**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 30, Pt 1**

**Episodes 3671–3849 (Total S 30: 3671–3860)**

**Episode 3671**

“I can’t be with you anymore, Cali. We’re done.”

For a moment, everything just…

*Stopped*.

I felt like I was outside my body, watching the scene unfold. Xavier, me, and the shattered glass on the floor, like a dreadful warning of what was to come. I stood there, stupefied, unwilling and unable to accept whatever the fuck was happening right now.

“What—” My voice sounded murky. Like I was underwater. “What did you just say?”

Xavier looked harsh, severe. Untouchable. Almost worse than when I’d first met him. Before I’d come to know the person he was underneath it all—how loyal and brave and loving he could be. Ever since we’d gotten together for real and up until this very moment, I’d never doubted his feelings for me. He’d proven his love for me—he’d grown so much, just to be with me.

I trusted him.

I *knew* him.

At least, I thought I did.

*This can’t be real…*

It just wasn’t real.

And yet, Xavier still said, “We’re over, Cali. What was unclear when I said it the first time?”

I was shaking so hard, I thought I’d break. “But—but we can’t be done, we’re *mated*, Xavier. You can’t just…” My voice cracked. “You can’t *break up* with me.”

That was a lie, though.

This wasn’t the first time Xavier had asked to break up. He’d done it once before, what felt like a long time ago. I’d just fallen into the *due destini* madness and had kissed Greyson, and Xavier had been so furious that he’d pushed me away.

But we’d moved past that.

We were together, and for him to do this out of the blue, it just…

*It can’t be real.*

“I’m done here,” he said gruffly, preparing to leave. To walk past me like I was nothing. This man had fucking fought armies and magic and entire other *realms* for me, and now he was about to walk away?

What the *hell?*

“No!” I blocked his way. The words flew out of me, jerky with panic. “You need to stop and tell me what’s really happening here! This isn’t right—where is this even coming from? It makes no sense, Xavier! *You love me!*”

I was breathing hard enough that my lungs hurt. Xavier had stopped moving, stopped speaking. He just gazed at me with those eyes that had held me captive from the moment we’d met. I had no idea what was going on in his head. Not an inkling.

He’d been so distant and volatile since the handprint flared up and my hospital visit. Things had escalated with him after that, but his every reaction had been abrupt and bizarre. At this realization, I suddenly got a strange feeling.

My gut was telling me that under Xavier’s explosive anger, there was terror.

*Is this it?*

Could our mate bond be making him act so strangely? Was his wolf freaking out after seeing me so sick? Had the idea of losing me sent him over the edge?

The thought was jarring.

And even though he was looking sharp, the urge to soothe and comfort him was still overwhelming.

“If this is about me being sick, I’m okay now,” I said in a low voice—like he was a wild animal, and I had to fight not to spook him. “You don’t have to worry about me, Xavier.”

I reached for his hand. He let me touch him, and that was a small victory. His skin was cold, and that felt wrong, but I was still so grateful that he hadn’t rejected my touch.

“I’m okay now,” I whispered. “Vander came and told me themself. Nature is healing. Magic has finally leveled out. What happened to me isn’t going to happen again. You don’t need to be scared, Xavier.”

He stayed silent for a moment. His heavy breathing and the pounding of my heart were all I could hear. And as he stared, as his palm gripped mine, I realized that this had to be it. I’d touched on what he’d been too afraid to say, earlier.

*He doesn’t want to lose me*, I realized*. The idea of it is so painful that he can’t deal with it. He’s so terrified, he just can’t bear watching me get hurt.*

That sounded like Xavier.

That sounded real.

“Please don’t do this,” I whispered, taking another step closer. “I know worrying about me is hard for you, and I can’t imagine how your wolf is feeling right now, but please, don’t pull away from me. I need you now, more than ever…”

The moment I finished my sentence, something flashed through Xavier’s eyes.

A fire ignited.

He yanked his hand away. If he’d looked lost before, that was gone now, and all that was left was blazing fury.

How could he be so angry?

*How is this real?*

“Why would I want to be with someone so indecisive that she only needs me when her other mate is too busy?” he said.

That was what he said, in a voice so low it was barely audible.

I still felt like I’d been slapped.

“*What?*” I choked out. I didn’t sound like myself.

But the worst part was that *he* did.

Xavier sounded like himself.

Who he used to be.

Because even though I thought he’d grown, even though I thought he’d changed, even though I thought he’d done it all for me, this raging bull before me, picking a fight and saying hurtful things? I’d definitely seen it before.

It *was* Xavier.

“You can’t even open that fucking letter, Cali,” he said, getting louder. “Why would I want to be with someone who can’t choose me? Why should I keep degrading myself like that?”

My eyes burned with tears ready to spill, but he didn’t seem to notice. Or if he did, he didn’t care. I fought to speak. “But it’s not like that! I thought—we’ve talked about this, Xavier, the *due destini*… I thought you understood?”

When he came closer this time, the movement was quick and sudden enough that I flinched back.

The man I loved made me flinch.

“What I understand,” he said, right in my face, “is that you’re greedy and selfish, Cali. You want both of us all to yourself, and you want to drag this out for as long as possible, because you fucking love the attention! If you can’t get something from one of us, you turn right around and go to the other one. It’s like we’re both expendable and replaceable for you, and I’m just…” He shook his head. “I’m fucking sick of it.”

*I* felt sick.

I felt raw, like his words had reached inside and sliced me up. This couldn’t be happening. *This can’t be fucking happening*. He just *couldn’t* have been feeling this way all along. Could he?

“You…” I exhaled sharply. “You’re talking about me like I’ve always been a burden to you, like we were never on the same page. That can’t be true, I—”

“It *is* true, Cali,” he snapped. “You wanted honesty? You got it.”

I felt small and heartbroken in the face of his rage.

I felt lost in the face of this new reality, where everything I knew was in pieces.

I was left speechless.

There were tears trailing down my cheeks, but at the sight of them, he just…

Kept going.

He kept hurting me, and this time, he sounded *mocking*.

“Here we go again, of course you’re crying! What did I expect? You’ve always been like this!” He pointed an accusing finger at me. “You’ve never fucking stood on your own, Cali. You try to do it, you’re supposed to be practicing your magic or whatever bullshit, but it’s all one big show. You *always* need me or my brother to step in and save you!”

It was like he was listing all my darkest fears. I still felt the urge to cower, but… I’d lived today. Today, I’d walked out of that hospital breathing, and that had to count for something. *I* had to count for something.

And suddenly, I could speak. “Why are you doing this, Xavier?”

I could speak, even if it came out as a whisper, barely audible underneath his furious recitation of all my faults.

“—day in, day out, all the time, at your beck and call. It’s like I’m a fucking dog on your leash—”

“Why are you doing this?”

“—I’m always second best to my brother, and you’re just toying with us both, like—”

“*Why are you doing this?*”

He stopped.

This time, I’d managed a shout, and it caught his attention. Finally, he paused, and he really looked at me.

What I saw in his eyes terrified me.

“Because I’m done,” he said, breathing heavily. “I need more than this. I need more than you could ever give.”

He moved, then. To leave.

To leave *me*.

Like this was real.

*This is real.*

I’d already been crying, but now it turned into frantic sobbing as I ran after him.

“No! Please, *please* don’t go!” I clawed at his arm to pull him back, desperate at the thought of losing him. “If you’ve felt this way all this time, then I need to understand how it happened, Xavier! Let’s talk about this when you’ve calmed down—we can fix this!”

I was trembling all over, sending out one pleading word after another while I teetered, ready to crumble. The chant in my head went on, over and over again, a never-ending *this can’t be happening this can’t be happening this can’t be happening this can’t be happening—*

But then, Xavier pulled his arm away.

Then, my denial was shattered.

“There’s no fixing this, Cali,” Xavier said sharply. “We’re done. We’re breaking up. That should make your choice a lot easier. My brother can have you, along with all your problems.”

**Episode 3672**

**Xavier**

“There’s no fixing this. We’re done. We’re breaking up. That should make your choice a lot easier. My brother can have you—along with all your problems.”

That was what I said. My heart was ripped into smaller pieces with every word that came out of my mouth. I’d never felt pain like this. Saying those horrible things and hurting Cali made me despise myself. Made me despise the person I’d become, in this new world where I had no control over my actions.

The only feeling greater than the disgust I felt toward myself was my rage toward Adéluce. She’d stolen the future I’d always dreamed of with Cali. She’d poisoned it, forced me to poison my relationship with the only person who’d ever made me a better man. The only person who’d ever been good for me.

In more ways than one, Cali had been my salvation.

Now, in order to save her, I had to lose her.

Cali had to stay alive.

And in order for her to stay alive, she had to hate me, just like Adéluce had suggested. Because if I wasn’t harsh enough, if I wasn’t cruel enough, Cali would suspect the truth, and that would take her down a dangerous path. It could lead her to Adéluce and force her to face the kind of danger that I was fucking desperately trying to protect her from.

This was tearing me apart.

My wolf was howling, clawing at my insides, but it had to be done.

I had no choice.

I’d told Cali to go to my brother, as if I hadn’t been fighting for her from the very beginning. At the thought of the two of them together forever—*touching, laughing, talking, fucking*—I felt so suffocated and acidic that it took me a moment to recover.

It was enough for Cali to bounce back.

She’d always been resilient like that. Fearless. *That* was who she was—not the person I’d just painted her to be, just so I could hurt her. Watching me, she wiped her eyes, moving from shock and denial to something that looked very close to anger. If this moment had happened under different circumstances, I would’ve been proud of her.

This was the Cali I knew.

This was the Cali I remembered from the first time I’d broken up with her, after she’d kissed Greyson.

“How could you speak to me like that, after all we’ve been through?” she snapped, hands fisted at her sides. “This can’t be what we’ve become, Xavier! What’s wrong with you? How can you do this? I know you love me—you’re just being a horrible asshole right now!”

Of course I loved her.

Of course she knew I loved her, and that was what would make this whole thing even worse.

I felt like screaming at her to just *stop*. *Stop doing this, stop fighting for me, for us, just fucking stop, don’t make this worse!*

“Cali, I need you to fucking listen to what I’m—”

“No, *you* listen!” She pointed at me. Accused me. “I know you don’t mean any of this bullshit! You’re trying to run because things got difficult—but you should be fighting for us!”

All of a sudden, she got so close, it was enough to distract me.

“Cali—”

“I’m not done talking!” She grabbed me by the front of my shirt, shaking me with fury and righteous indignation. She was so gorgeous, she took my breath away. “You should be fighting for our mate bond, Xavier! For our *love!* We’ve gone up against Silas and Letifer and Seluna, and you’re just throwing it all away, and for *what?*” She paused. Her voice lowered, cracked. Sniffling, she said, “Why can’t you just lean on me? That’s what a relationship *is*—we help each other. We don’t…” Her lips trembled. “We don’t do *this*.”

I wanted nothing more than to scoop her up in my arms and take it all back. I wanted to tell her that I loved her more than anything. I’d never stop. But the stakes were too high, and the reason behind Adéluce’s cruelty was clearer than ever. She wanted me to feel the pain of loss that she’d felt. I understood it now, far better in practice than in concept.

I’d kill her for this.

But right now, I was trapped.

“Don’t make this harder than it needs to be,” I rasped.

I gripped Cali’s wrists, pulled her off me in one firm even motion. She gasped, full of indignation, and my wolf howled. My wolf threatened and roared, feeding off Cali’s emotions.

When I turned my back on her, her voice was louder, more furious than ever. “So you’re just going to leave? Are you going to make me your ex-mate, like Ava?”

At the sound of Ava’s name, I went rigid.

“You can’t walk away from what we have,” Cali said. She sounded so determined, it broke my heart. “I don’t know what the hell has gotten into you, but I know *you*, Xavier.”

Because just like Cali knew me, I knew her as well. I knew she’d never give up on me, not so easily. I had no choice but to drive this home, to make *sure* she wouldn’t come after me. I had to lock and seal our mate bond for the time being, to protect her.

Even if my wolf raged at the idea, prowling like a caged animal inside me.

When I spoke again, it was with my back still turned to her.

“You don’t know me,” I said. “You don’t know a single thing about me. And you don’t know Ava, either.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

I took a breath. It sounded like an angry huff, but I was starting to shake. I couldn’t control my body any longer. I had to clenched my fists to hide it—to play this fucked up role. My nails dug deep into my palms.

My wolf was causing a ruckus on the inside, the reality of the situation sinking in. He cared for both Ava and Cali, but he’d *come back* for Cali. Cali was right. Our bond *was* special. It was powerful.

And I had to break it.

As I faced Cali and saw the love in her eyes under all the hurt and anger, I knew there was no other way.

“It means that you’re the one who pushed me toward Ava,” I said. “You told me to sleep with her, so that’s what I did.”

Shock.

Shock and then pain piercing through it, tainting Cali’s beautiful face. She choked, stumbling backwards as if I’d pushed her. Her voice was soft as a breath. “*What?*”

“Do I need to spell it out for you? I’ve been fucking Ava ever since you told me to.”

Her eyes were wide. She looked like she was going to be sick. She sounded like it too, her voice a trembling whisper. “You’ve been lying to me? All this time?”

I forced myself to nod. “You’ve been with Greyson—how is this any different?”

Tears started streaming down Cali’s cheeks again. Only this time, all that sorrow was replaced with fury. Hands wrapped around herself, she stepped back, away from me, shaking her head. Her whisper turned into a scream. “The difference is that it was never a secret! You’ve known everything about me and Greyson this whole time, but you’ve been lying about Ava—were you *ever* going to tell me the truth?”

This wasn’t the truth.

*Is it?* A dark voice came to me. *You kissed Ava on New Year’s Eve and never told Cali. You almost let Ava suck you off in the Airstream. You’ve been lying to Cali, and you deserve this pain you feel.*

*It’s a lie*, I fought to mind link. *I've made mistakes, but it hasn’t been like that with Ava.*

It didn’t go through to her. There was only static. And Cali was sobbing, hugging herself so tightly that the sight almost fucking killed me. There were invisible claws dragging across every inch of my body. They dug deep as I went against all my instincts, ripping out the best piece of myself and dropping it on the ground.

This was a sacrifice. This was a slaughter. This was the torture that Adéluce had wanted for me. I had to give it to the vampire-witch—if evil had a face, it was hers. And if I looked at Cali for one more second, I’d have to go find a silver dagger to cut my own throat.

I made a move to leave, but she shouted, “*Wait!*”

I couldn’t take this anymore.

Like a coward, like a fucking lowlife, with my back to her, I said, “Nothing matters anymore, Cali. I don’t want you. I can’t even look at you.”

At least that last part was true.

Her silence was deafening, and then I was gone. Out of the kitchen, through the hallway—I shoulder-checked someone. The scent told me it was Artemis.

“Xavier, what the hell?” she demanded.

I didn’t stop to explain. There was nothing *to* explain. There was no room for me to breathe in this house. I’d been stabbed and beaten, had limbs cut off and sewn back on. I’d spent years as a werewolf mercenary. I’d been my father’s soldier. I’d seen my mother die by my mate’s hand.

I had witnessed so much horror.

But, somehow, this was the pain that finally overwhelmed me, seeping through me like poison.

I plowed on outside to my motorcycle, my hands shaking as I reached for the keys in my pocket. I started the bike up, then peeled out of the driveway. I didn’t know where I was going.

I only knew that right now, I’d rather die than look at Cali.

**Episode 3673**

I stood in place, frozen, arms still wrapped around myself. I felt cold. Numb. I felt like I’d stopped being real.

*It’s fake. It has to be, all of it, can’t be true. No. It’s a lie, Xavier—*

But why would he have lied about sleeping with Ava? Why would he have made that kind of sick confession if it weren’t true? The idea made no sense—even less sense than the idea of him fucking her behind my back this entire time.

My heart sank, heavy in my chest. Agony seared through me, cutting through the numbness. My thoughts started going a mile a minute, images flashing through my head.

*Xavier and Ava, together at the palace on New Year’s Eve. Xavier and Ava, fighting the Bitterfangs alongside each other. Xavier holding Ava, carrying her when she had silver poisoning. He’d looked worried, shaken, and she’d looked so bad—pale and sick, like she was ready to—*

Die.

I’d almost died today, too.

Had Ava being sick followed by my being sick make Xavier realize that *she* was the one he couldn’t bear to lose? Had my getting sick been the final nail in the coffin of our relationship?

*Did Xavier make a choice? Did he just… not choose me?*

My knees buckled. I stumbled backwards, gripping the counter. I was shaking, breathing heavily. My mind was spinning, and I couldn’t help but wonder how and when Xavier and Ava had reignited their mate bond to such an extent.

*Are they in love again?*

The thought was like a blow to the chest, fast and blunt, cutting off my air supply. My grip on the counter faltered, my legs shaking so wildly that I fell. I dropped, but I didn’t feel the impact—I felt nothing but the pain that had started in my chest and spread through me like a disease.

Every breath I took hurt. My thoughts hurt even more.

*They can’t be in love, they can’t be! No, this goes against everything Xavier has ever told me about Ava—that he’d never trust her, that he didn’t need her anymore. That’s what he said! He…*

He’d been lying to me this entire time.

“Cali!”

Artemis ran into the kitchen. Her voice was loud, and crystal clear, even if everything else around me felt murky.

“I heard voices,” my sister said. She was so quiet. Artemis was never quiet. “It sounded like an argument, Cali, and then Xavier just left in a rush—he shoved right past me…”

Her feet stopped in front of me.

“Cali?” she whispered. “You’re crying… Do you need help standing?”

She offered me her hand.

I ignored it.

I felt so pathetic. Such a fool.

*He’s been fucking Ava this entire time, and you’re on the floor crying!*

I laughed, wiping my tears away, feeling like I was about to be sick. I grabbed the counter, stood up on my own. I finally looked at Artemis. Her face was pale.

“I was cleaning,” I told her, sniffling. It was ridiculous, but I said it. Not only that, I piled more bullshit onto the lie. “It was dirty. But not anymore, you know?”

I wasn’t making any sense, but I didn’t care. Not right now.

Artemis stared at me, her gaze roaming across my face. Her brow was furrowed, her lips pressed together. Her voice was gentle. “What happened?”

“Nothing!” So many dumb fucking lies. “Why would you think something happened?”

“I understand if you don’t want to talk about it, but…” Artemis stepped closer to me. “We sort of heard a lot of your... conversation, with Xavier.”

*Oh, god…*

“*We?*” I rasped. “What do you mean, ‘we’?”

“Most of the others could hear you two talking. I didn’t catch all of it from the beginning, but…” Artemis took a deep breath, gently resting her hand on my shoulder. “You don’t need to lie to me, okay?”

Lie.

I wished I could lie. I wished I could tell myself that my sister hadn’t heard Xavier humiliating me. That the *whole pack* hadn’t heard it. He’d been so angry—he’d been so angry for so long. He’d acted like he hated me, like he’d been resenting me for months for being with his brother.

*I feel so ashamed… Embarrassed.*

I’d have taken Seluna’s handprint over this kind of pain.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said, like a fucking moron, wiping my eyes again. More tears threatened to escape.

Artemis winced. “Cali, please don’t make this harder… We heard him break up with you. Everyone did.”

Trembling, I looked over my shoulder, through the kitchen door. A handful of pack members were standing in the living room, frozen. I locked eyes with Lola first. Her expression was thunderous. Jay had his fingers wrapped around her elbow, as if he’d been holding her back. Glaring at him, she yanked her arm from his grip, marching toward me.

Jay followed.

*Shit.*

What was I supposed to do? Talk about what had just happened? The thought made a fresh wave of nausea crash through me. I hadn’t even noticed they were there. I’d been in a bubble with Xavier. A bubble that had burst and left all… *this*. This feeling inside me that was swinging violently between numbness and grief.

And then there was the denial.

It looked more like a shattered shield.

“It’s just a hiccup,” I whispered. But even as I spoke, more tears spilled from my eyes. I wiped my face again. “We’ll be fine. Xavier’s just upset.”

“You’re the one who almost died, and *he’s* upset?” Artemis said sharply.

I didn’t have time to answer—Lola was here, and her expression was thunderous. Her jaw was set, her low voice full of fury when she spoke. “I’m going to kill him.”

She threw her arms around me, pulled me into a fierce hug. I hadn’t realized how badly I needed to be held until that exact moment. I hugged Lola back, soaked up her comfort.

I felt vindicated when she whispered in my ear, “How could he speak to you that way? How could he break up with you like that after everything you’ve been through together?”

I was devastated, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t angry.

I was angry, but that didn’t mean I had no more tears left to cry.

I started shaking, the sound I made closer to a sob. I hated this. All of it.

*Why did he have to do this? Why now? Why all the lies? Why why* why?

“I think we need some privacy,” Lola said. I’d never seen her so serious. She wasn’t acting like herself as he led me to one of the studies. But I didn’t feel like myself, either. I couldn’t fall back on sarcasm or cook up a joke, because nothing made sense.

*How… How did this happen? How did I not see it coming? How stupid am I?*

Lola sat me down on the couch, putting an arm around me. I snuggled closer to her, as if part of me believed that everything would be okay if I just kept crying on her shoulder.

*It doesn’t work that way, Cali.*

Right now, *nothing* was working.

Jay and Artemis had followed us into the study. Jay wasn’t speaking. His face was blank. Artemis’s earlier calm expression had shifted to something dark. I had no idea what she was thinking, but I knew it couldn’t be good.

“What do you need right now?” Lola asked me quietly.

Another broken laugh left me. It hurt.

*I just need to understand*, I thought. *I just—I really don’t fucking understand!*

“Right now, nothing,” I said. “I just feel… numb. You shouldn’t…” I swallowed thickly. “You shouldn’t have to worry about me.” Xavier’s words echoed in my head. “I’m sorry I’m always such a burden to everyone.”

“Cali—” Jay started.

“A burden?” Artemis cut Jay off, her earlier calm demeanor tainted by anger. “*Xavier* is the burden! He’s always causing problems! Just say the word and I’ll go after him, haul his ass back here, and give him a good beating!”

“No!” I shook my head, sniffling. “No, just let him go—clearly, that’s what he wants.” Another broken laugh.

I couldn’t believe what had just happened to me.

The boy I loved more than anything had broken me—and so callously.

*Was every single thing he ever told me a lie? All the declarations of love? All the times he said he’d pick me over anything and anyone? How could he just throw everything away?*

“Don’t go,” I told Artemis, when it looked like she was about to storm right out the door and hunt Xavier down like there was a bounty on his head. “I don’t want to talk to him again right now. I can’t.”

Artemis’s jaw clenched. She didn’t speak. But Lola nodded. “I get it.”

She took my hand, squeezing. She wiped my cheeks, pushed my hair back from my forehead. I looked at her, and the worry I saw in her eyes made me feel a little bit better.

After a long pause, Lola spoke again.

“So…” she said quietly. “I’m sure this is very bad timing, but I feel like there’s a question that needs to be asked.”

I stared at her blankly. “What?”

Lola swallowed audibly. “It’s just, if Xavier broke up with you…”

I winced. God, they’d heard *everything*.

“Does that mean your decision has been made?” Lola asked quietly. “Are you going to choose Greyson?”

**Episode 3674**

“*What?*” I spluttered.

Lola’s question sent my mind spinning. Right now, my relationship with Greyson was so far from my mind, it almost felt irrelevant. I felt faint at the thought of the *due destini*, of the choice, my head suddenly feeling ten times heavier, too hard to carry.

Breathing heavily, I bent forward, resting my elbows on my knees, my head on my palms. I had to fight the nausea, the crushing weight inside me.

I’d read somewhere that it was actually possible to die from a broken heart, and for some reason, my brain decided now was the time to throw me that information. Along with the image of Bella lying on the forest floor in *Twilight: New Moon*, after her break-up with Edward.

*Thanks, brain! Super fucking helpful!*

I got that Lola was trying to be helpful as well, but she’d actually just made things ten times worse.

“I can’t talk about Greyson, or the *due destini*,” I whispered, squeezing my eyes shut. “I just can’t—” My throat closed up, making it harder to breathe. “Just thinking about it makes me feel like I’m going to have a panic attack…”

“Oh my god, no,” Lola blurted, “I never meant to freak you out—I was just trying to figure out where your head’s at right now.” She rested her hand on my back, stroking softly. “I’m so sorry I mentioned Greyson.”

I straightened slowly, just so I could breathe better. “This feels like… like something that would happen to someone else. I can’t think. I can’t factor Greyson into this.”

I was confused, angry, and—more than anything—heartbroken. The last thing I wanted was to project that onto Greyson, in any capacity. That wouldn’t be fair to him. He’d been through so much push and pull with Xavier lately. Plus, if he heard the details of our fight and the way his brother had spoken to me, I had no doubt that he’d go hunt down Xavier himself and attack him.

*I can’t involve Greyson in this situation*, I thought. *I can’t hurt him like that. He deserves so much better.*

My head felt heavy again, my chest tight. I was still fighting to breathe.

“There you go, please calm down,” Lola whispered, still stroking my back.

I kept taking deep breaths, feeling like I was barely holding on. It was obvious, I could tell. Lola was watching me worriedly, and Artemis and Jay both looked grim. Jay’s formerly blank expression had cracked, and I could feel the tension radiating off him.

And then Lola glared at him.

“Look at her,” she told her mate in a sharp, low voice. “Look what he did to her… I’m going after him, Jay. This is fucking bullshit, and you know it.”

In the blink of an eye, Lola was standing. Artemis immediately took her place next to me on the couch. My heart was racing, there were pins and needles all over me, and I opened my mouth to tell her to stop. But before I could, Jay called after her.

“Lola, *stop*,” he said. “You can’t do that!”

She rounded on him, her voice loud. Furious. “Are you fucking *defending* him right now? Didn’t you hear the way he was talking to her? I’m Cali’s best friend—if I don’t go cut off Xavier’s fucking balls right the fuck now, then what good am I?”

“I’ll be glad to help,” Artemis said sharply.

At the same time, Jay said, “I heard, Lola, and I hated every bit of it too. But you can’t leave Cali right now.” He gestured at me. “She’s shaking like a leaf.”

Artemis wrapped her arms around me tight, like she was afraid I’d flutter away. Her hug was different from Lola’s—rough, almost like she hadn’t hugged people frequently enough to know how it worked. I gripped her forearm, hiding my face in her neck. Hearing them talk about what had happened made me feel so ashamed.

*Everyone heard everything*, I thought. *Everyone heard about Ava, everyone knows Xavier doesn’t…*

Had he *ever* loved me? Or had our relationship just been something the mate bond had forced him to endure?

“You don’t want to talk to Xavier right now,” Jay continued in the background. “I don’t know what the fuck is wrong with him—and there has to be something wrong, for him to act this way—but when he’s this furious, you don’t want to go up against him.”

Lola got all up in Jay’s face, dropping her fangs. “Well, he doesn’t want to go up against me, either. I’m much faster than he is, and we all know vampire poison hurts like a son of a bitch, so—”

“Lola, *no!*” I rasped.

My friend retracted her fangs, her gaze darting to me.

“*Please*,” I said, sniffling.

Jay’s voice was a whisper. “I’m angry at Xavier too, Lola. But your friend needs you right now.”

Lola swallowed, taking a deep breath. She stared at me, shaking her head before she returned to the couch. In moments, I was sandwiched between my sister and my best friend. And even though I was holding both their hands and surrounded by their warmth, the pain refused to relent. It came in waves, in between bouts of numbness. It was like my body was trying to fight it off by not feeling anything at all, but the pain was strong enough to break through that shield.

I was broken.

Humiliated.

If Xavier truly loved me, he wouldn’t have treated me this way.

*Is this just plain old heartbreak, or is the mate bond the reason why I’m feeling like this?* Fear gripped me. *Could this have injured my mate bond with Xavier in some irreparable way?*

My thoughts made everything worse. I let out a sob, and Lola and Artemis shushed me, hugged me. What would I have done without them? I had no idea how much worse I’d have felt if I’d been here without anyone to comfort me, to be angry with me, *for me.* They were on my side, and they’d fight Xavier for me in a heartbeat.

*But the fact that they’d feel the need to do that at all…*

“What can we do for you right now?” Lola asked, tucking my hair behind my ear.

“I… I don’t know,” I whispered. “He’s just—”

He must’ve gone to see Ava.

I snorted bitterly, glancing at Lola. “I guess it would feel pretty good to send Ava back to the spirit world. You’ve been gunning for that for months now, right?”

Lola winced. “About Ava… I had no idea. I would’ve told you.”

“Me too,” Jay said gruffly.

Artemis nodded.

I looked at them all, sighing. “I know.”

“I’m sorry about everything,” Lola muttered. “I know I gave you some pretty bad advice about what to do with Xavier and Ava. For them to… You know.”

*Right*, I thought bitterly. *Lola’s ‘let them bang it out’ advice.*

This wasn’t Lola’s fault, though.

“Don’t feel guilty about this,” I said. “Clearly this was always going to happen. But I just can’t believe he lied to me about it. He said to my face that he would never sleep with her, and now… Now, it basically sounds like he’s leaving me for her. Right?”

Nobody spoke.

Even though I knew they were all trying to help, I was certain that nothing they did would make me feel better. How could it? Was I meant to just *forget* Xavier’s cruelty? It was like every horrible trait he’d had when we’d first met had been quietly festering inside him, getting a million times worse, and now he’d exploded. All that ‘growth’ bullshit had been a lie.

Xavier and I had gone through so much, and I’d truly believed that he’d become gentler, more empathetic, more loving—all because he loved me. Just because of me.

Greyson had never needed to work on any of that, though.

*Greyson*. I still had him. I was still in love with him, too. Deeply. He’d always been there for me, right up to today, at the hospital. I knew there was a chance I’d actually start to feel better if he walked into the room and comforted me, but that would’ve been so wrong. Greyson was his own person—an incredible, brave, strong man. He didn’t deserve to act as my crutch because Xavier had treated me like trash.

How could it be that I was so heartbroken over one person, and so in love with another?

*The fucking* due destini*. It really is its own curse, isn’t it?*

I used the tissue Artemis had given me to wipe my eyes.

“Where’s Greyson?” I asked quietly. He couldn’t have heard the fight—he would’ve intervened, no question. I remembered that he’d come into the house with me earlier, when we’d gotten back from the hospital, but then he’d had to step away.

Jay cleared his throat. “Last time I saw him, he was heading out on patrol with Rishika.”

That was a small relief. Patrols usually took a while. At least I’d have a minute to go wash my face after all the goddamn crying, and try to pull myself together. I needed time to process alone.

“So, are you going to tell Greyson about this?” Lola asked quietly.

I opened my mouth to answer—just as the door opened.

“Tell me what?” Greyson asked.

**Episode 3675**

**Xavier**

The wind raked through my hair. It felt like ice against my face as I forced the bike to move even faster. The road was dark, but it was late, and there were barely any cars around. I was going as fast as I could. Under different circumstances, this would’ve been fun.

My wolf was howling and snarling non-stop, still pacing inside me, his rage echoing through me. I’d known so much pain in my life, but the only thing that could compare to this agony was what I’d felt when I’d killed Ava.

And now, I kept mentally replaying the look on Cali’s face when I’d told her about Ava.

It had obviously been a lie. But I couldn’t shake the fact that there was some truth to it that would’ve come out eventually, one way or another. Because I knew what had almost happened in the Airstream. I knew what it had done to me to see Ava on her knees in front of me, licking her lips, looking up at me like she needed me.

But even if my feelings had changed for Ava, even if they’d become murkier, the mate bond tougher to control, I *always* would’ve talked things out with Cali rather than doing something as drastic as ending our relationship. Like how she’d talked to me about Greyson—and despite all the chaos, we’d figured that out in the end.

There was no figuring out to be done, now.

With Adéluce’s blackmail and ultimatum, the possibility of talking to Cali had crashed and burned. The same way our relationship had crashed and burned, set alight by the most horrible, hurtful, vicious things I could’ve possibly said.

For god’s sake, I’d told her to go to my brother. The thought made want to fucking *scream*.

I revved the bike’s engine and pulled out onto the highway, ready to push this thing even faster. I had no idea where was going, what I was doing, what the fuck would happen next. I wanted to turn around and go back to Cali, but at this point, how would I ever earn back her trust? I wouldn’t even be able to speak to her without Adéluce finding out.

No. First, I had to find the vampire-witch. First, I had to kill Adéluce for what she’d done—for this torture. For this devastation that could only be rivaled by the way I’d felt after killing Ava with my bare hands.

My wolf had left me, then. His own form of revenge.

I could feel his grief now, the ache so sharp it was like teeth slicing through whatever the fuck was left of my heart. The animal in me howled, and I couldn’t blame him, but I had to keep him from going off the goddamn rails before it was too late.

I zoomed around a few cars, weaving in and out while focusing on my true task—to calm my wolf enough that he would sit the fuck down instead of abandoning me out of hatred and spite.

*I hate myself too*, I wanted to tell him. *But I had to do this.*

I reminded him that I’d been forced to do this—that if he left me now and I couldn’t shift, killing Adéluce and going back to Cali would be impossible. We both had to stay strong, had to stay together. That was the only way we were going to be able to protect Cali from Adéluce.

My wolf was not appeased, his voice a growl in my mind.

*You’re useless*. *You should’ve killed the witch already.*

*You’re pathetic*. *You should never have listened to Greyson when he said not to check the lake*.

*You’re cursed*. *Adéluce only went after Cali in the first place because of you.*

He said those things, but he didn’t leave me. He thrashed and howled in agony, but I got the feeling he understood. For now. He hadn’t left me, for Cali’s sake, but I didn’t know how long I’d be able to hold on to him. I didn’t know how long I’d be able to hold on to my own resolve.

The bike roared under me—I’d been going faster and faster this entire time, everything fucking terrible thought that invaded my head making the urge to run stronger.

But then I heard a siren behind me. It was a cop car, its lights going on as it raced to catch up.

*Fuck. Are you goddamn* kidding *me?*

I couldn’t believe I was going to have to deal with getting a ticket right now. Not that I’d actually get one. There was no way the cop would survive the process—I was certain that whoever I spoke to next would be in massive danger. I could see myself doing it—killing some random human who decided it was smart to mouth off at me while being at the wrong place at the wrong time. But that was the last thing I wanted to do.

It was the last thing *Cali* would’ve wanted me to do.

My jaw clenched.

Fuck, there was no way I’d ever be able to shake Cali from my thoughts.

But I had to *find* a way—I had to stay sane enough to figure out a way to get rid of Adéluce and be with Cali. It was the only way I’d ever be able to breathe right again.

Meanwhile, the cop had caught up to me. He pulled out his car’s megaphone, or whatever the fuck the thing was called. “You! The show-off with the Harley. Pull over.”

It was an order, and a sarcastic one at that. I wanted to laugh at how absurd this was.

There was no way I wouldn’t kill this dude if I stopped. I had to lose him.

I revved the bike, the cop kept talking shit on the speaker thing, and our confrontation turned into a proper chase. The road was almost empty, but whenever another car showed up, I made sure to dodge and ride ahead. The bike was built for speed, and I knew what I was doing.

We’d passed three exits so far, the cop car’s siren continuing to blare. I let him get close, and then I abruptly shot down the next exit—way too fast for him to make the turn in time to follow. I heard him cursing through the megaphone as his car shot past the exit, and I found myself driving down a long, winding road. I slowed down to go through some turns and twisting curves, then I brought the speed up again.

I’d never been to this area before. It was heavily forested, and once the only thing I could hear was the sound of my bike, I pulled over at the side of the road. I was all alone. There were barely any street lights. Shaking, I looked up at the night sky, at the moon. The adrenaline of the chase and the toxic feeling of helplessness curdled unpleasantly in my stomach.

What the fuck was I going to do now?

Killing Adéluce was the goal, obviously, but how was I supposed to do it? And where would I even find her? Would she find me? Probably. At least as long as I stayed away from Cali, as long as I didn’t try to tell her the truth of what was going on, my mate would be safe. The farther I could get from her, the better. Really, I could just go fully Rogue and head out of state.

But it wasn’t just Cali I’d be leaving behind—and there was no fucking way that my friends wouldn’t look for me. Colton, Gabe and Mikah, and even Greyson had the skills to track me down. Jay wouldn’t be able to do it himself, but he wouldn’t rest until he found an explanation for my behavior. I could just imagine how furious he had to be at me right now—I’d told him time and time again that nothing was going on with me and Ava.

I wondered if he’d heard what I’d told Cali. I wondered if he would buy it—but what the fuck did it really matter? I couldn’t talk to Cali right now, I couldn’t fix anything, and the memory of her pain made breathing difficult. I shook my head at myself. For now, traveling as far north as I could get sounded like the best option. I’d just have to do my best to remain untraceable and escape my friends.

I needed to clear my head, to strategize about what the fuck I was going to do about the vampire-witch. And I definitely had to stay away from Cali. After our conversation, seeing me again would only make her hate me even more, would only cause her more pain.

She’d been so confident about our love, until she wasn’t.

Until I’d broken her.

I *was* going to kill Adéluce.

I started up the bike again. I had to reroute and get the fuck out of here, so I turned around. I gasped in surprise when my headlights illuminated a person in the middle of the road.

No. Not a person.

A fucking *monster*.

Adéluce.

Her expression was cold, but her gaze was full of fire. Hatred. She truly hated me, and I realized I’d never gone up against such an opponent. I’d never had so much power and hatred focused on me. Not even from Silas.

And then, as if she’d heard my every thought, Adéluce said, “You’re not going anywhere, Xavier.”

With a wave of her hand, my bike and I were blasted backwards.

**Episode 3676**

**Greyson**

“So, are you going to tell Greyson about this?” I heard Lola ask.

I pushed the door open—it hadn’t been fully closed—and asked, “Tell me what?”

Cali winced. She looked at Artemis. Artemis looked at Lola. Lola looked at Jay. Jay looked at the floor, as if it were the most interesting thing in the entire world. The vibe in the room was so weird that I was immediately suspicious.

I’d already been on edge, actually, from the moment I’d entered the pack house—everything had been unnaturally quiet, filled with hushed whispers and tense looks from everyone I walked past. I’d run into Ravi in the hallway and asked about Cali.

“Uh,” he’d said, looking awkward. “She’s in the study with Jay, Lola, and her sister.”

I’d asked Ravi what was going on, but he’d said it would be better if I talked to Cali. The look on his face had been worrisome, along with the fact that he hadn’t wanted to talk. He was usually a huge gossip—he called it ‘social interest’ and said he was like his mom, that way—so I’d expected at least some sort of smartass remark.

When I hadn’t received it, I’d braced myself for the worst.

And now that I was looking at Cali, I knew why Ravi had been acting weird.

She’d been crying, she looked pale, and the way she was chewing on her lip told me that she wanted to say something, but wouldn’t. There were many things going unsaid right now—I could just see it in the way everyone was so tense and fidgety.

The quiet whispers I’d heard all through the pack house echoed behind me.

There was something *wrong* going on.

“What’s going on?” I asked. I tried to sound calm, composed. Instinctively, I knew it was what Cali needed. “Is it something to do with the handprint?” I asked. That was my biggest fear. “Is it back? If it’s come back…”

My throat tightened. I wasn’t sure what I’d do, if that were the case. The past couple of days had been a fucking emotional rollercoaster. The handprint, Cali in the hospital, my brother acting out, the threat from Malakai… I’d fucking *dared* to hope that Cali feeling better and the handprint vanishing meant that at least one nightmare was over. But things weren’t looking so optimistic, anymore.

Either way, whatever this was, I would handle it.

It didn’t matter if I *could*—I just would.

Anything for her.

“You look upset,” I said evenly, after a moment passed and Cali hadn’t replied. I moved closer to my mate. “Are you in pain? Do you need me to take you back to the hospital?”

Getting down to my haunches in front of her, I rested a hand on her knee. That seemed to have an immediate effect on her. Even if she still looked so sad it broke my goddamn heart, she eased a little.

“No, nothing like that—I’m so sorry to scare you,” she said quietly, resting her hand on mine. “It’s just… Um. Well, something did happen.”

“What?” I asked.

Cali swallowed, clearing her throat. “Uh…” She paused.

Confused and agitated, I looked at Artemis. She was frowning. I looked at Lola, who immediately looked away. And then I turned to Jay. He was a guy—he’d probably give me a clue, right?

But nope. He reminded me of a deer caught in headlights.

“Why are you looking at me, Greyson?” Jay asked in an unusually high-pitched voice. “This isn’t my story to tell.”

*Thanks for nothing, bud.*

I turned to Cali once more. “Did Malakai call again?”

She swallowed roughly. “No.”

“Then what’s going on?”

Cali withdrew her hand. Looked away. I straightened up, looked at the other three people in the room, and realized I was the only one who didn’t know what was happening. And nobody was talking. Frustration bit at me, but I fought not to lose my shit.

I took a deep breath, ignoring the way my heart was pounding like it wanted to fucking jump out of my chest, and looked around at the four of them one last time.

“My mate almost died today,” I said. “Can someone tell what the fuck is going on right now?”

The question had an edge to it, obviously, but I hadn’t yelled. That had to count for something.

Cali’s gaze flickered to me before she looked at the others. “Thank you all for everything, but I’d like to talk to Greyson alone.”

“Of course,” Lola said, and stood up.

Artemis followed, mumbling, “Yeah, no need for witnesses.” Jay said nothing, just nodded, while Artemis added, “We won’t be far if you need anything, Cali.”

“But not too close,” Lola blurted. “This is a private matter.” She looked between Cali and me. “You two really need to talk.”

I narrowed my eyes at Lola, offering her a jerky nod. *Gee, you think?*

She didn’t seem to notice my expression, just skedaddled along with everybody else. I closed the door behind them and then returned to Cali. I wanted to sit down next to her, close, so I could pull her into my arms and comfort her as much as I could. I had no fucking idea what fresh hell we’d been dumped into, but I needed to remind her that I’d have her back through it all.

There was something off about her, though.

I was getting a weird feeling that she didn’t want me to touch her right now. She didn’t look at me, didn’t reach for me like usual. My stomach clenched at the realization, but I sucked it up and left some space between as I took a seat on the couch. She glanced at me, taking a deep breath, and wrung her hands together so tightly that her knuckles turned white.

She didn’t speak, and I wanted to bang my head against the wall.

I smothered the worry, though. I couldn’t let it overpower me—not when it looked like she was ready to break. But I had to speed things along, otherwise we’d just sit here forever in a purgatory of silence and anxiety.

“Cali, please,” I said softly, reaching for her trembling hands. “Tell me what’s going on, love.”

Finally, she took a shaky breath and looked into my eyes. She looked so devastated, I wanted to tear the world apart.

And then she spoke. “Xavier broke up with me.”

*I…*

I couldn’t have heard that right.

“What?” I asked.

“Xavier broke up with me,” she repeated, sniffling.

No. But seriously. *What?*

Once I moved past the initial shock of whatever the fuck this was, I realized that it was actually… a relief? For fuck’s sake, I’d thought that Cali was dying again. That Malakai was hiding in the motherfucking basement, or that evil spirits who ate only half-Fae flesh were after my mate.

Xavier breaking up with her was just—

Weird.

It was really fucking weird. It felt fake. My brother was a lot of things—a dramatic little bitch who often threw tantrums, screaming that nobody understood him because he was just so darn special—but it wasn’t like him to hurt Cali. To leave her behind.

“Are you going to say something?” Cali whispered.

I snapped back to attention. Fake or real, this situation was so much better than my fears.

“I’m just—” I paused. “Shocked. I don’t get it. Yeah, Xavier’s been unpredictable and unhinged since you got really sick, but…” I frowned. “I never expected this. Are you—”

I cut myself off. Was I really about to ask her if she was *okay?* Of course she wasn’t. Of course she was devastated, and it looked like she’d been crying. A lot. She looked bad enough that I’d thought she was dying again.

That motherfucker had made my mate look like she was going to die.

What. The. *Fuck.*

Why the hell would he have done this to her?

The only thing that had changed lately, the only thing that could’ve triggered a breakup, was Cali getting sick. But I’d never even *dreamed* my brother would abandon Cali when she needed him the most. What kind of coward would break up with her at her lowest point?

How the hell could he just *check out*, the second she got back?

How dare he abandon her just as she’d escaped death’s doorstep?

“Did he give you a reason?” I asked. I tried not to sound like I wanted to snap someone’s (Xavier’s) neck, but it was hard.

Cali’s inhaled brokenly, fresh tears falling from her eyes. I squeezed her hands as she said, “Apparently, he’s been sleeping with Ava. Has been for a while. I didn’t know.”

What the fuck.

What. The. *Fuck.*

“He *cheated* on you?”

It was a testament to how complicated our situation was that I called it cheating. But that was what it was. Whatever was happening with the three of us, everybody involved was aware. Honesty was built into the foundations of our weird situation. But Xavier had never told Cali about him and Ava, and the thought of it made me…

*Furious*.

But then I felt something more. Something that felt like relief. Because if Xavier got with Ava, that would be good for me and Cali—obviously. But the second that thought arrived, I was hit with a strong pang of shame. How could I feel any sort of satisfaction over something that was making Cali look so sad?

No. I refused to think of this as a good thing.

“Xavier… I can’t believe he…” I paused. “He has been spending more time with Ava lately.” The realization landed hard. “He’s the one she’s always communicated better with, so I’ve been pushing him to hang out with her, to help with the Samara stuff.”

I paused. Cali and I locked eyes.

“Do you think that played into it?” I asked.

Cali pressed her lips together. “What do you mean?”

The possibility that I’d played a role in this horrible thing that had ended up causing Cali so much pain left me nauseated.

Swallowing roughly, I asked, “Do you think I gave my brother the alibi he needed to cheat on you?”

**Episode 3677**

**Xavier**

I was flung back, the bike went sideways, and then I was down. I collided with the ground, rocks digging into my hands and slicing through my skin. The air smelled like my blood.

I was sure Adéluce could smell it, too.

I was up a second later, my wolf roaring in fury.

“What the fuck are you *doing* here?” I growled, half-shifted already. “Haven’t you done enough?”

Without thinking, I charged toward her.

She vanished in the blink of an eye, and after slipping through my claws twice, she said, “Oh, Xavier. There’s always more to be done.”

I stood there, panting. Shaking. I realized I needed to rein in my rage and keep my head straight. I couldn’t keep senselessly attacking when she expected me to, wearing myself out in the process. I calculated the distance she’d put between us and stared at her head, at the shape of it. I thought about how good it would feel to rip it off. But she was just too fast, god-fucking-dammit. If I was going to attack successfully, I’d need to distract her. Distract her, kill her, and then…

Would I just leave?

What the fuck would I do then? How was I supposed to come back from what I’d just said to Cali? I wasn’t even sure it was possible.

Dread filled me. The catastrophic notion that everything was already fucking ruined, that Cali and I were truly done, weakened me. And the sensation of being trapped remained. It got even worse with Adéluce here in front of me. She looked regal, like she didn’t have a care in the world. Like she wasn’t a fucking monster out to destroy me.

“You’re so predictable, Xavier. You stupid boy,” she said with a laugh. She started to walk toward me. “I just knew you’d try to run away like a little coward.”

“I’m not a—”

“*Of course* you’re a coward!” she snarled, her voice distorted. “What gave you the idea that you could leave? That you could just exit this new reality I’ve created for you?”

“You never said I couldn’t!” I growled. “There was nothing in your rules about leaving.”

Adéluce stopped moving. Her expression changed again—her mood swinging violently back and forth. “Well.” She paused, like she was thinking about what I’d said. Pondering my words with great interest. “You know, you’re actually right.”

I was shocked to hear the words coming out of the mouth, and waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I was still partially shifted, my clawed hands ready if she decided to come closer. I’d distract her somehow, and then—one swipe. That was all it would take.

“About this one thing specifically, I mean,” she said. Like she was clarifying. Like we were friends, and she hadn’t just destroyed my life. She waved her hands airily. “I should’ve been more specific about some of the terms of our deal, but I’m happy to enlighten you now.”

“I’m good, thanks,” I spat.

Adéluce laughed again. It echoed through the woods, through the dark. My ears rang, the sound so sharp it caused me physical pain. I shook my head and roared, breaking through the nightmarish noise.

She stopped laughing.

I stopped roaring.

She stared at me, her eyes pitch black. “I’ll make this easy to digest for your tiny, impulsive, hot-headed brain, Xavier—you can’t leave the area.”

She was right about that, actually—I couldn’t leave the area without killing her. I stepped forward again, this time slowly. I watched her every move. My chance to pounce would show itself soon. It just fucking had to.

Otherwise, I didn’t know what I’d do.

My wolf roared impatiently.

“I forbid you from leaving, Xavier, so you’re as good as trapped here.” She smiled. “Accept that with as much dignity as you have left, boy.”

“I will *never* accept—”

Her smile twisted into a snarl. “You *will* *do* *as I say!* Did you really think I’d go through the trouble of cursing you just for you to up and die, or become a lumberjack?” She scoffed. “How does that give me the best bang for my buck? You can tell me, I’ll wait.”

I didn’t dignify that with a response. Instead, I said, “You should’ve outlined your rules more clearly, then.”

Adéluce’s eyes were full of burning hate. “*I* make the rules, Xavier. And if you leave this area, your precious little half-Fae will die. Like I said, you’re *trapped*.”

My entire body was heaving. I *was* trapped. I was nothing but a toy for Adéluce to torture and play with. I felt like an animal. I *was* an animal, and my wolf took over, rage the trigger.

Fully shifting in midair, I lunged for her. I couldn’t spend another moment lying to Cali, being away from her. This had to end right now. And maybe it could—if Adéluce’s reaction was any indication, I’d finally managed to catch her by surprise.

Her eyes widened, like she didn’t expect—or had forgotten—what it meant to fight a fully shifted werewolf. She raised her hands to blast me, but I evaded her, jumped over her, and was ready to attack from behind when she vanished again.

That couldn’t have been vampire speed—she’d moved too quickly. She was using her witch powers. Fucking *blipping*.

She laughed from twenty feet away. “Is that the best you’ve got?”

Her smile faded when I used my back legs to kick the bike toward her. It went flying, and her shock was obvious. She evaded, didn’t get hit by the bike, but that had never been my intention. I’d only wanted to distract her. When I lunged at her this time, my claws almost hit her skin—

But then she blasted me again.

I was flung backwards. I recovered fast, ducking to evade her follow-up burst of magic. She hadn’t used an immobilization spell yet—but why? Had the blipping exhausted her? Had all the magic she’d used to torture Cali weakened her? I had no idea. But I knew that if she froze me right now, I’d be fucking done.

I had to kill her before she could do it.

I roared, her fangs dropped, and I attacked again. She raised her hand, send out another blast of magic, but she missed. She’d assumed that when I leapt toward her, I’d intended to tackle her, but that had never been the plan. I landed five feet to her left, then charged again from close enough range that when I swiped at her, my claws *finally* sliced into her arm.

Adrenaline and victory rushed through me at the heavy, glorious scent of her blood.

She screamed when I shoved her down, one paw on her right arm, the other on her chest, my mouth open. Ready to bite her head off.

But then I felt metal pricking at my neck.

“You didn’t think I’d come prepared?” She was panting. Her mouth was bloody, her fangs dropped, her grin sinister. And in her free hand, she was holding a silver dagger to my throat. “You stupid, stupid *boy*.”

When she blasted me back this time, it was full force.

I landed several yards away, pain shooting through me at the impact. All the other wounds I’d gained suddenly came to life. But I couldn’t stop. I struggled to stand, but only for a moment. I ran, charging again.

She didn’t blip away this time.

She just stood there, her uninjured hand sliding over her injured one in one swooping motion, then over her tattered clothes. Right before my eyes, under the moonlight and the light from the street lamps, I watched as her wounds healed, her clothes stitched themselves together, her hair smoothed itself back. In moments, she looked immaculate.

She looked invincible.

And seconds before I could reach her, as I leapt through the air, she raised both hands—and everything stopped.

I was frozen.

A werewolf pinned to the air by her magic alone, and through the shock and terror, I finally realized that she wasn’t actually drained, or tired. She’d just been toying with me.

“If you leave, Xavier…” Her voice was low. Eerie. The dagger gleamed in her hand. “If you leave, this goes in Cali’s heart.”

And with that, she blipped away.

I dropped to the ground.

My wolf howled, and I’d never felt such rage.

I’d never felt more like a beast.

I started running, racing through these unknown woods. And even though the forest looked open and wide, I’d never felt more trapped.

Fuck Adéluce.

Fuck everything.

Once more, I had no idea what the hell I was going to do. I couldn’t go back to the pack house, not after what I’d said to Cali. My brother… Talking to Greyson would be a nightmare. It just wouldn’t end well, and there was no way anything I ever said would satisfy him. No matter what Cali decided to do, I doubted Greyson would ever forgive me.

That was exactly what Adéluce wanted. She wanted me to be cut off from everyone in the pack, too. And she was succeeding, because here I was—bruised, battered, and running away. Trapped.

A coward.

I went deeper and deeper into the woods, pushing myself hard, until I suddenly realized that I’d entered familiar territory.

I knew this place.

I knew where my wolf had taken me.

**Episode 3678**

**Ava**

I was running patrol with a few of the Samara wolves. I hadn’t had many volunteers tonight, but there were enough to keep things running. It was good to see who had stepped up, who was unwilling to slack off when it came to the safety of the pack.

Perrie’s mother, Josephine, was in the lead. She ran ahead, mind linking every now and then with information about the route. Geraint was in the middle, and I brought up the rear. We were making our final round. When we got back to camp, we’d hand off patrol duty to Marissa and Donovan before calling it a night.

It was really late, and Marissa and Donovan’s final patrol would take us through the last bit of the night. Ever since things had gone down with the Bitterfangs, I’d decided to keep this kind of schedule up and running. I knew it was the smart thing to do—and I didn’t need Xavier or Greyson or any Alpha to tell me how to set up patrol systems.

At least the pack hadn’t raised any objections to my orders, yet. Everyone had been cooperative so far, but I wasn’t sure for how long that would last. It was easy for a pack’s balance to fail without a proper leader. I supposed I could’ve been that for them—at least in theory—but not all of them were open-minded enough to accept a female Alpha.

If I’d *really* wanted to be Alpha, though, I would’ve pushed for it. I would’ve tried harder, made a plan, called in a few favors, figured out what the doubters wanted and given it to them, dangling some sort of carrot in their faces to get them on my side. I knew how to talk to people, when I put my mind to it.

But I hadn’t lied when I’d told Xavier I didn’t want the official Alpha position. It was too much work, too much stress, too much fucking everything. I had the dedication to be a good leader, though, especially at a time like this. I could deal with the naysayers until an official Alpha took the position. I’d never abandon the pack the way that Zeke had, and at least the Samaras had realized that. At least I’d gained some of their respect.

Another thing that had caught their attention was when I’d brought Xavier in as temporary Alpha. For so long, Xavier had been so dead-set on not taking the position that his acceptance had come as a shock to everybody. Not to me, though. Despite everything, I knew Xavier’s wolf was attached to me, even if we were a damn mess together.

I huffed as our team rounded the bend. Xavier had brought up Fletcher again, the other day. He wasn’t an ideal choice for Alpha, but he wasn’t a horrible one, either. He just needed work, really—work that I would have to do, if I wanted to get his Alpha genes up and running.

The whole endeavor already felt a little hopeless, but we were out of options. We needed to move forward—which meant I’d have to contact Fletcher tomorrow and get him to come see us again. He might be our only hope.

“How did it go?” Marissa asked when our team returned to camp. She, Donovan, and a few others had been waiting for us.

“All good,” I said. “Nothing to report. You should have a pretty smooth run.”

Marissa nodded, and Donovan signaled for their group to head out. The fact that there were no protests or grumbling was a step in the right direction. The pack’s vibe had been like this for a while now, and I’d fought very hard for it.

It felt like I was constantly fighting for something, actually. I never seemed to get a moment of peace.

When I got back to the Airstream, I was feeling exhausted. It was a lot, having all the patrols and the Alpha situation weighing on my mind. I was doing my best, especially considering the circumstances, but it had been difficult to take on this leadership role that I didn’t want, or even know how to handle. Even though I’d started to get the hang of things, the pressure of it all was immense. There was no way I’d ever make a play to be an official Alpha.

Shaking my head to myself, I headed to the shower. I hoped to quiet my thoughts, relax a little, have the water wash everything away. I turned on the shower, stood under the stream, and turned it up to hot.

It felt so good over my sore muscles, my cold skin. I just stood there and breathed for a bit, enjoying the small luxury, feeling my mind slowly empty. But the second it did, the moment I closed my eyes and rested my forehead against the tile, the image of Xavier popped into my head.

Typical.

So very typical.

I was so tired, both mentally and physically, that I couldn’t fight off the feelings. Maybe I didn’t deserve anything good after all the bad things I’d done, but I was still human. I was weak, and I needed this so badly that I indulged myself for a moment.

I imagined Xavier, here with me. He’d be too big for this space, his muscled shoulders almost funny in the tiny shower. My throat dried at the thought of the water gliding over his taut, hard body. There would be water droplets on his eyelashes—he had such long eyelashes.

I could just picture him smiling—I was pretty sure he’d smile. He rarely smiled at me, but right here, right now, he would. He’d lean in to kiss me, and maybe it would be tender at first, but we never rolled that way. Our kisses were all tongue and teeth and wandering hands. He’d want to touch me—that was part of it. The most important part. He’d want to lick into my mouth and nibble my lips, and then kiss down my throat, down my breasts. He’d keep his mouth there, suck there, slide his hand down my abdomen and lower, and then…

He always made me come so fast.

So fucking fast—borderline brutal with the volatile nature of it, the way he’d pull the pleasure out of me over and over. Like he couldn’t get enough. He’d kiss me like that, touch me like that. And then I could just see him dropping to his knees, slinging my leg over his shoulder to open me up, his lips between my thighs as he looked up at me and whispered, “I love you.”

My eyes flew open, a shudder coursing through me.

And then, anger.

Clenching my jaw, I turned off the shower. My whole body was tingling, begging for me to touch myself again, but I hated myself for going down this road. Why did I keep doing this? Whether I was at my highest or my lowest, my thoughts always flew to Xavier.

I grabbed a towel and walked out the shower, my gaze darting to the next room.

I’d been on my knees there, just yesterday. And what had almost happened between us? It hadn’t been a fantasy.

Xavier had really stood there, his cock hard, his scent overwhelming the space and every inch of my sanity. I’d been ready to take him in my mouth, ready to taste him, ready to let him use me and feel so much pleasure over it if it meant having him. If it meant easing this eternal need inside me.

The rawness of what had almost taken place in that moment had felt so real. It had felt like Xavier. The same energy had vibrated between us during our kiss at the palace, on New Year’s Eve. It had felt like a promise—like something had finally shifted back into place for Xavier, in terms of our mate bond.

My wolf had longed for it for so long. It was like a constant physical ache.

I shook the thought off, scoffing as I dried my hair with the towel.

“You’re a fucking idiot, Ava,” I told my reflection in the mirror.

Xavier would never give Cali up. He’d proven time and time again that—for some reason—he wanted her. I needed to accept that, even if my wolf didn’t want to let me. Even if, sometimes, I still felt helpless against the mate bond.

God, *why* did Xavier have to be my mate? He was broody and rude and so fucking horrible and so fucking hot it made me sick. He was just so, *so* bad for me. We were bad for each other—why hadn’t my wolf realized that yet? Apparently, she was too stubborn to listen. *I* was too stubborn. Self-destructive, probably.

I hated myself and how pathetic I was to want him.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I wrapped the towel around myself, heading for the living room/bedroom/main area of the Airstream. I caught movement outside from the corner of my eye. Probably someone from the pack, or—

“Xavier?”

*What the* fuck*?*

My heart pounding, I opened the door. “What the hell are you doing here?”

**Episode 3679**

“Do you think I gave my brother the excuse he needed to cheat on you?” Greyson asked.

It took me a second to process the question. Greyson was staring at me, looking so sad that it made me feel impossibly worse. As if I could ever blame him for something Xavier had done.

“That’s not it,” I whispered. “You’re not the one who gave him the go ahead.”

Greyson slowly let my hands go. He grimaced. “What does that mean?”

“I sort of—” I shook my head. God, this was so fucked up. “A while back, I sort of… encouraged Xavier to explore things with Ava. I know that ever since she came back, it’s been difficult for him, so I told him to maybe try and—”

“Hey, *no*.” Greyson’s voice was soft but firm. He slid a little closer on the couch. “None of this is your fault, Cali. Xavier went behind your back. He wasn’t honest with you when you’d asked him to be. He made the decisions he wanted to make.”

*Well,* I thought, wincing. *Doesn’t THAT paint a pretty fucking horrible picture?*

Greyson was right, though. If Xavier hadn’t wanted to hook up with Ava, then he wouldn’t have done it. Especially not multiple times. I could’ve understood once, in the heat of the moment. A kiss or two, or even more—I would’ve understood those as well. I would’ve been open to talking about them. I knew how hard it was to fight off a mate bond. I would’ve been able to sit down and listen to Xavier, if only he’d just told me.

If only he’d respected and cared for me enough to tell me.

*But no.*

Instead, he’d lied.

“It’s about trust,” I whispered. “He broke it. He’s been…” I swallowed down the tears. I didn’t want Greyson to see me crying over Xavier right now. “He’s been with her this entire time, and every time I asked him what was going on, he lied about it.”

I didn’t tell Greyson about the other stuff. About Xavier telling me I was a burden. Just a thing he’d had to deal with because of the mate bond. I always needed to be rescued, he’d said. I wasn’t good with my magic, he’d said. And okay, maybe he had a point. Maybe I *was* just fucking dead weight, and needed to go hide in a cave where I’d stop being such a useless problem for everyone.

But there was a small voice in my head, a fiery kind of voice that said, *You son of a bitch! Sure, I mostly don’t know what the fuck I’m doing, and sure, I AM annoying at least sixty percent of the time. But I’M the one who saved your sorry ass when we were fighting Seluna, Xavier! I’M the one who made a shield that protected you from Odette! How DARE YOU?*

How fucking *dare* he?

How dare he say he loved me and have sex with me and then, the day I almost died, treat me like I was nothing to him?

“None of this is your fault,” Greyson repeated. “Please don’t blame yourself for his actions, love.”

I faced Greyson. His expression was a mix of righteous anger and empathy. I felt choked up again when he added, “This is just Xavier. He always does whatever he wants, without taking anyone else into consideration.” Greyson’s voice dropped. It was soft—calm, even. “He doesn’t follow the rules, and it’s not fair for you to feel accountable for his actions when he’s not thinking of you in the slightest.”

The words stung, but Greyson didn’t want to hurt me. I knew that. I could feel it in his delivery—how gentle he was while also saying what he felt was true. And there was a truth to his words, definitely. Xavier was stubborn, but I knew a side of him that most people didn’t. I knew Xavier’s vulnerabilities, his heart, and that was what made this whole thing so much worse.

I used to think he *did* think of me.

I used to think he loved me with his whole heart.

What had changed? Was it really Ava, or had something else triggered the downfall of our relationship? Had I done something wrong? Had he assumed I wouldn’t have listened to him, if he’d explained things earlier? But he should’ve known that, as a *due destini* mate, I would’ve had some level of understanding about his Ava situation.

I was in love with two men—one who had broken my heart, and the other who still had it. I could understand the concept of Xavier being torn in two directions. It wasn’t quite the same as the *due destini*, but his first mate coming back to life wasn’t something Xavier had ever expected.

If Xavier had just been honest with me, if he hadn’t spoken to me like he wanted to get rid of me, then this whole thing might have brought us closer. The fact that we both had a mate bond with two people could’ve been common ground between us. But instead of talking to me, Xavier had decided to treat me like trash. And then he’d run away.

*It just… It still doesn’t make any sense*, I thought. *Has he been pretending this entire time? Did he even mean all the horrible things he said, or did he just say I was a burden to justify his cheating on me?*

The root of the issue here seemed to be his feelings for Ava—not any of his other excuses. But knowing that didn’t make things any easier. I was heartbroken. Betrayed. And when I looked at Greyson, I felt so damn guilty. I shouldn’t have been processing these emotions with him here. It just wasn’t fair for me to put him in a position where he’d have to put me back together now that Xavier had broken me.

“What are you thinking?” he asked quietly.

I let go of his hand and stood, smoothing out my shirt.

Greyson got up too, watching me worriedly. “Cali—”

“I don’t think we should talk about this anymore,” I said, taking a step back. I wished he could wrap his arms around me and pull me close, but that would’ve felt way too much like using him to fix his brother’s mess. I wrapped my arms around myself, just so he couldn’t.

“You know I’m here for you, Cali,” he said quietly. “Always.”

Unlike Xavier.

“You shouldn’t be the one to… to *handle me*,right now,” I said, grimacing. “I’m not going to let you comfort me because of something your own brother did. I’ll be okay.”

He looked dubious. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I said, nodding. *Lying*. I just couldn’t let Greyson see more of my devastation. I was going to protect him from this mess, if it was the last thing I did. “I need to do this on my own.”

*With the help of people who aren’t Greyson.*

“Everything is way too complicated, and I just feel like a boundary should be set, here,” I said. “Besides, it’s really late. Aren’t you tired?”

Greyson’s worried expression smoothed out a little. That could only mean he was suppressing his emotions, trying to appear calm, and that wasn’t good. I hated that I was doing this to him.

*Dammit, Xavier!*

“All right,” Greyson finally said. “Can I walk you to your room?”

“Of course,” I said, nodding. I was beyond exhausted.

We headed upstairs. I was still hugging myself, like a shield to keep him from wrapping his arms around me. But he didn’t even try to come closer, following my cues.

And yet, the more he kept his distance, the more I wanted him to touch me.

By the time we got to my room, that want had turned into longing. When we reached the door, I paused in front of it. I didn’t walk in, just lingered there awkwardly. Taking a deep breath, I turned to face Greyson. He was leaning against the doorframe, looking gorgeous, already staring at me. His gaze was intense, almost overwhelming. Under the force of his eyes, I had to suppress a shiver.

“Thank you,” I whispered. I reached for his hand, squeezing.

“For what?” he asked.

“For being there. Always. I love you so much.” I wasn’t going to let myself cry—Greyson didn’t deserve that. Greyson deserved to have a girl look at him like he hung the moon, and I hoped I could deliver.

I hoped I could be enough—and it felt like I could be.

Because Greyson had never made me feel unworthy.

Greyson had always made me feel strong and safe, and just so *alive*.

The darkness of Xavier’s betrayal lingered, but Greyson was with me, and his sheer presence made everything inside me feel smoother. Like I hadn’t been broken down just moments ago. Like I’d really be able to hold on, if only for him.

“I love you too,” he said. He smiled a little, and it was so beautiful, it made my heart flutter. “Get some rest.”

I swallowed thickly, glancing over my shoulder. At the bed.

I didn’t let go of his hand. Not yet.

He cleared his throat, then spoke carefully. “Would you like me to spend the night?”

**Episode 3680**

**Xavier**

I looked at Ava.

She stood in the Airstream’s doorway, wearing nothing but a towel, her hair wet. She looked fresh and clean, and there was always something so organically sexy about her. The sight of her felt like a funny juxtaposition to me. Her skin was glowing, and dewy from the shower—she was fucking radiant, while I was bloodstained, dirty, and beaten.

I couldn’t believe this was my life.

“Thanks for the warm welcome,” I said sarcastically, though I couldn’t quite manage my usual venom.

Ava shook her head. “You look like shit, X. What are you doing here? Are you even real?”

I frowned. Was I even real? What kind of weird-ass question was that? No matter. The last thing I needed right now was a long discussion.

“I know it’s late,” I said, “but I figured I could crash here. I don’t have anywhere else to go right now.”

Saying the words felt like swallowing glass. The pain and shame of leaving Cali still raged inside me. I was so close to home, but nothing felt right. Not a single fucking thing, apart from…

This.

Being here.

I’d never admit it out loud, but my feet had led me straight to Ava. Not to a motel, not anywhere else. And now that I was here, for the first time tonight, it didn’t feel like my wolf wanted to claw my eyes out. He wasn’t settled, and he definitely wasn’t fucking sane, but at least he wasn’t homicidal.

At least here, I’d have a roof over my head tonight.

*And Ava*, my wolf added.

This was such a fucking mess.

“What do you mean?” Ava looked confused. “Why can’t you go back to the Redwood pack house?”

It was cold out, and I was exhausted. The warmth from the Airstream, along with Ava’s scent, beckoned me in. Taking a deep breath, I walked past her and into the caravan. Then I sank down on the built-in couch. Ava closed the door behind me and stared.

I didn’t want to be an ass to her right now.

“Can we not talk about this?” I asked.

Ava hugged the towel closer, as if I hadn’t seen her naked a million times. I bit the inside of my cheek until I tasted blood, but at least…

At least my wolf was distracted.

At least he’d stopped threatening to leave.

“Of course we have to talk about this, Xavier,” Ava was saying, when I tuned back in. “Why can’t you go back to your pack?”

She sat down next to me, leaving some space between us. I could still smell her skin, though, could feel the heat radiating off her. And finally, like a fucking dumbass, I realized that coming here was actually a horrible idea. Especially given what had happened last time. This Airstream just wasn’t big enough for the two of us. I needed to get the hell away from her.

But my feet wouldn’t move.

“Are you even listening to me?” she asked. There was an edge to her tone. “I need an answer, here.”

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. I rubbed my face with both hands and sighed, just to do something—I literally couldn’t tell Ava the truth. I had to cook up a realistic enough lie, but she wasn’t going to let me think for long.

When I didn’t respond, she said, “Xavier, I’ll let you stay here, but only if you tell me why you can’t go back. Did you have a fight with someone?”

When I looked up at her, understanding washed over her expression.

“Did you fight with Greyson?” she whispered.

Technically, she wasn’t wrong.

“Yeah,” I said. “I had it out with Greyson, and I can’t go back right now.”

It was as good an excuse as any. Ava could believe what she wanted to believe. Either way, I wasn’t going to tell her about Cali. The news of our breakup would only give her ideas. It was probably unfair of me to have come here in the first place—Jay probably would’ve said I was tormenting Ava, or something.

But I couldn’t help it. I felt helpless. There was a gaping hole in my chest, and my wolf’s rage and grief were so giant, it felt like I could shatter. I had no idea what he’d do if I left the Airstream right now.

I had no idea what I would do to myself if I left.

I stayed firm on my decision not to tell Ava about what had happened with Cali, though. Even though Ava and I had grown closer. Even though we had… whatever this was that the mate bond was creating between us. Given the Adéluce situation, actually, I didn’t even think I’d be able to tell her what had happened—the spot behind my ear had already started burning, like it was getting ready to punish me.

“But what happened, exactly?” Ava asked. She looked concerned. I didn’t dare indulge myself with her worry, so I looked away. “Did Greyson banish you?”

I realized that I couldn’t make a huge statement about a banishment without it coming back to bite me in the ass. The Samaras and the Redwoods talked.

“No,” I said, shaking my head, “I’m not banished. But it was a bad fight.” I looked away, swallowing down the urge to keep staring at her. “I really don’t want to talk about it, Ava.”

She huffed. “Right… I should’ve expected that. You never want to talk about anything.”

There was a challenge in her tone, and it hit me straight in the chest. I was way too goddamn emotional and furious and torn apart right now to have a fight with her, too. I knew I needed to stay cool, lie low. But when I turned to look at her and she stared back at me with that fire in her eyes, I still had enough bite left in me to fall for her bullshit.

I hated myself for it.

“Because you know me so well, huh?” I shot back.

She crossed her arms over her towel, under her breasts, and I couldn’t help but look at the swell of them. I knew what her skin would feel like under my mouth, in my palms. I was disgusted with myself for going there, but my instincts had gone haywire tonight.

My wolf was growling for me to keep looking at her. He needed to feed on the sight of her. It felt like a warning. As if I had to give him this, the image of Ava looking like this, or *else*. Adéluce was the one who’d cursed me, but my wolf was taking this personally, and he blamed me, not the vampire-witch. I blamed myself, too.

I hated myself.

“*Really*, Xavier?” Ava spoke again, sarcasm in her tone. She’d caught me looking, and when my gaze darted up to meet hers, her eyebrows were arched. “Are you seriously doing this right now?”

“Doing what?”

“Pretending that nothing’s going on!” she burst out. “You never talk about anything! It’s—”

“I do talk—”

“Then let’s just fucking do it,” she said harshly. “Let’s talk about what happened between us, the last time we were here alone.”

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*. I should’ve known Ava wouldn’t just shut up and leave me be.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” I snapped.

She glared at me. “Oh, but there’s plenty. I know you can feel what’s happening between us, X.”

I looked away from her, shut my eyes, and rubbed my forehead. No matter what my wolf needed, *I* wanted to be anywhere but here. I didn’t know what to tell Ava, but I knew I could never accept the truth about the way things had evolved between her and me. Because nothing could change the fact that I was in love with Cali.

And now, there were forces out of my control that were stopping me from being with Cali. *That* was what this night was about—agony, lies, and self-disgust. Not Ava. This would *not* be about Ava. I couldn’t rip Cali’s heart out, rip my own heart out, and then go straight to Ava and discuss our old mate bond. I refused to stoop so low.

No matter how much my wolf protested, I stood up.

“It was a mistake, coming here,” I said. “I’ll just sleep outside.”

I headed to the door, my whole body aching, but then I heard Ava’s voice again.

“Fine,” she grumbled. “If you don’t want to talk, don’t talk. Just forget it. It’s freezing outside—you can stay in here if you want to.”

I paused by the door, turning to face her. She was by the sink now, busying herself with something. Clutching the towel to her body. She looked annoyed and dejected, but not angry. I knew she didn’t want me to sleep outside in the cold—I didn’t have to ask her about that twice. I needed to ask myself a question, though: what the hell was I doing right now?

Ava dropped the towel.

“So…” She sat on the bed that had been jammed into a corner, looking me in the eye as she slipped under the covers. “Are you staying or not?”

**Episode 3681**

I looked at Greyson, standing in the doorway of my room, and I wasn’t sure how to answer his question. Under any normal circumstances, I’d have said yes, of course I wanted him to stay. I wanted to bury my head in the crook of his neck, breathing in his scent. I wanted to feel his strong arms around me. I wanted to let him help me through this pain.

But these weren’t normal circumstances, and I wasn’t feeling quite myself.

I hesitated, unsure of what to say. Xavier had not only left me—he’d left a huge, gaping hole in my heart. I knew that Greyson would fill it for me if I asked him to, but I didn’t want to ask. Xavier leaves me, so I run to Greyson? It just seemed so… *wrong*.

Not to mention unfair to Greyson. I couldn’t do that to him, and yet I still wanted his comfort. *Crap*.

Some of my indecision must have shown on my face, because Greyson walked over to me and took my hands.

“Love, listen to me—I don’t want to put any pressure on you. I just want to be here for you. I just want to be able to comfort you. To hold you. Or, if that’s too much, I can spend the night in a chair next to your bed.” His voice was gentle. “I know this is hard, and I just want to help you, however I can.”

The expression on his face was so kind and sympathetic, it nearly broke my heart.

I nodded. “I know you do, and I appreciate it. You’re always looking out for me.” I took a deep breath. “And even though I would love to feel your arms around me tonight, I can’t.”

“Love—”

“I can’t, Greyson,” I insisted. “I feel like I’d be taking advantage of you. You’d be comforting me because your brother broke up with me. *Due destini* or not, that’s messed up, and I don’t want to put you in that position.”

I shook my head. Greyson had wanted me to choose him from the moment we’d discovered the *due destini*. But—*was* this my choice? Could I even still *make* a choice, or had Xavier taken that choice away from me when he’d walked out the door?

“Cali?” Greyson said quietly. “Do you want me to stay? All you have to do is say the word.”

I shook my head. “I think it would be better if you didn’t,” I murmured.

I saw a flicker of pain in his eyes, and my heart ached. I hated to see it, and I wished I hadn’t been the cause. I wished I could make everything easier on him. Hell, I wished I could make everything easier on both of us.

“It’s not because I don’t love you,” I insisted, squeezing his hands. “Of course I do. More than you could ever know. It’s just—”

“You don’t have to explain anything to me,” Greyson said.

“No, but I want to,” I said. “I just need some time to think. Tonight has been a lot, and I think I need a little space to figure out how I’m feeling about all of it.”

Greyson nodded. He leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to my lips. “I understand, love. Take all the time you need. If you do change your mind, or just want a little company, then let me know, okay? You know where to find me.”

A wave of gratitude swept over me, and I hugged him close, gripping him tight. It sort of felt like I was trying to absorb some of his strength and use it to support myself. Maybe that wasn’t fair to Greyson, either, but I needed at least that much from him.

When I finally pulled away, Greyson walked to the door. Then he paused at the doorway and turned back to me. “I’m sorry about all this, Cali.”

“What could you possibly be sorry about?” I asked, trying to keep my voice from shaking.

His expression was grave. “I’m sorry Xavier is putting you through so much pain. I love you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want you to choose me, but this isn’t how I hoped it would happen,” he said quietly, then he headed out the door, closing it behind him.

I dropped down onto the bed, my head spinning. Greyson wanted me to choose him. Just like Xavier had said he wanted me to choose him. But now I could only choose Greyson. He was my only remaining *due destini* option.

I leaned over, wrapping my arms around my torso. My stomach hurt, almost like I was hungry, but this was so, so, so much worse. There was a hollowness there that no food would ever fill. Tears filled my eyes as I lay down and curled in on myself. The tears flowed down my face, soaking into the duvet.

Why would Xavier do this to me? After everything we’d been through together. After all our history, all the love and passion we’d felt for each other.

If he’d fallen out of love with me, I might’ve been able to understand it. It still would’ve hurt like hell, but at least I’d have been able to wrap my mind around it. But that wasn’t it. He hated me for being a *due destini* mate—he hated me because of a curse. A curse I hadn’t asked for, and couldn’t do anything about. And he’d revealed his hatred in the cruelest way possible.

*And* he’d lied about Ava. Even though I’d always tried to be honest about all the hard things I was feeling and going through, he’d lied to me. Which made me wonder—what else had he lied about?

I squeezed my eyes shut as tears flowed down my face. I felt completely overwhelmed as I tried to imagine a future without my mate. Without Xavier. He had been my first, in so many ways. I’d never even imagined losing him—and now he’d destroyed our relationship.

Sobs wracked my body as I lay on the bed. The room grew darker and darker, until, after a long time, I felt a gentle hand on my shoulder.

I looked up to see my mom’s face. My dad was just behind her. They were wearing bathrobes, and even in the gloom, I could see that they both looked tired and worried.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Mom said, sitting down next to me and stroking my hair. “Artemis told us what happened. I know it’s too soon for you to be able to really talk about it, but your dad and I will be here for you when you’re ready.”

“And in the meantime, we’ve brought you a plant,” Dad said. He gestured toward a potted plant on the dresser.

I squinted my puffy eyes to see a plant in a pink ceramic pot. It had thin green leaves and small white flowers, almost like daisies.

“It’s a chamomile plant,” my mom said. “She just bloomed.”

I offered a weak smile—the best I could manage. “It’s beautiful.”

“Chamomile has healing properties,” my mom explained. “It should help you.”

“Thank you,” I rasped.

My dad put his hand on my shoulder. “I know this can’t be easy for you, pumpkin, and once you get some rest and start to feel better, I’m going to do whatever I can to help you through this.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

He nodded, then looked at my mom. She got up and they moved toward the door, where they paused for a moment.

“Do you need anything, sweetheart?” my mom asked. “Something to eat? Some tea? A glass of water?”

I shook my head. “No, thanks. Nothing.”

“It’s a shame,” my dad said quietly. “I really thought Xavier was one of the good guys.”

His words hit me like a punch to the stomach. I closed my eyes tightly as a fresh wave of pain washed over me.

“I thought so, too,” I said quietly, turning my head into the blankets.

“*Shhh*, Tom. Not now,” my mom hissed, and pushed him out of the room.

She closed the door, leaving me alone. I hated that Xavier had done this—not just to me, but to the pack, and to my parents. He had hurt so many people with his actions, shattered so many illusions about the kind of person he was.

Crying hard, I sucked in a ragged breath. The scent of the chamomile flowers was wafting around the room, and as I breathed it in, I willed the mild perfume to ease my sobs. My mom had said it was supposed to heal me, after all.

*So heal me*, I thought.

I took a deep breath, then another. Then another. I looked at the door as my eyelids began to feel heavy. As they began to drift shut, I wondered if I’d ever see Xavier again, or if we’d really said goodbye—forever.

**Episode 3682**

I slept, but fitfully, tossing and turning all night. I couldn’t find a position that felt comfortable, or that helped to ebb the pain. The pain was emotional, but after a while it turned physical, too. My whole body ached, so much so that I just couldn’t stay asleep. The pain enveloped me, keeping me awake.

And as I lay awake, staring at the dark ceiling, I thought about meeting Xavier for the first time. I thought about the fear I’d had, flying to Oregon, walking into this house and into his room for the first time. I thought about his glowering presence, and how much it had intimidated me—and for so long. Of course, I’d thought he was hot as hell, but I’d also been terrified of him. And yet somehow, I’d fallen in love with him. Despite his cold, rough exterior, despite the way he’d rejected me at first, I’d been drawn to him. I’d never been able to deny the magnetic pull I felt toward him.

But if I’d known then what I knew now—that he would inflict this kind of pain on me—maybe I would’ve made different choices. This pain was suffocating, it was worse than anything else I’d ever felt. I was pretty sure *dying* would’ve been easier to bear. If I could go back, maybe I would’ve turned around, walked out of the house, turned down the money, and just lived out my life without werewolves.

Tears flowed down my face as I contemplated a life without Xavier. A life empty of him. I loved him so much, and in the end, our relationship had gone beyond the mate bond—what we had was a deep, unconditional love. Or that was what I’d *thought* it was. Now, I was questioning everything. Had any of that been real?

I took a deep breath, trying to remember the calming exercises Kira had taught me. I needed to purge my mind of all things Xavier. With that in mind, I was mercifully able to drift off again.

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When I woke again, it was to the sound of running water. I listened to it for a moment, confused. What the hell was that? Had I left the sink running?

But when I opened my eyes, I was in the woods, nowhere near a sink.

Greyson was there, leaning casually against a tree. Behind him was a pond, and beyond that, a waterfall.

I looked around, confused. There was something very familiar about all this.

“Cali!”

I turned to see Xavier walking toward me.

He grabbed my arm, an angry, spiteful look blazing in his blue eyes. “How *could* you?”

“Wh—what?” I spluttered, confused.

Xavier glowered at me. “You *kissed* him?” he demanded, jerking his head toward Greyson. “My own *brother?*”

Before I could answer, Ava appeared behind Xavier, a smug smirk on her beautiful face.

“It doesn’t matter anyway, X,” she purred as she wrapped her arms around his torso.

Xavier looked at her, then back to me. “That’s true,” he agreed. “I never loved you.” He shook his head dismissively. “I never did. I just wanted to buy your virginity. Once I did that, I was done. My heart was always with Ava. My *only* mate.”

He turned and slipped his hands into Ava’s dark hair, kissing her deeply. I could only stare at them as my world crumbled around me.

“It’s the *due destini*. I never—it’s not my fault. I never planned to be with anyone but you,” I said to Xavier.

Too late, I glanced at Greyson, who shook his head.

He looked fed up. “You need to figure out what you want, Cali,” he said, pushing off from the tree and turning to leave.

“Where are you going?” I called after him, starting to feel panicked.

“I’m going back to Maren,” he said, still walking. “That’s where I belong. I never should’ve left her.”

“Greyson—”

He shifted in a blink and rounded on me with a snarl, making me jump back in surprise. Xavier and Ava shifted as well. I stumbled away from all of them, but they stalked toward me, closing in. My heart was beating hard as they drew closer and closer. What were they doing? What was happening?

Then, all at once, Xavier leapt for me, his teeth bared, and I sat bolt upright in bed, sweating, terrified and tangled in the sheets. I waved my arms, still fighting off the phantom Xavier from my nightmare. I accidentally sent a blast of magic across the room, and it hit the dresser, rattling the mirror and knocking my makeup bag to the floor.

I stared across the dark room as my heartbeat began to slow.

*It was just a dream,* I told myself. *Just a nightmare*. But I would’ve taken a Seluna dream over *that,* any day.

I swallowed and—realizing my throat was bone dry—untangled myself from the sheets. I padded to the bathroom for a glass of water and, squinting into the bright light, twisted around to look at my shoulder in the mirror, just to make sure the handprint was really gone.

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When I blinked my eyes open the next morning, it was to the sight of bright sunlight, streaming into my room. I groaned and covered my eyes with my arm. I wasn’t in the mood to see the sun today. I felt dark, so everything around me needed to be dark, too.

As I rolled over onto my side, I groaned again—prompted by pain, this time. My whole body throbbed. I’d hoped to feel better after a night’s sleep, but apparently, I’d been doomed to disappointment. I still felt sick to my stomach, and now my head ached, too.

But I knew I had to get up, so I hauled myself out of bed and pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt. Then I headed downstairs, thinking a cup of tea might take the edge off and make me feel a little better.

I didn’t see how it could possibly make me feel any worse.

There were a few pack members in the kitchen when I walked in, but they all stopped speaking abruptly when they saw me. No one said anything to me, and no one made direct eye contact, but I noticed a few people stealing glances at me as I filled the kettle and put it on the stove.

Well, I’d been wrong about one thing—coming to the kitchen for tea *had* made me feel worse.

I wanted to scream. I hated that everyone in the pack knew what had happened between Xavier and me. Though really, I couldn’t even say it had happened *between* us. Whatever had happened, it had been all Xavier. The only thing I was guilty of was trying desperately to understand.

“Hey, Cali.” Torin was looking at me with a sympathetic smile. “Feel like some breakfast?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said hesitantly. I pulled a mug from the cupboard. “I’m not all that hungry. Thank you though.”

“I know magic can’t heal a broken heart,” he said. “But cinnamon rolls might help?”

He held up a plate of freshly frosted cinnamon rolls. They were still steaming, and they looked *really* good.

“Thank you,” I said. “Maybe I will have one.”

He put the plate down and hugged me. “I’m sorry,” he said softly. “I wish there was something more I could do.”

“What smells so good?” Lola asked loudly, walking into the kitchen. “Is something baking, or is that a candle? I swear, if I’ve been fooled by one of those cinnamon roll candles again, I’m flipping that table—”

“No, no,” Torin said, letting me go. “They’re real cinnamon rolls. Just out of the oven.”

“Thank god,” Lola said, grinning. She smiled at me. “Good morning.”

“I think the smell of them woke me up,” Artemis added, walking in after Lola.

Neither my sister nor my best friend asked me how I was doing, for which I was immensely grateful.

Lola slipped her arms around me. She didn’t say anything, but I could see the look on her face, and I knew she was worried.

“I’ve had a great idea,” Artemis said, her mouth full of cinnamon roll. “For you and me, Cali.”

“What’s that?” I asked, dropping a tea bag into the mug and filling it with hot water.

“Why don’t we blast some things out back today?”

“What?”

“We could sharpen our magic skills. Set up some bottles on the fence and just”—she feigned blasting something with her magic—“*bam! bam! bam!”*

I watched as bright red tea seeped from the bag into the hot water. I was only half-listening to Artemis—my thoughts were still on my nightmare as it echoed in my head.

“Cali?” Artemis asked again. “What do you think?”  
 I snapped out of my reverie.

“That sounds great,” I said quickly. “Blasting things sounds like just what I need. But there’s something I need to do first.”

**Episode 3683**

**Xavier**

I woke up with a groan. It was morning, and there was sunlight streaming through the narrow window above me. I closed my eyes against it, trying to block it out. I was *not* in the mood for a sunshine-y morning. I felt like total shit. I’d slept on the Airstream’s built-in couch, but it was uncomfortable and tiny—not nearly big enough for my frame.

I hadn’t slept well, but I couldn’t lay all the blame on the couch. I didn’t think I would have slept well under any circumstances. I’d tossed and turned all night, and every time I’d opened my eyes, I’d been able to see Ava lying in bed, not even five feet away. Like a perfect visual reminder of everything that had gone wrong in my life.

And I also just hadn’t been able to turn my brain off. Every time I closed my eyes, my thoughts had started running at double speed. I’d just kept going over all the horrible things I’d said to Cali and picturing the devastated look on her face. Just thinking about it made me feel sick and heavy with guilt.

It was too late to fix this. I hated to even think it, but I had to accept that it was true. There was no coming back from what I’d done—I knew that. I could feel it in my bones, and the knowledge felt heavy, like lead. It made me want to sink down, down, down into the ground. I’d been roiling with guilt all night, and somehow, I was feeling even worse this morning. It was like a burn—the initial injury was jarring and upsetting, but the pain just steadily increased with every passing minute, until it became unbearable. That was what my pain over Cali felt like now.

Was this going to be my life from now on? Was I going to just keep feeling worse and worse?

I couldn’t get my head together. I felt scattered and unfocused. My wolf was a fucking wreck. He was still mourning the loss of Cali and confused that she’d been ripped away from us. I knew he was wondering where the hell she was, but he was also comforted by Ava’s proximity.

It wasn’t lost on me that in the depths of my devastation, my feet had brought me here. I hadn’t even thought about it; I’d just moved toward the Samara campsite like it had a magnetic pull. It had been pure instinct, and I wasn’t sure how I felt about it.

I covered my eyes with my arm and shook my head. It didn’t mean anything. Or even if it did, I didn’t want to know. I already had too much to deal with at the moment, and it all felt heavy as fuck. Right now, I didn’t want to think about anything except Cali—and how to kill Adéluce.

I was in crisis, which meant that nothing seemed sure, but I knew one thing, and I was holding on to it with both hands: I *needed* to get Cali back. Somehow. I hadn’t meant any of the shit I’d said to her—I’d only said it to force her away, to protect her. Sure, Cali had her problems. And yes, she’d made mistakes, but hell, so had I. Plenty of them, that was for damn sure. And even what I’d said to her about Greyson… Okay, I might’ve meant that, at one point—but directed solely at Greyson, not Cali.

The *due destini* had done this to all of us, but if Greyson had just stepped down, then Cali could’ve just ended up with me, like she was meant to. It was Greyson who was making it difficult for her to move on with her life.

But—I felt my frustration spike—even *that* felt like an oversimplification. I knew it was. I pushed a hand through my sleep-mussed hair as I thought it through.

The *due destini* complicated everything, yes, but the way I felt about my brother was different these days. I used to hate Greyson, and he’d let me hate him. I mean, it wasn’t like we were best buds now—there was still tension between us—but things were different between us these days. It was almost like we’d reached some kind of unspoken understanding.

But that had been before last night. I was very certain that *now*, the hatred he felt for me would be through the roof. There was no way he wouldn’t find out what I’d said to Cali. If she didn’t tell him herself, someone else surely would—I was sure I’d lost a lot of friends in the pack house after last night. And I knew that if our positions had been reversed, if *I’d* learned that *Greyson* had said those things to Cali, I’d have been feeling positively murderous.

I blew out a breath. Maybe an ass-kicking from my brother was what I needed. It was certainly what I deserved.

“Xavier? Are you awake?”

I hauled myself upright and looked blearily around. Ava was sitting up in bed, her hair tousled and her lips and eyes puffy with sleep. There was a small window just over the bed, so morning sunlight fell across her, illuminating her like she was in a goddamn movie. She looked beautiful and natural and radiant, and my wolf approved—*very* enthusiastically.

*No way. Down, boy*.

My wolf needed to get his shit together, because there was no way in hell I was getting involved with Ava—not after what I’d said to Cali. I hadn’t wanted to break up with her in the first place, and the last thing I needed to do right now was look to drown any of my sorrows in Ava. It would be too easy and a very bad idea for everyone involved.

Ava climbed out of bed. I hadn’t noticed last night, but she’d pulled on a white tank top and a pair of blue shorts to sleep in, and her legs looked long and lean as she stood up and stretched, reaching her arms toward the low ceiling of the trailer. She arched her back so her dark hair swung as she yawned, and she looked as fucking enticing as I’d ever seen her.

“How’d you sleep?” she asked, rubbing her eyes.

I snorted. “Like shit.”

“Yeah, you look like it, too.” She moved to the stove next to the bed and poured water from a bottle into the kettle, then set the kettle on the propane stove. “Think some caffeine might help?”

“Sure,” I said, rubbing my face.

She busied herself getting out a couple of mugs, some spoons, and a jar of instant coffee. When the kettle whistled, she poured the water into the mugs and stirred quickly, then she walked them over to my couch. She handed a mug to me and—crossing those damn distracting legs—sat down next to me, cradling her own mug.

I looked into the dark depths of the coffee. She’d served it black—she probably didn’t have cream or sugar, and I didn’t ask for it. I took a swallow of the hot liquid and felt it burn all the way down.

“You know, at some point, you’re going to have to give me a real answer about why you’re here,” Ava said, tilting her head as she looked at me. “You’re going to have to tell me what happened between you and your brother.”

I took another swallow of the bitter coffee. “I don’t have to tell you anything.”

Her gaze turned hard. “Like hell you don’t. If my pack could get in trouble for harboring a fugitive, then that’s something I need to know.”

I rolled my eyes. “A *fugitive*, Ava? Really?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. You tell me. Did you steal Greyson’s favorite cardigan or something? His special nighttime tea? He seems like a fancy guy.”

That surprised a laugh out of me. It felt weird to stretch my face like that. “You don’t need to worry about anything like that. No one’s going to come after you for letting me sleep here.”

She nodded and took a sip of her coffee. “There’s something you should know, X.”

I turned to her. We were sitting close—close enough I could’ve easily reached out and laid my hand on her warm thigh.

Holy shit, my wolf needed to shut the hell up.

“What’s that?” I asked, clearing my throat.

“I got a notice from the council.”

“The werewolf council?” I asked.

She nodded. “Knox’s trial will be held at the pack summit, and they still want me to testify.”

I waited. “And?”

“*And*, we don’t have an Alpha.”

“Okay?”

She looked uncomfortable. “I don’t want to take anyone from the pack with me, and I don’t think I should go by myself.”

“What about Fletcher?” I asked. “You’ve got to get him here, Ava. He won’t come without an invitation.”

She paused for a beat. “I’ve already contacted him. He’s going to stop by today.” She tilted her head again, looking at me curiously. “Do you want to stick around for our meeting?”

**Episode 3684**

**Greyson**

“Cali?”

She jumped back, startled, and looked at me with wide, scared eyes, as if she hadn’t seen me walking toward her. She must have been distracted, and I supposed I couldn’t blame her for that.

“Sorry I scared you, love,” I said. “I’m glad to see you’re up. I hope you had a good night’s sleep.”

She smiled softly but didn’t respond. I leaned in to kiss her, but she turned from me, only letting me kiss her cheek.

I hadn’t been expecting that. I understood that she was upset, but it felt like she was pushing me away, and that hurt.

“Are you okay?” I asked, leaning back again.

She nodded. “Yeah, but I didn’t sleep very well last night, so I’m still a little groggy.”

“I guess that’s to be expected.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah,” I repeated. There was a beat of awkward silence. It was strange—I couldn’t remember us ever having had a strained conversation before, but here we were, stewing in an odd silence. But then again, we hadn’t ever been through something like this before.

“I meant what I said last night,” I said, breaking the silence. “I’ll give you as much distance as you need. And I’m here, *always*. If you just want to talk—or want to not talk…” I trailed off. I felt like I was rambling. Her refusal of my kiss had rattled me more than I’d realized, but I knew I shouldn’t dwell on it.

Cali gave me that strained smile again. “Thanks. I’m going to go outside for a little while.”

“Oh? What are you going to do?” I asked.

“Artemis and I are going to practice some magic,” she said. She cleared her throat. “I’m just going to go put something warmer on first.”

She moved past me, heading toward the stairs. I opened my mouth to say something else to her, but when she reached the stairs, she practically sprinted up them, so I just stayed quiet.

As shitty as it made me feel, I was going to play by her rules—at least for now. I knew where she was coming from, not wanting to involve me in this… But fuck, I hated seeing her in pain and feeling like there was nothing I could do to help alleviate some of it.

Damn Xavier. This was all on him. He was the reason why Cali wasn’t sleeping and was feeling so raw. Part of me almost wished Xavier would finally just throw down and call for a Lupo Finale. Not only would it feel absolutely fantastic to have a chance to kick his ass—*again*—but it would finally make it clear that I was *done* putting up with my brother’s shitty behavior.

If Xavier wanted to come after me, fine. That was great. He could bring it on—anytime, anywhere. But what he’d done to Cali was unforgivable.

I walked toward the kitchen. Maybe some coffee would help clear my head. It probably couldn’t hurt. When I walked in, my mother was there, standing at the counter with Big Mac. They both looked up when I arrived, and I could easily read the worried looks on their faces.

“I don’t want to talk about Xavier and Cali,” I warned them both.

Big Mac shrugged. “What makes you think I was going to ask?”

“*MacKenzie*,” my mom chided. She turned to me. “Greyson, I know you don’t want to talk about it, but I do have one question.”

I groaned.

“Have you spoken to Xavier since last night?”

I sighed and pushed a hand through my hair, which was still tangled from sleep. I knew my mom’s heart was in the right place, so I tried not to be annoyed.

“Not yet,” I admitted. “But I’m planning on it.”

My mom seemed to accept this, and she nodded. “Okay, then. Let’s talk about the wedding.”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “I can’t have another buttercream versus fondant conversation. I just don’t have it in me.”

Right—the wedding. My head had been elsewhere—of course—but the wedding was fast approaching. It was too bad that Xavier had decided to pull something like this right before my mom’s wedding. I knew how excited Cali had been about the engagement, but now Xavier’s actions and abrupt departure were casting a dark shadow over everything.

I’d asked Cali to be my date—now I had to wonder if she’d still want to do that, or if she’d even want to go at all. And was Xavier still planning on coming? He’d been invited, of course, but that had been before last night. Now, if he came, it would just be awkward. But I supposed it was still too early to start sorting that out.

I took a deep breath. My mom was probably right—I did need to talk to my brother. If his breakup with Cali had happened because of something I’d done—or hadn’t done—then I wanted to know. Maybe it would give me some clue about how to help Cali through this.

“Greyson,” my mom said, pulling me from my thoughts. “I’m here for you, if you want to talk.” She shook her head. “I just can’t figure it out. What Xavier did just doesn’t make any sense to me.”

I couldn’t argue with that, and I wasn’t going to try. What Xavier had done *didn’t* make any sense, but I couldn’t think about that at the moment. I needed to focus on the pack.

Just because Xavier had run off—*again*—didn’t mean that there weren’t still plenty of pack issues to deal with, including the upcoming pack summit and the Bitterfang threat.

“Thanks, I’ll keep that in mind,” I said to my mother. Then I looked around the kitchen.

Rishika was sitting at the table with a cup of coffee and her phone, and I walked over to her.

“Anything to report from last night’s patrols?” I asked, leaning both hands on the table. “See anything unusual?”

Looking up from her phone, she shook her head. “No, nothing out of the ordinary.”

I nodded. I wasn’t surprised that it had been quiet, though Xavier’s sudden departure had jarred everyone.

Rishika reached out and covered my hand with hers. “Hey. Listen, man. I know everyone’s feeling for Cali right now, and they totally should be. I care about her just as much as everyone else, but I also know that something like this has to be affecting you, too. I hope you’re giving yourself a break.”

I blinked in surprise, then quickly looked away as the impact of her words hit me. I hadn’t let myself go there, but she was right. Cali hadn’t wanted me to spend the night with her, and just now, she’d turned away from my embrace. I knew she was upset, but it wasn’t like *I* had done anything to earn that kind of treatment from her. I knew she was hurting, but Rishika was right—I was hurting too.

I cleared my throat. “I’m dealing with it,” I said briskly.

Rishika gave me a searching look. “I’m sure you are. But if you want to talk about it, that might help.”

“Thanks, that’s nice of you to offer, but—”

“I’m not just offering to be nice,” she interrupted. “At the end of the day, you’re the Alpha, Greyson, and you need to be able to run the pack. Having a lot on your mind makes that harder.”

“I know,” I agreed. I took a deep breath. “I guess I am having some trouble understanding Cali’s reaction to all this. She has every right to be upset. She should be hurt and angry about what happened, but I just can’t shake the feeling that she’s taking all those emotions out on me, just because I happen to be the one standing in front of her.”

I swallowed hard. I hadn’t meant to say so much. It had just kind of… *come out*. I felt weird to even give voice to those thoughts. I felt ashamed for not giving Cali the benefit of the doubt.

I shook my head. “But maybe I’m just reading this all wrong. I don’t have a clue how to navigate something like this—I never have known how the *due destini* works.. I’m just kind of winging it, and it’s entirely possible I’m screwing it up.”

Rishika gave me a rueful smile. “Well, if it makes you feel any better, I don’t think there’s a playbook that covers this kind of situation.” She shrugged. “I suppose the best thing to do is just to give Cali some space and try to be supportive.”

“That’s what I’m doing,” I said. “Or trying to do, anyway. But there’s just something that’s been gnawing at me…” I trailed off. I didn’t even like to think about it, and I certainly didn’t want to *talk* about it, but I didn’t know what other options I had. The thought was already driving me crazy. It had kept me tossing and turning all night.

“What is it?” Rishika asked, frowning.

I started slowly. “Do you think…”   
 “Do I think what?” she pressed.

I just blurted it out. “Do you think Cali is pushing me away because Xavier would’ve been her choice?”

**Episode 3685**

I didn’t know what was compelling me to run away from Greyson, but I just felt like I had to put some distance between us. I took the stairs two at a time and hurried down the hallway. Then I burst into my room and looked wildly around.

“Where the hell did I put it?” I muttered to myself.

Moving to my dresser, I pulled open the top drawer and dug my hands in, feeling around for the key I’d stashed in there—the key that opened the desk drawer in the study.

With everything else going on, I’d almost completely forgotten about the letter Big Mac Mac had given me with the information about the killing curse. But when I’d been speaking to Artemis, Lola, and Torin, the letter had just popped into my head, and I’d suddenly felt like I *needed* to know what it said. But now that I was thinking about it, another question was beginning to worry me—if I did find the key and open the letter, would I be able to see the words? Big Mac had put a spell on the letter to ensure it could only be read when I was actually ready. So… Was I?

I didn’t know, but I felt like I needed to at least *try* to read it. I hadn’t considered it at the time, but was it possible that there was something Xavier knew that I didn’t? Something about the *due destini*? Was it possible that he was trying to protect me from something I didn’t know about? Could he have lied about Ava? Could he have made that whole story up?

I shook my head. I felt like I was grasping at straws—like I was just looking for excuses, for any way to justify what Xavier had done to me. For a way to forgive him. The whole thing was making me feel frantic and very, very desperate.

*You’re not going to be able to find a justifiable excuse*, whispered a little voice in the back of my head.

But what if Xavier was trying to hurt himself? What if the killing curse was still in effect, even though he’d taken himself out of the equation? Even if I didn’t actively choose Greyson, would I still be putting Xavier in some kind of danger? Some kind of “normal” *due destini* danger?

I needed to find out. I couldn’t move forward until I did.

I pushed aside the bras and panties in the drawer, looking for the tiny key I knew I’d thrown somewhere in my room. Finally, I picked up the porcelain bowl on the top of my dresser that I used for earrings and—

“*Aha!*” I crowed triumphantly.

The key was just beneath it, and I grabbed it. The metal was freezing cold, and I warmed it in my hand for a moment before I turned and headed back downstairs.

At the bottom of the stairs, I paused and looked around. There were a few pack members in the kitchen and a couple lounging in the living room. I wanted to make sure that no one would see me walking into the study and wonder what I was doing there.

I stepped quietly across the hall, then flattened myself against the wall next to the door. I slid down, and I had almost reached the door when I heard approaching voices. Someone was leaving the kitchen.

I stepped quickly into the study and shut the door behind me. I flipped the lock and leaned against the door, my heart thudding hard in my chest. And when I turned to the desk, my pulse seemed to quicken even more.

I was feeling intimidated by a *letter.* I knew it was crazy, but that was just how I felt. What if the words didn’t reveal themselves to me? What if I looked at the page but was still left in the dark about the killing curse—again?

I took a deep breath, trying to steel myself. No. That *couldn’t* be an option. I had to know. I needed to protect Greyson and Xavier, at all costs. Xavier might have left me, but that didn’t mean I wanted him *dead*.

And with that, I marched purposefully over to the desk and unlocked the top drawer. The letter was waiting for me inside, right where I’d left it. I looked down at it, lying there in all its glory.

I took a shuddering breath and reached for it. It felt heavy.

*It* should *feel heavy*, I told myself. It was important. Important—and scary. I was terrified, and my hands began to shake. If I opened the letter and it said that the curse was still in place, had Xavier sentenced himself to death by leaving me? Was that his plan? Was he trying to make me be with Greyson, thereby ensuring his own death, *on purpose*?  
 The thought scared the breath out of me, but then I thought back to what he’d told me about Ava.

If he had been hooking up with her—*fucking her*, in his words—maybe it was just that simple. Maybe he’d just realized that he wanted to be with Ava again, simple as that. That he wanted her more than he wanted me.

The pain of that possibility rocketed through me like an electric shock, and I felt sick. I had to brace my hand on the desk to stay stable. I blinked quickly and looked down, flipping the envelope over. I slipped my finger under the flap and began to open it, but I stopped when I heard someone rattle the doorknob.

Startled, I dropped the envelope and hopped over to the door, ready to pull it shut, but it was locked, and all the person on the other side could do was turn the doorknob.

“The door’s locked,” Sage’s voice said.

“Why is it locked?” Zainab asked.

“I don’t know; do you want me to ask the door?” Sage responded sarcastically. “It’s not here, anyway. It’s in the other study.”

Zainab groaned. “Are you *kidding* me? Why didn’t you say that before?”

“I *did*!” Sage protested. “You weren’t listening!”

“Yes I was!”

“You were not!” Sage insisted. “Look, I love you, but you never listen.”

“That’s totally untrue…”

They began to move away, and I took a relieved breath. I moved back to the desk and looked down at the letter, which I’d thrown back into the drawer.

I had to do this. For myself, and for Greyson. And for Xavier.

God, even just thinking about him made my heart lurch with pain and my eyes fill with tears. Maybe this was a terrible idea, and I wasn’t actually ready to know what the letter contained. Maybe I should just walk away.

But the thing was, I *felt* ready. I wanted to know what I was dealing with—and it wasn’t just about me, after all. It was about all three of us. And as much as I loved Greyson, I would never want my being with him to kill Xavier.

And I would never want it the other way around, either. My mates in danger was something I would never, ever want, under any circumstances. And if I’d learned anything from the *due destini*, it was that it was unpredictable with danger lurking, seemingly, everywhere. It was one of the main reasons why I saw *due destini* as the curse it was—despite what Lucian, Paige, and Russell thought about it.

I picked up the letter and paused, my hand still shaking. I walked cautiously to the door and listened closely, making sure that there was no one else around and that there would be no more interruptions. The hall beyond the office was quiet. I leaned against the door and slid to the floor with a sigh. Then I opened the envelope and carefully removed the letter.

I took a deep breath, then closed my eyes as I unfolded the letter. I’d been so afraid to look at it for so long, but there was no turning back now. Things had changed, and I had to know. I *had* to.

Swallowing hard, I opened my eyes and looked down—but the paper in front of me was *blank*. Just like last time. *Crap*.

I stared at it for a long, disbelieving moment. What the *hell*? Frustration coursed through me, then anger crashed like a wave. Why couldn’t this thing just show me what it said?!

Glaring down at the paper, I shook my head. “I’m ready!” I said. “I’m ready now! Let me see!”

I was about to crumple the paper into a tight ball and fling it across the room when something began to happen. It was so subtle at first, I wasn’t even sure what I was seeing. But it was enough to make me pause.

A shadow appeared on the paper. It was almost nothing, at first, but then it started to take shape, and letters slowly began to form on the page.

**Episode 3686**

**Xavier**

I looked at Ava for a moment, then shrugged. “Yeah, I can stick around.”

There was no reason why I couldn’t. It wasn’t like I had any other plans for the day. And just because Adéluce was fucking up *my* life at the moment, that didn’t mean I should let her screw up the Samara pack. They needed an Alpha—Ava was right about that much.

“You’ll stay?” Ava confirmed.

I nodded. “Sure. I’ll help you seal the deal with Fletcher.”

She gave me a wary look. “Are you only agreeing because you have nowhere else to go?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’ll be out of here by the end of the day,” I promised.

She looked skeptical but didn’t argue. She only shrugged and stood, dropping her mug in the sink and walking to the door. “Well, if you are going to stay, I don’t want you to do anything to scare Fletcher off.”

I frowned. “Scare him off? Why would I do that? If anything, I’ve been begging *you* not to scare him off.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You need a shower, X.”

I snorted. “Is that your idea of a subtle suggestion?”

“I wasn’t trying to be subtle,” she said wryly.

I looked down at myself. I was still naked, covered only with the blanket Ava had given me the night before. Beneath it, I was smeared with blood and dirt.

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea,” I said with a sigh, pushing my hair out of my face.

Ava smiled. “Just don’t use all the hot water.” She opened the Airstream’s door. “I’m going to go check on the patrols. It’s almost time for me to head out for my shift, but I’ll want a shower when I get back.” She glanced down at my naked chest. “I think there are still some of Knox’s clothes in one of the dresser drawers.”

She walked out, letting the door slam behind her. Alone in the trailer, I let out a breath, then heaved myself off the tiny couch and made my way toward the bathroom. I turned on the shower, and after just a second, steam began to fill the tiny room. I stepped under the spray and let out a relieved groan. My muscles were tight with pain and tension, and they were immediately soothed by the searing hot water. I let the water beat down on my shoulders for a few seconds, then picked up the bar of soap from the dish, getting to work on my body. And for a while, I let myself think of nothing else.

But by the time I was rinsing Ava’s almond-smelling shampoo from my hair, my mind was working again, and I was thinking about my plans.

I’d told Ava I was planning to leave later that day. I felt like I had to—being around Ava was a huge distraction. Just because I couldn’t be with Cali—*for now*, I reminded myself—didn’t mean I should be here with Ava.

Even last night, when I’d wound up here, I’d felt a twinge of guilt. It had felt like I was using Ava. Like she was my shelter in a storm. She wasn’t my chosen mate anymore, but she still didn’t deserve to be treated like that. I didn’t think she would object if I *did* want to stay—she’d probably be thrilled if I told her I was sticking around. And it wasn’t like my wolf would raise any objections to that plan, either, but it just didn’t feel right. Not when the pain of breaking up with Cali was still so raw, so fresh.

But I had no idea where else I could go. If not for Adéluce, I probably would’ve gone to Colton. I hadn’t seen my brother in ages. But I doubted Adéluce would allow a trip like that. I wondered how far the vampire-witch *would* allow me to go. I balled my hands into angry fists at the thought—I hated that she’d put me on a fucking leash.

Whatever. I was just going to have to improvise—maybe check into a motel for a few days until I figured out something else.

The hot water began to cool, and I remembered that Ava had warned me not to use it all up. I thought about how she was going to roll her eyes when she got in, and the image made me smile.

I shook my head, forcing myself not to think about her. I was going to get out, dry off, get dressed, deal with Fletcher, and then hit the road. I’d handle whatever came after that when it came.

I turned off the water and grabbed a towel—which smelled exactly like Ava.

Shit.

I slung the towel around my neck as my wolf went wild—he wanted comfort, and what better place than our first mate? Yeah. Being here for any extended amount of time was a bad idea. Even if Ava and I started out with the intention to just be friends, things between us were bound to take a turn at some point.

They always did.

I walked to the bedroom and pulled open the bottom drawer of the dresser. Ava was right—Knox *had* left some clothes behind, but I scowled at them. They were all his weird, shitty bro-gear. T-shirts with lurid logos and jeans with excessive embroidery all over the back pockets—and they didn’t even fit me. So they were too tight *and* tacky as hell.

Dammit. I couldn’t believe I’d shown up here with nothing. I should’ve been more thoughtful before I’d rushed away from Cali last night. I hadn’t been thinking at all. I should have at least grabbed some clothes.

I yanked on a pair of Knox’s jeans, thinking longingly of my own closet, where I had enough well-fitting jeans to last me a good long time.

I looked down at myself. I was going to have to be careful—one wrong move and I was going to rip Knox’s awful jeans at the seams. I pulled on a shirt, which stretched tight across my shoulders.

Maybe I could get in touch with Jay, ask him to collect a few things from my room and bring them here. He’d do it, if I asked him.

I started to reach for Ava’s phone, which she’d left near her bed, but then I thought about what I’d told Cali—I’d told her that I’d been fucking Ava.

My stomach clenched, and for a moment, I thought I was going to be sick. It had been a horrible lie, but I’d *had* to say it. I’d had to say something that I knew would make people turn against me. I couldn’t have played it soft. I couldn’t have talked about how we’d just grown apart, or maybe we wanted different things now. None of that bullshit would’ve worked. Not for this.

No, I’d needed to hurt Cali so deeply that it would protect her from Adéluce.

And Jay had already warned me that my wolf’s flirtation with Ava was hurting Cali. He’d disapproved of the time I’d spent with Ava, working on the Samara Alpha project. He’d told me to back off. So Jay probably wasn’t feeling too warm and fuzzy about me at the moment.

Actually, he was probably pretty fucking pissed off—along with the whole damn pack.

I pushed a hand through my wet hair with a sigh. That wasn’t exactly unexpected, but it meant I wasn’t going to be able to ask anyone for any favors for a while. At least not until I got my revenge on Adéluce—and I *was* going to get that.

But until that happy day arrived, I was going to have to play by her rules—however miserable they made me.

I walked into the kitchen and looked around, wondering if there was any actual coffee in the trailer. I couldn’t believe Ava drank instant coffee. No wonder things hadn’t worked out between us. I didn’t remember her ever having drunk it before—maybe it was just something Knox had left behind.

I went through all the cupboards in the tiny kitchen, but I didn’t find anything, so I gave up and stepped out into the bitter cold of the morning.

The morning mist still hung close to the ground, but through it I could see Ava standing by the knot of tents, talking to the Samaras. A few of them looked over at me as I stepped out, their eyes wary.

Ava glanced over her shoulder at me, then walked over. “Hey.”

“Hey,” I said.

“Everyone’s talking about you,” she said. “Wondering what you’re doing here.”

“You should tell them not to get used to seeing me around. After we deal with Fletcher, I’m hitting the road.”

Something flickered across Ava’s eyes. I thought it might’ve been disappointment, but it was gone too fast for me to know for sure.

She looked me up and down, then smirked. “You look good—though those clothes don’t leave much to the imagination.”

“Knox was too damn small to be an Alpha,” I growled.

Ava turned to watch as a car pulled up, rolling to a stop on the gravel and melted snow of the clearing. “Fletcher’s here.”

**Episode 3687**

My heart was pounding so hard, I could feel it at the base of my throat. I stared at the page in my hands as the words continued to form.

What if they told me that if I chose one mate, the other would die? That we hadn’t broken that curse that had been thrown in on top of the *due destini*?

Or what if they told me that the curse was gone and no one would die, regardless of my choice? Then, I’d just be back at square one: the *due destini*.

I swallowed hard. Just like before, neither option offered me any comfort. If I *was* able to choose, then I would hurt the mate I didn’t choose.

But then again, maybe not. I mean, with things the way they were with Xavier, I wasn’t sure I *could* choose him, even if I wanted to. He’d hurt me, he’d wrung me out and tossed me aside like it was nothing. Greyson hadn’t. He’d stood by me throughout everything. It wasn’t that I didn’t *want* to choose him—but I also didn’t want to *not* choose Greyson. Especially in this mindset.

My head was starting to spin, and I could feel sweat breaking out on my forehead. No matter how I looked at it, I was in a no-win situation. My hands felt damp where they gripped the paper. I wished I’d never pulled it out. I wished the letter could’ve just stayed in the drawer, waiting to be forgotten. Maybe I could just put it back before the message appeared and forget about it—go back to my life and pretend that nothing had changed.

But I knew that wasn’t an option. It just wasn’t the way I was built—now that I’d started down this road, I couldn’t turn back. The seed had been planted in my brain, and curiosity had gotten the best of me. I couldn’t walk away. I had to know which burden I’d be carrying from now on.

The letters on the page began to take shape, and slowly, I recognized Big Mac’s handwriting as sentences began to form.

I closed my eyes. “One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine…” I took a deep breath, hoping I’d allowed enough time for the letter to complete itself. “*Ten*.”

I opened my eyes and looked down.

*Cali,*

*If you’re reading this, it’s about damn time. No one will die if you choose. The curse has been broken. Choose wisely.*

*-M*

I gasped, and the letter fell from my hands, fluttering to the floor like a snowflake.

I dragged in a ragged breath. So that was the truth. Neither of them would die if I chose them. Greyson had been right, but I’d needed a confirmation like this. Something I could hold onto with my own hands that told me what I’d feared for so long wasn’t possible.

I was free from that curse.

But if this truth had set me free, then why did I feel so *trapped*? There was no other way to describe what I was feeling. I knew I should’ve been celebrating—I would no longer accidentally or deliberately kill one of my mates by making any kind of romantic decision. But that knowledge also removed the one thing that had been preventing me from choosing. The one really good reason I’d given myself for putting off choosing between the two men I loved so much.

And now Xavier had just removed another barrier—by leaving, he’d essentially chosen Greyson for me. But that wasn’t how *due destini* was supposed to work.

I thought about the sad tale of Cassandra and everything I’d read about her at the supernatural library. She’d been unable to choose between her mates, and it had driven her mad. They had all perished as a result of her inability to make a choice.

Now, I was faced with the same quandary—I could choose, or I could go mad.

But was it *really* a choice, if Xavier wasn’t with me?

Tears filled my eyes. The pain of losing him—of him leaving the way he had—hit me all over again, and a sob burst out of me.

I dropped my face into my hands as I started to cry. Tears dripped from between my fingers and fell, landing on the letter. Xavier was gone. I still couldn’t wrap my mind around it.

I’d been trying to put this decision off for as long as I’d known about it. And since I’d accidentally activated the killing curse, I’d been extra careful to never even make a *suggestion* of a choice. I’d done everything in my power to make sure I didn’t make a choice, even by accident. Was this my punishment for not having chosen earlier? To have the very option to choose ripped away from me? To put Greyson in a position where he didn’t know whether he was a first or second choice?

I started to shake as the sobs wracked my body. I couldn’t carry on like this. Among Xavier’s reasons for leaving, there had to be *one* that made some sense. But when would I know what the hell it was? My mind was totally scrambled. I needed time to process.

I took a shaking breath and wiped the tears from my face with the back of my hand. I bent and retrieved the letter, wiping the tears from that as well. Then I folded it, put it back in the envelope, and slipped it back into the drawer. I locked the drawer and dropped the key into my pocket.

Walking to the door, I stopped for a moment, trying to collect myself before leaving the study.

But as I unlocked the door and stepped out into the hallway, another thought occurred to me. Would Big Mac know that I’d seen the letter and read her message? I didn’t know how the magic she’d used on the letter worked; if it reported back to her in some way or alerted her that it had been activated.

I hoped not, but if she did somehow know, I was going to have to either explain myself to Big Mac—and explaining anything to Big Mac wasn’t an endeavor I ever looked forward to—or I would have to suck it up and reveal the truth to everyone.

I shook my head. Neither option sounded great to me at the moment.

Maybe I’d get lucky and find out that the letter was just a letter.

“Cali! There you are! I’ve been looking for you!”

I looked up to see Artemis coming around the corner of the hallway, like she’d been down in the basement. “Hey.”

“Where were you?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Oh, just… around.”

“Well, are you ready to head outside and start blasting some stuff?”

I nodded, glad that Artemis wasn’t pushing for answers, or asking about my red, puffy eyes.

We grabbed our coats, then headed outside.

We walked down the porch steps, then Artemis led me around the side of the house to the backyard. There was a low fence near the shed, and Artemis had hauled out a bag of beer bottles she’d rescued from the recycling bin. She set a dozen of them carefully on the low fence.

“You go first,” she said generously.

I didn’t need her to tell me twice, and I didn’t need to wait for inspiration to hit. I was feeling highly emotional, so magic was surging inside me, borne of my anger and grief. I raised my hands and let loose.

There was a loud popping sound and a burst of light.

“Holy shit!” Artemis shouted.

When the smoke cleared, she stepped toward the fence. The bottles had been obliterated, along with most of the fence.

“Wow, Cali,” Artemis said, awed. “Don’t hold back on my account.”

I flexed my fingers, feeling a little embarrassed. “Sorry. I think I let my emotions get the best of me, there.” And that was a dangerous thing to do with Fae magic. I needed to be more careful.

Artemis cleared the broken glass away and set up another set of bottles. “Try again?”

I nodded. I looked at the bottles, some of them clear glass, some brown, some green. I really tried to focus. My magic was still swelling within me, but I tried to stem the pain I felt and focus it. I narrowed my eyes at one green bottle and raised my hands.

My magic shot out, and the green bottle exploded with a pop.

“That was great!” Artemis called happily, smiling over at me.

“Cali!”

Artemis and I looked over at the house. Lola had just burst through the back door and was running toward us, a grin on her face.

“Cali,” she said breathlessly as she approached. “I’m glad to see you’re venting some of your frustration.”

“What?” I asked, confused.

Lola’s grin widened. “Blowing up bottles is great, but I have a better idea.”

“What are you talking about, Lola?” I asked, confused.

She grinned. “It’s time for a breakup party!”

**Episode 3688**

**Greyson**

“Greyson, no. I don’t think Cali was planning to choose Xavier. I don’t know *who* her choice would’ve been—and I don’t think she does, either,” Rishika said, shaking her head. “Honestly, I don’t have any idea how any of this *due destini* stuff works, man. All I know is that I see the way Cali looks at you, and I see the way you look at her. I know there’s a lot going on right now, but there’s something real between you. Cali’s hurting a lot right now, Greyson, but that doesn’t mean she doesn’t love you.”

I rubbed my jaw. “I know that.”

And I did. I could see that Rishika had a point. I was never going to doubt Cali’s love for me. We had too much history for that—she’d proven her love for me too many times for me to doubt it. And I hoped that she never doubted my love for her, either. But things were never so black and white. They couldn’t be, because of the *due destini*.

Until Cali chose between Xavier and me, I’d always feel that uncertainty. But Xavier had now effectively eliminated himself from the running—so what did that mean for me?

I didn’t really want to think about it. I wanted to be chosen by Cali—of course I did—but not by default. Except now, Xavier had thrust this new situation on Cali and me and taken the choice away.

Maybe it had been deliberate. Maybe Xavier had done it because he wanted to put me in this tenuous position. Maybe he *wanted* to make me suffer, not knowing if Cali really wanted to be with me, or if I was just her only option.

The thought pissed me off, and I felt my jaw clench. I hated the thought of it. It seemed so fucking petty—and exactly the kind of thing Xavier would do.

But why hurt Cali if he’d only wanted to screw with me?

It also seemed like a pretty risky gamble—one that might not pay off for him. If I decided to just accept that Cali loved me and be content with the situation, then Xavier’s plan would backfire spectacularly.

And in that scenario, Xavier’s risk would only have served to hurt Cali—so why would he have taken it at all?

“Greyson, I’m telling you,” Rishika went on, interrupting my swirling thoughts, “all you need to do is keep doing what you’re already doing. Keep being there for her and showing her that you love her. That’s what she needs to know, especially right now.”

I nodded. “You’re right. And I’m never going to stop doing that.”

She smiled up at me. “She probably just needs some time.”

“Thanks, Rishika.”

She got to her feet. “What are friends for?” she said. “I’m going to go check on Artemis. I thought I heard some Fae blasting going on earlier. I hope she didn’t get too carried away.”

“Okay.” I chuckled. “Thanks for keeping an eye out.”

Rishika headed out the back door, and I headed upstairs to my room. I needed to be alone for a moment—I needed to think.

I shut the door and just stood there for a moment, appreciating the silence. Then I walked to the window and looked out at the backyard. I could see Artemis and Cali on the lawn. Lola was standing with them, and Rishika was walking over. They were talking, and I felt a pang of jealousy over how easy it seemed. I wished I could be with Cali, too. But I was going to take Rishika’s advice and give her some space. I was going to wait until Cali was ready.

Stepping away from the window, I shook my head. I still couldn’t believe my brother had done what he’d done to her. Frustration flared in my chest, replaced almost immediately by anger—and then fury. Within seconds, I was seething. Xavier had acted like a coward when he’d run from the hospital, but that was absolutely *nothing* compared to what he’d proven himself to be by running away from Cali and the rest of the pack.

I curled my hands into tight fists. I’d decided that I wasn’t going to let myself feel responsible for any of this shit. Maybe I *had* urged Xavier to deal with Ava and the Samara pack. Maybe I *had* told him to help them out while they were without an Alpha. But that had been strictly for the pack’s sake. Stability in our ally packs was important for our own safety. Everyone knew that.

And I had certainly never encouraged Xavier to *sleep* with Ava. I’d told him to sort out those feelings for his former mate—and that it wasn’t fair on Cali for him to keep those fires burning. But if Xavier hadn’t been able to handle his old mate bond with Ava, or his latent feelings toward her, then that was fully on him. He could’ve spoken to me about it, or he could have gotten rid of those feelings on his own—for Cali’s sake.

But apparently, Xavier had done neither of those things. Instead, he’d slept with Ava behind Cali’s back, and then used that information against her, like a weapon.

I shook my head as I thought the whole thing through. There was just something about it—the neatness of it all—that didn’t quite make sense to me. It just felt… wrong. But I couldn’t quite put my finger on why. Sure, this was a choice that Xavier had made—but *when* had he made it? Why?

I wasn’t sure if I’d ever find out the answer to that, but I knew I wasn’t even going to get close until I talked to my brother. I just had to make sure I was in the right frame of mind first. If I went into a conversation with him thinking too hard about how badly he’d hurt Cali, I was worried I’d lose it and go all Silas on his ass. No matter what, I didn’t want to do *that.*

I was going to have to find a good balance—be tough, take no shit, but pull back on the aggression. It wouldn’t help Cali, and it would only hurt her more if she found out her two mates had been fighting. Though I wasn’t even sure if Xavier still considered himself to be Cali’s mate.

Yeah, that was what I was going to have to do—and there was no time like the present. I headed out of my room and roamed the pack house, hunting for Jay. If anyone knew where Xavier had gone, it would be his best friend.

“There you are,” I said when I found Jay in the living room, looking at his phone. “Where’s my brother?”

Jay looked up at me, surprised. “What are you talking about? How should I know?”

“Come on, Jay. Just tell me where he is. I know he’s been in touch with you,” I said. I wasn’t in the mood to play any games.

But Jay looked convincingly frustrated as he sighed. “Listen, man—I have no idea where Xavier ran off to. I wish he’d gotten in touch, but he hasn’t. I already asked Gabriel if he knew where he went, but he didn’t even know Xavier had left. He and Mikah are *firmly* on Team Cali, for the record. They wanted me to tell you that.”

“You’re being honest with me?” I asked. “You seriously don’t know where he is?”

Jay shook his head. “I don’t. But I will tell you if he gets in touch with me.”

I turned away, rubbing at the ache in my temple. Now I was going to have to waste good time tracking Xavier down. Possibly. It wasn’t like I had *no* idea where to start. It had occurred to me that Xavier could’ve run off to Ava’s. I’d check there, but if he wasn’t there, then finding him wasn’t going to be easy. My brother was good at disappearing when he wanted to.

I looked out the window at the cold, bright morning, and was just wondering if I should let Cali know about my plans when my phone rang. I looked down and saw that it was Lucian calling again.

It was amazing to me that the princeling had finally decided to embrace modern technology. Someone had probably just downloaded Candy Crush onto his phone.

“Yeah?” I answered gruffly. I wasn’t in the mood for Lucian’s aristocratic antics.

“Greyson! Greetings. I’m calling with less than stellar news, I’m afraid,” Lucian declared.

Shit. What the hell was happening now?

“This had better not be about Elle,” I said shortly.

“It’s not about Elle,” Mace said.

I frowned. What the hell? “Mace? Is that you? What are you doing on this call? What’s going on?”

“I asked Mace to join us because he and I both received the same call,” Lucian said.

“What call?” I asked.

“From Malakai,” Lucian informed me. “He’s threatening all of us now.”

**Episode 3689**

**Xavier**

The driver’s side door opened, and Fletcher climbed out of the car. He squinted, slid on a pair of aviators, and looked around the clearing. “Still living that tent life, huh?”

“Yeah,” Ava said, after a slight pause.

“I thought the Samaras were going to pick things up a little,” Fletcher said flatly. He did *not* look impressed.

I felt a sudden urge to punch the guy, but I kept it to myself. The Samara pack needed Fletcher more than he needed the Samara pack. And *I* needed Fletcher to assume the Alpha role even more than the Samaras did. If there was a competent Alpha in place, that would make cutting ties with Ava that much easier.

She stepped forward, toward Fletcher. “Thanks for coming. I wanted you to talk to the pack some more—”

“Hang on,” I said, interrupting her. “I think before we go another step, the three of us should have a little conversation.”

Fletcher pulled down his shades and looked at me over the top. “Oh, hey, man. What are you doing here?”

“I’m here… as a consultant.”

Fletcher looked at me, then at Ava, and smiled a knowing smile. “Oh, right. Got it.”

My hands balled into fists, but a sideways glance from Ava put my annoyance on pause. The Samara pack needed things to work out with Fletcher. I couldn’t be the one to snip the thread they were hanging by; I couldn’t wring Fletcher out over a not-totally-off-base assumption. But he was gonna need to stop acting like he knew anything about me if he wanted me to keep playing nice.

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Fletcher said. “I’m good with having a conversation. Before we get going, I have a few questions I need answered, myself. Things I’ve been thinking about since we last talked.”

“What kinds of questions?” Ava asked warily.

“Like, is being pack Alpha a full-time gig?” he asked, crossing his arms. “Would I have to quit my job at East Coast Tides? I mean, I’d hate to do that—I’m up for a promotion to assistant store manager, which would be cool. I’d get to wear a shirt.”

*Seriously? This guy would rather work at a clothing store than be Alpha?* I snorted, and Fletcher glanced at me. He looked me up and down, taking in my ill-fitting Knox-wear.

“I could probably get you a discount if you wanted to get some new clothes, man,” he said, eyeing me dubiously.

I stared at the guy in disbelief. “I can’t believe you actually asked that question.”

“What?” he asked, incredulously.

I took a step closer to him, getting into his face. “An Alpha’s job is to protect his pack, man. You’re not delivering pizzas, here. It’s not a part-time gig. It’s never *not* a full-time job. It’s twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. If you become the Samara Alpha, you will need to eat, think, sleep, and *breathe* Samara. There is *nothing* else.”

Fletcher seemed to consider this. “What about vacations?”

My jaw dropped, and after a moment, I threw my hands up in total frustration. “What the fuck—”

“Uh, Donovan, how about you show Fletcher around?” Ava said quickly. “I need a second to talk to my… consultant.”

Fletcher glanced at Ava, then shrugged. “Okay.” He looked at Donovan, who had appeared at his side. “My tour guide!” he announced, slapping the guy on the shoulder.

“Uh, yep. Right this way,” Donovan said awkwardly, gesturing toward the woods. He glanced around, and I got the feeling he was wondering what the hell he was supposed to show Fletcher.

As soon as they’d walked away, I turned to Ava.

“Yeah, that guy’s a tool,” I said, rolling my eyes.

Ava’s gaze was hard as steel. “Is he? Because right now, *you’re* the one who looks like a tool to me.”

I stared at her in disbelief. “Were we participating in the same conversation just now, Ava? The guy asked if this was a *part-time* *gig*! He wants to keep his fucking day job. He was asking about time off for vacations!”

“I don’t suppose you’ve even considered the possibility that Fletcher could be feeling nervous about all this and is covering by acting like a bit of an ass?” Ava snapped.

“No, I haven’t,” I shot back.

She narrowed her eyes. “And it probably doesn’t help matters that you’re actively trying to intimidate him.”

“If the guy can’t handle a few basic questions, then he probably isn’t Alpha material,” I pointed out. “I mean, come on, Ava, that’s just fact. And that’s not even taking into account his stalker ex-boyfriend. What was his name? Cameron?” I raised my eyebrows. “Do you *really* want someone with such a messy relationship history to take the helm of this pack?”

Ava stared at me, her eyes wide. “Are you *serious* right now?”

“What?” I asked.

“Who are *you* to question Fletcher about his ex?” she hissed. “You think he has a messy relationship history? *You’re* the messiest in town, Xavier Evers!”

Her words hit me like a slap to the face. “*Shut up*,” I snarled. “This isn’t about me.”

She laughed bitterly and shook her head. “Whatever, X.”

“What the hell does *that* mean?” I demanded.

“Nothing,” she said. “Nothing at all. Okay.” She crossed her arms. “You don’t like Fletcher, yet you want me to put him up to the others for Alpha—so tell me how you’d like him to prove he’s up for the job.”

I didn’t like her attitude, but I chose to ignore it for the moment and thought about the question. “Why don’t we just hold an Iudicium again?”

“The Iudicium?” Ava asked, clearly surprised. “Really?”

“Why not? If Fletcher can pass it, then fine. I won’t have any objections to him becoming Samara Alpha—assuming he doesn’t try to cheat the system like your genius cousin.”

Ava thought for a moment, then she shook her head. “I don’t think we have the time. I mean, you’re the one who’s been on my ass for us to find an Alpha ASAP.”

“You need to *make* the time,” I said firmly. “Listen, you’re running through Alpha candidates pretty quickly, Ava. If this one doesn’t work out, I don’t know how many more near misses this pack can handle. You have to get it right this time.”

“Do you think I don’t know that?” she snapped. “Don’t tell me my pack’s business, Xavier. I *know* what we’re up against—”

“Then stop jumping into shit without thinking about—”

“Oh, you’re one to talk,” Ava interrupted, rolling her eyes.

Our voices were getting louder and louder as we talked over each other, and we were starting to draw looks from the Samara wolves who were out of their tents, starting fires and getting ready for the day.

“Listen,” Ava snapped, dropping her voice to a low hiss. “You’re not a Samara wolf, remember? I appreciate your help, X, but in the end, this isn’t your call. Why don’t you just take a walk? Take some time to cool off.” She gave me an assessing look. “And maybe see if someone around here has some better fitting pants.”

I glowered at her. Fuck these stupid-ass jeans. Leave it to Ava to make a bad situation even worse. Still, I wasn’t going to argue with her. She was fucking right—I *wasn’t* a Samara, and if she wanted to screw her pack up so badly, then who was I to stand in her way?

I turned and stormed away. I headed toward the Airstream, but Marissa stepped into my path before I could reach it.

“Hey,” she said tentatively.

“What?” I growled.

“I couldn’t help but overhear you and Ava arguing,” she said.

God, she had no idea—arguing with Ava was just something that came naturally to me. It was like fucking *breathing* at this point.

“Don’t worry about it,” I muttered. “We’ll work it out.”  
 Marissa shook her head. “No, no, you don’t get it. The pack needs an Alpha. We need stability.”

“Yeah, I know—”

“And every time you and Ava get together, you two create chaos,” Marissa continued.

I stared at her for a moment. This was *not* the conversation I’d been expecting—or one I wanted to have.

“Trust me, that won’t be a problem. I’m not planning on sticking around,” I assured Marissa, trying to move past her.

She just stepped in front of me again. “Does Ava know that?”

“I’ve told her,” I said, still trying to get past her. “Many times.”

But Marissa wouldn’t let up. She just kept blocking my way. “And did she believe you?”

“I don’t fucking care what Ava believes,” I growled. I was annoyed and getting angrier by the second.

Marissa must have felt similarly, because her expression hardened as she looked at me, her brown eyes turning almost black. “Well, you’d better *start* caring, Xavier. Because if you don’t, you’re going to screw everything up.”

**Episode 3690**

“Wait, what?” I asked, staring at Lola. I wasn’t sure I’d heard her correctly. “What did you say? A *party?*”  
 “Yeah.” She grinned. “A breakup party. It’ll help you move on.”

I was stunned. The last thing I wanted to do right now was *move on*—or party about it. I couldn’t think of any possible reason why I would want to do either of those things. I was a walking open wound, which wasn’t exactly something I wanted to celebrate. And it wasn’t like I’d just gotten out of a bad marriage or something—I hadn’t *wanted* to break up with Xavier, so this wasn’t anything to celebrate. And how the hell was I supposed to be *moving on*? Wasn’t there a grieving period allocated to this kind of situation? Xavier had walked out less than twelve hours ago.

I looked at Artemis. I had no idea what to say, but some of my consternation must have shown on my face, because she shook her head.

“I don’t think a party is the best idea,” Artemis said, showing an uncharacteristic amount of diplomacy. “I mean, smashing things with magic is one thing—that’s what Rishika calls a healthy way of venting anger—but a party is something else altogether.”

“Yeah, I think Artemis is right,” I said weakly, still shocked by Lola’s suggestion.

Lola waved her hands, like she was shooing away our comments. “No, no, you don’t understand. I’m not talking about a party-party, like with streamers and balloons and stuff. I’m talking about a girls’ day kind of vibe.”

“A what?” Artemis asked, looking baffled. “What’s a girls’ day?”

“It’s a day of us eating frosting, cookies, and ice cream. Doing face masks, painting our nails, braiding each other’s hair, listening to music and true crime podcasts—hot girl shit,” Lola explained.

I thought I knew where this was going. I’d seen this before. I’d witnessed Lola coming up with the germ of an idea and then just running with it until she won everyone over. She’d once thrown a disco party in college that had nearly gotten hundreds of students expelled, and it had started pretty much like this. But—actually—judging by the description so far, I had to admit that this girls’ day party didn’t sound too bad.

“That could actually be fun,” I admitted.

“Yes, it could,” Lola said, nodding firmly. “This is about you, Cali, and doing what you need. Listen, I’m all for smashing things, but maybe we could do some comforting things, too, okay? It doesn’t have to be a celebration—more like a commiseration.” She started to back up, toward the house. “So, whenever you two are done out here, come find me. *No buts!*”

Lola turned on her heel and sprinted back inside before either Artemis or I could say anything in response.

I stared after her for a moment, then had to laugh. “Well, I guess we’re doing that later.”

Artemis looked at the closed back door, her brows furrowed in confusion. “I don’t get it. She wants to eat frosting? *Just* the frosting?”

I laughed again, and it felt strange. “It’s not quite like that. You’ll understand when you see it.”

“Okay,” Artemis said, though she didn’t look convinced. “Anyway, it’s my turn.”

She headed over to the fence and set up another row of bottles, then stepped back and took aim. While she blasted them one at a time, I lapsed into thought.

Lola’s plan did sound kind of fun, but I was still a little unsure. I didn’t know if I was really in the mood for a party—even if it wasn’t a party-party, like Lola had said. I didn’t know if I wanted to spend any more time dwelling on my very deep and still very raw misery. Especially since there were still a *lot* of answered questions.

“Okay,” Artemis said, setting up another row of bottles. “Your turn. Try to do them one at a time this time. See how precise you can get with your magic.”

“I’ll give it a shot,” I said. I took a deep breath and aimed, focusing on one bottle in the careful lineup my sister had made for me.

I took the bottles out one by one, and there was something oddly therapeutic about the action, and to deep focus it required. When my whole brain was wrapped up in concentration, it didn’t have time to wonder why Xavier had done what he’d done.

And it felt good to see my magic back in action. I flexed my fingers and looked down at my hands. Maybe it wasn’t *totally* back, but it was getting there.

“I wonder if I can still create the shield Grandpa Innes taught me,” I muttered to myself. I looked up at Artemis. “Try to blast me.”

“What?” she asked. “Cali, It’s one thing to feel sorry for yourself, but it’s *entirely* another to want to *die*! I’m not doing that kind of shit anymore, and—”

“Artemis!” I interrupted, holding up my hands to stop her tirade. “I’m not asking you to kill me! I just want to test my shielding. I want you to use a light burst of magic so I can try to deflect it. That’s all.”

“Oh,” Artemis said with a relieved sigh. “Oh. Okay. I can do that. But I can’t guarantee how strong my magic will be.”

“That’s okay,” I said, nodding. “I’ll chance it.”

I was feeling confident now that the handprint was gone. It felt like finally at least one thing was falling back into place. My magic could at least be a constant where the rest of my life was up in flames. I wanted to feel strong, powerful. Using my magic did that to me.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. I remembered what my grandfather had taught me, and pulled in the magic from the world around me. I fused it into a shield and opened my eyes, then nodded at Artemis.

“Ready,” I said.

Artemis shot a blast at me, and it bounced off the shield. She ducked as it ricocheted back at her, and when she straightened, she looked impressed.

“Wow. That’s great. Can you teach me how to do it?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said, surprised. I wasn’t sure if I *could* teach my sister anything about magic or fighting, but I was happy to try. “I’ll try to teach you,” I said, “but I want more than just the two of us learning a few skills.”

“What do you mean?” Artemis asked.

“I want to take things to the next level,” I said. “Maybe even a few levels beyond that.”

“*Okay*,” Artemis said slowly, clearly not understanding me.

“Xavier said that I never stand alone—that I rely too much on everyone else. I don’t think I do—not always. I’ve proven myself over and over. But I don’t know… If he had his doubts, then the others must, too. But, I mean, we’ve all had to rely on help every now and then.” I frowned. “Isn’t that the point of being in a pack? We’re not Rogues. We’re *supposed* to rely on each other. But even before I knew I had power of my own, I still managed to defend myself.” I crossed my arms defiantly over my chest. “Who else can claim they fought a werewolf with a spatula?”

“Cali, stop,” Artemis said firmly. “You listen to me. Xavier was being a jerk—nay, a raging asshole. Nothing he said should carry any weight—especially not after what he did last night.” She shook her head. “He doesn’t know what the hell he’s talking about. You’ve saved his sorry ass too many times to count. You know that, and he knows that. And he’d better not show his face around here, because I’ve got a flaming arrow with his name on it—”

“Artemis, stop,” I said reproachfully. As mad as I was with Xavier—and I was mad as *hell*—I still didn’t want to listen to anyone threaten or denigrate him. Just hearing about him made my heart hurt. I was furious with him, and I knew others were mad at him, too, but I still loved him. Even though he’d left me.

I shook my head as my throat started to feel tight.

“Listen,” I said, clearing my throat. “The point is, I want to become a skilled fighter—”

“You *are* a skilled fighter, Cali,” she countered.

“No, a skilled fighter like you,” I insisted. “There’s so much that I don’t know and I want to learn.”

My sister gave me a long look. “Why? So you can prove what I already know? That you’re skilled and capable and totally able to stand on your own two feet?”

I gritted my teeth. “I need to prove it to *myself*. But I can’t do it alone.”

Artemis gave a reluctant nod. “Okay.”

“Okay,” I repeated. “So, can we make a pact?”

**Episode 3691**

**Xavier**

Was Marissa being serious? That somehow *I* was going to be the one to screw everything up with the Samara pack? Ha.

I scoffed at Marissa. “You Samaras have done a great job of screwing things up on your own. You don’t need my help.”

Marissa squared off with me, her eyes narrowed and full of an emotion I couldn’t place. Frustration or concern… No, it was definitely something in between. “It’s your on-again, off-again relationship that’s causing the problem. You and Ava are incompatible parts on a sinking ship.”

“Whatever,” I grunted, casting her worries aside. I wasn’t going to have this conversation—partly because I just didn’t want to think about what Marissa was saying, or how her comments were beginning to dig under my skin. Maybe she was right. Maybe together, Ava and I were like dynamite—explosive and chaotic and devastating to everything around us. Ava influenced the Samaras, and, like it or not, we influenced each other. Maybe that *was* carrying over to all of them.

Maybe I’d already fucked up everything. Not just with Ava and the Samaras, but with Greyson and Cali and the Redwoods. My life was imploding—totally self-combusting—and I couldn’t even tell anyone why. Adéluce had made sure of that.

“Listen,” I said to Marissa, getting a little irritated now. “The Samaras’ problems are just that—the Samaras’. I am and have always been a Redwood. Your current state has nothing to do with me. Your past few leaders are who got you here—Nolan, Knox, Zeke. Now I’m just trying to help. And as for Ava—she is a grown woman. She can make her own decisions. She doesn’t need you babysitting her.”

“Yeah, sure. She’s a grown woman,” said Marissa. “But when you’re around, the very laws of physics seem to go out the window. She becomes just… confused and conflicted.” She stepped closer. I allowed it, refusing to back down an inch. “We need an Alpha,” she said, looking me in the eye.

“What the hell more do you want from me?” I asked, meeting her gaze head-on. “I’m here, aren’t I? I said I’d help you find an Alpha, and I am. Fletcher’s here, so stop complaining. Either accept him, or get some ideas of your own.”

*Fuck.* This was pissing me off.I should never have come to the campsite. It wasn’t like I had a lot of options, but there had to be something better than sitting here, taking Marissa’s shit. I wasn’t going to be psychoanalyzed by her or by anyone else. They couldn’t possibly understand the hell I was going through or how much I missed Cali. Or how ashamed I was that I’d hurt her.

Cali. My true mate. I’d hurt her.

This was all such bullshit. I’d lost control of every part of my life. Ava, Cali, the Samaras, Adéluce… What was I going to do about any of it?

“Is everything okay?”

Marissa and I stopped glaring at each other to look at Ava, who was walking toward us.

“How’s Fletcher?” Marissa asked her. “What’s the verdict?”

Several yards away, Fletcher was deep in conversation with a small group of Samara wolves. He seemed to be having a good time, laughing and chatting.

“He still seems interested,” Ava said. “But I’m sure a few people are going to question his commitment.” She looked at me as she spoke, a quiet and purposeful dig in my direction.

“I’ll go see what I can get out of him,” Marissa said, then shot me one last glare and headed off toward Fletcher’s little community meeting.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Ava rounded on me. “What was that about?”

I gave her a slight shrug. “Marissa’s just full of shit, that’s all.”

“Full of shit about what?” Ava asked. Again, I gave her nothing more than a half-assed shrug. She crossed her arms, eyeing me curiously. “And don’t you think that about everyone?”

“Pretty much,” I admitted. But in reality, I wasn’t sure just how full of shit Marissa was. I couldn’t help but think back to what she’d said about Ava—how she always seemed to lose her wits around me. How she was desperately needed to lead this pack, but I was undermining her efforts. Marissa was right about those two things. I couldn’t deny it.

And I also couldn’t deny that my thoughts kept straying back to the way Ava had looked last night. To the scent of her and the tension that had burned between us. My wolf was pacing inside me, constantly urging me to go to her. He still wanted that comfort now that Cali’d been ripped away from us.

It would’ve been so easy to give in. All that anger, all that want, all that electricity flickering in the air… It would’ve been so easy to just let go and take what my wolf was itching for. But if I just caved and gave into my instincts, things would get even messier than they already were.

Ava and I had a lot of issues, most of them completely unresolved. And unresolved they would stay, because I had no plans of confronting them anytime soon. The easiest thing to do would be to finish this business with Fletcher, force him to figure out the importance of his role, and then get the hell out with the knowledge that I’d left the Samaras in good hands.

“What do you think?” I asked, nodding in Fletcher’s direction—though I was actually more interested in changing the subject than in Ava’s opinion.

“I don’t know,” Ava admitted. “We’d have to do a lot of work with him.” Her gaze darted back to me. I wished she wouldn’t stare so much. Wished she wouldn’t stare so *big*. I could see every freckle in her irises. “Do you really think we should call for an Iudicium?”

This wasn’t my pack. It never had been, and it never would be.

“It’s what you did for Knox. But do whatever you think is best,” I said. “Whatever you decide is fine by me.”

This seemed to shake Ava. She stared at me with a deep, thoughtful gaze. “Do you really mean that?”

I wasn’t sure why she was taking my comment so seriously. I’d said it, hadn’t I? So I meant it… Right?

“Yes, I mean it,” I said. “If you think Fletcher is capable, and if Fletcher wants the job, then so be it.”

“So… that’s it?” Ava asked. “We get an Alpha, and you go back to the Redwoods?”

I should’ve seen the trap coming, but for once in my life, I’d trusted that Ava wouldn’t make problems where there were none. I hadn’t said anything about where I’d be going next, and for some reason, her assumptions grated on my nerves. I felt my teeth clench, though I hadn’t ordered them to.

“It’s none of your business where I go.” The words came spilling out of me, and my wolf’s fur bristled at the acidity in my tone. *Relax, Xavier*,I told myself. *Don’t make an ass of yourself in front of everyone.* “Let’s just get this over with,” I said, striding toward Fletcher.

I sized him up as I approached. He was young. Fit. Certainly, he was physically strong enough to be a pack Alpha, but Ava was right—he needed a lot of work. The guy was very, very green.

I’d made it halfway to his little confab when a hand shot out to stop me. I glanced down to see Ava’s hand resting on my chest, and I had the ridiculous thought that it was about to burn a hole right through me.

“Are you sure about him?” she asked, glancing back at Fletcher. “Really sure? We can’t afford another Zeke, or a Knox.”

I pushed her hand away. “Your opinion of him is more important than mine.”

Ava bit her tongue, watching me with those big blue eyes. But before she could say anything, her phone began to ring. She stepped aside to take the call, watching from afar as I honed in on Fletcher. I positioned myself in front of him to get his attention.

“Well? What do you think?” I asked.

Fletcher gestured at the pack. “This place is full of potential. It’ll take a little work, but I think I’m up for the challenge.”

Her call apparently finished, Ava approached us with an air of emergency she hadn’t had before. I narrowed my eyes, stepping toward her. “Who was that?”

“That was Malakai,” she said, looking alarmed.

“*What?*” I growled. “What the fuck did he want?”

Ava’s eyes were wide. She was still in shock. “He’s threatening to come after us for helping the Redwoods with Russell and Julia.”

I’d been expecting Malakai to call the other packs eventually.

Fletcher looked a little like a deer caught in headlights. “What do you mean, ‘come after us’?”

“An angry Alpha wants revenge,” said Ava, gesturing to the rest of the Samaras. “On *us.*”

And there it was.

All the blood drained from Fletcher’s face, and all the confidence he’d managed to build up vanished like it had never existed. “You want me to become your new Alpha while you’re *under threat?*”

**Episode 3692**

Artemis was staring at me like I’d lost my marbles.

“What do you mean, a pact?” she asked. “What kind of pact?”

I was embarrassed, but I forced myself to speak. “I want to be as good as you.”

“At what?” said Artemis.

“At fighting,” I said slowly. “Haven’t you been paying attention?”

Artemis scoffed. “Yes, but Cali, I just do what I have to do in order to survive. That’s why I was able to stay alive in the Fae world. It’s better to be the bounty hunter, not the one being hunted.”

I shook my head. “You’re one of the bravest, smartest, most capable fighters I’ve ever seen.”

She scratched at the back of her head, clearly embarrassed by my flattery—but it wasn’t empty words. Artemis had the kind of talent I could only dream of. If I could even get an ounce of that, I’d be way better off in this cutthroat world.

“If I can learn to be only half as good as you are, then that’s all the skill I need,” I said.

Artemis looked… unenthused. Maybe even a little annoyed that I was putting her on the spot like this. But I needed her—I needed to be *like her.*

“Why now?” she asked. “Why are you suddenly so dedicated to the idea of learning to fight?”

I hesitated, not quite sure how to answer that question. She was right, I had tried before, but the circumstances were different. *I’d* been different. I’d thought I was ready, but that hadn’t been the case. I was ready now.

“I first considered it back when Greyson raised the idea of my acting as his Luna for the pack summit,” I finally said. “I won’t exactly be a real Luna, sure, but I’ll still have to act like one. And that means embracing my strength—coming across as powerful and confident to all the wolves there.” I took a deep breath. “A good Luna should be strong enough to defend her pack, and that’s the kind of Luna I want to be—even if it’s only temporary. Do you think you can help me get there?”

Artemis sucked in her cheeks, like she was mulling this over. Finally, she relaxed her shoulders with a sigh. “There isn’t much time before the pack summit. And you’ve tried training before, and it didn’t work out.”

“I know, I was awful,” I admitted. “But that was before.”

“And what’s changed?” asked Artemis.

I crossed my arms. “Me. And, well, for starters, I’m not being manipulated by demons or necromancers anymore. This time, there’s nothing external to stop me.”

“That’s fair,” said Artemis, but then she paused when a thought seemed to pass over her. She met my eyes hesitantly, curiosity gleaming in her gaze. I braced myself. “And Xavier?” she asked. “How does he play into this?”

*Xavier.*

The sound of his name ripped through me like an arrow. I tried to ignore the ache that shot through my ribs. Xavier was like a limb I’d lost, and at the mention of his name, all the phantom pain had come rushing back.

I took a deep breath. “I can’t lie,” I said. “Xavier leaving me like that… It’s shaken me up. It’s making me rethink everything. But even if he hadn’t left, I’d still want to do this.”

Artemis’s demeanor softened. She reached out and pulled me into a hug. I treasured her warmth and the feeling of her arms wrapped around me.

“Remember this moment,” she said. “It’s the last time I’m going to comfort you. From now on, I’m going to be ruthless. Training won’t be fun. I’m going to be on your ass constantly, pushing you every day. I’ll bring you close to the breaking point, and it’s going to be on *you* to convince yourself that it’s worth it. I can do everything but that.” She pulled back to look me in the eye. “Are you sure you want to continue with this little pact of yours?”

The way Artemis had put it was a little jarring, but I didn’t have a choice.

“I have to do something to make myself stronger,” I said. “Less of a liability. I have to be better, and that’s the bottom line. And without…” I paused, the next word jamming in my throat for a moment. “And without *Xavier* in my corner, looking out for me, watching my back, protecting me from the world… I still have Greyson, of course, along with the rest of you, but I need to get better at protecting *myself*.”

That arrow of pain twinged in my chest, and I allowed the hurt to sink in. I had to acknowledge this if I wanted to get past it.

“Xavier promised to always be there for me,” I added. I tried to sound strong, but my voice splintered, like the pain inside me had come alive and crawled up into my throat. I choked it back down, but by then, it was too late. I pulled Artemis back into my arms to keep myself from crying and held her tight, too afraid of the threat of tears to say anything else.

Artemis accepted my embrace, immediately breaking her whole “this is my last time comforting you” promise and holding me close. For a long time, we stayed like that, until I felt the heartache sink back into the dark pit in my chest. After a long moment of breathing and holding my sister tight, I felt my control returning.

I pulled away, but Artemis didn’t go far, her brows pinched in obvious concern.

I cleared my throat. “I want this,” I assured her. “I want you to teach me everything you know. And… I need the distraction. Having you push me to my limit—to my breaking point, like you said—I think it would be good for me.” At the very least, it would keep my mind off that arrow in my chest, and the gaping wound Xavier had left behind. I took a deep breath. “No pain, no gain, right?”

A wide grin stretched Artemis’s face. “You have no idea,” she said fervently. “When do you want to start?”

“Why not now?”

Before Artemis could reply, there was a squeal from the porch. We both whipped around to see Lola bounding down the steps. “Chop chop! Let’s go! Party time!”

Artemis tipped her head back with a groan. “*Really?*” she said, looking at me. “You *really* want to go through with this breakup party?”

I couldn’t deny it—the thought of having a little fun did sound enticing. “I know it seems a little weird, but I need to do *something.* And you know Lola—she’s not going to stop until I give in. Might as well get it over with.”

Artemis pinched the bridge of her nose, as though Lola’s shenanigans were giving her a migraine. “Fine,” she grumbled. “But as soon as the party’s over, we’re starting your training. Don’t have too much frosting.”

We followed Lola inside, but I couldn’t quite ignore the slight tug in my chest that was telling me how *wrong* this was. A breakup party. It was all just kind of surreal.

*Had* Xavier really broken up with me?

It had just been so *sudden*. He’d pulled the plug on our relationship and then just walked out without any real discussion. I’d barely had a chance to talk at all, and that felt more unfair than anything. Where was *my* closure? Why had he been so cruel?

I paused there at the doorway. Artemis glanced back when she realized I wasn’t following her anymore.

“Um… I’ll be right in,” I told her.

Artemis seemed to realize I was having a moment and chose to give me space, disappearing into the house. I pulled my phone from my pocket, praying that I’d see a text message on the screen. A notification. Anything at all from Xavier.

A cruel nothing stared back at me.

Despite myself, I composed a text to him. *Why are you acting like this?*

But my nerves got the best of me before I could send it, and I deleted it and started again.  *We need to talk.*

This time, I got up the nerve to hit the send button. The moment my text soared off into the ether, I felt my heart drop into my stomach. I was a bundle of anger and nerves. I stayed where I was, leaning against the door frame, waiting and hoping for a response.

But nothing came. And why would it? Xavier had made it clear that he was done with me. That we were over. All the dread and pain crept back up inside me—this time partnered with desperation. Desperation that he would respond to my message. That he would say anything to me—anything that even *hinted* that our whole relationship had been more than just an illusion. But nothing came. And nothing came. And the longer that nothing came, the more foolish I felt.

The *angrier* I got.

Why was I the one reaching out to him, anyway? It should’ve been him trying to get in touch with me. I was the one who’d been broken. *Me.*

I found myself fisting my phone until my knuckles went white, then I stuffed it into my pocket and forced a smile onto my face as I got ready to head into the house.

I could hear voices inside—voices I didn’t recognize as belonging to Artemis or Lola. And when I stepped inside, I was surprised to see how many people were waiting for me. Lola had gone and fetched most of the pack, and when they saw me, they welcomed me in with open arms—some pulling me into hugs, others touching my shoulders and back with gentle displays of affection and sympathy.

And just like that, the arrow was ripped out of my chest.

I sank into their arms and cried.

**Episode 3693**

**Xavier**

I knew it. I fucking *knew* it.

Fletcher wasn’t Alpha material. And judging by the look on Ava’s face, she was arriving at the same conclusion.

Sometimes I hated being right.

“What the hell did you think being a pack Alpha was all about?” I asked. “It’s about *protecting the pack*. And this pack is in desperate need of protection. I thought we’d made that very clear.”

Fletcher hesitated, looking to Ava as if she would show him any more mercy than I had. “I—I know that,” he said. “But I thought I’d have a chance to grow into the role. To figure things out. I didn’t know I’d be leading an army into war on my very first day.”

“Listen, the Samara pack won’t be alone in this,” I said. “Malakai’s already threatened the Redwoods, and I’m betting he’ll do the same to the Vanguards and the Blue Bloods, if he hasn’t already.”

“Yeah,” Fletcher said, nervous gaze flitting between us again. “Listen, this all sounds great, but it just isn’t for me.”

“Not for you?” asked Ava scathingly. “Or are you just afraid?”

Her insinuation seemed to strike Fletcher in his tender underbelly. He raised his chin as if to challenge her. “I’m not interested—that’s all. I’ve got a promotion coming up, and being a Rogue has always worked for me.”

“But you have Alpha blood,” Ava insisted. I winced at the obvious desperation in her voice. “*Samara* blood. That has to mean something—especially now that we’re in trouble.”

“Just give it up,” I muttered to Ava. “This is pointless. Obviously, this guy’s not going to work out. He might have Alpha blood, but he’s clearly not Alpha material. I know the Samaras are in a vulnerable place and you need leadership, but don’t be desperate.”

Ava didn’t argue. She lowered her head—not quite in agreement, but in surrender. Maybe I should’ve listened to Ava the first time, too, when she’d wanted to dismiss Fletcher outright.

I rounded on Fletcher, wishing I had the power to set him on fire with my eyes. “Get the hell out of here. What a fucking waste of time.”

Fletcher returned my glare with one of his own. “I’m leaving because I’m choosing to leave, and because this job isn’t for me—*not* because you’ve ordered me to go. Got it?”

My wolf was snarling, and true rage was kindling in my gut. I stepped closer to Fletcher, pinning him with my gaze, my jaw clenching almost painfully. “*Go*. Right now. Before you make me *really* angry.”

Fletcher didn’t lower his furious gaze, but he did back away. He turned and walked quickly to his car, shooting glares over his shoulder every few steps. Ava and I watched as he peeled away, sending up a cloud of dust and rocks.

Then Ava rounded on me. “What the fuck are we supposed to do now?”

“I didn’t make the guy a coward,” I said with a scoff. “If anything, this is a good thing. Fletcher would’ve run for the hills at the first sign of trouble, just like Zeke did. Zeke was a coward, and you don’t need another one dragging the Samara pack right back to square one.”

Ava crossed her arms. “And yet that’s *exactly* where we are.”

“Where *you* are,” I corrected. “Not we. I’m not part of his damn pack. I agreed to help you find an Alpha, and I’ve done what I could—you’re going to have to figure it out on your own from here.”

Ava grabbed my arm, her fingernails digging into my skin. “So that’s it? You’re just giving up on us?”

My wolf lunged to the front of my mind at her touch. I forced him back down and shoved Ava’s hand away. “What do you expect me to do? I’m done.”

“You promised to help us find an Alpha!”

“Go talk to Lola—she has a list of other candidates,” I retorted. “Get the list, look through it, but from here on out my job here is done.” I turned away from her and started toward Knox’s old motorcycle. Surely no one was using it. “And I’m taking this.”

I made the mistake of looking back at Ava when I said that last part. She was standing there looking lost and defeated. Shocked and furious. A weird, intermingling blend of all the above. So quickly, she’d gone from a ferocious leader to a damsel in distress. But I wasn’t about to put my life on the line for a pack that wasn’t my own. Or for a woman who was so good at ruining my life, she didn’t even have to try.

“You said you can’t go back to the Redwood,” Ava said. “Where are you going to go?”

