**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 28 - Part 2**

**Episodes 3634–3686**

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# Episode 3634

**Greyson**

The pack house seemed to be exploding with people—and with drama. I’d only just been informed that Ava had shown up out of nowhere, injured and barely conscious. But I’d just seen Xavier disappear into the study with her, along with Cali and Torin, so it looked like he had that covered. I had my own drama to deal with. Besides, Xavier was always hassling me about wanting more responsibility. Well, he was welcome to it.

I’d wanted Cali by my side for the discussions I needed to have with the Pit Bulls, but I knew she was upset after the argument Xavier and I had gotten into, and I didn’t know if she was specifically upset with me. It was strange, because I’d thought she’d be relieved to hear my plan, which involved *not* going to war and killing people. Cali was always dead set *against* violence. She’d been like that for as long as I’d known her. She was always begging me not to hurt anyone, but the way she’d run out of the room after Xavier…

It bothered me that she was so anxious to comfort my brother, but I tried not to dwell on it. There were too many other things to think about, and I was feeling edgy enough as it was. I was just feeling supercharged, and despite what I’d said to Xavier, the idea of killing more Bitterfangs was definitely appealing. But that was just my adrenaline talking—it was running high—and I stood by my decision to take some time to regroup and think. I had spoken like an Alpha, thinking of the good of my pack. I just wished my brother could see eye to eye with me on things like that. It would help unite the pack, and it would sure as hell make my life a lot easier.

With a sigh, I turned to Russell. He was standing with his parents, and all three of them were talking to Vishal. I walked over to them.

“We need to discuss what you’re all going to do,” I said, breaking into their conversation. “Obviously, you’re not going to hide under our barrier for the rest of your lives—”

“No.” Vishal snorted. “Obviously not.”

I gave him a long look. “Why don’t you all go out onto the porch? We can talk there. I’ll be right out.”

They headed out, and I turned to Big Mac and my mother, who’d been standing on the other side of the room.

“Big Mac. First of all, I want to thank you for the barrier, and for everything you’ve been doing for the pack,” I said as I walked over. “We really appreciate it.”

The witch nodded. “I’m glad to do it,” she said. “I’m just sorry the barrier is being so difficult. It’s not being a very cooperative spell right now.”

“I get that, and I don’t want you to worry about it. I know you’re giving it all you’ve got, and you’re doing more than we should be asking you for.”

“Yeah, yeah, but the barrier really shouldn’t be this difficult to maintain,” she said, looking frustrated. “There’s just something about it this time… I’m really struggling with the spell.”

I couldn’t help but feel a little alarmed. Big Mac was a powerful witch—and, at times, a cocky one. Her saying she was struggling was a big red flag.

“Should we just let the barrier fall then?” I asked. I wanted to protect the pack, of course, but not if it was going to have serious consequences for Big Mac. I cared about her. She was going to be my stepmother, for all intents and purposes.

“No,” she said dismissively, rolling her eyes. “Stop being so dramatic. It’s just that I’m having to do more work than usual to keep it up. Magic like this is normally front loaded—difficult to get started, but a walk in the park to maintain. But this time…” She rubbed her head. “It’s like I’m running a marathon.”

I nodded. I didn’t want to keep arguing, but I still didn’t feel great about this. Big Mac was a powerful witch, so it was alarming to hear her talk about having difficulty with such an important spell.

“It’s not just the barrier, either,” she said, shifting her shoulders. “It’s all my magic. Lately, everything’s been feeling like this—harder than it should.” She looked over at me and narrowed her eyes. “And don’t you dare say what you’re thinking.”

“What?” I asked, surprised. “What am I thinking?”

“That I’m getting old!” Big Mac said, pointing at me accusingly.

“Of course that’s not what he’s saying, MacKenzie,” my mom said soothingly. “You’re not old.”

“I *know* I’m not,” Big Mac snapped. “That’s what makes this so strange. It would be a perfectly plausible explanation if that were the case, but it’s not.”

“Okay, okay,” I said, holding up my hands, hoping Big Mac wasn’t going to accuse me of any more thoughts I wasn’t actually thinking. I ran a hand through my hair, feeling worried and stressed. “Listen, I believe you know your limits, so I’ll leave you to it, but the second you feel like you can’t maintain it anymore, you let me know, okay?”

Big Mac didn’t look happy. “I can do it.”

“I know, but if you can’t, just let me know,” I said. “We’ll figure something else out.”

She hesitated for a moment, then nodded. “Fine. You have my word.”

I sighed. “Good.” And, speaking of barriers, I needed to do one more thing before I went out to talk to Russell and his entourage: ask Kira for a favor.

I found her in the kitchen. She was standing at the counter, making cup after cup of tea and handing them out to the pack members who’d just returned from the fight outside—some half-dressed, some completely naked.

“Hey,” I said, walking over.

“Hey,” she said, barely looking up. “Want a cup?”

“No, thanks. Do you have a second? I wanted to ask you something.”

“Sure,” she said, handing a peppermint tea to Sage and following me into the laundry room.

It looked like a bomb had exploded in there. I suspected everyone had raided the place after they’d gotten back, pulling out whatever clothes they could find from the dryer and the baskets, but now clean and dirty clothes were strewn everywhere. We both ignored them.

“What’s up?” Kira asked, crossing her arms.

“I need you to go to the Blue Blood pack house.”

Her eyebrows went up, surprised. “Really? Why?”

This was the part I’d been dreading.

“I sort of volunteered you to go create a barrier over there,” I admitted. “I’m sorry about that. I’m really regretting making the offer. Especially now that I’ve talked to Big Mac about the barrier she’s holding up here, and how hard it is on her.”

She nodded slowly. “Well, I appreciate the apology, and I understand why you offered that to the Blue Bloods. I haven’t seen them in action, but from everything I’ve heard people say, it sounds like the Bitterfangs are willing to do whatever it takes to get to the kids.”

“Yeah,” I said, rubbing my forehead, “you could say that. And that *is* why I offered. Mace volunteered to guard Julia, and I told them we’d provide a barrier to keep her safe. It was the only thing that made Russell agree to be separated from her.”

“I get it,” she said. “You don’t need to keep explaining, Greyson. I’ll do it.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you,” I said gratefully. “I really appreciate your willingness to help out with this.”

She smiled. “Hey, that’s just part of being in the pack, right?”

I smiled. I was glad she felt that way. “You’re right. It is.”

“Kira! Is there any more tea?” someone called. “I’m not seeing any!”

She shrugged. “I’d better go help Ravi before he tries to steep a dish towel.”

I followed her out of the laundry room, moving on to my next mission. My sights were set on Russell, his parents, and Vishal. They were waiting for me outside, but I needed to think before I joined them. It was clear that Vishal didn’t want to be at the pack house long, but less clear about what Russell and his moms were thinking. We were going to have to come up with a viable plan to get them out of our pack house, but also keep them safe—and we were going to have to come up with it fast.

I glanced over at Kira, who’d gone back to dispensing tea, and now a jar of Torin’s leftover Christmas cookies. Maybe I should have taken a cup. I felt exhausted, like I was running on fumes. Maybe that was why no ideas were coming to me. I just didn’t seem to have anything left in me. But Russell and his family were waiting for me, so I headed toward the door. I’d just reached for the doorknob when I heard someone call my name.

It was Xavier, and he sounded upset.

“What’s going on?” I asked, spinning around. “Xavier?”

“Greyson!” Xavier called again. He appeared in the doorway of the study. “Greyson, in here! It’s Cali!”

# Episode 3635

I stared at the wisp, completely transfixed. Behind me, I could hear Xavier calling my name. He was trying to speak to me, but it was hard to make out. I could feel his hands on me, trying to turn me around, but I was immovable. I couldn’t seem to stop looking at the wisp, fluttering and flashing outside the window. Wisps were like that—they just got into your head. And this one had me fully in its grasp. I could hear it speaking to me.

*Just stay with me, dear. Let whatever happens to Ava happen. You are not responsible for her. It’s better for Xavier if she goes away again. He was happier with her gone. You were happier, too. It would be better for you as well. Ava is a pest, a menace, and she can never love Xavier the way you can. Leave her, Caliana. Leave her.*

No, that wasn’t right. I tried to push back against the thoughts crowding into my head. I couldn’t just leave Ava to die like that, not when I could help her. Ava wasn’t my favorite person, but I couldn’t let her die. I tried to break the wisp’s hold on me, but it was just so strong…

*She’s useless, Caliana. Think of how much better off you’d be without her. Just let what happens happen. You didn’t hurt her; you don’t have to save her. She already died once—dead is what she’s supposed to be.*

I balled my hands into fists. Ava loved Xavier, and maybe that was a good thing, in a twisted sort of way. That thought threw me off, but I tried to cling to it. It felt crazy, but it was the nicest thing I could think of about Ava, and it actually helped to combat all the negativity the wisp kept whispering to me. I wouldn’t necessarily have *chosen* to have Ava in my life, but she would always look out for Xavier. If anything ever happened to me, I knew Ava would protect him. *That* was something good—something I could rely on, despite everything else.

I tried repeating this concept to myself, over and over. *Ava loves Xavier. Ava protects Xavier. Ava watches out for him…*

I tried to break contact with the wisp. I wanted to look away, but I couldn’t move from my spot at the window. Fear washed over me—why couldn’t I move? I felt like I’d been turned to stone. My brain was moving slowly, thinking only of what the wisp was telling me. Everything else moved as slow as molasses beneath the wisp’s words. In my muddled mind, I remembered what my mother had said to me—someone might have created this wisp. But why? And, more importantly, *who*?

I wasn’t sure, but if I ever managed to get out of this freeze, I’d have to tell my mom that it had happened again. But I could think about that later. Right now, all I knew was that I had to break free of the hold the wisp had on me and actually *help* Ava. Ava was a lot of things, but I would never want her to die because of me.

*Because I’m not that kind of person. No one can force me to hurt someone. No one—not even a wisp.*

These thoughts were loud in my head, louder even than the shrill tinkling of the wisp’s voice.

“Cali? What’s going on? Can you hear me?”

Now Greyson was calling for me, too. I could feel their hands on my back. They were trying to talk to me, trying to get me to turn to look at them. I tried to turn, pulling my gaze from the wisp just a little—but it was enough that Greyson was able to turn me around to look at him.

“Cali? Love? Are you there?” he asked, looking terrified.

I gasped for air, as though I’d stopped breathing while the wisp had me in the trance.

“Yes, I’m here,” I choked out.

Greyson pulled me close, hugging me tight. “What happened?”  
 I buried my face in his chest and shook my head. “I don’t even know.” Then, with another gasp, I pulled away from him and looked around. “Xavier? Ava? Am I too late?”

I looked over and saw Torin still standing over Ava, healing her. My mom was standing with him, bandaging her own hand. My brain felt slow, so it took longer than it should have for me to work out that my mom had given Ava blood—she’d saved Ava’s life.

I felt myself relax. Ava was going to be okay. I hadn’t killed her. The voice hadn’t won. Then, suddenly, like everything was hitting me at once, I felt woozy, and I swayed on my feet. Both Greyson and Xavier reached out, steadying me.

“Cali, maybe you should sit down,” Xavier said. “You look pale.”

“Yeah, and maybe get away from that window,” Greyson added.

I nodded, dropping the paper cutter onto the windowsill behind my back without turning around. I didn’t have any intention of looking out the window anytime soon.

“Why don’t we go into the living room?” Greyson suggested. “It’s getting a little crowded in here.”

“That’s a good idea,” Torin muttered, his hands still working over Ava. He was looking pretty weary himself, but Xavier guided me out before I could tell him to take it easy.

My mates guided me into the living room and toward the couch. As I dropped down onto it, a wave of weariness washed over me.

Greyson, Xavier, and my mom surrounded me, all wearing matching looks of worry.

“Cali, what’s going on?” my mom asked, bending toward me.

“What do you mean?” I asked, putting my hand over my eyes.

She glanced at Greyson. “Greyson and I came in because Xavier was yelling. What happened?”

I looked up at my mom, then my mates. I had lied to them before about the wisp, and now that something bad had happened, I wasn’t sure what to say. It was bad enough that I’d been lured out of the house—this time, I’d been overtaken *inside* the house. Through the glass of the window, for crying out loud.

Stalling for time, I rubbed my eyes. I didn’t want them to be upset with me.

“Cali?” my mom pressed. I knew her well enough to know she wasn’t going to let it go.

I sighed. “I was put into a kind of trance, I guess,” I admitted.

“What caused it?” Greyson asked.

I shrugged, trying to look casual. “I don’t know. Maybe the handprint?”

That sounded plausible, now that the Shard was gone. The handprint was the source of so many problems, why not this one too?

Xavier frowned. “Does your shoulder hurt now?”

Reflexively, I reached up and touched it. “Yeah,” I said, though it was a lie. My shoulder felt fine. “It was hurting before.”

Xavier didn’t look convinced. “You just stopped responding. It was like you were frozen. I’ve never seen you do anything like that before. It was like you were a statue or something. It was weird.”

I swallowed roughly, feeling guilty. “It’s not that weird. Seluna once turned you both into statues, remember?”

My mom sighed and looked between Xavier and Greyson. “I’m going to go get her a glass of water. Keep an eye on her, will you?”

“Sure thing,” Greyson muttered.

She walked away, but before either of my mates could say anything else, Torin walked over to us.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he said, “but Ava’s awake and talking.”

“That’s good,” I said quietly.

He nodded. “She’s asking for you,” he said, looking at Xavier. “She wants to see you.”

Xavier looked at me, and I could tell that he was feeling hurt. He didn’t say anything, though, and stepped away, following Torin out of the living room.

Watching him go, I wanted to cry. Why was I lying about this to my mates? Why was I keeping this to myself? I knew I should be honest with them—especially about something that scared me so much—but that just felt like too much right now. There was so much going on, and this on top of everything else just felt too scary. Too overwhelming.

But *not* telling them felt somehow even worse. It was like I was in denial about the situation. I knew that. I also knew it couldn’t last for long.

Greyson knelt in front of me, looking right into my eyes. He reached forward and brushed a lock of hair from my forehead, pushing it behind my ears. “Cali?’  
 I took a shuddering breath. “Yeah?’

“Listen, I’m going to say this as gently as I possibly can, okay?”  
 I nodded, but my palms had already started to sweat. “Okay.”

His grey eyes bored into mine. “I need you to tell me why you’re lying to me.”

# Episode 3636

**Xavier**

As I followed Torin out of the living room, I still felt pretty rattled by what had just happened to Cali. What the hell was that? I’d never seen anything like it. It had felt so strange to see her standing there like that, frozen. She’d been fine one minute, and then the next, it was like the lights had gone out. She hadn’t moved, even when I’d tugged at her, even when I’d yelled her name. The worst part was that I hadn’t been able to do anything. I’d felt helpless—which was something I didn’t often feel.

I rolled my neck around a couple of times, trying to loosen the tension. I felt like I was about to explode, and I tried to trace the feeling—and realized I’d been scared. I’d been fucking terrified, actually. It was that simple. I could admit it. And it made sense. The only things that really scared me were things that pertained to Cali. That was why I’d called for my brother. Of course, looking back on it, it felt cowardly. It felt so desperate to have needed his help, but I’d *been* desperate. That’s why I’d done it. I didn’t like it, but that wasn’t what was making me feel tense at the moment.

What was *really* pissing me off was that Cali was lying to me. Again. I knew whatever had happened had nothing to do with the handprint on her back. I just hoped it wasn’t a combination of the handprint and something else. But it *was* something else. I was sure about that. I knew Cali better than anyone else, and she wasn’t a good liar. She was hiding something, but I didn’t understand what or why.

So, it was good that I’d found an excuse to step away from her. After everything that had happened today with the Bitterfangs and Pit Bulls and Greyson, I didn’t trust myself to be totally in control of what I said, and I didn’t want to unleash on her. So I was glad to just remove myself from the situation.

I followed Torin into the hallway, then stopped and took a deep breath before I stepped into the den. Ava was still resting in the chair, looking pale. But when I walked closer, I saw that the dark veins on her arms were gone, which meant the silver wasn’t still coursing through her bloodstream. It meant that she was on the mend, and not as close to death as she’d been when she’d first fallen through the door.

“Thanks, man,” I said, looking up at Torin. “You did a great job.”

“I did my best,” he said, looking tired. “She’s still going to need time to recover. Silver poisoning is hardly a walk in the park.”

“Don’t I know it,” I muttered, speaking to myself.

Torin nodded. “Excuse me, will you? I’m going to go take a look at Orla’s hand.”

“Sure,” I murmured, and he stepped out, leaving me along with Ava.

I looked at her for a moment, then stepped toward her and crouched next to her.

“So,” I said flatly. “Want to tell me what the hell happened to you?”

Her eyelids fluttered, and she looked over at me. She tried to sit up, but it looked like it hurt. She coughed and shook her head. “No, not really.”

I rolled my eyes. “Come on, Ava. Cut the bullshit. What happened, why are you here, and how the fuck did you get poisoned with *silver*?”

I was so damn edgy it felt like I was about to crawl out of my skin. I rolled my shoulders, then flexed my fingers and balled my hands into fists. “Just fucking tell me the truth, okay, because I don’t think I can take anyone else lying to me right now.”

She gave me a long look, then pushed herself up onto her elbows, wincing with the pain. “I followed you,” she rasped.

I raised an eyebrow, trying to ignore how much I liked the hoarse scrape of her voice. “Yeah, I can see that. Why?”

Her dark eyes went a shade darker as she glared at me. “I heard what the Bitterfang wolves were saying about Cali. All that bullshit about wanting her gone because of what she is. Then I saw them follow you, so *I* started to follow you too. I wanted to try to help.”

I rocked back on my heels. “Well, that didn’t quite work out, did it? They showed up here, and there was no sign of you. What happened there?”

A muscle in her jaw twitched. She was mad about something. “There was another wolf with them. She came after me, caught me when I wasn’t paying attention. She almost took me out, but I fought her off in the end. I had to—I didn’t want her to get to you.” She shook her head, and her eyes took on a hunted look. “The way those Bitterfang wolves fight is—”

“Unusual,” I finished for her. “Yeah.”

She nodded. “I’ve never come up against wolves who fought that way before.”

“They’re still wolves; we’ll beat them back, same as any other pack that thinks to mess with us.”

Outside of my confidence, I still had to admit it was strange, the way the Bitterfang wolves almost created shields for each other, letting the lead wolf rest for a moment and cycling through their strongest fighters. I hated the pack, but there was possibly something to be learned from them. At least something to study and figure out if we were to go up against Malakai and the rest of the pack again—the way I wanted to.

Ava shifted her position and made a small noise. It was nothing, really—just a breath out her nose—but for *her*, it was as good as a wail of pain. I knew she was hurting, though she’d never show it.

I looked back at her, taking in her deathly pale face. “None of that explains how in the world you got silver poisoned.”

She settled back against the pillow with a frown. “I’m not sure. Or I wasn’t sure right away. But as I was lying here, practically dying, I got a little clarity, and I think I figured it out.”

“Great news,” I said dryly.

She ignored me. “So, while I was fighting this Bitterfang wolf, I noticed something around her neck.”

“What was it?” I asked.

“I don’t know, like a little bag or something? I’m not sure. I didn’t get a chance to ask,” she added sarcastically. “Anyway, when I tore into her and killed her, whatever was in the pouch broke open, and it must have had silver in it. That must have been what got to me.”

I frowned at her. “I don’t get it. I fought a bunch of the Bitterfang wolves, and none of them had anything around their necks.”

Ava shrugged. “Well, this one did.”

“But why?” I wondered to myself.

“Who knows? Maybe it’s just for some of them—something they wear if they want an honorable out during battle.”

“Oh, like if a battle starts going south and the werewolf doesn’t want to die by someone else’s hand, they chomp down on their little silver pouch and take care of business?”

“I guess so,” Ava said. “Seems bizarre, but they’re a weird pack.”

Silver poisoning wasn’t the death I’d choose—it was a grizzly way to go. I shuddered at the thought.

“Anyway,” Ava went on, “after that, I headed this way as fast as I could. I don’t really remember much, but I knew that I wanted to make sure you got back here safely, and I knew that if I got to you, you would help me.”

I stiffened at these words. “I *didn’t* help you, Ava. Torin did. And Orla.”

If my words stung her, she knew better than to show her annoyance so easily. She looked up at me, stony-eyed. “Because you asked them to.”

“*Cali* called for help,” I said coldly. It was important to me that Ava understood the sequence of events.

That time I knew my words struck home. She was quiet for a moment and looked down at her hands, where she was fiddling with something.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I snapped, reaching for it. “Is that the necklace the Bitterfang wolf had? Why would you keep that? It had silver on it—”

“That’s not what it is!” Ava said as I snatched it from her hands. “I wouldn’t keep that!”

I held up the object, which turned out to be a necklace. I dangled it, letting it swing in front of my face. Ava was right—it wasn’t some werewolf suicide necklace. It was the Shard. The one Cali should have been wearing around her neck.

A wave of anger washed over me, and I rounded on Ava, my eyes flashing. “How the fuck did you get this?”

# Episode 3637

**Greyson**

I looked hard at Cali, waiting for her answer. I didn’t want to, but I couldn’t stop myself from feeling frustrated with her—she’d lied to Xavier and me twice now about what was really going with her. Orla had said that it was a Fae thing—like it wasn’t any of my business—but Cali was my mate. Even if it was a Fae thing, it should’ve also been *my* thing. Any problem Cali had, I was always going to want to find a way to help her resolve it.

Cali opened her mouth, then closed it, then opened it again. “I’m not sure what you want me to say,” she finally managed.

“The truth, to start with.” I narrowed my eyes. “I know you were lying about whatever happened with that wisp, and I know you’re lying about what just happened.”

Cali swallowed hard. “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t—”

“I know when you’re lying, because I know *you*,” I said, stopping her from digging herself any deeper. “But what I can’t figure out is why.”

“What do you mean?” she asked quietly.

“Why are you lying to me?” I asked. I shook my head, baffled. “I don’t get it, love. All I want to do is help you, but I can’t do that if you hide things from me. I can’t do anything if you’re not willing to be open with me.” I ran a hand through my hair, feeling frustrated and hurt. “Don’t you trust me?”

Her mouth fell open in shock. “Of course I trust you,” she insisted. “I trust you with my life, Greyson. You know that!”

I took her hand in mine and squeezed. “And I trust you with mine, so maybe you can understand why I’m so frustrated right now. I can’t protect you if I don’t know what’s threatening you. I need to know what’s going on.”

I was pleading with her to be honest with me, and it felt so strange. She usually hated secrets and had pretty much been an open book since the day I’d met her, which meant she was keeping this secret for a reason. But I knew I just couldn’t let it go. It was too dangerous.

Cali dropped her gaze to our hands, which lay in her lap. She shifted hers in mine, so our fingers intertwined.

“I’m sorry, Greyson,” she whispered. “For lying, for all of it…” she paused and shook her head. She looked back up at me, straight into my eyes, and took a deep breath. “But I’m not sorry for doing what I have to do.”

I stared at her, shocked. “What does *that* mean?”

“It means that there is more to all of this craziness, and I don’t know what’s going on,” she explained.

I frowned. “That’s practically always what happens, love, until we *figure out* what’s going on. But we do that part together, remember?”

She shook her head. “This is different.”

“How is this—”

“This is a Fae thing that I don’t understand,” she said in a rush. She looked freaked out. “I didn’t want to tell you because I didn’t want to worry you. Or Xavier. I never do.”

“But it’s scaring you,” I said, scanning her face.

“Yeah, it’s scary,” she admitted.

“So why didn’t you tell us? We can help—”

“Because the idea of bringing up yet another scary thing to you and Xavier feels like history repeating itself!” she said, rolling her eyes in disgust. “I’m just so sick of it, Greyson. I’m sick of feeling like this.”

“Like what?”

“Like I’m *constantly* in a crisis!” she burst out. She looked like she was about to cry. “Like everything is always about me being in danger!”

I knew I should say something comforting—I *wanted* to say something—but Cali was venting, and I just let her get on with it. This issue was clearly bothering her, and she wanted to get it out, so I just listened.

“What good is it to try to be helpful to people like Russell and Julia if I can’t even help myself?” she demanded, tears streaming down her cheeks. “I just want some peace! I just want to be a useful member of the pack. I want to contribute and be helpful and maybe have one night of the week where I do the dishes! But I can’t even do that because of all these things that are constantly happening to me! I’m just so sick of it all!” She dashed the tears off her cheeks with the heel of her palm and glared at me. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, Greyson, but did you ever think that maybe this is something you might not be able to help with? I know you don’t like to hear that, but maybe it’s true.”

I raised my eyebrows. She was right about one thing—I *didn’t* like to hear that there was something bothering her that I couldn’t help with. I took a deep breath and asked the question that I dreaded—but needed to hear the answer to. “Can my brother help?”

Cali shook her head. “No, Greyson. That’s the thing. I don’t think anyone can help. Not you, not Xavier, maybe not even my mom.” She leaned her head back on the couch with a sigh and looked up at the beams spanning the high ceiling of the living room. “I’m just cursed.”

“Cali,” I started, but she shook her head.

“Don’t tell me I’m wrong,” she said, closing her eyes. “Just don’t. I *am* cursed. In so many ways.” She looked over at me. “I appreciate your support, but I don’t want you to always have to be my knight in shining armor. You’re so much more than that, Greyson. You’re the Alpha of this pack. You’re responsible for so many people, including yourself. And I’m so much more than a damsel in distress.” Her eyes grew bright, and tears streaked down her cheeks. “I know I am.”

She was hurting so badly, and my heart ached for her.

I pulled her hand to my chest. “Hey, stop talking like that. You have never been a damsel in distress.”

She smiled through the tears. “Right. Then explain the time I fell out a literal window and landed on top of you.”

I couldn’t help it—I laughed, remembering that astonishing moment. “That was just good timing.” The smile slid off my face, and I gazed into her eyes. “I will always be at your side, love, through the good and the bad. Even when you lie to me, even when the truth might hurt me. I love you, Cali, more than anything in this world.” I pressed her hand to my chest. “You know that, don’t you?”

She stopped crying and nodded. “I know that,” she whispered. “I love you, too.”

I leaned in, bracing my hands on either side of her hips, and pressed a kiss to her lips. She slipped her hands around my face, her fingers sliding up into my hair. Her lips tasted salty, though whether that was because of sweat or tears, I couldn’t tell.

I’d braced myself to lean into the kiss when someone called my name, and Cali and I froze.

I pulled away and looked around for the source of the shrill voice.

It was Paris, looking in through the front door.

“Are you coming?” she asked.

I sighed. “Yeah, I’m coming. Sorry.” I got to my feet. “My mate had a— I had to attend to her for a minute.”

Paris raised an eyebrow but didn’t comment. She just nodded and headed back outside.

I looked down at Cali. “I have to go talk to them.”

“What about?” Cali asked, wiping the last traces of tears from her cheeks.

“We have to come up with a plan for how to help Russell and Julia get away.”

“You know usually I’d ask to be a part of that, but I have a feeling you’re just going to tell me to rest. So to spare us an argument after… everything, we’ll talk more when you’re done, *Alpha*,” she said with a small smile.

I smiled down at her and dropped a kiss on top of her head. Then I headed outside.

“Sorry about the delay,” I said, pulling the door shut behind me as I walked onto the porch. “So, let’s get down to business. We need to come up with an idea that secures the safety of Russell, Julia, and the Pit Bulls. Which is a tall order, I grant you, but not impossible. What we have to keep in mind is the understanding we have of—”

“I have an idea!” Russell announced.

All the adults turned to look at him in surprise.

Vishal was the first to recover himself. “What is it, kid?”

Russell looked at us, his eyes sparkling with excitement. “Okay, hear me out: what if we convince the Bitterfangs that I’m dead?”

# Episode 3638

**Xavier**

I stared down at the Shard necklace in my hand. My fingers clenched around it as I looked up at Ava with a growl.

“Why do you have this? How did you even—” I cut myself off. My emotions were running haywire—protectiveness for Cali, fury and confusion that Ava had the thing, that Cali hadn’t even told me it had gone missing in the first place—and for a moment I didn’t know which way was up.

Why did Ava have this? Was this one of her games? Or… Or was there a darker purpose to this? She hadn’t stolen it from Cali, had she?

No… No, Ava was a lot of things, but she wasn’t a thief. That I knew, anyway. And Cali hadn’t said anything about the Shard being missing. At least not to me. I tried to ignore the ache that burrowed under my skin at that thought. Why hadn’t she told me? Cali knew that I cared about what happened to her. That I’d want to know if it went missing. For her benefit, and because I’d worked fucking hard to get that damn thing for her in the first place. It wasn’t like I’d found it at the mall.

The edges of the Shard dug into my palm. Maybe Cali hadn’t realized it was missing? That didn’t seem likely, considering how much she depended on it, but it was possible. A lot had happened recently.

As the haze began to recede from my vision, I realized belatedly that I should be grateful to Ava for keeping the Shard safe. And I *was* grateful, but things with Ava were just getting messier and messier, and it was fucking maddening.

Ever since our kiss on New Year’s Eve, the connection that lingered between us had intensified. I’d thought I’d gotten her out of my system once and for all, and now I felt like I was back at square one. Back to waking up every day with another bond tugging at my heart—whether I wanted it to or not. The tension complicated everything between Ava and me. Whatever polite distance we’d managed to build had been utterly obliviated.

And the worst part of all this was Ava and I were technically still working together on the Samara pack’s unresolved Alpha situation. It was like no matter how hard I tried to distance myself from Ava, I just kept getting sucked back in. Even now, when I should’ve had nothing to say to her outside of our packs’ alliance and Fletcher’s Alpha test, she was here, showing up with the Shard—yet another piece of my life that she had no business getting involved in.

“Explain,” I growled again. “Did you take this? Where the fuck did you get it?”

Ava shook her head, still looking weak and pale. It did funny things to my chest. Made me feel things I didn’t want to feel—which only pissed me off even more.

“I found it in the forest,” she said, voice weak. “I thought… I thought I had recognized it as Cali’s, so I grabbed it.”

Was she lying?

My eyes narrowed, and I forced myself to look past her fragile exterior for any signs of deception. It was a simple enough explanation, and yet I couldn’t honestly say I believed it. “And how do I know you didn’t just take it? It’s no secret that you don’t want me with Cali.”

“Why would I take it when I don’t even know what it is?” she asked, and god dammit, she sounded so hurt it made something inside me lurch. “I knew it was Cali’s, nothing else. I got it back for *you*. *Because* of your relationship with her.”

My brows rose. I hadn’t seen *that* coming. I should’ve, but hadn’t.

“Oh.” Guilt nagged at my stomach. I’d been all too ready to jump to the worst of conclusions, but she’d just been trying to do something nice. For *me*.

Ava scoffed. “You’re always so eager to make me the villain. Just take the stupid necklace.”

I gave her a dirty look. “Let’s not pretend that you don’t have one hell of a track record for exactly that kind of thing.”

She forced herself to sit up. A little color was finally returning to her cheeks, thank god. The sooner she was back on her feet, the sooner I’d be able to stop worrying about her. Then maybe it’d be easier to find that distance I’d worked so hard to erect between us. Or at least something close to it.

“That was the way things used to be,” she said. “Not how they are.”

I couldn’t stop myself from rolling my eyes. “Is that so?”

“It is. I know I’ve done things in the past to try to get you back. Things that were—”

“Manipulative?” I interrupted.

She glared. “I was going to say ‘unethical.’”

*Po-tayto, po-villainous.*

“Really? That’s how you’re going to phrase it?” I asked. “You sided with Silas. You pretended to be Cali and let me think I was with her.”

She had the decency to wince. “Like I said, unethical.”

“How about cold-hearted and evil?”

She huffed. Pissed off as she was, she was still trying to recover from the silver poisoning. She’d probably have been giving me hell right now, if she’d felt up to it. Hell, she probably would’ve stormed out by now.

“This isn’t a one-way street,” she reminded me. “Whatever bad things I’ve done—and I’m not refuting any of them—you’ve done your share of messed-up shit too.”

It was my turn to scoff. “Like what?”

“Oh, I can think of plenty of things, but let’s focus on recent history. You really think kissing me on New Year’s Eve wasn’t ‘unethical,’ according to your high and mighty standards? You go on and on about Cali, and yet you kissed me that night like I was the love of your life.”

I couldn’t stop the shock that steamrolled across my face. *So she felt it too? Fuck.*

“That didn’t mean anything,” I snapped. “*You* kissed *me*. I never asked for that. I didn’t want it.”

Ava shrugged. “Whatever you have to tell yourself to get to sleep at night. But for the record, I wasn’t the one who pushed *you* against a wall.”

I… had no response to that. Which pissed me off. Mainly because I knew she was telling the truth. There were no lies, no games. Just brutal honesty that I couldn’t refute. I didn’t want to admit to myself that I’d felt something that night. And yet that “something” was in no small part to blame for the mess my head was in now. Things between Ava and me weren’t comfortable. Sure, they’d been shaky since Ava had come back from the spirit world, but there had been moments when things had been… good? Tolerable? Moments when our old friendship had shone through all the pain and destruction.

Lately, though, things had been pretty much the exact opposite of tolerable. And I didn’t have the first fucking clue what to do about it.

I tightened my grip on the Shard. “Whatever’s between us—the physical attraction, the leftover emotion—it’s all exactly that. Leftover. Old. A piece of a time that’s long past. Cali is my mate now, and that’s how it’s going to stay. That’s my choice. *She* is my choice. And as long as I’m choosing her, I need you to respect that. Because nothing you do, no amount of reaction from my wolf, is going to change how I feel about her.”

Ava’s expression was thoughtful as she stared searchingly at my face. Finally, she looked down at her lap. “Choice implies that this is something you can control, but I don’t think it is. We were mated long before you and Cali, and unless I die again, that’s not going to change.”

She didn’t say it to be cruel, with any haughtiness or fire in her voice. She said it like it was a universal truth, not so very different from the laws of gravity. And hearing those words from her stirred up my wolf , something that hadn’t happened in quite some time.

Her words left me feeling unsettled. I didn’t like the idea of Ava dying again. And for the first time, not a single part of me whispered that things would be easier with her gone again. Instead, when I considered the possibility of her death, all I felt was loss.

I stood up. “You should get some rest. Thank you for bringing the Samaras to our aid, and for finding the Shard.”

“You’re welcome, X.”

The sound of my old nickname on her tongue did weird things to my stomach. I forced myself to walk out of the room before I could do or say anything that would come back to bite me later.

Ava sure wasn’t going to make this situation easy for either one of us. Would we ever reach a time where things between us weren’t so volatile?

# Episode 3639

**Greyson**

I barely had time to process Russell’s idea before his parents and Vishal all started shouting.

“Hell no!”

“Absolutely not!”

“That’s the stupidest idea I’ve ever heard.”

That last one came from Vishal.

“But it’ll work!” Russell insisted. “If you’d stop trying to protect me and just think about it—”

“No, *you* think about this with something other than that idiot heart of yours,” Vishal snarled. “You think I’m going to let the kid who is practically my nephew live out some half-assed version of *Romeo and Juliet*? You do know how that worked out for the originals, right? Newsflash: they didn’t ride off into the sunset.”

I guess the Rogues were pretty close. Still, they could at least try to cooperate more. We were trying to keep Russell alive, after all.

Heat rushed into Russell’s cheeks. “I know how it ends. But that’s just a story. This is real life—”

“Exactly! This is real life. People get hurt. People *have* been hurt already, and all because you and that girl wanted to play star-crossed lovers.”

“I love her!”

“That’s not the point, Russ! You think those psychopaths in the Bitterfang pack give a shit about how you *feel*?They want to tear you limb from limb regardless—and Julia with you. Now, you’ve made your bed, and you’ve brought a lot of people along with you,” Vishal said. “So if you want to help us clean up this mess you’ve made, then you need to get your ass back in the real world with the rest of us. No more fairy tales or love stories.”

Paris gave Vishal a sharp look but didn’t refute a thing he’d said. I honestly didn’t disagree, either. Russell’s plan wasn’t great. It would require about a hundred moving pieces, and at the end of the day, its success hinged entirely on convincing the Bitterfangs—a pack of wolves who were neither stupid nor warm and fuzzy—that they didn’t need to do anything violent and heinous because Russell was already dead.

I was just as desperate for solutions as anyone else, but there had to be a better option than this.

Russell turned to me, his eyes pleading with me to back him up. I wished I could.

“It’s not the best idea,” I said diplomatically. “The Bitterfangs might smell the lie, and if they think we’re trying to trick them, they could rain down hell on us all.”

“You think they’re not already going to rain down hell?” Russell demanded. “That ship has sailed. They want me dead, and unless they have some reason to believe that their work is done, they’re not going to stop until they *actually* kill me.”

God, I hated how much sense that argument made.

“Just another reason why you should have used your brain before you dragged so many people into this mess,” Vishal snapped.

I didn’t disagree with that either, but it seemed counterproductive to throw that in Russell’s face right now. What was done was done. There was no going back for any of us. And Russell wasn’t wrong. He, Julia, the Pit Bulls, and the rest of us—the Redwoods, the Samaras, and the Blue Bloods—were all in this now. And there was no reason for us to believe the Bitterfangs would stop coming for us. Clearly, they weren’t above starting a pack war over the Alpha’s runaway daughter, and there was no reasoning with people for whom violence was such a basic part of their pack culture. If Silas had taught me anything, it was that.

I hated to even admit it to myself, but Russell was possibly onto something. God awful idea and all.

“They have witches!” Russell pointed at me, his gaze narrowed on Vishal. “And Fae! They have all sorts of magic at their disposal that the Bitterfangs would never even think of. It can’t be that hard to cast some sort of death-glamour spell, right?”

My hackles rose at Russell’s casual mention of the Fae. Cali was *not* getting any more involved in this mess. Artemis was still on the mend. And Orla and Adair? They’d probably help protect the pack if push came to shove, but this wasn’t their fight.

And as for the witches…

“I’m *associated* with witches,” I said. “I can’t make any of them do anything they don’t want to do, and I’ll tell you right now, they’re certainly not going to want to poison a kid.”

Russell let out a frustrated groan. Like we were the ones being completely unreasonable. God, were all teenagers this annoying? I probably hadn’t been, like, a pleasure to be around, but I hadn’t been so utterly insufferable, had I?

I shook my head. “I get that you want to do something to help your girlfriend, but I’m not sure this is the best idea. Still,” I added, “if the Bitterfangs thought that Russell was out of the picture, that *could* change things.”

“Please don’t tell me you’re going along with this terrible excuse for a plan,” Paris said.

I put my hands up. “Hey, I don’t like the idea any more than you do, but the kid is making some sense. This could work—if we do it the right way.”

Vishal, Paris, and Joan still looked skeptical.

“It’s too dangerous,” Joan said. “You’ve all been very kind to my son, protecting him from those psychos, but what good will it have done if we go along with this plan and it blows up in our faces? Everything we’ve been through will mean nothing if they just kill Russell anyway.”

“We can come up with a backup plan, too,” I said. Now that I’d been convinced of the merits of Russell’s idea, the wheels in my head were spinning. “The Bitterfangs are going to attack again—that’s pretty much guaranteed. And we’d need to make things look believable—like Russell died accidentally. The Bitterfangs probably won’t believe us if we just go to them claiming that Russell’s already dead. It has to look like it’s happening in the moment, so they can think it’s real.”

“One quick thing: I don’t want Julia to know about this,” Russell said.

I frowned. “Why not? She’s part of this, isn’t she? Shouldn’t she be involved in the plan?”

“I seem to remember that keeping key details secret was a problem for the original Romeo and Juliet,” Vishal drawled.

Russell shot him a look but turned to me. “I know keeping this a secret will hurt Julia, but I don’t want to risk the Bitterfangs thinking that she’s lying to them. If she thinks it’s real, then she’ll react naturally, and they won’t hurt. And I’ll just have to try to explain myself to her after it’s all over.”

I agreed with Vishal—it didn’t seem smart to leave Julia out of such an important plan.

“She won’t even be there to see you ‘die,’” I pointed out, “but I still think you should tell her.”

I understood where the kid was coming from, but I could only imagine how it would feel to hear that Cali was dead. I’d be beyond devastated. I didn’t even want to think about it. And finding out later that it was all part of some bigger plan wouldn’t make the lie any less traumatic in the moment.

“You deserve to let her know about the plan in some capacity,” I said.

“If she even suspected that I was thinking about this plan, she’d try to stop me.”

*That sounds a lot like Cali.*

“Just think about it,” I finally said. “We don’t have to go all or nothing with this. We could send her a message. If Julia is safe, away from this whole situation as it goes down, then she’s not going to have to lie to anyone.”

“I could deliver the message to Julia and try to smuggle her away when the coast is clear,” Vishal offered.

Russell seemed to think this over before nodding. “I like the sound of that.”

“The Blue Bloods will definitely cooperate,” I added.

“So what are you saying?” Russell asked his parents and Vishal. “That Julia could come with us?”

Paris and Joan looked at each other for confirmation, then they nodded.

“Yes,” Joan said.

“We see how horrible the Bitterfangs are to Julia, and we can see how much you care for her,” Paris said.

“We might’ve taken the wrong approach before,” Joan added, “but we want to do right by you now, and keeping Julia safe will be good for both of you.”

Russell threw his arms around his mothers. “You don’t know what this means to me! Thank you so much! I can’t wait to tell Julia!”

I watched the family scene play out with a heavy heart. It was nice to see a reconciliation between Russell and his mothers. But this wasn’t just about them. A lot of the people I cared about were caught up in this mess, and if this plan went poorly, the Redwoods would be thrown into a pack war.

We were responsible for keeping the Bitterfangs’ pack princess away from her pack and her father, the Alpha, which meant we had one chance to get this plan right. Because if it went south, there would be no avoiding a war.

# Episode 3640

I decided to head up to my room to change. If I was being honest with myself, lying down for a while sounded nice too. I had ambitions regarding showering, but as soon as I stepped into my bedroom, a wave of dizziness slammed into me and it was all I could do to collapse onto my mattress instead of the floor.

I felt the Shard’s absence more acutely, feeling as weak as I did. Still, I didn’t feel horrible, all things considered. I felt weak and tired, but considering everything that had just happened, it was possible I would’ve felt this way *with* the Shard, too. Using as much magic as I had today was always going to drain me.

I rolled over on my back and stared up at the ceiling. My chest heaved with the movement, and a dull ache pulsed up my wrist. It still felt pretty sore, which was odd. Torin’s healing magic was normally fast and effective and didn’t leave any lingering signs of injury. From both what I’d seen—and what I’d experienced myself—Torin could put broken people back together like they’d never been hurt in the first place. But there was no ignoring the ache in my wrist. The dull reminder that something had happened.

*Maybe it’s just because healing broken bones is difficult, like Torin said.*

Or maybe the lingering pain was due to any of the myriad of other variables in play. Like losing the Shard, or the amount of magic I’d used leaving me depleted and less capable of bouncing back. Or some other horrible thing that I had no control over.

I pulled in a deep breath and sighed. I was beginning to recognize a pattern in my life, and I wasn’t loving it. It was just one thing after another, a new form of magic, a new curse, a new charm, a new fight—a new factor that made me a liability to everyone I loved.

I remembered my conversation with Greyson earlier, how he’d been so worried and—rightfully—angry about my being dishonest with him. And then I’d lied to him again. Sort of.

No, no. I had lied. A lie of omission was still a lie, right? I’d failed to tell him about the wisp situation. But what choice did I have? A girl could only take so much saving before she was completely demoralized. And Xavier and Greyson already had plenty to worry about—we were on the verge of a war with the most vicious werewolf pack I’d ever seen. And who could forget about everything they’d gone through just to get the Shard for me? Artemis was still recovering from being poisoned.

My mates didn’t really need to know about every little weird, crazy, scary thing that happened to me, right? Because if that were the case, it would take all day to summarize everything that had been going on lately.

And maybe that was the truth of why I hadn’t told them. Maybe a lot of terrible, scary stuff happened to me. But this was still my life, and I was in charge of how I responded to it. Not Greyson. Not Xavier. The very least I could do was try to take care of this *one thing* myself.

Besides, I didn’t even know what to do or say about the Shard yet, or the wisp. There was nothing to tell them. For now, I’d work on the wisp problem with my mom, and if we ended up needing to rope in the boys, so be it.

If someone was after the Shard, they weren’t going to go up against a full werewolf pack—that was clearly why they’d tried to lure me away. For now, the best thing I could do was stay put.

*Maybe it’s just the warlock they took the Shard from. I can understand why he’d have it out for me. They stole the Shard, and Artemis* did *bite off his pinky finger. He probably wants it back. The Shard, not the finger.*

*Focus, Cali*. I shook myself. Regardless, the best thing I could do right now was focus on resting. Sooner or later, the other pieces would fall into place. They always did.

There was a knock on my door, and Xavier stepped into my room. “Hey, I’ve got something for you.”

I struggled to sit up as he took a seat next to me on the bed. I couldn’t tell what he had in his hands, but it wasn’t a mug of white chocolate mocha, which was pretty much the only thing that sounded good right now.

Then he held out his hand and opened his fist to reveal the Shard necklace, and my jaw dropped.

“Oh my god! How did you get that? *Where* did you get that?”

“Ava found it. She didn’t know what it was, but she saw you wearing it earlier, so she grabbed it and brought it back with her.”

My brows rose. “Oh. Wow. That was… thoughtful?”

I’d had no idea Ava was capable of something so selfless—at least when she knew it would benefit me.

“May I?” Xavier held out the necklace.

I nodded, and he slipped it over my head. As soon as the Shard was resting against my chest, I started to feel better. Some of my draining exhaustion lifted. It didn’t fix everything—my wrist still ached, and I was still tired overall—but it did make me feel like I’d taken a good nap. Given how tired and weak I was, I’d take any help I could get.

“Thank you,” I said, smiling as I looked up at Xavier. When I saw the frustration on his face, my smile dimmed. “What’s wrong?” I asked, though I had a feeling I already knew the answer.

“Why didn’t you tell me the Shard was missing?” he asked.

I grimaced. I hated it when he used that tone on me—all frustration and disappointment. It always made me feel so guilt-ridden.

“I didn’t realize it was gone until we were practically back at the pack house, and then the Bitterfangs attacked—”

“I assumed you’d lost it in the chaos,” he interrupted, “but that’s not what I’m asking. You knew it was missing at some point before I returned it to you. Why didn’t you tell me you’d lost it?”

I sighed. This was like my conversation with Greyson all over again. “There was so much going on, and all of it was more important than the Shard. I didn’t want to be a burden. I figured I’d try to find it myself once I got some rest.”

He shook his head. “Don’t you get it? I’m always worried about you, Cali. If something happens to you, no matter *when* it happens, I want to be there to help you. I don’t care what else is going on, or if it makes things more difficult or whatever else you keep telling yourself to convince yourself to keep me out of the loop—I’ll still want to know. I’ll *always* want to know. Please don’t keep things like this from me.”

If I’d thought the guilt was bad before, now it threatened to drown me. “I’m sorry. I was just trying to do what I thought was best.”

“I know you were.” His tone was gentle. “But if the tables were turned, if I were in danger or facing some kind of trouble, wouldn’t you want to know?”

*Well, when he says it like that…*

“Yes,” I sighed. “I would. You’re completely right.”

And yet I still couldn’t bring myself to tell him about the wisp. It was like talking with Greyson all over again, with both love and guilt for keeping something from him pressing in on me.

“I know you just went through something scary,” he said, “but I want you to know that no matter what’s going on, you can always tell me. Please, stop lying to me and trust me enough to share what’s happening.” His lips curved up into a gentle smile. “If you don’t want me to worry, that’s the best way.”

Despite the self-loathing loop playing in my mind, I found myself smiling back. “Okay.”

His arms slipped around me, and he pulled me onto his lap. “I love you. You’re my whole world. You know that, right?”

“I do.”

His lips pressed against mine, and I threw myself into it with everything I had. This was my mate, the man I loved so much, who’d been there for me through thick and thin. I was the luckiest girl in the world to have his love.

He deepened the kiss and pressed me against the mattress. My fingers sank into his hair as his tongue slipped into my mouth. Yes, this was exactly what I needed—a sweet reminder of the good things in my life. Of the people who loved me. Of the people I’d do anything for.

Xavier was my rock, and I would show him that.

# Episode 3641

Xavier’s gentle kisses were driving me crazy. Each sweep of his tongue in my mouth left me hungry for more, more, more… He was being so careful with me. Even as his hips settled against mine, even while he kissed me deeply, thoroughly, so there could be no mistaking how he felt, there was none of the frenzy that so often overcame him when we were together. It felt like we could’ve stayed just like this forever, our bodies pressed together, our mouths working in tandem, and he would’ve been completely satisfied.

