the barrier, waving his hands in the air, looking like a disgruntled rooster.

“This is preposterous! I’m here to see Elle, and I expected a much warmer welcome from the Redwood pack!”

“You should’ve called first, Lucian,” Greyson said with an eye roll. “You can’t see Elle today—there’s a magical barrier right in front of you.”

Lucian frowned, looking confused. “There’s a *what*?”

Elle turned around to look up at Greyson. Even though she was still frowning, she said, “You can let me go now. I promise I will not go through.”

Greyson stared down at her. “Promise?”

“Promise from my heart.” She nodded and patted his arm. That little casual touch made my heart fucking *shatter*.

*Cali, stop! Jealousy is dumb!*

It really was. Ugh.

“What is the meaning of this?” Lucian shouted.

“A magic barrier!” Elle shouted back after Greyson had let her go. “It is magic from the cranky witch lady who is smarter than everybody!”

“Listen to her!” Sage called. She’d shifted back to human, same as Zainab, who added, “Yeah, if you come any closer, you’re going to break your face on the barrier!”

Lucian huffed and started to walk again, closing the last ten feet between him and the barrier. “This is ridiculous! None of you are making any sense!”

I rolled my eyes. “Lucian, listen to—”

Too late.

Lucian smacked into the barrier with a resounding noise that sounded like a very clear *PLOP!*

Lucian fell back, gasping.

“That is the barrier,” Elle told Lucian solemnly.

I stifled a laugh. “Well, then,” I said, “if we’d recorded that and posted it on social media, Lucian would’ve become a viral sensation.”

Greyson looked at me, cracking a smile that made my heart jump and my dumb insecurities vanish. Meanwhile, the princeling of dumbassery clutched his bloodied nose.

“Unbelievable!” He huffed. “There’s a barrier! Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

Elle frowned. “Everyone told you, Lucian, but you would not listen. You never listen to anything, actually.”

Lucian grunted and huffed again while Greyson stepped closer to the barrier.

“Why are you here, Lucian?” he demanded.

Lucian ignored Greyson’s comment. He just stared at him, eyes narrowed. “Why do you have a barrier up, Redwood Alpha?”

Armin suddenly appeared next to Lucian, quietly handing him a handkerchief for his nose. I hadn’t even seen him coming.

“We have our reasons,” Greyson said cryptically. I liked that vibe on him, honestly. Very sexy.

Lucian, on the other hand, didn’t seem to appreciate it. “Whatever the reason is, you must let me in.”

“I can’t do that,” Greyson replied.

Lucian tensed up in a way that made him stop looking comical. I saw his shoulders rise, his jaw clench, his eyes flash like he couldn’t even fathom someone defying him.

“You have to let me in,” he declared.

Greyson’s eyes narrowed. “Are you *ordering* me to do it?”

Lucian groaned. “Why would you not let me enter your home? After all, the Redwood and Vanguard packs are allies, and I am a prince.”

I granted Lucian that first point, but I also knew that bringing up the prince thing wasn’t going to help his case.

“We *are* allies,” Greyson said in a pointedly calm tone that he usually would’ve used with a toddler. “But it’s difficult to remove the barrier, and I can’t risk it.”

Lucian scowled. “Why is there a barrier in the first place? Does it have to do with a Rogue named Rusty and some pack darling?”

*What. The. Fuck.*

Greyson and I shared a shocked look.

*How the hell does Lucian know?* I asked Greyson.

*No idea*, he replied.

*He always manages to get intel—he’s like fucking Gossip Girl!* I said.

Greyson pressed his lips together, turning to Lucian again.

“Where did you hear that, Lucian?” Greyson asked.

“There’s no point in denying it,” Lucian said, his nose wrinkled haughtily.

“You’re wrong about one thing, you know,” I said in a firm tone. “The boy’s name is Russell.”

Lucian waved me off. “Whatever. The point is that I know what’s going on.”

Greyson crossed his arms. “And what exactly do you think you know?”

“I know all about the Rogues who call themselves the Pit Bulls. I assume the name is supposed to instill fear,” he said with an eye roll. “I also know about the Bitterfang pack, because we had a few visitors earlier.”

*Visitors?* I swallowed audibly, tensing up.

“What did you talk about with the Bitterfangs?” I asked.

Lucian handed the bloodied handkerchief to Armin, who accepted it expressionlessly. Straightening his jacket, Lucian said, “I had a nice chat with Lance, though the man is in dire need of a haircut.”

Greyson glared at Lucian. “What’s your point?”

“Well,” Lucian said, “Lance asked a lot of questions about the Redwood pack. He even accused me of hiding their Alpha’s precious daughter, Julia. When I denied it, he asked me if I knew anything about a missing pack member.” He stared at Greyson. “You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

Greyson would never tell Lucian that Xavier had killed Erick, but I had a feeling deep in my gut that Lucian already knew. How, though, was beyond me. The man really was freaking Gossip Girl.

Greyson smiled at Lucian, but he was *not* amused. “Even if I did know who was responsible for the Bitterfang pack’s loss, you’d be naïve to think I would divulge that information to you.”

Lucian glared at him. “But we’re allies!”

“I know we are,” Greyson said patiently, “but we have the situation under control. This isn’t a good time for you to visit. Next time you want to see Elle, call first. Thanks and goodbye.”

Greyson grabbed Elle’s hand and turned his back on Lucian.

“Everyone, go back to what you were doing,” he called over his shoulder. Elle opened her mouth to speak, but Greyson shot her a firm look. “Elle, I need to speak to you first.”

She nodded, and he didn’t let go of her hand. I bit the inside of my cheek.

*Cali, NO! STOP!*

I snapped the hell out of it.

“I was… I was getting ready for the meeting,” I muttered to Greyson as he, Elle, and I headed back to the house.

He nodded. “Good.” He glanced over his shoulder.

*The Bitterfang pack going to Lucian is worrisome*, he mind linked. *But as long as they don’t know that you’re the* due destini *mate, we still have the upper hand.*

My heart pounding, I replied, *Do you really think they’d just attack me and justify it by saying that my existence goes against werewolf tradition?*

Greyson’s eyes flashed with fury. But before he could say anything, Lucian’s voice echoed through the yard, and I went fucking rigid.

“Actually, I forgot to tell you, Greyson! The Bitterfang representative and I didn’t only talk about Rusty and Julia!”

Greyson froze.

“Lance was also very interested in Caliana,” Lucian added.

I gasped, spinning around. “*What?*”

Lucian stood there looking so satisfied to have our attention that I wanted to blast him to hell and back.

“Lance asked if you were a *due destini* mate, Caliana,” Lucian said, eyebrows arched. “A most fascinating conversation ensued.”

*Shit, crap, SHIT!*

Greyson let go of Elle and moved back to the barrier, his stride purposeful, his fists clenched at his sides. “What the fuck did you tell the Bitterfangs, Lucian?”

# Episode 3622

**Xavier**

After Gabe had spotted me with the medal, I’d dragged him to a separate room, away from the others. My plan had been to keep the medal situation to myself, but I trusted Gabe. We’d been through thick and thin together. He’d always be a royal pain in the ass, no question about it, but his loyalty would never be up for debate.

“Where in tarnation are you taking me?” he hissed as I dragged him down the hallway. “What kind of messy bullshit did you get your ass into this time?”

Rolling my eyes, I shoved him into the study and closed the door behind me. Then I held up the medal. Gabe frowned at the thing before his eyes widened. “*Dude*.”

“I know.”

“Fuck, that’s—that’s the thing from New Orleans, right? Did you swipe it from that witch Adéluce, or what?” He reached for the medal and inspected it, shaking his head. “But the one from New Orleans was all messed up—this looks different!” He looked up at me, his eyes still wide. “What the flying fuck is going on?”

“Okay, there were two of these,” I said quickly. “And they were fused together.”

Gabe blinked. “*Why?*”

“Fuck if I know. I found this one in my pocket.”

Gabe frowned. “In your *what*?”

“In my pocket!”

Gabe waved me off. “Jeez, stop yelling, I heard you the first time! What the shit is it doing hanging out in your pocket?”

“How the fuck am I supposed to know?”

Gabe scoffed. “Who’s supposed to know, then? *Me?*”

Rolling my eyes, I went in to grab the coin from his hands. “You’re so fucking annoying, gimme it!”

He shoved me and inspected the coin again. “Shut up, let me look at it.”

It felt good to talk to Gabe about this, actually. It reminded me of the time we’d spent working together, trying to figure things out.

“So you just found this thing in your pocket?” Gabe asked, breaking the silence. “Out of the blue?”

“Yeah.”

He frowned. “You’re sure it wasn’t there before?”

I scowled. “I’m sure, asshole. And even if it was in my pocket already, how’d it get there in the first place? Huh?”

“I literally asked you that ten seconds ago,” Gabe said wryly.

“And yet we still don’t have an answer.”

He snorted. “Xavier, come on. Maybe we’re overthinking this. Is there a chance that someone put it in there as a gag?”

I took a moment to process what the fuck he’d just said. I was now questioning my entire existence, along with my decision to discuss this with Gabe.

“After all the shit we went through with Adéluce, what kind of sociopath would put that thing in my pocket as a fucking gag? Who the hell would think that was funny, Gabe?”

Gabe shrugged, getting all defensive. “How would I know? It’s your coin, dude!”

I rubbed my temples. The gesture felt like something Greyson would’ve done, which made me even more aggravated. “I don’t know how I expected you to react when I told you about this, but I definitely didn’t expect this.”

“Quit your whining,” Gabe said, waving a hand at me. “We need to figure this shit out. What’s this coin about? What’s happening? What happens next? Do you have clues you can give me, here?”

I paused, swallowing hard. Then I said, “No idea. Except that I have a bad, ominous feeling about it.”

“Like it’s a warning?” Gabe asked.

“Could be,” I said, taking a deep breath. “What happened at Crater Lake…”

“You never made sure that Adéluce died that day,” Gabe said, as if he could read my thoughts.

“I’m still angry about that,” I admitted. “If this *is* a warning, could it be from her? Could she have survived Crater Lake?”

Gabe shrugged. “I saw her go under. I doubt anyone could’ve survived water that cold, except maybe Mikah, being cold-blooded and all.”

Adéluce was a *vampire*-witch. A vampire, like Mikah.

I ignored the way my stomach clenched.

“Is it possible that someone other than Adéluce would use this?” Gabe asked, waving the coin in my face. “Who else knew about the medals?”

“Just people in my pack,” I said. “Nobody I don’t trust. I just wish I could’ve confirmed that Adéluce was dead and frozen at the bottom of Crater Lake. If nothing else, it would’ve made for a heartwarming memory.”

Gabe chuckled, shaking his head at me. The smile faded from his mouth when he looked at the coin again. “If this is some kind of warning, though, what’s it warning you about?”

That was part of the reason why I hadn’t told Cali or anyone else about the medal. The trouble with Adéluce had stemmed from my days as a mercenary. I’d thought that this entire thing was behind us. Cali had the Shard, she was getting better, and the whole Adéluce episode was in the past.

It had to be.

“I don’t know,” I finally admitted. “I don’t know what’s happening, and I have no other theories.”

Gabe studied the medal again and pointed at the mark on it. “Do you know what this symbol means?”

I eyed the thing. There weren’t any words carved into this one, unlike the other two coins that had carried threats. It was just a symbol—why hadn’t I noticed that before? I’d been knocked off-balance when I’d found it, but that was no excuse. I couldn’t lose my focus now.

I studied the raised symbol that Gabe had pointed out. It was a circle that went around the edge of the coin, with an arrow etched into it. I wasn’t sure if it was familiar, or if my brain was playing tricks on me like the last time one of these coins had turned up.

“It feels like I should know what this symbol means,” I told Gabe. “But I can’t put my finger on it.”

Gabe looked between the coin and me, shaking his head. “You know, maybe this isn’t a warning at all.”

And now I was lost. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Gabe shrugged. “I’m just saying, there’s a chance that there’s no weird hidden meaning behind all this. Maybe Adéluce threw this medal your way *before* Crater Lake, not afterward.”

“Then how the fuck did it get in my pocket?” I asked.

Gabe scratched the back of his neck. “I don’t know—maybe you’re wearing the same pants you wore the day she died?”

“That’s bullshit,” I said.