I shrugged, a little uncomfortably. “I’ll know when I get there.”

“And what about us?” Ava said. “What about Malakai’s threat? You’re just going to go on your way and leave us with nothing? No defenses? No leadership?”

“I meant what I said to Fletcher,” I said. “The other packs will band together with you to face the Bitterfang threat, and they’ll have your backs until you find an Alpha.” My next words sounded just as bitter as they tasted. “Maybe ask Greyson for help.”

Ava opened her mouth to speak, but the revving of the motorcycle drowned out her voice as the engine snarled beneath me. I hit the gas and peeled out of the campsite before she could say another word, the roar of the bike vibrating through my bones.

Abandoning Ava and the Samaras didn’t feel great, but leaving them felt like the right call. What the hell did Ava expect me to do, anyway? Maybe Marissa was right—things always went to shit when the two of us were together. Whenever Ava dropped into my life, it was like she kicked off a sort of chemical reaction. No, it was better to leave that mess behind. Better for me. Better for her. Better for everyone.

*Better for you, too*,I wanted to tell the pain-in-the-ass wolf inside me, who was currently whimpering in a sad little pile. At least it didn’t feel like he was going to leave me. It felt like we could manage on our own, if we could get far enough away from here. We were hurt, yes, but not completely broken.

I had more important things to think about than his thirst for Ava. Like figuring out where the hell I was supposed to go from here. How far would Adéluce’s leash *allow* me to go?

At the thought of her name, I felt my chest begin to burn with resentment. Absentmindedly, I twisted the gas, and the bike kicked up to a higher speed. It helped ease the stress, a little—released some of the strain from my shoulders—but I knew I couldn’t afford another police chase.

This wasn’t the time to be reckless. But as much as I knew that, I also knew that this kind of anger was far too big for me to tame on my own. Breaking Cali’s heart was the worst thing I’d ever done. She probably thought I was a real piece of shit. And now Ava and the Samaras would think the same. That was at least of my own doing.

I wasn’t even sure if abandoning Ava was what I really wanted, but I was too pissed—too frustrated—to peel apart the feelings warring inside me and figure it out.

I had always thought I’d make a better Alpha than Greyson, but maybe I’d been wrong this entire time. Wasn’t I doing what Fletcher did? Leaving when things got too difficult? I’d always wanted to be Redwood Alpha—I’d always felt like it was my destiny. And now Adéluce had stolen any chance I’d had to make it happen.

If Fletcher had chosen to stay, he could’ve had a future. Staying for me would just mean more pain.

I imagined squeezing Adéluce’s neck, making her eyes roll back in her skull. I pictured her clawing at my hands as she fought for breath. I *wanted* to watch the life drain from her eyes. This was all her fault.

All my anger came flowing out, and I let out a scream, which was immediately snatched away by the wind. All that rage, and I didn’t make a sound. Even my screams were helpless. Smothered.

I was starting to pick up speed again, which I knew wasn’t the right call. So when I spotted a shitty dive bar, I veered off the road and stopped in the parking lot, beside dozens of other motorcycles.

The place was a dump—grungy and smelling of trash, and surely housing the kind of assholes who started fights over spilled drinks and girls in Daisy Dukes.

*Perfect*,I thought, cutting the engine. I shoved out the kickstand and stepped off the bike, the desire to cause someone *else* a little pain pumping through my veins.

Holding that thought close, I shoved the door open and stepped into the bar, praying that trouble would find me on the other side.

**Episode 3694**

**Greyson**

I was trying to get the hell off this call, but Lucian fucking refused to shut up, droning on about all the times the Vanguard pack had “emerged victorious from battle” over the years. I wasn’t in the mood for a history lesson—especially one that was at least ninety percent bullshit.

After several minutes—several minutes more than he deserved—I cut Lucian off. “Can we focus on Malakai’s threat?”

There was a slight pause, and then Mace spoke up. “I agree. We don’t know anything about the Bitterfang pack, other than what we learned recently. Does anyone have any idea how big the pack actually is? What their numbers look like?”

“I’ve put Armin on it,” Lucian said. “We should have some intel soon. When it comes in, I suggest we meet up to discuss it. Work out a plan once we have more information.”

I was taken aback. Damn. That might’ve been the first smart, useful thing I’d ever heard Lucian say.

“All right, sounds good,” I said.

“I’m in, too,” said Mace. “But what do we do about the Samaras—who, need I remind you both, are still without an Alpha?”

A long beat of silence followed his question—which wasn’t quite the ideal response, given the severity of that particular problem. *Fuck.* It had been Xavier’s job to help find a new Alpha for the Samara pack. But things hadn’t exactly gone as planned, what with Zeke’s death and there not being any viable candidates. And now Xavier wasn’t here to finish his one job.

“They can still join the Vanguards,” Lucian said cheerily.

“No,” Mace and I said at the same time. Hell would freeze over before I let *that* happen, and I was pretty sure Mace felt the same way.

“We should talk to Ava,” Mace said. “She’s the only Samara who seems to have her head screwed on. Greyson—maybe you can see if Xavier would be willing to talk to her? He could see if she’s willing to meet with the three of us about the Bitterfang issue.”

Another awkward silence took over the line—mostly from my end. Under normal circumstances, sure, I’d have asked Xavier to talk to Ava. But that wasn’t exactly an option anymore. And I didn’t exactly delight in the idea of telling the other Alphas why.

“I’ll take care of it,” I said.

“I’ll send word when Armin returns with intel on the Bitterfangs,” said Lucian.

Mace offered a hum of acknowledgement, and the call came to an end.

After hanging up, I pocketed my phone wearily. Damn, what a day. Now I had to figure out what to do about Ava—should I just call her now, or head over to the campsite to speak to her in person? It would probably be a good idea for me to check out the state of the Samara pack…

I was still trying to decide what to do when the sound of loud chatter shattered my focus. The sound had reached me from the living room, and, curiosity piqued, I followed it.

I recalled Lola trying to get my attention during my call with Mace and Lucian—something about a gathering for Cali. Support and sisterhood, et cetera, et cetera. But Cali already knew I’d always have her back—she didn’t need me to attend a party to prove it.

I was surprised to see that basically everyone in the pack had shown up. Lola always did the most, didn’t she? And though they were clearly working hard to cheer Cali up, I could immediately see that they were fighting a losing battle. She looked fucking *shattered*. I recognized the empty look in Cali’s red-rimmed eyes. She looked lost, like she didn’t know where to go or who to turn to, even in a sea of loving embraces.

Lola offered Cali a tub of ice cream, but even though she took it, she simply held it in her hands. I could tell she had no plans to eat it. Part of me wanted to stride over and shove a spoonful in her mouth, just to make sure she kept herself tethered to the earth. Poor thing looked like she was about to float off into space.

I had to admit, I had my doubts about Lola’s plan. Though I *was* impressed that she’d managed to get Cali to agree to it. Then again, there didn’t seem to be a lot of thoughts passing behind Cali’s eyes—just a whole shitload of disassociation and pain. She probably wasn’t thinking all that clearly.

Just another blessing to thank Xavier for.

Cali finally seemed to notice me standing by the door. She looked at me briefly, and the soullessness in her eyes stabbed through me like a knife to the gut. I couldn’t handle this shit anymore. Cali simply wasn’t allowed to suffer like this—not because of Xavier, not because of *anyone*.

I strode through the swarm to reach her, taking her ice cream and shoving it blindly into the hands of whoever would take it. Cali glanced up at me as I took her small, cold hands in mine and nodded toward the door. “Come with me, love.”

“W-Wait—” Cali tried to protest as I led her out through the masses. She grabbed my arm in a gentle attempt to stop me. “We can’t leave. They’re here for me. I have to stay.”

I managed to pull her into the study, sealing the door behind us and shutting out all the chatter and confusion. “But do you *want* to stay?”

“I should be there. I should…” She trailed off. Her glassy eyes looked up at me, then at the door.

I pulled her into my arms, and she sank bonelessly into my hold. She was all give and no fight. “That’s not what I asked.”

Cali pressed her face against my chest and gripped my shirt, her voice a little muffled. “It was great at first, to see how supportive everyone was. But then it hit me.”

“What did?” I asked, letting her pull back.

She glanced away. “I was suddenly just so aware of *why* everyone was there. Xavier. Because I’m pitiful.”

The pain washed over her face so suddenly, I couldn’t do anything to stop it.

She hid her face in her hands and sobbed. “Why did he leave me?”

There were reasons, obviously. But none of them had the power to comfort Cali in this moment. I wished Xavier could’ve seen this. I wished I could’ve shoved his fucking nose in the mess he’d made.

Cali was swiping at her tears, gasping for air between sobs. “I sent him a text, but he didn’t reply. I just don’t understand any of this, Greyson. What if something happened to him?”

A twinge of annoyance shot through me—there and gone, like a bullet. All the pain he’d caused her, and she was still worried for him. She didn’t seem to have an ounce of bitterness in her heart. I wished there was some way I could comfort her—some way I could assure her that Xavier was fine, even though the asshole didn’t deserve to be. But the truth was, I had no idea where my brother was or how he was doing.

I still needed to check with Ava when I saw her. It was *very* possible that she’d seen him or spoken to him—she was allegedly the main reason why Xavier had dumped Cali, after all.

“Hey, don’t worry,” I said, touching Cali’s shoulder and leaning forward to look into her teary eyes. “Xavier’s pretty self-reliant. He doesn’t need much to keep himself afloat.”

Cali sniffled and took a deep breath, trying to calm down. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I shouldn’t be talking to you about this. It isn’t fair.”

“It’s okay.” Obviously, it was kind of awkward, but what the hell was I supposed to do? Leave her to suffer in a room full of people? All that mattered right now was putting a stop to her tears before they drove me mad. “What’s not fair is what Xavier did to you.”

“I just can’t help but feel like it was something I did,” Cali said. “But what could it have been? I got sick, I went to the hospital… I don’t remember anything else that might have made him leave like that.”

“Forget why he left,” I said. “You need to heal. How do you think we can make that happen?”

“What do you mean?” Cali asked.

I took her shoulders, gave her a little shake. “What do you want to *do*,Cali?”

Cali lowered her gaze. A strange look overcame her—something between dawning realization and disappointment. She touched one of my hands where it was gripping her shoulder and said, “I realized, back there with Lola and the others… This house is just too full of memories. It’s too full of Xavier. It’s torture, and I can’t take anymore.”

Something twisted in my chest. I didn’t like the way she was talking. “So what are you saying?”

**Episode 3695**

**Xavier**

The bar was even worse on the inside than it was on the outside.

There was probably one light in the whole place, which flickered ominously above the heads of two bald men in denim jackets. It smelled of grease, cigarettes, and the cheap cologne drifting from the bartender, who was drying out half-washed glasses with a dirty rag.

It was truly a disgusting shithole—which meant it was exactly what I needed.

I made for the bar, not bothering to avoid the drunks in my path. I bumped shoulders with one—a tall, tough-looking guy who acknowledged me with a “fuck you” kind of glare that would’ve made a smart man sprint back to his car. But I wasn’t sure I wanted to be smart right now.

I ignored the threat in the man’s eyes and carried on, taking a seat on one of the bar’s tattered stools and ordering a beer.

“Bottle or tap?” asked the bartender.

“Bottle,” I replied, not wanting to swap spit with any of these humans.

The nape of my neck tingled, and I glanced back to see the man I’d bumped into, muttering to one of his buddies. They were both looking right at me. How about that? I’d only been here two minutes and I was already popular.

The sight of the guy I’d annoyed rallying his sweat-stained comrades put a real thrill in my veins. A one-on-one would’ve been too easy, anyway. Tonight, I needed a challenge.

I decided to let them simmer for a few more minutes and enjoy my beer. I took a swig while the crackling radio played some god-awful country song and dishes clattered behind the bar.

Then I heard a woman’s voice. “Stop! I told you to keep your hands to yourself.”

I glanced back and immediately spotted Mr. Tough Guy and one of his friends harassing a woman by the pool table. She was a server, judging by the tray in her hands. At a guess, she’d probably just delivered some drinks and had been heading back to the bar when my new friends had set their sights on her.

“Those assholes have been harassing her all day,” the bartender grumbled, ringing out a filthy rag. “I’ve already warned them a few times, god dammit. I don’t want to have to call the police, but I will.”

This just kept getting better.

“Don’t bother,” I told the bartender. I knew just how to remedy the situation—no police required.

I got to my feet and stalked over to the corner where the two men had the server trapped, missing teeth and blackened gums on display as they laughed.

“What’s the deal?” I asked, earning their attention immediately. “I thought dogs weren’t allowed in bars.”

Mr. Tough Guy rose from his perch on the edge of the pool table. “What did you just say?”

“Why are you bothering this woman?” I demanded. “She’s just trying to do her job.”

“What’s it to you?” he retorted, lip curled like he wanted to take a bite out of me.

His friend spread his arms in a way that was probably meant to look innocent. “We were just having some fun, pal.”

I touched the server’s shoulder, gently guiding her away from the situation.

“Doesn’t look like *she’s* having much fun,” I said to the guys. “In fact, it looks like she’s stuck in a shithole with a bunch of desperate assholes.”

They’d been waiting for an excuse to take a swing at me, and I’d just given them the green light.

The shorter man tossed his pool cue and lunged at me. His punch was expected, and I easily leaned out of its path. I immediately responded with a headbutt, hitting him between the eyes. He stumbled backward into a group of men, who shouted in anger when he made them spill their drinks—and then they stopped shouting and started punching.

Mr. Tough Guy came at me, hurling a beer bottle at my head. I ducked, letting the bottle smash harmlessly against the wall, and then he was coming for me, hands outstretched like he was ready to grab me by the throat and strangle the life right out of me. I managed to catch his arms before he could carry out this plan, twisting them behind his back and slamming his face into the nearest table.

Someone grabbed my shirt collar and hauled me away from Mr. Tough Guy—a stray bar patron, looking to join the fun. Before I could orient myself, he nailed me with a hard punch to the jaw.

Fun indeed.

I shoved him backward, and he took me down with him when he tripped and fell. We tussled on the ground, fists cracking against each other’s faces. I could taste blood in my mouth, and pain from that one lucky punch was already rattling my skull. I managed to finish my latest attacker off with another headbutt—because fuck it, why *not* cause myself a little more pain?

When the fight finally ended and the dust began to settle, I looked at the battered men splayed across the bar floor and slowly made my way back to my stool, swiping at the trail of blood that was dripping from my nose.

The bartender looked horrified by the mess of human bodies on his floor.

“Don’t bother with the cops,” I said, taking the napkin from beneath my beer and using it to finish cleaning the blood from my chin. “But you might want to have someone take out the trash.”

The bartender cleared his throat and fetched me a second beer. “Normally, I wouldn’t condone that kinda shit—especially seeing as you broke one of the tables over there—but hell if those guys didn’t deserve it.”

I relished the taste of the beer—mainly because it washed the blood from my mouth. And as I sat there, taking in my reflection in the bar’s reflective wall, I felt oddly satisfied by the mess I’d created. And I’d come out of it with a few bruises and a bloody nose—nothing too serious. My fists had copped the worst of it—I was pretty sure I’d busted one of my knuckles on someone’s teeth.

I couldn’t deny it—the pain felt fucking fantastic. It was just so *refreshing* to feel something physical after having spent so much time gripped by a different kind of pain. The kind of pain that didn’t fade when you iced it. This pain was nothing, really, compared to that—compared to the ache I’d felt since leaving Cali. The fight had done nothing to help her, or to remove Adéluce’s curse, but it had still felt damn good.

It felt *really fucking good* to let some of that pain out.

“Hey,” the bartender said, handing me a handful of fresh napkins and a baggy of ice. “Would you ever consider working as a bouncer? The night crowd can get pretty ugly around here.”

I had to laugh. Me, a bouncer? As far as jobs went, it didn’t hold the same appeal as “Redwood Alpha”—but it’d sure be a great way to cope with my misery.

“Maybe some other time,” I said.

I’d finished my first beer and started on the second when the server I’d rescued approached me nervously.

“Hey, I just wanted to thank you for what you did back there.” She looked a little shy, like maybe she’d only been on the job a couple weeks. I hadn’t taken a good look at her before, too focused on getting that fight started, but now, I noticed the fine details—the sexy, pouty lips, the freckles, the curves.

I glanced at the guys where they were still splayed on the floor, along with most of the bar’s other patrons. Some of them were whimpering in pain or nursing bloody noses, and others were already climbing to their feet.

“It was nothing,” I said to the server. “I hate assholes like that.”

“Well, no one’s ever done anything like that for me before,” she said. “So thank you. Is there any way I can repay you?”

There was a look in her eye that I’d seen before; a glimmer of something daring. I watched as she leaned in, clearly looking to repay me with a kiss. That wasn’t why I’d done it, but what would be the harm in that, really? I allowed myself to linger on the sight of her lips as they got closer. When she kissed me, they were soft, and they tasted like strawberry lip balm and mint gum.

*You can’t*, said a voice in my head. *Cali*. *You’re with Cali.*

But I wasn’t with Cali. I was in love with Cali, yes, but now I would *never* be Cali. I’d never kiss her again. Never hold her again. Never touch her again.

I jerked away, and the server just stood there, looking alarmed and embarrassed. “Oh—I’m sorry, I—”

I didn’t respond. I just left my mostly full beer behind and made for the door, wiping the taste of her from my lips. She was beautiful—stunning, even. But she wasn’t Cali. I wasn’t ready for anyone else, and I wasn’t sure I ever would be. I only wanted her.

As I passed a few men still sprawled on the ground, I gave one of them a subtle kick for good measure, then I headed for Knox’s bike, climbed on, and revved the engine. But as I sat there, the bike rumbling beneath me, I realized I had no idea where to go.

I’d hoped a little violence would set my mind straight, but it hadn’t. All I had to show for the experience was bruised knuckles and the lingering taste of blood and beer.

Over my dead body would I return to the Samara campsite after the way I’d left things with Ava. I didn’t need to add “abject humiliation” to the list of horrible shit I’d experienced in the past twenty-four hours.

Maybe I could check into a motel, find some clothes that actually fit. I glanced at the sleeve of my stolen Knox jacket, where the seams had split when I’d been grabbed at mid-fight. Finding a motel wasn’t a perfect plan, but at least it was something. Something to occupy my mind and my time while my world crumbled around me.

I revved the bike’s engine again, then pulled out of the bar. I was about to hit the road when a figure stepped out in front of me. I slammed on the brakes, and the bike fishtailed to a stop only inches away from them.

I looked up with a snarl, ready to rip into the idiot who’d nearly made me crash—but then I got a good look at them. The fight drained right out of me, replaced immediately by shock.

Kira crossed her arms and shot me a truly impressive glare. “And where the fuck have you been?”

# **Episode 3696**

I swallowed nervously. Greyson stared at me, his eyes pleading, his words hanging in the air between us.

*So what are you saying?*

I took in a shaky breath. “Maybe I’ll go back to Minnesota with my parents.”

He looked absolutely stunned. “*Back to Minnesota?* But Cali, your life is here now. Your friends, your sister, the pack…” He trailed off, but I still heard the unspoken addition to his list as clearly as if he’d mind linked it. *Me. I’m here.*

And even with my heart broken into so many pieces I didn’t know how I’d ever put them all back together, I knew he was right. I’d spent my whole life in Minnesota—until Lola had convinced me to come here, strike a deal to get the money for Mom’s hospital bills, and meet a man who’d wanted nothing to do with me at first.

And then I’d fallen deeply in love with him.

I felt a pang in my chest at the thought, bringing me right back to the reason why I’d considered running away to Minnesota in the first place. I’d fallen head over heels in love with Xavier. The kind of love that happened only once in a lifetime—well, maybe twice, for me. I’d given Xavier half of my heart, half of everything I had to give.

But it hadn’t been enough. *I* hadn’t been enough. And now he didn’t want me anymore.

And who could blame him, really? Who *would* want to be with someone like me, given any kind of choice? Someone who couldn’t choose between two men. Xavier’s critiques had only cut me so deeply because, on some level, I’d known they were justified. After everything I’d put him through, everything he’d done for me, I still hadn’t given him what he really wanted: my whole heart.

Maybe leaving was actually the sanest reaction he could’ve had. Maybe it’d be best if I left, too—if I saved Greyson from the same grief that had driven Xavier away. Because it was becoming painfully obvious that every minute I stayed in this house was just another reminder of my loss.

“Cali.” Greyson took my hand, his warm, gentle touch pulling me out of my increasingly depressing thoughts. “I know you’re in pain, but running away wouldn’t erase any of it. You’d just take all that hurt with you—and in Minnesota, the pack wouldn’t be there to help you through it.”

*My parents would be there.*

But that wouldn’t be the same. And my parents were finally trying to get back to their lives after weeks of chaos here in Oregon. How selfish would I be if I forced them to help me through even more of my problems?

“And maybe I’m being an asshole, but what about me?” Greyson continued. “I love you, Cali. I want to be there for you, but it’s not like I can just move the entire pack to Minnesota. Their lives are here. *My* life is here—just like yours. And for what it’s worth, I want my life to have you in it.”

It hit me then, what my outburst must have sounded like to Greyson—namely awful and selfish and cruel. What, I couldn’t have his brother, so I didn’t want any part of my life in Oregon at all? I hadn’t intended to say that at all—*of course* I couldn’t leave Greyson. Losing one of my mates was bad enough; I was pretty sure I’d just curl up and die if I lost both of them.

I loved Greyson deeply, desperately, but couldn’t he see that staying in the pack house was crushing me?

His jaw tensed as silence stretched between us. “I can’t stop you from leaving. If going back to Minnesota is what you think is best, I won’t be happy about it, but I’ll understand. I realize that right now, you might need something I can’t give you. But don’t you think you’d heal better here, surrounded by people who love you? Don’t you think it would cause you even more pain to leave so much behind?”

He wasn’t wrong. Other than my parents, who did I have in Minnesota? Lola’s dads? Alex?

*Not a chance.*

I’d worked hard to build a life here in Oregon. I’d put down roots. I couldn’t just rip them out of the ground and transplant them.

“If you went,” Greyson said evenly, “when would you come back?” He hesitated. “You would come back, right?”

I hadn’t really thought about it. Like, at all. The idea of running off to Minnesota had only just occurred to me—a half-baked, frantic plan to escape the heartache I felt here.

“Fine,” he said when I didn’t answer his question. “If you go to Minnesota, then I’m coming with you.”

*That* finally broke me out of my thoughts. “You can’t do that. Not that I wouldn’t want you with me—of course I’d want to be with you—but you have to take care of the pack. There’s still the Bitterfang pack to worry about, and the summit. The pack needs you.”

He took my hand again. “And *I* need *you*. So wherever you go, I’ll be with you.”

I knew, deep in my heart, that Greyson would never abandon his pack at a time like this, especially without even discussing it with them. But it was still comforting to know he was willing to make such a grand gesture to be with me. He’d said he’d always protect me, always keep me safe, and now he was proving it again.

But I could never put him in a position where he’d be forced to choose me over the pack. Going to Minnesota had seemed like an easy fix, but Greyson was right—my heartache wouldn’t stay behind in Oregon. It would travel right alongside me, all the way across the country, a constant reminder of Xavier’s absence. The scenery would be different, but the pain would be the same.

*And I really can’t bear the thought of leaving Greyson.*

I sighed. “You’re right. I’m not thinking logically—going back to Minnesota would be the wrong call. After all, I did just make a pact to train with Artemis. I can’t bail on her now.”

Greyson blew out a breath, clearly relieved. “Why start training now?”

I smiled, thinking of how badass and powerful I’d be, walking into the pack summit as Greyson’s Luna. “Because I’m going to be the best Luna ever.”

He used his grip on my hand to gently pull me in for a kiss. “You don’t have to train to do that. You’re already the best Luna the summit will ever see. And someday, you’ll be the genuine article—I’m sure of it.”

I wrapped my arms around him and breathed him in. No matter what happened, Greyson was always my comfort, my safe place to fall apart. And he never judged me for my moments of impulsiveness, or my mistakes, or my weaknesses.

He just loved me anyway.

“I’m glad you were here to talk me down,” I whispered.

He squeezed me a little tighter. “Me too. I’d have gone out to Minnesota to bring you back, but I’m happy you’re staying home.”

I smiled. *Home*. He was right. This *was* my home.

I knew Lola was only trying to make me feel better with her party—trying to show solidarity by putting on a show, by giving me what she thought I needed. But Greyson didn’t need to do any of that. It was like he just instinctively knew what I *actually* needed—no showy display required.

I couldn’t believe that just moments ago I’d seriously been planning to go back to Minnesota. As if that actually would’ve helped anything.

I eased myself out of Greyson’s arms and stood on my tiptoes to kiss him. “Thank you.”

“What are you thanking me for?”

“For being you.”

Greyson smiled. “I’m not sure I could be anyone else, but I’m willing to try, if that’s what you want.”

I laughed. “I love you just the way you are.”

This time, our lips met in the middle. And I let the kiss linger. Savored the warmth of his mouth on mine, his arms wrapped around me. All love and safety and acceptance. He didn’t resent me for grieving the loss of his brother’s love. He understood and would help me through it however he could. The pain Xavier had left me with wasn’t gone, but it had finally started to fade—to lose its sharpest edges. And I wasn’t going through it alone, half a country away from most of the people who cared about me.

It hurt to be surrounded by so many reminders of what Xavier and I used to have, but the pain was a price I was willing to pay. I’d be giving up too many good things if I left.

I’d be giving up Greyson.

“I should probably go apologize to Lola for ditching her party,” I said. “And then get back to training with Artemis. We haven’t even started and I’ve already gotten distracted. Do you want to watch? Maybe you’ll learn a thing or two.”

He grinned. “I’d love to see you go all badass, but I have to deal with the latest Bitterfang-adjacent problem first.”

I frowned. “How are you going to do that?”

His expression tightened, his grin fading. “I’m going to talk to Ava.”

# **Episode 3697**

**Xavier**

“*Kira?* What the *fuck*?”

She hadn’t so much as flinched when my bike had screeched to a stop right in front of her, and she didn’t seem to be cowed by my anger, either. Her arms were crossed over her chest, and her eyes narrowed on me like I was the scum of the earth.

“Do you have any idea what kind of mess you left behind when you ran off last night?” she demanded.

Oh, I had a pretty damn good idea, actually. The thought of it had been eating me alive from the moment I’d left the pack house. Cali’s devastated expression flashed through my mind every time I closed my eyes. I didn’t think I’d be getting that image out of my head anytime soon.

Still, fury roiled inside me. Who the hell did Kira think she was, tracking me down and trying to give me a lecture? As if I could be bullied into going back after I’d done my damnedest to burn every bridge I had with Cali and the pack? Had Kira not fucking gotten the message? I didn’t want a stern talking-to. I *literally* couldn’t explain myself, anyway, so there was no helping me. So why the hell couldn’t she just leave me the hell alone?

“I’m serious, Xavier,” Kira pressed. “What were you thinking? I have no idea what happened between you and Cali, but never in a million years would I have thought you were the kind of guy to run away with his tail between his legs.”

I had no response to that. At least, nothing more than a pissed-off snarl. What the hell was I supposed to do? I couldn’t explain any of this to her, to anyone. And if I tried, I was sure it would only make everything impossibly worse, somehow. Nobody could help me. Nobody could get me out of this shitshow of a situation but me.

I was fucking trapped—and even worse, I was the only one who knew it. Everyone else thought I’d just turned into a raging bastard on a whim. That I could actually be talked down from this ledge Adéluce had stuck me on.

I knew Kira’s intentions were good, which was pretty much the only thing keeping me from being even more of an asshole, but I really didn’t want to have this conversation with her. I literally *couldn’t* have it. And feeling so trapped all the time was so fucking shitty, I wanted to tear my own skin off. This was exactly what that vampire-bitch wanted—to make me so miserable I couldn’t see straight. So miserable I lost all hope. I was playing right into her hands, and I almost didn’t care.

But these were the cards I’d been dealt.

So while Kira watched me expectantly, clearly getting more pissed off the longer the silence simmered between us, all I could do was shrug. “I had my reasons, and none of them concern you.”

She scoffed, shaking her head. “And here I thought you were a better man. The man who helped avenge my husband’s death—what the hell happened to him? Is he still in there?”

I looked away. Fuck, this was killing me. I wanted to scream, but that wouldn’t solve anything. This was exactly what Adéluce had planned for me—layer after layer of suffering, turning my life into the world’s most sadistic cake.

Kira’s expression softened. “Xavier, please. I didn’t come here to fight.”

“Then why did you come?” I snapped. “I didn’t ask you to. Did Cali send you?”

“Nobody sent me. I’m here because I care about you, you growling idiot. I don’t know what the hell is wrong with you, and I probably shouldn’t even have bothered wasting my time coming after you, but I know how much you mean to Cali—and how much she means to you,” Kira said. “What you two have is special, and you shouldn’t just throw it away. She’s been an absolute wreck without you, and I know you can’t want that for her. So whatever happened between the two of you, can’t you just come back and try to work it out?”

Every word was a dagger to my heart—even worse, I knew Kira wasn’t exaggerating. I knew she was telling the truth, even if I couldn’t openly admit it. I had to put a pin in this. I couldn’t have pack members coming after me and putting me through this torture time and time again. I just couldn’t. I liked to think I was hot shit, but having all these people who cared so much about me and Cali coming out and trying to talk sense into me? Ripping open the wound again and again until I was bleeding out all over the place? Until I was weak enough to drop the act and go home?

Not an option.

Adéluce had told me I needed to get Cali to hate me. That if she hated me, she’d give up on me. And as much as that idea made me want to throw myself off the nearest cliff, there was some comfort in it, too. And if Cali hating me was the only way for me to *maybe* survive long enough to escape Adéluce, then I’d have to use that same tactic with Kira, too—and anyone else from the pack who tried to be an emissary for my relationship with Cali.

Because I couldn’t allow them to succeed in convincing me to go back. No matter what. If they succeeded, Cali would die. And that was something I definitely wouldn’t survive. I wouldn’t *want* to survive it. And then Adéluce would win, definitively.

*Fuck that.*

In a way, looking at this situation in black and white made it a tiny bit easier. If the choice was between making the whole damn world hate me and Cali’s death? I’d choose the former every time.

I eyed Kira, trying to decide how best to get her to leave me the hell alone. I knew my relationship with Cali was a sensitive issue for her—she’d told me she had a crush on me. And then when she’d been hexed and become convinced that I was her dead husband, I’d done all I could to be sensitive to it, to be kind to her. I cared about Kira. And I knew she cared about me too, especially if she’d been willing to come out here and face my wrath.

But this had to be done.

“You’re only trying to help me because you think you’ve got a chance with me now,” I spat, hating myself more with every word that passed my lips. The low blow left a bitter taste in my mouth.

Kira’s jaw tightened, and pain flashed through her eyes. Pain I’d just very deliberately caused. But it only took an instant for that pain to give way to fury.

“How *dare* you think that of me?” she snarled. “I care about you *as a friend*. But hey, maybe I was wrong. Maybe leaving Cali was the best thing you could’ve done for her. Fuck you, Xavier. Now get the hell out of my sight before I blast you.”

I hesitated. I’d done what I had to do, but it still *hurt*. Kira was my friend, and just like that, I’d used my knowledge of her to turn her against me. Just like I’d done with Cali.

*I’m sorry, Kira. You deserve so much better than that.*

I revved the bike’s engine and took one last look at her before pulling away. I watched her form shrink and fade away in the wing mirror. I wished I could turn back. I wished I could go to Cali and confess everything. She was the only person who could’ve comforted me right now, but I couldn’t go to her.

And unless I found a way to stop Adéluce, I might never be able to go to her again.

Something wet trickled down my cheek. *Shit. Is it raining? That’d be just perfect right now.*

And then I realized it wasn’t rain or snow—it was my own goddamn tears.

*Get a grip. You can wallow, or you can stop feeling sorry for yourself and make a plan.*

I wasn’t going to give up on Cali. Not yet. I only hoped she’d be able to forgive me when all was said and done.

I pulled into the next gas station to top up the bike. I checked my phone while I waited for the tank to fill. My heart lurched when I saw Cali’s name pop up in my message inbox.

*We need to talk*, her message read.

She was pissed. I could tell from that message alone. But of course she was mad—I’d broken her heart. I’d said horrible things to her and sounded like I meant them. I’d sounded like I didn’t love her.

Another hot tear slipped down my cheek, and I wiped it away.

*Fuck.*

I didn’t think I’d be able to take much more of this.

*I love you, Cali*, I typed back. I stared at the words, knowing I couldn’t send them. It wasn’t worth the risk. Until I figured out a plan, I needed to stay the hell away from her and keep her away from me.

I deleted the text and did the only thing I could think of.

I blocked her number.

# **Episode 3698**

I did a double take. Greyson was going to talk to Ava? Just hearing her name made me feel sick.

I kept my mouth shut, but my expression must have said it all, because Greyson sighed. “I know, love. But I have to. Malakai has threatened us, the Blue Bloods, and the Vanguards—I can only assume he’s done the same with the Samaras.”

Maybe it was my long-running beef with Ava. Or maybe it was the fact that she’d been helping Xavier cheat on me all this time, and I didn’t know how much of that was her fault and how much was Xavier’s. Maybe I was just a petty bitch. But no matter the reason, I couldn’t keep myself from saying, “And?”

“*And* the Samaras have no Alpha,” Greyson said. “We have the same responsibility to have their backs as we do with the Vanguards and the Blue Bloods. In fact, our responsibility is greater because they’re so much more vulnerable than the other packs, yet they still showed up for us. We need to return the favor. You understand that, right?”

“I do,” I said quickly. “And I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have reacted like that. There’s just…”

*What? Unending rage? Jealousy? Enough pettiness that I’m willing to throw away the lives of an entire pack over a man who couldn’t show me the respect of breaking up with me* before *he cheated with Ava?*

“Lots of feelings there,” I said finally.

Greyson nodded. “I know she’s not your favorite—”

“Understatement,” I muttered.

“—but I still have to go. But before I leave, I need you to do one thing for me.”

“What’s that?”

“Promise you’ll still be here when I get back. No impulsive trips to Minnesota, okay?” His lopsided smile told me he was making a joke, but the tension threaded through his voice told me there was some truth behind it. He was afraid I would leave. That he’d come back and I’d have vanished.

“I wouldn’t make a Fae promise about it,” I said, smiling wryly, “but I’m pretty sure I’ll still be training with Artemis by the time you get back.”

He kissed me again, then walked to the door before turning around to look at me. “Hey, I know you’re going through a really rough time right now. And I want you to know I’ll be here for you every step of the way.”

He headed out, leaving me to mull over his parting words.

*He’ll be there every step of the way—he just has to take a detour to see Ava, first…* As soon as the thought occurred to me, I hated myself for thinking it. *What the hell is wrong with me?* *Greyson has been nothing but completely supportive—he literally just said he’d be here for me, no matter what.*

Watching me grieve over my breakup with his brother couldn’t be easy for Greyson, and yet he was still here, still willing to support me in whatever way I needed, even going so far as to offer to come to Minnesota with me. And now he had to go take care of pack business—which, yes, involved Ava—and I’d suddenly lost all sense of trust and appreciation.

I blew out a long breath and rubbed my face. I needed to get my head on straight.

I had no right to question Greyson. There was absolutely nothing going on between him and Ava, no rusty mate bond holding them together and ruining everything. And then there was the whole part where I loved him and trusted him to not betray me.

But if I was being honest with myself, Xavier had battered my ability to trust, just as much as he’d battered my heart.

Why couldn’t Greyson have just *called* Ava? Why did he have to go to her?

I shook myself. *Knock it off, Cali!* It wasn’t fair to project all my anger toward Xavier onto Greyson. Greyson hadn’t done anything to hurt me—he was bending over backward to try to help me heal. Trusting him was the least I could do.

I lingered in the study for a moment to collect myself. I couldn’t stay in here forever, ruminating. Though the quiet was nice. In here, I didn’t have to pretend to be happy or play along with whatever scheme the pack had in mind to cheer me up. It was so incredibly kind of them to be so supportive of me, especially since so many of them had known Xavier much longer, but it was exhausting, too.

But I was serious about my training, even though Greyson had been kind enough to tell me I didn’t need any special training to prove myself as a worthy Luna. I still wanted to be able to say I’d done my best.

Running to Minnesota had been a bad idea. I knew that now, as much as it pained me to consider staying here, I shouldn’t run from everything. That would be a coward’s way out.

I thought again about the words in Big Mac’s letter.

*Choose wisely.*

I could imagine a future with Greyson, one filled with laughter and happiness and fulfillment. I’d pictured possible futures with both of my mates, sometimes in my dreams, occasionally when I was awake. It had always been like peeking into a fantasy, and every glimpse had left me smiling and hopeful.

*But how can I “choose wisely” when there’s no longer a choice to be made? Xavier made it for all of us when he left me.*

I felt a guilty pang in my stomach for not telling Greyson that the killing curse was gone right away. He’d been so attentive, so supportive. How could I neglect to tell him this important piece of information that concerned him?

He certainly hadn’t wasted time telling me that the three witches had helped him get rid of the curse—I’d wanted proof of that, of course, but now I had it. Big Mac had made good on that promise.

What I still didn’t know was what I was going to do, now that I had this proof. I couldn’t exactly keep the knowledge secret forever. Though I supposed I could still go mad by never officially choosing at all, even with Xavier gone.

I let that thought simmer for a solid ten seconds before rolling my eyes at myself. That was senseless—way too morose, even for me.

Maybe, for now, the best approach was not to do anything rash—don’t run off to Minnesota, and don’t worry about making any choices. I was going to be too busy training, anyway, and Greyson was hopefully going to be busy finding a way to prevent a war with the Bitterfangs.

I finally ventured out of the study and headed back to the living room. I must have taken longer in the study than I’d thought, because the party seemed to have withered away.

Lola sidled up to me, her face creased with concern. “Are you okay? I’m sorry if this party was a terrible idea. I never meant to make you run away.”

“Oh, it’s not that.” I gave her a weak smile. “I’m lucky to have a friend like you to help me through this. I didn’t mean to run off. I just had something to take care of.”

She shrugged. “The party was probably a crappy idea, anyway. I just really wanted to do something for you.”

I wrapped my arms around her. “You did. You showed me that everybody cares.”

Lola held up a melted carton of ice cream. “Want some?”

“I’m good, thanks. Have you seen Artemis?”

“She went looking for you, something about more target practice? I’ll help you find her.”

We stashed the melting ice cream in the freezer and headed outside together. Artemis was waiting in the yard.

She grinned when she saw us. “You ready to kick some butt?”

“Artemis is so hardcore,” Lola stage-whispered.

I laughed, something I hadn’t done in far too long. The realization made me think of Xavier and the text message I’d sent him. I pulled out my phone, and anger gripped me again. He hadn’t replied. Of course he hadn’t.

“Cali.” Lola scowled. “I seriously hope you’re not sending Xavier any texts. Show some self-respect—leave him on read.”

“I only sent one,” I said. “I told him we need to talk. He read the message, but he hasn’t replied.”

I blew out a breath. After what he’d said to me, I don’t know why some part of me felt like if we talked about things, we’d resolve whatever had gone wrong. But Xavier was continuing to show no regard for my emotions. It was pissing me the fuck off.

Lola plucked my phone out of my hand. “The only text you should send is this.” She spoke as she typed. “*You’re a dick—*”

“Wait!” I snatched the phone back before Lola had a chance to send the message, but my thumb slipped on the screen, and I let out a cry as I accidentally sent the message myself.

# **Episode 3699**

**Xavier**

I stared down at the phone in my hand, filled with regret and an overwhelming sense of loss. I wished I could block out my heartache as easily as I’d been able to block Cali’s phone number. Doing so had been impulsive and probably cruel, but it had been necessary.

I couldn’t have Cali reaching out to me—not when her life depended on us remaining apart. Every text message, every call, every voicemail would be a temptation. Sooner or later, she’d catch me at a weak moment, and I’d crack. I couldn’t let that happen.

I finished filling up the bike’s tank and pulled out of the gas station. For a moment, I was struck by a fresh wave of displacement. Where the hell was I supposed to go now?

Then I remembered there was a motel just a few miles up the road. I’d passed it hundreds of times without thinking twice, but maybe it could be my refuge for a little while. Just while I figured out what to do next.

As I kept driving, I thought about the server at the bar, and the offer I’d turned down. Even if I hadn’t been irrevocably hung up on Cali, to the point where the idea of having a fling with another woman felt repulsive, that kind of thing had never been my scene. Colton had always been the one who’d enjoyed the occasional hookup—but that had been before he and Maya had realized they were mates.

Now, they were two very volatile peas in a pod. Especially since Maya was pregnant. Sometimes I still couldn’t believe my twin was going to be a father.

I chuckled as he pulled up to the motel. It was exactly the kind of place Colton would’ve used for a hookup, back in the day. They probably rented their rooms by the hour. God, I hoped I’d be able to come up with a plan sooner rather than later—the place was depressing as fuck. It probably had bed bugs, too. The place was so bad, Adéluce might as well have picked it for me herself.

Actually, no. She probably wouldn’t have picked anywhere with a roof. Or indoor plumbing.

I parked my bike and headed inside to the front desk. “Can I get a room?”

The attendant grimaced and shook his head. “I’m so sorry, but the motel is completely booked—there’s a big wedding happening nearby.”

I sighed. *Figures. Why* wouldn’t *the closest roach-infested motel be booked out?*

“Can you recommend another motel nearby? Someplace local.” I didn’t know the exact boundaries of the cage Adéluce had put me in, but I didn’t want to push it. The last thing I needed was to get blasted off another bike for exceeding the limits she’d imposed.

“I’m sorry. It’s the mayor’s daughter’s wedding—all the motels for thirty minutes are booked solid. Lucky us, we got the overflow. You might have better luck in Portland? I know a couple places there that usually have vacancies. Do you want me to make a call for you?”

I shook my head. “No, thanks. Portland’s probably too far.”

The attendant frowned. “Too far for what?”

I was already heading for the door. So, all the motels were out. I couldn’t go back to the pack house. The Samara pack was basically scorched earth, at this point. I’d just have to figure out something else.

I slowed as I reached my parked bike. What was my next move? I couldn’t just keep wandering like this. Well, I *could*. But if I did decide to embrace the aimlessness, I’d be better off shifting and kicking it as a wolf for days on end—and that was one of the few things that sounded more appealing than living in a roach motel.

*I could grab some camping supplies and hang out in the woods for a few days.* It’d at least give me a home base, somewhere to linger until I made my next move. Whatever the hell that would be.

My phone buzzed, and I immediately thought of Cali. Was she calling me? Was she reaching out again? Did she miss me?

A few seconds later, I shook myself. *You blocked her, idiot. She can’t contact you anymore, which was the whole point.*

I checked my phone and let out a long sigh. It was Ava. She’d texted me.

*Call me.*

Fuck. Why the hell couldn’t she just leave me alone?

I decided to ignore the text. Hell, since I was blocking people, maybe it was time to just block her too. Cut that connection and keep her from messing with my life, just like I’d done with Cali. It only seemed fair. If I blocked one mate, shouldn’t I block the other?

I was sliding my phone back into my pocket when it started to ring.

“Fuck.” Ava was calling me now. She was just going to keep doing this, wasn’t she? She wasn’t going to rest, and we were going to keep playing this twisted game of tug-of-war until one of us killed the other. Again.

*She probably wants to yell at me for what I did earlier.*

I didn’t want to talk to her at all. Fortunately for her, I’d had a shitty enough day that talking to her again wouldn’t be the worst thing to happen today. Besides, wasn’t I basically a masochist now?

I answered the phone, and she immediately started speaking, her voice urgent. “Whatever you’re doing, whatever you think of me, forget it. I need you to put it all aside and get back here right now.”

I frowned. “What’s the rush? Did something happen?”

“Geraint is pushing for the Samaras to join the Vanguards, and I’m not sure I can talk the others out of it this time. If you don’t come back here and work your magic on them, the Samara pack might be gone for good by the end of the night.”

*Shit.* This was the last damn thing I needed. The Samaras couldn’t join the Vanguards. For one thing, making the Vanguard pack any stronger than they already were would fuck up the local packs’ balance of power. For another, we’d been advocating too hard against the Vanguards going all Manifest Destiny on the Samara pack to just let it happen now.

But when it came down to it, I knew the main reason why I couldn’t let it happen was because I cared about the Samara pack—and about Ava. And it wouldn’t be good for anyone if they were absorbed by the Vanguard pack. I fully intended to go back to the Redwood pack one day, and it wouldn’t be good for us if the Samara pack, our ally, stopped existing.

I sighed. “I’m on my way.”

I was going to have to change the Samaras’ minds, even if I had to rip Geraint a new asshole in the process.

A very few pissed-off minutes later, I found Ava waiting a short distance from the Samara campsite. One glance at her told me she was upset. My only comfort was that this time, she wasn’t upset with *me*.

I pulled up beside her and realized it was worse than I’d first thought.

*Has she been* crying*?*

“Thanks for coming.”

“Hop on,” I said. “Let’s go see what this is all about.”

She slid onto the bike behind me, wrapping her arms around my waist. My wolf was going nuts, having her so close. He wanted me to *keep* her close, to never let her go.

*Shut the hell up*, I snarled at him. I definitely didn’t have the time or energy for his usual bullshit.

Why the hell couldn’t I feel the same way toward Ava as I did that server? Unlike just about every other woman who wasn’t Cali, Ava didn’t repulse me. Not in any way that really counted. She felt good, pressed up against my back—and I wished like hell that I could’ve felt any other way about it.

Maybe I’d made a mistake, coming back here.

I drove the remaining short distance and immediately spotted Geraint talking to the other Samara wolves. I cut the engine as all eyes turned to Ava and me.

*Please don’t blow this,* she mind linked.

*Thanks for the show of faith. I’ll blow it deliberately if you don’t let go of me,* I snarled back.

She immediately released me and got off the bike. I followed suit, then approached the Samara pack.

Marissa glared at me. “Why am I not surprised to see the two of you together?”

I ignored the dig. “I hear there’s talk about disbanding the Samara pack and joining the Vanguards. Are you taking part in that discussion?”

She grimaced. “I’m just asking questions. The Bitterfangs have the power to wipe us out, anyway—under the banner of a war that your pack helped start. We have no Alpha. No real protection. I hate to admit it, but Geraint has a point—what choice do we have but to join the Vanguards?”

“There’s always a choice,” I retorted. “And you got yourselves involved when you took Julia in. Plus, like I already told you—the other packs will protect you while you search for a new Alpha.”

“Are you going to be our Alpha again?” Perrie asked. I glanced up—Marissa and I had gained an audience. “Are you going to stay this time?”

Before I could answer, my brother stepped out of the woods.

“That’s a good question,” Greyson said. “Are you?”

# **Episode 3700**

**Greyson**

Xavier looked surprised to see me. That made one of us. Xavier hanging around Ava was the most predictable piece of this whole mess. Why *wouldn’t* he have run off to Ava? It seemed like she was always the one he went to, whenever things got hard at the pack house. But apparently he’d been running off to Ava even more often than any of us had thought, if he’d been cheating with her this entire time.

My molars ground together at the thought. It was impossible to ignore the fact that my relationship with Cali would be much simpler if Xavier paired off with Ava once and for all, but the way all of this had gone down left a sour taste in my mouth. Cali deserved so much better than this. Ava too, probably. Yes, she was Xavier’s mate, and yes, their situation was probably more complicated than I’d ever know, but even she deserved to be treated like more than Xavier’s side piece.

*Maybe now they’ll finally make things official and make life less miserable for everyone—themselves included.*

As soon as I had the thought, guilt nagged at my insides. Cali wouldn’t be less miserable if that happened. Not even close.

During my run through the woods to the Samara campsite, I’d tried to imagine where else Xavier might have run off to—whether he’d headed to the lake house or left town entirely. But now, those seemed ridiculous. Why *wouldn’t* he have run to Ava?

Now I’d seen it with my own eyes, and all of Cali’s worst fears were being confirmed. When my duty here was done and I went back to the pack house, I had no idea what I’d tell Cali if she asked after Xavier. Would it be better for her to know the truth? That he’d run off to be with Ava? Or would it be kinder to hide the truth? Xavier had already told her he’d cheated—did she really need me to confirm it?

Xavier smirked and slipped an arm around Ava’s shoulders. “Why are you here?”

That little fucker. He’d shattered Cali’s heart, and apparently he didn’t feel an ounce of remorse. *Is he shitting me right now?*

I still couldn’t believe that he’d actually done this to our mate—to the woman Xavier had professed to love for so long. Seeing the reality of it playing out in front of me was mind-blowing and infuriating, all at once.

I took a deep breath, trying to keep my feelings about my asshole brother out of this. I wasn’t here to confront Xavier—I was here on official Redwood pack business, and that needed to be my focus. I couldn’t let personal grievances cloud my judgment right now.

“I’m here because Malakai of the Bitterfang pack has made threatening phone calls to the Redwood, Vanguard, and Blue Blood packs,” I said, speaking to the group at large.

The news seemed to ripple through the Samara ranks. They didn’t react with surprise, though. More like dread.

“He’s threatened us too,” said a young woman who I recognized as Lilac’s newfound mate, Perrie.

*That sounds about right.* Apparently, Malakai was as thorough as he was aggressive. He’d now officially threatened all four of the packs on his shit list.

I turned my full attention to Ava. Xavier wasn’t the Samara Alpha—he wasn’t even a member of the pack. There was no need for me to address him like he was important, or even relevant.

“Lucian has invited all the Alphas to meet, so we can discuss our options. We’re still hoping to avoid an all-out war, if possible. Since the Samaras are currently without an Alpha, I think it would be best if you come to the meeting on behalf of your pack, Ava.”

Another Samara pack member, Marissa, piped up. “Are you still going to protect us? It’s pretty obvious that we’ll be the easiest for the Bitterfangs to pick off, when they attack.”

Fear rippled through the crowd, and I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes. It was a fair question, but inciting panic and hysteria wasn’t going to help anyone. All it would do was lead to rash decisions, and right now, we couldn’t afford to make any mistakes. That was probably exactly what Malakai had been hoping for when he’d reached out with his threats—to knock the allied packs off-kilter and make us easier targets. We had to be smart about this. Our lives were on the line.

“My pack and I will protect you,” I assured them. “But you are going to have to find an Alpha, eventually. Everybody knows that a pack without an Alpha is vulnerable and weak. The Redwoods want to see the Samaras become strong again.”

“I’ll go,” Ava said. “It’s not like we have a choice.” She turned to the others. “Unless you’d rather we all go to the Vanguards so you can bow down before Lucian?”

I frowned. *What the hell is she talking about? I thought the Samaras already turned down Lucian’s proposal?*

Unless Lucian had made another offer? I’d thought he’d given up on the venture, but I’d also learned the hard way never to underestimate the princeling. He was shrewder than he let on, and it wouldn’t have surprised me in the least to learn that his invitation to meet was less about coming up with a strategy to fight the Bitterfangs and more about trying to expand his influence—along with the size of his pack.

“Fine, we won’t go to the Vanguards for now,” Geraint said. “But Greyson’s right—we need an Alpha.”

Several of the Samara wolves nodded in agreement.

“Why can’t Xavier be Alpha?” Perrie asked.

Several others chimed in to voice their approval of this idea. I pulled in a deep breath. This wasn’t *about* Xavier. He didn’t even have the right to be part of this conversation—the idea of him becoming Alpha of a pack he didn’t belong to was just plain ridiculous.

I met my brother’s eyes. He was smirking again, but the smugness didn’t reach his eyes. I didn’t have time to linger on that, though. Before he could respond, I cut in.

“Xavier is a Redwood,” I said flatly. “He can’t be your Alpha.”

My brother’s eyes narrowed. Clearly, he didn’t like that I was stealing his thunder. I couldn’t have given less of a shit about how he felt. What I was saying was the truth, and Xavier knew it.

“When is this pack meeting taking place?” Ava asked.

“I’m waiting for confirmation from Lucian, though I imagine it’ll happen soon,” I said. “I’ll keep you updated.”

“Thank you.” She nodded. “I’ll be there.”

“Great.” I turned my gaze on Xavier. “Can we talk in private?”

I turned away and started walking before he could refuse. I wasn’t playing games with him today—we were going to talk. Well, *I* was going to talk, and if he had even the slightest idea what was good for him, he was going to listen.

“Why?” he called after me. “I have nothing to say to you.”

When I turned back around, the bastard hadn’t moved an inch. “You’ll come and talk to me because *I’m your fucking Alpha*, and I’m ordering you to do so.”

That seemed to get his attention. He stalked forward, closing the space between us. “You were my Alpha. But not anymore.”

*Fucking hell. The dramatics with this one.* Colton never would’ve given me this amount of shit.

Well. Maybe.

I glanced around, noting our still-present Samara audience, then grabbed Xavier by the arm and started dragging him away. He shoved me off immediately.

“Say what you came to say and then get the hell out,” he snapped.

He wanted the entire Samara pack to know what a heartless asshole he was? Fine. *Don’t say I didn’t try to be civil…*

“What the hell do you mean, I’m not your Alpha?” I snapped.

“Oh, you’re right,” he said sarcastically. “I should’ve said that you’re my crappy, ineffective, impotent Alpha.”

His words hung between us, and I heard the Samara pack pull in a collective breath.

My vision went red. “You’re still a member of the Redwood pack, and therefore under my control.”

“No, I’m not,” he snarled. “Not anymore.”

That brought me up short, a little of my anger fading to make way for shock. “What, are you actually joining the Samaras? Or are you going Rogue? What the fuck are you doing, Xavier? Do *you* even know?”

“I’m no longer a Redwood pack member, and that’s all you need to know,” he snapped, his lip curling. “You can go back to your pathetic pack now.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I demanded. “Did you get a lobotomy or something? You’ve always been an ass, but you’ve never acted like this before.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know what to tell you.”

I shook my head. “You know what? Fine. You feel free to do whatever the hell you want. But before I go back to my *pathetic pack*, there’s a question you’re going to have to answer.” I eyed him, a fresh surge of fury building up in my chest. “Why did you do this to Cali? You’re pissed at me, fine. Hate me, fight me, hurl abuse at me, I don’t care. But when you left—*before* you left—you hurt the woman I love. You hurt the woman *you* were supposed to love. And if I didn’t know it would hurt her even more, I’d kill you for that alone, you despicable fucking coward.”

Xavier threw his head back and laughed. “Well then, what are you waiting for?”

And before I could respond, he shifted and lunged at me.

# **Episode 3701**

“*Oh my god!*” I screeched, staring down at the phone in my hand and the message I’d accidentally just sent. The message that called Xavier a dick. The message I definitely had *not* written, even if I’d sort of been the one to send it. I turned to Lola. “What have you done? What do I *do*?”

I looked back down at my phone, scrolling frantically, looking for a way to delete the text.

*He hasn’t had a chance to read it yet, right? So maybe I can unsend it! There has to be a way to unsend it! Where’s the undo button? Every modern device has one, right? RIGHT?*

I was freaking out, and Lola wasn’t helping one bit. She looked at me, wide-eyed. “Wait, Cali. Did you actually send that text? *Why?* I thought you didn’t want to!”

“I don’t! I didn’t mean to! It was an accident. My finger slipped and now it’s just… out there! What am I going to do? Xavier’s going to see this sooner or later and think I sent it to him!”

Lola shrugged. “I mean, technically, you did send it.”

“Not helping!”

“What? I don’t get why you’re so upset. Yeah, you wanted to take the high road, and that’s classy of you, but at the end of day, Xavier *is* a dick. And if that fact is somehow news to him, then you’re doing him a kindness by letting him know. And now he will.”

“I don’t think he’s a dick. I mean I *do*, right now, but I don’t want to keep texting him,” I said. “The more I keep texting him, the more he knows I’m even thinking about him when I don’t want to be.” It hurt too much and yet I couldn’t stop.

Lola sighed. “Cali, can I give you some tough love?”

I braced myself. Lola was a wild card whether she was giving tough love or not—but she did give good advice. Sometimes.

*When she’s not suggesting that I let Ava and Xavier sleep together…*

Okay, so I was definitely not over that not-so-stellar suggestion, but the point was, Lola cared about me. She had my back. So whatever she was about to say, I knew it would be coming from a place of love.

“Go ahead,” I said warily.

“Show some damn self-respect! I’m trying to be understanding and supportive because you’re going through hell right now, but when someone treats you the way Xavier did, then that person needs to be called out. I always liked Xavier, but you will always come first. I know you didn’t write those words, and you didn’t want to send them, but that doesn’t mean you should feel bad about that message finding its way to Xavier anyway. It’s the truth! He *is* a dick. He treated you like garbage, and he doesn’t deserve a fraction of the kindness you’re showing him.”

I knew Lola wasn’t wrong. There was just a not-so-small part of me that was still struggling to view Xavier with anything other than love and care. It was like I’d compartmentalized all my anger for him and all my love for him, and right now the love box was open and the anger one was closed, and all I could think about was how badly my accidental message could hurt his feelings.

I started to type an apology, but Lola yanked my phone out of my hand. “Oh, no you don’t.”

“Lola! Give it back!”

“I’m sorry, Cali, but you’ve proven that you can’t be trusted with this device right now. So until you come to your senses, I’m going to be your texting editor.”

“I don’t need an editor,” I growled.

“See? Stuff like that is what makes me think you can’t be trusted. You need to make sure *Cali* is okay. That’s your only job right now. Screw Xavier. He was the one who hurt you—he should be the one making sure *you’re* okay, but all you’ve gotten from him is radio silence. So why are you tying yourself into knots over a guy who can’t be bothered to show you even half the consideration you’re showing him?”

Lola’s words hit me like a runaway train. *Oh my god. She’s right.*

“Okay, fine,” I conceded. “Maybe you have a point.”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course I have a point.”

“Xavier *did* hurt me. Badly. And yeah, he’s not asking how I’m doing. He probably doesn’t even care. But that doesn’t mean I can just stop caring for him or worrying about him. My feelings for him didn’t just disappear when he broke up with me. It’s not like there’s a switch I can just turn off.”

“Well, maybe you should start trying to install one,” Lola retorted. “And stop groveling. It’s really hard to watch.”

“I’m not groveling!” I snapped. “Wanting to talk to someone isn’t groveling.”

She glared. “In this case, it’s a very fine line.”

I held out my hand. “Give me my phone. Now.”

Lola rolled her eyes and handed it over. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

I started to type, and she immediately groaned.

“Ugh, did you not listen to a *single thing* I just said?” she demanded. “Don’t do this. At the very least, you should give him time to absorb the message, maybe make him feel just a *little* bit bad for what he did.”

“I’ll let the dick text speak for itself then.”

I stared down at the apology I’d typed. But maybe there was some sense to just letting things hang for a moment and not spamming him with messages. If he didn’t want to talk to me, an apology for the accidental message wouldn’t change that.

I deleted my apology, and Lola, who was peering over my shoulder, smiled from ear to ear. “See? You finally get it. Let Xavier sweat it out. And if anyone’s going to reach out, it should be him.”

“Are you guys about done over there?” Artemis called. “It’s cold, and we have a lot of work to do.”

“Yeah, Cali.” Lola winked at me. “Maybe you should put your phone away and concentrate on your training. In the meantime, I’m going to clean up the remains of our ill-fated breakup party.”

She hugged me, and despite our argument, it was the easiest thing in the world to hug her back.

“Thank you, Lola,” I whispered.

“You know I’m always looking out for you.”

She headed inside, and I moved to slide my phone in my pocket and walk toward Artemis, but then I hesitated. It really wasn’t sitting right with me to just leave that message hanging.

The truth was, I just wanted to say my piece to him. I deserved that much after he’d just talked *at* me without giving me a chance to weigh in. And if the call started going south, I could always just hang up.

“Hang on, Artemis,” I said, “I’ll be right there.”

I called Xavier.

When he answered the call after only one ring, the sound of his voice almost made me start crying again. My heart raced, and my throat felt tight, almost like I couldn’t breathe. *Be strong Cali. Be strong.*

“Xavier,” I said. A question was on the tip of my tongue—I was going to ask how he was doing—but then I realized I wasn’t actually speaking with Xavier himself. I was hearing his voicemail message.

I cleared my throat as the beep finished. I tried to sound casual and matter-of-fact, even though I’d never felt more fragile.

“Hey, Xavier, it’s Cali. Obviously. My name probably came up on your phone to say I called. Because that’s how phones work.” Oh god. This was already going off the rails. “Anyway, I’m calling because you will have received a sort of mean text. Lola wrote it, and I accidentally sent it, but it was never meant to go to you, and I’m sorry if you read it and it… bothered you.” I stopped to pull in a breath. “No. You know what? I hope it did bother you. Because the truth is, you *are* being a dick. You’re being a raging asshole, Xavier, and somehow, I still wanted to hear your voice… And that fucking pisses me off. I still don’t understand why you left or why you had to be so… *mean*. But I know you better than you think, and I know you’re not telling me everything.”

I paused, the phone pressed to my ear, staring down at my shoes.

“And you want to know the worst part? Somehow, even though I know I should hate you for everything you said to me, I still fucking love you. I believe you still love me. How fucked up is that? I’m so confused. I think maybe you’re confused, too, and I just want to talk. I deserve a conversation—that’s the least you could do.” My voice cracked, and hot, angry tears slipped down my cheeks. “Bye.”

I hung up, just as Lola popped her head out the back door. “WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING? ARE YOU *CALLING* *HIM?*”

My cheeks heated, but there was no point trying to lie. I’d been caught in the act. “I left him a pretty pissed-off message. He didn’t pick up anyway. It went straight to voicemail.”

Lola came over, a frown twisting her mouth as she wrapped me in a hug. “I’m sorry. But I mean, there might be a reason why he didn’t pick up?”

I sniffled, wiping away the tears. He didn’t deserve them. “Like that he broke up with me? Yeah, I get it, Lola.”

“Sorry, I’m not trying to make you feel worse,” she said. “I’m just protective. I’m glad you gave him a piece of your mind. He’s an ass, though. He doesn’t deserve any more of your time. If it went to voicemail right away, that probably means he blocked you.”

Her words sent a dagger through my chest. “You think he *blocked me*?”

# **Episode 3702**

**Xavier**

I slammed into Greyson just as he shifted. The sounds of snarls and growls immediately filled the air. I sank my teeth into his shoulder while he was still shifting and felt it stretch and grow beneath my teeth as his blood filled my mouth.

Then all four of his massive, razor-tipped paws slammed into me, sending me reeling and breaking my hold on his shoulder. Satisfaction hummed through my veins. He thought he was the big bad Alpha, thought he could control me, but I was the one who’d drawn first blood.

He didn’t let me savor that victory for long. As I skidded back from the force of his kick, he lunged at me and we tumbled across the snowy ground, a wild mess of snapping teeth and clawing limbs, of growls and snarls.

God, I needed this more than I wanted to admit. Those loser humans I’d fought in the bar hadn’t been enough—they’d been way too easy to beat. As tough as they’d tried to look, I still could have taken the whole damn group with one arm tied behind my back. And their punches? Pathetic. They’d barely gone skin deep. Any minor hurts they’d inflicted had healed almost immediately. The pain from that fight hadn’t even been *remotely* enough to distract from the pain I was feeling over Cali.

But my brother was a far worthier opponent. This was a man who could rip me limb from limb if he wanted to. If I let him. Every time his claws and teeth tore through my skin, every time those powerful limbs slammed into me, bruising to the bone, I savored it. *This* was what I needed, and I deserved a hell of a lot worse for what I’d put Cali through. What I was still putting her through. To say nothing of the hurt I was inflicting elsewhere. Adéluce had forced me to burn my life down, and there was collateral damage everywhere I looked.

Greyson’s teeth sank into my leg, and I yelped before flipping him onto his back. My claws dragged across his chest, leaving blood streaming in their wake. Despite the guilt that threatened to drown me, I wasn’t above inflicting a little physical pain of my own—at least where Greyson was concerned.

If my brother hadn’t kept me from making sure Adéluce had died, back at Crater Lake, none of this would’ve happened. Cali wouldn’t have been put through hell, slowly declining while the remnants of Seluna’s ashes wreaked havoc. And I wouldn’t have wound up trapped in Adéluce’s little contract, destroying my own life one impossible choice at a time.

Greyson slammed into me again, his teeth sinking into the nape of my neck. He pinned me down, knocking the breath out of my lungs. The sharp pain that rocked through my neck, the stutter and heave of my lungs as they tried to suck in oxygen, the multiple sharp pressure points of his claws digging into my back and haunches—it all blended together. And for a split second, I didn’t think about Cali at all. I didn’t *think*, period.

And then Greyson let me go, stepping away and giving me a chance to suck down air and scramble to my feet. The moment I got my bearings, I lunged at him again. I wasn’t afraid to hurt him, but more than that, I wanted him to have every opportunity to hurt *me*, and I was nowhere near done.

“We have to stop them,” I heard Perrie say to Ava. “We can’t let them do this to each other!”

Over Greyson’s shoulder, I saw Perrie dart toward us. Ava yanked her back. “Don’t! You never want to get between two fighting Alphas.” Then Ava turned to us. “Stop—both of you! This isn’t helping anything.”

Hell, no. I was just getting started.

Greyson pinned me again, and his teeth sank deep into my shoulder—deep enough that my blood spurted into his mouth, my body going rigid for a split second from the sheer agony. It was perfect. And somehow, not nearly enough.

*That’s all you got?* I taunted him through the mind link. *What kind of Alpha are you, anyway?*

I reared up and dug my teeth into Greyson’s leg, blood and flesh and fur filling my mouth. It was barely a graze, but his growl was music to my ears. He grabbed me by the neck and threw me, and my body skidded several feet.

Then he shifted back to human and held up his hands. “I’m done.”

I mind linked to him with a growl. *Are you seriously giving up already?*

I lunged toward him, but Ava—shifted into her wolf form—jumped in front of me, and I screeched to a stop. My wolf was torn—attack Greyson or listen to Ava. Either way, I didn’t think I’d be able to bring myself to plow through Ava in order to get to my brother.

Greyson let his hands drop. It was gratifying to see all the still-healing slashes and bite marks I’d left on him. “I should beat you to a bloody pulp for what you’ve done, but I’m not going to give you what you want.”

I froze. *Shit. Am I that transparent?*

Greyson must have seen right through me.

I realized then that my brother was never going to fully engage me in a fight. Not in any way that could truly hurt me. Just like I didn’t really want to kill him.

I shifted back with a growl, and Greyson spat the blood from his mouth. “I’m not going to let you use me to help you feel better for what you did. I’m not your fucking therapist, but it doesn’t take a genius to see you’re trying to punish yourself for what you did to Cali. But that’s your dysfunction to work through—I’m not going to help you destroy yourself.”

I didn’t know what pissed me off more—that my brother was being fucking useless as usual, or that he was calling me on my shit. I hated that he knew me so well, especially when I’d done all I could to put as much distance between us as possible. I didn’t want his fucking pity, or his empathy. I knew he was angry at me, rightfully so, and I wished he’d just man the fuck up and give me the beating he so clearly wanted to dish out. That would’ve been a hell of a lot better than dealing with this Dr. Phil bullshit—even if everything he was saying was true.

Not that I’d ever admit it—not to Greyson, and certainly not in front of the Samaras.

Greyson shifted his gaze to Ava. “I’ll let you know when Lucian finalizes the details of the meeting.” Then he gave me one last, lingering look. “I hope you feel you made the right decision.”

With that, he shifted and left.

*Fucking Greyson.* Didn’t he know I didn’t want him to be the bigger man right now? I wished I had some snarky comment for him, something to get under his skin, but my mind was blank as I watched him disappear into the woods, heading back to the pack house.

But my anger at him didn’t last for long. Because *his* comment was the one that had gotten under *my* skin, and now all I could think about was what he’d said about Cali and the image of Cali’s expression when I’d left her. It was all playing on a loop in my brain, my brother’s voice superimposed over the pure devastation in Cali’s eyes when I’d shattered her heart.

*Fuck*. This was the exact opposite of what I needed. It was the exact kind of emotional reaction I’d been trying so hard to avoid.

Ava scowled and turned her back on me. “You can find more clothes in the Airstream. But when you’re dressed, you should leave.”

Now that the fight was over, the other Samaras dispersed.

“Ava, wait,” I called.

She rounded on me, anger etched into her expression. “*Wait?* I don’t think so. Today alone, you’ve driven off my last Alpha candidate and used me as a prop in your little war with your brother—do you really think I’m in the mood to deal with more of your bullshit?”

I blinked. “What are you talking about?

“Don’t think I didn’t notice how you put your arm around me when Greyson first showed up,” Ava snapped. “But it wasn’t for my benefit, was it? It was to piss off your brother.”

I couldn’t argue with that, so I didn’t try.

“I won’t let you use me like that,” Ava continued. “You won’t even talk to me about us—about the kiss we shared on New Year’s Eve, and what happened in the Airstream.” She stepped closer, her eyes flashing. “You need to tell me what you did to Cali. Unless you do that, you need to stay away.”

# **Episode 3703**

I stared at Lola, aghast. “You think Xavier *blocked* *me*? Why? Why would he do that?”

“Whoa.” She put her hands up. “Take a breath, okay? That’s just one of the possibilities, and mind you, it’s the worst one. I never said that Xavier *did* block you. In fact, I seriously doubt he would. It would take things to a whole other level, for him to just cut you out of his life completely. My point is, there are a lot of reasons why he might not have picked up the phone. You shouldn’t just assume the worst.”

But now that it was out there, I couldn’t not think about it. Why *wouldn’t* Xavier have blocked me? He’d cut me out of his life already, hadn’t he? He’d broken up with me, said such awful things, and had apparently been cheating with Ava. He’d left the pack house, and he wasn’t responding to my texts or answering my calls. With all that in mind, blocking me actually seemed like the logical next step, didn’t it?

“Lola, what if he did block me?” I asked quietly, my heart sinking. “Should I block him?”

*Why did I have to send that stupid text? Classic Cali, always finding new and creative ways to make things more pathetic.* If I’d just been a little bit more careful, I wouldn’t have ended up in this situation. My emotion had gotten the better of me—both my anger and my sadness. I wished I’d listened to Lola in the first place and not said anything.

“Cali!” Artemis yelled. “Are we doing this or what?”

“Yes!” I called instinctively. But I wasn’t sure if that was true. It felt like the fire inside me—the fire that had urged me to train, to become the best and most impressive Luna I could be—had been snuffed out. Now I just felt plain old disappointed. Confused as hell.

*Xavier doesn’t want to talk to me. He doesn’t want to see me.*

*He doesn’t* want *me.*

And maybe the accidental text didn’t even matter. Maybe the phone call and the voicemail were irrelevant, too. Maybe nothing I did—good or bad—had the power to change a damn thing, didn’t have the power to make Xavier love me again.

Maybe, in his mind, this distance Xavier was putting between us was a kindness. Maybe he was trying to prove how much he’d meant every word he’d said to me before he left. I was all over the place, my heart in pieces—trying to pretend it didn’t hurt so much, trying to pretend I didn’t miss him, acting like my concern for him was simple human compassion. But Xavier himself had been nothing but consistent.

He’d cheated on me. He’d lied to me. He’d told me he didn’t want me anymore. And then he’d left.

And now he was staying gone—in every definition of the word.

“Hey.” Lola grabbed my shoulders. “There could be a perfectly reasonable explanation for all this. Don’t jump to conclusions, okay?”

I barely heard her as my anger rose.

“I’m serious, Cali. The voicemail message could just mean that his phone was off. It doesn’t mean he doesn’t want to talk to you, or that he’s blocked you, or anything like that,” she said. “But if he did, he really is a dick.”

Her reassurance did absolutely nothing to make me feel better. With the idea that Xavier might have blocked me, that he might have been actively choosing not to speak to me, reality sank in. He was choosing to do these things, regardless. These were his actions, not some happenstance and if he wanted to change them, he could. But he wasn’t.

*Is this really how he wants things to be between us?*

I wasn’t done with him, but apparently, that didn’t matter. It didn’t matter that our relationship felt like an unfinished novel to me, didn’t matter that I felt like there had to be more.

Xavier wasn’t going to provide any more. He was done. Even if I wasn’t.

Emotion clogged my throat, and hot tears burned in my eyes.

“Shit. I’m sorry, Artemis!” I blurted out before running inside.

“Cali! Wait!” Lola called after me.

“What did you do?” Artemis shouted at her.

Pure emotion drove me as I raced into the house. I had no idea what to do, where to go, how to overcome the claustrophobic feeling that was stealing my breath. Everywhere I turned, memories of Xavier slapped me in the face. I couldn’t escape him. Couldn’t escape my own heartache. I wanted to rip them down from the walls of my mind. Scream. *Something.*

This house was where we’d first begun. Where I’d first met Xavier. This was *precisely* why I’d thought about going to Minnesota. Not because I wanted to get away from Greyson or the pack, but because I was desperate to escape all my memories of Xavier. Here in the pack house, there was nowhere to hide—Xavier was everywhere.

“Cali?”

I jolted at the sound of my father’s voice and turned to face him, tears slipping down my cheeks. “Dad?”

“Oh, sweetheart.” He pulled me into a hug and rubbed my back. “It’s going to be okay. I know it doesn’t feel like it, but things will get better.”

I shook my head, smearing my tear-stained cheeks against his shirt. “It hurts so much, it’s like I can’t breathe. I’m angry, then I’m sad, then I’m back to pissed off. How am I supposed to survive this?”

“You will,” he said simply. “It’s just going to hurt like hell in the meantime. Just try to breathe, okay? You don’t have to talk if you don’t feel like it.”

“What am I supposed to do about Xavier?” I could barely force the words out, I was sobbing so hard. “H-He left me, Dad. Just like that. He’s g-gone.”

This pain was worse than the *due destini* veins and the Seluna mark put together. I wasn’t just feeling it in my body—I felt it in my soul, like I was being ripped apart from the inside out.

Dad patted my back and held me a little tighter. “I don’t know if there *is* anything you can do, sweetie. I’m still learning about werewolf stuff—it’s still new to me—but it might not actually have anything to do with you.”

“What?” I blinked, squeezing the tears out of my eyes until I could see my father clearly. How could this *not* be about me? Xavier had been so cruel. He’d admitted to cheating. All his reasons for leaving—as far as I knew, as far as he’d told me—were related to me.

If this wasn’t my fault, then why hadn’t he just told me that? Why hadn’t he even tried to work things out before breaking my heart and running off?

Dad gently eased me out of his arms and stepped back. “When I was in college, I had a girlfriend. One I really loved.”

“W-What?” I wiped my face. “Dad, no offense, but I don’t really want to hear about your dating history right now.”

“Just hear me out, okay? I was struggling with one of my classes, and I realized I couldn’t balance both. Even though I really cared about this girl, deeply, I had to choose. And I chose my grades. My future. So we broke up.”

“Okay.” I mulled this over, then shook my head. “Are you saying Xavier couldn’t… balance me with something else?” The only *something* that came to mind was Ava, and I was already upset, I just didn’t want to venture down that rabbit hole. “No, that doesn’t make sense. I’m not Xavier’s girlfriend—I’m his mate. You don’t choose anything over your mate, do you?”

My dad shrugged. “Like I said, I’m new to this werewolf thing. But whatever it is, whatever made Xavier run off the way he did, it couldn’t possibly have anything to do with my beautiful, smart daughter.” He kissed my forehead. “I wish there was something else I could say or do to help. The best advice I can offer is to try to let him go, at least for now. Don’t run from the pain, but don’t wallow it in either. You just have to accept that Xavier made a decision, and try to let things run their course.”

Fresh tears burned my eyes at the thought of letting Xavier go. “I don’t know if I can do that.”

“I know,” he said. “But if Xavier still cares for you—and how could he not?—he’ll come back in some capacity.” A glimmer of hope bloomed in my chest—at least until my dad added, “I’ve come to care for Xavier, but I want my daughter to be with someone who will always choose her. Like I always choose your mother, and she always chooses me. You deserve that, and so much more.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

He gave me one last hug before heading off down the hallway. I took a deep breath, thinking about what my dad had said. Everyone was giving me advice, and I was grateful for that. Truly. But all that advice seemed to revolve around how to cope with Xavier leaving me—a concept that was not only painful, but still felt bizarrely unthinkable.

Could I really let go of Xavier? And if I did find a way, what would that mean for me and Greyson?

# **Episode 3704**

**Greyson**

I wouldn’t have thought it possible, but as I headed back to the pack house, I felt more annoyed with my brother than I’d been when I left. Then again, maybe I shouldn’t have been surprised. Xavier was a fucking magician when it came to pissing me off. He always had been. Now was no exception—only this time was so much worse than usual, because he’d brought Cali into it.

It had been clear almost from the very beginning of our fight that Xavier had instigated it as a way to try to absolve himself for what he’d done to Cali. Hurt your mate, then get beaten up by your older brother, aka your mate’s other mate.

It was fucked up—*beyond* fucked up—but it was exactly what he’d been after. Xavier would never admit it, but I knew him pretty well by now. He was my brother, after all. And I knew that when it came to Cali, whether he wanted her to know it or not, his emotions were in the driver’s seat. And it really pissed me off that he’d tried to use me to punish himself.

If Xavier was self-aware enough to know he’d done something horrible to Cali, then why the hell couldn’t he just own his actions, come back, apologize, and try to absolve himself the normal, healthy way? Why turn it into a vicious fight where he was looking to be the loser?

The only explanation I could think of for why he’d choose violence over actually solving things with Cali was that he didn’t actually *want* to solve things. Maybe he did hate himself for hurting Cali, but still didn’t want to fix things with her. I’d seen him put his arm around Ava. It made sense that Xavier had gone running back to her, like always, but I just wasn’t sure they were rekindling things. There was something about the way Xavier had looked at me as he’d slung his arm around his ex-mate that made me wonder if it had been some sort of act.

Why, I couldn’t even begin to imagine.

It wasn’t that I didn’t think Ava and Xavier getting back together would be a good thing—at least for Cali and me—but Xavier had absolutely devastated Cali when he’d left. It was like he’d deliberately gone out of his way to be as hurtful as possible.

And *that* was what really pissed me off about this whole thing. If Xavier really wanted to choose Ava over Cali, he could’ve just been honest about it. He could’ve been kind. Gentle. Respectful of Cali’s feelings, even if he had slipped up with Ava before deciding to be with her once and for all.

Instead, he’d been a snake. It sounded like he’d cheated on Cali for a long while before finally breaking things off, and then he’d been a complete asshole about it. It just didn’t sit right with me, and all my instincts were screaming at me to protect Cali from the person who’d hurt her—to hurt that person in return, even though he was my own brother.

But this wasn’t just about Cali. It was about the pack, too. If Xavier truly wanted to leave and become a rogue again, or even shack up with the Samaras, it would be a huge blow to the Redwood pack, from a logistical standpoint.

Xavier was one of the strongest wolves under my command, and he was the secondary leader of the pack. In choosing to accept my leadership, he’d glued together the broken fragments of the Redwood pack—the people who’d chosen to follow me, and those who would’ve preferred to follow him.

If Xavier left the pack, I’d still have Rishika, Ravi, and Jay—all very strong in their own right—but Xavier was Xavier. The power he carried in the pack was about more than just his fighting abilities. I liked to think that I’d proven myself as Alpha to those who’d joined under Xavier, and that at this point, they’d stay even if he left—especially considering the manner in which he’d exited the pack house. But I also didn’t want to face the reality of leading the Redwood pack without him, or the challenges that would pop up if he left. He was strong. I wanted him on my sidde. I hoped things wouldn’t actually come to him leaving for good.

*Maybe he really just needs some time away. He can work out whatever issues he has going on, then come back having pulled his head out of his ass.*

But that thought didn’t bring much comfort. If anything, it just pissed me off even more that he felt he had the license to burn bridges wherever he went, leaving everyone else to ride out the destruction.

I deliberately took the long way back to the pack house, hoping that I’d be able to run out some of my anger.

*It’s not worth it.* He’s *not worth it*,I reminded myself. *If Xavier really wants to run off and be an ass, it’s best to just let him go.*

I was still his older brother, but if I didn’t have to be his keeper anymore, then all the better. Without all his background grumbling, I’d be able to truly focus on leading the pack through the minefield of threats we had on the horizon—and I’d be able to devote myself properly to Cali, who needed me more than ever.

I’d meant it when I’d told her I wanted her to talk to me about her feelings, even if they had to do with Xavier. Of course it was difficult for me to see her miss him so much, to see how heartbroken she was over his absence—but I loved her, and above all, I wanted her to be happy. However long that took, and whatever the process required.

Still, it was a little maddening to see how deep her relationship with Xavier ran, especially because my asshat of a brother didn’t seem to care half as much as she did.

I shook off the frustration. *Just be there for her. She’s the woman you love, the woman you want to be with. Don’t fuck up this chance to go all in with her.*

I still didn’t know whether to tell her I’d seen Xavier at the Samara campsite. I honestly didn’t know if that knowledge would make her feel better or worse. She deserved to know the truth, and I didn’t want to keep it from her, I just wasn’t totally sure what that truth meant.

I reached the pack house just as Rishika, Sage, and Zainab came in from patrol.

“Hey,” I said.

“Did you see Ava?” Rishika asked.

“Yeah. I think she’ll show up at the Alpha meeting, but we won’t know for sure until Lucian calls it.”

“Is it true that Xavier is with Ava now?” Sage asked bluntly.

Zainab elbowed her in the side. “Don’t ask that!”

“Well, it’s a fair question!” Sage protested. “We all heard what he said to Cali. If he doesn’t want anyone to know about his relationship with Ava, then he probably shouldn’t have talked so loud.”

I sighed. “You’re not wrong, but I promise, I don’t know where my brother stands right now—about anything. I’d suggest keeping your focus on the Bitterfang threat.”

Sage and Zainab nodded and headed off, and I turned to Rishika.

“I know this is a big ask in a werewolf pack house,” I said, “but can you try to make sure people keep the gossip to a minimum? It’ll only hurt Cali if she overhears it.”

She nodded. “It *is* a big ask, but I’ll do my best.”

I headed inside, wanting nothing more than a shower. I needed to clean off the dirt and sweat and dried blood from my fight with Xavier before I saw Cali again. But then Elle intercepted me in the foyer.

“You look like you are thinking too hard about something,” she said. “Is it the meeting with Lucian?

I shook my head. “No, I’m not very worried about that.”

“Good. You shouldn’t be,” she said approvingly. “You are a good Alpha, and if there is a war, I will support you.”

A small smile tugged at my lips. It was good to know she was on the pack’s side. “And Lucian?”

She thought for a moment. “He has proven himself to be more impressive than I first thought, and I do like him, but my loyalty is still to you.”

Honestly, after potentially losing Xavier, it was pretty damn good to hear that *someone* still felt loyal toward me. Elle was a fierce and smart wolf, and she would only keep getting better. She’d really become an asset to the pack.

“Thanks, Elle,” I said.

I was about to head upstairs when she caught my arm. “I wanted to ask you something. How is Cali?”

My brows rose. “Not great. Why do you ask?”

“I have heard a lot of talk about ‘heartbreak’? Did Cali’s heart break? How is she still walking?”

Ah.

“Oh, I see,” I said. “No, it’s not like that. It’s not literal. Cali’s heart is physically okay.”

I didn’t really want to get into the specifics of everything, especially when I’d just asked Rishika to help curtail the gossip.

“But what does heartbreak mean for a mate?” Elle pressed. “If Cali has her heart broken and she has the *due destini* bond with you, what happens to your heart?”

# **Episode 3705**

**Xavier**

*Fucking Greyson.* Why the hell had he felt the need to mention Cali in front of Ava? This situation was already fucked up enough without bringing Ava into it too. It was none of her goddamn business, anyway. My deal with Adéluce had nothing to do with Ava, and getting into my separate-but-no-less-fucked-up baggage with my first mate was something I just didn’t have the bandwidth for at the moment. I couldn’t be emotionally responsible for any more heartache right now, and while Ava wasn’t my favorite person, I had come to care for her again, in my own way.

I didn’t want to put a target on her back with Adéluce, too.

I raised an eyebrow. “You’re asking what I did to Cali?”

First Kira, then Greyson, and now Ava—they were all coming to me, demanding an explanation I couldn’t give. Not while Adéluce was still pulling my strings. But standing here with Ava, I wanted to explain. I wanted to tell her the truth—all of it. I wanted to tell her that all the ugly things I’d done were wrapped up in love. In sacrifice.

What had I done to Cali? I’d only saved her life, that was all. And in doing so, I’d torn my own life apart.

But nobody would ever know the truth. They’d just keep thinking I was a selfish asshole who didn’t give a shit about all the damage he was leaving behind. But that was the deal I’d made with Adéluce, wasn’t it? Burn every bridge, give no explanations. Make Cali and everyone else hate me.

Better they all think I’m a selfish ass than have Cali dead.

And I could live with that outcome, because it was the price I was paying to save Cali’s life. Also, I didn’t actually care what anyone thought of me, except for Cali. And allowing her to think I didn’t love her anymore was the hardest thing I’d ever done. It had twisted up my entire life, my heart, my soul, and every relationship I had—good and bad.

When I’d agreed to this deal with Adéluce, my only concern had been saving Cali. It had never occurred to me that to see it through, I’d have to drop a bomb in my own life and hope that after I figured out a way to escape the deal, there would still be pieces for me to pick up.

And if there weren’t any pieces left? Well, maybe Adéluce would win anyway.

“Yes,” Ava said defiantly. “I’d like to know what you did to Cali. What was Greyson talking about?”

I glared. “Why are you so quick to believe what Greyson says?”

“Because he’s never lied to me,” she said bluntly. “He has no reason to. You, on the other hand…”

“Whether you believe Greyson or not, what I did or didn’t do to Cali is none of your business.”

She rolled her eyes. “Come on, you and I both know that’s not true. You told me the only reason you came here was because you had a fight with Greyson. You lied to me. I think you came here because you had a fight with Cali.” Her eyes flashed again, but not with anger this time. With pain. Her voice trembled as she added, “You came to me not because you wanted me, or because you wanted to help the Samara pack. You came to me because that’s what you always do when you have problems with Cali. It’s like clockwork with you. I should’ve known better.”

I scoffed. “Ease up on the drama, okay? My relationship with Cali has nothing to do with you, or the reason I came here.” *Lie*. “I came here because I couldn’t be there, and you needed my help. Per usual. Because you can’t seem to make it a week without begging me to come and fix something for you.”

“Right,” Ava said flatly. “And that’s why you just attacked your brother, the Alpha of a pack the Samaras are in an alliance with, in front of my pack? That was all for the benefit of the Samara pack? Are you planning to step in and protect us from the Bitterfangs yourself? Because I can’t even begin to fathom why else you’d attempt to beat the hell out of our only insurance policy and then dare to say it’s for my pack’s benefit.”

*Well, when she puts it that way…*

I swallowed roughly, then shook my head. I didn’t have an answer for that. Not one that didn’t involve telling her the truth, at least. But I couldn’t do that. Even if I wanted to, which I didn’t, I literally couldn’t tell anyone about my deal with Adéluce.

“You really have nothing to say for yourself?” Ava pressed. “You’re not going to give me the respect of an explanation?”

I ground my teeth together. “I guess not.”

“Fine. At least now I know where you stand,” she said. “Thanks for that, but I’m not going to put up with it anymore. Go back to Cali, put your arm around her in front of Greyson, and put your pissing match back where it belongs. Put your arm around anyone you like—I don’t care anymore. I don’t care where you go, or what you do. Just keep me and my pack out of it.”

Her words knocked the breath out of me, though I tried not to show it.

“Fine,” I managed, after a moment. It was probably better that way—being here was just another cruel reminder of everything I’d lost.

My wolf stirred, trying to convince me to stay with Ava. *Stay with our mate*. But I couldn’t, because she was right—she deserved better than being constantly lied to, than being used to sow more discord with Greyson. If I was going to cut my ties to Cali and the Redwood, I needed to cut all of them.

*It’s better this way.*

“Once I’m gone, I’m not coming back,” I warned Ava.

She laughed bitterly. “If I had a dime for every time you’ve claimed you weren’t coming back, I could build the Samaras a castle. Do you have any idea how much you’ve hurt me? It’s become a regular habit for you—run off, come back and jerk me around, and repeat. Maybe you’re starting to enjoy it, who knows? But I’m done. You have five minutes to grab some clothes and get out of my territory.”

She stalked off, leaving me alone.

*Fine. I’ll go*. It was what I wanted to do, anyway—what I’d told her I’d do.

I just didn’t know where to go.

I headed to the Airstream and pulled on some more of Knox’s clothes. Something caught my eye at the bottom of the tiny closet—a little spare backpacking tent. I was hit with an idea.

A couple minutes later, I was back on Knox’s motorcycle, the backpack the tent was in strapped to my back, as I pulled out onto the road. I set a course toward town. A plan was beginning to take shape in my mind. I’d pick up some more supplies, then set up a campsite somewhere—maybe in Three Devils Point, where nobody could accuse me of trespassing. Nobody would speak to me at all.

A little solitude in the wilderness would probably do me some good. I could run as a wolf as much as I wanted, and still have a campsite for human comforts. Plus, the time alone would give me a chance to clear my head, work out all this ugly knotted emotion, and make a plan to take on Adéluce. I wouldn’t have to deal with any bullshit from Greyson or Ava or anyone else. This was exactly what I needed.

I chuckled as I passed by the dive bar. *I wonder how my friends are feeling right now.* Probably not *too* bad. I’d gone easy on them, after all.

I parked the bike in front of a grocery store and pulled out my phone to put together a list of food and supplies I should take out into the woods. I couldn’t carry too much, but a handful of basics would hold me over for a few days, especially if I did some hunting in my wolf form.

Opening my phone sent me right back to the moment when I’d blocked Cali. It would’ve been the easiest thing in the world to unblock her now.

But then I’d have to talk to her. I’d have to keep being cruel to keep her away.

I didn’t know if I could face that again.

My stomach twisted at the sight of my phone’s background picture—a selfie Cali and I had taken when we’d spent that cozy day together at the cabin, just the two of us. Cali was looking right at the camera and smiling, but my eyes were on her. It was a stark reminder of everything I’d given up to keep her safe.

*I should delete this.*

My thumb hovered over the screen. Fuck, I missed her so much. That was what hurt the most. That was what nobody could understand.

Instead of deleting it, I changed my home screen to a picture of Colton and me.

Suddenly, someone shouted from behind me. “That’s him!”

I twisted around and saw the guys from the bar charging toward me.

**Episode 3706**

Now that I’d started, I just couldn’t stop thinking about what this all meant for Greyson and me.

*If I’m truly choosing him only because Xavier isn’t in the picture, would that be the right thin*g? *Is that really what we want? There’s no way Greyson would want to “win” me by default.*

Even thinking about it that way turned my stomach.I wondered if Xavier had even considered how the bomb he’d dropped would affect not only me, but Greyson as well. But really, for all I knew, hurting us this way was exactly what he’d wanted.

The awkward conversation I’d had with my dad was nagging at me, too. I knew he was just trying to help, but he’d only managed to confuse me even more. His unexpected (and unwelcome) story about his old girlfriend had left my head spinning. It was hard enough to picture my father with anyone but my mother—imagining him breaking up with another woman was basically impossible.

*Does my dad really understand what I’m going through? How could he? He doesn’t know what it’s like to be in a* due destini *relationship—and thank god for that. I wouldn’t wish this on my worst enemy.*

The death component of the *due destini* was gone, yes, but that didn’t make the situation any easier—and hearing about other breakups clearly wasn’t helpful, either, despite my father’s best intentions.

I kept trying to turn to people for answers, for comfort, for direction—anything to dull the pain or find enough of a distraction for the pain to subside. But no matter what I did, or who I talked to, or whatever measures people took to try to cheer me up, it was still there—the absence of Xavier. I felt like it was going to swallow me whole. It was like he was a ghost haunting the house, always present but nowhere to be seen.

*Where else can I go? Who else can help me figure this out?? There has to be something I can do to make this pain stop. How am I supposed to get over this? It feels like a part of me was ripped out of my body.*

I’d hoped that my training pact with Artemis would be enough to take my mind off things, if only for a little while, but I couldn’t even get myself to go outside and try. The adrenaline I’d felt while practicing with my magic was already waning, no match for my constant thoughts about Xavier.

*All I want is for all this pain to stop. But how? How can I make it go away?*

I paused as that thought took root. *Was there* something like that? Something I could do to stop feeling this way? At this point, I was so desperate, I knew I’d basically do anything to numb the memories that were haunting my every breath. Even when I blinked, I saw Xavier behind my eyelids. It was torture.

And then a thought occurred to me—maybe I’d be able to find an answer in the Obaltarion.

Finally feeling a shred of hope that there might be an actual solution to all this, I pulled out my laptop and went straight to the library’s website. I was probably resorting to extreme measures, but at this point, I was willing to do anything to numb the pain. It wasn’t fair that I was being forced to feel this way when Xavier was obviously feeling nothing at all. I didn’t even want to think about what he might’ve been doing to distract himself—or if he even needed distracting. From what I could tell, he was treating our breakup like a minor inconvenience rather than the soul-crushing catastrophe it was for me—and that was painful all on its own.

Xavier was a tough Alpha, that was for sure, and getting either of my mates to show emotion was always like pulling teeth, but how could he *not* be devastated? I just didn’t get it. None of his behavior over the past few days was adding up, but I supposed that wasn’t my problem anymore.

I let out a pained sigh as I used my library card to log into my account. I was surprised I’d even been able to find the card, given how often people kept borrowing it. I took a deep breath as I logged in, not even sure how to phrase what I was looking for.

“Get rid of pain…” I mouthed as I typed the words into the search bar.

A list of home remedies from ancient and modern times filled the page, but as I looked at them, I realized they were basically useless, seeing as I wasn’t a witch. Regardless, most of the spells seemed to be cures for physical pain, not the emotional agony I was currently experiencing.

*There has to be a cure for heartbreak. There just has to be.*

I didn’t know what I’d do if I had to feel this way for another minute, let alone another hour, or another day. I needed to find a cure that had inherent magical properties, since I wasn’t a spell caster—or rather, I absolutely wasn’t going to try to cast any spells after what had happened with Lola. I shuddered as I remembered the time she’d read a spell and nearly capsized the boat we’d been on. Spells were a definite no-no, as far as I was concerned. I had enough bad stuff my life without adding an errant spell to the mix.

I thought back to the time I’d asked Artemis to make me forget something, wondering if that might be the solution. If I couldn’t remember Xavier, then I couldn’t be sad about losing him, right? But no. That wasn’t what I wanted. I didn’t want to forget Xavier—I just wanted losing him not to hurt so damn much.

Starting to feel hopeless again, I tried a few more searches.

*How to cure heartache*. Nothing.

*What to do when your boyfriend dumps you out of the blue?* Nothing.

I tried varying the phrases and broadening my search, but nothing brought me the information I was looking for. Every result I got was either geared toward witches or just plain useless.

“How would taking a Jell-O bath—lime Jell-O only—take away heartache?” I grumbled to myself, starting to get frustrated. If I took that route, I’d still be sad, and also a sticky dessert-scented mess.

My laptop beeped, and a message from Steinar popped up.

*Need some help?*

I hesitated for only the slightest moment before I began to type a response, my eyes tearing up and my fingers trembling.

*Hey Steinar… Xavier broke up with me, and I’m feeling really down*, I wrote, barely able to believe the words as they appeared on the screen.

*What?! I’m sorry to hear that, Cali*, Steinar replied. *A true mate shouldn’t behave that way! Hold on, I’m going to send you some suggestions. We’ll get you back to your normal bubbly self in no time!*

I waited anxiously, hoping Steinar would send something actually helpful. I didn’t know if I could take much more of this pain. How was I supposed to function? There was no way I could be a good mate to Greyson while I was feeling like this, and he deserved better than that.

A few minutes passed before a list of names filled the message box.

*Take a look at these paratherapists, see if anyone appeals*, Steinar typed.

*Um… I was thinking of something a little more… expedient*, I replied.

*I know, but I think you should give this a try*,Steinar typed. *I went to a paratherapist to get over my ex, and it did wonders for me. Maybe it could help you, too.*

I was instantly distracted, trying to picture Steinar’s ex. Another gargoyle, maybe? Were there other living gargoyles, or was Steinar the only one?It felt good to think about something other than Xavier, if only for a few seconds.

*Any of the folks on this list would be good, but the person I would suggest is Carlson Greene*, Steinar continued. *You should go see him. I hear he’s highly recommended—a miracle worker!*

*Thanks*, I typed, adding a little smiley face. *I’ll consider going to see him, for sure, but if you think of anything faster in the meantime, please let me know!*

Magic, on the whole, was a hell of a lot faster.

*Oh, hold on!* Steinar messaged. *I found something for Fae that might work. It’s a pretty elaborate ritual, typically used by Fae to overcome great sadness. This could be right up your alley!*

I sat back, glancing between the link to the ritual and Carlson Greene’s number. I almost asked Steinar which option he recommended, but I stopped myself. This was a decision I needed to make on my own.

I bit my lip and stared at the screen. *Which one should I try?*

**Episode 3707**

**Greyson**

*Elle has a point. What* is *going to happen to my heart?*

Elle’s question had taken me by surprise, but it was valid. Cali, Xavier, and I were all tied together by the *due destini*—for better or for worse, obviously. What affected one of us would no doubt affect the others. It was all such a delicate balancing act—one that rarely reached equilibrium.So what was the answer to Elle’s question? What state was my heart in after a shakeup like this? I took quick stock of how I was feeling. So far, the only heartache I felt was over Cali’s pain, and being unable to fix it. Right now, that was the only way Xavier’s abandonment of Cali was affecting me, as far as I could tell.

“My heart is fine,” I finally said.

“Really?” Elle asked, clearly puzzled. “Well, you are a strong Alpha, so I believe you. But please let me know if your heart starts to feel sick,” she added, her eyes wide.

“I promise I will,” I said. It was nice having Elle around. She could be a handful, but her honest, direct communication was a breath of fresh air—especially when I was dealing with so much complicated shit in every other area of my life.

Elle turned to go but then twisted back around. “I want to go with you to the Alpha meeting.”

“Oh?” I said, wondering if this had anything to do with Lucian. “Why?”

“I want to help. I’m the daughter of an Alpha, and I always helped protect my pack. This is my pack now, and I will do anything to protect it.”

I wanted to believe that was the truth—especially since I was pretty sure that Elle was incapable of lying. “Thanks, Elle, and you *are* protecting us—by staying here and going on patrol with the others. That’s what we need right now, especially since you’re one of the best trackers we have. My meeting with Lucian is just to make plans.”

Lucian was already going to be annoying enough without Elle around. Bringing her with me to the palace was the last thing I wanted to deal with.

“Oh… So can I go on patrol with Sage and Zainab?” Elle asked excitedly.

“I don’t see why not. They could use the help.”

Elle’s eyes brightened. I knew she really enjoyed spending time with them both, and having another pair of eyes out on patrol was always a good thing. Elle had earned this.

Without another word, Elle dashed off to find the girls, and I went upstairs. I needed to clean myself up and change after my dustup with Xavier. I hadn’t planned for things to go so badly when I finally saw him, but I wasn’t exactly surprised that we’d come to blows. There’d just been so much tension simmering between us lately, even before Xavier had pulled his latest stunt. Things couldn’t have gone any other way.

I slowed as I passed Cali’s door. *I should really tell her about what happened with Xavier.* My chat with Elle had distracted me from everything that had happened at the Samara campsite—which was probably a good thing. It had helped cool my anger a bit, though I remained absolutely livid at my brother for all the bad decisions he was making. It was just like him not to think about how his actions affected not only Cali, but the pack as a whole.

*And he wants to be Redwood Alpha? Please. He doesn’t know the first thing about being there for the people who count on you, no matter what. He couldn’t even stick around for the woman he once claimed to love so much.*

I wanted to see Cali, but I needed to clean up first. If she saw me looking like this, she’d start asking questions, and then I’d have to give her all the (literally) gory details. It wasn’t that I was planning on lying to her, but I *was* planning on making it all sound a little less serious than it had actually been. Cali was already going through enough—I didn’t want to make her feel any worse by telling her that Xavier and I had literally been at each other’s throats.

I noticed a bluish light shining from beneath Cali’s door. *What is that?*

Unable to help myself, I knocked on her door. “Cali, you okay in there?”

When she didn’t answer right away, I opened the door a crack and peeked inside. Cali was sitting on the floor with her laptop in front of her, surrounded by a circle of small rocks and other objects.

“Cali?”

She jumped, then looked up at me. “Greyson! Hey.”

“Hey,” I said as I knelt beside her, wincing when my knee landed on one of the rocks. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, yeah, all this…” she said sheepishly. “It’s a little ritual that Steinar told me about. It’s supposed to help with… everything. I just got so tired of everyone suggesting ways for me to feel better. Nothing anyone suggested felt like the right thing to do. I was starting to get a little overwhelmed by it all, so I decided to take things into my own hands and use my magic.”

I looked around at the objects strewn all over the floor, and then at the instructions on her screen. “Are you sure about this, Cali? Is it safe?”

“It’s safe… enough. It’s either this or a paratherapist, and I need a fix right now.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “I wouldn’t rule out either option, but have you given yourself time to deal with your…” I trailed off, struggling for the right word. Loss? “Maybe you don’t need magic or spells or rituals or any of that stuff. Maybe you just need some time and support—and I’d like to be that support for you, love. If you’ll let me.”

She looked absolutely crestfallen. “Thank you, Greyson, but I just can’t handle this. I need the emptiness inside me to go away, or I don’t know what will happen.”

I took Cali’s hand, unable to push away the memory of her giving me her cheek when I’d tried to kiss her earlier. I understood why she’d done it, but that didn’t make it sting any less, even now.

“Listen, Cali, I would do anything to take the hurt away and carry your heartache, but the only thing I can do is be here for you—to listen, to hold you when you need to be held, and to do everything in my power to remind you that you’re not alone.” I took a pointed look at all the magical objects around us. “You know as well as I do that magic should be a last resort. I know this is hard, love, but you’re strong, and you’re going to get through this—and you don’t have to do it on your own. I’ll be here by your side, no matter what—if you’ll let me.”

Tears sprang into Cali’s eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for, and I didn’t tell you all that to make you cry,” I said. It felt terrible, watching her relive the pain of Xavier’s desertion over and over again. I pulled her into a tight hug, and she wrapped her arms around me.

“It feels like cheating,” Cali said, her voice muffled against my chest.

“What do you mean?”

“By using magic, it feels like I’m cheating—drawing on some ancient Fae ritual that I’m not even sure will work.” She gestured at the instructions. “And the directions are so complicated—what if I screw up and make things worse, somehow? This isn’t fair, Greyson. Why am I the one hurting like this when Xavier doesn’t even seem to care at all?”

I pulled away to look her in the eye, hoping she couldn’t see how much her pain was affecting me. “I can’t answer that, Cali,” I said. “But somehow, I don’t think Xavier is exactly immune to what he did to you.” *I still have a few bruises to prove it.*

Cali looked me in the eye, then quickly averted her gaze. “I’m sorry to keep talking about it. I know this is hard on you, too.”

“Stop apologizing, Cali.” I pulled her back against my chest. “I’ll listen to anything and everything you have to say—even if it is about my asshole brother.”

Cali let out a weak laugh. “Thank you, Greyson. For being so kind. Strong. You don’t know what it means to have you here right now.” She reached up and pulled me into a kiss, her soft, warm lips acting as the perfect salve for everything I’d just been through with Xavier. I leaned into the kiss, wanting more, needing more. Then I registered the wetness of her tears against my face, a stark reminder of the pain my brother had caused her.

*I can’t sit here kissing her when there’s something important she needs to know.*

Full of regret, I pulled away and looked her in the eye. “Cali, there’s something I have to tell you, and I want you to *try* not to get upset.”

Cali’s eyes widened in alarm. “What? What is it?”

I took a deep breath. “I saw Xavier today.”

**Episode 3708**

**Ava**

I poured another shot of whiskey into my glass and threw it back. It burned all the way down, which felt good, but I knew that no amount of liquor was going to dull the pain. Sending Xavier away had been the right thing to do—there was no question about that—but it still hurt like a knife to the gut.

In retrospect, I’d been stupid to think we were finally getting closer—but all signs had pointed to us getting over all the bullshit from our past. The kiss we’d shared on New Year’s Eve hadn’t been an impulsive reaction, no matter how many times Xavier had tried to make it seem that way. He could keep denying it, keep refusing to acknowledge it, but I’d felt the heat between us. There’d been no mistaking it. And then there was the other day, when I’d been *this close* to going down on him. The chemistry and heat radiating between us that night couldn’t be denied, either. He’d stopped me before we’d gone too far, but he’d been turned on—*very*—I’d seen it with my own eyes.

There was a hard knock on the trailer door, and then Geraint came barging in, clearly still angry about how things were going.

*Join the club.* I took another swig of whiskey and looked up at him, bracing myself.

“What are we waiting for, Ava? Every second we wait to join the Vanguards makes it easier for the Bitterfangs to just swoop in here and cut us down. And I hope you realize that they’re just the tip of the iceberg. We’re weak right now—anyone could be watching us, waiting for a chance to strike out and destroy us. We need to bolster our numbers, right now.”

I slammed my glass down in anger, and a little bit of whiskey sloshed out onto the table. I wasn’t in the mood for this right now. I wanted to be left alone to wallow in my misery. “The only way the Samaras will join with the Vanguards is if I die again, and I’m not planning on doing that anytime soon.”

“We can’t just sit around and wait for our problems to solve themselves! We have to *do something*!” Geraint shouted.

“And we *will*,” I said sternely. “In the meantime, give our pack a little credit. The Samaras are like a candle that won’t blow out—we’re resilient, and we will get through this. Have a little faith. I just need a bit more time.”

“We don’t need *more time*!” Geraint said. “What we need is an *Alpha*.”

He wasn’t wrong.

“Give me that time, and I’ll get us an Alpha.” My words sounded surer than I felt, and I was tempted to just tip the entire whiskey bottle down my throat, but I held back. This wasn’t the time to fall apart. Not in front of Geraint. I needed to at least give the illusion that I was holding my shit together—even though that couldn’t have been further from the truth.

“Sure you will.” Geraint snorted. “An Alpha like Knox? Zeke? Another flake like Fletcher? I can hardly wait to see what you come up with next.”

I glared at him. “I *will* find an Alpha. I said I will, so I will.”

Geraint sighed and looked away. “Fine. I’ll give you time, but only because you’re Nolan’s sister.”

He turned and slammed out of the Airstream without another word.

I waited a short beat before tipping a generous amount of whiskey into my glass and draining it in three gulps. I slammed the glass back down and sighed. I couldn’t blame Geraint, but I still didn’t like that he’d come at me like that.

*He should show more respect. If it weren’t for me, the pack would’ve folded already. I don’t see him stepping up. We should be proud that we’ve managed to hang on this long without a real Alpha. Weaker packs would’ve crumbled by now.*

“Shit.” Why couldn’t anything go right? It would’ve been so easy if Xavier had just stayed and become Alpha. I knew he wanted it, but right now, he was just too caught up in Cali drama to realize it.

*What else is new? Cali is the only thing he cares about—I need to get that through my head... But if that’s true, then why is he always sniffing around me? I don’t get it.*

I sat back in my chair and looked around. Being in the Airstream made me think of Xavier, and how we’d almost passed the point of no return. I’d played that moment over and over in my head so many times, and it broke my heart every single time to remember that Xavier would never choose me. He couldn’t even choose my pack.

I got up and went outside, wondering what my next move should be. Maybe the meeting with Lucian and the other Alphas would lead to something, but I wasn’t holding my breath.

“I hope Geraint wasn’t too much of a pain in the ass,” Marissa said, walking up to me.

“It’s all good,” I said, brushing it off. The last thing I needed was for the pack to start turning on each other. “He’s just a hothead.”

“Reminds me of someone…” Marissa said dryly, then coughed in a way that sounded distinctly like “Xavier.”

Her words hit me deep, reminding me yet again of how raw I was feeling after Xavier’s departure. *I left the trailer to get away from thinking about him, but it looks like that’s not going to happen…*

“Everyone saw when he put his arm around you,” Marissa said tentatively. “We thought that maybe you two were back together… But then you told him to leave.”

I sighed. I had no idea how to explain my relationship with Xavier—I barely understood it myself.

“It’s complicated,” I said simply, hoping that would be enough to get Marissa to change the subject.

“Obviously,” she said. “Listen, I don’t want to impose, but I’m your friend… And friends are honest with each other, right?”

I was a little surprised. I’d never really considered the idea of being friends with the Samaras—especially since I hadn’t really had any friends in such a long time. I certainly hadn’t had any while I was staying in the Redwood pack house, that was for sure. I’d kind of gotten used to not having anyone in my corner.

“Sure,” I said.

“I think Xavier still wants you,” Marissa said. “Call me sensitive, but I’ve always been pretty attuned to the emotions of other people’s wolves. Xavier’s wolf longs for you in a way that almost makes me jealous—and it’s obvious to the rest of the pack, too. I don’t know exactly what’s going on between you two—and of course, you don’t have to tell me—but I’m just telling you what I’m seeing.”

“I appreciate that,” I said dryly, not knowing what else to say.

“I don’t want to push, but Xavier is a real Alpha,” Marissa said. “He’s not a joke, like Fletcher or Knox or Zeke. He might be our only hope for bringing this pack back together.”

I looked at her, still unable to find the right words to express how I felt without laying it all out there. My thoughts were going a mile a minute.

“You don’t have to say anything,” Marissa said quickly. “I just wanted to get that off my chest. And now I’m going to go find Geraint, try to calm him down.”

I watched her go, thinking over everything she’d said about Xavier and his wolf. I’d felt the same thing she had, of course. My wolf was stirring even now, almost like she was picking up on Xavier’s hidden desire. I’d sent Xavier away, but I wasn’t feeling any better for it. If anything, I felt a whole lot fucking worse.

*What if Marissa’s right? What if Xavier really* is *our last hope for saving the pack? Don’t I owe it to myself and the pack to do something about that?*

Before I knew it, I was running back into the Airstream. I grabbed my bag, stuffed a bunch of clothes into it, and strapped it on before running back outside and shifting. I took off into the woods, determined to track Xavier down. It didn’t take me long to pick up his scent. I followed it toward town, and when I got close, I shifted back to human and yanked on my clothes.

I’d just turned down one of the main streets of town when I heard yelling.

*I’d know that voice anywhere…*

I picked up speed, heading for the voices, and then I found Xavier. He was in a vicious fight with three guys. He was holding his own, but the guys looked desperate to prove themselves. One wrong move on Xavier’s part, and I knew they’d pile on top of him. It was clear that they weren’t the type to play fair.

Something deep inside me—maybe it was my wolf—stirred with anger and the urge to protect him. Without a second thought, I threw down my bag and jumped into the fray, punching the guy closest to me and sending him sprawling.

Xavier turned to look at me, swiping the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. “What are you doing here?”

I looked him right in the eye. “What does it look like? I’m saving your ass.”

**Episode 3709**

“*What?* You saw Xavier?” My heart started hammering. “How was he?” I asked, afraid to hear the answer, whatever it might be.

Greyson sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. It was obvious that this was getting to him, too. “Honestly, he didn’t seem all that different. He was angry… But that could’ve been because I was there. We… kind of got into a fight.”

“No wonder you were so banged up,” I said. I’d noticed when he first came in, but I’d decided not to pry. Plus, they had been healing so fast.

“It doesn’t matter how I feel. The only thing I care about is what this is doing to you. You’re hurting because of him, and it drives me crazy that I can’t do anything to stop it.”

My heart lurched. “Yes, but remember what I said? I want to avoid having to talk about this with you. It’s unfair to you. You didn’t do anything wrong, and yet here you are, having to deal with me being upset.”

He shook his head. “That’s my job, Cali. Our love, our bond, is strong. I’ll be here through it all—the heartbreak, the pain, all of it. I’ll be here by your side no matter what. You can mourn the relationship you had with my brother, and I’ll be right here, holding your hand and helping you through it. It’s what I *want* to do, not what I have to do. I’m not going anywhere, okay?”

Greyson took my hand, and heat traveled to my cheeks. For the first time in what felt like ages, I wasn’t feeling the pain Xavier had caused me—not with the way Greyson was looking at me and making me feel.

Greyson leaned forward, his lips brushing against my ear. “I can help you feel good.”

At his words, the heat spread from my cheeks to every corner of my body.

“I just don’t want this to hurt you, or for it to be a problem for us,” he said softly. “I don’t want any more pain. For anyone. Do you understand that?”

I looked deep into his eyes, and instead of hurt or betrayal, all I saw was his love for me. Something stirred deep inside me.

*This feels good. This feels… right.*

I inhaled sharply as Greyson’s mouth crashed into mine, immediately making me forget every tragic, confusing thing that was happening in my life right now. There was no mistaking what Greyson wanted or how he felt about me. He loved me, wholeheartedly. I felt the same way, and I wanted the same thing. That was pure, inalienable *fact*.

Greyson rose to his feet, bringing me up with him. I loved how weightless I felt in his arms when he picked me up laid me down gently on the bed. He quickly covered my body with his, pressing me into the sheets, and I spread my legs so he could fit on top of me perfectly. I closed my eyes and gave in to the sensation of him. Of his lips dragging against my lips, of the bulge between his legs pressing against the heat that gathered between mine, of his strong, rough hands pushing my shirt up and over my head…

“I love you so much, Cali,” he said, gently working my pants off. His breath tickled my skin as he trailed kisses lower and lower, until I felt his tongue slide against my clit. He sucked on it, making me whimper. I felt him smile against me before diving deep inside me.

*Fuck*. Pleasure shot through me instantly, and I moaned out his name. I slid my hands into his hair, gasping and holding on as he fucked me with his tongue. My climax hit me out of nowhere, and I cried out, unable to hold back.

Greyson pulled back, smiling as he looked up at me, his eyes shining. “Do you know how good you taste?”

He moved his way up my body to kiss me again, slipping his tongue into my mouth. I moaned as I returned the kiss, tasting myself on him. With one hand he pinned my arms above my head before sliding two fingers inside me.

“*Greyson*,” I gasped. “Oh my god.”

“Come again for me, love,” he said, his voice gravelly in my ear. “*Let go.*”

My eyes shot open as I clung to him, waves of yet another orgasm building. Greyson pumped his fingers into me, curling them, beckoning me toward release. I couldn’t help but press my thighs together, trapping his hand between them. After a delicious eternity, my climax finally took hold. I held onto Greyson, pressing my face into his neck and breathing hard.

Greyson didn’t miss a beat. He moved back down my body, and in seconds his tongue darted against my nipples and along the tops of my breasts as he covered them with kisses. I opened my eyes just in time to see him pulling himself free of his boxers, his erection standing up straight and proud. I reached for it and slid my hands up and down the warm length, loving how heavy and solid it felt. Greyson groaned and collapsed beside me, his bottom lip trapped between his teeth.

“This is feeling a bit one sided,” I said, breathless as I stroked him. “My turn.”

Ready to take things further, I rolled on top of him and teased him with my mouth. I licked my way up his erection, swirling the tip in my mouth. Then, it was my turn to make my way up his body. I straddled him, lacing my fingers through his and trapped his hands against the bed. I loved how in control I felt—it was a sensation I hadn’t experienced in quite a while.

Keeping his hands pinned to the bed, I maneuvered my hips, slowly searching for his cock so that I could slide it inside me, hands free. It wasn’t easy, and we both laughed a little as I moved my hips, grinding against him, both of us letting out strained breaths of anticipation for the moment when he would finally be deep inside me.

We both let out moans of pleasure when I finally managed it, sliding down until my thighs met his and he was in as deep inside me. I started moving and was quickly gripped by pleasure so intense, it knocked every other thought out of my head. Greyson closed his eyes and moved his hips up to meet mine, matching my rhythm.

I finally let go of his hands, sitting up straight as I increased my speed, my momentum making the headboard thump against the wall.

“You look so fucking sexy like this—riding me,” Greyson breathed, his hands grabbing my hips and squeezing. “Beautiful.” Then he reached up and tangled one of his hands in my hair.

My breath caught, and I was unable to put my bliss into words. I braced my hands on his chest as we both began to move faster, and faster still.

Greyson flipped me onto my back and slid back inside me even deeper, his breath coming in short gasps as he nibbled at my ear. I spread my legs wide, completely opening myself up to him. I bucked against him, urging him toward his own peak.

“I’m coming,” he gasped out. Seconds later, we came together. As we rode out the waves together, he collapsed on top of me, his hips rolling against mine slower and slower, until he was completely still.

I laughed from under him. “You’re so big.”

“Didn’t seem like a problem a moment ago,” he chuckled darkly.

“I meant *heavy*,” I said. He laughed again and lifted himself up.

I grabbed his arms, stopping him. “Wait, I didn’t say move. I like the way you feel on top of me.”

“Good,” he grunted, collapsing again and burying his face in my hair.

I took a look around the room. Our clothes were scattered everywhere, and we’d kicked all the sheets and blankets onto the floor. I felt warm and satisfied from head to toe. I wrapped my arms around my mate, enjoying the glow that bound us together. We’d given ourselves to each other like this so many times before, but this time felt particularly perfect.

*Our bond is just so strong… Greyson has never been more right—he* can *make me feel good. He just proved it three times.*

I knew that if I stopped to dig into my emotions, I would find some hope mixed into the deep, dark pit that had been plaguing me from the moment Xavier had walked out on me.

*I can’t let myself go there right now. Greyson is giving me everything I need. He is my rock, and I know how much this situation is hurting him too.*

“This is all so complicated,” I said, “but I just want you to know that I love you, Greyson. A lot. *A lot*, a lot.”

Greyson kissed me on the temple. “I love you, too. A lot, a lot.”

I sighed and nuzzled into him, relishing the heat between us and the way the energy in the room had changed. He’d taken the edge off my desperation and replaced it with something else—steadiness and security, not to mention hot sex.

*Maybe this means something*,I thought. *Maybe these are the signs I should be focusing on. I need to put my energy into this Alpha. Into this man of mine. He deserves my attention and affection, doesn’t he?*

Greyson strummed his strong fingers down my back and placed a soft kiss on my cheek, a contented sigh escaping his lips.

“I love you so much,” I murmured.

Greyson chuckled. “You keep saying that.”

I propped myself up on my elbow and faced him. “Because it’s true. I love you very much, and in the middle of all this grief and these surreal circumstances, I don’t want that to get lost. I don’t want you to think for a single second that I don’t know that you’re the one who’s here for me.”

“I *am* here for you. Always, love.”

I leaned down for a kiss. Before long, our hands were roaming all over each other, and I could feel my blood rushing every which way. My hand was lingering just below his waist when I pulled back and looked him in the eye.

“I know that if I don’t ask this now, the moment really will pass, and bringing it up again later will be harder,” I said.

Greyson looked at me, clearly puzzled. “Is something wrong?”

I took a deep breath, mustering the strength to bring *him* back into the conversation—especially at a time like this. I knew that just saying his name could ruin the moment.

“Cali? Did I lose you?” Greyson asked.

“No. Never.” I smiled. “But there is something…”

“Okay. What?” He reached down and stroked my arm.

I took a deep breath. “I want to know what really happened when you saw Xavier.”

**Episode 3710**

**Xavier**

*What the hell is she doing here?*

Ava was the last person I wanted to see. Well, maybe not the *last* person—that honor was generally reserved for Greyson—but the truth was, I didn’t want to see anyone at all. My wolf felt differently, though. At the mere sight of Ava, he was reacting, feeding the anger that was coursing through my veins and mixing with the adrenaline from the fight. I’d been lost in the rush of taking on the guys from the bar, and that was exactly what I wanted. The only thing I really cared about right now was kicking their asses all the way back to whatever rock they’d dragged themselves out from underneath. But now here was Ava, fucking it up.

*What the hell? Didn’t she tell me to leave her alone? Why even do that if she didn’t mean it? Was it just so she could follow me and make things even worse?*

I glared at her. She was breathing hard from punching out one of the bigger guys, and her hair was cascading down around her shoulders, all messed up from the fight. On top of everything else, Ava was an incredible fighter. Always had been. She was strong, fearless, and sexy.

The guys were circling her, clearly bewildered, probably wondering how someone as small as Ava could bring so much pain and power. She was quick on her feet, had her fists raised, and wasn’t letting any of them flank her. They actually looked a little scared of her—and they were right to be.

I knew she wouldn’t stop, even if I told her to. She was stubborn. So stubborn, in fact, that she constantly refused to listen to me—even when I told her time and time again that I wasn’t interested in getting involved in the Samaras’ problems. It seemed like no matter what I said to her, or what she said to me, or how many times we agreed to stay away from each other, it just wouldn’t stick.

I reacted quickly when the guy Ava had punched came at me, obviously not too happy about being knocked on his ass and too uncertain to go after Ava, who was already making quick work of another biker. He lunged for me with his teeth bared, but I just slid out of the way and socked him in the jaw on his way past. He crumpled to the ground and lay there moaning, making no moves to get back up.

“And stay down!” I said, flashing him what I knew was a fairly evil-looking smile.

Ava took another guy out with a roundhouse kick to the gut. He flew into a car and slid to the ground, his head lolling against his chest.

The last guy standing decided to take his chances with me rather than Ava and ran at me, probably wanting to redeem himself and his friends after their terrible performance, but it was no use. I ducked his sloppy punch and came back with an uppercut that connected so well, Ava gave me an impressed look. The biker was down for the count.

“I’m taking off,” I said, breathing hard as I surveyed the men moaning on the ground. Hopefully they wouldn’t follow me this time—but if they did, I’d be happy to give them a repeat performance.

“What? That’s it? You’re not even going to thank me?” Ava demanded. “I saved your ass, and that’s all I get? ‘I’m taking off’? You really have a lot of nerve, Xavier.”

I whirled to face her, my chest puffed out as a surge of anger and indignation rose up inside me. *She’s so full of herself! I didn’t ask her to come here, and now she wants me to thank her? Is she serious?* “*You* saved *my* ass? Is that really what you think happened?”

Ava shrugged. “You needed me. Maybe it’s time you admit that.”

I shook my head, knowing that I would never admit that to her. Ever. “I don’t want help, and I don’t need you. Next time you see me in the middle of something, keep walking.”

“And let you get killed?”

I nodded emphatically. “Absolutely. Aren’t you the one who didn’t want to see me again, anyway?”

I turned away from her again, ready to get the hell out of dodge. When I’d abandoned my pack and the love of my life, I certainly hadn’t expected to end up cornered in a grocery store parking lot with Ava “coming to my rescue.” Nothing was going quite the way I planned it, lately.

I jumped when I felt Ava’s hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t,” I growled.

Even though I knew it was probably a bad idea, I turned to face her, staring into her eyes—which were burning with anger. The air between us was charged with a mix of emotions, and holding everything in was killing me. In a very short period of time, I’d been through the wringer with Cali, gotten into a fight with my brother, beaten down the same bunch of assholes twice, and now I was going to have to fight my wolf to keep him away from Ava. I was exhausted.

*This is worse than the other night in the Airstream*,I thought. *If only she’d kept out of it and left me the hell alone, I’d have been able to release tension in the fight. I just want to keep fighting, or sparring, or…*

I took a step toward Ava. Her eyes were searching mine for an answer, but I didn’t have one.

“I hate myself,” I choked out. “I couldn’t possibly hate myself more.”

I hadn’t been able to keep the words in—they’d just tumbled out of my mouth. I’d certainly had no intention of laying my soul bare for *Ava*, of all people.

Her expression softened, and I saw pity in her eyes. Pity for me.

Just like that, the moment died, and I was angry all over again.

“Don’t pity me,” I snarled. “Don’t you *dare* fucking pity me!”

I charged toward my bike. I was making so many mistakes I was starting to lose count, but I was going to stop this one right in its tracks. I had to get away from her. This wasn’t where I was meant to be, and it certainly wasn’t who I was meant to be with.

“Xavier!” Ava called out. “Xavier, *stop!*”

I didn’t turn around this time. My heart was pounding, and I knew exactly why. I was about two seconds from kissing her. I could almost taste her, feel the curve of her hips in my hands, and I wanted it to become a reality. That was the truth of it. My wolf was winning. My emotions for her that had been so broken and locked away were no longer locked away.

*Fuck.*

I hopped on my bike and gunned the engine. I could hear Ava’s footsteps rushing toward me, but I couldn’t look at her. I didn’t know what would happen if I looked at her right now. Before I knew it, she’d hopped on the back of my bike—just as I peeled out of the parking lot.

I didn’t know where I was going. I just drove. For a few minutes, I let my thoughts go calm and settled into it. Ava’s arms were linked around my waist, and I didn’t push her off. I didn’t want to. When I’d put my arm around her at the Samara campsite, it had felt so good, but I’d known it wouldn’t last and that I was just using her as a prop, just like she’d accused me of doing. This wasn’t like that. This was something else.

I pushed those thoughts away again and concentrated on the road ahead.

The longer we drove, the tighter she held onto me. My wolf couldn’t take it. I pulled off onto the shoulder of the deserted gravel road, cut the engine, and got off the bike.

“What the hell are you doing?” Ava asked.

“I should be asking you that.” I could feel my anger building again. “Why did you come after me?”

“Do you really need to ask?” Ava said, her eyebrows raised. “You know why.”

The anger was only growing. The situation with Adéluce, my fight with Greyson, the fact that Cali—the woman I adored—probably hated me now… Or at least she *should* hate me. Everyone should.

Ava climbed off the bike, flipping her hair over her shoulder as she walked toward me. “You always do this, you know. You pretend that you don’t need anyone, but it’s not true. In fact, it couldn’t be further from the truth. I have no idea what’s going on with you right now, Xavier, but you can’t handle it all on your own, and you don’t even have to, so just stop fucking trying!” Ava was standing close, now—too close—and she was holding my gaze. “Let me help you, X.”

My wolf was losing it, clamoring inside me and urging me on. I was losing touch with everything except what my wolf wanted, and right now, it was making itself heard. I didn’t know what overtook me—the anger, the lust, the grief—but I closed the space between us in an instant and kissed Ava with everything I had.

**Episode 3711**

**Greyson**

I should have known that the vague answer I’d given Cali about my visit with Xavier wasn’t going to fly. I’d hoped that she would let it go, but why would she? I could only imagine where her mind had gone when I’d told her I’d seen him. I’d expected her to press, I just wished she wasn’t doing it right *now*, after the amazing moment we’d just shared.

“Why did you two fight?” Cali continued. “You didn’t hurt each other too badly, did you?”

“No,” I said, thinking about how we’d pulled all—well, *most*—of our punches. We’d been mad, but we hadn’t wanted to kill each other. “It wasn’t what I wanted, please know that. I didn’t even know Xavier would be there. I just went to the Samaras to let them know I was going to meet with Lucian, but Xavier seemed hell-bent on fighting me. He didn’t really give a reason.”

Cali’s face fell. “So… Xavier’s with the Samaras?”

I nodded. I knew exactly what she was thinking—at least, I suspected I did. She was wondering what Xavier was doing there. She was wondering if he’d gone to be with Ava.

“I don’t understand why he’s behaving this way,” Cali said. “What did I do to him to deserve this? And why is he coming after you when he’s the one who’s wrong?”

“I’m no psychologist,” I said, “but it seemed to me that my brother was looking for a way to punish himself for what he did to you.”

Xavier was on some kind of self-destructive streak, and fighting with me was just a part of that.

Cali seemed to be taking this in, and I could see the pain in her eyes. She looked away from me, probably still battling with her hesitance to bring this part of her heartache to me, since it directly involved Xavier.

“I don’t know why Xavier did this to you, but I wish I did,” I said. I’d long since stopped trying to figure out what made my brother tick, but even this latest stunt was out of the ordinary for him. Honestly, I was just as stumped about it all as Cali was.

“Was he…” Cali began tentatively. “Was he with her?”

*And there it is. I knew this was going to come up. How do I tell her the truth without breaking her heart even more?*

I thought back to the way Xavier had slipped his arm around Ava’s waist, but as far as I’d been able to tell, that had all been for show—a way to telegraph that he’d moved on. I didn’t know if it had meant anything beyond that. And now that I was really thinking about it, I could have sworn that Ava seemed surprised for a moment before she’d leaned into Xavier—almost as if she hadn’t expected his public display of affection.

I turned my attention back to Cali, who was looking at me expectantly.

“Ava was there,” I said.

Cali bit her lip and looked away.

“But then, all the Samara wolves were there too,” I added, trying to cushion the blow. “So there’s that.”

Cali gave me a half smile, a knowing look in her eye. “I see what you’re trying to do,” she said lightly. Her expression darkened. “I wonder what he’s going to do now.”

I shrugged. “He didn’t say and I didn’t ask. It’s not like he would’ve told me, anyway. Even before all this, I can’t remember the last time my brother gave me a straight answer. Besides, we were fighting for most of the time I was there. We didn’t do much talking.”

“I suppose I should be relieved. At least I know that he isn’t dead,” Cali said. She was trying to look on the bright side, but I could see the worry in her eyes as she stared at the wall.

I sighed and pulled her close, wrapping my arms around her. “I know this is screwed up, and I wish I could give you the answers you need, but only Xavier can do that—and only if he wants to.”

“I know,” she said quietly. “That’s what’s so hard to accept. I didn’t want to believe it, but I had to face the reality that Xavier was telling me the truth. That he’d been sleeping with Ava. Why else would he have gone right to the Samaras? He’s not their Alpha. He could have gone anywhere, but he chose to go there and be with her over me.” Tears were brimming in Cali’s eyes, but she quickly wiped them away. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring this all up again with you. I just can’t stop thinking about it.”

“What did I tell you about apologizing? I *want* to be here for you, to comfort you,” I said.

Cali stretched up to kiss me. “And you’ve done that.”

There was a knock on the door, and Ravi’s voice filtered through to us. “Greyson, you in there? Lucian sent a car for you.”

“Thanks! Be right there,” I called grumpily.

“You’re going to the palace right now?” Cali asked.

“I guess I have no choice,” I said, sighing as I reluctantly untangled myself from Cali’s embrace and sat up. “I should’ve known that the princeling would just send a car without warning. Typical Lucian. He was supposed to give us a heads-up first, but he wouldn’t be Lucian if he didn’t do something to remind us all that he gives fuck all about everyone else’s schedule.”

Cali sat up. “Can I come with you?”

I hesitated. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. Ava is going to be there.”

Cali looked like I’d let all the wind out of her sails once again. “Then… Do you think Xavier’s going to be there, too?”

*He’d better fucking not be. The last thing I need is for my hotheaded brother to show up uninvited, swinging his fists and ruining everything. We need to focus on the Bitterfangs, not his crusade to blow up his own life.*

Begrudgingly, I got to my feet and stretched. Our conversation had all but pulled me out of our after-sex glow, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t still feeling the amazing aftereffects.

“I see no reason why Xavier would be there,” I said finally. “I wish *I* didn’t have to be there, but the Bitterfang threat can’t be taken lightly. I promise I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Okay. And if Xavier is there, can you tell him I tried to call him?” Cali asked.

I smothered my instinctive grimace. “I will.”

It hurt me to see the flash of hope in Cali’s eyes.

*I doubt telling him she called would change anything. Xavier seems hell-bent on distancing himself from all of us right now. If Cali called him and he didn’t have the decency to respond, I doubt there’s anything I could say that would change his mind. Ignoring everything I say is Xavier’s favorite pastime, after all.*

I gave Cali one last lingering kiss and then went to my room to take a shower. I tried to keep my mind peaceful while the water hit my skin, choosing to focus on the last hour, when Cali and I had forgotten our problems and simply enjoyed each other. I kept thinking about the feel of her skin against mine as I got dressed, wishing more than anything that I was still in bed with her.

I went downstairs and looked around for Rishika. Now that Xavier wasn’t here to keep watch over the pack while I was out, Rishika was next in line. In many ways, she was the better choice. She at least understood and respected the chain of command. She would never disobey me, and she rarely argued with any directives I gave—and if she did, it was for good reason and not just for the hell of it.

“Good luck at the meeting,” Rishika said once I’d passed on her instructions for the night ahead. “Here’s hoping we can avoid a pack war. But if it comes to that, I want you to know that I think we’re ready. We’re all behind you one hundred percent, no matter how this shakes out.”

I squeezed Rishika’s shoulder. “I really appreciate that.”

Feeling a little lighter after Rishika’s encouraging words, I went out to the car. Lucian’s driver opened the door for me with a flourish, and I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes as I slid inside. The driver pulled off without saying a word.

Then I had a thought. “Hey, I need to notify Ava, from the Samara pack.”

The driver’s eyes caught mine in the rearview mirror. “It’s been taken care of. Prince Lucian has already sent a car for her.”

I chuckled. “Of course he did,” I muttered. Lucian never missed a chance to throw his ‘royalty’ in everyone’s face.

As we pulled down the driveway toward the street, I glanced back at the pack house. I could see Cali staring out at me from her bedroom window. She had a bedsheet wrapped around her beautiful body, reminding me once again of where I would’ve rather been.

I watched her until I was too far away to see her anymore, but our conversation about Xavier kept playing through my mind. I just couldn’t help but wonder if Xavier really would have the audacity to show up to the palace with Ava.

**Episode 3712**

**Xavier**

Ava’s lips were soft and familiar against mine and I leaned into the kiss, quieting all the alarm bells in my head that were urging me to push her away and get a grip. I was too far gone, finally all too ready to throw caution to the wind. My wolf wanted Ava, and his needs had finally managed to eclipse my own.

I was a goner.

I took her face between my hands and deepened the kiss, groaning as her tongue searched my mouth. All that anger and lust was still simmering between us—that bond that just wouldn’t go away, no matter how hard I tried to destroy it.

More than that, I had a deep need for something—or *someone*—to take away the burden of Adéluce’s blackmail, or at least make me forget about it for even a little while. I didn’t have any other outlet for everything that had happened to me, and now I was pouring every shred of pain, frustration, and anger into that kiss. It felt good and awful, all at the same time. It was yet another way to hurt myself, just like fighting with Greyson, and those bozos from the bar. I just wanted to feel something, anything but the pain of what I’d lost.

*I shouldn’t be doing this—it’s only going to make things worse. But if I’m already fucked…*

One thing was for sure—this was punishment, not salvation.

I picked Ava up and sat back on the motorcycle with her long legs straddling my lap. We tore at each other, our kiss growing rougher and hungrier as our hands pulled and prodded at each other. I couldn’t keep myself from sliding my hands under her shirt and diving into her bra to palm her soft, warm breasts as her chest heaved against mine.

Ava was clearly venting her own frustrations, too. Her nails grazed roughly against my skin as she ripped my shirt open, sending the shredded fabric to the ground. She nibbled at my lips and arched her back as I kept kneading her breasts, losing myself in the feel of the skin I’d caressed so many times before.

I rolled a taut nipple between my thumb and forefinger for a few more beats, then I reached up to lace my fingers through her hair, tugging her head back so I could dot kisses along her exposed throat. Her hair was like silk in my hands, and I couldn’t help but remember how it had looked only a little while ago, when we’d fought side by side. I hadn’t given in to the thought at the time, but I’d wanted to run my hands through it ever since, and I hated myself for that.

I grunted as I pulled Ava’s shirt over her head, and then snapped her bra off her. I took a moment to admire her nakedness. I’d seen it so many times before, but it still took my breath away.

“Xavier,” Ava said, once my gaze made the long journey from the tips of her toes up to her face. “Xavier, I—”

Before she could say any more, I leaned forward and swirled my tongue into her mouth. I didn’t want to talk. I was too lost in the stark reality that we were finally giving in to whatever it was that had been lingering between us.

It almost felt like I was on autopilot. I felt nowhere near the passion I did when I was with Cali, but that didn’t mean that there wasn’t a lot of emotion flowing between us. I cared about Ava again. That in of itself was too much to handle. There was something comforting in being with Ava, even as my heart broke for the way I was betraying Cali.

I just couldn’t stop.

I pulled at the buttons on her jeans, tugging down the zipper harshly.

“Yes,” Ava breathed, her nails pressing into my neck.

I shoved my hand into her jeans, past her panties, and went down into the heat between us. I cupped her slick warmth in my hand. I hesitated for a beat, my eyes finding hers.

This felt like the final point of no return, a hole not worth digging myself out of, since I deserved to be right where I was. I’d torpedoed my entire life—my entire existence—and now this was all I had left.

I dipped a finger deep inside her. Ava moaned, a hand moving to cover her mouth. She was so wet, ready for more. Ready for me. I pressed my thumb against the firm nub of her clit. She held onto my shoulders, going weak against me. I snaked an arm around her back to better angle myself and support her.

“Did you miss this? Did you miss me fucking you like this?” My voice didn’t sound like my own as I slid another finger inside her. “I want to hear it.”

“*Yes*,” Ava hissed, her eyes closed, her legs wrapped around my waist.

It was strange how I was simultaneously loving and loathing the feel of her. I simultaneously wanted to make her come, and to run away. It was like I was living two realities at once, and it was tearing me apart.

“Open wider,” I grunted. She spread her legs wide, allowing me to thrust my fingers in deeper, my thumb sliding up and down with just the right amount of pressure. I knew just the way she liked it. While I used one hand to keep working her toward the climax I knew wasn’t far off. I leaned forward and took one of her nipples into my mouth and then the other, suckling at them and enjoying every second while she used my fingers to fuck herself.

“X, I'm going to come,” she gasped.

“Come,” I said gruffly. “I want to feel it.”

My own arousal surged as she began to cry out, her hips bucking against my hand as she broke apart in my arms. She looked so beautiful in that moment, her lips slightly parted and her eyes wide and staring at the sky. Memories of all the other times I’d made her come like this flashed through my mind, pushing away all the negative thoughts that were battling with my desire. It took everything I had not to slide off my pants so I could be inside her, but I wasn’t ready to go that far. I’d already gone far enough.

Ava leaned forward and fell against me as she rode out the last dregs of her orgasm. Her breath was hot against my ear, and it took me a moment to realize that I was panting, too—not as much from exertion as from the effort of pushing away my own yearning while satisfying hers.

Neither of us spoke. We didn’t move for a long while, either. We just sat there, balanced on the bike, our arms and wrapped loosely around each other as the cold wind bit at us.

I was stunned that I’d actually taken things so far. A slow, creeping disgust began to descend upon me.

*There’s no coming back from this, now. I just blew right past the point of no return. How far will I go from here?*

Ava finally straightened and looked me in the eye. A small smile tugged at the corners of her flushed lips. “I can feel how hard you are,” she said, running a hand down my chest, all the way to the waistband of my jeans. “Let me return the favor,” she said, licking her lips.

I stopped her before her hand could move any lower. “No. We’re done.”

Ava looked like I’d slapped her. I’d hurt her—I could tell by the look in her eyes. I’d seen that look so many times that there was really no mistaking it, but there was nothing I could do. I certainly wasn’t about to let things get any further out of hand.

I stood up and used the remaining buttons on my shirt to fasten it shut. I felt bad for treating her this way, but it couldn’t be helped. Right now, all I wanted was to begin the most likely impossible task of forgetting that any of this had happened.

“You keep doing this, and I keep falling for it,” Ava said bitterly as she climbed off the bike and started to yank her clothes back on. “Are we ever going to talk about this? Are we ever going to address whatever the fuck it is that keeps happening between us?”

I sighed. The last thing I wanted was to talk about anything with her, especially not after what had just gone down. The only thing I *did* want was to drive as far away from the scene of my latest mistake as I could.

I was desperate to just brush this off and drop the subject, but when I really thought about it, there was no point in lying to Ava. She was going to find out about me and Cali—either from me, or from the wave of werewolf gossip that was no doubt brewing even as we stood there. The news of our breakup was going to spread soon, no matter what.

*I might as well control the narrative—at least the part of it that I can actually talk about with Adéluce’s claws buried in me. Telling anyone about the blackmail part of the equation is still off the table, but that doesn’t mean I can’t tell Ava about one of its most major consequences.*

I took a deep breath and looked Ava in the eye, deciding just to rip off the Band-Aid. “I broke up with Cali.”

**Episode 3713**

I watched from the window as Lucian’s car took Greyson away. Just like that, I could feel the depression coming back. Being with Greyson had been wonderful, as always. I loved him so much, and he knew how to make me happy. But now that he was gone, the emptiness of before was back in full force and dragging me down into darkness.

*I hate that Xavier has this much control over me. Why can’t I just stop feeling all this misery? Maybe turning it off* would *be a good idea…*

Only the logical part of my brain was questioning the way I felt—and when it came to my mates, all logic took a back seat to the strength of my emotions. I had to do something to get out of this funk, or at least rise above it long enough to breathe a bit before I sank back down.

I thought back to how everyone had tried to rally around me to get my mind off things. I hated that I’d run from Artemis. We’d made a pact that *I’d* created, and I owed my sister a chance to fulfill it. After all, learning to fight would be a great distraction.

*Isn’t that why Greyson thinks Xavier attacked him? To distract himself from everything that’s going on?*

Since training was only really one step away from fighting, I knew it would help, and I needed all the help I could get. I couldn’t rely only on Greyson to get me through this. No matter how many times he tried to convince me that he was okay with holding my hand through my pain, I knew it just wasn’t fair to him. Leaning on Greyson also reminded me of what Xavier had said to me—his angry claim that I always relied on other people to get me out of tough situations.

*I’ll prove him wrong. I’m going to get over him, and I’m going to do it on my terms.*

I took a quick shower and got dressed, trying to avoid thinking about Xavier the entire time. Unfortunately, the news that he was staying with Ava was making that even harder to do than usual.

I finished up and then went downstairs to find Artemis. She was in the kitchen with Lola, Jacs, and Rishika, and their conversation came to an awkward halt when they saw me. I knew exactly what they’d been talking about, but I decided to ignore it. I wasn’t interested in pulling them into my pity party.

“Hey, Cali,” they all said in unison, avoiding my gaze.

“Sorry for abandoning you before,” I said to Artemis, trying to keep my tone light and unbothered. “I’m ready to train now.”

Artemis narrowed her eyes at me. “Are you just saying that, or do you really mean it?”

“I mean it,” I said quickly. “I have to do this. I *need* to do this.”

Artemis nodded, apparently satisfied. “Well then, let’s get to it.”

She grabbed a duffel bag, and I followed her outside.

“What’s in the bag?” I asked.

Artemis dropped it on the ground. “See for yourself.”

I opened it, unsure what I was going to find inside. I gasped. It was filled to the brim with all kinds of weapons: knives, arrows, swords, brass knuckles, and everything in between.

I looked up at Artemis. “You know I haven’t got the slightest idea how to use half of this stuff, and the other half I can’t even identify.”

“Don’t worry. If you stay true to our pact, by the time the summit rolls around, you’ll be well-versed in all of it, and more than ready to wage a war.”

I swallowed nervously. “Greyson and the others are actually trying to *avoid* a war.”

Artemis shrugged. “It’s better to be prepared. And sometimes, war can’t be avoided. The war between the Dark Fae and Light Fae has been going on forever, and we don’t want the same thing to happen with the Bitterfangs. The stronger we are, the better prepared we are, the better our chances to end it quickly and definitively.” Artemis reached into the duffel and pulled out a large sword. “Now, why don’t we start with some basics? This type of sword is called a saber.”

I was only a little nervous as Artemis and I faced each other. I had the saber in hand, and I could barely hold the heavy thing straight.

“Watch and learn,” Artemis said. She demonstrated a few defensive moves, then a few offensive ones. “Now you try.”

I tried to follow her lead, but while Artemis moved her saber around like it was an extension of her arm, I could barely keep mine from dragging me to the ground with its weight.

“I think my wrists are broken,” I said forlornly, letting the heavy blade drop to the ground.

“Okay, okay, maybe the saber isn’t your weapon. Don’t worry, we have lots of others to try.” Artemis tossed me a pair of nunchucks, then grabbed a set of her own. “The trick here is to keep your stance wide, and avoid knocking yourself out.”

“Okay…” I said skeptically, mirroring Artemis’s stance.

I watched as she whipped the nunchucks around effortlessly. They whizzed through the air, and Artemis looked like she’d been born to use them.

When I tried to copy her movements, it became immediately clear that I had *not* been born to use them. I accidentally bashed myself in the kneecap, then narrowly avoided doing the same thing to my head. After the nunchucks went flying and hit a tree, Artemis grabbed them and dropped them back into the bag.

“Nunchucks aren’t your thing, either, but that’s okay,” she said. “They aren’t all that practical, anyway.”

We tried out a few other heavy, dangerous weapons before I collapsed to the ground, exhausted.

“Need a breather?” Artemis asked, dropping down beside me.

“Understatement of the century,” I choked out.

I was out of breath, and every muscle in my body hurt. I didn’t know how Artemis had even managed to carry the bag of weapons out here, let alone throw them around like they weighed nothing. I was impressed—and certain that I was never going to be as good with all this stuff as she was.

“You did good!” Artemis said.

I gave her a look. “That’s nice,” I said, “but no, I didn’t. I’m glad we’re stopping.”

Artemis cocked her head. “I hate to disappoint you, but we’ve only just begun. This was a good start, but it’s obvious that you need to build up your endurance. We’re going to go running—with a twist. I’ll start a little ahead of you and leave a trail behind me. Then you’ll have to track me down and catch me. Sounds like fun, right?”

I groaned and fell back to the ground. “I hate running. Can’t we just walk quickly instead? You know the old saying: slow and steady wins the race.”

Artemis glared at me. She stood and picked up a sword, then smacked my leg with the flat of the blade. “Are you going to do this or not?”

I sighed and climbed to my feet. “Just so I understand the rules… Is this kind of like hide and seek?”

“Yes, except this isn’t a game,” Artemis snapped. She started walking backward toward the woods, her eyes on me. “Now, count to one hundred and then start to follow—and remember, this is a tracking exercise, so make sure you use your senses to find me.”

“Fine,” I grumbled.

I started counting as Artemis turned and ran into the woods. I finished my count and then took off after her. *Seems just like hide and seek to me.* I saw that Artemis had left me a few clues: broken branches and a footprint in the snow, to start with. Finding these little breadcrumbs so quickly got my hopes up. *Maybe I’ll be better at this than I was at the weapons lesson.*

I kept going, looking for more clues. I saw a few more footprints, a few trampled bushes, and another broken branch before I lost the trail. I slowed to a halt, realizing that I’d lost my way and had gone the direction of the Samara land. Seriously? I knew these woods well at this point not to make a rookie mistake like that…

*But that means Xavier’s close.*

Even when I was supposed to be making good on my pact and training with Artemis, it all came back to Xavier. I was starting to think I’d never be able to get him out of my head.

*Lola would be so pissed if I went to the Samara campsite to look for him. She warned me not to grovel.*

I stood there, unable to make myself retrace my steps and go looking for Artemis’s trail. I just needed to see Xavier with my own eyes. Maybe if he saw me, maybe if we talked and got to the bottom of whatever was going on, we’d be able to put all this trouble behind us and get on with our lives. There was nothing I wanted more.

*But he’s the one who’s wrong! He should be chasing me, not the other way around!*

I bit my lip, looking back and forth between the route that would lead me back to the pack house, and the route that would send me to the Samara campsite. To Xavier.

I was more confused than ever.

*What should I do?*

**Episode 3714**

**Ava**

I had no words. *Did Xavier really just tell me he broke up with Cali? Has hell really and truly frozen over?*

I narrowed my eyes at him. This had to be one of his cruel jokes or something… But I’d just had his lips on mine, his hands all over my body, his fingers inside me. It wasn’t lost on me that we’d almost had sex—technically, we actually *had*. Even the thought of it sent a spike of heat rushing through my body. Even now, I still wanted him, needed more of him. I wanted him inside me.

When it came to Xavier Evers, there was just this itch that I could never quite scratch. But it was more than just an itch; it was a longing, a desire, a *need.* Xavier was my mate.

I’d never stopped loving him, never stopped wanting him—not for a single second. I’d tried my best to prove that to him from the moment I’d come back into his life. I’d tried everything to prove what he meant to me and how much I’d changed.

*Have I finally done that? Does he finally believe that I’m a different person? Is he finally starting to see me for who I am* now*, and not who I used to be?*

Things between us had been so broken. The fact that we’d even made it this far was a major feat. I’d killed his mother, and I would never make a mistake like that again. I’d even made a promise to Marlene that I would watch over Xavier and protect him, and I’d been trying my damnedest to keep that promise. It was the least I could do after all the pain I’d caused them both. I didn’t know if Marlene asking that of me was the same as her forgiving me, but it had felt like a step in the right direction. His mother’s ghost had decided to give me a chance—was Xavier finally willing to do the same?

I looked at Xavier. He’d shut down on me again, that much was clear, but I still couldn’t help but feel hopeful. I wasn’t going to show it, though. This was Xavier, after all. He ran so hot and cold that I knew not to assume anything about what his revelation meant. I just had to play it cool… Though when it came to Xavier, I wasn’t very good at doing that. No one got under my skin the way he did.

Xavier’s gruff voice broke through my thoughts. “Go on and say something. I know you want to.”

Truthfully, I wasn’t sure what to say. But I managed to find my voice, anyway. “Why did you do it? Why did you break up with her? What the hell happened?”

Xavier looked me up and down and I shuddered, my body already starting to ache for him again. His hands roaming all over my body had felt so damn good; just like old times. I wanted more. We used to have so much fun together, and this hookup had reminded me of just how well he knew my body. I hoped it had brought back those memories for him, too. Things had gone so wrong between us, but once upon a time we’d been perfect for each other. I just couldn’t let go of the hope that we would be again.

“I didn’t do it because of you,” Xavier said.

His words were like a bucket of cold water being dumped over my head.

I scowled at him. “Such a typical Xavier answer.”

I tried not to let his words cut too deep, but it was hard. I was feeling more vulnerable than usual right now… Which I thought was totally fair, since I was fresh off the orgasm he had just given me.

“If you knew what I was going to say, then why did you ask?” he shot back. He ran a restless hand through his hair, and I could see his jaw working, like he was gritting his teeth.

I glared at him. “Because it makes no sense that you broke up with her. I thought Caliana Hart was your sun, moon, stars, the air that you breathe—whatever stupid mushy shit you two say to each other. I *asked* because you two breaking up makes absolutely no sense.”

I studied him, but I couldn’t even begin to read the expression on his face—though it kind of looked like he was holding himself back from saying more. I wanted him to tell me why he’d done it. If I found out what had finally put a wedge between them, it might give me a better idea of what to do to make sure we picked up where we’d left off.

“It’s complicated, and it’s also none of your business,” he said. “So drop it.”

“It *is* my business, and I’m not going to drop it. You’re the one who kissed *me* just now. And quit treating me like I’m just some… some… *rebound!* I’m your mate, and you would do well to remember that! I certainly do.”

No matter what I tried to get Xavier out of my life, out of my head, it never worked. He was in my heart forever, that would never change.

“I’ve tried to be understanding of Cali being your mate, too, Xavier—you know I have—but what do you want from me? You’re sending me so many fucking mixed signals! I wish you would just tell me what you want! Do you want to just fuck me whenever you’ve got an itch to scratch? Do you want to have me as a mistress on the side? To use me as a pawn in whatever games you’ve got going on, whenever the need arises?”

I thought back to how he’d slipped his arm around my waist, obviously to prove something to Greyson. It hadn’t felt good then, and it didn’t feel good now. It never felt good to be used.

“I’m not a second choice.” I took a step closer to him. “I’m the first choice. Always.”

Xavier glared at me. “Are you done?”

“Yeah. Now I am.” I crossed my arms over my chest, waiting. He was either going to run, or he was going to face this. I hoped for the latter, but I wasn’t holding my breath.

Xavier sighed, massaging his temples. “Everything between us… It’s confusing. I don’t know what to say or think about it, any more than you do. I don’t want to say that this was a mistake, and I don’t want you to feel like I’m using you… But what just happened doesn’t change anything between us. I may not be with Cali anymore”—he choked out the words, like they tasted bad—“but you and I still shouldn’t be together. We never should’ve been.”

My stomach dropped and my eyes stung. *I’m not going to cry. I will not fucking cry in front of him. Not right now.*

“Why would you say that, Xavier?” I demanded, shoving the tears away. “That’s just not true. We were good together, once. Before the pack war took everything from us. Why can’t you see that? Why are you so hell-bent on erasing everything that we had and pushing me away? It seems like you’re only doing it because you think it’s what you *should* do.”

“Ava—”

“Maybe the right thing is for us to be together again,” I said quickly, cutting him off. I had to lay it all out there. Even though things seemed to be progressing between us physically, emotionally, we weren’t anywhere near where I wanted to be. Pushing me away was Xavier’s favorite thing to do. “You’re my mate, Xavier. You’ll always be my mate. I wish you could see that. You tried to break our mate bond once, remember? But that only made it stronger.”

Xavier sighed and stared down at the ground. He looked tortured, sad, angry. I didn’t care—I needed to get this off my chest, once and for all.

“I think you broke up with Cali because a part of you has acknowledged what remains between us, even though you’re still scared of it. You’re afraid that whatever it is we have—the thing you just can’t shake, no matter how hard you try—is stronger than what you have with Cali. You’re afraid that if you give in, even a little bit, then she’ll know the truth too.”

Xavier climbed onto his bike and looked me right in the eye as he revved the engine. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

I shook my head. “At least I’m not in denial. At least I’m being honest with myself. Don’t you see? You could have everything you’ve ever wanted, X. It’s *right there* for you to take.” My cheeks warmed as I continued. “There’s a place for you at the head of the Samara pack. As Alpha. You were born to lead, Xavier, not play second fiddle to a lesser man. I mean it. You’re the only one I want.”

My words were loaded and I was going for broke, I knew that, but I had to put everything out there.

Xavier said nothing. He barely even looked at me as he revved the engine and peeled out, not even glancing back. It took me a while to realize I was shaking.

*Why is he like this? Why does he have to be so unreadable?*

I watched his taillights disappear, wondering if he was actually considering my offer.

**Episode 3715**

I stared at the trees that surrounded me, still trying to figure out what to do. Right now, I was seriously considering heading deeper into Samara territory. I just couldn’t shake my desire to see Xavier—especially when he was so close.

I bit my lip as I shot another glance back in the direction I’d come from. Artemis was waiting for me to track her down, but who were we kidding? I doubted I’d even be able to track a lumbering, half-dead bear. How could I think about tracking technique and stealth and all that when my missing mate was only a few minutes away? I had to admit, going to see Xavier was the most tempting option on the table. Didn’t I owe it to both of us to do whatever I could to fix things? And wouldn’t I have to see him face-to-face to do that?

I couldn’t help myself. I just needed to see him. Talk to him. He’d been so angry when we’d last spoken—maybe he’d had time to cool off since then, and we’d be able to have a more productive conversation…

*Don’t grovel, Cali!* Lola’s voice echoed through my head, snapping me out of it. God, what was I thinking? Lola was right. Of course I couldn’t go after him—not when he might have blocked my number. The nerve of him to do something like that—like I was some sort of pest. I wasn’t going to put myself out there and chase after him when he didn’t seem to give a single shit about me.

Before I knew it, even *more* tears were rolling down my cheeks. I swiped them away and closed my eyes, trying to get my composure back. I was actually starting to get mad, which was far preferable to the nagging sadness that had been plaguing me ever since Xavier had turned his back on me.

I shook my head and turned back, ready to see if I could actually give this tracking Artemis thing a shot. I hadn’t seen any clues for a while, but I only really needed to find one. I’d seen Artemis tracking her prey a bunch of times, along with Greyson… and Xavier.

“Shit!” No matter what I tried to take my mind off him, it just didn’t work.

I let out a burst of breath and shook out my arms, rolling my head from side to side.

*I can do this. I can track Artemis down. It’ll be a piece of cake. Maybe. All I need to do is think about the first thing Artemis would look for…*

I glanced at the ground. Maybe I’d be able to find another footprint, or a sign that the area had been disturbed recently. The only issue with that plan was that Artemis was pretty light on her feet…

I started to walk, keeping my eyes primed for any sign that she’d come this way.

After a couple of minutes, I spotted a stick that looked like it had been broken recently. “Huh.”

I crouched down to get a closer look. The wind couldn’t have done it, but maybe an animal had? That was always the hard part when it came to tracking, in my opinion. How were you supposed to know if your target had left a certain trail, or if it belonged to some random animal?

I stood up and saw that there was another broken stick a few feet away, which seemed a little too coincidental. Maybe Artemis *was* leaving a bunch of obvious clues behind on purpose, leaving me on “easy mode” since I was just learning the ropes.

Feeling encouraged, I followed the trail and came across Artemis sitting on a stump. I clapped my hands in excitement. “Yes! I did it!”

Artemis didn’t seem too impressed. “That took you way too long.”

I rolled my eyes. *Tough critic.* “I did it though, didn’t I? I found your little broken sticks and tracked you here, and that’s what counts. It was actually pretty easy once I knew what I was looking for.”

Artemis gave me a look. “Broken sticks? That wasn’t my trail.”

“Oh, so I just got lucky, then?”

Artemis nodded. “Seems like it. But even if that *is* the trail you followed, why did it take you so long? You said it was easy.”

I looked closely at my sister, debating whether or not to tell her what I was thinking.

*What could it hurt? Artemis is always so supportive. She won’t judge me, right? I’m going to tell her. I trust her.*

“It took me so long because I was thinking about going to the Samara campsite. I stumbled right into their territory while I was tracking you, and I thought that maybe I could just stop by… to see if Xavier was there.” I braced myself for my sister’s reaction.

Artemis looked at me blankly for a few seconds before shaking her head. “That’s a horrible idea.”

“Exactly, that’s why I didn’t *do* it, geez. I’m here with you right now because I thought better of it and made the right decision. I was just being transparent with you, telling you about my little moment of weakness.”

Artemis stood up and put an arm around my shoulder. “Fair enough, but next time you get an impulse like that, you have to tell me.”

“I just did!”

“I know—keep it up. I just want to be able to protect you, Cali. You’re going through a lot right now, and honestly, I’m pissed at Xavier. He never should have talked to you that way. At the very least, he could’ve made sure that there weren’t a bunch of people in the other room before he did it.”

Thinking about it made me relive it, and that was like a fresh punch to the gut. I wondered if I’d ever be able to think about that day without feeling like crap.

“If I see him any time soon, he’d better hope I don’t have my bow with me,” Artemis added darkly.

“Or a saber,” I said. “You’re good with that thing.”

Artemis’s eyes blazed. “Exactly. So, do you want to try this again? You have to actually find the right trail this time, though.”

“Fine,” I said. “But to be honest, I don’t have the foggiest idea how to find trails. Maybe it would be better if you gave me some pointers first, or some tracking 101 tips?”

“One-oh-one?” Artemis repeated, her brow furrowed. “How would numbers help?”

I laughed. Artemis had picked up a lot of human terminology almost mind-blowingly fast, but there were still a few things she hadn’t learned.

“One-oh-one is, like, the basics,” I said.

“Then just sat *that*,” Artemis grumbled. “So, pointers… Whenever you want to find out which direction the wind is coming from, you just wet your finger and…”

I listened for a bit, but started to zone out when I realized that her techniques didn’t really seem all that basic. Maybe tracking was outside of my skill level altogether, at this point. I wondered if some people just had a natural knack for tracking—if so, I’d probably never get the hang of it.

A twig snapped behind me, and I turned around, but there was no one there.

“That’s weird,” I said. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?” Artemis said, clearly miffed that I’d interrupted her.

“Nothing,” I said quickly. “Keep going.”

“So, what you want to do next is pick up a bit of the dung and rub it between your fingers to see if it’s warm…”

I raised my hand. “Wait a minute. Did you just say ‘dung’?”

Before Artemis could answer, there it was again—the twig snap. I whipped my head around. Still no one there.

“Are you sure you’re not hearing that?” I asked.

“What? No, I didn’t hear anything.”

“That’s the second time I’ve heard a twig snap behind me. Do you think someone might be watching us?”

Artemis looked skeptical as she shook her head. “No, I would’ve noticed. Are you trying to distract me so you can get out of training?”

“What? No! Of course not. I really thought I heard something. But you’re right, you would’ve caught on if someone was actually out here with us.”

“And yes, I did say dung, but that’s not the important part,” Artemis continued. “The important part is… What the hell, Cali?”

“Sorry,” I muttered.

I’d heard the sound again and turned all the way around, and now I was scanning the trees. The hairs on the back of my neck were standing up, and I kept thinking about all the snapped twigs I’d seen while attempting to track Artemis. Because if Artemis hadn’t left that trail, then who had?

“Seriously, Cali, everything’s fine.”

“You’re probably right,” I said, though I wasn’t quite so sure about that.

I turned back to face my sister—just in time to see something burst out of the trees and lunge straight for us.

**Episode 3716**

**Greyson**

I stepped out of the car before the driver could hurry to open the door for me and headed for the palace. I sighed as I stood before the massive wolf head knocker on Lucian’s door. *Man, it really sucks to be back here.*

I hoped I wasn’t the first to arrive.Right now, dealing with Lucian one on one was the last thing I wanted. At least if the others were here, I’d have backup.

I took a moment to collect myself, trying to push the image of Cali watching me from the window from my mind. I wished there was more I could’ve said or done for her before I left—I kind of felt like I’d abandoned her when she needed me most—but this meeting had to take precedence. I couldn’t be distracted, not with the Bitterfang threat looming over us. Attending this meeting and formulating a game plan was literally the best thing I could do for Cali. Nothing mattered more than keeping her safe.

I let the knocker drop loudly onto the polished wood of the door, and one of Lucian’s attendants opened it almost immediately. He gave me a slight bow and a polite smile, then ushered me into a large study, where Lucian all but jumped out of his seat to greet me.