Only, I didn’t know if I felt the same way. The slow-simmering lust in my belly was quickly reaching a boiling point, and for the first time since our fight with the Bitterfangs, I felt like myself. I dragged myself up onto my elbows, trying to push things a little further, but then another wave of dizziness crashed into me. Just like the one that had laid me out on my bed in the first place.

I broke away from Xavier’s mouth as I slumped against the mattress, no longer feeling sexy or capable. “Um… Sorry. I guess I’m not quite at my full strength just yet. Even the Shard must have some limits.”

The tacked-on joke fell flat, but Xavier just kissed my forehead and eased his weight off me. His arms slipped around me as we readjusted, going from kissing to snuggling. This wasn’t bad at all.

“Better?” he asked.

“Mm. This is perfect.” I twined our fingers together and nestled against his chest. “Sorry. I think not having the Shard earlier has left me a bit tired. Or the fight, or whatever.”

Again, the possible reasons I was basically an invalid were many. Too many. It was getting really freaking annoying.

“But you do feel better overall with the Shard, right?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. I think I just need some time to readjust. Thank you for bringing it back.”

“Of course,” he said. “I didn’t hesitate. I know how it helps you. I wouldn’t want you to have to go without it.”

I smiled, feeling warm and comfortable and loved as we lay together. As overbearing as Xavier—and Greyson—could be, it was always comforting to know how much they cared. How much they thought about me. That they were willing to do just about anything to make my life just a little easier. They both always had my best interests at heart.

*I guess Ava’s the one I should really be thanking*, I thought, *since she was the one who brought the Shard back. Even when she was hurt and in danger.*

It was still strange to imagine Ava doing something so selfless, and for me of all people. I knew—though it was an uncomfortable fact to acknowledge—that she’d do anything for Xavier. She’d probably die all over again if his life were in danger and her death meant saving him. But I’d always thought she flat-out hated me, or at least wasn’t inclined to lift a finger to help me. She’d sort of saved my life when Knox had kidnapped me, but that had been more of a team effort, since he’d trapped her too.

*I should thank her*, I thought. *That would be the right thing to do.*

Even though I really, really didn’t want to do it. Call me petty, but Ava wasn’t exactly my favorite person. And all the dark, selfish impulses I imagined she had were mirrored in my own behavior.

We could both do better. And she’d taken the first step. It was my turn now.

I kissed Xavier’s cheek. “Thanks again. I feel a lot better. I’m going to take a shower now.”

“Okay. I’ll see you downstairs, baby.” He gave me a sweet kiss and left my room.

After a quick shower and a change of clothes, I headed downstairs, determined to find my mom. She was in the kitchen, sipping a cup of tea, and I all but dragged her into one of the empty studies. She had to leave her teacup behind, much to her displeasure.

“Cali, what’s going on?” she asked, frowning. “Are you all right? You should be resting.”

I held out the Shard, still hanging from my neck. “I got it back.”

Her shoulders slumped with relief. “Oh, thank the gods. Where did you find it? I thought you lost it in the woods?”

“Ava found it and gave it to Xavier to return to me. It’s helping. I feel better.”

“Well, thank god for Ava.” She hugged me close.

For once, I didn’t disagree. Who knew what would have happened if Ava hadn’t found it out in the woods? Trespassing on Redwood land was frowned upon, and Rishika’s patrols were tighter than ever, but if someone had decided to venture into the forest and snatch the Shard, it would’ve been pretty easy. Ava had done me a huge favor.

Which, *again*, was why I needed to thank her.

“Please just be so, so careful with it,” Mom said. “You can’t lose it again. I don’t even want to think about what could’ve happened to you without it. I’ve been so worried about you.”

I nodded as she stepped back. “I know. I’ll be careful.”

And suddenly, all the words I’d been prepared to share with her died in my throat. Part of me didn’t *want* to tell her, I realized. Because once I told her, it was out there. There would be no going back or pretending that the strange feeling that had come over me hadn’t happened.

But my mother knew me too well, because after a beat, her brows drew together. “There’s something else, isn’t there?”

I nodded.

“What is it?”

I pulled in a deep breath. *Now or never, Cali.*

“When I was trying to help Ava… When she had silver poisoning, and I was going to cut my hand, but you had to step in for me…” I shook my head. My thoughts were in a jumble. I didn’t know how to describe what had happened because, at its heart, I still didn’t *know* what had happened. “I saw the wisp again. It wasn’t the handprint that made me freeze. It was the wisp. And it told me to do all these awful things. It told me to let Ava die.”

Mom’s expression darkened. “Well, that’s certainly not good.”

“I agree.”

“It seems that someone is trying to influence your mind and is using the wisp to do so. To what end, I’m not certain.” She sighed. “The best thing you can do now is to learn how to combat that kind of mental manipulation.”

“How do I do that?”

“I know a way. It was something your grandfather taught me a long time ago. Because I was the daughter of a high-ranking general from a prominent Light Fae family, I was often the target of enemies—there were quite a few foiled kidnapping plots, actually.”

My eyes widened. “Seriously?

Mom nodded.

It made sense, now that I thought about it—especially because Mom *had* married Kadmos as a peace offering to the Dark Fae in an attempt to stop the war.

Still, it was always strange to be reminded of all the lives my mom had lived before she’d met my father and given birth to me.

“There’s a way to charm a plant to direct and absorb mental manipulation, but there’s also a technique I learned from Kadmos. But that’s more difficult, and it’s not something I’ve mastered myself. As far as the plant charm goes, as long as the plant lives, it will redirect the energies of anyone trying to manipulate you toward the plant itself. But it won’t last forever, and once the plant dies, you’ll need a new one.”

She took a breath, clearly deep in thought.

“But if the plant *does* die, there’s another option,” she continued. “The technique Kadmos taught me. It’s not a charm—it’s a mindset. It’s almost a form of meditation—you have to think about a time when you were happy and cling to it.”

I frowned. “How is that supposed to keep people from manipulating me?”

“It’s a mental strength trick. If they can’t take away your happiness, then they can’t take you.”

Both of those options sounded all well and good, but I couldn’t shake the doubt that still nagged at me.

*Can I actually do any of this? The plant charm sounds good, but how many different charms can one person rely on? And how many more charms can I take before they start to cancel each other out and I’m back to square one? I just want this to go away, for me to stop being a target. I have to be strong, but it feels like I don’t know what that looks like anymore.*

Ignoring my pessimistic thoughts, I pulled in a deep breath. “Okay. Where do we start?”

“I’ll work on making the plant charm,” Mom said, “but I want you to work on the meditation trick, too, because one thing is very clear: someone is targeting you, and they’re not going to stop.”

# Episode 3642

**Xavier**

After leaving Cali’s room, I went to find Greyson. Of all the things Ava had told me about her run-in with the Bitterfangs, the fact that some of them seemed to carry ingestible silver was the most concerning. It was like they’d made a goddamn suicide pact or something, only instead of cyanide pills, they avoided being captured by popping some silver and killing themselves.

These guys were something else—and not something good. I’d never seen a pack that took its battle tactics so seriously, and that was saying something, because werewolves were a notoriously violent and militant bunch.

I found Greyson in the kitchen, pouring a cup of tea down the sink and muttering about people leaving their dishes lying around.

“Can I talk to you?” I asked. “Privately?”

His brows rose, but he followed me out to the backyard. The cold air was crisp against my skin, soothing both the heat in my blood from being upstairs with Cali and whatever the hell was wrong with my mind after speaking with Ava. It was amazing, the effects those two had on me, and pulled between the two of them as I was, I was beginning to feel like a piece of twisted-up saltwater taffy.

“What’s going on?” Greyson asked.

“The Bitterfangs are more dangerous than we thought.” I explained what Ava had told me about the silver sachets and the Bitterfang pack’s fatal little trick. “Clearly, they’re willing to die for their pack—even if it means taking their own lives. And, thanks to Ava, we know they’re capable of taking others down with them.”

“Shit.” My brother looked at me, wide-eyed. “How the hell were none of the Redwoods or Blue Bloods hurt the same way Ava was?”

I shrugged. “No idea. Luck, maybe?”

I hated the idea that the only reason we’d walked away from that confrontation was dumb luck. I knew for a fact that our pack’s luck never held for long.

“You got a better theory?” Greyson asked.

I sighed. “Maybe the Bitterfangs don’t all carry the silver? Maybe it’s only certain higher-up wolves, close to the Alpha?”

It wasn’t a huge leap of logic—but then again, it wasn’t like either one of us knew enough about the Bitterfangs for any idea to be anything more than a shot in the dark.

Though the theory did make sense. There was a lot of potential for those silver sachets to turn deadly by accident, and unless they had a Light Fae in the pack we didn’t know about, or some other antidote on hand, it could potentially result in a lot of pointless Bitterfang deaths if they weren’t careful.

“It’s certainly possible,” Greyson said after a beat. “Either way, we’ll have to let everyone know. Since we have no way of knowing which Bitterfang pack member could be packing silver, we’ll have to assume they all are. And that means the rest of us need to be prepared to go up against it.”

“Up against it?” I repeated, my brows raising. “Does that mean you’re leaning toward my plan to attack the Bitterfangs outright?”

“Not exactly. Russell had an idea. I’m honestly still trying to wrap my head around it. There are a thousand different ways it could blow up in our faces, and the logistics will be a nightmare.”

“You really know how to sell a guy on an idea,” I joked darkly. “So the kid came up with this plan? And nobody else had anything better to offer?”

Greyson sighed. “Unfortunately, no.”

I winced. “That’s pretty fucking bleak. Does it involve just going to a mini golf course with his girlfriend?”

“No. It involves faking his death.”

I paused, taking this in. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

“So he really is determined to play out the whole *Romeo and Juliet* thing, huh?”

Greyson rolled his eyes. “Didn’t know you knew Shakespeare.”

I shrugged. “Everyone knows that one. I saw the movie.”

“The DiCaprio one?”

“What do you think?”

He smirked, then shook his head. “I’m not saying it’s a great idea, but it’s the best we’ve come up with so far. And, assuming we can pull it off—which I’ll admit is a colossal *if*—we might be able to solve our Bitterfang issue without resorting to all-out war.”

I shrugged. “I guess it could work. But it still sounds incredibly stupid.”

“I won’t argue with you there. The problem is, I don’t know what else we’re supposed to do at this point. The Bitterfangs are dead set on getting their hands on Russell and making him pay for Julia’s decision to run off with him. If we can make them think Russell’s out of the picture, then it seems fair to assume they’ll back off.”

I wasn’t so sure about that. The Bitterfangs were vicious, bloodthirsty, ego-driven, super-soldier wolves. Where they were concerned, safe assumptions probably didn’t even exist.

I shrugged again. “What about Julia? They want her too, right? They’re not going to go back without her. Lance made it very clear that they won’t be doing that, and that they’re willing to tear down anything that gets in their way.”

Greyson rubbed his jaw. “You’re not wrong.”

*Music to my ears. Though that’s a funny way of saying, “Xavier, you’re right.”*

“But first we need to figure out this first part of the plan,” he continued. “If we can get them to stop hunting Russell, that’s step one.”

“Agreed. They certainly have it out for the kid.”

“Right. And with Julia, we at least have reason to believe they won’t kill her. I hope.”

“Wow,” I drawled. “You’re just full of confidence and reassurance tonight, huh?”

He shrugged. “It’s the best I’ve got. Somehow, we got pulled into this pack drama that’s none of our business, and even if I wanted to ditch the kids—and I don’t—it’s too late to back out now. We have to see this through to the best of our ability and hope we can avoid a war.”

“And Cali? If they go after her because she’s the *due destini* and they don’t *approve* of that?”

Greyson’s eyes went dark. “It would be the wrong move.”

“You’ve got that right.” I sighed. If they even tried to put a finger on Cali, I’d rip heads off. “So, Julia. You really don’t think they want to kill her?”

“No, not right now anyway, and that fact will buy us a little time. I’m not sure how *much* time, exactly, but any bit helps,” he said. “And with the witches’ protection on both sides—Kira with the Blue Bloods and Big Mac here—we have the option of buying a little more time.”

“Or setting ourselves up for a siege,” I said. “We don’t want to be sitting ducks. Remember, that barrier has failed us in the past.”

“It failed because we were attacked by very supernaturally inclined beings that were made by a former warlock,” Greyson pressed. Fair enough. The revenants by Letifer. “The Bitterfangs are formidable in their own way, no doubt about it, but I don’t think we have to worry about them pulling out some kind of magical arsenal.”

Like so many other things Greyson had said tonight, that idea didn’t exactly comfort me. “Still, we should go on the offensive. There’s no guarantee they won’t kill Julia, maybe just for the sake of ending this.”

“You really think Malakai would kill his daughter?”

I shrugged. “I can count on both hands the number of times Silas could’ve killed me if he’d felt like it, and I’m sure you can too. I’m not saying killing her wouldn’t be an exceptionally shitty thing for Malakai to do, but I wouldn’t put it past him, either.”

Greyson stilled, then nodded stiffly. I didn’t like bringing up our father, and I didn’t think Greyson enjoyed it either, but I knew I had a point. I didn’t feel bad about it—I was stating a fact. It was a fact that we’d both grown up with the same type of horrible father Julia had. I felt for her in that regard—and because I knew exactly what it was like to be in her shoes, I wasn’t going to play fast and loose with her life.

“I never would have let that happen to you,” he finally said.

I snorted. “Don’t pretend we always got along and you were watching my back. We still don’t get along.”

“Because you’re annoying as hell,” he retorted. “But, for the record, I always knew that if it came down to it… If Silas tried something, or if it were life-or-death, I’d pick you and Colton. Whether or not you’d pick me back was another story, but I never expected a thank-you.”

I blinked. I… had no response to that. It was certainly an entirely different narrative from the one I’d told myself about my brother throughout our childhood and most of my adulthood. I cleared my throat and refocused on the task at hand. “So, when is this Russell thing happening?”

“We have to discuss it, but the Bitterfangs will likely attack again the way they did today.”

“Me and a few of the others could go lure them out,” I suggested.

He shook his head. “I’m not sure about that.”

“But at least then, the Redwoods and company would be in control,” I pressed. “So why don’t I take Russell to them before they can come to us?”

# Episode 3643

Dread slipped down my spine, and my eyes widened in alarm. *My mom thinks someone’s targeting me?*

It made sense, all things considered, and it’s not like it would be the first time, but that didn’t make it any less unnerving.

“Do you think it’s the warlock we took the Shard from? Steve?”

She shrugged. “It’s possible. But I can’t be sure. Please don’t take this the wrong way, sweetheart, but I’ve noticed the Redwood pack is pretty good at making enemies.”

I buried my face in my hands with a groan. “Believe me, I know.” And if we were including everyone that the pack, Greyson, Xavier, or I had ever wronged, that was a *really* long list. Too long. And knowing how things normally went around here, we’d only add *more* enemies to the list before I had a chance to whittle it down. “How are we going to find out who’s doing this to me?”

“Before we worry about who’s behind this, let’s focus on a way to stop what’s happening to you,” Mom suggested. “You might not be able to control the actions of others, but with a strong enough defense, you can protect yourself from their attempts to manipulate you.”

I nodded. Her plan was reasonable, but I was still worried. Artemis had mentioned that there had been a lot of Fae back at the warlock’s place. Could one of them have wanted the Shard for themselves and followed my mates home so they could steal it?

“Cali, take a breath.” Mom hugged me and I inhaled her flowery scent, the same scent she’d had for as long as I could remember. Back before I’d discovered she was Fae, I’d always thought she had a special perfume, but now I knew that was her magical affinity that left her smelling like a flower garden on a warm spring day.

“You’re not alone in this,” she reminded me. “And I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

Tears welled up in my eyes. “Thanks, Mom.”

I was so lucky to have her nearby, to have the benefit of all her knowledge at my disposal. Before I’d learned the truth about my Fae heritage, I would’ve been absolutely clueless, dealing with something like this. There was so much I hadn’t known back then, and so much I still didn’t know. If I’d been forced to go through any of this without my mom or my sister, I wouldn’t have had a clue what to do. The Fae world was still so mysterious to me, along with the way my own magic worked.

I suppose it was ironic, in a way, to be only half Fae, because I always felt like I only had half the picture where anything Fae was concerned. And sure, things were getting better with my magic, but I never forgot that there were magic users out there who were significantly more proficient.

I’d spent the first twenty years of my life thinking I was human, and now that I knew the truth, I had so much to catch up on. How could I possibly measure up to people who’d spent their whole lives learning about magic, mastering it?

*I can’t measure up. And that puts me right back at square one—helpless. A liability to everyone around me. A damsel in distress.*

And I couldn’t accept that. Maybe the odds weren’t in my favor. Maybe I’d always be playing catchup to people like Artemis and Adair and my mom, and even Big Mac and that Fae-obsessed warlock.

But that didn’t mean I had to be helpless for the rest of my life.

I gave my mom one more squeeze before I let her go. “Thanks for working on the plant charm. I’m going to go talk to Artemis. I sort of have an idea.”

I found Artemis in her room, sharpening a dagger. She was supposed to be resting, but she was probably even worse at that than I was. Relaxation probably wasn’t something afforded to an orphan turned bounty hunter in the Fae world.

*Maybe sharpening daggers is her version of Netflix bingeing.*

She smiled at me when I poked my head into her room. “Hey. How are you feeling?”

“Better,” I said. I stepped inside, closing the door behind me. “I have a weird request.”

Her brows rose, but she didn’t stop sharpening her dagger. “Should I be nervous?”

“Can you try using your manipulation magic on me?” I asked. “Mom thinks it would be a good idea for me to learn how to resist it.”

I didn’t elaborate on *why* our mother had suggested I learn to defend myself against mental manipulation. I’d tell Artemis if it became necessary, but for now it seemed best to keep things between my mom and me. If I wasn’t telling Xavier or Greyson, I probably shouldn’t be going around telling other people, either.

Artemis set the dagger down with a grimace. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?” I asked. “You’re supposed to be practicing your magic, right? Building your powers back up? So why don’t you practice on me? I’ll be your guinea pig.”

Artemis looked confused. “What’s a guinea pig?”

“Oh. I guess you don’t have those in the Fae world. It’s like…” I thought about it for a second. “A mouse crossed with a potato?”

“Sounds horrific.”

“They’re actually really cute, but we’re getting off topic. Please, can you help me with this? We can help each other. You can ask me to make tea or get you a snack or something. So even if I can’t resist the manipulation, at least you’ll be rewarded?”

“Until I’m tired of tea.” Artemis sighed. “Fine. Let’s do it. But I want us to be supervised in case something goes wrong. I’m still not totally in control of my magic, and I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if I hurt you.”

I swallowed roughly. That didn’t sound great to me either. “Fair enough.”

“Let’s go ask Adair to help.”

We found Adair down in the library—with Tabitha. Things were getting pretty hot and heavy, if the way he had her pressed against the bookshelf was any indication.

*Wow! Those two don’t waste time! Avert gaze!*

I cleared my throat and looked down at the floor. “Um… Adair?”

The couple froze for a moment, then Tabitha pushed Adair back and fixed the collar of her shirt. “We were just, um—”

“Busy,” Adair said flatly.

Adair didn’t look fazed by the interruption, but Tabitha looked like she was about to burst into flames. I gave her a thumbs up, and she flushed an even deeper crimson.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Artemis said. “But we were hoping to work on some Fae magic-related things.”

Tabitha nodded and looked up at Adair. “That’s fine. We can talk later.”

He caught her hand and kissed it, clearly not caring that he had an audience. “I’ll think of you every moment we’re apart.”

Then he turned to Artemis and me, all the gentleness gone from his face. “This had better be important.”

*Sheesh! Remind me not to get between Adair and his lady love again.*

I nodded. “It is. I need to learn how to resist manipulation magic—people trying to get into your head, that kind of thing.”

Adair raised a brow but nodded. “Fine. Lead the way.”

We holed up in the kitchen, which miraculously wasn’t full of people. I quickly explained the plan to Adair. Well, the pieces of the plan that Artemis knew.

“… and Mom thinks I should learn it. Since Artemis needs to practice her magic, we figured we could kill two birds with one stone, but we wanted to make sure we had someone watching,” I finished.

“Is this a bad idea?” Artemis asked Adair.

I glared at her. “Seriously? You’re already backing down?”

“I told you—I don’t want to hurt you!”

“It’s not the worst idea you’ve ever had,” Adair said. “You both come from high society Fae families, which means there are skills you should both possess. Otherwise, whether you want to be part of those families or not, things could come back to bite you. Besides, as Fae, you need to be ready for any kind of attack, regardless. So, let’s get started.”

Artemis turned to me. “Cali, make me a cup of tea.”

I blinked, waiting for that feeling of compulsion to settle over me. I didn’t feel anything at all. I almost laughed.

*I’m not resisting it already, am I?* I thought. Then I remembered what my mom said—I had to think about something happy. *What’s a happy moment for me?*

I had a lot of good ones with my mates, but I didn’t want to pick a happy moment featuring just one of them. What if that somehow triggered the *due destini* curse?

I was still struggling to come with an appropriate memory when Artemis spoke again. “Cali, make me a cup of tea.”

This time, her voice had a strange quality to it that was both soothing and commanding.

*Think happy thoughts! Think happy thoughts!* Both Greyson and Xavier’s faces appeared in my mind, and then I blinked. *I did it!*

Only, when I looked down, I was holding a cup of freshly-steeped tea.

*Shit.*

Adair nodded, his expression flat. “Again.”

It was going to be a long day.

# Episode 3644

**Greyson**

I frowned at my brother. “You want to take Russell to the Bitterfangs? How *exactly* is that going to help him, outside of ensuring he gets a quick death?”

“You think I don’t have a plan?” He shrugged, apparently as carefree as ever—despite the fact that he was casually discussing handing the kid we’d put blood and sweat into protecting over to the psychopaths who wanted nothing more than to tear him limb from limb.

“Did you not hear a single thing I just said?” I snapped. “Why the hell would we gift wrap the kid after we’ve worked so hard to protect him and Julia? We’re on the verge of a pack war because we decided to get involved with their family drama. The whole point of faking Russell’s death is to protect the kid from the Bitterfangs. That’s why there’s a barrier up, and why we’ve increased patrols, and why we’re going to all this damn trouble and putting our lives on pause in the process!”

“I get it!” Xavier said, his hands raised in front of him. “I’m not an idiot.”

*Could have fooled me.*

“Then what the hell are you talking about?” I demanded.

“You want to protect the kid—”

“We *all* want to protect the kid. We’re in agreement on that, right?”

Xavier shrugged again. “The kid’s an idiot, but he doesn’t deserve to die. And Julia doesn’t deserve to live under her father’s thumb her whole life.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. I was trying to stave off a pack war and execute what was possibly the worst plan I’d ever agreed to, and my brother was wasting time debating semantics.

“Are you going to get to the point anytime soon?” I asked. “Or do you even have a point?”

“I’d get there if you stopped interrupting me,” he snapped.

I spread out my arms dramatically. “By all means, go right ahead.”

He did *not* resist the urge to roll his eyes. “You say the whole point of this is to protect the kid from the Bitterfangs? Well, that’s what I’m proposing. I could make it look like I’m betraying the Redwood pack by delivering Russell to the Bitterfangs.”

My instinct was to shoot that idea down. It was another complex and fragile layer to what was already a shitshow of a plan.

And yet…

I studied Xavier’s face. He was being serious. This wasn’t a joke. And the more I thought about it, the more I understood what he was getting at. His idea was smart. And incredibly impulsive, just like Xavier. But it wasn’t a bad idea.

“That just might work,” I said. “And that way, the rest of the Redwoods could be there as backup.”

He nodded. “Exactly.”

I saw his vision now: Xavier would look like he was betraying the pack—and the Pit Bulls—by taking Russell to the Bitterfangs to cut a deal. And the Redwoods would appear to be pursuing Xavier so they could get Russell back, but instead of attacking Xavier, we’d catch the Bitterfangs on the back leg and attack them instead, and in the thick of the fight—because there was no way in hell the Bitterfangs would back down from a fight, that much we could safely say about them—Russell would get “hurt” and it would look like he’d died.

“The plan gives us the opportunity to fake Russell’s death as part of the fight, which gives the Bitterfangs enough evidence to believe he’s dead*,*” I said.

Xavier nodded. “And there *will* be a fight. Those Bitterfangs are the most bloodthirsty pack I’ve ever seen.”

“Agreed.” I blew out a breath. “It’s obviously risky—there’s a lot that could go wrong—but it’s not a bad idea.”

My brother puffed out his chest. “That’s because I don’t have bad ideas.”

This time, I did roll my eyes. “That’s debatable. But this particular plan could work. Let’s go talk to the others and see what they think.”

I led Xavier back into the house and gathered most of the pack together—Rishika, Jay, Ravi, Sage, Zainab, Charlie, Violet, and Lilac—along with Russell’s moms and Vishal.

“To get you all up to speed: since our fight with the Bitterfangs at Three Devils Point, we’ve been discussing possible ways to put an end to this whole mess and get the Bitterfangs to leave Russell, Julia, and the Oregon packs alone,” I explained. “I think we’ve finally come up with something that might work. It’s risky, no doubt, but it could go a long way in starting to solve some of our problems.”

“How risky?” Rishika asked, ever shrewd in the face of danger. “What’s this plan?”

I glanced at Russell and the Pit Bulls. They nodded, and I turned to my pack. “We’re going to fake Russell’s death.”

The Redwood pack members all started talking at once.

“You’re *what*?”

“That’s a dumb idea!”

“How will that fix anything?”

I held up a hand to silence them. “We’re still working out the particulars of how to fake his death, exactly, but here’s the general idea.”

I told them about Xavier’s idea to pretend to betray the Redwoods and bring Russell to the Bitterfangs, giving us an opportunity to launch a full-scale assault.

“During the fight, Russell will be ‘wounded’ and we’ll fake his death,” I continued, “but the danger doesn’t end with Russell. Not all of you were present for the fight at Three Devils Point, but the Bitterfangs are incredibly formidable opponents. We’re not talking about a run-of-the-mill werewolf fight, here. They have a distinct, cooperative fighting style, and they fight with military precision. We’ll have to figure out a way to get through their defenses. In addition to that, we’ve learned that some members of the pack wear bags of silver powder around their necks when they fight.”

The horror that rippled through the room was palpable.

“Why would they do that?” Violet asked. “Aren’t they awful enough already?”

“We think they carry it as a last resort,” I said. “If they lose, they can ingest the silver to avoid being captured.”

Violet looked at me, speechless.

“But it’s not just a danger to the Bitterfangs themselves,” I continued. “If you’re not careful, the silver will poison you just as easily. And since we don’t know which of the Bitterfang wolves wear the silver, we have to assume they all have it, so watch yourselves.”

“What if *they* get Russell?” Jay asked. “Then what? How far are we willing to commit to this?”

The Pit Bulls gave him a dirty look, but I didn’t begrudge his question. After all, this wasn’t really our fight. It never had been.

“We protect each other and Russell at all costs,” I said. “And as I mentioned before, this plan is risky. We can’t predict everything the Bitterfangs are going to do. We’re going to have to rely on the partnership between the Redwoods, the Blue Bloods, and the Pit Bulls.”

“We can probably bank on the Samaras joining us, too,” Xavier added.

I nodded. “With all of us working together, what happened at Three Devils Point isn’t going to happen again. We’ll outnumber them, and we’ve already killed several of their members, so unless they get more of their pack up here, they’re not going to last. They might fight like nothing I’ve ever seen before, but they can only do so much against our combined strength.”

“Let’s do it,” Ravi said determinedly. “Let’s take care of the Bitterfangs and get them off our land once and for all.”

The gathered wolves cheered, and I promised I’d check in with more information later. Despite the threat, the pack seemed in high spirits, which was pretty much the best I could hope for in this kind of situation.

Joan cornered me after the pack dispersed. “Good speech. Now, how are we going to fake Russell’s death? Do you have any ideas at all?”

“I have to talk to one of our witches about that,” I said.

“We’d like to be part of that conversation,” Paris said.

I nodded. “Why don’t we go talk with her now?”

It’d be a nice friendly chat. Big Mac loved those.

Joan, Paris, Vishal, Xavier, Russell, and I found Big Mac out in the garage, working on her moonshine stock.

She looked up at us with a long-suffering sigh. “What do you need now?”

“Do you have a potion or a spell or something that would temporarily make Russell seem dead?” I asked. “Is that possible?”

“Hold this.” She passed me a huge mason jar filled with what smelled like rotten corn water. “And don’t drink that. It hasn’t aged yet, so it won’t taste good.” She sat back. “To answer your question, it’s doable. It’s actually a relatively easy potion to make.”

“Great,” I said, breathing a sigh of relief. A win—any win—right now almost seemed too good to be true.

“The potion would make his vitals so weak they’d be undetectable, even to a werewolf.”

Russell swallowed nervously, and Joan stepped forward. “Would he be safe? Could anything go wrong?”

Big Mac started pouring something into the jar I was holding. “Faking a boy’s death? Yes, I’d say a lot could go wrong.”

I gave her a pointed look. “We’re aware it’s quite the risk, but if you could tell us what specifically to expect, maybe we could prevent ourselves from accidentally killing Russell for real.”

“Well, the potion is the easy part,” she said. “Once he’s taken it and you want to bring him back, you’ll have to restart his heart.”

# 

# Episode 3645

I was getting sick of making tea. Or, at least, I would have been if I’d been aware of what I was doing. So maybe it was less about tea and more about finding a random teacup in my hand over and over again. With Adair’s guidance, Artemis kept requesting tea, and I kept trying to resist her manipulation.

To nobody’s surprise, Artemis was a lot better with her manipulation powers than I was at resisting them, and despite my best efforts, I kept bringing her more and more cups. No matter how hard I fought, no matter how much I tried to root myself in a happy memory, every time I snapped out of it, a new cup was sitting on the table next to all the others.

At the rate we were going, I’d use up all the teacups in the house. Hopefully this at least was helping Artemis feel more confident about regaining her magic, because I certainly wasn’t feeling at all confident in my ability to resist even the most benign manipulation.

“Cali, make me a cup of tea.” Artemis’s strong, soothing voice washed over me. I felt my shoulders relax, felt my mind go to that soft, hazy place…

*Nope! Not this time!*

I conjured up a memory from college—one of the first parties Lola and I had gone to together, and easily one of the best. We’d danced and sang and had the attention of all the cute upperclassmen. For the first time, I’d felt like I really belonged at college, like maybe I was going to be able to meet people and have fun, to do something more than just study and hang out at the apartment.

It had been a great night. Probably one of the top twenty great nights of my life. That had to be a sufficiently happy memory, right? Feeling bright and young and beautiful, my whole life ahead of me—

I stared down at the fresh cup of tea in my hand. “God dammit!”

And then, with a jolt of horror, I took in the kitchen table. It was absolutely *covered* in teacups. There had to be something like forty cups of freshly brewed tea. Though by now, not all of them were fresh anymore. Lots of them had probably gone cold. *What a waste.*

I added the newest cup to the bunch and slumped into a chair with a groan. “This is useless.”

It was the strangest thing, Artemis’s manipulation. I’d spent the better part of an hour making tea for her, boiling and brewing and pouring and stirring, walking back and forth from the table to the kitchen counter. That was a lot of steps, and yet I had no memory of any of it. I knew I’d done it, but something about Artemis’s manipulation kept me from processing it, even though I was very much conscious every step of the way.

It felt like a fever dream that I just couldn’t seem to escape.

Artemis patted my hand. “I think you were getting closer that last time. You hesitated a little longer before going over to make the tea.”

Adair rolled his eyes. “No, she didn’t. Lying to protect her feelings won’t help.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled.

He nodded. “Your enemies won’t go easy on you, Caliana. It’s best you learn to resist without depending on a crutch.”

Artemis frowned. “Are you calling me a crutch?”

“No, just your instinct to take pity on her.”

“Sounds about right,” I muttered.

I rubbed my face. This was so… *frustrating!* I hadn’t exactly expected it to be easy to resist magical manipulation, but I would’ve thought that by now, I’d have had some kind of breakthrough. Obviously, I was terrible at this. Hopefully my mom had better luck putting her magic plant together, because I was going to need all the help I could get.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway, and Lola popped her head in. “What’s with all the teacups?”

The answer was on the tip of my tongue, and then Jacqueline popped her head in too. “Wow. Are we having a tea party over here or something?” She helped herself to one of the cups of tea and grimaced. “Blegh. This one’s been steeping for too long.”

I sighed. “We’re kind of in the middle of something.”

But because the universe hated me, Charlie and Violet walked into the kitchen too. They stopped short at the sight of all the cups on the table.

“Wow,” Charlie said. “That’s a lot of tea.”

“Can we get some privacy in here, please?” I snapped.

I must have looked as tired and overwrought as I felt, because the peanut gallery wasted no time leaving the room.

Alone again with Artemis, Adair, and ten thousand cups of tea, I asked, “Now what? Obviously, this isn’t working. I’m not making progress. What am I doing wrong?”

“You need to focus on resisting,” Adair said.

“Oh, seriously? Is that all?” I said sarcastically. “And here I thought the point was to use as many cups as possible. Thanks for the tip!”

To his credit, he didn’t engage with my bad attitude. “As I was saying,” he continued, “The only way to focus your resistance is to hone in on a moment in the memory you’re thinking of.”

“A happy moment, right?” I asked.

He shook his head. “It can be happy or not. The important part is that the memory evokes strong emotion—strong enough to keep you anchored in your own self, and prevent another person’s power from slipping into your mind and unmooring you. The memory you use for this can be the time you’ve felt the angriest, the saddest—whatever you think is strong enough.”

“I think I’d rather choose something happy,” I said.

“That’s probably for the best,” Artemis said. “Lots of bad things have happened to you, so focusing on the good will probably help keep you from spiraling.”

*Well, that sounds bleak.*

But she was probably right. After all, she knew a lot more about this than I did.

I gave her a weak smile. “I’m glad you’re having an easier time with your magic, at least.”

She smiled back. “Me too. Even though I feel kind of guilty right now.”

“Don’t feel guilty. This is meant to be for your benefit, too.”

I was happy for Artemis. It really seemed like both of her magical abilities were coming back, just taking time to rebuild their strength. It would’ve been a lie to say I wasn’t jealous—and more than a little annoyed—but I was glad this was helping *someone*.

“Are you ready to try again?” Adair asked.

I hesitated. Giving up was sounding better and better, but I really wanted to get this right. I was still learning about the magical tricks I could use, having a new defense weapon in my arsenal was something I desperately needed. I would master this. I had no other choice.

Artemis must have sensed my hesitation. “Why don’t we take a break?” she suggested. “We’ve got to clean up all these cups, anyway.”

Adair shook his head. “We shouldn’t take a break.” He looked at me. “If this were easy, it wouldn’t be important to learn.”

With that nonsensical pearl of wisdom playing through my mind, I shook my head at Artemis.

“I want to resist at least once, in some capacity, so I know how it feels and I can try to replicate it,” I said. Clearly, I wasn’t going to master this in one day, but maybe I could still take one small step forward.

I geared up for another round with Artemis. Only this time, when I came back to myself, instead of a cup of tea, I found myself holding a sandwich on a plate. I looked at my sister, who took the plate from me with a shrug.

“What?” she said. “I’m hungry.”

The next time I tried, I brought Artemis a full lunch. Chips, another sandwich, a sliced-up apple, and a cup of soup. How long had I been out of it, under the thrall of her manipulation? Making something like this took more than a minute.

I huffed, clinging to my determination by my fingernails.

“Okay,” I said. “One more time. Last time.”

*Think happy thoughts, Cali! Focus!*

When was the happiest I’d been in my entire life?

Then the memory hit me: returning from the Fae world and giving my mom the moon buttercup. Saving her life when almost all hope had been lost.

“Happy” didn’t even begin to describe it. I’d felt light, relieved, and so full of love and joy that I’d thought I was going to explode. For so long, I’d grieved my mom’s illness, fought down desperation and hopelessness at the thought of finding the stupid flower and making it home in time to save her.

And then, somehow, I’d pulled it off. I’d saved her life. I’d been able to keep my mom.

Tears sprang to my eyes, and I heard Artemis asking me to get her bow and quiver. This time, I was aware of every step I took to her bedroom. Clinging to my happy memory, to the overwhelming love and joy I’d felt, I tried to drag my feet, tried to keep my hand from reaching for the doorknob.

Every attempt failed.

I opened the closet and found Artemis’s bow and quiver hanging inside. As I reached for them, my fingers shook.

*Don’t touch that bow!* I screamed at myself. *Don’t touch it! Think of Mom! Think of saving her!*

And yet my hand kept reaching out. *C’mon, Cali.* Sweat broke out on my brow. *You can resist this. You can do it. Resist!*

Was I capable of doing that?

# 

# Episode 3646

I poured every ounce of strength and emotion and mental power I had into two things: thinking of the time I’d saved my mother’s life, and trying to keep myself from touching Artemis’s bow.

I forced myself to add detail to the memory of my mom’s hospital room. The chilling beep of her heart monitor. The smell of the dying roses in the corner by the window. The faded cream color of the walls. The blue of her hospital gown. Bringing her the moon buttercup. Seeing her eyes open. Watching the color return to her face.

My fingers brushed against the smooth wood of the bow, but I didn’t give up. I hadn’t given up when saving my mother’s life had meant traveling to another world and crossing a strange land full of dangerous creatures. I hadn’t given up when I’d faced the troll, or the Kollector, or the ruthless bounty hunter I’d later learn was my sister.

I hadn’t given up on my mother, and I wasn’t going to give up on this task.

I pushed Artemis’s command out of my mind, my will as strong and overpowering as a tidal wave, and fixed my attention on the memory of seeing my mother’s eyes open. Of watching recognition and realization dawn in them. It had been a beautiful, joyful, terrifying moment, and I’d never forget it. It was the moment I’d known I’d done it. Known I’d saved her.

A loud clattering sound pulled me out of my thoughts, and I blinked, coming back to myself. Artemis’s bow was on the floor.

*I dropped it! Did I really just resist the command?* And then a new, much less thrilling realization sank in as I looked at the bow on the floor. *Shit. Artemis is going to kill me for dropping this. She loves this bow like it’s her child.*

In moments, my mind went to that hazy place again. It was as if by thinking about the bow instead of my mom, I was letting the manipulation take hold again. *No, no, no. Stop, Cali!* I told myself, but my body moved without me meaning for it to. My body bent over to pick the bow back up, and my hand closed around that smooth wood.

*Stop!* I urged myself again. *What’s happening?*

But I was already on autopilot again, walking downstairs with the bow, heading for Artemis.

*Come on, Cali. Focus! Do it again! Resist!*

I searched my hazy mind for the image of my mother. Of her eyes. Of the flower. Of that moment where dread and horror met joy and ecstatic relief.

*Drop it. Drop it. Drop it. Dropitdropitdropitdropit—*

I heard a clattering noise as the bow hit the ground, and I felt a sort of disconnect ripple through my mind—almost like a thread had just been cut. Suddenly, I was a puppet without strings.

I gasped and came back to myself. I was in the kitchen, with Artemis’s bow on the floor at my feet, and Artemis and Adair were staring at me in shock.

“Good gods!” Artemis jumped up from her chair to scoop up her precious bow. “You didn’t have to throw it so hard! Do you know what this is made out of? It’s irreplaceable, Cali!”

I couldn’t bring myself to feel an ounce of guilt, mostly because it was hard to feel anything at all. I was still in shock. Still overwhelmed by the barrage of sensations that had gone through me while I resisted, the feeling of being on autopilot, the gaps in my memory from when the manipulation had taken hold, the gut-wrenching feeling of holding on to one of my most powerful memories while simultaneously fighting to sever my tether to Artemis’s will.

I slumped down in a chair, breathless. Someone had tidied up the teacups. “Did I really do it?”

Adair nodded. “It seems you were able to resist, yes.”

Artemis was too busy inspecting her precious bow for damage to congratulate me. *What a brat.*

“There was another point where I managed to resist in Artemis’s room,” I told them. “I dropped the bow then, too.”

At this, my sister looked up at me. “I seem to remember telling you to fetch my quiver, too. You only brought the bow. I think you did better than you thought, and I’m proud of you.” She stroked her bow and shot me a glare. “But maybe next time we practice, we can play with something precious to *you*.”

“Sorry,” I said.

Despite my automatic apology, it didn’t escape me that she was the one who’d chosen to put her bow and quiver at risk by sending me to get them for her. So, rather than feeling guilty, I felt energized. Yes, I’d been pulled into the trance again, but I’d managed to break it not once, but twice. That was as good a baby step as I’d been hoping for.

“That’s progress, right?” I asked, scared that Adair would tell me I’d still messed it up, somehow. I’d worked so hard for those short bursts of resistance.

But, to my relief, he nodded. “Yes, it’s progress. But this is just the beginning. The fact that you resisted once proves that you can do it again, but you need to reach a level where you don’t even *start* to do what she says. You need to be able to break the connection before you act. It won’t do you any good if someone tells you to jump off a cliff and you break the connection halfway to the ground.”

I swallowed nervously. Adair had a special talent for being a buzzkill, but he wasn’t wrong. Artemis’s requests had all been benign. I’d been safe the entire time, and if I’d managed to break free at any point along the way, I wouldn’t have found myself in some weird, scary scenario. That definitely wouldn’t be the case if I had to resist mental manipulation from an enemy.

For now, though, I was glad the training wheels were still on. Or on at all.

“Plus,” Adair added, “Artemis is still building her strength back up. Coming from someone stronger, or someone with a deeper well of skill in this kind of magic, the compulsion could be harder to resist.”

I thought back to the wisp I’d seen through the window. How it had told me to let Ava die. How even though letting anyone die, even Ava, was repugnant to me, I’d been so tempted to do what it said. That manipulation had been incredibly difficult to resist, and I still wasn’t sure if I would have broken out of it at all if my mates hadn’t arrived.

“Okay. What can I do to get stronger?” I asked.

Adair’s expression was dead serious. “You keep practicing. Let’s do it again.”

With Adair’s warning fresh in my mind, we started another practice round. This time, Artemis had me washing teacups and returning them to the table for her to dry. Another benign set of commands, though I supposed it was possible that I could drop a teacup and break it.

But in the end, it didn’t matter. I couldn’t summon up the same level of resistance I’d managed before. In fact, I wasn’t able to resist again at all. In what felt like no time—but I knew was only the effect of the manipulation—the stack of dirty teacups in the sink had shrunk to almost nothing, and the cupboards had filled back up.

It was so maddening. So disheartening.

“Thanks,” Artemis said as I passed her another freshly washed teacup for drying.

I blinked rapidly, coming out of the trance. “Again? Come on! Why can’t I get this?”

She set the cup aside and patted my arm. “You’ll get it. You’ve made great progress today. You’re probably just tired,” she said. “Plus, my magic is supposed to be rare and difficult to counteract, you know?”

“But I did it once; why can’t I do it again? I’ve managed it twice—I know how it feels to resist. I know how to latch on to the memory and fight back, so why can’t I keep doing it?”

If what Adair had said was true, I was currently trying to fight the easiest of the easy versions of manipulation magic. If I couldn’t make consistent progress now, it didn’t bode well for my future ability to ward off whoever was trying to control me.

What if the wisp came back and told me to do something horrible again? Would I be able to resist it? I hadn’t even really resisted it before—it had just been interrupted by my mates. I didn’t even want to think about what it could make me do.

By the time all the teacups were washed and dried and put away, the start of a headache was pulsing in my skull. I still hadn’t mustered up any kind of meaningful resistance for a third time.

“Why don’t we call it for today?” Adair suggested.

My mom came in, smiling. “I’ve got the charm.”

Happy to have an escape from practicing, I turned to take it. The charm was in a little glass geometric terrarium, the size of a tennis ball, small enough to fit in the palm of my hand.

“Where should I put it?” I asked.

My mother conjured a vine and looped it through one part of the terrarium, then put the charm around my neck. It rested against my chest, next to the Shard.

She stepped back to eye her handiwork. “It’s a bit big, but the payoff should be worth it. This will help redirect any manipulation to the plant, which will absorb it. It’s not foolproof, but it’ll do *something*.”

“You shouldn’t rely on it, though,” Adair said, ever the ray of sunshine. “It would be better if you mastered resisting with your mind.”

“That’s true, but it can take a lot of time to get that right,” Mom said. “This is a good stopgap for now.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I said with a weak smile, then I turned to Artemis. “Can we try one more time, then? I want to make sure the charm is working.”

Artemis sighed but nodded. “One more time. I’m tired, too.”

“Wait,” Adair interjected. “Before we test the plant, I know a way we can *really* test this.”

# 

# Episode 3647

**Xavier**

Of *course* the “easy” potion came with a hell of a caveat. Witches were always like this, and Big Mac herself had practically made the caveat into an art form.

Russell’s moms wrapped their arms around him, and they probably didn’t even realize they were doing it. I rolled my eyes. Amateurs. Had they really thought their son would be able to get a magical “fake your own death” trick from a witch without any strings? Clearly, they’d never dealt with witches before. They were in for one hell of a rude awakening.

“We have to *restart his heart?*” Paris asked.

Big Mac nodded as she took the moonshine jar from Greyson and screwed a lid on tight. “Yep. The potion would essentially kill him—or bring him as close to death as he could go without actually dying—so counteracting it isn’t exactly easy.”

“So… what? Would we just need to do chest compressions?” Joan asked.

Big Mac shrugged. “That might be enough.”

“*Might?*” Joan repeated. “This is our son’s life we’re talking about here, so you’ll excuse me if we’re going to need a little more to go on than ‘might.’”

Big Mac set the jar aside and finally gave us her full attention. “You’re playing with life and death here, and it’s not a science. For some, chest compressions could work. Or a dose of epinephrine. Or a defibrillator. For others? It might not be enough. The pull of the spirit realm can be intense, and once they’re there, on the edge of life and death, it can be difficult to pull them back.”

“But you’re a witch,” Paris said. “You have all the magic in the world at your fingertips. You can’t guarantee our son’s safety, or pull him back from the spirit world yourself?”

“I work in magic, not miracles,” the witch said.

I wasn’t sure I believed that. Big Mac sure had a vibe that said she could pull a miracle out of a hat on a moment’s notice if she needed to. But then again, the spirit world was something else. I thought back to my own visit, when I’d gone searching for Lilac’s spirit. It was a hell of a place, and its pull was powerful. I almost hadn’t made it out myself, let alone pulled Lilac out of there.

“Okay…” Greyson sighed. “Let’s say the spirit world’s pull is strong, and he has trouble resisting it. What would we need to do to restart his heart, then?”

“It’s too bad our bridge has gone on her gap year,” Big Mac mused. “Marta would probably be the best option for keeping Russell in the living world and pulling him away from the boundary when the ruse is complete.”

Well, that was one problem with a simple solution. Finally.

“So let’s ask her to come back,” I said. “If she’s the only person with the ability to make sure the kid doesn’t actually die, then we obviously need her here.”

“We could ask her,” Big Mac said in that same mild, noncommittal tone. “But it’s her choice. I’ll talk to her. If she’s still with Okorie, then at least they’d be able to come back quickly.”

“That’d be great,” Greyson said. “And I’d be happy to talk to her myself if needed.”

She waved this off. “That won’t be necessary.”

Greyson turned to Joan and Paris “We won’t move forward with the plan until we know whether or not Marta can be here to keep Russell safe. Don’t worry.”

Their smiles were thin.

“I think the ship has sailed on worrying,” Paris said.

With this new wrinkle in our admittedly already shitty plan in mind, we all headed back to the house. I barely made it through the front door before Jay pulled me aside.

“Hey, are you going to talk to the Samaras and ask them to help out with this Russell plan?” he asked. “You mentioned in the meeting that it’s likely they’d pitch in, but we do actually have to ask them, right?”

I frowned, not sure where he was going with this. “Well, yeah. But Ava’s here at the house right now. She’s the leader of the Samaras in everything but name, and it’s not like I’m going to talk to Zeke about this. I’ll just ask Ava. I’m sure she’ll say yes. She and her pack have already gotten involved, after all. I’m sure they’ll want to see this through.”

I moved to step past Jay, but he put out a hand to stop me. “No, I get that. Ava’s the obvious point of contact. What I’m saying is, do you want *me* to talk to her? I’m happy to do that for you.”

I raised a brow, more confused than ever. What did he care if I talked to Ava? And why did he think I’d want to avoid it badly enough to send someone in my place?

“Where’s this coming from?” I asked. There was a sea of omission in Jay’s offer, and before I agreed to anything, I needed to know what he wasn’t telling me.

He shrugged. “I’m just asking if you want me to be a buffer.”

“A *buffer*?”