He rolled his eyes. “I don’t see you coming up with any better theories!”

I shook my head, my voice dropping to a whisper. “You can’t talk about this to anyone. Not even Mikah.”

Gabe scowled. “You know you never have to ask me that.”

“Yeah, but Mikah is your mate, so—”

He grabbed me by the neck, wagging his index finger in my face aggressively. “You’re my fucking friend—you know I’d take your secrets to the grave. Deadass.”

I nodded and slipped the medal back into my pocket before giving Gabe a hug.

A very quick, very manly hug, of course.

“You’re so obsessed with me,” he teased.

I rolled my eyes so hard I half-thought they’d fall out of my head. He laughed loudly as we walked out of the room, heading back into the living room, and then I heard a commotion up ahead.

Greyson, Cali, and Elle came into the house, all three of them frazzled and huffy. At least Cali was in one piece.

“What the hell’s going on this time?” I asked Greyson.

“We had a drop-in from Lucian,” Greyson said, his expression dark.

“Lucian hurt his nose,” Elle informed me seriously.

I frowned in confusion. “What?”

“Lucian knows about Russell and Julia,” Cali blurted out.

*Fuck*. That meant he’d probably want to get involved. I’d have preferred to keep as much of a distance from the princeling as possible, but I’d learned by now that Lucian was hard to get rid of. Like fungus.

“How the hell does this guy know about everything, always?” I wondered.

“That’s my question as well,” Greyson said coldly. “Lucian offered to help us, but I turned him down.”

Something was off, here—why did Cali look so upset? I approached her, taking her hand.

“Baby? What aren’t you telling me?” I asked.

Cali didn’t look up at me, and when she spoke, her voice cracked. “Lucian told Lance that I’m a *due destini* mate.”

The anger I felt erupted in a growl. “That idiot! If he knows everything about everyone, then he knows about the Bitterfang pack as well. Why the hell would he tell them about you? Doesn’t he understand the danger he’s put you in?”

“Sidenote,” Gabe interjected. “How the fuck is this asshole still alive?” He turned to me. “Dude, I can’t *believe* you haven’t throttled him yet.”

I couldn’t believe it either.

“Lucian claimed he didn’t know the *due destini* was a secret,” Greyson said darkly.

I cursed. “You have to stay here, then,” I told Cali, squeezing her hand. “You can’t come with us to meet Julia and the Pit Bulls.”

Greyson nodded. “It would be best if—”

Cali yanked her hand away from mine, her expression determined.

“But I *have to* go,” she declared. “I’m the mediator, and Russell trusts me. His parents will expect to see me, and if I’m not there, they’ll think something’s wrong.”

I exchanged a look with Greyson. His jaw clenched. We both knew Cali was right.

I wished we’d never agreed to any of this.

The quiet was broken by Rishika’s imposing voice.

“It’s dusk,” she said, walking up to us. “We have to go to the meeting.”

# Episode 3623

Rishika walked away after announcing it was time to go. She’d clearly sensed the tension in the air between my mates and me and decided it was best to retreat. *Smart*. I didn’t give them a chance to press their argument and went into full-on machine gun mode, speaking as quickly as possible.

“I know what you’re going to say—you’ve already said it all! Being outed as a d*ue destini* mate makes me a target for the Bitterfangs for some fucked-up reason or another, and it will be risky for me to be trapped outside the barrier when we know the Bitterfangs have already threatened us. *But!*”

I raised my index finger.

“I have proven time and time again that I can use my magic to protect myself and others. I am sick and tired of you two infantilizing me. Moreover, any hope for peace between the feuding families hinges on getting Russell’s parents to understand that Julia poses no threat!” I said. “If we can do that, perhaps the Bitterfangs will also eventually see that *Russell* poses no threat.”

Perhaps it was naïve of me to believe that, but I wasn’t going to back down now.

“Which,” I continued, “like I already told you, means that I have to be there! I’m the one who approached Russell’s parents and convinced them to meet Julia. What do you two hardasses think will happen if the Pit Bulls show up for the meeting and I’m not there? Won’t they find that suspicious? And what about Russell? He’s always, like, ten minutes away from a breakdown, and he’d probably implode without me! Poor baby, he—”

“Okay,” Greyson interrupted. “We get it.”

I huffed, glaring at him. “And you’re still going to try and stop me?”

“No,” Greyson said.

I gaped at him. “Wait, for real?”

“This is a mess,” Greyson told me. “But you’re right. Things would only get worse without you there.”

I grinned. *Oh my god, YAY!*

“Right?” I said. “I’m as much a part of this now as Russell and Julia.” I turned to Xavier. “Xavier, what do you think?”

He hesitated, sighing. “We can’t get out of this situation. We’re moving forward, and you’re the key to our plan. So, yeah.”

I nodded emphatically, trying to reassure both of them. “I know everything will turn out all right in the end, and nobody will get hurt—I’m certain I can make things better if I’m given a chance! Russell and Julia deserve a happily ever after.”

Greyson looked between Xavier and me. “I need you both to remember that there’s a chance the Bitterfangs will pick up Julia’s scent and crash the party today. You have to be prepared for anything.”

Xavier, his eyes fixed on me intensely, said, “As long as Cali stays near me during the meeting, everything will be fine.”

The atmosphere felt heavy, and Greyson wasn’t even looking at me. I wanted to hug him, tell him that everything would be okay, that he didn’t have to worry so much. But Xavier was staring at me like he was waiting for a confirmation.

“I won’t leave your side,” I agreed.

\*\*\*

A short while later—after I’d changed into my best “I’m a badass” outfit—I was waiting outside with Russell for the rest of the team.

“How are you feeling?” I asked gently.

He looked like he was vibrating on the inside. “I don’t know? I kind of want to jump up and down and throw up at the same time. It’s intense.”

I chuckled. “That’s just nerves and excitement. I can relate.”

Russell stared at me, his eyes wide, a breathless smile on his face. “You think everything’s going to be okay?”

I nodded. “I can feel it. Nobody’s going to get hurt.”

The rest of the team joined us then, and Greyson looked around.

“Thank you all for coming,” he said. His gaze flicked over me, and my stomach fluttered. I could just tell what was going on in his head.

*Please don’t worry*, I mind linked. *I can do this.*

He took a deep breath, giving me a curt nod before leading us all to the barrier. Big Mac was waiting for us. Her voice sounded oddly hoarse when she spoke.

“I need everybody here to remember that once you pass through this wall, you can only return if I let the barrier down,” she said, looking at everybody. “And that’s something I will only do when it’s safe.”

Did Big Mac have a sore throat or something? I eyed her and realized that she looked a little… “Haggard” wasn’t quite the right word, because Big Mac always looked stubborn enough to move a mountain, but it was close.

*Keeping the barrier up is draining Big Mac*, I realized, my heart pounding. *That didn’t happen last time. Why is it happening now?* The sooner we settled this family feud, the sooner the barrier could come down and give her some relief.

“We’ll do our best to fix this ASAP,” I told her.

Big Mac stared at me, her expression serious. “You’d better. I’ve invested a lot of time and effort in this pack’s well-being, Caliana. Trouble seems to keep finding you, but I refuse to see any of you get killed before my wedding.”

I blinked in shock. *Wow*. Was that Big Mac’s way of telling us she cared?

*I’ll take it!*

“Nobody’s getting killed,” Xavier said. Then he wrapped an arm around my shoulders and pulled me close. While the others discussed a few last-minute details, he turned to me, looking more intense than usual.

I patted his chest, smiling up at him, trying to put him at ease. “Don’t fret. I remember what you said.”

He raised an eyebrow. “What did I say?”

“That you’d only agree to let me come if I stayed near you,” I said with a snort. “But you don’t have to insist or anything. I like riding on your back.”

Xavier’s serious expression was broken with a smile. “I like to hear that.” But of course, as fast as it had arrived, the smile vanished. “Don’t let your drive to reconcile everyone cloud your judgment. We don’t know how this is going to play out.”

I nodded, mostly to appease him, then followed him as we all crossed through the barrier. I’d expected a surge of energy or something, but it just felt like walking through a door. I hoped coming back wouldn’t turn into a huge problem, later. The last thing we needed was to be stuck out here for an indefinite amount of time. But I couldn’t focus on any worst-case scenarios right now.

I needed to believe that Greyson’s worries were uncalled for, and everything would be okay in the end. After everything I’d been through lately, I needed to believe in something pure and nice, like young love fighting against the odds.

*Hop on*, Xavier mind linked a moment later. He’d already shifted.

I glanced over at Greyson’s grey wolf, and he gave me a nod. Taking a deep breath, I climbed onto Xavier’s back and wrapped my arms around his neck.

*This is exactly where you belong*, he mind linked. *Right here, with me. Hold on tight*.

My heart swelled at his words. I felt them to my core. But when I looked back over at Greyson, I couldn’t help but wonder if he was trying to make a statement… When I’d first met Xavier, I’d been attracted to him, but I had felt so intimidated by him too. Now, I trusted him with my life. He trusted me with his life, too.

I felt responsible for both him and Greyson today—I was the one who’d set up this meeting, and if something went wrong, it would be my fault. But I refused to linger on thoughts like that. No.

*Everything is going to be okay.*

The trip to Three Devils Point passed quickly. Russell stayed between me and Xavier and Greyson, followed by Rishika, Gabriel, and Jay.

When the team slowed and came to a stop at a small clearing, Xavier crouched down.

*We’re here*, he mind linked.

My heart hammering, I dismounted. Everybody shifted back to human, and Xavier wrapped an arm around my shoulders. Looking around, he said, “Welcome to Three Devils Point.”

I squinted around at the clearing. “This is… not very impressive.”

Xavier laughed. “If you were expecting to see some kind of devil monument, forget it. The name goes way back to when people were afraid to come out here after hearing stories and rumors about werewolves and other bad things.”

I inspected the area, looking in the distance. “Yeah, I'I was expecting a fence, at least—with barbed wire. I’m not sure how big a dozen acres is, but how will everyone know where to meet?”

Xavier shrugged. “We’re werewolves, baby.”

Just then, Russell gasped.

I twisted around and saw the Pit Bulls stepping out of the trees.

# Episode 3624

My stomach churned as Russell’s parents approached us. Right behind them was a group of Pit Bulls who were also in human form, some of whom I recognized from earlier. Including Vishal. I avoided looking at him.

*Not that I’m scared of him or anything. Artemis and I kicked his ass earlier.*

Okay, so maybe he made me nervous. Maybe all the Pit Bulls made me nervous. I really hoped they’d come to this meeting in good faith. But if they had, then why did it look like they’d come to fight?

Russell seemed to share my sentiments, and I rushed to reassure him.

“It’s going to be fine,” I whispered, patting his shoulder. “We’ll do everything we can to make sure nothing bad happens.”

Russell swallowed loudly, looking around anxiously. “But where’s Julia?”

Greyson’s composed voice came from behind us. “I spoke to Mace. They should be arriving any minute.”

I looked up at Greyson. He seemed uncharacteristically serious, but this was him during a mission. I knew he was worried, but the way he seemed so in control right now soothed me. Russell seemed to notice as well, and Greyson’s presence grounded us both.

Looking between us, Russell said, “Thank you.”

I smiled. “Why don’t you go talk to your parents?”

Russell nodded. He looked over at his moms and took a couple of steps toward them.

One of them raised her hand, her voice echoing through the field. “Russell!”

A grin split his face, and he sprinted toward them, rushing into their open arms. I exhaled in relief. Even though I’d had a good feeling about this, I hadn’t been certain about anyone’s intentions. Xavier and Greyson had repeatedly told me that this meeting could be a trap, but right now, that didn’t seem likely.

*So far, so good!*

Russell’s parents were tearing up now, holding him close and fussing over him. They were close enough to us that I could hear the conversation.

“I’m so glad to be able to hold you, not just look at you through that barrier,” said one of his moms.

“We’re sorry to put you through this,” said the other. “All we ever wanted was for you to be safe.”

“I’m sorry I put you through this, too,” Russell said quietly. “But I just… I really love Julia.”

While the three of them kept talking in hushed voices, one of the moms looked up at me and nodded. My heart swelled with pride. I felt someone bump my shoulder. It was Xavier, offering me a gorgeous, brilliant smile.

“You did all right, Cali,” he said.