“Ah, the Redwood Alpha has arrived!” Lucian said. “I hope the ride over was satisfactory?”

“It was fine,” I said dryly.

Clearly, Lucian was going to be his usual self, tonight, and I wasn’t happy about it. *Could he not, just one time, act like a normal person?* On the bright side, I wasn’t the first to arrive. Mace was talking to Aysel, who looked over the top, as usual.

“Ah, Greyson. Welcome,” she said, floating over to me and giving me an air kiss. “I have to say, the air feels absolutely *electric* with all these Alphas coming together. I should leave you all to it, but please do find me and say goodbye before you leave,” she said before heading off.

*Won’t be doing that if I can help it*,I thought as I took a seat in front of Lucian’s huge desk, wanting to get this show on the road so that I could get back to Cali. I didn’t want to be away from her for too long. She was doing her best to put on a brave face, but I could only imagine how she was doing without me there to help distract her.

“We’re waiting for Ava; she’s running a little late,” Mace said, probably sensing my impatience.

“Oh, you must excuse me for a moment—I want to make sure that Armin has my presentation ready!” Lucian said, before bounding out of the room.

“A presentation?” I said, once Lucian had gone. I couldn’t help rolling my eyes.

“You know him,” Mace said. “If he’s not doing too much, he doesn’t feel like he’s doing enough.”

“So true. So… How’s Maren doing?” It felt strange to be talking about her with Mace.

“She’s doing well, but she’s having a little trouble with Fenrir,” Mace said. “He’s growing up so fast, and he’s starting to flex his little werewolf muscles a bit. She’s having a hard time with it. I’ve been trying to guide the boy through it, but you remember how it was to be dealing with werewolf shit at that age . It’s not pretty. Maren’s a little out of her depth. I don’t think Fae go through as much as werewolves do while they’re coming into their own.”

“Sounds rough,” I said.

It didn’t surprise me that Mace had stepped into the father figure role for Fenrir, but I still felt a swell of jealousy. Leaving my past relationship with Maren out of it, there had been a time when I’d thought Fenrir was my son, and we’d built a strong connection. I missed him, to put it simply. There was always so much going on that I didn’t always have time to stop and realize just how much, but hearing all this from Mace brought it back to the forefront.

I’d told Maren that I’d help Fenrir navigate his werewolf urges, but it was starting to look like that responsibility had been stripped from me. It was probably for the best. I had too much on my plate as it was. And Mace was a decent guy—he wouldn’t steer Fenrir wrong…

Lucian came breezing back into the room, with Ava by his side and Armin bringing up the rear. Ava glanced at me, and I felt a bit of tension rise between us. She’d been there when Xavier had attacked me, after all.

*Fucking Xavier. Who knows what the hell is really going on with him? I doubt he’s telling Ava much of anything, either.*

I hoped Ava wouldn’t bring any of that up here—not in front of everyone else, not when we had to figure out what to do about Malakai. The Xavier problem was complicated and didn’t seem like it was going to be resolved any time soon, and especially not here. I also had no desire for Lucian and the others to get a front row seat to the current Redwood pack drama, allies or not.

“Thank you all for coming,” Lucian said. “Follow me, please.”

He led us to an impossibly large conference room.

“Is *everything* in this place larger than life?” I muttered to Mace.

“Nothing here is as large as Lucian’s ego, that much is for sure,” Mace said with a chuckle as we all took a seat around a huge, gleaming mahogany table.

Lucian seated himself firmly at the head of the table in a large, ornate chair that looked more like a throne than anything else. “Shall we begin?”

Lucian gestured to Armin, who cleared his throat and started talking. “Malakai has been the Bitterfang Alpha since he took over for his father while in his early twenties. His Luna is Honora, who is from a pack the Bitterfangs absorbed. They’ve been together since college.”

“Not surprising,” I said. “They must have a strong relationship if they were both of the same mind about killing their own daughter for defying them.”

I could only imagine how they ran their pack. It had to be one of the most toxic packs out there, with those two at the helm.

“Rumor has it, Malakai once murdered a rival Alpha and his Luna because of their non-traditional acceptance of Lunas as co-leaders, which of course caused a bit of a ripple in the surrounding werewolf community. As murder tends to. As for membership, the Bitterfang pack is estimated to have between forty and fifty members.”

Mace whistled. “That’s practically an army.”

Armin paused, looking irritated by Mace’s interruption. He cleared his throat again before he continued. “They’ve been based in Northern California for several generations. It appears that other local packs have gone out of their way to avoid them.”

“I can see why,” I said. “Their leader is ruthless, and the pack members are unorthodox, highly lethal fighters.”

“‘Aggressive’ is more like it,” Ava added.

“Agreed,” Lucian said. “Malakai has already proven that by invading all our territories and threatening us. I, for one, refuse to sit idly by while he throws his weight around in my woods. No one is allowed to threaten the Vanguards.”

“So you’d like to take a more aggressive approach, I assume?” I said, not liking Lucian’s very thinly veiled threat.

“You’re damn right. Match aggression with aggression. Do you not agree? Or do you fancy yourself and the Redwood pack to be better at the defensive side of things?” Lucian flashed a smile that wasn’t as harmless as he was trying to make it seem.

“The Redwoods can play any side of the field,” I said. “I’m sure you remember that.”

Lucian’s smile widened. “Oh, I remember being evenly matched.”

“This isn’t about the Vanguard-Redwood crap,” Ava said. “This is about a new threat, and I don’t know if we should poke the Bitterfang bear. We don’t know what alliances they have.”

“Agreed,” I said, surprised that Ava and I were thinking along the same lines.

“I kind of like the whole aggressive approach idea,” Mace said as he leaned back in his chair. “Sends a message.”

“And what’s that message, exactly?” I asked. “That we like to show our hand before we need to?”

“But we’ve already shown our hand, haven’t we? They already know our territory, along with almost everything about the Redwood and Samara packs, no?” Lucian said.

“Not everything,” I said. “They know the most important parts, like that we’re not to be messed with. We took out one of their lieutenants, after all. I think they might be a little more hesitant to come at us than you think. Maybe we don’t need to rush into this.”

“I agree with Greyson,” Ava said. “Sometimes taking the defensive position is the better move.”

Lucian leaned forward on the table. “So, what are we going to do? Keep waiting until the summit like sitting ducks? Or should we make a stand and attack them first?”

**Episode 3717**

My mind raced as our attacker bolted straight for me. They were literally a blur, and it was happening so fast that I didn’t even have time to summon my magic, and I didn’t have a single weapon on me.

*Why isn’t Artemis doing anything?? Is she just going to let—*

*Bam!* Just like that, I was tackled to the ground. My attacker rested their entire weight on top of me and I could barely move, even though I was fighting to get up. I yelped when I saw a flash of fangs. *A VAMPIRE?*

I closed my eyes and screamed, using my arms to protect my neck from the inevitable bite. Then I heard a peal of laughter. I opened my eyes to find Jacqueline sitting on top of me, laughing hysterically.

“Oh my gosh, you should have seen your face, Cali!” she wailed. “It was priceless. *Priceless!*”

“What the hell?” I said, shoving her off me. “What are you *doing*, Jacs?”

“Oh relax, Cali. It’s part of your training,” Jacs said.

“What? A part of my *training*?I could have killed you!”

Jacqueline started laughing even harder, tears sliding out of her eyes.

“I might have! You don’t know!” I said mutinously.

“I wouldn’t have let that happen,” Artemis said evenly.

“Well, it was still a mean thing to do!” I got up and brushed myself off, embarrassment sinking in around my anger and annoyance.

“I disagree, Cali. Your enemies won’t always warn you before they attack. In fact, most of the time, they won’t. That’s one of the most important lessons I can teach you. You have to be ready for anything,” Artemis said. “Expect the unexpected.”

“Does that include being lied to by your sister?” I snapped. I looked back and forth between Jacs and Artemis. Jacs was still cracking up, and I was grateful that Artemis hadn’t joined in. I might have lost it.

“What exactly was I lying about? Enlighten me,” Artemis said, sounding bored.

“Th-That’s not the point! You just… You just should have warned me! Not cool!”

Jacs rolled her eyes. “Like your sister said, that’s not how bad guys work. They’re not going to give you a heads-up before they attack.”

“Thanks, Jacs,” Artemis said. “Let’s all get back to the house. We have more training to do.”

I didn’t say much on the way back. I was still too annoyed. It didn’t help that Artemis was making us run back. There was nothing I loathed more than running. Worse than that, Jacs just wouldn’t stop poking fun at me. She was having *way* too much fun at my expense.

“Artemis, I can’t believe she said that! ‘I could have killed you,’ she said! Ha! With what, a scream? That’s rich.” Jacs dissolved into another fit of laughter. “If cowering could kill someone, then you’re right, Cali—I’d be as dead as they come.”

“Speaking of, Cali, why didn’t you use your magic?” Artemis asked.

“I didn’t have time,” I confessed. “I was so startled that I didn’t have a chance to summon it.”

“Which is why you should always have it ready. It should always be bubbling just under the surface, ready to go at a moment’s notice.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?” I said. “It kind of feels like walking around with a loaded gun. What if it goes off accidentally?”

I didn’t want to end up hurting someone by mistake because I was paranoid and keeping my magic at my fingertips twenty-four hours a day. That seemed like overkill.

“I know it’s not easy, but that’s why we’re training—so you won’t have to think,” Artemis said. “So you’ll be ready to react at the right time, and not a second earlier. You should think of your magic like a musician thinks of their instrument.”

That baffled me. “I don’t see the connection.”

I was starting to wonder if Artemis had been hanging around Lola too much. She was starting to sound just like her.

“A musician learns their instrument to the point where they can move their fingers to the right place without even thinking about it. That’s what you need to achieve. Your magic needs to become second nature to you.”

When we reached the pack house, I almost dropped to my knees from exhaustion. My chest was aching, and my breath was exploding from my mouth in loud bursts.

“I wasn’t sure I was going to make it,” I rasped. I collapsed on the porch steps and laid my head on my knees. “Am I going to pass out?”

“You’re not going to pass out,” Artemis said. She threw me a bottle of water. “Here. Hydrate.”

“Do you want me to stick around to attack Cali some more?” Jacs asked hopefully, like it was the only thing in the world she wanted to do.

“Thanks, but I think that’s enough for now,” Artemis said.

Jacqueline shot me a grin, baring her fangs. “You’re welcome!”

I glared after Jacs as she went sauntering into the house, still chuckling to herself. I wondered if the vampire was ever going to let me live this down. I wished I could think of something snarky to say, but I was too focused on staying conscious and sucking down as much water as I could.

Then it hit me. I really *did* owe Jacs a thank-you—from the moment she’d attacked me, I hadn’t thought about Xavier. He was definitely back in my thoughts full force right now, but those minutes of forgetfulness had to mean something.

“I think you’re right,” I told Artemis, finally starting to catch my breath. “Training is going to help me.”

Artemis smiled. “So, does that mean we should continue?”

She went back into her duffle bag and pulled out a deadly looking weapon with spikes all over it.

“Whoa. Be careful, Artemis, one slip up and you could take your eye out with that thing. Wait—maybe, for now, I can teach you how to make a shield?”

Artemis’s eyes brightened, and she dropped the scary looking weapon back into the bag. “Heck yeah, let’s do it!”

“Great!” I was just happy the weapon was back in the bag.

I took a moment to recall everything Grandpa Innes had taught me. I lifted my hands and started forming a ball of magic between them.

“First, you have to concentrate your magic into a dense ball like this,” I said. “Kind of like a snowball.”

Artemis lifted her hands and tried it. I could tell by the look on her face that she was concentrating really hard, but she couldn’t get it to work.

“I can’t do it,” Artemis said, frustration coloring her words.

“Maybe we should try something a little more basic,” I said. I bent down and grabbed a handful of snow, then started making a snowball. “See, like this!” I said, tossing it up in the air.

We set about making a huge pile of snowballs, laughing as we exchanged tips for the best technique. Without warning, I lobbed one of the snowballs at Artemis and it exploded against her chest. Artemis yelped in surprise and fell on her butt in the snow.

“Always be ready,” I teased.

“Oh, so it’s *payback* you’re after!” Artemis said, picking up an armful of snowballs.

I grabbed a bunch too and we started throwing them back and forth, both of us impressed by how good our aim was. *Maybe Artemis’s training is already paying off!*

Artemis was too quick for me, though, and ended up winning the fight after bombarding me with a rapid fury of snowballs. We both collapsed to the ground, laughing and soaked to the skin.

“Let’s add snowball fights to our training regimen,” I said when our laughter began to die down.

“Deal.” Artemis sat up, suddenly looking distracted. “I wish I could do that with my magic. No matter how much I tried to visualize it, I just couldn’t make it work. I could feel my magic surging inside me, but it just wouldn’t let me manipulate it the way you did yours.”

“Don’t give up,” I said.

I wanted to be as good a teacher as Artemis was—I just needed to find the right way to explain it, so she could grasp the concept better. Artemis and I would be unstoppable if we could both create shields.

“Let’s try again,” I said, standing up and offering her a hand. I pulled her to her feet and then stepped back a few paces, so she could get a good view of me. “Now, hold your hands out like this, and when you grab your magic, picture it coming up to your fingertips already in a fully formed ball. Close your eyes, if that helps.”

Artemis closed her eyes, her brow furrowed in concentration.

“Good,” I said. “Now feel it coursing through your hands, and move your fingers the same way you did when you were making the snowballs.”

There was a sudden flash of light, and we both jumped back in surprise. It was so bright that I couldn’t see a thing, but when that brightness began to fade and I could see again, I gasped. Artemis was holding a shimmering, magical bow.

I gasped. “How the *hell* did you do that?”

**Episode 3718**

**Xavier**

I skidded to a stop, deep within Three Devils Point. I wanted a place far, far away from anything that could remind me of Cali or Ava, and I was pretty sure this was as far away as I could get without triggering a reprimand from Adéluce. All it would take was one tiny violation of the terms for her to do something to harm Cali. She’d made that very clear.

*I will hunt her down and finish her off, but not until I’m good and ready for her. Not until I have the perfect way to make her pay for what she’s done to me.*

I couldn’t deny that the vampire-witch had gotten a leg up on me every time we’d come face-to-face, so I was going to have to come up with something other than anger-fueled brute strength to best her. Maybe spending time out here would help me think of something that would work.

I hopped off my bike and took in the fresh air and the quiet. This could be just what I needed—time alone without the pressure of having to explain myself to anyone. I was tired of leaving a path of pain and destruction behind me. I just needed to stay put for a while and let things settle.

I pulled out the tent and quickly set it up, then cleared some ground nearby for a fire. I went off to gather some branches and logs, wishing I felt more enthusiastic. I’d never loved camping like this, but at least I wasn’t bad at it. I was definitely better than Cali. I smiled, thinking about her trying to rough it. She’d had a pretty rough go of things when we’d headed to the Lupo Finale… I quickly pushed those thoughts away and chastised myself—not just for thinking badly of Cali, but for thinking about her at all.

*That’s not how this is supposed to work. I had to focus on pulling my shit together so I can take on Adéluce. I can’t start wallowing in my memories. That’s not going to help.*

Out here, there were no distractions. It was just me, my tent, my fire, and Mother Nature. A cold raindrop fell on my head, and I looked up through the trees. Clouds were moving in fast.

*No problem. I could use a nap, anyway.* I crawled into my tent and lay down. The ground was hard, and I kicked myself for not having grabbed a sleeping bag. I rolled over onto my back, only to flinch as a drop of water fell right into my eye. Shit. There was a hole in the top of the tent. No wonder it had been up for grabs.

“Fuck!” I should have taken a closer look at it.

I shifted over to avoid the hole, but I just couldn’t get comfortable. Not to mention that the leak was going to wet the entire floor of the tent in no time. I needed to go back to town and pick up the supplies I should’ve grabbed before I’d come out here. I tried to give myself a break—I had a lot on my mind, so it was no wonder I hadn’t prepared properly.

I hopped back on my motorcycle and raced through the cold rain back to town. As soon as I rolled to a stop in front of the grocery store, the rain stopped. *Of course. It couldn’t have stopped ten minutes ago, could it?* It was majorly annoying, but I refused to let it bring me down. I needed to think about this whole experience as a new chapter, a new beginning. If adversity brought growth, then bring it on—I was about to do a lot of growing.

I ran into the grocery store and grabbed some basic food and snacks, then came back outside. The sun was shining. That had to be a good omen, right?I packed all the goods onto the bike, my spirits lifting just a little.

A walk down the block led me to a camping supply store. I went in and picked up some cooking supplies, a new tent, and a thick sleeping bag, along with a rope to secure it all to the bike. Back outside, the sun still shining down, I strapped everything onto the bike and then hopped on, feeling better by the second.

I pulled out onto the road and pushed the speed limit as I headed back toward Three Devils Point. The cold wind felt good on my face, and it was finally starting to feel like the day might take a turn for the better.

I’d only gone a few miles when I noticed a car turn in behind me. There was nothing too unusual about that—there were only so many ways out of town—but after a couple more minutes and a couple of turns, I realized that the car was definitely trailing me. I accelerated, trying to lose them like I’d lost the cops before, but the car kept up with me.

“Shit. Does anything ever go my way these days?” I muttered, craning my neck as I tried to get a look at who was driving. I couldn’t fight a car with a motorcycle, but I could for damn sure fight whoever was driving it.

I turned off the road, rolling to a stop as the car pulled in behind me. I wasn’t surprised in the least when the doors opened and the two guys from the bar climbed out.

I smiled at them. “Back for more? Didn’t you already get your asses handed to you on a plate? Twice?”

I thought of Ava kicking the shit out of them and smiled.

One of them stepped forward. “This time, it’s different. You’re alone. No crazy chick here to help you out.” He pulled a chain out of his jacket and started swinging it. “And as you can see, we came prepared.”

I widened my smile and took my time looking both of them in the eye. “Prepared for what? Another ass beating? Because that’s exactly what you’re going to get.” I climbed off my bike, making sure not to turn my back on them for even a second. “Maybe this time, you’ll manage to bring me some actual pain.”

I rolled my neck, stretched out my shoulders, and bounced on my tiptoes a few times, at the ready. The day was definitely looking up. I would kick the shit out of these guys, then go back to my campsite to relax in solitude for a while.

The guys looked at each other and then back at me. I hoped that they weren’t getting cold feet. The one with the chain wasn’t even swinging it around anymore.

“What?” I said. “You guys chicken? You wondering if by the end of this, I’m going to be beating you with your own chain?” I asked with a snicker. “Come on, don’t flake out on me now. Let’s do it.”

“Fuck you!” one of the guys screamed, and they both came bolting toward me.

I was light on my feet, moving around so they couldn’t flank me. I threw one punch that grazed chain guy’s cheek while the other guy ran at me, tackling me to the ground. He was heavy, I’d give him that, and I wasn’t able to maneuver out from under him before he hit me with a swift punch to the nose. I saw stars, but it gave me the jolt I needed. I bucked him off and tripped him as he tried to get up, then finished him off with a hard kick to the middle of his back. He hit the ground face down and immediately started groaning.

Chain guy let out a snarl as he came at me, swinging the chain clumsily in my general direction. I caught it easily and then yanked it forward, pulling the overwhelmed chain master along with it. With one swift movement, I twisted around and wrapped the chain around his neck.

“Told you so,” I said, right in his ear.

“Fuck you!” he spat as he struggled to free himself.

He was thrashing and kicking with enough ferocity to throw me off-balance, and I slipped and vaulted backward. I was still recovering when the other guy came running at me, and something sharp tore into my side.

I groaned, finally releasing the chain. I stumbled backward and looked down. The handle of a knife was sticking out of my side, and my blood was flowing like a faucet. I dropped to my knees as my entire body broke out in a cold sweat.

*Whack!* The chain struck me hard across the face with an explosion of pain that cleared my mind for a split second before the world started to spin and I fell facedown on the ground. The two guys came and stood over me, both of them breathing hard and bloodied.

“Shit! I think we killed him!” one of them said, clearly freaking out.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here,” said the other.

I heard the sound of their footsteps as they retreated to their car. Their tires squealed as they disappeared down the road with a spray of gravel. I had to hand it to the assholes—they’d gotten me good.

I closed my eyes, thinking that this was probably for the best. Maybe now, all the pain would die along with me.

**Episode 3719**

**Greyson**

Lucian’s question only served to renew the argument, and I was getting tired of going around in circles. I needed to get back to Cali, and I wasn’t in the mood for a two-hour long debate when there was really only one option for us all, as far as I was concerned.

I stood up, drawing everyone’s attention. “I think attacking would be a mistake. If we did that, if we even set foot in their territory, they’d say we were trespassing, even though we have a right to attack after Malakai’s explicit threat,” I said pointedly, trying to show Mace and Lucian that I understood where they were coming from, even if I thought attacking was a stupid idea. “Besides that, we’d have to leave our territory and our pack houses here undefended while we trekked out to California, to territory we’re not familiar with. Not only would we be invaders, we’d be invaders with a distinct disadvantage. Not the right move, in my opinion. We have to be smart about this.”

“With all due respect, Greyson, I disagree,” Lucian said, slowly dropping back down into his seat. “They probably think that we don’t have the gall to come for them. Imagine their surprise when we do just that. They’d never see us coming. A surprise attack could only work in our favor.”

“Maybe at first,” I conceded. “But then, once we lost the element of surprise, we’d have an uphill battle ahead of us. The four of us know this area better than anyone. Here, we have the advantage, should they attack us.”

“Yes, and for all we know, Malakai is making all those threats to trick us into attacking him. Maybe that’s what he wants,” Ava added.

“Exactly,” I said. Ava was actually impressing me for once. She was shrewd and levelheaded, two things Lucian definitely was not. “I suggest that we sit tight and prepare on the assumption that a Bitterfang attack is inevitable, but we’ll also plan to take our grievance to the pack summit.”

Lucian waved a dismissive hand at me as he sank down low in his chair, looking every bit the petulant prince. “If Malakai and his followers attend the summit, who’s to say that they won’t start something there?”

Ava rolled her eyes. “Because that would be foolish and dangerous with the council’s rules in place. I doubt Malakai would be that stupid.”

Mace sighed. “I have to admit, Ava and Greyson are making sense. I think the best thing would be for us to show up at the summit as a united front. That way, Malakai and the other packs will think twice about taking us on.”

“Right,” I said. “We’ll show up together and prove that we easily outnumber the Bitterfangs—that way, we might just avoid a war that none of us want.”

Lucian let out a big sigh. “Look, you know I like to think of myself as the Propagator of Peace—”

Ava rolled her eyes again, and I chuckled.

“Don’t tell me that was your self-appointed moniker when you were courting a demon,” I said.

Ignoring my dig, Lucian stood up and flashed his winning smile. “As I was saying, I’m as much for peace as the next one, but we need to be smart and act in our own interests as well. Not sit around waiting for someone else to act. Surely the Alphas here must see the merit in that?” He held up his hand. “Apologies—I do realize that the Samaras are still sadly without an Alpha.”

We all looked at Ava as Lucian continued.

“So, Ava, what *is* your current Alpha situation?” he asked. “I understand that several candidates didn’t… pass muster. I am, of course, so sorry to hear that you’ve been having such trouble finding a suitable leader.”

I couldn’t help but notice a hint of satisfaction in Lucian’s words. I had no doubt that he was still hoping the Samaras would tuck their tails between their legs and run to join his pack. If that happened, I was sure that not even this massive palace would be able to handle the size of his ballooning ego.

Ava looked away. “We’re working on it,” she said tightly.

Lucian smiled. “Hope springs eternal. But know that my offer still stands—the Samaras are more than welcome to join the Vanguards. You must be tired of living like savages in the woods. It’s just so cold outside, and it’s ever so warm in here.” Lucian twirled away from the table and held up his arms. “Look at this place. It’s more than large enough to house your people. They’d live like royalty. Every need anticipated and sated. Parties, festivities, food, luxury—”

“No,” I said. “The alliance will appear stronger if we attend the summit as four distinct packs. If you absorb the Samaras, there’d only be three. And besides, I’m sure the Samaras prefer to stand on their own two feet. They don’t want charity. They’ve made it this far without it.”

I glanced at Ava, whose face was creased with obvious discomfort. I found myself experiencing one of those rare moments when I actually felt for her.

“No one in my pack is advocating to join the Vanguard pack,” she said. She wasn’t making eye contact with Lucian, and I wondered if what she’d said was true.

Lucian shrugged. “Regardless, if the Samaras don’t find with an Alpha soon, they’re going to look pretty vulnerable.” He paused for a beat before adding, “And not just to the Bitterfangs.”

Ava fixed Lucian with a hard look. “I’m well aware of that,” she said, her teeth clenched.

It was obvious that she was struggling to keep things cordial with the princeling. I couldn’t blame her. Lucian was all but rubbing her pack’s shortcomings in her face, and clearly having a hell of a good time doing it. The princeling literally couldn’t have looked more pleased with himself. If the guy had had a mustache, he’d have been twirling the hell out of it.

Lucian turned to Armin, who’d been standing quietly off to the side throughout the discussion. “Fetch us a map, would you, Armin? It wouldn’t hurt to get visuals on Bitterfangs territory. See exactly where it is, how wide it spreads.”

“Which map?” Armin asked. “There are literally hundreds in the cartography library.”

*Cartography library?* Mace mouthed to me, his eyes wide.

Lucian threw his hands up in disgust. “*Really!* Do I have to do everything myself?”

He got up and ushered Armin out of the room.

“I find it really hard to believe that Lucian has ever done *anything* himself,” Mace said, once the two men had left. Mace’s phone rang, and he looked at it. “Excuse me, gotta take this,” he said, getting up and hurrying out of the room.

For a moment, I wondered if it was Maren calling. They had to be pretty close if Maren was allowing him to play such an active role in Fenrir’s life, so it would make sense that they were in pretty constant contact. I mulled that over, not quite knowing how I felt about it just yet.

“Thank you for the support,” Ava said, breaking me out of my thoughts.

“I wasn’t supporting you,” I said quickly. “I was supporting your pack.”

“Either way, thanks,” she said. “It’s not easy to speak up for your pack in a room full of Alphas.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “You were right about the Bitterfang approach, and Lucian seems a little *too* naked in his desire to take over the Samaras. Props to you for standing strong against him. I know things can’t be easy for all of you right now, and that being in a place like this only shows how easy things *could* be.”

“Tell me about it,” Ava said with a sigh, taking a look around the large, opulent room.

“I’m glad we were able to come to an agreement on this,” I said. “Lucian seems to think that fighting is all fun and games, but I know different. The last thing we need is a pack war.” I took a breath, wondering whether I should say what was on the tip of my tongue. I decided to go for it. “There’s only one wild card in all this. Xavier.”

Ava gave me a sharp look. A moment of awkward silence passed between us before she finally spoke. “What does he have to do with this, exactly?”

I could tell that she was trying to sound nonchalant. Trying and failing. “You know Xavier. Unpredictable, hotheaded. His behavior has been… *extreme* lately, and it could interfere with our efforts to hold off the Bitterfangs. At times like these, it’s better to have everyone in line and solidly on the same page, but when it comes to my brother, that’s not an easy ask.”

“I see,” Ava said slowly.

“Have you seen my brother since he and I fought?” I pretty much knew the answer, but I wanted to hear it from her. When it came to Xavier, you could never be sure about anything. I didn’t want to get too deeply into the whole Xavier thing right now, but it wouldn’t hurt to get a little intel on him if I could.

Ava looked away, biting her lip. “Yes. I’ve seen him.”

She got up to look out the window, and I went to stand beside her.

“Then tell me, Ava.” I glanced at the door to make sure we were still alone before stepping close. “What the hell is going on between you and my brother?”

**Episode 3720**

Artemis was squealing in childish delight as she looked at the shimmering bow in her hands. It was glowing a purplish white, like it was made entirely out of magical energy—and it was. I’d never seen anything like it, and I was completely taken aback.

“Artemis, did you do this on purpose?” I asked, leaning close to get a better look at the shining thing. “It’s so… so… *you!*”

“What? No! I’ve never done this before—not even in the Fae world. This has never happened before… I wonder if it works?” she said, her eyes shining as she held it out to get a better look. “Better yet, I wonder how far it *shoots*? I wish there were a Bitterfang around to use for target practice. Then we’d really be able to see what this thing can do.”

She got into proper stance, narrowed one eye, aimed, and fired. I watched with wide eyes as the arrow flew through the air in a blur of light and struck a faraway tree, splitting it completely in half with a flash of blinding white energy.

“*Wow,*” I said, the word packed with wonder. “That is so badass!”

I couldn’t help but think about the implications of this. If Artemis could just conjure a bow and arrow out of thin air whenever she wanted, the Bitterfangs—or anyone else who decided to come at us—wouldn’t know what hit them.

“I know!” Artemis said. “This might be better than the real thing! Which, there’s not much better than a bow and arrow.” She was illuminated by the bow as she brought it close to her face to admire it. Her eyebrows knitted together in concentration, then she conjured another arrow and nocked it. “Endless ammo made from explosive energy! Yes please!”

As Artemis aimed and sent another shining arrow flying, I felt a twinge of jealousy. *A freaking magical bow and arrow? Who even knew that was possible?*

Not only was Artemis’s magic coming back in full force, but she had so much better control of it than I did. She hadn’t been able to make a shield, but in many ways, she’d made something way better. It seemed like I was always going to be ten steps behind my sister when it came to magic.

*But isn’t that why we made our pact? So that I can get as good as her?* *I shouldn’t be jealous—I should be encouraged. If Artemis has been using her magic for this long and is still encountering all sorts of surprises, that means the same thing could happen for me. This is an opportunity, not a setback.*

I just needed to practice—a lot. I’d only known about my magic for a short while, after all, and Artemis had been using hers for most of her life. I was on the right track, as far as I could tell. I’d already gotten good enough with my magic to use it to defend myself, and it had definitely come through for me in some pretty rough situations. Who knew how much more I would be able to do after Artemis’s rigorous training program? I just needed to put my mind to it and focus.

*Maybe I, too, will be able to conjure magical arrows and split my enemies in half, just like Artemis is doing to those trees! Once I master my shielding, I’ll see if I can conjure something else. Maybe even a saber made entirely out of magical energy! Now that would be cool. I wonder if it would weigh less than the real thing?*

Inspired by Artemis’s unexpected progress, I summoned up a shield and discovered that I could easily move it around, which was a new development.

“Look what I can do!” I said, zipping the shield around every which way like I was protecting myself from attacks from all sides.

Artemis and I slapped a quick high five. “Cali, that’s amazing! You’re really getting good with that thing. Come on, let’s practice! Let’s see what these things can really do!”

I kept moving my shield around, defending against imaginary projectiles and sword strikes while Artemis let loose a barrage of arrows, splitting one tree over and over until it looked like a smoking bouquet of ribbons. I’d never seen her look quite so satisfied. It was like she’d been ready and waiting for a magical bow her entire life.

My little surge of jealousy forgotten, I was gaining more confidence in my magic by the second. Before, when I’d been suffering because of the ashes and my magic had been fleeting and unbalanced, I’d thought I’d never be able to trust it again. It had never seemed to be there when I’d needed it, or to the degree that I’d required. But I wasn’t feeling any of that uncertainty anymore, and I wanted to take full advantage.

I was almost giddy as I switched between using my shield and sending out the occasional blast of magic right at an imaginary enemy. I even sent a blast at the tree Artemis had shredded, disintegrating it into a pile of ash. I felt more powerful and capable than ever before.

*With powers like these, I won’t need to be afraid of anyone or anything ever again.*

“I wish we could test these out under more extreme circumstances,” Artemis said, breathing hard. “Hitting trees is fun and all, but a moving target or something would be even better. I just want to up the stakes a little, I guess.”

“You’re so right,” I said. I was feeling pretty confident about my shield, so I said, “Maybe we can. Why don’t you try to shoot an arrow at me, and I’ll block it with my shield?”

Artemis pursed her lips. “Hmm, I’m not sure that’s a good idea. We don’t really know how powerful the arrows are, and you’re just now getting more control of your shield. What if it blasts right through? I would never forgive myself if I hurt you. Don’t get me wrong, it sounds like fun—but it also sounds like a recipe for disaster.”

I thought that over. “You’re probably right. Hmm… Well, why don’t you pretend like you’re going to shoot an arrow, and then we’ll see how fast I can conjure up my shield to block it?”

“That could work,” Artemis said. “Let’s give it a shot!”

“Okay, I’m going to count to three. One…” I summoned my energy, felt it building within me. “Two…” I lifted my hands and concentrated, forming the energy into a ball. “Three!”

I looked up at Artemis. But then there was a sudden sharp *snap*, and her bow disappeared.

Startled, I dropped my shield. “Whoa. What the hell just happened?”

Adair came stomping over. “Just what do you two think you’re doing?”

He stopped in front of us, his energy whip swirling before him.

“I—we—were just practicing. I wasn’t actually going to shoot!” Artemis said sheepishly.

“We were just training,” I said. “I’m getting better with my magic, and Artemis and I were just testing our limits a little. That’s all.”

Adair shook his head. “That’s foolish, and you should both know better! You should never train with loaded weapons. *Ever*. Especially since neither of you have full control over your magic, yet. You never know what could go wrong. Fae magic—*all* magic—is unpredictable, and things can go wrong in a split second if you don’t take every precaution.”

Artemis nodded slowly. “He has a point,” she said, looking at me. “The Kollector used to train his soldiers by having them use real weapons against each other. He lost plenty of his best people that way.”

Adair pinned Artemis to the spot with his glare. “You knew that, and yet you still tried? That doesn’t make much sense, now does it?”

“Adair, take it easy, it was both of us,” I said. “We both were just a little excited that our magic is finally working properly—and she was just trying to help me reach my full potential. No one got hurt, except for a few trees,” I said, trying to defend my sister. She and Adair were just now getting to a good place, and I didn’t want them to regress just because she and I had gotten a little carried away. “She wants me to be as formidable as both of you are with your magic, and I want that, too. We need to be able to take full advantage of every resource we have, and if we get good enough, we’ll be an amazing resource for the pack.”

“Two beginners trying to teach each other? Now I’ve heard everything.” Adair shook his head and started to walk away.

“You were supposed to be the one training us, remember?” Artemis called after him. “Instead, you’re out here yelling at us and mocking us. Some trainer you are.”

Adair turned back to face us, his eyes so dark and turbulent that I took a step back, intimidated.

“You’re right, Artemis,” Adair said. “I *did* say I would help. But you’d better be ready, because the real training starts tomorrow.”

**Episode 3721**

**Xavier**

When I opened my eyes, my entire body was throbbing with pain. I rolled onto my back, grunting. My jaw ached. I tasted blood, I smelled blood—I was lying in a fucking *pool* of blood. It smelled like mine.

I’d been attacked.

The memory was clear, now, but that didn’t improve the situation. I fought to sit up and winced at the pain in my side. More blood. I’d been stabbed.

“Shit,” I muttered, shaking my head. It hurt. Everything fucking hurt, but I didn’t give a damn. I wanted to go find those motherfuckers and start another fight. I wasn’t sure if I’d be looking for them to avenge myself or to cause myself more pain, though.

Cursing again, I finally managed to stand up. It had been difficult to get on my knees, force them to carry my weight, and then straighten to my feet. I was lightheaded—because of the blood loss?

I pushed myself forward, ignoring the dizziness. I would heal. I would be fine. This was nothing. Though, it took a concentrated effort for me to climb onto the bike, and even more effort to kick start it. Searing pain shot through my thigh.

Again, I pushed through, shifting the bike into gear—but the weight of the bike was suddenly too much for me to handle. I lost control easily, tipping over onto the ground, the bike landing on top of me. The engine revved against me, the muffler burned my skin, and I shoved the bike away, groaning loudly.

I could barely fucking move. I wasn’t going anywhere until I healed. Why the fuck wasn’t I healing? Why was it taking so much longer than usual?

Suddenly, the taste of my blood made me feel nauseous. I spat as much of it as I could onto the ground, grunting as I reached over and shut off the bike’s engine. I fell back down, breathing like I’d just run a marathon. This was so fucking wrong.

I looked at the knife wound. The knife was still in me. Huh. No wonder I hadn’t stopped bleeding. I grabbed the handle, ignoring the way my arm protested, then I counted to three, and pulled the son of a bitch out with a scream.

Fuck, this was a new low.

I fell back to the ground again, waited for the pain to ease. The knife was still in my hand. Breathing hard, I examined the blade after wiping it clean on my shirt. At least it wasn’t silver. Of course, there was no reason for it to be—those assholes had no idea I was a werewolf. Still, there was something off about the rate of my healing. Or maybe there wasn’t. Was I fucking imagining things?

I was imagining things.

The pain had dulled enough that I managed to crawl to my knees for a second time. I was covered in dirt and my own blood. I needed to get the fuck out of here, needed to get up and go somewhere to heal, but I didn’t have the strength. I felt… *tired*. Yes. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt so tired. Rest would do me good. I needed to rest. Just for a few minutes.

The moment I closed my eyes, Cali’s face popped into my head.

And then my thoughts started to roam, conjuring up a series of ridiculous little fantasies.

If the knife had been silver, Cali would’ve immediately offered to heal me. She’d have given me her blood and fussed over me and told me off for scaring the shit out of her again for no reason. But maybe it wouldn’t have happened that way, even if she’d been there. I’d hurt her so fucking badly—said such cruel things—that she might’ve just let me die.

But then I scoffed so hard at that thought that my chest ached.

Cali would never abandon me. No matter how sad or hurt or devastated she was, she’d never just let another person die—much less someone who was her mate. My wolf stirred at the thought, but his enthusiasm was pointless. Adéluce wouldn’t let me go back to Cali.

For a moment, the longing got too intense, too heavy, and I could only escape it by fantasizing about seeing Cali again. One look at her would be enough to take my pain away and restore my strength.

That would never happen, though.

Adéluce had gotten what she wanted. She was probably laughing at my suffering right now. When would she be satisfied? How much more would I have to endure? I’d broken up with Cali like she’d wanted, and it already felt like I’d already lived through a whole fucking year of agony.

The sound of a car approaching distracted me from my thoughts. I winced at the noise as it pulled over a few feet away. Who could it be? Probably those bastards coming back to finish me off. I should have gone after them first, but I’d been too weak.

I was *still* too weak. Fuck. *Heal.*

I turned to look at the car. Could I even put up a fight right now? There was blood in my eyes, my vision was blurry, and I couldn’t see who was approaching. The figure was tall and thin, and I tried to remember if either one of my attackers had had that build. I wiped the blood from my eyes, but I was still seeing spots. I dropped back down to the ground, groaning as the figure leaned over me.

“What happened to you?”

The voice was smooth. It echoed in my head. I tried to speak, to reply, but I couldn’t find the words. The figure touched my forehead, my cheek. The gesture felt warm, tender, and my heart leapt. My wolf howled, hope bursting through the pain. I couldn’t see this person, but I knew who it was. I was certain.

Cali had found me.

Adéluce hadn’t been able to stop my mate—our bond had been too strong for the evil vampire-witch’s spells. Our love was stronger than any revenge plot she could’ve possibly cooked up. I’d been trapped, but now Cali was here to save me.

Cali still loved me.

And together, we would be free.

I smiled up at the figure, and the world disappeared as I plunged into a pool of darkness.

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Later on, I recalled traveling. I had no idea where to or for how long, though. Lying in the back of a car, Cali driving, taking me away. Stumbling as she helped me into her room. The pain was a little less, now. Everything was better now, because I was lying in her bed.

I hadn’t opened my eyes yet—my lids felt too heavy—but I could sense Cali’s presence. I was back in the pack house, no longer out in the cold. No longer anywhere Adéluce could find me. But the vampire-witch had been watching me all the time, somehow. If she hadn’t intervened when Cali had saved me, that had to mean something.

Had Adéluce seen enough?

Had she released me?

Was I just too fucking pathetic for her to keep torturing?

The questions burned, but as long as I could stay here, with Cali, I didn’t care about the answers. A wet washcloth wiped the blood from my face. I still couldn’t see, though—Cali was only a fuzzy silhouette when I squinted at her.

My eyelids still felt heavy, so I kept them closed. If this was a concussion, I’d start feeling better soon. For now, I would take what I could get. I was so grateful for Cali.

She removed my shirt, cleaning my stab wound with another washcloth. “It’s starting to heal,” she said softly.

A sob was stuck in my throat, but I knew I couldn’t start crying like a fucking weakling right now. I couldn’t do that to Cali when I’d hurt her so badly. I needed to speak, though. At least try to smother some of the shame I felt.

“Thank you,” I said. My voice sounded rough. Foreign. “I owe you. I owe you… forever.”

I couldn’t say more. My throat was closing up again. *God dammit*, I wasn’t going to fucking cry. Not like this. Maybe later, when I could take her in my arms, and she could cry with me, and I could thank her again.

*Thank you for loving me, still.*

*Thank you for not giving up on me.*

*Thank you for seeing me as a better man than I could ever be.*

I’d been awful to her, a true beast, and I would spend the rest of my life making up for it. I would do everything I could to show her that I wanted her. That I’d *always* wanted her. I wished we could go somewhere, just the two of us, away from everything. We’d done that before, and I needed more of it.

I needed *her*.

I reached out to touch her, my eyes half-open, but her shadowy outline moved away.

“I’ll be right back,” she said.

She was gone.

I tried to mind link with her, to tell her to stay, but I got nothing. I was so weak that not even mind linking was working. I wasn’t able to concentrate enough to reach her. Cali wouldn’t have left me, if she’d heard me asking her to stay. I fought to sit up, but fell back against the pillow with a groan.

My head was still throbbing—that blow from the chain had been a hard one—but finally, slowly, I managed to properly open my eyes. The shadows in the room took on clear shapes. My vision was working again…

And everything was wrong.

This wasn’t Cali’s room.

The overwhelming scent of death hit me all of a sudden, along with the realization that I was *not* in the pack house. But where the hell was I? And why the fuck did I smell vampires?

**Episode 3722**

Adair stalked away toward the house, acting like a majestic, pissed-off tiger. I waited until he disappeared inside to speak—not that I was intimidated, or anything.

“So.” I turned to Artemis. “I guess Adair isn’t happy with us. Like, at all.”

Artemis rolled her eyes. “I think he just considers our training his business.”

I felt fidgety. “You really believe that?”

“Yeah. We probably offended him by going off on our own. Which is odd, because he didn’t actually want to help in the first place.”

“We managed to create the shield and the bow without his help, though, so we’re off to a good start, right?” I asked. “I mean, my magic is really working again. At least to an extent.”

Artemis agreed, and relief coursed through me.

My thoughts started running a mile a minute.

*What else can I do? What’s next, after the shield? Training with Artemis and Adair could actually help me become a proper fighter! FINALLY!*

The notion was something that I was going to hold on to. I needed to focus on what I’d experienced today—this feeling of being strong and capable, of putting in the effort and hard work to become a better version of myself. My fingertips still tingled from the excitement of using my magic so successfully.

“Artemis.” I stared at my sister, grabbing her hand and squeezing. “Thank you for bringing me out here today. It was amazing.”

“I know,” she said, grinning. “But don’t get too excited. Adair’s annoying, but I don’t think we’ll make that kind of progress again without his help. I’m pretty sure he’s going to kick our asses tomorrow—probably as part of our training *and* to teach us a lesson for ignoring him. We’d better rest up if we want to survive the day.”

Immediately, my excitement turned into nerves. “*Survive the day?* You think it’s going to be that intense?”

Artemis scoffed. “Didn’t you see him back there?”

I cringed. “But what if I can’t handle it? What if I’m not cut out for his style of training?”

Artemis shook her head. “I’ll be there with you every step of the way. Adair can be… difficult. But we have each other.”

I nodded. Her encouragement meant the world. I took a deep breath to calm myself, then the gears in my brain started turning again.

“He can’t be *that* tough, though, right?” I asked hopefully.

Artemis raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, he has to have a tender side. I’ve seen how he is around Tabitha,” I said. “Back in New Orleans, it was obvious that he was trying not to fall apart while we searched for her. He was clearly pining for her.”

Artemis offered a solemn nod. “I did notice the pining. It was very intense.”

“Besides,” I went on, “if Tabitha loves Adair, it has to be for a reason—he can’t be all rough, all the time. And he did *offer* to help us without being forced. Right?”

I sounded way too hopeful, but Artemis just shrugged. “I guess? I can’t say I’ve figured my uncle out. Maybe spending time with him during training will fix that. He’s still family.”

The word “family” reminded me how much hanging out with Artemis and working on my magic had helped me today. I glanced over at the pack house. I needed a moment with my sister before I had to go back inside and face everyone.

“Thank you again for all this,” I said quietly. “I really appreciate it.”

Artemis didn’t say anything for a moment, but her gaze spoke volumes.

*I see you.*

*I know how hard this has been for you.*

*I’m glad I could help*.

I heard all those things, loud and clear. And then Artemis offered me a teasing smirk and said, “You might not be thanking me after training tomorrow.”

As we walked back to the house together, Artemis rambling on about how cool my shield was, I felt a sliver of hope. With her by my side, it felt like training wouldn’t just make me a better fighter—it would also help me get through this breakup without falling apart.

*It could’ve been so much worse*, I thought. *Without my family and friends and Greyson, I don’t know what I would’ve done…*

I swallowed down the memory of Xavier’s harsh words and took a deep breath before entering the house.

“I’ll go look for Rishika,” Artemis said. “I have to tell her about my magic bow and arrow!” Artemis’s excitement made me grin. But her smile faded when she spoke again. “Are you going to be okay?”

I nodded. “Of course. Have fun with Rishika.”

Artemis squeezed my shoulder and ran off.

“It’s probably not a good idea to hold a live demonstration of your new weapon inside the house!” I called after her.

Artemis laughed, waving me off before disappearing around the corner.

*Well, then*, I thought. *Let’s see how* that *goes.*

I pictured Adair catching Artemis showing off her magic to Rishika and cringed. I was almost sure he wouldn’t approve. Somehow, though, I could see him doing the same thing to impress Tabitha—while looking like a Byronic hero, and with nobody else watching.

Shaking my head, I headed to the kitchen to get some water. Suddenly, Lola popped up out of nowhere, and I squeaked in surprise.

“Lola! What the—”

“I scared you? Sorry, I didn’t mean to—I’m just super quiet because I’m supposed to be super deadly. But not for you, obviously—you’re my best friend!” She grabbed both my hands and stared deep into my eyes. In a throaty voice, she said, “You’re my *best friend*, Cali.”

Her intensity was overwhelming. “Lola, seriously, what’s going on?”

“I’m so sorry for the failed pity party,” she said, yet again.

I sighed. “Please stop apologizing. It’s okay.”

“But I need to make it up to you, as your best friend. We *have* to do something else.”

*Oh, boy…*

“What do you have in mind?” I asked hesitantly.

“Let’s keep it low-key,” she said. “How about just the two of us, like old times?”

Lola’s earnestness made warmth spread through me. There was a reason why she and I had been such good friends for so long—we were always there for each other. We’d been through a few rough patches over the past year, but I would always love her.

“That sounds nice,” I said.

She grinned. “Perfect! I think some of the ice cream survived—I’ll go grab it.”

Ten minutes later, Lola and I were in my room, sitting together on the floor with a tub of ice cream and two spoons. There hadn’t been a lot left, so we finished it far too quickly.

“So,” Lola said, breaking the silence. “How are you feeling?”

The dreaded question.

“I’m trying not to think about Xavier, but it’s hard,” I said. “Everywhere I look, I see something that reminds me of him. So I’ve decided to concentrate on my training.”

“That’s a smart move, but you’re not training right now, so we should figure out a contingency plan.” Lola hummed thoughtfully. “What’s the highest form of escapism?”

“Uh—”

“Cinema!” Lola declared. “How about we binge watch all the *Twilight* movies?”

My tone was sarcastic. “Sure. Watching a bunch of werewolf movies sounds like a *great* distraction from Xavier.”

Lola laughed, standing up to reach for her laptop. “Hey, there’s vampires *and* at least our werewolves don’t wear cargo shorts.”

*Greyson would somehow manage to pull off cargo shorts*,I thought to myself.

“Do you know when Greyson is going to be back?” I asked.

“No idea,” Lola said. She dropped back down to sit next to me, setting her computer on a chair at eye level. “There’s no telling how long a meeting will be when it involves Lucian. He tends to go off topic…” She turned to me. “Just like you’re doing right now! You’re supposed to be focusing on Bella and Edward, Cali.”

I nodded, breathing deeply. “Right, yes.”

Lola tapped a key on her laptop and started the movie. Ten seconds later, she said, “Actually, why *aren’t* we talking about Greyson?”

I rolled my eyes. “So much for focusing on Bella and Edward.”

“Yeah, but what about *your* Edward?” Lola pressed. “Greyson, I mean. Though I guess Xavier is brooding and mysterious like Edward. But actually, Greyson is loyal like Edward, and he has Edward’s swagger—like in that scene where he’s wearing sunglasses and gets out of the car—”

“Lola,” I said firmly. “*Where* are you going with this?”

“Seriously, what are you going to do about Greyson?” she asked.

I was so confused. “What do you mean?”

Lola stopped the movie just as Bella’s voiceover started. She turned to me, looking uncharacteristically serious. “I get that you still don’t know *for sure* what the deal is with Xavier, but if he really did break up with you and block your number… Does that mean you’re going to choose Greyson?”

**Episode 3723**

**Greyson**

Ava met my gaze defiantly. “What would you do if there *was* something between me and Xavier?”

“My question was direct, Ava,” I said calmly, not matching her tone. “Answering with another question isn’t going to cut it.”

“Xavier agreed to help the Samaras find an Alpha. That’s it,” she said.

The truth was, Ava was hard to read. She’d helped the Redwoods in the past, and she’d apologized for all the fucked-up things she’d done. But that didn’t mean much when it came to this particular topic—she and Xavier were a match made in hell.

I’d never been sure about the best way to deal with Ava, and anything involving Xavier was going to make that even more difficult. Being aggressive and condescending with her probably wasn’t the right call, though. I was not my brother.

Despite my frustration—and despite whatever role Ava might have been playing in this whole messed-up love square situation we had going on—I decided to put all my cards on the table.

“Xavier broke up with Cali,” I said. “Did you know that?”

She didn’t miss a beat. “Yes.”

“Did Xavier tell you why he left her?” I asked.

Ava’s cool expression immediately turned defensive. “If you’re trying to blame me for their breakup, this conversation is over. I had *nothing* to do with it.”

I was hardly convinced. But anyway…

“I’m not trying to blame you,” I said. “I’m only trying to understand what’s going on in my brother’s secretive, stupid head.”

Ava didn’t even bother to defend her mate. “Talk to Xavier, then. I haven’t been able to get him to explain either.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Ava, let’s be honest here. I think we both know that you wouldn’t be unhappy if he did break up with Cali just to be with you.”

Ava glared. “He’s not next to me right now, though, is he? He’s not with the Samara pack, either. That should answer everything for you. If we were together, if we were involved, he would be here.”

That made sense in theory. But really, I didn’t know what to think. Whatever Xavier was going through, the other Alphas and I couldn’t let my brother’s erratic behavior disrupt our plans for the Bitterfang pack.

When I didn’t respond, Ava spoke again. “Regardless of what’s going on between me and Xavier, did it ever occur to you that maybe he just broke up with Cali because he doesn’t love her anymore?”

My immediate reaction was to laugh. Ava’s expression darkened, but I didn’t give a damn.

“I think that’s just wishful thinking on your part,” I said. “I don’t know why Xavier suddenly graduated from a normal asshole to a fully-fledged narcissist who should be repeatedly punched in the face, but some things don’t change. I hate to be the one to break it to you, but my brother is still very much in love with Cali.”

I *thought* so, at least.

I’d seen the way he was with Cali—right up until she’d gone to the hospital. And then he’d left her when she was at her lowest. After all they’d been through, it just didn’t make any fucking sense. To make matters worse, the details of Xavier’s little breakup speech still eluded me. The only thing anyone would say was that Xavier had mentioned hooking up with Ava. And now that I was face-to-face with Ava—and seeing for myself how committed to him she seemed—I just couldn’t rule out the possibility that they really *had* been sleeping together this entire time.

“I’d have thought you’d know how this works, Greyson,” Ava said, interrupting my thoughts. “You were once very much in love with that other Fae, Maren, weren’t you? People change.”

I gritted my teeth. That was below the belt.

That was Ava.

“This has nothing to do with me,” I said. “This is about you getting your hopes up for a man who suddenly seems dead set on ruining everything he touches.”

She scoffed. “The bar is in hell when it comes to Xavier, Greyson. I’ve learned to keep my expectations very low—don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried about you,” I said coldly. “I’m worried about our packs. I can’t allow whatever is going on between you and Xavier to interfere with the alliance, or the summit.”

I also didn’t want Cali to get hurt by whatever sick games Xavier and Ava were playing.

“Whatever’s going on between me and Xavier, as you say,” Ava said sharply, “has nothing to do with this meeting. If I didn’t give a damn, I wouldn’t be here. I’m fighting for my pack’s survival, and nobody—not even Xavier—is going to get in the way of that.”

At least Ava’s words matched her actions—she *had* been working tirelessly to keep the Samaras afloat. That was an undeniable truth. And a relief. Looking at her now, I believed she was proud enough to fight tooth and claw against Lucian’s plan to absorb the Samara pack.

But the Xavier situation was still unresolved.

How did my brother fit into all this?

How far would Ava go in order to reclaim her mate?

Mace’s voice interrupted my thoughts.

“False alarm,” he said, pocketing his phone. “One of my scouts called—they thought they found a Bitterfang, but it was just a Rogue, so…” He stopped short when he looked up, his gaze flickering between Ava and me. “Everything okay in here?”

“Sure,” Ava said sarcastically. “Talking with Greyson is always a delight.”

“I especially enjoyed it while Ava was staying at my pack house rent-free for months on end,” I replied in the same tone.

“For which I will always be grateful—even though you keep rubbing it in my face,” she shot back.

I forced a smile. “Xavier doesn’t have a monopoly on pettiness, Ava. I’m an Evers as well.”

Ava rolled her eyes.

*Wow*, Mace mouthed.

“I have returned!” Lucian declared, strutting into the room. His presence was exactly what was needed to cleanse the charming atmosphere in the room. Obviously.

If I hadn’t been so pissed off at Ava, I would’ve laughed.

Lucian was followed by Armin, who was holding a huge rolled-up map.

“Armin, chop chop!” Lucian clapped his hands, gesturing at the table.

Without a word, Armin spread the map across the table, and we all crowded around it. He grabbed a marker and drew a large circle on the map of Northern California. “This is all Bitterfang territory.”

Mace whistled. “Shit. I didn’t realize it was so large.”

I shook my head. “We could use that to our advantage. *If* Armin is right about the size of the Bitterfang territory—”

“Of course he’s right,” Lucian interrupted. “He’s my right-hand man!”

“*If* Armin is right,” I repeated to Mace, ignoring Lucian, “then Malakai has a lot of land to protect. Which means he has to spread his forces thin. If we do end up having to attack, all we’ll have to do is find the weakest point.”

“Wonderful!” Lucian grinned. “So, when are we attacking?”

This guy really just heard what he wanted to, didn’t he?

“I never said that we were, Lucian.” I weighed the odds for a moment, looking around the room. “But let’s make it official. Let’s put it to a vote.”

Lucian wrinkled his nose. “I suppose that’s an idea.” He looked over at Ava. “But the Samaras can’t vote—they don’t have an Alpha.”

I was ready to argue that Ava was the closest thing they had. She was doing her best—despite being kind of the worst—and I could respect that. But before I could speak, Ava did.

“I wasn’t expecting to vote,” she said. “I came here to find out what was going on, and I will make sure my pack follows whatever decision is reached.”

I tried to hide my surprise. I’d have expected Ava to be more assertive about this. It felt like Mace would’ve agreed to let her vote, much like I would have, but Lucian was more of a traditionalist, so she would’ve had to manipulate her way into it. Manipulation was one of Ava’s greatest talents, so I had to wonder why she hadn’t even tried.

“Let the Alphas vote,” Lucian said, looking—as ever—very happy with himself.

“I’m opposed to attacking,” I said right away. “It’s logical to believe that the Bitterfangs are looking for a fight and an eventual clash will be inevitable. But I don’t think that traveling all the way to California just to attack first is smart. We don’t know the area. If we let Malakai come to us, we’ll have the home field advantage.”

Lucian scoffed, “Greyson, please. Everybody knows that the best defense is a good offense. Hit them when they least expect it.”

Ava raised her eyebrows, turning to Mace. “It’s a split vote, Mace. You’re the tiebreaker. What do you want to do?”

**Episode 3724**

I couldn’t believe my best friend had just gone there. *Again!*

“I’ve already told you that I can’t be thinking about stuff like that right now, Lola.” I huffed. “I thought you asked to hang out because you wanted to make me feel better, not so you could drill me about things that are upsetting by default!”

“Okay, okay,” Lola said, putting her hands up. “I’m not trying to cause trouble. But you should still face facts—if Xavier is gone, then doesn’t that make your choice easier? Like, a *lot* easier?”

I could feel a headache coming on. And I’d been so happy outside with Artemis!

*Dammit, Lola.*

“Xavier broke up with me *yesterday*,” I reminded her. I was trying really hard to be patient. “Nothing is ‘easier’—it’s way too soon to think about the future.”

Lola sighed. “I know that, but—”

“But what? Why do you keep coming back to this when it’s like a gaping, bleeding wound in my chest?”

Lola’s eyes flashed with an emotion I couldn’t categorize. But, identifiable or not, it was intense. Her voice dropped when she spoke. “Xavier didn’t just break up with you, Cali. He cheated on you, and he humiliated you. His horrible behavior *should* be making your choice easier.”

My eyes burned with unshed tears. “You can’t expect me to think logically right now. I’m so heartbroken—”

“I’m thinking we need to fatten up your self-esteem and sense of self-preservation, Cali,” Lola interrupted. “Because if Xavier thinks he can treat you that way and get away with it, then there’s something seriously—”

“We’re *mated*!” My voice got louder. “It doesn’t work that way! We’re tied together, regardless of the *due destini*! It’s *not* simple, Lola.”

“It’s simpl*er*,” she insisted. “Xavier is acting like an asshole. Even if the *due destini* curse is still active, the choice part of it is gone since Xavier’s acting like he doesn’t want you. And even if it does involve one of your mates dying when you choose, perhaps Xavier effectively chose to die by rejecting you first and guaranteeing you’d end up with Greyson by default, so—”

“Lola, nobody’s going to *die*.”

She stared at me. Her voice went quiet. “Denial won’t help you, here.”

I wasn’t in denial.

“I haven’t told this to anyone yet,” I whispered, my heart pounding. “I need you to swear on Jay’s life that you’ll keep it a secret. Okay?”

Lola blinked. “On Jay’s life?”

I gripped her forearm. “On Jay’s life. I haven’t even told Artemis about this, and we both know you have loose lips. I need you to promise.”

Lola huffed. “Okay, okay—I swear on my mate’s life. Now, what’s this secret of yours?”

*Here goes nothing…*

“I finally had the courage to read it,” I said.

Lola frowned in confusion. “*Twilight*?”

I groaned. “No, not *Twilight.* Big Mac’s letter about the *due destini* curse.”

Lola’s eyes went wide. “*And?*”

My hands were shaking. “The death part of the curse has been lifted. I’m free to choose.”

My best friend blinked at me. I expected her to scream and high five and all that. But instead, she just went, “Hmm.”

*Hmm?*

I tried to keep my voice from turning into an offended shriek. “Really? That’s all you have to say?”

“I mean, it’s a good thing—”

“Ya *think*?”

“Yeah, like, nobody needs or wants a curse to dictate who they should or shouldn’t be with,” Lola said, pointing out the obvious. “This is your relationship—your relation*ships*—and you don’t need a curse as a fourth wheel.”

I just stared at Lola for a long moment. “You’re weirdly calm about all of this.”

She shrugged. “I guess I’d already guessed it would turn out that way? Big Mac kind of insinuated that the curse was gone.”

I leaned back against the bed, breathing deeply. I could see Lola’s point. But still.

“You promised not to tell anyone,” I muttered. “Please don’t forget that.”

Lola shook her head. “Of course, I swear!”

Her face was clouded with worry, and for a second, I wondered if I’d overreacted. Nevertheless, the thought of everyone else knowing about the letter, butting in and telling me what to do, how to think, how to feel… It sent my anxiety into orbit. Lola’s comments about Xavier’s behavior had already been tough enough to hear—if this became a pack issue, it would only make everything even harder.

*At least I could tell* someone *the truth…*

Lola wrapped an arm around me, pulling me closer. Her tender gesture made something ease inside me, probably because the weight of the secret had been lifted. Not entirely, since there were still so many issues left to deal with, but still.

“Thanks for listening,” I mumbled. “But I need you to remember that I’m not going to make any choices.”

Lola stared at me. “Even if the death curse is gone?”

“Even if the death curse is gone.”

“Even though Xavier left you?”

Breathing in right now made my heart ache. “Even though Xavier left. I can’t make any decisions. It’s too soon.”

Lola frowned. “I get that, but… Don’t you think you should tell Greyson about the death curse?”

I felt a twinge of guilt. Greyson and I had had such a wonderful time together. I wished all these thoughts about choosing, about the *due destini*, about the breakup… about *everything* would get out of my damn head. I just wanted to focus on being with Greyson, and on training with Artemis and her grumpy uncle.

*Training is going to be my path out of the pain of losing Xavier*. *I just know it. And if it’s not… Well, it’ll feel good. Hopefully.*

“I will have to talk to Greyson about it, yeah,” I finally told Lola. “But not right now. You said we were going to spend time together today anyway, right?” I nodded at her laptop. “Aren’t we going to watch the movie?”

“Okay,” Lola said. I could tell she was still worried, but I was glad she’d stopped pushing. She started the movie again, and we settled back. Barely a minute had passed before Lola said, “This isn’t working.”

I groaned. “Oh my god, *why*?”

“Because we don’t have popcorn!” she declared. “How can we have a movie marathon day without popcorn?”

“I think we’re going to need a buffet—aren’t there five *Twilight* movies?” I asked.

Lola gasped. “That’s a great idea! We can take a break and grab more food after the first movie. For now, I’ll just grab some popcorn and Skittles and chips, and I think Greyson’s hidden some cookies somewhere, but I’m sure he’d give them up for you, so—”

“If he’s successfully hidden cookies in a house full of werewolves who can sniff them out, that means he really doesn’t want them eaten. He wouldn’t give them up for me,” I declared.

Why the hell was I sounding so defensive?

Lola raised an eyebrow. “Cali, come on. Of course he’d give you the cookies. He’d do anything for you. Now let’s stop talking and get this show on the road. Be right back,” she said, dashing out the door.

*Easy for you to say!*

She’d just invited me into her lair and rattled me with all her questions and all her comments and all her “Xavier humiliated you” and “Greyson would do anything for you.” These were all things I already knew, of course, but hearing Lola say them out loud made everything even worse. I loved Greyson with all my heart, but I was mated with Xavier as well, and him breaking up with me just *didn’t make sense*. And I still loved him as well.

*I can’t just give up on him…*

And then there was the letter.

I’d told Lola about it, but I hadn’t informed either of the two people it impacted the most. Xavier had no idea about the truth. Greyson had always been pretty convinced that the curse was gone, and it turned out he was right. But neither of them knew for sure.

*Could this change things?* I wondered. *Would Xavier want to come back if he knew the curse was gone?*

I needed answers. It wasn’t like things had suddenly gotten worse between us before the breakup. In fact, up until the moment he’d broken my heart, I’d thought that things were going well. Amazing, even.

*There* was *all the weird energy between him and Ava, though. Especially after New Year’s…*

Lola’s voice interrupted my thoughts as she walked back into the room, arms full of snacks. “So, if you *did* choose Greyson—”

I huffed. “Lola. We said we weren’t going to talk about this.”

“But I’m just speaking hypothetically!” she shot back. “If you were to hypothetically choose between Xavier and Greyson, would you have to make a formal announcement?”

My eye twitched as I glared at Lola.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry!” She groaned. “Shutting up now!”

I was tense as a harp string during the silence that followed, because I knew there was no fucking way that she’d shut up.

“So, Xavier is mega hot, right?” Lola said approximately twenty seconds later. “And he’s got that ‘I’m so broken’ vibe, which works, because you can fix him—if that’s your thing. It’s a huge turn-off for me, by the way. Like, a man being unreliable like that and needing to be coddled twenty-four-seven as if you’re his mommy makes me drier than the Sahara desert.”

“Lola, that’s—”

“Anyway, back to Xavier being super hot! What else does he have going for him, though? Is he a good conversationalist? Can you see yourself starting a family with him in ten years? Children do not need fathers who run off like moody toddlers, Cali, it’s—”

Okay, that was ENOUGH.

“Lola, if you don’t stop talking, I will absolutely start crying,” I said.

I wasn’t above using blackmail.

She gasped. “You wouldn’t!”

“Try me.”

We were at an impasse.

She wrapped an arm around me and kissed my cheek, grumbling something about me weaponizing my tears. But how could I not? Lola was relentless! A steamroller! She did give great hugs, though. I snuggled closer to her, and she stroked my hair. I felt like a cat, which was nice.

“I wonder if the curse knows,” Lola suddenly whispered.

I frowned. “Knows what?”

“That it’s over,” Lola said. “That it has no power. That you can choose now, without anyone dying.”

I was still frowning. “I don’t think it works that way.”

“But how would the choosing work now, then?” she asked. “Is it like *The* *Bachelor*? Do you need a rose?”

I grimaced, releasing myself from Lola’s hug. “I’m not doing that again. Ever. Can we *please* watch the—”

“I’m just saying! How does the *due destini* work, with the dying aspect off the table? You just said that Xavier is still your mate—what happens to him if you choose Greyson?”

**Episode 3725**

**Xavier**

My vision had cleared. I wasn’t in Cali’s room. I wasn’t even in the pack house. Clothes were strewn about the small space, and all the furniture was weathered and crappy. The yellowed blinds were drawn, so I had no idea what time of day it was or how long I’d been here.

This bedroom smelled of death. And weed.

But the death scent was the real problem, because it meant I was in a fucking vampire’s bedroom.

A flash of memory made my already throbbing head ache even worse. Me, strapped to a table, serving as a blood bag for Iñigo’s clients. The image made me shiver and lift my arms instinctively. I wasn’t tied up.

If I’d been kidnapped to be used as a vampire snack, why the fuck wasn’t I tied up?

This was weird. All of it. Aside from the whole vampire issue, I just couldn’t believe a bunch of humans had fucked me up enough to hallucinate that Cali had come to my rescue.

I also had no idea who’d brought me to this room. The voice had been familiar, but I couldn’t pinpoint it. And I didn’t care. I wasn’t going to lie in some vampire’s bed and pretend everything was fine.

I swung out of bed, pausing for a moment to steady myself. I must’ve lost a lot more blood than I’d thought—or had the vampire drained me? I cursed under my breath, my hand flying to my neck. There were no fang marks, thank god. I checked my wrists—no holes there, either. I was relieved, but shit had just gotten even weirder.

I was an Alpha werewolf—Iñigo had wanted me because I was such a valued bloodsucker commodity. They loved Alpha blood. And yet this person—whoever the hell they were—had decided to just let me lounge in their bed, without any restraints, without any clothes, and without eating me.

Maybe I was being saved for some kind of special event?

The thought made me shudder.

Where the fuck were my clothes?

I forced myself to stand, ignoring the dizziness, and quietly poked around—I wasn’t going to leave this place naked, not when I wasn’t sure I was strong enough to shift.

The door opened.

“They’re in the wash,” someone said. The voice was female; soft and smoky.

I turned around and saw Mabel leaning against the doorway, looking decidedly unimpressed. And decidedly uninterested.

It was a testament to how messed up everything was that I was relieved to see the waitress from Iñigo’s diner. Not that I’d ever imagined myself in the same room as her again—I trusted no bloodsucker other than Mikah—but better her than a vampire I’d never met.

“Your clothes,” she clarified when I didn’t respond. “They were covered in blood and dirt. Not that I mind the blood, but the rest was a mood killer.”

I swallowed. “This is your room?

Mabel shrugged. “It’s not much, I know. But unless you’d prefer to lie in the dirt on the side of the road, it’s all there is.”

I didn’t speak.

She raised her eyebrows, crossing her arms. “I could’ve left you to bleed out. I could dump you back out there if that’s what you prefer.”

I wasn’t sure what was better, actually—bleeding out on the road or in a vampire’s bedroom.

“Why did you bother helping me at all?” I asked. I was curious here, for real.

Mabel shrugged. “You know, I was just wondering that myself. You *are* a sad-looking sight—maybe I just felt bad for you.”

A vampire. Pitying me. Great.

My pride would’ve been wounded if it hadn’t already been hacked away to basically nothing.

“You felt sorry for me,” I repeated, trying to wrap my head around what was happening here. “And you helped me. Even though I’m a werewolf, and you’re a vampire.”

Mabel remained impassive. “You’re still a person, and you looked horrible. So I decided to help. Even though Iñigo used to say that empathy is one of my weaknesses. But then again, he was an asshole, so I didn’t listen to him much.”

I scowled. “Why did you even work for him?”

Mabel shrugged again. “It was a job. And Iñigo made it difficult for anyone to quit.”

I didn’t want to think what “difficult” would’ve meant in that particular scenario. The threat of violence or worse, probably.

“But now that Iñigo’s gone, you don’t work at the diner anymore. Right?” I asked.

“I do,” Mabel said. “Until something else comes up, it’s all I have.”

There was a pang in my stomach. I could relate to her words—some of my mercenary work had fallen into that category. Nothing but a job and no other choices. A life without meaning. I’d been that way after Ava’s death, after my wolf had left.

But then Cali had come along, and she’d saved me, and she’d—

The thought of her was so painful that the ache inside me got impossibly bigger.

“I suppose you’re wondering why you found me lying on the side of the road?” I asked.

Mabel didn’t answer. She walked over to her dresser. There, she lit up a joint, offering it to me.

“No, thanks,” I said. I was surprised that I’d said the word “thanks” to a vampire, but I’d done worse things in my life, so whatever.

“Hope you don’t mind my smoking,” she said, taking a long drag.

She exhaled, and I blew the smoke away. “It’s fine. Just not my thing.”

She looked at me up and down. Paused. Then she said, “I just assumed you wound up on the losing side of a fight.”

I eyed her.

“The reason why you were on the side of the road?” she clarified. “Aren’t werewolves always getting into fights for no reason?”

I snorted, thinking of Colton. “There’s some truth to that.”

“My dryer isn’t the best, so it’s going to be a while before your clothes are dry,” she said. “Are you hungry?”

“No, thanks,” I said. Thanks again, apparently. When the fuck had I become so polite?

Mabel looked amused. “I was just asking, not offering. I don’t have any food in here. Maybe some old pretzels in a coat pocket somewhere.”

“Sounds appetizing,” I deadpanned.

She barked out a laugh. “And here I thought your big brother was the funny one.”

My stomach lurched at the mention of Greyson. It hurt. Why the hell did thinking about him *hurt*? He was a thorn in my side, and we’d made each other bleed just a few hours ago.

Things would’ve been so much easier if I hated him.

“So, why *were* you bleeding on the side of the road?” Mabel asked.

“Got knifed by some assholes,” I said.

I didn’t add that I had probably—definitely—deserved it.

Mabel’s eyebrows knitted. “Why would an Alpha werewolf let a few humans get the better of him?”

“Why do you assume they were human?” I evaded.

Mabel flashed her fangs. “I could practically taste them on you. And you haven’t answered the question.”

I’d given more answers to Mabel—a vampire I barely knew—than I’d given to Cali, Ava, and Greyson combined over the past day. It was fucking absurd.

“I was jumped,” I said.

I didn’t tell her that I’d wanted to get hurt. That I’d needed it. I didn’t tell her that I’d let it happen. I didn’t tell her that if I could’ve gone back in time, I’d have told them to beat me harder. I said none of those things, but Mabel watched me. She looked me up and down, making me feel uncomfortably like she could see right through me.

“You look like shit,” she finally said. “I thought you were dead.”

“Disappointed that I’m not?”

She blew out a cloud of smoke. “Not sure. What difference would it make to me? One less werewolf would probably be a good thing.”

She stepped closer, still staring. It was intense. Like I was a bug under a microscope, and she wanted to poke me. I didn’t feel threatened, though. Not exactly.

“If I didn’t know any better,” she muttered, “I’d say you had a death wish.”

Her words hit me straight in the chest. Could I deny them? What I was doing *did* look like a self-destructive spiral. Every move I’d made since breaking up with Cali and breaking both our hearts in the process had been the wrong thing to do. From attacking Adéluce without a plan, to going back to Ava, to touching Ava, to getting into dumb brawls with Greyson and those bikers—it had been one fucked-up thing after another.

I was a goddamn mess.

“Maybe you’re right,” I finally said. “Maybe I do have a death wish.”

Mabel’s reaction was to smile. A big-ass grin, at that.

Vampires, man.

“Then you should come with me,” she said.

I wasn’t sure where she was going with this, but I was intrigued. What the fuck else did I have to do right now, anyway?

“Come with you?” I asked. “Where? And why?”

She took another drag from her joint. “Not why—*how*.”

I raised a brow.

Mabel smirked. “How fucked up do you want to be?”

**Episode 3726**

Panic rushed through me like a shot of electricity.

I knew Lola was just throwing out questions like she normally did—i.e., without much thought behind them, and while doing her best impression of a sparkly flamethrower—but this question…

*THIS. QUESTION!*

Neither one of the guys was going to die because of the *due destini*. Big Mac was sure of it. But what if there was still some kind of consequence tied in with the curse? Who was to say breaking the murderous part of the curse hadn’t just left us with the status quo—and who knew what the hell that was? What if choosing Greyson would hurt Xavier? Not hurt him by killing him, but hurt him by…

*By what? What else, Cali?*

I didn’t know!

“Hey, did I say something wrong?” Lola asked anxiously. “I’m really sorry—I’m so stressed out about all this that I couldn’t keep my mouth shut, and now you look at you! It looks like you just saw a wisp or something.”

My throat was dry, the words locked inside my throat. The thought of actually doing harm to Xavier, no matter how badly he’d broken my heart, was unimaginable. I couldn’t hurt him in any way. I *wouldn’t*.

He’d been careless with me, disregarding me, but I refused to do the same to him.

“Oh my god, Cali!” Lola said in a hushed, low voice, squeezing my arms. “Can you just say something? You’re starting to freak me out! I shouldn’t have said anything in the first place!”

Too late now.

“I don’t…” I swallowed down the panic, biting my lower lip. “I don’t know if choosing Greyson would harm Xavier in any way. I don’t know what the *due destini* does if I choose. Cassandra never did.”

Lola took in a sharp breath. “Okay. So you should find out somehow, right?”

“I think I have to,” I whispered. “I need to make absolutely certain that if I *were* to choose Greyson, Xavier wouldn’t get hurt in any way.” I quickly added, “If that’s what I decide to do.”

“Ethically speaking, it would be good to figure that whole thing out, yes,” Lola said. “Not that Xavier dumping you the way he did was ethical in any way, so why we should care about whatever happens to him is a mystery to me, but—”

“Lola, *please*.” I was trying not to cry.

Lola swallowed. “Okay. You don’t want to cause Xavier any harm. So you have to figure this out. But how are you supposed to do that? Wouldn’t the only way be to actually choose Greyson and then see what happens to Xavier? Or finding out what happened with some other *due destini* who wasn’t Cassandra?”

*Twilight* was playing on in the background. I’d forgotten it was on until I heard Bella scream. I quickly turned it off and got to my feet, looking down at Lola.

“I’m going to find the information I need,” I declared.

She blinked. “You mean—”

“First, I need answers! I deserve them, damn it!”

I was raking my hands through my hair and pacing while Lola stared at me dubiously.

“Yes, answers! Love that for you, girl.” She paused, standing up as well. “But what does that mean, exactly?”

“I am going after Xavier,” I announced. “I need to talk to him—blocked or not blocked!”

Lola looked like she’d been hit in the face with a shovel.

Before she could try and talk me out of it, I pointed at my chest and said, “Now that he’s had a moment to chill out, I deserve to know where his head’s at about the two of us!”

Lola cringed. “But we already know where Xavier’s head’s at, Cali. He dumped you. Talking to him isn’t a good idea—”

I glared at her. “So what *is* a good idea, then? Watching *Twilight* while you ask questions I don’t know the answers to until I break down crying? What the fuck did you expect would happen if you kept stoking the fire for drama?”

Shockingly, Lola didn’t deny it. She pressed her lips together. “Cali, I’m so sorry—I’m just worried about you, and I—”

“This isn’t about you, Lola,” I said. My hands were shaking, along with my voice. “This is about me—and about Greyson and Xavier. I need to know why Xavier broke up with me.” Closure wasn’t the right word, because I didn’t want things to be over between me and Xavier… But answers… Answers I absolutely needed.

“In order to even be able to make a decision in the future—which, again, I have not decided to do—I need to know where the hell his head is at. That’s the first piece. The second is finding out whether something happens to one of the brothers if I were to choose them because of the *due destini*.”

Lola’s hands flailed. “But we know he won’t die—what else could possibly happen to him?”

“Wasn’t that what you just asked me?” I fired back. “It could be anything—stuff we haven’t even thought of. Heartbreak, maybe, or—”

Lola’s scoff was so loud, it echoed. “Who the fuck cares about Xavier’s heart breaking? He broke yours!”

I was trembling. When I spoke, it was with difficulty. “*I* care, okay?” My eyes burned with unshed tears. “I care about him. He’s my mate. I can’t just… *stop*.”

Lola was finally silent. She stood there, staring and clearly stunned. She didn’t speak, and the way she looked at me…

The way she looked at me made me feel like *she* was the one ready to start crying.

“Look, I get that you want to talk to him and find out why he’s put his head in his ass. But if you talk to him,” she whispered, “and he hurts you again—”

“I can’t shake the feeling that something’s going on, and he just won’t tell anyone,” I blurted out. “I can’t shake the feeling that what he said when he broke up with me was all lies, Lola.”

She sighed. “I think you’re just trying to come up with an excuse to see him again.”

I huffed. “I am not! If I’m ever going to go into choosing, I need all the info. And if Xavier is being a little secretive shit, that’s not helpful when we have a freaking supernatural curse attached to our mate bond.”

I paused. The tears I’d been swallowing down all this time started to spill. I wiped them away.

“No,” I said. Shook my head. “I’m not going to do anything until I know that we can both move on without it being something I regret.”

Lola followed me around the room as I grabbed more of my stuff. I went to the bathroom, and she followed me there. I went to the closet, and yep—there she was, like an anxious dog who could sense that I’d gone off the deep end.

“What about Greyson?” she asked quietly.

I whirled around to stare at her. “What do you—”

“I just think you need to be careful with what you’re doing, Cali,” she said. “Talking is one thing, but the way you’re acting about Xavier could make Greyson feel like he’s not the Alpha you wanted. Like he’s second best. You don’t want that, right?”

I almost choked on my own spit, anger flashing through me.

“I would *never* want to make Greyson feel that way,” I snapped, fighting not to shout. “He is an amazing man. I’m lucky to have him, and I need him in my life—do you understand what I’m saying, here?”

“Yeah, but—”

“I may have a lot more respect for Greyson right now, but that doesn’t change the fact that Xavier is my mate as well. I love them both. I’d go after either of them in this situation. I need you to believe me, Lola.”

She didn’t answer. She crossed the room, took me by the hands and said, “Just stop for a second, okay?”

“I can’t! This is too important. What if I hurt Xavier? I’d never be able to live with myself if he—”

“Cali, we’re going in circles here.” Lola’s tone was so calm, it was downright eerie. “I am going to *lose my mind* if we keep talking about Xavier like he doesn’t deserve to fuck right off after basically calling you useless and cheating on you with—”

“But—”

“—No, let me continue,” Lola said, “if the letter says the death curse has been broken, then it’s broken. Xavier’s fine. Greyson’s fine. Big Mac would never have lied about that.”

“Yes, but—”

“But what about *you*?” Lola demanded. “Let’s think about *you* for a second—for you, *due destini* means that if you don’t choose, you’ll go mad. And then not even Greyson would be able to fix you, and you’d die alone. That’s the only consequence I see right now.”

I gaped at her. “Oh, wow—thanks so fucking much for the reminder, Lola! It’s not like I *already* feel like I’m going mad, or anything!”

“You need to talk to Greyson about all of this,” Lola declared.

“I will, but he’s busy at the palace.”

Lola just stood there for a long moment, arms crossed. I held her gaze, knowing neither of us was going to back down. Her face was back to being eerily calm.

“What?” I asked. “Don’t you think Xavier owes me a deeper explanation for his behavior? A *real* one, instead of all the lies he gave me? You’re the one who keeps saying he treated me like shit!”

“Cali—”

“How the hell am I supposed to get closure when I don’t even have a real explanation?” My last words were mostly sobbed out.

Lola didn’t speak.

I wiped my wet cheeks.

Then, Lola said, “Well, too bad, because I’m not going to let you go to him.”

**Episode 3727**

**Greyson**

Mace had a good head on his shoulders. I assumed he would vote against attacking the Bitterfangs. Or maybe I was wrong. Because apart from a good head on his shoulders, he had an Alpha’s ego, and sometimes ego got in the way of logic.

Exhibit A: Lucian.

Exhibit B: Xavier.

It was a pattern.

“Well, Mace?” Lucian asked. “What’s it going to be?”

Mace’s gaze flicked between all three of us. He stared down at the map—at the Bitterfangs’ land.

“The Blue Bloods suffered a lot of losses in the Silas and Letifer battles,” he finally said. “Because of that, I think our best course of action right now is not to attack.”

I breathed a bit easier.

“Let’s see how things go at the pack summit,” I said. “It’s still possible that Malakai is making empty threats. If we see at the summit that he means business, then we can revisit this.”

“I agree,” Mace said.

Lucian rolled his eyes, his face twisting in disgust. “Why is democracy a thing? I blame the Greeks. Useless dreamers. If I had my way—”

“You don’t,” I cut in. I wasn’t about to let this peacock hijack the meeting. “We voted; it’s settled.”

Lucian huffed. He looked over at Ava, his eyes narrowing. “Ava, dear.”

The urge to gag tickled my throat.

“If you had voted,” Lucian said, “what would you have chosen?”

“I agree with Greyson,” she said. Then she quickly added, “And Mace. But at the same time, if the Bitterfangs do anything to actively threaten my pack, then I will personally go after Malakai—and nothing you do or say will stop me.”

I wasn’t surprised. Again and again, Ava had reminded us that she was loyal to her pack. I didn’t know how much of that loyalty was being compromised by her interest in Xavier, but, for now, I would just have to take her word for it that nothing Xavier did could change her priorities.

Taking Ava’s word for anything was problematic at best, but I preferred to keep my potential enemies close. Speaking of, Lucian stood up and spoke again.

“I just want to make sure I understand, here,” he said condescendingly. “We’re going to let the Bitterfangs do what they want and just bend over and—”

“That’s not what we just agreed to,” I snapped. “If the Bitterfangs attack, then the plan is to fight back.”

Lucian sneered. “And that’s not a coward’s move?”

I fantasized about grabbing Lucian and smashing his head against the wall. It was a nice image to have in my head—really very invigorating. Then I said, “I’ve been in my fair share of pack wars, Lucian. One of them was against my father, and it ended with me ripping his heart out—quite literally. I know what it means to be in a pack war, and it’s not something to be taken lightly.” I eyed Lucian and added, “Especially by an armchair general.”

Lucian laughed. “I’m not a general—I’m a *prince*.”

“Good thing this isn’t a monarchy,” I replied. Lucian could play prince all he wanted, but I would never bow down.

He glared at me, sitting back down. “Things would be easier if it were, hmm? I will abide by the decision of the majority… For now.”

“What is ‘for now’ supposed to mean?” I asked bluntly, beyond sick of his bullshit.

Lucian gave me an innocent look. “It means ‘for now.’”

I took a deep fucking breath. “If you screw things up by taking matters into your own hands, Lucian, all the packs could pay a price—so tread carefully. Do you understand what I’m saying here?”

Lucian’s eyes flashed with annoyance. He didn’t speak, but the message had clearly been received. The princeling had better stay true to his word, or Malakai wouldn’t be the only Alpha in trouble from the rest of us.

“All right,” Mace said, breaking the silence. “If there’s nothing else, I’d like to go report back to my pack. They’re all understandably on edge. With the alliance in agreement on this, they should be in a better place.”

He made a move toward the door, but then Aysel came in, all flowing skirts and fluttering eyelashes. “Lucian, I need to speak to you alone at once!”

Lucian waved a hand. “It’s all right—these are our allies. Whatever it is, you can speak in front of them.”

Aysel pressed her hands to her chest. “Aunt Hattie just called. She wants to come visit, Lucian.”

Lucian’s eyes widened. “Fuck.”

I was taken aback for a second. Had I ever heard the princeling swear? I didn’t think so. I’d heard the siblings talking about their Aunt Hattie before. And not in a good way. How much worse could she be than Aysel and Lucian? That particular bar was down in the sewer.

“Aunt Hattie must be a favorite relative of yours, huh?” I asked.

Lucian ignored me. Standing up, he looked at Aysel. “We must hide all the knives! And the spoons. Yes, the spoons for sure.”

Ava shot me a look, raising her eyebrows while Aysel scoffed. “The spoons are the least of our problems, Lucian!”

She made a beeline for her brother, listing all the things they had to hide before Hattie’s arrival. The two of them started rambling, going a mile a minute.

“I think I’ve heard enough,” Mace said. “None of this concerns me—and if you’ll excuse me, I have a pack to run.”

Without another word, he headed out. Lucian and Aysel didn’t even notice him leaving.

“The butter, Aysel! You’re right, we’ll have to get rid of it all! And I flew it in all the way from France—what a shame!” Lucian said mournfully, just as Ava turned to me.

“*Anyway*,” she said, “I’m leaving too. Gotta update my pack.”

She started to turn away, but I gripped her forearm, turning her back around.

“If you see my brother,” I said, “tell him I want to know what the fuck this is all about. He can’t just up and leave his pack.”

With narrowed eyes, Ava pulled her arm free. “I’m not Xavier’s messenger—tell him yourself.”

She started to walk away, but I couldn’t help myself.

“You don’t know him any more than I do, do you?” I called. Ava froze. Slowly, she turned to face me, her eyes narrowed. I kept talking. “I’ll bet that bothers you a lot more than you’re willing to admit.”

Ava scoffed. “And I bet *you* know even less than you’re willing to admit, Greyson. Xavier has never shared anything real with you. I’m not sure what kind of brothers you two are.”

Her words cut deep, and my anger tasted bitter. She turned to walk away, and I started to follow. I couldn’t believe she’d just said…

Something that was completely true.

Xavier was my younger brother. Colton’s twin. My instincts told me to protect him. Not in the human way, but in the animal way—the way an older wolf was supposed to protect their siblings. At the same time, though, everything was murky, because he wasn’t just my brother. He was the man my wolf wanted to destroy for hurting his mate.

“Greyson!” Lucian blocked my way before I could get the fuck out of there. “You can’t go yet.”

“Lucian,” I said, still marinating over the lovely mental image of slamming his head into the wall. “I have a pack to run. I’m afraid I can’t stick around to hear about Aunt Hattie’s issues with spoons and butter.”

“This is not a drill, Greyson,” Lucian said, jabbing a finger at me. “You should be just as concerned as I am that Aunt Hattie wants to come to the palace!”

“Why?” I asked. Because seriously—I had enough family troubles, and I didn’t need to take on anyone else’s.

“Don’t you see?” Lucian said, flapping a hand in my face. “There are only two reasons why Aunt Hattie would want to come here! The first is to make sure the construction of the palace wing that’s to be named for her is still on schedule. But it’s not!”

“A tragedy,” I deadpanned.

“Indeed,” Lucian said obliviously. “But the second—and probably most likely—reason for her visit is Elle.”

What. The actual. *Fuck*.

*What the fuck?*

“What does your aunt have to do with Elle?” I demanded. “Did you tell her that Elle is your mate? There’s no proof of that, only wishful thinking on your part—and Elle has made it clear that she isn’t ready to move forward with anything.”

Lucian rested his hands on my shoulders.

“Greyson,” he said gravely, “I came to the Redwood pack and offered an alliance with the Vanguards because I trusted you.”

Right. Lucian had just bypassed all my questions and said something random and mostly untrue. What else was new?

“I think we are remembering things differently, but let’s just move on, Lucian. Get to the point,” I said, stepping out of his reach.

Lucian’s expression was serious. “The point is this—your pack is vulnerable to the Bitterfangs, maybe more so than the Vanguards. What with your *due destini* situation that they don’t seem to be fans of. So you need us.”

“We *need you*?” I raised my eyebrows. “That’s a bold statement, coming from someone who had his heart broken by a demon not too long ago. I think the Blue Bloods and the Redwoods were very gracious not to decimate your pack while you were at your weakest.”

Lucian’s eyes narrowed in anger. “That was a low blow, Greyson, and you know it.”

“Perhaps. But if you ever say that the Redwoods *need* the Vanguards again, you and I are going to have a problem,” I said. “We all need each other. That’s the point of the alliance.”

Lucian offered a tight, fake, smile. “Fine. But the important thing is that alliances are built on trust. Without that, they’re nothing but hollow promises.”

My patience was running thin. “What are you trying to say here? What do Elle and Aunt Hattie have to do with anything?”

“Oh, but it’s all connected, you see. And you must trust me, or you wouldn’t be here,” Lucian said. “But why should *I* trust *you*?”

I scoffed. “Why shouldn’t you?”

Lucian’s gaze was sharp. “Because you lied to me, Greyson.”

**Episode 3728**

Excuse me? Was Lola seriously trying to stop me from going to see Xavier? I knew exactly where she was coming from, but she should’ve known I wasn’t going to let her do this.

“No way,” I said. “I’m going.”

“Cali, *stop*,” she said. “Just think about this a bit more.”

Lola just wouldn’t stop shutting down my—obviously brilliant—plans and ideas. And it was actually very upsetting. If I hadn’t felt like crying before, which I definitely had, she’d made it even harder for me not to cry. Just by telling me that I wasn’t making any sense.

*Aren’t best friends supposed to be supportive? Hmm?*

“I know where Xavier is,” I told her. “This isn’t some wild goose chase. He was last seen by Greyson at the Samara campsite. Doesn’t take much to guess he’s there.”

“Cali, *please*,” Lola said with a sigh, resting her hands on my shoulders. “You’re tired. We’re all worked up over *Twilight*—totally the wrong movie choice. My bad, okay? We can watch another movie; just sleep on this. You should definitely wait until Greyson comes back, so you can talk to him. At the very least, you should tell him about the letter.”

“And if I don’t?” I asked, stepping away from Lola’s gasp. “Will you tell him? You swore to me you wouldn’t! You swore on your mate’s life, and now—”

“I know that!” Lola huffed. “And I’m not taking it back, but going after Xavier on your own to talk when he clearly doesn’t want you to contact him, and you’re like… like *this*? It’s just a bad plan. As your best friend, it’s my job to tell you when a plan is bad, and this is it.”

My head was throbbing. *Lola is right, Cali*,said a little voice in my mind. *You’re being pathetic. You’re just a pathetic loser, running after Xavier like a beaten down puppy, begging for his attention, begging for explanations, begging for* him*, when he and Ava—*

No.

Just *no*.

No matter what Xavier had said, I’d been with him this entire time. I’d seen him grow right before my eyes, seen him become a better person, a better man. It couldn’t all have been a lie.

*But what if it was, Cali?*

Well, if it was, I had to know for certain. I deserved answers after he’d humiliated me like that. If he *had* been lying about loving me this entire time, I deserved to know why. I deserved a confrontation, and a real conversation—one that didn’t include him running away when he was done talking.

I deserved this, dammit.

As for Lola, I knew she was only trying to help, but she was just slowing me down and prolonging the time I spent *not* talking to Xavier. I couldn’t wait any longer.

I needed closure.

“This isn’t the kind of thing I can sleep on,” I told Lola. “I’m going.”

I grabbed my phone and purse, then headed for my bedroom door with Lola on my heels like a manic wasp.

“Cali, please—you need to come to your senses here!” she half-shouted. “What will you do if he refuses to talk to you again?”

I whirled around to face her, anger and hurt coiling inside me. I was shaking.

“You keep saying you’re my friend, right?” I snapped. “Then why do you keep just standing there, judging me?”

Lola flinched, looking hurt. I immediately regretted my choice of words, but it was too late.

Quietly, Lola said, “I’m just scared for you. I don’t want you to be broken again. I could help you, yes, but I don’t think this is the right thing to do. Can you stop for a second and just think this through?”

The laugh I let out was bitter. Helpless. “Think *what* through? The longer I wait, the harder it’s going to be to talk to Xavier. I need to do it now, while I’ve got the courage to face him. Do you understand?”

Lola didn’t speak. I opened the door.

My jaw dropped.

“Honey, what’s going on?” my mother asked with a frown. Her hand was raised, as though she’d been ready to knock on the door. “Are you going somewhere?”

*Shit. Shit shit shit!*

“Uh, Mom—it’s late. Why are you still awake?” I asked. Awkwardly, of course.

Mom pressed her lips together, her gaze darting to Lola. “Can you give us a minute, sweetie?”

Lola nodded, giving me a “this conversation isn’t over” kind of look before leaving the room. Mom sighed, glancing at Lola’s retreating back, then at the bag slung over my shoulder.

“I suppose this has something to do with Xavier?” she asked quietly.

I swallowed uncomfortably. Of course my mom had assumed correctly. She knew me. Plus, Lola and I had sort of been screaming while she was just outside the door.

“I need to ask him for an explanation, Mom,” I whispered. “A real one—not just the horrible, hurtful things he told me before.”

My mom’s voice was gentle. “What if he’s already told you everything there is to tell?”

I sniffled, shaking my head. “I refuse to believe that… At least not until I see him again.”

Mom sighed. “Are you going to run off into the woods to find him, then?”

I nodded. My plan felt far less solid than it had a few minutes ago, though.

“I’m not going to stop you, Cali,” Mom said. “But I do want you to think this through.”

“I will,” I said.

*You’re lying, Cali! You’re planning on leaving the moment Mom turns her back! You’re just hopeless.*

No. I was going after Xavier exactly *because* I had hope for us.

*What if my hope is the thing that breaks me, though?*

I shut down all these thoughts and stared at my mother. “Why did you want to see me, anyway?”

“Have you had any more interactions with wisps?” Mom asked. “Real or otherwise?”

“No, actually,” I said, realizing it was true as I spoke. It was something I’d realized before, but I realized I hadn’t talked to my mom about it. It had to have been because of Seluna, and now that she was gone… No handprint. No voices, no visions. No evil wisps. *And* my magic was coming back.

“I’m so glad to hear it,” Mom said, pulling me into a hug. I hugged her back, fighting down all the emotions inside me. I had to keep calm. At least, as much as I could.

“Me too,” I whispered. “I wish…”

“What?” Mom stroked my cheek, her eyes tender.

“I wish Xavier were here to celebrate with me. I wish he’d been there for me when I was at the hospital,” I said, swallowing past the lump in my throat.

Mom sighed. “I’m sorry about Xavier, darling. But at least you can rest easy, knowing that your issues with Seluna’s ashes seem to have settled. Maybe you should take a moment to let that seep in before you run off after Xavier. Not everything is bleak.”

“Thanks for reminding me,” I said.

On the inside, though, her words did very little to stem the anxiety I was still feeling over Xavier’s absence.

“It’s just—it was all so sudden.” I pressed my lips together. “One moment he loved me, the next he left me. I guess I’m still trying to process it. Something just feels wrong about his behavior. Like it’s not real.” I hesitated. “Do you think going after him after he dumped me makes me pathetic?”

“It takes a certain amount of courage to confront someone when we feel they’ve wronged us, Cali,” Mom said. “I don’t know exactly what Xavier told you when you two broke up—everybody seems reluctant to share the details, you included—but all I can tell you is to trust your instincts, sweetheart.”

I sniffled. “You think so?”

Mom stroked my cheek. “I love you, and I will support you through this, no matter what you decide to do. But, please, if you do go to him, don’t do it alone. The Bitterfangs might be out there somewhere, and you’re fragile right now. You need someone with you—maybe Artemis or Lola. Okay?”

I nodded. When my mom hugged me again and kissed my cheek, I allowed myself a moment of peace, but it was over way too early. My mom was gone a moment later, and I slumped down onto my bed, staring at my feet that wanted to rush me off to Xavier.

*Am I being impulsive? Rash?*

I wasn’t sure. But I didn’t want to spend another night here without knowing where Xavier was and why he’d left. I would start from there—by having a *real* conversation with him—and then my next step would be to figure out whether the *due destini* could somehow still hurt him.

I had to know.

Determined, I grabbed my purse and headed for the door again.

Lola was out in the hallway. She took one look at me and sighed. “I gather your mom didn’t talk you out of going after Xavier?”

I shook my head.

Before I could tell her that my mom wanted someone to come with me, Lola said, “Well, if that’s the case, then I’m coming with you.”

Without a word, I walked over to my best friend and hugged her.

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We gathered our coats and gloves and scarves and stepped outside. The night was quiet—the only sound was Lola audibly sniffing around as we took our first couple steps toward the Samara campsite. She wasn’t usually so obvious—she usually had a bit more tact—but she seemed to be taking her job very seriously.

And then she stopped and threw her hands up in exasperation.

“Well, fuck me sideways. His scent is everywhere!” She turned to me. “How do we know that Xavier is still with the Samaras?”

I took a deep breath. “There’s only one way to find out.”

**Episode 3729**

**Xavier**

Mabel’s question threw me off.

“I’m not really into getting fucked up,” I said. “At least not with drugs, which isn’t an easy thing to do for a werewolf, anyway. Unless the drugs are created by a witch, in which case I want no part of it.”

Mabel rolled her eyes. “That’s always an available option, but I mean fucked up like cut loose, forget everything, let everything go. That kind of thing.”

I paused for a moment. Because that did sound good. For fuck’s sake, I’d let a bunch of humans rough me up just to feel something other than the pain of losing Cali. I was willing to try just about anything to distract myself from that.

I was willing to try just about anything to punish myself for what I’d done.

“I’m listening,” I told Mabel.

“I know a guy who’s throwing a house party,” she said. “Nothing too wild.”

Okay. Maybe I had a death wish, but a house party full of vampires sounded like a lot. Like something I wouldn’t survive. And if I didn’t survive, I obviously wouldn’t be able to kill Adéluce, which was basically my only reason for existing right now.

I still had to figure out how to do it, but everything felt…

Bad right now.

Too bad to focus.

“You mean a house party full of vampires?” I asked. Just to clarify.

Mabel scowled. “Did you really think I would party with a bunch of werewolves?”

I shrugged. “Why not? You saved me.”

“Like I said, that was because you looked like a dying stray puppy,” she deadpanned.

“How do I know I won’t actually die if I come to this party?” I asked. “Vampires think Alpha wolves are delicious.”

Mabel rolled her eyes. “They’re not going to attack you. You’re with me.”

I weighed my options. And in the end, I thought, *Fuck it*—*this is what you deserve for hurting the woman you love.*

“Fine,” I said. “I can always leave if the party sucks. No pun intended.”

“You’re such a comedian,” Mabel told me flatly. “But you’d better hit the shower before we go.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Do I smell like wet dog?”

“No,” she said. “Actually, yes. You do smell like wet dog. But more importantly, you smell like your blood. If you show up like that, you’ll end up as the main course at an all-you-can-drink buffet.”

I squinted at her. “I thought you said they weren’t going to attack me.”

“No reason for us to push our luck,” she said casually. She directed me to the shower, adding, “Don’t use the green shampoo. It’s expensive. I’ll get your clothes when you’re done.”

“Thanks,” I said. Because apparently I was just fucking *polite*, now.

I had to walk through a cloud of smoke to reach the shower—seriously, too much weed—but at least I got there. I let the water run cold—I needed it to clear my head. Part of me thought that I didn’t deserve a hot shower. If I had to suffer through everything else in my life, why not suffer through cold showers, too? It seemed fitting.

If Greyson knew what I was thinking right now, he’d probably tell me to shut up and stop being so dramatic—probably while rolling his eyes…

And *why* was I thinking about my goddamn infuriating older brother?

I didn’t miss him.

But I didn’t hate him, either.

I wished I could hate him.

As I watched my blood swirl down the drain, I moved under the stream of cold water.

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I found my clothes waiting for me when I stepped out of the shower. Checking myself in the mirror, I noticed that my wound was nearly healed. It had taken longer than usual, for sure, which was weird. Had Adéluce done something to slow my healing? Or did it have something to do with breaking my mate’s heart?

My wolf growled at me. At least the flakey motherfucker hadn’t left me yet.

“Oh, good,” Mabel said when she saw me. “You don’t stink of blood anymore.”

I noticed that she didn’t mention the wet dog smell.

When she and I left her house, I was surprised to see Knox’s motorcycle.

“How did you bring this here?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Hot wiring is one of my many skills.”

“Cool. Thanks.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You say ‘thank you’ a lot for a man with a reputation for being a rude hothead.”

I scowled.

She laughed. “That’s the face I was expecting—much more you.” I rolled my eyes as she added, “Anyway, we can take my car if you’re not feeling up to driving.”

The idea of riding in a car driven by a vampire who reeked of weed was a bit too much. Yes, I wanted to torture myself, but not like that. I also didn’t like the idea of getting stuck at the party. If I had my own wheels, I’d be able to bail at any time.

“Let’s take the bike,” I said.

I got on, and she climbed up behind me. I revved the bike, noting that it had definitely taken a few hits since I’d stolen it from the Samaras.

“So,” I said. “Where we headed?”

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Mabel gave me directions. We cruised on the open road for a while, then she told me where to turn, how far to go, and, a couple of times, when to slow down. Eventually, the neighborhood started to look familiar. I felt like I’d seen it before…

“This is a pretty run-down neighborhood,” I noted.

She shrugged. “Yeah. My friend’s house makes my shitty little apartment look like a palace.”

This suited my mood just fine, actually. Luxury had never been my scene, anyway. As we approached the house, though, I realized that I *did* recognize this area.

“Is your friend a demon named Rhett, by any chance?”

Mabel’s grip around my waist tightened. “How do you know Rhett? Did Iñigo let him taste your blood?” She sounded surprised.

I thought back to when I’d been looking for the demon portal, when I’d been trying to find out how to return Seluna’s ashes. Ava had directed me to a tattoo artist, who’d then sent me to Rhett.

“It’s nothing to do with Iñigo,” I said. “I don’t really know Rhett. We just crossed paths once.”

“He’s a good guy,” Mabel said. She sounded uncharacteristically earnest about that. “A little intense, but what do you expect from a demon who hangs out with other demons?”

My stomach lurched at her words. More demons?

I slowed the bike and parked a few feet away from Rhett’s house. Mabel got off first, straightening out her clothes. She was going for a lingerie as clothes look with fishnets and combat boots with heavy eyeliner. It was definitely a change from her diner look that screamed, “I (look) like a broke college student, and I don’t give a fuck. Where’s the weed?” Though even off the clock, I bet she wanted to know the latter.

I eyed her. “Are there going to be many demons at this party?”

“No idea,” Mabel said, tossing her glossy black hair behind her. “Sometimes there are dozens, sometimes just a handful. You never know who’s going to show up at one of Rhett’s raves.”

My heart started pounding harder.

Mabel eyed me skeptically—vampire hearing and all. “Are you having second thoughts?”

“I’m not a fan of demons,” I said.

I didn’t mention Seluna, obviously. I wasn’t going to make Mabel into my fucking therapist.

She scoffed, crossing her arms over her chest. “Seriously?”

“Seriously,” I said. “It was bad enough when I thought I was going to a party full of vampires, but demons, too? What’s worse than that?”

Mabel raised an eyebrow. “I thought you were an Alpha, Xavier. But perhaps I was wrong. First, you get the shit kicked out of you by a few humans, and now you’re afraid of a couple of demons.”

My jaw clenched. She was baiting me. I’d thought that she was too chill and unconcerned about everything for that sort of behavior, but there it was.

“I have my reasons for not wanting to fuck around with demons, Mabel,” I said. “Besides, supernaturals usually stick to their own. You can’t tell me vampires are usually crazy about demons.”

Mabel shrugged, crossing her arms. “Whatever. Just decide what to do.” She looked over her shoulder, at the house. “You can join me and blow off some steam, or you can continue to wallow in whatever shit you’re wallowing in. It makes no difference to me.”

I scrutinized her face. She looked somber, almost bored, but she *had* saved me. Had she had any ulterior motives? I couldn’t see any. If she’d wanted to drink my blood, she would’ve.

I didn’t see the harm in the party—other than socializing with potential demons. But I almost couldn’t bring myself to care about that either. Why should anything matter right now, when I couldn’t do the one thing I needed to do? When I couldn’t get my shit together and come up with a plan to get rid of Adéluce?

The vampire-witch was out there, free to threaten Cali the moment I stopped marching to her tune. And even though I’d blamed Greyson time and time again for not letting me make sure Adéluce was dead at the bottom of the lake, the truth was that *I* was at the root of the problem.

I was the one who’d led Adéluce into our lives.

And now I was trapped.

I was a fucking coward. I’d broken Cali, and I’d fucked up my relationships with Ava and Greyson and Kira and—*everything*. I’d fucked up everything. Walking into a house full of demons and vampires should’ve been nothing to me, at this point.

Danger was what I deserved.

“I changed my mind,” I said to Mabel, climbing off the bike. “Let’s blow off some steam.”

**Episode 3730**

**Greyson**

I stared back at Lucian. He had this (extra) weird glint in his eye that spelled trouble. Was it menace? Regardless, it wasn’t good. Had Aunt Hattie’s threatened future arrival and her apparent hostility toward spoons pushed him off the deep end? It wouldn’t take a lot for Lucian to lose it, that was for sure.

I reminded myself to be patient with him.

I had to look at him like he was an unhinged relative I had to tolerate during the holidays. Another Xavier, perhaps. Only worse, because I wasn’t actually related to him, and I occasionally (mostly) wanted to kill him. The fantasy of smashing his head against the wall was always so alluring.

“I have no idea what you’re accusing me of,” I said calmly. “I haven’t lied to you about anything—I told you everything I know about the Bitterfangs.”

Lucian flashed his teeth. “This isn’t about the Bitterfangs—it’s about Elle.”

My stomach lurched. Immediately, I had a feeling I knew where this was going. It was a bad feeling, and I didn’t like it. In fact, I fucking despised it.

“I thought so,” Lucian said when I didn’t respond, his beady little eyes roving all over my face. “You know, I wanted to believe you, Greyson—to think that we had the kind of personal relationship where we could be honest with each other.”

After the hell the princeling had put Cali through, he was lucky our “personal relationship” wasn’t based on me being the person who’d ripped his head off.

“You mean like the way you were honest about your interest in my mate?” I asked sharply. “If anyone should be throwing around accusations of dishonesty here, Lucian, it’s me.”

Lucian’s sharp gaze softened slightly. He looked away, shaking his head. “I have apologized many times about what happened with Cali—”

“I don’t think apologizing will ever be enough,” I interrupted.

“But I was under the sway of a *demon*, Greyson!” Lucian clutched at his chest. “A crafty minx, Seluna was. I was nothing but her innocent victim. I would never dare—could never *bear*—to hurt the lovely Caliana otherwise. She is a treasure. No, an *angel*! A wondrous—”

“*Stop*,” I said. My voice was sharp. I’d really tried to be patient with Lucian, but he was clearly dead set on drowning me in bullshit, and I had to take a breath. “I still don’t know what you’re talking about. What do you think you know about Elle?”

“Oh, Greyson…” Lucian sighed, straightening his jacket. Then he smiled. “You know, I actually do appreciate that you’re still trying to be discreet. Discretion is a good quality for an Alpha. But there’s no point—I know the truth about my darling Elle.”

The way he said her name made me feel a little sick.

“Can you stop talking in riddles and get to the point?” I asked. “What do you think you know about Elle?”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek to distract myself. Could he really have found out about me turning Elle? Why did I get the feeling he had? *Fuck, fuck, fuck—*

“Ah,” Lucian said with a nod, pointing at me. “I appreciate you being cautious. The sign of a wise Alpha.” He gestured ahead. “Come walk with me.”

“You can come out and say whatever it is you’re accusing me of right here,” I said coldly. “There’s no need to migrate.”

Lucian tsked me. His passive aggression disguised as a weird buddy-buddy energy was so off-putting, I wanted to turn around and walk the fuck out. But I couldn’t. The feeling of wrongness still remained.

*He knows about Elle*, said a voice in my head. *He knows she’s a turned wolf.*

“Come on, Greyson,” Lucian said, very obviously trying to goad me. “I promise, you’ll understand once you see what I need to show you.”

I didn’t have time for this. I had to get back to Cali, check in on her, make sure she was okay… But I couldn’t just leave right now—not when Lucian’s interest in Elle spelled out such obvious trouble.

“Okay, then. Lead the way,” I told him, jaw clenched.

Lucian smiled like a shark.

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Lucian led me to a small library. It was the first small room I’d seen in the palace.

“Why are we here?” I asked.

“This is my learning library,” Lucian said with his usual air of self-importance. “When I want to learn about something, I dive all in.” He made a sweeping gesture with his arm. “There are books here that are the first and only editions.”

“So you can read. Good for you,” I said tightly. I didn’t give a damn about his fancy little library. “You still haven’t told me what you’ve been going on about.”

Lucian chuckled, reaching for a drawer. “Oh, Greyson. Your impatience is unbecoming—Xavier is a bad influence on you.”

I ignored the way my agitation soared at the sound of my brother’s name.

And then Lucian dropped a book on the desk.

I read the title.

*Wolves: A History.*

What kind of book was this? Why was Lucian showing it to me?

*You know exactly why*, said that voice in my head. *He knows. Lucian knows.*

If my stomach had dropped before, now it was in a knot so tight, it felt like it was trying to fucking strangle itself.

“Everything I’ve read, along with my own personal experience, suggests that you’ve been lying about Elle’s origins.” Lucian’s eyes narrowed on my face. “Did you *really* think I was that naïve? That gullible?”

Well. Lucian *had* thought that a demon was a goddess, so…

“Elle isn’t from some random werewolf pack, Greyson,” Lucian continued, clearly unfazed by my lack of a reply. “She was born of nature—a wild wolf—and I know what you did.”

Lucian pointed at me, his eyes gleaming. It was like he was waiting for me to say it.

I gritted my teeth. I didn’t even fucking breathe.

In a low voice, Lucian said, “You turned her. You turned a wild wolf.”

The cat was out of the bag. Or the wolf was out of the bag. Only there was no bag, except the fictional one that I wanted to wrap around Lucian’s head and use to suffocate him.

Murder fantasies aside, I hated everything about this situation. How the hell had Lucian found out? He couldn’t have read it in a fucking book, and no one in the pack would’ve told him about Elle. So how had he found out? How the fuck had this happened?

“I have no—”

Lucian cut me off. “Before you deny it, think very hard about what I said, about the importance of trust between us.”

For three full beats, the only sound in the room was the ticking grandfather clock. I wasn’t going to confirm this to him. There was no way.

Then I spoke. “Are you saying you’ll leave the alliance if I deny your outrageous theory?”

Lucian sighed theatrically, clearly pretending to be sad about it. “I will have no choice, Greyson. I cannot work with someone who cannot trust me.” He offered me half a smile. So fucking smug. “And we both know my theory isn’t outrageous.”

I kept calm. I had to.

“Nonetheless,” I said, *calmly*, “it *is* a theory. Why do you believe that Elle was turned? And why do you think I was the one who turned her?”

Lucian pointed to a stack of books on his other desk. “I’ve done the research, Greyson. And I’m not stupid.”

That last one was debatable.

“I almost can’t believe you did this, actually,” Lucian said, sounding almost dubious. “I would’ve expected someone as logical as you to be more cautious. Remember what I told you before?”

“Which part?” I asked. “You tend to talk a lot.”

Lucian shook his head. “You’re trying to tease me, but that just won’t do. There are many stories that say the person who turns a wolf becomes drunk on it, addicted to turning more of them. I’ve already told you this, but you—”

I scoffed loudly, looking at the rows of books. “Seriously? I bet there are thousands of stories on these shelves. Do you believe every one?”

Lucian’s expression hardened. “Only those that line up with the facts. You are addicted to—”

“I am not *addicted to Elle*,” I said sharply. It came out less composed than I would’ve liked, but what the fuck?

What. The. *Fuck.*

“I am not addicted to her,” I repeated. “I’m Elle’s Alpha, and I’m protective of her—just like I am with every other member of my pack.”

Lucian paused, looking like he’d enjoyed my small outburst.

“There are other stories,” he said, “that say the sire and the wolf he turned become codependent. That one cannot function without the other. The turned wolf craves their sire’s approval, to the extent where they would do anything to please them.”

I rubbed my forehead, shaking my head. “I don’t know what you want me to say. That’s just another story.”

Lucian’s laugh was incredulous. “So you’re not going to admit the truth?”

Obviously fucking not.

“I am the Redwood Alpha, and my pack needs me,” I said sharply. “I can’t stay here and listen to your stories. I’ve had enough.”

I was marching toward the door when a couple of guards appeared out of nowhere to block my way. My anger flared.

“Are you fucking *serious* right now?” I snapped, rounding on the princeling.

Lucian’s eyes were slits when our gazes locked. His voice was a low growl. “You’re the reason why Elle is resisting me, Greyson. And you’re not leaving until you fix it.”

**Episode 3731**

“So, what’s the plan?” Lola asked. “We just roll up to the Samaras and say, ‘Knock, knock, is Xavier home?’ Or what?”

I glared at her. “Not like that, but essentially yes. What’s the harm in that?”

Lola’s eyes narrowed. “I mean, he went to see Ava,” she said darkly. “Fucking *Ava*. I just don’t want us to walk in and see her stupid smug face with all of this going on. She is such a—”

“Stop, Lola,” I said, holding up a hand. “Listen, I’m not Ava’s biggest fan, either, but this isn’t about her.”

“What are you talking about?”

“This is about Xavier.” I shook my head. “It hurts to admit it, but no one forced Xavier to go to the Samaras—he did that on his own. And apparently, he’s been having sex with Ava this whole time, so…” I shrugged. It was a strangely casual gesture, considering how miserable I felt.

Lola looked at me in disbelief. “Are you going to be this chill when you get to the Samara campsite and confront Ava? Really?”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do,” I said. “But I’m going there to talk to *Xavier*.”

Lola didn’t look convinced. “Well, let’s go. But listen, it’s a real hike to the Samara campsite. Why don’t I shift and you can ride on my back? We’ll get there a hell of a lot quicker.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “But let me just run inside and grab a bigger bag so I can carry your clothes.”

We hadn’t gone far, so I just ran back into the house and grabbed a bag from the laundry room. I shoved my purse into it, then headed for the front door again.

“Cali!”

I turned to see Rishika and Artemis striding toward me. “Hey, what are you two up to?”

“Heading out on patrol,” Artemis said. “What about you?”

I hesitated. I didn’t want the whole pack to know my plan, but I also didn’t want to lie to my sister about what I was doing.

“I’m going to look for Xavier,” I said, keeping it vague.

Rishika scoffed dismissively. “What? *Why?*”

I didn’t like her tone, and I felt myself bristle. “Because he’s my mate,” I said shortly.

“Yeah, I get that. But if I were in your shoes, I certainly wouldn’t go looking for him,” Rishika said. “I wouldn’t even give him the time of day.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but—surprisingly—Artemis beat me to it.

“It’s not that simple,” she said, jumping to my defense. “If I ran off, you’d want to look for me, wouldn’t you?”

Rishika shrugged. “I guess so,” she muttered. She shook her head, like she wanted out of the conversation, then slipped past me and out the front door.

Artemis started to follow her but stopped in the doorframe. “Cali, do you want me to go with you?”

A wave of gratitude washed over me. “Thank you, but no. I think I’m okay. I have Lola to back me up if we run into any trouble.” I shook my head. “I know you all are just trying to look out for me, but I have to do this. I have to talk to Xavier.”

“Artemis!” Rishika called from the back yard. “Move your ass! We have to go!”

“Hold your damn horses!” Artemis bellowed back. She turned to Lola, who’d just appeared in the doorway—probably to see why I was taking so long. “You take good care of my sister, okay?”

Lola nodded and when Artemis disappeared out the door, she turned to me, a grin on her face. “That was cool.”

“What was?”

“Artemis thinks I’m qualified to protect you. That’s a nice compliment—well, by Artemis’s standards, at least.”

I slipped an arm around my friend’s shoulders. “Of course she trusts you. Why wouldn’t she? But who’s going to try to mess with a Fae and a vampire-werewolf hybrid, anyway?”

Lola laughed. “I guess we’ll find out.”

We walked out the door and into the cold winter air. The lawn was slushy under our feet as we crossed it, and when we stopped at the edge of the woods, Lola pulled off her clothes. She handed them to me, and I shoved them into my bag and slung it over my shoulder.

Lola shifted, and I looked out into the dark woods. Where wasXavier right now? The Samara campsite was as good a guess as any—I only hoped he was still there or had at least left an easy trail to follow.

Lola’s wolf nudged me, and I pulled myself out of my thoughts and climbed onto her back. Lola stepped into the woods and started to jog, then slowly picked up speed. Soon, we were sprinting, the woods nothing but a green blur on either side of me.

As I gripped her fur, I couldn’t help but notice how much smaller Lola was than both my mates. And it wasn’t that she was *small*, but compared to Greyson or Xavier, being on her back was like riding a pony instead of a warhorse. It was still a rush, but it was also an adjustment.

Cold air whipped at my face as we sped through the woods. Sooner than I would have thought possible, we reached what I was almost sure was the border of Redwood and Samara land. When we crossed that invisible line, everything started to look strange and unfamiliar, and Lola slowed down. She eventually came to a stop, and I hopped off her back and looked around.

“Why are you stopping here?” I asked. “Did you pick up Xavier’s scent?”

Lola shifted back to human. “It might seem less threatening to the Samaras if I don’t wander into their campsite fully shifted.”

“That’s a good point,” I said.

“Can you hand me my clothes?” she asked.

I pulled them out of the bag and handed them over.

“Have you given any thought to what you’re actually going to say if we *do* find Xavier?” she asked as she pulled on her jeans.

I handed her a sweatshirt. “I mean, I don’t have a prepared speech or anything. I just want to talk to him.”

“And say what, exactly?” she asked, stepping into her shoes.

I looked up at the snowy trees. “I don’t know. Ask if he was telling the truth about why he broke up with me. See if he really meant it.” I swallowed hard. Just saying the words out loud hurt like hell.

“Oh, Cali,” Lola said quietly. She sighed. “I don’t want to bring you down, but… What if he is here, but he just doesn’t want to talk?”

I looked over at her. “What do you mean?”

She shrugged. “A conversation requires two active participants, and Xavier hasn’t exactly been desperate to make your life easy, lately. I’m just wondering if you have a plan B. What if he just shuts you down and refuses to talk?”

My heart gave a painful throb at the thought of Xavier refusing to speak to me. “If he refuses to talk—”

My voice caught in my throat as my imagination took hold. What *would* that be like? Would he turn his back on me? Would he walk away? Would he be even crueler than he’d been the last time we talked?

I shook my head. “No, I don’t have a plan B,” I admitted. “If we find him and he won’t talk to me, I guess we’ll just leave. Go back to the pack house.”

Lola gave me a long look. “Well, let’s just hope it doesn’t come to that, right?”

“Right,” I said, practically choking on the word.

She pulled her hair into a ponytail and tilted her chin to the left. “Campsite’s that way.”

We walked until we reached a small clearing. There were tents and fire pits arranged around what looked like a makeshift communal area, where a small bonfire was burning.

“Perrie!” Lola called, raising her hand in greeting.

The girl rose from her seat near the fire and looked over at us, surprised.

“Hi.” She glanced between us in confusion. “What are you two doing here?”  
 “I’m looking for Xavier,” I said—no point in beating around the bush.

“Oh,” Perrie said flatly, some of the warmth fading from her expression. “He’s not here.”

“He left?” Lola asked.

Perrie nodded. “Yeah, a while ago.” She clasped her hands in front of her. “How’s Lilac doing?”

I opened my mouth to answer—

“What are *you* doing here?”  
 I looked over to see a girl who I thought I’d heard people call Marissa stomping toward us.

“Hey, chill,” Lola told her. “We’re not planning on staying.”

“I don’t care,” Marissa snapped. “You still shouldn’t be here. We have our hands full with our own shit. We don’t need *your* drama, too.”

I was taken aback by Marissa’s hostility. I barely even knew her, and I had no idea where the animosity was coming from.

“Is Ava here?” I asked hesitantly.

“Ava went to—” Perrie started, but Marissa held up her hand, and she shut her mouth.

“Ava’s not here,” Marissa said shortly.

“I’m back.”

I whipped around to see Ava behind me. She was standing in the middle of the clearing, her hands on her hips, her dark hair billowing in the cold winter air. Her skin was pale and clear, and her eyes were bright. She was—as usual—absolutely breathtakingly beautiful, and it bugged the shit out of me.

I narrowed my eyes. “Where the hell is my mate?”

**Episode 3732**

**Greyson**

I stared at Lucian for a long moment, the silence stretching out between us, and then I burst out laughing. “Are you fucking *kidding me* right now?”

“Pardon me?” he asked coldly. “Am I kidding about *what*, exactly?”

“Are you really going to try to imprison me—*me*,the Alpha of an allied pack—right before the pack summit, during which we are supposed to be working together to shore up our defenses against the Bitterfangs?”

“Understand that I have no wish to do this,” Lucian said primly, “but you’ve really given me no choice, Greyson Evers.”

I knew what was happening was serious as a funeral, but I couldn’t help but laugh.

“*What* is so amusing?” Lucian asked icily.

“You,” I said flatly. “This is so ridiculous, man, it’s actually funny. The little princeling… You’re so fucking full of yourself that you can’t even *conceptualize* a world where Elle isn’t completely consumed by you, so you have to make up some shit about how I’m keeping you apart, just so your world continues to make sense. It’s hilarious.”

My words seemed to hit their mark, and Lucian’s steely façade cracked a bit. “Wha—what do you mean?”

I shook my head. “You say I’m interfering, but what about you? Have you even bothered to get to know the woman you claim to love so much, man? And I mean *really* get to know her, beyond your fancy little chaperoned ‘dates’? Do you even care about who she really is? You should, because Elle is fiercely independent. She’s smart as hell, and she has no room in her life for bullshit. If she’s resisting your charms, maybe it’s because she just doesn’t find you charming. Maybe the problem here is *you*.”

Lucian’s eyes narrowed. “That can’t possibly be the case,” he said stubbornly. “I’m royal—a Vanguard prince! I’m adored by my pack, I’m built like a god, and I have the face of an archangel. What could she possibly find offensive about that—”

“This is exactly what I’m talking about,” I said, cutting him off. “You might mean well, Lucian, but you come across as a pompous ass. Elle isn’t stupid—she’s probably already figured that out, all on her own. If your ‘courtship’ is failing, it has nothing to do with me.”

Lucian’s gaze darted around, like he was trying to do some quick mental math.

“Listen to me,” I said, growing serious. “If you really care about Elle, and you’re really serious about developing a relationship with her—or improving the one you have, or whatever—then what you need to focus on is fixing yourself.”

Lucian gaped at me, stunned into silence. I’d never seen the princeling speechless before, but I’d finally managed it.

“Think about it,” I said with a shrug. “And while you do, you can let me go so I can go worry about the alliance and the Bitterfang threat—someone’s got to do it, and your mind is *clearly* elsewhere.”

Lucian—still looking rattled—nodded and waved at the guards. They stepped away from me, standing down. I turned toward the door.

“Is this what you might call tough love?” Lucian asked.

I glanced back at him and shrugged. “No. It’s called the truth.”

I brushed past Lucian’s guards, almost sorry they didn’t try to stop me. I was in the mood to make a statement.

“Do send Elle my regards, won’t you?” Lucian called.

I rolled my eyes, but I didn’t respond. What the hell was the point? Nothing ever got through to the stupid princeling.

Lucian’s car was waiting for me in the drive, but I decided not to take it. The less I was reminded of that idiot, the happier I’d be. I stopped next to the car, stripped down, and handed my clothes to the startled driver, who was waiting next to the car.

“See that these are returned to my pack house,” I said, then turned and headed into the woods. Once I reached the trees, I shifted and broke into a run.

I was glad to be in the woods, glad to be running, and—most of all—glad to be out of that fucking palace. Lucian’s accusations worried me. But I hadn’t told him a thing—Lucian still didn’t know for sure that I really had turned Elle, and that she’d once been a wild wolf. And it was going to stay that way. Lucian could keep guessing until he was blue in the face—until he had *actual* proof, I wasn’t going to confirm a damn thing.

The only person worried about an alleged bond between Elle and me was Lucian. Sure, I liked Elle, and she was a member of my pack. But my only connection to her was that I was her Alpha, and I was still fulfilling the promise I’d made to her father to look out for her.

I dropped my head and ran faster, until the woods blurred around me. As I went, I sorted through the scents I encountered—members of Lucian’s pack, then my own. But the scent that kept appearing again and again was Xavier’s.

I shook my head. Fucking hell. My brother couldn’t have picked a worse time to have a fucking quarter life crisis, or whatever the hell was going on with him. I felt anger rising in my chest as I thought it through. Not only had his temper tantrum and subsequent dramatic exit been harmful and painful for Cali, but it just wasn’t good for the rest of the pack. We always needed to keep morale up, but *especially* now, when we were under threat. The alliance needed to show its strength, and Xavier—for all his many, *many* faults—was an undeniable asset.

I snorted a frosty breath into the cold hair and gave my head a hard shake. I didn’t want to keep thinking about Xavier or dwelling on things I couldn’t control. If this was all for real—if Xavier really had broken up with Cali—I wasn’t going to pressure Cali to make a choice. I wanted her to choose me, sure, but I also wanted her to come to me because she *wanted* to. Because she’d decided on me. Because she knew I could make her happy, and because she wanted to make me happy too—for the rest of our lives. That had been my plan all along. Nothing had changed in that department.

But, of course, Xavier had found a way to make things all about him.

The pack house came into view as I rounded a dense stand of trees, and I thought about what I was going to have to do next. First up, I was obviously going to have to call an impromptu pack meeting so I could update everyone on the agreement I’d reached with the other Alphas—and Ava. I hoped it would help them breathe easier that we were all on the same page, and a war, while a threat, wasn’t currently impending.

Shifting back to human, I charged up the porch steps and burst through the front door. Ravi and Jay were standing in the foyer, and they looked up in surprise.

“Hey, man,” Jay started. “We—”

“Gather the pack,” I said, still breathing hard from my run.

Jay didn’t ask any more questions. He nodded, and he and Ravi jogged away, up the stairs and into the kitchen, calling everyone to the living room.

I looked around, wondering where Cali had gone. Before I’d left, she’d asked me to relay a message to Xavier. But—as I’d expected—Xavier hadn’t been at the palace meeting. Which meant that when I saw her, I’d be giving Cali a new reason to worry about my asshole of a brother. I hated that. Everything about it. Xavier didn’t deserve her worry. He didn’t deserve her attention.

I grabbed a clean pair of sweats from the laundry room and headed into the living room, just as the pack began to gather.

“Have you seen Cali?” I asked as Sage walked in.

“No, sorry,” she said, shaking her head. “Not for a while.”

Cali still didn’t appear as more and more of the pack gathered, and I was getting a little concerned. Where was she? Maybe outside, practicing her magic with Artemis again? I headed into the hall, thinking of checking upstairs. Maybe she’d fallen asleep or was taking a shower or something.

But then Artemis walked through the front door. Rishika followed her, pulling on a sweatshirt.

“Hey, where are you two coming from?” I asked, nodding at them.

“Patrol,” Rishika said. “Why? What’s up?”

“I’m looking for Cali. Have either of you seen her?”

Rishika glanced at Artemis. “The last time we saw her, she and Lola were heading out.”

“Out where?” I demanded.

Rishika looked at Artemis again who nodded. “Out to look for Xavier,” Rishika said, gulping.

“*What?*” I asked. “And you didn’t just *go*? You let her just *leave*?”

**Episode 3733**

**Xavier**

I had to admit—I really wasn’t thrilled by the idea of walking into a demon-hosted party. But I wasn’t going to back out. Not now. I’d made it this far, and I really did need to blow off some steam.

Mabel led the way toward a small house that was so rundown, it looked like a stiff wind might knock it over. The blasting music could be heard from the street and as we drew closer, I picked up the scents of weed and vampires—neither of which lifted my mood.

But Mabel didn’t seem to mind. She stepped right up to the door and knocked. There was no immediate answer, so she rang the bell. Still no answer, and she had her hand on the knob—about to open it—when the door swung inward.

Rhett stood in the doorway, backlit by smoke and the dim lights of the house. He looked at Mabel, then at me. His eyes narrowed. “I know you. You’re a werewolf.”

I bristled. It wasn’t whathe’d said, but rather the way he’d said it—he’d said the word *werewolf* like a curse word. Like an insult. As if demon was so much higher and mightier.

“You know, those shit manners of yours are probably why you have those scars,” I said, scanning his face.

Mabel rolled her eyes. “Will you both chill? Rhett, Xavier’s here with me. Relax, man. He’s cool. He just wants to party.”

Rhett stepped aside to let us in, but his eyes—the left one green, the right one blue—never left me as I moved into the dingy house.

I met his eyes, unafraid. I almost hoped he decided to escalate things. Why the hell not? I was mad as hell, and I had nothing to lose. I could use a good fight.

“Come on,” Mabel muttered, giving me a push so I moved past Rhett and into the house.

We moved into what was probably meant to be the living room, but instead felt like a living organism—one that fed off of filth and sex. The party was in full swing. People—well, vampires and demons—were partying hard. Some were dancing, some were drinking, and some were making out in corners. The place itself was nothing to write home about. It was practically falling apart. As we went further in, I could feel vampire eyes on me as we walked through the room. It was an odd feeling—like I was a walking cut of prime beef.

If anyone tried anything they were going to have a rude awakening.

“Just relax,” Mabel told me warningly. “No one will bother you if you don’t bother them. Everyone is here for the same reason we are—they just want to have fun.”

“I’m sure,” I said dryly.

“Mabel!” A hand reached out and grabbed Mabel’s arm. It pulled her over to a trio of ladies, who all started speaking at once.

“Where have you been?”

“Mabel, you look amazing! What are you doing differently?”

“Maybe it’s her haircut.”

“Ohh you’re right, it’s longer!”

“Tell us everything!”

“Who’s your friend?”

I didn’t need to be ogled anymore, so I stepped away. Maybe I’d be able to find a beer somewhere. I wasn’t even sure how long I wanted to stay—it felt weird to be at a party without Cali.

There was an ice chest near the kitchen stocked with drinks, so I pulled out an imported beer and flipped off the cap. I took a long pull and looked around, checking out the other party guests. Even if I hadn’t known that this was a bunch of demons and vampires, it was still a rough-looking crowd.

There was a light tap on my shoulder, and I turned to see a red-haired woman standing behind me. She smiled at me, flashing her fangs.

“You smell *delicious*,” she said suggestively, then began to dance. She took my hand, trying to engage me, but I shook my head.

“No, thanks,” I said, pulling my hand from her grip. “I’m not really in the dancing mood. Maybe later.”

Another vampire stepped over to us—a guy this time, tall and good-looking. He put his hand on the redhead’s shoulder and, without a word, they started to make out. But the woman’s eyes stayed open, fixed on me. Which was creepy as hell.

I moved away from them, keeping an eye out for Mabel. But instead of finding her, I ran into Rhett. Or rather, he ran into me, cornering me near the hallway.

“Did you ever find what you were looking for?” he asked without preamble.

“What?”

“What you were looking for, last time I saw you. Did you find it?”

I thought for a moment, then remembered I’d been looking for the ashes and Adéluce last time I’d seen the guy. I’d *thought* I’d found what I was looking for—I’d thought I’d returned all Seluna’s ashes to the demon world. But if I had, I wouldn’t have ended up here, partying with demons and bloodsuckers. I’d have been with Cali, at my pack house. I’d have been where I fucking belonged.

Where I *used* to belong.

Rhett was still looking at me, so I shook my head dismissively.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “I’m not looking for anything anymore.”

Rhett narrowed his eyes. “I don’t know about that. Guys like you are always looking for something—usually trouble. The question is whether I think you’re going to find it.”

I held up my hands. “Hey, man, it’s like Mabel said, I’m just here to have a good time.”

Rhett gave me a once-over. “That’s cool. I have something that might help.” He pulled a small plastic bag from his pocket and offered it to me. “The best.”

I eyed it. “Drugs aren’t really my thing, but thanks.”

Rhett shrugged. “Whatever. Suit yourself.”

He turned and offered the bag to the making out vampire couple, who paused their groping long enough to take some of the powder, lay it across the backs of their hands, and snort it up.

The woman was still looking at me, and now that they’d separated, she leaned into the man and whispered something to him. He looked at me, too. I didn’t like their interest in me *at all*. If it weren’t so damn loud in this place, I’d have been able to hear what they were saying about me. They were probably interested in me because I was an Alpha werewolf.

Terrific. This was one hell of a party. I grabbed another beer and popped the top off with the side of my thumb. I downed the thing in one long pull, hoping I’d be able to consume enough alcohol to dull the throbbing ache I was feeling.

“Xavier!” Mabel called. She walked over to me, a cloud of weed smoke billowing behind her. “Are you having a good time?”

I grunted and tossed my empty bottle into a recycling bin.

She narrowed her eyes. “It doesn’t look like it. Weren’t you supposed to blowing off steam here?”

I grabbed a third beer. “I’m working on it,” I muttered.

She gave me a long look. “It’s probably none of my business, but what happened to your girlfriend?’

I nearly spat out my beer—I was *not* prepared to answer any questions about Cali—but then Mabel kept talking, and what she said shocked the hell out of me.

“I liked Ava.”

“Ava *isn’t* my girlfriend,” I said quickly.

Mabel looked surprised. “Really? But she’s in love with you. Like, intensely.”

Before I had a moment to react to that statement, a hand clamped on my shoulder and spun me around. It was the male half of the vampire couple, and when I looked at him, I saw that his eyes were red-rimmed and oddly dilated. But that didn’t bother me nearly as much as the angry smile on his face, or the way his lips were pulled back, exposing his long, lethal-looking fangs.

“You insulted my girlfriend,” he snapped.

I shook his hand off my shoulder. “What are you talking about? I barely spoke to her.”

“She said she asked you to dance, and you turned her down,” the guy insisted.

“You want me to dance with your girlfriend?” I demanded, starting to get irritated. I shook my head. “That’s fucked up,” I said, shoving the vamp out of my face. “Maybe you should pay more attention to your girlfriend so she doesn’t need to ask strangers to dance.”

The vampire didn’t seem to like my advice. “Maybe I should drain you of your Alpha blood,” he hissed, his eyes starting to blaze.

“I think that’s a great idea,” I said, growing angrier by the minute. “In fact, I have an even better one—how about you and I fight it out, and I kick your ass?”

The vampire grinned, revealing his fangs. “You can try. But if I win, I get to drink your blood.” His grin widened. “*All* your blood.”

**Episode 3734**

**Artemis**

I glared at Greyson. I was annoyed with his accusing tone, but more annoyed with myself, because I sort of agreed with him. I *was* worried about Cali, and I shouldn’t have just let her go like that. And it was hard to argue that she would be fine—Cali always found a way to get into more than her fair share of trouble. But what could I have done?

“Cali’s not a prisoner,” I reminded Greyson, “and I’m not her jailer. She doesn’t *ask* me for permission to leave, and I don’t give it. I can’t stop her from coming and going. No one can. It’s Cali.”

Greyson’s expression darkened. “We all know what Cali is going through right now, and letting her run off into the woods at night probably wasn’t the best idea.”

“I’m not going to argue with that, but it sounds like something you need to discuss with Cali, not me,” I said coldly. A muscle twitched in Greyson’s jaw. “Besides, Cali went with Lola. It’s not like they’re defenseless out there—they can both take care of themselves.”

Greyson didn’t answer, just ran his hand through his hair, and I could see the stress and anxiety on his face. I felt for the guy, and my irritation started to fade.

“I know you’re worried,” I said, my voice gentler than before. “And if you’re *that* worried, you should just go after her and Lola. It shouldn’t be that hard to track them down.”

Greyson nodded. “Yeah, probably not. Thanks,” he said, then turned and walked into the living room, where the pack was gathered.

Everyone went quiet when he walked in. He went straight to the front of the group, standing in front of the windows and looking out the pack.

“Good I’m glad you’re all here. I have some news. The alliance is *not* going to go on the offensive with the Bitterfangs,” he said.

A murmur moved through the pack.

“That’s the right choice,” I said, relieved. “It’d be foolish to try to start a pack war.”

“Maybe,” Rishika said warily. “But that doesn’t mean there won’t still be one.”

“What do you mean?” Sage asked, craning around to look at her.

“Packs like the Bitterfang thrive on chaos,” Rishika explained, her expression grave. “Sometimes, they go looking for it.”

“I expect everyone to be aware that it wouldn’t take much to ignite things at the pack summit,” Greyson went on. “The Bitterfangs will be spoiling for a fight. They’ll be looking for any excuse to engage, and subsequently blow any confrontation out of proportion—which means that I expect those going to the summit to be on their best behavior. We’re not going to give them an opening. Is that clear? Any questions?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a question,” Zainab said. “It’s sort of related to this.”

“What is it?” Greyson asked.

“Is Xavier coming back?”

There was a long beat of awkward silence. Greyson shifted on his feet, looking uncharacteristically nervous.

He cleared his throat. “I don’t know,” he said. Then, to the rest of the pack: “Thank you all. You’re free to go.”

Everyone got to their feet, talking quietly to each other, but Greyson didn’t wait around—he headed straight out the living room door.

I watched him go, wondering if I should follow. He’d looked rattled by Zainab’s question—he clearly hadn’t been ready for anyone to ask it. But if I did go after him, what exactly would I say? I wasn’t sure what comfort I’d be able to offer him.

“Hey, should we head upstairs?” Rishika asked, touching my elbow to get my attention. “I want to get dressed.”

I nodded and followed her up.

“Xavier’s being so selfish.” Rishika shook her head as we reached the top of the stairs.

“I get what you’re saying,” I said, “but no one really knows what’s going with him.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Rishika said sharply.

“What do you mean by that?” I asked.

She turned to look at me. “If I treated you the way Xavier’s been treating Cali, I wouldn’t *want* you to come after me.”

This surprised me. “Really? Why?”

“Because if I treated you that way, I wouldn’t deserve you,” she said. She leaned forward and pressed a kiss to my lips. When she pulled back, her dark eyes looked right into mine. “You deserve someone who’ll be there for you, no matter what.”

I took this in. All this was so new to me. I was brand new to relationships, and I’d never really had a chance to grow into one when I’d lived in the Fae world. I’d been alone almost all my life—being unattached was just one of the sacrifices a bounty hunter had to make. I hadn’t given it much thought before I’d come to the human world, but after I’d arrived and started looking around, I’d decided that love *was* something worth fighting for. That was what my mom had told me, and ever since I’d met Rishika, I’d been sure it was true.

“I’d fight for you,” I said, my voice low. “No matter what, love is worth fighting for. *You’re* worth fighting for.”

Rishika’s eyes sparkled. “You’re right about that—love *is* worth fighting for. Maybe it’s even worth dying for. And I would do either of those for you—”

“I would for you, too—”

“But what Xavier did to Cali wasn’t love,” Rishika insisted.

I thought about that for a long moment. “I suppose not, but still…” I shook my head. “I still just can’t believe he would do that to Cali. He always seemed to love her so much. He was so dedicated to her. And they’re mates. I mean, that has to mean something, doesn’t it?”

Rishika sighed and started down the hallway, waving me after her. “Come on.”

She shut the bedroom door behind us and turned to look at me, her expression serious.

“Look at you and me, Artemis,” she said. “We’re not technically mates, but I love you more than anything in the world. Know that.”

I felt a fluttering in my stomach at her words. I knew that was how Rishika felt about me, but it was something else to hear her say the words, and it made me feel like my feet weren’t quite touching the ground.

“Just because people are mates, doesn’t mean they love each other. Or that their love is stronger than ours.” She tucked a strand of dark hair behind her ear. “I’m not trying to downplay how Cali feels about her mates, or how much she loves them, but you have to realize that every relationship is different. And you can never know what is going on inside anyone else’s.”

She stepped toward me and took my hand, pulling me close and pressing a kiss to my lips.

“We couldn’t be more different, could we?” she asked, speaking against my lips. “You’re a Fae; I’m a werewolf.”

I smiled, loving the feeling of her body against mine. Heat radiated off her, and I could feel it, even through my clothes. So good.

“I think we’re more similar than we are different,” I said, sliding my arms around her trim waist. “I don’t think opposites are the only ones who attract.” I pulled her close and kissed her. “And you’re wrong, by the way.”

Rishika pulled back, surprised. “What? What am I wrong about?”

I smiled at her consternation. “No matter what, we’ll always deserve each other.”

A smile broke through her confusion. “Is that so?”

“Yep,” I confirmed, and kissed her again.

She wrapped her arms around my neck and deepened the kiss. My whole body got warmer and warmer, until I was flooded with heat. It was desert-landscape heat, black-asphalt-on-a-blazing-day heat, surface-of-the-sun heat.

I walked her backward until we hit the bed, then let myself tumble down, bringing Rishika along with me. She pulled off her sweatshirt, and we yanked off my clothes together, flinging them away as we kissed and rolled across the bed.

“Touch me,” Rishika moaned, throwing her head back against the blankets.

As if I wanted anything else. I couldn’t make either of us wait any longer, so I grinned and did just that. I dragged my hand up the front of her thigh—so slowly, it made her pant—then let my hand hover over her sex for just a moment. Then, with a smile and a kiss, I slipped my fingers between her folds.

Rishika sucked in a breath and squeezed her eyes shut. “God, yes. Keep going.”

I moved my fingers in a circular motion, then slipped them in and out, marveling at the internal heat of her body. It was like she had a molten core. With my free hand I teased her breasts, rolling her hard nipples between my fingertips.

Rishika started to rock against me, riding my hand, but when I found her clit, she seized up, then pulled me into a rough, crushing kiss. She moaned against my lips, coming hard, and I nearly came myself. It was all of her—the smell of her, the feel of her, skin against skin… She was so close and so strong and so damn *hot*.

She was still panting as she sat up and slipped between my legs. It didn’t take much—a flick of her tongue, a twitch of her fingers inside me—and I was shaking, screaming, gripping the sheets.

We were whole together. We completed each other. We deserved each other.

**Episode 3735**

Two Samara pack members moved to stand with Ava, one on either side of her. She looked at them, seeming almost surprised to see them.

“Do you want us to throw them out, Ava?” one man asked. He looked young, barely out of his teens, but he was glowering at us.

“If you know what’s good for you, you won’t even try it,” Lola growled.

Hearing Lola’s tone, two more Samaras moved to back up Ava, and I knew I needed to do something to defuse the situation.

“Hey, everyone stop! We didn’t come here looking for a fight,” I said, holding up my hands. “I’m just looking for Xavier.”

“He isn’t here,” the young guy growled.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Ava said quickly. She looked over at me. “Why don’t we take this conversation somewhere a little more private?” she suggested, nodding toward the Airstream trailer in the center of the clearing.

I hesitated. I wasn’t sure if going somewhere private with Ava of all people was the wisest move. Lola must have been thinking along the same lines, because she moved closer to me.

“I’ll go with you if it’ll make you feel safer,” she said.

It wasn’t that I felt threatened by Ava; it was that I didn’t trust her. But she probably had a point—I didn’t want to have whatever conversation we needed to have in front of the rest of the Samara pack, especially Marissa, who’d been glaring at me with deep hostility from the moment I’d walked into the clearing.

“No, thanks,” I said to Lola. “I’ll be fine.”

“Okay,” she said warily. “But just holler if you need me to come kick someone’s ass.”

The Samaras didn’t like this one bit and stepped forward as one, eyes blazing.

Marissa in particular looked furious. “You need to watch your mouth.”

“Okay, okay. There’s no reason to be antagonistic,” I told Lola, giving her a hard look. “Will you *please* behave?”

Lola shrugged. “I can try.”

“*Do*,” I urged, then followed Ava, who was already walking toward the Airstream.

She held the door open for me then followed me inside, shutting us in. “Want a drink? I’ve got whiskey.”

“No,” I said shortly. “I didn’t come here to socialize.”

Ava shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

She opened a cupboard and pulled out a short glass and a bottle of brown liquid. Then she poured half a glass and turned back to me, leaning against the counter as she looked me over.

“So, you came here looking for Xavier. What makes you think I know where he is?” she asked evenly.

I ground my teeth. Her steady gaze was making me crazy. I wanted to scream, *Because Greyson saw him here!* But instead, I took a deep breath and tried to control myself. I couldn’t help but notice that Ava wasn’t actually being a jerk to me. This whole situation was probably just as awkward for her as it was for me.

“I know that Xavier came here after he left the pack house,” I said.

“Well, he’s not here,” Ava snapped. Then she gripped her whiskey glass and closed her eyes, like she was trying to keep her cool. She opened her eyes again. “I haven’t seen Xavier since he and Greyson fought. I was actually hoping *you* had heard from him, but obviously you haven’t.” She shrugged. “I guess we’re both in the dark.”

I nodded, half in disbelief. I couldn’t believe I was having this conversation with Ava. She’d *been* his mate, I *was* his mate… Or so I’d thought, anyway.

“I guess you have no idea where he went?” I ventured. Was she being honest or difficult? I never knew with her.

“No.” She took a long pull of her whiskey. “This is odd.”

“What’s odd?” I asked carefully.

“As it happens, we’re both worried about Xavier. And we’re both his mates.”

Ava’s words stung like a slap, but I tried to cover my upset and kept my expression neutral.

“I don’t know what’s going on with Xavier,” she continued, “or what happened between the two of you. And maybe it’s none of my business…”

She was right about that. It *was* none of her damn business. I didn’t even want to be having this conversation, but what the hell were my options?

“… but whatever’s going on with Xavier, it’s clear that he’s not talking, and that neither one of us has a clue about what’s really happening,” Ava finished.

I thought about that for a moment, wondering if it was really true.

“I’m surprised,” I said.

She raised an eyebrow. “Are you? About what?”

I crossed my arms. “I’d have thought you’d be thrilled to hear that Xavier broke up with me. Isn’t that what you’ve always wanted?”

She considered me for a moment, then shrugged. “If Xavier broke up with you, I wouldn’t cry myself to sleep over it. But I’m sure that sentiment goes both ways.”

I wasn’t surprised to hear it, but Ava wasn’t done.

“But if you think he left you to be with me, you’re wrong.” She tipped her drink back, swallowing the last of her whiskey. “He’s not here,” she said, her voice hard as flint.

I looked around the dingy trailer, just for something to do. Ava’s dark eyes were bottomless, and it freaked me out to look into their depths. “Everything would be so much easier if he were.”

“What do you mean?” Ava asked. “Easier how?”

“Then I would at least have some *answers.* If I knew he’d run off to be with you because you were in love again—or in lust,” I amended. *Love* just didn’t feel right. I wasn’t going to go there. “At least I’d have been able to wrap my mind around that. That would’ve given me more understanding than I have. At least I’d have known exactly where I stood with him.”

Ava nodded, looking astonishingly empathetic. “I get that. It’s hard when there’s just nothing there to go on.”

“Yeah,” I said slowly. This whole conversation was absolutely bizarre.

She sighed. “We both want to help Xavier, but until he’s willing to accept help from us—or from anyone—there doesn’t seem to be much we can do.”

“I know,” I said, nodding. “Anyway,” I said, heaving a sigh, “thanks for talking to me, I guess. It’s good to know where he’s *not*, at least.”

“What are you going to do now?” Ava asked. “Are you going to keep chasing after him?”

I felt certain she wanted me to say no. This was a test to see where I stood with Xavier. Whether she could weasel her way further in with him.

“Listen, I appreciate your honesty, Ava, but I’m not going to give up on Xavier,” I said firmly. “I’m going to find him.”

Ava poured herself another measure of whiskey. “Well, good luck,” she said, raising her glass to me. “You’re going to need it. Xavier Evers knows how to disappear when he wants to.”

I stepped toward the door and opened it. I was about to step back out into the winter air when I stopped and turned back. “Can I ask you something?”

Ava raised an eyebrow.

“There’s something I need to know,” I clarified.

She shrugged. “Go ahead. I have nothing to hide.”

I hesitated. I wasn’t sure how to ask about what I wanted to know, or if I actually even wanted to know it. But I was here, and this was my chance, so I plowed on.

“Is it true?” I asked. “Have you and Xavier really been sleeping together this whole time?”

Something dark and pained flickered through Ava’s eyes, but it was gone too fast for me to read. She gave me a wry smile and took a sip of her drink. “Is that what he told you?”

I felt frustration building in my chest, threatening to choke me.

“Forget it,” I muttered, and stepped out of the Airstream.

How stupid could I be? I’d let myself forget that Ava was Ava. Had I *really* expected her to give me a straight answer? She’d been honest with me for a moment, sure, but a tiger didn’t change its stripes.

I took a deep breath of clean, cold air. My mind was racing, my thoughts spiraling. I had a million more questions than before, and none of the answers I was looking for. I was desperate to understand what was going on, to know what the truth really was, but I felt further away from that than ever.

“Cali!”

I looked over to see Lola sprinting toward me, her face pale. “What’s up?” I asked.

“Greyson’s here,” she announced breathlessly.

“Really?” I asked, surprised. “Why?”

Lola raised an eyebrow. “Girl, why do you think? You, of course.”

I walked around the side of the Airstream to the bonfire. There were still a few wary Samaras gathered there, but now they’d been joined by Greyson, who was backlit by the blazing fire.

“Greyson, what are you—”

“You’re coming back to the house,” he said, speaking over me. “*Now*.”

**Episode 3736**

**Greyson**

The shocked look on Cali’s face made my heart stand still for a moment. I’d reacted instinctively, but I hadn’t meant to sound so angry.

“I’m sorry about how I just said that,” I said softly, taking a step toward her, “but I do think it’s best that you come back to the house. And you too, Lola,” I added, looking over at her.

“Well, I guess I don’t really have a choice, seeing as you’re my Alpha and all,” Lola muttered, looking slightly mutinous. “So sure. *Happy* *to*.”

“Greyson, why are you here really?” Cali asked me.

“Because you disappeared without telling me,” I reminded her.

“This is all really fascinating,” Marissa said, her voice dripping with sarcasm, “but maybe you can all deal with your personal shit somewhere that’s *not here*? Don’t you have your own land for this?”

I ignored the angry Samara.

“I was worried about you,” I told Cali and—as I watched her expression harden with frustration—quickly added, “and so I may have overreacted. I know you and Lola would’ve been fine out here alone. I know you can fend for yourselves.”

“Hell yeah, we can,” Lola said.

“But that doesn’t make what you’re doing safe,” I said, looking at Lola pointedly. “And that doesn’t mean you should go wandering into other packs’ territories.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more, Greyson,” Ava chimed in, striding out of the Airstream, letting the door slam loudly behind her.

I swallowed a groan. Great. This was exactly what I’d been hoping to avoid. How wonderful that I’d received the opportunity to make an already complicated situation even worse.

Ava joined the circle around the bonfire and crossed her arms. “Though I wouldn’t be surprised if Greyson’s out here looking for Xavier, too. Seems like everyone comes right to me when they lose him, these days.” Her expression hardened, and she looked right at me. “But I’d like to take this moment to remind you—and the rest of your pack—that I’m not a goddamn lost and found.”

“I didn’t come out here to look for Xavier this time, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to stop looking for him,” I told her firmly. “He’s still my brother.” I looked over at Cali and Lola. “Let’s go.”

They followed me away from the bonfire and out of the clearing. We were silent as we hit the tree line, and—as though we’d arranged it in advance—Lola and I shifted, and then Cali climbed onto my back.

I tried to hold still as she arranged herself and gripped my fur.

*I didn’t mean to snap at you like that*, I told her*. I’m sorry. I’m upset with Xavier, and it’s making me tense. If he hadn’t left, you wouldn’t have felt the need to go wandering in the woods.*

I hated that my brother was putting Cali through all this, but I needed to get it together. I was angry, but I was better than that, and I taking my Xavier-based anger out on Cali was unacceptable.

*I understand*, Cali said, her mental voice gentle. *I’m tense, too. I think the whole Xavier fiasco has put everyone on edge.* She hesitated. *But the bottom line is that we miss him, right?*

She seemed to be expecting an answer, but I couldn’t give her one. But I did think about the question. It was very clear that Cali missed Xavier, but I wasn’t so sure that I did. I cared about my brother, but I also really wished he could get his act together. I wished he could be more responsible. I wished he had the maturity to explain what the fuck he was doing so that everyone—especially Cali—would stop taking chances to find him.

*I’m sorry too, Greyson*, Cali added with a sigh. *If I hadn’t run off, you wouldn’t have needed to come after me. I should’ve waited to talk to you before I left. I should’ve told you first. And I would have, but you were at the meeting. Lola and I went to the campsite because I thought it would be a good place to look for Xavier’s trail. We were trying to track him, and we still might be able to do it.*

I didn’t know how to respond to this. I was worried about Xavier, and I did want to know where the hell he was. I’d assumed that he’d stay with the Samaras—with Ava—and I was disturbed that no one seemed to know where he’d gone.

If Xavier had taken off with the intention of disappearing, finding him would be very far from easy. And even if we *did* find him, I had no idea how he’d treat Cali when he saw her again.

*What do you plan to do if you do find Xavier?* I asked her.

Cali gave a small chuckle, though it was devoid of warmth. *Lola asked me that same question. So I’ll tell you what I told her—when I find Xavier, I’m going to talk to him. Get answers.*

I nodded, but I thought of the way Xavier had attacked me when I’d seen him. *And what if he doesn’t want to talk?*

Cali was silent. *I don’t know. I guess I’m kind of naively hoping that won’t happen.*

My heart hurt for her. She couldn’t even *imagine* a scenario where Xavier wouldn’t want to talk to her. I felt my hackles rise. I just couldn’t let him hurt her again.

*It’s not naive to have hope, love. But he has refused to talk to anyone*,I told her*. No one understands why he did what he did, but Xavier isn’t going to talk until he’s ready. That’s just how he is, and going to see him in the hope that he’ll provide some kind of insight about what he’s doing just seems pointless.*

I winced. Putting it all that way sounded harsh, but I was telling the truth, and Cali needed to hear it.

*That’s just the reality*, I added.

*So, what?* Cali asked. *What should I do? Just mope around at the pack house, hoping he’ll come back to me?*

*I don’t remember saying anything about moping. If I could help take away some of this pain you have, Cali I would. But you shouldn’t go roaming in the woods, putting yourself at risk for him*, I said, my anger rising yet again. It was getting harder and harder to talk about Xavier and his choices without getting thoroughly pissed off. *He did this*, I reminded Cali. *Let him fix it.*

Cali didn’t answer me, so I wasn’t sure if my sentiments were hitting the mark with her. She stayed quiet as we continued to race through the woods toward the pack house. Lola was right behind us—I could hear her feet pounding.

I felt Cali’s grip on my fur tighten, then release. *Greyson, stop.*

Putting on the brakes, I came to a screeching stop and looked around, worried. *What is it? Are you okay? What’s wrong?*

*Everything*, Cali said flatly.

*Hey, everything okay?* Lola asked, walking over to us. She was breathing hard and glancing between us, probably trying to figure out why we’d stopped so suddenly. *What’s going on?*

*I don’t know*, I admitted.

Cali slid off my back, landing hard on the forest floor. She turned to me and gave me a hard look. *I understand why you’re saying what you’re saying, but I’m not going to give up on Xavier.*

*Cali, no one is giving up on him*—

*Greyson, come* on*!*

*Um, can someone tell me what’s going on?* Lola asked, looking back and forth between Cali and me.

I ignored her. *Cali, listen to me—*

*If we go back to our safe little pack house, then that’s exactly what we’ll be doing*,Cali said. *We’ll be giving up. And Xavier will know it.*

*Um, excuse me—what are you two mind linking about?* Lola asked, more firmly this time.

*Xavier*, I told her shortly.

Lola snorted. *Figures.* Then she shifted to human. “I think it would just be a hell of a lot easier if everyone just spoke with their damn mouths. What part of Xavier Evers are you discussing? Did you pick up on his scent or something? Because I haven’t. I’m not getting anything out here.”

Why couldn’t Lola just mind her own business for two seconds? I ignored her request to shift back to human. This was a conversation between me and Cali and for now that’s how I wanted it to stay. The last thing we needed was more people inserting their opinion into this *due destini* mess.

I turned to Cali, who had that fierce, blazing look in her eyes. *What do you want to do?*

Her jaw was set. *I want to do what I came out here to do.*

*Which is?* I asked.

*I want to find Xavier*. She narrowed her eyes. *Are you going to try to stop me?*

**Episode 3737**

**Xavier**

“HEY!” Rhett walked over, getting between the vampire dude and me. He glanced at the both of us, clearly annoyed. “Hardison, Evers, you both need to *back off.* This is *my* house—it might be a piece of shit, but it’s mine, and if you want to fight, you’re going to have to take it out back. I still have three payments to make on that damn TV, and I’m not having you two assholes crashing into it.”

“Fine by me,” I snapped, glaring at the vampire—Hardison, Rhett had called him. Was that seriously his fucking name? “More space to toss you around, vamp.”

I followed Rhett as he led Hardison and me—and a knot of party guests—out the back door.

“Xavier,” Mabel said, grabbing my arm as I passed her. “What the hell are you doing? I thought you wanted to *avoid* trouble. That’s not exactly what you’re doing, here.”

I shrugged. “Didn’t you tell me to cut loose?”

She rolled her eyes. “I did, but getting into a fight with Hardison isn’t exactly what I meant. I mean, that’s a little extreme. Did you forget what Iñigo did to you?”

Put me on display as a blood bag for vampires to enjoy?

“I’ll never forget,” I growled. “And now I’ve got the chance to get a little revenge. Stay out of my way.”

I stepped away from Mabel and out the back door, onto a small back patio, where Hardison was waiting. The other guests had formed a ring, and I could see that they’d started placing bets. From the low chatter, I could tell that most of them favored the vamp. That was a big, costly mistake for the lot of them, because I was about to knock the fangs right out of this bloodsucker’s shit-eating grin.

“Okay, okay, listen up!” Rhett said, holding up his hands to quiet the rowdy crowd. “I’ve got some rules to announce. The rules are—that there are no rules!”

This was met with a big cheer from the crowd.

“The fight is over when one of the fighters gives in!” Rhett went on. “Unless they’re dead, in which case they’re the loser by default.”

I was barely listening. I wasn’t here to lose—I was here to kick this vamp’s annoying ass. To blow off steam, as Mabel had said. And *fuck*,did I have a lot of tension to let loose.

“Okay!” Rhett said, raising his arms like he was about to start a drag race. “Let the fun begin!”

Rhett flung his hands down and I didn’t hesitate, just lunged straight for Hardison. Unfortunately, though, the vampire had the same idea—and he was faster than me. He leapt out of reach and punched me in the ribs. It was a powerful blow and nearly knocked the wind out of me, but instead of slowing me down, it only added to the adrenaline high that was already flowing through my body.

“YES! GO!”

“GET HIM!”

“KICK HIS ASS!”

“Hurry this up, Hardison!” someone yelled. “I want to taste the Alpha’s sweet nectar!”

I gritted my teeth and pivoted around, ready to come at Hardison again. I knew I had the option of shifting, but there was something kind of satisfying about the thought of kicking a vampire’s ass while in human form. It just felt more insulting, somehow.

I lunged again and caught the guy around the waist, shoving him back into a line of trash cans, then the brick wall behind them. Hardison stumbled, but still tried to catch me with a bite. I saw him coming, though, and threw a punch, knocking his head back and making his teeth slam together with a loud crack. Hardison was strong as fuck, but he was all over the place. He was scattered and didn’t seem able to focus on me, which actually made it pretty easy for me to grab him and pin his arms to his sides. He looked around, confused, like he couldn’t figure out what had just happened.

*Yet another reason not to do drugs*, I thought to myself, then I kicked Hardison’s feet out from underneath him and slammed him into the patio.

His head bounced against the rough stones, and he looked at me, spitting and snarling. I snarled right back, my senses suddenly filled with nasty vampire death stench. It made my stomach turn, but other than that, I was enjoying myself. It felt good to fight—and this time, I was prepared.

Hardison grunted hard and lurched, throwing me off him. Suddenly unbalanced, I fought to right myself, but Hardison just pushed me back and slammed me against the sagging brick wall. He reared back and started punching—first my face, then my chest, then my stomach, focusing on my abs. It hurt, but each blow only served to fire me up more. *This* was what I wanted. The pain was almost suffocating, but it reminded me of what I’d done to Cali. The pain I’d inflicted on her was now my own.

Hardison refocused his attention on my face. He punched me once in the ear, then—while I was trying to land a kidney punch of my own—caught me with a right hook to the jaw. It made me bite a chunk out of the inside of my cheek, and I immediately tasted blood.