“Yeah. I know Greyson asked you to be the pack’s liaison with the Samaras, but I’d be happy to take on that responsibility in your place.”

*What the fuck is going on here?*

“Why?” I asked flatly. “What’s your sudden interest in Ava and the Samaras? You’ve been fine being on the sidelines of all of this before. What’s changed?”

Jay looked around, like he was afraid of being overheard, which only annoyed me more.

“Just spit it out,” I snapped.

He pulled me into an empty study and closed the door behind us. My mind spun, trying to think of ways this conversation could possibly go—only it came up empty. None of this made any goddamn sense. Unless Jay was looking for more responsibility in the pack? But then why was he coming to me? Greyson was the guy to talk to about that, and it didn’t make sense for Greyson to put Jay on the Samara pack when I had such an obvious connection and history with them. I know I’d been complaining about it, but it also did feel good to show how needed I was. How well I could handle things between packs.

“I… I saw something between you and Ava, when we were at the speedway,” Jay finally said.

I blinked. “Okay?” Again, he was telling me absolutely *nothing*. “What do you think you saw? Nothing happened.”

“It was just, like, a vibe,” he said, looking uncomfortable. “I could be wrong, but I know what you’ve told me in the past. You want to be with Cali, right?”

“Of course I do.” I rolled my eyes. “Ava and I are history. There’s nothing to worry about, and besides, it’s not really your business. Don’t we all have bigger things to worry about than who I’m vibing with?”

Jay put his hands up in front of him. “I’m just offering to be a buffer so you don’t have to deal with Ava anymore. That’s all.”

It was strange. His offer should’ve felt like a godsend. Like the answer to a prayer. Let someone else deal with Ava and her pathetic excuse for a pack and leave me the hell out of it? Give me some much-needed distance from the old mate I wanted so desperately to move on from? Wasn’t that exactly what I’d been wanting? Hadn’t I told Ava that exact thing multiple times? When I’d said I was in love with Cali, that I was choosing Cali?

And yet… Jay’s reaction made my hackles rise.

No, not my hackles. My wolf’s.

It was such a strong reaction, such an immediate and sharp refusal, that it took all my control to not spit out, “No!” right then and there.

My wolf didn’t want any other wolf to be involved with Ava, even in a platonic capacity. Some not so small part of me was clearly still possessive of her.

But, of course, if I said any of this to Jay, it’d only prove his point and make him worry even more about my “vibes” with Ava.

I pulled in a deep breath and forced a smile. “Thanks, but I’ve got this. I appreciate the offer, but I can handle Ava. It’s not a problem.”

Jay looked at me, skepticism clear on his face. “Are you sure? My offer still stands if you change your mind.”

“I’m sure. Thanks, though.” I patted him on the back. “It’s good to know I’ve got you looking out for me.”

“Always.”

We headed back, and with my conversation with Jay fresh in my mind, I wondered if I should just go talk to Ava now and get it out of the way. Make sure the Samaras would join us when it was time to make our move on the Bitterfangs.

But now I felt kind of self-conscious about asking her, even though it didn’t make any sense.

Suddenly, my phone rang. Kira’s name flashed on the display. She had to be calling from the Blue Blood pack house.

I answered right away. “Hey. What’s up?”

“We have a problem over here.”

# Episode 3648

“Before we test the plant, I know a way we can *really* test this,” Adair said. Ominously, obviously, because that was just his vibe.

“Um, haven’t we been testing it this entire time?” I asked. “Did you not notice the million cups of tea?”

Adair waved me off. “That was nothing. I think that in order for you to up your game, we need to raise the stakes.”

I shot Artemis an alarmed look, and she turned to Adair. “What do you have in mind?”

“I’ve been getting to know Dani, actually. She’s an interesting person,” Adair started.

That made sense, considering Adair seemed very close with Tabitha. Like, *very* close. They’d been enthusiastically kissing-slash-mauling each other earlier, which, good for them.

“I’ve come to understand how Dani’s powers work,” Adair went on, “and I believe that a way to truly test you, Cali, would be for Dani to amplify Artemis’s command. This would better simulate a real attack against you.”

I paused, squinting at Adair. He was a funny guy. Or really not funny at all.

“Right…” I paused. “But if I can’t even reliably defend myself against the easy level, how am I supposed to withstand manipulation on hard mode?”

“Like I said, raising the stakes could actually help you,” Adair explained. “It might force you to subconsciously unlock your base need to fight for yourself. It’s all about instinct.”

“That kind of makes sense, actually,” Artemis said thoughtfully.

I didn’t like this.

“It’s the best way to see what you’re capable of,” Adair insisted. “If you can break through the manipulation at that level, then you’re going to be far better prepared, and you won’t have to rely on the plant charm your mother gave you.”

I frowned. “I like the plant charm, though!”

“I’m sure you do,” Adair said in a tone that was somehow both fatherly and condescending. *Thanks, pal.* “But you could lose the charm during battle, and that would put you in a most vulnerable position.”

*He has a point there*, I thought. *I did lose the Shard necklace during our last battle.*

“Besides, it’s safer to conduct this kind of experiment under supervision, so there shouldn’t be anything to worry about,” Adair said.

I swallowed nervously, turning to Artemis. Crossing her arms, she said, “This might not be a bad idea, Cali. Besides, you’re the one who wanted to learn how to do this right here, right now.” She gave me a skeptical look. “Why the sudden urgency, anyway?”

I felt myself starting to sweat. I’d been keeping a lot of secrets lately, hadn’t I? I couldn’t see myself telling the truth, though—I was sick of having to explain the million ways I was constantly lacking. At the same time, though, I was also pretty nervous about lying. This entire situation made me feel like a steaming tea kettle that was ready to burst.

*Don’t think about tea, Cali! There’s been more than enough of it today!*

“Cali?” Artemis asked, eyebrows arched.

I realized I hadn’t spoken in a long moment, so I rushed to fill the silence. “I’m just worried that with things heating up with the Bitterfangs and threats constantly popping out of nowhere, my magic isn’t strong enough yet.” I turned to Adair. “You’re right. Let’s go find Dani.”

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Dani looked like an adorable baby bird that had been asked to fly too soon.

“Uh, I’m not comfortable using my magic like that,” Dani said, her eyes wide. “Especially with Cali involved.” She turned to me. “What if something goes wrong? I can’t risk hurting you! Okorie’s not here to stop me—”

“Who is this Okorie I keep hearing about?” Adair said with a frown.

“He’s a very powerful warlock who’d easily be able to protect Cali if something went wrong,” Dani told Adair.

Adair did not seem happy. “And I’m a very powerful Fae—*I* will protect Cali if something goes wrong.”

“And, of course, I’m here as well,” Tabitha spoke up. “I can step in to nullify everyone’s magic, if it comes to that.”

Adair nodded, taking Tabitha’s hand. “Tabitha’s abilities guarantee that Cali will be safe.” He looked between Dani and me. “I don’t expect much trouble, anyway—it’s not like we’re trying to have Cali do something outrageous or dangerous.”

“Yep,” Artemis said. “It’s probably going to be something food-related again. Or maybe you can go clean my room!”

The excitement in Artemis’s tone alarmed me.

“If we ignore the fact that Artemis would probably enjoy turning me into Cinderella—”

Artemis actually snickered at that. She’d started taking the “teasing older sister” role way too seriously.

“—I’m still not sure if I want to go straight to the hard stuff. What if I graduated to it after managing the easy stuff first?”

“Again, minor manipulation magic probably won’t trigger your self-protection instinct,” Adair said. “We need to turn up the volume.”

“Would you feel better if Xavier or Greyson were here?” Artemis asked.

“No!” I blurted out. If either of them were around, they’d probably figure out what was really happening with me and that damn mind-controlling wisp. I’d decided to keep them out of it for now, and I was going to stick to that decision.

Internally, I rolled my eyes at myself. *Denial and stubbornness are one hell of a drug!*

But still, I didn’t change my mind.

“You’re not going to give up on this idea, are you?” I asked Adair.

His eyes twinkled with… Was that excitement?

“I look forward to seeing how you do,” he said. I could just feel him internally rubbing his hands together.

“Is it me, or does your boyfriend see this as a fun experiment?” I asked Tabitha.

She just chuckled and blushed a little while Adair snorted, waving a hand at my neck. “You should take off Orla’s plant charm so you don’t waste it.”

I took off the charm and immediately felt naked. “I mean, if this really is an experiment, why don’t we prepare first? Perhaps do it a bit later?” I asked, clearly getting cold feet. “Doesn’t anyone want lunch? I hear I make a mean sandwich!”

“It was pretty good,” Artemis noted.

“Are you hungry, then?” Adair asked, eyeing me.

“No, but—”

“Are you expected somewhere? Got things to do? Didn’t you just say that you want to build your magic up?”

Adair’s attention was a *lot*. What the hell was I supposed to say when he just stared at me and fired off questions? I couldn’t even think long enough to offer an excuse!

“You shouldn’t bully Cali into this, though,” Tabitha told Adair wryly, nudging him.

He immediately got defensive. “*Me?* A bully? Cali, am I bullying you?”

“Not exactly,” I said. “It’s more like you’re shoving me in the direction you’ll enjoy the most.”

“Before we get into this,” Dani said, “I feel I need to know what Artemis is going to make Cali do.”

“Nothing bad, of course,” Artemis said. “This is my sister, remember? I promise it’s going to be something good.” This, she said with a wicked smile.

“I can’t believe you’re enjoying this!” I said.

Artemis got defensive in a way that actually reminded me of Adair. “I can’t help it, Cali. I’m half Dark Fae—trickery runs in my blood. I’m really the victim, here.”

Adair gave Artemis a dry look. “You had me in the first half, but then you went too far.”

“Whatever, let’s just do it,” I said with a huff.

Artemis was smirking now, the brat. I braced myself.

*My god, how many more cups of tea am I going to make today?*

I was pretty annoyed and determined to resist, but then I suddenly felt the strange urge to make a sandwich. The urge grew stronger and stronger, which was weird, because I thought I was too nervous to be hungry.

*It’s not real, Cali! Artemis is compelling you to make a sandwich! ANOTHER ONE!*

Artemis wasn’t even inventive in her requests. She was definitely enjoying the Cinderella vibes, and I did not appreciate that one bit. But my feet started moving, even if I didn’t want them to, right toward the kitchen.

*No! I have to resist!*

It wasn’t easy, though. Dani’s amplification magic was at play; I could feel it, could sense that Artemis’s power was magnified. Somehow, despite the magic being amplified, so was my awareness. Each movement felt like a memory as I moved toward the kitchen. But I couldn’t help but recall what Adair had said about raising the stakes.

What if this had actually been the wisp, urging me to kill Ava or do something equally bad?

What if this had been the wisp, telling me to hurt one of my mates? My sister? My parents and friends?

The thought made my head throb, and I gripped the doorframe to stop myself from moving.

“*No*,” I whispered, centering myself. I thought to my mom’s hospital room. The smell of the moon buttercup. The flowers by the window.

*Mom.*

When the compulsion to go make that sandwich pushed, I shoved back.

“No!” I turned back to face the others, breathing hard. “I’m NOT making you a sandwich! No more sandwiches for you!”

Artemis was grinning. “Cali, you did it! Could you make me another sandwich later, though? Because that first one really was good.”

Dani and Tabitha chuckled, but Adair was not amused.

“Making a sandwich?” Adair raised an eyebrow at Artemis. “You have to order her to do something more difficult. Something she wouldn’t want to do.”

Artemis frowned. “That’s a tough one. Cali may say that she doesn’t want to be Cinderella, but she loves taking care of me. She’d coddle me to death if I let her.”

Oh wow. Was I really so transparent?

“You know your sister better than anyone here,” Adair told Artemis. “Surely you can think of something to tell her to do? Preferably something that doesn’t involve food.”

Artemis frowned. “I’m not sure.”

Adair looked serious. “No matter what you may think, this isn’t a game to me, Cali,” he told me in an even tone. “I’ve seen what happens to people who can’t resist mind control.”

Adair was referring to his experience in the Dark Fae court, I realized. His words made me wonder what the hell that damn wisp was going to want next.

“Okay,” I said, swallowing roughly. “I get it. Artemis, go ahead.”

Adair nodded at me before turning to Artemis. “You have to think of something that’s going to really test Cali’s resolve, here.”

Artemis squinted at me before her eyes widened. “How about… Cali, I forbid you to kiss your mates!”

I gasped. “Artemis! *What have you done?*”

# Episode 3649

**Greyson**

Big Mac was going to call Marta, so I could scratch that off my list. In the meantime, I had to figure out the pros and cons of putting Russell under Big Mac’s spell.

Pros: the plan could work, the Bitterfangs would potentially leave the Pit Bulls alone, and Russell would get to live without being hunted.

Cons: there was a huge possibility that we wouldn’t be able to re-kick the kid’s heart. If that happened, Cali would be devastated, his parents would be devastated, and I didn’t think I’d be all that happy about it either. The kid was annoying, but he was still a kid, and he’d grown on me. Like a yapping puppy.

Plus, how valid were the pros here, really? How did we know the Bitterfangs wouldn’t still go after the Pit Bulls simply out of spite? Plus, they’d still want to bring Julia back with them. And then there was the fact that they wanted to attack Cali for no reason other than their fucked-up “traditional values.”

Really, Russell pretending to be dead could only be the first step in a larger plan.

“Greyson?” Big Mac’s voice interrupted my thoughts. She offered me her phone. “You should talk to Marta. I’ve filled her in on the basics and explained why we need her.”

I took the phone, pausing for a moment to collect my thoughts. I didn’t want to force Marta to come back. But the truth was, no matter what happened next, I’d prefer to have her here. I needed her help, and I wasn’t about to lie to myself or to her and deny that.

“Marta?”

“Greyson, hi,” she said. “I hear there’s trouble?”

I scoffed. “When isn’t there? Trouble always finds us.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she said. She sounded honest.

“You haven’t met Russell and Julia, but helping them would maintain the Redwood pack’s status, and help prevent a nasty pack war,” I told her. “This is important.”

“I’m not sure I’m ready to come back, though,” Marta said quietly.

I recalled something about Lilac finding his mate and the ensuing complications. Seeing as Marta had literally brought Lilac back from the dead, and now they were no longer together, I couldn’t exactly dismiss her feelings here. She must’ve been very hurt to leave without saying goodbye to anyone directly.

“I understand this is hard for you,” I said, “but you wouldn’t have to stay. We just need you here to keep Russell from being pulled into the spirit world.”

She paused. “Give me a second.”

I heard her cover the phone, and then there was some muffled speaking. I assumed she was talking it over with Okorie. I was beginning to wonder if sending Lilac away for a day or two might help with her decision, but then she returned to the phone.

“So, uh, I thought about it. No matter what, the pack is important to me,” she said. “You guys gave me the first real home I’ve had in years, so helping you is the least I can do. I’ll be there soon.”

“I know this is hard for you, Marta. Thank you,” I said, relieved. I didn’t directly tell her that I appreciated her putting her own personal issues on the backburner for this, but I felt like it was implied.

Big Mac looked pleased when I gave her back the phone. She walked off, continuing the conversation, and I headed to the living room to talk to Russell’s parents.

Joan and Paris caught up to me in the hallway, their expressions anxious.

“What happened?” Paris asked.

“Marta agreed to help.”

She and Joan shared a sigh of relief. “Thank you, Greyson.”

They were grateful, but I wasn’t sure about anything. I wished I could end this entire thing without having to follow Russell’s plan. I wished that these women and their kid and Julia could all just be safe and together, with no issues and no Bitterfang Silas-wannabes after them.

This entire situation was such a fucking mess.

“We have a problem,” Xavier said from behind me. “It’s urgent.”

I felt like laughing and smashing something at the same time.

“Excuse me,” I told the women, then turned to face Xavier. “What now?”

Xavier glanced over his shoulder and gestured for me to follow him. I did, internally cursing my luck, the universe, and everything else. But on the outside, I made sure to remain composed. I had to remind myself that being a good Alpha meant keeping a cool head, because losing it like I had at the beginning of the Three Devils Point battle just wasn’t an option.

“I just got off a call with Kira,” Xavier said once we were on the front porch. “She’s got the barrier up at the Blue Blood pack house, and it’s a good thing she does, because the Bitterfangs have been scouting the place out.”

I’d known that the Bitterfangs would make good on Lance’s threat. I’d just been a naïve asshole to think it wouldn’t happen so soon.

When I didn’t respond to Xavier, he said, “You should’ve killed Lance when you had the chance.”

My jaw clenched. “Killing him on neutral territory would’ve been as good as declaring war—”

“And what happened at Three Devils Point *wasn’t*? The way the Bitterfangs are acting, it’s like we’re at war already and the declaration is just a technicality,” Xavier said. “Besides, you told Lance you were going to kill him, but when push came to shove, you didn’t. You shouldn’t make threats like that if you’re not willing to follow through, Greyson. It makes you look weak.”

Xavier’s words hit me like a punch in the chest. I didn’t speak for a moment, angry and frustrated. Too fucking overwhelmed to explain everything I’d felt during that fight, everything I was feeling right now.

“We should’ve just done what I suggested and attacked first,” Xavier said when I still didn’t respond. “Now we’re stuck playing defense.”

I bit my cheek hard enough that I tasted blood. “As long as we beat them, it doesn’t matter.”

“It does if we suffer any casualties,” Xavier said. “Kira admitted that she’s finding it difficult to maintain the barrier. Whatever we do, we shouldn’t rely on the barriers to protect us. It’s possible the witches’ magic will weaken. Or fail.”

Xavier was making sense. Which was rare and fucked up. It also meant that the way I’d handled this entire situation had some flaws. I wished I knew how long we had. I needed Marta to arrive, needed to discuss more of the full, big-picture plan, and the details of the potion.

“What the fuck are you thinking right now?” Xavier asked, shoving me slightly. “Why aren’t you talking?”

I realized I’d been silent for at least a minute, and Xavier… Xavier was getting antsy.

None of this was good.

“If we’re going with Russell’s plan, I need to talk to Big Mac about the potion,” I said.

Xavier frowned. “Why? She said it was easy to make.”

“Yeah, but making sure Russell survives is a different story,” I said. “And we might need backup if the Bitterfangs continue their onslaught. How’s Ava doing?”

Xavier’s expression darkened. “She’s still recovering from the silver poisoning.”

“Right,” I said, wincing. “That takes a minute.”

“She should be back to her usual self in a few hours,” Xavier said. “I guess… I should go check on her. Make sure she knows we’re expecting a Bitterfang attack.”

My brother walked away with a scowl. He obviously wasn’t pleased that he had to deal with Ava, but at least I hadn’t been forced to order him to talk to her. Shaking my head, I followed Xavier back inside. I had to talk to Russell’s moms—make sure they understood that even if Marta were here, we couldn’t be one hundred percent sure that the kid would be okay.

Before I could get to them, though, I ran into Cali in the hallway. She looked tired and pale, and my heart ached at the sight of her.

“Hey,” she whispered, reaching out to rest a hand on my arm. “Did you think more about Russell’s plan?”

“It’s *all* I’ve been thinking about,” I admitted. “I wish there was something else we could do, but I haven’t managed to come up with any other ideas. We’ll see. In the meantime, Marta is coming to help.”

Cali sighed, resting her hands on my chest. “That’s a relief.” She glanced up at me. “This is still so risky, though. What will happen if the Bitterfangs find out that Russell’s death is fake? What if they kill him before we have a chance to get him out of harm’s way?”

“I wish I could promise you that everything will go according to plan,” I said. “But you have to know by now I will do everything I can to keep Russell safe. I’m going to keep my promise to you, come hell or high water.”

Cali’s voice was a whisper. “I know. You always stick by my side.”

I did. And that made the fact that she’d been lying to me even worse, somehow. I lifted her chin, tracing her jawline with my thumb. Whatever her secret was, I hoped it wouldn’t put her in any danger. This whole star-crossed teenagers thing was a lot to handle. I wanted to protect them—it was the right thing to do, to stand against the Bitterfangs, against Julia’s father, who reminded me so much of my own.

But Cali?

Cali was always so close to the heart of my every decision, and trying to keep her out of danger was my number one priority. Every time I failed, it ate at me.

I stared into her eyes, leaned in for a kiss, for the comfort of it. She gripped my shirt, but when my mouth brushed against hers, she didn’t…

She didn’t respond at all.

I frowned, pulling back. “What’s wrong?”

But before Cali could answer, there was a commotion outside.

Rishika sprinted inside. “They’re here!”

# Episode 3650

**Marta**

Okorie and I stood side by side outside the Redwood pack house. He’d taken my hand when he’d blipped us, and he hadn’t let go yet. His palm was large, his fingers long, his skin soft and warm. Lilac’s hands were big, too, but calloused—a werewolf’s hands, always running hot. I couldn’t help but note the differences, especially since Okorie was *still* holding me.

I had no idea what that meant. I wasn’t sure why he’d insisted on coming with me to visit the Redwoods, either, though I’d welcomed his decision. Ever since we’d left the pack house together, we hadn’t really defined our relationship. But I didn’t exactly mind that—I needed some time to figure things out, and spending time with Okorie was… not entirely unpleasant.

Okay, it was fun.

He was obnoxious and snarky, and apparently, I found that entertaining.

In fact, I didn’t mind teasing him a bit myself.

“Is there a reason why we’re standing outside the pack house?” I asked. “Why didn’t you just blip us inside? Did you run out of gas?”

He side-eyed me. “That’s insulting, Marta. I never run out of anything. My energy is infinite, my power immeasurable.”

I rolled my eyes, snorting. “And you’re also very humble, right?”

“Magnificently so,” he deadpanned.

“Are you going to explain why we’re not inside the pack house right now or not?”

Okorie peered at the air in front of us. “There’s a barrier up. It’s got Big Mac written all over it. They should have mentioned that minor detail when they called you.”

I frowned. “That’s weird.”

Okorie let my hand go, only to wrap his arm around my shoulders. “Are you cold?” he asked—and the question, paired with the gesture, made me warm up immediately.

I shook my head, gulping down a swarm of pterodactyl-sized butterflies that started flapping around inside my stomach.

“I suppose we should use the old-fashioned way to go through.” Okorie knocked on the barrier. It rippled at his touch, and he shouted, “Hello? The VIPs are here!”

“Could you break the barrier if you wanted to?” I asked.

When Okorie glanced at me, I felt heat creep up the back of my neck. “I suppose I could if I was running at a hundred percent, but the truth is, I’m feeling a little… off.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I thought your energy was infinite?”

Instead of offering a snarky reply, Okorie frowned. His expression had turned serious. “Yeah. It usually takes a lot to get me feeling like this. This is odd.”

“Could it be from the blipping?” I asked.

Okorie eyed the barrier. “I’m not sure…”

Before I could contemplate this further, Greyson, along with Rishika and Cali, walked out of the pack house. I’d felt awkward at the idea of returning to the pack, but seeing them made me smile. Especially Cali.

She smiled at me, and I waved. “Cali—”

My shout was cut short.

There were angry growls behind us.

Okorie’s grip on my shoulder tightened, and he spun us both around.

Three large werewolves emerged from the woods. I’d never seen them before in my life. Who the hell were they, and why did they look so pissed off? It had to have something to do with the kids Big Mac had mentioned.

“Is this why there’s a barrier?” Okorie asked in a low voice. “Are the Redwoods in another pack war?”

“I don’t know,” I said. The wolves started growling, as if they’d heard my answer to Okorie’s question. They started moving toward us in perfect sync, seemingly getting bigger the closer they got.

“Stay behind me, Marta,” Okorie said, pulling me even closer before he pounded on the barrier with his fist. “Greyson!” he shouted. “We have company!”

“Tell Big Mac to let the barrier down!” Greyson shouted at Cali.

Wide-eyed, Cali raced into the house. The werewolves kept creeping toward us, and Greyson and Rishika shifted. They leapt through the barrier and landed in front of Okorie and me, growling loudly. They were sending a warning to the strangers, who finally slowed down, seemingly hesitating.

“Nice of you to stop by, Greyson,” Okorie quipped.

The Alpha shot him a sharp look over his shoulder. I had no idea what was happening, but I knew I needed to help. I tried to sense any nearby spirits who I could draw energy from; then I’d be able to blast the werewolves, like I’d done during the fight with Letifer. I couldn’t sense any spirits to draw from, though, and worry spiked through me.

My heart started racing when Okorie asked Greyson, “How much longer till the barrier’s down?” His voice pitched up nervously at the end of the question.

Something was wrong with Okorie. I had never heard his tone so urgent. I didn’t have the time to ask him about it, though, because one of the three strange werewolves suddenly crouched down, then lunged.

He sailed right over Greyson and Rishika, heading for Okorie and me.

A scream rippled through me.

Okorie raised his right hand, and there was a blast of magic, shaking the ground and the trees around us. It hit the lunging wolf square in the face and caused it to fly back and stumble to the ground where the other two wolves were. The movement had seemed as natural to Okorie as ever, but this time, when it was over, Okorie slumped backward.

I rushed to support him. “Are you okay? What’s happening?”

“I’m not sure what’s going on,” Okorie rasped, visibly shaken. “I don’t know why the blipping took more out of me than normal.”

I felt my throat go dry. There was something unnatural about all this—I could just feel it. Meanwhile, the enemy wolf had recovered, ready to charge again, but Greyson and Rishika had formed a defensive barrier in front of us.

Okorie grunted. “Let me just…”

Clearly struggling, he raised his hands up to send out another blast. But he didn’t even manage a *spark*, and I felt my heart pounding in my throat.

“This isn’t right,” I whispered urgently, helping him lean against a tree. “The blipping can’t have done this.”

Okorie nodded sharply, just as I heard loud growling. I looked over my shoulder to see more werewolves coming out of the forest. I gasped—we were heavily outnumbered. I looked back toward the pack house, wondering where Big Mac was. Why hadn’t she lowered the barrier yet?

The growls turned into howls as the other werewolves—five of them—closed in. But suddenly, I realized they weren’t growling at Greyson or Rishika. They were going for the other three wolves—they had to be friends of the Redwood pack.

Moments later, the five new wolves, Rishika, and Greyson threw themselves at the three enemy wolves.

“Son of a…” Okorie cursed under his breath, fighting to stand, to raise his hands.

I held him back, supporting his weight. “You can’t help them right now,” I said. “You have to rest!”

He gripped at me tight, and even though the urge to protect him was intense, I was alarmed by how abnormal his reaction felt. His breath came out heavy as he looked at the still active barrier, then at the werewolves.

“Something’s…” His whisper trailed off. “Something’s seriously wrong here.”

I held him and held my breath, watching as the fight before us escalated. When the three strange werewolves finally retreated, running off into the woods, Greyson, Rishika, and the five Redwood-friendly werewolves chased after them.

At the same time, Big Mac’s voice echoed all around. “Marta!”

I turned to see her coming out of the house, led by Xavier and a frantic Cali. Xavier shifted and ran, flying through the barrier to join the hunt for the enemy wolves. Big Mac paused in front of her creation, her eyes wide as they met mine. Then she glanced at Okorie. I was still helping him stand, and concern burned through me.

“What’s happening?” I asked her.

With a shake of her head, Big Mac raised her hands to lower the barrier, but I could see her shiver and struggle with the effort. I had *never* seen her struggle before. Big Mac and Okorie were the most powerful magic wielders I’d ever met.

Seriously, what the hell was happening here?

When the barrier finally lowered, I quickly led Okorie to a tree stump closer to the house and helped him sit.

“What’s wrong with him?” Cali asked me, looking alarmed.

Okorie waved a dismissive hand. “It’s fine—my strength is returning.”

He was still sitting down, though.

“The Pit Bulls helped fend off the Bitterfangs.” Greyson’s voice came from behind me.

I turned around to see that he’d shifted back to human, along with Rishika and Xavier. Big Mac was standing with them. She smiled at me and started to walk over, but then her steps faltered.

Greyson moved closer to her, and she grabbed onto his arm before she could fall.

I gasped, running to her. “Big Mac! Are you okay?”

“How are you feeling?” Greyson asked her.

She waved him off and took a deep breath, shakily straightening to her full height. “Fine, I’m fine. I need to raise the barrier.”

She raised her hands…

And then dropped them.

Her voice was throaty. “I can’t do it.”

# Episode 3651

I ran after Marta. She’d rushed up to Big Mac, who’d almost fallen earlier. She was looking pale and shaken, and I’d never seen her like this without an extremely good reason. The Bitterfangs hadn’t attacked her, which meant this had something to do with the magic she’d just used.

*MAYDAY! Something’s wrong with Big Mac’s magic!*

“Are you okay? Does it hurt anywhere?” Marta was asking Big Mac when I reached them.

The witch shook her head. I wanted to hug Marta and say hi, ask where she’d been and how she was, but the sudden dark circles that had formed under Big Mac’s eyes startled me. I grabbed the Shard, ready to remove it from around my neck.

“You should wear this,” I told the witch. “It might be Fae, but a warlock had it. Maybe it’ll help somehow.”

Big Mac looked so appalled, I could’ve sworn she was trying to shoot lightning at me through her eyes. “Keep that to yourself, child. I don’t need any Fae gimmicks.”

I scowled. “That’s rude, but I’ll let it slide because you’re hurt.”

She huffed, throwing her hands up. “I’m not hurt!”

“MacKenzie!” Mrs. Smith shouted from the front porch, already running toward us.

“Christ, here we go,” Big Mac muttered with a quiet groan. Then she called out, “I’m fine, Sabine!”

Mrs. Smith was with us in seconds, fussing over a very annoyed-looking Big Mac, who of course didn’t dare tell her to stop. Marta proceeded with her own fussing, and I looked around, into the woods beyond where the barrier used to be.

“What if the Bitterfangs attack again?” I asked Greyson quietly, my heart hammering in my chest.

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” he replied. “It’s possible they aren’t retreating at all. Maybe they were trying to lure us away.”

“They might have gone to get reinforcements,” Xavier said. He looked off into the woods, his expression dark. “Should I go get more of the pack and go after them?”

“No!” I blurted out, gripping his arm. “Our best fighters are still tired after the last battle, and we still don’t know what’s wrong with Big Mac—or Okorie, actually.”

He turned to Xavier. “I think we’re good for now. The Pit Bulls will keep the Bitterfangs occupied.”

His gaze flickered to a grumpy Big Mac. She was sitting on a boulder, with Mrs. Smith hovering over her like a helicopter fiancée.

“Do you think you’ll be able to put the barrier back up later on?” he asked her.

“Maybe if Kira were here, she’d be able to do it,” I said, just as Okorie came over.

He put his hand on Marta’s shoulder, and she glanced up at him. “Are you okay?” she asked.

While he answered, too quiet for me to hear, I noticed how they looked at each other. I was glad Okorie was here to help, and to make Marta’s return easier. He could be an ass, sure, but right now, all I saw on his face was concern and determination.

“Someone get Dani,” Okorie said. “I can put the barrier back up, but I’m going to need her help to amplify my powers.”

“Or I can do it,” Big Mac said as Mrs. Smith helped her stand to her feet. “It was my barrier originally—with Dani’s help, I can put it up again.”

Okorie raised an eyebrow. “Glad to see my idea could be of service.”

As the two of them bickered, I realized that nobody was actually fetching Dani. Mrs. Smith was holding Big Mac, Marta was trying to referee the pissing contest between Okorie and Big Mac, and my mates, along with Rishika, were glaring at the woods, clearly waiting for an attack.

*Oh my god, Cali, just go get Dani.*

“I’ll go get Dani,” I declared, and raced toward the house, holding onto the plant charm so it didn’t smack me in the face.

“Thank you, Cali!” Greyson called after me. Glancing over my shoulder, I nodded, feeling a pang in my chest at the sight of him.

As I searched the house for Dani, I couldn’t help but remember my encounter with Greyson earlier, just before Marta and Okorie had arrived. He’d kissed me, but as much as I’d wanted to kiss him back, my lips had simply refused to move. It was like all my passion and love for him had been fighting to come up for air.

Artemis’s manipulation magic, of course.

It was nothing like the revulsion spell—it was more like I’d been frozen, unable to act on the feeling. I could barely process the sensation. It was crazy, because I loved Greyson with all my heart. The fact that one little command could override that was scary.

My face heated up. I was *not* going to finish that thought. I was also going to keep my cool, and not start yelling at Artemis now that I’d found her with Adair, Tabitha, and Dani. She and I were going to have to have a chat about this little manipulation spell she’d put on me.

“You!” I gasped, pointing at Artemis accusingly.

“Me?” Artemis blinked, looking confused.

I did not have time for this. Ugh!

“I’ll deal with you later,” I told Artemis sternly before turning to Dani. “We need you outside—Big Mac and Okorie need their powers amplified.”

A minute later, Dani was standing with Big Mac and Okorie, the three of them talking rapidly. Thankfully, Big Mac was looking much better. Mrs. Smith looked relieved. She didn’t even protest when Big Mac took Dani’s hand and walked out to a spot on the lawn that had been at the edge of the last barrier.

With the force of Dani’s amplification magic, Big Mac was able to recreate the barrier. I watched it rise, relief flooding me. But when it rose up into the sky, instead of staying invisible, it started to falter a bit, as if glitching out.

“Are you still having trouble with your magic?” I asked Big Mac.

She shot a look at Okorie before turning to me. “I’m not sure what’s going on, but something around here seems to be draining witches whenever we use magic.”

“It’s not normal,” Okorie said.

I looked between the two of them. Big Mac and Okorie were some of the most powerful witches I’d ever met. What could be draining their power? What could be so intense as to—

*Cali, wait. What if this is somehow your fault?*

My stomach lurched so violently that my knees started to buckle.

“Cali?” Xavier was suddenly by my side, putting an arm around me to keep me steady. He pulled me a few feet away, his eyes searching mine. “Are you okay?”

I was feeling sick with guilt. “What if I’m responsible for this, somehow?” I asked, my voice cracking.

Xavier scowled. “What are you talking about? Unless you secretly joined the Bitterfang pack, I don’t see how any of this could be your fault.”

“I’m talking about the witches’ magic draining so fast,” I said, wiping my nose with the back of my hand. “Vander says that Seluna’s death caused an imbalance, and I’m responsible for Seluna’s death—”

“Cali, if you hadn’t killed her, she would’ve killed us.”

“But now the balance is gone!” I choked out. “It’s gone, and it’s meant to return, but nobody seems to know when that’s going to happen, and I—”

Xavier shook his head. “Baby, calm down, you’re spiraling—”

“I know, and I can’t help it!” I hissed, tears threatening to escape my eyes.

Xavier gripped my arms. “Cali, look at me.”

His voice was gruff, and I couldn’t help but face him. I stared into his eyes, those eyes that had captivated me from the moment I’d seen them.

He spoke evenly. “The magic is trying to balance itself out. There’s nothing we can do right now except hold on. You have the Shard. You’re going to be all right.”

I took a breath. “But what about the Bitterfangs?”

Xavier shook his head. “The Bitterfangs are here because of Russell and Julia, and that has nothing to do with you. I know you’re worried about the kids, worried about the pack, and that’s okay. But you’re not to blame for any of it. Do you understand?”

I wanted to believe Xavier. Desperately. But I was the one who’d insisted on taking Russell in, and I was the one who’d thought his parents should meet Julia, which had resulted in the battle at Three Devils Point. I couldn’t dwell on all that, though. Because helping these kids was the only solution.

“Okay,” I whispered to Xavier, nodding.

He smiled a little, and it melted my heart. “I promise you, we will figure this out. You should go inside and let the others know that the barrier is back up.”

He stroked my cheek and leaned in for a kiss. I closed my eyes, eagerly waiting for the comfort of his lips…

Until we made contact, and I froze up.

His mouth felt so inviting, so good, but I was just—not fucking moving, unable to reciprocate and share my need for him. It was just like what had happened with Greyson! There was a wall between what I wanted to do and what I was able to do, and the realization made me want to tear my hair out.

*Unbelievable! This is the LAST THING I NEED RIGHT NOW!*

“Is something wrong, baby?” Xavier asked, pulling back with a frown.

There were so, so many things going wrong right now.

“I can’t,” I said, laughing helplessly.

Xavier looked lost. “You can’t—”

“I can’t keep lying to you and Greyson,” I said, cutting him off. “You were right all along. I need to tell you both the truth.”

# Episode 3652

“What’s going on?” Xavier asked, his gaze sharp. “You know you can tell me anything, Cali.”

I hated the fact that I’d pushed myself to this point. I hated that I’d lied to both my mates in the first place. Why did I keep making the same mistakes over and over when I knew that the truth was always going to come out in the end?

Xavier looked disappointed in me.

*Disappointed*.

That was even worse than him being angry—I knew what his anger looked like, and how to deal with it or ignore it. But his disappointment was new, and it hurt. I was a terrible mate, and I would probably be a terrible Luna.

*What kind of idiotic Luna withholds the truth from her mates?*

“Cali—” Xavier started, but Greyson spoke up from just a few feet away.

“Xavier—we need to discuss strategy. We can’t rely on the barrier.”

“We need to add more patrols,” Rishika said.

Xavier’s jaw clenched.

*I need to go*, he told me.

*I know; go speak with them*, I replied. *I can’t talk about this with the two of you in front of everyone, anyway.*

Xavier took a deep breath and nodded before walking over to Greyson and Rishika. I’d expected him to be a little more explosive—his usual style—but his restraint was welcome. Greyson caught my eye as Xavier started talking with Rishika, and he raised an eyebrow.

*All good?* he asked.

*We’ll talk soon*, I replied. *When things are a little quieter.*

He didn’t push. I was grateful for that, because I was three seconds away from banging my head against a tree. Repeatedly. What the hell was wrong with me? Why had I lied in the first place? Maybe because I wanted to handle things on my own, like I knew I was capable of—somewhere deep down in there. Plus, it had seemed like the least stressful way to proceed, except… *look at me now!* I was ready to spiral into an anxiety attack, so I wasn’t going to escape the stress, either way.

Safe to say, I wanted to tear my hair out in frustration.

The urge did not go away when I walked into the house and spotted Adair, helping Artemis strap on some weapons. The two of them were just happily chatting, bonding and shit, while Artemis’s magic was preventing me from sticking my tongue down Xavier’s and Greyson’s throats.

*Great! I’m so annoyed right now!*

“We were just getting ready to join the others outside,” Artemis told me. “What are you—”

“We need to talk, Artemis,” I said through gritted teeth, shooting a glare at Adair.

“Your sister is unhappy with you,” Adair informed Artemis blandly. “I’ll leave you two alone.”

He skedaddled with the grace of a beautiful, brooding stag, and I was left in the hallway with my traitor of a sister.

“I can’t kiss either of my mates, Artemis!” I hissed, smacking her shoulder.

She raised an eyebrow, not even flinching at my ferocious physical attack. “Oh, it worked? You didn’t just resist it, and that plant didn’t absorb it?”

“Of course it worked; you used Dani,” I declared. “You have magic, your magic is working, and now *I* am its poor innocent victim! Undo it, right this instant!”

Artemis looked genuinely surprised. “Wow. Okay, why won’t you just break through the compulsion?”

I blinked at her, both enraged and surprised. “Are you refusing to remove it?”

“I’m just wondering why you haven’t already blown it apart,” Artemis mused. “It’s so weird—I’ve seen the way you kiss Greyson and Xavier. You get really into it. Like you’re trying to eat their faces.”

“You did NOT just critique my kissing technique, Artemis!”

She shrugged. “I’m just saying—normally, you’re really into kissing your mates, so I thought that command would be a piece of cake for you to fight.”

“Well, it isn’t,” I snapped, feeling worse by the second. Artemis was right, in a way—I *should* have been able to fight anything that tried to come between my mates and me.

“If you could see the looks on Greyson’s and Xavier’s faces when I don’t kiss them back, Artemis… It’s horrible!” I clutched at my chest, because it was actually hurting. I knew I was being dramatic, but shit had hit the fan, and I just wanted to fall in a heap on the floor and cry. “And now—now I have to tell them what’s really going on! Everything is terrible, and you made it worse!”

Artemis’s eyes narrowed. *Uh-oh.*

“First of all, I did nothing to make anything worse, and you know it. What you asked me to do was of your own accord,” she said. “And what do you mean, what’s *really* going on? Going on with *what?*”

I opened my mouth to speak. Then closed it. I knew I should tell Artemis the truth, but I owed it to my mates to tell them first. Right? After all, I’d lied to them first, so this had to happen in the right order—fixing my mistake in order of seniority.

“Listen, there *is* something going on, okay?” I told Artemis. “But I can’t get into it right now.”

“So, you haven’t told me what it is, but you haven’t told your mates either?” Artemis asked, crossing her arms. “I thought you were supposed to be open and honest with each other—isn’t that part of the mate thing?”

I was being *dragged through the dirt*, and I would NOT stand for it.

“Stop, Artemis,” I said sharply. “I already know I fucked up—you don’t need to remind me and make me feel even worse. Which is pretty amazing, considering how bad I already feel.”

Artemis rolled her eyes. “Fine. But you’d better get ready to tell me everything.”

“Okay, sure,” I said. “Now just undo the manipulation magic.”

Artemis paused, pursing her lips. “Hmm, maybe later.”

I gaped at her. “*What?*”

“What?” Artemis asked innocently.

I grabbed her by the arms. “Do you have *any idea* what I’m going through right now?”

“I do, and I’m sorry,” Artemis said, grabbing my wrists to free herself from my grip. “But—”

“But *what*?”

“But I think Adair is right,” Artemis admitted. “This is the perfect test for you. It will trigger your instincts and force you to build up your mental self-defense.”

I was still gaping—so hard that my jaw had probably fallen on the floor.

“Artemis! How can you do this to me?” I hissed. “How would you feel if you weren’t able to kiss Rishika?”

Artemis snorted. “That would never happen. I’d walk through glass and fight anyone who tried to stand in my way.”

I glared at my sister. “Right, sure, that’s a nice fairy tale. But this is real life, and you’ve betrayed me!”

Artemis squinted at me again. “I mean, have I? It was Adair’s idea, and our mom agreed, so—”

“*So*, Adair is not *my* uncle!” I declared. “I’m not obligated to follow his advice.”

Artemis raised her eyebrows. “Mom agreed that this would be a good exercise for you, though.”

I crossed my arms. “Yeah, fine, but did you have to pick something like *that*?”

“Cali, come on, I honestly thought you’d just overcome it, knowing how in love you are with both of them. I thought it would be a non-issue,” Artemis said—and was she trying not to *laugh*? Oh my god, my own sister was a monster!

*No, Cali*, said a sneaky voice in my head. *You are the monster—a very weak monster, who lies to her mates and can’t fight her way through a stupid compulsion in order to kiss them!*

This was the worst day ever. And that said a lot, considering all the bad days we’d had recently.

Artemis was still talking while I spiraled. “Anyway, I’ll get rid of the manipulation magic—”

I gasped in relief.

“—on one condition,” Artemis cut in, raising an index finger.

I glared at her. “What condition, you ruthless sadist?”

Artemis totally ignored my insult. “I want you to tell me what this is all about, Cali. Tell me the truth.”

I couldn’t *believe* this was happening. “Are you fucking blackmailing me? *Me?* Your own *sister*?”

Artemis paused, looking thoughtful. And then she said, “Tabitha says that older sisters sometimes have to resort to extremes in order to help their stubborn younger siblings. Isn’t this what humans call ‘tough love’?”

I was fuming. “That’s just cruelty, Artemis!”

“Lying to your sister is cruel,” Artemis countered. “And apparently, it’s your lies that have brought this upon you. So fess up, and you can kiss your mates all you want.”

Well well WELL, if it wasn’t the consequences of my actions coming back to bite me in the ass…

“I already promised to tell you, you insufferable menace,” I snapped. “I just want to tell my mates first! Is that so bad?”

The front door flew open, cutting me off.

Greyson, Xavier, Marta, Okorie, Dani, Mrs. Smith, and Big Mac came in, all talking about the barrier. My heart pounding, I looked over Greyson’s shoulder.

“I can’t see the barrier,” I said. “Is it working?”

“It’s working,” Greyson replied gruffly.

I swallowed nervously. “Then why is everyone on edge? Is something wrong? Did the Bitterfangs come back?”

“No, but it doesn’t mean they won’t,” Greyson said grimly. “And the next time we drop the barrier, it’s down for good. The Bitterfangs will be able to walk right in and attack.”

# Episode 3653

I shivered at the thought of the Bitterfangs walking into the pack house as if they owned it. No way. Greyson wouldn’t let that happen. Neither would the witches, and there were so many of them on our side.

*Everything’s going to be fine!*

I was in such deep denial that I wondered how I hadn’t drowned in it yet.

“The barrier,” I said. “It’s held up so far, and Okorie’s here now, *and* we have Dani’s amplification magic. Do you really believe there’s no way the witches can keep it going?”

Greyson swallowed, shaking his head. His voice dropped. “Look around, love. All of the witches are having a hard time.”

I glanced over my shoulder. We’d moved into the living room, and Okorie, Dani, and Big Mac were sitting on the couch, talking quietly while Marta and Mrs. Smith watched over them. Okorie had dark circles under his eyes, and Dani and Big Mac seemed a bit paler than usual.

“The imbalance of nature is affecting them,” I whispered, my stomach clenching.

*This is all your fault, Cali! All your fault, all your fault, all your—*

“If that’s what it is, then it’s another thing we can blame Seluna for. Not you, Cali,” Xavier said, stepping closer.

It was as if he’d heard my thoughts, and a lump grew in my throat.

Marta had listened in on our conversation, and she spoke up. “I feel a little tired as well. But it could it be something else that’s causing the magic wielders to feel drained. We don’t know yet, Cali.”

“Well, my magic doesn’t seem to be affected,” Artemis said. “And Torin, Mom, and Adair’s powers all seem okay. So it’s only the witches and Marta—who’s a bridge, but I assume technically a witch—who have been affected.”

As the others debated, I realized that among the household’s Fae, I was the only one currently having issues. But I wasn’t sure how I fit into all this—apart from the obvious Seluna connection. The Shard seemed to be helping, though. Ever since I’d worn it, I had been feeling much better, and more in control of my powers.

“Rishika is organizing patrols, so even if the barrier fails, we’ll be ready,” Xavier said. There was a gleam in his eyes that I didn’t love. It almost looked like he would actually *like it* if the Bitterfangs attacked.

“You don’t have to seem so excited about it,” Big Mac told Xavier wryly, clearly reading his face the same way I had.

I really fucking hoped the barrier held.

“Ahem.” Mrs. Smith cleared her throat loudly. “How about the witches—and Marta—come with me to the kitchen? I can make you all something to eat.”

They all walked off—with Okorie holding Marta’s hand, I noted. Before I could feel even a little happy for them, though, Artemis stepped closer to me.

Her smile spelled trouble.

“Well, then,” she said pleasantly. “I think it’s the right time for Cali to share something she’s been meaning to tell everyone.”

Both my mates turned to me, their combined attention like a giant wave of male… *everything*.

*And they’re naked, too*, I thought. *Don’t look down, Cali!*

“Thanks for that, Artemis,” I snapped, glaring at my sister.

Artemis shrugged, because she was an unprincipled agent of chaos. *Unbelievable*.

“Rishika and I are going to take the first patrol,” she said, throwing an arm over a bemused Rishika’s shoulders. Leaning toward me, Artemis added, “But when I get back, you’re going to tell me everything, or there won’t be any of this for you!”

She turned to Rishika and made a show of giving her a kiss.

I’d never been less amused in my life.

“What’s happening? Why did you kiss me in front of them?” Rishika whispered to Artemis as the two of them walked off.

“Be careful out there!” Greyson called after them. “If you see any Bitterfangs, mind link me immediately!”

Rishika nodded and waved.

“Good luck, Cali!” Artemis shouted.

She was *infuriating*.

“So,” Greyson said once we were alone. I turned to face him and Xavier. All their attention was back on me, and my throat felt dry.

“So,” I muttered.

Greyson shared a look with Xavier. “I assume this has something to do with your conversation with Xavier, earlier?”

I nodded.

“Is it about you not telling me and Xavier the truth?” Greyson asked calmly.

*God dammit, Artemis!*

This was all my sister’s fault. But also mine. Mostly mine. But also hers. With a hint of horror, I realized that *this* was what it would’ve been like if I’d grown up with an older sister. Artemis would have tried to boss me around all the time—for my own good, in her opinion.

“It’s okay.” Xavier spoke up after I’d been silent for at least five seconds, taking my hand in his. “I’m sure you had your reasons for lying, Cali.”

I cringed at his phrasing—I hated hearing it put that way.

“I’m just really, really sorry about all this,” I blurted out, getting that out of the way first. “I never meant for things to go as far as they did.”

Greyson’s silver eyes bored into mine. “What do you mean by that?”

I winced, and Greyson shook his head.