His praise felt so good.

“Sorry to interrupt all this feel-good stuff,” Gabriel spoke up, “but I think it’s too soon to celebrate. Someone’s coming.”

Everybody tensed up, the air crackling with anticipation. No one wanted to say it, but I knew we were all almost certain that the Bitterfangs were going to crash this party.

*Could this be them? Are they here to ruin the moment? God dammit, Bitterfangs!*

“Relax.” Greyson spoke up so everybody could hear before glanced at me. “It’s Mace.”

A moment later, Mace emerged from the woods. My heart pounding, I ran up to him.

“Where’s Julia?” I asked. “Why isn’t she with you?”

Mace’s face was impassive. “She’s right behind me. No need to worry.” He looked over my shoulder, his eyes sharp. “Are those the parents?”

I nodded. “It’s going well so far.”

Mace raised an eyebrow, staring at them. He was listening in on their conversation, I assumed. “They’re literally crying about how much they love that little punk.” He turned to Greyson. “I swear to god, if we die over this—”

“Nobody’s going to die,” I interrupted firmly. “It’s going well so far. I hope that adding Julia to the mix will make things even better.”

Mace turned to Greyson again, his expression flat. “Are you going to tell her, or should I?”

Greyson shook his head at Mace, reaching out to take my hand. “Odds are that every time something changes here, you’ll need to smooth things over. Your mediation isn’t over yet. I need you to keep an eye on everybody, okay?”

I nodded, and he reached over and took my hand.

*I believe in you, love. No matter what, you know I always have*, he mind linked.

I squeezed his hand, feeling all warm and fuzzy inside. I opened my mouth to thank him, but I didn’t get the chance.

“Julia!” Russell shouted.

He’d spotted Julia the second she’d emerged from the woods, followed by a group of Blue Blood wolves. They stopped at the edge of the clearing, watching, no smiles on their faces while they two young lovers ran toward one another.

*How could anyone, including Russell’s parents, see any harm in this?* I wondered.

“Russell,” Julia said, her voice cracking as she and Russell hugged. Awkwardly. They didn’t kiss, not like they’d done at the Samara campsite, but that was probably because Russell’s parents were watching.

I got that. It wasn’t like I went around kissing my mates in front of my parents. The situation had been awkward enough when Mom and Dad had first met my mates, and sometimes it still was, so I just avoided any prolonged PDA in front of them.

Russell and Julia’s awkward hug seemed to take a while, though.

“You might want to get this moving along,” Greyson told me.

“But they’re so happy,” I whispered.

Greyson turned to me, eyebrows arched. “I’m sorry, but they look like two forks trying to hug. I think you’re allowed to interrupt the awkwardness.”

As much as I wanted to scold Greyson for being snarky, I felt like laughing. He was right—we hadn’t come here just for these two to meet up. Also, they *did* look like two forks trying to hug. I pressed my lips together, fighting down a smile as I walked over to the happy—awkward—couple.

Time for the hard part.

“Russell,” I said, touching his shoulder. “I think it’s time you introduced Julia to your parents. What do you think?”

Julia swallowed roughly, fiddling with the hem of her coat. She looked so nervous and jumpy that I wished I could wrap her in my arms and comfort her. But this was Russell’s moment, his responsibility.

“You think it’s the right time?” he asked, staring at me.

“This is why everybody is here, Russell,” I told him. “I know you can do this.”

Russell breathed deeply and took Julia’s hand, leading her over to his parents. The two women were quiet, staring at the kids.

“This is Julia,” he said. “Julia, these are my parents.”

The introductions were made, and even though Russell’s moms seemed rigid at first, the hardness I’d noticed when they’d shown up at the pack house was gone. They didn’t seem angry when they looked at Julia, or disappointed when they spoke to Russell.

*Is this… Is this really working?*

It was. I took a step back, smiling to myself. I was pleased with the way things were going, and proud that I’d helped broker this peace. And I’d done it without anyone dying—how about that?

*Well, apart from Erick…*

But I wasn’t going to blame Erick’s death on Xavier. The werewolf had tried to attack me, and Xavier had done his best to protect me. Really, this entire ordeal had been pretty bloodless overall, and I hoped it demonstrated that even werewolves could resolve things without a life-or-death struggle.

Sometimes it helped to be Fae. And human, actually. It gave me a different way of looking at things. A much less murder-oriented way, really.

“This is working so far,” Greyson whispered, coming to stand by my side.

I smiled up at him. “I know.”

The warmth in his gaze made me feel ten feet tall. We watched as Russell’s parents smiled at something Julia said, then the wind shifted.

Greyson, Xavier, Gabriel, and Rishika all stiffened.

*Oh, no… What’s happening?*

I looked over at the others—both the Pit Bulls and the Blue Bloods had also gone rigid, reacting to something. But what? Had they decided out of nowhere to attack each other? *Why?*

*And things were going so well!*

“Cali,” Xavier said gruffly, grabbing me by the crook of the elbow as he came to stand between Greyson and me. “You were supposed to stay close to me.”

I wanted to tell him that I hadn’t gone far and Greyson had been here the whole time, but I didn’t dare argue. Not right now, when Xavier was staring off into the woods so intently.

“Who is it?” I asked, my pulse thundering in my ears.

The answer was obvious. My mates had warned me that this could happen. I followed Xavier’s gaze and watched as Lance and a large group of hostile-looking Bitterfangs emerged from the trees.

*Fuck!*

There was a low growl to my left, and I turned to see Russell pull Julia closer. The girl’s eyes were wide, and she clutched Russell tightly.

Lance fixed an icy stare on the boy. “Give us Julia.”

# Episode 3625

**Greyson**

Everybody reacted at once.

Julia screamed. First, it was out of fear, but then it turned into a protest when Mace gripped her arm and dragged her away from her lover, back toward the Blue Bloods. At the same time, Russell’s parents grabbed the boy, pulled him back toward the Pit Bulls. Xavier growled, and when I looked, I saw Cali by his side. Next, I glanced at the tree line. I didn’t see Artemis, but that was the point. I had no doubt that she was there, arrows at the ready.

Cali was protected.

But if I wasn’t careful, this could blow up into a bloodbath.

That thought came into razor-sharp focus when Vishal snarled.

“You did this!” He pointed at me, seething. “The Redwoods and their Luna set a trap for us!”

“No!” Cali shouted, full of righteous indignation. “We never invited the Bitterfangs!”

Lance smiled, like he was enjoying this. The menace in that smile brought back many memories, all of them bad. This motherfucker thought himself as a Big Bad, but I’d dealt with a man so much worse than him for years upon years—both as a kid and as an adult.

I’d felt Silas’s beating heart in my hand.

My fury roared when Lance stared at Cali and said, “So nice to see you again.”

She flinched.

If I wasn’t careful, I’d kill a man today. Maybe more than one.

The realization was jarring, so I shoved it down, reminding myself that bloodshed was the last resort. Because I wasn’t Silas, and Cali hated violence, and yet…

And yet we were all here today because she’d asked us to be.

This meeting had been her choice, even though she’d known it was highly likely it would end in violence.

Lance sneered at Cali. “You say that this meeting isn’t for us, but we were invited the moment the Redwoods lied to us about Julia.”

“We weren’t lying,” Cali fired back. Her eyes flashed with anger. “We didn’t know where she was when we spoke to you.”

“You don’t need to explain anything to the Bitterfangs,” I told her, resting my hand on her shoulder. I turned to Lance again. “You and your pack are not welcome here. If you want to avoid trouble, you should leave while you still can.”

Lance laughed. He wasn’t afraid.

He wasn’t afraid, and for some reason, that enraged me further.

“You have it backward, Redwood Alpha,” he said. “You’re the ones who should leave, and stay out of the Bitterfang pack’s business.”

“But you invaded *our* territory!” Cali shouted. Her anger was rare but beautiful. It made my wolf stir, the urge to protect and soothe her overwhelming. But right now, she looked fearless. “You dared to camp in our territory without permission, even though that’s forbidden by werewolf law!”

With a sardonic smile, Lance looked around. “This right here is nobody’s territory, though. We have just as much a right to be here as the rest of you…” His cold gaze roamed over to the Blue Blood congregation, where Julia was shaking like a leaf. “And we’re not leaving without Julia.”

There was a furious roar, and I wasn’t shocked to see Russell break from his parents. “Stay away from Julia, Lance! She doesn’t want to be with you!”

My brain caught fire. How old was Lance? Twenty-five? Fucking *thirty*? Julia was a fifteen-year-old kid, and he—

No time to contemplate.

Russell was charging toward Lance, and Lance prepared to meet him halfway, but I moved quickly. I put myself between the boy and Lance, shoving the man back. He staggered, eyes widening before they narrowed with menace.

Teeth clenched, Lance spat, “You dare put your hands on—”

“If you lay a finger on that boy, I will kill you,” I said.

I sounded so calm. I knew something was wrong.

Not with them, though. With me.

I was at the end of my rope, and Lance didn’t know what that meant.

“You still have things all mixed up,” he said. Then he laughed. “*I* will kill *you*.” He turned his gaze on Cali. “And your Luna, too.”

*Don’t let Cali out of your sight*, I mind linked Xavier. *Lucian told them about her.*

Lucian had told them.

Because Lucian was alive, because I’d chosen to let him live. Because Cali had chosen to do the same. And now, here we were.

Meanwhile, Lance was waxing poetic.

“… and when I spit the last of your Luna’s blood out of my mouth, I’m going to kill the boy,” he hissed.

It was funny, really. He truly believed he could threaten my mate and the kid she’d taken under her wing. He really believed he was scary. But I knew true fear—I’d known the perpetual threat of my own father, who would’ve thought nothing of killing his own sons.

The interesting part, though, was that in the end, *I’d* thought nothing of killing *him*.

When I glanced at Xavier, I knew that he was thinking of Silas too. I wondered about my brother, who was always so quick to react, so aggressive—it was like he wasn’t afraid of what it meant to be violent. Meanwhile, I was constantly terrified of turning into our father.

I ignored the taste for blood that was forming on my tongue and decided to give Lance one last chance. A vain motherfucker like him would have to think he’d chosen to leave.

“I’d be happy to hear any of the Bitterfang pack’s grievances if you’re willing to present them at the pack summit,” I said. “Unless, of course, you’re worried that the other Alphas will rule against you.”

Lance laughed right in my face. “How fucking *dare you* assume I give a shit about the summit? I only care about one Alpha, and that’s Julia’s father. The rest of you can rot in hell.”

I didn’t look at Cali. But I could feel her nearby, and I could hear her in my head, saying my name.

*Greyson*, she mind linked.

I could see what was going to happen next, clear as day.

*There’s going to be a fight*, I told her. *There’s no avoiding it now.*

*Protect the kids*, she said.

This was her choice.

This was her war.

And after Seluna and Lucian and the failure and the shame of it all, I owed her one.

I owed her a war.

“Julia will come with me,” Lance went on, his cold eyes darting behind me. “And this boy dies today!”

He reached for Russell, grabbed him by the neck—

“I warned you not to touch him,” I growled.

I shifted, knocking Russell from Lance’s grip.

It was a trigger.

All sides shifted, fights breaking out.

“Julia!” Russell screamed.

The Blue Bloods were charging at the Bitterfangs while Mace dragged both the girl and Russell away. They’d be safe. Cali’s wish had been granted, and as if he knew it was her doing, Lance rounded on her.

“Get the *due destini* mate!” he screamed before shifting, and four Bitterfangs charged toward Cali. I heard Xavier growl behind me, and I knew she’d be okay with him. Unlike Lance, whose wolf howled, and then—

He retreated when I attacked.

He ran like a coward, a sea of Bitterfangs blocking my way to him, each one of them an obstacle that I tore right through. At the same time, from the corner of my eye, I saw that the Pit Bulls were going up against the Bitterfangs. Russell’s moms were right in the middle of the fray—I hoped they were good fighters, because the last thing we fucking needed right now was for the kid to witness his parents’ deaths. I couldn’t help them, though—I had a different goal in mind.

There were just three more Bitterfangs between me and Lance. I’d started clawing my way through to him when a howl shot through my ears. Xavier. It took a split second for me to look over my shoulder and see Xavier on the ground, two Bitterfangs tearing into him while a wolf with familiar eyes prowled toward Cali.