That woke me up, and I grabbed the vampire around the throat, squeezing hard. Hardison was caught off-guard and clawed uselessly at my hands. I ignored him and wheeled around, slamming him into the brick wall.

“This is for Cali,” I whispered with a smile.

The vamp’s eyes widened as my grip tightened. He was making gurgling sounds, and his attempts to shove me away were getting weaker. I wondered if Hardison was going to give up, or if my victory would come by default. A dead vampire? That was just the kind I preferred.

The vampire was losing the fight—fast. This was too easy. I loosened my grip, just a little—I didn’t want this to be over too soon.

Hardison suddenly sagged, and I let go, letting him fall to the ground at my feet. I towered over the vampire, glowering at him, then raised my hands, celebrating my victory. I managed to do this while ignoring the pain that radiated through my entire body, pulsing with every breath I took.

Satisfied, I turned to face the crowd in triumph, but stalled when I felt something grab my leg. I looked down to see Hardison peering up at me, a weird, sick grin on his face.

“What the—” I started, but I didn’t get to finish my sentence.

Hardison yanked on my leg, and I lost my balance. I toppled over and hit the stone ground, hard. Before my surprised brain had even processed this turn of events, the vamp was on top of me, pinning me to the ground. I struggled against his vice-like hands, but before I could make any headway, the guy reared back and head-butted me.

Oh *god*. Black and white fireworks exploded somewhere behind my eyes. Stars burst, then were replaced with a warm gush of blood, which poured into my eyes from the broken skin above my eyebrows.

Shit. That wasn’t good.

Hardison might as well have been drooling. He grinned like a lunatic and licked his lips.

No. No way. There was *no way* I was going to let this happen.

I dug deep and pushed, trying to throw the guy off me. But the vampire—who must have been faking his collapse—held on astonishingly tight. He reared back and head-butted me again, catching me in the jaw this time, but harder. Lights flashed in my vision again, but this time it was a kaleidoscope of whirling, vibrant colors—like an exploded rainbow in my brain.

Okay, this was really bad. I blinked hard and shook my head, trying to clear my vision, but that only increased the pain. My vision was blurred and everything around me—the people, the trash cans, the brick wall, the shitty Christmas lights strung up around the patio—turned into watercolor smudges.

I could feel Hardison’s breath on my ear, smell the stench of him.

“Fighting sure makes me thirsty,” he hissed.

Before I even had a moment to process this, I felt his fangs pierce the skin of my neck. They were sharp as broken glass, and his bite was as strong as a vice grip.

Around us, the party crowd went fucking *nuts* as Hardison began to drink, sucking down my blood.

It felt strangely good—in that weird, wrong, slightly obscene way a vampire bite usually felt.

When Hardison finally pulled away from my neck, I was lightheaded. It felt like my head had been filled with helium. Hardison snorted with laughter and looked around at the crowd.

“Who’s next?” he shouted, and the partiers jeered and surged forward. “Drinks are on me!”

**Episode 3738**

When Greyson shifted back to human his eyes were flashing.

“*No*,” he said without hesitation. “No way. I’m not going to let you go chasing after Xavier.”

“Greyson, how can you—”

“No, Cali,” he interrupted, shaking his head. “And I’ve already explained why.”

“Okay, whatexactly are we talking about?” Lola asked, clearly baffled. “I feel like I’ve only heard half of this conversation… Probably because I only heard half of it.”

“*Still* talking about Xavier,” Greyson grunted.

“Of course,” Lola muttered.

I was crushed by Greyson’s words, but not exactly surprised. Greyson’s argument made sense—perfect sense, actually—but right now, I didn’t care about logic or sense. I cared about Xavier, and about the hole he’d left in my heart. And the only way I could see to fill that hole was to find Xavier and try to get an explanation out of him.

I turned to Lola. “Will you go with me?”

“Listen,” Greyson said, stepping toward me before Lola could answer. “I’m not going to forbid you from doing this—though I sure as hell would like to—but I am the Redwood Alpha. Which means that I *can* forbid Lola from leaving the pack house.” He shook his head, his face tense. “I hate to pull the Alpha card, but you’re not leaving me a lot of room to maneuver here, Cali.”

“That’s not fair,” Lola huffed, annoyed.

“No, it’s not,” I agreed, then I turned to Greyson. “I’m a member of the pack, too. And you might be my mate, but you’re also my Alpha.”

“*So* not what I was complaining about,” Lola muttered.

Greyson pressed his lips into a thin line. “I’m not going to forbid my mate from doing anything—I don’t think mates shouldn’t have that kind of power over each other. It’s not good for a healthy relationship,” he said, like he was quoting a book or something. “But if you want to be treated like everyone else, then fine. I order both of you to get your asses back to the pack house—and stay there.”

Lola glared at him, but she didn’t argue.

I was torn. I knew that if I defied him, there was a chance that Greyson might physically stop me. But more than that—if I did go after Xavier to fix things, then I’d hurt Greyson by disregarding his worries. Which would suck.

So, basically, it was a no-win situation for me.

I sighed. “Fine. But this doesn’t mean I’m giving up on Xavier,” I said pointedly. It was important to me that Greyson understood that.

“I’m not asking you to,” he said, raising his hands. “I just don’t want you roaming the woods at night when there are active threats against the pack out there. It’s not safe, Cali.”

I thought about that. “So does that mean it would be okay for me to roam the woods in the middle of the day?”

Greyson didn’t look happy, but he shrugged. “I guess I would feel slightly better about that,” he finally said. “But not by very much.”

“Okay, then,” I said, deciding to take some assurance from this. I looked over at Lola, thinking that we could try again tomorrow. Maybe Artemis could join us, too.

“Fine, let’s go,” Lola said, starting to shiver. “I’m ready to get back.”

She and Greyson shifted back to their wolf forms, and I climbed back onto Greyson’s back. I settled in and held on tight, and we started back toward the house.

*I’m sorry, love*,he said. *I’m only trying to look out for you.*

*I know*, I said, giving him a squeeze. It was hard to get too mad at Greyson. He loved me, and everything he did was in service of that. I knew exactly where he was coming from, and I knew he understood me too… Even if that was difficult.

But I was still feeling edgy, and I was anxious to change the subject. I wanted to get my mind off Xavier. I was sounding like a broken record, and honestly? It didn’t feel good. But knowing that and actually getting my mind off of him were two very different things.

*What happened at the meeting at the Vanguard?* I asked. *Are we going to have a pack war?*

*No, thank god*, he said. *We talked about it, and the alliance agreed to deal with the Bitterfangs together, at the summit. We’ve all agreed to not start anything with them if we can possibly avoid it.*

I sighed with relief. *Well, that’s one less thing to worry about*, I said.

A war with the Bitterfangs was the last thing we needed right now. A war with *anyone*.

*So, what else happened at the meeting?* I asked.

*Well, Lucian knows about Elle*, Greyson said heavily.

*What?* I asked, confused*. What do you mean by that?*

He sighed. *He’s convinced that I turned her, and that she used to be a real wolf.*

*Wait, what?* I asked, alarmed. *What does that mean? For you? And for Elle?*

I wasn’t sure what Lucian would do with that kind of information, but I didn’t think it would be good.

*Is turning a real wolf a bad thing?* I asked. *Is it taboo for werewolves or something?*

*It’s not normal, that’s for sure*, Greyson admitted. *I havent’ heard of many stories of it, that is until Lucian decided to tell me. I did it because it was the right thing to do. I did it to protect the pack, and—obviously—it was the right choice. Elle’s a great pack member. I think we’re all happy to have her around. But this thing with Lucian…* He trailed off, shaking his head.

I rolled my eyes. *Of* course *this is happening now. And after we tried so hard to keep it a secret, too.*

*I know*, Greyson said*. It’s not great. I’m concerned, but I’m not ready to panic yet. Lucian thinks he knows the truth, but he’s basing it all on educated guesses. He doesn’t know for sure, but I suspect that he might use the information as… Well, not as blackmail per se, but maybe as leverage. But I don’t know for what purpose. Or against whom.*

*Oh god, Greyson*, I said.

*Or it could neither of those things*, Greyson said. *Maybe the whole thing is just giving Lucian ideas.*

*Ideas about what?* I asked, confused.

*Oh, you know, turning his own wild wolves. You know how much he loves being worshipped. If he starts creating werewolves that way, then there’ll be no stopping the Vanguards’ growth.*

*I don’t like the sound of that*, I said, my stomach clenching.

Greyson and I were quiet for a long time.

*Do you have any idea how Lucian managed to figure it out?* I asked.

*Nope*, Greyson said shortly.

*Do you think it’s possible that Elle told him?* I ventured. *Maybe by mistake? She almost let it slip once before.*

Hell, I almost had too.

*I doubt it*, Greyson said. *Elle’s too savvy to trust Lucian with that kind of knowledge. She’s a smart girl, and if she doesn’t think Lucian is up to her standards for an Alpha, she’s not about to trust him with a secret like that. She knows the kind of weight it carries.*

I took this in. I wasn’t sure what any of it meant—not all together—but I was sure that I didn’t like it. It made me feel unsteady and anxious. Lucian’s obsessions had only ever caused problems for the pack—and specifically me. And with everyone working their asses off to try to avoid a pack war, I could see his latest fixation causing problems.

*What would happen at the summit if the word got out about Elle’s origins?* I asked. *Do you think it would fall back on you? Do you think you’d be punished by the council for what you did?*

Greyson was quiet for long enough that I wondered if he was going to answer at all.

*I’m not sure*, he finally said.

My stomach dropped. *And what are you planning to do about it?*

*I plan to deny it to Lucian for as long as I can. He has no proof, and as long as I don’t say anything, he can’t prove a damn thing. It’s my word against his.*

*Oh, Greyson—*

*There’s something else*,he said.

*What?* I asked, with a sinking feeling.

*Lucian tried to blame me for Elle not responding to him romantically*, he said.

*What? Are you kidding me?*

*I wish I were*, Greyson said.

I shook my head. *I mean, none of us really want to see Elle and Lucian together, but what does he think you did?*

Greyson made an irritated noise. *He’s claiming that there’s a special bond between Elle and me. He says it was created when I turned her. He says that can happen when a werewolf sires a new wolf. But he made no distinction about turning a human or a wolf.*

My stomach tightened. A special bond? One that Lucian could sense?

*What kind of special bond?* I asked nervously.

**Episode 3739**

**Greyson**

Cali’s voice was breaking my heart. *What kind of special bond?*

I stopped abruptly. *Get off, Cali.*

*What?* She slid off my back, onto the ground. *Greyson, what’s going on? What’s wrong? I was just asking—I mean, did I do something wrong?* she asked, looking worried.

Of course she hadn’t done anything wrong. But I knew that look, and that tone of voice. I needed to make a few things very clear to her.

I shifted back to human. “Cali, look at me.”

Lola ran toward us. She’d shifted back to human as well, and she was looking a little frazzled. “Hey, what’s going on? Are we going home or not? What’s the deal with you two?”

I glanced over her shoulder at the woods. “We’re not far from the pack house, now. Just go on ahead, Lola. Cali and I will catch up in a second.”

Her expression immediately cleared, and she grinned knowingly. “Oh, *right*. Got it. You two want some time alone.” She winked theatrically. “Message received.”

Cali flushed. “Lola, what are you talking about? Stop!”

“Lola, get your head out of the gutter,” I said. “I need to have a private conversation with Cali.”

Lola didn’t look convinced. Her grin twisted into a smirk, and she raised her eyebrows. “Oh, I *bet* you do.”

Good god, would this woman not stop?

Then she laughed, shifted, and sprinted away, howling as she went.

Cali’s face was still flushed as she turned to me.

“What did you want to talk about?” she asked, looking around. “The bond?”

“No.” I slipped my arms around her waist, pulling her toward me. “This. This is what I wanted. Love, look at me.”

She looked up, and our gazes locked. Her cheeks and the tip of her nose were pink from the cold, and her eyes were bright and flashing in the moonlight as she looked at me. My gaze ranged over her eyes, her cheekbones, her lips…

“What do you see?” I asked her.

Cali frowned. “I see *you*, Greyson. I don’t know what you’re asking.”

“Look harder,” I urged. “What do you see?”

Cali looked at me, and after another moment, her confusion gave way to something else completely. Her expression softened and relaxed.

“I see a man who loves me very deeply,” she said, her voice nearly a whisper. “My mate.”

I smiled. “So I have to ask—why would you *ever* worry about losing me?”

Cali’s gaze darted away, almost like she was ashamed, but I wasn’t going to stand for that. I put my finger beneath her chin and turned her head back to me. I wanted to make this clear to her.

“Hey, I didn’t tell you to stop looking,” I said, teasing.

“Greyson…”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I assured her. “I *promise*. I know that you’ve been having a hard time, Cali, and that you’ve been going through a lot—more than any one person should ever have to bear. But know this—when everything else in your world is upside down, I will always be the one constant in your life. I will always be the man who loves you, and nothing that anyone ever says or does is going to change that. Nothing, and especially not a bond *Lucian* of all people thinks exists. Is that clear?”

She nodded wordlessly, and I leaned in and pressed a kiss to her lips. I slid my arms around her and pulled her even closer, wishing we could stay like this forever—my body around hers, shielding her from all the heartache and pain the world could dish out.

She opened her mouth to me, and I deepened the kiss. I caressed her cheeks, hoping she felt how much I loved her. When she started to shiver, I realized she couldn’t stay out here much longer. The temperature had dropped fast, and she was going to freeze if I didn’t get her inside soon.

“Why don’t we head back?” I said, pulling back.

She nodded, and I stepped away. I was about to shift when she put her hand on my arm, stopping me.

“Thank you, Greyson,” she said softly. “I love you, too.”

I nodded and shifted, then crouched down so she could climb onto my back. I loved the feel of her arms wrapping around my neck, and the deep knowledge that she trusted me with the responsibility of getting her home safely. She trusted me completely.

I started through the woods toward the house, moving at a slightly slower pace than usual. It wasn’t an accident—I knew what I was doing. I wanted to enjoy this time with her for a little longer. It was selfish—especially when she was so cold—but being alone with her when I was in my wolf form was special for both of us.

The house was almost in sight when I felt a sudden change in the air. I stopped, and my hackles went up. I looked around, my senses on high alert.

Then a blast of light soared past me—just inches from my nose—and struck a tree three feet from where I stood. The tree *exploded*, sending out a barrage of pine needles, wood chips, and snow.

I dropped to the ground, my heart racing. Cali was holding onto my neck so tightly that if she’d been a little bit stronger, I’d have had a hard time breathing.

*What was that?* she demanded.

*I have no idea*, I said honestly.

My first thought was that it was the Bitterfangs. Were they attacking? Was this it? Had Lucian’s suspicions been right? Shit.

Dammit, I never should’ve let my guard down. I never should’ve let Cali out of my sight in the first place. I never should’ve—

“Greyson? Cali!”

I heard racing footsteps and turned to see Artemis and Rishika running toward us, looking shocked.

“I’m *so* sorry!” Artemis burst out. “I didn’t know you were there. I never would’ve fired an arrow if I’d known!”

I looked at her, then at the exploded tree. An *arrow*? What the hell kind of arrow was Artemis talking about?

Cali slid off my back and ran toward her sister. “Wait! Were you able to summon the bow again?”

Artemis nodded, and the two of them hugged each other tightly.

I shifted back to human. “Will someone please tell me what the hell is going on?”

“Sorry, Greyson,” Rishika said, though she didn’t stop grinning. “Artemis has learned how to summon a magic bow and arrow, and she wanted to demonstrate.”

“And so you decided to fire one of these magic arrows into the woods. Blindly. At *night*,” I said flatly, annoyed.

Artemis flinched. “When you say it like that, it sounds really bad. I was actually aiming for one of the trees over there,” she said, pointing, “but my accuracy is still a work in progress.”

I rolled my eyes. “How about next time, you think about who might be in the area when you practice with your explosive magical arrows?”

Artemis and Rishika nodded humbly, but—I had to admit—I really wasn’t all that mad. Having a magical weapon in our arsenal could only be a good thing for the pack.

“Well, *I’m* excited,” Cali told her sister. “And I hope Adair will be able to help me master something similar. Maybe I can have a magical bow and arrow too. Or some magical throwing stars or something.”

I looked at my mate. “How are you even coming up with these suggestions?”

She shrugged. “Movies.”

I shook my head. “I can only imagine the damage you two could inflict on the pack house if you’re not careful.”

I made a mental note to talk to Adair in the morning. We needed to put some safety protocols in place before the Fae in the house went around excitedly blasting everything in sight.

“Let’s get back,” I said. “I think we’ve all done enough damage for one day.”

I brushed some of the snow and wood chips from my hair as we headed for the house. Then I reached over and brushed some pine needles from Cali’s shoulders. She smiled at me and caught my hand.

Suddenly, Rishika stopped in her tracks. “Whose car is that?”

I looked around and saw the dark sedan that had spooked her. It was parked to the side of the pack house, and I immediately recognized it as the car Lucian had sent.

Artemis was just raising her arms like she was about to summon her magic bow, but I put my hand on her shoulder.

“It’s okay,” I said quickly. “It’s Lucian’s driver. He’s just delivering my clothes.”

“What?” Cali asked.

“What clothes?” Rishika wondered.

“Why were you taking your clothes off at Lucian’s place?” said Artemis.

I ignored all their questions as I walked toward the car. The door opened and an attendant handed me a bag of my clothes. But then the window in the back went down and I froze.

Lucian was sitting in the back seat, and he wasn’t alone. He was with Elle.

“What the *hell*?”

**Episode 3740**

**Xavier**

Warm, wet, sticky blood ran down my neck, and I could feel it soaking into my shirt.

*Fuck*. I was furious with myself. I couldn’t believe I’d fallen for Hardison’s act. The dumbass fake-out he’d pulled on me was the oldest trick in the book, and I’d fallen for it hook, line, and sinker.

*Idiot.*

Maybe I was losing my edge. Maybe living with a pack had made me soft—dulled my senses.

The rest of the partying vamps were starting to move in on me, and I knew I was in trouble, because I was too weak from Hardison’s bite to put up much of a fight against them.

The worst part of all of this was the knowledge that *I* had done this—*I* had brought this on myself. This had happened because I was wallowing in self-pity. I’d gotten into this stupid fight at a vampire-slash-demon party with no backup, all because I’d been fueled by anger and pain.

Mabel must have been right—I *did* have a death wish.

The woman who’d been with Hardison—the girlfriend who’d wanted to dance—leaned over so she could whisper in my ear.

“I haven’t been able to take my eyes off you from the minute you walked in,” she purred. “I could tell you were an Alpha, just like you can tell a movie star from his fans. And I swear, I’m going to savor every single drop of you.” And with that, she bit down on my neck, moaning with intense pleasure as she drank.

Pleasure hit me like lightning. It was white-hot, searing from my neck to the rest of my body. I could feel myself losing blood fast, and I was getting even dizzier. I knew logically I should push her off, but that was the thing about vampire bites: they felt good as they silently destroyed you from the inside out.

Maybe this was good; maybe this is what I deserved. Pain seemed to be becoming a habit for me. A very unhealthy one.

I closed my eyes, imagining that instead of a vampire drinking my blood, the pressure on my neck was Cali kissing me. We were in bed, and she was kissing my neck, telling me how much she loved me.

*“It was always going to be you,” she said softly, pressing a kiss to my jaw. “I love you, Xavier. I love you now, I’ll love you tomorrow, I’ll love you forever.”*

I let myself drift into the dream.

*“How are you, baby?” I asked, looking down at her face. “Do you miss me? Because I miss the hell out of you. And someday I’m going to come back to you. I’m going to come back, and I’m going to explain everything.”*

*“Really?” she asked, her eyes going bright.*

*I nodded. “And then you can choose me, like I always knew you would.”*

“No! I’m next! I was standing right here!”

“I’m next! I called next! That’s what *next* means, Wendy!”

I was ripped out of my fantasy by the shrill sound of arguing vampires. After a confused moment, I realized they were arguing about who got to drink my blood next.

I was so tired and so weak, I could barely open my eyes, but I tried. Everything was blurry, though only part of that was because of the severe blood loss. The blood from my head wound was still dripping into my eyes, making it hard to see.

I squinted at the form striding purposefully toward me. Was that… *Ava?*

My heart sped up, and I tried to reach out for her. She’d come for me, even though I’d treated her so badly. But I’d had no choice. Right?

Why *had* I treated her so badly? Had she deserved it, or had it just been my anger looking for a place to land?

My thoughts were jumbled and disjointed. Was Ava still my mate? How did that work? Adéluce had cursed me so that I couldn’t be with Cali, but the joke was on her, because I still had a mate. I could still be with Ava, so whatever, Adéluce!

Okay, I was definitely dying. Why else would I even *think* that?

Yes, Ava and I did have a connection—that was very obvious, given the few times we’d gotten together. But *I* didn’t want her—my wolf did. I wanted Cali. But… Now that I wasn’t allowed to be with Cali, *should* I be with Ava?

I scoffed at that thought and tried to shake my head, but I was too weak.

“Tell everyone to back off, or they’re going to kill him,” someone said sternly.

*Was* that Ava?

Fangs were jerked from my neck, and I heard a complaining voice. A second later, soft hands cupped my cheeks.

“What have you gotten yourself into?”

I strained to see the face in front of me. No, it wasn’t Ava—it was Mabel. I felt a strange twinge of disappointment.

Mabel was looking at me, shaking her head. “Don’t look so sad to see me, Xavier Evers. I’m only saving your life.”

She slipped her arms beneath mine and helped me to my feet.

I tried to push her away. “I’m fine,” I slurred.

She shrugged. “Okay,” she said, and let go.

I dropped like a rock. Every bruise on my body pulsed with pain so sharp, it felt like I was being electrocuted. I groaned.

“Do you want my help or not?” Mabel asked.

I held up a hand. “Yes.”

She grabbed my hand and jerked me to my feet. “Okay, let’s get you out of here.”

Unsteady on my feet, I leaned heavily on Mabel. She wasn’t big by any means, but she seemed to handle my weight easily, and pushed through the crowd.

Hardison and his vampire girlfriend stepped in front of us, both licking their lips like cartoon dogs.

The girlfriend had a trickle of my blood running down her chin, and Hardison leaned over and licked it up.

“Thanks for the party favor,” the girlfriend said with a smile—her teeth were stained with blood. “We should do this again.”

Enraged, I took a wild swing at them, but it was like I was drunk, and I hit nothing but air. Hardison laughed, and Mabel pushed me forward, steering me out of the yard and back onto the street. She propped me up against a tree, in front of my bike, then she stepped back with a sigh.

“I’m guessing you’re in no condition to drive.” She shook her head. “What am I going to do with you? You know, you’re not actually my responsibility. I’ve saved your sorry ass twice, now. That’s enough.” She thought for a moment. “Maybe you should just call an Uber and go home.”

“I don’t have a home,” I slurred, annoyed.

“Well, I don’t know what I’m going to—”

“He can come home with me.”

I shifted my gaze and saw Ava striding toward us. I squinted, wanting to be sure this time. Was that *really* Ava? I tried to take a step toward her, but my knees gave out and I lurched backwards, barely caching myself against the tree.

“God, am I happy to see you,” Mabel said, with feeling. “How are you, Ava?”

Ava gave me an assessing look. “I’ve been better.”

“We should grab a coffee sometime,” Mabel said, “Catch up.”

Ava stepped toward me and put her arm around my waist, slipping her shoulder under my arm to prop me up. Then she caught sight of my mangled neck and went pale. “What the hell happened?’

“Oh, well, he got into it with a less-than-friendly vampire at the party back there and didn’t come out on top,” Mabel said awkwardly.

“*What?*” Ava snapped. She turned to me, her eyes flashing with rage. “A *vampire*? Are you fucking serious?”

“I tried to stop him, but what could I do?” Mabel asked, shrugging hopelessly. She nodded toward the house. “Anyway, my friends are waiting for me. I’ll see you both later. Good luck,” she added, then headed back into Rhett’s house.

Ava shoved me against the tree—a little too hard—and gave me a furious look. “I should just leave you here,” she snapped. “Call the vampires back out, let them finish you off.”

I was still feeling a little punch-drunk, and I grinned at her. “So you’re mad at me?”

“*Xavier*,” Ava growled, glaring at me.

I smirked. “So, if you’re mad, that must mean you care about me.”

“Oh my god.” She rolled her eyes. “You’re fucking impossible. You know that, right?”

She grabbed my arms and hauled me over to the bike. She pushed and pulled until I was on the back, then slung her leg over, positioning herself in front of me. She fumbled with the ignition for a moment, then the bike roared to life.

I stared at her, stunned. “Wait, are you really taking me home?”

Ava killed the engine, then twisted around to glare at me. “Xavier. Did you break up with Cali for me?”

**Episode 3741**

**Greyson**

I couldn’t process what was in front of me. Elle was in the car with Lucian. How the hell had any of this happened without me knowing about it?

“Greyson,” he said, acknowledging me with that deadpan expression of his. There was a little smirk too. “Elle and I were just having a chat. Is something wrong?”

A snarl leapt through my teeth. “Oh, I wonder whose idea that was? Don’t answer—I already know.”

Lucian raised an eyebrow. “I invited Elle to sit with me so we could discuss our relationship. No harm done.”

“*Relationship*.” I scoffed. What relationship? Sure, Elle was into Lucian—at least aesthetically—but he wasn’t Alpha enough for her. *She’d* said as much to me. “You aren’t Elle’s type.”

Cali touched my shoulder with a calming hand, drawing me back a few inches.

“Maybe you should ask Elle what she thinks,” she said, sounding far more poised than I was.

I searched Elle out in the shadows of the car, realizing I’d been completely ignoring her existence until this point.

“Do you really want to be here?” I asked her.

Lucian tossed his head back with a laugh. “What, do you think I’ve kidnapped her?”

“Wouldn’t put it past you,” I grumbled. “It’s not like you recently tried to imprison me, or anything.”

“Come, now,” said Lucian. “That was all just a little misunderstanding.”

“Bullshit,” I retorted. “There have been nothing but ‘misunderstandings’ with my pack from the moment you arrived back in Oregon.” I turned my gaze on Elle, who looked a little like she wanted to disappear. “Get out of the car.”

Cali made a frustrated, irritated sound. This probably wasn’t a good look for me—it probably wasn’t smart to be acting so possessive over Elle in front of Cali—but Elle was a member of my pack. It was my job to protect her from slime like Lucian. I didn’t trust the guy. Alliance or not.

“It’s okay, Greyson,” Elle said. “We are just talking—that’s all.”

“Just talking.” I bit back a frustrated laugh. I knew Elle was trying to be diplomatic, but I didn’t care about Lucian’s feelings right now. “And why are you talking to him, exactly?”

I leaned in through the car window, arms folded against the door. If that was what she wanted—to witness a true Alpha in action—I was very prepared to drag her into the house and send Lucian packing, all in an extremely Alpha way. But that wouldn’t be good politics. And it would probably horrify Cali, and honestly, me too. I didn’t relish acting like a jealous boyfriend; that’s not the kind of Alpha or man I wanted to be. But I was over Lucian inserting himself into my pack where he didn’t belong. My pack was just that—*mine*.

I had to get Elle to listen to me—obviously, Lucian was no good for her—but how was I supposed to do that when he had her wrapped around his finger? When every word I said made me sound like the bad guy and made him seem more and more like the better option? The fact that he was still so poised was just an extra dose of bullshit to top it all off.

I was scouring my mind for a solution when Cali pulled me roughly aside.

“Why are you acting like this?” she demanded.

“Are you kidding? You can’t convince me that you like the idea of Elle and Lucian being together any more than I do.” Cali was smart enough to know someone like Lucian had nothing good to offer a girl like Elle.

*I know,* Cali said through the mind link, stepping closer to me. *But the more you hold Elle back, the more she’s going to want him. People want what they can’t have, and it’s no different for her. You know that!* She crossed her arms, frowning. *Elle should be able to talk to whoever she wants. She should be able to make her own decisions, otherwise how is she supposed to learn and grow?*

Fucking hell. I knew she was right.

*I agree, but Elle’s not talking to just anyone. She’s talking to Lucian and I don’t like it,* I grumbled. *Why does he have to do this?*

Then the pieces fell together. Lucian needed a mate. He was an Alpha without a Luna, and that made him *less*. That made him something he would loathe himself for being—weak. If he was right, and Elle really was his mate, then he’d started to push because he wanted to attend the pack summit with his Luna.

Cali ripped me back out of my thoughts. *Why are you so freaked out about this, anyway?*

It was a reasonable question, but for some reason, I didn’t want to give her an answer. I didn’t know why—it was too hard to explain. Did I even have an explanation for my behavior? I thought back to what Lucian had told me about the “special bond” between Elle and me. Cali knew all about it… Was she implying that my reaction had something to do with that bond Lucian kept going on and on about?

Could that be why I was up in arms over Lucian? Because of the so-called bond between Elle and me?

No. No way. All I felt for Elle was the responsibility any Alpha felt for a pack mate—except a bit more intense, due to the promise I’d made to Elle’s father. I’d promised to look after her. And it’s exactly what I told Cali: I didn’t like that all of this was happening with Lucian specifically.

*I’m just on edge*, I told Cali. Lucian always has some kind of agenda, and I don’t want Elle getting tangled up in his bullshit.

“So what are you going to do?” Cali asked out loud, raising her eyebrow. She sounded frustrated, but I was too.

I shot a look at the car. I knew I had to end this—in a way that looked more like a suggestion than an order.

I returned to the car and leaned against the window frame. “Elle,” I said. Her attention snapped to me, like she was waiting for a scolding. “I’d like you inside,” I said calmly. “I’m calling a pack meeting. I want everyone in attendance.”

Lucian looked both irritated and amused. His brow arched, and a slight, disbelieving smirk crossed his face. “You’ve suddenly decided to call a meeting? Is it really so urgent that it must happen now? Elle and I were just having the most fascinating conversation about mates and bonding and fate.” He said each word with relish, like he was cherishing the way they snapped against me like rocks thrown at my face.

I growled low—gravel in my throat. “I’ll bet you were.”

Elle made to get out of the car. “I have to go, Lucian. Greyson is my Alpha. It’s my duty to listen to him and join my pack.”

Lucian didn’t challenge her. “Perhaps he *is* your Alpha. But remember, Elle—you’re *my* mate.”

“Enough,” I snapped, reaching out to take Elle’s hand. I helped her out of the car, then turned toward the house. “Everyone inside,” I ordered.

Everyone began to disperse, Artemis, Rishika, and Elle all starting toward the door. Cali was the only one who didn’t obey my order. She hung back, looking me over for a long moment. Then she turned and followed the others, leaving the shadow of her disappointment behind.

I turned back to Lucian. “Enjoy the ride back.”

I’d started to slam the door in his face when Lucian reached out and held it open.

“I wouldn’t do that,” he said.

“Do what?” I shot back.

Lucian looked at me steadily, a dangerous glimmer in his eye. “Interfere.”

I dared him, lifting my chin. “Are you threatening me?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t dream of it,” Lucian replied. “I’m just thinking of the alliance.”

Was he seriously trying to use that as leverage again? The fact that he was doing it at all spoke volumes. He was a spoiled brat and would try to use whatever he could to get what he wanted. I wasn’t going to let him.

“Surely you realize you aren’t acting rationally,” Lucian said when I didn’t say anything.

“I’m as rational as I’ve ever been,” I replied. “I’m doing what’s right for my pack.”

“Are you?” asked Lucian. He stepped out of the car, patiently shutting the door and rounding to face me straight-on. “I think you’re feeling threatened by me. This isn’t the energy of an Alpha just looking out for his pack mate. You’re feeling the bond I spoke of, aren’t you?”

I hesitated again—which was the wrong fucking move. But all the talk of this so-called bond was throwing me off.

Lucian hummed, apparently taking my silence as confirmation. “So I was right about you and Elle. You turned her, didn’t you?”

My molars ground together. “I think you need to leave.”

“Is that what you think?” Lucian asked, cocking his head. “Or is it just what you desperately want, because my being here is a threat to that precious little bond of yours?”

A snarl ripped through my throat. “Get the fuck out of here.”

That glimmer of danger in Lucian’s eyes turned a shade darker. The amused smirk on his face fell away, and he eyed me through narrowed eyes. “I’ll leave, Greyson,” he started, “but tell me—are you willing to risk the alliance over this?”

**Episode 3742**

**Xavier**

I was still feeling a little light-headed. I needed to answer Ava’s question, but how? Carefully, that was for sure. But I couldn’t do that without a clear mind—couldn’t think of a response that didn’t sprint right through an emotional minefield.

The idea that I’d left Cali for her was outrageous, but it wasn’t like I could explain why I’d *actually* left, thanks to Adéluce.

“Cat got your tongue?” Ava asked when I stayed silent. “I asked you a simple question, X.”

A simple question with what should’ve been a simple answer—but in the context of a not-so-simple situation. What the hell was I supposed to say?

“I hate to disappoint you, but…” My throat went tight. Suddenly, I felt like I was choking on a cough.

Ava’s eyes narrowed on me, the look on her face burning with annoyance. With a fire that said, *Out with it, before I cut it out.*

“I’ll ask you one more time. Did you leave Cali for me?” she asked, enunciating every word.

The word *no* came so easily to my mind, but it couldn’t seem to find its way out of my mouth. It was trapped inside me, bouncing around the walls of my brain. *No no no no no…*

Fuck.

I tried to shake my head, but that didn’t work either. I was frozen—couldn’t move, couldn’t find that link between my brain and my body.

Ava turned away, and I wasn’t sure if that meant I’d won and she’d drop the subject, or if I was about to regret my silence. How the hell was I supposed to reply to that question without giving Ava any false hope? Obviously, I hadn’t left Cali for her, but how could I explain that in a way that Adéluce’s curse would allow?

I was getting frustrated—pissed, actually. This wasn’t part of my deal with that asshole. I’d made that deal for Cali. It had been a sacrifice to save her. The deal had nothing to do with Ava—she wasn’t part of the terms.

The silence was too loud. I had to say something… anything.

“Don’t get the wrong impression,” I finally said, managing to sound aloof. “You had nothing to do with it.”

This didn’t seem to suffice. Ava scoffed. “And yet here we are again. The two of us.”

She started up the bike and revved the engine, then she peeled away from the sidewalk like a bat out of hell. I nearly fell off the back but managed to hook an arm around her waist and keep myself balanced.

Obviously, she wasn’t satisfied with my answer, but at least I’d been able to force out some kind of response. Maybe later, I’d find a way to make it clear to her that my leaving Cali didn’t mean I was going to run into her arms.

My goal was to get out of this alive and find a way back to Cali, by any means possible.

We sat in a thick, suffocating silence the entire ride to the Samara campsite, and I could feel the electricity sparking off Ava the whole time. She was thinking about our conversation, and I could sense her growing more volatile by the minute. My wolf was clawing at me, trying to get to her. Urging me to hold her closer, to kiss her on that flash of neck that was visible beneath her hair… But he was fighting a losing battle. For now, at least, I had too much self-control to give in.

I wished the beast in me would operate a little less emotionally. A *lot* less emotionally. This tug-of-war between what my wolf desired and what I actually wanted was getting really old.

He was only acting up now because I was sitting so close to Ava. Her scent, her warmth—he was picking up on all of it. If it had been Cali in my arms, I’d have been feeling the same way, surely. If it were Cali this close, my wolf would’ve been pining for her, too.

Suddenly, Ava pulled over and the bike whipped to a stop, nearly knocking me off the back again.

Confused, I slipped off the seat. “Want me to drive? I’m feeling a little better.”

“Look at me,” Ava snapped.

I made the mistake of doing as she asked, our eyes locking. The sheer rage burning behind hers felt like a curse bigger than Adéluce’s.

“What are we doing?” she asked. “I’m tired of picking you up every time you fall. Of hearing all these excuses about why you’ve come back or why you’re leaving. How much longer am I supposed to put up with all this?” She stepped off the bike and crossed her arms. “I could’ve left you with the vampires. Maybe Mabel would’ve helped you, or maybe not.”

She kept talking, but I had to admit, I wasn’t paying much attention. I was lost in her eyes—like glowing embers. The way her lips glistened, dewy and soft. The way they curved, the way they called to me. It took me a moment to realize she’d stopped talking. What had she said?

Maybe I wasn’t as healed as I thought. I *had* lost a lot of blood.

Then Ava stepped up to me. Closer than close. Without another sound, she grabbed me by the shirt and pulled me close, pressing her lips to mine.

Everything went blank. At first, I felt nothing—nothing at all. And then sensation hit me like a tidal wave. Her lips were forbidden and yet so welcoming, so warm, that they felt *safe*. Familiar and foreign, real and fantasy; they were everything I’d been avoiding and everything I wanted.

I shouldn’t have let this happen, and now I couldn’t stop myself from pulling her in—from moving against her kiss like I was starving for it.

My arms found their way around her, like they’d been reaching for her all this time. Like I’d been holding them back, and this was their reflexive response—to grab her, to pull her close, to gather her up like she might slip away from me.

I kissed her back fiercely. The wolf in me snarled, yipped, panted for her—and I gave him everything he wanted. She breathed hot against my teeth, and I kissed her again, my mind cleansed of every worried thought I’d had before. Everything was just… gone. Erased.

I wasn’t supposed to be doing this.

I couldn’t stop.

I needed more.

It wasn’t right.

I didn’t care.

I had never needed anything more. This was oxygen. And I breathed her in deeply, again and again.

Until suddenly, Ava tore away. Her chest rose and fell with ragged breaths as she whispered, “I know the answer now.”

Like she couldn’t deny herself, Ava pulled me against her again. But this time, when she tried to kiss me, Cali’s name ticked in my head like a time bomb. *Cali. Cali. Cali…*

*She wasn’t Cali.*

I pushed her back gently, working myself back into my own body. Trying to sober my mind with images of Cali. Her beautiful face. The way she’d looked when I’d left her.

Ava was back on me like a magnet, her lips on my neck, the fire-hot kiss shooting through me like poison. I wasn’t strong enough to pull away as my skin flared hot beneath her lips.

“Come back with me to the Samaras,” she whispered in my ear. Even the heat of her breath was enough to do me in. “It’s where you belong. Where *we* belong. Together.”

“I can’t.” I barely felt the words leave me. They sounded so weak—so faint.

Ava’s hand slid up my stomach, under my shirt, setting my body on fire. “You’re the Alpha we need, Xavier,” she breathed against my ear. “You know that.”

It hit me again—a sudden splash of sobriety at her mention of the word “Alpha.” Alpha of the fucking Samara pack? Wait a second—what had just happened?

“I can’t go back with you,” I said, firmer this time. “I’m not a Samara wolf. I’m a Redwood.”

I took her by the shoulders and pried her off me, opening some space between us. Even with that foot of air creating an invisible barrier between the two of us, hunger was still gnawing at my chest.

I saw that same hunger in Ava’s eyes.

“You can’t deny what just happened,” she said, her words low, scraping. Her wolf must’ve been going as nuts as mine.

“I can,” I replied. “It was the blood loss. I’m still recovering. Don’t read anything into it.”

Ava gestured at her own chest, impassioned. “I know what I felt. It was real—it’s always been real between us.”

I staggered back a step, desperate to create a void between us. Desperate to get away—to breathe without the starved influence of my wolf.

“I can’t do this anymore,” I said, shaking my head. Then I turned and started jogging toward the woods, pulling my clothes off as I went. I shifted in midair, grabbing my clothes in my wolf’s mouth. I hit the ground on all fours, the rhythm of my own footsteps pelting through me like drums as I picked up speed.

My mind was made up. I didn’t belong with the Redwood pack. I didn’t belong with the Samara pack, either.

I was done with all of it.

From here on out, I was a Rogue.

**Episode 3743**

I was standing in the crowded living room beside Elle, the two of us lingering at the door. A few other pack members had gathered inside, but none of them seemed aware of Greyson’s sudden pack meeting.

“Did something happen?” Elle asked. “Are we in danger?”

I bit my lip. “Um, I mean… I think he did it to separate you from Lucian.”

Elle didn’t seem surprised. She just frowned and sighed deeply. “I think so too. But if he didn’t want me to be with Lucian, he could have just said so. He is my Alpha—of course I’d listen to him.”

“True,” I said with a shrug. “But that’s not how Lucian would’ve seen it.”

I was glad Elle wasn’t pushing this, considering the whole Lucian-and-Elle-might-be-mates thing. I couldn’t really get a read on how she was feeling with everything happening with Lucian, but at least she was seeing reason with the situation at hand.

She’d come a long way from when she’d joined the Redwood pack. And it seemed like her lessons with Jacqueline were paying off well. I definitely knew I wasn’t as quick a learner as Elle, and I envied her for it. It would’ve made college and school in general a hell of a lot easier…

Outside, the clap of a car door echoed, then the rumble of its motor ripped off into the distance. The energy pouring off Greyson as he stepped back inside was absolutely thunderous.

He stomped in and shut the door behind him, his face looking ready for war.

“Go wait in the living room,” I told Elle, shooing her along. She obeyed, slipping into the next room. With Elle out of hearing range, I approached Greyson. “Hey, what happened?”

Greyson’s voice was low—and I couldn’t tell if it was because he was pissed or because he only wanted me to hear. Maybe both. “Lucian’s still threatening to pull out of the alliance.”

*Seriously?*

Immediately, I felt my heartbeat shoot into my throat. Was Lucian being serious? He *couldn’t*. The alliance was too important to forfeit like that. “*What?* Because of Elle?”

Greyson gave a deep, frustrated sigh. “No, it’s not because of Elle… It’s because of me. Lucian’s convinced that I turned Elle. Which he is right about, but I’m not telling him that. But he’s convinced there’s some kind of bond between us. He says that’s why I interfered with his little attempt to turn her into his mate.”

Wait, Lucian sees Greyson as a threat to his mate bond with Elle? I let the words play through my mind, struggling to find any kind of fault in them. It made sense—especially the part about the bond. And with the way Greyson was acting toward Elle… Who knew? But it wasn’t like Lucian was the best source of information… The guy had thought a demon was a moon goddess.

Cautiously I asked, “What do you think? Is there any truth to what Lucian is saying?”

“No,” Greyson said quickly. I could tell my question had poked him in a tender place, and he was clearly trying to control his reaction, because when he repeated his denial, he was calmer. “No, of course not.”

But there was a note of doubt in his tone. What the hell did that mean? Did he feel something with Elle?

“I don’t know about the connections that might exist between werewolves and those they turn,” I said, “but if there *is* something between you and Elle, maybe you’d be better off confronting it rather than denying it.”

I hated that I was even considering the possibility of Greyson and Elle having a special, powerful bond. The whole thing was totally unsettling. *Stop it, Cali, don’t jump to any conclusions about this.*

“There’s no point,” Greyson replied. “Elle’s a member of my pack. I’d react the same way if Lucian were pursuing any other Redwood pack member.”

I had to wonder if what he was saying was true, or if he was really just trying to convince himself. The way he’d acted with Elle had just been… different. I couldn’t imagine him reacting that way if Lucian had set his sights on just any pack mate.

I gave him a nudge toward the living room. “Elle’s waiting to hear from you. You should know that she understands your call for a pack meeting was just an excuse to get her away from Lucian. Maybe because I told her.”

“That’s all right, love. There’s no reason it has to be a secret,” Greyson grumbled. “Plus, she would’ve figured it out. I forget how smart she is.”

Before he could make for the living room, I tugged him back toward me. “Well, what are you going to do about all of this? Elle, Lucian and the alliance?”

Greyson put his hands on my hips, pulling me toward him. He seemed a little defeated. His strong shoulders sank as he let out a deep sigh. “I guess the first thing I should do is be honest with Elle.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” I said, my hands on his shoulders.

He leaned forward and gave me a kiss. I cupped his face in both my hands, returning the kiss. He squeezed me into him, his hands strong on my hips. Then he broke the kiss and turned from me. He walked toward Elle, and I followed right behind him. If I could do nothing else for him now, I could at least be there for moral support. I could help him through this, like he’d been helping me with my Xavier issues.

It didn’t escape me that Elle beamed when she saw Greyson coming, her face totally lighting up in recognition of her Alpha.

“I hope talking to Lucian didn’t upset you,” Elle said quietly, much like a child who’d just broken a prized teapot. She was waiting for her lashing, but it wouldn’t come—not from Greyson. Because something in my gut told me that Lucian was right. That the bond between Elle and Greyson was real, and very strong.

“I’m sorry,” Greyson told her. “I know I didn’t handle that well. But I need to be honest with you.”

Elle’s eyes widened, and she nodded, like she was ready and eager to hear whatever he had to say.

“I don’t trust Lucian,” Greyson admitted.

Elle’s face changed into something perplexed, then concerned. “What does it mean for the alliance then? Why would we have it if you don’t trust him?”

“It’s hard to explain,” Greyson said with a sigh.

I felt it was an appropriate time to butt in.

“Sometimes, you have to make the best out of a bad situation,” I explained. “The Bitterfang pack has threatened all of us—it serves the interests of all our packs to face that threat together.”

Elle nodded solemnly. “That makes sense. But I heard Lucian say something about breaking the alliance. Why would he do that?”

I shot a look at Greyson, hoping he’d take the reins. This was his drama, anyway.

“Is it because of me?” Elle asked.

“He’s just using the alliance as a threat,” Greyson grumbled. “He wants to get closer to you, and he’s trying to use the alliance as a tool to achieve that. He thinks that if he puts it up as collateral, I’ll allow him to do whatever he wants with you. I don’t like that.”

Elle seemed a little disheartened. Maybe she liked Lucian a little more than Greyson had realized. Maybe I was right—the decision should’ve been left to her. But regardless, she lowered her gaze and said, “You are smart. I trust you. I won’t talk to Lucian in the back of his car anymore.”

“Good,” Greyson said, planting a firm hand on her shoulder. “Don’t worry about it, all right? I’ll handle Lucian and the alliance.”

“Okay,” said Elle. “I won’t. Can I go? I promised Sage I’d go on patrol with her.”

Greyson gave her permission to leave, and Elle waved goodbye as she slipped past us and vanished out the front door.

When she was gone, I approached Greyson. “Wow, she really listens to you.”

I wasn’t expecting the dagger-sharp response as Greyson swung around to look at me. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

I was taken aback by his outburst. “I…” I stammered. “Until you responded like *that*, I didn’t think it meant anything.”

Greyson gave another of his deep, aching sighs. “I’m sorry. I’m just trying to figure out a way to secure the alliance without handing Elle off to Lucian like she’s a used car he can buy with a bit of blackmail.”

I touched his shoulder, hoping it would calm him down a bit. “It’s okay, I understand what’s at stake.”

In all honesty, I was a little hurt. His reaction… It had been like I’d accused him of murder. Maybe this bond really was something I needed to worry about.

Then, suddenly, Greyson took my hand. “Why don’t we get out of here?”

**Episode 3744**

**Xavier**

I wasn’t looking back.

I felt the damp earth between my toes—moss and bark and decaying fallen branches, the scrape of stone against my pads. The run was grounding me, but I still had no idea where I was headed. All I knew was that I needed to get the fuck away from Ava. From the way her kiss had nearly torn me out of my own goddamn body.

The thought of it still stirred something in me, and I felt unsettled and twitchy.

I’d come back to myself in the brief time I’d spent dashing through the trees, my strength rapidly returning as my healing kicked in. But having a clear head was almost worse, because I knew that the feelings I’d experienced when Ava had kissed me were real. I couldn’t deny their existence anymore.

*Fuck.* Part of me wanted to go on a vampire-killing spree. I wouldn’t have minded ripping Hardison’s head right off and beating his accomplice to death with it. If anyone else would’ve wanted to come at me too, it would’ve been their last time doing something like that.

It was a wonderful fantasy—a dream, even. But killing vampires wouldn’t fix any of my problems. And as darkness began to fall over the forest, I realized I had no idea where I was. How ironic.

*I get the metaphor, life. You can fuck off now.*

I was lost in more ways than one. Lost in this fucking forest, lost on Cali, lost on Ava. I felt ashamed, running away from her like this, but what else could I have done? I couldn’t explain anything to her—couldn’t tell her about the goddamn war that was raging inside me.

I liked the idea of going Rogue, but I wasn’t sure what it would mean for me. How far could I go, when Adéluce had restricted my movements? How could I truly be Rogue under that kind of oppression? Rogues were meant to roam free—to go wherever they wanted to go, whenever they wanted. Being restricted to the immediate area popped a big hole in that idea.

Fucking Adéluce.

Every day, my life became more and more inconvenienced by her bullshit. I couldn’t go back to the pack house, and I wasn’t going to join the Samaras, no matter how much Ava pleaded—no matter how she tried to seduce me into the idea. Shit.

I couldn’t go Rogue, either.

I paused, the air escaping me in heavy pants. My tail whipped in displeasure as I took in my immediate surroundings. I was pretty far from my campsite.

Shit.

I should’ve taken Knox’s bike, along with all the supplies I’d strapped to it. I had no camping supplies, no shelter. Nothing to ensure my comfort, or even my survival—besides my claws and teeth, that was.

Then I recalled the cabin I’d spent the night at with Cali. It wasn’t ideal—being a rental and all—but it was far enough off the radar that no one would find me. Hopefully it wasn’t currently occupied. Who the hell would rent a cabin all the way out here in the middle of winter? If nothing else, it’d give me time to think. Time to regroup and get my shit together. Maybe some food, if there was any in the pantry, and a warm shower.

I took off in the direction of the cabin, eager to put more distance between Ava and me. Eager to return to that place in time when I’d been at the cabin with Cali. When Ava hadn’t even been a passing thought. Now she was a stain on my mind, the sound of her voice echoing over and over again. *I’m tired of picking you up.* I scoffed as I thought back to what she’d said. That she was tired of being there for me.

Fuck, I hoped that was true. I didn’t want her help. I didn’t want her to come after me, to dash to my fucking rescue and mess everything up again.

Suddenly, I picked up the scents of a handful of Redwood wolves. Sage, Rishika, Ravi—each of them brought a stabbing sensation to my chest, along with feelings of remorse and anger. Of pain. Their scents were potent, but not enough to cover my own. I took to the nearby stream to hide my trail, the ice-cold water chilling me to the bone. Then I shot straight for the cabin.

I found it by scent alone—the familiar woods, the candles, the throw blankets, the smoky fireplace… It came upon me like a memory, and I found myself moving faster the moment I spotted the cabin on the horizon.

A few yards from the front door, I shifted back to human and put my clothes on—just in time to be hit by a wave of Cali’s scent. I froze. Was she here?

I stayed still, sniffing the breeze as it whistled through the gaps in the trees. I wished all that rustling would shut the hell up for just a second so I could listen more clearly. Hope climbed into my chest, and I smashed it back down with all my might.

Even if Cali were here, it wasn’t like I’d be able to go to her.

But the cabin was silent. I couldn’t hear a single footstep, breath, or cough. Surely there was no one inside. But her scent was so strong, it was making me dizzy. Maybe I was imagining it. Maybe the past was simply coming back to haunt me.

Fuck.

I was having a hard time separating reality from fantasy.

With my heart in my throat, I climbed the front steps and pushed open the door.

It was like time had stopped. Like I was still here with Cali—like we’d never left. I didn’t want to touch anything. Didn’t want to leave a single footprint behind. I didn’t want to do anything that could erase the memories.

Everything looked just as it had before. The fireplace where we’d snuggled up. The kitchen where we’d made breakfast. Cali’s smiling face. The warmth of her touch. I took in a deep, trembling breath, savoring the lingering scent of her.

It was like a dream. One I would soon wake up from and realize it was only that—a dream. None of it was real. Cali was a ghost. This whole place was a ghost.

All the romantic images went stale, turned ugly in my mind. Romantic cabin getaways with Cali, stolen kisses… Was it all in the past? Adéluce had taken away our entire future together. For now.

I found myself gripping my hair, pulling with all my might. Furious, I bent over and unleashed a scream of despair—of frustration. This was a fucking mistake. I shouldn’t have come here. The memories were way too painful to deal with.

Salt was being rubbed in every wound, and it seared like fire.

The only thing coming here had done was remind me of my lost future with Cali.

I couldn’t contain the rage building in my chest—it felt like I was going to pop like a fucking balloon. I let it out on my surroundings, shoving a lamp from the table and relishing the sound of it shattering. I broke the coat rack into pieces, shoved everything off the table beside me—carelessly smashing apart anything I could get my hands on. And when there was nothing left to break, I screamed into the wind.

“Rot in fucking hell, Adéluce! Fuck you for what you’ve done to me!” I tore a picture frame from the wall and hurled it at the fireplace. “Fuck!”

Then the door slammed open, smashing into the wall. I whipped around, startled by the sight of Adéluce, haloed by the moonlight. Of course she would come. She stepped into the cabin, a satisfied look on her face as she took in the sight of me. “Oh, you poor, poor boy.”

I let a snarl rip through my throat, my hands reaching for her before I could even register what was happening or wonder why she was here. Then Adéluce thrust out a hand, and a blast of energy sent me flying backward and slamming to the hardwood floor.

“Haven’t you learned your lesson?” she asked.

I felt pathetic, sprawled there on the floor. Gathering myself, I sat up.

“What the fuck do you want from me? Haven’t you done enough?” My voice split apart, weak with agony, but I didn’t care. “You’ve taken away everything that was important to me—my mate, my pack, *everything!* How much more can you take?”

Adéluce stepped closer, a glimmer of something terrifying in her eyes. “Giving up so soon? I don’t think so. You’re an Alpha. It’ll take a lot to break you, but I will. I promise you that.”

**Episode 3745**

**Greyson**

I made sure Cali was bundled up before we left the pack house, and I had a blanket draped over my shoulder like a folded towel. The sun was dipping low, and a bone-biting chill had taken to the air.

“Are we going on patrol?” she asked. “It would be a good chance to practice my magic.”

“I don’t think so,” I replied. “Not after Artemis almost blasted us with one of her magic arrows, earlier.”

I didn’t want to go on patrol, anyway. I just wanted a break—from everything but her.

I led Cali along the edge of the forest then up an incline, slippery with moss and damp leaves. I held her hand to keep her from slipping as she struggled up the hill behind me. It was a fight to get her up, but even once she’d made it, I didn’t want to let go of her hand. I never wanted to let go.

“I haven’t seen this part of Redwood territory before,” Cali admitted as we started toward the top of a knoll. The woods stretched out below us, a dark, gloomy canvas that rolled out for miles and miles. The moon was new but, young as it was, it still provided us with enough light to see the beauty of the trees.

The snowy treetops helped to illuminate the land, casting the world in a soft, blue glow. It was a remarkable night for a walk.

Cali gaped at the beauty of it all. I’d known she’d appreciate the view.

When a shooting star streaked across the sky, she tugged at my hand. “Oh my god! Look Greyson! You better make a wish!”

I laughed and gave her fingers a small tug. “It’s already come true. I’m with you, aren’t I?”

Cali gave me a small smile and looked up at the moon, large and blooming in the jet black night. “It’s beautiful.”

I had to take in a crisp breath of the night air. There was nothing like the taste of a chilly evening. “I haven’t been here in a while. I thought it would be a good place to share together.”

Cali snorted. “Do you say that to all the girls?” she teased.

I stopped, closing the distance between us with a single step. I wanted to kiss her. I *had* to kiss her. She was too beautiful, especially in this light. “You’re the only one,” I said as I leaned in. “There aren’t any other girls. There never will be.”

Cali suddenly pulled back, a slight frown on her face. “Don’t say that.”

I was stunned. Had I said something wrong? Wasn’t this exactly what she should’ve wanted to hear?

“But it’s true,” I protested.

A small line appeared between her furrowed brows. A line of worry—of fear and abandonment. “But I mean, Aysel came after you and all. You don’t know that.”

“You’re wrong. I *do* know that, love,” I assured her, pulling her back to me. “You’re my mate.”

“But what if somewhere were to happen to me?” she asked.

It was a silly question—mostly because I didn’t have enough fingers to count how many times something almost *had* happened to her. And each time, I’d refused to give up. I’d always kept the faith that we’d end up together. “Nothing’s going to happen to you, Cali. And if it does, I’ll be there to—”

“To what?” Cali asked with a frown. “To save me? What if you can’t? What if there comes a time where I just up and die? What happens when—”

“Stop.” I cradled her cheeks and forced her to look at me. “I don’t want to hear any more.”

Her face still full of worry, Cali looked up at me, that little frown still etched on her forehead. She captured my hands gently in her cold fingers. “I’m not trying to be morbid. It’s just… If something did happen to me, I wouldn’t want you to spend the rest of your life alone. And being a werewolf, you’ve got quitea life to live.”

“So what, you’d just want me to run off with some other girl?” I asked. “No grieving? No nothing?”

“Of course I’d want you to grieve,” Cali replied. “But not forever is all I’m saying. I’d want you to move on eventually. To fall in love. Maybe even find another mate.”

“I wouldn’t,” I told her. All this talk was twisting me up inside. I hated imagining something that bad happening to Cali—something I couldn’t control. Couldn’t stop. “I can’t fathom that. There will never be another you.”

Cali gave a small laugh at that. She pulled my hands gently from her face and held them in her own. Her hands were cold, and I couldn’t help but think she was just using mine to keep warm.

“Sure, there will never be another me,” she said. “But that doesn’t mean there wouldn’t be another love in your life.”

“Have you never read a fairy tale?” I asked. “Don’t you believe in the one true love thing?”

Something about the question seemed to bother her. Cali looked away, tension sweeping across her shoulders. She pulled her hands from mine and crossed her arms. Immediate guilt hit me like a punch.

“I didn’t mean it like that.” How could she believe in one true love when she was mated to two of us? I should’ve done a better job of watching my mouth. “I’m sorry,” I said, finding her hands again. “I brought you here so we could enjoy being together—not so I could make you think about shit like that.”

I took the blanket draped over my shoulder and laid it down on the icy ground. Cali joined me on top of it and I wrapped her in my arms, cradling her chilled body close. The world was so small below us. So quiet.

I felt so far away from everything.

Deep down, I knew this couldn’t last. The pack, Lucian, Elle, the Bitterfangs—it would all still be there when we went back. But for now, I wanted to cherish the distance we’d put between us and everyone else. Between us and our problems, our fears.

Right now, there was just me and Cali and the moon.

But I was still worried that something was bothering her. Something important, that we needed to get to the bottom of.

“Are you worried about what Lucian said?” I asked. “About the bond between Elle and me?”

Cali glanced back to me. The sadness in her eyes said everything. Xavier had left her, and now she was just counting down the moments until I destroyed her next.

I sighed, the breath leaving me with a difficult sting. “Listen. I do feel a connection with Elle, I won’t deny it. But it’s nothing like the connection I feel with you. Not even close.” I leaned in until our foreheads touched. Until I could feel her warm breath on my skin. “I love you like I’ve never loved anyone. Sometimes it’s so big and powerful, it scares me. But I have never doubted it.”

“Really?” Cali whispered. “Love isn’t what you feel for Elle?”

“No,” I whispered. “Don’t go thinking it’s the same thing. What I feel for Elle is… It’s a responsibility. It’s the love of family. Of pack. It isn’t like you—it’s not like this.”

This time, Cali let me kiss her. I lingered on her lips, soft and warm against mine. On the comfort and familiarity of her.

“I meant what I said,” I murmured against them, and felt her warm hand on my cheek. “You’re the only one.”

“I…” Cali paused. She was looking up at me, and I could see the wet shimmer of tears lining her eyes before they fluttered shut and she kissed me. It was more than a kiss. It was something that moved through every bone in my body. Something that woke me up inside, like turning on a light.

“I love you,” she whispered, her lips brushing mine.

I smiled and pulled back a few mere inches to look into her eyes. To stroke her cheek with my thumb. “You believe me?”

Cali nodded. “I feel silly for wondering about it.”

I hoped she wasn’t just saying that to comfort me. I hoped with everything I had that she really did believe me—that she trusted my love was for her and her alone.

She sighed and leaned against me, resting her head on my shoulder. “Now that we have that out of the way, what are we going to do about Lucian, Elle, and the alliance?”

“I’m hoping Lucian will calm down.” Hope was my only plan. “The alliance is beneficial for the Vanguards, and Lucian isn’t *that* stupid. Maybe he’ll remember how important the alliance is before he does anything idiotic.”

“But what if he doesn’t?” Cali pressed. “Maybe I should talk to him. He owes me, and sometimes he listens to what I have to say.”

“Absolutely not,” I grumbled. “After what I just witnessed with Elle, I don’t want you anywhere near him.”

Cali gave a deep sigh—a frustrated one, but one that relinquished the idea. “Okay,” she said. “But *someone* needs to talk to him, or the alliance is going to fall apart. So, who’s it going to be?”

**Episode 3746**

**Ava**

I was driving back to the Samara campsite, trying to ignore the tears of disappointment that were running down my cheeks. How many times was I going to let Xavier show me just how little he cared for me? How many times was I going to let him reject me? Once again, he’d denied that there was anything between us, claimed that what I was yearning for, what I could sense *he* was yearning for, was all in my mind—or worst yet, just a product of his blood loss.

*I don’t care what he says, I know that it’s all just an excuse to avoid the truth—that the mate bond between us is as strong as it ever was. Why can’t he admit it? Why does he choose to ignore the passion between us?*

How else was I meant to explain this game we kept playing? The constant push and pull, the way we kept testing the physical limits of our relationship? I thought back to what had happened on the bike, how we’d had our hands all over each other, how Xavier had brought me pleasure like he had so many times before. I’d seen the look in his eyes, seen him struggling not to take things ever further. His eyes never lied…

Or maybe I was just seeing what I wanted to see.

I knew exactly why I kept showing up for him—because I loved him. Xavier couldn’t—*wouldn’t*—let himself see that. Our bond was real, and it was strong, no matter how much he was trying to reject it. I could’ve left him to die at the hands of the vampires, but what had prompted me to track him down? What had seemed to guide me along the way, drawing me right to him? It had to have been our mate bond. There was no other explanation.

*And if I feel it, then he does, too. He just refuses to acknowledge it.* I sighed. *Maybe I set my expectations too high. I shouldn’t have pressured him. He probably would’ve come around on his own if I’d just eased off a little. I know Xavier—he doesn’t like to feel like anyone is pushing him to do anything. I know better. I have to let him come to the realization on his own… But how? He won’t even be honest with himself.*

Now, all I had left of him was the taste of his lips. And now he’d run off. Again. Only this time, I wasn’t going to chase him down. I was through with that. It made me look pathetic, weak, obsessed. Even though he was the one who needed help, the one who’d been hanging on by a thread by the time I got to him, *I* was the one who’d ended up looking pathetic, practically throwing myself at him.

*He doesn’t want to admit that he left Cali for me? Fine. Whatever twisted game he’s playing, I want no part of it. I have bigger fish to fry—and an entire pack to look after. It’s not a responsibility I want, but it’s a responsibility I have to accept. At least for now, I have to focus on that and that alone. Xavier will have to wait.*

I arrived at the campsite and was surprised to find Lucian waiting for me outside the Airstream. He flashed his perma-smug smile at me as I approached.

*Shit. Is he here to try to recruit us again? He needs to just shove it and take a hint. If people actually want to join his pack (and I hope they won’t, but that’s another story), then they’ll do it. I just wish he’d back off and stop campaigning or whatever it is he’s trying to do right now.*

I wasn’t in the mood for his bullshit, not after what I’d just gone through with Xavier. I just wanted to be alone, not have a verbal sparring match with “His Royal Highness.”

I sighed as I cut the engine. “Isn’t it past your bedtime, Lucian? I thought princes like you valued their beauty sleep.”

Lucian laughed. “The ride must have dulled your vision. Can’t you see how perfectly beautiful I already am?”

I rolled my eyes. “What do you want?”

Lucian’s smile faltered only a little, but he recovered quickly. “I like that you cut right to the chase.”

“Then it’s funny that you never practice what you preach,” I said.

Lucian cleared his throat. “I’ve come to the Samaras—”

“I already told you, we’re not joining up with the Vanguard pack. Nothing’s changed on that front, so don’t waste your time.” I walked past him toward the Airstream, looking forward to a big shot of whiskey and a hot shower.

“You’re wrong,” he said. “Everything has changed. The Vanguards are considering withdrawing from the alliance.”

I stopped short and turned to face him. “What? Are you kidding?”

“I do have a reputation for being a trickster, but I assure you, I’m deadly serious.”

My mind was racing. *Without the Vanguards, that means that it’s just the Redwoods, the Blue Bloods, and my Alpha-less pack against the Bitterfangs. I don’t like those odds.*

“With that said, I did promise to help protect the Samara pack, and as a man of my word, I still intend to do so. On one condition.”

I didn’t have to think too hard to know what that condition would be.

I shook my head. “I’m not turning the pack over to you. Forget it.”

His constant pushing on the subject was really starting to get under my skin, and it definitely confirmed my drive to stay separate from the Vanguards.

“Ava, I understand—and admire—your resistance. You’re proud to be a Samara wolf, but the writing is on the wall. Surely you see that.” He took a slow look around the camp, all but turning his nose up at the smattering of tents and trailers. “The Samaras are running around like headless chickens—no offense—and you know as well as I do that that never ends well for the chicken.”

I clenched my teeth and balled up my fists, doing everything in my power to keep from knocking him out cold. “I suggest you leave.”

Lucian just kept talking. “You might want to talk to some of your pack mates first. Not everyone shares your disdain for the Vanguards.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, my anger somehow reaching new levels. “Have you been talking to my pack?”

Lucian shrugged his shoulders and cocked his head. “I may have shared a few ideas with a few willing individuals…”

Marissa climbed out of her tent and came walking toward me. “Ava, hey. Can we talk?”

“What have you done?” I snarled at Lucian, taking a step toward him.

Lucian held his ground, looking absolutely unfazed. “Why don’t I give you two some time to talk things over? Perhaps I can drop by again in the morning.”

“Leave. Now. And don’t bother coming back here. You’re not welcome.” I was so mad that I could barely see straight. I couldn’t believe that Lucian had come here and sewn seeds of dissent within my pack. It was complete bullshit, but all I could think was that if we had an Alpha—if *I* were the Alpha—Lucian never would’ve had the balls.

Lucian flashed a winning smile at Marissa, turned on his heel, and left.

As soon as he was out of earshot, I rounded on Marissa, my anger finding a new place to land. “So, what, are you ready to hand the pack over to Lucian? That’s not your call.”

“I’m not, but Lucian did talk to some of the pack, and what he said made a lot of sense. I still believe in the Samara pack, I really do, but as we are, I don’t think that we can take on the Bitterfangs or any other future threats. Perhaps being absorbed by the Vanguard pack would be better than being destroyed.”

“That won’t happen.”

“You can’t make that promise, Ava,” Marissa said firmly. “I know you mean well, and I know you want to believe that we can get through this in our current state, but that’s just not realistic. Our last hope was getting Xavier to step in as our Alpha, but you let that slip away, and now where does that leave us?”

I was officially seeing red and wanted nothing more than to lash out at her and tell her how wrong she was, but part of me knew that there was some truth to what she was saying.

“Without an Alpha,” Marissa continued, “the Samaras are on the extinction list. That’s just the truth of it, no matter how much we want to bury our heads in the sand and pretend that things aren’t as bad as they are.”

“Marissa, please, just give me a little more time. I’m telling you, joining the Vanguards isn’t the right move. You think the Vanguard pack will be better, but you really don’t want to be indebted to a guy like Lucian. We can stand on our own feet—we’ve done it before, and we can do it again now. Please, convince the others not to abandon ship. Not yet.”

Marissa sighed and looked off into the distance. “I can try, but what’s the point?”

I thought about Xavier, then—about our kiss, and about the possibility that I knew existed. The possibility of a new future; one that maybe Xavier couldn’t quite see, but that I definitely could.

“Mark my words, Marissa,” I said. “Before Lucian comes back, I will get us an Alpha.”

**Episode 3747**

“As far as I’m concerned, Lucian can go fuck himself,” Greyson said. “We aren’t sending anyone to talk to him.”

“But that’s just the attitude Lucian expects of us, isn’t it?” I said. “He threatens us and then we respond in kind with anger and hostility. Maybe we can take a different approach this time? We could surprise him and try to defuse the situation.”

I knew that I was asking a lot of my mate. Greyson and Lucian were like oil and water, and for good reason, but I had a feeling that if we fell into our old patterns with the Vanguards, we’d regret it.

Greyson looked off into the distance, and I wondered what he was thinking. I braced myself, guessing that he was probably about to—kindly—tell me to leave his dealings with the Vanguards to him. But then, to my surprise, he nodded. “When did you get so wise?”

I grinned. “I’ve always been wise.”

I’d never get used to the feelings that flooded through me whenever Greyson agreed with me on pack matters. It always made me feel so Luna-like.

Greyson sighed and smiled. “I’m willing to talk to Lucian—I wouldn’t want to put that on anyone else—but I doubt it will make a difference—”

“And that’s why I propose that *I* talk to him,” I countered. “It’ll offer a different perspective—and he might be more willing to compromise.”

I didn’t want to say that I had a way with Lucian—that would probably set Greyson off—but it was true enough. When Alphas spoke to one another, there was always this undercurrent of a power struggle. With me, that wouldn’t be the case… I hoped.

“You’re right, but I still don’t like it,” Greyson said. “I also don’t want you going back to the palace or having anything at all to do with Lucian. The guy is the epitome of unpredictable, and I don’t want you to have to deal with him.”

“And I get that, which is why you’d be going with me,” I said. “I’d still be able to talk to Lucian one-on-one, but if anything went wrong, you’d be close enough to intervene—though I honestly doubt that Lucian would be stupid enough to threaten me. I think we’re past that.”

Once again, I was hoping that I wasn’t being completely naïve. Things weren’t perfect between Lucian and me, far from it, but I hoped that we’d at least gotten past the point where I had to fear for my safety when I was with him. We were in an alliance now, after all. At least for the time being.

There was a long silence before Greyson nodded. “Let’s do it. I trust you, and I’m willing to give your plan a try.”

“I don’t actually have a plan,” I admitted. “I was thinking the best thing I could do is listen to him. People like to feel heard—even self-important princes.”

“*Especially* self-important princes,” Greyson said. “Just promise me that you won’t get your hopes up. You know as well as I do that Lucian is a piece of work. But thank you for doing this, love.”

He pulled me close and kissed me deeply, nearly taking my breath away.

“What was that for?” I asked, gasping for air as we broke apart.

“I brought you here to escape everything,” he said. “Obviously that didn’t work, so I figured I might as well get in one good kiss before we leave.”

I was surprised. “Oh, are we going to Lucian’s right now?”

Greyson stood up and held out his hand. “Yeah, why not? It’s as good a time as any. Let’s see if you’re as wise as you seem.”

I laughed and took his hand, and he hauled me to my feet. I stood back as he took off his clothes, handed them to me to put in my bag, and shifted. Feeling hopeful, I climbed onto his back, wrapping my arms around his neck as he raced through the woods toward the Vanguard palace.

I was quiet on the way over, scrambling to think of what I was going to say to Lucian when I saw him. I hadn’t actually expected Greyson to give in to my suggestion so quickly, and I was even more surprised that we were already heading to the palace.

As if sensing my uncertainty, Greyson reached out to me via mind link. *You’ve got this, love.*

I smiled, feeling comforted by the fact that he knew me so well that he could practically read my thoughts.

*One of our strengths is your honesty, Cali*,Greyson added*. Wield it like a weapon, and you’ll be fine.*

I thought about that. The truth was, nobody wanted Lucian to be with Elle *but* Lucian. Based on my conversations with Elle on the subject, she didn’t seem to want to be with him, either. That was going to be a hard pill to swallow, especially for someone as conceited as His Royal Highness. How was I going to relay Elle’s opinions to him without causing any more damage? Was there any way to cushion the blow?

Greyson slowed as we approached the palace. He stopped at the entrance, and I climbed down, still searching for the perfect approach.

“Here goes nothing,” I said under my breath.

Greyson shifted back to human, I handed him his clothes, and he quickly got dressed. “Remember, Cali—if there’s any sign of trouble, if he threatens to keep you here, if he starts flirting, if you feel even a little uncomfortable, whatever—”

I stopped him with a kiss, trying to duplicate the passion and fire he’d put into the kiss we’d shared only a little while ago. I pulled away and looked him in the eye, noticing the satisfied smile playing across his lips. “I know. Don’t worry. We’re just going to talk.”

“That’s your plan,” he said, “but Lucian rarely follows any plans but his own.”

“I know, and I promise to be careful.”

We banged the knocker, and an attendant answered almost immediately, bowing sharply at the waist. He led us into the foyer. “Wait here while I let His Highness know that you’re here.”

Greyson rolled his eyes, then quickly covered the gesture with a polite smile. “Sure thing,” he said to the attendant. As soon as the man was gone, he turned to me. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to him being referred to as ‘His Highness.’ It’s such a joke.”

I wasn’t too miffed by that, since it was par for the course when it came to Lucian. I was more preoccupied by seeing the inside of the palace again. I felt a little shred of doubt creeping up inside me, despite my best efforts to stay positive. I couldn’t help but relive the horrors Lucian had put me through within these walls… But I quickly pushed those thoughts away.

*I can’t think about all that right now. I’m here on a mission, and I’ll come away victorious. There’s no other option.*

Lucian came breezing in, a big smile on his face as always. “Oh, Caliana, Greyson—so wonderful to see you! I’m just back from visiting the Samaras. I had a lovely little chat with Ava about her Alpha-less pack.”

Greyson glared at Lucian, and I knew we were both thinking the same thing: that the princeling was trying to do exactly what everyone feared—he was trying to take over the Samara pack. Again.

*If I do what I came here to do, I’ll be able to stop that from happening.*

“Lucian, good to see you, too,” I said quickly, trying to start off on the right foot. “I was hoping that I could speak with you. Alone.”

Lucian’s gaze flicked to Greyson and then back to me, a pleased look on his face. “That’s a pleasant surprise… I’m pleased that you now trust me enough to leave me alone with your beloved Caliana,” Lucian said to Greyson. “I would be delighted to speak with you, Caliana. It’s always a pleasure.”

I could feel Greyson’s eyes on us as I followed Lucian into an adjacent chamber—yet another room with high ceilings, expensive looking furniture, and a few too many paintings hanging on the walls.

“Please sit, make yourself comfortable, Caliana. Can I get you anything? A cocktail? Water? Wine?”

“No, I’m fine,” I said. I just wanted to get this over with and get back to Greyson—hopefully as the bearer of good news.

I sat down on a plush chaise longue. Lucian sat down, too, a little too close for my liking. I swallowed and took a deep breath.

“I think there was a slight misunderstanding, earlier,” I began.

“Oh? What about?”

“About your intentions with Elle,” I said.

“Yes…” he said thoughtfully. “I’ll admit that things didn’t go quite as I’d planned. A pity, really.”

*So far, so good. Maybe this is actually going to work.*

“I get it,” I said. “I think the problem might lie in your expectations of the whole thing—you can’t just expect someone like Elle to suddenly agree to be with you.”

Lucian sighed and nodded. “I know. In some ways, I wish that Elle were more like you, Caliana.” He leaned closer, his gaze boring into mine.

“Uh…” Alarm bells started going off in my head. “Thanks, I guess?”

“I should’ve done this sooner.” Lucian slid off his seat and dropped to one knee, removing a large, jeweled ring from his pocket. “What do you think?”

**Episode 3748**

**Greyson**

I was pacing back and forth, checking the time on my phone over and over again. I just couldn’t shake the feeling that this was a terrible, terrible idea. Cali had seemed so sure, so positive, that this could work, and I’d wanted to believe that she could do the impossible and get the princeling to act like he possessed even a shred of decency or common sense. But the more time passed, the more I was starting to think that this was the biggest mistake ever. Nothing good had ever come from Lucian having access to Cali, so why would things be any different this time?

*What the hell was I thinking? Leaving Cali alone with the damn princeling? After everything he’s done to show that he can’t be trusted? Like, AT ALL? I must have been crazy to agree to this.*

“Fuck this.” I went for the door, not caring what Lucian was going to think. I wasn’t going to stand here twiddling my thumbs while the princeling used this opportunity to be weird with my mate. *Again*.

I threw open the door—and got the shock of my life when I saw Lucian down on one knee, about to place a ring on Cali’s finger. *WHAT THE FUCK?* Lucian didn’t have even a moment to react before I grabbed him by his expensive shirt and yanked him to his feet.

“What the hell are you doing?” I burst out. I had to keep myself from popping him one right in the mouth. With these antics, it was exactly what he deserved.

Lucian blinked, looking confused. “What does it look like?”

“It looks like you’re back to your old games! *Proposing to my mate?* Have you lost your mind?” I shoved Lucian hard, nearly sending him toppling over one of his gaudy chairs.

Cali jumped between us. “Greyson, stop! He’s not proposing to me! He wants to propose to Elle! He’s just showing me the ring!”

I was astonished. That was still only marginally less horrific.

*What is WRONG with this guy? Can’t he take a hint? He and Elle barely even know each other!*

“I was just practicing,” Lucian said as he smoothed his rumpled clothes. “I want to make sure I do it right. Elle deserves the best, the most magical of proposals, and that takes a little practice. I’m sure you understand… Or maybe you don’t.”

“The only thing I understand is how completely full of shit you are!” I couldn’t believe this. How, exactly, was *this* part of Cali’s plan? Helping the princeling propose to Elle? That was the exact opposite of the right outcome!

“Greyson, calm down. Lucian just thinks that if he and Elle were to be married, the alliance would only be stronger,” Cali said. Then she gave me a look that said she knew exactly how stupid that sounded.

“Yes,” Lucian said quickly. “Since Elle is a Redwood pack member and I am the Prince of the Vanguard, our union makes perfect sense. It would be a pairing forged in tradition, bonded by the unbreakable strength of marriage. It would be historic—the merging of two powerful packs! What could be better? What could be more beneficial for both of us? Access to the Vanguards’ resources for you, and love and companionship for me. It’s the only way forward—in my humble opinion.”

“I’ve heard enough of this bullshit!” I burst out. “Why on *earth* would you think that I’d approve of this any more than what you tried to do earlier?”

Sometimes I wondered if Lucian was even living on the same planet as the rest of us.

“So… I assume you’re opposed?” Lucian said.

“You will marry Elle over my dead body,” I growled. I took Cali’s hand and pulled her toward me. “We’re leaving. Now.”

“Suit yourself, Greyson, but don’t forget my threat—or the fact that this alliance will not survive without me, or without this.” Lucian made a sweeping gesture with his hands that somehow managed to indicate the entire palace. “My resources are unmatched—but you already know that.”

“Screw you and your pack,” I hissed, my anger bubbling up inside me. I pulled Cali out of the room, storming past the guards and out into the fresh air. I had to get out of there before I did something I’d regret—or that Cali would never forgive me for.

“Greyson, I had no idea that was what Lucian was planning,” Cali said. “I barely got a word in before he was down on one knee and dropping the proposal bomb on me. I was too stunned to say anything, and then you came storming in not even a minute later. Why didn’t you just give me a chance to deal with it?”

“I’m sorry, Cali. I should’ve, you’re right. Lucian just makes me lose my fucking mind with his ridiculous bullshit.” Nothing Lucian did ever made sense. The proposal was completely idiotic. And even if he had just wanted Cali’s opinion, why the hell had he felt the need to get down on one knee like he was proposing to her? It absolutely made no sense, and I was sick and tired of his shenanigans.

“‘Ridiculous’ is certainly one word to describe it,” Cali said. “This isn’t the Middle Ages. Getting married for political reasons? Please. I just don’t understand—how can Lucian not see how ridiculous and outdated that idea sounds? Elle deserves to be courted, to have a real, normal, relationship if she wants one—not whatever Lucian is trying to pull. It’s unbelievable how out of touch he is.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter now,” I said. “I’m not going to let the princeling anywhere near Elle. You have my word on that.”

“But what about the alliance?”

“If Lucian is determined to use Elle as some sort of bargaining chip, then fuck his alliance,” I said darkly. “I won’t allow it. The princeling obviously missed the memo, but a marriage has to be built on love. If it’s based on anything else, it’s just a house of cards.” I took off my clothes and handed them to Cali. “Let’s just get back to the pack house.”

I saw red the entire run back to Redwood territory. I kept trying to calm myself down, but it was no use. The image of Lucian down on one knee in front of Cali kept replaying over and over again in my head. What in the world had made him think *any* of that was okay?

Other than my brother’s recent fucked-up actions, everything had been on track. The alliance had been strong and united against the Bitterfangs, ready to demonstrate our solidarity at the summit. Up until the moment Lucian had thrown a monkey wrench into everything, I’d been worried that the biggest threat to the alliance was Mr. Wildcard himself—Xavier. How wrong I’d been. This whole time, it had been right under my nose. *Lucian*. The quintessential fly in the ointment.

*Why did I ever think that Lucian would make this easy? Why did I think that he would act logically for once and not push things too far? Why did I think that he wouldn’t do everything in his power to destabilize the alliance and make things weird?*

And, of course, Lucian had felt the need to mention his visit to the Samaras, just to pile on more pressure. He knew exactly what he was doing, and it was all classic Lucian behavior. I should’ve been more vigilant, and a hell of a lot less trusting.

We arrived at the pack house, and I shifted back to human, still reeling from that complete disaster of a meeting.

“What do you want to do?” Cali asked.

*I want to forget everything and spend the night in your arms, but I know I can’t.*

“I don’t know yet,” I said.

“I think Lucian is dead serious about breaking up the alliance if he doesn’t get his way,” Cali said, her brow knitting with worry.

“I know,” I said. “He seemed pretty serious to me.”

I hated to see her affected by Lucian’s antics, once again. It was just like Lucian to put the entire alliance on the line over what amounted to a crush, as far as I was concerned.

“But I’m not about to suggest that we hand Elle over,” Cali said stubbornly. “That would be insane.”

“No, that’s not an option,” I agreed. I was already taking mental inventory of our numbers with just the Samaras and the Blue Bloods, wondering if we’d be strong enough to take on the Bitterfangs without the Vanguards.

*We might just have a chance, though avoiding a pack war would be a hell of a lot easier with the Vanguards on board. Shit! Why did Lucian have to blow everything up?*

“You think we should tell Elle about what happened?” Cali asked, taking a furtive look at the house and around the yard, like she was worried that Elle might be nearby.

“I’m not so sure that’s a good idea,” I said.

“Why? I think that she deserves to know. This is all about her, after all.”

“Perhaps,” I acknowledged. “But I don’t know what would be worse—Elle turning down Lucian’s proposal and worsening things with the Vanguards, or her actually accepting it.”

**Episode 3749**

**Xavier**

My head was pounding so hard I could hear it. I rolled over onto my back and lay there for a few beats before finally managing to stagger to my feet. It took a lot of effort for me not to fall right back down again. I took in my surroundings and realized I was still in the cabin.

*What the hell happened? Did I drink myself into a massive hangover or something? Did I black out? That doesn’t seem right…*

Every inch of my body ached, from my muscles straight through to the bone. A hangover couldn’t cause this kind of pain—this was the vampire-witch’s doing. The fog in my brain slowly began to lift, and I finally remembered. I’d tried to attack Adéluce and thought I’d had her in my hands at last, but she’d of course gotten away. Fuck blipping.

*But she didn’t kill me—and that was her mistake.*

I couldn’t help but laugh at the ridiculousness of that thought. Every single time we’d encountered each other, she’d either outsmarted or overpowered me, but the first thing I always thought afterward was how I was going to kick her ass the next time I laid eyes on her.

*What the hell makes me think our pattern is ever going to change? She’s so damn powerful, and she always seems to be one step ahead of me. How am I supposed to compete with that?*

Even so, I still wasn’t ready to admit defeat. She’d said that she wanted to break me, and I was bruised, I was sore, but I wasn’t broken. Not yet. I had a lot of fight left in me—but unless something changed, I didn’t know how much longer I’d be able to keep up the fight. Everyone had their limit, even me, and it was sobering to realize that I’d never been so close to reaching mine. I had to stay positive and focus on holding on for as long as I could. Long enough to break Adéluce’s stupid curse and hold Cali in my arms again. Nothing else mattered.

*But how will I ever do that? I don’t even have control over my own words or my own actions anymore. Adéluce is holding all the cards, and I don’t have the slightest idea of how to get the upper hand again.*

I didn’t think I’d ever felt so hopeless. The thought that I’d already failed was beginning to weigh me down. It was true that I wasn’t broken quite yet, but I was definitely breaking.

I set about building a small fire in the fireplace and warmed my hands in front of it for a bit before I went searching for something to eat. I was digging around in vain when I heard a noise outside.

*Someone’s here.*

I crouched and waited. If Adéluce had come back for more, I was going to put everything I had into fighting her this time. If it was actually some hapless guest coming to check in or the cleaner arriving, they were certainly in for a shock.

*If it’s the latter, all I have to do is growl, scare the crap out of them, and rush past them. They’ll be way too frightened to think clearly. Please let it be a human.*

Despite my willingness to throw everything I had at Adéluce, realistically, I didn’t know if I was in any state to go up against her again right now.

A voice filtered in from outside. “Xavier? Xavier, are you here?”

Ava. My wolf wanted to howl at the sound of her voice. She’d come looking for me.

I pushed the front door open and stepped out onto the porch. Ava was standing at the end of the drive next to Knox’s bike, her breath visible in the cold air. She’d never looked more beautiful, or more dangerous. I thought back to our kiss earlier, and my entire body flooded with heat. My wolf was growing more restless, urging me to run to her so that we could do it all again.

*No. I can’t let that happen. Not now. Not when I’m so battered and beaten that I can barely think straight.*

I pushed my wolf’s longing cries down deep. “Why did you follow me?”

“Why did you make it so easy?” she countered. “It’s almost as if you wanted me to find you.”

I was about to deny it, but then I stopped to really think about it.

*Is that true? Am I so fucked up right now that I led her straight to me without even registering what I was doing? Did I* want *her to find me?*

Ava sighed. “Could we talk inside? It’s cold as shit out here.”

I stepped aside, and she walked past me and into the cabin, leaving a trail of her intoxicating scent in her wake. It was driving my wolf crazy, and it took everything I had to calm him down once again.

I followed Ava inside but lingered in the doorway. “You can’t stay here.”

Ava turned on me. “Neither can you. This isn’t your cabin. You could get in trouble.”

I shrugged. “Trouble seems to be my signature these days. Besides, if a human comes here, what can they do? I’ll just scare the shit out of them and leave,” I said with a satisfied smile. I might not have been strong enough to cut down Adéluce yet, but I was still a werewolf. At the thought of Adéluce, my mood darkened. I refocused on Ava. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

“I’m here because I want you to come back to the Samaras.”

“Ava, how many times do I have to tell you that I’m not going to? Stop wasting your time.”

“Xavier, hear me out. You took the reins of the pack once before, to get us through the Bitterfang fight—why did you agree then?”

“Because the Redwoods needed to keep the Samaras from being annihilated. It was a strategic move, pure and simple.” I knew that Ava wouldn’t argue with that, even though she’d probably want to.

“Well, whatever the reason, you enjoyed it,” she said. “You can deny that if you want to, but you’d be lying to yourself as much as to me. You were in your element, Xavier. You liked being Alpha, being in charge. It’s in your blood. Every moment you’re not leading and guiding a pack is a waste.”

“I don’t know how many times I have to say this before it gets through to you,” I said flatly. “*I’m not going to be the Samara Alpha*. It’s not what I want. I’m a Redwood, through and through.”

*At least I used to be. I don’t exactly know what I am now. I need to get Adéluce out of the way so I can get back to my real life. The Redwood is the only pack I ever want to lead. Ava’s constant campaign for me to lead the Samaras only makes that clearer.*

My attention caught on the sight of Ava standing by the fire, warming herself. I couldn’t keep my eyes from drifting down from her face. Even clothed, her curves were visible. I turned away, not interested in torturing myself. I was already in enough pain and anguish without having to deal with my longing for Ava. But even with my back to her, I could still feel her. The cabin was starting to feel hot and claustrophobic. *I never should have let her come inside.*

“I’m here because Lucian is planning to withdraw from the alliance,” Ava said steadily, her eyes still on the fire.

I snorted darkly. “Typical Lucian. I would’ve been more surprised if you’d told me he was staying in the alliance and *not* being a total tool.”

“Yes, but he’s also still threatening to take over my pack,” she said. “The pack you once helped protect—whatever your reasons were.”

I turned and looked out the window, wishing that I was anywhere but here. Preferably back in the warmth of the pack house, *my* pack house, with Cali by my side. “I have my own problems. Maybe yours will work themselves out. Either way, it’s not my place to get involved.”

“Look at me, Xavier.”

I contemplated running out of the cabin and getting as far away from the temptation of Ava as I could, but I didn’t. Instead, I steeled myself and turned to face her. Once again, my gaze began to drift, and my wolf launched back into a frenzy. With no small amount of difficulty, I calmed him and met Ava’s gaze head-on.

“I know that you’re going through something,” she said, “and whatever it is, I truly hope you get through it. But my pack needs you. I wish it didn’t, but it does. If things keep going the way they’re going, the pack could be absorbed into the Vanguard pack before the summit. So I’m asking you—please, will you come back and at least be our temporary Alpha? Just one more time.” Ava took a step toward me. “Get us through the Bitterfang threat, and I promise I won’t bother you again.”

We both stood there in thick silence for a long while, the crackling fire the only sound in the room. I finally let out a loud sigh and looked her directly in the eyes. “Tell me something, Ava. Is it the pack that needs me, or is it you?”

**Episode 3750**

I stood there for a moment, chewing my bottom lip as I weighed the options.

“Shoot, you’re right,” I finally said. “If Elle turns Lucian down, he might just be butthurt enough to withdraw from the alliance on the spot. He might even turn against us, or blame us for her decision.”

“Exactly. He’s looking for any excuse to leave us high and dry. On the other hand, if she accepts, then she’d be agreeing to marry him for all the wrong reasons. Not to mention she’d be marrying Lucian of all people, which is a huge fail in and of itself. I don’t think I’d ever forgive myself if she ended up married to the princeling. Elle is still learning about being a werewolf, and she isn’t used to dealing with humans—or human customs, for that matter. Someone like Lucian is too advanced for her, and the two of them barely know each other. Certainly not well enough to even think about taking this step—Lucian’s winning personality aside.”

I laughed. “You couldn’t be more right. It’s just like Lucian to complicate things at a time like this.”

“It’s what he lives for. I knew there would be trouble the moment he set his sights on Elle. She’s part of our pack, and that means we have to look out for her—I promised her father as much. Lucian already has a feeling that I turned her, and who knows what he’ll do with that information? Especially if this doesn’t turn out the way he wants it to.”

“Really? What could he possibly do?” I was first to admit that I wasn’t all that well-versed in werewolf politics—they were so complicated—so maybe there was some rule that said you weren’t meant to turn wolves into werewolves.

“Who knows? But if anyone can think of a way to use it against us, it’s Lucian,” Greyson said.

“Maybe,” I said. “But my immediate concern is Elle. As much as we want to protect her from Lucian, she deserves to know that someone wants to marry her. Wouldn’t it be worse if she were blindsided by Lucian, without even really knowing what a proposal means? Or if she learned that we both knew and didn’t tell her? You were just saying that honesty is one of my greatest strengths, so let’s be honest with her.”

I understood where Greyson was coming from, and there was a small part of me that wanted to keep this little nugget of information from Elle so that she wouldn’t even have to deal with it—and so that we wouldn’t have to, either—but that wasn’t going to work. This was too big a deal to keep from her.

Greyson sighed. “So we’re going to tell her?”

“Correction—*I’m* going to tell her.”

“Why?”

I hesitated, thinking about the possible connection between Greyson and Elle. The *bond.* He’d nearly lost it when he’d found her in the car with Lucian earlier, and I couldn’t get the memory of his extreme reaction out of my head. Greyson had assured me over and over that the connection wasn’t romantic, but I wasn’t convinced that Elle didn’t see it that way. When she’d first joined the pack, she’d made no secret of the fact that she was into Greyson, after all. What if she mistook his concern for her as something else?

“I don’t want you to take this the wrong way,” I started, “but I’m more of a neutral party. I’m not responsible for Elle in the same way you are, so the stakes are a little lower. Besides that, Elle and I are friends. It might be better if she heard this type of thing from me. Maybe I can spin it into a little girl talk moment, to lessen the seriousness of it.”

Greyson nodded slowly, taking this in. “Okay, you tell her.”

“One more thing…” I hesitated. “I’ll talk to Elle, but this time, don’t come barging in. Elle isn’t Lucian—she’s not going to threaten or hurt me. I can handle her, okay? Trust me.”

“Got it,” Greyson said, almost sheepishly. “I’ll butt out this time.”

“Good. Thank you,” I said, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek before heading into the pack house. I hoped that he really was going to be patient and give Elle and me the time we needed to sort this out.

I had a quick look for Elle downstairs before going upstairs and finding her alone in her room.

She looked up from a magazine—a tabloid entertainment one that she’d probably gotten from Lola—and gave me a lopsided smile. “Hello, Cali!”

“Hey,” I said, sitting on the bed beside her. I suddenly felt a little uncertain about how I was going to start this conversation. It wasn’t every day I had to tell someone that a royal Alpha wanted to marry them.

“So… Elle… I know you’ve been learning a lot about the human world and werewolves and relationships,” I started. “So, uh, in the human world, when two people fall in love, um, when they care about each other a lot, they show their commitment by getting married.”

Elle smiled. “Like Big Mac and Mrs. Smith?”

I nodded. “Exactly. Just like that.”

“Oh, are you going to marry Greyson and Xavier?”

At the mention of Xavier’s name, a knot formed in my stomach. “N-No, not—that’s different—”

I stopped myself. The thought of being married to either of my mates had always been a fantasy, but also something completely removed from my reality. I’d never been able to seriously consider it, since it would’ve meant making an impossible choice. And now that I’d opened Big Mac’s letter and learned that I could actually make that choice without killing anyone, Xavier had ripped the fantasy of marrying him right out of my grasp.

“Maybe someday,” I said weakly. “Elle, would you ever consider marrying Lucian?”

Elle looked puzzled. “Marry him? But I’m not in love with him. You just said that people get married when they’re in love, right?”

“Yes, Elle, but sometimes people get married for other reasons, too.”

Elle frowned. “What other reasons?”

“Um…” *This conversation is turning out to be even more challenging than I thought it would.* “Sometimes people get married to unite two families, or for business reasons, or—”

“For packs?” Elle interrupted.

“Yes, for packs.” I didn’t bother telling her that that was probably a pretty rare thing—the conversation was already getting more complicated by the second, and I didn’t want to muddy the waters any further.

“Oh. If you’re not getting married, why are you talking about this?” Elle asked.

I took a deep breath. “Because Lucian wants to ask you to marry him.”

Elle pondered this for a moment, then scowled. “But I don’t want to get married. I would have to leave the Redwood pack, and Greyson wouldn’t be my Alpha anymore. No. I won’t do it.” And with that she stood up, seemingly finished with the conversation. “I can’t get married, and I don’t even love him. I am only attracted to him. I only *love* the Redwood pack.”

“I understand, Elle. You definitely don’t have to get married at all,” I said, standing up and taking her by the shoulders. “Don’t worry, no one is going to force you to get married—”

She shrugged and pushed past me. “I have to go.”

I was stunned. “Go? Go where?”

“Out,” Elle said before bounding out of the room.

I ran after her, still reeling as I heard the sound of her feet stomping down the stairs, and then the front door slamming.

*Damn, she’s fast.*

I raced downstairs and out onto the porch, where Elle’s shredded clothes were lying in a heap. I caught the quickest glimpse of her wolf heading for the woods before she disappeared into the trees.

*Oh no! If I lose Elle or if she runs away, what will Lucian do? He’ll either think that we’re lying and hiding her, or he’ll blame us for scaring her away. Either way, this isn’t good.*

I hesitated on the porch for a second, wondering whether I should find Greyson and tell him what had happened. This was the second important conversation of the day that hadn’t gone as planned.

*No, I can’t tell him. Not yet. I said I’d handle this myself, and I will.*

I leapt off the porch and took off after Elle, stopping at the edge of the woods and peering through the trees, hoping to catch a glimpse of her.

“Elle! Elle! Come back!”

After a few uncertain moments, I heard heavy breathing, and Elle materialized from the woods, her wolf eyes fixed on me.

“Elle, please come back,” I said. “I didn’t mean to upset you. We were just having a discussion, okay? Think about it this way—you’re lucky that you only have to deal with one potential mate. But that still doesn’t mean you have to do anything you don’t want to do.”

Elle trotted closer, still breathing hard, her eyes still on mine.

“Whatever happens, Elle, you have to know that I’m here for you. I promise that I’ll help you, and that we’ll stick together.” Moving slowly so I didn’t spook her and send her running off again, I took a few steps toward her and gave her a small smile, hoping to show her that this wasn’t really a big deal… Even though it kind of was. “So what do you say, Elle? Will you come back to the house with me so we can talk?”

**Episode 3751**

**Ava**

I was quiet for a beat, unsure of how to answer him, or even if I should.

*How do I respond to a question like that? Do I tell him the truth? Am I ready to be that vulnerable with Xavier when he keeps hurting me over and over again? But maybe the question is easier to answer than I think. I really am doing this for the pack… But I know that’s not the whole story.*

Xavier moved away to sit on the couch, and I wondered if he was trying to put some distance between us on purpose. I didn’t want him to feel like he had to do that, but I didn’t know what I could say to help the situation.

*I just have to say what I have to say. What’s the worst-case scenario? He leaves? He yells and tells me that he doesn’t want to be anywhere near me? He’s done that a million times already.*

“Why does it have to be either or?” I finally said. “I need you, and the pack needs you. Both statements are true.”

I let out a rush of breath, feeling like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

Xavier looked away, and I sat beside him and grabbed his chin, turning his head back to face me. I was surprised to see that he didn’t look angry, like I’d expected. He actually looked like he might understand where I was coming from.

My heart stuttered for a beat. *Is this it? Have I finally broken through to him?*

“I never stopped caring about you, Xavier,” I said. “You know that. I never stopped looking out for you, either. More than that, I never stopped loving you. I am in love with you, Xavier.”

Xavier wrenched his head away, and I wondered if I’d made things worse by telling him that. But how could I make things worse by telling him what he already knew? The way I felt about him wasn’t exactly a secret, and we’d argued about it so many times before.

“Why are you being like this?” I asked, forcing myself to speak calmly. “This can’t be new information.”

“You shouldn’t feel that way,” Xavier said.

“What does that mean?” I demanded. “What makes you think that I can just… *not?* It’s not so easy to just turn off your feelings.”

“Well, maybe you need to try harder,” Xavier said. “Whatever this is, it isn’t good. And it’s not going to lead anywhere good, either.”

“What makes you the expert? Did you turn into a fortune-teller when I wasn’t looking? You don’t get to decide how I feel. If you don’t want this, if you don’t want me, then fine, but you don’t get to tell me to turn off the way I feel. You don’t have that right.”

“I don’t…” He didn’t finish his thought, just sighed and dropped his face into his hands.

“See?” I pressed. “Even now, you can’t even finish that sentence. You’ve never really been able to stay away from me. What does that say about you?”

Xavier lifted his head and looked at me, his eyes on fire. He was staring at me with a look I recognized, and before I knew it, our lips were pressed together and I was crawling onto his lap and straddling him, reassured by the hardness between his legs that this was what he wanted, too.

I was thrilled that this was happening—again—but I was anxious, too, since he’d burned me so many times before. But as his hands slid gently up and down my back, as he pressed me closer to him and tunneled his tongue deep inside my mouth, searching, devouring, I realized that it felt different this time. He actually felt as hungry as I did, and he didn’t seem to be holding back. He let me touch him all over, and he didn’t stop my hands when I popped open his fly.

I dropped to my knees and yanked his pants and underwear down his legs, letting out a satisfied breath when his cock sprang free. I took in a shaky breath, searching his eyes for confirmation that he wanted this the way I did.

*Well?* he said. *What are you waiting for?*

With that, I took him in my hand and began to stroke, looking him in the eyes. He reached out and ran his hands through my hair as I increased my speed. I bit my lip, holding back a moan. I wanted more of him. Needed to taste him.

Unable to hold back, I slid him into my mouth, taking him in as far as I could before sliding back up and twirling my tongue along the tip, my hand twisting around his shaft as I did. He groaned and lay back on the couch, his hands tangled in my hair. Before long, he was controlling my speed, pushing my head slowly down his length before gently tugging it up, his hips jerking in time with the plunge of my mouth and the swirl of my tongue.

Without warning, he slid himself out from between my lips and picked me up. He strode across the living room and slammed me against the wall, almost angrily, then turned my face up to meet his and plunged his tongue into my mouth. Then he broke away from our kiss and made quick work of tugging my clothes off. He dropped low, took a nipple into his mouth, and suckled, his eyes still on mine.

I threw my head back and enjoyed the sensation of his tongue sliding along my goose-pimpled flesh. As if they had a mind of their own, my hips bucked against him, his heavy erection pressing against my stomach as he straightened and pressed his lips against mine once more.

We tore at each other then, knocking pictures off the walls and plants to the floor as we seemed to pour our frustration into each other, our mouths and tongues dueling for dominance.

Xavier walked me back to the couch and guided me onto my knees. Then he dropped down and licked into my hot, fluttering warmth from behind.

“Oh my god, Xavier,” I breathed.

After that, my thoughts turned to mush as he stiffened his tongue and took long, languid licks down the length of my sex, pausing to flick his tongue against my clit before dipping two fingers inside me and curving them down so that he hit a spot that sent me collapsing to the couch.

“Oh, no you don’t,” he grunted, lifting me back to my knees and thrusting his tongue into me with a gentleness that almost sent me reeling over the edge.

The next few moments were a blur. I thrust my hand behind me, searching for his cock. When I found it, I pulled him to me and pressed him up against the throbbing wetness between my legs. I wanted nothing more than to slide him inside, but he pulled his hips away slightly, making it clear that he wasn’t ready for that yet.

He pulled away and planted his hands on my ass, feathering kisses across my lower back and my ass cheeks, then he laid his head down on the couch and said, “Sit on my face.”

Weak in the knees, I did, and he thrust his tongue inside me as I slid against the hard ridges and planes of his face. I spun around, braced my hands on the floor, and took him into my mouth once again. We both strained and slid against each other until he let out a moan and I felt him harden and release in my mouth, his hips lifting up from the floor as his orgasm wracked his body. Still, his lips never left me, and—as if he knew that I wasn’t far behind him—he slid his tongue up to my clit, pressed his lips against it, and sucked. I came then, my arms going weak. I slowly collapsed until my shoulders rested against the floor, my hips bucking slowly against his face as my own climax crashed through me.

When we were done, we crawled back onto the couch, both of us breathing hard. I half expected him to jump up, yank on his clothes and get the hell out of there, but he didn’t. He stayed put and laid his head in my lap. I reached out to run my hands through his hair but stopped just before I made contact, my hand hovering over his hair as I wondered how he might respond to my doubling down—so to speak—on our intimacy.

*This time feels different. I can touch his hair, can’t I? After that, why shouldn’t I?*

I went for it, gliding my hands along the warmth of his scalp. Again, Xavier didn’t move a muscle.

Fueled by his apparent acceptance of our connection, I decided to finally ask the question that I’d been thinking about for so long. “Xavier, will you be my—” I stopped myself, taking a deep breath “Will you be the Samara Alpha?”

**Episode 3752**

Elle just kept staring at me, her wolf eyes pinning me to the spot until I started to get a little apprehensive. I didn’t know how to read wolf faces that didn’t belong to my mates. What if she was so mad about Lucian that she decided to take it out on me? She had a lot more control over her impulses these days, but she was still a young werewolf, and very unpredictable. I wished that she would shift back and tell me what she was thinking, though I wasn’t exactly sure which way that was going to go.

“Elle, come on,” I said. “Let’s go back to the house and talk about this. What do you say?”

To my relief, Elle shifted back, finally releasing me from the pressure of her wolfish stare.

“Okay, Cali. I will go back to the pack house,” she said.

“Oh my god, thank you.” I was so relieved to hear it. I hadn’t been looking forward to telling Greyson that I’d lost Elle—especially not with the Lucian proposal hanging over our heads.

We fell into step as we made our way back to the house.

“Elle,” I said, “you’re a part of this pack. You’ll *always* be a part of this pack, no matter what happens. We’re here for you, okay? You can make any choice youwant. *Your* choice is all that matters in this, I was just making sure you had all the information. Okay?”

“Really?” Elle asked, her eyes wide.

“Really,” I said firmly. “If you don’t want Lucian, that’s fine. I was never going to tell you you had to.”

It made me a little sad to see how surprised Elle was—almost as if she hadn’t considered the fact that her choice was really all that mattered in this decision. She’d panicked at the thought that she was going to be taken from the home she’d made at the pack house and forced to live with Lucian. Really, it made perfect sense that she’d run off.

“I know, but the pack’s safety comes first,” Elle said somberly. “I just want to do what’s best for the pack. Even if it’s hard.”

“That’s true, but that’s still not a good enough reason to marry someone,” I said. “This isn’t the 1500s.”

Elle gave me a confused look. “I don’t know what that means.”

“Never mind.”

Greyson was waiting for us on the porch as we approached, and I could see the question in his eyes.

“I haven’t decided anything yet,” Elle told him quickly. “I’ll let you know if I do.” She looked at me, then back at Greyson. “But it’s my choice.”

Then, without waiting for either of us to answer, she went inside.

Greyson opened his arms, and I stepped into them and hugged him tight. After the stress of the past few minutes, I definitely needed the comfort. It was amazing how just the sight of him, not to mention being in his arms, could make everything okay. He rested his chin on my head, and I felt his voice vibrating through me as he spoke.

“Thanks for talking to Elle. Whatever you said to her clearly resonated.” There was a pause as he let out a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I realize now that I… I probably wasn’t the right person to handle this situation. You’re so much better at this kind of stuff than I am. I just get so angry whenever Lucian’s involved that I can’t think straight. He hurt you so badly, and he made so much trouble for the pack. I don’t trust him, and I certainly don’t trust him around any of our pack mates—you in particular.”

“You don’t have to apologize. I get it,” I said.

I thought back to how angry Greyson had been when he’d burst in and seen Lucian down on one knee. I couldn’t blame him for reacting that way. In the past, Lucian had made it his mission to try to steal me from my mates, so it made perfect sense that Greyson didn’t want to give the princeling the time of day, alliance or not.

“I do have to apologize, though,” he said stubbornly. “It’s just that Elle is such a new addition, and I hate the thought of her being tied to him that way—I hate the thought of *him*, full stop. He’s just so smug, so unrepentant after the mess he created for all of us. That’s why I don’t make the best decisions when it comes to him. There’s just too much history there for me to be able to really bury the hatchet.”

“Well, he *did* apologize,” I said lightly, pulling back so I could look Greyson in the eye. I was joking, of course. I knew that one apology—hell, maybe even a few—wouldn’t fix everything that Lucian had done.

Greyson laughed and bent down to kiss me. It was soft and romantic, and I was filled with warmth at the reminder of how much I loved him. He was always there, always ready to pick me up when I was down—and his fierce loyalty to Elle and the rest of the pack was so admirable.

“You make me so happy, love,” Greyson said, reaching out to stroke my cheek.

“Right back at you,” I said.

I took his hand, and he led me to the door. Just before we slipped into the house, I took one last look at the woods and tried my best to ignore the sharp pang in my chest. I missed Xavier. No matter what was going on, my mind always went back to him. I loved Greyson so much—and when I was with him, I could truly say I was *with* him, in mind, body, and spirit—but my longing for Xavier was always there, simmering under the surface.

*I just need one shot to talk to Xavier and get everything out on the table. One way or another, that would give me the clarity I need about where I stand and where he stands. I just have to find him first.*

I followed Greyson up to his room, knowing that I wanted—needed—the comfort of his arms tonight. I wished it could’ve been enough to dull the pain of missing Xavier, but as we climbed into bed together and snuggled into each other’s arms, I knew that the only thing capable of doing that was Xavier himself.

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The sun woke me the next morning, streaming through the blinds and bathing the room in a warm glow. I was nestled in a tangle of blankets, and Greyson’s arm was slung over my waist. I could feel the tickle of his breath against the back of my neck, and I smiled, content in the knowledge that my mate was right beside me.

Well, one of my mates.

*And just like that, I’m thinking of Xavier. Will I ever get over this? Do I even want to?*

I was still hurting, but I couldn’t help but wonder what it would be like, to be like this with Greyson every day. Waking up with him, being able to focus on him and only him. I loved Greyson so much, and he showed me every single day just how much he loved and cared for me. It wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world to spend the rest of my days with someone who looked at me the way Greyson did.

*Is this what I want? Do I want to be with Greyson and Greyson only?*

I thought about Elle and how I’d told her that it was *her* choice that mattered when it came to Lucian. And when I really thought about it, I couldn’t help but think that my choosing Greyson would be the result of a choice being taken away from me. As much as I loved how uncomplicated and *right* things felt with Greyson at the moment, I didn’t want this to be a process of elimination. I knew now that Xavier wouldn’t die—Big Mac’s letter had confirmed that much—but what if something still happened to him? Something I hadn’t anticipated? After all, Cassandra had never chosen between her mates…

“I can hear you thinking,” Greyson said, his voice partially muffled by his pillow.

I felt his lips on the back of my neck and leaned into his kiss before twisting around so I could kiss him on the mouth.

“Oh yeah? What was I thinking about?” I almost regretted asking that. I didn’t want him to know what was on my mind, and I certainly didn’t want to discuss my predicament with him right now. It would ruin the moment for sure.

“You were thinking, ‘Man, I wish Greyson would wake up and kiss me,’” Greyson said with a grin. “And you know how I like to do whatever you ask me to do.”

“Bingo.”

I twisted all the way around and pressed my body against his, happy to let all thoughts of Xavier, the choice I needed to make, and the future of our *due destini* drift out of my mind. Greyson’s tongue was warm and insistent in my mouth, and I groaned as he shifted his weight on top of me. I linked my legs around his waist and pulled him in tightly to my body, then ran my hands up and down his taut back, already opening myself to him in case he wanted more.

“Mm, this is literally the perfect way to wake up,” Greyson said.

“You can say that again.”

We both looked up at a hard knock on the door.

“Hey!” Artemis shouted. “Stop… doing whatever it is you’re doing in there! Cali, get your ass out here. It’s time to train!”

**Episode 3753**

**Xavier**

I woke up on the couch with a heavy weight on my chest. Ava was fast asleep on top of me, and my arms were wrapped around her waist like a vice. Her bare breasts were warm against my chest, and her thick fan of hair almost covered us both. My wolf was content for the time being. The jury was still out on the rest of me.

I thought back to the night before and how Ava and I had nearly gone *all* the way. And how I’d stopped it before we could, because it still felt like a line I shouldn’t cross. Though I didn’t know why I was still drawing all these arbitrary lines—at this point, things with Ava were clearly headed in that direction. I couldn’t pretend that I hadn’t acted. Not after last night. We’d gone further than we ever had since I’d gotten together with Cali, and if we kept moving in this direction, it was only a matter of time before we went all the way.

*I did this, and now I have to deal with the consequences. But how can I even think about things getting any worse when they’re already so fucked up?*

It wasn’t that last night had been a bad time—how could *that* have been a bad time?—but I hated that I’d succumbed to it and enjoyed it. Even now, my whole body flushed with heat as I remembered the taste of Ava on my tongue. I wondered what it all meant for Adéluce. I’d enjoyed what Ava and I had done last night, but it was tearing me up inside that I’d enjoyed it so *much*. The feeling that I’d betrayed Cali was overwhelming—but clearly that hadn’t been enough to stop me from taking things as far as they’d gone.

*I had fun last night—I can’t ignore that—but I’m not happy. Not in the least. That’s what Adéluce wants, right? For me to be miserable? Or does this not qualify? Is she happy that I’m going down a path that’s pushing me further away from Cali? Or is this another bond that she’ll do everything in her power to ruin?*

I’d never know what was really going on in the vampire-witch’s head. Was Adéluce going to go after Cali now because I’d all but slept with Ava? Did Adéluce know how tortured I felt? Was I putting Ava in Adéluce’s crosshairs by involving her in my bullshit? Did I even care? No—I hated to admit it to myself, but I did care. How could I not? Adéluce was awful, and I wouldn’t have wished her on my worst enemy. I certainly didn’t want her going after Cali *or* Ava because of me.

Ava stirred on top of me, and her eyes fluttered open. She smiled sleepily before immediately shifting to a more guarded expression. Then she moved to kiss me. It was lazy, comfortable, familiar. I fell into the action, kissing her back and, once again, hating how much I enjoyed it.

When I pulled away, there was no trace of the guarded expression Ava had been wearing only seconds ago. It was unnerving, how easy it was to fall back into our old habits. Last night had brought back so many memories, even as my insides had churned with unease about what I was doing. I knew Ava’s body so well, and she knew mine too, and we’d always known how to bring each other pleasure—but this wasn’t the past. This was the present, and things were different, and now I’d made it so that things were going to be harder on all of us.

“So… About last night,” Ava began.

“What about it?” I said matter-of-factly. “We hooked up.”

“I know, I was there,” Ava said bluntly. “I meant… about what I asked you. About my wanting you to be Samara Alpha. What do you think?”

I’d been so surprised when she’d just come out and said it last night. But since she was bringing it up again now, she must’ve really been serious. It wasn’t like it was the first time she’d asked, but for the first time, I really stopped to consider it. It was funny how much had changed in such a short time. A few months ago, I would’ve told her to fuck off, and we certainly wouldn’t have been waking up in each other’s arms.

*What would it really mean if I became Alpha of the Samara pack? I’d be the one running the show. I wouldn’t have to deal with my brother questioning me, and I’d get to make all the decisions for the pack. I have to admit, it’s tempting.*

It was what I’d always wanted. *Almost*. It just wasn’t the right pack. Not by a long shot. I was born to be a pack Alpha—Ava had always been right about that—but I was meant to be Alpha of the Redwood pack. I’d never imagined myself as belonging to any other pack but mine, and I’d certainly never imagined myself leading any other pack but the Redwood. Being Alpha of the Samara pack would mean watching Greyson be the uncontested Alpha of the Redwoods, and probably, eventually, watching Cali become his Luna. There was no way I wanted to see that happen. I didn’t know if I’d be able to take it.

“There has to be another candidate who’d make more sense,” I said. Even as I said it, I knew that wasn’t the case—Ava had struggled to find anyone who was even fit to consider—but it was the only thing I could think to say.

“Don’t rush your answer, Xavier,” she said, with surprising softness. “Just think about it. And no, no one makes more sense than you. You’re the best person to be our Alpha, and I want it to be you. I know that you’d make our pack strong and as powerful as we’re meant to be. With you leading the charge, we’d be as powerful as the Vanguards, the Blue Bloods, the Bitterfangs—all of them. I believe in you, Xavier.”

I let her words wash over me, taking her advice and not jumping to shut her down just yet.

“And where do you fit into all of this? Into your plan for me to be the Samara Alpha?” There was no way in hell I’d have her as my Luna. There was only one person in the world I would ever want by my side in that way.

Ava paused, like she was thinking it over. “I suppose my role would be whatever you felt comfortable with it being. If you were Alpha, that would all be up to you, right? Xavier, I really think you are what’s best for the pack, and I think I’ve been plenty clear about where I stand.” She kissed me again, but this wasn’t a lazy kiss. This kiss was full of intent. She pulled back. “I could always make it a little clearer, if you’re still not sure.”

I surprised myself by putting my hand on her cheek, and I was struck by how easy things *could* be. And that was the thought that shocked me into pulling away from her. There was no getting away from it—I wanted Cali. I couldn’t fall into some makeshift, pretend connection with someone else. That wasn’t who I was, and I would never be happy that way.

I gently pulled away from Ava and sat up, scrubbing briskly at my face. “I need to think about this.”

Ava got up and pulled a throw blanket over herself as she put a little more distance between us. I saw a hint of that guarded look creeping over her face.

Now that I wasn’t touching her, now that there was a little space between us, I could feel my head clearing. I needed to figure this out, and soon. And no matter what I did, I knew that Adéluce was going to have something to say. She’d completely taken over my life, and none of my choices were my own, anymore. Even the thought of that sent a spike of anger through me. My mind raced, trying to think of ways to get ahead of the vampire-witch, but as usual, I came up empty.

*There has to be a way to outmaneuver her. I can’t live like this, stuck in this purgatory of hers. I can’t even think straight half the time because I’m so concerned about her wrath falling on me or someone I love.*

“I get it, Xavier,” Ava said. “It’s totally understandable that you need some time to think about this. It’s a big decision, and… I know that things are complicated by your link to the Redwood pack. But the Samaras don’t have the luxury of time. Other packs can smell blood in the water—they’re sniffing around and making moves, trying to snatch my pack right out from under me.”

I almost wanted to tell her again that that wasn’t my problem, but after what she and I had shared last night, and with my mind all twisted up as I considered the possible outcomes and moves I could—or couldn’t—make, I couldn’t bring myself to say it.

“I don’t trust Lucian and the Vanguards—not even a little,” Ava continued. She leaned forward to look me right in the eye. “Xavier, I hate to do this, but I need to know whether or not you’ll be our Alpha—and I need to know by sundown.”

**Episode 3754**

Greyson raised his eyebrows at me. “Oh, so you were serious about training, huh?”

I sat up. “Yep. I’m going to become a beautiful Fae master warrior, and people will tremble at the mention of my name.”

Greyson laughed. “But wait, I thought that was already true.”

He reached up and started tickling me. I laughed and fell on top of him, begging him to stop.

Artemis knocked again. “I’m *waiting*! Come on, we don’t want to be late. I can hear you in there—the time for fun is over.”

“Coming!” I sang.

I untangled myself from Greyson, giving him one final kiss before I hopped out of bed to go get dressed. I threw on something comfortable, wondering if Adair’s training was going to be as physical as Artemis’s.

“Have fun training. I’ll see you later!” Greyson called out as I left the bedroom and stepped into the hallway, where Artemis was waiting.

She was tapping her foot impatiently and gave me a good-natured eye roll.

“*Finally*, good gods. Let’s do this!” she said. She grabbed my hand and yanked me toward the stairs. “I hate to pull you away from your mate, but duty calls, and I’m not going to get yelled at by Adair for being late. Again.”

“Okay, okay, but I need to eat something first,” I said. “I can’t train properly on an empty stomach, can I?”

Artemis picked up a muffin and a thermos from the living room table and shoved them at me. “Here. Breakfast. Now let’s go! I don’t know if you remember, but I have a magic bow now, and I want to learn how to use it!”

We found Adair waiting for us on the porch, his arms crossed. He was checking his watch as we came walking out.

“Finally,” he grumbled. “If you’re not early, you’re late. Have you two ladies ever heard that?”

I was about to answer, but Artemis gave me a look, and I decided against it. It must have been a rhetorical question.

“Hey, Adair,” I said cheerily, hoping that maybe my attitude would lift his a couple notches. I shivered and wrapped my arms around myself. “Ooh, it’s cold out here! Could we… maybe… train inside?”

I glanced back at the warmth of the house. Maybe one of the larger studies would work as a training ground.

Adair drew back like I’d just said the most offensive thing he’d ever heard. “Absolutely not. Do you think you’ll have the luxury of choosing the battlefield in a real combat situation? Do you think your enemy will only want to fight on warm, sunny days?”

“No, but—”

“Exactly. No, we train outdoors. Your environment is just as much of a factor as your adversary.” Adair turned on his heels and walked away, not bothering to look back to see if we were following as he walked all the way out to the middle of the lawn. He clapped his hands as we loped out to join him. “Let’s go, we have to make up for lost time!”

“What?” I burst out. “But—”

Artemis shook her head at me, silencing me once again. “Nope. It’s not worth it. Let’s just kick ass and show him how good we are. That’s the only thing that’ll work with someone like him.”

Adair motioned to a spot on the grass, and Artemis and I fell into place, almost shoulder to shoulder.

Adair was facing the woods, his back to us. “So, tell me what you know of how magic works.”

I glanced at Artemis, who shrugged.

“Um, what do you mean?” I asked. “Doesn’t it just… work? Like gravity?”

Adair whipped around to face us, his eyes narrowed almost to slits. “You really don’t know anything, do you?”

*Wow. This is getting off to a great start.*

“Well, *some* of us only found out we were magic, like, a minute ago and are trying to stumble our way through it,” I snapped.

Artemis snickered, and Adair shot her a glare that cut her laughter short.

“Be that as it may,” Adair said, “you need to treat magic like any other muscle that needs to be trained. It’s inside you, and it’s a new skill set for you to master. Both of you use Fae magic, which is elemental in nature. But based on what I’ve seen so far of your paltry and dangerous attempts, you use energy magic, specifically.”

“What do you mean by that?” Artemis asked.

Adair sucked his teeth. “Weren’t you *raised* in the Fae world? You should at least know more than the baby Fae, here.”

“I am not a baby,” I said, then immediately regretted it. Was I really going to argue with Adair?

“Well, some of us were kidnapped as babies and raised by no one and had to figure everything out for ourselves,” Artemis retorted. She raised a questioning eyebrow, clearly not dwelling on the sad part of that reality and simply calling Adair out.

I shook my head. *I wonder if Artemis would be mad if I ditched this and went to go get back in bed with Greyson…He’d looked so good when I left…*

Adair rolled his eyes. “Yes, yes, we get it, you’re both very tragic figures—but that does not give you license to act in ignorance.”

Artemis and I exchanged another look but kept our mouths shut.

“Now, let’s start with the basics.” Adair lifted a palm and furrowed his brow in concentration until a glowing orb materialized, floating about an inch above his hand. With a flick of his fingers, the orb transformed into his energy whip. I was grudgingly impressed by how easy he made it seem.

I lifted my hands and started to bring my shield up, but Adair held up a hand.

“Stop! You’re not ready for that yet. First, try to make the orb. Once you can do that without sweating, we’ll see about the shield.”

Artemis already had her palm up and was obviously concentrating, but instead of an orb, her bow kept appearing.

“You’re too eager, Artemis,” Adair said. “Pull back. Be thoughtful about how much magic you’re using. Grab hold of it and conserve.”

I could feel my own magic surging inside me, but nothing was happening. There wasn’t even a spark. I thought back to the training that my grandfather had given me when I was in limbo. His words echoed in my head.

*Focus on the energy in the air around you. Feel it surging. Think about bringing it together.*

I closed my eyes and tried to drown out Adair’s sharp words by focusing on my grandfather’s rules. I wanted the orb to exist outside of me, so I sharpened my concentration even more and pushed the energy out. I knew I’d be able to do what was necessary if I were attacked, but that was always reactive. It was quite another thing to just call my magic to use whenever and wherever, and to have complete and total control over it.

Beside me, Artemis had finally succeeded in creating a small, floating orb just above her palm. Adair looked on in approval, and I couldn’t help feeling a sharp pang of jealousy. Adair was being an ass, but I respected him and wouldn’t have minded getting one of his looks of approval for myself.

*Come on, Cali. You can do this. You* haveto *do this. Prove Adair wrong and make your grandfather proud.*

I bit my lip and tried again. There was the smallest spark in the center of my palm, and then, all of a sudden, there it was—a tiny orb barely the size of a marble, floating in front of me.

“Good,” Adair said briskly. “Now see if you can make it a little bigger. Look at Artemis’s—try to duplicate that!” His voice lifted.

“Okay,” I said.

I focused again and the orb began to grow—slowly, but it was growing.

“I’m doing it!” I burst out.

Artemis and I grinned at each other, but then I realized that my orb was still growing. It was getting way bigger than Artemis’s, now.

“Okay, you can stop now,” Adair said.

“I’m not sure I can!”

I backed away from them both as the orb kept growing. It was almost bigger than my head, now.

“Hey, everybody! Breakfast is ready! I hope everyone’s hungry for pancakes!” Torin’s voice rang out from behind me.

“Torin, get back!” Artemis shouted before turning her attention back to me, her eyes wide with panic. “Cali, come on, reel it in! I know you can do it.”

“I’m trying!”

The orb was now too big for me to keep holding it. I flung it away from me, but it ricocheted and flew right back at us, crackling with energy.

“Get down!” Adair shouted, and he, Artemis, and I all dropped to the ground and covered our heads with our hands as the orb whizzed overhead.

Someone cried out, and then there was silence.

**Episode 3755**

**Greyson**

I stood by my bedroom window, watching Cali and Artemis train. I smiled, happy to see that Cali was doing something that would hopefully keep her mind off my brother. I was so proud of her, too. She’d come such a long way with her magic, and I was grateful to Adair for helping to bring her skills to another level. Cali’s magic was a force to be reckoned with, and if she built her skills even further, she’d be unstoppable.

I caught sight of someone bounding off the porch and heading straight for the group, and it only took me a moment to realize it was Torin. I could just make out that he was saying something about breakfast.

*Classic Torin*, I thought. I knew I’d smelled something cooking. I was just about to turn and head downstairs so that I could be first in line when a bright flash lit up the yard. The entire Fae group went into a frenzy as a huge ball of light went flying—right at Torin.

Without a second thought, I raced out of my room, hurtled down the stairs, and burst out the door. Cali, Artemis, and Adair were running toward Torin, who was sprawled on the ground, facedown and unmoving. We all reached him at the same time, and I could tell that we were all afraid of what we might find when we turned him over.

Deciding to bite the bullet, I knelt down beside him and gently turned him over onto his back, bracing myself for the worst.

“Wow, that was so good, Cali!” Torin said, a big smile on his face.

There was a collective sigh of relief.

“Torin, oh my god, are you okay?” Cali demanded. “I’m so sorry! Are you hurt? Please tell me you’re not hurt!”

“No, no, I’m not hurt, I’m okay. It barely touched me.” Torin pushed himself up into a sitting position. “I’m fine.”

I saw that Torin’s right sweater sleeve was singed, but otherwise he looked okay. There was a tree near the pack house that had taken the brunt of the energy ball and hadn’t fared as well as Torin, but I’d take a hit to our landscaping any day over one of our pack being hurt.

Torin’s face quickly switched to panic. *Oh, shit…*

“What is it, Torin? Are you actually hurt?” I asked. “What’s—”

“No! Do you smell that? The other pancakes are burning!” Torin scrambled to his feet and ran inside without giving anyone a second glance.

Adair cleared his throat. “That was… a little too close for comfort. Maybe we should find somewhere safer to train. Things like that are bound to happen until you both grow from novices into capable Fae.”

Cali was quiet, and I took her hand and pulled her aside. “Hey, Cali, are you okay?”

Cali ducked her head and avoided looking me in the eye. She pulled her hand away and wrapped her arms around her middle. She had a faraway look in her eyes, and it occurred to me that she was probably reliving the last few moments and feeling worse by the second.

“Love, it’s all good,” I said. “Don’t let this rattle you. You didn’t hurt him. Torin is fine. He’s more worried about the pancakes than—”

“But, Greyson, I *could have* hurt him! What if he wasn’t okay? What if that stupid ball of energy had actually hit him? He would’ve been incinerated! What if I’d killed him? What then?”

Artemis and Adair looked at each other and then at Cali before quickly looking away, probably searching for the right thing to say and coming up empty.

I could see that Cali was working herself into a panic attack, and that was the last thing I wanted for her. I took her by the hand and led her a bit away from the others, then laid my hands on her shoulders and stooped a bit so I could look her right in the eye.

“Take a deep breath, okay?” I said calmly. “Just breathe. He’s okay. That’s all that matters. Don’t get yourself all worked up by worrying about what could have been. That’s not helpful to anyone.”

Cali gave a slight nod and slowly dropped her hands to her sides. I could see that she was starting to calm down. “I really need to train. Not only so that I can protect myself, but so that I don’t accidentally hurt anyone. Maybe we should train somewhere else altogether. After that, I don’t know if I trust myself.” She glanced at the pack house, her eyes sad.

“*I* trust you, Cali,” I said. “And besides, it’s best that we all stay close right now. We’ll just make sure that everyone knows you three are training outside so no one surprises you. The field will be off-limits during your sessions. How does that sound? That way everyone will stay clear, and you won’t have to worry about anything but concentrating on your magic.”

Cali sighed and nodded her agreement. She took my hand and squeezed, managing a weak smile. “Thank you for believing in me.”

“Always. Now, let’s get back to the others,” I said, leading the way.

“All good?” Adair asked as we approached. “Happens to the best of us.”

I could tell that Cali appreciated his attempt to comfort her, especially since I knew that Adair could be a little prickly.

“Yeah, all good,” I said. “Don’t worry about changing locations. I told Cali that I’d let everyone in the pack house know that you’re training out here, and that the yard will be off-limits until you’re done.”

Adair nodded. “Sounds good.”

“And I’ll assume the responsibility for making sure no one interrupts, so you three can concentrate on your training,” I said.

I gave Cali’s hand another squeeze, hoping that she really was feeling better. I knew that she wanted this, needed this. There was no doubt in my mind that she was going to become a great fighter, because she could do anything that she put her mind to. She was great already, without almost any training at all. She’d single-handedly taken down Seluna, saving my life along with everyone else’s.I wouldn’t have been standing here if it weren’t for her.

I turned Cali to face me and gave her shoulders a squeeze. “Now, you get back to it. If you need anything, I’m just inside, okay?”

“Okay,” Cali said quietly.

I gave her a quick kiss and then went back inside. I was heading to the kitchen to check on Torin again when I spotted Elle sitting in the living room. Cali had filled me in on the details of their conversation the night before, and I was grateful that she’d done the heavy lifting in telling Elle about Lucian’s proposal plans.

I sat down beside her, but she didn’t react.

*That’s fair after, given how I kind of flipped out on her yesterday. We have a bond, but she still doesn’t know me all that well. It must have been jarring for her to see me acting like that.*

“Hey, Elle, I just wanted to say that I’m sorry,” I said.

“For what?”

“For the way I acted yesterday. It must have seemed like I don’t trust you. But you have to know that isn’t true. I trust you completely. Lucian is the one I don’t trust.”

“Okay.”

“I just wanted you to have all the information you need in order to make a decision—whatever that decision might be. Lucian is obviously a manipulative jerk, and he’s trying to dangle the alliance over our heads to force you into a proposal. I mean, I watched the guy almost marry a demon, like, a month ago. He’s clearly someone who moves too fast, and I didn’t want you to get caught up in whatever he’s up to, now.”

Lucian was *not* the right person to introduce Elle to the world of romantic relationships—that, I knew for sure.

Elle just looked at me.

“Maybe you two *are* mates,” I continued, “and if that’s the case, then you’re going to feel a certain pull toward the guy. But if there’s any part of you that’s nervous about any part of him, even a small part, don’t ignore your gut, Elle. Werewolves are very intuitive—*you’re* very intuitive—so you should listen to yourself on this.”

“I’m part of the pack,” Elle said. “And the pack’s safety matters to me. The alliance is something that we need in order to be safe. I won’t let Lucian take it away from us.”

I was struck by how strong Elle’s words were. She’d come a long way from barely being able to form a sentence. I hadn’t been sure about what would come of Elle joining the Redwood pack, but now I was so proud of who she was becoming. Almost every time I spoke with her, I came away with a new appreciation for how much of an asset she was.

“Greyson, you say that you trust me,” Elle said slowly.

“I do.”

“Then let me talk to Lucian.”

**Episode 3756**

Adair rounded on me and Artemis, his expression unreadable. “Clearly, it’s a little too early for energy magic, so let’s shift gears and start with something external, first.”

He beckoned for us to follow him to the bonfire area.

“Sit,” he said. “We’re going to work on expressing our energy in a productive way.”

Artemis rolled her eyes. “Cali would have gotten it eventually. We don’t need to be treated like we don’t know anything at all.”

“Oh? Well, I think Torin’s charred sweater says different,” Adair said, glancing at Artemis. “What do you two think? Do you think experts go around nearly incinerating their friends and family?”

*Ouch. But he’s right, whether Artemis and I want to hear it or not. One inch to the right and Torin could’ve been seriously hurt.*

I forced myself not to dwell on it. Greyson was right too. Torin was okay, and he probably could’ve healed himself if I *had* hit him—though that still didn’t mean it was worth the risk.

Artemis gave me a sheepish look and shrugged. “Fair enough.”

“Anyway, showing is better than telling.” Adair gestured to the firepit and the few errant logs piled inside it. “Make a small fire. Show me how good you are. I want it controlled, and I don’t want to be turned to ash in the process. Think you can manage that?”

I stared into the firepit with no idea how to start. I’d never even thought about creating fire before, so I didn’t know how I was suddenly supposed to just do it. Next to me, Artemis was clearly trying to do something, judging by the strained look on her face.

“What are you doing?” I asked her.

“I’m trying to control how much power I’m letting out,” Artemis grunted, her face still screwed into a mask of concentration. “Trying to keep a steady hand, all that.”

“I can probably do that, too,” I said.

I started to focus on the logs, willing a tiny amount of energy to be pushed away from me and onto them. One of the logs began to smoke, and Adair nodded.

“Nice, nice. Looking good,” he said.

The log sparked and caught fire, and Artemis pumped her fist in the air. “Yeah! Woo! See? I knew it could do it! How’s that for showing?”

I stared at the other log, which hadn’t even begun to smoke yet. I frowned. “Why is this so hard for me? How come Artemis is able to do it so easily?”

“It wasn’t *easy*,” Artemis said. “Remember, I’ve got a longer history with this stuff. Don’t worry, Cali, you’ll get it. It just takes practice, like Adair said.”

“Easier said than done,” I grumbled.

I thought back to how I’d felt when Artemis had first created her bow and arrow—and by accident no less. She was way better than me, and no matter how much I tried not to, I couldn’t help but feel discouraged.

“Cali, Artemis is stronger than you. That’s why she’s able to do it and you can’t. Nothing more, nothing less,” Adair said patiently.

“Great. Then I guess I’ll just never be good enough,” I said.

I was really starting to get down on myself, and despite the positive spin that Greyson had put on things, almost blowing Torin up really hadn’t helped. I just wanted to crawl back into bed and wait for a do-over. Our first training session wasn’t exactly boding well for all the sessions to come. At this rate, Adair was probably going to give up on me and tell me I was a lost cause.

“What?” Adair said. “No, Cali, Artemis is stronger *right now*, because she’s trained more historically. I told you, your magic is like a muscle, and in this case, your muscle just needs to be strengthened.”

“I understand,” I said around a sigh. I didn’t want to be such a downer, but it was hard when I was trying my absolute best and nothing seemed to be going right. “I guess I’m just not sure how to do that. How to ‘strengthen the muscle.’ I don’t really understand what you mean when you tell me to start a small fire.”

There was a span of silence before Adair said, “Well, maybe we shouldn’t be training together. You’re too focused on your sister and comparing your skills. You don’t seem able to do what needs to be done.”

“I might be done for the day, anyway,” Artemis said. “I think I have something I can work on to help limit the amount of power I let out, but honestly, I can do that anywhere.”

She stood to leave.

“Please don’t accidentally burn the house down,” I said.

Artemis laughed and winked at me. “I’ll try not to.” She looked at Adair. “But no promises.”

Adair opened his mouth to say something, but Artemis quickly jumped in.

“I’m just kidding, Adair. I’ll be careful.”

When she was gone, Adair turned back to me, his perpetually serious face looking somehow even more serious. “Okay, now that Artemis is gone, maybe you’ll be able to focus. I want you to close your eyes.”

“My grandfather told me to focus on the energy in the air around me, feel it surging, then think about bringing it together,” I said. A part of me wanted Adair to know that this wasn’t my first go round. I’d done some training with Okorie, too, though not enough to really mention. However, I thought that having been trained by my grandfather—even if it had occurred in some weird limbo dreamworld—might mean something to Adair.

“Your grandfather was right,” Adair said. “But his instructions were maybe a little too vague. Let’s try to get more specific today. Now tell me, Cali—can you feel the energy in the air?”

I closed my eyes and concentrated, trying to tune into the air around me. After only a few seconds, I realized that I did notice a kind of buzzing feeling. “Yes, I can feel it.”

“Can you reach out and try to connect it with your mind? Think about it like you’re absorbing the electricity through your skin and guiding it up to your brain.”

With my eyes still closed, I reached out a hand.

“Ow!” I said when Adair smacked the hand down.

“I said with your mind, Cali, not with your hand.”

Wincing, I clasped my hands in my lap and mentally reached out. I suddenly heard a low hissing sound, and I opened my eyes to see the log smoking.

“Yay!” I’d finally done it, and it had only taken a hand slap.

“Good,” Adair said, nodding his head, seemingly impressed. “That was good.”

The smoke began to dissipate, and I focused on the log, trying to concentrate even harder. I tapped into the sensation of the crackling air around me once again, willing the log to catch fire. I pushed out at the electricity I could feel prickling against my skin, wondering how I’d never noticed it before. Adair and I both jumped back a bit as the log burst into flames, setting several others alight as well.

“Remember to *limit*,” Adair ordered. “You can’t just push as much magic as you want without stopping. You have to use the right amount of force for the situation. Don’t let your magic just have its way with you. That’s not control. You have to command dominance over your magic. Don’t let it do anything you don’t want it to do.”

“This is really hard,” I said. “How am I supposed to focus *and* channel the energy *and* think about where it’s going *and* do all this other stuff all at the same time?”

The fire was still raging, and even as I spoke, I was trying to put Adair’s tips into action to reel it back, but I was starting to get overwhelmed.

“The more you work on it, the more you practice, the more it’ll start to become like second nature,” he said. “Like breathing, like reading, hell, like riding a bike—you won’t have to think about it too hard at all. But right now, the muscle is weak, and you need to strengthen it.”

I nodded, feeling like I might be starting to understand his muscle analogy a little bit more.

Behind us, Lola’s voice rang out. “Oh, are we having a bonfire? Cool! Seems a bit early for one of those, since it’s not even dark out yet, but I can go get the stuff for s’mores if we are!”

Adair closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I thought your mate said that we wouldn’t be interrupted again.”

Lola, closer now, said, “I do what I want. So, are you doing magic training stuff all day, or do you have some time for other things?”

She gave me a meaningful look, but I had no idea what she was talking about.

Adair stood up. “That’s probably enough for today, anyway. You’re not quite ready to be using your magic for long stretches. We’ll work up to that.”

When he was gone, Lola plopped down beside me and leaned close. “I think I have an idea for how you can talk to Xavier.”

**Episode 3757**

**Xavier**

I had to decide whether I wanted to be Samara Alpha by sundown?

I regarded Ava, but she said nothing else. I simply nodded. “Okay, I can do that.”

That would be more than enough time for me to really think about things and decide whether I was ready—or not ready—to take the leap and become the Samara Alpha.

Ava let out a breath, like she was relieved that she’d gotten that off her chest. “I’ll leave you to it, then.”

She moved to get up, then hesitated. It almost looked like she was about to come back toward me. But then, apparently thinking better of it, she turned and left, closing the door softly behind her.

I leaned back on the couch and stared at the ceiling. *What the hell am I going to do?*

I really only had two options. On the one hand, I could go Rogue and get as far away from everyone as possible.

*And be stuck in this area because of Adéluce. Scratch that plan. Besides, I left that life behind for a reason.*

My other option was to become Alpha of the Samaras—a pack I didn’t want—with a mate who wasn’t Cali.

*But if I did that, I’d be stronger. I’d have a pack of my own that I could run on my own terms, without my brother butting in and sticking his nose where it isn’t wanted.*

I got up and pulled my clothes on, then busied myself with pacing back and forth as my mind reviewed every possible choice, over and over again. It wasn’t long before I was going in circles. No matter how I tried to twist things around in my head, everything led back to the same two options. I just couldn’t determine which was really the lesser of two evils. Both options were pretty shitty, truthfully.

I was imagining what it would be like to be Alpha of the wrong pack when I stubbed my toe on something.

“Shit,” I hissed, looking down to investigate.

It was an overturned ceramic planter. The plant itself was lying in a cloud of dirt a few feet away. Ava and I had made quite the mess the night before. There were things all over the floor, and if I were a different kind of person, I might’ve been embarrassed.

*But I’m not, so I’m not.*

I couldn’t stop a little smile from creasing my lips as I remembered just what had turned this place into such a mess—but just as quickly, my mood darkened. Everything was just… *wrong*, and it showed no signs of righting itself anytime soon.

*I’ll jump in the shower. Maybe that will clear my head.*

I’d just started for the stairs when I heard the creak of a doorknob twisting behind me.

*Shit. This time someone* is *coming in!*

I dashed for the back door, just as I heard the shout of someone seeing the mess we’d made of the living room—but there was no way I was sticking around to deal with that. I had enough going on without the possibility of the police being called, or worse.

When I stepped foot in the backyard, I almost shifted, but then I thought better of it. I headed for the bike instead. Ava had left it in the driveway, and I silently thanked her for not taking it when she left. It was looking pretty worse for wear, by this point.

I hopped on the bike, started it, and took off down the driveway in a spray of gravel. I headed toward town, deciding that I was going to get a drink. I drove in the direction of a spot I knew well and pulled into the parking lot. Before I could even step off my bike, the door opened and the same punks from the day before came walking out, laughing about something that probably wasn’t funny in the least. It took them a second, but when they finally noticed me, they both stared at me like they’d seen a ghost—which made sense, seeing as they’d left me for dead.

I shot them a cocky grin. This was exactly what I needed, to burn off some of my anxiety*.* There was no way I was going to let them get the better of me this time.

“Did you miss me?” I asked. “Not checking the body is a real rookie mistake. How embarrassing for you.”

They looked completely spooked, and it was making my day while simultaneously taking the sting out of having lost to them yesterday.

“No way, man,” one of them said. “You were dead! There’s no way.” He grabbed his friend’s arm and yanked him away. “Let’s get the hell out of here!”

They ran and hopped into a truck, their tires squealing as they took off.

“Hell yes!” I burst out as I revved my engine and pulled off after them.

I’d just made it onto the road and was leaning into the chase when my front tire popped, sending me flying over the handlebars. I hit the ground hard, right on my shoulder, and slid for a few feet before I tumbled to a stop. I bit back a shout of pain and lay there for a second, trying to assess the latest round of damage to my body.

A pointed boot stepped into my field of vision, and my stomach dropped. I looked up to see Adéluce staring down at me with a sickening smile on her face, her hands planted on her hips. “Hello, Xavier. Having some mechanical issues?”

I rolled over onto my back and groaned. “That was you? You fucking—”

“Gee, I just don’t know,” she mused. “A random horrible thing happens to you… Who could it be? Surely not the woman whose life’s purpose right now is to make you suffer. No, it couldn’t be!”

Slowly, and with no small amount of pain, I got to my feet and glared at her. “Why would you do that? What do you care if I go after a couple of assholes I want to fight? Don’t you have anything better to do?”

I rubbed at the torn sleeve of my shirt and stared after the fast-disappearing taillights of my prey. Adéluce was really, *really* starting to cramp my style.

“No, I don’t have anything better to do,” she said. “All I care about is making sure that you don’t get any satisfaction from anything, even beating on a couple of townies. You don’t deserve it.”

I looked at her, going nearly blind with hate. She wasn’t going to let me live. It was even more of a wonder now that she hadn’t somehow inserted herself into what had happened between Ava and me the night before.

*I can’t keep going like this for much longer. I have to figure out a way to get out from under her thumb. Is this what my life is going to be, now? This random vampire-witch lady stepping in to ruin my day whenever the fuck she feels like it? Even when she’s already ruined my life? Where will it stop? What* won’t *she do?*

I looked up at her, wishing she would just drop dead right in front of me. I couldn’t keep being a victim of her whims. I had to do something.

“I’m going to find a way out of this,” I said through clenched teeth. “I’m going to find a way to beat you. I’m going to do whatever I can, you just wait. And you won’t even see it coming.”

A slow, evil smile spread across her face. “I don’t really care. You can do—or rather, *try* to do—whatever you want, as long as it isn’t going home to your mate. I’ll find a way to make any choice you make go bad. And don’t forget, this isn’t just about you, Xavier. I control Caliana’s fate, too. If you want her to live a long, happy life, you’ll never, ever go back to her.”

I curled my hands into fists, knowing that I couldn’t hit her—or do much of anything at all. It was driving me crazy, but Cali mattered more than getting the satisfaction of taking a swing at Adéluce. I didn’t know what I would do if something I did sent the bitch after Cali. I was just going to have to stuff my anger down deep, once again. For now.

“Cat got your tongue, Xavier? I can tell you’re burning to say something.”

I nodded, too overcome by anger to trust myself to say even another word to her.

“Oh, no worries,” she said breezily. “We’ll have plenty of time for you to say whatever’s on your mind, Xavier. Plenty of time.”

I just stared at her, imagining all the ways I was going to make her suffer when I finally got the chance.

*I’m going to do whatever it takes to get strong enough to take her down. That’s the only thing that matters to me now.*

“Don’t forget what I said,” Adéluce said with a sneer before she disappeared into thin air.

I took a deep breath, forcing myself to calm down. What she said didn’t matter. I knew what had to happen next.

I’d started to walk toward the bike when my phone vibrated in my pocket. I took it out and looked at the screen. It was Jay.

**Episode 3758**

I held the phone pressed to my ear as it rang and rang and rang some more.

“It’s about to go to voicemail,” I said to Lola, my heart pounding.

I closed my eyes, willing Xavier to answer. It just felt like if I could get him to answer, if he heard my voice—if we could just talk—everything would get better. There was too much love between us for things to keep going on this way. All he had to do was pick up the phone. Maybe then, he’d realize how much he missed me and would decide to try to fix whatever it was that was going on between us.

“Really? He’s not answering? Is he seriously screening Jay’s calls, too?” Lola said, shaking her head in disbelief. “That’s so messed up; they’re supposed to be friends. Jay is going to be so pissed when I tell him. What the fuck is up with him?”

I was about to ask Lola if Jay knew that we had his phone when Xavier’s voice came through on the line.

“Hello? What’s up, man?” He sounded almost normal, and even that kind of got to me, since it was still more proof that he wasn’t as torn up over this as I was.

My voice caught in my throat as I scrambled for something to say. My heart was racing. I couldn’t believe I was actually hearing his voice.

*He just answered! What do I say?* I mouthed to Lola. Everything that I’d wanted to say to him whipped through my brain, but right now, none of those things seemed right—nor did I have enough command of my emotions to say them without breaking down.

Lola was gesturing at me wildly. “Say hello!” she hissed. “Or hey, or something like that! Yeah, hey’s good!”

“Hey,” I squeaked out. Then I waited, half expecting him to hang up and knowing that it would crush me if he did.

There was a sharp intake of breath on the other end.

“Xavier, don’t hang up. I only want to talk to you. I don’t understand why you won’t at least give me that.” I turned my back on Lola and stared off into the woods as I tried to form the right words. I was so afraid that he was just going to hang up on me. I didn’t want to say the wrong thing. “I’m just looking for answers.”

“What part of ‘my brother can have you and all of your problems’ don’t you understand? I don’t want to be with you anymore, Cali.” Xavier’s voice was ice-cold, and it cut me like a knife, straight through to the bone.

All the breath went out of me, and my heart felt like it was breaking into a million pieces all over again.

*How can he treat me like this? It’s like he’s a completely different person. Like there was never anything between us at all.*

“Xavier, I just want to understand!” I burst out. “I hate feeling like this—like I’m missing something. You have to tell me what’s going on! You owe me that much. Remember when we promised each other that there wouldn’t be any secrets between us? Just tell me whatever it is that’s causing this! Maybe if you help me understand, I’ll be able to leave you alone.”

I didn’t know if that was even possible, I just wanted to keep him talking.

Xavier sighed loudly. “Before you, Ava was my mate. She’s been around me longer, and she knows me so much better than you ever will. She’s strong. I don’t have to worry about her all the time. And it feels good, for once, not to have to worry about someone all the time.”

Tears were welling up in my eyes, and they started to flow down my cheeks in waves, blurring my vision. It was taking everything I had not to sob into the phone. I couldn’t believe that he would bring Ava up again. My knees were like jelly as I took a few shaky steps away from Lola.

“So that’s it?” I said, my voice shaking uncontrollably. “Just like that, you’re done?”

I was starting to feel light-headed. The shock of this was just too much.

“Yeah, I’m done,” Xavier said. “Don’t call me again. I’ll block every single Redwood if I have to.”

*That confirms it. He really did* *block me.* It was yet another blow, the last one and final one I could take. The phone dropped from my fingers and hit the ground.

Lola picked it up and held it to her mouth. “Get fucked!” she shouted before ending the call.

Then she gathered me into her arms as I dissolved into body-wracking sobs that literally took my breath away.

“It’s okay, Cali. Fuck him. Really, truly, fuck him.” She was rubbing and patting my back, rocking me back and forth. “We can try something different. We’ll get through to him, Cali, I promise. We’ll get to the bottom of this. You have my word.”

The hole in my heart felt bigger than ever, but I pulled away from Lola, angrily swiping the tears from my face. “No. I’m done. I don’t ever, ever want to feel like that again.”

Xavier’s sharp voice and sharper words were playing through my head on repeat, and I was reeling. My entire world was crumbling around me, and it tore me up inside that there was absolutely nothing I could do to fix things. I knew that, now. Two people had to be willing to work to repair a relationship, and Xavier had made it perfectly clear that he had no intention of doing that. He’d said such horrible things, and his voice had sounded so… *angry*, so disconnected. I’d heard him speak to other people like that, but I’d never dreamed that I’d be on the receiving end one day. I felt sick to my stomach.

“He’s with Ava now,” I choked out. “He confirmed it. Again. How do I talk to him when I know she’ll be there? For all I know, she was right beside him, laughing at me! This was always what she wanted, and now she’s got it. She’s got him!”

“Cali, what did he say?” Lola asked.

“He said that I’m weak and Ava’s strong. But that’s complete bullshit—*I’m* the one who saved him from Seluna. Nothing about this makes sense, but I’m done trying to get him to talk to me. He’s made his bed, and now he can lie in it. With *Ava*,” I spat.

Lola reared back in shock, shaking her head in confusion. “I just don’t get it. This is… He can’t even stand Ava. I—”

“I don’t care. It’s not my problem anymore. They deserve each other.”

Slowly but surely, my anger was beginning to fill the hole where Xavier used to be. This was the point of no return. It had to be, for my own sanity.

“Come on,” Lola said. She grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the house. “Let’s go inside and distract ourselves. We can hang out with the rest of the pack or do whatever you want to do, Cali. Anything to get your mind off that asshole.”

I stopped short. “You know what I want to do?”

My anger was still simmering inside me, almost eclipsing the overwhelming sadness that had plagued me since Xavier had left. *Almost*.

Lola turned to face me. “What?”

“I want to break something.”

A slow smile spread across Lola’s face. “We can definitely do that. Maybe we can break some of Xavier’s things?”

“No, I don’t want to see anything that reminds me of him. I just want to get all this anger out of my system.”

We went into the house, and Lola pulled me into the basement, shutting the door behind us. We went down the stairs, and I was grateful to see that it was empty.

Lola pointed to a punching bag hanging in the corner. “Why don’t you hit that while I go look for stuff for you to break?”

“Okay,” I said, eyeing the punching bag. I went to stand in front of it, and before I knew it, I’d let out a scream of frustration that echoed off the walls. I let out another one as I wound up my fist and slammed it into the bag. White hot pain immediately blossomed through my fingers. “Ow, ow, ouch!”

I cradled my hand against my chest as hot tears pooled in my eyes again. I wasn’t sure if they were because of the pain in my hand or my complete and utter heartbreak. Probably both. But at this point, I wasn’t even sure what hurt worse.I slowly uncurled my fingers and then opened and closed my fist a few times, checking to see if I’d broken anything.

I heard the door creak open behind me.

“Hey,” I called to Lola, not turning around. “What did you find? And just to let you know, this punching bag might not have been the right move.”

It wasn’t Lola who answered.

Greyson’s deep voice rumbled through the air. “Did you talk to my brother?”

**Episode 3759**

**Greyson**

Cali was standing next to the old punching bag, her shoulders heaving. She was crying, and she’d obviously hurt her hand and was holding it gingerly against her chest. I couldn’t be sure, of course, but I couldn’t help but think that only my brother could put her in a state like this. Xavier had been the source of quite a few issues lately, and just the thought of him bringing Cali to this point pissed me off.

At this point, my brother was on my shit list right alongside the princeling. They were both self-important, selfish wolves who were running around doing whatever they wanted without giving even a second thought to who they might be hurting, and I was tired of it. Especially since it was falling on me to pick up the pieces. I didn’t mind giving Cali the support she needed through this, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t pissed at Xavier for putting us both in this position. He wasn’t around to witness the way this was affecting Cali—but I was, and I would never forgive him for that.

*If Xavier did this, I’m going to kill him.*

“Cali, I’m just asking,” I said. “Did you talk to him? Is he the reason why you’re feeling this way?”

Cali gave me a short nod, confirming my suspicions.

I quickly closed the space between us and pulled her into my arms, taking care not to bump her hand. “I’m sorry.”

I gritted my teeth as I imagined punching Xavier in the nose and standing over him while he writhed in pain. He was acting like even more of a jackass than usual, and I didn’t get it. Xavier had never been the most agreeable guy, but at least when it came to Cali, he used to show that he had a heart somewhere in that steely body of his. Now, I wasn’t so sure.

“You’re not the one who should be sorry,” Cali said. “*I’m* sorry, for ever thinking I could actually get through to him. *He* should be sorry, for being such a… such a… *dick!*”

I was trying my hardest not to laugh, but I couldn’t believe that word had just come out of Cali’s mouth.

I wrapped my arms around her tighter as she buried her face in my chest. “It’s okay, love. I’m here.”

I stroked her hair, wishing that there was some way for me to just take her pain away—or better yet, make her forget that Xavier had ever existed.

“I just really hate this,” she sobbed. “It’s just so hard! I keep trying to get over it, but I can’t. And talking to him only made things worse.”

“Do you want to tell me what happened?”

Cali shook her head against my chest. “No. It’s not fair to you. Just hold me, okay? That’s all I want right now.”

I lifted her chin and pressed my lips softly against hers. “I know that your heart is in the right place about not confiding in me, Cali, but I need you to know that you can. That’s what I’m here for—for the good times and the bad. I believe in the two of us, and I know you do, too, and there’s nothing that my brother can do to get in the way of that. You know that, right?”

Cali nodded against my chest before finally pulling back and wiping her eyes.

I took her hurt hand in mine and looked it over. “By the looks of it, I don’t think you broke anything, but we’ll have to get you some gloves for next time. Maybe kick the bag first, too—soften it up a little before going in for the kill.”

Cali nodded, laughing a bit through her sniffles. “Noted. Now I know why the rest of you are such great fighters. You’re all down here socking bags of bricks for fun.”

“Exactly,” I said distractedly, trying to think of a way to take her mind off her pain. Then I realized that I needed to update her about Elle, anyway. That would certainly shift her focus a bit. “So… You in the mood for an Elle update?”

Cali nodded emphatically. “Yes, please. Anything to give me something else to think about.”

“I talked to her, and she wants to go speak to Lucian,” I said. “Which isn’t surprising. Elle definitely values her independence—I’m seeing that more and more from her.”

Cali was already shaking her head. “No, I don’t like that idea at all. She shouldn’t talk to him unless she really has to. Lucian is slippery. We know how to deal with him and put him in his place—as much as anyone can, when it comes to him—but Elle might not be equipped for that. She should steer clear.”

“You know I agree with you completely,” I said, “but I also told Elle that it’s her decision, and that I’ll back her up if it’s really what she wants to do.”

After how strongly I’d reacted when I’d found her in the car with Lucian, I’d wanted to be careful not to overstep, and to make sure she knew that I wasn’t trying to run her life or guide her decisions—that was all up to her.

“Obviously, but we don’t actually want her to talk to him, right?” Cali asked.

“No, we don’t want her to talk to him, and we *definitely* don’t want her to be his mate. Can you imagine being tied to the Vanguard pack like that forever? Lucian at pack gatherings, at dinners, at social events…” I shivered, imagining the absolute horror of it all. “And you know Aysel would be right there by his side, trying to throw herself at anything with a pulse.”

Cali gagged. “Ugh, no thanks. They are literally the worst.”

“So, it’s agreed,” I said. “We’re going to try to steer Elle in the direction of never being in the same room as Lucian—ever.”

Cali smiled, and I felt a little thrill of success that I’d been able to turn her mood around, even a little. *Eat that, Xavier.*

Cali let out a whoosh of breath as she disentangled herself from me. She looked up at me, her sniffles finally slowing, her tears starting to dry up. “Thank you for being with me.”

I shook my head. “Cali, come on, you don’t have to thank me. I’m in this for me, too,” I said, waggling my eyebrows at her.

Cali laughed again, and my heart leapt. “No, seriously, Greyson. I love you, and I’m glad that we have each other.” She rose up onto her tiptoes and kissed me on the lips. “I’m going to go find Lola before she rips the house apart looking for stuff for me to break.”

I gave her a confused look. “Yes, please stop her from breaking our house. We need it to live in.”

I followed Cali up the stairs, but we parted ways once at the top. I went into the kitchen and found Rishika leaning against the counter with a cup of coffee steaming in her hands.

Her eyes lit up when she saw me. “Oh good, you’re here. I need to talk to you.”

“Oh? What’s up?”

I hoped it wasn’t anything too serious—I was beyond tired of being hit with wave after wave of bad news. I needed something light to deal with, for once. If anyone brought any more problems my way, *I* was going to be the one breaking things.

“So… I know there’s *stuff* going on with Xavier right now, and with the summit right around the corner, I think we need to come up with a plan for how to handle things if he doesn’t end up coming along. The pack is starting to get a little antsy, and we should get ahead of that if we can.”

“Yeah, he’s not coming,” I said simply, not wanting to explain it in any detail yet. “Cali and I will need to talk about how to present it first.”

Rishika nodded slowly. “Okay… Then who’s going to take his place at the summit? We can’t sacrifice a spot. We need someone powerful to step in and take his place. We can’t afford to look weak at this summit, of all places. Not right now.”

Appreciating Rishika’s forethought, I said, “Do you have someone in mind?”

Rishika looked up at the ceiling, thinking. “I guess I’m of two minds about it. If we want to put another strong wolf in Xavier’s place, I think Ravi fits the bill. On the other hand, we could go with a witch and have Kira take Xavier’s spot. Seems unlikely Big Mac would change around her moonshine selling plans. We just need to decide which would have the better optics.”

I nodded, taking that in. “Those are both great suggestions, Rishika. Let’s discuss it some more and think about what the best option is. It might not hurt to chat with Kira and Ravi and the others to get their thoughts on things.”

“Agreed,” Rishika said.

Artemis came bounding into the kitchen. “Hey, do either of you have any clue where Elle is going?”

My hackles immediately went up. “What do you mean?”

Without waiting for Artemis to answer, I ran for the front porch—and got there just in time to see Elle shift and take off into the woods.

**Episode 3760**

**Ava**

I arrived back at the campsite to find most of the pack milling around, clearly feeling restless and lost.

*Join the club*, I thought as I made my way through the camp. People were whispering among themselves, stopping abruptly and averting their eyes as I walked past. There was a strange energy in the air, and I didn’t like it one bit.

Geraint spotted me almost immediately and made a beeline straight for me, wasting no time getting in my face. “Have a fun little break from your pack?” he asked. “Must have been nice.”

I gave him a long look before I responded. “What, did I miss something important?”

“I don’t appreciate your flippant tone, especially when we need to be figuring out what’s happening to our pack,” he snapped. “Everyone is on edge, and you’re not helping. You’re the closest thing we have to a leader, and you need to act like one!”

I shoved him away, barely holding myself back from laying him out. I didn’t like the way he was talking to me, but infighting was the last thing we needed. I wasn’t even sure that cleaning his clock would make me feel any better. Nothing would. Except one thing, and I would have to wait for that.

“Don’t you think I know that, Geraint?” I retorted. “I’m doing everything I can to fix this mess we’re in, and you foisting your anxiety onto me isn’t helping. Get a grip.”

“I don’t even understand why you’re hanging on so tightly to whatever it is we’ve got going here,” he said, waving his hand at the camp. “We’re a shell of our former selves. Everyone but you can see that. We should just give up and join the Vanguards. Beggars can’t be choosers.”

“Speak for yourself,” I snapped. “I’m no beggar. You claim to be loyal to the Samara pack, but it’s clear that you just want us to disappear. How is that loyalty?”

I choked out that last word. I loved the Samara pack so much, and I’d been doing everything in my power to bring us back to our former glory, but nothing I was doing was working, and now I was on edge and completely exhausted. I didn’t know if I had any more fight in me. I’d never been one to give up, but maybe I was taking it too far this time.

Geraint sneered. “No, that’s not what I said! I want us to survive—whatever that means.”

I paused. He wasn’t wrong. As it stood, I didn’t know what I was going to do if Xavier refused to be our Alpha, and I didn’t have the foggiest idea which way he was going to go. If the past was any indication, it wasn’t looking good for us. Ever since I’d killed Xavier’s mother, he’d never chosen me—not if there had been literally any other option. It was hard for me to believe that would change now, even after everything that had happened between us recently.

Geraint and I snapped to attention as a fight broke out between two pack members, only a few feet away from us.

“See?” Geraint said. “Things aren’t going well, Ava. We’re falling apart more and more every second that we wait here in this… in this *limbo*! Lucian says—”

“Wait, you’re the one who’s been talking to Lucian?”

To my surprise, Geraint had the decency to look a little ashamed as he nodded at me. “I have, yes, and I have to admit that he has some pretty interesting things to say.”

I nodded tiredly, suddenly feeling way too burned out to argue with him. “Please, Geraint, just give me until this evening. I’ll know the outcome of something I’m trying by sundown.”