“Hey, don’t freak out,” he said. “Whatever it is that happened, no matter how bad it is, there’s nothing you could tell us that would make either of us love you any less.”

Greyson’s expression, the way he looked so sincere and calm… It comforted me. Along with the fact that he’d just calmly acknowledged both his *and* Xavier’s feelings about me. That was practically miraculous.

“The sooner you tell us,” Greyson continued, “the sooner we can help. That’s all.”

“I don’t know if you can help, though,” I whispered.

“Let us be the judge of that,” Xavier said evenly.

I braced myself, taking a deep breath. “It all started with a wisp.”

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I finished speaking a few minutes later, having narrated the entire tale to my silent mates and peppered it with numerous apologies. Instead of looking angry or disappointed, though—which Xavier had appeared to be, earlier—both of them seemed concerned.

“I wish you’d kept us in the loop from the beginning,” Greyson said, “but I’m glad you’ve finally told us.”

I turned to Xavier, holding my breath. He nodded, and my heart eased.

“I agree with Greyson,” he said. “But now that we know, the question is, what do we do about it?”

“I’m not telling you this because I expect you to fix my problems for me,” I said. “I’m telling you just because you deserve to know the truth, and I hate keeping secrets from you.”

Xavier didn’t say anything, only nodded.

“How are you feeling right now, though?” Greyson asked. “Any mental manipulation concerns?”

I reached to touch the Shard and my mom’s plant charm. They made me feel much safer.

“Physically, I feel okay,” I said honestly. “But I’m stressed out over what my mom said. That someone might be using that wisp to get to me.” I looked between them. “And if I’m being honest, I’m really freaked out about that wisp. What if it comes back? Who knows what it might want me to do? What if I can’t resist it?”

Xavier pressed his lips together, shaking his head. “I’m sure if you try hard enough—”

“Does this whole thing have anything to do with Artemis’s manipulation magic?” Greyson asked, cutting Xavier off. “And what she was talking about earlier?”

I folded my hands together to stop them from shaking. “Yeah. Artemis has been using her magic to help me build up some resistance against mental attacks.”

Greyson crossed his arms over his chest, arching an eyebrow. “Resistance training?”

I nodded. “Like, she compels me to do things, or not do things, and I try to fight the compulsion. She made me make, like, five hundred cups of tea today.”

“So that’s where all the tea bags went,” Greyson quipped.

Xavier didn’t seem amused, and neither was I.

“Greyson, this really isn’t funny,” I said. “Artemis’s magic is the reason why I can’t kiss you or Xavier. Artemis made me unable to.”

Greyson’s eyes widened.

Xavier’s jaw clenched. “Excuse me, *what*?”

I winced, feeling horribly awkward. “Yeah, she said that it would be the ultimate test, because I’d definitely feel strongly enough to fight off the magic and kiss you back, but I—I failed.”

The way Greyson looked at me made me feel funny. What was he thinking?

Xavier’s scowl, in the meantime, was completely transparent.

“Have Artemis remove the compulsion,” he said immediately.

“I’m going to,” I said. “She promised to do it after I told her the truth about why I need to learn to resist her magic, so it should be fine.”

“Wait,” Xavier said slowly. “Is that why you’re telling us the truth now?”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

He crossed his arms. “If Artemis hadn’t forced your hand, would you ever have come clean?”

# Episode 3654

**Xavier**

I hated that I sounded so accusatory, but it was taking a lot of effort to keep my simmering anger in check. It was obvious that Cali was genuinely remorseful, but despite what I’d told her about understanding that she’d had her reasons for lying, it didn’t sit well with me.

I couldn’t care less if she lied to Greyson. But lying to *me?* It was wrong. I didn’t know how else to explain it. It made my wolf howl in frustration, as if old wounds were being torn open.

I couldn’t say any of that to my mate, though. Not when she was so obviously upset with herself. And, more importantly, I couldn’t say anything while Greyson was here, acting like he was totally cool with Cali lying. The son of a bitch was a great actor, but I knew the truth—Greyson had definitely been upset when we’d discussed Cali keeping something from us.

Bringing any of that up right now, though, wouldn’t do me any good.

If Greyson wanted to treat this like a fucking play at a theater, then so be it. I’d do the same. I’d let Cali believe I was okay with what had happened. Because at the end of the day, it didn’t matter whether she lied or not—our bond wasn’t going to change. I loved her no matter what, and I would always be there for her.

Sure, I’d be angry at her for a while, but in the end, I knew that my feelings for her would always rise above anything that came between us. I wanted to pull her close right now. I wanted to take in her scent, kiss her, tell her that I loved her more than anything in this fucked-up world…

But Greyson was there. Like a giant older-brother-shaped shadow, watching us like a fucking hawk.

Not to mention the fact that Cali hadn’t kissed me back, earlier. That sucked. It was a feeling I hoped never to experience again. At least she hadn’t managed to kiss Greyson back, either. I probably would’ve lost my shit if she’d been able to resist the compulsion for him and not me.

“I think—I think I would’ve told you both in the end, of course,” Cali finally said, looking between us. “Artemis only sped up the process by blackmailing me.” Cali paused, and then the rest came out in an angry breath. “Like the ruthless, manipulative, know-it-all saboteur that she is!”

Greyson smirked. Was he for fucking real right now?

“I think she was just being an older sister, looking out for you in a problematic but ultimately loving way,” he said casually. “That’s how it works.”

“That’s bullshit,” I told Greyson with a huff before turning to my mate again. “I’ll go talk to Artemis, make her undo whatever she’s done.”

Greyson actually laughed at that, the asshole. “*Make* her? Have you *met* Artemis?”

“Xavier, don’t,” Cali said urgently. “Artemis told me she’d remove the compulsion if I told you guys the truth, and I have, so it’s fine!”

“It’s not fine,” I said. “Artemis needs to know that she can never use her magic to come between us. I get that she thought she was helping you build up your resistance, but the end doesn’t justify the means.”

Cali sighed, shaking her head. “Xavier—”

“I’ll go talk to her,” I declared. “Be right back.”

I stepped into the hallway, determined to go find Artemis and let her know that she could never fucking do this again, but then there was suddenly a voice in my head.

*I want to talk to you*, Ava mind linked.

I paused, groaning. What the fuck was going on with Ava this time? I considered just ignoring her. What was the worst that could happen? As if answering, my brain provided the mental image of Ava slumped and bloodied in my arms after she’d stumbled through the pack house door.

Fuck.

Grumbling under my breath, I turned on my heel and headed to the bedroom we’d assigned to Ava. I paused in front of the door, took a deep breath, and was reaching for the knob when I caught movement in the corner of my eye.

Jay turned the corner, spotting me instantly.

He slowed down when he saw me and gave me a pointed look. But he was smart enough not to pause, and he kept moving down the hall.

*That’s right, walk the hell away*,I thought to myself.

I could just feel his eyes—eye—judging me. He was my best friend, and he’d basically accused me of still having feelings for Ava earlier. He’d said that he’d seen something between us, back at the speedway, which was nonsense.

It was a very good thing he hadn’t said anything about it just now. I would’ve flipped. I loved Jay, I did, but I refused to talk about Ava with him when all I wanted was to be with Cali. I’d already made that clear to both Jay and Ava, multiple times.

*Are you coming inside, or…?* Ava mind linked, interrupting my thoughts.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door. Ava was sitting up in bed. Some of the color had returned to her cheeks, and her eyes had that familiar mischievous sparkle instead of the dulled, pained look they’d held before.

Of course, the sparkle part was bullshit. I wasn’t going to fall for any of her sparkle shit, ever. I had to be on constant guard for any of her tricks, and she had a whole bunch of them. I was ready to close the door, but then I thought of Jay and his judgmental eyes. *Eye*. For being in the singular, that thing held a lot of power. So I left the door partially open, not willing to take any chances with Ava. There was no need to set the pack rumor mill spinning.

“What do you want this time?” I asked Ava, stopping a few feet away from her.

She glared at me. “Nice to see you too, Xavier.” In a mocking tone, she added, “*Ava, are you okay? I was so worried when you almost died because you helped protect my pack from the Bitterfangs!*”

“Jesus fuck, will you drop it?” I gestured at her vaguely. “Clearly, you’re fine.”

Ava’s glare softened, a slight smirk playing on her mouth. “Oh? Glad you noticed.”

I did not have the patience for this.

“I didn’t come here to play games, Ava,” I said, reaching for the door.

“Wait!” She stood up. “I heard a commotion outside—I need to be kept up-to-date with what’s going on.”

“A few Bitterfangs tried to attack, but we handled it,” I said. “Nothing to worry about, as long as the witches can figure out why they’re having trouble keeping the barrier up. Maybe because it’s gone up and down so many times.”

Ava’s expression darkened. “Why didn’t someone tell me sooner?”

“I didn’t think—”

“The Redwoods have their barrier, and Torin told me that Kira is protecting the Blue Bloods with a barrier of their own, but what about the Samaras? The Samaras fought side by side with the Redwoods, but now you guys are going to let us get slaughtered by the Bitterfangs? Some loyalty!”

“Slow the fuck down; it’s not like that,” I said sharply. “The Bitterfangs want Russell and Julia. We’re holding Russell, and the Blue Bloods have Julia—that’s the main reason why we have the barriers up.”

Ava’s eyes narrowed. “Nobody knows what the Bitterfangs really want, Xavier. This could all just be a fucking excuse for them to seize our territories, and I’m not going to sit here and let my pack get wiped out!”

She dodged me and charged toward the door. The sight of her just walking out on me without even looking back made something in me snap. I was so fucking angry that she wouldn’t listen to me, that she wouldn’t *trust me*,that my wolf roared on the inside. Without thinking, I grabbed her.

The contact felt like lightning.

And I knew that she felt it too. How could she not?

*Fuck.*

But she still struggled to free herself. She still hissed, “I’m done here, Xavier!”

“You’re in no fucking condition to run through the woods!” I snarled back. “Ava, listen to me. The Bitterfangs are out there—”

“Like you care! Let go!”

I didn’t.

I *couldn’t*. My grip on her tightened, images flooding in my head—New Year’s Eve, the speedway, the day at Tanya’s office and the shared teenage memory the witch had taken from us both. That last one felt like a physical blow, and my wolf howled, startling me. It was enough for Ava to free herself from my grip, and she darted for the door.

I blocked her escape.

She shoved me. “Get the fuck out of my way, Xavier!”

When I spoke, my voice was a low growl. “You’re not going anywhere.”

# Episode 3655

**Marta**

“We’re so happy to see you,” Dani said, wrapping me in a hug.

“Welcome back!” Tabitha smiled and got in on the embrace as well.

I was sandwiched between the two sisters, and it felt amazing.

“I know it’s only been a few days since I left, but I missed you guys,” I said.

“We missed you too,” Dani said, patting my arm. She’d always been so sweet to me, so open and caring.

I still felt bad that I’d left without saying goodbye to everyone—I felt especially bad about walking out on Violet, Dani, and Cali—but it had been too hard. I was grateful to the pack for not making me feel weird about it, but I just couldn’t believe I was back already. When I’d taken off with Okorie, I hadn’t known if my departure would be permanent, but I definitely hadn’t expected to be back so soon.

Thinking of Okorie made me want to go check on him again. He could prance around like a peacock all he wanted, pretending everything was fine, but I’d never seen him as exhausted as he was today. There was something bad happening to magic users in the area, and it seemed like the more powerful you were, the greater the impact—and Big Mac and Okorie were both very powerful.

It was worrying, to say the least.

“Marta!” Violet’s voice interrupted my thoughts. She walked into the living room with a grinning Charlie. “I’m so glad you’re back!”

“You couldn’t stay away from the troublemaker Redwoods, right?” Charlie teased. His hug lifted me off my feet, and I chuckled when he deposited me right in front of Violet.

“My turn,” Violet said. “Prepare to be squished!”

Violet’s embrace was, indeed, extra squishy.

I suddenly felt overwhelmed by emotion, my throat closing up. Like a dork, I looked around at everybody and whispered, “Thank you, guys.”

*Thank you for not hating me for leaving*,I wanted to say. *Thank you for being my friends.*

“Thank *you* for coming back to help Russell,” Violet said, smiling at me. “He and Julia have such a tragically romantic story, but thanks to you, it’s going to have a happily ever after.”

“I really hope I can help,” I said. “How did it all start?”

While Violet filled me in on the teenage drama, I couldn’t help but notice that just about everyone I’d gotten close to in the pack had come to welcome me—except Lilac. I shouldn’t have been surprised, or bothered. He’d been pretty upset when I’d left. I couldn’t blame him.

Besides, he was probably off doing mate things with Perrie.

The thought made me wince. I wanted to interrupt Violet’s story about the young lovers and ask about Lilac, but I hesitated. I didn’t know how Violet would react to the question, and I didn’t want to upset her.

Once she’d finished telling me about Julia and Russell, Violet said, “How about we all go upstairs to my room? I have so many questions about your trip with Okorie!”

“Speaking of Okorie, though, I should check on him before we go upstairs to talk. I’ll be right back, okay?”

Violet nodded, her expression smooth. That was good enough for me, even though I knew Violet was probably thinking about Lilac right now. Lilac, who hadn’t come to see me.

I headed for the kitchen, pausing in the hallway to collect myself.

I was being stupid. Lilac was under no obligation to come see me—we’d broken up. And besides, whatever I had or didn’t have with Okorie needed to be explored. Just like Lilac needed to explore his bond with Perrie.

Everything was happening like it was supposed to.

And yet, no matter how many times I told myself that, over and over, the pit in my stomach always told another story. A feeling of bitterness and sorrow crept up on me, along with a little voice, whispering in my head.

*No matter what, Lilac should’ve come to say hello and make sure I was okay. After all we’ve been through, all the love we shared, he should’ve at least made an appearance and given me an awkward nod, or something.*

I felt like I deserved a simple hello. Did he hate me too much to even give me that?

I wiped away a tear, forcing myself to get a grip. Then I took a deep breath, put on a smile, and walked into the kitchen.

Okorie was sitting there alone, sipping white chocolate mocha. His spine was straight, his posture pristine.

The second our eyes met, tension sparked in the air.

“Where are Mrs. Smith and Big Mac?” I asked, swallowing thickly. “I thought they were with you?”

He waved a hand. “They went to do some research. I thought I’d stay back, take a few minutes to relax.”

The way he was acting all casual, as if I *hadn’t* been helping him stay upright just a little while ago, made a ticklish sensation spread all over me. I just couldn’t stop myself from teasing him.

“Do you want to relax, or do you want to rest?” I asked, taking a seat next to him. “Because you seemed pretty tired, earlier.”

He shot me a *look*. “I suppose I should take it easy. After all, magic is quite a lot of hard work.”

I raised my eyebrows at him. “I thought your powers were immeasurable, though. You know, since you’re a genius magical prodigy and all?”

He grinned. “Your words, not mine.”

“Ha, those were *your* words, earlier.”

He sighed, taking another sip of mocha. “I know. All my attempts to impress you today have failed miserably.”

I felt my cheeks heat up at his admission. He wanted to impress me?

“Building that barrier shouldn’t have been difficult, though—for me, Big Mac, or Dani,” he continued, staring into his cup. “Clearly something’s going on here, and it’s putting all our magic out of balance. We need to figure it out.”

I shook my head, reaching out to take his hand. “You should take it easy.”

His gaze flicked to our joined hands. He lifted them and rested them on the table, his thumb brushing over my knuckle, his grip gentle but firm. When he turned to look at me, his eyes were playful, mischievous. The warmth that had spread across my cheeks traveled downward, engulfing my neck, my chest, my stomach, then heading even lower…

“Things aren’t all bad, you know,” he said quietly. “At least I have a pretty good nurse.”

He leaned in closer. I held my breath, my heart pounding. He smelled like the chocolate and coffee he’d been drinking, and when he glanced at my mouth, it felt like an invisible, pulsating string was pulling me toward him.

I *wanted* his kiss.

I wanted it badly enough that right now, nothing else mattered.

“Marta?”

Lilac’s voice cut through the haze, and I jumped away from Okorie.

I turned to see him standing by the doorway, his scowl so deep that I immediately felt guilty and slid even further away from Okorie. I didn’t know why—Lilac and I weren’t together, and of course, I wasn’t ashamed of Okorie. But this situation was clearly awkward for everyone, and my not-so-discreet withdrawal had made it very obvious to Lilac that Okorie and I had just almost kissed.

Damn it.

“Lilac, uh,” I said, forcing a smile. “Hi.”

The sudden quiet was so intense that I wanted to hide under the table.

“I heard you were back,” Lilac finally muttered. “Just wanted to say hello.” His gaze flicked to Okorie. “But I see you’re busy.”

Without another word, he turned his back on us and headed off.

God, I felt horrible. What was I supposed to do now? This wasn’t how I wanted things to go between Lilac and me!

“Go talk to him,” Okorie said smoothly, cutting off my thoughts.

I flinched, turning to him. “Did you just—”

“Yes. Go. You and Lilac probably have some unfinished business,” he said with a shrug.

I tilted my head. “And you’re… You’re cool with that?”

Okorie arched an eyebrow and took my hand again, sending that same warm, irresistible feeling shooting through my body. “I’m not that worried,” he said, his voice low.

For a moment, I couldn’t help but fall back into his eyes, his confident smile, the way he glanced at my lips as if he couldn’t help himself…

When Okorie let go of my hand, I whispered a croaky thanks and forced myself to go after Lilac, my skin still burning where he’d touched me.

When I caught up to Lilac and reached out to grab his shoulder, the gesture felt wrong. Like I was overstepping. I stopped short and spoke instead.

“Lilac?”

He paused, then turned to face me. His expression was blank, his tone cool. “What do you want?”

Huffing, I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. What *did* I want—other than him to stop being so incredibly frustrating? I had no idea.

“I just, I thought we should talk—”

“There’s no need,” Lilac said coldly.

“But—”

“You should know that I have a new girlfriend, Marta.”

# Episode 3656

**Greyson**

All huffy, my brother stalked off to find Artemis and demand she release the spell. I didn’t love his chances—Artemis wasn’t going to react well, given the mood he was in. On the bright side, she was currently out on patrol with Rishika, so at least Xavier would have a little time to cool off before he talked to her. I was pretty sure he was angry at Cali for lying to us, even though he’d insisted otherwise. But I knew my brother well enough to read between the lines.

I also knew myself, and I could never get mad at Cali for something like this. Not when she was so upset over having lied to us that she looked like she was about to burst out crying. I couldn’t help but feel for her. She looked like a sad kitten that had lost its way, and all I wanted was to cuddle her and tell her everything would be okay. But above all that, I was worried about this fucking wisp situation—what fresh hell had we stumbled into now?

Why couldn’t *the world* just leave Cali alone?

“I’m not upset with you, I promise,” I told Cali, pulling her into a hug. “All I want is for you to be safe.”

And also to kiss her. I definitely wanted that as well, and the need intensified when she faced me and reached up to stroke my cheek.

“Thank you, Greyson,” she whispered.

I leaned into her touch, her palm and dainty fingertips scorching my skin. I glanced at her lips, so pretty and pink, and she pursed them.

“Don’t do that,” she said throatily.

I swallowed roughly, meeting her eyes. “Do what?”

“You know what I mean,” she said, her cheeks reddening. “I—I want to kiss you too, but I can’t, and when you look at me like that, it feels…”

I glanced at her chest, then lower. My gaze lingered there for a moment before I met her eyes again.

“How does it feel?” I asked gruffly.

She turned so red, it was delicious. “*Greyson*,” she scolded. We’re in the hallway!”

“Okay. Just wanted to make sure I wasn’t the only one suffering,” I teased.

She scoffed, smacking my arm. I leaned closer, nuzzling her cheek before wrapping my arms around her again.

“At least we can still hug each other,” I said. “And there’s no revulsion, this time.”

She sounded squeaky. “I definitely don’t feel disgusted at all.”

“How do you feel, then?”

“Greyson. *Hallway*.”

I smirked. “Right.”

“I’ll work things out with Artemis,” Cali said. “I just hope Xavier doesn’t yell at her or anything like that. She doesn’t respond well to demands. I should probably get to her before he does, otherwise we’re going to end up with an even bigger problem on our hands. She and Rishika should be back from their patrol soon, right? Maybe I’ll wait for them outside.”

As much as I wanted to kiss Cali all over and have her kiss me back, her safety came first, along with the safety of the pack.

So I said, “You should wait for them in the house. I don’t want you lingering outside when the barrier could fail at any time.”

Cali sighed. “Okay,” she said glumly.

“Hey,” I murmured, tucking her hair behind her ear. “Everything’s going to be fine. I don’t want you to feel guilty about any of this anymore. I’m here for you.”

She looked up at me, her eyes like that sad-slash-hopeful emoji. “You really mean that, don’t you?”

“I do.” I cupped her cheek. “Besides, you’re so cute, it’s incredible. Who could ever stay mad at you?”

She blushed again. “Oh my god, *stop*!”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “Okay, let’s take our minds off kisses and go check on Big Mac. What do you think?”

“Sounds good. She looked so tired, earlier,” Cali said with a frown. “I hate what’s happening to her. And to the other witches.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You are *not* to come up with a way to blame yourself for that, Caliana Hart. Understood?”

She took a deep breath. “Understood.”

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Big Mac was sitting in the den, brooding while my mom fussed over her. While Cali and I waited to be acknowledged, my mom added wood to the fireplace, asked Big Mac if she needed more tea or a pillow, and kissed her forehead.

Big Mac was acting all gruff. “Can you just sit down, Sabine? I don’t need all this attention!”

Though when my mom asked if she wanted more mocha, her response was a resounding yes.

I was glad they’d found each other, actually. My mother had a lot of good things to offer, and I knew that Big Mac was grateful for her care. I didn’t know if it was a werewolf thing, but I just *knew* how much she loved my mother, and it made me happy.

“Are you sure you’re feeling better?” Cali asked Big Mac, looking anxious.

Big Mac glared up at her. “If anyone dares asks me that again, I’m going to use my last bit of magic to turn the pack house into a barn.”

“MacKenzie, please,” my mom gently chastised. “They’re genuinely concerned for you.”

I cleared my throat. “We are concerned, but also…”

Big Mac scoffed. “I knew it! I *knew* you wanted something—you always do. What is it this time?”

“Hey, I’m actually only asking this because I’m worried about you,” I said. “Are you still capable of making Russell’s potion?”

Big Mac nodded. “Making the potion is typically easy. But getting it to work… Well, that might be the hard part.”

“What does that mean?” Cali demanded. “We can’t take any chances with Russell’s heart.”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Relax. I’m not going to make a potion that doesn’t work.” She reached for my mom’s hand. “But I have to admit, whatever’s affecting magic right now is taxing me. I feel more exhausted than I’ve ever been.”

“But the potion—”

“I can make the potion,” Big Mac interrupted. “I’m confident about that.”

I should’ve felt a wave of relief at Big Mac’s words. Instead, I realized that in the back of my mind, I’d been hoping that Big Mac would say the potion wasn’t an option anymore. My reaction only underscored the skepticism I felt about Russell’s plan. But I hadn’t been able to come up with a better one, and we had to do *something* to help those kids.

“Is there anything I can do for you, Big Mac?” Cali asked.

Big Mac huffed. “Yes.”

Cali perked up. “What?”

“Get out and leave me alone!”

I grinned, nudging Cali. “She must be feeling better if she’s got the energy to yell.”

Cali smirked, and my mother chuckled, but the witch was not amused.

“So, when do you think you’ll be able to make the potion?” I asked.

“Tonight, after I’d had some rest,” she said.

“Sounds good,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Why are you still here?” Big Mac asked impatiently.

“*MacKenzie!*” my mom said, half-exasperated, half-amused.

“What?” Big Mac said defensively. “They talk too much!”

“That we do,” I said, taking Cali’s hand and leading her out of the room. Over my shoulder, I called, “Better take good care of Big Mac, Mom—I know she loves it!”

We exited the room to the sound of Big Mac’s grumbling. I shot a look at Cali, expecting her to be as amused as I was, but she was frowning.

“You’re worried about the potion?” I asked.

She nodded. “It’s just… It’s a lot.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “By the time the potion’s ready, I’ll have worked out the details of the plan.”

Cali took a deep breath. “But will it really work? Because there are so many places where it could go wrong.”

“I won’t go ahead with the plan unless I’m sure it’s going to work, Cali,” I promised.

I pulled her close, she wrapped her arms around me, and I gazed down at her. She glanced at my mouth, and the second she did, my reaction was automatic.

I leaned in for a kiss, then caught myself and stopped before I could make contact.

Cali huffed. “I know.”

“Artemis should be back from her patrol soon,” I said. “Xavier will have to be on his best behavior when he asks her to remove the compulsion.”

Cali’s tone was wry. “I think it’d be best if I asked her.”

I cupped Cali’s cheek, trailing my thumb over her chin, then her lower lip. “I hope this whole thing gets resolved soon,” I murmured. “Because I don’t know much longer I can wait to kiss my mate.”

Cali swallowed audibly, leaning closer. But I didn’t want to push my luck and try for a kiss—if she didn’t manage to resist Artemis’s magic, she’d only be disappointed.

“Let’s go for another hug instead,” I said.

She nodded.

I pulled her close and hugged her tight, breathing in the scent of her hair. Her arms locked around my torso, and she buried her face in my neck.

“Does this feel good?” I whispered in her ear.

She sounded squeaky all over again. “*Yep*.”

I chuckled, glancing out the window. Immediately, I frowned. Xavier was stalking toward the barrier, apparently intending to walk right through it.

What the fuck?

Artemis was patrolling *inside* the barrier, so where the hell was he going?

# Episode 3657

**Xavier**

I paused at the barrier. If I passed through it, I almost certainly wouldn’t be able to get back inside. And if, by some fucking miracle, Big Mac dropped the barrier to let me in, she wouldn’t be able to raise it again. And then the pack house would be vulnerable. Cali would be vulnerable, and there were weird, evil wisps out there, desperate to reach her.

If I kept thinking about this, I’d fucking explode.

“Where the hell are you going?” Greyson shouted. His voice echoed, bouncing off the barrier before it reached my ears.

Clenching my teeth, I turned to face my brother. Was he here to talk to me or fucking babysit me? Either way, I wasn’t impressed.

“I need to do something about the Samaras,” I told Greyson. “Everyone who went up against the Bitterfangs at Three Devils Point is protected—except the Samaras.” I gestured to the forest, outside the barrier. “They’re sitting ducks out there without any magical protection.”

My brother’s tone was so calm, it was fucking *enraging*. “The Blue Bloods have a barrier because they’re protecting Julia, and we have a barrier because Russell’s with us. The Samaras don’t have anything the Bitterfangs want. They’re not in danger, Xavier.”

I walked up to my brother, my voice sharp. “The Samaras put themselves in danger the moment they agreed to help us, Greyson. Somehow, I fucking doubt that the Bitterfangs are the forgiving type.”

“What are you saying?” Greyson asked coldly. “You want to just walk through the barrier? Leave the Redwoods and Cali behind to go check on the Samaras?”

“I never fucking said—”

“Can’t you just call them?” Greyson interrupted impatiently. “There’s no point in leaving the protection of the barrier if they’re all fine.”

I growled, fighting to keep my fists at my sides instead of planting them in my brother’s face. “Of course I tried calling them! Do you really think I’d risk going out if I could avoid it with a simple fucking phone call?”

“Then why—”

“Zeke never responded to my calls or texts!” I snapped.

Greyson paused, snorting. “Right. What a surprise. It’s really too bad Fletcher hasn’t moved forward enough with the Samaras to be named Alpha—he would’ve been an improvement over Zeke.”

“That’s just fucking wishful thinking,” I said with a scoff. “Fletcher hasn’t spent any time even as a *member* of the Samara pack; he’s nowhere near ready to be Alpha, to deal with a threat of this magnitude. He’s just as useless as Zeke at this point.”

Greyson leveled me with a stare. “I’m not sure where you fit in with all this, Xavier.”

“What the fuck do you mean?” I demanded. “You’ve made me go back and forth with the Samaras. You’ve told me you want them as our allies! That means we have to look out for them when they’re under threat. What the hell do you want me to do?”

At this point, I’d gone back and forth in my own mind countless times. Mostly because of Ava. There was nothing I had against the rest of the Samara, but it was so easy to flip a switch—to see them as useful or useless. Except, I knew that back and forth was really because of Ava.

Did I want her, did I not?

Fuck, I couldn’t go there right now.

Greyson paused, crossing his arms. “I’ll let you go, if that’s what you want. But first, I want a straight answer about something.”

“About fucking what?”

Greyson looked me dead in the eye. “Are you doing this for the Samaras, or are you doing it for Ava?”

The silence that followed felt suffocating. I couldn’t fucking believe that Greyson had just gone there. Part of me was furious at his question, at the fact that he’d dared to think it, let alone ask it out loud.

But another part of me knew that Ava was why I would go. I hadn’t been able to deny that, from the moment my wolf had started acting up. Ever since she came back.

But Ava wasn’t the only reason I was willing to go to bat for the Samara. She *couldn’t* be.

“I meant what I said, Greyson,” I told him through gritted teeth. “In order to maintain our reputation, the Redwood pack has to do right by its allies. And I’m the pack’s official liaison with the Samaras, which means it’s my responsibility to check in on them.”

To protect them. It was what Ava wanted, and she was right—it had to be done. But I’d be damned if I admitted that to her ever.

Greyson’s eyes narrowed. “Are you sure there’s nothing else at play, here?”

I scoffed. “Are you fucking kidding me? Weren’t you the one who asked me to help rebuild the Samaras?”

“Yes,” Greyson said. “But that doesn’t change your… situation with Ava.”

He just kept hammering at that point, and the urge to punch him right in the mouth was a hard one to beat.

“You mean to tell me that you think the Samaras are safe right now?” I asked. I knew what I was really asking, *is Ava safe right now?* My wolf needed to know. Hell, *I* needed to know. “How the fuck are you going to sleep at night, knowing that they stepped up to fight beside us and the Bitterfangs slaughtered them for it? I have to make sure they’re okay. It’s the right thing to do, Greyson.”

“I know. But there’s more to it than that.”

I scoffed. “What? It seems pretty cut and dried to me, but you’re the Alpha, right? I’ll do whatever the fuck you want.” I pointed at him. “But whatever happens next is *your* responsibility.”

Greyson shook his head, scowling. “This isn’t about who’s Alpha. It’s about doing what’s best for our pack, and right now, we need you here. And I’m not about to risk the entire pack or weaken Big Mac further by having her remove the barrier. What don’t you understand here?”

“And what about the Samaras?” I asked, fuming. “Do we just leave them to fend for themselves after they had our backs at Three Devils Point?”

“It’s not my fault that Zeke is playing hard to reach, Xavier,” Greyson snapped. “Ava is a far better leader than him, anyway. If she wants to return to her pack right now and make sure they’re safe, then that’s fine. I’m happy to give her supplies or money for the Samaras to crash somewhere else if she decides that they need to leave their campsite.”

I shook my head. “We should bring them through our barrier—”

“Xavier, you’re not listening!” Greyson said, shaking his head. “Until the magic issue has been dealt with, I can’t allow the barrier to be taken down again. Ava’s free to leave, but no one is coming back through from the other side—not even our pack members, if any of them happen to leave.”

I growled in frustration. “She sure fucking tried, but Ava’s in no shape to go anywhere!”

“Then there’s nothing I can do right now,” Greyson said coolly.

I wanted to grab the boulder nearby and break it over his head.

“Thanks a lot,” I snapped, shoulder-bumping the asshole as I walked past him. “I get to go tell her the bad news, now!”

“Do you want a piece of advice, Xavier?”

I laughed. “Fuck no!”

I kept marching forward, but Greyson caught up, darting forward to block my way.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I demanded. “Do you *want* to get punched?’

“You need to stop fooling yourself,” Greyson said. “You talk about how concerned you are about the Samara pack, but we both know this is about Ava. You need to figure that out—if not for your own sake, then for Cali’s.”

The instinct to shift suddenly became overwhelming. My brother’s words were a clear challenge, my worst fears shoved right in my face. And I wouldn’t fucking stand for it.

“Get out of my way before this gets ugly, Greyson,” I hissed.

Greyson didn’t speak for a moment. Was he really about to push me over this? Of all the hills to die on, had he seriously chosen this one?

My eyes narrowed. “Greyson, if—”

“Fine,” he said, stepping aside. “But I need you to realize that I didn’t say all that just to piss you off, or to make you feel bad. I said it because it needed to be said. Because what’s going on between you and Ava is *obvious*, Xavier.”

“You’re full of shit,” I snapped, walking away.

My fury over Greyson’s behavior clashed with the frustration I felt over having to tell Ava that I wouldn’t be able to warn the Samaras.

The easiest option would be to throw the blame for the decision at Greyson’s feet, right where it belonged. But that would make me look weak.

That would make it seem like I was following Greyson’s orders. That he was the big boss who made the decisions. That I was, truly, Greyson’s fucking *second*, just like Armin had said.

The idea burned me up with rage, and yet I couldn’t actually deny it.

I couldn’t deny that there was truth to what Armin had said on New Year’s Eve, and to what Greyson had thrown in my face just now about Ava. After all, Jay had said something similar recently, and the fact that both of them had picked up on it was… unsettling.

I found myself seriously regretting turning down Jay’s offer to take over as Redwood liaison to the Samaras. Things would be so much easier if I’d let Jay act as a buffer between Ava and me.

But I’d said no. Like a fucking idiot.

Why the fuck did I keep torturing myself like this?

Why the fuck couldn’t I just stick to a decision?

I knew the answer—my wolf was holding it tight to his chest—but I wanted to deny it. I just wanted to forget about Ava, even if both Jay and Greyson had obviously picked up on *something* between us. Something I’d felt when Ava had kissed me during the New Year’s Eve party. Something that had been haunting me ever since.

I’d told Ava that the kiss meant nothing.

Had I been wrong?

# Episode 3658

I watched through the window as Xavier shoved past Greyson and stormed toward the house. I felt my stomach tense. What had just happened between them? Had something I’d done or said triggered an argument? Fruitless as it might’ve seemed, I couldn’t bring myself to stop hoping that they’d eventually be past their petty squabbles over me. Or were they fighting because of the compulsion Artemis had placed on me—and the no kissing?

Greyson had told me he needed to check something at the barrier, and I’d headed into the kitchen to get something to eat, but I’d immediately lost my appetite at the sight of him confronting Xavier on the lawn.

As I stared out at the wet, January day, what I really couldn’t comprehend was why it looked like Xavier was trying to leave. It looked like he’d been trying to pass through the barrier. I stared out the window, my mind racing. I just didn’t understand. Why would he want to do that?

I needed answers, so I headed for the kitchen door, and just as I reached it, Xavier stormed in through the front door.

His expression was hard as steel, and he marched straight past the kitchen, toward the stairs. He hadn’t even seen me.

“Xavier?” I called.

He turned and—seeing me—his expression softened. “Cali.”

“Hey. Is… Is everything okay?” I asked hesitantly.

He walked back toward me and wrapped me in a hug. “Yeah, everything’s fine. Why wouldn’t it be?”

I pulled away slightly and looked up at him, confused. “Because I saw you trying to leave, and then arguing with Greyson.”

Xavier closed his eyes for a moment and sighed. He shook his head. “It was no big deal.”

“Whatwasn’t a big deal?” I pressed. “*Were* you trying to leave?”

“Yeah, I was going to check on the Samaras and make sure they’re prepared in the event of an attack from the Bitterfangs,” he explained. “Greyson wasn’t happy about it. He wants me to stay here, and we argued about it.”

“Oh,” I said, surprised.

“What?” he asked. “What is it?”

I shrugged. “I guess I’m a little surprised you were going to leave the pack house, given the barrier situation—but I appreciate that you were trying to help the Samaras,” I added quickly. “Maybe we can figure something out from here. Or maybe Ava will be able to reach Zeke.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Xavier said vaguely.

I gave him a searching look. “Are you mad at me?”

“About what?”

“Artemis’s manipulation magic?”

He smiled after a moment. Was that… hesitation? Maybe I was imagining it. “I’m not mad at you at all,” he said. “If anything, I’m a bit peeved with Artemis. But don’t you worry about it.” He leaned in to kiss me, then remembered himself and pulled away. “I have to go see Ava. I need to talk to her about the Samaras.”

He gave me a squeeze and headed off toward the stairs. I walked after him, and halfway up, he stopped and looked down at me. He hesitated, as though he wanted to say something to me, but then he just smiled and kept walking up the stairs.

I watched him, wondering what it was he’d just decided notto tell me. I wanted to know, and I thought about going after him to ask, but after some thought, I decided not to. I didn’t want it to look like I didn’t believe him, or that I didn’t trust him.

Of course I trusted him.

“Hey.”

I turned to see Lola walking toward the kitchen.

She was looking at me curiously. “You okay? You look all… weird and pensive.”

I rolled my eyes, but I was glad she’d asked. It was always nice to have Lola around. If anyone was going to understand my concerns, it would be my best friend.

She looked at me, then up to where Xavier was disappearing around the corner at the top of the stairs. Then she rolled her eyes. “Wait, let me guess. Is it Ava again?”

I sighed. “I guess I’m less than thrilled that she’s still at the pack house,” I admitted. “But it’s hard, you know?”

“Why?” Lola wondered.

“She *was* injured while she was helping us fight the Bitterfangs,” I pointed out. “That makes it more complicated.”

Lola shook her head. “I don’t see how. I wish we could just kick her out, once and for all.” She glanced up the stairs. “But I have to admit, the girl can fight. I saw Ava take down two Bitterfangs by herself—and you know how those bastards fight. Ava kicked some serious ass. Until, you know, she got her ass poisoned by silver, I guess.”

“I guess,” I muttered, begrudgingly grateful that Ava had been there to help out. It was hard to imagine what might have happened if the Bitterfangs had won, and the horror Russell would’ve faced if they’d gotten their hands on him.

I sighed. “I just wish Xavier didn’t always feel compelled to be the one to deal with her, you know?”

Lola nodded. “At least we know Ava will go back to her pack as soon as she can. You know how focused she is on rebuilding it.”

“That’s true,” I mused. “Or I hope it is. But I feel like I’ve hoped that before, and Ava always seems to work her way back to the Redwoods. And to Xavier.” Feeling legitimately angry now, I glared up the stairs, in Ava’s general direction. “She’s like an evil boomerang.”

Lola laughed. “That would be a great name for a band.”

“I’m not kidding, Lola,” I snapped. “It’s a very troubling pattern.”

“Okay,” she said. “Then do something about it.”

I rolled my eyes. “Like what?”

She shrugged. “Break the pattern.”

I looked at her, curious now. “How?”

Lola thought for a moment. “Break Ava?” She mimed breaking an invisible stick over her knee, then laughed again.

I shook my head. “Yeah, if only it were that easy. Also, Ava’s little, but she’s really strong. Have you seen her?”

“Yeah.” Lola chuckled. “That probably wouldn’t work.”

“Regardless, I would never do that to her,” I said, shaking my head.

“Well, I still think we could figure something out if we put our minds to it. Let me know if you want to brainstorm,” Lola offered. “I have to head out. Jay wants us to patrol together. I think he thinks this counts as a date night.”

I smiled, but I felt a sharp pang of jealousy.

“What’s up?” Lola asked, apparently noticing a change in my expression.

“It’s nothing,” I said, shaking my head.

“Cali?”

I shrugged. “I was just thinking that neither of my mates would ever ask me to join them on patrol. They’d both probably say it was too risky for me, even though I’ve proven that capable of defending myself again and again,” I added, not even trying to keep the bitterness out of my voice.

“Well, maybe if you were turned, they might change their minds,” Lola said lightly, clearly trying to pull me out of my dark mood.

I stared at her, struck by the idea. Lately, we’d been so busy thinking about Seluna and the Bitterfangs that I hadn’t had time to think of much else. But Lola’s offhand comment reminded me of my mostly buried desire to become a werewolf.

“Anyway, I should get going; Jay’s waiting,” Lola said. She turned to go, then looked over her shoulder. “Hey, how’s our young Romeo doing, by the way?”

“Oh, Russell!” I realized that I hadn’t had a chance to check on him since we’d returned from the battle. “I don’t know, but I should go check on him. He must be freaking out. Even with both his moms here, that battle was rough, and he has to be worried about Julia.”

Lola’s joking smile slipped away. “I know. I feel bad for the kid. What a crappy position to be in—for both of them.”

“I know,” I said. “I’ll go see him now. Be safe on patrol.”

“I will. I hope Russell’s okay.”

We parted, and I headed upstairs. We’d put Russell in Marta’s room. I hoped she wouldn’t mind that we’d co-opted her space, but Marta had always been pretty easygoing.

I walked down the hallway but stopped when I reached Ava’s temporary room. The door was closed. I supposed Xavier was inside, talking about whatever needed to be talked about. As I stared at the door, I was tempted to eavesdrop, but I gave my head a hard shake.

*Stop*, I told myself. I wasn’t going to let Ava make me stoop so low. She wasn’t going to reduce me to listening at keyholes.

I marched past her door and headed to Marta’s room, but Lola’s words kept playing on a loop in my head. I wasn’t willing to break Ava, but maybe Lola had a point.

Was there a way to break Ava’s connection to Xavier… for good?

# Episode 3659

**Lilac**

Violet slammed my door behind her, then rounded on me, her expression hard as stone.

“I cannot *believe* you told Marta you have a new girlfriend,” she hissed.

I stared at her. “But I *do* have a new—”

“And who *is* this so-called new girlfriend?” she demanded. “Marta hasn’t even been gone a week, Lilac! Did you start swiping right on WolfMates the second she walked out the damn door?”

“No! What? No—*Perrie* is my girlfriend,” I stammered.

Violet’s eyes went wide. They just kept getting bigger and bigger, until it started to freak me out.

“*Perrie?*” she finally spluttered. “*Perrie* is your new girlfriend?”

I glared at her, irritated by her incredulity. “Yeah. Perrie. What the hell, Violet? Why does that seem so crazy to you? Why is it so unbelievable? I’m a hot, fit guy, okay? There are lots of girls who would want to date me. It’s not the craziest idea in the world that—”

“Hang on, hang on, hang on!” Violet said, cutting me off and holding up her hands to make me stop speaking. “I don’t want to hear your whole damn dating profile, Lilac. Exactly how many dates have you and the Samara girl been on?”

I felt myself slump. “Um… one? Almost two,” I added hastily.

Violet shook her head. “Unbelievable. Have you and your committed girlfriend Perrie even *talked* about your relationship?”

I slumped further down. “Well, no. Not exactly.”

Violet stared at me like she couldn’t figure out what she was looking at. “I cannot *believe* you.”

“What?” I demanded.

“*What?* Do you have any idea how cruel it was to say that to Marta?”

“I wasn’t trying to be cruel,” I retorted. “I was just being honest. I don’t want Marta to have any expectations.”

Violet shook her head, looking disgusted. “I’m ashamed of you, Lilac. I’m ashamed that you’re my brother, *and* that you’re my twin.”

Violet and I had always been close, and she’d never said anything like that to me before. Her words felt like a slap across my face.

“Why?” I demanded, feeling defensive.

Anger flashing in her eyes, Violet stepped toward me, getting right up into my face. “Because you told Marta that you had a new girlfriend—and not because you wanted to control her so-called ‘expectations,’ but because you wanted to make her jealous. I’m right about that, aren’t I? Well, congratulations, Lilac, your plan worked out even better than you intended. Instead of making her jealous, you hurt her. You *hurt* Marta. Is that what you wanted?”

My stomach twisted with guilt at her words.

“She brought *him* with her,” I said bitterly, still feeling the sting of seeing Violet show up with Okorie.

Her anger apparently spent, Violet dropped down to sit beside me on the bed.

“Oh, Lilac,” she started with a sigh, “Marta left with Okorie because he could help with her magic. I mean, did you forget *why* Okorie came to us in the first place? He was Dani and Marta’s mentor.”

I shook my head. “I haven’t forgotten. But they got so close, Violet. And when I saw Marta with him in the kitchen, almost *kissing*… I just got so angry.” I rubbed my eyes. “But you’re right. I mean, I know you’re right. You *should* be ashamed of me. I did want to hurt her.”

Violet put her arm around my shoulders. “I know this is hard for you, Lilac, and I still love you, no matter what.”

“Do you think I should apologize to her?” I asked.

Violet shrugged. “I suppose that might help, and it’s probably the right thing to do.” She looked up at me. “But I wonder…”

“What?” I asked her.

“Do you actually *want* Perrie to be your girlfriend?”

I thought about that. I’d had a good time with Perrie on our coffee date, and we *did* have a connection—but it just didn’t feel like the connection I’d always shared with Marta. I didn’t know if that was a good or bad sign. Even when I’d been a ghost, speaking to Marta through the veil of mortality, I’d felt the tether that connected us.

“I don’t know,” I finally said.

Violet looked thoughtful. “I think you need to give Perrie a chance—as long as she’s interested. The two of you could be mates, after all. I mean, what you did to Marta was wrong, but maybe you do need to stop dwelling on her and focus on figuring out your relationship with Perrie.”

I shrugged. “Maybe you’re right. I’ll see if Perrie wants to go out on that second date we talked about.”

“Yeah, maybe you should see what she thinks.” Violet pulled me into a hug. “I’m going to head out.”

I waited until she left, then pulled out my phone and tried to call Perrie a few times. By the fifth try, I could feel my heart racing. Why wasn’t she picking up?

Finally, her face popped up on the screen as she answered the video call.

“Lilac!” She looked surprised that I’d called, but not upset, which I took as a good sign. She was less dressed up than she’d been at the café and looked less glamorous, but I still felt my wolf stir when I saw her face. I was nervous about talking to her, but before I had a chance to say anything, she spoke again.

“Hey, listen, we haven’t heard from Ava,” she said. “We don’t know what’s going on. Do you know anything?”

“I… I don’t know much,” I started hesitantly. “But Ava’s here. I think she got hurt and came here to recover.”

Perrie didn’t look happy to hear that. “*What?* Are you serious? Why didn’t anyone tell us?”

“I don’t know?” I said, shrugging helplessly.

“Everything’s a bit of a mess over here,” she went on. “No one knows what to do.”

I frowned. “What are you talking about? Where’s your Alpha?”

Perrie rolled her eyes. “Oh god, Zeke? He’s holed up in his trailer and won’t come out. Ava’s the only one in this pack who seems to have any sense.”

I nodded, but my plan to ask her out on a date was fading fast. She seemed to have much bigger things on her mind. “Are you okay?”

She sighed. “Everyone’s scared. Marissa scented some unknown wolves in our territory during this morning’s patrol.”

I opened my mouth to tell her what I knew, but I hesitated. I wasn’t sure how much to say, and I didn’t want to scare her.

“I could find out exactly what’s going on with Ava, if you want,” I offered.

“Could you? That’d be great,” she said, her face alight with relief. “Thanks, Lilac.”

“Sure. I’ll get back to you. Talk to you soon.”

I ended the call and looked down at the dark screen. I wished I could’ve done or said something to comfort her. She’d seemed really stressed, but there wasn’t anything I could do through the phone, and even if we met in person, I wouldn’t be able to do anything. Not until the Bitterfang problems were over.

The thing was—despite my petty reasons for telling Marta that she was my girlfriend—I genuinely liked Perrie. There was something about her that I was drawn to, which confused the hell out of me. I was pretty sure that I still loved Marta, but seeing Perrie looking so anxious and scared had awakened something inside me, and it wasn’t going away.

I needed to talk to someone about what I was feeling—someone besides my sister. My emotions were a huge, confusing jumble, and I needed someone with a neutral perspective to help me sort through them. I thought about Xavier. I’d talked to him about Marta in the past—maybe I could talk to him about Perrie now.

It was worth a shot, so I got to my feet and headed out of my room to find him. As I walked down the hallway, I happened to hear his voice coming from behind a closed door, so I paused and knocked.

After a moment, Xavier opened the door, clearly irritated by the interruption.

“What?” he demanded.

Behind him, I could see Ava sitting up in bed, looking similarly annoyed.

I hesitated. It didn’t seem like the opportune moment to have a heart-to-heart about girls and mates.

“*What?*” Xavier asked again. “What’s up, Lilac? Is something wrong?”

“Um—yeah. I mean no. I mean yeah,” I started, completely incoherently. Then I took a deep breath and pulled myself together. “I was just talking to Perrie, and she was saying that the Samaras are worried—”

“Worried about what?” Ava asked, looking alarmed.

I ran a hand through my hair, trying not to be nervous. Ava kind of intimidated me. “She was asking about where you were, and she mentioned that Marissa picked up some scents—unknown wolves—while she was on patrol this morning.”

“You know what this means?” Xavier said.

Ava nodded. “They’re scouting us out.”

