**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 30, Pt 2**

**Episodes 3850–3860 (Total S 30: 3671– 3860)**

**Episode 3850**

Had I thought about what I would say to Xavier if he showed up? I paused for a moment, processing Lola’s question. The thought of seeing him again made my stomach twist, my heart pound. But I needed to give both Lola and myself an answer here.

“Honestly, not exactly,” I said. “After the angry voicemail I left him, I haven’t tried to contact him again, and he hasn’t tried to contact me either. That says a lot.”

Lola scoffed. “It says that he’s an asshole!”

I didn’t comment on that. Swallowing thickly, I admitted, “Seeing Ava with Xavier right now in any capacity is the last thing I need.”

Lola’s expression was dark. “I’d like to stick a fork in Ava just for the fun of it.”

I blinked at her. “That’s descriptive.”

“I think about it a lot,” she said casually.

I tried not to laugh. Or cry. “I don’t think Ava is the problem here. It’s Xavier. I don’t know what I’ll do if I see him…” The thought made my hands shake. “If he pushes me or tries to be mean or something, I might just explode at him, you know?” I scoffed. “Now, *that* would be interesting—it would make for a great show at the summit, at least.”

“So true!” Lola looked excited about this, which was a bad sign.

“But how would it look to the rest of the packs?” I asked.

“It would show that you’re not someone to be fucked with. It would make the ultimate Luna statement,” Lola said, rubbing her hands together gleefully.

“Lola—”

“No, I love it! Blast the son of a bitch!”

“I appreciate your enthusiasm,” I said wryly, “but I don’t really want to hurt Xavier. I still…” I swallowed, shaking my head. My hands turned into fists as I said, “I still love him despite everything.”

Lola scowled. “That’s just gross.”

“It’s true,” I said. “I’m hurt and pissed off, but I can’t just stop loving him. Or who we used to be together and the beautiful moments we shared.”

Lola glowered at me. “He killed those moments when he treated you like shit!”

I pressed my lips together. “Don’t forget that I’m supposed to be *Greyson’s* Luna. I really don’t want the *due destini* to get in the way of me being a good leader. I can’t let anything mess up my reputation.”

Lola frowned. “But it’s not realistic! Xavier might not show up, but *if* he does—”

Yes, we were talking about a completely theoretical scenario right now and getting worked up. That was Lola’s specialty.

“—he needs to know that he is not forgiven!” Lola declared. “If I were you, I’d want to rip his head off the first chance I had.”

“Well, I’m not you,” I said. “I’m not going to hurt Xavier. The easiest thing is to not talk to him at all—the ball is in his court. If anything, I plan on avoiding him altogether.”

“I doubt that’s possible,” Lola said, crushing my dreams. “If Xavier comes to the summit, you’re bound to run into each other.”

“If we do, we do,” I said, steeling myself. And then, with all the determination and stubbornness I could muster, I said, “I refuse to let it eat me alive.”

Lola blinked at me in surprise. “Well, shit.”

“What?”

She pointed at my face. “The way you just said that—kind of cool? You just might make a kickass Luna yet.”

I snorted, shaking my head as Lola said, “Okay, more outfits! You have to try on more! Especially if Xavier does drop by.”

All this talk about Xavier did make me wonder about the possibility of him starting a conversation with me. But why would he? He’d made it pretty fucking clear that I was nothing to him. The thought made me want to cry or punch something, but it was true.

I loved him, and he had hurt me.

*Perhaps beyond repair…*

The thought was scary. It still felt foreign to me, the possibility of letting Xavier go for good. Forever. It made a shudder run through me, goosebumps rising on my forearms.

*No, I’m not thinking about this right now. He probably won’t even be at the summit, anyway!*

I forced myself to keep packing, and I eyed my drawers while Lola ran in and out of our rooms, bringing in more clothes for both her and me. There were so many clothes in her designated to-bring pile that I wondered if werewolves packed more in case they shifted and ripped them apart.

When I asked Lola, she said, “What? No! These are just my outfits!”

Well, at least I didn’t have to worry about any of my stuff tearing. But what about Greyson? He was going to show up after traveling through the woods to Idaho. He wouldn’t have a bag with anything to change into. What if he didn’t have any clothes at all? Werewolves might be used to seeing each other naked, but I was not going to let those Lunas see how hot Greyson was.

“I’ll go pack Greyson a bag,” I told Lola, skedaddling out of the room.

“Good idea!” she called from behind me. And then, as if she could hear my thoughts, she said, “Greyson has a gazillion abs, and, respectfully, he’s quite the shower, so you need to cover up the goods before someone tries to snatch him away!”

Lola screamed that loud enough for the entire house to hear.

Trying not to laugh or die of embarrassment, I headed to Greyson’s room, determined to make sure that my Alpha would be the best-dressed Alpha at the summit. I went through his closet and packed his best outfits, with all the colors that complimented his eyes and hair. Henleys, shirts, jeans, coats, jackets—all very nice, yes indeed.

*How fancy is this summit going to be, though?*

I was contemplating picking up a suit or two for him—Suit Greyson was on a whole other level—when I heard a door slam shut.

“Artemis?” Rishika’s voice echoed, followed by a pounding. I stuck my head out to see her fist land on Artemis’s and her door, over and over. “Artemis, please open up! We need to talk!”

*What the hell is going on here?*

I rushed out of the room, marching up to Rishika. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

Rishika stepped back from the door and pinched the bridge of her nose. Her other hand was wrapped around her waist. I’d never seen her look so—vulnerable?

My stomach dropped. This had to be bad.

“Artemis doesn’t want to go to the summit,” she whispered.

My eyes widened. “What happened?”

“We had a fight,” Rishika admitted, turning to look at me now.

I gaped. “Are you serious? You two are basically all over each other twenty-four seven, and *now* you decide to fight? Five minutes before the summit?”

“I didn’t mean for this to happen!” Rishika declared. “Artemis is upset, and this is just…”

Rishika was talking, but I couldn’t listen. My ears were ringing. This was anxiety, and it was really fucking horrid, because I’d been counting on having Artemis at the summit with me. Her presence would’ve made me feel ten times better about the whole Luna thing while Greyson wasn’t there.

*Fix this, Cali! Fix. This!*

“Let me talk to her,” I told Rishika, taking a deep breath.

“You can try,” Rishika said in a low voice, taking a few steps back.

I knocked on the door softly. “Artemis? It’s me. Can we talk?”

“Go away!”

“Well, I’m not going anywhere,” I said. “We need to talk. Right now.”

The door flew open. I came face-to-face with Artemis. Her eyes were red and puffy—she’d been crying.

“Oh my god, what’s wrong?” I whispered, my worry overwhelming every other emotion. “Last time I saw you, you were okay!”

I realized that the last time I’d seen her, she was with Adair outside.

“Did you fight with Adair?” I asked. “I saw you two arguing in the yard, but I didn’t think—”

“You didn’t think *what*?” Artemis snapped, wiping her eyes.

*Shit*.

“Did he say something to upset you? Is that why you told Rishika you aren’t coming to the summit?” I asked.

Artemis looked down, sniffling. She was breaking my heart. “Nobody believes that my father could still be alive.”

“That’s not true.” I pointed at my chest. “I believe it. I believe *you*, Artemis!”

Artemis’s jaw clenched. “You’re just saying that because you’re nice. You don’t really believe it. Nobody believes me…” She wrapped her arms around herself. “I’m all alone in this.”

I didn’t understand what was going on with her, but Artemis was really hurt here. I reached out to touch her arm, but she stepped back.

“I’m not going anywhere with a group of people who think I’m out of my mind,” she said, sniffling. “I’m not even a werewolf; I’m a Fae. I don’t belong there, anyway.”

“*I’m* a Fae too, Artemis,” I told her. “I’m going as Luna after you encouraged me to.”

That gave Artemis pause. She looked up at me, and I tried to pull at this thread.

“You’re supposed to have my back, remember? And what about our training?”

“We’ll do it when you’re back,” Artemis said, shaking her head.

“And what about Rishika?” I asked.

“What about her?” Artemis’s tone was hard. “She can do what she wants. She’s a werewolf.”

I couldn’t make sense of what was happening right now. Artemis’s reaction to this felt so extreme. Especially where Rishika, who’d always been so supportive of her, was concerned.

“I don’t know what has you so upset right now,” I whispered, “but you’re my sister. I need you to come with me to the summit, because you’re the one person I trust above everybody else.”

That made Artemis draw in a sharp breath.

“Greyson is going to be late, Artemis, and I’m honestly terrified,” I admitted shakily. “What can I do to convince you to come?”

**Episode 3851**

**Xavier**

I threw the last shirt from the drawer I was rummaging through on the floor of the Airstream, groaning in frustration. It had become clear to me that on top of being a shitty Alpha, Knox also had zero style.

I yanked open the second—and final—drawer that contained Knox’s clothes, hoping this one was where he’d kept his actual “to be seen in public” wardrobe. Rifling through the contents, I was starting to get desperate. There had to be *something* left in here that both fit me and didn’t make me look like a complete asshole. First impressions always counted, and the last thing I wanted was to roll up at the werewolf council summit looking like a douchebag.

As I pulled on yet *another* pair of ill-fitting jeans with embellished back pockets, my thoughts went back to the conversation I’d just had with Ava. She’d agreed not to bring up me making her my Luna again—or at least not to actively talk about it—but I knew that discussion wasn’t going away. Whether we were talking about it or not, the topic would be simmering between us. It was just going to *be* there, every interaction between us brimming with the energy of a coiled spring.

I had to say this about Ava—she was an effective communicator. She’d made her feelings about things perfectly clear—she was determined to be my Luna. And I knew I couldn’t put her off indefinitely. I just hoped we could make it through the summit without the whole thing blowing up in my face.

She said she loved me, which was interesting. I used to doubt that. Hell, I used to doubt everything she said to me. But she had no reason to lie to me now—unless she was trying to manipulate me into making her my Luna. I supposed that was something she might have done in the past. But things between us were different than they used to be. And, as much as I hated to admit it, the feelings between us weren’t one-sided.