He sighed. “Fine, Ava. I guess I’ll see you at sundown, then.”

I left him and went into the Airstream. I wasn’t surprised to find Marissa at the table, waiting for me.

“There she is,” she said. “Where’d you get off to last night?”

Unlike with Geraint, I could hear the affection in her voice and knew that she was just teasing. Given how heavy everything was right now, I appreciated a moment of levity—even if it involved my reflecting on the night I’d just spent with the very person who could make or break our pack.

“Yeah, I, uh, was taking care of a few things.”

Marissa grinned, but her expression quickly grew serious. “Were you with Xavier?”

“Why does it matter?” I said. “I was where I was, and I did what I did.”

Marissa shook her head and sat back in her chair. “I don’t love the sound of that. If you’re spending the night with that Redwood, why is his mate sniffing around here? Seems messy if you ask me.”

I shrugged. “I have no idea what’s going on with Cali, and I don’t really care. Besides, as far as I know, she and Xavier aren’t together anymore. On top of that, Xavier’s left the Redwood pack, so if you need to refer to him from here on out, feel free to just call him Xavier—not ‘the Redwood.’”

“I’ll call him whatever I want as long as he’s hurting my friend’s feelings and leading her on,” Marissa said.

“He’s not hurting me or leading me on, Marissa. I’m fine, really, and just doing what I need to do. I can handle it.”

I didn’t know if that was really true, but there was no use spilling my insecurities out on the table for Marissa to sift through. I needed to maintain some semblance of having my shit together, even if that couldn’t have been further from the truth.

“I’m just worried about you, Ava,” Marissa said. “Believe me, I want nothing more than to believe what you’re saying, but I also know how you feel about him. It’s written all over your face, and I have to tell you, I’m not sure if he has the same words written on his.”

I sighed. “You should leave. I need to be alone right now.”

Marissa stood up and nodded. “Okay, I get it, girl. But I’m around if you need to talk.”

“Thanks,” I muttered as I closed the door behind her.

I leaned against the door, then slid to the floor. Everything was falling apart around me. There was no ignoring it, no sugar coating it. I couldn’t help but feel like this was the beginning of the end.

*What am I going to do? If Xavier doesn’t show up, if he doesn’t come through like I need him to, should we just go be part of the Vanguard pack? Am I just delaying the inevitable? Am I putting what’s left of our pack in danger for the sake of my pride?*

It pained me to think of the Samara pack losing its name, and I absolutely *hated* Lucian. How the hell was I going to join his pack when I could barely stand to look the man in his arrogant, too-pretty eyes? I couldn’t imagine having him as my Alpha. Just the thought of it left a bad taste in my mouth.

The door vibrated against me as someone knocked.

“Marissa, I told you I wanted to be alone. Go away,” I said.

The knock came again, louder than before. I stood up and yanked open the door—and almost fell right back down when I saw Xavier standing in front of me. He’d cleaned himself up and was dressed to the nines. He looked incredible.

My breath caught in my throat as I took him in. He was just so damn beautiful. I looked up at the sky. It wasn’t even noon yet. My face fell, and a wave of despair washed over me.

*He must be here to tell me no. Well, at least he isn’t waiting until the last minute to let me down and blow my world apart.*

I stepped aside to let him into the Airstream, all too aware of the way every single Samara had stopped to watch us as I closed the door. Xavier filled the small space, looking way too big for it, as usual. He had his hands shoved in his pockets and his back to me. It felt like my knees were about to give out.

*At least I tried. The odds were stacked against me from the beginning, but dammit, at least I tried.*

I cleared my throat, finally finding my voice. “If you’re going to say no, just say it so I can start getting used to having to call that garbage prince Alpha.”

Xavier finally turned to face me, a determined look in his eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“What do you mean?” I said. “I gave you until sundown to decide, and you’re here already. I should have known that you wouldn’t… that you… Just say it, Xavier. You’re here to tell me no, right? That you don’t want to be here, or to be with me?”

I was working overtime to keep from crying. I flat out *refused* to cry in front of him yet again.

Xavier stepped close to me and placed his huge, heavy hands on my shoulders. “I’m here because I didn’t need until sundown to realize what I need to do.” He let out a breath. “I’ll do it, Ava. I’ll be the Samara Alpha.”

**Episode 3761**

**Xavier**

I felt like I was in a dream. Maybe a nightmare.

Had I really just agreed to be the Samara Alpha?

The air in the trailer was completely still and silent, as if nothing would dare disturb this moment. My wolf was stirring wildly—he’d always wanted to be an Alpha. An Alpha with a pack, with the power and responsibilities the role entailed.

My wolf had always wanted so many things. Ava was a reminder of that.

She stood there for a long beat, frozen and dubious. She opened her mouth to speak but closed it before closing the distance between us. She pulled me into a hug. The initial contact struck me like lightning, and something inside me switched off. Despite the softness of her cheek, the scent of her hair, the feel of her breasts against me, I couldn’t reciprocate the hug. A strange numbness came over me.

“Please tell me this isn’t a joke,” she whispered. “Some kind of cruel game…”

Part of me wished it were. Not that long ago, it would have been a pleasure to hurt Ava like that, to see her wounded reaction when I laughed in her face and told her that I was just teasing. But that was then. Things had changed—not just for me, but between us. I was tired of fighting it. I wasn’t sure if I still had the option to fight, really.

My wolf rejoiced.

Slowly, I put my arms around her. “I’m not here to joke or to tease you.” I sounded gruff. “I’m here to be the Samara Alpha.”

Ava pulled back. Her voice was a gentle murmur that sent shivers down my spine. “I want you to say that again, Xavier. Just so I can be sure.”

I met her gaze. I fought not to be distracted by the depth of her eyes, her inviting mouth, her hot breath so close to my skin…

“I will be the Alpha you’ve always wanted,” I said. And the most fucked-up thing was that I meant that. It was a promise.

Ava scrutinized my face. There was still surprise in her expression, but above it, I saw hope. “Why?”

I hesitated. I couldn’t possibly explain. Adéluce had made it impossible for me to tell the brutal truth.

“I want to make sure you’re doing this for the right reasons, Xavier,” Ava added. Her hand was resting on my shoulder, her fingers digging into my shirt. Slowly, I broke the embrace. Her proximity made it harder to think. To lie.

“Does it really matter?” I deflected. “The Samaras are in need of an Alpha. You want me to be that Alpha. The way I see it, the situation is pretty straightforward.”

Her brow furrowed. “But where do you fit into the equation? You’ve been acting…” She paused, as if trying to figure out the right word to say. “Different, lately.”

Different was an understatement. I deflected again.

“Things change. People change. It happens,” I said.

Her eyes narrowed slightly. “You say you’ll be the Alpha the Samaras need, the Alpha I’ve always wanted. But what do *you* want, Xavier?”

What did I want? That was a loaded question.

But there was no question about what my wolf wanted. He urged me to take Ava. Do it right here, right now, push her down the floor, tear her clothes off, leave bite marks on her body, come inside and all over her as the two of us fucked like animals. My wolf wanted to unleash the desire I had suppressed and kept hidden ever since she’d returned from the dead.

*What do you want, Xavier?*

I was scared of the answer.

“Why can’t you let it be?” I asked, jaw clenched. “I agreed to what you want—isn’t that enough?”

Ava crossed her arms. “It’s not. The Samaras have already been disappointed and betrayed by Knox, Zeke, Fletcher, and now—”

“None of them were ever going to work out,” I interrupted. “Are you suggesting that I’m in the same useless league as them?”

“Of course you’re better than them,” Ava said sharply. “But you can’t go into this and take it lightly.” She took a step closer, resting her hands on my chest. “I need you to say that you want this as much as I do. Can you do that for me?”

Ava’s touch, her scent and closeness were making a pretty fucking compelling case. But the question remained.

*What do you want, Xavier?*

I wanted Caliana Hart. Always. I thought back to our earlier disastrous phone call—to the cold, cruel version of myself who’d told her that Ava was my mate and that I didn’t want to be with Cali anymore. I’d said that Ava was stronger, and that I wouldn’t have to worry about her the way I’d worried over Cali.

It had taken all my strength to get through that conversation, to break Cali’s heart so that Adéluce wouldn’t harm her, to make sure that Cali would be okay. Physically, at least. Because the damage I’d inflicted on her soul by saying those terrible things was something she might never be able to overcome. But what choice did I have? I had to keep Cali safe and push her to move on from me.

*What do you want, Xavier?*

For now, with Adéluce lurking, I couldn’t have what I wanted, but I had to move on. And being the Alpha of the Samaras would give me the opportunity to do that.

I reached for Ava, touched her chin to lift it. I made her face me. A twinge of guilt simmered within me. She was asking for the truth, something I’d never be able to share with anyone. I could only reassure her that I wanted to be Samara Alpha; she didn’t need to know why.

The truth was that I was trapped. Everything I truly wanted had been taken from me. The mate I wanted to be with, the pack I wanted to lead…

And yet, being here with Ava felt like a lifeline. Coming to her now was a complicated, bittersweet, almost scary thing that made me wonder what the fuck Adéluce would do next—if I was putting Ava and the Samaras in danger by agreeing to this.

But the Samaras were already in danger, from the Bitterfangs and Lucian and the pack summit. At least this way, I could be of use. I was trapped, and I felt like a lowlife for all the times I’d hurt Cali, but at least *here*, I could do something right.

Maybe.

I didn’t know if I was making any fucking sense.

All I knew was that I was exhausted and confused, and even though everything felt like a goddamn hurricane, the sharp truth was that Ava remained a constant in my life. Better the devil you know, and all—even if I’d been a devil for her as well.

I opened my mouth to speak, and Ava’s gorgeous eyes were fixed on my lips.

I didn’t say that this wasn’t my first choice.

I didn’t say that I didn’t know what I’d do otherwise.

I didn’t say that I was trapped, and fucked, and that this thing between us was as toxic as could be.

Cradling her chin, I just said, “I want to be the Samara Alpha. I want it, Ava.”

The most messed-up, fascinating part of all this was that, despite the chaos that surrounded this decision, I wasn’t lying. And Ava could tell. She’d known me for years—since we were kids, and much better people than we were now. She stared at me like no matter how many secrets I kept, there was a part of me that she would always claim as her own.

And that part was telling the truth right now.

“That’s all I needed to hear,” she said hoarsely. She brought the hand I had on her chin to her mouth, kissing my fingers, the middle of my palm. She leaned closer, embraced me once more, her lips on my neck. I was drawn into it easily, quicksand fast with her scent and warmth surrounding me like that.

My chest tightened sharply, suddenly. The image of Cali smiling popped into my head, and a fresh pang of pain coursed through me.

I pulled back.

“I’m agreeing to be the Samara Alpha. But beyond that…” I trailed off.

What the fuck could I say when my feelings were so mixed-up I could’ve drowned in them?

Ava’s expression was tainted by a flash of hurt, but she reined it in. She was quick to recover, always.

Wistfully, she said, “You already know I want you. I’m not going to pretend otherwise. And while I suspect you want me too, I’m willing to focus on you becoming Alpha first.”

Her fingertips toyed with the hair at my nape. I had to suppress a shudder. She could tell. I saw it in her soft, pleased smile.

“Let’s take this one step at a time, Xavier,” she whispered. “Can we do that?”

**Episode 3762**

**Greyson**

I cursed under my breath before racing off the porch, shifting as I ran. I picked up Elle’s scent immediately, tracking her through the woods. I had no doubt about where Elle was headed, and the thought made my wolf grit his teeth.

The palace.

Lucian.

Lucian, with his greedy little eyes and his grabby paws. The way he touched and looked at Elle—so similar to how he’d touched and looked at Cali—made me want to grab that beloved ceremonial cannon of his, set it up in his bedroom, and direct it right at his face as he enjoyed one of his beauty naps.

Perhaps I wasn’t taking this very well.

Everything had happened too fast—Elle wasn’t supposed to try and talk to Lucian tonight. Not so soon. Sure, when she’d asked for my permission, I’d said yes. I didn’t want her to be upset, and I did want her to make her own choice. But, selfishly, I’d just hoped she would make the choice I wanted her to make.

After making *that* great decision, I’d conspired with Cali to prevent Elle’s meeting with Lucian from happening. I hadn’t been direct enough with Elle, and things had gotten messy, because Elle wasn’t just any pack member. And, apparently, when it came to her, I wasn’t just any Alpha, either.

The biggest problem here was that Cali and I hadn’t discussed *how* we were going to steer Elle away from Lucian. Would I have to give Elle a few gory details about his nightmarish past with Cali? With Seluna? Would Elle even be able to understand the fucked-up implications?

I had no idea, but I had to find an excuse to keep her away from him, and fast. There was no way I was going to let her simply *go* to Lucian—not when I didn’t know if she was going to accept his proposal. *Would she* accept his proposal? Judging by our conversation, it seemed like a no. But Elle was a wild card.

Fuck.

I wished Cali were here. I hated the fact that I was running off into the woods, scrambling to get Elle, when I knew Cali was struggling right now. The anger I felt toward Xavier was getting more intense every day, even though I was really trying to ignore it.

I fought to focus on the positive—Cali had been able to use training to deal with her pain, and I’d been there for her. Right now, I had to find Elle as soon as possible, make sure she didn’t run off again, and then stick around at the pack house for a while in case Cali needed me.

I was heading straight for the palace, closing in on Elle—she was fast, but no match for me—when I came across another, unfamiliar scent. I skidded to a halt, sniffing the air. I was still in Redwood territory. Who the hell was trespassing on our land?

Could this be the Bitterfangs? Perhaps a scout to spy and see what our pack alliance was up to before the pack summit? No—this was just one wolf. They wouldn’t send just one person to spy on three different packs. This couldn’t be an all-out attack. But if this wasn’t the Bitterfangs, who *was* it?

Could it be a Vanguard? Someone Lucian had sent? Whomever this scent belonged to seemed to be following Elle as well, so I couldn’t rule that out as a possibility. Worry flooded me, and I picked up my pace. I was responsible for Elle. I always had been, from the very beginning. But Lucian had suggested that our connection went deeper than a simple sense of responsibility.

Lucian had fucking *insisted* it was more than that.

He could be right. Or maybe not. Or maybe yes. Or maybe this was a huge goddamn problem—

A strange wolf burst out of the trees to my left and slammed into my side.

I crashed to the ground—I’d been distracted by my thoughts and hadn’t seen the massive wolf coming. I was always ready for a fight, though, and before the bastard could attack again, I was on him.

I ducked and avoided getting bitten, throwing him off. I got my first real look at him—thick neck circled by a dark brown ring, but otherwise glossy black fur, intense hazel eyes, scarred jaw. Nobody I recognized, which meant he was probably a Rogue.

I straightened to my full height and snarled.

*Who the hell are you?* I demanded via mind link. *This is Redwood territory.*

The werewolf didn’t reply. I was ready to pounce when his gaze shifted to the right, and he suddenly took off. Did this son of a bitch think I was going to let him get away? I growled and started running after him—and then Elle’s scent got caught under my nose.

Shit.

I couldn’t chase a Rogue and stop Elle from meeting with Lucian at the same time. Then, as quickly as I saw him, he ran off in a different direction. After I was done with the Elle situation, I’d send out a search party for the bastard, just to make sure he’d left our territory.

But first, Elle.

With a warning howl that I knew the Rogue would pick it up, I headed off after Elle. The fight with the Rogue had stalled me, so I ran faster, pushed myself harder to catch up with Elle. I’d been so close to her earlier, but now I knew I’d have to hurry if I wanted to find her before she reached the palace.

The second I crossed into Vanguard territory, I picked up Lucian’s scent. A low growl escaped my chest. My feelings toward Lucian had always fluctuated between irritation and rage. Now, we were definitely in rage territory. None of this should’ve been happening—not right before the summit, and with the Bitterfang threat hanging over us.

Lucian’s behavior only confirmed what Cali and I already knew—he couldn’t be trusted. Either he wanted to use Elle as a pawn in some political game, or he was just plain trying to make me marry her off to him, like something out of a really melodramatic play. Perhaps he was going for both at the same time. Whatever he wanted with Elle, I was sure that love had nothing to do with it*.*

Yet again, I had to wonder if—no matter the ramifications—killing Lucian was the only long-term solution to the myriad problems he presented.

When I saw the palace entrance up ahead, my anger only intensified. I looked around—where the hell was Elle? She should’ve been here. Had she really gotten that far ahead of me in such a short amount of time? The answer was yes—her scent led me right to the entrance.

Fucking hell.

I shifted back to human at the door, and immediately, two guards approached.

“What’s your business here?” asked the taller of the two.

“None of your fucking business,” I snapped.

“We cannot allow you to—”

“I’m here to see Lucian,” I said casually, then added, “And I’ll rip you to shreds if you don’t get out of my way.”

I made the threat like I was talking about the weather. I didn’t need to shout to get my point across. The men both stiffened, their eyes widening as they took in my face.

“The Redwood Alpha!” the shorter man burst out.

My gaze flicked to him.

He immediately looked up at this companion. “He’s the Redwood Alpha. I recognize him.” He turned to me. “You may proceed.”

“That was the smart thing to do,” I said, pushing past them hard enough that they stumbled.

I followed Elle’s scent, gritting my teeth when I realized it was already mixed with Lucian’s. A sudden wave of disgust hit me. My stomach lurched, my wolf howling on the inside as the instinct to protect rose within my chest.

I made it to the courtyard—one of them—before I finally spotted them. Elle and Lucian, under an arch of red roses. She was sitting on a marble bench, her posture straight, her legs crossed. Just like Lola had taught her. Her long red hair tumbled over her shoulders, brushing past her navel and lower.

I remembered Cali comparing her to Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*, it was why she’d suggested the name Arielle. I could see it now. Just like the mermaid, Elle was brand-new to this world—a world that wasn’t a kind one. I had sworn to her father that I would protect her, and Lucian’s sheer presence in her vicinity threatened to break that promise.

Fucking *Lucian*. He was sitting next to her, creepily leering at her—until he suddenly went rigid. The moment I entered the space, his head snapped toward me. I didn’t look away from Elle, though. Her eyes widened when she saw me, her gaze locking with mine.

“What are you doing here, Elle?” I asked.

Lucian stood up, a broad smile on his face. “Why, she’s here to accept my marriage proposal, of course!”

**Episode 3763**

“Are you going to tell me where we’re going?” I asked Lola from the passenger seat.

She kept her eyes fixed on the road. In an uncharacteristically serious tone, she said, “This is a necessary surprise, Cali. I had to get inventive.”

“Inventive? Should I be worried?” I asked, starting to feel a bit anxious.

“Of course not!” Lola declared. “No worries at all—I don’t want you to worry, ever. I am here to solve all your problems. And since the pack wasn’t too keen on sacrificing their possessions so you could break them as a form of Xavier catharsis, I have found another solution.”

My head pounded at the mention of Xavier’s name. I’d been doing all I could to avoid thinking about him. Being with Greyson—talking with him, touching him, kissing him—had helped. He was like this fantastical, awe-inspiring beast of prey that just happened to be super loving and cuddly toward me, and when I was around him, I felt centered.

But now that Greyson wasn’t here with me anymore, I was back to square one.

A square that looked like a box. A box that felt as heavy as a ton of bricks. A ton of bricks that I wanted to throw at Xavier’s fucking head. Because seriously, he didn’t make any sense, and also, how dare he TREAT ME THIS WAY AFTER ALL THE SHIT WE’D BEEN—

“Cali?” Lola said quietly. “Are you okay?”

I took a deep, deep breath. “It’s just…” I scoffed. “Rage. You know? It comes and goes in waves.”

Lola cringed. “I’m sorry I mentioned Xavier.”

I shook my head, folding my hands on my lap. They were shaking. “It’s fine. If not you, then someone else—or something else—would’ve reminded me of him.” I sighed. “Maybe going on this mystery trip will be just the thing for me, actually.”

Glancing at me, Lola gave me a small smile. “See? I told you it’ll be—WHAT THE FUCK!”

A deer jumped out of the woods, and the tires screeched when Lola jammed on the brakes. I screamed, grabbing my seat. Lola swerved to avoid the animal before it raced off across the road and into the forest on the other side.

*Oh my GOD!*

My heart was pounding like crazy.

“*Seriously?*” Lola rolled down her window and shouted, “What the hell is wrong with you? You’re lucky I’m not hunting you down and draining you right now!”

Breathing shakily, I asked, “Just who on earth are you talking to right now?”

Lola turned to look at me, scowling. “The deer, of course. The audacity of herbivores is unmatched.”

I stared at Lola.

She stared at me.

When I burst out laughing at the absurdity of it all, Lola followed.

*This feels… better.*

This felt a *lot* better.

Lola looked so pleased with herself. “See? We’re already having fun!”

I appreciated my friend so much right now. As Lola pulled back into the road and started driving again, I remembered something.

“Hey,” I said. “Didn’t you actually feed on deer to deal with your cravings after you went vampire? Do you still do that?”

Lola shrugged. “Occasionally. But I don’t really like deer blood—too gamey.”

I squinted at her. “So, what *do* you do when you get the urge to vamp out?”

Lola smiled, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Sometimes, Jay lets me have a taste. It’s kinky and sexy, and he’s *delicious*.”

I tried to hide my grimace. Who would’ve thought that mild-mannered Jay had that in him? Then again, he *had* lost an eye for Lola. Apart from brave, he was probably a little bit unhinged, deep down. Still, that didn’t change the fact that their little blood donation arrangement was questionable, to say the least.

*What if Lola suddenly can’t contain herself in the heat of the moment? What if she hurts him? I’m not going to kink-shame anyone here, but I also don’t want Jay to die while trying to have a good time.*

“Lola,” I said cautiously, “are you sure that isn’t dangerous?”

Lola snorted, opening her mouth to answer, but then my gaze caught a familiar sign up ahead.

My blood ran cold.

“*Glenn’s Junkyard?*” I shuddered. “What the hell are we doing here, Lola?”

She sighed. “Okay, hear me out—”

“Hear *what*?” I asked, feeling on edge. “I can’t believe you’d bring us here! Jay and Lilac and Marta and you and I were nearly killed by vampires at this junkyard! Did you somehow forget, or—”

“I *obviously* didn’t forget,” Lola said with a snort. Good to see she was amused. “But it’s the only place I could think of that was close enough and has lots of… junk. Things that we can break.”

My heart was still pounding.

“Lola,” I said, my voice dropping nervously. “I really don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Cali, it’s fine, I promise!” She pulled in, pointing to a sign on the fence. “See what it says there? ‘Under new management.’ That means no more vampires.”

“But how are we going to—”

“I already called ahead, played up the broken heart thing, talked about how my friend really needs this, and the new owner said we can break anything we want.”

I was shocked by Lola’s resourcefulness. “But how did they agree to—”

“Apparently, the new owner just went through a bitter divorce, so she was sympathetic,” Lola said, grinning. “Cool, right?”

I just blinked at her.

She cringed. “Not cool—I mean, like, that we can all commiserate? Not me, I didn’t break up with Jay, of course. I don’t know what I’d do if that happened, but of course it won’t, so—” Lola cut herself off, smiling tightly. “*Anyway*. Let’s just go smash some shit! I promise it’s going to be fun!”

I hated being back at this place, but Lola seemed so thrilled with herself that I decided to play along. What else was there to do? At least I’d be spending time with Lola.

She parked the car, humming with excitement, before we both got out. I followed her as she went to the back of the car, opening the trunk to reveal two pairs of goggles and two sledgehammers. She offered me one.

“Here you go,” she said happily.

I could barely lift the thing.

Lola, meanwhile, had zero issues hoisting hers up. Her werewolf and vampire strength combined were working like a charm. She hefted the sledgehammer like it was a toothpick, and I felt a twinge of envy that I immediately regretted.

*Cali!* I scolded myself. *Lola’s trying to make you feel better—don’t be like this!*

I was doing my best.

“Let’s go find something to smash,” Lola said, gesturing to a pile of rusting cars.

She sauntered ahead, and I followed, dragging my sledgehammer behind me.

“Wait! Protection first,” Lola said, and she gave me my pair of goggles.

We both put them on, and then Lola raised her sledgehammer. With a scream, she shattered the taillights of a car. Then she turned to me with a giant smile on her face. “Cali! That felt so good! Give it a try!”

I took a deep breath and tried to lift the hammer—to no avail. The failure stung.

“Not sure this is going to work,” I said with a grunt.

Lola raised her index finger. “Do not despair! We’ll find something else. I’ll look around and find you something lighter to use for the smashing!”

Lola had already started to wander through the cars and other damaged things. Suddenly, I recalled Adair and Artemis, and our conversation about controlling my magic. When I looked around, realization dawned. Destruction was the point of this place, so I actually didn’t have to contain myself here, did I?

*Plus, there’s no Adair looking over my shoulder, judging me*, I thought. I looked around for any security cameras, but didn’t see any. Maybe this was safe… *Why not take advantage and use my magic to wreak some well-earned havoc?*

“Lola, wait,” I said.

She paused, looking up from a pile of broken washing machines. “What?”

“Stand back, okay? I want to try something.”

Lola looked intrigued. I glanced around and made sure we were alone. After that, I picked out a dilapidated green car and started concentrating. I felt the magic in the air around me, simmering under the surface. I pulled it inside me, holding it in my hands like a living breathing thing that pulsated, warm and strong.

*Right now, I am strong.*

I whipped my hands forward, sending the magic toward the green car.

*BANG!*

The windows exploded. I stood there, watching, breathing fast. When I turned to Lola, she looked awestruck.

“That was… *awesome*!” she squealed, clapping her hands.

“It feels awesome,” I said, chuckling. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

Power buzzed through my veins, a restless energy that was making me feel less vulnerable. Less broken. I didn’t have to hide who I was here, and I didn’t have to pretend to be something I wasn’t by trying to pick up a heavy sledgehammer.

I wasn’t physically strong, but I had *this*.

This gift was mine, and owning it felt priceless.

“Okay, do that one now!” Lola pointed at a red car excitedly, jumping in place.

I laughed at her enthusiasm, gathering energy from the air again to repeat the process. Maybe I didn’t have the finesse and control that Adair wanted, but it sure felt great to blast stuff.

“Do it, do it, do it!” Lola was chanting, and I fired off my magic.

*BANG!*

The car doors were blown off by the blast, crashing to the ground. Lola cackled in delight. I laughed as well, but then my friend’s face suddenly twisted with alarm. A second later, I heard a sharp sound behind us.

I turned toward the source. “What…”

A woman with a large gun was standing there, staring at me.

Pointing the weapon right at me, she hissed, “What the *hell* are you?”

**Episode 3764**

**Xavier**

I paced in the cramped confines of the Airstream. It only allowed for a couple of steps in either direction. Since I’d told Ava that I’d be the Samara Alpha and we’d agreed to put our fucked-up feelings toward each other on the back burner, I’d been filled with a strange mix of nervous energy, dread, and something else.

Hope.

The moment Ava had left, my mind had cleared slightly. All the loose threads that had been floating around in my head had come together. I’d formed a plan, and even if it was tentative, it was much better than nothing. I had accepted that my place, for now, was here. With the Samaras.

I’d always wanted to be a pack Alpha. Specifically, the Alpha of the Redwood pack. Becoming the Alpha of the Samara pack was like losing and getting the consolation prize. But Adéluce had forced my hand. I wasn’t going to let her keep me from being a leader now that the opportunity had presented itself—and the Samaras were truly in trouble.

I could use my time with them, and all their problems, to gain experience.

And then, if—no, *when*—I defeated Adéluce, fixed things with Cali, gotten the Samaras stable, and kicked Greyson to the curb, I’d be able to do what I’d been born to do. Be the Redwood Alpha, with Cali by my side as my Luna. I wasn’t going to tell Ava any of that, obviously, but it made me feel far less shaky to have an end goal here—one that involved the mate I truly loved.

Nevertheless, all that was a distant dream.

Right here, right now, I had the Samara pack, and Ava. I actually—technically—hadn’t lied to her. I *did* want to be the Samara Alpha. I’d just never said for how long.

The dread, and Adéluce’s lingering danger, were still there, lurking beneath the excitement I’d started to feel. But at least this was a plan—a chance for me to move forward, instead of wallowing in misery and anger. As for dealing with the Samaras themselves—that shouldn’t be too problematic. If anyone could lead this ragtag group, it was me.

It wasn’t a foolproof plan—not by a long shot. There was always the off chance that the Samaras would reject me. Or Adéluce would decide fuck this up for me for her own sadistic amusement. More than anything, though, I dreaded the pain the news of my becoming Samara Alpha would cause Cali. There was nothing I could do to soften the blow.

But maybe that was a good thing, in the long run.

Cali’s devastation would probably make Adéluce happy. Because when Cali hurt, I did too. No matter how much I plotted and fought, there was a gaping, bleeding wound inside me, seeping into my every move.

I just hoped I wasn’t making a huge fucking mistake here.

“Hey.” Ava’s soft voice came from the doorway.

I stopped pacing and looked over at her. She paused by the entrance, her dark hair caught in a golden halo of sunlight. Her eyes took me in. There was a slight, wicked smile on her face. The breeze from the open door carried in her scent, and it told me exactly she felt when she looked at me.

She *wanted.* Her desire was endless, constant. It wasn’t going anywhere. She emanated the kind of emotion that made me think if I kissed her right now, she’d melt. That if I felt between her legs right now, she’d already be wet.

The trailer felt even smaller when she walked in, my collar suddenly too tight. My wolf reacted, the animal in me pretty fucking clear on how instinct worked—the only way for him to settle down would be to claim.

Keeping my relationship with Ava “professional” was going to be easier said than done.

“I can’t believe this is really happening,” Ava said quietly, laughing a little. She leaned against the door. “After all this time, you’re going to be an Alpha.” She looked at me through her eyelashes. “*My* Alpha.”

My wolf shuddered in pleasure. I pushed him down—I had to keep my composure.

“Hearing you say that sounds strange,” I said.

That wasn’t a lie, but Ava didn’t seem disappointed. She smiled. “I’m going to help you get used to it, Xavier. I’ll be with you every step of the way. Don’t worry.”

That was *exactly* what I worried about.

She leaned against the closed door, crossing her arms. Before I could say anything else, she went on.

“Do you remember when we used to dream of our future together?” she asked quietly.

Of course I remembered. I remembered talking and laughing with her. I remembered feeling like she was the only person in the world who’d ever understand me.

Wistfully, she added, “You were going to be Alpha, and I was going to be your Luna. We were just teenagers, caught in a fantasy. But we believed in each other, X.”

“I remember,” I said before she could pile on more memories. I fought really fucking hard to keep my voice even. “I don’t think we should be reminiscing right now, though. We shouldn’t get carried away by the past—we’re not those star-crossed teenagers anymore, anyway. The world no longer revolves around us.”

I thought I’d let her down gently enough. By my standards, at least. And it worked.

Ava nodded, taking a deep breath before glancing out the tiny window. “You’re right. There are too many things to deal with. The most important task is already in motion, actually.”

“Already?” I asked.

She nodded. “I called a mandatory pack meeting, though I didn’t tell anyone why. I thought you should be the one to tell them the exciting news.”

My stomach throbbed at her words. “Is it really that exciting, though?”

“Of course.” She smiled. “Right now, I feel like the luckiest woman in the world. I know you’re going to save us.”

The back of my neck heated. I straightened my spine, almost like I could become taller just because she believed in me.

Fuck. I shouldn’t have been reacting to her that way. Mate or not.

“Shouldn’t—” I cleared my throat, trying to suppress the feeling. “Shouldn’t you have warned them ahead of time?”

She shook her head. “It’s not necessary. My pack is hungry for a leader like you, and now you’re here.”

The way she stared at me, the way she said the word “hungry,” made me feel even more constrained by the small space. Ava was no stranger to overindulgence. Back when we were truly together, she used to seek me out constantly, always needy. We would fuck for hours on end, anywhere, anytime, all the fucking time—like nothing else mattered other than our bodies crashing together.

My throat was dry when she held out her hand.

“Are you ready?” she asked. “They’re waiting.”

I stared at her hand. The gravity of what lay ahead, waiting just outside that door, hit me. This wasn’t a dream. It was real. If I walked out that door, there would be no turning back—I would have left the Redwoods and joined another pack.

I would have left Cali to stand next to Ava.

My mind flashed to Cali. To her smiling at me, laughing with me, kissing me, naked underneath me as she said she loved me. To her saying things like, *“Xavier, you’re so reckless, stop making me worry!”* and, *“You make me feel so safe.”* And always, *“I love you, Xavier.”*

Cali loved me. *Me.*

She’d loved me enough to make my wolf come back, something I didn’t think was possible. But Cali was always making the impossible happen, wasn’t she?

She’d loved me enough to make me whole, and I’d loved her enough to make myself better.

But now…

“Are you okay?” Ava asked, snapping me back to the present.

No. I wasn’t okay. My heart felt like it was ready to burst. My chest hurt so badly, I had to bite the inside of my cheek and taste my own blood to distract myself.

“I promise it’s going to be okay, X,” Ava said. “I’ll be right there with you. I—”

“It’s fine,” I said gruffly.

I pulled myself out of it. I had to move forward.

“I’m ready,” I told Ava. I locked eyes with her, then let her take my hand and lead me to the Airstream stairs and outside.

The entire pack looked up as I stepped down to face them.

Nobody made a sound.

I slipped my hand free from Ava’s. I cleared my throat and took a deep breath. Marissa, Geraint, Perrie, Donovan—the whole Samara pack was watching me.

I made sure to meet their eyes as I spoke. “Your search for an Alpha is over.”

There was an audible collective gasp. Everyone looked around at each other.

Geraint stepped forward. “Yeah? Why’s that?”

I glanced at the crowd. “I’m your new Alpha.”

**Episode 3765**

**Greyson**

I was too stunned to speak.

No—I was too *angry*. I feared that if I uttered a word right now, if I fucking moved, it would be to charge at Lucian and beat him to a pulp. I wasn’t going to blame Elle for this. Never. My fury was directed at Lucian, and Lucian alone. He’d always been the goddamn problem here.

This princeling who fancied himself a royal and thought he could just waltz in and claim anything and anyone he pleased. He fancied himself the grandmaster, and now he’d fucking dared to propose to Elle, and she… What, she’d *accepted*?

How the hell could that have happened in such a short amount of time?

“Lucian, *no*!” Elle’s voice made me snap out of my stupor. Her words were sharp, and followed by a loud crack of sound as her hand impacted with Lucian’s cheek.

Elle had actually slapped him.

Thank *god*.

I barely suppressed a laugh. I desperately wanted to say, *That’s my girl, humiliate that ridiculous motherfucker!* I refrained, but I still couldn’t help but smile. My fury had popped like a balloon, and it was all thanks to Elle. I was relieved and amused, suddenly having a grand old time watching the pair of them. Elle had her arms crossed, and she was glaring at Lucian as the princeling rubbed his haw.

“Well,” he said with a chuckle, “I may have misrepresented the circumstances. Elle was right to put me in my place.”

The fact that Lucian didn’t seem to mind getting slapped added a whole new layer of fuckery to an already messy situation. Was I even surprised, though? The fucked-up pretend-royal probably had a long list of kinks, and the idea of Elle being subjected to them in any way made me sick to my stomach.

Walking over to her, I gripped the crook of her elbow and pulled her away from him. She didn’t resist, just let herself be led. I put an arm around her, as if that would serve as an extra layer of protection. Anything to keep the distance between her and Lucian.

“Are you okay?” I asked her gruffly.

Elle looked up at me, shrugging. She nestled closer, lifting her face to my neck and inhaling deeply. It felt like I wasn’t going to get a real reply, but this clearly felt comforting to her, so there was nothing else to be said.

Meanwhile, all of Lucian’s amusement had vanished. His gaze sliding between Elle and me, he said, “Of *course* she’s all right. I was merely explaining the benefits of marriage, and I was about to propose when you barged in, Greyson.” He shook his head disapprovingly. “That seems to be a regular, annoying, and ill-timed habit of yours. You should try to be more discreet.”

I was no longer listening.

“Elle,” I said. “We should go.”

Lucian gasped. “No, wait!” He made a move to get down on one knee, pulling a ring with a giant rock on it from his pocket. “I was just about to—”

“That’s enough,” I snapped, taking a step backward, pulling Elle with me.

Lucian scowled at me. “But I have been practicing my speech of undying love, Greyson! You must allow me to propose to Elle, and then we can let her decide what to do. I will not take no for an answer.”

Elle clung to me, scowling at him. “I already said no! Why don’t you ever listen, Lucian?” Then, more quietly, she added, “How am I supposed to talk to you when you never listen?”

His expression changed yet again, and he let out an exaggerated yelp. “Elle! Please, do not fret! I cherish every word that comes out of your beautiful lips, my darling dove—I simply spoke poorly. I only meant that my heart cannot possibly let you leave without hearing my proposal.”

Lucian made a move to approach, to touch Elle. I stepped the hell back, pulling her with me, my arm still around her.

“Are you going to physically stop Elle from leaving, then?” I demanded. “Like you’ve done to Cali, my brother, and myself on far too many occasions?”

Elle’s eyes widened. “Lucian? Is that true?”

“*Yes*,” I bit out, jaw clenched. “Keeping people here against their will seems to be a habit of Lucian’s.”

“Like yours is barging into the room when Lucian is trying to get me alone?” Elle asked.

At the same time, Lucian vehemently said, “I am *appalled*, Greyson! I would never do such a thing!”

“Right,” I deadpanned. “So I’ve witnessed you abducting people once or twice or fifteen times, but I’m completely out of line to assume you’d do it again?”

“Precisely,” Lucian said with a wave of his hand. “Your prejudice is tactless, and not in tune with our alliance. Besides, I would never do that to Elle—a lovely young woman like her needs her freedom! It’s what sets her apart.”

Lucian’s nonsense was escalating, and mentioning the alliance didn’t help my temper.

“Save your bullshit proposal for someone else, Lucian,” I said darkly. “Elle’s already given you her answer.”

I took Elle’s hand, pulling her with me toward the exit, but Lucian blocked our way.

“But Greyson!” He huffed, irritated. “I haven’t even made my offer! You cannot possibly dismiss me this way!”

I spoke through gritted teeth. “*Watch me*.”

I walked past him, Elle keeping up with me without a word, but then Lucian spoke again. This time, his voice was loud and angry.

“Redwood Alpha!” he snapped. “Need I remind you what’s at stake here? Is the alliance a joke to you?”

I paused. My breathing came out slow. Heavy. Elle’s hand was warm in mine, steady, her grip tight. I was not going to let go. I was *not* going to let her engage with this lowlife of a fake royal. She wasn’t his toy. I refused to let him treat her the way he’d treated Cali—I couldn’t fall into the same trap for a second time.

Slowly, I turned to face Lucian.

I wished I could just end this right here, right now.

Lucian was big, but when I got *just* the right amount of angry, nothing could stop me.

But there were so many fucking reasons why I couldn’t kill him—especially not right now. The Vanguards would overwhelm me before Elle and I could make it to the door. The consequences would be dire for everybody—for Elle, for Cali, for the pack.

I needed to get a damn grip.

“The alliance will survive, with or without you,” I said. “And even if that weren’t the case, there’s no way I’d ever force Elle into a marriage to save it.”

Lucian looked actually offended. “Goodness, when did I ever *force* anyone? I only want to propose. Is there a reason why you’re opposed to a mere proposal?”

“She already said no,” I snapped. “You said you won’t force her, but that’s exactly what you’re trying to do by repeatedly ignoring her response and acting like an entitled, pompous jackass. And to answer your question, I would have no problem with Elle hearing a marriage proposal from someone who actually loves and respects her.”

Lucian glowered. “But, of course, I do! How dare you doubt my feelings—”

Still holding her hand, I stepped in front of Elle, blocking Lucian’s view of her. “You have feelings for her? Seriously? You’ve known her for how long? Went on a date or two? If you truly loved Elle, you’d stop using her as leverage.”

Lucian marched closer, getting all up in my space. His eyes flashed with fury. Through gritted teeth, he said, “Of course I love her. She’s my mate.”

“Those two concepts don’t always go hand in hand,” I snapped. “Elle told you—”

“Greyson,” Elle cut in, tugging on my hand. “You two keep talking like I’m not here. I don’t like it!”

Flinching, I turned to her. She was looking up at me, the set of her jaw tight, her brow furrowed.

“I’m sorry,” I said quickly. “Let’s go.”

The princeling gasped. “But Elle! I haven’t—”

“Lucian,” she snapped, staring at him. “Let us go.”

Lucian paused, staring at her. If I hadn’t known what he was capable of, I would have thought he looked like a wounded child.

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I held my breath until we reached the woods outside the palace, my ears attuned to my surroundings. Nothing. I’d been convinced that Lucian would send someone after us, but that hadn’t happened. Had he really meant it when he’d said that he would never keep Elle at the palace against her will? I doubted it.

“Are you okay?” I asked Elle.

She didn’t look at me. Letting go of my hand, she said, “I want to go home.”

I swallowed. “I know this is hard, Elle. It’s a lot for anyone to handle, let alone a new werewolf like you. If you want to talk, I’m right here.”

Elle didn’t look at me, still. “I want to go home,” she repeated.

We shifted and started running. She didn’t meet my gaze once. When I asked if she was hungry or tired, she only offered one-word responses. I hated it. Just before we reached Redwood territory, she came to a sudden stop.

*What’s wrong?* I mind linked. I wondered if she’d caught a whiff of the Rogue who’d been stalking her earlier.

When Elle turned to look at me, though, she didn’t seem alarmed.

*I think I should go back*, she said. She sounded serious.

*But we’re going back already*, I said. *We’ll be at the pack house soon.*

*No*, Elle said*. I want to go back to Lucian and accept his proposal.*

**Episode 3766**

*Shit.* This was *not* good.

I froze. A woman was pointing a gun at me, and it looked like she knew how to use it. I had no idea how much of my flamboyant display of magic she’d seen, but I had a very bad feeling in the pit of my stomach.

*If I made a shield right now, would it stop the bullets?* I wondered. *Maybe not the best time to experiment…*

“I asked you a question!” the woman snarled. “What the hell are you?”

I glanced at Lola nervously. She looked as shocked as I was, but in the blink of an eye, her expression changed. In an appeasing tone, she said, “Excuse me for startling you—I’m Lola. I called in advance, remember? You agreed to let us smash some stuff and blow off some steam because my bestie’s ex is the worst?”

“Yeah, yeah,” the woman grumbled, but she didn’t lower the gun. “I know who you are, but you two didn’t just smash stuff—I saw what you did!”

Lola placed a hand over her heart, fluttering her eyelashes innocently. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t fuck with me, kid!” the woman barked. “What you did just now ain’t normal!”

The woman was getting agitated, which was a bad thing for someone who was holding a gun. I wracked my brain, scrambling to come up with a believable explanation. But what? Not knowing how much she’d seen was our biggest issue right now.

*Could I tell her the truth?*

Of course not! I doubted the woman would believe me, anyway. It would probably make her even angrier. Or if she *did* believe me, well, that would be even worse. Because that could possibly end up exposing the entire supernatural world, and for what? All because I’d decided to blast a bunch of stuff to forget about that stupid asshole Xavier!

*GOD DAMMIT, XAVIER!*

I needed to fix this right now. Maybe I could blast the gun from the woman’s hands? Nope, bad idea—I didn’t need Adair to tell me that I had a long way to go until I attained that kind of precision. There was a chance that I’d make the gun go off, or that the woman could still manage to shoot me while trying to defend herself.

Lola would be okay if the gun fired—she was both a werewolf and vampire, so a bullet, unless it was silver, wouldn’t kill her. But I didn’t have that security. One bullet, and I’d be gone. I had survived demons and witches and trolls and vampires, but a single bullet would take me out.

*This is* not *how I imagined spending my evening!*

“… super rude, you know?” Lola was saying. I hadn’t even realized she’d been talking. “It’s like every man out there wants to crush your spirit! My friend’s ex didn’t even give her a decent explanation for his behavior!”

I realized that Lola had obviously been trying to distract the gun lady. It wasn’t working.

“That doesn’t answer my question!” she snapped, cutting Lola off. “I saw what your friend was doing out here.”

She shifted the gun, aiming it straight at my chest. There were thirty feet between us, but somehow, I didn’t doubt that she’d be able to make the shot.

“I’ll give you ten seconds to answer me, kid,” she said.

I felt sick to my stomach. I glanced at Lola, who had—by some miracle—actually shut up. Was she out of excuses and lies? Impossible! Also, why the hell was she staring at the woman so intensely? It was creeping me out.

“Lola,” I hissed, stepping closer to her. “What are you doing?”

“I’m trying to use my vampire compulsion powers,” she whispered back.

I huffed. “Oh my god! You don’t *have* compulsion powers!”

“Cali, I’m trying here—don’t interrupt me!”

“Oy!” the woman barked, cocking the gun. “Stop whispering and answer me!”

“I’m sorry!” I blurted out, forcing a laugh. “I’m really sorry to alarm you! It was just—it—”

I didn’t know how much this woman had seen, but it had been enough for her to get a gun. I said the first thing that came to mind.

“I thought my friend warned you,” I said quickly. “We’ve been playing with homemade fireworks.”

The woman narrowed her eyes. “Show me.”

I gulped, looking around. “Uh…”

Lola laughed nervously. “Obviously we can’t show you, because as you already saw, we used them.”

There was a long, tense pause as the woman eyed us both. Her eyes were narrowed. I held my breath, screaming inside my head.

*I can’t believe I was dumb enough to use my magic out in the open! Why didn’t Lola stop me? If I survive, how the hell am I going to explain this to Greyson? He’s going to be so devastated that—*

“God damn,” the woman said, interrupting my thoughts. She lowered her gun. “Don’t you two realize that fireworks are dangerous? You’re lucky you didn’t blow your hands off!”

I blinked in shock. *Has she really bought it so easily?*

“We’re not stupid,” Lola said with a huff. “We watched tutorials online!”

Whether Lola and I were stupid was always up for debate, but I wasn’t going to engage with that question right now. Everybody and their mother knew that I was super terrible at lying, so we had to get out of here before I dug an even deeper hole for myself.

“Lola,” I said through gritted teeth, nudging her. “Let it go.”

Lola scowled.

“We appreciate your concern,” I told the lady. “Again, sorry we worried you! It won’t happen again.”

“Right. It won’t.” Lola wrinkled her nose. “Even though this *is* a junkyard.”

The woman glared at Lola. “You got a problem with junk?”

“What? Us?” I laughed in a way that made me think of a turkey just before Thanksgiving. “We LOVE junk! Lola!” I grabbed her hand, squeezing. “Tell her how much you love junk!”

“Actually, recycling metal is a great way to promote sustainability,” Lola burst out. “And I also love seeing junk after it’s been cleaned up and—”

“I hate junk,” the woman barked. Both Lola and I shut up. “If it wasn’t for my ex—that jackass Glenn—I would’ve opened a pie shop long ago.”

I smiled tightly. “Well. It’s never too late, right?”

The woman glared at me.

I cleared my throat, grabbing Lola by the arm. “Anyway, we’d better go! So nice to meet you.”

The woman didn’t return the sentiment—*rude*—but I could just feel her eyes on us as we rushed toward the exit.

*Okay, that was SO CLOSE! I can’t believe we got away with—*

Suddenly, I heard the woman’s loud voice behind us. “I don’t believe you two.”

Lola froze. I slowly turned to face the woman. Of fucking *course* this wasn’t going to be easy. What did I expect? This was Lola and me—we were amateurs at life who were pros at getting into trouble.

“I don’t know what you two were really doing,” the woman said, peering at me, “but I have your friend’s number. I’m going to do some investigating.”

Lola huffed. “What for? This is ridiculous. Have you no heart? My friend’s going through a horrible breakup, and you’re just—”

“It’s fine!” I called, gripping Lola’s arm tighter. Through my teeth, I hissed, “*Don’t make it worse.* Let’s get out of here while we can.”

I quickly led a huffy Lola back to the car. The woman was still watching us, gun in hand, even as we climbed into our seats.

The second Lola closed the driver’s door, she said, “We could go back when she’s not watching and kill her.”

I gaped in horror. “LOLA!”

“What?” she said defensively. “It’s just an idea! We have to do *something*. If she does her ‘digging’ and finds out what we really are…”

A sense of dread spread inside me. “She can’t do anything. Nobody would believe her.”

“*Some* people would believe her,” Lola said darkly. “Hunters.”

“She’s not a hunter, Lola… Wait—did you think she *was*?” My voice turned high-pitched. “What’s she going to do, just grab a bunch of other hunters and track us down?”

“Maybe she’s not a hunter herself, but I’ll bet hunters have their ears out for the kind of report she’d made,” Lola said. She wasn’t helping my anxiety AT ALL. “Either way, this can’t be good. Remember all the trouble Dick Wigbert caused?”

I felt sick to my stomach. All I could think about was Greyson and the pack. My mate tried so hard all the time to do what was best for the Redwoods, and what had *I* done? I’d brought more trouble to the pack. JUST before the summit!

*You’re such an idiot, Cali! UGH!*

As I beat myself up, Lola pulled out into the road and chuckled to herself. “Anyway, you have to admit that up until that lady got all up in our business, that was fun.”

“It was fun,” I admitted. “But also pretty stupid.” I sighed, shaking my head. “I need to be more careful about using my magic out in the open. What if she figures it out? What if you’re right, and she is a hunter, and—”

“I was just catastrophizing! I don’t actually think she’s a hunter,” Lola said. “She’s probably just a suspicious human, and she didn’t even seem all that smart. She’ll probably forget all about what she thinks she saw.”

I swallowed audibly. “And if she doesn’t?”

Lola pressed her lips together.

And then, I got an idea. A marvelous-nuts-brilliant idea.

*Hey… This could actually work!*

My heart was pounding. “Lola, we need to make her forget she ever saw us.”

**Episode 3767**

**Xavier**

The reaction to my announcement was… mixed. There was surprise, and what I hoped was relief and support, in the Samaras’ expressions. For the most part, they seemed to be in favor of my becoming their Alpha. I could feel the energy coming off them, and my wolf sniffed the air, preparing for whatever happened next.

Neither he nor I missed the few hostile looks in the crowd, though.

Marissa and Geraint were the most obvious. They both stared at me defiantly, Geraint with a glower, Marissa with her eyebrows arched, like she wasn’t sure if this was real. If they had a problem or didn’t want me, I had a few choice words I would’ve *loved* to share with them.

But no.

The old Xavier might’ve gone off on them, but I knew I couldn’t do that right now. My thoughts went to Greyson for the briefest of moments—he always told me that I needed to be diplomatic and keep my cool. If only he could see me now, following his advice while also desperately needing to prove that I could be the better Alpha.

I had an opportunity here.

A real one.

So I shoved down the urge to set some people straight and reminded myself that I needed to do my best to keep the Samaras united. The naysayers had to be won over, not discarded. The Samaras had dealt with enough disruption—they didn’t need any more of it.

I glanced at Ava.

With a nod, she mind linked, *Keep going. Show them it’s really what you want. You can do this.*

She was right, I realized. I *could* do this. I’d been born to do this.

Stepping forward, I spoke up again.

“Since Nolan’s death,” I said, “the Samaras have been adrift, vulnerable, and we’ve already dissolved once. Maybe this time we simply dissolve for good.”

Immediately, there were murmurs of agreement. I felt more confident as I continued.

“You know who I am,” I said. “You know I’m a born Alpha. You know my family, my history, my bloodline—and the kind of gravitas it holds among our kind. The Samara pack won’t remain overlooked by other packs with me as its leader.”

Geraint frowned at that, but he didn’t make a sound.

“That doesn’t mean we should accept you with open arms.” Marissa glanced at Ava before looking back at me. “How do we know we can trust you?”

Ava shot her an intense look, but I cut in before she could speak.

“I’ve repeatedly proven to you that I care about the Samara pack. I led you against the Bitterfangs when Zeke couldn’t handle it. I didn’t have to step in and do that—I could’ve let you fend for yourselves, but I chose not to.”

More widespread murmurs of agreement. But then Geraint spoke.

“Why would you even want to be our Alpha?” he asked. “You have no ties to the Samara pack.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I said. I reached over, taking Ava’s hand. I saw her inhale sharply. My chest ached at the touch, my wolf rejoicing. “No matter what’s happened in the past, Ava is my mate,” I said. “And everybody knows that that’s not something to be taken lightly.”

My wolf paused at that. Because while Ava was his mate, Cali was as well—and for a moment, he felt torn. Like this was wrong. Like *I* was wrong, and Cali should’ve been the mate I was talking about. I shoved all his thoughts and feelings down, though. I pushed through, because that was what an Alpha did. I’d watched my brother do it again and again.

I fucking hated how much I understood him, now.

I hated to admit that he’d been right.

Even though having pack members defying me, questioning me, left me feeling acidic and furious, I had to tell myself that they were wrong. That I couldn’t let my ego get in the way.

“I know you don’t want another Zeke or Knox taking the reins,” I said. “But I’m not them. You know I’m not.”

Many of the Samaras agreed, their voices loud. I hid a smile.

Over them, though, Donovan spoke up. “You may be better than Zeke and Knox, but that doesn’t take much. How do we know you’re right for us?”

“You don’t have anyone else,” I said bluntly. “I’m your best bet. I have ties to the Samara pack. I’m Ava’s mate. I’m the only one who can lead you—and you’ve already seen that I’m capable of leading you into battle. I can protect you against the Bitterfangs and help you regain the greatness you once enjoyed.”

I heard the words coming out of my mouth and realized that I believed each and every one of them. Besides, I truly wanted to be Alpha. This was my moment. It hadn’t happened the way I’d planned, but that had been before Adéluce.

I wondered if she was watching this.

Would she let it happen? Or was she going to interfere, to rob me of the Alpha position like she’d robbed me of everything else?

This moment did feel good enough for her to steal, actually.

The Samaras had been murmuring to each other approvingly, and a couple of them were even clapping. Donovan’s expression was unreadable, but I could feel him assessing my answer.

“The Samaras have been waiting for an Alpha,” Ava said, squeezing my hand. “I promised I’d find one, and I’ve done better than that. I found the absolute best Alpha we could have. I know what a true Alpha looks like.”

“Yeah!” someone called.

There was cheering, now. *Real* cheering. Whistles and claps of excitement. My wolf let out a howl, the feeling of acceptance vibrating through the air, a primal instinct that came hand in hand with being part of a pack and having your mate beside you.

Ava’s support made my pulse skyrocket. Lust was one thing, but this was more than that. This was community, and our mate bond had never felt so intense. At least not since she’d been back. Ava smiled at me like she felt it too. She was so beautiful, the sight of her shot a pang through my chest.

“The Samara pack will rise again!” she shouted, holding my hand tight.

This time, the cheering was even louder. I didn’t stop myself from smiling. I fucking *couldn’t*, because this was my moment. I wished Greyson could see me right now. These people wanted *me* to be their leader. They knew what I could do for them. I would finally prove to everybody that I was the better Alpha—that when it came down to it, my brother was lesser than me in every way.

I would prove that I was *never* meant to be Greyson’s fucking second.

I was determined to make the Samaras the most powerful, respected, and feared pack in the area.

“That’s all well and good.” Geraint’s loud voice cut through all the cheering. “I know you’ve proven yourself in the past, Xavier, but the past shouldn’t play into this. What’s your plan, here? *How* are you going to help us grow and become stronger? What measures will you take?”

Geraint fired off one question after the other, and dissension broke out among the others.

“It’s too early to ask him shit like that,” someone said.

“He talks a big game, but if he doesn’t have a plan, how is he any better than the others?” someone else said.

More arguments started, but I had to shut them down.

“I will do whatever it takes to prove that I’m taking this seriously,” I said loudly. “The Samaras don’t want to cower in the shadows of the Vanguards, the Blue Bloods, or the Redwoods. We want to stand on our own, and I can bring you there.”

“So we should just take your word for it?” Donovan asked, crossing his arms. “Becoming Alpha is a big responsibility, and even though you’re a strong fighter, your reputation as someone who doesn’t think before marching straight into danger doesn’t help your case. Being Alpha is a huge responsibility, and you shouldn’t take it lightly.”

His defiance made fury rise inside me. I let Ava’s hand go, stepping closer to Donovan. I sized him up, doing my best to look intimidating.

“Do you think I need *you* to remind me how serious this is?” I asked, my voice low. “Does it look like I’m fucking playing here?”

Donovan held my stare. I’d give the guy one thing—he had guts.

“I am prepared to be a pack Alpha,” I said simply. “I have been my whole life. But if you doubt it, I’m willing to prove it to you.”

Donovan cleared his throat. “Good to hear. There are traditions to follow in situations like this,” he said. “We can’t just let anyone be Alpha because he says he can, or because he wants to.”

“Seriously?” Ava scoffed. Her agitation had clearly started growing the second I’d let her hand go. “Why the hell are you being difficult here, Donovan?”

Donovan shot a look at Marissa. “We all want what’s best for the Samara pack,” he said. “We want Xavier to do what any candidate would have to do—undertake an Iudicium.”

Ava snarled. “This is unnecessary. Xavier’s already proven himself as a capable leader, it’s—”

“No,” I said, cutting her off. “If this is what will satisfy them and quell any doubts, then fine. An Iudicium it is.”

**Episode 3768**

**Greyson**

Elle made a move to turn back, but I blocked her way.

*There’s no way I’m going to let you go back to Lucian*, I mind linked. *Why did you change your mind?*

Elle’s wolf was much smaller than mine. She stood there for a moment, taking me in before looking around, like she was measuring her possibility of making an escape. The idea that she might just bolt had me on edge. The tension between us grew with every fucking second she didn’t answer my question. I knew I was supposed to stay composed, but I just couldn’t do that when Lucian was involved.

*Why the fuck haven’t we killed the princeling yet?* Xavier would’ve asked. And for all his faults, for all the million reasons why I was furious with him right now, his words resonated. Even though I knew it couldn’t happen.

*Elle?* I mind linked again. *Talk to me. Please.*

When she shifted back to human, I could breathe again.

“While we were running, I was thinking about what happened at the palace just now…” Elle looked up at me, her hands drawing up to hug her torso. “I don’t want to be the reason why the alliance falls apart. I know how important it is. How dangerous the Bitterfangs are. I will marry Lucian to protect my pack and my Alpha.”

So *this* was why Elle had been so quiet before. She was blaming herself for Lucian’s threats. She saw herself as the problem, when it was Lucian who needed to be beaten, dragged through the mud, then covered in honey and left in the middle of a fucking field with fire ants crawling up his ass.

The fact that he’d put her in this position made my wolf grit his teeth with rage… And something else. Something I couldn’t pinpoint. But nothing changed the fact that I was responsible for Elle, and the idea of letting her marry that pretentious, self-centered princeling just because he demanded it had me absolutely goddamn livid.

“Please don’t be mad—” Elle cut herself off when I shifted back to human as well.

“I’m not mad at you, Elle,” I said levelly, placing my hands on her shoulders. “I could never be mad at you. This is all Lucian’s fault.”

She stared up at me, looking oddly vulnerable. “I don’t think he’s going to stop if I don’t give him what he wants.”

There was a loud screeching noise inside my head. Was it my conscience jumping off a cliff? Was it my anger doing its best imitation of a teakettle at boiling point? Who the fuck knew? What I *did* know was that I had to contain myself right now and avoid howling in fury.

“You are not a *thing* for Lucian to want,” I told Elle in a low voice. “You are your own person. You are loyal and kind, and everyone in the pack wants to see you grow. Lucian does *not* deserve you.”

Elle swallowed, taking a step back, out of my grasp. I let her go, even though everything in me was screaming to just grab her and drag her back to the house—just to make sure she didn’t run off.

“I don’t know what ‘deserving me’ means. Lucian says he’s my mate,” she said. “And if I agree to marry him, then I will be with my mate, and the alliance will remain.”

“The fact that Lucian says he’s your mate doesn’t actually make him your mate,” I said. “Besides, you told me that you didn’t respect Lucian, didn’t think he was Alpha enough for you—has that changed?”

Elle looked down at the ground, quiet for a moment before she replied. “No. But he could be. Maybe if I marry him, he will become more like you.”

I felt a sharp fit of laughter bubbling up my throat. Lucian would never be like me. Not because I was that fucking phenomenal, but because Lucian was just that fucking bad. He was a self-obsessed narcissist who put his own needs and whims above everything else—his pack included. He was a tyrant who viewed Elle as a thing he wanted to possess.

Mates or not, he didn’t deserve her. Just like Xavier didn’t deserve Cali after the way he’d treated her. That particular wound was fresh, and I was obviously projecting, but it was hard not to.

“If the alliance weren’t being threatened,” I said to Elle, “would you still want to marry Lucian?”

Elle pressed her lips together. She hugged herself again. She seemed so young right now that the idea of Lucian touching her in *that* way—in *any* way—had bile rising up my throat.

“I have to do *something*,” Elle said, looking up at me. This time, there was a determined set to her jaw. “I’m the only one who can. You and the Redwoods have protected me, taken me in, taught me so much. I want to help you all in return. If marrying Lucian is all I can offer, then I’m going to do it.”

“No,” I said matter-of-factly.

I said it like an Alpha.

Elle blinked up at me, her breath catching in her throat. “No?”

I was looking at Elle right now, but all I could see was Cali. I thought about Cali—how she always wanted to give back to the pack, to contribute. I remembered how she’d insisted that we didn’t kill Lucian when he’d been weakened, even after everything he’d done to her. And all because she hadn’t wanted to create any more trouble for the pack.

Who the fuck *did* that? Who the hell would allow the man who’d treated her like a puppet get away with it, all in the name of the greater good?

I was looking at Elle and seeing Cali, and the idea of history repeating itself under my watch made a fresh wave of rage course through me.

“No,” I repeated. “That’s *not* all you have to offer. You’re new, and still learning about being a werewolf. I know you haven’t had time to contribute as much as you’d like, but you have fought with us, defended the pack. We all care about you.”

Elle’s voice was hoarse. “I know you care about me. That’s why I want to do this. Because I care about you, too. Let me—”

“No,” I said, gripping her by the shoulders again. “I’m not letting you. Lucian wants you, just like he wanted Cali. But just because Lucian wants something, doesn’t mean he should have it. Just because you care about the pack, doesn’t mean you have to sacrifice yourself, your happiness, your future, to someone like Lucian. Do you understand, Elle?”

Elle looked down at my chest, frowning. Was she listening to my heart? It was pounding.

I couldn’t hide it.

Finally, she said, “You didn’t let Lucian have Cali.”

“Of course not.”

Elle’s gaze darted up to mine. “Because you and Cali are mates.”

I swallowed. “Yes, the mate bond drove my efforts to protect Cali from Lucian. But I would do the same for you.”

Elle’s face twisted in confusion. “But we’re not mates. You don’t need to protect me like that.”

I didn’t speak for a moment. Elle stared at me, and the idea of letting her go felt like a knife digging into my flesh. No, no, and fucking *no*.

“I’d do the same for any pack member,” I said. “You’re all under my protection.”

Elle narrowed her eyes at me, like she could sense that something was off with my response. To be fair, it *was* half a lie. I would’ve protected any Redwood, of course, but the connection I felt with Elle was bubbling up, demanding to be acknowledged.

It wasn’t a mate bond, but it was there.

“Like I said, Lucian doesn’t deserve you,” I told her.

She broke away from my grip again—only this time, it was with a huff. Raking her hands through her hair, she said, “But the pack deserves the alliance! The Redwoods deserve stability and safety and—”

“We’ll be fine, Elle.”

She stared up at me. “But what if you’re not? What if the pack gets in trouble and I didn’t do all I could to stop it from happening?”

“If I’m the Alpha you think I am, you need to believe me when I say I’ll take care of the pack,” I told her seriously.

That finally gave her pause.

“Let me make you a deal,” I said, capitalizing. “How about you don’t do anything until after the pack summit? Let’s see how that plays out—Lucian could be bluffing, after all. It would be terrible for you to bind yourself to someone you don’t want for no good reason.”

The words coming out of my mouth made me think of my mother. Marlene, as well—Xavier and Colton’s mother. They’d both been forced to be with Silas, and only tragedy had followed.

Looking at Elle right now, I thought of Cali, and I thought of my mother.

I couldn’t stop myself from doing it.

I looked at Elle, and I was steady, calm, confident. Direct. The kind of Alpha she seemed to need.

I wasn’t letting her go.

“If, after the summit, you still feel like you want to marry Lucian, then we can talk about it,” I said. “But I want to make something very clear, here. Marry who you love. Don’t marry for any other reason—not for any alliance, not as a noble sacrifice.”

Marriage had to be about love. Like the love I had with Cali. A true union between us would make the pack proud. It would make us a proper Alpha and Luna. That was the kind of love—the kind of marriage—Elle deserved.

She stayed silent for a full five seconds before she asked, “If I wanted to go back right now, would you stop me?”

“I could,” I said. I wasn’t playing. “I am your Alpha.”

Elle swallowed audibly. “If you… If you weren’t my Alpha, would you still stop me? Would you still see this as a bad idea?”

This was a horrific idea, but only because it involved Lucian. If this situation had featured another, better man, the benefits of a marriage between a rival pack’s Alpha and a Redwood wolf would’ve been numerous. That would’ve been obvious to any Alpha.

But I wasn’t just Elle’s Alpha. I was… something I couldn’t quite define.

“Elle,” I said. “Will you agree to wait until after the summit to decide?”

**Episode 3769**

“Forget she ever saw us?” Lola huffed. “That’s impossible. I make a lasting impression, Cali—nobody can ever forget me once they see me.”

I prayed for strength. And patience. And a snack, perhaps. That would be nice.

“*Lola*.”

She fluttered her eyelashes at me. “Yes, best friend?”

“Keep your eyes on the road and be serious!” I said in a sharp—by my standards—tone. “I have a bad feeling about that woman. It won’t take much for her to realize the fireworks story was a lie. She’s going to figure it out.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “How could she possibly do that?”

“I mean, don’t fireworks have, like, stuff that they leave behind? Powder or something? The string thingies that are attached to them?”

She blinked at me. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“The *string thingies*, Lola!” I exclaimed. “There won’t be any of them left, because those weren’t fireworks—they were *me*! And that woman is going to figure that out, and then we’ll be doomed.”

“We’re not *doomed*.” Lola scoffed. Then she paused. “Though I did try to use my vampire powers to manipulate her, and it didn’t work.”

My eye twitched. “Oh my *god*, that’s because you don’t *have* manipulation powers!”

“Hey, we don’t know anything for sure,” Lola said defensively. “Artemis didn’t know she could make magic arrows up until a few hours ago. So who knows what I’m capable of, if I put my mind to it?”

I rubbed my temples, taking a deep breath. “We don’t have the time to develop your hidden powers right now, Lola. If indeed you have any—”

“I have to have *some*,” Lola said pointedly. “It wouldn’t be fair if only Artemis did.”

“Can you please focus?” I asked impatiently. “We need to do something about this woman before it’s too late. She could be posting about us on the internet right now. We have to make her forget.”

“As we’ve established, I can’t actually do that,” Lola said with a huff. “But what about Artemis?”

I processed Lola’s question, taking deep breaths. Artemis had, indeed, used her manipulation magic on Dick Wigbert. And then again on me, when I’d been trying to build up my resistance. I shook off the memory of the horrible situation with the wisps. I was glad that was behind me and that Mom had safekeeping of the Shard. Hopefully we wouldn’t need that again anytime soon.

“Artemis does seem to have more control over her magic lately…” I trailed off. “So maybe that isn’t a bad idea.”

“All my ideas are great ideas,” Lola informed me.

I chose not to comment on that.

“I suppose we can ask Artemis,” I said. “But, of course, that would entail admitting that I was careless with my magic in the first place…” I swallowed nervously, my already sprinting pulse racing even faster. “Shit, I can only imagine what Adair would say.”

Lola winced. “Adair does get grumpy very easily. It’s super annoying.”

“He wouldn’t be wrong to get mad, Lola. What if he says he doesn’t want to train me anymore?” I felt a lump grow in my throat. “I was so stupid—*why* did I have to use my magic in public like that?”

*Ugh. None of this would have happened if I hadn’t been trying to get over Xavier by smashing things! Wait—am I actually blaming Xavier for this?*

Yes. Yes, I was.

“Please don’t be so hard on yourself,” Lola told me with a sigh. “We’re supernaturals living in the human world. Something like this was bound to happen to one of us eventually.”

“How often does it happen, though?” I asked, suddenly realizing something. “Dick found out, and Artemis took care of it, but Artemis is Fae. What do werewolves do when they don’t have an Artemis?”

Lola shot me a sideways look. “Do you really want to know?”

The answer flashed up in my head like a lightbulb, and I shuddered. “Nope.”

Neither of us spoke for a moment. A very brief moment, because then I turned in my seat, looking at her with wide eyes.

“But it’s not right, Lola!” I burst out.

She looked confused. “What’s not right?”

“What werewolves do!”

Lola shot me another sideways look. “Well, I didn’t actually *tell* you what they do, so—”

“So, you didn’t have to tell me—I already know,” I said with a huff. “I want to believe that there’s always an alternative to what happens to people like Tony.”

Lola scowled at that. “I don’t think Tony is a good example. He wasn’t exactly innocent.”

“But what happens to actual innocents who find out about werewolves?” I pressed. “And who judges who’s innocent or not? Werewolves and vampires don’t *always* have to kill to cover up their secrets, right?”

Lola’s face was serious. “Cali, I know this is upsetting to you, but…”

My palms were sweating. “But what?”

She sighed. “Honestly?”

“Honestly,” I said. “You’re always supposed to be honest with me.”

“Well, then,” Lola muttered, grip tightening on the steering wheel. “All I’m saying is that it would be easy to slip back into the junkyard at night and take care of the problem.”

The hair on the back of my neck stood up. “I hate the way you say ‘take care’—like killing someone is like fixing a flat tire or something.”

Lola pressed her lips together. “Humans are a threat, Cali. It’s a fact of supernatural life.”

My stomach clenched. I was getting upset now, and I didn’t know if it was because of what had happened tonight, or Xavier, or Lola’s answers, or everything at once.

*Probably everything at once…*

“If I’d discovered you were a werewolf before you guys told me,” I said, “would you have killed me?”

Lola shrugged. “Well, Jay wouldn’t have let me. He’s cute like that.”

I glared at her, shoving her in the arm.

She chuckled. “Hey!”

“Lola, this isn’t funny! And you didn’t answer my question!”

“You were suspicious for a while there, and Xavier and Colton didn’t kill you, did they?” Lola said. “And they had plenty of opportunities.”

“Right,” I said bitterly, “Xavier used to threaten to kill me all the time. And I totally didn’t see that as a flag red enough to make me get the fuck away from him…” Thinking about it now made me want to punch something. “What the hell is wrong with me?”

Lola shook her head. “Mate bonds are a hell of a thing,” she said. “Let’s not talk about Xavier. As for me, I’m obviously joking about Jay telling me not to kill you. I’m your best friend—do you really think I would ever hurt you?”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “What *would* you have done, then? Talked to me about it?”

“Of course,” Lola said with a coy little smirk. “I would’ve explained everything to you, watched you freak out, and then perhaps turned you to keep you safe. That way, we’d have been together forever.”

I rolled my eyes. “Not funny, Lola.”

She squinted at me. “Am I joking, though?”

“Stop!” I shoved her. She laughed, and then I said, “What about the junkyard lady, though?”

“Again, I don’t think we have to worry about it.” She raised an eyebrow at me. “I mean, I know you’re absolutely going to worry about it, because that’s what you do. But maybe we should keep this between us. No need to tell Greyson.”

I gaped at her. “Do you really expect me to keep this a secret from my mate? A woman pointed a gun at us!”

Lola shrugged. “So? We’ve been through worse, haven’t we?”

“That’s beside the point,” I said. “That woman could pose a danger to the pack, and it would be irresponsible and dangerous not to tell Greyson.”

“Right,” Lola said, pursing her lips. “Okay, how about this—what do you think Greyson would do if he learned that a woman threatened you with a gun? And before you answer, think about what Xavier did to Tony, and Tony didn’t even *have* a gun.”

I paused, my throat growing dry. Lola had a point. Xavier wouldn’t have hesitated—the woman would’ve already been dead by now.

*At least the old Xavier, the one who gave a shit about me, wouldn’t have hesitated.*

I shoved the thought out of my brain and refocused on Greyson. Greyson was different. He thought differently to his brother, yet he still loved me fiercely. I knew he was more of a pacifist at heart, much more levelheaded, but still…

“I know Greyson’s supposed to be the less violent one,” Lola said, “but we’ve seen him during battle, and honestly? I think he’s scarier than Xavier when he gets to the point of no return.”

I didn’t disagree with Lola. I didn’t speak, either.

“Are you willing to take a chance on Greyson?” Lola pressed. “Or should we just go back and kill the woman ourselves, spare him the trouble?”

I stared at Lola. “I hope you’re kidding.”

Lola shot me a look. There was no smile on her face.

I swallowed down my nerves. “Lola, *please*. Promise me you won’t kill that woman. I can’t…” I rubbed my forehead. “I couldn’t bear it if someone died just because I wanted to blast shit to help me get over Xavier. Promise me.”

Lola glanced at me and huffed. “Okay, fine.”

“You’d better not have your fingers crossed,” I warned her. “You promised!”

“I said fine!” she shot back. “Now stop worrying so much!”

I tried my best. And failed.

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Lola parked the car in the driveway. Once we got out, she asked, “So, what are you going to do?”

“I’ll talk to Artemis first,” I said, “see if she’ll agree to help.”

“Cali?”

Adair’s voice made me jump. *Oh, SHIT!*

I whirled around—he was sitting with Tabitha on the front porch.

Staring at me intensely, he asked, “What do you want Artemis to help you with?”

**Episode 3770**

**Xavier**

Donovan seemed satisfied. “The Iudicium will take place tomorrow, then.”

Chatter and cheers erupted throughout the pack. My confidence was growing by the second. I’d come into this whole thing a little unsure, feeling like I’d let my emotions pull me to the Samaras. To Ava. But now, I knew I could do this. With so many of the Samaras smiling and clapping for me, with Ava by my side, I felt good.

I felt steady.

This was my decision, and it was a true one. And nobody—not even the vampire-witch—was forcing me to do this. I could’ve gone Rogue and stayed away from all packs. But that would have played right into Adéluce’s hands, and I refused to let her take anything else from me.

She couldn’t keep me from my destiny. There were many things that were bigger than her, and this felt like one of them. And maybe, if I played my cards right, if I figured out a strong enough plan, I’d be able to use the power that came with being Samara Alpha against her.

I couldn’t dwell on that secret hope for too long, though. I didn’t want to get paranoid, but it was hard not to when I’d seen how powerful Adéluce was. I couldn’t rule out the possibility that she could somehow read my thoughts—if not all of them, then at least some. Perhaps she was able to sense my decisions before I made them.

This was only a theory, but she’d played the long game to bring me to this point, to turn me away from everything I held dear. I needed to play the same game, then turn it back against her when the time was right. In the meantime, I was going to do what I’d been born to do.

There was part of me—a small part—that wondered if the fact that Adéluce wasn’t stopping me from becoming Samara Alpha was cause for alarm. But I couldn’t linger on that thought. This was my decision.

I’d been trapped, but I’d found a way out.

This *had* *to be* my way out.

As talk about the Iudicium continued, Ava pulled me aside.

“I want to talk to you,” she said, her voice low. Husky.

I looked at her hand on my arm. Her touch had always made me feel conflicted. Since she’d gotten back, the push and pull just hadn’t eased—at least not until recently.

Her touch might not have felt right, but it didn’t feel wrong, either.

“Okay,” I said.

She slid down her palm down my arm to my hand, and I felt my throat go dry. She led me back to the Airstream, and I followed.

When she closed the door behind us and turned to face me, I said, “What did you want to talk—”

My question was smothered by her mouth. The kiss was passionate and hungry, her touch insistent as she shoved me up against the door. My first instinct was to push her away, but I didn’t. I fucking *couldn’t*, not when my wolf was howling with joy despite his grief. This moment was surreal and powerful enough to push past my second thoughts.

I was going to be an Alpha. Not of the Redwoods, but of the Samaras. And I wasn’t celebrating with Cali, but with Ava. It should’ve felt wrong, but it fucking *didn’t*, and I’d fought against my mate bond with Ava for so long that…

How the fuck was I meant to keep fighting this? I was so tired of fighting, to the point where it felt like a breaking point was close.

Something had to give.

“What’s wrong?” Ava pulled back, breaking the kiss. Her breathing was ragged, her hands gripping the sides of my neck. “If you’re upset about the Iudicium, then I’ll talk them out of it, okay?” She shook her head, stroked my chest. “You don’t need to prove anything to anyone. None of them are brave enough, strong enough, smart enough to be Alpha. If they were, they would’ve tried already. I’ll help you, Xavier. You deserve this.”

*You deserve this*.

She was looking up at me with so much admiration and fucking adoration that my sense of self—previously beaten to a goddamn pulp—rose up. My wolf howled confidently, and when I stared back at Ava, at her bright eyes and all the hope in them, I felt this immense sense of *power*.

Ava was my mate, and she believed in me. And despite everything, that was exactly what my wolf needed to know.

“I’ll do the Iudicium,” I told her gruffly. “I’ll show them what a true Alpha can do. I don’t need to talk anyone out of anything, or cheat like Knox did. Once I come out the other side a victor, there will never be any questions or doubts about my position within this pack. I am their Alpha.”

Ava’s eyes were glistening. She smiled a little and let out a dubious chuckle, her hands shaky as she caressed my shoulder, my cheek. Her tenderness felt strange, but still familiar.

“This is what I’ve always wanted, Xavier,” she whispered. “It’s what you deserve. I just can’t believe it’s finally happening.”

I couldn’t believe it either. But it was all real. I was on the cusp of becoming the Samara Alpha, and Ava was right by my side.

I lifted her chin, cradled her cheek in my hand. She leaned into my touch, gripping my shirt tightly. She looked up at me through her lashes, and I couldn’t deny the way my heart expanded in my chest.

Even though I was still mourning the loss of Cali.

Nothing had changed—I was still going to fight my way back to Cali and the Redwood pack. Whether they would accept me back was something else, especially after what I’d done and what I was about to do. I didn’t know what the future would hold, but all I could do was move forward, and, one day, beg for forgiveness.

Maybe that day wasn’t today, or tomorrow, but this was my first step in that direction to getting my life back from Adéluce, and I couldn’t afford to lose sight of that. I couldn’t forget my true, long-term goal. But this was going to be a journey, and I just…

I didn’t want to be alone.

I didn’t know what I’d do if I was left alone right now.

And Ava would never leave me.

Despite my hesitation, I could feel it, sense it, fucking *taste* her devotion when she leaned up and brushed my lips over hers. My wolf was still howling, and Ava was right—I deserved this. I deserved a chance to forget the horrible things Adéluce had done.

Maybe this wasn’t fair to Ava, but I couldn’t tell her the truth anyway. And it was hard to think about what was fair and what wasn’t when everything was fucked, and Ava’s mouth was hot against mine.

She clung to me and moaned loudly when I kissed her back. Her pleasure ignited a sense of victory inside me that felt almost feral.

I couldn’t fucking control this. It was animal.

I lifted her up, and she wrapped her legs around me. She never stopped kissing me, her nails digging into my neck, her mouth wide open for my tongue. I walked over to the bed, dropped her on it, and when she pulled me on top of her, I couldn’t stop.

I couldn’t fucking *stop*.

Ava moaned and trembled under me, her thighs locked around my hips, her lower body locked with mine. She whimpered when she felt how hard I was. I groaned at the contact, at the heat and pressure. Her entire body heaved when I bit into her neck, her hips arching upward, rocking into mine. She touched me all over, anywhere she could, like she couldn’t believe this was happening, like she couldn’t get enough.

The mate bond was vibrating between us.

The connection soared, electrifying the air around us, and I knew she’d let me do whatever the hell I wanted to her. She’d let me tear her clothes off and fuck her like a beast. She’d open her legs for me, her mouth. She’d drink me down and let me use her and use me back and rejoice in how good it felt. Ava and I used to be bad together, but this was so good, it felt like I could break with just these kisses, with the friction between our bodies, with the scent of her need.

This could be the point of no return.

Control slipped through my fingertips, almost gone—

*Cali’s laugh.*

There it was, in my head—a searing sound, burning through everything else.

I pulled back, breathless, shaking.

Ava was underneath me, staring up at me, panting. Her eyes were dark, her face flushed, a mark already blooming on her neck. I’d done that.

“I’m yours if you want me, Xavier,” she whispered. “I know you said you wanted to take things slow, but this…” She swallowed roughly. “This isn’t exactly slow, is it?”

How could I tell her she was wrong?

Her grip on me didn’t falter.

“When you’re Alpha…”

*When*, she said. Not *if*. *When*.

To Ava, I was never second best.

To Ava, I was nobody’s second.

“When you’re Alpha, what will it mean for me?” she asked quietly. “Will I be your Luna?”

**Episode 3771**

I swallowed nervously. I didn’t even know *why* I was so nervous—Adair hadn’t asked me anything outrageous. But there was just something about his quiet, watchful presence that always made me a little edgy. Especially if my magic was involved.

“Um, I’m going to go check on Jay,” Lola squeaked, and hurried into the house.

I glared after her—*Great, Lola, thanks for that*—then I turned to Adair and forced a smile.

“Hey, you two, I didn’t see you there,” I said. “Where have you been hiding, Adair? Tabitha? I feel like I haven’t seen you two in ages. How are you?”

But Adair wasn’t going to be so easily sidetracked. “I asked you about Artemis. What are you going to ask her?”

I hesitated. I wasn’t ready to admit—to Adair, of all people—that I’d just been reckless with my magic. But he was looking at me with those piercing blue eyes that seemed to see through me, and he was clearly expecting me to say something, so I thought fast. I had to tell him something that sounded believable but was also boring enough to make him lose interest.

“It’s about Xavier.” I sighed, trying to look sad. “I need some sisterly advice.”

Adair was staring at me so hard, it felt like he was trying to see into my brain. His eyes were so intense, I had a panicked moment where I wondered if he was actually going to buy what I was selling. *I* knew I was a terrible liar, but Adair didn’t know me well enough to know that. Maybe he just thought I was *always* this sweaty.

“Well, that stuff with your mate is none of my business,” he muttered, glancing away.

A huge wave of relief crashed over me, followed almost immediately by a twinge of guilt. I didn’t like to lie.

“I assume that you’re still planning to train,” he went on. “Based on your efforts this morning, you’re going to need it if you want to gain control of your magic.” Adair looked grave. “If you don’t get ahold of it, you could end up using it recklessly without even realizing.”

I pictured the woman holding the gun and felt my face flush.

“Well, we wouldn’t want that,” I said, my voice unnaturally high.

“If you’re looking for Artemis, she was in the kitchen with Rishika the last time I saw her,” Tabitha offered.

“Thanks,” I said hurriedly, and rushed into the house. I *was* in a hurry to find my sister, but I was more anxious to get away from Adair’s questions and the intensity of his stare.

But the moment I got to the door and reached for the knob, I heard Greyson’s voice, and that stopped me in my tracks. I turned around and looked, wondering where he was. Then I spotted him, emerging from the woods with Elle—both of them naked.

Normally I would’ve had *no* objection to seeing Greyson naked—his body was a freaking work of art. But I didn’t like seeing him naked *with Elle*, and I didn’t like that Adair and Tabitha were sitting three feet away, either.

The intense awkwardness of the moment made me wish for glamour magic so that I could clothe both of them magically. It was cold out, so I probably would’ve given both of them turtlenecks and snowsuits. Something with heavy padding and hats with earflaps—because of the *weather*, of course.

I’d just started to wonder why the hell Greyson and Elle were coming out of the woods together when I stopped myself with a hard shake of my head. Greyson had just told me about Lucian’s theory—that turning Elle had created some kind of bond between them—but I couldn’t just assume that was true.

In fact, I wasn’t going to even consider it. Not now. Not when Xavier had just left me. If I really had lost Xavier, there was no way I was even going to think about losing Greyson, too.

“Hey,” I said, waving to the two of them as they approached the porch. “Where have you two been? Were you out on patrol?”

Greyson looked up at me, his expression serious. “Cali,” he said with a sigh. “Why don’t we go inside?”

I could tell in an instant that something was wrong. Something was bothering Greyson, but I didn’t ask him what it was, just followed him inside.

He started toward the kitchen, but I tapped his shoulder.

“Maybe you could grab some clothes?” I suggested. “And maybe you could do the same, Elle.”

Elle looked down at her naked—and perfect—body. She shrugged, like she didn’t understand my reasoning, but headed into the laundry room, presumably to root around for something to wear.

I followed Greyson as he headed upstairs. In his room, he pulled open a drawer and yanked out a pair of sweats, and I sat on the bed, enjoying the visual feast of his naked body.

He glanced up at me as he pulled on the pants. “You’re blushing, love.”

“You’re naked,” I said, by way of explanation. “There’s a lot to blush about. Like, *a lot*.”

Greyson smiled as he reached for a T-shirt. “Well, if it’s too much for you, let me know.”

“Oh, I can handle it,” I assured him.

He cocked an eyebrow. “Are you sure about that? You look like you might be a little overcome.”

I shrugged. “It *is* a little distracting, I guess. “

“Distracting?” he repeated, his tone taking on a teasing note. He took a step toward me and leaned in. “Well, we wouldn’t want that.”

He leaned closer still and pressed a kiss to my lips. I let myself melt against him. His tongue opened my lips, then entered my mouth, exploring and claiming. My mind went blissfully blank as he pulled me close, pressing his warm, still half-naked body against mine.

Then I pulled back and looked up into his face. “Hang on, why are you kissing me?”

He grinned down at me. “Just to make sure I can still make you look that way.”

My face felt like lava, and I stepped away from him, feeling flustered. “So, if you weren’t on patrol, why *were* you in the woods? What were you doing?”

Greyson’s eyes glinted as he looked at me. “Caliana Hart, you’d better not be jealous.”

“I—of course, I’m not jealous,” I sputtered, which was an utter lie. I absolutely *was* jealous, but I wasn’t about to admit it.

Greyson dropped onto the bed, his shirt still in his hands. I almost wished he would put it on. The way his abs looked as he moved was distracting as hell.

To save myself from the distraction, I walked around to the opposite side of the bed and perched on the edge—and tried to keep my eyes off his muscles as much as I could.

“What happened with Elle?” I asked again.

Greyson ran a hand through his hair. “She was about to throw her life away.”

I frowned. “What does that mean?”

“She was going to accept Lucian’s marriage proposal.”

“*No!*” I gasped. “Why would she *do* that?”

I shuddered. The thought of Elle marrying Lucian made me feel physically sick. Lucian was complicated and so very problematic, and Elle deserved so much better than that.

“Because she’s worried that Lucian’s going to pull out of the alliance if she says no,” Greyson said. “She says she doesn’t want to be responsible for that.”

“Are you kidding me?” I asked. “She can’t think that way!”

“She does,” Greyson said.

I shook my head firmly. “There’s no way I’m going to let this happen.”

“It’s more difficult than that,” Greyson said heavily. “I don’t like it either, but Elle can make her own decisions.”

“I just—” I stopped myself, looking at Greyson in surprise.

“What?” he asked.

“No, it’s just that—” I shook my head, feeling a little off-balance. “I’m just surprised to hear *you* making that argument. I mean, you’re right, but usually *I’m* the one making that point and fighting for Elle’s independence. And I do believe she deserves that independence, but when it comes to her marrying Lucian just to appease him…” I balled my hands into fists. “No, that’s too much. We have to draw the line somewhere.”

“Well, we don’t have to worry for now,” Greyson said. “I talked to her, and I got her to agree to wait until after the summit to make her final decision.”

“Doesn’t give us much time though, does it?” I asked.

“No, but I’m hoping by then it won’t even matter,” Greyson said. “After the summit, the Bitterfangs won’t be a threat anymore—one way or another—and Elle won’t feel pressured to marry Lucian.”

I nodded, taking this in. “That sounds good. But do you think Lucian’s bluffing, or do you think he’s actually going to do it? Do you think he’d really pull out of the alliance?”

**Episode 3772**

**Ava**

I looked up at Xavier’s face, watching his controlled reaction to my question. His eyes narrowed for the briefest of moments, then he shook his head.

“We agreed not to get ahead of ourselves, didn’t we?” he asked.

“I know, but—”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he said shortly.

A wave of disappointment crashed over me. He was right—we *had* agreed not to get ahead of ourselves, and to take things slowly—but was I really getting ahead of myself, here?

“Now that your place as Alpha is basically settled, is it *really* the wrong time to talk about this?” I asked, propping myself up on my elbows. “To think about what your new role is going to mean—for both of us?”

Xavier’s jaw worked. “I’m not Alpha yet, am I?”

I gave him a long look. “I don’t know how you want me to answer that question. Are you actually starting to wonder if you’ll be able to pass the Iudicium? You’re usually so confident.”

He shrugged. “No, I’m still confident. I know I’ll ace the Iudicium and become the Samara Alpha. But the Iudicium hasn’t happened yet, and until it does, I don’t see any point in discussing anything that might happen afterward.”

I pulled myself back, putting some distance between us. “Are you afraid to talk about the future? About *our* future?” I shook my head. “Am I even a *part* of your future?”

I swallowed hard, my heart pounding. Things between us had been feeling so good, but I suddenly felt my grip on Xavier slipping. Was he doing this with me just to become Samara Alpha?

I knew I was being paranoid—I could feel myself falling prey to my usual Xavier-based insecurities—but I couldn’t help it. He’d been away from me for such a long time, and it had been such a long road back to each other, and I couldn’t help but feel like we were *still* on unsteady ground.

I opened my mouth, about to give voice to these questions, but then Xavier heaved a gusty sigh.

“So, are you going to shut up now or what?” he demanded.

This caught me off-guard.

“Excuse me?” I asked icily.

He raised a suggestive eyebrow, and it was hard to mistake the gleam in his eyes. “Do you want to keep talking, Ava, or do you want to do something *other* than talking?”

His blue eyes felt like searchlights. They were fixed on me, and I felt exposed beneath them. I felt my resolve melt. Suddenly, I couldn’t even remember what I’d wanted to ask him. Whatever it was, it could wait. I’d waited so long for Xavier to come back to me, and now here he was. I *didn’t* want to talk. I wanted something else. I wanted him. Everything I had ever wanted was standing right in front of me.

I’d worked my ass off to bring us here. I’d fucking walked through a mirror out of the spirit world for this man. It was a challenge for me to turn off the part of my brain that thought put the good of the Samara pack above all else, but didn’t I deserve to celebrate arriving at this point? Didn’t I deserve to truly live in this moment? Didn’t I deserve to satiate what had been a nearly unbearable hunger for my mate?

Some of what I was thinking must have shown in my eyes, because Xavier smiled in a satisfied way. “Yeah, I had a feeling you’d come around.”

He leaned over me and pressed a kiss to my lips. It started slow but grew in intensity as we both opened ourselves up to it. He ran his tongue along mine, but I wasn’t content to just sit back, and I pressed my tongue to his, tangling them together.

By the time he pulled away, I was panting. He moved his kisses to my jaw, then nibbled my ear. He did it softly at first, then nipped hard enough to make me gasp. Then he moved lower, his kisses moving to my neck, then my collarbones, then my breasts.

I leaned my head back, letting myself luxuriate in the moment. I’d made it so far—I couldn’t mess it up now. Not when I had everything I’d been wanting for so long.

Xavier moved lower, dipping his tongue into my belly button, then lower still.

My breath caught in my throat. Something new was happening—this felt like a crossroads, of sorts. A point that, at one time, I’d thought I’d never reach with him again.

I could feel his breath on my inner thighs, and when I felt his tongue lick along my folds, it felt like my whole body had turned to liquid. I clutched at the sheets, balling them up in my hands as I panted. He found my clit and sucked, pushing his shoulders between my legs to give him better access.

This was just the start for Xavier and me. We were right back at the beginning again. We still had so much to overcome, but I felt like we were finally where we were meant to be.

We were *meant* to be together. That was our fate, and he was going to realize it. I just knew he would.

My back arched as he pushed his fingers into me, maintaining the pressure of his mouth on my clit. I was seeing stars; I was coming undone. I cried out as I started to come on his tongue.

It was only up from here.

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When we stepped out of the Airstream, my legs were still trembling. My heart was racing, and I felt flushed and sweaty. I nearly swayed on my feet and wanted to lean against Xavier for support, but I could feel the curious eyes of the pack on us, so I tried to look normal.

I tugged on my ear. It was this odd quirk—it always seemed to itch after I’d been intimate with Xavier. I’d always had the itch, even when we were young. It was a funny thing, like a little reminder that being with Xavier was an itch I could never seem to fully scratch. I could never get enough of him.

But there were a lot of people watching us, and I knew I needed to keep it together. I loved Xavier, and I wanted him, but I couldn’t let my desire for him undercut his position as Samara Alpha. I’d spent more time than anyone else thinking about the Samaras, and what this pack needed more than anything was stability.

I would bring up the Luna issue with Xavier again, but he was clearly feeling squirrely about it, so I was going to give him a break, for now. Give him the space he needed.

Just the thought of being his Luna put a smile on my face, though. It was what I’d always wanted, and I was just so, *so* close. I could practically touch it.

Geraint, Donovan, and Fausto—Perrie’s father—stepped toward us.

“We wanted to talk to you about the terms of the Iudicium,” Donovan said, looking at Xavier.

I hesitated. It was crazy, I knew. It was perfectly understandable that they wanted to learn more about their new Alpha, but I just felt this gut-deep negative reaction to their request. It was like I didn’t want to share Xavier with anyone else, no matter the circumstances. He was my prized possession.

But Xavier was nodding. “Yeah, we can go over that,” he said, and the four of them walked toward the fire.

“This is *exactly* what I was worried about.” Marissa had appeared at my side, looking frustrated.

I frowned at her. “*What* was what you were worried about?” I looked around. “Isn’t this what you wanted? Isn’t Xavier exactly what the entire pack’s been pushing me to find? A true Alpha?”

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” she hissed, lowering her voice.

“Then what are you talking about?” I asked, still not following.

She gritted her teeth. “I’m not worried about Xavier being a true Alpha—I’m talking about what I was worried about before.”

“What?” I asked, baffled.

“About how his relationship with you could screw everything up,” she snapped.

“*Oh*,” I said, finally understanding. “Listen, there’s nothing to worry about. Look.” I gestured to where Xavier was standing by the bonfire, deep in conversation with the other three men. “He’s totally focused on the Iudicium. Surely you can see that.”

But Marissa shook her head, looking unconvinced. “He might be focused right now, but you’re not fooling me, Ava.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked, starting to get fed up with the conversation.

She narrowed her eyes. “I can smell the truth.”

Marissa could glare at me until time stood still—I didn’t give a shit. I wasn’t going to let myself be fazed by her.

I gave her an assessing look as another thought occurred to me. “Marissa, are you *jealous*?”

She rolled her eyes. “*Please*. Trust me, I have *no* interest in Xavier Evers. But you need to think about the ramifications of your actions, Ava.”

“What ramifications?”

“What happens if things don’t work out between you two?” She raised her eyebrows. “And what about his *due destini*?”

**Episode 3773**

“Well?” I pressed when Greyson didn’t answer.

He shook his head. “I’m not worried about Lucian.”

“You’re not?” I asked.

“No.” He ran a hand through his hair, pushing it away from his forehead. The action made the muscles of his chest ripple, but I tried to pay attention to what he was saying. “It doesn’t matter if the little princeling isn’t bluffing. We’ll be prepared.”

“But how?” I asked.

“The alliance didn’t start with the Vanguards, and it sure as hell isn’t going to end without them,” Greyson said with a hint of bitterness. “We still have Mace and the Blue Bloods, and whatever remains of the Samara pack.”

I flinched. I knew what it meant to have the Samaras working with us—it meant working with Ava. My thoughts went to Xavier, to his claim that he’d been sleeping with her, and I felt my stomach clench. It ached every time I thought about him. But Greyson was still talking, so I tried to pay attention.

“—and I really doubt that either of them will side with Lucian. They know what he’s about, and I don’t think there’s too much love lost between those packs and the Vanguards. They put up with the Vanguards because they have to, same as us,” he said with a gusty sigh. “Anyway, no one can predict what Lucian will do—hell, I don’t even think *Lucian* knows what he’s going to do, most of the time—so there’s no sense in worrying over it.”

“I guess that’s true,” I said, though I wasn’t fully convinced.

Greyson stood and stepped toward me. He kissed me, then pulled back and looked at my face. “I wonder if I’m going to have to pull an Alpha on you.”

I raised a surprised brow. “What does that mean?”

He half-smiled. “I could order you not to worry.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I dare you to try.”

He laughed. “I know that would be impossible. That’s just your way, love. You always worry about everyone else, and I think that’s wonderful.” He slipped on his shirt. “How’s the training going?”

“What?”

“I saw you talking to Adair when Elle and I came back.”

“Oh…” Not wanting to tell him what I’d been trying to hide from Adair, I thought fast. No need to bring it up just yet. “I’m still learning.”

He frowned. “I hope you’re not going to worry about what happened with Torin. Don’t let it keep you from learning the full potential of your magic, love.”

I felt a pang of guilt and tried not to wince. I still hadn’t told Greyson about what had happened in the junkyard. But not telling wasn’t the same as lying, exactly. Besides, I was almost certain I’d be able to take care of the problem on my own. With Artemis’s help.

Greyson furrowed his brow. “Are you okay? Your expression just went kind of distant.”

“Y-Yeah,” I stammered. “I’m fine. I’m just—” I cleared my throat. “I’m anxious to talk to Artemis before we start training.”

He smiled and kissed me again. “You’ll do great. I know it. You’re really talented.”

“Thanks,” I said, then I turned and headed out. I wasn’t lying about being anxious, but that had more to do with avoiding more questions from Greyson than finding my sister.

It would’ve been hard enough to keep the junkyard incident from him under normal circumstances—the fact that I’d kept my mouth shut while he was half-naked was like a magic trick. One look at those abs and those shoulders and I just wanted to blurt out every secret I’d ever kept.

I had to convince Artemis to help me.

I found her in the kitchen with Rishika and Torin, all three of them standing by the stove.

“—and what you want to do is just get the water moving before you put the egg in,” Torin was saying.

He stirred water in a pot on the stove, then cracked an egg and let it gently fall into the water.

“*Ah*,” Rishika said, watching closely.

“And then you just let it go at a very gentle simmer, and the swirl of the water keeps the white from separating,” Torin finished.

“That’s fantastic,” Rishika said, sounding genuinely impressed.

Artemis made a dismissive noise. “I don’t get what all the fuss is about. It’s still an egg, no matter how you cook it.”

Torin looked scandalized. “Well, yes, but each different form of cooking makes the experience of eggs unique.”

Artemis rolled her eyes. “An egg’s an egg—”

I grabbed Artemis’s arm and hauled her away from Torin, who looked like he was about to have a stroke.

“It’s still an egg!” she shouted as I pulled her out of the kitchen. “What?” she demanded after I’d pulled her into the study and shut the door.

I looked around, making sure we were totally alone, then turned back to Artemis, who was looking at me warily.

“I need your help,” I said.

Her expression cleared. “Don’t worry, I talked to Adair. He agreed to be a little less… Adair-ish?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “It isn’t that.”

Artemis frowned. “What is it, then?”

“I need you to use your mind control magic.”

Her expression darkened. “I thought we were past all that. Wait—are you still being controlled?” She looked around quickly. “Is there something in the room with us right now?”

“No, no,” I said quickly. “This isn’t for me—it’s for a human. Will you help me?”

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I walked out of the study feeling a lot more confident than I had going in. I felt sure that Artemis would be able to fix my junkyard problem.

Actually, she’d seemed kind of offended that I’d had any doubts that she would help.

“We *are* sisters, you know,” she’d said. “Of course, I’ll help.”

So now I was heading upstairs to fill Lola in. And maybe to ever-so-slightly-smugly point out that killing the lady with the gun was *not* the best solution.

But when I reached Lola’s door and raised my hand to knock, I felt a weird shift deep within me. Suddenly, I was hit with a strange feeling—something was wrong. I could feel it. I frowned, examining the feeling. What was it? Was it Xavier? What was the source of this creeping dread?

“CALI!” Lola pulled the door open and screamed, jumping backward. “What are you doing, just standing there like that? Are you trying to scare the shit out of me, because mission accomplished! Damn, girl.”

I opened my mouth to tell Lola what was going on, but I couldn’t get myself to speak. It felt like my tongue had been paralyzed by that creeping fear and anxiety.

Lola took in the look on my face, then immediately grabbed my arm and pulled me into her room.

“What’s wrong?” she demanded, slamming the door shut. “Did you eat one of Torin’s eggs? I told him, just scramble those suckers—”

“No, no,” I finally managed to say. I sat down on the edge of Lola’s bed and took a deep breath. I had to tell her what had started to be on my mind, no matter how crazy it sounded. “No, I think… it might have to do with my mate bond.”

“What about your mate bond?” Lola asked, looking confused.

“I… don’t know,” I said. I was still trying to make sense of what I was feeling. “I just feel like something is wrong, but maybe that’s just me.”

“Yeah, I mean you’ve been really stressed and obviously upset about the breakup,” she said. “Do you know, like, what feels like it’s wrong?”

I shook my head. “No idea.”

“Okay,” she said slowly. “Listen, Cali, no offense, but *which* mate bond are we talking about, here?”

I looked up at her. “What?”

“Are we talking about your bond with Greyson, or your bond with the bastard who ran off on you?” Lola asked warily.

I could feel my heart starting to pound, hard enough that it felt painful. I was trying not to panic, but the fear was mounting. “I think it’s Xavier. It feels like my bond with him is slipping or something. Like it’s weakening.” I looked up at Lola. “Have you ever experienced anything like that? Felt anything like that with Jay? Maybe when you were at that vampire school?”

Lola shook her head. “No, nothing like what you’re talking about. Even when I was at Tottenville and going through the vampire heat and all ‘Hot for Teacher,’ I never questioned my mate bond.”

“Never?” I asked again.

“No. But then again, I’m not *due destini*.” Lola shrugged. “That’s bound to make things different, right?”

“Yeah, that’s true. And like you said, I’ve been stressed about it,” I said. I closed my eyes, trying to concentrate on the feeling within me. “I don’t even know how to describe it. It’s—it’s more like an ominous feeling. Like I’m… inching closer to a destiny? Like I’ve somehow made my choice, or he’s trying to sever the mate bond.”

My heart was racing now, and I opened my eyes in a full-blown panic.

“Wait—has *he* made a choice?”

**Episode 3774**

**Greyson**

I glanced through the pages of scribbled notes on the desk in front of me. I was supposed to be going over the plans for the mixer I’d be co-hosting with the Nightshade pack, but I was struggling. My mind was wandering, and I just couldn’t seem to focus on the party. It probably didn’t help matters that I had no real interest in doing it. Organizing a party for a bunch of werewolves at the summit seemed stupid and trivial, and out of the purview of an Alpha.

*Especially* when I had so many other things to focus on that were much more important.

At least I felt confident about Elle, now—I felt like I’d really gotten through to her, and that she wasn’t about to go running off to sacrifice herself to the princeling.

But I knew the clock was ticking on that. I had to hope that by the time the summit came to an end, Elle would be able to make the right decision.

There was a knock on the door, and I looked up, startled out of my thoughts.

“Come in,” I said, clearing my throat and shuffling my papers again.

Ravi opened the door and stepped into the study. “Hey, hope I’m not disturbing you, man.”

“No, no,” I said, waving him in. “Truth be told, I’m glad for the interruption. Anything to take my mind off this damn mixer. What’s up?”

Ravi stepped toward me, holding out an envelope. “This came for you.”

I took the envelope, which bore a dark red wax seal on the back. I tore the thing open and pulled out a sheet of heavy paper.

The envelope had looked so official, I wasn’t surprised to find my official summons to speak at Knox’s trial at the summit. I heaved a sigh. With everything else that was going on, I’d somehow managed to forget all about Knox.

I tossed the summons onto the desk, and when I looked up, I was surprised to see that Ravi was still in the room. He was hovering by the door, like he couldn’t decide if he should stay or go.

“What’s up, man?” I asked. “Do you need something else?”

Ravi looked uncomfortable, which I decided to take as a sign of respect. Ravi was a pretty cool guy, but I supposed I had a natural intimidation factor. It was part of being an Alpha, but also just part of being me.

“You’re not thinking of eloping with Lucian, too, are you?” I asked wryly.

It was a joke, but one Ravi clearly didn’t get.

“What?” he asked, looking completely baffled.

“Forget it,” I muttered, rubbing at a sore spot on my temple. “Never mind. What can I do for you, Ravi?”

He took a deep breath, like he was preparing himself for something awful. “I’d like to go with you and the others to the summit,” he burst out. “I know I had a rocky start with the pack, but I feel like I’ve really made up for it and I’ve been a good pack member. I’m a good travel buddy, and I won’t cause any trouble, and I—”

“And you want to have fun at the parties?” I guessed, cutting him off.

Ravi looked a bit embarrassed. “Yeah,” he admitted. “I know it sounds shallow, but I swear it’s not. Ever since Joss’s death, I’ve been really struggling to find myself—in the pack and just in my own life, you know?”

I was struck by this. Partly because Ravi didn’t usually open up like this, but mainly because I bore a lot of responsibility for Joss’s death. So, there was a sting of guilt there, too.

“I just need to do *something*—get out, meet other wolves, all that shit. I just have to do something to move past the loss,” Ravi went on.

I nodded, feeling for him. “I get it. You want to have some fun.”

Ravi looked surprised by this assessment. “I—I guess I do. I didn’t think of it in those terms, but maybe that *is* it.”

“I understand that, and I can’t fault you for it. You’re young, Ravi. You shouldn’t be saddled with that kind of grief for the rest of your life.” I shrugged. “Yeah, I don’t see why you can’t come. I can ask my mom to keep an eye on the pack house while we’re all gone since she decided to stay behind. And I can ask Kira to back her up. It wouldn’t hurt to have a witch on hand to protect the house if it came to that.”

Ravi’s face lit up. “Really? Oh, Greyson, that’s great. I really appreciate—”

“But I do have a favor to ask you in exchange,” I interrupted.

“You want *me* to do *you* a favor?” Ravi asked, clearly surprised. “Sure. What is it?”

“I want you to keep an eye on Lucian,” I said, leaning forward. “During the summit, I want you to be my eyes and ears. I want to know where Lucian is, who he’s talking to, and what he’s doing.”

Ravi hesitated for a moment. “But what about the parties?”

I managed not to roll my eyes. “I’m just asking you to keep an eye out for Lucian. You can still enjoy yourself, Ravi, but if you see something, say something, okay?”

“Okay,” Ravi said with a grin that lit up his whole face. “I can do that. Thanks, Greyson.”

He turned and headed out, leaving me feeling a little better about the whole Lucian situation. The guy was a total wild card, and having everyone—not just Ravi—keeping an eye on him would reduce the likelihood of any unpleasant surprises.

Ravi had shut the door behind him, and when there was another knock on it, I assumed it was him again, coming back with more questions.

“I told you, you can go to as many parties as you want” I yelled through the door. “As long as you don’t get stoned out of your mind, you can literally make out with anyone!”

“Is that so?” Cali asked, opening the study door.

“Cali!” I said, surprised. “I—no—I thought you were Ravi.”

“I don’t get *that* a lot,” she said, raising her eyebrows.

“Come on in,” I said. “And for the record, you can’t make out with anyone.”

She stepped inside. “You seem busy. Am I bothering you?”

I got to my feet and walked around the desk, then took her in my arms. “The only way you could bother me is if you don’t let me do this.” I kissed her. “What’s wrong?”

Cali wrapped her arms around me and buried her face in my chest. “Nothing. I just wanted to hold you.”

“I’ve got no objections to that,” I said with a chuckle, but my mind was racing. Something new was going on with Cali, and I had no idea what it was. The last time I’d seen her, she’d been fine—and flirting with me. Something had happened to change her mood. What had it been?

But I wasn’t going to interrogate her. There was a lot going on, and if she just wanted some comfort from me, I was going to give her all I could.

Cali held me close. “Thank you,” she murmured.

“For what, love?” I asked, dropping a kiss onto her dark hair.

“For being just what I needed,” she said quietly.

The office was quiet as we held each other, but after a long moment, Cali sighed.

“You know, sometimes I worry that this is all just a fantasy. That my whole life is just a dream, and one day I’ll wake up and it’ll all be gone.”

I hugged her tighter. “I’ll never let that happen.”

She chuckled, and the sound rumbled against my chest. “I know. It’s just this crazy feeling. I *know* that what we have is real. I can feel that in my bones, just like I can feel you,” she said, tightening her hold on me.

“I wish you didn’t feel the need to question that,” I said quietly. “I’m real, you’re real—we’re both very real, and I am really very in love with you.”

“I know,” she said with a sigh.

“You *do* know that, don’t you?” I asked, looking down at her.

Cali pulled back so she could look up at my face and smiled, the expression lighting up her face like she was a damn angel. “Remember how distracting I said you were before, when you were naked?”

I stared at her for a moment—no idea how her brain had landed there, of all places.

“Yeah?” I said, half-amazed, half-amused.

Cali’s smile widened into a grin. “Well, I think we need to do something about that.”

**Episode 3775**

As we started to kiss, I felt the muscles in my shoulders relax. This was just what I needed—to be with Greyson, to feel his arms around me, to feel his body against mine. Sometimes, I let myself get totally caught up in my anxiety. It was like Greyson said—I worried too much about everyone, and sometimes I let that anxiety rule me. But I was determined not to let that happen now. Whatever bad feeling I’d experienced outside Lola’s bedroom—and whatever it had to do with the mate bond—it had passed. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe I’d just imagined it. Maybe it was just the impact of Xavier’s prolonged absence.

Greyson broke away from the kiss and looked down at me.

“Am I just as distracting with my shirt *on*?” he asked slyly. Then—before I could answer—he bent and kissed my neck lightly. “Or is it better like this?” He ripped his shirt off.

I stared in wonder at his broad, sculpted chest, then let my gaze wander down to his washboard abs. I’d never fully understood that phrase until I’d met werewolves, but—looking at Greyson’s defined abs—I could definitely see why the analogy had taken hold. The clearly defined musculature looked exactly like the ridges on old-fashioned tin washboards.

I ran my fingers down his chest. “This is *torture*,” I groaned. “Why do you have to look *so* good?”

Greyson laughed, his grey eyes flashing with humor. “I’m sorry? Is that a problem for you?”

And before I could answer that question, he put his hands on my shoulders and walked me backward until I hit his desk, then he grabbed me by the waist and lifted me up to sit on top.

He took a step back. “Now, maybe you’d like to point out my flaws.”

I felt my face heat. Greyson was looking at me, and there was a mischievous glint in his eyes. It was adorable, but it flustered the hell out of me.

“Now, don’t be shy,” he instructed me. “I must have *some* flaws.”

I rolled my eyes. Fine. If he wanted to play this game, I could play this game.

“Turn around,” I said, drawing a circle in the air with my finger.

He revolved slowly, giving me a 360 view of his body.

“Well?” he asked.

“Well,” I said, “the problem with you, Greyson, is that you’re perfect.”

He shook his head. “That’s a cop-out. You’re being a chicken.”

“I’m not!” insisted. “It’s the truth. Come on, you have to know this. I can’t find one thing about you that I don’t like or that I don’t find really sexy.”

Greyson nodded, taking this in, then narrowed his eyes at me. “Okay.”

“Okay?” I asked. “Okay what?”

“Now it’s my turn.”

My whole body went cold.

“I’m not…” I shook my head. “I’m not going to *pose* for you.”

“You don’t have to,” he said smoothly. “There’s no need.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“I’ve got your entire body memorized,” he said with a wicked smile.

My cheeks began to burn with embarrassment as Greyson rubbed his chin, looking thoughtful.

“What?” I demanded.

“I can think of one major flaw,” he said thoughtfully.

I stared at him in shock. “What is it?”

My mind was spinning. Was it my tiger marks? That seemed unlikely—Greyson had never so much as mentioned them before. It could be something else—something not physical. Could it be the way I got worked up over tiny things? Was it my face? My hair? My laugh?

I was really starting to spiral when Greyson walked toward me and ran his finger down the center of my shirt, grabbing the hem. “Your only flaw, my love, is that you’re still wearing clothes.”

Heat flooded me as he grasped my shirt, pulled it over my head, and pulled me close. I could feel myself blushing furiously, and Greyson looked down at me with a wolfish grin.

“See,” he said, “that’s an improvement already.”

I swallowed hard and reached for Greyson’s belt. “Well, maybe there are a few improvements I could think of for you, too.”

He kept his eyes on mine as I unbuckled his belt, then unbuttoned his jeans. They slid off his hips and dropped to the floor, and he kicked them away.

“Yeah,” I said breathlessly. “That *is* better.”

“And how about this?” Greyson asked, reaching around and unclasping my bra with a flick of his fingers. He pulled at it, and I let it shimmy down my arms, exposing me. “Ah, yes, much better,” he said, filling his hands with my breasts.

I shivered at his touch, but I wanted *more*. I leaned into him, pressing against his hands.

He bent and nipped my shoulder. “Take off your jeans, love.”

I did as he commanded, standing from the desk and pulling my jeans off. Soon, I was standing there in just my neon pink lace panties.

Greyson glanced down at them, then looked up at me with a smirk. “Those are cute. Too bad they’re getting destroyed.”

An instant later, the panties were nothing more than lace shreds, and Greyson had lifted me back onto the desk. He kissed me hard, pressing himself between my legs. I loved the feel of him growing hard against me, and I wrapped my legs around his waist, wanting him even closer. The tingle that had started between my legs had grown to a warm center of pleasure under Greyson’s ministrations, and now it bloomed into an outright *ache* of need.

His kisses were consuming me, and I could barely breathe, but I didn’t want to stop. I *couldn’t* stop. His cock pressed against me, almost teasingly.

“*Greyson!*” I pleaded.

He broke away from our kiss and looked at me. “Yes?” he asked, feigning curiosity.

“I want you inside me,” I begged, tightening my legs around his waist.

His eyes scanned my face, then my body, spending quite a bit of time on my breasts. He thumbed my nipple, then trailed his finger down my chest, to my stomach, then slipped it into me, rubbing a tight circle around my clit.

“Oh my *god*,” I said, practically vibrating.

I arched back, riding his hand, until he pulled his hand away and drove his cock into me, hard enough to make me gasp.

“Was *this* what you were after?” he asked. “You wanted me inside you that bad, huh?”

I could only nod.

He leaned close, so my breasts were crushed against his chest. “Did you want to touch yourself, thinking about me inside of you?”

“Yes,” I whimpered. I was starting to shake all over. “I need more, Greyson, *please*.”

He continued to pump into me, increasing the speed, his hand still circling me in my most sensitive spot. I cried out as my body squeezed around his length. Then he moaned, burying his face in my shoulder as he came.

“Fuck,” he moaned. “You don’t know what you do to me, love.”

“Right back at you.” I chuckled. I had come so hard, and I still felt like I was shaking. I leaned back and looked around. “Your desk,” I said weakly.

The desk was a *mess*—papers were everywhere—but I had never felt better. I was on a high. I’d been worried about my mate bond—with Xavier, yes, but also with Greyson. Feeling that way was never a good thing, but whenever I was with Greyson like this—or simply being held in his arms—I knew in my heart that our connection was solid. I loved him so much.

“I love you,” he whispered, as though he was reading my mind. He leaned down and kissed me gently, then pulled away.

He helped me sit up, then helped me down from the desk. As I searched for what was left of my clothes, he gathered up the papers that had been scattered on the floor.

As I pulled my bra back on, I glanced over at the top drawer, where I’d stashed the letter from Big Mac. I felt a pang of… something. Guilt, maybe. I’d read the letter. I should tell him, I knew that—I hadn’t gotten around it. It wasn’t intentional. There had just been so many new developments since I’d read it. And part of me wished I could tell *both* Greyson and Xavier what the letter had contained. But that didn’t seem possible now, considering Xavier wasn’t currently speaking to me.

I pulled my shirt on and sighed.

Greyson looked at me, then followed my line of sight. “Oh, don’t worry about the letter, love.”

“What?” I asked quickly, wondering if he knew that I knew.

He gave me an understanding smile. “Don’t stress about it. Everything in time, right?”

I swallowed hard. I knew what the letter said, and it was past time to be honest. It would be a betrayal of Greyson’s trust if I wasn’t.

“Greyson.” I took a deep breath. “I read the letter.”

**Episode 3776**

**Xavier**

“—and we just want to make sure you have the support you need, going into the Iudicium,” Donovan was saying.  
 Geraint and Fausto nodded, and I was about to respond when I felt a strange chill move through me. It was a cold, creeping dread, and it seemed to shiver down my spine, settling somewhere around my belly. It wasn’t anxiety or fear—I’d never felt anything like it before—but somehow, I knew where it was coming from. My mate bond was the source of the feeling, but I had no idea what that meant.

Regardless, it rattled me to my core, though I tried not to show it.

Geraint looked at the bonfire. “It’s getting big.”

I nodded, barely swallowing the name on my lips—

*Cali.*

I was always thinking of her, of course, but why was she suddenly so prominent in my thoughts? Had something happened to her? Had she done something?

A dark thought occurred to me, and suddenly I couldn’t feel the heat from the fire at all. Was this feeling happening because she’d just made her choice?

*No.*

I gritted my teeth and pushed the thought aside. It *couldn’t* be that. I wouldn’t even entertain the idea. There was no way she would’ve done that without at least giving me a heads-up. Something so major—something that could potentially lead to my *death*. As far as I knew, she hadn’t yet been able to read Big Mac’s letter revealing the status of the killing curse. I knew I’d had to act in a way that would hurt Cali, that would make her hate me, even, but I couldn’t believe she would ever do anything to effectively *kill* me. Not after everything we’d been through together.

*But what if she did?* wondered a little voice in the back of my brain. *What if she did make a choice, and it was Greyson? What if she knows you could die, and she doesn’t care?*

I didn’t even know if I’d be able to blame her for that. What choice had I *given* her? I’d made it clear as hell that I was nothing but a cheating scumbag and had been hooking up with Ava throughout our relationship—even if that wasn’t the truth.

Yes, Ava and I had shared the kiss on New Year’s Eve and the incident in the Airstream… And those hadn’t been fair to Cali. I knew that, and it made me feel like shit. But when all that nonsense of Cali encouraging me to sleep with Ava to get her out of my system had happened, I’d seen how hearing anything had hurt her. How could I tell her about a kiss or two when it would hurt her? When I had barely wrapped my head around those moments?

Well, I was understanding more now. Ava and I were getting closer. That much was true, but that was out of pain and self-preservation—No, wait. That wasn’t right either. I’d been getting closer to Ava because I cared about her, and because everything was a mess. I didn’t want that to be true, but it was.

“—and what do you think, Xavier?”

I looked over to see Donovan looking up at me.

My throat felt desert-dry, and I swallowed. “About?”

Donovan seemed unfazed that I hadn’t been paying attention. “About the Iudicium. Are you nervous?”

I tried not to sigh. I had to shake myself out of this funk, right now. These people were counting on me, and I needed to show them that I was in this. I *wanted* to be in this—for them. Becoming Samara Alpha was the only thing that might give me any measure of power against Adéluce. And thinking of it in those terms *did* make me a little nervous. There was just so much at stake.

But I only shrugged. “I’m not worried,” I said. “I mean, if Knox could do it with the scrap of Alpha blood he had in him, I don’t think I’m going to have an issue.”

Geraint snorted. “Cocky much, Evers?”

I eyed the guy. “I’m not being cocky, I’m just being honest. I don’t do false humility, man—that’s a waste of my time. If Ava and the rest of the pack didn’t think I was capable of doing this, then I probably wouldn’t be in this position, would I? What Alpha wants to lead without the backing of his pack?”

“A bad one,” Fausto supplied.

“Exactly. And that’s not the kind of Alpha I intend to be. I mean it when I say that I want to be able to lead this pack. I want to make us strong. I’ve been around this pack since I was a kid, and I know what the Samaras used to be. I know what the Samaras could be, and I know what the Samaras will be again.

Perrie’s dad nodded approvingly at this, then lifted his beer with a smile. “I like the sound of that, and I’ll raise a glass to it. Cheers.”

Donovan lifted his beer, and—after a slight hesitation—Geraint lifted his too. “Hear, hear,” they murmured.

I nodded and clinked my bottle—the one they’d handed me when I’d walked over—against theirs.

There was a strange feeling in the air as we all drank—an unspoken understanding, almost. As though they were already accepting me as their Alpha, even though it wasn’t anywhere near official.

It was something I’d been waiting for my whole life, but this whole thing still felt strange and twisted. A shadow of my original dream. It should’ve been the Redwoods around me—my friends and family—but these men were almost strangers.

I guzzled my beer, trying to swallow down that feeling along with the alcohol.

“Hey, I hate to interrupt, but Ava’s looking for you, Xavier,” Marissa said, stepping into our small circle.

Perrie’s dad chuckled. “Well, you’d better get moving, son. You don’t want to leave your mate hanging. I should know—I’ve been in the doghouse more than once for that.”

He had said it jovially, but I didn’t laugh.

“Excuse me,” I said with a nod as I backed away, turning to Marissa. “Where is she?”

The young woman smiled. “Just follow me. I’ll take you to her.”

I looked around. “Okay, I mean, you could just tell me where she is…”

When I’d left her, Ava had been talking to Marissa, and the moment before that… Well, I knew *exactly* where she’d been the moment before that.

I’d have been lying to myself if I said I hadn’t enjoyed my hookup with Ava in the Airstream, but I still had that hollow feeling in my belly. I just felt… incomplete, somehow.

“Where are we going?” I asked as Marissa led us further away from the bonfire and deeper into the trees.

The woods were winter-quiet. The early January snow had turned to ice, and it crunched under our feet as we walked. I could see my breath in the air, but—as usual—I barely felt the cold. Werewolves just didn’t experience temperature the same way humans did. But still, it seemed unlikely that Ava would just be hanging out in the middle of the woods at night, waiting for me.

Marissa turned at my question, still smiling. Her eyes were gleaming. “Ava wanted to have some privacy with you.”

I frowned at this. It was possible, but if Ava really wanted to be alone with me, she had the Airstream. We weren’t fourteen years old anymore. We didn’t need to sneak off into the woods to be alone.

I sniffed the air but didn’t pick up anything except the sharp pine tang from the trees, the smoke from the bonfire back in the clearing, and Marissa’s scent, which nearly overwhelmed me. Why was she walking so close?

“Where is she?” I asked.

“Just a little farther,” Marissa said, her normally sharp voice almost singsong.

A moment later she tripped over a root and grabbed my arm, clutching my bicep for support.

“Sorry!” she said. “You wouldn’t think a wolf could be so clumsy, would you?”

“It’s fine,” I said warily. Marissa was acting extremely strange, and I tracked her movements carefully.

She didn’t let go of me but instead stepped closer, pressing her breasts against my arm.

“What are you—”

Before I could finish my question, she had backed me against a willow tree. She was close, her fingertips light on my chest.

“What’s going on?” I asked, my brain trying to compute what was happening. “Where’s Ava?”

It shouldn’t have taken me so long to figure out what was going on, but Marissa had always been so chilly with me, so the quick turnaround had caught me off-guard, and now I was struggling to catch up.

She smiled. “Okay, confession—I was lying.”

“Lying?” I repeated.

She shook her head. “Ava wasn’t looking for you. I don’t even know where she is. I wanted to get you alone so I could apologize for our conversation earlier.”

“Apologize?”

She stepped even closer and took a breath, like she was drinking in my scent. “I wanted to say that I was sorry for doubting your intentions. That was very wrong of me.”

“It’s fine,” I said warily. My brain was spinning, trying to figure out how the hell I was going to untangle myself from this situation.

“But do you forgive me?” she asked softly, looking up at me from beneath half-closed lids.

It was so strange to see her like this. “I guess—”

“Because if you don’t, you could *punish* me.” She lifted onto her tiptoes, moving her mouth closer to mine. “Whatever you want to do to me, Xavier—I’m *yours*.”

**Episode 3777**

**Greyson**

I stared at Cali, confused.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “Are you saying you *read* the letter? As in you were able to read what it said? Or did you just open it?”

I couldn’t figure out what she was talking about. As far as I knew, the letter was still locked in the desk drawer, blank and unread. Though I’d known what the letter would say, even before Big Mac had given it to Cali. At least, I damn well *hoped* I knew what it would say, after everything I’d gone through with the witch sisters. I’d fought my ass off to free Cali, Xavier, and myself from the killing aspect of the *due destini* curse.

Cali still wasn’t answering me.

“Cali?” I pressed. “Are you saying you looked at the letter, or that you were able to read it?”

She swallowed hard. “I was able to read it,” she said quietly. “The letter showed itself to me.”

It felt like I’d just been punched in the gut. If Cali had been able to read the words written on the letter, that meant she felt like she could make a choice.

Shit.

What did that mean for me? Did that mean she’d made a decision? That she was close to making one?

No—I shoved that thought away.

No, Cali being able to read the letter could mean a lot of things. That was the fucked-up thing about magic—every spell had a million different potential meanings, and not always the ones you expected. Her being able to read the letter possibly just meant that she was ready to read it, and that she needed the information it contained. It didn’t necessarily mean she was ready to make a decision.

That made some sense, but I couldn’t quite seem to make myself believe it—mainly because right now, I was her only real option, and the choice didn’t seem *quite* as hard as it used to be.

“Well?” I asked tensely. “What did it say?”

Cali looked anxious and hesitant.

“Love,” I said, gentling my voice and stepping toward her. “You can tell me what it says, good or bad. I’m here for you. I don’t want you to feel like you can’t tell me. I can see that this is weighing on you, and you don’t have to carry that burden alone. Even if you need time—it’s been a lot to process—that’s fine. I know you needed to read that letter to believe that the killing curse was gone for good.” I paused. “I mean, part of me”—the annoyed part—“wishes you just could’ve taken my word for it when I came out of that vision. I wish you could’ve trusted me. I never would’ve led you astray.”

Cali gave a jerky nod. “I know. And I’ve been wanting to tell you from the moment I read the letter, but I guess I was hoping I’d get the chance to tell both you and Xavier what it said. I think subconsciously, I was waiting for that, but Xavier obviously isn’t here, so…” She took a deep breath. “You were right. The killing curse is gone.”

I smiled, feeling vindicated. “That’s wonderful news, love.”

“Yeah.” She smiled back. “It is. And I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. It was just—”

“A lot to handle?” I ventured.  
 She nodded, looking relieved that I understood.

I pulled her into a hug, then leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss to her lips. “I understand. This is complicated, but I hope you know that *nothing* has changed between us. Nothing ever could. I love you, and I don’t expect you to make a choice anytime soon.”

I meant that—I did want to give Cali the time that she needed—but saying the words still irked me.

Cali smiled up at me and hugged me tighter. “Thank you, Greyson. That means a lot.”

Hearing that from her made me glad I’d kept my mouth shut. Cali already had enough to deal with right now. She didn’t have to wade through my frustration, too. I knew she would listen, but I didn’t want to put that on her right now.

“I love you, Greyson Evers,” she said, lifting onto her tiptoes to kiss my cheek. “Now, I’m going to go take a quick shower and change. I need to find some new underwear. You won’t believe it, but something happened to the pair I just had on.”

I grinned at her as she headed out of the study. Alone again, I grabbed my clothes and pulled them on. I was still feeling good after my encounter with Cali, but a little rattled, too. It felt like maybe I shouldn’t have been feeling that way—like maybe it wasn’t fair. But this had been the *due destini*’s modus operandi the entire time—constantly putting all three of us in completely impossible positions, where there was no clear path to follow. The killing curse wasn’t even a typical part of the *due destini*. It had only happened because of a spell gone haywire. But now, it was gone. Now, Cali could safely choose between her mates. And she still wasn’t choosing…

*Reel it in*, Greyson, I told myself sternly. *Get your shit together.*

Dressed again and with my papers back in order, I headed out of the study and strode toward the kitchen.

Cali loved me. I knew that. And I also knew that I was in it for life with her. However long it took her to choose, it didn’t matter to me. It was going to be the two of us in the end. I could feel it. That was our destiny.

Rounding the corner, I ran into my mother—literally.

“*Greyson!*” she exclaimed, stumbling back a step.

“Mom!” I reached out and grabbed her elbow, steading her. “Sorry. Are you okay? I didn’t see you.”

“I’m fine,” she said with a smile. She looked up at me. “You seem a little preoccupied.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I said vaguely. Glancing up into the kitchen, I was surprised to find it empty for once. “Actually, can I talk to you for a second? Are you busy?”

“Of course, we can talk,” she said, frowning. “Is everything all right?”

We walked to the kitchen island and sat on the stools. My mom pushed a plate of Torin’s cookies toward me, but I shook my head. I wasn’t hungry.

“Cali read the letter,” I told her.

“Big Mac’s letter?”

I nodded. “She knows the killing curse is gone.”

Big Mac had probably told my mom the truth the moment she’d learned it herself—I doubted the status of the killing curse was news to her.

“Oh! That’s wonderful!” my mom burst out. “I’m so thrilled! It was causing Cali so much grief, not knowing if she was putting you and Xavier in danger—” Probably seeing the twisted look on my face, she stopped herself, and her face fell. “Oh no. Oh god. Has some horrible new aspect of the *due destini* cropped up to replace the killing curse?”

“No, no, nothing like that,” I assured her.

“Then what’s wrong?” she asked.

I looked down at my hands. “It’s just that we’re back to square one, aren’t we?”

“What do you mean?”

“Cali has to choose between us.”

My mom nodded slowly. “Ah, yes. I see. Even with Xavier gone—and after he broke up with her so cruelly.”

I ran a hand through my hair, frustration coursing through me. “I’ve been waiting for Cali to make this choice since the day I met her, Mom, but I don’t want her to choose me like *this*. Because there are no other options. Because I’m just what she’s been left with.”

She sighed. “Yes, I can see that. I don’t agree that she’d choose you for those reasons, but I can see what you’re saying.” She leaned forward and cupped my cheek with her palm. “Greyson, I know it doesn’t feel like it now, but you have to trust me—everything will be all right. And it’s okay to feel how you’re feeling. You’re all doing the best you can, but the *due destini* is so difficult.”

I snorted. “You’ve got that right.”

I looked down with my phone rang. When I pulled it from my pocket, I could see that it was Mace calling.

“Thanks, Mom,” I said. “I’ll talk to you later.”

She nodded. “Any time, Greyson.”

“Hey,” I said to Mace. “Everything good?”

I desperately hoped the answer was yes. I didn’t think I’d be able to handle another crisis at the moment.

“Yeah, I just wanted to give you a heads-up about a new development.”

I frowned. I couldn’t read Mace’s tone. “Okay. What development?”

“I wanted to let you know that Maren and I have been seeing more of each other, and she’s going to come to the summit with me.”

This stopped me in my tracks, and my reaction was immediate and instinctive. “No she’s not.”

**Episode 3778**

As I headed upstairs, I couldn’t help but feel self-conscious—and not because I wasn’t wearing underwear. Okay, not *just* because I wasn’t wearing underwear. It had more to do with the conversation I’d just had with Greyson. It seemed like he’d taken the news that I’d read the letter fairly well, but I didn’t feel like I’d explained things particularly elegantly. Greyson had been understanding—he was always understanding—but something else was still bothering me. I just wished Xavier had been there, and I’d been able to give the news to both of them.

How the hell *was* I supposed to tell Xavier? Write him a letter? Send a telegram? Carrier pigeon? Was there just not going to be any communication between us ever again?

Though, now that I thought about it, I still didn’t know if there’d be an inbuilt *due destini* punishment for the person I didn’t choose. I’d done research, of course, but there wasn’t much information available in the Obaltarion, and absolutely *no* information about anyone who’d successfully chosen between mates and lived to tell the tale. The killing curse was gone, but for all I knew, the outcome of the original *due destini* choice could be just as bad.

I tried to shake these dark thoughts from my mind as I reached my room. Thinking that way was pointless. There were so many other things to stress about—I didn’t need to dwell on that right now.

I shed my shirt and bra and turned on the shower, making the water almost scalding. I didn’t need more anxious thoughts taking root in my mind. They weren’t going to do me any good, and it really wouldn’t help anyone if I kept spiraling. I needed to focus on my training, focus on loving Greyson, focus on (maybe) trying to talk to Xavier again to figure out what the hell was going on with him. It was still bothering me, even if I was trying to act like it didn’t. That was where my energy needed to be—not on these fears I couldn’t control.

I kicked my jeans to the side and stepped into the shower, letting the hot water beat down on my head and my back and willing it to wash away my worries.

Focus—that was going to be my plan.

I took a deep breath of the warm, steamy air. It felt good to have a plan. That new certainty—combined with the hot shower—was starting to calm me down. Thank god.

I grabbed my soap and started scrubbing, letting the lavender buds in the soap massage my tense muscles.

I was just washing the suds off when I heard the bathroom door open.

Surprised, I peeked around the shower door. “Greyson? What are you doing in here? I thought you were—”

I stopped mid-sentence. Because it wasn’t Greyson standing in the steaming bathroom. It was Xavier.

I stared at him for a long, shocked moment. I couldn’t believe my eyes. But there he was, clear as day—the dark hair, the blue eyes, the dark shadow of a beard along his sharp jaw…

*My Xavier.*

“What are you doing here?” I breathed, my voice barely audible.

“I had to come,” he said softly. “I couldn’t stay away from you any longer.”

And without another word, he stepped toward the shower, pulling his shirt over his head with one hand. He unbuckled his belt and flicked open the button on his jeans, letting them fall to the floor, then stepped into the shower next to me.

I was too startled to do or say anything—until he grabbed me, wrapping me in his arms, pulling my body against his.

Then I melted.

“Why did you leave?” I asked, grasping onto him. I was clinging to him as waves of sadness and fear and relief washed over me, one after the other. It was overwhelming, like being drowned by a storm at sea. “Why did you say all those horrible things to me, Xavier? Why did you—”

He tipped my chin up and pressed his lips to mine, silencing all my questions. His mouth was warm and inviting, and I was so hungry for it. I opened myself up to the kiss, inviting his tongue into my mouth. Despite the pain, despite everything that had happened, Xavier felt like home, and I had missed him so badly. This was Xavier Evers. I loved him. I had loved him from the moment I’d met him. Nothing would ever change that.

His tongue tangled with mine, and he walked me backward, pressing me against the cold tile of the shower wall. When he pressed his body against mine, he was somehow hotter than the scalding water, and I needed him. I wrapped one leg around him, wanting him closer—wanting every square inch of my body in contact with his. I was gasping for air but unwilling to break away from the kiss.

His hands were everywhere—sliding down my ribs, threading into my hair, grasping my hips. As desperate as I was for him, he seemed just as desperate for me, and we clung to each other. He lifted me against the shower wall, pressing into me, trying to fill the ache between my legs. I clung to him, terrified he would disappear again.

“Promise you’ll stay with me this time,” I murmured, speaking against his lips. “Promise me you won’t leave me again, Xavier. *Promise me*.”

Xavier pulled away and looked down at me, the look in his blue eyes so complex, I couldn’t begin to read it. He pressed a kiss to my lips, and I closed my eyes for a moment, willing to wait for my answers… But when I opened them again, Xavier was gone.

I was alone, like I had been all along—only now, I was sobbing.

The water had gone cold, but I barely registered it as I dropped my head into my hands and let the sobs wrack my body.

When I was all cried out, I rinsed my face, gathered myself, and turned off the water. I grabbed my towel and wrapped it around myself. I felt numb. I just didn’t feel… anything. I wished I did. I wished I could feel as angry as I had at the junkyard. At least anger had some action attached to it. At least anger was a feeling I could wrap my brain around. I would’ve happily taken anger over this void of sadness.

Oh fuck—the junkyard.

My stomach dropped. How could I have forgotten?

I dried off quickly and threw on a clean pair of jeans and a sweater. I pulled my hair into a damp bun and headed downstairs.

I found Lola and Artemis in the den, both of them half-watching a baking show that Torin was glued to.

“Finally!” Artemis said when I hurried into the room. “Where the hell have you been? I can’t watch anyone else cry over cake.”

Lola jumped to her feet. “Grab your coat, your purse, your phone—whatever else you’re going to need.”

“What?” I asked her, baffled. “What are you talking about? Why are you rushing me?”

“The junkyard closes at seven!”

I glanced at the clock over the television. “Crap. That’s in an hour.”  
 “Yeah, I know,” Lola said, rolling her eyes. “That’s kind of why I’m rushing you. So, let’s shake a leg, ladies.” She looked at Artemis. “Are you coming or what?”

Artemis raised an eyebrow as she got to her feet. “If you push me, Lola, you won’t like the way I push back.”

“Fine,” Lola muttered.

I looked around, wondering if Greyson was nearby. I still wasn’t sure if I should’ve told him about this; part of me still felt like, as the Alpha, and my mate, he needed to know about any potential threats to the pack’s safety. But as I looked at my sister and my best friend, I felt certain that the three of us were more than capable of handling this and keeping our pack safe.

We walked toward the door, and I grabbed my keys from the table.

“I suppose I’ll drive?” I said, and when no one objected, we headed out.

Outside, the air was frosty. It was dark, and the moon was shining. As we headed for my car, I started to feel uneasy.

“You okay?” Lola asked, giving me a sideways look.

“I’m fine,” I said quickly. Then I shrugged. “I’m okay. I was just thinking that I’m just going to have to re-familiarize myself with my car as I drive. I’ve barely driven it since Xavier got it for me—”

Without warning, tears filled my eyes. I stopped in my tracks and looked down at my keys, my throat tightening painfully.

Lola snatched the keys from my hand. “I’ll drive.”

Artemis immediately stole the keys from Lola. “No, I’ll drive.”

“Drive *where*, exactly?”

We all whipped around to see Rishika standing behind us, arms crossed.

**Episode 3779**

**Xavier**

I leaned back against the willow tree, digging deep to keep my cool. I raised an eyebrow and took another long pull of the beer I was still holding.

Marissa looked up at me—I’d never noticed it before, but her eyes were dark and deep, and the bedroom effect wasn’t *in*effective. “It’s only your right, as the next Samara Alpha.”

I cocked my head. “*Whatever* I want?”

She nodded, her eyes blazing, and trailed a fingertip up and down my chest. “Whatever you want, Xavier Evers. You can have me however you like, in whatever position. You can make me say anything, do anything, *be* anything.”

I nodded, taking this in. “I can do whatever I want to you?” I repeated, like I was making sure.

She nodded again.

So, I stood straight, threw my empty beer bottle with enough force that it shattered against the frost-hard ground, and in one swift motion, lifted Marissa by the waist and reversed our positions, so *I* was pushing *her* up against the tree.

Her eyes went wide, and I watched as her pupils dilated. It was like she hadn’t expected me to take her up on her offer, but the instant her surprise passed, she switched fluidly back into seduction mode.

“You want to do it *here*?” she purred, pressing her chest against mine. “So close to everyone? What if they hear us?’

I shrugged. “So, what if they do? Isn’t that more exciting?”

She nodded, her eyes widening even more. They were basically taking up half her face, now. Her breath caught as I leaned in close to her, my mouth right next to her ear. Her heart was beating fast—I could feel it fluttering against my chest.

“Marissa, do you know what I’d like you to do?”

“Anything for you, Xavier,” she breathed. “I’m in your *capable* hands.”

I leaned back and glared down at her. “I want you take your ass back to the bonfire and stop trying to seduce me, because it’s not going to fucking work.”

She seemed pretty in character because it took a moment for my words to sink in. But when they did, the moment broke, and Marissa’s expression hardened into a scowl. The change was so immediate and so dramatic that it made me laugh.

“Nice try,” I said.

“Did you know I was faking the whole time?” she demanded, looking furious.

“I mean, it was pretty obvious.” I looked around. “Why *did* you do this? Was it for Ava? Did she put you up to this?”

Marissa’s scowl deepened. “No one put me up to anything. I did this of my own accord. I wanted to test whether you were loyal to your mate.”

I raised an eyebrow. “This was a *loyalty* test?”

“As I’m sure you are well aware, there are plenty of Alphas who aren’t loyal to their mates, or who don’t even *have* a mate,” Marissa said haughtily. “They just like to sleep with anyone willing.”

I shrugged. “I guess I do know a couple of Alphas like that,” I admitted. “Though luckily, they seem to be a dying breed.”

Marissa huffed and stepped away from the tree. It looked like she was about to head back toward the clearing and the bonfire like I’d told her to—but before she could leave, I grabbed her arm.

She looked down at my hand on her bicep, then up at me, a flashing question in her eyes.

“Don’t try that again,” I said, my voice a low warning.

She didn’t answer, but her lips went tight.

“I’m choosing to believe your story about this being some sort of test, but try it again and we’re going to have an issue. I’m here because the Samaras need me, and because I want to be here. We don’t need to play games like little kids, Melissa.”

“It’s *Marissa*,” she hissed.

I smiled. “I know. Try ‘testing me’ like that again, and we’ll have a problem. Do you understand?”

She yanked her arm from my grasp. “I heard you the first time. I was only looking out for my friend, and for my pack.”

I shrugged. “You don’t have to worry about either of those. They’re both in my capable hands.”

She rolled her eyes and turned her back on me, heading back to the bonfire and the rest of the pack.

I watched her go, then bent to pick up the pieces of glass from the bottle I’d smashed. It wouldn’t do to leave them on the ground out here. Anyone running through the area could cut themselves on the shards. Luckily, the bottle had broken into large chunks, so I picked it up easily, then headed back through the woods to the bonfire.

I wasn’t far behind Marissa when I emerged into the clearing. Ava was waiting, and she looked at me, then at Marissa, who’d moved to stand near the fire.

“What’s going on?” Ava asked, moving to stand next to me.

“Nothing,” I said shortly, and moved past her, looking for a place to toss the glass.

“Don’t lie to me, Xavier,” she said coldly.

I turned to face her. “Should I be expecting anyone *else* to try to seduce me, or was Marissa it for the night?”

Ava’s face flushed. The undulating light from the fire lit her features, and she glanced around, her eyes flashing with anger.

“What did she do?” she demanded, glaring at Marissa.

Her reaction was clearly territorial, and I felt my wolf reacting to it. He loved that she was furious to hear that someone had tried to make a move on me. I wasn’t shocked to see her response, either. She *had* told me that she loved me—she’d never hidden that fact from me.

“*Tell me!*” she spat.

“Relax,” I said, grabbing her arm as she started to move toward Marissa. “You don’t want to throw hands with your friends. She was apparently trying to look out for you—in a really ham-fisted way. According to her, it was in your best interest for her to find out if I’d be willing to fuck her against a tree in the woods. But—spoiler alert—I wasn’t.”

Ava looked shocked, and a little rattled. She clearly didn’t quite know how to take all this information in. But before she could formulate a response, there was a sharp whistle, and we both glanced at the bonfire.

A woman stood before it, silhouetted by the flames. I squinted for a moment, then recognized the woman as Perrie’s mother, Josephine.

“I’d like to say a few words,” she called, raising her hands, trying to get everyone’s attention.

Ava shot me a curious look, and I raised an eyebrow. It was clear that neither one of us was certain what to expect, but we walked toward the bonfire anyway. There were a dozen or so others gathered around, and they quieted down, so that the only sound in the cold night was the pop and sizzle of the fire, along with the occasional thump as a large log broke and tumbled deeper into the flames.

Josephine cleared her throat. “I’m glad we can all be here tonight. I think we’re all thinking the same thing right now—that things have been tough for our pack for a long, long time. We’ve lost a lot and endured a lot. We scattered and were brought back together.” She nodded over at Ava. “We kept the faith in our pack, even when it seemed like everything was lost. And now, it feels like we’re on the edge of something good. A chance for the Samara pack to turn things around, once and for all.”

“Hear, hear!” someone shouted from the darkness.

“I’ll drink to that!” another voice chimed in.

Josephine smiled over at me. “Xavier Evers. We hope that you’re a part of this new beginning, and we wish you luck at the Iudicium. We hope you do us proud.”

“Good luck!” a man said, raising his beer.

“Best of luck!” a younger girl added with a smile.

Ava took my hand, lacing her fingers through mine. “Good luck, X,” she said quietly.

I looked down at our hands. Her hand was warm in mine, and I didn’t feel the urge to pull away from her touch. It still felt strange, but it was also… good?

God, everything was just so fucking complicated.

“You two look like you could use a drink,” Donovan said, walking over to us with a couple of beers.

“Thanks,” I grunted, accepting the bottles. Pulling my hand away from Ava, I popped off the caps and handed a bottle to her.

“So,” she said, turning to face me.

“So,” I said, taking a long drink.

She raised an eyebrow. “If you win the Iudicium—”

“*When* I win,” I corrected her.

She laughed. “*When* you win.” She sobered quickly. “When you win, what will it mean for our alliance with the Redwoods?”

**Episode 3780**

Oh, crap. We were busted. Rishika must have seen us leaving the house and followed us outside. She was Greyson’s right hand, which meant our little adventure was about to end. She’d tell Greyson what we were up to, he would put a stop to it, and that would be that.

I shot a look at Lola, then at Artemis, but they were both looking back at me with identical shocked expressions. So they were both basically useless.

“Drive *where*?” Rishika asked again. “Where are you going?”

“We were just going to take a drive,” I said.

“Yep,” Lola said quickly. “Just heading out for a drive. To get some fresh air.” She took a deep breath, to demonstrate.

Rishika narrowed her eyes. “Why not just go for a walk?”

“That’s a fair point,” I admitted.

“We were thinking of going to Starbucks,” Lola added, improvising wildly. “You of all people must know how much Artemis *loves* a Frappuccino. She can’t go an hour without asking for one, am I right? She’s *obsessed*!”

“A frap-a-what?” Artemis asked, confused. “What are you talking about, Lola?”

Rishika looked between the three of us. “You’re all being really weird.”

“*Weird?* *Us?*” Lola said in a very weird tone of voice.

Rishika rolled her eyes. “Just tell me where you’re going. I’m not the hall monitor. I’m not going to ruin your fun, or anything.”

“Oh, I don’t know how much fun it’s going to be,” Artemis said dismissively. “We’re just going to a junkyard—”

“Artemis!” Lola exclaimed. “Come *on*!”

“What?” Artemis asked, clearly baffled.

I sighed, but Rishika just laughed.  
 “A junkyard?” she asked. “Why are you going there?”

Artemis tossed the car keys into the air. “Either you come with us and stop asking questions, or you stay behind and stop asking questions. And—as you well know, Rishika—I have many good ways to *make* *you* stop asking questions.”

Rishika flushed, and I did the same. I could only hope that my sister’s seduction-slash-blackmail technique would work on her girlfriend.

I was relieved when Rishika laughed.

“Okay, I’ll come,” she said. “I’m off patrol, anyway. Let’s go.”

We headed for the car.

“Let me drive,” Lola said, reaching for the keys when we got to the car.

“No way,” Artemis said, yanking them back.

“Artemis!”

Lola grabbed the keys and there was a brief tug of war before Lola—ever scrappy—tugged them away from Artemis.

“*I’m* driving,” Lola announced triumphantly, unlocking the car.

Before I opened the passenger door, I glanced back at the house. I didn’t like the feeling that I was hiding something from Greyson. But I wasn’t actually hiding, I reminded myself. I was just trying to take care of a problem on my own. I didn’t need Greyson to take care of it for me, and I didn’t need Xavier either. I could do this on my own, with my friends’ help. Greyson already had enough to deal with.

Artemis accepted the loss of the keys with poor grace, but she did seem to cheer up when she realized she’d get to snuggle with Rishika in the back seat. Lola started the car, and a minute later we were flying down the road, leaving the pack house behind.

When we pulled into the rough gravel space that passed for the junkyard’s parking lot, Rishika looked out her window. “Wow. You weren’t kidding. This place is *literally* a dump.” She looked in at the rest of us. “Why are we here, exactly?”

“Hey!” Artemis said sternly. “What did I say about questions?”

Rishika rolled her eyes, and we all piled out of the car.

Outside, I took a deep breath of the cold night air. Rishika had come this far—she might as well know what was going on. We wouldn’t be able to keep the truth from her much longer, anyway—from a practical standpoint.

“Listen, Rishika,” I started, turning to her. “Earlier today, there was kind of an incident here.”

She frowned. “What kind of incident?”

“I may have accidentally used my magic in front of a human—”

“*What?*” Rishika gasped out, her eyes widening.

“I know, I know,” I said hurriedly.

“That’s why we’re coming back with Artemis,” Lola added. “She’s going to do her memory wipe thing.”

“It’s not actually a memory wipe, but whatever,” Artemis muttered.

Rishika turned to her. “Do you really think this is a good idea? Do you think you’re strong enough to do this? You’re up for it?”

Artemis nodded. “Sure. I was able to command Cali a bunch of times. You all saw how much tea she made.”

Lola nodded. “Yeah, that was a shit-ton of tea.”

I glared at her. “It was for a good cause.”

“Anyway, this should only take a few minutes,” Artemis went on. “In and out. No harm done.”

Rishika didn’t look fully convinced, but she shrugged. “All right, if you say so.”

“Oh, by the way,” Lola said casually, “you should know that this woman has a gun.”

Artemis and Rishika both rounded on her.

“She has a *what*?”

“Why the hell didn’t you mention that straight away?”

“What the hell is your problem—”

“Okay, okay, everyone needs to chill out,” I said, putting my hands up to stop the yelling. “A gun isn’t great, but we are two Fae, a vampire-wolf, and a werewolf. We can take on a single shotgun.”

I hoped to god that I sounded more confident than I felt.

Artemis shook her head. “Whatever. Let’s just take care of this so we can get the hell out of here. Where is this woman?”

Lola pointed. “Over in the main office. The building that looks like a hut. She’s probably there.”

Artemis nodded, and her bounty hunter instincts immediately took over. That information was all she needed, and she started walking toward the hut.

I rushed after her. “When you replace her memory, just have her think she never saw any of it. No magic of any kind. We were here checking out a junk car—nothing else.”

“Got it,” Artemis said, though she was clearly only half-listening. Her focus was on the hut.

I was starting to get really nervous as we approached the office, and by the time we reached it, my heart was pounding. I knocked and a moment later, the woman from earlier pulled the door open.

Her eyes landed on me and narrowed. “*You*,” she hissed. Then she spotted Lola. “And *you*.”

“Hey!” Lola said, waving cheerfully.

“We just wanted to apologize again for earlier,” I said quickly as the woman flushed with fury. “It was just a misunderstanding.”

Before the woman could react to that, Artemis stepped between her and me.

“*These two girls came by earlier to check out some junk*,” Artemis intoned. “*Nothing else happened. You don’t recognize them, and you never will*.”

The woman’s angry expression froze for a moment. She looked confused, then she closed her eyes.

I watched her warily. Had it worked? I glanced at my sister, who gave me a brief nod.

Then the woman opened her eyes and looked at us. She looked surprised, like she was noticing us for the first time. “Oh, gosh—I’m sorry, ladies, but we’re actually closing soon. If you’re here looking for parts, you might need to come back tomorrow.”

Rishika stepped forward. “That’s fine. We’ll come back later. Thanks.”

She hooked her arm through Artemis’s and Lola hooked her arm through mine, and the four of us headed back toward the car. Once we’d piled in and slammed the doors shut, there was a beat of silence, and then we all burst out laughing.

“It worked!” Lola burst out. “It friggin’ *worked*! You’re a badass, Artemis!”

Artemis shrugged with false modesty. “Well, yeah. But Cali,” she said, looking over at me, “you did so well. You didn’t even flinch. And you’re kind of a flincher.”

I laughed, feeling pretty proud of myself.

Lola started the car and peeled out of the junkyard, spraying gravel behind us.

“That was the definition of a no harm, no foul solution,” she said as she drove along the dark road, back toward the pack house.

I was feeling almost giddy with relief, and I leaned back in my seat with a sigh.

“Watch out for deer,” Rishika warned.

“It’s fine,” Lola said, waving her hand dismissively. “It’s not that dark out.”

I frowned. “What are you talking about?” I asked. “It’s January. It’s pitch-black.”

“It’s fine,” Lola repeated. “You know, I only said it to get Rishika off our backs, but now I can’t stop thinking about it—we really *should* get some Starbucks.”

I laughed. “It’s kind of late for caffeine, don’t you think?”

Lola grinned. “I feel like a sugar rush could only help this adrenaline rush.”

“Yeah, okay,” I agreed. “That sounds like fun. I could go for a drink—”

Something large and dark rushed onto the road, directly in front of the car.

“*Watch out!*” Rishika bellowed.

But it was too late—Lola didn’t have time to swerve, and she crashed the car into what felt like a *very* large animal.

**Episode 3781**

**Greyson**

“Who do you think you are, saying that to me?” Mace asked, an unfamiliar chill in his voice.

I felt my wolf bristle in response, but I took a deep breath and forced him to relax. He was itching to break through and unleash a little hell, but it would get me nowhere if this exploded into a full-fledged fight.

“Maren is Fae,” I said calmly. “She doesn’t belong at a werewolf summit.”

“You’re not the Alpha of everyone, Greyson,” Mace retorted. “Besides, you decided to bring Cali. What, you can bring a Fae, but I can’t?”

All the effort I’d put into calming myself down had been for nothing. Mace had stoked the fire in me, and now it was roaring again. “Cali is my mate. The situation’s different.”

“And yet you haven’t made her your Luna,” Mace shot back. “So, if that’s your logic, then she doesn’t have any more right to attend the summit than Maren.”

I fell silent. Hot rage was shooting through me, for a multitude of reasons—chief among them the fact that Mace wasn’t totally wrong. I *hadn’t* made Cali my Luna. And it was my Luna I was meant to bring to the summit—not my mate.

“We’ll continue this discussion later,” I grumbled into the phone.

“Don’t worry about it,” Mace said curtly. “No discussion required.”

He ended the call before I could reply, but I didn’t mind the swift return to silence. I had a lot to think about, a lot to consider that I hadn’t considered before.

Cali as my Luna.

Cali as my Luna at the werewolf summit when she was a Fae.

I stood there in the hall for a long moment, letting the anxiety wring through me. Now that the *due destini* choice didn’t have a built-in death sentence, there were new options in play, and I knew which one I wanted to choose. Only I didn’t know if I’d be able to go through with it, to ask her to be my Luna—I knew I’d be putting her in a terrible position.

But—just as importantly—how much longer could the Redwoods go without a Luna to lead them? And who better than Cali? Not only did I love her, but everyone else did too. It just made sense, especially with Xavier galivanting off doing whatever the fuck.

I didn’t know what the right course of action was. I had been avoiding this topic for so long, I’d convinced myself to forget about it entirely. That was because of the *due destini* and Xavier. And Mace was right; if I didn’t want Maren to go because she was a Fae, then the same would have to be true of Cali.

But I wanted Cali by my side. I wanted to feel the power we could have together as Alpha and Luna, even if it was only temporary. Was that possible?

I wandered mindlessly into the kitchen, where my mom still lingered.

She took in the expression on my face and frowned. “Is everything okay?”

I kneaded at my face, trying to ease the muscles so no one else would see the worry. So, no one else would ask *why* I was worried. I didn’t even know how to approach the topic. I’d probably just been skirting around it for far too long.

I took a deep breath. “I’m worried about going to the summit when the pack isn’t as healthy as it could be.”

“What do you mean?” she asked. “I’d say we’re pretty healthy already. Wouldn’t you?”

I hesitated. Part of me didn’t want to admit that there was a problem at all. I wanted to keep avoiding it—keep ignoring it. Everything was fine as it was. I was worried that by making changes, I’d throw everything out of orbit. But it was also a weight I was very desperate to get off my chest.

“I’m worried because we don’t have a Luna,” I admitted.

My mom’s brows shot up. “What changed? Last time we talked about this, it didn’t seem like much of an issue to you.”

“Nothing’s changed,” I said. “But I’m worried I haven’t been focusing on what’s best for the pack. Especially now that we’ve lost Xavier.”

I didn’t want to admit it, but he’d been the pack’s biggest gun—our intimidation factor—and without his presence, it felt like we’d lost a limb.

“I care about Cali,” I continued. “I don’t want to force her into something that’s going to make her hurt. But the pack…”

My heart was warring between the two loves of my life: Cali and the Redwood pack.

“Having a Luna at the summit *would* be a great show of strength,” said my mom. “It would certainly help to elevate the reputation of the pack. But you can’t coerce someone into being your Luna—even if they’re undeniably your mate.”

“I know that,” I said, heart growing heavier by the second. “I would never force Cali to do anything she doesn’t want to do. But it’s like you said—a Luna would be an incredible asset for us at the summit.”

“Have you talked about that with her recently? Do you know if she could be ready to be your Luna?”

“No,” I said with a deep sigh. “Is there a spell or something we could do? Some kind of ritual that could tell me how she’d react?”

My mom covered her mouth to hide a smile, knowing I wasn’t in the mood for laughter. “I think cutting corners like that might not be the best move, dear. I’ll tell you how you figure it out: you ask her. Talk to your mate, Greyson.”

Just then, Big Mac walked in. I immediately felt a little claustrophobic.

“Sabine?” she called as she rounded the corner. “I need to talk to you about wedding stuff.”

I hesitated. “Should I stay?”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “No, we’re good. Thanks.”

I laughed and reversed out of the kitchen, happy to evade the wedding conversation. “No worries, I’ll leave it to you.”

I left the sound of their quiet chatter behind and walked into the living room. My mom’s words rang in my ears. *Talk to your mate, Greyson.* She made it sound so easy, but I knew better. I knew—despite how understanding Cali always tried to be—that this was a sensitive topic for her. That she probably wasn’t ready to *talk* about it, let alone actually become my Luna.

But my mom was right. This wasn’t a place to cut corners. No matter how hard it would be, I just needed to talk to Cali about it. She was levelheaded—she’d understand. This wasn’t any standard relationship drama; this concerned the pack. Cali would do what she always did when faced with difficult decisions—she would stand by me and help me find a resolution.

That was that. I’d talk to Cali.

Last we spoke, she’d said she was going to change, so I jogged upstairs to her room. But after a couple of knocks with no response, I pushed her door open to find no one inside. Maybe she was still with Lola? But when I headed to Lola’s room, it was empty too. Artemis was missing as well. Every room I tried—empty, empty, empty. I was starting to get worried.

It was never a good sign when they all vanished together.

I pulled out my phone and dialed Cali’s number, impatiently waiting for the dial tone to end and for her to pick up, but she never did. I hung up at the sound of her voicemail message. The same thing happened when I tried Artemis and Lola. I even tried Rishika, who didn’t answer either.

Every call went straight to voicemail.

I didn’t like the look of this. With all the threats hanging over the pack right now, the absence of several pack members felt like a bad omen. It wasn’t like Cali to wander off without letting me know. They were hiding something. They had to be.

I started for the front door, anxiety quickly building up in my chest. I needed to find them, needed to make sure they were okay.

But as I burst out of the kitchen, I was met with Torin, who was sitting on the couch in a cozy sweater with a mug of cocoa. Torin clearly hadn’t been expecting my dramatic entrance, and he yelped at the sight of me.

“What’s going on?” he asked, wiping at the patch of cocoa that had splattered onto his pants.

“I can’t find Cali,” I said. “And she, Lola, Artemis, and Rishika aren’t answering their phones.”

Torin straightened up. “I thought I saw all four of them leaving earlier, but they didn’t say where they were going. It did kind of look serious, if that helps.”

*Serious?* My heart slammed into my throat. Fucking great. What if something had happened?

I thought back to what Cali had said about Xavier, earlier—about how weird it was to be talking about the *due destini* without him. Was it possible that she’d gone out looking for him again?

**Episode 3782**

The car came to a stop, but I didn’t think any of us felt it. We all just sat there in stunned silence, processing what had just happened. It was like we’d all lost the ability to talk, or move. What the hell had just happened?

Then Lola cracked. “Oh my *god*, I just fucking hit something!”

“You don’t say?” said Rishika, with a healthy amount of sarcasm.

“Should we get out and see what it was?” I asked. “If it was an animal or something, it might need help.”

Artemis was first to open her door. The rest of us followed her lead, unbuckling our seatbelts and stepping out. We rounded the front of the car, meeting at the hood. The front-end damage to the car was minimal at best, but in front of us was a dark lump of fur, sprawled on the street.

“Is that a bear?” I asked.

Rishika shook her head, taking one small step closer to the animal. “No. That’s a Rogue werewolf, is what it is.”

Whatever it was, it wasn’t moving. It lay there in a heap, limp and apparently lifeless. I leaned forward, reaching out to touch it—to move it so we could see if it was really a werewolf, or just a random animal that had taken an unfortunate leap in front of our car.

Suddenly, hands were pulling me backward. Lola and Rishika had each grabbed an arm, and were yanking me away from the animal like their lives depended on it.

“Hold on just a minute, Cali,” said Rishika. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Me neither,” said Lola. “There’s something off about the scent of this wolf…”

Artemis took a step back, looking hesitant and uncharacteristically worried. “Maybe we should get back in the car?”

“But what if it’s hurt?” I contested. “We can’t just leave it there!”

Suddenly, the wolf began to stir.

“Nope!” Lola squeaked. She gave my arm a good tug. “We need to go. Like, now.”

Rishika yanked me into the car, and Lola and Artemis jumped in after me, slamming the doors immediately. Just as Lola shut hers, the wolf wobbled slowly to its feet, looking stunned and shaky. He was huge. Shit, Maybe Rishika had been right. It’s not just some animal…

It slouched one way, then the other, then staggered off into the woods. It wasn’t a wolf I’d ever seen before. It was dark as night, with the strangest fur markings—mystical and mysterious and… beautiful. He had a ring of brown fur along his neck, and the rest of him was black. I couldn’t look away from the unique pattern of its fur. Before I could ask about it, Lola spoke.

