**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 31, Part 1**

**Episodes 3861–4005 (S31 total: 3861–4045)**

# **Episode 3861**

I stood there, frozen with shock. I couldn’t move, couldn’t speak, couldn’t do anything but stare at the man whose face I’d been desperate to see for days now. The man who had broken my heart.

*What on earth is he doing here?* I’d been hoping I wouldn’t see him at the summit. This whole situation already felt like a minefield, what with the looming threat of Malakai and the Bitterfang pack, presenting myself to a bunch of werewolves as Greyson’s half-Fae mate, and the assorted power plays and reputations that were made and built among the packs at the summit.

And now Xavier was here too? Why? Hadn’t he shunned the Redwoods?

*He sure as hell shunned me…*

I’d been hoping Lola was right—that Xavier wouldn’t have any reason to come to the summit. If he didn’t have ties to any packs, what was the point?

As my brain struggled to process this sudden turn of events, my eyes drank in every detail of Xavier’s appearance.

*He looks good. He* still *looks so good. A little thinner than I remember, but… that face.*

That beautiful face had become so familiar to me, I almost knew it better than my own reflection. I could trace the contours of it in my mind. The faint and ever-present crease between his brows. The slope of his nose. The full bow of his lips and the chiseled edge of his jaw.

Despite my aching heart, my battered pride, and the dozens of questions swirling through my mind, all I wanted to do was race forward and embrace him. Some not-so-small part of me was *happy* to see him. *Relieved* that he’d come.

And then I noticed Ava standing beside him. So close… too close. Like they were two halves of a set.

The thought made my stomach lurch.

A frown twisted my lips as I noticed all the Samaras were with him too, standing just behind him.

*Wait, what the hell is going on here? Is Xavier at the summit* with *the Samaras? Is it because… because of Ava? Did she invite him here?*

My brain couldn’t keep up with the barrage of questions. And my heart couldn’t stand this silence between us, thick and heavy. I needed to do something. Say something. Anything.

I took a step forward. “Xav—”

His gaze slid past me, and he shook his head as he called out, “No! Not those tents. We need them to be together.”

I glanced over my shoulder and spotted another Samara pack member among the tents. When I glanced back at Xavier, he’d already turned and started walking away. The other Samaras followed behind him like he was their shepherd.

Only Ava hung back, staring at me with something like remorse. Pity.

*Great. Now I’ve got Ava of all people feeling sorry for me. This is just getting better and better.*

Ava eventually turned and followed after Xavier and her pack, and I was left with a racing heart, a sinking stomach, and more questions than ever. What was I supposed to do with that? Xavier was here at the summit… with the Samara pack? And he had barely even acknowledged me. The way he’d acted… like I was nobody to him. *Less* than nobody.

A hand landed on my shoulder, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. I turned to see Lola standing next to me. I’d completely forgotten she was there. My run-in with Xavier had had a witness. I was only a little comforted that the witness was my best friend.

“Do you want me to go punch him in the mouth?” Lola asked.

I shook my head, tears stinging my eyes. I’d been hoping not to run into Xavier here, but I’d never imagined that seeing him would affect me like this. I’d thought I was done crying over him, that I could take whatever happened next because he’d already done his worst.

I was wrong. His complete dismissal cut deep, and I was bleeding out all over again. I couldn’t help it.

Still, I tried to hold the tears back and wiped away the few that had fallen. He didn’t deserve my tears. Not the ones I’d already shed, and certainly not any more of them.

“No,” I finally said. “He obviously doesn’t want to talk to me right now.”

“What about our plan for you to give him a piece of your mind? I know you weren’t expecting to see him here, but this could be a great opportunity. There’s all sorts of places to bury a body around here.”

Her comment—and the straight-faced way she said it—pulled a choked laugh out of my chest. “No. Believe me, I’ve thought a lot about what I might say but… I don’t know that that’s a good idea. Who knows what I’d say if I actually confronted him? And unless he’s ready to apologize, I don’t know how well I could take more of his attitude.”

A fresh wave of tears burned my eyes, and Lola hugged me tight. “Oh no! I’m sorry! I was trying to help you access your anger, not your sadness!”

I shook my head again, sniffling. “No, it’s okay. I’m going to be okay.”

“If it helps, I think I saw him checking you out, even though he tried to hide it. Not that I blame him. That outfit looks so hot on you. There’s one success, at least.”

A small smile tugged at my lips. “Thank you for always being such a good friend to me.” I didn’t even want to think about what it would have been like to have that run-in with Xavier alone. I probably would have fallen to pieces right here where everyone could see.

She patted my shoulder. “Let’s just get out of here. We were on our way to Big Mac, remember?”

I nodded, and we headed off to Big Mac’s little tent, a ways away from the rest of the Redwood pack. It was still weird to me that she’d set up shop so far away from us, but then again, Big Mac wasn’t exactly known for being sentimental about her pack.

“Big Mac!” I called through the tent flap. There wasn’t really a way to knock, was there? “It’s Cali and Lola. Can we come in?”

She responded with a grunt, and, glancing at Lola, I took that to mean “come in.”

We pushed the flap aside and stepped into her tent. My eyes went wide as saucers. *Big Mac has really made herself at home!*

The interior of her tent was fully furnished with a plush throw rug and even some hanging lights. I did a double take at the king size bed in the middle of the space. It looked absolutely amazing, just as comfortable as the bedroom she shared with Mrs. Smith back at the pack house.

“Wow…” I breathed, then frowned. “Wait a minute.”

I popped my head out of the tent flap, glanced up at the exterior of the tent, then ducked back inside. It was definitely *way* bigger in here than it should be from the outside.

Lola must have had the same realization I did, because she gasped. “Hey! You magicked your tent bigger! Can you do that for all of us?”

Ravi looked thrilled at this possibility. “Yeah, I’d love a king size bed. Or a mini fridge.” His face lit up. “Oh, wait! You could get us—”

“Nope.” Big Mac’s scowl dared him to make another request. He kept his mouth shut.

*Smart guy*.

“I’m not wasting any of my magic on your comfort,” the witch continued. “I need a space to be able to sell my wares to pay for my wedding. So, unless you’re buying something, get out.”

“Oh. Right.” Guilt nagged at my stomach. We were always bothering Big Mac for things back home. We had to remember she was here to sell her moonshine, not as a Redwood witch… Plus, she had done so much for us in the past. She more than deserved to have this one weekend to do her own thing, even if it was get werewolves stupid drunk. “Sorry, Big Mac. We just wanted to check on you to make sure you were okay since your tent is far from the rest of the pack.”

I thought back to Malakai confronting us. Was it safe for Big Mac to be all the way over here on her own?

Then I remembered who Malakai would be dealing with. Big Mac was probably more than capable of protecting herself from any threat the summit presented with her magic. And who knew? Maybe setting herself up away from the Redwood pack’s tents offered another kind of protection.

*Speaking of protection…*

Guilt twisted my stomach all over again as I remembered there was something I needed to ask Big Mac. I winced. “Actually… We do need to buy something. Do you have a protection potion or spell we can use against Malakai and the Bitterfangs?”

# **Episode 3862**

**Greyson**

I hauled ass toward the summit. I had to get back to Cali.

I didn’t want her to face Malakai alone, and I was kicking myself for never once considering that was a possibility. I’d known I was sending her in alone to represent the Redwood pack as a rare half-Fae Luna, and that was already a scary enough situation, but I’d never once thought about what would happen if the Bitterfangs arrived at the summit before I did.

*Stupid Greyson.* I’d thought going to help Elle’s father—supporting an ally *and* a pack member—was the best thing I could do, even if it meant arriving late to the summit. Now I just felt pulled in too many directions. And as a result, I was failing to fulfill my duty as the Redwood Alpha.

I burst through the trees and into a forest clearing, my paws skittering over some loose rocks left behind in a dried-up riverbed. Moments later, those same rocks clattered again. I glanced back to see who was on my six.

Helix. *What the hell does he want now?*

I mind linked to him. *You shouldn’t come with us*.

He didn’t break his stride. *Why not?*

I didn’t want to state the obvious—that Helix was obviously loyal to Dayton, the Alpha who had changed him, and I didn’t want him to report this clusterfuck back to Dayton and give me something else to worry about. So, I opted for the simpler, if no less true, option.

*The summit is an official pack event, and you’re not an official part of a pack*, I explained. *You don’t belong there.*

Okay, that sounded kind of harsh. But it wasn’t wrong. There wouldn’t be any Rogues there, and as a newly turned werewolf, Helix would be out of place in so many ways. He’d be more of a liability than anything else, and I couldn’t have one more thing to worry about right now.

*I will not make any trouble*,Helix responded, then added meekly, *I have nowhere else to go.*

Well, shit.

I slowed to a stop and huffed out a sigh. The other two wolves followed suit.

*Just go back to the Redwood pack house then*, I told him. *Tell them I sent you and said it was okay for you to stay. They’ll recognize you and look out for you until we get back from the summit.*

He seemed hesitant, but after a beat, he nodded. *Thank you. How do I get there?*

I gave him the general directions, and he turned to head to the pack house, but he still seemed reluctant.

*It’ll be okay*, Elle said. *The pack will look after you, and I’ll see you again soon.*

She brushed her nose against his in farewell, and this seemed to calm him more than anything I’d said. After a beat, he turned and headed off into the woods, heading toward the Redwood pack house.

*We need to get to the summit as fast as possible. Let’s go*, I said to Elle before bursting into a sprint. Elle fell back into position beside me.

*Did we do the right thing not letting Helix come with us?* she asked.

*Like I said, he’s not a part of our pack. Or any pack for that matter. He’s welcome as a guest at the pack house, but he has no place at the summit.*

*I know what I said before, but he’s my friend*, she said. *And I was not an official member of the pack either at one point, but I’m here now. What’s the difference?*

Dayton was the difference. I’d turned Elle myself. I’d been responsible for her from day one, and ever since then she’d been part of the Redwood pack in some capacity or another, even if I hadn’t known then just how capable she’d become.

Helix had no such connection to the Redwood pack, or to me.

*If Helix had decided he wanted to pledge his loyalty to me right now, then he could’ve stayed. But he left easily, willingly. You’re part of the Redwood pack now, Elle.*

*I don’t think he knew that was an option*. *If you had told him—*

*We can circle back around to it when we’re done with the summit*, I said impatiently. Though, if I was being honest, I didn’t know if I wanted a wolf in my pack who was loyal to another Alpha. It seemed like I was just asking for a disaster, no matter which way I looked at it.

*Maybe he’ll be gone by the time we get back*, I thought. With everything else going on, it’d be nice to have one less thing to worry about.

Elle sped up to bump against my shoulder with her snout, but she sort of bounced off me instead and tripped with a yelp.

My heart jolted at the sound, and panic exploded inside me. *She’s hurt. Elle’s hurt.*

I skidded to a stop and rushed over to check on her. She was already rising to her feet, but I nudged her shoulder with my own snout, a physical confirmation that she was truly okay.

*Watch where you’re going!* I scolded. *I don’t want you getting hurt.*

*I’m fine*. She shook herself. *You don’t need to yell at me.*

I was about to argue that I hadn’t yelled at her when I realized that, actually, I *had* yelled. All she’d done was trip and fall, and I’d completely lost my shit. What the hell was that all about?

*I’m sorry*. *I didn’t mean to yell*. And then, because I apparently couldn’t help myself, I added, *But you really need to be more careful! I can’t always watch over and take care of you.*

Except, some part of me *did* want to be the one who watched over her. Who cared for her, protected her. I wanted to shift to my human form and hold her close, to personally make sure she was never hurt again.

*What the fuck is happening to me?*

This intense urge… It wasn’t like the normal protectiveness I felt for the other members of my pack. In fact, it didn’t totally feel like it was coming from me, from *Greyson*, either. The urge came from somewhere visceral, somewhere deep and unconscious. And I wasn’t certain I had full control of it.

Finally, I shook my head. *Come on. Cali’s waiting.*

We sprinted through the woods in silence for a long while until, finally, I picked up the scent of other wolves. I put on another burst of speed, and Elle kept pace with me, right on my tracks.

Finally, we broke through the tree line and entered the summit area.

Elle’s voice slipped through my mind. *Go find Cali. I’ll find the others.*

*Good idea.*

I broke away from her and headed toward the center of the tents. It was absolute chaos, with werewolves in both wolf and human form milling around, setting up tents, gathering around bonfires, chatting, drinking, and eating. Cali might be the only half-Fae here, but it’d still be impossible to find her right away.

*Love?* I mind linked. *I’m here. Where are you?*

*We’re in the blue section.*

I veered off that way and raced through the crowd of wolves and tents until I picked up Cali’s scent. I skidded to a stop in front of a small tent and mind linked.

*I’m outside.*

The tent flap lifted, and Cali stepped out as I shifted back into my human form.

She launched herself at me, throwing her arms around my neck. “Greyson! I missed you!”

My arms slipped around her, and I hugged her back. She clung to me even tighter. This was a hell of a lot more desperate a hello than I was used to.

*Malakai must have really frightened her.*

I kicked myself again for letting her face the Bitterfang Alpha alone.

Cali pulled back just enough to capture my lips in a frenzied kiss. Again, it felt desperate, full of emotion I couldn’t even begin to track. I poured all my love into the kiss, doing what I could to reassure her. I was here now, and I wouldn’t let anyone or anything hurt her.

We broke apart, and a frown twisted my lips. “Are you okay? What happened with Malakai? Where is he?”

“I took care of it for now. I was hoping Big Mac would have some way to protect us from the Bitterfangs with magic, but she said there’s no way to do it outside of making a barrier, which would negate the reason for the Redwood pack coming to the summit, because then we wouldn’t be able to interact with any other packs.”

I nodded. Much as the idea of wrapping Cali up in a protective shield appealed to me, Big Mac had a point. “At least there’s a no violence rule here at the summit. Malakai can’t do anything to us without having the werewolf council to answer to…” I looked her over for any sign of injury. She seemed okay physically, but there was still something about her expression, her energy, that put me on edge. “Are you sure you’re all right? Malakai didn’t do anything to you?”

She shook her head. “He scared the hell out of me, but no, he didn’t break any of the summit rules. If anything, he was overly polite to us. Like, in a really creepy way. And he did mention Julia. He said he wanted to see the people who were responsible for her death.” She grimaced.

That couldn’t bode well. Clearly, Malakai was trying to make a statement.

“I’m here now. Don’t worry.” Now that I had a better understanding of the situation and knew Cali was more or less all right, some of the panic receded from the forefront of my mind, and I was able to actually look at my mate. My brows lifted. “Wow. You look amazing. My Luna.”

Her cheeks pinked. “Thanks. I brought some clothes for you. They’re back in our tent.”

I smiled. “Perfect. Let’s head there.”

She nodded and led me to our tent. I started rummaging through the bags for something to wear when Cali, standing behind me, cleared her throat. “There’s something else I should tell you… I saw Xavier. He’s here with the Samara pack.”

# **Episode 3863**

**Xavier**

After my run-in with Cali, I didn’t stop moving until I reached the Samara pack’s designated campsite. I ducked into the first tent I came across. I didn’t care which one it was—I had to get inside and get some goddamn privacy, before the cracks in my shield started to show.

I clenched my fists, drawing in one slow breath after another as despair threatened to drown me. Motion had been all that kept me from coming unglued, and now that I was standing still, there was nothing to protect me from all the emotion that had been battering at my defenses from the moment I saw Cali again.

She’d looked good. Beautiful as ever. But sad. And the look on her face when she saw me? I knew I wasn’t the only one feeling devastated by our run-in. I wasn’t sure which of us came away from that interaction feeling worse—Cali, because I’d completely ignored her when she’d clearly wanted to talk to me, or me, for the exact same reason. The only difference was, where I had so much guilt I could barely put one foot in front of the other as I’d walked away from her, Cali was probably pissed off and hurt.

Not that I blamed her. Whatever she was feeling, it was less than I deserved.

The tent flap swished behind me, and Ava’s voice filled the small space. “Oof. That was awkward. Why didn’t you at least talk to them? You could’ve cleared the air, you know?”

I didn’t respond. I didn’t talk to Cali because I couldn’t. I didn’t trust myself to speak to her—as long as Adéluce’s deal was hanging over my head, the only thing I could offer Cali was more pain. And she’d already gotten way more than her fair share. And the way Lola had glared at me, I knew any kind of conversation was a nonstarter.

“They *are* your old pack,” Ava pressed. “Not that I want you to be best friends with them or anything, but you can’t just ignore them for the whole summit. I mean… I suppose you could *try*, but just be cordial. You know, normal stuff like ‘hello, how are you, goodbye.’ It would be a lot easier on everyone.”

I spun on her with a growl. “Ava, can you mind your own goddamn business, please?”

Her jaw dropped, and she took a step back. Then, shock morphed into anger. It was a look I was becoming increasingly familiar with. Pretty much everyone was looking at me that way these days.

“You know, I’m not asking you for more details about your random desertion of your childhood pack because I can tell you need space or whatever,” she said. “But what was the point of you coming here if you’re going to freak out every time you see Cali and the Redwoods? You don’t exactly invoke the image of a strong Alpha going around like that.”

I couldn’t help wincing at the sound of Cali’s name on Ava’s lips. Not even her snipe about me looking weak could soften the blow. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Big surprise there. You never want to talk about it. But you made a choice—you’re here, at the summit, as our Alpha. And everyone is going to find out sooner rather than later, even your old pack. And Greyson. And… her.”

I hated that she was right. Just like I hated that I still didn’t have the first fucking clue what to do about any of it.

I sighed and sank into the folding chair that came with the tent. “You think I don’t know that? You don’t think I’m dreading their reactions?”

I’d burned just about every bridge when I’d left the Redwoods, so I knew they probably weren’t feeling overly fond of me right about now. But becoming the Alpha of another pack, *officially* renouncing my ties to the pack I’d grown up in? The pack that I—and everyone else—had assumed I’d be a part of forever? That was something else—a bridge too far.

I didn’t know if I’d ever be able to come back from that.

Ava seemed to soften. She knelt next to me. “This is really hurting you, huh?”

I shook my head. I hated being vulnerable in front of Ava. Once upon a time, she’d been the person I’d confided in more than anyone else, but now I didn’t trust her to not use it against me. Unfortunately, I couldn’t seem to hide my feelings as well as I usually could.

She sighed. “You’re an open book, X. Maybe try to think of it this way: If they really cared about you, they’d support your choices.”

I shook my head again. “They won’t understand why I’m doing this,” I muttered. They’d think this was some kind of power play. Or that I’d straight-out betrayed them and ditched them for a new pack where I could be the Alpha.

And it wasn’t like I could even tell them the truth. *Did I back myself into a corner by coming here as the Samara Alpha?*

I couldn’t wipe the memory of Cali’s shocked expression from my mind. If she was that surprised just to see me here, I couldn’t even imagine how much worse it would be when she found out I was the new Samara Alpha. I couldn’t even look at her—how was I going to break this news?

“Maybe I shouldn’t have agreed to all of this,” I mumbled, more to myself than Ava.

I should have known better than to say it out loud if I didn’t want her to get involved.

“Why *did* you agree to do this, Xavier?”

I looked up at her, and she must not have liked whatever she saw on my face because her brows knit together. “For a long time, I hoped you would step up and be the Alpha my pack needed. The Alpha *I* needed. And then you did. But… Xavier, leading a pack is an honor. I know things with the Samaras have been a little… messy. But we deserve a good Alpha. One who *wants* to lead us. I thought that Alpha was you. Was I wrong?”

All I could do was look at her. I still couldn’t give her a full answer, even though one was long overdue.

“You’re really not going to make this easy for me, are you?”

I scowled. “I’m not trying to do anything to you.”

“Well, whether I’m your official Luna or not, I need to make sure you’re really going to be a good Alpha for my pack. It’s my responsibility, too, since I pushed so hard for you to be Alpha. We can’t fuck this up, Xavier. Not here. Not in front of so many other powerful packs who would like nothing more than to tear a weaker pack apart.”

I nodded. “Hey, I know. I won’t let you down.”

“And… If you need some backup to run interference with the Redwoods, I can help with that. If you need it.”

Some strange combination of emotions—maybe shame and gratitude—clogged my throat, but I swallowed it down. “Thanks,” I said gruffly.

Ava took my hand. “I don’t know why you’re the one person that can make me soft, but here we are.”

I couldn’t help grinning at the frustration in her voice. *Leave it to Ava to make a sweet sentiment sound like a horrible burden.*

I stood and put my hands on her shoulders. “I do really appreciate you. I know I don’t say it. But it’s meant… a lot, the past few days.”

*And having Ava on my side wouldn’t hurt for whatever’s to come with Adéluce.*

And, on the more personal side of things that I’d never admit aloud, it comforted me to know Ava was in my corner. I was glad *someone* felt that way about me. And Ava was strong. And we did have a connection, like it or not.

She looked absolutely stunned at this statement, and the shock on her face, the pout of her lips, was too much for me to resist. I dipped my head and caught her lips with mine.

I’d intended a quick peck, but before I knew it, she grabbed the back of my neck and pulled me down closer, deeper. I resisted only briefly before losing myself in the kiss. It was nice to be able to lose myself in something that wasn’t related to my fears or worries about the Redwoods, or Cali, or Adéluce—or any other fucked-up piece of my life.

I scooped Ava up in my arms and then laid her down on the sleeping bags on the small cot in my tent. It wasn’t really wide enough for two, but we didn’t need much room. Ava broke away from my mouth just long enough to kiss her way down my neck.

Ravenous need welled up inside me as I started to trail my hand down her stomach, inching lower.

“Xavier!” a low voice called.

It wasn’t Ava.

I looked up just as my older brother flung open the tent flap and snarled, “What the fuck are you doing here?”

# **Episode 3864**

**Greyson**

I was gonna fucking kill my brother.

I sneered down at the sight of him halfway to rutting with Ava in his tent. They were both naked, red-cheeked, and had clearly been about to get busy before I’d interrupted.

Strangely, I didn’t feel even a little bit bad. If anything, seeing my brother now, for the first time since our fight at the Samara encampment, screwing around with Ava at the summit, only reminded me just how blindingly pissed off at him I was. All the anger I’d been holding in as I watched Cali deal with a broken heart came rushing forward.

“Seriously? How can you do this when you *just* saw how upset you made Cali? I know you ran into her. She told me all about it—about how you treated her like garbage. Again.”

My brother had some balls on him, because he didn’t even stand. Didn’t act like he was embarrassed or bothered by what I’d just said or anything but hunky-fucking-dory about this whole situation he’d created.

With a lazy yawn, Xavier sat up and started to get dressed. Then he turned to Ava. “Can you give us a minute?”

She raised a brow at this, but she nodded, grabbing some clothes, and gave him a lingering kiss before skirting past me on her way out of the tent.

I stared at Xavier expectantly as the silence thickened between us. “Well?”

He shrugged. “What? You’ve never heard of knocking?”

Xavier actually had the audacity to look annoyed, which only enraged me more. If this kept up, he was gonna push me to do something I may or may not regret later. Like literally beating some sense into him. He’d even sat back down on the goddamn cot.

I stomped over and grabbed him by the collar, lifting him to stand. “Answer my question.”

Xavier pushed me off, never losing that maddening blasé expression for even a moment. “It’s none of your business what I do anymore. I’m not a part of your pack.”

I blinked. As jarring as it was to hear him say it, I didn’t believe it for a minute. Xavier had lived and breathed Redwood pack from the moment he was born. He and I might have all sorts of problems, but he’d never turn his back on his pack. Not for long.

But then again, I used to think he’d never turn his back on Cali, either. *Guess I was wrong.*

Maybe I didn’t know my brother like I thought I did.

The thought only added fuel to the fire raging inside me.

“You’re still sticking to that story, huh? What, you think you can just leave the Redwoods and we’ll all just stop being affected by your choices? Do you even know how much pain Cali has been in? You’re still mated to her.”

For a split second, I could have sworn I saw a flash of something in my brother’s eyes—pain, maybe? Or regret?—but then it was gone so fast I wasn’t sure if I’d imagined it or not.

What the hell was going on with him? Why was he acting like this? And why was it like pulling teeth to get him to be real for just one goddamn second?

It wasn’t like I wanted Xavier to come back and be with Cali. A not-so-small part of me was selfishly relieved to not have to share her the past few days. But I couldn’t stand watching Cali be in so much pain over Xavier, and I didn’t understand what on earth had happened to give my brother such a strong change of heart. This wasn’t the brother I’d come to know and care about.

He’d all but uprooted his entire life in the span of a few days. Why? What wasn’t he telling me?

I decided to try another tactic. Anger and pushiness had never worked with Xavier before, and it clearly wasn’t working now. Maybe something softer would work. Maybe… If I took the first step, reminded him there were people who cared about him, people who were hurting in his absence, that might be enough to break this hard-ass act he was so determined to put on.

I softened my voice and tried to be the older brother I was still figuring out how to be. “We’re worried about you, Xavier. All of us. The whole pack. We had no idea where you were half the time.” I gestured around the tent. “And we had no idea you’d be here. Why didn’t you tell us?”

He stared at me for a beat, then scoffed and shook his head. “This is rich.”

“What is?”

“You. Pretending to be the concerned older brother. What is it? Now that you have Cali all to yourself you feel bad for me? Well, I’m not here to clear your conscience about anything, and I don’t want your pity.”

Just like that, all my goodwill dried up. My patience combusted. I was back to spitting embers. “Are you fucking kidding me? *You’re* the one who’s fucking breaking her heart over and over again! Are you seriously telling me you don’t fucking care?”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re not getting it. How I feel is none of your concern. Now, if you don’t mind, the welcome bonfire is starting soon, and I need to get ready.”

My weight pitched forward, ready to close the distance between us as my hand curled into a tight fist. God, I’d love to do it. I’d never wanted to punch my brother more in my entire life, which was saying something.

But then Cali’s voice slipped through my mind. *Where are you? The pack is getting ready for the bonfire. Ravi says it’s in the booklet.*

I scowled. I didn’t want to tell Cali where I was or that I’d nearly witnessed Ava and Xavier hooking up. It’d just hurt her more, and I was so, so tired of seeing my mate in pain.

I shook my head and stepped back. “I don’t know what’s going on with you. But I hope you’ll come to your senses soon.”

I headed to the tent flap, hesitating briefly before adding under my breath, “Cali’s not the only one you hurt by leaving.”

Then I left Xavier alone. Just like he wanted.

\*\*\*

The other Redwoods and I arrived at the bonfire about an hour later. I took a deep breath to steady myself as we approached the crowd. It was a fucking madhouse.

Cali took my hand, twining our fingers together. “Wow. There are so many packs here.”

I nodded. “Stick close.”

I recognized several of the other wolves as we approached the fire, and already I felt exhausted at the prospect of greeting all of them. I didn’t even want to come to the bonfire, especially since Xavier had mentioned he’d be there. But I was the Redwood Alpha, and making small talk with other pack Alphas was part of the gig. I couldn’t avoid it.

Dayton and his pack approached us.

“Greyson.” He nodded at me in greeting. “Happy to see you made it.”

My lips curved into a frown. He didn’t even try to sound like he meant it.

“Where’s your beautiful Luna?” he asked.

I turned to Cali, who was standing at my side. “This is Cali, *my Luna*.” There was a force in my words, a message not to mention Elle in front of Cali.

Naturally, Dayton either didn’t get it or didn’t care. His eyes widened. “Oh, my apologies. I thought that other gorgeous woman was your Luna. My mistake.”

Before I could summon up a response to *that*, a tipsy member of another pack slammed into Dayton, and he stumbled to the side. He spun on the guy with a snarl. “Watch where the fuck you’re going!”

“It’s a party!” the tipsy guy slurred. “Lighten up, man!”

Dayton grabbed him by the collar, already half shifted so his claws tore through the wolf’s shirt.

I pushed them apart. “Cool off—both of you! Remember, there’s no violence allowed here.”

Feedback shrieked through the speakers, and we all flinched before looking over to the small wooden dais near the bonfire where werewolf council member Samson Cesaries was standing, holding a microphone.

“Don’t get in my way again,” Dayton said before storming off with his pack behind him.

I rolled my eyes, and Cali and I turned to the dais to hear the opening speech. The sooner this show got on the road, the sooner I could get the hell out of here and go back to my tent.

“Welcome, everyone!” Cesaries boomed. “It’s good to see so many familiar faces! Let us begin our opening ceremony. Can I have all pack Alphas join us at the front here?”

I turned and kissed Cali, glad to have her by my side through this long and obnoxious ordeal. Then I walked forward through the crowd. I saw several familiar faces heading for the dais—Lucian, Mace, Porter, Dayton, Duke—and some unfamiliar ones.

I emerged from the crowd near the edge of the dais but stopped short when I made eye contact with Xavier, who had also come forward with the pack Alphas.

*What the* hell*?*

# **Episode 3865**

I smiled as I watched Greyson approach the dais to take his place among the other pack Alphas. That smile disappeared when I saw Xavier doing the same thing.

*Wait, what is he doing? He doesn’t belong up there. He’s not a pack Alpha. Is this some kind of stunt?*

My mind couldn’t latch onto what all of this could mean, even as a small voice whispered a perfectly logical explanation for why Xavier had taken a place among the pack Alphas. Why he’d come here with the Samaras and was calling the shots when I’d run into him.

But… No. No, that was impossible. That was even less likely than Xavier going up in front of the whole summit in some kind of stunt.

So what the hell was going on?

Next to me, Lola leaned in and whispered, “What the hell is Xavier doing up there?”

*I wish I knew*.

All I could do was shake my head. I couldn’t seem to push the words out of my throat, which suddenly felt tight. I barely even heard Cesaries’s speech about the need for packs to come together in harmony… Something about good leadership making for strong packs and strong “pacts.”

There was a smattering of chuckles in the crowd, but I couldn’t for the life of me understand what was so funny. I glanced over at Greyson, who looked just as shocked to see Xavier up on the dais with the other Alphas as I was. I turned my gaze back to Xavier, who stared out at the crowd confidently.

Nobody was sending him away. Telling him he shouldn’t be up there.

*Oh god.* My head started to spin. *Does this mean Xavier is Alpha of a pack?*

Because there was only one pack he could be the Alpha of… Right? Even if I hated to admit it. Even if the mere thought made my stomach lurch and my heart break all over again.

*He’s the new Samara Alpha.*

It made sense. It explained why he’d come here. Why he’d showed up with them. And the more I thought about it, the more it did seem like he was literally “leading” them through the crowd when I saw him earlier.

But… Even if it was the logical explanation, why would he do this? And why now? I knew he’d been asked to lead the Samaras before, and he’d turned them down.

*Maybe he changed his mind. Maybe he was too tired of waiting for me to make a choice so that he could take his place as the Alpha of the Redwoods.*

Maybe it all went back to everything he’d told me the day he walked out of my life.

Xavier had always wanted to be the Alpha of his own pack, to lead. But I’d sort of thought that wish only extended to the Redwoods. That the pack he’d spent his whole life in was the only one he’d ever want to be a part of.

*Did I drive him to this choice when I took Greyson’s side as Alpha? Is this my fault?*

I gulped. Guilt mixed with my anger and confusion and hurt. What was I supposed to do with all this?

Finally, Cesaries finished his speech, and the bonfire was officially lit. The summit had begun.

All the Alphas went back to their respective packs, and my eyes were glued to Xavier as he returned to the waiting Samaras. Ava rushed to his side and patted him on the shoulder. Xavier smiled down at her, and my heart clenched.

*No. It can’t be true. There has to be another explanation.*

And then Ava tilted her head up to whisper in Xavier’s ear. He leaned down closer to hear her better. There was something terribly intimate about the casual closeness, like there had been a thousand moments between them just like it. Only those ones I hadn’t had a front-row seat to.

*Does this mean Ava is his Luna? Have I truly lost him forever?*

Somehow, even though Xavier had said all those terrible things, even though he’d walked out on me and the Redwoods, even though he’d probably blocked my number, and when we’d run into each other earlier, he’d acted like I wasn’t even there—*somehow*, despite all that, I’d still held onto the hope that he’d come back someday. That he’d love me again.

I realized now I’d been stupid to hope. Xavier had told me he was done. I should have listened. Maybe then it wouldn’t be so devastating to see the truth of things playing out right in front of me.

My stomach lurched, and for a moment I thought I was going to be sick all over the grass. I pulled in one deep breath after another, until I was sure I wasn’t going to vomit, and then I grabbed the cup from Lola’s hand and downed its contents in one go.

I hissed at the acrid flavor of Big Mac’s moonshine, and the way it stung down my throat, but I didn’t care enough to stop drinking. I needed an escape. Something to numb the deepening sense of despair that threatened to swallow me whole.

So, after pressing Lola’s empty cup back in her hand, I turned and grabbed Ravi’s half-drunk cup and downed that one too.

“Whoa there, Lady Lush,” Lola said. “Slow down. You know you can’t hold your liquor well.”

“I don’t care.” I started forward, the ache in my chest and the moonshine sloshing in my otherwise empty stomach giving me courage I didn’t actually feel. Enough was enough. It was time to confront Xavier and demand the truth. He owed me that much, at least.

Suddenly, Greyson stepped in front of me, concern etched into the lines of his face. “Are you okay?”

“I just want to talk to him,” I blurted out. “I’m sure he can explain this to us.”

I realized I was clutching Greyson’s hands desperately now, like he was my lifeline. The only thing keeping me sane.

He didn’t say anything. He just pulled me into his arms. It was then that I realized I was trembling. I didn’t know if it was my emotions or the two cups of moonshine. Did it matter?

“I’m not sure now is the right time,” Greyson said gently, his lips brushing against my earlobe. “Not in front of everyone. The whole summit would be our audience, and we don’t need that. Let’s take our time. We’ll talk to him together, okay?”

I nodded against his chest, feeling marginally better, safe and warm and protected, for the first time since I’d stepped foot here at the summit. I never wanted him to let me go. As long as I was in Greyson’s arms, I had a shield against my turmoil.

A crash sounded nearby, followed by a pained yelp. We broke apart to see that Elle had collided with one of Big Mac’s tables and moonshine had spilled all over the ground. I glanced over at Big Mac, who looked beyond annoyed.

Artemis was reaching down to help Elle to her feet. Greyson lurched toward them, then seemed to hesitate. It was clear he wanted to go help, too, and it didn’t take a genius to guess why he was holding himself back.

“You should see if she’s okay,” I said. I wasn’t the only one Greyson was responsible for while we were here at the summit. Besides, it wasn’t fair to him to have to bear the brunt of all my Xavier angst.

“If you’re sure,” he said.

I nodded. “I’ll be right here.”

He went over to help Elle, that familiar concern on his face as he asked her what happened.

I started picking up cups of moonshine when a shadow fell over me, backlit by the bonfire. I glanced up to see Ava standing over me.

“You okay?” she asked.

I frowned as I stood with the empty cups in my hands. *Why is she talking to me? She’s literally the last person on earth I want to have a conversation with right now.*

“Why do you care?” I asked. I knew I sounded rude, but seeing Ava was just another reminder of everything terribly wrong in my life. That Xavier had left. And, apparently, he’d chosen *her*.

“I don’t, actually. Who do I pay for the moonshine?”

I glanced over at Big Mac, who was trying to stop Elle from “helping” her fix the table.

*Great. Now I’m the salesman too.*

I sighed. “How many do you want?”

Ava held out a twenty. “Two.”

I scowled. *Is the second one for Xavier?*

Big Mac was only charging seven dollars a cup, but I took the twenty anyway and didn’t offer change before shoving two cups into Ava’s waiting hands.

As I scowled at Ava’s retreating back, I grabbed another cup of moonshine and downed it. This time I barely felt the burn.

*I can’t let this stand. I can’t just sit here and not know what’s actually going on with Xavier. I have to do something.*

# **Episode 3866**

Moonshine fueled me as I stomped over to the other side of the bonfire, where I’d seen Xavier and Ava together earlier. Several of the Samaras were still clustered near the fire, drinking and celebrating the first night of the summit, but Xavier wasn’t with them.

*Where did he go?*

Briefly, I considered mind linking with him, but then I decided against it. It wasn’t as if he’d actually respond, and I didn’t think I could handle him rejecting me in a new way. Especially one so personal. One that proved we were still mates, even if Xavier didn’t feel that way anymore.

I wandered around the edge of the bonfire, looking for him. Night had fallen now, and everyone’s faces were lit in dramatic contrast by the bonfire flames, making all the revelers look sort of sinister.

I wove through the crowd when that guy I’d met earlier, Dayton, stepped into my path.

“Cali, right? You’re Greyson’s Luna?”

I nodded. “That’s me. Excuse me.”

He moved to the side to block my escape. This guy was pushy. Why the heck wasn’t he going to let me pass?

“Can I help you with something?” I asked.

His grin made my stomach lurch. “I always wanted to meet the girl who got Greyson Evers to finally settle down.”

*Oooookay.* I frowned. I didn’t have the first clue how to take that, but it didn’t exactly seem like a compliment, to me or Greyson. “It was good to meet you earlier, but I have to go now,” I said, trying again to dodge him.

Again, he put himself right in my path. I was sorely tempted to blast him away with my Fae magic, but the summit had rules about violence, and how bad would it be if the half-Fae Luna of the Redwood pack was the first one to break them?

“I wonder… Do you know what kind of life Greyson led before he met you? He really never seemed like the type who would settle down. Which is why I figure you must be one hell of a woman to get him to commit like this.”

*Ugh… Does he even know how misogynistic he sounds?*

Greyson had committed to me because we were mates. And, yeah, probably because he was a little older and more mature now than when he’d known this Dayton guy, but choosing to settle down was Greyson’s choice alone. Not something I’d pushed on him. And I wasn’t the prize given to him for living a more mellow life.

I really didn’t know where Dayton was going with all this, or why he was even bothering to share with me. And I didn’t really *want* to know. It definitely didn’t seem like he was actually Greyson’s friend.

“Yes, well, Greyson and I are very happy together,” I said briskly. “Now if you’ll excuse me—”

“Ah, good to hear. I’m *very* glad to hear about how happy Greyson is right now.”

And the creep factor just kept increasing. Dayton’s words didn’t really match his tone at all, kind of like when Malakai had approached me earlier. Was this common werewolf behavior? Something they taught all the young wolves when they were growing up? Creepy Passive Aggressiveness 101?

Now I was *really* considering pushing him back with my Fae powers, if only because he didn’t seem to be taking the hint.

“Cali!” a feminine voice called out.

Relief rolled over me, and I was sure it was clear on my face. But I didn’t care what Dayton thought of me, or if I offended him.

I turned to see Maren heading toward me, and my relief intensified. “Hey, Maren!” I waved to her, probably a little too enthusiastically, but it wasn’t every day I was saved by Greyson’s Fae ex. *Or* that I was so over the moon to see her.

She sidled up to me with a smile. “I’m so glad to see a familiar face! I feel lost in a sea of unfamiliar werewolves.” Maren spared Dayton a glance. “No offense.”

“None taken,” he grunted. Dayton didn’t seem pleased with the interruption.

She held out her hand. “I’m Maren.”

“Dayton. Alpha of the Nightshade pack. Nice to meet you.” He shook her hand then glanced at me. “I’ll see you around, Cali.”

He strode off, and I blew out a breath. “Thank god.”

“You okay?” Maren asked. “That guy seemed to be way too interested in you.”

I nodded. “Thanks for the rescue. I think he’s a frenemy of Greyson’s. All he wanted to talk about was how crazy Greyson used to be. I think there was some implication of me being a ball and chain.”

Maren shook her head. “Sounds like a winner. Greyson did run with mixed crowds back in the day.”

“I know.” Greyson had already shared his past with me. I didn’t care what he’d done back then or who he’d done it with. All that mattered was who he was now—and that we were together. “It’s nice to see you here. I’ve really felt like a fish out of water.”

“I feel the same way. When Mace asked me to come as moral support, I didn’t realize how intense this thing would be. I thought it would just be like a wolfier Coachella.”

My brows lifted, and my lips curved up into a grin. “Oh, so it’s serious with Mace?”

She gave me a sheepish smile. “It might be heading that way.”

I glanced around the crowded bonfire. “Is Fenrir here? I’ve missed the little guy. I’d love to see him.”

Maren shook her head. “He’s with my friend Nina back in Portland. School and all.”

I nodded. “That makes sense. I guess this isn’t really an appropriate place for kids anyway, huh?”

“No way. I have a feeling things are only going to get crazier as the summit continues. But… Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I was just… exploring.”

Her gaze caught on something over my shoulder. “Oh, Mace is signaling for me. But find me tomorrow! I’m sure we’ll both be lost for things to do while all the wolf stuff happens.”

I nodded again. “I will.”

Gratitude welled up in my chest as I watched Maren disappear into the crowd. Who would have thought I’d ever feel so glad to see one of Greyson’s exes? And now she was a friend—I hoped. Nonetheless, someone I was glad to have here at the summit.

Alone again, I continued my search for Xavier. Only, after a few steps, my head started to spin.

*Oof. I shouldn’t have drunk so much moonshine.*

But then again, I’d kind of needed it to bolster my courage too. It was all part of the plan. Well, not so much the spins, but the recklessness that came with the three or so cups of alcohol simmering in my belly. It was the only way I could bring myself to face Xavier right now.

And there he was, on the far edge of the crowd. He disappeared behind the dais, and I jogged toward him.

“Xavier!”

He stopped, and his body tensed, so I knew he’d heard me. But he didn’t turn around. Was he seriously going to keep ignoring me?

No. He wouldn’t. If only because I wouldn’t *let* him.

I closed the distance between us and grabbed his hand. My head still spun from the moonshine, so it was a little disorienting to watch him spin around too.

“What?” he snapped.

His harsh tone grounded me, if nothing else. I couldn’t go spinning off into moonshine land when my mate was looking at me like he hated me. I flinched but didn’t let go of his hand. He had already walked away from me too many times, and I wasn’t going to make it easy for him to do it again.

All the questions that had been nagging at me rushed forward. “Please, just talk to me. Tell me what’s going on. Are you really the Alpha of the Samara pack? I don’t understand. How did this happen?”

He yanked his hand out of my grip. “You don’t need to understand. We’re not together. My life has nothing to do with you anymore.”

Maybe if I’d had a little less moonshine, his words would have hurt me. Wounded me and made me give up on this idiotic idea to confront him. But now, all I felt was pissed off.

“Are you really saying everything we’ve been through means absolutely nothing to you? Or were you lying to me every time you swore that you loved me?”

His expression hardened, and he gritted out, “Cali, leave me alone.”

He turned to leave, and I grabbed his arm again. “No! I’ve let you have your space. You owe me a true explanation. You broke my heart! I need to know why!”

Angry tears slipped down my cheeks, and my head spun—not just from the moonshine, but from the barrage of emotions slamming into me. “Tell me once and for all why you did this so I can finally let you go. So I can stop loving you the way you’ve stopped loving me.”

“What have I not made clear to you? God, how many times do you need me to say it?”

“I want to know *why*! Why did you do this to us?” I demanded. “Why?”

I gripped his shirt, anger and hurt coursing through me.

And then I didn’t know who moved first, but our lips collided, and I lost myself in his arms.

# **Episode 3867**

**Xavier**

I needed to push Cali away. Physically push her out of my arms, break my lips away from hers. Hell, I needed to turn tail and run as fast and as far as I could until she had no chance of catching up.

But I couldn’t do it. Any of it.

I was weak. I knew better. Knew that I *couldn’t* have Cali, not even in a fleeting moment like this one. Knew that I shouldn’t. That Adéluce wouldn’t even let me try, and even if she did, Cali had already been through enough pain on my account. It was cruel and selfish and weak to ask for anything more.

But I was all of those things. And fuck, I needed this. Needed her.

So I held on tighter, pulled her flush against my frame, delved deeper into her mouth, savoring the taste of her, the feel of her body in my arms again. It was like coming home after being away for far too long.

And for the first time since I’d made that awful deal with Adéluce, everything felt totally, perfectly *right*. Like I was finally exactly where I belonged.

I wanted to pull Cali to the ground right here and now, to be with her in every way. To stake my claim on her and make up for the time we’d lost. My palms slipped beneath the fabric of her jacket, my callused fingertips dragging against warm, soft skin.

She let out a little moan, and somehow it hit my heart and my cock at the same time. How many times had I wished I could kiss her one last time, *be with her* one last time? Have one last chance to savor my mate before I said goodbye to her again?

Maybe this was my chance. I broke away from her lips, kissing a hot trail down the curve of her jaw, just like I knew she loved. Goosebumps broke out on her skin, and she let out a breathy sigh.

God, she was just too fucking perfect. My mate. My Cali. My everything. My—

Suddenly, she shoved me *hard*, her hands flat against my chest. I didn’t move, weighing so much more than she did and being so much stronger than her, and she sort of bounced off me. Her hands went to her temples, and she groaned.

When she’d first tried to push me, I thought she was going to keep arguing. Keep demanding answers I just couldn’t give her. But now I was thrown for a loop. What was happening to her?

Cali let out another pained groan and doubled over.

My body moved without my being totally conscious of it, and instinct took over as I scooped her up into my arms. I raced back toward the bonfire.

“Help! We need some help over here!”

A couple of Samara wolves raced over, no doubt attuned to the sound of their Alpha’s voice. Jesse and Marissa. Right about now, I wished it were anyone but them.

“What’s going on?” Marissa asked.

Jesse eyed Cali’s prone form. She looked like she was going to either pass out or be sick all over me. “What happened to her?”

“I don’t know.”

Then Greyson was there, all speed and fury and dominance as he shoved his way through the crowd, pulled Cali out of my arms, and gently lowered her to the grass. He kneeled down next to her. “Love? What happened? Where does it hurt?”

All Cali could do was groan. My brother looked up at me then, and maybe I wasn’t that weak after all, because a weaker man than me would have been incinerated on the spot with the force of his fury.

He leapt to his feet and pushed me back so hard I went sprawling to the ground.

“What the hell did you do to her?” Greyson demanded.

I didn’t answer, didn’t fight back, didn’t even try to stand. Because as I lay there, sprawled across the ground, a horrible thought froze me in place.

Cali and I were kissing—everything was fine—and then she was in uncontrollable pain. *Does Ad*é*luce have something to do with this?*

Who the hell was I kidding? She had to be connected to this, right? When curses and other magical bullshit weren’t running the show, Cali was healthy. Not the type to go around dropping to the ground in excruciating pain. This had to be connected to Adéluce’s magic, and to me. She had threatened Cali’s life if I allowed myself so much as a moment of happiness with her.

And I’d kissed her anyway. Took my time with it, too. Hell, I probably would have slept with her if Cali hadn’t crumpled.

And now she was in agonizing pain.

It all had to be connected. It was too coincidental not to be.

“He… kissed me,” came Cali’s voice.

Well, shit. There it was. I couldn’t linger in my self-loathing for long, because Greyson reached to grip me by the throat.

“You did *what*?” His snarl was a rare union of wolf and human, the all-consuming rage of someone defending their mate. And suddenly, I had a glimpse of what our father must have felt right before Greyson ripped out his throat.

If I was being honest, that didn’t sound too bad just about now.

Suddenly, Ava appeared, shoving herself between us and breaking Greyson’s hold on me.

“What the fuck? Calm down!”

Greyson looked like he was seconds away from going nuclear. “Don’t you fucking go near her—”

“Gentlemen, do we have a problem?”

Cesaries and some of the elders had arrived. *Great. The whole welcome wagon is here.*

Cesaries took in the scene and frowned. “Oh dear. What’s happening here?”

I finally pushed myself to my feet, my head still reeling from the realization that I’d hurt Cali. I looked at her, curled up tight on the ground. Was I still too close? Was it making her pain worse? I needed to get the hell away from her.

I turned to leave when Ava grabbed my arm. “Where are you going? The elders are asking us a question.”

Right. That.

I turned back to face them and cleared my throat. “This was my fault, but I didn’t put a hand on her. She suddenly collapsed in pain out of nowhere.”

My brother’s scowl deepened, but he didn’t contradict me.

“Well, I guess we’ve had tempers rise at other summits,” Cesaries said. “Just remember the rules. We take them very seriously here.”

I nodded, and with one final glance at Cali, who was sitting up and speaking in a low voice to Artemis and Lola, who must have arrived right after the elders, I turned and headed back toward the Samara tents.

I should have never let Cali kiss me. Or… Had I kissed her? Either way, I should have never let it happen. I shouldn’t have even let myself speak to her in private like that. But I couldn’t bring myself to walk away from her. If this fiasco had shown me anything, it was that I still loved her. So much. It was shattering me from the inside out to not be with her.

*Fuck. I need to do something about this. About Ad*é*luce and all this fucking anger.*

Footsteps sounded on the grass behind me, and I didn’t have to look to know who it was.

“What the hell was that all about?” Ava demanded. “Did you really kiss her?”

Honestly? I wished I could tell her the real reason for all of this. I really did. If only to have one person in this whole goddamn world know exactly what I was going through. But I knew the agreement Adéluce and I had made, inside and out. It wouldn’t allow me to tell anyone. Not Cali, not Greyson, not Ava. Not anyone.

“I made the mistake of talking to her—that’s all—and she got sick,” I said. It wasn’t even a lie, necessarily. Whether Ava believed me about the kiss was moot. She’d believe what she wanted.

“Okay…” Ava frowned. “That doesn’t really make sense. You’re making it sound like you talking to her is the reason she got sick.”

Again, not a lie.

“Just let it go this time,” I said darkly.

She scoffed. “Whatever. I’m just trying to figure out what’s happening with you.”

“Well, do us both a favor and stop trying to figure it out.”

“Fine. You want another drink? Seems like you could use it.”

We’d arrived back at our tent, and I felt like shit. No matter what I did, Cali ended up hurt. My old pack ended up hurt. *I* ended up hurt. The despair that had been haunting me for the past few days threatened to rise up and swallow me whole.

There really was nothing I could do about this awful situation, was there? No escape.

And I realized suddenly that if I couldn’t break free, then I at least wanted to stop feeling so goddamn much.

I turned back to Ava. “You know what I want right now?”

I pulled her in for a deep, demanding kiss. She kissed me back, and for a moment it was almost enough.

Almost.

Then she pulled away. “Where is this coming from?”

“You’re not interested?”

“I never said that.” She stripped off her pants and shirt before striding into our tent. And with one last glance toward the bonfire, I followed her.

# **Episode 3868**

I was never, ever drinking again.

My head throbbed as I held onto Lola and Artemis’s hands. Or, they held onto mine. It was only thanks to them that I was even staying upright. I wasn’t sitting up on my own strength. A paramedic werewolf had come over at the elders’ request and was checking my pulse after shining a flashlight in my eyes.

I thought back to my conversation with Maren. *Maybe this isn’t so different from a wolfie version of Coachella*. *But why would werewolves need paramedics anyway? I thought their healing abilities took care of just about everything.*

“Your pulse is a little fast, and your blood pressure’s a little low. But otherwise, you seem fine. My guess is you’re dealing with exhaustion brought on by dehydration,” she said. “How much did you have to drink?”

I noticed the paramedic wolf hadn’t asked *if* I’d drank anything, but how much. Then again, even *I* could smell the moonshine on my breath. The paramedic had probably picked up the scent the second she’d knelt down next to me.

“Umm… I don’t remember exactly,” I confessed. My cheeks heated, and the throbbing in my head increased. “I just know I drank way more than I probably should have in a very short period of time.”

Lola, who had been uncharacteristically quiet during the paramedic’s exam, chose this moment to speak up. “And she didn’t eat much today.”

I scowled at my friend. *Way to throw me under the bus, Lola.*

But then again, I *had* brought this on myself. What was it Lola had called me? Lady Lush? I was definitely living up to the nickname.

“Is that true?” the paramedic asked.

I nodded reluctantly.

“Well, there’s your problem. Drink enough moonshine and not enough water, then add in an empty stomach, and it’s no wonder you’re not feeling your best. With a recipe like that, I’m surprised you’re not tossing your cookies.”

The mere mention of vomiting made my stomach churn. “Let’s not talk about that.”

“Fair enough.” The paramedic sat back. “Drink a few bottles of water and get some rest. You’ll probably have a hell of a hangover in the morning, but you’ll be okay.”

“Thank you.” I slowly rose to my feet with Artemis and Lola’s help. The paramedic followed suit before disappearing back into the crowd.

I turned to Lola, Artemis, and the rest of the Redwood pack who had gathered around during all the drama. My face was so hot I could almost see the red glow. I’d never been so embarrassed in my entire life. First night of the summit, and I’d gotten drunk and made a scene. But not even a rowdy one like a true werewolf pack member.

No, I’d turned into a drunk damsel in distress, and half the summit—including the elders—had been there to witness it.

*How mortifying.*

Still, I couldn’t stop myself from scanning the crowd for Xavier. I didn’t see him anywhere. Ava was gone too, though some of the Samaras had stuck around to watch everything play out.

*I should have known he wouldn’t stay.* I’d practically had to climb on him to get him to talk to me, and even then, he’d refused to say anything meaningful. I was an idiot to look for him. He didn’t want me—he’d made that abundantly clear.

“Sorry, everyone,” I said meekly.

“It’s okay. Big Mac’s moonshine gets the best of us sometimes.” Lola patted my arm. “How about I walk you back to your tent?”

I nodded gratefully. “Yes, please. Thanks, Lola.”

“I can take her,” Greyson began. I winced. I knew he probably wanted to talk about what had happened… About Xavier kissing me. *Except it was the opposite! You kissed him!* I gulped just as Maren and Mace pushed to the front of the crowd.

“Hey, Greyson,” Mace said, “did you see that Duke is here with Paige?”

I didn’t know what to feel: annoyance that my mate was being pulled away again, or gratitude that Mace and Maren hadn’t been here to witness my humiliation, and clearly didn’t know about it because they weren’t asking after me.

Greyson looked less than thrilled about making the rounds, but I mind linked to him.

*You can go. You need to chat, right? Network?*

*But with Duke?* Greyson’s voice was almost a whine, and the ghost of a smile tugged at my lips.

*Don’t worry about me. Lola will walk me back, and I’ll just be lying down in the tent.*

And drinking water. Gallons and gallons of water.

He nodded. *I’ll come back as soon as I can, and we can talk.*

Lola and I walked back to the tent in relative silence—another surprise, considering Lola was my escort. Then, just as we were about to reach my tent, she finally blurted out, “Okay, what happened with Xavier?”

I sighed as another wave of humiliation, regret, and hurt washed over me. I should have been used to it by now—it was how I felt every time Xavier’s name came up. Every time I thought of him. Every time I remembered he was gone.

“Nothing important,” I said.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine. But there are some whispers going around about what happened.”

Great. Just what I needed. I nodded, then winced as my skull twinged with pain. “Well, I kissed him.”

“WHAT? *YOU* KISSED XAVIER? Not the other way around?”

The twinge became a sucker punch, and I grabbed her hand. “Geez, Lola. You wanna be a little louder? I think some people across the camp didn’t quite hear you.”

“Sorry.” She winced, lowering her voice. “It’s just… I didn’t think that was on the table for you. I could totally see why he would try it, but…”

“It wasn’t on the table. It’s not. I…” I groaned. “It was stupid. I know it was stupid, but I got so heated up, and then all the moonshine I had, I just wasn’t thinking straight. I think maybe I’m still not.” Which one of us *had* moved first? My head was still swimming. I needed water and rest—stat. Just like Dr. Wolfie ordered.

Lola sighed. “I guess I get it. I mean, he’s still your mate. And nothing he’s doing is making any damn sense. Did he at least explain himself before the smooches?”

“No.” I scowled. “He didn’t tell me anything. We just talked in circles, which makes it all the worse that I kissed him. I mean… I should know better, right? After everything he’s done. Everything he has said to me. It was just a moment of weakness, and I hate it.”

And the worst part was now Xavier really did know one hundred percent that I was super *not* over him, while he seemed to be well on his way to being over me. He was so callous and cruel to me. He’d been acting like I didn’t matter from the moment he broke up with me. His behavior now was even worse than when I’d first met him, which was saying something, because back then he was a total ass, too.

But my stupid brain and stupider heart couldn’t stop thinking about what it was like when we’d kissed. How he’d held me so tightly. How passionate his lips were as they moved against mine. That wasn’t the kiss of someone who didn’t love you anymore, right? So what did it mean?

“I think the best thing you can do right now is try to sleep it off,” Lola said. “Do you want me to stay with you?”

I shook my head. “No, thanks. I want to be alone right now. Go enjoy yourself. Babysitting duty’s over.”

“I don’t mind. Just text me if you need anything, okay?”

“I will.” I hugged her. “Thank you, Lola. You’re the best.”

She headed back to the bonfire, and I pushed through the tent flap and all but threw myself down onto my cot.

I wished I’d never come to the summit. All I wanted right now was to be back in the comfort of my own room with my own things. The tent was empty and cold, and the cot dug into me as I curled up inside the sleeping bag.

But all the physical discomfort in the world didn’t compare to the emotions swirling inside me. One kiss with Xavier, and suddenly I remembered all the reasons I loved him so much. That was all it took. That tiny bit of progress in getting over him I’d worked so hard for was ruined.

God, I was pathetic.

Still, I hated not believing Xavier about why he left me. Was it really Ava? It seemed to be… But that kiss… I shook my head. Would it really make a difference? Only if he loved me. And a kiss didn’t necessarily mean love. It could mean he still wanted to have sex with me, but nothing more. But even when Xavier didn’t love me, he wouldn’t have sex with me… So, what game was he playing?

I groaned. I was so frustrated I wanted to scream. So, I did just that.

I rolled over, pushed my face into my pillow, and screamed my heart out.

*How dare Xavier kiss me when he knew exactly what he was putting me through? Is he just sadistic? He can’t do this to me! He can’t just… make me feel so wonderful and then…*

I thought back to the sudden pain in my heart. It felt like it had come out of the blue somehow. Moonshine was the obvious culprit, but I hadn’t had a headache before I’d kissed Xavier. It was almost like… almost like my body was rejecting the kiss?

*No, that’s silly. Why would my body do that?*

But it all felt so intense. Not like any alcohol-driven headache or nausea I’d ever felt before.

I sat up with a gasp.

*What if this all has to do with the* due destini*, our mate bond, and the breakup?*

# **Episode 3869**

**Greyson**

I couldn’t stop thinking about Cali. I couldn’t stop thinking about the fact that my brother had *kissed* her. I wished I’d gone with her instead of staying here, making small talk and being all diplomatic with the seemingly endless line of Alphas who wanted to talk to me.

Maybe if Cali wasn’t sick, I wouldn’t be in such a hurry to get away… But no. No, I’d choose Cali over wasting my time schmoozing with a bunch of Alphas I’d never speak to again until the next summit anyway.

As it was, I couldn’t wait to get the hell out of here and get back to Cali to talk about what had happened with my brother. And my lack of interest was probably clear as day. Werewolves weren’t a stupid bunch—and it didn’t take a particularly observant one to pick up on the fact that Mace was carrying the conversation for me when I dropped out of it. He’d been doing that a lot tonight. I’d probably owe him for it later. Even Maren had been helping play interference before she’d stepped away to call Fenrir to say good night.

Mace nudged me as another Alpha approached. “You remember Duke, right?”

I smiled tightly at the Alpha’s familiar face. “Of course I do.”

*How could I forget the Alpha who’d spent an entire New Year’s Eve party trying to proposition me and my mate at every turn?*

“Have you been well?” I asked.

Duke smiled. “I can’t complain.”

I almost asked if he was planning to start another orgy here at the summit, but I decided to keep the smartass comment to myself. I’d already narrowly avoided one fight tonight—two, if I counted Dayton and the drunk wolf. It was probably best not to push my luck.

“I need another drink,” Mace said. “Greyson, you look like you could use one, too.”

He pulled me aside before I could respond. “Hey, you’d better get your head in the game. We need to make sure we’re in good with the other packs to ensure the Bitterfangs don’t try to cross us.” He grabbed a cup of moonshine and pressed it into my hand. “So, whatever’s keeping you preoccupied, try to ignore it. There’s more than just playing nice with the other Alphas at stake here.”

I nodded, fairly chastised. Mace was right. And, beyond that, it was good of him to remind me what was riding on the summit being successful, not just for the Redwoods, but for the Blue Bloods, too. He’d been covering my ass all night.

*At least with Mace backing me, I have one good ally.*

I’d never count on Lucian if I could help it, and now that my brother was running things over at the Samara pack, it was anyone’s best guess whether or not we could count on them in a pinch.

“I can get my head in the game,” I said. “Let’s go back and try again.”

Mace scanned the crowd. “Actually, save it for tomorrow. Things are starting to get rowdy out there. I think people are more into the drinks than we realized.”

I looked out at the Alphas gathered around as well. Yeah, they were definitely well on their way to getting totally shit-faced. “Werewolves do like their parties,” I mused.

On the bright side, all that partying was probably going to get me out of another hour or so of pretending to care about some other pack’s latest news. That was an hour sooner I’d be able to get back to Cali.

“I signed our packs up for the Ludis tournament tomorrow, so that’ll be a good chance to get to know some of the packs from far away,” Mace said.

“Sounds like a plan. See you tomorrow.” I downed my cup, slapped Mace on the back, and headed back to my tent.

Finally, some peace. Just me and Cali. Hopefully she’d been resting while I was out schmoozing—

I lifted the tent flap to find my mate sitting upright on the cot, bent over her laptop. The light from the screen cast her face into sharp relief and made the shadows under her eyes look even worse than they had when she’d headed to the tent with Lola.

“Hey,” I said softly. “Why aren’t you resting? How is your head?”

“I’m feeling better,” she said, never taking her eyes off the screen. “I’m drinking water. But I can’t figure out how to connect to the hotspot. This damn pamphlet is so confusing!” She peeled her eyes away from her laptop to shake the welcome packet at me.

A crease furrowing between my brows, I sat down in one of the chairs next to the cot, set the welcome packet aside, and wrapped an arm around her.

We sat like that for a moment, peace and quiet wrapping around us. Cali’s body thrummed with tension, but the longer we sat together, the more she finally seemed to relax.

After a few minutes of silence, she said, “It’s the *due destini*.”

I frowned and pulled away so I could look at her face. “What does the *due destini* have to do with what happened with—?”

“—Xavier,” she finished for me. There was so much pain wrapped up in her voice. “I think he thinks we’re still cursed. Or maybe there’s a new curse? Or maybe he’s possessed and that’s why he kissed me. How did you feel when you were possessed by Letifer?”

So, she wasn’t handling the news well, then. Not that I expected her to. It was a lot to process. One day, out of the blue, her mate broke up with her. And then a few days later, he showed up again, now the Alpha of another pack. It was a lot for me to wrap my head around, too.

I took her chin in my hand. “Take a deep breath.”

She sucked down air, and her body relaxed again. God, I hated that we were here together, Alpha and Luna, representing the Redwood pack, and my goddamn brother was the only thing either one of us could worry about right now.

But I knew it’d be useless to try to convince Cali not to worry about Xavier now that he’d shown up at the summit. He was a walking reminder of her heartache and probably would remain so until the summit was over.

“You’re not mad at me, are you?”

I blinked, surprised. “Why would I be?”

Cali frowned. “Because of the kiss….”

“Oh, love,” I said, reaching for her. “No, I’m not mad. I mean, I *am*, but not with you. My brother’s doing a terrific job messing with your head and messing with me. I’m just sorry I wasn’t there to stop him.”

She nodded, taking this in. “It has to be the explanation for why he’s acting so strange,” she continued. “He must know something about the *due destini* that we don’t. But why wouldn't he tell us?” The last part was muttered to herself as she turned on her laptop again.

I caught her hand and gently shut her laptop. “Look, whatever is going on with my brother isn’t going anywhere. The answers will come out. For now, just stay away from him. We can pick it up in the morning.”

She shook her head. “I can’t—”

“I promise I’ll help you,” I said gently. “I’ll do whatever it takes to help you figure out what’s going on, but you already got sick once tonight. I’m worried about you, love.”

She sighed and rested her head on my shoulder. “You’re right. My head is still killing me.”

I nodded. “Come on.”

I set her laptop aside, lay back in bed, and opened my arms to her. She lay down against me, nestling into my shoulder.

“Try to get some sleep, okay?” I said.

She nodded. I could tell just from how heavy her head was getting that she was already falling asleep. It was the easiest thing in the world to curl up next to her, savoring her warmth and closeness, and drift off to sleep myself.

\*\*\*

God, I hated how much schmoozing I had to do. It just wasn’t my cup of tea.

To add insult to injury, I’d had to leave Cali super early in the morning to make it to the “breakfast mixer” as Mace had cheerfully described it last night. I kind of hated how Mace looked perfectly fine while I felt like death. All the tiny finger foods in the world weren’t enough to take the edge off my hangover.

Plus, who the hell actually enjoyed making small talk over mini-quiches?

Mace came over, a mug of coffee in hand, and slapped my back just a little too hard. “Did you see the roster for the Ludis tournament?”

I groaned. “You signed our packs up for that, didn’t you?”

He grinned, not the least bit repentant. “I sure did. We’re gonna have so much fun.”

Great. Now I had to play a silly game.

I spotted my brother across the way, talking to Dayton. Mace followed my gaze and nodded. “Oh, yeah. The Samaras are signed up, too.”

“Great,” I muttered. “With my luck, I’ll be facing off against Xavier.”

“Oh, no. You’re not against the Samaras in the first round. Don’t worry.”

“Then who?”

Before Mace could answer, Lucian appeared in front of me with a flourish. “It seems we are opponents on the field of battle!”

*Fuck.*

The only person in the world I wanted to face off against *less* than my brother was Lucian.

I forced a smile. “May the best wolf win.”

*At least this is an excuse to tackle Lucian without getting into trouble with the council.*

Lucian nodded. “How about a side wager between gentlemen?”

He stuck out his hand. I just stared at it. “What would the wager be?”

“If the Vanguard pack wins, then the lovely Elle will camp with us for the rest of the summit.”

# **Episode 3870**

I woke up in the tent alone. For a moment, I was completely disoriented, surprised to not find myself back in my own bed, and then I remembered where I was. And why Greyson wasn’t with me.

If I thought really hard, I hazily recalled him kissing me earlier this morning and mentioning something about going to a brunch thing. I’d been half asleep and had dozed off again the moment he was out of the tent.

Now, though, I was completely awake. My pounding head made sure of that.

I sat up with a groan, holding my head. “Oh god.”

*I’m never drinking Big Mac’s moonshine again.*

I pulled on the first outfit I found in my bag. Today, I couldn’t care less about making a good impression. I’d probably screwed that up for myself last night anyway.

Right now, all I wanted was coffee and Advil.

I wandered out of the tent, wincing at the morning light that stabbed into my brain, and stumbled over to where Artemis and Rishika were standing nearby.

Artemis eyed me sympathetically. “Oh, you look like you’re still feeling the moonshine.”

“You think?” I growled.

Lola rushed up to us, way too chipper. “Oh no! Looks like Cali’s famous lightweight status is confirmed yet again!”

“Inside voice, Lola,” I whimpered.

“But we’re out—”

“*Inside voice*,” I repeated. *Are you ever allowed to hit your best friend in the mouth? Would it count as violence at the summit, even if Lola super-duper deserved it?*

Lola looked positively gleeful as she leaned in. “Coffee?”

I nodded, then immediately regretted the movement. My head felt like it was going to fall off. Maybe that wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world. At least then I wouldn’t feel the pain anymore.

I headed over to the dining tent and went straight for the coffee stand. I didn’t even wait for my cup to fill all the way before I pulled it away from the spout and downed half of it.

*Oh, coffee. I love you so much.*

After refilling my cup, I spotted Big Mac seated at one of the long tables and remembered my theory from last night: that somehow, the way Xavier broke up with me had affected the *due destini* and the mate bond. Stranger things had happened, right? And in the cold light of morning, it didn’t sound so crazy.

I took a seat next to Big Mac. “Hey. How was your night? Did you make a lot in sales? It seemed like everyone was drinking your moonshine.”

“Hmm,” she grunted. “Can’t talk. I’m figuring out how much stock I should have free for tonight.”

I nodded. “Oh, yeah. Sure. Can I help?”

Trying to do math with a pounding head was probably a recipe for disaster, but the sooner she finished up her business-y stuff, the sooner I could ask her about my theory.

She let out a long-suffering sigh and looked up at me. “Okay, fine. Spill it. What do you want?”

I winced. *When she put it that way…*

“I hate to bother you…”

“Then don’t,” Big Mac said flatly.

I blinked, shocked at her tone. Could she cut me some slack? I was having one of the worst hangovers of my life, and I’d *still* offered to help her with her math! What more did she need from me?

“Ugh.” She rolled her eyes. “Fine. Just tell me.”

“I just wondered if you could do another test, to really make sure the *due destini* curse stuff is *gone* gone and not… like, changed somehow?”

“Changed somehow.” Big Mac set her notes aside and rubbed her temples. I got the sudden feeling I wasn’t the only one with a headache at this moment, though she probably couldn’t blame hers on moonshine. “Do I even want to know what this is all about?”

Probably not. And I hated to look like the pathetic ex-girlfriend by telling her about my theory and the shitshow between Xavier and me last night that had brought it on.

“I know that the letter says that the death part of it is gone, but I can’t help but think… Maybe something’s changed?”

Understanding dawned on her face. “This is about Xavier breaking up with you?”

After a beat, I nodded.

“Well, to be honest, I don’t like what that boy is doing or how he’s going about it. I guess I can check it again.”

“Really?” My eyes widened. It was *never* this easy to convince Big Mac to help.

*She must be feeling generous after all those moonshine sales…*

*Or I really do look that pathetic. Either way, it’s a win! Sort of.*

“Sure,” the witch said. “Come to my tent after lunch.”

Lola plopped down beside me. “Hey, they’re going to start the Ludis tournament. Want to go and watch?”

“Ludis? What’s that?” I asked.

“You’ll see.” She grinned. “It’s a lot of fun.”

“Um, okay.” I nodded. Regardless, I’d been wondering where Greyson was. Maybe that was where he’d ended up, too.

I went with Lola and Artemis to watch the tournament and found Greyson standing with Rishika, Ravi, and Jay.

Jay waved us over. “Hey, Lola! You want to play? We need a fifth.”

Lola sighed. “Okay, but I can be very competitive.”

He laughed. “Oh yeah, I remember.”

I eyed the group, my brows furrowing. “So… What is this exactly?”

“It’s a werewolf… sport,” Greyson explained. “Basically.”

“Oh.” I said, though I didn’t really understand it any better now. “I like sports? I guess. Go Redwoods!”

He laughed, and I asked, “Are you guys any good?”

“We’ll be able to hold our own,” he assured me with a wink. “And we’d better win since Lucian’s is the first team we’re up against.”

My brows rose at that, and I looked across the field to see Lucian stretching delicately like he was about to go onstage and perform a ballet routine rather than an intense field sport.

Greyson sidled up to me and lowered his voice. “The guy tried to make a bet where he gets Elle like a trophy if he wins. I said no. Obviously.”

I gasped, horrified. “That’s disgusting.”

My mate’s eyes darkened. “If he tries to lay his hands on her, I won’t hold back.”

Shock rolled down my spine at the promise of violence and the intense vitriol etched into Greyson’s face. He meant every word he’d just said, I realized. If Lucian made an unwelcome advance, Greyson would be out for his blood.

It wasn’t an unreasonable response, all things considered, especially given how much violence was encoded into werewolf culture, but Greyson was usually so much better at controlling his anger over something like this.

I put a hand on his arm, and he jerked away, almost surprised. Like he’d forgotten I was there.

“Sorry,” he said quickly. “I was stuck in my own thoughts.”

“It’s okay.” Unease tightened my stomach. What just happened?

He sighed. “I just… I’ve been feeling this intense need to protect Elle lately. I can’t really explain it. And then…” He looked up at me and gulped. Unease morphed into full-on dread. I couldn’t take any more bad news. Not with everything that was going on with Xavier.

“Just tell me.” I forced myself to spit out the words, thinking it was better to know than to be in the dark. Even if I wasn’t sure that was totally true.

“Elle kissed me earlier, and I didn’t push her off right away.”

I frowned. This wasn’t, like, amazing news, but I wasn’t plummeting into despair, either. Plus, I’d kissed Xavier, and Greyson had been understanding about it… “She kissed you?”

He nodded.

“Okay, well… I know Elle doesn’t always understand the rules of mates. I’ll talk to her about it again.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

I smiled. “I care about Elle, too. I want her to be comfortable in our world. I’ll talk to her again. It’s fine.”

He kissed my forehead. “Thank you for being such an amazing and understanding mate.”

And then, before we could say any more, the whistle blew to signal the start of the game.

I wished Greyson good luck and joined Artemis, who was sitting with Mace and Maren in the stands. It sounded like Mace was in the middle of explaining the rules to Artemis.

“There’s five people on a team. It’s mostly like rugby, but the players can use acrobatics—jumps and flips—to get to the other side of the field. The players can partially shift if necessary, but no full wolf. If a team tears up the ball with their claws, they forfeit possession. Each game is an hour, broken into two halves. At the end, the team with the most points wins.”

I settled in, my eyes on the field.

Jay faced off against Armin in the center circle for the tip-off. Jay got possession of the ball, and Artemis and I cheered.

Then Armin charged at Jay and threw him down so hard he slammed into the ground.

**Episode 3871**

I stood there fielding sharp waves of panic and wondering if I should go check on Jay. He’d been hit pretty hard, and it was scary to see him just lying there not moving a muscle. After I saw Lola take off and race over to him, I decided to stay put. With Lola by his side, he was in good hands.

“Jay, are you all right?” Lola’s voice just barely reached me from where she kneeled at Jay’s side on the field. She scrambled to help him sit up, stroking his back and looking him over.

Jay held a hand pressed to his head and sagged against Lola for a moment, both of them talking quietly to each other before Jay turned to the crowd and extended a thumbs-up into the air. The entire crowd broke into a cheer, and with a whistle blow, the game continued.

I let out a breath of relief, glad that things hadn’t taken a bad turn. I looked at Mace and Maren, still shaking my head. “Wow, that was like… really violent.”

Mace shrugged. “Oh, that was nothing. It can get way more intense than that.”

I frowned, not liking the idea of Greyson being involved in a game that could hurt him. From the looks of things, one wrong move could send someone to the first aid tent—or worse.

*It’s just a game. Why do they have to go so hard? Do they have something to prove?*

Lucian was certainly into it. He was calling the plays, his voice booming out to reach the spectators watching from beyond the sidelines. The Vanguards had actually practiced a lot from the looks of it, and Lucian was taking it all very seriously.

In a play that happened so quickly I barely saw it happen, the Vanguards gained possession of the ball. Then, to my surprise, Lola leaped into the air and flipped over the main group of players who were busy wrestling with each other and plucked the ball out of a distracted opponent’s hands. It was all very rugby—at least it looked that way to someone like me who barely knew what that game was and only kind of understood how closely it resembled Ludis.

With quick, sure movements, Lola flipped back to the other end of the field and easily scored a goal. I jumped up and down, clapping and screaming. “Yay, Lola! Show them what you can do! Woo!” The crowd went wild as Lola slammed the ball to the ground in the goal zone and did an intense victory dance full of pelvis thrusts and finger shakes. I could see Jay pumping his fists and throwing her a thumbs-up while he contended with the crush of bodies in the center of the field.

Lola didn’t stop there. She was definitely in her element. Her intensity didn’t wane for the entire game, and she ended up scoring over half the goals. It was no surprise that she was scoring like that since she wasn’t showing the other side even a shred of mercy. Without any hesitation, she slammed into them, clotheslined them, tackled them to the ground, and wrestled the ball away only to roll right to her feet and race toward goal after goal after goal. It was really amazing to watch.

But even with all that, it was Greyson I couldn’t take my eyes off of. He was so graceful as he flipped through the air and raced up the field, the ball cradled in his powerful hold. I was nearly salivating over the way his muscles strained and bunched beneath his skin as he swiftly tackled one guy only to pivot, keep his balance, and pluck the ball from another player. He made it look like it was the easiest thing in the world to do. I was impressed… and really, really, turned on.

*I most definitely like sports now. Where has Ludis—or rather Greyson playing Ludis—been all my life?*

Greyson scored again with ease, moving as one with his teammates as they swarmed the field, shutting down any attempts the other team made to gain traction. It was almost like Lola and Greyson were the only Redwoods out there playing as they dominated the match.

By the end, the Redwoods won 13-5. Lucian looked sweaty, worn out, and dejected as he walked over and shook hands with Greyson, sealing his defeat. Before I even knew what I was doing, my legs had carried me out onto the field, and I leapt into Greyson’s arms. I was just so pumped by the whole thing that I could barely help myself.

“Greyson, you were amazing!” I said. “You owned the field. I couldn’t believe it! You stole the ball a million times, and you made scoring a goal look so easy!”

Greyson laughed and spun me around in sloppy, giddy circles. “I was playing for you, all for you, love,” he said.

He seemed so happy… so light. It was rare that we all got to just cut loose and have some fun, and while I’d been nervous at the start of the game, now all I wanted was to watch him on that field one more time. It was so invigorating to see that side of him.

“That was fun to watch,” Elle said, appearing beside us.

Lucian threw a disappointed nod in Elle’s direction. Elle frowned in confusion, and I realized that she didn’t know about the bet. I looked up at Greyson, who gave me a minute head shake that said: “Don’t go there.”

*Agreed*, I mind linked. *Now’s not the time to let Elle know that Lucian bet on her. We’ll just let everyone enjoy themselves for a bit before we start a fresh round of drama.*

*Sounds like a plan*, Greyson replied.

“So, what now?” I asked.

“A shower,” Greyson replied. “I’ll come find you after?”

I looked him right in the eye. “You’d better.”

He turned to go, and I watched him leave, my eyes glued to his butt as it moved beneath his shorts. After watching him in that game, I couldn’t wait to see him naked. I wanted to feel that power in other, more intimate ways.

“Better luck next time, brother!” Aysel called out.

I turned to see Aysel lounging in a very cushy red lounge chair a few feet away at the edge of the field. She was wearing a pink feathery robe and had what looked like a mai tai in her hand, complete with a pink and white candy-striped straw. She looked every part the royal princess in her element—and the periwinkle parasol perched over her head, blocking her from the sun, completed the look. It was all very Elle Woods.

“Where did all of that come from?” I asked with a frown.

Aysel sighed and said, “I told Lucian that if I was going to be forced to come here, then I had to have my comforts. I made him hire some staff to transport the necessities.” She fluttered her hand around her setup.

*I’ve never heard a lounge chair and a parasol referred to as necessities, but I suppose this* is *Aysel I’m talking to.*

“I would invite you to sit with me, Caliana, but I don’t have a spare.”

I forced a smile. “Gee, thanks, but I’m good.” I turned back to Elle. “I’m going to find Greyson.” I rushed off before I could be trapped in any more awkward small talk with Aysel. To say the woman was unrelatable and completely out of touch would be putting it lightly.

I found the showers and peeked into one marked “vacant” and was surprised at how nice it was. Each shower was in its own little private modular building with a sink, plenty of towels, and even a place to sit.

*Greyson*,I mind linked. *Where are you? I’m outside the showers.*

*Hey! I’m in the third one from the left*,he replied.

I hurried over to his door and pulled it open, a cloud of steam rushing out to greet me. As the steam cleared, I was presented with a full view of my mate’s muscular back, which almost seemed too big for the ample space of the shower. He looked over his shoulder at me and smiled.

“Sorry, almost done. It’s just so nice in here. The hot water is perfect after a game like that.”

I blushed. “No, don’t mind me. Take your time.” Then, feeling bold, I added, “In fact, why don’t I wash your back?”

He lifted a brow at me. “Really?”

I smiled. “Really… Think of it as a part of your prize for winning the game.”

Greyson’s eyes stayed riveted to me while I stripped off my clothes. He grinned and looped his arms around me as I stepped into the spray with him. “I should play Ludis more often,” he said, his voice husky. Without warning, he kissed me, pressing me back against the wall of the shower and running his rough, powerful hands up and down my body.

I arched into him, liking the way our hot, wet bodies felt pressed together. He braced one hand on the wall while the other held me close as he deepened the kiss, his eyes closed. “This is the perfect post-game celebration,” he breathed against my lips. With one swift movement, he lifted me in his arms and pinned me to the wall. His hand tunneled between us, and I took in a sharp breath when I felt one finger enter me.

I tightened my arms around his neck and slid up and down against his hand as mind-blowing waves of pleasure took hold of my body. Just before a moan of pleasure escaped my lips, I gasped and looked at him. “Wait, will anyone hear us?”

**Episode 3872**

**Greyson**

“I want them to hear us,” I said. Cali’s slick warmth fluttering around my finger was enough to make me not give a damn where we were, let alone who might be listening. I thrust my finger deeper and slid another one inside of her, then angled my hand so that my palm was flush against her clit.

She moaned, finally giving in. My cock strained between us. “If you keep that up, literally everyone at the summit is going to hear me, not to mention anyone outside waiting their turn.”

“And?” I slid my fingers in and out of her slowly, exploring her depths and eliciting another moan of pleasure from her lips. Then I took them out to take my shaft in my hand. Cali’s gaze dropped down to watch me stroke myself to my full length. Then I closed the space between us and slid deeply into her.

Cali gasped, and her thighs tightened around me. “*Fuck, Greyson*.”

A low chuckle rumbled in my chest. “I hope they do hear that.”

I closed my eyes and concentrated on the sensation of her throbbing around me. I relished the warmth of her wet, soft breasts sliding against my chest and the supple firmness of her ass in my hands as I guided her up and down my length. She held onto me, planting soft kisses along my shoulders and neck.

Then I slid out of her, putting her back on her feet. She whimpered in protest—fucking music to my ears. “Turn around,” I said.

She raised an eyebrow but turned around and splayed her hands on the wall. She looked at me over her shoulder, one eye obscured by the thick curtain of her hair. She arched her back and spread her legs wide, inviting me to take her from behind.

I came up behind her, pressing myself into her back. Placing my hands on her hips, I lifted her up, and she arched against me, her legs latching back onto me. I wrapped one arm around her waist as I angled my shaft and inched inside of her so that I could hit the most sensitive parts of her. Her body quaked against me as I entered her.

With my arm secure around her waist holding her in place, I reached around and rubbed her clit between my fingers as I pumped into her, unable to control my urge to dive as deep inside of her as possible. We bucked against each other, straining and thrusting and melting into an achingly perfect rhythm. When she came, she reared back against me and pressed hard, surprising me. I slipped and caught us on the wall behind as my own orgasm begged to break free.

“Fuck!” I hissed through clenched teeth. I banged my hand against the wall as wave after wave of pleasure coursed through every inch of me, my hips jerking against her until we were both spent and sagging against the shower wall, the water rinsing us clean.

I was the first to break free of the haze. I leaned out of the shower to grab a towel and wrapped Cali in it before pulling her into my embrace. I moved the wet tangle of her hair aside and kissed her neck, letting my lips linger there for a few beats.

She laughed. “How long do you think we can stay in here before someone comes looking for us?”

I sighed. “I think I need to make an appearance as Alpha. I still have to try to meet some of the other Alphas to see if they’ll support the Redwoods and show the Bitterfangs that we’re not to be messed with.”

Cali sighed but nodded. “I get it,” she said. “We’re not here just to have fun.”

“No… But that doesn’t mean we can’t fit some in whenever we can… So maybe later? We have the mixer tonight, but I’m sure we can get together, just the two of us, after.”

Cali turned and grinned up at me. “Yeah, but for now, let’s get dressed and go schmooze with the other packs.”

“Just like a power couple is supposed to,” I said. I stepped out of the shower and briskly dried off before pulling on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt I’d brought. Cali did the same, and I couldn’t help but watch her until she’d pulled on her jacket, and even then, it was hard to look away. She was so damn beautiful, and I wanted her all the time—even more so after the moment we’d just stolen together.

We made a pitstop back at our tent—Cali wanted to change her shoes—and then we went to join the others in the food tent. The breakfast spread had been replaced with lunch, and I scowled as I considered row after row of tiny sandwiches.

“Who the hell catered this? Rabbits?” I grabbed a handful of the mini sandwiches, not caring if I looked greedy. We were werewolves, and our appetites reflected that. Whoever was in charge of the food probably hadn’t fed this many packs at once before.

I was even hungrier than usual after the match, so I swiped an entire bowl of chips from the table, piled just a few more sandwiches on my plate, and then went to join Cali.

She laughed as I approached with my armful of food. “Wow. Somebody’s hungry.” She plucked three of the tiny sandwiches off my plate for herself.

“Hell yeah I am, and these little things aren’t going to cut it. I’ll probably have to eat ten of them *and* all these chips to even take the edge off.”

I spotted Mace getting ready for the next match, and, with food in hand, Cali and I went over to join him.

“Hey,” he said, shooting us a quick look before glancing back at his phone. He was checking the game plan. “Looks like we’re up against the Northwind pack. I heard they’re tough.”

“Yeah, but I’m sure you got this,” I said. Mace was a good player. Granted, I had no idea how the Northwinds played, but I was sure they were no match for the Blue Bloods.

Right on cue, the Alpha of the Northwind pack came walking over, his eyes on Mace. “We’re not going to take it easy on you,” he said. “Nor would you expect us to.” He and Mace shared a handshake.

Putting on my diplomacy hat for this Alpha I’d never met before, I held out my hand. “Hi, I’m Greyson. Alpha of the Redwoods.”

The Northwind Alpha took my hand and gave it a solid shake. “I’m Ethaniel.”

“Great to meet you finally. I’ve heard that the Northwinds are a very honorable pack.”

Ethaniel laughed. “Yes, we are, but we also don’t get involved in other packs’ politics. Not our style.”

I frowned. “What does that mean?”

“Oh, I thought you were going to ask me for an alliance like Malakai did. Just getting ahead of it. You understand.”

My stomach dropped. *So, Malakai is actively searching out alliances here, too. That can only mean that he plans to go up against the Redwoods with a bigger force at his disposal.*

“I’m going to tell you what I told Malakai: Whatever beef there is between you two is personal, not political, so my pack won’t get involved.” He hesitated, as if deciding whether or not to say whatever else was on his mind. “But for what it’s worth, if I were to choose, I heard the stories about the Redwoods defeating your father before he did anything more to hurt us all, and I respect that.”

I gave a grateful nod. That was something, I guessed, even though the thought of Malakai going around trying to form alliances gave me a really bad feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Ethaniel turned back to Mace. “I’ll see you on the field.”

“See you out there,” Mace said. Once Ethaniel was gone, Mace frowned and said, “that’s not good. Malakai is already busy poisoning the waters. We have to do something about this.” He turned to one of his Blue Blood pack members who was lingering nearby. “Hey, Spencer, you’re captain now. I can’t play. Do us proud, you hear?”

“You got it, Mace,” she said with a nod before turning to let the rest of the team know.

Mace slapped me on the back. “Come on, let’s go chat with some of the other Alphas.”

I finished off the rest of my sandwiches as we walked. I spotted an Alpha who had to be seven feet tall standing by the table of tiny sandwiches, shaking his head.

“What the fuck?” he muttered and lifted his head, looking around as if searching for someone to shoulder the blame. When I saw his face clearer, I recognized him as Wade, Alpha of the Ironwood pack.

*He gets it. This finger food stuff doesn’t fly here. Maybe I should relate to him since we’ve already got some common ground.*

“You’d think they’d realize that this isn’t a tea party we’re having here,” I said.

Wade eyed me as he grabbed two sandwiches and shoved them into his cavernous mouth, but he didn’t reply.

The vibe was already very off, but I decided to power through. “I was hoping—”

“I don’t talk while I’m eating!” he barked. A piece of chewed-up sandwich flew out of his mouth, narrowly missing my head. Then, without another word, he stomped off with a plate piled high with sandwiches.

*Strike one.*

Mace smiled. “Maybe let me take the lead on this.”

\*\*\*

After doing a lap of the tables, Mace and I ended up seated at a table with five other Alphas. It was good to have Mace right by my side, and I was grateful for his connections—and his casual demeanor.

I’d grabbed another pile of sandwiches, and everyone was busy eating their own in between watching me with wary eyes. Wade, who was seated across from me with a now-empty plate, spoke up first.

“So, you’ve gone and gotten yourself on Malakai’s bad side, huh?” he grunted.

I nodded. “It wasn’t intentional, but there was a young Rogue who needed help. Only afterward did I realize that the pack he needed protection from was the Bitterfang pack.”

“Bad luck there,” another Alpha added.

I nodded in his direction. “I do think it’s unfortunate that we weren’t able to settle things in a more… diplomatic way… But I don’t regret helping the boy. He didn’t deserve to be hunted just because he fell in love.”

The two Alphas nodded, which seemed like a good sign. The other three, however, kept their heads down and stayed neutral.

Mace spoke up. “So, we aren’t asking for anything big. Just a sign of support, anything that shows that the Redwoods are a valued pack in the region. We’re hoping that it’ll at least get Malakai to stop and listen to us before attacking.”

A voice suddenly cut in behind us. “I don’t need to listen to the people who killed my daughter.”

I turned to face a large, domineering wolf, and my gut plummeted with trepidation.

The wolf stepped forward and stared daggers down at me. “Nice to finally meet you, Greyson Evers. I’m Malakai.”

**Episode 3873**

**Xavier**

I’d done a pretty good job of avoiding the other packs all morning—which was for the best considering the state I was in. I’d been in an awful mood since the moment I woke up to find myself tangled in Ava’s arms. Then, as I’d moved to separate myself from her, my hand hit something hard under my pillow, and my blood ran cold. Another medal. Just what I needed after the day I’d had. It was no doubt a gift from Adéluce, yet another reminder of the ruin she’d made of my life. The vampire-witch was like a demonic tooth fairy that had visited me in the night to leave a symbol of her bullshit under my pillow.

*It’s a warning. She saw what happened with Cali yesterday, and she wanted to make sure that I knew. Well, the medal is overkill. I knew from the moment that Cali doubled over in pain that Adéluce was flexing her muscles to make me fall back in line.*

I cursed to myself as I made my way to the dining tent, keeping my head down and avoiding anyone and everyone’s gaze. A round of small talk would probably kill me right about now. All I could think about was Cali, and the fact that I couldn’t be with her was driving me insane.

I knew that I shouldn’t have let Cali get close to me, but my self-control had faltered right when I needed it most. Kissing her had been reckless and stupid, but in the moment it had been the only thing in the world that I wanted.

I slid a hand into my pocket and palmed the medal. I wished that I could just throw it away, but I knew that wouldn’t do anything. Knowing Adéluce, it would only make things worse. Medal or no medal, the threat was still there.

I arrived at the dining area and realized that I’d completely missed breakfast. Lunch had been put out, which amounted to tiny sandwiches with toothpicks in them.

Sighing, I looked around to see if I could spot anyone from the Samara pack. I assumed that maybe they were attending one of the panels the summit was offering, though I didn’t know who would go to a panel when the Ludis games were in full swing.

I weaved through the crowd, my eyes still busy searching… for Cali. I’d tried to tell myself that I was looking for a friendly face from the Samara pack, but my heart knew differently.

*I’m looking for her so I can avoid her, but I also want to see how she’s doing. I just need proof that she’s okay after what Adéluce did. I don’t know what I’ll do if I find her and she’s still in pain.*

When I still didn’t spot her after a few more minutes of searching, I gave up and went to the table of food. Once again, I stared down at the tiny sandwiches, unable to stop a scowl from forming on my face. I leaned close to get a better look—or to convince myself that sandwiches that small weren’t a figment of my imagination.

I looked up as a huge, lumbering wolf sidled up to the table and grabbed the entire last serving plate of sandwiches.

“Dude, what the hell?” I called out.

“Hungry!” the guy grunted before stomping away.

“Great. Now what?” I turned to check out the side dishes. There was a veggie platter, cheese and crackers, and something that looked very much like pruny olives. I literally turned my nose up and walked away.

*I’ll get food somewhere else. There’s no way I’m going to eat that crap with the mood I’m in. I need something good, something to take my mind off the mess my life is in right now.*

Someone started yelling behind me, and I turned to see a huge wolf getting in Greyson’s face. Greyson was in the process of standing up from a table full of other Alphas who were shrinking away from the altercation, obviously afraid of the hulking wolf.

Before I could stop myself, I rushed over to intervene. Just as I reached them, Greyson sidestepped the man and calmly said, “I’m glad that you came to introduce yourself.”

“Of course I did. I needed to see the face of the wolf who killed my daughter!” the man growled, taking a step closer to Greyson.

I quickly put the pieces together in my mind and realized that the huge wall of a man facing Greyson down was Malakai. My already sour disposition easily shifted to anger, and I considered half-shifting, just in case. Mace turned and spotted me, and, as if reading my mind, shook his head.

I took a deep breath and nodded back to signal that I got his message. He was right. This wasn’t the time for me to show force. It would only set Malakai off and make things worse.

“I was hoping we could have a civilized talk,” Greyson said. “So that we could avoid you feeling like you need to talk to my Luna without me being there. Again.”

There it was. Greyson’s Luna. The word flew out of Greyson’s mouth and hit me in the face like a splash of cold water.

*Luna? Greyson has a Luna now?*

There wasn’t a single doubt in my mind about who that Luna was. Cali. My stomach dropped, and my head swam as the news washed over me.

*And that means that Malakai had the nerve to confront Cali? While she was alone?*

I clenched my fists, trying to stay calm. I had to face one issue at a time, here. Malakai was literally shoving himself in our faces right now, and it would be best for all of us if we didn’t take the bait. At least not yet.

I stepped forward. “I’m sure you’d like to meet me, as well. I’m the Alpha of the Samaras.”

Greyson visibly stiffened, and I took a small bit of pleasure in making my brother as uncomfortable as I was at hearing the news that Cali was his Luna.

Malakai scowled at me, his gaze also taking in Mace at the same time.

“Good. Then you’re all mostly here. Now all I need is that coward Alpha of the Vanguard pack, and I’ll finally have a complete visual on who my targets are.”

I started to say something, but Greyson held up a hand. It took everything in me not to slap that hand away, but I knew that no matter what my feelings about my brother were right now, we had to show solidarity in front of Malakai. I would deal with Greyson later. In private. After all, the Bitterfang Alpha had threatened the Samaras, too.

“I understand that you’re in mourning,” Greyson said. “And I regret the role we played in you losing your daughter.”

I wanted to laugh out loud. It was just like Greyson to apologize for something he shouldn’t have. It was *Malakai’s* fault that he lost his daughter and that he was so insufferable that she ran away and faked her own death. We had nothing to do with that. We’d only tried to help—but I knew that reasoning would fall on Malakai’s deaf ears right about now.

“But our packs do not need to be at war,” Greyson continued. “I know we can find a solution that works for both of us.”

Malakai stepped so close to Greyson that their faces were mere inches apart. “I already have a solution, and it’s to destroy anyone who crosses my pack!”

I’d had enough. This wasn’t going well, and I needed to do something before it reached the point of no return. I shoved Malakai away and wedged myself between him and Greyson. “Don’t threaten my brother if you want to keep all your teeth.”

Malakai bared his teeth to reveal that he was partially shifted, and his teeth were now all fangs. Meeting his challenge, I half-shifted, too.

Not even a moment later, Cesaries walked by, his eyes taking in the lunch table before he finally looked at the standoff taking place only a few feet away from him. “Oh my,” he said. “I guess the finger sandwiches have gotten you all riled up.” He let out a congenial laugh that belied the sharp look in his eyes.

“Ah, yes, a great spread,” Greyson said quickly.

Cesaries smiled. “Very good. Play nice. We’re always watching.” Then he turned heel and sauntered away without even so much as a second glance over his shoulder.

Greyson turned his attention back to Malakai. “Now is not the time for this,” he said evenly. His eyes found mine. “Nor is it the place.”

I didn’t want to back down, not when Malakai had made the type of naked threat that would get him killed anywhere else but here. If he wanted to challenge us, then he needed to make good on it. Honestly, I didn’t trust him not to strike out at any moment and catch us off-guard.

“Just wait until this is over,” Malakai said, shifting back fully and stepping out of Greyson’s space. He gave me a long, murderous glance before turning and stalking away.

Mace let out a sigh. “He’s foreboding, I’ll give him that.”

Greyson nodded. “And he doesn’t seem to be backing down.”

“What did he mean by that?” I asked, watching the large wolf as he disappeared into a tent where one of the panels was taking place. “Is he planning to attack us all as soon as the summit is over?”

**Episode 3874**

It had crossed my mind that I should have gone with Greyson when he took off with Mace, but I didn’t have a lot to offer in terms of werewolf politics. Staying behind was probably for the best. The entire thing already seemed complicated enough without me being involved. I might have had the mark of a Luna, but I was still feeling a little… well, green. Being here in such an official capacity was new to me, and I didn’t want to mess it up. Best to play it safe.

Even so, it was hard to pay attention to the Ludis match between the Blue Bloods and the Northwinds. The two teams were pretty evenly matched, and the thrill of watching it wasn’t there without Greyson on the field. It was obvious that my newfound love of sports was only awakened when my mate was the star of the show.

Big Mac came walking by, and Lola waved at her. “Hey, Big Mac, want to join us? Ludis matches are summit tradition! Apparently. But you should watch two or three or five. Join us!”

Big Mac shook her head. “No, I need to do a few more calculations for tonight’s mixer.”

“Wait up!” I said, already heading toward her. “I’ll be back, Lola. Let me know if anything exciting happens.”

“It won’t,” Lola said. “I’m not out there, remember?”

I laughed as I dashed away to join Big Mac—who did not wait for me. She was already halfway to her tent before I managed to catch up.

“I’m busy,” she barked as soon as I fell into step beside her.

I frowned. “Oh, I just thought… You said I could come to your tent after lunch.” I really wanted to get her witchy thoughts about the status of the *due destini*, and I was eager to do it before I ran into Xavier again.

Big Mac sighed just as we reached the entrance to her tent. She held the flap open, the exasperation evident on her face. “Come in, then.”

Somehow, Big Mac’s tent had grown even larger and was more decked out than it had been when I saw it last. I looked up and gasped. “Wait a minute, was that there last night?” I said, pointing to the chandelier sparkling over my head.

Big Mac grunted and shrugged.

There was also a new checkout counter with a little sign that read “Back in 5” and high-top tables complete with plush-looking stools. Off to the left was a small seating area with two chairs and separated by a fancy, marble-topped drink table. The entire place looked like a high-end bar.

“Wow, you’ve done so much with the place!” I spun around to take it all in.

Big Mac shrugged again. “Wolves drink twenty-four-seven, and not just at the parties. I needed a place to sell my wares.”

“But where will you sleep now?” I asked, still taking in all the changes that had been made in such a short time.

In answer, Big Mac knocked against the back wall of her tent, and a door appeared. “I magicked it for privacy. Simple. Don’t want any drunk wolves wandering into my personal space.” She opened the door, and I saw that it was identical to Big Mac and Mrs. Smith’s room back home. There was even a cute little photo of Mrs. Smith propped up on the nightstand.

I smiled at the small reminder that Big Mac was really a softie underneath it all.

Big Mac went over to her chest of supplies and cracked it open. “Okay, so, testing the *due destini*.” She sat back and stroked her chin. “Where did I put those herbs?” She leaned over and dug around in the chest, bringing out candles and satchels and strange oblong jars of unrecognizable contents before snapping her fingers and rummaging around in a different section.

I took a seat as Big Mac moved around the room, preparing. Finally, she came over and laid out everything she was going to need. “Okay, I’ve got to prick your finger.”

“Okay,” I said. I held out my hand, thinking about how used to all of this I’d become. When I’d first met Big Mac, she’d been even gruffer and scarier than she was now. Back then, I never would have willingly offered up my blood to her without my mates by my side.

Big Mac pricked my finger with an antique-looking needle and pressed on my finger, letting some of the blood drop into the goblet containing the herb mixture. “Perfect, now sit back, relax, and watch me do my thing,” she said without even a hint of a smile.

Big Mac closed her eyes, clasped her hands in her lap, and muttered a spell under her breath. The goblet began to smoke, and without opening her eyes, she leaned over it and breathed in the smoke. I could see her eyeballs moving around quickly under her lids, like she was seeing visions.

When she opened her eyes again, they were foggy, the irises gone completely white. She blinked a few times, and her eyes cleared and went back to normal. “Phew, that gives you a head rush,” she said.

I smiled tentatively, eager to hear the results. “Did you see anything? Did the *due destini* curse change?”

Big Mac shook her head. “Nope. It’s the same as it was the last time I checked. The death curse is gone—thankfully—but you are still mated to both brothers in equal measure.”

I sat back, feeling dejected. I didn’t think I’d ever been so disappointed to hear that my *due destini* situation wasn’t more… sinister. “Thanks,” I said, unable to keep the dissatisfaction out of my voice.

Big Mac clapped me gruffly on the shoulder, almost sending me flying. “Don’t take so much responsibility for all this, Cali. Xavier is the one making these stupid-ass choices, not you.”

I let out a muffled laugh, my mood instantly bolstered by Big Mac’s attempts to comfort me—which was a rare occurrence indeed. I nodded. “Thanks, Big Mac. I really appreciate it.”

Big Mac gave a curt nod, all business once again. “Good, now get out so I can do business.”

I left Big Mac’s tent without a clue as to what my next move should be. I’d really been hoping for a better explanation for what Xavier was up to. I’d hoped that Big Mac would be able to offer me the insight that Xavier just wouldn’t give me. Now that she’d revealed that nothing had changed, I was lost.

I didn’t even see Elle before I slammed into her, and we both nearly went tumbling to the ground with the force of our collision. I hadn’t even realized I was walking so fast. I reached out to stabilize her, and then we both shared an awkward laugh—at least *my* laugh was awkward. “Hey, sorry. Wasn’t paying attention,” I said.

“Oh, it’s okay. I was just avoiding Lucian. He seems to be kind of upset whenever he sees me now, and I don’t know why. It’s kind of annoying.”

I sighed. “You haven’t had a chance to talk to Greyson yet, I take it?”

Elle hesitated. “I have been avoiding Greyson, too.”

I was surprised to hear that—and maybe even more surprised to hear her admit it. Elle was nothing if not earnest. “What? Why have you been avoiding him?”

“Because… I’m worried that Greyson doesn’t think I can take care of myself for some reason.”

“Really?” I hadn’t expected that answer. “Oh no… I don’t think that’s true. Greyson knows how far you’ve come. Every single day you get smarter and more capable, and Greyson thinks you’re the best tracker we have. Honestly, that goes for everyone in the pack, Elle. We all think you’ve grown by leaps and bounds!”

Elle sighed. “I don’t know… It’s just strange that he’s suddenly become… overprotective.”

I nodded, remembering the times that I’d thought the same of Greyson’s behavior. I’d thought that he’d cooled down a little along with the whole Lucian wanting to propose to Elle situation, but maybe I was wrong. “I’ve noticed it, too. But he’s the Alpha, so he’s pretty protective over all of us.” I paused, wondering if I should say what I was thinking. I quickly decided that when it came to Elle, being direct was the best move.

“Is that really why you’re avoiding him, Elle? Or is it because of the kiss?”

It was Elle’s turn to look shocked. “You know about that?”

I nodded and quickly said, “I’m not mad. Was I surprised? Sure… But I know that you feel really connected to Greyson, and I get that.”

“It just sort of happened,” Elle added. “I didn’t plan to kiss him, Cali, I mean it. But something in the moment just… pulled me to him. I hope you believe that it was just some weird… thing… and nothing romantic or anything like that,” Elle said, her eyes wide.

I frowned, remembering how Greyson had mentioned how strong his pull to Elle had grown. He’d described it as being an intense, overpowering, uncontrollable urge to protect her at any cost.

I looked Elle in the eye, wanting to choose my words carefully. “Elle, do you think this could be happening because Greyson turned you? And if it is… Why *now*?”

**Episode 3875**

**Artemis**

To my surprise, I was really enjoying the Ludis match. Werewolves needed a sport to call their own, and they’d certainly found one that fit them perfectly. I’d stepped away to grab some celery and cauliflower from the veggie platter in the chow tent, and I was now hurrying back to finish watching the game with Rishika.

“Celery?” I asked her, handing her a stalk dripping with ranch dressing.

“Don’t mind if I do,” she said.

We both stood there crunching away on our snacks as the Blue Bloods made yet another goal. I threw up my arms to cheer—and accidentally knocked the beer out of a passing wolf’s hand. I started to apologize, but the wolf instantly got in my face.

“Watch yourself, girl!” He spat out the word “girl” like it was a curse word. Then he paused and sniffed the air. “Wait a minute, are you even a wolf?”

I frowned and popped a piece of cauliflower in my mouth. “No. And more importantly, I’m probably not the person you should be starting something with. Just a friendly warning.”

“A little *girl* like you warning me?” the wolf snarled. “Your very presence here is a mistake. Don’t forget that.”

I scowled. “What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?”

The wolf barked a snide laugh. “Of course, you wouldn’t get it. You’re not a wolf. Just a little girl trying to play pretend and hook up above her status. That’s why you’re here. I know your kind. You’re an Alpha chaser.”

*Alpha chaser? What in the…?*

“*Excuse* me?”

Rishika grabbed my arm before I could say any more. “Artemis, come on.” She started pulling me away as the wolf yelled after us.

“Yeah, you’d better run, Alpha chaser! Run away, you coward! You don’t belong here, and everyone knows it, especially your little girlfriend!”

I yanked away from Rishika and turned back to confront the wolf, but Rishika grabbed my hand and yanked me after her, not breaking her stride.

“Just keep walking, Artemis,” she muttered. “He’s not worth it, believe me.”

When we were far enough away, I pulled free of Rishika’s hold and whirled to face her. “Are you serious? You heard what that guy said to me, and what? I’m just supposed to ignore it? He was talking to *me*! Why do I have to be the one to walk away when he deserves an arrow to the foot?”

Rishika sighed. “Because we’re better than him, that’s why.”

“Really? Is that really the reason, Rishika? Or is it because you’re embarrassed of me because I’m Fae and not a werewolf?”

Rishika looked as if I’d slapped her. “What? Where is this coming from?”

“Don’t tell me you haven’t seen how all these wolves have been glaring at me since the moment we arrived. They know I’m not one of them. They might not know I’m Fae, but they can tell I’m not a wolf. Some of them are more subtle than that guy, but I can *feel* their hostility toward me. Cali’s a pack Luna, so no one wants to start problems with Greyson, and they like Big Mac’s moonshine, so I suspect she’s safe, too. But me? I’m fair game, apparently. Have you even seen what I’ve been going through? You haven’t said anything.”

“I don’t have eyes in the back of my head, Artemis. And if you haven’t noticed, a lot of shit has been going on. The Bitterfangs are literally going around here planting bad seeds about the Redwoods and trying to start a war with us, but my bad if I didn’t notice that someone looked at you the wrong way.” Rishika turned her back on me and walked a few paces before crossing her arms over her chest and cursing under her breath.

I stood there silently, watching her, battling to overcome what she’d just said to me. She was right; she had a lot on her plate, but that didn’t mean that I didn’t still need her.

“Are you still mad about our fight over your father?” Rishika asked.

Anger bloomed in my stomach at the mention of my father, and I had to work hard to control it as I answered her. “I am, but it’s not about that right now. I guess I’m… feeling,” I didn’t want to admit it, but I knew I needed to, “*insecure*.” Insecure usually wasn’t something that described me. I hated it. I hated that I was so rattled by all of this shit. I shouldn’t have been. “I just need a moment to breathe.”

Rishika looked like she was about to say something, but I gently cut her off.

“Listen, I don’t want to be angry at you,” I said. “I just need to breathe. Just… give me a few minutes,” I said.

I left Rishika standing there and went back to our tent. I flopped down face-first onto the bed. *What’s wrong with me?* I wondered. *Why is it so hard for me to accept that my father might actually be dead?*

Just the thought of it felt so wrong, though. Incorrect.

And, on top of that, why couldn’t I accept that I was a Fae among werewolves, now? Having my mind bogged down by all these worries and doubts was exhausting me. And I shouldn’t have taken it out on my girlfriend of all people. Ugh, gods.

I sighed as Rishika slowly entered the tent. “Artemis, hey… I’m sorry. I don’t want to fight with you. Can you talk to me?”

I dropped my face into my hands. “Everything feels like so much,” I said. “I’m still mad about everything with my dad, but it’s not directed at you. I’m sorry if I’m making it feel like it is. And I just feel so… out of place here. I’m a Fae, and you’re a werewolf. There are things about this that I still fundamentally don’t get, and it’s getting to me with… everything else.”

Rishika advanced deeper into the tent. She sat down beside me and took my hands in hers. “I’m sorry. I had no idea you were feeling that way. But I love that you’re Fae—you know that, right? You could never be out of place when you’re next to me.”

I nodded, thankful that she was being so understanding at a moment like this. “Sorry I’m a bit hotheaded right now. You didn’t deserve that. I should have explained myself better to begin with.”

“And I should have realized that you were still upset. But I don’t know what you don’t tell me. *I’m* telling *you* right now that you being Fae doesn’t bother me; I love it about you. You’re incredible. And everything with your dad… I meant what I told you. I just don’t want you to get hurt, but I’ll be by your side through it all.”

I nodded and pulled Rishika into a hug, and she kissed me on the cheek.

“From now on, I’ll try to push aside my doubts and trust your gut,” she said.

“Thanks,” I said, planting a kiss on her cheek in return. “And from now on, I’ll try not to take my anger at others out on you. That’s not fair.”

Rishika smiled and kissed my other cheek. “And I promise to always take your side against bullies.”

I laughed and kissed Rishika’s other cheek. “And I’ll always remind you that those bullies are probably just jealous of how unbelievably hot we are.”

Rishika laughed at that as she leaned forward, this time kissing me on the mouth. And then we were tearing each other’s clothes off.

Rishika took the lead, yanking my shirt up over my head and covering my breasts in kisses, her tongue flicking over my taut nipples while her hands worked to slide my underwear down my hips.

I closed my eyes and laid back, wanting her to do whatever she wanted to me. My heartbeat quickened as she slid my panties off over my toes, and seconds later, I felt the tickle of her breath against my clit before her tongue was pressing against it, flicking up and down while her hands held my thighs spread wide.

“*Gods*,” I whispered. “Gods, Rishika. That feels so good.” My hips seemed to take on a mind of their own as I bucked against her mouth. She suckled my clit between her lips and then thrust three fingers inside of me and curled them, causing me to cry out. My orgasm rolled through me, building until my legs shook.

She pulled away to remove her panties and then climbed on top of me and straddled me. “You’re so beautiful,” she whispered, leaning down to suck on my neck.

“Please.” I didn’t know what I was begging for, but Rishika knew just what I needed. Her wetness mingled with mine as she slid herself against me. We moved together in perfect sync, grinding against one another until I was clutching at the cot, trying to catch my breath. I needed more. I wanted to give *her* more.

I reached between us and edged my middle finger into Rishika’s tight, hot pussy and pumped it in and out of her in time with our movements. She started to grind against my hand. I added another finger, quickening my pace.

“Fuck, Artemis,” she said, her voice airy.

I flipped her onto her back, continuing to pump my fingers into her, my thumb caressing her clit. Greedily, I leaned down to take one of her nipples into my mouth. Fucking perfect. I grazed the hard pebble of her breast with my teeth and then she was shaking, shattering beneath me.

We both readjusted and collapsed onto the bed together. We lay face-to-face and enjoyed a slow kiss, relishing in each other.

Rishika’s eyes grew heavy, and seconds later, I could tell by the steady rush of her breath that she was asleep. I pulled her close and stroked her hair, thinking that all that anger I’d felt and misdirected at the woman I loved needed to be channeled to a more productive place.

As soon as this summit was over, I was going to stop at nothing to find my father.

**Episode 3876**

Elle gave me a confused look. “What do you mean?”

“I just feel like both you and Greyson have talked about how intense the bond between you suddenly feels, and I can’t help but wonder why that would happen so suddenly…” I had my theories, but there was no real way for me to know what was really going on. It wasn’t like I was a werewolf expert—far from it. But whatever it was, it seemed to be getting stronger by the day.

“Oh… Do you mean like how Lucian told me that I feel so connected to Greyson because he turned me?” Elle asked.

“Yes, that.” I supposed that Lucian could be right once every blue moon, not that we would ever admit that to him. “Maybe there’s something to that, but we didn’t want to admit it before? I mean, why *would* we have listened to Lucian? He’s not exactly the most reliable source of information.” Not to mention that whatever information he offered almost always in some way tied back to benefitting him.

Elle nodded, taking this in. “So, you’re saying maybe Lucian was right in some way?”

“Yes, so maybe we should go ask Lucian about it? See what he knows?” I didn’t think I’d ever speak those words, but Lucian had seemed to know something we didn’t about why Greyson and Elle were having trouble… defining the boundaries of their relationship. Maybe Lucian could be useful for once.

Elle hesitated. “Maybe he can help, but he’s acting all strange around me right now because of the proposal. And I think he might be embarrassed about losing the game, too.”

“Well… We have to figure out if our suspicions are true. How about I take the lead? You can just come along for moral support.”

“Sounds good,” Elle said.

I went to find Aysel first, hoping that she might point us in the right direction. She was still lazing away in her lounge chair next to the Ludis field but didn’t appear to be watching the game raging on in front of her. Now, in addition to her mai tai, she was holding a fan that matched her parasol and was lazily flapping it in front of her face as we approached.

“Hey, Aysel. Any idea where your brother is?” I asked her.

She peered at us over her sunglasses and thrust her mai tai in the direction of a set of tents behind her. Then, without a word, she dropped her head back down to the lounge chair and continued fanning herself.

I nodded and led Elle over to the tents. Luckily, I didn’t have to look hard to figure out which one belonged to Lucian. It was the biggest one of them all and had bejeweled flaps and a long red carpet leading to the entrance. Huge golden flags boasting the Vanguard crest were posted on either side of the tent and flapping brilliantly in the wind. If it didn’t scream “a princeling lives here,” I didn’t know what did.

I rolled my eyes. *These two don’t know the meaning of subtlety.*

“Knock, knock,” I said as I moved the front flap out of the way and stepped inside. The whole tent was dark, and I could smell incense burning. Calming meditation music flowed through the tent, and in the dimness, I could just make out Lucian’s form. He was lying flat on a very fluffy bed with cucumbers over his eyes and his arms crossed over his chest like he was resting in a coffin.

“Lucian?” I said, my voice low since the atmosphere all but demanded it. He didn’t stir, and I edged closer. “Um… Lucian?”

He didn’t reply. I walked closer and tapped him on the shoulder, and he spoke without moving a muscle. I wasn’t even sure that his lips moved to form the words, and it kind of creeped me out.

“Yes, may I help you? I’m busy recentering my energy. It’s clear that it is askew, and that’s what caused our loss today.”

I nodded. “Yes, of course. I can see that. But I was wondering if you could answer a quick question I had?”

Sighing with annoyance, Lucian yanked the cucumbers off his eyes and sat up. “What? What is it? You’ve already ruined my meditation, so you might as well ask.” Then he spotted Elle, and his face immediately folded in embarrassment. “Oh, my forest rose, Elle. I didn’t see you there. Wonderful to see you.”

Elle nodded awkwardly. “Hi, Lucian.”

Working overtime now to appear calm and collected, Lucian turned to me with a congenial smile. “What can I do for you, my favorite *due destini*?”

Hearing him say that threw me off for a split second, but I powered through. “Great… So, you’ve mentioned… once or twice… that you think Elle and Greyson have some sort of… supernatural bond.”

*Because you think he turned her, and you’re right*, I thought. *But I definitely won’t be admitting that to you. You’d probably go announcing it to the entire summit.*

I continued. “Could you explain that a little more? What could that, uh, entail?” I asked, trying to keep my voice as neutral as possible.

Lucian raised an eyebrow at me, and I panicked a little, wondering if I had basically just confirmed his suspicions. If he had pieced together what I was talking about, he was merciful enough not to say it, which would be very un-Lucian-like of him if that were the case. “Oh, do you mean when I spoke of the sire bond? It’s just a connection that a wolf gets when they turn another. *If* that’s something that they’ve done. When the wolf who performs the turning is an Alpha, the bond can be quite strong… Or so the stories go. Why do you ask?” his mouth curved up into a smile.

“Um… no reason.” I didn’t like the sound of that. If what he was saying was true, what did that mean for Greyson and Elle? Was the bond going to keep growing and growing until something went wrong? “This sire bond… How long does it usually last?”

Lucian looked upward as if recalling the information. “Well, the old tomes say that it can last for a wolf’s lifetime.”

I sighed. *Great. So, it’s some kind of legend thing like the* due destini*. Perfect. Just what we need.*

I wasn’t sure if I trusted Lucian’s word alone, but at least this was a good place to start. “Okay, Lucian, well, thanks for that! We’ll let you get back to your… realignment or whatever.”

I took Elle’s hand and began to guide her out of the tent.

“I don’t usually lose so badly!” Lucian called after us. “I’m a very good Ludis player! The best that most have ever seen!”

He said more, but his voice faded away as we burst free from the tent and booked it as far away as we could. “Maybe it was a mistake asking him about this,” I said. “Maybe Greyson’s protectiveness is just an Alpha thing? Or maybe it’s nothing. We might be blowing it out of proportion when there’s really nothing at all going on.”

Elle didn’t seem convinced. “Are you sure it might not be a sire bond? I mean, Greyson *did* turn me. And if it *is* that, it sounds serious.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want to force us on a wild goose chase just off Lucian’s word alone.”

*Plus*, I thought, *I have much more serious things to worry about in the meantime. If it* is *a sire bond, what’s the big deal, anyway? It’s okay if they have a connection; it even makes sense because of what Greyson did for her. I trust them. If there’s something going on with them, they’ll figure it out.*

“Okay… But maybe I’ll ask around? I want to know. Either way,” Elle said.

I nodded. “Sure, but just know that I might be overreacting. I don’t want you to think that something’s wrong when really it’s not. No use making a mountain out of a molehill, you know?”

Elle scrunched up her brow in confusion. “I don’t get it. A mountain? Out of a molehill? How would that happen, exactly?”

“Oh—it’s just a figure of speech. It just means don’t make something big out of something little.”

“Ohhh, I get it. Well, anyway, Cali, I trust you. If you feel like something’s off, then, well, maybe something is.”

I felt a warmth at that. I really did like Elle a lot. She was sweet and honest, and she didn’t mince words, which I appreciated. Which were all the reasons that she and Lucian would never be a good match.

“Okay, you take point and ask around, but try not to kiss my mate again if you can help it,” I said with mock seriousness.

Elle laughed. “Deal. I swear I will do everything in my power not to kiss him again.”

“Good,” I said, surprised by how relieved I felt at hearing her say that.

On our way back to the dining tent, I zeroed in on the werewolf council where they were seated at a table discussing something that didn’t look all that serious. “Wait,” I said, stopping short. “I have an idea.”

“What is it?” Elle asked, following my gaze.

“Why don’t we go right to the source? Let’s ask the werewolf council.”

**Episode 3877**

“Ask the werewolf council? Are you sure?” Elle seemed a little nervous about the idea. “What if they get mad that we’re bothering them?” She cast a nervous glance their way and then looked back at me.

“Why would they turn us away? The point of the summit is for us all to get to know each other, right? We’re new to this, and they should want to educate us about the werewolf ways. I’m sure they’ll be happy to help!” Without overthinking it too much, I walked with determination over to the council. Cesaries saw me coming and rose to greet me, which I took as a good sign.

“Hi, I’m not sure if you remember me…” I began.

“Of course I remember you! A *due destini* is not someone you forget!” Cesaries said. He casted a glance back at the council, and they all nodded vigorously in agreement.

I winced at that. “Yes, well, I have a quick question for you, if you don’t mind?”

“Did you break the *due destini* bond?” another council member interjected.

I turned to them, confused. “Excuse me?”

“I heard you’re here as Greyson Evers’s new Luna, which means that you made a choice.” The woman smiled slowly as if she’d just caught me in a trap of some sort. “So that’s why I’m asking. Did you do it? Did you break the *due destini*?” A wave of excited murmurs whipped through the council members.

I blinked, my mind rolling through a thousand possible responses. “Ah, yes, I’m here as his Luna.”

Cesaries looked intrigued. “Wow, so you *have* chosen. I hadn’t heard that!” He turned to glance back at the council members with a look on his face like they’d all just received a juicy piece of gossip. Everyone was looking at me with even more interest now, and I was starting to feel really uncomfortable under their scrutiny.

*I had no idea the conversation was going to go in this direction when I came over here. But are they right? Did I somehow choose by coming here with Greyson?*

Even the thought of that felt horrible. I didn’t want to choose Greyson or Xavier by default; it wasn’t fair to them, but it was starting to look like that was exactly what I’d done. *Shit.* I didn’t know why I hadn’t anticipated people asking about this. Almost everywhere else I’d gone, they certainly had, so why wouldn’t they here? I was kicking myself for not being more prepared.

I’d tried to plan exactly how I was going to break the news—or the non-news since I wasn’t really Greyson’s Luna—to Xavier, but I hadn’t gone over how I would address anyone else who thought to ask once they saw that I was here as only Greyson’s Luna. It made perfect sense, and yet somehow it hadn’t even crossed my mind that people would assume that I’d finally put an end to the *due destini*… even though I hadn’t.

“Do you mind if I ask my question?” My voice came out way meeker than I’d intended, but they’d completely thrown me for a loop, and I was trying hard to recover.

Cesaries nodded kindly. “Of course.”

“I want to know if sire bonds exist? Because someone told me that they do, and I thought who better to confirm than the council, right?” I laughed, trying to lighten the mood. To their credit, the council flashed polite smiles… Well, most of them, anyway.

Cesaries’s eyes widened. “Oh… Is Greyson thinking of turning you?”

“Oh… um. Yes. He is. We’ve talked about it for a while. Just weighing our options, you know. I just want to be… um… prepared? Just in case it happens. But nothing’s set in stone. Just wondering.” I was talking too much, and I wondered if they could tell how nervous I was.

Cesaries stroked his chin, thinking. “Sire bonds do happen sometimes. Not always, especially if the wolf doing the turning isn’t a very strong werewolf to begin with. Though, some theorize that the bond is always there but just so weak that neither notices it… And then it just fades away naturally without ever calling any attention to itself.”

I frowned. “So… That means that the sire bond is real? Not a myth?”

“No, not a myth. It rose up naturally as a way to control new werewolves so that they didn’t go on a rampage as they adjusted to their new state of being. It certainly wouldn’t do to have newly made werewolves running amok, hurting humans and drawing attention to the werewolf world at large, now would it?” Cesaries let out a congenial laugh, and the other council members laughed along with him. I tried to laugh, but it came out as more of a whimper, and the council members shot me curious looks.

I cleared my throat to cover it, my cheeks burning with embarrassment. “Cool… So, could a sire bond make the sire and the new wolf feel… supernaturally attracted to each other? Could it make them… intensely connected?”

Cesaries laughed as the council murmured in excited discussion behind him. “Ah, yes. We have heard of instances like this many times, and allegedly it can develop gradually over time. Mostly when the werewolf doing the turning is a very strong Alpha. However, you don’t have to worry about any of that, as you’re already mated to Greyson.”

I nodded. “Yeah, yeah, sure, of course.” Now I was worrying more than ever. Everything that was being said—from Lucian’s information down to Cesaries’s knowledge—implied that what was happening between Elle and Greyson was definitely a supernatural pull. And Greyson being a strong Alpha made it all the stronger.

*But why the delayed reaction? Why is it getting stronger suddenly?*

When I really thought about it, though, Elle had always been really attached to Greyson. In the beginning, she’d made it pretty clear that she was into him, so maybe that had been the sire bond at work all along.

“Cali, you seem to have something else on your mind… Please feel free to ask. Our knowledge is your knowledge,” Cesaries said.

“Um… well…” I stalled, trying to think of how to put my next question without arousing suspicion. “Do you think there could be some sort of delayed reaction with the sire bond? Like a sire bond that gains intensity over time… or one that lies dormant and then flares up after a few weeks?”

Cesaries was eyeing me closely now. “Why would you ask that?” He leaned close and sniffed me. “You’re not turned. Why would that be on your mind?”

“I don’t know,” I said quickly. “Just curious, I guess?” I uttered an awkward laugh and gave a weak wave. “Well, thank you for your help!” I grabbed Elle’s hand and speed walked away.

“So, it *is* the sire bond!” Elle said once we were safely back at our tents. “That makes so much sense. That’s great, isn’t it, Cali? Now we know what’s going on! Now we don’t have to be confused anymore!”

“Yeah, it seems that way, but I’m still confused about the delayed intensity thing. I wish I could’ve asked more without giving away the truth.” Cesaries had seemed nice enough, but as I’d asked more questions, I definitely saw the wheels turning in his head. I didn’t want to risk getting Greyson in any trouble—or exposing his private business to the council.

Elle nodded. “Maybe we just do some more research? Just to make sure we really understand what’s going on?”

I nodded just as I heard Lola calling our names. “Elle, let’s just keep this between us for the time being, okay? At least until we find out more.”

Elle nodded. “Okay. It will be our little secret.”

I left Elle in her tent and intercepted Lola as she came jogging over. “I’ve been looking all over for you, Cali! I thought you said you were going to Big Mac’s tent for the *due destini* test thing. Did that not happen?”

“Sorry,” I said. “I meant to tell you about it, but then I got distracted talking to Elle.”

Lola looked disappointed. “Oh, so you told her first?”

“Oh, no. I haven’t told anyone yet. There isn’t anything to tell, really. Big Mac did the spell and said that the *due destini* is unchanged.”

Lola’s face fell. “I’m sorry to hear that, Cali. I know you really wanted to know if there was another reason for Xavier’s weird behavior.”

“Yeah, I guess it’s just become easy to blame so much on the *due destini*, but I might have to accept that in this case, it has nothing to do with it. It’s just Xavier being weird for other reasons. Reasons that he won’t tell me about.”

An odd expression crossed Lola’s face. “Although… I was thinking. Maybe he’s trying to protect you in his weird Xavier way.”

“What do you mean?”

Lola shrugged. “I don’t know… Maybe Xavier was worried that you not choosing would make you go mad like Cassandra did. Maybe he’s doing what he’s doing to force you to choose.”

Rage gathered in my chest as I let Lola’s theory sink in. If that was the truth, then I was really pissed. How dare he play martyr and not even give me the opportunity to make my own choice? I was tired of this. I didn’t care anymore if he didn’t want to talk. I was going to make him.

**Episode 3878**

**Xavier**

I crossed my arms as Greyson settled into his seat and tried to talk to the Alphas again. I was trying to pick up on the overall vibe of the table, but from what I could tell, it was a pretty mixed bag. It was me, Greyson, and Mace on one side of the table, and the five other Alphas on the other, and all of them were wearing their best poker faces.

“Listen, we don’t want to get on the Bitterfangs’ bad side,” said Ethaniel. “They’re not the type of enemy you want to have, especially if you want peace for your pack—which I do.”

“I get that,” Greyson said. “All we want is to show Malakai that it’s not worth the trouble to try and go up against our packs if we have the support of most of the region’s werewolves.”

Another one of the Alphas looked uncertain as he spoke up. “And how are we supposed to know that you’re the packs to bet on? I’m not interested in picking the losing side.”

“Fuck that,” I said, unable to hide my anger. “This shouldn’t be talked about like it’s a bet. It’s a moral thing. A values thing. Malakai is a bully at best and a tyrant at worst. Do you really want to take the side of someone like him?”

The Alpha in the middle had been silent the entire time, and he finally piped up. “Perhaps if you did something to show your strength to us, some kind of proof that you’re the right packs to get behind, we might be convinced to back you.”

“And how do you suppose we do that?” Greyson asked.

“That’s up to you. You’re strong? Well, prove it. I don’t think that’s too much to ask. Sorry, I can’t just take your word for it. I have to make an informed decision for the safety and position of my pack.”

I leaned back in my chair, considering his proposal. “It’s not like we can have a mock fight here. Violence isn’t allowed.”

Right then, a cheer rose up from the Ludis game field.

“So, win the tournament,” one of the other Alphas said. “That’s how you can prove it.”

“Excuse me?” Greyson said.

“I said, win the tournament. It’ll show us that you have strength and strategy on your side. Then, maybe we’ll consider backing you.”

The other four Alphas nodded their agreement.

Greyson, Mace, and I shared a look. “Fine,” I said with a shrug. “We’ll win the tournament, but we have to up the stakes. None of this ‘we’ll consider it’ bullshit. We need you to agree that if we win, you’ll take our side in any conflict that comes up between us and the Bitterfang pack. Deal?”

“Deal,” the Alphas said in unison.

We all stood and shook on it.

“Thanks for standing on our side,” Greyson said to me as we walked away.

I shrugged, already feeling uncomfortable. “Yeah, well, I have the Samaras to think about. They’re in on this too.”

Greyson scowled. “About that… We haven’t had a chance to talk since last night.”

Before Greyson could get a word out, Cali came storming over and poked a finger into my chest. “You and me. We’re talking. Now.” Then she turned and stormed off without waiting for me to reply.

I turned to look at Greyson, who was scowling after Cali.

“Listen, I’m not—”

“Talk to her,” Greyson said gruffly. “You owe her that, at least.”

“What? You of all people shouldn’t want me to talk to her. Isn’t this what you wanted? Having Cali all to yourself? You’re not making any sense. It’s like you’ll do anything just to disagree with me.”

“This isn’t about me. This is about her. She’s hurting, and if she needs you to talk to her, talk to her.”

I wanted to say no, I needed to say no, and I was about to say no, but then I just ended up nodding and turning to follow her.

*I’m making a huge mistake if I go talk to her right now. It’s not like anything has changed. She’s going to ask me a bunch of questions that I can’t answer, and we’ll end up right in the same place that we’ve always been.*

I couldn’t help but reach into my pocket and feel the medal as I thought about Adéluce and how she’d hurt Cali when we’d kissed last night. What if that happened again? What would she do to her this time?

*I can’t do this. I can’t go talk to her. Not after what happened last night.*

But despite all of my internal protests, I found myself standing in front of Cali’s tent. Before I knew it, I was moving inside and standing in front of her. She had her arms crossed over her chest, and she wasted no time lighting into me.

“Tell me that this isn’t some stupid martyr thing. Tell me that you’re not acting like this to take away my right to choose between you and Greyson. Tell me that you’re not sacrificing yourself for my safety when I didn’t ask you to.”

My heart clenched with hope.

*She knows? How the hell does she know?*

I opened my mouth and prepared to deny it without actually talking about Adéluce, but before I could say a word, Cali started pacing back and forth in front of me.

“I get it, Xavier. I know the story, too. Cassandra went mad because she couldn’t choose. That’s why everyone’s so intrigued by the whole *due destini* thing. They think it might make me crazy one day—but that’s *my* problem, not yours. Besides, I know my own mind. I know what I can take and what I can’t. That’s not going to happen to me, at least not right now. And I can’t believe that you think breaking my heart would just make me choose. If it were that easy, don’t you think I would have done it by now? I don’t like living like this! It’s torture! Don’t you get it? I would do anything to be through with this.”

I realized then that she didn’t know. She was talking about the *due destini*, not Adéluce. I vaulted forward and grabbed her arms to stop her from pacing and turned her to face me. “Cali, listen to me. You need to stop.”

“Just tell me *when*!” she wailed, tears forming in her eyes. “Tell me when you fell for Ava again. Please.”

I tried to figure out a lie, anything that would stop her torment and strike me from her heart forever so that she could finally move on, but before I could, a thin shock of blood began to run out of her nose.

*No, this can’t be happening.*

I let go, flinging her away like she was a live wire. “I can’t do this.” I turned and left the tent, ignoring Cali’s voice as she called after me. I raced out of the campground and tore into the forest, and I kept running and running until I felt light-headed.

“Adéluce!” I screamed at the sky with no one else around to hear me. “Adéluce, answer me! Stop doing this. Stop hurting Cali! She doesn’t deserve this! Hurt *me* if you have to hurt someone. Hurt *me*! I’m doing everything you asked! I’m not the one who is trying to break your rules and getting her to come to me. If you’re paying any attention at all you’d see that I’m pushing her away. Over and over again!”

Finally, a laughing voice echoed in my head. *You’re not doing enough, Xavier. You need to break all trust with Cali, remember?*

I whirled around, clenching and unclenching my fists. I wanted her dead, but the witch wasn’t anywhere to be seen. “This isn’t fair!” I yelled, knowing that she didn’t care about what was fair, but unable to stop myself from saying it. “Haven’t we all suffered enough?”

*Not nearly enough, Xavier. But, if you really want to prove how desperate you are, I’ll give you a chance. Win the Ludis tournament.*

I scowled. “*What?*”

Adéluce laughed. *If you win the entire tournament, I will no longer hurt Cali if she tries to speak to you.*

My breath caught in my throat. I’d seen how easy it was for Adéluce to hurt Cali. She’d done it over and over again, so it was hard to believe that she would just stop if I won a Ludis tournament. It didn’t make sense.

*But, Xavier, the other terms of our deal still remain. Nothing else changes. But I’ll take mercy on you. I’ll leave Cali be if she comes to you of her own accord—*if *you win.*

I wanted to believe her, but I just didn’t trust it. “You mean it? All I have to do is win the tournament and you won’t hurt her anymore if she tries to talk to me?”