We were still mated, and I was still attracted to her. She was beautiful, and I was a man with eyes and a body that responded to hers, but I was fighting to keep those feelings under control. I couldn’t allow all that to screw up what I still saw as my endgame—to get Cali back.

I just had to navigate this carefully. I loved Cali. I had loved her from the moment I met her. I would always love her. She was my heart, and my thoughts were never far from her. Whatever I felt toward Ava couldn’t be love—it was just a combination of our old mate bond, old memories, and proximity. Right? Whatever it was, I would have to keep a lid on it—let it simmer without boiling over. We’d settled into a dynamic, and it would have to do for now.

I looked at my reflection in the wavy mirror shoved into the corner of the Airstream. It was too small, but if I angled my body, I could get a sense of what I was seeing. The jeans I had on weren’t the worst of the bunch, but as soon as I could, I was going shopping and then burning the rest of Knox’s hideous wardrobe. His clothes were an abomination and an insult to denim everywhere.

Everything left of him here was just a reminder of what a waste of a werewolf he was.

I yanked on a T-shirt—plain black, thank god—and stepped out of the Airstream into the cold winter air. When I looked around, I was pleased to see that the campsite around the firepit didn’t look like the aftermath of a frat party.

Ava was sitting by the fire, sipping from a mug of coffee and talking quietly with Marissa.

I looked at both of them, wondering how much Ava had told Marissa. I watched as a look passed between the two women, and I suspected that Marissa knew a lot more than I would have wanted her to.

Whatever. Maybe it was good that Ava had someone else to confide in. As long as Marissa didn’t take any sort of active role, it might help ease the tension growing between Ava and me for her to have someone else to lean on.

Looking back at me, Ava got to her feet and walked over to me. She surveyed my clothes with a long, assessing stare, then bit her lip, like she was holding back a smile.

“Don’t say a word,” I warned her. “I don’t want to hear it.”

“I wasn’t going to,” she said, though her eyes sparkled with laughter. “Have you decided who is going to represent the pack at the summit?”

“Not for sure, but my initial thoughts are Jesse, Marissa, Geraint, and Donovan,” I said, ticking off names as I looked around the clearing.

Ava stared at me. “*And?*”

I stared back. “And what?”

“Did you leave someone off that list?”

I shrugged. “I don’t think so.”

She flushed with anger, and it was my turn to smirk.

“*Gotcha.* Come on, Ava. You’re first on the list.”

She glared at me and shook her head. “Xavier, be serious. I was thinking we should include Josephine.”

“Yeah? Why?”

“She’s really social, she’s older—which helps show that our pack isn’t just a bunch of teenagers running around—and she’s been to a few of these summits.”

I nodded. “Yeah, that’s a good idea. We’ll plan on it.” Ava had made some good points, and I wanted her to feel like she was a part of the planning for our presence at the summit.

I did not dwell on the fact that that was exactly what a Luna would do.

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A short time later, I walked around the clearing, looking over the small group of Samaras ready to head out to the summit. They looked good—ready and excited.

I turned to a pack member named Fausto. “You’re in charge of the pack while we’re away,” I told him. “If there’s any trouble, any concerns, just let me know. I’ll have my phone on me and should be reachable.”

Fausto nodded. “Got it.”

I looked over at Ava, who nodded.

*We’re ready for you to give the word, Alpha*, she mind linked.

I suddenly felt the weight of responsibility settle on my shoulders, and I looked around at all the eyes on me. They were looking to me to lead them. I was their Alpha.

Everyone had their bags sitting at their feet, and I nodded. “Let’s go!”

That was the signal they needed, and—as one—the group shifted into their werewolf forms and grabbed their bags with their teeth.

Those staying behind cheered and hooted as I led the group into the woods, and as we began to run, the sounds of the pack members left in the clearing faded to silence.

The woods were snowy and quiet, and Ava was at my side as we began to sprint. Once we got to Hells Canyon—and the summit where I would appear as the Samara Alpha—there would be no turning back. That would be it.

My heart thumped as I thought about it. I had considered this all before, but being here—running toward it now—made it feel more real than ever before. I knew I needed to prepare myself for what lay ahead. I needed to be prepared for when I saw Cali. She was going to be there with my brother, of course. Why wouldn’t she be?

I dropped my head and sprinted harder. I knew the rest of the pack would struggle to keep up with me, but something was burning within me, and I had to run through it before it consumed me completely.

It was going to eat me alive to see Cali at my brother’s side, but I had to play along, no matter how much pain I felt. That was the nature of Adéluce’s curse. This was the pain she had promised, and, yeah—she delivered.

This was wrong. All of this was wrong. I was approaching the werewolf summit as an Alpha, but this was wrong. I should be leading the Redwood pack, not the Samaras. But Adéluce wouldn’t allow that. Hell, I was surprised she was even allowing me this much.

Which was *another* worry of mine. I was troubled by what her hidden agenda might be. She said that I was following her plan. *Her* plan—as if I had no say in the trajectory of my life or even individual decisions I made.

She could have been bluffing about that, just saying it as a way to get under my skin and keep me guessing. If so, she’d done a hell of a job. But she could have been setting me up to fail.

I leaped over a frozen creek, landing hard on the frozen ground on the other side. There was no way to know the vampire-witch’s true intentions. Nothing she did was ever clear-cut. I just hoped to hell she wasn’t leading me—and the pack following me—directly into the lion’s den.

**Episode 3852**

Nothing, apparently. There was *nothing* I could do to convince Artemis to come with me to the summit. Nothing I said seemed to change her mind, and I’d pretty much tried to say it all. I sat back on the bed, starting to really worry. It was going to be hard enough to be at this conference-slash-party weekend for werewolves acting the part of the Redwood Luna, but I had thought that Artemis was going to be there to keep me from freaking out too much. Maybe it was selfish, but I really needed my sister’s support. Especially since—without her there with me—I would be the only Fae at the summit.

I looked at my sister, who was sitting on the edge of the bed, her arms crossed over her chest, staring down at the floor. Artemis could be stubborn—I’d always known this about her—but this felt different somehow. She just seemed so determined. I knew she and Rishika had been in fights before—they’d nearly broken up once because of Letifer. But this was different, too. There was no evil spirit pulling Artemis’s strings this time. This time it was all her, and Artemis wouldn’t even talk to Rishika, which was *so* strange. They were usually really good at communicating with each other.

I thought about my options, cycling through them. There weren’t a lot, so it didn’t take long. I could talk to our mother about this, but that didn’t feel quite right. This felt like something I needed to deal with on my own.

Artemis didn’t even look up when I got to my feet and walked to the door, so I headed through the house to find Rishika.

The living room was empty, and she wasn’t in the kitchen, but when I went down to the basement, I heard the heavy thudding of something being punched, and I knew I was getting close. I found her in the weight room, going full attack mode on the punching bag.

“Hey,” I said cautiously. I didn’t walk in. I knew what Rishika was like in action, and I didn’t want to risk getting anywhere near her blood circle—which was large.

Rishika stopped punching and turned to look at me, breathing hard. “Hey. Any luck?”

I took a deep breath. “I’m going to try talking to her once more, and I think it would help if you were with me.”

“I don’t know,” Rishika said, wiping sweat from her forehead. “She’s really pissed at me right now.” She thought for a moment, looking down at the tape on her hands. “But I really love her, and I do want to fix things.”

“So, you’ll come?” I asked.

Rishika hesitated for a moment more, then nodded. “Okay.” She pulled the tape off her hands and dropped it into the trash can near the door. “I’ll do what I can.”

As we headed up the stairs, Rishika looked over at me.

“Did she say anything to you?”

“She said she didn’t want to come to the summit,” I told her. “Which freaked me out. I don’t want to go without her. I’m really scared. I just hope I can change her mind.”

Rishika looked grim. “Well, I wouldn’t get your hopes up.”

Artemis looked up when Rishika and I walked into her room, but she didn’t say anything. I could feel the tension between the two women, and it made me feel nervous—but determined. If *I* couldn’t mend things between Rishika and Artemis, then no one could. I couldn’t let myself fail at this.

I cleared my throat. “Listen, Artemis, I know you’re upset with Rishika, and with Adair. But I also know that they both only want what’s best for you—”

“Hang on, Cali, I want to say something,” Rishika said, interrupting me. She looked over at Artemis. “I meant what I said earlier, Artemis. I don’t want you to get hurt. But I also want to be with you, and I want to help you through this. And if that means that we look for Kadmos, then that’s what we do. We look together.”

Artemis looked at Rishika for a long moment. Tears filled her eyes, and she suddenly got to her feet and threw her arms around her girlfriend. “I’m sorry,” she murmured. “I’m so sorry, Rishika. I didn’t mean half of what I said. It’s just that sometimes I feel so alone when it comes to finding out about my father. It just feels like no one else cares.”

“Artemis,” I started, my heart aching, “that’s not true. *We* care. You’re never going to be alone in this search. We’re always going to be here for you—”

“I know,” Artemis said, pulling away from Rishika and wiping tears from her eyes. “I know that, Cali, I do. I was just too upset about everything to see it. And I’m sorry that I hurt you. But I’m not going to give up,” she finished stubbornly.

“I’m not going to ask you to stop looking,” Rishika said, sounding exasperated. “But I also don’t want to watch you chase ghosts.” She sighed. “I honestly don’t know what to do with you. I don’t know how to be supportive *and* protective. But there has to be a way, and we can find it together. *If* you’ll let me.”

I held my breath as the women looked at each other. I waited for Artemis to say something—*anything.*

Artemis opened her mouth. She started to speak, then stopped herself. She hesitated, then pulled Rishika back into an embrace. “I just want to see him. Just once,” she said, her voice muffled by Rishika’s shoulder. “I just want to give him what was stolen from us—a chance to see me. I just want us to see each other.”

Tears filled my eyes. I felt the sharpness of Artemis’s pain, and I wished more than anything there was something I could do to help her.