“Shit,” Xavier breathed. “That’s not good. That means—”

Ava finished his thought. “It means the Bitterfangs are planning to attack my pack.”

# Episode 3660

**Xavier**

“What else did Perrie say?” I pressed, staring Lilac down. “How many scents did Marissa pick up? Did she see any wolves? Or was it just the scents? Has anyone gone back out to check? What the hell is going on with the Samaras? What are they doing to protect themselves?”

Lilac’s gaze darted between Ava and me. He looked nervous and gave a quick shrug. “I—I don’t know. That’s all she said. We didn’t talk very long, and I didn’t really ask any questions. She just said that Marissa picked up the scent of unfamiliar wolves this morning. That’s all.”

“Fuck,” I muttered, shaking my head. “Where the hell is Zeke? Why isn’t he handling this?”

“Yeah, I asked Perrie that, too, and she said that Zeke had locked himself in his trailer,” Lilac said. “She said he wasn’t coming out. That’s why they’re looking for Ava.”

I rolled my eyes. “That guy is fucking useless. Yet another winner for the Samaras.”

Lilac shuffled his feet. It looked like he really wanted to leave, but he hesitated. “So, what should I tell Perrie? I said I’d get back to her about when you’re going back,” he said, looking at Ava.

She pinched the bridge of her nose, looking stressed. “Tell her I’ll be in touch with them soon.”

Lilac nodded. “Okay. Thanks. I’ll let her know.”

I shut the door. This was *exactly* why I wanted to go to the Samaras and warn them about the Bitterfangs. Even if Zeke had picked up the goddamn phone, we all knew how useless he was. The Samaras’ actual acting Alpha was currently here in *our* pack house, recovering from silver poisoning. The rest of the pack was totally vulnerable out there, and possibly about to be ambushed.

I shook my head. “So, what should we do about the Samaras?”

Ava raised her eyebrow at me. “What should *we* do?” she repeated. “Seriously?”

“What?” I asked, confused.

“I wasn’t aware you were interested in doing anything for my pack,” she said.

“Come on,” I snarled. “You know that’s bullshit. I could have left you to drop dead from silver poisoning on the porch, but I didn’t, did I?”

She raised the other eyebrow. “I was talking about the Samara pack as a whole—not myself, X.”

I turned away from her, fuming. Fuck her. What was it about this woman that always had my thoughts scrambled?

“I already told you why I couldn’t leave to warn them, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to help your pack,” I snapped. “I have no interest in leaving them to be massacred.”

“I’m sorry,” Ava said quietly. The smug look on her face was gone. “I know that. I know you wouldn’t abandon the Samara pack, not after everything you’ve already done to help us.”

I shrugged this comment off. “It’s fine. I mean, I know this is really hard for you. I didn’t come here to argue about this.”

Ava gave me a curious look. “Why *did* you come?”

“What?”

“Why *did* you come? You’ve already checked on me. You know I’m recovering fine. Why did you come back up here to my room?”

I ground my teeth but didn’t answer her. I thought about what both Greyson and Jay had said to me, about the kiss Ava and I’d shared on New Year’s Eve. I’d almost told Cali about the kiss a few moments ago, when we’d been standing on the stairs, but I’d changed my mind at the last moment. I just didn’t want to hurt her. Even though I wanted to believe the kiss had meant nothing, I couldn’t say that to Cali—not until I knew for sure. I’d come to Ava’s room to figure out why I was still thinking about that fucking kiss, even after all this time. But now—standing here with Ava looking at me, that half-perplexed, half-knowing expression on her face—I wasn’t even sure I wanted to get into it.

I had to say something, though, so I cleared my throat. “I came up here to tell you that I can’t go to the Samaras and warn them about the Bitterfangs. I wanted to give you a heads-up. And to tell you why.”

Ava gave me a skeptical look. “Okay… And that’s *all* you came here to tell me?”

I bristled at that. “Yeah. What else would I have to say to you? Why else would I be here? I think I’ve made it very clear to you that I’m only interested in helping the Samaras because of the Bitterfang threat. That’s it.”

Ava gave me a long look, then she swung her feet to the floor. When she winced with pain, my wolf reacted, and I nearly stepped toward her. I had to ball my hands into fists to keep from reaching out. Even with everything going on between us—everything that had passed between us—there was something that always got me when I saw Ava hurting. She was a powerful, fiercely strong wolf, but she could seem so small, so fragile. I just felt this fundamental urge to protect her.

“Where do you think you’re going?” I growled.

She grimaced in obvious pain as she got to her feet. “I can only assume the scents Marissa picked up this morning belong to the Bitterfangs.”

“We don’t know that for sure,” I ground out, though I’d have bet my last dollar that she was probably right.

She shook her head. “Maybe not, but I’m not willing to risk my pack’s safety by assuming otherwise.”

“So?” I asked when she stepped toward the door.

“*So*, I’m going back to the Samara pack so I can warn them about the Bitterfangs—that’s where I’m supposed to be.”

I stepped in front of her, blocking her path. “Get your ass back into that bed,” I growled. I’ve already told you, you’re not going anywhere.”

She glared up at me. “Then who’s going to warn my pack?”

I gave an exasperated huff. “Even if Zeke is locked up in his trailer, shaking with fear, showing his true colors—”

“Refusing to answer his phone,” Ava muttered.

“—you can still call Perrie,” I finished. “Explain the situation to her. Lilac was able to get ahold of her, so you should be able to, as well. She can tell the others. Hell, she can go bang on Zeke’s door until he crawls out from under the covers.”

“That’s exactly what I’m planning to do,” Ava said. “But then what?”

“Then what *what?*” I asked.

“What if the Bitterfangs do decide to attack? They’re clearly scouting out our land. They’re planning something. Who’s going to defend my pack when that happens?” Ava demanded, her dark eyes flashing.

Shit. I didn’t have an answer for that.

She shook her head. “Listen, Xavier, I know you think you’re looking out for me, but you’re not my Alpha, and I’m not a Redwood. You have no right to keep me here as a virtual prisoner while my pack is facing such a grave threat.”

I felt my hackles rise at the mention of my not being Alpha. That was typical Ava—she liked to rub that in whenever she got a chance. Did she have to do it right now?

Clearly seeing the anger in my eyes, she shrugged, guessing at its cause. “It’s the truth, and you know it. You had your chance to be Samara Alpha, and you turned it down. You had a claim to the position. We *are* mates, technically speaking.”

I shook my head, choosing to ignore this line of reasoning. “You’re being a fucking idiot. You know that, right? You’re going to try to get through the woods, alone, while you’re still recovering from silver poisoning. Look at you. You can barely fucking stand.”

Now it was time for Ava to get defensive.

“I can take care of myself,” she shot back. “I’ve been doing it for a long fucking time, Xavier, and I’ve been pretty damn successful. I survived the spirit realm—I think I can survive a walk through the woods back to my territory.” She moved past me. “I’m going to have Lilac call Perrie. I’ll see you later,” she added dismissively as she disappeared out the door.

I watched her go, my frustration sharp as broken glass. I scrubbed my hands across my face and headed out into the hallway and downstairs. Ava was still recovering, and she needed to stay here until she was stronger, and I was going to have to figure out a way to convince her not to leave—which felt weird and wrong, and why the hell did I *want* to convince her to stay?

Everything felt ass-backward, and my head was a mess as I hit the first floor, but through the jumble of thoughts, one idea floated to the surface—one that felt like it just might work.

Maybe I could get Greyson to prevent her from leaving.

# Episode 3661

**Greyson**

When Artemis and Rishika got back from patrol, I was waiting for them on the back porch. They looked cold as they walked up, stomping snow from their shoes and rubbing their hands together. I was glad to see them—I was always relieved when members of my pack got home safely—and I was also glad to hear that they had nothing unusual to report.

“Nothing out of the ordinary, chief,” Rishika said, shaking her head, her cheeks flushed with the cold. “As far as we could tell, no sign of any Rogues or Bitterfangs roaming around.”

“Not unless they can transform into magpies,” Artemis added. “Is that a thing?”

“Not that I know of,” I said. “Well, I’m glad to hear it, and glad that you’re back.” I cleared my throat. “I wanted to talk to you, Artemis. It’s about—”

“Hold up. I already know what it’s about,” she said. “It’s about the manipulation magic I performed, right?”

“Yeah, it is,” I admitted.

“I figured.” She nodded. “What about it?”

“I just think it’s a little unfair to Cali.”

She gave me a keen look. “And to you?”

“And to me,” I admitted. “I want you to undo it.”

She took a deep breath, looking thoughtful. “Okay.”

“*Okay?*” I asked, amazed that I’d been able to get something done so easily for once. “Great. Then let’s—”

“Yeah. I’ll get rid of it. Once I have a chance to talk to Cali,” she said. She raised an eyebrow, daring me to argue. “That was our deal.”

From the look on her face, I could tell that I wasn’t going to change her mind, so I shrugged. “Fine. Then why don’t you head inside and find Cali so you can have your little chat right now.”

“Fine by me,” Artemis said, and she and Rishika disappeared through the kitchen door.

Jay and Lola brushed past them on their way outside.

“Hey, Greyson,” Jay said, unzipping his jacket and pulling it off. “What are you doing out here?”

“What are *you* doing out here?” I countered.

“We’re taking the next patrol shift,” Jay said, tossing his jacket onto the rail of the deck. He grinned at Lola. “Just getting some time alone.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Oh, right. Thanks for taking this patrol shift,” I said. “Let me know if you see anything out there that I should know about.”

“You got it,” Jay said. He swung his arm around Lola’s shoulders, and the two of them headed down the porch steps.

As I watched them walk toward the trees, I felt a pang of jealousy. It wasn’t that Jay and Lola had always had it easy—what with Jay losing his eye, and Lola’s vampire problems—but, no matter what happened, they always worked through their problems together. Their relationship was strong, and there was something so enviably easy about how straightforward it seemed. Despite everything they’d gone through, they seemed as happy with each other as they’d ever been. Happier, maybe. Stronger together than ever.

I wanted that with Cali so badly—though preferably with both my eyes intact and Cali not craving blood.

If we could just get past all this drama with the Bitterfang pack and resolve the magic imbalance issues we’d been having, then maybe—*just maybe*—we’d get a chance to work on all that.

I turned to head back inside, just as Xavier came out onto the porch. I stifled a sigh. What the hell did my brother want now?

“Hey, what’s up?” I asked, hoping to hell we weren’t about to get into another argument about Xavier crossing the barrier. It would certainly make things a hell of a lot easier for *me* if my brother left, but it wouldn’t be great for the pack. Cali probably wouldn’t be too crazy about it, either.

“I wanted to talk to you about Ava and the Samaras,” Xavier said.

That surprised me. “Okay. We already talked about that,” I reminded him. “If Ava insists on going, then godspeed. She’s not a pack member, and she can do whatever she—”

“I want you to stop her,” Xavier said.

“What?” I asked, confused. “Why? She wants to return to her pack. Isn’t that what you were just arguing about?”

He shook his eyes. “No, listen. I think the Bitterfangs are getting ready to attack the Samaras. Lilac was talking to some girl he’s seeing in the pack, and she told him they scented some strange wolves on their land. Odds are it’s the Bitterfangs. Ava thinks so too, and she wants to leave immediately.”

I’d told Xavier that I didn’t think the Bitterfangs would make a move on the Samaras. Apparently, I’d been wrong about that. Apparently, I’d underestimated the Bitterfangs’ thirst for revenge. There was still a lot I didn’t know about them.

I shrugged. “Well, it sounds like Ava knows what she’s doing. She probably *should* be with her pack. God knows she’s a better leader than any of their other options at the moment.”

“Yeah, she would be,” Xavier snapped. “*If* she were fully recovered. But she’s a fucking mess. She’s too weak. And until she’s better, sending her outside the barrier—when we know who’s probably waiting for her—would be reckless. We can’t do it.”

“I guess,” I said slowly. “Look, I don’t want anything bad to happen to Ava or the Samaras. But it sounds like leaving should be Ava’s decision to make.”

Xavier gritted his teeth so hard, a muscle in his jaw began to twitch. “I’m asking for your help on this,” he ground out, like every word cost him. “Will you help?”

I gave my brother a searching look. What the hell was this all about? Why was Xavier so worried about Ava? I knew if I asked, he’d try to explain it by claiming that the Samaras were our allies and we stood to benefit from maintaining strong borders. He’d tell me that Ava had fought with us at Three Devils Point, and protecting her was the right thing to do. He was right about all that, and I wouldn’t deny it, but I had a feeling that there was something more to this. But I’d already questioned my brother about this, and it had gotten real nasty, real quick. Xavier’s defenses were set to kill when it came to questions about Ava, so I didn’t bother to ask again.

“Listen, Xavier,” I said, “I get what you’re saying, and I’m sorry, but I still think Ava should be able to decide what she wants to do. She’s a big girl, and she knows what she can handle.”

Xavier’s blue eyes flashed with anger as I spoke, but I didn’t wait for him to reply. I had a feeling that nothing that was said from this point onward was going to be especially productive—or flattering—so I turned toward the house.

“I’m trying, here.”

I turned back to Xavier, who had spoken quietly. “What did you say?”

He ground his teeth. “I’m *trying*.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’m trying to figure out why I’m bothering with Ava,” he clarified. He shook his head, like he was trying to clear it of a frustrating thought. “I don’t like that I keep bothering, but I do. I don’t know—maybe it’s got something to do with our stagnant mate bond. Maybe that’s what’s making me feel like I still need to protect her. I don’t know the fucking answer.” His expression was dark, and when he looked up at me, there was anger in his eyes. “But I want to make it crystal clear to you that—whatever the fuck is going on with Ava—I am still fully committed to Cali—”

“Okay, I didn’t say anything—”

“I love Cali more than anything,” he went on, ignoring me. “And nothing will ever—*ever*—change that.”

I looked into my brother’s face, which fell into the shadow cast by the house as the dim sun moved across the cloudy sky. I could see the conflict playing across it. He was a man being pulled in opposite directions by forces within himself, and I felt for him. I believed that his feelings for Cali were genuine, and that whatever was going on with Ava was making things really hard for him. I couldn’t help the petty thought that if Xavier still had feelings for Ava, that could really open the door for Cali’s and my relationship. Even so, despite Xavier’s and my problems and rivalries, I wanted to help him. But stopping Ava from going to her pack when they needed her didn’t feel like the answer. If anything, keeping her around when my brother’s feelings for her were so obviously conflicted was probably risky.

“Will you help?” Xavier asked again through gritted teeth.

I shook my head. “No. I’m sorry, Xavier. My mind’s made up.”

His jaw worked, and I could see him thinking, pivoting as he thought of another solution. “Then let me go with her.”

“*What?*” I asked, shocked.

“Let me go with her to the Samara campsite. Will you do that?”

# Episode 3662

Russell, Paris, Joan, and I were gathered in the den, discussing the plan and the use of the potion.

“I’ll tell you truthfully, Cali,” Paris said, shaking her head, “we’re very wary about going through with this.”

“I understand that—” I started.

“The only reason we’ve agreed is because of the Bitterfangs,” she went on. “We know they’ve made it very clear that they want to kill our son.” She shot a worried look at Russell. “And we know that we have to do *something*. Just waiting around isn’t an option.”

“No,” Joan agreed. “But it’s true that we have some concerns about putting our trust in a witch. That’s not something we’ve ever done before. And the Pit Bulls are Rogues—we don’t grant our trust casually. And especially not to witches.”

“I understand that,” I said. “I know that witches and werewolves aren’t natural allies, but you have to understand the special relationship our pack has with our witches. To start with, our Alpha—Greyson—used to be a Rogue himself. And now his mother is engaged to Big Mac, who is a witch.”

“Yeah, I get that,” Paris said. “But I hope you can appreciate where we’re coming from. It’s not that we don’t like witches on principle, like some werewolves. It’s more than that for us. We’ve had some bad run-ins with them in the past, and we’re not looking to repeat the experience.”

Her expression had turned dark, like she was remembering.

I nodded, thinking about Big Mac, and how intimidated I’d been by her when I’d first met her. Truth be told, she *still* intimidated me, but I knew she was a good person. I thought about how she’d taken Marta under her wing without any hesitation when the young woman had shown up at the pack house, fresh from the living hell where she’d been trapped for fifty years. Big Mac had helped Marta navigate her magic when she was at her most vulnerable, and she’d been so kind—going above and beyond what was expected of her.

“I get that you’ve had some bad experiences,” I said, “but Big Mac isn’t like a lot of other witches. Yeah, she can be prickly, and yeah, she’s made some tough bargains in exchange for her magic—but deep down, she really has a good heart. And I know she would never do anything to harm a child.”

Russell glared at me. “I’m *not* a child. I’m basically a grown man.”

I cleared my throat. “I mean, Big Mac would never do anything to harm a *young man* like Russell.”

That seemed to satisfy him.

Paris looked at me closely, then leaned forward, speaking in a low voice. “Cali, I have something to ask you. I’ve overheard some things…”

“What things?” I asked curiously when she didn’t elaborate.

“I understand that your pack’s witches have been having some issues with their magic,” she said. “Is that true?”

“It’s—well…” I stammered.

I didn’t want to lie—I still had to fulfill my bargain with Artemis, which only existed because of my *last* lie. But I also didn’t want to give too much away. I barely knew these women, and I was hesitant to reveal the problems that Big Mac and the other witches had been experiencing with their magic. It just felt too personal to talk about with strangers.

I tried to keep things neutral. “One way or another, there’s enough magic between the various witches in the house that there shouldn’t be any problems.”

Paris didn’t look wholly satisfied by this answer, but Russell spoke before she could ask any more questions.

“When are they going to have the potion ready?” he asked eagerly. “Because I’m ready to take it. I want to see Julia as soon as possible.”

I smiled at the kid. Apparently, despite the hesitation his mothers were feeling, Russell was still full steam ahead. Anything for Julia.

Paris gave him a stern look. “Russell, we need to think about this.”

“Think about what?” he demanded.

“This isn’t something you should be rushing into,” she chided. “This whole thing requires some serious thought.”

Russell pouted, looking more like a kid than ever. “But being away from Julia is *torture*!”

I tried to hide my smile. Russell might’ve seen himself as a grown man, but he was definitely a kid. Still, I felt for him. I knew I would’ve felt the same way if I were separated from my mates for any extended period of time. I hated to be away from either of them. It just made me feel… not whole.

“I’ll go talk to the witches,” I told them all. “I’ll let you all know the moment the potion is ready, and then you can make your decisions.”

“Thanks, Cali,” Russell said.

“No problem.” I got to my feet and headed into the hallway.

Joan and Paris followed me.

“Thank you, Cali, for taking the time to talk to Russell about all of this,” Joan said quietly. “For explaining things.” She glanced back into the den. “Despite how certain he sounds, I think we all know he’s scared.”

I nodded. “Of course. Honestly, I wish I could assure you both that there isn’t a reason for him to be scared, but that would be a lie—and I think you both know that. I think the plan is a good one, and that our pack will do everything we can to make it work, but if I’ve learned anything, it’s that there are never any guarantees when it comes to risky plans like this.”

Joan looked at Paris, and they both nodded.

“We understand,” Paris said. “We know that. Thanks for being honest, Cali. We appreciate it.”

As I headed toward the living room, I thought about the witches. All this talk about them and their magic problems made me want to check in and see how they were doing.

I was tempted to use my own magic, just to see how it was working, but I wasn’t sure if I wanted to. There was a chance that it would drain me, and I needed my energy.

In the living room, I found Mrs. Smith flipping through a binder by the fire.

“Hi, Mrs. Smith. Do you know where Big Mac is?” I asked her.

She looked up. “She’s around, preparing to get to work on the *Romeo and Juliet* potion,” she said. “And it’s probably best not to disturb her.”

“Got it. How’s she doing?” I asked.

Mrs. Smith looked thoughtful. “Well, I was concerned at first, of course. But MacKenzie is MacKenzie, and she seems to have regained her strength.”

I nodded, then looked over and saw that the binder on Mrs. Smith’s lap was filled with wedding information.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I feel like your wedding is being overshadowed by all this pack drama. You and Big Mac deserve a carefree wedding.”

She laughed. “Oh, I don’t know if there’s ever been such a thing.”

“You’re probably right,” I said, smiling. “I hope you’ll let me know if there’s anything I can do. I’d love to help.”

“Thank you, dear. I will.” Mrs. Smith gave me a long look. “And what about you?”

I blinked. “What *about* me?”

“How are *you*, Cali? How are you feeling?”

“Oh.” I was oddly thrown by the question. “I haven’t really been thinking about it,” I said, realizing it only when I said the words. “Which I think means that I’m feeling better.” I looked down at the Shard and the plant charm. “Or maybe the charms are just working their magic.”

Mrs. Smith smiled. “Maybe. Either way, I’m glad.”

“Me too.”

I headed into the kitchen, still thinking about the question. I really *was* feeling better. Maybe things were going to start turning around for me.

Maybe things were going to start turning around for everyone.

That thought filled me with so much hope that I started to feel bad about what I’d been considering, earlier—coming up with some scheme to keep Xavier and Ava apart. I couldn’t let myself obsess over that situation. I just had to believe that things were going to work out.

A sudden cry from outside drew my attention, and I ran out the back door. I was surprised to find Greyson outside with Xavier, Big Mac, Okorie, and Marta.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, running over to the group.

Big Mac and Okorie were looking out at the forest. Okorie had his hands raised, and both he and Big Mac were grimacing, both of them clearly doing something difficult, though I couldn’t see what it was.

“What’s happening?” I asked again when no one offered an explanation.

“The barrier’s trying to fall, and Okorie’s trying to hold it up,” Greyson said, his expression grim. “He’s struggling. Big Mac’s trying to help him.”

Big Mac groaned, her face turning red with effort. “Someone is using dark magic to bring it down!”

# Episode 3663

“*Dark magic?*” I repeated, alarm bells clanging in my head. “Someone’s using dark magic?”

Behind me, I heard the back door bang open. A moment later, Dani had joined us.

“How can I help?” she asked, looking around.

I must not have been the only one to hear Okorie shouting, because Russell and his mothers burst out of the house, too.

“What’s going on?” Paris asked.

“Use your magic, Dani,” Big Mac choked out, ignoring Paris’s question. “Help Okorie. Strengthen his magic.”

Dani nodded and got to work, focusing all her energy on Okorie. He nodded, and I was pretty sure she was helping, but even with her amplification magic, Okorie still seemed to be struggling. Big Mac hadn’t stepped away, and I didn’t think she’d stopped assisting him. Now three of our witches were working to hold up the barrier, and they were struggling.

“What does this mean?” Xavier asked Big Mac. “Where’s the dark magic coming from?”

She shook her head. “I have no idea.”

“It’s got to be coming from *somewhere*,” Xavier said, looking frustrated.

“I can feel it too,” Okorie said breathlessly. “Someone’s working hard, trying to negate our magic. Someone really powerful.”

I looked around, taking in the barrier. It looked strange, and I blinked hard, trying to clear my vision. Was it just my imagination, or did it seem like the barrier was revealing itself through random and sporadic pulses of flickering light? I watched it closely, trying to make sure I was actually seeing what I thought I was seeing. I’d seen plenty of magical barriers around the pack house, and none of them had ever done *that*.

I felt a sense of dread creep over me, settling as heavy as lead. I glanced over at Russell, who was standing with his mothers. They all looked terrified. I thought about what I’d just told them. Had it been a mistake to assure them that everything would be okay?

“There are only two non-local groups who know about the barrier,” Greyson said, looking around. “The Pit Bulls and the Bitterfangs.”

Paris glowered at Greyson. “I hope you don’t think my Pit Bulls have anything to do with this! That would make no sense. No Pit Bull would ever put Russell in danger.”

“Which leaves the Bitterfangs,” Greyson said grimly.

I swallowed convulsively. “Do you think the Bitterfangs found their own witch? One of those black market witches, like Tanya? Someone who’s willing to use their magic for money, no matter who it might affect?”

Greyson shook his head. “We can’t rule anything out right now.”

Artemis and Rishika came onto the porch and headed down the steps. They strode toward us, looking ready to rumble.

“What’s going on?” Artemis asked.

“Are we being attacked?” Rishka wanted to know. She cracked her knuckles, looking ready to crack some heads.

“Okay, I want everyone to take a breath,” Greyson said, looking around. “There are a lot of theories flying around, and there’s no productivity in panicking.” He looked over at Okorie. “Can you keep the barrier up?”

Okorie was sweating now, but he nodded. “I think the three of us can fend off the dark magic for now.”

He sounded sure, but I could see how much he was straining, and I had to wonder how sustainable this actually was. I could practically see how the effort of holding up the barrier was draining him, right before our eyes. I really didn’t know if he’d be able to keep it up much longer.

I grabbed Greyson’s arm and pulled him away from the group. “Do you think we should give up on the barrier?”

He opened his mouth to argue, but I spoke over him.

“I know you’re the Alpha and all, but think about it. Does it make sense to possibly harm our witches trying to keep the thing intact? I know it’s protecting us, but at what cost? Wouldn’t it be better for our pack if our witches were as healthy and strong as possible? There’s already something weird going on with their magic, and this is only draining them faster.”

Xavier walked over as I spoke, and Greyson looked past him at Okorie, watching as he struggled. Then his gaze moved to Big Mac, then to Dani, both of them looking pale.

Xavier shot a glance at me, then looked at Greyson. “What are you planning on doing here, man?”

I looked at Xavier, wondering why he’d just looked at me in that odd way. My thoughts went to that moment on the stairway this morning, when he’d looked as though he was about to tell me something but had stopped himself.

Was something bothering him?

“Cali thinks I should take the pressure off the witches,” Greyson said to Xavier. “Protect the pack house the old-fashioned way—with no magic barrier.”

Xavier glanced behind him, at Okorie and Big Mac and Dani. He nodded. “Yeah, she’s got a point.”

Greyson sighed. “Yeah, I think so, too.”

I looked at them both, surprised. Not only were they agreeing with me, but they were agreeing with each other. That was odd. Odd, but nice. I almost smiled, despite everything. Maybe things weren’t as bad as all that.

Greyson ran a hand through his hair. “I’m just not sure it’s a smart move to take down the barrier until I know that the Bitterfangs aren’t prepared to attack us the minute it comes down.”

I glanced past him at the flickering barrier, then beyond it. I was trying to see into the woods. Could the Bitterfang pack be in there, waiting? Ready to attack the moment the barrier came down?

Xavier was looking into the trees as well, his expression thoughtful. “I can go out past the barrier, do a little surveillance. Keep it stealthy.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said. “I hate the idea of you going out there on your own.” I shook my head. “I know you’re a brilliant fighter, but I’ve seen how the Bitterfangs fight. They’re ruthless.”

I didn’t say it, but I was worried that he’d be easily overwhelmed if he was outnumbered.

Greyson must have been thinking along the same lines. “She has a point. It might be dangerous to go out there alone.”

“Come on,” Xavier urged. “I know these woods better than anyone—including you,” he said, looking at Greyson. “I’ll be less noticeable on my own. I can travel faster and be more inconspicuous. I don’t want to go out with a group. It’ll just slow me down.”

“It’s not your speed that’s the issue,” Greyson shot back.

“What’s needed if *not* speed?”

“I just don’t think we need to go haring into the forest like—”

“I’ll go with you,” I interrupted.

They both looked at me in abject surprise.

“*No*,” they said together.

I glared at them, annoyed. “A minute ago you were agreeing with me about relieving the witches. And before that, Xavier, you were telling me that my plan to introduce Russell’s parents to Julia was a success. And Greyson,” I said, rounding on him. “Weren’t you all excited about bringing me to the pack summit as your Luna? Did either of you mean any of that, or was it all just talk?”

There was a beat of awkward silence.

“Of course it wasn’t just talk,” Greyson said, “and I do want you at the summit as my Luna, but you have to see—”

“Being good at making plans isn’t the same as marching out into the woods and risking a confrontation with the Bitterfangs,” Xavier finished. “I mean, that’s crazy!”

I felt frustration growing in my chest, and then, almost imperceptibly, it was replaced by the feeling of my magic stirring within me. It mixed with my anger, and almost before I realized what I was doing, I’d blasted the ground by their feet.

Both Xavier and Greyson jumped back, startled as the winter-wet ground cracked and started to smoke.

“Cali!” Greyson exclaimed.

“What the hell?” Xavier bellowed.

I’d surprised myself as much as them, but I stayed defiant. “I’m not *helpless*. You know that—both of you do. You’ve seen it!” I reminded them. “I can fight. When are the two of you going to acknowledge that? And not just by patting me on the head and *saying* I’m powerful, but by actually trusting that I can look after myself.”

“Cali, it’s not that—”

“We know that you can—”

They both spoke at once, but before they could get started on their explanations, Lola’s wolf burst into view from the other side of the house. She was bloodied and running so fast she was foaming at the mouth.

“Lola!” I screamed. “What’s happened to you?”  
 She shifted back to human and stood there panting, fighting to catch her breath.

“It’s Jay!” she yelled when she could finally make a sound.

“What happened?” Xavier demanded, stepping toward her.

“He’s been attacked!”

# Episode 3664

**Xavier**

I didn’t hesitate—I ran toward Lola, looking beyond her for any sign of Jay.

“Help him! *Please!*” Lola screamed. Even in her human form, blood was streaming down her face.

She was starting to panic, and I grabbed her shoulders, forcing her to focus on me. “Lola. What happened? Where is Jay?”

Cali stepped forward, putting a comforting hand on her friend’s arm. “Talk to us Lola. Please. Where is Jay?”

She took a deep, shaking breath. “Follow me. I’ll show you where he is.”

We followed her as she ran toward the land beyond the back of the house. There, the perimeter stretched far into the distance, and we couldn’t see everything that was happening inside the barrier. Maybe the size of it was why the witches were having so much trouble, but it hadn’t been like that in the past. There was clearly something else at play.

“How did this happen?” Cali asked as we walked.

“We were coming back from doing our perimeter check when Jay picked up a scent,” Lola said hurriedly, still running, leading us into the trees.

“Whose scent was it?” I asked quickly.

She shook her head. “I don’t know. Neither of us did. But we followed it, and then we were jumped. I don’t know how. I thought the barrier would protect us, but they somehow came through it?”

“Was it the Bitterfangs?’ I asked, looking around, watching for any movement around us. I was suddenly regretting having Cali tag along.

“I don’t know,” Lola wailed, sounding close to hysterical again. “All I know is that there were a few of them. I don’t know—it all happened so fast. I tried to fight back, but I knew we were outnumbered, so I ran back for help.”

“It’s okay, we’ll figure this out,” Cali said.

My heart was pounding. I was worried. Jay was like a brother to me—and not nearly as annoying as either of my actual brothers. If anything happened to him, there would be *blood.*

“Watch your back!” Greyson called from behind us. “It could be a trap!”

I wheeled around. “You think I don’t know that? I know it could be a trap, dumbass! But it doesn’t matter! Jay’s a Redwood, and he needs help!”

I glared at Greyson, pissed that he’d even try to slow me down.

Greyson stormed over to me. “Think about what you’re doing.”

“I *am* thinking. You’re the one who isn’t. If it was Rishika out there, you wouldn’t hesitate—”

Greyson grabbed my shirt. “This is the Bitterfangs we’re talking about, Xavier. They could be trying to split us up, weaken our defenses. If they somehow got inside the barrier, we need to know *how.*”

I shook my brother off. “You still have plenty of firepower if Lola and I go after Jay,” I shot back.

“Please, *stop*,” Cali said, her expression stern as she looked between us. “We need to focus on Jay right now.”

Greyson stopped. “You’re right,” he told her. Then he looked back over his shoulder. “Ravi!”

Ravi jogged over to us. “What’s up, Alpha?”

“Go with them,” Greyson said shortly. “Go look for Jay.”

“Thanks,” I said, barely moving my mouth. It was useful to have his Alpha approval for this—not that his disapproval would have stopped me. I turned to Ravi. “Let’s go.”

Lola hadn’t waited—she was already a hundred yards away, hurrying toward where she’d left Jay. Ravi, Cali, and I sprinted after her.

We caught up to Lola as she came to a sudden stop and looked wildly around.

“Jay! JAY? Where are you?” she screamed. “JAY!”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“He was right here,” she said, looking terrified.

“We’re going to find him,” Cali told her, wrapping her arms around Lola.

“Look,” Ravi said, pointing down to the soggy ground.

I spotted a trail of blood on the ground. It was leading toward the barrier. Without a moment’s hesitation, Lola pulled away from Cali to shift into her wolf form and take off.

“Lola!” Cali screamed.

“Stop!” I bellowed.

She pulled up short and looked back at me, her gaze questioning.

“Greyson could be right,” I said, hating the words. “This could be a trap. And if we go past the barrier, anything could happen. We could be ambushed again, and we won’t be able to get back through.”

Lola turned her back on me and raced toward the barrier.

“Fuck,” I muttered. I turned to Cali. “Please go warn the others that we may need backup.” She nodded, already starting to run back toward the house. Then I shifted and chased after her best friend.

Ravi shifted too, and he fell into step beside me. As we caught up with Lola, I caught the scent of strange werewolves as the wind shifted. Their scents mixed with Jay’s, and I didn’t recognize any of them.

I dropped my head and followed the scent trail, running on pure adrenaline. That helped mask the deep fear that was coursing through me. It helped me to avoid focusing on the blood we were still seeing, and the thought that it belonged to Jay.

A snarl and a yelp brought my head up, and I looked into a thick copse of trees up ahead. Even through the undergrowth, I could see what was happening: three werewolves were attacking Jay.

Part of me was deeply relieved—Jay was still alive, still fighting, doing the best he could. But he was clearly overpowered and outnumbered, and he was fading fast.

Ravi growled and lunged past both me and Lola, jumping into the fray and launching his whole body into one of the wolves. He caught the wolf off-guard and slammed him into an aspen with bone-rattling force.

Lola took on the second wolf, one with brown fur, and when I turned to the last wolf, I realized I recognized the grey from our earlier run-in with the Bitterfangs. The look in the grey’s eyes told me he recognized me too, and he lunged at me.

But I was ready for him. I batted him easily away, using his own momentum against him. He yelped as he hit the ground but was back on his feet—snarling—in an instant. He came for me again and caught the side of my face with his claws. The sting was sharp, but I swallowed the pain and reared back so I could lunge.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Ravi and Lola fighting hard. Instinctively, we’d all formed a protective ring around Jay, who was panting, his sides heaving with the effort of fighting off all three wolves.

I couldn’t help but notice how effective the Bitterfangs were as a fighting unit. Every time I knocked the grey wolf to the ground, the brown wolf Lola was fighting would break away and attack me as I tried to regroup for another attack. Their tactics made the fight way more challenging than it should have been.

But I had an edge, and I knew it—this was *my* pack. Jay was *my* friend, and the Bitterfangs were fucking around in *my* territory. So fury flowed through me like lifeblood, and I attacked with all the pent-up anger I’d been feeling toward the Bitterfangs since they’d first appeared on the scene.

I sank my teeth into the back of the grey wolf’s neck and yanked, throwing him into a tree. He hit it hard, then fell to the ground. He got up, but slower this time, and I could see him eyeing his pack mates, looking for help. But they were busy, too. Ravi had his wolf pinned and was clawing the shit out of him, and Lola had savaged the side of the brown wolf, making blood flow onto the snowy ground.

I watched the grey wolf, waiting for him to attack again, but instead, he made a snuffling snorting sound that must have been a sign to retreat. The three wolves drew back from their fights, then disappeared into the woods.

I spat out a mouthful of blood that wasn’t my own, then turned to look at Jay, who’d collapsed.

Lola shifted back to human. “Jay! Oh god, Jay!” She pulled him into her arms.

Ravi had chased after the retreating Bitterfangs, and I followed him, just to make sure they hadn’t just fallen back to regroup. They seemed to be truly gone, so I loped back to Lola and Jay. I needed to assess how badly Jay had been injured.

He was bloody, and there were several large wounds in his side and on his head. He was in bad shape—no doubt about that—but I’d seen worse.

“You’re going to be fine,” Lola was saying, her voice soothing. “You did great out there, baby. You were kicking their asses.”

Ravi trudged back and shifted back to human. “They’re gone,” he confirmed, wiping sweat from his face. “They’ve fully retreated.”

I nodded and shifted to human, too. “We need to get back to the pack house. The barrier’s been breached. Or it’s broken, I don’t know, but we have a fucking problem.”

Together, we brought Jay back toward the house.

It hadn’t been fully obvious, out in the trees, but by the time we got back, I could tell that the barrier was gone. I could sense its absence, and even if I hadn’t been able to do that, the general mood would’ve tipped me off. Everyone seemed to be panicking.

“*Jay!*” Sage yelled when we drew near. She and Zainab came running over to help us.

“Where are the witches? What the fuck happened to the barrier?” I demanded.

“I don’t give a fuck about the barrier right now!” Lola said. “We need to get Jay inside!”

“Someone get Torin!” Sage yelled.

“Xavier!” Cali ran toward me, looking anxious. “Are you okay? I was just sending help.”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said, pulling her into a hug.

Over her shoulder, I saw Ava step out the back door. Great, as if I needed her as an audience for this.

“Follow Lola,” I suggested to Cali. “She’s pretty freaked out right now.”

Cali nodded and started toward Lola, though she slowed slightly as she and Ava passed each other.

I stepped in front of Ava. “If you came to help, you’re a little too late.”

She gave me an even look. “I didn’t. I’m going to help *my* pack, like I told you I would,” she said, then she shoved past me without waiting for an answer.

Grinding my teeth in frustration, I reached out and grabbed her shoulder, turning her back around to face me. “I’m coming with you.”

# Episode 3665

**Greyson**

As Lola and Ravi helped Jay into the living room, I glanced out the window. Xavier was standing with Ava, and I wasn’t surprised to see that they looked like they were arguing. With all the chaos, I hadn’t noticed that Ava had left the pack house. *That* didn’t surprise me, either.

And I also wasn’t surprised when they both shifted and took off running into the woods.

“*Fuck*,” I muttered.

I wasn’t surprised to see it, but I was pissed. When Xavier had asked me to let him go with Ava, I’d told him no. We needed him here. But I’d seen the anger in my brother’s eyes when he hadn’t gotten the answer he wanted. And now that he’d managed to bring Jay back in one piece—mostly—he probably thought he could do no wrong.

But that didn’t give him the right to defy my direct orders, and I was *not* happy.

I glanced over and caught Cali looking out the window. She must have seen Xavier run off with Ava, too. *Great*. This was *exactly* why I’d warned Xavier to be careful with Ava. Now, all his messed-up, conflicting feelings toward her were bleeding out onto everything and everyone—including Cali.

I wanted to say something to her—to reassure her—but before I got the chance, Lola called her name.

“Cali! Can you come help?” she yelled from the living room, sounding scared.

Cali nodded and hurried off to help her friend. I glanced out the window again, but Xavier was long gone. I was going to have to deal with my brother later. I couldn’t let him just defy me like that. There would be consequences. There *had* to be. But there was nothing I could do at the moment, so I followed Cali into the living room and saw that Torin was standing above Jay, who was still in his wolf form, assessing his wounds.

“I’m going to try the mate lick,” Lola said, leaning over to speak to Jay.

He nodded weakly, and she shifted to her wolf form, then licked his wounds.

Jay closed his eye, wincing.

*Are you well enough to tell me what the hell happened out there?* I asked through the mind link.

Jay sighed. *Yeah, I’m okay*, he said, though his mental voice sounded tight.

*How did this happen?*

*Lola and I were out on patrol on the edge of the barrier, before the woods. I picked up some scents and didn’t recognize them, so I wanted to check them out. Thought they might be old, but no stone unturned, right?*

*Right*, I agreed. I’d insisted that every patrol do a *thorough* inspection of the perimeter.

*So we were looking around, and we got ambushed.*

I bristled. I’d just seen Xavier defy me, and now I was hearing that Jay had done the same damn thing.

*Why did you and Lola cross the barrier when I explicitly told you not to?* I demanded. *I told* everyone *not to! Why did you think you were the exception?*

*We didn’t cross it!* Jay protested. *Greyson… the wolves who attacked us were already inside the barrier.*

*What?* I demanded.

*That’s how they were able to attack us so effectively. We weren’t expecting it—at all. We thought we were safe*, Jay explained. *I have no idea how they got in.*

I had to take a moment to process this new information. *Okay. Thanks for the report. I’m sorry you got hurt. Feel better, okay?*

*No problem*, he said. *Between Torin and Lola, I’m going to be back on my feet before you know it*, he promised, though he still looked pretty weak.

My mind still spinning, I turned away from Jay and looked out the wide living room windows. The day was grey and still, and the clouds hung heavy up above. The pine trees stood out starkly against the slate-colored sky, and the snow lay colorless on the ground.

I thought hard. The barrier had been ineffective. Even with all that effort, even though it had drained the energy of every witch we had, the barrier had failed at keeping us safe. Where did we go from here?

I glanced again at Cali. That was what she’d been trying to convince me to do. To drop the barrier so the witches could regroup. But even with this development, I still wasn’t convinced it was the best scenario. Even though the barrier was compromised, wasn’t it still better to have *something* in place, just in case the Bitterfangs were planning a massive assault? But would the witches even be able to raise the barrier back up regardless?

I curled my hands into fists. One way or another, I was going to have to make a decision—and fast.

“Greyson?”

I turned to see that Paris and Joan were standing at my shoulder, looking pensive.

“Yeah? What’s up?” I asked tersely.

“Listen, I know this isn’t the best time,” Paris acknowledged, “but we wanted to let you know that we’ve decided to take Russell and leave.”

I hadn’t been expecting this, but I wasn’t fully surprised to hear it, either. I’d seen the way they’d looked, watching as Okorie had struggled to hold up the barrier.

“I think that’s a bad idea,” I told them. “You’re still safer here than anywhere else.”

“That might be true,” Joan admitted, “but what’s also true is that the Bitterfangs are attacking the Redwood pack because you’re all protecting Russell.” She shook her head, looking miserable. “Us being here just isn’t good for you. It’s endangering your whole pack.”

“The Pit Bulls are Rogues,” Paris went on. “We do better on our own, anyway. We appreciate you looking after Russell, and letting us be here for as long as you did—”

“Wait! No!” Russell ran over. “What are you talking about? You aren’t telling him we’re leaving, are you?” he asked desperately.

“Russell,” Paris started, but he was already shaking his head stubbornly.

“Forget it. I’m not going anywhere without Julia,” he said. “She needs me!”

Paris grabbed his shoulder, just as he lunged for the back door. “Russell, listen to me. You need to calm down. The Blue Blood pack will protect Julia—”

“How?” he demanded, still fighting to free himself from his mom. “Our barrier isn’t working. Who’s to say the barrier at the Blue Bloods’ pack house is any better?”

Russell generally talked like a lovestruck puppy, so it was odd to hear him making any sense, but I had to admit there was truth to what he was saying. How *did* we know that the other barrier was holding up?

There was only one way to know for certain.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket to call Mace. I had to warn the guy about the attack on Jay. Something like that could happen to his pack, too. But—more than anything—I had to warn him about what had happened to our barrier. And to ask him if he’d noticed anything out of the ordinary in his territory.

But when I looked at my phone, I saw that I had notifications. I hadn’t heard my phone ring, but Mace had already called, and followed the call up with a text that answered a lot of my questions.

*Barrier down. Call me.*

“Shit,” I said, my heart sinking. Kira must have been having the same issues with her magic. *Dammit*. And I knew if anything happened to Julia while she was with the Blue Bloods, all the responsibility and blame would fall on my shoulders. I was the Alpha, and it had been my decision to send her away.

“Greyson?” Joan said, her voice wary. “What’s wrong? You don’t look so good.”

I looked up at Russell’s parents, who were both watching me closely. I knew that if I passed on Mace’s message about the barrier failing, Russell would *freak out* about Julia. And I couldn’t afford to have anyone else freaking out in this pack house. We were at freak-out capacity.

And until I spoke to Mace and found out what was actually happening, I didn’t want to tell anyone anything. So I was just going to have to play it down. Otherwise I’d cause a massive ripple effect through everyone here.

But there was one thing I now knew for sure, and it was time to do something about it.

“I’m fine, thanks,” I said to Joan. “Will you excuse me?”

“Greyson?” Cali had appeared next to me and was watching me warily.

She stayed by my side as I marched outside to where Big Mac, Dani, and Okorie still stood, their eyes on where the barrier had been. I could see at a glance how bad they looked. They looked sapped of energy, and I knew just looking at them that I was doing the right thing.

“Enough!” I bellowed, striding toward them. “We don’t need a barrier. We don’t need magic. We’re the Redwood pack, and it’s time to defend ourselves the old-fashioned way.”

# Episode 3666

**Xavier**

As we moved through the snowy woods toward Samara territory, Ava kept sprinting ahead.

*Slow down*, I told her for the fifth time.

She did, but only slightly, and I knew that slowing down even a little was making her furious.

*We have to be careful*, I reminded her, annoyed that I had to be the responsible one. *We don’t know what’s out here. We don’t know if the Bitterfangs are waiting for us—*

*My* pack *is waiting for me*, she snapped.

*I know that.* *Did you talk to anyone?* I asked.

*I spoke to Perrie*, she said, hopping easily over a fallen tree. *There’s no doubt that the Bitterfangs are moving into our territory.*

*Yeah? And what are you going to do about it?*

She growled. *Keep them away.*

She was speeding up again, and I ground my teeth in frustration.

*Slow the fuck down. If we get ambushed by the Bitterfangs on the way there and get our asses handed to us because of your damn carelessness, then we won’t be able to help anyone. If they’re in trouble, they’re probably holding them off. You’re just one wolf, Ava.*

She glared at me. *I don’t remember asking you to come*, she shot back. *This was your decision.* She paused. *Or was it Greyson’s?*

I snarled deep in the back of my throat. Fucking Ava. She always knew how to push my buttons. That was what came of knowing someone for so long.

*I don’t need my fucking brother’s permission to do anything*, I told her.

Even running at top speed, I could still see her rolling her eyes.

*Do I actually need to remind you how a pack works?* she asked. *How Alphas give the orders and everyone else is supposed to follow them? Greyson is your Alpha, remember?*

I didn’t answer her. There was nothing to say in response to that, and my anger was building in my chest, growing like a living thing.

I almost wished we could run into Lance. With the raw anger flowing through me, that fucker wouldn’t stand a chance. Ava just loved to rub the Alpha thing in my face—and she did it every damn chance she got. She’d even gotten a dig in while she was recovering from silver poisoning, when I’d refused to let her leave the pack house—which I still maintained had been the right thing to do.

She must’ve been conveniently forgetting that I’d intended to go out to the Samara campsite and warn them about the Bitterfangs myself. And I would’ve made it, too, if not for the barrier complication.

A strange scent pulled me from my thoughts, and I lifted my nose, sniffing the cold winter air.

*Are you getting that?* I asked Ava. The scent wasn’t familiar, and I had to assume it belonged to a Bitterfang. *Let’s go*, I said, following the trail.

Behind me, I felt Ava pull to a stop.

*Where the hell are you going?* she demanded.

I turned to look at her. *What are you talking about? I’m following the scent.*

*Why?*

*I’m going to take out whatever Bitterfang wolf it leads to*, I said, baffled that I had to explain this to Ava, of all people.

She shook her head. *No way. I don’t give a damn about the Bitterfangs. That’s not why I’m here.*

*What are you talking about?* I demanded.

*This is about the Samaras*, she said hotly. *I’m going to my pack. If you want to go on some damn fishing expedition, that’s your business, X. I’m not going to stop you. But I’m not going with you.*

Fuck. I hated to admit it, but she was right. There would always be time to hunt the Bitterfang down. And that wasn’t why we were out here. Making sure the Samaras were safe was the goal.

*Fine*, I grunted. *Let’s go.*

We turned back toward Samara territory, and by the time we crossed the invisible boundary, neither one of us was speaking.

As much as I hated to admit it, my wolf was enjoying the close proximity to Ava, and the primitive joy of running next to her in our wolf forms. There was something primal and free about it, and my wolf was lapping up the moment.

I tried to put him back in his place, but he wouldn’t budge. Stubborn bastard.

I thought back to what Greyson had said to me, about how I needed to figure out this thing with Ava. I dropped my head and ran harder, thinking that was easier said than done.

Ava began to slow, and when I looked up, I saw scattered tents and cold fire pits—we were approaching the Samara campsite. Knox’s old Airstream was dead ahead, and the majority of the Samara tents were clustered nearby. But there was no one around.

Ava shifted back to human and looked around, her brows drawn together in concern.

“Where the hell is everyone?” she asked, clearly speaking more to herself than to me.

I shifted as well and took in the scene. It was eerie. “It’s like a ghost town,” I muttered.