*Yes, that’s all.*

I knew that I shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth, but Adéluce’s promise just didn’t track with anything she’d said or done up until now. “What’s the catch?”

Adéluce chuckled. *I’m a sports fan.*

I shook my head. “I’ll take it. I’ll take the deal. If it gets me time with Cali, then it’s worth it.”

*I thought you would. May the best wolf win.*

“Don’t worry. I will,” I said. I was so elated that I nearly cried tears of joy. If I won this tournament, I’d be one step closer to fixing things and breaking this curse Adéluce had put on me and Cali. It would buy me even more time to figure out how to destroy her, and in the meantime, Cali wouldn’t suffer for merely trying to talk to me.

Ava’s voice rose from behind me, and I whipped around to face her as she asked, “Who are you talking to out here?”

**Episode 3879**

**Xavier**

“What are you doing here?” I asked as Ava walked toward me, confusion marring her features. “Did you follow me?”

Ava frowned. “No… I just picked up your scent trail and was confused about why you’d come all the way out here. I got concerned. Sorry for worrying about you, I guess.”

I could see the hurt in her eyes, and I did feel kind of guilty for upsetting her. But I couldn’t deal with her right now. I was afraid that she was going to stick her nose somewhere it didn’t belong and get hurt by Adéluce. Now that I’d achieved even a small bit of leeway with the vampire-witch, I didn’t want anything to interfere and ruin it. Besides, it wasn’t just Cali that I had to protect—it was everyone around me. Every single person I cared about was in danger as long as Adéluce had her claws in me. I just wished Ava would quit pressing me about it.

“Why don’t you stop following me around like a goddamn puppy and let me do what I need to do?” I stomped back toward the campground, and Ava did the exact opposite of what I asked: she followed me.

“Well, maybe I’d stop following you if I could stop worrying about your ass. And I’d stop worrying about you if you told me the freaking truth about whatever’s going on with you!”

“Would you stop pushing the issue? There’s nothing going on! There’s nothing for me to tell you, Ava, so just drop it, will you?? I just don’t talk about my feelings all the time like you seem to want me to!”

“Xavier, can you please get your head out of your ass and realize that I just want to help you? That’s all! If you keep going on like this, even I won’t be able to stay by your side.” With that, she stormed past me and returned to the summit campgrounds, leaving me behind.

I sighed and dropped my head into my hands. It was all becoming too fucking much. Now I was even pushing Ava away, but there was nothing else I could do.

*I just need a chance to give some sort of clue to all the people I love. A way for them to figure out that Adéluce is still alive and threatening me, without actually telling them. But how? If I knew how to do it, I would have already done it a million times over.*

I shoved my hand into my pocket and my fingers brushed against the medal again. I pulled it out and stared at it. By now I knew the symbol etched across its surface as well as I knew myself. Adéluce’s calling card.

*Maybe if I can just get this to Cali… All I would have to say to her is, “This one is new.”*

“This one is new,” I recited, practicing it over and over again. My stomach jumped with excitement. If I could say it now, what would stop me from saying it when it mattered? Maybe this was the way! Cali was so smart that she’d definitely figure it out.

*She has to figure it out. This is my only hope.*

With a new flame of hope surging in my belly, I raced toward the Ludis field. It felt good to have made some progress. I was going to win the tournament—I had to—and then I would be able to talk to Cali about the medal without anything happening to her.

No sooner had I stepped onto the field than Marissa came running up to me. “Xavier, where have you been? We’re up next!”

I pumped my fist, feeling energized for the first time in a long time. “Let’s do this!” I ran out onto the field, totally amped up. We were going up against the Cobalt pack, and my excitement grew as I sized up the competition. From what I could see, we would be able to take them easily. I realized that this was going to be a good bit of stress relief. I was going to give it my all and blow off some steam.

The whistle blew, and I thundered out onto the field. Within a few minutes, I got in a few good tackles that advanced our position. I spotted the ball in the hands of an opposing team member, and I rushed him with everything I had in me, sending him flying.

A whistle blew, and the referee screamed, “Unnecessary roughness!”

“Calm down!” Ava said, jogging up beside me. “You’re acting like this is an actual battle. It’s a game.”

I gritted my teeth and continued.

Before long, it was halftime, and the Samaras were winning—thanks to me being so intense about the game. Marissa, Geraint, and Jesse gave me a high five as we regrouped, but Ava simply eyed me.

“What’s gotten into you?” she hissed so the others couldn’t hear. “First, you’re talking to yourself out in the woods, and now you’re in here acting like you’re on the front lines. What gives?”

“Nothing!” I shot back. “I’m fine. I’m just enjoying some friendly competition.”

Ava shook her head. “That’s not it. But what’s the point in even asking you? It’s not like you’re going to tell me.”

“Now you’re getting it,” I said just as the whistle blew announcing that halftime was over.

“Okay everyone, shake hands! Let’s have a nicer match during this half, okay?” The ref shot me a pointed look, and I scowled back at him. I wished everyone would get off my back.

As we moved past the other team to shake hands, one of the Cobalt team members stopped me. “Hey, you’re Xavier Evers, right?”

I frowned at him, searching my memory banks to see if I knew him. I was pretty sure I’d never run into anyone from the Cobalt pack, but I’d met a lot of people in my travels, so it was possible I had and just forgotten. “Who wants to know?”

“My name’s Porter. I’m the Cobalt Alpha. I just… I see it. You and your brother look very similar. Act very similar, too.”

My eyes moved to Greyson, who was watching us from the sidelines, his gaze focused and intense.

“Oh no, I mean Colton,” Porter said quickly.

Oh.

I looked at Porter with new eyes, surprised. I hadn’t expected him to know my twin. “Nice that you know my twin brother, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to take it easy on you guys out there.”

Porter smiled. “Would never dream of it.”

The game started up again, and I was even more into it than during the first half. I shoulder checked one of the Cobalts as he made a rush for the goal, knocking the wind out of him—which resulted in yet another foul. I didn’t even pause. I just kept moving, my mind focused on nothing else but winning and getting to Cali so that I could finally put an end to the torment that Adéluce was putting me through.

*Will you fucking cool it?* Ava’s mind link filtered into my brain. *Calm the fuck down, or you’re out of the game!*

*Quit worrying about me. Just focus on winning, Ava. You should be good at that by now*, I shot back.

I faked left and slammed right into Porter, and he went down, bones rattling. The whistle blew, and the ref gave me a red card.

“You’re out!” the ref screamed, jamming his finger at me.

“That’s a bullshit call!” I yelled, getting right up in the ref’s face. “Take it back! This is what the game’s all about! If they can’t take it, then they shouldn’t be playing!” I was so mad I felt like I was about to take the guy’s head off.

*He can’t do this to me. Not right now. I’m so close. I have to be in the game. I have to win!*

I wasn’t sure, but I could almost swear that I heard Adéluce’s laughter echoing in my head. I couldn’t tell if I was imagining it or not, but it was getting to me either way.

“Get the hell off my field!” the ref said, his voice low and menacing. He was a big guy; I was bigger, but still. I had a feeling that if I didn’t move my ass, we were going to come to blows… And then the game might be forfeit.

“Fuck you,” I grumbled under my breath as I stormed off the field.

Luckily, we were already up 11-8 and time was running out. I was biting my nails as the last seconds ticked down, and then the whistle blew and the game was over. We won. I nearly collapsed with relief. My hot head hadn’t ruined our chance. Yet. I was going to need to be better, stronger, more levelheaded the next round. Whoever we were going up against next, we had to win.

The Samaras were cheering and jumping around, celebrating our victory when an announcement crackled over the loudspeaker. “That’s it for the games today. Thanks everyone for making today an amazing day for Ludis! Tomorrow, join us for the semi-finals. The first game will be the Samaras…” The announcer shuffled through a sheaf of papers, his head down. “Tomorrow will be the Samaras versus the Redwoods!”

**Episode 3880**

I’d gotten a bunch of blood spatters on my shirt and had to change it, making me late to the Ludis fields. I’d never been the type to get nosebleeds, and it was strange for me to just get one out of nowhere, but maybe it was the weather or the altitude or something.

The nosebleed wasn’t my main concern, anyway. No, what was way worse than a bloody nose was the way Xavier had walked out on our conversation… again. Why was it that we couldn’t have a normal conversation without him being evasive, angry, or weird? Now I was more convinced than ever that there was a much bigger reason why he’d broken up with me.

I wasn’t naïve. I might have been a virgin when Xavier and I met, but my friends had experienced breakups before. I’d seen how those breakups had gone down. Even if the guy was super mean, they never acted quite as strangely as Xavier had been acting.

Lola came racing over as I walked onto the field. “Oh my god, did you just hear what they announced?” Lola looked like she was about to jump right out of her skin.

“No, what?” I braced myself. I was of the mind that no news was good news, so if Lola had something to report, it was probably going to be something bad—or at least something that would complicate my life even more.

“Oh… um…” Lola suddenly looked really hesitant to say whatever was on the tip of her tongue. Luckily, Artemis came walking up only a second later.

“The Redwoods and the Samaras are going against each other tomorrow in the Ludis semi-finals,” she said bluntly. “Crazy, right?”

I felt my heart drop.

*Why does that sound like it’s going to be an absolute trainwreck??*

I looked around for Greyson and spotted him talking to Mace and a couple of other Blue Bloods. I could only just overhear what they were saying.

“I was kind of sad that we lost our second match, but then I heard that one of the other semi-finalists is Malakai and the Bitterfangs,” Mace said.

Greyson nodded. “Seems like he’ll be the one to beat at the finals.”

Mace nodded. “Yeah, right after you have to beat Xavier.”

Greyson caught my eye and smiled. “Hey, you. Where’ve you been?”

“Oh, nowhere,” I said. “Just taking my time and gathering my thoughts.” I decided not to tell him about the bloody nose just yet. I didn’t want him to worry. I didn’t think it was a big deal, but I had a feeling that Greyson would flip if he knew that it had happened while I was talking to Xavier.

“Did you get to talk to him? What did he say?” Greyson asked.

I couldn’t even get the words out, so I just shook my head. Greyson’s eyes flashed with anger, and I held up a hand. “Do *not* take this out on him on the field. This is between me and him. I don’t need you to hurt him on my behalf.”

Greyson frowned. “Fine.”

I looked at him closely, worried that even though he’d said he wouldn’t, he still would. The look in his eye said it all. He was not happy with his brother, and I didn’t know if he was going to be able to hold back when they saw each other again.

Ravi came walking over, drink in hand. “Hey, all. You’re coming to the end-of-day mixer, right? It’s about to start. I thought it was going to be at the *end* of the day, like at *night*. But what they meant was after the tournament ended for the day.” Ravi’s voice was high; he seemed a bit frantic, like he was starting to freak out. He’d put a lot into making sure the mixer went off without a hitch, so I understood why he was feeling the pressure.

“It’ll be okay Ravi,” I assured him, patting his back. “You organized a really great mixer, and everyone’s going to love it, and we’re all going to have a good time.”

Ravi frowned. “Do you think people will still want the glowsticks even though it’s not dark outside?”

I gave him a sweet smile. “Of course! They’ll still look great.” Ravi rushed off, muttering something about tasting the punch.

“We have to go to the mixer,” I said, turning to Greyson. “We have to support him. Let him know that we appreciate all the time and effort he put into this party. Plus, it’ll be fun.”

Greyson nodded. “Sure, yeah. He took this on for me, so the least I can do is attend.”

I took Greyson’s hand, and we strolled over to where the mixer was already in full swing. Big Mac was there, passing out drinks and taking money hand over fist. I didn’t think I’d seen her so happy in weeks—maybe ever. Greyson and I drifted by the welcome table where there was a massive stack of glowsticks. Dutifully, Greyson and I each took one and held them up so that Ravi could see that we had them. He threw us a grateful smile.

“You want a drink?” Greyson asked, guiding me to the beverage table.

“No, I’m good,” I said. I was still hungover from the previous night and didn’t even want to *think* about drinking anything else.

I spotted Rishika and some of the Blue Bloods mingling, and I started to head over to them, but then the music started blaring and some of the wolves got up and moved to the dance floor. One of them bumped into me on their way, and then I bumped into another wolf, making her spill her drink.

I started to apologize, and then Ava turned around with a scowl, holding her hand away from her body so that the liquid wouldn’t get on her dress, which of course looked absolutely amazing on her.

“Oh, hi, Ava.” I felt super awkward with Ava now, and for good reason. We hadn’t run into each other since the whole Xavier-Alpha thing had been announced the night before.

I started to turn and walk away before any painful small talk ensued, but Ava reached out and grabbed my arm. “Wait, Cali. We should talk,” she said.

I frowned down at her hand, and she quickly pulled it back, which kind of surprised me. I couldn’t ever remember Ava caring all that much about my comfort.

I crossed my arms, trying to remain as normal and nonchalant as she was trying to be. “What is it?” I didn’t recognize the icy tone in my own voice, but I didn’t mind it, either.

Ava sighed. “I know how all of this looks.”

I scowled. “It looks like you slept with my mate behind my back and convinced him to leave me and his whole pack behind,” I said simply. I wasn’t sure what else she could possibly have to say. Xavier had made it clear that he wanted nothing to do with me or the Redwoods, and so I didn’t see any reason why she and I needed to hash anything out.

Ava nodded. “See? That’s exactly why I wanted to talk. It’s not how it looks. Not exactly.”

I scowled again, unable to help myself, but then I realized that if I wasn’t going to get anything resembling a straight answer out of Xavier, then maybe I’d get one from Ava… Although when Xavier had initially left, Ava hadn’t been all that forthcoming, either. I wondered what had changed between then and now.

“Okay. So how did it happen, then?” I asked. There was a very small part of me that didn’t even want to know. I was afraid that it might be worse than I’d ever imagined.

“I don’t know why Xavier broke up with you. We’ve grown… closer. We’re still mates—that’s a fact.”

I hated that, but I couldn’t deny it. She was right, that was a fact… which was what made this situation all the more complicated.

“Alpha is the role that Xavier was always meant to have,” Ava continued. “He probably felt stifled with the Redwoods under Greyson’s rule.”

I hated the sound of that. And I hated it even more coming from Ava. “You’re making it sound like Greyson is a tyrant when he isn’t. He has rules, but what Alpha doesn’t? He’s a fair Alpha… Though I will admit that it has often been difficult for Xavier to accept Greyson’s role as Alpha.”

“Why should he? It’s always been his destiny,” she said. “You would do well to respect that, Cali. He made his choice.”

That hit me hard. Probably because there was more than a shred of truth to it. *Do I need to try to accept that Xavier broke up with me because he doesn’t want me? Is it pathetic for me to keep chasing him, begging him to talk to me and give me an explanation?*

Ava suddenly looked past me and went rigid.

*What now? Don’t tell me more bad news is coming my way. I think I’ve handled all I can for the day.*

“Shit, what the fuck is he doing here?” Ava said.

I turned to follow her gaze and was shocked to come face-to-face with Knox.

**Episode 3881**

**Ava**

Knox was sauntering through the mixer like he *hadn’t* been ostracized for ruining our entire pack. In fact, he was acting like he owned the place, heading toward me as if he didn’t have a care in the world.

I couldn’t believe this was happening

I couldn’t believe it was fucking *real*.

“… Ava?” Cali had been talking in the background, but her voice only registered now.

My pulse was ringing in my ears, and my throat was dry. Was this panic?

“Ava, are you okay?” Cali was asking. “Do you need backup, here?”

I frowned. I wasn’t used to Cali acting all sympathetic toward me. I didn’t need her pity, and I *definitely* didn’t need her help.

“It’s fine,” I said, shaking my head. “I can handle this.”

I turned to face Knox, steeling myself. Oddly enough, Cali didn’t move from my side. We both stood there, waiting. And then Knox was in front of me, pausing to look at me up and down with disdain. His arrogant expression made me want to punch him.

He sneered at me. “Aren’t you going to greet me, cousin?”

I kept my voice even. The last thing the pack needed was a scene. “Who let you out of your cage, Knox?”

He scoffed. “Are you saying I’m not welcome here?”

I looked around, swallowing thickly. “If you escaped, don’t expect me to help you.”

Knox laughed. It didn’t sound genuine. “If I escaped, do you really think the first place I’d come would be here? The site of my future trial?” His gaze flicked to the side, and he took a few steps backward.

I’d been so absorbed by Knox’s presence that I hadn’t noticed the two big, hulking wolves flanking him. Like guards. I felt a twinge of relief when I realized that Knox wasn’t *attending* the mixer—he was being walked past the mixer by his guards. As if he were a dog. My shoulders relaxed a bit with this new piece of information, yet at the same time, another feeling started to grow inside me. I felt… sorry for Knox.

I felt sad that it had come to this.

Quietly, deep down, a voice inside my head asked if I would ever learn that all my family had ever done was betray me. Learning was subjective, though. Learning was hard to take up. Following already established patterns was easier, and my wolf’s instincts to stay loyal to family usually prevailed.

I didn’t love my cousin, but I also didn’t want him to be punished too harshly. I didn’t want him to subjected to severe pain, or lose a limb, or be so viciously humiliated that he wasn’t able to come back from it. He was still family, after all.

I was about to tell him just that when Knox leaned closer.

“I heard you gave our pack to Xavier Evers,” he spat. “That was a huge mistake, cousin.”

His words sounded like a threat, and my hackles rose immediately.

I should’ve expected this. When would I learn?

“Your opinions are no longer relevant to the Samara pack, Knox,” I said. “Xavier will be a far better Alpha than you ever were.”

Knox’s eyes narrowed, and he growled. He made a move to take a swing at me. Before I could duck, the guards were on it. They grabbed him by the arms, yanking him away.

“Let me go, you bastards!” Knox shouted. “Do you know who I am?”

My cheeks burned as the guards dragged Knox away. There were people here who *did* know who Knox was. My cousin. My family. My shame. I was so embarrassed, I wanted to disappear. Why did this have to happen here? My pack already looked weak with its merry-go-round of Alphas, and with Knox’s trial, and now this? Why the fuck did he have to make everything worse?

“Are you okay?” Cali’s hand was gentle on my arm.

I flinched, my embarrassment doubling down at the empathy in her tone. The pity. I hated that she’d seen me like this.

“Of course I’m okay,” I snapped. “And even if I weren’t, I wouldn’t need *you* to help me.”

Cali winced, taking a step back. This wasn’t her fault, and yet I’d still been a bitch to her. Guilt hit me hard, and then I got even angrier. What was this power that Cali had over people, even me, to make them want to take care of her? *This* was why Xavier had chosen her in the past. She could create a connection with anyone. And with Xavier being her mate… He hadn’t stood a chance.

“I don’t need you to pretend to be my friend,” I told her, crossing my arms. “Just go back to your pack and leave me alone.”

She blinked up at me in shock, opening her mouth to speak, but I was done here. I stormed off, away from her. But the moment I was alone, I felt even worse. My head cleared, and I realized that I’d lashed out at Cali because she was just… *there*. Wrong place, wrong time. Objectively, she hadn’t deserved that kind of treatment, and I felt like…

Like I should apologize.

Still, it wasn’t my responsibility to cater to Cali’s feelings. She had enough people doing that. Everybody always cared for her, protected her, loved her. Cali was so loved by her pack that it made my stomach twist with jealousy.

No. I wasn’t going to fucking apologize to her. She could fuck off. In fact, I wished I could go back to the time when I’d just purely hated her and hadn’t known her as a person. I scoffed under my breath, shaking my head—I needed to forget about Cali, snap out of this, and focus on what was actually important.

I needed to go find Xavier and let him know Knox was here. I had a sinking feeling that the outcome of Knox’s trial could undermine Xavier’s legitimacy as Samara Alpha. I felt responsible for this—I should have predicted it would happen. After all, I’d known that my cousin’s trial was going to happen at the summit.

Knox deserved to be punished, I knew that. He’d done horrible, illegal things—not the least of which had been dumping me in a fucking pit when I’d disagreed with him. Plus, he’d had his cronies take those werewolf steroids, which definitely went against the council’s rules. Knox had done all that on his own, and it wasn’t my fault that he’d behaved that way.

So why did I feel responsible for him?

Why did I feel so conflicted after seeing him paraded around like he was less-than?

Family bonds ran deep in both wolves and werewolves, but a line needed to be drawn somewhere. Right? Xavier hadn’t found it difficult to hate Greyson when they’d first met. The way he felt toward his brother right now, though, seemed to be much murkier.

Up ahead, I saw Xavier across the way, talking to Marissa. He hated talking about feelings, but maybe he’d be able to help me clear up mine regarding Knox. At the very least, he needed to know about the shit Knox’s trial had the potential to stir up. He wouldn’t be happy, but I trusted him to figure it out.

I’d started to walk toward him when someone shouted my name

“Ava!”

I turned, my mouth dropping open in shock when I saw my aunt Leona. Knox’s mom. My father’s sister. I hadn’t seen her in what felt like forever. She looked regal and imposing as she walked toward me. Anxiety flooded me when I spotted my uncle Jason—the Alpha of the Sycamore pack—in the background.

I felt the sudden urge to bolt. That wouldn’t fly, though. Knox’s mother had almost reached me, her gaze fixed on mine. I hadn’t seen Leona in a really long time. She reminded me so much of my father. It was jarring—like seeing a ghost.

I was intimidated and in awe, all at once.

I pushed the feelings down.

“So, it’s true,” Leona said when she stopped in front of me. She took me in. “You *are* alive.”

I nodded awkwardly. What can you really say when someone brings up your miraculous resurrection?

“Welcome back,” my aunt said, but the words were stiff. Almost like I’d come back from the dry cleaner’s and not the spirit world.

“Thanks,” I said quietly.

“Being dead must’ve been traumatizing,” Leona said in an apathetic tone. “I’m thinking that’s why you’re acting like this.”

I swallowed uneasily. “Like what?”

Leona pressed her lips together, reaching to take my hand. She squeezed. “I beg you, Ava. Please reconsider Knox’s trial. Speak up on his behalf.”

“The things that Knox did—”

“He’s still your blood,” Leona interrupted. “What would your father say if he knew you didn’t stand by your cousin? What would your brother think?”

Her words hit me right in the chest.

“You know that family comes first,” Leona said, her gaze boring into mine. “Don’t let them convict him, Ava.”

**Episode 3882**

After Ava yelled at me and stormed off, I felt uncomfortable and hot. What the hell was wrong with her? Had Xavier been giving her lectures on how to act like a moody asshole teenager? Yeah, she and I weren’t best friends or anything, but I’d thought—

I didn’t know what I’d thought.

*This is the woman who’s sleeping with your mate, Cali! What did you expect?*

My face was flushed with anger, my skin prickling from the heat. I took off my leather blazer, and the cool air felt good on my bare arms. I needed to chill. Literally. Knox was here, which couldn’t be easy for Ava. She was upset, so she’d taken it out on me, and—

*And I swore to myself that I wouldn’t let Ava affect me anymore.*

Was I accomplishing that? Nope. I had to pull myself together. Besides, I was fine. I didn’t need to make peace with Ava if Ava wasn’t willing to participate. What I needed to do was mingle enough that I didn’t seem antisocial and try to enjoy myself at this mixer.

Taking a deep, determined breath, I walked over to the mixer counter to find something to drink.

“Shit shit shit!”

When I turned, I saw Ravi rushing by.

“Hey, are you okay?” I asked.

He turned to me, blinking a bunch of times, like the question hadn’t registered. And then he blurted out, “The glowsticks aren’t working! I tried to break one, and I think they’re all broken. Even when it gets dark, it’ll be a total bust…”

“Wow, I’m sorry, Ravi,” I said. I know he’d worked really hard on all of this. If all the glowsticks really were broken, that would suck. “Don’t worry. People are having a good time without them so far. And if they don’t work later, they won’t even notice.” I gestured around. “They seem to be enjoying the dancing regardless.”

Ravi’s frazzled expression softened slightly as he looked at the dance floor. “That’s true, actually. Maybe I should go talk to the DJ about the playlist, though—the Nightshade pack picked some snoozers.”

As he ran off, I chuckled under my breath. His enthusiasm was endearing, and he’d definitely done his best, here. Still smiling a little, I turned back to the drinks. I’d just decided to get something non-alcoholic after my hangover when I saw that a few people had gathered around the table. Paige from the Aspen pack—the overly friendly Luna who enjoyed swinging partners—was one of them, along with two other beautiful female wolves.

Paige smiled, striding toward me. “Cali, hi. How have you been?”

That was a very loaded question that I was *not* going to answer truthfully.

“All is well!” I said. “How are you?”

Paige prattled on about how nice it was to be here with all the other packs. I realized she hadn’t actually told me how she was. I wondered whether to ask about her attempts to get pregnant, but I decided against it, given that the last time we’d discussed the matter, Paige had said some weird things about the *due destini*.

*Let’s just avoid any more uncomfortable conversations…*

“That’s great,” I said to Paige, agreeing with whatever it was she’d been saying about the summit. Then I turned to the two women standing next to her.

Paige laughed, noticing her gaff. “Oh, I’m so sorry! That’s so rude of me.” She wrapped an arm around the taller of the two women. “This is Geena from the Nightshade pack, and Rowena from the Cobalt pack.”

“Nice to meet you both,” I said. “I’m Cali from the Redwood pack.”

“We know,” Rowena said, smiling a little. Hopefully it was a friendly smile.

Paige’s voice got weirdly louder. “Rowena is a Luna, but she’s not a wolf either!”

A fizzle of excitement bubbled up inside me. Did this mean that I could get the mark *without* exploding into a million sparkly pieces?

“Correct.” Eyebrows arched, Rowena gave Paige a look. “I’m a witch.”

There were a dozen questions I wanted to ask Rowena, but this was mixed company. It definitely felt like I shouldn’t be talking about my strange non-Luna situation in front of these people—I definitely didn’t want to draw attention to my fake Luna mark.

Nevertheless, Rowena had to have a Luna mark, right? She was probably the only person I’d ever met who knew anything about getting a Luna mark without being a wolf. So if I could just get a minute alone with her—

“Anyway, let’s go get drinks,” Paige said, grabbing Geena’s hand. Geena nodded, and Paige turned to us. “What are you girlies in the mood for?”

“Surprise me,” Rowena said, and Paige was clearly delighted.

I opened my mouth to tell Paige that I didn’t want to be surprised because a) I was too stressed out for surprises, and b) I didn’t actually want anything to drink. But Paige was already sauntering away.

“I’ll bring you the best cocktail they have, Cali!” she called over her shoulder.

Rowena and I were left alone.

I’d gotten what I wanted, so, naturally, I was now screaming inside my head.

*How do I ask Rowena if she has a Luna mark? She has to have one, right? Otherwise, she wouldn’t be her pack’s official Luna. If a witch can get it successfully with no issues, that could mean that I might be able to do it as well!*

Okay, I had to ask her. But I also had to be super chill and ask her without making things awkward.

I cleared my throat, steadied myself, and opened my mouth. “Um.”

Eloquent.

“You know Colton Evers, right?” Rowena asked, not missing a beat.

I hadn’t thought of Colton or Maya in a while, so her question caught me by surprise. “Of course I know him. I’m…” I chuckled awkwardly. “Well, I’m mated to both his brothers.”

Rowena raised an eyebrow.

“You know, it’s actually a pretty boring story,” I said quickly, moving along. “I’m guessing you know Colton, too, then?”

Rowena scoffed. “Unfortunately.”

I stared at Rowena, took in her sarcastic, fed-up expression, and burst out laughing. She looked startled before grinning back at me.

“Sorry,” I said. “Colton is just—”

“A lot?”

I snorted. “That’s one way of putting it.”

She and I shared a knowing smile, which made something in my stomach relax. Was I making a new friend? I loved new friends! And old friends, too, but there was something exciting about new friends. I’d always been a people person, despite being an occasional social disaster.

I’d been so stressed out about this summit that I’d forgotten how much I actually liked to talk to people. I felt at ease with Rowena, even though she was a stranger. I was about to ask her how she’d met Colton—had he burst into her room without knocking?—but then Paige and Geena came back.

“I got you an umbrella, too,” Paige informed me happily, giving me an umbrella-clad orange drink that strongly smelled of alcohol.

*Oh, boy…*

I wanted to tell her no thanks, given the whole moonshine debacle, but I was trying to make friends here. Peer pressure was a real thing, and I was a true victim of it. So I just grabbed the drink and forced a smile. I took a tiny sip and ignored the way my eyes watered.

*What the hell do these werewolves put in their drinks?*

Meanwhile, Geena was looking at me up and down. “So you’re the new Luna of the Redwood pack, right?”

She stared at my shoulder unabashedly. My fake Luna mark was on full display. I felt my smile faltering as I realized that both Paige and Rowena were watching me curiously. I’d taken off my jacket on a whim and hadn’t realized that everybody would take the opportunity to examine me from head to toe. But what else had I expected? Werewolves spread information like wildfire. I’d never met bigger gossips.

“Yes,” I said, clearing my throat. “I’m here as Luna of the Redwood pack. It’s a, uh, new development, but we’re very happy.” I waved my fist in the air like a dork and mumbled, “Go Redwoods! And all that.”

Rowena laughed at my antics. Maybe I wasn’t acting as awkwardly as I felt I was. Or maybe she just didn’t mind that I was being so awkward, which was even better. At least *someone* here didn’t seem eager to tear me apart and inspect every little part of me—including my beautiful but very fake Luna mark.

I smiled back at Rowena. Maybe *something* good could come out of this epically stressful experience.

But a moment later, Paige reminded me that I wasn’t here to relax, and these nosy werewolves definitely didn’t know how to mind their own damn business.

“Wait a minute,” Paige said with a confused frown. “So, if you’re Greyson’s Luna, does that mean the *due destini* has been resolved?”

**Episode 3883**

My throat went dry.

*Seriously? Why did Paige have to ask me that so openly, in front of everyone? Have* none *of these werewolves ever heard of tact?*

I’d wanted to keep the *due destini* talk to a minimum during the summit. Though I suspected that talking to Xavier earlier had probably stirred up a lot of rumors and interest. I hadn’t been able to stop myself from going up to him and demanding an explanation, though. He’d just randomly appeared, and now he was the Samara Alpha, and nothing made any freaking sense! Including the fact that Paige thought it was appropriate to ask me about my love life.

“Pardon?” I said, hoping Paige would have enough decorum to steer the conversation in a different direction. This was a naïve hope, obviously. Werewolves had no shame.

“She asked if you were still a *due destini* mate,” Geena pressed, clearly interested.

Paige nodded empathetically. “Yes, was the *due destini* resolved?” She grinned cheekily, raising an eyebrow. “I must admit, the whole thing is kind of like a really addictive soap opera. Greyson and Xavier are just so delicious!”

Geena grinned, nodding in agreement. I just stood there, torn between awkwardness and annoyance. These women had mates, *and* they were Lunas—how did they think it was normal or appropriate to talk to me about my mates’ “deliciousness” levels? And here I’d been thinking *I* would be the one to embarrass myself at this damn summit.

*You* are *embarrassing yourself, Cali! Stop it before this goes too far!*

But *how*? Seriously, what was I supposed to say? Was I meant to thank Paige for thinking that my mates were hot? Had she meant it as a compliment? Yes, they were delicious—though Xavier was currently *poisoned* deliciousness—and yes, we were in a *due destini* relationship, but how the hell was I supposed to say that without raising even more questions? Xavier dumping me and my fake Luna mark for Greyson added a lot of complications to an already complicated situation.

“Maybe we can talk about something else,” Rowena cut in.

I appreciated her so much, but I realized that if I didn’t answer in this moment, I was just going to get asked again later. Maybe if I gave Paige and Geena a satisfying explanation, they’d circulate it around the summit, and then the assembled packs of North America could all just leave me alone.

*Is that too much to ask? Probably.*

“I’m still a *due destini* mate,” I said, loudly enough that some of the other werewolves in the vicinity would hear me—again, just to avoid future questions. “But it’s… complicated. It’s always been complicated, and it will continue to be complicated. That’s just the nature of the situation.”

There.

I looked between the women, hoping my vagueness would appease them. I pulled my jacket back on and took a real sip of my drink. It was very sweet, and *very* strong. Yikes.

Neither of the Lunas looked any less curious. Double yikes.

“But Xavier is the Alpha of the Samara pack now, right?” Paige asked.

Geena pressed her lips together. “Exactly. How does it work being in a *due destini* with someone who’s not in your pack anymore? How does that work? Visits?”

*It doesn’t*, I thought. *Xavier has turned his back on our connection, our mate bond, and the* due destini*…*

I swallowed past the lump in my throat and reminded myself that I needed to be strong for Greyson. For the Redwoods. I couldn’t go around airing our dirty laundry—even though that was clearly what Paige and Geena wanted me to do.

“Like I said, it’s complicated,” I repeated with a shrug. They seemed ready to ask more questions, both opening their mouths at the same time. So, I added, “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go pee. My bladder is tiny.”

Perhaps my excuse was a bit too descriptive, but if *they* had zero tact, why should *I* keep up appearances? I took off without another word, weaving through the crowd, making a beeline for the bathrooms. I’d lied to the women, and now I needed to commit. Tossing my fruity drink into a trash can, I kept walking, trying to even out my heartbeat.

*It’s okay! You did okay! It’s not like you said that Xavier hates you and your Luna mark is fake! This is FINE!*

I repeated those words in my head, trying to believe them.

The sounds of the mixer had started to fade when I heard footsteps right behind me. On edge, I whirled around. There was nobody there, but the hairs on the back of my neck were standing up. Was someone following me? Should I use my powers? Should I scream? Was it all in my head?

*I don’t think it’s in my head!*

I breathed deeply, trying to calm myself down before I called for my sword and started slicing up the surrounding vegetation.

“Cali, wait up!”

None of the bushes were speaking—it was Rowena, raising her hand and walking over to me. I let out a shaky exhale, feeling like I’d just run a marathon.

“Rowena?” My voice sounded squeaky. “I heard footsteps, and I—shit, you scared me.”

She laughed a little, shaking her head. “Sorry, I should have called your name or something. I wanted to talk to you about something.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Alone.”

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

Rowena’s expression sobered. In a quiet voice, she said, “I know it’s fake.”

My heart seized up. “You know what’s fake?”

Rowena swallowed, glancing over her shoulder again. When she saw nobody nearby, she muttered, “Your Luna mark. I can tell it was made by a witch’s magic, and not by an actual Luna ceremony.”

*Oh shit.*

This… did not bode well.

“What?” I spluttered, chuckling awkwardly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Where did you get that impression? Wait, people can *fake* Luna marks?”

Rowena just raised an eyebrow.

I wanted to bang my head against the nearest tree.

“Oh my god, *fine*!” I hissed. “How did you know?”

Rowena pressed her lips together. Was she trying not to laugh?

“Are you always so dramatic?” she asked quietly.

I blinked at her. “This is the equivalent of a national secret for me! Don’t you understand that?”

Rowena nodded, her teasing expression vanishing. “Of course, yes. Don’t worry—I won’t tell anyone.”

My stomach twisted. I expected a “but” to come after that sentence. *“I won’t tell anyone, but I’ll need X or Y from you.”* Jeez, when had I become so cynical? Being around werewolves had shattered my rose-colored glasses. I wanted them back.

“Really?” I asked cautiously. “Is there a catch? Because I know how much witches like their bargains.”

Rowena snorted, shaking her head. “That’s true, but I can make an exception.”

I gave her a cautious look. “Why?”

“It doesn’t bother me or anything—I’m not a stickler for old werewolf rules and traditions, and I figure you faked the mark for a good reason.” She shrugged. “I’d thought about doing something similar before I got the real mark, so I truly understand why you did it.”

I swallowed, feeling something in my chest ease. Had I finally caught a break during this super stressful trip? It seemed like it, and I couldn’t have been more grateful.

“Thank you,” I whispered. “I really appreciate you keeping this a secret.”

I paused, trying to figure out how I could ask her about her own mark—why she’d contemplated a fake one, and how she’d gotten a real one. And survived it. As I thought, Rowena glanced at my shoulder again.

After glancing around once more, double-checking we were alone, she said, “Look, I know we don’t know each other well yet, but I wanted to warn you. I might not be the only person who sees through the fake mark. You have to be careful. You know how wolves seem to have friends in all kinds of places.”

I swallowed nervously, nodding. “Thank you for the warning.”

Rowena opened her mouth again, then paused.

“What?” I asked.

“Can I see it more closely?” she asked. She looked eager, almost. “I’d love a closer look at the workmanship.”

I grinned, turning to pull down my sleeve to reveal the mark fully.

Rowena let out a small gasp. “Damn. The magic is amazing—it looks so real.”

“I know some great witches,” I said, smiling.

Rowena brushed her fingers over it softly. “It’s a solid Luna mark. Kudos.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but then there was a tingle at the back of my neck. We were being watched—I could feel it. I turned to look around, my heart pounding.

And then I spotted Xavier, just standing there.

His hands were fisted at his sides, his jaw clenched. His eyes were dark, depthless as he glared at both Rowena and me. At me in particular. At my shoulder.

He was looking directly at my Luna mark.

**Episode 3884**

**Xavier**

I couldn’t believe my eyes. Cali had a Luna mark. *Greyson’s* Luna mark. But if—if she’d become Greyson’s Luna, I would’ve felt something, right? It would’ve affected our mate bond, the *due destini*… Wouldn’t it? Then again, we definitely didn’t know everything about the *due destini*.

Cali had gone ahead and gotten Greyson’s mark, and I hadn’t even felt it.

How could she have done this to me?

How could she—

The pain was so immense, it should’ve been fucking paralyzing. But somehow, my first instinct was to move. Run toward her, grab her, pull her to me, remind her what we were, what we’d always been. I stepped forward, my fury rising, my wolf howling in agony at the sight of Greyson’s mark on my mate.

But then, I remembered where we were. What this meant. Who was watching.

Adéluce was always watching.

Adéluce had done this, pushed me to push Cali to do this. But still, I’d never really believed it.

I’d never truly believed that Cali would give up on me like that.

“You…” My gaze flicked up to hers. I sounded winded, like I couldn’t breathe. “You really did this? You really became *his* Luna?”

The hurt and fury in my voice were obvious. I couldn’t fucking control them.

“Is everything okay?” the strange woman asked, looking between Cali and me with raised eyebrows.

“This is none of your goddamn business!” I snapped.

The other woman flinched, clearly shocked by my tone, but then her eyes flashed with anger. She turned to Cali. “Do you know this bully?”

My jaw clenched. A bully. Of course that’s all I was to my mate now, thanks to Adéluce.

“I’m okay, Rowena, thanks,” Cali told the woman. “I’ll handle this. You can head back.”

Rowena paused, as if contemplating her next move. Then she offered Cali a curt nod and left, walking past me. Her eyes were fixed on me, sharp, like a warning. Like she didn’t trust me to be around Cali—because what? I’d fucking hurt her?

It wasn’t *me* anyone had to worry about.

“Xavier,” Cali started, pulling her jacket back on, “I can’t do this right now. Just—” She ran her hands through her hair, looking up at me with glistening eyes. “Just *don’t*.”

My mouth dropped open. If I’d been angry before, my rage was now incandescent. My wolf was thrashing on the inside, but he wasn’t blaming Cali. He was blaming *me*.

*You did this*, he said.

*You broke this*, he said.

He was right, and that *hurt*. But I couldn’t ignore the agony of Cali’s betrayal, because I’d thought—I’d…

I’d never thought this would happen.

I took a step closer. “So, you say you want to talk to me, but if I’m the one who tries to start the conversation, you want me to shut up? Which is it, Cali?” I tried not to yell, but I wasn’t strong enough to stop myself. “When will you stop being so fucking *fickle*?”

The words flew out of my mouth, and a part of me couldn’t help but worry about Adéluce. I wasn’t meant to be talking to Cali at all. We had a deal, a new deal—if I won the tournament, then Cali wouldn’t get hurt if she talked to me—but that wasn’t active yet. Hopefully the way I was yelling at Cali right now would show Adéluce that I was still trying to push her away, and she wouldn’t hurt her.

I *was* pushing her away right now, actually.

But for once, I wasn’t doing it because Adéluce had ordered me to.

I was doing it because I really fucking needed Cali to answer my goddamn questions—even if it meant her glaring up at me with more venom than she’d ever aimed in my direction.

“*I’m* the one who’s fickle?” she demanded. “That’s rich, coming from you, Xavier.”

“How could you do this when you knew the Luna mark could kill you?” I pointed at her shoulder, my whole body shaking with indignation. “How the hell could you risk your life for *him*?”

She flinched back as if I’d struck a chord. And then she did the unthinkable.

She marched closer to me.

It was only a matter of time before Adéluce hurt her for speaking to me.

“No,” I spat. “I’m done, fucking *done*!”

I turned to walk away from her, but my wolf was raging. If he’d had an anchor, he would’ve dropped it. He was all fury and despair. It was like he was reliving the night I’d broken Cali’s heart—and mine as well.

“Xavier!” She called my name, and when my wolf heard it, he forced me to a standstill.

I was dreading what would come next, but I couldn’t move. I couldn’t leave her.

She came to stand in front of me, ten feet between us, fire in her eyes. “Your audacity is just—”

“You were mad at me for breaking up with you, so you went ahead and became Greyson’s Luna? Is that it?” I demanded. I couldn’t control my mouth. “When did you do this? Why did you risk your fucking life for a damn mark?”

“Are you kidding me?” She stormed closer to me. I immediately stepped back as her voice rose in anger. “This is ridiculous, Xavier! *Now* you’re worried about me? After you hurt me way more than the mark ever could?”

Her words made my heart shatter all over again. I’d already known how badly I’d hurt her, but the pain of it just didn’t get old. The wound was still gaping, and this was fucked.

All of it.

Her voice lowered, low and shaky with indignation as she went on.

“You have *no right* to ask me any of these questions,” she hissed. “The second you broke up with me and walked out of my life—walked out of all our lives—*you* lost the right to ask questions.”

“Right, but *you* can just demand that we talk whenever you—”

“I’m not the one who ended our relationship for no fucking reason!” she shouted, jabbing a finger at her chest. “And now look at you—are you out of your fucking mind? You think you’re allowed to come and yell at me about my choices? When you won’t give me any answers? You can’t have it both ways! You can’t…” She was panting, her voice cracking. “You can’t do this to me!”

I wanted to run to her.

I wanted to embrace her, tell her it was all a lie. That I’d never wanted to hurt her, that I would never fucking leave her. But before I could speak at all, Adéluce struck.

Cali winced, touching her forehead.

*Shit*. I never should’ve walked up to her.

“This conversation is giving me a headache,” Cali muttered with a shaky breath. All the fire and fight had fizzled out of her. Now all that was left was hurt. “I’m going back to the mixer.”

Without another word, she turned and walked away.

The sight of her retreating back made my wolf claw at the inside of my chest.

“Cali!”

She rounded on me, her eyes flashing with aggravation. “No! I don’t want to talk to you right now!”

And then she left.

The pain of it made me want to drop to my knees. Goddamn collapse, or chase after her, beg her. But I knew I had no right. I knew that I had done this, and my wolf was right to blame me for it. Besides, if I *did* talk to Cali again, Adéluce might show up. She might punish Cali again with something worse than a headache.

I was pretty sure Cali had only escaped relatively unscathed this time because the conversation had been so painful for me. Adéluce wanted Cali to hate me, and I’d just made great progress on that front. Cali was hating me more every day.

She hated me enough to take on Greyson’s mark.

I’d seen it clearly—it couldn’t have been anything but the Luna mark. But what did that mean for us? My head was aching at the thought of it, my blood racing, fucked-up thoughts invading my head.

Was this how it was, now?

Was it all over?

Yes, I’d deliberately pushed Cali away, but I’d never forget that she’d chosen Greyson over me. That was what the Luna mark meant, right? I just couldn’t see any other explanation.

Throughout and despite the *due destini*, I’d never doubted Cali’s loyalty. I’d thought that she would always love me, no matter what. I’d thought that even when she hated me, there would still be a part of her that would feel for me the way I felt for her. But I couldn’t judge her too harshly, could I? I’d broken her, and she’d done the only thing she could to feel whole again.

She’d become Greyson’s Luna.

She’d turned her back on me.

And if she was Greyson’s now, then what was the point in telling her the truth? In fighting to get back to her?

Even if I *did* manage to defeat Adéluce in the future, was there any coming back from this?

**Episode 3885**

**Ava**

I needed to get away from the mixer. Well, the mixer wasn’t the problem—my aunt was. I knew I’d dropped the ball, here. I should’ve realized that my aunt would be at the summit. The Sycamore pack had been invited, and Knox’s trial had been scheduled, so of course they wouldn’t miss it. I had been so wrapped up in Xavier and finding an Alpha that it had totally slipped my mind.

Now, I was dealing with the consequences.

I hadn’t expected my aunt to walk right up to me, to speak about my father like that. Why would she bring him into this? The mere thought of him made the hairs on my forearms rise. My relationship with my father had been… intense.

Not like Xavier and Silas—not that bad. But it had never been good. Or rather, *I* had never been good enough for *him*. Nothing was ever enough for my father, though—like Silas, he was greedy. He and Silas would’ve seen eye to eye on a lot of things.

That was what had killed my father in the first pack war. He’d always wanted more power, and his greed had destroyed him. In a way, it had destroyed me as well, as I’d died at the hand of my own mate. My father’s death had made room for Nolan to take his position, and though I’d never considered Nolan to be as extreme as my father, he hadn’t been too far off.

Our family was a toxic fucking mess.

I shook my head and kept walking, finishing off the drink I’d snagged. I struggled to remember my father’s face—I hadn’t seen him in years. I hadn’t even seen him in the spirit world. It was like he was avoiding me, continuing to deem me unworthy from beyond the grave. I could picture it, actually—even if we came face-to-face in the spirit world, he’d probably just turn away. Even after he’d made me kill my own mate’s mother to prove my loyalty.

The urge to punch something, make something bleed, hit me out of nowhere. And then I noticed someone else moving through the darkness beyond the mixer as the sun set. Xavier. I recognized him by the shape of his shoulders, by his scent. My mouth watered, my stomach fluttering when he moved closer. It was almost like he’d sensed me, too.

I hoped he had.

“Why aren’t you at the mixer?” he asked.

His voice was oddly gruff. His face was in the shadows, but his eyes still gleamed. I wanted to ask him if everything was okay, but then he spoke again.

“Did something happen?” he asked.

I needed to tell him. I couldn’t stall.

“I’m escaping my dysfunctional family,” I admitted with a scowl.

Xavier lifted a brow. “What do you mean?”

“Knox is here for his trial,” I said, swallowing roughly. “My aunt wanted to talk to me about it.”

I looked away, down at my hands. I was fiddling with them like a kid. I hated how vulnerable I felt. I hated how my family still had the power to make me feel this way, even after they’d hurt me repeatedly. Knox was allowed to throw me in a pit and ignore my opinions, and I was supposed to stay loyal.

How did that make any sense?

“Ah,” Xavier said quietly. “I’m guessing it wasn’t one big group hug?”

My gaze flicked up to him. That felt like something Greyson would’ve said, not Xavier. Xavier wasn’t usually sarcastic—he was just… explosive.

I wished he could care about me to be furious on my behalf. I wished I could be enough for him.

I wished I could be enough for *someone*.

“It’s fine,” I said, shaking my head. “I’ll deal with my aunt. And Knox. I’ve done it before.” I let out a humorless laugh. “I always deal with everything, don’t I?”

Xavier took a step closer. And even though he felt subdued, the sudden intensity in his voice was unmistakable. “You don’t have to do it alone. I’m the Alpha of your pack.”

My stomach fluttered again. I felt like a dumb teenager, waiting for her first kiss.

“So, you’re coming to the trial, right?” I sounded hopeful. I *was* hopeful. Hope was all I had.

“Of course,” he said, nodding.

Just then, there was a small cheer up ahead. Xavier and I turned to see a dozen glowsticks being waved through the air.

“And Ravi was worried about those damn things,” Xavier said, shaking his head with a small smile. “They’re working now that the sun has set.”

My eyes were fixed on his face. On his smile. It was so rare to see him like this—unguarded. Actually smiling. He turned to me, and I couldn’t help but smile too.

His gaze flicked to my mouth before he muttered, “It looks nice, doesn’t it?”

I nodded. “From a distance.”

Xavier chuckled. “Definitely nicer up here, away from the crowd.”

Just the two of us. Together. Xavier was smiling with me, and we were alone again, and it felt like he liked that. Like he was starting to see how real this could be. We fit together—we always had. That was the one and only truth.

“We’re quite the pair, huh?” I mumbled. “Standing out here, two completely antisocial wolves trying to lead a pack.”

Xavier shook his head. “Fuck anyone who thinks we can’t do this. I know we’ll succeed.” He glanced at me. “You won’t let us fail.”

The annoying stomach fluttering was out of control, now. Butterflies galore. Damn, I was so far gone. The way he looked at me, the way he’d touched me and put his mouth on me all those times, every intimate moment, physical or otherwise… It all meant so much to me. And right now, when he looked at me, I felt it all the more.

I loved him. I couldn’t fucking stop it.

“I mean it, Ava,” he said. Suddenly, he took me by the shoulders. The contact lit me up from the inside out, as ever. My surprise was even greater when he said, “The Samaras only exist today because of you.”

There was a sincerity to Xavier’s expression that I couldn’t place. Or maybe I just wasn’t used to it anymore. I wasn’t used to feeling appreciated. The feeling was overwhelming, and it made my heart race. I didn’t know what to do, how to deal with this kind of attention. Was this… *tenderness?*

I hadn’t felt anything like it in years.

“You’re just…” I looked away, trying to brush it off. “What’s come over you?”

Xavier let go of me slowly, trailing his hands down my arms. I had to suppress a shiver.

“You know, I think you’re the only person in my life who still has my back,” he said.

I snorted. “That’s because I’m desensitized to your assholery.”

Xavier let out a laugh. If his smile was rare, his laugh was even more precious. The sound was so good to my ears—like a promise that everything would be okay. Perhaps it would be. Because the truth was, we *did* make a great pair. We made a good team, a strong one—and it felt like Xavier was finally getting to see that.

It felt like Xavier was finally starting to see a real future for the Samara pack. For him and me together. I knew it was naïve to dream about it, and I fought to keep my expectations in check. The fact that he was being nice right now didn’t mean that he’d defined our relationship. He’d refused to make me his Luna.

But there was still that dangerous word. *Maybe*.

Maybe we’d be okay.

Maybe we’d be together.

Maybe, once the summit was over, he’d make me his Luna.

Xavier stepped closer to me, leaning in for a kiss. He was initiating. He was doing this. He wanted this. He wanted *me*.

The kiss started off slowly, just a brush of his lips over mine. My toes curled, my heart hammering. I loved the way he tasted—I’d never get enough. He kept it soft for a beat or two, not a second longer. It felt like he couldn’t help himself, like he was starving for me. My stomach dropped when he grabbed the back of my head tightly, growling into my mouth.

And just then, there was a scream from beyond the trees.

“What?” I said dazedly when Xavier jerked his head up. He pushed me behind him, scanning the area. His protectiveness had me buzzing.

“Stay here,” he said gruffly.

Of course, I wasn’t going to do that. I was just as protective of him. Despite his grumbling protests, I followed him into the trees. Suddenly, Xavier’s foot hit something. He leaned over to inspect it as a familiar metallic scent hit my nose.

Xavier hadn’t bumped into something—no, he’d bumped into *someone*.

A body. Covered in blood.

Xavier looked up at me. “He’s dead.”

**Episode 3886**

**Greyson**

How much schmoozing could an Alpha take? As it turned out, not a lot, because I was already done with mingling. I’d been talking with the other pack Alphas all day, trying to convince them to support the Redwoods in our conflict with the Bitterfang pack—which seemed like the reasonable thing to do, since we weren’t stuck in the Dark Ages, and Malakai was basically a public menace.

Werewolves, unfortunately, didn’t care much about reason a lot of the time. They were interested in strength. At least seven packs had declared that they wouldn’t even consider talking to me until I won the whole tournament. I thought about approaching the Lunas instead, seeing as women were usually much friendlier toward me. I could chat them up, indirectly ask them to make their partners see what needed to be done here. In my experience, at least seven out of ten Alphas did whatever their Lunas suggested and thought they’d had the idea first.

Because men were dumb. Admittedly, I did get a bit dumb myself, when it came to Cali. No shame in admitting it. To myself, at least.

Anyway, that was a good plan as a concept, but in practice, I knew that many issues could arise. I realized that talking to the Lunas solo could provoke another Geena situation, where the Alpha would think I was hitting on his mate. So, I sat my ass down and decided not to even look at the Lunas, just to make sure nobody got any ideas.

Part of the problem here was that, like the Redwoods, the Bitterfangs were also semi-finalists in the Ludis tournament. If we both reached the final, it would be the ultimate showdown. Redwoods versus Bitterfangs. A little preview of who could win an actual fight. Werewolves took their games way too seriously, and the Ludis games were kind of like the Colosseum. I’d have preferred to fight lions rather than Malakai, though. At least lions probably had some sort of code of honor, and wouldn’t eat you if they weren’t hungry.

I doubted that Malakai had any honor.

I knew he wouldn’t hold back on the field. I hoped we ended up facing off against anyone *but* the Bitterfangs in the final, just to remove the pressure of having to win when our opponents would definitely be playing dirty. But in order to reach that final round, we needed to win the semi-finals first—and we’d be going up against the Samaras.

I had to find Xavier and remind him of the stakes, here. The Redwoods had to win the match against the Samaras, which in turn would strengthen our regional alliance. Which I assumed was still a thing, despite Xavier behaving like an unpredictable rooster with its head cut off.

I looked around for my brother, walking through the mixer. Where the hell had he vanished to this time? Did he really think that being so antisocial was going to do him any favors as a new Alpha? Why was he like this? Why the fuck did I care that he was like this?

Why couldn’t I *stop* caring?

I decided that when I found Xavier, I would “accidentally” punch him. In a playful way, perhaps. Just to ease some of the tension.

“Greyson!”

*Speaking of wanting to punch someone…* Lucian appeared out of nowhere, blocking my way. He was looking all morose and forlorn after his loss on the Ludis field.

“I was hoping for a word,” he said.

“I was hoping for world peace and a vacation,” I replied, “but unfortunately, I can’t seem to get either.”

I made a move to bypass him, but he blocked me again.

He was scowling, now. “This is important, Greyson. It’s about my mate bond with Elle.”

I sighed. “Your *alleged* mate bond, you mean.”

Lucian crossed his arms over his chest. “Believe what you want. I still need to talk to you about the situation.”

On a scale of one to ten, the level to which I didn’t want to get involved in Lucian’s drama was a solid three hundred. But then Lucian’s eyes widened as he looked over my shoulder, and he lifted his hand to wave.

“Elle!” he called. “Join us, my dear—there’s something we need to discuss!”

Elle came over, eyeing both of us with suspicion. She reminded me of a cat that didn’t want to be cuddled, which was fine by me. I hadn’t talked to her since I’d gotten all weirdly overprotective. I had enough on my plate as it was—but of course, Lucian disagreed.

“What’s happening?” Elle asked, looking at Lucian with narrowed eyes.

“I figured it out after you and Cali came to see me in the tent, my dear!” Lucian exclaimed.

I turned to Elle. When I spoke, my voice was dead cold. “You and Cali did *what*?”

Elle looked at the ground like it was the most fascinating thing she’d ever seen.

“Yes, they came to see me!” Lucian nodded. “A feast for the eyes, the two of them together, let me tell you that.” The princeling winked at me. I wanted to strangle him. He kept talking. “Anyway, I didn’t understand what their questions meant at the time, but I get it now! I’d already suspected it, after all.” He pointed at Elle. “Elle is reluctant to join me as my mate because she still feels the pull of the sire bond to you. It all makes sense, now.”

I took a deep breath, trying to remain composed. “What are you talking about, Lucian?”

I turned to Elle, who looked like she wanted to be anywhere but here. I could relate.

“Elle,” I said. “*Explain*.”

Elle glanced up at me, swallowing nervously. “I just—I wanted to talk about this… pull we have to each other. I’ve always felt attached to you. I know you have a mate, and it’s not me. But maybe what Lucian is saying—”

“Elle,” I interrupted her. The last thing I needed was her finishing that sentence and giving any credence to this whole sire bond theory in front of Lucian. It would all but confirm his suspicions about me turning her if we appeared to be considering this as a possibility that applied to us. “This is nonsense,” I said, shaking my head. “The sire bond is just a myth. A wolf fairy tale. And why would something like that even affect *us*?” I tried to give her a meaningful look that made it clear we shouldn’t discuss this with Lucian.

Elle bit her lower lip, her expression doubtful. So I continued.

“It’s just a story about a turned wolf being mind-controlled to do his sire’s bidding.” I paused, wondering if Elle felt compelled to do whatever I commanded despite her own wishes. She certainly didn’t listen to me half the time, so I didn’t think that was the case.

“Well,” Lucian said, “I was thinking—”

“Help!”

Ava’s voice rose over the music. I turned to see her racing toward us.

She was covered in blood.

Shocked gasps and cries filled the air as people took notice of her appearance and state of panic. Ava was just about to us when Marissa intercepted her. She looked frantic as she patted Ava down, looking her over for wounds.

“What the hell happened?” Marissa cried. “Are you hurt?”

Ava’s chest was heaving. “It—it’s not my blood. We found someone—someone’s dead in the woods.”

*We*, she’d said. Interesting.

I looked ahead, over Ava’s shoulder. That was when I spotted Xavier standing at the tree line. What had my brother gotten himself into this time? I couldn’t keep up with his bullshit.

“We need to talk to Xavier,” Lucian said, his voice low.

Half of the mixer attendees seemed to agree, because we all started up the hill in a group. I reached my brother first, and Xavier gave me an annoyed look. Like he would’ve far preferred it if I’d been slower. When he opened his mouth, though, what came out wasn’t an insult.

“We found a body.” He gestured behind him. “It looks like a recent attack.”

The scent of blood was rich in the air. The body looked completely mangled. I bent over it, Xavier on my side, while the rest of the werewolves milled around behind us.

“Everyone return to the summit grounds!” Cesaries called. “You two—cordon off the area.”

I stared at the dead man’s face, and behind all that blood, I thought he seemed familiar. Suddenly, I caught a whiff of Cali’s scent. I turned to my right, and there she was, rushing toward me.

“Greyson!” She grabbed my arm, swallowing roughly as she spotted the body. Her eyes widened. “Oh my god…” She looked up at me, her grip on my arm tightening. Her voice was low, a whisper. “The body, he’s—that’s the guy who bumped into Dayton. Remember? When we first arrived?”

Realization dawned. That was how I knew this guy. That was why he seemed familiar.

“You’re right,” I said.

“His name is Evan,” Cesaries said. He clicked his tongue. “He’s from the Northwind pack.” He glanced around the forest, his expression severe. “Someone broke our no violence rule.”

*Yeah*, I thought. *And now there’s a killer at the summit.*

**Episode 3887**

Fear raced through me at the sight of the dead body. He used to be a person, and how he was just lying there, immobile, his eyes open and empty. I looked away, wincing. Greyson wrapped an arm around my shoulders, pressing a kiss to my temple.

“I’m right here,” he whispered.

He was always next to me. Warmth spread through me.

“You said you saw Evan get into an altercation?” Cesaries’s voice was loud.

Slowly, I turned to him, realizing that he was talking to me. His eyes were intense on my face, and I swallowed roughly. I didn’t want to get anyone in trouble, but this guy was dead. The right thing would be for the murderer to be brought to justice. This wasn’t a game anymore.

*I don’t think it’s ever been a game…*

Luckily, Greyson saved me from having to speak. “We saw Evan get into a drunken argument with Dayton on the day we arrived. But it wasn’t anything major. Just a misunderstanding.”

Cesaries’s eyes narrowed as he examined Greyson. Then he leaned toward the council minion wolf standing beside him and whispered something in his ear. Times like these, I wished my hearing was better. Hanging out with werewolves had definitely upped my own nosiness.

“Yes, sir,” the minion said, nodding before he took off.

Cesaries looked at the other side of the body, where Xavier was standing. My stomach clenched at the sight of him. The last time we’d spoken, an hour or less ago, things had gone catastrophically badly. I didn’t want to dwell on what he’d said about the Luna mark. Lola would’ve said that Xavier had made his own bed, and now it was time to lie in it.

My sentiments were similar, though the ache inside me remained. The pain I’d seen in Xavier’s face had made everything even more confusing, actually. I just didn’t know what to believe. All I knew for sure was that I couldn’t deal with him right now. He wasn’t looking at me, anyway. He only had eyes for Ava. She still had blood on her hands, probably from trying to resuscitate the guy.

“Did either of you see anyone running away from the scene of the crime?” Cesaries asked, addressing Ava and Xavier.

“No,” Xavier said.

“I’m—I’m sorry I touched the body,” Ava said shakily. “I thought I could help him, but now my scent is all over him, and you can’t—”

“It’s fine,” Cesaries said with a wave of his hand. “Your scent is the easiest to rule out—the rest are the real problem. There’s a lot of blood, and there are so many wolves here that it’s practically impossible to separate the killer’s scent.”

Ava swallowed nervously, nodding. Her eyes were downcast, and Xavier put a supportive hand on her shoulder. The sight made my heart squeeze. I didn’t want him touching her, but I also knew that that was a pretty shitty thing to think. Ava, even though she was often the fucking worst, was devastated right now. She’d found a dead body, for crying out loud—of course she needed support.

*It doesn’t have to be Xavier who gives it to her, though! Ugh, he’s so infuriating and confusing. How dare he—*

I shut my thoughts off. Pettiness had no place in this situation. I turned back to Greyson, focusing on him. By this point, Rishika, Artemis, and Lola had all joined us.

Artemis’s eyebrows were arched. “I thought werewolves healed… Why didn’t he heal?”

“The attack was so vicious that his wounds didn’t get a chance to heal,” Rishika said.

My stomach dropped. Just then, there was angry shouting from behind us. A moment later, Dayton appeared. He was being pulled along by the minion wolf Cesaries had sent off earlier.

“Are you serious?” he snapped at Cesaries. “I’m a suspect? I didn’t do anything!” He shot a glare at Greyson before his expression twisted into a sneer. “Ah, of course! Now I see what’s going on here.”

Greyson didn’t speak. His face was expressionless as Cesaries eyed Dayton.

“Witnesses saw you getting into an altercation with this wolf earlier,” Cesaries said. “Can you tell me what it was about?”

“Witnesses, huh?” Dayton scowled at Greyson, but he met Dayton’s eyes without blinking. He looked pretty intimidating, actually. Like, if I didn’t know Greyson, and I saw him just looking at someone like that, I’d be like, “Oh shit, it’s about to go down!”

Nothing went down, but I had to wonder if this was a good idea. Dayton already hated Greyson and the Redwoods—should we be making him angrier? But at the same time, what was Greyson supposed to do, bend over and let Dayton intimidate us?

*This internal conflict is killing me!*

“Don’t start throwing blame around. I only asked you a simple question,” Cesaries said evenly. “Did you or did you not have an altercation with the victim earlier?”

Dayton scoffed. “The guy rammed into me. We exchanged words, and then I didn’t give him a second thought. That’s it!”

Cesaries nodded. “So, you haven’t seen this wolf since?”

“No, I’ve been with my pack all day,” Dayton said with a huff. “You can ask any of them.”

“Fine,” Cesaries said curtly. “Thank you for your cooperation. We might be by later to ask you more questions.”

Dayton nodded stiffly. He shot one last angry glare at Greyson and me before storming off again…

And walking right past Malakai.

I flinched in surprise, shrinking closer to Greyson.

*Shit!* I thought. *How long has Malakai been lurking there?*

The moment I pressed myself close, Greyson wrapped his arm around my waist. His gaze flicked to Malakai as well.

*What do you think he’s doing here?* I asked him.

*Don’t jump to any conclusions*, Greyson replied.

I huffed internally. *I just asked a question. Conclusions? What conclusions?*

Greyson turned to me, raising an eyebrow.

*Okay, FINE!* I said. *It was* one *conclusion—that Malakai is a murderous murderer who murders.*

Greyson pressed his lips together*. Or he might just be curious about what’s happening.*

*Sure*, I said. *But why is he looking between us and the dead body? Does he want us to go meet up with poor Evan?*

Greyson pulled me closer. *I don’t want you to worry, love. Malakai won’t do anything in front of the council.*

“… you all need to leave the scene so we can investigate further,” Cesaries was saying.

Malakai didn’t move an inch, like he was waiting for us to leave first. I glanced at Xavier and Ava, who seemed ready to go. In that exact moment, Xavier met Malakai’s eyes.

I could’ve sworn I heard thunder echoing in the distance.

Immediately, Xavier glanced at Greyson. Greyson gave a nearly imperceptible shake of his head. Thankfully, Xavier seemed to take the hint and walked past Malakai without a word, leading a shaken Ava away.

She’d treated me like shit earlier, but it was hard not to feel sorry for her.

“Let’s go,” Greyson muttered, taking my hand. I held my breath as we walked past Malakai.

Eyeing us, he spoke for the first time since he’d arrived at the scene. “Such a shame, someone breaking the no violence rule at the summit. I guess no one’s safe.”

My heart dropped.

*What the hell does* that *mean?*

Greyson just nodded, pulling me toward the summit grounds. Lola, Rishika, and Artemis followed us quietly. I was vibrating with stress. The moment we were far enough away, I whirled toward Greyson.

“Did you hear that?” I hissed. “Seriously, Greyson, what if he’s the one who killed Evan?”

Greyson sighed. “Like I said, don’t jump to conclusions.”

“What if he’s testing the waters to see if he can get away with it?” Lola said, her eyes wide. “Kill a random wolf first, then come after his real targets? Which, you know, would be *us*.”

Lola’s words sent a shiver down my spine, but Greyson looked unbothered.

“Don’t let your imagination run away with you, Lola,” he said.

I tugged on his arm. “But what if it’s true?”

He turned to me, his gaze intense. “If it’s true, then we’ll protect our own. But for now, we can’t assume anything.”

I knew that Greyson had to walk the line between panicking the Redwood delegation and being cautious about this new threat. I appreciated his level head—always—and it did make me feel better. But not entirely, because catastrophic thoughts were hard to let go of.

*Hello, anxiety!*

“Whether or not it was Malakai, *someone* was bold enough to kill here,” Rishika said. “We need to keep our guard up.”

Lola huffed. “I’m telling you, it was Malakai!”

Greyson gave her a flat look. “We have no proof. You can’t just spread misinformation and cause panic without proof, Lola.”

My mate looked like he was getting a little angry and frustrated. It took a lot to get Greyson to a place where he would actually show his emotions like this, so today must’ve been a lot for him.

“Let’s stop talking about this for now,” I said, hooking my arm through his. Looking up at him, I said, “Maybe you should get some rest, okay? You had to deal with a lot today.”

Greyson nodded quietly, leaning down to kiss my cheek before ducking into our tent.

When he was out of earshot, Lola hissed, “Yeah, but what if—”

“Yeah, I know, and I agree,” I hissed back. “It could be Malakai, but we need proof.”

Artemis’s voice was low and cool. “Then let’s go get some.”

**Episode 3888**

**Artemis**

“What do you mean?” Cali asked, looking alarmed.

Sometimes, my sister reminded me of an innocent little bird. One that I needed to corrupt.

“Whenever I wanted to get more information on my enemies in the Fae world, I did recon,” I told her.

Cali looked intrigued, but Rishika frowned. “This isn’t a war.”

“*Yet*,” I said.

Rishika scowled but didn’t argue. I called that progress.

“But I—I don’t want to do anything that could get the Redwoods in more hot water,” Cali said, shaking her head.

Lola scoffed. “So, what? We just wait for Malakai to attack us? Kill us in our sleep? Steal our skincare? My collection is priceless, I’ll have you know!”

“Lola has a point,” I said. “Apart from the part about skincare.”

“I think this is getting out of hand,” Rishika said, shaking her head.

“Exactly!” Lola declared. “We can stop it from getting *more* out of hand. If Malakai really is scheming against us, then we need to figure out what his plans are before he can enact them.”

“Makes sense to me,” I said.

Rishika gave me a look. “And it doesn’t concern you at all that you’re agreeing with Lola?”

Lola gasped in offense. But Rishika’s words actually did give me pause for a moment.

“It doesn’t matter,” Lola pressed on. “Like Cali said, we need proof.”

Cali winced. “I didn’t say that—Greyson did. And Greyson wouldn’t like this conversation if he were here.”

“Greyson is getting worn out by all this nonstop nonsense, and we need to help him,” Lola declared. “We need to prove that Malakai has got something up his sleeve, or the council won’t do anything to stop him.”

“That’s another good point,” I noted.

Rishika looked like she’d just smelled something rotten, but Cali’s eyes widened in realization.

“Wait, that’s actually a great non-violent solution!” she said. “If the council gets involved and orders Malakai not to make a move against us, then it really would solve all our problems!” Cali turned to Lola. “Lola, you’re a genius!”

Lola flipped her hair over her shoulder. “I know.”

“I think we need to think this through more,” Rishika said evenly. “Preferably when our Alpha—the man who has repeatedly risked his life for us—is around to weigh in.”

Cali immediately looked guilty, but I rolled my eyes.

“Oh, come on!” I said. “Like Lola said, we’re trying to *help* Greyson, here. If we can prove that Malakai is the murderer or that he intends to break the summit’s rules, he’s toast.”

“But we’d need to *really* prove it,” Rishika said. “The council usually lets wolves settle their own disputes, unless a wolf breaks the werewolf code. Which Malakai hasn’t done yet. At least not openly.”

“But if he *did* kill a wolf at the summit, that definitely wouldn’t sit well with the council,” I said.

Rishika peered at me. “It seems like you three are going to do this whether I think it’s a good idea or not.” She turned to Cali. “You understand that going through with this would mean betraying Greyson’s confidence, right?”

Cali looked a little sick. “Um…”

“Stop that!” Lola waved a hand at Rishika. “Don’t make her feel guilty!”

“What if she *needs* to feel guilty, though?” Rishika asked. She turned to me. “Why won’t you let Greyson deal with this?”

“We’re not going to get caught, Rishika,” I said. “This is what my gut is telling me to do to help the pack—and Greyson, too.”

She pressed her lips together. I gave her a look, like, *What did we say about you supporting my choices?*

She sighed deeply. “Fine. But we have to be smart about this.”

\*\*\*

The four of us met up during the dinner rush, all dressed in black. Cali showed up in a turtleneck and tights. Rishika, who looked like she’d have preferred to be having dinner, was wearing a black T-shirt and jeans.

“I appreciate that you’re here,” I told her, taking her hand.

She squeezed my hand, sighing. “I’m just worried that you three will go ahead and do this anyway. It’s better to go along with it, so I can keep an eye on you.”

I scowled. “That doesn’t sound like believing in me.”

“Well, do *you* believe in *me*?” Rishika countered. “What about my gut feeling that says we shouldn’t do this?”

I opened my mouth to protest, but nothing came out. She did have a point. How did two gut feelings battle it out?

“I have arrived!” Lola jumped out from behind a bush—very loudly, I might add. She was wearing a black jumpsuit and a ski mask. It covered her entire face. I could barely see her eyes.

“Lola!” Cali hissed. “What are you wearing? We’re not spies!”

“But we are!” Lola said. “We don’t want anyone to recognize us, so our faces shouldn’t be visible.”

Rishika shot me a look, like, *What did I tell you about agreeing with Lola?*

I ignored her and checked that my weapons were all securely strapped to my person.

“We need to be quiet and quick,” I said. “Don’t linger. We have to finish before the Bitterfangs get back from dinner.”

Cali nodded. “Okay. But wait, what are we doing, exactly?”

Rishika was rubbing her temples like she was getting a headache.

“Looking for anything that could be evidence, obviously,” Lola said.

“If we survive this,” Rishika said, “Greyson’s going to put us in time-out in the basement or something. And it’s going to be justified.”

Cali gasped.

“He won’t punish you, Cali. He’s dumb for you,” Rishika said.

Cali looked relieved, and I rolled my eyes.

“He’s not going to do anything,” I said. “If we get caught, we’ll just tell them that we went for a stroll because we got bored at dinner. What’s the worst that could happen?”

\*\*\*

When we reached the Bitterfang campsite, there were still some wolves lingering behind, or preparing to make their way to dinner. Rishika and I hid behind a tent, Cali hid behind a tree, and Lola hid in the shadow of a tall, fat bush.

“My amazing spy outfit allows me to become one with the night,” Lola whispered to us, lying on the ground behind the bush.

Looking up from Lola, Rishika turned to me. Her expression was so deeply unimpressed that it made me think of Greyson. Maybe those two had been hanging out a little too much, lately.

Once the camp emptied, I gestured for Cali and Lola to start at one end of the tents, while Rishika and I took the other end. Rishika and I moved toward the east side and split up. I entered the first empty tent—it was small and sparse. I made quick work of checking the bags and found nothing.

Rishika and I moved through the tents systematically. We made our way to the center of the camp, where the biggest tent was. That was where we ran into Lola and Cali again.

“Anything?” I whispered.

“I only found the murder weapon!” Lola held up a pointy thing, all puffed up and proud of herself.

I frowned. “That looks more like a letter opener. The guy was clawed to death.”

Lola paused. “You’re right,” she muttered dejectedly.

Cali sighed. “I didn’t find anything at all.”

I pointed at the big tent. “This tent must be Malakai’s, though.”

Rishika stared at me. “Do you really think that he’d kill the guy himself? Wouldn’t he get one of his minions to do it?”

“Well, we’re here, so we might as well look,” I said.

Rishika pressed her lips together. “We’re leaving our scents all over the place.”

“There’s a ton of bonfire smoke coming this way, which should help conceal any scents we leave behind,” I noted. “Or at least it’ll muddy them up enough to make it plausible that we could’ve been just strolling by.”

We entered Malakai’s tent, and there was a lot more inside of it than the others. Though the furniture was sparse, there was a bunch of luggage strewn around.

I reached for a couple of the suitcases and realized they were locked. Maybe that was normal, or he was hiding something. Seemed like a toss-up to me.

“You guys!” Cali hissed. “Look!”

I turned and saw my sister holding up a shirt drenched in blood. Rishika gasped, Lola squeaked, and we all rushed to Cali.

Lola removed her ski mask to sniff the shirt. “It definitely smells like werewolf blood, but…”

“But there’s quite a few scents on there,” Rishika said, finishing for Lola, her eyes wide.

“Let’s take it and go!” I whispered. “Before someone comes!”

Cali shoved the shirt into the tote she’d brought with her, and we all ran for the exit.

I was thinking we’d actually done it, actually succeeded at finding evidence condemning Malakai—*Take note, Rishika! My gut was right!*—as I ducked out of the tent.

And promptly slammed into a solid male chest.

**Episode 3889**

I rammed into Artemis’s back when she jerked to a stop at the entrance of the tent.

“What the—”

I never finished my sentence.

“What the actual fuck are you doing?” said a loud, angry voice.

Fear flooded me.

*Shit shit shit!* We were about to be discovered!

And then my mind exploded, a million thoughts flooding in at once.

*What the hell am I going to tell Greyson? How could I do this to him? I AM A MONSTER! This was such a stupid idea—of course it was! We totally infiltrated the enemy camp! What did I expect?* Not *to get caught?*

“Jay?” Lola squeaked behind me, interrupting my internal screaming.

My chest unclenched ever so slightly.

*Jay?* I mouthed at Rishika.

She offered a sharp, relieved nod.

We piled out of the tent, and Jay’s eye widened at the sight of us.

Lola pulled off her ski mask. “Jay, baby, it’s me!”

Jay looked like he was about to have a stroke. That expression intensified when he spotted Rishika. “Fucking *seriously*, Rishika?”

I flinched at his tone. I’d never heard him use such a tone with… Well, anyone. Ever.

“What the hell was I supposed to do?” Rishika hissed at him. “They were going to do this with or without me!”

“Jay…” I was so relieved, I could’ve cried. “I’m so glad it’s just you. Thank god.”

He glared at me. “Yeah, you’re damn lucky it’s just me! Are you trying to get yourselves *killed*?”

Lola said, “We were just—”

“No, I don’t want to hear whatever excuse you all have,” Jay declared. “You’re all supposed to be better than this!” He turned to me. “Cali. What is Greyson going to think when he finds out you went behind his back?”

Jay had hit the nail on the head, and I felt like I was going to burst into tears. Looking around anxiously, I said, “Yes, yell at us, but let’s not do it here! We need to go!”

“That’s exactly why I followed you,” Jay said through clenched teeth. “To get you as far away from here as possible!”

He grabbed a speechless Lola’s hand and pulled her out of the camp. Artemis, Rishika, and I exchanged a look before we hurried after them.

I felt like I was going to be sick.

*Jay’s right, Cali! What the HELL were you thinking? We shouldn’t have come here like this! Bonfire smoke or not, they might smell us…*

I clutched the tote with the bloody shirt inside. I hoped it would help, somehow—I hoped it would give us some sort of clue. Anything to make coming here worth it, and not the stupidest decision I’d made in a while.

*What am I going to tell Greyson?*

\*\*\*

When we were safely out of the Bitterfang camp, Lola started up again.

“Jay, baby, we only wanted to help Greyson! We thought—”

“You thought what?” Jay snapped. “That you’d be *helping* Greyson by putting yourselves and the entire pack in even greater danger?”

Lola’s eyes were glistening. “Jay, you’ve never snapped at me like this before.”

He raked his hands through his hair. “That’s because this was a suicide mission! You would’ve been caught trespassing, and then who the fuck knows what the Bitterfangs would’ve done to you?”

Lola swallowed roughly, her cheeks flushing.

I stepped in. “Jay, don’t blame Lola. This was my idea. I should take the brunt of this blame, since I’m the acting Luna.”

Artemis shook her head. “No. I insisted, even though Rishika said we shouldn’t be doing this, so—”

“That’s not true,” I interrupted, shaking my head. “I’m the Luna; I could’ve and *should’ve* stopped you. This was my call, in the end.”

Jay took a deep breath, rubbing his face. I’d really never seen him so stressed or angry. This man had been to war, multiple times. He was a soldier, for god’s sake, and we’d broken him.

*See what you did, Cali?*

“Well, it doesn’t matter who’s responsible,” Jay said quietly. “We just have to tell Greyson about this.”

I swallowed roughly. “I’ll do it.”

Artemis winced. “Are you sure?”

What was the alternative? I was Greyson’s mate. I’d gone behind his back. The least I could do right now was have the decency to tell him about it.

“Yes,” I said. “Just let me handle it.”

Rishika breathed deeply, nodding at me. Then she grabbed Artemis’s hand, and the two of them headed off toward their tent.

“I was just freaked the fuck out worried,” Jay was whispering to Lola, cradling her in his arms. “What if you’d gotten hurt? The Bitterfangs would’ve considered you all trespassers… Did you forget what that would’ve meant?”

Lola swallowed. She looked like she was about to cry.

Hard same.

“I’ll…” I took a deep breath. “I’ll see you two later.”

Without a word, Jay pulled Lola toward their tent. The look she shot me before we parted was sad, and I hated it. We couldn’t mind link, but I could see her thoughts, clear as day.

*If we got Jay to get so mad, we must’ve really fucked up.*

What would Greyson say? But that didn’t matter—I had to tell him. I had so many regrets about tonight, but that didn’t mean I could keep this a secret from him. I was ashamed for not having talked to him first, and for acting impulsively. Rishika had been right all along, and we’d all ignored her.

*I’m the acting Luna, dammit! How will I ever prove I’m ready for the real deal when I do dumb, dangerous shit like this?*

I paused in front of the tent I was sharing with Greyson, lingering for a moment.

It was now or never.

I pushed inside, my breath catching when I saw Greyson’s muscular back. He was changing into a pair of sweatpants, his shirt gone.

“Hey, love,” he said, smiling a little. “Where were you? I was looking for you at dinner.”

I sat down on the folding chair. I didn’t trust myself not to dramatically collapse or something.

Fuck, this was bad.

“I have to tell you something,” I said slowly.

Greyson paused, eyeing me. “What do you mean? What’s going on?”

The next words came out in a single breath.

“WekindofsnuckintoMalakai’stent.”

Greyson was speechless. He blinked at me. “You *what*?”

My stomach was heaving. I was about three seconds away from hyperventilating. Shit, *why* had I done this?

“We snuck into Malakai’s tent,” I whispered.

He stared at me. “Is this a joke?”

“No. It’s not,” I admitted quietly.

Greyson stood there for a moment, motionless. His face went through a range of emotions—shock, anger, disappointment—all flashing by so fast that it gave me whiplash. But could I really blame him? How could I stand here and expect Greyson not to be at least as furious as Jay?

“Greyson, I’m so sorry—”

“Why would you take that risk?” he interrupted. His voice was low, shaky. “I don’t understand what… what the goal was.”

My heart was beating fast, sweat gathering at the back of my neck.

“We figured that if the council realized the Bitterfangs were dirty, that they were hurting people, they’d take our side and we’d be able to avoid a war. We saw how you were getting frustrated earlier, so we thought we’d help with—”

“Help with *what*?”

“We think Malakai’s involved with the murder!” I said, standing up. “You heard what he said to us earlier, when the body was found.”

In two strides, Greyson was in front of me. He still looked disbelieving, like he couldn’t quite wrap his head around what was happening here.

“Cali, we can’t just accuse him like this. He’s already got his eye on us. We can’t give him another reason to come after us. Do you understand what I’m saying here? Do you understand what this means? I thought…” He swallowed. The hurt in his tone made my heart ache. “I thought we were past you going behind my back. I thought you trusted me as your Alpha. As your mate.” He looked wounded. “Do you not?”

I felt like crying. “Of course I trust you! You’re, like, the best! Ever!”

He stared at me. “Then why did you go behind my back?”

“I know it was stupid, but I just wanted to help—look!” I pulled out the bloody T-shirt like a trophy. “We found this. Lola says it’s werewolf blood.”

Greyson took the shirt and sniffed it. Sighing, he said, “That’s Duke’s blood.”

“What? Are you sure?”

Greyson nodded. “I heard that Malakai smashed him in the face pretty badly during the games. It’s probably from the Ludis tournament.”

*Oh my god… How could I be such an idiot?*

Greyson examined my face, pressing his lips together. “What are you thinking?”

“That I betrayed your trust for no reason and I regret everything,” I burst out, pressing the heels of my palms into my eyes.

Greyson took a deep breath and pulled me into his arms. His warmth felt like ointment over a burn.

“I know you want to protect the pack,” he said, speaking into the crown of my head, “but you have to be careful with Malakai.” He faced me, cupping my cheek. “You said you were trying to help prevent the war… Do you have any idea what would’ve happened if you’d been caught tonight?”

I winced. “We couldn’t have just said we were passing by?”

Greyson shook his head. I didn’t speak. I rested my hands against his chest, nails digging into his skin.

“You could’ve started a war tonight, if he’d caught you,” Greyson said. “If he ever hurt you, I’d have to kill him. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

I wiped my cheeks quickly. When had I started crying?

“I’m so, so sorry,” I said. “I just got so caught up in all of it, I wasn’t thinking clearly. It was stupid; I realize that now.”

Greyson cleared his throat, pushing my hair over my shoulder. “It’s nothing we can’t deal with. But I don’t like that he’ll be able to smell you over there. I can’t stand the thought of it.”

Fear wrapped icy fingers around my throat and squeezed.

“Greyson,” I whispered, “do you think Malakai will retaliate against us for trespassing in his camp?”

**Episode 3890**

Greyson didn’t reply immediately. That was a bad sign. It meant his answer was yes, and he was trying to think of a way to cushion the blow. I’d made a terrible mistake, and I only hoped it wasn’t going to cost us too much.

“I was trying to do what I thought was right,” I whispered. “You have so much on your plate all the time, so I wanted to do something to help you, and the pack too. But I fucked it up. I’ll never be a good Luna. I’m just a dumb kid who—”

“Hey, *stop*,” Greyson said sharply, holding me close. “Look at me.”

When I looked up, stared into his eyes, my heart broke all over again.

“It’s over,” he said firmly. “I will handle this, no matter what the Bitterfangs might want to throw at us. I don’t want you to worry, okay?”

I laughed a little, wiping my cheeks. “How can I stop worrying? I’ve made everything so much worse!”

Greyson’s expression was calm. “If Malakai attacks us for this, it’ll be because he was always going to attack us. You know that. He has it out for us, and no matter what we do or say, it’s going to stay that way. He thinks we killed his daughter. There’s no going back from that.”

*There’s no going back from that*. He’d said that in a way that sounded definitive, serious. Somehow, his certainty made me feel a tiny bit better. At the same time, though, I wanted to throw myself to the floor and start sobbing, because seriously—how the *fuck* had I thought this was a good idea?

My need to help the pack, my stress over everything, my fear of sitting idle while Greyson always did his best for us… It had all gotten the best of me. And my constant doubt had been driving it all. My doubt that no matter what Greyson said, what anyone said, I would never be a good Luna.

It was like I’d fulfilled a self-destructive prophecy.

And Greyson hadn’t even raised his voice.

“I don’t know what I’d do without you,” I whispered, burying my face in his neck, hugging him. “I’m so sorry for going behind your back. I’m the worst mate ever.”

“Love, please,” he murmured, brushing the tears from my cheeks. “It’s over. Let’s just try to get some sleep, okay?”

I nodded, sniffling. Greyson lay down on the cot as I got ready for bed. I could feel his eyes following me. I couldn’t help but sense that there was a different vibe than usual in the room. The warmth was there, but something felt… off.

Something felt sad.

Greyson was upset.

He wasn’t telling me exactly how upset he was, how hurt he was that we’d gone behind his back and betrayed his trust. But I told myself that he was right to be upset, and at this point, there was nothing we could do about it.

When I joined him in the cot, I pressed up against him, resting my head on his chest. He wrapped his arms around me, his breathing even. He didn’t move to kiss me, and I didn’t try to kiss him either. I was feeling too guilty for that, the shame lingering, wrapping around my throat. This was about trust, and I’d broken it. Even though I’d had the best intentions.

“I love you, Greyson,” I whispered into the dark. “You know that, right? I love you more than anything.”

And even though Greyson said, “I love you too,” sleep didn’t come easily.

\*\*\*

I woke up the next morning with Greyson’s scent in my nose. He shifted in the cot. I was practically on top of him. I stared at him for a moment. His sheer physical perfection never failed to take my breath away. When he opened his eyes, my heart started racing.

His voice was gruff with sleep. “Good morning, love.”

My cheeks warmed. “Good morning.”

Quirking an eyebrow, Greyson glided his hands to my hips, pulling me against him. I could feel just how good a morning it was for him. The solid muscle of him, the way he looked at me… It made me feel all melty inside.

*… And to think that you BETRAYED him last night, Cali!*

My conscience was screaming at me, and the events of last night came flooding back.

“I’d better get ready for the game,” Greyson said, letting out a long breath. “We’re supposed to get to the field soon.”

“Right,” I said, swallowing. “The Ludis thing.” I paused. “Are you prepared to talk to Malakai if he approaches you?”

“It is what it is,” Greyson said with a shrug. “I’d better get up.”

I rolled off him, and he got to his feet, picking up his bag from the floor. I kept staring at him, biting my lip, until his gaze flicked back to me. He offered me a small smile that had my entire body heating up.

Raising an eyebrow, he asked, “Something on your mind?”

“It’s just…” My voice was quiet. “You didn’t give me a good morning kiss.”

He stared at me for a moment before letting out a low laugh. “Come here.”

He pulled me in, kissing my cheek, my nose, my lips. It was soft and perfect. It was Greyson.

And then he was gone, and I was alone in the tent.

There was a lump in my throat as I flopped back down onto the cot for a moment. I would’ve done anything to get rid of this weird vibe between Greyson and me… I could tell that he was hurt deep down, probably because I hadn’t been honest with him more than anything else. And that hurt me as well.

*Okay, Cali*, I told myself. *You need a game plan.*

I vowed to show Greyson how much I believed in him today on the field. I swore to myself that I wasn’t going to do anything else in pursuit of the Bitterfangs right now—no matter how guilty they seemed. I had to keep that line drawn, for the sake of the pack.

Greyson had been right all along.

Sighing, I got ready, trying to avoid any bad thoughts.

\*\*\*

Outside, I found Lola helping Elle to make a sign that said “Go Redwoods!”

“Hold this up for us during the game, okay?” she told Elle.

Elle nodded, grinning excitedly.

I pulled Lola aside. “What happened with Jay after you left?”

“He was worried. I get where he was coming from, so I didn’t make a scene or anything.” She shrugged. “We had sex, and he’s been back to normal, for the most part.”

And Greyson and I hadn’t even kissed last night. I told myself that didn’t mean anything. It *couldn’t* mean anything. Greyson loved me—that, I was certain about.

As part of my new “make sure Greyson knows that I trust him and believe in him” resolution, I decided to make a banner, just for him. I painted a heart on it, my own heart pounding at the thought of him smiling at me when he saw it.

\*\*\*

We had breakfast, and then all the Redwoods headed to the Ludis field. The council was standing in the middle, talking seriously with the refs.

“What’s going on?” I asked Lola.

“They’re talking about possibly canceling the tournament,” she said darkly.

I blinked in shock. “Wait, really?”

This was bad news. The Redwoods needed to win this tournament if we wanted to get the other packs’ support.

“I guess they’re thinking about canceling it because someone was killed last night, right?” Artemis spoke up. “That kind of puts a damper on a sports tournament.”

Rishika shook her head. “They won’t cancel it. We’re werewolves—we’ve all seen worse.”

Finally, the council ended their mini-conference.

“The tournament will continue as scheduled!” Cesaries shouted.

There were cheers from everyone except the Northwind pack. That was Evan’s pack. Of course they weren’t happy about this decision—but maybe the games would be good for morale? My own morale was definitely boosted when Greyson jogged over in his game outfit.

“Good luck out there!” I called.

Greyson nodded, his gaze resting on me for a beat too long. “Thanks. Hopefully he won’t take things too far.”

I frowned.

*Wait, who is he talking about? I thought we weren’t playing the Bitterfangs until the final?*

“What’s today’s match?” I asked Elle.

“The semi-finals,” she parroted. I was pretty sure Lola had drilled all sorts of useless sports information into her head.

I frowned, trying to remember who the Redwoods were playing today.

Realization dawned when I saw Xavier walk out into the middle of the field.

*Oh my god… The Redwoods are playing the Samaras! HOW could I have forgotten that?*

With the actual murder and the Bitterfang nonsense the night before, that little gem of information had slipped my mind. But that didn’t mean I wasn’t now vibrating in my seat.

“Shake hands!” the referee called, gesturing for Greyson and Xavier to come together.

Both their expressions were serious. When their palms met, you could’ve cut the tension with a knife.

They waited for the tip-off, and the crowd held its breath.

I felt my heart screech to a halt before jump-starting again when Greyson got possession of the ball. The Redwoods burst into cheers next to me, but the excitement was short-lived. Xavier lunged forward wildly, immediately tackling Greyson to the ground so violently that everybody heard the thud.

*Oh my god… This is* bad*.*

The ref blew his whistle, waving a yellow card in Xavier’s face. He snarled. At the same time, Greyson jumped to his feet, his gaze fixed dangerously on his brother.

I was so worried that my stomach heaved.

I glanced between my mates. *Was this just the beginning?*

**Episode 3891**

**Greyson**

Wiping dirt from my face, I got to my feet and glared at Xavier. “What the hell, man? You don’t need to go so damn hard.”

“Yes, I do,” he growled.

I waited, expecting him to say more, but nothing came.

“Possession to the Redwoods!” the ref yelled, grabbing the ball and tossing it to me.

I ground my teeth. I wanted to tell Xavier how much I needed to win this—didn’t he remember that? But Xavier turned his back on me and moved away, off to join his team. I looked over my shoulder at my own teammates, all of whom were looking a little confused. I couldn’t blame them for their confusion. After all, not so long ago, Xavier had been one of us, and now he was tackling me. Well, he would’ve done that before, but now the context was completely different, wasn’t it?

I shook my head. I couldn’t worry about Xavier—not now. I needed to focus on winning. I tossed the ball between my hands. When the ref blew the whistle to restart the game, I was ready.

The rest of the first half was intense, but the two teams were evenly matched, and we went toe to toe on nearly every play.

Thirty minutes in, Lola was charging down the field with the ball. I was behind her, with enough distance between us that when I saw Xavier coming for her, all I could do was shout a warning.

“Lola! *Heads up!*”

But it was too late. Xavier had gone low, sweeping her off her feet and dumping her to the ground with a teeth-rattling thud.

Lola gasped, then shouted in pain. She dropped the ball and grabbed her ankle as she rocked back and forth, her eyes clenched shut.

“Lola! Are you okay?” I demanded, sprinting over.

She shook her head. “No. It’s my ankle. It bent weirdly when I went down. I think it’s sprained.”

Jay appeared at my shoulder, and his eye was flashing with fury. He glared at Xavier and stepped up to him, getting right up into his face. “What the fuck is wrong with you, man?”

Xavier didn’t flinch. “It’s a game. That’s how it’s played.”

He didn’t seem the least bit sorry, which pissed Jay off even more.

“What the *hell*, Xavier?” he burst out.

He shoved Xavier, causing him to stumble back a step. Xavier’s expression darkened, and I stepped between them before they could start throwing punches.

“HEY!” the ref called, jogging over. He glared at Xavier. “Do I need to throw you out of this game?”

Xavier glared at the ref, then at Jay. Finally, he took a step back. “No.”

He turned and jogged back toward his team.

I stared after him, baffled. Xavier had been acting so weird lately, but this was different. He was taking things to a new level.

The ref looked down at Lola, who was still whimpering as she massaged her ankle. He blew his whistle. “Let’s call it. Halftime!”

Jay looked thunderous as he bent and gathered Lola gently in his arms, carrying her off the field.

With Lola taken care of, I strode over to the Samaras’ side of the field.

“We need to talk,” I hissed at Xavier’s back.

He didn’t turn. “Go back to your team.”

I gritted my teeth. “No. You and I need to talk, Xavier. *Now*.”

“Hey! What’s going on?”

I looked over as Cali jogged to my side. At the sound of her voice, Xavier turned as well.

“Cali, you shouldn’t be on the field during the game,” I started, but she wasn’t listening to me.

She glared at Xavier as she stepped toward him and jabbed a finger into his chest. “What the hell is going on with you, Xavier Evers? I get that you’re mad at me—for whatever reason—but you don’t need to go around hurting my friends because of what’s going on between us!”

Xavier shoved Cali’s finger away and scoffed, so harshly and so dismissively that it shocked me. “I’m not doing anything to *your friends*. I’m just trying to win the game. This has nothing to do with you, Caliana.”

Cali narrowed her eyes. “Really? Are you sure about that? Because this isn’t like you.”

He looked at her for a moment, and a sneer curled his lip. “It isn’t, huh? When will you realize that you have no idea what’s *like me*? You never did. And I’ve got some news for you—the whole world doesn’t revolve around you, Cali. *I* sure as hell don’t.” He turned to Ava. “Let’s go.”

Ava looked startled, but she fell into step beside Xavier as they walked away from us, toward the far side of the field.

When I looked back at Cali, there were angry tears in her eyes. I opened my mouth to say something to her, but the ref blew his whistle before I could get a word out.

“No spectators on the field!” he bellowed, waving angrily at Cali.

“You should go back to the others,” I said quietly.

Cali nodded, fighting to keep the tears from falling down her face. The sight filled me with fury.

It must have been doing something similar to her, because when she turned to look at me, her eyes were bright with intensity.

“You’d better win,” she said darkly.

I nodded. “I will.”

Halftime seemed both too long and too short, but when it was over, I was ready to go. I’d made the decision to play the second half as hard as Xavier had played the first. I was going to go just as hard as he had. And Xavier hadn’t decided to let up, which meant that as soon as the game started again, he and I were locked in a two-man battle.

I had the ball and was running it up the field when Xavier sacked me. There was a frantic scramble, and he ended up with the ball. He was running it up the field when *I* sacked *him*. It went on like that, quarter after quarter. We were getting an equal number of possessions and sacks, and at one point, I realized I was only vaguely aware of the other players on the field. My whole focus had narrowed down to my brother.

We were nearing the end of the last quarter when I got possession of the ball. The score was tied, and as I focused on the goal line, I knew I needed to reach it. I needed this point to win the game and seal the alliances we needed to beat the Bitterfangs. Everything was riding on this.

We called a time out, and I gathered my team around me.

“What’s the play, boss?” Ravi asked, wiping sweat and dirt from his face.

“I think we’re going to use a trick play,” I said quietly. “Xavier’s intent on taking me down, so we’re going to pretend that I’m the one running the ball up the field, but it’s actually going to be Jay. Everyone got it?”

The team nodded, Jay looking particularly determined.

“Let’s go,” he growled.

We broke, and as we took our places on the field, I happened to catch Xavier’s eye.

“You’re going to lose,” I said quietly, just loud enough for him to hear.

“Over my dead body,” he replied through gritted teeth.

My blood was boiling, but I shrugged like it didn’t matter. “We’ll see.”

The ref blew the whistle, signaling the start of play, and my stomach gave a huge lurch. My play went just as planned. Xavier went after me right away, tackling me hard, but when he rolled off me, I opened my hands, showing him that I didn’t have the ball.

“Gotcha,” I muttered.

“*Fuck!*” Xavier bellowed.

Enraged, he leapt to his feet, half-shifted to his wolf form, and raced after Jay, who was sprinting up the field.

I was shocked. I hadn’t expected *this*. Xavier was running so fast, I knew in an instant that Jay didn’t stand a chance. Xavier caught up and tackled him, just a yard before the goal line.

But he didn’t stop there. With Jay on the ground, Xavier raised a clawed hand, like he was going to slash his face.

“What the FUCK?” Jay shouted, his hands flying up protectively.

The ref blew the whistle like crazy, waving a red card in the air and sprinting toward them, and everyone on the sidelines jumped to their feet.

We all reached them just as Xavier climbed off Jay and shifted back to his wholly human form.

I grabbed my brother’s shoulder and shoved him back, farther away.

“What the *fuck* is wrong with you, Xavier?” I burst out. “What’s gotten into you? Why are you playing this game like it’s an actual life-or-death battle?”

“BECAUSE IT IS!” Xavier snapped, his eyes flashing.

This gave me pause. I didn’t know how to react, because there was something in his eyes—a kind of wild desperation—that made me hesitate. It made me wonder what the hell else was going on that I didn’t know about. But before I could ask, the ref reached us.

“It’s a tied game,” he declared. “We need to go to Sudden Death.”

**Episode 3892**

Sudden Death. I heard people repeating it in whispers.

*Sudden Death.*

*Sudden Death.*

*Sudden Death.*

I didn’t like the sound of that at all.

“What does Sudden Death mean?” I asked Mace, who’d been watching the game with the Redwoods.

“It’s kind of like hockey, when they go into overtime,” he said.

I nodded. “Okay, you’re going to need to keep explaining.”

He rolled his eyes. “Come on, Hart. I thought you were from Minnesota—”

“Oh my god, Mace, just tell me what it means!”

“Okay, okay, keep your hair on,” he said. “Well, in hockey Sudden Death, the first team to score a goal wins, no matter what.”

“Oh, well that doesn’t sound too bad,” I said, letting out a relieved breath.

“Except…”

My heart thumped. “Except *what*?”

Mace sighed. “Well, in Ludis Sudden Death, there’s one major difference.”

“And what’s that?”

Mace shrugged. “The players can fully shift.”

I stared at him. “*What?* You’re kidding. No way! You saw how intense Xavier just got! They can’t fully shift! They’ll kill each other!”

“The refs won’t let them *kill* each other,” Mace said, clearly trying to sound reasonable.

“You don’t know that!” I cried. “What if they can’t stop them?”

I clasped my hands together and twisted my fingers nervously. I was starting to really worry.

Artemis appeared at my side and grabbed my hand. “Hey. Do you want to leave?”

I shook my head. “No. I need to stay. I need to see what happens.”

All the same, I kept hold of Artemis’s hand as we were all ushered back to the sidelines and the ref blew the whistle, signaling the start of overtime.

Xavier shifted immediately, landing on four paws in his wolf form. Greyson did the same. He charged his brother, and I looked away just before they collided.

When I chanced a look back, they were on the ground, wrestling and snarling and slashing at each other. Lola darted in and snatched the ball, which was lying forgotten beside them. She tucked it under her arm and took off, racing for the goal line. Ava and Marissa immediately dashed after her, but she was sprinting hard. Her ankle was nearly healed, and despite the injury, she was still pretty fast.

I jumped up and down and found myself almost screaming. “Go, LOLA! RUN!” I clutched Artemis’s hand as Lola neared the goal line. “GO, LOLA! *GO!*”

We were going to do it! We were so close! She just had to go a little further—the crowd went nuts as Lola reached the goal post.

“*YES! YES! YES*!” I screamed, jumping up and down, hugging Artemis. “She did it!”

“Hell yeah!” Artemis shouted, jumping with me.

Meanwhile, on the Ludis field, Lola was screaming like a crazy person. She spiked the ball and started to dance. Jay ran to her, caught her in his arms, and spun her around while the rest of the Redwoods celebrated on the field.

All of us on the sidelines were pressing forward, racing onto the field to congratulate the team, but I slowed when I saw Greyson shift back to human. He was all rough around the edges, his muscles flexing with every movement. He got to his feet and held out his hand to Xavier, who was human again now too, but still sprawled out on the ground. Greyson kept his hand there, offering to help him to his feet.

I felt on edge again. I was glad to see Greyson’s gesture, but I could feel the tension in the air. Neither brother moved, and I was about to walk over when finally Xavier’s expression darkened. He slapped Greyson’s hand away and got to his feet without assistance. Then he stormed away without a word.

I sighed, then walked over to where Greyson stood, watching his brother walk away.

“Congratulations?” I chanced, giving him a small smile.

“Yeah, sure,” Greyson muttered.

“What is it?” I asked.

He looked down at me, almost like he was only just noticing me, and shook his head. “Nothing. I just… Nothing. I’m jumping to conclusions for no reason.” He wrapped his arms around me. “We won. Let’s go celebrate with the rest of the pack.”

I nodded, and we followed the pack as they headed off the field. Jay had hoisted Lola onto his shoulders, and the two of them were leading the way to Big Mac’s tent—which was currently operating as Big Mac’s speakeasy.

“Drinks for everyone!” Lola shouted as Jay set her back on her feet.

“Notice how she doesn’t mention who’s paying?” Greyson said with a wry grin.

I smiled, but my mind was spinning as we all filed into the tent for drinks. I couldn’t get my mind off Xavier’s wild intensity during the game, even as someone pressed a drink into my hand.

I looked down into its depths, wondering where Xavier was now. Part of me wanted to find him and ask what the hell was going on with him, but I didn’t know if that would do any good. Every time I’d tried to talk to him lately, he’d just brushed me off—and he was getting ruder and more dismissive every time. I didn’t know how many more rejections I could take before my heart split completely in two.

Drumming my fingers against my glass, I let my memory glide over all the interactions we’d had since we’d arrived at the summit. He’d been *really* upset about my Luna mark. My stomach fluttered when I remembered his reaction. A part of me had hoped that his response meant he still cared about me.

But then he’d been so cruel to me at the game today. So what was the truth?

I didn’t know. Maybe I never would.

“I’m starving!” Jay announced. He knocked back the rest of his drink and slammed the glass down on one of the tent’s small tables. “It feels like lunchtime to me! Lola and I are going to go raid the lunch buffet by the river!”

This was met with cheers for some reason, which made me laugh. The pack was just on a high from winning, and clearly everything sounded great to them. Jay and Lola headed out in search of food, but the rest of the pack stayed behind to drink.

I shook my head and gave my shoulders a little roll. I needed to pull myself together. I didn’t want to be a downer. I couldn’t worry about Xavier all the time. I needed to be present in the moment—and the current moment was one of celebration.

“Cheers!” Ravi cried, lifting his glass. “To the Redwood pack!”

“To the Redwood pack!” I shouted with everyone else, and then I downed my shot, hoping it would go a ways toward loosening me up.

Mace walked over to Greyson and clapped him on the shoulder. “Hey, man, great win out there. It was a tough one. I was worried it wouldn’t happen for a second.”

Greyson nodded. “Yeah, we went hard.”

Mace raised his eyebrows. “Maybe you were trying to show everyone how tough the Redwoods are. Show that you can win honestly, and not just because Xavier’s your brother.”

Greyson frowned. “Yeah, maybe,” he said vaguely.

But I perked up at that. Yeah, maybe that *was* the reason why Xavier and Greyson had been so combative on the field. It was definitely a better explanation than Xavier was mad at me for some unknown reason.

The thought made me feel better, but not by much. I just couldn’t shake the memory of the look on his face when he’d told me that the world didn’t revolve around me. He’d just looked so… *furious*.

Greyson was shrugged. “Whatever. I’m just glad we’re in the final. Now we just have to beat whoever wins the other semi-final match.” He ran a hand through his sweaty hair. “Do you know what the score is?”

Mace shrugged. “No, but last I heard, it was close.”

“I’m sure the Redwoods are going to do great,” I said quickly. “Our team is really good. Just look at what Lola was able to do out there.”

“Yeah, we’ll see—” Greyson started, but he stopped when the tent flap was pulled aside.

I looked over, expecting to see Jay and Lola returning victoriously with their plates piled high with food, but that wasn’t who it was.

Malakai and the Bitterfang team stood framed in the archway of the tent, backlit by the bright sunlight.

Malakai blinked into the gloom of the tent, then looked around. He zeroed in on Greyson and, with a disarming smile, stepped toward him. “Celebrating, I see! Another round of shots! On me!”

Big Mac poured another round of shots and set them out without comment. Malakai passed them around, handing Greyson his glass last.

“We should toast,” Malakai said with a smile.

“And why would we do that?” Greyson asked warily.

“Because it looks like it’ll be your pack versus mine in the final, Greyson.” Malakai raised his glass. “May the best Alpha win.”

**Episode 3893**

**Xavier**

I lifted my cot over my head and slammed it back down to the ground, making the aluminum frame crumple like a soda can. I picked up my bag and hurled it across the tent as I shouted. Clothes rained down, and I kicked them, fury coursing through me like poison. I’d had the chance to win, and I’d blown it. I’d fucking lost, and I was *livid*. I flexed my hands and curled them into fists, fighting the urge to pull the tent down around me.

Finally, my rage spent, I dropped down onto the pile of clothes that had fallen from my bag. I was breathing hard, and my heart was pounding. I put my hands over my eyes and let the self-recrimination begin as wave after wave of guilt washed over me. I was mad—at myself. I’d fucked up majorly, and I had no one to blame but myself. I could’ve won that stupid game, but I’d known from the start that I’d need to stay focused. And I’d failed. I’d let Greyson’s taunting get to me. I’d let him throw me off. I’d shifted my focus to my brother and forgotten about the ball—Lola had just fucking picked it up off the ground—and now look at how things had played out. I’d lost my chance to be able to talk to Cali without hurting her.

I’d known what was at stake, I’d played as hard as I could, but I’d lost, and now my chances of giving Cali a clue about what was happening with Adéluce were gone. I’d let my impulsiveness run away with me, and I’d lost my chance to warn her of the danger she was in. Who the hell knew if I’d get another opportunity?

“Wow.” Ava stepped into the tent. She was dirty and sweaty and had a bit of dried blood on the corner of her mouth. She looked around and gave a low whistle. “You know you really are a sore loser, X.”

“Don’t fucking start, Ava,” I snarled. “I’m not in the mood.”  
 She held up her hands in surrender. “Hey, I was just coming to check on you, but now I see that it was a bad idea.”

I made a low growling sound in the back of my throat.

“Fine,” she said shortly, not looking the least bit scared of me. “Be a baby about it. But I wanted to let you know that—as our *Alpha*—you do need to talk to your pack sooner or later. Preferably sooner. They’re all upset about losing, too.”

She gave me a pointed look and strode out of the tent, leaving me feeling even worse than before. I threw my arm across my eyes with a groan. As much as I wanted to wallow in self-pity, I *was* an Alpha now. And with that title came responsibility.

So, with a massive effort, I got to my feet and dug through the pile of clothes beneath me. Pulling out a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, I yanked them on and stepped out of the tent.

It was lunchtime, so I headed down toward the tables that had been set up near the river. When I arrived, I looked around for my pack. I didn’t see any familiar faces—they were probably still changing after the game.

My stomach growled, reminding me that I’d just played a hard-as-fuck game of Ludis, so I picked up a plate. I’d grab food and snag a table for the pack. We’d need to sit down and talk about the game, anyway.

I made my way down the table, grabbing some asparagus, a couple of rolls, and some steak tenderloin. I was scowling down at a plate of teeny tiny spring rolls when Jay stepped up to the other side of the table.

Shit.

He seemed to be thinking the same thing, because he stopped when he saw me and frowned. He started to move away, which was a relief, but then he stopped himself and turned back.

“I just don’t get it,” he said.

*Fuck.*

“You don’t need to *get* anything,” I said without looking up.

I could feel Jay staring at me.

“Seriously?” he finally said, and I could hear the anger and hurt in his voice. “I thought we were friends, Xavier.”

I gritted my teeth.

“You know, you didn’t just leave Cali high and dry when you took off. You left all of us,” Jay said. “All the Redwoods. We depended on you, man.”

“You have your Alpha,” I said, scowling.

“Oh, stop with that bullshit,” Jay snapped. “You know that a pack needs more than an Alpha to function well, and you were integral to the Redwoods.” He looked at me for a long moment. “Is that what it really was? You were still angry that you weren’t Alpha, so you jumped ship?”

I shrugged. I didn’t trust myself to lie convincingly about what was going on with me. Not to Jay, who’d known me for longer than almost anyone.

He gave me a searching look. “Tell me you left because you fell in love with Ava.”

“What?” I asked, surprised.

He shook his head. “I’d be able to understand that.”

“It’s complicated,” I muttered.

Jay kept his eye on me, and I watched as the look in it changed, turning bitter. “Well, even if you’re not a Redwood anymore, you can’t forget everything we’ve been through. What you did to Lola and Greyson on the field wasn’t cool, man.”

A wave of guilt washed over me. I did feel bad about tackling Lola as hard as I had. “Listen, I’m sorry about that. I didn’t mean to hurt her.”

That seemed to cool Jay down a bit, and he nodded. “I guess that game can get to all of us. But Xavier, you were so intense out there. I’ve never seen you play something like *that*.”

I shrugged again.

“Lola thinks you’re mad at Cali about the Luna mark thing,” Jay said, eyeing me keenly.

Anger bloomed in my chest. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Good, that’s probably for the best,” Jay said.

*For the best?* This stopped me in my tracks, one of those stupid tiny spring rolls halfway to my plate. That was a weird thing to say.

“Why did you say that?” I asked Jay.

Jay shifted on his feet. “You already said you didn’t want to talk about it, man. Drop it.”

Well now I wasn’t going to. Jay had been my friend for a long ass time. He was hiding something. I knew that. I had a hunch, but it sounded crazy.

“Is Cali’s Luna mark fake?”

Jay’s eyes went wide, and he didn’t respond fast enough. *Bingo.*

I couldn’t believe Greyson was so stupid as to put a target on Cali’s back like that. How had they done it? Probably used Kira again and that spell she’d done at the Vanguard.

“Are you serious?” I asked. “Greyson brought her here with a *fake* Luna mark?”

“Keep your voice down,” Jay snapped. “I’m not telling you shit, Xavier.”

That was practically all the confirmation I needed. He wasn’t denying it whatsoever. I knew I’d hit the nail right on the head.

I scowled at him. “I guess no one thought I *should* know that valuable piece of information, did they?

Jay scowled right back at me. “Well, that was your choice, wasn’t it? You decided to stop being involved in Redwood business. Why would we share that with you?”

I looked him dead in the eyes. “I guess so.”

Then I turned and didn’t look back.

I put my plate on a free table and dropped down onto the bench. My stomach felt like a clenched fist, and the last thing I felt like doing was eating, but I knew I had to get some food into me, so I started to shovel it in. I’d only just started when a jolt of pain pierced my skull.

I winced and dropped my fork. I pushed my palms against my temples, trying to ease the intense pressure.

Then I heard it—Adéluce’s laughing voice, echoing in my head.

*Oh, poor, poor Xavier. Couldn’t win his little werewolf game.*

I scowled down at the table, but I didn’t reply. I couldn’t. I was in the middle of the lunch crowd, and—even though the table I’d chosen was at the far edge—I didn’t want to look like I was talking to myself.

*I was really rooting for you. And you obviously wanted to win so badly. It was kind of… pathetic.* Adéluce laughed again. *But I have to say, the way you were so cruel to Cali was especially entertaining. Far more so than the game.*

“Leave me alone,” I muttered. The pain was growing more intense.

*Oh, you know I can’t do that. Well, I suppose I* could*, but I won’t. You must know that by now. You’re my favorite toy, Xavier Evers. But because you’re my favorite, I’ll give you one more chance*.

The pain was nearly making me sick, but I straightened at this, my heart pounding.

“What?” I asked. “You will?”

*Why not?* She laughed again, cold as ice. *I’m a bitch, but I’m not completely heartless. I’ll give you another chance to talk to Cali. But this time, the time limit is one minute. And I’m warning you now—if you fail at this task, that’s it.*

“What’s it?” I asked, my stomach clenching.

*That’s* it*,* Adéluce said. *Fail again, and you won’t get any more chances.*

**Episode 3894**

I clutched my glass as I watched Malakai and Greyson, who were staring hard at each other. The tension between them was growing with every passing moment, and the air in the tent was getting thick with it.

Finally, Greyson took a step back. A muscle in his jaw twitched, but when he spoke, his voice was even.

“Then I guess I’ll see you on the Ludis field,” he said, and he held out his hand for Malakai to shake.

Malakai—obviously annoyed he hadn’t gotten the reaction he’d been seeking—looked down at the extended hand with a sneer. He turned his back on Greyson and left the tent, waving for his pack to follow.

I let out a relieved breath as they left. “Well, *that* was really tense.”

“What the hell *was* that?” Ravi muttered. Then he shook his head and knocked back the rest of his drink.

I took a step closer to Greyson. “How are you feeling about the final match now?” I asked, keeping my voice low. “Do you think we can win?”

Greyson’s face was set in a frown. “We don’t have a choice. We *have* to win. We have to prove to the other Alphas that we can hold our own against the Bitterfangs. Even if it is just in a Ludis game.” He shook his head. “Winning is the only way to get the other Alphas to stand behind the Redwoods.”

I could hear the urgency in his voice, and the knowledge of how much was really at stake here settled into the pit of my stomach. I wrapped my arms around him and pulled him close.

He slid an arm around me. “Don’t worry, love. We’ve been through a lot as a pack—I think we can get through a game of Ludis.”

I gave a worried chuckle. He kissed the top of my head, and when I looked up, he smiled at me and pressed a proper kiss to my lips.

It was a warm, moonshine-infused kiss, and I leaned into him even more. Heat flooded through me, and for a moment, I just let myself just feel *good*. Let myself feel confident in Greyson as Alpha and in his ability to win the game and secure the support the Redwoods desperately needed. If anyone could do it, he could.

Then someone cleared their throat.

The sound was loud and pointed and very clearly intended to interrupt what was shaping up to be a very good kiss.

Greyson and I broke apart to see Armin standing in front of us. He was wearing a three-piece suit, which looked weird as hell in a tent, and when we disengaged, he handed me an envelope. It was thick, linen paper—the kind Lucian used to send to Elle.

“What is this?” I asked.

Armin—who I realized looked deeply uncomfortable—shook his head. “I was only told to deliver the letter. I wasn’t apprised of its contents.”

Then he cleared his throat again and strode out of the tent.

I frowned at the envelope in my hand, wondering what the hell Lucian could possibly want from me. But when I opened it, I saw that it wasn’t from Lucian at all.

“It’s from Aysel,” I said, scanning the letter. “It’s an invitation… to a Luna tea.” I frowned. “But Aysel’s not a Luna.”

I looked up to see that Greyson, Lola, and Artemis had gathered to check out the invitation.

“When is it?” Lola asked.

I checked the invitation. “Right now.”

Lola shrugged. “Maybe you should just go?”

“Really? You think so?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Why not? It might be a good distraction,” she said.

But Greyson didn’t look so sure. “I don’t know if I like the idea of you being alone with all this Bitterfang stuff going on.”

I nodded, and I couldn’t stop myself from thinking about how Rowena had pegged my Luna mark as a fake. If she had known, would other Lunas be able to figure it out, too? Though Rowena *was* a witch, and she *had* promised to keep my secret…

“If I’m the only Luna who doesn’t go to this thing, it’ll look weird, won’t it?” I asked, tapping the thick invitation against my palm.

“That’s true,” Artemis said, nodding.

Greyson sighed. “Well, I guess I’m outnumbered.” He leaned in and kissed my cheek. “Just be careful, okay?”

“I will,” I promised. “I’ll see you later.”

Heading out of the tent, I strode toward the location Aysel had specified on the invitation. It was down near the river, and as I drew close, I was shocked to see that a tent had been set up. But this wasn’t the kind of practical, army-green tent that the rest of us were staying in—this tent was big and bright white and had transparent windows that let in the sunlight. This wasn’t a camping tent; this was an *event tent*.

When I walked inside, I found a large, round table in the center, covered with a lace tablecloth. On it was a full china service for an elaborate English tea—dainty teacups and saucers, dessert plates, salad plates, luncheon plates, and about a dozen different forks.

Aysel was already there, enthroned in one of the ornately carved wooden chairs, and she was wearing—to my utmost shock—a full Regency costume. The dress was lavender, with a high empire waist, and her very generous cleavage spilled from the low neckline.

I was so surprised that I stopped in the doorway of the tent. I nearly rolled my eyes but managed to stop myself in time.

“Hi, Aysel,” I said, barely stifling a laugh. I’d give her this much—Aysel certainly knew how to put on a show.

“*Wow*.”

Rowena appeared at my shoulder. She was looking around the tent with wide, surprised eyes, and they grew even wider when they landed on Aysel.

“This is… a *lot*,” Rowena said quietly.

“Yep.” I nodded. “That’s Aysel for you.”

Rowena smiled, and we both took our seats as Paige and Geena arrived. More and more Lunas filed in—how was I supposed to ever introduce myself to all of them?—and I was surprised when Ava appeared in the doorway of the tent. She hesitated, like coming in was the last thing she wanted to do, but finally she stepped toward an empty seat.

When I saw her, my heart dropped. Did that mean she was Xavier’s *official* Luna? Would he really have done something like that without telling me? Then again, did he think I’d done exactly that, too, with Greyson?

I braced myself as Ava sat down next to me. I opened my mouth, trying to think of something to say. Anything. But what was there to talk about between us? Nothing.

“Welcome, welcome!” Aysel’s voice called out. Phew. “I thought it would be nice for the leading ladies of each pack in attendance to get to know each other. You know, without all that testosterone getting in the way.” Was I supposed to laugh here? “And it would be wrong of me not to include the leading ladies of each pack, even if they’re not yet a Luna.” She gestured to Ava. “No offense. The Samaras *are* our allies.” Aysel looked around. “Though it does seem as though Maren has chosen not to accept my invitation on behalf of the Blue Bloods.”

Ava took this in and nodded, apparently satisfied with Aysel’s explanation. But then she stiffened as a woman appeared in the doorway of the tent. The woman stepped in and took an empty seat next to Ava.

I didn’t recognize the woman, but Ava seemed to, and the woman definitely knew her.

“Ava,” the woman said quietly.

Ava nodded. “Aunt Leona,” she said just as quietly.

I was surprised. Thiswas Ava’s *aunt*? I glanced at Aysel. What was she up to with all this? Why was she bringing so many people together, many of whom clearly didn’t get along?

Just as I was wondering this, another figure appeared in the doorway of the tent. She was tall, with dark hair and high, sharp cheekbones. She was wearing a perfectly tailored linen suit, and she strode into the tent as though she owned it. I got the distinct impression this woman—whoever she was—was *not* to be messed with.

She took the seat directly across from me, and Aysel clapped her hands together.

“Wonderful! We’re all here. Now, why don’t we go around and introduce ourselves? I’ll go first, of course. I’m Aysel, as you all know, and I’m representing the Vanguard pack, as we have no official Luna as of yet. It’s wonderful to be with a group of such powerful women.”

She looked over at me expectantly.

“Oh, yeah, I—” I swallowed. “I’m Caliana, Luna of the Redwood pack. I… It’s nice to meet you all?”

I glanced over at Rowena, glad I was done with that bit of awkwardness, but before Rowena could open her mouth, the woman in the tan suit spoke.

“I’m surprised you had the nerve to show your face here, Redwood,” she said.

I looked over at her, surprised. “Excuse me?”

Aysel glanced at the woman in the suit. “Um, perhaps you’d like to introduce yourself?”

She narrowed her eyes. “With pleasure. I am Honora, Luna of the Bitterfang pack—and mother to a child the Redwood pack murdered.”

**Episode 3895**

**Xavier**

I lay on the cot in my tent, looking up at the ceiling and having a good hard brood. Ava had taken off somewhere, the pack was scattered around the camp, and I had dipped out of lunch early. After that message from Adéluce, I’d needed some time alone to think shit through.

I just didn’t know what the hell I was supposed to do. Adéluce had trapped me between a rock and a hard place, which was where she seemed to like me best. She’d dangled the opportunity to talk to Cali in front of me again—but at what price?

I scrubbed at my face as her voice echoed through my head again.

*Make sure the Redwoods lose the final game of the tournament. Then you and Cali can have a minute alone.*

Groaning, I covered my face with my hands. What the actual hell? Could I do this? Could I really sabotage Greyson and the Redwoods’ chances of winning the Ludis final?

I wasn’t an idiot. I knew what winning the tournament would mean for the Redwoods. And I knew how important it was for Greyson to prove himself and the pack to the other Alphas. So, if I did sabotage their chances, then the Redwoods would be vulnerable to the Bitterfangs, and to any attack they chose to mount.

And the repercussions of a Bitterfang attack would extend past the Redwoods—it could put the Samaras at risk, too. I couldn’t do that to both packs, could I?

Fucking hell. If I did any of it, I was a selfish asshole. Did that matter?

But if I didn’t get to talk to Cali, I didn’t know if Adéluce would ever give me another chance… *Fuck.*

My head pounded as I tried to think my way through the murky depths of this problem.

On one hand… Maybe the packs didn’t actually *need* an alliance. I knew Greyson was really focused on finding more allies, but maybe the Redwoods, the Blue Bloods, the Samaras, and the Vanguards didn’t actually *need* help against the Bitterfangs. Maybe we could stand against the Bitterfangs on our own. It was possible, at least. But I probably wouldn’t get another chance to talk to Cali without Adéluce watching.

And while the vampire-witch currently had her sights set on me, she was unpredictable and vindictive. She had reason to hate all of us, since we all fought against her; she could decide at any moment to redirect her torture toward anyone she chose. Anyone whose pain would hurt me, too. That made her a huge threat to all of us—but I was the only one who knew about her. Which meant that this was more important… Right?

The winter wind blew outside my tent, rippling the canvas sides. I didn’t feel the cold, but the sound was lonely. It matched the way I felt inside. Because if I *did* sabotage Greyson and the Redwood team and they ever found out, the Redwoods would never forgive me—Adéluce or no Adéluce. More importantly, *Cali* would never forgive me. I didn’t know how I’d come back from that betrayal, on top of everything else I’d already done.

And maybe that was exactly why Adéluce was doing this. Maybe that was why she was pushing me toward this inevitability—so that I *had* to make this kind of impossible choice. I could either betray the Redwoods to protect Cali, or I could do nothing and live in constant fear that Adéluce would lash out at Cali.

I dug my fingers into my hair and shook my head. Fury coursed through me. I was so angry about the impossibility of it all, it was hard to breathe. I hated that I had to make this terrible choice.

Weirdly, in this moment, I missed my brother. At least with Greyson around to badger me into talking through every step of every damn plan I made, I’d always had another person to lean on. Another brain, another set of eyes and ears. And with Greyson as Alpha, there’d been someone else around to make the hard choices.

But Greyson wasn’t here now. Now, I was all alone. I was Alpha of my own pack, and I didn’t have anyone to trust, or to lean on when it came to anything with Adéluce. The closest I could have was Ava, but she didn’t—couldn’t—know the full truth. I had to bear it alone.

Pressure built in my chest, like a huge weight was sitting on top of me. I struggled to take a deep breath and wondered vaguely if this was what a panic attack felt like. Maybe this whole thing had been a mistake. Maybe becoming Samara Alpha had been the wrong choice. If I hadn’t gone after the position, then I wouldn’t be here—I wouldn’t feel responsible for the destiny of two packs.

But that kind of thinking was pointless. I *was* the Samara Alpha, and there was no turning back now. I had to do what I thought would do the most good. And a pack couldn’t fight an invisible threat, could it?

My choice was clear, even if it wasn’t easy—I had to tell Cali about Adéluce and hope that the four packs would be strong enough to face Malakai and the Bitterfangs on their own.

It was torture to think about, but it was the only choice…

Right?

I felt like I was going to go crazy if I kept thinking about it, so I stood up and pushed my way out of the tent. I needed to act now, before I changed my mind.

But when I stepped outside, I spotted Donovan, Marissa, Josephine, and Geraint. When they saw me emerge from the tent, they hurried toward me.

“Hey,” Marissa called. “Do you think the Bitterfangs were watching our game?”

“What?” I asked, confused by her question. “The Ludis game? I don’t know. Why?”

“I was just thinking,” she said. “If they were watching… Do you think they’ve decided we’re weak because we lost?”  
 I took a step back, trying to figure out a way to exit this conversation with minimal Marissa drama. I didn’t have time to agonize over our Ludis loss and its possible repercussions with the Bitterfangs—I had to figure out how the hell I was going to sabotage the Redwoods’ next game.

But the pack wanted to chat.

“I think we should set up a patrol around our camp,” Donovan said, crossing his arms. “With that dead wolf in the woods, we don’t know who might come at us.”

“That might be a good idea,” Josephine said, and Geraint nodded.

“Fine,” I said, anxious to get away. “Donovan, you set up a schedule for a night patrol around our camp. Two wolves at a time, two-hour shifts.”

Donovan nodded. “You got it. Geraint, Josephine, let’s go. Marissa? You coming?”

“Yeah, in a minute,” she said, waving them away. When they were gone, she turned back to me. “Should we do something to help Greyson and the Redwoods?”

“What do you mean?” I asked quickly.

“I hear that Greyson’s been trying to rally the other Alphas to our side,” she said. “I was wondering if we should do something to help him.”

I felt a sharp pang of guilt in my gut.

“We still have an alliance with three other packs,” I said, running a distracted hand through my hair. “That makes us strong. We’ll be fine.”

Marissa didn’t look so sure. “I don’t know. We’re not on the best of terms with the Vanguards at the moment. I think Lucian’s a sore loser, and he’s not super happy that you’re our Alpha now.” She shook her head. “Besides, I don’t feel good hiding behind the stronger Redwood pack with all this Bitterfang shit.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I just don’t like it,” she said. “It hurts my pride as a Samara. We need to show the other packs that we’re strong, too. I don’t want to play second fiddle to any pack, let alone your brother’s.”

I shook my head. “Listen, don’t worry about this right now. I’ve got it covered.”

She frowned, not looking convinced, which annoyed the hell out of me. Was this how Greyson felt every time a Redwood pack member disagreed with him or second-guessed his decisions?

“Yeah, but—” Marissa started, but then she was interrupted by a booming—and unfortunately familiar—voice.

“Hello to my allies and friends!”

I looked over to see Lucian striding purposefully toward us.

“God help us,” I muttered, rolling my eyes. I did *not* have time for Lucian’s shit right now.

“Xavier!” Lucian called, waving.

“I really don’t have time to talk right now, Lucian. Sorry—”

“Ah, I see,” he said, stepping into my path to block what should’ve been my hasty retreat. “I’ll make it quick, then.”

“What?” I asked with a sigh, giving in.

He leveled a look at me. “I think it’s time you and I spoke, Xavier Evers.”

I stared back at him. “We’re speaking right now, Lucian.”

“Alpha to Alpha,” he clarified.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

His expression was grave. “I think we need to clear the air.”

**Episode 3896**

I just stared at the woman across from me. How the hellwas I supposed to reply to *that*? This woman thought I’d played a role in *murdering* her daughter. No wonder she was glaring daggers at me. And if I said the wrong thing, it would make Honora even angrier than she already was. Which—judging by her dark, flashing eyes—was pretty damn angry.

But she wasn’t waiting for me to respond. She looked around, her dark eyes sweeping over Ava and Aysel as she spoke. “And it’s not *just* the Redwoods. The Vanguards, the Blue Bloods, *and* the Samaras will pay as well.” She turned to me, and I could practically feel her glare. “My daughter, Julia, died at your pack house, Luna. She was ripped away from me because of the choices *your* pack made.”

Anger rose in my chest, and I suddenly found my voice. “That’s not true.”

The whole table—all of whom had been silent up to this point—turned to stare at me in shock.

But that didn’t deter me.

“Your daughter was ripped away from you because of the choices *you* made,” I said, leaning toward Honora. “If you were such a loving family, why did she feel the need to run away in the first place?”

Honora’s eyelid began to twitch, so I knew I’d hit a nerve. I wanted to go on, but I kept my mouth shut. I didn’t want to keep talking and risk saying the wrong thing. I couldn’t chance exposing the fact that Julia was still alive. I couldn’t do that to Julia—not after the Redwoods had promised to protect her and Russell.

There was a strained silence around the table, and I noticed the other women shifting uncomfortably in their seats. Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything—but no. Screw that. I wasn’t going to sit back and let Honora push me around. Even if it was risky to push back.

I glanced at Aysel, who looked pale in her silly dress, and I felt a pang of guilt. I cleared my throat.

“I’m truly sorry that you lost your daughter,” I said, looking at Honora.

The stately woman abruptly pushed her chair back from the table, rattling the delicate china. “I only came here so I could look you in the eye when I tell you that I won’t let this go easily. Your packs killed my daughter. I do not forgive, and I do not forget.”

I watched in horror as Honora strode out of the tent. I looked around at the stunned faces of the other Lunas and saw that Ava was glaring at Honora’s retreating form.

“Well, it seems Honora won’t be joining us for tea,” Aysel said briskly, recovering.

I looked over at her, surprised. She seemed so calm. Even before, she’d only seemed a little put out that I’d made a scene and disturbed her party. But now, she appeared distinctly unbothered, especially considering that the Vanguard pack was one of the ones Honora had just explicitly threatened.

Rowena cleared her throat. “Perhaps we should take a raincheck on the tea?”

“Why?” Aysel asked with a frown. She looked around. “We have the tea, the food, and the company. It would be a waste not to enjoy it.”

I looked at the delicate sandwiches on their tiered platters, and my stomach roiled at the thought of eating anything. I was just too tense after my confrontation with Honora.

But Aysel didn’t appear to feel the same, and she was *intent* on having her tea party. She reached for a teapot and began to pour.

Rowena leaned close to me. “For what it’s worth,” she said in a low voice, “I believe you.”

“What?” I asked. My head was still spinning, and I struggled to focus.

“About the daughter,” Rowena clarified. “I’m sure it was just a horrible accident. It’s terrible, but these things happen.”

I nodded and grabbed a couple of cucumber sandwiches from the platter in front of me, stuffing them in my mouth. I chewed hard, mainly to avoid saying anything more to Rowena—or anyone else.

Aysel passed around the tea and sandwiches and tried valiantly to start conversations, but what followed was the most awkward, tension-filled party I’d ever attended.

There was no music, and every attempt at conversation fizzled almost immediately, so the only sounds were of tea being sipped and the clinking of cups on saucers.

“Glad the weather seems to be holding,” Aysel said, tossing out the statement like she was throwing out a lifeline.

No one responded.

Finally, even Aysel seemed to give up. “I suppose we’re out of tea,” she said after the longest thirty minutes of my life.

I was the first to get to my feet. “Thanks for a lovely party, Aysel.”

She nodded, though it looked like she knew I was lying.

I felt bad, but not bad enough to stick around. I hurried out of the tent and went in search of Greyson.

I looked around when I got back to the blue zone, but he wasn’t at the campfire with the rest of the pack.

“There you are,” I said, relieved, when I walked into our tent and found him sitting on the cot.

“Hey,” he said, smiling up at me. “How did teatime go?”

“Oh my god,” I groaned, flopping down onto the cot behind him. “Where do I start?”

“What happened?”

I sighed. “Well, the Bitterfang Luna showed up. Have you ever seen her?”

Greyson shook his head.

“She’s got a real Angelina Jolie vibe,” I said. “*Very* intimidating cheekbones. She was great, right up to the point where she told me that she hates the Redwood pack because of what happened to Julia and that she’ll never forgive us. Oh, and that we’re all going to pay for what we did.”

“*What?*” Greyson looked shocked. “Did she hurt you?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “She didn’t even try. But I’m losing any sympathy I might’ve had for that woman. She clearly *wants* to hurt us. I can definitely see why she’s married to Malakai. They’re quite a couple—they’re both monsters. I can’t believe Julia had to grow up with them as parents.”

“She did run away,” Greyson pointed out. “And she’s safe now. We just have to keep it that way.”