Artemis pulled away from Rishika and turned to face me. “Cali, I’m sorry. I’ll come with you to the summit.” She smiled, her eyes brimming with tears. “I would be too worried to let you go without me. Who knows what you could get up to? You might cause a pack war.”

Surprised, I laughed through my tears, and Artemis reached for me, pulling me into the hug with her and Rishika.

“Okay,” Artemis said briskly, pulling away. “If I’m going to this boozy werewolf weekend, I need to pack.”

“I thought you already did,” I said, confused.

She shook her head. “I have no idea what I was throwing in my bag before. I have to go *actually* pack.”

I grinned after her, feeling a million times better. Buoyed by this turn of events, I left the two women alone and headed back downstairs, feeling light as a feather. My confidence was returning. Artemis was going to be at my side, and with her—along with Rishika, Lola, Jay, Ravi, and Big Mac—the Redwoods paddock, led by Greyson, was going to be the envy of the summit.

The only thing worrying me now was Greyson. I still hadn’t heard from him. I pulled my phone out of my pocket. Still no notifications. Well, if I showed up at the summit before he did, at least I’d have the others with me.

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“And you’re sure you have everything you need?” my mom asked. “Does someone have a first aid kit? Did you bring a GPS tracker? And a flashlight?”

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn’t help but smile. “I think we have everything we need,” I assured my mom. “We’ll take good care of ourselves.”

“And you have some good wool socks, right?” my dad asked. “You don’t want your feet getting cold while you’re camping.”

“I brought socks,” I told him. “Plenty of socks.”

Mrs. Smith put her arms around Big Mac and hugged her close, then pressed a kiss to her lips. “You take care.”

“I will,” Big Mac said. “And don’t you dare change the menu for the wedding while I’m away.”

“I won’t,” Mrs. Smith promised.

“I’m serious,” Big Mac warned. “Any changes and there will be consequences.”

“We’re ready!” Lola announced, walking out of the house and down the front steps. She and Jay were both loaded down with bags.

I looked around. Everyone was there. Everyone but Greyson.

For a moment we all stood there, like we were waiting for a train to arrive. Then Rishika gave me a nudge and a meaningful look. *You’re the Luna. It’s your show*, it seemed to say.

Oh god. *I* was the Luna. This was *my* show.

I took a deep breath. “Thanks, everyone, for coming. This should be a good time.”

Ravi cheered at this.

I looked over at Big Mac. “Okay. Let’s go.”

Big Mac nodded and raised her hands. “Hold on.”

I felt that internal tug, and the next moment we were all being blipped away, directly to Hells Canyon.

**Episode 3853**

**Greyson**

As we ran through the flat, freezing plains of Idaho, heading back toward Oregon, my mind was spinning. I couldn’t shake the memory of that kiss with Elle, and I wondered if she was thinking about it too. I still had no idea what had come over us. I’d been going over it in my head—again and again—and I just couldn’t figure it out. I knew that it sounded cliché, but it really had come out of the blue. There was no build-up to it, no simmering sexual tension we were responding to. At least not for me, and given the way Elle had reacted afterward, I was pretty sure she felt the same way.

I glanced over at her as we ran. She was right next to me, but she was looking straight ahead, her sharp eyes scanning the landscape around us, always alert. She wasn’t even looking at me, so I had no idea what she was thinking about.

All I knew was that when we’d kissed, I’d felt a surge of protective instinct welling up. It was something deep and primal inside of me. Was it the bond? Was it that connection Lucian had talked about?

But how could that be? Charlie hadn’t felt it with the lunatic who’d turned him. I wondered if it was different for Elle and me because I was an Alpha. Or because I had turned Elle from a natural wolf to a werewolf, which wasn’t as common as a human being accidentally or—in Charlie’s case—purposefully bitten. Still, it could be worth asking him about it, if I could pull him away from hanging out with Violet and Lilac for a bit. Maybe there was *something* helpful to glean from the human-turned-by-a-werewolf dynamic.

I shook my head as I skirted around a patch of dead grass. I just wished I knew someone in the same position as me who I could talk to, who might understand what I was going through. But who could that be? There was no one in our pack who knew anything about an alleged bond between an Alpha and a wild wolf. This kind of thing wasn’t in Big Mac’s wheelhouse, and—from what I understood—this kind of thing was a rare enough occurrence that I doubted my mother knew anything more about it than I did.

The one person I *did* know I needed to talk to about it was Cali. I didn’t look forward to that conversation, but I knew it needed to happen. Whatever had just happened between Elle and me, I knew I couldn’t put the blame for it solely on her. Even if she had initiated it, I hadn’t stopped it—at least not right away. I dreaded it, but Cali deserved to know.

My stomach turned at the thought of telling her about it, and I tried to think of the words I would use to explain what happened. *Out of the blue… Neither of us planned it… It meant nothing…*

The more I thought about it, the worse it sounded, and I realized I probably shouldn’t overthink it. I would just tell her what had happened. Cali was a big girl; she wasn’t going to collapse. Yes, the timing sucked because of what Xavier had just done to her. I knew she was feeling pretty wounded about it, but that didn’t give me any excuse for not being honest. Not only was Cali strong enough to handle the truth, but she deserved nothing *but* the truth—now more than ever. I owed her that.

After another mile I happened to glance down and realized that I still had blood spattered over my fur from the fight. Elle probably did as well. Dammit. If I was going to show up at the werewolf summit with Elle and Helix—although I wasn’t entirely sure I *was* going to do that—I wanted to do it looking my best. And if not my best, at *least* not like I had just gotten into a knock-down, drag-out fight with a wild wolf.

We needed to clean up. I looked around. If it had been the summer, I could just lead us toward the nearest source of water to go for a dip. A stream, a pond, a lake—anything would do. But it was the middle of winter, and everything would be frozen.

I knew Idaho had lava hot springs, but I didn’t know where they were.

*Helix, are there hot springs around here?* I asked, glancing over my shoulder at the running wolf just behind me.

*Yeah, I think so. I passed one on my way to the Redwoods.* He looked around. *I think I can lead us to it. It is not too far from here.*

I was hesitant, but I slowed slightly, letting Helix take the lead. *Don’t go too far off course*, I warned him.

He nodded as he veered slightly, leading us east.

I fell into step beside Elle, who still seemed to be averting her eyes from mine. We ran for a long moment in silence. I knew I should say something—*anything*—but I didn’t know what, and I didn’t want the weirdness surrounding the kiss to come between us.

Finally I cleared my throat. *I’m not blaming anyone for what happened*, I said, looking straight ahead.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Elle glance at me.

*I’m the one who kissed you*, she pointed out.

*That’s true*, I admitted, *but I should have stopped it sooner. I should have stopped it right away.*

Elle slowed her running pace. *What about Cali?*

I looked over at her. I wasn’t sure what to say because I wasn’t sure what she was asking.

*She’s your mate*, Elle went on. *I shouldn’t have kissed you. It was wrong, and I feel bad. Like I hurt Cali.*

*You’re not to blame*, I said again.

Elle shook her head, like she didn’t believe me.

*I’m going to talk to Cali when we get back. I’m going to explain what happened.*

Elle looked over at me, shocked. *What will she do?*

*I’m not sure, but I think she’ll understand.*

*Will she be hurt?* Elle wondered.

I thought about the question for a moment. We came to a cluster of jagged lava rocks, and I scrambled over them before I answered. *I don’t know. I don’t think so. Not if I’m honest with her and tell her the truth.*

I *had* to believe that.

*What about you?* I asked.

*What do you mean?* Elle asked, looking over at me. *What about me?*

*Are you worried about Lucian?*

*Lucian?* she repeated. *Why would I be worried about him?*

*Well, I know he has claimed that you two are mates*, I said.

Elle shook her furry head. *That’s different from you and Cali.*

*How is that different?* I asked.

*You and Cali love each other. I don’t love Lucian.*

I nodded. *Yeah, I can see your logic there*. Though I suspected Lucian’s attitude might be a little different. I seriously doubted the princeling would care to hear of anyone kissing the woman he decided was his mate.

Elle looked distinctly unconcerned. *There’s nothing I can do about how Lucian feels, Alpha Greyson.*

I chuckled. *That’s true.*

Elle was right about that, but I also knew how honest she was—and how she didn’t really have a filter. It was highly likely she would mention the kiss to Lucian, who wasn’t likely to be at all pleased about it.

I had to make sure I told Cali first. Lucian had the loosest lips of anyone I’d ever known. If there was any gossip within the werewolf world, he knew it and was dying to tell you about it. I didn’t want Cali to find out about this mistake of a kiss from anyone but me.

We ran in silence for another ten miles, then ten more. Helix seemed to know where he was going, but we were going too far off course. I was just about to tell him to forget about it when I caught the scent on the cold winter wind. It was the earthy, sulfur smell of hot springs. After another mile I could almost feel the heat of them on the frigid wind. It was going to feel really good to sink into the hot water and wash the blood away.

The smell of the hot springs grew stronger and stronger, and then it started to fade, like we’d just run past them. What the hell? I looked up at Helix, who was still running determinedly on. Where the hell was he going?

*Greyson?* Elle asked, looking over at me. *Where are we going?*

*Just stay with me*, I said, thinking fast. I looked up at Helix and was about to yell up to him to stop when I suddenly caught a whiff of other werewolves.

One scent in particular stood out, so I wasn’t fully surprised when I heard the voice speak.

“Greyson, how good to see you.”

**Episode 3854**

**Xavier**

We were on the move and making good time. It wouldn’t take long to get to Hells Canyon at the speed we could travel in wolf form, and that felt good. It also felt good to lead the Samara pack, though my head wasn’t quite clear. I loved to run, and the mountains and plains were beautiful in the cold winter light, but I couldn’t quite shake the question I’d asked myself about Adéluce earlier.

It felt like she was lurking everywhere, as if she might pop out at me at any time. She wasn’t there—I knew she wasn’t—but I kept turning my head, wondering if I was seeing flashes of her at the corners of my vision.

Ava caught up with me. *You okay, X?*

*Yeah*, I said shortly.