I recognized the scent—Jonnathan. He was the one who’d smelled Erick on Xavier. There was a menace in his gaze that rammed right into me, made me feel like he wasn’t fighting because he wanted to defend, protect, or survive. He was fighting because he enjoyed killing. Just like Silas.

I didn’t realize I’d started running toward Jonnathan until I crashed into him—just before he leapt at Cali. We slammed into the ground, but I didn’t feel the impact. I felt nothing but rage, and I ran on that alone.

I hauled Jonnathan back to the ground, pinning him down.

He laughed, mind linked, *I’m gonna kill you and then score two for the price of one—the boy and the cursed* due destini *mate!*

He tried to throw me off and seethed when I easily kept him pinned. I watched him squirm with the mild interest of a predator playing with his food. And when he realized he was no match for my strength, when he realized he couldn’t fucking move, his eyes widened.

Realization dawned, and the terror in his eyes was satisfaction enough.

I snapped my teeth, opened my mouth, and tore his throat out.

The noise of skin breaking, bones cracking, became one with the sound of blood pumping through my veins, adrenaline mixing with fury. I spat out my mouthful and howled, looking around.

*Who’s next?*

# Episode 3626

**Xavier**

I was fighting to keep track of Cali in the fray. Despite her promise to stay close, she’d taken it upon herself to give the Bitterfangs a run for their money. I was having a difficult time keeping an eye on her, actually, because Cali had ended up being… *explosive*.

Or maybe more like *chaotic*, given how quickly she was shooting blasts of magic at wolf after wolf. The Bitterfangs were shocked at first but kept coming at her—and she kept coming at them, flashes of light blinding me again and again.

If I hadn’t been worried as all hell, I’d have been impressed.

There were three or four Bitterfangs between us, and I tore my way through, making a beeline for Cali. I hadn’t expected them to get into formation so fast, and they charged at me from all angles. Their style of fighting was something I’d never seen before, but nothing my claws and teeth couldn’t handle.

But when Cali stopped fighting for a moment, panting, I knew I had to hurry. Magic drained you, I’d learned that much, and there were so many of these bastards coming at her, teeth bared. I didn’t know who was who, but anyone who threatened my mate would simply have to drop dead.

The Bitterfangs knew who Cali was—*what* she was—and it didn’t matter if they believed in the curse or not. The end result was that they knew she represented something, and that was enough to trigger their rage and prejudice in the name of “tradition.”

They’d hurt her over my dead body.

*I’m just a few feet away*, I mind linked. *When I land in front of you, jump on my back.*

Her gaze flicked toward me, and she nodded as I leapt over two other wolves to get to her. But then a third one slammed into me mid-leap. When we came crashing down, I was so fucking pissed off, I literally saw red.

These assholes were clearly very well-practiced. The way they moved was almost militaristic. The Bitterfangs seemed to be advancing either all at once, or in groups of four or five that targeted a single person. The wolf who’d come at me had attacked solo, though, and that had been his first mistake. I matched his speed and then surpassed it, slamming the wolf down and tearing at him with my claws.

Then I heard Cali’s scream.

She’d fallen down, and one of those sons of bitches had lunged at her, snapping his teeth over her head. My heart pounded so hard I felt it in my throat as I ran toward her.

Greyson got there first, ramming into the Bitterfang wolf from behind and snapping his neck with such force that the wolf didn’t even make a sound, just fell to the ground in a heap. Greyson snatched Cali up and helped her lean against him, and I could fucking breathe again. I knew my brother would protect her with everything he had.

*I’m coming*, I said to Cali. *I’m getting you out of here.*

*No*, she said. *I’m feeling better, and I can fight! Stay where you are and let me do this!*

She sounded so uncharacteristically intense that I froze for a moment. Another wolf, a big bastard, darted in to block my way. I tried to evade and claw, but he ducked and went for my belly. A strategic, weighted move from a fighter who knew what he was doing. The idea that we’d underestimated the Bitterfangs’ training was starting to seem like a reality. But when the wolf got me down on the ground, on my back, I decided I’d fucking had enough.

I bit down on his paw and raised a paw to slice through his neck—

*WHOOSH!*

An arrow went straight through the wolf’s neck.

Artemis. She’d followed us. She was reliable that way, and I was grateful to her. I shoved the wolf off me, spat the taste of his blood out of my mouth, and looked around. Cali was still with Greyson, but she seemed to have regained her strength. She blasted a row of wolves out of Greyson’s way.

Where the hell had all these Bitterfangs come from? Or were some of the Pit Bulls trying to fight us, too? I hoped that wasn’t the case, because we were trying to help the morons. Russell’s parents had seemed suspicious earlier, thinking this had been a trap and we’d invited the Bitterfangs.

My impression right now, though, was that the Pit Bulls—or at least most of them—were fighting alongside us. And even if the Bitterfangs seemed to have an army spurting out of the trees, it was them against members of three packs, basically—and likely the best those three packs had to offer. I wished we’d brought more of our own with us today, but at least some of our strongest fighters were here.

Gabe, for one, seemed to be having the time of his life. The Bitterfangs’ military formation didn’t seem to have fazed him in the least. I spotted him tearing into a screeching Bitterfang wolf, and it brought back old fond memories.

*Hey, X, look how clean that cut was!* Gabe mind linked after slicing a wolf’s head off. *It’s like I’m a living motherfucking guillotine!*

As much as I wanted to praise Gabe’s precision—of fucking course he was proud of something like that—I needed to get back to the fight. And finally get to Cali. As much as she seemed to be doing okay right now, I knew that her energy was coming in bursts.

*Xavier! On your left!* Jay’s voice echoed in my head, and suddenly I was surrounded by five Bitterfangs. This strategic fighting bullshit was getting old. As they prowled toward me, Jay leapt into the circle with me.

*Let’s show them what we’ve got*, he mind linked.

I charged first, fed up and furious with the bullshit that was keeping me away from Cali. Within a minute, Jay had killed off one of the Bitterfangs, I’d gotten rid of two, and the remaining two kept charging us in unison.

*When I say duck*, I told Jay, *do it!*

The two Bitterfangs attacked once more, one on either side, teeth bared and ready to bite down.

*Duck!* I shouted, and shoved Jay’s wolf out of the fray.

The two Bitterfangs ended up tearing into each other’s necks, and their howls of pain gave me a boost of adrenaline. After that, it was easy for Jay and me to finish the job. Jay was panting slightly when he turned to me.

He sounded annoyed, almost, when he mind linked. *How many more soldiers have the Bitterfangs brought with them?*

Just then, I heard howling coming from the west.

I knew that sound.

I turned to see Ava’s wolf, graceful and powerful enough to make my chest throb. She was leading a bunch of Samara wolves into the fray. For a second, I thought I was fucking imagining it. How had she known to come here?

*Seems like reinforcements have arrived*, Jay mind linked. He sounded surprised but pleased. Despite everything, I felt the same.

The two of us made our way across the battlefield, heading toward Ava.

*What the hell are you doing here?* I asked.

She scoffed. *No “thank you”?*

I rolled my eyes and tackled a wolf as he prepared to attack her, shoving him out of the way.

*How did you even know we were here?* I asked.

*Mace called me.* Ava clawed at another wolf, continuing to fight right beside me as if this was just another Tuesday to her. *Unlike the Redwoods, Mace seems to see the value of the Samara pack as a potential ally.*

Her tone was so damn unnecessary*.*

*I’m not arguing with you about any of that shit right now*, I said.

She huffed and shoved me into an attacking wolf. I tore into his chest with my claws. When we were fighting alongside each other instead of against each other, Ava could actually be… useful. I was grateful that she’d come with the others. The Bitterfang pack’s fighting style was a lot, and there were so many of them. But there was still no sign of their Alpha.

What a coward.

Ava didn’t stop for a second after that. She and I worked together to bring down a wolf that was mostly muscle. She went for his eyes, I went for his knees, and when he dropped dead, we locked eyes and my wolf howled in victory. Right now, in the battlefield, where everything was instinct, this moment felt absolutely *right*. The feeling was surreal, considering how badly my last conversation with Ava had gone.

But I pushed through.

Ava was here to fight, and if she was effective with me by her side, so be it. I could focus, and—

“Greyson!” Cali’s scream burst through my brain, rattling me whole. “NO! Get away from me!” She cried out in pain, a sob etched into her words.

I spun around to see blood gushing down her arm and a wolf tackling her to the ground.

Greyson was nowhere to be seen.

# Episode 3627

Clutching at my bloody arm, I moaned and cursed both my luck and that damn Bitterfang wolf. For a second there, I’d thought I’d been bitten—now THAT would’ve been unfortunate—but the wound looked more like a claw mark. My fear subsided, even though the thought that I could be turned by a random enemy wolf was so jarring that I felt sick to my stomach.

Everything had happened so fast.

I’d been on Greyson’s back, holding on as he tore through the fight with a ferocity that had knocked the wind right out of me. But then one of the Bitterfangs had slammed into us, and I’d fallen off. I couldn’t believe that the wolf had been able to match Greyson’s speed.

Now, I was on the ground, alone in the middle of the fight. Adrenaline surged, anxiety rushing through me as I fought to sit up. I looked around frantically for Greyson.

*I don’t see him! I don’t see him, I don’t see him, I—*

“Greyson!” I screamed.

But it wasn’t Greyson that I saw. A giant wolf tackled me, hovering over me with all the fucking audacity in the world as he snapped his teeth inches away from my face.

“NO! Get away from me!” I shouted, my arm screaming with pain. I didn’t know who the hell this wolf was, but I was pretty sure he wanted me dead. Terror latched onto me, but my anger and righteous indignation were stronger.

*All this to take out two kids in love? LEAVE THEM ALONE!*

I fought to summon my magic, hoping to blast him like I’d blasted Vishal and all those other assholes. But the wolf raised his massive paws and slammed them down onto my arms. I cried out in agony, the sudden impact making me choke.

I couldn’t move either of my arms. I’d been shown how to escape—my grandfather had taught me—but when I tried to break free, the wolf bore down. His weight was immense, and I was fucking terrified he’d break my bones. He was drooling, the stench of his breath making me gag.

“Have you EVER heard of oral hygiene, you disgusting asshole?” I snapped. I was trying to distract him, and it worked. He blinked in shock for a moment before snarling. I weaseled one hand out from under his paw, ready to go for his eyes as he opened his mouth—probably so he could bite my head off.

I opened mine to scream, but then suddenly I heard a sharp, quick sound—like a tear.

I watched, frozen and transfixed, as instead of lupus sputo, a stream of blood spurted from the wolf’s open mouth. He collapsed on top of me, and my entire body protested the immense weight.

*What the HELL just happened?*

I fought to get free, contemplating blasting the corpse—YIKES—into a million pieces because he was just too heavy for me to move, but then I spotted one of Artemis’s arrows in the wolf’s neck.

“*Shit*,” I breathed. “Shit!”

Someone kicked at the dead wolf, then a hand grabbed me and pulled me out from underneath him.

“Artemis?” I panted.

She grinned down at me before firing another arrow at an incoming wolf. It went clean through his eye, and he plopped down like a dead fish.

Jesus fucking Christ, her AIM! Also, how had she managed to kick that wolf off me? She probably had muscles I didn’t even know existed.

I decided it probably wasn’t the right time to ask for her workout routine—which I knew I’d never follow, anyway—and clambered to my feet.

“You’re here!” I choked out, grabbing onto her, shaking a little with how relieved I felt. “Wait, why are you here? No matter, tell me later, I have to find my mates! Greyson might be hurt—”

“Greyson alone is responsible for one quarter of all the kills on this battlefield,” Artemis told me casually, putting her hand on my back and guiding me away from the fray. “I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

I… would have to marinate over that at a more appropriate time.

“Why are you here?” I repeated as Artemis loosed another arrow and pulled me away.

“Someone’s got to look out for you,” she said with a shrug. “You’re always getting into trouble, you know.”

I wanted to tell her that I resented that accusation. But she was definitely right, and a little self-reflection never hurt anyone.

“Thank you for being here,” I said honestly. “But now that I’m standing, I can use my magic. I don’t need you to be my bodyguard.”

Artemis shot another arrow, and another werewolf fell. Her dark expression made me rush to explain.