I nodded and sat up. “I know. I feel more determined than ever to protect her and Russell now that I’ve seen what they were running from. I knew it was bad, but I didn’t know *how* bad, you know? I could never force anyone to live with such volatile parents.” I shook my head. “When’s the final Ludis game?”

“Not for an hour,” Greyson said. “I was hoping to get some rest beforehand, conserve my energy.”

I nodded. “Maybe we can rest together?”

Greyson smiled and lay back next to me, opening his arms. I grinned and scooted closer, laying my head on his chest. It felt so good to be near him, especially after that awful tea party.

Greyson kissed my head, and I tilted my face up so he could kiss my lips instead. He complied, and when he pressed his tongue against my lips, I opened them, letting him run his tongue along mine. The kiss was deep and searching and hungry, on both sides.

Greyson broke away with a chuckle. “Hang on, this isn’t resting.”

“Yeah, but it’ll definitely loosen you up, right?” I asked, arching an eyebrow.

Greyson chuckled and slid his hand beneath the hem of my shirt. I shivered as his hands passed softly over my breasts and he pressed another kiss to my lips. This one was hot and urgent, and I smiled as he pulled off my shirt then unbuttoned my jeans.

My fingers went to the button of his jeans, and a moment later we were tangled together on our tiny cot, naked and giggling as we tried to adjust to the small space. But the giggles died on my lips when Greyson grasped my hips and lifted me, positioning me on top of him. I moaned as I straddled him, and the pressure of his body against me stole the breath from my lungs.

“You were right, love,” he said, his voice husky. “I’m feeling more relaxed already.”

Then he adjusted himself beneath me and entered me so suddenly that I gasped.

“Oh *god*,” I moaned, digging my nails into his shoulders. “*Greyson*.”

He held on tight to my hips as we moved in perfect rhythm until I began to shake. Pleasure was building up inside me as I drew closer and closer to a climax. How could he do this to me so damn *quickly*?

“Greyson,” I said, arching back, driving him deeper into me as I rolled my hips against him. “Oh god, Greyson.”

He came right behind me. He clutched me to him as his body began to pulse. “Oh *fuck*.”

We wound down slowly, smiling at each other like fools, and then I dropped down to lie beside him again, nestled in his arms.

“Now, don’t you feel looser?” I teased, resting a hand on his chest.

Greyson’s only response was a rumbling laugh.

“Greyson!” Lola called from just outside the tent. “You in there? We have to get to the field for the final!”

**Episode 3897**

**Xavier**

I eyed Lucian warily. I really didn’t want to talk to him—not just because I had other shit to deal with, but because the last time we’d spoken, it hadn’t gone well. He’d accused me of stealing the Samara pack out from under him, I’d laughed in his face, and he’d been huffy toward me ever since.

But now, Lucian returned my gaze with a congenial smile. “Come now, Xavier, don’t look at me like that. I assure you—I come in peace!”

I rolled my eyes. I had my doubts about that claim, but I figured I wasn’t going to get away without talking to him, so I just shrugged.

“Fine. We’ll talk. Let’s go over here,” I said, leading Lucian a little ways away.

I wanted to get away from Marissa, who was watching us both keenly. Marissa was certainly a Samara wolf through and through, and I knew she wanted what was best for the pack, but I didn’t want her overhearing whatever crazy shit Lucian might say.

Once we’d moved out of Samara earshot, Lucian turned to me, a grave look on his face.

“Xavier, I wanted to clear the air after my earlier accusations,” he said. “I was quite emotional when I made them. Partly because I’d just lost something I wanted. It was no secret that I wished to enfold the Samara pack into the sphere of Vanguard influence. And, you see, it wasn’t until very recently that I’ve had to experience losing something I truly coveted. And for me to lose those things to people as uncultured and obviously beneath me as you and your brother…”

He chuckled, like this was all just friendly banter.

I stared at him, wondering if he ever actually listened to himself when he spoke. Was it possible he had no idea how much of a fucking brat he came across as?

When he realized I wasn’t laughing along with him, his smile died on his lips.

“In any case,” he said, clearing his throat, “I’ve been thinking about it, and I’ve decided that you actually do make a suitable Alpha for the Samaras. You’re strong and honorable, and you have no objections to the deplorable conditions in which they live. And you *were* able to best me—though, of course, when that happened, I wasn’t quite at the top of my game!”

He slapped me on the back, like this was all in good fun, and I glowered at him. Lucian was really grating on my nerves. He *always* grated on my nerves, but this monologue of his was even worse than usual—which I hadn’t thought possible.

I shifted my shoulder away from him, “So, what? You’re giving me your blessing to be Samara Alpha?”

Lucian smiled broadly. “Yes, in a way! And I’d like to re-up the alliance between our packs. Officially! With the new Alpha. That being you!”

I sighed. “Sure. Fine. We’re allies. It’s official. Are we done?”

Lucian frowned at me, clearly annoyed by my response.

“What?” I demanded.

“Well, I was hoping for something a bit… more*.*”

“More what?” I asked.

“More… *grand*. To make our alliance truly official.”

“What do you mean?”

Lucian looked around. “We *are* at the pack summit! What better place to declare something as official as an alliance?”

“You want us to announce it? In front of everyone?” I asked incredulously.

“Well, of course,” Lucian said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

I swallowed a groan. I wasn’t in the mood for Lucian’s theatrics, but at the same time, I knew that I needed this alliance. Especially if I was going to sabotage the Redwoods’ chance to form additional alliances.

But I truly hated that I needed *Lucian*, of all people.

“Don’t we already have one?” I asked. “Technically speaking, there was one made between us when I was in the Redwood pack.”

Lucian smiled. “But now you’re a Samara. All the better to reestablish old friendships publicly.”

“Fine,” I said through gritted teeth. “Let’s do it.”

Lucian didn’t seem to register how begrudgingly I was agreeing. He grinned and slapped my shoulder again. “Wonderful! Let’s plan to announce it at the grand banquet dinner if we can, after the Ludis final.”

“Sounds great. I’ll catch you later,” I muttered and quickly strode away before Lucian could call me back.

I took a deep breath as I walked, glad to be away from the guy’s overzealous energy. But as I made my way toward the Ludis field, my mood darkened. I still had to figure out a way to keep the Redwoods from winning this game.

I went over a few options in my head, but they were all too complicated or too risky. The only thing I could think of that wouldn’t potentially result in anyone getting hurt was for the Redwoods to forfeit. But they would have to do it voluntarily, which didn’t seem likely to happen. Or… If they didn’t have enough players, they’d be forced to withdraw.

Just then, I glanced up and spotted Jay in the distance. It looked like he was walking toward the portable bathrooms the council had placed near the Ludis fields.

Hang on. Maybe this was my chance. If I could knock Jay out, then he wouldn’t be able to play, and the Redwood team wouldn’t have enough players.

My stomach clenched. I felt awful about this plan, but I knew that the only way to keep Jay out of the game would be to knock him out.

I took a deep breath and rerouted, tracking Jay from a distance. I stayed far enough behind him that I didn’t seem suspicious. There was another guy waiting at the toilets, and he nodded to Jay. A woman emerged from the booth, and when the other guy disappeared inside, I knew it was my chance.

I was just about to step toward Jay and put my plan into action when a voice made me stop in my tracks.

“Xavier?” Ava had appeared at my side. She was looking at me warily, her hands on her hips. “What are you doing, lurking out here?”

Shit.

I stared back at Ava, trying not to look as guilty as I felt. I couldn’t go through with my plan now.

“Lurking?” I said. “I’m not lurking. I’m waiting for the toilet.”

Ava gave me a sharp look. “Everything okay, X? Those tiny sandwiches not sitting too well?”

Rolling my eyes at her, I strode away from the toilets. It didn’t matter anymore. I’d blown my shot.

“Let’s just go watch the game, okay?” I said sharply.

Ava was walking next to me, and she lifted a brow at this. “Really? And who are you going to be cheering for?”

“What?” I asked, surprised.

“I mean, you did almost tear your brother’s head off during the semi-finals,” she pointed out.

I shrugged. “We lost. What’s done is done.”

Ava looked at me a moment longer, then she shook her head. “Okay, something is *definitely* up with you.”

I reached over and grabbed the end of her long, dark braid and gave it a tweak. “Fine. Stay paranoid. Assume the worst about me.”

Ava pushed my hand away, frowning at me. “Where have you been this whole time, anyway?”

“Actually, I was just talking to Lucian.”

“Really? About what?”

“We’ve consolidated our alliance. Officially. We’re going to announce it tonight, but even if we don’t, it’s done.”

Ava looked pleasantly surprised. “Oh, that’s really good, Xavier. I’m glad you smoothed things over with him.”’

I nodded. “That’s my job as Alpha, right?”

“That’s true.”

Ava waved at Marissa and Donovan and the rest of the pack as we approached the Ludis field. The sidelines were packed with people—it looked like nearly everyone at the summit had come to see the final match.

“Everyone ready for this?” Donovan asked when we joined the Samaras at the east end of the field.

Cesaries emerged from the crowd and walked to centerfield.

“Welcome to everyone!” he called.

I held my breath. I knew it was impossible, but I was still praying that the match would be canceled for some reason—*any* reason.

“Will the captains from the Redwood and Bitterfang teams please join me in the center of the field?” Cesaries went on.

My heart was pounding. I was running out of time. Fast.

Greyson stepped onto the field and was met with cheers from the crowded sidelines, and not only from the Redwood pack. Malakai stepped forward, too, receiving his own cheers, and the two men joined Cesaries in the center of the field.

“The captains will shake hands!” Cesaries declared.

Greyson and Malakai clasped hands, and even from a distance I could see that it looked like they were trying to crush each other’s bones.

“The teams will prepare for play!” Cesaries called. “The game is about to begin!”

Shit. I need to do something. *Now*. If I had any hope of speaking to Cali, of trying to get her to understand… or not to give up on me… then Greyson and the Redwood team could *not* win this game.

I had to come up with another way to stop the final.

**Episode 3898**

**Greyson**

“That’s enough,” Cesaries said in a quieter voice. He glanced between Malakai and me. “Let go, and go get your teams ready.”

Malakai maintained his iron grip on my hand for a moment longer, then he let go. His light eyes were cold as ice as he glared at me, then he turned toward his team. When I joined my own team members, they all looked tense. I knew how they felt. I was feeling uneasy myself. I just wasn’t sure how the Bitterfangs were going to play this game. The other Ludis games I’d seen them play had been intense. I knew they played a highly physical game, but I could handle that. I wasn’t going to let them knock me around—me, or any of the other Redwoods.

“Got a pep talk for us, coach?” Lola asked. She looked nervous. Everyone did.

I didn’t have a pep talk, but I knew I needed to say something—I needed to step up as the captain of our team, and as the Alpha of our pack.

“Let’s just do our best out there,” I said. “Let’s play a good, clean game. Let’s remember that we’re Redwoods—and that’s what’s going to help us win.” I looked around. “Hands in! Let’s do this!”

Everyone jammed into a rough circle and thrust their hands together.

“LET’S DO THIS!” they all shouted.

I grinned as I felt the team’s morale kick back up. Feeling lighter, I looked out the sidelines, hoping to see Cali—a kiss for good luck wouldn’t go amiss—but a ref blew his whistle before I could spot her.

“Captains!” he called. “Bring your teams to the field.”

My heart rate ticked up as we walked onto the Ludis field. I walked toward where the ref was standing in the center. Malakai was already there, and he and I faced each other, ready for the tip off.

“Ready for this, boy?” Malakai asked.

“I’m ready, old man,” I shot back, annoyed. I didn’t want to trade insults—I wanted to focus on the game.

The ref stood between the two of us, the ball in his hand. He blew his whistle, signaling the start of the game, and threw the ball high into the air.

As one, Malakai and I leapt for it. We crashed into each other in midair, then fell to the ground, still grappling for possession.

Malakai wasn’t giving a single inch, but I managed to grasp the ball with my fingertips and pull it close. I pivoted—so my back pushed Malakai away—then passed the ball to Lola. Just as the ball left my hands, Malakai yanked me down to the ground, tackling me hard.

“Fuck,” he muttered when he realized I’d already passed the ball. He scrambled away and took off.

I got to my feet and ran after him, but my eyes were on Lola. She was sprinting up the field, and my heart pounded when I realized she was nearing the goal line. She was nearly there—and then a Bitterfang appeared out of nowhere and threw himself at her feet, tackling her to the ground.

“DAMMIT!” I spat angrily.

Lola disentangled herself from the Bitterfang player and got to her feet. She whipped around to look at the ref. “What the hell? That was a foul!”

The ref just shook his head. “The Bitterfangs have possession.”

“Are you freaking kidding me?” Lola exclaimed, looking outraged. “*Unbelievable!*” she snapped, stalking away from the ball.

When she got closer, I saw that she was holding her side, and her expression was pained.

“What’s wrong?” Jay asked quickly.

Lola pulled her hand away and held it up, showing us her bloody palm. “That Bitterfang player slashed me after I was already down.”

An angry growl rumbled in the back of my throat, and I shook my head. “*That’s* how they’re going to play this game? I should’ve expected this.”

“Fuckers,” Jay muttered. He was at Lola’s side, checking the wound. “It’s already healing.”

“We’re still going to win,” I assured my team, who had gathered around me. “They can play as dirty as they want—we’re still the better players.”

The team nodded, and when the ref blew the whistle, we were ready. The game was intense and physical, like I’d known it would be—but it was dirty, too.

At one point, when Ravi was waiting for a call and the ref’s back was turned, a Bitterfang player turned and charged him, tackling him to the ground. Then the player got up and walked away, like nothing had happened. We complained, but because the ref hadn’t seen it, he refused to call a foul. Apparently, that was the Bitterfang’s whole strategy—inflict as much damage as possible without having anything called.

And—unfortunately for us—that strategy was going pretty well for them.

*Are you doing okay?* Cali asked me through the mind link. *This game is crazy! They’re not playing fair at all.*

*We’re fine*, I told her as I pulled Jay out from the bottom of a Bitterfang dogpile. *We’ve faced worse things than this.*

But as Jay shakily got to his feet, I wondered if that was actually true. There was a hell of a lot riding on the outcome of this game, and it was tied at 1-1.

Jay looked unsteady on his feet, and when I looked around at the rest of the team, I realized the others didn’t look much better. Lola was pale, and her jersey was still blood-stained, and everyone else looked dirty and tired. I didn’t know how much longer we’d be able to keep it up. Healing was relatively easy for werewolves, but it took a lot of energy, and that—combined with how hard the game was—was wearing us all down.

That had to be the object of the Bitterfangs’ strategy—to drain the Redwoods until we were too weak to defend.

The ref blew the whistle. “That’s halftime!”

Cali and Artemis ran out onto the field to pull our players to the sidelines. Artemis looked furious as she dabbed at the blood pouring from Rishika’s latest would—a gash on her forearm.

“Uh, refs!” Artemis shouted. “Are you seeing this?”

The nearest ref glanced over. “It’s a rough game,” he offered lazily.

“Bullshit!” Artemis bit back.

Cali gasped, scandalized. “The refs don’t even care about the wounds? Seriously? They’re playing so dirty out there!” she exclaimed, pointing toward the Bitterfang team.

Big Mac sauntered over, and even she looked disturbed—for Big Mac. “I don’t like all this foul play. It stinks.”

Cali nodded. “I know. It’s awful to watch. Greyson, you should go to the council or something.”

“And say what?” I asked incredulously. “That the other team isn’t playing fair?”

Cali scowled at me, and I saw hurt in her eyes and instantly knew I’d been too harsh.

I sighed. I was tired, and I’d snapped—none of this was Cali’s fault, and she was just worried.

“I’m sorry, love,” I said. “I know this must be hard to watch. It’s hard to play, too. I’m just as frustrated as you are, but this is supposed to be a friendly tournament. It isn’t something the council would get involved with.”

“Yeah, I know it’s *supposed* to be just a friendly tournament, but it’s come to symbolize something a lot bigger,” Cali pointed out. “Doesn’t that matter?”

I shrugged. “Not really. Not if we can’t prove it.”

Cali let out a frustrated growl. “This sucks, Greyson.”

For some reason, that made me chuckle. “I know it does. And I know how you feel.”

She still looked annoyed as she and Artemis handed out bottles of water to the team. I took one and drank half of it in one gulp. I poured the other half over my head. I knew the air temperature was below freezing, but I was burning up. I shook the water out of my hair and—when I rubbed it from my eyes—saw that I’d started to steam in the frigid winter air.

When the ref blew the whistle, I looked over at him, surprised. “Already?”

“Shortest halftime ever,” Lola muttered. She took another quick drink of water and handed the bottle back to Cali. “Thanks.”

Cali nodded, but as I started back onto the field, she grabbed my hand, holding me back. “Hey, the Bitterfangs look like they’re out for blood. Be careful out there, okay?”

I could see the worry in her eyes, and I nodded, then leaned down to press a kiss to her forehead. “I’ll be careful. I promise.”

But that promise turned out to be hard to keep. When the second half started, even I was shocked by how brutal the Bitterfangs were willing to be. Every tackle was bone-rattling, and every time the ref turned his back to check out a call, the Redwood players took to moving as far from the Bitterfang players as possible, to avoid their dirty sneak attacks.

But even with that new tactic, the Redwood players were getting tired. We were barely hanging on.

The next time I got hold of the ball, I passed it to Lola, who was just to my right. She caught it easily and slipped through a hole in the Bitterfangs’ advancing defensive line.

“GO!” I yelled as she started to sprint up the field. “GO LOLA!”

She was slipping around Bitterfang wolves easily, and for a moment I thought she was actually going to make it, but then I was distracted by a shout from the crowd.

“WATCH IT!”

Two wolves were tussling on the sidelines. As Lola approached them, they shifted to their wolf forms and began to fight in earnest. The charcoal grey wolf knocked into the brown, and they tumbled forward—onto the field, and directly in front of Lola.

She was going too fast to dodge, and she tripped over them, launching into the air just before she could reach the goal line.

“What did you *do*?”

“What the hell?”

“WATCH OUT!”

I stared in shock as more wolves spilled onto the field and an all-out brawl broke out.

**Episode 3899**

I stood still, watching in horror as wolves flooded the Ludis field, snarling and growling, savagely attacking each other. To my right, a pair tumbled to the ground, rolling across the grass as they slashed at each other. The muddy snow of the field was turning red with blood. To my left, three wolves were advancing on a single white wolf, whose coat was already stained with fresh blood.

It was the sight of that blood that finally jolted me into action.

“*Lola!*” I screamed, looking desperately around. She’d tripped over the first wolves on the field. Was she all right?

But a second later, I spotted her—Jay had his arms around her and was pulling her out of the fray.

“What the hell is going on?” I asked Artemis, who was at my side. “Are they allowed to do this?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. This game sort of has rules, but also sort of doesn’t?”

My heart pounding wildly, I ran out onto the field, dodging the chaos until I reached Greyson.

“What’s happening?” I burst out.

Greyson grabbed me and pulled me toward him. “Cali, what are you doing out here? Stay close to me!”

“What’s going on?” I asked again.

He looked around and shook his head, his expression dark. “I don’t know. But whatever it is, we shouldn’t get involved.”

“IN THE NAME OF THE WEREWOLF COUNCIL, I DEMAND THAT YOU STOP THIS INSTANT!”

Cesaries’s voice rose over the snarls and screams of pain, and everyone froze. I could see representatives from the werewolf council wading through the fray, pulling wolves apart.

“I demand to know what this is all about!” Cesaries said. He was looking around, his expression furious. “You all know there is no violence allowed at the summit. How did this begin?”

There was a beat of silence, then Dayton stepped forward. “The Northwind pack was throwing baseless accusations at the Nightshades!”

“Why did you let a few insults devolve into a fight?” Cesaries demanded.

Dayton looked furious. “We were defending our honor!”

The Alpha of the Northwind pack, Ethaniel, stepped forward, his dark eyes flashing dangerously. “Someone from the Nightshade pack killed Evan!”

This pronouncement was met with a shocked silence.

Cesaries turned to Dayton. “Is this true?”

“No! Of course not!” Dayton spat.

“LIAR!” Ethaniel snarled. “One of your pack was heard bragging about it!”

“Prove it!” Dayton snarled. “Prove this to me! Tell me exactly which wolf you heard speak of this!”

Ethaniel glared at him, then turned to one of the wolves who was being held by a council guard. “Who was it? Who did you hear speaking?”

The wolf looked a little spooked by the question. He darted his eyes around, then looked back at Ethaniel. “Well, I can’t say who it was—not exactly. But the voice came from the Nightshade group. I *know* it was one of them! And we know that Evan got in Dayton’s way!” The wolf was gaining confidence as he spoke. “It makes sense, doesn’t it?”

This was met with an angry cheer from the Northwind pack, and jeers from the Nightshades.

Cesaries shook his head, looking frustrated. “That isn’t evidence. We’ll have to hold a trial. We cannot have violence breaking out at the summit—it goes against the rules of our governing body.” He tipped his chin toward the guards. This must have been a signal for them, because they started to drag the four offending wolves away.

“Where are they taking them?” I asked Greyson.

Greyson looked grave. “I’m not sure. The council probably has a holding area.”

Cesaries sighed. “I’m sorry, but I think it’s for the best if we cancel the rest of the tournament.” This pronouncement was met with boos, but Cesaries valiantly tried to speak over them. “We have far more serious issues to deal with today!”

I gaped at the man. “He can’t do that!” I turned to Greyson. “Can he? He can’t just cancel it! It’s just a *tie*? What does that mean?”

Greyson didn’t get a chance to answer that question before Mace made his way over to us, wading through the crowd.

“Greyson!” he called, waving as he approached. “Listen, since the final has been canceled, we’ll need to talk to the other Alphas about this.”

Greyson nodded, though he didn’t reply. He looked too angry.

What the hell did *that* mean? Had the new pack alliance been ruined because the Redwoods hadn’t won the game? We hadn’t had a chance! What was going to happen now?

I looked around and happened to catch sight of Malakai. He was standing a ways away, watching Greyson and Mace with a small, smug smile curling his lip. There was something about that smile that unnerved me and made me wonder if he’d somehow been involved in the fight that had ended the game.

But no. He couldn’t have been involved. He’d been on the field the whole time.

I continued to scan the crowd, taking in the angry and disappointed faces, but I stopped when I reached Xavier. He was watching Greyson, too, but his expression was odd—mainly because he didn’t really have any expression at all. He was standing just behind Dayton, watching Greyson and Mace with a completely blank face.

I took an instinctive step toward him, but just as I did, he backed away, then turned and melted into the crowd.

I stared after him for a long moment. I wanted to go after him. I wasn’t even sure why, but some part of me wanted to ask him… *something*.

But then Lola walked over—well, limped over. She was being held up by Jay, and she looked rough. She had a scrape down the side of her face, her jersey was stained with blood, and it looked like she had a black eye.

“Oh god, Lola, are you okay?” I gasped out, rushing to her side.

She grinned at me. “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure—”

“I’m already healing,” she assured me. “I only *look* like shit. It’s a good thing I’m a hybrid.”

I tried to smile back, but I couldn’t force my mouth to form the right shape. I was just too worried about everything.

“—and I’m not even sure how the game would’ve ended,” Mace was saying.

Greyson frowned at him. “What do you mean?”

The other Alpha shrugged. “It was getting rough out there, man. Maybe it’s for the best that it ended early. I don’t know what the ref was doing, but it was devolving into an unregulated Ludis game.”

Greyson pushed a hand through his sweaty hair with a sigh. “Yeah, I know. That’s how it felt, too. But we need to figure out if this counts as a win with the other Alphas.” He thought for a moment. “Maybe we could argue that the cancellation was out of our control.”

I frowned. “What’s an unregulated Ludis game?”

Mace looked over at me. “Kind of exactly what it sounds like. A Ludis game played without referees. Packs play, sometimes, but without a third party around to call fouls and stuff, it can get really rough.” He paused, then chuckled. “Okay, it *always* gets really rough.”

“I’ve heard of wolves dying in those games,” Jay said darkly.

I stared at him, then at Mace. “*What?*” I demanded, shocked. “Are you kidding? People *die*? But this is just a sport! People shouldn’t die!”

Mace shrugged again. “Shit happens.”

I looked out at the field, which was still filled with people. I shivered. Maybe it *was* better that the game had ended early. I knew it complicated things, not having an uncomplicated win for the Redwoods, but I couldn’t help but feel relieved, too—even though Greyson was looking worried.

“Real shame the game had to end early.”  
 We all turned to see that Malakai had walked over. He was dirty and sweaty as he stood looking at Greyson, a satisfied smile playing across his lips.

“Yeah, a real shame,” Greyson said evenly.

“We were so ready to win,” Malakai continued.

Lola snorted. “Yeah right. I was about to score on your ass, and you know it.”

Jay tightened his grip on her arm. “Lola, enough,” he whispered.

Malakai let out a cold, harsh laugh. “Really?” He narrowed his eyes at Lola. “Are you so sure about that?”

Lola didn’t reply, but she raised her chin defiantly.

Malakai smiled. “Then why don’t we see?”

See? See *what*? Shit, this really didn’t sound good. There was a look in his eye, something that made my skin crawl. One side of his lips turned up into a smirk. I gulped, looking at Greyson.

Greyson frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Let’s finish what we started,” Malakai said coldly. “Let’s finish the game. *Unofficially*.”

I sucked in a breath. Was he serious? He couldn’t be.

There was a beat of tense silence.

Greyson looked over at Mace, who looked worried but shrugged.

“Come on, Greyson,” Malakai said, his voice teasing now. “Let’s play. Let’s see who the real winner is.”

**Episode 3900**

**Greyson**

I ground my teeth. I wanted to tell Malakai that he could shove his stupid challenge right up his ass, but I bit my tongue. Unregulated Ludis games were dangerous as hell, but a clear win might get the other Alphas on my side…

“No way!” Cali exclaimed. Her eyes were flashing as she looked between us. “You *cannot* play this game without referees. It’s too dangerous.”

Malakai scoffed and, turning away from Cali, looked straight at me. “Are you really going to let your *non-wolf* Luna tell you how to run your pack, Alpha? Your *due destini* mate who can’t keep her hands to herself? Sickening.”

The disdain in his voice wasn’t lost on me, and I bristled at the sound of it. I felt Cali tense beside me as well, but I grabbed her arm and half-pulled her behind me before she could impulsively blast Malakai, or something. It was a shame, though—seeing her blast the smug look off the Alpha’s face would’ve been a sight to see.

“Don’t you fucking talk about her,” I snarled. “She’s better than you’ll ever be.”

Malakai didn’t seem to like the implication that he was somehow beneath Cali, and his eyes flashed with unmistakable anger—but I didn’t give a shit.

“I’ll let you know about the game,” I told him. “I have to confer with my pack.”

Malakai managed to look even more disgusted. “Democracy in a pack? How quaint.”

He was baiting me—I knew it—but I refused to rise to it.

“I’ll give you an answer when I have one,” I snapped.

“Make sure it’s before dinner. I can’t wait forever,” Malakai said shortly. He raised an eyebrow. “Unless you’re afraid to lose.”

Fury coursed through me, but I forced myself to turn, and I’d almost started to walk away when I stopped. No. Fuck that. I’d had enough of Malakai’s shit.

“The match is on,” I snapped. “We’ll see you here, at midnight.”

And with that, I stalked away.

“*Phew!*” Mace said, jogging to catch up with me. “That was really tense.”

“Yeah,” I said. I shook my head. “Though I’m not sure that was a good idea.”

“I *know* it wasn’t a good idea,” Cali grumbled, striding at my side. “Playing an unregulated, unauthorized game against the Bitterfangs is a really *bad* idea.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “I know, I know, but it might be our only chance to win the other Alphas to our side.”

Mace thought for a moment. “Let’s try to talk to them beforehand. Your performance in the finals was respectable—”

“Thanks,” I muttered sourly, thinking of how many bone-rattling hits we’d all taken.

“Maybe it was enough for them to see that you can hold your own against Malakai,” Mace said.

“Yeah, maybe,” I said with a sigh, hoping that was true.

“I’ll go ask around,” he said. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

I watched as Mace strode away. It was frustrating, but all I could do at the moment was hope that things would work out. Somehow.

I shook my head and turned back to Cali. “I’ll walk you back to camp.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I want you where it’s safe,” I said. “And you should keep an eye on Lola, make sure she’s healing.”

She didn’t look happy about this. “I don’t want to leave you alone to deal with this.”

“I’ll be fine,” I assured her. “Trust me.”

She didn’t look fully convinced, but when we got back to the blue zone, she reluctantly went to check on Lola.

I headed off to track down Mace. It took a while, but I found him at his tent in the yellow zone. When I walked in, I saw that he’d managed to gather most of the Alphas we wanted in the alliance. None of them look particularly happy to be there. And Dayton was there, too, which didn’t make me feel any better.

There was a part of me that just wanted to say “to hell with all this” and walk away. But that wasn’t an option. I needed to face this. However much this sucked, it was my duty, and I couldn’t walk away.

I took a deep breath and walked farther into the tent.

“Greyson!” Lucian looked over at me. “Glad you’re here.” He waved me over. “Come join us, will you?”

I walked over to where he was standing with Mace, away from the rest of the Alphas.

“What?” I asked.

Lucian lowered his voice. “Why don’t we just tell her parents that she’s alive?”

He didn’t have to say Julia’s name—we all knew who he was talking about.

Recognition flashed in Mace’s eyes, and he shook his head. “We can’t do that.”

“Why not?” Lucian asked.

Mace rolled his eyes. “If we tell them, why did we even go to the trouble of protecting her in the first place?”

“I agree with Mace,” I said. “The Bitterfangs can try to slander us all they want, but in the end, they’ll end up showing more about themselves than about us. We’re in the right in this.”

Lucian looked like he wanted to argue more, but before he could, another voice spoke up.

“You didn’t win.”

I looked over my shoulder. It was Porter speaking. “What?”

He was glowering at me. “You didn’t win,” he repeated. “The Ludis game. That was the deal.”

“It was out of our control,” I pointed out. “We could have won. You saw that.”

Duke frowned. “That *is* true.”

“And—like I promised before—you wouldn’t actually have to fight the Bitterfangs. You’d just have to give us your support and make them think twice before attacking us. Any of us,” I added, looking around at all the assembled Alphas.

Porter scowled. “You want our support to help prevent a pack war?”

I sighed. “Yes. With more packs behind us, my hope is that Malakai will be less likely to escalate. We’d outnumber him, and he’d be foolish to proceed.”

Duke seemed to consider this. “That sounds pretty reasonable. I know *I* don’t want another pack war to break out.” He grinned. “I mean, we’re at the summit! We should be focusing on more pleasurable pursuits, right?”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes—freeing everyone up to sleep around didn’t seem like the *most* compelling reason to avoid a deadly pack war—but it *did* seem like the other Alphas were considering this idea.

“No way.”

I looked over at Dayton, who had his arms crossed and a stubborn look on his face.

“If we get involved in Redwood shit, then Malakai will target us and our packs.” Dayton looked around at the other Alphas. “You saw how he was on that field. I don’t want to end up in his crosshairs.”

This seemed to be the argument with the most sway. A few of the Alphas looked worried, and a few nodded.

I wanted to wring Dayton’s cowardly neck. He was just undermining me out of spite. But I took a deep breath and tried to speak calmly.

“If that’s how any of you feel, then that’s your prerogative,” I said. “But—I swear to all of you—I’ll make sure no harm comes to any of your packs.”

Dayton laughed bitterly. “Oh, really? And how much power can you possibly have when you’re here, *begging* us for help?”

I was already on the edge, and this pushed me right over it. I took a step forward and shoved Dayton’s shoulder. He stumbled back a few steps.

“If you have a problem with me, then come to me man to man, Dayton,” I said coldly. “Don’t fuck up this meeting out of pure spite. What we’re talking about is important—and much bigger than your petty little grudges.”

Dayton recovered his footing and his pride in a moment and got right up in my face. “I’ll do whatever I damn well please. I’m not the one who needs help here!”

My pulse was pounding in my temples, and I realized that I’d let my anger get the best of me. I ground my teeth.

“Fine,” I gritted out, trying to breathe evenly as fury coursed through me. “*Fine*. It’s clear you don’t want to help.” I turned to look at the other Alphas. “But as for the rest of you—please, don’t make any decisions now. Think everything over properly before you decide.”

Porter frowned, looking thoughtful. “I hear Malakai challenged you to finish the game unofficially.”

“Yeah, and?”

Duke piped up. “Win the game for real this time.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, that was the plan.”

He shook his head. “No, man. I mean, do that, and you’ll have the Aspen pack on your side.”

I looked at him, trying to gauge if he was serious, then flicked my glaze over to Porter.

He still looked worried, but he nodded. “I guess if you win, then that’s a good sign.” His frown deepened. “Okay. If you win, the Cobalt pack will be with you too.”

I eyed the two Alphas. “What are the conditions?”

# **Episode 3901**

**Xavier**

*Does this count?* I wracked my brain, trying to determine whether or not recent events would qualify for Adéluce’s bargain—and appeal to her twisted logic. *The Redwoods didn’t win. Does that mean Adéluce will uphold her end of the bargain and let me talk to Cali?*

I focused my thoughts on Adéluce, grimacing at the mere idea of allowing that evil bitch into my head. Of actually *inviting* her there. But I needed answers.

Except she didn’t appear. I was alone with nothing but my confused and frantic and pissed-off thoughts for company. So, business as usual.

What if I didn’t pull it off to Adéluce’s satisfaction? Would she renege on the deal because the match had ended in a tie?

But… no. Greyson hadn’t *won*. That was the deal, right? Keep the Redwoods from winning. Or was it all irrelevant because I hadn’t actually had a hand in that outcome? I’d lost my chance with Jay once Ava had shown up, and I’d struggled with how to stop the game once it had begun. I should’ve tried to do more to sabotage Greyson, but something had held me back. Made me hesitate.

Fear. Dread. The knowledge that doing something so public, so final, would expose the depths of my betrayal for everyone to see.

And maybe deep down—so deep I hadn’t been able to acknowledge it at the time—some small part of me had known that sabotaging Greyson and the Redwoods just so I could talk to Cali would’ve been the selfish choice. That, at the end of the day, Malakai *was* a big threat to both the Redwoods and the Samaras—our biggest threat, save for Adéluce herself, I supposed.

Maybe that was why I’d stopped myself. Because I hadn’t been able to leave either pack to that fate.

*Fuck*. I rubbed my face. Despite everything I’d told myself, I clearly still cared about the Redwoods too damn much, to the point that it was almost a goddamn liability. At least where my need to protect Cali was concerned.

It was so fucking maddening, being torn between these two important connections in my life. I was trying to save Cali while also *not* completely destroying my chances of having a relationship with her in the future, once Adéluce was dead and gone—for good this time.

But if I wanted to make that happen, according to the fucked-up rules Adéluce had made for me, then I had to go above and beyond to destroy any and all of my connections to the Redwood pack. To my family. I’d thought—before the summit, when it had just been a question of my feelings for Cali—that a scorched earth approach would be worthwhile. That no price was too high if it meant Cali would be safe and we’d still have a chance at a future together.

But now, I knew better. I couldn’t destroy a chance for the Redwoods to form potentially life-saving alliances. The Bitterfangs were ruthless and driven by a dangerous ideology that didn’t give a damn about making nice or mitigating loss. And that meant they could quite possibly be the greatest danger the Redwood pack had ever faced.

I couldn’t screw up the pack’s chance to avoid a war with the Bitterfangs. To get enough allies on their side that the Bitterfangs wouldn’t dare to fuck with them. Not even if it meant screwing up my only chance to talk to Cali.

And then the fight had broken out.

I’d wondered briefly if it had been Adéluce’s doing. After all, she’d seemed intent on Greyson losing. Why it was so damn important to her, I had no idea. Unless her elaborate plan to torture me involved making sure the Redwoods, Samaras, Vanguards, and Blue Bloods faced the Bitterfangs alone. Maybe she wanted a pack war.

But the more I thought about it, the more certain I felt that it was all just a coincidence. After all, the whole point of ensuring a Redwood loss had been to make me orchestrate it. Not just to fuck things up for the Redwoods, but for *me* to be the perpetrator of that destruction.

And I hadn’t done a damn thing.

Still, if Adéluce could play dirty, so could I. And I was determined to find a way to use this to my advantage.

Finally, Adéluce’s voice slipped into my mind. *What do you want?*

I fought the urge to cringe. Every time she got inside my head, I wished I had a scrub brush and some bleach for my brain.

I steeled myself. *Greyson didn’t win.*

*Oh, I’m aware. And what hand did you have in that outcome, Xavier?*

I scowled. *I was working on it. And you never said I had to be directly responsible. You just said you wanted to make sure Greyson didn’t win.*

Adéluce didn’t sound amused. *I’m not in the business of loopholes, Xavier Evers. You should know that better than anyone. Greyson might not have won, but he didn’t lose, either.*

I blew out a breath, shaking my head. Since when was this bitch not in the business of loopholes? She’d been making up new rules ever since I’d locked myself into this deal with her. Every day, I wondered what fresh hell she’d throw at me. So, no, I didn’t believe she was shutting me down out of anything other than a desire to make me miserable.

*I should’ve known you’d try to wiggle your way out of this.* Even in my mind, my voice was a growl. *All I’m asking is that Cali doesn’t get hurt if she tries to speak to me. I’m actively avoiding starting conversations with her—I’m doing everything I can to push her away. But I have no control over her coming up to me and trying to talk. She doesn’t know the rules. Don’t punish her—*

*It’s too late*, Adéluce interrupted. *The game is over.*

And then her voice disappeared from my mind, and I was alone with my thoughts again.

“God fucking *dammit*.”

What the hell was I supposed to do now? I clearly needed to figure a way to get Cali to stop talking to me. Maybe give me a ten-foot berth at all times, for good measure.

It was the last thing I *actually* wanted. All this time, ever since I’d first made the deal with Adéluce, I’d hoped that I’d be able to find a way to connect with Cali—to give her some comfort, some idea that I still loved her… Even if I couldn’t be with her right now.

But, as per fucking usual, Adéluce had taken a giant shit all over my plans. Now, I knew better than to hope. Now, all I wanted was for Cali to stay safe, even if it meant keeping her far away, in every sense of the word.

I started walking through the maze of summit tents, wondering what the hell I was going to do now.

*Do I need to double down on the breakup?*

After a while, I realized I’d stumbled upon the Redwood camp. Artemis was about ten feet away, doing some target practice with her knives.

*Shit.*

I needed to get the hell out of here before she decided to use *me* for target practice—not that I’d blame her if she did.

I turned to leave and almost slammed directly into Jay.

He caught me by the shoulders and steadied me before stepping back. “Whoa, hey. Um, what are you doing here?”

The words dried up on my tongue. “Ah, I’m just…”

“Looking for Cali? She’s with Lola.”

“Thanks.”

At least now I knew to avoid Lola, too.

Before I could run off, Jay caught my arm. “Wait. I need to ask you something.”

I raised a brow. “What is it?”

“Earlier today, I felt like I was being followed before the Ludis game. I thought it was nothing, but then I caught your scent. You got anything to say about that?”

There was a note of steel in his voice, and he crossed his arms as he waited for me to answer. I got the sinking feeling that the future of our friendship was hanging in the balance.

“No,” I said slowly. “I don’t know anything about that. Maybe I just had to go to the bathroom.”

He nodded and eyed me intently before he spoke again. “Okay, then. I’ll trust you.”

No combination of words could’ve gutted me more. I didn’t deserve this loyalty from Jay. I’d been planning to knock him out in a toilet block, for god’s sake.

*What kind of person am I becoming?*

Before I could get the fuck out of there, I saw Cali step out of Lola’s tent. She froze when she saw me. My throat closed up as a rush of emotion hit me. There was so much I wanted to tell her, but the best thing I could do was stay away. For both our sakes.

Rishika ran over to Cali. “Is Lola healed?”

Cali turned to her. “Um, mostly. Why?”

“Um.” Rishika looked at Cali then me. “The game later?”

“Ugh, I hate this,” Cali said, shaking her head. “Isn’t there some other way?”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Rishika rolled her eyes and turned to me. “Not that it concerns you, but we’re going to finish the match against the Bitterfangs.”

My stomach lurched. *Does this mean I can still fulfill my deal with Adéluce?*

# **Episode 3902**

**Violet**

I checked myself out in the mirror with a smile. *I have to admit, I look damn good.*

I’d picked out my cutest outfit in preparation for tonight—a minidress with tights and kitten heels. Comfortable, not too formal, but still a big step up from my usual T-shirts and jeans.

*Tonight is going to be awesome!*

The house had been so boring since the others had left for the summit. Sure, well over half of the pack had stayed behind, but it just wasn’t the same. There wasn’t as much to do, or as many people to talk to.

But that was exactly why Lilac and I had come up with the idea to throw a little party. And why not? We did have a whole fancy pack house all to ourselves—it seemed like it’d be a waste not to enjoy it to the fullest.

Plus, wasn’t it a teen’s prerogative to throw a party while the parents were away? It was a rite of passage—one Lilac and I had yet to complete. But tonight, we’d change that.

To be fair, I didn’t know if just inviting Perrie and a few of the other younger local wolves over even counted as a party. I tried to imagine what an invitation would say.

*An intimate evening? A small soirée?* I wrinkled my nose. *That sounds like something the Vanguards would put on an invitation. I don’t need the night to be* that *fancy.*

After checking my reflection one more time, I jogged downstairs to the living room, where Lilac was putting out bowls of snacks. I frowned. He was *supposed* to be down here prepping things with Charlie.

“Where’s Charlie?” I asked.

Lilac shrugged. “He was looking for board games and wandered off.”

I rolled my eyes. “If he’s slacking on party prep—”

Just then, Charlie walked in with a small cask in his arms. When he saw Lilac and me, he gave us a mischievous grin. “Guess who found Big Mac’s stash!”

My eyes widened. “Um… Are you *insane*? Big Mac will kill us for breaking into her moonshine supply! You’re probably already a dead man just for touching it.”

How ironic would that be? Charlie had fought vampires and vampire-revenants, Rogue werewolves and hunters, and in the end, he was going to be taken out by his own poor impulses and an ill-tempered witch.

Charlie shook his head. “Relax, Sunshine. I don’t think she wants this one.”

“Have you *seen* the way she treats her product?” I demanded. “Of course she wants it!”

“No, look.” He hefted the barrel to show me the side. “There’s a big red X on this one! I think she was going to throw it away, but there’s still some moonshine in it.” He shook the barrel for effect, and I definitely heard some liquid sloshing around inside.

“Sweet!” Lilac said. “Nice score!”

I wrinkled my nose. “So… What? She made a bad batch or something? And you want to drink it?”

Charlie shrugged. “Moonshine’s moonshine. And nothing improves a party like a little liquor.”

I rolled my eyes. “Your funeral.”

Just then, the doorbell rang. I hurried to the front door, excited that Perrie and the others had arrived, and also eager to put some distance between myself and the stolen cask. If Big Mac ever did find out that Charlie had stolen part of her supply—whether it was going to be tossed or not—I’d probably be blamed too, but it seemed practical to create some reasonable doubt.

I yanked open the front door. “Hey, welcome to…” I trailed off, my jaw dropping at the dozen or so teens standing behind Perrie. “Um… You brought friends?”

She shrugged. “Sorry, word spread fast, and, well, everyone’s bored with all the Alphas and packs at the summit. We’re not the only ones looking for something to do tonight. You don’t mind, do you?”

If I *did* mind, it didn’t matter, because I didn’t have a chance to speak before one of the pushier male wolves rushed forward and practically elbowed his way into the pack house. “Are there snacks?”

I nodded, sort of in shock at the direction the night was taking. “Yeah, we have some—”

Once he made it through the door, it was like the seal was broken, and a bunch of his friends followed suit and descended on the living room.

“—chips,” I finished with a sigh. They were already gone. I turned to Perrie. “Do you even know all these people? Which pack are they from?”

“Chill.” She waved me off. “They’re cool.”

One of the few remaining teens standing behind her stepped forward and pushed a box of beers—the brand was something with a blue ribbon—into my arms.

“We come bearing gifts!” he said.

“W-What?” I sputtered, looking down at the box like it was going to bite me. “No, this isn’t that kind of party!”

Sure, Charlie had that reject moonshine, but from the sound of the sloshing inside the barrel, there would *maybe* be enough for everyone to have a tiny sip. More a novelty than an opportunity to get drunk.

But it was too late. Everyone had rushed past me and into the house and was getting comfortable. Someone had turned on music, and the volume was a few notches higher than I would’ve liked. People were crowding around the snack bowls. Everyone seemed to have gathered in the living room.

“Okay,” I told myself, still standing in the foyer clutching the box of beers. “Maybe it isn’t going to be that bad. We’ve got people, they’re eating and socializing… Maybe it’ll be just fine.”

It took less than ten minutes for me to realize that no, things were *not* going to be just fine. After a few minutes of cramming salty snacks down their throats, people started coming over to me to get beers. I ended up handing the box off to one of them, thinking that I didn’t want to be the alcohol distributor for the party, but that only led to the box being sent around the room and beers cracking open left and right.

Soon after that, the music got louder, people were jumping on couches and furniture, and I was pretty sure that one or two couples had wandered off deeper into the house to… be alone.

“You look stressed.” Charlie pressed a cup into my hands. “Drink up.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want a beer.”

“It’s not beer.”

I peered down at the clear liquid in the cup, and the acrid scent of high proof alcohol hit me like a ton of bricks. “This is the moonshine, isn’t it?”

“Oh yeah.” Charlie’s cheeks were bright red.

I glanced around the party, which was now really living up to the name. It was the kind of teen party I’d seen in movies. The kind that usually ended with a gigantic mess and all kinds of destruction.

“What the hell?” I took the cup and knocked it back. Then I almost spat it out. It was *bitter*. I forced myself to swallow it down. “Holy crap. I can see why Big Mac threw out that batch.”

“Her loss.” Charlie shrugged. “And it’s a hell of a lot stronger than that piss-weak beer the others are passing around.”

I giggled. Already, I could feel the heat of the moonshine spreading outward from my belly. *Maybe I should’ve eaten something before the party…*

“Um, what’s going on?”

I turned to see Torin standing in the doorway, his brow creased. I scrambled over to him.

“Torin!” I said. “Don’t tell Mrs. Smith! We’ll clean up afterward, I swear!”

He looked devastated. “Violet, how could you do this?”

Guilt slammed into me. “Torin, I’m so sorry—”

“How could you throw a party and *not invite me*?”

Charlie came over, wrapped an arm around Torin’s shoulders, and pressed a Solo cup of moonshine into the Fae’s hand. “Of course you’re invited! In fact, have you ever played beer pong?”

“Ooh!” Torin’s eyes lit up. “No! What’s that?”

He followed Charlie into the kitchen, and Charlie threw a wink at me over his shoulder.

I rolled my eyes. The moonshine was making things a bit fuzzy, but I still couldn’t help but wonder if this was a legitimate disaster. I scanned the living room and spotted Lilac sitting on the couch with Perrie. They seemed to be deep in conversation.

*So, maybe it’s not all bad.* It was nice to see my brother getting along with his mate.

One of the Blue Blood teens changed the music, and one of my favorite songs came on. I joined the cluster of teens dancing in the middle of the room.

“I think I actually love parties!” I shouted to no one in particular.

Suddenly, the music cut out.

I turned around. “Hey, we were listening—”

I stopped short. Mrs. Smith was standing next to the speakers, her arms crossed.

“Okay!” she shouted. “Party’s over. All non-Redwood teens, *out*! Now!”

The wolves grumbled but made quick work of filing out of the house. I thought I’d felt guilty with Torin before, but now I was *drowning* in guilt. Which was kind of tricky, because my brain was drowning in moonshine.

Mrs. Smith pointed to me, Charlie, and Lilac in turn, her face screwed up in anger. “Clean this up—now!”

I tried to ignore the spinning in my head as I grabbed a trash bag. It didn’t take long for me to fill it up, and I was dragging it outside to throw it out when I heard footsteps behind me.

I spun around to see Mrs. Smith following me with another full bag.

“I’m so sorry,” I blurted out.

She sighed. “I know I seem like a party pooper, but I’m responsible for all of you right now. I don’t want too many unknown wolves in the pack house.”

I nodded. “You’re right. It was reckless. I’m—”

“Quiet.” Mrs. Smith froze, then glanced around.

“What’s going—”

“Hush, Violet.”

She slowly walked to the edge of the property, peering into the dark woods. After a long string of seconds, she turned around and started back toward the house.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I thought I heard something—”

A growl ripped through the air, and a dark figure pounced on Mrs. Smith.

# **Episode 3903**

I openly stared at Xavier, my forehead creasing.

*What’s he doing? Why is he even over here and concerning himself with Redwood business? I thought he hated us all now. So why does it look like he… cares?*

We stood there facing each other, silence lingering between us. For a split second, it almost looked like Xavier was going to grab me and pull me into his arms. I’d seen that look on his face so many times before—that tenderness and joy. My heart tripped over itself, seeing that look again. I’d missed it so much.

But then it disappeared, so quickly I wondered if I’d imagined it.

Now, he just looked like he was in pain.

His lip parted, and he looked like he was about to stay something when suddenly he doubled over with a groan, grabbing his head.

I took a tentative step forward. “Xavier, are you okay?”

He jolted upright, like my words had yanked him up by the scruff of his neck. “I need to go.”

He raced away before I could get another word in. All I could do was stare after him as he disappeared into the sea of tents.

*Um… What the hell was that? I’ve never seen him act so scattered before.*

Obviously, he’d been acting strangely—in my mind, every day since he’d broken up with me and left the Redwood pack was a day in which he was acting out of character. I still couldn’t wrap my head around how he’d completely changed his life, seemingly overnight. He’d left the pack of his childhood, left his family, his mate, his friends, and joined up with the Samaras to be their Alpha and, apparently, shack up with Ava—the woman he’d reassured me time and time again that he hated, even though they were still mates. I’d thought he was planning a future with me, with the Redwoods—but then again, wasn’t that what he’d told me when we’d broken up? That he couldn’t keep waiting for me to choose him, for things with the Redwood pack to fall into place for him?

Maybe, all things considered, his recent behavior wasn’t actually out of character. Maybe he was just fed up with settling for less than he wanted.

But none of that explained what the heck had happened just now. He’d seemed so… erratic. Even a little unhinged. It wasn’t a good look on him.

Rishika let out a low whistle. “Wow. Maybe he’s actually going crazy.”

I spun on her. “Don’t say that! He’s just… stressed. Probably.”

“Are you seriously defending him right now?” Rishika demanded. “After everything he’s said and done to you, and to the pack?”

I grimaced. It was still second nature to defend him, to try to empathize with him—even though he’d done nothing to deserve it. He’d all but kicked me out of his life, and he’d made it abundantly clear since then that he didn’t want anything to do with me.

Whatever was going on with him, it wasn’t my business. Not anymore.

I sighed. “You’re right. Xavier’s issues are his own. He’s no longer a member of our pack.”

But I couldn’t shake the guilt and sadness that settled over me as I turned back to Lola’s tent. Rishika followed me in. I was glad to see that Lola was on the mend, but my stomach was twisting. How was the game so close already?

“Are we sure we have to do this?” I asked. “Maybe I can talk Greyson out of it.”

“Don’t think you can. It sounds like the other Alphas are only going to ally with us if we win this game,” Rishika said.

My gut clenched at the idea of Greyson facing down Malakai again. “Crap. But it’s so dangerous. Why are the packs being so unreasonable? If Greyson gets hurt—or worse—we won’t need an alliance anymore, because Malakai will be unstoppable.”

Rishika shrugged. “I get where you’re coming from, but wolves respond to strength. If we want more packs to join our alliance, we need to prove that we’re strong enough to be worth throwing in with. Plus, they’re all probably scared of Malakai. They want to know we have what it takes to stand up to the Bitterfangs, and that we’re not looking for other packs to fight our battles for us.”

When she put it that way, it sort of made sense. But going up against Malakai again—having Greyson and the others risk themselves—seemed like way too high a price to pay for a few more allies.

“I’m going to go find Greyson and talk to him,” I said.

“Okay,” Rishika said. “But I don’t think you’re going to change his mind.”

“Well, I’m still going to try.”

I stormed out of Lola’s tent. I couldn’t believe it had come to this. It was too much. We shouldn’t have to prove ourselves. Malakai was *wrong*, and he was a bully! It should’ve been a no-brainer for the other packs to join forces with us against him.

*Why won’t the other packs just stand up to him like the Redwoods have? Why doesn’t anyone else have any freaking integrity? I mean, even Lucian stood with us, and he’s a coward through and through!*

I was so worked up by the time I found Greyson heading back to our tent that I threw myself into his path and blurted out, “We shouldn’t do this! Malakai was baiting you! He just wants a chance to hurt us!”

Greyson sighed. “This is what the other Alphas want.”

I huffed. “But they’re not the ones whose lives will be at risk.”

“I know, but this is for a good cause,” he said. “It’s not just to protect us. It’s to protect *them.* I made them a promise, Cali.”

That was when I realized he wasn’t just talking about the Redwood pack—he was talking about Russell and Julia, two teenagers who’d never had anyone fight for them like this before.

Could I really take that away from them? I remembered the hopeless looks on their faces when they’d thought their only choice was to die for love. I never wanted either of them to feel so trapped or desperate again.

I groaned. “You’re right, dammit. It’s just so frustrating.”

Greyson cupped my cheek. “I know, love, but we’re going to get through this together.”

I nodded. “I hope you know you’re a really good man, Greyson Evers.”

He smiled. “That’s because I have a good mate by my side.”

He pulled me in for a kiss that left me hungry for more.

“Maybe you need help relaxing again?” I asked.

He laughed, but there was a glint in his eyes that hadn’t been there before. “I might be amenable to that.”

He took my hand, and we walked toward our tent together, picking up speed until we were basically running by the time we skidded to a stop in front of it, laughing as we went.

Suddenly, Greyson stopped short, blocking the entrance to our tent.

I bumped into his back. “Hey, what are you doing? Let’s go inside. We don’t have much time before dinner.”

He shushed me and didn’t move an inch. Dread unfurled down my spine. What had happened now?

*Is something wrong?* I asked Greyson through our mind link.

Before he could reply, a horribly familiar voice came from inside the tent. “I can hear you, you know. You might as well come in.”

Greyson’s face twisted into a scowl, and he pushed his way into the tent. I couldn’t help but notice how he made sure to block my body with his own.

I peered around his broad shoulder, hoping against hope that the owner of the voice wasn’t who I thought it was.

My hopes died the second my gaze landed on Malakai. He was sitting in one of the camp chairs, looking completely at ease in another Alpha’s tent.

Malakai grinned. “Hello, Greyson.”

“The fuck are you doing here, Malakai?”

“Business.”

“Business that requires you to sneak into our tent?”

He shrugged. “I’m just returning the favor.”

His sharp gaze shot to me, and I shrank back behind Greyson, whose shoulders stiffened.

“You can’t prove anything,” Greyson said flatly.

Malakai laughed. “You’re right about that. But I just wanted to give you a heads-up. A little courtesy.”

“What are you talking about?” Greyson demanded, scowling.

“Greyson, you really are proving yourself to be a very green Alpha, not covering all your bases.”

*Well, I don’t love the sound of that. Is he going to try to attack Greyson right now? I’m the only witness, and he wants me dead, too.*

If Greyson and I ended up dead, everyone would know it was Malakai. But would it matter if there was no way to prove it? And did Malakai even care enough about the threat of the council to hold himself back?

“Just because there’s no violence allowed *here*, at the summit,” Malakai continued, “doesn’t mean I can’t hurt you in other ways.”

# **Episode 3904**

**Xavier**

I paced back and forth in my tent, wracking my brain for a way to keep Greyson from winning the rematch with Malakai. This was my chance—maybe my *last* chance—to speak with Cali. And maybe it was selfish of me to screw things over for the Redwood pack, and maybe, if push came to shove, that was still a step I might not be willing to take, but the thought of allowing Cali to keep getting hurt every time she tried to talk to me just wasn’t fucking acceptable.

It wasn’t even about trying to keep her from hating me anymore. I knew better than to hope that Adéluce would let me tell Cali about our deal, even if I *did* sabotage Greyson and the Redwoods during the match. But if I could at least talk to her, or get Adéluce to stop hurting her… That’d be enough.

I’d raced away from the Redwood tents like a bat out of hell, trying to keep my distance from Cali. I’d pushed my luck just by being there, by letting her see me, by exchanging those few words with her.

I’d seen in her eyes that she’d had something to say to me. No surprises there. I’d done everything I could to push her away, and she just kept coming back, kept demanding answers I couldn’t give. I knew she was angry. I knew she was confused, and hurt, and probably wanted nothing more than to bite my head off. Honestly, if she were able to go for it without being affected by Adéluce’s magic, I’d welcome it. It was nothing less than I deserved.

But right now, I couldn’t worry about Cali’s feelings or how fucking crazy I must’ve looked to her and Rishika. My focus had to be on trying to prevent Adéluce from hurting Cali if she tried to speak to me. This whole mess had only ever been about trying to protect Cali, and if I let Adéluce keep fucking with her after I’d already burned so many bridges, then what the fuck was I even doing?

I wished I could give Cali anything other than more pain and unanswered questions, but the second I’d so much as tried to speak to Cali, to warn her, it had felt like lightning had split my skull in half. A gift from Adéluce, no doubt. And even if I’d managed to push through the pain, I knew she would’ve turned her anger on Cali.

My next task was simple enough—if I wanted to save my mate from Adéluce, I had to make sure the Redwood pack lost the Ludis match against the Bitterfangs.

Still, even if I did manage to stop the game, I knew that any deal I made with Adéluce would come with a shitload of strings—some visible and some not. That vampire-bitch loved nothing more than playing puppet master. And that’s what I’d become: a puppet.

I glanced at the time. I had to come up with a plan, and soon, because the match was set to take place at midnight, which wasn’t far off.

Anxiety and dread knotted my stomach. How the hell was I going to pull this off? And even if I did figure out a solution, would I really be able to go through with it? I was already so ashamed that I’d been willing to hurt Jay to spare Cali. I was ultimately glad that Ava had interrupted and I hadn’t been able to do it. I’d probably never forgive myself if I ended up crossing the line the way I needed to.

But if I failed to sabotage the match, there was a chance that Adéluce might actually *kill* Cali. I didn’t know how far she was willing to take this, but since her goal in all this was to torture me, I couldn’t take any chances.

And if Cali died because of my mistakes, I wouldn’t be able to live with myself.

The tent flap flew open, and Ava walked in. “What are you doing in here all by yourself? The pack is already heading to dinner. Are you coming?”

“I’ll be there in a minute,” I said. “Go ahead without me.”

She didn’t budge, and I lifted my gaze to meet hers. She was watching me carefully. Too fucking carefully. It was unnerving sometimes, how well she could read me, especially when I was trying so hard to keep my cards close to my chest.

“What?” I asked irritably. Could she stop looking at me?

“Are you okay?”

I scoffed. “Of course I am. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You’re certainly not acting like it.” She slowly approached me. “Is it something I’ve done?”

I shook my head and looked away.

*Everything I’ve done lately has been because of Cali, and Ava has no idea.*

Not that I could’ve actually told her that, even if I wanted to. And even if I could, if Adéluce loosened my tongue long enough for me to tell Ava everything, what good would that do? Ava would be both hurt and angry that I was doing all of this—risking the alliance and the vulnerable Samara pack—to save Cali. And I wouldn’t blame her one bit. If I were in her shoes, I’d be pissed at me, too.

Yes, Ava was my mate, and yes, we still had a special—if fucked-up—connection, even after all this time, but I knew exactly how much rebuilding the Samara pack meant to Ava. Her pack was the most important thing to her, and even though I knew that, I’d still put them all in Adéluce’s crosshairs to protect Cali. And now, I was going to push them in even further into Malakai’s by sabotaging Greyson’s match. It would be bad for everyone in the alliance, Samaras included.

“Then what is it?” Ava pressed. “Is it seeing Cali again?”

That was a logical assumption. I’d told Ava that Cali and I were done, but from her perspective, I clearly wasn’t acting like it. I needed to do better.

I met her eyes again. “You’re right. Seeing Cali here with my brother hit me harder than I expected. But it’s not just Cali and Greyson—it’s seeing so many people from my pack. My pack mates, my friends. I should’ve been better prepared for this.”

At first, Ava said nothing, but her eyes narrowed ever so slightly. Had I laid it on too thick?

Finally, she nodded. “Okay. If you need a moment to straighten your shit out, fine. But don’t take too long. We need our Alpha to be here for us.”

She left the tent, and I blew out a breath. “Fuck.”

It was official: Ava knew me too damn well. And she hadn’t totally bought my act, like I’d been hoping. She wasn’t wrong, though. I needed to get my shit together, or she was going to question me as Alpha and start digging around. And if she somehow got anywhere close to the truth, she’d probably end up on Adéluce’s shit list, too.

I couldn’t handle the thought of another of my mates’ lives being at risk. Regardless of my mixed feelings where Ava was concerned, I didn’t want Adéluce to start messing with her too. All the more reason to get my head back in the game, sabotage Greyson, and get this over with.

I’d just pulled my attention back to potential ways to throw the match when Adéluce’s grating laughter filled the tent.

I turned to see her sitting on my cot, a shit-eating grin twisting her mouth. “Oh, I do so enjoy watching you sweat.”

“What now?” I snapped. “If you’re here to gloat, then forget it. I’ve got a dinner to attend.”

“I just thought I’d check in and see what your plan is,” she said innocently. “The rematch is only a few hours away, after all.”

“You think I don’t fucking know that? I’m still figuring it out.”

“Hmm.” Her eyes narrowed, but not in anger. It was almost like she was sizing me up. “I wonder… Do you have enough courage left in you to go through with your original plan and knock your best friend out?”

I wasn’t surprised that she knew what my plan had been. The fucking bloodsucker was always watching me, always a step ahead.

“I’m not going to drag Jay into this,” I muttered.

“Poor thing,” Adéluce crooned. “I know how difficult this must be. If you try to throw the match and you’re found out, the repercussions could be devastating—for you, for your new pack, for the alliance… I could help you if you like.”

Then an announcement rippled through the encampment: “*Dinner is being served in the mess tent.*”

Fuck. I was out of time. I had to go—but before I left, I forced myself to ask the question. “What kind of help are you offering?”

Adéluce’s cold smile chilled me to the bone as she stood and held out a vial. “Do you have the courage to use it?”

# **Episode 3905**

My nerves threatened to get the best of me as I walked into the mess tent. Despite not having eaten anything since lunch, my stomach was so knotted up that I couldn’t imagine eating.

Thanks to my little misadventure with Artemis and Lola last night, trying to find evidence of Malakai being a killer, I’d missed the first summit dinner and didn’t have the first idea of what to expect. I’d sort of assumed that we’d keep up the pack segregation and I’d just sit with the rest of the Redwood pack at one of the long tables, but then Greyson’s hand on my lower back gently guided me toward a long table set to one side of the dining tent.

I scanned the faces of the people already seated and realized our table was set for all the pack Alphas and their respective Lunas. The council was already seated in the middle.

*Great. All the leadership on display for the rest of the summit.*

My anxiety must’ve been obvious, because Greyson squeezed my hand. “Don’t be worried, love. It’s just dinner.”

But that’s not really why I was so worried. I was still shaky from our encounter with Malakai in our tent. He’d heavily insinuated attacking the pack house, and Greyson had, in no uncertain terms, told him to get out. He’d left without another word, but the chilling smile on his face, like he knew something we didn’t… Greyson had immediately tried to call the pack house, but no one had answered…

Plus, all of this was still so new to me. *He’s a werewolf and a not-fake Alpha. He’s used to this kind of thing.*

I was half-Fae, a fake Luna, and so much of a stranger to this aspect of werewolf culture that I didn’t think I’d ever get used to it.

Greyson’s voice snapped me back to the present. “You’re representing the Redwood pack,” he murmured to me. “You’ve earned your place here. To everyone here, you’re also a Luna—*my* Luna—and I’m your Alpha and mate. They will respect you for all those things.”

A warm burst of pride bubbled up inside me. Ever since I’d arrived, I’d felt like an impostor, just waiting to be found out. And it was hard not to feel like everyone could see through my act.

But Greyson was right—I’d earned my right to be here. Most of the other packs in attendance didn’t know the first thing about me, but the Redwoods—my pack—did. They knew I’d fought for and with them, knew that I loved each and every one of them, knew that I’d die for them. And because of all that, they’d accepted me as their unofficial Luna. They supported me as their representative. If they believed in me, and if Greyson believed in me, then maybe it was time for me to start believing in myself.

I pushed my shoulders back and walked tall and proud, like a true Luna should—for about six steps.

The second my gaze landed on Malakai and Honora, my newfound confidence shriveled up like a flower faced with a winter frost. Their cold, unforgiving stares were fixed on me, and I forced myself to stay strong. To not flinch. To stare right back at them and let them know that I wouldn’t be intimidated.

*Take that, motherfuckers.*

*Okay, Cali, reel it in. Be strong but not petty. I need to be better than them. I* am *better than them. These are the people who were willing to kill their daughter because she loved a Rogue. These are the people who treat their pack members like they’re disposable, who long for violence and power and believe in some seriously antiquated shit.*

Greyson and I took our seats at the long table, and the Bitterfang Alpha and Luna did the same. Fortunately, their place cards had been set on the other end of the row of council members, all the way down the table. Was that intentional? The discord between our packs couldn’t have been more obvious, so it would’ve been a shrewd call on the council’s part to keep us separated.

I leaned over to Greyson. “Have you heard from anyone at the pack house yet?”

“Not yet,” he said. “I’m going to try my mother again.”

Just then, Ava walked into the mess tent then. Surprisingly, Xavier didn’t come in with her. It was… sort of a relief, but also sort of unnerving. I’d been mentally preparing myself to see Xavier and Ava come in together. To see them in the same roles Greyson and I were currently occupying.

It was a nice break, not to have to see them together, but now I didn’t know *what* to prepare for. Ava stopped to talk to a couple of Samara wolves.

Greyson squeezed my hand again, gently refocusing my attention. “Maybe you should focus on something else. I know it won’t be easy, but you have to start thinking of the Samaras as just another pack. They’re our allies—our most vulnerable allies, but our allies all the same. Try to think of them the same way you think of the Blue Bloods.”

I sighed. That was definitely easier said than done. My issue wasn’t even with the Samara pack members—just its new Alpha and sort-of Luna. Ava and I had been on the same side of a fight enough times that it wasn’t *totally* impossible to see her as an ally, but there was a lot of bad blood between us, too.

As for Xavier… He was my mate, and I loved him. He’d broken my heart, and sometimes I thought he was the cruelest, most selfish ass I’d ever had the misfortune of meeting, but I still didn’t know how to think of him the same way I thought of Mace.

I peeled my gaze away from away and glanced at the place cards on the seats next to mine and Greyson’s. I bit back a groan.

*Of course.*

The seats next to us were reserved for Xavier and “guest.” *Ugh.* I assumed he’d be bringing Ava.

*Maybe the Bitterfang couple would’ve been the better option.*

Greyson was talking to Cesaries, who was seated on his other side, when Xavier finally strode into the mess tent. Our eyes met briefly before he looked away and sought out Ava. She greeted him with a kiss, and my stomach lurched. I wanted to turn away—I sort of *did* turn away—but it was like watching a train wreck. I couldn’t *not* look.

I stole another glance at them, and my stomach twisted again. No matter how often I saw Ava and Xavier together, something about it just didn’t feel right. Maybe because I still saw him as my mate, even though he clearly didn’t share that perspective anymore.

*Greyson’s right. I need to figure out a way to see them differently. I can’t spend the rest of the summit feeling like I’ve been sucker punched every time I see them together.*

I didn’t even want to think about what would happen after the summit.

Xavier and Ava only hesitated for a moment before taking their seats beside me.

I forced a smile. “Well, this is awkward.”

I was only half-joking, but I hoped that addressing the elephant in the room would make us all a little more comfortable. I was half-expecting Xavier to react with a chuckle, or even just a nod—some sort of acknowledgment. But of course, even that was too much to ask for. He ignored me completely, acting like I hadn’t said anything at all. I *knew* he’d heard me, though. He was sitting three feet away, and the room wasn’t that loud.

*He’s blowing me off. Again.*

I thought about mind linking with him, but the fact that he was sitting right beside me and still choosing to ignore me was heart-wrenching enough. If he ignored something as intimate as a mind link, it would be too much to bear.

I looked down at my plate and saw in my peripheral vision that Ava was holding Xavier’s hand.

I took Greyson’s hand and immediately felt like an asshole. I wasn’t about to turn this dinner into a competition. But Greyson’s touch was comforting, and I desperately needed a little comfort right now, so I kept holding his hand.

If Xavier wanted to ignore me, that was fine. I could ignore him right back.

But that one question was still driving me crazy: *Why is he doing this to me?*

Why was he acting like we’d never been together? Like being so cold and cruel was normal? There was nothing normal about any of this.

Something was wrong.Xavier wouldn’t admit it, but I felt it in my gut. And if it took the rest of my life to figure out the puzzle, then so be it. I was a Luna now—sort of—and I wasn’t going to let myself get pushed around.

Xavier clearly didn’t want to talk about it, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t keep digging.

After the rest of the Alphas and Lunas took their seats, Cesaries stood, raising his hands. “May I have your attention, please!”

The large tent quieted, and Cesaries smiled as he looked out at the gathered packs.

“Thank you,” he said. “It is such a pleasure to see all of you here on this second day of the pack summit. Tonight’s dinner will follow the traditions of previous summits, and will commence with a toast from one of the attending packs. This year, that honor goes to the Redwood pack.” He turned to Greyson and me. “The floor is yours.”

Greyson started to rise, but I put a hand on his shoulder and pushed him back into his seat before I stood up and grabbed my glass. “I’ve got this.”

# **Episode 3906**

**Greyson**

I was absolutely stunned as Cali stood and faced the entire damn pack summit, armed with nothing more than her wine glass.

*Is she really about to give the toast? Willingly?*

I had no idea where the change of attitude had come from. She’d been so apprehensive about even attending the summit, and it was no secret that she’d been uncomfortable from the moment she’d arrived—and that had been before our run-in with Malakai, before Xavier had shown up and made everything worse.

For so long, it had seemed like Cali couldn’t quite find her place in the Redwood pack because she wasn’t a wolf. Even though she was the mate of the Alpha. Even though she’d fought for the pack time and time again.

Yet here she was, standing in the spotlight, about to address a tent full of werewolves. My heart swelled with emotion, and I mind linked with her.

*I’m so proud of you, love*,I told her.

She glanced back at me over her shoulder with a smile before turning to address the summit.

“Thank you, Councilor Cesaries—”

“No.” Malakai cut Cali off and leapt to his feet, his face twisted in a malignant scowl. “I oppose the Redwood Luna giving the toast. Enough of this nonsense!”

Murmurs began to ripple through the packs at the lower tables. I shot to my feet, my fists clenched. Where the hell did this guy get off, talking to Cali like that? Especially after he’d threatened us earlier. My phone felt hot in my pocket—I still hadn’t heard from anyone, which wasn’t feeling like a good sign.

Cesaries frowned at Malakai. “On what grounds do you oppose the Redwood Luna giving a toast? Is she not a member of the Redwood pack?”

Malakai grimaced. “The Bitterfang pack and I oppose *any* Luna giving the toast. It flouts tradition. The toasts at the summit have been—and will always be—given by a pack Alpha. It’s not a Luna’s place to impose on the proper order of things.”

I scoffed. *Fuck*. I’d already known Malakai was a misogynist—the way he treated his daughter was proof of that—but this was some next level idiocy.

“That’s bullshit,” I snapped.

The packs were practically buzzing with chatter, now.

“It’s not *bullshit*,” Malakai snarled. “It’s respect for tradition. Tradition is what brings the packs together every year. It’s what keeps our bonds strong. If we disregard tradition, we have nothing.”

Wasn’t it bad enough that this asshole was threatening my pack? That he was making my life hell with his challenges and all his serial killer threat bullshit? Now he had to drag Cali when she was trying like hell to be brave and represent our pack? Like hell was I going to let that happen.

I shook my head. “You are so full of—”

*Greyson.* Cali’s voice slipped into my mind. *Let me handle this.*

That was almost exactly the last thing I wanted to do. Cali was my mate, and this asshat was doing everything he could to make our lives hell, and he was too damn shameless to even stop that behavior in public.

*I don’t think so*, I said. *Who knows how far he’s willing to take this? I don’t want you to get hurt.*

*Let me be your Luna*, Cali insisted.

*Fine. But I’m standing by, just in case—and if he pulls any more threatening bullshit, I’m putting a stop to it.*

Cali didn’t so much as look Malakai’s way as she calmly addressed the packs. “I’m sure you all have a great deal of appreciation and respect for your traditions—that’s one of the many things I love about my own pack.”

Malakai’s head swiveled on his neck like he was some kind of pissed-off bird. His face reddened more and more with every word that left Cali’s mouth, and his fury brought a smile to my face.

*Assholes like Malakai aren’t used to being ignored. Well, he’d better get used to it.*

“Another thing I love about the Redwood pack is its culture of inclusion and progress,” Cali continued. “We certainly do love our traditions—I’ve had more barbecues in the last year than in the rest of my life put together.”

Laughter rippled through the tent, and not just from the Redwood pack members. My smile widened. Cali was winning them over.

Cali smiled as she looked fondly out at the gathered wolves. “Some traditions are welcome. They bring us together; they protect us. They make us stronger because of our shared commitment to them. But other traditions are outdated. Some of them try to force a certain way of life on us, whether that way serves the community or not. I think it’s time for everyone to be included. And as Luna of the Redwood pack, I’m proud to take the first step in creating a *new* tradition.” Cali raised her glass. “I propose a toast—to the Lunas who stand with me, to their Alphas, and to all of you. I’m honored to be here at the summit!”

The room erupted into cheers, with countless wolves raising their glasses to Cali. I raised my own glass as I turned to my mate, absolutely in awe. I’d always known she was strong. I’d known she was brave and determined to be the best Luna she could possibly be. She took this job seriously, even if it wasn’t official just yet, and I knew how important it was to Cali to do right by me and by the pack. She had nothing to prove to me. I knew she was the perfect Luna for our pack. She’d more than proven herself as both worthy and capable. Still, I’d never imagined that she’d do anything like this—stand in front of a huge congregation of werewolves and address them all with such poise and charm. Anyone—save for the Bitterfangs—who might’ve had their doubts about my mate wouldn’t doubt her anymore.

I’d never been so proud of her. What she’d done had taken strength and courage, and it was the perfect way to send a not-too-subtle message to Malakai that he was just another Alpha.

I glanced over at the Bitterfang leader and swallowed back a laugh at his unmasked fury. I couldn’t resist. I raised my glass and winked at Malakai, who slammed his drink down and made to stand. He was clearly ready to storm out of the dinner, but his Luna put a hand on his shoulder and leaned in to whisper furiously to him.

*Probably telling him he looks like a fool.*

I knocked back my drink. Champagne had never tasted so good.

Cali sat back down, and Cesaries stood, giving her a deferential nod. “Thank you so much, Caliana, for such a gracious speech. Now, I suggest that you all take your seats, as dinner is about to be served.”

I pulled Cali in for a deep kiss. “You are incredible.”

Cali’s cheeks pinked, and I noticed Xavier watching us over her shoulder before he turned away.

*How did we end up sitting next to Xavier and Ava, anyway? Was the seating chart based on pack proximity, or was someone with a very twisted sense of humor just having some fun?*

I wondered if the proximity to Xavier and Ava was part of what had motivated Cali to make the toast in the first place.

“How did I do?” she asked. “I hope you don’t think I was out of line.”

I shook my head. “You were perfect—though I have to admit, I’m surprised. You’re not usually this bold.”

She shrugged. “I was just thinking about why I’m here and all the training I’ve been doing. I don’t want my role as Luna to be limited. I don’t want to be just a figurehead—a way to check all the boxes.”

I squeezed her hand. “I promise, I’ve never thought of you that way.”

She beamed at me. “I never thought you would.” She leaned in to brush her lips over mine. “I’m sorry. I don’t think I helped smooth things over with Malakai.”

“I think that ship has sailed,” I said dryly. “The guy is rooted to his ancient, outdated traditions. He was ready to kill his own daughter because she was in love with a Rogue—that should say it all.”

As much as I wanted to avoid any kind of violent confrontation with the Bitterfangs and their Alpha, I was seriously beginning to doubt that anything would stop that from happening. If I beat Malakai in the match tonight, I’d at least have more allies behind me. But avoiding conflict? No, that was probably off the table.

Movement in the corner of my eye caught my attention. Ravi was ducking down to talk to me.

“Greyson,” he said quietly. “Kira’s outside. She wants to talk to you.”

I frowned. Why was Kira here? Why hadn’t she just called me back? “Did she say anything?”

Ravi shook his head. “She only said it was important.”

I stood, and Cali immediately moved to follow, but I put a hand on her shoulder. “Stay here. You need to represent the pack. I’ll be right back.”

I threw Malakai a cold glance as I followed Ravi out of the tent to where Kira was waiting, looking stricken.

My stomach dropped. I knew she wasn’t here with good news. “What happened?”

“Your mother was attacked.”

# **Episode 3907**

Both Malakai’s pissed-off expression and the way I’d essentially just told him to fuck off—in the most diplomatic way possible—had left me with an incredible high. That feeling had only intensified with the overwhelmingly positive reaction from Cesaries and the assembled packs. Standing up to him, even just by giving one hell of a toast, had made me feel strong in a way I wasn’t used to, and when I’d sat back down after my speech, I’d been practically glowing with pride and satisfaction.

But now that Greyson had been pulled away, my triumph over Malakai and the Bitterfangs was losing some of its glow. What was Kira doing here? She got along just fine with the Redwoods, but I knew that she tried to avoid werewolves as a rule. Whatever had driven her to come to the summit, it had to be urgent.

Which meant it couldn’t be good news.

*Ugh, why can’t we catch a break?* It felt like our wins never lasted long enough for us to properly enjoy them. Something terrible always came along to ruin things.

Alone now, without Greyson, I glanced around the high table and caught Malakai’s eye. His mouth curved into a smile that sent chills down my spine, and I quickly looked away. Despite my speech, I was still terrified of what he was capable of. The guy gave off serious serial killer vibes, and I knew he was fully capable of following through on whatever threats he made. I also knew that he’d probably enjoy it.

*Don’t think about him. Enjoy your win. All the packs loved you. Not even Malakai can take that away from you.*

Well, *almost* all the packs. The Bitterfangs probably wanted me dead even more now. But hey, what else was new?

For better or worse, there *was* one person at the table who had the power to distract me from Malakai, and he was sitting right next to me. Not that he’d acknowledged our proximity. I might as well have been sitting next to a brick wall, for all the conversation we’d had. But I knew it wouldn’t take much to “accidentally” brush my arm against his.

*What would he do?* He seemed determined to ignore me, to shut me out and push me away. And he was still refusing to explain *anything*.

That was the worst part. I didn’t want to pressure him into being around me, or even try to change his mind. But I did need to understand what was going on with him. I couldn’t just accept everything he’d said at face value and move on. But if he actually took the time to treat me like a person, if he actually explained even *one* of his recent drastic decisions, I liked to think that I’d be able to accept it and move on. Maybe then, it wouldn’t be so impossible for me to give him the space he so clearly wanted.

But until he was ready to talk about this like adults, I wasn’t above giving him a little push.

Before I could follow through with Operation Bug Xavier, a heavy hand landed on my shoulder—just this side of too hard.

I craned my neck to look up, and the breath stuttered out of my lungs. It was Malakai.

*Shit!* I flinched as his grip tightened, then forced myself to pull in a deep breath.

*You can’t let him intimidate you—even if he’s terrifying. And his hand is so cold!*

I forced a smile and put my hand over his like we were besties. The skin-to-skin contact made me want to chop my hand off.

“Malakai,” I sing-songed. “How nice of you to visit! Are you lost? Do you need directions back to your seat?”

He leaned in close. “Don’t think your tough act is fooling me. You, Caliana Hart, are a heretic. A Fae freak who will not escape my wrath, no matter how many pretty speeches you make.”

I swallowed, and even the fake parts of my confidence died.

*Where is Greyson? Maybe I bit off more than I can chew… Malakai certainly wouldn’t be messing with me if he hadn’t left… I hope.*

I considered mind linking with Greyson, but he was dealing with whatever was going on with Kira. It had to be about the pack house, and I didn’t want to bother him. Besides, *surely* Malakai wouldn’t do anything rash here, in front of the council and all the other packs.

To my right, Xavier suddenly stood. “Excuse me.”

Hope blossomed in my chest. *Xavier’s going to stand up for me. He’s going to put Malakai in his place. I knew he wouldn’t just sit there and do nothing!*

If nothing else, he and I were still mates. We didn’t have to be anything else right now, but Xavier probably had some wolf instinct to keep me safe. He wouldn’t let Malakai hurt me.

Xavier turned to Ava. “I need to talk to the pack. I’ll be right back.”

And then he brushed past Malakai and walked away, leaving me at Malakai’s mercy. He didn’t even look back. Not once.

*What the actual* fuck*? Why would he do this to me? Can’t he see I’m fighting for my life over here?*

It was one thing to break my heart—and I still didn’t know if I’d ever forgive him for that—but he was seriously going to leave me here to face down Malakai? *Alone?*

Out of sheer desperation, I glanced over at Ava, hoping against hope for some backup. But she was talking to Duke and Paige and either hadn’t noticed what was going on between Malakai and me, or didn’t care.

Honora appeared next to Malakai and gripped his arm. “This is not the place.”

She threw me a dirty look, then led Malakai back to his seat.

I wanted to scream. *There’s* never *a good place to threaten someone! It’s not okay! It’s never okay!*

Still, it was more than a little surprising that Malakai, who seemed to be just as much a misogynist as he was a control freak, would listen to anything his Luna said. At least he was out of my personal space for now. If that wasn’t a win, I didn’t know what was.

I pulled in a deep breath, drank some more champagne, and tried to settle down. *Smile, eat your food, be the Luna the pack needs you to be.*

But between Greyson being gone, Xavier’s empty seat, and the weight of Malakai’s gaze from across the room, I couldn’t focus. The food seemed dry and tasteless. I scanned the tent for Greyson. He still wasn’t back. What could be taking so long?

Xavier was speaking to the Samaras, just like he’d said he would. My fork clanked against my plate, and I realized my hand was shaking. I carefully set down my fork and slipped my hand under my thigh. I didn’t want Malakai to know he’d gotten to me.

I scanned the tent again, my heart beginning to race. *I can’t stay here. I need to get some air… and find Greyson.*

I made my way to the exit, just as Xavier headed back to the table. It wasn’t by design; at least not on my end. Now that he’d ditched me to face Malakai’s wrath alone, Xavier was the last person I wanted to talk to.

I wouldn’t be able to avoid him without doubling back around the whole tent, which would’ve looked very obvious. Besides, why should I be the one to make room for him? *Screw Xavier. Let* him *feel awkward for once.*

His eyes met mine as we crossed paths, and then he moved past me.

Like it was nothing.

Like *I* was nothing.

*Ugh.* I couldn’t just let him walk away. Not after he’d failed to defend me.

I rounded on him. “Are you seriously so pissed at me that you don’t care, or are you just that afraid of Malakai?”

Something flashed in his eyes—pain? Guilt? I wasn’t sure—but whatever it was passed in an instant, and his face twisted into a scowl.

“Ava needs me.”

He took another step away from me, and I grabbed his arm, my anger boiling over.

“You can fool yourself, but you’re not fooling me,” I hissed. “You care—I know you do. You have to—”

Before I could finish, a sharp pain ripped through my stomach, and I doubled over with a gasp. *What’s wrong with me?*

Xavier brushed my hand off his arm. “Don’t talk to me.”

And then he walked away. Again. I knew I should’ve gotten used to it by now, but the shock and hurt were still powerful.

*I’m in obvious pain, and that’s all he has to say to me? “Don’t talk to me”?*

Lola came over, a grin splitting her face. “That was a fucking awesome fuck-you speech!”

She hugged me tight, and I winced.

She pulled back. “Are you okay? Did you eat any of the appetizers? I think the sushi was bad.”

The pain receded, and I let out a long breath. “I’m fine.”

Lola looked past me, no doubt watching Xavier return to his seat. “Is he still being a dick?”

“Yep.”

“You want me to knock some sense into him?”

“I appreciate the offer, but no thanks. I’m going to find Greyson.”

I left the tent and almost ran smack into Greyson, who was in the process of storming back inside.

“Hey, what’s going on?” I asked.

“I’m going to kill Malakai,” Greyson snarled.

# **Episode 3908**

**Xavier**

Fuck, I hated myself.

No, hate wasn’t the right word. *Despise*. That was the winner.

Every interaction I’d had with Cali—hell, every fucking second of this goddamn summit—had been torture.

*I bet Adéluce is enjoying every goddamn minute of this.* Watching me agonize. Watching me dig myself in deeper and deeper with Cali and the Redwoods, and even Ava, to some extent. Everywhere I looked, I was pissing people off. Hurting them and hurting myself.

It was agonizing.

There was no doubt in my mind that the pain Cali had experienced when she’d tried to speak to me had been Adéluce’s doing. A nasty little reminder that unless I caused the Redwoods to lose, Cali would be under constant threat, no matter how much I tried to push her away.

And the worst part was, I didn’t have any control over it. I was doing everything I could to keep my distance from Cali and to encourage her to do the same, but she was relentless when she wanted something, and so she kept coming back for more. Kept demanding answers I couldn’t possibly give and getting herself hurt in the process.

Just trying to avoid her clearly wasn’t enough for Adéluce. She was going to take every shot she could, and as long as Cali kept pushing things, she’d give that vampire-bitch unlimited chances to hurt her. And me.

It was bad enough that Cali and I had been seated next to each other, and I made a mental note to find whoever had come up with that seating chart and shove my foot up their ass. How was I supposed to ignore her when she was there every time I turned around?

When Malakai had come over to threaten her, I’d had to fight every protective instinct I possessed to keep myself from shifting and shredding that Bitterfang asshole right then and there. It would’ve been a clear violation of the summit’s no violence rule, but at this point, I couldn’t bring myself to care.

I was determined to protect Cali, even if everyone else in the world was determined to make that as hard as fucking possible. Let the council lock me up, banish me—anything would be better than this constant pain.

I’d known my inaction with Malakai would turn Cali against me. Part of me had actually been hoping for that. As much as I loved her—and as much as it would break my heart if she gave up on me—at least then, she’d be safer.

But even leaving her to face Malakai’s wrath alone hadn’t been enough to push her away. She’d still felt the need to confront me—and that was when Adéluce had swooped in and hurt her. Again.

I slipped my hand into my pocket and palmed the vial Adéluce had given me when I’d accepted her help… The plan was simple enough… All I had to do was slip Greyson a drop or two, and he’d be just drugged up enough to throw off his game. But could I really go through with it?

I could. In fact, I had to. Now more than ever, I knew this was the only way to keep the woman I loved safe.

Ava sidled up to me, and I removed my hand from my pocket.

“How are the Samaras doing?” she asked.

Honestly? I didn’t even remember what Marissa and I had talked about. I’d hardly been paying attention. All my focus had been on Cali and Malakai, but since physically removing myself from the situation was the only thing I’d been able to do to keep my cool, speaking with my pack had seemed like the best option.

“They’re enjoying themselves,” I said smoothly.

I returned to my seat, and Ava followed suit. I picked up my fork, preparing to pretend to care about my dinner when I’d never had less of an appetite.

“What did you think of Cali’s speech?” Ava asked, her tone carefully neutral.

I took a little extra time swallowing my food—I hadn’t really paid attention to what I was eating—and bought myself some time.

What did I think of Cali’s speech? I thought it was as brave and fucking amazing as she was. And as foolish as she was, too. I agreed with every word she’d said, and I loved her even more for having put Malakai in his place as publicly as she had. But what I *didn’t* love was that she’d knowingly put herself even more solidly in his crosshairs. He probably wanted to kill her more than ever, which was just fucking great.

But none of that felt like something I could tell Ava. For one, she probably didn’t want to hear me sing Cali’s praises. And for that same reason, I obviously couldn’t tell her how much Cali’s speech had me worried for her safety.

When I’d finally dragged out that bite to its utmost, I shrugged. “I think it was what Malakai and his followers needed to hear.”

Her brows rose. “That’s it?”

I sighed. “What do you want from me? A critical essay on Cali’s toast?”

Ava glared at me, looking ready to dig in her heels for the long haul. Fortunately, Duke and Paige interrupted.

“Hey,” Duke said, leaning into Ava’s space while Paige peered at us over his shoulder. “We’re hosting a little after party tonight. We’re only inviting the hottest guests, and you both make the cut.”

*Considering the last party that involved the Aspen Alpha and Luna was an orgy, hard pass.*

I shook my head. “Thank you, but I’m actually planning to watch the rematch tonight. But Ava’s welcome to join you if she wants.”

She smacked me under the table, and I bit back a wince. *Jesus. Did she have to hit so hard?*

“I appreciate the invite,” she said to the Aspen leaders, “but I’m not interested.”

Duke eyed her hungrily—something he’d been doing all goddamn night, actually. It was fucking maddening.

“If you change your minds,” he purred, “stop by the east pavilion after the match.”

Cesaries leaned in across Cali and Greyson’s empty seats. “What match? The council canceled all further games due to the rash of violence.”

I tensed. *Fuck. If the council keeps the match from happening, will I lose my shot at saving Cali?*

What should I do? Lying to Cesaries’s face didn’t seem like the smartest call, especially since Ava, Duke, or Paige could easily spill the truth. But this match *had* to happen. I couldn’t let anything get in the way.

Before I could come up with a response that wouldn’t doom Cali or stick a knife in my own back, Duke said, “From what I understand, it’s some sort of grudge match between the Redwood and Bitterfang packs.”

*Awesome. Thanks a lot, Duke.*

Cesaries’s brows knit together, and he shook his head. “What is it with werewolves and their grudges?” He rolled his eyes and raised his glass. “Well, may the best pack win.”

I did a double take. “Wait. You and the council aren’t going to stop the match from happening?”

“I don’t love that these two packs have enough animosity that they’re going to have an unsanctioned match, but I’d rather they settle their differences on the sports field than the battlefield,” he said. “The council has no interest or say in how the packs entertain themselves, as long as they don’t violate the rules. Werewolves will be werewolves, and we don’t want to restrict them—the summit is a chance to celebrate who we are, after all. And that does include our… less civilized sides.” He eyed me. “Do you have a different opinion?”

It was taking every ounce of self-control I possessed not to grin like a fucking maniac. Relief almost knocked me off my feet. It was making me giddy. I still had a chance. *Cali* still had a chance.

I shook my head as casually as I could. “That seems reasonable.”

I slipped my hand into my pocket and wrapped my fingers around Adéluce’s vial. Drugging Greyson would almost definitely be more than enough to make the Redwood team lose. I might not have been my brother’s biggest fan, but there was no denying he was a key player. Without Greyson at a hundred percent, the Redwood team wouldn’t stand a chance against the Bitterfangs.

I didn’t love that by doing this, I’d be screwing the Redwood pack out of a bunch of potential allies, but I couldn’t live like this anymore. I couldn’t let Cali keep getting hurt. I had to do something.

I glanced over at Ava, who was deep in conversation with Duke and Paige. Cesaries was talking to one of the council members. I looked past Cali’s empty seat to Greyson’s, and my gaze locked onto his glass.

It was right there. And nobody was watching. No time like the present.

With one hand on the vial in my pocket, I reached for Greyson’s glass.

# **Episode 3909**

**Greyson**

Red fury clouded my vision as I stomped toward the mess tent, ready to tear Malakai’s fucking throat out.

Cali shoved futilely against my chest, trying and failing to block my way with her body.

“Greyson, stop!” she half-shouted. “Talk to me! What’s going on?”

“I’m going to wrap my hands around that fucker’s throat and watch the lights go out,” I snarled. “That’s what’s going on. *Move*, Cali.”

I tried to brush past her, but she threw herself in my way again. “Why? What happened? Does this have anything to do with Kira showing up? What did she tell you? Did something happen at the house?”

I could tell by the way she was barraging me with questions that she was trying to distract me from my anger, from the pure murderous need boiling in my blood. But it was useless. My bloodlust wouldn’t be sated until the Bitterfang Alpha was finally taken care of—once and for all. And all the questions in the world couldn’t distract me from that mission.

“Greyson,” Cali said, her eyes wide with fear. “*Please*. Talk to me.”

The raw emotion in her voice was what finally broke through my fury. I heaved out a breath and realized I was panting from the effort of holding myself back.

“The Bitterfang pack attacked my mother,” I said tightly.

Cali paled. “*What?* Oh my god. Is she okay?”

“She’s healing,” Kira said. I’d completely forgotten she was behind me. The moment she’d told me my mother had been attacked, I’d forgotten everything except for how much I needed to kill Malakai. “Torin’s helping her, too.”

Cali nodded, her shoulders slumping with relief. “That’s good. Torin will make sure she’s fully healed.” She turned to look at me. “Your mom is in the best possible hands.”

The sheer fact that my mom had been hurt while I was away—while our pack was vulnerable—and needed to heal at all was enough to send my temper into the stratosphere.

“That’s not the point.” I only just kept myself from snapping at Cali. “The Bitterfang pack trespassed on our land and attacked a member of our pack when they knew I’d be busy here. And Malakai has to be the one who orchestrated the whole thing. I’m not going to allow anyone to hurt my family and get away with it. This cat and mouse game with Malakai needs to end—right now. So, please, get out of my way so I can go in there and rip out his spine.”

“Wait.” Cali pushed against my chest again, a one-woman barrier between me and justice for my mother. “I understand how upset you must be, but are you really going to go in there and murder Malakai in front of everyone?”

She had no *idea* how “upset” I was. If she knew the true extent of my rage, she wouldn’t be trying to stop me right now. She’d be blasting that tent open to help me get to Malakai faster.

“Yeah, that’s the plan,” I gritted out.

“Cesaries and the other council members are sitting *right there*,” Cali said urgently. “What about the no violence rule? Do you really want to spit in their faces by committing murder right in front of them? Is hurting Malakai worth being banished, or whatever else they do to punish wolves who break their rules?”

I blew out a breath. She had a point, as much as I hated to admit it. I heard her unspoken question—was taking out Malakai worth everything it would cost me? Everything it would do to Cali and the pack?

I knew the answer—knew that Malakai wasn’t worth it—but there was no taming the raging fury inside me. It beat against my bones, trying to force my muscles into motion.

“I can’t just sit there and pretend everything’s okay,” I spat. “Do you really expect me to go back in there and play nice with the guy who just tried to murder my mother?”

“No! Not at all.” Cali shook her head. “Believe me, I want him dead, too. Hurting your mother is…”

“Unforgivable,” I snarled. “The bastard’s signed his own death warrant.”

“I agree,” she said quickly. “But maybe you should go about this more discreetly. I’ve already lost one mate, Greyson. I’m not about to lose the other.”

That brought me up short, though I still had no fucking clue what to do next. The urge for revenge ran deep. It was a primitive thing.

Cali turned to Kira. “How do you know the attacker was from the Bitterfang pack? Did they confess?”

The witch shook her head. “He didn’t have a chance. Charlie and Violet killed him.”

“Shame,” I grumbled. “I would’ve liked to have done it myself.”

“So, then you don’t know for sure that the attacker is—*was*—from the Bitterfang pack. If you go in there, teeth bared, and accuse Malakai when you have no proof, things could turn ugly. Well, ugli*er*.”

“Things are already about as ugly as they can get,” I said, thinking of Malakai’s warning. I knew something had been about to go wrong. I’d known it, and I still hadn’t been able to stop it.

*Just because there’s no violence allowed* here*, at the summit, doesn’t mean I can’t hurt you in other ways.*

I didn’t need proof. I knew in my bones that Malakai was to blame for all of this. And I needed to make him pay, to show him he didn’t get to go around hurting people for shits and giggles. That I wouldn’t back down, even if that meant killing him.

“Wait.” Cali’s expression shifted from panicked to grave. “Has anyone told Big Mac?”

“Fuck…” I sighed. “You’re right. My mom would want Big Mac to know.”

I turned on my heel and headed toward Big Mac’s tent. I’d lost my appetite, and I didn’t trust myself to so much as look in Malakai’s direction without giving in to my urge to kill him.

I tried to gather my thoughts as I approached Big Mac’s tent. How could I break this news to her? Maybe it would be best to tell her up front that everyone was okay.

*Or maybe I tell her it was Malakai, then sit back and watch her turn him to ash.*

Cali stopped me before we entered the tent. “Try to keep your anger in check, okay? If you even hint that Malakai is responsible for hurting her fiancée, who knows what Big Mac will do? She’s a witch, not a werewolf. She doesn’t have to follow the council’s rules. Plus, you know, she’s Big Mac.”

I sighed. “Fine. I’ll keep Malakai out of it. For now.”

Maybe I’d get a chance to watch her torture him later. It would be good to have something to look forward to.

I took a deep breath and entered the tent.

Big Mac looked up from behind the counter. “Is it wise to start drinking before your match?”

“I’m not here to drink. I have some news from the pack house… My mom was attacked.”

The witch dropped a bottle, and it shattered at her feet. “*What?*”

Kira grabbed the reins of the conversation. “She’s recovering. She should be fine. She just wanted to let you all know and didn’t feel like a phone call would be appropriate, so she sent me.”

“*Who did this?*”

Big Mac was seething, and I decided I was glad I’d taken Cali’s advice. It was entirely possible that Big Mac was so angry she’d fly off the handle right here and now, and I didn’t relish the idea of the summit getting any messier. Werewolves were a hot-blooded bunch, and there was no telling how quickly things would go sideways if an outsider—a witch, no less—was caught assaulting one of their own.

“The attacker was killed,” Cali said, “but we thought you might want to go back to the pack house.”

“You thought right. I’m leaving right now.” She began to gather her things, then paused to look back at us. “Can one of you deal with the moonshine?”

I nodded. “I’ll put Ravi in charge. Don’t worry.”

“Thanks.” She started for the exit.

“And MacKenzie?” I said.

She stopped, glancing at me.

“We’ll make them pay,” I said. “I promise.”

“I expected no less,” Big Mac said.

She and Kira stepped outside and blipped away.

“Do you want to go with them?” Cali asked. “Make sure Mrs. Smith is really okay? Nobody would blame you.”

Oh, plenty of people would blame me. If I left my pack now, I’d be playing right into Malakai’s hands. He was trying to hurt my pack, make me look weak, bully and threaten me until I submitted. For now, I had to stay the course.

“I wish I could, but since she’s recovering, I belong here,” I said. “I’m still not ruling out the possibility that the Bitterfangs are behind this.” I turned to head back to the mess tent. “Guard the moonshine, okay? I’ll send Ravi to take over.”

To my surprise, Cali didn’t argue. As I approached the dining tent, I ran into Malakai, who was speaking with some of his pack members.

He looked up as I approached and smirked. “Everything okay? How’s the family?”

And that was when I fucking lost it.

I grabbed Malakai with a snarl. “I know it was you, you piece of shit!”

He didn’t even flinch. “Do you really want to start a fight right here?”

I shoved him hard enough that he stumbled. “I can’t do anything about it here, but once we’re on the field tonight, all bets are off. We’re settling this, once and for all.”

# **Episode 3910**

I hated the smell of moonshine. It was like rubbing alcohol but worse, somehow. My eyes teared up, and my nose burned as I cleaned up the shattered glass and spilled moonshine from the floor of the tent.

*Poor Big Mac.* I didn’t think I’d ever seen her so shaken before. I couldn’t blame her. I’d be upset too if my fiancée had been attacked while I was away. Thank god Greyson hadn’t told her his theory about Malakai ordering the attack. A not-so-small part of me would’ve loved to see Big Mac unleash her magic on Malakai and the Bitterfangs, but this wasn’t the time or the place. It wouldn’t help Mrs. Smith at all if we all got ourselves into a world of trouble while fighting to avenge her.

Footsteps sounded outside the tent. *I hope that’s Ravi*. I needed to get back to Greyson before he lost his shit. He’d seemed calmer when he’d left the moonshine tent than when he’d arrived, but if he was heading back to the dining tent, he’d almost certainly cross paths with Malakai, and I wasn’t sure he’d be able to do that without landing a few blows, at the very least.

The tent flap opened, and I looked up to see Honora, the Bitterfang Luna, standing over me, her nose crinkled in disgust.

“Not only are you common and a dirty little Fae, but you’re doing something utterly beneath a Luna.”

I wasn’t sure whether to be offended or terrified. I settled for being both, but trying not to show it. Which was easier said than done. My knees shook a little as I stood. Honora was one hell of an intimidating woman. She had all the grace and poise and cutting cruelty of Miranda Priestly, but she was also probably a violent and sadistic werewolf like her mate—so not only could she back up her threats, she’d probably insult me while trying to kill me.

I shrugged and tried to sound nonchalant. “In a true pack, everyone does what’s needed. I’m simply doing my part.”

Honora’s nostrils flared as her eyes narrowed on me. “Don’t talk to me about true packs. You might have given a pretty little speech in there, but you’re not fooling anyone.”

I scoffed. “Are you here to buy some moonshine? If not, you should leave.”

“You may act welcoming and pretend you’re nothing more than a friendly new addition,” Honora said, “but you, Caliana Hart, are nothing but a half-Fae mongrel with radical ideas that need to die with you.”

*Well, there’s that trademark cruelty…*

My molars ground together, and suddenly I understood perfectly why Greyson wanted to kill Malakai. His Luna certainly wasn’t on my favorite person list.

*Maybe she and Seluna can be besties in hell. They’d be perfect for each other.*

“Go ahead,” Honora snapped. “Use your Fae magic on me. See what it gets you.”

She was egging me on. *Hah.* My fists clenched, and I forced myself to pull in a deep breath. I gagged a little on the still-present scent of the moonshine.

*Take your own advice, Cali*,I thought. *Use a little restraint. Even if a good blasting is exactly what this bitch deserves.*

But, no. I couldn’t. I *wouldn’t*. I wasn’t going to be goaded into a fight with Honora. If we ever did fight, it would be when I was ready. It would be on my terms, not hers.

“Um, everything okay in here?” Ravi’s voice cut through the tension.

He was standing in the doorway of the tent, peering inside. There was a question in his eyes that I didn’t need a mind link to be able to read.

*Need some help?*

I smiled. I’d never been more grateful to see Ravi. He sidestepped Honora and slung an arm around me as he gave the Bitterfang Luna a wide smile.

“Need help with anything?” he asked. “You need some moonshine, I’m your guy.”

Honora never took her eyes off my face. “I think we’re fine for now. I’ll see you at the match, Caliana.”

And with that, she strutted out of the tent. It took all my self-control to not kick her in the ass on the way out.

Ravi dropped his arm and turned to me. “What the hell was that about? That woman looks like she’d kill puppies and turn their skin into a coat, given half a chance.”

I laughed, despite the awful situation.

“I think she’s trying to goad us into a fight,” I said simply.

I considered telling Ravi about Greyson’s theory that Malakai was to blame for the attack on Mrs. Smith, but it was probably better if fewer people knew about that right now. It was easier to control a situation when fewer people were involved, and it already felt like we were on the brink of teetering out of control.

“I got that impression, too,” Ravi said. “But don’t worry about it. The Redwoods will settle this on the field, and the Bitterfangs will have to put their tails between their legs and piss off.”

“I hope so.” But I kind of doubted it was going to be that easy. Things were never that simple for the Redwood pack, and Malakai was already proving himself to be more cruel and cunning and aggressive than we’d given him credit for.

Ravi scoffed. “Have a little faith. It’s in the bag. The way Greyson’s been playing? The Bitterfangs don’t stand a chance.”

I smiled. It was good to see that Ravi had such confidence in Greyson. The whole pack did. “Thanks for filling in for Big Mac. I know she appreciates it.”

Ravi laughed. “I’ve had a lot of odd jobs in my time, bartender included. I know my way around. Plus, I’ve been dying to have all this moonshine to myself.”

“Better make sure the money adds up when it’s time to head back to the pack house,” I warned him. “You don’t want to owe a debt to Big Mac. Just ask Jay.”

“Fair point.” Ravi laughed again, but then his smile faded. “I heard about Mrs. Smith. Let me know if there’s anything I can do.”

I nodded. “I think the best thing you can do right now is not drink all the moonshine. Save some for the rest of the summit.”

I headed for the door.

“You know anything about that cute girl sitting at the Nightshade table?” Ravi called after me. “She’s been checking me out.”

I grimaced, thinking of the friction between Dayton and Greyson. “You might want to steer clear of her, and the rest of the Nightshades. We have enough bad blood to deal with already.”

I hurried back toward the mess tent and could just make out Xavier and Ava hurriedly exiting together. They were huddled close, and judging by their body language, they were in the middle of an argument.

*What’s that about?*

I nonchalantly moved closer, straining to hear them, but I couldn’t make out a word. If only I were a werewolf, I’d have been able to hear everything.

Still, there was a silver lining: Xavier and Ava were clearly having trouble in paradise.

The thought made me smile, and that smile made me hate myself just a little bit. It was so petty to enjoy the sight of them arguing—like we were all in high school again or something. A proper Luna wouldn’t stoop so low.

Then I remembered what Honora had said to me.

*Okay, so maybe Lunas aren’t above being petty bitches. But that’s not the kind of Luna I want to be.*

Honora clearly thought of the Fae as a lesser species, but we were nothing to scoff at. Just look at how badass my sister was.

*Would Honora dare say any of that crap to Artemis?* I doubted it. Artemis gave off a very strong don’t-fuck-with-me vibe that kept most assholes away. *Maybe she can teach me how to do that.*

I entered the mess tent and found Greyson sitting at the Alpha table. I dropped down into my seat next to him.

“How are you doing?” I asked.

He didn’t seem to hear me. He was too busy glaring daggers at Malakai, who was addressing the Bitterfang table.

I put a gentle hand on his arm. “Greyson?”

He jerked under my touch, then shook himself. “Sorry. I just can’t wait till midnight.”

I eyed his untouched plate. “You haven’t eaten anything. Shouldn’t you refuel before the match?”

He took a couple small bites, probably more to placate me than anything else.

“Was everything okay at the moonshine tent?” he asked. “Big Mac would never forgive me if something happened to her inventory.”

“Ravi has it under control.” I glanced over at the Nightshade table and spotted the cute girl Ravi had mentioned. Hopefully he listened to my advice and steered clear of her.

“We should have a toast.” Greyson picked up his glass. “To beating the shit out of the Bitterfangs.”

“I’ll drink to that.”

I clinked our glasses together, and he drained his in one gulp.

**Episode 3911**

**Xavier**

I waited until Ava was in the tent with me to turn on her. I was lucky that I’d managed to get her away from the others before she lit into me and everyone in the entire camp overhead what we were talking about—which would’ve turned things from bad to worse.

“Why won’t you answer me?” she demanded, her eyes flashing. “Tell me what you did!”

“Keep your voice down, will you?” I stepped close to her and tried to grab her shoulders, but she shrugged out of my grasp. “Ava, come on. Don’t be like that. You want me to explain? Then you have to calm down.”

Ava lowered her voice, but the anger was still clear in her voice. “Tell me right now, Xavier! What did you do? What did you put in Greyson’s drink?”

I literally couldn’t tell her about Adéluce’s potion. Besides, I wasn’t going to risk even *trying* to say or do anything that might violate the terms of our agreement. One slipup, and I knew that Adéluce wouldn’t hesitate to take it out on whoever I cared about—so her hurting Ava wasn’t outside the realm of possibility.

“Why do you care, anyway?” I asked, trying to soften my tone as much as I could to play it down.

“*What?*” Ava shook her head, incredulous. “How can you even ask me that? I’m your fucking mate—and if that isn’t reason enough, then do I need to remind you that you are Alpha of my pack?”

I rolled my eyes. “How could I forget when you take every opportunity to remind me?”

“Don’t you dare be glib with me. You don’t have the right. And I know you, Xavier, better than you know yourself. I can see right through your bullshit. I saw you put something in Greyson’s glass. What was it?”

“You didn’t see anything, Ava,” I said gruffly. “Stop making stuff up.”

Ava got in my face. “Are you calling me a liar?”

I backed up a few steps, searching frantically for the right words to deescalate this situation. “I’m not saying, that, Ava. I’m just saying that you’re mistaken. You thought you saw something that you didn’t see.”

In my mind, I was cursing Adéluce. Ava wasn’t the liar—I was. I was lying to everyone I cared about, because I didn’t have a choice. I knew that if I didn’t lie, the people I loved would be hurt, but that didn’t make it any easier for me.

Ava narrowed her gaze and stuck out her hand. “Hand it over.”

I shook my head, putting on my best “what the fuck are you talking about?” expression and hoping she didn’t see right through it.

Surprising me with her speed, Ava’s hand shot into my pocket, and she pulled out the vial. She held it up between us. “So, you still want to try and convince me that I was seeing things?”

“Give that to me!” I hissed as I lunged for the vial, all the while scrambling to come up with a suitable excuse. It tore me up inside that there was literally nothing I could tell her to explain what I’d done.

Ava held the vial out of reach, popped the cap off, and sniffed. “What *is* this?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. What could I say? That I’d drugged my brother to sabotage him so that he couldn’t win the game that would keep both our packs out of harm’s way?

“I have a pretty good idea, actually,” Ava said. “I was the one who put the drug in Knox’s drink so that he’d fail the Iudicium, remember?”

“Then you’ll also remember that it didn’t work, so why would I try the same tactic again?”

“You’re asking the wrong question, Xavier,” Ava snapped. “What I want to know is why you’d do this to Greyson. To your own *brother*. I know you two have had issues for a while now, but it’s shocking that you would stoop this low. Would you really sacrifice our pack’s safety—and the safety of the Redwoods, who you claim to love so much—just because you’re jealous of your big brother? This game has a lot on the line for every pack we’re allied with, including the Blue Bloods and the Vanguards. Why would you do this to them? To us?”

I just looked at her. What more could I do? I couldn’t explain myself and why any of this was happening—protecting Cali from Adéluce. There was literally no excuse but the actual one, and I couldn’t even tell her a word of it.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said lamely.

“You do, Xavier,” Ava said flatly. “It’s all making sense to me now. Tell me if I’ve got this right—you became the Samara Alpha so that you could sabotage the alliance at the first opportunity. But what I don’t get is who you’re trying to punish by doing this?”

I reached for her again, surprised by how much I just wanted to hold her and calm her down and make her stop looking at me like I was the worst person she’d ever laid eyes on.

She pushed me away with a sad shake of her head. “Don’t you see what you’re doing? You’re our Alpha now. Your first priority is supposed to be the safety and well-being of your pack.”

“I know that!” I scrubbed at my eyes, searching for anything I could say to make this better. “If you’d just let me explain—”

Ava shook her head. “No. I don’t want to hear what you have to say. Not when I know you want to break up the alliance and let the Bitterfangs destroy us.” Ava snorted bitterly. “You know, it’s funny. It doesn’t actually surprise me that you’d throw the Samaras under the bus, but the Redwoods? That’s really shocking. You clearly don’t care about anything but your rivalry with your brother. You’d blow up all our lives just so you can get the last laugh with Greyson. I guess if you can’t have the Redwood pack, then no one can, huh?”

A tense moment of silence passed between us. Ava had put as much distance between us as she could without just up and leaving the tent. The hurt and anger in her eyes was affecting me way more than I would’ve expected, and every inch of me was screaming out, wanting to tell her everything.

“You’re wrong about me,” was all I could manage.

Ava laughed. “Now that’s an understatement. Maybe I’ve been wrong about you this whole time.” She held up the vial. “There was a time when I might’ve tried to help you.” She shook her head. “But this time, you’ve gone too far.” Ava turned toward the exit, the vial still in her hand. “I’m not going to let you get away with this.”

I watched her go, my feet rooted to the spot so that I couldn’t even go after her. I just stood there for a few beats before I whirled around and kicked a chair across the floor.

“Fuck!”

The sad part was, I’d known from the moment that I accepted the vial that it would somehow backfire on me. I’d just been too desperate to reject her offer. So overcome by my need to be with Cali again that I’d risked everything.

I peered through the tent flap and spotted Ava—she was heading toward the mess tent.

*Fuck. Greyson’s there, along with the entire council. If she tells them what I did, I’m completely fucked.*

I bolted out of the tent and caught up with her.

“Ava, could you fucking stop?” I grabbed her arm and spun her around to face me. Her eyes were fiery as they met mine. “Everything you said was true, okay? I was going to use the potion to fuck Greyson up so that he lost tonight. But when it came down to it, I couldn’t do it.”

She eyed me warily, but she wasn’t storming off, and she wasn’t yelling at me. Good. Baby steps. But she was still clutching the vial, and I put my hand over hers.

“You can’t show this to Greyson,” I said. “If you do, no one will believe that I didn’t use it. I have no idea what that will do to the alliance, to the match. All I want is for you to know that I *am* the Samara Alpha, and that I was wrong to even consider using that potion. I know that now, because of *you*. I really do want the Redwood team to win.”

I stepped close and looked her in the eye. She held my gaze—that was another good sign. I just needed her to believe me, but this was Ava. Didn’t she always want to believe me?

“I didn’t use it, Ava,” I said, licking my lips. “I promise I didn’t. Do you believe me?”

**Episode 3912**

**Greyson**

Cali and I were just finishing up with dinner when some of the other Alphas came over to wish us luck. They crowded around us to offer fist bumps and handshakes, but I could tell that they weren’t sold on the idea that the Redwood team could actually come out victorious against the Bitterfangs. They were doing their best not to show it, though.

“Despite everything,” one of the Alphas said, “we’re all rooting for you. Kick ass out there tonight.”

I smiled up at them, appreciating the support. Truthfully, I wished they could just agree to side with us against the Bitterfangs without all the extra hurdles. I hated that we had to prove ourselves to them when we’d already done enough in the past to show that we were a force to be reckoned with. Honestly, the other packs should’ve been begging *us* to throw our support behind *them.*

I’d foolishly hoped that Malakai’s outburst at the dinner would’ve given everyone a better clue about who it was they were dealing with, but honestly, it seemed to have had no effect at all. No one even brought it up. It was almost like it hadn’t even happened.

*Fine by me*, I thought. *If beating Malakai’s ass in a game of Ludis is what they need to see before they can come over to our side—the* right *side—then so be it.*

I was glad that our little match was going to be unregulated. I’d been in the ring with plenty of fighters who’d tried to take me out with dirty tricks—dirty fighting was nothing new, and definitely nothing to be afraid of. Malakai was really making a mistake by underestimating the Redwood team.

“I heard about Mrs. Smith,” Mace said. He glanced over at Malakai. “We both know who’s responsible. Make him pay, Greyson.”

“I plan to. You don’t have to worry about that,” I said, a little wave of anger cresting in the pit of my stomach. It hurt that I hadn’t been there to protect my mother, and I couldn’t wait to get back to her. For now, though, I was going to have to defend her from afar and make sure that Malakai would never be in a position to send anyone to hurt my family ever again.

Cali and I got up and went outside, just as my phone buzzed in my pocket. It was Rishika asking where I was. “Shit.”

“What?” Cali asked, eyes wide.

“The game starts in fifteen minutes.”

Cali tensed beside me as we exchanged a look.

“Is it already midnight?” she asked breathlessly.

I nodded slowly, dealing with my own surprise. The minutes had slipped by so quickly…

*I guess time flies when you’re being threatened by a maniac Alpha and his pack of rabid wolves…*

“We don’t have much time. I need to go get ready for the match,” I said to Cali.

I felt good about my physical capabilities, but that didn’t say much about how I was feeling mentally. I was going to have to push my anger and hate for Malakai aside during the match so that I could concentrate on beating him and not make any mistakes.

I was fully aware of the looks I was getting as Cali and I passed by other wolves on our way to our tent. I couldn’t help but wonder who was pulling for me and who was betting against me.

I didn’t relax until Cali and I were alone in our tent, and even then, I couldn’t stop thinking about what Malakai had done—and tried to do—to my mother.

“Be careful,” Cali said as I got dressed. “I’m sure there’s going to be a lot of cheating. That’s the point of this whole unregulated match thing, right? That there aren’t any rules?” Cali shuddered. “That means anything goes, right?”

I pulled her into my arms, knowing that she was having a hard time wrapping her head around us settling things this way, and I could see in her eyes how worried she was about how things were going to turn out. As much as I wished that I could just kill Malakai and get this over with, this match was way, way bigger than that.

“You know what’s at stake, Cali,” I said. “If we win out there tonight, it will not only humiliate the Bitterfangs on the field, but they’ll also lose any potential support from the other packs. If we can make that happen, then we won’t have to worry about them at all.”

“I get that,” Cali said, the worry in her eyes deepening. “But what if you find out—for sure—that Malakai was really behind the attack on your mother?”

I gritted my teeth, a surge of anger turning my vision red for a moment. “I’m already sure that Malakai’s behind it, so it wouldn’t take much convincing, but even so… If it comes down to that, then we’ll deal with it.”

“We?” Cali repeated.

“We,” I said firmly. “You’re the Redwood Luna. I wouldn’t think of taking any action against Malakai without your opinion and assistance.”

Cali shook her head. “I love hearing you say that, but you and I both know that I don’t really deserve all that praise, or that responsibility. Not yet.”

I put a finger to her lips, quieting her. “Maybe not, but we can talk about that later, okay?”

We both perked up at the sound of Ravi and Lola calling my name. It was time to go. I planted a kiss on Cali’s lips, wishing that I could just stay in the tent with her. I’d looked forward to coming to the summit to connect with the other packs and maybe even have a little fun, but it was clear that that wasn’t going to happen.

“You ready for this?” I asked Cali as we moved toward the entrance to our tent.

“Yes. Are you?”

“I’ve never been more ready for anything in my life,” I said darkly.

Jay, Lola, Ravi, and Rishika were just outside the tent, waiting for us. There wasn’t a single smile between them. They all had their game faces on, which boosted my confidence in what we were about to do. This was one of those times when I knew that a pep talk was in order, and I needed to do everything I could do to remind them of why we were going to win this thing.

“You all know the importance of this fight—this match, I mean—so I don’t need to reiterate it. Just go out there, fight hard, and don’t let them get to you. Know that we can beat them, that we *will* beat them. We’re the better team. We’re the better pack, and that’s all that matters. And no matter what happens, I’m proud of all of you.”

“And we’re proud of you,” Rishika said.

We broke into a chant as we jogged toward the field, shouting “Redwood!” over and over again as the field came into view. Portable lights had been set up along the perimeter of the field, and it seemed like everyone had gathered to watch.

Malakai and the Bitterfangs arrived just as we did, and they jogged right up to us. Malakai was all smiles.

“I’m surprised,” he said. “I have to admit, I thought your pack was going to back out—too much pressure for a little group like yours.”

“Stop with the fake smiles,” I growled. I was using every bit of willpower I possessed to keep from clawing his face off right then and there. “I know what you did, and no matter what happens out there, you’re going to pay. Dearly.”

Malakai plastered on a shocked expression. “Are you accusing me of something, Greyson?”

I met his gaze head-on and didn’t flinch. “Fuck you.”

Ravi jerked forward as someone shoved him, and then a scuffle broke out. For a few minutes, fists flew in every direction as the Bitterfangs and the Redwoods clashed on the edge of the field, snarls and shouts filling the air.

“Break it up!” yelled some werewolves on the sidelines as they ran to wedge themselves between us.

I gave Malakai one last good shove. He tried to retaliate, but the werewolves got between us, blocking him. I noticed that it was two wolves from the Blue Blood pack. I looked around and caught Mace’s eye, and he nodded. Then, turning back to Malakai, I threw him a smug smile and then turned to lead the Redwood team to the sidelines to wait for the game to begin. Cali was waiting for me there, and she gave me a kiss on the cheek.

“Be careful. Please,” she said.

“I will,” I said. “Don’t worry, Cali. This is going to be over sooner than you think, and I have no doubt in my mind that the Redwoods are going to come out on top.”

“I believe in you,” Cali said.

We all took our positions on the field. Malakai was right across from me, and we were glaring daggers at each other. The air was thick with tension, and I couldn’t wait to get my hands on him for some lovely sanctioned violence. Everyone on the sidelines chanted, counting down from three…

The match was underway.

**Episode 3913**

I couldn’t stand still. The moment the game had started, my heart had skipped a beat, and it hadn’t gone back to normal since. I was almost too nervous to watch, and I flinched as the ball was thrown for the first time. There was just so much riding on the outcome of this game. I wished that things were different, that we could’ve reasoned with the other Alphas rather than be forced to resort to this—a game that could take a bad turn at any moment.

How was it fair that so many alliances—people who could help stop a war—were making that decision based on a *sports game*?

The crowd that had assembled reacted as one of the Bitterfangs made a break for the goal line. Lola was hot on his heels and gaining fast. Just before he reached the line, Lola intercepted him and stole the ball.

“Go Lola!” I squealed, jumping up and down and clapping.

My best friend was a real asset on the field, and we were going to need everyone at their best today if there was any chance of us winning—though I still wasn’t convinced that winning would prove anything. But despite my reservations, I knew I still had to cheer for them. It helped me as much as—or maybe even more than—it helped them.

I shouted again as Lola passed the ball to Rishika.

“They’re doing amazing,” Artemis said. “Rishika’s going to kill it!”

Artemis’s choice of words gave me pause, but I shook it off and nodded excitedly. I’d been so worried about seeing violence, carnage, and blood that I hadn’t really thought about the game itself. I was just happy that they hadn’t already resorted to violence.

*Yet*, a little voice in my head said.

My eyes searched the field until I found Greyson again. He was shouting out orders to the others as he swiftly moved downfield. Malakai was chasing him, but Greyson was too fast and easily gave him the slip.

“Yes, Greyson!” I screamed.

I didn’t think my voice was going to work tomorrow, but I didn’t care. I wanted my mate to know that I was there cheering him on and that I believed in his ability to pull this off. My nerves were settling more and more with every passing minute, and as Greyson approached the goal line, I really started to feel like he was going to lead the Redwoods to victory.

Greyson passed the ball to Rishika, and Artemis jumped up as she made a break for the goal line. Without even looking over her shoulder at the gang of Bitterfangs on her heels, Rishika crossed over into the goal zone. Artemis and I went wild. We clasped hands and jumped around in a little circle, laughing with glee.

My celebration stopped cold when I spotted Xavier and Ava seated together watching the game. I suddenly couldn’t take my eyes off them, and I certainly didn’t feel like dancing or cheering anymore.

“Cali, hey, what’s wrong?” Artemis asked. Then she followed my gaze and spotted Xavier and Ava. “Oh. Forget about them,” she growled. “Keep your focus on the game, and on the mate who supports you.”

“You’re right,” I said quietly.

I tried to refocus, but my mind was racing. Logically, Xavier and Ava should have been cheering for the Redwood team, but when Xavier had left me, he seemed to have left his logic behind, too. It wasn’t like they were actively cheering against us—they seemed to be on our side, more or less—but who really knew when it came to them? Xavier certainly wasn’t acting like himself, so there was really no way for me to know whether he was thinking the way I assumed he was.

Artemis reached out and physically turned my face back toward the game. “I mean it, Cali. Stop focusing on Xavier and Ava. It’s not helping anyone or anything.”

“I know,” I said sheepishly. “I just can’t help it. Something just isn’t right, and it’s killing me that I can’t figure out what it is.”

Artemis looked me in the eye. “You know I love you. You’re my sister.”

“I know that, Artemis. Why are you telling me this?”

“Because sometimes it takes someone you love to help you face a harsh truth,” Artemis said tentatively.

“Oh yeah, and what’s that?” I could imagine any number of things Artemis might say, and I knew I didn’t want to hear any of them.

“The truth, Cali, is that you’re looking for an excuse to help you cope with losing Xavier.”

Her words seemed to slap me in the face, but I held my tongue. I felt foolish for not expecting her to say that. Of course, it made complete sense…

The problem was that she wasn’t wrong. No matter how much I didn’t want to listen to her, or talk about Xavier… She was right. And I probably needed to hear this, no matter how much I hated it.

“You want to believe that someone or something other than his feelings for you is responsible for Xavier’s behavior,” Artemis continued. “But I’ve been around long enough to know that people’s feelings change. We don’t always know why, but they do. Maybe Xavier’s changed and isn’t who you thought he was. Maybe that’s all there is to it.”

I was speechless. I wanted to protest. I wanted to show her all the proof of Xavier’s strange behavior, of all the times he’d clearly tried to tell me something that he hadn’t seemed able to get out, of all the hints I’d gotten that something strange was going on with him. But was any of that legitimate? Or was it all in my head? Maybe she was right. Maybe my fear that Xavier had stopped loving me was true and there was no other explanation but that.

*He doesn’t love me anymore. It’s over.*

It felt like I’d been punched in the gut. It was too much to bear.

I forced myself to meet Artemis’s eyes and forced a smile. “I’ll try to keep that in mind.”

Artemis nodded slowly. “I hope you do.”

She squeezed my arm and then turned back to the game.

I stole one last look at Xavier and instantly regretted it. Ava now had her hand on his shoulder and was leaning in close, saying something in his ear. I turned away and tried to refocus on the game.

*Artemis might be right, but I’m just not ready to believe it. Not yet.*

There was a violent clash of bodies on the field, and it only took me a split second to realize that it was Greyson and Malakai, fighting for control of the ball. The crowd roared as the other players dove in and did their best to pull the two men apart.

I clenched my fists, and my teeth—I wanted to go in there and blast Malakai—but then Greyson locked eyes with me and flashed a smile. His mind link came through, confident and clear in my mind.

*It’s all good*, he said. *I’m pissing him off deliberately. Putting him off his game.*

I gave him a nod. I was glad he was okay, but I didn’t like how they were literally trying to destroy each other out there. The game had been pretty tame up to this point, but I knew that it could take a turn at any moment.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I took it out and saw it was Kira calling.

*Probably an update about Mrs. Smith. I hope nothing’s gone wrong…*

Just as I went to answer the phone, another fight had broken out on the field, this time between Jay and one of the Bitterfang wolves. They were clawing at each other as they scrambled after the ball, which was spinning away across the ground. I gasped as Rishika shifted, barreling into the fight, and some of the Bitterfangs did the same. I gripped my sister’s hand as Greyson went into the fight. There was a loud cracking sound, and someone howled out in pain.

This was getting bad.

“Who’s hurt?” I asked, looking around as werewolves on the sidelines tried to pull the fight apart. “Who?”

“I think one of their wolves,” Artemis said.

Sure enough, one of the Bitterfang wolves was on the ground, their leg completely bent backward. Immediately I gagged, turning away. There was so much blood.

*Greyson, please be careful…*

The fight dissipated, but I was feeling light-headed. This was beyond hard to watch. I turned to my sister. “Hey, I’ll be right back. Kira’s trying to call me.”

*And I feel like I’m going to puke if I don’t get away from here…*

Artemis shot me a confused look, but she nodded.

I stepped away from the playing field, hurrying away until the noise was low enough to call Kira back. She answered right away. “Kira, sorry. What’s going on?”

“It’s Sabine,” she said. “She’s fully healed. I wanted to let Greyson know.”

I sighed. “That’s great. Greyson will be so happy to hear it, but he’s in the middle of a Ludis match right now. I’ll give him the good news and have him call you as soon as it’s over.”

“Sounds good—wish him good luck,” Kira said, then she ended the call.

I slid my phone back into my pocket and turned to head back to the game—only to run smack into Honora.

The Luna flashed me a cold smile. “Cali. So nice to finally get you alone.”

**Episode 3914**

I took a nervous step back and braced myself—I even reached inward and pulled my magic to the surface, just in case. It was obvious that this little rendezvous was no accident. Honora had probably seen me move away from the others and was taking her chance to have a go at me. Now, I was right where she wanted me: alone in the shadows and away from the relative safety of the game crowd. I was now facing off with the Bitterfang Luna—the woman who held me responsible for her daughter’s death. Maybe I’d pushed too many of Honora’s buttons at Aysel’s tea party and at dinner, and now she was coming to show me exactly how she dealt with people who crossed her.

“What do you want?” I asked, trying to sound strong. If Honora sensed even a shred of softness in me, I knew she’d latch onto it and tear me apart.

“We never had a chance to finish our conversation,” Honora said breezily. “I thought it was important for us to talk one-on-one. Clear the air. These types of disagreements can get… out of hand… if no one makes an effort to talk things out.”

I began to edge back toward the field. “I think we said all that we needed to say.”

Honora grabbed my arm and stopped me. “You might have, but I haven’t. There are still a few things that I need to make clear. A few things that you should know. Just to put things in perspective.”

I tried to shake Honora off, but her grip was firm, and I could already picture the bruise I was going to have. I wished that I could mind link to Greyson and call for help, but that would only distract him from the game. And as for Xavier… There was no point. He was with Ava, and he probably wouldn’t even respond. I was going to have to get used to having only one of my mates to protect me—and I would have to get better at protecting myself, too.

“You disrespected me in front of all the other Lunas, and I won’t stand for it,” Honora said coldly. “Granted, you’re an outsider, and you don’t know how things work around here, but let me give you a little crash course. No one talks to me like you did—least of all someone who’s only here to encroach on a sacred event. What you did was unforgivable.”

“What’s unforgivable is you publicly accusing me of killing your daughter when it’s not even true,” I retorted.

Honora had known exactly what she was doing when she’d thrown that accusation out. Even if the other Alphas at the summit didn’t quite believe that was how things had gone down, Honora had planted the seed of doubt in their minds. We were already going through hell to earn the support of the other packs, and Honora’s comment hadn’t helped.

Honora shrugged. “The facts speak for themselves.”

A sudden roar from the crowd drew my attention.

“I need to get back to the match,” I said. “You’re entitled to your opinion, even if it’s wrong.”

With one final tug, I managed to break free of Honora’s grip and started walking back toward the match. I resisted the urge to do what I really wanted—which was to run away as fast as I could. Honora’s presence alone sent chills up and down my spine, and I couldn’t wait to be back in the crowd and far away from her.

*I’m supposed to be the Redwood Luna. I have to project the courage and strength of a Luna, even if I’m edging toward being completely terrified. If I falter for even a second, there’s a chance that someone will figure out the truth. There’s no telling what would happen if someone like Honora realized that I’m not who I’m pretending to be.*

Honora laughed, not letting me leave. “By the way, do you think people haven’t noticed?”

My heart lurched, and I slowed as Honora continued, her voice rising over the distant roar of the crowd.

“The way you look at the Samara Alpha? Watching his every move? Hanging on his every word whenever he pities you enough to give you the time of day?” Honora tittered a laugh. “It’s pathetic, really. Though I can’t say I’m surprised.”

I turned slowly to face her. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Honora raised an eyebrow. “Oh, no? Werewolves love to gossip, and everyone’s talking about it. If I were you, I’d be embarrassed to show my face here at the summit. In fact, I was surprised to see you here at all. Have you no shame? Didn’t your Fae elders teach you any self-respect? Or is that not something the Fae value?”

I stalked back over to her with my hands balled into fists. Honora was doing a good job of pressing all my buttons, but I wasn’t going to just let her push me around. I had to take a stand right here and now, or her behavior would only get worse.

“You can use your alleged *due destini* status as an excuse all you want,” Honora continued, “but at the end of the day, we all see you for exactly what you are: a two-timing Fae harlot. Nothing more, nothing less.”

I was gritting my teeth so hard now that my jaw was starting to hurt.

*How dare she? She has no idea what I’ve been through, the challenges and heartache I’ve had to endure.*

I felt my magic building inside me, and I had to remind myself not to lash out. There was too much at stake, but why did I feel like I had to defend myself? Honora wanted me to lose my cool, and for that very reason, I had to restrain myself. If I wanted to be respected as a Luna, I couldn’t lose it here.

But that didn’t mean I was going to take this lying down.

I got in Honora’s face. “You don’t know me,” I said flatly. “You know nothing about me. So, if you followed me here just to insult me, to call me names, I have to tell you, I’ve heard way worse from way better.”

Honora’s eyes flashed from human to wolf, and I flinched. I recovered quickly, not wanting to show my fear. This was my chance to prove that I wasn’t just some girl who Honora could push around and intimidate. I had to assert myself, even though my heart was pounding hard enough to hurt.

“Stay away from me, and stay away from my pack,” I said curtly.

Without another word, I turned on my heel and headed back toward the game. I was terrified. I had to resist the urge to look back and see if Honora was about to shift and attack me. I knew that if I did that, I’d lose whatever small piece of ground I’d gained and look exactly as weak as Honora wanted to believe I was. She’d know that she was in my head—which she was, but there was no way I could let her know that.

*Stay strong, Cali. Keep walking. Not much farther to go, and then you’ll be back with Artemis and the others.*

Honora’s voice caught up to me. “You don’t have kids, do you?”

I hesitated, then turned to face her. Honora wasn’t looking at me, but out into the distance.

“Until you have a child of your own, you’ll never understand,” she said.

I was shocked. *Is Honora tearing up?*

“There isn’t a minute that goes by when I don’t think about her,” she said. “I miss her every moment of every day.”

I was shocked. Up until this point, I hadn’t seen anything in Honora but spite, hate, and anger. Hadn’t Honora been prepared to kill her own daughter? Wasn’t that the entire reason why we’d involved ourselves in the first place? Had I been wrong? How could Honora have threatened Julia’s life if she was this distraught now that she thought she was dead?