“We need to get the hell out of here,” she said.

“Agreed,” said Rishika. “And we need to let Greyson know about this.”

I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the gap in the trees the wolf had disappeared through.

“That’s fine,” I murmured absently to the others. “Just remember not to tell him about the junkyard.”

I didn’t want to keep secrets, but we had it totally handled. There was no need to bother Greyson with it. He had enough on his shoulders as it was. But the wolf… Greyson probably *did* need to know about that.

“Thank you again, Artemis,” I said. “For fixing things with the junkyard owner.”

“You don’t need to thank me,” Artemis said. “I already told you, it isn’t necessary. We’re sisters. We look after each other.”

Despite my nerves over the wolf, I felt a bubbling warmth in my chest. It was wonderful, having my sister in my life—and Artemis was just so *loyal*. She cared for me enough to come to my rescue.

“Are you guys sure the mind control will hold?” Lola asked.

Artemis seemed a little stung by the question. “Yes,” she said, sounding peeved. “There’s no reason why it shouldn’t. I know what I’m doing. I’ve done this before—many times.”

“Many times?” asked Rishika.

“Humans are too nosy for their own good,” Artemis muttered.

“I’m just glad we fixed it without making it worse,” I said, forcing myself to relax with a deep sigh. “We can just forget about it now.”

“Right,” said Artemis.

“Sure,” said Lola.

“Agreed,” said Rishika.

“Maybe next time we want to break things, we’ll just… find a different junkyard?” Lola said.

I tipped my head back against the headrest and laughed. “That’s probably not a bad idea.”

For the rest of the ride home, we were mostly quiet, all of us trying to relax after such an exciting turn of events. Lola turned on the radio, and we decompressed in silence all the way back to the house.

When we arrived, we were greeted by the sight of Greyson and Torin, waiting for us outside. Both of them looked terribly anxious. Their heads immediately snapped toward the sound of the car pulling in, and Greyson jogged promptly down the steps to meet us. The moment I stepped out of the car, I found myself looking at a pissed-off Alpha wolf.

“Where the hell were you guys?” Greyson demanded.

Great. Busted.

“Okay, just calm down and hear me out,” I began. “We had to go. We had to figure out how to stop—”

“Did you go out to find Xavier?” Greyson interrupted.

I couldn’t speak. Why was he bringing Xavier up now? I didn’t know whether to be offended by his assumption or to comfort him, because that definitely wasn’t the case.

I finally managed to find some words, getting them out nervously. “No, of course not.”

But Greyson was already speaking over me. “I understand you’re feeling bad about things, but I want you to know that I’m here.”

What on earth was he talking about?

“I know,” I spoke slowly, trying to calm the energy of the conversation, but it didn’t seem to work. Greyson was aggravated, like he’d built up a bunch of adrenaline while he was waiting for me to come back. “What is going on? What are you talking about?”

“Oh, my god, just stop. Both of you,” Lola snapped, stepping out of the car. She looked between the two of us while the others piled out of the car and joined us in a circle. “You aren’t even listening to each other.”

Greyson and I exchanged a glance and shut our mouths.

Once we were quiet, Lola waved her hands at the air, apparently satisfied with her mediating, and said, “Go on.”

Greyson gestured to me in a way that clearly said, *After you.*

Lola’s interruption had helped ease the tension, but it had done nothing for the irritation I was feeling at Greyson’s accusation.

I crossed my arms. “I did *not* go to find Xavier. I would’ve told you what was happening if that were the case, and you should know that.”

He shrugged uncomfortably, looking a little ashamed of himself. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions.” His apology was like a breath of fresh air. I relaxed a little, relieved to see he was calming down. But then he spoke again. “But if you weren’t out looking for Xavier, what *were* you doing?”

Lola clapped her hands together and said, in a sudden burst of brilliance, “Girls’ night out. We decided to go for a spontaneous drive. Get some food, enjoy the night.”

It was the most predictable excuse ever, but Lola nailed the execution. For a second, I thought Greyson was eating it up. Then he pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed.

“I’m not in the mood to even begin to pretend I believe you, but we can deal with that later.” He reached out and gently took my hand. Then he looked at the others. “You three go inside. We’ll discuss this later.”

Lola fidgeted nervously. “Um, what’s there to discuss?”

“Maybe the fact that not one of you answered your phones when I tried to call you, earlier?” Greyson said.

“Greyson, actually,” Rishika started, “there was something I wanted to tell you about.”

“Tell me later,” he said. “I want to talk to Cali first.”

The three of them all seemed to shrink a little under the weight of his tone, and climbed the steps up to the house with their tails between their legs. As she passed, Lola mouthed a quick “sorry”in my direction.

Greyson and I followed everyone inside, but we went upstairs to his room. When he shut the door behind us, and a desperately-needed sense of privacy descended over the room, I crossed my arms and looked up at him.

“There really wasn’t anything to worry about,” I said. “We were just getting out of the house for a while.”

I felt bad for lying, but I didn’t want there to be yet another issue for Greyson to worry about.

“That’s fine,” Greyson said. “Don’t worry about it.”

I was surprised by his sudden willingness to forgive and forget. My defiant arms fell to my sides. “Then what’s up?”

“Sit down,” Greyson said, gesturing to the bed.

Anxiously, I took a seat on the edge.

He came closer, leaning down to look me in the eye. “I have something serious to ask you.”

**Episode 3783**

**Xavier**

“Why should the alliance matter?” I asked. “You know I’m the right Alpha for this pack; the alliance will agree if we do.”

I’d said it without missing a beat, but I was only just starting to think through some of the less obvious implications of my becoming Samara Alpha and being involved in the alliance. Like, first off, how I was going to have to tell the Redwood, Vanguard, and Blue Blood packs that I was the new Samara Alpha. I didn’t know how they were going to take that, in actuality.

I refused to let the agony of that thought show on my face, and I bit back the sudden weakness in my voice. “Honestly, my main concern right now is that I’m going to have to be *diplomatic* with Lucian. I hate that jackass.”

Ava laughed, nodding in agreement. “I get it. I don’t envy you.”

Now that I was thinking about it, I realized that pack alliance meetings were going to be a nightmare for me to navigate. Somehow, I’d have to keep it together and represent the Samaras while my brother and my mate were right there, representing the Redwood pack as a team.

*Possibly as Alpha and Luna*, my treacherous mind supplied, but I shoved that thought down into a deep, dark hole.

How was I going to stand in the same room as Cali without talking to her? Without touching her or holding her? Suddenly, it felt like a snake had wrapped itself around my insides, pushing more air from my lungs by the second.

I could almost hear Adéluce laughing somewhere in the distance. Mocking me for the implications of the choice she’d allowed me to make. I’d been wondering why she hadn’t intervened to stop me from taking on the Samaras, but now I had a feeling I knew the answer—witnessing Greyson and Cali together was exactly the kind of torture Adéluce wanted for me, and as Samara Alpha, I’d be seeing a lot more of them than I would’ve as a Rogue.

I was beginning to wilt at the thought of Cali and the shitty hand fate had dealt me. But a thought occurred to me—I was a goddamn *Alpha*. Why was I letting Adéluce rule me like this?

“I’m going to make the Samara pack into something people will respect again,” I said with resolve. “They deserve that much.” It wouldn’t be easy, but I was going to rebuild this pack. “I can do it,” I said, mostly to myself. “I can make it happen.”

“I believe you,” Ava said. She looked me over warmly and smiled. “I *always* believed in you—I just needed to hear you say it out loud. I know this won’t be easy.” She reached out and rested a hand on my arm, her touch electric. My wolf bucked wildly inside me. “No matter what, I’ll be beside you to help Samaras,” Ava said. “But we all saw that fight with Greyson. I guess what I really want to know is how your brother will react to you becoming our Alpha.”

“I won’t lie to you,” I said. Before I could continue, Ava raised a brow, like she was calling me on my bullshit. “I won’t lie to you about *this*,” I clarified. “Or about pack stuff. I swear.”

Obviously, there were things Ava didn’t need to know, but this was her pack*.* Obviously, I wouldn’t keep anything from her that pertained to the Samaras. I wouldn’t screw her over like that. I’d done enough screwing her over to last a lifetime.

“I won’t lie to you,” I repeated. “The truth is, dealing with Greyson is going to be hard on multiple levels. He’s used to seeing me as his irritating little brother. I’m going to have to force him into a change of perspective, and he’s stubborn as hell. It won’t be easy.”

Ava nodded, seeming to understand what I was saying, and quietly digesting all the unspoken parts. The topic of Cali had been wisely avoided. “I get it,” she said. “You need to move mountains. Change Greyson’s perception. He needs to give you the respect and recognition you deserve.”

“The respect and recognition I deserve as his equal, and the Alpha of a strong fucking pack,” I finished for her. Suddenly, the ease of the conversation hit me like a tidal wave. I’d been so comfortable talking to Ava, and I hadn’t even noticed. It was like she was picking up on my emotions and feeding them back to me.

It was strange, how quickly I’d fallen back into the way we used to be. Suddenly, everything was like it used to be, back when we were just mates and things were simple. Back when we loved each other.

It would’ve been so easy to go back. Except…

Suddenly, it felt like my stomach was being squeezed in a fist. I couldn’t think of Cali. I had to stop—had to distract myself. I realized then that Ava was leaning forward, watching my lips. I allowed her to move closer, let her press a kiss to them. Hesitantly—but not *too* hesitantly—I kissed her back, cherishing the way my mind instantly tore away from thoughts of anything else. Once again, I was entranced by her kiss. Her touch.

I kissed her for a long, warm moment before I pulled back.

Ava looked shocked, like she hadn’t meant to initiate the kiss to begin with. “I’m sorry, I—”

I pressed a finger to her mouth, a fire building in me at the softness of her lips. At the way I still felt them against mine. “If I don’t want this, I’ll stop,” I said.

That squeeze hit me again, the uncomfortable twisting sensation in my gut. I pushed it aside and let my finger fall from Ava’s lips. If I was going to do this, then it had to be my choice. I was tired of not having a say in the direction of my own life. I wouldn’t be the strong Alpha this pack needed if I didn’t have any confidence in my own power. And I wouldn’t be able to find that confidence if I was distracted by a desperate attempt to live in two worlds at once.

And it wasn’t like I didn’t care about Ava. I did.

It was strange to admit it, but I cared about her more than I’d let myself realize.

I felt her touch and looked down to see she was taking my hand, pulling me back toward the Airstream. I snagged a bottle of wine on the way, then followed her inside. I wrenched out the cork with a hard twist and took a long drink, offering the bottle to Ava as I swallowed down the rough taste.

Ava grinned and echoed my movements, tossing her head back, taking a swallow that almost seemed to overwhelm her.

It would take a lot more than a bottle of wine to ward away all the thoughts in my mind. That was the real problem. I just wanted to stop thinking—about everything. I wanted my mind to go blank, my thoughts to melt away. Just for a little while.

Ava put the bottle down and leaned against the counter, the look on her face inviting. Her body language said *come closer*,so I did. I boxed her in against the counter, my arms on either side of her.

She looked up into my eyes, her own so vibrant. So cool and inviting. There was something daring in them—a glimmer of want that said, *This is right.* And it did feel right. It felt so strangely right as she pushed herself forward and kissed me.

It was innocent, at first. Just a precious beat of brushing lips, then she pulled away and searched my face, clearly wondering if what she’d done was okay. If I would welcome the affection. If I would let her in again, or put a stop to it.

I had no intention of stopping anything.

Her eyes fell to my lips, and I felt myself leaning in, pining for that feeling. This time, when she kissed me, it was much less innocent. I fell into her lips, into the sheer heat of her. It was just lips at first, then tongue. The fire of her mouth, burning against mine.

Her fingers tunneled into my hair, and I found myself grasping at her waist. Her breath picked up, crashing against my lips in between kisses, filling me like smoke. I took in her taste, her heat, her skin, my fingers roaming under her clothes, just to feel the warmth of her skin beneath

And yet I couldn’t stop touching, couldn’t stop kissing. I found myself pressing against her, wanting more where there was nothing left to take. No breath left in our lungs, no space between our bodies. There was nothing more to fill the yearning in me, not without…

We broke apart, breathing heavily against each other. I could tear myself from her lips, but not the closeness. Not her scent, her warmth. I leaned my forehead against hers, and we stayed there, eyes closed, breathing hard.

Then, gently, Ava pushed me away and took my hand.

Without a word, she began to lead me toward the bed.

**Episode 3784**

Greyson’s tone took me by surprise. Despite the appearance he presented to the world, Greyson wasn’t naturally all that serious—but lately, everything had seemed to be of dire importance. What was he going to ask me? I shifted a little, uncomfortable under the pressure of his gaze.

“Okay, sure,” I said. “Whatever you need. You know I’ll support you, whatever it is.”

“Don’t promise me anything yet,” he said, his eyes pushing into me. “I need to tell you what I’m asking, first.”

I was confused. Was there something wrong with promising that I’d always be there for him? He seemed on edge, and I’d thought maybe my reassurance would calm him, but it seemed to have had the opposite effect.

Confused, I nodded. “All right.”

“The pack summit’s coming up,” Greyson began. “And I’ve been doing a lot of thinking. About the pack. About its reputation, and the appearance it needs to present at the summit. We need to seem strong and healthy and powerful. The other packs, the other Alphas… They’ll be sniffing for weakness. Looking for soft spots to exploit in the future.”

I wasn’t sure where he was going with this, but it made sense that he was taking the summit so seriously. Greyson was already under a lot of stress, and Xavier’s disappearing act had only added to that stress, in many different ways. The fact that Xavier wouldn’t be attending the summit with us had to be worrying him. Then of course, pepper in some Bitterfang drama and the whole Lucian-Elle debacle… I had to wonder whether Greyson had been keeping any other concerns to himself. It wouldn’t have been the first time one of the Evers brothers had kept a secret from me.

Greyson kept talking. “Thinking about the summit has made me realize that sometimes, I don’t focus enough on what’s best for the pack. I’m too focused on… us.”

I couldn’t help but interrupt. “Listen, you’re a great Alpha, and the pack knows that. They’re lucky to have you. You care about them, and you show it every day.”

Greyson’s face relaxed a little. The serious look in his eyes was still there, but his expression had softened. He even smiled. “I appreciate that, but just hear me out. I need you to understand *why* I’m asking what I’m about to ask you.”

A nervous lump formed in my throat. “Okay.”

Greyson shifted, crouching down to look me in the eye. He took my hand. “We’ve been through a lot lately, and before the summit, I think the pack needs to see a show of strength. Something that will liven them up, and show the rest of the world who the Redwoods really are. Who we can be, with a little strength and proper leadership.” He looked me resolutely in the eye. “Cali, I’d like you to come to the summit as Luna of the Redwood pack.”

My heart fell—dropped into my stomach like a lead weight. He was asking me to be his Luna? Had I understood correctly?

I opened my mouth, but nothing happened. And when I forced myself to speak, the only thing that came out was a nonsensical stammer. “I—I mean. What—uh—”

Greyson touched my shoulder, a new kind of ease coming to his face. It must’ve taken a lot of strength for him to ask the question, because despite my unintelligible response, he seemed relieved. “Don’t worry,” he said. “Take your time to decide. I’m not asking you to give me an answer right this second. But you do understand where I’m coming from, don’t you?”

I considered everything he’d just said, replaying the words in my mind. I thought about the Redwood pack, and the things I’d heard others say about it. We didn’t have the best reputation. Not the worst, but also not the best. Greyson was right—what the pack needed was revitalization. And strategically, my becoming its Luna was the right move, but…

“I love you,” Greyson said firmly, holding my gaze. “And I’m not asking you to do this purely for the good of the pack. *I love you*, Cali. Of course, I wantyou to be my Luna. I wish I could’ve asked you without the pressure of a deadline, but—”

“I understand,” I said.

“You do?”

I nodded. “You wanted me to understand why you were asking me this, and I do. It’s not like I haven’t thought about becoming the Redwood Luna, especially now that the killing part of the *due destini* curse is gone. I know we’re mates. I know that the only thing standing between me and a future as the Luna of this pack is one small ceremony.”

“Don’t forget, we still don’t know what that ceremony might do to a non-wolf,” Greyson added. It was a difficult point, but he was right to raise it. There was a lot to consider.

“Even so, I’ve still *thought* about it,” I said. “I wasn’t lying, earlier—Xavier not being here is making everything difficult. I just… I don’t want to make a choice that doesn’t *feel* like a choice.”

Greyson nodded, but I didn’t miss the shadow of disappointment that passed over his face. “I understand. But I still have to think this through as an Alpha.”

“I get it… I just—” I took a deep breath, trying to come up with a way to articulate my feelings in a way Greyson might understand. “I don’t think I’m ready to make a decision just this moment.”

“Of course not,” Greyson said, giving me a slight smile. I could tell by the look on his face that I’d made things a little more difficult for him, but I had to be honest.

Was I ready to become his Luna? Was I even right for it?

“Can I just have a little time to think?” I asked.

Greyson nodded. He rose and pulled me into his arms, hugging me tightly. But I could tell by the tension in his body and the way he didn’t say anything that he was stressed about the whole situation.

I rubbed his back and pulled away to find his lips, pressing a soft kiss to them. He breathed out through his nose and kissed me back. I captured his cheeks in my hands and cherished the feeling.

I could always feel the passion in Greyson. It was one thing to be *told* you were wanted—to feel it on a person’s skin was entirely another. And I felt it in the way Greyson kissed me. How he deepened that kiss until I found myself leaning back, ready to fall onto the bed.

He stopped before we could go any further, and I barely held back a whimper at the loss of his lips as he pulled away to look me in the eye.

“So where did you really go?” he asked.

I blanched a little.

A handsome smile stretched over Greyson’s face. “Forgot about that, huh?”

“No,” I replied, apprehension squeezing my chest. “But there is something you need to know—I meant to tell you earlier, but I got distracted.”

“What’s that?”

“On our way home, we hit something.”

An edge of alarm rose in his voice. “Are you okay?”

I felt like laughing at his response. Asking if I was okay, like I wasn’t sitting there in front of him.

I smiled. “No—I’m fine, everyone’s fine. Well, kind of. Actually, what we hit was a wolf.”

Greyson’s brows furrowed and he looked at me quizzically. “Like, a wolf, or a *wolf?*”

“I’m not sure,” I replied. “Rishika and Lola both caught the scent, but they didn’t agree on anything. Rishika thought it was a Rogue, though. It was pretty freaky actually…”

“Was there anything distinct about the wolf?” asked Greyson.

I chewed on my lip. “Well, there was something weird about its coat. A strange pattern in its fur that I’d never seen before—there was a brown ring around its neck, but the rest of it was a deep black.”

Greyson’s brows lifted in surprise. “Did it have a scarred jaw and hazel eyes?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I couldn’t see its eyes, but the jaw might’ve been scarred? Why? Do you know who it is?”

“No,” said Greyson, lowering his gaze thoughtfully. “But I saw a similar wolf in the woods earlier, when I was going after Elle. With everything going on, I don’t want to brush it off as coincidence. If we both saw the same wolf, it might mean something.”

I nodded. Perhaps it *was* just coincidence—but it wasn’t the kind of coincidence we could afford to overlook right now.

“I’ve already told the rest of the pack about the wolf I saw,” Greyson said. “I’ll make sure to update everyone about the new sighting, and let Rishika know as well. Whoever it is, we need to be more vigilant. We should be more vigilant about everything, now.”

It looked like he wanted to keep talking, but before he could, a piercing howl came from outside. We both shot to our feet.

“What was that?” I burst out.

“I think you mean ‘who,’” Greyson said grimly, already running for the door.

**Episode 3785**

**Ava**

Xavier and I were connected in nearly every way. My hands in his hair, his tongue in my mouth, hot huffs of breath moving between us. We lay on the bed, undeniably indulging in each other. The pressure of his body on top of mine was igniting me on the inside, lighting me up in a place that had been longing for him for far too long. And I let out all that pent-up lust, pulling him against me, kissing him harder.

So hard, in fact, that I couldn’t recall ever having kissed a person like this before. But I couldn’t stop—it was like I was *breathing* him. It was like he was the air in my lungs, and I loved the taste of every breath. I needed more. I needed to feel him inside of me, desperately. I had to connect with him that way again, and we were close. So close. But… Something wasn’t right.

Every move me made—as perfect as they were—felt distracted and hesitant. I wasn’t thinking, but Xavier was. And it was slowing him down. Keeping him at a distance.

I flattened my hand on his chest and pushed him back a bit.

He looked down at me with hooded eyes, his cheeks flushed. “What is it?”

My wolf stirred. Every instinct I had was telling me to pull him back to me. To finish what we’d started. But I couldn’t do it. Not like this. I needed him to be all in.

Xavier eyed my face with a dash of confusion. “Is this not what you want?”

Hah. The irony of that question.

“I should be asking you the same thing,” I said. “You’re distracted; I can feel it.”

“I’m not distracted,” Xavier said. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You just promised not to lie to me anymore,” I challenged. “You’re acting like I don’t know you. But I do. And I know when you’re here, and I know when you’re not—and right now, you’re not here.”

“Fine,” Xavier said, giving in with a sigh. “You’re right. I’m not being fair to you.”

His words made me ache, but at least he was finally being honest.

“See?” I asked. “Was that so hard?” Despite the pain stabbing through my chest, I gave a small laugh. “You used to be so good at hurting my feelings.”

He flinched, a flash of guilt passing over his face. It wasn’t the reaction I’d been going for, but it did dull the ache in me. Was he actually taking mental notes about his behavior? Maybe Xavier really did care about me…

I ran my hand up his chest—my palm flat, moving over all the strong curves of his body. God, I wanted him. But not like this. Not when he didn’t want me just as much.

“I know you don’t mean any harm,” I told him. “But I deserve better than this. If we’re going to do this, I want all of you.”

“You have me,” Xavier said. He clasped the nape of my neck and leaned in to kiss me, and it took all the strength I had to pull back. To push him away and crawl out from under him.

“Not right now,” I said. “I need to go.”

Xavier slumped back, his expression a mix of concern and disappointment. “Where are you going?”

“I just need to clear my head,” I told him.

I left him behind in the Airstream, not looking back. I knew that if I did, I’d probably break and make a swift U-turn and run right back to him. And yeah, getting back to it with Xavier would feel great. Amazing, probably. But it would be a passing bliss before I found myself lying there, feeling like absolute hell.

My wolf was frustrated, and I could feel it, but this was for the best. For both of us. It just wasn’t the right time.

I found myself absorbed by the pack, celebration thick in the air. I was happy to see the Samaras finally on the cusp of something great. It had been a long time since they’d had any reason to party at all.

Even though Xavier and I weren’t exactly where I wanted us to be, the knowledge that the Samaras were on the way back up gave me strength. We were finally going to show the world what we could be.

The pre-Iudicium excitement was effervescent and contagious, and I found myself shedding all the pain and embarrassment. This was what I needed—a taste of happiness, something exciting to hold in my heart. To shake away all the fears I had that maybe Xavier and I would never reach that place. Maybe he’d always hesitate. Maybe he’d always distance himself from me.

I breathed in the sparkling air around me and held it in my chest. *No more Xavier thoughts. Just enjoy the night, Ava.*

I snatched a bottle of beer from the table and twisted off the top, taking a deep gulp. It burned and fizzled delightfully. Just the medicine I needed.

Everyone seemed to be having a good time. There was chatting and laughter, dancing and drinking, and excited words passed between friends about the promise of a new beginning. But as I passed by one of the fires, I overheard a wolf speaking emphatically. Simon, was his name. I knew him—he was a decent guy, but a bit angsty.

“What gives him the right to come in here and tell us he’s our Alpha?” he was exclaiming. “Who the hell does he think he is?”

His pal—Jesse—nodded in agreement. I felt a jolt of displeasure stab through me. They were obviously drunk and riling each other up, but I couldn’t let this stand.

I butted in shamelessly. “You’d better put some respect in your tone when you talk about our Alpha.”

Both men looked me over, clearly both confused and insulted by my presence.

“He’s not my Alpha yet,” Simon spat. “He hasn’t passed the Iudicium yet. And the Samaras deserve better than some two-bit pack’s castoff stray.”

Something in me snapped. I clenched my fists, feeling my knuckles go white. Even if Xavier *hadn’t* been our almost-Alpha, I wouldn’t have let this go unpunished.

“I’m not going to let you speak about my mate that way,” I half-growled.

“You’re not our Luna yet,” Jesse said tauntingly.

A smile spread across my face, and not a kind one. “You should keep your useless mouth shut about matters you’ll never understand.”

This seemed to do the trick. Jesse shot up, a furious look igniting on his face. He took a swing at me, and I leapt back, dropping my beer but dodging his fist. Simon took the opportunity to come at me next, but I was far faster than he was. I veered to the side, twisting away from his punch. But Jesse’s next advance was too sudden for me to deflect. I took a hit to the jaw that sent me stumbling to the ground.

I popped right back up, refusing to show a single moment of weakness. But as I found my balance again, I realized a crowd had gathered around us, eagerly waiting to see who would go down and who would win.

Suddenly, the fight felt like a test. A show of power to see if I could put unruly pack members in their place, like a Luna was supposed to. I had to win. I was the one who’d brought Xavier here. If I failed, it would reflect poorly on him.

But I was so lost in my thoughts, I didn’t notice the fist flying at me from the side. It struck me square in the jaw, and I tumbled to the ground, once again sweeping back to my feet. I could taste the blood in my mouth, feel it wet on my face. I brushed it away from my lip and charged, trying to move unpredictably. Simon couldn’t keep up with me—couldn’t anticipate where I would go. I managed to throw a hit that cracked hard against his nose and sent him sprawling to the ground.

It would’ve been a sweet victory, but something was wrong. My instincts tingled, and I shot a look to the left. There was a wolf standing where Jesse had been, and his clothing was shredded on the ground. His lip curled as he crouched down, snarling at me through his teeth. He leapt at me.

I couldn’t dodge a wolf—I knew that as well as anyone. I did the only thing I could think to do, which was shield my face with my arms and wait for him to rip into me.

But the pain never came.

Instead, something flashed across my vision, and a fist smashed into Jesse’s face—but it wasn’t mine.

Jesse went sprawling with a yelp, and I lowered my arms to see Xavier, planting himself between me and the wolf.

**Episode 3786**

Greyson and I rushed downstairs and out the door. He was faster than me, of course, and made it to the edge of the woods long before I did. By the time I caught up with him, he was already kneeling and staring at the ground, his expression unreadable.

“What is it?” I asked, panic circling in my stomach.

The howl hadn’t sounded familiar, but then again, I was no expert. I was getting more and more acclimated to pack life, but there was still so much I had to learn—including the ability to recognize the howls of wolves other than my mates.

In response, Greyson held up a finger, then raised his nose and sniffed the air, his eyes narrowed to slits as he concentrated. I looked down at the ground where he’d stopped and saw a set of massive pawprints. I took a look around, but there didn’t seem to be anyone close by.

“I don’t like this,” Greyson said, almost under his breath. “Whoever howled, they’re already so far away that I can barely pick up their scent, which means they’re *fast*.” He straightened. “Wait here. I’m going to take a look around.”

I grabbed his hand before he could dash off. “No, Greyson. There’s something weird going on, here—I don’t think we should split up.”

The last thing I wanted was for Greyson to go off searching for the source of the howl, only to get caught by surprise. If we stuck together, at least I’d be able to help him with my magic if anything unexpected happened.

Greyson’s expression softened and he squeezed my hand. “Do you sense something? Is this a Fae thing, maybe?”

I shook my head. “No… There’s just something about all of this that’s giving me a bad feeling.”

I wished that I could explain it better, but I didn’t quite understand the feeling myself. I just had a sense that it would be better if we stayed together—at least until we had a better idea of what we were dealing with. I knew better than anyone how quickly things could go off the rails, and I really wasn’t in the mood for more chaos.

“Okay,” Greyson said, glancing at the woods. “I still want to take a look at the immediate area, though, so why don’t you come with me? Stay close.”

I nodded and followed his lead as we walked a bit deeper into the woods. We hadn’t gone far before Greyson dropped to his knees again, but I could tell by his expression that he hadn’t quite found what he was looking for. I looked at the ground, trying to put some of my limited tracking training to use, but I couldn’t make out any more pawprints, or any evidence at all that anyone—or anything—had been here.

Greyson let out a frustrated sigh. “How is it that they’ve left no trace behind other than a few pawprints? It almost feels intentional, like they wanted us to find the prints, but nothing else. I’m starting to agree with you—there’s something off here, and I don’t like it.”

He tightened his grip on my hand and pulled me closer to him.

“Greyson!” It was Rishika, and it sounded like she was just at the edge of the woods in the direction we’d just come from. We quickly backtracked and found her with Artemis. Mimicking Greyson’s position from only a minute ago, she was kneeling beside the pawprints and examining them closely. She looked as confused as we both felt.

“This can’t be a coincidence,” she said, looking up as we approached. “We just hit that wolf, and now we find these prints here. There’s a connection, but hell if I know exactly what it is.”

“Agreed,” Greyson said, his brows knitted in thought. “The wolf you hit—judging by Cali’s description, I think I saw him earlier. I don’t know what to make of it, either.”

“Could he be following us? Stalking us?” Artemis asked. “I saw how hurt that wolf was. If this is the same wolf, how did he get all the way here? Doesn’t make sense. Maybe this is someone else?”

“No,” Greyson said. “This is definitely the same wolf I saw earlier. The scent is faint, but I recognize it.”

“Same here. I definitely got a good whiff of the one we hit, and this is the same scent,” Rishika said. She slowly got to her feet and stared intently at the woods, searching for answers.

“Then that’s definitely a cause for concern, right?” Artemis said.

“I can’t believe we have to worry about *another* wolf,” I said. “Come on! We’re already dealing with the Bitterfangs, and now there’s some Rogue sniffing around that we have to stress about too?”

We already had so much going on as we prepared for the summit—up to and including the whole Luna issue. It would have been nice, for once, to only have one huge issue at a time to focus on, but I was slowly starting to come to terms with the fact that that was never going to happen.

“On the plus side, the Rogue hasn’t actually said anything to any of us or threatened us or anything, right?” Artemis asked. “Just trying to find the bright side.”

“No, but trespassing on our land is threat enough,” Greyson said. “For that reason alone, we have to assume that the Rogue is hostile. We can’t afford to let our guard down right now, regardless.”

“That might be true,” I said, “but it’s strange that the Rogue didn’t say anything to us when he had the chance. We were right here, if it wanted to make a statement. If he really wanted to threaten us, wouldn’t he have taken that opportunity to do it?”

We were still discussing the possibilities when more members of the pack came out to join us.

“We heard the howl. Is it the Bitterfangs?” Zainab asked.

Greyson moved to address the gathering pack. “No, it’s the same Rogue I mentioned earlier,” he said. “The same one that Cali and the others hit with their car, and the same one I saw chasing Elle. There are prints nearby and I recognize the scent from earlier, but that’s all we have to go on right now.”

The pack erupted into conversation, throwing theories around about who it could be.

“This doesn’t sound great, whether it’s a Rogue or a pack wolf working for one of our enemies…” Zainab trailed off and shook her head. “It’s just more crap that we have to deal with. Hopefully the issue resolves itself so we can get back to more important stuff.”

“You’re telling me. The timing is shit,” Greyson said. “Hoping we can get to the bottom of it quickly.”

“I still feel like we’re missing something,” I said. I understood Greyson’s assumption that the Rogue might be a threat, but I had a gut feeling that that might not quite be the case. “Everything about this feels weird to me.”

“Weird but not ridiculous. Whoever it is could be casing the place,” Sage said. “We have no idea what their motives are, and until we do, we have to assume the worst.”

“In my experience, wolves who aren’t up to anything don’t go wandering onto another pack’s territory,” Zainab added. “I want to think positive, but it doesn’t feel like a friendly visit.”

The group moved on to a discussion of the ins and outs of pack politics, but I noticed that Elle was hanging back and staying quiet.

*She must be feeling overwhelmed. This is all a lot—as usual.*

I made my way over to Elle and pulled her a little away from the others. “You doing all right? Greyson told me about what happened with Lucian.”

Elle had certainly joined a pack that experienced more than its fair share of excitement—and now she had an overzealous suitor to deal with on top of everything else. Sometimes I wondered if she was having second thoughts about leaving the simplicity of natural wolf life to become a werewolf. I hoped not.

“I’m going to figure out all that Lucian stuff on my own,” Elle said with a wave of her hand. “But I like the pack, and I like having Greyson as my Alpha.”

I smiled, but I could see that *something* had Elle rattled. “Glad to hear that, but is there anything else going on? Something that we should know? We’re all here for you—you know that, right? You can tell me anything.”

Elle seemed put out, and her expression was confused. “I recognized the Rogue wolf’s scent. It’s someone from my old pack.”

“Oh, well that’s good, right?” I ventured. “Maybe someone came to visit?”

I wanted to believe that the wolf didn’t mean any harm—if he *was* from Elle’s old pack, then it was definitely possible. But Elle’s expression darkened, telling me that that wasn’t the case.

“No, I don’t know. Like I said, I think it’s someone from my old pack, and I recognize the scent… But I don’t know, Cali.” She looked up at me, a frantic look in her eyes. “There was something very wrong about it.”

**Episode 3787**

**Xavier**

My fist connected with Jesse’s snout, and he went flying. He landed a few feet away in a tangle of furry limbs, then let out a guttural growl as he scrambled to his feet. I could tell that he was a little dazed but trying his hardest to focus on me.

Simon tried to rush me from behind, but before he could even get close, Ava grabbed him by the arm, spun him around and shoved him away. He hit the ground with a thud but was back on his feet immediately.

“You got him?” I asked Ava as we pressed our backs together so that neither of the wolves could catch us by surprise.

“Please, this is a piece of cake,” Ava said.

Jesse was running straight for us, his teeth bared in a snarl and his eyes nearly red with anger. He lunged and caught my shirt in his teeth, nearly tearing it off, but he wasn’t quick enough—or strong enough—to knock me off-balance, and I hit him with an uppercut to the underside of his jaw, flipping him backwards nearly head over tail.

I whirled around to see Ava bouncing on her tiptoes, egging Simon on. He was approaching her slowly with his head low to the ground, and I could all but see the gears turning in his head as he tried to figure out the best approach.

“Oh no, Simon, did I shake you up? Come on! You’re so big and bad; come get me!” Ava said with a wicked smile.

Simon snarled and picked up speed, staying low and lunging at one of Ava’s ankles. Light on her feet, Ava easily bounced out of his way. She clasped her hands together and brought her fists down on top of Simon’s head like a sledgehammer. He was down for the count.

I turned back to Jesse, who was looking a little unsteady on his feet.

“I can do this all day,” I said. “I don’t know if you two noticed, but neither of us has even broken a sweat.”

In the smartest move that the two men had probably made in their lives, they both shifted back to human. They still looked pretty pissed off, but it was clear that they were surrendering.

I knew right then that this was a turning point for me. Now was the time for me to show what kind of Alpha I was going to be.

*These people aren’t going to accept me as their leader just because I tell them to. I have to act the part. I have to earn it.*

“Do you want to go back to having Knox as an Alpha?” I inquired. “Because this kind of shit might have flown with him, but it won’t with me. Trust me on that.”

I took a slow look around at the pack. They were all watching me, waiting to see what was going to happen next.

“I get everyone’s all strung up about this,” I said, “but tomorrow, when I complete the Iudicium and officially become the Samara Alpha, you’ll all see exactly what I can do. You’ll all see how strong you’ll become with me leading the way. And you’ll all fall in line, because you’ll know that I’m what’s best for this pack—whether you realize that right now or not.” I cast a pointed glance at Simon and Jesse, who both looked away. “And you WILL respect me and my mate.”

I could almost feel the pride radiating off Ava, and it was exhilarating. I deliberately kept my eyes off her, though. Instead, I kept staring Simon and Jesse down. I could almost see their internal struggle as they processed what I’d said, but eventually, they bowed their heads.

*I win.*

It felt great. This was my first test as a new Alpha, and I’d passed it with flying colors.

*Like there was ever any doubt.*

I was surprised when the pack erupted into cheers, apparently having seen what they needed to see. My wolf went wild as it heard Ava’s voice join the others.

Someone shoved a beer into my hand, and Geraint, Donovan, and Marissa came up to clink their bottles against mine. Despite my uncertainty about this whole turn of events, I had to admit that I was feeling really great.

*I can do this. I can make this pack a big deal. I know it.*

Ava grabbed my arm and pulled me aside. “I’m sorry that things with Jesse and Simon escalated like that. They were just talking so much crap about you, and—”

“Oh, so you were defending my honor?” I interrupted, a cheeky grin spreading across my face.

Ava gave me a playful shove. “Oh, shut up. Don’t let it go to your head. It’s just that when you’re Alpha—officially—I don’t want this sort of anger lingering under the surface, and I definitely don’t want people to think that they can say whatever they want. Like you said, they’re going to have to follow you—and I’m going to do whatever I can to make sure that happens.” She tilted her head, getting a little cocky. “Besides, this all worked out for the best. You got to prove something today.”

I gave her a skeptical look. “I’m not sure if beating down two little puppies proves much—”

Ava shook her head. “The pack needed to see it, and I’m glad it happened.”

I gave Ava a tight nod, then started making my way back toward the Airstream. I felt Ava hesitate behind me.

Starting tomorrow, I was going to be Alpha of this pack. It would be good to have Ava in my corner.

I turned back to face her, needing to get something off my chest. “You were right, earlier. I wasn’t fair to you. But I *do* appreciate what you mean to the pack.”

“I know that,” Ava said softly. “But I want to know what I mean to *you.*”

I opened my mouth to respond, but I wasn’t sure what was going to come out of it. Luckily, Ava held her hand up to stop me before I could say a word.

“No, not right now. I want you to really think about it. I want you to really be sure.” Then, to my surprise, she turned and started to walk away. She shot a glance at me over her shoulder. “I’ll see you at the Iudicium tomorrow.”

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The next day, I woke up in a sleeping bag alone. I’d found a place near one of the fires to bed down for the night, right after Ava had left me. I hadn’t wanted to go back into the Airstream, not when it smelled so strongly of Ava and held so many memories of us pushing the boundaries. I needed my head clear today. I was about to compete in an Iudicium, after all—but I wasn’t actually nervous, just really excited.

*I’m going to get through this, I know it. There’s no way I won’t crush it.*

I thought back to Knox’s Iudicium, and felt fully ready for what was to come. I got up, and having nothing to prepare—knowing that this whole trial was about me and my wolf and my control—I headed to the center of the campsite.

When I got there, a small crowd of people had already gathered, with Ava at the front. My wolf roared inside me. I had to admit that this new air of authority looked damn good on Ava. I fielded a quick wave of guilt as I thought of Cali—I never wanted to forget who my true mate was, but right now, I had to focus.

Seeing me, Ava waved. “Hey, come here!”

Her face was open with affection. I added that to my folder of guilt, damning Adéluce all over again. The crowd was growing by the second, but they parted as I walked through, allowing me to take my place in front of Ava. I wasn’t surprised to see that she’d taken on the role that Hector had assumed last time, and when she started to speak, I really listened.

“This is the time for you to prove that you are really our Alpha. You must not take this role lightly, and this test has been designed to remind you of that fact. You will commit, and you will use all your strength and knowledge to lead us through whatever trials come our way. Everything you have, everything you will be, is for the Samara pack. Once the Iudicium begins, it will not end until you succeed. Do *not* be distracted.”

I knew that last comment was specific to me, but she needn’t have worried. There was no way I was going to fail at this.

“Do you, Xavier Evers, accept these terms?” Ava asked, her voice strong and clear.

“I do,” I said.

There was a pride in Ava’s eyes that literally made me stand up taller. I wanted to make her proud—I wanted to make the Samara pack proud. I was going to give the Iudicium everything I had or die trying.

“Good,” Ava said. “Now, from this moment until the end of the Iudicium, you are on your own.”

**Episode 3788**

**Greyson**

The pack was crowded into the living room, most of them murmuring nervously. Last night, Elle had told Cali that she recognized the Rogue’s scent, but I’d felt like we could wait until morning to discuss it. A member of Elle’s old pack wasn’t going to just come after us out of the blue—there was no reason for it. I needed to believe that their intentions were pure, and so I would—until anything happened that told me otherwise.

Ready to talk it through, I quickly filled the rest of the pack in, then turned to Elle. “Do you know a wolf with a brown ring around its neck? What do you think is going on, exactly?”

“Yes, but there were a few wolves in my pack with different markings similar to that… And the scent is one I *almost* know well, but there’s a part of it that’s unfamiliar. No one in my pack ever had a scent *exactly* like that. I wish there was more I could say,” Elle said, then she dropped her head.

“Don’t worry,” I assured her. “You’ve already given us a lot to go on. Don’t feel bad for even a second.” I shifted my attention to the rest of the pack. “This is something that just a few of us should be able to handle. Elle and I will go out looking for this wolf, now that we know he’s someone from Elle’s old pack and not some random Rogue.”

I didn’t want the pack to worry. We’d all been through so much, and the last thing I wanted was to get everyone’s hackles up if there was no reason for it.

“We should still be careful,” Rishika said. “I’d like to join you, Greyson, if that’s okay. Three heads are better than two, right?”

I nodded. “Of course, Rishika, that’s a great idea. Everyone, keep your eyes sharp and stay alert if you leave the pack house, but I don’t think that this is a huge threat, so don’t feel the need to be too on edge. Once we know more, we’ll fill you in.”

As the pack dispersed, Cali came over and grabbed my hand.

“Please be careful, Greyson,” she said. “There’s still something about this that I don’t like. I’ve just got a weird feeling that it’s going to end badly.”

Cali’s eyes were searching mine, and I knew that look well. She needed reassurance, and I was all too happy to give it to her. Cali was always watching out for me and letting me know how much she cared. The least I could do was calm her worries—especially since we weren’t sure that this was even anything to be concerned about.

I smoothed my thumb down the back of her hand and pulled her close, planting a kiss on the top of her head. “You know that I’m always careful, and you know that I’ll always come back home to you.”

There was nothing that would ever keep me away from her—and the look in her eyes told me that she believed me when I said it. My heart skipped a beat as I thought about how much I adored her.

Cali rose onto her tiptoes and gave me a quick kiss. “I know,” she said. “In other words, you’re a badass who can take on any challenge that comes your way.”

“If you say so,” I said with a smile.

Elle and Rishika walked by, and I quickly fell into step behind them.

“We’ll be back soon, okay?” I told Cali, walking backward so I could keep talking to her. “Don’t worry—this is going to be easy breezy. Believe me?”

Cali nodded. “I believe you.”

I gave her a lingering glance as Elle, Rishika, and I trailed out of the pack house. I was happy to have them both by my side. While I didn’t think we’d encounter anything too threatening, it didn’t hurt to have two capable fighters on hand, just in case.

“So, what are you thinking?” I asked Rishika once we’d started into the woods. We quickly made our way over to where we’d found the prints the night before.

“I’ll run ahead a bit and try to pick up the scent,” she said. “You and Elle can hang back and look for any clues, see if you can pick up a different trail. Divide and conquer.”

“That’s a good idea,” I said. Rishika’s thought patterns so mirrored my own that I rarely had to second-guess her, which was a relief at times like this.

Rishika nodded and then shifted, giving Elle and me a nod before she disappeared into the trees.

“Ready?” I asked Elle. I could feel a little tension radiating off her, and I hoped that she wasn’t stressing too much about all this.

“Yes,” she said. “I’m ready.”

I led the way, and as we both walked deeper into the woods, I kept an eye out for any broken branches or pawprints. Elle and I didn’t talk much, but the silence between us wasn’t exactly awkward. I thought it was probably the right time to revisit the Lucian issue. I just didn’t want Elle to think that she had to shoulder everything on her own—especially now that she was stressing out over the strange wolf, too.

“Are you doing okay with the Lucian thing?” I asked tentatively. I wanted to help, but Elle had made it clear that Lucian was a touchy subject, and I didn’t want to put her off.

Elle gave me a strange look. “I’m willing to wait until after the summit. I already told you that.”

“Yes, you already told me. I’m asking how you’re *feeling.*” I could already tell that this conversation wasn’t going to go the way I’d planned.

Elle’s expression was blank. “I don’t understand what you’re asking me.”

I had to remind myself that Elle was still very young in human years. She was a quick study, but that didn’t mean she’d grasped all the nuances of human life just yet. I could only imagine how overwhelming the learning curve had to be. After all, I doubted wild wolves spent a lot of time sharing their feelings.

I tried again. “What I mean is that making a big decision can sometimes be stressful or make you feel anxious. I just want to make sure you know that that’s normal, and that I’m here if you need to talk anything out.”

Elle shook her head, clearly frustrated. “I don’t understand all these human feelings! In my old pack, we’d just fight things out and be done with it. Sometimes I hate how much humans just want to *talk* about things all the time. Talk talk talk! All they do is talk, but they don’t actually *say* much of anything.”

She crossed her arms over her chest, pouting slightly.

“Wait, are you saying that you just want to fight Lucian?” I asked.

I had to admit, I would’ve *loved* to see Elle hand Lucian his ass, and I had no doubt that she would best him if they ever went up against each other. Elle was a fierce, instinctive fighter who hadn’t grown up in the lap of luxury like Lucian. She definitely had an edge on him.

“Or you,” Elle said. “You could fight him for me. You don’t even like him.”

“Uh… Okay. Well, we try to avoid fights where we can, but that’s good to know,” I said, turning my attention back to our surroundings.

I kept catching snatches of the strange scent, but never enough to follow. I was starting to wonder if we were ever going to find this wolf, but then I saw it: a broken branch. I knelt down to take a closer look, and I saw that a tuft of black fur was snagged on it.

“Elle, I think we might have actually found something,” I said.

Elle lifted her nose to the air and took a deep sniff. “Yes. I think I can smell my old pack’s scent.”

I stood up and looked at her. “Why would they be back here? I thought we had an agreement. Do you think that there’s something wrong?”

Elle shrugged, still sniffing. “Not sure. One thing I know is that my father would never break his word. I can’t think of any reason why he would go back on his word. And just so you know, Greyson, my loyalty is to my new pack, now.”

“Of course, I know that, Elle,” I said. “I didn’t doubt it for a second. I trust you, but there’s a lot riding on your old pack upholding their end of our agreement. There’s so much happening right now, and we don’t have time to deal with unwanted attention from overly curious scientists. This is just a complication that we don’t need—that’s the only thing that’s annoying me right now.”

Elle and I both jumped at a loud crash. Seconds later, Rishika came running toward us, panting hard. She jumped into a shift, her human feet barely hitting the ground before she shouted, “Watch out!”

She’d barely gotten her warning out before a huge black wolf with a telltale brown ring around its neck lunged out of the trees and tackled Elle to the ground.

**Episode 3789**

I stared after Greyson, Elle, and Rishika until I couldn’t see them anymore. I was glad that for once, this seemed to be a pretty safe outing—even though I couldn’t shake the bad feeling in the pit of my stomach. I hoped that I was just being overcautious and that there wasn’t really anything to worry about, but I wasn’t entirely convinced.

I couldn’t imagine anyone from Elle’s old pack wishing us harm, and I knew that Greyson would be able to handle himself if things didn’t go quite as planned. But that didn’t mean I wasn’t going to worry until he came back to me safe and sound.

Adair’s voice cut through my thoughts, as condescending as ever. “Looks like you might have some time for some much-needed training, now that your mate has actually left your side for once.”

I turned to see the Fae standing behind me and frowned. “I can make time whenever you want. I know that my training is important.”

“Then you should remember to make it a priority,” Adair retorted.

“We just trained yesterday,” I said flatly. It wasn’t like I’d been actively avoiding training—though admittedly, until he’d mentioned it, I hadn’t had a single thought about when our next session would be.

“And have you practiced at all since then?” Adair asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Um… Kind of.” I thought back to how I’d been able to let my magic fly at the junkyard. I wished that I could tell him that I’d had a bit more practice with my magic, but then I’d probably have to lie about the whole junkyard worker incident. I could only imagine what Adair would say if he found out about that little tidbit. Sure, he was getting on my case right now, and I wasn’t happy about it, but that didn’t mean I wanted to lie to him.

“Sounds convincing,” Adair said after a short pause. “Maybe we should use this opportunity to go outside and do some work, since you have the time.”

“Sure,” I said.

If nothing else, training would help take my mind off Greyson. Not to mention the fact that I really was eager to get better at using my magic, and, despite Adair’s sour attitude, I knew he’d get me there in no time. He’d already helped me unlock parts of my magic that I’d never even thought to tap into—never in a million years had I imagined that I’d be able to start a fire just by concentrating really hard on a log—even though I still had a lot to learn about controlling the *intensity* of my magic.

Adair led me out to one of the snow-covered trees on the front lawn. He pointed to one of the branches near the top. “Do you see that branch?”

“Yes, obviously,” I said.

Adair rolled his eyes. “I’m trying to make sure you know that I’m talking about that specific branch near the top—the one that’s kind of bent at an odd angle.”

“Yes, I see it,” I said.

“Great. Now I want you to use your magic and hit only that branch. We’ve established that you can go big—now let’s see if you can be precise. Remember what we talked about during our last session. You have to limit the energy, using only what you need to get the job done.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

I took a deep breath and tried to focus. I could feel the energy around me, just like I had at the junkyard. Just as I started to pull it, the memory of Greyson asking me to be his Luna cut into my concentration. Every emotion that had surged through me when he’d asked the question hit me again, and I suddenly shoved out all the energy I’d been gathering, barely managing to direct it at the tree. There was a loud crash, and a heap of snow from the top of the tree plummeted to the ground.

Adair groaned and shook off the snow that had landed on top of his head. “Cali, that’s the exact opposite of what I asked you to do.”

“Sorry!” I said quickly. “I don’t know why I can’t do this.”

“I know why,” Adair said. “I can feel your lack of focus. What has your attention so divided?”

“It’s nothing,” I said, not wanting to tell him. “It’s just something I have to deal with.”

Not that I had the slightest clue how I was going to do that. Deciding whether or not to become Greyson’s Luna was such a big step, and I couldn’t imagine making a choice like that so quickly.

Adair threw his hands up in frustration. “I thought it would be enough to remove Artemis as a distraction, but clearly we have to try something new to get you on track.”

“Why do you care so much?” I asked, genuinely curious. “We barely know each other.”

Adair hadn’t seemed all that interested in any of us when we’d first met up with him in New Orleans, so it was strange that he was suddenly so invested in me and my magic. He seemed so irritated by me most of the time that I was surprised he was helping at all.

“I care because not only are we both Fae in a human world, but because you are my niece’s sister. You are family. You need to be strong enough to protect yourself—and the people you care about—from the threats of this world.”

I didn’t know what response I’d expected, but Adair’s sincere answer threw me off-guard. I was touched.

“I get it,” I said. “I promise to try harder. I’ll master this, I know I will. I just have to work through some things first.”

Adair took this in and gave me a slow nod. “I understand, Cali, but your training should be a priority. That’s the only way you’ll ever really tap into the furthest limits of your power. You have a lot of potential, and building up your protective and offensive skills should always be a priority for you.”

“I get that, too. I promise I’ll do better. But I think right now, I need to deal with this thing that’s getting in my way, otherwise I don’t see my focus improving any time soon,” I said.

Until I dealt with Greyson’s question head-on, there was no way I was going to be able to focus on much of anything—least of all my magic. Getting that under control was hard enough on days when my head was clear—though I wasn’t sure if I’d actually had a completely clear head since I’d entered the pack house.

“Go take care of business,” Adair said. “We can reconvene later.”

I left Adair, knowing that I had questions—lots of them—but I just didn’t know who to ask. I made my way back to the house, peeling off my coat and boots as I went inside. The house was warm and bustling as usual, and I spotted Mrs. Smith sitting on the couch in the living room. For once, she wasn’t nose deep in some wedding book or another.

*Mrs. Smith might be just the person to ask about all this Luna stuff—she must have seen a lot, over the course of her life. She knows so much about werewolf politics, too. She clearly cares deeply for Greyson, but she’s always been honest with me, as far as I know.*

“Hey, Mrs. Smith, can I talk to you?” I asked.

“Of course, Cali.” She patted the seat beside her. “What’s going on?”

“Greyson asked me to be his Luna, and he wants it to happen before we go to the summit.” The words kind of spilled out of my mouth, and I could tell that Mrs. Smith was a little surprised.

“Oh…” she said. “And how do you feel about that?”

“I love that he asked me, of course,” I said. “And I love that he wants me to take on such an important role, but I’m concerned about what it could mean for Xavier, since he’s not here. And aside from all that, I’m a little afraid of the ceremony and how I might react to it.”

Saying it all out loud reminded me of exactly how much was on my mind. It was pretty obvious why I hadn’t done well during my little impromptu training session with Adair.

Mrs. Smith nodded. “Those are a lot of feelings, but none of them are categorically a yes.”

I laughed. “You’re not wrong, but there is a part of me that really wants this.” I paused, still trying to get my own thoughts together and wondering if I really wanted an answer to the question on the tip of my tongue. “Mrs. Smith, what do you think about all this? Do you think I should agree to be Greyson’s Luna?”

Mrs. Smith tilted her head thoughtfully, clearly not taking the question lightly.

“Well, Cali, I won’t lie to you,” she finally said. “A Luna is an important part of any pack, and I think that having one would go a long way toward finally making the Redwood pack everything it can be.”

**Episode 3790**

**Xavier**

*This is too easy*,I thought smugly.

I was in wolf form, running through the forest at a fast clip. I remembered the dart guns from Knox’s trial and, as I scoped out the tree line, I spotted a few people perched in the branches, letting loose volleys of well-aimed darts. Dodging them was simple—I wasn’t even getting tired. I was surprised that they hadn’t changed up the trial, especially after I’d seen Knox do it, but maybe that was on purpose. They wanted me to show them that I was better than him by completing the same trials.

Unfortunately, being too well prepared gave me enough spare brainpower to think.

Cali’s face flitted into my mind, and I shook my head to clear it out. I couldn’t afford to lose focus. I had to pay attention to where I was right here and now and not think about what I’d lost. I was finally getting what I’d wanted for so long: to be the Alpha of a strong pack.

*But is it a strong pack? Or is it just the only pack available?*

I was a castoff Alpha for a castoff pack. How was I supposed to make something of that? My paw hit a rock, and I nearly stumbled. For a moment, every good feeling I’d had about taking over as Alpha Samara slipped away. I thought about Cali, and the Redwood pack, and how I would’ve given everything to be with my true mate in my true pack—not this broken pack that no one seemed to want to lead.

*No! The Samara pack will be great because I’m great. Period. This isn’t the time to doubt myself, or the Samaras. This is the path I’ve chosen, and I’m going to see it through. It’s the only way I might make it out of this bullshit with Adéluce.*

I regained my equilibrium and kept moving, increasing my speed. I could almost feel the icy water of the lake, but I still had a long way to go.

Ava’s words echoed through my mind. *Everything you have, everything you will be, is for the Samara pack.*

*That* was what I needed to keep at the forefront of my mind. That thought had to be my driving force, or I wasn’t going to succeed—and there was no way I was going to fail at this.

I leapt over a log and bounded forward, regaining confidence by the second. All the negative thoughts that had flooded through my brain only moments ago were nowhere to be found. I decided to take it easy on myself—this had all happened so fast, and I was still wrapping my head around it. It made sense that I would have a few moments of uncertainty about taking this step, but that uncertainty was gone now.

*I am* killing *this trial! By the time this whole thing is over, I’ll probably have set a record or something.*

Once I got through all three trials and I was the official Samara Alpha, I’d be able to face Greyson as a true equal, and he’d never be able to talk down to me again. No more giving me orders, no more second-guessing everything I said, everything I did—he would have to respect me as his equal, and as the Alpha of a pack that would only get stronger with me leading it.

I wove through the trees, my footing sure and all hesitation gone. I knew exactly where I was headed, and I was almost excited to face the icy lake—one of the most challenging and dangerous parts of the Iudicium.

The air began to chill around me, signaling that I was getting closer to the water. I launched myself over another fallen log, this one larger than the last. My paws hit the ground hard, and I kept going, ramping up my speed even more. Running through the woods like this had a way of putting things in perspective. Politics, complications, the drama of human life—it all melted away when you were racing through the woods alone, putting your speed and power to the test.

I felt free in a way that I hadn’t in a long, long time, and it felt good. This was my chance to forget everything and just be in the now. I forgot about the shackles of my life, the hard times, the pitfalls, and thought of nothing but myself and the woods around me and making it to the next trial. I had one goal, and one goal only—to finish this Iudicium. After that, everything else would fall into place.

I thought fleetingly of Adéluce, but not even the vampire-witch could get me down right now. For the first time in a long time, with the cold, crisp wind rushing through my fur and the hard, frozen ground beneath my paws, I felt like I could overcome anything. I just needed to remember my power, and stop getting so caught up in things that didn’t matter. It was nice to focus on nothing but the physical challenge of the Iudicium—braving the woods, dodging the dart attacks raining down from the trees above, and hitting the water that couldn’t be much farther away.

I broke through a thicket of trees, dodged a low-hanging, snow-covered branch, and then lifted my head to take in my surroundings. I could see the lake now. It was only a few yards away. Despite my fur, the cold was starting to slice into my body, but I kept going. Nothing was going to stop me from reaching my goal. Nothing was going to stand in my way. I was finally going to reach my full potential and do what I’d been born to do—lead a pack to glory.

I hit the edge of the lake and stopped to take in the wide expanse of ice ahead of me. On the other side, I could see the mountain I’d have to climb once I’d made it across. It was almost like I’d prepared for this very moment my entire life, and now I finally had the opportunity to prove how good an Alpha I was.

*I’ve got this. I was built for this. How is it this easy to become Alpha? How was it so hard for Knox? Simple—I was made for this, and he wasn’t.*

I placed one paw gingerly on the ice, not cocky enough to be reckless with that first step. I let out a sigh of relief when the ice held under my weight. Deciding to rely on my instincts for this leg of the trial, I launched myself forward and sprinted across the surface of the frozen lake. The ice was rough under my feet, which was good, since that meant I wasn’t slipping and sliding my way across. There was an ease to my movements, and with each step, my conviction grew—I had no doubt that I’d be able to finish the trial strong.

I kept up my fast pace and quickly reached the halfway point. At the rate I was going, I’d be on the other side in just a few minutes. My heart full and beating hard, I took a leap forward and landed on my front paws. But then I heard a loud cracking sound, and I felt the ice give way beneath me.

*Oh shit.*

I plunged into the water, and the unforgiving cold of the lake was a shock to my system. But it wasn’t just cold—it was a stabbing, awful pain that ripped through my body and sent my thoughts spiraling. It took everything I had to clear my mind enough to realize that I had to swim like I’d never swum before if I wanted to make it back to the surface. Werewolves tended to run hot—even under circumstances like these—but that didn’t mean I could take my time. Water this cold wasn’t anything to mess around with.

I started kicking, propelling myself up toward the fast-disappearing hole in the ice, knowing that if I didn’t move quickly, I would lose sight of it. I could easily get trapped under the ice, but I had no intention of dying this way. There was too much riding on me getting through this. Cali’s face floated before me once again as I thought of all the reasons why I had to make it out of this alive.

*Come on Xavier,* I could almost hear her say. *You can do it.*

*Just a little farther,* I told myself. *Come on, Xavier, push through. Not much farther.*

I could see the sunlight pouring through the hole. I was close. My nose was about to touch the surface when a hand gripped my back leg and yanked me down. Confusion flooded me as I tried to figure out what was happening, and a sick feeling rose in my stomach.

I looked down to see none other than Adéluce, gleefully dragging me into the depths of the frigid water.

**Episode 3791**

**Greyson**

I wasted no time shifting and growling at the newcomer. Elle had shifted as well, and for a moment, it looked like she and the other wolf were attacking each other. They were rolling across the snowy ground and nipping at each other, both struggling for dominance in a tangle of furry, flailing limbs.

I crouched down low, searching for an opening. I was just about to pounce when Rishika spoke.

*Wait, I don’t think they’re fighting. I think they’re… playing?* Rishika had shifted again after her warning, and even on her wolf’s face I could see confusion—and a little amusement.

I looked at them again. They were now playfully swatting at each other and faking lunges. When Elle pinned the wolf to the ground only to playfully dash away so he could give chase, I realized Rishika was right—they *were* playing.

*Who the hell is this guy?*

I reached out to Elle via mind link. *What’s going on?*

She didn’t answer, but she looked extremely happy. There was an energy to her that I hadn’t seen in… maybe ever? I was a little saddened to think that she hadn’t been this open with the pack yet. I was witnessing a whole new side to her—a lighter, carefree, unguarded side that she obviously hadn’t been comfortable enough to show during her time with the pack so far.

I stood there watching them, trying to put the pieces together. Elle had mentioned that she’d recognized the strange scent as belonging to someone from her pack, but nothing she’d said had indicated it was someone she knew well or was very close to. Which made it even more bewildering that the two wolves in front of me were the picture of pure joy right now.

I supposed that when I really thought about it, it made sense. Elle had admitted that the smell was both familiar and sort of not. Now that the wolf was closer, I also recognized the scent of Elle’s pack, but she was right. There was definitely something… *else* there, too. I couldn’t quite put my finger on what it was, but clearly it wasn’t strange enough to give Elle pause. She looked more in her element now than I’d ever seen her.

Elle had yet to answer my question, so I stepped between them before they could tackle each other again and reached out to her again.

*Elle, seriously, who is this?* I asked. *What’s going on?*

Elle and the mystery wolf both calmed down as they turned their attention to me. They were both breathing hard and exchanging furtive glances, like they were children who’d just been caught doing something bad.

*Sorry*,Elle mind linked. *I just can’t believe he’s here. This is one of my best friends from my old pack. I’ve missed him—I just got carried away, I guess.*

There was an excitement in Elle’s voice that I wasn’t sure I’d ever heard before, either. A second later, a new voice entered my head.

*It is so good to finally meet Elle’s new pack. You may call me Helix! Happy to know you!*

I took a step back. This new wolf had a *ton* of energy. He was jumping around like a puppy and started running between Rishika and me, creating a figure-8 path in the snow around us.

*Uh, it’s nice to meet you too…* I replied.

Helix skidded to a stop in front of Rishika and got all up in her face, his tongue out. *Hello! You may call me Helix. Who are you?*

He sat down with his head cocked to the side, patiently awaiting Rishika’s response.

Rishika gave me a look. *This one sure has a LOT of energy. Too much, if I’m being honest. He seems harmless enough, but I’m still going to go take a look around to make sure he didn’t bring any friends. You got this?*

I hesitated for a moment, taking in the scene.

*Why don’t you wait a minute?* I replied.

I was still wrapping my head around what was happening here, and I was feeling a little out of sorts. Helix’s strange scent was still throwing me for a loop, and Elle’s unusual behavior wasn’t helping matters.

Rishika widened her eyes at me in a pointed kind of way, and I sensed that she wanted nothing more than to get out of there. This was probably a lot for her, too. It was one thing to run into a stranger who wanted to rip your face off, and quite another to run into one who wanted to *lick* your face off.

*Okay, sure, yes, do a quick sweep*, I said. *We’ll be here.* *Be sure to let me know if you need me.*

*Thanks, will do*, Rishika said. *And good luck with all… this.*

She turned to leave.

*It was nice to meet you, whoever you are!* Helix mind linked, bounding around in front of Rishika as she tried to get going.

Rishika’s mind link contained an awkward laugh as she edged around Helix. *Nice to meet you, too. Goodbye!*

Without even a backward glance, Rishika disappeared into the woods.

When she was gone, I turned back to Helix. He was staring after her, his tongue still lolling out of his mouth.

*Now, Helix, tell us what you’re doing here*,I said. *Why are you following people from my pack?*

I wasn’t quite sure what I was dealing with, here, but there was still the matter of why he’d been lurking around our territory without introducing himself. I wouldn’t feel completely comfortable with him until we at least had that little detail ironed out.

Helix tilted his head, and then, to my great surprise, he shifted. In moments, he was standing before us in human form. He was very tall, with longish hair, hazel eyes, and a jagged scar along his jaw, and he was wearing a happy grin that perfectly complemented his overall vibe. He held his arms out, as if waiting for a hug.

I could feel Elle’s hackles rising beside me. She obviously hadn’t had any idea that her old friend Helix was a werewolf. It had to be jarring, to say the least, and Elle wasn’t one to take surprises well.

I shifted back to human, making sure to keep a bit of distance from Helix. Like Rishika had said, he seemed harmless enough, but when encountering a new wolf—especially a new werewolf—you could never be too sure.

“Who… How are you a werewolf?” I asked Helix.

It wasn’t the best question I’d ever asked, but I was still recovering from the shock of it all. It was obvious that he was a new werewolf, and I was curious about how it had come about. When I’d first encountered Elle’s old pack, there definitely hadn’t been any other werewolves in the bunch. The whole idea of becoming a werewolf had seemed almost sacred to them, so it was a little unexpected to run into another member of Elle’s old pack who’d taken the same path as her.

For the first time, Helix seemed uncertain. He dropped his hands to his sides. “I thought Elle would be excited. I missed her, and I thought she would be happy to see me like this. I thought it would be new and fun to talk to each other as humans.”

Elle was still in wolf form, probably still too thrown off by this new development to make a move. Her energy had done a complete 180 from what it had been when she and Helix had first reunited.

“Elle,” I began. “Why don’t you shift back too, so we can all talk about this?”

Elle did as I asked, but she also moved closer to my side, keeping her distance from Helix.

“When did this happen? Why did you do this, Helix?” she asked him. I couldn’t quite read the tone of Elle’s voice, but I didn’t sense much excitement in it. She seemed a little put out, if anything. “I don’t understand what’s happening.”

Helix shrugged. “The pack moved east, and I found an Alpha who agreed to give me the bite and my human name. I could not refuse.” He stepped forward as if to reach for Elle, but she moved farther back behind me. Helix’s face fell. “Why are you being this way? I thought you would be—”

I held up a hand, interrupting him. “It’s all well and good that you got the bite and a human name, but why are you here?”

I was starting to worry that maybe Helix wasn’t as good-natured as he appeared. I didn’t want Elle, or anyone else in the pack, to be hurt if this guy wasn’t who he said he was.

“Why did you do it?” Elle burst out. “I don’t understand.”

Helix sighed and dropped his head, as if taking a moment to find the right words. “I did it because I needed to find you, Elle. You have no idea what has been going on… You need to come back to the pack.”

**Episode 3792**

As soon as Mrs. Smith said the words, I knew that she was right. Having a Luna would definitely be a good thing for the pack. Having a Luna—someone to lead alongside—made an Alpha stronger. The Redwood pack being down a Luna—especially for so long—made the pack look weaker in the eyes of some other packs. I knew that, even if no one else was willing to say it.

“Cali, please know that I’m not trying to push you or make you feel bad,” Mrs. Smith continued. “It’s just… I’ve been in this world for a long time—I’ve seen a lot and learned a lot and made my share of mistakes—and one thing I know for sure is that a strong pack needs a strong Luna.”

“No, I get it,” I said. “I just don’t like feeling this way. I hate that I can’t just say yes to Greyson. You have no idea how much I wish that it could be as easy as that.”

I had no doubt that Mrs. Smith believed I was sincere, but still, I always felt a little off-balance when I was talking to her about anything concerning Greyson. It had to be difficult for her, watching her son going through the *due destini*. It wasn’t fun for anyone, really.

Mrs. Smith put a gentle hand on my arm. “This is a difficult path, Cali, but one that could be filled with so many rewards. Just know that I am so glad that my son has someone like you in his corner.”

My heart warmed at that. With how complicated things had always been between me and Greyson… and Xavier… it felt good to know that Mrs. Smith could see how much I cared about her son.

“Even though you can’t say yes to being Greyson’s Luna right now,” she added, “I know that you’re still in a position to help him, and that you’ll do whatever you can to support him.”

Mrs. Smith was good at being impartial, and I knew she always tried to be, but she was still Greyson’s mother. She was obviously thinking of him first and foremost. She wanted to see him happy and safe by any means necessary, and she certainly wanted his time as Alpha to be successful. But that didn’t make anything she’d said to me less true.

“Thank you, Mrs. Smith,” I said. “You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

*Too bad I’m not in the market for more stuff to think about.*

Mrs. Smith definitely meant well, but I wasn’t sure that this conversation had given me any clarity.

“I know this is a hard decision,” she said, “but I’m here for you whenever you need, Cali, and I’m always happy to answer any questions. I know that werewolf stuff can be a little overwhelming.”

“Thanks,” I said, standing. “I really appreciate that.”

I gave Mrs. Smith’s hand a squeeze before leaving her to go upstairs to my bedroom. I was starting to think I needed to talk about this with someone who would be a little more unbiased in their approach.

I’d just reached the top of the stairs when Lola came out of her room.

*Perfect timing. I can talk to Lola about this. She’ll either give me the best advice ever or come up with some plan that’s totally bananas, but either way, she’ll have something to offer. At this point, I need all the help that I can get.*

“Hey, Lola, are you busy?”

“No, what’s up?”

“Could I talk to you about something? It’s kind of important.”

Barely any time had passed since Greyson had asked me to be his Luna, but the pressure I felt was growing with every second. Whatever decision I made could have uncertain consequences for me, Greyson, and Xavier. I had to do the right thing, here, and it worried me that I was still so far from knowing what that was.

“Of course,” Lola said, instantly serious. “Come in.”

We both sat down on her bed, and as usual, Lola wasted no time diving in.

“So, is this about Xavier?” she asked.

“Um… Kind of, I guess?”

“Just say the word, and I’ll find a new place for us to break stuff.” Lola was already picking up her phone. “I’ll just go back to my other search results. I’m sure we can find somewhere that’ll get us in today. We’ll just have to be more careful this time—you know, with the blasty blasty—”

I laughed. “No, no, that’s not necessary. I think I’m good on that front. No… This about Greyson, really. He wants me to be his official Luna for the summit.”

Lola’s eyes went wide. “Oh no… Wouldn’t that mean that you’d be kind of choosing Greyson? What would that mean for Xavier? Would he be…” She drew her finger across her neck in the universal gesture for death. “… out of the running?”

I rolled my eyes at Lola’s theatrics. Then I sighed. “I don’t know. It’s still really complicated despite the death clause being gone. I obviously still love Xavier, so I wouldn’t be *not* choosing him. It’s just hard, because I know that becoming Greyson’s Luna would be really good for the pack. It’s not like I would be *choosing* Greyson, necessarily—I’d just be doing my part for the Redwoods. We need to present a strong front at the summit, and my stepping up as Luna would help with that.”

Lola winced. “Now I get why you said this was important. That sounds like a lot of pressure, but you’re right—the pack does need a Luna. We’ve been without one for so long…”

“Exactly,” I said. “Not to mention that if this Bitterfang stuff goes south, there could be a war. It would mean a lot if the other packs at the summit saw us as whole, with an Alpha *and* a Luna.”

“That makes a lot of sense,” Lola said. “But… To me, it still sounds like you’d be choosing Greyson. It’s kind of implied with the whole Luna thing. A Luna *chooses* their Alpha, and an Alpha *chooses* their Luna. I don’t really know how you could get around that.”

“No, that’s not the point,” I said, getting a little frustrated by what Lola was focusing on. She wasn’t helping matters. I was already having a hard enough time with that detail, and I was just starting to come to terms with the fact that becoming Greyson’s Luna might not be as serious as all that, but Lola was starting to make me doubt things, and I didn’t need that right now. “I… I really don’t think that this would be the same as the *due destini* choosing. Really, I’d be choosing the pack—which Xavier is a part of. That has to make it okay, right?”

Or maybe that nuance didn’t matter, as much as I wished it did. Maybe a choice was still a choice, in the end. *Ugh.*

Lola nodded slowly, clearly skeptical. “Okay… It sounds like you’ve got it all figured out. So what are you so worried about?”

“Because even though this is about the pack, I feel strange about not being able to talk to Xavier about it. I guess I just don’t like the idea that he isn’t involved in this at all.”

For so long, Xavier had been such a huge part of every big decision I made. It felt wrong to be even considering something so monumental without him even knowing about it.

Lola scrunched up her nose. “But… Xavier chose to make that happen, not you.”

I smiled, feeling a little wistful. “That might be true, but that doesn’t mean that my feelings for him just shut off. I’m still in love with him.”

“Well… yeah. That sucks,” Lola said.

“Plus, even if I do decide to go through with it, there’s still the Luna ceremony to think about. I’m really nervous about that. It’s dangerous—I’ve known that from the moment I was introduced to werewolf pack life. It’s never been done to someone who’s not a werewolf. No one has any idea how I’d even react to it.”

“Yeah, I don’t want you to take such a big risk without having all the information. The ceremony is so intense for werewolves that I can’t imagine it would be kind to a non-werewolf.” Lola sighed and looked away, biting her lip. “I wonder if there’s another way…”

“I want to be there for Greyson, obviously*,* and for the pack,” I said. “There has to be a way for me to do that without anyone getting hurt—myself included.” I fell back against Lola’s pillows, my head starting to spin as the full gravity of the situation hit me once more. “There has to be a way to safely get the Luna mark if you’re not a werewolf. We just have to find it.”

“You’re right,” Lola said. “There has to be another way for you to be there for the Redwoods—something that will be just as effective as that dang Luna mark.”

“Oh my god, you’re a genius!” I said, shooting up from the bed.

“I am?” Lola asked, a slow smile spreading across her face.

“Yes, you are! I have to go talk to Kira.”

**Episode 3793**

**Xavier**

Adéluce’s grip on my back leg was iron tight, her fingernails digging savagely into the flesh beneath my fur. I was using every bit of strength I possessed to fight her, and the searing cold of the icy water was really starting to get to me. I was beginning to lose steam, and I wasn’t sure how much fight I had left in me.

It was almost like I could hear the vampire-witch’s laughter echoing through my head, and my hatred for her welled up inside me. I gave one final hard kick, and Adéluce let go. With a burst of energy that surprised even me, I shot up toward the broken hole in the ice and dragged myself out of the freezing water.

I collapsed onto the ice and tried to get my breathing back to normal. I’d barely managed to catch my breath when a pair of dark boots invaded my vision. A spike of trepidation bit into my gut when I looked up to see Adéluce standing over me, perfectly dry and looking down at me with a sickening smile on her face. I was shocked.

“This isn’t a private event, you know,” I choked out. “There are Samara wolves everywhere, watching this happen. They’ll be onto you in no time. I don’t know if you’re aware, but werewolves hate vampires and can smell them a mile away—and it doesn’t help that you’re a witch, too.”

Adéluce’s grin only got bigger. “Oh, don’t worry. No one else can see me—or smell me. To them, you just look weak.”

I struggled to stand, needing to prove that she wasn’t getting to me. I didn’t want to give her the satisfaction.

*I wish she’d just get the hell out of here! What the hell does she even want?*

I was surprised when Adéluce responded to my unspoken question. “Oh, Xavier, you should know me better by now. I want what I always want: for you to feel pain.”

Her smile slowly morphed into a scowl that sent a chill through my body.

*How is she reading my mind? Is she even really here?* I growled at her, baring my teeth. I didn’t know everything that Adéluce was capable of, and that was increasingly a major worry for me.

Adéluce smiled. “Not now, little wolf. I don’t know how many times you’re going to try that before you realize that you can’t touch me. And to all the Samaras watching you right now, it looks like you’re attacking the air. Is that the kind of image you want to present to your new pack? That of a wolf past his prime, coming unhinged?”

I hated that she was right. I couldn’t afford to look like I was losing it. I had to keep it together, even though Adéluce was doing her best to torture me and make me look like an idiot. I wasn’t going to play into it. Not this time.

“Anyway,” Adéluce said, sounding bored. “I just wanted to remind you that I’m always here, always watching. Even during this farce of a trial. You’ll never be the Alpha you want to be. How can you help these people when you can’t even help yourself? The Samaras really messed up, thinking that you would be their savior. It’s like watching a train wreck in slow motion.”

I stared at her, immediately recognizing her game. *She just wants to get into my head. That’s all this is. I’m not going to let her do it.*

Adéluce sputtered a laugh. “Silly wolf. I’m already *in* your head. Haven’t you realized that yet? No matter what you do, you can’t hide from me. Not even your mind is safe from me. When it comes to you, Xavier, I’m everywhere.”

*Fuck her. I just need to keep going, no matter what. I can’t get distracted by whatever this is. No matter what she says, I’m going to be the Samara Alpha, and I’m going to do great things.*

Adéluce cackled and shook her head. “Whatever you have to tell yourself, Xavier. But think about this: I control your life. If I didn’t want you to be here, believe me, you wouldn’t be.”

Her words sent a shock of icy panic through my body, but I couldn’t let it deter me.

*I can’t let her weasel her way in right now. I have to stay focused. I have to stay confident. I’ll think about what she’s saying later, but right now, the only thing I need to be focused on is getting through this final trial.*

Leaving Adéluce’s apparition—or whatever she was—behind me, I pushed forward to run across the rest of the lake. I didn’t think she’d pull me under a second time, or at least I hoped not. She’d already done what she’d come here to do—namely, break my concentration and take me down in the eyes of my future pack. But she couldn’t take this away from me. I wasn’t going to let her. I would die before I let Adéluce ruin this, too.

I finally reached the opposite shore, letting out a howl of relief when I hit dry land. I was still shivering violently from my dunk in the lake, and I was in more pain than I’d expected to be. My lungs were aching, and my ankle stung where Adéluce had grabbed me, but I had to push through it. There was still one more trial.

I looked up at the mountain, jutting into the sky before me.

*I can do this. I have to do this. There’s no other option. I can’t let Ava down. I can’t let the Samaras down. This wasn’t how I pictured my life ending up, but now that it’s a reality, I have to see it through. I have to do the right thing.*

A crowd of Samaras came loping up in wolf form, shifting back to human as they got closer. I hoped I wouldn’t be asked about the incident they’d just witnessed. I wouldn’t have an answer to give them, and I just wanted to keep going. I would readily face whatever they had to say about it later, after I’d completed the Iudicium. Once the trials were over, I would finally be able to breathe, finally be able to process not only Adéluce, but the new direction my life was taking.

At the forefront of the crowd was Ava. I shifted back to human as she stepped forward in all her beautiful, naked glory. “Xavier, it is now time for the third trial. This is where you will prove that you can look after us, and that you understand how to take care of your pack.”

I braced myself, waiting for her to ask for volunteers, but she didn’t.

“For this trial, you will be carrying me up the mountain,” she said.

“That feels right,” I replied.

I thought back to how furious I’d been when Ava had volunteered during Knox’s trial, but now that I was going through it myself, I knew that she was the best possible choice. We’d set Knox up to fail, and that had put Ava’s life in danger, but that wasn’t the case this time. Despite my little lake adventure, I still felt strong and powerful, and I wasn’t going to let anything happen to her.

The crowd broke into low murmurs as they processed this latest bit of information.

“That’s not fair,” someone said. “Ava must have an angle.”

Ava spun around to face the pack, furious. “How dare you?”

Before I could jump in to defend her, Marissa spoke up.

“Ava is Xavier’s mate,” she said. “Who better than his mate to represent the pack to the person who might become our Alpha? It makes sense.”

The murmurs quieted, and no one else raised any objections. It was hard to argue with what Marissa had said, and even though she and I had gotten off to a shaky start, I appreciated her standing up for Ava.

“Good,” Ava said, looking around the pack, as if daring anyone else to interrupt. “We’ll see you after Xavier makes it to the top.”

“And when the Samara pack has its new Alpha,” I added, unable to ignore the pride welling up in my chest.

Adéluce had tried to shake me, but it hadn’t worked. I was going to blow through this trial, just like the others—in spite of her interference. Ava was going to be by my side, and I knew she was in my corner. I was finally ready to prove that I was the right person to be the Samaras’ Alpha, and that I would lead the pack into a new era of strength and power.

A few pack members stepped forward with ropes, and Ava allowed them to bind her wrists and legs. Once they were done, I picked her up and slung her over my shoulder.

“All right, Ava,” I said, almost under my breath. “Hold on tight.”

**Episode 3794**

**Greyson**

“Helix, what are you talking about?” Elle asked. “I can’t go back right now. There’s so much happening, and I’m loyal to my new pack. They’ve even given me a human name: Elle. I have responsibilities here. I can’t leave and go back to my old pack just like that!”

“Yes, Elle has taken on a key role in our pack. She can’t just run off,” I added, doing my best to support her. I could tell that she was shocked by what Helix had said but was trying to put on a brave face.

“I understand that,” Helix began. “But—”

“But what? What is it? What would make you do this?” Elle demanded. “What made you become a werewolf and come find me? What’s happening?”

“There is a problem at our new home. It is your father.” Helix looked like it pained him to even be telling Elle this. I could also tell by his expression that he was still wrapping his head around human speech and mannerisms and was working overtime to find the right way to tell Elle what he had to say.

Elle pushed by me and grabbed Helix by the shoulders. “What about my father? Tell me everything! Is he hurt? Is he sick? What?”

“And start at the beginning,” I added, needing to gain control over the situation. “When I last saw Elle’s old pack, they were planning to move east and out of these woods.”

And thankfully, they’d taken the interest of LIPS with them, which had saved us from dealing with human interference. Now, it was clear that something had gone wrong with that plan. Selfishly, I hoped that whatever it was wouldn’t come back to bite my pack in the ass.

“You are right, and that is what we did,” Helix said. “Our packs had an agreement, and Elle’s father never forgot that. He is an honorable wolf… Unlike some other wolves I know.”

“What does that mean?” Elle asked. “What dishonorable wolves are you talking about, Helix?”

“I am sorry, Elle, I am telling you things in the wrong order. As Greyson said, we left these woods and traveled to our new home. Everything was great. For a time. I missed you a lot, Elle. I am glad to see that you have found your new pack and home.”

“Focus, Helix,” Elle said, but she was smiling now. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Yes, you still need to tell us why you’re here,” I pressed.

“Right, right. When we arrived in our new territory, we had no idea what was waiting for us.”

“Was it LIPS?” I asked.

“I am sorry. I do not know what that means,” Helix said. “Lips? Like a mouth?”

“LIPS—the humans who were hunting us. The scientists?” LIPS had thankfully been out of my realm of worries for a while, but that I wasn’t naïve enough to think that they were gone forever. I only hoped that they hadn’t already made it back into our orbit. I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to handle them right now, on top of everything else.

“No, there were no humans where we went, but the territory was already occupied by other packs.” Helix dropped his head, as if he were finding it difficult to continue. “We thought that we could join peacefully and have our own space, and we did… Until our peace was shaken, but not in the way we expected.” Helix took Elle’s hand. “Your father, he is in trouble. The scarred wolf has given himself a human name, Ranger, and has decided to go against your father.”

“He has? Why? I thought he was our friend?” Elle said.

“That is what I thought, too, but no. Ranger thinks that your father is weak for giving you to a human.”

“What? No one *gave* Elle to anyone,” I said.

Never for one moment had Elle’s father and I discussed him “giving” her to me. I’d taken her into our pack as an equal, and with a promise to care for her and teach her how to live in both the human and werewolf worlds. Never once had I considered it the type of arrangement where Elle “belonged” to me, or to anyone else in the pack.

Elle ripped her hand out of Helix’s grip. “I wanted this! My father didn’t decide this for me! No one made that decision but me! If Ranger really knew me or my father, he would never think that we would agree to something like that!”

“*I* know that, Elle. I am sorry. I did not mean it that way—it is just what Ranger says. He is just trying to make your father look bad, so he can take over. It is just an excuse. Now, things have escalated, and I worry for your father’s life. You are smart, Elle. You always use reason and logic. I came to get you so that you could help your father. I have tried to do what I can, but nothing has worked so far. You are the only hope we have of bringing peace back to our pack.”

“That sounds like a pack issue,” I said. “Unfortunately, that’s sometimes just the way things are.” Even though my words seemed harsh, I tried to say them as gently and apologetically as I could. I knew it couldn’t be easy for Elle to hear all this. “If Elle’s father wants to keep his position as Alpha, then he’ll have to fight for it.”

It was an inconvenient truth of pack life, one shared by both werewolf packs and natural wolf packs. Staying at the top sometimes meant you had to defend your place—for better or worse.

Still, when I’d first caught Helix’s strange scent, I’d never imagined it would lead back to problems with Elle’s old pack. It complicated things, for sure, and at this point I almost wished Helix really had been some random Rogue that we could’ve just attacked and run off—or killed, if need be. As it stood now, this was yet another problem that would drag on Elle’s mind.

“No!” Elle said, her eyes flashing. “My father could die! That can’t happen. He’s strong, and he’s a good fighter, but that doesn’t mean that Ranger can’t hurt him! I have to protect my father!” Elle’s anxiety was clearly skyrocketing as she whirled to face me. “And you! How could you say that? You’re the reason why my pack had to leave this area—had to leave their home! And now my father is having problems, but you say that’s just a part of pack life? No. I don’t accept that.”

I wanted to protest, but I couldn’t. She was right. I’d made the agreement with Elle’s pack to save everyone from LIPS, and Elle had certainly gotten something out of it in becoming a werewolf and joining our pack, but that didn’t mean she was wrong.

*Shit. I shouldn’t have said that. It was insensitive. This is her father we’re talking about—of course it’s not something she can just chalk up to pack politics and forget about.*

“Listen, Elle, hold on. We can figure this out,” I said. “You’re a part of the Redwood pack now, and we’re here for each other, no matter what. We can go back to the house and talk this out, probably round up some reinforcements.”

Helix was already shaking his head before I finished talking. “No, there is no time for that. The situation grows worse each day. I am already worried that we are too late. If we take any more time, there may be no chance at all to save him.”

“Helix, does anyone know that you’re here? What’s your plan?” Elle asked. She was already in problem-solving mode, and I could only imagine where her thoughts were heading.

Helix looked away, sheepish. “This. This was my plan. To come and find you. The only one I told was the big grey wolf, the one we would say was like a boulder, and he said that he would do his best to stall…”

“So that means we might have a *little* time?” I asked.

“I don’t know… I’m just so worried.” Helix turned to Elle. “You have not been there. You have not seen what things are like. It is very bad… But maybe Greyson is right.”

“Greyson *is* right,” Elle said. “He will know what to do. He can fix this. Can’t you, Greyson?” She glanced at me with a pleading look in her eyes.

I liked that Elle believed in me, but there was already so much going on. Problems were coming at me from all sides, and no matter how much I hated to admit it, being without Xavier had made everything that much more complicated.

*Can I really just drop everything and run to the aid of a pack that I’m not even a part of? Can I put Elle’s needs before those of my pack, even for a few days?*

I didn’t know how I could avoid it. Elle had become an important part of the pack. I’d promised her father that I would look out for her, that I would protect her, and that meant protecting her mental well-being, too. How could I let her father go up against a threat that might cost him his life without doing everything in my power to help him? When he’d helped *my* pack?

Elle was willing to *marry* *Lucian* to help the Redwood pack and to uphold our alliance. So couldn’t I help her with this?

**Episode 3795**

“What do you mean?” Lola asked. “I mean, thanks for calling me a genius and everything, but I’m not seeing what Kira has to do with any of this?”

“Remember that horrible Vanguard party a while back?” I asked, the plan coming together in my mind.

“Which one? They’ve all been horrible. Oh—are you talking about the one where I got stuck in those handcuffs?” Lola asked. She got a faraway look in her eyes, like she was remembering that night. Awful or not, it was definitely a night that would go down in history.

“What? No. Just come on. Let’s go talk to Kira.”

Now that I had an idea of what it might take to fix this whole Luna issue, I was impatient to get started. As soon as I took care of this, I knew I’d feel a lot better. It was all I’d been thinking about since Greyson had brought it up, and I couldn’t wait to get it out of my head. I wasn’t ready to make a decision as big as becoming Greyson’s Luna—that much was obvious. If my conversation with Kira went the way I hoped it would, I’d be able to buy myself more time to really consider what it would mean to officially take on the role.

I grabbed Lola’s hand and dragged her out of her bedroom and right to Kira’s door.

“Kira!” I called out as I knocked. “Hey, Kira! I need you!” I knocked again.

Kira opened her door a moment later, giving Lola and me a surprised look. “Hey, Cali, Lola. What’s up?”

“Hey, Kira, can we come in? I have a question for you,” I said.

“Of course.” Kira stepped back to let us in. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m so glad you asked! So, I’ve been wracking my brain trying to figure out how I can help the pack at the summit—you know, as far as what my role will be.”

“Uh-huh…” Kira was clearly a little confused about why I was bringing this to her. “And?”

“Well, I think I finally have an idea. The pack needs to look strong, right?” I said. “The Redwoods have to put their best foot forward at the summit, make sure everyone there knows we’re not to be messed with, right?”

“Cali, just ask what you want to ask,” Lola grumbled.

I shot her an annoyed look, then refocused on Kira. “Fine. Kira, do you remember when you had to fake my Luna mark for that Vanguard party?”

It felt like a lifetime ago that I’d attended Lucian’s party, standing proudly between my two mates in my too-slinky dress. Just thinking about it sent a wave of nostalgia racing through me, and I had to push the memory away as quickly as it developed. With the way things were, now… Thinking about that party really made me miss Xavier. We hadn’t been excited about going to Lucian’s party, but we’d definitely enjoyed spending time together.

Understanding dawned across Lola’s face, and she nodded. “Ooh! I see where you’re going with this! I guess I *am* smart!” She raised her hand, and I gave her a high five.

“Right? So smart!” I said.

“Uh, yeah, I remember,” Kira said. “But what’s so smart about what you’re talking about?”

“I want to go to the summit as Greyson’s Luna, but… I’m not actually ready to take on the role officially yet.” It was strange to admit that to Lola and Kira when I hadn’t had a proper conversation with Greyson about it, but it was always easier to say difficult things to people who didn’t have a personal stake in the issue.

“Oh… So you want me to do a version of that spell again?” Kira asked.

“Exactly! But couldn’t we just do the same one?”

Kira hadn’t rushed to say no, which I was taking as a good sign. I couldn’t believe my luck. Kira would be able to give me the mark again, and everything else would take care of itself. Greyson would be happy, I would be happy, and Xavier wouldn’t be affected. It was the perfect plan.

“No,” Kira said. “We can’t do the same one. That spell was specific to you, Xavier, and Greyson. This one would just be for you and Greyson, so it’s not quite the same thing. I’ll have to do some research into what a fake Luna mark spell would look like for a single mated pair who easily *could be* a real Luna and Alpha.”

“Okay… Well, if it’s not the same spell, is there a way to do it that doesn’t require us to maintain the illusion ourselves the entire time? That part was stressful, and I wouldn’t mind leaving it out this time around.” It had been hard work, having to thinklike I really was both Greyson and Xavier’s Luna, though looking back on it, I guessed it hadn’t been *so* bad. At least then, I’d still had Xavier beside me.

Kira cocked her head to the side, considering it. “Sure, yeah, I think so. The last spell was actually more tenuous to cast because it involved three people, but the Luna stuff in general should be more stable this time around, since it’ll just be the two of you.”

“Yes! Thanks, Kira!” I pulled both her and Lola into an awkward group hug. “We did it! We figured it out! Kira, you have no idea how much of a load you just took off my shoulders.”

I was almost giddy with excitement and relief.

Now, I was going to be able to be there for Greyson without feeling weird about the Xavier stuff. I’d be able to step up for the pack, and the Redwoods would have a strong presence at the summit. Everything was going to work out fine.

*There are really so many upsides to living with witches! There’s so much stuff they can do, so many problems they can solve. I can’t believe I didn’t think of this sooner.*

“If I get to work now, I should have the spell ready soon, if you want to do this today,” Kira said.

“Oh, no, I didn’t think we’d do it today,” I said, surprised.

“I mean, the summit is coming up very soon, and the spell would need time to stabilize and properly imprint on your skin. There’s no use waiting until the last minute in this case. So if you could get Greyson and come back this evening, we can just get it over with then. That way, you won’t have anything to worry about, and you can head into the days before the summit stress-free. Good, right?”

“Oh… Yeah, right,” I said. “I guess I *do* need to talk to Greyson about this.”

Kira laughed. “Yeah, that part might be important.”

She and Lola exchanged a glance.

Somehow, I hadn’t factored in telling Greyson about this. I hoped that he would be on board, especially since I wasn’t actually making a final decision about becoming his Luna, just doing a quick fix for the summit. Hopefully he would understand that I wasn’t in the right headspace to decide, but I’d still do whatever it took to support him and the pack at the summit.

“Last time, all three of you needed to be present for the spell to work, and this will be no different,” Kira said. “This is all about the connection between you and Greyson. That’s the most important element of the spell.”

I flinched, her words making me think about how much I wished Xavier could be with me for the spell. This wasn’t going to be a real Luna ceremony, not by a long shot, but every time I really thought about it, I felt a hollowness in my chest where Xavier should’ve been. It was almost like he’d taken a big chunk of me with him when he left, and I would’ve given anything to get it—and him—back.

“So, Kira, is there anything we can do to help you prep?” Lola asked.

Kira shook her head and waved us off. “No, I’ve got this. You guys get out of here. I’ll figure out what I need to do, and we’ll make it happen. Just meet me back here after you’ve talked to Greyson.”

“Okay, sounds like a plan,” I said. A bit of my excitement had waned now that all the thoughts about Xavier had rushed in, but I was still pretty psyched that I’d found a workaround. “Thanks, Kira.”

As we left Kira’s room and made our way down the hall, I could sense that Lola wanted to say something, but she was hesitating.

“Lola, out with it,” I said. “I can tell that you’ve got something on the tip of your tongue.”

Lola stopped walking and turned to face me. “Listen, Cali. I think this is a good idea, but it’s going to probably put a lot of eyes on you at the summit. There as Greyson’s Luna and all? I just want to make sure you’ve really thought it through.”

I considered it. She wasn’t wrong. “I know you’re worried, and I appreciate it, but I’m going to have eyes on me with or without a Luna mark,” I said. “People know about the *due destini*, so even if people aren’t talking about me and Greyson, they might talk about that instead.”

Lola nodded. “That’s true. Werewolves love gossip.”

Then a thought gripped me. I knew Lola was going to kill me. “Do you think… Do you think this whole fake Luna mark spell thing is something I should tell Xavier about?”

**Episode 3796**

**Xavier**

Stretching my entire body to its limits, I grabbed a handhold in the rock above me and pulled myself up. Ava was heavy on my shoulders, and I had a feeling that this climb was going to be a little harder than I’d first thought. I was almost fully recovered from my time beneath the ice, but that didn’t mean that I wasn’t exhausted. It didn’t help that my fingertips were scraped and bleeding—the speed of the climb and my need to grip and move at every moment wasn’t giving them any time to heal.

*Climbing a mountain with an entire adult person strapped to your back isn’t easy. But I guess if it were, it wouldn’t be part of the Iudicium.*

Ava had been quiet for the past few minutes, but I was just waiting her out. If I knew Ava—and I knew her pretty well—she definitely had a thing or two to say. It didn’t take long for her to prove me right.

“So… What was that, out on the lake?” she asked. “It looked like you were attacking the air. It really freaked some people out. They thought that maybe something had gone wrong.”

I got the feeling that maybe *she* was the one who’d been freaked out. I knew she had a lot riding on my making it through these trials, especially since it had been such a long road for us to get to a place where I’d even *consider* becoming Samara Alpha, let alone climb a mountain for the privilege. Still, I couldn’t tell her the truth about what had happened. Adéluce had made sure of that.

“Oh—it was nothing,” I said. “Just nerves. I’ve wanted this for so long that I got in my head a bit when I fell through the ice. I needed to get back in the game, so I was kind of riling myself up and putting my game face back on, that’s all. No big deal. Don’t worry about it, okay? I’m here now. That’s all that matters, and that’s definitely all that I’m focusing on.”

I hoped I sounded more convincing to her than I did to my own ears.

There was a slight pause, like Ava was really thinking about what I’d just said. I was surprised to find that I was actually a little nervous about how she might react. I didn’t want her trust and belief in me to falter, even a little.

*It’s crazy how dramatically things have changed in such a short amount of time. A week ago, I didn’t care one bit about what Ava thought of me.*

“You know you were born for this,” Ava said.

I couldn’t help it—her words made me feel amazing. Somehow, just hearing them made me even more determined to blow this trial out of the water. I was all on my own with the Adéluce crap, but at least I knew Ava believed in me.

Becoming Samara Alpha was the best way to beat Adéluce. She had no idea what she was in for. I couldn’t wait to see the look on her smug face when I took her down. It would come one day, that much I knew.

*She’d better watch her vampire-witch ass once I’m Alpha. Samara or Redwood, it makes no difference—I’m still a force to be reckoned with. My finishing this Iudicium will prove that.*

I stepped up onto a jagged foothold, but as soon as I trusted my weight to it, I realized that the rock wasn’t as stable as I’d thought. It crumbled under my foot, and Ava gasped in my ear as we began to drop. I quickly dug my fingers into the holds I already had, and thankfully, we didn’t fall. I froze for a few seconds, catching my breath and getting my bearings. I could feel Ava’s chest heaving against my back, but she was quiet as a mouse.

“Can you move at all?” I asked her. “Your hip is digging into my back.”

“There’s a ledge just above us,” she said calmly. “Get there, and we can adjust my position.”

With a bit of difficulty, I pulled us up onto the wide ledge and set Ava down, breathing heavily.

“You doing okay, there?” Ava joked. “Is this a little harder than you expected?”

I could hear the innuendo in her voice, and I barely cracked a smile, still a little shaken up by almost having caused us to plunge to our deaths a few seconds ago. “I guess I just can’t help but think about the last time I held your life in my hands.”

She sighed. “That was a very different time, I think.”

“Yes, I know that, but…” I didn’t know how to finish that sentence. There was so much history between us; so much of it complicated, and a lot of it bad. It was strange how near-death experiences could make you think about the past.

Ava’s hands were still bound, but she looped them over my head and around my neck and pulled me close. “That was a different time, Xavier. You’ve got this, okay? I believe in you, a hundred percent. Like I said, you were built for this.”

I took a deep breath, and my entire body shuddered. I let myself take comfort in the sensation of Ava’s body pressed against mine. I took another breath and tried to relax.

*She’s right*, I thought. *Things are different now.*

She lifted her arms back up over my head and stepped away. “So, are you ready to get moving again?”

I nodded and picked her up again, feeling like just that small break—and Ava’s reassurance—had given me what I needed to bring this thing home.

I reached up and pulled us up and away from the ledge. Feeling strong and capable, I easily climbed another thirty feet. I was about to pull myself up again and find another hold when Adéluce’s voice ripped through my mind.

*Love the new weight on your back, Xavier. She’s a good look for you.*

“Shit,” I hissed under my breath as I nearly lost my grip.

“Xavier?” There was the slightest tremor in Ava’s voice. “What’s going on? Shit. *Shit!* I think… I think I’m slipping!”

Panicking, I held on with one hand and used the other to pull Ava around to my front. Now I was cradling her against my bare chest with one arm and holding our combined weight with the other. The mountain suddenly felt sharp and cold against every part of my body that touched it.

*What’s the matter, Xavier?* Adéluce taunted. *Can’t see this through? Is it too hard? Is your beautiful mate a little too heavy?*

I looked around wildly, half-expecting to see Adéluce hanging from the side of the mountain, watching me and cackling—but there was nothing up here but Ava, me, and the unforgiving rock.

*This is so picture-perfect*, Adéluce continued. *Really. What a wonderful way to go, don’t you think? Once you two are dashed to bits on the ground below, you can be buried together. So romantic!*

My mind raced as I tried to figure out what Adéluce’s game was. *Is she going to come after Ava now? Is Adéluce even really here? Am I just hearing things? Or is this all my fault? Maybe—maybe I just picked a bad handhold.*

“Ah!” I groaned as my fingers began to slip on the rock as her weight shifted on me. “No!”

“Xavier! What’s happening!” Ava shouted.

I called on every bit of strength and willpower I possessed to keep holding on, but I knew it was no use. I started swinging back and forth, hoping to use our combined body weight to vault us over to the right, where there were a few sections of jutting rock that would hold us.

“I’m trying, Ava, I’m really trying!” I burst out. “If I can just gain enough momentum, I’ll be able to swing over and find a better handhold.”

“Okay,” Ava whimpered. “I trust you.”

I tried to put my plan into action, using my last bit of strength to swing. *It’s now or never.* Holding Ava tightly to my chest, I swung… and missed.

Just like that, Ava and I were free falling. The mountainside raced by us in a blur, and Ava’s screams seemed to pierce straight through my brain. I reached out blindly and managed to catch hold of an outcropping, but my abrupt stop ripped Ava out of my arms. I reached for her, but it was too late.

“*Fuck!*” I yelled as Ava screamed.

I snapped my eyes shut at the sickening thud of her body hitting the plateau below. Then everything was quiet.

*I can’t look. I can’t fucking look!*

I clung to the rock, shaking, willing myself to open my eyes and face what had happened. I let out a few huge breaths, preparing myself, and then I looked down.

Ava was lying twisted on the ledge below, and she wasn’t moving.

**Episode 3797**

**Greyson**

“Of course I’ll help your father,” I said. “I’m your Alpha, and we protect our own.”

Elle was family, and whatever hurt her hurt us all. I knew that Alphas needed to fight to stay on top and put challengers in their place, but that didn’t mean I wouldn’t intervene to make sure that things went the way that they were meant to—especially when I knew that Elle would be devastated if her father lost the challenge.

Elle brightened. “Yes, Greyson! See, Helix? He’s an amazing Alpha. I knew he would help!”

Elle was, again, more excited than I’d ever seen her, and I was happy that I’d been able to bring her this much relief.

“I will help, but we do have other things going on that need to be dealt with,” I said. I hated to say it, but it was true. I had to prioritize; it was part of my role as Alpha. I couldn’t let emotion get in the way, even though it was hard, sometimes.

“Oh…” Elle said, suddenly looking a little worried. “I understand.”

I turned to Helix. “I want you to really think about what I’m going to ask you, Helix, and try not to answer emotionally, okay? Give it to me straight. Do we have some time on this? Can Elle’s father hold out against Ranger for just a little longer?”

I was almost holding my breath as I waited, hopefully for the answer I needed—that we had a few days to spare before we had to tear off eastward to help Elle’s father out of a bind.

Elle squeezed Helix’s hand. “It’s okay, I trust your opinion,” she said. “Just tell me.”

Helix’s face fell, and he pulled Elle into a hug. “I’m sorry, Elle. I wish that we came back together for a better reason. I have missed you so much!”

Elle buried her face in Helix’s chest, and the two young wolves stood locked in a quiet embrace.

I cleared my throat. “I’m glad that you two were able to reunite, but you have to tell us how much time we have, Helix.” I said. “It seems like timing is crucial in this matter, and we have to be mindful of that.”

Helix let out a long breath as he thought about it. “I think that Elle’s father can maybe hold on for a few more days. He does have some of the pack protecting him and standing between him and Ranger.”

“That’s good, at least we have a little time,” I said, relieved. “We’re going to help—you have my word on that—but we need to figure out the best wayto do it. It won’t help anyone if the three of us just go rushing in. Besides, I have responsibilities to my own pack that I can’t just ignore—as much as I want to take care of this quickly, Elle,” I added. “Helix, I think you’d better come back with us to the pack house so we can plan our next steps.”

Elle touched my bicep lightly, a bit more subdued now. “Thank you, Greyson. I’ll never forget this.”

“I told you, Elle—I’m your Alpha, and I’ll do whatever I can to help.” As overwhelming as it was to have yet another issue to face—one that didn’t even directly involve the Redwood pack—it felt good to be able to come through for Elle. Not only would it prove just how far I would go to help her, it would also prove the pack’s loyalty to her.

We all shifted and ran back to the pack house. Helix was fast, and he knew the woods almost as well as I did.

Rishika was waiting for us on the porch when we arrived, and we all shifted back as we approached.

“Is everything sorted?” she asked, casting a wary look at Helix. “I’m assuming everything’s okay?”

“Yeah. We’ve got some stuff to work out, though. Turns out there’s something going down with Elle’s old pack,” I said, almost not wanting to give Rishika our latest round of bad news.

Rishika grimaced. “Great. More trouble.” She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose, obviously sharing my pain.

“Helix, I’m sad that this is how we’ve come back together, but I’m excited to share my new life with you,” Elle said as she led Helix through the front door.

The screen door had barely swung shut before I heard Elle starting to introduce him as her “pup best friend from my old pack.” I started after them, wanting to make sure the pack knew that I was on board with Helix’s visit. Rishika grabbed my arm, stopping me before I could follow them inside.

“Do you know what you’re going to do?” she asked. “How will we be able to handle this new stuff when we already have the Bitterfangs and the summit to deal with?”

“I have it under control,” I said. “Just to fill you in, apparently someone’s challenging the Alpha of Elle’s old pack—Elle’s father. Helix came to find Elle because he’s scared for Elle’s father’s safety. I said that we would help, but I didn’t promise to do anything right away. I told them both that the pack would do what we could, but I made it clear that we have a few other things to address before we can devote any resources to that.”

“Does Elle understand the difference between helping in whatever way we can and doing everything she needs us to do?” Rishika asked.

I considered what she was saying. She was right. There was definitely a difference. “I’ll make sure that she does. For now, let’s get inside before that overgrown puppy breaks something.”

Rishika and I joined the others inside. Elle and Helix had gotten dressed, and Torin was now passing one of Xavier’s sweaters to Helix while Elle explained how to wear it.

“But I already have a T-shirt,” Helix said, saying the word “T-shirt” like he was still figuring out how to pronounce it. “So why do I need to put this on, too?”

“Because it’s winter, and it will keep you warm,” Elle said.

“And you put all this stuff on over your skin *all* the time?” Helix asked, taking the sweater and turning it over in his hands like it was an artifact from a dig site.

“Yes. Human skin is very delicate. You’ll see,” Elle said excitedly.

Rishika took one look at the scene and turned to leave. “I’m going to go find Artemis. Good luck with”—she gestured widely at the room—“*that*.”

I waved at her, then went upstairs and slid into a pair of sweatpants. When I got back downstairs, Torin was introducing Helix to Ravi, who was doing his best to avoid Helix’s outstretched arms.

“And this is Ravi,” Torin said. “He’s really good-looking, and he’s going through some stuff.”

“Hey, dude, not cool,” Ravi grumbled.

“What?” Torin said innocently. “We’re the same. I’m also good-looking, and I’m also going through some stuff.” He shrugged.

“I understand!” Helix said.

Ravi started backing away toward the kitchen. “Nice to meet you and all, but I… have to go!”

I looked around, wondering where Cali was.

“Who’s this?” Cali’s voice came from behind me, sending a warm feeling flooding through my body. Just the sound of her voice seemed to make everything better. She stepped up next to me, and I pulled her close and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“This is Helix. He’s the ‘Rogue’ we’ve been searching for. Turns out he’s not a Rogue at all, but a member of Elle’s old pack.”

Cali’s eyes went wide. “Oh my god.” She rushed over to Helix. “I am *so sorry* that we hit you with our car! You came out of nowhere!”

Helix smiled. “Do not worry. I heal really fast now, and that car barely left a scratch. Now, if I were still just a normal wolf, you might have killed me!” he added, his expression unusually serious.

Cali swallowed hard and returned to my side, an uneasy smile on her face.

“Wow,” she said quietly. “He’s… interesting.”

“More like a handful,” I said. “I can’t really picture him and Elle as friends.”

“I don’t know, I think it’s cute. You know what they say—opposites attract.”

I nodded slowly. “Mm, let’s not pull any unsuspecting wolves into the Lucian-shaped mess that Elle has going on right now.”

“Agreed. Oh!” Cali said suddenly. “I’m actually happy that I ran into you.”

“Why? Is something wrong?” I asked. It had become second nature now for me to ask if something was wrong, these days. I looked up at Helix and Elle, who were now talking somberly in the corner. *Case in point…*

“No, no, nothing like that,” Cali said. “Everything’s perfect. I just need to talk to you about something kind of important.”

“What?” I asked, still not convinced that she wasn’t about to drop some bomb on me. “Cali, come on. What’s this about?”

She bit her lip, her hesitation palpable. “Well… It’s about the summit.”

**Episode 3798**

**Xavier**

I let go of my handholds and dropped down onto the plateau. I wasted no time rushing over to Ava’s still form. She was on her back, and her eyes were closed. There was a trail of blood running down her forehead, and she was covered head to toe in cuts and bruises. She’d fallen a long way, and she looked like it. I didn’t even know where to start. My heart was hammering as I stood there frozen, taking in the damage she’d sustained from the fall.

*Do I move her? Is she healing? Hell, is she* breathing*? I can’t tell. Why is this happening? Please let her be okay! I didn’t do all of this just to lose her…*

“Ava?” My voice was barely above a whisper. I said her name again, louder this time. “Ava? Can you hear me?”

She didn’t move a muscle. The silence was deafening.

Even though I was afraid to find out, I leaned close and put my ear next to her nose. I let out a sigh of relief when I felt the tickle of her breath against my ear.

*She’s alive, at least. Thank fuck she’s alive. I can work with that.*

“Ava?” I touched her cheek lightly. “Ava, please don’t do this to me. Please wake up. *Ava!*”

I said her name again and again, but she didn’t move a muscle.

I fell back onto my ass, reeling. This was absolutely horrifying. I still couldn’t believe it had actually happened. I’d lost my grip, and she’d fallen. I didn’t know what I’d do if there was something really wrong with her, something her body wouldn’t be able to heal from. She wasn’t dead, but there were fates worse than death.

*Is this my fault? Did I do this, or was it Adéluce? Did I imagine her, or was she actually there? Am I so far gone that I can’t figure out what’s real and what isn’t anymore? How can I take care of anyone, let alone an entire pack, when Adéluce can just step in at any time she wants and ruin everything? She hates me so damn much that all she cares about is hurting the people I care about. Like Ava—she trusted me, and now look at her!*

I pressed a hand to Ava’s throat, and I was immediately thrown back to the moment when that same hand had ripped her throat out. It felt like that had happened an eternity ago. I couldn’t help but wonder if I was back there again, ripping her life away once more—this time with Adéluce’s help.

I leaned down and pressed my forehead against hers. “Please. Please wake up, Ava. Please. I want you to wake up. You *have* to wake up! You can’t be gone!”

Barely aware of what I was doing, I kissed her. After a while, I pulled back. Like an idiot, I half-expected her to magically wake up, but nothing happened. I pulled her up into my arms and pressed my lips against her head, letting my tongue feel the coppery taste of her blood. Could the mate bond save her?

She didn’t move.

Carefully, I laid her back down on the ground in front of me, quiet and still, very much a victim of my mistake. Whether or not Adéluce was to blame didn’t really matter in the grand scheme of things. The only thing that mattered was how badly Ava was hurt.

*I should have known better. Our story isn’t some prince and princess bullshit, but we’re in a fucked-up fairy tale, all right, with its very own omniscient wicked witch.*

I stood up and looked up at the sky. Hot, furious tears were collecting in my eyes, rolling down my cheeks and dropping from my face. I felt like I was losing it.

*How could I let this happen? How could I have put Ava in this position? She believed in me. She believed that I could complete this trial, and this is how I repay her? By dropping her off the side of a mountain?*

I pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes and let out a wild scream that seemed to bounce off the mountain and echo back at me from every direction. Then a small cough caught my attention. Shocked, I looked down to see Ava coughing and struggling to move. Her eyes fluttered open, and I dropped down beside her and put my hands on her shoulders.

“Ava, stay still. You had a nasty fall.” My voice was shaking, and I hoped she hadn’t noticed. I didn’t want her to panic.

“What happened?” Ava’s voice was small and thick in her throat. “Everything hurts.”

She coughed and winced with pain. Her wounds were starting to knit back together, though, and I let out a huge sigh of relief. If she was healing, that meant she was going to be okay. Gently, I helped her sit upright, and she groaned and sucked in a rush of air between her teeth.

“Xavier? What happened?” she asked again.

I swallowed, not wanting to say it out loud. “One of the ledges I thought was good just… crumbled, and then we fell. But you’re okay, Ava, you’re okay. Thank god, you’re okay.”

Ava cracked a pained grin. “Careful, Xavier; you keep this up, and I might start to think you actually care.”

“I’m just glad you’re not dead.”

“Wow. Such a romantic.”

I laughed. I really did feel an almost overwhelming sense of relief. I had no clue what I would’ve done if I’d had to carry her lifeless form back down the mountain. I certainly had no idea how I would’ve faced the Samaras after something like that.

Taking things slow, I helped Ava to her feet and then carefully draped her back over my shoulder. I made sure that she was secure and stable, then I looked up at the rocky expanse that stood between me and the top of the mountain.

*I have to be extra careful, now. I can’t let her fall again. Next time, she might not be so lucky. Only a fool would test fate twice. Guess I am one.*

“What are you waiting for?” Ava asked, her voice still a little raspy. “Let’s do this.”

Spurred on by Ava’s resilience as much as by her words, I vaulted up and caught two handholds. I let out a gust of breath when they held firm, willing myself to tap back into the confidence I’d felt at the beginning of the Iudicium.

My right foot searched for and found a strong foothold. I tested my weight on it before allowing myself to use it as a stepping stone to another foothold. After a while, I found my rhythm, and I made it through the rest of the climb without incident. Before I knew it, we’d reached the top.

I lowered Ava to the ground as gently as I could before collapsing beside her.

*I made it. I can’t believe it. It wasn’t easy—it was maybe one of the hardest things I’ve ever done—but I got through it. I made it to the top. I completed the Iudicium.*

I partially shifted my hand and used a claw to slice the ties that bound Ava’s legs together. Then I clambered onto my knees and took hold of her wrists. She looked up at me, and I stared down at her, neither of us breaking eye contact for even a second as I sliced off the rope.

I helped Ava to her feet and then took hold of her chin, turning her head so I could check the worst wound of all—a jagged gash in the side of her head. There was dried blood on the side of her face, but the cut itself was gone. Completely healed. I turned her back to face me, so we could look each other in the eye.

“Are you feeling okay?” I asked her.

Smiling a huge smile, Ava jumped up and wrapped her arms around me. I caught her and lifted her into the hug, happy that she was okay and thrilled that I was able to hug her when, for a moment, I hadn’t been sure if it would ever happen again.

“You made it, Xavier. You did it!” Ava said.

We spent a few more moments in private celebration, and then, with little conversation, we concentrated on making our way back down the mountain. We heard the cheers even before we’d reached the bottom. The pack rushed up to us, shouting and slapping us both on the back. I quickly schooled my features into something serious.

*I did it. I’m nearly there. I completed the Iudicium and proved my worth during the trials. I deserve to be Alpha. I’ve earned it. I fought for it. It’s mine.*

Ava cleared her throat, looking good as new except for a few smears of blood and quickly fading bruises. “Xavier Evers,” she said, “you have completed the Iudicium. You have proven yourself fit to be Alpha of the Samara pack. Now all that’s left for us to do is vote.”

**Episode 3799**

Greyson followed me to the den, and after checking to make sure it was empty, I pulled him inside and shut the door, then quickly engaged the lock. Greyson and I had quite a bit to talk about, and I didn’t want anyone bursting in on us to interrupt—which was a real possibility in a house with this many people living in it.

A slow grin spread across Greyson’s face. “You know, Cali, if you wanted to be alone with me, all you had to do was ask.”

He reached for me, but I swatted his hand away. “No! That’s not what I brought you in here for. I need to talk to you. I have a plan,” I said. “So behave yourself and listen.”

“Oh, I love that you have a plan, but how dangerous is it?” Greyson’s smile was gone, and he was giving me a faux serious look.

“Ha ha, very funny,” I said with an eye roll.

“Funny or not, I can’t help but notice that you haven’t answered my question,” Greyson said. “So, lay it on me. This plan of yours—is death assured, or only a possibility?”

He laughed again and dodged another one of my swats.

“Greyson, stop it!” I said as I yanked him down to sit beside me on the couch. “It’s not life-or-death, I promise.” I took his hand and started playing with his fingers, feeling a little bit like I was stalling. “That’s not to say that it might not be a little dangerous, but it’s nothing you can’t handle.”

“Okay, I’m all ears. Shoot.” Greyson sank down into the couch, making himself comfortable.

“I’ve been thinking about your question all day.”

Greyson’s expression got serious for real this time. “Cali, I know that was a big question to ask you. I want you to know—”

I held up a hand, stopping him. “Wait Greyson, let me finish. I’ve been thinking about your question—I mean really, really considering it—and I realized that I want to be your Luna more than anything, but I’m not ready to make it official yet, not with everything I’ve just gone through with Xavier.”

Well, it was honest, at least, wasn’t it? That’s what I owed Greyson. And it felt so good to get that off my chest. It had been knocking around in my head all day, and now that I’d said it, it was like I could breathe again.

“I get that, Cali,” Greyson said, “and that’s why I’ll understand if you have to say no right now. I’m not expecting you to just walk away from your feelings for my brother—as much as I’d like for you to do just that,” he added with a wry smile. “This is all so complicated; I knew that even when I asked the question. So I’m good with it.”

I pulled Greyson’s hand up to rest it against my heart. “I’m so grateful for that. But I know that this is more important than you, me, and Xavier—it’s about the pack, and how much it would mean for us to have both an Alpha and a Luna at the summit. Like you said, our relationship is complicated, but our devotion and responsibility to the pack shouldn’t be.”

Greyson lifted an eyebrow. “I totally agree, but I don’t think I follow. What’s the plan?”

“The plan is for Kira to give me a fake Luna mark again.” I said it quickly, so that the words all rushed out on a single breath, then I braced myself, waiting for Greyson’s reaction.

“You mean like the one we used for the Vanguard party?” Greyson scowled. “Ugh. That party…”

“Tell me about it,” I said. “But yes, it’ll be just like at the party, but this time it’ll just be for the two of us.”

Greyson hummed thoughtfully. “I have to admit, I do like the sound of that. It’s a great workaround.”

“Yes, and I’ve already talked to Kira about it. She’s ready whenever we are, but she thinks we should do the spell as soon as possible so that the fake mark is settled by the time we go to the summit.”

Greyson was still nodding, and I was starting to get excited. I wasn’t sure what I’d expected, but he was taking everything so… *well*. Not only was he taking my idea in stride, but he’d barely batted an eye when I’d confessed that I still couldn’t be his Luna, even though Xavier wasn’t in the picture anymore. It was clear that I’d built this all up into way more than it needed to be, and I was relieved that Greyson was being his normal, understanding self.

With the whole telling him part out of the way, I was starting to get excited.

“So, you really think this is a good idea?” I asked him. I wanted him to be completely sure.

“I do,” Greyson said. “Not only will this help the pack’s reputation, but you’ll be better protected at the summit. It’ll give you a certain level of legitimacy in the eyes of all the other packs—not to mention the werewolf council.” Greyson squeezed my hand and leaned forward to plant a kiss on my lips. “Also, I feel the need to say that this idea is super, super hot.”

Heat spread across my face, and I ducked my head, feeling suddenly bashful.

Greyson laughed. “You’re so cute when you blush. And just so you know, I can’t wait to see you wearing one single Luna mark.” He leaned close so that his lips brushed against my ear. “And nothing else.”

The heat dropped down from my face and spread to every inch of my body. Kira giving me the Luna mark would be almost as good as the real thing—and a lot safer, too. I couldn’t wait to get started.

Greyson’s comment about the single Luna mark made me think back to what I’d asked Lola—whether I should tell Xavier about what we were going to do.

*I should. I know that’s the right thing to do. I have to tell Xavier before the summit, whatever it takes*.

I needed him to know that it wasn’t real and that despite where things stood between us, I hadn’t made a choice. I didn’t want to run into him at the summit and have him think that I’d actually become the Redwood Luna.

*Not that he even cares. But that doesn’t matter.* I *care, and I need him to know, even if he doesn’t think I’m his problem anymore.*

“Okay, so when are we doing this?” Greyson asked, snapping me out of my thoughts. His eyes were shining, and seeing him so happy pushed away all my negative thoughts about Xavier.

“Why not right now?” I asked.

I took Greyson’s hand and led him up to Kira’s room. Her door was open, and we went right inside. Kira was just finishing up her preparations, and the setup looked identical to the last time we’d done the spell. There was a chalice sitting on an altar, filled to the brim with a fragrant herbal mixture. Only it wasn’t a silvery color this time, but a deep, reddish purple.

“Hey, you two,” Kira said with an easy smile. “I’m almost ready. Now strip!”

“Oh, right, I forgot about that part,” I said.

As I started to remove my clothing, I felt Greyson’s heated stare on me as strongly as if it had been a physical touch.

Greyson slid off his sweatpants, and we both locked eyes for a long moment before Kira cleared her throat.

“All right, are we ready to begin?” she asked.

“We are,” Greyson and I said in unison.

“Greyson, do you remember what to do?” Kira asked.

I could see that Greyson had already partially shifted, and he had a claw ready to go.

“I remember,” he said.

“Good.” Kira closed her eyes and started speaking in a language I didn’t understand.

I turned around and braced myself for the pain of Greyson carving the mark into my back. Greyson pressed his claw against my shoulder and pressed down. I shivered once, and then I felt nothing worse than a pleasant buzz. I let out a gasp, and the movement behind me stopped.

“You okay, love?” Greyson asked, concern evident in his voice.

Amazed, I shook my head. “Yes, I’m fine. It doesn’t hurt at all.”

Kira stopped chanting and said, “This is a different spell, so it shouldn’t. Greyson, keep going.”

Greyson pressed his claw into my skin once again, and the pressure and the buzz returned. Then, a few moments later, he pulled his claw away. We both turned to face Kira again, waiting for the next set of instructions.

When Kira didn’t add anything, I said, “Okay, so… What’s next?”

Kira shrugged, already moving around the room and blowing out candles. “That’s it—Luna, you may kiss your Alpha. It’s over. Cali, you are now officially the fake Luna of the Redwood pack.”

**Episode 3800**

“Wow, that’s really it?” I asked Kira. “The last time we did this, it was so much more… fraught and intense. Was that because it was split between the three of us?”

Kira nodded. “That’s part of it. Also, this type of spell’s just not meant for three people. Of course this time was easier—we did it the way it was always intended to be done.”

The deeper meaning in Kira’s words hung in the air, and Greyson and I lapsed into a comfortable silence as we put our clothes back on. I’d felt connected to Greyson for so long, but there was something more there, now. When I’d come to Kira to ask for the spell, I hadn’t anticipated that it would bring Greyson and me closer together, but it was definitely a welcome side effect.

“Thanks, Kira,” I said.

My gaze slid over to Greyson. The only thing I could think about was getting him alone, and I could tell by the look in his eyes that he was thinking the exact same thing.

“Don’t mention it,” Kira said, and Greyson and I raced out of her room and made a beeline for Greyson’s.

Greyson kicked the door shut behind us and wasted no time gathering me into his arms.

“I feel like…”

“We’re two halves of a whole,” Greyson said, finishing my sentence.

I turned around and lifted my shirt up and over my shoulder. Greyson’s fingers reached out to gently graze the mark, and a delicious chill raced through my body.

“I want to see it,” I said.

“You *should* see it. It’s absolutely beautiful,” Greyson said. His hands on my waist, he guided me into the bathroom.

I gasped as I looked at it in the mirror. “I love it.”

I ran my fingers over the mark, struck by how right it felt. It went so much deeper than the fake marks from the Vanguard party. This time, it felt solid and real, and it made me feel so *loved*.

Behind me, Greyson was quiet, almost in awe. My eyes shifted and caught his in the mirror.

*I need him. Now.*

I let my shirt fall and twisted around, my mouth already searching for his. When our lips connected, it felt like a lightning strike. He slid his tongue deeply, gently, into my mouth and swirled it around, pressing me against the sink and causing a low moan to escape my mouth.

Greyson pulled back and breathed out, “*Luna*.”

Hearing the word, my heart began to race. Apparently, it was exactly what I needed to hear from him. The word echoed in my mind, and I closed my eyes and threw my head back as he trailed kisses from my lips down to my neck.

“Say it again,” I breathed. “Call me that again.”

“*Luna*,” Greyson said. He picked me up and sat me on the vanity, then covered my mouth with his again.

“Yes,” I moaned. I ran my hands from the top of his head down his neck to his strong back and pulled him against me, wanting to feel every inch of him. “*Again*.”

“Luna,” Greyson grunted as he dropped to his knees and pulled my pants off, almost roughly, leaving my panties on. He looked up at me, his eyelids heavy, a wicked smile playing across his lips. “You know what I want to hear you say?”

“Yes, Alpha,” I said. “A Luna always knows what her Alpha wants.”

Greyson growled and ran his hands up and down the goose-pimpled flesh of my legs, ending up at the apex of my thighs. He ran his hands across the already soaked silk of my panties, and then, with his eyes on mine, he pressed his thumb gently against my clit. I reared back, barely stopping myself from crashing into the mirror.

“You don’t know what you’re doing to me right now, Cali,” Greyson said.

Without another word, he pushed my panties to the side and swirled his tongue against me. With his thumb still working against my clit, his tongue parted my folds and then dipped deep inside me. He pulled away just long enough to spread my legs wider, and then his lips found my fluttering center again, and I moaned as waves of liquid pleasure danced through my body, almost seeming to radiate from the new mark on my shoulder.

I ran my hands through Greyson’s hair, grateful that in the face of all the stressful things he was going through, he still made time for me, no matter what. I couldn’t ignore how different things felt, how his every touch seemed to send off a wave of electric sparks that short-circuited my brain and left me blissfully blank.

“Come here,” Greyson said, pulling me down off the vanity.

My knees were weak as he turned me around and bent me over. I gripped the edges of the counter and flipped my hair forward as I caught my reflection; one eye obscured by my hair, the other looking at Greyson’s hulking form behind me.

He slowly maneuvered his pants down his legs, and his erection landed heavily on the small of my back. I closed my eyes, anticipating how it was going to feel.

“I can’t wait to have you deep inside me,” I moaned.

“Oh yeah? Is that what my Luna wants?” Greyson asked, his voice low and gruff. He palmed my neck and then slowly slid his hand down my spine until it came to rest on my ass. “Tell me, love. Tell me exactly what my Luna wants.”

“I want my Alpha deep inside me,” I said, my voice husky to my own ears. I was hungry for him. Every nerve ending in my body was straining toward him, desperate to feel him deep inside me.

“What my Luna wants, my Luna gets.”

Greyson slid himself slowly inside me, inch by delicious inch, undulating his hips ever so slightly. I collapsed against the cool countertop, spreading my legs so that he could go even deeper. He did, groaning as he pushed in further.

“Fuck, Cali. *Yes*. Take it all.”

“I will, Alpha.”

I moaned as he gave a slow thrust that sent pulses through my entire body. I arched my back and then straightened so that I could feel the hard planes of his chest against my back as he slid in and out me.

“Is my Luna satisfied?” Greyson asked as one hand snaked across my stomach and then dipped low to cup my sex in his massive hand. He slid my slick clit between his fingers in time with the pumping of his cock, and I laid my head back on his shoulder, barely cognizant of the moment when my knees gave out. Greyson barely missed a beat in holding me upright.

My orgasm hit me like the crash of a warm, pleasant wave—and still, Greyson didn’t stop. He picked me up, took me back into the bedroom, and laid me down gently on the bed.

“What does my Luna want now?” he asked.

I finally opened my eyes to see his handsome, flushed face hovering above mine. I pulled him down so that he was on his back, and then I mounted him.

“I want my Alpha to come,” I said. “*Hard*.”

I bucked my hips against his, my hands braced on his powerful shoulders as I lifted my hips high on his shaft and brought them down hard, pulling him even deeper inside me.

“Fuck, I’m close,” he grunted.

And then he was jerking his hips up to meet my thrusts, and soon we were crashing against each other, thrashing, our lips coming together hungrily. Then I felt the surge of his climax and the rush of my own, and we both collapsed in a tangled, damp heap on the bed.

Afterward, I drifted in and out of sleep until I finally woke up to see Greyson fast asleep next to me. I rolled over and ran a hand up and down the hot skin of his back. I felt so full of love, so full of happiness. I had my Alpha right here next to me—safe, sound, and unbelievably sexy.

*Greyson is feeling the exact same thing; I know he is. It’s like there’s this current of pure heat between us now. I’ve never felt anything like it.*

A shiver ran through my body as I thought back to watching him in the mirror as he thrust against me, his handsome face set in concentration and pleasure. There was absolutely nothing like this connection. I loved it, and I couldn’t believe that it had taken a spell to make us feel this way. To feel more connected than ever before.

*I wonder if this is what being a Luna is truly like… Do real Lunas feel this crazy, unbelievable connection to their mates? How could the real thing possibly be any better than this?*

At that thought, I bolted upright.

*Oh my god! Am I actually Greyson’s Luna?*

**Episode 3801**

**Xavier**

When Ava and I returned to the Samara campsite, I realized that one of the first things I’d have to do when I was officially voted in as Alpha would be to rebuild the Samara pack house. Living in an Airstream and a bunch of tents showed weakness. We had to come back strong, and shelter meant power. It also meant money, but that wasn’t a problem for me.

“What’s going on with your face?” Ava asked, gesturing toward my eyebrows. “You look pissed off when you should be celebrating. You passed the Iudicium, proved that you’re an Alpha, and now—”

“Now we move forward, I know,” I said. “I’m excited. But I also have to get in the zone, figure out what I need to do next.”

Ava said something about me brooding all the time, but I wasn’t really listening. My enthusiasm was dampened by the knowledge that I already *had* an awesome pack house. I couldn’t live in it, though. It was on Redwood land. It was where I would’ve lived as the Alpha of the Redwood pack, with Cali as my Luna.

But now my brother was living in it, with Cali.

Reclaiming the Redwood pack house as my personal property would mean starting a pack war against my brother. Against Cali. I would never do that to my mate, so I discarded the idea. Besides, being the Samara Alpha meant a brand-new start—a new home. I wouldn’t be able to do that if I stayed in my old pack house, with memories of Cali at every corner.

“When we get back from the summit,” I said to Ava, “I want to build a new pack house. That should be our priority.”

Ava seemed surprised, but her expression quickly split into a satisfied smile. My wolf preened at her approval. He was so fucking easy to please.

“That’s a great idea,” Ava said. “The Airstream is a poor substitute for a proper pack house, and getting a roof over our heads will be an important step toward rebuilding the pack to its former glory.”

I nodded.

Before I could say anything else, Ava added, “My brother’s money has come through, by the way—I have all the funds we’ll need.”

I shook my head. “The finances won’t be an issue.” I looked over at the crowd around the fire, scanning their faces. “There are other things I’m worried about right now…”

Most of the pack was celebrating, but I could see and sense that some weren’t as enthusiastic as the others.

I nodded toward Simon and Jesse—both of them were sitting on a log, drinking and scowling. “Look at those little pricks. Didn’t I make my case already?”

“I suppose they’re too stubborn and blinded by pride to accept the situation,” Ava said wryly. “Pretty annoying traits in puppies.”

I frowned. “Do you think they’re going to be trouble?”

Ava’s gaze flicked from the boys to me, and she barked out a laugh. “Oh, please. They’re harmless. It’s already been proven that you can deal with them with your eyes closed.”

I looked around, my voice lowering when I spoke again. “Could they influence the pack against me?”

Ava shook her head. “I have no doubt you’ll have the support of the pack, Simon and Jesse notwithstanding. Everybody knows they’re dramatic little shits. Do whatever’s necessary to get them in line.”

My wolf growled, riled up by the thought of subordination. But I shook my head.

“It won’t be necessary for now. But if they cause a scene again…” I raised an eyebrow. “Depending on how much they escalate things, I might not hold back. And the Samara pack will lose two wolves.”

Whether that would mean banishing them or killing them remained to be seen. I immediately imagined how horrified Cali would’ve been if she’d heard me say something like that. She’d have been full of empathy and understanding toward those two assholes, and she definitely would’ve said that violence—or murder, obviously—was never the solution. She would’ve scolded me made me feel bad, as well.

Ava, on the other hand, was a werewolf. And when I casually mentioned getting rid of the kids as an option, she merely shrugged.

“It would be a shame,” she said. “The pack can’t afford to lose members, and the two of them are young and strong, and could be soldiers with the right training. But you’re right—they won’t be worth keeping around if they cause any more trouble.”

Ava’s approval made my wolf grumble in satisfaction, and the intensity of the feeling caught me off-guard. Thankfully, before this could turn into a *moment* between Ava and me, Marissa bounded over to us.

“Xavier, congrats!” She flashed a huge smile at Ava. “The pack is eager to vote—though we technically have until midnight to get through the process, right?”

Ava scoffed. “We’ve waited long enough. I want the voting to begin and end as soon as possible.”

Marissa nodded. “That’s what I thought. The ballots are already being distributed. As soon as they’re collected, we can start counting.” She turned to me again, her expression bright. The woman had never smiled at me like this before. Had she stopped hating me? What the fuck was I supposed to do with that? Could I actually trust her, after her little seduction scheme?

“I’m not surprised that you passed the Iudicium, Xavier,” she said. “Keep up the good work.”

With a slap to my shoulder, Marissa went off. I was left standing there, watching her go for a moment before I turned to Ava.

“Weird how she didn’t give me any shit,” I mused.

Ava snorted. “As long as she feels like you’re being honest, you’re fine.”

I scoffed. “So what? She trusts me now?”

“I wouldn’t go that far. You’d better stay on her good side,” Ava said teasingly.

“Where are you going?” I asked when she made a move to follow Marissa. It was a dumb question—why *wouldn’t* Ava go hang out with her friend? Why would she stay with me?

But my wolf hated the idea of Ava not being by his side 24/7.

“I have to cast my vote like everybody else,” Ava said. She raised an eyebrow cheekily, crossing her arms over her chest. “But maybe I haven’t made up my mind yet.”

I scoffed. “Hilarious.”

Ava tilted her head to the side, looking me up and down, and a hint of doubt entered my head. I’d let her fall on the mountain, after all. I’d let Adéluce distract me with her bullshit. The thought made my stomach clench.

“Of course you should vote however you want,” I went on when Ava didn’t speak. “If you’ve changed your mind for any reason, if you don’t think I’m the right Alpha… Well, now’s the time to say it.”

Silently, Ava closed the distance between us. The sight of her bleeding was fresh in my memory, and I fucking hated it. But Ava’s expression was soft, just like her hand when she placed it on my cheek.

“I’ve been waiting a long time for this moment, Xavier. Of course I haven’t changed my mind.”

My wolf stirred as Ava caressed my face. There had been a time when I would’ve slapped her hand away. But that was the past. Now, when Ava stared into my eyes, I felt all negative thought melting away.

“I’m voting with my head and my heart,” she said softly. “My head believes that you’re the best Alpha—you always have been.” She took my hand and placed it against her chest. “And my heart… You know how my heart feels.”

Ava didn’t let go of my wrist, and I didn’t withdraw my hand, either. The warmth of her body, the contact, had the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end.

“I hope your heart is in this too, X,” Ava said. “This is a chance for a new beginning. Not only for the Samaras, but for you and me.”

I nodded at her words, and she smiled. It was beautiful as ever. She let go of my hand, turned her back on me, and walked toward the others. I watched her leave. My wolf was antsy, eager for me to grab her, pull her back to me.

I forced him down. It wasn’t time for this. Not now.

The impact of what was happening began to take hold.

Ava had said it herself—this was a new beginning. It had nothing to do with the life I’d planned for myself, but it was still a chance to get what I’d always wanted. I was about to become an Alpha. The responsibility, the weight of it all, bore down on me. But I wasn’t intimidated by the role I was about to step into. I had earned it, through it all.

The only thing that troubled me was what this would do to Cali when she inevitably found out.

**Episode 3802**

**Greyson**

When I opened my eyes, Cali was sitting up in bed beside me. I wanted to pull her close again. I hadn’t had enough of her. I didn’t think I’d ever get enough. The fantasy of it was heady, intoxicating—her and me in this bed for hours on end, her mouth on mine, my body inside hers as I claimed her over and over, marked her as mine.

Only mine.

I swallowed hard, sitting up to reach for her, pull her back in and kiss her all over, when I saw her expression. Was that… panic?

What the hell?

“What’s wrong?” I looked around the room. “Did something happen?”

“No!” She shook her head. “It’s fine, I’m—”

“You’re not fine,” I said, reaching for her hands. Her wide eyes locked with mine. “Tell me what’s wrong before I start making up worst-case scenarios in my head.”

She frowned. “Don’t do that.”

“Then you have to tell me the truth.”

“What if Kira’s spell actually made me your Luna? For real?” she blurted out, biting her lower lip.

I paused. Squinted at her. “How did you reach this conclusion?”

“The sex, Greyson!” she sputtered. Her filter was clearly long gone. “If this is how it feels with a *fake* Luna mark, then how much better could it possibly get with the real one? This has to be a real one!”

Her admission made my already pretty hefty ego gain at least a hundred pounds.

I stared at her for a moment. She stared back, still looking wildly alarmed, and I…

I burst out laughing.

She looked shocked, and I reined it in immediately, trying to pass it off as a cough.

“I’m sorry, it’s just—” I cut myself off. Pressed my lips together. “Would it be so bad if it actually were the real Luna mark?”

“Of course not!” Cali said quickly. “But what about the *due destini*?”

I took a deep breath and reminded myself that this was reality, not a fantasy, and I had to adapt. I pulled Cali close and made sure to remain composed. “I get what you mean. You’re worried about Xavier.”

“Yeah—”

“Despite what he’s done to you and how he spoke to you.”

“*Greyson*.”

“I’m just saying,” I said with a shrug. “But anyway, you’ve seen a Luna ceremony, how it goes.” Judging by the way Cali winced, she remembered it well. “There’s nothing Kira or any witch can do to make someone a Luna. They can’t intervene in werewolf affairs in that kind of way—it would go against nature. The mark you bear is not a real Luna mark.”

Cali sighed. At least she looked less worried now. Resting her head on my shoulder, she said, “You’re right. That makes sense.” She glanced up at me. “Please believe me when I say I wouldn’t mind if it were real. Only…” She trailed off.

I lifted her chin, brushing my mouth over hers. “I know that this is only for the summit. And when the time comes, when you *are* ready, we can talk about the next steps to make you a real Luna—if that’s what you want. I would never force anything on you.”

She pressed her lips together. “I know. I just… I hate to disappoint you in any way. Ever.”

“You could never disappoint me,” I said, shaking my head. “Besides, there are lots of things to consider, including how the ceremony would affect a non-wolf. The bond between an Alpha and his Luna is special.”

She fiddled with my hand in her lap. Her voice was a whisper. “What we have is already special.”

I smiled. “I know, love.”

She stared at my lips before her gaze flicked up my eyes again. “Thank you for always being so supportive. What would I do without you?”

I cupped her cheek. “I want what’s best for you. Always.”

“I want the same for you,” she murmured, leaning closer.

She kissed my cheek, my jaw, the corner of my mouth before she kissed my lips. I held her close, enjoying her tenderness. The idea of her as my real Luna was both exciting and terrifying.

Cali would be with me, by my side, representing the pack. Luna was a position of respect, or authority—but also of danger. I couldn’t ignore that or tell myself to forget about it for the good of the pack. What would’ve happened if I’d made Cali my Luna after the Lupo Finale? Nothing good. It would’ve been a dick move.

It would’ve forced Cali to make a choice, something I’d vowed never to do. But I was comfortable, now, in a way I hadn’t been before. I’d adjusted to being a pack Alpha after years spent as a Rogue. I’d grown into the role—and Cali had grown so much, too.

She’d learned more about the supernatural world, and she was training, learning how to control her Fae powers. Who knew what she’d be able to do in the future? Her powers seemed to have infinite potential, and I couldn’t wait to be by her side and watch her become the best, most powerful version of herself. She was as dedicated as any werewolf in our pack, and twice as stubborn.

But the fact that I believed in her didn’t mean that she could take up the Luna role without truly thinking about it. Above all, Cali needed to trust in herself—in both her emotions and her mind. I was confident that that time would come, eventually. I was certain about it, felt it deep in my bones.

“When you’re ready,” I whispered, “I know you’ll be an incredible Luna.”

Cali smiled, stroking my cheek. She leaned in and kissed my lower lip, then the upper. Against my mouth, she said, “I love you so much. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Her words, her scent, her warmth and proximity made me woozy. My need for her returned—or rather, it had never left. The fake Luna mark spell had brought it up to the surface, but it was always there, brewing, this unstoppable urge to adore her.

Cali owned my heart and everything that I was.

“I love you more than I ever thought possible,” I whispered. “Before I met you, I never knew I could feel like this.”

Her gaze was fixed on my mouth, her eyes burning. Her scent had shifted, all the anxiety gone, replaced by yearning. When she kissed me this time, there was an intensity to it that had me groaning into her mouth. And when she fell back against the mattress and pulled me down on top of her, I felt like the luckiest man alive.

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When I woke up next, Cali wasn’t panicking. She was nuzzled peacefully against my chest, a small, satiated smile on her mouth. Damn if she didn’t look gorgeous in her sleep… I wanted to stay here, with her in my arms and underneath me until the end of fucking time, but reality called. Unfortunately.

“Cali, love…” I gently stirred her awake. “I have to get going. Need to handle some pack stuff, okay?”

She groaned against my chest. She was adorable. “Can’t we stay here?”

Smirking, I slid my hand from her waist to her hip, squeezing. “You want to go again?”

Her eyes shot open. Her expression was both scandalized and intrigued. “*Seriously?*”

“Unfortunately, no.” I chuckled, kissing her nose. “I really have to refocus on the pack, iron out a few details before we take our next steps.”

Cali and I slipped into our clothes, then shared one last kiss.

“I love you,” I said after breaking the embrace.

She smiled, then turned to the mirror to fix her hair as I headed to the door.

When I opened it, I was surprised to find Elle standing there with Helix. How the hell hadn’t I heard either of them shuffling around? Then again, when Cali was naked, I never paid much attention to anything else.

“Greyson,” Elle said. There was a tightness in her voice, and a look of annoyance flashed across her face when Cali joined me at the door.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

Elle huffed. “You said you were going to help my father.”

“It’s only been a few hours since we found Helix, Elle. I have some things to work out first.”

Elle pouted, crossing her arms. “Fine.”

I suppressed a sigh. “I’ll meet you in the living room in a half hour.”

Without a word, Elle shot a glare at Cali. Then she walked away, pulling Helix with her.

“I am Helix!” he called, instead of goodbye. He reminded me of a Pokémon, or that *I am Groot* tree from the Marvel movies.

Anyway…

“I suppose Elle’s just really worried about her dad,” Cali said.

I nodded, but internally, I could feel that something else was troubling Elle, too. Her energy was off.

“What are you planning to do?” Cali asked.

I sighed. “I’m going to have to go to Idaho, to Elle’s old pack.”

“What?” Cali frowned. “But what about the summit?”

“It’s being held at Hells Canyon, which is on the Idaho-Oregon border,” I said. “You’ll have to go to the summit without me.”

**Episode 3803**

I stared at Greyson, blinking incredulously. I had no idea what the hell was going on. I must’ve misheard—there was no other explanation.

“What are you even talking about?” My voice got high-pitched and squeaky, rising right along with my panic. “I wouldn’t dare go to the summit all alone—I’m not a werewolf; I’m not even a real Luna!”

“Cali—”

“Oh my god, Greyson! Why would you even *suggest* such a thing? That’s—”

“Cali,” he said firmly, grabbing me by the shoulders. The force of his grip, along with his stare, shut me up. “I would never put you in a situation like that, love. Don’t you know me by now?”

I nodded, settling down. But I was still breathless.

Pulling me into a hug, he spoke in my ear. “I will go with Elle and Helix to help Elle’s father. Then I will meet you and the other Redwoods at the summit.”

I held Greyson tightly, my panic subsiding. Though I still wasn’t crazy about his plan.

*Cali, chill*, I told myself. *It’s not like you’ll be alone at any point!*

That was true. Rishika, Jay, Lola, Artemis, and Big Mac would all be coming with me. And I could understand why Greyson wanted to help Elle’s father. He felt responsible for Elle, and Elle was a Redwood wolf. I’d expect Greyson to do the same if my own father, or any other Redwood pack member’s parent, were in danger.

*But what will happen when I show up at the summit without Greyson?*

How would the rest of the packs react? What would they say when they saw Greyson arriving with Elle instead of me? Would the other packs think that Elle was his Luna? My stomach twisted at the possibility. At the image of Greyson, looking as regal as ever, walking into the summit with model-beautiful Elle by his side, all serious and imposing, the two of them looking so—

“Cali?” Greyson’s firm voice interrupted my thoughts. “Look at me.”

I looked at him. All the care I saw in his gaze made me feel like an idiot for feeling this way.

“I hope you can be okay with this,” he said. “But if not, I can think of another solution.”

I swallowed nervously. “What are your options?”

Greyson opened his mouth. Closed it. His jaw clenching, he shook his head. “I don’t have many. This looks like the best one at the moment, considering the time crunch.”

I needed to get a grip. Greyson was stretched so thin right now. I couldn’t make everything harder for him. It wouldn’t be right.

“I’m not exactly thrilled about this,” I admitted. “I’d feel a million times safer arriving at the summit with you. But I understand that you’re trying to do what’s best for everyone.”

Greyson sighed. “I wish there was a better way.” He paused, as if he’d realized something. “But actually, there’s a chance I’ll make it to the summit before you and the others even arrive. So you won’t have to face anyone without me.”

I shook my head. “I appreciate your optimism, but you need to take whatever time you need to fix things for Elle’s father. I don’t want to risk putting him in greater danger. Besides, I don’t want my issues to stress you out—you have enough on your plate.”

“I can handle this, love, as long as I know that you can too.”

I breathed deeply, nodding again. “I can do it. I think I was just surprised.”

*Here’s your proof I’m not ready to be Luna… A Luna wouldn’t freak out over something like this!*

I shoved the thought away while Greyson lifted my chin, making me look at him. “You know I’d bring you with me if I could, but we’re dealing with real wolves, here. They get a little jumpy around humans.”

Greyson was right. I recalled how standoffish Elle’s old pack mates had been toward me. And now that their pack was being threatened, my presence would probably only agitate them more. It definitely wouldn’t *help* matters. Unlike werewolves, I couldn’t even communicate with real wolves, so this whole thing was obviously *not* the right mission for me.

“Don’t worry,” I told Greyson finally. “I’ll be fine.”

He cupped my cheek, and his voice dropped. “I wouldn’t ask you to do this if I didn’t think you’d be able to handle it. I know you have the confidence to pull this off. You just need to believe in yourself like I believe in you, love.”

Greyson’s words made my throat tighten with emotion. He was so good at… well, *this*. *Us*. His words always grounded and encouraged me. They always reminded me that I could be better and greater and much stronger than I was now, if only I put my mind to it.

It was beautiful.

“Okay,” I muttered, covering the hand he had on my cheek. “Promise you won’t worry about me, then.”

A chuckle broke through his serious expression. “What are you talking about? I’d worry about you even if you were almighty and invincible. It’s called being crazy in love with you.”

I couldn’t prevent the smile that formed on my lips.

“Fine, I get it,” said. “How about we make a pact?”

Straight-faced, he said, “Does the pact involve being naked?”

“*No*,” I said firmly, ignoring how his mischievous gaze made me feel. “The pact is that we will both worry equally about each other, but we won’t allow it to mess up what we need to do.”

He smiled. “Deal.”

I bit my lip, leaning up to kiss him—but then his head turned to the left, like he’d just heard something.

He sighed, looking at the staircase. “Sorry—I need to talk to the others, make some arrangements for the time I’ll be away.” He faced me. “Do you think Ravi would be able to handle planning the mixer with the Nightshade pack?”

“I think he’d be great at it,” I said.

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “Probably a little *too* great, now that I think about it.”

I snorted.

Greyson kissed my cheek. “I promise I’ll come see you before I have to leave, okay? It might be fast, and I’m sorry about that.”

“It’s okay. Love you.”

I watched as he headed downstairs, my heart beating fast. The way I felt was weird—like I’d just lost something. And that “something” was the opportunity to arrive at the summit with Greyson by my side.

*Don’t overthink this, Cali!*

I headed back to the room, trying to follow my own advice. I paused before the mirror, peeking at my Luna mark. It looked a hell of a lot better than Seluna’s handprint. But despite that, and despite what I’d told Greyson and his belief in me, I still didn’t feel secure in this plan.

I could just imagine everybody staring at me as I arrived at the summit. They’d size me up, contemplate whether or not I was a worthy Redwood Luna. I hadn’t forgotten what had happened to Joss. And Joss had been a hard-ass.

*Plus, the Bitterfangs have already threatened me…*

Before my thoughts could spiral there, I reminded myself that the Bitterfangs wouldn’t try any funny business at a public event. Besides, I had my magic, and I wouldn’t be alone. I would just be without my mates. Without Greyson, and without Xavier.

My chest ached at the thought. It would be so strange for me to be an official Redwood representative without Xavier. But he was the one who’d decided to leave me, to treat me like he’d never loved me. I couldn’t depend on him to help me if things went badly at the summit. It would be pathetic to ask for his help, anyway.

*He’s made his choice, and it’s not me.*

I ignored the fresh wave of pain and focused on my reflection. What was I supposed to do as a Luna? Would I just declare myself, the way Lucian liked to do? The way Greyson did whenever the pack was getting too rowdy?

I cleared my throat, stared into my eyes, and summoned the deepest voice I could muster. “Hello. I am the Redwood Luna.”

Well. That sounded ridiculous. But perhaps the more I practiced, the more natural it would sound. Hopefully I’d eventually sound less like I was trying to be Batman.

Lola’s voice startled me. “Cali, what are you doing?”

I turned to see her looming in the doorway, smirking at me.

“I’m just—practicing being Luna,” I said. Like a dork.

“Oh, that’s smart! You *should* practice, because right now, you don’t feel very Luna-like. Your vibe is off.”

I gave her a flat look. “Thanks for the honesty, Lola.”

“No problem, bestie!” She strutted into the room, flipping her hair over her shoulder. “I’m here to help.”

“Do you have any tips on how I should just… *be*?” I asked.

“I think it’s all about confidence,” Lola declared. “People will believe you if *you* believe you.”

My throat felt dry, and I was filled with nervous energy.

“But what if I *don’t* believe in myself?” I asked Lola.

The question was loaded. It caused a domino effect inside my head, because the follow-up questions were even heavier.

*If I don’t believe in myself while I’m at the summit, what will happen to the pack?*

*What will happen to Greyson?*

**Episode 3804**

**Ava**

I stopped before I reached the others. It would be better if I fetched the ornate ballot box from the Airstream—it would give the voting an air of credibility and formality. I could just have the votes placed on a table or something, but I wanted this to look and feel as official as possible.

It wasn’t every day that someone was voted in as Alpha, and Xavier had earned every ceremony in the playbook. *I’d* earned this—I’d worked so hard to get to this triumphant moment.

I grabbed the box from the Airstream, stopping to look at myself in the mirror.

I remembered looking out through a similar mirror when I’d been in the spirit world. I’d dreamed of returning to the living world, back then. I’d yearned to reclaim Xavier as my mate, to fix everything between us, to make us brand-new. It had seemed impossible, of course. I’d been dead, killed by Xavier’s vengeful rage.

Maybe I’d deserved it then.

Maybe I’d deserved even worse for letting myself get carried away and betraying him.

But all that had been before I’d returned, before I’d come to understand what I’d done, and how he and I had reached that nightmarish point in our relationship. The journey to get back to the world of the living had been a struggle, a fight to piece my reality together. It had continued even after I’d come back to life and had met Xavier once more. I’d kept trying to get him back, to make him see all the ways I still loved him, despite everything.

The way we fit together wasn’t perfect, but it was real. Always. And I meant what I’d told him—this was our second chance. A chance that I’d never considered possible while I was wasting away in the land of the dead. He and I had come so far since then, and this was our moment.

I intended to build the life we deserved.

The Samara pack would rise again, and Xavier and I would be at the top. Like we were meant to be.

All that hope made me feel a little drunk, made it hard for me to keep the smile off my face. I carried the ballot box outside and placed it on a table before my pack. Marissa hovered nearby, and she handed me a slip of paper.

“To cast your vote,” she said. Her tone was teasing. “I wonder if you’re going to vote for Xavier.”

I scoffed. “Hilarious.”

She grinned, and I looked around. Many of my pack mates were cutting their fingers with a partially shifted claw. Blood meant a “yes” vote, and I couldn’t help but smile. I couldn’t see what *everybody* was doing, but I had little doubt that when the votes were tallied, Xavier would become the Samara Alpha.

It was the only outcome that made sense.

I had fought tooth and nail for it, for him, and for us.

I slashed my finger, allowed the blood to flow onto the white paper. I watched, thinking of all the blood spilled between Xavier and me. At least this time, my blood would build something, instead of ruining it. This time, my blood didn’t mean death. It meant the rebirth of the Samara pack.

It meant the rebirth of our relationship.

I finished wiping my blood on the paper and placed it in the box, along with a few of the others. Marissa dropped hers in, her expression still light. She’d been so worried for the Samaras for so long that it felt good to see her like this.

“Let’s talk,” she said, reaching for my hand and pulling me aside. “On a scale of one to ten, how excited are you right now?” she asked when we were alone. “Three million?”

I snorted. I wasn’t the type to draw hearts with Xavier’s name in them, so I tried to play it cool.

“This isn’t about me,” I said. “This is about the pack, and obviously I’m very excited about that—just like you are.”

Marissa scoffed. “Oh, please, you can’t compare the two of us—I’m happy for the pack, but you have so much to gain here.”

“What do you mean?”

Marissa snorted. “Ava, come on. You can take the high road if you want, but with Xavier sure to become Alpha, you’re going to be Luna. That’s a *huge* deal—how can you not be excited?”

I nodded, processing her words. “It sounds great in theory, yeah.”

Marissa crossed her arms, a shadow passing over her expression. “Only in theory?”

“Xavier and I haven’t discussed all that yet,” I admitted.

Marissa frowned. “Wait, what? *How?* How can you not have discussed it?”

I shifted uncomfortably. “We just haven’t had a chance…”

Xavier and I had agreed to take small steps, and I was well aware that he had a short fuse. I had to be careful. I didn’t think he’d just run off after committing himself to the Samara—he was too proud for that—but our relationship was a whole other issue.

Xavier was… skittish.

I couldn’t risk scaring him off.

“I don’t know what’s going on here,” Marissa said, her tone low but firm, “but you’d better get to work.” She looked around, her voice dropping even further. “Everyone in the pack knows that Xavier is… or was… Cali’s mate. And Alphas almost always choose their mates to be their Lunas.”

Her words made a pang of anger shoot through me. What the fuck?

“Don’t forget that *I* was his mate first,” I said sharply. “I’ve always been his mate, since we were teenagers. We were together for years.”

Marissa shook her head with a huff. “I know. But that doesn’t erase Cali. You get what I mean? You need to lock this down. Be his Luna.”

Despite my visceral reaction to her words, Marissa had a point. If I wanted to complete my dream, to secure the future of the Samara pack, my work couldn’t end with Xavier becoming Alpha. I had to become his Luna.

That was the way things were supposed to be—I’d known it from the moment we’d first recognized each other as mates. Our wolves had always known. And even though we’d lost each other along the way, even though we’d gone through horror, breaking things was part of a werewolf’s animal nature.

Now was the time to mend.

“As soon as Xavier settles into being Alpha, he’ll decide what to do about his Luna,” I said. “I need to give him time.”

Marissa raised an eyebrow. “That’s very noble. But I know you aren’t exactly the noble type.”

I rolled my eyes, and she took a step closer.

“I mean it, Ava,” she said. “Even if Xavier’s dumped Cali, she’s still his mate, and you know exactly what that means. *You* were the mate he left behind, before.”

Her words landed with a thud inside my head.

“Xavier is an Alpha,” Marissa went on. “He’s smart and strong and hotheaded, but he’s still a man, and men… *Well*.” She raised an eyebrow. “I think you know how to handle a man.” I swallowed thickly as she continued. “Do whatever you have to do to become Luna. Make Xavier forget about Cali. Fight for what you *know* you want. It’ll be good for the pack, and good for *you*.”

With that, she squeezed my shoulder and walked off, leaving me to my thoughts. They were going a mile a minute. I could see her point of view—it made sense. But giving Xavier time and space also made sense, considering who he was. Considering who we’d been together. It wasn’t possible to erase all our baggage overnight.

I’d just assumed, and hoped, that when Xavier came back to me and became the Samara Alpha, he would naturally choose me to be his Luna. Eventually. We hadn’t had a lot of time to discuss it, but it was the only logical path.

But Marissa’s words were making doubt rear its ugly head inside me. Why had she even felt the need to even bring this up right now? Did she sense hesitation in Xavier?

My pulse thundered in my ears as I looked around. I’d sensed Xavier’s presence, my wolf always attuned to him. He was walking toward me as the last of the votes were placed in the box. I stared at him, taking in every inch of him.

He looked like a natural Alpha—tall, powerful, sure of himself. My mate.

Cali’s mate, too.

My hands turned into fists as paranoia kicked in.

What if Xavier didn’t choose me as his Luna? What if he’d been playing with me this whole time, eager to become the Samara Alpha only to leave me behind? What if he’d always planned on choosing Cali, one way or another?

Marissa’s words echoed in my head.

*Do whatever you have to do to become Luna. Make Xavier forget about Cali. Fight for what you* know *you want.*

What did I need to do to make Xavier choose me, once and for all?

**Episode 3805**

“Cali,” Lola said, “if the people at the summit don’t believe that you’re our Luna, they’ll eat you alive. Metaphorically speaking. Then again, you never know…”

I shot her a look. “Lola. Not helping.”

Lola went “*Aw!*” and gave me a side hug.

At least she was good at hugs.

“I love you, you know that?” she said. “You are my bestest friend, and I love you so much, and you need to stop doubting yourself!” She pushed my hair behind my shoulders, smoothing it out as we both eyed my reflection in the mirror. Absentmindedly, she added, “Besides, a Luna is really just another werewolf.”

“I’m not a werewolf,” I said wryly, facing her.

Lola rolled her eyes. “That’s not the point.”

“What *is* the point, exactly?”

*That I’m going to blast something the moment someone’s mean to me?*

I actually did not appreciate the extremes of my personality. I was either a scaredy cat hiding under the bed, or a magical bazooka out to blow things up.

*Chill, self!*

Meanwhile, Lola was still rambling.

“… like I said, you have to fake it till you make it! The point is, you have the mark, the pack believes in you, and Greyson will be there to back you up.” My friend nodded briskly. “It’s also pretty obvious how much you love each other.” Lola’s nose crinkled. “Sometimes it’s so obvious, it’s too cute to even look at.”

I let out a half-laugh, half-snort. “You’re one to talk. I could say the same about you and Jay.”

Lola perked up, sighing dreamily as she pressed her hands to her chest. “I know! My Jay is the love of my life. And the sex? *Oh my god*.”

While Lola rhapsodized about how beautiful Jay’s penis was—he probably would’ve died from embarrassment (or maybe pride?) if he’d been able to hear her—I processed her words. Not the Jay stuff, obviously—the other stuff. The “fake it till you make it” part. That always sounded good in theory, but it was much more difficult in practice.

*It would be easier if I knew that Greyson was going to be there. Things are always easier when he’s with me…*

I loved that Greyson was someone I could always depend on, but at the same time, the thought made me feel uneasy. Greyson wouldn’t always be able to come to my rescue. In theory, I knew that I needed to be able to stand on my own. To be my own person.

*I can’t let all the bullshit Xavier said about me being weak come true!*

The thought made my chest hurt, and then Lola snapped her fingers in my face. “Cali! I’m talking to you. You need to chill about the summit—we have a few days to prepare you, anyway. It should be fine.”

I took a deep breath. “Okay, two things. One: we both know I’m not the best liar—”

“You did pull it off at the Vanguard party, though,” Lola reminded me. “For the most part.”

That was true. But the second issue wasn’t so easily dismissed.

“Greyson might be a little late to the summit,” I told Lola. “I might have to represent the pack without my mate.”

Lola pondered that. “Huh.”

I stared at her. “*Huh?* That’s all you have to say?”

“I’m just thinking. It’s interesting.”

My left eye twitched. “Interesting? Not dangerous or intimidating? Just *interesting*?”

Ignoring my nervous energy, Lola decided to make it worse. “If Greyson isn’t there, what happens if Xavier shows up?”

I blinked at her. “Lola, oh my *god*.”

“What?” she said with a defensive huff. “It is a real possibility that we have to consider—better to think about it now than be totally blindsided at the summit.”

I swallowed nervously. “I have no idea. If Xavier shows up and sees that I’m the Luna of the Redwood pack… Is he going to think that I really decided to take that step?”

Lola rolled her eyes. “Well, none of us should give a damn about how Xavier feels. He left you, he left the pack, so—whatever, goodbye.”

I frowned. “But what if he *is* at the summit?”

“Now that I think about it,” Lola said, “since he’s kind of a Rogue now, there would be no reason for him to show up.” She pressed her lips together, squeezing my shoulder. “I’m sorry I even brought it up.”

There was truth to Lola’s ramblings, though. Even if that truth was painful. At least she was right about that last part—if Xavier really *had* decided to go Rogue, what would he gain by coming to the summit?

The answer came out of nowhere, making me wince.

“He might be with Ava,” I said grimly. “Maybe he’ll come with the Samaras.”