*You seem out of sorts*. She looked at me for a moment. *Don’t tell me you’re getting nervous about the summit.*

I snorted. *Me? No. I’m looking forward to showing off the new Samara pack.*

*I am, too, but you should be nervous.*

*Why?* I demanded.

*Why? Because every wolf there is going to be judging you and judging the Samaras.*

I looked over at her. *I wonder if* you’re *the one who’s nervous. Are you having doubts?*

Should *I be having doubts?* she shot back.

*Come on. You know you have no reason for doubts.*

She was quiet for a moment. *I know I don’t have to remind you what’s at stake here, X. It’s not just the alliance, but us coming to this summit will be a very public debut of the Samara pack 2.0. The last impression the werewolf council had of us is when they hauled off Knox, so we’re going to need to overcome that.*

*Well, that shouldn’t be too hard*, I pointed out. *The bar was set pretty low with Knox. We could trip and still clear it.*

*That’s true*, Ava agreed wryly, *not that it’s something any of us are particularly proud of.*

I felt some of my tension easing. It was nice talking things through with Ava—just talking about regular things, like nothing was wrong. The Luna question was still there, of course. I knew it wasn’t going to go away, but I was glad we had managed to push it to the back burner. For now, anyway.

*Have you given any thought to what you’re going to tell the council about Knox during your testimony?* I asked her.

*I’m going to tell the truth*, Ava said simply. *Why wouldn’t I? I don’t have to make anything up. Pretty much everything Knox did—from start to finish—sucked. I just have to tell it like it is.*

We crested a steep hill and started down the other side, carefully avoiding patches of slick, black ice as we went.

*Well, if I’m asked, I’m going to say that Knox was a petulant, narcissistic piece of shit with no fashion taste who nearly destroyed this pack. How’s that sound?*

*Hey, come on, X, don’t hold back on my account*, Ava joked, giving me a sideways look. *Tell me how you really feel about the guy.*

*I didn’t think it was possible, but I think having to wear his shitty clothes has made me hate him even more than before*, I admitted.

*Come on*, Ava chided. *Your ass looks good in those jeans with the rhinestones on the pockets.* I heard her laugh in my head when I growled at her.

*Whatever. I’m happy to give my testimony to the council if they want it*, I said.

Ava ran for a moment without speaking. *I wonder what the council will do with Knox afterward.*

*What do you mean?* I asked, looking over at her.

*Afterward, if they find him guilty.*

I thought about this. *I suppose it will depend on what they find him guilty of. I mean, being a dick isn’t a crime.*

Ava nodded. *Knox* is *a jerk, but he is my family. He’s still my cousin, and I don’t have much family left.*

*So, you want him to walk?* I asked, surprised. That wasn’t what I had expected to hear from her.

*No*, she said quickly. *No, that’s not what I want. I hope the council will punish him—he has to account for what he did and be held responsible—but I would hate to see him suffer for it for the rest of his life.*

I let her words sink in. When I looked over at her, I couldn’t help but feel for her. She had an obligation to testify, but it didn’t escape me that it was going to be hard to testify against her own cousin—no matter how much of a jerk he had been. This wasn’t going to be easy for her.

Glancing over my shoulder, I looked back at the rest of the pack, making sure they were keeping up with Ava and me. We had set a brisk pace, and I was glad to see that the pack was in an orderly line behind us. No one was trailing behind.

I wondered how Jesse was handling the journey. We’d had a good talk, but I still wasn’t going to let my guard down around the guy. Not yet. Not until I was fully convinced I had earned his trust.

As I turned to face forward again, the wind picked up. It was bitterly cold, but that wasn’t the worst part. It carried with it the scent of someone I had been hoping to avoid.

*Lucian.*

Fucking hell.

*You’ve got to be kidding me*, Ava groaned. *Why does he keep popping up?*

I slowed my pace. *Pull back, everyone*, I called back to the rest of the pack. We’ve got a visitor.

Lucian appeared over a rise to the west. He looked around, spotted us, and bounded over.

*I am shocked to run into the Samara pack so far from your pack house—or, rather, your trailer park!* Lucian exclaimed, looking around.

I doubted he was really that shocked. Lucian was always playing his own game of 3-D chess, and he didn’t like surprises.

The crack about the trailer park made my hackles rise, and I reminded myself to make building a real pack house for the Samaras a top priority after the summit.

*What are you doing out here?* I asked Lucian. I glanced around at the barren tundra. *You’re not really the type to wander too far from the comfort of your palace, are you? I mean, there are no showers or steam baths out here for you to lounge in.*

Wolf expressions were harder to read than human expressions. They tended to be less nuanced. It was harder to read degrees of emotion on someone’s face, but I thought I saw a flicker of anger pass across Lucian’s furry face.

*Oh, I always try to get outside*, he said, easily, recovering from his momentary anger. *I think it’s good to spend time in the natural world. Everyone should do it, don’t you think?*

I rolled my eyes. *You mean go for a run in the woods? Yeah, I* do *think so.*

*Actually, I’m on my way to the summit*, Lucian went on.

*Where’s the rest of your pack?* Ava asked, looking around. Lucian appeared to be alone, which was strange for an Alpha who liked backup.

*Oh, Lucian probably thinks he doesn’t need anyone else, don’t you, Lucian?* I asked, my tone mocking.

*Oh, all the others—Aysel and Armin—are driving to Hells Canyon.*

*Driving?* Ava asked, scandalized.

*Yes, Aysel simply refused to come to this little affair unless she could bring her rather extensive wardrobe. She insisted she would not rough it and show up at all the parties looking like hell. So, they’re well on their way. I expect they should be arriving at the site sometime later today.*

*Unbelievable*, Ava muttered, I suspected only to me.

Lucian looked over the assembled Samaras, then at Ava, then at me. *And what are* you *doing out here, Xavier Evers?*

There was something strange and hungry about the way he asked the question, and I hesitated to answer.

*We’re headed to the summit*, Ava said, speaking before I could. *Just like you. What do you think we’re doing?*

Lucian looked confused. *You’re going to the summit? Without an Alpha? Dear, Ava, is that wise?*

I tensed. This wasn’t how I wanted things to go. I didn’t want to explain everything to Lucian, out here in the blowing wind.

But Lucian didn’t even bother to wait for anyone to answer him.

He shook his head. *No matter. You can join the Vanguard pack! That’s what I’ve been suggesting all along—*

*That’s not going to happen*, Ava snarled, her eyes flashing dangerously.

Lucian looked taken aback. He stared at Ava for a moment, then shot a questioning look at me.

I’m *their Alpha*, I said.

This shocked Lucian. Then his eyes narrowed to a dangerous glare. *Xavier Evers, do you mean to tell me that you took what was mine?*

**Episode 3855**

When we came out of the blip, everyone stumbled, a bit disoriented. We looked around, trying to get our bearings. When my surroundings came into focus, I realized that I was standing atop a snow-covered hill, overlooking a long gorge. A wide river snaked along the bottom of the ravine, and snow was heaped on either side of the fast-moving water and all along the hilltops. The hill was cold and beautiful, and beyond it, the view was so expansive it nearly took my breath away.

Next to me, Ravi dropped to his knees and puked on the snow.

“Ugh, *gross*!” Lola cried, stepping quickly away from him. “Ravi! Big Mac! Can’t you do something?”

“Don’t blame me,” Big Mac said briskly. “Blipping affects everyone differently.”

“Sorry,” Ravi muttered, wiping his mouth. He looked flushed and sweaty and embarrassed, and I felt for the guy.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said quietly. “It’s totally normal. Even Xavier gets motion sick when he’s blipped—” I stopped myself, pressing my lips together. I didn’t want to start this trip talking about Xavier.

It wasn’t like I had planned to—it had just come out. I gave my head a shake. I had to stop measuring every experience using Xavier as an example.

But that wasn’t going to be easy. He and I had been through so much together.

I helped Ravi to his feet. “Just take some deep breaths, okay?” I suggested.

Ravi nodded and looked around. “It’s beautiful here.”

“Yeah, it’s great,” Lola said dismissively. “But where are we supposed to go? The website was a little unclear. Shouldn’t someone be welcoming us with cocktails or something?”

Down near the river, I could see tents clustered together and a trail of smoke that looked like it came from a campfire. “Maybe down that way?” I suggested, pointing. “It doesn’t look too far.”

No one objected, so Artemis, Rishika, and I took the lead as we followed a narrow, winding, slightly snowy path down the hill toward the river.

“It’s the Snake River,” Jay said.

“Fascinating,” Lola teased. “I didn’t realize we’d be getting a guided tour.”

We walked along the river until we reached a clearing where tents had been set up. Throughout the campground were firepits and heaters that appeared to be powered by solar panels.

I was a little surprised by the setup. When we had traveled to the Lupo Finale, everything had been completely hidden underground at Thor’s Well. There would have been no sign of life for a passing hiker. But this was completely different. Everything here was right out in the open. I was a little concerned about humans in the area noticing, but I refused to let myself worry about it for once. I hadn’t planned the werewolf summit, and the council must know what it was doing.

“I can’t believe we’re going to have to stay in tents,” Lola grumbled. “I *hate* roughing it.”

“Looks like that’s where we check in,” Rishika said, pointing to a tent bearing a sign that read *Registration*.

As we headed over to it, I looked through the crowds of people, still hoping that I’d see Greyson, and that he’d somehow managed to arrive before we did. But no such luck.

We stopped outside the tent, and we all looked at each other for a moment.

Finally, Rishika gave me a prod. “You should go in and register our pack, Cali.”

I felt my chest tighten. *Our* pack. Rishika was right—I was part of the Redwood pack and was the acting Luna. This was my job.

But I was nervous, and my heart fluttered in my chest.

Artemis seemed to sense this. She gave me an encouraging nod. “Go ahead, Cali. You can do this.”

I took a deep breath and stepped into the tent. I was trying to look sure and confident, but my foot caught on the lip of the tent flap and I tripped, which caused me to crash into the registration table just inside the tent’s entrance.