The wind blew through the clearing, whistling around the pine trees. It rattled the branches of the bare aspens and curled around our naked bodies as we turned slowly, looking for any sign of life.

I could feel Ava’s anxiety—it was radiating off her in waves.

*Maybe we’re already too late.*

I managed to keep that thought to myself, but Ava was smart, and she’d seen some shit, and something told me that she was probably thinking the same thing.

There was a scuffling, crunching sound to the west, and I grabbed Ava’s elbow, signaling for her to drop down. We crouched by an empty tent, listening hard.

Ava’s eyes met mine. *Someone’s coming this way, though the woods.*

She was right, and I felt myself tensing for a fight. I moved, positioning myself in front of her. I focused on the woods, feeling keyed up, ready to shift and attack in an instant.

Wait, *why* had I just moved in front of Ava? *Dammit*. I was doing it again. That instinctive urge to protect her. It was like I couldn’t even control it. My wolf just wouldn’t let me have it any other way.

“Hello?” Marissa stepped out of the trees and into the clearing. She looked around cautiously. “Hello? Ava?”

“Marissa!” Ava said, standing and taking a step forward.

Relief washed over Marissa’s face, and she ran to Ava, throwing her arms around her.

“Are you okay?” Ava asked, enveloping the girl in her arms.

I couldn’t help but feel impressed with Ava in that moment. She was so many things—and almost all of them pissed me off—but I really admired how gentle she was being with Marissa, who was obviously upset. I hadn’t fully realized it, but Ava could really step up when the moment called for it.

Marissa nodded and pulled a little away. “Yeah, I’m okay. Just scared. I thought you were the Bitterfangs.”

I looked around. “Where is everyone?”

“After I picked up more wolf scents I didn’t recognize, we all decided to hide in the woods,” Marissa explained breathlessly. “We didn’t want to just sit around and wait to be ambushed.”

“That was smart,” I admitted.

But Ava was shaking her head. “I get why you did that, but I need you to go gather the others. We can’t be a pack if we’re scattered and shaking in our boots.”

I stared at Ava. That had been *seamless*. She understood that they’d been scared, but she also knew what needed to be done. She’d taken charge without a second thought—just like an Alpha.

With that thought, I glanced at Knox’s trailer.

“Is Zeke still cowering inside?” I asked Marissa, nodding toward the Airstream.

She shrugged. “I assume so. After Ava called, Perrie knocked on the door and tried to get him to come out, but he wouldn’t. She was trying to talk to him through the door, but he refused to do anything.”

Fury whipped through me, and I stomped over to the trailer. “It’s time for Zeke to act like a goddamn Alpha and take charge. He needs to change his goddamn attitude.”

“You got that right,” Ava muttered, and she followed me as I stormed toward the trailer.

Together, we pounded on the aluminum door.

“Get your ass out here!” I bellowed.

“Zeke!” Ava called. “Come out!”

There was no response.

“Get the fuck out here!” I yelled.

Still nothing. I couldn’t believe what a coward Zeke was turning out to be. I’d known it, but still. Seeing it at a time like this made my stomach turn.

Ava went to pound on the door again, but I’d had enough. I leaned back and kicked the door off its hinges.

“Yeah, that’ll do it,” Ava muttered, and she yanked the door out of the way, then stepped into the trailer. After a moment, she turned and looked back at me, her eyes wide. “X, it’s empty.”

“*What?*”

“Zeke’s run off.”

# Episode 3667

I stared at Greyson, shaking. “You think we should keep the barrier down?”

He nodded, his jaw set. “Yes.”

I wasn’t sure where this sudden shift was coming from, but at least he was coming round to my idea.

And maybe I *could* see why he’d changed his mind. Okorie and Big Mac looked exhausted. Whether he decided to keep the barrier down or not, there was no telling how much longer they’d be able to keep trying to restore it. There was clearly something going on that was affecting them. Was it the same Seluna issue I was having? Was this because the ashes hadn’t settled in yet?

It made me nervous, and—even though it had been my idea—the thought of not having the barrier made me nervous, too. But the witches were too important. What if they pushed themselves too far and couldn’t come back from it? I still thought it was the right thing to do, but I wasn’t sure what we were going to do without it. I hadn’t planned that far ahead.

Would the dark magic that was attacking the barrier before redirect to the house and do something to the pack? Or if the person casting the dark magic was nearby, would they move in and attack at close range at any moment? And who was behind the dark magic in the first place?

A thought occurred to me, and I felt a sudden chill sweep through me. What if it was the same person who’d created that wisp? The one that could manipulate my mind? I didn’t want anyone who could do *that* getting any closer to the pack house.

“Stop trying to restore the barrier,” Greyson said again. “Let it go.”

Big Mac was shaking her head. “Don’t be ridiculous. There’s dark magic out there.”

“And it’s hurting you to fight it,” he said. “We can deal with some dark magic.”

“No,” she said flatly. “We can handle this.”

“We’ve got this,” Okorie agreed. Even Marta and Dani, standing next to him, both nodded.

Greyson looked frustrated. “The barrier has already failed. It was glitching—what happened to Jay happened because someone managed to get inside. We can’t rely on the barrier, and I don’t want you draining yourselves to keep it in place when it’s not even us doing us all that much good. You’re killing yourselves to maintain a leaking dam.”

“You really should stop,” I said, agreeing with Greyson. “You need your strength, all of you. And Big Mac, if we want to execute the potion plan for Russell, we’re going to need you.”

Big Mac looked frustrated. “Dammit,” she muttered to herself.

I understood her exasperation—to some degree. I wasn’t nearly as powerful as Big Mac, but I still understood what it was like to let yourself down. Big Mac was a really strong witch, and usually capable of so much. It had to be driving her crazy that she was struggling so hard with this barrier. Especially when she’d made it sound so simple, and she’d already done it so many times in the past. That indignity had to sting.

Mrs. Smith had been standing off to the side, watching silently, but she must have been thinking along the same lines, because she walked over to where Big Mac was standing and put her hand on the witch’s shoulder.

“MacKenzie,” she said quietly. “MacKenzie… Please.”

Big Mac looked over at her fiancée for a long moment, then sighed. “Okay.” She rubbed her eyes and looked over at the others. “Okorie. Enough.”

Okorie looked over at her, and they both nodded. They waved their hands, and the air around us seemed to crackle for an instant, and then it was still as the last of the magic hanging in the air dissipated.

“It’s done,” Big Mac said heavily. “We’ve let the barrier go.”

She sounded upset, but I couldn’t help but notice that all the witches seemed relieved, and color was returning to their faces. It looked like life was flowing back into them.

“Thank you for your hard work,” Greyson said. He turned to the pack members who’d gathered to watch from the porch. “Everybody, get down here!” he bellowed.

People moved down the lawn, and when we’d all gathered, Greyson looked around, making sure everyone was there.

“I want patrols running nonstop,” he said. “We have a lot more ground to cover, now that the barrier is down. We have to secure our territory.”

“I’m on it, Greyson,” Rishika said quickly. “I’ll get the patrols organized.”

Greyson nodded, then turned to Vishal, Joan, and Paris. “Can we count on the Pit Bulls for help?”

Vishal nodded. “You got it. Now that the barrier is down, I’ll bring them here. And I’ll send someone to get the girl from the Blue Bloods. We decided that was the best way to keep Russell from running off again.”

“Thanks for that. And that makes sense,” he said. “Okay, you all know what you’re supposed to do. Rishika will give you your patrol assignments. Let’s move.”

As everyone dispersed, I lingered at Greyson’s side.

“What can I do?” I asked.

He glanced down at me. “Stay safe.”

I shook my head. “That’s not enough.”

“Cali—”

“No, Greyson. This is my pack, too.” When he started to move away, I grabbed his hand and turned him toward me, cupping his face and looking right into his eyes. “I’m here for you. Whatever you need, I will do my best to do it. But I won’t hesitate to blast you if you don’t let me do *something*.”

He gave me a brief smile. “Thank you, love. I appreciate that.” Then the smile faded, and he shook his head, his expression clouding. “We went about this all wrong. We never should have let ourselves get used to defending the pack house with magic. It’s just not reliable—”

“Hey, don’t think that way,” I said quickly.

“It’s a good tool,” Greyson said. “But that’s what it is. A tool. We shouldn’t have come to depend on it. That was a mistake. There’s nothing better than our own hands, our own pack. We’re werewolves, for god’s sake. I don’t know what I was thinking—”

“Greyson, stop talking like that. You were smart to use the resources you had access to,” I said firmly. “You were smart to use magic. Come on. That’s what sets the Redwood apart from the other packs. It’s what makes us even stronger. We’re willing to think outside the box, doing things that haven’t been done before. What’s happening now has nothing to do with that. What’s happening now has something to do with dark magic—and that’s totally out of our control.”

Greyson pulled me close, wrapping his arms around me. He dropped his face to my hair and breathed me in. “Thank you.”

Without even thinking about it, I leaned back, stretched up onto my toes, and kissed him.

He slid a hand around my face and kissed back, his mouth warm and instantly hungry for me. I felt myself melt against him, and the tension in my body seemed to fade away as his tongue slid along mine. A moan rumbled in the back of my throat, and I arched against him, aching for more contact. Kissing Greyson made the world fall away. All my worries seemed to disappear whenever his arms were around me. All I felt was heat.

I could’ve stayed like that all day, but he pulled gently away. And when he did, I saw that he looked a little puzzled.

“What is it?” I wondered.

“Did you settle things with Artemis?” he asked.

My brain was still fuzzy from the kiss, so I didn’t understand what he was asking. “What? What things?”

“You kissed me,” he pointed out.

“Oh, yeah.” It dawned on me that I still had to speak to my sister. I’d just defied her command. So… did that mean I’d overcome it? I shrugged. There was only one way to find out.

I reached up to kiss Greyson a second time—

But I couldn’t do it.

*Shit.*

Greyson frowned. “How were you able to kiss me before?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know what I did.” I grinned. “But I’m glad I was able to do it.’

He smiled and cupped my cheek, his strong hand gentle on my face. “Me too.”

“*Greyson!*”

We both looked over to see Rishika on the porch. She was surrounded by pack members and looking a little stressed as she waved him over.

“Probably some problem with patrols,” he muttered. He looked down at me. “I have to go.”

“Go,” I said, giving him a little push. “Go be the Alpha.”

He gave my hand a squeeze, but as he walked away, I had to wonder how I’d done what I’d just done. It didn’t make any sense. How the hell had I just overcome that manipulation? Was it because it was… Greyson?

No. I couldn’t think like that. I was mated to two incredible werewolves. It could’ve happened with either of them. And the most important thing right now was that I had broken the manipulation—even if it had been brief.

So, the real question was… How could I break it permanently?

# Episode 3668

I watched as Greyson headed over to Rishika to organize the patrols. Judging by the way everyone was moving people into groups, they were going to increase the frequency of patrols and the number of people per team—probably to avoid a repeat of what had happened to Jay and Lola.

As they worked, I let myself think about the kiss Greyson and I had just shared, and Artemis’s command—but only for a moment. Then I put it out of my mind with a quick shake of my head. I needed to focus on what was actually in front of me, and right now that was the Bitterfang pack and the possibility of their imminent attack, now that the barrier had come down and was staying down.

Greyson had told me to stay safe, but I’d been serious when I’d told him that wasn’t enough for me. I understood why he’d said it—I wished he wasn’t about to run full-speed into danger, too—but we were a werewolf pack, and risk just came with the territory.

So what was *my* risk going to be? I balled my hands into fists, steeling myself. I’d shown my magic to Greyson and Xavier earlier, and now I was ready to act.

I looked around, and when I spotted Artemis, I strode over to her.

“Artemis!” I said. “I think we should team up.”

She nodded. “Yeah, good idea. I want to keep an eye on Rishika.”

“No, I’m not talking about patrols,” I said. “But we do have our magic, and I think we should use it.”

“Our magic?” Artemis gave me a curious look. “Do you think that’s a good idea?”

“Yeah. Why not?” I demanded.

“Look at what’s happening to the witches,” she said, nodding over to where Big Mac still stood with Okorie, Dani, and Marta. “Their magic’s not holding up so well, obviously. What makes you think ours will?”

“Yours is working fine on me,” I said, raising an eyebrow. *Or it was… Had I broken her control on it, or had her magic slipped?* Shit. A problem for later. We had to see if this would even work first. The compulsion was back to working, so that’s what I was going with for now.

She sighed. “Okay, but even if it *is* working fine, what can we really do?”

I shifted on my feet. “Well, I was actually hoping you’d be able to answer that question for me, seeing as you’re our resident bounty hunter who was highly involved in the Fae war.”

“*Former* bounty hunter,” she corrected. Then she shrugged. “At least for now. But I did show you how to use my bow. Maybe you could borrow my spare.”

I swallowed nervously. “I’m not really sure if I actually learned how to use it all that well. Isn’t there *anything* we could do with our magic to help out?”

“I don’t know…”

“Okay, hear me out. I know I still have a lot to learn about it, but I was thinking about the shield charm Grandpa Innes taught me. And I was figuring that you could learn to use it too, right? I mean, there’s no reason why you couldn’t—you and I have such similar magic. Well, one of them, at least,” I said. Artemis having two types of magic was either very cool or very unfair, depending who you were. “I mean, couldn’t we figure out a way to use our magic on a larger scale to help protect the pack? If we could figure out a way to make a giant shield, we could use that in place of the witch’s barrier.”

Artemis looked a little taken aback, but—to her credit—she seemed to think about my suggestion.

“I don’t know,” she said slowly. “I’ve never considered that before. I guess there could be a way to expand that charm. It’s not like there’s a size limit on it. But there’s no guarantee that the two of us could make it stay up. And—remember—I’ve never even tried to make a shield.”

Crap. She was right about that. I thought fast.

“Okay. Then is there something else we could do with the number of Fae we have here? A charm or something? Like how we used the Fae circle to summon a wisp—”

I winced at the thought of wisps, remembering the last one I’d encountered, but I tried to shake it off.

“We did that before, to find something,” I went on. “Is there something we could do together to protect the house? Something I don’t know about?”

Artemis thought about the question. “It’s possible… Maybe?”

I felt myself deflate. I could hear the doubt in her voice. It almost felt like she just was humoring me, which was *not* what I needed.

I glanced around. “Maybe we could ask Mom or Adair. They’re older; they might have some ideas. Or Torin.”

Artemis shrugged. “Yeah, that’s probably true. If there’s anything to be done, they’d be the ones to ask. It can’t hurt to brainstorm. But I’m going to keep hold of my bow, whatever happens. That never fails me,” she added with a grin.

I smiled back. “I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

“Okay, well, I’ll go collect the other Fae, then. See what they have to say about the idea,” Artemis said.

“I think Torin was just finishing up with Jay,” I said. “He was looking a lot better.”

Artemis nodded. “It was a head wound. Those are mostly just blood. I’m sure he’s fine.”

“Let’s hope so,” I murmured.

As Artemis moved off, I went looking for my parents. I found them standing by the back door.

“Cali, there you are. Your dad wants to go out on a patrol,” my mom said accusingly the moment she spotted me.

“Do you?” I asked, surprised. “I guess that makes sense,” I said slowly. He *was* a werewolf, after all. Though, truthfully, I was still getting used to that fact.

“Cali, tell your mother that I’m going to be fine,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“Cali, tell your father that if he insists on going, then he has to promise to be very careful,” my mom said, looking stern.

“Oh my god, you two, just talk to each other, please,” I said, squeezing past them into the kitchen. “I’d really rather not be your messenger girl.”

My dad turned to my mom. “Orla, I already told you that I’d be careful. I’ve learned a lot since becoming a werewolf. And I’ve been working out with some of the pack in the weight room. Look!” He flexed his bicep.

I smiled at how proud he looked. He’d always been tough, but in very different ways than my mates, and even some of the other werewolves. Tom Hart had always been an individual—excellent at doing exactly what was right for him. And I loved that about him. But the fact was, he had zeroexperience fighting other werewolves—especially highly skilled wolves like the Bitterfangs—and that made me nervous.

“Dad, listen, I’ve seen the Bitterfang wolves in action, and they’re next-level fighters,” I said cautiously. I had to interject myself; I couldn’t help it. “You have to understand what you’d be getting into, going out on patrols.”

He nodded. “I’m not saying I couldn’t use some more practice—I know I could,” he admitted. “But I want to get out there. It feels like the right thing to do.”

“I don’t know, Tom,” my mom said, pursing her lips. “How about you just be the eyes and the ears out there? You know, you keep an eye on everyone else. Kind of like a supervisor.”

My dad nodded. “Yeah, I could do that,” he said slowly. “That way, I could be out there without having to do much actual fighting.”

“Exactly,” I said, feeling relieved he’d reacted positively to my mom’s suggestion. I didn’t want to take the wind out of his sails, but I was on my mom’s side on this issue. I’d worry too, knowing that my dad was out there, possibly facing off against a nasty Bitterfang wolf like Lance. I’d never seen a fighter like him.

It also didn’t escape my notice that my mom was reacting to the idea of my dad going out on patrol in just the same way Greyson had reacted to the idea of *me* going out on patrol—but the two situations were *very* different.

My dad had recently become a werewolf and had spent the majority of the time since his transformation inside the safety of the pack house. Whereas *I* had faced down nearly every horror the supernatural world had to offer, and I was still here—still fighting.

Which reminded me…

“Mom, I need you for something,” I said, grabbing her wrist. “Come outside with me.”

“Caliana,” my mom said, clearly surprised. “What’s going on? What do you need me for?”

I pulled her out onto the lawn, where Artemis had already gathered Adair and Torin.

As my mom and I walked over, Adair looked at us, his expression characteristically annoyed.

“Can someone please explain why exactly we’re here?” he said.

I looked around at the assembled Fae. “We have to make a new barrier.”

# Episode 3669

**Xavier**

I stared at Ava in shock. “Why do you think Zeke ran off?”

Ava turned back to me. She gestured at the shitty Airstream. “X, he’s gone. What other conclusion should I jump to?”

“Ava, think for a second. Is it possible that Zeke was captured by the Bitterfangs?” I asked. “Is it possible he might even have been killed, trying to protect the pack? Or that he was killed because he’s your Alpha?”

As the words left my mouth, I was hit by a troubling thought: if that had happened, should I not have left Greyson? Shit.

No, I was being crazy. The Samaras were *not* the Redwoods, and the Redwoods would never allow their Alpha to be assassinated. The Bitterfangs would have to take out the whole pack—vampires, witches, and Fae included—before they let that happen.

Ava snorted. “Give me a break. That’s pure fantasy, Xavier. Just like the idea that Zeke could ever be our true Alpha.” She gave me a hard look, then grabbed my arm and pulled me into the trailer. “If you don’t believe me, take a look for yourself.”

I stepped in and looked around, and all my doubts immediately died—the Airstream had been cleared out. Ava was right. This wasn’t the home of someone who’d been taken by force or against their will. Zeke had taken the time to pack his things. He had left of his own accord.

“Fucking hell,” I muttered, running a frustrated hand through my hair. I was mad, but not exactly shocked that Zeke had abandoned his pack at the first sign of trouble. “Well, we all knew he was weak—”

“This isn’t just weakness, Xavier. Zeke is a traitor,” Ava hissed, her eyes flashing dangerously. “Running away like this is no different than joining the Bitterfangs and fighting against us. If I ever cross paths with that bastard again—”

“This isn’t the time for wishful thinking,” I said. “You have a pack you need to bring together. You need to form a plan before the Bitterfangs make their next move on you, Ava. You need to focus. I doubt it’s going to be long before we see them. You know as well as I do that werewolves have a knack for sensing when their enemies are at their weakest. And a pack without an Alpha is the definition of weak.”

Ava blew out an infuriated breath, but she nodded. Her blood was running hot, but she was a realist, and she knew I was right.

She stepped out of the Airstream. As I followed, Perrie came running over to us, looking worried.

“Ava, there you are!” she called. “We have a problem.”

I felt Ava tense next to me.

“Another one?” she asked. “What is it now?”

Perrie pointed to the remaining Samaras, who’d returned from wherever the hell they’d been hiding. The pack members were milling around and seemed to be gathering their belongings. There didn’t *seem* to be anything wrong, and I frowned.

“What’s the problem?” I asked.

Ava looked hard at them, watching as they moved their blankets and food stores out of the tents and into duffel bags. “What the hell are they doing?”

“Packing.”

Ava rounded on Perrie. “*What?*”

The girl nodded grimly. “Yeah. They started as soon as we got back from the woods. They’re planning to leave the Samara pack and join the Vanguards.”

I stared at Perrie, stunned. “*What the hell?*” I burst out. “Why would they even *think* to go to that little princeling and his pack for help—”

But Ava wasn’t listening. She was already marching toward the tents like a human hurricane.

I leaned against the Airstream with a sigh. Were they not even willing to give Fletcher a chance? It didn’t seem like it. Last I knew, he was still a contender, but I didn’t know where that stood. That was, ultimately, her problem to deal with, not mine. But it did suck to see this happen to the Samara pack—it was hard to see that they’d fallen so far.

Ava shoved past the pack members and stood in the midst of them, next to a cold firepit. She rounded on them, glaring. “You have got to be fucking kidding me,” she spat. “Are you *really* thinking of leaving our pack? Of joining up with someone else? After all we’ve been through? Are you really going to abandon everything you’ve fought for? Everything our brothers and sisters have *died* for? Has their blood been for nothing? Are you really going to abandon the pack of your ancestors? For the *Vanguards*?” she asked, spitting the name out like a bad taste. Fair.

There were a couple of murmurs, but I couldn’t hear what anyone else was saying, so I walked closer. I was interested in what their paltry explanations might sound like.

“—and it’s not like we’ve got a future here. And anyway, their Alpha promised he would protect us,” a man was saying.

Ava laughed, but the sound was without joy. “Protect you, huh? And where the hell did you get that idea, Donovan?”

Donovan looked down at the ground, refusing to meet Ava’s eyes. “When Lucian came to see you, he told us all about the Vanguard pack and his palace. We thought it sounded pretty good.”

His words hit me like a ton of bricks.

“Wait, Lucian came *here*?” I snarled, rounding on Ava. I hadn’t expected *that*, and I couldn’t help but think of when I’d seen Ava and Lucian kissing in the Vanguard pool at the New Year’s party. I felt myself grow hot with fury, and my wolf growled with jealousy.

Ava didn’t answer me—her eyes were on her pack.

“Why should we live in tents in the snow when we could go live in a palace?” another woman said.

A few others murmured in agreement.

“We won’t last the entire winter out here with no Alpha!”

“What’s left of the Samara pack, anyway?”

“If that’s what you want, then you can go to hell!” Ava exploded, her face flushing hot. “If comfort and a fucking *hot shower* matters more to you than your heritage, then just *leave*! If you want to run off like Zeke and abandon your pack, then go. Just go! I don’t want you here. You don’t fucking belong here, and you sure as hell don’t deserve to carry the Samara name.”

Fuming, she shoved past the pack members in disgust. They looked at each other for a moment, shamefaced, and then continued to pack.

I rubbed a hand over my eyes. Fucking hell. This whole thing was turning into an unqualified disaster. I’d come out here to help the Samaras, and now Ava was giving up? Already?

She was storming toward the Airstream, and I jogged to catch up with her, catching her wrist to stop her.

“Ava! What the hell are you doing?” I demanded.

Angry tears were welling up in her eyes, and she yanked her arm out of my grasp. “Exactly what I *should* be doing. If they want to leave, then I don’t want them in my pack. They’re fucking cowards, X.”

I worked to fight down a surge of jealous anger. “Because they want to go to Lucian?” I stepped toward her and lifted her chin, so her eyes met mine. “Were you going to tell me that he came out here?”

She met my eyes, her gaze bold and challenging. “Why do you care?”

I narrowed my eyes in disbelief. “God, Ava, don’t you get it? I left my pack to come out here with you. Why the fuck do you think I did that?”  
 “I have no idea,” she shot back, her breath coming fast. “Why don’t you tell me?”

I shook my head. “Unbelievable.”

“*Tell me*,” she taunted, taking a step closer to me. “Let me hear you say it, Xavier.”

Our gazes were locked, but I could hear the silence in the clearing around us. I could tell that the other pack members had stopped what they were doing to watch us.

What the hell did Ava want me to say? What did she want to hear? That I’d liked kissing her on New Year’s Eve? That I thought about it all the fucking time? That Jay was right—that there was something between us still, even after everything? Or that Greyson was right—that whatever was making my wolf burn with jealousy about Ava wasn’t fair to Cali, and that knowing that only pissed me off even more?

Did she want me to say that I’d had plenty of opportunities to send her back to the spirit world, but I’d never taken that step because I couldn’t bear the thought of losing her again?

*Shit.*

*Oh shit.*

*Fucking hell.*

*I still care about her. I never stopped.*

That last one rocked my world. My breath caught in my throat. Even as the thought flashed through my mind, I knew it wasn’t new. It had been there since the day Ava had returned, but I’d never allowed myself to think it. Until now.

Fuck.

I’d been in denial about it for so long—and now that I’d finally admitted it to myself, only one question remained.

What the hell did this mean for Cali?

# Episode 3670

Torin, Adair, and my mom all stared at me in obvious surprise. My heart, meanwhile, was pounding as I tried for a smile.

“I was hoping someone might have some ideas,” I said.

Torin frowned. “A *barrier*? Like, around the pack house? Like the witches were doing?”

“That’s what I was thinking,” I said.

Torin shook his head. “I only have healing magic, Cali,” he reminded me.

“Well, that’s where you’re strongest,” I pointed out, “but that doesn’t mean that’s *all* you can do. Remember when we were fighting Knox and Tanner tried to attack us, and you used your magic to open all his wounds—”

“Don’t remind me,” Torin said, closing his eyes. He looked upset at the memory. “I don’t like to think about that.”

“I know, Torin,” I said gently. “But you did it to protect us. To protect me. And I would do the same for you if I could. I’m not asking you to do that again,” I said, seeing how pale Torin had grown at the reminder of Tanner. “I just think we need to consider what we can do as Fae—since we’re the only people whose magic seems to be working—to help out. We need to do something defensive, something to protect the pack house. And to do that, we need to think creatively.”

I looked hard at my mom and Adair, neither of whom had really reacted to my request.

“Any ideas?” I pressed.

My mom glanced at Adair. “Did you ever hear about the Siege of the Fells?”  
 Adair rolled his eyes. “Every child in the Fae world is taught about the Siege.”

“Excuse me?” Artemis asked. “What siege? I wasn’t taught about that. It sounds interesting.”

“During the early years of the Fae wars, a wall of fire was created to protect the Dark Fae from an overwhelming attack by the Light Fae,” my mom said.

“And eventually, the Dark Fae were still forced to surrender,” Adair pointed out.

My mom forced a smile. “I’m aware of that, Adair, but the point is that the wall of fire held off their opponents—who greatly outnumbered them—for thirty days. It gave them some breathing room, and they were able to smuggle most of their citizens to safety.”

Adair shook his head. “Yes, it’s an interesting bedtime story,” he said shortly, “but unless you’ve suddenly gained the ability to harness fire, I don’t see how the lessons of the Siege are applicable to the current situation.”

I ignored Adair and thought hard about my mom’s story.

“So, how did the Dark Fae build the wall of fire? And—if we could do it—would we be able to keep it under control? And keep it from, you know, burning down the pack house and everyone inside?”

“I don’t know,” my mom admitted. “I can’t harness fire, of course, but maybe we don’t *need* fire.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “How can we build a wall of fire without, you know, *fire*?”

She shook her head. “Maybe we can build a different kind of barrier?”

“Like what?” I asked. “Is there another element that could work? Wind? Ice? Could we control something like that?” I wondered. I glanced over at Artemis, who looked equally puzzled.

She shrugged. “Beats me. I’d never even heard of this Siege before now.”

“Hey.” Greyson strode over to stand next to me. He slipped his arm around my shoulders and looked around. “All the Fae in one place, huh? Anyone want to tell me what’s going on?”

His eyes were on me, and I smiled nervously.

“We’re trying to come up with a way to replace the barrier,” I said.

“You are?” he asked, looking surprised.

“Yeah. Something that will protect the house, but using Fae magic instead of witch magic.”

“Another brilliant Caliana plan,” Artemis quipped.

I shot her a glare, then looked at Greyson, waiting for his reaction. I wondered whether he was going to nip the whole idea in the bud before we’d even had a chance to develop a plan. It would be too bad if he did. I wanted to know what my mom had in mind. I’d never heard of the Siege of the Fells either, but the idea of a Fae-powered wall was really exciting. I was always interested in learning about new ways to use my magic.

“What exactly did you have in mind?” Greyson asked, surprising me with his obvious interest.

My mom smiled. “Well, why don’t you all step back a little?” She shot me a look. “Cali, do you remember your favorite fairy tale when you were a child?”

I was surprised by the question, but I thought for a moment. “*Sleeping Beauty*? What about it?”

“Do you remember how you used to sit in my lap, and we’d read the story from that big book we had?”

“Of course I do… Wait… Are you suggesting what I think you are?”

My mom gave me a knowing smile. “Just watch.”

She raised her hands up above her head and closed her eyes. She began to move her fingers, almost like she was playing an invisible piano, and I felt my own eyes go wide as the ground below my feet began to tremble. I took a startled step back when wide cracks opened up, and behind me, Torin gasped. From deep inside the frozen ground, a cluster of thick, thorny vines rose up. They twisted upward, growing fast, like I was watching a time-lapse of normal plant growth. All around the house, the thick wall of vines rose higher and higher, until they were twice as tall as Greyson. Then my mom took a deep breath, like she was steeling herself, and reached her hands up even higher—straight up into the sky. My pulse thudded in my ears as I watched the vines grew taller still, stretching and growing until they blocked out what was left of the sinking winter sun.

Artemis took a step back, looking upward in clear amazement. “Whoa, Mom, this is badass! This would’ve been super useful back when I was being hunted by the Garroter. That guy sucked. But this would have stopped him, no problem.”

I craned my neck, trying to see the top of the vines. They had to be twenty feet tall, at least. I looked along the wall until it disappeared around the corner of the house—but I assumed it wrapped around the whole pack house, enclosing us inside.

“I can’t believe this,” I said quietly. I reached out and touched the vines, then drew my hand back with a hiss of pain when I pricked my finger on a thorn. “It’s just like *Sleeping Beauty*,” I breathed.

“Is this for real?” Ravi asked, walking over to look at the vine barrier. He reached out to touch, then snatched his hand back. “Ow! It’s so sharp!”

“Well, stop touching it,” Zainab said, who’d walked over to look at it as well. She slapped Ravi’s hand away when he reached out for it again.

Adair gave my mom one of his rare smiles. “I have to admit, I’m impressed,” he said. “Nicely done, Orla.”

“This is fantastic,” Torin said, walking closer to study it. He turned to look at my mom. “Do you think you could add roses? That would be so pretty.”

Greyson nodded as he looked the barrier over. He pulled on a vine, then grasped a handful and gave it a powerful yank, ignoring the thorns. He nodded approvingly. “This is good. It will definitely slow the Bitterfangs down. But it won’t stop them. Even with this surrounding the pack house, they’ll eventually figure out a way to breach it and attack.”

Artemis tightened her grip on her bow. “And when they do, we’ll be ready.”

I hadn’t even realized he was wearing it, but Torin drew a sword from a sheath on his belt and held it loosely by his side. “If I have to do what I did to Tanner to the whole Bitterfang troop, I’ll do it.”

I knew exactly what that promise meant to him, and I squeezed his shoulder.

Adair nodded and snapped his energy whip. It hit the barrier and sent bark and thorns flying. Ravi stumbled back.

“Watch it,” he grumbled, glaring at Adair.

“And I’ll be ready to blast anyone who makes it through,” I said, flexing my fingers. My hands were pulsing with magic, and I felt hopeful—really hopeful—for the first time in a long time.

*This* was what I’d wanted—this was why I’d brought the Fae together. We each had our individual powers, and we could each do something different to protect the pack. We weren’t werewolves, but we *were* members of the Redwood pack, and we could help defend it.

Suddenly, the smile on Greyson’s face slipped. He whipped around, his eyes on the thorn barrier, almost like he was looking straight through it.

“What is it?” I asked. There was something about his look that made my heart break into a sprint.

“There are wolves coming,” he said. “And they’re coming fast.”

# Episode 3671

**Xavier**

My mind was racing as I tried to make sense of my own realization. What did this mean? *Did* I truly care about Ava? Like, *care* care about her? Would I go so far as to admit that I had actual feelings for her?

*NO.*

My gut reaction to that question was immediate. Just the idea of it made me nauseous. But *was* that the answer, despite my instinctive denial? Was I being honest with myself? No matter what I tried to tell myself, it felt somehow impossible to return to the state of denial I’d just left, where I’d let myself believe that I didn’t feel anything for Ava at all.

“Xavier?”

Ava’s voice broke into my thoughts, and I looked over to see her watching me expectantly. She raised her eyebrows, clearly waiting for an answer, and all I’d done was stand there silently.

I shook my head. “It doesn’t fucking matter why I came here. What matters right now is that you are going to lose your entire pack if you don’t do something about it. *Now*. Is that what you want, Ava? After all this time and effort? Do you really want to lose the one thing you have left?”

A look of surprise flickered over her face. It was mixed with pain, like she hadn’t expected me to punch back so ruthlessly. She looked like she was about to say something but then thought better of it and turned away from me. She stepped toward her pack, all of whom were all still watching us, transfixed.

“Listen to me!” she shouted. “If any of you want to leave, that’s your right, but as long as I’m here, the Samara pack *stays*. Right here, on the land of our ancestors. Our pack has existed here longer than any of us have been alive. Since before our parents and grandparents were alive.” She looked around at the Samaras, her eyes blazing. “And you have to ask yourselves: are you really willing to end the story of the Samara pack now, because of one outside threat? Is that all it’s going to take to drive you off?”

There were some murmurs, but regardless of whether they were positive or negative, Ava ignored them.

“We need to stay here and fight!” she cried, her voice echoing through the clearing, bouncing off the trees. “This is our home, dammit, and we have to defend it!”

I watched as some of the pack members stopped their packing. They looked up, clearly listening to her. And I understood why. I couldn’t bring myself to tear my eyes away from her, either. She was magnetic, righteous rage building around her like a fire. I could practically feel the heat.

“So,” she said, glowering at her pack. “*Who’s with me?*”

I tore my eyes away from her to look around at the Samaras. They were all frozen, though I saw a few glance furtively around, waiting for someone else—*anyone else*—to make the first move. I sighed. This was a pack who’d had it hard for a long time, and they were gun shy. Wary. I swallowed a sigh, wondering how the hell someone as fierce as Ava had been produced by a pack like this.

To his credit, Donovan was the first to move. He looked back at the others, then slowly set his duffel bag at his feet. He looked at Ava and nodded.

My wolf howled with pleasure. He liked when Ava was commanding.

“I’ll stay, but what are we going to do?” Donovan asked. “Zeke is gone, and we still don’t have an Alpha. Without one, we’re toast. The other packs will know we’re easy pickings, and we’ll die trying to defend our land and each other.”

“You don’t need an Alpha,” I said, stepping forward.

The pack turned to look at me in obvious surprise. Even Ava looked startled by my statement.

“Not yet, anyway,” I clarified. “All you have to do for the moment is work together. You have to have someone who can call the shots if you end up fighting the Bitterfangs. But that doesn’t necessarily have to be an Alpha.”

“Maybe not, but who’s going to do that?” Donovan asked, looking around.

Everyone’s eyes went to Ava, obviously. She was the natural leader of the pack, but she didn’t say anything. She looked at me, her expression tense, and pressed her lips into a thin line. Ava was a good fighter, a good leader, but it just didn’t seem like she wanted the tactician role. She was best when she was acting on instinct, but I didn’t know how good she’d be at strategy and battle planning—or even if she’d want to lead her people in battle.

But I knew how much her pack meant to her. It was hard to miss. Everything she did was for the good of her pack. She had tried to stay away after her brother’s death, but I knew better than anyone that a pack stayed in someone’s blood no matter how far they went. And I could see how determined she was now to not lose them again. I knew she would gladly die to defend her pack, and when I spoke, it felt like the words just poured out of me like water from a broken dam.

“I’ll do it.”

If the Ava and the Samara pack looked surprised by my statement, it was *nothing* compared to what I felt. What the *fuck*?Had I just *volunteered* to lead this pack in battle?

It wasn’t that I was worried I couldn’t handle it. I knew I was capable of it, and the reality was that they *did* need someone to do it. And it wasn’t just a favor I’d be doing—this was a matter of life-and-death for the Samaras. I’d come this far—it just felt like I had to see this thing through. I *would* see this thing through. I owed it to Ava. I was going to do whatever it took to make this happen. The Samara pack had been around a long time, and I’d poured a lot of myself into it. Too much to see it lost to the Bitterfangs, or absorbed by the Vanguard pack. So even though I’d made the offer without thinking, I didn’t regret it. I would lead them.

Donovan looked me over. “Why?”

“Why what?” I asked shortly.

He shrugged. “Why should we listen to you?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that question. I supposed the easiest answer was that if they didn’t listen to me, they would all fucking die.

I managed not to say that out loud, but only barely.

“Because I’m the one with the most experience in leading this kind of troop movement,” I said. “I have battle experience, and I’ve saved your asses a few times in the past as well. I think you’ll find, Donovan, that I don’t have to prove myself in the slightest—”

“But why should we—” Donovan started again, but Ava stepped forward, that blazing look back in her eyes.

“You should listen to him because he’s my mate,” she said crisply. “That’s reason enough.”

Hearing those words coming out of her mouth did something to my wolf. He leapt to life. He became agitated and restless, pacing back and forth in my head.

There were murmurs from the pack all around us, moving through the Samaras like a breeze through the clearing. I didn’t contradict Ava, though a big part of me knew I should. I was *not* Ava’s mate. She was my *former* mate. It was an important distinction, but there was something about the word *former* that was pissing off my wolf. It was making him growl and snap at me. I tried to ignore him, and failing that, tried to push back. She *was* my former mate. She was, and no amount of snarling from my wolf was going to change that.

Ava was still talking. “You’ll find that Xavier Evers is exactly who he says he is. He’s the best fighter I’ve ever known. Better than Nolan ever was. There’s no one else who could carry us through something as unprecedented as an attack from the Bitterfang pack on our own lands.”

She looked at me, her eyes icy blue. They looked right into mine, and I felt a connection between us. My blood began to simmer as she turned back to her pack and kept speaking.

“Xavier Evers will not let us down!”

The pack reacted to this, but I barely heard them. My ears were ringing, and my skin began to hum. There was something about hearing her speak those words that filled me with a warm, almost addictive sensation. It spread through my bloodstream, and it occurred to me that I could get used to the feeling.

“You always have a choice,” Ava was saying. “But if you want to survive the week, you will listen to Xavier.” She turned and gave me a hard, piercing look. “Until this crisis is over, you should consider him your Alpha.”

# Episode 3672

**Greyson**

I could sense the wolves drawing closer, and I scrambled to gather my pack.

“Orla!” I barked out. “Can you put up more of these vines? I want you to strengthen what you’ve already created, make sure we don’t have any gaps, and that it goes all the way around the house.”

I had no idea how many wolves were approaching the pack house, or even who they were, but given what we already knew about the threats in the area, I had to assume it was the Bitterfangs—which meant I needed any protection Orla could provide.

“Consider it done,” she said and turned toward her thorny barrier. She raised her hands, and the ground began to shake again as more vines sprouted from the ground, twisting through the barrier, making it even thicker.

“What can we do?” Cali asked as she, Adair, and Torin stepped toward me.

I hesitated. I didn’t love that Cali was out here. I knew I’d feel much better if she was in the pack house. There was no guarantee of safety—even in there—but I knew I’d feel better.

But I also knew that if it wasn’t for Cali, Orla might not have come up with the idea to make the wall of thorns. I knew Cali wanted to be out here with the rest of the pack, so how could I justify locking her inside? She was Orla’s daughter and Artemis’s sister. She was one of the Fae—ready and willing to fight, shoulder to shoulder with the rest of the pack.

I wasn’t happy about it, but I couldn’t afford to get into an argument with her. Not now. I’d just have to make sure to protect her if the Bitterfangs *did* attack—and if they made it through the thorns.

Dammit. Why had Xavier decided to run off *now*? This was exactly why I’d refused to let him leave. We needed him here, and he was nowhere to be found.

There would have to be consequences for his defiance.

“Joan, Paris—get Russell inside,” I said. “I don’t want him exposed out here. We don’t want to make it easy for the Bitterfangs to make good on their threats against him.”

The women nodded and hustled Russell into the house.

Vishal rounded the corner of the house, followed by a knot of Pit Bull Rogues. They looked up, marveling at the thorny wall.

“That is *badass*,” one of them said, which made Orla grin.

“Okay, let’s do this,” I said, gesturing everyone toward the barrier.

Orla had created a temporary gap in the wall of thorns, and we headed toward it.

“Be ready!” I commanded. “Remember, these are Bitterfang wolves, and their fighting style is precise and ruthless, so keep your damn wits about you.”

Everyone nodded, and just as I was about to signal for everyone to shift, the wind changed, and I caught a familiar scent—an *annoyingly* familiar scent.

I turned and looked through the gap in the barrier. “*Lucian?*”

Sure enough, there he was. Strutting toward us like a fucking peacock, closely followed by Armin—of course—and a small group of Vanguard wolves.

Cali appeared next to me and peered through the gap. “What the hell is he doing here?” she demanded.

“I don’t have the vaguest idea,” I muttered. Then I glanced around, wondering if Elle was nearby. The last time I’d seen her, she’d been teaming up with Sage and Zainab to go keep watch on the east side of the house.

Artemis drew back her bowstring. “I could get him in the heart from here. Guaranteed hit.”

I considered it for a moment, but I figured it probably wouldn’t be in my best interests in the long term. Damn tempting, though. “Better hold back, Artemis.”

She groaned as she lowered the bow. “You’re going to regret that.”

“You’re probably right,” I muttered. Then, louder, I called, “Fall back, everyone!”

I had no intention of going out to meet Lucian. Whatever he was doing here, he could come to me.

Lucian eyed the thorn barrier curiously as he stepped through the gap, then looked at me with a bright smile. “There he is! The man of the hour.”

*Un-fucking-believable.*

“What do you want?” I growled.

Lucian looked back at the wall of vines. “That’s quite a defense system you have there. I understand you’re under some kind of siege, is that right?”

“Why do you care?”

“Did you think our alliance was merely for show? I’m here to lend you assistance and, more importantly, additional wolves,” he said with a toothy smile.

I eyed him warily, glad again that Elle was nowhere to be seen. It wasn’t that we *didn’t* need backup, but I had reservations about accepting anything from Lucian.

I glanced over at Cali. *What do you think about this?*

Cali raised an eyebrow. *We could use the help. Maybe we should take him up on the offer.*

*Maybe*, I agreed. *Given our present situation, it would be kind of stupid to turn him away.*

*Kind of*, Cali acknowledged.

*As long as he doesn’t try to order my pack around like he’s some kind of royal commander. I swear, Napoleon had a* Lucian *complex.*

Cali stifled a giggle as I turned to Lucian. “Thanks, that’d be great. We could use the help—”

“Wonderful,” Lucian said, cutting me off with a smile. “We’ll settle in and find something productive to do—”

“But I want you to remember who’s in charge,” I reminded him. “We appreciate your help, but this is Redwood territory.”

“I understand,” Lucian said smoothly. He looked around with a grin. “I must say, it’s actually rather exciting. I’ve never actually been ordered around before.” He turned to Armin. “What’s it like?”

Armin gave him a thin smile. “A pure delight, sir.”

“Wonderful,” Lucian gushed, apparently not recognizing the sarcasm. He scanned the crowd, lingering on Cali. “Loveliest Caliana, how are you? It’s so nice to see you,” he said, stepping toward her and taking her hand. He bent over it and kissed her knuckles.

“It’s nice of you to offer to help,” Cali said, gently pulling her hand away.

She stepped toward me and pulled me a little away from the group. “My mom said to tell you she’s almost done fortifying the wall.”

“Is she?” I looked around. “That’s great. I mean, it’s not a perfect defense, but it’ll give the Bitterfangs some serious trouble.”

“Agreed,” she said. “But we still have a problem.”

“What’s that?” I asked, frowning.

“Xavier.”

“What about him?”

Cali gave me a reproachful look. “He’s not here. How is he supposed to get back inside when he comes back?”

I hesitated. I wasn’t sure quite what to say. I didn’t want to be too harsh with Cali, so I chose my words carefully. “Listen, Cali, my brother made the choice to leave.”

“All the more reason why we should find him,” Cali said sternly.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Xavier is your brother, Greyson,” she said, her eyes bright.

My jaw ached with tension. Cali was upset, and I hated that Xavier was putting her through this. Why couldn’t my brother see that his actions had consequences? He’d always been so short-sighted…

I took a deep breath. “Love, I hear what you’re saying, and Xavier and I can get into it as soon as he returns, but trust me, there’s no point in us going after him. He doesn’t want to be found now. He’ll come back when he needs to, as he always does. Until then, we have more pressing matters to deal with—”

“More pressing than your brother—”

“Yes,” I said firmly. “This pack is my priority, and I have to do whatever I can to keep them safe. Xavier chose to leave—he’s on his own until he gets back.”

Cali fell silent, and I saw her gaze shift past me to the opening in the wall. She didn’t say anything, but unshed tears shone bright in her eyes.

All around us, the pack bustled around, getting ready for whatever was coming next.

“Ravi, Jay, Lola! Over there!” Rishika yelled. She was organizing battle teams at stations along the briar barrier. “Charlie, are you ready to go?”

“Yeah, I’m ready.”

I turned to see Charlie spinning a Bo staff with a surprising amount of skill. He was such a valuable pack member, it was easy for me to forget he was so young, but he looked ready. Everyone did. I looked around as the pack prepared for battle, and I was glad to see that everyone was rising to the challenge.

I was anxious about the Bitterfangs, but whatever they brought, the Redwoods were going to be ready for them, and that eased some of my tension.

My phone rang, and I fished it from my pocket. The caller ID told me it was Mace calling, and my tension flooded back. I realized abruptly that I’d never returned his call. I’d meant to, but too much had happened, and I’d never gotten around to it.

I answered the call. “Mace? What’s up?”

“Greyson,” Mace said. His voice sounded ragged, like he’d been inhaling smoke.

“What’s wrong?” I asked immediately. There was something in his tone that set off alarm bells in my head. “What’s happened?”

“It’s Julia. They took her.”

# Episode 3673

**Xavier**

Ava’s declaration hit me like a ton of bricks.

*Consider him your Alpha.*

I’d wanted to hear those words for as long as I could remember, but not when it came to leading the Samara pack. Ava knew that as well as I did. My knee-jerk reaction was to push back against her.

Was that why she’d kissed me?

*Is she trying to force me into becoming the Samara Alpha? She’s always wanted that, and she’s finally found an opportunity to rope me into it. Is all of this just a manipulation technique? Make me remember I care about her and then do this? I’m not about to let her manipulate me, though. Not now, not ever.*

There was nothing I wanted more than to be Alpha, but only of the Redwood pack. I also didn’t want to get the role by default. I wanted to fight for it, strive for it, earn it the hard, respectable way. I wanted—*needed*—to take it away from Greyson. I wanted it to be something I chose, not… whatever this was. This didn’t feel right at all.

I couldn’t stop clenching my jaw. I was fuming, but I didn’t want to show it, not right now. Ava had crossed the line—again—but I knew that her pack was hanging by a thread, and an angry outburst from me wasn’t the right move. The Samaras had stopped packing their bags, and all eyes were on me, waiting to see how I was going to react.

*I guess I did say that I would take charge of the Samaras. At least for the fight. If I go back on that promise now, Ava’s entire pack could fall apart. I don’t want that on my conscience.*

I suppressed a sigh. “Yes. Consider me your *leader*,” I said tightly. I looked over at Ava. Her expression was unreadable. *She’s not going to risk jumping for joy just yet—and for good reason.* “I’m more than happy to stay here and help lead you all and keep you all safe from the Bitterfang threat. It’s the least I can do.”

Some of the Samaras began to nod, relief written across their faces.

Donovan stepped away from the group and held out his hand, still frowning. “Okay, we’ll take it,” he said. “Glad to have you on board, even if it’s only temporary.”

*Damn right it’s temporary. Fucking Zeke. What type of werewolf just up and leaves when their pack needs them most? Now his cowardice is having a direct effect on my life, and he’s on my shit list forever. I should be with Cali right now, and instead I’m here, cleaning up his mess.*

I forced a smile and gave Donovan’s hand a firm shake, keeping my eyes locked on Ava all the while. She was still playing it cool, and that was making me even madder.