“Of course I appreciate your help! But I can fend for myself—look!” I blasted a Bitterfang wolf who’d been running toward us with a glint in his eye. He went flying, slamming into three of his pack mates. I glanced at Artemis. “See?”

Artemis squinted at me. “Cali… Are you enjoying this?”

I didn’t answer, jarred by the question. I hated to admit it, but it did feel good to use my magic like this. I felt useful and powerful, protecting myself and others after months of being made to feel like a fragile damsel.

Artemis didn’t wait for me to reply—she kept shooting as I scanned the area. I needed to find my mates, make sure they were okay, make sure Russell and Julia were safe. This was exactly what I’d been hoping to avoid. I hated the idea of anyone being in danger, and this fight could’ve been avoided if the Bitterfangs had possessed a *hint* of reason. The situation could’ve been resolved peacefully, with Russell’s parents realizing that Julia was just a girl who was running away from an abusive home and needed their help.

But now, there was war.

It was difficult to tell whose side was which. It was all a blur of fur and fangs until I spotted a familiar silver wolf, giant and majestic—Greyson. Just like Artemis had said, there were several dead or dying werewolves in his vicinity.

He had attacked to end a life.

He had attacked to start a war.

Greyson looked terrifying in battle—cunning as he evaded, and brutal and powerful when he went for the kill. It was blindingly obvious why he was a natural Alpha. And even though he seemed so unlike himself right now, I knew that he was still my mate, still a man who would’ve done anything to protect me.

Still, it was strange to know that Greyson had two such opposing sides. One side of him was gentle, loving, and thoughtful… And then there was *this*. This force of nature that seemed unstoppable.

“It’s all fun and games until Greyson enters murder mode, right?” Artemis said with a chuckle, shooting another arrow. Her words—so disturbing, yet spoken with such ease—startled me out of my stupor. I realized I’d been holding my breath, watching my mate.

“We have to find the kids,” I said urgently. “Greyson will know where they are.”

Artemis nodded, and together we fought our way toward him. I kept an eye out for Russell and Julia along the way, hoping they were being protected. As we waded through the battlefield, my anger returned and grew. I hated the thought that Russell and Julia had been forced into this situation. Especially when it seemed so unnecessary.

We made it to Greyson.

*I was about to come to you when I saw Artemis*, he mind linked. Before I could reply, he herded both my sister and me to the side. His wolf was panting, gaze darting between Artemis and me.

“Are you okay?” I asked shakily.

*As long as you’re okay, I’m fine*, he said. His voice sounded rough in my head, and I felt a strong urge to touch him, to feel that he was real even though he seemed so different.

“Where are the kids?” I asked.

*With Mace*, he replied. *Where’s Xavier?*

I looked around again and finally spotted him. He wasn’t alone.

What was *Ava* doing here? Where the hell had she come from?

*Xavier!* I mind linked.

That got his attention. As he trotted over, Ava in tow, I strangled the urge to ask what was going on with her. At least she was on our side. I opened my mouth to ask Greyson if she had just arrived, but he mind linked with me first.

*You need to get out of here*,he said.

I turned to look at him. Seeing the blood on his face up close made me inhale sharply. The way he stared at me made me shiver.

*This is not a debate, Cali*, he added.

“But I can’t run away like a coward!” I retorted. “I can help—”

*I know*, he interrupted. *But they know about you.* *They know you’re a* due destini *mate. They want to kill you.*

His words, the gruff way he spoke them, the sight of the blood all over him shocked me into silence. I knew what I was in the Bitterfangs’ eyes. An abomination that had given Julia funny notions about the power of love. If they wanted to kill the boy Julia’d run off with, I could only imagine what they’d do if they get their hands on me. I wanted to help now, but my arm was hurting badly, and it would’ve been a lie to say I wasn’t intimidated by the Bitterfangs’ hatred.

Artemis and Ava had been holding off any approaching wolves while we talked, but there were just so many of them…

*I’ll take Cali back and grab some reinforcements*, Xavier mind linked. *We might need them. At least then, Cali will be safely behind the barrier, once we can get it down then back up.* He turned to stare at me. *Apart from the kids, you’re the one the Bitterfangs want right now.*

I opened my mouth to speak, but Greyson spoke up again.

*Please do it, love*, he said. *Just this once, please don’t argue.*

I didn’t know if it was the rawness in his gaze or the blood all over him, but my resistance crumbled.

“Okay,” I whispered, reaching out to touch Greyson’s cheek.

Despite the blood, his wolf’s warmth felt the same as always, and something inside me eased.

A moment later, I was on Xavier’s back, my arms wrapped tight around his neck. I felt safe against him, even if the throbbing pain in my arm intensified.

*I’m right here*, he mind linked.

I held him tighter, seeking comfort as a wave of guilt washed over me. I hadn’t wanted to believe that things would turn out this way. Then again, when did I ever see true danger coming?

My hand went up to grip the Shard, to ground myself—but all my hand made contact with was my collarbone.

*No.*

Dread washed over me. I patted at my neck, my chest…

*No no no NO! This can’t be!*

My throat was bare. The Shard was gone.

# Episode 3628

**Xavier**

I sprinted as fast as I could through Three Devils Point, the gravel slipping beneath my feet as I ran. I wanted to get Redwood land under my feet, so I’d at least be in a safe zone. I wasn’t afraid of threats—Redwood territory would only be *safe* in the sense that if anyone was following me, I’d be able to safely attack first. On my own land, I’d be well within my rights to take them down.

*You okay?* I asked Cali, who was holding onto me tightly.

*I’m fine*, she said, but even through the mind link, I could tell she was tense. She was hanging on for all she was worth, and I hated that she sounded so rattled, but the Bitterfangs were trying to kill her just on principle, so I supposed I understood why.

The Bitterfangs didn’t like what Cali was, or that she proved that *due destini* existed, challenging whatever archaic ideal they were so desperate to hold on to. Fuck that pack.

I felt fury rising up inside me, and I gave my head a hard shake. I couldn’t do this. I had to steel myself against this kind of thinking, or else I was going to sprint back to the fight and tear out every single one of their throats—and as satisfying as that would be, it couldn’t be my goal right now.

My only mission—the one thing that would always be paramount for me—was to protect Cali. I knew she would do the same for me. That was how much we mattered to each other.

I dropped my head and ran faster, pressing on through the scrubby bushes and thick undergrowth. I was running hard enough that I could hear my heartbeat in my ears—but then I heard the unmistakable sound of running feet coming up behind me. I shot a glance over my shoulder and saw that we had company. Three wolves were following us. *Of fucking course*. They were far behind me, and I didn’t think there was any danger of them catching up, but that was cold comfort.

I edged right, then left, weaving through the pines.

*Hold on*, I warned Cali. *I’m going to get a little creative here. And don’t hesitate to blast if you get a clear shot. You feel free to let them have it.*

*You got it*, Cali said.

Zigzagging through the trees, I’d almost shaken off my shadows when one of the wolves—a grey one— suddenly appeared right in front of me.

I skidded to a stop on the rocky ground. I’d been hauling ass, so it was already tough to redirect my momentum, but then another wolf appeared at my right.

*Hold on, Cali*, I said. *Tight as you can.*

*I’m trying*, she said nervously.

I got a bad feeling and looked over my shoulder. Sure enough, the third wolf was edging closer.

Great.

I knew I could take them—I wasn’t worried about that—but I didn’t like Cali being so exposed, holding onto my back.

The three wolves began to circle us.

*The* due destini *mate is trying to leave the party so soon?* one of them taunted.

The other two laughed, the sound like a bark.

I narrowed my eyes. *You might want to work on your material*, I shot back*. If that was supposed to be a joke, it sucked.*

The comedian growled at me.

*I had no idea it was real*, another wolf said, looking up at Cali. *I didn’t think I’d ever actually see a* due destini *mate.*

*Me neither*, said the third wolf—brown, with short hair. *Hell, I’d forgotten all about them until Julia got so obsessed with the concept.*

*It didn’t make Alpha Malakai very happy, did it?* the first wolf asked.

*Nope*, the other two chorused.

The grey wolf—who seemed to be the leader—glared at Cali. *The* due destini *mate made Julia forget her place.*

*That’s not my problem*, I snapped. *What are you going to do to Julia, anyway? Put her back in her place?*

*Yes*, the grey wolf snarled. *Right after we put you two in the ground. We can’t have* this *just walking around.* He glowered at Cali. *Ideas like that and the people who support them have to be eradicated. Put down*, he enunciated.

*I’d love to see you try*, I said menacingly.

Then, without waiting for a reply, I lunged at the three wolves, who’d gathered together into a knot. I felt Cali grip my fur as I leapt. The wolves snarled as I hit them, and then it was a flurry of teeth and kicks and claws. They put up a fight, but I pushed past them and sprinted off into the woods.

I *needed* to get to the pack house. That much was clear. As much as I wanted to deal with these Bitterfang jokers, I knew I needed to get Cali somewhere safe, and if I could make it to the pack house, I’d be able to get her inside, then go back out and take care of the Three Stooges.

I had to admit, the Bitterfangs were fierce fighters. Julia clearly hadn’t been lying about the intense training they went through. Even fighting just one of them, I’d been pushed to think smarter and fight harder—something I rarely experienced with any other wolves around these parts.

Ultimately, that was a good thing, but taking care of the other two while I fought the grey wolf was going to be hard—but not impossible.

Anyway, I was glad Cali hadn’t been able to hear what they were saying. She was scared enough as it was, and she didn’t need to hear any of their bullshit.

The three wolves followed me as I sprinted for the pack house, trying to nip at my back legs. It was such a childish move—young wolves did the same thing to get each other to trip—but I ignored them, focusing only on Cali and making sure I kept her safe. Finally, probably annoyed that they weren’t getting any reaction out of me, the brown wolf lunged at me and tore into my side. The bite stung, but even worse, it only narrowly missed Cali. She gasped and slid backward, away from the long, sharp teeth.

I struggled against the wolf, but as I did, Cali slipped off my back.

Damn it.

Enraged, I rounded on the brown wolf and lunged, ripping out the bastard’s throat in two seconds. In an instant, he’d gone from a living, breathing wolf to nothing but a wolf skin.

There was blood everywhere—I could taste it—and I looked around for Cali. She was on the ground a few yards away from me. She was crouched down, breathing hard, and looking terrified. She’d been sprayed with blood and was clutching her wrist like it hurt.

I’d just taken a step toward her when I heard the thundering of many running feet. I looked around and processed all the visual information as it came in—a reddish wolf was charging toward Cali, her mouth open and teeth bared, but I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to make it to her in time to help, because the grey wolf was coming at me—already almost on top of me.

DAMN IT.

I acted on instinct and dipped my head, dropping it below the muzzle of the grey wolf as he charged toward me. That gave me leverage, and I lifted the grey wolf off his feet, using his forward momentum to send him rocketing into a tree stump. He slumped to the ground, a crumpled pile of fur and legs.

I spun around toward Cali, my heart racing, just in time to see her hold up her hands and hit the red wolf with a blast of magic. The red wolf stopped in her tracks, then flew backward and collapsed, still as a stone.

*That’s my girl*, I thought, gazing proudly at Cali.

In the moment of stillness, with both Bitterfang wolves down, I loped over and scooped Cali up onto my back.

She favored her wrist as she climbed up, but I couldn’t worry about that at the moment. There were two stunned Bitterfang wolves behind me, and I had to hurry.

We headed through the woods as quickly as we could, and when I finally spotted the pack house through the trees, I nearly sighed with relief.

But it wasn’t over yet—we still had the barrier to deal with.

I could see pack members gathered on the porch and in the yard. Kira was the first to see me, and she grabbed Big Mac’s arm, pointing. Lola and Jacqueline were there, too, along with Mikah and Ravi.

As we drew closer, I slowed down, and Cali slid off my back, still cradling her wrist. I shifted back to human, scooped her into my arms, and pounded my fist against the barrier.

The magic rippled up in a wave as I yelled, “Take this thing down. NOW!”