Part of me wanted to turn my back on her and leave her to wallow in her pain, since she’d brought this on herself… But what if she hadn’t?

*Should I tell her the truth? That Julia is still alive?*

But as I approached Honora, I realized that something wasn’t right. There was something about this new vulnerability that just didn’t feel real. There was something in Honora’s eyes—a cunning glance, a twitch of her lip—that brought me back to the reality of who this woman really was.

*She’s playing me, and I almost fell for it.*

“I might be all the things you accuse me of,” I said, “and no, I don’t have a child, but if I did, I’d never try to kill her just because she was in love.”

Honora’s eyes turned cold and menacing in a flash.

“Julia was always going to die,” I said. “The only question was, by whose hand? At least it was her own. On her own terms, and no one else’s.”

I turned away again, my stride feeling strong even as my stomach lurched with the gravity of what had just happened. And as I got closer to the field and left Honora far behind, I couldn’t help but wonder what I’d just set in motion.

**Episode 3915**

**Xavier**

As the match raged on, I was acutely aware of Ava’s proximity. She was leaning close and constantly touching me, caressing my neck and back and all but draping herself over me. She’d told me in the tent that she believed I hadn’t drugged Greyson—and I’d been so relieved, I’d kissed her. I needed her on my side now more than ever, and there was no way I could let her tell Greyson and the others what I’d been planning to do.

At the time, though, I’d wondered if she was just saying that she believed me to avoid an argument. She’d been so mad and disappointed in me that it was almost shocking that she’d come around so quickly. But I had to take her word for it, even if I hadn’t quite been able to read her in the moment.

*Figuring out the difference between what Ava says and what she means could be a sporting event in and of itself.*

But sitting here with her now, I had to believe that she’d meant it.

I wondered if there would ever be a time where I’d be able to tell everyone just what the hell was going on, for real. With the way things were going, it didn’t seem like that was ever going to happen. I pushed that thought away. It was too depressing to even think about.

I was surprised by how reassuring it felt to be with Ava—even though I’d fucked up my last chance to save Cali from Adéluce’s twisted games. If nothing else, Ava was stabilizing and grounding me at a time when the world beneath my feet felt deeply unstable. I needed that. Nothing was going right, but at least I wasn’t completely alone. I’d done everything in my power to push Ava away, and I was lucky that she’d been too stubborn to let me succeed.

I glanced at Cali, but she wasn’t watching us anymore. I’d seen her stealing glances at me and Ava, and I’d wondered if it was all too much for her to bear. It was bad enough that I’d shown up as the Samara Alpha, but to see me with Ava, seemingly enjoying her company? I knew that had to suck for Cali. But there was nothing I could do. It was necessary if I was going to keep her safe. Maybe one day, she’d understand why I was behaving this way, but for now, it was just the way things had to be.

I’d seen what Adéluce could do to Cali, and my being at Ava’s side was just one more way for me to push Cali away—even if it wasn’t really what I wanted. But would it be enough?

I felt Ava’s eyes on me and turned to face her. “What?”

“Are you ever going to tell me what’s going on?” she asked. “Like, what’s *really* going on?”

“Are you ever going to stop asking me?” I fired back.

I couldn’t blame her for pushing. I could only imagine what everyone was thinking of my recent strange behavior.

Ava narrowed her eyes at me, and I knew that I was going to have to give her more than my usual brush-off. She claimed to believe I hadn’t actually drugged Greyson, but that didn’t mean that I was completely out of the woods yet.

I sighed and ran my hand down my face. “I’m just in a really difficult position. I’m the new Alpha of a re-emerging pack—and then there’s the whole alliance thing.”

“And Cali?” Ava pressed.

“Cali and I are—”

“Can you just try?”

I looked at her, puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, Cali isn’t here. I *am*. Be with me, right here, right now, in this moment. Can you at least try?”

I knew that she was right. I had to stop stealing glances at Cali and worrying about her constantly. I had to try to make this thing with Ava stick because I was the Alpha of the Samara pack. I wanted to be a good Alpha no matter what, and I wasn’t going to be able to do that if I kept letting my feelings for Cali get in the way. But it was really Adéluce who was in the way of everything. And she was dangerous to the Samara pack, and she was dangerous to Cali.

This was my new normal. And if I ever figured out a way to kill Adéluce, I was going to have a whole lot of reckoning to do. But right now? I had to survive.

I leaned over and kissed Ava. “I’m here. I’m all yours.”

Saying it felt both wrong and right at the same time, but I swallowed my conflicted feelings down and deepened the kiss.

Ava had just threaded her hands into my hair when a roar from the crowd broke us apart. We both watched as Jay passed the ball to Greyson, who dodged a defender and made a break for the goal line.

One of the Bitterfangs charged after Greyson, fully shifting in a wolf and tackling Greyson to the ground. Immediately, Greyson shifted to his wolf, snapping back at the other wolf and drawing blood. I leapt up as the crowd roared, wanting more.

*Here we go.*

“Get the pretty boy Alpha! Let’s see his fur fly!” a wolf called from the sidelines. I instantly zeroed in on him. I didn’t recognize him, and right now I didn’t give a fuck what pack he belonged to.

“The fuck did you say?” I rounded on him instantly.

The werewolf gave me a look. “I didn’t say anything.”

“No, I fucking heard you,” I growled. “The next time you hope for my brother’s blood to be spilled, you had better hope yours isn’t first.”

I didn’t know what had come over me, but I was mad enough to throw a punch—even though the werewolf wasn’t the person I really wanted to hit. The person I *really* wanted to tear apart was Adéluce, and she was the one person I literally couldn’t touch. It was driving me crazy.

“Come on, Xavier,” Ava said, pulling me back. “Let’s just go.”

I jerked my head in a begrudging nod, just as I caught Greyson’s eyes. With everything festering between us, I didn’t know how much it mattered that I’d just taken his side—though it had to count for something. Not that I really cared.

“I should never have doubted you,” Ava said as we returned to our spots on the sideline. “You really are sticking up for your brother.”

I shook my head. “I’m not sticking up for him. I’m sticking up for the team. I want the Bitterfangs to lose, for the good of the pack. If we can cut Malakai off at the knees here, we’ll be able to build an alliance that’ll finally give him pause.”

*And more than that, winning will ensure that Cali’s safe. And Ava, too.*

“As far as I’m concerned, Greyson can break his leg in three places—just as long as the Redwoods win this thing first,” I said.

Ava laughed. “Why not four places?”

I smiled. Ava had always been good at hating the people I hated—but I liked that she’d drawn the line at my drugging Greyson. It showed, once again, how much she’d changed. She had values and decency now, which was a big part of why I’d been able to come back to her.

“Despite the non-call, I think the momentum is shifting toward the Redwoods,” Ava said. “They’re on fire. Jay is playing really well, and Lola is like their secret weapon. Who knew that she could command the field like this? I’m impressed.”

She kept talking via mind link. *And when they win, we’ll both get what we want. The alliances.*

She slid her arm around my waist, and I leaned into her as the game wore on. I spotted Cali walking back toward the sidelines and wondered if this was our new reality. I was with Ava now, and Cali was Greyson’s Luna for all intents and purposes, even if the mark wasn’t real. We’d reached a new point on our relationship—or rather our non-relationship—and it was strange to think that this was the way that things were going to be from now on.

*Can I be happy living like this? Can I really settle down with Ava, officially? Is this what my life is going to be?*

My emotions were in a tailspin. On one hand, I felt sad and low about the idea of never having Cali by my side again—never kissing her neck or smelling her scent or having her in my arms—but on the other hand, I wasn’t miserable with Ava. Not by a long shot. This just wasn’t the way I’d expected my life to turn out, and that was jarring.

A burst of action on the field drew my attention. Greyson had stolen the ball and was charging toward the goal line. He was way ahead of the Bitterfangs who were trying to catch him, but then Malakai skidded up alongside him and shifted. Without missing a beat, he tackled Greyson, snarling savagely as the ball flew out of Greyson’s hands.

Greyson didn’t waste a second. He shifted and lunged for Malakai’s throat.

**Episode 3916**

**Greyson**

There wasn’t a world where I’d thought the Bitterfangs would play this game in any sort of honorable way. They’d had blatant fouls in the first game, and now that this game had no refs of any kind, they were taking things to the next level. Malakai had shifted and flat-out attacked me. And I wasn’t about to sit back and take it.

If he wanted a fight, he was going to get it.

I slammed into Malakai full force, narrowly missing his throat. Not holding back, I clamped down hard on his neck and dug my teeth in, then snapped my head to the left, tossing him away. He skidded across the ground and then charged me as soon as he regained his footing, his head low so that he could hit me in the legs and knock me off-balance.

I jumped out of the way and then dug my teeth into his side even as people on the sidelines cheered while others booed. I even felt someone tugging at me, trying to break my hold on Malakai, but I wasn’t going to let that happen. I wasn’t going to stop, not now. Malakai had been poking at me and poking at me, and now I was finally giving him what he deserved. All I could think was that if I killed him right here and now, our problems would be over and the Redwood pack would be free to worry about something else for a change.

*Is that the best you can do?* Malakai mind linked.

*Not even close. I’m just warming up*,I shot back. Malakai was going to learn why it wasn’t a good idea to cross me, or the people I cared about.

We circled each other, growling and snarling, both of us looking for the right time to strike.

“Get back to the game!” someone shouted on the sidelines. Then a few others began chanting. “Back to the game! Back to the game!”

Ha. Easy for them to say.

Malakai and I both stood down and shifted back to human. We were breathing hard, bloody from the brawl. A dark voice in my head told me it wasn’t enough blood.

“We could end this now if you wanted,” Malakai said.

“And what would that entail?” I asked. I didn’t know what he was trying to goad me into, but I wasn’t going to take the bait.

“Ending things, a mercy to you and your pack, really,” he said. “You don’t have what it takes to beat us.”

I stepped toward Malakai, our gazes level with one another. “You and I both know that’s bullshit.”

Malakai held up his hands, feigning innocence. “Say what you will, Greyson, but you’re no real match for me.”

I couldn’t help it. I snorted.

“Oh, you think that you are?”

“I know I am,” I said. If I’d killed my father, I could certainly best the likes of Malakai. He was nothing special, just another cog in a machine that Silas practically invented.

“Even with your little Fae slut dragging you down?”

I saw fucking red.

“*Say that again*,” I growled, shoving him. “Put her name in your mouth one more time, and I swear that I will fucking tear your throat out. That’s a *promise.*”

Malakai laughed, shaking his head. “Oh Greyson, you have come so far from tradition that I don’t think there’s any helping you now.”

“Greyson, let’s go.” It was Rishika. She pulled on my arm. “Let’s get back to the game.”

“She’s right,” he said. “We’ve gotta a bit distracted, haven’t we?”

Fuck this guy. But if the game was going to give me an out to put Malakai on his back for what he’d just said about Cali, then gladly. I wasn’t about to hand the game over to the Bitterfangs. Not after this.

I glanced at the score. “Shit.”

The score was tied, and now my team was down a player.

*I shouldn’t have lost it out there. I have to be better—and smarter—than Malakai. But bringing Cali into this… Calling her* that*.* The *due destini* was clearly still on his mind.

I walked back toward the Redwoods with Rishika, whose eye caught my own. “You good?” she asked before spitting a glob of blood on the ground.

“I will be,” I said. “You?”

“It’s been a rough game,” Rishika said. “This is bullshit. I know the game is unregulated, but fuck.”

“I can’t argue with that.” I sighed and looked out over the field as the Bitterfangs also regrouped. “We can still win this, though. The game is tied, but we’re running out of time. I want to avoid a sudden death match, if only because I might take it literally and murder Malakai in front of everyone.”

But would that be such a bad thing? He’d earned it and then some.

“Do you think it makes sense to keep pushing the offense?” Rishika asked. “The Bitterfang team is working hard, but they’re getting tired, too. With you out, it might be best to just focus on getting the ball to Lola and letting her run it.”

“That sounds good, but it’s up to you now,” I said. “Whatever you decide, it’ll work—as long as we don’t let the Bitterfangs get the upper hand.”

We both looked up as someone on the sidelines whistled loudly. They wanted the game to be underway again. We’d give it to them. Rishika and I bumped fists before making our way back out onto the field. We joined Jay, Lola, and Ravi, who were looking pretty beat.

“You know what’s at stake,” I told them. “We need to win. The Redwoods can do this—you just have to lead the way.”

Ravi nodded. “Don’t worry, captain; we’re going to win.”

“Fuck yes, we are!” Lola said. “Let’s do this!”

“Keep our heads down; we just need a few more points before the game ends,” I said. “We only have five minutes left. We need to score and then hold them off.”

Jay put his hand in. “Redwood on three?”

We all put our hands in. I nodded and counted down.

“Redwood!” we shouted in unison.

Then we left our huddle and spread out across the field. Malakai was jogging backward across the field, but his eyes were on me. He had that same smug smile on his face as before. I was itching for the moment I wiped it off his face.

*I’m not surprised*,I thought. *I just didn’t think the Bitterfang pack’s playing dirty would be as blatant as this. But I can’t get stuck on things I can’t control. We’ll just have to beat him at his own game. Victory will be even sweeter if we win when he’s playing this way.*

Suddenly Cali’s mind link filtered into my thoughts, startling me as we all got into position to restart the game.

*Hey, are you okay? I saw what happened. Bullshit, of course. Do you think we should complain to the council?*

I shook my head. *There’s no point. They’re not going to get involved—Cesaries made that clear enough. This is an unregulated game. They’d probably only step in if a battle royale broke out, and even then, I wouldn’t expect them to put a stop to things. This is a personal matter.*

*I understand*, Cali said before her voice perked up. *I have some good news, though!*

*Really? What is it?*

*Kira called. She just wanted to tell you that your mom is fully healed.*

*That* is *good news.*

I was relieved—it was exactly what I needed to hear right now. The match had required my full attention, but my concern for my mother had been nestled in the back of my mind the entire time. I couldn’t ignore that it was one of the reasons why I’d gone after Malakai. For revenge. It would take solid proof to convince me that Malakai wasn’t responsible for the attempt on my mother’s life.

*Thanks, Cali. I’ll call my mother to check in after the match.*

I turned my attention back to the game. We were all ready, and I was itching to get back in there now. Someone on the sidelines whistled again, and we all took that as the signal. We all took off running. Jay got possession of the ball and I ran out in front of him, barreling straight into a Bitterfang wolf.

The wolf snarled at me, shifting and snapping his teeth. I partially shifted my hands, clawing into the wolf and drawing blood. He howled in pain as I slammed him to the ground. As I looked up, Jay got tackled. *Hard.*

The ball went flying and everyone scrambled toward it. Rishika got her hands on it, but a Bitterfang body slammed her. Lola and Ravi held off two other Bitterfangs who were trying to get past them. I had to get in there.

My feet slid on the trampled ground as I lunged for the ball. I got a grip on it just as a pain exploded in my head. There was a loud cracking sound and my ears rang. My feet faltered and I began to fall, the ground coming fast.

The ball fell out of my hands, and right into Malakai’s.

I tried to push up off the ground to go after him, but it was too fucking late.

Malakai crossed the goal line.

It was over. The Redwoods had lost the match to the Bitterfangs.

**Episode 3917**

As the crowd reacted—mostly with boos—I could do nothing but stand there and look out at the field for a few moments, trying to process what had just happened. After the initial shock passed, I raced toward Greyson, who was bloody on the ground. Malakai had swung his elbow into the side of Greyson’s head. It’d been brutal.

“Greyson!” I rushed to his side. “Greyson, are you okay?”

“I’m fine, love,” he said. He didn’t *look* fine.

“But your head—”

“Will be fine,” he said. “Promise.”

He pushed himself up, and I grabbed his hands to help him out. The end of the game had been rough, and selfishly I was glad that it was finally over. Losing wasn’t the outcome any of us had wanted, but at least my mate and my friends came out… well, *alive.*

“Let me walk this off,” Greyson said.

I wanted to protest, but there was a look in his eyes. He needed a moment to himself. “Okay,” I said. “I’ll be here.”

Greyson began to walk off, and I felt helpless as I watched him. I looked around; the end of the game had bolstered all the spectators. Then I saw Cesaries among them all. Anger flared inside me, and I marched right up to him.

“Are you going to ignore what happened here?” I demanded.

Cesaries eyed me coolly. “I have no opinion. This was an unsanctioned grudge match. Your mate knows as well as anyone that in those cases, the chips fall where they may.”

“Then who am I supposed to complain to about this?” I spluttered.

Greyson’s voice echoed in my head. *It’s pointless to try to fight the result with the council.* Screw that. I had to try.

“I suggest you direct your ire at the true object of your frustration—the Bitterfang pack. There’s nothing I can do,” Cesaries said.

“There’s nothing you *want* to do,” I retorted, not caring that I was speaking out of turn. “Maybe you and the other council members were in on it—maybe you *wanted* the Bitterfangs to win.”

There was really no other explanation. But why were they allowing the Bitterfangs to flout the summit rules and be so violent? So that they could keep throwing their weight around and intimidating everyone?

Cesaries’s normally benevolent demeanor receded, and his expression darkened.

“You’d better keep your accusations to yourself,” he said icily. “The council doesn’t take kindly to having its honor challenged.”

I swallowed audibly and took a step back, some of my anger receding. “I didn’t mean to offend. It’s just obvious that the Bitterfangs were trying to do more than win a game. They were being so brutal, and nobody’s doing anything about it!”

The darkness in Cesaries’s eyes faded, and his expression softened. “I’m sure it will all work out in the end.”

I bit my tongue, not liking his patronizing tone. “The Bitterfangs are determined to start a pack war, and the council is just standing by and letting it happen. Aren’t you supposed to be all about keeping the peace? Why wouldn’t you make it your business to stop a pack war when you can see one coming, clear as day?”

Cesaries considered me closely before speaking again. “I suggest you worry more about your Alpha and less about the outcome of a grudge match.”

With that, he left me to join the other council members, who looked down their noses at me before turning and walking away.

I glared after them, furious. This whole summit was starting to piss me off. Most of these wolves walked around talking about honor and respect, but with the exception of our pack, most of the people I’d met here wouldn’t have known true honor and respect if it bit them in the ass.

*The Ludis game was bullshit, Honora just threatened me, Xavier is running around with Ava and a new pack, and the Redwoods might have just lost any chance of creating a broader alliance to stop the Bitterfangs.* I glanced at the council. *And the council couldn’t care less.*

Greyson, Ravi, Lola, and Jay came up to join me. Their expressions ran the gamut from grim to pissed off. Elle and Artemis joined us, too, and Artemis’s face was red with anger.

“Is this really how werewolves conduct themselves?” she demanded. “Cheating and lying and playing games? Where’s the honor in that? I’ve never seen anything like this.”

She turned and threw a heated glare in the Bitterfangs’ direction. They were cheering and laughing and spraying beer all over each other, as if their victory had been earned.

“We should settle things with an off-the-grid grudge match. No audience. Winner takes all,” Artemis said.

“I don’t know about that,” I said.

I hooked an arm through Greyson’s, looking at him. I wanted to ask what he planned to do next, but I knew it might be too soon. It was obvious that he was more pissed off than the rest of us combined. I felt him tense as Malakai looked our way and then sauntered over, flanked by a couple of his pack mates.

He smiled at Greyson. “Well, looks like the best team won.”

Greyson ignored Malakai and held me close as he shoved past the other Alpha. “Let’s go, Cali.”

Malakai laughed. “Oh, Greyson. Are you sore because you were just humiliated in front of all your friends? Are you mad because now they know what I’ve known all along—that the Redwood pack and its allies are weak and pathetic? Maybe you all should’ve spent more time building your physical skills rather than getting wrapped up in teenage dramas that don’t concern you.”

Malakai’s minions laughed, and I gritted my teeth, wishing I could wipe all the smug smiles off their faces with a blast of magic.

Greyson stopped and turned, and I was instantly worried. The look on Greyson’s face was positively murderous. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen him so angry—and then I realized it had probably been when we’d gone up against Silas.

“At least we played fair,” Greyson said as he walked up to Malakai. “You and I both know that cheating is the only way you can win anything. Otherwise, the Redwoods would have mopped the field with you Bitterfang fucks.”

I tugged at Greyson’s arm, not liking the way he and Malakai were looking at each other. “Forget him, Greyson. He’s not worth it. Don’t waste your time with him.”

I could feel the hate hanging in the air between them. I knew from experience that emotion like that passing between two Alphas could only proceed in one direction. I was just as upset as Greyson was, but lashing out at the Bitterfangs wasn’t worth him getting hurt—or getting thrown out of the summit. With the way things seemed to be going, if a fight did break out, Greyson would be the one to suffer the consequences while Malakai got off scot-free.

“You’re right,” Greyson said, finally tearing his gaze away from Malakai and looking at me. “Come on, let’s go.”

Greyson squeezed my hand as we walked away. He was tense, but I already had a plan to help him relax. Our night wasn’t going to be completely ruined. Not if I could help it.

“Hey, Greyson,” Malakai called out.

Greyson stiffened.

*Ignore him. Just keep walking*,I mind linked.

“Tell your mother that my pack has been praying for her speedy recovery,” Malakai said.

I didn’t even see Greyson move. I blinked, and he was charging after Malakai. His eyes told me everything I needed to know—he was going to kill him.

“Greyson!” I shouted.

I started running after him, but then Xavier appeared out of nowhere and jammed himself between Greyson and Malakai. He threw out his arms to keep the men apart as they tried to get at each other.

“Stop!” Xavier yelled. “Not here, not now, not like this.” He turned to Greyson. “Can’t you see he’s just trying to get under your skin? And with a cheap shot like that? Don’t let him! Come on.”

Xavier pulled Greyson away, and I was relieved to see that Greyson was letting him. I followed them, but not before I gave Malakai one last angry glare. Malakai glared right back, his gaze menacing and penetrating. I shuddered at the intensity. This wasn’t over. That much was clear.

I finally turned away and joined Xavier and Greyson. Xavier didn’t even spare me a glance. Without a word, he dropped Greyson’s arm and left to join Ava, where she lingered a few yards away. I couldn’t let that bother me. He’d been with her at the start of the game, so it made perfect sense that he would be with her at the end.

I turned to Greyson and took his hand. I had to focus on him right now. He still looked like he was ready to go on a killing spree.

“Wait a second,” I said.

Greyson stopped walking.

“I know you’re disappointed and angry and everything in between, and I can’t blame you.”

“You heard what he said? About my mother?” Greyson said. “What more proof do I need? He tried to kill her, and now he just gets to walk away? How am I supposed to let that slide? How am I supposed to let him live, Cali?”

I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know what I’d do if someone bragged about hurting my mom to my face—but I didn’t think I’d be able to see past my anger, either.

“I’m going to get cleaned up,” Greyson said before starting toward the tents.

I watched him, an overwhelming sense of dread sweeping over me. Greyson hadn’t said it, but the decision was all but made.

War with the Bitterfang pack was inevitable.

**Episode 3918**

**Xavier**

Ava greeted me with a kiss, and I leaned into it, taking comfort from wherever I could.

“You did the right thing, stepping in to keep the pack war from kicking off right there on the field,” she said. “The Bitterfangs are out for blood. There’s no point in Greyson playing right into Malakai’s hands.”

I’d kept my brother from attacking Malakai for the noblest of reasons—to prevent a pack war that would ensnare the Redwood, Blue Blood, Vanguard, and Samara packs. But it hadn’t been just that. I’d felt a need to protect. Greyson was my brother. And it wasn’t that I didn’t think he could handle Malakai. I’d gotten in the middle because it was the right thing to do. Greyson would’ve regretted losing it like that in front of everyone—appearing to take his loss the hard way—even if the Bitterfang cheating had been blatantly obvious to everyone who’d seen the game. If he’d really laid into Malakai, all hell would’ve broken loose, and Cali would’ve been caught right in the middle of it.

But if Ava wanted to think I’d intervened only for the “right” reasons, then I wasn’t going to tell her otherwise.

I shrugged. “The summit is supposed to be a celebration. Why ruin it by letting a couple of dickhead Alphas go at each other? If I hadn’t interfered, the council would’ve kicked them out for instigating violence.”

Ava rolled her eyes. “Do you have to argue about everything? Preventing an immediate pack war was still the right thing to do. And it puts you on better terms with Greyson.”

I sucked my teeth. “And why would I give a damn about that?”

“Maybe because we need the Redwoods’ support even more than they need ours?” she said dryly.

I thought about that. “Maybe for now. But once I rebuild the pack, we won’t need anyone, least of all the Redwoods.”

As we approached our tent, I noticed groups of people making their way toward the main summit area. I stopped someone on their way past me.

“Hey, what’s going on?” I asked.

“A party,” the young werewolf said simply. “Hosted by the Aspen pack.”

I groaned as the kid continued on his way. “Right. Duke and Paige are at it again.”

Ava shrugged. “Yeah, well, it *is* the summit—it’s not all about grudge matches and your brother’s vendettas. We should go. Cut loose. Actually have a little fun, for once. Besides, didn’t you just say that the summit is supposed to be a celebration?”

“So, what you’re saying is that you’re in the mood for an orgy?” I deadpanned.

“Um, no, not at all. But I doubt *every* Aspen party theme is ‘throuples-are-us.’ Come on, Xavier.” She took my hand and started tugging me in the direction of the party. “It’ll be a good chance to blow off a little steam—and you’ll be able to get to know some of the other Alphas. Widen your circle a bit.”

“Look at you,” I said, surprised by the fondness in my voice. “Always thinking strategically.”

Ava smiled. “Wouldn’t you like a drink?”

“I’d like a bunch of drinks,” I said, finally giving in.

I squeezed Ava’s hand and steered her toward the party. Really, I didn’t know how we’d missed it before. Masses of people were gathered around roaring bonfires, and I was relieved to see that there weren’t a bunch of mattresses lying about.

Ava grabbed a couple of beers, and we moved closer to one of the bonfires—the biggest of the three that were raging in the center of the party. I cracked my can open and clinked it with Ava’s before I took a long sip, my eyes combing through the crowd. I was both relieved and disappointed that Cali didn’t seem to be in attendance.

*One less thing to worry about. At least now I can do what Ava asked and focus on her, exclusively.*

More than a few people were hooking up and making out in the shadows. Paige and Duke were definitely in their element, dressed in barely-there matching outfits and getting comfortable with Geena. I pointed to them.

“Hey, isn’t that Dayton’s Luna?” I asked.

Ava laughed. “Sure is. But maybe Dayton gets off on watching.” She giggled as she took a swig of her drink.

I scowled.

“Oh, Xavier, lighten up,” Ava said, rolling her eyes. “I hope you’re not going soft on me. We’re werewolves, what do you expect?”

She was right, but Paige and Duke’s scene had never been my style, and I knew plenty of werewolves who agreed with me—though there were also plenty who didn’t. I shuddered as I thought back to the awkward Vanguard shindigs I’d been coerced into attending. I was expecting to spot Lucian at any moment, probably secreted in a corner, enjoying a bit of throuple action.

I spotted Mace with Maren talking to Porter and Rowena. Ava followed my gaze and pulled me close.

“We should go chat with them,” she said. “You can’t be the sidelined Alpha, Xavier. You need to get into the mix, be the fun Alpha I know you can be.”

I dropped my head back and dragged my feet a little as Ava pulled me over to join the group.

“Xavier, hey,” Porter said, lifting his beer in my direction.

“Hey, how’s it going?” I said, trying my best to loosen up.

“Good,” Porter said. “You’ve met my wife and Luna, Rowena?”

She gave me a tight smile, and I remembered that she’d witnessed my little confrontation with Cali, earlier. “Hey, Xavier.”

“Hey,” I said sheepishly. “We met before—but I wasn’t at my best.”

“It’s fine,” Rowena said. “Werewolves are temperamental. I’m learning.”

“So, where’s Greyson?” Porter asked.

“Don’t know, don’t care. Not my brother’s keeper,” I said.

*I came over here to represent the Samaras, not talk about my brother.*

“Case in point,” Rowena muttered.

“Yeah, well, he *is* Colton’s twin,” Porter said. He and Rowena laughed, shooting cryptic glances in my direction. “Anyway. Greyson got a raw deal today,” Porter said, changing the subject.

“Tell me about it,” Mace said. “Unsanctioned match or not, that was a free-for-all—but only for the Bitterfangs. Those wolves were being total dicks. Greyson never stood a chance.”

Maren nodded and quietly sipped her beer.

“And somehow Greyson mostly kept his cool,” Mace said. “I think I would’ve tried to rip Malakai’s throat out.”

“Yeah, Greyson definitely has patience. I don’t know many wolves who would’ve been able to take the high road after a match like that,” Porter said.

I was starting to get irritated, and I knew that I needed to remove myself before I ruined the connections I’d already made.

“Bathroom,” I grunted at Ava.

Ava gave me a knowing look and nodded. “Okay, I’ll be here.”

I made a beeline for the bathroom, avoiding everyone’s eyes so that I couldn’t get pulled into any more small talk. I had a feeling that all anyone was going to be talking about was the grudge match. Werewolves loved to gossip, and that trait was only compounded at events like this one, where every unusual thing that happened was blown out of proportion and turned into front-page news. Too bad I wasn’t in the mood to hear about my brother over and over again, or I would’ve been in heaven.

I walked into the bathroom, flashing back to the day before, when I’d been skulking around out here ready to knock Jay out.

The bathroom was empty except for one guy who’d already had too much to drink. He eyed me as I came in.

“You’re with the Redwoods, right?” he slurred.

“No. I’m the Samara Alpha. Get used to it,” I grumbled, hoping that there wouldn’t be any follow-up questions and planning to ignore them if there were.

After I was finished, I went to the sink to wash my hands. I turned on the water and then lifted my gaze to my reflection in the mirror. Adéluce was staring back at me with a smirk. I jumped back, startled.

“Hey, man, you all right?” the stranger slurred. “You look like you just saw a ghost.”

“What the hell are you doing—” I started, but then I glanced at the man, who was side-eyeing me now. I turned to face him. “Hey, piss off! I need some privacy.”

The guy backed away and then hurried out of the bathroom, the door slamming shut behind him. I turned back to Adéluce.

“You must be happy about how things turned out,” I said. “The Redwood team lost.”

Adéluce’s smile widened. “Yes, but no thanks to you, I’m afraid.”

I twisted my mouth into a sneer. I should’ve known that she was going to split hairs. Again.

“What difference does that make?” I demanded. “They lost, and you got what you wanted. Leave Cali alone like you promised.”

“Leaving Cali alone is *your* job, Xavier, not mine. And from what I’ve seen so far, you aren’t very good at it.”

“Leave Cali the fuck alone!” I yelled, my voice bouncing off the walls of the small space.

I punched the mirror, and it shattered, slicing my knuckles so deeply that they started to bleed. Adéluce’s laughter echoed in my head, and I knew at that moment that this was never going to end. She was going to string me along forever—but only if I let her.

I had to put an end to this, and there was only one way to do it.

**Episode 3919**

**Greyson**

I had just returned to the tent from the shower and was busy drying my hair, my mind a million miles away. Cali was in the tent with me and was being nothing but supportive, but I was still too angry to listen. I just couldn’t stop replaying the game over and over again in my head. My thoughts kept snagging on Malakai attacking me and keeping me from scoring the goal that would’ve changed the game. It was maddening.

“Did you hear me? I said that we shouldn’t let Malakai ruin our time here,” Cali said. She grabbed me. “Look at me, Greyson Evers. As much as we wanted to beat the Bitterfangs, losing doesn’t have to be the end of our pack. You told me before that we could still take on the Bitterfangs with the original alliance—us, the Blue Bloods, the Vanguards, and the Samaras. We still have an alliance that’s worth something—and that’s all thanks to you.”

I let her words sink in, willing them to cut through the haze of anger in my head. She was right. Losing on the Ludis field didn’t have to change anything. I was blaming myself, worried that I’d publicly blown my standing as an Alpha and let my pack down, but maybe it wasn’t as serious as all that. It wasn’t like it hadn’t been blatantly obvious that the Bitterfangs had stolen their victory.

I pulled Cali into a kiss. “Thanks for knocking some sense into me. But I *will* deal with Malakai.”

Cali looked away from me.

“What?” I asked.

“Malakai isn’t our only problem,” she said with a sigh. “Honora came after me during the match.”

“What? Why didn’t you tell me?”

My mind was already racing with what I could do to make sure that never happened again. This was Cali’s first summit, and it burned me up that she was having such a bad experience with asshole werewolves coming at her from every direction.

“I wasn’t going to distract you. And it’s okay,” Cali said, gently pushing me down to sit on the cot. “I handled her.”

I gave her a look. “What exactly does that mean? And what did she do, anyway?”

“She was just trying to get me to admit that the Redwoods are responsible for Julia’s death. What else? I put the blame right where it belongs—on her.” Cali paused. “But… that might have added fuel to the fire.”

I sighed and finished drying off my hair. “Don’t worry about it. The fire was already raging out of control. Whatever happened with Honora won’t make a difference in the grand scheme of things. I’m just sorry that I wasn’t there to defend you.”

“You know, the funny thing is, I wished that you were, at first,” Cali said. “Then I reminded myself that I’m supposed to be acting like a Luna, and I started to give as good as I got.”

I smiled. “Then that’s good enough for me. We can think of that little unpleasantness as a learning experience, then.”

“That’s a good way of looking at it,” Cali said brightly. “Hurry up and finish getting dressed. We should go to the Aspen party and show the others that we’re not one and done.”

I grimaced. “Isn’t that the orgy pack?”

Cali laughed. “Yes, but that’s not the point. We just need to make an appearance, show that we’re not rattled and that we can take a beating—albeit an unfair one—and keep going.”

“Well, let’s check it out at the very least, see what the vibe is like.”

I grabbed a shirt and followed Cali out of the tent to where the rest of the Redwood delegation was gathered around a small fire, brooding. Rishika was stripping the bark off a stick and tossing it into the fire. Artemis was lying on her back and staring at the sky with a blank look on her face, and everyone else was just staring into the flames. No one was speaking.

Cali clapped her hands. “Look sharp, Redwoods! Everyone get up. We’re going to a party.”

Artemis and Rishika started grumbling, but Cali cut them off.

“We belong to the Redwood pack, and while we might have been defeated by a cheating scumbag opponent, we should still be proud for playing as hard as we did,” Cali said. “There’s no reason for us to hang our heads. We played a good, clean game.”

I came up beside Cali, liking what I was hearing. “Maybe the score showed that we lost, but that doesn’t mean anything to us. Not really. What matters is that we achieved a moral victory. We played by the rules, we didn’t try to cheat, and we came within a hair’s breadth of winning. That counts for something, doesn’t it?”

“Hell yeah, it does,” Rishika said.

“And I could use a drink. Or two. Or three,” Ravi said.

“Me too,” Artemis said.

“Five each for us,” Lola added, nudging Jay in the side.

The group began to rally, and we put out the fire and made our way to the party. I fell into step beside Cali and looped an arm around her waist, happy to have her by my side. I always felt like a winner whenever we were together.

“Don’t let that fake Luna mark get in your head, love,” I whispered in her ear. “You showed them just how great a Luna you are.”

I felt so connected to her, I wasn’t sure how a real Luna mark would be able to strengthen our bond any further.

Cali’s cheeks reddened as she looked up at me, then she smacked a kiss onto my lips. “Thanks for that. I definitely have my moments of self-doubt, but at times like this, taking the lead as your Luna—acting or not—feels right.”

We’d almost made it to the party when I realized that the moonshine tent was open.

I turned to Ravi. “What the hell? I thought you closed the tent for the match.”

Ravi looked as puzzled as I felt, and he was already changing course toward the tent. “I did close it.”

I was pissed. I’d told Big Mac that I’d take care of it. It was one of the few things she’d asked of us, and we were blowing it.

I sprinted into the tent—and was shocked to find Big Mac standing behind the counter, serving bottles of moonshine to a growing line of customers.

“What are you doing here?” I asked. “I thought you were back home with my mother.”

“Your mother is all healed up, and I can’t afford to pass up all this business,” Big Mac said gruffly, barely sparing me a glance as she swiped a credit card through the reader. “And I wasn’t going to leave you all witchless.” She looked around. “No, sir. Not in this den of vipers you werewolves call a summit.”

“Thanks,” I said, knowing that Big Mac cared a lot more for me and the pack than she’d ever admit. It was good to have her back for a lot of reasons—but especially because we might end up needing her help with the Bitterfangs.

We left Big Mac and continued on our way to the party. The field was filling up, and music was pulsing through the air, instantly lifting my spirits. Cali was right. This was just what I needed.

“Hey, Greyson, nice to see you,” Porter said. He was with Mace and a few others and was wearing an easy smile. “Congratulations, by the way.”

I took the beer he offered me and gave him a confused look. “Thanks, but did you see the final score? We lost.”

“Maybe, but you guys played your asses off and would’ve won if the Bitterfangs hadn’t *cheated* theirasses off. Seeing Lola running that ball and Rishika plowing through the Bitterfang defenses like they weren’t even there?” Porter did a chef’s kiss. “Priceless.”

“Ravi, you were a beast,” Mace added. “And Greyson.” Mace held out his bottle, and I clinked mine against it. “You were the MVP.”

“Thanks, man,” I said. “I’m glad I’ve got people who have my back around here.”

The mood lifted a little more.

“What does this mean for the alliance?” Cali asked bluntly.

“Your integrity speaks for itself,” Porter said. “The Alphas wanted to see you demonstrate your strength, and you did exactly that.” He held out his hand. “The Cobalt pack will stand with you.”

I shook his hand in disbelief. I hadn’t expected this, but I was beyond pleased. “I appreciate it, man.”

I took a swig of my beer, finally loosening up as I took a look around the party. Everyone was smiling and laughing and having a good time. It was the perfect time to do the rounds and find out if Porter’s opinion was the exception or the rule.

I didn’t want to jinx it, but it seemed like the tide could be turning against the Bitterfangs.

**Episode 3920**

I felt like screaming for joy. I’d assumed the other packs would turn their backs on us, that they wouldn’t care that the Bitterfangs had resorted to dirty tricks to win. I’d never felt so good about being wrong.

Greyson leaned into me and squeezed me tight. “I’m going to take advantage of this momentum and go talk to the other Alphas. Maybe I can get a few others to join up with us.” He kissed me. “And maybe later, we can celebrate in private.”

My heart fluttered, and my cheeks burned for the second time in as many minutes.

“Unless you want to ask Paige and Duke to join us?” Greyson said, his expression faux-serious.

I smacked him. “I know you’re joking, but still!”

“Forget it,” he said, laughing. “I’ve just decided that I don’t want to share you.”

I looked at him, knowing that this was a loaded statement. My thoughts couldn’t help but go to a dark place for a moment. Greyson was no stranger to sharing me, what with the *due destini* hanging over our heads.

*Shake it off, Cali.*

He kissed me again, and I melted against him.

“I’ll see you soon, okay?” he said.

I nodded as he headed off, wishing that things were different. I knew he had to go and try to shift the tide in our favor, but I wished that he could just stay with me and enjoy the party. We both deserved a little levity. But Greyson was an Alpha, and nothing mattered more to him than the safety of his pack.

Lola came walking over. “I saw Porter and Greyson shake hands. Does that mean we might not die?”

I laughed. “It’s starting to look that way. And I meant what I said before, by the way—I’m really proud of you for playing the way you did. You were all unstoppable out there.”

“Except that we *were* stopped,” Lola grumbled. “But I’m trying to be positive. Jay, on the other hand…” She shot a glance his way. “He’s still pouting, but I think I can find a way to get his mind off it.”

“No magical handcuffs this time,” I said, unwilling to ever let her live that down.

Lola surprised me by arching her eyebrows. “No promises.”

I left Lola to go get a drink, and I noticed that Paige was staring at me from the other side of one of the bonfires. She raised her glass at me, and I forced a smile, then busied myself with a keg, spilling a stream of beer right onto my shoes.

I forced myself not to look in Paige’s direction again. I was still uneasy around her after our surrogate conversation. Honestly, I was afraid that they were going to ask me about all that stuff again—and I wasn’t ready for that. Or maybe she just wanted a hookup. Either way, I was going to do my best to avoid her.

Elle came walking up, her expression confused in the light of the flickering flames.

“What’s on your mind?” I asked as I finally managed to get some of the beer into a red Solo cup.

“I don’t fully understand the whole Ludis thing, but I do know that the Bitterfang pack cheated,” Elle said, frowning. “If Artemis wasn’t holding me back, I would’ve ripped Malakai’s face off for trying to hurt Greyson.”

“Well, cheers to Artemis, then,” I said.

The last thing we needed was Elle going toe to toe with Malakai. He was an asshole and a joke, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t dangerous. I wondered if Elle had felt so protective of the rest of the team during the match… Or had she only been worried about Greyson?

The Ludis match had taken up so much of my headspace that I hadn’t even had time to process what the council had said about the sire bond, and I wondered if it was responsible for Elle’s vengeful feelings toward Malakai.

“Sorry that the Redwoods lost,” Lucian said, sidling up with what could only be described as a golden chalice in his hand. Elle and I both stared at it before sharing a look. “But you should all hold your heads high. Integrity means more than brute strength, and ethics mean more than…”

I tuned him out and turned to scan the crowd for Artemis. We hadn’t had much of a chance to talk since the match, and I wanted to tell her the good news about our new alliance with the Cobalt pack. If Greyson was successful tonight and was able to secure even more support, it would be like our Ludis loss had never happened.

“Do you want a drink?” Elle asked Lucian. She leaned forward to peer into his chalice. “It looks like your—uh—cup is empty.”

Lucian twisted his face in disgust and lifted his chalice. “I never imbibe *keg beer*.” He spread his hand across his chest and cringed away from the keg in disgust. “Would you care to sample a real drink, Elle?”

I narrowed my eyes at Lucian, wondering what he was up to. “I don’t think—”

Before I could finish my sentence, Lucian hooked his arm through Elle’s and gestured at Armin, who wheeled over an honest-to-god bar cart. I had to laugh at the ridiculousness of it; Armin making high-end cocktails in the middle of a field that was already littered with plastic cups.

Still, I knew that when it came to Lucian, things could spiral out of control in an instant. I was going to have to keep an eye on them—Greyson would certainly want me to.

*I might as well add that to my list of Luna duties.*

Malakai and Honora joined the party, and I was surprised to see them. They didn’t seem the type to willingly attend a party thrown by a couple with… *orgiastic* interests. I couldn’t see either of them approving of this kind of scene. Honestly, I wouldn’t be at all surprised if they shifted and started attacking people if things got too… erotic.

But then I realized why they’d come. Swarms of werewolves went up to them, congratulating them on their victory in the Ludis match. Clearly, not everyone at the summit believed that the Bitterfangs were the lying, cheating assholes I knew them to be.

I scanned the crowd for Greyson, hoping that he was having good luck turning the obviously divided crowd. I didn’t see him, and I hoped he was getting on okay.

I shivered when Honora turned her icy gaze my way. I was tempted to give her the finger, but I had to behave like a Luna. I couldn’t picture Geena, Rowena, or even Paige flipping someone the bird. Maya, on the other hand—she totally would’ve done it. She wasn’t a Luna, but she was close. But I knew I couldn’t pull off the kind of behavior that Maya was known for, so I kept my hands at my sides.

I turned away and collided with Lola, who grabbed my arm.

“Let’s go check out the big bonfire,” she said.

I followed her gaze. It had almost burned down to nothing.

“What, that smoldering heap of molten wood and ash?” A couple of werewolves were passed out beside it. “Why would I want to go over there?” I tried to pull away from her. “Maybe later. I need to keep an eye on Lucian and Elle.”

I knew that Lucian would be on cloud nine right now, having been left alone with Elle—all the more reason for me to keep an eye on him. A happy Lucian was a dangerous Lucian.

I cursed under my breath. He and Elle were no longer standing beside Armin’s bar cart, and I frantically scanned the crowd for them.

“Crap!” I said. “Where did they go? They were standing there just a second ago!”

Lola still had a death grip on my arm.

“Cali, forget about them for now. Besides, we can’t go that way, let’s go this way!” she said, tugging at my arm and pointing toward the smoldering bonfire. “It’s quiet over there, and we can have a little girl talk. We haven’t really had a chance to do that since we got here, so no time like the present, right?”

I planted my feet and rounded on Lola. “What’s your problem? Why are you acting so weird? I don’t want to go hang out by that creepy, burned-out bonfire. There are two perfectly good bonfires burning over there! Besides, I need to look for Lucian and Elle, anyway, and that’s probably where they went. I didn’t see them pass by this way.”

I tried to start walking, but Lola yanked me back. “Cali, don’t. Please. Just don’t.”

“You’re being *really* weird right now,” I said, pushing past Lola—only to stop dead in my tracks. Suddenly, I understood why Lola was acting so strangely.

Xavier was sitting near the bonfire, but he wasn’t alone. Ava was straddling his hips, and he was cupping her face as he kissed her. They were making out, their bodies pressed together, their eyes closed, and my throat went dry as Xavier’s hands slid down to Ava’s hips.

Clearly they didn’t care that they were surrounded by people.

Suddenly Ava changed tactics, going to kiss along Xavier’s jaw and neck. He tipped his head back, allowing her. Then Xavier opened his eyes, his gaze catching mine over Ava’s shoulder as he smirked.

**Episode 3921**

**Xavier**

Ava’s mouth was on me, but my eyes were on Cali. She looked pained. Like she was going to be sick. Like there’d been one thing still sacred, and I’d desecrated that as well by kissing Ava in front of her.

I’d broken everything. Again.

The sight of Cali’s devastation burned me as she turned away, walking off. I squeezed my eyes shut, grabbed Ava’s hips harder, felt her moan vibrate through me. Not even Ava’s taste on my tongue could smother the bitterness I felt.

I loathed myself more than Cali ever could.

I wanted to go after her, but I couldn’t—not if I wanted Adéluce to leave her alone. I knew things would only get worse if Cali kept trying to talk to me. Desperate times called for desperate measures, and I *was* fucking desperate. Enough to use Ava to hurt Cali, hurt her like Adéluce had asked. And now the damage was even worse.

I would never forget the look on Cali’s face. I would never forget her hurt, because it mirrored mine. And yet it wasn’t all pain. The worst part of all, the most fucked-up part, was that I’d kissed Ava to hurt Cali, but as much as I despised myself for it, my wolf rejoiced. My wolf was getting the connection he craved, the feeling of belonging.

*This is wrong.*

Was it, though?

Even if I hadn’t kissed Ava now, I’d still have kissed her later.

If I didn’t push Cali away now, things would only get worse.

I could feel it in my gut, in the pleasure Adéluce got when she caused Cali physical pain. And there had been a wild moment, when I’d grabbed Ava and kissed her in front of Cali, when I’d thought, *Better that I hurt her instead of Adéluce.*

At least this way, I had an element of control over both Cali’s pain and mine.

And my hatred for the vampire-witch grew with every breath I took.

“What’s wrong?”

Ava broke off the kiss, meeting my eyes. She caressed my cheek, breathing harshly, searching my face. She’d clearly sensed that something was off, and that was to her credit. She wasn’t the fucking problem here. *I* was. And I’d set this entire camp on fire before I told Ava I’d been thinking about Cali.

“I just…” I paused, trying to recover. To push the conversation somewhere safe. “I just can’t believe how far we’ve come since you came back.”

I wasn’t even lying, and Ava could tell. She touched my cheek again, and the way her gesture made my skin tingle couldn’t be ignored. I was supposed to be so tough, but yet here I was, like a fucking dog, rejoicing in being touched, in being cared for in my isolation.

Lying to everyone I cared about had made me the loneliest I’d ever been in my life.

“I always knew that this would happen, Xavier,” Ava whispered. “That we could survive anything. We’re mates—that never changed. The only real change is that you’re the Samara Alpha, now.” She smiled a little. “Which means you’re *my* Alpha.”

It was true. Ava had accepted me as her Alpha. She’d helped me when nobody else could. She was the one fucking constant in my life. And as much I’d tried to push her away, as desperately as I’d fought my conflicted feelings for her, here we were.

Ava and me, together again.

I couldn’t keep lying to myself, telling myself that I was only staying with Ava because of Adéluce. There had always been other reasons—reasons that went beyond Adéluce. The natural pull between Ava and me had always been undeniable, even if I’d been fighting it. For what felt like a very long time, I’d been fighting Adéluce, myself, and my wolf, all at once.

And I was fucking *exhausted*.

I knew I’d never stop loving Cali. I’d never stop trying to break Adéluce’s spell so I could return to Cali in the future. But that future seemed too far away when the present was so painful that Ava was the only thing keeping me sane.

“Come here,” I said gruffly, pulling Ava back in for another kiss. I went all in, let the feelings I’d been denying take over. In the middle of all this mess, Ava was the only thing that felt good.

*BOOM!*

We broke apart, my ears ringing, my grip on her waist was tight as I stood up, carrying her with me, as I looked around for the threat. But then I heard her low laughter and noticed the shower of lights above us. Someone had set off a firework.

“Are you kidding me?” I huffed while the wolves around us cheered. I put Ava down.

She smirked, shoving me lightly. “Don’t be a grump. They’re pretty.”

*Ava* was pretty. The fireworks were fine. Whatever.

She moved to kiss me again, and I suddenly needed a drink.

“You want a beer or something?” I asked. But as I tried to leave, Ava pulled me back.

“The only thing I want right now is for my Alpha to sit with me and enjoy the fireworks,” Ava said. Her eyes gleamed in the dark, under the colorful lights in the sky. And there was something about hearing her call me Alpha… Something both welcoming and haunting.

Cali was out there, hurting because of me. But my finding and comforting her would cause her actual physical pain, and it would hurt Ava as well. I couldn’t tell Cali the truth, and I couldn’t tell Ava the truth, but Ava was the only true thing in my life right now.

Our mate bond was the only thing I hadn’t ruined yet.

I was exhausted.

And, for now, I was so fucking tired of fighting.

“Okay.” My voice sounded foreign to my own ears.

I settled back into the chair with Ava on my lap. As we watched the showers of sparks and colors in the sky, she wrapped an arm around me—more of that tenderness, that sense of not being alone, that sense of being cared for. Even when I didn’t deserve it.

I knew she loved me—after all, she’d told me. She always had, and even though I hated myself for taking comfort in that fact, I did. When the entire Redwood pack turned against me—which would happen sooner rather than later, I was sure—there would still be Ava. She’d always been there.

She’d come back from the dead for me.

There was something terrifying and yet deeply fucking inevitable about that.

About us being together.

As the fireworks continued, the telltale sounds of people making out—or more—started all around us. I wasn’t surprised—this *was* a party hosted by Paige and Duke, after all. A few of the Samaras were stealing glances at Ava and me, probably wondering how far we were going to take things in public.

Swallowing hard, I looked around to see who else was in this mix of bodies—which was when I spotted Jay. He wasn’t kissing anyone. He was walking away, but he spared a moment to shoot me a final glare. It was fueled with disappointment. It made my stomach throb, because it reminded me of what I already knew.

With the Redwoods giving up on me like this, I was losing a part of myself. I was a wolf torn from his pack by force—it went against the natural order.

“What are you thinking?” Ava’s whisper sent shivers down my spine.

I looked at her. If we were talking about nature, here, my wolf’s instinct was to rub her fucking feet. He was grateful. Because when I’d been torn out from my pack, Ava had taken me in. In the midst of all the lies, she was the one true thing that I didn’t have to fight for.

I was so tired of fighting.

“You’re beautiful,” I said. It was true. Her skin under her firelight, her eyes—fuck, her eyes… The way she looked at me was scorching fucking hot.

Ava smiled, twisting to brush her lips over mine. I gripped her waist, pulled her closer for another kiss—a harder one, with teeth—but she broke it off *way* too soon. She stood up, offering me her hand. I felt antsy, my wolf hungry, my brain in a fog as I grabbed for her, ready to pull her back onto my lap.

“Not here,” she said firmly.

For a moment, I was surprised by her desire to be discreet. But if this was what she wanted, I wasn’t going to say no.

I took her hand and let her lead me away from the bonfire, away from the others, toward our tent. My heart was beating so hard, my chest hurt.

I stopped walking.

Ava eyed me, lifting an eyebrow. She didn’t ask the question, but it hung in the air. *Are you going to back out, Xavier?* I was sure that if I acted on my feelings for her now, I’d be consumed by guilt. But what the fuck was the point of that guilt now?

I stared back at Ava. The way she looked at me… It was like I owned her. I felt dizzy with the power of it. After everything Adéluce had done, I’d forgotten how power felt, but in this moment, with Ava looking at me like this, I felt strong. With Ava, and only with her, I felt like myself. She was the only true thing I had left.

She was all I had.

“Come here,” I said for the second time tonight. But this time, I didn’t hold back.

I pulled Ava close, picked her up, and braced her against a nearby tree. I swallowed her moan and gasp when I kissed her hard. My wolf was howling, making the need to claim her razor sharp.

And I knew.

I knew if I was going to hell, I might as well enjoy the ride.

**Episode 3922**

**Ava**

My head was spinning. I’d thought Xavier would want to wait until we reached our tent, but instead, he’d picked me up and pinned me against a tree. We were all alone, away from prying eyes, just the two of us, and I wasn’t about to tell him to stop.

I couldn’t get my hopes up only to have them shattered again, though. We’d come so close to this moment time and time again in the past, but Xavier would always hit the brakes, and I would always tell myself to stop asking for more. I was convinced that eventually his feelings for me—both physical and emotional—would overcome any reservations he had. For so long, I’d wanted him so badly, but I still braced myself for the inevitable letdown.

Xavier always stopped.

Only this time, he hadn’t stopped yet.

His teeth scraped my neck, his hands all over me. His lower body was locked with mine as he rocked against me, hard and relentless, and I felt like crying with how good the friction felt.

He wanted me.

His every move had a heightened edge to it. Was I imagining it? I broke off the kiss, pulled back, grabbed his face. I made him look at me, and he stared back, his face illuminated by the moonlight. He was panting. I was too.

I was trembling with how much I wanted him, with how real this felt. I wasn’t sure how far we’d go tonight, how far he’d let us go, but there was a raw quality to him in this moment that called to my wolf, that begged me to just *do something*. *Say* something.

Say how I truly felt. Say how I still felt. Say how I helpless I felt.

“I love you,” I whispered.

The silence between us was heavy. Xavier’s dark eyes were fixed on mine. In that moment, I felt like he believed me. It hadn’t seemed that way in the cabin, but it felt different now.

I knew he knew, but I wanted to say it again. He knew he was the reason why I’d held on in the spirit world, the reason why I’d escaped it. He was my reason for *everything*.

His gaze was locked with mine, and he wasn’t just looking at me—he *saw* me. He knew me, and as long as he believed in the way I loved him, I could be there for him. I could wait for him to catch up. I would always wait for him to come back to me.

I would always say “I love you” without expecting him to say it back.

And he didn’t.

Instead, he murmured, “I know.”

And right now, that was enough. His voice cracked on the words, his body let out a shiver, and the mate bond vibrated between us, my wolf howling in triumph at his acceptance.

And then he kissed me again.

He kissed me like he was starving and unhinged, the force of it making my head slam back against the tree trunk, my back scraping against the bark, his belt buckle digging into my inner thigh. He was heaving, grinding into me, and then he choked out, “*Fuck*.”

He let go of me.

For a second—just one—my stomach dropped, my heart shattered, and I thought it was over. But then the second was done, gone, and he pushed me down to the forest ground. He pulled his shirt off, then he dragged down the sleeves of my dress, the straps of my bra. The cool night air hit my bare skin, but I felt searing hot all over as Xavier put his mouth and teeth on my neck, my chest. The sounds he made were animal, completely out of control as I kissed and grabbed him back, gave as good as I got.

I hadn’t felt so alive in years.

“Xavier, *please*,” I choked out as I ran my hands through his hair, dug my nails into his nape.

His groan pulsated against my skin. He licked a stripe from the middle of my chest to my lips, then covered me with his body. The heat and crushing weight of him felt scorching, so good I could’ve cried. He had one hand on my jaw, keeping my mouth open for his tongue, and the other was trailing down between my legs.

“*Please*,” I said again.

He flipped my dress up and tore my underwear off. He used two fingers on me, then three, all rough and with no finesse. He didn’t have to be gentle, though—I didn’t fucking *want* him to be. Not when I’d been ready for him—waiting for exactly this—always melting for him. My hips arched up into his touch, achy with how much I needed, burning with how long I’d waited for this. For *more* than this.

The moon bathed him in light, tracing his heaving muscles as he hovered over me; his shoulders, his arms, his chest and collarbones and abs… The lust in his scent was heady, heavy, curling around me like a living entity, making my wolf howl.

I watched him reach for his pants and unzip with shaky hands. I watched him stroke himself with one hand and push my knee to the side with the other. I watched how he watched me, and I couldn’t stop trembling.

I spread my legs wider for him, gripping the insides of my thighs to open up, present myself for him. To submit. I’d done it once, and I’d do it again. His gaze was depthless as he stared at my face, then at the place between my legs. His lips were parted, his breathing hard, his eyes gleaming like he couldn’t get enough of the sight of me.

He looked feral.

He looked like an Alpha.

And then, he was *mine*.

He was one with me, thrusting inside, the feel and stretch of him sudden and immense. I gasped, my pelvis spasming, flying upward to chase the feel of him, the pleasure so overwhelming I could’ve died. He hushed my whimpering cries with kisses and rotated his hips, as if making room for himself inside, as if coaxing my body to remember what he felt like. And it did. The memory of him had been vibrating in my mind for such a long time, but reality was even better—reality was the feeling of being pinned, claimed, *owned* by my mate.

“I missed this so much,” I rasped against his mouth, and his shudder coursed through me.

In this moment, I owned him, too.

He groaned when I locked my legs around his waist and my arms around his back, just to feel him crash down onto me, to fuck me harder. The sounds I made were animal, just like his, the mate bond between us becoming almost tangible in that moment—a surge of energy thickening, expanding, curling around us, tying us together.

I’d come back from the dead just for this.

Just for him.

The nails I’d been digging into his flesh got longer and sharper—sharp enough to scratch and draw blood when he went faster, harder. We shattered together, never stopped kissing, never stopped colliding. He groaned and growled when I clawed at his back with my shifted hand, marring his skin. But he didn’t back away.

He enjoyed it.

He *needed* it.

He needed *me*.

He had to know by now, didn’t he?

I was his first mate.

I was his first love.

We were meant to be.

\*\*\*

I felt blissed out and floaty as he picked me up. When I opened my eyes, we were back in the tent. He laid me down. He hadn’t said a word, and I searched for his eyes.

“How’s your back?” I asked. My voice was hoarse. My heart was pounding.

When our gazes locked, his was soft. Sated. He was satisfied because of me, and my wolf preened. She was proud.

“I’m good,” he murmured. He turned around to grab some sweats, and I saw that he was already healing. Still, though, my mark would be under his skin. It wasn’t the full mate mark, but it was something. A claim on him that I knew Cali would never be able to make, because she wasn’t a wolf.

Xavier and I were the same.

I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep myself from smiling.

The sounds of partying and probable orgies outside lingered in the background. I barely paid attention to any of it as Xavier got into bed with me, cuddling close with no hesitation. He rested his head on my chest and wrapped an arm around my waist. When I ran my fingers through his hair, he let out a tiny groan of pleasure that made my toes curl.

“You *like* this,” I whispered, teasing. “You like it when I touch your hair.”

He let out a huff but nestled closer to me, rubbing his cheek on my bare chest like he couldn’t help himself. I wanted to laugh. This was just so *Xavier*—always so grumpy, but also so very obvious. It had always been endearing. His grip on my waist tightened, and he just stayed there, plastered against me as I stroked his hair, the sounds of the party outside lulling us both into sleep.

As I started to drift off, I wondered if what had happened tonight meant he would choose me as his Luna.

He had until the end of the summit, which was fast approaching, to give me an answer. After tonight, I felt like it would happen. It had to. He wouldn’t just keep hooking up with me if he had no intention of moving forward with our relationship. What kind of man would do that?

*But if he refuses to take me on as Samara Luna…*

I pushed the thought aside. There was no need to get paranoid. There was no other option. There’d never *been* another option. I would be Xavier’s Luna one day, no matter what.

I pulled his arm higher, shifting a bit, and he got the hint. Even though he was half-asleep already, he pulled me in, my back to his chest, wrapping his arm around me. His lips brushed my ear in a kiss. It made my chest ache, how normal this felt; how tender.

In a few moments, my eyes felt droopy, the excitement of the day taking over.

“Good night, Xavier,” I mumbled, still smiling.

His voice was barely audible. “Good night, Cali.”

**Episode 3923**

I felt sick to my stomach, only this time, it wasn’t because of the moonshine—it was because I’d just seen Xavier kissing Ava. He’d done it in front of me, as if to shove in my face all the ways that I no longer mattered to him. That was what his grin had said. He’d been *mocking* me.

*Is this what’s become of us?* I thought, stumbling away from the party.

I had no idea where I was going, but I just couldn’t take seeing Xavier and Ava together. I didn’t know what I’d have done if I’d stayed—either burst into tears or fucking blast him, probably. Him, not her. *Ava* had never told me she loved me, or that she wanted to be with me forever.

*Was it all just lies? Did Xavier spend MONTHS lying to me? And for* what*?*

I kept moving away from the party, my ears ringing, my heart pounding. I knew I shouldn’t wander too far into the woods, but I needed to get the hell away from the sounds of the party. I needed to erase anything that could remind me of what just happened.

*This is why Lola was acting so strange*,I realized, kicking a rock. *She tried to stop me from seeing them.*

It didn’t matter, though. Xavier seemed to have done this on purpose, so one way or another, sooner or later, I would’ve seen him with Ava. He would’ve made sure of it—his smug expression had made that pretty clear.

*He wanted to hurt me…*

That had to be it. Otherwise, he would’ve kissed Ava in their tent. Instead, he’d chosen to make a public statement. His devastated expression when he’d seen Greyson’s Luna mark on my shoulder made even less sense, now. How could he react like that and then go ahead and do this?

Had he always been this cruel? I’d been terrified when I’d first met him, sure—he’d seemed so intimidating. Had I always just been a pawn caught in the *due destini*—destined to love a man who’d end up hurting me? The *due destini* madness would’ve been better than suffering through Xavier’s games.

*No.* I thought, biting my tongue. *I shouldn’t think that way. Not when I have Greyson, and my friends, and my parents. They would all be so devastated if I—*

A cracking sound from behind me cut off my thoughts.

I paused. I looked around and abruptly realized that I was alone, in the woods, at a werewolf summit.

*Shit. This was* such *a bad idea.*

I held my breath. The nausea I’d been feeling quickly turned into fear. The forest was dark and damp and cold, and it definitely felt like nobody would hear my screams if someone jumped out and murdered me. Could Malakai or Honora have seen me wander off alone? Had I just presented them with a gift-wrapped chance to make good on their threats?

*I can’t believe you just ran off into the forest, Cali!* I scolded myself. *Especially after that wolf was murdered! Look around! Are there any witnesses?*

If the earth opened up and swallowed me, nobody would ever know.

*But seriously, did I* really *have to get into this situation? By coming out here, I automatically made myself, like, ten times more murderable. Is this how I die? God dammit, NO!*

No, because I wasn’t defenseless. I had *never* been defenseless—any spatula in the pack house could confirm this. There were probably legends about me in the spatula community. But anyway, spatulas and curling irons notwithstanding, I had my magic now. Magic was far more intimidating and effective than any household tool.

*I came here to act as Greyson’s Luna*, I reminded myself. *NOT Xavier’s punching bag.*

My jaw clenched at the thought, and my anguish twisted into anger. Whirling in the direction of the sound I’d heard, I glared into the darkness.

*I can deal with whatever’s coming for me*, I told myself. *I’ve survived much, much worse.*

It was true, and I knew it—my magic knew it. It thrummed at my fingertips after being summoned, almost like it was glad to be awake. The thrill I’d felt when Grandpa Innes had helped me conjure my sword had been intoxicating, and that feeling was exactly what I needed right now—a victory to overshadow all of Xavier’s brooding, manipulative, fucked-up bullshit.

Swallowing hard, I stared down at my hand. I felt the magic course through me, and the image of the sword took form in my head as it materialized in my hand.

“Well, shit,” I breathed, blinking at the glowing weapon. It was so light, too. Very user friendly.

*Wait. Am I… Am I a* badass*?*

This was an age-old question, one that made up at least fifty percent of my habitual identity crisis. Vibrating with energy, I eyed a tree up ahead and charged forward, swinging at it with my sword. Might as well get some training in, eh?

*THUD!*

The tree’s bark dropped. The cut was clean, too—as if the bark were nothing but lettuce and my sword was an expensive chef’s knife. Torin had bought a bunch of those with Greyson’s credit card before Greyson had explained to him that seeing as we weren’t serial killers, we didn’t actually need fifty giant kitchen knives. Especially not the kind that were a hundred dollars apiece.

“So, you mean business, huh?” I whispered to the sword.

It twinkled, almost like it was winking at me.

Anyway, speaking of serial killers, if there was one around right now who felt like messing with me, they had another thing coming. There was another rustling sound, and I turned in that direction. The darkness didn’t help my eyesight, but I could definitely hear someone—or something—moving toward me. And they were moving fast.

*It’s now or never, Cali.*

I raised my magic sword, ready to strike—

“Cali?” Artemis’s voice echoed through the quiet of the forest. “Where are you?”

My stomach dropped, unease spreading through me. Was I really about to use magic on someone without even seeing them first? What would’ve happened if I’d lost control of the sword?

*Shit*.

I made the sword vanish, just as Artemis emerged from the trees. “What are you doing out here?”

“What am *I* doing here?” I huffed. “What are *you* doing here? You scared me to death!”

Artemis cringed. “Right—I just thought I’d come find you.” Her voice dropped. “Are you okay?”

Great. Artemis definitely knew about Xavier’s little performance. My chest constricted at the realization that he’d humiliated me in front of basically everybody I knew.

“Lola told me what happened,” Artemis said, walking up to me. I pressed my lips together, unsure of what to say. But Artemis knew what I needed. She pulled me into a hug and whispered, “I’m sorry. You don’t deserve this. It’s not fair.”

*It’s not fair.*

Artemis’s words echoed in my head, hitting me hard. I hugged her back, burying my face in her neck. My eyes burned, and in no time at all, I was crying.

I hated myself for it.

I hated what Xavier and I had become.

*It’s just not fair…*

“Hey, look at me.” Artemis wiped my tears with the sleeve of her shirt. “You already knew this would happen, right?” Her tone was gentle, but her pause was pointed. I fought to even out my breathing as she added, “He’s with Ava, Cali. It’s terrible that he felt the need to rub it in your face, but at least now there’s no doubt. The two of you are over. You do know that, don’t you?”

I nodded. Weakly. What the fuck else was I supposed to do?

“You can’t keep pretending that this is just some phase Xavier’s going through—not anymore.” Artemis squeezed my shoulders, her gaze fixed on mine. “You can’t let him treat you this way. It hurts to know the truth, but isn’t it better than not knowing?”

My head hurt. My chest hurt, and the hole there—in the spot right between my lungs and underneath my heart—remained. It throbbed, seizing, but my anger had grown bigger than the pain. It had become so large, it was brushing against acceptance.

Artemis was right.

There could be no more doubt, no more questioning what I might’ve done to push Xavier away. We were past that now. His cruelty was on another level, and I needed to accept that I just might’ve been wrong about him all along.

*Maybe I never even knew the real him at all.*

“You’re right,” I told Artemis hoarsely.

“You should come back to the party,” she said seriously. “Don’t give Xavier the satisfaction of affecting you this way. You might only be acting Luna, but this is a chance to prove that you’re more than an act.”

I sniffled. “You really think so?”

Artemis scoffed. “Of course. You are strong, and you are better than this. You are much better than *him*.”

That was true. If anyone deserved to feel ashamed right now, it was Xavier.

“What if he and Ava are still there?” I asked Artemis as we headed back toward the party. I hated the way my voice cracked. “What the hell am I supposed to do?”

“Well, I’d be happy to blast them both with magic arrows,” Artemis said flatly.

I blinked in alarm. “Artemis, the summit has a no violence rule! You can’t just—”

Artemis chuckled and draped an arm across my shoulders. “Lighten up, little sister! What do you say we get some of that moonshine?”

**Episode 3924**

**Elle**

I was sitting on an outdoor bed. Or was it a big chair? It was a bed that looked like a chair, when it could’ve been just a bed, or just a chair. But I’d learned that humans and werewolves liked to make things complicated, and to have variety in their furniture. For no obvious reason.

Lucian, especially, had more useless things than anyone I’d ever met—even here, out in the forest. He had his own drink cart, with his own drink-making person, and many tiny spoons.

“You’ll love the cocktail we’re preparing for you, my sweet papaya!” he called over his shoulder. “Just you wait!”

Lucian liked to call me things I didn’t understand. He also loved to be very loud. I didn’t mind that part. Most werewolves were loud, especially tonight. The party around me had gotten more intense. Many of the werewolves had begun mating. But, like Lola had said, that didn’t mean they were mates—just that they were having sex.

Humans and werewolves and vampires did that for pleasure, I’d learned. Not because they wanted pups to make the pack stronger. They all enjoyed the physical aspect of things a lot: the sex. I gathered there would be many pups after tonight.

I wanted one of those one day. A pup—a *baby*, the human ones were called. But I only wanted that with the right mate. The right partner would ensure survival for myself, my pups, and our pack. I looked over at Lucian. I wasn’t sure if he was the one. He was very pretty, with very pretty eyes, but he just… He made so much noise for no reason at all. It was like he wanted to shout, “Look at me! Look at me!” at the top of his lungs, all the time.

*My* lungs felt a bit funny when Lucian looked at me, though.

Jacqueline had told me all about the heart and the lungs in the human body during one of our reading classes, because they were her favorite parts to threaten humans she’d eat. Lola had fought with her for telling me stuff like that, but those two always fought and then became friends again, so I never really paid any attention to that.

I always just focused on the learning part, not the bickering—while I was a human age of about twenty-one, there was so much I had to catch up on. According to Jacqueline I was doing well; she said I learned faster than anyone she’s seen throughout her long vampire life. But that wasn’t enough for me. I was determined to learn everything the human world had to offer. It was why I’d wanted to turn at all.

“Here,” Lucian said, offering me a glass of pink liquid before sitting down next to me on the bed-chair. “This is a custom cocktail I had made just for you. I call it, ‘Starry Night, Pounding Hearts.’”

Greyson definitely would’ve hated that name.

“Thank you for the drink,” I said—because Lola said I needed to say “thank you” to be polite, even though Jacqueline said being polite was overrated—and took the glass from his hand. I was about to take a sip when he held out his own drink toward mine.

“Before we drink, we have to do this for good luck, okay?” He clinked his glass against mine. “Cheers, my forest rose.”

I wasn’t sure why we had to do the glass-clinking thing, but humans seemed to do it, so I wasn’t surprised that Lucian liked it. Like I said, he enjoyed making noise. He also enjoyed smiling, which was good, because he looked even prettier when he smiled. My lungs did that odd thing again when he stared at me, but that felt nice as well.

Lucian took a sip of his drink, and I did the same. I could taste alcohol in it, but it was pleasant. It tasted a bit like pine needles and fruit.

“Thank you for having a drink with me,” Lucian said. “It’s been the highlight of my summit experience so far. I don’t know what I would’ve done without you here tonight.”

Lucian always said beautiful words that made me feel the same way I felt whenever I saw fireflies on a dark night. I wasn’t sure what to think about that. It was a strange feeling that felt good—very good—even though I knew I wasn’t supposed to be here, with him, letting him sit so close to me.

Greyson wouldn’t like it. Greyson said that Lucian wasn’t a good man, and Cali agreed. But if he wasn’t good, then why was he so nice to me? Yes, he didn’t listen sometimes, but whenever he realized he was annoying me, he stopped. That was a good thing in a man, Jacqueline said.

And I’d seen what was going on at this summit. Alliances were more important than ever when we had the Bitterfangs threatening us. And even though I wasn’t sure whether I felt the mate connection with Lucian—the connection he claimed to feel toward me—I did know that the Vanguards could play an important role in the fight against the Bitterfangs, and any other enemy packs that came along.

Lucian was an Alpha, though he wasn’t as strong as Greyson. But Lucian did have a giant pack and resources that the Redwoods could use to our advantage. And I didn’t mind spending time with Lucian. I actually liked it, most of the time. I liked looking at him. I liked looking at him so much that it made me wonder about sex. Sex… with Lucian.

Would I find pleasure with him?

Pleasure seemed like a big deal in the human and supernatural worlds. And Lucian’s kisses at the Vanguard palace during one of our “dates”—the dates that Greyson and Cali hadn’t liked *at all*—had felt good. More than good. I’d felt all sorts of odd human sensations that I still didn’t know how to describe. I would have to ask Jacqueline the next time we had a reading class. Perhaps there was a book I could read about it.

But if I really was mated to Lucian, or even just had these attraction feelings… I still didn’t know if he would be the best mate and partner in terms of survival. Where I came from, everything was about survival. I needed a fit mate above all else—not one who had a lot of useless furniture and made a lot of noise. I didn’t know if a mate bond was capable of making me forget about those annoying things, but so far, it hadn’t helped.

Then again, what Lucian lacked in strength, he made up for in numbers. If I did marry him like he wanted me to, it would help the survival of the Redwood pack. The Redwoods were very strong, but there weren’t nearly as many of them. And helping the Redwood pack, helping Greyson, was the only goal I had in mind.

I needed to think more about this and assess Lucian.

“How are you enjoying the summit so far, my darling dove?” Lucian asked, looking at me over his glass. “Any thoughts? Opinions?”

I looked around. More mating was happening, and there were lots of noises and scents in the air. I shrugged. “People are enjoying themselves.”

Lucian nodded, humming. I liked that sound. It was low and vibrating. “There was a time when I would’ve partaken in such earthly pleasures,” he said. “In fact, I have many times—but since I’ve met you, I’ve had no interest in others. Nobody compares to you, my forest rose.”

I wasn’t sure what he was talking about, but his lips were beautiful when he talked. When he smiled. His mouth had brought me pleasure, before—could we do that again? Did he want to do it again? I was curious about the way Lucian made me feel when I looked at him for too long. Human emotions were so strange to me, but they were exciting. I loved them.

How much more pleasure could his lips bring me?

I had to find out.

When I leaned over and pressed my mouth to his, he made a startled sound. But then he quickly recovered, his large hand moving to the back of my neck, the tip of his tongue tracing the opening of my lips. I parted them. It felt right, like instinct. I knew instinct. And then he moved even closer.

His tongue was in my mouth, brushing against mine. We’d never done this before, and I was surprised, but then I realized that I… I *liked* this. I was enjoying this. The contact made my cheeks grow hot, and I felt my wolf want to completely take over. My throat felt hot as well, and my chest, and my hands, and lower. I felt very hot all over, and Lucian didn’t stop. He kept me there, kept my mouth open, gave me his tongue.

I didn’t know what was happening to me, to my body, but it felt—

*Good*.

It felt so very good that I made a noise I’d never made before.

When Lucian stopped, I didn’t want him to.

“Perfect girl,” Lucian said in a rough voice, his mouth a breath away from mine. “Would you prefer to kiss in the privacy of my tent?”

Greyson wouldn’t want that. Greyson wouldn’t like this kissing. He wouldn’t be happy at all, and he was my Alpha. I knew I should stop, but my wolf… My wolf wanted Lucian… and I wanted his mouth on mine again. I just wanted it. A lot. And Greyson kept saying I was my own wolf, right?

I needed to explore this side of being human. I craved it in a way that was foreign and instinct all in one. If I was a werewolf, why should I not behave like one? To give into my wolf, to explore the human emotions that made me feel like I was in the clouds.

“Please,” Lucian breathed against my jaw. “Please, come with me, my darling…”

He trailed kisses down my neck, and I shivered. This was pleasure, and I wanted—

*Helix?*

Over Lucian’s shoulder, I spotted Helix moving through the woods.

I frowned. I couldn’t believe this.

Greyson had ordered Helix to go to the Redwood pack house—so *what* was he doing here?

**Episode 3925**

**Greyson**

I was trying not to smile, but it was hard. Having the Cobalt pack join the alliance was a huge win for the Redwoods. Cali’s speech about our moral victory had been accurate, but at the end of the day, the Redwood team had lost to the Bitterfang team, and I hadn’t known what to expect in the aftermath.

Now, though, it was clear as day that maintaining integrity and not falling to the low level of the Bitterfangs had its merits. I needed to capitalize on that fact—on my pack’s newfound reputation for being honorable and just. Which we were, obviously, though using our reputation as leverage probably wasn’t a very honorable thing to do. But it wasn’t my fault that marketing was the only way to make anyone give a shit about anything these days.

I had to do what I had to do, and I was pretty sure I could use Porter’s declaration to convince a few of the other packs to follow him and become our allies. I glanced at Malakai and Honora—they looked disgusted by the rash of hookups breaking out around them. I felt like walking up to Malakai and asking, “What? You’ve never been to a werewolf party before?” before punching him in the face.

Anyhow, back to my earlier point—Malakai might’ve cheated his way to victory, but his triumph would be short-lived when he realized the Redwood alliance had already grown stronger. The Cobalt pack was on our side, and I needed to find more allies ASAP.

I looked past the writhing bodies. Hopefully there were a few Alphas who weren’t participating in Duke and Paige’s flesh fest. I spotted Wade, the Ironwood Alpha—mainly because he was impossible to miss. He towered over everyone else. I’d tried to talk to him twice so far, the second time having been interrupted by Malakai. That couldn’t have been a coincidence. Malakai clearly didn’t want the Ironwoods on our side. If I could earn their allegiance, there was a chance he’d think twice before escalating hostilities.

I kept my eyes fixed on Wade and made a beeline for him. He just stood there by the drinks table, arms crossed, watching the others with a completely unimpressed expression. I had to look up to make eye contact with him, which was a little bit humbling for me, to tell the truth.

“Hey,” I said.

Wade glanced at me. Offered a nod. Was this progress?

Probably not.

“Did you ever find any real-sized sandwiches?” I asked.

The joke fell flat. Wade turned to look at me like he’d never been so bored in his life (even though we all knew I was fucking hilarious, thank you very much).

He squinted at me suspiciously. “What do you want?”

This guy had no sense of humor, and he wouldn’t be charmed by bullshit. So, I decided to cut to the chase. “I assume you saw the match.”

Wade grunted. So eloquent. “Yeah. You lost.”

This wasn’t going well.

I was getting ready to mention that the Cobalt pack appreciated our integrity and had joined our alliance when Wade gestured at Malakai. “That guy’s a dick.”

I almost spat out my drink but forced myself to swallow. Now that I had an opportunity, I wasn’t going to let it slip away.

“Malakai is more than a dick,” I said. “He’s a hypocrite. He preaches about values and honor, but the way he acts is dirty and fucked up. He threatens anyone who doesn’t fit into the shitty boxes he’s set up in his head.”

Wade’s expression darkened. “True. The Bitterfangs are a bunch of cheating, backward-thinking assholes. They shouldn’t even be here.”

“How much are you willing to commit to that sentiment?” I asked.

Wade paused. Spat to the side. Turned to me again. It was all very dramatic.

“What do you have in mind?” he asked gravely.

“The Bitterfangs have been threatening my pack and a few others,” I said. “Would the Ironwoods join the Redwood alliance to make the Bitterfangs think twice about starting a war?”

Wade gave me yet another flat look. I gave him one back, because two could play at that game. Anyway, I was pretty sure this was more his style than my being friendly.

“That depends,” Wade finally said.

“On what?”

“What size sandwiches do you serve?” he asked, narrowing his eyes.

I blinked. “Huh?”

Wade offered the slightest hint of a smile. “Just kidding.”

I paused, then snorted. So, the giant *did* have a sense of humor. I could work with this.

“So, what do you say?” I asked.

“I understand your predicament,” he replied, “and I sympathize. But right now, I have to look out for my pack.”

“That’s fair,” I said, ignoring my pang of disappointment. “So, you’re not going to join our alliance.”

Wade shook his head. “I’m not saying yes, but I’m not ruling it out, either. I’ll have to talk it over with my pack.”

The fact that Wade would actually ask his people’s opinion said a lot about who he was as an Alpha.

“I get it,” I said. “I’d do the same thing.”

Wade eyed me up and down. “I don’t want to give you false hope, but I doubt any Ironwood wolves like the Bitterfangs. It all depends on what we want to do moving forward, so…” He held out his hand. “I’ll let you know.”

We shook on it. He squeezed hard, but I squeezed even harder—Alpha to Alpha.

Was this progress?

Yes, it was.

\*\*\*

Feeling pretty good after talking to Wade, I headed for the bonfire. The party had become less of a party and more of a hookup zone. But there was still a large group drinking around the fire. I spotted Cali a few feet ahead. She was with Artemis, laughing about something. The firelight made her skin glow, and the sight of her smile made me grin.

“Hey, love,” I said when I reached her.

She gasped and looked up at me, making grabby hands. “Greyson, there you are!” She paused, frowning as she took me in. “You’re very handsome. Did you know that?”

Artemis snorted. I laughed a little, amused by her boldness in front of so many strangers, and leaned down to greet her with a kiss. I tasted the alcohol on her tongue. Her overly enthusiastic greeting made sense now—she’d been drinking. Which was weird. She was a lightweight, and she’d had so much to drink on that first day that I’d expected her to take a break for the rest of the summit. But at least it looked like she was in a great mood. That was all that really mattered to me.

“Having fun?” I asked, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

“Now I am!” She pointed at Artemis. “Thanks to my *seesterrr!*”

I raised an eyebrow at Artemis.

She snickered into her cup. “Sorry, Greyson, you might have your hands full tonight.”

“Pfft!” Cali waved a hand in my face. “I’m just having a little bit of moonshine”—she hiccupped—“then going to sleep.” She smirked up at me. “In your arms!” She looked down at my chest. “Right! Here!” She poked at my left pectoral, and Artemis laughed in the background.

This was cute and all, but it wasn’t Cali. She didn’t get drunk like this for no reason. At least not usually. Was I missing something?

“I thought you didn’t like moonshine,” I said, nodding at her cup. “What prompted this?”

Emotion flashed across Cali’s face—so fast, I couldn’t quite read it. She looked away, and I turned to Artemis. She blinked at me rapidly, like she was trying to fly away with the force of her eyelashes alone.

Something was wrong.

“Did something happen, Artemis?”

Artemis nodded, even as she said, “No! Nothing! Not one thing!”

Artemis was usually a better liar than this, but she was tipsy, and that didn’t help. The moment I turned to Cali, my gaze locking with hers, she shrugged, like, “Eh, fuck it.”

And then, with a bitter little laugh, she said, “I saw Xavier making out with Ava. Just out in the open, no fucks given. And then he saw me watching and *smirked* at me.”

“Are you serious?” I asked. If I sounded angry, it was because I was. The quiet kind of anger that went from a ten to a thousand in seconds if left unchecked.

“Yeah,” she said, shrugging. “But it’s okay, I hit a tree with my sword, and we’re doing better now!” Her eyes widened. “My sword is *so* cool, you know. Like, *whoa*.”

What *wasn’t* fucking cool was Xavier acting out like this. First, he’d kissed Cali, and now he was kissing his other mate right out in the open, where he’d known Cali would see. It was like he’d *wanted* Cali to see. The action showed so much disrespect and disregard to a person who’d only ever loved him, it bordered on fucking malice, and I had to wonder if he really *had* done it on purpose.

I never would’ve considered it a month ago, but I didn’t know my brother anymore. Still, that didn’t mean I’d keep letting him hurt the woman I adored as if Cali was nothing to him. As if Cali was nothing to *me*.

No matter what Cali, Jay, or anyone else said, I was *done* waiting for Xavier to turn over a leaf. I was done trying to ignore him.

I was done playing nice.

Turning to Artemis, I asked, “Where the hell is my brother?”

**Episode 3926**

**Xavier**

My eyes were closed, my arms tight around Ava’s warm, soft body. She smelled like me, like us, and this felt—

*SMACK!*

“What the *fuck*?” I reared back, raising a hand to stop her from hitting me again. Because she’d just fucking slapped me, startling me out of my half-sleep. She snarled, ready to strike again, but I gripped her wrist to stop her. “For real? Are we going down some kind of BDSM route without discussing it first?”

She ripped her hand free and shoved me, her eyes flashing with such fury that my stomach dropped. I’d thought… I’d thought that us having sex was what she’d wanted all along. For fuck’s sake, she’d said she loved me, and now—

“I can’t even look at you right now!” she screamed, pushing me toward the tent door with so much force, it looked like she’d dive straight into a physical fight if I didn’t move. But I couldn’t just leave her like this. “Get the fuck out!”

“Okay, stop!” I grabbed her arms, forcing her to stop struggling. “What’s wrong? I’m not going anywhere until you tell me.”

Ava was panting, her eyes sharp on me. When I realized they were glistening with tears, a sense of dread spread through me. How the fuck did we get here? For a moment back there, I’d thought… I’d thought that at least for tonight, for a few hours, things would be good. That my wolf would be satisfied.

Right now, he was howling, demanding I fix this.

But I had no fucking idea what I’d done!

“Tell me,” she began in a low, accusatory voice, “were you thinking of her when you were fucking me?”

I was stunned for a moment, then the gears in my head went into overdrive.

“What?” I demanded. “No, I—what the fuck are you talking about?”

“You’re a liar!” Ava was back to screaming, back to crying, raising her hand to strike me again. She was hurting, but this couldn’t be my fault. Not this time.

Gritting my teeth, I grabbed her wrist again. “Have you lost your *mind*?”

She growled before she lifted her free hand and punched me in the shoulder. “Get. *Out!*”

That same hand went into half-shift mode, her claws elongating. Clearly, she meant business.

I couldn’t fucking talk to her when she was like this, so I just got out.

What the hell had come over her?

“My name is *Ava*, by the way,” she spat, standing in the tent doorway. “In case you forgot!”

*What?*

“Why would you think I forgot?” I demanded, taking a step closer. “I don’t understand what the fuck is happening right now! Just tell me what—”

She didn’t let me finish. She turned her back on me, and the tent flap closed behind her, leaving me standing alone outside with a bewildered expression. Then she threw jeans and a shirt at my feet. Seriously?

Shaking my head to myself, I got dressed. Then I made a move to open that damn tent flap, try to reason with her, to figure out what was wrong, unless—

*Had* I done something wrong?

Was there something I’d done to make her go off like that?

Just a few minutes ago, everything had been good, relatively speaking. Ava and I had had sex. It had been wild and fucked up, but I hadn’t expected anything less. I’d felt sated. Like my wolf would finally shut the fuck up for a while as he curled up at Ava’s feet like a cat.

I’d been holding her, and I’d just felt… less alone. It was supposed to be a tiny break from the fuckery that was my life right now, a single moment that didn’t hurt like a son of a bitch. And then… What had happened then?

I remembered now.

As I’d dozed off, I’d started thinking about Cali.

It had been more of a memory—an involuntary one, like my brain was rebelling against its new reality. The image of Cali had floated into my head, along with a memory of the two of us drifting off to sleep together. Those had always been some of my favorite, most pleasurable moments. A calmness would always come over me, just because I’d known that Cali was there, in my arms.

Fuck, I couldn’t believe I’d said her name *out loud.*

No wonder Ava lost her shit. I had to apologize. Right now.

I looked around—I was lucky that everybody else was still at the party and hadn’t heard our screaming match. Swallowing hard, I approached the tent, but I didn’t move the flap. Not yet.

“I didn’t mean to…” I paused, wincing. “I didn’t mean to say that. It was just a slip of the tongue—it didn’t mean anything.”

Ava’s voice was a hiss behind the tent flap. “A *Freudian* slip?”

I felt like slapping my forehead. “I wasn’t thinking of anyone but you, Ava. But I do have two mates, and I—”

“Got confused?” she snapped. “Well, I hope to hell you didn’t get confused earlier, Xavier. Or were you imagining Cali when we—”

“No!” I interrupted, shaking my head. “Of course not. It wasn’t like that.”

My wolf growled. *Now look at what you’ve done!*

How the fuck had I managed to make a mess out of this, too? My hands clenched into fists, my stomach twisting, and I realized that this fucking *hurt*. All of it.

This was exactly what Adéluce wanted.

“Go away,” Ava said. Her tone was low and rough, unyielding.

I considered forcing my way in, but knowing Ava, that would turn into a fight, and I couldn’t risk that—not when I was trying to strengthen pack unity. But I sure as fuck wasn’t about to beg her, either. I was still the Alpha.

Maybe the best course of action would be to give her time to cool down. I needed time to cool down as well, so I didn’t say anything I’d regret. Taking a deep breath, I weighed my options. I could return to the party, act like nothing had happened, and take my mind off everything.

As I turned and walked off, I saw Marissa and Ravi approaching. My gaze flicked to Ravi, and I gave him a nod. He looked uncomfortable.

Marissa narrowed her eyes at me. “Where are you going, Xavier?”

“To the party,” I said lightly. I made a move to walk past her, but Marissa blocked my way.

“Where’s Ava?” she asked.

I gestured to the tent. “She’s resting.”

Marissa didn’t look convinced. But fuck her. I didn’t have to explain myself to her. I glanced at Ravi. Fuck him, too. He was treating me like a stranger, even though I was—

I *was* a stranger, now.

I ignored all the muddy emotions inside me and glared at them both. “Try not to make too much noise.”

I pushed past them, and they didn’t say a word. I wasn’t surprised Ravi was hooking up with Marissa. Why not? The Samaras and the Redwoods were supposed to be allies, after all.

I needed a fucking drink.

I would get one, think things through, and figure out how much time to give Ava before I went back and tried again. I paused when I spotted the bonfire up ahead, though. Would Cali be there? I’d seen her run off when she’d spotted me kissing Ava. How awkward would it be if she’d gone back to the party?

I turned my hands into fists.

I needed to get used to this. Cali needed to get used to it, too. If I was truly going to be the Samara Alpha, I couldn’t hide from her or from anyone else. I couldn’t—literally wasn’t allowed to—smooth things over with Cali, so I definitely needed to smooth things over with Ava. None of this was Ava’s fault. And what had happened earlier, in the forest, it had meant… something.

It had meant no more fighting.

A moment of peace, like the moments I used to share with Cali.

But now here Ava and I were again, fighting.

I was sick of everything.

With that thought twisting in my head, I started for the bonfire, but then sudden movement caught my eye. Before I could react, Greyson was charging toward me, getting up in my face in moments.

“*How could you?*” he demanded, shoving me.

I stepped back, extremely goddamn confused. Was Greyson talking about my sleeping with Ava? How could he even know about that? And how the fuck was it any of his business?

“How could you kiss Ava in front of Cali?” Greyson demanded. “The least you could do after all this bullshit was show some respect for her feelings!”

He shoved me again, and for a moment, I was too struck to react. Struck by guilt, fierce and acidic, at the memory of Cali’s expression right before she’d walked off. I didn’t think I had the luxury of guilt anymore, though. At least not right now.

So, I shoved it down, then I shoved Greyson, too.

“Get out of my way,” I snarled.

Greyson didn’t move a muscle. Suddenly, he was planted in place like a statue, his voice calm. Cold. “Tread carefully, Xavier. The Samara pack needs the alliance more than the alliance needs the Samara pack.”

This was intimidation, plain and simple. And the worst part? The worst part was that my brother was very good at it.

“Fuck off!” I snapped. “I’m not trying to mess up the alliance—Cali has nothing to do with it!”

Greyson was immobile one moment and bursting into action the next. He grabbed me by the back of the neck—a sensitive spot for any wolf—catching me by surprise before he dragged me close, his teeth bared.

“You son of a bitch. You keep hurting Cali, and you think, what? That I’ll let you get away with it?” He squeezed my windpipe, hard enough that I choked, couldn’t speak. I grabbed his wrists, tried to fight him off, but his grip was too strong. His fury was thick—the kind I’d seen him wear in battle. “I don’t know what your plan is,” he hissed, “and I don’t know what the fuck is wrong with you, Xavier, but I want to make something very clear. After everything you’ve done, you will *never* return to the Redwood pack.”

**Episode 3927**

I’d been sitting by the fire for a while now. Almost everyone from the Redwood delegation had congregated, and they were all drinking and laughing. Having fun. Artemis was sitting next to me. She was singing-slash-muttering an old Fae song about a troll who fell in love with a flower. The moonshine had hit us both pretty hard. I kept watching for Greyson, but I was tipsy, and I didn’t feel like I could stand up right now to go look for him.

Or maybe I just didn’t want to stand up.

Maybe I didn’t want to stop Greyson from confronting Xavier.

The logical part of my brain—the part that wasn’t tainted by jealousy and pettiness—knew that I shouldn’t have told Greyson about Xavier kissing Ava in front of me. Now I was worried that they would get into a fight, and I didn’t want that either. At the same time, though, what was I supposed to do? Just lie to Greyson when he asked what was wrong with me?

*Xavier!* That’s *what’s wrong with me!*

I wasn’t about to get mad at Greyson for doing the same thing I would’ve done in his position. Xavier was behaving like a total bastard, and if anyone was going to be able to get through to him, it was his older brother.

*Cali, you’re doing it again…*

I was. I was always looking for a solution to the Xavier problem, always hoping that one thing or another would bring him back to his senses. Bring him back to me. Like a pathetic idiot, I was hoping that Greyson would not only stand up for me—what mate wouldn’t want her mate to stand up for her?—but also that he could solve the Xavier mystery. I was hoping that Greyson would manage to extract the answers to all my questions about Xavier’s irrational, erratic behavior.

*Something isn’t right with him. It can’t be. He can’t have just changed so easily—and so quickly!*

I hated this. I hated how I kept going back and forth between knowing I had to move on and wanting to fix things. But really, how could I justify keeping it up? Before, in the forest, Artemis had told me the truth about my relationship with Xavier. I knew it would never be easy to let him go, but I had to try.

I had no other choice.

“You were right,” I muttered to my sister.

She stopped grumble-singing about the troll’s love affair with pollen and turned to me. “I’m right about many things. You’ll have to be more specific.”

“It’s time for me to realize that I’ve lost Xavier forever,” I said, ignoring the lump in my throat.

Artemis frowned. “You’re looking at it the wrong way. You aren’t losing Xavier. You’re finally gaining Greyson, wholeheartedly and completely.”

“That’s a better way of putting it, but…” I glanced at Artemis. “Of course you’d say that. You’ve always been closer to Greyson than Xavier, so of course you want me to end up with him.”

Artemis scoffed. “That has nothing to do with it. The facts speak for themselves.”

I paused. Because there it was again. Logic. Facts.

*Why can’t I just accept them?*

My thoughts were interrupted when I spotted Greyson returning. I could suddenly breathe easier—it didn’t look like he and Xavier had fought. There were no ripped clothes, no open wounds. Just Greyson, as imposing as ever, but with an expression so impassive it could only spell out trouble.

*Well, at least he’s not bleeding?*

He came to stand behind me. I looked up, ready to ask if he’d talked to Xavier, but before I could, he addressed the group. “I need everyone to head back to the Redwood tents for a quick pack meeting. Right now.”

Before I could ask him what was happening, he walked away.

\*\*\*

My anxiety over Greyson’s announcement made me sober up fast. I joined the others by the tents, coming to stand next to him.

Artemis squeezed my arm, leaning down to whisper in my ear. “I think I know where this is going.”

I didn’t. My pulse was racing.

Looking around, Greyson asked, “Where’s Ravi?”

“I just saw him with Marissa from the Samara pack, I think,” Rishika said.

Oh, yeah. I’d seen the two of them talking together earlier, too. Maybe they’d taken advantage of the party and left to hook up? That would be nice—Ravi deserved to be happy. Even if it was someone from the Samara pack…

“Should I track him down?” Rishika asked Greyson.

He waved it off. “It’s fine. We can fill him in later.”

“What’s this about?” Lola asked, her gaze flicking toward me. She looked intrigued.

“I wanted to make something clear to everyone,” Greyson said. His gaze landed on each and every one of us. His voice was even. “As you’re all aware, Xavier is now the Alpha of the Samara pack.”

Of course I’d known that already, but it hit harder hearing it from Greyson’s mouth. The authoritative way he said it carried weight, and it squeezed my heart just a little more.

Greyson continued. “The fact that he’s the Samara Alpha means he’s no longer a Redwood pack member.”

My heart took another hit.

“Where are you going with this, Greyson?” Jay asked. He seemed cautious.

Greyson’s expression was calm and unyielding. “Xavier is no longer one of us, and he’s been behaving like he never was. Therefore, I don’t want to see any Redwood pack members talking to him. And if he wants to talk to any of us for any reason, he’s going to need my permission. Is that clear?”

The silence that followed made my head ache. Greyson had finally drawn a line in the sand, and I felt like it was my fault, and now—

No.

*No.*

I needed to stop trying to make excuses for Xavier. Because this wasn’t just about the way he’d treated me—he’d been mistreating everybody in the pack.

Nobody spoke for a long moment, but nobody questioned Greyson, either. Still, I could sense that they were somewhat dismayed—Rishika and Jay in particular.

Meanwhile, Artemis was inspecting her nails, and Lola was watching Jay closely. I gathered that she didn’t give a damn about Xavier—she’d been mad enough at him to make that obvious—but she knew that Jay was still attached.

“What about the alliance?” Rishika asked carefully.

“From now on, Xavier’s on a need-to-know basis,” Greyson said.

Jay’s voice was gruff. “Why? What happened?”

Greyson glanced at me. My heart pounded. For a tense moment, I was worried he was going to tell everyone about the Xavier-Ava kissing incident. But then he said, “It’s not just one thing. It’s a pattern of unreliable behavior, and that pattern’s escalating. You’re all aware that Xavier has been dismissive at best and disrespectful and aggressive at worst toward the Redwood pack as a whole. As such, I no longer feel like I can trust him. Until that changes, my orders stand.”

Nobody argued. Nobody *could* argue—not even Jay. Xavier had been way too rough with Lola during the match, after all. And even though he’d talked to Jay afterward, there were some lines you just didn’t cross—and Xavier had crossed them all.

My eyes burned with unshed tears, because I couldn’t do anything to fix this. Greyson’s reaction was completely logical. And there it was—again. Logic. Facts. Xavier had been behaving in a way that could only have ended with this result, and yet I still felt horrible about it. It made me feel sick to think that Xavier was being completely cut off from his own pack. But he’d given Greyson no choice.

*How did we end up here?*

“I just wanted you all to know—black and white, out in the open, no rumors or whispered theories,” Greyson said in a cool tone. “Now, you can all go back to the party and have fun. Don’t let Xavier’s defection spoil the night.”

The group was subdued as we headed back to the party—except for Artemis, who flung an arm across Rishika’s shoulders and kissed her cheek, mumbling something I didn’t catch. It was obvious who gave the fewest shits about Xavier around here, but I wondered if that made Artemis’s opinion the most accurate. She could see him through a lens that wasn’t emotional. Unlike me, unlike Jay… Unlike Greyson.

*This can’t be easy for him.*

Despite the natural competition between Greyson and Xavier, they were still brothers.

“How are you feeling?” I asked him quietly as we walked toward the fire together.

He eyed me. “I should be asking you that, love.”

I swallowed thickly. “I’m fine. It’s—”

I cut myself off when I spotted Rowena a few feet away, leaning against a tree. She didn’t look so good.

“I’ll be right back,” I told Greyson. “I have to go check on my friend.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Are you okay? That moonshine doesn’t fuck around.”

I was still a little tipsy, but I could handle it. “I drank like a quarter of what I had the other night—I should be fine, don’t worry.”

Greyson looked like he was going to worry no matter what I said, but I ignored that and headed for Rowena.

“Hey,” I said. “How are you feeling? Did you have too much moonshine? That was me the other night, and let me tell you—”

I didn’t have the time to finish my sentence. Rowena gagged before she twisted to the side and vomited.

I winced, handing her a tissue from my pocket. “I think you need to lie down. Should I go get Porter?”

Rowena shook her head, wiping her mouth and squeezing her eyes shut. “No. I don’t want him to see.”

I frowned. “Are you embarrassed to be sick in front of him? You guys are mates—I’m sure he won’t mind.”

Rowena sighed, leaning against the tree again. Her voice was a whisper. “It isn’t that. I think I’m pregnant.”

**Episode 3928**

**Greyson**

My warning about Xavier had been clear. Enough was enough. I wasn’t surprised that the Redwoods were bummed out about it, though. Pack bonds were a big deal for wolves, and everybody had been attached to Xavier, one way or another.

But it had to be said—I didn’t trust Xavier anymore. He’d been acting like an asshole for a while now, and his unstable, unpredictable behavior during the summit had sealed the deal. If he could be so careless and flippant with Ava around Cali, who knew what else he could jeopardize?

My brother was out of control, and I was sick of it. I was furious about it, actually—a deep kind of fury that bubbled just below the surface. I hated the way it made me feel. I hated the way it made *Cali* feel.

She seemed okay right now, though. She was a few feet away, chatting with Rowena. Cali was looking pretty steady at the moment, thankfully, so I allowed myself a break from worrying about her and looked around. My eyes fell on Big Mac’s moonshine tent, and I realized that I hadn’t checked in on her for a while.

When I arrived, I found her cleaning up.

“Done for the night?” I asked.

She scowled. “I’m cutting you werewolves off. I thought you could hold your liquor, but have you *seen* what’s going on near the bonfire?”

I choked on a laugh. “Hey, this is a werewolf summit. Things tend to get a little wild, with or without moonshine.”

Big Mac rolled her eyes, grumbling something about having seen enough hairy wolf dicks to last her a lifetime. At the same time, she grabbed a couple of glasses and gestured for me to sit at a chair across her sales bench.

“I saved this one just for you,” she said, opening a bottle.

“What is it?” I asked.

“A special reserve. I don’t sell it.”

She started to pour me a glass—a big one—and I shook my head. “I really shouldn’t drink more tonight.”

Big Mac shook her head. “You’re going to need it with what I have to tell you.”

I chose to feel intrigued instead of nervous, but I still picked up the glass. We shared a silent toast, and I took a sip. The alcohol was strong. It burned, but it was also oddly soothing.

“Damn,” I said. My voice sounded gruff, my throat still tingling. “You could make a fortune if you sold this.”

Big Mac wrinkled her nose. “There’s no need. Most of those heathens wouldn’t know the difference. It’d be a waste of good moonshine.”

I smirked. “You’re exaggerating.”

She raised an eyebrow, pointing outside. My ability to argue with her evaporated when I saw one of the Blue Bloods doing a flaming belly shot. We really were heathens.

Oh, well.

“How was my mom?” I asked, getting to the real reason why I’d come by.

Big Mac nodded. “She’s fine. Better now. But she did mention that there was an incident at the house, right before her attack. The teenagers threw a house party, and she put an end to it.”

I sighed. “I suppose that was to be expected. It’s basically a rite of passage.”

Big Mac frowned. “Teenagers are annoying. They should sit down, shut up, and eat their food.”

I snorted, finishing up my drink. “You’d be a very wise mother, Big Mac.”

“I know. I’ve gained far too much experience, keeping an eye on you Redwoods,” she replied flatly.

I laughed, because she did have a point. Placing my glass on the bench, I made a move to stand. “Thanks for the moonshine, and for updating me.”

“The drink I poured you wasn’t so I could tell you about the kids’ party,” Big Mac said.

I froze. My lighter mood vanished. “Is my mom—”

“No. Like I said, she’s fine. But…” Big Mac held out her hand and dropped a necklace into mine.

I studied it, scowling. “What’s this?”

“It was taken from the werewolf who attacked Sabine. It’s Bitterfang—the capsule’s full of silver. Sabine’s attacker might have used it if they’d captured him, but Charlie and Violet killed him before he got a chance.”

I had to stop myself from clenching my fist around the vial and releasing the silver. If Violet or Charlie had accidentally bitten this thing while defending my mother, they could’ve died.

“You should hang onto this for now,” I said, handing the necklace back.

She nodded. “The body of Sabine’s attacker has been taken care of, by the way.”

I took in her words, then glanced at the necklace in her hand. I realized that those two things meant I now had proof that the Bitterfangs had tried to kill my mother. And I sincerely doubted it had been a rogue pack member, acting on his own.

“Malakai ordered the hit,” I said.

Just like there was no doubt about the fact that he needed to pay for it with his own blood.

Big Mac’s voice was cold. “If you don’t kill him, I will.”

My jaw clenched. “You know I want to kill him as much as you do, but I won’t ignite a pack war over something personal. My mom survived, and I don’t want to look back and realize that the pack got hurt because I thought with my heart instead of my head.”

I’d almost done that many times lately, my anger much harder to control than it used to be. I felt uneasy about the unprecedented inclination.

I couldn’t let myself slip.

Big Mac paused, staring at me, as if weighing her words. Finally, she said, “I think that a pack war with the Bitterfangs has been inevitable from the moment you took in those kids, Greyson. But what do I know?”

I swallowed. “Give me time. I need to make sure the alliance is solid. When Malakai sees our numbers, he’ll back off.”

“Or he won’t,” she said simply. “Because mad dogs don’t use logic. Malakai is guided by anger, prejudice, and greed. He’s not going to stop at Sabine. And once he learns that his minion’s dead, he’ll want more Redwood blood.”

She was right.

“Whether we end up going to war or not, I don’t want you to worry,” I said. “Silas was a bigger threat, and we defeated him. I know that if we work together, we can handle Malakai.”

Big Mac raised an eyebrow. “Oh, I know. If Malakai decides he doesn’t want to stop, there are plenty of easy solutions, Greyson.”

The threat was obvious in Big Mac’s voice. I wasn’t surprised—I’d always known she was ruthless. I was also very glad she was on our side.

“Thanks for filling me in,” I told her, standing up. “I’ll keep you in the loop.”

She nodded, and that was that.

As I walked out, I glanced in the direction of the Bitterfang camp. Was Malakai so filled with rage that he would attack one of us while we were at the summit? The fact that he’d sent his minion to the Redwood pack house instead of doing something here suggested that he wasn’t there yet. But I felt like it was only a matter of time.

He’d gone after my mother with a *plan*. He’d asked me how she was—that was proof enough. In a way, sending someone after her had been more sinister than attacking us at the summit. It had been a coward’s move, sneaky and reprehensible and classically Bitterfang. They didn’t play fair. Part of me wanted to tell the council, but deep down I knew it wouldn’t do anything. I’d just look like a tattletale, and the elders wouldn’t do anything anyway.

I looked over at their camp again and wondered if I could just set them on fire. The thought started to throb inside my head—like it was a real possibility, even though it clearly fucking wasn’t. My wolf growled, the urge to protect my own, my mother, rising inside me. The need for revenge was an instinct, the animal kind, and I fought to ignore it.

I couldn’t let the anger win.

Heading back to the bonfire, I looked ahead to find Cali—she was the only person who’d be able to make me feel better right now. But instead of Cali, I spotted two people making out in the shadows. Shaking my head, I started to turn away when I saw something glitter in the night. A bracelet. A gold one. I recognized it.

It was Maren’s.

*That* was Maren.

She and Mace were kissing intensely, their hands all over each other.

I turned and walked off immediately. That was just… strange. But why was I surprised? Maren and Mace were a couple. Of course they were kissing, and of course they were fucking. Mace had brought her here. He’d even asked for my approval to date her, but it was another thing to see it so plainly. It was unsettling to me, and I just… I didn’t get *why* I felt this way.

I was with Cali. I adored Cali. Maren’s actions weren’t supposed to bother me—I didn’t want to be with her. I wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of my life with my mate. That had never been up for debate, so why—

A low growl interrupted my thoughts, and I looked up to see a wolf.

A familiar wolf with a brown stripe around his neck.

“Helix?” I snapped. “What the hell are you doing here?”

In the blink of an eye, Helix lunged for my throat.

**Episode 3929**

Rowena didn’t seem very happy about the idea that she might be pregnant. I couldn’t tell the tone of things. Was she shocked but happy? Shocked but upset? Upset but happy that she might be having a were-baby?

“Are you sure?” I asked.

Rowena’s only reply was to retch again. Oh, *god*. I handed her another tissue and gently guided her to a chair. She wouldn’t meet my eyes, and I took in her features. How old was she, even? She didn’t give off a ready-to-be-a-mom vibe. Her skin was so smooth and perfect, not aged yet by her role as Luna.

“How did this even happen?” I blurted out. Then I cringed and corrected myself. “I mean—when did it happen?”

Rowena took a breath. “I don’t know. It must’ve been recently. But Porter and I have been so careful.”

“Judging by your reaction…” I swallowed. “You guys weren’t planning this, were you? Like, at all?”

Rowena gave me a wry smile. “After seeing what Maya went through, we decided that waiting would be a better option. Besides, we’re young, and we’ve only been married a short while. We’re still in the honeymoon phase. We want to enjoy being husband and wife, not…” Her lips trembled, and she groaned, burying her face in her hands. “Not *parents*!”

I fought to find the bright side. “Do want to have kids one day?”

“One day—not right *now*,” she choked out. She started to cry, and I immediately felt horrible for her. Sniffling, she said, “I don’t know what to do. I—I’m pretty sure Porter is going to be upset, too. Neither one of us is ready to deal with this kind of responsibility.”

“I know this is super stressful and just—a *lot*,” I said, squeezing her hands, “but I think that you need to make sure you’re actually pregnant before you tell Porter.”

“But I don’t have a pregnancy test,” Rowena whispered, wiping her eyes. “And I don’t know the spell off the top of my head. I doubt I’d even have the ingredients for it.”

“Right,” I said. “That wouldn’t be something you’d think to add to your luggage when you’re heading to a werewolf summit…”

Who would’ve brought something like that with them? Lola wouldn’t have been that practical. Rishika and Artemis didn’t even need one. But maybe Big Mac could do some kind of pregnancy test spell—she’d definitely brought all sorts of magical things with her.

“I think I might have a solution,” I told Rowena. “I’ll be right back.”

\*\*\*

Big Mac glared at me when I entered her tent—a.k.a. her usual greeting.

“I’m done for the night, Cali. You’ll have to wait until tomorrow,” she said.

“I’m not here for moonshine,” I said. “This is kind of an emergency.”

Big Mac groaned. “What now? I’m tired, and I want to blip back to the house and see Sabine. Don’t I deserve a moment of peace?”

“You really do,” I said seriously. “But before you go, could you do a magic pregnancy test?”

Big Mac’s eyes narrowed. “Dare I ask why?”

“It’s not for me,” I spluttered. “It’s for a friend.”

That sounded fake, but it was the truth. Thank god.

Big Mac, however, crossed her arms over her chest and raised her eyebrows at me.

I groaned and shook my head. “I’m being honest! I just promised my friend that I’d keep her secret a secret, you know? I can’t just go around talking about it. That’s, like, how friendship works.”

During Lola’s pregnancy test debacle, everyone had thought *I* was pregnant. I knew that Big Mac wasn’t the gossipy type, but what if she accidentally let something slip? I couldn’t risk it.

“I don’t really care one way or the other, Cali. *But!*” She pointed at me. “If you are lying, and you are indeed pregnant, your little runt had better not call me ‘Grandma.’ Sabine and I are far too young to be grandparents.”

I scowled. “You can’t call your own step-grandchild a runt, Big Mac. That’s so mean.”

Big Mac gave me a flat look.

“Oh my god, I’m *not* pregnant!”

Big Mac rubbed her temples. “Fine, you’re not. But how do you expect me to do a pregnancy test spell on someone I’m not supposed to see?”

I deflated. “I… hadn’t thought of that.”

Big Mac sighed. “Whatever. It doesn’t matter—I don’t even know a pregnancy test spell. But…” She reached into a bag. “I do have a couple of these.”

She handed me a regular human pregnancy test.

“Okay, I’m sorry, *why* do you even have these?” I asked, bewildered.

“They came with the first aid kit. Besides, have you *seen* what’s going on out there?” she demanded.

I hoped the wolves at Paige and Duke’s party were being careful, but that definitely wasn’t my concern right now. I thanked Big Mac and hurried off. I felt weird running around with a pregnancy test, but it wasn’t like anyone was paying attention to me. They were either partying or having sex. The lack of shame was outstanding, but was I really surprised?

Of course not.

“I’m here!” I slid to a halt in front of Rowena. She was slumped right where I’d left her, looking beyond miserable. Her eyes widened in surprise when I pulled the test from my pocket. “We should go to the bathroom.”

\*\*\*

“Do you want me to come in with you?” I asked when Rowena looked like she was about to vomit again.

Swallowing nervously, she said, “I think—I think I’d prefer it if you guarded the door for me. I don’t want anyone coming in.”

I nodded, squeezing her shoulder. She walked inside, and I stood in front of the door, prepared to tell any arrivals that all three restroom stalls were occupied at the moment, tough luck.

*Yes, I will lie if necessary! This is for a good cause, an important—*

My thoughts were interrupted when someone did walk by—Dayton, the Nightshade Alpha. He didn’t like Greyson, and he had gotten pissed when Greyson and I had told Cesaries that he’d fought with Evan, a.k.a. the murder victim. He was alone, without his Luna, Geena. He spotted me and grinned.

What the hell was I supposed to do? Say hi? The guy had bad vibes.

My looking away from him did not discourage him, though. He sauntered over, peering at me in a way that made me uncomfortable. As he approached, I took a step back, and then another when he came to stand in front of me. He stared. A lot.

*Can he just NOT?*

“The restrooms are occupied,” I informed him. “I’d suggest circling back in ten minutes.”

He snorted. “I’m not here for that, little Fae. I’ve been wondering…” In the blink of an eye, he was *way* too close. He loomed over me, and my stomach twisted with unease. Instinctively, I took another step back. My back hit the bathroom door. The smell of moonshine fanned over my face when he said, “Did you know that Greyson fucked my Luna?”

All the horrible werewolves at the summit really needed to learn to leave me alone. I had a magical sword, for crying out loud! But it would probably be better to use the shield in this situation, if it came to that. You know, since it wasn’t particularly diplomatic to go around slicing strange Alphas in half and all.

“First of all, you are invading my space, so take several steps back,” I told him. Yes, I was being rude, but I had no more fucks to give. “Second, Greyson is my mate. He’d never cheat on me with your Luna. The moonshine is making you hallucinate.”

Dayton laughed. He moved a little farther back, thank god, but he wasn’t done talking. “I don’t mean here, little Fae. I mean a few years ago—though the night is still young…”

I glared at him. “Greyson would never cheat on me. You don’t know what you’re talking about. Also, I am Fae, but I am *not* little, so you’d better watch your—”

He threw his head back and laughed, cutting me off. Then his gaze drifted down my body in a greedy, predatory way that made me queasy. “Aren’t you a feisty one? Just delectable…”

I was half-intimidated, half-furious—though the fury seemed to be gaining ground. Ever since the Seluna mark had vanished, I’d been feeling more and more like my normal self. And my normal self—the version who went after werewolves with spatulas—had no problem telling this guy to fuck off.

“I am not having this conversation with you,” I said, glaring up at him. “Leave me alone.”

It was like he hadn’t heard a word. Still looking at me up and down, Dayton muttered, “While I’m not fully in agreement with Duke and Paige, I do believe that all good Alphas share.” He licked his lips. “It might help bring my pack into the alliance.”

I gaped at him, bristling.

*Did this asshole just suggest that I* pimp myself outto him *in the name of werewolf politics? UNBELIEVABLE!*

I was approximately one minute away from losing my shit. Sure, we weren’t supposed to use violence, but also, *Go to hell and stay there, you disgusting dick!*

“I don’t think you understand what you’re dealing with, Dayton,” I said, my fingers tingling with magic. “I have repeatedly warned you to get out of my space. Are you sure you’re ready to deal with the consequences of your actions?”

He laughed again, leaning even closer. “Aw, pretty little Fae—are you playing hard to get?”

*Well, then*, I thought. *I warned him!*

I raised my hands, ready to channel a shield that would send Dayton flying into a tree—

A muscled familiar figure punched Dayton off me.

*Xavier?*

**Episode 3930**

**Xavier**

I had shoved Greyson off me after his little speech. The guilt had been too heavy for me to say anything to him other than “fuck off.” He’d stalked away, glancing back at me one last time, looking like he didn’t even know me. I’d been left behind. And, judging by Greyson’s words and fury, I’d been locked out of the Redwood pack for good.

The hint of disappointment I’d glimpsed through his anger had been the very worst part of the whole incident.

I would never admit out loud how badly that had hurt.

I’d been walking around aimlessly since our fight. I wasn’t sure what to do or where to go, since Ava had kicked me out of our tent. I contemplated rejoining the party, but the closer I got, the less I wanted to. There would be questions about Ava and me. Questions I wasn’t in the mood to answer.

That was when I spotted Dayton cornering Cali.

And from that point onward, all I saw was red.

My fist collided with Dayton’s face over and over, like my hands were no longer my own, like I couldn’t control myself.

Cali’s voice echoed behind me as she shouted, “Xavier! STOP!”

Stop? What the fuck? Was she confused? Drunk? I was trying to *help* her.

“Stop it! Right now!” she screamed, grabbing my arm.

Her hands burned my bare skin, the contact so intense that I snapped out of the bloodlust and rage, yanking myself away from Dayton. The momentum made Cali stumble back. I went rigid, panting, staring at her.

Had I hurt her? Had I actually hurt her just now?

“What the *fuck*, Xavier!” she burst out.

Okay. She was fine, so I could get back to business.

I turned to Dayton, who was lying on the ground, chest heaving. I spat on him and kicked him in the stomach. Then I offered him one last warning.

“Don’t even *think* about bringing this to the council, you piece of shit,” I growled. “I saw what you tried to do.”

Dayton glared up at me, wiping blood from his mouth. He stood with difficulty, sneering, his teeth bloody. “So, the rumors about the *due destini* are true…” He glanced between Cali and me. “You and your brother are in love with the same girl.”

My jaw clenched. “Whatever you heard, you’re wrong. I put you on your ass because Cali is the Redwood Luna. You keep your filthy paws to yourself.”

Dayton eyed me coolly. “But you’re the *Samara* Alpha, so—”

“Just stay the fuck away from her,” I growled. “She’s not yours.”

*She’s not mine either*, I thought.

I felt sick.

Dayton scoffed but turned to leave. I glared after him, still seething. Shaking. I turned to Cali—at least she was okay. But instead of gratitude, all I saw on her face was anger.

What the *fuck* had I done wrong this time?

“What the hell was that, Xavier?” she demanded. “I had that handled.”

“Really,” I said flatly. “You did?”

She glared at me. “Of course I did! I have magic, and I was about to use it! I don’t need you to step in and ‘save me’”—she did air quotes with her fingers—“or whatever the hell you thought you were doing!”

I couldn’t believe we were arguing about this.

“I kept Dayton from assaulting you. *That* was what I was doing. What would’ve happened if I hadn’t come along?”

She scoffed. “I would’ve used my shield. The same thing I used against the New Orleans witches to save your sorry ass! Also, I have a literal magical sword now.” She gestured toward the woods. “I can slice through a tree like it’s a fucking *radish*, Xavier.”

“A—*what?*”

“A radish!”

That was it. I’d dumped Cali, and she’d lost her mind.

“I didn’t understand a word of what you just said,” I told her.

“Well, good thing you don’t need to,” she snapped.

She had never… She had *never* looked at me like this. Like she was fed up with me, like her patience had run out, like she couldn’t stand another minute of this altercation.

And then suddenly there was a burst of energy. I closed my eyes for a moment, looking away. When I opened them, Cali stood there with her Fae magic shield in front of her, sparkling the same way that her eyes were with determination.

“The point is that I did *not* need your help,” she said.

Her voice was tight. Hard. The way she was behaving was so *not* Cali that it made my breath hitch. Had I pushed her to this?

“I was only trying to—”

“You know what would really be helpful, Xavier?” she said as she dropped the shield. “If you stayed the fuck away from me.”

Her words struck me. The kiss with Ava had done exactly what I’d hoped and feared it might. And while this was ultimately a good thing, I still hated it.

All of it.

Deep down, I’d never actually expected Cali to give up on me.

Not Cali.

Not my girl.

I was her first love, her first lover, her first everything. We’d been through so much, and I’d thought…

How dare I think that she should suffer my abuse in silence?

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she demanded, bristling. “What did you expect? That you’d be able to treat me like dirt and then make everything A-okay again by deciding to play hero?”

Her outrage burned. I was scorched all over, raw, and she had no idea. She had no idea that I wanted to fall to her feet and beg her for forgiveness. She had no idea that I loved her more than anything, than anyone. She had no idea that I’d fucking die for her.

She had no idea, and she was looking at me like she didn’t know me.

Had I finally found the straw to break the camel’s back?

Gathering my mangled emotions, I said, “Next time, a thank-you would be nice.”

She glared at me, and I walked off. I felt like hell. Not only did Cali definitely hate me, but Ava seemed to be heading down that path as well. Because I’d thought of Cali after fucking her. I couldn’t blame either one of them, and Greyson hated me, too, and my wolf… Well, he was mainly raging at me for hurting Ava.

Everything was a mess. My chest was tight, my heart pounding so fast that it hurt. My ears were ringing, Cali’s words echoing in my head.

*You know what would really be helpful, Xavier? If you stayed the fuck away from me.*

*Stay the fuck away from me…*

*Stay the fuck away from me…*

Stay. The fuck. Away.

I was sure that, somewhere out there, Adéluce was pleased as punch.

I stopped walking. I stopped moving, heart pounding so hard I thought I would go into cardiac arrest. Was this Adéluce, or was my own body punishing me? I was so furious that my hands went into a half-shift, claws digging into my flesh. Blood started dripping to the ground, and I looked up.

At the sky.

At the moon.

At Adéluce, wherever the hell she was.

“You fucking bitch!” I shouted.

It happened in an instant.

All the air was sucked out of my lungs. My knees buckled. I gasped and coughed, couldn’t breathe at all, and this—*this* was Adéluce. I was still choking when she appeared before me, her eyebrows arched.

“You should watch your mouth, Xavier.” She waved a hand in my face, and I drew in a shaky breath.

“Why do you even care that I called you a bitch?” I hissed, fighting to stand. “You know what I think of you. It’s no secret.”

Adéluce gave me a wide-eyed look. “That’s true. But it’s still no excuse to be rude.”

I fought to stand, and when I did, I wondered how I could get her to just… *leave*. I couldn’t defeat her, not like this, so her leaving was my best bet. And yet my hatred for her was so massive that I couldn’t just let her go.

“Why are you even here, Adéluce?” I demanded. “Don’t you have anyone else to fuck with?”

Adéluce smiled. It was an expression that I had come to loathe. “I do, but you’re so much more fun. You always get into such beautiful messes.”

I bit my tongue until I tasted blood.

She went on. “First, you screw Ava, then you screw her again when you call her Cali, then you try to save Cali and she kicks you to the curb. All in one evening, Xavier! What an exciting life you lead.”

I fought not to gag. “What are you? Some sick voyeur? You get off on seeing me fuck, is that it?”

She laughed, rolling her eyes. “Oh, Xavier, of course you would think so highly of yourself. Though you do get credit for giving it your all. And Ava is always so delighted to get even a crumb of your attention. Let’s just say that the pathology of it all is fascinating to me.”

This fucking bitch was talking about *pathology*, like she was a scientist and we were her lab rats. She wanted to talk pathology? What about all the bullshit she’d done? Hurting Cali every time I talked to her, like—

*Wait.*

Cali hadn’t been hurt during our last exchange. The wheels in my head started to spin. Greyson had lost the Ludis rematch, right? Did that mean that Adéluce had somehow been forced to uphold her end of the deal?

Could I talk to Cali without hurting her?

**Episode 3931**

**Greyson**

When Helix hit me, it felt like all the force he could muster. I stumbled back, but I managed to partially shift, and when I got my feet back under me, I threw the younger wolf off me.

“What the fuck? Helix, it’s me,” I panted, thinking he might have been confused. Maybe he’d mistaken me for someone else. Maybe that was why he was here instead of the Redwood pack house. “It’s Greyson—”

But he didn’t give me a chance to finish before he scrambled to his feet and came after me again. But this time it wasn’t a surprise attack, and I was ready for it. I shifted completely and leapt toward him. We collided in midair, and we were already grappling when we hit the ground.

Honestly, it wasn’t much of a fight—I was stronger and a much more experienced fighter. It was really more a matter of doing everything in my power not to *kill* Helix as I batted his snarling mouth away from my neck. I was trying to stay present in the fight, but my mind was spinning. Why the hell was Helix attacking me?

Was it because I’d refused to allow him to come to the summit? Could he really be trying to rip my throat out for such a petty reason?

Helix struggled beneath me, then broke free and tried to attack from my left side. I pivoted and delivered a kick with my back legs, sending him flying back. The young wolf was strong and fast and a creative fighter, but he really was no match for me.

He hit the ground hard but was back on his feet in a moment, coming at me again, his mouth foaming as he growled. I let him get close, then I swept a paw beneath his legs and dumped him to the ground. There, I rolled him onto his back and pinned him down.

*Why aren’t you at the pack house?* I demanded.

*Because I belong here!* Helix snarled.

I stared down at him, confused. *You belong where I tell you to belong. It wasn’t a request, Helix. It was an order.*

He didn’t like this, and he struggled harder, trying to break free.

*Stop, Helix!* I ordered, but he ignored me.

I glanced up. I knew it wasn’t going to be long before this fight drew attention, and even if my part of the fight was self-defense and justified, I knew that would need to be proven if we were found fighting at the summit. That would leave me tangled up in some complicated council tribunal, which might scare off the packs I was trying desperately to win over.

Helix tried to surge upward, but I adjusted my hold on him, putting pressure on his chest to cut off his air supply. I needed to keep this quiet. Whatever was going on, it seemed like something had happened to turn Helix against me. But *why*? What the hell had I ever done other than try to help him?

Was he *really* so upset that I’d sent him to stay at our warm, comfortable pack house that he was now out to *kill me*? That obviously didn’t make sense. Was he here because of Elle? She’d even encouraged him to go, despite being disappointed. *So what gives?*

No, there had to be something else going on.

*Just talk to me, Helix*, I urged. *Tell me what you’re doing.*

But he wasn’t listening to me. Even pinned beneath me, even losing breath, Helix was still struggling. Using all his strength, he pulled his head up, wrapped his teeth around my foreleg, and bit down.

I growled as pain surged through me. Okay, time to end this. I’d kept the pressure on his chest moderate—just enough to weaken him—but the time for moderation had passed. I moved my now-bleeding foreleg so that it was pressed right against his neck.

*I’m warning you now, I’ll rip out your damn throat if you don’t knock this off. Shift back to your human form. Now.*

But he just kept fighting.

With a sigh, I leaned down and clamped my teeth around his neck. I didn’t want to do it, but I had to show him that I meant business. I’d just felt the new werewolf tense when suddenly, I was knocked away from him.

I tumbled to the ground, then rolled and shot to my feet in an instant. Looking around, I saw Elle—in her wolf form—standing between Helix and me.

*What are you doing?* I demanded. I started toward Helix, who had gotten to his feet more slowly, but Elle stepped in front of me, blocking my path.

Helix looked at Elle for a moment, then at me, then he turned and ran off, disappearing into the woods behind the campground.

I rounded on Elle. *You’re letting him get away!*

*I know*,she said, turning to me. *Why were you fighting?*

*Because he attacked me*, I shot back.

Elle’s furry face registered a look of surprise. *He attacked you?*

*Yep*, I snapped.

*But… Why would Helix attack you?* She asked, clearly confused.

*Hell if I know*. *I asked him—a few times, actually—but he refused to say. Didn’t say a damn thing except that he belonged here*. I shook my head. *Any idea what he meant by that?*

*He said he belonged here?* She repeated quietly. She shook her gingery head*. No, I have no idea*. She looked back up at me. *Are you angry with me that I helped Helix? That I let him get away?*

I blew out a breath, which came out as a frosty cloud in the cold winter air. *No, I’m not mad.*

I *was*, but clearly something was wrong here.

*It’ll be easy enough to track him down if we want to find him*, I said*. And I’m sure the situation looked weird to you—it was weird to me, too. I get that your loyalty was divided.*

*Yes*, she said quietly.

Helix was from Elle’s first pack—he was a friend from her childhood. And I was her Alpha. I imagined her feelings were pretty complicated. Add to that the alleged sire bond we shared, and she had a recipe for a mix of very conflicting feelings.

*Maybe we should go back to the campsite*, I suggested.

Elle hesitated. She looked over her shoulder, in the direction Helix had gone in. *Do you think he’ll be okay out there?*

I thought Helix would be fine—at least unless the council found out that he’d attacked me without provocation. Then, they would hunt him down and force him to face the consequences. But I didn’t mention that.

*That will depend on Helix*, was all I told Elle.

*What do you mean?* she asked.

*It will depend on what he does next. If he attacked* me *like that, then there’s a chance he might attack others. I know Helix, and I didn’t want to hurt him, so I was careful with him, but someone else might not be*. I shook my head*. If he attacks like that again, his target might not hesitate to kill him.*

Elle stared at me, her expression stricken. I hated that I’d put that look on her face, but what I’d said was true, and she needed to hear it. I didn’t know what was going on with Helix, but he was playing a dangerous game.

I shifted back to human. “We should get back, Elle.”

She nodded and shifted back too. She still looked desperately sad, so I took a step toward her and put my arm around her narrow shoulders.

“Listen, it’s late,” I said. “We can figure out what to do in the morning.”

Elle nodded. Then she looked up at me, and her eyes went wide. “Greyson! You’re bleeding!”

I looked at the arm I’d draped around her shoulders. It was the one Helix had bitten. I could see his bite marks in my skin. The wound was mangled and bloody as hell, but it was already healing.

“It’s fine,” I assured Elle.

But she didn’t look convinced. She took my arm in her hands and began to wipe the blood away, her touch delicate on the ripped skin.

“What did he *do*?” she murmured.

“Elle! There you are! I’ve been looking for you everywhere—”

Elle and I looked up to see Lucian striding toward us. He stopped when he saw us, and his eyes roved over us, taking us in. In an instant, I saw what he saw—Elle and me standing together, away from anyone else. Naked, bodies close together.

Lucian’s expression hardened. “Greyson Evers, I *demand* that you step away from her.”

Then he spotted my blood, which I’d accidentally smeared on Elle when I’d put my arm around her shoulders, and his face went red with fury.

“What the *hell* did you do to her?” he snarled, taking a threatening step toward me. “What did you do to my mate?”

**Episode 3932**

**Xavier**

I eyed Adéluce warily. I knew I had to play this carefully, so when I spoke, I made sure to keep any hope from registering in my voice. There was nothing the vampire-witch liked more than tormenting me, and I didn’t want to give her any new ideas—or ammunition.

“Greyson lost the game,” I said. “Are you going to uphold your end of our deal?”

Adéluce looked at me for a long, incredulous moment, then she burst out laughing. The sound was high and sharp, and I flinched away from it. “Xavier Evers! You disappoint me. Tell me you’re not actually *that* naïve.”

My stomach dropped, along with any remaining dregs of hope.

She shook her head. “No, my dear boy, you didn’t earn a reprieve for Caliana. Of course not. Don’t you think I was watching the Ludis game? You didn’t do anything at all to make the Redwoods win or lose. And with your *pathetic* inaction, you sided with your old pack.” A cold smile curled her lips. “Besides, watching your mate turn against you was *too* perfect. The back and forth was like a song. First you hurt her, then she hurts you…” She clasped her hands together. “It’s beautiful! Like theatre! Like *opera*! Why in the world would I ever want to stop that?”

I bristled at this, but I kept my mouth clamped shut. There was no good way to respond to her, but there was so much anger flowing through me that it was hard to breathe. It felt like I was finally seeing Adéluce’s master plan—she had ensured that not only would I inflict physical pain on Cali just by talking to her, but we would both suffer crippling emotional pain just by being around each other. And all of this had been orchestrated for Adéluce’s psychotic enjoyment.

I ground my teeth. I’d thought I hated the vampire-witch before, but that was nothing—*nothing*—compared to the murderous loathing that coursed through me now. Without thought, I lunged for her. The next instant, I was slammed to the ground with enough force that the breath surged out of my lungs.

Sucking in air, I staggered to my feet, ready to defend myself, but when I turned back to her, Adéluce had disappeared. I whipped around, looking for her, but she was gone, and only the chilling sound of her laughter remained, echoing through my head.

“DAMMIT!” I bellowed, punching an aspen tree. “DAMMIT ALL TO HELL!”

I’d done *everything* she’d wanted me to do since the beginning. All I hadn’t done was stop this game, but the Redwoods had lost anyway. But what had any of this gotten me? Absolutely *nothing.* All I’d done was turn both Cali *and* Ava against me.

I ran my stinging hand through my hair. I knew there was no way I could fix things with Cali—hell, just trying could kill her. But I still had a chance to make things right with Ava. I shook my head, my anger ebbing away. If nothing else, Ava deserved some kind of explanation for what had happened tonight.

With a sigh, I turned and headed back to our tent. As I walked, I wondered if I’d even be able to get Ava to speak to me. Truth be told, I wouldn’t blame her if she refused. I’d be pretty pissed if the situation were reversed and she called me any other name but my own.