A grizzled-looking man jumped up from behind the table and ran to my side. His speed shocked the hell out of me. “Are you okay?” he asked quickly.

“Fine, fine,” I breathed, trying not to burst into humiliated flames. I cleared my throat. “Just trying to make an entrance.”

The man laughed, which was nice of him. “I guess you’re here to register?”

“That’s right,” I said, hoping the flush in my cheeks was starting to fade. “I’m Caliana Hart…” I swallowed hard. “Luna of the Redwood pack?”

Dammit. The way I said it made it sound like I was asking a question.

But the man didn’t seem to notice. He had gone around to the other side of the table and taken his seat again. He typed something into his laptop, waited a moment, then smiled. “There you are. You’re among the first to arrive. Welcome!”

“Thanks,” I said. “We’re glad to be here.”

He flipped the laptop around so it faced toward me. “I just need you to confirm this information.”

I glanced over the data on the screen—names of pack members, contact information, both of our pack houses’ addresses.

“This your first summit?” the man asked while I perused.

“What’s that?” I asked, looking up.

He shrugged. “I’ve been to almost every summit since we began holding them, and I don’t remember ever meeting such a pleasant and beautiful Luna.”

My face flushed again. “Thank you, that’s kind of you to say. Yes, this is my first. This information is all correct,” I said, gesturing toward the screen.

The man nodded and flipped the laptop around toward him again. “And where’s your Alpha?”

My stomach dropped. “He—he’s on his way. Greyson Evers?”

The man’s kind smile faltered for a moment. He raised a brow. “Silas’s son, huh?”

My throat went dry. “Yep,” I said, though it came out as a squeak.

The man gave me a handful of name tags. “Well, you can’t blame the apple because the tree was rotten, can you?”

“No,” I murmured.

He pointed behind me, out the tent flaps. “Your pack is going to be straight out there, in the blue zone. Since you’re first, you’ve got your choice of tents.”

“Thank you,” I said, turning to leave.

“Hang on,” he called after me.

I turned and looked quickly around, wondering what I could have done wrong.

The man got up and walked around the table to me. “There’s one thing you have to remember while you’re here, Caliana Hart of the Redwood pack.”

My mind reeled. I couldn’t imagine what it was, and I silently cursed Greyson for not being here with me. I was totally unprepared for this. “What is it?” I asked nervously.

The man grinned at me. “You have to have a hell of a fucking good time!”

He started to laugh, and I felt my whole body relax.

“I’ll try,” I promised him with a smile. I headed out of the tent and joined the rest of my pack.

“How’d it go?” Artemis asked. “Sounded like *someone* was having a good time in there.”

“Fine,” I said quickly, handing around the name tags. I was amazed that they already had everyone’s names on them.

“They misspelled my name,” Big Mac snarled, glaring down at her tag.

“Sorry,” I said, dreading going back in to have it fixed.

She shook her head, muttered something under her breath, and the letters on the tag corrected themselves.

“Everyone else’s are fine?” I asked, looking around.

“Yep,” Rishika said, putting her tag on her chest.

“Okay, which of these loser tents belong to us?” Lola asked, glaring around the clearing.

I looked in the direction the man at registration had pointed and saw an arrow that signified the blue zone. “That way,” I said, pointing. “We get first choice.”

“Goody,” Lola sniped.

“Come on, Lola,” Jay coaxed, putting an arm around her shoulders. “This is going to be fun. Who doesn’t love a campout?”

“Me,” Lola said flatly.

“I’m getting a single,” Big Mac stated firmly as we neared the cluster of blue zone tents. “This looks fine,” she said, disappearing into a small, one-person tent. It was much farther away from all the other available tents.

Well then.

We kept walking, trying to find free ones. “How about this one, Lola?” Jay asked, taking Lola’s hand and pulling her into a cozy-looking tent. She smiled and let herself be pulled inside.

Rishika and Artemis disappeared into another tent, and Ravi wandered into a larger tent. The front flap was wide open, and I could see multiple bunks set up, like a bunk house. That would be good for Ravi—I knew he wanted to meet new people here.

But now that everyone was taken care of, that just left me.

I looked around the clearing. More werewolves were arriving, and now there was a small line snaking out the front of the registration tent as wolves waited for their tent assignments.

I blew out a breath. Well, I’d successfully brought the Redwood pack here. What the hell was I supposed to do *now*?

**Episode 3856**

**Greyson**

I turned toward the voice that had spoken to see Helix, who had just shifted back to human, now standing next to a tall man with a familiar face. The tall man slung his arm around Helix, who smiled up at him like a puppy.

I shifted to my human form. “*Dayton?*” I asked in disbelief.

It was—of course—Dayton, the Nightshade Alpha, and he smiled at me, though it was the kind of smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “And here I was, worried you wouldn’t recognize me, Greyson.”

I heard the sarcasm in his voice and wasn’t surprised by it. Whatever.

I turned to Helix. “How do you know him?” I asked, baffled.

“He is the one I told you about,” Helix explained.

“What are you talking about?”

“He is the one who turned me,”

I stared at him, stunned into silence as a dawning realization broke over me. A few things started to suddenly fall into place.

Dayton saw my expression and smirked. He shrugged. “What can I say? Young Helix here asked to become a werewolf, and what could I do? I obliged. And now we’re thick as thieves.”

I looked around the small clearing. There were tents that looked like they were in the process of being taken down, and a fire that was out but still smoking, as if someone had just banked it. It looked like the group had been in the process of packing up camp when they’d heard our approach and shifted to their wolf forms. There was a cluster of them gathered behind Dayton, and as I stood there, they shifted to their human forms, one by one.

“Hi, Greyson,” a woman said, stepping next to Dayton.

I stared at her. She was stunningly beautiful, with long, copper hair and bright green eyes. I recognized her, and I was surprised to realize that I finally remembered her name. On one hand, I never should’ve forgotten it, but I’d been a different man when I’d, ah, met her…

“Geena?”

She gave me a small, intimate smile. “It’s been a long time. I wasn’t sure you’d remember me.”

I remembered her, all right. But not like this. When I’d hooked up with Geena—ages ago—she had been a human through and through. She *definitely* hadn’t been a werewolf in disguise. There was a lot in my life during that time that I couldn’t be sure about, but this wasn’t one of those things. Hiding your identity as a werewolf wasn’t something you could easily do from another of your kind. But if she’d been seeing Dayton at the time, then maybe she’d known what I was, or had an inclination. Clearly she had a type.

Elle came to stand next to me and shifted to her human form. “Greyson? Who are all these people?” she asked quietly, looking around at the people gathered behind Dayton.

Dayton shifted his eyes to Elle, and his expression turned thirsty. “And who is *this*, Greyson? Is this beautiful lady your Luna?”

I ignored the second half of the question. “This is Elle. She’s a member of the Redwood pack.”

Dayton nodded approvingly, then tipped his chin, gesturing to the group over his shoulder. “And this is my pack, the Nightshade. And—of course—you already know my lovely Luna, Greyson. I believe you and Geena have a long acquaintance.” His expression darkened. “An *intimate* acquaintance, I believe.”

My memory flashed back to my one and only encounter with Geena. It had been in the parking lot of the bar where I’d met her. It had been fast, messy, and was now nothing but a faded memory tinged with regret.

I bristled but schooled my expression. “Are we going to dredge up the past now, Dayton? I think it’s time to put all that behind us—don’t you?”

Dayton’s eyes flashed. “I suppose it is,” he said slowly, though he looked as though he didn’t think so at all. “But it *is* always fun to recall memories, isn’t it? Even if they’re not so fond? Take a little stroll down memory lane. Maybe we can rehash our golden days over a few beers once we’re all at the summit hosting our mixer together.”

I met Dayton’s eyes with my own challenging gaze. “Yeah, the mixer. Sure, of course,” I said. I held back on saying “That sounds like the last thing I want to do.” The wind blew around us, mingling the bitter cold air with the warm breezes coming off the nearby hot springs. The effect was surreal. “We need to get going. We’re already going to arrive late.”

I thought of Cali and how she would be arriving before me—maybe she even had already. She was probably stressed out, and here I was, standing here making small talk with these assholes. This whole thing was a waste of time. I didn’t give a shit about Dayton.

Dayton looked us over with unveiled criticism. “Well, if you are headed for the summit, I hope you’re not going to show up looking like that. You all look like you crawled out of a mud pit.”

I snorted and rolled my eyes.

Dayton turned to Helix. “You need to clean up, or people will think you’re nothing but trash.”

My hands curled into fists. I knew that comment was directed at me, and that Dayton was just talking shit to provoke me.

It was working.

“You need to keep your bullshit to yourself, man,” I growled.

Helix paled. “I am sorry,” he said, looking at Dayton with a worried expression. “I was just leading everyone to the hot springs so we could bathe and clean up.”

“Well, you’d better hurry,” Dayton said. “You’re already late.”

Helix nodded, like *I* hadn’t *just* said that and like he hadn’t just wasted our damn time with this useless detour. “It is a short way from here,” he said, turning to Elle and me. “I will lead the way.”

He headed off, back the way we had come.

Dayton sighed contentedly. “Such an obedient young man,” he said. “I chose his name, too, did you know? He will listen to anything I say.”

“I see that,” I muttered, thinking that wasn’t such a great quality.

“We share such a special bond, you know,” Dayton said, looking fondly after Helix.

A bell rang in my head, and I turned back to Dayton, more interested. “What do you know about the bond between a werewolf and the one turned?”

Dayton made a tsking sound. “Oh, poor, *poor* Greyson. An Alpha of a pack and you haven’t yet had the chance to turn someone? Never once had the opportunity to feel the power of it? To feel the beat of another being’s heart beneath your hand and to know that no matter what, there will always be something that binds you to that being? That *is* too bad.” Then Dayton’s eyes changed, growing more interested. “Unless… Unless you *have* turned someone, and you’re ashamed of it. Is that it?”

I shook my head, wishing I’d never asked the question. “I have nothing to be ashamed of,” I insisted, fully aware that Elle was at my side, listening to every word I was saying with keen interest.