# Episode 3629

**Greyson**

I gave the black Bitterfang wolf a powerful kick with my back legs, and when he crumpled at my feet with a whimper, I took a moment to look around the clearing. It was still chaos, but it felt more balanced now that the Samaras had arrived to back us up. There didn’t seem to be any more Bitterfangs arriving, either, which made me feel like the tide was turning. I was glad about that, and the fact that Cali wasn’t there anymore. I could never concentrate in a fight like this when she was around—I was always too worried about her. The irony was that when I was distracted like that, it made both of us *less* safe. I hoped that Xavier had gotten her home and that she was safely inside the barrier around the pack house.

Obviously, I would have preferred to take her there myself—to see her arrive safely with my own two eyes—but I knew I couldn’t abandon my pack mates. It was my duty to be here—to lead them in the fight, as their Alpha.

And I was doing just that. The black wolf was still whimpering at my feet—from the sound of his ragged breathing, I thought I might have collapsed a lung when I’d kicked him—and I looked around at Rishika, Jay, Gabriel, and Artemis. They were all deep in the fray, fighting hard and working together seamlessly to fend off the Bitterfangs. As I watched, Jay tossed a tawny brown wolf over his shoulder, and Rishika caught it in midair, slamming it down to the ground where it lay still—knocked out by the blow. Artemis drew back her bow and let an arrow fly, making quick work of taking down two wolves. They didn’t look dead, but they were definitely down for the count.

I scanned the snarling crowd for Lance. I figured we’d be able to end this if we could wound him, but ideally not kill him. Not because his existence added much to the world, but because of the potential consequences to my pack. Lance was clearly close to the Bitterfang Alpha—I suspected that killing him would be like if someone killed Xavier.

If that ever happened, I’d have no choice but to rain down hell on the person and the pack responsible. I had to think very strategically, here. A war was *not* something I wanted right now, but I couldn’t let Lance take Julia and kill Russell. There had to be a middle ground, but I just couldn’t see it—not yet, anyway.

The lovestruck teens were currently being protected by the Pit Bulls, which was a good sight to see.

I looked around at the Redwoods, the Blue Bloods, and the Samaras.

*LET’S FINISH THIS!* I shouted to them all through the communal mind link.

An instant later, Lance’s wolf stepped forward, seemingly out of nowhere.

*Yes, let’s*, he said coolly, his voice echoing in my head.

I turned so I was looking him right in the eye. *You and me. Whoever wins gets the girl.*

*And the boy*, Lance added.

I ground my teeth. I knew it was risky, but I also knew I had to do it. There was no way I was going to let the Bitterfangs get Julia or Russell.

I tipped my head, sizing him up. *Going one-on-one is a smart move, considering your pack has lost so many members today. Pity they’re about to lose one more.*

He shook his furry head. *They died fighting for what they believed in. They died noble deaths.*

*Fighting to kill a child?* I asked. *Yeah, that sounds real noble. Right up there with Gandhi and Malala.*

Lance narrowed his eyes. *Have you fallen so far? Have you forgotten the way things are supposed to be?* *Werewolves are meant to have—to love—only one mate. For life. To be with another is sickening.*

I snorted. *Yeah, because werewolves totally adhere to that rule. They’re known for their devoted monogamy, right? Besides, my father believed in that principle, but he was still a bastard. He still hurt women. He hurt people, and he didn’t care about anyone but himself.* I shook my head. *You pretend you care about these principles of yours, but I’ve known bastards like you my whole life. It’s just a front. It’s just an excuse for you to hurt people who don’t think the same way as you. If it wasn’t* due destini*, you’d find some other “principle” to weaponize. You’d find a different bit of archaic lore and twist it to suit your agenda. It’s reverse engineering, and I’m not interested, so why don’t you just shut the hell up? I don’t give a fuck about any of this.*

*This is about tradition!* Lance spat. *Our way of life.*

*Give me a fucking break*, I growled. *You’re hiding behind this veil of tradition, and you’re fucking* rotting*. You’re hiding what you really are—a monster.*

I watched Lance take some deep breaths, apparently trying to control his temper.

Finally, he shook his head. *It is unfortunate that you feel that way, Greyson. I can see that you’re a strong Alpha, but ideas like yours are dangerous. You cannot be allowed to spread them. You could corrupt the minds of those under your command—worse, you could corrupt the minds of children. Even other Alphas*,he added with a glance at the Blue Bloods and the Samaras. He shook his head, looking almost sad. *You were once so strong, but look at what that Fae bitch has done to you.*

I rolled my eyes. I’d heard enough. More than enough—so I lunged, ready to end this. I went for Lance’s throat, but he was ready for me, dodging out of range at the last second. I landed and pivoted, going for him again. I went high, and he went low, landing a glancing blow on my belly.

I had to admit that it was a difficult fight. The Bitterfangs clearly trained like a freaking militia, which made them difficult to fight. They were predictably unpredictable, but I was starting to adjust to their style.

I dodged a blow from Lance’s claws and lunged forward to sink my teeth into his back. He yelped, and I felt him flinch. I was finally getting the upper hand when suddenly, I felt a fiery sting in my side.

I looked around to see another wolf—brown with white streaks—clawing mercilessly at my side. It was clear the wolf wanted me to release Lance, but his intervention amounted to straight-up cheating. This was no longer a one-on-one fight.

Dammit.

Without releasing Lance, I kicked at the striped wolf, but it was difficult to handle both of them at once, and I knew I’d lost my momentum.

The striped wolf could clearly sense this, too. I felt her rearing back, about to renew her attack, when suddenly there was a spray of blood.

Vishal appeared next to the fallen striped wolf’s body. He had blood on his muzzle, and it was clear he’d just taken her down.

We shared a look, and a moment of clear understanding. I let go of Lance, and together, Vishal and I went for him.

Rishika ran to join us, then Jay appeared as well. Lance’s gaze darted around as he backed away, taking in the group closing in on him.

He tried to make a break for it, but Gabriel was right there, blocking his path. In that moment of distraction, I charged at him, knocking him on his back and pinning him down, my claws at this throat.

More than anything, I wanted to kill this bastard, but I forced myself to stop and think. I had to be smart. Killing him could mean trouble for my pack.

Breathing hard, I glared down at Lance. *Leave*, I commanded. *I’ve won. We get the girl* and *the boy.*

To make my point, I pressed my claw into Lance’s neck—carefully, just enough to draw blood. I felt him swallow.

*You’ve won*, he conceded. He got to his feet when I released him. *This time*, he added.

He howled a call to retreat. There was an instant yelping and yowling from the Bitterfangs in response to this—his pack clearly disagreed with this order. But then he howled again, and they began to fall back, extracting themselves from their individual fights.

I watched as Lance gathered his people and began to walk away. But when he reached the trees, he stopped and looked over his shoulder, his gaze dark and angry.

*Make no mistake, Redwood Alpha*, he said. *You may have won this time, but take me at my word—this isn’t over.*

# Episode 3630

I couldn’t stop shaking. Xavier’s arms were locked around me, but I just couldn’t get warm. It was cold, but I was starting to wonder if it was actually shock. My wrist was aching, and every step Xavier took jostled it, even though I was trying to cradle it. I wasn’t exactly sure what was wrong with it, but I had a sneaking suspicion it had something to do with the moment I’d tumbled off Xavier’s back and tried to brace for the fall.

Which I’d done extremely poorly.

I’d heard a distinct crunch as I’d hit the ground, followed by a breathtaking jolt of pain up my arm. And now it was throbbing, even though I was trying not to move it. *Shit.*

“Come on!” Xavier yelled, pounding on the barrier again. “Drop this thing!”

The others were running down the lawn toward us, but apparently not fast enough for him.

“NOW! I want this down NOW!” he bellowed.

Big Mac moved forward and raised her hands. Unexpected movement caught my eye, and I looked over Xavier’s shoulder to see two wolves emerging from the trees.

Damn it. They’d followed us.

Big Mac saw them too and hesitated—and in a moment, I understood. She didn’t want to drop the barrier and risk those wolves getting close enough to the pack house to cause more trouble.

“Put me down,” I said to Xavier.

“What? No!” he snapped.

“I’ll be fine,” I assured him. “Seriously. Go deal with those wolves.”

It was a strange thing to say, knowing what it would mean for him to “deal with” them. I could still feel the blood splattered across my face from the wolf he’d killed in the woods. I rubbed at it with the edge of my sleeve. No need to think about that right now…

“*No*,” he snapped, shaking his head. “I’m not doing that. Take the barrier down *now*!” he shouted, looking back at Big Mac.

“Do it, Big Mac!” Lola added. She shifted to her wolf form.

“Yeah, come on! Do it!” Sage yelled, taking Lola’s cue and shifting too.

“Oh my god, now please!” Zainab added. She shifted as well.

Ravi shifted, and Adair’s whip appeared in his hand.

My heart swelled as I looked at all of them, standing ready. They were going to fight for us. What did I do to deserve friends like these?

“NOW!” Xavier yelled.

“I’m working on it!” Big Mac snarled. “If you could have just a little bit of patience while I complete this very complicated spell, that would be great.”

She closed her eyes, and I watched her mouth moving. She was chanting the spell, though I couldn’t hear her. I looked over my shoulder and saw that the wolves were getting closer. They were coming for us, charging across the distance.

“Come on,” I muttered, starting to sweat.

The wolves were closing in, and Xavier raised his hand to bang on the barrier, but it was gone. We leapt across what was left of the shimmering magic *just* as the Bitterfang wolves lunged. But Sage, Zainab, Ravi, Lola, and Adair were ready and caught the wolves in midair.

My heart was thundering, and before I could even process what I was seeing, Mikah had appeared before me. He held out his arms, taking me from Xavier—who immediately shifted into his wolf.

*Be safe*, he said. *I’ll be right back*. Then he pivoted and threw himself into the battle taking place with the Bitterfang wolves.

Mikah ran me toward the house, and I looked over his shoulder, feeling helpless as I watched Xavier and the rest of my friends. The Bitterfang wolves were tough, but there were so many Redwoods, I was hoping we’d make quick work of them.

It was strange that they’d followed Xavier and me to the pack house, and stranger still that they hadn’t fallen back when they’d seen how many Redwoods they’d be facing. It was almost like the Bitterfang wolves *wanted* to die—which I found surprising. Though I couldn’t manage to feel even a scrap of pity for them.

We reached the porch, where Torin was waiting with my parents, all of them looking terrified.

“Thank you, Mikah,” I said as the vampire put me down. But as I unwound my arm from around his neck, I accidentally jostled my wrist, which sent a shot of searing pain up my arm. I hissed.

“Cali, what happened?” Mom asked.

“It’s my wrist,” I admitted. “I think it’s broken.”

Torin stepped forward and eyed it. “It’s pretty swollen,” he said, shaking his head. “It definitely looks broken to me.”

“Can you fix it?” I asked.

He ushered me inside and into the living room. “Yeah, but you’d better sit down.”

“Thank you, Mikah,” Mom said, turning gratefully to the vampire.

Mikah nodded, then hurried back outside to help the others. Clearly, now that diplomacy was out of the question, he had no more qualms about showing himself to the Bitterfangs.

“Can I see your wrist?” Torin asked, holding out his hand.

I nodded but was distracted when I heard the sound of a yelping wolf through the still-open door. Was that Lola? Ravi? *Xavier?*

“Cali?” Mom said gently. “Honey, Torin wants to see your wrist.”

“Sorry,” I said, tuning back in to him. *Everyone out there is strong. They’ll be okay.* “Yeah, of course.”

I held out my wrist, supporting it with my left hand.

His hands were cool as he took my arm and looked at it closely.

“Does that hurt?” he asked, applying light pressure to the base of my wrist.

“*Yes!*” I yelped.

“What about here?” he asked, turning my forearm ever so slightly.

I nodded, trying not to cry out in pain.

He pursed his lips. “Absolutely a broken wrist, and you might have fractured your arm, too.”

“Can you heal that?” I asked anxiously. I’d never seen him heal a broken bone before, but I’d seen him heal far weirder injuries, so I was sure he could do it.

“Well, I’ve only done it once,” he admitted.

“Really?”  
 He nodded. “Astrid broke her arm once when we were running from some Dark Fae warriors. It was… Uh, it wasn’t pretty.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“It looked like it really hurt her, to have me heal it,” he said. “She screamed. Reallyloud.”

I rolled my eyes. “It *already* hurts, Torin. I don’t care, please, just heal it!”

He still looked nervous, but he nodded. “Okay. Just try not to scream, okay?”