Though I still liked to think that I’d listen to her and ultimately forgive her. And it wasn’t like I didn’t have any experience with this—I’d forgiven Cali when she’d called me Greyson. Though the thought of it still pissed me off.

The only excuse was that the *due destini* had been screwing with us both. The pull of two mates fucked with your head in ways that were hard to ignore or explain to anyone else.

It was a good example, but I wasn’t going to tell Ava that story. Considering the circumstances, I wasn’t even planning on mentioning Cali’s name to her at all, if I could avoid it. I knew it had been a sensitive subject for us before, and it was even more so now.

I reached our tent and stopped just outside. I stood for a moment and listened. It was quiet. Was Ava asleep? I didn’t think waking her up would be a great way to start this conversation. But then I heard her voice.

“What do you want, Xavier?”

I could tell by her tone that she had zero fucks to give, but I still looked around warily. I really didn’t want to have this conversation out in the open, where anyone could hear us.

“Can I come in? I just want to talk.” She didn’t answer. “If you don’t like what I have to say, then I’ll leave.”

There was another long pause. It was just a tent, so it wasn’t like I wouldn’t be able to get in if I really wanted to, but I needed her to *let* me in. I needed her to accept my offer. I could force my way in, could force her to listen to me, but I couldn’t force her to forgive me. And I didn’t want this to erupt into a fight. Not now, when there was so much at stake for the pack.

Finally, Ava pulled the tent flap back. She looked at me for a moment, then stepped aside, letting me in.

As I stepped in, I saw that her beautiful face had a hard, wary look to it, and she seemed tired. My instinct was to pull her close and wrap her in my arms. I was almost overwhelmed by my need to protect her, even though I knew I was the one who’d caused her to look so damn weary. There was just something about that mate instinct that never, ever went away. It had always been there, even when she’d first come back from the dead and I’d loathed her with everything I had.

I waited for her to let the tent flap fall shut before I spoke. I could sense her impatience, but this wasn’t easy for me. I wasn’t used to apologizing to Ava, but I knew I had to.

I cleared my throat. “Thanks for agreeing to listen—”

“You haven’t *said* anything yet,” she snapped angrily, her eyes flashing.

I sighed. “I’m sorry.” I paused, letting the apology hang in the air between us. I wondered if she believed me. I knew she *wanted* to believe me, but that was different. I hoped she did believe me, because I meant it. I really was sorry. I knew what it felt like to be in her shoes, and it fucking sucked. “I know I hurt you. What I called you before… I didn’t mean it. It wasn’t intentional. I get why you might’ve thought that I did it on purpose. I mean, let’s face it, one thing we have in common is our ability to hurt each other.”

Ava crossed her arms but still didn’t respond. *Fuck.*

“We’ve fucked each other up so much—you by siding with your pack during the war and killing my mom, and me by killing you…” I shook my head, sighing. “But here we are, Ava. We’ve been given this second act, and I don’t want to fuck it up again.”

There was another beat of heavy silence between us.

Ava searched my face. “Does any of this have anything to do with Cali?”

I thought about how hard I’d worked to avoid mentioning her name—given the situation earlier where apparently I’d said her name in my sleep—but Ava was too smart for that. She just cut right through the bullshit. Cali’s name had been hanging over the whole conversation. She hung over everything.

I shook my head. “No,” I answered honestly. I knew there was a time when this would have been all about Cali, but things were different, somehow. “Like I already said, I’m sorry about earlier. But this isn’t about her; it’s about us. It’s about reestablishing our connection, Ava. We had one once, remember?”

She didn’t answer, but some of the wariness had left her eyes.

“What we had felt unbreakable, until Silas came along and destroyed everything.” I sighed. “I really value you, Ava, and as the Samara Alpha, I want to have you by my side.”

Her eyes widened a fraction, and she opened her mouth to say something, but then she stopped herself. She pressed her lips together and turned, moving away.

I started to reach out—to stop her, to touch her, to connect with her—but I stopped myself. The ball was in her court. I’d said my piece, and I’d failed, and the weight of that failure settled heavily on my shoulders.

“I—I just wanted you to know that,” I muttered, then turned to leave.

“Don’t.”

I turned back. “What?”

She looked at me. “Don’t go.”

“Really?

Her eyes met mine. “I want you to stay.”

**Episode 3933**

Breathing deeply, I fought to regain control of my emotions. I knew I should’ve been feeling good—I had finally told Xavier what he needed to hear. But it had really sucked. It had been painful, and it had left me feeling wounded and raw.

I looked over—confused—as the bathroom door opened.

“Oh, Rowena!” I said, suddenly remembering what the hell I was doing here. Then it occurred to me that she must’ve heard everything.

She sighed. “False alarm.”

“What?” I asked, staring at her. I had no idea what she was talking about—my mind was still on Xavier and what had happened with Dayton.

“The pregnancy test was negative,” she said. “Thank god.”

“Oh, I’m so glad,” I said, pulling her into a hug. “Maybe it was food poisoning? Some of that food looked pretty sketchy to me.”

“Yeah.” Rowena nodded. “It must’ve been. But I’m glad I know for sure.” She frowned. “Did I hear yelling out here? Is everything okay?”

*No, I just told my mate to fuck off. Everything is* not *okay*.

I’d never imagined that I’d ever say anything like that to Xavier—not in a million years. But I had said it, and there was no taking it back. And—more than that—I was still convinced that it had needed to be said.

“Oh, you know,” I said, gesturing vaguely at the debauchery around us. “Some of the wolves probably had too much moonshine.”

That part was true. I’d smelled the stuff wafting off Dayton when he’d gotten too close.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Rowena said, looking around.

“Anyway, you should probably get some rest. It’s late, and neither of us are werewolves, so we’re not naturally nocturnal like the rest of them,” I said, nodding over my shoulder.

Rowena gave me a bittersweet smile. “I know. Though sometimes I think how much easier it would be if I *were*, you know? If I were a werewolf, I mean. Anyway,” she added, “thanks for all your help, Cali. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” I murmured as she headed off.

As I watched her go, her words sank into my brain. I *did* know how she felt. I often thought about how useful it would be if I were a werewolf, too. But there were so many questions—about my being half Fae, about the *due destini*… Would a transformation work on me? Would it put me in danger? Would I even live through it?

There were so many lingering doubts surrounding the issue. Besides, I was just now starting to recognize the potential I already had within myself. I wasn’t even close to realizing the full power of my Fae magic—I’d only just scratched the surface—but it was something that filled me with wonder and excitement. It was this whole other part of myself, and I couldn’t wait to find out what else I was capable of.

Becoming a werewolf—if that was my path—was something I could think about another time.

I took a deep breath. I was glad to have been distracted by Rowena and her news. The emotions of my altercation with Xavier had been threatening to overwhelm me, but after speaking with her, my feelings felt like they’d settled. I didn’t hurt any less, but I didn’t feel as on edge as I had just after Xavier had walked away.

Which was a relief. I’d been worried that I’d bring that emotional baggage back with me when I joined Greyson in our tent. He would’ve noticed that something was wrong, and it wasn’t fair to make him deal with the fallout of my crumbled relationship with Xavier.

My heart still stung, but I was under control again.

I started back toward our tent, but I stopped after a few steps when I saw spots of blood on the hard-packed dirt. It had to be Dayton’s. Xavier had hit him pretty hard when he’d pushed him off me. I’d heard Dayton’s grunts of pain.

I gave a wry smile. Dayton was lucky, all in all. If Xavier hadn’t intervened, I might’ve bumped him off with my shield. And if I’d really needed it, I had my sword.

I shivered a little in the winter air. The thought of what I could do with my power was frightening… and thrilling. There’d been a time when I wasn’t so well-equipped. Now I had all this magic at my disposal and I was actually figuring it out. I was coming into my own.

I hoped.

As I walked toward the blue zone and our tent, I debated telling Greyson about what had happened with Dayton. I felt like he should know that Dayton was becoming a problem, but it would be hard to tell the story without mentioning Xavier, and he’d become such a touchy subject for us both. Well, he’d always been a touchy subject between us, but… in a new way, now.

I still hadn’t decided what I was going to do when I heard familiar voices. I looked around and saw Greyson standing with Elle and Lucian. Greyson and Elle were naked, and they seemed to be arguing with Lucian, who was fully clothed.

I stared at them all for a moment, dumbfounded. What the hell was going on?

Then I leapt into action and raced toward them. But when I drew close, I felt my anxiety ease. Up close, I could see that Greyson had control of the situation—whatever the hell the situation was.

Lucian looked over at me as I got close. “I don’t know how you do this, Caliana!”

“What?” I asked, confused.

He shook his head. “I thought I was strong—I really did—but this is just too much!”

He turned to glare at Greyson, then stormed away, crashing through the aspen trees.

I stared after him for a moment, then turned to Greyson. “What the hell was he talking about? He doesn’t know how I do *what*?”

Greyson shook his head, looking deeply annoyed. “Honestly, Cali, don’t waste your brainpower trying to understand the princeling.” He looked over at Elle. “You should head back to your tent. We’ll talk in the morning.”

Elle hesitated. It looked like she wanted to argue or say something else, but she finally nodded, and we all started back toward our tents.

We didn’t speak as we walked, though I shot Greyson and Elle a few curious looks. Neither of them looked back at me; they both looked grave and kept their eyes down.

When we reached the blue zone, Greyson stood and watched until Elle reached her tent and disappeared inside before he led us both back to our tent.

We stepped inside, and I lit the lantern. I turned it up, and when I turned back to Greyson, I saw that he had dried blood all over his forearm. It had been too dark outside to see it before now, and I gasped in shock.

“Greyson! What happened?” My eyes widened. “Did Lucian do that to you?” I demanded, thinking of the argument I’d walked into.

Greyson barked out a laugh. “Come on, Cali. I’d never give Lucian the chance.”

“So then what were you two fighting about?” I asked.

“The princeling thought I was hurting Elle. Some of my blood got smeared on her, and Lucian assumed the worst.”

“Why?” I asked, baffled. I knew Greyson would never hurt Elle, and if Lucian had given it a second of thought, he would’ve remembered that too.

Greyson grabbed his towel from where he’d thrown it on the top of his bag and began to roughly wipe the wound on his arm.

I stepped forward and took the towel from his hands. “Greyson, you’re being too rough. Let me.”

I folded the towel and dabbed carefully at his arm. When I looked closely, I saw that despite the gory dried blood, the actual wound was almost healed.

“Okay, if Lucian didn’t attack you, then who did?” I asked. “And don’t tell me it was Elle. I’ll know that’s not true.”

“No,” Greyson agreed with a chuckle.   
 “So who was it?” I asked again.

“Helix,” Greyson said with a sigh.

I looked up quickly, surprised. “What? *Helix?*”

Greyson nodded gravely. “He attacked me.”

“Why?” I demanded.

“I have no idea,” he said. He looked down at his arm. “He’s not even supposed to be here.”

I dabbed at Greyson’s arm again, trying to wipe away the nearly dried blood. “Do you think he was trying to… God, I hate to even say it.” I shook my head.

“What is it, love?” Greyson asked gently.

“Do you think he was trying to kill you?” I finally asked.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “Maybe.”

I took this in. “Is it possible that Helix killed Evan?”

Greyson’s face darkened. “God, I hadn’t even thought of that.” He was quiet for a moment, then he shook his head. “I wouldn’t rule it out.”

I looked up at him. “Then what are we going to do about this?”

**Episode 3934**

**Greyson**

I looked at Cali for a long moment. *Then what are we going to do about this?*

She’d asked the question, and she was waiting for an answer. I wasn’t going to downplay the seriousness of the situation. There had been a time when I would’ve been inclined to shield Cali from the harshness of my world and its conflicts, but that time was long gone. She was here, at the summit, with the pack, acting as my Luna. She was a part of my world now, and she could handle the truth.

I took a deep breath. “I’m not sure what I’m going to do about Helix, but I do know we’ll handle it together.”

Cali looked surprised for a moment, then she nodded. “We will. Together.”

I thought for a moment as Cali continued to dab at the blood on my arm. “Helix said he belonged here,” I muttered. “I guess he meant here at the summit, with the rest of the pack. But that doesn’t make any sense.”

“What do you mean?” Cali asked. She gave my arm a dark look, then tossed the bloodstained towel into the corner of the tent.

“If anything, Helix belongs with Dayton and the Nightshades,” I said, “but that’s only if he wants to belong to a pack at all. He told me he didn’t, but…” I shook my head. “I don’t know. I guess it’s possible he might have changed his mind.”

“Yeah, maybe he changed his mind,” Cali said, eyeing me. “Or maybe he had his mind changed for him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe he was convinced.” Cali looked worried. “I just have to wonder if Dayton is mixed up in this, somehow.”

I scrubbed a hand along my jaw, feeling the rough scrape of stubble as I thought that over. “I admit that I’m no fan of the Nightshade Alpha, but I don’t know. Why would Dayton want Helix to go around attacking people? That doesn’t make any sense. And I just can’t shake the feeling that there was something else to this. Something personal.”

“Well, I don’t like *that*,” Cali said warily. “If it’s personal to you, it’s personal to me. I’m not just going to let Helix get away with attacking you like that, and I’m not going to let him come after you again, either. Especially after what Dayton did to me tonight.”

This pulled me from my thoughts in an instant. “Wait. What did Dayton do to you tonight?”

Cali’s cheeks colored, like she hadn’t meant to say that out loud. “Oh, well, I was standing by the bonfire, and he came over to talk to me and…” She shrugged. “He tried to intimidate me. You know how he is.”

I gave her a searching look. “Are you trying to downplay what happened?”

She rolled her eyes. “I mean, he was being a jerk, but I had it handled.”

I stepped toward her. “Did he hurt you?”

“No, no,” she said, putting a hand on my chest, like she was trying to keep me calm. “No, he didn’t get the chance. I was going to smack him with my shield charm, but…”

“But what?” I pressed.

She sighed. “But before I could, Xavier came along and punched him off me.”

*Xavier?* I stared at her, stunned. I hadn’t expected the story to end like that.

My mind spun. On the one hand, I was glad my brother had helped Cali—even though she could’ve handled it on her own, it was still the right thing to do. But on the other hand, I just didn’t understand Xavier’s game. He’d been doing everything in his power to hurt Cali, lately, so why the hell had he protected her from Dayton? He couldn’t have it both ways.

My head began to pound as I tried to figure out what his motives could possibly have been. When I failed, I gritted my teeth. I was glad Cali was okay, but I wasn’t happy.

“I don’t trust Xavier,” I growled.

Cali nodded. “I was surprised when he showed up, too, but then I came to my senses and told him to get lost.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I—I told him to fuck off.”

“You did?” I asked, shocked.

Her cheeks flushed. “Yeah, and I’m not sorry about it. I thought I would be, but I’m not. It needed to be said, and it was a long time coming.”

I tried not to smile. This was a complicated situation. I had my own personal reasons for wanting Cali to take a hard line with Xavier, but I also knew that what she’d done couldn’t have been easy for her.

I took her hands. “Are you okay?”

She looked up at me. “I wasn’t at first, but I am now. It was hard, but it was the right thing to do. For all of us, I think.”

I leaned down and pressed a kiss to her lips. She kissed me back for a moment, then broke away.

“Your arm is still worrying me. I’m just going to run over to Big Mac’s tent to ask her for something to clean it up a little—”

“My arm is fine,” I said firmly, grabbing her hand and stopping her from leaving the tent. “Look. It’s already healed,” I said, showing it to her.

She looked at it, shaking her head. “You werewolves are a medical miracle.”

I put my hand beneath her chin and raised her face to mine. “Now, about Dayton—do you think I need to go have a little heart-to-heart with him?”

She smiled. “I don’t think that’s necessary. I’m pretty sure he got the message.”

There was something about the way she said it that told me that Dayton had taken a pretty hard hit from Xavier, which I liked. I had a suspicion that Dayton had gone to Cali in a perverted attempt to even the score with me because of what had happened between Geena and me all those years ago.

Dayton was a petty loser, and I was furious that he’d tried to take out his insecurities on Cali.

“Well, maybe he needs a second message,” I said, my voice a low growl. “You’re my mate, and the message ought to be delivered by me—in person.”

Cali thought about that for a moment. “Maybe you’re right. But maybe we could deliver the message together.”

I smiled. “That’s an even better idea.”

Cali’s eyebrows shot up, and she stared at me, surprised. “Wait—do you really mean that?”

I grabbed her around the waist, pulled her close, and kissed her. “We’re mates, love. We’re partners. Whatever they throw at us, we face it together.”

Cali leaned back and smiled up at me. “We beat it together, too.”

I laughed. “You know, I can’t help but notice that you’ve become quite sure of yourself lately, Caliana Hart. Have you noticed that, too?”

“Is that a bad thing?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Not at all,” I said, shaking my head. “Just the opposite. As a matter of fact, I think it’s sexy as hell.”

I kissed her again, then stepped away, reaching for the pair of sweats I’d thrown over the end of the cot.

Cali put her hand on my arm, stopping me. “But do you know what’s even sexier?”

Heat flooded me when I saw the fiery look in her eyes. “What’s that?”

She gave me an impish smile. “Seeing my Alpha mate ready to kick the prince’s royal ass.” She shrugged. “And it didn’t hurt that I could *see* your ass while you were going all Alpha on Lucian.”

I laughed. “Love, I’m happy to let you see my ass anytime you want. Just say the word.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You’ll *let* me? Do I need *permission* to see what’s mine?”

Something unexpected stirred within me. I’d never heard Cali speak like that—I’d never heard her lay claim to me like that. It was the way I’d felt about her from the moment I’d laid eyes on her, but I’d never heard her say anything like that about me.

“You can have whatever you want,” I breathed, all the blood in my body swiftly rerouting southward.

Cali’s face flushed as she saw my body react to her words. Her dark eyes flashed with a new sense of purpose and even ownership as her gaze swept down my body, taking me in. I was hers, and she could see how much I wanted to make her mine right now.

When her eyes met mine again, they were shining. “What if I want *everything*, Greyson Evers?”

*Holy fuck.*

I crossed the distance between us to slide my arm around her waist and pulled her close. My whole body felt like it was on fire, and when I spoke, my voice was a low rasp. “What’s mine is yours, love.”

She put her hands on my chest and pushed me down onto the cot. “Prove it.”

**Episode 3935**

I didn’t know exactly what had happened. As I straddled Greyson’s naked form on the cot, I felt fueled by this unexpected—but exciting—sense of empowerment. Maybe it had something to do with finally telling Xavier off. Maybe it was the certainty that I had what it took to take on Dayton. Maybe it was just being here at the summit, acting as the Redwood Luna.

Whatever it was, there was something inside me that was giving me this *insatiable* desire to have Greyson here and now. Seeing him get an erection from my words alone had made me dizzy—and it was making me even wet. I felt his cock hardening even more beneath me, and I smiled. I was ready to stake my claim.

I slid myself up and down, rubbing against him. I was teasing him, but I was teasing myself, too, and it was making me even wetter. Heat flooded through me, and I leaned down and kissed him. His mouth was searing hot as his tongue slid against mine. I sucked on the end of it. I wanted to go over the edge with him—*now*. It felt like I was nearly there already.

“I’m going to fuck you, Greyson,” I whispered against his mouth, feeling high on my own sense of daring.

“Is that so?” he asked, his hands greedily grabbing at my thighs and hips. “*Prove it, love.*”

I grabbed the hem of my shirt and yanked it off, then undid the button of my jeans. I saw the surprise in Greyson’s eyes as he took me in, and I tangled my hand in his hair, pulling hard, then covered his mouth with mine again. I deepened the kiss, feeling strong and powerful and about ten feet tall.

And then the cot broke.

I screamed.

I had no idea what happened, but one of the legs just gave out, and we broke apart as we slid off, hitting the ground in a jumble of limbs.

“What the hell!” Greyson exclaimed, grabbing onto me to shield me from the worst of the impact.

We stared at each other for a surprised moment, and then we burst out laughing.

I shook my head. “That’s what happens when I take charge, I guess.”

Greyson grinned. “Let’s see what happens when I take charge,” he growled, and then he flipped me over, pressing me to the floor of the tent.

Desire surged within me as he yanked my jeans down my hips. His gaze swept down me, taking me in slowly, proprietorially. I was his, his gaze seemed to say. I was his, and he was mine. I stretched out like a cat, feeling warm and languorous beneath his lustful eyes.

“You know exactly what you’re fucking doing,” he growled.

I smiled up at him. “Maybe I do.”

With a snarl, he yanked my panties down and flung them over his shoulder. Then he dropped his mouth to my breast and ran his tongue over my nipple, making me cry out.

“Oh *god*.”

He smiled, then moved to my other breast. While his tongue worked, his hand moved down, and his fingers slipped into me. I hissed with pleasure as he began to move in circular motions.

“Greyson,” I moaned, arching against him. “I want you *inside* me.”

“Not yet,” he commanded. “Not until I decide you’re ready.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “*I’m ready*,” I promised him.

He stopped moving for a moment, and my whole body pulsed with want. When he started up again, I could have cried.

“Greyson! *Please.* I want you. I want to *fuck you.*”

He chuckled. “I do like the sound of that.”

An instant later, he buried his cock inside me with so much force that I gasped. He grasped my hips, hard and steady. I wanted that. I wanted it *hard*. I wanted him to leave his handprints on my body. I was his, and I wanted everyone to know it.

He drove into me again and again, and I felt myself starting to shake. I grabbed him, digging my nails into his skin as the storm broke.

“*Yes!*”

He was shivering, thrusting into me. “Oh *fuck, love*.”

I writhed beneath him, still coming as he finished. We clutched at each other as we slowed down, panting for breath.

“Greyson,” I breathed when I could speak. “That was…”

“*Spectacular*,” he finished, still panting for breath.

He pulled out and lay down beside me, gathering me into his arms. I’d just cuddled into him when someone yelled at us from outside.

“Are you two *finally* done?”

It was Lola, and she was yelling from her tent. My eyes widened, and I looked over at Greyson, who looked just as surprised as I felt.

“Some of us are *trying* to get some sleep!” Lola added.

Greyson was silent for a moment, then he snorted with laughter. I started to giggle, too.

“Sorry!” I called, nestling closer to Greyson.

I sighed, amazed that I was able to feel so good. The day had not been without its rough patches, but it had ended pretty amazingly.

I rested my head on Greyson’s chest. “We’re going to need a new cot.”

Greyson shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know. I like the ground. I think it’s more comfortable.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s probably because you’re a wolf, Greyson.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that you’re used to sleeping on the ground. The cold, hard, forest ground.”

“Ah! I see,” Greyson said, smiling at me teasingly. “So all that tough talk was just an excuse to trick me into bed, huh? Just an act? Cali, I’m wounded.”

I laughed. “I mean, I hope I don’t need to *trick* you into doing anything.”

“You don’t,” Greyson assured me, giving me a wolfish grin.

“—but yeah, I think the cot was slightly better for my non-wolf body,” I said.  
 “Well, if that’s the case,” Greyson said, running his hands down the length of my naked side, “then we’ll have to do something about it. Looking after this body is a very high priority for me.”

I laughed and closed my eyes. My body was worn out, but my mind was too wound up to sleep.

Sensing this, Greyson rubbed my shoulders. “Turn over so I can rub your back,” he said, pulling the blanket from the cot to cover me up.

I turned but eyed him warily. “Okay, but don’t try to start anything up again, or Lola’s going to bust in here and strangle us.”

He smiled. “I’m just trying to help you relax so you can get to sleep. I can feel how tense your shoulders are. You just need to get your head out of the gutter, love.”

I chuckled and closed my eyes. Greyson started by rubbing my shoulders, then moved slowly and methodically down my back. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I was trying to do some breathing exercises, but without much success. I knew Greyson had been teasing me about being horny, but he really wasn’t far off. It was definitely hard to relax when he was touching me like that, and there was no way I was going to be able to control my breathing.

“That’s good, thanks,” I said, turning to look at him.

He propped himself up on one elbow. “What would help you fall asleep?”

I looked around the tent. “I don’t know. I mean, it would probably help if it wasn’t so damn bright in here.” I pulled the blanket up over my eyes, but that made it hard to breathe. “Why *is* it so bright in here? It’s the middle of the night in the middle of nowhere.”

I got to my feet and grabbed one of Greyson’s sweatshirts. I pulled it on as I opened the tent flap. Honestly, I was half-expecting to see one of the spotlights that had been set up for the grudge match. But there was only the moon, shining just overhead.

I squinted as I looked at it—it was blindingly bright. It was like looking at a barely weakened sun.

Greyson came up behind me and wrapped his arms around me, keeping me warm as the winter wind curled around my body.

“If you think it’s bright now, just wait until tomorrow night.”

I twisted around to look at him. “Tomorrow night? What’s tomorrow night? And how the hell could the moon get any brighter?”

He smiled at my outrage. “It won’t be full until tomorrow.”

I looked back at the moon, using my hand to shield my eyes from its powerful glow. It looked full to my untrained eyes, but I trusted that Greyson knew a full moon when he saw one—or didn’t see one.

“I’ve seen plenty of full moons, but I’ve never seen one as bright as this one,” I said.

“The Wolf Moon is always the brightest.”

“The Wolf Moon?” I repeated. An inexplicable thrill surged through me, raising goosebumps all over my body. “I’ve never heard of that. What is it?”

**Episode 3936**

**Elle**

I was back in the blue area, at the Redwood campsite, but I wasn’t inside my tent. I was sitting outside, looking up at the moon. It had been a long day, and I knew I needed to rest, but I just didn’t feel ready to go to sleep. Greyson had pretty much ordered me to, and I wanted to listen to him—I felt a *need* to listen to him—but I also wanted to go after Helix.

I stared out into the night, thinking of my friend out there, alone. I knew I wasn’t the most experienced werewolf here at the summit, but I probably *was* the best tracker. Greyson knew that—that was why he asked for my help whenever he needed a tracker. And I knew I would have no trouble tracking Helix; especially not tonight, with the moon shining so brightly.

I tipped my head back and looked at the sky, which looked black as coal against the brightness of the moon. I just felt like I *had* to see Helix. I had to understand why he’d disobeyed Greyson’s order—why he’d come to the summit. And—most of all—I had to understand why he’d attacked Greyson.

I felt so torn. Helix was my pack mate. I’d known him all my life. We’d grown up together. He was like a brother to me. And he’d come all the way from Idaho to get help for my father. But Greyson meant so much to me. He’d turned me, and we shared a bond. I didn’t fully understand it, but I felt it. Maybe it wasn’t a mate bond, but I’d heard Lucian call it a sire bond.

But even without that bond, I respected Greyson. He was a powerful and thoughtful leader, and he made decisions because he thought they really were right for the pack. Maybe some of my loyalty was because of the sire bond, but I was also loyal because Greyson was my Alpha, and he’d proven himself worthy of that title again and again.

I thought of how mad Lucian had been when he’d seen Greyson and me standing together. Part of me felt bad for him. He’d just seemed so confused. Not only had I left him in his tent without any explanation, but he’d gotten caught in the middle of the Helix problem.

I smiled, thinking of how he’d tried to defend me. I had not needed it, of course. He’d been stupid to accuse Greyson. Greyson would never hurt me—I knew that for a fact. And Lucian should’ve known it, too.

But Helix hadn’t been defending me when he’d attacked Greyson.

The smile left my mouth as I shook my head, confused all over again. Why *had* Helix come here, and *why* had he attacked Greyson? How could he have been foolish enough to attack an Alpha—especially Greyson, who’d helped out my father and our pack?

Greyson was loyal—that was one of the things I respected most about him. I was loyal, too. I thought about loyalty, and how that sense of loyalty was making the alliance stronger. It was good that Greyson was gaining the trust of some of the other Alphas here at the summit, but I knew he still needed the support of the Vanguard pack. Which meant he needed *Lucian’s* support. The Vanguard wolves were very loyal to their Alpha—maybe too much—and would do nothing without his full approval.

But Lucian had seemed pretty upset when he’d stormed off. I wondered if he still thought Greyson had attacked me.

My stomach tightened with worry. I didn’t want to be the reason why the Redwoods and the Vanguards turned against each other.

I realized then that I’d started walking. That was fine, I thought. I just needed to work off some of the nervous energy I was feeling. But after a moment, I realized I was doing more than that—I was walking directly toward Lucian’s tent.

I sighed. I knew why I was going there, and I knew what I needed to do—I needed to make sure Lucian didn’t do anything to threaten the Redwood-Vanguard alliance.

And—even with everything else—I was still puzzled by how much I had enjoyed kissing him. It had made my whole body feel strange—like I was waking up after a long, long sleep. It was unique and thrilling and kind of terrifying, all at once.

When I reached Lucian’s tent, I saw that Armin had been stationed outside to keep watch. Though, I didn’t know how much watching he was actually doing, considering that he was asleep.

But—as if he could sense me—he jerked awake and got shakily to his feet. But before he could ask what I wanted, Lucian appeared in the opening of his tent.

He drew the flap aside and waved me in, smiling. “Elle, I’m so glad to see you. And I’m glad you’ve come back. Please come in.”

I stepped inside. Lucian was wearing a red silk robe, and his tent was lit with candles, which flickered as the winter wind blew in through the open flap. When Lucian turned to me, his eyes were sparkling in the warm light.

I turned away, and then I was looking at his bed. It was stunning—nothing like the narrow little cot I had back in my own tent.

Lucian cleared his throat, and when I looked back at him, I saw that he looked flustered, which he never did.

“Will you sit?” he said, gesturing toward a small couch in the corner of the tent.

I sat, and he sat beside me. We were quiet for a moment.

“Can I get you anything?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “I just came to talk to you.”

Lucian nodded. “Yes, I’ll admit I do have some questions for you.”

I swallowed hard. “What questions?”

“Well, to start with—why did you run off?”

I took a deep breath. “Yes, about that—”

“Actually”—Lucian held up a hand—“it’s okay. I understand.”

I stared at him. “You understand what?”

“It was too much for you,” he said simply.

I wasn’t sure what that was supposed to mean. I shifted my position on the hard couch. I wanted to tell him about Helix and how he’d attacked Greyson, but before I could say anything, Lucian reached forward and trailed his fingers down my cheek.

His touch was soft—barely there—but I felt a sudden jolt, like I’d been struck by lightning. If there had been any doubt before, it was suddenly gone. I *definitely* felt something between Lucian and me. In a way, it reminded me of the pull I felt toward Greyson—it felt like a kind of bond, though I didn’t know which of the two was stronger.

My head spun. My thoughts were getting mixed up. I’d come here to talk, but my body tingled, and right now, I didn’t feel like talking at all.

Lucian’s eyes flashed, and he leaned in and kissed me. I was startled, but not in a way that made me want to pull away. I stayed where I was. My wolf and I were curious about what might happen next.

His hands cradled my face, then moved slowly down to my shoulders, then down my arms. They slid around my waist and snaked their way up my back, and it felt like he was leaving trails of fire where he touched me. Every bit of skin he touched seemed to burn, like flames were licking me, caressing me.

“I can’t help but feel drawn to you,” he whispered, leaning so close I could feel the tickle of his breath on my ear. “I lie awake at night, tormented with the knowledge that I can do nothing more than picture you, instead of being able to touch you—like this.”

He ran his hands down the length of my thighs, and I sucked in a breath as a series of strange sensations washed over me.

He brushed a kiss onto my lips. “I know you’re new to all of this, Elle. But I do wish you would trust me. I hope you know that I will do whatever it takes to win your heart.”

Heat flooded me. It felt like I was sick with a fever, but I knew that wasn’t it. Did all humans feel this way? I didn’t have a fever, and I wasn’t sick. I was afraid to move—I liked the way he was touching me, and I was worried that if I moved, he would stop. My wolf didn’t want him to.

But then—to my dismay—he did stop. He removed his hands from my body and leaned back. I felt cold and sad, and for a moment, I thought I might start to cry.

He looked at me for a second, then cupped my chin. “Elle, there’s something I want to try with you. Will you let me?”

**Episode 3937**

As I looked up at Greyson, I couldn’t quite tell if he was teasing me. I’d never heard of the Wolf Moon, and it sounded… Well, it sounded a little on the nose.

“It’s a real thing,” he said, smiling when he saw the wary expression on my face. “It’s what January’s full moon is called. It got the name because Native Americans would hear wolves howl on cold winter nights, when the moon was full. They thought the wolves were howling because they were hungry, but…” He shook his head. “We know that’s not why wolves howl.”

“Wow,” I breathed, looking up at the sky. “That’s so romantic.”

Greyson’s chuckle sounded warm. “Oh, I don’t know about that. There are other names for January’s full moon—the Ice Moon, the Hard Moon, the Cold Moon, the Freeze-Up Moon…”

I leaned back against his chest, glad to have the heat from his body radiating into me. “Is there something special about this moon? I mean, why does it get its own name?”

“It’s the first full moon of the year,” he pointed out.

“I guess that makes it special,” I mused, looking up at the bright light with renewed interest. “But I wonder if there’s more to it than that.”

“What do you mean?”  
 “I mean, does it have anything to do with werewolves?”

Greyson was quiet for a moment. “That depends on what you believe.”

I smiled. “I guess I have no choice but to believe. Though not too long ago, I was sure that werewolves were fictional.”

Greyson’s laugh was a low rumble. “I’m glad I made you a believer.”

I twisted around to look up at his face. “I’m tempted to kiss you, but I need to know what the Wolf Moon is supposed to do to people before I decide if it’s safe or not.”

Greyson looked thoughtful. “Everything I know is rumor—stories, really.”

“What are the stories?”

“One of them says that werewolves tend to be more fertile during the Wolf Moon.”

“*Fertile?*” I repeated, raising a brow. “As in having *babies*?”

Greyson nodded, and my thoughts went to Rowena. I wondered if I should warn her about this. Given what had happened, it seemed pretty relevant.

“Some believe that the moon makes the Alphas more aggressive,” Greyson continued. “But I don’t know about that. We’re all naturally aggressive, so it’s kind of hard to tell the difference.”

I laughed at that. “Yeah, I can see that.”

Greyson looked up at the moon. “Others believe that it makes us more powerful when we’re shifted.”

I took this in. “Okay. You’ve told me what other people think, but what about you?”

He looked down at me. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, you’ve lived through years of Wolf Moons—what do *you* think they do? What do you believe?”

Greyson searched my face for a moment, then he leaned down and pressed a kiss to my neck, just below my ear. I shivered.

“I believe that you’ve never looked more beautiful than you do at this moment,” he said, his voice low and husky.

My entire body flushed as he brushed his lips against mine. Part of me wanted to lean into him and deepen the kiss, to see where his mouth wanted to take me, but I pulled away.

“What do you think?” I asked again. “Do you think the Wolf Moon has some kind of supernatural power?”

He looked up, considering my words. “I don’t know. I’ve never been a superstitious person. I find that people often do what they do because of the ideas they believe in.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said, frowning.

“Like, if you believe the Wolf Moon makes you more aggressive, then you feel more aggressive. If you believe the Wolf Moon makes you stronger, then you feel stronger.” He thought for a moment, then looked down at me. “But one way or another, I’ll be keeping an eye on you. Wolf Moon or not, there’s already enough tension here, with all these packs shoved in together. All these Alphas in one place. And I wouldn’t bet any money that the Wolf Moon is *only* a myth.”

I studied his grave expression. I still wasn’t sure if he was teasing me, but I figured he was right about people acting out what they believed to be true—whether it was real or not. I made a mental note to stay vigilant tomorrow night. You never knew what might happen, especially where werewolves were concerned.

“If you had to choose,” I wondered, “which legend would you want to be true?”

Greyson smiled, and his eyes lit with a sudden mischievous spark. “Oh, I think the one about being more fertile sounds like the most fun.”

I rolled my eyes and playfully swatted his arm. “*Greyson!* I’m not ready to start a family.”

“I know that, but shouldn’t we get in as much practice as possible?”

Before I could answer, he bent and swept me into his arms, then turned and carried me back into the tent.

I slipped my arm around his neck with a smile. “Well, practice makes perfect, right?”

Greyson looked shocked. “And here I thought I was perfect already. Maybe I just need to try a little harder.”

And with that, he kissed me, then lowered me onto our bedding.

\*\*\*

The next day dawned bright and cold. The sky was a bright blue bowl overhead when I stepped out of my tent, and as I headed toward the mess tent, I couldn’t help but notice that a lot of people were looking pretty rough around the edges.

I wondered if that was because of Big Mac’s powerful moonshine or the wild partying that had gone on at Paige and Duke’s party.

“I’m going to kill you.”

I looked up in surprise. Lola had fallen into step beside me, and she was glaring at me. Up close, I could see that she looked tired—pale face, puffy eyes, bedhead…

“What?” I said.

“You kept me up all night, Cali.”

My cheeks flushed. “Sorry.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You’re not sorry. You’re glowing. It makes me sick.”

I laughed. “Okay, I’m sorry I kept you up—I’m *not* sorry about the circumstances under which you were kept up.”

Lola shook her head. “Outrageous,” she muttered. “Hey, Ravi!” she called, waving.

Ravi waved back and jogged toward us. “Morning.”

I eyed him. “Are you wearing the same clothes as yesterday?”

“And why are you coming from the direction of the Samara tents?” Lola asked.

“There you are, Ravi,” Rishika said, striding over with Artemis at her side. “Where were you last night?”

Ravi looked at the four of us and smiled awkwardly. “Uh, well… Marissa and I… You know.”

Rishika’s eyes went wide. “Wait—you slept with the enemy?” she asked, punching him in the arm.

“Sorry.” Ravi chuckled, rubbing his arm and not looking particularly apologetic. “In my defense, the Samaras aren’t actually our enemies. They’re our allies.”

“Still,” Artemis said, glancing at me.

“Listen, we all need to be extra careful today,” I said, ignoring Artemis and looking around at everyone.

“Why?” Lola asked.

“It’s the start of the Wolf Moon,” I said.

“Oh god,” Rishika groaned, rolling her eyes. “Cali, don’t tell me you actually buy into any of that.”

“What?” I asked, surprised by her contempt.

“It’s all fairy-tale bullshit,” she said. “Alphas just keep telling the stories because they’re a handy excuse for their bad behavior.”

“That’s not true,” Ravi said, looking offended. “The effects of the Wolf Moon are real.”

“Ravi, come on, man,” Rishika started, laughing.

“Hey, my mom believed in the Wolf Moon, and she was as tough and smart as they came,” Ravi said. “She always said I never would’ve been born if not for the Wolf Moon.”

“And what a tragedy that would’ve been,” Artemis teased.

“Yeah, think of poor Marissa,” Lola said, ruffling Ravi’s hair. “She would have been so lonely last night, with no Ravi in the world.”

He grinned. “Luckily, none of you will ever have to know the pain of living in a world without Ravi.”

We laughed, and the five of us headed toward the mess tent. As we approached, I spotted Cesaries standing near the entrance. He was with a couple of other wolves I recognized as council members. They were huddled together a ways apart from anyone else, and they were speaking animatedly.

“What’s going on?” I asked, tipping my chin toward the small group. I wondered if they’d found out about what had happened last night—either with Helix, or with Dayton and Xavier. But I didn’t know how much the others knew about those incidents, so I kept those questions to myself.

“I don’t know,” Ravi said, eyeing Cesaries. He shrugged. “I can’t be sure, but it’s probably got something to do with Knox’s trial.”

“Oh, right,” Artemis said. “I’d almost forgotten about that. When does that start?”

Ravi looked at her. “Today.”

**Episode 3938**

**Xavier**

“Xavier, I can’t wait any longer,” Ava panted as she arched beneath me.

I slowed my rhythm, liking how this made her suck in her breath.

“You can’t wait even a minute longer?” I asked teasingly.

She shook her head and dug her nails into my back. “No, I can’t,” she gasped. “I can’t. Oh god, Xavier.”

The way her body tightened around me as she came pushed me over the edge. I rocked inside her, totally lost in the moment. I thought of nothing besides the softness of her skin, the smell of her hair, and the way I felt inside her. It was incredible, and I gave myself over to it completely.

“Fuck,” I moaned. “*Fuck*, Ava.”

She wrapped her legs around my waist, pulling me deeper, and it was like a volcano erupting. I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, couldn’t speak. There was nothing but the woman beneath me and the pleasure coursing through me. It was like the whole world had fallen away, leaving nothing but the two of us.

When I finished and finally opened my eyes, Ava was smiling up at me.

“Having fun?” she asked with a wry smile.

I chuckled and dropped down to lie next to her on the narrow cot. “You could say that. What about you?”

“Without a doubt,” she assured me.

I took a deep breath, feeling lighter than I had in a long time. And it wasn’t the post-orgasm endorphins that were making me feel that way—okay, it wasn’t *just* the post-orgasm endorphins. Ava and I had woken up to a bright morning, and things between us felt good. There was nothing remaining of the heaviness we’d dealt with yesterday, and when she’d woken me up by slipping off my pants, I’d been more than enthusiastic.

I just felt good—and *that* felt good in and of itself.

In the silence of the early morning, Ava’s stomach rumbled.

I looked at her, and she looked back at me, surprised.

“I guess I’m hungry,” she said, resting her hand on her bare stomach. “I hope we didn’t miss breakfast.”

“Oh, would you rather have had breakfast?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “Because I don’t remember you mentioning that when we woke up and then you were giving me a hand job.”

She rolled her eyes and swatted my arm. “I mean, why can’t I have both? And if we hurry, we can probably still make it before they pack everything away. Come on,” she said, struggling to sit up. The cot was narrow, and with both of us in it, the valley it created was deep.

“Okay,” I said with a groan, sitting up.

I’d just swung my feet to the ground when Ava put her hand on my arm.

“Xavier? When did you get a tattoo?” she asked, a curious look on her face.

I frowned at her. “A tattoo? What are you talking about?”

“There,” she said pointing. She grabbed her bag and pulled it toward her, rifled around in it for a moment, then pulled out a hand mirror. “Look.”

I took the mirror and angled it so I could look at the spot she was pointing to. In a moment, I saw what she was talking about. There was a small crescent moon shape behind my ear. I stared at it for a long moment, baffled. What the hell *was* that? When *had* I gotten a tattoo?

Wait—shit. I knew when I’d gotten it. When I’d made that deal with Adéluce, I’d felt something sting just behind my ear. I hadn’t known what it was at the time, and then with everything else going on, I’d forgotten all about it.

Ava was still looking at me inquiringly, but I wasn’t going to tell her where I’d actually gotten it, so I just shrugged. “I’ve always had it.”

“Really?” she asked, surprised. “I’ve never noticed it.”

“Yeah, it’s just a birthmark or something. Maybe my hair’s always covered it,” I added. I didn’t like the suspicious way she was looking at me.

This finally seemed to satisfy her. “I like it. It’s fitting, a werewolf with a crescent moon birthmark.” She leaned forward and kissed it gently, then got to her feet. “I need to get ready for the trial.”

“Oh yeah, the trial,” I said, surprised. I’d almost forgotten it was due to start today. With everything going on, I hadn’t given Knox a single thought. But I knew Ava was worried about her cousin—no matter how obnoxious he was.

“You know, I originally wanted Knox to be burned at the stake for what he did,” I said, getting to my feet.

Ava whipped around, and I recognized the inner conflict in her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly. “I know this is hard for you. I know you want to do what’s right, and I’m going to support you—whatever you decide to say. Or not to say.”

She eyed me. “I feel like you’re trying too hard, Xavier.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh my god, Ava. I’m trying to be sincere here.”

She half-smiled and leaned in for a kiss. “Are you?”

I slid my hand around her neck and tangled it in her hair as I returned her kiss. It was deep and hungry, and I could already feel my wolf growing restless again.

*Oh my god, we* just *got laid. Calm down*, I ordered.

Ava pulled away from the kiss. She sat down on the cot and looked up at me. “Did I tell you that my Aunt Leona wants me to lie during the trial?”

“*What?*”

She nodded. “She wants me to tell the council that Knox was the real victim.”

I snorted with contempt. “That’d be a tough sell.” I shook my head. “I don’t know your aunt, Ava, but I have to say—I don’t like her.”

“I know,” Ava said heavily.

“It’s not like Knox was subtle in his methods or anything,” I said. “Taking werewolf steroids to cheat in the Iudicium, blatantly ignoring what was best for the pack, nearly starting a *pack war*…”

Ava looked at me out of the corner of her eye as she reached for a pair of jeans. “What are you, the prosecution’s star witness?”

I shrugged. “Listen, all I’m saying is that people know what Knox did. It’s not a secret. What about Knox’s father? How’s he trying to convince you to perjure yourself?”

Pain flashed across Ava’s dark eyes. She pulled a sweatshirt over her head. “He’s refusing to speak to me,” she said quietly.

She looked devastated, and I felt for her. Ava had lost so much—her family, her pack. She was desperate for connection, and Knox and his parents were the only family she had left, and they’d turned against her.

“Hey, you should do whatever you think is best,” I said quietly. “Whatever that is. I won’t judge you for your decision.”

She looked up at me for a moment, then nodded. “I haven’t decided what I’m going to say yet, but thank you. It’s really good to hear that you’ll have my back no matter what.” She took a deep breath and gave her head a shake. “Anyway, should we go get breakfast?”  
 “I’m not really hungry,” I told her. “I think I might go for a run. Do you want to come?”

“I do, but I’m starving,” she moaned, pressing her hand to the flat plane of her stomach.

“Okay, I’ll catch up with you later,” I said.

I leaned in to give her a kiss, then she headed out of the tent. I pulled on joggers, a T-shirt, and running shoes, then headed out myself. I struck out toward the woods, avoiding the main camp area. I liked running here, both in my wolf form and my human form. The terrain was rough and challenging and kept me focused on the task at hand.

I took a switchback that sloped steeply upward. The air was thin but cold and clean, and I let it fill my lungs.

Before I knew it, I’d reached the crest of the hill. I paused on the overlook, stopping for a moment to catch my breath. It was beautiful here—the sky was bright blue and completely devoid of clouds, and the Snake River lay below me, winding through the gorge. The bright morning sun cast everything in warm, golden light, and I looked around, marveling at it all.

Sometimes I let myself get so caught up in my own troubles that I forgot about the rest of the world. I was a werewolf—I was connected to the land. I needed to take more time to find my place in the natural world, even when the human shit was crowding in. *Especially* then.

I took a deep breath. Things felt… good*.* Maybe this was the way things were always supposed to be for me. Maybe this was as good as things could get.

Maybe I was supposed to be with Ava.

**Episode 3939**

**Greyson**

The mess tent was crowded when I arrived, and I stopped in the doorway and looked around, trying to spot Cali in the crush of werewolves. I’d wanted a few minutes alone in our tent to think about the Helix situation, so Cali had headed out without me.

There seemed to be a big line of people waiting for coffee, and I couldn’t help but notice that there were a lot of red eyes and hazy expressions as people waited for a cup. Wolves always partied hard at the summit, but last night had been extra crazy, and now people were paying the price.

A plate crashed somewhere, shattering into pieces, and half the wolves in the tent winced at the loud noise. I shook my head. Big Mac’s moonshine was popular, but it had its drawbacks.

I still didn’t quite know what to do about Helix. I knew he was naive and impressionable, and that counted for something, but he’d attacked me out of nowhere, and I couldn’t just forget that. I was torn between taking what had happened to the council and letting them deal with it and just taking care of things myself.

Though when Cali had brought up Evan, it had made me wonder if there *was* a connection between Helix’s odd behavior and the death of the werewolf. All I knew was that there were some questions I needed answered.

Regardless, I wanted to talk to Elle. She was close to Helix and had been worried about what she’d seen last night, and I wanted to hash things out with her. I looked around and spotted her sitting at a table with the other Redwoods. It was a relief to see her there. When I’d sent her back to her tent last night, she’d looked so hesitant, I’d been a little worried that she’d go after Helix on her own.

When I looked around again, I caught sight of Cali. She was standing at one of the buffet tables, seemingly waiting for a waffle to finish cooking, and she smiled at me when I caught her eye. I waved at her, signaled that I’d be with her in a moment, then made my way toward Elle.

But as I drew closer to Elle, something in the air slowed me down. I sniffed—it was Lucian. I could smell him. I looked around, but I couldn’t see him. He didn’t usually eat in the mess tent with the rest of the wolves. I didn’t know *what* he did. Armin probably squeezed fresh juice for him or some dumb shit like that. So where the *hell* was that scent coming from—

Oh god, it was Elle. The realization hit me like a ton of bricks. *Elle* smelled like Lucian. His scent was all over her. My hackles rose. What the *hell*? Why did she smell like that guy?

I didn’t want to make a scene, but I just couldn’t wrap my head around this—whatever the hell *this* was.

I stepped closer to the table. “Ravi, move down, would you? I want to talk to Elle.”

Grabbing his plate, Ravi scooted down the bench, and I took his seat, next to Elle. Lucian’s scent was nearly overpowering now, and it turned my stomach.

I guess I could forget about breakfast—the smell of Lucian had made me lose my appetite.

I leaned toward Elle. “Tell me you went back to your tent last night and stayed there.”

Elle looked over at me, her expression blank. “Why? Do you want me to lie to you?”

I felt a headache climbing up the back of my skull. “You went to Lucian?”

She nodded.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. “Can you explain why you did that?”  
 She sighed. “I hope you’re not too upset, Greyson. I know you told me to go to sleep, but I just wasn’t tired. And I wanted to see Lucian.”

“But *why*?” I asked, baffled.

She shrugged. “We kissed.”

*Oh god.* My anger began to mount. “Did he do anything else?”

Elle eyed me. “Like what?”

I felt myself cringing. I wanted to get ahold of the situation, but I did *not* want to know the details. Elle was plenty old enough, but there was just something about it being… *Lucian* that I hated. “I want to make sure you realize what you’re getting yourself into, Elle.”

Elle took this in. “Lucian didn’t do anything that I didn’t want.”

“And why did you go to him?” I asked again. “Was it only for… that?”

“I went because of what happened with Helix,” she said. “And because of the pack.”

I frowned at her. “What does Helix or the pack have to do with you kissing Lucian?”

“The alliance,” she said, like this was perfectly obvious. “We need the Vanguards to help fight the Bitterfangs, right?”

I stared at her, stunned. “You went to Lucian because you wanted to be sure he wouldn’tbreak the alliance?”

She gave a kind of half-shrug, but she didn’t deny it. I opened my mouth, but no words came out. I was too shocked. I didn’t know if I was more upset by the fact that she’d taken it upon herself to shore up the alliance, or that she’d made out—and possibly done more than that—with that annoying little princeling.

Elle sighed. “I did what I felt I had to do. I know I have some influence over Lucian—even though I don’t totally understand it—and I used that influence to help protect our pack. Isn’t that what wolves do for their packs?”

I gaped at her. “I never asked you to do that, Elle. And I don’t want you to do it again, got it?”  
 She frowned and looked like she was about to argue, so I spoke quickly.

“It’s one thing if you genuinely want to be with Lucian, Elle. That’s—*okay*,” I said with difficulty. “But it’s another thing if you’re doing it as part of some strategic plan for the pack. That’s *not* okay—you deserve better than that.”

Her frown had changed—now, she just looked deeply confused. “Can it be both?”

I thought about her words. So it wasn’t that she’d gone to Lucian *just* because of the alliance—she really was drawn to him, for whatever batshit reason. They had a connection, and I needed to stop letting my own conflicted feelings interfere with that.

I ran an agitated hand through my hair. I knew holding myself back wasn’t going to be easy, though. Whether it was the sire bond or something else, I just couldn’t accept the idea of Elle and Lucian together. I didn’t like the guy—he was smarmy and untrustworthy, and I just knew too much about him.

Elle looked down at her plate. It didn’t look as though she’d eaten much. Her sausages and toast were untouched. “Lucian says that we’re meant to be together.”

I snorted with derision. *Of course* Lucian had said that. I could practically hear his voice in my head.

“When did he tell you that?” I asked, figuring he’d probably used that line as a ploy to seduce her.

I could picture the guy, wearing one of the flowing silk robes he seemed to favor, trying to impress Elle with his usual shtick of self-importance and pseudo-romantic bullshit. Then I thought of Elle and Lucian kissing, and I had to swallow down the bile that welled up in my throat.

“He told me when I was leaving,” Elle said. “He mind linked with me.”

For a moment, the din of the mess hall disappeared. My ears rang like I’d just been punched—hard. It felt like all my thoughts had emptied out, and the only thing I could hear was Elle saying, *He mind linked with me*, over and over and over again.

“Are—are you sure?” I choked out.

I glanced down the table, to where Lola and Jay and Ravi were chatting with Rishika and Artemis. They all looked occupied, and I desperately hoped they were and that they hadn’t heard at least the most recent part of this insane conversation.

“Of course I’m sure,” Elle said. “I heard him as clearly as I’m hearing you, Greyson. And I mind linked back. I told him that it had been fun to kiss him.”

I gritted my teeth so hard it made my head ache. I sifted through my ragged thoughts. It wasn’t jealousy I was feeling. My own kiss with Elle had definitely *not* been fun, and I was glad about that, so I knew it wasn’t that I wanted to be the one kissing her.

What I was feeling was something else entirely, and I needed to figure out what the hell I was going to do next. If Elle and Lucian could mind link in human form, then I had a whole new problem on my hands. That could only mean one thing. Lucian had been right all along—Elle *was* his mate.

**Episode 3940**

I finally got my waffle and moved down the buffet line, loading it up with strawberries and blueberries, then I topped the fruit with fresh whipped cream. For a werewolf summit, this place was surprisingly well stocked—who was even making all this food? The council? *No, Cali, don’t look a gift buffet in the mouth.*

I moved to another table to get crispy bacon, soft scrambled eggs, hot buttered toast, and a warm pastry. By the time I was finished, my plate was piled almost embarrassingly high, but I had a feeling I wouldn’t have any trouble finishing the food. I was starving. My extended nocturnal activities with Greyson had apparently burned a lot of calories, and I was famished.

The mess tent was full of wolves milling around, coming in and out, and as I moved down the line to get juice, I saw Marissa come in with a few Samara wolves. I scanned the group behind the wolf, but I didn’t see Xavier or Ava. That was probably for the best. I’d managed to push all the simmering conflict out of my mind last night, and I didn’t want to get angry again by remembering it. Not now, not after the night I’d just had. Not when I was feeling so good this morning.

It had been amazing to be with Greyson last night. Lola yelling at us notwithstanding, it had felt so great to be together so freely, without anything coming between us.

I reached for a glass of orange juice, but my grip faltered a bit as my hand closed around the cool glass. Xavier and I had once experienced moments like that. Moments of pure connection. My heart seemed to skip a beat as I remembered how it had been when I’d first met him, in those heady days when it had just been the two of us. Things used to be that blissful with us, too—

I squeezed my eyes shut. *Stop it, Cali*, I told myself. I couldn’t do this. I couldn’t dwell on the past. I had to stay in the moment. I opened my eyes and gave my head a little shake.

I looked up in time to see Honora appear on the other side of the table. My breath caught as she reached for a glass of juice, and when she looked up, our eyes met across the table.

For a moment, she looked as stunned as I felt, but then her expression changed to one of smug satisfaction, and she raised a mocking eyebrow. “Caliana. I’m surprised to see you here. As a matter of fact, I’m surprised to see any of the Redwoods here this morning.”

“Excuse me?” I said quietly.

“I would’ve thought you’d all be far too embarrassed to show your faces in front of the other packs after such a humiliating loss to the Bitterfang team.”

I held her challenging gaze. “If anyone should be ashamed, it’s the entire Bitterfang pack. You won by cheating, and everyone knows it. Is thatsomething you’re *proud* of?”

Her mouth twitched. It was small, but it was enough to let me know I’d hit the target I’d been aiming for.

“You should be careful,” she said coolly, recovering herself. “There are many here who disapprove of your wanton ways.” She grasped her fork like a dagger and drove it into a chunk of bloody beef.

The sight of it turned my stomach, but I refused to look away. “The only person who should be careful is you,” I countered. “There are many here who think you and your pack are wrong—believing as you do in such outdated traditions.” I leaned forward, lowering my voice. “And while I know you think you’re good at intimidating people, we won’t be intimidated.”

Then I turned on my heel and strode away before Honora could say anything else. I took a deep breath, trying to shake off the rattled feeling the confrontation had left me with. Apparently, that took up all my attention, because I ran smack into someone.

I looked up, grasping my breakfast plate. I was desperate not to drop everything I was holding—that would really undercut the cool “fuck you” I’d just delivered to Honora.

“Oh, Rowena, hey!” I said, steadying my plate. “Sorry about that. I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

“Hey, Cali. No problem. Thanks again for your help last night with…” She glanced around. “You know.”

“Sure,” I said. “I’m glad I was able to help. Did you end up talking to Porter about…” Now *I* glanced around. “You know?”

Rowena glanced toward the Cobalt pack’s table where her husband sat. “No, I didn’t,” she admitted.

“Really?” I said. “Maybe you should. I’ve learned from experience that it’s never a good idea to keep secrets from your mate.”

“I know,” Rowena said, looking pained as she turned back toward me. “I’m just nervous. That’s all.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I mean, I’m just relieved it was a false alarm,” she said.

I took that in. I liked to think that if I ever had a pregnancy scare of my own, I’d tell my mate. I mean, I liked to *think* I would, but I knew I’d probably be too nervous, just like Rowena. Though Greyson would probably be *thrilled* if he heard he was going to be a father. Thankfully, he wasn’t going to be—not anytime soon. He might’ve been thrilled with that idea, but I wasn’t ready for that—not yet.

“Are you going to the trial?” Rowena asked me.

“Oh, yeah, the trial’s today,” I said. “I keep forgetting.”

“Everyone’s talking about it.”

“Yeah, I’m going,” I said. “Greyson will be testifying, so I’ll be there.”

Rowena leaned toward me and lowered her voice. “I heard that Knox could be sentenced to death for what he did.”

I swallowed hard. “I—I hadn’t heard that.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know, it could just be rumors. Though you never know. The council could decide to be harsh if they feel like they need to prove something or set an example. That’s what the witch council would do. Anyway.” She looked down at my plate. “I’m keeping you from your breakfast. It’s going to get cold, with all my talking. Maybe we can catch up properly later, after the trial.”

She turned and had just started to walk away, but I had a sudden thought and hurried after her.

“Rowena! Hang on.” I tipped my head toward a less crowded corner. “I do want to talk later. I actually wanted to talk to you about my Luna mark.”

Rowena’s surprise disappeared, and she smiled. “I haven’t said a word to anyone about it, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“No, no, that’s not it,” I assured her. “No, I—” I looked around. “I don’t want to talk about it here. Later? After the trial?”

Rowena nodded. “Yeah, that’s fine. I’ll find you then.” She smiled again. “I’m going to go get some breakfast. I’ll see you later.”

I watched her go and took a deep breath. I didn’t know if a witch surviving a Luna mark had any bearing on my situation, but I figured it would be useful to know what it was like for any non-werewolf supernatural to go through the Luna ceremony.

A witch and a Fae were as different as they came, but one thing we had in common was *not* being wolves.

Besides, Rowena being a witch could potentially be useful in other ways. Maybe she knew protection spells or enchantments to help me get through the ceremony.

My breakfast *was g*etting cold, so I headed across the dining tent toward Greyson and the rest of the Redwoods. I was still starving, so I took a huge bite of my pastry as I walked. I’d just shoved about half of it into my mouth when I saw Xavier walk into the tent.

I froze in my tracks and nearly spat out the pastry.

*Get it together, Cali!*

As I swallowed hastily, he met my eyes. We looked at each other for a moment, and I saw no emotions on his face. There was no spark of recognition in his eyes, no angst, no anger, no nothing. It was like he was looking at a blank wall. Only he wasn’t looking at a wall—he was looking at me.

And then he wasn’t. He looked away and turned toward where the Samaras were sitting, eating their breakfast.

I shook my head and continued toward my table. But I only made it a few steps before it hit me—other than nearly choking on a cheese Danish, nothing had happened when I’d seen Xavier.

I stood still for a moment, sifting through my feelings. Was that real? Was that true? I’d been surprised, sure, but no—I didn’t feel devastated.

My mind spun. What did that mean? Did it mean—*could* it mean—that I was actually done with Xavier?

# **Episode 3941**

*Am I really done with Xavier?*

As soon as the words raced through my mind, I *knew* I wasn’t. The very concept of being *done* with him was so wrong; the opposite of how I felt and what I ultimately wanted. No, it wasn’t that I was done with Xavier. It was that I didn’t feel anything about him at all.

It was like I’d squashed all my thoughts and feelings away in some faraway corner of my mind. And why shouldn’t I? Every time I looked at Xavier or tried to speak with him or even just *thought* of him, hurt followed. And despite my efforts, it didn’t seem like that was going to change anytime soon, if ever. I was stuck seeing him (and Ava, ugh) for the remainder of the summit, however long that would be. I couldn’t spend the rest of my time here feeling like I was dragging my heart through broken glass every time our paths crossed. It wasn’t fair to me, or to Greyson, or to the pack I was supposed to be leading as Luna.

*So, Xavier-related feelings, meet Pandora’s Box. Enjoy being locked up. I know I’d love a break from being in pain all the time.*

I took a seat next to Greyson at the Redwood table. He was in the middle of a conversation with Elle, but I wasn’t really listening. My thoughts were still tangled up in that blank look Xavier had given me. I could feel him at the Samara table, and part of me desperately wanted to look over to see if he was looking at me—but that was exactly what I’d just told myself I wouldn’t do. I wouldn’t engage with him, wouldn’t place any hopes or expectations on someone who seemed determined to push me out of his life as coldly and cruelly as possible. And even though that was a heavy truth to bear, I didn’t feel anything as I acknowledged it to myself.

It was strange, still wanting to connect with him but not feeling anything about it. It was like my body knew better than my brain—and thank god for that. Some part of me needed to have two feet in reality, even if denial felt easier.

Because I was finally realizing it wasn’t easier, holding on to the hope that Xavier and I could work things out. That if I could just understand him, then everything would get better, and my heart wouldn’t be smashed into increasingly smaller pieces every time I saw him. I wasn’t doing anyone any favors by denying the truth, least of all myself.

*It’s better this way*.

I’d been so afraid of admitting the truth, of acknowledging that Xavier truly didn’t want me anymore and our future together had disappeared. I’d been afraid of what that would mean. Of how badly it would hurt to accept it rather than holding on to that fool’s hope that things would get better.

But the thing was, it didn’t hurt. Not really. I wasn’t sad about it, but I wasn’t happy, either. I wasn’t over Xavier, and I certainly wasn’t happy for him and Ava. I was just numb. He’d successfully put me in defense mode, made my emotions shut down completely.

*Is feeling nothing better than feeling hurt?* It seemed like a bit of a copout. Unhealthy, probably. But there was no denying how nice it was to have a reprieve.

Greyson shifted next to me, entwining his fingers with mine. I felt a surge of warmth for him, so strong it almost took my breath away. How could I feel so wholly in love with one mate, and capable of completely burying my feelings around the other? Was this just how survival mode worked? Or did it have something to do with the *due destini*?

I allowed myself to think about my love for Xavier—a love I’d always thought burned just as bright as my feelings for Greyson—and the pain I’d begun to associate with it. I could picture the box in my mind where my love was shut up tight. I knew it was there—waiting to be unlocked, to unleash all my heartache—but right now, I couldn’t do anything with it.

And even worse, I wasn’t sure if I wanted to.

Someone squeezed my hand. “Cali.”

I was pulled out of my thoughts by the sound of Greyson’s voice, by the sensation of his hand on mine.

“What’s up?” I asked.

He watched my face carefully, clearly concerned. “I’ve been calling your name for a few seconds. Are you feeling all right? What’s going on in that head of yours?”

I realized then that Elle was no longer sitting beside him. I must’ve been caught up in my own thoughts for quite some time.

“Oh, I’m fine,” I said airily, though the words tasted like a lie. “I’m going to have to ask the chef what’s in those croissants—they were so good that everything else stopped existing for a second.”

He laughed but sobered just as quickly. Something like anxiety churned in my stomach—another reminder that I *could* feel things, at least where Greyson was concerned. Did he not believe me?

But instead of pressing the issue, he said, “I was saying, they’re mates.”

I frowned, confused. Clearly, I’d missed out on more than I’d thought. “Umm… Xavier and Ava? I know.”

“Not them,” Greyson said with a look of disgust. “Worse.”

I almost laughed. “Which mate pairing could possibly be worse than those two?”

“Elle and *Lucian*.” He spat the Vanguard Alpha’s name like it was a curse. “They really are mates.”

My eyes widened, and all thoughts of Xavier disappeared. “Seriously? I thought they were just attracted to each other. I’m pretty sure Elle is just testing the waters. Remember, she’s new to all of this. And I really do think Lucian is…” I trailed off.

Greyson quirked a brow, amused. “He’s what?”

I shrugged. “An extremely willing participant? Personally, I don’t get it, but if Elle wants someone to experiment with, it’s her choice.”

Greyson shook his head. “No, you don’t understand. There’s a lot more between them than just attraction. They mind linked. As humans.”

I gasped. “*What?*”

Could that really be true, or was this another of Lucian’s tricks? Then again, mind linking as humans was what had initially told me that Greyson and I were mates. If what he was saying was true, then there probably wasn’t much we could do.

“So Lucian’s been right about it this whole time,” I said. “Which is shocking… Does Elle want that?”

“It seems like she does, but do you think she understands fully what being mates entails?” he asked. “She didn’t turn into a werewolf that long ago… I just worry about her still understanding everything that can come with being human.”

“I mean, there was a learning curve after she turned,” I said. “There’s a lot about the human world that’s… shocking. Even to me sometimes. Elle’s had a lot to absorb, that’s for sure. But I think she continues to show that she’s her own, strong person who makes her own decisions. Even decisions we might not like—like Lucian.”

Greyson grimaced. “I know she’s strong. And, look, Elle can experiment if she wants—you’re right about that. But Lucian wants more than experimentation. He wants Elle. Wants to be with her. Like, forever. He wants to get to that proposal as soon as possible.”

*Oh. Right.* That much, I already knew. It was just that things had been so crazy that I’d somehow forgotten. And really, how *could* I forget that huge rock? It was a testament to what a nightmare the summit had been so far that that little detail had managed to slip my mind.

“Are you worried about Lucian’s feelings and Elle’s ability to consent since she’s only just turned?” I asked.

Greyson shook his head. “No, Elle’s old enough, and I know she would never do something she didn’t want to do. It’s just… I can’t get past that it’s *Lucian.*”

“I know what you mean,” I mumbled.   
 “I hope the spoiled princeling gets his stupid heart broken, but I also don’t want this to blow up in anyone’s face. It already seems like too many things are about to fall into chaos. And Elle…” He looked like he wanted to say more, but he hesitated.

“Elle, what?” I pressed.

“I’m also worried she thinks she should be with Lucian for the sake of the alliance. She’s the daughter of an Alpha wolf; I know she takes the idea of duty seriously.”

I tensed. “Wait, are you saying you don’t think she actually wants to do this?”

“No, I think she wants Lucian on some level—they *are* mates. The problem is, I can’t really tell if she’s more motivated by the prospect of helping the Redwoods, or by an actual desire to be with him.”

“Well, it’s still her choice,” I said. “As long as there’s a part of her that wants it, we can’t really tell her no. That’s not fair. I wish we could stop her, but it’s really not our place.”

A small voice in my head asked if there was another reason why Greyson was up in arms about all of this. *Does this have something to do with his sire bond with Elle? Is he jealous of Lucian? Is that really why he’s upset?*

I shook my head to clear away the thought. That wasn’t a road I wanted to venture down right now. I had to trust my mate, and he had to trust his pack member.

Greyson looked like he was going to say something more, but then a voice boomed over the din of the mess tent.

“The trial of Knox Voss is about to begin!” someone shouted. “Greyson Evers and Ava Reed, please report to Samson Cesaries!”

# **Episode 3942**

**Greyson**

I stood up with Cali, taking her hand as we left the tent. She couldn’t come with me to meet Cesaries, but I wanted to keep her close for as long as possible. The summit hadn’t been easy for her in any way, what with her role as fake Luna, the ongoing tensions with the Bitterfang pack, Xavier’s nonsense, and the fact that most summits were barely tolerable even for the most seasoned werewolves.

Werewolves were hot-blooded, territorial creatures, usually with chips on our shoulders and shitty attitudes to match. Being forced together for the summit didn’t help, though I could see the value in developing friendly relationships with other packs—assuming they didn’t turn around and stab you in the back the moment it was convenient.

As a half-Fae non-wolf who was still new to so many aspects of the wolf world, I’d always known Cali would have her work cut out for her, attending the summit. And that had been *before* Xavier had stomped on her heart, cut ties with the Redwood pack, and then shown up unexpectedly at the summit as the new Samara Alpha, with Ava by his side.

This summit was turning into one big pile-on, with Cali and me at the center. So sue me if I wanted to hold on to the one piece of this snowballing shitshow that was giving me comfort.

We left the mess tent and headed toward the area where they’d be staging the trial. A little ways ahead, Xavier and Ava were walking over together too. Just the sight of my brother and his first mate had my blood boiling.

*How dare he just fucking flaunt his relationship with her when he knows Cali has to sit by and watch?*

I wasn’t Ava’s biggest fan, but I liked to think I could’ve come around to her being with my brother—*if* they hadn’t gone about things in basically the shadiest way possible. Though I had to admit, my anger was directed more at Xavier than at Ava.

The hand that wasn’t holding Cali’s curled tight, a reflex based on my desire to wring my brother’s idiot neck for being such an asshole. And before I could calm myself—I needed to have my shit together by the time I testified in Knox’s trial—Cali tensed next to me.

I looked down at her face, then followed her gaze to see Dayton glaring in our direction. Another fucking complication. We’d come to the summit hoping to gain more allies, not more enemies—which wasn’t to say I didn’t want to beat that little shit into the ground.

I took a step forward, ready to ask him what the fuck he was staring at, but then Cali squeezed my hand.

“Don’t,” she said quietly. “He’s not worth it.”

I wasn’t sure I agreed. This asshole had threatened my mate. I hated that she’d gone through that when I hadn’t been around to protect her—I hated it *almost* as much as the fact that Xavier had been the one to step in. I was grateful to him, sure, but Cali shouldn’t have been forced to depend on the asshole who kept breaking her heart for protection.

Cali’s shoulders straightened. “Is there a problem?” she called to Dayton.

*Wow.* I hadn’t expected that. My mate was just full of surprises.

“Yeah,” I added. “Is there something you wanted to say, Dayton?”

The guy looked like he was seriously considering murdering us both in broad daylight, but he didn’t answer.

“Yeah, I fucking thought so,” I muttered.

“Easy,” Cali said, squeezing my hand again.

I’d have bet the deed to the lake house that Dayton was only staying quiet was because he knew he’d started this. He didn’t have a leg to stand on. If he opened his mouth, Cali and I would be well within our rights to deal with him.

I glanced at Cali. She looked ready to brawl. God, I loved her. My fierce, brave mate. I loved that this side of her was coming out, even if it didn’t have the best timing.

*Maybe there* is *something to the Wolf Moon…*

Finally, Dayton rolled his eyes and looked away.

“At least we know he can make smart choices on occasion,” I whispered as we kept walking toward the amphitheater where the trial would be held.

Cali laughed.

Cesaries wasn’t far ahead now. It was almost time for Cali and me to split up for the trial.

“Are you ready to take the stand?” Cali asked.

I nodded. “I’m not worried. I’ll just tell the truth. It sets you free, right?” I certainly wouldn’t mind being free of Knox once and for all.

“I don’t know about that, but I’m glad this shouldn’t be too complicated.”

“Me too,” I said. “It should be pretty cut and dried. Knox will probably get what he deserves, and we can all live happily ever after.”

She nodded. “Good luck.”

“Do I get a kiss for luck?”

She grinned. “You don’t even have to ask.”

She leaned up and gave me a very sweet kiss that was over far too soon. She headed off to sit next to Artemis in the stands. I was stuck testifying, but Cali got to sit back and watch the proceedings with everyone else.

I kept walking toward Cesaries, and I felt someone fall into step next to me. I glanced over and saw it was Ava. I couldn’t imagine what she would be feeling right now, being asked to testify against her own cousin, knowing that her testimony could be the thing that resulted in him being sentenced to death. I didn’t envy her position one bit.

Still, there was nobody better than Ava to describe exactly what things had been like for the Samara pack under Knox’s “leadership.” And if she was half as committed to the well-being of the Samara pack as she seemed, then she’d tell the council the truth—regardless of what would happen to Knox as a result.

She gave me a curt nod of acknowledgement, and I returned it.

“Greyson, Ava, welcome,” Cesaries said. “Are you both prepared and aware of what you need to do?”

“Yes,” I said.

Ava just nodded. She was looking a little pale.

“I need to hear you both say it,” Cesaries said.

“Yes,” Ava said tightly.

“Thank you. I need you both to understand that you must tell the truth during today’s trial. We’ll know if you’re lying, and trust me, no wolf wants what’s waiting on the other end of a perjury charge.”

Ava’s face went impossibly paler.

*Greyson!*

I turned toward the amphitheater, which was crowded with wolves. I found Cali in the crowd with the other Redwoods, and she smiled at me.

*Good luck*, she said.

In the middle of the amphitheater, Knox stood in silver chains. The council sat in front of him on a crudely built dais. I moved quickly to an empty spot to the right of the dais and waited for my turn to be questioned.

I briefly met Knox’s eyes. He glared at me, and I ignored him. He’d never had my respect, and he’d lost any hope of sympathy from me the moment he’d gone after Cali.

His cronies were in similar shackles, waiting for their own trials. I recognized Blaine and Zipper, who both looked like they were about to be sick.

Cesaries stepped into the center of the council dais. “We have assembled here today for the trial of Knox Voss.” His gaze narrowed on Knox. “You stand accused of crimes against the werewolf community, and of bringing in outsiders to subvert tradition and werewolf law. These crimes are punishable by death. How do you plead?”

“Not guilty,” Knox bit out.

I held back a laugh. *Typical.* I’d already known that Knox was squirrelly and allergic to consequences, but lying to the council was ballsy, even for him. But then again, if he was found guilty, he would be sentenced to death for his crimes, so maybe he just felt like he didn’t have anything to lose.

Cesaries addressed the crowd. “The council has already heard testimony from the accused’s family. They say he is a good man and a good wolf, and that these accusations are unearned.” He nodded and turned to me. “Now it falls to Greyson Evers to provide his account of the matter at hand. Alpha Evers, please step forward and tell us what you know of Knox’s crimes.”

I did as he asked, raising my voice to address the council. “I was there when Knox used a potion to create false strength in himself and his followers, which resulted in poor conditions and strife for the Samara pack—”

“He’s lying!” Knox shrieked. “Greyson and Xavier Evers worked together to take me down! They wanted to take over the Samara pack, and I was the only one standing in their way!”

An ugly stillness rippled through the crowd, and Cesaries turned to me. “Is this true?”

# **Episode 3943**

**Ava**My stomach lurched, and for a moment, I thought I was going to be sick.

How had I not seen this coming? Knox had no concept of accountability. Of course he wouldn’t plead guilty. In his eyes, everything he’d done had been completely within his rights as Samara Alpha. He probably still felt completely entitled to the position.

And of course he’d do everything in his power to make things difficult for the two Alphas who had helped take him down. He was grasping at straws, clearly trying to avoid the consequences of what he’d done, and he was trying to either escape a conviction or take Xavier and Greyson down with him. And it didn’t look great that Xavier was now the Samara Alpha—it looked like everything had gone completely according to the plan Knox had just described.

But honestly, after everything we’d been through to dethrone Knox, and everything he was being accused of, it was shocking to me that Cesaries felt he had to even ask Greyson if it were true. Knox was a pathological liar—of course there was no truth to the accusations he’d just thrown out.

Greyson’s face twisted with annoyance. “No,” he said curtly. “Absolutely not. There’s no truth to that whatsoever—Knox is just trying to cover his own ass.”

“And what about your brother?” Cesaries pressed. “He *is* the Samara Alpha now.”

“I found out Xavier had become the Alpha of the Samara pack at the same time as the rest of you,” Greyson said. “How he ended up in that role is his business—I didn’t have anything to do with it.”

Knox scoffed. “How convenient—”

“Silence!” one of the council members hissed. “You will speak only when spoken to!”

This was getting out of hand. I scanned the crowd for Xavier and caught his eye. I could tell he was trying to give me a look of support, but it looked like he was literally biting his own cheek to keep from speaking up. I didn’t blame him—he was at the center of a lot of public scrutiny right now, but he wasn’t in a position to defend himself.

I mind linked with him. *Are you okay?*

*I should be asking you that*, he said.

My chest warmed. A lot of people might’ve thought his consideration was the smallest kindness, really nothing more than basic decency, but it meant everything to me to know he cared.

*This is such bullshit*, Xavier growled. *Knox is guilty. None of us will say anything different, even if the council has to interview every goddamn member of the Samara pack. How many more hoops are we going to have to jump through before they finally deal with him?*

On the stand, Greyson reiterated what he knew about Knox’s plans and the things he’d done as Samara Alpha. He also had to assure the council two more times that he and Xavier hadn’t had a master plan to dethrone Knox and make Xavier the Samara Alpha.

“Knox was a danger to the Samaras and the Redwoods alike,” Greyson said. “We removed him to save innocent lives.”

Knox had been quiet for the last little while, but I knew my cousin. He’d definitely have more to say.

Xavier’s voice cut into my thoughts again. *Are you ready?*

I straightened my shoulders. *I think so.*

*Is there anything I can do to help?*

*No. I’m just going to tell the council exactly what happened—that’s all I can do.*

By now, the council had wrapped up Greyson’s testimony and questioning.

“Thank you for your time,” Cesaries said. “You’ve given us much to consider.”

Greyson nodded and stepped back.

“Ava Reed?” Cesaries said. “Please step forward.”

I drew in a deep breath, steeled myself, and walked up to stand in the space Greyson had just vacated. Before Cesaries could dive in, I cleared my throat and asked, “I would like to address Knox’s accusations against Xavier Evers, if I may.”

Cesaries seemed to consider this for a moment before nodding. “I’ll allow it.”

“Xavier has every right to be the Alpha of the Samara pack,” I said. “He’s my mate, for one, and he made it through the Iudicium *without* outside help—which is something Knox failed to do. Xavier’s claim to the position of Samara Alpha is just as strong as Knox’s, if not stronger.”

Another murmur rippled through the crowd, and I could almost feel them migrating back to our side. I stared out at them defiantly. They were despicable for being so easily swayed by someone who had every reason to lie. Xavier was the best thing that had happened to my pack in a long, long time, and I refused to allow anyone to try to destroy his reputation—least of all my asshole cousin.

And then my gaze snagged on my aunt and uncle, Knox’s parents. They both looked absolutely murderous. They could probably feel the tide turning, too. Maybe they knew that soon, Knox wouldn’t be able to outrun the consequences of his actions.

Knox was entitled, arrogant, and uninterested in actually trying to make amends. He was downright dangerous, but his parents still loved him. I knew they did. Just like I knew they had to be terrified about what could happen to their only son.

*Maybe I should lie… Knox was never built to be Alpha. He screwed up big time. But is punishing him worth losing the last family I have left?*

If Knox were convicted, he’d be sentenced to death. My aunt and uncle would disown me, or maybe even try to kill me. Xavier would still be all I had, and yes, he was my mate, but…

*Is that enough? He hasn’t even officially made me his Luna. He’s still hung up on Cali.*

Xavier’s voice sounded in my mind again. *You can do this. Remember what I said—I’ll back you no matter what you decide.*

That settled it for me.

Maybe Xavier alone wasn’t enough to make up for losing the last of my family, but protecting Knox wasn’t worth sacrificing everything else.

“Everything Greyson told you was true,” I said. “Knox did all that and more. He attacked me, his blood family, and threw me in a pit. He did the same to the Redwood Luna. I don’t think Knox was a good Alpha, but I do think he was doing what he thought was best for our pack. Obviously, he got it wrong. But that said, I don’t think he deserves to be aggressively punished. I don’t think his poor choices should end his life. There should be consequences, absolutely, but…” I struggled to think of the right way to phrase it. “But *productive* consequences. Isn’t death too quick? It doesn’t give the person being punished a chance to learn. It doesn’t offer an opportunity for redemption.”

My mouth went dry, and I swallowed. When I’d been dead, I’d walked aimlessly for what had felt like an eon. I’d been brought back for all the wrong reasons, but ultimately, I’d been given a second chance at life. I’d gotten a chance to learn, to earn forgiveness, and to become better. And yes, I’d made mistakes at the beginning of my second chance, in part thank to Silas. But I’d done things I wasn’t proud of and deeply regretted. I was no saint, that was for sure. But I liked to think I’d put the work in to be a better person, and I believed that I was now the best version of myself thus far.

I felt the weight of angry stares coming from the crowd, but I held my head high and ignored them. I believed in what I’d said, one hundred percent. The last thing I wanted was for Knox to die—and I definitely didn’t want to lose the few family members I had left—but I wasn’t going to lie for him. He deserved to face the consequences of his actions. He deserved a chance to put in the hard work and learn to be better.

Cesaries nodded. “Thank you, Ava. You’ve certainly given us a lot to consider.”

His words contradicted the grim expression on his face, and I didn’t know whether or not I had reason to hope. There were a lot of heavy looks being thrown Knox’s way, and I knew there was still a good chance that my cousin might not make it out of this alive.

But if that was the council’s wish, at least now I knew it wouldn’t be my fault. I’d tried to advocate for Knox, but it wasn’t my responsibility to protect him from the consequences of his actions. He’d made his own choices, and now he had to live with them.

I left the center of the amphitheater and started to make my way into the stands, toward Xavier.

A heavy hand fell on my shoulder, and I felt razor-sharp claws digging into my skin.

I spun around to see my aunt, her teeth bared.

“If they kill my boy,” Leona spat, “I’ll slit your throat.”

# **Episode 3944**

**Xavier**

I saw Leona lunge for Ava, and I didn’t even think. My body moved of its own accord; it was like everything happened in slow motion. I shoved my way through the crowd, fury and protective instincts blinding me to everything but the threat to my mate. I could’ve mown down Cesaries himself without batting an eye.

I ripped Leona’s hand away from Ava’s shoulder, then shoved my way between the two of them and glared down at Ava’s aunt. My wolf was itching to come out, to tear this woman limb from limb for daring to mess with my mate.

It was almost funny—it was exactly how I’d felt when I’d seen Dayton threatening Cali. But that awareness didn’t diminish my current rage in the slightest. I still wanted that bitch dead for laying a fucking hand on Ava.

Ava stepped close and said something, but I couldn’t hear it over the sound of blood rushing through my head. Somewhere nearby, someone yelled for order. I put an arm out to keep Ava back, to protect her from further harassment.

We’d have order—as soon as Leona remembered her place.

I leaned toward the older wolf. “If you touch her again, it will be the last thing you do. That’s a promise.”

“You think I’m afraid of you, Xavier Evers?” Leona asked. She hadn’t so much as blinked when I’d threatened her. “You’re just as much at fault as she is. If my son comes to harm, don’t think you’ll escape the consequences, either.”

Ava put a hand on my arm, and her voice slipped into my mind. *It’s okay, Xavier. I can handle this.*

But it didn’t take a mate bond for me to know just how upset she was. Ava had lost so many family members, and I knew how much that weighed on her. It had been no small thing for her to testify against Knox, knowing that if the council found him guilty, her cousin could be put to death. And if that happened, it seemed she’d lose her aunt and uncle too. The last pieces of her broken family.

*She’s lost so much. We both have.*

But I couldn’t imagine what it was like to be in Ava’s position. Sure, I’d helped my brothers take down our father, and if Greyson hadn’t killed Silas, I’d have stepped in and done it myself. But our father had been a maniac, and there’d been no love lost between any of us. I still had Colton. And even Greyson, to some extent. I wasn’t entirely alone in the world—not like Ava would be if Knox was executed by the council.

And yet she’d still told the truth. She’d still supported me, and her pack, and even Greyson. Ava was even braver than I’d given her credit for.

“Order, please!” a council member called from the front of the dais. “Before we adjourn to deliberate on the verdict, we would like to open the floor to anyone who wishes to add their testimony.”

You could’ve heard a single cricket amidst the sea of werewolves. Nobody was stepping forward, for better or worse. None of the Samaras. None of the Redwoods. None of Knox’s so-called friends who’d escaped punishment.

I pulled in a breath and moved to the front of the crowd to address the council. “I have something to say.”

*Xavier, what are you doing?* Ava asked.

*It’s okay*, I replied. *I’m doing exactly what I said I would. I’ve got your back.*

“Very well,” Cesaries said with a nod. “Please come forward and say your piece.”

I approached the edge of the dais, looking up at the council members. “I am Xavier Evers, Alpha of the Samara pack.”

Greyson was still standing off to the side of the dais, and I couldn’t help but glance at him as I spoke. I wanted to see how my words landed, how he reacted to the fact that I’d risen to his level. He didn’t have any power to lord over me anymore. I had a pack of my own now. It was like I’d told him before—I was nobody’s second.

I couldn’t read the expression on his face. He seemed neither happy nor sad. But then again, my brother was a master at masking his emotions. It was a skill he’d no doubt honed during his childhood, growing up under Silas’s shadow.

I turned back to the council. “Since I’ve been pulled into this case, I think I have a right to offer my perspective.”

“Fair enough,” Cesaries said. “Continue.”

“I was there too. I witnessed everything Ava and Greyson have described, and…” I took a breath, measuring my words carefully. I was only going to get one chance to say my piece, and I had to make sure I did it right. “This kid is a moron.”

I looked back at Knox, who was looking positively murderous. Out in the crowd, his parents seemed pissed off too, though they were hiding it better.

*If they didn’t already know their son was an idiot, it’s good that I’m letting them know now. Someone had to rip that Band-Aid off.*

“I think at this point, the council probably understands that the best Knox was capable of—with the help of strength-boosting potions and his own team of wolves who were more loyal to him than to their pack—was a weak attempt at a takeover, and it failed spectacularly. The Samara pack handled Knox. And honestly? It wasn’t even that hard. He was a pain in the ass, but he’s no criminal mastermind. The only reason he’s still alive is because the council stepped in, and now that I’m the Alpha of the Samara pack, I know that if Knox were ever to try anything again, he’d be dealt with swiftly and easily.”

It was strange—after everything that had happened since Knox had taken control of the Samara pack, the risk he’d presented seemed almost laughable. Back then, he’d seemed like a real threat. But now, compared to Adéluce and Malakai, he was just a kid playing a game he wasn’t smart enough to win.

“I think, if I were to sum up the crimes he committed, it would be fair to say that Knox was just a kid throwing a violent temper tantrum. He deserves a solid punishment, but he *can* be fixed. I agree with my mate—Knox doesn’t need to die over this. Let him live knowing that he failed, and that everyone views him with contempt. He’ll live with the knowledge that he’s the weakest among us—and if that’s not a punishment, I don’t know what is. And who knows? Maybe he’ll learn a thing or two and come out of it a better wolf.”

I glanced at Knox. If looks could kill, I’d have been a pile of torn-up meat.

*You’re welcome, asshole.*

Cesaries nodded, and the council took in what I’d said. There seemed to be some sort of unspoken conversation between them.

“We need to deliberate further,” Cesaries finally said, “but we will take your perspective into consideration as we make our decision.”

I nodded and stepped back. I couldn’t be sure, but I hoped my words might have helped. In any case, it didn’t seem like Knox’s life was definitively on the line anymore. Hopefully Ava would see that I’d backed her up, just like I’d promised.

The council withdrew, and a large man I wasn’t familiar with stepped forward to lead Knox away. With the council heading away to deliberate, the crowd dispersed into small groups to discuss the trial.

Ava’s hand slipped into mine.

*Thank you*, she said through the mind link. *I know you didn’t have to say anything. You could’ve just supported me quietly, and it would have been enough. But the fact that you stepped up and spoke on my cousin’s behalf means more than you can know.*

Her praise washed over me and warmed me from the inside out. It was nice, feeling like I could actually do something good for someone—like my presence in Ava’s life was improving things rather than making everything harder. It had been too long since I’d felt that way about anyone.

I squeezed her hand and gave her a soft smile.

Marissa rushed up. “Ava, we need to talk.”

Ava didn’t let go of my hand, but she turned to speak with Marissa. I scanned the crowd, and my heart tripped over itself when I spotted Cali talking to Artemis. I felt a lurch of longing, a need for her to be the one next to me, for me to make *her* life better.

Ava’s palm felt nice in my hand, but I was acutely aware that it was only there because I’d been forced away from Cali.

I tuned back in when I realized Marissa had gone quiet.

“Did you hear me, Xavier?” she pressed.

“No. What did you say?”

“You need to call a pack meeting,” she snapped. “You and Ava need to explain yourselves.”

# **Episode 3945**

I tried to focus on what my sister was saying about the trial—both for my own peace of mind, and so nobody would realize just how long I’d been fixated on Ava and Xavier. I couldn’t stop staring at them holding hands, and I couldn’t stop replaying the trial in my mind—particularly the looks that had passed between Xavier and his other mate, and how quickly he’d stepped up to support her, and the intimacy they seemed to share that went far beyond physical attraction.

And the way that when he’d said “my mate,” he was talking about *her*.

Somehow, this felt a hundred times worse than the kiss I’d witnessed. That, I could chalk up to lust. But it really did seem like Xavier and Ava had a genuine mental and emotional connection. A lust-driven alliance between the two of them, I possibly could’ve handled. They *did* have a history, and even though Xavier had assured me time and time again that he loved me, that he chose me—ha!—despite his lingering connection with Ava, I’d always comforted myself with the knowledge that he and Ava didn’t have the love, the trust, or the mental and emotional connection that he and I had.

But it looked like I’d been wrong about that. Somewhere along the way, they’d become closer. Maybe close enough that I’d been replaced altogether.

I felt the mental box containing all my Xavier feelings start to open, and my chest tightened. The hole in my heart ached. No—*ached* didn’t cover it. It hurt like hell. All my pain, my insecurities, my confusion and anger and despair… It was all starting to creep forward, and I couldn’t find that numb place anymore.

*Get back in the box!* *I don’t want to deal with this!*

I deliberately focused on my sister’s face and tried to put Xavier and Ava out of my mind.

*I just won’t think about them. I’ll keep myself distracted, and maybe if I do that for long enough, the next time I see them, it won’t hurt so much.*

But by the time I *really* brought my attention back to Artemis, she’d stopped talking. She looked away from my face and then scanned the crowd until she spotted Ava and Xavier, holding hands. Then she scowled and turned back to me.

“Xavier’s an asshole,” she declared.

“I agree,” Greyson said as he sidled up to us.

I fought back the instinctive urge to defend Xavier. I knew Greyson wasn’t exactly thrilled with his brother these days. Not that they were ever really on good terms for any substantial period of time, but things between them had reached a new low. Greyson was protective of me and hated how Xavier had been treating me, but he was also hurting from Xavier’s abandonment.

I reminded myself that he had his own reasons for feeling the way he did about his brother—reasons that had nothing to do with me.

“What do you think of Xavier’s testimony?” I asked, changing the subject.

Greyson’s expression turned thoughtful. “I see where he was coming from, but I’m not sure he thought everything through. If Knox goes free, it could just give him the opportunity to do something even worse later on. It could make him feel unstoppable. I don’t know if he’s capable of rehabilitation.”

I frowned. “So it’s death or nothing? Don’t werewolves have jail or something?”

Knox had done terrible things, and he did need to suffer some kind of consequence, but I didn’t think he deserved to *die*.

*Oh no…*

I groaned.

“What’s wrong?” Artemis asked.

“I hate to say it, but I agree with Xavier and Ava.”

My sister laughed. “Sure you do,” she said. “That’s right now, though. But I want you to tell me the minute you want Xavier and Ava *handled*, okay? I’d be happy to take care of that for you.”

“Absolutely not,” I said firmly. “Leave it alone. Don’t do anything.”

“Agreed.” If Greyson thought Artemis was joking, it didn’t seem like he thought it was funny. “Believe me, I get the urge to try to knock some sense into Xavier, but the last thing we need is the possibility of *another* pack war. Especially not with a pack we’re supposed to be allied with.” He pinned Artemis with the weight of his gaze. “The no violence rule at the summit goes for everyone, including vengeful Fae bounty hunters. Got it?”

Artemis rolled her eyes. “Fine. But for the record, I wasn’t actually going to do anything. I was just trying to help Cali feel better.”

It warmed my heart that so many people were looking out for me, defending me, and trying to help me through this ongoing heartbreak. If Xavier’s betrayal had done nothing else, it had shown me just how many people cared about me, even though Xavier had known many of them longer.

*Looks like I got all his friends in the breakup.*

The thought didn’t comfort me as much as I’d hoped it would, but there was no denying the little bit of petty satisfaction it brought me.

But that was enough talk of Xavier. It was time to focus on literally anything else.

“Instead of talking about murder, maybe you and I can get away from the crowds and do some training?” I asked Artemis.

“I think that’s a great idea.” Greyson said, kissing my cheek. “You two should head into the woods. I’ll catch up with you later.” He headed off.

“Good thinking,” Artemis said. “I’ve been wanting to try something out with my bow, anyway.”

We left the crowds behind and found a pretty spot some distance from the tents.

“Do you want to start off with some sparring?” Artemis asked.

I nodded. “Yeah, that sounds great. I don’t want to lose the momentum we had going before the summit.”

“Right. We don’t want to let Adair down,” Artemis said sarcastically.

I didn’t wait for my sister to initiate the fight, just summoned my sword and took a step forward.

“Actually,” Artemis said, and I paused, “let’s see if you can cut through my normal, non-magic arrows. I’ll shoot them, and you see if you can slice them out of the air.”

Nerves thrummed up my spine. *That definitely won’t end with me getting skewered…*

Still, a grin tugged at my lips. I’d wanted a distraction, right? Well, there was nothing more distracting than trying to avoid being impaled by my sister’s arrows. “All right. Let’s do it.”

Artemis stepped back and loosed an arrow while I rushed forward with my sword out. I swung it as the arrow got close, and the magic blade glanced off the arrowhead. The arrow spun away, but it didn’t quite fall to the ground.

“Pretend this is real!” Artemis called. “You won’t be able to do this if you’re sure we’re just practicing.”

I nodded, and I refocused. And then, all of a sudden, it wasn’t Artemis shooting at me—it was Dayton.

I knew that didn’t make sense—a werewolf would never use a weapon; they were plenty lethal without them—but I could still feel myself moving faster and slashing harder.

One arrow fell to the ground, then two, then three.

I laughed at Dayton’s imagined taunts as we practiced, at how pissed off he’d be to know he couldn’t hit me. That I was one-upping him, putting him in his place. I kept going, sprinting back and forth as the arrows kept coming.

But then Dayton’s fake voice changed. I looked up, and it was Xavier shooting at me.

A tiny sliver of hurt almost slipped past my defenses.

*No!*

Instead of wallowing and letting all those feelings wash over me, I latched onto the anger and swung my sword. It felt good to be able to do this—to use magic like this. I wasn’t helpless any longer. I’d felt like that for so long, and now? Things were different. I swung the sword again with such force that it took me a moment to hear my sister’s voice.

“Cali! Cali, stop! That’s enough!”

I dropped my arm, sweat trickling down the back of my neck, and saw my sister looking at me with something like pride.

“Sorry, I was getting carried away,” I said.

“You did great!” she said. “But I need a quick breather. You want some water?”

I nodded. I was breathing heavily. Water sounded good. And now that the emotion and adrenaline were leaving my body, something like fatigue had started to set in. Exercising had worked, though. The ache in my chest was gone. I felt powerful, exhilarated by what I’d just done, and by the endorphins rushing through me. I wasn’t some sad, pining damsel—I was a force to be reckoned with.

*That was… intense.*

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I pulled it out. My eyes widened.

*Why do I have five missed calls from my mom? Is there something wrong at the pack house?*

# **Episode 3946**

**Xavier**

Ava and I were surrounded by Samara pack members. *Angry* Samara pack members.

“Seriously? What were you thinking?” Marissa demanded.

“You know what Knox did to this pack! He almost destroyed us! Again!” another Samara said.

“How could you and Ava do that?” someone burst out. “You’re trying to *save* his sorry life? After everything he pulled, how could either of you make any excuses for this behavior? How could you support him? It’s a fucking betrayal!”

Next to me, Ava was practically vibrating with anger. I needed to put a pin in this now, before things got any uglier.

I held up a hand, and the pack went quiet.

“Are you done yelling?” I asked, my tone making it clear that there was really only one acceptable answer to this. “Are you ready to hear what Ava and I have to say?”

Geraint scoffed, but he went quiet when I shot him a warning look.

“Fine,” Marissa huffed. “But for the record, I don’t know what you could possibly say to make this better.”

For a moment, I saw red. Yes, Marissa had a knack for pissing me off, but where the fuck did she get off thinking she could talk to her Alpha like that? I didn’t want to lead like my father had—I was no tyrant, and given how fragile the Samara pack was, pushing too hard for control could sow dissent that would be just as damaging as Knox’s bullshit—but I drew the line at allowing members of my own pack to actively disrespect me or Ava. I was their Alpha, and Ava had worked tirelessly—and often all by herself—to keep the broken pieces of the Samara pack glued together. They had every right to be angry, but would it fucking kill them to give us the benefit of the doubt?

I narrowed my eyes at Marissa. “What I’ll say is that I’m your Alpha, and you may not always understand what I’m doing, but you should always know that it’s what’s best for the pack. And if you genuinely can’t even try to believe that, then maybe you should reconsider whether or not this pack is the best place for you.”

To my satisfaction, the wolves all looked a little chagrined.

“Now, to address your concerns about Ava’s and my testimonies—do you really think that idiot kid is a threat? Is our pack so weak? We have so many bigger issues to deal with. The Bitterfangs are literally nipping at our heels, and you want to act like *Knox* is our biggest problem? Seriously?”

“I meant everything I said about my cousin,” Ava added. “And I’d say it all again. He did terrible damage to this pack, yes. Believe me, nobody knows that better than I do. But what will sentencing him to death do, other than spilling more blood? Don’t misunderstand us. We do believe Knox needs to be punished, and I have every faith that he will be. But in the meantime, we’ve shown the council and every pack here at the summit that the Samara pack can *think*. We don’t make decisions based purely on emotion. Arguing for Knox to pay for his crimes with his life would’ve been an emotional reaction, and we’re better than that.”

“Ava’s right.” I nodded at her. “And I don’t regret a single thing I said, either. We both made what we felt was the best call. I’m not telling you not to be mad. You have every right to be angry with Knox. You have every right to hate him. For all the damage he caused, he hurt the Samara pack the most. Don’t think Ava and I have forgotten that. But right now, we have far more important things to do than deal with some snot-nosed kid. We’re above this. I’m your Alpha now, and you may all feel very strongly about the Alpha who came before me, but I’m telling you now that we’re leaving him in the past. Feel whatever you need to feel, but don’t let it affect decisions that will ripple into the future. Whatever happened then, it doesn’t matter now. This only matters if Ava and I say it matters.”

“And we say it doesn’t,” she added.

I watched our words sink in. The Samara delegation seemed to be on our side now. Maybe they still didn’t agree, but at least they were willing to follow Ava’s and my lead.

*Maybe they do trust us after all… Or they’re just that desperate for a strong Alpha who’s not a fucking idiot.*

Either way, we’d get the same result, so I guessed it didn’t matter.

Finally, Marissa nodded. “Now that you mention it, Knox did look pretty pathetic.”

“Yeah.” Donovan laughed. “I’m going to hold on to the sight of Knox looking scared and in chains for a long, long time. I wish I’d taken a picture.”

I forced a grin to let them know I approved of the shift in their feelings. If I was being honest, I was still unnerved as hell, but it didn’t have anything to do with Knox. No, I was still unsettled by my feelings for Cali—what it had been like to see her in the crowd, the longing I felt, and how similar it was to my feelings for Ava. Similar, but not identical.

At the end of the day, I’d still choose Cali if I had the option. And there was no forgetting that.

I forced myself to focus on the task at hand. The Samara delegation gathered around me, Ava at my side.

This was where I was right now. Where I needed to be. And thank god Ava and I had managed to talk our pack mates off the ledge. I’d taken a risk when I’d advocated for Knox’s punishment not to include a death sentence. I’d done it for Ava, and, like I’d told the Samaras, I didn’t have a single regret. I’d do it all over again in a heartbeat. But it had still been a risky move, and since I hadn’t been the Samaras’ Alpha for long, it wouldn’t have been outside the realm of possibility for there to have been an insurrection.

It was better that this had worked out. That my role as Alpha was still secure.

“Well, if that’s all,” I said, “I think I’m going to go take a run.”

The day had worn on me, and I needed to get away for a few minutes to clear my head.

“Do you want company?” Ava asked.

“I’m okay.” She looked disappointed, so I softened the rejection with a hand on her shoulder. “I’ll see you later.”

My heart was racing, a wild animal trying to beat its way out of my chest. I needed to get out of there, fast.

I turned and made myself stroll toward the woods like I was in no hurry, like I didn’t have a care in the world, but the minute I hit the tree line, I broke into a run.

*It’s barely midmorning, and I’m already on my second run of the day…* I didn’t want to think too deeply about what that said about my emotional state, though the word “unsustainable” came to mind.

I breathed in deeply through my nose, pushed the air out through my mouth, and tried to ground myself in the physical sensation of running, of my feet pounding against the forest floor.

I was being a good Alpha to the Samaras. I knew that, and it was really the only comfort I could find in all of this. The Samaras were better off with me than without. I wasn’t sure I could say the same about anyone else in my life right now.

I tried to let the knowledge that I was doing something good be the dominant thought in my head, but Cali kept slipping through. I sure as shit wasn’t good for her.

I hunched my shoulders and put on a burst of speed. Cali was the last person I wanted to think about. I needed to accept that this was my life right now. That Cali didn’t get to be a part of it—not the way I wanted.

But her face was still imprinted in my mind—her devastated expression when she’d seen me kissing Ava.

In my mind, I heard her telling me to stay the fuck away from her. I wasn’t even mad. I understood why she’d feel that way, even though I was only trying to protect her. Every shitty thing I’d done had been to protect her.

Not that she knew that. As far as she knew, I was just a cruel asshole who’d used her and tossed her aside.

My chest tightened at the thought.

All of a sudden, my instincts screamed at me to stop running—I wasn’t alone.

I lurched to a halt and looked around. I could’ve been followed by any number of the wolves at the summit. I didn’t know how the other packs felt about Knox. I could’ve invited some enmity there by trying to convince the council to spare him.

*Fuck. I should’ve thought of that.*

An unfamiliar wolf stepped onto the trail in front of me.

“Who are you?” I demanded. “What do you want?”

A voice I’d never heard before slipped into my mind. *Your blood.*

# **Episode 3947**

I dialed my mom back without a second thought. My mind filled with worst-case scenarios as the phone rang. Had something happened to Dad? Were the Bitterfangs attacking the pack house again? Was there an earthquake? Was someone sick?

Finally, my mom picked up the phone. “Oh, hi, Cali.”

I frowned. She sounded pleasantly surprised. I’d missed all those calls from her, and now she was acting like she hadn’t expected to hear from me?

“What’s going on?” I demanded. “I have a bunch of missed calls from you. Are you okay? Is Dad all right?”

“Oh, yes, everything’s fine,” she said. “Sorry, sweetheart. I didn’t mean to worry you. I just wanted to check in with you. I hadn’t heard from you, and after what happened to Sabine, I just wanted to make sure you were all right. After all, you are in the thick of it at the summit, aren’t you? Are you doing okay?”

I thought about Xavier showing up as the new Samara Alpha, Ava at his side, Malakai’s threats, all that weird stuff that kept happening with Dayton, and Knox’s trial.

“Yeah,” I said, “everything’s fine here. But it’s still… a lot.”

*Talk about an understatement.* It felt like we were taking hits left and right and barely managing to avoid being knocked down permanently.

“Is the Bitterfang pack there?” Mom asked.

I sighed. “Unfortunately, yes.”

“Oh no. Did something happen?”

I thought about my run-ins with Honora, which had run the gamut from her accusing me of killing her daughter to her calling me a mongrel. I thought of how she’d tried to play on my guilt when she was just as terrible a parent as Malakai was—she didn’t care about Julia at all. And this vendetta the Bitterfangs had against us because of Julia’s “death” had more to do with pride than any actual love the Alpha and Luna had for their daughter.

And then there was Malakai—how he’d scared half the packs away from allying with us, his misogyny and threats, how he’d ordered a hit on Mrs. Smith purely to hurt Greyson. He was a maniac. A psychopath.

*He and Honora are really meant for each other.*

If spending time with the Bitterfang pack had one benefit, it was that I felt better than ever about stepping in to help Julia and Russell. Especially Julia. Wherever she was now, at least she was genuinely loved and valued.

“Cali? Is everything okay?” Mom asked. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Sorry, Artemis distracted me for a second,” I lied. “Everything’s fine here. Seeing the Bitterfangs has been… kind of intense at times, but we’re fine. There’s a rule against violence here at the summit, so none of the tension has gone anywhere.”

And now I was just spitting out one lie after another. But there was no point in telling her about every little scary thing that had happened. It wasn’t like she could do anything. It’d just make her worry more. And ultimately, this was something Greyson and I needed to deal with on our own.

I decided to change the subject.

“Knox’s trial started today,” I said, then I filled her in on the specifics of the testimonies and how it had been both similar to and different from a human trial. “There’s no real jury or anything, and if the council decides he’s guilty, they might execute him. I guess werewolves don’t have jails.”

“Huh,” Mom said. “I was wondering what the trial would be like. It sounds very different from our Fae traditions. We do have jails—not that they’re very pleasant.”

“Oh, don’t say that,” I said. “I don’t want to feel guilty over something that hasn’t even happened yet.”

Mom laughed. “Sweetheart, I don’t think there’s any risk of Knox ending up in a Fae jail.”

A genuine smile curved my lips. It was nice talking to my mom. My mood felt lighter now than it had been pretty much since I’d walked into the summit. “So, everything really is fine at the pack house?”

“It is. I just wanted to talk to you. How’s your sister doing?”

I glanced back and realized I’d wandered much farther away than I’d meant to. Artemis was no longer in sight. “She’s fine. You know Artemis—nothing ruffles her. Always tough, always looking for a fight. You know. But we’re both looking forward to coming home soon.”

“Good. Remember, your dad and I have bought our tickets to go home to Minnesota.”

“Right.” My smile faded. It was a weird thing to admit, but I was going to miss living with my parents. We’d always had a good relationship, but when I’d moved out during college, I’d never really imagined myself living with them again. And as strange as the transition had been, I’d gotten used to having them around—I enjoyed their company and the comfort they brought me. Especially since I knew now that neither of them were human.

But if a pack war really was on the horizon, it would be better to keep my parents safe in faraway Minnesota. This wasn’t their fight, and they’d put their own lives on hold for long enough. Plus, it’d be nice to have two fewer people to worry about when things with the Bitterfangs did come to a head… I gulped. I hated that it felt like a “when,” not an “if,” but it was just true. I had a gut feeling that things with the Bitterfangs were going to go down, and it was only a matter of time.

Honestly, if I could, I’d send everyone I cared about to a safe, faraway place if I could—but then we’d lose the whole pack, and our few allies would be in an even more precarious situation. But I knew that wasn’t realistic. Plus, everyone would probably fight me tooth and nail to stick around.

“We can talk about that when I get back,” I told my mom, “but I’ll be sad to see you and Dad go.”

“Believe me, sweetie, we’ll be sad to leave you, but it’s probably time. I’ll let you get back to the summit. Thanks for calling me back. I love you. I’ll see you soon.”

“Love you too, Mom.”

I ended the call and had started walking back toward Artemis when a loud growl filled the air and two wolves tumbled onto the trail ahead of me. I immediately recognized one of them—it was Xavier.

Even as a wolf, I could tell he was glaring at me, and his voice thundered in my head. *Get the hell out of here now!*

The other wolf’s gaze snapped over to mine, and a wave of panic rushed over me. Shit—it was Helix.

I tried to reach out to Greyson via mind link, hoping he would hear me. *Greyson, I found Helix. He’s fighting with Xavier. Get here now!*

I squared my shoulders and pulled my magic sword into existence.

Suddenly, Xavier’s voice boomed through my head again. *What the hell, Cali? I told you to leave!*

“Shut up!” I snapped. “I can handle myself!”

He didn’t get to treat me like crap and act like I didn’t matter and then boss me around. If Helix wanted to threaten me, then I’d defend myself. Xavier had made it crystal clear that I couldn’t count on him, so I wouldn’t.

Helix leapt toward me, his teeth bared. I raised my free hand and let out a blast of magic that sent him flying backward into a tree. The thick trunk groaned with the impact, but it didn’t break. Helix crumpled to the ground and didn’t get back up. He didn’t move at all.

*Oh shit. Did I kill him?*

I rushed forward to check for a pulse.

Behind me, Xavier had shifted back to human. “Cali, wait—”

But I was already kneeling down next to Helix. His chest rose and fell steadily. He wasn’t dead.

“Oh, thank god,” I muttered. My shoulders slumped with relief. “He’s just unconscious.”

“Why didn’t you run?” Xavier demanded. “I told you I could handle him. Why didn’t you listen to me?”

I stood and rounded on him. “Seriously? Why should I listen to you? I told *you* that I could handle myself.” I stomped forward and got in his face. “And since you’ve made it perfectly clear that you don’t give a damn about me, why are you even still here?”

As soon as the words left my lips, I realized this was the closest we’d been since he left me. I barely registered it, though—I was too pissed off, at the mercy of my own rage and hurt. All the emotions I’d been trying to hold back were rushing out of the box I’d tucked them into, and they demanded to be heard.

And then, suddenly, heat flared in Xavier’s eyes. It was a heat I recognized, and we both went very still.

# **Episode 3948**

**Greyson**

My heart beat in double-time as I raced through the woods, pure panic flooding my veins. After getting Cali’s mind link message, I’d immediately dropped what I was doing, shifted, and burst through the tree line and into the forest. It had taken me a while—way too long—to pick up her scent, but I’d finally found it, and now I was tracking her through the woods.

I wish I knew what the hell was going on. I knew Cali had gone off to train with Artemis, and I hoped her sister was there to help. Cali was capable—probably more capable than I even gave her credit for—but Artemis was on another level altogether. Two powerful Fae against Helix was a much better bet than Cali alone. Magic or no magic, I didn’t like my mate being in a battle alone with an unhinged werewolf.

But hadn’t she said Xavier was there too? What the hell was he doing out in the woods, fighting with Helix? And why was Helix attacking so many people? It seemed like every time I turned around, the kid was causing trouble.

I sensed the three of them—Xavier, Cali, and Helix—up ahead, and I bounded through the trees, only to find Cali and Xavier inches away from each other, breathing heavily.

*Okay… What the hell did I just walk into?*

At my appearance, they jumped apart, and Cali was by my side by the time I finished shifting back to human.

I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her close. Whatever bizarre thing was going on between Cali and Xavier, the most important thing was that she was okay. And… she *was* okay, right?

I pulled back just far enough to look her over. “Are you all right? Did he hurt you?”

“No, I didn’t give him a chance.”

I pulled her back against me, relief and pride crashing over me. My strong mate. She was okay. Maybe if I told myself that a hundred more times, my heart would catch up with my brain.

“I’m fine, Greyson,” she mumbled into my chest. “Really.”

We pulled apart, and she gestured over at Helix, who was crumpled on the ground in front of a battered-looking tree trunk. In fact, there was a dent in the trunk in almost the exact shape of Helix himself.

Cali grinned awkwardly. “I handled it.”

I grinned. “You certainly did. Good job, love.” My smile disappeared. “But that doesn’t explain what’s going on here.” My eyes narrowed on Xavier. “What do you have to do with all this? Cali said you were fighting with Helix?”

Xavier shrugged. “Is that his name? He followed me into the woods and attacked me. I don’t know why—but I do know I’m going to finish this.”

He took a step toward Helix, murder etched into his expression, and I leapt between them. There was no doubt that Helix was causing problems, and he needed to explain what the hell was going on and answer for what he’d done. But if I let Xavier kill him, Elle would be devastated.

“Get out of my way,” Xavier snarled.

I shook my head. “No, let me handle him.”

“Why the hell would I do that? I’m the one he attacked. This has nothing to do with you.”

“He attacked my mate,” I countered. “I think that gives me a say in this. And I say you’re not touching him. I’ll take care of this.”

“Like hell you will. You are *not* my Alpha. We’re equals. Why do you think you get to decide what happens here? This asshole attacked me. It’s my call and my right to turn him in for what he’s done.”

I bit back a groan. Why did my brother *always* have to be so goddamn stubborn? Clearly, becoming Alpha of his own pack hadn’t done anything to fix that chip on his shoulder.

It was comforting to know Xavier wasn’t actually planning to kill Helix—that he was going to turn him in to the council instead—but that could easily open a whole new can of worms with Dayton, with Elle, with Lucian… Once the Helix ball got rolling, there would be no way to stop it. And the very last thing the Redwood pack needed was more enemies to worry about.

Xavier wasn’t wrong—I didn’t have the power to make this call on his behalf. He had every right to want Helix punished for attacking him. But there was an ocean of complications that Xavier didn’t understand. If he just let me deal with this, I’d be able to see to Helix *and* minimize the fallout.

“Well, he actually attacked me first,” I said, grasping at straws.

Xavier huffed out a laugh. He knew as well I did that that explanation was weak as hell. “Maybe you should’ve handled it at the time, then. Now it looks like it’s my turn to deal with your mess.”

I should’ve known that wouldn’t be enough to convince him.

I pulled in a deep breath and tried to find some semblance of calm. I didn’t want to fight him here.

“I’m telling you,” I said slowly, “this is a Redwood pack issue. That should take precedence over any personal vendettas. Think of the alliance.”

My brother frowned. “What the hell does that have to do with anything? This guy’s clearly a loose cannon. Hell, he’s probably the one who murdered that Northwind wolf. If he’s going around attacking people, then he needs to be dealt with. Why does it matter if I’m the one to do it?”

I hated to admit it, but he had a point, and he wasn’t even being an ass about it. To his mind, and to any logical mind that wasn’t aware of the background context, there *wasn’t* any difference between which of us took Helix to the council. The solution to this problem should’ve been every bit as simple as Xavier was making it out to be.

*Should* being the operative word.

Cali stepped forward. “Xavier, this guy used to be in Elle’s pack. They’re childhood friends. I’ve met him before, and he was a nice guy. Let Greyson do what he needs to do. There’s something bigger going on that you don’t understand.”

At her interjection, all the emotion disappeared from my brother’s face. He turned away. “Fine. You’re right. Redwood business isn’t my problem.”

Cali’s breath hitched, and I knew Xavier’s words had hit their mark.

Before any of us could respond, Ava came rushing into the clearing.

*Perfect. Because this situation isn’t already tense enough.*

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

Ava ignored me and went straight to Xavier. She cupped his face and looked into his eyes. “Are you okay? I came as soon as you called.”

Oh. That made sense. Cali had reached out to me for help with Helix—it was only logical that Xavier had done the same with Ava. Still, this felt… intrusive, somehow. Like I was looking in on a private moment between my brother and his mate.

*Actually, that’s* exactly *what I’m looking at.*

I glanced at Cali to make sure she was okay, but her face had gone blank, just like Xavier’s had moments ago. I reached for her hand and squeezed it. Her expression didn’t change, but she squeezed my hand back tight.

“I’m okay,” Xavier said, then quickly caught Ava up on what had happened.

Ava glanced at Helix’s crumpled form with distaste. “We should take him in. Make sure he’s held accountable.”

Of course Ava was taking Xavier’s side. It was strange, seeing the connection between my brother and his mate play out. They seemed like every bit as much of a team as Cali and me.

*Maybe Xavier really has moved on from Cali.*

I hated that Cali was hurting—she clearly wasn’t over Xavier—and I hated that my brother had handled this thing like a huge dick, but… maybe this would help strengthen my own relationship with Cali, coming out of the summit.

Cali had tucked herself even closer to my side, and I realized what a strange parallel the four of us made, with Xavier and Ava on one side and Cali and me on the other.

“Xavier agreed that we would handle it,” Cali told Ava.

Ava laughed. “I think he was being sarcastic.”

Well, this wasn’t going at all the way I’d been hoping. *Why are they being so difficult?* We’d been *this* close to getting Xavier to give up on taking charge of Helix—now that Ava was here, were we going to have to go through that song and dance all over again?

I tried to reason with them. “I’m just saying, we don’t need to turn him in right away.”

“And I don’t see why we shouldn’t,” Xavier said.

Ava looked from Xavier’s face to mine and Cali’s and smirked. “It looks like we may have reached a stalemate.”

# **Episode 3949**

I hated everything about this. Greyson and Xavier fighting over how to handle Helix. Ava showing up and complicating everything. Seeing Ava and Xavier together and being so… intimate. And poor Helix. He’d been so nice to me the first time we’d met, and I’d just thrown him against a tree with enough force to knock him out. Any harder and I could have done some real damage. Thank goodness for werewolf healing. Hopefully by the time he woke up, he’d be feeling okay.

I just couldn’t understand why Helix would’ve attacked any of us. He didn’t even seem like the same person I’d met before. Had he been brainwashed, somehow? *Could* werewolves get brainwashed? What if this was part of the Bitterfangs’ plan to derail any potential alliances?

My head spun with questions and possibilities. There were so many things happening right now, some of them connected, some of them not, and I didn’t know what to do about any of them.

Around me, Xavier and Ava were still arguing with Greyson about what to do with Helix. I couldn’t help but feel resentful toward Ava. We’d gotten Xavier on board with letting Greyson take care of Helix before she’d shown up, but now that she’d stuck her nose in it, we were back to square one.

“Greyson,” Ava said, “this isn’t your call. This guy, whoever the hell he is, attacked the Samara Alpha. It’s our business now.”

“The Redwoods have business with him too,” Greyson countered, “and ours goes back further than a little squabble that happened ten minutes ago. Besides, Helix attacked Cali too—and me, earlier.”

“I didn’t realize you’d called dibs on him,” Ava snarked. “But if this guy has been going around attacking people, and you’ve been covering for him, that’s not exactly a good look for you.”

“Is that a threat?” Greyson growled.

“Hey, don’t talk to her like that,” Xavier snapped, stepping in front of Ava. “Besides, she makes a good point. You said you knew this guy, and that he attacked you before—so why didn’t you turn him in already? He’s dangerous. For all we know, he’s to blame for that other wolf’s death. What are you waiting for?”

Greyson grimaced. “Like Cali said, there are things happening in the Redwood pack that you’re not aware of. We’re not actually being irresponsible, here.”

Ava crossed her arms. “That’s not how it looks from where I’m standing.”

Greyson scoffed. “Well, Ava, I’m surprised you can see anything at all with your head so far up Xavier’s ass.”

Xavier growled. “What the *fuck* did you just say to her?”

Oh god. This was getting out of hand.

“Stop!” I shouted. “All of you. This isn’t getting us anywhere. Since we can’t seem to agree on who should be responsible for Helix, how about we just try to ask him some questions now and then figure out what to do after that? If there’s something else going on and we take him to the council without figuring it out first, who knows if the council will tell us anything at all?”

Greyson nodded. “Great idea.”

“When I said this was bigger,” I continued, glancing at Xavier, “I meant that there’s information you don’t have. The Bitterfangs—”

*Cali, wait.* Greyson’s voice cut into my mind.

I stopped talking and glanced at him.

*Do you really want to mention the Bitterfangs?* Greyson asked.

*Shouldn’t they know about the attack on the pack house?* I asked. *If we’re going to be in an alliance with the Samaras, we need to share any information that’s relevant to both of us—an assassin in the area seems relevant.*

Greyson gave me a half-smile. *You’re getting better at this diplomacy thing than I am.*

I smiled back. *That’s not true, but I appreciate the thought.*

“Oh my god,” Ava groaned. “If you guys are done whispering in each other’s brains, can I ask what the hell you’re talking about? How does this guy attacking Xavier have anything to do with the Bitterfangs?”

“The Bitterfangs sent someone to attack the Redwood pack,” I said.

Xavier’s eyes widened, and he took a step forward, like he couldn’t stop himself. “Is everyone okay?”

Now it was my turn to be surprised. For a split second, it was like the old Xavier had come back. The Xavier who actually cared about the Redwoods.

I nodded. “Everyone’s fine now.”

If he noticed my phrasing, he didn’t mention it. He just gave us a short nod, like he’d remembered to go back to being the standoffish Xavier I kind of hated.

“Give us a moment to discuss this,” he said, then he and Ava headed several feet away to speak quietly.

Greyson pulled me aside. “Are you okay?” he asked. “I know this can’t be easy for you.”

I held on tight to that brief moment when I’d seen the old Xavier. It was the closest thing I had to proof that he was still in there somewhere.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” I said. “I just want to get through this.”

After a few moments, Xavier and Ava came back. Ava looked sort of frustrated, which I had to assume was a good thing for us. I hid my smile at the pissy look on her face.

“Fine,” Xavier said. “You can ask your questions and do what you want with him. But I want him turned in by sundown, or I’ll do it myself. Is that understood?”

Greyson frowned. “What’s up with the deadline? What do you care?”

“I get that you’re in a tough spot about how this affects the Redwoods, but I’m a pack Alpha now, and I can’t just let some random wolf come at me with no consequences. I have to think about what this means for *my* pack. If you let him go after displaying violent behavior—and it sounds like you’ve already done that before—and he comes after me again, it’ll be the last thing he ever does.”

Ava smirked at that. I kind of wanted to punch it off her face.

Greyson nodded. “That’s fair, but it won’t come to that. We’ll handle this.” A tense silence set in for a moment, and then Greyson added, “So… You can leave now. We’ve got it from here.”

Xavier looked like he was ready to lash out at Greyson again, but Ava pulled him away. “Come on. Let’s get back to our pack.”

My gut twisted as Xavier put an arm around Ava’s shoulders. Neither one of them looked back as they disappeared into the forest, and I had to wrench my gaze back to Greyson and make myself focus on the task at hand. This wasn’t about Xavier and Ava. It was about Helix, and the Redwoods, and maybe even the Bitterfangs, for all we knew.

That was why we were here. To find out what the hell was going on.

Greyson was kneeling next to Helix, and his face was all crinkled up.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Is he okay? Did I hit him too hard?”

A little snort escaped Greyson’s nose, and I realized why his face looked like that. He wasn’t concerned or horrified. He was trying not to laugh. What could possibly be so funny?

He chuckled. “You got him really good, huh?”

Heat rushed into my cheeks. “I was just trying to protect myself.”

“And you did a fantastic job.”

I sighed, frustrated. “So he’s not waking up anytime soon?”

Greyson shook his head. “Doesn’t look like it. I think our best bet is to move him to one of the Redwood tents.”

“And I’m guessing we don’t want anyone to see us?”

“Yeah, that’d be the safest option.”

“Okay, so how do we smuggle a strange wolf into the summit?”

Greyson stood. “As unstoppable as we are together, I think we’re going to need help. I’ll stay with Helix. Can you run back and grab a few people?”

“On it.”

I left Greyson in the clearing with Helix and hurried back to the campsite. The first Redwood pack member I ran into was Elle, which was kind of perfect. Maybe our luck was starting to change.

“Elle, there’s been an issue with Helix,” I said. “We need to get back to him and Greyson right away.”

Before Elle could respond, a male voice cut in, and my heart sank when I saw Lucian coming up behind Elle.

“Did I hear correctly? Is that damned wolf really back again?” he asked.

Elle shot him a dirty look. Lucian was almost literally the last person in the world I wanted involved in our scheme to smuggle Helix into the summit, but with the way he insisted on hanging around Elle all the time, I doubted we’d be able to shake him. And Greyson did need him.

With a sigh of resignation, I filled them both in on what had happened.

“So now we have Helix unconscious in the woods, and we need to be quiet about bringing him back here,” I said. “Come with me, both of you.”

When we reached Greyson and Helix, Elle let out a cry before racing to Helix’s side and dropping to her knees. “You shouldn’t have hit him so hard, Cali.”

I winced. “Sorry. But how are we going to get him back to the tents?”

Beside me, Lucian laughed. “You always think so small, Caliana. This isn’t a wolf problem—this is a human problem. And money solves *all* human problems.”

# **Episode 3950**

**Xavier**

Ava and I headed back to the Samara camp in silence. From the look of things over at the amphitheater, the council still seemed to be deliberating. I was trying to leave my frustration with Greyson and Cali and Helix—whoever the hell he even was—back in the woods, but that was easier said than done.

*Cali’s right*, I tried to remind myself. *If there are Redwood issues wrapped up in whatever the hell’s going on with that Helix guy, then they need a chance to look into it.*

It could well be that Helix was just crazy or something, and the attack had been completely random. I certainly didn’t know the guy, and from what little he’d said to me, I didn’t get the impression the attack had anything to do with the Samaras. I’d probably just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. And in any case, it didn’t matter. Greyson and Cali would take care of whatever connection the guy had to the Redwood pack, and then they’d turn him in.

My role in that situation was over, and I needed to get used to that fact, as much as I hated it. Even if there had been something hauntingly right about working with Greyson and Cali. But I’d given that up. I wasn’t part of the Redwood pack anymore. I needed to focus on the pack I *was* a part of.

Ava’s voice broke me out of my thoughts. “So… That was weird.”

I shrugged. Which part was she even referring to? My being attacked by Helix? The apparent fact that Greyson had known the guy was running around and attacking people and hadn’t done anything about it? The way Ava had negotiated at my side against Cali and Greyson, like we were part of some fucked-up fated mate power quadrangle?

It was all weird, and I hated all of it. Just like I hated that I’d been forced to come to this damn summit where I couldn’t get through a single day without remembering everything I’d given up.

When I didn’t say anything, Ava continued.

“They’re just so…” She seemed to consider her words carefully. “*Intense*. They’re so intense. Taking that wolf to the council would’ve been the simplest solution, but of course they’ve got a bunch of secrets and intrigue going on. It doesn’t seem like anything’s ever simple with them.”

*That’s a hell of an understatement.*

I shrugged again. “Well, that’s Cali and Greyson for you.”

“They’re well matched.”

The dig was directed at my brother and Cali, but it hurt me too. I didn’t want to hear about Greyson and Cali being a match. At all. It didn’t matter if they were a good match, or a bad match, or a mediocre one. The thought of them being paired up tore me to pieces just as much now as it always had. Hell, maybe it hurt even more now because, for all intents and purposes, I’d stepped aside and practically shoved Cali into Greyson’s arms.

Ava looked at me with a smile. “I’m glad we worked together back there. Showed a united front, like true pack leaders should.”

She was right—we’d projected an image fit for the Alpha and Luna of a pack. But I’d hated every second I’d spent on the opposite side of Cali. And, before Ava had shown up, it’d been even worse, because it had been Greyson and Cali against me.

I didn’t regret arguing with Greyson, and I didn’t think it had been unreasonable to demand that I’d be the one to hold Helix accountable. Like I’d told Greyson, we were equals. I led a pack now too, and that came with certain responsibilities—one of which was dealing with anyone who tried to fuck with me.

But the way Greyson and Cali were acting, *I* was the unreasonable one. I hated standing on the outside of their united front. Hated even more that I’d put myself there.

“So, you really don’t have any idea why that wolf went after you?” Ava asked.

I shook my head. “None at all. I’d never even met him before. The only explanation I can think of is that someone else sent him to do their dirty work.”

She grimaced as she mulled the possibility over. “Well, you do have more enemies than friends.” Her lips curved up into a smirk. “You and I have that in common.”

The smirk told me she was teasing, and I leaned into the levity. “I don’t know… I think I have a lot more friends than you do.”

“Rude!” She shoved me with a laugh. “Well, at least I have you.”

I slung an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close as we continued toward our tent. “You’ve got me.”

*For now.*

Guilt churned in my stomach, a sensation that was so normal by now, I could almost ignore it. Almost.

Ava’s expression sobered. “Did you see that Cali has a Luna mark?”

I tensed, then tried to answer as neutrally as possible. “I saw it.”

“Are you feeling okay about it?”

I appreciated her asking me, but it wasn’t like I could be honest. I couldn’t tell her it was tearing me up inside. That my gut twisted every time I saw it.

I forced a smile and squeezed her a little tighter. “You’ve got me, and I’ve got you. That’s what matters.”

Someone tapped my shoulder, and I stopped and turned to find Knox’s parents, Jason and Leona, standing behind us.

I felt Ava tense under my arm, but her aunt and uncle didn’t look angry. To my surprise, they actually seemed calm. Leona actually looked like she would’ve been on the verge of smiling, if she were a little less nervous.

“Um, can we help you with something?” I asked.

“We came to say thank you,” Jason said.

Ava’s brow creased. “For what?”

“We thought you were throwing Knox under the bus, but now we realize that you and Xavier were trying to save his life,” Leona said. “I know my son didn’t make all the right choices, and that he hurt you, but… He’s my only son. I’m his mother.”

As much as I wanted to laugh at the egregious understatement she’d made about Knox’s behavior, I heard what she wasn’t saying, too. What was she supposed to do? Of course she didn’t want her kid to die.

“That’s fair,” I said.

Jason held out his hand, I took it, and we shook decisively.

“For what it’s worth,” I said, “I really do hope they give him an easy sentence. But that doesn’t mean we won’t follow through with what we said. If Knox is freed and becomes a problem, we’ll have to deal with it. And we won’t be as forgiving a second time.”

Knox’s parents nodded.

“We understand,” Leona said.

“No matter what,” Jason said, “this has shown us that we’ll always be family. Sometimes family has to make hard decisions. We get it.”

Then, to my utter shock, Leona threw her arms around my shoulders. I stared at Ava over Leona’s shoulder, my eyes wide. Ava looked like she was trying not to laugh. I tentatively patted Leona’s back and mouthed, *Help me*.

Leona released me. “We’re going to go and wait for the council to return. Thank you again, both of you.”

Leona and Jason both hugged Ava as well, and Ava’s relief was almost palpable. She was practically glowing as she said goodbye to her aunt and uncle.

Once they were gone, Ava put her hand on my cheek. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

She gave me an expectant look, and I put my hands up.

“I mean, you don’t have to thank me,” I said. “I told you where I stood. I told you what I would do.”

“You’re right. You did.”

She ran a hand down my arm and twined our hands together as she pulled me toward our tent. I followed right behind her, and once we were inside our tent, she turned and kissed me deeply.

“If I’m not careful, I’m going to get used to people coming through for me, and it’ll be all your fault,” she said.

*That might not be such a bad thing for her.*

Still, it felt good to be wanted. To have done something to make someone happy. Instead of voicing these thoughts, though, I leaned forward and kissed her. Half of everything I said was a lie, but I couldn’t lie to her now, while our lips were moving together.

I walked her back toward the cot, never breaking our connection. The kiss deepened as we lowered together, and I let out a groan when her warm palms dragged across my chest. She flipped us over and leaned over me. Her hips dragged against my hardening cock, and my lust ratcheted up a few more notches.

Her hair hung around us like a curtain as she whispered, “I can’t wait to be your Luna.”

**Episode 3951**

“What do you mean?” I asked. “How can money solve this?”

Lucian was definitely over-the-top enough to buy Helix a private jet or something to whisk him away, but I was sure that a simpler fix was in order.

“I meant exactly what I said—money can make this go away,” Lucian said. “And as we all know, I have plenty of money.” He flashed a wolfish smile, and his gaze drifted over to Elle, as if he was checking to make sure she’d heard him.

I shook my head. “Lucian, we just need a quick, simple solution. Maybe when he comes to, we can just reason with him and ask why—”

But Lucian wasn’t even pretending to listen to me. And somehow, Armin appeared what seemed like moments later, along with a couple of brutish-looking Vanguard wolves.

Lucian lifted his chin with distaste. “Armin, I must reorganize my tent. When I woke up, I found it most displeasing to see my dresser at the west end of the tent when there are placements that better align with the feng shui of the space.” He turned to me and Elle. “You should both accompany me back to my tent so that you can assess things yourselves.”

I nodded slowly. “Um… Okay? I suppose we can help with that.”

“And I’ll stay here, I guess,” Greyson grumbled.

“Thank you, Greyson, so magnanimous,” Lucian said.

*You going to be okay?* I mind linked.

*Yeah, I hate to trust Lucian, but it’s not like we have a lot of options right now. Stay safe.*

*I will.*

I didn’t have the slightest idea what Lucian was up to, but I hoped that whatever it was would solve our very real Helix problem without turning it into an even bigger mess.

Elle and I followed Lucian and his wolves back to his tent. Lucian wasted no time ordering everyone around, making so many demands that my head started spinning. Elle and I stood in a corner, watching the swarm of activity with Lucian at its center, directing everyone like an orchestra conductor. I didn’t think I’d ever seen him more in his element.

“Put that here! No, not here, *there.* Perfect. Actually, no, I hate it!” Lucian stamped his foot, sending Vanguards scattering with chests of drawers, dressers, mirrors, and everything in between balanced in their arms as they hurried to place things according to his specifications. Then he turned his attention on me. “Caliana, this trunk!” He thrust his finger at the trunk in question, which had already been moved at least six times. “I can’t stand to look at it!”

“Um, what?” I stared at him.

“I said, *I can’t stand to look at it*.” He widened his eyes very deliberately, and I finally picked up what he was putting down.