Dayton smiled, looking pleased. “Well, I’m glad to hear that. And there’s no reason why you should be. Werewolves are special—superior beings, of course. We should revel in our greatness, don’t you think? We should never shy away from it.”

I took this in. “Is that why you turned Helix?”

“What?” he asked. He was barely listening to me. Dayton was putting on a show, and it was clear he wasn’t looking for audience participation.

I narrowed my eyes. “Did you turn Helix so that you could feel strong and powerful?”

Dayton shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know. I suppose that was part of it. But Helix did ask me to turn him, and why should I have turned him down? Who am I to rob someone of what we have? Besides, I was curious what would happen. I’d never turned a wolf before.” He looked keenly at Elle, then back at me. “Have you?”

I ignored him—and the hungry look in his eyes—and turned to Geena. “And what about you?” I asked her.

She smiled. “What about me, Greyson?”

“Did you ask Dayton to turn you?”

She raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t have to.”

“What does that mean?”

“We both wanted it.”

I smiled, shaking my head with disgust I didn’t bother to conceal. “Then it seems like you two are a perfect match.”

Dayton’s eyes were hard as flint as he looked at me. Then he looked away and turned to his pack. “Let’s head out. We’re going to leave Greyson and his little pack friends to clean their muddy paws. They probably don’t need our help for that.”  
 As the Nightshade pack members shifted to their wolf forms, Dayton turned and took a step toward me. His eyes were as cold as the north-blowing wind.

“You’d better keep your girl close, Greyson Evers.”

“Excuse me?” I snarled.

“Well, we wouldn’t want things to get out of hand at the summit, would we?”

**Episode 3857**

Everyone else was claiming their tents, and—looking at the line of packs waiting to register—I figured I should do the same before they were all gone, so I walked into an empty two-person tent. I dropped my bag in the corner and looked around. It was small, but there was room enough for two, and the front flap opened to a beautiful view of the sweeping sky outside.

There was a bundle of metal poles and canvas in the corner. When I went over to investigate, I realized that this was the sleeping cot. It was pretty tangled, but after a moment I managed to get it straightened out, and after a few more moments, I managed to get it set up.

A cold breeze blew in through the tent flap, and I shivered, even though I was still wearing my coat. I hoped it would be warm enough to sleep in the tent at night when the temperature dropped, but the heater was a bit on the fritz. Of course, if they weren’t working, it would barely affect the werewolves. They didn’t feel temperatures in the same way humans did—or Fae. But it might be a concern for me. Good thing I was going to have Greyson with me to keep me warm.

With the cot set up, I sat down and bounced on the taut canvas to see how comfortable it was going to be. It was fine, but it suddenly occurred to me how incredibly small the cot was. Smaller and narrower than a twin bed. And there was only one. My cheeks flared with a blush as I realized how close I was going to have to be to Greyson for us to sleep on this thing.

He was my mate, of course, but it didn’t seem to matter. Even after all this time, the thought of being near Greyson never failed to make the butterflies flutter in my stomach.

I looked through the open tent flap at the bright sky outside. It was that bright, unflinching blue of winter, but it reminded me of the last time I’d slept in a tent like this. It had been at the Lupo Finale. That had been a different period in my life—to say the least.

I remembered walking in on Greyson in what I referred to in my memory as *a state of undress* with Joss. I’d been so furious in that moment, but I couldn’t figure out why. I just didn’t have enough awareness of what was really going on between Greyson and me to recognize what I was feeling in that moment as overwhelming jealousy. I’d been angry about the kiss we’d shared—angry for what it had done to my relationship with Xavier, and for what it was doing to me internally.

I shook my head. Things had changed so much since then. I was sharing a tent with Greyson this time, and it was me who was going to represent our pack as the Luna. I felt a surge of pride in my chest—but it was mixed with a fearful kind of anxiety.

Clasping my hands tightly together, I looked around the tent again. I just wasn’t sure of what my next move should be—that was why I was trying to bide my time in here. I was going to have to figure something out, though, or—better yet—Greyson would just show up.

*Greyson? Are you there? Can you hear me?* I asked, hoping he was close enough for the mind link to work. *We’re at the summit. Waiting for you.*

There was no answer, so I got to my feet. I slipped my coat off and adjusted my clothes, making sure they weren’t rumpled from blipping. I was wearing an outfit Lola had picked out for me: a black leather blazer over a black mock neck, a short black skirt, double-layer tights that looked sheer black but had nude fleece underneath, and knee-high chunky black boots.

There was no full-length mirror, so I could only look down at myself and hope that I looked cool. Or at least that I looked like a Luna. The whole effect was a bit dark and edgy for me, but I trusted Lola.

Mostly.

I pulled my hair from its messy bun and was just about to give a good shake when I stopped myself. *The Luna mark.*

Was it still there, like Kira had promised? Had it faded, somehow?

I grabbed a hand mirror from my luggage and held it slightly behind me, pulling down my neckline so I could get a proper view of the back of my shoulder. I gave a sigh of relief when I saw the mark still imprinted on my skin.

I looked over when I heard the tent zipper moving, and Lola poked her head inside.

“Hey, how much do you think we can pay Big Mac to make these tents bigger on the inside?”

“What?” I asked, laughing in surprise.

“Or, like, insulated? And with plumbing?”

I looked around. “I don’t know. Probably not enough.”

Lola looked me up and down. “Oh my *GOD*, Cali! You look *amazing*!”

I preened. “Do I look like Luna material?”

“*Sexy* Luna material,” Lola said, nodding in approval. “Oh, and when Greyson shows up and sees you, you’re welcome in advance.”

My face flushed. “Thank you, Lola,” I said obediently, though, in the back of my head, I couldn’t stop myself from wondering if Xavier would think I looked good, too. I mean, that was sort of the plan, wasn’t it? To have Xavier eat his heart out when he saw me?

I didn’t want Lola to go on another rampage about Xavier, so I didn’t bring that up, but internally I couldn’t stop myself from hoping the plan worked—if he showed up.

I took my name tag off my coat and put it on my top, then looked at Lola. “So, what are we supposed to be doing now?”

Lola shrugged. “Anything, I guess. Ravi has a booklet with all the events listed. Maybe we should look at that. There might be something good. I just want something with food involved.”

As if on cue, my stomach grumbled. “I agree,” I said, putting a hand over it. “I think we’ve gotten spoiled with Torin at the pack house. We’re never without something to eat. Let’s go find some food.”

When Lola and I stepped out of my tent, I saw that the Redwood pack had congregated around the small firepit at the center of the blue zone. Ravi was there, holding the booklet.

“—and there’s a panel on effective patrolling,” he was saying, pointing to the brochure. He frowned. “Wait, how is there a *better* way to patrol? You run your borders and look around. How can you improve on that?”

“I guess that’s why you go to the panel,” Rishika said.

Ravi laughed, and I smiled. There was an excitement buzzing in the air between the pack members. I knew they had been excited to come to the summit, but seeing them here, it was evident how pumped they were.

I was glad to be here too, but I was missing Greyson. But he was going to be here soon. Any moment, I was sure.

I looked around and saw other packs moving down the thoroughfare in front of the blue zone, heading toward their own tents.

“Do you think we should go introduce ourselves?” I asked. There seemed to be a lot of werewolves showing up, but I hadn’t seen any familiar faces, which meant that the Vanguards and Blue Bloods hadn’t arrived yet. Or the Samaras—thank god.

“It’s probably a good idea to at least say hello,” Rishika said. “Get the lay of the land on who’s here. But let’s all be sure we keep away from the Bitterfangs.”

I nodded and tried to look confident, but my stomach clenched. I had no intention of mingling with the Bitterfang pack, and while the guy at the check-in table hadn’t said anything to me about being Fae, he had seemed like a real summit go-getter. He wanted this to be a positive experience, and I knew that some wolves here weren’t going to take kindly to the fact that I was Fae. But if I was going to be a Luna, then I had to do this.

I took a deep breath. “Okay. Let’s go say hi.”

“Hang on. I have to grab something from my tent,” Ravi said, shoving the brochure into his pocket and sprinting toward his tent.

There was a beat of silence as we all looked at each other.

“I’m definitely going to that patrolling panel,” Rishika said, making Jay laugh.

“Hello.”

We all looked over as a man stepped toward our group. He was older, maybe a little younger than my dad. He was tall and powerfully built, with salt and pepper hair and a beard.

He smiled around at us. “It’s good to see newcomers,” he said, his voice deep and smooth like velvet.

I smiled back, grateful for the friendly gesture, and stepped forward to introduce myself and my pack. “Hi, I’m Caliana Hart, Redwood pack Luna. It’s nice to meet you.”

I put my hand out, and just as he took it in his powerful hand, I caught sight of his name tag… And my blood ran cold.

*Malakai, Bitterfang Alpha.*

**Episode 3858**

**Xavier**

I stared at Lucian for a long moment. Then I started to laugh. I had no idea if he had expected me to take his thinly veiled threat seriously, but I wasn’t about to.

*Listen, man, I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. I don’t know how it’s possible to take something from you that was never yours to begin with.* I shook my head at his glowering face, then looked back at Ava and the rest of the pack. *We don’t have time for this bullshit. Let’s go.*

We started moving again. There was a patch of trees up ahead, and we moved into them. Behind us, I could hear Lucian following. *Of course.*

After a few moments, he caught up with me.

*I admit, I’m surprised to see that you’ve parted ways with the Redwood pack, Xavier.*

*Is that right?* I asked without the least bit of actual interest.

*Of course. I would have thought the least you could have done was to inform me. We’re supposed to be allies, after all. We shouldn’t keep secrets from each other.*

*Well, consider yourself officially notified*, I said shortly.

He was quiet for a moment, and the only sound was the quiet crunch of paws on snow.

*But what of your mate, Xavier?* Lucian finally asked. *What of Caliana?*

My stomach tightened. I knew Ava was watching and listening closely, so I needed to be very careful how I responded to this question. I was also restricted in terms of what I could actually say, thanks to the vampire-witch’s spell over me.