He took a deep breath and rubbed his hands together. They began to glow faintly blue. *Here goes nothing*. He placed them on my arm, and a burning sensation flowed through me, emanating from the spot he was touching.

It hurt like hell, and I bit my lip. My mom reached out for my hand, and my dad put his hands on my shoulders, holding me tightly.

The burning sensation now felt like fire, and it was everywhere, not just my arm, though that was where it hurt the worst. It felt like I was holding my arm in the hottest part of a bonfire. I’d promised Torin that I wouldn’t scream, but I couldn’t keep myself from whimpering.

Torin looked apologetic. “I’m sorry, Cali. I did warn you. I can’t stop. Not now—that would be so much worse.”

“It’s fine,” I managed. “Just finish it. *Please.*”

Tense, he nodded and refocused on my arm. The pain was nearly overwhelming, but I could almost feel my bones moving, fusing back together. It was like nothing I’d ever felt before, and I hoped I’d never feel it again.

I closed my eyes and breathed hard through my nose, just trying to stay conscious. And then, sooner than I’d expected, Torin lifted his hands from my arm.

“I’m done,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

I opened my eyes and looked down at my arm. It still looked swollen and bruised—had the healing even worked?

“Can you move your hand?” my mom asked.

I tried, flexing my fingers and pulling them into a fist. My hand felt stiff, and moving it still burned a little, but the fact that I could do it at all felt kind of miraculous.

“You should try to rest if you can,” Torin advised. “The bones are healed, but you should let the magic keep doing its work.”

“Okay,” I said, amazed. “Thank you, Torin. I honestly have no idea what I’d do without you.”

Torin looked tired, but he smiled. “I’m glad it worked.”

My mom threw her arms around me as Torin left the room. “Oh, Cali, I was so worried about you.”

“I’m okay,” I assured her, patting her back with my good hand.

Apparently not willing to take my word for it, my mom pulled away and looked me over, checking for more injuries. Her gaze dropped from my face to my neck, then she frowned.

“Where’s the Shard?” she asked.

My whole body tensed. “I lost it.”

My mom’s eyes went wide as dinner plates. “Oh, Cali, no.”

“I know, Mom, I know—”

“No, Cali, that’s not good. You can’t be without it. We need it back. *Now.*”

# Episode 3631

**Greyson**

I stood in the clearing with the Samaras, the Blue Bloods, and my Redwoods. The Pit Bulls were there, too, standing with Russell and Julia. We’d won, but it didn’t exactly feel like a victory. How could it? We’d been ambushed. Totally blindsided. Our peaceful—if tense—meeting had gone south when the Bitterfang pack had arrived, and I was left with a bitter taste in my mouth about the whole thing.

When I glanced over at them, I saw that Russell and Julia were clinging to each other. They looked terrified, clearly rattled by what had just taken place. I couldn’t really blame them. But what the hell was I supposed to do with these kids now? I should’ve killed Lance when I could, but I’d been in a difficult position. It was either prioritize the kids so they could live or kill him.

Not a difficult decision, really.

But it did mean that the Bitterfangs were likely going to be a thorn in our side again. They weren’t going to stop coming after us until they could bring Julia back to Malakai. And for Russell, if the Bitterfangs got their hands on him, he’d be dead in seconds.

“What now?” Mace asked, stepping forward and turning to face the group. He looked around. “I want to protect the kids,” he said, nodding toward Julia and Russell, “but let’s be serious about what that’s going to look like. They came at us without their full pack; we don’t know what them at full force looks like. We might have handled them today, but we don’t know what could come if they want blood. That has to be considered.”

“It was just a handful of us today, and we won,” I countered. “We both came prepared for a meeting, not an all-out battle. If we’d brought more pack members along, prepared for a proper fight, things probably would’ve gone differently.”

*Better*,I thought to myself. *Things would’ve gone better. With the rest of the Redwood wolves, a couple of vampires, and maybe a witch or two, we could’ve ended this before it began.*

Mace raised his eyebrows, but one of Russell’s moms stepped forward before he could respond to that.

“We’ll take Russell,” she said. “If we do that, this can end, and he’ll be safe.”

“But what happens to Julia?” I asked. “The Bitterfangs aren’t going to stop coming after her until they get their pack princess back.”

Paris shook her head. “Julia—you’re a sweet girl, honey, but my only goal is to protect my son. At any cost.”

Russell stepped toward his mom, his face red with fury. “What are you talking about? After all this, you *still* want to keep me separated from her?” He shook his head. “No way. The only way I’m coming with you is if Julia comes, too.”

“If Julia comes, the Bitterfangs will come after us,” Paris said. “Please think about it, Russell—”

He set his jaw. “Absolutely not. I’m not going anywhere without her, Mom.”

I moved to stand next to Russell. “Paris, I understand your concern, but this is exactly what the Bitterfangs want. I know you want to get Russell away from this situation, but as it stands, they’re not going to stop until he’s dead. That’s what they want. They’re going to keep coming, and not just because they want to bring Julia to her father—they want to make an example out of Russell.”

Julia let out a sob, and Russell put his arms around her.

“This might be hard to hear, but it’s the truth,” I said. “Wherever you go with Russell, you’re going to be hunted. There’s no scenario where the Bitterfangs are going to just let this fizzle out.”

Paris rounded on me. “Then what do you suggest we do?” she demanded. “Just let them win?” She narrowed her eyes. “Let me ask you something, Alpha. Are you a parent?”

Without meaning to, a picture of Fenrir popped up in my head. There had been a time when I’d wanted nothing more than to be that kid’s father. I thought of my dreams of being married to Cali, and of having children together—including a daughter we’d name after my mother.

I looked down at Paris. “No, I’m not a parent.”

“I didn’t think so,” she growled. “So don’t think you know what a parent would do for their child.”

I didn’t like her tone, but I had to admit that she wasn’t wrong. Still, I was right about the Bitterfangs, so why weren’t they listening to me? It wasn’t like I *wanted* to be tied up in this mess, but it felt like it was too late to back out now. For better or for worse, the Redwoods were involved.

Vishal stepped forward. “Greyson is right. The Bitterfangs won’t stop until they’re stopped. No matter where you go, Russell and the girl will never be safe. And neither will the Pit Bulls.”

“Let us help you,” I offered. “We’re all in this together now. Come back to the Redwood pack house, and we’ll figure this out.”

Vishal didn’t look convinced.

“We can protect you,” I said. “We have witches.”

Russell’s moms looked at each other, and I could see the unspoken conversation happening between them. They looked unsure about what I was proposing.

“And what about Julia?” Russell asked, single-minded as always.

“It might be best to keep her separate—for now,” Mace said. “My pack would welcome and protect her.”

Russell looked like he was about to argue, but I cut him off before he could get started.

“I think that sounds smart. Having both of you in one location still isn’t a good idea. Listen,” I added when Russell still looked mutinous, “I’ll even ask one of the Redwood witches to go to the Blue Blood pack house and create a magical barrier to keep everyone safe.”

That seemed to satisfy Russell, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

“Okay,” he finally said. “That sounds okay.”

Great. Now I was going to have to convince one of our witches to do that. Whatever—that was a worry for a later time. One of many.

“Fine,” Paris said, nodding. “We’ll come to your pack house, but just for now. Just until we figure out a plan for ourselves.”

“Fine by me,” I said. Did this woman really think I wanted to trap them and make them stay forever?

“Okay, then let’s head out,” Rishika said, clapping her hands together.

I turned to Mace. “Thanks, man. I knew we could count on you.”

He nodded. “Anytime.”

I nodded. “I’ll be in touch as soon as we get back to the house. We’ll coordinate having one of our witches come to you and put up the barrier.”

“We’ll be waiting. Let’s go, Blue Bloods. Julia,” he said, looking over at the girl.

She tearfully separated herself from Russell and followed Mace into the trees.

“Samara pack, thank you, too,” I said.

The Samaras were already disappearing into the trees, heading back toward their land, but the few remaining wolves who heard me nodded in acknowledgement.

“Okay,” I said, turning to the Redwoods and the Pit Bulls. “That just leaves us.”

As a group, we shifted and headed into the trees. The way was clear, and we made good time, and when we got back to the house, I found my brother, Ravi, and Sage standing on the lawn outside, looking down at the bodies of two very dead wolves.

We all shifted to human as we emerged from the trees and walked closer. I saw my brother, eyeing me with indignation, but he said nothing.

“What’s going on here?” Ravi asked, looking over my shoulder at the Pit Bulls.

“The Pit Bulls are going to stay here for a while. They’ve got the Bitterfangs on their tail, so we’re going to watch their backs.” I looked back over my shoulder. “What happened to the barrier? We need to get it back up. We need the protection.”

I looked over at Big Mac, who was standing off to the side.

She nodded but looked grave. “I can do it, but once I put the thing back up, I’m going to need to replenish my magic. I’m not a machine, you know.”

“That will be fine,” I said. “Thank you.”

I turned to the Pit Bulls and looked them over. I intended to keep my promise about watching their backs, but I knew I needed to be smart about it. They’d helped us out in a pinch, but they were still Rogues.

“This is what we’re going to do,” I said, looking around. “We’re going to let Russell and a few others inside the protection of the barrier.”

I wasn’t going to let an entire non-pack of Rogues into my house, but I did want to keep the kid safe. I’d compromise. Hopefully they would too.

Russell’s moms stepped forward, with him between them. “We’ll go.”

“Fine,” I agreed.

“The rest of us can stay outside the barrier,” one of the Pit Bulls said, a big guy with a shiny bald head. “Protect the outside from intruders.”

“Good,” I nodded. “All the rest of the Pit Bulls should stay outside.”

They nodded in agreement.

Big Mac stepped forward and raised her arms. She closed her eyes and began to mutter the spell, creating the barrier. I stood a bit behind her, watching as the air began to shimmer above us. The barrier descended like a curtain around the yard, giving way just before the forest really began. The Pit Bulls had turned to watch it, and then, moving fast enough that none of us could react in time, Vishal leapt. He lunged forward, toward the pack house, and slid under the barrier just before it crashed down to the ground.

# Episode 3632

**Xavier**

I rushed toward Vishal as he slid along the ground inside the barrier. Ravi was next to me, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw Gabe coming up from the side. I tensed, ready for a fight. We’d just taken down two Bitterfangs—we could take care of one Rogue if we needed to.

We all slowed as Vishal got to his feet.

“Don’t even think about taking another step,” I snarled.

“Don’t hurt him!” Paris bellowed, hurrying down the porch steps toward us.

Outside the barrier, the other Pit Bulls were pounding on the invisible wall, screaming at us.

“Back off, man!”

“You don’t know what you’re doing! Leave him alone!”

“Don’t touch him!”

I ignored them. They couldn’t get through, which meant I didn’t have to deal with them.

Vishal didn’t move, but—to his credit—he didn’t look scared or intimidated as Ravi, Gabe, and I all barreled toward him.

“We could push him back through,” I suggested. “Trap him on the other side.”

Big Mac had walked over to me. “I know you pride yourself on being tough or whatever it is you call it, but why not hear the man out first?”

I sighed. I *supposed* the witch had a point.

With a sigh, I turned to Vishal. There only seemed to be one option, and I was ready to try my luck with the Rogue.

“Stand down!” someone shouted.

I turned to see Greyson striding toward me.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I demanded.

“Leave him alone. Vishal saved my ass during the fight with Lance. We owe him a friendly discussion, at least.” Greyson turned to Vishal. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

Vishal’s jaw was set. “I wasn’t going to let Paris, Joan, and Russell be trapped in here without an ally.”

“Hang on,” I said angrily. “*You* don’t trust *us*?”

Vishal met my eyes. “I don’t trust anyone.”

“Huh.” I looked at Greyson. “So much for the ‘we owe him a friendly discussion’ argument, wouldn’t you say?”  
 “He’s our dearest friend,” Joan put in. She and Paris had hurried over to join the discussion. “Please,” she added with a pleading look.

Vishal put up his hands in surrender. “Listen, I don’t mean your pack any harm, I swear to you. I just want to be here if they need me,” he said, nodding toward Joan and Paris.

I looked over at Greyson, wondering what the hell my brother was thinking.

Greyson nodded. “It’s fine. Vishal can stay.” Then, without another word on the subject, he turned and headed back to the pack house.