“Oh! Yes, let’s get rid of it now!” I said quickly.

I eyed the trunk as I approached it, wondering if it was even big enough for Helix to fit inside. Or if I was even going to be able to carry it empty. I bent down and gave it a test lift, then set it down immediately.

“Oof!” I looked from Lucian to Elle. “It’s really heavy.”

“I’ll help, Cali,” Elle said.

She came over and grabbed one end as I lifted the other, and then we both hobbled out of the tent with it. We made our way back to the forest without anyone paying us any attention, since Lucian was still busy making a princely scene. Elle and I exchanged a look when we heard him yelling in the background about a stain he’d found on a rug.

I rolled my eyes. “Lucian definitely takes glamping to a whole new level.”

Elle raised an eyebrow. “What’s glamping?”

“Fancy camping,” I said quickly.

I was hoping that Elle wouldn’t ask for any more clarification, as I was using every bit of focus I possessed to avoid dropping the trunk on my toes. We finally made it into the woods, having skirted the camp the long way so that no one would notice us—hopefully. It was risky, but necessary.

*I guess I should look on the bright side. Even if we get caught with Helix, at least it’ll seem like we were just trying to do the right thing. We’re capturing the killer so that he can’t hurt anyone else. No one would blame us for that, right?*

I didn’t even want to think about what the council would do to Helix if they got their hands on him.

“Any idea why Helix did what he did?” I asked Elle.

“No,” she said. “The Helix I know is gentle. A friend. He would never hurt anyone unless they deserved it.”

I grimaced. How exactly was he determining who “deserved it,” these days? Obviously, he was of the mind that Greyson and Xavier had wronged him, and he was taking matters into his own hands to even the score. That was dangerous and had brought us to where we were now—namely, preparing to throw his unconscious body into a trunk.

“I don’t think there was any real reason for him to hurt Greyson especially,” Elle continued. “Greyson helped both of us, and our pack too. He helped protect my father, and he tried to be supportive of Helix and me, even when he didn’t really have to be.” Her expression darkened. “I’m hoping that this is all just some big misunderstanding.”

I sighed. “I hope so, too.”

But I had a feeling that, misunderstanding or not, Helix had left quite a bad taste in Greyson’s and Xavier’s mouths.

Elle and I hauled the chest the rest of the way, until my arms and legs felt like they were about to give out. Luckily, Greyson spotted us and ran over to help.

“Did Helix wake up?” I asked him.

“No, not yet. What’s with this trunk?” he asked as he pulled it away from both Elle and me.

“This is for Helix, so we can get him to camp. It was Lucian’s idea,” I said.

Greyson smirked. “Of course it was.”

Elle and I followed Greyson to where Helix was still passed out on the ground. We opened the trunk, and Greyson and Elle immediately set about lifting Helix into it. As soon as they picked him up, his eyes shot open, and he started thrashing.

“Let me go! Let me go! Help!” he said.

“Calm down, man!” Greyson dropped him back to the ground and leaned down to try to comfort him, but it was clear that Helix was terrified. “No one wants to hurt you, but you have to relax.”

As soon as Helix registered who it was standing over him, his eyes darkened. “*You*.”

Greyson stood up and took a couple of steps back, his posture erect and predatory. “Yeah, me. What are you going to do about it?”

Elle stepped between them with her eyes on Helix. “Helix, you have to stop this. This isn’t like you!”

I saw Helix register Elle’s voice, and for a moment, his eyes seemed to clear. He looked grateful to hear her voice.

“Help me, Elle,” he pleaded.

Elle stooped down to caress his face. “We’re trying to. Please let us.”

Then Helix’s gaze went back to Greyson, and he started thrashing again, scrambling and fighting to get to his feet. Greyson put a hand on his shoulder, holding him down.

“Sorry, buddy, but you’re going to have to cooperate,” Greyson said. “Otherwise, we can’t let you go. You’re a danger to yourself and others with the way you’re acting right now.”

“Helix, listen to Greyson,” I said. “He doesn’t want to hurt you. None of us do. We just want to talk to you. We want to know why you’re doing this, why you’re attacking us… and our friends.” It felt strange to lump Xavier in with my “friends,” but I pushed past it.

Helix clenched his jaw and looked away. I couldn’t quite tell what he was thinking, but at least he wasn’t fighting against Greyson and Elle anymore.

“Listen, Helix, either you take the easy way, or the hard way,” Greyson said. “We’re all hoping that you choose the right option,”

“I hope so, too, Helix. We don’t want to make things any more complicated for anyone. We just want to get to the bottom of things and sort this out,” I added.

*Ideally* before *the council gets wind of this and makes everyone’s life a living hell. Given how ready they were to kill Knox—and still might—Helix could face a similar fate if they learn what he’s done on summit land.*

I looked between Helix and Elle, thinking about how horrible it would be for him to suffer that fate and knowing that Elle would take it really hard. He might’ve been acting out, but he definitely didn’t deserve to be put to death—especially when he seemed so out of sorts.

“Helix,” Elle said. “*Please*.”

Helix closed his eyes for a moment, still clearly struggling internally. When he finally opened them, he looked calmer than he had a few moments ago.

“Fine,” he said. “I will tell you.”

**Episode 3952**

**Greyson**

*Finally, he’s going to say something about why he’s doing all this! Helix is out for blood, and I need to know why.*

I stared down at him, wondering how things had gone so wrong in such a short amount of time. Granted, we were little more than strangers, but I never would’ve predicted that things between us would take such a turn.

*I know that Elle wants us all to get along, but that won’t happen until I can be sure that Helix won’t try to attack me again*,I thought to myself. *I’d hate to do it, but I won’t hesitate to take him out if he goes for my throat a second time.*

It was all so odd. I’d spent a lot of time with Helix on our trip to Idaho to help Elle’s father, and he’d been so happy-go-lucky and positive. That was a far cry from the man I was restraining right now. There was an air of wildness around him, which probably wasn’t all that surprising, seeing as he’d been a wild wolf up until very recently. I just couldn’t figure out what had gone wrong between the last time I’d seen him and him showing up here at the summit. The only thing I was sure of was that Helix wasn’t in his right mind.

*What could have triggered this? And, more importantly, how do we stop it? I wonder if we even can. If he were capable of listening to reason, he probably would’ve done it by now.*

Cali, Elle, and I were in a circle around Helix, waiting silently for him to shed some light on his strange behavior.

“Well?” I said impatiently when the silence stretched on too long. “Why did you attack me? Why did you attack Xavier?”

Helix swallowed audibly. “Because I am a loyal wolf.”

I made a face at Cali, and she shrugged.

*I don’t get it either*, she mind linked. *If anything, he should be loyal to you, considering how you’ve taken care of Elle. And his wolf pack.*

“Because you’re loyal?” I repeated, looking at Helix. “I’m going to need you to be a little more specific. Who are you loyal to, exactly?”

Helix gritted his teeth. “I am loyal to my maker.”

He was staring at me with what looked like hatred, but I just couldn’t understand *why*. We barely knew each other, and the little time we’d spent together had been relatively positive. It was all so *weird*.

“And you wronged him,” Helix added.

Dayton. That must have been who he was talking about and who he was trying to protect. Elle was certainly protective of me. Once again, it made me consider the strength of the sire bond between made werewolves and those who turned them—though I wasn’t sure if that was at play in this case.

Instinctively, I tightened my grip on Helix, anchoring him to the ground so that he could barely move. He wasn’t happy about being restrained, and with a hard yank, he tried to vault to his feet. I slammed him back down, and he bared his teeth at me before thrashing and jerking against my hold. At the rate he was going, I knew he was moments from shifting. If that happened, the time for talking things through would be over.

*I’m done dealing with this*, I thought angrily. *I have enough on my plate without having to watch my back around some unruly new werewolf with a chip on his shoulder. If he doesn’t want to calm down and act civilized, it’s time for the next best thing.*

“All right, that’s enough,” I hissed.

I drew my fist back, and, fast enough that Helix didn’t see it coming, I knocked him out cold. Both Elle and Cali gasped, and I felt a *little* guilty—but not really. He was out of control, and this was for his own good.

I turned to Elle and gestured to the trunk. “Help me get him in there before someone wanders out here and sees us.”

I grabbed Helix under the arms while Elle and Cali both moved to take his feet, and together we shuffled him over to the trunk and began to gently lower him inside.

“Who the hell is he talking about, anyway? Who’s his maker?” Cali said.

I waited until we’d gotten Helix’s top half into the trunk before I responded. “Dayton.” I looked over at Elle, but she didn’t say a word. “When we were on our way to the summit, we ran into the Nightshade pack. Helix told me that Dayton was the one who turned him into a werewolf.”

Cali’s eyes went wide. “*What?*”

“Helix seemed pretty devoted to him at the time too,” I said. “Said he’d do anything for him.”

Apparently, I should’ve given more thought to what that might mean if Dayton and I ever came to blows.

“But Helix isn’t a killer!” Elle glanced down at his motionless form. “At least he *wasn’t*.”

I shook my head, wishing that things hadn’t gotten so complicated so fast. “I have to wonder if this isn’t just blind, violent loyalty. In fact, I’m almost certain Dayton told Helix to do some of these things.”

“I agree,” Cali said. “Helix attacked Xavier, and he argued with Dayton last night. That doesn’t seem like a coincidence.”

“So, what are we dealing with here?” I mused. “Is Dayton building a hit list for Helix to go through like it’s a grocery list or something?”

It wouldn’t have surprised me if Dayton was taking advantage of Helix’s devotion and using him as a bodyguard—or a hitman.

Cali shrugged and shoved Helix’s feet into the chest. “It’s possible.”

The more I thought about it, the more I believed that Helix wasn’t just randomly kicking asses and taking names to please his maker. Like Xavier, I’d only been attacked after I’d gotten in a tiff with Dayton—and the attack had happened when I’d been in a vulnerable position and easy to ambush, away from the rest of the summit.

Warming to the idea of Dayton directing Helix’s attacks, I had to think of the heated exchange between Evan and Dayton. Evan had been murdered shortly afterward.

I slammed the trunk closed and then turned my attention back to Elle and Cali.

“We need to act fast on this,” I said.

“Yes, let’s get it over with,” Cali agreed. “Though I think Lucian could redecorate and rearrange the furniture in his tent all day if he wanted to.”

“That’s for damn sure,” I muttered. “Let’s get this thing back to camp.”

I lifted one end of the trunk, and Cali and Elle grabbed the other. I probably could’ve carried it on my own, but we’d move much faster with Elle and Cali helping, and speed was of the essence. We needed to take care of this before anyone started wondering where we’d wandered off to.

We made it back to the Vanguard campsite to see pieces of furniture being carried in and out of Lucian’s tent. At this point, it looked like an entire apartment had been staged on the bank of the Snake River.

“Aysel’s involved now. Why am I not surprised?” Cali muttered as we approached.

Aysel was sprawled out on a black velvet chaise that two well-muscled Vanguard wolves were carrying down to the river. She waved at us as they carted her by, then went back to directing her manservants.

“Ah, thank goodness you brought it back!” Lucian said when he spotted us. “That trunk is a family heirloom. How could I have been so foolish earlier? There’s no way I can get rid of it. Thank you so much! You can put it in my study.”

I arched an eyebrow at him. “You mean your tent?”

Lucian’s eyes flashed. “If I meant my tent, I would’ve said so. Now, put it in my study, and don’t delay! I still have so much to do!”

“Whatever,” I grumbled.

Cali and I rolled our eyes at each other before taking the chest into the tent. It was my first time laying eyes on the interior, and I immediately understood Lucian’s indignation about his study. The tent had multiple rooms—for whatever reason—and it actually took us several moments to locate an area of the tent with a desk and a few bookshelves.

“This is the epitome of too fucking much,” I grumbled.

Lucian came in and zipped the “door” shut behind him. “So?”

“We got him,” I answered. “And we might’ve already gotten the information we need out of him.”

“Excellent,” Lucian said. “I’m sure I can get some restraints as well.”

*I’m not even going to ask why he brought those.*

“I brought them just in case the mood struck,” Lucian volunteered, waggling his eyebrows. Luckily, he kept his suggestive gaze from landing on Elle, and none of us asked him to elaborate.

“So, what should we do next?” Cali asked.

I shrugged. “I can only see one logical next step. We have to go confront Dayton.”

**Episode 3953**

**Xavier**

I froze with my hands still on Ava’s hips. With her hovering over me and her hair forming a curtain around us, I suddenly felt trapped.

A wave of panic crested inside me as I said, “Ava… We agreed to make that decision at the end of the summit.”

Ava grinned and leaned down to kiss me. “I know… But I think we both know the way this is going, don’t we, X?”

She kissed me three times in rapid succession. I kissed her back, mainly to stall a bit, since I didn’t know how to respond. Especially considering that, for the first time, I didn’t think Ava was wrong. I’d given her every indication that I would make her my Luna at the end of this. But every time the word “Luna” entered my mind, I thought of Cali. I couldn’t help it. I’d dreamed of Cali being my Luna for so damn long that I just couldn’t shake the idea.

I pushed the thought from my mind and tried to plant myself in the here and now, with Ava. I didn’t want to think about Cali right now. Not with Ava like this. I’d reached the point where it really felt like I was betraying her by losing myself in thoughts of Cali. I didn’t even want to think about how every moment I spent with Ava felt like the ultimate betrayal of Cali.

“I just want you to know that I’m ready,” Ava said. “I’m ready for everything with you, Xavier.”

She kissed me again, and I lost myself in it, knowing that the clock was ticking and I needed to figure out what the hell I was going to do. A pack without a Luna wasn’t unheard of—the Redwoods had been without one for ages—but it was certainly a strange situation when a pack’s Alpha was both mated and on good terms with said mate.

Ava dropped down and straddled me as she swirled her tongue deeper into my mouth. With an urgency that I shared, she pulled my rigid shaft free of my pants, moved her panties to the side, and lowered herself down. I sighed, watching as she slowly pulled me inside, inch by inch. It wasn’t until I’d completely disappeared within her that I closed my eyes and lay back, enjoying the sensation of being enveloped in her tight warmth.

“Fuck, Xavier. You feel so good,” she breathed.

She rocked back and forth against me while she trailed kisses across my lips, my neck, and the sensitive spot behind my ear. She increased her speed, urging me closer and closer to the edge while I palmed her breasts, surging up from time to time to cover them with kisses.

With every twist of her hips, she brought me closer to climax. I groaned and pulled her down against me as we began to strain against each other, our climaxes coming quick and hard. We pressed our lips together as the last jolts of pleasure coursed through our bodies, and then we sprawled out side by side on the cot, breathing hard.

“God, I missed that,” Ava said.

*It’s even better than I remembered*. “Yeah,” I replied. Then I sighed and got up, swinging my feet to the floor and wiping myself off with a towel before quickly changing into a clean shirt and jeans.

Ava got up and got dressed, too. Hand in hand, we left the tent and headed out toward the main part of the camp. We passed the Samara delegation, gathered by a bonfire near our campsite. Ava’s hand tensed in mine as she tugged me toward them.

“Hey,” she said breezily.

Geraint nodded. “No Knox updates yet. Hope we hear something soon. Everyone’s getting antsy.” Geraint’s last word was clipped, almost like he wanted to add more but had decided against it.

“Thanks for keeping us posted,” Ava said. “Hopefully we’ll get the results today, but the council has been known to drag things out.”

“Yeah, but I don’t see why they would in this case,” I said. “Seems to me that they’d want to get this off their plates so they can concentrate on other summit business.”

I didn’t envy the council. They were well within their rights to execute Knox, and not too long ago I would’ve been all for it—maybe even pushed for them to do it. But now, I was happy to be a part of showing him mercy—especially since that was what Ava wanted.

“Anybody want to go hunt down some hot springs?” Marissa asked.

I was about to answer when I caught sight of Greyson coming toward me with Cali, Lucian, and Elle in tow.

“I’ll be back,” I said to the Samaras.

I wasn’t surprised when Ava followed me as I made my way over to meet the others.

“What’s going on?” I asked Greyson.

“We have an update about the… situation.” He glanced at Ava before continuing. “It’s Dayton.”

I was confused at first. “Dayton? The Nightshade Alpha?”

Greyson nodded. “He changed Helix, and we think he might be using their bond to exploit him. It looks like he’s been sending Helix to kill people he takes a disliking to—for whatever twisted reason.”

I took this in and was immediately angry. *Is Dayton really enough of a coward that he has to send out the equivalent of a werewolf pup to attack his enemies? Is he so heartless that he would twist Helix’s mind like that and put him in danger?*

Helix was lucky that Greyson and I were capable of showing restraint. A lesser werewolf would’ve ripped his throat out without a second thought.

“What an asshole,” I said darkly. “I assumed he’d learned his lesson last night when I confronted him for harassing Cali, but clearly I was wrong.”

Almost outside of my control, my gaze drifted to Cali. We locked eyes for a long moment, unwavering. The intensity built until it was too much for me to bear, and in the end, I was the one who looked away.

“So?” I said, snapping out of whatever trance I’d fallen into. “You all look like you’re on a mission. I take it you have a plan?”

“More or less,” Greyson said. “We’re going to go talk to Dayton. Since you were one of his victims, I thought you might want to join us… Unless you’re too busy playing Alpha, that is.”

Lucian snickered, and I shot him a look that stopped him cold. The princeling smirked. “No offence intended—just enjoying this little demonstration of sibling rivalry.”

I’d already tuned Lucian out, but I was still angry at Greyson’s dig. I swiftly pushed that anger down and tried not to let it show. I wasn’t going to let Greyson get to me, not right now. I was feeling good, and the future didn’t look as bad as it had not too long ago. I’d made peace with my situation—more or less—and I wasn’t about to let Greyson ruin that.

“Sure. I’ll come with you,” I said tightly. I pulled Ava close. “We both will.”

I felt Ava’s hand on my back and appreciated her show of support, but I couldn’t help but glance at Cali again. She was still expressionless.

*Good. This is what I wanted, right? What I had to make happen? For her not to care one bit about me. Well, that’s the way it is now. She doesn’t care. That’s what will keep her safe from Adéluce… Doesn’t make it hurt any less, though.*

“Lead the way,” I said to Greyson. “Let’s see if Dayton is man enough to admit to what he’s done.”

“I think I saw him roasting things by the mess tent not too long ago,” Lucian said as we cut across the center of camp.

We made our way to the mess tent, and sure enough, Dayton was lounging in front of it with a few members of his pack.

“What a surprise—you were actually right about something for once,” I grumbled at Lucian, who only nodded and smiled.

I shifted my attention back to Dayton and got pissed off all over again.

*The nerve of this guy, thinking he can talk to Cali the way he did… And now thinks he can attack me—and by sending one of his minions after me to do what he was too chickenshit to do? Pathetic.*

My mind drifted back to what Cali had said to me after I’d confronted Dayton—about how she hadn’t wanted or needed my help. Then she’d followed it up by telling me to stay the fuck away from her—which was working out, clearly. I’d never imagined that she’d speak to me that way, but I really should’ve expected nothing less after the stunts I’d pulled to push her away.

Dayton looked up as we approached, a smug smile across his lips. “Can I help you?”

“You can,” Greyson said. “We’re looking to have bit of a friendly chat.”

Dayton tore a chunk of meat from the huge steak on his plate. “Oh yeah? What about?”

“It won’t take very long,” I said.

Dayton stood and looked between me, Greyson, and Lucian. His chest was puffed out, his hands balled into fists. It was obvious that he was trying to look intimidating, but I wasn’t going to back down. I intended to get some answers out of him, one way or another.

Greyson stepped forward to meet his silent challenge.

“Come with us, now,” Greyson said to Dayton, his voice low.

Dayton’s expression darkened. “Give me one reason why I should.”

**Episode 3954**

I bit my lip, unsure how this was going to go down. I was nervous. It wasn’t like I’d thought this confrontation was going to go *well*, but I still didn’t want to see a fight break out.

It looked very much like Greyson, Xavier, and Lucian were about to face off against Dayton, which would obviously draw a bunch of attention—not to mention the ire of the council. We couldn’t afford to have their eyes on us right now, especially when we had an unconscious would-be killer wolf locked in a trunk in Lucian’s tent.

*How do I stop this from getting any worse? What can I say? What can I do? I can’t let them fight.*

Without thinking too hard about it, I stepped forward.

“It’s about the alliances,” I told Dayton. “We want to discuss a few things with you before we proceed. Geena, too.”

I gestured to the Luna, who was sitting and watching us through narrowed eyes. The other Nightshade wolves were on alert, too, and I could tell they were following Dayton’s lead. One word from him and they’d attack, summit rules be damned.

Dayton turned his attention to me and smiled, which broke the tension just a bit. “Well, why didn’t you say so?” He cracked his knuckles. “I’m always open to hearing a proposition.”

His smile made my stomach turn as I recalled the way he’d spoken to me the night before.

I gritted my teeth and gave him a fake smile in return. “Of course. We’re just hoping to steal you away so we can chat somewhere a little more private.”

Dayton nodded. “Of course, of course.” He offered Geena his hand and helped her up. “Where to?”

“If you’ll just follow me, I know of a perfect location,” Lucian said. “It’s like I always say—if you have to talk business, do it in the lap of luxury.”

I could almost *hear* Greyson rolling his eyes, but now that the tense moment had passed, I didn’t even mind Lucian’s ridiculousness.

Breathing a bit easier, I fell into step next to Greyson. I kept my eyes on Lucian’s back, wanting to avoid even the slightest chance of meeting Xavier’s eyes again. I didn’t think I’d be able to take it after the stare-down we’d shared a few minutes ago. I’d done my best to keep my expression neutral, and he’d seemingly been doing the same. I wondered if things would ever be normal between us.

My thoughts were broken when Greyson took my hand and squeezed.

*Thanks for that, love*,he mind linked. *That was some quick thinking. You stopped everyone from making a mistake we might not have been able to come back from.*

I gave him an easy smile, recalling how hard it had been to smile at Dayton. *Of course. I’m just glad that Dayton listened to me. Though I’m not sure how agreeable he’s going to be once we actually confront him.*

*Don’t worry about that. We’ll handle it.*

I tried not to let the implications of Greyson’s words get to me. He and the other wolves had been—for the most part—on their best behavior throughout the summit, despite several close calls. I’d just have to hope that their good behavior would hold throughout this conversation.

We followed Lucian back to the Vanguard campsite, and he led us to a sitting area complete with plush seating and a sunshade overhead.

*Where the hell did this come from? I swear this wasn’t here even an hour ago*,I thought to myself.

I had to hand it to Lucian—he knew how to travel in style. It was definitely a little too rich and over-the-top for my taste, but I supposed I could see the appeal.

“Come, sit. Would anyone like a drink? Armin makes a mean Manhattan,” Lucian said as he sat in the fanciest chair—the one that looked suspiciously like a throne. Right next to it was a chair that looked like its smaller cousin, and he directed Elle to that one.

“No drinks just yet,” Greyson said. “Let’s get down to business, first.”

Dayton and Geena chose a sofa, and Greyson, Xavier, Ava, and I sat in the chairs on either side of it. While I had chosen to sit on the arm of Greyson’s chair, Ava had plopped right down in Xavier’s lap and was trailing her long, graceful fingers through his hair. They both looked so relaxed, even though the conversation we were all about to have promised to be anything but. I forced myself to look away from them, knowing that torturing myself wasn’t helpful.

“I knew that you’d come to talk to me about this eventually,” Dayton said, oozing with self-importance. Geena linked her arm around her mate’s and leaned in close, looking at him with pure adoration in her eyes.

“Is that so?” Greyson said.

Dayton nodded. “Don’t think I don’t know about your attempts to link up with the other packs and build up the little alliance you’ve got going on.” He looked at all of us. “The Nightshade pack is strong only because of me. My leadership as Alpha is second to none—ask anyone in my pack.” He leaned back against the sofa, and Geena nestled into the crook of his arm. “They’ll tell you how my rule has brought us success, prosperity, and strength. All that to say, you’d be fools not to court me in your mission to build a strong alliance. Without the Nightshade pack, your alliance will be nothing.”

“Really, you can ask anyone,” Geena added. “Dayton is the best Alpha the Nightshades have ever had.”

Dayton sniffed, then lifted his nose in the air and looked down it as he considered us. “So, what are you offering?”

Xavier snorted. “Excuse me?”

“What are you offering?” Dayton repeated. “What are the incentives? Why should I consider joining your alliance?”

“The *incentive* is that we don’t turn you in to the council for attacking me and my brother,” Greyson said coldly. “Is that good enough for you?”

I watched Dayton closely, trying to gauge his reaction. His eyebrows shot up, and he looked genuinely surprised, but he said nothing.

*Is he shocked that he’s been caught? Or is he just trying to think up a lie to cover his ass?*

“What’s your endgame, anyway?” Greyson asked almost casually. “Why did you have us attacked? What did you stand to gain? Did you send someone after us because of the petty grudge you have against me? Or were you trying to sidestep the council’s no violence rule by bringing in a Rogue? And an inexperienced one, at that. You could’ve gotten any of us killed with your bullshit.”

Dayton held up a hand and shook his head. “Whoa. Wait just a goddamn minute. I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

Lucian placed a hand on Elle’s shoulder, and there was fire in his eyes when he spoke. “You’ve taken a good wolf and compromised his integrity. How do you plead? You only have one chance to get this right, I might add.”

Taking note of Lucian’s hand placement, I made a mental note to circle back to the Elle and Lucian thing once all this was taken care of. It wasn’t lost on me that Elle didn’t shrug his touch away like she might’ve done before.

Geena scoffed at Lucian’s words. “What are you talking about? Compromising a wolf? What?”

“You are barking up the wrong tree,” Dayton said. “Something’s scrambled your brains. We don’t have the foggiest idea what you’re talking about. I haven’t compromised a thing, and I haven’t attacked you.” He turned his attention to Lucian. “I might’ve been a Rogue, once upon a time, but I think I’m in good company when it comes to checkered pasts as lone wolves.” He turned to Greyson. “And to be frank, yes, I do have a bit of a problem with you, but why would I risk attacking you in a place like this? I honor the rules of the summit, and I always have. And Xavier—why would I attack *you*?” He sat back and sighed. “Listen to yourselves. You’re talking crazy. None of these accusations make any sense.”

“The thing is, we know that you didn’t attack us,” Greyson said. “At least not personally. You had Helix for that. Remember him? The wolf you turned?”

Dayton’s eyes went wide for the quickest moment, but he kept his mouth shut.

“Fuck them, baby,” Geena said, her voice low enough that we could barely make out what she was saying. “They’re desperate for allies and probably trying to hit you with some fake blackmail so that you’ll support them without getting anything in return.”

Dayton shook his head and motioned for her to be quiet, and he was avoiding our gazes. Geena said nothing else. Were they mind linking now?

I watched him closely, doing my best to read him. *Have we caught Dayton in a lie?*

**Episode 3955**

We all sat there, waiting to see what Dayton had to say. Was he going to confess? Was he going to keep denying it? And then an even more fantastic idea crossed my mind—was it possible that he was actually telling the truth? I looked around at the other Alphas, then I met Elle’s eyes. I wondered if she could feel the tension like I could.

Greyson got to his feet. “Look, we could just force you to tell the truth.”

“Or you could just explain it to us,” Xavier said from across the way. He leaned back in his chair, and Ava draped her body across his. “We’ll give you two minutes.”

Dayton’s eyes darted around the circle. He looked confused, and a little alarmed.

“Two minutes to explain what?” he said. “I already told you—I don’t understand what the hell you’re talking about or what you’re even accusing me of. I haven’t sent anyone to attack any of you. And even if I did want to come at you, I’d do it myself.” He looked at Geena. “Wouldn’t I, honey?”

“You would. You certainly wouldn’t send some random Rogue to handle such an easy job.” Geena rolled her eyes. “And the fact that they think you *would* says more about them than it does about you.”

*Him throwing the burden of proof to Geena could just be a ploy to buy time… Is he trying to come up with a lie?*

“Now I’ll admit that I bet against the Redwood team in the Ludis tournament, and I made a nice chunk of change when you lost, but that’s it,” Dayton said. “And that’s my right! If you want to go after everyone who bet against you, you’ll be going after half the summit, just so you know. So I don’t get why you’d single me out.” He seemed to be gaining his footing a bit. “Regardless, there’s no reason for me to have a Rogue—whether I turned him or not—do my dirty work.”

“Like I said, he does that himself!” Geena added.

*What do you think?* I asked Greyson. *Do you believe him?*

Greyson frowned. *Not sure. He sounds convincing, though, I’ll give him that. But Dayton’s always been cocky, and a good liar. He could be lying right now—I definitely wouldn’t put it past him. And that’s the thing about good liars—they know how to make you believe them.*

*True*, I said. *I wonder if there’s a way for us to make him tell the truth—or at least let us confirm whether he’s lying or not.*

*That’s a great idea, Cali*,Greyson said.

“Fine,” he said out loud. “You say you didn’t do it? Then prove it. We have a way to know for sure if you’re lying. And if you know what’s good for you, for your Luna, and your pack, you’ll let us use it.”

Dayton leaned forward. “Whatever it is, I’ll do it.”

Geena rolled her eyes. “Sure, he’ll play your stupid game if it gets you off his back.”

I was surprised that Dayton had agreed so quickly, but the three Alphas staring him down had probably helped him make the decision.

“Glad to hear it,” Greyson said. “Follow me.”

Greyson led the way, and I stayed at his side, liking how he was taking charge. I never wanted to see Greyson fight, but I definitely liked it when he asserted his dominance. I got a flash of memory of him owning the Ludis field, and a surge of heat coursed through me. Greyson was at his best when he was calling the shots, and it was amazing to watch him in action.

Lucian sidled up next to Greyson. “What are we going to do?” he asked softly. “Are we going to torture him to get him to spill? I can send Armin to fetch my restraints.”

Greyson gave Lucian a look. “No, nothing like that. I think we can get what we need out of Dayton without resorting to violence… Or restraints.”

We reached Big Mac’s moonshine tent and filed inside. I glanced back over my shoulder before the tent flap fell back into place, shutting out the outside world. To the casual observer, I was sure it looked like we’d all headed in for a drink. Honestly, I wished that was what we were really doing, rather than forcing the truth out of an asshole Alpha.

Big Mac was cleaning the bar, and she looked up at us with a smile that disappeared as soon as I waved at her.

“Great. What are you lot doing here?” She sighed and pointed to a chalkboard covered in fancy script. “There’s a special moonshine cocktail, today only, made with thyme, orange zest, and whipped egg whites, and topped with a delicious mint garnish. If that’s not your speed—”

“We’re not here to drink, Big Mac,” Greyson said.

She sighed and narrowed her eyes. “Then why *are* you here?”

We looked at each other, all apparently too nervous to speak. Big Mac was clearly in one of her darker moods, and none of us wanted to poke the proverbial bear.

Finally, I decided to take the hit. “We need a truth serum,” I said. “Or something like it. Uh, please.”

“I want, I need, can you, will you?” Big Mac mimicked in a whiny voice. “Do any of you ever figure out your shit on your own? *Ever?*”

Despite her complaints, she ducked under the counter and pulled out a huge bag, filled to the brim with who knew what. She looked up at us, then at the bag, then back at us.

“Don’t ask. You don’t want to know.” She sighed again, probably her fifth since we’d entered the tent. “So, how much of this do you need?”

Greyson and I exchanged a glance.

“Um… The standard amount?” Greyson said.

Big Mac reached into her bag and pulled out a flask. She opened it, swirled it around under her nose, and then twisted the cap back on and thrust it out at me. “Here.”

I took it from her. “Thanks… Um, how does it work?”

“It’s pretty straightforward,” Big Mac said. “They drink it, and if they start lying, they start choking. The effects last for about an hour. Significantly less, if they choke to death.” She smirked a little.

“That sounds… extreme,” I said.

Big Mac thrust her hand out. “Then give it back and go fend for yourselves.”

I pulled the flask close to my chest. “No, no, this is exactly what we need. Thank you!”

“What? Don’t I have a say in this?” Dayton griped.

“You’ll be fine, kid,” Big Mac said. “As long as you don’t lie, that is.”

“Thanks again, Big Mac,” Greyson said. “Do you have somewhere we can go for privacy?”

“I should’ve known that the asking wouldn’t end with the potion.” Big Mac snapped her fingers, and a door appeared behind the bar. “Don’t take too long.”

“Why, will the door disappear and trap us inside if we overstay?” I asked.

Big Mac stared at me like I’d just said the stupidest thing in the world before she shook her head. “No. I just want you to get the hell out of my hair as soon as possible. I don’t want you scaring my customers away with your shenanigans.”

“Noted,” Xavier said dryly.

We all went inside, and Dayton took a seat in a high-backed chair. Geena moved to stand behind him, placing her hands on his shoulders. She bent down and whispered something in his ear, and this time, I couldn’t hear a word of it.

I handed Greyson the flask, and he thrust it into Dayton’s hands. “Here. Drink.”

Dayton took the flask and looked up at Greyson. “I’ll do this. It’s not fair, but if this is what it takes to prove to you that I’m not lying, I’ll do it. I don’t want a reputation as a liar. The Nightshade pack has come too far—we don’t deserve to fall from grace because of the crazy theories of a couple of Redwoods.” He turned his gaze on Xavier. “And Redwood rejects.”

“Just drink the potion and stop boring us,” Xavier said as he slung an arm across Ava’s shoulders.

Dayton unscrewed the flask and took a sip, grimacing dramatically.

“So, should we ask a test question to start?” Lucian asked. “Not that I don’t trust your witch, Greyson, but…”

“A test question sounds like a great idea,” Xavier said.

“Sure does,” Ava said.

Greyson turned back to Dayton. “Are we friends?”

“Of course!” Dayton said quickly. Almost immediately, he started coughing and gagging so hard that I was afraid his eyes were going to pop right out of his head.

“Well, I guess it works,” I said, alarmed.

“Baby? Baby? Are you okay?” Geena raced around and dropped to her knees in front of Dayton, taking his face in her hands. “Are you okay? Talk to me! Stop choking, baby!”

The rest of us exchanged alarmed looks.

“Shit,” I said. “How do we make him stop?”

**Episode 3956**

I was freaking out, Geena was freaking out, and Xavier, Greyson, and Ava were looking at Dayton like he was a bomb that was due to explode at any second. Dayton’s face had turned a sickening shade of purple, and rivers of sweat were streaming down his temples and forehead. He didn’t look good at all, and I was afraid he wouldn’t be able to keep this up for much longer without suffering real consequences.

I turned to Greyson and grabbed his hands. “What do we do? How do we get him to stop?”

I didn’t know what I’d expected when Big Mac had described the effect the potion would have on Dayton, but this was far beyond anything I’d imagined. He looked like he was going to keel over at any second.

Understandably, Geena was in hysterics, and her frantic wails filled the room. “Dayton! Dayton, baby! I’m right here, okay? Just take a deep breath. Think happy thoughts!”

*I think he needs a lot more than happy thoughts, but I suppose she’s trying to do the best she can under the circumstances.*

“Greyson,” I said. “We have to do something! If he dies here, how will we explain it to the council?”

Greyson’s face fell. “You’re right. I’ll be right back.”

He ran out the door to find Big Mac.

I looked at Xavier and Ava, who both lifted their hands in unison as if to say, “Don’t look at me!” My head spinning, I refocused on Dayton.

“It’s okay,” I said as I took a few steps toward him. “Just calm down and take a deep breath.” Then, without giving it much thought, I slapped him hard across the face.

Geena immediately shoved me away, her eyes flashing. “What the hell was that for?”

“I don’t know! I thought it might help!”

“Don’t touch him!” she hissed. “You and your friends are the reason he’s in this mess in the first place!”

Big Mac and Greyson came barreling into the room. Big Mac took in the scene, then lifted a hand and snapped her fingers.

“Ack,” Dayton said, just before he started gasping down huge breaths of air. It was obvious that he couldn’t quite catch his breath, but at least he wasn’t gagging anymore. A bit of the color was even returning to his face.

“It still sounds like he’s drowning, but he’s a little better than he was a second ago,” I said to Geena. “That’s good, right? That he can breathe?”

Geena just looked at me before turning back to Dayton and smoothing her hands down his cheeks. “It’s okay, baby. You’re so strong. Nothing can take you out! Isn’t that right, baby?”

Dayton had his arms draped along the back of the chair and looked like he was struggling to stay upright, but he was finally breathing normally again.

“That was close,” I said. “That potion works really fast!”

Big Mac took a calm look around the room, her gaze coming to rest on Greyson. “Next time, ask a different questionjust tell the truth. Unless maybe .”

“What? But you could have told us that!” I said.

Big Mac rounded on me. “How the hell was I supposed to know what you wanted to achieve here? Maybe you *wanted* him to choke to death. Who am I to say?”

I opened my mouth to reply—*no* we most certainly did not want anyone choking to death—, but she held up a finger to stop me.

“I don’t actually want to know, got it? Just finish up whatever it is that you’re doing in here and scram. This isn’t a great business look.” With that, Big Mac strolled out of the room, slamming the magicked door behind her.

Greyson joined me where I was standing in front of Dayton, who was now sitting with his hand wrapped around his throat.

“Should we even ask more questions?” I whispered to Greyson. Now that Big Mac had left, I was feeling a little shaky about stopping the choking if Dayton decided to lie again…

Honestly, I was beginning to feel very nervous about this entire plan. Dayton’s reaction had been so intense, and I wasn’t interested in witnessing a repeat performance. I doubted Dayton and Geena wanted to go through that again, either.

“No, no, it’s fine. Ask your questions,” Dayton said hoarsely. “I want to prove myself to you. To all of you.”

Greyson nodded. “I don’t get why you didn’t answer my first question truthfully. We all know that you and I aren’t friends.”

Dayton managed a smile. “Wishful thinking, I guessFriends is a broad term. I keep my enemies close like friends.”

“So we’re enemies then?”

Dayton shook his head. “No.”  
 Not a lie, but not all that reassuring either. He saw Greyson as somewhere in between. Didn’t like the sound of that.

Lucian stepped forward. “Pardon, I have a question for you. Did you send my beautiful forest rose’s friend to attack Greyson and Xavier?”

Dayton screwed up his face. “Who?”

Lucian gestured to Elle. “My lovely mate, of course.”

Dayton looked at Elle, then reached back to take Geena’s hand in his. “No. I did not send your mate’s friend to attack Greyson and Xavier. Like I said, I take the council’s rules seriously, especially since this is my first summit as Nightshade Alpha. I’ll admit that a few of us got off on the wrong foot”—he looked at Greyson—“but why would I attack you? It’d be an idiotic move.”

Xavier snorted, clearly unhappy with that answer, but the proof of Dayton’s honesty was right in front of us. He wasn’t gagging and choking like before.

Still, Xavier stepped forward. “Really? You weren’t trying to start something when you went after the Redwood Luna?”

I winced at the way he’d avoided using my name… And I might have imagined it, but he’d said the word “Luna” like it tasted bad. He didn’t even bother looking at me.

“You say you don’t want any trouble,” Xavier continued, “so what was the goal with that little stunt? To make friends?” Xavier gave Dayton a cold smile. “I doubt it.”

Dayton looked at me and wet his lips. “I wanted to get under Greyson’s skin, that’s all. I just… can’t get over what happened between him and Geena.”

*Really? So I was just some pawn in his little revenge scheme against Greyson—over something that happened ages ago?*

“So you decided to take it out on me?” I said. “And why are you so mad at Greyson about this, anyway? He didn’t even know you existed at the time.”

Greyson nodded. “She has a point.”

“Yes I do!” I exclaimed.

Dayton scowled and glanced at Geena. She shrugged.

Obviously not wanting to dwell on that, Greyson posed another question. “Do you have any idea why Helix would want to attack us? Did you give him any indication that hurting us might be something you’d want?”

Dayton paused for a minute, thinking. “No, not knowingly. I just remember being excited about turning a real wolf into a werewolf. I’ve only ever turned humans—willingly, of course.”

I swallowed nervously as I noticed Lucian eyeing Greyson.

*Does he still believe that Greyson turned Elle? And if he does, is he going to make a big deal about it? tell everyone here about it?*

I decided not to dwell on that, especially when Lucian was so unpredictable that it was barely worth trying to figure out his plans.

“Helix was happy to be turned,” Dayton said. “But he seemed to want to go his own way afterward, so I let him. When I ran into him and Greyson on the way here, that was the first time I’d seen him since I turned him. I figured there might be some loyalty there, but at the moment, I’m not interested in exploring it.”

“So you didn’t ask Helix to kill Evan from the Northwind pack?” Xavier asked.

Dayton shook his head emphatically. “No.”

He still wasn’t coughing, so obviously, he was telling the truth. It almost would’ve been easier if he *were* behind Helix’s behavior. Now we still had to figure out why Helix felt so much loyalty to “his maker” that he tried to hurt Xavier and Greyson.

I could tell that everyone else was thinking, too, and probably realizing that we’d been wrong to suspect Dayton.

I had no idea what to make of all this. Dayton clearly wasn’t lying, but it still felt like there was some piece of the puzzle missing. Maybe something had been misinterpreted on Helix’s end. After all, he was pretty new to the werewolf world, as well as the human one. He was bound to make some mistakes.

“Why would Helix have said he was working for you if you never asked him to do anything?” I asked. I couldn’t for the life of me figure out what would’ve driven Helix to such an extreme.

“Hell if I know,” Dayton said. “But I swear to all of you, I haven’t asked anything of Helix.”

I was at a loss. Helix and Greyson had formed a relationship, albeit a very new one, and there was no real reason for him to have such a problem with Xavier—so why had he tried to hurt them? I doubted it was just a case of new werewolf growing pains. Something else had to be at play.

Then Lucian spoke up. “I know why Helix is doing all of this. It’s the sire bond, of course.”

**Episode 3957**

**Greyson**

Lucian’s words echoed in my head as I looked at Elle. Our eyes met, and we both quickly looked away. I’d had an inkling that the sire bond might be behind whatever was going on with Helix, but I was still skeptical about it, since I’d never heard anyone discuss it seriously until recently. I hadn’t wanted to believe it could be strong enough to send Helix off the deep end, but now I was really starting to wonder.

*Is the sire bond really at play, here?* Does *Helix have some intense, innate sense of loyalty to Dayton that he can’t control? And if so, where does it end? Will he be fighting Dayton’s battles without Dayton even knowing about it forever? How could a bond change someone’s personality so completely?*

Helix had said he would do anything for Dayton, but I’d had no idea that “anything” would include assuming grudges on Dayton’s behalf. I certainly hadn’t pictured us having to knock him out and lock him in a trunk to keep him from hurting anyone.

*What does this mean for me and Elle? If I’m feeling so overprotective of Elle because of the sire bond, does that mean this link between us could turn into something bigger? Could Elle wake up one day and start compulsively killing all my enemies?*

There was no denying that Elle was loyal—she’d proven that time and time again—but if the Lucian mate bond situation had taught me anything, it was that she had no problem defying me. My conversation with Cali earlier flahed in my mind. Elle didn’t do what she didn’t want to do. Elle had a mind of her own—our mutual protectiveness aside. And it wasn’t like Elle went bonkers and tried to kill everyone I disagreed with.

*If that were the case, Xavier would be dead about ten times over.* I smirked to myself. *And Lucian, too, come to think of it.*

But then again, it wasn’t something I’d asked of her. Would that change things?

It didn’t make much sense to me at all. If the sire bond wasn’t causing Elle to overreact to any threat that came my way, then why was Helix so deeply affected? Why was the bond so much stronger between Dayton and Helix than it was between me and Elle? All we had was a close pack bond where we wanted to protect the other.

“We don’t know that it’s their sire bond,” I finally said.

Lucian frowned, looking at me like I’d just denied the existence of gravity. “Greyson, you *can’t* be serious. How could it not be? I’ve already explained this. The sire bond can grow toxic and rot from within itself. Some turned wolves will do anything to please their sire. *Anything*. That sounds exactly like what we’re dealing with here.”

“But I’ve turned humans into werewolves in the past,” Dayton said. He gave Geena a fond look. “My mate included. This has never happened before. Not even once.”

Geena nodded. “I can second that. I’d know if I had a murderous loyalty to Dayton.”

If I weren’t still hiding the truth about Elle and me from Lucian, I would’ve agreed with her and provided my own example.

When I really thought about it, I did remember how it had been when Elle was newly turned. She’d been pretty obsessed with me, much to Cali’s chagrin. Maybe she’d leveled out so well because she’d had a pack to teach her appropriate behavior—including how to practice loyalty without going crazy over it. Conversely, Helix had left Dayton’s side immediately and come straight to find Elle.

Cali looked around. “Maybe it’s because Helix started off as a wolf and not a human?”

Ava chimed in. “Maybe he’s more wolf than man?”

“Maybe it speaks to Helix’s personality—the one he had even when he was a wolf?” I asked. “If he was, uh, murderous?”

Elle gave a grave nod, and Lucian slipped his arm around her shoulders. I couldn’t ignore how much the sight of it irked me, but this wasn’t the time or place to react.

“I knew Helix when he was a wolf. He was always very loyal,” Elle said. “It’s one of his best qualities. It made him a good friend. But he wasn’t a murderer, and he never picked fights. I hate to think that this is just what he will have to deal with as a werewolf.”

I sighed. “We can’t just keep speculating.” I held up the truth potion as a thought popped into my head. “Maybe we could give Helix some of this and see if it helps us get to the root of things. Hopefully, this has nothing to do with the sire bond—and I hope even more that all of this is short-lived. Something he’ll outgrow.”

It didn’t escape me that Helix’s personality shift had happened right after we’d seen Dayton on the way to the summit. Before that, he’d seemed relatively even-keeled, if a little overzealous.

Cali eyed the potion. “You’re right. Maybe we should try giving him some of that. That way, we can get the answers we need and then figure out what to do about them. We just have to keep him calm so whatever is driving him to fight for Dayton doesn’t come out while we do.” Cali bit her lip. “But maybe we should figure out how to stop the choking part, first?”

“I think we should try to get Dayton and Helix in the same room. Maybe seeing how they interact will give us some clues, too,” I said.

“What’s the point?” Xavier asked. “We already know that Helix is guilty. Let’s just hand him over to the council and let them figure it out. This really isn’t our problem.”

*Correction—it’s not* his *problem, so Xavier wants no part of it. He has his head stuck so far up his ass that he doesn’t even care what else is going on.*

Lucian seemed to be considering Xavier’s suggestion. “I do think that could be the best course of action.” He turned to Elle. “I’m sorry, my forest rose.”

Elle shook her head. “No. I don’t accept that. Helix is having a hard time. We can’t just turn him in and leave him on his own. That’s not what wolves do. Can’t we at least *try* talking to him? Please?”

“I agree with Elle,” Cali said. “Besides, turning Helix over to the council now will just ensure that we don’t get any answers. They’ll cut us out. They might not even let Elle talk to him, and that wouldn’t be fair.”

I took Cali’s words in, loving how compassionate she was being, even though Helix hadn’t really earned it. It was so like her to always see past the things a person did wrong in favor of taking stock of who they really were. I supposed that was why she’d held onto hope with Xavier for so long.

“I’m curious, now,” Dayton admitted. “I’d like to get to the bottom of this, too—especially if the guy’s going around hurting people in my name. That could bring me trouble that I don’t want.”

“Good point,” Geena said. “We don’t need anyone claiming to be attacking people on our behalf. Like I said before—”

“We know, we know—Dayton takes care of his own dirty work,” Cali finished, clearly exasperated.

“Fine,” Xavier said. “But one way or another, the lid is going to blow off this whole thing. And when the Northwinds find out that you’ve been harboring the wolf who killed one of their own just so you can sit around playing Scooby-Doo, don’t come crying to me.”

I held back an eye roll. That was exactly what I’d told Elle, minus the Scooby-Doo part. I didn’t *want* to agree with Xavier, but he was right. Helix’s crimes would be discovered, one way or another, and there could be consequences for everyone involved. The council was more involved than ever in things that normally would’ve been pack business—which made sense, seeing as we were all under their eye at the summit.

“Let’s get this over with,” I finally said.

“It’s about time,” Big Mac grumbled as we passed by her on our way back to Lucian’s tent. Despite her comment, her expression was soft when she looked at me. “Is everything okay?”

I nodded. “It’s being handled. Thanks again for your help.” I shook the potion in the air between us.

“No problem. Just be careful with that stuff—and if anybody dies, you’d better keep your lips zipped about where you got it from,” she said.

I smiled and was about to laugh, but the expression on her face told me that she was dead serious.

“Noted,” I said before following the others out of the tent.

We were nearly back at Lucian’s campsite when the loud bleat of a trumpet cut through the air. We all stopped and looked around.

A few seconds later, a voice crackled over the loudspeakers that had been set up throughout the camp. “Deliberation on the matter of Knox Voss has come to an end. We have a ruling.”

**Episode 3958**

*Wow, they reached a decision that quickly? Is that a good sign or a bad sign?*

I hadn’t even been sure if they were going to decide today at all. They’d seemed so dead set on the prospect of sentencing Knox to death before Xavier and Ava had spoken up on his behalf—such a big decision really should’ve taken more time.

If I was being honest with myself, when Xavier had stepped up and advocated against putting Knox to death, my heart had fluttered. I’d had so many conversations with Xavier in the past about how he shouldn’t just kill people indiscriminately, and it had felt good to finally see him argue in favor of saving someone’s life—and someone who’d wronged him, no less.

But my excitement had been short-lived. It wasn’t like he’d done it for me. It had all been for Ava. The whole trial had been bittersweet and strange, but ultimately, I agreed with both of them—Knox being put to death wasn’t fair. He deserved to be punished, but there had to be a better way than killing him.

“We should head to the amphitheater,” Greyson said, once the announcement was over. “We need to be present for the council’s decision. The Helix stuff can wait for now.”

I grabbed Greyson’s hand. “Are you doing okay after all that back there?”

“I’m good,” he said. “I understand why we should report Helix, but at the same time, I do want to know whether the sire bond could really be responsible for what’s going on with him.”

I nodded my agreement, already knowing what was on Greyson’s mind—mainly because it was the same thing I’d been concerned about from the moment Lucian had mentioned the sire bond.

“To tell you the truth, I’m worried about you and Elle,” I whispered. “I hate the possibility that what Lucian said could be true—that a sire bond could turn rotten and morph into something so horrible. I only want to protect you both, but how am I supposed to fight some ancient werewolf phenomena I don’t even understand?”

If a mate bond couldn’t be easily broken, I could only imagine the difficulties someone would face if they tried to break a sire bond. As far as I understood it—and that wasn’t very far—the sire bond seemed more unpredictable than the mate bond, and possibly stronger. But I was only guessing.

“I appreciate that, but for now, we’re both okay. Luckily,” Greyson said. He was putting on a good front, but I could tell by the look in his eye that he wasn’t completely convinced that he and Elle were out of the woods, so to speak.

I reached up to cup his face and kissed him. My entire body was buzzing when I pulled away.

“Everything will be all right,” I said. “One step at a time.”

I really believed that, and I had good reason to. No matter what we went through, Greyson and I always seemed to come out on the other side even stronger than before. There was no reason to think that wouldn’t be the case this time, too.

We all made our way over to the amphitheater, which was already packed with people. I waved at the Redwood delegation when I spotted them, and they came over to join us.

Greyson drifted off to speak with Rishika, Ravi, and Artemis, and Lola made a beeline for me and pulled me into a tight hug.

“Where have you been?” she asked. “We’ve just been spending all our time skipping rocks on the river. I never realized how much fun that could be. I beat Jay like a million times. I even got five skips in one throw!”

“Um… Cool?” I said, glancing at Jay as he came to stand beside her.

He rolled his eye. “That last one was NOT a skip, and you know it.” He looked at me. “Who cheats at skipping stones?”

I nodded slowly as I considered how my friends had spent their afternoon.

“Honestly, it sounds like you guys were really, really bored,” I said.

“Tell me about it,” Lola grumbled. Then she perked up. “What were you doing? Don’t tell me that you and Greyson didn’t have enough sexy time last night and decided to get back into it today?”

I blushed. “No! We weren’t doing that. We were… um… having a drink with Xavier, Ava, Lucian, and Elle.”

Lola’s eyes went wide. “Am I hearing things? How the hell did *that* happen? You did it *voluntarily*?” She craned her neck to look around. “And it looks like you’re all still alive and accounted for. Go figure.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. I didn’t want to lie to Lola, but with so many people around—not to mention the council—I wanted to keep any mentions of Helix to a minimum.

“I’ll fill you in on all the gory details later,” I said. “But yes, if you’re wondering, seeing Ava and Xavier together in close proximity for an extended period, especially after last night’s little display, royally sucked.”

Lola nodded vigorously. “I bet. I kind of have the image burned into my brain. Every time I close my eyes, I see it. Xavier’s arms wrapped around Ava all tight and stuff, one hand cupping her ass.” She shook her head. “Then there’s the way Ava’s amazing hair was—”

“Stop!” I said, louder than I meant to. A couple of people gave me strange looks. “Please don’t remind me. I most definitely don’t need a blow-by-blow, okay?”

Lola winced. “My bad.” She reached for my hand and squeezed it. “Good job hanging in there. You’re really taking one for the pack, girl.”

I smiled, liking that she was putting it that way. I would’ve done anything for the pack, and I appreciated that Lola knew it. Moments like this really made me feel like a Luna.

“That’s such a positive way to look at it,” I said with a smile, trying to will myself to see things through Lola’s eyes for a bit.

“We are about to begin!” said a voice over the loudspeaker. “Please take your seats!”

Every pack began to gather together and find seats on the grass. The Redwoods picked a spot halfway up a small hill so that we could see the dais down below. There was a strange energy in the air, and it was making me kind of nervous. I looked around, wondering where the council members were.

“They called us all here, and now they’re late?” I whispered to Lola.

Lola shrugged. “They never claimed to be punctual.”

I got myself settled as a few stragglers made their way into the grassy area for the trial. But even with everyone milling and shuffling around us, my eyes had to pick Xavier and Ava out of the crowd. They were sitting next to each other with the Samara delegation, and Ava’s hand was caressing Xavier’s back. I was trying my absolute best not to look—especially after reliving last night’s make-out session, thanks to Lola—but I couldn’t help it.

*I have to admit it, at least to myself—all of this IS bothering me. I liked it a lot more when I felt numb about everything.*

Bitterness settled in my stomach as Xavier hooked his arm over Ava’s shoulders and pulled her close. It was almost enough to make me gag.

*He clearly doesn’t give a flying fuck about PDA, even with me only a few yards away. Last night was proof of that. He just wants to disrespect me any way he can, and I have to come to terms with that and get past it as best I can.*

But as I looked at them—so comfortable and at ease in each other’s presence—I realized that it was truly easier said than done. But I had to try. I wouldn’t be able to get through the summit in one piece if I didn’t learn to block them out.

*I wish my magic could block emotional attacks and not just physical ones. If I could conjure a shield that made sure I never had to look at them being all lovey-dovey again, I’d be so happy.*

I finally tore my gaze away from them and diverted my attention to the river. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, but instead of picturing Xavier and Ava making out last night, I found myself looking right into Xavier’s eyes. He had the same look in his eye that he’d had when we were in the forest, right after our fight with Helix.

I hadn’t wanted to process it at the time, but there’d been something there. Something that I couldn’t explain—especially now that we were so disconnected. It was the same look he’d had when he’d come to my defense against Dayton.

Confusion and anger mixed and melded in the pit of my stomach, and I opened my eyes. Once again, my gaze drifted down to Xavier’s back.

*Somewhere deep down, does Xavier still love me?*

**Episode 3959**

**Ava**

I was nervous about hearing the council’s ruling—and surprised that it had come so quickly. There was no standard deliberation time when it came to the council, but I’d fully expected them to take at least a day or two. I didn’t know if their reaching a decision in record time boded well for Knox or not. Either way, we were about to find out, and I was a bag of nerves.

My leg was shaking as I looked around, waiting for the council to arrive. I wished they would hurry up. The suspense really started to get to me as it finally hit me—really and truly—that this was a matter of life and death.

I was trying to keep my mind from thinking the worst, but it wasn’t easy. So much bad stuff had happened to me that it was hard to see the bright side of things.

*Please don’t let them kill him. That’s the only outcome I can’t live with. Knox is an asshole and a pretty awful guy all around, but that doesn’t mean he deserves to die. He’s young and should have a chance to change. We all deserve that much.*

I couldn’t help but think about how much *I’d* changed, and how it had made all the difference in getting me to this point. I glanced up at my mate—my Alpha. The old Ava certainly wouldn’t have been sitting with Xavier right now and leaning on him for support. For the first time, it finally felt like I might be getting back every piece of my life that I’d lost with my death.

Finally, I was pulling away from the crushing loneliness that had plagued me for so long. It had felt so good to hug my aunt and uncle earlier. It had been such a long time since we’d had an opportunity to really spend time together, and I’d forgotten how good it felt to have my family around to support me. I was so used to people turning their backs on me that I barely knew how to react when they actually showed up and proved that they cared.

A long time ago, family had meant everything to me. Nolan and I had been inseparable, especially since we’d really only had each other to rely on. Then that had all been ripped away—and it had been partly my fault. Now, I had a second chance at happiness, and there was no way I was going to blow it. I wanted to enjoy all the good things I had coming my way.

I wanted my family, and I wanted Xavier to stick by my side. Xavier had pulled through for me when I needed him most, and there was a real chance that our testimony could save Knox. If the council decided to take our words to heart and keep Knox alive, I might actually be able to have everything I wanted. This was the closest I’d ever come to living the life I’d dreamed of, and it was stressful to think about how much was hanging in the balance right now.

I reached out and rubbed Xavier’s back, then leaned into him as his hand dropped to my knee to stop it from shaking. It was almost too much to believe that he was here by my side, supporting me. Even thinking about it made me smile. I knew how good a team we were, and we’d get even better once all the summit madness and the trial and everything else was behind us.

I’d surprised Xavier earlier when I’d asked about the Luna thing, but I meant what I’d said—things were only getting more serious between us, so him making me Luna felt kind of inevitable. Honestly, he hadn’t responded as negatively as I might’ve expected—he hadn’t shot the idea down, like he would’ve done in the past.

Once again, I was reminded of how far we’d come. I loved Xavier, and I was finally able to believe that he was on his way back to loving me, too.

Xavier squeezed my leg gently. “Stop.”

“I can’t,” I said.

It was like a swarm of butterflies had been released in my stomach. I wanted to think the best, and for the most part I was managing it, but doubt kept creeping through, no matter how hard I tried to fight it off.

“There’s no use worrying about it now, Ava,” Xavier said. “They’ve already made their decision, and there’s nothing we can do about it but listen to what they have to say.”

I took that in and sighed. “You’re right. It’s out of my hands now.” I didn’t want to think too much about that, so I changed the subject. “So, how does it feel working with your brother like this?”

Xavier’s expression was aloof. “What do you mean?”

I looked up at him. “It must make you feel some type of way to be mixed up in Greyson’s problems. I’m sure you thought you’d left all that behind, but here he is, dragging you back into his mess.”

Xavier cocked his head to the side. “I know I said otherwise back in Big Mac’s tent, but this isn’t just Greyson’s problem. Helix attacked us both.”

“Right,” I said. “But you also said that you wanted to just turn him in and be done with it. Which one is it? How do you really feel?”

Xavier looked down at me. “Don’t try to look for something that isn’t there,” he said simply. “I’m only invested in the issue because of the alliance.”

*I don’t care about Helix*, Xavier mind linked to me. *I would’ve dealt with him the moment he attacked me if Cali hadn’t interrupted.*

I nodded slowly, another question forming in my mind. *You never did explain what happened, there.*

Xavier snorted. *Cali inserted herself where she didn’t need to be.*

I chuckled. *And what else is new?*

Xavier didn’t laugh. He glanced at me and then stared off into the distance. *Essentially. What happened just is what it is, and now it’s taken on a dramatic life of its own, like usual.*

I sighed and nestled into his chest, feeling safe and happy. I stretched up to plant a kiss on his cheek. “I really do appreciate you doing all this for the alliance. For the pack.”

Xavier nodded slightly, his eyes shining as he looked down at me. “Of course.”

I grabbed his head and pulled him down into a kiss. He leaned into it, his tongue slowly tangling with mine. We lost ourselves for a few moments before we heard a murmur rise up from the wolves around us. We broke apart just in time to see the council approaching the dais. They had Knox, Blaine, and Zipper with them, all three of them still in their chains.

A hush fell over the crowd as they all took their places on the dais. The knot was back in my stomach, and I looked around and caught my Aunt Leona’s eye. She was emotional, and so was my uncle, but both of them were putting on a strong front. I hoped they wouldn’t have to worry for much longer. They didn’t deserve to suffer for the mistakes Knox had made.

My anxiety eased just a bit when Leona and Jason both gave me a slight nod. It was funny how such a small gesture could mean so much.

Everyone snapped to attention as Cesaries stepped forward, his expression more serious now than I’d possibly ever seen it.

“Welcome back,” he called, then he lifted his hands in the air. “All rise!”

Xavier and I stood, along with everyone else. The energy in the air was electric, and there was total silence as we all waited to hear what was coming next.

“We took our deliberation on this matter very, very seriously,” Cesaries said. “We did our duty to make a decision borne out of honor, respect, and a belief in righting the wrongs that any wolf commits against their people. Today, we will see justice served, as is our right and duty as the werewolf council.”

I let out a breath and waited. I hoped that they really had considered what was fair and what was just—and even what was merciful. I took Xavier’s hand and squeezed it, bracing myself. I’d come a long way wanting Knox not to be sentenced to death. He really had done the Samaras wrong, but he was the little family I had left… It didn’t make it easy by any means.

“Ultimately, our decision calls for these three wolves to make a decision for themselves, as freedom of choice does have a place in our process,” Cesaries said.

My interest was thoroughly piqued. I couldn’t begin to imagine where the council was going with this. What did he mean, he’d let them decide? Decide what?

Cesaries cleared his throat. “Our decision is this: the three accused must choose either to join the Samara pack and serve it with loyalty and honor, or be stripped of their wolves forever.”

**Episode 3960**

**Xavier**

I was shocked, and after the life I’d lived, there were very few things that still had the power to shock me.

*Did I hear him right? Did he just say that they have to join the Samara pack or be stripped of their wolves? The* Samara *pack?* My *pack?*

Questions swirled in my head, and I wanted answers—now—but Cesaries was still talking.

He turned to face Knox and the others. “So, young wolves, the choice is yours. Either live out the rest of your lives with the Samara pack, or lose the thing that makes you who you are. If you choose to rejoin the pack you disgraced, you must learn to live in harmony with those you went to such great lengths to hurt.”

I was fuming. *I can’t sit here and listen to any more of this bullshit!*

I stepped forward. “What kind of restorative justice bullshit is this?” I called out. “I don’t want Knox in my pack, and I certainly don’t want his little sidekicks. Why the fuck was I not included in this decision? I’m the Samara Alpha. I’m the only one with the right to decide who joins or doesn’t join my pack.”

I could feel the rest of the council reacting, along with the entire crowd, but I didn’t care. I had to say my piece.

“Sorry, but did I say anywhere in my testimony that I was prepared to welcome them back with open arms?” I demanded. “No. So why would the council force this on me? Who’s being punished here, exactly?”

Cesaries narrowed his eyes at me, clearly upset about the interruption. Too bad I didn’t give a shit.

“Why not send these egomaniacs back to where they came from?” I continued. “Let the Sycamore pack deal with them. They aren’t my problem. I’ve already given them enough of my time and energy—I don’t plan on giving them any more.”

“We believe that integrating them back into the Samara pack might give these young wolves the best opportunity to change and grow,” Cesaries said.

*More like the best opportunity for me to kick their asses so hard that they never even think about my pack ever again.*

“And lest you forget, this is a council decision,” Cesaries added, his tone hardening. “Samara Alpha, you will stand down and respect our decision. This is the choice we have made, and it is final.”

The air was thick with tension, and I didn’t think it was going to dissipate anytime soon—at least not until the council came to their senses and reconsidered. I didn’t want Knox to be put to death, but I *did* want him to face justice. Him returning to the Samara pack to throw his weight around didn’t seem like a punishment to me.

“Should the young wolves refuse to join the Samara pack, they will lose their wolves and be shunned as outcasts, forced to live as humans. They will be punished if they ever try to interact with the werewolf community in any way. They will be branded with the mark of the mortuus lupus—the symbol of the dead wolf—and they will lose every link they have to what once made them werewolves.”

Ava’s nails were digging into my hand by now, and I winced, knowing exactly how she was feeling.

*Losing their wolves is a fate much worse than death*, she said to me. *Death is quick. This, what the council is suggesting, is a prolonged sentence that will haunt them forever and probably drive them mad.*

*And having them join our pack again will drive* us *mad*,I retorted. *That feels like a fate worse than death to me! It’ll be hell for us, bringing those bastards back into the fold. And the pack will be furious.*

*It won’t be easy*, Ava said, *but at least we’d be able to keep an eye on them. If they choose the other option and are forced to live as humans, not being able to shift ever again… Who knows what they’d do? You lost your wolf once, Xavier. You know how devastating it is.*

I knew, all right, but this still put me in an incredibly difficult position. I could only imagine how the rest of the Samaras were feeling. I looked around and saw that they were just as surprised and horrified as I was. Knox had made their lives hell. Shit, he’d made the *Redwoods’* lives hell.

Bringing Knox back home as a part of the pack was practically a slap in the face to everyone who’d worked so hard to push him out. But Ava was right—losing your wolf was pure torture. I’d felt completely empty inside—until Cali had come into my life and brought my wolf back to me. My throat tightened at the thought, and I fought to push away that memory and the accompanying wave of sensation.

*I don’t want him in my pack*, I said to Ava.

Our *pack*, she shot back.

*The pack hates him, Ava!* I *hate him! He might be your cousin, but have you forgotten what kind of person he is? What kind of people his minions are? Right now, they’re probably laughing inside because they’re going to end up right back where they started. It’s like they aren’t being punished at all! There’s no way the rest of the pack is going to go for this.*

*The pack will listen to you. They’ll follow your lead*, Ava said confidently.

Once again, I glanced at the other Samaras, noting the mix of expressions on their faces—everything from stunned to angry to stoic.

I was about to speak to them when Marissa stood and stepped forward.

“We follow you, Alpha,” she said. The others nodded their agreement. “Whatever you decide, we’re behind you.”

I nodded at Marissa, and she sat back down with the others.

*Great*,I thought. *So if Knox and the others do choose to return, at least I won’t get any pushback from the Samaras—even though I’d completely understand if they staged a mutiny.*

I was pissed. Of all the possible ways this could have played out, *why* had things taken this turn?

Cesaries was looking at me, and I realized that he’d asked me a question I’d been too preoccupied to answer.

“Did you hear me, Alpha?” he called. “I asked if the terms that I have laid out are acceptable to the Samara pack.”

I stared at Cesaries, anger and resolve battling for dominance in the pit of my stomach. I hated that I was being put in this position, but I didn’t really see any other option besides going along with whatever the council wanted. I could keep resisting and piss them off to the point where they took out their ire on my pack, or I could let Knox waltz back in and rejoin us with a clean fucking slate.

*All shitty options. Adéluce must be loving this.*

I gritted my teeth as the words fought their way out of my mouth. “Yes. The Samara pack accepts the council’s terms.”

“Good,” Cesaries said. He turned to Knox and gestured for him to be brought forward. “Knox Voss, it is time for you to make your decision. Which do you choose? To live under the Samara Alpha, Xavier Evers, or to lose your wolf forever?”

I held my head high as Knox looked at me. I realized that this was the smallest I’d ever seen him look. He was stuck between two shitty choices, and that made me happy.

*Is there a chance that this kid is so prideful that he’ll choose losing his wolf instead of being under my thumb?*

There was a big part of me that hoped he would—and honestly, I wouldn’t put it past him. And I knew that whatever Knox chose, his cronies would fall right into line with him.

Knox nodded. “I know what I want to do.”

The council attendants stepped forward and finally released Knox from his chains.

“You are now free to make your decision, unburdened,” Cesaries said.

Knox turned to face me and held my gaze. The tension in the air had somehow increased tenfold. I stood there with my chest puffed out, my arms hanging loosely at my sides, and the knowledge that I was the baddest Alpha in the whole damn congregation. I would have to take whatever decision that Knox made in stride, and I was ready to face whatever challenge lay ahead.

Knox took a step toward me. His expression was strong, and for a moment, I thought that he was going to perform one last defiant act in front of me and the rest of the Samaras—as well as every other pack in attendance. One thing was for sure—if he came at me, I would have no choice but to cut him down, even with the council watching.

Then, in an instant, I decided that I wasn’t going to leave it up to him. I was going to push the issue. At least that way, I could take back some of my control.

I took a step toward Knox.

“Kneel,” I said through clenched teeth.

At first Knox did nothing, and the tension grew thicker between us. I braced myself, ready to dole out the punishment the council had failed to enact. But just when I thought Knox was going to turn back around to address the council, he knelt.

**Episode 3961**

It felt like I was looking into someone else’s dream. Or nightmare. It was all just so surreal. Knox’s life had been spared, but it had come at the cost of his pride. I watched, holding my breath as he knelt before Xavier, humbled by the council’s verdict.

*Humiliated* by Xavier’s new power over him.

This was a startling visual confirmation of something I’d been fighting to come to terms with—Xavier was the Samara Alpha. He was intimidating, imposing, and right now, his position and superiority were more obvious than ever. This moment validated who he was to the Samaras, showcasing his identity in a way that was undeniable.

He was another pack’s Alpha, end of story. And Ava was standing with him.

She stared at him—tall, beautiful, stoic, and so proud. Proud of Xavier and of her pack as well. Even though she wasn’t officially Xavier’s Luna, seeing the two of them together in this moment spoke for itself. It screamed, actually, loud and clear.

*Cali, stop being stupid and delusional! Xavier isn’t yours. He’s obviously not yours.*

Moments ago, I’d wondered if Xavier still loved me. I’d been fucking pathetic enough to ask myself the question, but that felt like an idiotic fantasy now. Xavier had clearly moved on. Easily. Like I’d only ever been a footnote in his life, and Ava had been his endgame all along. It was only a matter of time before Ava became his Luna. Only a matter of time before he forgot me entirely.

I was nothing to Xavier.

*He’s not yours. He’s not yours, he’s not yours, he’s never, ever,* ever *been yours*.

How could I have been so stupid?

“I, Knox Voss, pledge my loyalty…”

Knox was speaking, but I wasn’t listening. My eyes felt hot and scratchy, brimming with tears. I turned away, a pang of shame coursing through me. I’d tried to convince myself that I could move on from Xavier, but look at me now—crying over him, again.

*Why are you doing this?* I wanted to ask him. *Did you throw away what we had just to become Alpha?*

Had he *become* that selfish, that cruel, or had he been that way all along, and I’d just been too blind to see it?

Either way, I couldn’t even look at him now.

I couldn’t be here.

I couldn’t *breathe*.

As Blaine and Zipper approached Xavier, I realized that if I stayed here another second, everyone else would realize I was about to fall apart. I walked away, picking up speed, fighting not to hyperventilate. I was gripping my throat, choking on a sob, when I felt a large, warm hand on my arm.

“Hey, where are you—”

When he saw my face, Greyson stopped speaking. He slung an arm around my shoulders and led me away, pressing a kiss to my temple. For some reason, that simple, tender gesture made the drizzle of my tears turn into a storm.

*Great, Cali! Fan-fucking-tastic effort to be stoic right there!*

Greyson paused once we’d put some distance between us and the trial.

“I suspect you’re not reacting like this because of the verdict,” he murmured.

He looked… sad. Crap. That’s not what I wanted. But I couldn’t find my voice to reply. He pulled me into a full-on hug. I clung to him, sniffling in his shirt like a pathetic moron.

“I get it, love,” he said quietly. “Watching my brother accept that pledge was hard for me, too.”

I looked up at him, wiping my eyes. “I’m sorry, I—”

“Don’t apologize,” he interrupted, shaking his head. “I don’t want to give a damn about what he does, but it’s hard not to.”

Yet again, I remembered that when Xavier had walked out on me, he’d left his brother as well. He’d left the pack without any explanation or courtesy. Without any respect.

“We always had our differences, but I thought he cared,” Greyson whispered, his eyes downcast. “I thought that he was one of us. I was obviously wrong.”

I squeezed him tighter, and we just stood there, holding each other for a long beat. I’d stopped crying, but Greyson’s shirt was ruined.

“Will you get into trouble for leaving the trial?” I asked hoarsely.

“Nah,” he said. “The verdict is in; the trial is over. We’re good.”

My eyes were puffy, so they ached when I squinted at him. “Are we, though?”

Greyson stared at me for a beat. Then he let out a low, gruff chuckle, giving me a kiss on the cheek. I loved him so much I wanted to start crying again, but I decided I’d probably cried enough for one day.

“I’m glad Knox and the others weren’t killed,” I said, “but I’m not so sure that forcing them to join the Samara pack is in anyone’s best interest.”

“Agreed,” Greyson said. “And it couldn’t have come at a worse time. The alliance can’t afford to have someone like Knox around, stirring up trouble. He may have sworn his loyalty to Xavier and the Samara pack, but based on what we know about Knox, there’s no reason to trust or believe him.”

I swallowed nervously. “Do you think he’ll turn on Xavier?”

“If Knox is smart, he’ll toe the line. At the Samara and with the other packs.” Greyson lifted an eyebrow. “But we know that intelligence isn’t one of Knox’s strengths, and who knows how Xavier will deal with any transgressions?”

I frowned. “Yeah, Xavier clearly wasn’t happy with the verdict.”

“The council managed to avoid making any real decision by putting it all on him,” Greyson said.

I snorted. “I guess I’m not surprised. It seems like they try to avoid getting involved in anything unless it serves their own purposes.”

“They could’ve simply exiled Knox, though,” Greyson said. “Or sent him back to his old pack. Instead, there’s this. Their decision is pretty messy, if you ask me.”

I paused. “Did you just call the werewolf council ‘messy,’ like they’re a bunch of bitchy high-school girls?”

He raised an eyebrow. “If the shoe fits.”

I smiled a little, but it quickly faded. I glanced back toward the amphitheater. The trial was wrapping up, and Xavier was still there. He was the one who would deal with the consequences of this mess, and, like Greyson, I wished I could stop caring about him. When Xavier had abandoned the Redwood pack to become the Alpha of his own, he’d known that various curveballs would be thrown his way. It was the nature of the game, and a decision that he must’ve been dwelling on for a while.

A decision that he hadn’t involved me in.

Xavier had shut me out—had *been* shutting me out for a long time.

*Accept it, Cali. This is the new normal. This is it.*

“It just… feels wrong,” I told Greyson. “But I guess we’ll get used to it. Xavier’s already moved on, so we should too.”

I couldn’t avoid the bitterness that seeped into my tone, and Greyson noticed. He lifted my chin, making me look at him. His eyes were dark, but his expression was smooth. Calm. As ever, he was steady in the face of crisis.

“I know that this is especially hard on you,” he said. “You’ve got the mate bond to consider, after all. But I don’t want you to feel alone, here. I’m sure the others are upset too, right now.”

I stared at him. “Really?”

“I know they’re probably confused, angry, disappointed—not just because of the decision about Knox, but also because that was the first time we really saw Xavier in his new role. It’s a lot for everybody.” He paused. “Apart from Artemis. I don’t think she gives a fuck—she’s just ready to murder Xavier for being mean to you.”

I felt a little bad for laughing at that. But I’d cried so much already, and this… This felt better.

Greyson stroked my cheek, smiling softly. “There’s that smile. You’re going to be okay.” He kissed my jaw, my mouth. “I will do everything I can to help you through this.”

I shook my head, sniffling. “This isn’t your responsibility. I just have to come to terms with our new reality. Xavier is the Samara Alpha.”

*And Ava is right there by his side*, I thought but didn’t say out loud. *Maybe that’s why it hurts so much.*

What would I do if it always hurt? God, this just wasn’t fair to me—and it wasn’t fair to Greyson, either. Greyson deserved the world, not a mate who kept pining over the asshole who’d dumped her.

*I make myself* sick*.*

“Let’s just move on,” I said firmly. “I’ll try my best to—”

I was cut off when Greyson spotted something over my shoulder and tensed.

I turned to see Lucian standing there, his eyebrows arched. “Pardon the interruption, dear friends. But now that the trial is over, what are we going to do with the *thing* in my trunk?”

**Episode 3962**

**Xavier**

I had a strong urge to spit. The bitter taste of the verdict lingered. And lingered. And fucking *lingered*. My anger was nothing new, though now there were layers to it—Adéluce sat at the core, but the council, Knox, and Knox’s lackeys were floating at surface level, and that didn’t mean they weren’t a problem.

This was just so goddamn *annoying*.

I glanced from Knox, Zipper, and Blaine to the council members, who were already walking away. They were probably too embarrassed to face any questions after their ridiculous decision. Fuck them.

Scoffing, I turned to the crowd. The first thing I noticed was that Cali was gone—but maybe that was for the best. I could only imagine what this had been like for her.

She was probably relieved that Knox wasn’t going to be killed, though. That was just the way she thought. I, however, didn’t share that viewpoint. If I’d been asked to choose between dealing with Knox and his BFFs on the daily or killing them, I would’ve instantly chosen the latter. But then there was the Ava problem.

If the council had sentenced Knox to death, it would’ve been a cruel blow to her. It was why I’d used my testimony to advocate for a lighter sentence. I wondered if the verdict would’ve been different if I’d been harsher while speaking about Knox. Maybe if I’d flat-out condemned them, Knox and his buds would’ve been heading on a one-way trip to the spirit world right now instead of settling into my pack.

And now I was stuck babysitting them.

“The council’s decision was shit,” someone said loudly.

I turned to see Mace and grunted. “When has the council actually done shit? Their area of expertise is ignoring problems until they go away. Or land in someone else’s lap.”

“Ours, in this case,” Mace said grimly.

I frowned. “You mean mine and the Samaras’.”

Mace scoffed. “You’re not alone in this, Xavier. We need to call a meeting to talk about what this new development means for the alliance.”

I frowned harder. The way I saw it, Mace was being a little dramatic, but I wasn’t about to tell him that. Because of diplomacy and shit.

“Fine,” I said. “I have to deal with a few things first, but I’ll call a meeting soon.”

\*\*\*

I gave Knox a moment to talk to Ava and his parents. They were hugging, his mom was crying—the works. If they loved him so much, why the fuck hadn’t the council just sent him back to them? They could’ve been one big happy family, gone on picnics, done whatever shit families did. But *no*.

When it sank in that the chattering and hugging wasn’t going to end anytime soon, I cleared my throat loudly.

“I need to talk to Knox,” I said. “Alone.”

I realized the disdainful throat-clearing thing was something I’d seen Greyson do a few times. Apparently, now that I was Alpha, I’d become as annoying as my infuriating older brother. I wouldn’t hear the end of it if he ever caught me slipping like this. He’d probably say some shit like, *Look at you, Xavier. How does it feel to finally have a personality? Or are you just turning into me?*

I couldn’t believe I was imagining Greyson roasting me right now.

No, I did *not* miss it. And it was the last thing I needed right now with these three assholes part of my pack now. I had my hands full, that was for sure.

“Zipper, Blaine—you too. I need to talk to all of you,” I said, snapping my fingers for them to follow. “*Now*.”

Once all four of us were out of earshot of everyone in the vicinity, I turned to face them. I couldn’t tell if they were relieved that they still had their wolves, or burning with humiliation for being forced to pledge their allegiance to me in front of everyone. The latter would’ve been delightful, but I knew better. I needed to get a better sense of what I was dealing with here, so I looked at each of them in turn.

Knox averted his eyes. Zipper too.

Blaine stared right back at me.

I sighed. We were going to have a problem with this one, weren’t we? No matter. He wasn’t part of Ava’s family, and that made him expendable. I could snap his neck in moments if necessary. As for Zipper… I wasn’t too worried about him. He always struck me as a follower. Knox and Blaine were the real issues.

“I need to make something clear,” I said. “I didn’t want you three back in the Samara pack, and I still don’t. It’s obvious you feel the same way, so—”

“No!” Knox shook his head frantically, his eyes wide. “I meant what I said, Xavier! I’ve given the Samara pack my loyalty, my—”

“Don’t lie to me,” I interrupted. “The only reason any of you did this is so you wouldn’t lose your wolves. But don’t think that’s going to change anything.” I looked them all over. “Until you prove yourselves, until you show that you are truly Samara wolves, you will be constantly on trial. If you step so much as a *toenail* out of line, you’re done. Don’t be fooled—I’ll kill all of you without hesitation or regret.”

None of the assholes spoke. And this time, even Blaine averted his eyes—as he should. Because I was their fucking Alpha. And no, I wasn’t an Alpha like Greyson. He wouldn’t have threatened to kill these morons.

Or maybe he would’ve made the threat, but he wouldn’t have followed through until things got dire. Even then, he probably would’ve exiled them instead of killing them. He had Cali on his shoulder like a little angel, directing his every move, keeping him all fucking saintly and noble.

How many people had I spared because of Cali? Just because I didn’t want her to be mad, or sad, or whatever the hell? I’d lost count. And there was part of me, a small part, that feared who I could become without her influence.

My wolf growled, but I ignored him.

Geraint had been lurking behind some trees, along with a few other Samaras.

“Help Knox and the others set up a tent in the Samara area and keep a close eye on them,” I ordered. “Keep me posted.”

Geraint eyed the three little dicks warily before huffing in agreement. He led them away, shaking his head and grumbling. At least the runts had stayed silent.

Suddenly, I got the feeling I was being watched, and I turned to see Ava staring at me.

Watching.

Frowning.

“Why don’t you look happier?” I asked. “The council spared their lives and their wolves.”

Ava looked around to make sure we were alone before walking up to me. “I heard what you just told them.” She peered at me. “The trial is over, but you’re saying they’ll still be on trial.”

I scowled. “I have no choice, Ava. I’m not going to simply forgive and forget everything that Knox and his apostles did. The only reason I testified on their behalf was because of you. To support you, not them.”

Ava paused. “Are you sorry you did that?” she asked quietly.

“I don’t regret having your back,” I said. That much was true. “But I’m not happy with the result.” I scoffed. “I doubt anyone is. Classic council move.”

She winced. “I guess I thought… Well, I didn’t think *this* would happen. I didn’t think we’d be stuck with them.”

“The last thing I want is to be Knox’s babysitter,” I said darkly. “They should have banished him, let all three of them spend a few years as Rogues.”

Ava nodded, raking her hands through her hair. “You’re right. With this verdict, it’s like they’re punishing our pack, too.”

“Exactly,” I said. “And I don’t think the Samaras deserve that.”

We definitely didn’t. I already had enough shit to deal with without having to make sure that Knox didn’t stab me in the back.

“Don’t you think Knox could’ve changed?” Ava asked. “That the trial could’ve taught him a lesson?”

I laughed.

She shoved me. “I mean it, Xavier.”

All I knew was that Ava had a long history of forgiving the fucked-up men in her life—myself included. I just wasn’t quite sure what to do with that knowledge.

“Whatever,” I said. I was in no mood for laughter now. “There’s no point in dwelling on what could have been. Knox and his friends are part of our pack now, and we have to accept it.”

Ava scrutinized my face before speaking. “I can do that. But will you be able to?”

I gritted my teeth. “I don’t have a choice.”

Ava moved closer. “That’s what you say, but I also heard what you told them.” She swallowed hard. “I need to know, Xavier—if he forced your hand, would you really kill my cousin?”

**Episode 3963**

Lucian, Elle, Dayton, Geena, Armin, Greyson, and I were all gathered in Lucian’s tent. We stood around the trunk in a circle. Dayton peered at it suspiciously, like the thing was going to grow legs and start running. Lucian squinted at it, as if determined to take an X-ray of its contents without actually opening it.

*This is going great already!*

Greyson cleared his throat, breaking the silence. “Not that I’m not enjoying the quiet, but I think this is the point where we move forward with the plan.”

Lucian flinched, turning to Greyson with a start. “Right!” He clapped his hands, nodding at Armin. “You may proceed.”

And then, with a flourish that matched Lucian’s general vibe, Armin unlocked and opened the trunk. My breath caught when I saw Helix, still unconscious and unmoving. My stomach dropped, bad thoughts—the worst—invading my head immediately.

*Oh, no! Why isn’t he moving? Is he even breathing?*

Lucian grabbed Helix by the hair and slapped him across the face. Hard. Helix was startled awake, and he looked around wildly, fighting to speak past the gag in his mouth.

“Ah, you’re awake!” Lucian patted Helix’s head. He jerked away. “We shall remove the gag, but if you scream, we will knock you out again and leave you in this trunk. Do you understand?”

Panting, Helix nodded emphatically. I tried to remind myself that he’d attacked Greyson—and Xavier—so I had no reason to feel sorry for him.

*Still, though!* I thought. *We don’t really know what’s going on here.*

As Armin pulled Helix out of the trunk and sat him on a chair, my sympathy for him hit even harder. He was naked, shaking, and obviously scared.

“Give him something to wear,” I told Lucian. “He’s shivering.”

Lucian rolled his eyes. He was ready to protest, I could just tell. But then Elle said, “Cali is right. Helix is cold and scared.”

At her words, Lucian shut the hell up and told Armin to give the young werewolf pants and a blanket.

*Okay*, I thought. *Lucian listens to Elle. That’s… a development?*

Greyson stepped forward, looking down at Helix. “Do you need water?”

Helix shook his head.

“Okay,” Greyson said. “We’re going to give you a potion to drink, and then we will ask you some questions. If you don’t answer truthfully, there will be painful consequences. Got it?”

Helix turned to Elle, swallowing nervously. Elle placed a hand on his shoulder.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I trust Greyson.” Her expression was composed, but I could tell that this was hard for her. After all, she and Helix had grown up together.

“Yes, let’s get on with it,” Lucian said, waving a hand to rush Helix as he drank some of the potion. He grimaced before swallowing.

The second Helix finished drinking, Lucian moved to stand next to Greyson and started to fire off one question after another.

“Why are you here? Who sent you? What is Elle’s favorite color? Did you ever want to be her mate? Do you like her hair? Why did you attack the Redwood Alpha? I may find Greyson annoying at times, but he *is* my ally, and I will defend him to the death! Or as long as it fits my purposes. He’s aesthetically pleasing, at least, and as a prince I have to value that—it’s in my nature! Oh, and the Samara Alpha—why did you attack him? Xavier’s something else, but—”

While Lucian kept going, Helix stared at him in obvious shock, Dayton looked bewildered, Geena looked intrigued, Armin looked like this was just another day for him, and Elle looked confused.

As for Greyson, he’d had enough.

“*Stop*.” He grabbed Lucian’s shoulder, interrupting him. “Let’s do this with some kind of order.”

“I can do order,” Lucian declared. “This is my trunk, ergo this shall be my interrogation, ergo—”

Greyson cut him off again. “Big Mac gave us the spell, and I have experience dealing with her potions. I’m in charge here, end of story.”

Greyson didn’t need to be a prince to take command of a situation, that was for sure.

Lucian yanked himself out of my mate’s grip with a huff and took a step back, looking like a wet cat. “*Fine*.”

“That was hot,” Geena muttered, eyeing Greyson.

Dayton shot her a glare.

*Did this… Did this woman seriously just call Greyson hot in front of her mate?*

Honestly, Dayton and Geena deserved each other.

“Let’s start with some basic questions,” Greyson said. “Did you attack Xavier Evers?”

“Wait!” I burst out.

Everyone turned to me. I ignored them, focusing on Helix.

“Helix, when Greyson says there will be painful consequences if you lie, he means that if you lie, you could choke and suffocate. That’s what the potion does.”

Helix kept his eyes fixed on me.

“You should be careful with your answers, and absolutely truthful,” I emphasized. “We’re not sure how to stop the choking without Big Mac here to help. So tell the truth. Please.”

Helix nodded, breathing shakily. “Yes.”

“So,” Greyson said. “I repeat—did you attack Xavier Evers?”

In a shaky whisper, Helix said, “I attacked Xavier Evers.”

“Aha! I knew it!” Lucian exclaimed.

“Literally everyone knew that part,” Dayton snapped.

Geena shushed him while Greyson continued.

“Did you attack me?” Greyson asked Helix.

The young werewolf offered another nervous nod. I was feeling less anxious.

*Phew. So far, so good! But what if he lies during the next question? Would CPR help? Oh my god, do I even* know *CPR?*

“Why not ask him the real questions, Greyson?” Lucian demanded. “We already know what he did, but we don’t know *why* he did it—though we have our suspicions.” He shot an accusing look at Dayton.

“We already went over this!” Dayton growled. “The potion proved that I didn’t do anything!”

“Both of you, *stop*. Right now,” Greyson snapped.

Lucian and Dayton scowled but didn’t speak again.

“I’d like to ask a question,” Elle said suddenly.

Greyson’s focus shifted to her. He hesitated.

*Let her ask*, I mind linked. *I don’t think Helix would lie to Elle, potion or no potion.*

Greyson turned to me. *You’re right.*

He nodded at Elle. “Go ahead.”

Elle stared at Helix. Her voice was soft. “Why did you attack Greyson?”

Helix swallowed, loud enough that I could hear it. And then he looked at Dayton. “Because of him.”

“Liar!” Dayton spat. “I didn’t tell him to do anything! Why isn’t he choking?”

He shoved past Armin and Lucian, lunging for Helix’s throat.

I didn’t have time to do anything—Greyson was on it, grabbing a seething Dayton and pulling him away from Helix. To my shock, Lucian helped Greyson.

“That is my forest rose’s friend, you abominable barbarian!” he snapped at Dayton.

“Dayton’s telling the truth!” Geena glowered at the rest of us. “Helix is lying!”

“The potion works,” Greyson snapped. “He’s not fucking lying.”

“I never, not once in my life, told this liar to do anything!” Dayton shouted, struggling against Armin’s grip. They all started arguing while Elle tried to comfort Helix.

*I can’t let this go on!*

“OKAY!” I said loudly, clapping my hands together. “Everyone calm down!”

“But—”

“Dayton!” I pointed at the asshole, cutting him off. “I know you’re not going to shut up until you’re proven innocent, but the only way to get there is if you stop shouting so we can ask more questions. How about that?”

Dayton glared at me. “I don’t appreciate your tone, Redwood Luna.”

“And I don’t appreciate you screaming like a banshee, but we don’t always get what we want, do we?”

Nobody spoke for a moment until Greyson coughed out a laugh. Dayton glared at him.

“Now, everybody calm down, and just…” I turned to Greyson. “Can I try?”

“Of course,” Greyson said right away. He stood next to me, as I spoke to Helix.

Keeping my voice calm, I asked, “Did Dayton tell you to attack Greyson?”

“No,” Helix said.

Dayton huffed. “See? I told you.”

I ignored him.

“Did Dayton tell you to attack Xavier?” I asked Helix.

I could already see the answer in his eyes.

“No,” he said quietly.

“If Dayton didn’t order you to attack anyone, why did you do it?” I asked.

Helix paused, chewing on his bottom lip.

“If the potion doesn’t choke you, I will,” Dayton hissed.

Greyson shoved Dayton back. “You’re not helping.”

Helix looked at Dayton nervously before turning to me.

“It’s okay,” I said, trying to sound as soothing as possible. “Just tell us the truth.”

“Please Helix,” Elle said encouragingly.

Helix looked between us before he blurted out, “I attacked them because Dayton turned me, and I have to protect Dayton!”

The silence that followed was laced with confusion.

Lucian was the one to break it, speaking from the corner of his mouth. “Armin?”

“Yes, Your Highness?” Armin replied.

Lucian frowned. “What am I missing, here?”

I waved Lucian off and turned back to Helix. “Why do you feel like you have to protect Dayton, though?” I asked him. “Who told you to?”

“It wasn’t me,” Dayton snapped.

Then he grunted, because Greyson elbowed him.

“I have to protect the person who turned me,” Helix said, his eyes flashing with sudden determination. “Xavier and Greyson threatened my sire, so I had to protect him. That is all, okay?”

No. It was not fucking okay.

*Do you remember what Lucian said about the sire bond, Cali? Hmm? Because if his claims are true, they sure as hell explain Helix’s behavior!*

Well, shit.

My heart pounding, I glanced at Elle and Greyson. Could this—this *madness*—happen to them too?

Was their sire bond a ticking time bomb?

**Episode 3964**

**Greyson**

“I told you so!” Dayton burst out. “I’ve been telling the fucking truth all along, and none of you believed me! This is just…”

Dayton kept talking, but I ignored him. I was more worried about Cali, and the look of apprehension on her face as she glanced between Elle and me. I knew what she was thinking. It was the same thought that had crossed—or more like stabbed into—my mind.

If Helix was being influenced to such an extreme degree by the sire bond, could the same thing happen to Elle and me?

I’d been told that Helix hadn’t spent enough time with Dayton after being turned, which had played a role in his general behavior. But that didn’t mean that Elle and I were immune to this kind of thing. In fact, Elle was already willing to sacrifice herself and marry Lucian in an effort to help me and the pack.

Then again, “sacrifice” might’ve been too strong a word, seeing as Elle and Lucian had… a thing. A mate thing. A mate thing that made me want to gag. Still, it was obvious that I was very important to Elle. But did that mean she had the potential to snap and attack someone who looked at me the wrong way?

For someone who tried to mind his own business—me, *I* tried to mind my own business—everybody was all up in mine. All the fucking time. I never got a moment of peace—it was like the universe was being paid to throw shit at me.

Bottom line, I had a bunch of people after me for reasons that had nothing to do with me, and everything to do with their own problematic behaviors. See: the Bitterfang pack and its psycho Alpha mate pair.

With the image of Elle charging toward Malakai throbbing in my head, I fought off a wince and turned back to Helix. Neither Xavier nor I had instigated our confrontations with Dayton, yet Helix had gone after us anyway. Critical thinking clearly wasn’t his strong suit. Somehow, I wasn’t surprised.

I *was* pretty fucking worried, though.

*What are you going to do about Helix?* Cali mind linked.

She was giving me that look. The “I can feel you thinking about murder, Greyson, and that’s not very nice” look. It was pretty compelling. And frustrating. But mostly compelling.

Sighing, I replied, *I honestly don’t know.*

I turned to the others. “There’s still the matter of Evan.”

A hush fell over everyone, even whiny-little-bitch-Dayton, and we all turned to Helix.

“Helix,” I said. “Did you kill Evan?”

Helix frowned. “Yes. Because Evan attacked Dayton.”

Well, then. This was just lovely.

“‘Attacked’ is a bit of an extreme description,” I said.

Helix frowned even harder. “But he did attack him! Dayton was upset!”

Dayton groaned, rubbing his face with his hands.

“That’s not how I remember it, Helix,” I told him. “They bumped into each other. You don’t go around killing people because of stuff like that.”

Helix glared up at me. “Dayton was upset, and I wanted to help.”

Oh, man…

“Okay, just for clarity’s sake, let’s talk about a hypothetical scenario here,” I said. “Someone sneezes on Dayton, and Dayton starts screaming and thrashing like a five-year-old. What do you do to the person who sneezed?”

Helix puffed up. “Kill them because they upset Dayton.”

“We have a problem,” Lucian announced.

No shit.

“Well, we don’t have many options, here,” I said. I looked at everyone before my gaze settled on Cali. “We may have to hand this issue over to the council.”

There was a collective groan, and I shook my head. “I get it. The council didn’t exactly take care of the Knox problem in a satisfactory way, and they didn’t do much to investigate Evan’s murder, either. But, at the very least, the Northwind pack deserves to know what happened. Evan was innocent.”

Cali pressed her lips together. “And Helix isn’t innocent?”

“I mean, he did kill someone for literally no good reason,” I pointed out.

“Turning him over to the council would pretty much seal his death warrant, Greyson,” Cali said, clearly upset.

“Not if we tell them about the sire bond,” I said. “The council may consider those mitigating circumstances—”

“I doubt the Northwind pack would allow anything other than Helix’s execution,” Lucian said. “And we can handle that ourselves.”

Cali gasped. “What does *that* mean?”

Lucian shrugged. “There are certain ways of dealing with such matters.”

“I don’t know what you mean, but we’re not hurting anyone at all,” I said firmly. “Let’s take this conversation elsewhere.” I glanced at Helix. He was slumped forward, his head hanging low. “It’s not fair to talk about this in front of him.”

“I only wanted to help Dayton,” the young werewolf said shakily.

My stomach twisted at the sight of him. Dayton huffed, grumbling something about the consequences of his actions biting him in the ass.

Shaking my head, I said, “Let’s all just go outside.”

“Armin, stay behind to watch Helix,” Lucian ordered.

The moment Cali and I walked out of the tent, Elle stepped in front of us. “Can I talk to you both for a moment?” She glanced over her shoulder at the others. “Alone?”

Cali and I exchanged a look before I said, “Yeah.”

*This has been so hard on Elle*, Cali mind linked.

*I know*, I replied. *It’s a fucking mess all round, and I don’t think things are looking good for her friend…*

The moment we were out of earshot of the others, Elle whirled around and pinned us with a stare. “Is Helix going to be executed?”

I wasn’t surprised by her bluntness.

“It’s a possibility,” I admitted. She already knew; it was no use to try to lie.

Elle’s eyes flashed with something harsh before she looked down at the ground, her face twisting into a grimace.

“We don’t want that to happen,” Cali rushed to say.

“It’s true,” I said. “But we can’t rule it out as a possibility, and you should be prepared. Helix killed someone—in our world, that can’t go unpunished.”

Elle folded her hands, biting into her lower lip.

I took a step closer to her. Calmly, I asked, “Elle, if something like this happened in your old pack, what would the result be?”

Elle looked up at me now. She swallowed roughly. “They would be killed. I know how this works.”

There was a long, heavy silence.

“We are not wild wolves, though,” Cali pointed out. “There are laws and traditions. There must be a way to deal with this that doesn’t end in Helix’s death, right, Greyson?”

I glanced between the two of them, nodding. “I’ll do some digging, see what I can find. I promise, I’ll do everything I can to spare Helix’s life.”

Cali frowned. “But if you turn this over to the council…”

“Then chances are they won’t be lenient,” I admitted. “Helix killed a pack member during the summit. The Northwind pack will insist he pay the ultimate price—and I can’t blame them for it.”

Cali winced. “But—”

“What if it had been one of our own who bumped into Dayton?” I interrupted. “What if Helix had killed Lola or Jay? What then?”

Cali fell silent, pressing her lips together. I turned to Elle, whose eyes were glistening.

“If Helix had killed a Redwood pack member, I’d want him dead—any other Alpha would feel the same,” I said. “And ultimately, this isn’t my decision. I can try to help Helix, but I can’t cross any lines.”

“What do you mean?” Cali asked quietly.

“If I try to force the council to spare Helix, it could turn the Northwind pack against the Redwood pack,” I said. “And we can’t afford that with the Bitterfangs lurking in the background.”

“But…” Elle stared at me. Her breath came out shaky. “I’ve known Helix all my life. I don’t want him to die, not because of this.”

The way Elle looked at me felt like a punch in the gut. I knew it was normal to feel a certain amount of empathy for her, but this felt like more. More intense, more visceral, more like I wanted to ignore all reason and just make sure Elle stopped being sad. It reminded me of the loyalty I felt toward Cali, toward the mate bond, and that realization was stark—and pretty fucking dark. My reaction was a clear sign of the sire bond.

Knowing how intense it was, how could I possibly ignore the impact it had had on Helix?

“We’ll do everything we can to help,” Cali said, reaching for Elle’s hand. She turned to me. “By the way, Greyson—did you get Big Mac’s potion before we left the tent?”

Fuck. Big Mac would never forgive me if I lost some of her supplies.

I excused myself and rushed back to the tent. Lucian had rejoined Armin inside, and Lucian was in the process of asking Helix a question—a question that Helix couldn’t lie about, thanks to the truth serum.

“Say, Helix,” Lucian said. “Did Greyson turn Elle?”

**Episode 3965**

**Xavier**

I wasn’t surprised by Ava’s question, and I didn’t hesitate to answer.

“Yes,” I said. “I would kill Knox if I felt it was necessary to protect the pack.”

Ava narrowed her eyes at me. “So you’d only do it for the Samaras? Not because you hate Knox?”

My jaw clenched. “I know that wasn’t the answer you wanted to hear, Ava, but let’s not make this personal. I’m sure you’re aware that Knox is disruptive, and an Alpha needs to put his pack first.”

As soon as the words left my mouth, I thought of Cali. Had I been thinking of my pack when I’d walked out on the Redwoods? When I became Samara Alpha? I could make the excuse that I hadn’t been Alpha when I’d left the Redwoods, but it would’ve been just that—an excuse. I’d left the Redwood pack to save Cali. I’d put her first, not the pack. And I was slowly realizing that by defending Knox on the stand, I’d put Ava first, not the Samaras.

This was fucked up.

“And what would you do, huh?” I asked Ava. I didn’t mean to sound harsh, but it came out that way. “Would you put the safety of the pack at risk in order to protect your sorry excuse for a cousin?”

I regretted adding that description of Knox when she winced, but I couldn’t hide my disdain for the shrimp. I might’ve had a hand in saving Knox, but that didn’t mean I had to like him. Ava seemed to be processing that as a fact, and her silence was heavy. She stared at me, and I could feel her anger at me for calling her out.

Perhaps I shouldn’t have turned the question on her like that, but I needed her to understand the position I was in. Before she could attempt to answer, I said, “I’m responsible for the pack—their lives are on my shoulders, and the consequences of the council’s decision are mine to deal with. So, if Knox threatened the pack, what would you expect me to do?”

Ava’s eyes flashed with indignation before she squeezed them shut and took a deep breath. “Fine. Of course I agree with you. If my cousin tried to betray you, he would have to be killed.”

I felt a little vindicated.

“But it would’ve been nice if you hadn’t been so quick to say you’d kill him—as if you relish the idea,” Ava added sharply. “I know you despise my cousin.”

“And why wouldn’t I despise him?” I shot back. “He’s an asshole! And yet, despite that undeniable fact, I still helped save his life. A fact that you seem to be forgetting.”

“Xavier—”

“And actually, I don’t *relish* *the idea* of killing Knox,” I added. “I’m not that callous.”

Ava crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow.

I huffed. “Fine—I’m not that callous when it comes to *you*. Things have changed between us. I know how you feel about losing the last of your family. I know how upset you would be if I killed him, and what the consequences would be.”

Ava paused, surprise evident on her face. “You… thought of all that?”

“Of course I did,” I said. “If I killed Knox, Leona and Jason would cut you off—you’d be dead to them. And I know that would hurt you.”

Ava didn’t speak for a long moment. She just stared at me. It was one of those times when I couldn’t read her face, and it ate at me. What the fuck was she thinking? My wolf itched to comfort her, so I didn’t stop to think before I rested my hands on her shoulders.

“I know all this talk about Knox and death can’t be easy on you,” I said. “Especially when the council easily could’ve killed him today. And you know me—I could’ve been petty, made it your job to keep your cousin and his buds in line. But this is a pack problem, not a you problem.”

She swallowed. “All pack problems are my problems.”

“It may feel that way to you, yeah,” I said. “But I need you to remember that I didn’t save Knox’s life for Knox, or his parents—I did it for you.”

Ava’s blank expression melted away. Her anger was gone, and all that was left was a wistfulness that made my stomach pang.

“I know,” she said quietly. Then she smiled a little. “This is the most thoughtful explanation I’ve ever heard you give about anything, Xavier Evers.”

“Yeah, well.” I rolled my eyes. “I guess I’m a chatterbox these days.”

She took my hand, breathing deeply. “Some of the others in the pack might not be happy that you spoke up on Knox’s behalf. They might say it went against what was best for the pack.”

“It might seem that way,” I admitted. “But we’re also the smallest pack in the alliance, and we just added three new members. Maybe they’re far from perfect, but they do boost our numbers. And they’re young, so if we don’t kill them for being annoying, they’ll be around for a while.”

Ava gave me a look. “You have such a practical mind.”

“Thanks.”

“That was sarcasm, Xavier.”

I scoffed, nudging her, and then one of the council attendants interrupted us.

“Excuse me,” he said, “but Cesaries would like a word with both of you. In private.”

Scowling, I mind linked with Ava. *What now?*

*He probably wants to remind us that they’ll be watching to make sure you don’t throw Knox and the others out of the pack*, Ava replied. *Or into a volcano.*

*I’m not about to assume anything*, I said. *Follow my lead—we have to make sure the council and the pack are on the same page.*

Still holding hands, Ava and I followed the attendant.

*Thanks for the talk we just had. You have to know that I trust you, Xavier*, Ava told me. I had to fight off a smile at that.

Despite our disagreement-slash-argument over Knox, Ava still had my back. It felt weird to acknowledge it, but in retrospect, since Ava had come back from the dead, hadn’t she *always* had my back? There had been the sick, manipulative fuckery of her having sex with Greyson and me while wearing Cali’s face, of course, but Ava had done that to appease her brother. Her family had always been her biggest weakness, and she’d repeatedly made amends since then. She’d almost died multiple times to defend the Redwood pack, and I couldn’t ignore that.

“Come, come, take a seat,” Cesaries said when we entered his tent. He plopped himself down behind his desk, and we sat down across from him. “Would you two like some tea? Coffee?”

“We’re good,” I said.

“What’s this about?” Ava asked bluntly.

“Well,” Cesaries said, looking between us, “I know that not everyone was pleased with the council’s decision today.”

I bit my tongue and forced myself not to react. Ava’s expression was calm. She only nodded.

Cesaries went on. “The council wants you both to know that we felt our decision was best for everyone involved. Young werewolves do make mistakes, and putting them under your care—the both of you—seems like a sure way to put them on the road to redemption.”

I glanced at Ava. *More bullshit.*

*It does sound like he expects us to babysit and nurture them, as if they’re not grown men*, Ava conceded.

Cesaries shrugged. “Boys will be boys, so—”

“*So*, they need to be taught respect,” I interrupted, unable to help myself. “Trust me, we’ll be working on that.”

Cesaries raised an eyebrow. “Just what I wanted to hear.”

“Anything else?” Ava asked.

Cesaries’s gaze flicked to her. “I think everybody in this room can agree that it’s unfortunate the trial had to overshadow the summit, which is supposed to be about celebrating our culture.”

“Sure,” Ava said. I didn’t speak or move at all, because I was ready to roll my eyes again.

“But now that the trial is over,” Cesaries continued, “I believe it’s time to refocus.”

“Right,” I agreed cautiously. “And what does that entail?”

*And why are you talking to us about it?*

“We have to provide the packs with something joyous, of course,” Cesaries said.

I suppressed the urge to scoff at how cryptic Cesaries was being. What did “something joyous” even mean? More parties? More barbecues? More orgies?

“I’m sure the council will think of… whatever it is that’s joyous enough to lighten the mood,” I said, making a move to stand up from my seat.

“We already have, Xavier,” Cesaries said.

I paused, eyeing him warily. “And what’s that?”

“It will be an event that reminds our kind of what packs are really all about, and how unity can make us all stronger.” Cesaries leaned forward, over his desk, and reached for Ava’s hand. Then he took mine, too. I was too surprised to pull away. He smiled, looking between us. “I’m talking about a Luna ceremony for the Samara pack.”

**Episode 3966**

**Greyson**

I watched the scene play out before me, almost like it was in slow motion.

“Yes,” Helix told Lucian. “Elle was a wolf, and Greyson turned her.”

I was aware that if I grabbed him and shook him until his head flew off, it wouldn’t look too good. It also wouldn’t help my case if I rushed to frantically deny his words. Meanwhile, Lucian punched his fist into the air.

“Aha! *I* *knew it!*” he burst out. “I knew it all along! I had my suspicions, and now I have proof!”

“What do you mean, proof?” I spun around to see Elle and Cali. They’d followed me. Cali gave me an apologetic glance. My guess was it hadn’t been her decision.

Lucian chuckled. “Oh, my darling—if Helix had lied, he’d be suffocating right now. But he’s well, which means he told the truth!”

I realized I could try to argue that Helix wasn’t lying, he was just misinformed. But with Lucian parading around like a peacock, talking about how much of a genius he was to have figured this out, I knew he probably wouldn’t buy the lie. The secret was out. Lucian knew that I’d turned Elle—exactly what he’d been trying to get out of me for the longest time. And if I was supposed to feel any relief about this, I didn’t.

I had no idea what the fuck Lucian was going to do with the information.

The rules about turning wolves were murky. Plus, given the situation with Helix, and the unknowns about the sire bond, I doubted the council would be thrilled if they find out there were *two* wolf-born werewolves at the summit, and one of them had committed murder.

“I was right!” Lucian was *still* goddamn bellowing. “I was right, I was right, I was—”

“Keep your damn voice down,” I snapped, grabbing him by the arm to stop his triumphant flailing.

Lucian’s good mood vanished as he angrily yanked his arm from my grasp.

“Why should I?” he demanded. “You lied to me, Greyson! How are we supposed to maintain an effective alliance when you willingly deceive one of your staunchest allies—nay, the *staunchest*?”

Cali’s scoff was so loud, it actually drowned out Lucian’s tirade. “I can’t believe this—*the staunchest*? That’s stretching things a bit, isn’t it?”

Lucian blinked at her in obvious shock. “Caliana, I have the utmost respect for you, in every—”

“Did you respect me when you repeatedly kidnapped and manipulated me in order to please a demon?” Cali demanded. “You wanted to turn me into Seluna’s puppet! How was any of that *respectful*?”

Elle frowned. “Is that true, Lucian?”

Glancing at Elle, Lucian spoke to Cali through clenched teeth. “I didn’t know I was being tricked by a demon. I was a fool in love, semi-possessed by it, and I have repeatedly apologized—”

“I may forgive, but I won’t forget, Lucian,” Cali declared.

I wished I had popcorn.

“But—”

“I’m not done talking,” she interrupted firmly. “You do know that I was dealing with the demon mark up until a few weeks ago, right? Do you understand how horrible that whole experience was for me? If there was a real supernatural court and I asked for reparations, your entire goddamn fortune would vanish! Poof!”

Lucian gasped. “*Poof?*”

“That’s right, poof!” Cali said. “You and your sister would have to live outdoors, in the wild, with none of *this*.” She gestured at the interior of his luxurious tent before her gaze landed on a box of undoubtedly ludicrously expensive bottled water in the corner. She scoffed. “You’d be drinking water direct from a mountain spring, let me tell you that.”

Lucian gasped even harder. “*A mountain spring?*”

“Lucian,” Elle said, speaking up for the first time in a while. I had no idea how much of Cali’s tirade she’d understood. “What are you going to do now that you know the truth about Greyson and me?”

Lucian’s outraged expression immediately softened. “My darling, you are my heart.” He reached over, taking her hands. “I would never, ever do anything to hurt my forest rose.”

Cali rolled her eyes. I’d have laughed if I hadn’t been so goddamn fed up.

“So, you’ll keep this to yourself?” I pressed. “Because this isn’t a fucking game, Lucian.”

Lucian dropped Elle’s hands, turning to glare at me. “I resent the implications in your tone, Greyson. What on earth would I gain by exposing my precious mate to the uncertainties and whims of the council?”

I hated to hear Lucian refer to Elle as his mate, and not because of my sire bond with Elle—because I didn’t like him. And Cali had a huge point regarding who Lucian was, and all the horrible, fucked-up things he’d done.

“Greyson’s right, this isn’t a game,” Cali spoke up again—she was on a roll here, and it filled me with pride despite the messy circumstances. “If the Bitterfangs learned the truth, they’d use it against Elle. Look at how they turned against their own daughter. They’d probably decide that Elle’s some kind of heretic who needs to be burned at the stake.”

“Exactly,” I agreed. “And the knowledge could also strain the alliance and the other packs’ support.”

Lucian huffed, shooting daggers between Cali and me. “I don’t understand why you refuse to trust me! I really have no intention of saying anything.” He picked up Elle’s hands again, staring into her eyes as he spoke. “You are my mate, my darling. I would do anything to protect you.”

Elle opened her mouth to speak and then closed it, like she was uncomfortable. I immediately grabbed Lucian by the shirt, pulling him away from her.

“You’d better stick to your damn word, Lucian,” I said. “Or *else*.”

Getting all up in my face, he snarled, “And you’d better stay away from my mate!”

“That will never happen,” I snapped, shoving him backward. “Elle is a member of my pack. She’s a Redwood through and through.”

Lucian’s chest was heaving, but he straightened and smoothed his hair back, letting out a chuckle that spelled trouble. Smiling, he glanced at Cali. “Is that the sire bond speaking, do you think? Or something else?”

When I shoved Lucian this time, he lost his balance and stumbled backward. “Don’t you *dare* try to draw Cali into this. You are the problem, here.”

Lucian’s cockiness deflated. It was jarring to witness, but I didn’t give a fuck about his sensibilities.

Shaking my head, I turned to Elle and said, “Elle, let’s go.”

“*No,*” she said loudly, shocking me. She stepped closer to both Lucian and me. “I have to know what you’re going to do about Helix.” She pointed at her friend, who’d been watching us nervously. “You can’t just keep him in that box—he’s a werewolf, and before that, he was a wolf. He deserves more than this.”

“Elle,” I said with all the goddamn patience I had left. “Helix killed another werewolf. We can’t just let him run free and risk someone else getting hurt.”

“I’m sorry to say it, but I have to agree with Greyson in this case, my dear,” Lucian told Elle with a scowl.

“But I didn’t understand what was happening,” Helix said. “I do now. I won’t do it again!”

I eyed him. “I don’t know if you know how to control yourself, Helix. Or Dayton, for that matter.”

“But it was the sire bond,” Elle insisted. “He shouldn’t be held responsible for what happened.” She stared at me. “Greyson, we have both felt that bond. Helix’s bond may be stronger for some reason, but he didn’t do any of this on purpose.”

I realized that Cali hadn’t spoken in the last couple of minutes, and I stole a glance at her. Her expression was stoic. I was certain that all this talk about sire bonds probably wasn’t making her feel too good. But I wasn’t about to lie, to pretend that the bond didn’t exist. I could never lie to Cali.

“Okay,” I said. “I understand why we shouldn’t condemn Helix for something he has no control over—if anything, Dayton should be held accountable for turning a wolf and then letting him run amok without any guidance.”

Lucian raised his brows. “With that logic in mind, should we hold you accountable for any mistakes Elle might make, Greyson?”

My hands balled into fists. The princeling was just *begging* me to smack him around.

“This isn’t solving anything,” Cali said evenly. “You two need to stop fighting and focus on the matter at hand.”

She was right. As much as the princeling deserved to have his face pounded, it wouldn’t exactly be smart to blow up the alliance over a murder that neither one of us was responsible for.

“Let’s just keep Helix here until we can all agree on what to do,” I said.

Elle glanced at Helix. “I want to talk to him alone. Can I?”

I didn’t like it, but Cali nudged me.

“Let’s give them some space,” I said with a sigh. “They’ve known each other all their lives.”

In the end, everyone but Elle and Helix left the tent. The moment we were outside, Lucian met my eyes.

“You know we cannot ignore this situation, Greyson,” he said ominously. “Tonight is the Wolf Moon. Things are only going to get worse.”

**Episode 3967**

My stomach tightened.

“Things are going to get *worse*?” I whisper-hissed at Lucian. “What, is someone else going to die?”

“Take a breath, love,” Greyson said, squeezing my shoulder gently. “Like I told you, the so-called power of the Wolf Moon is a myth.”

“Like the sire bond is a myth?” Lucian asked mockingly.

Greyson looked like he was one sentence away from beating Lucian into a pulp. It took a lot to push Greyson into this kind of mental state, so I was a bit worried. But also mildly intrigued, because wow, was he *hot*.

“No,” Greyson snapped at Lucian, “like the myth where Seluna is a moon goddess and not a demon.”

Lucian gasped, clearly offended by Greyson pointing out the flaws in his logic. The prince was, after all, against all logic as a rule. And he definitely believed in a lot of questionable things—including the fact that he was a prince.

But Lucian could believe he was a penguin for all I cared, honestly—the real problem was that Elle wanted to be with him. Not only to help the alliance, but also because she desired him. I could tell by the way she looked at him. I mean, sure, he was jarringly beautiful in a literal Prince Charming kind of way—but what about his creepy vibes and all the weird stuff he was always saying? I knew Elle was smart—she’d had doubts about him before—but I hoped she’d keep seeing what kind of person he was.

Who was to say that Lucian’s belief in the Wolf Moon was anything more than a result of his wild imagination? His crazy beliefs didn’t seem to have a limit—he was a prince, Seluna was a goddess, Greyson and Elle had a sire bond, he and Elle had a mate bond… It was all preposterous, and—

*No... Two of those are true. Crap.*

Sure, Lucian wasn’t a prince, and Seluna wasn’t a goddess, but Greyson and Elle did have a sire bond. And Lucian did seem to be Elle’s mate, considering the fact that they could mind link while human. What did that mean? That all of Lucian’s wild claims had a fifty-fifty chance of being true?

*Yikes.*

Okay, well, at least a fifty percent chance wasn’t a one hundred percent chance. And it definitely didn’t mean that Lucian was right about everything. Just because there was a truth to the sire bond situation with Helix didn’t mean it was a one-size-fits-all to every bond created when a werewolf turned someone.

Maybe wishful thinking, but maybe not.

“I can see the doubt in your eyes, Caliana,” Lucian told me pointedly.

“What gave me away?” I replied, so exasperated that I didn’t even bother to hold back the sarcasm.

Lucian sighed deeply. “If you two are convinced that the sire bond and the Wolf Moon are nothing but stories, are you willing to let Helix go based on theories? No matter what, the council wants him, and who knows what they’ll believe?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Greyson asked coldly.

“If they don’t ascribe to the idea of the sire bond, the council will blame Helix for the murder that he *did* commit, and he will be killed,” Lucian said with a shrug. “It’s simple, really.”

I winced, eyeing Greyson. *I hate to admit it, but Lucian has a point*, I told him.

Greyson’s expression was composed, but his eyes were sharp. I knew he agreed.

“None of this answers the bigger question,” I said, looking between Greyson and Lucian. “What should we do with Helix?”

Lucian seemed to be thinking. Greyson looked around, as if to make sure we were alone and nobody was listening in.

“I think the best thing to do right now is to protect Helix from himself and the council,” Greyson said. “If we keep Helix under our control, we can wait until the summit ends and then decide what to do.”

“But what if the council figures out what happened to Evan before that?” Lucian asked.

“We play it by ear,” Greyson said.

“Would the council *really* solve the murder, though?” I asked, eyebrows arched. “They feel… kind of pointless to me. I mean, look at how they forced the Samaras to take on Knox and his co-conspirators. They didn’t *do* anything.”

“Despite the council’s occasional irresponsible practices and the fucked-up way they handled Knox,” Greyson said, “they do have the power to go to extremes. The councilors are all experienced, cunning, intelligent werewolves.” He paused. “And they don’t like doing a lot of work if they don’t have to.”

I rubbed my temples. “Ugh. They sound like every politician ever.”

“If they’d decided to take away Knox’s wolf, it would have happened,” Greyson said. “That wasn’t an empty threat.”

I swallowed nervously. “If they did that to Helix, he’d be lost. He’s barely had time to be human—how would he survive?”

“That’s a good point,” Lucian said.

We ignored him.

“We shouldn’t make assumptions and work ourselves up, love,” Greyson told me calmly. “There’s no telling what the council will do, and worrying about the possibilities isn’t going to help us in this case.”

“Also a good point,” Lucian said.

We ignored him.

“So does this mean we’re going to keep Helix locked up?” I asked.

Greyson stared at me. His face was serious. “Would you feel comfortable letting him roam free right now?”

I grimaced. “No. Not when he might attack you again. Or Xavier. And if there *is* anything to the Wolf Moon, who knows what he might do?”

“Yet another great point! This is why I enjoy scheming with you two, even though neither of you can let go of the past,” Lucian said.

Before we could ignore him once more, he kept talking.

“Actually, I should assign Armin to watch Helix,” he added. “That way, he won’t have to go back in the trunk.”

“I guess that’s a fair compromise,” I muttered. “Helix won’t be killed, and he won’t be able to hurt anyone else, either.”

“There,” Lucian said. “Problem solved!”

*Not even close, but anyway*…

And then Greyson made things even worse for me by reminding me of the obvious. “I guess someone should tell Xavier what happened.”

Nobody spoke for a beat. The moment Lucian turned to me, clearly ready to say that I should do it, I blurted out, “I’d rather not.”

I was done crying for today.

“Oh,” Lucian said, eyebrows arched. “Is your relationship with Xavier—”

“Literally none of your business?” Greyson supplied. “Yep, that’s right.”

“Very well, then,” Lucian said. “I suppose I could speak to Xavier myself.”

Greyson looked at him like he was nuts. Which he was. “I’ll do it. It’s fine.”

It wasn’t going to be fine. Nothing was fine. But at least without me there, Greyson and Xavier might be able to agree on a course of action.

“I’ll let you know how it goes,” Greyson said, leaning in to give me a brief kiss. I wanted to deepen it, to bury myself in his embrace, but Lucian was watching. This wasn’t the right time, and I had to get a grip.

*There are bigger issues than Xavier’s BS at hand…*

Swallowing past the lump in my throat, I walked away from Greyson and Lucian, heading for the Redwood tents. As I passed by the Cobalt pack’s camp, Rowena emerged. She smiled, waving at me, and I remembered that I had some unfinished business with her. The witch and I had agreed to talk about the Luna mark after the trial, and I still needed some answers.

“Hey,” Rowena said when I walked over to her. “I was just looking for you.” She glanced over her shoulder at her tent. “We can talk privately in there—I’ve soundproofed it with a spell.”

I snorted as I followed her inside. “That’s just the kind of spell that Greyson and I need at night.”

I was mortified the moment I realized what I’d said—I definitely didn’t know Rowena *that* well! But she just stared at me for a moment before she burst out laughing.

“I get it; werewolf stamina is a thing.” She raised an eyebrow. “After I got my mark… Well, let’s just say that wolves are territorial.”

I flushed, feeling a little awkward. But that *was* why I’d come here—to talk about the Luna mark.

“Would you like to see it?” Rowena asked me.

“Yeah,” I said.

Rowena took off her sweater and turned, lowering the strap of her tank top to put the mark on full display. My heart started pounding when I saw it. It was like mine—iridescent and glowing—but also not. Rowena’s mark seemed to pulsate somehow, like it had a life of its own.

“Can I touch it?” I asked quietly, almost in awe.

Rowena grinned. “Go ahead.”

When I touched the mark, I expected something to happen—like lightning striking or a surge of power—but it was just… normal skin. That didn’t look normal.

“Thank you,” I said, and Rowena covered up her shoulder again.

“I doubt you came here just to see it, though,” Rowena said. “What did you really want to talk about?”

I took a deep breath and cut to the chase. “You’re a witch who obviously survived receiving a Luna mark. Do you think a half-Fae could survive the process, too?”

**Episode 3968**

**Greyson**

I was glad that Cali had decided not to come with me to talk to Xavier. She’d been right to say that having her there could complicate things—for all of us, but above all, for me. Because if my brother made any kind of asshole comment about Cali, it would be very hard for me not to punch him. In the chest, in the stomach, in his mouth. Maybe I would make him lose a tooth or two—you know, for good luck.

All that aside, the truth was that apart from worrying—*ahem, obsessing*—over Cali’s well-being, there was another reason why I didn’t want her to interact with my brother. A selfish reason that I wasn’t going to verbalize, but felt deep in my bones. Cali was with me now, and Xavier didn’t fucking *deserve* to lay eyes on her, to talk to her, to take in her scent. He’d lost all those privileges when he’d treated her like shit. When he’d kissed Ava in front of her. When he’d humiliated her and forced me to tell him that he’d never be welcome in the Redwood pack again.

He was with Ava when I arrived at the Samara campsite. They were speaking heatedly, but they stopped when they spotted me. There was an awkward silence, and then Xavier huffed.

“Greyson. What do you want?”

I glanced at Ava. Did she need to know about the Helix development? Did she need to know anything, ever? That was a general question. Thankfully, she answered it herself.

“Go on without me,” she said, shooting a glare at Xavier. “I’ve got somewhere better to be.”

I watched her stomp off before turning to Xavier. “Trouble in paradise?”

Xavier huffed again. “What do you want?”

I looked around. The Samaras were watching. Of course.

“Is there somewhere we can speak in private?” I asked. I couldn’t afford to have anyone overhear.

Xavier’s eyes narrowed. “Is this about Cali?”

I clenched my teeth to keep myself from breaking his. I was the bigger person that way. “No. Nothing to do with Cali.”

I hated that Xavier had gone there first. It was telling, though I wasn’t sure what it said, exactly. Then again, I’d recently grabbed him by the scruff and threatened him over Cali because he’d *kissed her*, so it wasn’t like we hadn’t had a few intense talks about her, lately.

“It’s about Helix,” I muttered, looking around.

“Still?” Xavier asked.

“Let’s just go,” I said. I wasn’t in the mood for one of his temper tantrums. This was actually serious pack business.

“Fine. Let’s go to my tent,” Xavier said with a grunt. “It’s separate from the others, near one of the creeks—the water muffles sound.”

When we reached his tent, I thought about Cali again. And, again, I was glad that she hadn’t come along. It didn’t take werewolf senses to know that this wasn’t just Xavier’s tent—it was Ava’s, too. Her clothes and belongings were everywhere, and there were two pillows on the unmade cot. This moment right here would’ve been one more thing to hurt Cali, rubbing the truth in her face. Just like Xavier and Ava had done at the party by making out in front of her.

“Looks like you’re settled in as Samara Alpha,” I said. “That didn’t take long.”

Xavier crossed his arms. “Just cut to the chase, Greyson. I’m not interested in small talk about what you think about me as the Samara Alpha.”

Since I’d decided not to get angry at him during this particular interaction, the only thing I could do was sigh. In a long-suffering way, because I’d been suffering for a while now.

“Of course you’re not,” I said. The “you rude little bitch” at the end of that sentence was implied. “Under normal circumstances, I might have even been happy for you. But there’s nothing normal about the way you handled any of this, so that’s on you.”

“Spare me the fucking lecture. I’ve heard this spiel before,” Xavier snapped. “You said you came here to talk about Helix—what about him?”

“Helix confessed to everything,” I said, keeping my voice low. “Including Evan’s murder.”

“I’m not surprised,” Xavier said with a shrug. “The guy tried to kill me. He has a death wish or something. I assume you’ve turned him over to the council?”

“We haven’t decided what to do,” I said.

Xavier scowled. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Elle is Helix’s old pack mate,” I said tightly. “And the way Helix has been going off is… complicated.”

Xavier’s eyes narrowed. “*How?*”

I wondered if I should go into detail, and I immediately decided not to. The truth of the matter was that I didn’t trust Xavier as much as I used to. I just couldn’t. The thought left a bitter taste in my mouth, but it was undeniable.

In the end, I just said, “There may be a possibility that Helix’s behavior has something to do with his sire bond with Dayton.”

Xavier stared at me for a moment before he chuckled. “Wow.”

I frowned. “What’s so funny?”

“You just admitted that this is complicated because the princeling might be right.” Xavier pointed at me. “You’re worried that the sire bond thing might fuck *you* over, too.”

I forced myself not to react. Xavier wasn’t wrong, but I wasn’t about to admit it to him. The Samaras might’ve been our allies, but Xavier and I were far from friendly right now. On paper, we weren’t enemies, and we were still brothers, but we were not *friends*. I doubted there’d ever been a moment when we had been. I used to think we could trust each other, at least, but that belief had been thoroughly shattered.

So what the fuck was left?

“Come on,” Xavier said, walking up to me. His expression had changed, and his voice had lowered. When he spoke, it sounded like he was *taunting* me. “Come on, just admit it. It’s just the two of us. No one else has to know.”

“I have no idea what the fuck you’re talking about,” I said coldly.

He squinted at me, and when a half smile formed on his lips, it looked more like a grimace.

“She’s always seen you as the good one, you know,” Xavier said quietly. “Greyson, her perfect boyfriend. The reliable one, the one who never lies to her, who respects her, who always listens to her—all that bullshit.” His tone was mocking. “But you’ve got your own liabilities, don’t you?” Xavier leaned closer, and the gleam of satisfaction in his eyes sent a chill down my spine. “I know you’re scared that the sire bond is going to screw things up with Cali. You’re fucking *terrified*, Greyson.”

My anger had awakened, snapping to attention. But violence was one thing, and words were another. And sometimes, with Xavier, words could do the trick just fine.

“Well, you *would* know more about screwing things up with Cali than I do,” I said calmly.

The silence that followed was heavy. For the briefest of moments, the look in Xavier’s eyes suggested that I’d just wounded more than his ego. I’d hit him where it counted. Where he was already hurt. That couldn’t be true though, could it?

Regardless, I didn’t have time to process, because a moment later, his expression darkened.

“You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about, so shut up,” Xavier growled.

Getting into a pissing match with Xavier wasn’t what I’d come here to do. I was itching to get the fuck out of this damn Samara tent, where my brother slept. He’d left our pack and who he used to be. It was like all the good parts of who he was had vanished, and all that was left was a sour, selfish bastard. This wasn’t the Xavier I’d grown to respect, but I had to remind myself that I’d probably never truly known him.

I had to remind myself that this must’ve been him all along.

“Lucian and I have decided to keep Helix under our watch until we can figure out what to do with him,” I said. “That’s what I came over to tell you.”

I’d already turned to leave when Xavier snorted. “Really? You’re cozying up to Lucian now?”

“I don’t think you have room to judge, Xavier. You’re looking pretty damn cozy with Ava.” I gestured around the tent. “It wasn’t all that long ago that you wanted to kill her. You know, *again*.”

Xavier's eyes flashed angrily. “Get out.”

I raised my hands, and my eyebrows as well, pretending to be defensive when all I felt was the urge to attack. I started toward the exit again, but I couldn’t stop myself from asking him one last question.

*The* question.

“So you’ve definitely made your choice, then?” I asked.

Xavier scowled at me. “To be Samara Alpha? Isn’t that obvious?”

“No, Xavier,” I said. “To be with Ava, not Cali.”

**Episode 3969**

Rowena paused for a moment, and I suddenly felt like I’d overstepped. Was she even going to answer me? Was I just being a nosy, annoying Fae right now? Did Fae have a reputation for being nosy? Oh my god, was I reinforcing stereotypes one invasive question at a time?

“Sorry!” I blurted out. “I shouldn’t have just asked you that without—”

“No, no, it’s fine,” Rowena rushed to reassure me. “I was just trying to remember if I’ve ever heard of a Fae becoming a Luna, but I don’t think I have.”

So. On the upside, Rowena wasn’t annoyed by me. On the downside, her answer wasn’t exactly encouraging. The disappointment I felt had to be obvious on my face, because Rowena squeezed my shoulder sympathetically.

“I know how difficult a situation you must be in,” she said.

I fiddled with my hands. “Really?”

“Of course,” Rowena said. “Why else would you have gone to the trouble of having a witch put a fake Luna mark on you?”

I sighed, nodding. “Yeah. I mean, both my mates have mentioned the possibility of me becoming their Luna, but there was always the question of whether I’d be able to survive the process.”

Rowena smiled ruefully. “I went through a similar thing.” She pressed her lips together. “It was hard enough just with Porter—I can’t even imagine what it would be like to have two mates to discuss this with.”

*It’s all good now, Rowena!* I wanted to say. *Xavier dumped me in order to pursue glory and Ava’s glorious ass, so he doesn’t count anymore!*

I forced myself to stay on track.

“Did Porter pressure you to get the mark?” I asked.

“Absolutely not—he would never do that.” Rowena shook her head, letting out a little scoff. “If anything, I pressured him. I drove him nuts, pestering him about it.”

I chuckled. Then I *realized* I’d chuckled, and I gave her a sheepish look. “Sorry. I mean—”

“I know, it’s fine,” Rowena said, smirking. “I guess it all just became… a lot. Because I knew how important it was for an Alpha to have a Luna—both for the Alpha and the Alpha’s pack.”

“I get what you mean,” I said with a sigh. “Neither of my mates have ever pressured me about it, either—I mean, they’ve wanted it, sure. And I do, too. I’m the one who keeps bringing it up because of the reasons you just mentioned.” I paused, eyeing her face. She seemed so open and friendly that I knew I had to ask everything right now or regret it later. “How was the process for you? Like, emotionally?”

Rowena took a deep breath. “Even though I wanted it, the idea was sometimes overwhelming. It was something I thought about even before we knew that Porter would become Alpha. I’d been uncertain at first because it was something I knew my mother would’ve been opposed to… I mean, she hated the idea that a witch could be with a werewolf, and we always ended up having horrible arguments.”

I winced. “I’m so sorry… That sounds like a nightmare.”

Rowena gave me a sad little smile. “It was. In fact, it got so bad that we ended up estranged.”

“That sounds terrible,” I said. Just the idea of it made me slightly panicky. I loved my mom so much, and if anything ever came between us…

“How did your mother take to you having *two* werewolf boyfriends?” Rowena asked.

I thought for a moment. “Well, somehow, she embraced both relationships”—*while they were both going on, that is*—“and she never told me to stop seeing them or anything. But she worries about me. Though I think that has more to do with all the danger we keep getting thrown into.”