“Okay,” I said, clapping my hands. “Let’s get this place cleaned up, make it easier to defend if it comes down to it. We should also get two groups out on patrol. We need to know if there are Bitterfangs lurking in the area, and if they are, we have to figure out where they’re coming from. We’re going to go on the offensive—that’s the only way we’ll get through this in one piece.”

Marissa stepped forward. “I’ll lead one of the patrols.”

“I’ll take the other one,” Donovan said.

I couldn’t help but notice how much more confident everyone looked, now that they had an actual leader in place. I was the reason for that confidence, and I couldn’t ignore the sense of pride welling up inside me. “Great. Make sure you all have each other’s backs. Keep your eyes and ears sharp, don’t get distracted, and don’t lose focus for even a moment. The Bitterfangs are nothing to mess around with.”

“Got it,” Donovan said.

Marissa nodded. “Will do.”

I was making this happen, and everyone was listening to me. There was none of the back and forth and arguing that always happened when I was standing next to Greyson. I was in charge, and right now my orders were the only thing that mattered.

*This is how things should be—but not in this backward, twisted way. Not with the Samaras. It should be the Redwoods at my command. They should be looking to* me *for strength and guidance, like the Samaras are right now.*

Ava was in the thick of things, helping to form the patrol teams and plotting out their routes. I had to admit, she was a good second. I immediately shook that thought away.

*This is temporary*,I reminded myself. *Just until the Bitterfang threat is over.*

Ava and I locked eyes, and I didn’t have to say a word as I turned and walked into the Airstream.

I looked around, noting how sparse the tiny space seemed now the Zeke had cleared out. I spotted a nearly empty bottle of whiskey. It was cheap stuff, but it would do the job. I opened it and took a swig, just as the door opened behind me. I didn’t need to turn around to know it was Ava.

Even with the aroma of whiskey in my nose, Ava’s scent filled the space. It was driving my wolf crazy. I turned to face her. She was stark naked, standing in the doorway. *Shocker.* I considered hurling the bottle at her—for everything she’d done and said from the moment things had gone wrong between us. Resisting the urge, I set the bottle down and said one word. “Why?”

Ava thrust out her chin defiantly. “Because it was the only way I could get you to do what needs to be done. You taking the lead is the only way for the Samaras to survive this and come out intact on the other side. I did what I had to do.”

“No,” I said. “What you did was shoehorn me into this position. You’re always trying to fit me into your life when the last thing I want is to be anywhere near you. I felt pity for you, and you used that against me. Like always.”

The words were hot against my tongue. There was a truth to them, but there was a truth to what I’d felt for her before. I cared about her.

That was the whole fucking problem.

Ava’s eyes flashed, and she jabbed me in the chest. “You’re a fucking liar, you know that?”

My lip curled into a snarl. “The only liar here is you. You just lied to your entire pack when you told them to view me as their Alpha.”

Ava snorted. “If you’re so offended, then why did you accept? You should have seen yourself—you fell right into the role you say you don’t want. Ordering people around, making decisions. Your face lit up. You *loved* it.”

“You didn’t give me a choice!” I snapped. “You knew that if I didn’t accept, the entire pack would’ve cut out of here and run to the Vanguards—and I wasn’t going to take the blame for that.”

Ava shook her head, her gaze boring into me. “No, you always have a choice. You’re Xavier Evers. When has anyone ever backed you into a corner that you didn’t want to be in?”

There was no use trying to argue with that. We stared at each other in silence for a few moments before I finally found my voice again. “If you try anything like that again, you’ll regret it.”

Ava threw her head back and laughed. “What could you do to me that hasn’t already been done? Huh? Tell me. I’m dying to know.”

I flashed back to that long-ago moment when I’d killed her. I’d been blind with rage, seeing red. The only thing I’d cared about at that moment was getting revenge for my mother. Had things really changed that much since then?In an instant, I found myself overwhelmed and overstimulated by a rush of familiar old feelings, and strange new ones that I was trying my best to make sense of.

“Don’t play the victim, Ava,” I said. “Everything that’s happened to us, happened *between* us, has been your fault. Don’t forget that.”

Ava’s eyes darkened with anger. “Don’t you dare blame this on me when *we* keep arriving at the same place, over and over again.” She moved to jab me again. “We—”

I caught her hand and pulled her close. “I warned you.”

It wasn’t clear who moved first, but in the end, it didn’t matter. In a flash, our lips were locked together. I walked Ava back against the wall, devouring her mouth, running my fingers through her long, thick hair, then letting my hands roam boldly over the planes and valleys of her naked body. I couldn’t help myself, and neither could she. Our mouths met, moving hot and starved against one another.

Her fingernails raked down my bare chest to my abdomen and then snaked around and down my back. She squeezed my ass and pulled me close, grinding herself hungrily against me. She linked her arms around my neck, damn near climbing up my body as we clawed and raked at each other, our tongues dueling and clashing, our breath coming out in hard, warm gasps.

My mind was blissfully blank, unable to process anything but the white haze of longing and desire and lust that was surging through me like rushing floodwater.

Ava pushed me back against the kitchenette counter as she grasped me by the hips and dropped to her knees, her mouth pressing against my stomach, my hip bone. With her breath tickling the sensitive skin of my shaft and her icy eyes on mine, she stopped—waiting for me. Waiting for a signal.

But there were no thoughts. No fears, no hesitation. I could feel only want—red, iron-hot desire. A beast inside of me, clawing toward her, desperate for more. Never sated. Never satisfied.

I was never going to escape her.

I found myself turning my fingers to a fist in her hair as she brought her wet lips even closer.

# Episode 3674

All the color drained from Greyson’s face, and I knew that something was wrong. Very wrong.

I rushed to his side and grabbed his hand. He was still on the phone, and I couldn’t hear what was being said on the other end of the line, but he squeezed my hand and pulled me closer.

“Thanks, Mace,” Greyson said. “Meet us here. Yeah. Bye.” Greyson ended the call and shoved his phone back into his pocket. “*Shit.*” He pinched the bridge of his nose and cursed under his breath a few more times.

“What happened?” I demanded. “What’s going on?”

I had a gut feeling about the news he’d gotten, but I hoped I was wrong.

Greyson dragged his hand down his face. “It’s Julia.”

I tensed and closed my eyes, waiting for it. *This can’t be happening. Not after everything we’ve done…*

“The Bitterfangs took her,” Greyson said.

My stomach dropped. “No. *No*—that can’t be true!” I wanted to scream in frustration. We’d had her. We’d had Julia—she’d been *safe.*

“It’s true,” Greyson said around a sigh. “Mace just told me.”

“But how? I don’t understand. Kira had the barrier up…” Even as I said it, I realized that Kira must have been suffering the same difficulties as the other witches. Shifting gears, I said, “So Kira probably couldn’t keep her barrier up, either. But the Blue Blood pack is strong—how could the Bitterfangs have gotten past them?”

I’d seen the Blue Blood pack in action, and there was no way they would’ve given Julia up without a fight.

“I was wondering the same thing,” Greyson said. “But Mace said they were jumped, caught by surprise. Didn’t even have time to defend themselves. The Bitterfangs used the falling barrier as an opportunity to surprise them. They’d been taunting the Blue Bloods the entire time, testing the barrier. Apparently it gave way…”

I swallowed roughly, imagining how frightened Julia had to have been. The Blue Blood pack had no doubt done all they could to protect Julia, but like us, they probably hadn’t expected the barrier to fall… If the Bitterfangs had had the ability to surprise them. The Bitterfangs were fierce, vicious fighters. If anyone was capable of taking Mace and his pack by surprise, it was them.

I looked around until I found Russell standing with his parents and a few other Pit Bulls on the porch. He was looking so hopeful and calm, it pained me to know that I was about to ruin it.

*What am I going to say to him? How am I going to tell him that our plan failed and Julia is… gone? Kidnapped? We tell him to trust us, to depend on us, and then this happens.*

I hated the idea of having to deliver such bad news, but we had no choice. It wasn’t like we could hide this from him. I’d learned my lesson about keeping important things from people, even if it was intended to protect them. It never turned out well in the end.

I sighed and dropped my head, feeling defeated. *We let both those kids down. We tried, but we couldn’t keep Julia safe. We just couldn’t do it.*

I took a deep breath and steeled myself.

“No, this isn’t over yet,” I said. “What’s the plan? How are we going to get her back?”

We couldn’t give up and let the Bitterfangs win. They were hardcore, but so were we. The Redwood pack hadn’t backed down from a challenge yet, and we certainly weren’t going to start today—not when Julia’s life was hanging in the balance. Likely Russell’s too. Just because the Bitterfangs had Julia didn’t mean they would suddenly stop their pursuit of Russell.

“Mace is taking some of his wolves to go looking for her, but from what he told me, the Bitterfangs held the Blue Bloods off until Lance got away with Julia. They could be miles away by now… Or closer than we think.” Greyson shook his head and sighed.

A sliver of fear rose within me. “Do you think they’re going to come for Russell next?”

I found myself impossibly more thankful for my mother and the wall of thorns she’d erected around the pack house. It was the only thing we had that gave us an edge against the Bitterfangs. Without it, we would’ve been sitting ducks. At least with my mom’s barrier, we’d be able to slow the Bitterfangs down. At least I hoped so. It was clear that they didn’t let much of anything get in the way of what they wanted, but we had Artemis and the others, who would be waiting on our side of the barrier to pick off anyone who tried to get through.

Greyson nodded. “Definitely. I have no doubt that they’ll be coming for Russell. They’ve made their agenda quite clear, and it’s only a matter of time before they act on it. I doubt they’ll bring Julia with them, though. They wouldn’t want to risk us taking her back somehow.” He winced and cursed under his breath. “We also have no way of knowing whether the messenger Vishal sent to tell Julia about our plan was able to get to her before she was taken. So if we still execute our plan to fake Russell’s death, she might actually think he’s dead, and that would be torture for her.” Greyson shook his head somberly. “This isn’t good.”

No, he definitely had that right… This was a complete disaster. I suddenly felt nauseous. The idea of Julia not knowing the truth of the plan was just too much to bear. There was something so cruel about it… But being cruel to defenseless children seemed to be the Bitterfangs’ M.O., so they were getting exactly what they wanted. What kind of pack concerned themselves with starting pack wars over something as pure as young love, anyway? Did they have nothing better to do?

“Why are some werewolves like this?” I asked bitterly. “So traditional and stuck in their ways, drawing these stark lines and making all these rules and daring anyone to break them? If the Bitterfangs were as open-minded about Rogues as the Redwoods are, none of this would be happening.”

Greyson squeezed my hand again. “That’s not entirely true. You see how the Bitterfangs are. They’re just looking for a fight, something or someone to hate, any reason to hurt other people. If it wasn’t the Rogues or the *due destini* it would just be something else, believe me. I know how packs like theirs operate. I went through it with Silas. It didn’t matter to my father what the reason was, or if the people he had a problem with were good. He wanted to take things—everything—and he didn’t care who got hurt. He wanted chaos—and even more, he wanted to be the one to create it.”

Seeing the flicker of pain in his eyes as Greyson talked about his father hit me to my core, but he recovered quickly, and the look of fiery determination returned.

“If Malakai is anything like Silas,” he continued, “then all of this goes far deeper than some old rivalry between the pack and the Rogues. If it runs that deep, then it’s most likely a part of Malakai’s core, and it’s probably infected his entire pack. The Alpha always sets the tone, and if that tone is evil and violent, then the pack will follow suit without question, even against their own better judgment.”

A chill raced through me as I remembered how terrifying Silas had been. Just the thought that there was someone out there who was even a fraction of what Silas had been… It scared me. How were there still werewolves like that out there? How was it that people still listened to them? Followed their every command? I knew the answer, but fear still didn’t seem like enough reason… Maybe Greyson was right. Maybe they all simply agreed with Malakai.

Obviously seeing the look of distress on my face, Greyson leaned in and kissed me on the forehead. “My goal right now is to keep you and the others safe. We’re going to get Julia back, don’t worry. There’s no way we’re going to let those assholes have her.”

He gave me a quick peck on the lips before he excused himself to go talk to Lucian, Rishika, and the others.

I watched them all react to the news about Julia and then immediately launch into planning mode. I wished I knew how to help. I hated the thought of Julia being caught up in all this. It wasn’t fair that the girl was suffering just because she believed in love—specifically my *due destini* brand of love.

Greyson was right—a Bitterfang attack was on the horizon. From the moment we’d met the Bitterfangs, it had been clear that they were out for blood.

As I jogged back toward the house, Artemis called out to me. “Cali! Where are you going?”

“To look for the witches!” I shouted over my shoulder. “We need to make that potion, right now.”

# Episode 3675

**Xavier**

I was lost. My desire for Ava was so strong that I couldn’t pull myself out of it. I was helpless against the heat coursing through my body. The heat that Ava was causing. I closed my eyes and gave myself over to it, reveling in it. My wolf wanted nothing more than what Ava was offering. I hated how good she looked down there on her knees, her mouth inches from my cock.

*It would be so easy. Enjoyable. It’s exactly what I need right now.* The lusty haze had taken my mind, my body, and my sensibilities hostage. It was stronger than it had ever been, and my resistance was damn close to zero. *Just do it, Xavier. It’s what you want. It would feel so good. Just like old times.*

“Do you want this, Xavier?” Ava asked, speaking her silent question from moments ago out loud. Her eyes were on mine, her breath tickling my skin. Her voice was little more than a husky rasp. She was clearly having the same difficulties I was.

I had no idea how our fight had morphed into this, but somehow it made perfect sense. It was the type of thing that was bound to happen to me. To us. I didn’t know what to do. I was grateful that Ava had paused to ask, mercifully giving me one last opportunity to stop this—whether that was her intention or not. The problem was, I didn’t want to stop. I wanted her. There was no question about that. I knew exactly what would happen if I told her yes, and my entire body yearned to give in and let it happen.

*If I say yes to her, I’ll get to feel her warm lips take me into her mouth, like they have so many times in the past.*

I closed my eyes, all but feeling the slick roughness of her tongue sliding up and down my cock faster and faster until I couldn’t take it anymore. I wanted to feel that. I *needed* to feel it.

There was something deep inside me telling me to stop, that this wasn’t what I really wanted, but that voice was almost too faint to hear over my urge to take things further.

Memories of the times Ava and I had spent tangled up in each other washed through my mind, rinsing away all reason. All I could think about was that if I gave in and let her take me into her mouth, it would be so easy to let things take their course. I longed to cover her body with mine before sliding deep inside her, inch by inch. I imagined the feel of her strong legs wrapped around my waist, the warmth of her soft breasts sliding against my sweat slicked chest, the tickle of her breath in my ear as she said my name over and over again…

*Do it. Do it, Xavier. You want her, and she wants you. Do it.*

Lust was in the driver’s seat, and I was as close as I had ever come to giving in to Ava, but my mind was slowly breaking free of the haze.

*This isn’t what—or who—you want. You want Cali. You love Cali. You long for Cali… But you also long for Ava. You can’t deny that you want her. Your wolf is crying out for you to listen, to finally listen and bury yourself deep inside her until she screams.*

The sensation of Ava’s nails digging into my thighs broke me out of my fantasy. “Xavier, is this what you want? I know I do.”

There was something about the way she said it that was almost shy—which Ava wasn’t. Maybe it was uncertainty, fear that I was about to reject her yet again. She must have sensed my internal struggle. We’d been here so many times before—though we’d never gone this far. She was probably as confused by this constant back and forth as I was.

I looked down at her, my brain slowly chugging back to life. I knew that she wasn’t going to do a damn thing until she knew that I was all in. Here it was again: an opportunity for me to do the right thing. The smart thing. The only thing that mattered.

*Cali. All I can think about right now is Cali. I wish it was her looking up at me right now with her cheeks and lips flushed. Cali is everything to me.*

The haze was gone, and not a moment too soon.

“Shit,” I hissed, pulling out of Ava’s hold and letting go of her hair. “No. No, I don’t want this.”

Ava looked like she’d just been shaken out of the haze as well. She stood up, brushing her thick curtain of hair over her shoulder as she turned her back to me and wrapped her arms around herself.

“That’s good,” she said quietly. “We would’ve regretted it, if we’d gone too far.”

My wolf stirred in protest, but I pushed it down. There was nothing I needed to say. I’d said enough already. I cleared my throat, noting how quickly the air had turned from hot and passionate to cool and awkward.

“Meet me outside?” I said. “I’m going to go check in with the patrols and get everything going. I’m the Samara Alpha for now, after all,” I joked, attempting to inject some lightness into my voice. I needed to get back on track. I was here to help the Samaras defend themselves against the Bitterfang, and that was it.

“Right,” Ava said evenly, her tone completely neutral. She looked up at me, but the heat and desire were long gone from her eyes. I couldn’t read her.

She walked to the door of the Airstream and rested her fingers on the handle, hesitating. She still had her back to me, and my wolf yearned for her to turn around so that I could see her face. That yearning fought viciously against my desire for her to leave so that I didn’t have to look at her anymore.

Ava suddenly turned to face me, her eyes finally meeting mine. “I meant what I said about you, Xavier.”

“What?” I almost added that she’d said so much about me since we’d known each other that she could’ve been referring to anything, but I kept my mouth shut. I barely trusted myself to have a conversation with her after everything that had just happened.

“That you’re the best fighter I know,” she said wistfully. “There was a time, X, when I knew that if I had you by my side, anything could happen. That we could take on the world as long as we were together.”

I looked at her, not saying anything. Not knowing *what* to say. So much had happened in such a short time that my head was spinning. I was itching to get out of this trailer and get back to what I knew—fighting and taking out anyone who dared to cross my pack or its allies.

Ava shook her head. “There’s so much shit between us, but I still think you’re the only person who can actually help us right now.” She hesitated. “Most of the time, I don’t even know if I love you or hate you.”

With that, she opened the door and slipped outside, letting it swing shut behind her.

As soon as she was gone, I gasped for air as panic seized my entire body.

*How could we let ourselves get caught up like that? Why does this keep happening?* My skin was crawling as the reality of the last few minutes hit me hard. I’d nearly given in to my wolf—my wolf, who still desperately yearned for that old connection. *But I can’t keep living with this constant push and pull from my wolf. He almost won. What just happened here… That wasn’t me. That’s not what I want for myself, for Cali.*

I’d almost taken things to the point of no return. The point where Cali would never have forgiven me. Despite her previous attempt to give me a “free pass” to let whatever needed to happen between me and Ava happen, I knew that if I crossed that line, *the* line, it would destroy everything that Cali and I had built. The New Year’s Eve kiss had been one spark, but tonight had been something else entirely, and I was starting to feel like I was losing control. I didn’t like it one bit.

*I need control, now more than ever. I can’t afford to lose my grip.*

I went into the small bathroom—I could barely fit inside it—and splashed some water on my face. I stood up and looked at my reflection, staring back at me.

*Yup. I look as lost as I feel. I’ve got to snap myself out of this.*

If I couldn’t shake what was happening between me and Ava, then what was I going to say to Cali? How was I going to look her in the eye? What I’d done was a betrayal, in my eyes. When Cali was the one I wanted, I was being pulled to Ava still. Just the thought of her being upset with me or hurting because of something I’d done was almost too much to take.

I wouldn’t blame Cali if she hated me.

“Shit!” I splashed more water on my face, but this time, when I looked up at the mirror, there was someone else looking back at me.

# Episode 3676

**Greyson**

I hurried after Cali as she ran into the house. Russell was still on the porch, and the look on his face made it clear that Vishal had just told him about Julia. He’d beaten us all to the punch. Shit. This wasn’t going to be good. He was in full panic mode. Paris was trying to hold him back, but he was fighting to get free.

“Stop it, Mom! I have to go to her! She’s all alone and afraid! She needs me! I can’t just sit back and do nothing!” He was about to jump off the porch, but he stopped short when I stepped into his path.

“Where do you think you’re going?” I asked. The kid was seconds away from doing something dangerous, and I had to stop him before he got himself—or someone else—hurt.

“Get out of my way! I’m going to get Julia back!” Russell yelled, his eyes wild as he tried to rush past me.

I grabbed him by the arm, stopping him. “You can’t leave right now. You’ll put everyone—including your moms—in danger. Is that what you want? You need to calm down and keep a cool head about this. You rushing off into the woods on a wild goose chase isn’t going to help anyone—least of all Julia. You don’t even know where she is!”

A range of conflicting emotions battled across the boy’s face. He wanted to protect the girl he loved, but he didn’t want to put the people he cared about at risk in the process. I knew that look well.

I sighed. This was definitely a bad situation, and it had to be handled carefully. I knew that if we didn’t get Julia back—and fast—Russell could very well do something stupid. He was a tenacious kid. He’d escape if he really put his mind to it. I cared about him and Julia, but I couldn’t have him putting the pack at risk—not even for love.

*But I get it. If it were Cali out there, I’d move mountains to get her back, no matter the risk.*

I’d almost lost Cali too many times already. I knew all too well what it felt like to lose the person you loved most in the world while feeling powerless to get them back.

Russell let out a stuttering sigh as a look of pure pain crossed his face. My heart went out to him. I put a hand on his shoulder and looked him in the eye.

“Russell, we’ll get her back,” I said. “I promise.”

Russell scowled up at me, obviously reluctant to take my word for it—especially since Julia had been taken right out from under one of our allies. I knew that Mace had done his damndest to protect Julia from the Bitterfangs, but I also knew that that didn’t matter to Russell right now. He just wanted to know that his girlfriend was safe.

Russell pulled away from me and crossed his arms. I could tell he was still contemplating making a break for it and taking matters into his own hands. I only hoped he would quickly realize that was a bad idea. There was no guarantee that he’d be lucky enough to survive the Bitterfangs with nothing but a few cuts and bruises for a second time. In fact, it was damn near impossible.

Lucian sidled up to us. “Do we get the girl back through brute force, perhaps?”

*Ah, Lucian. Unhelpful as always.*

I shook my head, scowling. “No. Your days of forcing people to do what you want not on Vanguard territory are over, Lucian—and besides, it isn’t your call. Whatever I say goes, remember?”

Lucian just shrugged. “Of course. No need to pull rank. I’m here to help, just like everyone else.”

I wanted to roll my eyes, but I fought off the urge. I still didn’t trust the princeling one bit, but I needed his alliance for now. We had no idea whether the Bitterfangs would call for any backup. Our main goal was to get Julia out alive and keep Russell that way too.

Russell sighed and looked up at me. “Greyson, do you really promise? You’ll do everything you can to get Julia back? No matter what it takes?”

“I promise. I give you my word as an Alpha. No matter what it takes, I’ll get Julia back safe and sound.”

Russell gave a stiff nod. He finally seemed to be calming down, though he still looked completely gutted as he returned to his moms, who gathered him into a tight embrace.

*Thank you*, Paris mouthed to me, over Russell’s head.

I gave her a slight nod. *Don’t thank me yet*,I thought to myself. I was confident about getting Julia back, but I knew better than anyone how quickly fortunes could turn. We had no idea where Julia was, and we still needed to make sure we were prepared for any surprise attacks by the Bitterfangs. There was a lot at stake here, and I was trying my best to keep everything running smoothly.

I spotted Rishika and Jay talking near the new barrier, and I called them over.

“We need to talk,” I told them.

I stepped off the porch and away from Russell. I didn’t want him overhearing and getting even more stressed out than he already was. With the state he was in, the kid was liable to criticize anything we came up with before running off, thinking he could do better.

“Sure, what’s up?” Rishika said.

“We need a plan,” I said bluntly.

Rishika looked back at the barrier. “We have the perimeter covered, and this new barrier seems to be holding for the moment. I’ve got no idea how it’ll hold up against a Bitterfang onslaught, but I feel good about it.”

“Me too,” Jay said.

I nodded. “That’s good. At least we’ve got some defenses up. That’s half the battle.”

“Lola said that she, Jacqueline, and Mikah can help with the perimeter checks too, if you want,” Jay said.

“Good, I’ll assign the vampires a shift or two, give the others some relief,” Rishika said.

“That’s all good, but we can’t focus solely on defense right now,” I said. “This threat isn’t going to go away until we figure out how to resolve this whole damn situation. It’s already on the brink of spiraling out of control, and I’d like to get a handle on it before it does.”

Rishika scowled. “I don’t get why the Bitterfangs won’t just back off. We clearly outnumber them, and they’re trespassing.”

I nodded. “I agree, but you know as well as I do that a lot of wolves hold on way too tight to old traditions. They have a point to prove.” I sighed, looking at the barrier and the pawprints on the ground from the fighting and the constant patrols. I was still a little stunned that we were probably on the brink of yet another battle. “Wolves like the Bitterfangs feel threatened by anyone who wants change. They think that their way of life is somehow going to get wiped out, even though their conservative traditions are so ingrained in wolf culture that the few people who decide to do things differently would never have the power to threaten them.”

“I just don’t get it. Just let people live their lives. Seems like a waste of time and energy, getting all up in arms about stuff like this,” Jay said.

“It is. But when people are used to controlling literally everything, they freak out the moment someone tries to break free of that control. It makes them think their entire world is crumbling when that’s not the case at all. Silas was like that—obsessed with tradition, followed a bunch of antiquated customs and laws. It’s one of the reasons why I used to prefer Rogue life. I basically escaped to it. I always hated how stifling all Silas’s rules were, and how you had to play his game if you wanted any kind of power.” I kicked at a clod of dirt on the ground. “There’s nothing I hate more than playing games.”

“That’s why the Redwood pack is so strong,” Rishika said. “We don’t get caught up in all that stuff.”

“There are more important things to worry about, after all,” I said, thinking about all the threats that had come our way, and how we’d always mobilized quickly and efficiently—thanks at least in part to the flexible way the Redwood pack operated. “Like right now, we need to make a move of our own. Go on the offensive. But we can’t do that until we know where the Bitterfangs are keeping Julia.”

Rishika frowned and stared off toward the woods. “Do you want me to pull a few people off perimeter patrol to go look for her?”

I scowled as I thought that over. “I don’t like the idea of putting a dent in our defenses for this, but I really don’t see how else we can form a team.”

Lola, who’d been lingering nearby, stepped up. “Let the vampires go.”

# Episode 3677

Big Mac and Okorie were still hard at work making the potion, and I was watching. The kitchen was a flurry of activity as they moved around, plucking this and that from the shelves without missing a beat. They were talking quickly to each other, finishing each other’s sentences and using a bunch of words that I’d never heard in my life. It definitely felt like I was watching a couple of masters practicing their craft.

“Just a pinch,” Big Mac said, just before Okorie dropped a sprinkle of something into the vial. “Perfect,” she said as the potion began to bubble, filling the kitchen with thick steam.

*I should probably stand back and let them do their thing.*

I moved out of the way just as Okorie pranced by with another mysterious jar, this one filled with what looked like blackened grains of rice.

“Sheesh, is everything okay in here?” Artemis asked as she came into the room, fanning her way through the vapors. “Should we call the fire department?”

I chuckled. “Everything’s fine… I think. It’s really exciting, watching them work. They said it won’t be much longer now.”

“So, we’re really doing this, huh? Letting the kid take a potion that’s essentially going to kill him?” Artemis asked.

“It was his idea, but when you put it that way…” A new wave of anxiety bubbled up inside me. “But it’ll only be for a few minutes, and we’ll have Marta standing by.”

“Yeah, but how good is Marta with her magic at this point?” Artemis asked bluntly. “If I’m not mistaken, she and Dani were in ‘Control Your Magic So It Doesn’t Kill People’ school not that long ago.”

I was feeling more anxious by the second. Artemis had a point. This was extremely risky, and there was a lot of space for it to go horribly wrong.

*Is Artemis right? Is this too much to put on such a young kid? Maybe we should find another way…*

Artemis and I coughed as a Big Mac threw in an ingredient that made the concoction hiss and smoke even more. Okorie and Big Mac high fived over the potion. I didn’t think I’d ever seen the two witches more in their element. Seeing them so in sync actually calmed me down a little.

*Big Mac and Okorie are skilled, experienced witches. Big Mac always has to say the warnings that go along with a spell. She’s a good witch; she knows what she’s doing. It’s going to be fine.*

Still, it didn’t hurt to be sure.

“So… Um… How many people do you know who’ve taken this potion?” I asked.

Big Mac scowled. “Are you questioning me right now?”

Okorie shook his head at me in clear disbelief, like he was shocked that I would even *think* to doubt Big Mac—or himself, for that matter.

I shrank back. “No! Of course not; I never would do that. I just feel like we need to make sure?”

“Tell me, Cali, do you want this potion to actually kill him?” Big Mac said. “Because even one deviation from the recipe—which could be caused by distractions and unnecessary questions—could turn this entire concoction deadly in the blink of an eye.”

Thoroughly chastised, I pasted on a weak smile. “Oh, no—sorry. Okay. I get it. I think they’ve got this under control,” I muttered to Artemis before slinking out of the kitchen and away from Big Mac’s glare. This was one of those times where I was just going to have to trust that Big Mac knew what she was doing.

I ran into Lola as she jogged down the stairs in what looked like a cat burglar outfit. I stopped her, taking in her getup and trying to make sense of it. “Um, where are you going, dressed like that?”

“Off on a mission for the pack. Where else?” Lola said with a comical eye roll.

“Wait, what kind of mission? You’re going outside of my mom’s barrier?” I didn’t want my best friend to take any unnecessary risks.

“Yep,” Lola said blithely. “We need to know where Julia is being kept.”

My heart jumped into my throat. I wanted to tell her not to go out there alone, but I knew that my fear was more than a little irrational, so instead, I frowned and said, “Stay safe out there, okay?”

Lola smiled and pulled me into a hug. “Of course! And don’t worry, I won’t be alone. Mikah and Jacs are coming, too.”

I nodded, feeling a little better. “Okay, good. I love you!”

“Love you right back!” Lola said with a big smile. “I’ll tell you all about our little adventure as soon as we get back.”

She gave me one last hug before going out to join Mikah and Jacs, who were already waiting on the porch.

I followed her out to watch them leave, and saw that my mother was standing near the thorn barrier. With a flick of her wrists, she used her magic to dissolve the barrier so that Lola, Mikah, and Jacs could pass through.

“Hey, love,” Greyson said, coming up to stand beside me. He took my hand and squeezed it. “Don’t worry, she’ll be okay,” he said, obviously reading my anxiety loud and clear.

I looked up at him. “I wish the people we love didn’t have to keep putting themselves at risk.”

Greyson shot a thoughtful look at Russell, who was sitting with his parents, obviously still having a hard time. “Yeah, but what else can we do?”

My heart broke just a little, seeing Russell so despondent. I nodded. “Well, we’re doing the right thing. At least I know that.”

My mom was still lingering by the barrier, even though Lola and the others were long gone. After a few moments, she turned to face me. She had a frown on her face, and I immediately walked over to her.

“Mom?” I said. “Is something the matter?”

She hesitated for a moment before she finally spoke. “Maybe. It took me longer than it should have to regrow the thorns, just now. It’s almost like there’s some sort of drain on my magic… I don’t know. I can’t really describe it.”

My anxiety spiked yet again. “You mean your magic is being affected too, like the witches’? What’s wrong with it? Ugh, why isn’t the balance getting better? Things were supposed to go back to normal once we got Seluna’s ashes back to the demon world! This should all be over! Why isn’t it?”

My mom reached out and patted my arm. “Cali, Cali, calm down. Don’t worry. I’m sure that it’s just that I’ve used so much magic lately. I’ve cast a lot of spells recently, and these days, I’m not used to using my magic so much. I’m sure it’s no big deal.”

I nodded, deciding to accept my mother’s explanation—even though the worry festered in the back of my mind.

*I can’t dwell on this, though. I have to focus on being positive for my mates, my friends, and most of all, for Russell.*

Joan came walking over to us with Paris right behind, her eyes still on her son.

“We think he needs something to eat,” Joan said. “Is it okay if we grab something from the kitchen?”

“Of course,” Greyson said. “Let me help you.”

He led them both inside, and I started to go with them, but then I spotted Russell sniffling on a bench, all by himself.

“Do you mind if I sit here with you until your moms come back?” I asked him.

Russell jerked his shoulder in a shrug, obviously trying to hide his tears from me. “Free country.”

I sat down beside him. “You know, once, a demon had both of my mates,” I said. “She was so powerful that I didn’t think I’d ever be able to get them away from her. I really thought they were going to die, right in front of me.”

My voice wobbled as I remembered it.

Russell swiped the moisture from his cheeks and looked up at me. “What did you do?”

I sighed. “Honestly, I broke down for a second. I really, really thought I was going to lose them. It seemed really hopeless.”

Russell frowned. “So… you couldn’t help them?”

“No, I got them back, obviously. But I also don’t blame myself for freaking out for a second. We’re allowed to be mad or scared when someone we love is in danger. It’s normal.”

Russell looked away from me. “So, what, is this a big adult lesson for me or something?”

I smiled. “Yeah, I guess I’m not very subtle.”

Russell nodded. “Well, thanks for trying, at least.”

I nodded. “Anytime, and if you need to talk more—about anything at all—I’m here.”

“Yeah. I guess. Maybe.”

I started to say more, but then I heard a strange, indecipherable whispering in my ear. I frowned and turned, half-expecting to see someone standing right behind me.

It was the wisp.

Its voice rose in my ear again, louder this time. “*Bring down the wall of thorns!*”

# Episode 3678

**Xavier**

I stared in horror at the face looking back at me. It couldn’t be possible, but there she was—Adéluce.

I reared back, instantly on my guard. I’d bested the vampire-witch before, and I would do it again. But as soon as I blinked, she was gone. I leaned forward, staring at my own face in the mirror—right where I was sure Adéluce’s had been only a second ago.

*What the hell is going on here? Am I seeing things, or…?*

“Adéluce?” I said softly. “Are you here?”

I waited for a response and felt kind of stupid when there was no reply. I shook my head and blinked my eyes a few times, just to be sure, before I stared at my reflection once more. I let out a breath and relaxed.

*It’s only me. I must have been seeing things. I’m probably a little out of it after everything that just happened.*

Still, this reminded me that I really didn’t have any idea where Adéluce really was. She seemed to have died, disappearing at the bottom of the lake after we’d defeated her and found Seluna’s ashes, but how could we be sure? Everyone else seemed convinced that she was dead, but I had a sneaking suspicion that she wasn’t.

If only we’d been able to recover her body and make sure she was dead, once and for all. Power like hers was strong enough to survive almost anything—including a werewolf attack and a drowning.

I had this nagging fear that if she’d really survived, she’d be more determined than ever to get back at me for the role she thought I’d played in her family’s death—not to mention the role I’d definitely played in attacking her and possibly drowning her in an icy lake.

*Would she really give up on the vendetta she has against me because she lost the ashes?* If she’d survived, that didn’t seem likely. If the Bitterfangs were any indication, people held all kinds of grudges over far lesser grievances.

I took a deep breath and threw one last splash of cold water on my face. I was relieved when I opened my eyes and saw my own reflection again. I decided not to dwell on Adéluce—not when I had so many other issues staring me right in the face. *Real* issues.

*Still, I should probably take a better look at the coin that made its way into my pocket.*

There was no message on the coin, but that didn’t mean it was harmless. It was enough that it had shown up out of nowhere. I hadn’t had the best experiences with mysterious coins, after all. I rolled my eyes and dried my face. Now, whenever I ran across a spare quarter, I was going to think it was evil or something. I almost laughed out loud at the thought of myself cowering in fear whenever I got change back at a store.

I had to stop dwelling on this mental path, or I wasn’t going to get anything done. I was at the Samara campsite for a reason—and that reason wasn’t to worry over Adéluce, or coins. And it definitely wasn’t to do what I’d just done with Ava. I needed to get the Samaras organized and help my pack, that was all that mattered. The sooner I did that, the sooner I would be back at Cali’s side, where I belonged.

I started to step out of the bathroom, but then I hesitated. I didn’t want another Ava confrontation. It would probably be best for us to steer clear of each other for the time being, though I didn’t know how I was going to manage that, seeing as I’d agreed to lead the Samaras on a temporary basis. What I really wanted was to go back to the pack house and help the Samaras out from there.

*I don’t really have to be here to lead them, do I?*

Unfortunately, I already knew the answer to that. I couldn’t just up and leave. The Redwoods needed the Samaras on our side against the Bitterfangs, and Ava was so mercurial that I wouldn’t put it past her to tell the Samaras to stay out of this latest conflict and hang the Redwoods out to dry if I showed any sign of not keeping my word.

As much as I wanted to, I knew I couldn’t just hide out in the Airstream. But as soon I stepped outside, Ava was right there waiting for me, just like I’d expected. I took a few tentative steps forward, ready to do whatever I could to keep us from getting into the same old fight. Before I could say a word, Ava held up a hand.

“I don’t want to fight anymore, okay?” she said. “Let’s just figure out how to keep our packs safe. That’s the most important thing right now.”

I nodded slowly, surprised that we both seemed to be on the same page for once. My wolf jumped to attention, pleased by one of the rare moments of synergy between Ava and me.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s go see if any more Samaras have returned. We should leave for Redwood territory as soon as we can.”

Ava gestured in front of her. “After you, acting Alpha.”

I rolled my eyes at the exaggerated title, but I didn’t dispute it.

We approached the big group of Samaras, who spread out into a semi-circle as I got closer. I came to a stop and looked around at them, wondering why no one was talking.

Ava coughed quietly, and I looked at her.

*They’re waiting on your leader speech*,she mind linked.

I was surprised at first, but then I realized that as far as the Samaras were concerned, I was currently their Alpha. The thought still made me uncomfortable, but I didn’t think it was the right time to drive home the point that this was a very temporary arrangement.

*No use letting the wind out of their sails just yet. They’ve already had a time of it with that bozo Zeke deserting them when they needed him most.*

I had to keep in mind that this was wartime, and my current role was just for the coming battle. These were extenuating circumstances, and there was no use in getting hung up on the fact that Ava had thrust me into the role of Alpha for a pack that wasn’t my own.

Not wanting the silence to stretch on for too long, I cleared my throat. “The plan is to give the rest of your pack another couple of hours to gather here at the campsite. Once they get here, we’ll head out to Redwood territory, where we’ll join up with the other local packs. You all need to be prepared for possible attacks from the Bitterfangs along the way. They fight fiercely, and they don’t care about fighting fair, so be on your toes. We already know that they’re not happy with the Samara pack for sheltering Julia, and it’s obvious that they want to take revenge on anyone who’s helped the kids.”

I decided not to get into how the Bitterfangs hated that Cali’s *due destini* nature had inspired the two young lovers—even though it was a large part of why the Bitterfangs were so hell-bent on going up against us.

With Cali on my mind, I continued. “We have to be on alert at all times until we’ve safely rendezvoused with the other packs. We can and will get through this, but we have to be smart. There’s no room for error. If we play our cards right, we’ll get through this thing in no time and get back to our normal lives.”

The wolves nodded, and I couldn’t help but notice how they all seemed to be standing taller, now.

*It’s almost like they’re inspired by me… Could that be it?*

It felt good. Natural. I’d been standing in Greyson’s shadow for so long that I’d forgotten what it felt like to be the only voice leading the pack.

*Don’t get too used to it*, I reminded myself. *This is only temporary. As soon as the Bitterfang threat has been dealt with, it’s back to the Redwood pack, where you belong. This is like… Alpha practice. Yes. Practice for the real thing—for when you take your rightful place as Redwood Alpha.*

It felt much better, thinking about it that way. At least if I thought of this as practice, I wouldn’t get angry again about how Ava had all but forced me into it. At least it was serving a purpose, though I didn’t really *need* practice. I could already lead circles around Greyson.

I turned at the sound of someone moving toward us through the woods. I recognized their scents as belonging to Samaras, and I was about to greet them when I realized what I was seeing. It was Marissa and Donovan—but they weren’t alone.

“Look who we found,” Marissa said, dumping a beaten and battered Zeke at our feet.

# Episode 3679

**Lola**

I was on a mission. I had a very personal reason for wanting to stick it to the Bitterfangs—they’d attacked my mate, and there was no way in hell I was going to let that slide.

“Hey! Wait! Slow down, killer!” Jacs called as she hurried to catch up with me.

“Oh, sorry!” I said, realizing that I was practically sprinting through the woods. I slowed down so that Jacs could catch up.

“We’re fast as hell, too, but there’s something to be said for pacing yourself,” Mikah said, once he’d caught up with us. “And I believe we should come up with a plan rather than charging into the very place where we last saw the Bitterfangs.”

“I wouldn’t say no to a plan,” Jacs said.

“The only plan is to find Julia and tell everyone where she is,” I said.

“Yes, that’s a very good *goal*,” Mikah said kindly. “What’s the plan for reaching that goal?”

My cheeks warmed as Mikah’s words sank in.

*Well, I didn’t really plan on* leading *this little mission.* I wasn’t really a natural leader, and I was okay with that. “What do you think, Mikah?”

“We should go the stealth route,” he said breezily. “There are only three of us, so we have to be careful. There’s no way we should risk having to go up against the Bitterfang wolves. No matter how fast and badass we vampires are—”

“Hell yeah, we are!” Jacs cut in, holding up her hand for a high five.

Mikah smiled as we both high fived her. “—it wouldn’t end well for us,” he finished.

I nodded. “That makes sense.”

Jacs was stroking her chin. “But what if we can grab the girl? If we get the chance, shouldn’t we just swipe her and take her back to the pack house?”

Mikah winced and shook his head. “We really shouldn’t make any risky moves… But if we see a truly safe, truly idiot-proof opportunity, we should take it.”

“Okay, but do you really think a werewolf girl would willingly run off with three vampires?” I asked. “The Redwood pack is pretty diverse and open-minded, but as a rule, werewolves and vampires don’t get along all that well.”

Jacs frowned. “I don’t see why not. I mean, we’d be there to help her.”

“Yeah, but you don’t understand just how wary werewolves are of vampires,” I said.

Jacs sighed, rolling her eyes. “You werewolves really love your stereotypes and biases against vampires, don’t you?”

“Hey, it’s not like that! Werewolves have their reasons, okay?” I said, starting to get defensive. I was a vampire now, but I was also a werewolf, and I completely understood why there was a rift between the two groups. There was a lot of history, and mistakes had been made on both sides—not that Jacs would ever admit to that.

“Lola, you’re a hybrid,” Mikah said. “So if we find an opening, you’ll be the one to approach Julia. She’ll catch your scent, realize you’re not a full vampire, and be more likely to listen to you. Problem solved.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said.

“Unless she sniffs you out and is just completely confused,” Jacs said with a sniff. “That’s what happens when most people get a whiff of you.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when and if we get to it,” Mikah said dryly. He turned his attention on me. “So, Lola, how good are you at sneak attacks?”

I frowned. Had I ever crept up behind someone to take them down? “I don’t really know. I don’t think I’ve ever tried it before. Werewolf attacks are usually a tad less… subtle.”

Jacs grinned mischievously at Mikah. “Oh, I get it. If we run into wolves, you want us to incapacitate them with our venom?”

Mikah nodded. “Exactly. We have to use the weapons we have to our advantage.”

“That sounds good to me,” I said, kind of excited to learn a new vampy trick.

“Now that we have a plan, let’s get moving,” Mikah said, already taking off into the woods toward the last spot where we’d scented the Bitterfangs.

We weren’t walking for very long before I scented strange wolves. I signaled to Mikah and Jacs, and they nodded, silently agreeing that we should keep quiet from here on out. We moved swiftly and soundlessly through the trees. I called on my vampire instincts and took a few visual tips from Jacs and Mikah to make sure that I didn’t make a sound as we moved over fallen branches, moss, and leaves.

I smelled the wolf before I saw him. He was obviously a perimeter guard. I pointed him out to the others, and Jacs glided up behind the wolf and grabbed him. She held the wolf’s mouth shut to keep him quiet, then dug her fangs into his neck. It didn’t take long for him to pass out from the venom.

Mikah had spotted another guard nearby. In a flash, he was behind the wolf and biting his neck—except he did it so quickly that he didn’t have to cover the wolf’s mouth, since he didn’t get the chance to make a sound.

I spotted a third guard up ahead and sped toward him, but then I stumbled over a log and nearly faceplanted—and made a shit ton of noise in the process. The guard spun around and let out a shout before I panicked and punched him in the face. He fell to the ground, dazed.

*Who needs venom when you’ve got a left hook with hybrid strength behind it?*

My little moment of relief was cut short when Mikah came over and frowned at me. I shrugged and mouthed, *Sorry*.

Mikah gave a nod, then signaled for us to move forward now that we’d taken out the perimeter guards. I hung back a bit, embarrassed that I’d messed up. I was still new at the whole vampire stealth thing, but Jacs and Mikah were so perfect in executing all their vampire moves that I didn’t want to let them down. Using every bit of concentration I had, I fell into step behind them, vowing to not make another sound.

Finally, we found the main camp. Mikah pointed to the trees above us, and I nodded. As quietly as I could manage, I scaled a thick tree trunk and got a bird’s eye view of the camp. I sniffed the air, realizing belatedly that I’d never met Julia, which meant I couldn’t pick out her particular scent from the rest of the werewolves.

*Dammit!*

Just as I was about to kick myself for not having asked Russell if he had something of Julia’s I could use to learn her scent, I smelled something familiar.

*Of course! It’s Russell’s scent! Julia and Russell have spent time together, so she still has trace amounts of his scent on her.*

I turned my head and spotted a tent set apart from the others, with two guards posted at the opening.

*That has to be where they’re keeping Julia!*

Tapping into my vampire abilities once again, I swung swiftly over to another tree. It was thrilling, moving so quickly and quietly, far above the enemy. I was used to feeling strong and powerful, but the precision and speed of my vampire powers still felt new and invigorating.

I was above Julia’s tent now, and I looked up to meet Mikah’s eyes. He was two branches above me, and Jacs was in the tree right next to ours. I pointed at the tent, and Mikah nodded. Slowly, carefully, I climbed down the tree and crept over to the first guard, staying right behind him and out of the line of sight of the other guard. Impressing myself, I sped up behind him, placed my hand over his mouth, and dragged him backward into the woods. I bit him in the neck and waited for him to pass out from my venom.

I’d moved so fast that the other guard was only just noticing that his friend was gone. Confused and calling for his partner, he walked around to the back of the tent, scanning the area. He was just about to spot me when I jumped out and took him down, too. Smooth and easy. I smiled and looked toward Mikah’s hiding place, hoping he approved. He gestured at me impatiently, clearly urging me to hurry.

I pouted. *I think I did a pretty good stealth job, there. He could have at least thrown me a thumbs up!* Still, he was right—we needed to get in and out before someone came to check on the prisoner.

Still in stealth mode, I slipped into the tent. There was a figure huddled in the far corner. It was definitely Julia. I could smell Russell’s scent on her.

“I said I’m not hungry!” Julia said, her voice shaking.

I crept closer to her, hoping that the dim light of the tent would catch my face so that she could see in my eyes that I wasn’t there to hurt her.

“I don’t have time to explain, but I’m here to bring you to Russell,” I whispered.

Julia lifted her head and looked at me with wide, hopeful eyes. “Russell? Is he okay?”

I nodded. “Yes, he’s fine, but you have to be quiet. Let’s go.”

Julia nodded, looking very determined as she leapt to her feet to follow. I was happy to see that she looked physically fine, which was important, since we were going to have to run soon.

I threw open the tent flap—and came face-to-face with half a dozen Bitterfang wolves.

I gave an awkward laugh. “Oh, this isn’t the bathroom!”

A moment later, Jacs came barreling through the wolves. She bit one and slammed her fist into another, sending him flying as she shouted, “RUN!”

# Episode 3680

I nearly jumped right out of my skin at the sight of the wisp. *Oh no. It’s back. Why does this have to happen right now?*

Russell frowned at me, clearly confused. “What’s happening? Are you okay?”

He gave me a strange look and twisted around to look where I was looking, but of course, he couldn’t see it.

“Y-Yes. I’m fine. I just… I have to go.”

I raced off the porch and away from the house, hoping that neither Russell nor anyone else would follow. I knew I needed to tell my Mom like I had promised I would when I saw a wisp next. I didn’t want this wisp anywhere near the pack house. The last time it had appeared, it had wanted me to practically murder Ava, and who knew what else it was truly capable of?

I ran, doing my best to find a route that wouldn’t lead me directly to the thorn barrier, but I was utterly surrounded. There was no way to avoid it.

The wisp was still there, hovering just above my head.

“*Bring it down!*” it said again. “*Do it now! Destroy the barrier! Blast it to pieces!*”

I shook my head.

*I’m not going to listen. I can’t. I have to fight it. I have to be stronger than it is. It’s the only way.* I pressed my hands over my ears. I could feel the overwhelming urge to blast the wall with my magic welling up inside me, but I resisted it. *This is why I trained with Artemis. I have to overcome the compulsion. I can’t let the wisp have this much power over me.*

I still hadn’t quite figured out how I’d resisted Artemis’s command not to kiss my mates, but I thought back to how I’d felt when I’d broken through it with Greyson.