Lola visibly cringed. “Okay, now I *really* regret bringing him up.”

There was a lump in my throat. “No, you’re right—”

“But I think we have to operate assuming there’s a chance he might come. But if he does, maybe you treat him like he’s not even there,” Lola declared. “Ignore him completely. There’s no need to add any more stress to your plate. We don’t want you out there blasting people just because you’re all agitated.”

I sighed. “I’m not going to blast anyone.”

“Maybe you could blast Xavier, just for fun,” Lola said conversationally. “If he knows what’s good for him, he won’t come, and if he does, he’ll stay the hell away from you. Hopefully some time away will help him realize what an asshole he’s been.”

I sighed. “*Lola*…”

“I’m sorry, but I believe in tough love,” Lola said firmly. “I also believe in revenge, and what Xavier did to you was unforgivable.”

I forced myself not to think about the day of our breakup. His cold eyes. His harsh words. Harsh words he’d repeated when I’d called him to ask for an explanation. If I sat down and went over it all, I’d just start feeling angry all over again, and then Lola and I would have to find another junkyard.

*And we all know how that ended last time!*

“You know what?” Lola was saying. “Even if Xavier *does* show his sorry ass at the summit, he’ll get barbecue eyes from everyone. Even Jay! Jay is so mad at him, you know. Even if he won’t admit it. I can just tell he’s stewing, my poor baby.”

None of this was making me feel better, and I knew that if I let Lola go on, she’d only escalate everything further.

*Abort, abort!* I thought. *Change the subject!*

And so I did.

“What do you think I should wear to the summit?”

As expected, that did give Lola pause. Nothing like clothes to distract her. But then she burst out laughing. “Cali! You’re a Fae fake Luna and you’re worried about fashion?”

“NOT helpful, Lola!”

“Right, I’m sorry,” Lola said, sobering up. Though I could still see a smirk on her mouth. “I promise it’ll be fine. Like I said, you made a pretty good fake Luna at the palace. Think of the summit as just another party.”

I sighed deeply. “I suppose I can try.”

“Don’t try, *do*! I know you can. You have survived a million and one monsters in the past few months—this is going to be a piece of cake in comparison.”

“That’s true,” I said, realizing she was right. “I guess this whole Seluna thing did leave me a bit wary, though.”

Lola squeezed my arms. “But you’re still you, babe. You can do this. And you’ll look fantastic while you’re at it—I have a closet full of sexy clothes, and I’m going to help you choose the *best* outfit.”

*Oh hell*, I thought, laughing awkwardly. *I can only imagine what she’d pick out.*

“Stay here,” Lola said primly. “I’ll be right back.”

“Please don’t bring back anything that requires me to go braless,” I called after her.

She waved me off. “Bras are a nuisance! Free the nipple, Cali!”

I turned to look at myself in the mirror again. The outfit nonsense notwithstanding, Lola was right. I could do this. I’d done much more difficult things during my time in the supernatural world. Besides, I had no choice.

The Redwood pack would be counting on me to pull this off, and I couldn’t let them down. I had to put my game face on and move forward. I still had a few days to get used to the whole Luna thing, and to further develop my magic.

*It’s going to be fine! All of it! Just fine!*

I eyed myself in the mirror and tried to stand a little taller, shoulders back, spine straight. All the Lunas I’d ever encountered had been proud and regal. Joss, for example. She’d been Greyson’s Luna, and even though it had hurt when Greyson had chosen her, I understood why. She was everything you could possibly want in a Luna… And she’d died *because* she was a Luna. Pip had been Mace’s Luna… And she’d died as well.

A sickening pit formed in my stomach.

*Being a Luna seems like a fatal disease… Surely not every Luna dies tragically?*

Paige’s face popped into my head. Okay, Paige! Paige was alive, and as far as I knew, she was still swinging with her mate. I wasn’t about to become a swinger, but I wanted to remain alive like Paige. She was—kind of—the closest thing I had to a role model.

Fantastic.

“Cali?” There was a knock on my door, and a moment later, Kira walked in. “I just wanted to check on you.”

“Oh, thanks,” I said. I lowered the shoulder of my dress to show her my mark.

She eyed it, eyebrows arched. “Not to brag, but I did good work, there. It looks great.”

I smiled a little. “At least there’s that, right?”

Kira’s dark eyes darted up to mine. “There’s more to it than appearance, though.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Cali, there’s something I haven’t told you about the mark.”

**Episode 3806**

**Xavier**

I took in the atmosphere as I walked toward Ava. Everyone was watching me—I could feel their eyes on me and smell the blood in the air. A good sign. The more blood, the more votes for me as Alpha. I was feeling confident, but I didn’t want to show it too much. There was a fine line between confidence and… Knox.

Besides, despite the certainty I had in my abilities, I couldn’t shake the dark thoughts that lurked in the back of my mind. I couldn’t fucking help but think back to Adéluce and wonder if she was going to do something to take this away from me, too. I didn’t know what she *could* do, exactly, but it seemed likely that she’d do *something*, simply because Adéluce lived to make my life hell. She knew I wanted to be Alpha, and she wasn’t in the business of letting me have what I wanted. Along with that thought, though, there was another—what would it mean if Adéluce *did* let me become Alpha?

What if it was all part of some sort of long con?

No.

I couldn’t let her get in my fucking head like she had on the mountain. I couldn’t let her win. Not when I had a pack to help, and a mate to protect. My heart ached at that thought, and I realized I wasn’t only thinking about Cali.

I closed the distance between Ava and me, my gaze fixed on her face. She had a strange expression that I couldn’t pinpoint. She’d been fine earlier. The last time I’d seen her, she was…

Talking to Marissa.

Marissa had been skeptical about my commitment to the pack. Her failed seduction ploy had made that clear. But she’d congratulated me earlier, hadn’t she? Had that been bullshit? Was she still planting seeds of doubt in Ava’s mind? Could Marissa have pretended to be on my side and voted against me behind my back?

That was possible. But if it *was* what had happened, I couldn’t do anything about it. Still, I wasn’t about to let Marissa or anyone undermine whatever it was that Ava and I had established. My wolf was growling at the mere thought of his connection with Ava being threatened, and he was a dramatic motherfucker. I needed to keep him stable.

“Hey,” I said, joining Ava. “What’s going on with you?”

She flinched at the sound of my voice, like she’d been lost in thought.

“Are you nervous about the vote?” I asked her. “Changed your mind about my chances?”

Ava seemed to refocus, her full attention on me now. A strange look passed across her face, but then it was gone.

“Why would I change my mind?” she asked, nodding toward the box. “I know my pack and how they operate. There’s blood in the air, after all.” She raised an eyebrow. “I bet you can already count the votes by the scent alone.”

I relaxed a bit. Whatever had been bothering Ava moments ago seemed to have passed. I felt even better when she reached for my hand. My wolf stirred as she gestured to the pack and the land around us.

“Remember this moment, Xavier,” she said. “This is the last time you’ll be an outsider. The last time you won’t be a pack Alpha.”

Her praise was like a shot of energy, rushing through my system. I couldn’t deny how much her words affected me—how much *she* affected me. I knew I’d done my part, here, but the truth was Ava had been the key to this entire situation.

“I’m good at this, but you should take some of the credit,” I said. “None of it would be happening without you, and that’s the truth.”

Ava smiled. She looked pleased and soft, and my heart pounded. Because she didn’t know the *whole* truth. She didn’t know that none of this would’ve been happening if it weren’t for Adéluce. Ava had no idea that I’d essentially been forced into this, even though I viewed it as a lifeline. But I literally couldn’t explain any of that to her, thanks to Adéluce.

I wondered if she was watching right now.

Anger simmered inside me at the thought, but I pushed it away.

“I know what this means to you, Ava,” I said. “You did so much to keep your pack together after your brother’s death. And if you hadn’t supported me, pushed me toward this, you might’ve ended up with another Zeke or Fletcher.”

Ava snorted, shaking her head. Looking away, she opened her mouth to say something but then paused. When our eyes met, hers were warm. “I’m just glad we can enjoy this moment together.”

She looked down at our joined hands. The heat of her touch had every vein in my body warming up. This didn’t escape my wolf. He was urging me to kiss Ava, to cement the bond between us.

But I resisted.

I hadn’t done any of this to be with Ava—I’d done it because of a vampire-witch’s threats against Cali. At least by becoming Samara Alpha, I’d be able to lessen some of the misery I felt. I could help the Samaras, and Ava as well. I could savor this, but I needed to remember that I’d done this solely to become Alpha. Whatever lay ahead for Ava and me, I wasn’t about to speculate.

My wolf thought I was a fool in denial, though. He felt that kissing and touching Ava earlier had only made our bond stronger, that it could only grow from now on. My wolf thought I wasn’t in control. But I had to be, for my sanity’s sake. At least for now.

“It’s time to count the votes,” Ava said, and I was brought back to reality. She nodded toward an older woman, sitting at the table where the ornate voting box had been placed. Squeezing my hand, Ava said, “I asked Josephine—Perrie’s mom—to count the votes. People might’ve doubted the count if I did it myself.”

“What do you mean?”

Ava raised an eyebrow at me. “Xavier. Everyone in the pack knows I’m far from neutral in this situation.”

Her belief in me made my wolf howl in satisfaction.

“Let’s start the process, then,” Josephine called loudly.

And then she opened the voting box.

Josephine counted the votes aloud. First, there were several blood marks, and then a blank.

“A blank note means a vote of no,” Josephine said. “Moving on…”

She moved on. There were another two yes votes, then a no.

I looked around—I knew who the two votes against me belonged to. Both Jesse and Simon were standing together, glaring at me defiantly. They were almost laughable in their insolence.

“Look at the puppies, fucking pissing all over the place,” I whispered to Ava. “I might have to teach them to show a little respect.”

Her choked scoff made me smirk.

Josephine continued to count the votes, one by one.

“Ballot number seven,” she said, unfolding the piece of paper. “In favor of Xavier.”

My anticipation continued to build. This was really happening. They were voting for me. And it wasn’t just a few people—the votes went on like that.

“In favor.”

“In favor.”

“In favor.”

“In favor.”

Ava grinned at me. The scent of blood in the air was intoxicating. And then—

“Against,” Josephine said, and my positive thoughts came to a stop. I looked back at Josephine to see the unfolded piece of paper in her hands. Blank. I turned to Ava, and the look of surprise on her face didn’t spell out anything good.

Scanning the pack’s somber faces, I mind linked Ava. *Who do you think the third vote against me belonged to?*

Ava pressed her lips together*. I don’t know.*

*Could it be Marissa?* I asked. I didn’t trust that girl.

*I doubt Marissa’s against you*, Ava said, shutting that down. *But either way, the third vote doesn’t matter, just like the other two. So far, there are way more votes in your favor.*

I swallowed nervously as Josephine kept counting. More stained paper, more blood, more yeses. The tension inside me eased.

*You’re right*, I said to Ava.

*Don’t worry about the naysayers*, she said. *All you have to do now is show those who doubt you why you’re here and what you’re made of, and they’ll fall in line.*

*True*, I said.

*You have to live up to what you’ve promised, Xavier*, Ava said, squeezing my hand. I turned to face her. Her eyes were dark, intense on mine. *I know you can do it. I know* you*, Xavier. We’re in this together.*

My wolf roared. My heart pounded.

We were in this together.

“All the votes have been counted,” Josephine said in a loud, official-sounding voice. She closed the box and looked up, pinning me with her imposing gaze. “I am pleased to announce that the Samara pack has a new Alpha. Congratulations, Xavier Evers.”

**Episode 3807**

I stared at Kira, who was looking very casual for someone who’d just dropped a bombshell.

In my calmest tone—probably to hide the fact that I was internally screaming—I said, “Why is it that every time I start to feel better about something, it comes with a caveat?”

Kira raised her index finger like a teacher. “I never said it was a bad thing. There are just a few things you should be aware of before you head off to the summit with the fake Luna mark.”

I was really trying to keep my shit together.

“Before you continue, I have a question,” I told Kira.

“Go ahead,” she said, in her usual flat tone.

“Whatever those ‘things’ are, why didn’t you tell me about them *before* you put the mark on me?” I asked.

Kira remained impassive. Unimpressed, almost. Had to be nice to be her!

“Because I didn’t know about them at the time,” she said to me. “Now, I’ve done more research.”

“And you couldn’t have done that research beforehand?” I asked.

She crossed her arms, her face twisting into a scowl. “Are you doubting my process?”

*Obviously!* I wanted to shout. This was so unfair. I was scolded for misfiring my magic pretty frequently—thanks, Adair—but what about witches? Their spells often had consequences that had nothing to do with the desired outcome!

“Should I go on, or do you want to keep staring at me without talking?” Kira asked.

“Right,” I said, clearing my throat. I braced myself, took a deep breath, and said, “Go ahead. What’s happening this time?”

“Because of the Luna mark,” Kira said, “and the fact that my spell targets only you and Greyson, there’s a good chance that things will become… more intense, for the both of you.”

I raised a brow. “Intense? What things?”

She shrugged. “Pretty much everything—your emotions, your desires, your senses—will be amplified.”

Oh, *god*…

“Have you noticed anything different since you received the mark?” Kira asked.

My face heated. The only thing I could think of was when Greyson and I had slept together. But had that been because of the spell, or because of the way we felt about each other? Because that didn’t seem out of the realms of possibility, either—Greyson had a lot of… *uh*… pent-up energy. And apparently, I did too.

“I feel like you want to ask me something,” Kira said, squinting at me.

At least she wasn’t grunting like Big Mac.

“When you say things are going to get more intense, do you mean that whatever I’m feeling isn’t real? It’s just a side effect of the fake Luna spell?”

Kira shook her head. “The spell doesn’t plant emotions or anything like that. It just makes more of them. So if you’re feeling a five out of ten about something, it takes it to, like, an eight or nine.”

I blinked, alarmed. This explained what had happened with Greyson, earlier—at least partially.

“But what if I already feel a ten out of ten about something?” I asked. “Where does it go then?” My voice got a little squeaky. “There’s nothing higher than ten in the out-of-ten scale, Kira!”

Kira shrugged. “There could be. I just wanted to make you aware of that.”

I tried to see the bright side of this. At least nobody was going to die because of this spell. So. Progress! But I wasn’t thrilled by the idea of having my already intense emotions amplified. I wondered if that was why I was feeling so anxious about the summit, and attending it alone. My reaction to that situation did feel a bit much, even for me.

“You said something else?” I asked. “About my senses being amplified?”

“That’s on the table as well,” Kira said.

“So, what?” I asked with a twinge of excitement. “Will I be more like a werewolf? Will I be able to see in the dark like Greyson? Will I be able to smell people’s scents?”

*Oh my god, is this my time to shine?*

But then my budding excitement was immediately crushed by worry.

“But what—what about my magic?” I demanded. “Is it going to be like when Dani was out of control, amplifying my magic to the point of danger?”

I could hear the panic in my tone.

“Kira, I’ve been trying so hard to control my magic!” I burst out. “I can’t have this spell ruin what little progress I’ve—”

“Okay, deep breaths!” Kira cut me off, resting both her hands on my shoulders.

At least I could follow orders.

“Don’t panic,” Kira said firmly. “The amplification isn’t going to affect *everything* you do or experience.”

“Really?” I asked hopefully.

“Really,” Kira reassured me in that matter-of-fact way of hers. “Just know that if you suddenly feel an overwhelming desire to cry, or to hug someone, you might need to exercise a little restraint. And the spell doesn’t make up fake emotions—it just amplifies those that are already there.”

I swallowed nervously. “This could get so messy. You understand that, right?”

Kira let go of my shoulders. “If it gets to be too much, I can always reverse the spell.”

“I don’t think that’s an option. I’ve already committed to being the Redwood ‘Luna’ for the summit.” I made air-quotes around the word “Luna.”

“You can always back out,” Kira said.

I frowned. I couldn’t back out—I didn’t want to. I didn’t want to fail the pack, or Greyson, or myself. And even if I felt stressed out, I’d feel even worse if I didn’t at least *try* to do this. I might’ve been anxious, but I was also stubborn, so there. Problem solved.

Kind of.

“I’ll do my best to handle the spell,” I told Kira.

She gave me a skeptical look. I tried not to be offended.

“We have a few days before the summit,” she said. “I’ll keep researching, just in case there’s something I’ve overlooked—some way to provide the mark without the side effects.”

“Perhaps this isn’t all bad, though,” I said, realization dawning. “There’s a chance that having all these intense feelings and senses will make me feel more like a real Luna, right?”

Kira shrugged and walked away, but I was still processing.

*Hey… Maybe this is a good thing.*

It would be a good thing if I could learn to use my heightened senses in the same way I was learning how to use my magic. I would’ve preferred to have one mountain to climb at a time, but hey, this could be a double feature. It wasn’t like anything bad had happened to me because of the spell’s side effects, anyway.

*If anything, something very* good *happened to me earlier…*

I felt my cheeks flush at the thought of being with Greyson, and I shook my head, heading downstairs. Suddenly, I was ravenous. I paused by the staircase. Was I really craving Torin’s pancakes, or was it just the spell? No, Kira had said that it didn’t create emotions—or anything physical like hunger—it only intensified them.

*So I must just really deeply love Torin’s pancakes. They are good.*

I was making my way toward the kitchen when I ran into Greyson.

“Hey,” he said softly. “I was just coming to find you.”

I stared up at him, and he—he was so *tall*. Wonderfully tall. So tall and so charming and sweet and so fucking hot. *Jesus*. Why was he so hot? Had he always been so hot? Being away from him was suddenly torture—it felt wrong.

It made me ache, and the urge to kiss him hit me like an anvil. There were probably cartoon hearts dancing all around my head right now. Because the only thing that made sense in this moment was to grab Greyson by the neck of his T-shirt, push him up against the wall, and glue my mouth to his.

*Much better!*

It wasn’t just better—it was amazing. It was Greyson kissing me like we hadn’t done this in days, grabbing at me, opening his mouth for me to taste. I was melting against him, whimpering against his mouth as he spun us around, taking his turn to push *me* up against the wall—

And then I remembered we were in the hallway, where anyone could just walk in and see us mauling each other.

“I…” I broke the kiss, panting against his mouth. I hadn’t let him go, though. “It’s the Luna mark that’s making things, like, more intense. But I already wanted to kiss you. I want to kiss you *a lot*.”

He laughed against my neck, and a shudder ran through me. My skin felt hot, and the urge to arch into his touch, into his body, was immense. God, did he make me feel good.

“I want to kiss you too, love. I always do.” Greyson tucked my hair behind my ear. “But I was actually coming to find you so I could tell you about Idaho.”

My lust screeched to a halt.

“What?”

“Idaho,” Greyson repeated. “Elle’s pack, helping her dad, all that? I told everyone about my plans to meet you at the summit, but I’m hoping to take care of this quickly.” He stroked my cheek. “I want to arrive with you. I want us to do this together from the very beginning. I’ll try my best not to be late, okay?”

Greyson was speaking, but my pulse was thundering so loudly that his words sounded far away. And then I realized that it wasn’t *my* pulse that was ringing in my ears. My gaze moved from Greyson’s eyes to his lips, then down his chest, where his heart had to be thumping.

His heartbeat echoed inside my head, right alongside my own.

*What* is *this? Am I imagining it? Or am I really hearing it, thanks to my supercharged spell senses?*

“… and I knew I had to speak with you right away,” Greyson was saying in the background of my consciousness. My gaze snapped up to meet his.

“What?” I asked breathlessly. I felt woozy, hot, *dazed*.

Greyson stared at me. “Elle and I are leaving right now.”

**Episode 3808**

**Greyson**

“What?” Cali’s inhale was sharp. “*Now?* I know you said it was soon, but this feels really fast…”

“I don’t want to put Elle’s father in more danger by waiting to go, and the sooner I leave, the sooner I can return,” I said, stroking her arm. “I need to get this done before I can focus on the summit.”

Cali’s breathing was still hard, and she was gripping the front of my shirt like she didn’t want to let go. Her gaze was a little unfocused, like she was struggling with something.

“Cali?” I frowned. “Everything okay? Didn’t we talk about this earlier?”

Letting go of my shirt, she let out a sound that reminded me of a laugh, only sad.

I needed to fix this immediately.

“Hey, no, look at me,” I whispered, taking her hands. When she looked up at me again, I said, “Ranger and his wolves are no match for an Alpha werewolf. This won’t be dangerous for me—I’ll be okay. You know that, right?”

Cali took a deep breath, nodding. “Right. Yes.”

“As for the summit, I need you to remember you’re not going alone. If there’s any trouble, I know Rishika and the others will step up to protect you.”

Cali’s expression turned into a frown. “I can protect *myself*. I can blast every single damn werewolf who bothers me. Even if they *don’t* bother me, actually.”

My tone was deadpan. “Well. That should be great for our diplomatic efforts.”

“Greyson, this isn’t a joke,” she said sternly. She was really hot when she was stern, so this was working for me. But I had to get my mind out of the gutter and focus, here.

“I know the fake Luna mark was your idea, but if you can’t do this, just tell me,” I said honestly. “You can always stay back at the house if you’re scared—”

“I’m not *scared* to go to the summit.” She huffed. “It’s just… I’m not a good liar. You know that, Greyson. I know the fake mark was my idea, but how can I pretend to be something I’m not? If you were there, it would be much easier, because—”

“Because I inspire you to lie more easily?”

“Yes!”

I pressed my lips together to hide a smile.

She realized I was teasing her and huffed, smacking me on the chest. “Obviously not *that*! You just—you make me feel more confident! Just by being you.”

She gestured at me, and I leaned in, cupping her cheek. Her gaze immediately flicked to my mouth, her breath catching.

At least there was no doubt that I had her attention, here.

“I know you want to help the pack, but this could backfire,” I said gruffly. “If you go to the summit as our Luna and feel like you’re falling apart the entire time, it would be much worse than you not going at all. You get that, right?”

She stared at me. After taking a deep breath, she said, “I do. And I really do want to go. It’s just that acting like a Luna—”

“You can act like a Luna, Cali. In all the battles the pack has fought, you’ve already acted like one. Because at heart, you *are* a Luna—you have my heart, and I’m the Alpha. And I recognize you for what you are, which is extraordinary.”

She swallowed roughly, unblinking. “Wow. That was really good.”

“Just the truth. You’ve dealt with far worse than the summit, and you’ve always come out on top.” I kissed her cheek.

“You’re right,” she said, nodding.

“I wish I didn’t have to go, but I need to. You know that leaving you is always the last thing I want to do.”

Cali sighed, wrapping her arms around me. Her embrace was tight, her scent soothing under my nose. Against my chest, she mumbled, “Promise to stay in touch. I know you’ll be too far away to mind link, but make sure you don’t lose your phone.”

I snorted. “I won’t be gone that long, but of course I’ll stay in touch.”

She rubbed her cheek against my chest like a cat, then looked up at me with those pretty eyes of hers. “I love you.”

She was really making it very fucking hard to leave her. But I told myself that taking care of a real wolf like Ranger should be quick compared to the revenants, demons, and other horrors I’d dealt with of late. I’d be back in her arms in no time.

“I love you too,” I murmured, leaning down to give her one last kiss.

The pull I felt toward her was omnipresent, sharp in its intensity, but I pushed it back down, even when Cali held onto me a little too tight.

“I’ll be back before you know it,” I breathed against her mouth. “Everything’s going to be fine.”

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I packed a bag, making sure to include my phone, and headed outside. I had to shove all thoughts of Cali out of my head. This was a mission, and daydreaming about my mate and her beautiful smile and her amazing tits wasn’t practical. Unfortunately. I had to stay focused during the journey. If for no other reason than to keep an eye on the puppies who were travelling with me.

“Good to go?” I asked.

Elle and Helix nodded eagerly, both of them full of excited energy.

“Don’t forget to stay close to me,” I told them. “Once we reach your pack, I’ll deal with Ranger. Don’t do anything without checking in with me first. Okay?”

After they’d both agreed, I shifted, and they did the same. I led them into the woods, heading east, toward Idaho. I glanced back at the pack house, realizing that the next time I saw Cali would be when she was presented as my Luna at the summit.

It would be a lie, but I thought of it as more of a preview. Because one day, it was going to be the truth. I would make Cali my Luna for real, and we wouldn’t need witch magic for that, just the love we shared.

*Greyson?* Elle’s mind link interrupted my thoughts. She drew up beside me as we raced through the woods, the red fur of her wolf complementing the green of the forest. *Thank you for doing this. I know you didn’t have to.*

I shook my head. *I promised your father I would take care of you. Taking care of your father is the same thing.*

*And you’d do this for anyone from the Redwood pack, right?* she asked.

That was also true. But there was a nagging voice in the back of my head telling me that that even if I hadn’t promised Elle’s father, and even if Elle hadn’t been a pack mate, I would’ve done everything I could to help her. Just because I’d turned her.

Though the realization of my fierce protectiveness toward Elle was troubling, I couldn’t deny it. At least not anymore. Something compelled me to be by her side, to make sure she was okay. It was instinct, and the only logical reason for that was the bond that had formed between us the moment I’d turned her.

It was just like that son of a bitch Lucian had said.

I’d have preferred to eat dirt or fall into a volcano rather than admit out loud that the princeling was right about anything, ever, but I couldn’t lie to myself. My wolf and Elle’s wolf were connected, and that was that.

As for Lucian… I still wasn’t sure what his game was.

*Why didn’t you ask me to let you go to Lucian for help?* I asked Elle.

*Why would I do that?* Elle asked.

*Because he insists that he’s your mate.*

*That doesn’t matter*, Elle said dismissively. *I wanted* you *to help me. And since you’re the one who turned me, it makes sense. And it’s the right thing to do. Don’t you think?*

I agreed. Internally, though, I wondered if the reason why Elle had come to me and hadn’t even mentioned Lucian was because she could also feel the bond between us. I didn’t dare ask her about it, though. The last thing I needed was another talk about feelings with her. Better to just ignore the problem.

Hopefully it would eventually go away on its own. Poof.

*I’m worried about Helix*, Elle said next.

Apparently, we were done talking about the other thing, which was fine by me.

*Why are you worried?* I asked, glancing back at Helix. He was a couple of steps behind us, skipping through the forest like he was auditioning for a Disney cartoon.

*I always wanted to be a werewolf*, Elle said. *In fact, Helix used to tease me about it. But I’ve known Helix all my life, and he never expressed any interest in becoming a werewolf.*

I was surprised. *Didn’t Helix say he found an Alpha who agreed to turn him? Clearly, he sought it out.*

*That’s what he* told *us*, Elle said. *But when I asked more questions about it, he was vague.*

*And that worries you?* I asked.

Elle glanced at Helix, who remained obliviously happy.

*I’m worried that he doesn’t really know what he’s become*, Elle said. *And I know my father’s pack won’t let him stay with them. They may not even know that he’s been turned.*

The scent of a brand-new issue tickled my nose. Helix couldn’t become *my* problem, though—I already had enough, thank you universe.

*The wolves will have to sort it out*, I told Elle.

She said nothing. Was she going to ask if Helix could join the Redwood pack? I couldn’t consider that right now. One step at a time, dammit. I had to settle this bullshit with Ranger first, and then join Cali at the summit. Anything beyond that would have to wait.

*What is this place?* Helix mind linked, looking around.

*Three Devils Point*, I replied as we passed through.

And then I stopped moving.

Someone was following us. The scent was familiar. Familiar, and *infuriating*.

A moment later, Lucian stepped out of the trees, his gaze fixed on Elle.

**Episode 3809**

**Xavier**

I swelled with pride as the Samara pack cheered. The Samara pack, with the notable exception of Simon and Jesse, who clapped with all the enthusiasm of funeral directors. Or corpses, which was exactly what I’d turn them into if they kept pushing their luck. They represented two of the votes against me.

But what about the third?

I scanned the crowd, wondering. Screw them all, though—Ava was right. I would make them see the error of their ways and, as more time passed and I proved myself, they’d all fall in line. They’d have no choice.

“Xavier!” Ava called, pulling me out of my thoughts. “You need to make a speech!”

Her bright smile was mesmerizing, but I didn’t allow myself to linger on it for too long. I *did* need to make a speech, after all. I realized I should’ve prepared more for this portion of the ceremony, but I’d been so eager to get through all the rest that it had slipped my mind. Shaking my head to clear it, I braced myself and stepped forward.

The pack immediately settled down, and the knowledge that I had enough of their respect to get that made me feel more confident. It made me feel like *myself*. I’d been born for this.

This was my moment.

“Thank you all for putting your faith in me,” I said. “But this moment shouldn’t be all about me. This is a moment of celebration for the whole Samara pack. You’re stepping out of the shadows created by Silas and Letifer—this is our time to celebrate the greatness that will follow!”

The moment I finished my sentence, the crowd erupted into cheers. Not bad for not having prepared a speech. I locked eyes with Ava, and she smiled and nodded. I hadn’t seen her so happy in years. She looked younger, carefree. Like the version of herself that I’d first fallen for.

My wolf howled in yearning. I broke my eye contact with Ava, my throat dry.

I stared at the crowd again and continued.

“I promise to lead you to your full potential, to give you all I have. I know there are still a few of you who have reservations about me”—I glanced at the idiot puppies, a.k.a. Simon and Jesse—“but I have no doubt you will quickly come to see that I am the Alpha you need. And the other packs will know it too, when we show up to surprise them at the summit.”

More cheers from the crowd, and smiling faces everywhere.

“A toast!” Donovan raised his glass, his voice loud. “To Xavier and the Samara pack!”

“To Xavier and the Samara pack!” everybody shouted, raising their drinks, erupting into enthusiastic roars.

My wolf preened and howled in satisfaction, lapping up their acceptance and admiration. He felt newly connected to this territory and its people, and I felt the same way. I relished the moment, the adulation.

It was what I’d always wanted.

The pack surrounded me, clapping me on the back, welcoming me. Their excitement poured into the air around me. I couldn’t stop myself from smiling. From realizing that I was more than just worthy of being here—I was *lucky* to be here.

When I looked around once more, taking in the pack’s contentment, I was hit by the bittersweetness of it all.

This was my moment, yeah. It was what I’d always wanted—just not the way I’d ever pictured it.

I was Alpha, yes, but not of the Redwood pack. And I wasn’t with Cali. That was the part that was hardest to wrap my head, and heart, around. I had to come to terms with my brand-new reality. A reality where Cali wasn’t with me, but I finally had the thing I’d longed for for so long that it had become my identity.

“To the new Samara Alpha!” Marissa came forward, all smiles. She seemed genuine, at least. She held out a bottle that I recognized as Big Mac’s moonshine. Where the hell had she gotten that? Marissa announced, “I’ve been saving this for a long time!”

She took a big swig and then spat the liquid into the fire, causing flames to explode. The Samaras laughed and clapped, cheering again.

“Here,” Marissa said, handing me the bottle. “Try it out.”

I didn’t tell her that I’d had Big Mac’s moonshine many times, and that something about celebrating this moment with this particular drink felt wrong. But maybe not. Maybe it was a good way to sign off on my ties with the Redwood pack. At least for the time being. Until I evened the score with Adéluce.

In the meantime, I might as well enjoy myself. I refused to think about missing Jay or Kira or anyone else from the Redwood pack house. There was no point in brooding during a time of celebration.

I took a big gulp from the bottle. It burned all the way down, jarring me back into the present.

Right now, I was here.

With the Samaras.

With *my* pack.

With Ava.

“Here you go,” I said, handing her the bottle.

Grinning, she took a swig. Music started playing—upbeat and fun. People were dancing, drinking, having a good time.

Ava was fucking *glowing*.

I could feel the satisfaction rolling off her as she moved through the crowd and talked to everybody. After handing off the bottle to someone else, she returned to me, her eyes fixed on mine, searing in their intensity.

“How does it feel?” she asked.

I couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped me. “Hard to believe.”

She raised her eyebrows and poked my shoulder playfully. “You’d better start believing it soon, because everyone’s putting their faith in you.”

“What about you?” I asked. The question was supposed to be real, but it came off as coy. Flirty. Like I was fishing for attention and compliments and everything Ava had to give. And the truth was, I fucking *wanted* those things from her. No matter how hard I tried to shove down the urge, it was omnipresent, like my wolf’s need.

Ava could tell. She felt it too, and when she leaned toward me, it was to touch my lips with the tips of her fingers. Her voice was husky. “I never doubted you, Xavier. I hope you believe that.”

I saw the fire burning in her eyes. The fire for me, for her pack. It was all there. My wolf sensed it too, restlessness coursing through him. But before I could do or say anything, Ava lowered her hand, took a step back.

“There’s one more thing that needs to be done,” she said softly.

She turned to the others. Now, her voice was loud and full of authority.

“Samaras!” she called. “We must take the pledge of loyalty.”

The music stopped. Ava turned to me. With her gaze fixed on mine, she lowered herself to one knee. The others followed. I noted with satisfaction that Jesse and Simon had begrudgingly dropped to their knees as well. They’d thrown their little tantrums, but they were already falling in line.

If nothing else, I had already united the pack.

“I pledge my loyalty to you, Xavier Evers, Alpha of the Samara pack,” Ava said, staring up at me.

Her gaze was intense, need and devotion radiating off her. I recalled the way she’d submitted to me at the Vanguard palace. Little had I known back then that she would eventually be pledging her loyalty to me as her Alpha.

The rest of the pack pledged in unison, but I couldn’t look away from Ava. She straightened slowly, her body a breath away from mine, her breasts brushing against my arm. I stopped breathing. In the background, the party started up again, music blasting once more, people partying.

But Ava stood there with me.

“What do you want to do?” she asked.

“I want to let them enjoy this moment. I can get serious with them tomorrow,” I said, glancing at the others. Swallowing, I asked, “What do you want to do?”

She smiled sensually. It felt dangerous for my composure.

“I’d like to enjoy this moment too,” she murmured, leaning closer to speak in my ear. “But maybe not with everyone else.”

Her hot breath made the hair on the back of my neck rise. My wolf urged me to grab her, have her. The need got even worse when she touched my hand and brushed against me for a second time in as many minutes.

And then she was off, walking toward the Airstream.

I stood there, watching her—her glossy hair, her narrow waist, her hips, her ass. I pictured her naked underneath me, her eyes trusting, her legs and mouth parted. It was enough to make my wolf growl, commanding me to follow. I couldn’t fight him. I wasn’t sure I even wanted to, anymore.

I wasn’t sure I *could*.

And I hated myself for it.

Ava’s scent called me, teasing, tickling my nose as I followed her. I watched her every move, her every step. It was like my common sense was slowly melting away, and all that was left in me was animal, ready to pounce on her. She reached for the door of the Airstream, long fingers wrapping around the handle—

All sound stopped.

Ava wasn’t moving. Everyone was frozen in place.

“What the *fuck*?” I muttered, looking around.

And then I heard a slow clap. Adéluce stepped out of the raging fire like it was nothing but a door. Sneering, she said, “Congratulations, Alpha.”

**Episode 3810**

The people who would be going to the summit were Rishika, Jay, Lola, Artemis, Big Mac, Ravi, and myself. Ravi was the latest addition, and he’d decided to take his role as Redwood party host pretty seriously.

“I have a spreadsheet,” he told me with a smug grin, gesturing at his laptop.

*I have anxiety*, I wanted to reply. But that felt a bit counterproductive, so I kept my mouth shut. Meanwhile, Rishika was standing in the middle of the room, going over our game plan for the summit. She was full of totally unrelatable—to me—confidence and determination. I saw Artemis sigh dreamily as she stared at her.

“I hate that I can’t come with you guys,” Torin grumbled, peering over Ravi’s shoulder at the computer screen. “If anyone knows how to plan a party, it’s me.”

“That’s true,” Rishika agreed.

“You could totally help me now, though,” Ravi said.

Torin perked up. “Really?”

The two of them high fived, and Ravi said, “Dream team, let’s go! One question, though.”

Torin peered at Ravi. “Shoot.”

Ravi was deadly serious. “Do you know anything about glowsticks?”

I blinked in alarm. In a low voice, I asked Rishika, “Is the summit supposed to be some kind of werewolf rave?”

Rishika frowned at Ravi as he went on to tell Torin—in detail—all about the greatness of glowsticks.

“Cali!” Lola grabbed me by the arm, pulling me aside. “What are you doing right now?”

“Trying to figure out if glowsticks are a good idea for the summit party,” I said.

Lola’s eye twitched. “Are you serious? Stop wasting time here—practice makes perfect! If you want to pass yourself off as a Luna at the summit, you should try acting the part with your own pack first.”

I shot a look at Rishika. She was talking to Artemis and Jay, still looking very imposing. I wondered what it was like, to walk into a room and think, *Fuck if I care what you think of me, I already know I’m great!*

“Greyson put Rishika in charge,” I told Lola. “I don’t want to do anything to undermine her. *And* she’s Artemis’s girlfriend, so I don’t want things to be weird between us.”

“But this is a real opportunity to hone your leadership skills, babe,” Lola insisted.

“By competing with *Rishika*?” I asked incredulously.

“We’re not talking about a competition here, obviously,” Lola said with a snort. “Not even *I* would want to compete with Rishika. But you should talk to her, see how she—”

“But maybe I won’t have to do anything, really,” I blurted out. “Maybe Greyson will make it back before the summit and help me through this.”

Lola gave me a look. “I wouldn’t count on it. Idaho is a bit of a trek. Also, you can’t just lean on Greyson for everything all the time—what about feminism and stuff?”

I frowned. “I’ve had so many near-death experiences lately that I forgot about feminism.” I took a deep breath. “Okay. I *will* ask Rishika. I guess she can give me some pointers.”

“That’s what *I* said!” Lola smiled. “Rishika is a natural-born leader. If things were different, Rishika would make an awesome Alpha.”

“You talking about my amazing girlfriend?” Artemis asked, popping into the conversation.

“Do you think Rishika would have any advice for me about how to present myself as a Luna, despite being a fake?” I asked.

Artemis shrugged. “I suppose there’s only one way to find out.”

She grabbed me by the arm—total unnecessary use of force, but that was Artemis—and dragged me to Rishika.

“I need you to stop obsessing over the glowsticks,” Rishika was saying to Ravi. “There are far more serious issues at play here.” Before Ravi could reply, Rishika looked around the room and spoke up. “I need everyone who’ll be attending the summit to remember the very real threat from the Bitterfangs—that hasn’t gone away, by any means.”

Rishika’s announcement made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. I’d been so preoccupied thinking about the other packs that I’d forgotten all about the Bitterfang pack and Malakai.

*Kira said that the Luna spell multiplies things, but I don’t see your brain cells multiplying, Cali…*

The gravity of the situation finally hit me full force, and I was instantly filled with dread.

“But we can deal with the Bitterfangs,” Rishika added confidently, reminding me of Greyson. Her attitude also made me feel like I was overreacting.

*The Seluna Slayer should not, in theory, act like such a fussy baby.*

*I* was the Seluna Slayer, by the way.

*Wait… Is this an opportunity to rebrand myself?*

Perhaps if I survived the summit.

“Cali is worried about being a fake Luna,” Artemis told her girlfriend. “Do you have any advice for her?”

Rishika shrugged. “My first tip would be to not get killed.”

A line of dead Lunas paraded through my head.

“Something less gloomy would be more helpful,” Artemis told Rishika, her eyebrows arched.

“I’m worried about not seeming authentic,” I said. “We can’t afford to let anyone figure out I’m only pretending.”

Rishika looked me up and down. “In that case, my first suggestion would be to think before you speak.”

I frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that you frequently say whatever pops into your head,” Lola said helpfully.

“I know I’ve been impulsive in the past, but I’d like to think I’m more cautious these days,” I said with a huff.

“And I’d also like to think that my sister, who has survived a million and one bad things, can deal with something so simple,” Artemis said in a firm tone. “Seriously, Cali—you killed Seluna. Stop being afraid of your own shadow.”

“I’ll have you know that my shadow is actually pretty scary when I haven’t brushed my hair—it has serious Medusa vibes,” I told Artemis. “Also, stop judging me! Almost dying a lot changes a person.”

“Maybe you should go to therapy, Cali,” Ravi said from across the room, still googling images of glowsticks.

Torin frowned, crossing his arms over his chest. “Or just not go to the summit. I don’t think it’s good for you to do this if you’re so scared.”

“I’m not *that* scared,” I told Torin. “I do want to go.”

“Cali’s going to the summit,” Lola declared. “The pack needs her. She’s a badass. Everyone else at the summit will be beneath her.”

I choked. “Okay, that escalated quickly—”

“BOTTOM LINE,” Rishika said loudly, interrupting all our conversations. “Cali, I need you to focus, and remember one thing.”

I swallowed nervously. “That glowsticks are unnecessary?”

“Yes,” Rishika said. “But also that everyone will be watching you, looking for reactions, measuring you up. The Alphas will all do it to each other, and so will the Lunas. Just make sure you’re on your best behavior.”

I nodded, processing her words. “That makes sense. So, like you said, I’ll have to think before I speak, be aware that all eyes are on me, and basically not make a fool of myself.”

“And whatever you do, don’t give anyone reason to doubt you,” Rishika added.

“What does *that* mean?”

“You shouldn’t do anything that could seem out of place,” Rishika said.

Lola scoffed. “What could she possibly do that would be out of place? Cali is super well-adjusted! And she can be savvy, when she puts her mind to it.”

“I mean, that would take some effort…” I trailed off.

“Since you’ve decided that you’ll be coming with us to the summit,” Rishika said seriously, “you need to come with the motivation to do your best. It’s bad enough that you’re not a werewolf, so anything you do will be met with reservations from the other packs. So just… make smart choices.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Smart choices?”

Rishika raised an eyebrow right back at me. “Didn’t you ever hear that saying growing up?”

I nodded.

“Well, that’s it—that’s my best advice,” Rishika said. “Make smart choices. And if anything happens, don’t worry—we’ve got your back.”

“Make smart choices and try not to get killed, right?” I said with a nervous chuckle. “Getting killed is exactly what I’m hoping to avoid… Though I’m sure Malakai has other plans.”

“Cali, come on,” Artemis said, “you need to have more faith in us! You’re not going there helpless and alone—we’ll be there, and you know how to use your magic.”

“Try not to get worked up,” Jay said in that soothing way of his. “Yes, Malakai will be there, but this isn’t some grudge match. This is a summit—a chance for the packs to get together. Nobody coming to this thing will be looking for trouble.”

I scoffed. Loudly.

“Okay,” Jay said, “maybe Malakai will be looking for trouble, but he’ll be the exception. We have the alliance, and the council will be there too, keeping an eye on things. Avoiding pack wars is *literally* why the council was formed.”

“That all makes sense,” I muttered. “But there’s one thing that’s still bothering me.”

“What?” Lola asked.

“If we have an alliance,” I said, “then how do we know the Bitterfangs don’t have one too?”

**Episode 3811**

**Xavier**

My eyes locked with Adéluce’s, and my wolf roared with fury and despair.

No. Fucking *no*.

I wouldn’t let her ruin this.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I snarled.

The vampire-witch smiled. “Why are you surprised to see me, Xavier? Don’t you know by now that I’m always watching you?” She took a step closer, eyeing me up and down with the kind of derision that poisoned my insides with acid. “*Werewolves*. Dumb dogs, always so entertaining.”

Adéluce didn’t break eye-contact, didn’t even fucking move. And then In the blink of an eye, she was gone. Whirling around, I spotted Adéluce, standing by the Airstream next to Ava, who was still frozen in place. The vampire-witch studied Ava, her expression curious. Almost like she was a scientist, and the rest of us only existed to be part of her experiment.

“I have to admit, this girl is a beauty,” Adéluce said, her cold gaze pinned to Ava’s face. “You always seem to fall for the pretty ones.” Her voice lowered yet became ten times more menacing. The moment it dropped, her fangs did as well. “I have a feeling Ava’s blood isn’t quite as sweet as her appearance suggests, though…”

My wolf howled. In agony, in fear.

He was terrified for Ava, and at the realization, my urge to decimate and destroy took over. I took a step back, preparing to lunge at Adéluce and stomp on her fucking head—

Adéluce grabbed Ava by the throat.

“Not so fast, Xavier,” she said mockingly. “Give this some thought. Are you willing to sacrifice another mate during your feeble attempts to reunite with another one?”

My wolf froze.

I felt like I’d been stabbed in the heart.

Because as much as I wanted to return to Cali, I would never sacrifice Ava in the process. I was well past that kind of thing now. Regardless, I knew that this whole thing was a game for Adéluce.

Ava deserved better.

And as shameful and fucking humiliating as it was to admit, there was no guarantee that I would even succeed in killing Adéluce. The vampire-witch had proven time and time again that she was hard to wound, much less destroy.

“That’s what I thought,” Adéluce said coldly. She relaxed her grip on Ava, offering me a sharp, bloodthirsty smile. “Why don’t you shift back so we can talk, Xavier? All that fur makes things feel so… savage.”

She was toying with me. I was the prey to her predator. I was the animal she wanted to humiliate. To her, I wasn’t an Alpha. The reality of it all made me feel so acidic on the inside that I didn’t know what to do with it. Yet, when she had her hands on Ava, I had no choice but to follow her orders. It was the same position I was already in. I had to do everything Adéluce said.

When I shifted back to human, I kept one hand partially shifted, just in case.

“Why are you here?” I asked Adéluce gruffly.

Maybe I could stall her. Maybe the magic required to keep all these people frozen would eventually drain her, if I could just get her talking.

It was wishful thinking, but that was all I fucking had right now.

“I’m surprised how quickly you came running back to your first love,” Adéluce said, her gaze back on Ava. “I actually feel like Ava is a better fit for you. Cali never really measured up, did she?”

“Don’t talk about her!” I hissed.

Adéluce didn’t even flinch. She looked around, at the people, at the campsite, before speaking again. “How long has it been since you left the Redwoods? You’ve already managed to become Alpha of a different pack. You work very quickly for someone who’s supposed to be heartbroken.”

My wolf growled. I did, too. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

She laughed. “Don’t I?” She eyed Ava. “Do you think about Cali when you’re kissing Ava? Is Ava just a body for you to use? I can’t help but feel that she deserves better than to be treated like an object… Or a means to an end.”

I didn’t speak. I couldn’t. The guilt was white-hot, searing through me. I felt sick. It was what Adéluce wanted.

“I suppose this was the only natural outcome, though,” Adéluce said with a shrug. Her index finger, her long, sharp fingernail, slid across Ava’s collarbones. “Ava is Cali’s replacement, because that’s all she can be right now. After all, you can’t go back to Cali. You can’t tell her why you left her, or why you’re pretending to be happy with Ava, playing at being Samara Alpha.” She turned to me, her eyes gleaming. “What a farce.”

“Leave Cali out of this,” I growled, stepping forward.

Adéluce laughed, the sound painfully shrill. “You still don’t get it, do you?”

I never saw her move. And suddenly, *I* couldn’t move.

In the blink of an eye, Adéluce’s hand was around my throat, squeezing, her fangs pressed against my neck. The smell of death surrounded me, chilling and fucking *suffocating*. Her breath reeked of it when she whispered in my ear. “Your suffering is only just beginning, Xavier. Have no fear, there’s plenty more in store for you.”

Her grip tightened. Her fangs pierced my skin.

And still, I couldn’t move. My wolf howled and roared, but I was trapped. Once again, I was nothing but a weak animal.

“Go ahead,” I hissed. “Drain my blood. I don’t fucking care anymore.”

I wasn’t lying. Not entirely. I *did* care, but I also couldn’t stand this.

The mockery.

The humiliation.

I knew one thing, though: if Adéluce killed me, she would have no reason to go after Cali. Or Ava. Or Greyson. Or any of the packs.

If I died, this nightmare would be over for all of us.

But Adéluce just laughed. “You’re such a terrible liar, Xavier. I know you want to live—your soul screams for it! What purpose would killing you serve?”

“I—”

She squeezed my neck harder. My breath caught.

“There’s no suffering for the dead,” she hissed, “only for the living they leave behind. Killing you would be a relief, but I’m not here to ease your pain—I’m here to see you cooked alive by your guilt and agony.”

“I’ll cook *you* alive before that happens,” I snarled.

Her eyes gleamed once more. “It’s too late for that, boy…” She moved her mouth to my ear. Her words were a terrifying whisper. “Your fall from grace has already begun. This is exactly what I wanted you to do. You fell *right into my trap*.”

There was pain, then, in my neck—skin breaking, blood flowing, Adéluce was biting into me like I was nothing but meat. Not a real person. Only her fucking toy.

And then, she was gone.

“Woohoo!”

Suddenly, someone was shouting. People were dancing and laughing, and music filled the air again. The party. It had started back up, even as I stumbled forward and clutched at my neck.

Ava stared at me, frowning. “Are you okay?”

I looked down at myself. One of my hands was still partially shifted. My other was still wet with the blood from my neck where Adéluce had bitten me.

I stared at Ava*. Did you see what happened?* I wanted to ask. But I couldn’t find the words. The curse wasn’t going to let me. The blood on my neck was real, though—Adéluce had to have been here. I hadn’t imagined the horror.

“Are you coming in?” Ava asked, opening the Airstream door.

My throat was dry, just like the blood in my hands.

“I—I need a drink,” I mumbled, backing away.

Ava’s expression was filled with surprise before a flash of pain—of rejection—crossed her face. I couldn’t deal with that right now. I couldn’t even fucking look at her.

I made my way back to the party, ignoring the congratulations, the claps on the back. I grabbed a beer and downed it, hoping it would wash away the turmoil I felt inside.

It didn’t fucking work.

Adéluce’s words echoed in my head, and my jaw clenched. The things she’d said… How could I possibly believe that she’d planned all this? She’d pushed me away from Cali, sure, but she hadn’t forced me to come to the Samara pack, to Ava.

“… tomorrow, Xavier? What do you say?”

Someone was talking to me. My gaze flicked to the figure before me—Geraint. He had questions, thoughts about my being Alpha.

I wanted to fucking bury myself in a hole.

“Not now,” I told him, walking away.

I grabbed another beer and made a beeline for the Airstream, because where the fuck else was I supposed to go after being sworn in as Samara Alpha?

I felt broken down, empty and fucking horrible, and it got even worse when I reached for the door and found it locked. I banged on it. No answer. I could sense Ava on the other side, though. What the *hell*?

“Ava?” I called. “What’s going on?”

Her voice was barely audible through the door. “Did you only use me to become Alpha?”

**Episode 3812**

**Greyson**

This was fucking ridiculous. With everything else that was going on, Lucian’s timing couldn’t have been worse. Of course, his timing was *never* good, because I never actually wanted to see him, but this was particularly poor timing. Even for him.

*What do we do?* Elle asked me.

*I’ll deal with him*, I told her, moving to stand in front of her and Helix.

Lucian’s eyes narrowed when he was deprived of the ability to leer at Elle.

*Greyson*, Lucian said. *It’s a fine day, don’t you think?*

Sometimes, I felt like I deserved an award for my patience.

*What are you doing here, Lucian?* I snapped.

Lucian’s wolf made a disgruntled noise. *That’s not a very welcoming greeting for an ally! I thought we were friends.*

Patience awards. So many. I deserved them all.

*I’m not in the mood for games, Lucian, and you’re obviously eager to play*, I said. *Just answer my question. Why. Are. You. Here?*

Lucian sat back on his haunches. *How do you know our meeting isn’t a coincidence?*

I scoffed mentally. *Don’t underestimate my intellect*. *I don’t believe in coincidences when you’re involved.*

*I don’t understand your accusation*, Lucian said. *This isn’t Redwood territory. Three Devils Point doesn’t belong to you. I have just as much a right to be here as you do.*

*You still haven’t answered my question*, I growled.

Lucian ignored me. Stepping to the side, he got Elle in his eyeline again and spoke. *My darling Elle, always a pleasure to see you.*

*I know*, was her flat reply.

I’d have laughed under different circumstances.

Lucian was, of course, undeterred. *Who is the young man with you, dear?*

I got ready to tell the asshole that it was none of his fucking business—

*I am Helix!*

Helix had introduced himself. Helpful.

*It’s funny how you seem to attract all these young werewolves, Greyson*,Lucian said. He looked both amused and suspicious. So that was fucking great.

*It must be something in the water*, I replied dryly.

Lucian laughed. My urge to murder kept rising.

*We have to go*, Elle blurted out.

Lucian stopped mid-cackle, his eyes narrowing. *Do you, now? And where are you going in such a hurry?*

Lucian was on a fishing expedition, and I simply didn’t have time for it.

*Elle’s right*, I said. *We have to go—*

*To Idaho!* Helix offered.

Fucking hell mother*fuck*.

*That’s enough*, I snapped at Helix.

He blinked at me, alarmed.

The sudden silence between the four of us was deafening. Lucian broke it to say, *Idaho? Perhaps I should accompany you—I hear good things about the potatoes there.*

Potatoes were nice. Because they came from the ground. Which was where I, as a general rule, wanted to bury Lucian. I opened my mouth to tell him that we didn’t need him to escort us anywhere, ever, but then Elle spoke up.

*You shouldn’t come with us, Lucian*, she said. *I promise to see you when I return.*

*Promise?* Lucian’s wolf almost fucking yipped. *I like the sound of that! We still have much to learn about each other, after all.*

*We do*, she said. *Just not now. Later.*

I didn’t like the sound of any of this, obviously. Elle getting sucked back into her infatuation with the princeling would be horrible for many reasons—foremost among which was the fact that Lucian was a werewolf-shaped narcissistic son of a bitch. Also, the thought of him touching her made me physically ill.

Truly, viscerally ill.

*I look forward to spending time with the Redwood pack at the summit*, Lucian said, turning to me. *It should be a grand time, don’t you think?*

I gave him a sarcastic sneer*. Can’t wait*.

I nodded at Helix, who hadn’t spoken a word since I’d snapped at him. I felt bad about it, but this was better than him running his mouth.

*Let’s go*, I said, catching up with Elle. Helix was a couple of steps behind.

As we continued forward, I kept looking over my shoulder to make sure Lucian wasn’t following. Bringing him into the situation with Elle’s father and Ranger would do nothing but create a mess. An even *bigger* mess. And I already had too much on my plate. Elle, the summit…

Now that I thought about it, I realized that Elle might as well come to the summit with me after the Idaho situation had been dealt with. We were going to be a long way from home, and I didn’t like the idea of her traveling back to the pack house with only Helix for company. Not with Lucian lurking out there. If Rishika or Ravi or Jay had been escorting her, that would’ve been a different story, but the way things were, the only solution would be to return her myself. But if I had to do that, I’d be extra late to the summit, and Cali was already unhappy about this whole situation. I couldn’t make it worse.

Bringing Elle to the summit with me looked like the best option, even if it was less than ideal. Elle was still new to werewolves—she would have many questions—and, of course, Lucian would be there. I could just imagine him putting more pressure on Elle to accept his ridiculous proposal. I could also imagine myself struggling to ignore his posturing.

Elle watched him fondly, but all I could think was that Helix was going to be yet another problem. If his old pack didn’t let him stick around, what would I do? The young wolf had already almost blown it by telling Lucian we were going to Idaho. He couldn’t be trusted to keep his mouth shut at the summit. But the alternative was—what? Abandoning him in the woods to fend for himself?

Perhaps that was a bit dramatic, but my point still stood. How the hell did I get myself in these kinds of situations, anyway? It felt like there was an adorable, vaguely problematic stray banging on my door every other day, asking for my help.

Though I was the one who’d brought Elle into this, so I couldn’t complain.

*Do you think Lucian will follow?* Elle asked me.

*I sure as fuck hope not*, I thought. What I told Elle, though, was, *I don’t think so.*

*That’s good*, she said.

We continued to run in silence, but my mind wouldn’t shut up. I wondered if Elle *wanted* Lucian to follow us. Now that would’ve been a fucking treat… I shot her a look. She seemed normal, like herself, and I was—

Being weird.

It was weird that I wanted so badly to keep Elle away from Lucian.

But was it, really? Lucian was the creepiest guy I knew. It would’ve been weirder if I’d actually *wanted* her to engage with him. I had to protect her for a million reasons—as her Alpha, and her… maker? Sire?

Both options sounded weird.

This bond I felt with her was *more.* And also weird.

*What do you plan to do about Helix?* Elle asked suddenly.

She must’ve been thinking about asking me this question for at least fifteen minutes. That would’ve been just like her—quiet and astute; far more so than we gave her credit for.

*I’m not sure*, I replied honestly.

*Are you planning to bring me to the summit?* she asked.

It was like she was reading my mind.

*I don’t have much choice*, I told her. *We’ll basically be there already—it just makes sense.*

Elle fell quiet again. I wondered what would come out of her mouth next. Because she definitely wasn’t done talking—I could just feel the vibes. Of astuteness.

*Helix shouldn’t come to the summit*, she said suddenly. *He’s not ready.*

I was glad to see that, once again, her assessment of the situation was sane.

*What do you think we should do with him?*

*I don’t think we can leave him with my old pack*,she said. *He’s a werewolf now. But he can’t come to the summit…*

So the idea of sending him into the woods to fend for himself was starting to look good?

*We can think about what to do with Helix after we help your father*, I said.

Elle nodded.

Just then, Helix bellowed, *Fog!*

He ran forward, and I realized what he meant. He was talking about the fog that had slowly enveloped us. It was unexpectedly way worse up ahead.

*Helix, slow down!* I said as he scampered ahead, disappearing from view. This was bad—we were approaching one of the highways, and I wanted that damn puppy next to me. I mind linked him again. *Come back here; it’s dangerous!*

*Can’t come back*, he replied. He was no longer excited. *Can’t—can’t see!*

He was right. Werewolf eyesight couldn’t penetrate fog this dense—not even mine.

*Helix, stop moving!* I said. *Wherever you are, stay put and wait for us!*

*Helix, stop!* Elle sounded worried. At least *she* knew to stay close. *Listen to Greyson!*

Helix didn’t reply. I could hear him panting up ahead, like he was still running. Like he was panicked and couldn’t figure which way was which. Elle and I were running behind him, and I fought to catch his scent through the moisture of the fog.

*Helix, just stop moving!* I said. *Stay in one place, so we can find you!*

Suddenly, I felt the shoulder of the highway beneath my paws.

I heard a car approaching.

The sound was followed by a blaring horn, a loud screech, and a sickening thud.

**Episode 3813**

“It’s possible that the Bitterfangs have formed their own alliance, but not very likely,” Jay said. “Malakai’s views are so extreme that I can’t see him finding willing partners.”

Lola scoffed. “Hah! Sometimes, you can think you’ve found the absolute worst version of something, but I promise, there’s always something much worse waiting around the corner.”

Jay stared at Lola. “Do you really think that’s helping your friend?”

“Yikes, you’re right!” Lola said with a wince, turning to me. “Sorry.”

I cleared my throat. “It’s fine.” It wasn’t fine. “But what are you saying, here? That there are going to be more Malakais for me to meet at the summit?”

“No,” Lola said. “Just that there are probably a few packs as evil and twisted as the Bitterfangs.”

Jay sighed deeply.

“Come on, babe!” Lola said defensively. “I can’t lie to my best friend!”

“You did lie to me about losing my favorite sports bra, though,” I grumbled.

“That was because Jay tore it off me,” Lola said.

Jay blushed. I cringed.

“See?” Lola said, pointing between us. “Honesty!”

“*Anyway*,” Rishika said loudly, “Lola has a point about evil packs. Evil packs do exist, just like evil people. But we shouldn’t stress over it”—she said that with the coolness of a person who didn’t stress over things—“because we have a plan in place, and no matter who is or isn’t allied with the Bitterfangs, we will be prepared.”

*I* was not prepared, obviously. But despite my millions of negative feelings about going to the summit as a fake Luna, with Malakai (and possibly his friends) hanging out in the sidelines, I realized that it would probably be good to take a break from fretting.

It would be better if I used this nervous energy to actually *prepare* for this highly stressful situation. Greyson was right, and Lola was right—we weren’t leaving for a few days, and I could use that time to my benefit. Who knew what magic skills I could learn?

I’d be happy with just one.

*Small victories! I’ll take them!*

I turned to Artemis. “Have you seen Adair?”

Artemis narrowed her eyes at me. “What are you up to?”

“I want to cram some training in before my fake Luna debut,” I said.

“Good idea,” Artemis said. “Can I come along? I could help you, too.”

I used to be intimidated and jealous of Artemis’s fighting and magic skills. I wanted to believe that I could put that behind me, though. Now, having Artemis train with me would raise the bar, make me want to work harder. And if I was lucky, and if I tried hard enough, perhaps some of Artemis’s skills would rub off on me.

“Let’s go find Adair,” Artemis said.

We found him in the kitchen with Torin. I had no idea when Torin had left Ravi’s company, but it had apparently been long enough for him to corner Adair.

“Some of the herbs are milder in the human world, but others are richer, elevated in such a way that makes the palate dance!” Torin was saying, his hands flailing. “Don’t you agree? You’ve eaten food in both the Fae world and the human world—what do you think? What’s your favorite human spice?”

“No,” Adair said flatly.

Torin offered a confused smile. “No, you don’t agree, or no, you don’t have a favorite spice?”

Adair stared at Torin like he’d have taken open-heart surgery over continuing with this conversation.

“Ahem.” I cleared my throat. “Sorry to interrupt you two, but we were wondering if Adair had some time right now to train with us outside? It won’t take long, just—”

“Yes,” Adair said in a way that sounded almost relieved (by his standards).

He walked past Torin and toward Artemis and me. As the three of us headed outside—Artemis and me grabbing our coats from the hallway—Torin called after us, “Fae herbs is superior! You know I’m right!”

“You’re right, Torin!” Artemis called back while we hovered by the exit.

Adair gave Artemis a look.

“What?” Artemis said defensively. “Torin’s so nice. And he *is* right about the oregano.”

Adair sighed deeply, shaking his head. He walked out first, his cape of a coat flaring behind him.

“*So* dramatic,” I muttered to Artemis.

Snickering, we followed him.

When we got outside, Adair turned to face us. “You two should warm up with some hand-to-hand combat before you delve into magic,” he announced.

“Artemis is a far more experienced fighter than me, Adair.” I frowned. “Are you doing this because I called you dramatic? Is this payback?”

Adair looked shocked. Then his eyes narrowed. “You called me *what*?”

“Nothing,” I blurted out, flushing. “Nothing, you’re great—hand-to-hand combat, I can do that.”

That was highly debatable. But *technically*,I had trained in hand-to-hand combat in the past, with Lola, with Artemis, with Rishika. So I wasn’t completely clueless. Besides, I’d decided that I was going to work on myself. I wasn’t going to back down, and I couldn’t let Greyson down. If I was going to be his Luna—if only for a few days—I needed to project that I was a far better fighter than I currently was. I couldn’t always rely on my magic alone.

Artemis smirked at me. “Ready, little sis?”

“Ready,” I said under my breath, raising my fists.

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I was *not* ready. That was made very clear the first time I was slammed into the snowy ground. Then the second time. But I actually bounced back up easily, and we kept going. I didn’t ask for a break or anything—I was pleasantly surprised by myself, but also not really. I knew how stubborn I was.

“Artemis, turn around, don’t look. Cali, try to do it like this,” Adair said.

He demonstrated how to evade and punch in a different way. The next time I tried the move on Artemis, she actually stumbled backward, and, with a kick to her stomach, I threw her to the ground.

I laughed. “Oh my god, I did it!”

Panting, heart pounding, I held out my hand to help Artemis to her feet.

“Good work, kid.” She grinned up at me, clearly pleased. “Let’s go again.”

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Hand-to-hand combat wasn’t completely horrible, now that I was getting the hang of it. The most annoying thing about it, though, was how much my body was starting to hurt. I was definitely going to have a few bruises tomorrow.

“Getting tired?” Artemis teased, her fists still raised.

Scoffing, I ducked when she went for my stomach and threw a counterpunch.

I nailed Artemis right on the chin.

*Shit!*

Artemis grunted and dropped to her knees.

I gasped. “Artemis! Oh my god, are you okay? I’m so sorry!”

Artemis rubbed her chin, looking up at me. “Not bad.”

She hopped back up.

One second, I was looking at her face, and the next, I was on my back, looking up at the sky. She’d swiped my legs out from under me.

“Having fun?” Artemis grinned down at me, sticking her head into my line of sight.

“How did you do that?” I asked. “I want to do that!”

I got up quickly, and instead of telling me how to do it, Artemis just knocked me down again.

“Artemis,” Adair said sternly.

“I’m just trying to show her!” Artemis said with a huff.

She really was trying her best, so I paid more attention. By the sixth time, I figured out how to evade the move. By the tenth, I actually managed to swipe Artemis’s legs out from under *her*.

“You totally let me do that!” I said, nudging her.

She snorted. “I’m not that charitable.”

Even though my whole body was hurting, I was feeling much more confident.

“Okay, enough,” Adair said loudly. “Fighting hand-to-hand is just a warm up—it’s time to incorporate some magic. Some adversaries rely on physical combat only, but others add in magic as well. We need to focus on that now.”

I swallowed nervously. “But what if I accidentally blast Artemis? You know I have trouble being precise with my magic. I can only go big and make everything explode.”

Artemis scoffed. “You’re not going to blow me up, Cali. I’ll just dodge.”

“Just try to use your shield for now; play defense,” Adair told me. “Artemis will use her magic arrows on you.”

That was the right play, of course, and I really didn’t want to accidentally use more force and hurt Artemis. But I wished that *I* could go on the offensive. I wished that I could be good at something for once—and have a cool weapon like Artemis.

“Are you ready?” Artemis asked.

If I failed, Artemis would blast me with a blazing arrow, which didn’t sound like fun. But Adair was watching—I assumed he wouldn’t let me die.

*Even if his constantly annoyed expression says otherwise…*

“Ready,” I said with a nod, steadying myself as I faced Artemis. I watched as she summoned her bow, light glimmering everywhere—

A different kind of light flickered to my left.

*What? Is that a* wisp*?*

Before I could turn to look, Artemis loosed a magic arrow, and it shot right toward me.

**Episode 3814**

**Xavier**

“Did you only use me to become Alpha?”

Ava’s question shot through me. For a moment I was paralyzed, the feeling similar to when Adéluce forced me into immobility. Only now, it wasn’t magic that had struck me—it was guilt. *Had I* done all this just to become Alpha?

No.

It was far more complicated than that.

“Ava,” I said. “Where is this coming from? Open the door so we can talk.”

I kept my voice as low as possible—fully aware of how it would look to the pack if Ava and I were seen fighting two seconds after I became Alpha. I hated the idea of letting down the people who’d voted for me—namely, the entire Samara pack, with the exception of three people. Three negative votes.

My plan had been to win those three votes over, not have a blowup with Ava and lose *more* people. Ava kicking me out of the Airstream was a surefire way to start things off on the wrong foot. But if Adéluce hadn’t been lying—if my becoming Samara Alpha had been her plan all along, and I’d walked right into her trap—then what the fuck was the point of anything?

I had to admit, the vampire-witch was right about my conflicted emotions. Would I end up causing my own internal torture? Was it already happening? It sure felt like it. There was something triumphant yet painful about being here without Cali. It felt like by becoming Samara Alpha, I was betraying her a second time. And Ava asking me if I’d used her only made me feel worse.

And the door stayed shut, Ava keeping herself away from me.

“Ava…” My voice was a whisper. “Open the door.”

If my becoming Samara Alpha had indeed been Adéluce’s intention all along, I’d have to start seriously worrying about Ava. But I couldn’t just fucking walk away from the Samaras, for a million and one reasons. I was their Alpha now, and there was no guarantee that Adéluce wouldn’t harm Ava or her pack just to torture me. I just had to keep going through the motions.

I had to keep going if I wanted any hope of stopping Adéluce one day.

I was trapped. I’d dragged Ava down with me by being with her, and this was all wrong.

But what the fuck was the *right* choice, under these horrible circumstances?

“Ava,” I whispered again, knocking on the door. “I need to talk to you.”

Even if I wasn’t in love with Ava, I didn’t want her to feel like I’d used her in any way. Because even though I didn’t necessarily want to be with Ava, I did care about her. I knew for a fact that I’d fucking lose it if Adéluce hurt her to get to me. I cared what Ava thought about me, and I cared about what happened to the Samaras.

*Fuck.*

“What do I need to do to get you to open this door and talk to me?” I asked. My voice was louder now, the hole inside my chest filling with agitation. I could feel eyes on me, on my back, but I ignored it all.

Finally, I heard the lock clicking.

Ava opened the door. She looked simultaneously pouty and pissed off. My wolf stirred at the sight, but I shoved him down. The motherfucker wasn’t helping matters.

“Fine,” Ava grumbled, stepping aside.

I walked in. The tiny Airstream was filled with her scent. It was like a punch in the gut, but I ignored that, too.

“Well?” she asked, crossing her arms. “What did you want to say?”

“Do you really believe I would do all this just to become Alpha?” I asked. “That I’d lie to you and say that I care about you just to manipulate you into helping me?”

Ava looked away. Her posture and silence spoke volumes. My guilt was ever-present, getting worse by the second, but what the fuck was I supposed to do? I couldn’t tell her the truth, and I couldn’t leave. It was seeming increasingly likely that Adéluce really had let me become Samara Alpha just to torture me.

But I couldn’t think that way. I would lose my mind if I did.

I would lose Ava.

In this chaos of lies and feelings and denial and having two mates, I knew that in order to retain some of my sanity, I’d have to grab onto everything that felt *true*. And this moment, with Ava, was true. The way my wolf called for her was as real as could be. So, I was going to try. I was going to try to convince Ava—and myself—that I was in this place because I wanted to be.

To hell with Adéluce and her grand scheme.

“This whole thing is new to us both,” I said quietly. “It’ll probably take a little time for us to fully trust each other. But the fact is, I’m here, I’m the Alpha, and I’m with you. I do care about you, Ava. I want you to know that I’m here for you.”

She swallowed, meeting my eyes. Her heated gaze made the back of my neck burn.

“What else do you want?” she asked.

That was a loaded question. I wasn’t—I *couldn’t* *be*—in love with Ava, but my wolf wanted her. He was screaming in my head. But was it a cry of pain for Cali, or of hunger for Ava? Was it all one and the same, and so utterly fucked up that I had no hope?

I couldn’t tell.

I stared into Ava’s eyes. She looked both vulnerable and powerful. Dangerous. She always felt dangerous to me. But that didn’t mean that I didn’t want to protect her. She deserved it.

“I want it all,” I said, reaching for her arm.

She didn’t let me touch her, evading my grip. “All? What does that mean?”

I wished I could explain. I wished I could tell her I was being fully honest, but I couldn’t. Again, I clung to the bits and pieces of truth that I could find in this situation.

“I won’t do anything to hurt you or the Samara pack,” I said carefully. That was true. “I’m here with you because I want to be.” Also true.

“I know you’ve always wanted to be Alpha, and I’ve encouraged you for as long as we’ve known each other,” Ava said quietly. “We’ve danced around how I’m going to fit into your ascension. I know that we both agreed to take this one step at a time, but…”

“But what?”

“But it’s hard for me to do that when all I want is to be with you.”

Her words left me breathless.

My wolf howled, clawing at my insides. Needing more.

“We’ve been through so much to get here, Xavier,” Ava whispered, taking a step closer to me. Her scent was the biggest fucking tease. “I’m not asking you to say you love me. But I need to know that this is real and not some ploy to—”

“It’s not a ploy,” I said. “I’m not a fucking monster.”

I hoped I wasn’t.

I hoped I wouldn’t become one.

I hoped I would come out of this alive and in one piece.

I hoped Cali and Ava would, too.

“I just need to know if this is real,” Ava said quietly.

Her vulnerable gaze made me feel raw. Hooked. Because I *was* hooked on Ava. Because no matter how much I missed Cali, no matter how much I *loved* Cali, Ava was still my mate. I didn’t want to feel this way about her, but it was undeniable, and it was true. It was the one true thing among a million lies and traps.

I couldn’t tell Ava that I loved her, though, because I didn’t. Not the same way she loved me. I used to doubt her feelings, but I wasn’t able to anymore. The way she’d helped me with the Samaras, the way she believed in me, the way she’d been there for me for a while, now—Ava was rock solid. And right now, she was my anchor.

She moved closer and glanced at my mouth, then down my chest. I knew she could feel my wolf and the way he felt for her. To him, Ava was a necessity. She was the only thing keeping him going right now after we had lost Cali. My wolf had once completely fallen apart because we’d lost Ava—because I’d killed her. He’d resented me, left me. And Cali had brought him back. Now he was more confused than ever, clinging to what we both had left.

“This thing between us… It *is* real, isn’t it?” she whispered.

“It’s real,” I said. The words made my throat constrict, my neck itch. I unconsciously touched the side of it, and Ava’s eyes widened.

She gasped. “You’re bleeding!”

Flinching, I withdrew my hand from my neck, but it was too late.

Ava’s eyes narrowed, and she stepped closer. “Why do you have a vampire bite, Xavier?”

**Episode 3815**

**Greyson**

*Helix!* Elle screamed, already running toward the source of the sound. I blocked her path to the road. I hoped Helix hadn’t been hit by a car *again*. I hoped no humans had been harmed.

I hoped this whole thing could end well without any more goddamn *drama*.

*Let me go first*, I told Elle.

Shaking, she slowed down and nodded. I hated seeing her like this. Clenching my jaw hard enough to hurt, I cautiously led Elle across the road. I tried to see through the blanket of fog, but it was so thick it was pointless. I had to use my other senses to navigate. I heard the sound of wheels spinning, and then I smelled oil. A moment later, the car came into view. Its crumpled hood was wrapped around a tree.

Helix was on the other side of the car, untouched. There were people inside the car, cushioned from harm by the deployed airbags. I sniffed the air for blood and didn’t find any traces of it. Relief flooded me. They were okay.

“… we crashed trying to avoid a bear or something!” One of the humans was talking on the phone. “It was huge, like—” The human’s gaze connected with mine. His shaky voice turned into a scream. “And now we’re surrounded by wolves! Really, really big wolves!”

*We have to get out of here*, I said to Elle.

I ran around the car while the humans screamed.

*Follow us!* I told Helix.

I led him and Elle back into the woods, none of us speaking. I’d expected Helix to be jittery or apologetic or something, but nope. I thought he’d sounded panicked earlier because he hadn’t been able to see through the fog. Yet when I looked at him now, he seemed… excited? What the actual fuck?

When we put some distance between us and the road, I came to a halt and spun around to face Helix, unable to control my anger.

*Why did you run off ahead without permission?* I demanded.

Helix blinked at me. *The land clouds—*

*They’re called fog*, I snapped. *And you might be new to being a werewolf, but you were still a wolf, beforehand—you* know *what fog is. You know that it’s dangerous because we can’t see!*

Helix actually shrugged. *Shrugged*.

I was going to lose it.

*We’re here to help Elle’s father*, I snapped, stepping closer to him, *but you just wasted time for no reason!*

Helix huffed. *I am the reason why you know Elle’s father is in trouble in the first place! If I did not—*

*The only reason you’re here with us is because I allowed it*, I declared. *And I only did that because you agreed to let me lead. If you’d rather get run over by a car because you can’t follow basic orders, then get out of here and go be reckless somewhere else.*

Helix looked down, grumbling. *I already got hit by a car. It is not a big deal.*

*You could’ve hurt the humans in the car*, I snapped. *You could’ve killed someone, and for what? Just to play? None of this is a game!*

Helix fell silent, glaring at the ground. Elle’s wolf felt anxious. I fucking hated it.

*You have a lot to learn, Helix*,I said. *No werewolf is invincible, and we don’t reveal ourselves to humans for no reason.* I glanced at Elle again. *If you really want to help Elle’s father, you need to keep your mouth shut, stay close, and listen to every word I say. Can you do that?*

I hadn’t expected Helix to show this amount of insubordination. It alarmed me on a visceral level. But at least the kid was looking down, clearly submitting—at least for the moment.

Finally, he nodded. *Yes*.

*Follow me*, I said, glancing between him and Elle. *We’ve already wasted enough time.*

Elle hadn’t said a word, but I could feel the frustration rolling off her. Frustration, concern, and other emotions—none of them good. She didn’t try to talk to Helix, though, and he shut up as well. Thankfully.

Elle’s questions about what we were going to do with Helix after we’d helped her father returned to my head. If Helix disobeyed orders in the name of mindless fun again, the answer would be clear. He would have to fend for himself.

I decided to change our route and aim for a higher elevation, just to deal with the fog. It eased up a bit as we moved forward, and I pressed ahead. I’d hoped to reach Idaho before nightfall, but now, I wasn’t so sure if that was going to happen.

The moment we started down a slope, the fog started thickening again, a milky, cold, damp blanket that covered the valley before us. *Dammit*. It wasn’t supernatural—at least I didn't think so—but it was still something I was going to have to contend with. I weighed our options. We could change our route again to cover more ground, but if the fog continued like this, we’d have to spend the night somewhere in the woods until it cleared.

If I’d been traveling alone, I would’ve pushed through and navigated the fog. I’d done it before—I had plenty of experience dealing with bad weather. But right now, I was responsible for Elle and Helix, and adding two young werewolves to the mix would only make things more complicated. Especially when I didn’t trust Helix to obey my orders.

As we continued down the route I picked—one that was definitely taking more time to navigate due to the fog—I thought about Cali. The fog was a setback I hadn’t anticipated. I didn’t like the idea of arriving late to the summit.

Cali had been worried about arriving alone. And even though I knew she could handle it, that she was brave and strong, she sometimes had trouble remembering that herself. Interacting with a bunch of Alphas she didn’t know without me there probably wouldn’t help. I scowled at that thought, the urge to protect and soothe my mate gnawing at me.

The fog ahead was so thick I couldn’t see a damn thing.

*The fog is bad*, Elle said. Her mental voice was laced with concern.

*You’re right*, I said, pausing. I didn’t want to do this, but we had to. *We’re stopping*, I told both of them*. I don’t want anything to happen that could set this trip back any further.*

*When will the fog end?* Helix asked.

*Hopefully tonight*, I said. *Morning at the latest.* I turned to Elle. *And then we can make our way to your father as quickly as possible.*

Elle’s wolf was quiet, frowning. But in the end, she nodded. *You’re right, Greyson.*

It was a relief to know that she, at least, appreciated what I was trying to do here.

*Thank you for listening, Ell*e, I said.

*I listen too*, Helix piped up.

*No, you don’t*, Elle told him seriously.

*I’m going to find a place where we can wait out the fog*, I said. *Follow me. No running ahead*.

Helix huffed.

Carefully, I led the way through the forest. I had to stop and listen to every sound, smell every scent, because my vision was totally compromised. The process felt agonizingly slow.

When we reached a field, Elle said, *This is nice.*

*Yes, very nice*, Helix agreed.

*We can’t hang around out in the open*, I disagreed. *It might be okay for natural wolves to seek shelter in open spaces, but not werewolves. Let’s check the south side.*

I steered them past the field and back under the cover of the trees, choosing a spot under a large tree. There wasn’t much snow on the ground, there.

*I like this tree*, Elle announced.

Helix didn’t say anything, but I didn’t care if he didn’t like the tree, to be honest. This was it, and he needed to accept it.

Before I could say anything else, Elle stepped forward, stamping down the remaining snow under the tree, creating a little nest. I mimicked her, and then Helix did the same.

In the end, the three of us settled down in a tight ball, huddling for warmth. I’d never had much cause to spend nights outdoors as a wolf, but this felt natural. Elle was pressed against me, her body warm, her fur tickling my nose. Something about that felt natural, too. This was exactly what a natural wolf would’ve done to keep warm and protected. This was right, on a basic, instinctual level.

I took a look around to make sure there were no obvious threats, though it didn’t do much good—the fog was still too thick. I checked for anything out of the ordinary with my ears and nose and found nothing. The air was heavy with moisture. I ignored it.

Then, suddenly, a breeze blew in our direction.

The scents of woodsmoke and roasting meat invaded my nose.

Before I could speak, Helix was on the move.

**Episode 3816**

I didn’t have time to think as Artemis’s magic arrow sped toward me. If I were as agile and athletic as my sister, trained in survival from a young age like she had been, I might’ve been able to dodge it. But instead, my muscles froze and my brain stuttered.

I was a sitting duck.

*It’s going to hit me! Oh my—*

The arrow dissolved mere inches from my face. I blinked, my body still thrumming with tension and bracing for the impact.

Except that impact wasn’t coming. Was it?

I glanced around, my brows knitting in confusion. And then I realized my hands were out in front of me, and shimmering in the air in front of my fingertips was a shield.

Realization rushed in. The arrow *would* have hit me, but I’d used my magical shield to absorb it.

I blinked. Somehow, understanding what had happened to the arrow didn’t make the situation any less mind-boggling.

*I created a shield. One strong enough to withstand Artemis’s magic arrows…*

But how? And *when*? My brain had been all animal panic and dread for the handful of seconds that arrow had been shooting toward me.

I dropped my hands, and the shield disappeared. I turned to Adair, still not quite able to believe I’d defended myself so… well, *handily*. No pun intended.

“Did you just save me?” I asked.

Ever stoic, he shook his head. Maybe it was his resting robot face, but he seemed neither surprised nor happy nor sad nor—well, anything—about this development. But then his lips curved up the tiniest bit, and he gave me what might have been the world’s smallest smile. If I hadn’t gotten to know the general blank apathy of his face so well over the last few weeks, I might not have been able to tell the difference.

But it was there, all right. Adair was *smiling* at me.

“Well done,” he said.

*Oh my god. He’s smiling, and he’s complimenting me!* Coming from Adair, this felt like the highest praise.

Artemis raced up to me and threw her arms around me. “Fuck ‘well done’—you were amazing!”

When she released me, I looked back down at my hands again. “I really did it, didn’t I? I made a shield without having to think about it. It was just instinctive.”

And creating the shield on the fly like that was exactly what Adair had been trying to teach me all this time—to use my magic instinctively, to make the action as mindless and automatic as breathing.

That sort of feat had seemed impossible before, and even now that I’d pulled it off once, I still struggled to wrap my head around the idea of replicating it. But pride and excitement still shimmered inside me.

*Now that I’ve done it once, I can do it again, right?*

“You took a big step forward today,” Adair said, “but you still need to keep practicing to make sure this isn’t a one-off. You need to be able to summon the shield again and again, effortlessly, so that if you’re ever attacked by someone who *isn’t* your sister, you’ll be prepared. It’s no good celebrating now if you can’t use your magic when it’s truly needed.”

It was like he’d read my mind—and then twisted my thoughts into a gigantic buzzkill.

Artemis rolled her eyes. “He’s right, but you can celebrate if you want. You should. You kicked ass just now.”

Adair’s micro-smile shrank. “Artemis, fire an arrow at Cali again.”

She put some distance between us and turned to me. “Are you ready?”

I swallowed nervously. What if my instinctive shielding had just been a fluke? What if I *couldn’t* do it again? Or, at least, what if I couldn’t shield myself reliably? If I hadn’t been distracted by the wisp, I might’ve gotten in my head about the shield—overthought it and failed.

*But wait—there* was *a wisp, wasn’t there?*

I looked around the yard and huffed out a breath. I kind of hated that I didn’t even know for sure what I’d seen, what had pulled me out of my head just long enough that I’d been able to shield myself so effortlessly. How could I replicate that experience if I didn’t even know what all the variables had been? For all I knew, I hadn’t seen a wisp at all. It could’ve been the fading sunlight hitting an icicle in a tree or something.

I turned my gaze back to my sister. “Artemis, did you see—”

My breath caught in my throat—another arrow was shooting toward me, and, *again*, I was caught off-guard. I didn’t have time to react, to duck, or speak or really even think anything other than, *Oh shit!*

But once again, the arrow never hit me. Once again, my hands were out in front of me, and a new shield was shimmering just beyond my fingertips.

I’d summoned it again. Without thinking.

“I did it again!” I squealed, dropping my hands and dissolving the shield. I wanted to jump up and down in triumph, to race a victory lap around the yard. I’d created a shield *twice* now. What more evidence did I need that I could do this? That protecting myself with my magic could become second nature?

This time, Adair didn’t give me a smile. Not even another tiny baby one.

“Another one, Artemis,” he ordered.

She nodded and shot another arrow at me.

This time, though, I wasn’t distracted by the wisp, or whatever it had actually been. This time, I was focused, and I knew the arrow was coming. I tried not to think about it whizzing toward me, about whether or not my magic would spark to life and protect me again—but *not* thinking of it was like being with Greyson and trying not to kiss him.

It was damn near impossible.

Before I knew it, Artemis’s arrow grazed my shoulder, and I stumbled back with a yelp. I gripped my shoulder, which was already bleeding. Pain radiated down my arm.

*So much for “third time’s the charm”…* I’d been so in my head about using the shield that I hadn’t even raised my hands to protect myself. I’d just let the arrow hit me.

Artemis raced up to me again, her eyes wide. “Shit. I’m so sorry. Are you okay? Should I get Torin?”

I hissed out a pained breath and shook my head. “It’s okay. He can heal it later.”

“Keep at it,” Adair said. “If we stop at the slightest injury, there’s no way you’ll be prepared for a real threat.”

Artemis glared at her uncle before turning back to me. “Are you sure you’re okay? I’m so sorry, Cali.”

“It’s not your fault.” I forced a smile that was much bigger than the one Adair had given me. “Let’s go again.”

She looked unsure but eventually jogged back to her place and readied another arrow.

It really wasn’t her fault. Getting hurt was on me. I’d known the arrow was coming, but I’d hesitated. I couldn’t let that happen again.

Besides, I was capable of pulling this off. I knew I was.

Artemis was a little more gun shy now, but we managed a few more rounds. There were more close calls, but I didn’t get hit again.

It was the strangest thing—the more we practiced, the more I realized the shield seemed to be taking on a life of its own, appearing to defend me whenever I sensed that danger was getting close. It was kind of like a sixth sense.

With each arrow I dissolved, my confidence grew—even though the constant ache in my shoulder was a reminder that I couldn’t afford to be careless again.

Artemis and I were both panting by the time Adair raised a hand and called out, “That’s enough for now.”

“But I’m just starting to get good at it,” I said. “Can’t we keep going? Maybe you can help me discover some kind of hidden weapon or something, now that I’ve got a handle on defending myself?”

I didn’t want to sound jealous, but Artemis could summon magic arrows, and Adair had his whips. I didn't want my magic to be solely defensive. Wasn’t it best to strike first?

Adair shook his head. “Head inside and have Torin take a look at your shoulder.”

I wanted to argue with the Dark Fae, but Artemis put a hand on my uninjured shoulder. “You’re not going to change his mind—believe me. Celebrate what you’ve achieved today. Tomorrow’s another day.”

“I *am* happy about it, but being able to defend myself isn’t enough. I want to be able to fight like you, if I have to. If I have a secret weapon inside me like you do, I need to be able to access it. Just like the shield.”

“Adair’s not like our grandfather,” Artemis began, and my eyes widened as a new idea occurred to me.

*That’s it! If Adair won’t help me, maybe our grandfather will!*

I turned on my heel and headed toward the house.

Artemis hurried after me. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to ask Mom for more of her special tea so I can try to communicate with Grandpa Innes again.”

My sister’s face tightened, and I suddenly remembered how things had gone for her the last time she’d drunk the tea. She’d been hoping to meet her father, Kadmos, but instead she’d ended up meeting the Kollector.

Artemis straightened her shoulders and nodded. “Okay, but only if I get to come along.”

# **Episode 3817**

**Xavier**

Ava’s question hung in the air between us, growing more urgent the longer I struggled to find an answer.

Why did I have a vampire bite? Well, it was kind of a long story. One I was probably incapable of telling, knowing Adéluce. And in any case, if I ever got the chance to break my forced silence, the first person I would tell was Cali, not Ava.

I’d been hoping like hell that my confrontation with Adéluce had been some kind of vision. Just another mind game. Clearly, she was powerful enough to fuck with my life whether she was in the immediate vicinity or not, so why would she feel the need to stick around?

But the fact that I had an actual bite mark on my neck was evidence that she *had* been there, right? She was still close enough to do physical harm.

Not that I could tell Ava any of this.

I considered lying and telling her I’d cut myself shaving, but I knew she’d sniff that one out in a heartbeat. Ava had experienced her fair share of vampire bites, after all. She knew the difference between what it looked like when a vampire sank their fangs into your neck and when you nicked yourself with a razor.

And… if I was being honest with myself—which was getting harder and harder to do these days—I didn’t want to lie to her. At least, not any more than I already had. A certain amount of lying was implicit in this shitshow of a situation I’d found myself in, but lying to her beyond that just felt wrong.

Ava wasn’t stupid. She was a hell of a lot more astute than I typically gave her credit for, and she knew me better than almost anyone. She had to know that not everything was above board with me, at the moment. And yet she was still giving me the benefit of the doubt, showing me a trust I definitely hadn’t earned.

The least I could do was not disrespect the olive branch she’d offered me.

And maybe I wouldn’t have to lie. Maybe I could avoid a direct answer.

I shrugged. “I was drained pretty good by the vampires at Rhett’s demon house party.”

She frowned. “That was a few days ago. You should have healed by—”

I silenced her with a kiss. I didn’t know what else to do to keep her distracted.

Fortunately, Ava leaned into it, wrapping her arms around my neck and deepening the kiss. I couldn’t hold back my groan when her mouth opened for me and my tongue slid against hers. Everything felt pretty fucked up right now, and Ava wasn’t the person I truly wanted to be with, but there was no denying the connection between us. It only ever took the slightest spark for it to blaze to an inferno.

I pressed myself against her, sinking my fingers into her hair and tugging her head back so I could kiss down the column of her throat. Her breathy gasps had my wolf going wild.

Suddenly, she pushed me away. “What the hell was that for?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. I’d wanted to distract her, but now my body was aching to have her back in my arms. My wolf was growling at me to kiss her again.

“Does it matter?” I finally said.

She opened her mouth to speak, confusion pinching her expression. Then something like resolve flashed in her blue eyes, and she pulled me back in for another kiss. My wolf was going mad with desire, relishing the feel of her in my arms. To him, this was right. This was how things were supposed to be—Ava and me, and nobody else.

But this time, I couldn’t lose myself. My body wanted her, yes, and my wolf was on cloud nine. But in my mind and in my heart, I felt dirty. Cheap. Like the world’s biggest asshole. Which, hell, I probably was. Lately, I’d done nothing but burn bridges and break hearts and try to hide from how shitty everything felt. Maybe I deserved to feel this way—but Ava didn’t deserve this. She loved me, despite the long, fucked-up history between us. She didn’t deserve to have her feelings for me used against her as a distraction from the elephant in the room.

This was exactly what she’d just accused me of only moments ago—using her. But what choice did I have? It wasn’t like I could tell her the truth.

Despite all the guilt roiling in my stomach and the seemingly endless supply of baggage between us, I did have feelings for Ava. But at the end of the day, Cali was the one whose lips I wanted pressed against mine.

Ava pressed herself against me, kissing me with a hunger that nearly made my wolf purr. And fuck, I felt like a goddamn worm.

But it wasn’t enough to make me stop, and that was the worst part of all. That, even when I knew just how fucked up this was, I still chose my own selfish feelings over Ava’s.

I needed to push everything out of my mind—the guilt, the torment Adéluce had saddled me with. Maybe it was selfish—despicable, even—and maybe I was weak, but I was also a drowning man in need of a gulp of air.

I lifted Ava up and carried her to the bed. The moment her ass made contact with the mattress, she pressed a hand against my chest to stop me.

“Wait,” she said.

I pulled back to look at her. God, she looked fucking to die for, all mussed hair and swollen lips and pink cheeks. She drew in a ragged breath, her chest rising and falling and drawing my gaze down to her delicious tits.

Again, my wolf howled at me to make her mine. My body was in complete agreement.

But none of that mattered if it wasn’t what she wanted, too.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I want you,” she confessed. “But I also know you’re keeping something from me.”

I shook my head. “I’m not—”

“Let me finish.” She pressed her palm flat against my chest again, forcing me back another few inches. “I want you—that’s no secret. But I want you to know that I trust you, too. Even though I know you’re not telling me everything. I trust that you have reasons—good reasons—for keeping the truth from me. But I also recognize that you keeping things from me means you don’t fully trust me. So, until you do, I’m willing to wait. In time, I know you’ll come to trust me enough to tell me whatever it is you’re keeping secret.”

I blinked, at a complete loss for words. And for once, I couldn’t blame Adéluce for my silence. For my inability to force even a few syllables to the tip of my tongue.

“I… I don’t know what to say,” I finally managed.

*Understatement of the fucking century…*

“I know,” Ava said. “And I want you to know I don’t blame you. I accused you of using me to get what you wanted, but maybe I’ve been doing a little bit of that, too. I’ve always wanted you, Xavier. And, it just so happened that I also wanted an Alpha for my pack. So maybe I pushed a little extra to make those two things align.” She smiled. “I’ve got the Alpha I wanted. I’m willing to wait a little longer for you.”

I studied her face, my throat full of emotion I was too overwhelmed to name. I was never certain of Ava, but in this moment, I believed her. She’d made it clear before that she wouldn’t accept just a piece of me. She wanted everything—but I couldn’t promise her that. At this point, it was one of the few lines I wouldn’t cross when it came to my first mate, which made it all the more important.

I couldn’t give her all of me or assure her that my heart would change in time, but I could honor her wishes and back off.

I stepped away, trying like hell to rein in my wolf and my dick. A thick, awkward silence settled between us, punctured by the sounds of the party outside.

A knock sounded on the Airstream door, and I’d never been so grateful for an interruption in my entire life.

“I hope I’m not interrupting,” Marissa called out, “but there’s a pack out here that’s eager to mingle with its new Alpha.”

Ava rolled her eyes, glancing at me. “I doubt she cares whether or not she’s interrupting.”

She stood up and smoothed her long hair. She started for the door, then stopped to cup my chin in her hand. Her lips brushed over mine in a sweet kiss.

“One step at a time, remember?” she said. “It’s time for you to be our Alpha.”

She released me and opened the door, and I followed her out as Marissa raised an eyebrow. I brushed past the annoying Samara and toward the people who seemed so eager to see me. They all watched me expectantly, excitement shining in their eyes.

*What do they expect me to do? I told them to enjoy themselves for now—we can face the real world tomorrow.*

Then an idea struck me, and I turned to Ava. “You want me to be your Alpha? You got it.”

# **Episode 3818**

I’d expected Mom to need some convincing when I asked her to brew some of her special Fae tea. But, to my surprise, she was receptive to the idea. She’d even said that she thought it could be good for Artemis and me to go on this journey together.

So, before I knew it, my sister and I were sitting in the kitchen, watching our mother prepare the tea that would, hopefully, take us to see our grandfather.

I was relieved that my mom hadn’t argued with my idea, but anxiety still nagged at my stomach when I looked at my sister. Seeing the Kollector again instead of her father had been genuinely traumatic for Artemis, and I didn’t want to put her back in that dark place.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I asked her, for at least the third time. “I’m sure you remember, but the last time you drank the tea, it didn’t go so well.”

“Of course I remember,” she said airily. “And believe me, meeting the Kollector again is the last thing I want to do. That’s why we’re going to drink the tea together, and when we fall asleep, we’ll hold hands so we’ll journey together too.”

I blinked. “Um, I’m not sure that’s how it works.”

I didn’t even know for sure that I was going to meet our grandfather when I passed over into that strange twilight world, just like Artemis hadn’t realized she was going to end up face-to-face with the Kollector. It was impossible to know for sure where we’d end up, and whether or not we’d end up there together—holding hands or not.

But if it meant potentially unlocking a magic weapon for myself, it was a risk I was willing to take. Shielding was helpful—and would probably save my life, in the future—but it wouldn’t do a thing to help me fight back against anyone who tried to harm me.

But I couldn’t ask Artemis to risk putting herself through something awful just to help me find that weapon.

My mom gripped my shoulders. “Stop fretting. The tea won’t put either of you in any physical danger. I’d never let you two do this if there was a chance it could actually hurt you. All it will do is help you reach a calming spiritual state—and hopefully make a connection.”

I craned my neck to look up at her. “Do you think the hand-holding will work?”

She shrugged. “It couldn’t hurt. But it might be better if the two of you just think about your grandfather. You may find it easier to make a connection with him if your spirits are already seeking him out in some way.”

That did make sense, I supposed. Sort of. Still, if things did go wrong, I didn’t relish the idea of facing the Kollector again, spiritually or otherwise. I couldn’t imagine he’d feel too kindly about coming face-to-face with the person who’d redirected the blow of a thunderbird to turn him into ashes.

I met Artemis’s eyes. “You don’t have to do this. I’m the one who wants to discover if I have any secret magic. You don’t have to cross over with me—I’ve gone alone before, and I can do it again.”

“I’m not scared,” Artemis said. “Yeah, I saw the Kollector last time, but I didn’t have you with me.” She gave me a teasing smile. “Besides, we kicked the Kollector’s ass once before. If push comes to shove, we can do it again. And I want a chance to meet our grandfather, too. Who knows? Maybe I’ll learn something about my magic, too.”

I wished I shared Artemis’s optimism.

Mom set two mugs of tea down in front of us on a tray, and that powerful, familiar scent rose up to meet me.

“Why don’t we go somewhere more comfortable?” Mom suggested.

She grabbed the tray and led us to one of the studies—the one with the oversized armchairs that even a shifted werewolf could curl up in.

Artemis and I took a seat in the armchairs while Mom set the tray of tea down on the coffee table in front of us.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

Artemis and I glanced at each other for confirmation, then nodded.

“We’re ready,” Artemis said, reaching for a cup. I took the other one.

“Remember to think about the person you want to speak to, and the questions you have for them,” Mom reminded us. “There’s no telling how long you’ll have, so you need to be prepared.”

Artemis took my free hand in hers, and we began to sip the tea. The sweet flavor slid over my tongue, followed by the bitter aftertaste that made me scrunch my face up. When I glanced over at Artemis, she was making the same face.

We put our cups down on the tray without letting go of each other’s hands.

“Good,” Mom said. “Now close your eyes and try to relax.”

I squeezed Artemis’s hand as I settled back and closed my eyes. Already, my eyelids felt heavy and in no time at all, I was drifting away.

“Cali.”

My eyes snapped open at the sound of Xavier’s voice. It echoed in the distance, and my heart swelled with hope.

*Can I talk to him here? Maybe we can finally work things out. Maybe he can help me understand.*

His name was on the tip of my tongue, but then I heard my own voice, anguished and broken, echoing back to me.

“*Why are you doing this?*”

Xavier’s voice was as cold as it was unforgiving. “*Because I’m done.*”

I’d have known those words anywhere. We’d said them to each other when Xavier had broken up with me, right before he’d walked out of my life. I’d probably go to my grave remembering the poisonous way he’d said them—and the way those three little words had completely shattered me.

Even now, hearing him say those things all over again left me as gutted as I’d been when he’d left me in the kitchen.

“Xavier,” I whimpered, tears burning my eyes.

A gentle pressure squeezed my hand, and suddenly Artemis was there beside me, still holding my hand.

*She never left me*, I realized. Emotion filled my throat.

“Where have you been?” she asked. “Don’t get distracted by memories. Remember what Mom told us—we’re here to talk to Grandpa Innes.”

I took a deep breath and nodded, still sniffling. My sister was right. We had a very specific purpose for being here, and I couldn’t let myself get sidetracked by my broken heart. God knew it’d still be there waiting for me when I woke up.

I looked around. We were in the glen, and it was just as idyllic as I remembered. Crickets sang, filling the air, and a warm, gentle breeze brushed against the leaves in the trees. This was safety. Comfort.

I pulled in a deep breath, and slowly released it, imagining my heartache flowing away on the breeze.

“Are you okay?” Artemis asked.

I forced a smile and nodded again, pushing the pain away. “Let’s go find Grandpa.”

I held on tight to Artemis’s hand, afraid that I’d lose her if I let her go.

“We should look for a fairy circle,” I said. “That’s where I found him before.”

“Good plan.”

We moved through the glen, and my confidence grew with each step. Our mother had promised that no physical harm could come to us. Unfortunately, she hadn’t said anything about emotional harm—though I already knew from Artemis’s experience that drinking the tea could leave a mark.

Still, if I could survive hearing Xavier break my heart all over again, I could make it through this.

We didn’t get far before we came across a place that was familiar to me, only this time there were three stumps in the circle instead of two.

“Is this where you saw him last time?” Artemis asked.

I nodded and gestured for her to sit on the stump next to mine. Our hands were still locked together.

I pulled in a deep breath. “Innes.”

If I could summon my own magic, then maybe I could summon our grandfather.

The leaves at our feet began to swirl, and the breeze cooled by a few degrees. Gradually, the swirling leaves formed a familiar shape.

Artemis gasped. “Is that him?”

I could only nod as Grandpa Innes took shape.

He smiled as he turned to face us. “Caliana, what a pleasant surprise.” Then his gaze shifted to Artemis. “And you must be Artemis.”

Artemis’s mouth opened, but no sound came out at first. “G-Grandfather?”

Grandpa Innes chuckled. “I was about to say ‘in the flesh,’ but that wouldn’t be entirely accurate.”

He took a seat on the stump across from us. “So, what brings you both here?”

“Last time I was here, you taught me how to summon a shield,” I began.

He nodded. “I remember. How’d it go?”

“It took me a while, but I’ve got the hang of it now.”

“I’m not surprised,” he said proudly. “We Wrenthorns come from a gifted bloodline. We’re warriors.”

“That’s actually why we’re here,” I said. “Can you teach me how to summon a weapon?”

# **Episode 3819**

**Greyson**

*Dammit, Helix!*

I jumped up, already incensed by the new werewolf’s apparent inability to listen to a single goddamn thing I ever said. What part of “stay by my side” was so difficult for him to understand?

Next to me, Elle jumped to her feet too. Her fur brushed against mine with the easy closeness that came with being part of the same pack.

*Let me talk to him*, she said. *I’m not making excuses for him, but Helix is still new to all this. I understand what he’s going through.*

*Fine*, I grumbled.

I wasn’t thrilled by the idea of being empathetic when all I really wanted to do was tear the guy a new asshole, but Elle was probably right. She’d been very similar when she was first turned—impulsive and driven by the new, stronger senses and instincts that came with being a werewolf. She could understand what Helix was going through better than anyone else, if only because she was the only other person around who’d been turned like he had.

*This could be a good learning moment for both of them*, I realized reluctantly.

I let Elle take the lead, and she easily locked onto Helix’s tracks. As we followed his trail, the smell of smoke intensified.

*Shit.*

There was only one explanation for the scent of burning wood and cooking meat—there were humans out here, probably cooking dinner. Though why anyone would want to camp out here in the middle of nowhere in the dead of winter was beyond me. Even as a werewolf, I wouldn’t have chosen to stick around out here if I’d had an actual shelter to go to.

Maybe the humans had gotten stuck out here in the fog, too. But if that were the case, then why would they have come out here at all in the first place? We were far from the roads—it required deliberate, intensive effort to get out here. The trek wasn’t one that could’ve happened by accident.

As we ran forward as quietly as possible, I could just make out Helix up ahead, crouched behind a copse of trees. The sight of the unruly little bastard made my blood start boiling all over again.

Elle could say her piece all she wanted, but I was still going to make sure that Helix understood—in no uncertain terms, once and for all—who was in charge. And who was going to get their ass kicked for disobedience.

As we got closer to the spot where Helix was crouched, the casual banter of humans filled the air. My instincts had been right. I couldn’t see the campers through the fog, but I could certainly smell them.

Elle and I crept forward, and I was just about to lay into Helix when Elle beat me to the punch.

*Don’t go any farther*, she snapped. *The rules are still the same. They haven’t changed just because you’re a werewolf now. Always avoid humans—no good can come from them.*

*I was just curious*, Helix said. He ducked his head then glanced longing out at the human encampment. *And I am hungry.*

*You can’t just eat humans!* Elle snapped. *Have you lost your mind?*

*Not the humans! The meat they are cooking smells good. It would make a good dinner.*

*We can hunt later*, Elle said dismissively. *And the more time we spend chasing after you, the less time we’ll have to hunt. You’re not supposed to go wandering off. Greyson told us to stay with him, so that’s what we need to do. If you leave again and make me come after you, I’m going to beat you up. Do you understand?*

If I’d been in my human form, there’d have been no containing my smile. Once again, I’d underestimated Elle. She had a very clear command of the situation, and she and I both knew she was more than capable of making good on her threat. She’d come a long way from the freshly turned werewolf I’d first met.

*Maybe I should let her run point more often*,I thought idly.

Helix’s head drooped lower, and his shoulders hunched. Clearly, he wasn’t happy to be in trouble. I couldn’t blame him for being hungry. I was hungry, too. And I could also understand how becoming a werewolf would be overwhelming. There were so many new things for Helix to learn—a whole new set of rules, a whole new body. It was enough to make anyone lose sight of their better judgment.

But we couldn’t tangle with humans—not now, not ever, and definitely not while Helix was such a wild card. The last thing we needed was for a bunch of humans to band together for some kind of wolf hunt. We’d only just gotten LIPS off our radar.

We’d have to address our hunger later. Until the fog finally broke, we’d be sticking to the original plan: hunker down someplace safe and far away from humans.

*We need to get back to our hiding place*, I told them.

I didn’t wait for them to reply. I turned around and headed back, and the sound of their footfalls behind me told me they were following suit.

We were about halfway there when Helix’s voice slipped into my mind.

*I am sorry, Greyson*, he said. *I promise it will not happen again.*

*It better not*, I said. And that was that.

We finally made it back to the sheltered tree, and as we settled back down to rest, Helix cocked his head at me.

*Are you and Elle mates?* he asked.

The question sent a jolt through me. *Why would you ask that?*

*You act like you are*, he said simply.

*We’re not mates*, Elle said. *Greyson is my Alpha, so I must listen to him.*

Elle said it like that settled the matter, but Helix’s question nagged at me. Was there something more between Elle and me, at least from an outsider’s perspective? I couldn’t imagine he would’ve thought to ask if he hadn’t picked up on *something*.

I looked at Helix. *What made you think Elle and I are mates? Is it something I’m doing?*

*Maybe*,he said. *A little. You seem to look out for each other. You seem to have a sort of understanding. And since you turned Elle, it would make sense.*

*That’s not how mate bonds work*, I explained. *Turning someone doesn’t make them your mate.*

*I do know that*. *I do not think the Alpha who turned me is my mate.* Helix paused for a moment, then added, *Still, you and Elle seem to have a bond. Maybe because you turned her. I feel close to the Alpha who turned me, and if I ever met him again, I would want to look out for him. I would probably do anything for him.*

Helix’s devotion to the Alpha who’d turned him left me feeling a little queasy. It was almost an exact description of the bond the princeling had spoken about. And if even an outsider who hadn’t known me for very long was picking up on something, the connection I had with Elle had to be stronger than I liked to think it was.

I just didn’t know if it was a real connection between us—a living, breathing, magical bond forged when I’d turned Elle—or if it was more of a sense of obligation. An emotional connection.

I could see how Elle might feel for me the same way Helix felt toward the werewolf who’d turned him, but even if I hadn’t promised Elle’s father to look after her, I’d still have felt an obligation to do so. I would never—*could* never—abandon her.

I wanted to believe that was all that connected Elle and me: an unspoken obligation.

*We should try to get some rest*, I said. *As soon as the fog breaks, we’ll get moving.*

I curled up on the ground, acutely aware of Elle’s body next to mine. I wished I could put some more distance between us, but we needed each other’s warmth.

I forced myself to close my eyes and drift off.

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When I opened my eyes, I was back in my human form, running through the woods. It was daytime. The air was warm, and the forest was alive with summer growth.

I was chasing after Elle, who was just ahead of me, her red hair gleaming in the pockets of sunlight that broke through the trees.

She stopped short in front of a waterfall, and I knew she was about to jump in.

I reached for her, my fingers curling around her wrist. “Elle, no—”

And then she slipped from my grasp, laughed, and leapt off the edge, disappearing beneath the surface of the water.

“ELLE!”

I jumped in after her, but the moment my body hit the water, I jolted awake to find Elle’s wolf eyes staring back at me.

*Did you see the waterfall too?* she asked.

# **Episode 3820**

Our grandfather’s eyes twinkled. Apparently, summoning his spirit to ask how I could create a magical weapon had caught his attention. Hopefully that meant he’d be able to help.

“A weapon?” he asked. “What for?”

“I want—” I stopped myself. “No, I *need* to become a better fighter. I’m getting good at using the shield, but I don’t feel that alone would be enough to fully hold my own against an opponent. I need to be able to fight back.” I eyed my sister. “I want to be as good as Artemis—maybe even better.”

She rolled her eyes. “That’s never going to happen. You might want to lower your expectations a bit.”

Grandpa Innes bellowed with laughter. “I’m glad to see that both my granddaughters have fight in them. As I said before, Wrenthorns are warriors. It’s in our blood; the fire that heats our veins. It’s only natural that you’d come here looking to become better fighters. You’re following in the steps of your ancestors.”

*Right. Our ancestors.*

I was glad Grandpa Innes was enthusiastic about helping me—it was bound to make things easier. And since our family was apparently so gung ho about fighting, and he was clearly very proud of that legacy, it probably meant that he had a treasure trove of knowledge to pass on.

But it was more than just my family legacy that had brought me here to find answers. In fact, my legacy as a Wrenthorn didn’t come close to tipping the scales. I was here because I had something very important to prove to myself—and because I needed to prove Xavier wrong. His words, those ugly accusations, still echoed in my mind, as fresh as if he’d just said them to me. And the worst part was, there was some truth to what he’d said, as ugly as his words had been.

For a long time now—far too long—I’d been relying on the protection of others. I’d counted on the people around me—my mates and my family and my friends and the pack and even, on rare occasions, people like Ava and Lucian and Aysel—to protect me. I’d been a liability to them. Worse, I’d been a burden, because danger followed me like a shadow, and I could never quite handle it on my own.

Sure, I’d fought back. I’d figured out how to blast my Fae magic, and now I was getting pretty good at shielding. But I was still pretty damn far from being a warrior. And with the Bitterfang threat still hanging over us, the summit coming up, and the other dangers that would inevitably crop up along the way, I needed to learn to defend myself. To fight back. To be an asset to the pack instead of the liability I’d been for far too long. And to do *that*, I needed to have a proper weapon at my disposal. I didn’t have the benefit of decades of training and fighting, like so many of the people around me, but I had willpower and Fae magic and, hopefully, the ability to create a weapon out of both of those things.

Grandpa Innes turned to Artemis. “You’ve found your bow, then?”

Artemis’s brows rose. “Yes. How’d you know that?”

“I’ve been watching the two of you.” He smiled fondly at my sister, and some of the anxiety I’d been feeling on her behalf eased. “I’m very proud of you, Artemis.”

She ducked her head, her cheeks heating. “Um, thanks.”

*She’s not used to praise, is she?* Then again, why would she be? She’d spent most of her life fighting, learning to survive on her own and crossing paths with some of the cruelest people I’d ever had the displeasure of meeting. Familial pride was clearly still new to her—just being *part* of a family was still new to her.

I cleared my throat to get Grandpa Innes’s attention. “Will you help me?”

“That depends,” he said. “What kind of weapon do you have in mind?”

The answer that rushed to the tip of my tongue—“a badass one”*—*was probably not the one my grandfather had in mind. It also wasn’t terribly specific.

“I’m not sure, exactly,” I admitted. “I just want something that will allow me to go on the offensive. The shield is great, of course,” I added quickly. “It’s already saved my life more than once, and I’m so grateful that you taught me how to use my magic to protect myself. But now, I’m looking for something I can use to fight back. To attack, rather than just defend.”

“Fair enough,” Grandpa Innes said. “Which weapons have you used before?”

I fought the urge to grimace. It was more than a little embarrassing how little fighting experience I had—to say nothing of my nearly nonexistent experience with weaponry.

*Do I really want to tell my war general grandfather about how I wielded a spatula?* I immediately decided against it. Even if he knew what a spatula was—and if the mere concept of a member of his bloodline using one as a weapon wasn’t completely embarrassing to him—discovering the ability to create a magical spatula would be the ultimate letdown.

*Unless I want my enemies to laugh themselves to death…*

A curling iron had the same problem. A circular saw was too bulky and unwieldy, and… beyond that, there was just the wooden spoon.

Not exactly the stuff of legends.

“What about some kind of knife?” I asked. “Something sharp? I don’t know, aren’t there, like, spears or whatever?”

He shook his head. “A spear is not very practical, and it would be difficult to handle.”

“Okay.” I shrugged. “I’m not picky. I wouldn’t mind being able to throw magical arrows like Artemis, or wield a magical whip like Adair.”

“Magical weapons are specifically matched to those who wield them,” my grandfather said. “Artemis is a skilled archer—her magical weapon suits her. Have you had any success with whips?”

“No.” My shoulders slumped. “I haven’t had success with anything other than creating a shield, or occasionally firing off a blast of magic.”

Grandpa Innes’s face lit up with a broad smile. “Of course! If you can handle a shield—”

“Then your magical weapon could be a sword!” Artemis finished.

Our grandfather beamed, all patriarchal pride. “A sword would be just the thing.”

I eyed them skeptically. They were both so jazzed about the idea, but I wasn’t sure I felt the same way. “I don’t think I’ve ever used a sword before.”

“You have,” Artemis said. “Not necessarily well, but you have.”

I shook my head. “Exactly. I don’t have a lot of experience with them. Plus, my hands are so tiny! Wouldn’t that make it hard to use?”

“Steel swords can be tricky to master, it’s true,” Grandpa Innes said, “but magical swords are superior in every way. More importantly, if the weapon is meant for you, it will not be a burden. Now—stand up, face me, and summon a shield.”

I swallowed nervously but did as he asked. Something like stage fright had my pulse racing and my palms breaking out in a cold sweat. I’d created a shield in dangerous situations before, and I’d managed to pull it off earlier, even with Adair and Artemis watching. But what if I failed now? What if I’d spent all this time telling my grandfather the shield he’d taught me wasn’t enough, only to choke and not be able to create one at all?

I glanced at Artemis, who gave me a bright smile. “You can do this.”

I nodded and pulled in a deep breath. In a split second, a magical shield appeared in front of me.

I felt my grandfather’s eyes on me, studying me and the shield I’d made.

“It really does suit you,” he said. “But did you feel how easily it came to you now that you’ve practiced? That can be the same for your sword.”

Then, in the blink of an eye, he was waving a magical sword through the air. I stumbled back in surprise, and my shield disappeared. “Wow! You do make that look easy…”

“It will be for you too in time. Now, swords are uncommon magical weapons,” he said. “If you wish to wield one, you will need to dig deep—not every magic user is capable of summoning a sword, but it’s in your blood. Now concentrate and picture the sword taking shape in your hands.”

I looked down at my empty hands and tried to imagine a sword filling them, my fingers curling around the hilt. Energy surged through me, magic built inside me, and suddenly a sword appeared in my hands. Wow. Maybe this *was* in my blood.

“Oh my god!” I dropped the sword and it vanished. I stared down at the ground in shock. “Did that really happen?”

“I saw it,” Artemis said. “It was real.”

I turned to Grandpa Innes, who smiled. “Just like the shield, the sword is within you. You just need to draw it out. Practice, and you will master it.”

“I will,” I said, energized by my success and determined to continue my training right away.

Then he turned to Artemis. “And why are you here, granddaughter? Are you seeking more magical weapons?”

“She came here to help me, and maybe to learn a few things about magic—”

Artemis cut me off. “What do you know about my father, Kadmos?”

# **Episode 3821**

**Xavier**

Ava’s eyes widened at my statement, then narrowed them. She crossed her arms, only adding to the sly grin tugging at my lips.

“Xavier, what are you planning?”

Oh, this was going to be so much fun.

“I’m the Alpha now,” I reminded her. “It’s not your place to question me.”

Heat rushed into her cheeks, and her eyes narrowed with something like understanding. She didn’t knowwhat I had planned, exactly, but she knew something was up. I wouldn’t keep her in the dark for long.

I turned back to the pack, who’d been watching our interaction with keen interest.

*Seriously, the way they keep staring is starting to give me the heebie-jeebies. It’s like they’ve never seen an Alpha before.*

And then I remembered—they hadn’t had a proper Alpha in a long time. Nolan had ultimately screwed the pack over, Knox had been a pathetic excuse for a leader, and every wannabe Alpha who’d come after them had been even worse.

*Well, I’m here now, and I’m going to show them what they’ve been missing.*

“I’m going to lead you all on a run now,” I said. “I expect each and every one of you to keep up.”

When I glanced back at Ava, she was smiling. She liked my idea. I tried to ignore how much my wolf liked that she approved—along with the part of me that liked her support too. Immediately, Ava stripped down, which seemed to light a fire under the rest of the Samara pack as they followed suit.

My eyes dragged over her exposed curves. She had my wolf’s full attention, now. Despite the understanding Ava and I had reached, my wolf wanted her more than ever. Hopefully, I’d be able to channel all that yearning into a long, fast run. Maybe that’d satiate my wolf—at least for a little while.

Running had always been a good distraction for me. With any luck, running with my new pack would help keep my mind off Cali and the emptiness I felt, deep down. The emptiness I just couldn’t seem to escape.

I watched with no small amount of pride as the rest of the pack finished shifting. This was my pack now. I threw my head back and let out a howl before racing off into the woods, Ava right beside me.

It was thrilling and surreal and bittersweet, all at once. How many times had I imagined this moment? Being a pack Alpha, leading my pack on our first run together? I’d always imagined it would be Cali with me in this moment, not Ava. And that I’d be leading the Redwood pack, not the Samaras.

The cold winter air rushed into my lungs as I pushed myself harder, faster. My legs burned and my heart pounded, and my paws pounded into the ground in time with the rest of my pack as we ran together.

It was both everything I’d ever hoped for and not enough. But these were the cards I’d been dealt, and if the days since I’d made my deal with Adéluce had taught me anything, it was that I just had to deal with it—take the hits as they came, and the wins wherever I could get them. My dream of turning Cali into a werewolf so she could be a proper Luna, running alongside me, would have to remain nothing more than a fantasy, at least for now.

Ava’s voice slipped into my mind, jerking my thoughts away from Cali. *Where are we going?*

*I’m doing a loop of our territory.*

*Why?*

*So that it’s crystal clear what’s ours.*

With that, I picked up my pace, bursting into a sprint that would be a challenge for the others to keep up with. Ultimately, they wouldn’t be able to, but they’d still try like hell. I was an Alpha, which meant I was stronger and faster than other wolves. If nothing else, this run would remind the pack of that fact, in no uncertain terms.

*Jesse and Simon can run their little hearts out, but they’ll always be behind me*.

I took a little more pleasure in that thought than I probably should have.

Soon, we reached the Three Devils Point border, and I slowed to a stop. The rest of the pack fell in behind me, and I turned to face them, taking the time to look each and every one of them in the eye.

They were all breathing hard—much harder than I was—and watching me expectantly.

*Look behind you*, I commanded. *This is Samara land. Take it in. It belongs to our pack. To all of us. And I expect each and every one of you to defend your home, to protect your pack. No one can take it from us unless the Samara pack decides to give it to them. And as long as I’m Alpha, that will never happen.*

I let my words sink and watched as they all looked around, taking in the view of their territory. My initial concerns about the third negative vote suddenly felt trivial. Clearly, the majority of the Samara pack was on my side. The few who doubted me would either accept me as their Alpha or be forced to look for a new home elsewhere.

I wouldn’t be like Silas. I wouldn’t kill those who refused to pledge their loyalty to me. I wouldn’t lead with fear and violence. I was going to win the Samaras over by doing what was right—by uniting them and making the pack stronger than ever.

I glanced over at Ava, who was watching me with an intensity that stirred my wolf up all over again.

*You’ll have to work hard to keep up*, I told the pack. *I’m not going to hold back this time.*

And with that, I took off into the woods.

To her credit, Ava managed to stay close behind me. I was putting her speed to the test, but she’d always been one of the stronger, faster members of the Samara pack.

*Good qualities for a Luna*, my wolf reminded me. I ignored him.

*This is a good idea*, Ava said. *Bringing everyone together for a purpose and leading them every step of the way.*

I knew it was a good idea. My plan was working—I could tell by the way the pack was working so hard to keep up. It was more than just their nature leading them forward at such a grueling pace. Werewolves were naturally competitive, especially in tests of speed and strength, but they weren’t exhausting themselves like this in pursuit of bragging rights. Sure, none of them wanted to be the one who lagged behind, but more than that, they were following me because they truly believed I was their leader.

They trusted me. They believed I could lead them, and make their pack better. It felt damn good, even if ultimately, the Samara pack wasn’t the one I wanted to lead.

I lunged into a clearing, and a familiar scent caught my attention.

*Speaking of…*

We’d reached the edge of Samara territory, where it bordered Redwood land, and I had to physically stop myself from running straight back to the Redwood pack house.

Suddenly, the sweetness of my triumph took on a bitter flavor all over again.

I wasn’t a Redwood wolf anymore. The pack I’d been born and raised in, the pack I’d fought to lead one day—all my ties to it were gone now. The moment I’d become Samara Alpha, my connections to the Redwood pack had been erased.

At least for now.

I must have slowed a little as we edged along the border between the two territories, because Ava came up beside me.

*I know this can’t be easy for you, and I won’t pretend to know what you’re feeling right now, but this is a new beginning for you, for me, and for the pack.* She cocked her head toward the pack of wolves following behind us. *You need to lead us all back home, Xavier.*

I took one last fleeting look at the Redwood land, allowing myself to picture the familiar terrain, the pack house, Cali…

*Is anyone from the Redwood pack nearby?* I wondered, and I tried to pick up any fresh familiar scents as we turned away. Traces of Rishika, Ravi, and some of the others hit my nose, but those traces were old. There were no Redwood witnesses to this moment.

The empty feeling in my chest expanded, and I tried to ignore it as I turned the Samara pack around and led them home.

When we reached the campsite, I waited for them to all gather around me.

*Welcome to the next chapter in the Samara pack’s history*, I said to them all. ThenI threw back my head and howled. The rest of the pack joined in, and the air filled with our howls. I savored the power of their calls as they echoed around me.

Then we all shifted back to human, and I started pulling my clothes back on.

Geraint approached me, nodding deferentially. “So, we’ve found our Alpha—when do we make a formal announcement?”

**Episode 3822**

At Artemis’s question, our grandfather’s eyes flashed with something that looked like malice. My stomach tightened. Something was wrong. I just didn’t know what, exactly.

Grandpa Innes didn’t answer right away, and Artemis plowed on. “You must know something about my father, right? Were you there when he married our mother? Did you arrange the alliance between the two royal families? Did you know Kadmos?”

The gentle, grandfatherly demeanor that had given me comfort throughout this strange, otherworldly experience slipped away, replaced by a hardness that sent chills down my spine. I suddenly understood how it was possible that the Light Fae general and my good-natured grandfather were the same person.

“Don’t ask me about him, Artemis,” Grandpa Innes warned, his tone sharp in a way I’d never heard before. “And do not speak his name here.”

Artemis flinched like he’d just struck her. Seeing my formidable sister react that way to a long-lost member of her family—someone who was supposed to love her, supposed to give her the gentleness and nurturing she deserved but had never received—made me step slightly in front of her, like I could shield her from our grandfather’s change of demeanor like I’d shielded myself from Artemis’s arrows.

“Don’t be angry with her,” I said. “Kadmos is her father, and she never got to meet him. She never got to meet any of us until just a little while ago. Of course she’s curious—”

Grandpa Innes turned his wrath on me. “I told you not to say his name!” he thundered. The temperature in the glen seemed to drop several degrees.

I forced myself to straighten my shoulders and hold my head high. This didn’t make any sense. What was our grandfather so upset about?

“Why not?” I pressed. “All Artemis is doing is asking a question—one she deserves to know the answer to. What’s the danger in that?”

Grandpa Innes shook his head. “You came here asking for my help. I’ve done what you wanted.”

“You helped *me*,” I said. “Can’t you at least *try* to help Artemis?”

The anger in Grandpa Innes’s eyes abruptly faded, and he looked past me, at my sister. “I’m sorry I spoke so harshly.” His gaze shifted to me. “To both of you.” A bittersweet smile curved his lips. “Make sure you keep practicing. Magic is like anything else—it requires time and dedication if you wish to achieve mastery. You have everything you need to follow in your ancestors’ footsteps and become great warriors, and I have no doubt that my granddaughters will make me proud.”

The cool breeze picked up again, swirling the leaves on the ground, and Grandpa Innes’s face flickered. His form was already starting to fade away.

“It’s time to go back,” he said.

“Wait!” I reached for him, and Artemis pushed me aside to lunge forward.

“Not yet!” she cried.

And then, before either of us could so much as blink, I found myself back in the pack house study, my body jolting upright in the armchair.

“Grandfather, wait! Please!” I shouted.

I turned and saw Artemis, still asleep in her chair. Then she jolted forward, her eyes opening as she looked around, disoriented. “Where is he? Where’d he go?”

I caught her hands. “He’s gone. We’re back.”

She turned to me with a look of anger and confusion. “He didn’t answer me.” Her voice was raw and thick with emotion. “Why didn’t he answer me?”

Our mother dropped to her knees in front of Artemis. “It’s okay. Take a breath. You’re safe now.”

Artemis jerked her hands out of my grip. “I know I’m safe. I know where I am. What I *don’t* understand is what kind of grandfather that guy is supposed to be!”

Mom’s brow furrowed, and she looked from my sister’s angry face to me. “I think you need to catch me up. What happened?”

“We saw Grandpa Innes,” I said. “And he helped me with my magic, but when Artemis asked him to tell her about Kadmos, he refused.”

“He was all too happy to talk about the glory days of being a warrior, and to teach Cali how to make a magic sword, but I asked *one* question, and he shut me out. He acted like I’d committed a crime or something by just saying my father’s name,” Artemis snapped.

My heart ached for her. It wasn’t hard to hear the hurt and anger in her words. Artemis’s entire life—save for the past few months—had been defined by the absence of family. By having to grow up and learn to survive without any of the people who were supposed to love and care for her. It was the most natural thing in the world for her to be curious about her father, to want to know about the person who made up half of what she was, but I understood even more how a rejection like our grandfather’s would cut deep—especially when he’d been so generous with me not once, but twice.

“Oh, sweetheart, I’m so sorry.” Mom wrapped Artemis in a hug. “My father doesn’t have a mean bone in his body—if he didn’t give you the answer you were looking for, I’m sure he had a good reason.”

“But he didn’t *give* any reason,” I said. “He just yelled at us, refused to talk about it, and then left.”

Mom sat back, watching my sister’s face with concern. Artemis’s head was bowed and her shoulders were hunched, but I could see the quiet tears slipping down her cheeks.

“I know how frustrating that must have been for you. I’m so sorry.” Mom said, gently wiping the tears from Artemis’s cheeks.

My sister sat back and swiped at her face. “All he had to do was tell me something—anything—about Kadmos. Whether or not he’s still alive, for example. Where’s the harm in that?” Before Mom could defend her father again, Artemis plowed on. “Don’t I have a right to know?”

“Maybe your grandfather doesn’t have the answer either,” Mom said.

Artemis stood up. “Then why not just say that? Why did he have to act like… like such an ass?” She stalked toward the door, but then spun on her heel to face our mother. “Don’t you want to know, too? Or are you too afraid to find out?”

She stormed out before our mother could respond.

Mom let out a long sigh and turned to face me, pain flashing in her eyes. “I’m sorry the visit was so disappointing for you.”

It hadn’t been, for me. Not completely.

I reached forward and hugged her. “Artemis didn’t mean any of that. She’s just upset. You know how important it is to her to learn more about her dad.”

“I know,” Mom said. “And I don’t blame her one bit for wanting to know. I just hate feeling so helpless. I wish I could help her, somehow.”

“*Do you* want to know what happened to Kadmos?” I asked. I’d thought of him as “Artemis’s dad” for so long, it was easy to forget that my mother had her own history with the man. And that that history probably came with its own set of complex feelings.

“I do, if only for Artemis’s sake. I hope she finds what she’s looking for. I truly do. But as I’ve watched her go on this journey, it’s made me realize that what’s most important to me is living in the present,” Mom said. “I love you, Artemis, and your father very much. I’m grateful to have him in my life, and nothing will ever change that.”

“And Kadmos?” I pressed, almost afraid to ask.

“It’s thanks to him that I have Artemis.” A soft smile pulled at Mom’s lips. “Regardless of everything else, I’ll always be grateful to him for that.” She kissed my forehead. “I’m going to talk to your sister and see if I can help her through this.”

She left the study, and I stayed alone in the armchair for a moment, mulling over our encounter with Grandpa Innes and its ugly aftermath. Was there anything I could do to help Artemis?

No answers came to mind. Hopefully, I’d be able to think of something eventually. Artemis deserved answers, but with every dead end she’d been hitting, I wasn’t sure how she’d ever get them.

*I’ll check on Artemis after Mom talks to her. Maybe there’s something else she and I can try.*

I grabbed the tea tray and stood to bring it into the kitchen, but then I realized we’d been in Greyson’s study this whole time. I set down the tray and scrambled for my phone. Had he tried to contact me while I was out of it?

But when I turned the display on, there was nothing. No messages. No missed calls. I frowned at the time. He’d been gone for a while, and he’d promised to keep in touch. So, what was with the radio silence?

*Greyson*, I thought. *I know you can’t hear me, but I hope you’re all right.*

Suddenly, his deep voice slipped into my mind. *Cali?*

I jolted, my eyes widening. *Oh my god! Greyson, is that you?*

# **Episode 3823**

**Greyson**

I jerked my head, looking around as shock rolled through my body.

Cali. I’d heard her speaking through our mind link… But that was impossible, wasn’t it? I narrowed my eyes at the forest around us, half-thinking she was about to pop out from behind a tree or something.

But nothing had changed. The forest was still chilly, quiet, and thick with fog. Helix and Elle were staring at me, likely waiting for me to answer Elle’s question and wondering why the hell I was suddenly acting so shocked.

I wished I had some idea of what was going on, too.

Elle’s question—and the startling implication that we’d somehow shared a dream—had practically been erased from my brain the moment I’d heard Cali’s voice in my mind.

*Hold on, Elle*, I said, then I cautiously reached out to Cali through our mind link. *Cali? Is everything okay?*

Even though I’d just heard her voice, I didn’t expect the connection to take. Didn’t expect to be able to make contact. And yet, not seconds later, I heard her sweet voice again.

*Everything’s fine*,she said. *I was just worried because I hadn’t heard from you. But now that we can mind link, you must be coming back. Is Elle’s father okay?*

I shook my head, confusion rushing in and washing away some of my shock. This shouldn’t be possible. I was miles away from Cali, well out of mind link range. What on earth was happening?

*I’m not on my way back*, I told her. *We were delayed near the border because of dense fog. We… This shouldn’t be happening. We shouldn’t be able to hear each other right now. I don’t know why we can suddenly mind link with so much distance between us. It doesn’t make any sense.*

I knew I should’ve been happy to hear from Cali, but when it came to my mate, magic acting erratically left me feeling more unnerved than excited. What could it mean?

*I’m glad you’re okay*. Relief filled Cali’s voice. *I think I know what’s going on. Kira’s Luna mark spell must have amplified our connection.*

Oh. Relief rushed into my chest, too, though for an entirely different reason. Cali was okay. For once, there was a painless explanation for a weird occurrence in our lives. With that worry set aside, gratitude rushed in.

I was thrilled to hear Cali’s voice. If Kira was responsible for that, fantastic. All that mattered was that Cali was okay.

*I’m sorry I didn’t contact you sooner*, I said. *Though I kind of doubt I would’ve been able to call. We’re in the middle of nowhere. I bet there’s not a cell signal for miles. I’m also in my wolf form. It’s not easy to operate a cell phone with a paw.*

She laughed, and the sound warmed me from the inside out.

*That’s all right*,she said. *I miss you.*

God, I missed her too. So badly, I could’ve sworn I felt the dull pain of her absence in my chest. I would’ve far preferred to be at the pack house with Cali instead of out here in East Who-the-Fuck, freezing my ass off. Hopefully we’d be able to wrap this up sooner rather than later and get the hell back to my mate.

*I love you*, I told her. *I’ll try not to be late to the summit. I’ll see you soon*.

*Stay in touch*,she said. *Remember, you promised. And now that we know we can mind link, there’s no excuse.*

If I’d been in my human form, her teasing tone would’ve brought a smile to my face.

*I’d never break a promise to you*, I said.

*Good*. *By the way, I’ve been preparing for the summit. I might even have a new secret weapon—I’ll tell you all about it when I meet you there.*

She sounded excited and proud, but I wasn’t sure what to make of this new development. I was glad she was taking such an active role in the summit preparations and was taking her position as fake Luna seriously, but I didn’t love the idea of Cali having to think about weapons—especially not secret ones. The most important thing was that she stayed safe.

I looked around. The fog was beginning to lift, which meant we could finally move out.

*I have to get going*, I said. *I’ll contact you again when I reach Elle’s pack.*

*I love you*,she said. *Talk to you soon.*

With Cali’s voice still echoing in my mind, I turned back to Elle, who’d been waiting expectantly throughout my conversation with Cali.

*I’m sorry*, I said to Elle. *I was mind linking with Cali.*

*Really?* She sounded surprised. *I didn’t know mates could communicate over such a distance.*

*I didn’t know either*, I said simply. Elle didn’t need to hear the details.

Helix, I noticed, had drifted off to sleep while I was conversing with Cali, and his quiet, breathy snores echoed through the otherwise silent forest. Elle poked him with a paw.

*Wake up, lazy beast.* Then she turned her attention back to me. *You never answered my question about the waterfall.*

Right. The waterfall. The dream I’d had… with Elle. It was a bizarre situation all on its own, but hearing Cali had pushed it from my mind. Now, though, countless questions rushed to the forefront of my mind. How did Elle know what I’d dreamed about? Did her question mean she’d dreamt about the waterfall too?

*Why do you assume that we shared a dream?* I asked cautiously.

*It’s just a feeling,* Elle said. *In my dream, I felt you with me. I could sense you there.*

Well, that didn’t exactly comfort me. The last time I’d shared a dream with someone, that someone had been Cali, and that had only happened because of the three witches and their twisted magic. I hoped to hell they weren’t meddling with my life again.

Elle kept staring at me expectantly, and I realized she wasn’t going to let this go.

*Well?* she prodded. *Did you dream about it too?*

I hesitated another beat, then nodded. *I did dream about a waterfall… And you were there.*

*You were in my dream too,* she said. *I sensed you, but I saw you too. You were running behind me in the woods, and we found a waterfall. You tried to stop me from jumping in, but I jumped anyway.*

Elle sounded excited by the possibility of us sharing a dream. Clearly, the image of her jumping into the waterfall hadn’t filled her with the same dread and anxiety I’d felt when my dream self had watched her sink below the surface of the water. Even now, the memory sent a chill down my spine that had nothing to do with the temperature of the forest.

*I was trying to help you*, I said. *To keep you from getting hurt.*

*Oh.* Her voice softened. *I was just having fun.*

Huh. I hadn’t considered the possibility that the dream had been playful for her. All I’d felt was panic. Panic that I couldn’t catch up with her. That I couldn’t stop her from jumping. It was strange, the different intentions we’d each brought into the dream and how they’d affected our interpretations. It sounded like the same sequence of events had played out, but our experiences couldn’t have been more different.

I wondered what it meant that my dream had nearly given me a heart attack, while Elle’s had been something to laugh about. Had it been my sense of obligation to her making itself known? I felt like I had to protect her, so maybe even something as innocuous as playing in the forest and diving into a waterfall was cause for alarm.

If that was the case, then why had Elle’s dream been so playful?

Silence settled between us again, and Helix kept snoring.

*Do you think we had the same dream because you turned me?* Elle asked. *Is this something that always happens between werewolves and the people they turn?*

*Honestly? I have no clue*, I said.

Hearing her question our connection, hearing her assume that we had any kind of connection at all, made me uneasy all over again. I’d certainly never shared dreams with anyone but Cali, and there’d been an external magical reason for that.

There had to be a reason why Elle and I had shared that dream, and my turning her made sense, but still…

I didn’t want to think about the implications of what that meant. As it was, Lucian’s words about Elle’s and my possible connection still haunted me. There was still so much about turning someone that I didn’t fully understand. I probably should’ve done more research before committing to turning Elle, but there hadn’t been time for any of that. I’d had to act fast so we could get LIPS off our asses.

Maybe being an Alpha played into the whole situation in ways I didn’t yet understand—but now wasn’t the time to dwell on all my questions.

I glanced at Elle and Helix. *Time to go.*

**Episode 3824**

I was practically floating as I headed upstairs to look for Artemis. Being able to mind link with Greyson from such a distance had completely turned my day around. The relief I’d felt when I’d heard him respond had been palpable.

I always knew I worried about him—duh—but knowing that he actually had a way to contact me if something went wrong even while he was in wolf form… It felt good. Assuming that the mind link worked the farther away he got… Still, I’d have to remember to thank Kira for her work on the Luna spell. It was hard not having Greyson around, but being able to contact him would certainly help make the distance more manageable.

I was glad Greyson was okay, but I hoped he’d be able to come back soon. From the sound of it, he still had a lot of work to do with Elle’s pack. I knew there was a chance he and Elle would make it back before the summit, that I wouldn’t have to worry about walking in alone, but that chance was looking slimmer and slimmer. I couldn’t count on Greyson being there to hold my hand every step of the way.

Now more than ever, I had to learn to stand on my own. The Redwood pack was depending on me to be a strong representative—fake Luna and all, half-Fae and all.

This was why I wanted to practice summoning my magic sword. *Just wait until Greyson sees me with that!*

I’d wanted to tell him about it when we were mind linking, and I still wanted to tell him now. It was a huge leap in my magical ability, and I couldn’t help imagining just how badass I’d look fighting with a magical sword and shield like some kind of battle maiden from a fantasy novel.

For a moment, I considered mind linking with him again to tell him the news, but then I decided to wait. He had a big job on his hands, and I didn’t want to distract him. The sooner he finished up with Elle’s pack, the sooner he’d be able to come home, after all.

Besides, he’d promised to contact me again. I just had to be patient.

Easier said than done.

On the bright side, if I squeezed in some magic practice before he made it back, I’d be able to *show* him the news instead of just telling him about it. I could just imagine the shock and pride on his face.

I stopped outside Artemis’s bedroom door and raised my hand to knock. Then I paused as my mom’s voice slipped under the door. She and Artemis were clearly still talking things through.

*I should probably give them some space*.

I loved Artemis and wanted to help and support her in any way I could, but she and Mom shared something I didn’t have: a connection to Kadmos. Our mother was probably the best person to try to comfort Artemis right now.

I didn’t blame Artemis one bit for being so upset. This was all our grandfather’s fault, anyway. If he hadn’t been so averse to talking about Kadmos, this whole drama might never have happened.

*Why does no one want to talk about Kadmos, anyway?* I couldn’t even tell if his fate was a riddle that no one had ever solved, or a dirty secret nobody wanted to talk about.

It wasn’t fair that Artemis kept hitting all these dead ends. At least I’d been able to spend my entire life with my dad—Artemis had never even *met* her father.

I headed back downstairs and grabbed my coat. Artemis needed space, so I’d get to work practicing with my sword on my own—but I wasn’t about to do it in the house. Who knew how much damage Phil would have to fix if I lost control of a magical sword?

Or worse, what if I accidentally hurt someone?

I reached for the door, my mind filled with images of me wielding my new weapon like a half-Fae version of *Xena: Warrior Princess*, but then a hand grabbed my arm and spun me around.

“What the—” I burst out. “*Torin?*”

“Good,” he said simply, looking me up and down. “You’re ready to go.”

He pushed the front door open and pulled me out after him. I let him tug me along, confused.

“Go where?” I asked.

He stopped and turned to look at me, excitement brightening his face. “Kevin is throwing a party, and I need you to come with me.”

I immediately planted my feet. “Why?”

He smiled and gave me a wink. “Because I don’t want to be tempted to stay overnight. And if I go alone, I’m pretty sure that’s exactly what will happen.”

I laughed. “So, you want me to be your… what? Your human chastity belt?”

“Something like that.”

I remembered that Torin was worried about Kevin finding out that he was Fae. “You know, if this is about trying to keep your identity a secret, there’s a pretty simple solution. Kevin will never know that you’re Fae if you don’t tell him.”

He pouted. “You say that like it’s really that easy.”

“Isn’t it? Kevin’s a human. Like, a really normal human, with no knowledge of the supernatural world. He doesn’t believe Fae are real. Why would he ever think that you’re one of them?”

Torin sighed. “Obviously, I’d never tell him on purpose, but I could accidentally let it slip, and then where would we be? That’s why I need you to come with me. I need help keeping the lie alive.”

“How romantic.” I laughed again. “Just explain one thing to me: how is my being there going to keep you from spilling the truth to Kevin?”

“Cali, please!” Torin burst out. “I hate to beg, but I’m begging now. *Please* come with me to Kevin’s party.”

“A party?”

I turned to see Lola standing in the doorway, her eyes wide. “Count me in!” she said. “Things are getting boring around here—I could use a little excitement.”

I looked to Torin for confirmation, but he just shrugged. “The more the merrier.”

Jay poked his head out the front door. “If Lola’s going, I’m coming with her.”

And then, within seconds, the front porch was flooded with half the pack—Jacs, Ravi, Sage, Zainab, Charlie, Violet, and Lilac—all of them offering to go with Torin to Kevin’s party.

*Well, this escalated quickly…*

But was inviting half the pack to Kevin’s human party the right thing to do? Wasn’t it rude to bring a bunch of uninvited guests? And wouldn’t having nearly a dozen supernaturals at a human party make it even more difficult for Torin to keep his secret?

I looked around for someone to stop this snowball before it rolled out of control, but nobody was stepping up. And then I remembered that Greyson wasn’t here to make the call. I was pretty sure that he’d think this was a bad idea.

*Should I mind link him and ask? But I kind of don’t want to bother him about a party when he’s off doing something important. So… Does that mean I have to step up and make the call?*

I noticed Rishika loitering in the doorway, watching things unfold. I sidled up to her.

“What do you think we should do?”

She shrugged. “I doubt there’s any harm in it. It might even be a good way to blow off some steam before the summit.”

“So, you think it’s a good idea?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think,” Rishika said. “If you’re going to be the pack Luna at the summit, you should be the one making the call. It’ll be good practice for the real thing.”

I turned back to the group and realized they were all watching me expectantly, waiting for me to decide. I still didn’t know what the right answer was. Clearly, Torin wanted to go, and he wanted *me* to go with him. He also wasn’t a werewolf, so he had more freedom and flexibility in his decisions.

But he also didn’t seem to care if half the pack went to the party with him. And the idea of so many supernaturals and humans in the same place made me nervous.

*The responsible thing would be to say no. But the responsible thing isn’t always what’s best, right? And we’re talking about a bunch of werewolves, here—they always play by different rules.*

I turned to Torin. “Do you know who else is going to be at the party?”

“A bunch of Kevin’s friends, I think. Maybe a few coworkers.”

So, definitely humans. Did I really want to bring werewolves, Fae, and a vampire to a party full of humans?

Rishika stepped up to my side. “Whatever you decide, no one will fault you.”

I didn’t want my first decision as acting Luna to be a buzzkill. And since not everyone was going to the summit, I probably shouldn’t kill a chance for the others to have some fun.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s go to Kevin’s party!”

# **Episode 3825**

**Xavier**

I sat on the lumpy couch in the Airstream. The party had died down. I didn’t know what the pack was up to, but I didn’t particularly care either. I was their Alpha, not their babysitter. And my most recent interaction with a pack member had left a sour taste in my mouth.

The run had gone well. It had been an affirming show of strength to the pack, as well as an opportunity to test their loyalty to me. I’d felt like the pack had come back from the run more unified, and full of new purpose.

At least that was how I’d felt until Geraint had mentioned making an official announcement about the new Samara Alpha.

It was a fair point, I had to admit. The Samaras were excited to have the protection and legitimacy that came with having a strong Alpha. It had been a very long time since they’d had those two luxuries. It was only natural they’d want to announce it to the world. My ascension was good news for the pack, and it would also make any potential threats think twice about making a move on them, now that they weren’t quite as vulnerable as they used to be.

For my own part, I was both proud and excited to lead this pack. But it was a loaded situation, too. Once that announcement went out, there’d be no coming back from it. I’d be officially locked in as Samara Alpha.

Not that I wasn’t already. But somehow it felt like it would be different if everyone knew. Right now, the Samaras and I were separate from the rest of the world, but that wouldn’t be the case once the word got out.

I finished the can of beer I’d grabbed when I got back from the run and tossed it in the sink. I mulled over Geraint’s question again, and the heavy weight it had laid across my shoulders.

I didn’t care what the other packs thought. What the other Alphas thought. I was proud to lead the Samaras, and I respected the loyalty they’d shown me so far. I was proud to offer this fractured pack some protection and stability, to help them grow and recover from what my father and Nolan had done to them.

There was really only one thing that made me hesitate whenever I considered making an official announcement.

Cali.

*What’s Cali going to think when she finds out about this? How is it going to look to her?*

Shame curdled the beer in my stomach as I recalled the things I’d said to her. Things about Ava. Things about my own lack of commitment to Cali, about my lack of respect for her.

They were all lies, of course, but Cali didn’t know that. And once she learned that I’d cut ties with the Redwood pack and joined up with the Samaras, that I was leading them with Ava at my side, whether or not she was officially my Luna, it wouldn’t be hard for Cali to jump to conclusions. About me and Ava. About my feelings and loyalties. About the future I wanted for myself.

I hadn’t forgotten that Adéluce had said that she’d wanted me to go down this path all along. That so far, I’d played right into her hands. And since she was determined to tear Cali and me apart, my new role with the Samara pack would undoubtedly divide us further.

And Cali wasn’t the only one I’d be pushed further away from. Being Samara Alpha would put me at odds with the entire Redwood pack, and Greyson in particular.

I shook my head and let out a low, humorless laugh. *Greyson is going to flip when he finds out.*

That boosted my spirits a little. My brother had always tried to put me in my place—he’d given me that ultimatum, basically told me to shape up or ship out. But now I was the one calling the shots. This was *my* pack, and Greyson couldn’t tell me to do shit.

If there was one silver lining in this shitshow, it was that.

The door to the Airstream opened, and Ava walked in. I looked over at her, and we exchanged a glance before another heavy silence filled the air. For a brief second, it was like the run had never happened, like we were right back in that moment when Ava had told me she’d wait for me to be all in.

Then her gaze shuttered, and an easy smirk tugged at her lips. “The bonfire’s out. We don’t have to worry about Donovan falling into it and singeing himself like last time.”

I snorted, and some of the tension between us dissipated. Thank god.

“Did that really happen?” I asked.

“Oh yeah.” She nodded. “He can be a bit of a sloppy drunk. Also, a really huggy one.”

She moved through the small space and squeezed past me to get to the bed. I leaned against the counter and turned to watch her move toward the tiny bedroom space at the end of the trailer. We hadn’t talked about this—where I’d stay, sleeping arrangements, that kind of thing. That was all as up in the air as everything else between us.

Technically, the Airstream had been the Alpha’s place since Knox had led the pack. Ava, as the Samaras’ de facto leader during all the recent unrest, had been staying in here.

I was the Alpha now, and there was history between us. The rest of the pack probably thought there was something going on. But she wasn’t my Luna.

That didn’t mean I was going to kick her out of her home, though.

“Is it all right if I stay in here?” I asked.

I hadn’t forgotten about our fight, or her questions about my motives, or all the answers I’d failed to give her. I hadn’t explained the vampire bite—not that I could—but I knew Ava wasn’t one to forgive and forget. She’d put down a boundary between us, and I had no doubt she’d enforce it.

She shrugged and perched on the edge of the mattress. “The couch is there. It’s lumpy as hell and smells like weed and spilled beer. Help yourself.”

I nodded. “Looking forward to it.”

“So, when *are* you going to announce that you’re the new Samara Alpha?” she pressed. “It shouldn’t be a secret. When the other packs find out, we’ll instantly be less vulnerable.”

“I know,” I grunted. I’d put off giving Geraint a straight answer, but the more I thought about it, the more it seemed like there was one very good time to make the announcement. “We’ll tell everyone at the summit.”

Her brows rose. “You like to make a splash, don’t you?”

I shrugged. “It seems like the best place to let everyone know. Saves me the trouble of making the rounds—and it makes one hell of a statement.”

“Can’t argue with that.” She nodded. “Are you going to tell your brother before then?”

I turned back toward the sink. “Greyson can find out with everyone else.”

I sauntered over to the couch, tugged off my shirt, and lay down, propping my head up so I could still see Ava’s face. If she was surprised by my response, she didn’t show it. She just asked, “Is that the smartest decision? You know, for the alliance?”

“Are you already questioning my decisions as Alpha?” I kept a playful note in my voice so she’d know I was teasing.

She rolled her eyes. “I’m just saying. It’s not like you and Greyson have the best relationship. With your hasty exit from the Redwood pack and god knows what else happened with it, I could see this becoming another point of tension between you two—especially if he finds out at the summit with everyone else. He’s going to be blindsided.”

Probably. But that was half the fun.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “I told you I wouldn’t do anything that would harm the Samara pack, and I meant it.”

“Were you serious about building a new pack house, too?”

“Of course I was,” I said. “We can’t camp out like this forever. The pack deserves a real home.”

Excitement bubbled in my chest as I spoke, but something like anxiety nagged at me alongside it. I was the Samara Alpha, and I was in this relationship, or whatever the hell it was, with Ava—and now we were building a house together?

My life had done a complete one-eighty in the span of a few days. I was trying to roll with it, but I couldn’t help but wonder what the hell I was doing.

*This is a means to an end, right? A way to get some footing, some power behind me. Once I have that, I’ll destroy Adéluce, save Cali, and reunite us.*

Just thinking of her made my stomach twist. I loved her, and I still hated myself for hurting her, even though I’d done it with the best of intentions. I had so much shit to figure out in between being Alpha and killing Adéluce, but I would figure it out. I had to.

Silence had settled between Ava and me again, and I laid my head down, ready to drift off. But then her voice broke through the silence.

“Xavier…”

There was a hesitance, a vulnerability in her tone that made my heart race. Was she going to invite me to join her in the bed? I wasn’t sure I was ready for that.

“Yeah?” I asked.

“You say the summit will be the best place to tell everyone that you’re the new Samara Alpha… Does ‘everyone’ include Cali?”

**Episode 3826**

We were on our way to Kevin’s, me driving my car and Lola bringing up the rear in another. Torin was riding shotgun with me and was in the middle of a minor freak-out. I could only imagine what was going through his head. It was one thing to go to your new boyfriend’s party, but it was quite another to do it while having to deal with all the secrets—not to mention pack members—that Torin was bringing along.

“I’m getting a little worried,” Torin said. “Now that practically the entire pack is coming, I’m scared that things might get a little out of hand. Do you think this is going to be a disaster?” He started biting his nails. “Cali, is this going to be a major fail?”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” I said.

Truth be told, though, I was wondering the exact same thing. I was feeling a little overwhelmed by the responsibility of keeping two carloads of supernaturals under the radar at a human party. I hoped I hadn’t bitten off more than I could chew. I’d never really led an outing all on my own without Greyson or Xavier by my side. What if something happened and I wasn’t prepared to handle it? What if the police got called? What if someone *died*?

*It’ll be fine*, I told myself. *I just have to do as Rishika suggested—take charge and make sure that no one shifts. I’d also better keep an eye on Jacqueline and make sure that she doesn’t get hungry and fang one of Kevin’s guests. And I should probably keep a close eye on Lola for the same reason. A vampire attack would definitely turn this entire event into an epic fail—and an even more epic crime scene.*

The more I thought about it, the more anxious I got. Greyson wanted me to be his Luna for real one day, and I wanted to show him that I was capable, but was this the way to do it? I was starting to think that the smart thing to do would be to turn the car around and head home.

I shot a glance at Torin. He was nervous, sure, but behind that, I could tell that he was eager to see Kevin. I didn’t want to disappoint him, and I knew it would look bad if I suddenly changed my mind about going to the party. I was going to have to see this thing through, for better or worse.

“It’s going to be fine, Torin,” I said firmly. “It’s a party. People are going there to cut loose—no one’s going to be waiting in the wings to judge you. Besides, we have a pretty good pack. I’m sure everyone’s going to be on their best behavior.”

*At least they’d better be. I’d hate to have to explain myself to Greyson if everything went off the rails.*

“Okay,” Torin said, not sounding all that convinced. “Do you think there will ever be a time when I’ll be able to show Kevin who I really am? I know it’s dangerous to let humans in on our secrets, but I have been thinking that if things got serious between us, I think I’d want to tell him that I’m Fae. Even now, I’m starting to feel a lot of… feelings for him, and it would be nice to share things with him. Important things.”

“I know how you feel,” I said, being careful not to say the wrong thing. Torin was sensitive right now, and I didn’t want to push him over the edge. I knew what it was like to get lost in your own uncertain thoughts—especially when it came to building a romantic relationship.

“I know you do. I know I was on the fence before, but there are things about my life that I can’t exactly share without giving him the context,” Torin continued. “Like some of the things that Astrid and I went through in the Fae world, my healing abilities, my childhood—any of it. I feel like there’s a massive part of me that I’m hiding, and until I can reveal those things, how can Kevin and I ever really get to know each other?”

“It’s definitely complicated,” I said. “I wish I could tell you exactly what the right move is, but I’m not the best person to ask. My own mom didn’t tell me I was part Fae until really recently. Lola kept her werewolf side a secret from me for a long time, even though we’re best friends. In the end, I think it depends on how much you and Kevin trust each other.”

Torin nodded slowly, thinking it over. “So… either way, not tonight. He and I still need to get to know each other a little better. We’re getting there, but we still have a long way to go. Here’s hoping that this party will help with that.” He pointed. “There, turn right at this intersection.”

I followed Torin’s directions, wondering if we were going the right way. There didn’t seem to be anything in this neighborhood but huge houses with sprawling lawns and wrought iron gates.

“Oh, it’s right here!” Torin said, looking up from the GPS on his phone and pointing again.

I pulled into a winding driveway that led to a looming mansion. I was stunned. “Wait, Kevin lives *here*? You never mentioned that he was *rich!*”

Torin shrugged. “I never really thought about it, and you never asked.”

“Fair enough,” I said.

We pulled up at the end of a line of parked cars and climbed out, just as Lola came bounding up excitedly.

“Torin, seriously? What *is* this place?” Lola asked. “It’s so fancy!”

“Yeah, if I’d known it was a mansion party I would’ve worn my formal eye patch,” Jay joked.

“Wait until you see inside,” Torin said. “It’s kind of mind blowing.”

Jacs came walking up, her mouth hanging open. “What does Kevin do for a living? Is he, like, a pop star or something?”

Torin looked confused. “What do you mean?”

“Torin, the guy must be loaded,” Jay said. “Look at this place! The front lawn alone is like, the size of five football fields.”

“This place would even give Lucian pause—for a second,” I said. I’d never really seen Lucian get jealous before, but I was pretty sure this place would strike at least a little envy into his heart. The palace was still bigger and fancier, but Kevin’s house was definitely giving it a run for its money.

“I guess I didn’t really think all that much about it,” Torin said. “Is it important? Was I supposed to ask about it when I first met Kevin on Tinder? Is that something you’re supposed to do?”

He was getting worked up again, so I quickly shook my head. “No, Torin, it’s not. It doesn’t really matter. We’re just surprised, I guess. We had no idea that Kevin had such a big house.”

*And so many fountains, and ornamental hedges…*

Torin bit his lip. “I hope this doesn’t change anything. Kevin has no clue about who—or what—we really are. So we have to be careful.”

“Don’t worry about that, either, Torin,” I said. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that supernaturals tend to hold their cards pretty close to the chest when it comes to humans. They don’t advertise.”

I’d had no idea that Xavier was a werewolf when I first met him. There hadn’t been any telltale signs right off the bat. I kind of blamed Lola for that—though if she’d told me the truth right from the beginning, I doubt I would’ve believed her. I probably wouldn’t have agreed to meet Xavier, either.

Rishika came walking up with a brooding Artemis by her side. “So, are we going in, or are we just going to stand out here and admire the party from afar?”

Torin let out a big breath. “Let’s go.”

He led the way up the cobblestone path to the front door. I could hear loud music blaring from inside the house.

Before Torin could reach for the door, I stopped him and turned to address the group. “Everyone, I just want to say something really quick.”

Jacs rolled her eyes. “Oh no. I feel a lecture coming on.”

Ignoring Jacs, I continued. “Even though this is a chance to blow off some steam and have some fun, we have to remember that the summit is only a couple of days away, and we can’t afford to get into any trouble. We can’t put ourselves—or the pack—in any kind of jeopardy right now.”

I was trying to sound assertive and firm, but all I could think about was how much better this would’ve been if I’d had Greyson with me. He would’ve known exactly what to say, exactly how to deal with this. I didn’t even want to consider the possibility that he might not have allowed us to come here at all. I had to believe that I’d made the right decision… Even though I was nervous as hell that I hadn’t.

“So, yes, just… keep that in mind,” I finished weakly.

I looked around at all of them. Their faces were blank as they stared back at me, and I couldn’t help but wonder if they respected me enough to remember what I’d just said.

**Episode 3827**

Torin opened the door to a large entryway, complete with glossy marble floors and a sparkling chandelier overhead. It was the picture of high class, and we all let out a collective gasp as we stepped across the threshold.

Kevin was only a few feet away downing a drink when he spotted Torin. His eyes lit up with delight as he rushed over.

“Torin! You made it!” He pulled Torin into a tight hug and peered at the rest of us over his shoulder. “And you brought your friends, great! Come on in, everyone!”

Kevin ushered us out of the foyer and into a sprawling living room full of people. The music was loud, but not unpleasantly so, and the drinks were obviously flowing. People were dancing and talking and laughing. It was a nice vibe overall, and I allowed myself to relax a little.

“Welcome, welcome,” Kevin said. “I’m so glad all of you could make it. I’ve been telling all my friends about you, Torin. They can’t wait to meet you!” Kevin spotted me. “And Cali! Great to see you again. Where are Xavier and Greyson?”

I swallowed harshly. Just hearing their names dredged up more feelings than I was prepared to deal with at the moment.

“Oh, they’re both away… On trips!” I burst out.

It was *sort of* true, though I’d had a hell of a time getting the words out of my mouth. I wasn’t prepared to explain any more than that, and luckily, Kevin didn’t ask. He was already leading Torin and the others away, talking excitedly as he waved his hands around.

“This isn’t what I expected,” I said to Lola. “I’m kind of in shock. You could fit, like, three pack houses in here.”

“I know. I didn’t expect this, either,” Lola said. “I figured Kevin and his buds were good for a kegger. Who knew he was filthy rich? Torin had better keep this one.”

I shot Lola a look. “You know Torin isn’t like that. He genuinely likes the guy.” Not only that, but he seemed absolutely unfazed by Kevin’s wealth.

Jacs sucked her teeth, her eyes wide as she looked around. “Torin can like Kevin *and* his money, Cali. The two aren’t mutually exclusive. Besides, there’s nothing wrong with being practical. I’d marry for money in a heartbeat.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course you would.”

We made our way through the house, plucking glasses of champagne from a passing waiter’s tray. The opulence of the place was breathtaking. Torin was right about the inside being even more impressive than the outside. I couldn’t believe that Kevin got to experience this kind of luxury every single day. I never would’ve guessed it, based on the few times I’d met him. Kevin had just seemed like a lowkey, new-age kind of guy. He’d never given any indication that he lived like this. It was a good reminder that you could never judge a book by its cover.

“This kind of reminds me of a Vanguard party… Only without all the craziness,” I said.

“The night’s still young,” Sage quipped.

I hoped that wasn’t an omen. I didn’t want this party to resemble one of Lucian’s. At *all*. Rishika was looking at this event as a test of my ability to keep the pack under control—it had better not morph into a demon orgy or anything. Wrangling that sort of chaos was definitely above my skill level.

*If I even get a hint that something like that’s about to go down, I’m going to grab everyone and get them the heck out of here by any means necessary. I can’t risk things getting out of hand.*

Lola’s eyes went wide. “Look at those drinks over there!” She downed the rest of her champagne, set the empty glass down almost too hard on a table, and went running toward a table full of exotic, strangely-colored cocktails. “Wow. I’ve never seen anything like it!”

Kevin came walking over. “Try one of the Soul Searchers.” He handed swirling multi-colored concoctions to Lola, Jacs, and me. “They’re life-changing.”

Kevin held out his glass to salute us, then rushed off to keep making his rounds as the host.

Jacs wrinkled her nose. “It smells like… I don’t know. But it doesn’t smell good.”

She sniffed the glass some more, almost sticking her entire nose inside.

Lola elbowed Jacs in the side. “Don’t be a weenie. Nothing ventured, you know the rest.” Lola was already sipping her cocktail and seemed to like it. “Tasty.”

I took a swallow of the strange drink. “Mm, it’s actually pretty good.”

It didn’t quite taste like anything I’d ever drunk before, but that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing.

Jacs finally took a tentative sip and managed a small smile. “It’s okay, I guess.” She gestured behind me. “Don’t look now, but some hot guy is totally checking you out.”

Lola smirked. “Too bad for him, I’ve got my Jay with me.”

Still, Lola ran her hands through her hair and gave it a flip.

I glanced over and saw the guy that Jacs was talking about. He was kind of cute, I guessed, but definitely not my type.

“How do you know he’s not looking at you?” I asked Jacs. “There are three of us standing here.”

Jacs scowled. “You and Lola are idiots. He’s clearly checking you out, Cali. It’s obvious.”

I choked on my drink. “What? *Me?* Why?”