Rowena seemed surprised. “So she never had an issue with them being werewolves? With them not fitting well with you? And the fact that there were *two* of them didn’t faze her?”

I chuckled. “I mean, she didn’t expect it, but as long as she saw that I was happy, she was good.”

Rowena’s expression was wistful. “You’re so lucky. Parents aren’t always so understanding.”

I patted her shoulder. “I’m really sorry about your mom.”

Rowena sighed. “Thank you. Either way, I chose to have the mark in the end. Porter is the one for me, so it’s a done deal.”

I paused, glancing at her now-covered shoulder. “What was it like?”

“What?”

“The Luna ceremony,” I said. “I’ve only seen one, but it involved two werewolves, and it looked painful.”

Rowena nodded. “That sounds accurate. It was the most painful thing I’d ever experienced.”

I winced.

*Oh, no! My pain tolerance is… Well, actually, it’s not bad. BUT STILL!*

“I’m not surprised to hear you say that,” I said, fighting for calm.

“At one point, I even wanted to die,” Rowena admitted. “And in the days after the ceremony, no one was sure if I’d survive. The mark refused to heal, and I had constant pain, fevers, chills, delusions…”

I blinked. I was definitely getting the unfiltered version of events—which was good, but also fucking terrifying.

“Delusions?” I asked.

“At one point, I thought Porter was trying to cook me for dinner.” She snorted. “I laugh about it now because he hates cooking.”

“But back then…”

“Back then, I was out of my mind,” Rowena said. “I kept seeing him as a TV chef, with the uniform and everything. He’d scream at people and order them to get their shit together. He’d call me a delicious pancake. It would’ve been sexy if it wasn’t so disturbing.”

I had to laugh myself, now. Rowena grinned, shaking her head. Slowly, she took my hand. Her voice dropped, taking on this ethereal, dreamy quality that immediately drew me in.

“Despite all that, though, I’d go through it again,” she whispered. “Being Porter’s Luna is like nothing I’ve ever experienced. We’re more in love now than before. It’s the greatest gift we could give each other.”

Her words left me breathless. There was something deeply troubling about this whole thing, but also so romantic. Rowena had risked her life for the man she loved, and she didn’t regret it. Not even after everything she’d endured to get the mark.

I felt my eyes well up, and I sighed.

*Really, self? Are you* really *going to cry when this woman just told you that her Alpha called her a delicious pancake during a fever dream?*

Rowena pulled me out of my reverie. “Again, though, that was just my experience,” she said. “Your response could be much better.”

“Or worse,” I said wryly. “I don’t even want to imagine the delusions that would hit me.”

“In retrospect,” Rowena said, “I’d take the cooking me for dinner scenario over some of the worse ones.”

“That’s comforting.”

Rowena chuckled, and I squeezed her hand as she held mine.

“Thanks so much for answering my questions today,” I said. “I really appreciate your help, and your honesty.”

As I stood up, Rowena said, “Hey, maybe you and Greyson can join us for dinner sometime?”

I smiled. “I’d love that, and I’m pretty sure Greyson would, too.” Then, with a smirk, I asked, “Will Porter be cooking?”

Rowena scoffed. “No way!”

Snickering, I moved to head out, but then Rowena spoke again.

“I forgot to tell you, by the way,” she said. “I did end up talking to Porter about the pregnancy scare.”

“How did he take it?” I asked.

Rowena sighed. “He couldn’t have been more understanding and supportive. I got a little paranoid back there, to tell you the truth. Stress isn’t the best adviser, I guess.”

*Tell me about it…*

Speaking of stress, I had one more question for Rowena.

“Are you familiar with the Wolf Moon?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I’ve heard of it. Don’t know if there’s anything to it, but as a witch, I’ve learned that there are often reasons why people believe in legends and myths.”

I cringed. “I suppose we both should be careful tonight, then.”

Rowena nodded, and we shook on it, like a silent agreement. I headed out of her tent after that, feeling lighter. I was glad we’d had this talk, though I wasn’t sure if it had resolved anything.

I wished so badly that there was an easy way to make the decision about becoming a real Luna. But regardless, no matter how much I insisted, there was no way that Greyson would give me a Luna mark unless he knew I would survive it.

My heart pounded at the thought.

Love was a funny thing, wasn’t it?

As I passed by the Vanguard encampment, I thought about Helix. He was probably scared and hungry. I knew he was a danger, a potential liablity, but he was still a person… I could at least check on him, see if he wanted something to eat.

When I walked into the tent, though, it was empty.

*Fuck.*

Had Helix *escaped*?

**Episode 3970**

**Xavier**

My brother had really decided it was a good idea to ask if I’d officially chosen Ava over Cali. *No Greyson, I haven’t. I’m actually being blackmailed by a vampire-witch who’s making it impossible for me to be with the mate I actually want to be with. Thanks for asking.*

“That’s none of your concern,” was my response. I felt like standing up and shoving him out of the tent, but how would that look to the gathered Samaras?

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Greyson said coldly. “As long as you continue to fuck both me and Cali over, it will absolutely be *my concern*. You can’t have both Ava and Cali—it doesn’t work that way. You don’t get to kiss Cali anymore, Xavier. It’s done.”

His words made me feel sick. I ignored the feeling. I *pretended*.

“Fucking hell,” I burst out, rolling my eyes. “I refuse to have this conversation with you again.”

“I’m just saying,” Greyson went on, his eyes fixed on mine, “if you think Cali will ever take you back, you’re delusional. There is nothing you could ever say to justify the way you’ve treated her. Effectively, you’ve *already* chosen Ava. Do you not get that?”

My anger was overshadowed by guilt. Greyson was right, but there was a factor in play that nobody knew about: Adéluce. Still, Greyson wasn’t wrong about the fact that I’d made some decisions I couldn’t come back from. Like sleeping with Ava. Like this damn Luna thing that the council now had hanging over my head.

I had no idea how the hell I was going to deal with *that* mess.

Ava and I were, of course, not agreeing on anything. She wanted to be Luna, and I wanted to… Well, to *not* make that decision on command. Why the fuck should I be forced to perform a Luna ceremony during the summit?

The council had decided to fuck up the mood with Knox’s trial, and now that they’d realized the assembled packs all thought they’d dropped the ball, the councilors had decided that they needed something to cheer people up. Essentially, we were doing whatever the fuck popped into the heads of a bunch of old men who had no idea what was best for anyone.

Instead of thinking up ways to celebrate, those assholes should’ve been looking for a murderer. A killer whose identity and location both Greyson and I knew and didn’t seem to be doing shit about. But why *should* we do anything when the council was just snoozing on their asses?

Fuck this.

“What?” Greyson’s tone was sharp, his gaze fierce. “You’ve got nothing to say about that?”

“I have no idea what the hell you *want* me to say,” I retorted. “You keep talking in circles, like—”

“If you gave a shit about Cali, you never would’ve kissed Cali, and you wouldn’t have kissed Ava in front of her like that,” he interrupted. “Never.”

I felt like screaming at the bastard.

*I did it to keep Adéluce from hurting her! I did it* for *her! It’s all for her.*

I didn’t want Cali trying to talk to me, and so far I’d succeeded. A little too well, really. So, of course, this fucking stung. Even worse, I couldn’t explain any of it to Greyson, and his holier-than-thou behavior was driving me up the fucking wall. It had been better when he’d growled at me and declared that he’d never accept me back into the Redwood pack. I needed to end this conversation and drive him away.

So I said, “You’re just pissed that you’ll never know if she chose you because she wanted you, or because I left her.”

Greyson’s arms dropped to his sides. He stepped forward, toward me. His eyes went dark. The last time I’d seen that look on his face, he’d killed someone. I had to stand my ground, though. Even when Greyson said, “You’d better be very fucking careful about what you say next, little brother.”

I might’ve been the younger brother, but right now, I had the upper hand.

“Or what?” I challenged. “You going to hit me?”

Greyson eyed me up and down. “No. That’d be doing you too many favors. But there are other ways to hurt a person, and you’d best remember that.”

I scoffed. “Are you threatening me?”

Greyson didn’t even answer that.

“I’ll handle the Helix shit, and you will stay out of it,” he said. “Got it?”

I shook my head. “You’d better know what the fuck you’re doing.”

With a final look of disdain and disappointment, Greyson left.

Somehow, that hurt far more than his anger.

“Fuck,” I hissed, fists curling at my sides.

My whole body felt rigid, like I’d just been in a fight. When I kicked the cot, I wasn’t even aware of what I was doing. It just rammed itself into the tent, and then the tent was collapsing around me. I was suddenly being drowned by the canvas while simultaneously drowning in anger and Greyson’s fucking *bullshit*.

“Motherfucker!” I snarled, tearing my way out of the ruined tent.

The second I got out, I saw Marissa. Just standing there, watching me.

“What?” I barked.

She raised an eyebrow. “You good?”

I threw the shredded pieces of tent to the ground and started to walk away.

“Make sure someone gets us a new one,” I barked over my shoulder.

Marissa sounded awkward. “*Sure…*”

I made a move to storm off, but then I remembered that I had to be fucking *polite*, now.

“Thanks,” I said.

And then I walked the fuck away. If there was ever a time to go for a run, it was now, even though I was very aware of one obvious fact—I couldn’t run from this.

“Xavier!” someone called.

I turned to see Knox coming over with Blaine, Zipper, and Knox’s parents. Great. Exactly what I needed right now.

But I had to be sociable, because that was what an Alpha did.

I’d asked for this.

“Xavier.” Jason spoke first, nodding at me seriously. “I want to thank you for taking these delinquents into your pack.”

Leona pressed her lips together, her hand resting on her chest. Her voice was throaty when she spoke. “I’m so grateful that the council was merciful.”

Merciful? To whom? Because it definitely felt like *I* was being punished right now.

I glanced at Knox and the other two.

“As long as they stay in line, everything should work out,” I told Knox’s parents.

“We’ll do our best,” Knox said seriously. “We know it’s important.”

Blaine and Zipper nodded, staring at the ground.

“Your best might not be good enough,” I said. “You’ll need to prove that you’ve changed. That the Samaras can trust you. That you can be good for your pack.”

All three of them nodded. I eyed them again. There was nothing defiant in their eyes.

*Yet*.

I recalled the trial, and the way Knox had accused Greyson of lying about the werewolf strength potion that Knox and his little buddies had taken. He’d done it with such certainty and fucking audacity, it had been completely infuriating. He’d been ready to fight before, but now he was just cowering. He was wounded, but maybe not for long.

Either way, I meant what I’d said to Ava—I’d kill any one of them if I had to.

I was going to make it very goddamn clear that bad behavior would not be tolerated.

*You should treat them kindly*, said a voice in my head. *Give them a second chance.*

It was a soft, beautiful voice. Cali’s, of course. I forced myself not to dwell on what she’d said, because I didn’t know if I could do it. I didn’t know if I could be the man she’d always wanted me to be. Not under these circumstances. Not when I didn’t have her.

I felt raw inside.

Cali had always taken the high road, but I lived in the ditch. Especially now, with the choices I’d made. With Ava in my bed and getting closer to my heart, like she was fucking owed it. With the council asking for a Luna ceremony like it was just another party.

“Let’s allow the Samara Alpha a moment of peace,” Jason said when I stopped talking. At least one of them had realized I wasn’t in the mood for chitchat. “I’ll help you and the others set up your tent,” he told his son, leading him, Blaine, and Zipper away.

No, they hadn’t caused trouble so far. But I knew it was only a matter of time. I could just sense it. A tiger didn’t change its stripes, and a little dickhead werewolf didn’t change his fur. At least they were going to set up their tents without my help—that was a bonus.

I remembered, then, that I had to deal with my own fucking tent.

“If that’s all,” I said to Leona, already making a move to walk away.

But then Ava’s aunt spoke up. “Actually…”

I felt her hand on my arm, stopping me from leaving. When I turned back, Leona’s expression was severe.

“I want to talk to you about my niece, Xavier,” she said. “In private.”

**Episode 3971**

I looked around the tent, trying to make sense of what I was seeing.

*Okay*, I told myself, *don’t panic. Do* not *panic.*

Just because Helix wasn’t here, that didn’t mean something bad had happened. It only meant that Helix was… *not here*. But neither was Armin, who’d been ordered to watch Helix. So maybe that meant something. Elle wasn’t here, either.

I walked slowly around the perimeter of the tent, looking around carefully, but I didn’t see anything that suggested a struggle had taken place. Everything seemed to be in place, and I didn’t find any blood.

I was relieved about that, but I still couldn’t figure out why the tent was empty.

Biting my lip, I thought hard. I could go find Greyson and warn him… But maybe that would be sounding the alarm too early. Maybe Lucian had ordered Armin to move Helix for some reason. There could be a lot of reasons.

The self-proclaimed prince didn’t take kindly to criticism, and I knew he wouldn’t want to be accused of harboring a murderer by the council. He’d been the one saying we should keep him locked up, anyway, so it didn’t seem likely he’d just up and let him go…

Taking a deep breath, I shook my head. No. I needed to pull it together. I couldn’t let my imagination run away with me like that. I needed to think this through clearly and logically.

And then I realized—I just needed to go find Armin or Elle. They’d know what was going on.

I headed out of the tent, hoping like hell that I was right and there was a rational explanation for Helix’s disappearance. The idea of a confessed murderer running around the summit made my heart pound with fear. Beyond the fact that it was wildly dangerous, Helix being on the loose could bring a lot of trouble to both the Redwood and Vanguard packs. This had the potential to spiral into a disaster.

I set my jaw as I strode toward the other tents. If I was going to be a Luna—or at least pretend to be one—then I needed to be able to handle this on my own.

Aysel’s tent was just up ahead. It was wildly extravagant and over-decorated, and there was no mistaking it. The tent flap opened, and—to my surprise—Armin stepped out.

Relieved to see him, I was just about to ask him about Helix when he looked down to finish buttoning up his shirt.

*What the hell?*

I had no idea what to make of this, and—when I waved at him—Armin confused me even more by looking extremely flustered.

“Oh, Caliana—hello,” he said, looking around nervously.

“You know, you don’t have to leave so quickly…” Aysel appeared in the doorway of the tent. She stepped toward Armin and placed a hand on his chest. Her long blonde hair was uncharacteristically tousled, and she was wearing a flowing silk robe. It was very light pink, and so sheer that it left absolutely *nothing* to the imagination. She leaned in to kiss Armin, then—as she pulled away—glanced over, finally catching sight of me.

“Hi, Aysel,” I said. My own face flushed hot, though I had no idea why I felt embarrassed.

Aysel raised an eyebrow. She looked completely unconcerned by my presence.

Armin, however, continued to look deeply uncomfortable. He cleared his throat. “If you ladies will excuse me, I’m sure I’m needed elsewhere for… something.”

He hurried away, and I saw that his shoes were still untied.

Oh god. I hated that I’d just witnessed that. I needed to get the hell away. I started to back away, hoping to make a quick exit, but Aysel just rolled her eyes.

“God, Caliana, stop being so judgmental.”

“I didn’t say anything!” I protested.

She glared at me. “That’s what makes it feel so judge-y.” She looked over my shoulder at Armin’s retreating figure and sighed. “The best thing about Armin is that he does everything I say.” She looked back at me with a wicked smile. “And I do mean *everything*.”

I cringed. I fought against it, but images of Aysel and Armin just popped into my head. This was a nightmare.

“Come in, Caliana,” Aysel said, still sounding annoyed.

I didn’t know quite what else to do, so I followed Aysel into her tent. Like her brother’s, Aysel’s tent was bigger than the standard tents, and it was filled with actual furniture instead of the rickety cots everyone else had. But the sheets on the bed were twisted, and Aysel’s clothes lay strewn across the floor.

I stopped and squeezed my eyes shut. I did *not* need to be in here. I did *not* need a more detailed mental image of Aysel and Armin’s… *lovemaking*.

“I was actually looking for Armin,” I said. “I need to talk to him.”

Aysel turned to me, her brows raised. “Is this about the guy in the trunk?”

I stared at her in surprise. “How do you know about that?”

She scoffed dismissively. “Caliana, I know everything.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “So, do you know what *happened* to the guy in the trunk, then?”

Aysel crossed her arms. “Isn’t he still in the trunk?”

Oh god. That wasn’t good.

“No, he’s not,” I told her. “He’s *gone*. I have to go find Armin and see if he knows where he went. This is a *problem.*”

And with that, I hurried out.

Outside, I looked around wildly. I’d been hoping to spot Armin right away, but I didn’t see him anywhere.

Shit. This *really* wasn’t good.

Okay, it still wasn’t the time to panic.

“So, we’re looking for the guy in the trunk?”

I looked over. Aysel had appeared beside me. She was dressed now, and her eyes were flashing with excitement.

“What?” I asked blankly.

“Finally, something interesting to do!” she said, clapping her hands. “This summit has been a bit of a snooze, don’t you think?”

I looked at her carefully, trying to figure out how much Aysel actually knew. She seemed too cavalier about the idea of looking for a literal murderer. It wasn’t like we were going to steal snacks from another pack’s bonfire—Helix had killed Evan, then viciously attacked Greyson and Xavier. I had to wonder if Aysel was aware of how dire the situation really was.

“If we’re looking for Armin, we should go check his tent—humble as it is,” she suggested.

“Okay,” I said, with a shrug. “Lead the way.”

She pointed, and we started walking down the row of Vanguard tents. When we reached the smallest tent, I was about to call out to announce myself, but Aysel blew right past me and pushed the flap of the tent open.

Armin was inside, but he was pants-less, and when he saw us, he shouted in surprise and stumbled backward, looking deeply embarrassed.

Aysel ignored this and swept into the tent, dragging me with her.

Armin got his feet back under him, pulled on his pants, and finally found his voice. “May I be of assistance, princess?”

Aysel rolled her eyes and turned to me. “He’s all yours.”

I didn’t like the dismissive way Aysel spoke, and I felt bad for Armin, but I knew I needed to stay focused.

“Where’s Helix?” I asked.

Armin looked at me, clearly confused. “Helix? What do you mean?”

“He pulled a Houdini!” Aysel snapped.

“I’m… sorry?” Armin said, as though this hadn’t cleared anything up.

“It seems he escaped while you were gone,” Aysel clarified. “You know, while we were…” She raised her eyebrows suggestively.

Armin’s expression cleared. He understood. Then the blood drained from his face, and he looked horrified. “Dear god, we have to find him.”

He hurriedly buttoned his pants and shoved his feet into his shoes as he stumbled out of the tent.

“Greyson!” I called, spotting him walking by.

Greyson looked over. He took one look at me and frowned. “Cali, what’s wrong?”

“Helix is gone,” I told him bluntly. There was no point in hiding the truth.

“*What?*” Greyson burst out. “Are you kidding me?”

I shook my head.

“I left him with Arielle when I stepped out,” Armin added. “I was busy with… uh… the princess.”

Greyson looked at Armin, then at Aysel, then at me. I could see him putting everything together in his head.

“*Dammit!*” he exploded. “I knew this was a mistake. I never should’ve left Lucian in charge of this. Fucking hell!”

“Elle!” My heart leapt into my throat. Elle was walking past the field of tents, and I waved to her. “Look! There’s Elle! She was with Helix when Armin left. She might know what happened. Elle, come here!”

Elle hurried over. “What is it? Why are you waving your arms around so much?”

“Helix is gone,” I said.

I waited for her reaction. Helix was her friend, and I knew she didn’t want any harm to come to him. This was bad that he was gone. The council could find him, or he could hurt someone else…

“Yes, I know,” Elle said after a moment. “I let him go.”

**Episode 3972**

**Xavier**

I glanced around, trying to think of something to say. I was trying to be polite, but the last thing I wanted to do right now was have a conversation with Ava’s aunt about Ava. I had enough to deal with at the moment without adding any Reed family bullshit to the mix. Wasn’t it enough for them that I’d just helped save the life of their fuckup son?

I knew that Ava would want me to show her family respect, which meant I was so busy trying to think of a polite way to exit the conversation that I lost my chance. Leona took my arm and led me over to where the Sycamore pack was camping out.

“Would you like some tea?” she offered, leading me toward a bonfire.

“No—thanks,” I added hastily. “I’m actually kind of in a hurry—”

“Then I’ll get right to the point, Xavier,” Leona said, turning to look at me. “I’m concerned about Ava.”

I felt myself tense. Was this going to be another push to make Ava my Luna? God, it was bad enough that the council was sticking their damn noses in my business—now Ava’s aunt was about to join in, too?

“I know that my niece was killed,” she went on, leveling a piercing gaze at me. “But now that she’s back, the family would prefer that she remain alive.”

I felt the chill in her words and understood her not-so-subtle hint. “I see.”

She took a step closer to me, her eyes never moving from me. “You did the right thing by speaking up for my son. I know he is far from perfect, but he didn’t deserve to die.”

Knox was about as far from perfect as it was possible to get, but I said nothing. This wasn’t about Knox. Whatever Leona and I were saying to each other, it was about Ava.

“You helped my son, and I’m grateful. I know I was tough on Ava, but I know she understands why. But if you hurt my niece,” Leona went on, her voice cold as ice, “there will be hell to pay. Ava may have her faults—who doesn’t?—but she is the last living child of my only brother, and I will *not* lose her again. Not with all this behind us. Do you hear me, Xavier Evers?”

I nodded slowly. “I hear you.” And I did. I got her message, loud and clear. “But I think you’re selling Ava short.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Selling her short?”

“Ava will always land on her feet.”

Her gaze swept over my face. She was searching it, trying to read my mind, but I wasn’t worried about what she might find. I meant what I’d said. Ava was my mate—I’d finally stopped fighting that fact.

“I’ll make sure she does.”

“I’m going to look out for her,” I said, biting back from arguing with her more.

Leona nodded. “I’m glad to hear it. I’m so happy we had this talk. It was most informative. And I look forward to receiving the invitation.”

Startled by the turn of conversation, I frowned at her. “Invitation?”

Leona’s smile hardened and her eyes looked like flint. “To Ava’s Luna ceremony, of course.”

My jaw clenched as Leona turned and disappeared into her tent.

What the *fuck*? Had Cesaries made a fucking summit-wide announcement?

Fury coursed through me, and I whipped around, marching toward the council tents. I was sick of this bullshit, and ready to put an end to it—once and for all. Who the hell else had Cesaries told?

As I stalked back through the Samara camp, I saw Geraint with Knox, Blaine, and Zipper. He was helping them put the finishing touches on their tents, and he waved at me as I stormed by.

“Hey, Xavier, just finishing up here,” he said. “Is there anything else you want—”

“They’re too close to the fire!” I snapped, glaring at the tents.

The tents weren’t too close to the fire—not by a long shot—and everyone looked a little puzzled. Luckily, I didn’t really have to explain myself. I wasn’t going to get into what the conversation I’d just had was about.

“Move them back!” I snapped at Knox.

“But, Xavier, it’s—”

“Did I not make myself clear?” I snarled. I rounded on Knox, Blaine, and Zipper, who all took a wary step back. “And if you don’t do it right, I’ll kick all your asses until you do. You got me?”

They nodded.

I looked back at Geraint, who was watching me warily. “And this time, don’t help them.”

I stormed away, knowing full well that I was unfairly taking my anger out on Knox and his ragtag bunch. But why the hell not? And why was it even unfair? A lot of my current frustration was the shrimp’s fault.

I could feel Knox’s angry look burning into my back, but I didn’t give a shit. That was possibly a mistake, because—thanks to the fucking council’s wisdom—Knox was once again my problem. But all that meant for me was that I was going to do everything in my power to make his life a fucking misery until he fell into line.

Leona was grateful that I’d helped save her son, but she might not feel quite the same sense of gratitude when she saw the hell I was going to put Knox through to make him earn the mercy he’d been granted.

“Xavier!”

I looked to the right, and it felt like my breath had been stolen from my lungs. Ava was striding toward me, the wind pulling her curtain of dark hair away from her face. Even through the red haze of my anger, her beauty hit me like a battering ram. I scanned her face, taking in her perfect features, the skin that gleamed like polished porcelain in the golden glow of the late afternoon sun.

Fuck. I’d wanted to stay angry, but just seeing her had dulled the sharpest parts of my fury. And she looked upset, which set off something protective in me.

Great.

“We have to talk about what the council is expecting us to do,” she said, stopping in front of me. She shook her hair away and looked up into my face, her own eyes oddly unreadable.

I shook my head. “I don’t care what the council expects—we’re not going to be forced into this.”

She glanced away for a moment, her dark gaze turning distant.

“But isn’t it what we’re going to do anyway, Xavier?” she asked. “Does it really matter what the council wants if it’s what we want, too?”

I had no idea what the hell I was supposed to say to that. The cold winter wind blew around us as we stood together for a long, silent moment. I’d been ambivalent about this question for so long, and now I was being forced to make a hard choice.

I had looked away, and I suddenly felt Ava’s hand on my jaw. When I looked down at her, her eyes were blazing up at me.

“Look me in the eye, Xavier, and tell me you weren’t going to ask me to be your Luna at the end of all this.”

Dammit. I had no idea how I’d ended up here, but I was in a tough position. If I was being honest with myself—*really* honest—I knew that I’d always intended to ask her. It was an inevitable choice, but not necessarily a choice I wanted to make. And *certainly* not a choice I wanted to make under these fucked-up circumstances. When I closed my eyes and imagined my Luna—imagined who I truly wanted my Luna to be—I saw Cali. It had always been Cali. And that wasn’t fair to Ava, but that was just the current reality.

Ava just kept looking up at me, her gaze steady. I was the Alpha of the Samara pack. There was responsibility in that, and I knew it. I knew I had to do right by the pack—and I had to put the pack first.

I hated to look to my brother as any kind of example, but I couldn’t help but think of how Greyson had chosen Joss to be his Luna. Joss had been the right choice, and even though she hadn’t been his true love, or even his mate, he’d put the pack first. Joss had been the means to an end.

Luna was a role that suited Ava well, and one she deserved. No one cared more about the Samara pack than she did. No one had given more of themselves for the pack.

And Ava and I were together, weren’t we? We were good together… until we weren’t. It had always been like that for Ava and me. Something always came between us in the end.

“I need to know, X,” Ava said quietly. “Are we going to do this?”

**Episode 3973**

**Greyson**

I stared at Elle in disbelief, wondering if I’d heard her correctly and hoping that I hadn’t.

“I’m sorry, you did *what*?” I asked.

Elle looked at me, a little sheepish. “I let Helix go,” she repeated.

“But *why*?” Cali asked, looking stunned.

Elle looked between Cali and me. She looked apologetic, like she didn’t want us to be upset with her. “I’m sorry, Greyson. I know it’s not what you wanted, but Helix promised he didn’t mean to do it. He said it was all a mistake and he was sorry.”

I let out a frustrated breath. “He probably said that to play on your sympathy, Elle. He tricked you. He just wanted to be released, and he would’ve said whatever it took.”

Elle’s composure broke for a moment. “He *used* me?”

“Yes, and now we have to resolve this before—”

There was a shout in the distance, followed by a laugh. Agitated, I looked around. I didn’t like anything that was happening at the moment, but I didn’t want to have this conversation out in the open where anyone could hear us, so I waved irritably. “Everyone, back to my tent. Come on, let’s move.”

I led the way, and everyone followed as we walked quickly out of the Vanguard encampment and back to the cluster of Redwood tents. When we were safely inside my tent, I pulled the flap shut and rounded on Elle.

“Helix has been attacking people. He *killed someone*. I know you care about your old pack mate, Elle, but you have to think about the consequences of your actions. He’s out there now, free to attack and kill others. And you two didn’t help matters, either,” I snapped, glaring at Aysel and Armin. “Why the fuck did you abandon your post?” Then I looked at Cali. “Who else knows about this?”

Cali shook her head, looking worried. “No one. Just the five of us, I think.”

I blew out a frustrated breath. “For now, anyway. It’s only a matter of time before the council finds out—all it’ll take is for Helix to strike again.”

“We should tell Dayton what’s going on,” Cali said.

Aysel rolled her eyes. “Dayton? That rude Nightshade Alpha?”

I ignored Aysel and responded to Cali’s comment. “I don’t know about bringing him back into this…”

“I know, I get that, but since Helix’s loyalty to Dayton is what’s making him so dangerous, Dayton has to bear some responsibility, right? I mean, he’s the one who turned him. Maybe Dayton’s own will—for Helix to *stop hurting people*—is enough.”

I rubbed my chin. “I guess so.”

I understood the point she was making. The responsibility she was talking about was the same responsibility I felt toward Elle—but at least Elle wasn’t running around killing people. No, she was just releasing murderers from lockup.

“Okay,” I said, turning to Aysel and Armin. “You two go back to your tents while I deal with this. And—obviously—if Helix shows up again, let me know.”

“Of course,” Armin said, nodding.

He looked sheepish about the part he’d played in the security failure, but Aysel—predictably—didn’t look the least bit guilty.

“I’ll be sure to let you know if I see any convicts running around,” she said breezily.

“But what should I tell the prince?” Armin asked, stopping me as I was about to lead Elle and Cali out of the tent and toward the Nightshade encampment to speak to Dayton. “He’s going to be furious with me for leaving my post.”

“This mess is partly Lucian’s fault,” I pointed out. “I don’t need any more help from the princeling on this.”

Armin tensed, clearly displeased to hear me refer to his boss so dismissively. “I have no choice but to inform the prince about what has happened with Helix.”

“You’d better,” Aysel warned. “Because he *will* find out about it, and if he finds out from someone else…” She trailed off, shaking her head in a threatening kind of way.

Armin took the hint, paled, and rushed out of the tent, clearly intent on making sure Lucian was apprised of the situation as soon as possible.

“Well, good luck on your little quest,” Aysel said, then she sauntered out of the tent after Armin.

I shook my head, feeling frustrated as hell. I wished I could contain this turn of events, but that didn’t seem possible. It was already spreading. Armin would tell Lucian, Lucian would tell someone else, and on and on, until the news was spreading through the summit like wildfire.

If it hadn’t been for Elle, I probably would’ve turned Helix over to the council when we’d caught him, and I wouldn’t have ended up dealing with any of this shit.

“Let’s go,” I muttered, and Cali, Elle, and I started walking toward the Nightshade tents.

“What do you think Dayton is going to do?” Cali wondered as we walked.

“What do you mean?” I asked curiously.

“About Helix. What do you think he’s going to do? He seemed genuinely confused when he found out what Helix had been up to,” she pointed out. “Is he going to be understanding of the situation, given that we know more now, or is he going to want it to just go away?”

I nodded. “I don’t know. You’re right though, he was confused. But being upset about something isn’t the same as taking responsibility and doing something to fix it.”

“True,” Cali muttered. She glanced at Elle, who was looking down at her feet as we walked, not saying a word.

*Are you worried about Elle?* Cali asked.

*Yeah*, I admitted. *I mean, I’ve never turned anyone before her. I don’t know what could happen now.*

The only person I’d ever even wanted to turn was Cali, but I’d never acted on it—I couldn’t. There was just too much risk. Even when Cali had asked—when she’d really wanted me to—I hadn’t been able to bring myself to do it. So, in the end, Elle had been my first turned werewolf.

*I know you were careful*, Cali said gently. *I know you didn’t just turn her because you thought it would be a fun thing to do. You did it because it was what the pack needed in order to stay safe. We needed to lead Dick away from our territory. And being turned is what Elle really wanted, too. Dayton, though…* She shook her head. *He was much more reckless when he turned Helix.*

She was right about that, and it darkened my thoughts as we drew closer to the Nightshade camp. When we reached it, I spotted Dayton immediately. He was sitting by a campfire with Geena and a couple of other Nightshade wolves, but he stood when he saw us approaching.

“Greyson,” he started warily, “what can I do—”

“We have a problem,” I snapped, cutting him off.

“We do?” he said, looking taken aback. “What kind of problem?”

“It’s about Helix.”

Dayton looked surprised. He glanced over at Geena, then at the other Nightshade wolves.

“Leave us,” he ordered the wolves. When they were gone and it was only him and Geena, he turned back to me. “What happened?”

“He’s gone,” I said flatly. “Elle set him free. He tricked her, and now he’s gone. No idea where he is.”

Dayton stared at me in disbelief, then turned on Elle. “You let him out? I can’t believe you did that! What were you think—”

“Don’t make this about her,” I snapped. “None of this would’ve happened if you hadn’t turned Helix.”

Dayton let out a frustrated snarl. “Oh, that is such—”

“Greyson’s right,” Geena said quietly. “We have to deal with this, Dayton.”

I was relieved to hear her speak like that. At least Geena seemed to have some sense and understood that a free-roaming Helix posed a real and present danger to all the packs here at the summit—even if Dayton was too stubborn to see it.

Dayton looked frustrated but resigned. “So, what the hell are we supposed to do?”

“I think we need to form a search party,” I said. “A small one. We have to be smart about this. Anything too large will draw the suspicion of the rest of the packs, and then it’ll only be a matter of time before the council takes notice.”

“So, who should go?” Dayton asked.

“Just me and you,” I said. “There’s no need for any of the other Alphas involved to join us.”

“What about Lucian?” Elle asked with a frown.

“What about him?” I asked shortly.

“He should go with you as well,” she said.

I looked over at Cali, who raised her eyebrows. Lucian was Elle’s mate, which meant that he was going to agree with Elle, and that had the potential to cause problems, given how strongly Elle felt about this matter.

But before I could say anything, Dayton spoke.

“Listen,” he said, clearing his throat. “I know this is my problem. I appreciate everyone’s help, but this is something the Nightshades should handle on our own. Geena and I can take care of Helix. He’s really not anyone else’s problem, and I’d hate it if the council found out what happened and punished us all for not reporting it.” He shook his head, looking frustrated and dejected. “I turned Helix, and he’s my responsibility. I have to go find him before he hurts anyone else.”

Elle stepped toward him. “And what are you going to do if you find him?”

**Episode 3974**

I tensed as Elle stepped toward Dayton. Dayton was unpredictable, but in that moment, I was more worried about Elle—I could hear the threat in her question.

Apparently, Greyson could, too, because he reached for Elle’s arm and tugged her back.

“Elle, it’s like I told you,” he said quietly. “What happens to Helix now depends on what Helix does. If he listens to Dayton—and listens to reason—then maybe we can work something out, okay?”

I flashed back to the moment Helix had attacked Xavier and felt myself shudder with fear. He’d been so vicious in that moment, so clearly bloodthirsty. There had been no mercy in that attack—he’d been out to kill. And the image of Evan’s bloodied body appeared in my mind whenever I closed my eyes. It felt like it was burned into place, and I couldn’t get rid of it.

“And what if Helix doesn’t listen to reason?” I asked quietly. “Or tricks us again the way he tricked Elle?”

Greyson looked at me, then at Dayton. No one said anything, and the silence lay heavy around us.

Finally, Dayton broke it. “Then,” he said with a sigh, “we’ll have no choice. We’ll have to kill him.”

Elle snarled dangerously and took another step toward him, but Dayton put up his hands to stop her.

“It’s not going to be up to me at that point,” he said firmly. “If Helix doesn’t stop, he could cause a pack war. Think about it. As it is, relations with the Northwind pack are already tense as hell. It wouldn’t be a stretch to imagine that if they found out who killed Evan, they would put the blame on my pack. And it wouldn’t take much for things to escalate from there.” Dayton looked at Greyson. “And if the Northwinds find out that the Redwoods knew about it all and didn’t say anything, that could be the start of a full-scale pack war.”

I swallowed hard. That sounded dark. One of the main reasons we’d come to the summit had been to *avoid* a pack war. But if Dayton was right, then everything Greyson had been working for here could disintegrate in moments. We were already on thin ice with the Bitterfangs. We didn’t need this, too…

Dayton seemed to be thinking along the same lines. “Everything would be gone, Greyson. All the alliances you’ve built would crumble.”

There was another long silence as we took this in. I could see Greyson thinking, processing the information. I knew this was hard for him. Whatever decision he made, he wouldn’t make it lightly.

*Dayton’s right*, I said.

*I know*, he said grimly.

I frowned. If Greyson knew that Dayton was right, then why was he hesitating?

And then it struck me. I looked at the wolf beside him, with the red hair and the blazing green eyes. It was Elle. *She* was holding him back. The sire bond was making him hesitate.

That wasn’t good.

*You need to do what’s right for the whole pack*, I reminded Greyson pointedly.

He glanced up at me and nodded. Then he looked over at Dayton. “I’m going to turn this over to you and Geena.”

“*Greyson*,” Elle said. “Please. You can’t let them do this.”

“Elle,” I said gently, putting my arm around her shoulders. “He’s the Alpha; he has to do what he thinks is right.”

She didn’t say anything after that, though she continued to look upset, and she pulled away from my embrace. I knew Elle wasn’t happy about it. I hoped it wouldn’t come to her worst fears either.

“If the Nightshades need any help, you know where to find us,” Greyson said.

Dayton nodded.

Greyson looked over at Elle and me. “Let’s go.”

As Elle and Greyson started back toward the Redwood tents, I hung back for a moment.

“Please do everything you can for Helix,” I said. “This isn’t all his fault.”

Dayton gave me a long look, then nodded wordlessly. That would have to be enough.

I turned away and caught up with Greyson, who had his arm around Elle. She was holding herself stiffly, and I watched as he leaned down to speak to her, probably trying to make her understand.

It was interesting to note that I didn’t feel jealous, seeing the two of them walking like that—seeing how close they were. There had been a time when I probably would’ve been, but not now. I knew the nature of the connection between them. Maybe not everyone believed in the sire bond, but—I had to admit—it sure explained a lot of things.

But there was something about seeing them together—and the conversation we’d just had with Dayton—that filled me with a different kind of unease.

I looked up into the sky, which was still an afternoon blue. But the sun was starting to set, falling fast behind the western hills. And that meant that soon, the Wolf Moon would rise.

I knew a lot of people didn’t believe it that, either, but… *Would* *it* affect the wolves here at the summit? Or was it just another myth?

I wished I had an answer to that question.

I caught up to Greyson and Elle, and we walked back to the Redwood tents in silence. When we got there, I spotted Lola, Jay, Artemis, Rishika, and Ravi gathered around the fire. They looked up as we approached.

Greyson bent and spoke to Elle again. She didn’t respond, though she did seem to listen. When he was finished talking, she disappeared into her tent.

I watched her go, thinking about how she’d helped Helix escape—*after* he’d confessed to murder. Was Elle really going to stay in her tent when she knew Dayton and Geena were out there, hunting Helix? I definitely wasn’t confident about that.

I stepped close to Greyson. “Do you think one of us should stay with Elle?”

He sighed, looking grave. “Probably,” he said, pushing a hand through his hair. He looked tired. “But if anyone’s going to stay with her, it should probably be me.”

I fought to keep my expression neutral. I wasn’t exactly surprised to hear him say this, but I also wasn’t happy about it.

He looked down at me and—as though reading my thoughts—added, “It’s not that you’re not capable of looking out for her, Cali. I know you are. You’ve proven yourself time and time again. But Elle’s my responsibility, and she listens to me. I’m her Alpha.”

That was true, but I didn’t think that was the only reason why Elle listened to Greyson.

“I’ve seen the connection between you two,” I said slowly.

“Cali,” Greyson started, but I held up my hand to forestall his protests.

“I’m not blaming you, Greyson. Or Elle. I’m just making an observation about what I’ve seen, and what I’ve seen is that there’s more to the way Elle listens to you than just a pack member’s loyalty to her Alpha.”

He frowned. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying…” I hesitated for a moment, then pushed on. “I’m scared about how the sire bond might affect the two of you.”

“Cali—”

“Think about it. We’ve seen what happened with Helix and Dayton, and we know Lucian’s worried about you and Elle because of it,” I pointed out.

Greyson was quiet for a moment as he studied my face. Then he cupped my chin in his hands. “You know that I love you.”

I stretched up onto my tiptoes and kissed him. “Of course I know that. I’m not doubting that you love me, Greyson. That isn’t what this is about. But you didn’t turn me. You turned Elle. Which means there are factors at play that could become dangerous if we’re not careful.”

Greyson’s expression darkened in a way that made me think I’d hit on something he’d been worried about as well.

“Don’t you think?” I pressed.

Finally, he nodded. “I’ve thought of that, too,” he admitted. “You saw how blindsided Dayton was by what Helix had done. He didn’t see it coming.” Greyson shook his head. “And if Helix was driven to kill because of his sire bond with Dayton, isn’t it possible that Elle could go down the same path?”

I hesitated for just a moment. “And isn’t it possible that you could do the same for Elle?”

Greyson looked startled by this. “What?”

“I’ve seen how protective you are of Elle, how defensive you can get about her. Like how you were acting with Dayton. What if that need to protect her became so strong that you…” I hesitated. “That you went too far?”

He frowned. “I doubt I would. I’m an Alpha, Cali, and I’ve been a werewolf for a long time. Much longer than Elle. And I wasn’t born a wild wolf.”

“That’s true,” I agreed. “But we have no idea if those facts are even relevant, where the sire bond is concerned.”

“I guess,” Greyson said warily. “So, what do you suggest?”

I thought for a moment. “Maybe we need to test your bond with Elle.”

**Episode 3975**

**Xavier**

*Are we going to do this?*

Honestly, I didn’t know *what* I was going to do. I felt like I was going to crawl out of my skin. I hated being pressured into making decisions—*any* decisions—and I especially didn’t want to be pressured into making a decision as important as one about my Luna. But I *had* promised Ava that I’d make my decision by the end of the summit. We were getting there, weren’t we?

Fuck. Why had I said that? What the hell had I been thinking when I’d kicked that can down the road? What miracle had I expected to occur by the end of the summit? A sign in the sky? A voice in my head telling me what to do?

Really, I knew *why* I’d done it. I’d been trying to placate Ava, to figure out something in the meantime before the end of the summit so I could get out of this. Well. That was going swimmingly for me, wasn’t it?

Other than Adéluce’s occasional—but very annoying—appearances, I wasn’t expecting anything like that. The bitch had to be downright gleeful with how things were currently going for me.

And I had to admit—if only to myself—that I was just putting off making an inevitable decision. I’d been naïve to think I could somehow prevent it. My hesitation had nothing to do with the council’s pressure campaign or even Leona’s warning. I’d run out of stalling time. I’d told Ava I would decide, and I couldn’t keep putting her off forever. She deserved better than that, in a way.

But—I gritted my teeth—would making her my Luna actually be the right thing for Ava? For the Samaras? For *me*? Even if I took Cali out of the equation—though I wasn’t sure that was actually possible—I had to acknowledge that I still felt ambivalent about making Ava my Luna.

I blew out a frustrated breath and looked down at her. She was still standing in front of me, waiting for me to answer her. Fucking hell.

As I stayed silent, her expression hardened. I watched as her eyes turned angry, though I could see that the anger was flecked with pain.

She let go of my face and took a step back. “Your hesitation makes your answer very clear, Xavier.”

And with that, she turned and stormed away.

“I’ll decide tonight,” I called. “By sundown.”

She stopped and slowly turned back, her expression wary. When I stepped toward her, she almost moved away, but seemed to force herself to stay still.

I put my hands on her shoulders. “I’m sorry, Ava. I know I’m making this more difficult than it should be. But we both know this decision should be made on our terms. And I want you to know that it will be. You deserve that, whatever my decision ends up being.”

Her dark gaze flicked over my face. “Fine,” she said shortly. “I’ll give you until sundown. Whatever. I don’t care. But you know as well as I do that you’re just making things worse by avoiding this, Xavier. By putting it off. You can move the timeline as many times as you want, but in the end, you’re going to have to decide one way or the other. You and I both know that.”

“I know,” I said sharply. “But you should also know that I’m dealing with a lot right now—”

“Then let me *help you*!” Ava burst out. “You don’t need to take on everything by yourself, X. You keep acting like you’re responsible for everything to do with this pack, and like no one cares as much as you do, and it’s really starting to piss me off. This is my pack, too—and haven’t I been there every goddamn step of the way?” Her eyes flashed angrily. “I won’t even wait for you to answer that question, because I *know* the answer. When are you going to acknowledge that?”

I opened my mouth—to say what, I wasn’t sure—but Ava moved first, surprising the hell out of me by grabbing my shirt and kissing me, hard.

The kiss shocked me, but after a split second, I realized that my whole body was responding to it, and I moved to wrap my arms around her and pull her body toward mine.

But she broke away from the kiss and stepped away from me. Her lips looked swollen, and she shook her head.

“If you do make me your Luna, will you start treating me like one?” She gave me a searching look. “I’m not sure you ever will.”

Her hair swished behind her as she turned and walked away.

As I watched her walk away, I considered going after her. My body was still humming from the kiss, and the sway of her hips called my name, but I stayed where I was. What more was there to say? Besides, there was a lot of truth to what she’d just said.

The idea of having Ava as my Luna would be different from the reality. Making Ava my Luna would destroy any hope I still had of returning to Cali. If there was anyone who understood the significance of becoming a Luna, it was Caliana Hart.

But Greyson had chosen Joss, and Cali had eventually accepted his decision.

Then again, Ava definitely wasn’t Joss. Joss had never been Greyson’s mate, and Ava was mine. Making Ava my Luna was different, and I knew it. Cali would know it, too.

As I turned and headed back toward the Samara tents, I glanced up at the setting sun. It was just at the top of the western hills, about to drop down below their ridges.

How the hell was I supposed to make this decision?

As I drew closer to camp, I spotted Knox. He was putting the final stake in the corner of his tent while Blaine and Zipper stood back and watched. The other two’s tents were already finished.

In spite of everything, I smiled to myself. I hadn’t really needed to make Knox move the tents, but I’d been pissed off after my conversation with Leona, and hell, why *not* make Knox and his little buddies work a little harder? A little sweat wasn’t going to hurt them.

I supposed I should’ve been above that kind of pettiness now that I was an Alpha, but the shrimp needed to be put in his place.

Actually, that reminded me—I needed to address the whole Samara delegation about the Knox, Blaine, and Zipper deal. They needed to know what was going on.

“Geraint,” I called, “would you gather everyone together? There’s something I need to say.”

Geraint nodded and started sticking his head into tents, calling people out.

As Ava stepped out of her tent, I hoped to hell she hadn’t assumed I was about to make the Luna announcement. Her face was blank as she took her place with the others near the fire.

I looked around at the gathered delegation—Marissa, Jesse, Donovan, Josephine, Geraint, and the three douchebags, Knox, Blaine, and Zipper. They were all looking at me expectantly.

“Well, as you probably know by now, the council has put us in a difficult position,” I said. “I understand that more than a few of you resent the council’s decision to add these three to the pack.” I tipped my chin toward Knox, Blaine, and Zipper.

Zipper at least had the sense to look uncomfortable.

“If we were all Rogues,” I went on, “we could have told the council to go to hell. But we’re not—we’re the Samara pack. But I want to make something clear.” I turned to the three idiots with an icy stare. “You may now be Samaras in name, but until you’ve proven yourselves, you will be looked down upon as the lowest of the low. You will do everything asked of you without hesitation or a single word of complaint. You need to earn your place in this pack. Belonging is not a gift the council is free to give—even if they believe otherwise. Any questions?”

There was a ringing silence, cut only by the wind as it whipped through the camp.

I raised an eyebrow. “Good. Then we all understand each other.”

I was about to turn away when Blaine took a jerky step forward, a strained, menacing look on his face. He was growling in the back of his throat. Did he want to challenge me? Really? He’d been a handful back when Knox had been Alpha, so my guess was that he didn’t like being told he was essentially gum on the bottom of my shoe.

I was about to react when Ava stepped forward. She slipped between us, facing Blaine, her small frame solid as steel in front of his hulking body. And when she spoke, the sound was like frost-covered steel.

“I would think very carefully about what you’re about to do.”

**Episode 3976**

Greyson looked at me, confused. “I’m not sure I know what you mean. How could we test my bond with Elle?”

“I don’t know, but there could be something that might help determine if there could be a problem,” I said.

Greyson shook his head. “There isn’t a problem, Cali. I’m not about to murder the next person who looks at Elle sideways. Come on. I’m not out of control. And I don’t think Elle is, either.”

“No, I know you’re not. You’re, like, the most *in*-control person I know. And I love Elle, but, like Helix, she’s a born wolf. And Helix’s wild behavior seemed to come out of nowhere, so how do we really know that something might not try to overtake you—”

“Okay, okay,” Greyson said, holding up his hand. “Say we were actually considering this—what kind of test did you have in mind?”

This stopped me for a moment. “I don’t know, exactly. I mean, there has to be something we could try, right?”

“I don’t know,” he said, shrugging. “Maybe not. Not everyone believes that the sire bond even exists.” He shook his head. “Anyway, I have a few more pressing matters to deal with. I know what you’re saying, love,” he added when I opened my mouth to protest. “It would be great to find out if the bond was real or not, but as far as I know, that test simply doesn’t exist.”

“We can ask around, though, can’t we?” I pressed. “We don’t know of a test, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t one.”

Greyson raised his eyebrows. “I don’t think so. Asking around the summit about a sire bond test probably isn’t the best idea. It’s bound to raise a lot of uncomfortable questions that none of us want to answer.”

I frowned, feeling disappointed, though he was probably right about that part.

“I guess we could ask Big Mac,” I said dispiritedly. “She knows a lot about that kind of stuff, and she wouldn’t tell anyone.”

Greyson’s expression softened, and he gave me a small smile. “As much as I’d like to do that with you, I just can’t let myself get pulled into it. Not right now.”

“Greyson—”

“I don’t want to discount your concerns, and I’m not trying to, but there’s just too much for me to deal with right now.” He put his hands on my shoulders and looked into my eyes. “I promise, if I notice any changes in myself, or if I start acting irrationally—or if Elle does something strange or dangerous—then I promise you, I’ll reconsider. Is that okay?”

I sighed. “I don’t want to make things harder for you,” I told him. I thought it over. “I won’t pursue it any further. For now,” I added, raising an eyebrow.

He smiled. “I know you, Cali, and I know you’re not about to drop this. But I can’t worry about your tenacity at the moment—I still have to deal with Elle.”

“How so?” I asked.

Greyson glanced in the direction of Elle’s tent. “I know the thing with Helix really upset her.”

“Do you think she’s going to go out looking for him?” I asked.

“I hope not,” Greyson said slowly. “I should go find her. If I’m there with her, she’ll listen to my instructions and stick around here.”

“So, what are you going to do?” I asked. “You’re not going to put her under lock and key, then?”

Greyson laughed, clearly surprised. “No, though I doubt I’d be able to hold her, even if I tried.” He looked back at Elle’s tent again and frowned. “She was just so upset about Helix being held captive—it wouldn’t be fair to lock her up. She’s done nothing wrong. No, I’m just going to make sure she stays by my side until Helix is—well…” He chose his words carefully. “Until Helix has been dealtwith.”

I swallowed hard. I could hear the implication of his words. Dayton had made it pretty clear that if Helix became a problem, he would be eliminated.

I felt my stomach clench with worry. “I hope it doesn’t come to that,” I said. “For Elle’s sake.”

He nodded. “I’m going to go talk to her,” he said, turning away.

“Hang on,” I said, grabbing his arm and holding him back. “Maybe I should go.”

“You? Why?” Greyson asked.

“Maybe I could be there for her better,” I said. “Woman to woman.”

Greyson gave me a long look. “I hope you’re not offering to talk to Elle because you’re worried about this sire bond thing.”

“No, of course not,” I said quickly. “I’m offering because I think I’d be better at this than you. I can be more sensitive—though I do want to ask her a few questions about how the Wolf Moon might be affecting her.”

“That’s fine,” Greyson said warily. “You can talk to her; I don’t have a problem with that. But I do want to warn you—if she refuses to listen to me and won’t stick around, then I’m going to have to take over.”

“Well, let’s just hope it doesn’t come to that,” I said, suddenly worried.

I walked over to Elle’s tent and stood outside for a moment.

“Elle!” I called, announcing myself. “Can I come in? I just want to talk.”

This was met with silence. The quiet stretched for so long that I started to worry that she’d slipped out and gone after Helix.

But then a moment later, the tent flap whipped open, and Elle stood there, looking at me. After a long moment, she stepped back and let me enter her tent.

I stepped inside and, when I turned, found Elle looking at me, waiting for me to speak.

I cleared my throat. “Hey, how are you feeling?”

“How do you think?” she asked.

I winced. “Right, sorry. I just mean, I know this is difficult. I’m here for you, Elle—I hope you know that.”

She nodded. “I know.”

We stood in silence for a moment. Then I cleared my throat again. “There’s something else, too. Greyson wants you to stick with him for the time being,” I began. “He wants to keep an eye on you for a bit.”

She didn’t argue. She didn’t say anything. Even in the darkness of the tent, I could see that she didn’t look happy. She looked anxious and angry and scared. I was sure she was thinking about Helix, which I understood. I couldn’t imagine what it would be like, knowing there was a chance your friend was about to die.

“None of us want to harm Helix,” I said. “Dayton and Geena will do all they can—I know they will.”

Elle nodded. “Yes. We’ll see.”

I hesitated. I wasn’t sure how to bring up the bond problem, so I decided to start out vague. “Elle, how are you feeling about Greyson?”

Her brows drew down. “What?”

“Like, have you been feeling any differently about him, lately?”

This didn’t seem to clear things up. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Have you… been feeling closerto him, lately?” I tried.

Elle narrowed her eyes. “Greyson is my Alpha. I always feel close to him.”

“Right, yeah. But have you felt *closer* than usual?” I asked. “Like in the last twenty-four hours or so?”

Elle gave me an intense look. “Why are you asking me all this, Cali?”

I sighed, figuring I might as well stop beating around the bush. “I was just wondering if the Wolf Moon might be having an effect on bonds—mate or otherwise.”

“Why would it?” Elle asked.

I shook my head. It was clear I wasn’t going to get anywhere asking Elle about this. Either she was unaware of the potential effects of the Wolf Moon, or she was just too worried about Helix to care.

“Forget it,” I said, waving my hand. “Hey, speaking of bonds, I heard that you mind linked with Lucian. That’s a big deal.”

To my surprise, Elle’s frown only deepened.

“Are you trying to distract me, Cali? So I won’t run after Helix?” she demanded.

“What? Elle, why would you—”

“Or are you here to tell me about all the things Lucian has done that are so horrible?” she asked. “Because I know already. I don’t need them repeated to me, not right now.”

“That’s not what I was trying to do,” I insisted. “No, I just heard about you and Lucian, and I wanted to know more about what was going on—”

I stopped talking again, but it wasn’t Elle who’d cut me off this time. Someone had started shouting just outside, and my heart lurched into a sprint.

I hurried out of the tent, Elle on my heels.

There were people everywhere, milling around in front of the bonfire, drinking and throwing back their heads to howl up at the darkening sky. I looked around in confusion. I barely recognized anyone. The crowd looked like a mix of all the summit packs.

“What’s going on?” I asked a guy who was passing by with a six-pack of beer.

“*What’s going on?*” The guy looked over at me with a wide grin. “It’s the Wolf Moon party!”

**Episode 3977**

**Xavier**

I felt myself tense. I didn’t know what Blaine was going to do, but I’d be damned if I let him take out his anger on Ava. I was about to pull her back behind me, but Knox spoke before I could move.

“Blaine, enough,” he said, his voice quiet but sharp.

Blaine hesitated for a moment, like a dog who’d been called. He moved his glare from Ava to me, then stepped back to stand next to Knox.

I eyed the shrimp. The little guy clearly still wielded some power with his pals. That was interesting, and it had the potential to be either useful or dangerous.

I suddenly heard wolves howling in the distance, and I glanced up to see that the sky was growing darker. It had to be the packs getting pumped up for the Wolf Moon party. There was always a party to celebrate the Wolf Moon.

I turned to my pack. “I want you all to enjoy the party tonight, but you’re all Samaras—remember to act like it.” I turned to the three thorns in my side. “Especially you three.”

None of them responded to that.

I glanced at the others. “Keep your eyes on them. Let me know if they get out of line.”

The Samaras nodded, and everyone started walking toward the source of the music and the howling.

I stepped in front of Blaine before he could follow the group.

“You’re lucky,” I said quietly. He looked up at me, clearly surprised. “But luck doesn’t last. And the next time you decide to threaten me or my mate, your luck will run out. You got me?”

Blaine looked at me but didn’t respond, and after a beat of tense silence, Zipper grabbed his arm and pulled him away.

Ava was standing behind him, looking at me intensely. I looked up at the sky. The sun was nearly gone, but there were still a few streaks of light, which meant I still had some time before sunset.

“Thanks for stepping in back there,” I said to her, “but it really wasn’t necessary. Blaine would never be able to hurt me.”

“That’s not the point,” she said sharply. “When the Alpha is threatened, he must be defended. I’m just pissed that I was the only one who stepped up.” She shook her head. “We have our work cut out for us to get the pack ready to be able to hold its own in the alliance.”

“That’s true,” I admitted, “but we might be closer than you think.”

She looked at me a moment longer, and it looked like she was wrestling with something. Finally, she reached out and took my hand. “We should go to the party. Together. It will help the pack.”

I didn’t pull my hand away. Not only was she right—we did need to arrive together, as a show of unity—but her hand felt good in mine. I twined my fingers through hers, and we started walking toward where a low bass beat was pumping loud enough to make the earth vibrate under our feet.

The party had already started to take shape—dozens of kegs were being set up, and Big Mac’s moonshine tent was open for business. Great—that meant that there were going to be a *lot* of drunk werewolves stumbling around the campground.

A few wolves had already shifted and were running around outside the sea of tents, playing some kind of game of tag.

I shook my head. Truthfully, I would’ve preferred to be anywhere else, but Ava was right. We needed to be here, or—more accurately—to be *seen* here.

Cesaries was near the moonshine tent, speaking with Mace, when he caught my eye. He raised an eyebrow meaningfully. I wanted to tell him to mind his own fucking business, but—again—that would be a bad move for the pack, so I bit my tongue. If ever there was a moment to be political, this was it.

Gripping Ava’s hand tightly, I led her over to the moonshine tent. Cesaries looked as though he was nearly salivating with pleasure by the time we reached him.

“It’s nice to see you two here,” he said, grinning widely. “And together, too. Shall I take this as a sign of what’s to come?”

I would’ve loved to have smacked the grin right off his face, but instead I gripped Ava’s hand even tighter. “You’ll have your answer by sundown.”

Cesaries lit up like a damn Christmas tree. “Excellent!” he bellowed. “Then we will truly have something to celebrate!”

I stepped away, thinking I couldn’t get away from the guy fast enough.

Ava fell into step at my side, but her gaze was dark when she looked up at me. “You told him that he would get his answer, Xavier.”

I looked down at her. “What?”

“You said that Cesaries would get *his* answer at sunset.” She shook her head. “Don’t forget that what *he* wants and expects doesn’t matter. This is our question, not his.”

“You will,” I said. “Don’t worry about that.” Then I smiled at her. If nothing else, it was clear that Ava wouldn’t be intimidated by Cesaries—or anyone else. That was a good quality in a Luna, and something I needed to take into account as the ice I stood on continued to thin.

Jay was standing near a bonfire, and he nodded when he caught my eye.

As I always did when I saw him now, I felt a pang of regret. I couldn’t believe I’d even considered hurting Jay. No matter what I’d gone through in the past, I’d always been able to count on Jay’s support and friendship. He’d never been afraid to call me out on bullshit when he saw it, but he’d always had my back, too.

His friendship was one more thing Adéluce had taken from me. I wanted it back. One more reason why I wanted to squeeze the life out of the vampire-witch with my bare hands.

I stopped and took a deep breath.

“Xavier?” Ava said. “You okay?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Fine. Why don’t you go get a drink? I’ll come find you in a minute.”

Ava still looked a little wary, but she nodded and moved away.

I stepped toward Jay, hoping he wouldn’t leave immediately.

“You want to grab a beer?” I asked him.

Jay looked surprised for a moment, but then his expression changed. I’d known Jay for a long time, and I could see in an instant that he was torn.

I shook my head, immediately realizing that I’d put him in a compromising position. Most of the Redwoods had turned on me—and with good reason. “Look, just forget it—”

“Sure,” Jay said with a shrug, cutting me off.

“Oh. Okay,” I said, caught off-guard.

Jay and I walked over to the kegs, where a Blue Blood wolf handed us each a red plastic cup. Foam spilled over the sides as we took them, and we stood for a moment in awkward silence.

“How’s it been going?” I asked. The question felt fake as hell, but I felt like I had to say something. I needed to break the ice, somehow.

Jay shrugged again, then glanced over at a small knot of Samaras, who were standing with Ava, getting drinks. “Fine. How about you?” He took a drink of foamy beer. “You’ve had some pretty big changes, huh?”

I nodded, hating the strain between us. I couldn’t remember us ever having to force conversation. But, then again, I’d never considered knocking Jay out before, so yeah, Jay was right—there *had* been a lot of changes. And Adéluce had been responsible for all of them. She’d changed everything in my life, altering the landscape like a fucking bomb.

“Yeah, I’m still adjusting,” I admitted.

I took a sip of the beer, getting nothing but a mouthful of foam. I wanted to ask how Cali was, but I felt like that was a line I shouldn’t cross. Plus, who knew how Adéluce would take that question?

“That guy sure looks like he’s not crazy about you.”

I followed Jay’s gaze and saw Blaine glowering at me. He was standing next to Zipper, glaring like he was being paid to do it.

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, I’m not too concerned about him. But, to be honest, most of the pack still doesn’t know quite what to make of me. The only person I can really trust is Ava.”

Jay snorted. “Who would’ve thought I’d ever hear you saying that?” he muttered, almost to himself.

That was fair. I scanned the assembled Samaras, thinking about the truth of my words. Aside from Ava, there really *was* no one else I could trust. There were people I could look to for support, but there was no one like Jay—no one I could confide in.

Then an idea hit me.

I turned to Jay. “Would you ever consider joining the Samara pack?”

**Episode 3978**

“What do you think of this?” Lola asked, holding up a cropped sweater and a pair of tight pants. “For the Wolf Moon party?”

I gave the outfit a critical once-over. Lola’s outfit choices were always a little on the extreme side for my tastes. And even though I’d become a lot more comfortable with my body recently, I still wasn’t sure I wanted to go out in public in the outfit Lola had chosen.

“Um, are you sure about that?” I asked hesitantly. “For me?”

Lola glared. “Are you questioning me again?” She pushed the clothes toward me. “Just put this on, and you’ll be the finest Luna babe *ever*.”

“I’m not even sure that’s something I want to be,” I started, but Lola cut me off.

“Trust me. You are going to look hot as hell in this,” she insisted.

“I’m not sure about that, either,” I said. I held up the black leather pants. “And how am I supposed to fit into these, anyway?”

“Have faith. They stretch,” Lola assured me. “You’ll see—just pull them on.”

With a sigh I dropped my jeans, and together Lola and I yanked the leather pants up over my hips.

“See,” Lola said victoriously, pointing me toward the mirror.

I looked into the mirror. Now that the pants were on, I had to admit—they did look hot. They hugged my every curve and made my legs look longer than I’d ever seen them.

“And they’re pleather, so they’ll keep you warm *and* looking hot, all at the same time!” Lola declared.

I rolled my eyes but laughed and took the charcoal-grey cropped sweater she handed me.

“I’m still not sure about these boots,” I said, pulling them on. “I still think I’m going to trip.”

“Relax,” Lola said, waving a dismissive hand. “You’re going to be fine.”

I wasn’t sure, but when I walked out of the tent, Greyson took one look at me and stopped in his tracks. His gaze dropped down, then scanned slowly upward, taking everything in.

I smiled to myself.

“Wow,” Greyson said, stepping toward me and pulling me close. “You look incredible, love.”

He pressed a kiss to my lips, and I felt my face start to burn, almost like I was embarrassed. I wasn’t used to being in clothes like this… But that was absurd—there was no reason for me to be ashamed or embarrassed about anything.

So, I stretched up onto my tiptoes so I could whisper in his ear. “Is it the Wolf Moon, or are you just happy to see me?”

Greyson burst out laughing. He wrapped his arm more tightly around me and kissed me again. “I’m always happy to see you, love, Wolf Moon or not,” he murmured against my lips. “And I’ll prove that to you later when I get to peel you out of those pants.”

My heart beat faster at the thought.

Greyson bent to kiss me again, but he stopped when Elle appeared at his shoulder. She was wearing snug jeans and a chunky sweater the same color as her eyes. I recognized it as Lola’s and realized that I wasn’t the only pack member she’d helped dress for the party. Elle was wearing her hair down, and it rippled down her back in its natural waves. She looked stunning, of course.

I stepped away from Greyson. I wasn’t going to make out with him in front of Elle.

Wait—was Elle going to be spending the night with us in our tent? I knew Greyson wanted to keep an eye on her so she didn’t run off after Helix, but how far was he planning on taking that? Because right now, it felt like it was the other way around, and Elle was watching *us*. And I wasn’t thrilled with that idea. Even if the Wolf Moon was nothing but another full moon, I wanted to spend it with Greyson. *Alone*.

*Do you think Lola or one of the others could keep an eye on Elle tonight?* I asked Greyson.

*Let’s not worry about that right now*, he said. *I’ll figure something out.*

He looked around. “Is everyone ready for this party?”

“Let’s do this!” Ravi yelled up at the sky.

The party seemed to be centered on a space one campsite over, but there were wolves everywhere.

“Does anyone know where Jay is?” Lola asked.

I glanced around, but I didn’t see him. “Nope.”

“I need a drink,” she muttered. “I’m so thirsty.”

I gave her a sideways glance. “Thirsty *how*, exactly?”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I mean, there’s thirsty-thirsty, vampire-thirsty, and, like, sexy-thirsty. So, which one are you?” I asked warily. I couldn’t help but notice that Lola seemed to be operating on level ten tonight. She was bouncing on the balls of her feet like she was too amped up to stand still. It reminded me of when she’d been swept up in the vampire heat. Yet another Wolf Moon effect?

Lola rolled her eyes at me. “I’m regular thirsty. I need a drink, but not a beer. That’s too boring for me. But”—she gave me a smile and a sly wink—“I might feel thirsty in the other ways you mentioned later tonight.”

I frowned. I hoped Lola was joking—at least about feeling thirsty for blood—but honestly, it was hard to tell.

“Let’s head over,” Greyson called, nodding toward the bonfire where the other packs had gathered.

It wasn’t far, and as we approached, I could see that Blue Blood wolves were manning the kegs, which had to mean that they were hosting the party.

“It’s good to see that Mace and the Blue Bloods are in charge tonight,” I murmured to Greyson.

“What do you mean?” he said, looking around.

“With them hosting, at least we can count on this being a regular party. Not a sex-fest with snacks, like the parties Duke and Paige throw,” I said.

Greyson laughed. “That’s true, but it is kind of a shame.”

I frowned. “What’s a shame?”

“You just look so hot tonight,” he said, and his hand on my waist drifted slowly downward until it rested on the curve of my ass. “You could have all the wolf boys howling for you.”

I rolled my eyes but smiled as we approached Mace.

“Great party,” I told him.

Mace looked pleased. “Thanks, but I didn’t have much to do with it. Maren and Spencer are the ones you should be praising.”

Maren—who was standing next to Mace with a drink in her hand—shook her head. “I barely did a thing. It was all Spencer.”

I looked over to where Spencer was standing. I’d had the chance to briefly meet her the other day. She was nice. Currently, she was working on what looked like a photo booth setup, with a selfie stick and a box of silly costumes and props.

“That looks like fun,” I said.

“I have to admit,” Mace said, lowering his voice, “I wasn’t crazy about the idea of co-hosting this thing with the Ironwoods.”

As one, we all looked over at Wade—the giant Alpha, as I kept calling him to try to keep track of all these Alphas I kept briefly meeting—who was standing at the food table. He was carefully arranging plates of snacks and piles of napkins with his giant hands.

“Wade insisted on being in charge of the food,” Maren explained. “He wanted to make sure there was regular-sized food, and lots of it.”

That made me laugh. Maren laughed, too, and when I saw the way her smile lit up her face, I was hit by how freaking weird this situation really was. Here I was, having a light, regular conversation with Greyson’s ex-girlfriend—a Dark Fae who was now dating another werewolf Alpha. And then there was Greyson, playing chaperone to Elle, the natural wolf he’d turned into a werewolf.

It was weird. It was all weird.

I glanced up and finally spotted Jay. He was over near the kegs, talking to Xavier, which was *also* weird. I’d thought Jay was pissed at Xavier.

My eyes continued to wander, taking in the party. The sky was growing darker by the moment, and the wolves were being typically wild as the bonfire grew taller and burned hotter. The Blue Bloods had provided a dozen kegs of beer, but I wondered if it was going to be enough.

On the far side of the bonfire, I caught sight of Malakai and Honora and the rest of the Bitterfang pack.

Great. Who the hell had invited *them*? Probably no one, to be fair—no one was ever *invited* to parties like this; they simply started, and wolves just showed up. Wolves gravitated toward parties like moths to a flame.

“Greyson! Mace!”

I looked up to see Cesaries striding toward us. He was flanked by two more members of the council, and all three of them were smiling broadly at Greyson and Mace.

“Cesaries,” Greyson said mildly, nodding in greeting.

“I notice that most of the Alphas are here. That’s very good, Mace,” Cesaries said. “In fact, I’ve seen everyone except Dayton. Do you know where he is?”

**Episode 3979**

**Xavier**

Jay was quiet in the wake of my question. I couldn’t blame him for that—I was sure he hadn’t been expecting it. I hadn’t expected to *ask* it, if I was being honest. But I was still on edge as I waited for his answer. I didn’t know what my friend was going to say—or if I could even call him my friend anymore.

I’d surprised myself by asking him to join the Samara pack, but I didn’t regret it. I wanted Jay with me. I wanted someone I trusted by my side.

“Listen, Xavier,” Jay started hesitantly. “I—”

I didn’t like the sound of that, so I cut him off. “Hey, you don’t have to give me an answer right now.”

I wanted Jay to answer—I *needed* him to answer—but, at the same time, I didn’t think I’d be able to deal with a rejection.

“I know it’s been a weird time, and that some of my choices have been confusing, but I trust you, man, and I hope you can still trust me,” I said. “Or, at least, I hope that the trust you once had might be salvageable. I just want you to think about it, okay? Because there’s absolutely a place for you and Lola in the Samara pack.”

Jay took a thoughtful sip of beer and nodded. “Okay, thanks. I appreciate the offer. And—yeah, you’re right. I have been confused about your decisions. All of them, actually. And why you’ve been so cold to Cali and the rest of us.”

I felt myself tense, and my walls shot right back up. I knew I couldn’t talk about this with anyone—least of all Jay—so I just shook my head.

“Why *have* you been so cruel to Cali?” Jay pressed. “I mean, she’s your mate, regardless of whether you’re with Ava now.” He gave me a long look. “She’s your mate, and she doesn’t deserve what you’ve been doing to her.”

He seemed to expect an answer, but I didn’t have one to give him. I looked away, out at the party, which was raging around us.

Jay made a frustrated noise. “If I were treating Lola the way you’ve been treating Cali, wouldn’t you knock some sense into me? I’d hope you would, man. That’s what friends do.”

He was right. That was exactly the kind of thing Jay and I always used to do for each other. But what could I even communicate to my friend about the situation I was in? Adéluce didn’t let me say much of anything without serious consequences—for me *and* for Cali. I could try to test the limits of what she’d let me say, but I didn’t want to risk it. Not when Cali was on the line.

“I’m not here to talk about Cali,” I said shortly, turning back to Jay. “I’m asking you about the pack. Just think about what I said, okay?”  
 Jay looked at me for a moment, then nodded, took a sip of his beer, and walked away.

I sighed. A moment later, Ava walked over to me.

“What was that about?” she asked, nodding after Jay’s retreating figure.

I shrugged, feeling a new weight on my shoulders as I did. “Nothing. Just trying to mend some fences.”

Ava gave me a curious look. “Did it work?”

I looked over at Jay. “I have no idea.”

Ava took a sip of her beer and looked out at the party, her dark eyes scanning the crowd. “Knox seems to be enjoying himself.”

I followed her gaze to a small knot of wolves. Knox was in the center of them, along with Blaine and Zipper, of course. Those three were like conjoined triplets. Knox was laughing hard, holding a red cup in each hand and guzzling from each one in turn, cheered on by his idiot friends.

I rolled my eyes. “Maybe I didn’t make myself clear,” I muttered and strode over to where they were standing. “What the hell are you three doing?” I snapped.

Knox, Blaine, and Zipper looked over at me, surprised. There was a small part of me that wanted one of them to take the bait and try something. To come at me or pull some shit—I was frustrated and mad and spoiling for a fight, and it would’ve been fantastic to take out some of that anger on one of them.

But the other part of me—the more logical part—knew we were surrounded by the rest of the packs, and if any of these three did anything, it would make my pack look bad. And if my pack looked bad, *I* looked bad.

But Knox just shrugged. “We’re just having a good time,” he said petulantly. “Is that a problem?”

I narrowed my eyes. “I thought my speech earlier regarding your place in this pack was clear.” I looked at the three of them. “Am I remembering that wrong?”

Knox snorted. “Are you serious? We’re at a party, Xavier. We just want to have fun like everyone else.”

“Oh, you think you’re like everyone else? See, that’s a problem,” I said, shaking my head. “You still don’t get it. You’re *not* like everyone else. Not at all.”

Knox glanced at Zipper and Blaine, then back at me. “What do you mean?”

“What I told you earlier, if you’d listen. You don’t have any rights around here, man,” I said coldly. “Not yet. Not until you earn them.”

Knox’s hackles went up. “Hey, you know, I stepped up when I needed to. When Blaine almost lost his shit, I did what I needed to do.”

*Maybe you should ease up on the leash a little*, Ava said.

I looked at her in shock. *Are you seriously taking their side?*

She gave a half-shrug. *They’ve been in jail for a long time, X. They haven’t had a chance to blow off any steam or socialize or just be free. Maybe you should give them a break.*

I ground my teeth. *They don’t deserve a break, Ava. If anything, they deserve to be broken.*

She raised an eyebrow. *Okay. It’s your call, X. I’ll back you up, whatever you do. But if you want their allegiance in the long run, you need to think long term, and sometimes it helps to give a little back.*

Reluctantly, I let the truth of her words sink in, then turned back to Knox.

“Just watch yourselves tonight,” I said, my voice a warning. “Because if you or the idiot twins cause any problems, there will be hell to pay. You got me?”

The three of them nodded.

“We got you,” Knox muttered, turning away.

I turned back to Ava. “Happy?”

She raised an eyebrow. “This isn’t about my happiness, Xavier. A good Alpha has to be firm but fair. Those three have been trouble in the past, but I think if you can get them to accept their place in the pack and be loyal to you, they’ll be loyal forever. They’re idiots, but they’re young, and they could be trained to be assets to the pack. That’s a win for everyone.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “Yeah, you’re probably right about that—though I’d still like to rip Blaine’s throat out for what he did earlier.”

I blew out a breath and looked absently around. I happened to glance over toward where the Redwoods were gathered, and for a moment, my eyes locked with Cali’s. It was like being electrocuted, and I turned quickly away.

*Fuck.*

Pain surged through me, and my heart pounded in my chest. I needed to get it together. I needed to be able to look Cali in the eye without reacting like I’d just been stabbed in the gut. It was only going to make her suspicious. Worse—it could be dangerous for her. And it wasn’t fair to Ava.

I glanced at her. She was looking out at the Samaras, taking everyone in. It was hard to hide anything from Ava for long. If she hadn’t noticed this time, she would next time.

I cleared my throat, trying to slow the rapid beating of my heart.

“I wonder who Paige and Duke are going to hit on next,” I said, nodding toward the Alpha and Luna as they threaded their way through the party. They were in the midst of hundreds of actual werewolves, but somehow their predatory wolfishness managed to stand out. “We could make it a drinking game.”

“I’m not sure I can afford to get that drunk,” she said, laughing. But then she suddenly stopped. “Heads up, Greyson’s coming over.”

Surprised, I looked up. I’d last seen Greyson standing with Cesaries and Cali, but now he was making his way through the crowd toward me, Elle by his side.

Seeing his face triggered something in me, and my omnipresent anger surged.

“What the hell does he want?” I muttered.

“No idea,” Ava said quietly.

I set my jaw as he drew closer. He probably wanted to tell me off, or order me to do something for him. Well, tough luck. He wasn’t my Alpha anymore—not that I’d done much listening to him when he was.

Greyson stopped in front of me. “Xavier. I need your help.”

**Episode 3980**

**Greyson**

“No.”

I stared at Xavier, taken aback. “What?”

He shook his head. “No. I’m not interested, man.”

I glared at him. “You don’t even know what I’m going to ask.”

“And I don’t care,” he said. “Your problems aren’t mine anymore, and I have enough of my own.”

“*Xavier*,” I started, my voice a warning, but he wasn’t listening. “I—”

“In case you forgot,” he said, cutting me off, “you’re not my fucking Alpha anymore. Go order someone else around. Like her,” he said, nodding toward Elle.

“Leave Elle out of this,” I said. “Is this what you want? Is this really what it’s come down to?”

I still just couldn’t believe that Xavier had done such a complete one-eighty. He’d always been an asshole, but he’d become completely irrational. I’d been right about him settling into his role as the Samara Alpha a little too quickly. The power must have gone to his head. I opened my mouth to say something about that, but I changed my mind. What the hell was the point?

“Forget it,” I muttered.

Xavier smirked. “I already have.”

“What do you need help with?”

I’d started to turn away, but I stopped when Ava spoke. I looked at her, then at Xavier, who looked surprised himself. Judging by the look on his face, it appeared that he still had a few things to work out with his other mate.

“Helix,” I said.

“Not my problem,” Xavier said, shaking his head. “If you had listened to me before, you wouldn’t even have a Helix problem, because there would be no Helix.”

Elle made a strangled noise in her throat and opened her mouth to protest.

“Hang on,” I said, putting my hand on her arm. I turned back to Ava. “Is that what you think, too?”

She shrugged, her face impassive. “I agree with Xavier. I only asked because I was curious.”

I blew out a frustrated breath and turned to Elle. “Let’s go. This was a waste of time.”

“You got that right,” Xavier said as we walked away.

“Fuck,” I muttered as we headed back toward the Redwood group. I shook my head as anger made my pulse pound in my ears. I didn’t know what the hell I’d been expecting. I had to stop thinking that I could rely on Xavier—that he was capable of doing the right thing.

Elle put her hand on my arm. “Greyson.”

I looked down at her. “What’s up?”

“You should let me do it.”

I frowned at her. “Let you do *what*?”

“I should be the one to look for Helix and Dayton.” She looked up at me earnestly. “You don’t need Xavier, you need me. I’m the best tracker you have.”

“*Elle*,” I said, and it sounded a little like a curse. I looked around, grabbed her arm, and led her into the closest vacant tent. “Inside.”

We stepped into the small tent, and when the flap closed, it blocked out most of the loud music and laughter from the party, making the dim space feel strangely quiet and cocoon-like.

I took a deep breath, trying to collect myself before I spoke. I was pissed at Xavier, and I didn’t want to take my anger out on Elle, but I did want to make her understand the seriousness of what we were talking about.

“Listen to me,” I said. “I know you care about Helix, but there’s no way I’m going to let you get further involved in whatever the hell is going on here.”

“Greyson—”

“Elle, don’t you understand that if you keep wading into this, it’s only going to come back and bite you?” I demanded. I pointed to the tent flap, indicating the party beyond. “I’m not going to let them do anything to you. I made a promise to your father, and I intend to keep that promise for as long as I live. I intend to keep you *safe*. But I can’t do that if you keep running off and trying to get into trouble. I get that Helix is your friend, but I am your Alpha now. I don’t want to have to pull rank on you, Elle, but I will if you force my hand. Do you hear me?”

Elle’s eyes were wide as she looked up at me, and she nodded slowly. “I hear you, Greyson, and I understand what you’re saying.”

“Do you?” I asked, frustration still coursing through me.

“Of course I do. I know that it might seem like Helix is testing my loyalty, especially since he played on it earlier, but I can promise you one thing.” She swallowed hard and looked up at me, her eyes bright in the dim light of the tent. “You are my Alpha.”

I gave Elle a long, hard look. I wanted to believe her, and I knew she *wanted* to mean what she said, but I also knew to take her words with a large grain of salt. She’d said similar things to me before, and yet here we were. Again.

I knew this wasn’t easy for Elle, and I was trying to be sympathetic. I knew she was torn between her feelings and loyalty for Helix and her loyalty to me and the pack. All I could do was hope that she was listening now—at least for the time being.

I scrubbed at my jaw, thinking hard. If we could just make it through the night without Elle running off in search of Dayton or Helix and causing more problems, I would take that as a win.

So I nodded. “Okay. Let’s go back to the party.”

I pulled the tent flap aside so she could pass through, and we stepped back out into the dark golden light of sunset. There were bonfires burning every few feet and werewolves from every pack milling around, laughing and drinking and calling to each other. The party had only just begun, but it was clearly in full swing, which didn’t surprise me. It never took long for a werewolf party to take off.

As we stepped back into the chaos, I spotted Lucian striding toward us. When he stopped in front of us, he ignored me completely, like I was nothing but a spare tent pole, and gathered Elle into his arms.

“I’ve been looking for you everywhere, my little forest rose.” He pulled her close and kissed her temple, bending her back over his arm as he did.

I nearly gagged at the sight, and Elle must have felt similarly, because she pushed Lucian away and stepped back, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

I couldn’t help but smile at the cool rejection and the look of abject confusion on the princeling’s face. I’d have bet good money that that kind of thing didn’t happen to him often.

His mouth opened and closed in shock. “My darling Elle—have I offended thee?” he asked, his confusion apparently turning him into a Shakespearian swain.

Elle didn’t answer, so I had to stifle my laughter to provide some insight.

“It’s possible she’s just not in the mood, man,” I said.

Lucian didn’t appear to appreciate this, and he glared at me. “I don’t recall asking for your opinion, Greyson Evers.”

The most sympathetic part of me wondered if I should leave the two of them alone to work out the communication confusion they were having, but I really didn’t see how that was going to be possible. Despite her big promises, I wanted to make sure Elle didn’t run off to track Helix or Dayton—and besides, I still really hated that Lucian and Elle were mates, and I wasn’t interested in easing their path.

I looked at Elle, who was looking at Lucian. I wondered if they were mind linking.

“We should get going,” I said, taking Elle’s arm, but Lucian grabbed for her hand.

“Excuse me,” he said loftily, “but I think I have a right to speak to my mate.”

I *really* didn’t like that—maybe because it was true, and maybe because I just didn’t like to hear it spoken out loud.

“I think *you* have a right to go to hell,” I snapped. Where the hell did Lucian get off saying this shit? “We have to go. We have pack matters to deal with.”

Lucian bristled. “She is my mate, and I will lay claim to her time when I—”

“I can speak for myself,” Elle said, interrupting us both. “I don’t need either of you to do it for me.”

Lucian and I stopped speaking and looked over at her.

“I’m sick of both of you treating me like I can’t make decisions,” she said. “I’m perfectly capable of doing it, and you need to let me.”

I shook my head. “Sorry, Elle. Of course. You’re right.”

Lucian cleared his throat, looking slightly embarrassed. “Forgive me, my darling. But I heard that Greyson has been keeping you under his watch, and it irks me so.”

“Why?” she asked, raising an eyebrow. “He’s my Alpha. It’s his job to protect members of his pack.”

Lucian looked over at me, grimacing. “But since I am your mate, *I* should be the one to help protect you.” He raised an eyebrow. “Do you have a problem with that, Greyson?”

# **Episode 3981**

I stood back and watched Greyson, Elle, and Lucian’s conversation unfold. It really didn’t seem like things were going well—which, with that trio involved, wasn’t so surprising. Greyson and Lucian almost always butted heads, especially where Elle was involved.

I started to head over to see how I could help. This Helix situation wasn’t Greyson’s problem to deal with alone. It was a pack problem, and I was supposed to be the Luna. Plus, it would probably help to have someone with a little more distance from Elle weighing in. Seeing as how Lucian was her mate and Greyson was her sire, I wasn’t sure things would ever get better between those three.

I was halfway to the arguing group when Lola grabbed my arm. “Ugh. I saw the way Xavier looked at you—why is he being such a dick?”

*I wish I knew.*

I shook my head. “He didn’t even have the guts to look at me. He turned away.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m talking about. What gives? I get that you two broke up and he’s with Ava now, but since you keep running into each other here at the summit, and we’re supposed to be allies with the Samaras, you’d think he’d at least show a little courtesy. You know, just, like, an ounce of basic decency. Is that really so much to ask?”

I agreed with everything Lola was saying, but I’d learned firsthand—the hard way—that asking *anything* of Xavier was asking too much. And that certainly included basic courtesy. It hurt like hell to admit it to myself, but it was the truth.

I forced myself to shrug. “He’s going to do what he’s going to do. It’s not my business.”

Maybe if I played it down long enough, it’d stop killing me inside to be around him when he was determined to act so horribly. I’d hoped to move past feeling this way, since he’d made it abundantly clear that he didn’t want me. And then we’d had that strange, charged moment right after Helix had attacked him.

I didn’t know what to make of any of it. It was so confusing. I wanted to move on, I really did, but Xavier was making it impossible. Every time he did something like that—something that made it seem like he cared, even just a little bit—it reminded me of what I’d lost. What we’d had before everything had gone so wrong so fast.

Now I was the one who couldn’t look over at the Samaras. Tears stung the corners of my eyes. Would it ever stop hurting so badly? Would I ever be able to move on from him? He was still my mate, even though he didn’t want me anymore, even though he’d apparently chosen Ava. Our bond was still intact. Would it fade with time? Would Greyson eventually be the only one I was connected to in that way?

The thought made my heart lurch. I loved Greyson, and I knew I’d be a mess without him, but it just felt so wrong to imagine my mate bond with Xavier disappearing. For us to not be together in any way.

And yet that was exactly what he wanted, wasn’t it? And sooner or later, I’d have to learn to accept it.

*Pull yourself together, Cali*. *Don’t let this consume you, not right now. This is supposed to be a celebration. Don’t be a buzzkill.*

I cleared my throat. “Do you know what Xavier and Jay were talking about?”

Lola shook her head. “No idea, but Xavier had better have apologized for everything. Not that Jay should forgive him, but Xavier should at least make the effort.” She scanned the crowd. “I’m worried that Jay’s more upset about Xavier leaving than he’s letting on.”

I knew exactly what that felt like.

“Cali! Lola!”

We looked over to see Artemis standing by the lawn games.

“Let’s play cornhole!” she shouted. “Have a little inter-pack competition. What do you think?”

Lola grinned. “I’m in.” She glanced at me as she dragged me over to Artemis. “Don’t you remember playing this back in Minnesota?”

I did. It was a fun, simple game, but I’d had no idea werewolves played it.

Lola moved faster, her grip on my arm like steel as she yanked me through the crowd.

“Woah. What’s the rush?” I asked.

“I’m excited to play!”

By the time Lola and I arrived, Rishika and Artemis had teamed up and set up the boards.

Artemis pressed a set of bean bags into my hand. “You and Lola versus Rishika and me. First to twenty-one wins, and the losing team has to take a shot of moonshine.”

I groaned and glanced at Lola. “We’d better not lose. I’ve had enough moonshine to last me for a *long* time.”

Lola nodded, her gaze on Artemis. She was really taking this seriously. “Fair enough. But first, let’s do a practice round.”

She grabbed one of the bean bags out of my hand and stood in front of the target: a long, polished board raised at an angle, with a hole in the center near the top. It wasn’t far away, maybe five feet or so. Even for a human, it wasn’t much of a challenge. For Lola, Artemis, and Rishika, it’d be a breeze.

Lola’s eyes narrowed on the board, and she whipped the bag toward the hole. It smacked into the lower end of the board so hard the board split down the middle.

I gasped.

“What the hell, Lola?” Rishika demanded. “We can’t play if you break the damn thing.”

“Sorry.” Lola shrugged. “Guess I was a little overexcited.”

Rishika scoffed. “You think?”

Artemis and Rishika did their best to fix the board.

“All right, Cali, you’re up,” Artemis said. “Try not to murder it.”

I took my practice shot. The bean bag slid up the board and into the hole. I cheered. “Three points!”

“Well done,” Artemis said. “But the pressure will be on once we start playing for real.”

“I think I can handle it,” I said with a grin. “Lola, on the other hand…”

I looked over at my friend, who was so eager to throw the bean bag again that she was bouncing on her toes.

“How about you take a deep breath before you go again?” I suggested.

She shrugged. “Can I help it if I was born a natural competitor?”

Rishika and Artemis took their practice shots, and the real game began.

While Rishika got ready to throw, Jay sidled up to us. “You two winning yet?” he asked Lola.

She smiled. “Not yet. But soon.”

He nodded but didn’t seem very interested in watching the game unfold.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah.” He gave me a very forced-looking smile. “For sure.”

“What did Xavier have to say to you?” Lola asked.

Jay was suddenly very interested in the tree line. “Uh, he asked me to join the Samara pack.”

“*What?*” Lola snarled. For a second, it looked like her fangs had come out. “What the *fuck*? He’s such a traitor, trying to poach our best people! I hope you told him where he could shove his invitation.”

I winced. I didn’t want to paint Xavier as a traitor, but it was more than a little shocking to hear he was trying to recruit Redwood pack members.

*He’s just so far gone, now…*

“For what it’s worth, he wants you to join, too,” Jay told Lola. “But, of course, I turned him down.”

Lola didn’t seem to be listening. She grabbed a cornhole bag and began to stomp over to where the Samara pack was gathered.

I grabbed her arm. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?”

“Honestly? I have no idea,” I said. “But I’m a little worried about your plans for that bean bag.”

Lola smirked. “I’m just going to deliver a message to Xavier.”

“With a bean bag?” I asked. “Lola, don’t. Let’s not make this situation worse.”

“Fine,” she grumbled.

As I steered her back toward our game, I glanced over at the Samaras—and accidentally made eye contact with Ava.

*Ugh*. *She might be the only person on the planet I don’t want to look at* more *than Xavier.*

Back at the cornhole game, Rishika made a bullseye. “Three points!”

I wasn’t surprised. With her athleticism, this game was never going to be hard for her. Hopefully Lola’s abilities as a hybrid would help make up for my comparatively mediocre strength and accuracy.

Lola stepped up to take her turn, her lips curled into a snarl. As she pulled her arm back to make her throw, she squeezed the back so tightly it exploded, sending dried corn everywhere.

Jay and I exchanged a wide-eyed look.

“Stupid, poorly-made bag,” Lola cursed. She grabbed another one, and just as she was about to hurl it toward the board, Jay caught her wrist and pulled her into a kiss.

Lola whipped the bag out, missing the target completely. It exploded on the ground—right at Honora’s feet.

I grimaced. *This is just getting better and better.*

“Jay! Why’d you distract me?” Lola demanded.

I tensed as Honora looked down at the shredded fabric and dried corn, then fixed her cold gaze on Lola before advancing toward us.

Artemis glared at her. “Who invited you?”

She ignored my sister and picked up a bean bag before looking at me and smiling coldly. “How about we raise the stakes?”

# **Episode 3982**

**Greyson**

Fucking *Lucian.* I meant what I’d said to Elle earlier. This had nothing to do with the sire bond. I was just trying to protect her from the council, which was something I’d have done for any member of my pack. I wasn’t trying to protect her because of the so-called sire bond. Whether or not we even had one was irrelevant to this situation.

The reality was, if the council found out what Helix had done, and that Elle had helped him escape, she’d probably be charged as a traitor and put to death. And I wasn’t going to let that happen. All I wanted was to keep her out of harm’s way.

Lucian, on the other hand, was clearly just trying to get on Elle’s good side in order to lure her into his pack—and probably his bed. It was fucking sickening. They might’ve been mates, but he didn’t actually *care* about her. He didn’t see her as a person. All he wanted was for Elle to embody his dream of what the Vanguard Luna would be.

I’d never really trusted Lucian—after the shady shit he’d pulled with Cali, I knew I never would. But it was just egregious that he couldn’t even be sincere when his own alleged mate was involved. It only went to show how untrustworthy Lucian really was.

“You’re being overprotective of her,” Lucian said, sneering. “Weren’t you listening? She wants to make her own decisions, and you’re not letting her. And she’s *my* mate.”

The undercurrent of ownership in his voice made my vision go red.

“Elle’s her own fucking person,” I snarled.

“And I am *not* going to be watched! And you’re *both* acting like I’m just a thing to be managed.” Brows knitted with fury, Elle turned on her heel and started marching toward the Redwood delegation.

I sighed. “Elle, wait. Hold on.”

Her steps didn’t miss a beat. “Don’t worry!” she called over her shoulder. “I’ll be with Ravi. I’m sure he can *watch* me just as well as either of you but with much less condescension.”

Fucking great. This was exactly what I’d been trying to avoid.

Lucian rounded on me. “This is all your fault.”

My brows rose. “I beg your pardon?”

“If you would just leave us alone, none of this would have happened. We’re mates. We don’t need your permission to be together, so just butt out—”

I snorted. “When hell freezes over.”

“You are *unbelievable*.” Lucian shook his head. “I’ve tried to go about this the gentlemanly way. I’ve tried to be respectful of the bond you and Elle share—”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, give me a break. You’ve been inserting yourself into her life and Redwood affairs since the moment you saw her. You know why I don’t trust you? Because you’re incapable of setting your own selfishness aside for a single goddamn minute. I’ll ‘leave you alone’ when you stop trying to manipulate Elle the way you tried to do to Cali.”

“Manipulate her?” If Lucian had looked angry before, now he looked absolutely furious. “My love for Elle is pure! She is the light of my life, and all I want is her happiness.”

“And the Oscar goes to…” I muttered.

Aysel swept in with a scowl. “Are you two seriously at it again? Right here, where anyone can see?” She flung out her arms to indicate the Wolf Moon party, only about twenty feet away. “How do you think this looks for our alliance? Do you really think anyone is going to want to back you two when you’re at each other’s throats all the time? If I can see it, you can bet the others can, too.”

I scoffed and shook my head. Aysel could lecture me all she wanted, but there was no way in hell I was going to take any shit from her—especially not when this was her fault. “Seriously? You want to play it that way? Fine—if Armin hadn’t been… *distracted*, then none of this would be happening. So maybe you should get down from that high horse before you hurt yourself.”

“Don’t you dare denigrate Armin!” Lucian snapped. “He’s proven himself to be a loyal foot soldier for the Vanguard pack.”

“If you really think that, maybe you should take a closer look at where Armin’s feet have been taking him,” I said.

Lucian frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Aysel winced. “Greyson, don’t—”

“When Armin left his post and was soldiering away with Aysel, Helix escaped,” I said, giving Lucian a meaningful look. Aysel was the one who’d butted into this. If she didn’t want to be involved, she should have stayed quiet.

Lucian turned to Aysel, incredulous. “Is this true, my sweet sister? You were *cavorting* with Armin?”

Aysel shrugged. “I was bored.”

Lucian cursed and shook his head. “Must you seduce every one of my assistants?”

“You say that like I actually had to work at it.” She smirked. “It didn’t take much.”

“My word, you are *unbelievable*,” Lucian burst out. “I’m trying to run a pack, to show our strength to everyone here at the summit, and you… you’re…”

She raised a brow. “I’m what, brother?”

He grimaced. “You’re… *not helping!*”

*My work here is done.*

I left the two of them to their bickering. There was no way in hell I was getting involved in this sibling spat. I was pretty sure I’d made my point with Lucian, though only time would tell. In the meantime, though, I owed Elle an apology. I’d never meant to imply that she was some sort of object, and I knew Cali would be upset that I’d made Elle feel that way.

But Cali also knew what was at stake, and that we had to keep Elle close to protect the pack. And to protect Elle, too. She was loved and supported in the Redwood pack. If she were to join the Vanguards, I had no doubt that its members would always put Lucian’s preferences and feelings ahead of hers. For now, the Redwood pack was the best place for Elle to be.

Hopefully soon, Geena and Dayton would have some good news for us. Then Elle wouldn’t have a reason to run off again.

And as for Lucian…

I sighed. I’d probably have to accept the idea of him and Elle as a couple at some point, but not today. I’d never accept it until I knew for sure that Elle was in the relationship for the right reasons, which meant not using it as a political tool for the Redwoods. Especially when I was asking her *not* to. Even if Lucian were the most trustworthy Alpha in the world, I’d never want Elle to feel like she had to be with someone she didn’t want for the sake of the pack.

I spotted Cali with Lola, Artemis, and Rishika at the cornhole game and stopped short. *Is she talking to* Honora*?*

I immediately changed direction, hoping to put a pin in whatever the hell they were talking about, but then I ran smack into someone.

“Oof!”

“Sorry.”

I steadied the person before they hit the ground and realized I’d run into Maren. A bag of ice lay at our feet. She must have dropped it when we’d collided.

“Shit, sorry,” I said again.

We both dropped down to pick up the bag, and our hands met. We both froze, our eyes locked, then yanked our hands back.

“Sorry,” I repeated.

I was like a broken record. Also, this was beyond awkward. Apologizing for accidentally touching hands when we used to hold hands—and do a lot more than that… Was that really where we were now?

I grabbed the bag and straightened. “Can I carry this somewhere for you?”

The bag really wasn’t that heavy. Maren had probably handled it just fine before I’d plowed into her. But we hadn’t had a chance to talk much since the summit had begun.

“Sure.” She smiled and led the way.

“How are you enjoying your first werewolf summit?” I asked. “Is it all it’s cracked up to be?”

Maren nudged me with her elbow and raised a brow. “Really? Small talk? Are you going to ask me about the weather next?”

I laughed. “Yeah… This is awkward. How’s Fenrir?”

She smiled. “He’s doing well. He asks a lot of questions about werewolves and Fae.”

I smiled back, but it felt forced. I wished I could help answer some of the boy’s questions. Another awkward silence slipped in between us.

“You know,” Maren began, “I wish you’d been honest with me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ever since Mace and I started dating, you’ve been acting strangely,” she said. “If it bothered you, you should have said so at the beginning.”

I frowned. “Would it have mattered?”

“Honestly? I don’t know. But it does make me wonder…” She paused for a moment, taking a breath. “Are you not okay with me seeing Mace?”

# **Episode 3983**

I narrowed my eyes at Honora. *Raise the stakes? What’s she talking about?*

I was genuinely afraid to ask, and I also had zero interest in playing any kind of game with her, regardless of how “high” the stakes might be. But given the way she was looking at me, with all that serial killer determination in her eyes, I got the distinct impression that I needed to play along.

“Um… What do you mean?” I forced myself to ask.

Honora hefted the bean bag in her hand. “We play a round, and the loser is sacrificed to the Wolf Moon.”

I blinked. “I beg your what?”

She laughed, tossing the bag up into the air again. Her movements were almost too fast for my eyes to track. “You silly Fae think you know this world, that you can play Luna, you can get all dressed up and come to our sacred events, but you will never be one of us.” Her lips curled into a sneer. “Leave it to a Fae to become a *due destini* mate—all you do is seduce our wolves and make them less honorable. And what happens next? You give birth to mongrels.”

Fury pulsed in my veins, but my brain seemed to have short-circuited in response to all the shitty things I’d just heard. It was like an entire internet comment section had just spilled out of her mouth, all at once. I felt like I’d just been slapped. I had… no response to any of it.

*Is this Honora getting back at me for our conversation at the Ludis match? When I insinuated that she’s the reason Julia is “dead”?*

But then I realized Honora’s reason for treating me this way was irrelevant. There was no excuse for it, and in the end, I had to stand up for myself regardless. I couldn’t just be a doormat to this lady. For one thing, she’d never stop. She’d take advantage of anything she considered a sign of weakness. For another, I would never be able to respect myself for letting her treat me like this. Honora would probably never respect me either way, but the least I could do was stand my ground like I had last time. It seemed to be the only kind of strength she recognized.

I straightened my shoulders. “Well, I’d rather be a… What did you call me? Ah, yes, a two-timing Fae harlot than a werewolf who drives her own daughter from her pack.”

Honora’s mouth firmed into a thin line, and her eye twitched.

*Ooh, I struck a nerve. Is this the part where she loses her shit and tries to kill me?* I tried not to visibly gulp. I’d assumed that the whole “trying to kill me” part of things would fall to Malakai, but maybe I’d underestimated the depth of Honora’s hatred for me.

Fortunately, Rishika and Artemis stepped between us before things could escalate any further.

“I think you should leave,” Artemis said to Honora.

“We can play another time,” Rishika added.

Honora held my gaze as she dropped the cornhole bag. “Fine. I can tell when I’m not wanted.”

With that, the Bitterfang Luna walked away. Once she’d disappeared into the crowd, I finally felt like I could breathe again.

Naturally, Lola was the first one to break the silence that had settled around us. “What the hell was *that*?”

She lunged forward, grabbed a bean bag, and pulled her arm back to hurl it at Honora, but I caught her arm.

“Lola, no!” I burst out. “What the hell? Are you *trying* to start a pack war?”

My friend shrugged, not the least bit repentant. “The bitch deserves it.”

“No!” I snapped. “I mean, maybe—but a bit of name calling isn’t worth starting a war over.”

Artemis frowned after Honora. “I don’t have any idea what that was about, but I don’t like it.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know either.”

I still felt shaken by the whole encounter, though I was trying not to. Honora hadn’t been anything more than her usual unhinged self. But still…

“I can’t believe I just did that,” I said. It was one thing to defend myself against all those horrible things she’d said, but I’d practically rubbed Julia’s “death” in her face. Again. “It’s going to come back to bite me in the ass later, isn’t it?”

Artemis smiled. “It was badass. Risky, but badass.”

I considered my sister’s perspective. My usual instinct would’ve been to run to Greyson or Xavier for help with Honora—at least, before Xavier had started hating me. Instead, I’d held my ground and taken care of it myself. Just like a true Luna.

If nothing else, that was something to be proud of.

“That’s not the first loaded conversation I’ve had with Honora,” I admitted. “I think she wants me to admit that our pack killed Julia.”

Rishika, Lola, and my sister all gaped at me.

“But…” Rishika said, trailing off meaningfully.

I nodded. “I know. This whole thing is a mess. From what I’ve gathered, Honora wasn’t going to win mother of the year anytime soon, but they’re clearly still holding us responsible. I don’t think they actually care about Julia so much as they feel we’ve offended their pack.”

“Wow. How maternal,” Artemis deadpanned.

“I know,” I said. “But getting back at us for the offense we’ve caused is just as important to the Bitterfangs as avenging a daughter’s death might be to someone else. It’s a disaster waiting to happen. They can’t hurt us right now, but I really don’t know what’s going to happen when the summit ends.”

“Well, the good news is, we have our new alliances,” Artemis said.

*Yeah, as long as nobody finds out who killed Evan. Or that we hid the killer’s identity from everyone. Or that a Redwood pack member helped him escape.*

The more I thought about it, the more likely it seemed that we were very, very screwed.

Artemis threw an arm around my shoulders. “Don’t worry about any of that right now, okay? Greyson will figure out what to do for the pack.”

I was sure she was right, but I kind of wanted to be the one to figure out a way to help the pack for once. Still, there were just so many things to take into account—things Greyson understood better than I did. Not because I was less capable, but because he was a werewolf, and he’d lived in the werewolf world his entire life.

*Greyson told me we’d face the Bitterfangs together—maybe we can figure out the Helix problem together, too.*

Lola grimaced. “I need something stronger than frat boy beer.”

“I can grab you a drink,” Jay offered. “I think the Ironwoods are making dark and stormies.”

“No, I’m not in the mood for a rum drink. I want moonshine.” She grabbed my arm. “Come on. Let’s go hit up Big Mac.”

She didn’t give me a chance to argue before she started dragging me toward Big Mac’s Moonshinorium.

Just like before, when she’d pulled me over to the cornhole boards, Lola was moving like someone had lit a fire under her. I didn’t understand where this urgency was coming from, and I dug my heels in to try to slow her down.

“Whoa. Lola, is everything okay?”

“Of course it is.” She didn’t break her stride. “I just need a drink… Or two. Why do you ask?”

“You’re just acting a little hyper.”

She flashed me a grin. “Don’t worry about me. I’m just getting into the Wolf Moon spirit.”

Somehow, that didn’t comfort me.

We entered Big Mac’s tent and found a couple of Bitterfangs finishing up their purchase. I swallowed nervously when I saw them, but did my best to stand back and ignore them. They had the right to buy moonshine too, plus every purchase was more money for Big Mac and Mrs. Smith’s wedding.

The Bitterfang wolves threw us dirty looks over their shoulders, and Lola bristled.

“What are you looking at?” she snapped.

“Hey!” Big Mac snapped. “Keep it civil, all of you, or I’ll turn you into possums.”

The Bitterfangs finished up their purchase and left the tent pretty quickly after that.

Lola stepped up to the counter and ordered a couple of shots. Then she turned to me. “You want anything, Cali?”

“I don’t need a shot. I’m not drinking moonshine tonight,” I said, shaking my head.

Lola scoffed. “Uh, the two shots are for me.”

Of course they were.

I met Big Mac’s eyes. “Have any of your customers been acting kind of weird tonight?”

The witch shrugged. “They’re wolves. You’re going to have to be more specific.”

Lola glared at her.

“I guess I’m just worried the Wolf Moon is going to affect the werewolves,” I said. “But that’s just a superstition, right?”

Big Mac slammed the two shots down in front of Lola. “Do you think the werewolves will be the only ones affected? If so, you’re wrong. Dead wrong.”

# **Episode 3984**

**Greyson**

For a moment, I just stared at Maren, completely blindsided. Where was this coming from?

“I… I thought I made it clear that I have no problem with you and Mace,” I finally managed to say.

“Well, yes, you *said* that, but did you really mean it?”

*Does it really matter?* I wanted to ask. If I was being honest with myself, I wasn’t exactly thrilled to see my ex-girlfriend with Mace, even though I was with Cali now and had moved on. Maren had, too. And that was kind of the point, wasn’t it? She was living her life on her own terms, and I didn’t get a say in who she dated. My opinion didn’t matter—so why was she even asking me for it? This was like Elle with Lucian, wasn’t it?

No, this was Maren. I’d *dated* Maren. Once been in *love* with her. It wasn’t the same situation.

“Greyson?” she pressed. “Please, be honest.”

I sighed. “I mean, I’ll admit I had my reservations, but your relationship is none of my business. And, for what it’s worth, I do think Mace is a great guy. But my opinion shouldn’t matter. I did appreciate that Mace checked in with me before asking you out—but again, this isn’t my business, and you guys don’t need my permission.”

Maren reached out and rested a hand on my shoulder, and I found I didn’t really mind the simple touch. It reminded me of how we used to be, back when we were madly in love. Before things had gotten too complicated and I’d left. Before I’d met Cali and Maren had met Fenrir’s dad and had a kid. It felt like a lifetime ago.

I snapped myself out of it. It *had been* another life. And all the feelings connected to it were better left in the past—which was exactly why I was trying to keep my nose out of Maren and Mace’s affairs.

“I’m happy for you both,” I said carefully, “and I wish you the best.”

“And I appreciate that,” Maren said evenly, “but you’re still not giving me a direct answer. Come on, Greyson. We used to be so close. We could tell each other anything. I miss that.”

There were a million reasons why Maren and I weren’t close anymore, not the least of which was that we were no longer romantically involved. Our lives had gone in different directions, and we’d moved on to other people. I wasn’t asking Maren to weigh in on my relationship with Cali, or how it made her feel, so why did she need this from me?

“I just want you to be honest with me right now,” she said. “That’s all I’m asking.”

I forced a polite smile. The problem was, I didn’t know how to answer that. Logically, Maren should’ve been able to see whoever she wanted, and it shouldn’t have bothered me. But there *was* something there. Something I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

*Am I jealous?*

No, that didn’t seem right. We’d been apart for so long now, and I loved Cali with all my heart. *She* was the one I was supposed to be with. And Maren had a son with Aiden. But… something still felt off. It was *sort of* like jealousy, as if our relationship remained unresolved, even after all this time—a loose end that needed tying up.

I thought back to when I’d been in New Orleans. Specifically, to the hallucination I’d had—or maybe it had been a dream—in which I’d been happily married to Maren, and Fenrir had been our son. It had been a cruel trick by Odette, but the fact that the dream had the power to affect me at all—even hurt me a bit, once I’d realized none of it was real—probably meant there was more to my feelings for Maren than just platonic fondness.

I just didn’t have the first idea of what the hell to do with that. The idea of being married and having a child… They were both things I wanted, but with Cali. And now that Xavier seemed to have stepped away from Cali and the Redwood pack altogether, the last obstacle was out of the way. Nothing was stopping me from fulfilling my dream—*with Cali.*

So why the hell was I having these feelings toward Maren? Why now? And why was she pushing me for an answer I didn’t know how to give her?

At this point, I had more questions swirling around in my head than certainties. But Maren had shown vulnerability in coming to ask me all this, so it’d be a dick move to answer her question with one of my own. If nothing else, she deserved a direct answer.

I gently removed her hand from my shoulder. “I’m glad you and Mace have found each other, and I have no problem with it.”

Her gaze flicked down to my hand, which still held hers, and then her gaze locked with mine again. “Are you sure about that?”

I released her hand. Was that *doubt* I heard in her voice? Was she doubting her feelings for Mace? Or was she just doubting that I was telling the truth?

“Why wouldn’t I be?” I asked.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “This must all seem so out of left field. I’m just asking because I’ve… I’ve been feeling things, and I’m not sure what to make of them.”

“Feeling things?” I repeated. “For Mace? Or… for me?”

It was probably stupid to ask, to pull on this thread at all. But I couldn’t stop myself—just like I hadn’t been able to stop myself from dreaming about Maren, about that fake future with her. Maybe I wasn’t the only one feeling some nagging, unresolved emotions from the past.

“I really like Mace,” she said after a beat. “I want to give our relationship a shot, and he’s been so good to Fenrir. But I also don’t want these unresolved feelings between you and me—whatever they are—to get in the way. Does that make sense?”

“It does,” I said carefully.

I didn’t know how much of what I was feeling to reveal. What would be the point, anyway? We weren’t together anymore. We both wanted to move on with other people. Why go down that road when it couldn’t lead anywhere good?

The packs were starting to gather en masse for the Wolf Moon party. I glanced around over Maren’s shoulder, looking for Cali. She wasn’t with Honora anymore, which could only be a good thing, but the rest of the Redwoods were still over by the lawn games. Cali wasn’t with them.

I wasn’t worried, necessarily. The summit’s no violence rule was pretty powerful, all things considered. And it wasn’t like Cali could have been abducted with so many Redwood pack members around her. But I still wanted to find her. When the Wolf Moon rose, I wanted to experience it with her by my side. Plus, after this uncomfortable chat with Maren, I wanted to go spend time with the woman I’d chosen. My mate. It couldn’t hurt to reaffirm my choices to myself, get my head out of the past, out of a future I didn’t want anymore.

Everything I needed was here, in the present.

As I scanned the crowd, I noticed Mace approaching us and turned back to Maren. “I get where you’re coming from. I want to keep our friendship, and not just because I care about you, but because I’d still like to be a part of Fenrir’s life in whatever way you allow. The fact is, we’ll always care about each other. I don’t know if being at the summit, seeing the proof that we’ve both moved on, is what’s behind these feelings, but I hope we can still be there for each other.”

Maren smiled. “I would like that, too.”

Relief rushed through me. I meant everything I’d said about caring about her and Fenrir, and wanting to be part of the boy’s life. It was absolutely her call who she allowed to hang around her son, and I’d accept whatever she wanted where he was concerned. But I was glad that she was willing to be my friend, and to allow me to be Fenrir’s friend—even if there was nothing romantic between us anymore, and never would be again.

“Maren, I’ve been looking for you.” Mace smiled at her, then glanced at me. His gaze dropped down to the bag of ice in my hands. “Is everything okay?”

I took one last look at Maren, then forced a smile, shoved the bag of ice into Mace’s arms, and slapped him on the back. “I was just thanking Maren for hosting the party.”

Hopefully Mace wouldn’t question things further. Whatever was going on between Maren and me, he had nothing to worry about—I’d make sure of it. And it wasn’t his business, anyway.

“Have you seen Cali around?” I asked him.

Mace shook his head. “Not recently. But I suggest you get your pack rounded up—the Wolf Moon will be rising soon.”

# **Episode 3985**

**Ava**

I watched Xavier as he mingled with our pack. He was brooding. Again. Which, all things considered, wasn’t exactly unusual. It was his default setting, really, and I’d more than grown used to it. Even when we were younger, before Silas and the pack war, back when things between us were easy, he’d had a tendency to brood.

Honestly, I thought it was kind of sexy.

I just hoped that if he was unhappy about something, it had to do with whatever he and Jay had talked about and not the Luna decision that was being forced on us. I was tired of being a source of unhappiness in Xavier’s life, and after all the progress we’d made in the past few days, I was hoping to leave that dynamic behind.

If I was being honest, I wasn’t exactly thrilled about the council pushing the Luna ceremony on us, either. Of course I wanted it. I wanted it more than anything else—ever since we were first mated, all I’d ever wanted was to be Xavier’s Luna. But not like this. Not as an order to be fulfilled to appease the council.

The only way it could’ve been worse was if I’d been the one pushing him into it. So at least I had that comfort, and things weren’t quite that bad. In a perfect world, Xavier would choose me to be his Luna without reservation, and not just because it was the right thing to do for the pack. I’d been the glue keeping the pack together since it had eventually reformed after my brother’s death—throughout the Knox debacle and the search for the right Alpha, I’d been its only real constant. I deserved to be the Samara Luna. I’d more than earned the position, and Xavier—along with everyone else familiar with the Samara pack—knew it just as well as I did. If he chose someone else, it would weaken his position, his claim as Alpha. If he chose me, then we would continue to be the strong united team we’d been since Xavier had taken charge.

But that wasn’t enough. That wasn’t why I wanted him to choose me. Our roles in the pack aside, the council aside, I wanted Xavier to choose me because he *wanted* me to be his Luna. I wanted him to choose me because I was his mate, and he loved me.

It felt like a foolish thing to hope for, even now, but there was no denying that it was what I wanted. That Xavier and the bright future we’d lost were what I wanted.

I’d wanted him back from the first moment I’d returned from the spirit world. I’d known that the odds were stacked against us—we’d hurt each other so badly—but it hadn’t been until I’d actively tried to reconcile with him that I’d realized just how difficult it was going to be.

But I’d never let that deter me.

I’d stayed close. I’d proven myself trustworthy. I’d let him feel the things he needed to feel, until eventually, he’d come to me.

And now, finally, I was on the cusp of getting everything I’d ever wanted. I had the Samara pack back together again. I had Xavier. I was even in striking distance of becoming his Luna. It all felt like a dream, but I didn’t have to pinch myself to know that it was very, very real. All I could do now was wait and hope that Xavier made the right decision. That everything I’d worked so hard to build was finally coming together.

The packs were gathering in anticipation of the moonrise. I glanced up at the sky—when had the sun set? I’d been so caught up in my own fantasies that I hadn’t noticed the time passing, but the moon would break over the horizon soon. The time had come for Xavier to make his decision, and to share it with me.

I pulled in a deep breath. *Play it cool, Ava.*

It was time for him to make his decision; I needed to know what he was going to do, if only so that I’d know how to approach this situation with Cesaries. But there was so much more riding on this than just appeasing the council, and I didn’t want to seem overly anxious, or to make him feel pressured.

*Just relax. Everything will be fine*.

As I made my way over to Xavier, someone stepped in front of me and blocked my way. I blinked up at my cousin, my heart sinking. I might have advocated for him to not be killed, but he was still the last person I wanted to talk to right now.

“Hi, Knox,” I said. “Excuse me, I need to—”

“Can we talk? We haven’t really had a chance to discuss everything.”

He kept talking, but I was barely listening. I bit back a sigh and glanced over his shoulder at Xavier.

“Ava.” Knox tugged at my arm like a small child might’ve done. On a small child, it would’ve been endearing. Or at least permissible. But since Knox was a grown-ass man, it was annoying as hell.

“What do you want?” I snapped. “Can’t you see I’ve got something more important to do than listen to you whine?”

He shook his head. “I’m not here to whine. I’m here to ask for your help. Ava, I know I fucked up, but Xavier is doing everything he can to remind me of it. He’s practically rubbing my face in it. He’s playing along for the council’s benefit, but I know he won’t give me or the others a real chance.”

“I’m sorry,” I said sarcastically, “how is this not whining?”

He grimaced. “Xavier listens to you. Can you at least put in a good word for me? Get Xavier to back the fuck off and stop riding us?”

I crossed my arms. “Just to make sure I’m understanding this—you’re upset because after betraying the pack, throwing me in a pit, and trying to kill Xavier, he’s not being as friendly to you as you’d prefer?”

“That’s not—”

I cut him off. “I support Xavier one hundred percent. The way you’re treated in the pack is his call to make, and remember—the alternative to this was losing your wolf, maybe even death, so I’m a little confused as to why I’m not hearing more gratitude.”

“I am grateful—to you,” Knox said. “I know you’re the reason the council spared me. Because we’re family and you care about me, and you wouldn’t let me die. All I’m asking is that you remember that family bond now that I’m back in the pack. I know I’ve got a lot of work ahead of me, and I could really use your help.”

“Family bond?” I huffed, then spun Knox around to look at Xavier. “You want to talk about bonds? Xavieris my Alpha, my *mate*.”

I caught myself before I could add, *And I’m going to be his Luna.*

I spun my cousin back around. “Don’t you *ever* try to turn me against Xavier again. Don’t ever try to undermine him, or me. You’re here because of our mercy and generosity—and don’t forget that, or you might find yourself in a tough spot, *cousin*.”

He jerked out of my grip. “I was just asking for some help!”

“For all your talk about us being family, you still betrayed me,” I reminded him. “I haven’t forgotten that, or forgiven you for it, so don’t expect much sympathy from me. Just do what Xavier says, and you’ll keep living. You’ve got a lot to prove.”

Knox stalked away, grumbling under his breath.

*God, he’s such a little shit.*

Maybe I could’ve been more understanding to him, but I’d already exhausted myself trying to help him. Maybe it was tough love, but if anyone needed a bit of that, it was Knox. I wanted my family back—it was why I’d spoken up for Knox at the trial—but I stood by what I said. Knox had to prove it. To me and to everyone in the Samara pack.

The field was filling up. Moonrise had to be mere minutes away. I started toward Xavier, but I immediately stopped short.

I didn’t want to ask him, even though the sun was setting. I wanted him to come to me. I wanted him to tell me that he’d chosen me as his Luna. That way, it would be entirely his choice.

My heart banged against my ribcage, and a cold sweat broke out on the back of my neck. There was a chance, maybe even a good chance, that he wouldn’t choose me. I had to prepare myself for that. Xavier had disappointed me in the past—he’d even broken my heart.

But that was before. For a long time now, I’d dreamed of a new beginning for us, and that beginning was about to start.

Xavier looked up at the darkening sky, then turned toward me. My stomach churned as he approached, and suddenly I forgot how to breathe. All I could hear was the frantic beating of my heart.

This was the moment—the final piece of my dream falling into place. I knew what I wanted. All I could do was hope that he wanted the same thing. And if he didn’t, I wouldn’t let it crush me. I would press on and wait for the next opportunity.

Xavier stopped in front of me. His eyes met mine—those eyes I’d dreamed of since we’d first met.

“Ava,” he said. “I’ve made my decision.”

**Episode 3986**

I let out a sigh as Big Mac’s words hung in the air. Werewolves weren’t the only ones who were going to be affected by the Wolf Moon? From that, I could infer that, a) the werewolves *would* be affected, and it wasn’t just a superstition, and b) other groups would be affected, too.

I wanted to ask Big Mac if she was joking, but I knew she was no comedian. When she bothered to give you a warning, it was for a good reason, and the best thing you could do was listen to her.

“What do you mean I’m dead wrong?” I asked. “What kind of situation are we dealing with, here?”

It had to be bad if the most supernaturally educated person I knew thought we needed to be wary.

“I’m a witch, Cali. I’m not an expert on werewolf mythology,” Big Mac said. “But I’ve been around long enough to have seen a few things.”

Lola jumped in, looking just as keyed up as she’d been when she’d almost assaulted Honora with a bean bag. “What kinds of things?”

Big Mac shrugged. “Do you think it’s a coincidence that strange shit happens whenever there’s a Wolf Moon? Think again. And all the stories of that weird shit? None of it is limited to werewolves.”

“Wait. You think it’s all real?” I asked. “Rowena seemed to think it was just a myth. A story passed down to give werewolves an excuse to let loose.”

I tried not to sound too hopeful, but *that*—the Wolf Moon essentially being some sort of morale boosting tradition—seemed more realistic than there actually being some sort of wolfy magic in the air. But then again, who was I to say what was and wasn’t realistic? I was a half-Fae. I’d been to the Fae world. I’d fought revenants and summoned ghosts. Was it really so unlikely that there was some truth to the Wolf Moon myth?

“Rowena’s certainly entitled to her opinions,” Big Mac said, “but I’m not taking any chances. I won’t be performing any spells until the Wolf Moon has passed.” She gave me a meaningful look. “And I suggest you do the same.”

“I’m Fae,” I said, frowning. “In what way could the moon affect me?”

“Who knows?” Big Mac said with a shrug. “It could be because it’s the first full moon of the year. Or because the Wolf Moon is like the Harvest Moon on steroids.”

“Oh, I like the sound of that.” Lola grinned. “I can’t wait to see it!”

I rolled my eyes and gave her a Look. “Why don’t you have another shot? Maybe it’ll calm you down.”

*She’s acting like someone dumped a bucket of sugar in her. Is it the moon?*

“I don’t know much about the specifics, but I think you should both try to be careful tonight,” Big Mac said. “And not just because your magic might be affected, Cali, but also because the Wolf Moon can enhance emotions, senses—pretty much everything. And this place is teeming with werewolves, who, let’s face it, aren’t exactly known for their calm dispositions.”

I grimaced. I didn’t like the sound of any of this. Emotions were already running high as it was, what with Helix running around killing people, the ongoing tension with the Bitterfang pack, Knox’s trial, and Xavier showing up as the Samaras’ new Alpha.

*We’re barely keeping it together as it is. What will happen if the Wolf Moon amplifies all those tensions? Actually, no. I don’t want to think about it.*

There were a hundred different ways the Wolf Moon could make things go sideways. And I’d be with my magic throughout the chaos? How was I supposed to defend myself? What if Helix went off the rails and tried to kill someone again?

“I don’t know,” Lola drawled, holding a third empty shot glass. “I think it could be fun. Maybe even a little sexy.”

I shot her a look. Only Lola would think a night of high emotions and ancient magic would sound *fun*, or…

“What do you mean, sexy?” I asked.

“I mean, I get it could be dangerous with all the aggression being multiplied, but anger’s not the only emotion out there. What about passion?” She waggled her eyebrows at me. “Maybe this’ll be a chance to blow off some steam, you know?”

“Oh my god.” I shook my head. “That’s *seriously* where your mind is going with this?”

She shrugged. “Big Mac said it can affect anything, so…”

“If you two are done, I have other customers to attend to,” Big Mac said. She looked just as annoyed with Lola as I felt. I took the hint, made sure Lola paid for her shots, and then dragged her out of the tent.

“Thanks, Big Mac,” I called over my shoulder.

As we stepped out of the tent, I suddenly felt vulnerable and exposed. I looked at the sea of werewolves surrounding me. Suddenly, every one of them felt like a potential threat.

*Are they all going to suddenly turn on each other? Or… What if Lola’s right and tonight turns into another Paige-and-Duke, anything-goes sex party?* An orgy was definitely better than a bloodbath, but I wasn’t interested in being anywhere near either option.

“Big Mac really freaked you out, huh?” Lola said, eyeing me.

“Should I *not* be freaked out?”

She shook her head. “Big Mac is one of the smartest people I know, but you know how often she sticks with doom and gloom. She’s got the ‘harbinger of bad news’ gig perfected.”

My brows rose. “So you don’t think we should listen to her? You think she’s wrong?”

“I think she’s entitled to her opinion,” Lola said, echoing Big Mac’s words from earlier, “but she’s not the only one who’s experienced the Wolf Moon before. I’m a werewolf, remember? And I’ve lived through a bunch of Wolf Moons. It’s really not anything like how she made it out to be.”

I frowned. “So… What happened before?”

“The last one was almost like a normal night. The only different thing that happened was that Jay brought in this new sex toy, and—”

“Nope!” I threw my hands up. “I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want to know. Besides, that’s not helpful.”

“Fine,” Lola said, rolling her eyes. “But I still think you’re worrying over nothing. Greyson will make sure nothing happens to you. Unless you don’t want him to—”

My glare cut her off, and Lola shrugged.

“I wonder what Jay did with that sex toy?” she asked herself.

“Can you please focus for, like, fifteen seconds?” I said with a groan. “We have to get back to the pack.”

Ushering Lola through the crowd was almost impossible. She was practically buzzing with energy, despite the three shots of moonshine, and in the end, I had to drag her along by the arm to get her to come with me.

“Oh, there you two are,” Ravi said as we rejoined the group.

“Just went to get a drink,” I said, glancing around. The packs were on the move. “What’s happening now?”

“We’re supposed to follow everyone down to the river—the council is going to make some kind of speech to kick off the Wolf Moon.”

Rishika smirked. “The councilors love nothing more than hearing themselves talk.”

“Sounds like fun,” I deadpanned. “Lola, go with Ravi and Rishika.”

I excused myself from the group and looked around for Greyson. If we had to attend a council thing, then it was probably best that we were together for it. But I didn’t see him anywhere, and I ended up following the Redwoods and everyone else down to the river.

Cesaries was standing on some kind of podium. Behind him, I could just make out a sliver of the moon peeking out from behind a ridge. Even that pale strip was incredibly bright and buttery yellow. If not for Big Mac’s warning, I probably would’ve thought it was one of the most beautiful things I’d ever seen. Romantic, even. But all I felt was dread. Maybe Lola didn’t think there was anything to worry about, but I couldn’t say I agreed.

“Welcome, all!” Cesaries called out. “What an honor it is to be with you tonight as we usher in the Wolf Moon!”

The crowd cheered, and I tuned Cesaries out as I scanned the throng for Greyson. Where was he? He had to be here, right?

*Maybe I should mind link with him…*

“If everyone will please turn their attention to the sky and watch as the Wolf Moon makes her appearance!” Cesaries shouted.

Suddenly, in a wave of sound and motion, all the werewolves shifted as one and started howling. It was a majestic, wild, and magical thing to witness—but it was also so loud that I had to clap my hands over my ears.

I turned to look for Artemis. Since she was one of the few others here who couldn’t shift, I figured she’d stick out like a sore thumb.

And then a gasp tore out of my throat as I witnessed Lola bite down on Artemis’s neck and drag her off into the woods.

# **Episode 3987**

**Xavier**

I threw my head back and howled with all the others. Our voices filled the air, and there were so many of us that the sound was deafening. But I didn’t mind. If anything, it was sort of cathartic, releasing my wolf and connecting with the moon in this primal, ancient way.

Ava was at my side, howling her heart out. She raised her voice to the moon, seemingly louder than all the others. I knew why she was so full of joy. I’d made my decision, and I’d told her the news.

Ava was going to be my Luna.

My wolf was thrilled, of course. He’d wanted this for a long time for a Luna. But what of Cali? Did my wolf only want a Luna and didn’t care about which mate it was? I knew my wolf still longed for Cali the same way I did, but it seemed my wolf was willing to take what he could get.

To me, this wasn’t ideal. It wasn’t what I’d hoped for. I wanted Cali as my Luna. I wanted her leading my pack at my side. It was a special kind of torture, in a way—attending the summit, greeting the Wolf Moon, going through all these rites of passage as an Alpha with the wrong woman.

*Fucking Cesaries.* This wasn’t how I’d wanted to make this decision, with the head of the council inserting himself into our business, turning this deeply personal choice into a public spectacle.

But it had to be done, even if none of this was playing out how I’d hoped it would. Cesaries wasn’t the kind of wolf who took no for an answer, and besides, it was only fair to Ava. She deserved to be Samara Luna. Hell, she deserved to be Alpha, given the way she’d single-handedly kept the pack together through so much turmoil. Plus, she was my mate—as complicated as my feelings about that reality still were—and I felt wrong, leading her on. I couldn’t just keep stretching things out forever, trapping her in a limbo where she didn’t know her place.

For all intents and purposes, she’d been the Samara Luna ever since I’d become the pack’s Alpha, even if I hadn’t been ready to make it official. And I still wasn’t ready—but once I’d realized the sun had set, that my time had run out, I’d known it was time to make a decision.

There were really only two options, anyway: tell her I wasn’t going to make her my Luna, or tell her I was. It was just that simple. And if I’d opted for the former, she would’ve been crushed. It also would’ve upset the balance of the pack’s leadership at a time when I needed Ava to help me keep the pack from imploding. The pack was still fragile and vulnerable, and adding Knox and his buddies back into the mix wasn’t helping matters.

If I wanted to lead this pack, to help its members thrive, then I needed Ava’s strength and knowledge and leadership.

Plus, I knew Ava—probably better than anyone else in the world. If I’d told her no, she wouldn’t have accepted it. She might’ve played nice with the council watching our every move, but the moment we returned to our normal lives, she’d have started pushing to take the Luna mantle, and we’d have ended up in this same untenable position all over again. So why fight it?

As much as I wished Cali were in Ava’s place, Cali just couldn’t be part of my life right now. And who knew when I’d be able to let her back in—if she even *wanted* to be part of my life ever again, given everything that had happened between us lately?

No, I’d realized that I needed to set my personal feelings aside and focus on what I could do right now, in the present, with the situation in front of me. And what I could do was fully accept my role as Samara Alpha, and work to make my pack as strong as it could be. Ava would be instrumental in making that happen.

And, if I was being honest with myself, I still had feelings for Ava. Once, I’d thought I’d never be able to stop hating her, but now I knew better. My feelings had evolved—into what, I wasn’t sure, but I no longer wanted to kill her. If nothing else, there was a part of me, separate from my wolf, that enjoyed being with her.

Our howls continued to fill the night air, and for the first time since the summit had begun, I felt like I was part of something bigger. I still loathed Malakai and his lackeys, of course, but the other wolves here? In that moment, I felt like I was a part of them, and they were a part of me. That we’d found something like kinship in this communal worship of the Wolf Moon.

Ava casually nuzzled my side before throwing her head back to howl again. I could practically feel her joy and satisfaction humming through our mate bond.

I’d asked her to keep the news to herself for now, but I’d have to tell Cesaries soon, which pissed me off to no end. This obligation he’d set on our shoulders weighed heavily. And once I did tell him the news, it would be official. The Luna ceremony would take on a life of its own. There would be no turning back, no second-guessing.

Ava would be my Luna, and everyone would know it.

I had to tell Cali before word got out—and Cesaries would undoubtedly start shouting from the rooftops the moment I told him about my decision. I couldn’t let Cali find out from anyone other than me, even though letting her find out from someone else would put one more nail in our relationship’s coffin. Hell, there was a chance that it might even be the final straw that broke our mate connection and made her despise me for good.

But I wouldn’t give Adéluce the satisfaction of forcing that situation. Despite everything I’d been forced to do, I knew I owed it to Cali to tell her myself, face-to-face. No matter how difficult that was, I knew she didn’t deserve that. I knew by this point owed her a hell of a lot more than that, actually, but this was something. Something she shouldn’t hear from someone else.

I knew it was a risk—once Cali was made aware of my plan to make Ava my Luna, she’d *have* to choose Greyson, to end the *due destini* and live out her happily ever after with my brother. And she wouldn’t have a fake Luna mark anymore—I was sure my brother would find a way to make her his Luna for real.

The thought made me want to vomit. Made me want to scream, tear my hair out, claw my eyes out, and burn down the whole world for the unfairness of it all.

My howl died in my throat, and I stepped back from Ava and the other Samaras. They were so entranced by the moon and the symphony of howling that they didn’t notice.

I needed some air. Needed to get away from the feeling that a noose was tightening around my neck.

No—I needed to find Cali. I couldn’t put this off any longer. I scanned the crowd for her—and went still when I saw Lola dragging Artemis away by the neck.

*What the hell?*

I looked around for Greyson. Why wasn’t he putting a stop to this? But I didn’t see him anywhere.

*Fuck!*

I raced toward Lola and arrived at the same time Cali did. She didn’t see me at first—she was probably too freaked out about what was happening to her sister. I shifted back to human as Cali grabbed Lola’s arm.

“Stop!” she shouted. “What the hell are you *doing*?”

Lola’s pupils were dilated, with just a hint of red in her irises, and her fangs and mouth dripped with Artemis’s blood. She’d gone full vampire. This creature wasn’t Lola—not anymore.

“Cali, run!” Artemis said, her words sounding slurred. Blood dripped from her neck, and she was looking hazy. She pushed against Lola, who let go of her, grabbing a knife that had been somewhere on her person to wield it in front of her.

Lola snarled and pushed Cali away, lunging back at Artemis. The two grappled as Cali stumbled right into me, and I caught her. She looked up at me and jolted, like she’d only just realized I was there.

“Do something!” she demanded. “I don’t want to use my magic; I could hit either of them! If you care about me at all, if you care about my sister and Lola, you have to *do something!*”

Her words stung, though I knew they shouldn’t. I’d been driving her to this point ever since Adéluce had forced me to break up with her. But Cali needed me—that was probably the only reason why she was talking to me at all.