*I just need to remember that feeling and then duplicate it. I just have to think back to when I was about to kiss Greyson. How did I feel? Was I defiant? Happy? What was I thinking? Did it have something to do with Greyson himself?*

I was at a loss. I really couldn’t pinpoint how I’d done it, but I still tried my best to recapture the feeling so I could use it to push back against the urge to destroy the thorn barrier. A few minutes passed, and I concentrated hard on reliving those moments, but in the end, I still wasn’t any closer to understanding how I’d managed to defy Artemis’s compulsion. It seemed I hadn’t quite mastered it.

Gritting my teeth, I tried to step back away from the thorn wall, but my feet were rooted in place. It was like my body wouldn’t listen to my brain because it was too busy taking commands from the wisp.

*No! This can’t be happening. Not right now. I have to fight it!*

“*Destroy the thorns! Destroy the barrier!*” the wisp demanded. “*Blast it. Tear it down! Do it now!*”

“No!” I shouted. “No! I won’t do it! Stop it! Leave me alone! I won’t!”

I had my hands pressed over my ears, but it didn’t seem to be doing much good. The voice seemed to be coming from inside my head, and no matter what I did, I couldn’t block it out. My body felt heavy and unresponsive, and try as I might, I still couldn’t move my feet.

I cried out as I struggled to use every ounce of willpower and strength I possessed to resist the wisp’s pull, but my hands were warming up anyway. I was gathering my magic.

“I won’t do this!” I sobbed. “I will resist you! I won’t let you control me!”

“*You* will *destroy it*,” the wisp said cruelly. “*And you’re going to destroy it* now*!*”

“No!”

Even as I screamed in protest, I could feel the energy ball growing larger inside me. My mind raced as I tried to figure out where I could aim it so that it wouldn’t hurt the thorn barrier. I looked around, growing more frantic by the second, but there was nowhere I could send the blast without potentially damaging the pack house itself. I closed my eyes and gathered every bit of strength I had, trying to pull my magic back, but I couldn’t get a grip on it.

It occurred to me then that I was fighting one of the hardest battles of my life, and it was taking place inside my body. I felt beads of sweat breaking out across my brow as I tried to push my magic down deep, to where the wisp couldn’t force me to use it. But it was no use. The energy ball was so big now that if I didn’t release it, I was worried that *I* might explode*.*

Finally, I squeezed my eyes shut and let the ball of energy loose at the thorns. An explosion of dust and smoke billowed around me, so thick that I could barely see even a foot in front of my face. I coughed, waving away the smoke and debris as it slowly dissipated. My whole body felt weak with anxiety as I braced myself for the sight of the damage I’d done to the barrier. I blinked against the dust and dirt until it finally cleared, and I could see the thorn wall.

It was already growing back again, and in a matter of seconds, it was completely intact.

Shaking, I slumped to my knees. *Thank god my mother’s magic is so strong. If it wasn’t, the wisp would’ve forced me to leave us vulnerable to the Bitterfangs. I would never have forgiven myself if I’d blasted the wall down and the Bitterfangs had come in and caught us by surprise, like they did the Blue Bloods.*

My arms were aching like crazy, like I’d been fighting for my life. It felt like my entire body was vibrating in protest of what had just happened. Even my head and jaw ached from the strain of trying to resist the wisp’s control. I felt awful.

*Who’s doing this to me? Why have the wisps turned against me? Is it because I was the one who caused the magic imbalance in the first place, and the dust from that is still settling? Will this ever end?*

Dread settled in the pit of my stomach as I wondered if all of this was my punishment. I was the one who’d killed Seluna in the first place and brought forth the ashes that had tampered with the balance of nature. Even Vander had warned me that the world’s magic wasn’t righting itself the way it was supposed to. If magic was now forever changed because of my choices, maybe someone was punishing me for that. Maybe they were trying to make me pay for messing with something so powerful.

*That’s not fair! I killed Seluna to protect myself and my mates! I didn’t* want *to kill her—I had no choice!*

I let out a low sob and buried my face in my hands. I didn’t think I’d ever felt as hopeless as I did at that moment.

*What if I messed up so big this time that there’s no fixing things? What if there’s nothing I can do to fix what’s wrong with me? What if this is just the way my life is going to be from now on?*

Part of me wished that I’d never found out I was Fae. It just seemed like ever since I’d discovered who I really was, I’d come up against one problem after another.

*If I weren’t Fae, none of this would be happening. I’d get to live a normal life without being hounded by trouble. I’m so sick of this! I just want things to be normal for once!*

I sat there on the cold ground and allowed myself to wallow in self-pity for a while. Then I took a deep breath and pushed away the negative thoughts as best I could.

*There’s no use regretting the past. If I really caused the wisps to be coming after me, then I have to find a way to fix it. There’s no other option.*

What choice did I have? It wasn’t like I could go back in time and keep myself from being born half Fae. Plus, I couldn’t help but think of all the good things that had come into my life since I’d discovered I was Fae—including my Fae sister.

*I guess it’s true what they say. You can’t have the good without the bad.*

I picked myself up off the ground, wondering what to do next. To my horror, the wisp zoomed back into focus again.

“No!” I cried out. “Go away! Leave me alone! You can’t make me destroy the barrier. You saw it! My mother’s magic is too strong!”

The wisp bounced and wavered above me silently for a few beats, almost like it was considering what I’d said, and then it spoke again. “*Then you must get her blood, Caliana!*”

# Episode 3681

**Ava**

It was Zeke. I couldn’t believe it. No matter how much I resented him, I still flinched at the sight of how badly he’d been beaten. Nobody deserved that.

“What happened to him?” I asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

“I don’t know,” Marissa said. “We found him this way.”

“Yeah, on the path leading out of the territory,” Donovan said plainly.

Anger surged through me. “So he was trying to run and probably came across the wrong person.”

“No! You—you don’t understand!” Zeke sputtered. “I was trying to help you!”

Xavier stood over Zeke with his arms crossed. “Explain.”

“I was trying to help the pack! That’s why I look like this,” Zeke said.

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t believe you. You ran away, Zeke. I saw your Airstream—you packed all your stuff. You abandoned us! Admit it.”

I glanced at Xavier—who had an expression of disbelief on his face—and couldn’t help but think about what had passed between us earlier. I quickly pushed that away and returned my attention to the matter at hand.

“So you’re not even going to let me explain my side of things?” Zeke asked.

I rolled my eyes again. I was so over this. “Fine, Zeke. Tell us why you left.”

“I was trying to spy on the Bitterfangs,” he said in a wheedling tone. “I wanted to help you—to help the pack.”

Xavier’s eyes narrowed. “So, what did you find out?”

Zeke scowled and ducked his head. “Nothing. It wasn’t long before they caught me and did this to me.”

I scoffed. “Oh yeah? And what proof do you have that that’s what you were trying to do?”

It was just like Zeke to not only run away with his tail between his legs, but to make up an elaborate lie about it now that he’d been caught.

“Look at my face!” Zeke pleaded. “Isn’t that proof enough?”

I shook my head and reached out to Xavier via mind link. *Do you believe him?*

*No*,Xavier said*. Like you said, he packed all his stuff. Why would he do that if he was just popping out for some sort of spying excursion? He was definitely running.*

*Exactly. We need to punish him.*

Xavier sighed. *I know you do, and I’d love to do the honors, but right now there’s too much at stake for the rest of your pack. The way I see it, if he wants to run, then fine. Get fucked.*

That frustrated me. If we let Zeke run, we’d be giving him exactly what he wanted, and that wasn’t what he deserved. I was starting to think that what he *did* deserve was the ass beating he’d apparently gotten from the Bitterfangs. It served him right.

But why would they have let him go?

I looked at Xavier, realizing I was just as frustrated with him as I was with the whole runaway Alpha situation. I was tired of all the back and forth. It was all getting to be too much. As much as I tried to resist it, I couldn’t help but think again about what had happened between us in the Airstream. He’d truly, finally *wanted* to give in to the heat that was simmering between us, but he’d stopped it. Just like he had every time before. I only wanted him if he was ready to stop holding back. I was tired of him dipping a toe into familiar waters only to run away when things got too intense. When it came to me and him, I had to wonder if he was always going to end up running back to Cali, leaving me in the dust time and time again.

*What do you want to do?* Xavier’s mind link broke through my thoughts.

I hesitated. I wasn’t sure what the right move was. If it were up to me, Zeke would actually pay for his behavior, be forced to learn why he couldn’t get away with just running out on his pack when they needed him. But clearly, Xavier wasn’t on the same page.

I was about to reply when I caught a strange scent on the breeze. I partially shifted my hands and turned toward the woods—just as Lance came walking out of them. Xavier had partially shifted his hands too, and then stepped forward, ready to take Lance on.

“I come in peace,” Lance said, his hands raised.

I narrowed my eyes. I didn’t trust it.

*What do you think this is about?* I mind linked to Xavier.

*No idea, but let’s take a moment and see what he’s up to before we react.*

Lance kept coming, his hands still up. I didn’t smell any other unfamiliar wolves on the breeze, so it seemed like he was here alone.

*Good*,I thought to myself. *He’s outnumbered. If he tries to pull anything, we’ll cut him down before he knows what hit him.*

Since we had the upper hand, I was willing to listen to whatever he’d come to tell us, but that didn’t mean I was going to believe it.

“Why are you here?” Xavier asked, stepping forward.

Lance’s gaze fell on Zeke, who was literally cowering behind me. I was as embarrassed by our sad excuse for an Alpha as I was angry. Zeke was literally the worst, and useless to boot.

“I’m not here to fight with your packs,” Lance began. “I’m here to discuss a matter of honor.”

I frowned. “What the hell are you even talking about?”

“I believe in honor and loyalty,” Lance continued. “So, when a wolf is disloyal to his pack, I cannot—*will* not—let it stand.”

I gave him a confused look. “What are you saying?”

Lance’s gaze dragged slowly back to Zeke. “This one came to us, asking to betray his pack.”

“He’s lying! He’s lying!” Zeke whimpered.

“He wanted to change sides,” Lance said, as if Zeke hadn’t said a word.

“That’s not true!” Zeke burst out. “He’s lying, Ava! You have to believe me. I would never do that!”

Zeke might as well have been saying nothing at all. My heart fell. *I knew it. I knew he was lying. But for him to sink this low?*

“Why are you telling us this?” Xavier asked.

“Like I said. I believe in honor and loyalty, and this wolf? The Samara Alpha?” He said the words like they tasted bad. “He didn’t demonstrate either of those traits when he came sniveling to us. I believe that you have the right to know about his actions, regardless of what’s going on between our packs.”

I scowled at Lance. “So, that’s the only reason you came here? To make sure we knew about our Alpha’s lack of loyalty and honor?”

Lance nodded. “You can believe me or not. I’ve given you the message I came to deliver.”

He turned and started to leave.

“You really expect us to let you leave like this?” Xavier called after him.

Not even bothering to turn around, Lance said, “Despite the image you try to project, Xavier Evers, I know you’re an Alpha. You wouldn’t dishonor yourself by attacking me while my back is turned.”

Xavier growled behind me, and I could almost hear the string of curses that were undoubtedly going off in his head.

“Just let him go,” I said, putting my hand on his arm.

“Fine,” Xavier spat.

He finally relaxed and fully shifted back to human, and I did the same. It seemed like Lance really *had* come to pass on a warning about Zeke, so the threat was gone—for now.

I turned to Zeke. “I knew you were lying.”

“N-N-No! He—he made that up!” Zeke said. “Who are you going to believe? A wolf who’s trying to kill you and wipe out our entire pack, or someone who’s a part of your pack and has done nothing but try to protect you?”

I had to stop myself from laughing in his face. “You’re no longer a part of this pack. You want to run? Then run. You are officially exiled. You will never have the protection of any pack in this area again. Do you hear me?”

Zeke’s eyes widened in horror. “You can’t kick me out now! You saw him! Lance, the Bitterfangs—they have it out for me!”

I glared at him. “That isn’t my problem. You made your bed, now it’s time to lie in it.”

“This isn’t just banishment! This is a death sentence!” Zeke shouted. “They’ll kill me!”

I shook my head, my heart feeling cold and hard in my chest. “You’re not our responsibility anymore, Zeke.”

Zeke shifted in the blink of an eye, growling as he leapt at me. I shifted too, meeting him in midair. I overpowered him immediately, taking his neck between my teeth and shaking him, my anger taking over. I threw him to the ground and pinned him beneath my paws. I was a second away from ripping his throat out when I stopped myself. I stepped back and boldly shifted back to human while Zeke cowered on the ground, still in wolf form.

“Sparing your miserable life is the only charity I’m willing to give you,” I hissed. “I won’t kill you here and now, Zeke, even though that’s exactly what I *should* do.” I stepped closer and loomed over him. “Now get the hell out of here before I change my mind.”

# Episode 3682

My heartbeat quickened at the wisp’s command. *Blood? It wants my mother’s blood?*

*Take that charm off, Caliana. Be a good little Fae.*

Shaking, my hands took the plant charm off me. Shit shit shit! What was going on? Why couldn’t I stop this?

*Use your mother’s blood to tear down the barrier, Caliana!*

*No!* I said back. That I would *not* do. *I won’t do that, and you can’t make me!*

I gritted my teeth again, trying to resist the wisp’s pull. But even as I struggled and fought, my body started to walk. I bent down and physically grabbed my legs, trying to stop them from carrying me toward the pack house, but it wasn’t working. I was moving faster and faster, and I couldn’t stop. I didn’t know what to do—so I decided to just lean into it.

I raced into the house and called out desperately to my mother. “Mom? Mom!”

I let out a breath of relief when my mother came running into the room. I strained and fought to keep myself from lunging at her, and the urge passed—for the moment.

“Cali? What is it? Are you okay?

“Mom—please! Don’t get any closer! Don’t let me hurt you!” I held my hands up, hoping she would stay back. “Don’t let me hurt you, Mom. I’m trying to fight it, but it’s hard! I can’t!”

“What the hell is happening?” Artemis demanded as she burst into the room.

“Artemis, help me get your sister somewhere she can sit down,” Mom said.

They led me to one of the back bedrooms and sat me down on the bed.

I looked at Artemis. “Please, don’t let me hurt her! Don’t let me hurt Mom!”

Artemis frowned at me. “I don’t understand; what’s happening? Why would you hurt Mom?”

“It’s that wisp,” I sobbed. “It’s telling me to hurt her. It wants me to take her blood!”

Before I could stop it, I felt the wisp’s force surge within me, taking control again. I jumped off the bed and lunged at my mother.

Quick on her feet as always, Artemis caught me in midair and wrestled me back down onto the bed, pinning me down.

“Cali, what the hell?” she grunted as she fought to press me down onto the bed.

“Please! Help me! I can’t control it!” I screamed as tears streamed down my face. I was bucking against Artemis and yanking my arms and legs, trying to get free. It felt like electricity was racing though my body, making me fight Artemis. My eyes were on my mother, and my body was fighting to toss Artemis off and go straight for her.

*I can’t believe this. My body really wants to hurt my mother, and there’s nothing I can do to suppress it!*

“Stop it, Cali! Stop it now!” Artemis shouted. “Cali! Cali! Do you hear me? Stop!”

I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to focus on nothing but the sound of my sister’s voice. With the wisp’s influence flooding through me, it was really hard to do, but I kept trying. I’d never been more thankful for Artemis’s strength. The wisp was still fighting to make me do what it wanted, but Artemis had my legs and arms pinned hard to the bed, so I couldn’t move, no matter how much I struggled. After a few more minutes of the wisp fighting against the both of us, I finally regained a bit of control.

I waited a few moments, just to be sure. I could still feel a hint of the compulsion inside me, but it was nothing like before. I seemed to be holding it at bay for the moment.

“I think I’m okay now,” I said. “You can let me go.”

Artemis gave me a suspicious look.

“Really, Artemis, I’m not going to do anything right now. I don’t feel what I felt before—it finally stopped. But maybe stay close.” I turned to look at my mother, whose face was crumpled with distress. “Mom, you have to stay away from me.”

Artemis finally nodded and let me go. Rubbing my wrists and legs where Artemis had held me down, I sat up on the bed. I felt completely worn out. I just wanted this to end, but it didn’t seem to be showing any signs of slowing down. It took everything I had not to descend into another round of self-pity.

“Cali, you have to tell us what happened,” Mom said. I noticed that she was keeping her distance, like I’d asked. “You said the wisp appeared again? Tell me exactly what happened.”

I took a deep breath, fighting a sudden urge to wrap my hands around my mother’s neck. For a moment, I thought I was going to need Artemis to hold me down again, but I tensed my muscles, holding myself back. “Yes, it was the wisp. It wanted me to blast down the thorn wall. It *made* me blast it. I tried to stop it, but I couldn’t.”

“Blasting it wouldn’t have worked,” my mother said.

“It didn’t,” I said. “But when the wisp realized that, it told me to use your blood to tear down the barrier. Then it forced me into the pack house and sent me after you.”

Mom shook her head. “Spilled blood is dark magic.”

She shook her head and paced back and forth a little, her brow knitted with worry.

“Sorry, but what the fuck are we talking about right now? Wisps? Getting Mom’s blood?” Artemis said, pointing at me. “Is that why you’re carrying that?”

I looked down and saw that I was holding a branch of thorns.

“I don’t even remember picking this up.” I gave Artemis a desperate look. “See? I can’t stop myself. When the wisp reaches out to me, I literally have no control, no matter what I try. I did my best to resist, how I did when we practiced, but I’m just not strong enough. It didn’t matter how hard I fought—it still took over!”

Nodding, Artemis reached down and tried to pry the branch out of my hands, but my hand was closed around it like a vise, and Artemis soon gave up.

“Geez, you’ve got a hell of a hold on that thing,” she said.

“I’m sorry. It’s like I’m the puppet and the wisp is holding the strings. I can’t stop it.” I reached over and tried to pry the branch out of my own hand, but of course, it didn’t work. Fear gripped me. I hated feeling this way—the way I had when Seluna had possessed me too. Was this going to get worse? And how?

Artemis looked from me to our mother. “I could knock her out. Maybe that’ll reset things?”

I nodded excitedly. “Yes, yes! Do that! If I’m unconscious then I can’t move, right?”

My mother looked horrified. “Artemis! You are NOT going to punch your sister out!”

“Not a punch, really. More like a little bonk on the head. I know just the right spot. Fully effective, minimal lasting damage,” Artemis said, almost proudly. “She wouldn’t feel a thing.”

“No, Artemis, we’re going to have to find another way.” Without warning, my mother started walking toward me.

I cringed. “Mom! Didn’t you hear me? Don’t get close to me! I’m going to hurt you! I can’t trust myself not to!”

But she didn’t stop. She came closer, holding out her hand. “I know that you can overcome it, Cali. You’re stronger than this.”

I was about to protest when a feeling of calm fell over me. Tears started streaming down my cheeks. “Mom, I don’t want to hurt you! I love you so much. That’s the last thing I want—but the wisp…”

My mother nodded. “I know, Cali. I know. Just listen to the sound of my voice. Forget about the wisp. Forget about how it feels when it’s controlling you. Focus on my voice, and nothing else. Lock the wisp out of your mind. You can do this. Fight it, Cali. Think of something joyful, something that makes you happy, and hold on to that.”

I closed my eyes and thought of saving my mother. This was the moment that would ground me. I had to rely on it. Again, I clung to the feeling that had welled up in my chest when I’d first realized that my mother was going to be okay. I took another deep breath. Suddenly, I felt a lot calmer.

“I think that maybe it’s working,” I said.

Mom was right next to me, now. “Good, that’s good. Now hold on to that feeling, Cali. Don’t let it go. Use it. This is good. You’re doing great.”

I finally opened my eyes to smile at my mother and thank her for talking me through this, but at the sight of her face, a fire flared to life inside me. I gasped as a sharp, stabbing pain tore through my shoulder.

It was the Seluna mark.

Before I could even react to the waves of pain radiating from the mark, I watched in horror as my arm rose, then lashed out at my mother with the branch of thorns.

# Episode 3683

**Xavier**

I growled, primed to back Ava up in case Zeke lashed out again. Ava had made it clear that she had no interest in being Alpha, but when she stepped up and did things like making the executive decision to banish Zeke from the pack… Well, I couldn’t help but think about how good an Alpha she would be. Throughout the confrontation, I’d hovered close by her side, ready to jump in if needed, but of course Ava had handled the situation perfectly.

*The Samara pack would be lucky to have her as their Alpha. Despite our differences, that’s never been a question in my mind. Too bad she’s not interested in the job.*

Without another word, Zeke slinked away into the forest. Ava watched him go, lifting her fingers to her temples and massaging them like she was trying to fight off a headache.

“Are you okay?” I ventured.

“Yeah. I just need a minute.” She turned and went back into the trailer.

I watched her go, then looked around. All the other wolves had stood silently by, watching it all go down, and now they seemed to be at a loss. I didn’t blame them. They hadn’t seen a stitch of stability since Nolan had died, and knowing Nolan, they probably hadn’t had much stability before his death, either.

“Nothing’s changed,” I said to the wolves. They instantly snapped to attention, waiting for direction. “Let’s keep going with our preparations to move out. We need to meet up with the other packs soon.”

“On it!” Marissa said, and she and Donovan rushed off with the other wolves.

I went after Ava and walked into the trailer to find her almost slumped over the counter. She looked pale and drawn, and she was shaking ever so slightly. I had to resist the urge to reach out and comfort her. My wolf didn’t like seeing her like this, and I was working overtime to keep my feelings in check. There was no room for me to blur the lines between us any more than I already had.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I asked.

Ava turned to look at me. “I’m fine. I just need a second. It’s not every day that you have to make the decision to banish someone from your pack.” She gave me a weak smile. “Just trying to put my head back together.”

I nodded. “For what it’s worth, I completely agree with what you did. Zeke gave you no choice, really. It was for the safety of the pack. I’ve never seen a bigger liability than that guy.”

Ava closed her eyes. “I almost killed him. I *wanted* to kill him. I pictured myself doing it.”

I looked at her, unsure of the right thing to say. To be honest, I probably would have killed him myself—especially since it had looked like Zeke was going to try to kill Ava for a minute there. The guy was bad news, and had somehow gone from bad to worse. He lacked the guts to protect his pack, but he’d certainly found the gall to try and attack the only thing the pack had going for it. If Ava *had* killed him, it would’ve been in self-defense, no doubt about it.

*But her holding back showed a lot of strength, too*,I thought to myself. *As reluctant as I am to admit it, Ava truly seems to have changed. There was a time when she would have killed Zeke without a second thought.*

I’d seen glimpses and flashes of the new Ava, but I always got caught up in the past. But now, despite our issues, I was starting to think that she truly was a different person than the girl who’d killed my mother. It was almost hard to believe that she’d changed so much, but everything she’d said and done lately proved to me that she really had.

There was a shout from outside, and Ava’s head shot up.

“What now?” she said.

I hurried out of the trailer, and Marissa came running up.

“We’re all here,” she said. “The last of the pack just arrived.”

I nodded, then glanced back at Ava. “You ready?”

She certainly looked ready, which was surprising, since I knew she wasn’t feeling all that great. Once again, I was impressed by how she always managed to show up for her pack.

“Let’s go,” she said. “We need to end this thing.”

“Let’s move out!” I shouted.

I shifted, and all the other wolves followed suit. Once again, that feeling of pride and power welled up inside me at the authority I commanded as de facto Alpha. I ran into the forest, and the others followed. Ava was right on my flank, and for a moment, my wolf reacted as if that was where she belonged. I quickly shook that thought away.

*That’s not what this is. Ava is only doing what’s best for the Samaras, and I’m helping her as an ally. Nothing more, nothing less. It should be Cali here by my side as my true Luna.*

As much as I wanted to push Ava out of my mind and think only of Cali, I couldn’t help but think back to the moment when Zeke had lunged at Ava. I’d felt real fear at the possibility of him hurting her—of him *killing* her. I’d felt real fear at the thought of losing her.

*None of that matters right now. Ava is fine. Zeke didn’t hurt her, and she’s right here next to me. She’s going to fight beside me against the Bitterfangs, and that’s it. All those feelings I had before have no place in my heart. I need to get a grip and focus on what’s important, and that’s not Ava.*

I was starting to think that I was trying to convince myself of something that just wasn’t true. I could no longer hide from the fact that I still cared about Ava. No matter what I told myself, my emotions, my reactions, and my wolf all thought differently.

Marissa and Donovan fell into step beside us.

Marissa reached out to me via mind link. *We scouted ahead. Looks like the Bitterfangs are on the move.*

Shit.We were cutting it really close here.

*Let’s hurry up! Stay on your toes!* I mind linked to the rest of the pack as I raced forward, taking a path that I knew would get us back to Redwood territory quickly. I hoped that my knowledge of the forest would give us the edge we needed to get back to the pack house faster. I knew these woods like the back of my hand, and I couldn’t help but enjoy weaving through the trees, my feet barely touching the ground as I pushed myself to the limit.

Not much later, relief flooded through me as I recognized our trees. We were back on Redwood land. I lifted my nose to take in the familiar scent of my own territory. It was good to be back. I slowed a bit as we reached the outskirts of our land. I’d been expecting to run into one of our patrols, but instead, I saw a wall of thorns.

*What the hell is this?*

I slowly approached it, and just as I was about to touch it with my snout, it began to crumble.

*Get back!* I mind linked to the Samaras. I saw them all skid to a halt, trying to keep their distance as the entire thorny wall fell into nothing more than a mass of brittle branches on the ground. Cautiously, I moved forward and picked my way through the ruins.

*What does this mean?* Ava mind linked, asking the very question I was thinking.

*I don’t know*,I said. *But let’s find out.*

I hurried up to the pack house, shifting back to human as I walked up the steps to the porch. Greyson, Rishika, and Jay were waiting there, along with Mace and Kira. When had theyarrived?

Greyson looked super pissed as he turned his gaze on me. “I told you not to leave, and you did it anyway. Do you see the issue, there?”

I stared back at him, keeping my expression blank. “I don’t think it’s worth fighting over at the moment,” I said stonily. “We caught the Bitterfangs’ scent as we made our way here. They’re coming.”

Greyson’s expression darkened as I pointed at the fallen thorns.

“What’s that?” I demanded. “Or should I say, what *was* that?”

“It’s what I was coming out to check on when you arrived. It was a thorn wall made by Orla that was keeping the Bitterfangs out,” Greyson said.

I scowled, realizing that it would’ve done a good job of keeping me out, too. They’d put it up after I left.

*Why wouldn’t they give me a heads-up that I was pretty much barred from getting back into the pack house?*

But there was no time to be mad. I turned to my brother, deciding to ignore his sour expression.

“So, what are we going to do about the Bitterfangs, my Alpha?” I couldn’t help but make a dig, however small.

A flicker of annoyance passed across Greyson’s face, and he sighed. “We can’t waste any more time. We have to kill Russell.”

# Episode 3684

I fought Artemis as she tried to hold me back. I’d finally dropped the thorn branch, but I’d already done the damage. My mother was standing off to the side, pressing a hand to the wound on her arm. Her blood had spilled on the ground, and the wisp had appeared and was now somehow… floating in it.

*What is it doing? Is it* drinking *her blood right now? Like a vampire wisp? The fuck?*

The wisp took on a faint red glow before it rose from the puddle of blood and zipped away. I stared after it, watching it go as the intense rage that had been surging within me finally started to abate. I blinked and looked around, my gaze coming to rest on my mother.

“Mom, are you okay? I’m sorry!” I finally had control of my body again, and I rushed to my mother’s side.

“I’m fine,” she said. “It’s just a cut.”

She removed her hand and looked closely at the wound. It was still bleeding a little, but it didn’t look too bad up close. That didn’t mean that I felt any better about having attacked my mother, even if I hadn’t meant to do it.

“What the hell did the wisp want with your blood?” Artemis asked. “I didn’t know wisps were into that sort of thing.”

Mom frowned. “Usually they’re not, but I think I know why this one wanted it. I can feel that my connection with the thorn barrier has been severed.” She walked to the window and looked out. “Cali, you said the wisp wanted to destroy the thorn wall? Well, it looks like it got exactly what it wanted.”

I joined her at the window and gasped. The thorn wall had completely withered away. Even as we looked on, the final section shriveled and fell.

“That’s why it wanted your blood,” I said softly. *And it used me to get it.*

“Yes. It needed to cut the magic connection to the thorns,” she said. “It basically used my magic against us.”

“But I don’t get it. What is its end goal here? Is whoever’s doing this related to the Bitterfangs?” I asked. I was at a total loss. We knew it wasn’t a real wisp, but why was any of this happening? Why did whoever was controlling it care whether the thorn wall was intact or not? Unless they were part of the Bitterfang pack or something. But how would they know so much about Fae magic?

Mom opened her mouth, but she was cut short by shouting from outside. We all went running out to see Greyson standing on the porch, but my gaze moved past him and zeroed in on Xavier.

*He’s back!*

I rushed over to him and threw my arms around his neck. I held him tightly for a few seconds before I realized that he wasn’t alone. The Samaras were here, and they were all shifting back to human around him. I turned and gave Ava an awkward nod of acknowledgment. She was standing nearby and was completely naked, of course. They were all naked, but there was something about Ava’s nudity that really got to me.

Ava returned my nod, just barely, as others began to gather on the porch.

Xavier turned his attention to Greyson. “Well? What’s the move?”

I could feel the tension between my mates, and I figured Greyson was angry with Xavier for leaving. Frankly, I was too, but Greyson spoke up before I could.

“The Bitterfangs are coming, right now,” he said, loud enough so that everyone could hear. “We have to prepare for their attack. Keep your wits about you. Don’t let up. Follow my lead. We’ll get through this. There’s no reason to fear them.”

That got everyone moving. Lucian strutted over, his chest puffed out as always. “The Vanguards are ready, as usual. We’re here to support you in whatever capacity you require.”

I wondered how it was possible for Lucian to be gracious and snide, all at once. It was a real talent.

Lucian turned his attention to Ava and the Samaras. “Where’s Zeke?”

I felt Xavier tense beside me.

“He’s gone,” Ava said. “Xavier will be leading the Samara pack through this battle.”

A wave of conflicting emotions moved through me at this revelation.

“What does that mean?” I demanded. “Why are you leading the Samaras all of a sudden? Is it just for the battle? Or for longer?”

*He must have been too busy to give me a heads-up, or I’m sure he would have told me about this.* I snuck a glance at Ava, who was busy talking to one of her pack members. *I’m sure she’s just tickled pink about this little development.*

I couldn’t help but feel a tinge of annoyance, but I quickly dashed it away. I trusted that Xavier knew what he was doing with this, so I just needed to let it be. If he was leading the Samaras right now, it had to be for a good reason.

Xavier wrapped an arm around my shoulders and gave me a squeeze. “It’s temporary,” he said reassuringly. “Just until we get through this.”

Lucian’s brow lifted, and a cloud of some emotion I couldn’t dissect passed across his face.

“Interesting,” he said, before moving off to go talk to Armin.

Greyson walked down the porch stairs to join us in the yard, his eyes on Xavier. He didn’t look happy.

“Look, just because you look like some hero bringing the cavalry in doesn’t mean we’re not going to talk about how you just up and ran off after I explicitly told you not to,” Greyson said grimly. “You didn’t even stop to think about what your absence might mean for the pack, and that’s not okay.”

Xavier bristled, and I could see that a million scathing comments were piling up on the tip of his tongue, but in the end, he just said, “Fine. But that’s for later.”

I didn’t like this tension between my mates, but I knew that now wasn’t the time for mediation. We’d have to address whatever was brewing between them, but only after we’d faced off with the Bitterfangs.

I looked up just as Big Mac and Okorie came out of the house. Big Mac was carrying a small vial.

“It’s ready,” she said. “One near-death potion, signed, sealed, and delivered.”

Russell approached as Big Mac turned to him, holding the potion just out of his reach.

“Only drink one sip of this, kid,” she said. “If you drink any more than that, we might not be able to revive you, and I think we can both agree on how much that would suck.”

Russell nodded, his eyes wide and glued to the jar. “One sip. Got it. Um… How big is a sip?”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Just pretend that you’re tasting it. Okay?”

“Got it,” Russell said, swallowing nervously.

Joan came walking over. “Are you *sure* it’s safe? We don’t know anything about this potion. How do we know it’s okay for him to drink?”

“Joan’s right. We don’t want to risk it if there’s any chance at all that he could be hurt,” Paris added. “It’s not worth it to us. We can find another way to face the Bitterfangs—one that doesn’t involve allowing our son to put his life in danger.”

Marta stepped forward. “Don’t worry. I’ll make sure to pull him out of the spirit world and put him back in his body before he can get stuck there. I just have to do it within fifteen minutes of him taking the potion.”

Paris and Joan exchanged a reluctant look.

“I’m really not sure about this,” Paris said. “This is our son’s life you’re messing with. If anything happens to him…” She trailed off, clearly unwilling to finish the sentence.

“Please, moms. I have to do this for the Pit Bulls, and for Julia. I know it’s risky, but I trust them.” Russell turned and looked at Big Mac and Okorie before finally letting his gaze rest on me. “I know the Redwoods wouldn’t do anything that would intentionally hurt me.”

Joan was still shaking her head, but she finally gave in with a sigh. “Fine, okay. But I don’t care what ends up happening—fifteen minutes after you take the potion, we’re reviving you, no matter what.”

Marta gave an enthusiastic nod of agreement, which seemed to calm Russell’s parents even more.

“Agreed!” Russell said quickly.

“Drink it when the Bitterfangs will see you,” Greyson said. “Be careful.”

Zainab darted out of the woods and raced to join us on the lawn.

“Incoming!” she shouted.

Everyone—Lucian and the Vanguards, Ava and the Samaras, the Redwoods with Greyson and Xavier up front, Mace and his Blue Bloods—formed ranks, with Russell right in the center. He was clutching the vial and he looked more than a little nervous, though he was trying to put on a brave face.

I kept my eyes on the forest and finally made out one wolf shape, then two, then a dozen…

The Bitterfangs had arrived.

# Episode 3685

**Greyson**

I stepped forward, ready to confer with Lance, who was leading the Bitterfang advance. It was pretty clear that we were beyond talking, but with Cali on my mind, I wanted to exhaust every possible option before resorting to violence.

*Perhaps Lance will finally listen to reason.* But I knew that was never going to happen. Lance didn’t *want* to see reason. He wasn’t interested in understanding the other side of things. He was only interested in hurting anyone who got in the way of his beliefs.

I waited patiently for the Bitterfangs to stop and form their ranks—which they did with more precision than I’d ever seen from a werewolf pack. They were all in wolf form, arranged in a rigid battle formation. I frowned, not liking the message that conveyed. But behind me, my pack was shifting too. If Lance wanted a fight, he’d get one.

With a little difficulty, I managed to plaster on my most diplomatic expression as Lance shifted to human and stepped toward me. This face-off showed all signs of going south, but that didn’t mean that I wasn’t going to try to avoid bloodshed if it was at all possible. But that didn’t mean I would hesitate to rip Lance’s throat out if he stepped out of line.

Lance didn’t look happy when he spoke. “You’re using some very dishonorable tactics, Greyson. I thought you were better than that.”

I scowled. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. We’re just trying to protect our land and our packs.”

Lance scowled. “Where is she?”

I lifted a brow. “Who? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I honestly had no idea. I didn’t know whether Lola’s vampire rescue mission had been successful. It seemed like there was a possibility. Did we have the edge on this situation again?

Lance cracked a cold smile. “Don’t play dumb, Redwood. Where’s Julia? Tell me now, and we might avoid any… unnecessary unpleasantness.”

Russell made a noise behind me, and Lance’s eyes flicked toward the boy before he narrowed them at me. “A few vampires attacked our camp and kidnapped our Alpha’s daughter. We followed their scent here, so don’t try to deny it. We know you have her. If you don’t give up your vamp accomplices and reveal where you’re keeping Julia, we’ll have no choice but to attack. Please, Greyson, don’t force my hand. I wouldn’t want to wipe your pack off the map just because of a little… disagreement.”

*So Mikah, Lola, and Jacqueline located Julia,* took *her, and brought her straight back here… Great.*

I didn’t want to give up the fact that I had no idea where Lola and the others were right now. If Lance thought they were anywhere but inside the pack house (and not in the vicinity), barricaded behind the rest of us, he’d probably send a detail off to find them, and I couldn’t have that.

I lifted my chin and looked Lance in the eye. “Julia doesn’t seem to want to be with your pack. Why don’t you just respect her wishes? Why cause bloodshed over something that’s easily fixed? Let her make her own decision about where she ends up.”

A last chance at logic. It was something that Silas never would’ve allowed me or my brothers. It was why we had to take it. Why we had had to kill him. The Bitterfang Alpha didn’t care about giving his child a good life.

Lance laughed. “A child can’t make those sorts of decisions. Julia doesn’t know what’s best for her. That’s for her parents to determine—and last I checked, you’re not her kin.”

I bristled, practically hearing an echo of Silas’s voice as the man spoke. Silas had put me through brutal training while beating it into me that I had no right to complain. He always used to tell me that I belonged to him, that I had no rights, that I was nothing more than a stupid child, incapable of making my own decisions or even having my own feelings.

I shook my memories away and focused on the man standing in front of me. I couldn’t get distracted now. Things were too tense for that, and chaos could easily break out at the slightest misstep.

“Child or not, Julia’s a smart girl, and she knows what she wants,” I said. “You should just go, and take your people with you. Leave before this gets out of hand. Can’t you see what you’re doing? You’re about to start a pack war over your Alpha’s pride. Is all of this really worth that?”

“Our Alpha’s pride is the pride of our pack!” Lance retorted. “It’s no surprise to me that you don’t understand that concept.” He cast an appraising look at everyone behind me, clearly judging us and finding us wanting. “We will do what we must to preserve our honor.”

I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes. *Fuck your honor if it means forcing people to suffer under a tyrannical ruler. Does this guy even hear himself speaking? He sounds brainwashed. Or maybe he’s just completely deluded. It’s obvious that he doesn’t know what it’s like to belong to a pack where you can keep your autonomy. Or maybe he doesn’t* want *to know.*

“And what will you do if I say no?” I pressed. “Do you really think you can take all of us?”

I took a pointed look at the wolves standing behind him in their tight formation.

*We could take them, easily. If he steps out of line, we’ll decimate them. Period.*

I looked back at Lance and planted my feet, standing even taller. If he wanted to challenge us, he was going to learn a lesson that he would never forget: don’t cross the Redwood pack.

A look of pure rage spread across Lance’s face. Once again, his gaze dragged over our allied packs, but this time, he was clearly analyzing the sheer number of wolves standing at the ready behind me. It was clear that his anger had driven him this far, but he hadn’t expected this many wolves to ally against him. His mistake.

*See. That’s what happens when you’re so blinded by your own righteousness that you expect everyone to just fall in line with your beliefs. Now if he’d just come and talked to us like a normal person—like even the Pit Bull Rogues managed to do—he wouldn’t be in this position right now, doubting his chances.*

My attention went toward sudden movement in the trees. I kept my expression blank as I spotted Mikah. I thanked our lucky stars that the breeze hadn’t shifted this way, or else Lance would have smelled him coming from a mile off. Mikah gave me a slight nod, signaling that he and the others were safe.

*Gabriel*, I mind linked. The mercenary had shifted to his wolf form when some of the others had. *What the fuck are they doing?*

*Mikah says they’re handling it*, Gabriel’s voice came.

Ha. Sure. I knew Mikah was smart, and Jacqueline and Lola were too, despite both being a bit more impulsive than the more seasoned vampire. I would just have to trust that he could handle things—and that was easy to do when it came to Mikah. He’d proven himself to be capable time and time again.

Lance followed my gaze and was starting to turn to see what had caught my eye, but I quickly stepped forward and grabbed his wrist to distract him. Lance couldn’t know that Julia was nearby.

It took me a split second to realize that I’d made the wrong move.

Lance immediately went on the defensive. He shifted and swiped my shoulder with his claws. Blood sprayed through the air.

Rishika growled ferociously as she leapt to my side. A few of the Bitterfangs stepped forward, too, meeting her challenge.

“Wait! No!” Cali shouted. “Stop! Don’t do this!”

I started to shift. Things were quickly getting out of hand, and I knew then that we probably weren’t going to have any choice but to fight. I had to protect Cali, and I couldn’t let the Bitterfangs attack first and steal the advantage. We needed to end this, now.

I was about to lunge at Lance when Russell ran up and wedged himself between us.

“Stop it!” he yelled. “I’m tired of this! All this fighting and the bloodshed, just because I love Julia. Well, I’m done with it. I’m over it, do you hear me?” He turned to face the Bitterfangs and held up the potion. “You want me dead? This will do exactly what you want it to do. One drop of this, and I’ll be gone. *Dead*. But by my hand, not yours.”

He opened the jar of potion and took a deep sip before anyone could try to—or seem to—stop him.

Everyone froze, and for a few long moments, nothing happened. The Bitterfangs stood there, looking at Russell in confusion while the allied packs held our collective breath to see what happened next. Russell was just standing there, his chest heaving as he looked from the Bitterfangs to the Redwoods to his parents and then back to the Bitterfangs.

*Is there something wrong with the potion? It doesn’t seem to be working—*

As soon as that thought formed in my brain, Russell’s face went as white as a sheet. He let out a choked cry, then collapsed to the ground.

# Episode 3686

The image of Russell crumpling to the ground would probably be etched into my brain forever. It really looked like he was dead.

I couldn’t help but race forward and drop to my knees beside him. I thought back to when I’d watched Okorie and Big Mac creating the potion. They’d looked confident and sure, so I forced myself to believe that Russell was okay—that our plan would work.

That didn’t make it any less unnerving to see his lifeless body lying on the ground, though.

I reached out and pressed a finger to Russell’s neck to check his pulse. There was nothing. I let out a sob and covered my face with my hands as a rush of panic coursed through me.

*Calm down, Cali. This is how it’s supposed to go. The magic has literally stopped his heart. He drank the right amount of potion—he’s fine. All you need to do is put on a convincing show.*

I looked up, letting my gaze drag from Greyson to Lance. “He’s dead!”

It felt so real that I didn’t even have to act. It really seemed like he was dead, and I was having a hard time convincing myself otherwise. It just seemed so real.

Lance shifted back to human and plied Greyson and me with a suspicious look.

“You could be lying, for all we know. Stand aside.” His jaw set, Lance leaned down to check Russell’s pulse. He kept moving his finger around, trying to find it, but I had faith in Big Mac’s magic. There was no way Lance was going to feel a thing. At least not right now. Finally, Lance stood up and shook his head. “Stupid boy. Fitting that he would die a coward’s death.”

A scream rang out from the trees, and Julia raced out of the woods, heading straight for us. Lance tried to intercept her, but she batted him away, obviously emboldened and strengthened by her grief. Sobbing, she fell to Russell’s side and gathered him in her arms.

“NO! This can’t be happening. Russell! Come on, please wake up!”

“Stop this, Julia, right now!” Lance said. “He’s dead. He didn’t care enough about you to live, so don’t waste your tears on him. He ended up being just as weak and selfish as we always said he was. Now, come with us. We need to get back home. This is over!”

He grabbed Julia’s arm, but she snatched it away.

“Leave me alone!” Julia screeched. “I’m not going with you!”

She turned back to Russell and threw herself on top of him. She started shaking him and gently slapping his face, trying to bring him around. It was painful to watch. Greyson and I locked eyes. It looked like he was barely handling the scene himself.

Angry, Lance reached down and yanked Julia’s arm, all but pulling her up from the ground.

“Let go of her!” I said, trying to stop him, but Greyson quickly restrained me. “What are you doing?” I hissed.

“The last thing I want is for him to turn his anger on you,” Greyson whispered back. *Besides, the plan is working*, he mind linked.

“Stay in your place, Fae!” Lance snarled as he dragged Julia away. “This doesn’t concern you.”

“No!” Julia wailed. “I’m not going with you! *You did this!*” she hissed at Lance. “You wouldn’t leave him alone, and now he’s dead!”

She’d grabbed hold of Russell’s body and wouldn’t let go. She was practically dragging him along with her as Lance yanked her back toward where the Bitterfangs stood, their perfect formation having been broken in the confusion.

The potion vial fell from Russell’s limp hand, and Julia reached for it and picked it up.

“Is this what killed him?” She looked at me with anger in her eyes. “Who gave him this? Who would give him a potion that would kill him? *Who?* I thought you were supposed to be protecting him!”

I stood there frozen in terror as Julia melted into hysterics. She jumped up to her feet, yanking away from Lance yet again, sending him slightly off-balance.

“No! I won’t go with you! I’ll never go with you. I’ll die before I do that!” Julia lifted the vial to her mouth and downed the rest of the potion.

“No!” I screamed, reaching for her. But with Greyson’s arms still wrapped tight around me, I couldn’t get to her fast enough.

Julia put her hands around her throat and started to gag. Instead of turning white, her face went as red as a tomato. It looked like her head was about to explode. She collapsed to the ground, clutching at her throat as she seized and jerked in the grass, foam bubbling at her lips. It was one of the most horrific things I’d ever seen.

The entire place was in hysterics. I could hear the Bitterfangs’ cries and shouts of disbelief blending into the general bedlam that was breaking out as we all watched this young girl struggle for her life, right before our eyes.

Shaking, I crawled to Julia’s side, desperately trying to figure out what to do.

*How can I stop this? Why isn’t anyone doing anything?*

I looked around. Everyone was frozen. It had all happened so fast that the potion bottle was still rolling across the ground after its fall from Julia’s hands.

*Think, Cali, think! How can I help her? This is so dangerous for her. She drank the whole thing! What’s going to happen to her? Is she really going to die?*

Lance, like everyone else, was completely stunned.

A few more painful and horrifying seconds passed before Julia’s body went completely still. I looked up at Lance. His face was now as white as Russell’s.

*Finally, something’s gotten to him. Maybe he has a heart somewhere in there after all. Though I doubt it.*

I took a look around, realizing that somebody needed to say something. I looked down at Julia. She was completely limp in my arms. “She’s… dead.”

That seemed to break Lance out of his stupor. A growl rolled deep in his throat, and his eyes were blazing as he looked at Greyson. “Look what you did!”

He lunged for Greyson, claws bursting from his fingertips—just as the ground began to shake. For a moment, I thought I was hallucinating, but then everyone started to react, shouting in confusion while trying to maintain their balance.

*What the hell? Is this an earthquake?*

Thick thornbushes emerged from the ground and formed a partial wall that separated the allied packs from the Bitterfangs. I looked back toward the house and saw my mother standing on the porch with her arms stretched toward the sky, her fingertips crackling with light. Artemis was right at her side, supporting her weight. I could tell by the look on my mother’s face that it was taking everything she had to keep this new barrier strong.

She slumped against Artemis as the thorn wall finally began to settle. Dad rushed toward them and lifted Mom easily into his arms. She looked absolutely exhausted.

Lance’s face was screwed up into a mask of anger, but he also looked a little afraid of the thorn wall, like he had no interest in testing it. He’d obviously never come across Fae magic of this magnitude before. Pride swelled in my chest at the sight of what my mother had managed to do in order to save Greyson, right in the nick of time.

“Abominations!” Lance spat. “You’re all a bunch of abominations to werewolf law! Allying yourselves with vampires and Fae? You should be ashamed! You don’t deserve to call yourselves werewolves! You’re scum! All of you!”

I stood up and squared off against him, the thorn wall separating us. “And what has your honor gotten you? Huh? Look around! What have you achieved here today?”

My anger was growing by the second. I stepped toward the wall until it was the only thing keeping us apart.

“You pushed your own pack member away, forcing your beliefs on Julia without listening to her, or even *considering* what she wanted! None of you even cared about what would make *her* happy! You forced her to run away, you forced her to hide, and when that didn’t work, you forced her to *kill herself!*” I sobbed those last words as I looked down at Julia’s lifeless body. I was still holding out hope for Julia. Big Mac had warned Russell about drinking too much of the potion, but I hoped there was still a chance that she wasn’t dead. Either way, Julia really had been driven to this extreme. She’d felt so hopeless that she’d taken her own life—at least, that had been her intention.

Tears were streaming down my face as I looked Lance right in the eye. “Are you happy now? All this, for your Alpha’s honor! For his pride! How do you think he’s going to feel when he finds out his daughter is dead?”

Lance stood there, staring right back at me, hatred burning bright in his eyes.

When he spoke, his mouth twitched with disgust and rage. “I will get justice for my Alpha’s daughter by bringing her father your head!”