Jacs stared at me. “Um… I don’t know? Maybe because you’re hot?” Jacs shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Good thing not *all* Fae are this clueless.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said quickly, taking another gulp of my drink. “I’m not interested.”

“Maybe not, but he’s coming over here anyway. Want us to get rid of him?” Lola asked. She and Jacs both flashed the tips of their fangs, and I nearly spat my drink out at them.

“Stop that!” I hissed. “I don’t even want to imagine what you two would do to him! Don’t worry, I’ll handle it.”

I tried to pretend that I hadn’t noticed the stranger as he approached.

“Hi, I’m Dylan,” he said with a self-assured smile. He held out his hand, and I gave it a shake before quickly pulling my hand away.

Both Jacs and Lola stepped back to watch—and hopefully not rip poor Dylan’s throat out.

“I’m sorry to interrupt you and your friends, but I noticed you the moment you walked in. How come Kevin never mentioned you?” He stepped closer. “Because you’re definitely worth mentioning.” His mouth twitched into a crooked smile.

I wanted to puke at the terrible come-on, but I restrained myself. I could see Lola and Jacs smirking out of the corner of my eye. Smirking was better than fang flashing, as far as I was concerned.

“I appreciate your interest—Dylan, was it? But I have two boyfriends.” I quickly caught myself as Dylan gave me a confused look. “I mean… *a* boyfriend. One.”

I was flustered, and I was sure he could tell. It also felt kind of wrong saying it out loud, even though it was the truth. Xavier had left me, so this was my new reality. I had *one* boyfriend. It shouldn’t have felt so weird, since having two boyfriends would’ve been the weirder scenario to almost anyone else, but it did. It was going to take some getting used to.

Dylan shrugged, unfazed. “We could *make it* two.”

He arched an eyebrow and took a slow, seductive swallow of his drink.

I quickly shifted my gaze and caught sight of Artemis over Dylan’s shoulder. “Oh, I see my sister. Talk to you later.”

I rushed away—the more distance I could put between the two of us, the better. I scuttled over to join the others, who were now standing with Rishika and Artemis.

“Why don’t we go exploring?” I suggested. “I’d love to check out more of this amazing house.”

Artemis didn’t look too thrilled about that idea. She clearly wasn’t happy to be here. I didn’t know what she didn’t like about the place—or the party—but something was rubbing her the wrong way for sure.

Rishika gave Artemis a look, as if silently telling her to relax, then glanced at me. “Sure, let’s take a look around the place. Wouldn’t hurt to scope out all the exits.”

Lola chuckled and came up beside me as we started strolling down a long hallway. “What, things didn’t work out with you and the playboy charmer? That’s a shame.”

I looked at her. “What are you talking about?”

Before Lola could answer, we walked into a huge room with framed pictures hanging from all the walls. I arched my eyebrows as I took in the paintings. They didn’t seem like the type of decor a hot young guy like Kevin would choose. I slowed to a stop under the largest one. It was a family portrait.

Rishika grabbed my arm and pulled me close.

“Cali, we have to get the fuck out of here,” she hissed.

I was confused. “Come on, the paintings aren’t *that* bad. I’m sure we can forgive him a couple of bad decorating choices.”

Rishika shook her head and jabbed a finger at the family portrait. “Cali! That’s Dick Wigbert!”

**Episode 3828**

**Artemis**

Hearing Dick’s name and seeing Cali’s shocked reaction, I looked up at the portrait and my eyes went wide. Rishika was right—in the painting, standing just behind Kevin, was Dick Wigbert. What the fuck? How was that possible?

I reached for the dagger tucked away in the waistband of my jeans and then leaned over to whisper to Rishika. “How does he know Dick? Is this some kind of trap?”

I felt the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. It was weird looking up at Dick like this. It was giving me the creeps.

“Could be,” Rishika said. “But then again, Kevin had no idea we were coming. Torin was the one who invited us, and he isn’t even a wolf. It could just be an awful coincidence, but still, what are the odds?”

“Well, if Dick does decide to make an unwelcome appearance, I’ll be more than happy to conjure up a magic arrow with his name on it.”

I fantasized about sending one of the sparkling energy projectiles flying right at his smug face. I’d had a bad feeling about coming here, and now I wanted nothing more than to leave. Even just a portrait of Dick was too close for comfort. For all we knew, the eyes in his photos were actually cameras, and he was stalking us right this second. I certainly wouldn’t have put it past him.

Kevin came walking over, all smiles. “I see you’ve all entered the chamber of bad art, courtesy of my mother,” he said with a grin. “I really hate this one, though. Mom refuses to take it down, so I have to deal with it,” he said, gesturing at the family portrait.

“Who’s that?” Rishika asked casually as she pointed to Dick Wigbert.

“Oh, you mean Uncle Dick? That’s my mom’s older brother,” Kevin said.

The rest of the pack had started to gather around. I figured they had to have overheard Rishika and me talking and wanted to get to the bottom of this, too.

“Where is he?” I asked innocently. “Do you think he’ll stop by?”

I almost hoped he would.

Kevin shrugged. “Who knows? Uncle Dick’s a lone wolf, always busy chasing his passion. He blew us off at Christmas because he had a lead on some wolf pack. Like, literally. It pissed my mom off, even though she doesn’t like him very much.” He leaned close. “Truthfully, the guy’s certifiable. He’s completely obsessed with wolves. According to my mother, he always has been.”

I couldn’t argue with Kevin on that. Dick Wigbert was about as wolf crazy as a human could get. I wished that we’d taken him out when we’d had the chance. He definitely wasn’t a guy you wanted to have sniffing around. Greyson had been pretty confident that he’d gotten rid of him, but Dick was the type who might just lie low for a while, only to reemerge when you least expected it.

“Anyway, I suggest we leave old Dick behind. I don’t think you all came here to discuss my family, right?” Kevin lifted his glass. “You came here to party! Come on!”

He turned and left, motioning for everyone to follow.

“Aren’t you coming?” Rishika asked as she grabbed my hand.

“Yes,” I said absently. “In a few minutes. Go ahead without me. I’ll catch up.”

I couldn’t take my eyes off the portrait.

Rishika gave my hand a gentle tug so that I turned my attention to her, and then she narrowed her eyes at me. “You’re not going to deface Dick’s portrait, are you? I dislike the guy as much as anyone, but I don’t think that’s the right move. Torin would be horrified.”

I still had my hand on my dagger. “You know, that hadn’t occurred to me. But now that you mention it, a slash or two might not be such a bad idea.”

Maybe I’d cut his face out of the portrait altogether. Kevin’s mom probably wouldn’t mind. Too much.

Rishika glared at me. “We don’t want to signal that there’s any connection between us and Wigbert. We have to be cautious but subtle. Okay?”

I nodded and sighed. “Okay, okay. I’ll behave. I just need a few minutes.”

Rishika pulled me into a hug. “Okay. Just don’t let Innes ruin your night. And don’t be too long—I think we should stick together.”

Rishika pressed a quick kiss to my lips, then went to join the others.

*Wow. She knows me so well.*

I slowly let my hand drop away from the hilt of the dagger. Of course I was still brooding over my grandfather. It occurred to me that my overall sour mood had nothing to do with Kevin or this house or even Dick’s portrait—I was just mad about hitting yet another dead end with Kadmos. It seemed like no matter where I turned, I couldn’t get any answers about my father. I was starting to wonder if I’d *ever* find out what I needed to know.

I was getting madder by the second. I just didn’t get it. Grandpa Innes could’ve helped, but he’d refused. He was my grandfather—why *wouldn’t* I be pissed that he’d refused to tell me about something so important? I might’ve been new to the whole having a family thing, but I’d seen enough to know that family members were supposed to look out for each other. Even Kevin’s mother kept Dick’s portrait around. Family ties had to mean something, even if you didn’t particularly like certain members of your family. It was kind of the name of the game, as far as I could tell.

I walked away from the portrait and took in the grandiosity surrounding me. This place reminded me of the Vanguard palace—and also the Kollector. There was just too much of everything. Too much sparkling light, too much shiny marble, too many amazing chandeliers. It was like the house was trying too hard.

I wandered down the hallway and came upon a small study. I went inside, shut the door, and settled into a chair, then I removed the small flask I’d hidden in the inside pocket of my leather jacket. I’d swiped a bit of Mom’s special tea without her knowing. Grandpa Innes might have thought he was done with me, but I wasn’t done with him. Not by a long shot.

I opened the bottle and took a long drink. Then I put the flask away, leaned back in the chair, and closed my eyes.

Within a few minutes, I was back in the glen. I looked around but didn’t immediately spot him.

“Hello?” I called out. “Grandpa Innes? I know you’re here! I’m back!” I spun around, scanning the area. I made my way toward the tree stumps. “I dare you to show your face! I’m not going to stop coming after you until you answer me!”

A cool wind stirred the leaves around me, and I stopped. If I’d somehow summoned the Kollector this time, I was going to greet him with one of my magic arrows. But instead of anyone making themselves known, the glen turned dark, and I heard the sound of muffled voices.

I reached back and clutched my dagger, wondering if it would even work in this tea-concocted Fae world. *I guess there’s only one way to find out…*

“Do you think she can hear me?” said a man’s tender voice.

*Whose voice was that?* I spun around quickly, trying to catch anyone who might be hiding just out of sight.

The man continued. “I want her to know that I can’t wait to meet her… And that she will always be the greatest achievement of my life. I will protect and love her until the day I die.”

I was so confused. There was something familiar about the voice, but I couldn’t place it. *Who is this man? Who is he talking to?*

The man began to hum a soft melody, then broke off.

“I’m sorry,” he said with a chuckle. “Sorry I’m not a better singer. Maybe I’ll be better when I come back. I’ll practice so that you can actually enjoy it when I sing to you, deal?”

I looked around. “Who is that? Where are you?”

I started running toward the stumps again, determined to find whoever was talking. I still couldn’t shake the feeling that I knew the voice—it was familiar and not, all at the same time.

The darkness finally began to lift, and I spotted a figure in the distance. I picked up my speed, determined to find out who it was. I felt my hope rising, but I knew that I couldn’t give in to it. I’d dealt with enough disappointment in my life, and I wasn’t about to set myself up for more.

A wave of uncertainty stopped me in my tracks. I let my hands drop to my sides, and then I just stood there, peering at the figure. “Who are you?”

**Episode 3829**

**Greyson**

Elle immediately hopped to her feet and jabbed Helix in his side, waking him.

*Time to go*, she said. She seemed a little antsy. Cagey, even.

*You good?* I asked her.

*I’m good*, she replied. *Just anxious to get to my father.*

Helix sat up, yawning and stretching. *Go? Yes. Go!* Excitement was already shining in his eyes.

I looked at the path ahead, glad that we were able to move again now that the fog had lifted. The sooner we took care of Ranger, the sooner I’d be able to get back to Cali. I’d heard the anxiety in her voice when I’d told her that I might be arriving late to the summit, and I didn’t like it at all.

Once again, I cursed the timing of this issue with Elle’s old pack. I was more than happy to help Elle, but I still felt like I was losing valuable time that could’ve been spent strategizing for the summit. Not to mention spending time with Cali.

She was still pretty torn up about Xavier being gone, and that was unfortunate, but I had to admit that I was enjoying having her all to myself. Cali was pretty much always on my mind when I was away from her for any amount of time, but it seemed like ever since she’d gotten the fake Luna mark, I thought about her constantly. I didn’t mind it. Thinking about seeing Cali gave me something to look forward to.

*How much farther do you think we have to go?* Elle asked as we got under way. I could hear the impatience in her voice.

*It is still a long way*,Helix replied.

That might have been the case, but I could tell that Helix was growing eager, which meant we were definitely getting closer. He kept running ahead of us, and I kept having to pull him back into step with Elle and me.

*Helix, you can’t just go running off, remember?* I asked.

He obviously had a short memory, because no sooner had he finally moved back into place beside me than he was speeding up and bounding ahead again. I nipped at his heels, and he slowed down.

*Sorry!* he said sheepishly.

*Don’t be sorry, just stop doing it!* I snapped.

I knew I wasn’t being very nice, but babysitting a new werewolf was the absolute last thing I felt like doing right now. Thankfully, Helix had finally gotten the message. He calmed down and remained in step with us as we sped toward our destination.

I relaxed and let my mind wander a bit as we ran, my thoughts flying right back to where they always did—Cali. I wondered what she was doing right now. I hoped she was enjoying herself and not worrying too much about the summit. She was going to do great there, whether I was with her from the start or not.

I wasn’t sure how long we’d been running when I snapped back to attention. I looked around and realized that we’d probably crossed the border into Idaho not long ago. I recognized the shift in temperature, and there was a slightly different smell in the air.

*We’re probably not far from Hells Canyon*, I thought to myself. I quickly fought off the hopeful idea that I might still make it back to the summit in time. There was nothing that I wanted more than to be at Cali’s side when she made her initial appearance there, but I couldn’t count on anything until I saw what kind of trouble I was up against with the natural wolf pack.

*I’m picking up some unfamiliar werewolf scents*, Elle said. *I think they’re coming from our left.*

I slowed to a stop. The last thing we needed was to run into a tangle with some Rogues. Helix was hard enough to control as it was—I didn’t even want to think about what it’d be like trying to keep him in check during a fight. Still, there was no question that our journey had taken us through some other pack’s territories, which technically made us trespassers.

*Stay close*, I told Elle and Helix when I noticed sudden movement out of the corner of my eye.

I turned around, just as a reddish wolf stepped out from behind a tree, a young woman perched on his back.

I growled and dipped my head low as I stepped out in front of Elle and Helix, blocking them from the strange wolf. I wasn’t in the mood for a fight, but I would give this stranger hell if I had to. The red wolf backed up slightly, clearly surprised, but also ready for whatever came his way.

He was standing completely still and considering me quietly, his head cocked.

*Are you Colton’s brother?* The wolf’s mind link was not at all unfriendly, but I stayed alert.

I was a little thrown by the mention of Colton. I hadn’t thought much about Xavier’s twin since he’d left with Maya. But, knowing Colton, the red wolf could easily be one of his enemies, out to settle a score by picking a fight with me.

*Who’s asking?* I replied.

*Porter*, the red wolf said. *From the Cobalt pack*.

He stood up straighter, puffing out his chest.

I paused. I wasn’t familiar with the Cobalt pack. I didn’t think I’d ever encountered it, even in my wild Rogue days. And why was this wolf asking about Colton?

*If I had to guess*, Porter continued, *I’d say you’re either Xavier or Greyson Evers. Am I right?*

*Why do you assume that?* I shot back. But strangely enough, Porter’s additional questions were lessening my wariness rather than intensifying it.

*Because the resemblance to Colton is obvious. There’s something about your eyes*, Porter said good-naturedly.

*Whatever Colton did or didn’t do has nothing to do with me*, I said. I didn’t have time to get dragged into whatever mess Colton was stirring up out in the world. I had my own problems. *He’s always been irresponsible*, I grumbled before I could catch myself. Colton was basically the worst version of Xavier, which said it all.

Porter laughed. *Oh—so you must be Greyson.*

I ducked my head, deciding to acknowledge that. *I am. It’s been great meeting you and all, but I have to go.*

*Fine*, Porter said. *But you might want to reconsider your opinion of Colton, at least in part. He saved my pack.*

That was surprising, to say the least. It would’ve made more sense for this strange wolf to have said that Colton had *destroyed* his pack, if anything. From what I knew of my half-brother, he wasn’t the sentimental type, and it was hard to picture him sticking his neck out for anyone. I wondered for a split second if we really *were* talking about the same guy.

*I don’t know Colton too well anymore*, I said. *But what I remember of him isn’t all that positive, if I’m being honest. He can be a little shit.*

*Colton pretty much said the same thing about you*, Porter said dryly. *Sorry, I haven’t introduced you to Rowena.*

Porter lifted his head slightly, and the woman climbed off his back just as Porter shifted.

“This is my wife, Rowena,” Porter said, out loud this time. “Rowena, this is Colton’s half-brother, Greyson.”

Reluctantly, I shifted, too. Helix and Elle both did the same.

“Nice to meet you, Rowena,” I said. “This is Elle and Helix.”

“Hello,” Elle and Helix said shyly.

“Hi,” Rowena said breezily. “I do remember Colton mentioning you a few times, Greyson.”

I considered the woman standing before me. I could sense that she wasn’t a werewolf.

“Where’s the Cobalt pack house?” I asked. “Near here?”

“No, we’re based near the Craters of the Moon,” Porter answered.

“Wow. You’re pretty far from home,” I said. “What brings you out this way?”

I was relaxing more by the second, though I was still a bit on guard. That was my default state, these days. I’d felt Elle and Helix tense up behind me when we’d first run into Porter and Rowena, but now they seemed more relaxed, too.

“We’re on our way to the summit,” Rowena said. “We decided to take the scenic route. Wait… Aren’t you the Redwood Alpha?” she asked. “That part, I doremember.”

“Aren’t you headed in the wrong direction?” Porter asked me. “I assume you’re heading to the summit, too? I hear that everyone who’s anyone is going,” he said dryly.

I smirked. “Yeah, I am, but I have some business to attend to first.”

Porter nodded. “Cool. Well, I look forward to seeing you there. Maybe Rowena and the Redwood Luna can hang out? We’ve been out on the road for a while—I’m sure she could use some girl time.”

“You have no idea,” Rowena said with feeling.

I eyed Rowena. “So, you’re the Cobalt Luna?”

She’d been riding Porter as a human—was she not a wolf? Rowena nodded and twisted around, showing me the symbol on her back. “Yes, and I have the Luna mark to prove it. Hurt like hell.”

“But she took it like a pro,” Porter said proudly.

My mind was already racing. Rowena wasn’t a wolf, yet she had the Luna mark… And as far as I could tell, she still had all her fingers, toes, and wits about her, which meant the Luna mark ceremony hadn’t left her any worse for wear.

If she could survive it, then that meant Cali might be able to, too.

**Episode 3830**

**Xavier**

I was pissed.

“What do you mean by that?” I demanded. “Why would you ask me if announcing my Alpha ascension at the summit includes Cali?”

This was the last thing I wanted to talk about—especially with Ava. I hadn’t even wrapped my own head around what any of this was going to look like, so I definitely wasn’t in any mood to workshop it with her. I just wanted to go to sleep and dream about Cali.

Ava eyed me coolly. “Relax. You’re the one who said that everyone would find out at the same time, so it’s a valid question, wouldn’t you say? Anyway, I’m not asking if you’re over her. I’m not that masochistic. I’m simply asking if you’re going to keep your new role hidden from her.”

I clenched my jaw, biting back every angry word I wanted to say.

“Didn’t I already say that I wouldn’t let anything interfere with my duty to the Samara pack?” I’d said it, and I meant it. I was still adjusting to this new direction my life had taken, but that didn’t mean that I was going to let my duty fall by the wayside.

Ava shrugged. “That’s what you said, yes. But I’m not stupid, Xavier. I know how complicated this situation is.” She sighed and crossed her arms. “Obviously, Cali and I aren’t BFFs, but I think it might be quite a shock for your mate to find out that you’re now the Samara Alpha. Announcing it at the summit with her there would almost be like breaking up with her via text. Don’t you think she deserves better?”

I looked closely at Ava, but I wasn’t quite able to decipher the look on her face. She didn’t look mad, and she didn’t look like she was toying with me, either. I wasn’t exactly sure what her game was, but I knew I didn’t like it.

“I’m not stupid, I said. “There’s no way I believe that you’re looking out for Cali’s best interests. What’s this really about, Ava?”

Ava laughed. “Okay. Got it. You want to pretend you don’t care. That’s up to you, I guess, but there’s a lot at stake here. Cali *will* care, and that could bring trouble to the alliance. Don’t you think that’s something to consider?”

She had a point. If *I* found out something big about Cali at the summit, I’d probably take it badly. But I couldn’t explain what had happened to Cali—not in the way that I wanted. Even if I could, there was a chance it might make things *less* thorny between us, which was what I wanted but couldn’t dare risk. Cali had to keep hating me, no matter how much it hurt both of us. Her life depended on it.

“You might not believe me,” I said, “but I’m over caring about the *due destini* and Cali.”

Ava snorted and rolled her eyes. “You’re right—I don’t believe you. I know how *due destini* works. It’s out of your control. Until Cali makes her choice, it will always hang over you. Forever and ever.”

“There’s no choice to be made!” I snapped. “I’m not with the Redwoods, and I’m not with Cali. I’m here with the Samaras, and with you—or hadn’t you noticed? Do you ever wonder why you’re always questioning me about this? Maybe it’s because you’re insecure. Maybe you don’t really believe that I want to be Samara Alpha—and if that’s true, then maybe I know who cast that third vote against me.”

I was definitely speaking out of anger, but I couldn’t help myself. Ava should’ve known better than to bring up Cali. She was a sore subject, and I had enough on my plate without talking about my current mate with my old one.

*Is Cali even my mate anymore? How can I say that she is, with things the way they are? It definitely* feels *like she is…*

Ava shook her head and let out a genuine chuckle. “Give me a break, X. Do you really believe that? That I would go to all this trouble to get you to even *consider* becoming Alpha, and then bring you here and let my pack put you through a fucking Iudicium only to turn my back on you? Have you been drinking?” She smirked up at me, still with that unbothered look on her face. “Get real.”

A bit of silence passed between us before I spoke again.

“I wouldn’t put anything past you,” I said. “Though I doubt you’d do that. You’re a lot of things, but you’re not stupid,” I added, a bit of my anger slipping away.

Ava smiled. “Well, at least we agree on something.” She settled back onto her bed. “If you don’t want to give Cali advance notice, then that’s your call. You won’t hear me bringing it up again.”

“Is that a promise?” I muttered.

Deciding to let it go, I settled back on the couch. I cast a sidelong glance at Ava. My wolf was crying out to join her, but I was hardly in the mood. All that talk about Cali had only made me miss her more. I felt like I was spiraling a little. I should’ve been concentrating on my new role—maybe even coming up with a game plan for how to present the pack at the summit—but instead, I was lying on a lumpy couch in a trailer, barely four feet away from my ex, longing for Cali.

I could admit that much of what Ava had said had some truth to it, but there wasn’t much I could do about it. Adéluce had made sure of that. The vampire-witch had my hands tied, and there wasn’t a damn thing I could do right now but bide my time. I just had to believe that Cali was strong enough not to blow up the entire alliance because of me.

I lay there in the dark until I was sure that Ava had fallen asleep, then I slipped off the couch and grabbed my phone. I really hated this Airstream. It was way too cramped, with absolutely nowhere to go for privacy. Quietly, I stepped outside. I wasn’t surprised to see that some of the Samaras were still up partying, but luckily they didn’t notice me—or if they did, they gave me space, which I appreciated.

Sticking to the shadows, I found Cali’s voicemail in my messages folder. I pressed play and held the phone tightly to my ear. It was one she’d sent recently, and it had fast become one of my favorites because she called me a dick and a raging asshole, and it was always funny to hear Cali curse like that. Especially with so much feeling behind it. But it wasn’t really about the message. I just needed to hear her voice. It was like a drug to me—calming and dangerous at the same time.

“Caliana,” I murmured as I listened. Her words tore at my heart. She still loved me. I’d abandoned her, I’d spoken to her in a way that had damn near made me sick to my stomach, and she still wanted to talk to me. It was a pissed-off voicemail, granted, but she still wanted me. “Shit!” I burst out.

*Why? Why does she still care about me after what I did to her? How could she want anything to do with me? What more do I have to do to make her hate me?*

But I already knew the answer. Showing up at the summit as the Samara Alpha with Ava by my side was sure to drive a knife right through Cali’s heart. If she didn’t hate me after that, she’d be pretty damn close.

*Ava was right about that, too. It will totally blindside her.*

Even though I’d been lying when I’d told Cali that Ava and I had been fucking behind her back, I knew deep down that she hadn’t believed a word of it. Maybe the summit would be the final straw. Maybe her seeing me there with proof that I was living what looked like the new life that I’d chosen over her would finally tear us apart forever.

I sighed and replayed the voicemail. I closed my eyes and held my breath as I listened, taking comfort in the sound of Cali’s voice, and even in the anger and hurt that I heard there. It was all I had of her, and it would have to be enough for now.

When the message finished playing for the second time, I had to stop myself from starting it up again. I shoved my phone into my pocket and stared up at the sky, not wanting to go back into the Airstream with my emotions so raw.

I heard a laugh and glanced across the campsite to see Marissa talking to Jesse. I’d told everyone that tomorrow would be the day I officially took charge of the pack and started preparing them for the summit—but maybe I could start a little earlier.

I marched over and grabbed Jesse by the arm. “Come with me.”

**Episode 3831**

Rishika took my arm and pulled me away from the portrait room.

“It’s not safe for us to be here,” she whispered to me. “Dick Wigbert almost killed Mrs. Smith. He’s not a good guy, Cali.”

“I remember,” I said. “And I’m not saying he is. But maybe we should talk to Torin? Do you think he has any idea that Wigbert is Kevin’s uncle?”

I couldn’t imagine that Torin would’ve brought us here if that were the case, but who knew? Stranger things had happened. Maybe Torin knew but didn’t realize the danger that Dick presented to the pack—but that didn’t sound right, either.

Rishika paused, like she was considering it. “I can’t imagine that he does. But doesn’t this seem like *too* much of a coincidence to you? What are the odds? Maybe we should go back to the source. I could easily get Kevin to spill everything he knows,” she said grimly. “Wouldn’t take long, either.”

I winced. I didn’t want to ponder Rishika’s interrogation tactics. There was no way I was going to let anything happen to Kevin. I wasn’t about to let things spiral out of control on my watch. If I was going to be Luna, I needed to be able to handle something as simple as this, right?

*Why couldn’t this have been just an average, innocent, run-of-the-mill party? Why can’t the Redwoods ever just enjoy themselves without diving headfirst into some kind of drama?*

This was obviously something that Greyson needed to know about. I didn’t want to jump to any conclusions, but maybe it would be best if Torin stopped seeing Kevin. Even if Torin didn’t know anything about Kevin being related to Dick, I didn’t know if there was any way for it *not* to blow up in our faces at some point down the line if they kept seeing each other.

*Torin would take having to break up with Kevin really hard*, I thought. *He said on the car ride over that he’s falling for him. How can we just tell Torin who he can and can’t see, anyway? I certainly wouldn’t like to be told that. Who would? But if it’s the best thing for the pack, then maybe it’s a sacrifice he’d have to make…*

I heard Torin’s voice and turned to see him laughing with a bunch of guys. He looked so happy, and he was definitely in party mode. It looked like he was making headway with Kevin’s friends, and I hated to spoil his fun, but this was serious.

I turned back to Rishika. “Don’t go interrogating anyone just yet. I’m going to go speak to Torin.”

I went over and grabbed him.

“Hey, can I talk to you for a sec?” I asked.

“Sure,” Torin said. He flashed the guys a polite smile. “I’ll be right back,” he said before following me to a safe distance to talk. “So, are you having fun? Kevin is an amazing host, don’t you think? He thought about every detail of this party, and it shows. I’ve been trying to find something wrong, but I haven’t found a thing. Kevin is just… the best.”

“About that,” I said as I led him back over to Rishika. “Did you know that Dick Wigbert is Kevin’s uncle?”

“Wait what?” Torin said, the smile slowly fading from his lips. Then the smile came back, and he laughed. “You almost got me there, Cali! That was a pretty good joke.”

“This is no laughing matter,” Rishika snapped.

“Whoa, listen. If that really is the case, then I had no idea. That just seems like… How is that even possible? Are you sure?” Torin asked, looking between Rishika and me.

“Kevin admitted it,” I said.

It didn’t feel good to see the pained look flash across Torin’s face.

“I’ve heard enough,” Rishika said. “Let’s just get out of here. For all we know, this entire thing is a setup.”

“Wait,” Torin said. “Just because Dick is his uncle, that doesn’t make Kevin a dangerous person.” He turned to me. “Cali, you should understand that more than anyone. Xavier and Greyson are Silas’s sons—does that make them evil?”

I looked at Rishika and then back at Torin and shrugged. “You have a point.”

“Kevin rarely sees his family,” Torin reasoned. “He doesn’t even live in this house—he stays in the pool house out back. It would be crazy to judge him for the things his family does. If we did that, a whole lot of people in the pack house would be considered threats, wouldn’t they?”

“Maybe I should go have a talk with Kevin,” Rishika said to me. She didn’t seem to be listening to Torin at all.

Torin’s eyes went wide. “What do you mean, ‘have a talk’ with him? You’re not going to hurt him, are you?” Torin looked at me. “Cali, don’t let her hurt him. He has nothing to do with what Wigbert did!”

“All right everyone, calm down!” I said, then trained my attention on Rishika. “There’s no evidence that Kevin is up to anything. Torin’s right. We can’t just assume that Kevin is working with Dick. I’m not even sure Dick is still a threat. Remember, Rishika—Artemis used her mind control to make Dick forget about werewolves and move on. You might be getting all worked up over something that’s probably just a fluke.”

I hoped that Rishika would listen to reason. In my experience, she usually did—at least when Greyson was the one in charge.

“Actually, I don’t remember Artemis mind controlling Dick—from what I’m told, she accidentally affected my memory, too,” Rishika said.

“So… Since you still can’t remember, then the same is probably true for Dick, right?” I said. “If Artemis accidentally wiped your memory and it’s still gone, then Artemis definitely wiped Dick’s mind on *purpose*,right?”

Rishika looked away, clearly thinking. “I guess. Hopefully.”

Then I realized something, and I looked around the room. “Speaking of, has anyone *seen* Artemis? Last I saw her was in the room with the portrait. Where’d she go?”

I hoped she hadn’t decided to bail without telling anyone. It had been clear that Artemis had been feeling off since our visit with our grandfather. Maybe she’d decided she wasn’t in the partying mood and had taken the first opportunity to get out of Dodge.

“She said she needed a few minutes alone, but I told her not to be too long,” Rishika said. “Come on; let’s go find her.”

We’d just begun our search when we ran right into Jacs. She was holding another one of the multi-colored cocktails, this one a different color than her first, and was sipping it slowly.

“Hey, Cali. What happened to that hot guy you were talking to?” Jacs asked.

“Who? Dylan?” I asked. I’d completely forgotten about him. “He was kind of a jerk. Why are you looking for him?”

“Maybe he was a jerk to you, but he and I kind of hit it off. Besides, if he *is* a jerk, I know how to take care of that. Trust me.” She flashed her fangs.

“Oh my god, I never should’ve brought you guys,” Torin grumbled.

“Really, Jacqueline, stop doing that!” I said.

“Anyway, Dylan and I made plans to go check out the hot tub, but I can’t find him. Help me look,” Jacs said.

I groaned. “Jacs, I don’t care about Dylan, okay?” I couldn’t believe she was interested in him. He seemed like one of those guys who followed pick-up artists on social media. “I’m looking for Artemis. Have you seen her?”

Jacs shook her head and flashed me a bored look. “Do you guys have any idea how much you all lose track of each other? I swear, half my conversations in the pack house begin with someone asking me if I’ve seen someone else.” Jacs eyes lit up. “Ooh, is that him?”

She scurried off without giving any of us a second glance.

“Screw this,” Rishika said. “I’ll just track Artemis’s scent.”

I followed Rishika, my anxiety growing by the second. I hoped that I was right and that there was nothing to worry about on the Dick Wigbert front. Maybe it was just bad luck that Torin’s new love interest happened to be related to a person who most of the pack wanted dead.

I sighed. This was my first “test” as Luna, and already Lola and Jacs had flashed their fangs way too many times, we’d lost Artemis, and we were partying in a house that belonged to some of Dick Wigbert’s relatives. It would’ve been funny if I hadn’t been on the edge of a freak-out.

“She went this way for sure,” Rishika said. She sniffed the air as she led the way down the hallway to a closed door. “Bingo.”

She turned the knob and opened the door.

I didn’t know why I was holding my breath as it opened, but I was. I gasped, trying to make sense of what I was seeing. Artemis was passed out in a chair with tears rolling down her cheeks, and Dylan was standing over her with a flask in his hand.

Rishika rushed Dylan and slammed him into the wall. “What in the *hell* have you done?”

**Episode 3832**

**Artemis**

I held my breath as the figure slowly turned to face me. My heart was pounding with excitement. *Could this really be my father? Am I really about to see him right here, right now?*

I took a few steps forward, hoping that I was finally about to get what I’d been wanting for so long.

But my hope was dashed when I finally saw who the figure was. Grandpa Innes. My disappointment was quickly replaced by anger. Had he misled me on purpose? Had he been playing with my emotions? Why would he do that? Wasn’t it obvious how important this was to me? Or did he just not care?

“*You!*” I screamed at him. I immediately summoned a magic arrow and fired it at him. I wanted nothing more than to put him out of his misery. Grandfather or not, I didn’t like being toyed with.

Too bad Grandpa Innes had other plans. He was much faster than his age would suggest, and he easily evaded my arrow.

“Artemis, calm yourself. You aren’t thinking straight. You need to let go of your anger!” he said.

I was past that point. If I couldn’t shoot him, I was just going to have to fight him. I’d managed to touch him during our first encounter, which meant I could hit him. There was nothing I wanted more than to make him feel the pain I was feeling.

I lunged at him, but he caught my fist before it could make contact, and we went tumbling to the ground, both struggling to win the upper hand.

“Stop moving!” I yelled.

I was trying desperately to pin Grandpa Innes down so that I could punch him properly, but he was too fast for me. Every time I thought I had him, he’d jerk away and I’d end up hitting nothing but air. Once or twice, my fist plowed into the ground, and I screamed in frustration. Luckily nothing broke, but it still hurt like hell.

“You must stop this now, Artemis!” he said. He vaulted up from the ground with a surprising burst of strength, knocking me off-balance.

Undeterred, I found my footing and went after him again, but it was no use. No matter how many punches, kicks, or lunges I threw his way, none of my strikes ever connected.

Grandpa Innes grabbed my wrists and tried to hold me still.

“Let go of me!” I screamed, twisting in his grip. But I couldn’t get free of him. “Why won’t you just tell me what I want to know!”

I was running out of steam, but I used the last of my strength to pull away from him as hard as I could. I almost shouted with glee when I managed to free one hand.

*Now I’ll show him! If he won’t tell me the easy way, I’ll make him tell me the hard way.*

I reached for my dagger, but as soon as my hand touched the hilt, I was hit by a surge of energy that threw me back, knocking the dagger from my hands and slamming me into a tree. I rolled over onto my back, waiting for my vision to clear and the pain to subside.

“I don’t want to fight you,” Grandpa Innes said, a sad look on his face.

“I don’t care what you want!” I growled, hot tears running down my cheeks. “And if you don’t want to fight, then tell me about Kadmos! Why won’t you help me?”

His tone was soft when he finally responded. “Because, Artemis, I’m trying to protect you.”

“Sure you are,” I said. I spotted my dagger on the ground between us.

He gestured to it. “Go ahead. Pick it up. You can use it if you like, but it won’t do you any good. I died long ago. You can’t kill what’s already dead.”

I hesitated for a moment, and a fog seemed to lift from my mind.

*What the hell am I doing? Was I really just trying to kill my own grandfather? What’s wrong with me?*

I let out a sigh and finally managed to rise up to a seated position. My entire body ached, but I probably deserved it for going after my grandfather like a wild animal. I was just desperate to learn anything at all about my father, and I was willing to go to any lengths for information.

“I’m just looking for answers,” I said quietly.

Grandpa Innes held out a hand, and after a moment’s hesitation, I took it.

“I understand what you’re going through, Artemis. I can only imagine how difficult this has been for you,” he said.

With Grandpa Innes’s help, I hopped to my feet and dusted myself off. My grandfather’s warm, calloused hand was definitely comforting, and I needed a bit of comfort right about now.

“Artemis, you have to understand that I do want to help you,” he said. “You and Caliana are my only grandchildren—the last thing I want to do is harm you. Why can’t you see that?”

I wiped away my tears. “Then why won’t you help me? Why are you refusing to talk about my dad? Don’t you understand that not knowing the first thing about my father is hurting me? It eats at me every single day! How is refusing to tell me anything about Kadmos protecting me? If anything, it’s *killing me!*”

Grandpa Innes took me by the elbow and guided me to one of the tree stumps. He helped me to sit down and then sat beside me. He heaved a big sigh, looked up at the sky, and then looked back at me again. I could tell that he was considering whether he wanted to tell me whatever was on his mind, and I was hoping like hell that he would. I’d traveled all the way to New Orleans to find information about my dad, but I’d come up empty. There’d been so much going on since then that I hadn’t even had time to consider what my next move could be. Now that everything I’d been looking for was so close, I wanted it more than ever.

Grandpa Innes’s eyes were kind when he spoke. “Close your eyes, Artemis.”

I did as I was told, and when he told me to open them again, I found myself in a large, ornate room. Mom, much younger and brimming with joy, was seated beside a handsome, uniformed man who reminded me of Adair.

*Is that my father? Is that him, finally?* My heart was still hammering away in my chest. I’d waited so long to see him, and now that I finally had, I could barely believe it. I looked to my left and saw a much younger Innes and Hera.

“Why have you brought us here?” young Innes asked my mom.

She opened her mouth to speak, then seemed to grow overwhelmed with emotion. She turned to the man beside her, searching his gaze. “Tell them,” she said. “Tell them, Kadmos.”

My heart jumped, and then it finally slowed. It felt like the first time I’d breathed calmly in far too long. *Finally*, I was looking at my father.

Young Kadmos smiled. “Innes, Hera—Orla and I are going to have a baby daughter.”

My grandparents both gasped and then embraced each other in excitement. The happiness was obvious on both their faces, and my mom and Kadmos looked at the two older Fae with excitement.

The image slowly faded, and then I was back in the glen with Grandpa Innes. I grabbed his hand and looked him in the eye.

“She was pregnant with me?” I asked.

He smiled. “Yes, she was. It was one of the happiest days of her life, and I remember it like it was yesterday.”

I leaned toward my grandfather, wanting to hear more. I couldn’t believe that I’d finally found what I was looking for. But even now, I could only think about how much more I didn’t know.

“Is my father still alive?” I asked. My stomach twisted. I needed this answer. Didn’t he understand that? Couldn’t he see it?

He looked away for a moment, his smile fading. “The path you’re on is a dark one, Artemis.”

I shook my head at him, my frustration rising again. “I don’t care about any of that—not right now. My entire life has been a dark path, anyway,” I said, laughing bitterly. “Mostly because I’ve always felt so lost. But now that I know more about my father, maybe that can change. So tell me, Grandfather. I have to know. I have a right to.”

A pained expression crossed his face as he looked at me. “I wish that I could tell you what you want to hear, Artemis,” he said. “You have no idea what I would give not to have to tell you this. But after that day, I never saw Kadmos again. I’ve never even seen him here.”

**Episode 3833**

I ran up to my sister, trying to curb my rising panic. Rishika and Dylan were shouting at each other, and Artemis still hadn’t moved a muscle. Clearly, she was out cold.

I reached out and shook her. “Artemis? Artemis! Wake up! Can you hear me? Artemis?”

I turned to Dylan. He had dropped the flask and was busy protesting his innocence.

“I’m just as confused as you are,” he said to Rishika. “So stop yelling at me! It’s not helping. You don’t even know all the facts, and you’re jumping to conclusions!”

“Shut up! I’m the one talking here!” Rishika said.

“Exactly!” Dylan said, throwing up his hands.

I picked up the flask from the floor. “What is this? Dylan, did you give whatever’s in this to Artemis? Is that why she’s like this?”

Dylan glared between Rishika and me. “*No!* When are you two going to *listen* to me? I didn’t do anything!”

Rishika merely tightened her fists in reply.

“Okay, explain,” I said firmly, knowing I was ready to blast him at a moment’s notice if I decided he was lying about not hurting my sister.

“I found the girl like this with the flask in her hand. I thought she drank too much and needed help. But I don’t have the slightest idea what she drank. Isn’t she *your* sister? Isn’t it *your* job to know what she drank?” Dylan snapped, straightening his shirt from where Rishika had grabbed him. “Talk about a buzzkill,” he muttered.

Rishika shoved Dylan to the side. “That *is* Artemis’s flask,” she told me. “Now I recognize it.”

“*See?*” Dylan burst, throwing his hands up.

I ignored him.

“Really?” I held it up to my nose and sniffed it. It smelled suspiciously like the Fae tea Mom had made. I breathed a sigh of relief. “Artemis isn’t in any danger,” I said. I glanced at Dylan, knowing that I couldn’t say much more with him around.

The door opened, and Jacs poked her head in, instantly focusing on Dylan.

“There you are,” she said with a smile. “What happened to that dip in the hot tub you promised me?” She drew her lips into a pout.

Dylan quickly headed toward Jacs, but Rishika jumped in his path and grabbed him again. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“W-What? Why?” Dylan stammered, struggling to get out of Rishika’s hold. He looked terrified.

Jacs glared at Rishika. “What is *wrong* with you? Do any of you ever chill? Sheesh!”

“Rishika,” I said, edging closer. Dylan was pretty much shaking like a leaf, and surprisingly, I kind of felt bad for the guy. “Don’t beat him up. It’s okay. This isn’t his fault.” I looked at Jacs. “Go, and take him with you.”

Jacs reached through the door and took Dylan’s hand, smiling flirtatiously. “My pleasure. Come with me—I’ll help you forget all about these rage junkies.”

Once they were gone, Rishika rounded on me, frantic. “What the hell is going on here? What’s wrong with Artemis?” Her voice was no longer angry. Now, it was choked with emotion. “Why won’t she wake up?”

I held up the flask. “She drank my mother’s tea. You know, the one that sends us into the Fae dream world to talk to dead people? She’s just in a sort of sleep state. She’s not hurt or passed out or anything.”

Rishika nodded slowly. “Oh, yeah. *That* tea.”

“I couldn’t tell you that in front of Dylan. He’s already probably wondering what the hell is up with Torin’s friends.”

I hoped that we’d stayed more under the radar than it seemed, otherwise we really weren’t doing our duty in supporting Torin tonight. Though with everything that had happened since we’d walked through Kevin’s door, I wasn’t sure that things could’ve turned out any other way.

Rishika knelt down beside Artemis and stroked her face. “Why would she drink that tea here, of all places? She’s completely vulnerable right now.”

“I wish I knew,” I said. “I guess she was obsessed with talking to our grandfather again about Kadmos. She’s been looking for answers for so long… Though why she’d choose to look for those answers at Kevin’s party is anyone’s guess.”

“It’s my fault,” Rishika said. “She wasn’t up for a party, and I guilted her into coming. I shouldn’t have done that. I know her. If she doesn’t want to do something, if she doesn’t want to go somewhere, I should take her word for it.”

“It’s okay, Rishika, don’t blame yourself,” I said.

“But I do. I knew she didn’t want to come, and I forced her. I thought it might cheer her up. Music, drinks, a change of scenery. We don’t get out of the pack house that much—at least for leisure stuff—so I thought that this would be a good opportunity. Clearly, I was wrong. I should’ve been more sensitive to her needs.”

“Rishika, I get that you feel like you failed her, but I promise, you didn’t,” I said firmly.

This wasn’t the time for Rishika to go on a guilt trip. Artemis was a big girl, and she did whatever she wanted. If she wanted to drink the tea and go talk to our grandfather in the middle of this party, I doubted that there was anything that Rishika could’ve said or done to stop her. I knew that Artemis wouldn’t want Rishika to blame herself, either.

“Do you think she’s going to be okay?” Rishika asked.

“Mom said that no physical harm can come from the tea, so I think she’ll be fine,” I said. “All we have to do is wait for her to wake up.”

“And when will that be?” Rishika asked. “She’s dead to the world right now. Do you know if there’s anything we can do to wake her up faster?”

She reached out to jostle Artemis, but she was still out cold and didn’t stir, even a little.

I shook my head. *I can’t believe this. Why couldn’t Artemis have pulled this little stunt after we’d gotten back home? Rishika has a point—when* is *she going to wake up? Is she going to be out for hours? How will we get her out of here? Someone will probably call an ambulance—or, better yet, they might call the police if they see us smuggling a body out of here. We definitely don’t need that kind of attention.*

Torin came bursting in. “I heard what happened. Do I need to heal her?”

“No,” I said. “Everybody’s fine. But I do think that as soon as Artemis comes to, it’ll be time to leave.”

“Oh,” Torin said, disappointed. “Fine. I’ll go round up the others.” He left, closing the door behind him.

Not even a second later, Artemis jerked upright in her seat, inhaling a loud, sharp breath.

“My father is alive!” she choked out. “He’s alive. I can’t believe it; he’s alive!”

“What?” I said, stunned.

“You’re awake!” Rishika said, quickly gathering Artemis into a hug. “Don’t ever do that again, you hear me? You had me so worried. I almost shredded Dylan!”

Artemis looked at Rishika, clearly confused. “Dylan? Who’s that?”

I waved her question away. “Not important. But what do you mean, Kadmos is alive? Did you see him?”

“No, not really,” Artemis said groggily.

Rishika held up the flask, confused. She sniffed it and scowled. “Just how much of this stuff did you drink, anyway?”

“If you didn’t see Kadmos, how do you know that he’s alive?” I pressed.

Artemis shook her head as if we were the ones who weren’t thinking straight. “That’s the point—don’t you get it? I didn’t see him!”

“Um… I still don’t understand,” I said.

“Grandpa Innes has never seen Kadmos in the Fae spirit world, or whatever that place is, which means that my father must still be alive,” Artemis said. Her eyes were shining. “Isn’t that great, Cali? After all that uncertainty, I finally know the truth. He’s alive.”

I glanced at Rishika, who shrugged at me. Artemis wasn’t making much sense right now. She was probably still hazy from the tea.

Artemis stood up. “We have to go back to the pack house, right now.”

I let out a breath of relief. I wanted to get out of here just as much as she did. We’d narrowly avoided certain disaster, as far as I was concerned, and I wanted to get home before anything else could go wrong.

“That’s a great idea, Artemis,” I said. “Torin’s already rounding everyone up. We’ll be out of here in no time.”

“I’m all for going home, Artemis, but why are you in such a hurry?” Rishika asked. “You still seem a little out of it. Do you think that you should maybe rest for a few minutes more? We don’t want you passing out or anything.”

“No, I want to go now,” Artemis said. “The sooner we get back, the sooner I can murder Adair for lying to me.”

**Episode 3834**

**Greyson**

The knowledge that Rowena was a Luna had my mind swirling with possibilities, and they were all good. It wasn’t often that you ran into a non-werewolf Luna—I didn’t think I ever had, come to think of it. I couldn’t be completely sure, but I was pretty convinced that this woman wasn’t a shifter—she certainly didn’t smell like one—and she’d gotten through the Luna ceremony unscathed.

*This confirms that Cali might be able to have a real Luna mark in the future… And if that’s the case, then I need to know. If Cali knew that it was definitely possible to make it through the ceremony alive, would that make her more willing to agree to be my Luna?*

“I don’t mean to pry,” I started, knowing that prying was *exactly* what I wanted to do, “but Rowena, you’re clearly not a werewolf…”

I left it open-ended, hoping that she would finish my thought.

Rowena nodded. “Yes, that’s right. Definitely not a werewolf. I’m a witch.”

Helix gasped. “A witch?!”

I shot Helix a stern look, then turned back to Porter and Rowena. “So… The Cobalt pack has a witch for a Luna.”

“Yes. A very beloved, very fierce witch,” Porter said. He pulled Rowena close and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Seeing how obviously in love they were made me long for Cali. I wished she were here by my side right now. *Soon*, I told myself.

“I hope you and your friends aren’t old-fashioned, ‘a Luna must be a werewolf’ people,” Porter said tentatively. “There are enough naysayers out there already—I don’t feel like dealing with any more of them.”

I heard the hint of challenge in Porter’s voice, and I respected and understood it. Cali and I encountered plenty of that kind of hate ourselves. It was a huge part of why I wanted to be by her side through the entire summit.

“No, we’re not,” I said quickly. “It was lucky that we were able to meet like this before the summit. I look forward to seeing you there.”

“Likewise,” Porter said. He glanced at Elle. “Is she your Luna?”

“No!” I said quickly, then cleared my throat. “No, just a member of my pack—and a damn good one,” I said. “My Luna is back with my pack.”

I didn’t offer any more information, not seeing any reason to.

“Well, we should probably get going. We have a few things to do before the summit,” Porter said, preparing to shift.

“Wait!” I said quickly. “How was Colton doing, the last time you saw him? Is he okay?”

Just because I didn’t know what Colton was doing anymore didn’t mean I didn’t give a shit. I was his and Xavier’s older brother. It kind of came with the territory.

Rowena laughed. “He’s a pain in the ass, of course.” Then she sobered. “But he was actually in a bit of hot water, last time we saw him.”

Porter looked a little remorseful. “We didn’t actually even get a chance to say goodbye.”

I raised an eyebrow at them. “What aren’t you telling me? What kind of trouble was he in?”

Porter and Rowena exchanged a look. “He and Maya probably figured things out, for the baby’s sake.”

I’d almost forgotten that Colton was going to be a father. Probably because my brain hadn’t been able to process the thought of Colton being responsible for another life besides his own.

I sighed. “What kind of trouble was he in? Is he okay? He hasn’t reached out for help, but…”

“Like I said, I’m sure they’re fine,” Rowena said. “They’re tough as hell, him and Maya. But congratulations are in order, I guess? You’re going to be an uncle!”

“Yeah, and here’s hoping that Colton becoming a father will change him in a good way,” Porter said. “He and Maya have a very… How do I put it?”

“They’re really something,” Rowena finished for him.

I shrugged. “I bet.” I thought back to how often I’d seen Maya and Colton fighting like cats and dogs. It was a wonder they hadn’t killed each other already. “Anyway, again, it was nice to meet you. It’s always a relief to run into strangers out in the woods and not have to fight them to the death.”

“Tell me about it,” Porter muttered.

“See you at the summit?” I said.

“See you there,” Porter said. He shifted, Rowena climbed onto his back, and they took off into the woods.

“Do you like your brother?” Elle asked.

I looked at her, surprised. “Why would you ask that?”

Elle shrugged. “Because you never talk about him. I didn’t even know you had another brother besides Xavier.”

That made sense. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d even mentioned Colton.

“Yeah, I don’t talk about him much,” I said.

I decided not to add that Colton wasn’t the type of person you really wanted to think about unless you had a good reason. It wasn’t like he and I were close—though he and Xavier were thick as thieves.

*But I didn’t leave my Rogue life behind and come back to the Redwood pack only for Xavier’s sake. I wanted to protect Colton from Silas, too.*

Colton had left before I’d had a chance to really get to know him. I could only imagine what my half-brother thought of me. Probably what Xavier used to think of me before we… Well, had we ever actually made up? There’d been times when I felt like Xavier and I had gotten to a better place, but with him now gone and the way he’d left things, it was like we’d taken a million backward steps in our relationship.

“You should try to keep in contact with Colton. He’s your blood. There’s nothing more important than family,” Elle said. “But it’s not my place. Forget I said anything.”

“Yeah,” I said, nodding weakly. “You’re right. I’ll work on that. Now, let’s shift. We need to get going. We’re making good time—we don’t want to fall behind.”

I shifted and fell into step behind Helix, letting him lead the way.

As we moved through the woods, I thought about how crazy it was that Colton was about to be a father. Rowena had even congratulated me about it, and all I could think was that in a normal family, my becoming an uncle might have felt like the most natural thing in the world. But as it stood, Colton and I were so distant that I wondered if I’d even get to meet his kid.

*I’m sure I will, eventually, but it might not feel the way it should. How are things* supposed *to feel between two practically estranged brothers when one of them has a kid? I’d definitely like to be in his kid’s life, so I guess we’ll have to bury whatever bad blood remains between us.*

Elle was right. Colton and I didn’t have the best relationship, but he was still blood. He was one of the reasons why I’d come back, even if I didn’t always think about it that way. I’d come back to protect what was left of my family, and now Colton was about to start a family of his own.

*Greyson?* Elle said.

*Yeah?* I replied.

*Do you want to be a father one day? With Cali?*

I thought about Elle’s question, unable to stop the wave of jealousy that raced through me. Colton had it good. He had one mate, and they’d chosen each other, and there wasn’t a ton of complicated stuff keeping them from taking the next steps in their relationship. I wished more than anything that Cali and I could take those steps. I wished we could start a family of our own. I’d certainly dreamed about it, but that was exactly what it felt like—a dream. Something I would only ever get to experience when I closed my eyes.

*I’ve always wanted to be a father someday*, I told Elle. *But right now, we have other things to think about.*

So many things. Things like what to do about whatever was still lingering between Cali and my brother. Things like whether Cali would be able to survive getting the official Luna mark—if she ever even made the choice to become my Luna. There seemed to be so many damn obstacles in the way of us moving on and taking those big steps in our lives. Having a baby seemed like something that was *way* down at the bottom of the list, almost too far away to see.

Helix had picked up his pace.

*Hey!* I called to him. *Slow down. This territory is unfamiliar to me. I don’t want to walk into a trap.*

*Sorry*, Helix said. *I am starting to pick up my pack’s scent.* He slowed for a few paces before he sped up again. *It’s getting stronger. We are almost there!*

I supposed I couldn’t blame him. He was excited, and probably worried about his pack.

We came to a rocky clearing, and Helix ground to a halt. He looked around.

*They were right here. This is where I left them*,he told me.

I looked around. The place looked deserted, which wasn’t a surprise, really. Real wolves weren’t like werewolves. They didn’t have pack houses, so they tended to be on the move way more than werewolves. Still, it would have been handy if they’d stayed put. Now we were going to have to look for them, which would take even more time.

Elle came up to me, and when her mind link came through to me, I could tell that she was working overtime to keep herself calm.

*Greyson*, she said. *I smell blood.*

**Episode 3835**

**Xavier**

“Did I do something wrong?” Jesse asked as I pulled him away from Marissa. He kept looking back at Marissa, but she just shrugged at him and took a long swig from her beer.

That was a loaded question. Jesse had definitely done something wrong when he’d attacked me and then had the balls to vote against me, but I wasn’t pulling him aside to punish him for his pseudo-betrayal—even though it would’ve felt kind of good to do that.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” I said evenly. “You should be free to vote for whoever you want. That’s the whole point of a vote, right?”

It wasn’t like I’d expected every single person to vote in my favor—I hadn’t witnessed many Alpha elections where the decision had been unanimous—but it still stung to have someone make it clear that they didn’t believe in you.

Jesse grinned and relaxed. “Well, that’s good to hear.”

I was tempted to knock that grin right off his face, but I restrained myself. There were plenty of other methods to show him the error of his ways—if that became necessary.

“I’m going to be brutally honest, here. I know you didn’t vote for me,” I said.

Jesse shrugged. “What of it?”

“Nothing. I don’t care,” I said. “I still became Samara Alpha, which means I have the support of just about everyone in the pack… except you.”

I’d expected Jesse to vote against me, of course, but that didn’t mean I wanted to let his distaste for me fester. That sort of thing was like a virus, and I didn’t want it spreading to the rest of the pack. Better to nip it in the bud early.

“I’m not the only one who voted against you,” Jesse pointed out. “There were others.”

*I wonder if he knows who cast the third vote?* I could question him, force him to tell me, but that wasn’t how I wanted to do things. I wasn’t interested in ruling with fear and intimidation, like Silas had. I totally believed what I’d said, before—it was right that he’d been free to vote however he chose to. I wanted to earn the respect of the dissenters in my pack, not steal it.

“Regardless of how you feel about me, the pack is the most important thing. Building it back up to its former glory is all I care about. Regardless of personal feelings, you and I are going to have to work together to protect the pack. I think that’s something we’re on the same page about, right?”

Jesse’s eyes narrowed. “What do you want from me?”

I looked around. Marissa was far away now, but I could tell she was watching us. So were some of the other pack members. I knew that the pack would be watching my every move for a while, until they got comfortable with the idea of me as their leader. Even those who supported me would still be watching closely to confirm that they’d made the right decision. I planned to show them that they had.

“I want to show you that even if we don’t agree, we can still find common ground. Even if we argue, I will listen. So, to that end, I want you to be part of the group that attends the summit,” I said.

Jesse lifted a brow in surprise. “Wow, didn’t expect that, but sure. That sounds good.”

His posture had noticeably relaxed, and he shoved his hands into his pockets, looking me in the eye for maybe the first time since I’d pulled him away.

“Good,” I said.

I didn’t know what the pack had expected of me when I’d pulled Jesse aside, and I had an idea of what Jesse had expected of me, but it was nice to prove them all wrong. They didn’t know me all that well yet, but in time, they would.

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I woke up early, just as the sun was coming up. I got up off the couch in the Airstream and stretched. I glanced over at Ava, who was still asleep. She looked so peaceful—unlike when she was upset with me, which was basically all the time. I wondered if things between us would ever be peaceful. Sure, we had our moments, but they seemed few and far between.

I grabbed my shirt and went outside. I loved this time of morning. It was so peaceful, and because of the party last night, everyone was most likely still asleep, or at least still in their tents. I headed over to a little makeshift workout area and ran through some of my daily exercises—mostly stretches and strength training and other stuff that got my heart rate up a bit.

This was going to be my first full day as Alpha, and I needed to set a precedent. I’d led the Alpha run, and last night we’d partied, but there was no way I was going to sleep in. I wanted to show everyone that I meant business, that I wasn’t like any Alpha they’d had before.

I continued my workout, increasing the intensity and feeling good. I liked pushing myself. I was about to push myself even further, but then I heard a voice in my head.

*Don’t hurt yourself.* It sounded like Cali, and I wished with every fiber of my being that that were possible. That was definitely something she would’ve said to me—despite her awareness of the fact that I was an Alpha and could take basically anything, especially a little intense exercise.

Thinking of Cali made me briefly lose my momentum. I whipped off my shirt and used it to swipe the sweat off my face. I bent at the waist and closed my eyes—and saw Cali’s smiling face.

*She might hate you now, but that’s only because you made her hate you. Because you’re trying to save her. One day, she’ll understand.*

I’d just decided that it was time for a run when I heard the door to the Airstream open. I stopped moving and looked back. Ava was standing in the doorway of the Airstream, leaning against it with her arms crossed.

“Don’t stop on my account,” she said.

“Wasn’t planning on it,” I grunted. I tossed my shirt to the ground. “I’m going for a run.”

“Cool, I’ll join you.”

I wanted to say no. I liked my solo runs, and they gave me a chance to clear my head and think—and today a brisk run would be a perfect opportunity for me to let off even more steam. But it felt like the pack was on a knife’s edge right now waiting for what was next, and I needed to keep the peace. Maybe this little gesture would help mend whatever rift was forming between me and Ava, since I needed her in my corner to keep the Samaras calm.

“Fine, but I’m not waiting for you,” I said. I took off running. “You’d better hurry up!” I called over my shoulder.

Ava stripped off her shirt in one swift motion. “You wish you were as fast as me!”

Moments later, we’d both shifted and were running through the woods together. I tried to ignore her, but Ava was right—she was fast.

*What happened when you left the Airstream last night?* Ava asked.

*I invited Jesse to the summit.*

*Really? Are you sure you want to bring him in on that? You know he didn’t vote for you, right?*

*That’s exactly why I did it. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer, right? And don’t you want me to win everyone over? Inviting Jesse will go a long way in doing that, I imagine.*

Ava didn’t respond for a while. We ran in comfortable silence, both of us leapfrogging easily over a bunch of fallen trees.

*Yes, but just be careful*,she finally said.

*I am. I really don’t think that Jesse will try to undermine me at the summit. At least if he’s smart, he won’t. The Samaras are trying to reestablish themselves, and Jesse’s made it clear that he cares about the pack. That’s why he challenged me.*

*I trust you*, Ava replied.

*You should.*

*Now let me show you just how fast I am.*

Ava bolted ahead, and I raced off after her. It felt good to really push myself, to run faster than I had in a long time. My muscles were aching, and my breath was blasting out of my mouth, but I wasn’t tired. Not yet. The slice of the cold wind through my fur was invigorating, and it was nice to be challenged.

*Too slow!* Ava said with a laugh.

I pushed even harder, giving it my all, and only then did I finally catch up with her.

*Just taking a breather!* Ava said before bolting off again.

*What the hell? Did you drink ten cups of coffee in the Airstream before you came out?* I asked as I pulled from even deeper energy reserves to catch up with Ava yet again.

*I don’t need coffee; I’m a natural*,Ava replied.

We’d been running shoulder to shoulder for a while when we suddenly came face-to-face with another wolf.

I skidded to a stop. *Ravi?*

**Episode 3836**

I woke with a start after a restless night’s sleep. I’d had weird dreams—mostly about Greyson and Xavier and Artemis, though I wasn’t able to piece them together into anything coherent.

*They were probably just stress dreams*, I thought. *I’ve had a weird couple of days, so that makes sense. I’ve got a truckload of worries about my sister and my mates, so that’s probably why I dreamed about them.*

I yawned and stretched, thinking over what I could remember of the dreams. They weren’t getting any clearer. If anything, they were getting fuzzier by the moment. Maybe if I tackled all the issues in real life, it would help me stop thinking about them. I just wasn’t exactly sure how to do that. There wasn’t anything I could do about Xavier, even though I wished that weren’t the case. Greyson was off in Idaho, and I wouldn’t see him until he got back. Artemis, however, I could do something about.

Last night, after she’d awoken from her tea-induced Fae trip only to announce that her father was alive and she had to kill Adair, we’d been intercepted by some of Kevin’s party guests and Artemis’s proclamations had been forgotten… For the time being. We’d played cool and joked and laughed with them, which honestly had been kind of refreshing after the shock of finding Artemis passed out in a Fae tea-induced stupor.

After we’d managed to break away from Kevin’s friends, I’d gone to round up Torin and the others so we could head back to the pack house, but I’d encountered quite a bit of resistance. The party had still been in full swing at that point, and no one had wanted to leave. I’d tried to put my foot down, but there had been a lot of grumbling.

Eventually, I’d agreed to let Jay and Lola stay back with the others if they promised to keep an eye on things and bring everyone home safely. If it had just been Lola staying behind, I wouldn’t have agreed to it, but I knew I could trust Jay to do the responsible thing.

*I really feel like I did the right thing. We had a few hiccups last night, but nothing too major, and none of the humans realized anything was going on. That’s a success, as far as I’m concerned. If Dick Wigbert had shown up, that would’ve been another story, but he didn’t. Everything ended up okay. My first Luna assignment was a success!*

By the time we’d gotten back home, I’d been exhausted. I’d made Artemis pledge—definitely not Fae promise—to hold off on killing anyone until we had a chance to talk in the morning.

Now, morning had arrived, and I was eager to get to the bottom of Artemis’s murderous impulse. I got up, pulled on a robe, and went downstairs. Maybe I could make Artemis a cup of non-Fae tea as a way of starting things off on the right foot. Tea had a way of resetting things, in my experience.

I was surprised to see Jacqueline come in through the front door as I passed it. She was wearing the same outfit she’d had on at the party, and her hair was mussed.

“Were you out all night?” I asked her. “Didn’t you come home with Jay and Lola?”

Jacs rolled her eyes. “No. I decided to stay. Dylan was just so sweet that I couldn’t resist! You really missed out. Too bad you’re taken—he was a delicious catch.”

My eyes went wide. “Wait a minute, is that BLOOD on your face? Did you *drink* Dylan? Did you *kill* him?” My mind started reeling. “Oh no! How am I ever going to be able to explain that? What will Kevin and his friends think? What if Dick Wigbert finds out that murderous vampires were roaming around his family home? What if he’s on his way here right now? What are we going to do?”

Headed down a spiral, I started trying to think of what to say to Greyson.

Jacs just stood there looking at me, cool, calm, and collected as usual. “Cali, really, are you that stupid? I didn’t feed on Dylan… At least not in that way.” She flashed a coy smile and wiped the blood off her cheeks. “The blood is from a little venison snack I had on the way home. I needed to fuel up. Dylan has a lot of stamina for a human.”

I grimaced. “Okay, okay, I don’t need to hear any more about it.”

Jacs yawned. “Fine by me. Though it’s funny you’re being so prim and proper about it when I’ve heard you and your mates going at it *plenty* of times.”

“What?” My cheeks warmed, and I wanted to melt into the floor. “What are you talking about?”

I was horrified as I thought back to all the times when things *had* gotten a little louder than I’d intended. No one had ever really mentioned anything, though—until now. But maybe Jacqueline was bluffing.

“Oh, nothing, Cali. Don’t worry your little innocent head about it. Anyway, I’m tired. I’m going to go get some beauty sleep… Not that I need it.” With that, Jacs turned and went upstairs.

Once she was gone, I took a quick look around downstairs, hoping that no one had heard her little comment—or anything else she’d said, for that matter. I sighed and went to the kitchen, where I quickly made a cup of black tea and then took it upstairs to find Artemis, hoping she was feeling a little calmer this morning. Her proclamation about killing Adair had definitely been a lot. I didn’t know how serious she was about it…

Rishika was coming out of their room as I approached. She smiled when she saw me. “Thanks, Cali, for last night. You did a good job handling things. I know I was a handful, so good on you for having my back and talking me down a few times.”

“It was no problem,” I said, proud to be getting a compliment from Rishika. There had definitely been a few tense moments at the party, and I was happy that I’d managed to de-escalate them, for the most part.

Rishika’s eyes dropped to the tea in my hand, and she lit up. “Is that for Artemis? Your timing is perfect. She’s just waking up.”

“Good. Did she say anything more last night about Kadmos or Adair?” I asked. She’d had so much to say last night before we’d gotten interrupted. I wondered if everything she’d said was true, or if it had just been tea aftershocks.

Rishika shook her head. “No, she was dead tired when we got home and went right to sleep. She also mumbled something about not wanting to tell me the whole story and then having to turn around and repeat it to you, so she’d talk to us both about it today.”

I smiled. “That’s such an Artemis thing to do.”

Rishika laughed. “Indeed.”

I held up the mug of tea. “So, should we talk to her now?”

Rishika turned and opened the bedroom door. “Let’s give it a try.”

Artemis was sitting up in bed as we walked in. I couldn’t really read her expression, but she looked a little tired and out of sorts. That was at least good—she wasn’t in murdering mode just yet.

I presented the tea to her. “I come bearing gifts!” I set the mug down on her bedside table and then dove right in. “So, what did you mean last night?”

Artemis eyed me coolly. “I meant exactly what I said. Kadmos is alive, and Adair’s going to pay with his life for lying to me.”

“But you don’t actually *know* if Kadmos is alive,” Rishika said. “You just have a feelingthat he is. You don’t really have proof, right?”

“I actually believe you, Artemis,” I said. “But you can’t be serious about killing Adair!”

“He lied to me!” Artemis hissed. “How could he do that? He has to pay! What if I’d never gotten the chance to talk to Grandpa Innes? What if I’d ended up living the rest of my life thinking my father was dead?”

“But isn’t it possible that Adair *thinks* Kadmos is dead?” I pressed. “From what I’ve seen of the Fae world, nothing is ever really as it seems. That place just seems so duplicitous and full of secrets. You need to just *talk* to Adair, okay? Don’t stab him or shoot him with a magic arrow. Talk to him. He’s family. He deserves at least that much, doesn’t he?”

“Fine,” Artemis grumbled. She finally picked up her tea and took a large swig. “Thanks for the tea.”

“Anytime,” I said, then I took my sister’s hand in mine. “And I meant what I said. I do believe you about Kadmos being alive. I really do. Now, what can I do to help you find your father?”

**Episode 3837**

**Greyson**

I was *not* happy. We’d been following the wolf pack’s scent all night, venturing deeper and deeper into Idaho, but we still hadn’t caught up with them. My reservations about getting involved with Elle’s father and the natural wolves had obviously been justified. If this went on for much longer, there was no way I’d be able to make it to the summit at the same time as Cali and the Redwood delegation. It was time for me to start preparing myself—and Cali—for the very real possibility that I wasn’t going to make it in time.

I had to keep reminding myself that I was the reason why Elle’s old pack had come up this way in the first place. If they’d remained in Oregon, her father probably wouldn’t have been threatened by Ranger. I had a role in this, and I was paying the price, whether I liked it or not. I only hoped that we weren’t too late.

*Helping Elle and her father isn’t the problem*,I thought. *The problem is how damn long it’s taking to do it. If we can just find them, I know I’ll be able to put a stop to this Ranger wolf in no time.*

Elle was growing more upset by the minute. She’d smelled blood—some of which she’d recognized as belonging to her father—which was never a good sign. I wanted to reassure her that there had been other blood scents, too, which meant that Ranger had been wounded too. Maybe her father had bested him—or at least managed to escape.

*Don’t worry, Elle*,I said. *We’ll find him. Just because you smelled your father’s blood, doesn’t mean you should expect the worst.*

*I know that. But it doesn’t mean he isn’t dead or badly hurt, either*, Elle snapped. *Don’t try to say things to make me feel better, Greyson. I’ll only feel better when I see him.*

Realizing that Elle wasn’t in any mood to be consoled, I shifted my conversation to Helix. *Is your Alpha a good fighter?* I asked him. *Do you think he’ll be able to hold his own?*

*He is*, Helix replied. *And he can.* *That is why he is the Alpha.*

That might’ve been enough for a regular wolf pack, but for werewolves, there was a lot more to being Alpha than fighting. Werewolf Alphas had to make decisions—good ones—and they had to lead. Silas had been a ferocious fighter, but an awful Alpha. I could think of other great fighters I knew who lacked some of the key traits of a good Alpha, too.

Helix slowed to a stop and lifted his nose into the air. *I think we’re getting close. The scents are getting stronger.*

I noticed that the wind was behind us, which meant that the wolves we were pursuing were probably already aware that we were on their tail.

*Be careful*, I said to Helix and Elle, eyeing them both. *You need to do exactly as I say. Is that clear?*

Helix and Elle both nodded.

Satisfied that I wouldn’t have to worry about them if shit hit the fan, I turned my attention to trying to sense the wolves myself. I listened hard and inhaled, trying to figure out what we were about to run into. How many wolves were we going to encounter? Would it be just Ranger and Elle’s father? Would there be more? Would there be an entire wolf pack to contend with? How would I know who was for the Alpha and who was for his competition?

I suddenly wished that I were alone and able to take care of this without having to worry about Elle and Helix. They weren’t used to situations like this. One wrong move could send the entire thing spiraling out of control, and I didn’t have time for that. I just had to hope that they really would follow my lead in all this.

Helix took a few steps back and ducked his head, indicating something on the ground.

*More blood*,he said. *And it is fresh.*

*I see it*,I said. There wasn’t a lot of it, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t a bad wound.

*And it’s my father’s*, Elle added, her voice pained. I could tell she was on the verge of panicking, and I prayed that she wasn’t about to do something stupid.

I was about to tell her not to worry, but then I saw the blur of two wolves lunging at me with their teeth bared. I knew right away that they weren’t werewolves—they were too small. It didn’t seem like they were deterred in the least by how much bigger I was.

With little effort, I tossed one of the wolves to the side and then tore after the other one and pounced, pinning the snarling wolf to the ground. I reared back and howled, preparing to rip its throat out. I hadn’t planned on killing so soon, but when the occasion called for it, it didn’t pay to hesitate.

Elle came running up beside me. *Greyson, stop! Stop it! Don’t hurt him!*

I hesitated and twisted around to face Elle, keeping my eyes on the wolves. The other one had recovered and was circling me. He was keeping his distance but was clearly ready to attack again at any moment. The one under my paws was still snarling and fighting to get free.

*I’ll stop when they stop!* I said to Elle.

Almost as soon as I said the words, the two wolves lowered their hackles and calmed their aggression, just like that.

I glanced at Elle. *I take it you know them?*

Helix came trotting over, his gaze darting between the two wolves.

*Helix? What are you doing here?* asked the wolf as I finally allowed him to slip out from under my paws.

*I brought Greyson here to help save our Alpha*, Helix replied. *It is a shame that you have met this way.*

I stepped back, calming my own aggression since it was clear that the wolves were no longer a threat. It was obvious that they’d just been on the offensive, which wasn’t surprising, given the circumstances.

*Greyson, these are members of my pack.* He motioned to the other wolf, who was now approaching since I’d released his companion. His fur reminded me of a brown moss on trees. And the other one had eyes like a sunbeam. Helix turned to face them. *Why did you attack Greyson?*

*He is a werewolf*, said Sunbeam. *Dangerous.*

*I don’t care about any of this!* Elle snapped. *Where is my father? I want to see him now!*

The two wolves snapped to attention as they eyed Elle. Sunbeam was the one who spoke.

*We will take you to him.*

*Then let’s go*, I said, growing more impatient by the second. I wouldn’t admit it to Elle—there was no reason to put her any more on edge than she already was—but I was concerned about all the blood we’d found. It didn’t bode well for her father, that much was for sure.

I fell into step behind Moss and Sunbeam, momentarily distracted by how much larger I was. It reminded me of how different normal wolves were from werewolves. They definitely had guts, attacking a wolf at least three times their size. I’d almost forgotten how small Elle had been when we’d first met.

*They’re lucky that Elle intervened, or I would’ve made quick work of them both. Hell, I was seconds away from sending Sunbeam to meet his maker.*

As we continued through the woods, traveling even farther away from the summit site, to my displeasure, I noticed that the unfamiliar scents of wolf mixed with blood were growing stronger. The smell of blood was almost overpowering, now, and soon I heard the sound of wolves fighting.

We broke through the trees and emerged into a snowy field. A group of wolves shot us a quick glance as we approached, but they were more preoccupied with fighting than figuring out who their newest guests were.

I recognized some of the wolves from when I’d spoken with Elle’s father back in Oregon, and I spotted her father almost immediately. Like Sunbeam and Moss, the wolves were small, but that didn’t mean that they weren’t capable of inflicting damage. I imagined that if a whole pack of them descended on a large animal, or even a werewolf, they’d probably be able to get the upper hand.

A loud howl tore through the air, and Elle took off into the field.

*Elle!* I called out after her. She’d disobeyed me the second she saw her old pack, which pissed me off, since I’d literally just told her and Helix to follow my lead. The last thing I wanted was for her to get hurt when I was supposed to be here protecting her. *Elle, come back here!*

I caught up to her, grabbed the scruff of her neck between my teeth, and threw her backward. There was no way she was just going to jump into that fight before I figured out exactly what was going on.

I turned back to the raging fight—just as a large wolf savagely pinned Elle’s father to the bloodstained ground.

**Episode 3838**

**Xavier**

Everything came to a standstill as I stared directly at Ravi’s wolf. I was frozen, unable even to form a complete thought. In my head, I sorted through about a million lighthearted things I could say, but nothing came out. Ravi didn’t say anything or move a muscle, either. The air between us was tense—and plenty awkward.

We were both right on the border between Samara and Redwood land, so this had been bound to happen at some point. I was surprised it hadn’t happened before now.

*But that doesn’t mean I’m prepared for it. That doesn’t mean I ever wanted this to happen. What if I’d run into someone else? What if I’d run into Cali?*

I quickly pushed that thought out of my head, unable to even imagine the pain I would feel seeing her this way, especially with Ava by my side. It would be too much to bear. It would be the stuff of Adéluce’s dreams.

Ravi was on patrol, no doubt, and I knew that shit would hit the fan as soon as anyone from the Redwood pack found out I was the new Samara Alpha.

*But there’s no way that Ravi can tell that I’m the Alpha just by looking at me. It’s not like I have a mark, like a Luna.*

Still, it was starting to feel like my plan to reveal the big news at the summit was in jeopardy. I had a bad feeling that it would get out before then, though I hoped to hell that that feeling was wrong.

The moment dragged on and on until Ravi just turned around and ran off, most likely to continue his patrol.

*Shit. There’s no way Ravi isn’t going to tell everyone that he saw me. That’s the entire point of patrolling—search, investigate, and report. I don’t give a shit about Greyson, but Cali… Fuck. What if he tells her? What will she think?*

Obviously being seen with Ava would help in terms of the narrative I’d fed Cali to keep her away, but the idea still put a sour taste in my mouth. But what could I do? I didn’t know how much more I could beat myself up about all this when I was just trying to make the best of the hand I’d been dealt by Adéluce.

Without a word, I started to run again, forcing Ava to try to catch up with me this time. This run had done absolutely nothing to clear my head. In fact, it had made everything a lot worse.

I circled back to the Samara campsite before too long and shifted back, Ava right on my heels. I’d almost made it to the safety of the Airstream to hide in the too-small shower, but, of course, Ava wasn’t going to let me get away that easily.

She grabbed me by the arm, stopping me. “Hey, what the hell was that?”

I shook her off. “Nothing.”

“It didn’t look like nothing. It looked like you got spooked. I hope you aren’t worried that Ravi somehow figured out you’re the Samara Alpha.”

“I’m not worried about a goddamn thing!” I said, a little too loudly, before storming off into the Airstream. I breathed a sigh of relief when Ava didn’t follow me. I didn’t need her to press me on anything else. She’d done enough of that yesterday, and now my brain was already having a field day about the implications of seeing Ravi.

I maneuvered myself into the shower and tried to enjoy it as much as I could, seeing as only half of my body could fit into the stall at any given time. Surprisingly, the warm water calmed me. It had been weird, seeing Ravi. Under normal circumstances, we might have laughed, shot the shit a little. But that time was long gone, and a pang of loss hit me, sending me back into the dark place I was trying my hardest to claw my way out of.

Yesterday’s conversation with Ava suddenly came back full force, haunting me. She’d been worried that seeing Cali at the summit would adversely affect me, and I’d insisted that it wouldn’t… But then I’d run into Ravi, and just like that, everything had crashed into perspective. Not to mention the fact that I’d seemingly lost the ability to speak to him, to say hi, even to ask him how he was. Why couldn’t I have just done that? It probably would’ve made things less dramatic, and a *lot* less awkward.

*From now on, I’m going to have to treat the Redwoods like they’re just any other pack.*

But I knew it wasn’t going to be that easy. Nothing ever was.

“Shit!” I pounded my fist against the shower wall, causing the entire Airstream to quake.

I thought about Cali, wondering what she was doing. I wondered if she hated me yet. At least when I was alone, I didn’t have to hide my feelings from Ava or anyone else. I’d always valued my solo time, and moments like this reminded me why. Being one-on-one with my thoughts was always the best way for me to get through things that were troubling me.

I shut off the shower and dried off, feeling a little better. I pulled on my pants and collapsed onto the couch, already pulling out my phone so that I could replay Cali’s voicemail again. I couldn’t wait to hear her voice. But just as the message began to play, the Airstream door slammed open, and Ava came walking in.

Noting the tense look on her face, I casually dropped my phone back into my pocket. Ava barely looked at me, just went straight for the bottle of whiskey.

“Isn’t it a little early for that?” I asked.

Ava ignored me and poured herself a glass, downing it immediately.

I sighed. “What? Are you mad because I got the first shower? It’s all yours now.”

Ava slammed her glass down. “Nope. I’m pissed because you left me mid-conversation. Just stormed away—after yelling at me for *nothing*, I’ll add.”

I sighed again, knowing that she had a point but not in the mood to fight with her. I typically laid a lot of the blame for our fights on Ava, but I knew that in some cases, I played a big part. Seeing Ravi had completely thrown me for a loop, and I knew that owning my new position as Samara Alpha in front of the people I cared about—the people from what was fast becoming my past—was definitely going to be a challenge.

“The summit is coming up fast,” Ava continued. “How are we supposed to show strength? How are we supposed to present a unified front when you can’t even talk to me? You say you trust me, but your actions prove that you don’t.”

She sloshed another pour of whiskey into her glass and drank it down.

“I’ve been giving and giving and giving, and you can’t even be bothered to give an inch on this,” she said. “You’re still worried about Cali and what she thinks.” She pinned me to the spot with an accusatory gaze.

There was a big part of me that wanted to argue with her, that wanted to tell her how wrong she was, but she *wasn’t* wrong. I couldn’t deny the truth of what she was saying.

“There’s not much I can say here,” I began. “But what I *can* say is that you’re not wrong. I knew when I ran off that you would immediately know why.”

Ava nodded slowly, as if mulling over what I’d said. She shifted her jaw a bit before she spoke again. “You already told me that you left Cali. You told me that you were over her, and I knew that was a lie. And I’m aware that you couldn’t give two shits about lying to me, but you’re also lying to yourself. Feelings don’t work like that, Xavier. You know that, and I know that. As much as it sucks to admit it, your connection with Cali is way too strong for you to just be done with her like you claim.” She paused for a moment. “Listen, X, I don’t blame you for having mixed emotions about all this. It makes sense that you would. But what I won’t forgive is you walking around pretending that everything’s okay while you keep your true feelings bottled up.”

I let a bit of silence pass between us before I spoke. “If you already know everything, what do you expect me to say?”

Ava shook her head, like she was wondering the same thing herself. “You wanted this—at least you said you did. You told me that you wanted to be Alpha. I didn’t force you, and it’s high time you stopped acting like I did. I’m tired of your shit, Xavier. I’m tired of dancing around your moods, that’s for damn sure. I keep going along with everything for your sake, Xavier, but tell me—what are you going to give me and our pack in return?”

**Episode 3839**

I half-expected Artemis to have already thought up some super plan to find her father. She was usually pretty good at planning, especially when it came to things that were really important to her.

“I don’t really have a plan yet,” she said. “But knowing that you have my back means a lot. It really does.” She sighed. “I know it sounds kind of crazy, thinking that my father is alive when all the signs point to him being dead…”

I looked at Rishika, but I couldn’t read her expression. I took Artemis’s hand and squeezed it. “I meant it when I said that I believe you, Artemis. And even if I didn’t, if there’s any question about Kadmos’s fate, then you deserve the truth. I want to help you, and I want to be by your side every step of the way.”

Artemis had always been so supportive of me, so helping her through this was the least I could do.

Artemis squeezed my hand back. “Thanks, Cali.”

She looked at Rishika, who simply nodded and smiled.

“Whatever you need, babe. You know I have your back through thick and thin—in the Fae world, this world, wherever,” Rishika said.

“Thank you both,” Artemis said. “And thanks for the tea, Cali… Even though I guess I’ve probably had enough tea lately.”

“That’s for sure,” Rishika grumbled.

“I’m starving,” Artemis said with deliberate lightness. “I think I’m going to head downstairs and see if Torin put any good leftovers in the fridge, but do you want to spar in a little bit, Cali?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said. “I want to see if I can summon that sword, like I did in Fae limbo with Grandpa Innes.”

Artemis grinned. “We’ll definitely make it happen.” She hopped up and left the room. “Torin! Are there any eggs left?” she shouted as she ran down the hall.

I listened to her bound down the stairs, happy that she seemed to be in a better place than the night before. I was finally breathing a little easier myself, too. I was glad that Artemis was seeing things more positively and feeling a little less revenge-y toward Adair. The latest potential crisis had been averted.

I wondered what Greyson was going to think about all this when I told him. I’d tried to test out our extended mind link connection last night to at least say good night, but I’d gotten nothing but static. It seemed like Kira’s Luna mark spell had its limits. I’d been a little disappointed by that, but I hoped to hear from him soon.

*I wonder if Kira can do a spell to make our mind link stronger? So it can always work across huge distances? That would definitely come in handy.*

In the meantime, I supposed a text would have to do. I pulled out my phone and sent Greyson a quick message.

*All good here. How are you doing?* I doubted that I would get an answer right away, since Greyson had told me he was out of cell range.

My stomach growled, and I headed downstairs to do the same as Artemis: check to see if Torin had any good leftovers—preferably eggs. I’d nearly reached the kitchen when Rishika came up and stopped me.

“Hey, Cali, can I talk to you for a sec?” she asked.

“Yeah, sure. What’s up?”

“This whole Artemis-Kadmos thing has me kind of shaken up,” she admitted. “Do you really think Kadmos is alive? You seem so sure, but I don’t know. I’m just worried about Artemis. I don’t want her to get her hopes up.”

I followed Rishika’s gaze to where Artemis was standing with Torin at the stove as he cracked two eggs against his head.

“I had such high hopes for Adair, and we *did* find him, but now I’m worried about what will happen if we don’t find Kadmos,” Rishika continued.

I nodded, not knowing exactly what to say. I understood exactly where Rishika was coming from. Artemis had been searching for her father for so long, and she was so desperate for any information about him that she wasn’t really listening to reason. I didn’t want to admit it to Rishika—and I definitely wasn’t going to say it to Artemis—but no, I wasn’t sure if Kadmos was alive. How could I be? And really, how could Artemis?

“All I can do is be there for her and stand by her side through whatever she wants to do,” I said. “It might not be easy, but no matter the outcome, Artemis is going to need both of us. For now, we’ll just have to help her find the truth. And hopefully that won’t take us back to New Orleans, because I think I’m good on the Big Easy for a while.”

“Same,” Rishika said. “And you’re right—Artemis needs us right now. More than that, she needs us to be positive.”

Rishika and I went into the kitchen to join Artemis and Torin, and, after breakfast, Artemis and I went outside to practice our magic.

“You ready to show off a little?” Artemis said as she bounded down the steps into the yard. Her spirits seemed to have lifted a bit—especially compared to the night before.

“I think so,” I said. “At least I hope so. Sometimes my magic seems like a fluke. There are times when it works really well, and then others when it’s a pain in the ass.”

“Mine’s kind of like that, too,” Artemis admitted. “Though it’s been pretty steady lately. So, are you ready to see what mood your magic is in today?”

I nodded, suddenly feeling nervous. For some reason, I felt a sudden need to please Artemis. I wanted to show her that I could truly have her back, whether we were searching for Kadmos or fighting a battle. What if finding her father brought us into dangerous situations where I’d need to be able to call my magic without fail? I needed to prove to Artemis that I could do it.

“Today is a good magic day for me, apparently,” Artemis said, flashing her magic bow. She shot a volley of arrows at trees far out in the woods. She seemed so free and easy with her movements, and her magic seemed to be coming to her without any effort at all.

I couldn’t help but envy her. She was a natural. But then again, like I kept telling myself, I was new to this. I would reach Artemis’s level in time. It would take a lot of practice and a lot of focus, but I was willing to commit. Both Grandpa Innes and Adair had said that practice was the key to unlocking the next level of my Fae magic skill, so I had to trust that they were right.

“I’m starting to feel like this might not be a good magic day,” I said after a few failed attempts to reproduce the sword I’d created in the Fae spirit world.

“Don’t be so down on yourself,” Artemis said brightly. “Maybe you should start with your shield and then work your way up to the sword?”

I sighed, still wishing that I could call my sword as easily as Artemis could summon her bow. “You’re probably right. Gotta take the small steps before the big leap, right?”

“Right,” Artemis said firmly.

I quickly generated my magic shield and swung it around, blocking everything Artemis threw at me to test it.

“You know, I think you’re right about starting small and working my way up,” I said. “I should stop being so hard on myself. I remember when I couldn’t even get my shield to work, and now look at me!”

I quickly moved to block a rock that Artemis hurled my way. After a bit of practice with the shield, I was starting to feel more confident.

“Maybe I’ll try the sword again,” I said.

“It couldn’t hurt,” Artemis said, already going back to shooting her shimmering arrows at trees.

“Right, it can’t hurt,” I muttered as I concentrated.

I replayed exactly what I’d done with Grandpa Innes. I remembered how proud of me he’d been when I’d finally conjured the sword, and I tried to harness that feeling and put it into envisioning the sword in my hands.

I concentrated, liking the way the energy felt building up inside me. I was stunned when I felt the magic take shape. The orb I’d formed in my palm began to stretch and shift until finally…

“Look, Artemis! I did it!”

Artemis pumped her fist in the air as I raised the sword. “Way to go, Cali!”

“I can’t believe it! I’ve got a fucking sword!”

“A *magic* sword!” Artemis amended. “Completely badass, Cali!” Artemis palmed one of her daggers. “Now, try to knock this out of my hand.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Adair, heading straight for us.

*Wait until he sees what I can do!*

I got into position and swung my sword, hoping to knock Artemis’s dagger out of her hand—but instead, the sword slipped out of my grasp and shot toward Adair.

**Episode 3840**

**Artemis**

All I could do was watch as Cali’s sword went shooting right at Adair, who knocked it away with his magic whip without even breaking his stride. Cali’s sword fell to the ground and fizzled away. I tore my gaze away from Adair to look at Cali, a small smirk playing on my lips.

*And to think Cali was worried that* I *was the one who was going to kill Adair. She almost decapitated him!*

“Adair, I’m so, so sorry!” Cali said, rushing up to him. “I was just practicing, and I thought I’d be able to knock Artemis’s dagger out of her hand, but—”

“The Wrenthorns have never appreciated me,” Adair said with an affronted sniff. “Did your grandfather put you up to this?”

“What? No! I—no one put me up to this. I just… It was a mistake! Like I said, I was trying to…” Cali stopped and looked at me. “Didn’t you hear—”

I subtly shook my head, stopping her before she said too much. If Adair really thought Cali was a Wrenthorn assassin, we might as well let him keep thinking it. It was much more fun than the reality.

“Adair, we were just practicing. I was excited about my new sword and wanted to show it off,” Cali said. “No more, no less.”

“I suppose that tracks. It does seem that whenever you’re practicing, *someone* almost gets killed,” Adair said.

I spun my dagger around in my hand, thinking about how easy it would be to just stab Adair right then and there. It would serve him right for lying to me about my father. He was damn lucky that Cali had made me agree not to kill him. At least for the time being. Besides, maybe Adair could still be useful.

“Hey, Adair,” I said breezily. “I was hoping that you could show me a few more dagger techniques. I’d be interested to hear any pointers you might have.”

Adair looked at me and gave a slight nod. “You *do* like knives, don’t you?”

“Maybe that’s not such a good idea,” Cali interrupted. “Maybe we’ve practiced enough for today. I, for one, am exhausted! Artemis, want to go watch some TV? Or talk to Torin about Kevin?”

I eyed Cali for a few seconds before I turned back to Adair. I knew what she was trying to do, and I wasn’t having it. I might not have had the go-ahead to kill Adair, but I definitely had other plans for him.

“Well?” I pressed. “Any tips or tricks you want to give your dear niece? One can never be too prepared, right?” I forced a smile that felt more like a scowl.

“I suppose there are a few things I could teach you,” Adair said begrudgingly. “You do throw pretty recklessly. Your technique could use some refinement.”

I was surprised to hear that he actually had some feedback. I’d only asked for a dagger-fighting lesson as a ploy to talk to him about Kadmos.

*How dare he insult my dagger* *technique? I’ve done more with this dagger* *than he’s ever done with that little magic whip of his!*

“Excuse me?” I said. “My dagger work is second to none—not to brag.”

Adair raised his eyebrow. “Oh, what I meant was, you throw like you were never trained. You have a… *rustic* style. Yes, that’s it. Not sloppy—rustic.”

I glared at him. “Well, there aren’t too many people who would challenge me to a knife fight.”

*Although I’m certainly open to any takers.*

Adair shrugged. “Sure. I mean, you’re not bad, but your aim could be even better. Isn’t that the point of practice? To get better? Here, let me show you.”

He held out his hand, and, reluctantly, I handed him the dagger.

*I’ll put up with his criticism if it’ll help me get more information from him. He said with some certainty that Kadmos is dead, but does he really believe that, or did he just want me to? Either way, I’m going to find out.*

“Watch and learn.” Adair did a swift spin move and threw the dagger. It hit a tree dead center. “With just a few minor adjustments to the way you hold the dagger, you’ll be able to increase your accuracy while moving.”

“Wow,” Cali said, clapping. “That was… amazing.”

“Please,” I said with an eye roll. “Anyone can hit a tree, especially one that big. Well, maybe you can’t, Cali, but I could do it easily.”

I almost demonstrated my ability to beat Adair at his own game, but I was still just a touch groggy from the night before and knew I’d never live it down if I missed—though I doubted that I would.

“I could do it if someone showed me how,” Cali grumbled.

Adair went to retrieve the dagger, then he walked back over to us. “All I’m saying is that your throwing motion could be improved. That’s what you asked me for, right? Pointers? Well, do you want them or not?” Adair balanced the tip of the dagger on his finger as he spoke.

“Fine,” I grumbled.

I stood back and watched while he demonstrated a motion that was actually kind of cool. It wasn’t the same way I held a dagger—or threw it—so I supposed that I could add it to my list of techniques. Still, Adair’s dagger throwing tips were the least of what I wanted from him right now.

“So… Did Kadmos have many enemies?” I asked as Adair handed me the dagger and repositioned my hands and arms, adjusting my stance.

“Seriously?” Adair asked, looking at me with an eyebrow arched. “Too many to count. But it’s not that much of a surprise. Anyone in my brother’s position is bound to have more enemies than friends. It comes with the territory. It’s one of the reasons why I wanted no part of it.”

Cali was watching us, obviously nervous. She kept flinching every time I made a stabbing motion with the dagger.

“Artemis, you should be careful with that,” she said. “Adair, shouldn’t she be careful with that?”

I took the dagger and gave it a twirl, then threw it behind my back and caught it.

“The only person she’d hurt is herself,” Adair said dryly.

*That’s what you think, Uncle.*

I was showing off a little, but why not? I’d earned my right to do that. Despite what Adair had said, I’d practiced with my dagger for literal years, and I had enough battle scars to prove that I could face off against a worthy opponent and come out on top in the end.

“I can’t take this,” Cali said. “I’m going inside to get some water.” She turned and headed for the house.

I watched her go, then turned back to Adair. “You know, daggers are useful, but is there anything that Kadmos did or used in battle that was unique to him? Like a special move or something? Anything that you could show me?”

Adair paused and narrowed his eyes. “You seem to be full of questions about your father today. Did something happen when you visited your grandfather?”

I met Adair’s steely gaze head-on. “What would you say if I told you that my father is alive?”

Adair stared at me for a long moment before he burst out laughing. “I’d say you were delirious!”

I let him laugh, and I didn’t flinch. I’d let the cat out of the bag, and now there was no turning back.

“But what if he were?” I persisted. “What if my father really is alive?”

Adair’s laughter stopped, and his gaze turned dark and angry. “I told you, he’s dead.”

I stared right back at him. There was no way I was backing down. I was going to get the answers I needed, and I wasn’t going to let him intimidate me into backpedaling.

I felt my own anger rising as I said, “You say that like you want him to be dead!”

“You think I *wanted* him dead?” Adair snarled. “Don’t be ridiculous! Of course I want him alive! He’s my brother!”

Adair had taken a few steps back and was looking like he wanted to be anywhere but here with me.

“I wonder if that’s true,” I said simply.

“You’d better be careful what you say to me,” Adair said. His voice was low.

“Tell me, Uncle, do you want him to be alive because you mean it, or because if he were, the Dark Fae court would finally stop looking for you? If he comes back, they’d stop trying to force you to assume his role. It would solve a lot of your problems if he were alive, right? That’s probably why—”

“Enough!” Adair boomed, his eyes flashing. “How *dare* you?”

I stepped close to him, making it clear that I wasn’t afraid of him. Not even a little. “I have reason to believe that my father is still alive. And if there’s even the smallest chance, don’t you think we should pursue it?”

**Episode 3841**

**Greyson**

Ranger was a large, formidable fighter, and he had Elle’s father pinned on the ground. No matter how big a wild wolf was, though, it would never be a match for an Alpha werewolf. When I slammed into Ranger, knocking him off Elle’s father, both wild wolves snarled at me.

At least they’d stopped fighting.

I had taken control over the scene, but I didn’t know how far to push. Did I kill Ranger? It wouldn’t be difficult, but I knew that murder would take things to another level. It would set a bad precedent, when werewolves and wild wolves weren’t even supposed to interact in the first place. I never would’ve come here if it weren’t for Elle.

And yet, here we were.

*You are human*, Ranger said to me, his voice ominous in my head. *We are wolves. You do not belong here.* He glared at Elle and Helix, his teeth clenched, blood dripping down his face. *None of you belong here!*

After stating the obvious, Ranger lunged at me. I avoided his bite—child’s play—and shoved him to the ground, immobilizing him with one large paw on his chest. He growled up at me, humiliated, while I weighed my next move.

But I quickly realized that I had no real options here.

I’d come to Idaho to help Elle’s father. I had to stop the fighting, for her sake.

That was all that mattered.

*You have to make a choice, wolf*, I told Ranger. *Give up now and leave the pack, or die today*.

Elle snarled from a few feet away. When I looked up and our eyes locked, I could feel the rage emanating from her. Her shout echoed viciously in my head. *He should die!*

Before I could speak, she ran forward. This was going to be a head-on attack, I realized, and I couldn’t keep Ranger restrained and stop Elle at the same time. Instinct told me to kick Ranger away and grab Elle before she did something she’d regret, but I didn’t have to take things that far.

Elle’s father blocked her way.

*Stand down, child*, he mind linked with a growl.

Elle was much larger than her father, now. And yet, even after months apart, Elle ducked her head, and I felt their dynamic reemerge. Her father was the one with the authority between them. Elle was still his daughter, no matter what.

*I came here to help you*, Elle told him, panting. *I have to help you!*

Her father’s voice was cold. *I did not ask for help. This is not your battle*.

Without sparing Elle another look, he turned sharply to me.

*Nobody told you to come here, Redwood Alpha. Take my daughter back*. His gaze flicked down to his opponent, still struggling under my paw like a pinned fly. *I will deal with Ranger.*

*But I want to help!* Elle declared, approaching her father. I noticed how she lowered herself closer to the ground, like she wanted to appear smaller. On some level, it was heartbreaking to watch. *You’ll always be my family*, Elle added, her mental voice softer now.

Her father didn’t move. Didn’t speak to her. He just turned to me. Ranger howled and snapped his teeth underneath me, but Elle’s father still said, *Release him.*

This was a pretty bad idea, in my opinion.

*This isn’t right!* Helix mind linked loudly. I was surprised he hadn’t butted in earlier, honestly. *I brought Elle and Greyson here to save the pack! I had to do something before—*

Elle’s father let out a roar. His earlier coldness had turned into fury, and he stalked toward Helix. *You think that I cannot defend my own reign? My own pack? How dare you!*

I realized how this had to look to Elle’s father—he felt disrespected. I should’ve seen it coming. Before he could lunge at Helix, who actually seemed intimidated by the wolf’s anger, I shoved Ranger away and stepped in front of Elle’s father.

*I take the blame for coming here*, I said. *Your pack helped the Redwood pack. I only wanted to return the favor.*

Eyes narrowed, Elle’s father paused as he took me in. That only lasted for a few seconds—but that was enough for Ranger. That fucking weasel lunged for Elle the moment my attention wasn’t on her. Elle howled in pain, and a second later, the scent of her blood flooded the air.

The need to defend and protect one of my own hit me like a fucking truck.

With an echoing snarl, I slammed into Ranger, knocking him off Elle before he could do more damage. The snow beside Elle turned red, and red was all I saw as well. Ranger could fight anyone he wanted to become Alpha of these wild wolves, but to attack a member of my pack? Unforgivable.

*This ends now!* I snarled, shoving Ranger to the ground. I slammed my paw down on his windpipe, making him choke.

His eyes were wide as he stared up at me, terror in them, as if he’d finally fucking realized that I could snap his neck like a toothpick.

Good.

*No!* Elle’s father mind linked from behind me.

When I turned to look at him, he was panting.

*You promised to protect Elle*, he said, his tone sharp. *You have to take her away now. Keep her safe. She does not need to see any of this*.

I wanted to argue—mostly to say that Ranger was a sneaky little bitch who needed his ass handed to him, and it would give me great pleasure to be the one to deliver him to death’s doorstep. Poetic, I know.

But Elle’s father wasn’t fucking around. Determination was plain as day all over his face. If I went against him right now, it would show a lack of respect that neither he nor Elle would appreciate. My gaze flicked to her—her wound wasn’t too bad. It would heal quickly.

*This is not your fight, werewolf*, Elle’s father declared.

He was right.

I let Ranger go. The wolf lay on the ground, fighting to catch his breath. I went to check on Elle next, but as I tried to help her stand, she pulled away.

*No*, she said sharply, jumping up as if she’d never been hurt. *I came here to help my father!*

She made a move to charge at Ranger, but I blocked her way.

*This is his fight*, *Elle*, I said. *We can’t intervene when he asked us not—*

Two things happened at the same time. Elle growled in anger, distracting both me and her father, and Ranger made his move. He leapt toward Elle’s bloodied father, aiming straight for his throat. Elle let out a howl that sounded like a cry of despair, but I held her back.

*This is your father’s fight*, I told her.

Elle wouldn’t stop struggling in my grasp, and I could sense her fear and anger, a potent combination that coursed through me. It was a shock to feel her emotions so clearly. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end, my heart pounding. Was this happening because of the alleged sire bond, or was it because I was her Alpha? Either way, Elle’s feelings crashed through me, as if the two of us were tied up together while we watched Elle’s father fight for his position.

*This is his fight*, I repeated to Elle.

She went limp when she realized I wasn’t going to let go.

The two wolves crashed around in the snow, biting, growling, fur and blood flying. It was a vicious battle, and we weren’t the only ones witnessing it. Many other wolves were watching but not interfering. Wild wolves didn’t choose sides, after all. They just followed the strongest leader. The Alpha. There was no room for politics.

It was the animal side of what we were, and we were seeing it play out in real time.

*No!* Elle shouted when Ranger slammed her father to the ground.

Still, I held her back. I knew now that if any of us intervened, the old wolf’s honor would be destroyed. I understood him well enough now to know that he would rather die than be saved.

My pulse echoing in my ears, I watched as Ranger pounced on Elle’s father. He only paused to howl in triumph, his arrogance clear as day. Elle’s roar of despair pierced through the cold forest air while Ranger opened his fanged mouth to finish the job.

It was all the time that Elle’s father needed.

Ranger’s arrogance was his downfall. It gave the older, more experienced wolf the opportunity to lunge for Ranger’s neck. Ranger yelped in pain. He fought to break free as the blood poured, but Elle’s father just bit down harder.

Elle wasn’t breathing.

Ranger’s growls were reduced to gurgling sounds, before he stumbled back and collapsed to the ground, dead. I watched as Elle rushed toward her father, her sob of relief echoing in my head. The older wolf rose slowly, clearly wounded. Elle moved to help him, but before she could go anywhere near her father, the wolf turned a glare on her.

*You should never have come here, child*, he told her harshly. *You are not one of us.*

**Episode 3842**

**Ava**

I stared at Xavier, fuming. How much more of this was I meant to take? He’d been pushing all my buttons—the right ones, and all too often the wrong ones. At the beginning of this whole ordeal, I had decided that I would continue to bend to what he wanted, that I’d go along with his plans and wouldn’t push. I’d moved forward by doing what was best for my pack, and for myself as well.

I had persuaded Xavier to become the Samara Alpha.

But now that he *was* our Alpha, and there was no risk of him dramatically running off into the night, I saw no reason to continue to act like his fucking doormat. Especially since the man in question was making everything increasingly difficult for me with his wishy-washy bullshit.

I might have been in love with Xavier, but I needed to stand my ground here. This was *my* pack. Yes, I had brought Xavier here, but that was because I wanted him to be part of this. I always had. I needed him to recognize that he was in a new pack, the right pack, with me. He needed to get that into his head whenever he decided to feel all nostalgic about the Redwood pack and Cali.

“I know you still have feelings for Cali,” I said sharply.

His jaw clenched. “I don’t—”

“Don’t lie to me,” I snapped, cutting him off. “It’s obvious. What’s *not* obvious is whether you have feelings for me.”

He groaned, raking his hands through his hair. “Of course I fucking do! I’m here, aren’t I?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You’re here because you wanted to be Alpha, and you had nowhere else to go. Let’s not fool ourselves.”

He scoffed, dropping down onto the couch before looking up at me. “It’s not like that! I’m here because I want to be, I’m here to…” He paused, his voice dropping. “I’m here to be with you.”

I laughed bitterly, starting to pace in front of him. “My god, you can’t even say the words!”

“What the hell is your problem right now?” he demanded, his eyes pinning me as I moved in the small space. “You *know* I want you, Ava!”

I paused in front of him, my gaze fixed on his. “If that’s true, then why do you keep hurting me like this?”

Xavier groaned, burying his face in his hands. “Jesus fucking Christ, I didn’t do anything to hurt you!” His head snapped up to look at me again, his hands fists on his knees. “You wanted me to be the Alpha of your pack, and I did it! I’m no longer with Cali, no longer with the Redwood pack.” He stood to his full height, the air around him almost vibrating as he stepped closer to me. My breath caught when he grabbed me by the shoulders. “What more do you want from me?”

His touch was electrifying. His scent was killing me. And the way he looked at me? It felt like it could drop me to my knees.

But I fucking would *not* allow that.

Because none of this was enough.

“I’m tired of your games, Xavier.”

I pulled free of him, turning away, but he grabbed me again. Rough hands on me, on my waist. Resisting him was getting harder by the second.

“Just tell me what you want,” he said in a lower voice, making me face him.

Our eyes locked, his palms moving from my body to my face. I gripped his wrists and yanked them away, because the way he could affect me was infuriating. Right now, the way my wolf was begging for him was humiliating.

“How can you be so blind to it?” I demanded.

“Blind to what?” he snapped. “What the fuck am I not seeing here?”

“You’re the Samara Alpha!” I pointed at him, then outside. “The people out there trust you with their lives! It’s what you wanted, and I gave it to you, but what about what *I* want?” I pointed at myself. “Have you *ever* considered what I want? Truly fucking considered it? Not in passing, not like a footnote in your plans?”

He paused, his dark eyes piercing through me. His chest was heaving, his breathing heavy as he regarded me. And then, when I couldn’t stand the silence any longer, I said the words out loud.

“I want to be your Luna.”

He looked away, exhaling sharply. “We’ve talked about this, Ava. One step at a time.”

But I wasn’t going to let him brush me off.

“And we’ve taken one step already,” I said. “You’re the Alpha. The next step is for you to choose a Luna.”

He glared at me. “How many times do we need to go over this? You agreed to give me time to—”

“Well, I no longer agree,” I declared. “How about that?”

Xavier’s expression was shocked for a moment. Incredulous. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d challenged him like this. The last time I hadn’t tiptoed around him and his moods and his precious feelings. But that had been before.

Before I’d caught him.

Right now, whether he realized it or not, Xavier was in my territory.

He was the Alpha, but this was *my* pack—and he needed to give me the respect I deserved.

“We have to leave for the summit soon, and you expect me to make you my Luna right this moment?” he asked. He still sounded dubious, like he had no idea what the fuck was happening.

I was more than happy to explain.

“I just need to feel like you’re taking this seriously, Xavier,” I said. “That you’re taking *me* seriously. If you’d already told me that you wanted me to be your Luna, I wouldn’t be pushing, I wouldn’t have brought this up again. But all you do is evade and distract.”

“I never—”

“Don’t play that game with me,” I said, shaking my head. “I know bullshit when I see it. You can’t keep stringing me along like I’m less-than.”

“I’ve committed to being Samara Alpha—”

I stepped up to him, my anger rising. “Where’s your commitment to *me*? If you’re the Alpha, where the hell do I fit in?”

He glared at me. “Your timing is fucking shit, Ava. We can discuss this after the summit.”

I scoffed. “If you think people aren’t going to ask about us at the summit, you’re kidding yourself.”

He huffed, getting in my face. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that we’re mates!” I said, my voice rising. “And I’m a Samara wolf, and you’re the Samara Alpha—who I brought in! People are going to wonder why the hell I’m not the Samara Luna yet, and that won’t make either of us look good!”

Again, Xavier hesitated.

Again, he stared—glared—eyes sharp on me. He looked angry, irked, *needy*. He looked at me like he wanted me, and I realized that I could kiss him right now. I could kiss him, and he’d kiss me back. Yet I didn’t want to bring his wolf into this. I didn’t want to push and exploit, but he was tempting me.

“Don’t tell me you haven’t thought about this,” I told him in a lower, calmer tone. “I know you have. But you’re just too in your feelings for Cali to do anything about it.”

He looked away. He took several steps back, as if this small space could ever be big enough for the two of us. He didn’t speak, but I wasn’t done.

“We need to at least be on the same page about the situation,” I said. “A united front. If anyone asks me why I’m not your Luna yet, I need to have an answer ready—”

“Not every Alpha is going to show up with a Luna,” he growled.

“Not every Alpha builds an Alpha claim on being someone’s mate!” I snapped.

Silence. It was so heavy, I wondered if I’d pushed too hard. But I was tired of being pushed around too. This couldn’t go on. I had no problem taking it one step at a time, as long as all those steps didn’t land on me.

“I know you’re holding out for Cali, Xavier, but she can’t be Samara Luna. I’m the one who—”

“I already told you that Cali and I are done,” he said through gritted teeth.

Despite his words, our run-in with Ravi spoke volumes about Xavier’s mental state. Despite everything, I could feel his lingering attachment to the Redwood pack. To Cali.

“I’m here with you,” Xavier said, taking a step closer. His voice was even, now. Measured. “Not Cali.”

I crossed my arms. “That’s true. You’ve made your bed. And, at least for the moment, I’m the one who seems to be lying in it with you.”

Xavier’s eyes narrowed, but he didn’t contradict me. The way he accepted my words as fact sent an electric jolt through me. There’d been a time where he would’ve mocked me for acknowledging our connection, but that was over.

Now, we were in this together.

Xavier could act as pissy and pouty as he wanted, but he couldn’t turn back.

“You’re the one who’s made these decisions, Xavier,” I told him. “You have to deal with the consequences now, and I’m part of the package. I’m the only one who could possibly become the Samara Luna.”

I stared at him.

When he didn’t speak, didn’t move, I added, “I am willing to wait, but only for so long. I expect a decision on this by the end of the summit.”

**Episode 3843**

I watched Artemis and Adair through the kitchen window. I felt like a nosy little asshole for spying on them, but I couldn’t help it. This was like *Days of Our Lives*, only much more stressful. Adair was still an enigma, after all, and I was worried that Artemis would do something to set him off.

*Cali, you’re overreacting. Adair would never do anything to harm Artemis!*

Now, that was up for debate. Much like Adair’s nature. He didn’t speak much, and even though he wasn’t a monster, I didn’t have him pegged for the type to *not* defend himself if attacked. He and Artemis might’ve been related, but that only meant so much. When it came to the supernatural world, things like family seemed to be extra complicated—if Silas and his sons were anything to go by.

The thought made me shudder, so I forced myself to refocus on my spying.

Okay, so it didn’t *look* like they were going to kill each other. That was good. Perhaps I overreacted earlier when Artemis brought out that dagger. Even if she nicked Adair—just for funsies—she wouldn’t *actually* kill him. Even though she had repeatedly said that she would.

My sister was… *a lot.*

How much longer was this heated little chat between them going to last? Because I had stuff to do that didn’t involve watching them. I wanted to practice my magic, maybe get in some more sparring in before we had to start getting ready for the summit. Should I go outside and interrupt them?

*No*, I thought. *This is important to Artemis. She needs to learn about Kadmos.*

For Artemis, I could wait.

I heard footsteps behind me and turned to see Ravi walking into the kitchen.

“What’s up, Cali?” He raised an eyebrow at me. “Who are we spying on today?”

“Not spying—*observing*,” I told him with a serious nod.

He came over, peering over my shoulder and through the window. “Huh. Are those two at it again?”

I realized that Ravi could actually hear them, which meant this whole situation had probably gotten a little too invasive. I forced myself to turn away from the window, and Ravi did the same.

“They’re fine,” I said. “Probably. I’ll have to follow up with Artemis about it later.”

Ravi poured himself a glass of water. “Sorry I’m all sweaty and disgusting,” he said after taking a huge gulp. “I just got back from running patrol.”

I blinked at Ravi—at his face, only—and didn’t comment on the fact that he was obviously *not* disgusting. It felt like I was meant to do something Luna-ish right now—something that did *not* involve complimenting a pack member’s abs. That kind of thing wasn’t meant to be a Luna’s concern. What *was* meant to be a Luna’s concern—perhaps above all else—was pack security.

“Is there anything to report?” I asked. “From the patrol?” I clarified. Because I was awkward.

Ravi’s expression changed, suddenly. I could tell that there was something on his mind.

“Uh…” He paused, drinking the last of his water. Then he lingered, examining his glass like it was fascinating. He was definitely hiding something, and it was stressing me out.

“Ravi,” I said. “Did you see something? Whatever it is, I can handle it.”

“It’s—” Ravi paused again, then shook his head and cleared his throat. “All good, actually.”

Still holding his empty glass of water for some reason, he started to walk out of the kitchen.

*Is he taking that glass out on a walk with him? What the hell is going on here?*

I was ready to call him out, or at least comment on his taste in inanimate pets (a rock was a better choice than a glass, just saying), when he suddenly stopped and turned to face me.

“I saw Xavier and Ava this morning,” he burst out.

*That*, I hadn’t expected.

I stood there, not breathing, feeling like someone had just kicked me in the fucking stomach. Ravi winced, as if he could sense my turmoil, and that made everything worse, somehow. I couldn’t look weak.

I fucking *refused* to look weak.

“What did they say?” I asked. I tried to be calm. Chill. I probably wasn’t fooling anyone.

“They didn’t talk,” Ravi said quickly. “They seemed to just be on a run.”

I nodded, swallowing down the emotion.

*They’re together… Of course they are.*

Why the hell was I even surprised that Xavier had been hanging out with Ava all this time? He’d told me that he’d left me for her, more or less. He’d admitted that he’d been sleeping with her behind my back. I’d been fully aware that this would happen sooner than later—so why did it hurt so much?

Why did I feel sick at the thought?

The idea of them being so close, just around the corner, and doing normal things—everyday domestic things—almost bothered me more than knowing they were having sex. The intimacy of running together as wolves was something I’d never shared with Xavier. The notion left a bitter taste in my mouth, and no matter how much I tried not to give a damn, I knew that it was a lost cause.

I was still in love with Xavier.

I was still in love with the person he used to be with me before that horrible fight, before the horrible things he’d told me. I was still furious at him for breaking us apart like we’d never mattered. He’d tried to break *me* like *I’d* never mattered.

The hurt was fresh, and the tears would be easy to shed, but I couldn’t allow it.

Not now.

“Sorry,” Ravi muttered, looking at the floor. “I know it sucks, but I thought you should know…”

I cleared my throat. “It’s not a big deal.”

We both knew that my words fell short of being even remotely convincing.

After placing his empty glass in the sink, Ravi gestured behind him awkwardly. “I’ll just…”

He walked away. The moment he was gone, I fell into a chair. Immediately, an image popped into my head.

*Xavier and Ava are in wolf form, frolicking through the woods, playing, the sun shining over them. They shift back to human, they’re by a stream, naked bodies, big smiles. He touches her cheek, she bites her lip, and then—*

No. No, no, fucking *NO*.

*I have to do better than this.*

If Xavier really was hanging out with Ava, then I needed to get used to it. Or at least not feel gutted every time I was reminded of it. I couldn’t let my memories of Xavier interfere with my role as Luna—or at least as fake Luna. I had to toughen up, come hell or high water. There were bound to be things at the summit that would be far more important than my crushed heart, so I couldn’t let myself get distracted like this so close to the event.

I stood up, shaking my head to clear it. I was determined not to let Xavier rule my emotions. Really, I was glad that Ravi had told me about running into them. I needed to get used to the idea of them together—without crying or internally screaming or feeling like I was going to be sick. If I could practice my magic to get better, then I could do the same with my emotions. Practice detachment, and fortify the wall.

When it came to Xavier, I needed a wall around me.

I needed to be strong, otherwise I didn’t know how I would survive the heartache.

*I need to be okay… End of story.*

Shoving all those thoughts aside, I glanced out the window. How were Artemis and Adair doing? I hadn’t heard any war cries, so I assumed that they hadn’t slaughtered each other yet. They weren’t out there at all now, though, and I frowned.

Had they really killed each other in complete silence? Or was practice just over for now?

“Cali.” Rishika’s voice cut through my thoughts. I turned to see her popping her head into the kitchen. “We need to start getting ready to leave for the summit.”

I swallowed nervously. “Already?”

It always seemed to feel like the summit was far in the future—but the future was fast approaching.

Rishika shrugged. “Better to start getting ready sooner rather than later, right?”

“Right,” I agreed.

I ignored the way my palms started sweating. Maybe if I finished up packing quickly, I’d still have some time to squeeze in that bit of training I wanted to do. More sword yielding would do wonders for my confidence, I was sure. It was very cool.

Actually, you could even argue that a sword was cooler than, say, a bow and arrow.

*Wait, am I kind of a badass?*

“By the way, have you heard from Greyson?” Rishika asked, interrupting my semi-delirium.

“It’s been a hot minute,” I said, realizing.

“You should probably let him know we’re planning to leave for the summit soon,” Rishika said.

With that, she left, and I found myself alone in the kitchen. Just me and my thoughts…

*I am the Redwood’s (fake) Luna, dammit! I have a sword! I am going to pull this off, and I need to believe that!*

But the truth was, I’d always held out hope that Greyson would arrive at the summit with me. Taking a deep breath, I picked up my phone and started typing.

*Hope everything’s okay… Are you going to make it in time?*

**Episode 3844**

**Xavier**

I was trying not to show my frustration. And failing. Yeah, I was annoyed at Ava, but could I be angry with her for speaking what I knew deep down was the truth? I actually felt bad for her, even though I wasn’t gonna admit it. It wouldn’t be very Alpha of me to do that.

So, I opted for warning her instead.

“You don’t get to give me an ultimatum,” I told her sharply. “I’m already the Alpha, and there isn’t much you can do about it now.”

She scoffed. “When did I ever say—”

“I mean it, Ava,” I cut her off. “If you didn’t want me to be Alpha, you had your opportunities to stop me. You should’ve joined Jesse, Simon, and the third nonbeliever and voted against me.”

Ava paused for a moment, just staring at me. Then, in a voice that sounded like it could turn into a frustrated scream if I wasn’t careful, she said, “I’m telling you I want to be Luna, and you somehow turn this into me not wanting you as Alpha? You have not responded to any of the points I brought up. You’re just fucking up the conversation because you want to avoid talking about this.”

“It’s all connected, Ava,” I snapped. “I’ve been the Alpha—what? Practically for one minute, and you’re already undermining me, pressuring me to do what you want. You’re acting like *you’re* the fucking Alpha here, when you voted for *me*. You can’t take that back now. The past is in the past, and now I’m in charge.”

Her hands dropped from around her chest. Her intake of breath was sharp, and when our eyes locked, I could see the hurt and anger in hers. I hoped I hadn’t pushed too hard. I knew I needed Ava on my side—not undermining me—but I couldn’t just give her what she wanted.

I couldn’t give her that kind of commitment, not when it tangled up our mate bond with my role as Alpha. If I marked Ava as my Luna, it would solidify our connection in every way possible. It would bond us in a way that we *chose*. I could not go there with Ava, not when Cali owned my heart. For fuck’s sake, I was doing all this just because of Cali—to protect her and work toward killing Adéluce.

My wolf growled at the sight of Ava’s hurt, though.

He was restless, begging, aggravated, and I started to fully understand why Adéluce had wanted me to lead the Samaras. Putting me in this difficult situation with Ava hurt like a son of a bitch. The mate bond and my wolf screamed at me to soothe her. But if I pursued this with Ava, if I went all out with her and made her my Luna, it would hurt Cali. Even more than she was hurting already, thanks to yours truly.

All the while, Ava was hurting too. It added to my guilt, to my sense of self-loathing. Ava shouldn’t have to be caught up in all this. But, somehow, it felt like me being stuck in this situation was exactly what Adéluce had been planning.

I couldn’t seem to stop hurting both of my mates.

“This isn’t about me changing my mind or trying to take over,” Ava said, finally. Her voice was low. Controlled. “This is about how we proceed going forward.” She came closer. Her words were a husky whisper that sent chills down my spine. “I can’t help what I feel, what I want, Xavier. And I want all of you. Not just pieces, or when it suits you to be with me. I deserve *more*. You shouldn’t be surprised that I’m asking for it.”

The problem was that Ava was fucking right.

The problem was that I knew what I’d gotten myself into, but I’d overestimated myself and underestimated her—both who she was and her effect on me. My wolf was howling, needing, his howls so loud that I had to do something—*anything* to shut him up.

“Don’t get things confused,” I said, taking a step back, moving the fuck away from her. “We might be hooking up, but being mates with benefits doesn’t lend itself automatically to an Alpha-Luna partnership.”

For a moment, Ava fell silent.

I regretted my choice of words immediately. I didn’t want to make this any worse for her, but I just did. The pain that suddenly marred her face shook me to the core. I felt sick, like all of this was a nightmare.

And then she made it worse.

She stepped closer once more. Only this time, she touched me as well. She rested her hand on my bare chest, her nails hard against my skin. My wolf was jolted, shaking. I was pinned there, breathing heavily, watching as her lush lips parted.

“So, I’m good enough to make you come, but I’m not good enough to be your partner,” she said in a whisper.

And then she drew her nails across my bare chest.

My hands turned into fists at the sensation. It was a mix of pain and guilty pleasure as our eyes locked, my entire body going rigid with it. I felt hot all over, taut, ready to fucking snap with want.

“You can keep lying to yourself, Xavier,” she whispered, eyes gleaming, “but you know something has changed between us.”

Before her hand could reach my navel, I gripped her wrist and pulled her to me within a fraction of an inch. How easy it would be to kiss her. How fucking good it would feel to give in to the yearning that had been consuming me ever since I came to the Samara pack. But after that, what?

There would be no turning back.

I couldn’t allow it.

Giving in to that primitive need would jeopardize my plan to return to Cali. I’d already probably fucked that up at this point. And no matter what I told Ava, no matter how much I could share with her or not, ending up with Cali would always be my long-term objective.

I *was* using Ava.

And I hated myself for it, for hurting Cali, for fucking *everything*.

Adéluce’s plan was clear, obvious, and I was sick with it all.

“This conversation is over,” I rasped, letting Ava go. I grabbed my shirt and headed outside.

*You can’t run away from this, Xavier!* she mind linked.

I froze just outside the door. Of course. The mind link. Yet another way we were connected. Taking a deep breath, I looked around the campsite. I gazed at the pack members I was now in charge of.

“I’m not running anywhere,” I told her. I faced her and kept my voice low but even. We couldn’t cause a scene with everyone watching. “You said you brought me here and fought for me to be the Samara Alpha. The Samaras are going to arrive at the summit with a disadvantage. We’re starting out from a place of weakness, but we can change that. We have to. We must appear strong at the summit, to make it known that the Samaras aren’t rudderless, vulnerable, ready to be defeated.”

“What does that have to do with what we were discussing earlier?” she asked sharply.

“We can’t let other stuff distract us,” I replied. “We need to commit here. Our main goal at the summit is to make the Samara pack appear like we have our shit together.”

That answer was all I was willing to give her right now. What she was asking for, even beyond becoming my Luna, was too much for me to consider. Even if I could feel everyone’s eyes on us right now. Ava was right—they were probably expecting me to announce her as my Luna any minute now.

I probably wouldn’t be able to avoid it forever.

I had walked out of the trailer, hoping that Ava would drop the conversation when we were out in the open, in front of the others. But no. She was fucking determined, and I had nowhere to hide.

“I’ll make you a deal,” I said. “If you agree to stop bringing it up, stop distracting us from doing what we need to do—”

“You can’t put me on hold forever,” she hissed. “We decided already.”

*I’m not suggesting that*, I told her through our mind link. *But every time you bring it up, every time we’re standing here with the others watching from a distance, every time we fight in that goddamn Airstream that’s not fucking soundproof, you risk drawing them into this conversation!*

*So what?* she scoffed in my head. *They will bring it up sooner or later, Xavier! It’s an obvious next step. It’s something that would make us look good at the summit.*

“Fine,” I said, jaw clenched, “but that doesn’t change the fact that I need more time, and you’re only making it harder for me.”

She glared. “I need an answers, Xavier. You can’t just ignore me.”

She was right about that. I couldn’t ignore her. I couldn’t ignore the way my wolf howled for her. But what I also couldn’t ignore was the way my heart ached at the thought of Cali. This was all for her. For her love, and above all, for Cali’s safety.

I needed more goddamn time.

“Tell you what,” I said to Ava, “if you can stop privately and publicly raising questions about becoming my Luna, then yes. I’ll do it. I will give you an answer at the end of the summit.”

**Episode 3845**

**Greyson**

The harshness in the elder wolf’s tone surprised me. I was ready to tell him that Elle was his daughter, that she came here because she was worried about him. But I stopped myself. This was Elle’s fight, not mine. Her hurt did funny things to me, though. Not *funny haha*, but funny, like, *I’d do anything she asked right now if it meant helping her find comfort and soothing*.

I fought to contain the protective feeling that rose up inside me.

*But I came all this way*, Elle mind linked her father in a whisper, her wolf whimpering.

My stomach churned at the sound.

*I am glad to see you*, her father replied. He didn’t seem glad, though—he seemed worried when he looked at her. *But you should not risk yourself for me or the pack.*

*Why?* she asked quietly.

*When I agreed to let you be turned, I knew, and you knew, that you would no longer be a member of our pack*, he replied. He sat back on his haunches, his eyes fixed on Elle. *You do not belong among the wild wolves anymore, child.*

Elle’s wolf whimpered again, and I fucking hated it. I didn’t believe that her father was saying this to be cruel, though. The fact remained that werewolves and wild wolves were not the same. He was right about the situation, whether or not Elle understood. As she stared at him like she wanted to approach but wouldn’t dare, her father spoke again.

*I am sorry*, he said.

Those three words spoken with such ease and genuine feeling struck me. I’d never heard a father say them. This wolf was nothing like Silas—that was for sure. Silas wouldn’t have bothered to explain anything. He would exploit, he would be hurtful, and he would take great pleasure in his child’s pain. He would have been quick to let me or any one of my brothers die for him, without a moment's hesitation. Certainly without any remorse.

*Becoming human is what you asked for to be happy*, Elle’s father said quietly. *I hope you are happy.*

Elle didn’t speak. Nobody spoke. We all looked at her, but she had eyes for him only. In a whisper, she asked her father, *Are you okay?*

The wolf licked the deepest one of his wounds. *I will heal.*

I hoped that was true. These wolves didn’t have healing powers like werewolves. Out here, without medicine or magic, a simple infection could kill Elle’s father. Shaking my head, I glanced at Ranger’s corpse—at least the elder wolf had proved he was able to lead the pack. I doubted there would be more challengers like Ranger. This was a good thing, in a way.

But Elle still seemed devastated, and I didn’t want to watch her hurt anymore.

We needed to remove ourselves from this situation right now.

*We have to get going, Elle*, I mind linked. *We’re running late already.*

That was certainly true. We had already traveled farther into Idaho than I had planned. My worry about Cali showing up at the summit first, without me by her side, nagged at me. My mate had been so stressed out about this, and I wasn’t there to help her. I hated the idea of disappointing her, and what had been a seed of concern earlier had grown quickly. It was as if the mate bond wanted to remind me of what I needed to be focusing on right now.

I really fucking hoped we could make up for all the lost time by not being sidetracked.

*Have a good journey*, Elle’s father told me.

*Thank you*, I replied. *You held your own today, but never forget that even though we live very different lives, you can always count on me for help.*

The wolf tilted his head, as if in a nod. *Thank you for fulfilling your promise to protect my daughter*. He turned to Elle. *You have found a good Alpha. Stay with him.*

Elle wasn’t speaking. Her feelings had felt so vivid to me earlier, but now she was closed off. I decided that the best way to deal with this was to push along. We couldn’t stall any longer—not with Cali and the summit waiting.

*Say your goodbyes, Elle*, I mind linked before starting toward the woods. I heard the sound of running footsteps behind me before I realized that Helix was tagging along with the enthusiasm of a puppy.

*I am coming with you!* he mind linked.

I stopped, facing him. *You’re not a member of the Redwood pack.*

Helix paused*. Elle’s father said I do not belong here anymore…*

I wanted to tell him that he should’ve thought of that before he sought out being turned. But Elle was already upset, and I had no idea how she’d react if I started fighting with her childhood friend right now. Taking him to the summit would be a pretty bad idea, though—that much was obvious. Elle and I had already agreed on that point.

Bringing Elle was already risky, but at least she had a good head on her shoulders. Helix, on the other hand, seemed to have clouds, butterflies, and a penchant for chaos in the place of a brain. Which made ordering him to go off into the woods and survive on his own even more questionable.

Fuck.

*I won’t make any promises*, I told Helix. *But you can follow along for now*.

Helix’s wolf gave me a toothy grin. I frowned at him in case he got any ideas that we were friends now, but he remained unbothered. Shaking my head, I moved forward, and he followed. At least he had learned that lesson.

A few minutes later, Elle caught up with us. She seemed sullen, too quiet. She had to be worried about her father. The scene between them earlier was intense. I had never seen her that devastated. I’d never sensed her pain so vividly. There was no way she was suddenly okay now.

*Helix*, I mind linked, *go ahead of us.*

He gasped in enthusiasm. *Go ahead?*

*Yes, just this once*, I said. *Do some scouting. If you come across anything, let me know. But don’t wander too far ahead.*

*Yes, Alpha!* Helix scrambled forward, excited to have a mission. I sure as hell hoped he didn’t think this was some sort of Redwood pack test. I also didn’t like how happy he was. The way he acted threw me off—I couldn’t tell if it was an overeager puppy thing, or if he just wasn’t listening to me at all.

Anyway. At least I was alone with Elle now.

*Are you okay?* I mind linked.

*I could have taken care of myself*, she snapped.

Her scathing tone was so shocking that I almost flinched. *You’re upset with me because I stopped you from attacking Ranger?*

She didn’t reply. This would not do.

I blocked her way, peering at her.

*You asked me to help, Elle*, I said. *I did the best I could, trying to honor your father’s wishes.*

Elle remained quiet, looking at the ground. I kept an eye on her and an ear out to make sure Helix hadn’t drifted off too far. As the seconds ticked by, though, and Elle stubbornly refused to meet my gaze, a sinking feeling grew in my stomach.

Was there a chance I had read the entire situation wrong?

What if Elle wasn’t worried about her father?

What if she simply missed her old life as a wild wolf?

Could she be having second thoughts about being turned?

*Shit.*

I *never* would have turned Elle if I thought that she wasn’t 100 percent ready—if her father hadn’t assured me of it. She and her father had suggested it, had insisted on it, and these were the consequences of her actions. But could Elle have changed her mind about all this after meeting her father again today?

Her father’s firm stance about werewolves and wild wolves remaining separate might have stirred something within her. Was she homesick? She could be. It would be an easy assumption to make—she knew nothing of the human world or the werewolf world, and her father had basically just shunned her. Even though he clearly loved her.

The wolf wouldn’t have asked for her to get turned in the first place if he didn’t love her dearly and want her to be happy. Elle, though, looked nothing but deeply unhappy right now. She seemed angry and frustrated. And even though I could no longer sense her emotions like I did earlier, I could tell that this was really fucking bad.

Meanwhile, Helix was frolicking ahead.

I had better rein him in before he reached goddamn Antarctica.

*Heli*x, I mind linked, *stay put.*

*Okay!* he replied. At least he answered.

I turned to Elle, taking her in. She still wasn’t looking at me. Even if something might’ve changed for her today, nothing had changed for me. My responsibility to her remained. I could never dismiss or ignore it. I truly wanted what was best for her.

*Elle*, I said, *do you not want to be a Redwood anymore?*

**Episode 3846**

I stared at my phone, willing it to show Greyson’s response to my text. My hopes were crushed as the seconds ticked by, though. I knew that, realistically, wherever he was probably wasn’t the cell phone signal capital of the world.

*But what if he’s not responding because something bad happened to him?*

That was highly unlikely. I was pretty sure he could handle a bunch of wild wolves. Greyson was fine. Whereas I was… still kind of an anxious mess? Like half a mess. Or maybe I remained a complete mess, but I’d figured out a better way to hide it.

*For how much longer, though?*

What was going to happen if I walked into the summit without Greyson? What if people didn’t buy that I was the Luna? What if Kira’s spell faltered? How would the other attendees react? What if they were all like the Bitterfangs, who believed that werewolf Lunas had to be 100 percent werewolf? There was no way Malakai was going to roll out the red carpet for a half-Fae like me.

But even if we took my own worries out of the equation, if I were found out as a fake, it would expose the Redwood pack to danger. We wouldn’t have a leader—we’d be vulnerable. Not to mention, our reputation as a respectable pack would be shot to hell. I’d become the Lying Luna or something…

*Seriously, why on earth did Greyson agree to my idiotic plan?* I wondered, my heart pounding. *It’s like, okay, he thinks I’m hot for some reason, but that doesn’t mean he has to agree with all my nonsense!*

Now that I thought about it more, I knew I shouldn’t be going to this damn summit in the first place. Everything was horrible, because *I* was horrible, and also not good enough to lead them all to glory, and also—

*Cali, STOP! You can do this! Stop spiraling!*

The voice in my head sounded suspiciously like Lola’s. If Lola, of all people, thought I was overreacting, then it had to be true. It made sense, actually—I couldn’t project being a proper Luna if I was freaking out. Greyson had confidence in me, and despite all my catastrophic thoughts, I realistically knew that he’d never agree with a plan of mine if he didn’t think I could pull it off. Plus, it wasn’t just Greyson who believed in me. Rishika did as well. Both of them were logical and reliable, and they thought I could do this.

“I can do this,” I told myself out loud.

“Do what?” Lola’s voice asked.

I looked up to see her standing in the doorway, eyebrows arched. I cleared my throat awkwardly. “I’m just giving myself a pep talk for the summit. Rishika said we need to start getting ready to leave.”

“Oh, that’s a great idea!” Lola chirped, clapping her hands together. “What are we supposed to bring?”

I squinted at Lola. “Nobody told me I was supposed to bring anything.” I gulped, my eyes widening. “Oh god, am I supposed to bring a gift or something? I haven’t gone shopping!”

“No gifts, Cali,” Lola said with a snort. “I’m just saying—what is the lodging like? Cabins, perhaps?” She sighed, looking out the window dreamily. “I’d like to imagine it’s being held at a four-star winter wonderland kind of resort, but I doubt there’s one in Hells Canyon.”

“I… have no idea where we’re staying,” I admitted. “That has been the last thing on my mind.”

“Hey, maybe it’s going to be like Coachella!” She nudged me. “We should totally go in April, by the way!”

Here I was, trying to survive freaking winter, and Lola was ready for April.

“Let’s just focus on one thing at a time,” I told her tightly. “Greyson mentioned at some point that there was a website for the summit—we can check it out and see where we’re sleeping.”

“Let’s look it up on my laptop!” Lola said enthusiastically, grabbing my hand and pulling me toward her bedroom. Before we could reach it, we ran into Ravi, who was biting his nails. That was never a good thing.

“Everything okay, Ravi?” I asked.

“I’m just—” He exhaled sharply, then blurted it all out. “I’m just worried I didn’t do enough planning for the mixer. I really don’t want to disappoint Greyson, but I’ve reached out several times to the Nightshade pack, and they haven’t responded. We’re supposed to be throwing this thing together, but they’re totally ghosting me!”

“Rude!” Lola said with a huff.

“Right?” Ravi said. “I’m going to provide plenty of snacks and drinks, but where’s the wow factor?” He looked between Lola and me. “Do you guys think I should get a few strobe lights? Maybe a fog machine? More glowsticks?”

Lola narrowed her eyes at him. “Ravi, this isn’t a rave… Is it?”

Ravi’s stress turned into a glower. “I don’t need that kind of attitude, Lola. You don’t have to throw a rave to have a fog machine! It’s cool!”

“In the eighties, maybe,” Lola said dryly.

Ravi gasped in obvious offense, but before he could say anything, I stepped between them. “Ravi, I’m sure that whatever you come up with will be great,” I said. “But if you want my opinion, I think keeping it simple is best. Isn’t the main thing to socialize with the other packs? Putting up disco balls and lasers isn’t important and won’t help with anything.”

Ravi’s eyes lit up. “Lasers! What a great idea, Cali. Shit, I have to tell Torin!”

He ran off before I could breathe another word.

Lola groaned. “Lasers? This better not turn into a sci-fi convention. I do not like *Star Wars*!” She paused, a sudden twinkle in her eye as she nudged me. “Though Jay and I did have some fun cosplay outfits when we went to Vegas.”

I blinked at her in confusion. “When the heck did you go to Vegas?”

Lola cleared her throat, grabbing me by the arm. “Um, anyway, how about that website?”

I couldn’t stop myself from picturing Lola dressed as Princess Leia and Jay as Han Solo as we headed upstairs to Lola’s bedroom. I managed to shake off the image of Lola’s miniscule golden bikini when she found the summit website.

“Oh my god,” Lola said with a huff, “look at this!” She pointed at the screen. In bold black letters, it said, *Lodging is provided. Tents are provided on a first come, first served basis.*

“Tents?” Lola’s tone was both incredulous and annoyed. “That’s it? A TENT? What kind of lodging is that? What are we, heathens?” She huffed. “Where am I going to take my hot thirty-minute showers? Where will I do my ten-step skincare routine?”

I cringed. “In the tent, I suppose?”

“Unbelievable!” She threw her hands up before slamming her laptop shut. “What kind of medieval werewolf bullshit is this?”

“I think the biggest issue for me is gonna be the freezing cold,” I said, shuddering just thinking about it. “I don’t have werewolf heat like you guys.”

Lola waved a hand. “You can dress up for the cold; it’ll be fine!” She raised an index finger. “Though you do not want to overdo it.”

I shot her a look. “Overdo it, how? I need layers, Lola!”

She rolled her eyes. “What I mean is that if we show up overdressed, it will look like we’re trying too hard. And if we underdress, everyone will think we’ve got no class.”

I scoffed. “I think there are more important things to worry about than how well we dress. Like, mainly that I’ll turn into a fake-Luna icicle.”

Lola narrowed her eyes at me. “Are you forgetting who you’re talking to, Cali? You need both style and warmth for this trip, and I shall provide both!” She gripped my hand and dragged me to her closet, immediately starting to rifle through her wardrobe.

“As the Redwood Luna, you need to look elegant and expensive,” she said. “And as Xavier’s ex, you need to look super hot, so the rat bastard can cry over what he can’t have!”

“*If* he’s even there,” I said, ignoring the twitch in my stomach.

*Do you think he’ll be going there with Ava?* I thought but didn’t ask her out loud.

“Right—he might be there!” Lola declared. Full of indignation and her usual unnecessary dramatics, she pointed at me. “And if he is, when he sees you, he will regret the day that he dared hurt you!”

“I’m not going to the summit to make Xavier jealous. Whether he’s gonna be there or not.” I paused, gulping nervously. “Which I doubt he will be.”

*The last thing I need is adding Xavier to the messy mixture that is this damn summit!*

Lola shrugged, looking back into her closet. “Either way, dressing the part is a win-win. Besides, Greyson isn’t going to object to seeing you looking hot AF, and you need to wear something that makes you feel confident, Cali.” She turned to me and offered a serious nod. “Being Luna is about confidence!”

I couldn’t argue with that one.

“Okay, try this on,” she said, thrusting a knitted dress into my hands. It had a high, winter-appropriate neckline, but it was much, *much* more form-fitting than anything I’d normally wear.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Lola pressed.

I realized that she wasn’t going to relent until I did as she asked, so I surrendered to my fate. After I slipped the dress on, Lola zipped it up and pushed me in front of the mirror.

I stared at my reflection, examining myself. “Well…”

A knock on the door interrupted me. “Hey, Cali?” Sage walked in, her expression unreadable. “There’s a situation…”

I frowned. “A situation?”

“Lucian is here,” Sage said. “He’s asking about Elle.”

**Episode 3847**

I was grateful for the interruption—Hurricane Lola could be a lot when she was in Fashion Mode. But I was also not thrilled to be dealing with Lucian right now.

“Nice dress, by the way,” Sage said, eyeing me up and down. “Shows off your figure but, like, in a classy way.”

“See?” Lola grinned at me. “I told you so!”

Ignoring Lola, I asked Sage, “What’s going on with Lucian, exactly?”

She shrugged. “I wasn’t sure who should talk to him, but it sure as hell isn’t gonna be me. The guy gives me the creeps.”

Who could fault Sage for that? My first instinct was to tell her to go find Rishika or Jay to deal with him, but then I reined myself in. I supposed that part of my new (fake) Luna responsibilities would have to be doing stuff I didn’t want to do. And I did have a vast history with Lucian, after all.

*Maybe that’s exactly why you shouldn’t be the one to talk to Lucian, Cali!*

I ignored my internal turmoil—it was getting old—and decided to get this over with.

“I’ll go talk to him,” I told Sage. I left her behind with Lola, who was chatting a mile a minute, throwing outfits for me onto the bed. At least someone was having fun around here.

*Couldn’t be me!*

As I climbed down the stairs, I wished Greyson were back. It was probably a bit problematic to think, but things were so much easier around here when he took care of everything.

*What? It’s true…*

He still hadn’t responded to my text, though, and the possibility of him arriving with me at the summit seemed less and less realistic. I had to stop obsessing over that, I realized—I could do this on my own, with the pack backing me up. I needed to rise to the occasion and be worthy of Greyson’s support. That was all.

*That’s all, Cali. Step the fuck up!*

Shaking my head to clear it, I finished climbing down the stairs and headed to the foyer where Lucian was waiting. The moment he saw me, his eyes flickered downward, his pupils actually dilating.

I realized, too late, that I was still wearing Lola’s dress.

“Caliana,” Lucian said, beaming at me. “You look radiant.”

First of all, a world of *nope*. Second, just—*NOPE*.

“What do you want, Lucian?” I asked, clearing my throat.

He was still staring. Up and down, checking me out with no shame at all, to the point where I was cringing so hard that my jaw clenched.

“It’s a shame we are not mates, Caliana,” Lucian said with a sigh that was a tad too breathy. “Our children would be gorgeous.”

I almost gagged.

*This is why people hate you*, *Lucian*, I thought.

“Well, we’re *not* mates,” I said curtly, “and I’m very busy right now. What do you want? I assume it’s an emergency, otherwise you know it’s impolite to drop in unannounced.” I knew that he *didn’t* know that, as evidenced by his *many* drop-ins, but he needed to learn it.

Lucian blinked up at me—he’d been staring at my waistline this entire time, like seriously what the actual fuck?—before barking out an incredulous laugh.

“Oh my, Caliana,” he said, “I’ve never seen you act so… assertive? It suits you, darling. I like it.”

“Lucian,” I said, grimacing, “*stop*. Right now.”

Lucian chuckled. “See? You sound so dominant, dear. It’s titillating.”

The lamp sitting on the side table next to Lucian was what was titillating *me*, actually. After the spatula and the curling iron, a lamp sounded like the perfect weapon for me. I wouldn’t even have to use my magic.

“I asked you a question, Lucian,” I said impatiently. “What. Do. You. Want?”

“The obvious, of course,” Lucian said with a shrug. “I have come to see my mate. I want to say goodbye to her before I leave for the summit. She must be back from her trip to Idaho, yes?” He looked around. “Where is she?”

“Elle isn’t here,” I said.

Lucian paused, raising his eyebrows. “She and Greyson are still away?”

“Yep. Sorry you came all this way for nothing. Well, have a nice—”

“Why, exactly, did they go to Idaho?” Lucian pressed.

Of course he’d ask that.

“I am not at liberty to say,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

Lucian’s eyes narrowed. “So Elle and Greyson have been off gallivanting all night together? Is that what you’re telling me, Caliana?”

I swallowed. I was a terrible liar, and I knew that the more I even thought about spinning this, the worse it was going to sound. But did I really have to lie here? I didn’t owe it to Lucian to be truthful. In fact, I didn’t owe him a damn thing after the way he’d treated me. I could speak to him, be on civil enough terms, but I didn’t have to indulge his bullshit.

*I’m the (sort of) Luna, dammit! I should not have to take any shit from this asshole!*

“You shouldn’t worry about Greyson and Elle, Lucian,” I said, wrapping my arm around his. He looked so surprised at the contact that I took advantage of it and shuffled him toward the door. “They are strong wolves—you know that. They’re going to be fine.”

“But—” Lucian started as I ushered him over the doorstep and outside. “But Elle is my mate! I deserve to know—”

“Like I already said, I’m very busy, Lucian, so we should catch up at the summit,” I interrupted. “Goodbye now!” I snapped my fingers, and the friction sent out a little zing of magic that closed the door right in Lucian’s face.

*What…*

The shock settled in when I heard Lucian sputtering outside.

*… did I just do?*

Had I just shoved Lucian out of the house and slammed the door in his face? Was this a joke, or was it real life? It had to be real life, right? Oh. Wow.

*Wait, am I a badass?*

“Yay, Cali!” Lola’s voice came from behind me. I turned to see her barreling down the stairs, clapping, a huge grin on her face. “Way to tell off that jerk!”

I sounded dubious. “I *did* tell him off, didn’t I?”

Lola smirked. “About time, if you ask me!”

I snorted, shaking my head.

“Okay, let’s go back upstairs—I wanna show you the other outfits I found for you.”

“Speaking of which,” I said wryly, grabbing her arm, “I’m not going to wear this.” I gestured down at myself.

“But why?” Lola asked as we climbed up the stairs. “It looks so good on you.”

I cringed. “Lucian hit on me. And if Lucian hit on me, we’ve done something wrong.”

Lola scoffed. “It means we’ve done something *right*! Imagine walking into the summit, surrounded by all these Alphas who will be drooling over you.”

I grimaced. “Do you really think the idea of drooling werewolves is a selling point for me?”

Lola waggled her eyebrows. “But it will make all the Lunas jealous.”

I stared at Lola like she was nuts. Because she was nuts. “Have you lost your mind? As is, just being there is going to be stressful enough for me. Antagonizing other Lunas is the last thing I want to do!”

Lola rolled her eyes. “Okay, fine. But being sexy gives you power.”

“Does it, though?” I asked, squinting.

Too late, Lola was already shoving a new outfit in my arms. I decided I would try the clothes out just so we could get this whole wardrobe situation over with. I should be doing something else with my last few hours before the summit—something more important than fashion. Like practicing my magic.

*Although shutting the door in Lucian’s face like that would have made Adair proud. Hah!*

Thinking about Adair reminded me of Artemis. “Hey,” I told Lola, “have you seen Artemis? I should check on her before we go.”

“Later,” Lola said, fixing the sleeves of yet another knitted, ultra-formfitting dress, this one black. “Now, let me look at you!” She nodded as she took me in, looking alarmingly satisfied. “Ah, yes. That’s the right balance. Sexy, menacing, and great for the cold weather!”

I frowned, looking down at my boob area. The material felt nice, and there was no cleavage showing, but the whole thing was just so snug. “Fit like a glove” was supposed to be a good thing, but what if I didn’t like fitted things? What if I preferred something that resembled a cozy sack of potatoes in neutral colors? Now, that would be nice.

“Cali, stop staring at your boobs and pay attention,” Lola said, snapping her fingers in my face. “I asked you a question!”

“What?”

Lola raised an eyebrow. “Have you thought about what you’re going to say?”

I almost choked. “What? Am I supposed to make a speech?” My voice had turned into a squeak. “Why didn’t anyone tell me? You guys are—”

“No, no speech!” Lola rushed to say. “I meant, have you thought about what you’re going to say to Xavier if he shows up?”

**Episode 3848**

**Greyson**

*How could you doubt that I want to be a Redwood?* Elle snapped.

This was the second time she’d spoken to me in that tone since we left her father. It was disrespectful, but if I corrected her right now, she might run off.

I had to be careful.

*I* *did not mean to upset you, Elle*, I said. *I just sensed that you were having doubts about being turned. Have you ever wished that you could rejoin your old wolf pack?*

Elle’s wolf huffed. *That couldn’t be further from the truth!*

*What’s the truth, then?* I asked.

*I’m upset with my father*, she said, *but that doesn’t change anything about us. I want to be a Redwood. I want you to be my Alpha. Maybe it’s the other way around, here?*

She was still being hostile, and I was so fucking confused as to why.

*What are you even talking about?* I asked.

For a moment, her wolf stared at me. Her breaths were coming out sharp. When she spoke in my head next, her voice was lower. Broken.

*I think you’re asking me if I want to leave because* you *don’t want to be my Alpha, Greyson. I think you’re having doubts about turning me. That’s why you’re saying all this.*

I couldn’t control the low growl that escaped my chest. *I never said that. Yes, I had my problems with turning a wild wolf originally, but once I turned you, I put my doubts to rest.*

Elle shifted to human, suddenly. The way she looked at me, all that feeling in her eyes, gave me pause. “I can’t tell if you really mean that,” she whispered, wrapping her arms around herself. “I can’t tell, and it hurts to feel like I don’t belong anywhere.”

I shifted back to human as well. “Elle—”

“No,” she cut in, shaking her head. “I’m not finished. I’m trying to be honest about my feelings—don’t you always say I should do that?”

I nodded. She took a deep breath, and then she started again.

“My father said I can’t see him again,” she muttered. “I miss him, but I still feel like I never belonged with his pack. And even if I wanted to turn back now, it’s too late for that…” Her gaze locked with mine. “I’m like you now. I’ve always wanted to be like you. I’ve always felt a connection to werewolves. I thought I felt a connection to *you*, Greyson, but now it feels like I made a mistake asking you to turn me…” She swallowed, her fingertips digging into her arms as she hugged herself. Her next words were a bitter whisper. “Maybe I should have asked Lucian.”

I realized that Elle was upset, but that took things too far. Lucian? Turning Elle? Absolutely the fuck not. I swallowed down the anger I felt at the mere thought of it and weighed the situation.

Elle had misread what I had tried to say earlier, probably because she was upset with her father. He had rejected Elle, and even if it was for her own good, that had clearly stung enough to make her feel like this.

She was projecting his rejection onto me, and I needed to fix this and soothe her. Elle was brave, prideful, and I couldn’t bear feeling like she was about to cry. She had tried so hard, had come so far, and that was worthy of admiration. She deserved to be encouraged. She deserved to be embraced.

She deserved to belong.

“Are you done telling me how you feel?” I asked her quietly. “Can I speak about the way I see things now?”

She sniffled, nodding. She was still hugging herself, still not looking at me.

That needed to change.

“I know that I turned you as part of a plan to protect my pack,” I said. “But your father trusted me when he allowed me to turn you. His instinct was to protect you, and he knew that I would always do that. So, of course I want you to be part of the Redwood pack, Elle. You belong with us.”

She looked up at me, her eyes glistening at the corners. All the hope and vulnerability in her gaze made my chest ache, but I wasn’t done talking here.

She had to feel safe. She deserved to feel safe.

“Everyone in the pack agrees with me. We all know that you’re one of us,” I said. My voice was throaty, but I ignored it. “You’ve come so far in such a short period of time. You are incredibly smart, loyal, honest—those are all things that I can’t teach. You’re also strong and brave, and if there’s anyone I want to be in my pack, it's you.”

She swallowed, stepping closer. Her voice cracked. “Do you really mean that?”

“Of course,” I said. “You are honest with me, and I am honest with you. Promise.”

Elle gazed at me for a moment. There was that hope of hers again, starting from her eyes and dripping down her face, painting her expression with a kind of softness that I had never seen before. She was radiant, because in that moment, she was happy.

She was safe with me.

She was—

Grabbing my face and kissing me hard enough to knock the wind out me.

My first instinct was to push her away. This *wasn’t* what I meant when I said I wanted her. This wasn’t what I craved, this wasn’t my mate, this wasn’t how things were supposed to be.

But my instinct wasn’t winning this round.

Instinct was shoved aside, stomped on, disregarded as another force pushed me toward Elle. I was no longer in control of my body, of my wolf—there was something else there. Elle and I together, *we* were something else. Something natural yet unnatural and foreign at the same time. Something that I could barely wrap my head around right now.

I could not feel any of this.

Suddenly, my senses were cut off.

Suddenly, I was watching us as an outside observer.

Elle and me, her arms locked around my neck, mine around her waist, pulling her close as she kissed me. She moved against my mouth over and over, little kisses that deepened as I responded to her. As I let her take from me. As I gave back to her.

I let her have this, let her glue her breasts against my chest and feel the heat of my body, because it felt like this was what she needed right now.

This was me, showing her that I cared.

That I would not reject her and abandon her.

That with me, with my pack and under my protection, she was safe.

Was this what she needed?

*NO.*

My instinct awoke, and I was back in my body. I was real.

And I couldn’t give this to Elle.

Cali was my mate.

*Cali.*

“We can’t—” I broke away from Elle. I wiped my mouth, ignoring the shudder that ran through me at the loss of her heat. “We can’t do this.”

Elle was breathing hard, staring at me, saying nothing.

Fucking hell, what was she thinking? Was she mad? Was she disappointed? Did she want more? What the actual *fuck* had just happened? How could I lose control like that? It felt like a trance, like a spell, like something so completely unprecedented that it was fucking disturbing.

I needed to tell Cali.

Somewhere ahead of us, Helix howled. Elle seemed to snap out of whatever trance she was in. “We should…” Her voice was husky. “We should make sure Helix isn’t in trouble.”

She started ahead, but I stopped her. “Elle, what are you thinking?”

She fixed her eyes on me. She whispered, “I know that wasn’t right.”

“It wasn’t right,” I repeated. “It can’t happen again. Ever.”

She swallowed, pressing her lips together. “And it was weird. Wasn’t it weird?”

I remembered when Artemis and I had kissed. That had been weird too. Nothing sexy about it. This was the same—but not. This was something else, something I hadn’t been able to push away. It had to be the sire-werewolf connection that the damn princeling kept talking to me about.

Why else wouldn’t I have stopped Elle earlier?

Why hadn’t I been *able* to stop her?

“This can never happen again,” I said once more. “Never.”

“It won’t.” She looked down. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why I did that…”

It wasn’t the fact that Elle had kissed me that bothered me the most. It was the fact that I had kissed her back and hadn’t broken it off instantly. Again, I thought of Lucian and all his theories about the bond between a werewolf and the wolf they turned, and my jaw clenched.

Fucking hell.

*I am here!* Helix was barreling toward us.

Elle shifted without saying another word. I did the same, breathing sharply, my thoughts focusing on Cali. The timing couldn’t be worse—she was already dealing with Xavier leaving her to be with Ava, and now I would have to tell her that I had kissed Elle. Because I couldn’t control it. Because I had for sure created some sort of connection with Elle when I turned her.

That had to be the only explanation.

*Where have you been?* Helix asked. *I thought you two were lost!*

*Everything’s okay*, I told Helix.

It was a lie.

How the hell was I going to explain this to Cali?

**Episode 3849**

**Artemis**

Huffing, I threw another pair of pants into my bag. I wasn’t even sure what I’d packed so far—I’d just been grabbing things and tossing them in.

I picked up a dagger, the urge to stomp outside with it and use Adair for target practice intense. I had had it up to *here* with him.

How could he simply *refuse* to even consider that Kadmos might be alive?

I paused my packing, looking at the mirror across the room. My reflection glared back at me, the dagger in my hand gleaming. I’d been holding that same one earlier, when Adair and I had stood outside and he had spoken those harsh words.

*“My brother is dead.”*

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*“My brother is dead,” Adair said. He was so stubborn.*

*But we were related, and I could be stubborn, too.*

*“Why are you so sure that Kadmos is dead?” I demanded. “*How *can you be so certain? I’m telling you, I have a gut feeling about this!”*

*“Your gut feeling does not matter.” He looked past me, a faraway expression in his eyes. “Don’t you think I looked for him?”*

*“How should I know?” I asked. “You rarely talk about anything. Ever.”*

*Adair kept looking ahead. His voice was cold. “Why are you putting this all on me? If my brother were alive, don’t you think that Kadmos should have been looking for us both?”*

*His words made my chest constrict, drawing in on itself. The possibility that my father hadn’t tried to find me, didn’t care about me, made something in me shudder and crack apart.*

*“I tried to find him, Artemis,” Adair said quietly. “I risked my life a thousand times over trying to find Kadmos. You have no idea the things I’ve seen, the things I’ve done. But at some point, it became obvious. He’s dead.”*

*He turned his gaze back on me, his eyes sharp. “I’m done looking. I’m trying to move past that, to live my own life. I suggest you do the same.”*

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“Artemis?” Rishika’s voice pulled me back to real time. I looked up to see her holding a bathing suit. “Why are you packing this?”

I snatched it and threw it aside, jaw clenched. I grabbed more clothes to shove into the bag, my heart pounding in my ears. I could feel Rishika’s eyes on me—searching and intense. Her voice was light, but I could sense her worry. “That bag do something to piss you off?” she asked. “You’re beating the hell out of it and everything you put inside. What’s going on?”

I sat down on the bed, huffing. “Adair really pissed me off.”

Rishika frowned. “Does this have to do with what you were saying about your dad earlier?”

I nodded curtly. Rishika sat down next to me, leaving some space between us. “Things between you and Adair have always been a little… tenuous.”

I laughed bitterly. “You think? The man is impossible!”

Rishika pressed her lips together. “What happened?”

“Adair is just giving up,” I snapped. “It’s his own brother we’re talking about, and he’s acting as if he doesn't care at all!”

Rishika didn’t say anything. I turned to look at her. “What?”

Her voice was calm. “I don’t think Adair doesn’t care about Kadmos, Artemis. That can’t be true.”

I shook my head. My tone was harsh, angry, but I couldn’t help it. “You weren’t there to see him. He told me my father was dead without any proof, told me he stopped looking for him, told me I should do the same.”

Rishika fell silent. Removing a second swimsuit from the bag, she scooted closer to me on the bed. Softly, she took my hand in hers. “Maybe he’s right. Have you ever thought of that?”

All the air got knocked out of me at her words. “How can you say that to me?” I demanded, pulling my hand away before I stood up. “You’re taking Adair’s side!”

Rishika blinked up at me, shaking her head. “I’m not taking anyone’s side. I’m just worried that you’re going down a very dark path. I worry that your quest to find your father is going to consume you.”

I shook my head, taking a step back, crossing my arms over my chest. “You say you love me, right?”

Rishika flinched. “Of course I love you! Where is this coming from?”

“If you love me, then aren’t you supposed to be on my side? Always and no matter what?”

Rishika kept her voice even, her gaze on me steady. “Of course I love you,” she said again, “and I want to support you—”

“Then why are you not supporting me?” My voice was louder now.

Loud enough for Rishika to stand as well and peer at me with her dark eyes. “I need you to take a moment here and think, Artemis. Calm down—”

“Do *not* tell me to calm down!” I snapped.

“Then what am I supposed to do?” she asked, her composure cracking. “I worry about you, okay? I’ve seen how disappointed you were when you first learned he was dead, and how determined you became when the possibility of him being alive was brought up—”

“He can’t be dead!”

“You don’t know that,” Rishika said.

“What if I can just feel it?” I asked, pointing at my chest. “What then? Why don’t you believe in me?”

Rishika shook her head. “Artemis, realistically speaking, if Adair has really searched everywhere for Kadmos, he is probably right about his brother’s death. If he were alive, wouldn’t he be looking for both of you?”

Rishika said the words loudly, clearly, and I felt them like a physical weight on my chest. Adair had said something similar, and that had hurt the most. I took a step back, but Rishika didn’t let me put distance between us. She held me by the arms, made me look at her. And when she spoke this time, her voice was soft.

“I love you, Artemis. I hate seeing you like this. I’m only trying to protect you from being hurt again.”

Her eyes were gleaming, so beautiful they took my breath away. But the pain I felt right now was too big to be smothered by Rishika and her good intentions. I yanked myself from her and said, “Too late. *You* just hurt me.”

I stormed out of the room. Rishika’s voice followed me as I pounded down the stairs.

“Artemis, please! Let’s talk about this!”

Talk about what? Rishika had made her stance clear. I never should have brought it up to her. Of course she didn’t believe Kadmos could be alive—why would she when Adair didn’t? So far, the only person who believed in me and this feeling I had about Kadmos’s life was Cali…

Could she be agreeing with me just to placate me?

Whatever. The fact was, Grandpa Innes had never seen Kadmos in the Fae afterlife. And Mom had told me once that the trees hinted Kadmos could be alive. There had to be something to that. Although if there was, why hadn’t Mom looked for Kadmos herself? Perhaps she didn’t believe he was alive either.

I was all alone.

I always ended up alone, and that was what hurt the most.

My feet had brought me to the front door. I hadn’t even realized it. I had no idea what to do, where to go right now. I would love to use a few of my magic arrows and blast Adair for being so horrible.

Unfortunately, Cali would for sure be mad if I attacked him, so it was out of the question.

I decided to go outside and use some trees as target practice. I needed something to help vent the anger I felt. It was connected to my magic, and I could feel it building, needing release.

“Artemis, hey.” Ravi’s voice pulled me out of my thoughts.

I turned to him. He frowned, looking me up and down. “Uh, we’re leaving for the summit soon. Did you pack? Where’s your stuff?”

Ravi, with all his questions, was tempting me to blast *him*. I reminded myself that none of this was his fault, though, so I pulled back, ignoring him.

“Wait, where are you going?” he called as I reached for the front doorknob. “Did something happen?”

“Artemis.” Now it was Rishika saying my name. I dropped my arm and turned to see her coming down the stairs. The moment our eyes met, all the pain I felt, the rejection from earlier, made my heart throb.

I whirled around to Ravi, whose eyebrows shot up his forehead. “Forget about it,” I snapped.

I turned back to Rishika. Her gaze was so intense I gulped. Her voice was soothing, as if she were talking to a wild animal. “I understand you’re upset, Artemis…” She climbed down the stairs, approaching me. The need to touch her was ever-present, but I resisted it. “I think there’s something deeper bothering you here,” Rishika went on, “but you don’t know how to express it, and that’s why you’re acting like this. Please, let’s just go—”

I shook my head. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”