*I took what is rightfully mine, Lucian*, I snapped. *Ava is my mate, which she always has been. And that means you don’t have to worry about the Samara pack any longer. I’ll take care of them, so you don’t have to.*

Lucian took this in. *And what does your brother think of all this?* *How has Greyson responded to—*

*I don’t give a fuck about my brother’s thoughts on this*, I shot back, the most honest statement I’d made so far. *I don’t have time to worry about him. I have a pack to run.*

Lucian nodded. *I’ll admit it, Xavier, I’m impressed. This is a bold move. Though, I have to tell you, I can’t believe you left someone as special as your Caliana.*

The best course of action at the moment seemed to be ripping out Lucian’s throat—at least that would get him to shut the hell up. The last thing I needed was to be confronted about the pain I’d inflicted on Cali—and *myself*—by leaving her.

*I also find it hard to believe that Greyson left Cali to go to the summit by herself. You Evers brothers are nothing if not a mystery to me—*

*Wait, what?* I demanded, stopping in my tracks. *What are you talking about?*

Lucian looked surprised. *I’m sorry, I thought you knew.*

*Well, I don’t, so tell me what you’re talking about.*

My mind was spinning. That didn’t make any sense. Why the hell would Greyson leave Cali to fend for herself at a fucking *werewolf summit* of all places? My heart pounded in my chest as I waited impatiently for Lucian to explain.

*I ran into Greyson while I was traveling*,he started*. It was Greyson, Elle, and a young werewolf I didn’t know. They said they were on their way to Idaho, for some reason.*

*Idaho?* I repeated, confused.

*Yes, I know*, Lucian said, sounding amused. *Baffling, isn’t it?*

He was right about that. Why the fuck would Greyson run off to Idaho? We had no business in Idaho.

*Who was the werewolf?* I asked.

Lucian shook his head. *I don’t have the faintest idea who he was. But when I stopped by the Redwood pack house this morning to see my mate off, neither Elle nor Greyson had returned, which I found odd. I asked about them, of course, and I thought Caliana was acting strangely when pressed. Though I suppose she has a right to. After all, her mate seemingly ran off with a beautiful, young werewolf—who just happens to be* my *mate.*

Was he seriously still going on about that between him and Elle?

Lucian shook his head, continuing. *Caliana was probably in shock. And she was probably also realizing that she was going to have to go to the summit alone, which likely didn’t help.*

I stared at Lucian, trying to parse out his story. Lucian was always a hard read—trying to tell if he was exaggerating or just flat-out making shit up was a freaking magic trick. He was prone to both. But if he *was* lying, I couldn’t figure out why. He didn’t seem to have a motive to *not* tell me the truth here. Other than stirring up chaos, which wasn’t beyond him, but there wasn’t anything for him to gain from it.

No, if anything, Lucian himself seemed pretty pissed off that Elle was gone and had run off with Greyson.

I knew Lucian’s hang-up about Elle and Greyson, so that was probably really bothering him. I didn’t know if I believed that Elle and Lucian were actually mates, but Lucian clearly did.

*Anyway*, Lucian said briskly, shaking himself out of his reverie, *I suppose we can question Caliana about all of this when we see her at the summit.*

Feeling the stares of the Samaras boring into me, I started moving again, making my pace quick. Honestly, I wasn’t sure about talking to Cali once I got there—I was pretty sure Adéluce wouldn’t allow that—but the idea of letting her step into a werewolf summit by herself—without someone like me to protect her—pissed me off.

Was this what Adéluce had wanted? To make Cali vulnerable by bringing her to the summit *alone*? Was this what she had been planning all along? Was this just another step in her wretched plan?

I was running quickly, but at this thought, I picked up my pace even more. If nothing else, I needed to get to Hells Canyon before anything happened to Cali. I might not be able to talk to her, but I could still protect her.

I just didn’t get why Greyson would bail on her at a time like this. What the *hell* was he off doing? He was the Redwood *Alpha*. Even without the fact that Cali was on her own there, he was supposed to be at the summit representing the damn pack. What the hell did he think he was doing?

I was fuming, running so hard it was starting to get hard to breathe. The wind was cold on my face and as I gulped it into my lungs, but that’s the way I liked it. I would always rather run in the cold than in the humid heat.

Ava caught up to me. *We’re going to be there soon. Sooner, if you keep up this pace.*

*Good*, I muttered.

*I just hope this shit with Cali and the Redwood pack isn’t going to be a problem for you, X.*

*How many times are you going to bring this up?* I snapped, glaring over at her.

*Xavier, I—*

*No, Ava, you keep questioning me about it, and I keep giving you the same damn answer. When are you going to trust me?*

She narrowed her eyes. *I’m not stupid, Xavier. I’ve got eyes and ears. As soon as Lucian brought up Cali, you started running like your house was on fire.*

I shook my head. *If I’m running faster, it’s because we’ve already wasted enough time.*

She gazed at me, her eyes keen. Ava didn’t miss a damn thing. *Sure. Believe that if you want. I know what I know.*

I was about to argue back when we crested the ridge of a hill. Below us I saw dozens of tents scattered along the curving edge of the Snake River. Smoke from campfires was already curling up into the air. The view from our vantage point was breathtaking, and I was about to comment on it, but Lucian spoke first—

*Tents? Oh god, they’re asking us to stay in* tents *for this? Aysel won’t be happy to hear this. I’ll be lucky if she doesn’t turn around and go right home*, he muttered, shaking his head. *Tents are just so nineteenth century.*

Ava turned to me. *Xavier, look, I don’t want to fight. Not now. We’re here, and everyone in the Samara pack is counting on us to come out of this summit with the respect and sense of pride our pack used to command. I feel the weight of that responsibility. It drives me in everything I do, and I’ve put my faith in you to help get us there.* She gave me a long, searching look. *I just hope you’re ready to step up as Alpha. As* our *Alpha.*

I met her gaze, then turned and started down the hill toward the tents and the summit. *I am.*

**Episode 3859**

**Greyson**

Elle and I were silent as we followed Helix’s trail. It wasn’t hard—I just followed the smell and warmth emanating from the hot springs. When we got there, I looked around. The rocky ground was a deep, earthy red, and the water of the springs was such a strange milky blue it looked abnormal. But it must have been fine, because Helix was in the water already.

“Come on in,” he called, splashing as he waved to us. “It feels great!”

Elle gave me a sideways glance and stepped forward, slipping into the steaming pool. I followed her. The water did feel great, but I didn’t feel much relief. I barely even noticed. My mind kept turning over the encounter we’d just had with Dayton.

I ducked my head under the water and rubbed my hand through my hair, scrubbing out all the accumulated dirt and sweat. The reality was that I didn’t give a shit what that guy thought of me. If Dayton wanted to keep blaming me for hooking up with Geena all those years ago, that wasn’t remotely my problem. I’d already explained to him that I’d had no idea at the time that Geena had been his girlfriend. And why was it that Dayton still blamed *me* for the crime but had managed to forgive Geena for cheating on him? Not only forgave her—hell, he’d turned around and made her his Luna. That was fucked up and annoying, but that wasn’t what was bothering me.

What was *actually* bothering me and keeping me from enjoying the hot spring was the nakedly hungry way Dayton had been eyeing Elle. It had stirred up a jealous and protective fire inside me, and that’s what was bothering me.

And it doubly sucked because Dayton had talked about the special connection he had with Helix—it was obvious how eager Helix was to follow Dayton’s commands. I had just been wishing I knew someone I could speak to about this exact thing, and if we didn’t hate each other, I might be able to sit with Dayton over a few beers and talk more about this special connection forged between a werewolf and the wolf he turned. But—given that it *was* Dayton and me—I didn’t really see that happening.

I shook out my hair and looked over at Elle, who had dipped her long red hair into the water and was now squeezing the water out. I wondered if *that* was what was going on between us. Did the special connection Dayton mentioned explain the kiss Elle and I had shared?

Helix had finished washing off, and, bored, he made the mistake of pushing a wave of water in Elle’s direction. It caught her off-guard and splashed her right in the face. She sputtered for a surprised moment, then her eyes narrowed. With a growl she tackled Helix hard, taking him under the water, and held him there as he kicked.

I laughed at their roughhousing. I was glad to see that Elle seemed unfazed by Dayton’s ogling. She had seemed rattled earlier, but she was unfailingly resilient.

I was pulled from my thoughts when a blast of hot water hit me in the face. I looked around quickly. Helix had gotten free of Elle and had sent the jet my way. I sputtered and spit out a mouthful of water. I was a little annoyed but also glad to be distracted from my troubled thoughts. I needed something to lighten me up. The last thing I wanted was to show up at the summit all dark and brooding. I wanted Cali to enjoy her time at the summit—even if there were some serious issues we were going to have to deal with. Most of those issues stemming from our problems with the Bitterfang pack.

But I could deal with that when I got to the summit, I reminded myself. For the moment, I sent a wave of water back at Helix. It crashed over him, leaving him sputtering and wiping his eyes.

“Oh, I will get you for that.” He laughed.

Elle started to giggle, and an all-out war broke out as we each tried to defend ourselves while trying to half-drown the other two.

I ducked beneath the water and splashed my hands at the other two as hard as I could, combining my defense and offense. I knew we couldn’t stay at the hot spring too long, but I figured we had a few minutes. We needed some time to clean up, and I needed a minute to prepare myself for what was in store for me at the summit—and to wash away the residue of my encounter with Dayton.

When I broke through the surface again, Elle and Helix were gasping and laughing from my onslaught, and I was glad to see Elle looking happy. She so rarely had a chance to have fun. Ever since I’d turned her, she had hit the ground running. She’d been forced into the problems with the pack right from the get-go, so she deserved a moment like this—time away from the pack house and a chance to just play with a childhood friend.

*That* was something I never really had a chance to do—not with Silas as my father. Friends weren’t something he allowed.

As I watched, Elle slipped beneath the water, then jumped out, spitting a jet of water at Helix.

“*Hey!*” he yelled, laughing. He wiped his face and rushed for her.