Lola swiped at Artemis with another growl, getting ahold of the Fae. She sank her fangs back into Artemis, and her weapon dropped to the ground. Shit, she really was trying to drain her. I didn’t want to harm Lola, but I wasn’t going to let anyone hurt Cali or her sister.

“Stop!” Cali screamed, grabbing at Lola’s arm again. “This isn’t you!”

Lola stopped, her head slowly turning toward Cali. She dropped Artemis, who slumped to the ground from blood loss. Then Lola zeroed in on Cali like the predator she clearly was right now.

I had to act, but if I tried to protect Cali, would Adéluce hurt her?

# **Episode 3988**

*Oh my god. There’s so much blood.*

“Artemis?” I called to my sister. She groaned on the ground and her head lolled to the side. “Hang on, okay? You’re going to be fine.”

Her eyelids fluttered, and she mumbled something too soft for me to make out. Lola must have drained her fast—I’d gone after them as quickly as I could, but Artemis was already so weak.

And now Lola had her sights set on me. Lola circled me, her eyes blood-red and wild. She didn’t look like my best friend. In fact, now that she’d practically drained my sister dry, she was looking at me like I was the best dessert in town.

I spared a glance over my shoulder at Xavier. Was he seriously not going to do *anything*? What the hell was wrong with him?He was just standing there, frozen. Sure, he’d pushed Lola away from me, and that had made her drop Artemis, so he’d sort of helped there, but otherwise, what was he even doing here?

I looked back at Lola, who had used my few seconds of distracted staring at Xavier as an opportunity to creep forward.

I raised my free hand. “Stay back! I don’t want to hurt you, but I won’t let you feed on me or my sister.”

I really, *really* didn’t want to use my magic against Lola. Despite how unhinged she was right now, I didn’t actually want to hurt her. Plus, Big Mac had warned me not to use my magic during the Wolf Moon.

What if I tried to defend myself, but my magic was so out of whack that I hurt Lola really badly? Or what if it didn’t work at all? That would be proof that I was helpless, and Lola would have no reason to hold back. And who could forget that we were in a freaking forest with all this wood around? What would happen if some of it impaled Lola?

Lola darted forward, so fast and strong I could barely track her movements. I dove toward my sister and tried to pull her out of the way, but Lola’s teeth snagged on her arm and left a deep cut in their wake. It bled, and Artemis let out a pained moan.

I couldn’t do this. I couldn’t protect her. Lola was a vampire—and not just that, she was a hybrid. She was fast and strong beyond anything I was capable of matching. Without the confidence to use my magic, Artemis and I were as good as dead. Shit.

“Lola, please!” My voice broke, and tears burned my eyes. “Stop!”

At this point, I was going to have to just use my magic, regardless of the damage it might cause. Lola wasn’t herself right now, but I couldn’t just let her kill me or my sister. Even if protecting us meant hurting her—badly.

Tears burned a hot trail down my cheeks. “Don’t come any closer! Please, just stop this! This isn’t you! I know you’d never hurt me or Artemis. You can control this!”

Lola hissed, her bloodstained fangs flashing in the ultra-bright moonlight.

This was a nightmare, and all I wanted was to wake up. Every possible outcome was completely unacceptable, completely heartbreaking. It broke my heart to see my sister like this, weak and helpless. It broke my heart to know that my best friend was the one who’d hurt her. It broke my heart to know that all Lola wanted to do was finish the job she’d started, and probably drain me, too, for good measure. It broke my heart that I was going to have to make a decision—to protect my sister at all costs, even if it hurt my best friend just as badly as she’d hurt Artemis, or…

No, there was no choice. I had to do this. Because the final piece of the heartbreak puzzle was that Xavier was just standing there, stock-still, not three feet away. He was an Alpha werewolf—probably the person here who was strong and fast enough to take on Lola—and he wasn’t doing a damn thing to help.

A sob ripped through my throat. I couldn’t take my eyes off Lola as I cried out, “Xavier, please! Please just do something! Do you have any fucking feelings anymore?” When he still didn’t move, I screamed even louder, praying that I could be heard over the sea of howls filling the air.

Lola took a slow step forward, her bloodstained lips curving up into a manic grin. Oh god. She was going to do it. She was going to attack us. She was going to force my hand.

Movement blurred in the corner of my eye as Xavier finally seemed to snap out of his reverie. He slammed into Lola and dragged her away from Artemis and me, fighting for every step.

“Get Artemis out of here!” he shouted.

“Come on!” I slipped my arm under Artemis’s shoulder. “We need to get some help.”

My sister leaned heavily on me. She wasn’t strong enough to stand on her own, and I wasn’t strong enough to carry her out of here.

Nearby, Xavier was still wrestling with a hissing Lola. Even with all his Alpha strength, he seemed to be struggling to pin her down. She was just that strong, that out of control.

*Is he going to have to shift to get the upper hand?*

Then Jay rushed onto the scene and slammed into Xavier.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Jay snapped.

Xavier didn’t so much as look at Jay. He didn’t try to fight back, either—he just redoubled his efforts to control Lola, who was still trying to break away and get to Artemis and me.

Jay’s eye widened, and realization seemed to set in. “*Lola?*”

“She’s out of control!” Xavier gritted out as he wrestled with Jay’s mate. Jay went in there, grabbing at Lola himself.

“Lola! Stop!” he said desperately.

“*Artemis?*” Rishika finally rushed onto the scene as well, paling in horror when she saw my sister’s limp form. She turned her wide-eyed gaze on Lola’s bloodstained mouth, and her face contorted with fury. “What the *hell* did you do?”

“She couldn’t help it!” I burst out. “She’s not herself! It has to be the Wolf Moon affecting her. She was almost frantic, earlier, and it only got worse the closer we got to the moonrise.”

Rishika gathered Artemis in her arms. “You should’ve stayed at the pack house,” she muttered.

Artemis, who finally seemed to be coming to, at least a little, gave her girlfriend a weak smile. “And miss all this fun?”

I stepped back, my arms and clothes covered in blood, as Rishika stood, carrying Artemis bridal style.

“I’m going to take her to Big Mac,” Rishika said.

I nodded and breathed a sigh of relief. Big Mac would be able to help my sister, no question. And with Jay here, we’d finally be able to get Lola under control. She was already more subdued, though still crazy-eyed. He stood with her locked tightly in his arms, and he was murmuring to her softly. Thank god he’d been able to get through to her.

*Crisis averted. Barely.*

Later, once everything had had a chance to sink in, I knew I’d probably fall to pieces. For now, though, I was too relieved to feel much else.

Jay wrapped his arms around Lola. She thrashed a bit in his arms, like she couldn’t help but move her body, but not enough to break free of his hold. “I’ll take it from here,” he grunted. He scanned my bloodstained shirt. “I’m so sorry, Cali. I don’t know what’s happening, but I’ll make sure she doesn’t hurt anyone else.”

“It’s not her fault, or yours.” I smiled weakly. “I’m just glad you’re here now. You’re the person she’s going to want most when she comes back to herself.”

Jay hauled Lola off, and I turned to Xavier to thank him. He’d certainly dragged his feet, but in the end, he’d still saved my life, and Artemis’s. For that, I was grateful.

“Xav—” I stopped. He was already walking away.

I hurried to catch up, grabbing his hand and spinning him around to face me.

He just stared at me flatly, not saying anything. His face gave absolutely nothing away. At first, I wasn’t sure what to say or do. Normally, he would’ve asked if I was okay. He would’ve doted on me, and he *never* would’ve walked away.

But we’d left normal behind a long time ago.

“Um… Thank you,” I managed. “I don’t even want to think about how that could’ve gone if you hadn’t stepped in.”

He still said nothing.

*Seriously? I know you’re not a statue. Give me* something. Was he mad at me for how I’d spoken to him in the heat of the moment?

“I… I’m sorry,” I added. “I was panicking and worried about Artemis, and for a second I really thought you weren’t going to help us. That’s why I accused you of not having feelings.”

He shrugged and finally spoke. “Don’t read too much into it. The Redwoods are allied with my pack. It was my duty to help.”

The distinction stung. He was making it clear he was no longer a Redwood, and that he hadn’t helped us because he cared. He glanced toward Rishika, who was moving slowly as she carried Artemis toward Big Mac’s tent.

“Artemis is strong,” he said. “She’ll be okay.” Then his gaze returned to me. “You should go with your sister.”

He tried to walk away, but I wouldn’t let go of him. Rather, I moved in closer. “Listen, I don’t know what’s going on with you, and maybe I’ll never understand it, but I know that somewhere deep down, you still care about your pack. About your friends, and about me. You can’t have just lost that. It still has to be there.”

He stared back at me, and for the briefest of moments, I saw the same look in his eyes he’d had after Helix’s attack. Real emotion. The real *Xavier*.

*I knew you were still in there.*

He was acting like he hated me, and he was doing everything he could to keep me away, but there he was.

And then his expression hardened, and that look disappeared. “You need to go back.”

“Won’t you at least acknowledge that you still care?”

He looked away. “I can’t do that.” Something like pain flickered in his face.

“Xavier, I know there’s something you’re not telling me,” I said. “Probably a lot of somethings. Why don’t you just say it? Whatever it is, I’ll listen.”

He met my eyes again, reaching out a hand as if to touch my cheek. He froze inches away from making contact and dropped his hand. His eyes flashed cold again. “I can’t.”

“I won’t accept that,” I pressed. “I know you’re struggling with something. I can see it in your face. Just tell me.”

He grabbed my arms with a growl. “Listen to me.” His eyes burned, and his face was only inches away from mine. “This is the last time.”

I frowned. “Last time for what?”

“Once the summit is over, we’ll never be this close again,” he said. “You’ll never *want* to be.”

I tried to pull back, but he held on with an iron grip. “What are you talking about?” I demanded. “What are you going to do?”

His grip tightened, and he pulled me in toward him. Then I let out a gasp as his lips crashed into mine.

# **Episode 3989**

The moment Xavier’s lips met mine, I was transported back to the first time I’d kissed him. We’d probably kissed a thousand times since then, but something about the way his lips moved over mine now—hungry bordering on desperate, domineering, exhilarating and nerve-wracking and yet so, so *right*—made me think of the beginning.

Xavier deepened the kiss, threading his fingers through my hair, and I let out a breathy sigh as I sank into his embrace, savoring him and his touch every bit as much as he savored me.

When we’d kissed for the very first time, I’d been nervous, even a little terrified. But I’d been hungry, too. Hungry for *him*, just like he was hungry for me. I hadn’t wanted to stop kissing him or exploring him, despite my inexperience. But that had been a long time ago. So much had happened since then, and my fear of him had vanished, replaced by an aching love.

Lately, the emphasis had been on the *aching*.

He nipped at my bottom lip, his fingers clenching on my hair. It didn’t hurt, but there was a renewed urgency to his touch, and I thought of what he’d said to me before he’d kissed me.

*This will be the last time…*

I shoved the words away. I didn’t want to think about that right now, about whatever was troubling him so much he’d burned down his entire life and started over. I didn’t understand why he was kissing me now, after everything else he’d said and done, after the seemingly endless effort he’d put into proving to me that he didn’t care.

I knew I should push him away. I should ask questions, demand answers. I knew it wasn’t right or healthy to let him kiss me like he loved me when he’d spent so long acting like he didn’t even care enough to hate me. When he’d broken my heart, along with the hearts of Greyson and all my friends. When he’d disappeared, made me sick with worry, and then shown up at the summit as the Alpha of another pack, with Ava at his side.

He didn’t deserve to kiss me right now. I knew it, and he probably knew it too. I didn’t deserve to be treated so poorly by the man who was supposed to be my mate, either. And yet I couldn’t bring myself to stop him, or myself. In that moment, I didn’t care about what either of us deserved, or what was right or healthy.

All I wanted was Xavier—right here, right now. In my arms and making me come alive.

I’d yearned for this from the moment he’d left, and I let myself be drawn into it. Let it drown out everything else around us. I lost all sense of time and space, allowing myself to get lost in his kiss.

God, I’d missed this.

I’d missed feeling his lips on mine, feeling his strong arms wrapped around me, protecting me, wanting me. I never wanted it to end—but now that I’d given in, I was overwhelmed by a sudden wave of fear.

He’d said that this was the last time we’d be this close—which meant that this kiss would be our last. I was afraid to breathe, afraid to move. It felt like even the slightest nudge in the wrong direction would shatter this moment that I wanted to last forever.

Xavier tightened his hold on me, and I squeezed him back with all my might, as though I could permanently fuse us together with my strength and will alone.

He still loved me. That’s what this had to mean, right? His love felt evident in the way he kissed me, in the way his hands moved through my hair, in the desperate sounds he made.

If I’d ever doubted his feelings, or believed for even a second that they’d changed, I’d been wrong. Triumph glowed in my chest, but it was bittersweet. Because even though this proof of his feelings meant everything, it would change nothing. He’d as good as told me so, right before he’d kissed me.

The sounds of the party started to seep in, sending cracks through the bubble we’d wrapped around us. I pushed the sounds away and kissed him deeper, more urgently.

*Not now. Please don’t take this from me. Just leave me with Xavier.*

Eventually, we had to come up for air, and I cracked my eyes open to reassure myself that this was really happening. That he was here, in my arms, his lips swollen like mine. His chest rising and falling rapidly like mine.

What I saw took my breath away.

The wolf moon hung in the sky behind him, casting his naked body in a magical bluish glow. He’d never looked so breathtakingly beautiful, so otherworldly. For a moment I just took him in, gulping down the cold night air as my hands stroked his cheeks.

His breath was ragged and hot on my face, and despite the sounds of the party growing in volume around us, I didn’t look away from his face. I could have stared at him forever.

His eyes drew me in, just like they had the first time I’d looked at them. It felt like a lifetime ago. Back then, I’d had no idea then what this man would come to mean to me. Now, I knew better. Now, I knew exactly who and what Xavier was to me: he was my mate. My friend. He was everything to me, and his place was at my side.

He pulled me in for another kiss, a desperate, frantic thing full of tongue and barely restrained lust. I was all too eager to throw myself into the deep end again. To drown myself in his touch, in the way he made me feel. In the lust and love and bittersweet heartache that flared with each breathy crash of our lips, each moan and caress.

I pressed myself flush against him, trying to get as close to him as possible. His hands slid down to my hips and locked me in place against his body. He wanted this just as much as I did. This meant just as much to him as it did to me. He was hungry, too. Desperate and aching and needy in every possible way. Just like I was.

I kissed him harder, more frantically, like I could imprint myself on his lips, imprint my touch on his body. We were practically devouring each other now, and yet it still wasn’t enough.

The howling reached a crescendo, and nearby I heard a rustle in the woods. Immediately, Xavier and I broke apart, stumbling to regain our footing. I looked, and a distance away a few wolves were running past us. Would the rest of the party follow?

We stood there, close enough to touch, but far enough apart now that I felt myself sinking back into the present, into the terrible reality I’d wanted to escape.

I breathed hard, almost dizzy from the kiss and the emotions that crashed over me. My mind was jumbled, filled with pleasure, with aching desire, with confusion, joy, and sadness. Now that the moment was over, all the relevant questions and implications rushed to the forefront of my mind.

*What did this kiss mean? Why did he kiss me at all?*

When he’d kissed me, I’d been so overcome that I hadn’t worried about any of this—but now, I needed to understand. I needed answers before he went back to keeping me at arm’s length. That couldn’t have been a goodbye kiss. It had to mean something—but what?

Xavier reached out and pressed a gentle finger to my lips. His expression shifted from something desperate and hungry to a bittersweet smile that made tears prick at the corners of my eyes. There was something like quiet despair staring back at me from his beautiful face.

“I have to go back to my pack,” he said.

“Wait.” I grabbed his wrist before he could escape again. “You can’t just kiss me like that and walk away like nothing happened.”

He bit his kiss-swollen lower lip, seeming to hesitate. Every time I’d tried to broach this subject with him before, he’d been cold and closed off. Now, so much emotion was flashing through his eyes that I didn’t even know how to begin deciphering it.

There was something he wasn’t telling me. Something he *wanted* to say. And he couldn’t deny what we’d both just felt. It had been too strong for either of us to ignore. If he tried, it would be the most pathetic lie I’d ever heard.

I cupped his chin. “Please, just tell me.”

He gently pushed my hands off him and turned away.

I grabbed his arm again. “You *kissed* me, and now you’re just going to walk away like it never happened? Why? What do you want from me?”

A few tears slipped down my cheeks. My heart was breaking all over again. How many times had he pulled that trick off now?

When he turned to face me, the softness in his eyes had vanished again, and that cold, cruel version of my mate had returned. A fresh wave of tears slipped down my cheeks, and I shuddered at the sudden transition. Just like our kiss, that look on his face took me back to when we’d first met. When I’d been terrified of him. I didn’t want to feel that way about him now.

*No. Don’t do this, Xavier.*

“You’re right,” he said, his jaw tensing. “I do have something to say.” He reached out and cupped my cheeks, forcing me to look him in the eye. “Ava is going to be my Luna. We’re holding the ceremony tonight.”

**Episode 3990**

No combination of words could have hit me harder than Xavier’s declaration that he’d chosen Ava to be his Luna.

*No…*

Suddenly I was dizzy, like all the air had been knocked out of my lungs.

“I wanted you to know,” Xavier added before turning around and walking off. This time, I didn’t try to stop him.

My knees trembled. All of me trembled. I felt faint, weak—like the life force had been drained out of me.

*Did Lola drink my blood too? Is that why I feel like I’m going to collapse?*

Spots appeared in my vision, and my knees buckled. I hit the ground hard, rocks and twigs cutting into my palms, my knees. My stomach lurched so violently that I was sure I was going to be sick.

*This can’t be real. He was* just *kissing me.* We’d just connected in a way I hadn’t felt in a long time. He’d kissed me like he loved me. Like I was something precious. Like he couldn’t live without me.

*And then he tells me he’s making Ava his Luna?*

I wanted to scream. To throw my head back like all the wolves at the party and shriek at the sky until my vocal cords bled.

I knew he and Ava had a connection. They were mates too, as much as I hated to admit it. But I’d accepted that. And then he’d told me that he’d cheated on me with her, and he’d left. Later, Ava had told me that wasn’t true, but I hadn’t been able to extract the real truth from Xavier. If he hadn’t been cheating with Ava, why would he have lied about it? And why would he have shown up here with her, leading *her* pack, if they weren’t together?

I’d tried so hard to make sense of it that I’d tied my brain in knots. And even though Xavier had refused to be honest with me—hell, he’d refused to have a real conversation with me at all—I’d tried to accept that he’d left me. That he’d chosen Ava. Even though it felt like a knife had been jabbed between my ribs every time I saw them together.

But then he’d kissed me. He’d made me fall in love with him all over again. He’d completely destroyed the box containing all my feelings for him. He’d given me hope that things could work out between us, that he still loved me, that maybe there was still a chance for us to be together.

And then he’d told me he was making Ava his Luna.

No matter how many times I played it through in my mind, trying to make sense of it, it smashed into my chest so hard it took my breath away.

If I’d thought he was acting cruel to me before, I’d been wrong. *This* was true cruelty. He’d hit me where it would hurt the most. Because even when he’d run off and become the Samara Alpha, there’d still been hope.

But now, after making me foolishly believe he needed me, he’d told me the truth, practically rubbed my face in it. There was no room for me in his life. Not anymore. He’d tossed me aside and given it all to Ava.

I slowly rose to my feet and looked around. I couldn’t see him anymore. He’d disappeared into the howling crowd. He was probably back at Ava’s side, leading their pack through the Wolf Moon celebration.

I swiped at the angry, heartbroken tears staining my cheeks. Fury was finally starting to burn through my shock and hurt.

*How dare he make me cry for him. Again!* He *should be the one crying. He should be ashamed of himself!*

He knew I still loved him, knew I wanted him back, that I was willing to forgive all the awful things he’d done—and he’d used that knowledge against me in the cruelest way possible.

I looked up at the huge moon illuminating the night sky. I couldn’t even see the stars.

*I will never let him do that to me again*,I vowed to myself. *We’re finished. I’m finished with Xavier. It’s really over. He’s not going to hurt me anymore.*

My fists curled tight in anger as I glared up at the moon, and I felt dried blood crunch between my fingers. I looked down, suddenly remembering what had happened right before Xavier had hurt me.

*This is Artemis’s blood. She needs me*.

And I needed to pull myself together. I needed to be there for Artemis, to make sure she was okay. And then I’d have to check on Lola, too. Once she came back to herself, she’d be horrified by what she’d done.

I wouldn’t let them down, no matter what awful shit Xavier did to me.

I jogged past the howling wolves and headed to Big Mac’s moonshine tent. The witch had put up a sign on the tent: “Closed—Will reopen shortly.”

I pushed through the tent flap and found Artemis sitting up on Big Mac’s cot with Rishika holding her hand. Big Mac was leaning over my sister and applying some sort of ointment to Artemis’s neck wounds.

The witch cursed. “I was hoping my herbs would be enough, but this is a vampire bite. They’re the worst. I might have to use my magic.”

I stepped forward. “Is that really necessary?”

Big Mac glared at me over her shoulder. “It’s either that or let your sister bleed to death. I’m assuming you have a preference?”

I winced. “Sorry. Do what you need to do.”

As worried as I was about Big Mac’s magic going haywire, we had to stop the bleeding. There was no other option.

“As for Lola, something has to be done to ensure that nothing like this happens again. Jay’s managed to subdue her, but there’s no telling how long she’ll stay that way,” Big Mac continued. “We can’t have her racing around the summit draining people left and right.”

Rishika shook her head. “Actually, something needs to be done to me so I don’t rip her fucking throat out the next time I see her.”

“It wasn’t her fault,” I said. “She’s under the influence of the Wolf Moon. She’s not herself. I’ll go talk to her, though.”

Hopefully she’d finally snapped out of her bloodlust, and I wouldn’t have to risk using magic on her to defend myself. Going through that experience once had been awful enough—I didn’t want to repeat it.

The tent flap opened, and Greyson stalked in. “There you are. I’ve been looking for all of you everywhere. What have—” He stopped short when he saw the blood staining my shirt. “What the fuck happened? Are you okay?”

Suddenly, the fear and devastation of the night came crashing down on me, and I rushed over to him and threw my arms around him.

Greyson hugged me. “Are you okay, love? What’s going on?”

*The world is garbage and full of violence and cruelty*.

And then a new layer of horror slammed into me. Oh my god. I’d kissed Xavier.

Obviously, I’d kissed Xavier before and Greyson had known about it and tolerated it, but things were different now. Xavier was more or less out of the picture, and Greyson and I had settled into something new. Something that only included the two of us. How would he react to me kissing his brother now?

I pulled in a deep breath to collect myself, then drew back to speak to him. “Lola’s gone moon crazy, and she attacked Artemis. She tried to attack me, too,” I said, hoping that if I focused on the Lola situation, maybe I’d be able to keep what had happened with Xavier from spilling out in front of everyone.

I knew I had to be honest with Greyson about what happened with Xavier, and I would be. But not in front of an audience.

“Big Mac is going to use magic on Artemis to heal the bite,” I said. “We don’t really know what to do about Lola yet.”

I sighed. This was like Helix going off the rails and hurting people all over again, only this time, it was worse—this time, it was my best friend.

Greyson nodded. “We’ll figure all of this out. I just need a moment to catch up.”

He looked like he was going to approach Big Mac, but I pulled him out of the tent. “There’s something else.”

He frowned. “What is it? Did Lola bite you, too?” He looked me over, clearly searching for injuries. “Or did something else happen?”

I swallowed roughly and nodded. This wasn’t going to be easy to say, but I needed to get it out. I couldn’t allow him to find out what happened from anyone else but me. And who knew who’d seen Xavier and me? We’d practically been making out right in the open.

I pulled in a deep breath. “You know I love you, right?”

He nodded. “Of course.”

“Well… Xavier helped with Lola, and I was talking to him afterward, and then… And then he kissed me.”

**Episode 3991**

**Greyson**

I felt completely gut-punched. I couldn’t believe that Xavier would dare kiss Cali after everything that he’d put her though. Then a thought hit me.

*That was how the kiss was last time, but this feels different. She didn’t say if she kissed him back. Did she? Did she not push him away?*

I wasn’t going to accuse her, though. Ultimately, this was all Xavier’s fault. He was playing with her feelings. Maybe I didn’t even want to know if Cali had liked the kiss—or if she’d kissed him back. It was enough that Xavier had initiated it at all. How Cali had responded was a moot point.

“I don’t understand why it happened,” Cali added. “Especially knowing that Xavier is about to make Ava his Luna. Did you know that?”

Cali’s voice caught in her throat, almost as if it hurt her to say the words.

I shook my head. The news surprised me, though maybe it shouldn’t have. Xavier was constantly doing reckless things now. “No, I didn’t know—but it makes what Xavier did even worse.”

I balled my hands into fists as my anger began to rise. I couldn’t believe Xavier had had the nerve to kiss her, especially if he was making Ava his Luna. Had he even thought about how it would make her feel? That it would give her false hope? Did he do this because Cali had my Luna mark and he didn’t know it was fake?

“I know… He told me right after he kissed me.” Cali’s eyes shimmered like she was about to cry, but then she looked away. Her pain was palpable.

I was shocked, but that quickly turned into fury. “He’s playing with you to hurt you—and to get back at the both of us.”

Xavier knew exactly what he was doing. It was almost as if he didn’t *want* Cali to get over him. He was deliberately prolonging her pain, and I wasn’t going to stand by and let him do that.

Cali shook her head. “No, I don’t think that’s true. There was something else he wanted to tell me, I’m sure of it. If only I could’ve talked to him for a little longer—”

“No fucking way,” I said, cutting her off. “I don’t even want him to *look* at you again, let alone talk to you. How much more of this are you expected to take?”

I turned away from her and started pacing. I wasn’t mad at Cali, but it was frustrating that she *still* couldn’t see what Xavier was really up to. She was so blinded by her love for him that she just couldn’t stop searching for the good in him.

“What are you planning to do?” she asked, watching as I paced back and forth.

I knew what I wanted to do—namely, beat the crap out of my little brother and make sure he never pulled anything like that ever again—but I also knew that Cali was watching me. And more than that, I knew that despite Xavier’s awful behavior, she would never forgive me if I fought with him.

“I want to talk to Xavier,” I finally said. “I want to make it clear that whatever he’s doing, he needs to stop.”

*And that if he doesn’t, he’ll regret it.*

Cali came up to me and placed her hands on my chest. “Then I’m coming with you.”

“But, Cali—”

“Greyson, please,” she said. “I can see how upset you are, and I’m worried about what will happen if you confront him alone. I need to be there to make sure that things don’t get out of hand. To make sure that the only thing you both do is talk.”

I lifted her hands from my chest and held them. “I’m pissed, yes, but I need to talk to my brother alone. I’m not going to attack him, so you don’t have to worry about that, okay?”

Even as I said the words, my desire to do just that bloomed—but for Cali’s sake, I would do my best to hold back. I would be calm and direct with Xavier, but I would make it clear that if he didn’t do what I asked, there would be problems.

Cali gave me a skeptical look. “You sure about that?”

I didn’t answer her right away. All I felt was rage against my brother—which made me as skeptical as Cali that I’d be able to keep my cool, even as I told myself that I would stay calm, no matter what. I was going to have to pull my anger back and regain control. Too bad that was easier said than done. From the moment Cali had revealed what Xavier did, I’d been fantasizing about kicking his ass.

“I just can’t let Xavier play us like this,” I said. “I can’t let him go around doing whatever he wants and thinking there won’t be consequences.”

*For all I know, he kissed her just to provoke me. We’ve been at each other’s throats even more than usual over the past few days, so it makes sense that he would do whatever he could to get under my skin. And it worked.*

“Maybe you should wait until morning,” Cali said tentatively. “Maybe you’ll have cooled off by then, and be thinking a little clearer. I don’t know what rushing over to confront him tonight is going to achieve. It won’t make much of a difference.”

“I don’t want to cool off,” I said evenly. “And it’ll make a difference to me. I have to go take care of this now.”

I turned and headed for the tent flap, but Cali moved ahead of me, blocking my way.

“Please, Greyson,” she said. “Take a breath and wait. I haven’t seen you this angry in a long time. Do you think it’s possible you’re being affected by the Wolf Moon? Everyone seems to be acting strangely—it could be affecting you, too.”

Cali took my hands and the contact calmed me, but only a little.

“The only thing that’s affecting me is Xavier having the audacity to kiss you,” I replied. “*Again.*”

“But maybe the Wolf Moon is why Xavier kissed me in the first place,” she countered. “Maybe he couldn’t help himself. After what Lola did to Artemis and the way everyone’s just acting a little… strangely… I think that could be the reason.”

I pulled away from Cali and shook my head. “I don’t want you to make any excuses for him, Cali. What he did was wrong, Wolf Moon or not.” Honestly, it was kind of rubbing me the wrong way that Cali would even *think* to make excuses for Xavier after all the stuff he’d pulled. Why couldn’t she just realize that he was only looking out for himself and didn’t care how his actions were affecting anyone else, especially her? “Others might believe in the Wolf Moon, but I, for one, am not about to give Xavier a pass based on some superstitious mumbo jumbo.”

Without another word, I turned and stormed out of the tent. I made a beeline for the main bonfire, searching for Xavier. I wondered if anyone else had seen the kiss Cali and Xavier had shared. But if they had, they were doing a good job of not making a big deal out of it. The most I got was a few curious looks as I waded through the crowd gathered around the fire.

I spotted some of the Samaras hanging out, but Xavier wasn’t with them. I pushed through them and headed for the Samara campsite, but as I approached, I picked up Xavier’s scent on the breeze. I turned to look in the direction it was coming from. The woods. Xavier must have headed there—which made perfect sense. When Xavier was stressed, he liked to go and calm down alone.

*He’s in for a disappointment this time. He’s going to have to face up to what he did to Cali. I’m going to make sure that he never goes near her again.*

I followed the scent deep into the woods, and before long, I heard the sound of Xavier’s voice. He was cursing, angry, but I couldn’t see who he was talking to. I paused to listen, just as Xavier shouted, “You fucking bitch! You ruined my life!”

I almost laughed at the hypocrisy. How was Cali in any way responsible for the chaos that Xavier had caused? It was just like him to blame the state of his life on someone other than himself. I stormed toward him, blind with rage. All of my reasoning and all my plans to be calm when I confronted Xavier had gone right out of the window. Cali would be upset with me for attacking Xavier—that much was for sure—but at this moment, the only thing I could think about was showing him the consequences of his actions.

Xavier turned, startled, as I caught him by surprise. I wrapped my hand around his neck and pinned him against a tree, then leaned in close as I tightened my grip on his throat.

“Either you end things with Cali once and for all,” I said, “or I will kill you.”

**Episode 3992**

**Xavier**

Greyson’s grip on my throat tightened, and I was starting to have trouble breathing, but there was no way I would ever let him know that. I wasn’t about to give him the satisfaction. If he wanted to hurt me, he was going to have to try a lot harder than this. And maybe I did want him to hurt me. It’s not like I didn’t deserve it, ultimately.

“I did end things,” I said tersely. “I broke up with her. Or haven’t you been paying attention?”

Greyson shoved me. “You know that’s not what I mean. You might have told her that you were done with her, but then you have the nerve to fucking *kiss her*? *Twice?*”

Ah, so he knew what had just happened with Cali. Greyson was madder than I’d seen him in a long time. His eyes were turbulent and anchored to mine, and he spoke through clenched teeth.

I said nothing. At Greyson’s words, the memory of the kiss flooded my brain. It had felt so right and so wrong, all at the same time. Not to mention how dangerous it was for me to have taken that leap. Adéluce could still hurt Cali for my misstep—but I hadn’t been able to help myself. For all I knew, that might’ve been the last time I ever saw Cali, and my entire being had compelled me to kiss her. One last time.

I pushed Greyson back. “What do you expect? Cali and I are mates. You and I both know that there’s no way to break a mate bond, even if I wanted to. I know it better than anyone, since I tried to do it with Ava. If anything, my trying to break our bond only made it stronger. Is that what you want? For the bond between me and Cali to grow?” I gave him a bitter smile. “Where would that leave you?”

Greyson shoved me again. “You know damn well that’s not what I want.”

“Oh? I’m starting to wonder if *you* even know what you want. You wanted Cali to choose you, so I stepped aside. And yet she still hasn’t made that choice. And even if she does, will that end our mate bond?” I snorted a laugh. “Hardly. Now I see why you’re so mad. Because no matter what, whenever you’re with her, you’ll always have to wonder if she’s thinking of me.”

Doubt flickered across Greyson’s face before he drew back and punched me. Hard.

I spat out a glob of blood and looked him in the eye, laughing. “Feel better now? It doesn’t change anything—you know that, right? You will always have your doubts. You’ll always be asking yourself the question: did she choose me just because there was no other choice?” I swiped a hand across my mouth to wipe away the blood that was dripping down to my chin. “You’ll always wonder if you’re just the default. A door prize.”

Greyson was winding back to punch me again when Ava appeared behind him and grabbed his fist, stopping him.

“That’s my mate you’re about to punch,” she hissed.

Greyson spun around to face her, and Ava gave him a calm, steady look.

“You know,” she said, “this isn’t exactly the way to keep our alliance intact.”

Greyson stood back and looked between the both of us, his face screwed up in disgust. “You two deserve each other,” he spat.

Without sparing either of us another glance, he took off back toward the campground.

“Nothing quite like brotherly love,” Ava said with a smirk.

I chuckled and swiped my mouth again. “Brotherly love indeed. He just hauled off and attacked me. I have no idea why.”

Ava eyed me coolly. “I have my theories,” she said. She glanced back toward the campsite. “I suggest you get yourself cleaned up, let that lip heal, and then come join the pack. They’re starting to ask why their Alpha isn’t with them.”

Ava started to head off.

“Wait,” I said.

She stopped and turned back to face me. I knew that I should tell her what happened with Cali. She deserved to know, and, despite everything, I really wanted honesty to be the policy between us. Not that that would never truly happen with Adéluce pulling the strings.

Aside from that, I was still furious with myself for allowing the kiss to happen. And how could I tell Ava that I’d kissed Cali not even an hour after I’d told her that I was going to make her my Luna? What would she think of me? How would something like that even sound, coming out of my mouth? For all I knew, once I told Ava what I’d done, she might refuse to be my Luna—maybe even pull her support for me altogether.

Ava crossed her arms and shifted impatiently on her feet. “What is it, Xavier?”

“Thanks,” I said. I lifted my hand and motioned in the direction Greyson had gone. “For that.”

I swallowed and stared at her, wondering if, somehow, she already knew about what had happened between me and Cali. I hadn’t seen her around when I was with Cali, but I knew Ava well, and she always had her ways.

“You’re right,” I said. “I need to spend time with the pack. Head back to camp. I’ll be there soon.”

“Good. See you there,” Ava said before nodding and heading off.

Before everything that had happened with Cali, that had been my plan—to join the Samaras for the night and further cement our bond as a pack. But then things had spiraled so far out of control and I’d stopped in the woods to be alone—and to vent. I wondered how much of my one-sided conversation with Adéluce Greyson had overheard. He was probably starting to think I was losing my mind. I almost wished that I were. At least that way, I would’ve had an excuse for all the wild shit I’d done lately.

Kissing Cali was way up there on my list of mistakes—and that list was growing longer by the day. The only thing I didn’t care about at all was how the kiss had wounded Greyson’s pride. Fuck him. It was Adéluce’s role in it all that was driving me to the edge. I supposed I needed to look on the bright side, though. The kiss hadn’t hurt Cali—at least as far as I could tell.

At least not physically.

I *was* hurting, though. Was all of this what Adéluce had wanted all along? Why had she allowed the kiss to happen? For her own amusement?

*Shit. Why do I constantly trip up and play right into her hands? She wants me to suffer, and I’m helping her achieve it. I have to be smarter than her from here on out.*

Adéluce could cause me all the pain in the world and I would take it, as long as she left Cali out of it. But that was the hardest part. I had to stay away from Cali, no matter what. As long as I kept my distance, Cali would be safe. That was the only way to guarantee it. I glanced around the woods, wondering if Adéluce was watching me, even now. She was probably smiling and laughing and thoroughly enjoying my misery.

With a sigh, I made my way back to the Samara camp. Ava was waiting for me inside our tent, and she handed me some clothes. We dressed in a silence that wasn’t exactly uncomfortable, and then I took her hand and we went to the bonfire. I looked down at her, and she looked up at me.

*I should tell her what happened. She deserves to know—especially if she’s going to be my Luna. There shouldn’t be secrets between us. Especially not this kind.*

I squeezed her hand as we neared the bonfire, and she leaned against my shoulder. I let out a sigh, enjoying the contact and wanting a few moments of calm to clear my head. I would tell her everything… Later.

To my disappointment, Cesaries and the rest of the council headed straight for us as we made our way into the center of the party.

Cesaries smiled at us as he approached, glancing back and forth between Ava and me with expectation in his eyes. “So, are we going to be making a special announcement?”

I looked past the council to see that the Redwoods were gathering. A million thoughts raced through my head—and a million emotions were attached to each of those thoughts—but I didn’t let myself dwell on them. This was my new reality—here by Ava’s side as the Samara pack Alpha—and I needed to fully accept that if I had any hope of being happy again.

I looked at Ava and nodded. “Yes. Ava is going to be my Luna.”

Cesaries clapped his hands with pleasure. “Amazing! In that case, we’d better not waste another second.”

**Episode 3993**

I let out a sigh of relief when Greyson returned, but he was tight-lipped as he raced past me into the tent to get dressed. I didn’t know if that was a good sign or a bad sign, but at least he looked a little less angry than he had when he’d rushed out of the tent to find Xavier.

*At least he didn’t come back bloodied. Maybe he and Xavier really had a good talk and came to some kind of agreement. And maybe hell has frozen over, too!*

I hurried after him into the tent, surprised that he wasn’t being more forthcoming. After it became clear that he wasn’t going to volunteer any information, I had to ask.

“So… Did you find Xavier? What happened?”

Greyson was rummaging through his duffel bag and kept his back to me as he answered. His voice was even, almost emotionless. “Just tell me if Xavier ever does anything like that again.”

I reached out and spun him around to face me. “You need to tell me what happened, Greyson. Right now.”

“Everything’s fine,” Greyson said around a sigh. “I said what I needed to say, and that was that.”

He leaned down to kiss me, but I pulled back. As much as I enjoyed kissing Greyson, and no matter how much I wanted to keep doing it, I knew he was just trying to distract me.

“Don’t,” I said. “Not until we get this out in the open. What exactly happened with Xavier? Is everything okay between you? Or have you two at least come to some sort of agreement?”

It was a longshot to think that they might reach some sort of middle ground, but I hoped that they’d made even a modicum of progress. Xavier and I were in a complicated place at the moment, but that didn’t mean I wanted an even larger rift between the brothers. At least not because of me. I knew they’d never be friends, but they could possibly come to some sort of mutual respect. They were in an alliance, after all.

Greyson looked me in the eye. “Some kind of agreement?” He sputtered a laugh. “I wouldn’t say that. I punched him.”

I grinned, thinking he was joking. But when he didn’t smile back, I realized he was serious.

He held up his hand. “I hit him pretty hard, and my knuckles were a little bruised, but they’ve already healed, so you’ll just have to take my word for it.” He took my hand in his and planted a kiss on my own knuckles. “I shouldn’t have hit him. I know that. I hope you’ll forgive me. You have to trust that I went into the conversation with every intention of keeping things civil. But when I saw him, I lost it.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. I’d seen how angry Greyson had been when he’d left. Actually, furious was a more fitting way to describe it. I’d been worried that they were going to kill each other, and it would be all my fault. With the Wolf Moon shining down on everyone, it wouldn’t have surprised me if things had taken an even darker turn.

*If him hitting Xavier is the worst of it, I should be relieved. But why am I suddenly swimming in a nice big dose of Cali Guilt? Maybe it’s because I sort of feel like this is my fault. I should have stopped Xavier right away when he leaned in for the kiss. I could have pushed him back before his lips even touched mine. If I had, Greyson wouldn’t be feeling like this, and things wouldn’t have gotten physical between them.*

But the truth was, I hadn’t *wanted* to keep Xavier from kissing me. Quite the opposite. I’d been swept away by the yearning I’d felt for him ever since he’d walked out on me. In the past, kissing either of my mates had been acceptable—expected, even. It might have been a begrudging acceptance on both their parts, but they’d both understood how the *due destini* was affecting me. Before Xavier had left and blown up all our worlds, he and Greyson had actually seemed to be getting used to the idea of sharing me. Now, in our new reality, that couldn’t have been further from the truth.

*This kiss was different. It was forbidden and wrong on so many levels. Things aren’t like they were before. It’s no wonder Greyson’s angry. He’s probably hurt, too. Part of that is my fault, even if Greyson’s being cool about it and not blaming me.*

It wasn’t lost on me that I’d avoided telling Greyson about the part I’d played in the kiss. How I’d given into it. Practically welcomed it. Thankfully—mercifully—Greyson hadn’t asked. If he had, I would’ve been forced to tell him the truth—that I’d wanted it.

Greyson was hurt and angry, but he wasn’t the only one. I was hurt and angry, too. All I could think about was why Xavier had done it. Had he kissed me because he still loved me, or because he wanted to hurt me? To confuse me? To hurt Greyson? To make things worse for us? For the packs? I didn’t know what the hell to think. It didn’t help that Xavier was refusing to just come out and tell me what was really going on. Even after all this, I knew in my gut that there was something I didn’t know—something more to the story.

*Instead, Xavier just keeps twisting the knife by doing things like by hitting me with the news that Ava is going to be his Luna only moments after kissing me. How the hell did he think I would react to that? Why would he give me hope that things might be taking a turn, only to do the equivalent of throwing cold water in my face immediately afterward?*

Greyson was pulling on a shirt when I reached out to stop him. “I meant what I said before. I love you, Greyson, and I’m sorry that this happened.”

Greyson pulled me into a tight embrace and smiled. “I love you, too.”

He kissed me again, and this time I didn’t pull away. This wasn’t taboo. This wasn’t going to start a pack war. Kissing him didn’t fill me with guilt. It felt good—better than good. I leaned into the kiss, and Greyson’s hands dropped down to caress my back. Just as our kiss began to lay the foundations of something else, the blast of a trumpet cut through the air.

Still breathing fast, I pulled away and looked out through the small gap in the tent flap. “What the hell was that?”

“Only one way to find out.” Greyson took my hand and pulled me out of the tent. Everyone was gathering by the bonfire. “There’s probably going to be some kind of announcement. Let’s check it out.”

I stopped him and handed him his shirt. “Put this on, otherwise you and your sexy body will distract me from anything and everything else that’s going on.”

Greyson chuckled as he slipped on his shirt, and then we went to join the others. Cesaries was standing in the center of the assembled wolves, and he waved his hands to quiet the crowd. He was standing behind a podium, and he beamed proudly as he spoke. “The Samaras will be gaining a Luna tonight—yet another sign that the Samara pack is well on its way to reaching its full potential.”

My throat felt tight and dry. The rest of me was suddenly sweating, and I felt like I was burning in every place Xavier’s hands had been on me. There was a smattering of applause and a few cheers, mostly from the Samaras.

Cesaries waited for the noise to die down before he continued. “Xavier Evers has chosen Ava Reed to be his Luna, and we will all have privilege of attending their Luna ceremony, blessed by the brilliant light of the Wolf Moon!”

Cesaries stepped aside to reveal Xavier and Ava, standing hand in hand. My stomach lurched violently, even though I was fully prepared. Xavier had told me as plainly as he could that this was going to happen, and happen tonight, but that didn’t soften the blow of seeing it.

“Guess he wasn’t lying about this,” Greyson muttered. He tightened his hold on my hand, as if reacting to the turmoil I was feeling.

I leaned into him as cheers rained down around us. I looked around and saw for the first time how everything in the area had been decorated. It was a far more festive approach than had been taken for Joss’s Luna ceremony—but still not quite as over-the-top as the event Lucian had put together when he’d been hell-bent on making Seluna his Luna.

I looked around, trying to spot him. I was sure he was busy pointing out the shortcomings of this ceremony to whoever had the misfortune of standing next to him. I didn’t see him, and I decided to count my blessings that he wasn’t close by, for once.

Rishika and Artemis came walking over, holding hands. I was glad to see Artemis walking around, if only barely. She was still pale and drawn, and I knew that she wasn’t back to her full strength. I winced as I thought of Lola burying her fangs in Artemis’s neck and dragging her toward the woods.

“Big Mac kicked us out of the moonshine tent,” Rishika said. “She’s about to do the spell for Lola.”

**Episode 3994**

“Big Mac’s going to do it now?” I asked, looking up at the Wolf Moon. It was bigger and brighter than ever. “Should we maybe rethink this?”

Rishika shrugged. She turned and glanced back in the direction of the moonshine tent. “Whatever she has to do to make sure that Lola stops randomly ripping into people’s necks, I’m good with it personally.”

I almost opened my mouth to defend Lola, but considering the state Artemis was in, I decided it might not be the best idea. Rishika was allowed to be angry that Lola had, in effect, treated Artemis like a T-bone steak. I wasn’t too happy about it either—even though I knew that Lola hadn’t done it on purpose.

Still, maybe we were too hasty to ask Big Mac to use magic again on a night like this. Did we have any other options?

“Excuse me,” I said. “I’ll be back.”

I raced off toward Big Mac’s tent, keen to get as far away from the Xavier and Ava show as I possibly could.

“I’m going to find Elle to check in,” Greyson called after me. “I’ll come to the moonshine tent after that.”

I waved in response, and then I put my head down and ran toward Big Mac’s tent, hoping I wasn’t too late. Big Mac had warned me not to use my magic, so I was shocked that she was about to use hers—especially on Lola. What if it got out of control or overwhelmed her and people—*Lola*—got hurt as a result?

I reached Big Mac’s tent in no time. Jay was standing outside, and he stopped me just as I was about to rush in. “Don’t, Cali. Big Mac warned us all to stay away.”

“Aren’t you worried?” I asked him.

Jay pointed to his eye patch. “Um, yes. I’m fully aware of what witches are capable of,” he said. “Plus, everyone’s made it pretty clear that magic tonight is a toss-up.”

“Then we should at least talk to Big Mac and find out if we have any other options. If we’re not already too late, that is.”

I pushed past Jay and entered the tent. Lola was passed out, stretched out on a cot, and Big Mac was beside her, raising her hands.

“Wait!” I shouted.

Big Mac looked up at me, her eyes blazing with anger. “I said I was not to be disturbed!”

Tamping down the fear that had risen within me at the look in Big Mac’s eye, I rushed toward her with Jay right on my heels. “What are you planning to do?”

Big Mac’s voice was icier than I’d ever heard it—and that was saying a lot. “I’m doing exactly what I told you I was going to do. Doesn’t anyone ever listen to me? Oh wait, they don’t, which is why you’re standing here when I explicitly told everyone to leave me alone.”

I took a small step back, wanting to at least be out of Big Mac’s reach. “But… Didn’t you warn me about using magic during the Wolf Moon? What if something bad happens? What if the spell does something it’s not supposed to?”

Big Mac rolled her eyes and looked even more annoyed—if that were even possible. “Oh, gee. I must have forgotten.” She shook her head. “Of *course* I know the risks! I’m the one who told *you* about the Wolf Moon’s effects on magic, for goodness’ sake. But look at her.” Big Mac thrust her hand down at Lola. “She can’t be seen like this.”

As I looked at Lola, I understood what Big Mac was getting at. Her fangs were showing, and her eyes were totally bloodshot. She looked like a mess. And if her fangs didn’t retract, it was definitely going to cause some issues with all the werewolves out there…

“Can she not put her fangs away?” I asked.

“If she could, don’t you think she would have by now? That’s the whole point,” Big Mac said. “That’s literally why I’m in here, casting a spell—because she can’t retract her fangs. The vampire part of her must be out of whack because of the moon. Now get out.”

Jay stepped forward. “No.”

Big Mac looked taken aback. “What?”

“Everyone’s freaked me out about using magic tonight. I don’t want something to happen to my mate.” He knelt at Lola’s side. “I’ll take full responsibility for her. I’ll watch her.” He pulled Lola’s hand to his lips and kissed it.

*That’s really romantic… and really dangerous. Lola’s bitten Jay before, and she definitely doesn’t have full control over herself tonight.*

“Do you think it’s safe for you to be alone with her?” I asked Jay.

“I can take care of myself,” Jay said, stroking Lola’s face as she slept.

Jay seemed resolved to take care of this, but I wasn’t sure it was such a good idea. I’d thought that all Lola’s vampire urges had been taken care of with Emmett and Jacs’s help, but clearly that wasn’t the case. It couldn’t be a coincidence that Lola was having fang issues on the same night as the Wolf Moon. We had to keep her safe, and ourselves.

I shuddered. Werewolves didn’t like vampires, hybrid or otherwise, and the entire area was flooded with werewolves. It didn’t help that everyone was under the influence of the Wolf Moon—that’s how I was seeing it. Despite Greyson’s skepticism, I truly believed that it was taking a toll on all of us.

“Jay, I know you want to help protect Lola, but I think it might be dangerous for you under the circumstances.” I looked at Big Mac. “But so is using magic right now.”

“Setting her loose to attack more people is the bad idea here, Cali,” Big Mac said, exasperated. “If you all decide to forgo the magic and send her off with her ill-equipped boyfriend here, I’m going to have to wash my hands of this whole thing. I realize that you’re one of those ‘love conquers all’ types, Jay, but I’m telling you, there’s no guarantee that Lola won’t rip you to shreds the moment she wakes up and you’re alone. But if you’re willing to take the risk…”

“We should ask Lola,” I said.

Big Mac smirked and rolled her eyes. “And risk waking her up?” She reached behind the bar and pulled a wooden stake out of her bag. “Just in case.”

I snatched the stake away from her. “What are you even doing with this?”

Big Mac eyed me coolly. “Calm down. It’s for the tents. I thought it might come in handy—not that I need to explain myself to you, Caliana.”

Big Mac turned away and started wiping down the bar top. I could tell that she was seconds away from physically kicking us all out, or me at least.

“We won’t need the stake,” Jay said. “I’ll take good care of Lola.”

“I want Big Mac to use her magic,” Lola suddenly croaked. I jumped at the sound of her voice. Immediately, I braced myself. Was she still feral? She sounded more like herself, but…

“Lola?” Jay asked. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” she said, still sounding hoarse. “I’m so sorry, baby. I didn’t mean to do it. I’m so sorry—”

She started to sob, and Jay scooped her into his arms. “It’s okay, you didn’t mean to.”

“Please, I want Big Mac to help me,” she cried.

Jay shook his head. “But, Lola, tonight’s all weird with the moon, and Big Mac said it herself—using magic on a night like this—”

“I don’t think I can control myself for very long,” she said in between sobs. “I already hurt Artemis; I don’t want to hurt anyone else.”

I would’ve argued with her, but she was right. We were stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Big Mac sighed loudly. “Do it, don’t do it, I don’t care. Just make up your minds so I can get on with my life. I have a moonshine business to attend to. So, tell me now, once and for all—are we doing this, or are we not? Because if not”—she thrust a hand at the door—“you can see yourselves out. Now.”

Jay looked at me, and I looked at Lola. She nodded, revealing her fangs. “Fine. Let’s do it.”

Big Mac came back to kneel beside Lola and shot a glare at both me and Jay. “I don’t like working with an audience. Give me some space.”

“Of course,” I yelped.

Jay and I took a few steps back.

I crossed my fingers and held my breath as Big Mac started moving her hands over Lola, muttering a spell under her breath. The tent began to vibrate and flap as if being blown by a strong wind, and the candles began to flicker and dance. I was surprised that I didn’t feel anything—especially since I could almost sense the surge of Big Mac’s magic being released. It was a sensation that I couldn’t remember ever having been aware of before.

Lola closed her eyes and rose up to levitate above the cot. Shit. Was the spell supposed to do that? Then her eyes snapped open, and she let out a bloodcurdling scream.

**Episode 3995**

**Ava**

I was in my tent with Marissa and Josephine, who were rushing around to help me get dressed. The Luna ceremony wasn’t even an hour away, and it should’ve felt like a wedding day. Instead, it felt like there was a dark cloud hanging over me.

“Hair up or down?” Marissa asked, raking her fingers through my hair and staring at my reflection in the mirror she’d propped against the wall of the tent.

“Down,” Josephine said. “Ava’s hair is one of her best features—she definitely has to show it off.”

“I vote up,” Marissa said. “When your hair is up and contained, it holds up better against wind, rain, humidity, all of that.”

“No. You’re wrong. If we cover it with hairspray it won’t move an inch, even if a monsoon blows in.” Josephine picked up a can of holding spray and gave it a few test sprays in the air.

“That sounds really cute: stiff hair for her wedding. But at least she’ll be wearing it down!” Marissa said sarcastically.

“It’s not a wedding,” I said sharply, interrupting Josephine before she tried to plead her case again. Besides, I wasn’t in the mood for any unnecessary bullshit right now. “I’ll wear it down. No hairspray, though. I’m not worried about the wind or rain or anything else. It’ll all be fine.”

“Geez, who put a bee in your bonnet?” Marissa asked.

“She’s just anxious,” Josephine said. Thankfully, she dropped the hair discussion. She picked up a tube of lipstick and held it up to my face. “What about this shade of red for tonight?”

“Sure. It would be good if she were about to go out with a vampire,” Marissa deadpanned. She picked up a more neutral color—one that I wore quite often. “How about this one?”

“Yes, that one is giving ‘divorcée preparing for an exciting night at the supermarket.’” Josephine scrunched up her nose in distaste. “But what do I know?”

I looked between the two tubes of lipstick and then quickly closed my eyes to picture how I’d look in each. When I opened them, I’d made my decision. I didn’t need either of them to weigh in.

I reached up and took the tube from Josephine’s hand. “This is the one,” I said, gazing in the mirror as I applied it quickly and expertly.

Luckily, there was no argument about my outfit: a long black dress with a plunging neckline and a cinched waist. I’d brought it just in case. I’d never been to a summit, so I’d had no idea how formal I might have to be. Never in a million years had I imagined I’d end up wearing it to my Luna ceremony.

I slid it on and was pleased to find that it fit perfectly. I twisted around to admire the way it left my shoulders exposed. I didn’t care if I was going to be a little chilly in the dress—I wanted everyone to see my shoulder once I had the mark. I twisted back around and smoothed down the front. I felt absolutely gorgeous.

“You look amazing,” Josephine said. “Just divine.”

“Perfect,” Marissa added. “Like a dream.”

With all the biggest decisions about my look for the night taken care of, we moved on to adding the finishing touches. Marissa popped open a jar of shimmering body butter, and we applied it all over my shoulders, collarbone, and down my legs, which were exposed by a high yet tasteful slit. When we were done, I admired the soft, subtle glow of my skin in the mirror.

“I think I’m ready,” I said, but that dark cloud still lingered over me.

A new spike of anxiety snaked its way into my stomach. No one had brought up what was actually about to happen—namely, Xavier carving the Luna symbol into my flesh while the entire summit watched. Lunas were always judged harshly by how much they screamed or squirmed. I had to do this, no going back.

Aunt Leona and Uncle Jason were going to be there, too—and probably casting a critical eye on me. They were both happy with how things had turned out for Knox, but feeling like part of the family again was a little surreal. It was what I’d wanted for so long, but my mind kept finding reasons why it was a lie, or ways that I was going to ruin it.

I tried to shake all the heavy stuff away and focus on getting ready. I should’ve been enjoying this, not questioning it. But my mind kept wandering back to the confrontation between Greyson and Xavier that I’d stumbled into.

*Was it about Cali? Does it even matter if it was? I’m going to be Xavier’s Luna soon, and there will have to be boundaries in place once that happens. At least as his Luna, I’ll have the right to put them there.*

Marissa added a final finishing touch to my hair, then sat the flat iron down with a bang. She took a step back to admire her handiwork, then wiped a tear from her eye. “You look absolutely stunning, Ava. Just beautiful.”

She pulled me into a hug, and I leaned into it.

“Thanks, Marissa,” I said, my mouth muffled against her shoulder. I was holding back my own tears, which was strange in and of itself. I wasn’t much of a crier, but things were so good right now that I could hardly believe my luck.

“I’m just so happy for you, Ava,” Marissa added. “I’m so glad that Xavier finally made the right decision.”

That hadn’t always been the case with Marissa. She’d had her share of doubts about Xavier… But they’d been reasonable doubts. Hell, I’d had my doubts, too.But I’d always known this moment would come. Xavier and I were meant to be together, and he was finally coming to believe that as much as I did.

“Could you guys give me a few minutes?” I asked them. “I just need some time alone to get my head on straight.”

“Of course. Call us if you need us,” Marissa said as she and Josephine slipped out of the tent.

Once they were gone, I let out a big breath and turned to face the mirror. It all felt so surreal. After everything we’d been through, this was really about to happen. I remembered when Xavier and I had started out together—when we’d first discovered we were mates. I’d always known this moment would come.

I remembered it like it was yesterday. Xavier had been laughing at something I’d said, and then he’d paused to brush something from my hair. It had been then, in that seemingly trivial moment, that I’d known I was going to be his Luna someday. That I would always be by his side, and that we would always face the world together.

Of course, that had been before Silas had nearly destroyed that for me. For the both of us. This was my second chance, and I wasn’t about to let it slip away. As far as I was concerned, there was nothing to stand between us anymore. We were meant to be together, and it was finally happening.

I took another moment to gather myself, smoothing my hands down over my waist to where my dress flared out at the hips.

*This is the last time I’m going to look like this or feel like this. The next time I look in this mirror, I’ll be his Luna. That’s what you want, right?*

I could hear the crowd gathering outside, and I thought about how different my teenage fantasy Luna ceremony had been—like a fairy tale. A happily ever after, without the brutal carving of flesh. A small chill went through me, but I shrugged it off. I didn’t really care about the pain—I would take reality over fantasy any day.

I was just about to step out of the tent when Aunt Leona steamrolled her way in. I backed up a few paces, surprised.

“Oh, Ava!” Aunt Leona said after stepping back to take me in. “Your mother would’ve been so proud of you.”

She pulled me into a hug, and, still shocked, I stood there stiffly in her embrace.

Leona finally let me go and then looked me in the eye. “I mean it, Ava. You look so beautiful.”

*Am I dreaming right now? Leona never gives me compliments.*

I felt something hot on my cheek and realized I was tearing up. Leona stuck a hand into her purse and pulled out a tissue. “Here you go, dear. You don’t want to mess up that beautiful makeup. Make sure to dab and not wipe!”

I took the tissue and did as she’d instructed, then looked in the mirror to check my eyes. Luckily, my mascara hadn’t run or smudged.

“This is such a perfect way to end the summit,” Leona said. “And how wonderful that Knox was spared by you, and now you’ll be the Luna of his pack! That’s what family is all about—celebrating good moments, looking out for each other, and spending time together.”

“Yes, I’m beginning to see that,” I said quietly.

“Yes…” She hesitated. “And I know you’ve had your share of struggles, but hopefully tonight is the beginning of a lifetime of happiness. I know from experience that being a Luna is one of the most important and fulfilling roles a werewolf can perform. But it does take effort.”

“Thanks, Aunt Leona,” I said. “And I know it takes work, but I think I’m up for the challenge.”

She reached out and squeezed my hand, nodding. “Xavier seems like a fine young man—but make no mistake, his Luna will be responsible for his happiness.”

“Mm-hmm…” I was starting to wonder where all this was going.

“Do you know how to please your Alpha?”

My cheeks warmed. “I think I have that covered,” I said briskly

I thought back to Marissa giving me a similar speech—one that had charged me with doing whatever it took to become Luna. And it looked like I’d done just that.

Leona beamed at me. “Then you should take advantage of tonight’s Wolf Moon and do the best thing you can do to strengthen a pack.”

I arched an eyebrow. “And what’s that?”

Aunt Leona’s smile grew. “A baby, of course.”

**Episode 3996**

Lola was still hovering above the cot like she was possessed, and I couldn’t look away. Her eyes were red and dilated, and her mouth had gone completely slack. She was still my best friend, but also not, at the same time. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing, and I was starting to worry that Lola might end up stuck this way forever. Who knew what could happen under the light of the Wolf Moon?

My heart racing, I stepped toward Lola. “Is that supposed to be happening?”

“Don’t get close, Cali!” Big Mac screamed.

But it was too late. I was blasted back with a force so powerful that it sent me crashing right into Big Mac. We both tumbled to the ground, and as we tried to disentangle ourselves, I heard the sound of a struggle.

“I was afraid this would happen,” Big Mac hissed, shoving me off her and getting to her feet. “No—I *knew* this would happen once you got involved.”

“What? What did you know was going to happen?” I asked. “If you knew someone was going to get blasted by some invisible force field if they tried to get near Lola, you could’ve said something!”

Then I saw it. Lola had stopped floating and was now trying to sink her fangs into Jay’s neck, and she was damn close to doing it. She moved fast; it was as if Lola had acquired the ability to fly. Her feet weren’t even touching the ground, and she was still doing everything in her power to suck Jay’s blood.

“Jay!” I shouted. “Get away from her!”

Under any other circumstances, seeing Lola fly might’ve been fun and exciting. But right now, the sight of her soaring through the air and trying to chomp down on her mate was nothing but terrifying. What was happening? Had the spell not helped with *anything*?

I finally got to my feet, wanting to help Jay, but not sure what the hell I could do. “Lola! Stop! That’s your mate! You don’t want to do this, I promise you! Jay is your soulmate, not your dinner!”

Lola didn’t even look at me. It was like I wasn’t talking at all. She was just fixated on Jay’s neck.

“I don’t think that’s helping, Cali,” Jay said as he struggled to keep his floating mate at arm’s length.

Big Mac shoved me aside and picked up the stake. “I’ll stop her.”

My eyes went wide. “You’re not going to stake my friend!”

Big Mac scowled at me. “I’m just putting it away so that no one gets hurt. Now get out of my way and let me put an end to this.”

Just as Big Mac lifted her hands to cast a spell, Jay said, “Wait! I know how to handle Lola.”

He pulled her down against him, making sure to keep his neck out of her reach. Then he turned her around so that she was facing him. I was horrified. Lola looked less like my friend and more like a demon. I didn’t think I’d ever be able to unsee this.

*What if we can’t get Lola back under control? What will happen to her? What will happen to* us*? And what about the rest of the summit out there?*

I pushed away an image of Lola tearing through the camp, trying to drain every werewolf at the summit.

*Shit, this is not good…*

“Look at me,” Jay said to Lola, his voice firm.

Lola resisted, still too busy trying to lunge at Jay’s neck. He was doing a good job of keeping her at bay, but I didn’t know how much longer he was going to be able to keep it up. Lola was being absolutely relentless, and Big Mac was hovering to the side, her hands still raised just in case Jay’s plan backfired.

“Come on, Lola. It’s me. See me. Look at me.” Jay held her back with one hand and reached out to caress her face with the other. “Shh, calm down. This isn’t what you want.”

I couldn’t believe how calm Jay was being. If a wolf was seconds away from ripping me to pieces, I was pretty sure I’d have been running like the wind and screaming my lungs out. But maybe I wouldn’t be if it were Greyson. No, I’d definitely be hugging him and gently touching his face while speaking to him in a soothing voice.

Love like the mate bond would make you fearless.

I was relieved when Lola began to calm down a little. Jay’s words were finally having an effect on her. She’d stopped straining toward him, and while her eyes were still creepy as hell, it finally actually looked like she was *seeing* him. Her fangs were still out, but it seemed like things were taking a good turn. Jay leaned forward to kiss her.

“No!” Big Mac and I screamed in unison.

Jay ignored us and pressed his lips to Lola’s mouth. She bit down on his lip, drawing blood.

“Jay!” I said, reaching for him—just as Lola gasped. “Are you crazy? What are you doing?”

Her eyes switched back to their normal brown, and her fangs receded. She cast a confused look around the tent, looking drained. “Jay?” she said in a small voice. “What happened?”

“It’s okay, Lola. I’ve got you,” Jay replied. He picked her up and went to lay her back down on the cot.

Lola reached up to touch Jay’s bloodied lip. “Did I… Is everyone okay? Artemis?”

Jay wrapped Lola in his arms. “She’s okay. We’re all okay, baby. Don’t worry about that. We know you weren’t yourself. It’s okay.”

“It’s definitely *not* okay,” Big Mac snarled. “This is not how that spell was supposed to work, regardless of your interruption.” She glared at me. “My concerns about the Wolf Moon and magic were right. I’m initiating a magic lockdown until the end of the night.”

“No arguments here,” I said. “And I’m really sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Big Mac grumbled. “It’s over.”

It really seemed over when Jay and Lola started making out, and Big Mac let out a massive sigh and snatched up her things. “I don’t have time for this. I’m going to go and do a quick walk around the camp to burn off a little steam, and you’d all better be out of here by the time I get back. I have a business to run!”

Big Mac tore out of the tent. Left alone with Jay and Lola, I looked away as their kissing intensified. I didn’t think I’d ever felt more like a third wheel, but I didn’t want to interrupt their tender moment after everything they’d gone through.

I considered going after Big Mac to ask if Lola was completely out of danger, but I decided against it, given the mood Big Mac was in at the moment.

“Hey,” Greyson said as he came walking into the tent. “Elle is still hanging around with Ravi—” He trailed off as he got a good look at the tent. “What the hell happened in here?”

Jay and Lola were still too busy making out to answer, and I grabbed Greyson’s hand and pulled him out of the tent. “Lola went all *Exorcist* on Jay, but he seems to have it under control now.”

Greyson flashed me a skeptical look. “Did you just say that Lola ‘went all *Exorcist* on Jay’?”

I nodded. “Yes. I know you don’t believe in it, but there’s something about the Wolf Moon that has everyone acting strangely. Big Mac says it’s affecting magic, too, and when she tried to cast a spell to calm Lola down, things went haywire. I’d moved closer to Lola, there was this force field thing… I don’t know. It was all kind of a mess. I don’t think that’s a coincidence with the moon.”

“Some random phenomenon is affecting magic again? What else is new?” Greyson joked. “So now those two are sucking face in celebration of Lola not draining Jay of all his blood?”

I nodded. “Pretty much. It was life or death in there for a minute.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re okay, love,” Greyson said.

I smiled thinly. “I’m glad Jay’s not ripped to shreds…”

Suddenly there was a loud sound, almost like a trumpet.

“Attention summit attendees! The Luna ceremony of Xavier Evers and Ava Reed of the Samara pack is about to begin!”

Greyson shook his head once the announcement was over. “I don’t know what the hell is wrong with Xavier. This whole thing is a joke.”

I didn’t know if “joke” was the word I would’ve used to describe it, but regardless, I wasn’t in any mood to watch it happen. “Yeah. I wish I knew what was really going through his head. But I suppose it doesn’t matter anymore.”

Greyson stepped forward and took my face between his hands. “How are you feeling? Should we just skip the whole damn thing? What do you want to do?”

**Episode 3997**

**Greyson**

Cali was trying to be strong, but it was going to be extremely painful for her to watch Xavier take Ava as his Luna, and I knew it. I tried to think about how I would feel if I had to watch Cali make such a big pledge and commitment to someone else—and it wasn’t lost on me that that could’ve been a reality if she’d ever chosen Xavier—but it was almost too much to even think about. My heart would probably break into a million pieces if I ever had to witness that.

“No, I think I have to see it with my own eyes in order to believe it,” Cali said. “And once that’s done… Then I’ll know for sure that things between Xavier and me will never be the same again.”

I recalled how Cali had witnessed Joss’s Luna ceremony. At the time, she’d been hurt that I hadn’t chosen her, but she’d stood by and watched anyway. This felt different, though. My choice had made sense.

I’d chosen Joss because being a Luna was dangerous, and Joss had been a strong, experienced fighter. Even though she’d been killed in the end, my choice had still made sense. There’d also been the very real possibility of Cali not being able to survive a Luna ceremony—and we still didn’t know if she could. On top of all that, Cali just hadn’t been ready to become a Luna back then. She was more than ready now, though, and I couldn’t wait to make it official. I only hoped that my brother’s terrible choices hadn’t put a bad taste in Cali’s mouth about the whole thing.

*Whatever it is that Xavier’s doing, it makes no sense at all. It’s like he’s deliberately trying to hurt Cali. It was bad enough that he ran off and became the Samara Alpha, but to follow that up with choosing Ava of all people as his Luna? The same Ava he murdered, once upon a time? The same Ava he did everything in his power to rid himself of when she returned from the spirit world? Where’s the sense in any of that?*

“Cali, really think about this. You’re under no obligation to torment yourself by watching them. We can take a midnight hike, go spend some time together,” I said. I looked deep into her eyes, hoping that she was going to say yes.

“I would love that, Greyson, you know I would,” she said. “But I have to witness this. I know it’ll be painful, but I’m also supposed to be the Redwood Luna. I need to be there—I need to show everyone that I’m strong enough to watch it happen.”

I reached out and cupped her chin. “And I’ll stand with you. We’ll watch this catastrophe together.”

I kissed her softly, wishing that I could just whisk her away from all of this. I knew she was trying to prove a point, but I wanted her to take care of herself. She wanted to be strong, but it wouldn’t have made her weak to choose not to watch Xavier make one of the biggest mistakes of his life.

Cali clung to me, and I tightened my hold on her. We stayed that way until I heard someone clear their throat behind us. I turned to see Lucian standing with Elle.

*Great. Bad enough that we have to watch Ava and Xavier playing power couple, but now I have to suffer through more of this Lucian and Elle bullshit, too?*

Elle looked at Cali. “Aren’t you mad that Xavier is doing this?” she asked.

“I’m not mad, I guess,” Cali said. “Confused and hurt? Yes.”

Elle crossed her arms. “Well, I *am* mad. We should all be looking for Helix instead of watching this ceremony. It’s nothing but a distraction. This whole night has been.”

I looked out toward the gathering. Dayton and Geena hadn’t come back yet—which didn’t necessarily mean anything—but if they didn’t get back soon, Cesaries might start asking about them again. Their absence would be hard to cover up for long. Especially since they were the Nightshade Alpha and Luna, and I was sure the council expected them to be here for the ceremony. Even as weird as it all was, I knew that I had to be here, too. My absence would’ve been even weirder. Tradition and custom trumped personal rifts any day in werewolf culture.

“Elle, we’ll look into finding Helix as soon as the ceremony is over,” I said.

“Good,” she said. “Hopefully it’ll be quick.”

Cali sighed. “Let’s just get this over with.”

She was putting up a brave front, but I could hear the anxiety in her voice. I took her hand and squeezed it.

“I’m here, so please lean on me whenever you need to, love,” I whispered in her ear.

Cali looked up at me and smiled. “I know. And thank you.”

We made our way toward the spot where the ceremony would be held, and Lucian snorted as it came into view.

“These decorations are sadly lacking.” Lucian turned to Elle. “I promise that our ceremony will make whatever this is look like a backyard barbecue.”

Just as Lucian said that, we passed by a smoking grill being manned by a bunch of half-drunk werewolves. I looked at Elle, trying to gauge how she’d taken Lucian’s statement. I wondered if this was the first time he’d brought up their prospective Luna ceremony. Knowing the princeling, though, he’d almost certainly discussed it with her before. Lucian was addicted to moving too fast when it came to love, so it wouldn’t have surprised me if he’d already started showing her fabric swatches and catering options.

“You okay?” I asked Elle, not wanting to zero in on the statement Lucian had made—especially since he was right beside us.

Elle shrugged and looked away.

I shifted my attention back to Cali when I felt her hand tighten around mine. We were getting closer now, and she was probably second-guessing her decision to attend the ceremony.

I reached out to her via mind link. *Are you good, love? We can still ditch this. Don’t feel like you need to prove anything to me, or anyone else. We can turn around and leave right now. There’s a good chance no one will even notice that we’re not there.*

I knew that wasn’t true, but I didn’t want her to feel any obligation to do this.

*I’m sure*,she replied. *But that doesn’t mean I’m not feeling like I might throw up at any moment.*

I threw an arm around her shoulders. *I’ll do everything I can to help you through this, you know that, right?*

I suddenly wondered how Xavier would feel if Cesaries announced that I was about to make Cali my Luna—especially at an event as big and well-attended as the summit. I smiled at the thought. I didn’t really have to wonder. I knew it would drive Xavier mad with anger, jealousy, and regret. In the past, I never would’ve taken so much pleasure in the idea of inflicting pain like that on Xavier, but things had changed. Xavier deserved all the pain he was going to get.

We fell in with the other Redwoods and together, we made our way down to the river. We were almost there when I nudged Cali’s shoulder. Lola, looking very un-*Exorcist* like, was walking with Jay, hand in hand. I’d hoped that seeing her friend looking normal and happy would make Cali feel a little better, but she barely reacted when she saw them.

*Cali, this might be your last chance to turn around*, I said. I wouldn’t care if she left mid-ceremony, but I knew that Cali would. If she slipped away right now, it might not make as much of a spectacle as if she needed to leave right in the thick of things.

*No, I’ve got this. I promise.* She still looked like a deer in headlights.

We finally reached the bank of the Snake River. The air was buzzing with conversation and laughter—all the normal vibes of a Luna ceremony. I realized that Cali and I were probably the only ones in the whole place—other than the other Redwoods, perhaps—who weren’t happy that this ceremony was taking place.

It was strange. I’d fantasized about the day that Xavier moved on to someone else and left Cali to me, but now that it had actually happened, all I could think about was how I wished that it had gone down some other way. A way that hadn’t hurt Cali so badly and put her in such an awkward position.

I looked around. I didn’t see Xavier or Ava.

*I doubt that they’ve chickened out, though it’s a nice wish.*

I happened to meet Malakai’s angry gaze, and we stood there locked in a stare down until Cesaries began to speak again, drawing everyone’s attention.

“Please, everyone, form a circle. The Luna ceremony is about to begin.”

**Episode 3998**

I looked around, wondering how we were supposed to form a circle while standing at the edge of a lake. Then I watched as some of the others began to move into the icy cold river to form the circle around the edge of the bank. Thankfully, we were far enough away from the bank that we didn’t have to go into the water. It was one thing to watch your mate conduct a Luna ceremony with another person, but it was quite another to have to be cold and wet while doing so.

I looked up and noticed then that there were twinkle lights strung everywhere. I wondered how they’d gotten there, and why the council had put them up. They didn’t seem to be their taste—but there was a lot I didn’t know about the council and its customs.

The Wolf Moon shone high and white above the scene, and it all looked so picturesque—like something right out of a movie. But despite the beauty of it all, my nausea was only intensifying. If this were any other ceremony, I would’ve been so excited, and thought all the decorations and small touches were beautiful. But this wasn’t any other ceremony. This was my mate proclaiming his commitment to another woman.

I closed my eyes and tried to concentrate on my breathing, still clutching Greyson’s hand. I opened my eyes and saw Ravi lean over to whisper in Rishika’s ear, and I could just make out what he said.

“Isn’t this completely fucked up? Why is Xavier doing this?”

*Great question. I’ve been asking myself the same thing every single day since Xavier left me, and I’m no closer to an answer.*

Just like that, the knot in the pit of my stomach that had only just started to unwind was back full force. This was the second Luna ceremony of one of my mates that I wasn’t involved in. I’d meant it when I’d told Greyson about needing to witness this with my own eyes. A spiteful part of me hoped that Xavier looked me right in the eyes while I stood here holding Greyson’s hand… But then I remembered the kiss we’d shared earlier.

*This all just feels so weird. The emotion of this. The wrongness of it. Something feels… not right. It’s unsettling in a way that I can’t really put my finger on.*

When I’d watched Joss’s ceremony, I’d had a similar feeling that something just wasn’t right. It might’ve just been the mate bond—the bond that I hadn’t even realized was there, so early on—reacting to the sight of something that could drive a wedge between us, or maybe it had been something else? Perhaps this felt wrong because I’d seen the look in Xavier’s eyes, and it didn’t match the way he’d been behaving toward me lately. It was all just so confusing.

I flashed back to how Xavier had looked at me before and after the kiss. I remembered his body language, and even the argument we’d had after I’d helped him with Helix. It was all too much, and I wished my mind would slow down and clear so that I could get through this.

I squeezed my eyes shut and fought back the very real urge to throw up. I couldn’t imagine anything worse—Ava would probably appear right as I was puking, her gorgeous hair flowing and her beautiful dress hitting her curves just right and Xavier right by her side, both of them watching me with disgust.

*This is a nightmare. A pure, real nightmare that I’m living in—and that I can’t escape. It almost feels like Seluna is still wreaking havoc on my life. Like I’m cursed, or being punished for something, but I don’t know what it is.*

I took a few more deep breaths to calm my nausea. Greyson was pretty much steering me into place as the circle expanded to accommodate more guests. I shivered as the reality of it all continued to hit me from every angle.

*I dreamed of being Xavier’s Luna. I asked him to give me the Luna mark so many times in the past. And now he’s going to give it to Ava. Even the thought of it is a lot. Maybe more than I can bear. And when it comes to Ava, he doesn’t even have to wonder if she will survive it—she’s stronger than me. She’s a werewolf. It’s like they’re meant to be.*

My heart was pounding almost painfully. I was starting to wonder if coming here to see this had been a big mistake. I should’ve taken Greyson up on his offer of a midnight hike—anything to get me away from this. I could tell him now. I could reach out to Greyson via mind link and tell him that I couldn’t do this. That I needed to get away from here—and he would help me do it. But I couldn’t make myself ask. Staying here to see this was masochistic, but it was also necessary.

Ravi snorted behind me. “It’s like witnessing a train wreck. You want to look away, but you literally can’t stop watching.”

“Keep it down,” Greyson warned. “We might not be into this, but the other packs might not understand why we’re complaining.”

I knew Greyson was right—but Ravi was, too. This *was* like a train wreck. Only I wasn’t just watching it happen; I was in the wreck, too.

My thoughts were growing more frantic by the second. *Why is Xavier doing this? What’s the reason? The real one? Is he doing it because he really wants Ava to be his Luna, or because he knows how deeply it will hurt me?*

None of it made sense. If he was just trying to hurt me, why had he kissed me like that? Like there was feeling behind it? Maybe it was to make it feel worse, and that’s all it was. But why had he proven that his feelings for me hadn’t soured as much as he’d been trying to make it seem? Why had he made it seem like hope? None of it had felt like a joke, then. It had felt as real as any kiss we’d ever shared. Maybe even more so.

*Stop it, Cali. You can’t keep torturing yourself like this. You can’t keep fantasizing about old times and taking all these trips down memory lane. There’s no point. Xavier’s made his decision, and that’s that. This is too painful a journey to keep taking with him.*

Artemis came walking up to me. She looked like she’d fully recovered from Lola’s attack, and I was happy to see her.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

I nodded, swallowing back the queasiness that was still building up inside me. Artemis squeezed my shoulder in support, and I placed my hand over hers.

I looked around, thinking about what Greyson had said about everyone else being happy—or at the very least not *un*happy—about seeing Xavier and Ava come together like this. I saw a lot of smiling faces, and I even heard snatches of conversations between people who seemed to be happy that Ava and Xavier had “finally come back together.” Those comments hit me like a kick to the gut. Ava and Xavier had history, and people were talking about them like they’d always been destined to reunite.

*Only Greyson, the Redwoods, and I have any sort of qualms about this. Everyone else is just happy to see the Samara pack regaining its footing.*

I spotted Malakai and noticed that he and Honora looked just as bitter and hostile as ever. I would’ve thought that they’d be pleased by this. After all, the crowning of a Luna was a centerpiece of werewolf tradition. Then again, I didn’t imagine there was much that made Malakai or Honora happy.

Somber music began to play as Cesaries moved into the center of the circle. I braced myself as he began to speak.

“I’m so glad to see all of you here tonight. We are lucky to have this ceremony occur on such a revered night, with the Wolf Moon shining down and giving even more credence to this wonderful union. At the very first Luna ceremony, a moon not unlike this one appeared from behind the clouds and bathed everyone in attendance in its glorious rays. Tonight, we will carry on the tradition of that first ceremony, and celebrate what makes a Luna one of the most revered and important parts of any pack.”

*This is bullshit. Why are the Redwoods the only ones who smell something rotten about this?*

I felt so cynical and bitter and hypocritical. I had to admit, at least to myself, that I wasn’t here to celebrate—I was here because I was hoping to see it fall apart. I didn’t care what went wrong, I just hoped that something would—like in romantic comedies, where either the bride or groom was left crying at the altar.

*Maybe a giant surge of water will rise up from the river and sweep Cesaries and all the Bitterfangs away, never to be seen again.*

My fantasy of ruin and destruction came to a screeching halt when Xavier appeared. He looked brilliant under the Wolf Moon, and I hated that I’d never seen him look better.

*Ava doesn’t deserve him. She doesn’t deserve any of this.*

My stomach churned, and I tightened my grip on Greyson’s hand.

Looking straight ahead, Xavier made his way to the rocks lining the riverbank and stopped near Cesaries, who leaned close to him and said something to him that I couldn’t hear. Xavier took a look around and shrugged.

The crowd began to murmur, and Lola whispered, a little too loudly, “Where the hell is she?”

**Episode 3999**

**Xavier**

I couldn’t answer Cesaries’s question—I had no idea where Ava was. I’d been separated from her before the ceremony began, and I’d assumed that I would meet her here, down by the river. I’d been so wrapped up in my own thoughts about what tonight was going to mean that I’d barely thought about the logistics of the ceremony—including when Ava would appear, or from where.

*Shit. What if she isn’t coming? What if she freaked out for some reason and is having second thoughts? Is she going to bail on me? Maybe she found out about my kiss with Cali…*

My stomach dropped as I ran through every possible scenario that could send tonight reeling into disaster—but then Ava appeared. She was bathed in the moonlight and coming toward me like a vision from a dream. My breath caught in my throat, and my heart started beating fast. She seemed to be gliding toward me, an ethereal sight under the Wolf Moon. Her hair was cascading down her tanned shoulders, and her lips were ruby red and curved up into a slight smile. Her beautiful eyes reflected every sliver of moonlight, and they sparkled like diamonds as she made her way down to the riverbank.

*This is… too much. Is Adéluce fucking with me right now? Making everything seem more intense, almost too good to be true?*

Ava had always been beautiful, but tonight, there was something else there. Something that hit me straight in the chest and scrambled my thoughts. For one of the first times ever, all I could think about was Ava. Nothing else seemed to matter.

Everyone turned to watch her approach, and I swelled with pride. I had what everyone wanted. I was the Alpha of the Samara pack, and I was about to have a Luna who was the envy of all. My gaze drifted over the crowd, and then I saw Cali, and the reality of it all came crashing down on me.

*This is it. Once I go through with this, Cali will be free to choose Greyson and could even become his real Luna. But no matter what we do, no matter what happens today or ever, we’ll still have our mate bond. Not even Adéluce can break that.*

Even though I knew that I shouldn’t have been thinking about that at a time like this, knowing that Cali and I would always be linked gave me comfort. I was making a pledge to someone else tonight, but that couldn’t break what already existed between me and Cali—even though I’d done everything in my power to damage it.

Ava came to a stop in front of me, and up close, her beauty seemed almost otherworldly. Her scent rose up to meet my nose, and for a moment, all my worries melted away.

Cesaries smiled at us. “You both look magnificent. Werewolf royalty, in the flesh. I am honored to be presiding over this ceremony today.”

I took Ava’s hands in mine and looked into her eyes, only to see an edge there that gave me pause.

Her mind link broke through my racing thoughts. *I know you kissed Cali.*

I froze and sent a panicked mind link back to her. *How?*

I immediately regretted asking that question. It didn’t really matter how she’d found out. What mattered was that she knew.

*It was hard to miss*,Ava said. *You two did it while everyone was shifted and howling. I saw it, Xavier.*

I was filled with dread and guilt. *Why didn’t you say anything? You should have told me.*

Ava kept her eyes on mine. *I was waiting to see if you were going to tell me. I hoped that you would.*

I wanted to say that I’d been planning to tell her later, but I knew that would sound like bullshit. The point was that I’d kept it from her. There was no other way to look at it.

*It doesn’t matter, Ava*, I said. *Yes, I kissed her, but it didn’t mean anything. You’re about to become my Luna.*

Ava narrowed her eyes, and I had a feeling I knew what she was going to say before she even said it. I knew Ava well.

*I’m not your Luna yet, am I? I could just walk away…* She paused for a moment. *I won’t do that, but let me make something very clear. If anything like that ever happens again, it* will *matter. You will regret it. We both will.*

Ava held my gaze, and I stood there wondering what that meant. Was it some kind of threat?

“It’s time to begin the ceremony,” Cesaries said. He gestured to one of the council members, who handed him a golden goblet. Another member was busy preparing the silver liquid in a stone bowl beside us. Except for the murmurs of the creatures in the forest, it was silent. A council member bowed and handed Cesaries a dark herbal mixture, which he poured into the goblet. “*Et factum est vinculum*,” he chanted. He gave a reverent bow, and then he held the goblet up to the moonlight.

I wanted to steal a glance at Cali, but after Ava’s warning, I knew it would be too risky. I was more anxious than I’d ever felt in my life. My mouth was dry, my palms were sweaty, and my knees felt like jelly. It was taking everything in my power not to collapse. I tried to swallow and couldn’t, and I felt like everyone in the circle—Ava included—could tell that I was about to pass out.

*This must be what it’s like for a groom during a wedding. The uncertainty, the excitement, the fear, all mixing together to make a perfect storm of a freak out. At least this will be over soon, and then I can finally move on with my life—the life I never pictured but have been forced to choose.*

In many ways, a Luna ceremony wasn’t unlike a wedding ceremony—except that it wasn’t like a wedding at all. It carried so much more weight than a wedding ever could. It created a bond that would unify and strengthen a pack. During a wedding, rings were exchanged, but here, the symbol of Ava’s commitment would be carved into her flesh. It couldn’t be removed like a wedding band. It was permanent. Binding.

*At least this isn’t a wedding. A marriage implies something else—a union based on trust and love. The kiss Cali and I shared might have done damage to the trust that I’ve built with Ava, and as for the love... I have no idea how I feel about that.*

I was numb. That was the only way I could really describe how I was feeling—completely and totally numb. I’d been forced to numb myself to be able to live in this world without Cali, and I’d certainly been forced to numb a big part of myself in order to even entertain making this kind of commitment to Ava. What I didn’t know was whether a lack of feeling counted as a feeling in and of itself, and if anything could grow from such a barren place inside me.

Cesaries handed me the goblet. “Take this and drink from it, Xavier.”

I lifted the goblet to my lips. The scent of the mixture was strong but not unpleasant—like a strong, earthy tea. I tipped the warm liquid to my lips and drank it down. It tasted slightly bitter, and it burned a trail down my throat.

“Now, pass the goblet to Ava,” Cesaries said.

Ava took it, our fingers brushing as she did. She raised the goblet to her lips, her eyes locking with mine as she drank. She lowered the empty goblet and gave me a slight smile as she licked it from her lips.

I smiled back, the tightness in my chest relaxing just a little.

Then Ava started to scream. She put her hands to her throat and bent over, coughing and choking.

“Ava,” I said, remembering the pain that had hit Joss like a freight train when she’d drunk from the goblet. I reached out and placed a hand on her back. “It’s going to be okay—”

Then Ava started to fall. I caught her in my arms as everyone gasped.

“Help, medic!” Cesaries shouted, his voice tinged with panic. “Get a medic here! Now!”

I knelt down on the ground and held Ava close, her chest pressed against mine. Her breath was erupting from her lips in stuttering gasps.

“It’s going to be okay, Ava. I promise.” I knew I couldn’t actually promise that, but I had to say something, anything.

We locked eyes, and every vibrant, mischievous, angry, suspicious look she’d ever given me was eclipsed by the deep sadness that I saw in her gaze. My own eyes stung with tears.

She reached up to touch me, but then her arm fell to her side. And then I felt her heartbeat slow to a stop as she took her last breath and died in my arms.

**Episode 4000**

**Xavier**

Frantic, I looked up at a panicked Cesaries. I felt like my head was about to spin right off my shoulders. Sharp stones were biting into my knees and legs as I knelt on the ground with Ava in my arms, but I barely noticed or cared.

“What happened?” I shouted. “Tell me! What happened? What’s wrong?”

Joss had suffered a violent reaction to the ceremonial drink, too, but it was a normal part of the ceremony, and she’d come out of it okay. But as I looked down at Ava’s limp body, I realized that this wasn’t the same thing. Ava wasn’t breathing. Her eyes were vacant. I pressed my hand to her chest and moved it around, trying to find a heartbeat that wasn’t there.

*This can’t be happening. Not now. I know we’ve had our ups and downs, but this can’t be the way things end. Not like this.*

A horrible memory flashed through my brain: me slitting Ava’s throat in revenge for killing my mother. She looked just the same now, lying in my arms, except this time there wasn’t any blood. But I didn’t want her dead this time. I didn’t even want to see her hurt. She was supposed to be my Luna. She didn’t deserve to die on what should’ve been one of the happiest days of her life.

I jerked my head up as a loud cackle filled my head. Adéluce. And then I knew. It was her. She’d done this. I whipped my head around, looking for the vampire-witch. I spotted her standing on the riverbank, her face creased with laughter. I gently slid Ava to the ground and rose to my feet.

“You poisoned her!” I shouted. “You fucking bitch! *How dare you?*”

Adéluce shook her head. “Did you really think I was going to let you enjoy this? Did you really think that you and your rebound mate were just going to walk off into the sunset together? How stupid are you? Haven’t you listened to a thing I’ve said? I want you to suffer, Xavier, and what better way to do that than to kill anything and everything you care about?”

I started toward her, my chest filled with rage, pain, sorrow—but most of all, the need for revenge. So far, I’d managed to take everything she’d done to me. She’d ripped my life apart bit by bit and I’d somehow endured it, kept standing, and rolled with it. But now she’d gone too far. Ava had never been a part of this, and I wasn’t going to take Adéluce’s shit anymore. If she wanted to hurt Ava, I was going to make sure she didn’t live to enjoy the pain it would cause me.

I charged toward her, partially shifting as I anticipated her defensive moves. I grabbed her around the neck and pulled her close. “Say goodbye, Adéluce.”

I drew back my shifted hand and gave it a savage swipe… Only to catch nothing but thin air. She was gone.

I wanted to scream with frustration. She’d escaped me again. I looked around wildly, only to see Ava staring back at me as she lowered the goblet from her lips. My head swam with confusion. I reached out—too late—to snatch the goblet from Ava’s hands, but she’d already drunk the liquid.

*What in the hell is going on here? Is Adéluce going to torture me by making me relive this over and over until I lose my mind? I can’t watch her die again. The pain is too much.*

I thought back to how horrible I’d felt when Ava had fallen during the Iudicium, and I realized that I never wanted to see her hurt again. Adéluce was now not only manipulating me through Cali, but leveraging my fast-growing feelings for Ava, too. I was sick of it.

I watched Ava as she licked the excess liquid from her lips, just like last time. She’d drained the goblet just like before, but she wasn’t choking. The goblet slipped from her fingers as her skin began to turn red. She started gasping in pain, and she clutched my shoulder for support. She wrapped her arms around her stomach, and the air filled with the sound of her cracking bones as she began to partially shift. Her skin was mottled and sweaty, and she bared her teeth against the pain. For a moment, I thought she really was going to die again.

Shocked voices rose up from the crowd—and then I remembered that Joss had gone through this exact same thing. I just had to help Ava through it. Adéluce had been toying with me, trying to make me think that Ava was dead, but she wasn’t. She was right here, and I was going to give her all the support I could to make sure she made it through this.

I reached out to Ava via mind link. *You’ve got this, Ava. You can do it. I’m right here. Be strong.*

Cesaries extended the stone bowl of silver liquid toward us. “The time has come. You must mark her, Xavier.”

I nodded and partially shifted my hand. My hand shook as I realized it was the same hand I’d used to try to kill Adéluce. Now, I had to use it to mark my Luna and cause Ava even more pain. Holding my breath, I dipped my claw into the silver. The liquid felt alive, like it had a mind of its own.

Gently, Cesaries pushed Ava down onto her knees and positioned her shoulder so that I could easily access it. I reached out to her again.

*It’s time*, I told her.

I tore into her skin, and she screamed. I willed myself to hold my hand steady and not hesitate, since that would only prolong things. The sooner I got this over with, the less she would have to suffer. I continued to form the mark while doing my best to block out her screams.

*It’s almost over*, I mind linked.

Her screams eventually died down to moans, and her blood flowed freely down her back as I completed the Luna crescent. The entire time, I was fighting off memories of slashing her throat and seeing her dead at my feet. The image of that mixed with the image of Adéluce’s hallucination—or whatever it had been—of Ava dying in my arms nearly sent me over the edge, but I held steady.

My eyes were stinging as I pulled my claw away. Ava was partially shifted and almost doubled over on the ground, her breath coming in ragged gasps and tears rolling down her cheeks. I hated myself in that moment. I’d done this to her. I’d caused her pain, yet again.

Cesaries put a gentle hand on my shoulder. “It’s time for you to complete the bond.”

Right on cue, I felt my wolf coming to life inside me, urging me to do as Cesaries instructed.

*Claim her for the both of us. It’s time.*

I reached my hand toward her and pulled her close. She looked up at me, wiping tears from her eyes. I was surprised to see that she was smiling. Those weren’t tears of pain, but tears of joy. Even after what she’d just gone through, Ava was strong enough to see through the pain. It reminded me of the one thing that I’d always known about Ava, the one thing that I’d never doubted, even when I’d hated her—she was one of the strongest people I knew.

This was what Ava had always wanted ever since we were young and in love, and definitely ever since she’d come back from the dead and tried to lay her claim on me. It was shocking to realize that she’d succeeded. She was my Luna, and I took pride in knowing that I’d been able to give it to her.

We locked eyes, and I pulled her to me and kissed her hard. Our tongues mingled and dueled, and I felt the snap of her hands shifting back just before she slid her soft fingers through my hair. I shifted my hands back too, then reached up to join hands with her before I pressed my body tight against hers.

I was rocked. I’d kissed Ava so many times before, but this was different—deeper, more emotional. My wolf was howling loudly within me, and I could feel my mate bond with Ava surging with white hot energy. When we finally broke apart to catch our breath, I saw that the entire summit was watching us. My head was spinning with pleasure, happiness, relief, and everything in between.

When I’d become Samara Alpha, I’d been ambivalent about taking things to this point with Ava. I’d worried and stressed over making this decision, and about whether it was the right thing to do with my heart as confused as it was. I’d thought I’d be able to put off ever making Ava my Luna. But now, I was glad I hadn’t.

Cesaries took both our hands and raised them high, his smiling face shining in the moonlight. “I give you the Alpha and Luna of the Samara pack!”

**Episode 4001**

Xavier sealed the Luna bond with a kiss—and not just any kiss. He grabbed Ava, his mouth devouring hers like she was all he’d ever wanted. Like he hadn’t kissed me tonight, too.

Vines wrapped around my heart and squeezed, and I could feel it—this was jealousy. I tasted the bitterness of it while the sight in front of me made obvious a fact that I should’ve accepted a long time ago. Xavier had made his choice, and he’d chosen Ava.

*This is it. This is the truth. You can’t escape it, Cali.*

I wanted to turn away, but I forced myself to stay. I forced myself to look, so I could finally get the fact that I’d lost him through my head. It was the only solution I could think of. I couldn’t keep feeling like this, living like this. I needed to let go of Xavier and exist without this constant pain, this anguish that was only getting worse as an invisible hand grabbed my heart and squeezed, harder with every moment.

And harder.

And harder.

And—

*What the fuck?*

The squeezing suddenly felt more like a stab, and my lungs seized. I doubled over, fighting to catch my breath.

“Cali?” Greyson knelt beside me. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I choked out, even though I was clearly *not* fucking fine.

Hot tears prickled at my eyes as I fought to catch my breath, and I wasn’t sure if they were a reaction to the physical pain, the jealousy, or the shame I felt for having this kind of reaction to a man who’d chosen another woman.

*Pathetic. I’m so pathetic.*

“This was a bad idea,” Greyson said gruffly. “You shouldn’t be here.”

I tried to shake my head, wanting to soldier through even though the façade was gone. But Greyson was fast—he scooped me up into his arms, quickly carrying me away.

“I’m taking you to our tent,” he told me softly. “I need you to focus on your breaths, okay? You can do this, love.”

Somehow, I managed it. The farther we got from the ceremony, the more the ache in my chest and lungs eased, until I could finally breathe right and the pain was just a dull throb. What the hell had that been? A panic attack? The *due destini* punishing me? My mate bond with Xavier mocking me?

Or had it just been my damn heart breaking?

I kind of wanted to laugh, actually. Maniacally.

“I’m okay now,” I muttered. “I can walk.”

Greyson didn’t say anything. His eyes gleamed silver in the dark, looking oddly otherworldly, and his grip around me only tightened. He didn’t want to put me down, but I’d already humiliated myself enough for one night.

*No*, I thought. *No, I can’t keep doing this to the man I love.*

Greyson couldn’t keep comforting me because of the things that Xavier did.

Sliding out of his arms, I said, “I’m feeling better, I promise.”

His face was bathed in the moonlight, which meant I could see the raw concern in his eyes.

“I think you should take a moment,” he said quietly, gesturing at our tent. I hadn’t even noticed that we’d arrived.

I pushed inside, eager to get away from the crowds, from prying eyes. From any potential witnesses to the twisted ball of emotions that was throbbing inside me—anger, jealousy, despair, self-pity… and relief.

Pure relief, suddenly overshadowing everything else, because this was Xavier’s choice, not mine.

This was Xavier pushing things to the point of no return, not me.

This decision of his was no longer my responsibility, and I wouldn’t have to agonize about the results.

I’d been a *due destini* for months now, with the decision I’d been avoiding slowly tightening around my neck like a rope. But now, I no longer had to consider the consequences of that decision, because I didn’t have to make it at all.

And so, in the sea of dark emotions I was feeling, my relief was beacon-bright.

“Cali?”

I looked up. Greyson was holding up the tent flap, peering inside. He looked so tall and strong, yet there was a hesitancy in his stance.

“Should I go?” he asked. “I can give you some space if—”

“Stay with me,” I said. The words were automatic. The thought of being away from him right now just didn’t compute.

When he walked into the tent, filling the small space with his presence, something inside me eased. When he sat beside me on the cot, I wanted to lean closer, to bury my face in his neck and never let go.

“Tell me what I can do for you,” he whispered, and—

*Here we fucking go again.*

Greyson, comforting me as I mourned my relationship with his brother. This thing had to end. It had to stop. It just wasn’t fucking fair—to either of us. To Greyson, because he should never be anyone’s second choice, but the *due destini* was rearing its ugly head right now. The bitter taste returned to my mouth, but I swallowed it down.

“I’ll be okay,” I said quietly. “I just need time.”

Greyson nodded. He wrapped an arm around me, pulling me closer to rest my head against his shoulder. “I love you, Cali.”

I swallowed, looking up at him. Shame returned, because this didn’t feel right. “You shouldn’t have to be there for me. This isn’t fair to you, and I—I know this whole situation with Xavier is painful for you, too.”

Greyson pulled back, placing his palms on my shoulders to make me fully face him. “Don’t go there,” he said. “I’ve accepted that this is fucked up for all of us. All I care about right now is being here for you—you just went through something painful, and I’m going to do my best to make you feel better. So, stop thinking whatever you’re thinking.”

He looked so earnest that my reaction was to crack a genuine smile. “When did you get so strict?”

His eyebrows arched. “I’ve always been *very* strict.”

I scrutinized his face, and a lump formed in my throat. More tears threatened to escape my eyes, but I stopped myself. Greyson was being so solid for me—I couldn’t keep falling apart. I needed to get a fucking grip. For him.

He deserved it.

He deserved the world.

“I don’t deserve you,” I said in a low voice.

He cupped my cheek, his thumb brushing my cheekbone. “That’s funny, because I was just thinking that you’re exactly what I need. Always.”

“Always?”

He smiled. It was gorgeous, so full of love that it pulled relief back to the forefront of all my conflicted emotions. And even though I was still devastated, there was a part of me that felt free.

There was a part of me that felt like this was meant to be.

“You and me. Always,” Greyson said in a low voice.

Leaning forward, he kissed me lightly. It was just a brush of his lips over mine, but it felt like so much more. Like it was an invitation to stay here in this moment with him without having to answer to anyone or anything else.

He pulled away, tucking my hair behind my ear. I felt all fluttery inside, my gaze dropping to his mouth. I reached out, traced his lips with my fingertips just to feel his breath catch, his tongue dart out. I leaned forward and kissed him again, harder this time, my arms locking around his neck to pull him closer.

He let out a sound of surprise before breaking off the kiss. “Are you sure?”

My heart was pounding, and the pain from earlier was gone, overcome by a searing warmth that felt so right, it soothed every part of me. Having Greyson here with me felt like the biggest relief of all.

What we had was true love. The right kind, the kind that didn’t hurt.

“You’re right, Greyson,” I said against his lips, my gaze flicking up to his. “I need you too. We need each other.”

When he smiled, I kissed it. I kissed it again and again, my hands moving from his hair to his chest, breaking away only to take off his jacket and shirt. I went for my own clothes next, and he helped, and then everything was discarded on the floor and I was left in my underwear. The night was chilly, but I felt hot. Feverish.

I pushed him back on the cot, and he fell. He gripped my waist when I straddled his hips, a choked off groan escaping his mouth, the muscles of his torso and arms rippling. He looked up at me with burning eyes, panting as I reached for his zipper.

*I did this*, I thought, trembling. *I make him feel like this, and this—*

*This is right.*

This was right.

“Cali…”

He stopped talking—mainly because I grabbed his hand and slid it to the elastic of my underwear. “Tear this off,” I said.

He was shocked, but that didn’t last long. He laughed like a devil and I leaned forward to kiss him again—hard, like I wanted it. And then my underwear was gone, torn apart, and his zipper was lowered, and I didn’t need a single fucking thing other than the feel of him inside me. I thought I had him, right there, right where I wanted him, but then he suddenly pulled away and flipped us over, pinning my wrists above my head.

I melted underneath him.

“I need you to say it, love,” he whispered, and I knew I’d give him anything he ever wanted. His breath was hot against my lips. And when he spoke again, a shiver ran through me. “Say you’re mine.”

**Episode 4002**

**Greyson**

Cali didn’t hesitate for a second, and my wolf howled in victory.

“I’m yours, Greyson,” she whispered, trembling underneath me. “I need you so much.”

It certainly *felt* like she needed me when she spread her pretty thighs and arched her hips to take me inside and shuddered when I ground down against her. She moaned and met my thrusts, squirming up against me. It felt like she was mad with pleasure, like she couldn’t get enough, like there was no room for shame when it came to getting what she craved. And what she craved was me.

“Again,” I panted. “Say it again.”

She did. Over and over, she said that she needed me, that she was mine, and when I lifted her knee and bent it to her chest, changing the angle, she spasmed underneath me, breaking apart. She felt amazing, and I wanted more of her pleasure spilled all over me.

“Fuck,” I rasped. She was still shaking when I withdrew and kissed my way down her chest, her stomach. I settled between her legs and put my mouth on her, and she cried out, her hands clenching on my hair.

I kept going, enjoying myself until she came again, on my tongue, writhing underneath me, her scent all over me like a brand. Afterward, she lay there for a long moment, panting hard. Her eyes were closed, her body spent, and I fucking adored the sight of her. I kissed the insides of her thighs, drunk on her taste and scent. When she started stroking my hair, I almost started goddamn *purring*.

“Greyson?” Her voice was hoarse. A request.

“I’m right here, love,” I said, always ready to give her anything she wanted.

She reached for me once more, and I slid up her body. She guided me inside her as we both trembled, our eyes locked. I flipped us over, moving her on top of me, leading her movements. Tremors ran through me as I watched her. She rode me hard, sweat dripping down the side of her neck, and I sat up and licked it away.

I kissed her collarbones and chest as she yanked at my hair, making needy little sounds that made me want to die of pleasure. She grabbed my face, bringing it up to hers so she could kiss me, devouring. And then together, wrapped in each other, we shattered.

“I’ll always be yours,” she whispered.

With every atom of my body, I believed her.

\*\*\*

We lay in each other’s arms afterward, panting. I stared at Cali’s heaving chest, her stomach, between her thighs… My wolf roared, possessive.

“That was…” I paused. “Something.”

Cali chuckled, curling into me. “You can say that again.”

She looked happy, and my heart ached with how much I wanted to make sure she stayed like this. Content. Smiling.

With a smile of my own, I pushed her hair back from her face. I wished we could stay here in our little bubble forever, but I knew that was impossible. The outside world would never stop demanding our attention and throwing problems in our path.

*Xavier* would never stop.

How would I keep protecting Cali from the pain Xavier was causing her without beating the shit out of him? I was genuinely struggling to think of a different solution. I just couldn’t fucking *believe* he’d gone through with the Luna ceremony.

I’d always known that Cali and I would end up together, but I’d always been sure that Xavier truly loved her. I’d begun to doubt that recently, of course, and the ceremony we’d just witnessed was conclusive proof—if Xavier loved Cali as a mate was meant to, he never would’ve been so callous. I was furious at him, but at the same time, relief lurked in the back of my head. At least now, he’d officially stopped stringing her along.

Really, when I thought about it, he’d done exactly what I’d told him to do. Could he have moved forward with the Luna thing just because I’d threatened to kill him if he kept toying with Cali? No. I’d never *actually* kill my brother, and he had to fucking know that. I would never be like our father, who would’ve happily killed all three of us. I refused to be like him—even if my fury toward Xavier sometimes felt so gigantic that controlling it was the biggest struggle I’d ever faced.

Dammit, could all this Luna bullshit *really* have been Xavier’s response to my threat? If so, when the fuck had Xavier started listening to my demands? Could he really have chosen this moment to finally listen? Was this a real possibility, or was I just grasping at straws, trying to make sense of his bullshit?

Guilt spread through me at the memory of Cali during the Luna ceremony—could I have helped create this whole fucked-up situation?

My throat dried out, and my first reaction was to release my grip on Cali, suddenly feeling like I didn’t deserve her warmth. But she didn’t ease her grip. She wrapped her arms around me tighter, burying her face in my neck.

“No, don’t go…” Her grumble made my breath catch. “Stay here.”

I swallowed hard, stroking her hair. I tried to reason my way through the guilt, smoothing it over. I couldn’t allow myself feel responsible for Xavier’s fucked up decisions. He was his own man. And if that man was a cruel one, it wasn’t my fault. I hadn’t raised him.

I wasn’t Xavier’s fucking father—but I was still being forced to deal with the consequences of his actions, and I resented him for it.

“I need to check on the pack,” I muttered to Cali. “See how they’re feeling after everything that happened tonight.”

Cali pouted, rubbing her nose against my neck. “Five more minutes?”

She was so sweet. So damn cute. I was such a lucky son of a bitch to have her.

“Of course,” I said, stroking her back.

Quietly, she said, “I wish we could just have Big Mac blip us back home right now. I wish we could just…” Her blush deepened. “Spend the rest of the day in bed.”

I chuckled, trailing my hand down her arm. “Me too. Besides, it’s not like there’s anything else left for the pack to do at the summit. I’ve accomplished everything I set out to achieve, technically.”

Cali nodded. “We did get the allies we need to deter the Bitterfangs.”

Exactly—which meant it was time to go. Because the longer we stayed, the more chances Xavier would have to hurt Cali, and the more I’d have to remind myself that he was family, and I couldn’t murder him. Unfortunately.

“What are you thinking?” Cali asked.

“Eh,” I grumbled vaguely. “What are *you* thinking?”

Cali met my eyes, swallowing roughly. Then she licked her lips, glancing down my body. “Honestly?”

“Honestly.”

“I’m just thinking that if five minutes could turn into ten, I’m pretty sure I could—”

“NO!”

What the fuck was that?

Cali’s eyes widened. “Was that Elle?”

I cursed under my breath, because that *was* Elle, shouting at someone just a few feet away from our tent.

“Elle, listen to me!” Rishika shouted back. “Greyson wouldn’t like this!”

Cali cringed. “God, what is it this time?”

I shook my head and sighed, making sure it was a long-suffering one. Because I did suffer a lot.

Standing up, I grabbed a pair of pants and pushed through the tent flap to see that the shouting had escalated into a physical altercation. Well, sort of. Rishika was physically restraining Elle, who was struggling fruitlessly.

Clutching at my composure, I asked, “What’s going on here?”

Rishika turned to me, her expression indignant. “She’s trying to go after Helix by herself.”

Elle growled, fighting to release herself. “I have to find Helix before Dayton does!” Her eyes locked on mine. “I waited long enough after the ceremony, like you said. I’m not waiting anymore!”

I eyed Rishika, giving her a curt nod. She let Elle go, but Elle knew better than to just run off immediately.

“Elle,” I said evenly, staring her down. “Helix isn’t your responsibility. I’ve discouraged you from going because I’m trying to keep you safe.”

Elle pointed at the woods. “But I have to keep *Helix* safe. I can help him. I *know* I can. He’ll listen to me.”

I shook my head. “The way he listened to you when he tricked you into letting him go?” I asked. “Dayton is Helix’s sire; he’s the one best suited to take care of this. It’s not your place.”

Elle glared at me. “But the way Dayton was talking, he’ll probably just kill Helix to get rid of a problem. How is that fair?”

“That doesn’t mean you should put yourself in danger to protect him,” I told her sharply. “I understand that Helix is your friend, but the moment you let him go, you put him in even more danger. Do you see that now?”

She huffed. “*Yes!* That’s why I want to help him, Greyson. I have to fix this!”

I moved closer, gripping both her shoulders. “You won’t fix anything by running off into the woods. That would only make things worse. You are a member of *my* pack. You are my responsibility—you knew that would be the case when I turned you. I am your Alpha, and I refuse to let you go running into the woods after Helix.”

Elle’s eyes were fiery as she stared up at me. “Fine. Then come with me.”

**Episode 4003**

**Xavier**

Ava and I were accepting congratulations in what was essentially a receiving line, like we’d just gotten married or something. I was having a hard time keeping a smile on my face and acting diplomatic.

These people didn’t really give a fuck about me choosing my Luna—they were just gossipy werewolves. Most of the guys were checking Ava out in that damn dress, too, and I had to remind myself not to punch anyone. Since the Luna ceremony, my emotions toward Ava had been feeling… sharper.

Usually, Luna ceremonies were much less formal, but the fact that I’d done this at the summit had made everything much more intense. I felt like a stranger among strangers. I couldn’t help but notice that the only Redwoods who came up to congratulate me were Jay and Ravi. They were both overly polite, in a way that could only have been fake. Greyson seemed to have disappeared, along with Cali.

What the fuck were they doing right now?

*No*. No, I couldn’t think about that. Because thinking meant hurting, and I’d already done enough of that. And now that I’d chosen Ava as my Luna, it was extra wrong to think about Cali in that way. I had to work on letting go of these thoughts of her. Even though Adéluce had forced me to leave Cali, but she hadn’t forced me to be with Ava as a resut. She hadn’t forced me to make Ava my Luna; that had been pressure from the council and Ava herself. If I ever got out of any of this fucked-up situation, I was going to have a lot of answering to do. The only comfort was this would make Cali hate me more, which would keep her away from me and safe from Adéluce.

The contradiction of this entire fucked-up situation made my chest hurt.

I had to accept that this was my reality. If I wanted to survive Adéluce’s revenge without slitting my own fucking throat just to make it stop, I needed to accept the new life that I’d made for myself. I had to accept that one day I’d have to answer for all the fucked-up shit I’d done both because of Adéluce and on my own.

I looked over at Ava. She was listening to something Paige was saying, and she was gorgeous. Long dark hair, red lips, and that *dress*. Fuck, my wolf wanted her. Her scent made my mouth water. But it wasn’t just that. No, this wasn’t just lust. Ava had been so loyal and supportive of me. If things were different, I’d have been thrilled to have her as my mate and Luna.

In a world where Cali didn’t exist, Ava would’ve been the perfect person for me.

But Adéluce wouldn’t let me be with Cali. Would she let me continue on the way I did with Ava? She’d given me that awful hallucination during the Luna ceremony. What the hell did it mean? Had I put Ava in danger as well by making her my Luna? Would opening up to her, truly being with her, mean her death? The thought of Ava getting hurt because of me made my stomach lurch.

I… cared about her. I really fucking did.

Shit.

Adéluce knew that, didn’t she? Ava and I argued constantly. I had to be careful not to show that I cared for Ava too much, just so Adéluce didn’t realize it. I didn’t want to put Ava in danger because I was starting to have feelings for her again.

Just thinking about that made me realize how insane it sounded—but my entire goddamn life was insane, now. And it was all because of that vampire-witch. Fucking Adéluce was derailing me from the life I had wanted for myself, and I was sure she was loving it.

“Someone’s scowling.”

Ava’s low, melodic voice broke into my thoughts, and a moment later, her hand slipped into mine. Fuck, she felt good. She felt like the only good thing in my life right now. And deep down, I was terrified of losing her too.

I had to shove the worries aside tonight, though. Ava had just become a Luna. My *Luna*.

She’d already found out that I’d kissed Cali and been justifiably furious—I didn’t want to make her feel like shit right now by seeming distant.

“These people talk too much,” I told her with a grunt. “Also, all these assholes are staring at your tits in that dress like they’ve never seen a pair in their lives.”

She raised an eyebrow. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that we’re werewolves and we spend half our lives naked.”

She laughed, and my wolf preened. “Xavier. Are you jealous?”

I scowled harder, because I meant what I’d said. The scowl was also to indulge her. This was who I was, now—an Alpha who indulged the formerly duplicitous, risen-from-the-dead mate who he’d murdered, once upon a time.

*You can’t make this shit up*, Greyson would’ve said.

“When can we leave?” Ava whispered in my ear.

“Not sure,” I said. “But I was thinking the same thing.”

“Ah, there you are!” Cesaries appeared with two cups. “Here, a toast to the happy Alpha-Luna duo!”

Ava and I raised our glasses with everyone else. I continued to pretend I was happy to have all these people staring at me, saying my thank-yous and making small talk. But the moment Cesaries turned away to talk to someone else, I gripped Ava’s hand.

“Follow me,” I murmured.

She grinned, and I pulled her through the crowd quickly. Once we were free of the main area, we ran for the forest. We were like two teenagers escaping a party to be alone, away from prying eyes.

When we reached a small clearing and paused, I said, “I swear to god, if I’d been forced to shake one more person’s hand back there, I would’ve fucking ripped it off.”

“Whatever you say, Mr. Diplomacy.”

I scoffed indignantly at her obvious teasing, and she rolled her eyes, laughing. That made me laugh, too, and I couldn’t remember the last time I’d done that. The last time I’d meant it. The realization made something bubble up inside me that didn’t feel bad or bitter.

The Wolf Moon bathed Ava’s features as she smiled up at it, and my pulse quickened. I wondered if she was going to bring up my kiss with Cali again and ruin the moment. But she didn’t. Ava was still smiling when she turned to face me. It lit up her whole face.

She needed to smile more. I *wanted* her to smile more.

“You’re going to be a great Luna,” I told her. “But I guess you’ve always known that.”

“Yes,” she said, her smile slowly fading. “But it’s good to hear you say it.”

The mate bond vibrated between us, our connection stronger than ever. I could taste her scent on my tongue. Her eyes were fixed on mine, intense. And when her gaze flicked down to my mouth, something inside me snapped.

I wasn’t sure who moved first, but it happened. Fast. One second we were holding hands, the next we were kissing and clawing each other’s clothes off. Ava’s skin was hot, and she was so wet when I stroked between her legs. It felt like she’d been ready for this ever since I’d kissed her after the ceremony. Just waiting for me to bend her over whenever the fuck I wanted, like we were animals.

With her, I *felt* like an animal.

She moaned out a *yes* when I pushed her down onto her hands and knees on the forest floor. Shaking, she arched her back for me, pulling her hair over her shoulder to reveal her Luna mark, which gleamed under the Wolf Moon’s bright light. When she turned her head and our eyes met, the last of my sanity evaporated.

I didn’t want to be sane right now, anyway. I didn’t want to fucking think. Because thinking meant remembering, and remembering meant hurting. I didn’t want to hurt. I wanted to drown in this thing I had with Ava.

We both shuddered at my first thrust. I felt the mate bond between us pulsing with energy. I leaned forward to put my mouth on Ava’s neck, on her shoulder. On the spot where I’d left my mark. I kissed and licked it, groaning at the taste of her skin.

“Xavier, fuck, just like that,” she whimpered, and I gave her what she wanted, keeping up the pace. My mouth never left the Luna mark on her shoulder, and when my teeth scraped over it, Ava’s entire body fluttered and spasmed. She came, keening while my wolf roared. My every instinct screamed that Ava was my Luna, and I could please her.

And that knowledge felt so fucking good that I was ready to go over the edge myself.

“*Please*, Xavier,” Ava choked out, panting. “Please, come inside me, let me feel you, please—”

“Xavier!”

I grunted, my pace faltering.

Ava gasped, her nails digging into the dirt. “What the—”

“Xavier!”

I knew that voice.

“Marissa,” Ava breathed.

I pulled away from her with a growl. She rushed to stand, to grab her dress and cover herself up. A second later, Marissa appeared, looking between us. I didn’t make a move to hide my raging hard-on. She could go to hell right now, for all I cared.

“What the fuck do you want?” I snapped, still breathing hard.

Marissa lifted a brow, glancing at Ava. Despite the fact that I was seething and naked, she wasn’t deterred. Deadpan, she said, “We’ve got a huge problem back at camp.”

**Episode 4004**

“No,” Greyson said sternly. He was really good at being stern, no joke. “We’ve talked about this.”

Elle looked super pissed. But I wasn’t going to go there. Scrambling to get dressed, I contemplated stepping in to help smooth things over. Elle and I were close enough that she’d listen to me. I hoped. I planned on trying, anyway.

*I’ll just slide on over and say that Greyson means well*, I thought. *I’ll be super discreet and super unproblematic and super—*

“Fine!” Elle snapped. “If you won’t help me, then I’ll find someone who will.”

She turned and stormed off, just as I marched out of the tent.

“Elle!” I called, making a move to go after her. But I didn’t get far before Greyson placed a hand on my shoulder, stopping me.

“Let her go for now,” he told me.

I watched Elle disappear between the Redwood tents before entering her own. I felt bad for her, because I knew what it felt like to want to do something really badly and be told you couldn’t, “for your own good.”

Greyson sighed. It was… Well, the only word that described that sigh was “long-suffering.” “She’s had a bit of a rough go of things lately, and I don’t like it.”

I cringed. “I mean, Helix *is* her friend. The whole sire-bond situation is pretty stressful.”

“I know, but I’m just trying to keep her from getting into some untenable situation,” he said, shaking his head. “And we’re supposed to have a sire bond or whatever, right? You’d think she would listen to me more, or even just as her Alpha. But no.”

“It’s probably a good thing she doesn’t,” I said. “Maybe it means you and Elle won’t have the same fate as Dayton and Helix.”

“Maybe,” Greyson said. “We should finish packing.”

We went over to Rishika who was over by her tent, shoving some stuff into a duffle bag.

“Rishika, has everyone else started packing up too?” he asked. “The summit’s ending tomorrow—I want us out of here ASAP.”

Rishika nodded. “I’ve told them to get ready to leave. The hardest tent to pack up will be Big Mac’s, but she doesn’t want anyone to touch her moonshine, so we can’t help her.”

“Big Mac set up her tent herself, so I’m sure she’ll be fine taking it down. Probably with a snap of her fingers,” Greyson said.

“True. I’ll go check on everyone’s status,” Rishika said before walking off.

“What can I do to help us get out of here?” I asked Greyson.

“Everything’s pretty much taken care of. You can go back to the tent and rest.” He reached for my hand, brushing his thumb over my knuckles. “You’ve had an intense day, love.”

Greyson’s tenderness was touching—it really was—but why hadn’t I been a part of the logistics of our departure from the summit? Greyson kept talking like I was going to be his Luna one day—I would’ve thought that meant he’d keep me in the loop with all his decisions because I was his Luna.

*“You’re not a wolf,” Honora said. “As an outsider, you can’t fully understand how wolf society works.”*

I shook my head. Why was Honora’s bullshit coming to mind right now? Sure, I wasn’t a wolf, but I was still supernatural. Whatever. I shouldn’t take anything she said to heart. She’d literally threatened to kill her own daughter because she’d fallen in love and apparently that wasn’t a good thing. That woman didn’t have the right or the wisdom to judge anyone about anything, ever.

*Also, there’s no reason to doubt yourself,* I told myself.

“Are you okay?” Greyson asked.

“Yeah,” I muttered. “Just—”

“Hey!” Jay called. I turned to see him approaching with Ravi. “Rishika said you wanted us to start packing up for tomorrow?”

Greyson nodded. “Is the party still going on?”

Jay glanced at me before he spoke. “Yeah, looks like it’s still raging.”

“It’s totally a celebration,” Ravi blurted out. The moment the words left his mouth, he seemed to regret them. But he hadn’t done anything wrong—I’d already known that the party would be a celebration to honor Xavier and Ava.

And yet it still hurt.

*Forget about it*, I told myself. *Forget about it, forget about it, forget—*

“Did you talk to him?” Greyson asked. He didn’t say Xavier’s name, as if to spare me. But the fact that Greyson felt like he had to walk on eggshells around me made me feel worse than hearing Xavier’s name would’ve done. Especially after the amazing time we’d just had in the tent.

*Ugh, I hate this.*

“We just said congratulations, on behalf of the whole pack,” Ravi said with a shrug. “That was it.”

“Thanks,” Greyson said. “Though I should’ve been the one to do that.” His jaw clenched. Shaking his head, he let out a sound that was half sigh, half groan. “Actually, if I don’t go congratulate him, people will talk.”

“And the last thing we need is more talk,” Jay said, with a sigh of his own.

Greyson nodded, turning to me. His expression was suddenly calm—he’d put on his diplomatic mask. “I’ll be right back, okay? Please get some rest before we—”

“No,” I interrupted. “I should go with you.”

Greyson hesitated. “Are you sure?”

Was I sure? Was I fucking *sure*? I’d nearly had a panic attack or a heart attack when I’d seen Xavier and Ava kissing, earlier. Greyson had been forced to literally pick me up and remove me from the scene. So no, I wasn’t *sure*. But I had to get the hell over my lack of surety and move forward. This couldn’t keep happening to me.

I nodded firmly. “Yes. I want to do my duty by the pack. Being seen congratulating Xavier is important for our image, right? And for the alliance?”

Greyson frowned. But in the end, he said nothing—just held out his hand for me. As we started walking toward the revelry, I gripped it a little tighter than usual.

*I’ve got you*, he mind linked. *Don’t worry*.

With his soothing voice in my head, I breathed a little easier.

\*\*\*

Once we got back to the party, I looked up at the dais, but Xavier and Ava weren’t there. Greyson and I moved through the crowd until we ran into Mace and Maren. After a few pleasantries that miraculously didn’t feel awkward, Greyson turned to Mace.

“So, where’s the happy Alpha and Luna?” he asked.

And then things *did* get awkward, because Mace immediately glanced at me.

*Is that pity in his gaze? Does he feel sorry for me?*

No. I couldn’t start getting all paranoid, here.

“I saw them leave the party a while back,” Mace said carefully.

My heart throbbed. I ignored it.

“Where were they going?” I asked, trying to sound nonchalant. Did it work? Of fucking course not.

“No idea, but I haven’t seen them since,” Mace said with a shrug.

So Xavier and Ava had snuck away together after their Luna ceremony. After Xavier had kissed me. This night was just amazing all over. Spectacular. I wasn’t jealous or sad or sick to my stomach *at all*. Everything was fine. Great, in fact.

*I shouldn’t care about what Xavier does*, I thought. *I* should not fucking care.

I’d been holding onto a quiet sort of hope that Xavier and Ava’s Alpha-Luna bond would be like Greyson and Joss’s—platonic, and for the strength of the pack. But Greyson and Joss hadn’t been mates, and there had been nothing platonic about the kisses Xavier and Ava had shared in front of everybody.

*They’re sleeping together*,I told myself. *He’s touching her, he’s kissing her, but I don’t know if…*

But I didn’t know if he loved her.

*Could* he have fallen in love with her again? She was his choice, his mate, his Luna—but was all that built on convenience and lust, or was it built on love?

*Does it even fucking matter? I need to stop—*

My musing came to a halt when a sudden, stabbing pain in my stomach left me breathless. I winced, surprised. Had I eaten something bad? I’d been so anxious about the Luna ceremony, and then my chest had started hurting. Could this be another symptom of stress?

“I don’t think Xavier and Ava are coming back,” Greyson said, interrupting my thoughts. “We should head back to camp.”

I nodded, pressing my lips together as I breathed through the pain. After a few beats, it faded, but still—this was just so weird.

*Stress kills people, Cali. IT KILLS THEM!*

Well, wasn’t this just fucking *peachy*?

“Are you okay, love?” Greyson whispered, leaning closer. “You look like you’re in pain.”

I shook my head. “I think this was a bad idea, me coming.”

Greyson nodded, but his worry was obvious. I hated myself for doing this to him. He’d asked if I should come, and I’d insisted. He opened his mouth to say something else, but then Cesaries popped out of nowhere with a huge glass of moonshine, slapping Greyson on the back.

“Ah, Greyson!” he half-yelled. “I was looking for you! Enjoying the festivities?”

“Sure,” Greyson said, deadpan.

Cesaries grinned. “Seems like everything worked out quite well in the end. I’m so glad that Xavier and Ava listened to my…” He raised his eyebrows. “Shall we say, my *strong suggestion* about conducting the ceremony.” He chuckled. “It’s so good to have something to celebrate after that unfortunate trial, don’t you think?”

Cesaries’s words landed in my head with a thud.

*Wait… Was Xavier forced into this?*

**Episode 4005**

**Lola**

I sat in my tent, contemplating the meaning of life. Also stewing. I’d skipped the Luna ceremony, because Big Mac had strongly suggested—a.k.a. insisted—that I stay here to recover from her spell. But even if that hadn’t been a thing, I wouldn’t have wanted to go to the party. Partly because both Xavier and Ava could choke for all I cared, but also because the rest of the pack would be there.

I just couldn’t face them after attacking Artemis. I was so freaking embarrassed about that—I felt horrible enough that I’d thrown myself at Rishika’s feet and given her permission to beat me up. Rishika had given me a completely unimpressed look—which had reminded me of Greyson, weirdly enough—and walked off.

The rest of the Redwoods had insisted that they didn’t blame me, that the Wolf Moon did weird things to supernatural creatures, but I still felt like shit about it. Artemis was my best friend’s sister, and my own friend! That was the only reason why I’d managed to catch her unawares—she trusted me, so she hadn’t *expected* an attack. What would’ve happened if I hadn’t been stopped? I didn’t even want to think about it.

When I’d first become a hybrid, bringing harm to the pack had been my greatest fear. But I’d grown so confident in my control that I’d left that worry behind. After all, I’d literally run away to a vampire school to learn to control my cravings and basically brought a teacher home with me. I’d almost lost Jay during that whole fiasco. Hadn’t I earned a little peace?

A sound from outside caught my attention, and I looked up. I smelled Jay just before he walked into the tent. He looked exhausted.

“Hey,” I said. “How’d the ceremony go? You seem tired.”

He sighed, rolling onto the cot and resting his head on my lap. “I’m just *dying* from the exhaustion.”

The hyperbole and dramatics were so not Jay that a laugh escaped me. He pushed his hair back from his forehead as I asked, “Was it really that bad?”

Jay groaned, closing his eye. “I don’t think I can go to any more parties. And coming from me, that should tell you a lot.”

I chuckled again, running my hands through his hair.

He smiled with his eye closed, nestling closer to me. “That feels good.”

For a while, we just stayed there in silence, and the intensity of my love for him made my heart ache. I was so glad we were together—so glad that there was nothing to separate us. Cali’s love life was insane in comparison, and I would *never* want to be in her shoes.

“How’s Cali doing?” I asked Jay, breaking the silence.

Jay frowned and sat up, opening his eye. “I’m not sure—she had to leave halfway through the ceremony.”

“That makes sense.” I swallowed roughly, shaking my head. “This is so fucked up—I should be out there with her, not holed up in this damn tent because I can’t seem to keep my fangs—”

“Lola, no,” Jay said, cutting me off. “Don’t blame yourself for any of what happened earlier.”

“How can I not? I’m a bad friend, I’m a bad pack member…”

“That’s not true. Artemis is fine, like I told you,” Jay said. “And you’re far from a bad friend. Plus, Cali has Greyson right now. You can’t fix Xavier being an ass to her. It’s not your responsibility anyway.”

When I laughed this time, it was bitter. “Um, did you forget that I’m the one who introduced them?”

Jay shook his head. “You couldn’t have known any of this would happen.”

I scowled. “I knew what he was, Jay. I thought it was going to be forever for them, not the start of some *due destini* BS that would end with… *this*.”

Jay took my hands. “Is this really still worrying you? I thought you were over all that.”

“I mean, I mostly am. And Cali swears she doesn’t blame me. But I still worry about my friend.”

“I get it,” Jay said. “But setting Cali up with Xavier was what brought you back to me, so I’m sorry, but I can’t regret it. Not entirely.”

A smile formed on my lips. “I guess that’s one good thing that came from their relationship.”

Jay pouted. Like, really truly pouted, with his lower lip jutting out and everything. “You *guess*?”

I laughed at his antics—his reaction was just so *me*, and I loved him for it. But that didn’t mean I couldn’t tease back.

Punching him in the shoulder, I scoffed. “Stop acting all cute to make me feel better!”

“Really? Then I *shouldn’t* do this?” He leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek.

I pressed my lips together, forcing a scowl. “No.”

Jay nodded seriously. “Okay, then I definitely shouldn’t do *this*.” He kissed me on the forehead.

My mouth twitched. “Definitely not.”

He raised an eyebrow, leaning closer. “So I for sure will never do this again, then…”

He brushed his mouth over mine, and this time, I couldn’t stop myself from grinning.

“Well, maybe you can do it one more time—just so I can be sure I want to forbid it.”

Jay laughed, and the sound made me feel all warm inside, with fizzy bubbles bursting in my stomach. He leaned closer once more, stealing another kiss before he rolled me onto my back. He lay right next to me, his hand resting on the side of my neck while I squirmed closer. He kissed my cheek, my forehead, my mouth, little pecks that had me smiling against his lips.

“My turn now,” I said, moving to straddle him. He was startled for a moment, but then he grinned, looking up at me. He was so beautiful that it made my heart clench. I intertwined our fingers and rested them on either side of his face. I dropped a kiss on his forehead, his nose, the corner of his mouth, then I moved to his neck, breathing in his scent.

He smelled delicious, like always. Like he was the perfect drug for me. But I didn’t feel myself losing control, and the relief of that realization made me press the softest kiss to his throat. Jay shivered, his hips arching up slightly.

“Sorry,” he murmured. “You’re still recovering from the spell. We shouldn’t—”

I cut him off with another kiss, this one full-on, with more intent. I lost myself in it, sighing into his mouth. I was so happy to have him with me right now. I wouldn’t have been able to get through it otherwise. There was a lot I did have to apologize for, but it meant so much that he forgave me for what happened. I loved him so fucking much, I thought I could just—

Jay froze, interrupting my internal love declaration. He ended the kiss—which was uncalled for, actually—and said, “Hang on.”

“Huh?”

He pulled me from his lap and sat up.

“What is it?” I asked.

When he didn’t respond, I tugged at his shoulder to pull him back to me, but he didn’t budge.

“Do you smell that?” he asked.

His question caught me off-guard, and I finally expanded my focus beyond Jay’s scent and rock-hard body. I sniffed the air.

“It’s a wolf,” I whispered. “Not one of the Redwoods.” Alarmed, I sat up too. “This is our camp. Who’s here?”

Jay’s expression was grim. He stood up from the cot. “I don’t know, but I’ll—”

I heard a tearing sound, followed by my own involuntary scream as I realized that claws were ripping through the fabric of our tent. Before I could figure out what was happening, Jay growled and raced outside.

“Jay!” I shouted. “It’s fine! Probably a prank!” I grabbed a pair of shoes, huffing. “We were in the middle of something, dammit!”

I raced out of the tent to get my man, but then I heard something behind me and spun around. A wolf stood there, half-shifted. Growling.

“Okay,” I said. “Probably not a prank.”

My hackles immediately rose, my stance shifting. I got a good whiff of the stranger’s scent and immediately realized that he was a Bitterfang.

I glared at him, my hands fisted at my sides. “Be very careful. You’re close to breaking the rules of the summit.”

The wolf had the audacity to laugh. “The rules don’t say anything about violence against tents.”

He took a menacing step closer, and I gritted my teeth. How fucking dare he? My anger flared, and I felt my fangs dropping. No, no, no, I was supposed to be in control again, dammit!

When I clamped my mouth shut, he let out a dark laugh. “What? Do you want to drink my blood?”

I inhaled sharply. “What did you just say?”

With a sneer, the Bitterfang let his claws extend as he pointed at me accusingly. “This is just the beginning, bloodsucker.”