I stared at his retreating form for a moment, then jogged after him,

“Are you serious?” I asked, catching up with him.

“What?”

“*What?*” I repeated incredulously. “You’re just going to let that guy stay?”

He glared at me. “Were you not listening?” he snapped. “Vishal saved my life. He’s here to protect his friends. What he’s doing is honorable, Xavier. It’s what either of us would’ve done in his place.”

“That’s beside the point,” I hissed.

“Why?” Greyson demanded.

“Because none of our friends would ever be in this position,” I pointed out. “I think you’re making a big mistake here, man. A Rogue is a Rogue. You can’t fucking trust them. It’s that simple.”

Greyson stopped walking and rounded on me. “I was a Rogue once.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Yeah. And look where that got us.”

A muscle in his jaw twitched, and he shook his head. “I’m done with this conversation. My decision was never actually up for discussion. Where’s Cali?”

I bit my tongue. I didn’t like being dismissed like that, but yeah—Cali. He was asking if she was okay, and he had the right to know.

“She’s inside,” I said.

We walked up the porch steps, and I edged through the front door before Greyson, then into the living room. Cali was on the couch, leaning her head back. She looked weary and pale, but she looked up as we walked in, then got to her feet. I stepped toward her and picked her up, hugging her tightly.

“Are you okay?” I asked, putting her down and looking her over carefully. “How’s your wrist?”

“What happened to your wrist?” Greyson asked quickly.

“I hurt it,” Cali admitted. “I *broke* it, actually—”

“*What?*” Greyson demanded.

“But Torin healed it,” she said quickly. “I’m good now. Promise. How are you both?” she asked. “Are you okay?”

“I am now,” I said.

She nodded and turned to Greyson, hugging him. I tried not to let that bother me but wasn’t totally successful.

“Cali,” Russell said, walking into the room.

“Russell!” Cali burst out, pulling away from Greyson. She ran to Russell and threw her arms around him. “I’m so happy to see you! How are you? Where’s Julia? Is she all right? What happened after I left?”

Russell took a deep breath and started filling Cali in. I looked on, just grateful to see Cali safe and happy. Then something caught my eye, and I saw Vishal had stepped into the living room. He was standing off to the side, in a corner near the dark fireplace, looking on at the scene, not saying anything. He wasn’t technically doing anything wrong, but I made a mental note to keep an eye on the guy.

“So,” I said, looking around at the group. “What’s the plan?”

“What do you mean?” Greyson asked. “What plan?”

“The plan for everyone who’s here now,” I said. “Are we just going to hang out like the Brady Bunch until the Bitterfangs decide to show up again, or what?”

My brother glared at me. “Of course not.”

“So what are we going to do?” I pressed.

“Right now, we’re going to regroup until we figure out what our next move is going to be.”

“What do you mean, our next move?” I asked. “How hard is that to figure out? We just have to kill the Bitterfangs.”

The side conversations that had been going on in the living room stopped as I said this, and all eyes turned to me.

“What?” I asked, looking around. “Am I wrong?”

“You know,” Gabe said, “there *is* something to be said for that idea.”

I nodded. “Tell me about it. Think about it—the Bitterfangs are nothing but a thorn in our side. They’ve already proven that they’re a threat, haven’t they? They don’t respect pack rules. They’ve crossed pack boundary lines with no remorse, they’ve marked a freaking kid for death, and as for their Alpha… His own daughter is just a pawn in his game. She’s not even a person to them.”

“That’s my guy!” Gabe said, pointing at me.

“The way I see it,” I went on, ignoring Gabe, “it’s no loss if the Bitterfangs are eradicated.”

I looked around, watching as everyone took my words in. I could see them resonating with people. Russell’s moms looked convinced, Vishal was nodding, even some of the Redwoods looked like they agreed. Ravi was looking at me, and I knew Gabe was listening to me, even if he wasn’t technically a pack member.

“He might have a point,” Rishika started. “I—”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Greyson said shortly.

“Hey, I’m just saying—”

“I said that’s *enough*,” Greyson snapped, his voice cold as ice. He looked around, his eyes flashing with anger. “All of you, listen to me now. I will not risk my entire pack to put down the Bitterfangs. Yes, you’re right,” he said, looking over at me as I opened my mouth to argue. “The Bitterfangs are dangerous. They’re a threat, but we’ve seen them in action, and we all know they’ll fight to the death if they come after us. That’s how they’ve been trained. That’s their culture. But that’s *all* we know about them. We cannot dive headfirst into a war when we barely know the enemy or know whether they’re actually looking to retaliate.”

He looked around the room, which had gone quiet again.

“Right now, we all need to try to settle down. We need to catch our breath, and *then* we will discuss what we’re going to do next.”

I glowered at my brother. This was so typical of Greyson.

I whipped around and stormed out of the room. I paused in the doorway and looked at the front door. I wanted to go for a run—I *needed* to go for a run—but obviously, that wasn’t an option.

I fucking hated when Greyson undermined me, especially in front of the pack, and *especially* when I knew *he* knew I was right.

Fuck.

Even if I couldn’t run because of the barrier, I needed some damn fresh air, so I pulled the front door open. But as I did, a limp, blood-splattered body fell through the doorway, slumping toward me. I caught it just before it hit the ground and stared down at it in shock.

It was Ava.

# Episode 3633

The pack house was jammed full of people, and I wove my way through them, trying to follow Xavier. When he’d stormed away from the charged confrontation with Greyson, he’d been fuming. I understood where he was coming from—I understood where both of them were coming from—but total death and destruction wasn’t the way I ever wanted to do things. The way the Bitterfangs had ambushed us out there had been really upsetting, and everyone was on edge. Both Xavier and Greyson had made fair, valid points about what our next move should be, but Greyson’s reasoning had made sense—the idea of intentionally going after a pack like the Bitterfangs just seemed risky.

So I understood why he didn’t want to send the Redwoods directly into the path of danger. But on the other hand, I did agree with Xavier’s argument that just sitting around wasn’t an option. The Bitterfangs were relentless, and if we didn’t do something about them, they were just going to come after us again and again, leaving a trail of destruction and pain. I didn’t want that for anyone. We could lose friends, family. Julia too.

It just felt so complicated. I knew Julia wasn’t close with her mother or father—I didn’t even think she liked them all that much—but that probably didn’t mean she wanted them dead.

Crap, this situation was so difficult. Couldn’t we just shake hands and be done?

I spied Xavier at the front door, and I hurried toward him. He was hunched over, and my heart rate sped up—was he okay?

But as I drew near, I saw that he was holding someone in his arms—someone covered in blood. And I realized with a jolt that that someone was Ava.

“Oh my god,” I gasped out, coming next to him. “What *happened*?”

Ava looked terrible. She was pale and bloodied, and her eyes were half-closed.

“Torin!” I called, looking desperately around. “*Torin!*”

Xavier had his arm around Ava’s waist and was trying futilely to get her to stand. She was alone, which meant she must have walked here, and she was like a ragdoll in his arms.

“What the hell?” I asked, looking out the door. “How did she even get here? Where did she come from?”

He shook his head. “I have no idea. I didn’t even know she was coming. I just opened the door and there she was.” He looked at the empty land in front of the house. “I don’t even know how she got here before the barrier came down. She’s really hurt.”

“I can see that, but…” I frowned. “Why isn’t she healing?”

“I—I don’t know. I’m not sure.” Giving up on getting her to stand, Xavier scooped Ava into his arms. Her head lolled back.

I stepped forward and caught it, pushing it forward so it rested against Xavier’s chest. She looked so pale and weak… It was strange to see her like that. Strange and alarming. Ava had been a thorn in my side from the moment she’d shown up, but she’d always been so strong. It was bizarre to see her hurt like this.

“Do you think the Bitterfangs could’ve done this to her?” I asked Xavier.

He looked grave. “I don’t know.”

“I’m here! You called! I’m here! What do you need?” Torin asked, hurrying toward us. Then he caught sight of Ava and stopped, surprised. “Oh. Okay. *That’s* what you need.”

“Let’s take her in there,” Xavier said, nodding toward the study next to the front door.

Torin opened the door, and Xavier carried Ava inside, setting her carefully on the wingchair in front of the desk. I grabbed a pillow and put it beneath her head for support. There was a fuzzy throw blanket on the window seat, and I grabbed it as Torin took a deep breath, preparing to heal her.

Now that she was lying down, I had a chance to look her over, and I saw that the blood splattered and streaked all over her had probably come from several deep gashes along her arms and on the side of her head. Those had bled into her hair, but it was hard to tell how much, because her dark hair had absorbed all the red. She was visibly shivering, but when I went to spread the blanket over her more, Torin put his hand out to stop me.

“No, Cali, don’t. I need to have access to her body to heal her.”

I looked at Xavier. “What do we do?”

Xavier looked worried, but I couldn’t tell what he was thinking as he looked down at his other mate. Was he concerned she was going to die?

“Xavier?” I pressed.

He shrugged, still not looking up at me. “I don’t know. There might not be much we *can* do. There’s a lot of blood, and if she’s not healing on her own…”

I didn’t like that answer.

“Torin, do whatever you can to help her, okay?” I urged.

His hands were glowing blue as he held them over her body, but he shook his head. “I’m trying, but there’s a problem.”

“What?” I asked, my stomach knotting. “What’s wrong?”

“Her wounds aren’t healing.”

“*What?*” Xavier growled. “Why? What does that mean?”

“See for yourself,” Torin said, focused on his hands.

Xavier and I leaned in to look, and it was immediately obvious that Torin was right. Ava’s wounds were wide and gaping and, worst of all, still bleeding. They were horrible, gruesome, and clearly getting worse by the minute. *Shit.* What the hell had happened to her?

“That isn’t good,” I muttered. I was scared. If something like this could happen to Ava, then it could happen to Xavier or Greyson too. “What do we do? Why isn’t she healing? Are you able to figure it out somehow?”

“I don’t know,” Xavier said, almost like he was speaking to himself.

We kept looking at her, and after a moment, I saw something appear on her skin. At first I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me, but that wasn’t the case.

“Oh, god, Xavier. Look!” I pointed to Ava’s arm, where dark veins were starting to appear.

“Fuck,” Xavier breathed. He leaned close to Ava and grabbed her shoulders, shaking her gently. “Ava? Can you hear me? Ava? It’s Xavier. What happened to you?”

Her eyelids fluttered at the sound of his voice. For a moment, they opened and focused on him. She opened her mouth, and for a second, I thought she was going to speak—tell us what had happened—but no sound came out. She was too hurt.

Xavier—still grasping her shoulders—closed his eyes for a moment. “Fuck. It’s silver.”

“What?” Torin and I said together.

“Silver,” he repeated. “She’s been poisoned with silver.”

I looked at him, shocked. I looked back at the dark veins—they were familiar. Both of my mates had had them at some point. Shit. How had Ava gotten them? Had she confirmed the silver to Xavier via the mind link? Could she tell him the whole story?

“Okay, then that means she needs Fae blood,” I said. “Right away.”

Torin shook his head. “I can’t. I would, but I’m trying to keep these wounds from getting worse.”

“I’m on it,” I said quickly.

I looked around the study for something sharp that I could use to cut open my palm. Scissors, a letter opener—even a tack would’ve done the trick. I went over to the desk, rifling through it and found a paper cutter. It was a small size, made to be used on photographs, which meant the blade was on the inside, and difficult to access. I eyed the thing, wondering how in the world I was going to use it to cut my hand, but then I felt a strange tingling sensation on the back of my neck.

Something sparkled in the corner of my eye, and I looked up to see a wisp floating just outside the window. I stared at it, transfixed.

“Cali? What are you doing?” Xavier said, but it felt like his voice was coming to me from a distance. It was so faint.

I knew he was waiting for me to respond, but I just couldn’t seem to do it. I was looking at the wisp, and suddenly a thought popped into my head. It appeared as though it had been dropped by a passing plane, floating gently down until it landed in my brain.

*Wouldn’t it be easier if Ava was gone?*

My eyes widened, and I gave my head a shake, trying to rid myself of the intrusive thought. What the hell was *that*?

The back of my neck tingled again, and my eyes were drawn to the wisp. I heard the thing speak in a high, trilling voice that bounced around the inside of my head like a rubber ball.

*Let Ava die, Caliana.*