She backed up, trying to splash him. “Stay away!” she called, laughing. “Just back up!”

She was getting into the shallow water closer to me, and I was just about to tell her to watch her step when she hit the loose red rock gravel and lost her footing. She slipped, and I reached out on instinct, catching her in my arms.

She was laughing as she fell, but when she looked up at me, her laughter faded. When her eyes locked with mine, her whole expression changed.

A voice somewhere in the back of my head was telling me to help her to her feet and step away, but I didn’t do either of those things. I kept her where she was—clasped tight in my arms. That same feeling that had prevented me from pushing her away when she’d kissed me was keeping me from stepping away from her now. I didn’t have a name for that feeling—it was just this deep, instinctive, primal part of me. It wanted her close. It wanted to protect her. To keep her safe.

But there was something else, too, and I couldn’t ignore it. My eyes scanned down the length of her. She was naked, and in my arms. Her wet hair was the same color as the red rock beneath the water. Her eyes were the color of the strange water. It was like she was a mermaid who had just emerged from these hot springs, straight into my arms. She was beautiful and radiant and so damn close to me.

Her chest was heaving as she breathed, and I suspected that wasn’t just because she’d been splashing around. She was a strong werewolf—playing around in a hot spring wouldn’t make her winded. There was something else that had stolen her breath.

Then I realized that I was breathing hard, too.

I had to move. I had to do something. I couldn’t just let this continue. I couldn’t risk another kiss.

*Pull it together, Greyson. What’s wrong with you?*

I lifted her up and set her on her feet. “You got this?” I asked, my voice oddly husky.

She looked up at me, and I could see water droplets beaded on her full lips. They parted as she tipped her face up toward mine. She had just reached her hand toward me when I took a step back.

“We should get going.”

I saw the confusion in her eyes, but just for a moment, before I turned away. I stepped out of the hot spring and onto the rocky ledge. The freezing winter wind bit into my skin, but that was what I had wanted. I was hoping the cold air would knock some damn sense into me.

Whatever the hell was happening to me—whatever was drawing me toward Elle—it had to stop. *Now.*

And if it didn’t stop, then I was going to fight it. I knew how to do that. Even before I met Cali, I knew what it was like to be attracted to someone. And even after I was with Cali, I had felt something with Maren—a rekindled spark. And I’d fought that. But what I was feeling with Elle was different from any of that. That’s what freaked me out about it. If it was just an acknowledgment that she was a beautiful woman, that would be one thing. *That* I could understand. But I didn’t know what this was.

“We are going now?” Helix asked, stepping out of the water.

“Yeah,” I said shortly. “We’re late as it is—”

*Where are you?*

I stopped when I heard the voice. It was Cali, speaking to me through the mind link.

*Greyson, I need you.*

**Episode 3860**

Malakai’s hand had closed over mine and was holding it in a tight grip. It wasn’t quite a vise grip, but it was close.

I swallowed hard and could hear my pulse racing in my ears. I didn’t know what the hell I was supposed to say to him, and now that he was so close to me, he was so tall I had to crane my head to look up into his eyes. I knew I must look surprised—or possibly intimidated—but that was hard to avoid. It was difficult to act chill when the man was literally *towering* over me.

Malakai smiled down at me, and the expression was surprisingly pleasant. It was strange, and I stared up at him in wonder. If I hadn’t known that this was an Alpha who had very recently been actively trying to murder a teenager, who apparently *hated* the *due destini*—which meant he must hate the hell out of me—and had threatened not only the Redwood pack, but the Vanguard, Blue Blood, *and* Samara packs as well, then I’d probably think he looked like a nice guy. A nice, hot, older guy.

But the fact was that I *did* know all those things, and I’d been around way too long to fall for a nice smile and a hot body.

My heart was beating hard in my chest, but the next moment, Artemis, Rishika, Ravi, Lola, and Jay were at my side.

“Is there a problem?” Rishika asked, her voice hard as flint.

There was something about the sound of it that made my shoulders relax. Rishika was a badass, and she wasn’t going to let anything happen to me. Neither were the rest of my friends.

Malakai laughed, the sound casual and easy. “Of course not. I’m not here to cause any trouble. There’s a strict rule against violence at the summit, remember? It’s on a form in your welcome packet.”

I didn’t remember that being mentioned, or having read it, but I nodded. “That’s right, there is a rule.” I pulled my hand from his and stepped back, crossing my arms over my chest and tucking my hand beneath my arm.

*Please, Greyson! Where are you? We need you! Malakai is here, and he’s* talking *to me!*

Relief broke over me like a wave of warm water when I heard Greyson’s answering voice—

*I’m coming, love. I hear you. I’m not far now. I’ll be there soon.*

The reassurance helped me swallow down *some* of my fear. I balled my hands into fists and reminded myself that I wasn’t defenseless. I could summon a sword when I wanted to, for god’s sake. A *sword*. A sword made entirely of magic. I mean, yeah, I might not be able to fully *wield* said sword yet, but still. I could summon it. There might be a rule against violence, but defending myself against a murderous Alpha seemed fair.

Malakai looked over the group with laughter in his light-colored eyes. “My dear Redwood pack, there’s no need to look so tense. I merely wanted to formally introduce myself. And”—his eyes turned icy—“I wanted to get a look at the faces of the people who killed my daughter.”

I bit my tongue hard. It was tough to hear those words, but I couldn’t betray any outrage. I couldn’t risk letting on that Julia was actually alive. The longer Malakai believed she was dead, the safer Julia and Russell would remain.

He looked at each of us, one by one. “Well, I look forward to meeting your Alpha. Of course, I’m not one to pass judgment, but it does seem *careless* of Greyson to leave you all unattended like this.” His eyes landed on me and stayed there. “Especially his *due destini* mate. Sometimes things get a little… *rough* at these summits.”

Jay made a low noise in the back of his throat. It wasn’t quite a growl, but it sounded like a warning.

Malakai smiled his pleasant smile, aiming it at me. “Pleasure meeting you. I’ll leave you to settle in.”

As soon as he stepped away, I let out a huge breath, and Rishika, Ravi, Jay, and Lola stepped between me and his retreating form.

Artemis was at my side, putting her arm around me. “You’re okay now. You’re fine.”

I looked over at her and nodded, then stopped, seeing the dagger she held discreetly in her free hand.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said, though it wasn’t until that moment that I realized I had started to shake. I looked over Jay’s shoulder, watching Malakai walk away. “That was another threat.”

“What was?” Ravi asked, frowning.

“What he said. Even if there can be no violence here *officially*, I don’t know whether someone like Malakai adheres to the rules printed in the welcome packet, or if he feels justified because he thinks Julia is dead, but when he mentioned violence—that was a threat.”

Ravi looked over his shoulder, making sure Malakai had gone a sufficient distance away, then turned back to me. “Maybe Julia faking her death was a bad idea.”

“No,” Artemis said without hesitation. “Come on. If he’s approaching us in broad daylight in front of dozens of witnesses to deliver *friendly* threats? I think Julia is much better off without him.”

“I agree, but I suggest none of us ever mention Julia’s name again,” Rishika said in a low hiss. She looked around. “If Malakai ever found out what really happened, who the hell knows what he would do? Considering we already appear to be on his shit list.”

Jay nodded. “Rishika’s right. Let’s just keep our mouths shut. Especially while we’re here. We all need to be on alert. Especially because these summits always involve drinking.” He sighed. “A *lot* of drinking. And there’s always Big Mac’s moonshine.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Ravi asked, looking confused.

“Come on, man,” Jay said, rolling his eye. “Alcohol always inspires a certain level of loose lips, and we can’t afford to sink ships. Be careful of what you say and who you’re saying it to out here.”

“Agreed,” Rishika said, nodding. “And I also think someone should be outside Cali’s tent at all times, or with Cali if she’s out and about.”

“I don’t think that’s going to be necessary,” I said quickly. “I mean, thank you for your concern, but I hope I won’t need that. I was able to contact Greyson through the mind link. I told him what was going on with Malakai.”

“That must mean he’s really close, then,” Lola said, looking around.

“Maybe not,” I corrected. “The mind link does seem to be working from farther away now, thanks to Kira,” I admitted. “But he is coming. He said he won’t be long.”

There seemed to be a collective breath of relief from the pack at this news. I appreciated how confident everyone had appeared with Malakai, but it was clear they would all be glad when Greyson arrived.

I looked around. “But I want to make something clear. I know that running into Malakai was unnerving for us all—it definitely was for me. But I refuse to let that happen again.” I straightened my shoulders. “I say that we all act like nothing happened. If we seem rattled by him, then we’re giving him exactly what he wants.”

Everyone took this in for a moment, then Ravi nodded.

“That’s true. He was trying to manipulate us. We shouldn’t let him.”

“Exactly,” I said.

“And we need to toe the line here,” he went on, grinning at me. “Cali is our Luna. We’re all supposed to listen to her.”

I squirmed a little at this. Hearing that after the run-in with Malakai felt weird—but feeling Ravi’s support also felt really good.

“So, what should we do?” Rishika asked.

“I think we should keep exploring,” I said, trying to sound more confident than I felt. It wasn’t exactly what I wanted to do, but there was no way I was going to send the pack to go cower in their tents while we all waited for Greyson to arrive. That wasn’t what the Redwood pack should do. That would be exactly what Malakai wanted, and I wasn’t going to play his game.

Ravi clapped his hands together. “Sounds good to me.” He looked around expectantly. “Anyone know where Big Mac is setting up her moonshine lounge?”

Everyone shook their heads.

“No idea,” Jay said.

“Maybe in her tent. We should go see,” Ravi suggested with a grin.

“Why?” Lola asked warily.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Ravi said innocently. “Maybe she’ll offer a few samples? Who knows?”

Lola snorted. “In your dreams, man. Have you *met* Big Mac? She’ll charge you double just because she can. But yeah, let’s go look.”

I was laughing as I turned, but when I saw the figure in front of me, I froze, the laughter dying on my lips.

Xavier stood before me, his eyes locked on mine.