**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 32 - Part 1**

**Episodes 4046-4180 (S32 Total: 4046-4256)**

**Episode 4046**

**Greyson**

I had hoped it wouldn’t come to this. But was I surprised? Of course not. This was Xavier. Disagreeing with me on literally everything was his main personality trait. Was he insecure in his new Alpha status?

Even though I wanted to say that out loud—that and many other things—I didn’t. Mace was right. We couldn’t keep arguing. And if someone was acknowledged as the leader, at least until we got back, it would make things easier. There would be less friction. At least in theory.

*Fine. Let’s settle on a leader*, I replied to Mace’s question. *But before that, I need my brother to explain to me why he doesn’t want us to move to a safer place to cross.*

*I don’t need to explain myself to you*, Xavier spat.

*If we’re in an alliance, you do*, I said. *I want logic and facts to back up your suggestions. Not random bursts of ego or insecurity.*

Xavier scoffed. *I told you—it would waste time for us to look for another place to cross.*

*How much time? Ten minutes? Half an hour? Wouldn’t that be worth our safety?*

Xavier snarled. *To your point, let’s just drop it. Just say that you don’t want me to be in charge, Greyson. It’s obvious, and now who’s holding us back from making a decision?*

My favorite thing about interacting with Xavier was that I could look at him sideways, and he would say that I had a personal vendetta against him. The most hilarious part of it all, though, was that he was right. I *did* have a personal vendetta against him, and the grudge I held was as big as Xavier’s blind monster of an ego.

He’d hurt my mate, inexcusably.

If he wanted to keep escalating this, I was bound to snap.

Not to the point where things would get physical. But I did lose my composure just enough to growl at Xavier. I knew it was wrong to start another fight right now, but I couldn’t stop myself. And that made this entire situation even more fucked up.

*You’re right, I don’t think you should be the leader,* I said*. You’ve made a mess out of everything. You abandoned the Redwoods for the Samaras, you treated Cali like shit, you—* I bit my tongue. I needed to stay out of his game.

*Stop both of you, and let’s get this over with,* Mace demanded. *I had hoped I wouldn't live to see another one—not after the hell your father put us through.*

Xavier growled*. You think we don’t know that, Mace?*

*The point is*, Mace spat, *I don’t want my pack to get caught up in another family feud.*

I bristled. *What Silas did was neither mine nor Xavier’s fault, Mace, and you know that.*

*Gentlemen*, Lucian mind linked, prancing over, *how about we make this easy? Make me the leader.*

There was an immediate reaction—a collective *NO* that everybody shared, apart from Aysel. At least we were all easily aligned on that.

Her wolf huffed. *You would be lucky to have my brother as the leader!*

“Are we going to keep wasting time here?” Ava spoke up from Xavier’s back, her eyes flashing as she looked among us. “We need to get Big Mac help.”

I looked at the witch. Her eyes were half-open, and she was partially slumped against my brother. If Ava weren’t holding her up, she would have fallen.

Guilt hit me like a train.

“Every single one of you should respect the fact that Xavier is your equal,” Ava said. “And Xavier and I are the only pack here with both the Alpha and Luna present.”

*Xavier must have told her what was going on. Was he seriously trying to get her to defend him?*

I thought back to the Luna ceremony—how much pain it had caused Cali. It had been totally unnecessary for Xavier to complete the ritual at the summit, in front of Cali. But he’d done it anyway. Right after he kissed my mate.

He was such a joke it made me sick.

I looked up at Ava. She thought she was lucky to be with Xavier, but I knew better.

*If something happens to Big Mac on Xavier’s watch, the blame falls on you and Ava*, I mind linked to my brother. He could pass along the message, that I knew*. And before you say anything about Big Mac being in my pack, I’ll remind you that she’s saved both your asses countless times. Do you understand what I’m saying here?*

*I do*, Xavier said. *You don’t need to explain it to me.*

*I’m fine with Xavier taking charge*, Mace spoke up, shooting me a pointed look. *Let’s be done with this and move.*

I sighed. Even though my brother wasn’t my first choice right now, I needed to be part of this decision, and fast. I glanced at Big Mac—we’d already wasted so much time, and the idea of wasting any more made me feel worse about everything.

*Fine, Xavier’s in charge for this*, I agreed gruffly.

*Thanks for your support*, Xavier grunted sarcastically. He gestured ahead. *It’s settled—we’ll cross here.* He started to lead us toward the river when Lucian spoke up.

*Uh, pardon me, but wouldn’t it be better to cross over there?* With his snout, Lucian pointed to a shallower part of the river just upstream, a short distance away. *It’s very close!*

Xavier glared at Lucian but said nothing, leading us to the spot the princeling indicated. He made a move to step in, but I blocked his way.

*Let me go first*, I mind linked. *If it turns out to be dangerous, I don’t want you to lose Big Mac.*

Xavier’s wolf peered at me, eyes flashing with irritation. But in the end, he stepped back and said, *Be my guest.*

I was shocked he didn’t put up more of a fight, but I wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth. I entered the river—it was bitter cold. I hoped Xavier could keep Big Mac far enough above the water. The last thing we needed was her getting hypothermia. I moved forward cautiously, and slowly, the water rose up to my neck. This was okay. Okay enough.

Until I got about halfway in and lost my footing.

The rocks below were slick and unsteady, and I huffed as I lost my balance. I found my footing and turned back to look at the others. *At the midway mark*, I mind linked, *be extra careful—the rocks down here are slippery and uneven.*

Nobody replied, but I knew they’d heard. I moved ahead without another word. Thankfully the rest of the way was as good as it could be, considering the circumstances. That made me feel better about the entire situation. As I climbed up the bank on the other side, I told myself that Ava was strong, and Xavier’s wolf was massive. Xavier’s plan could turn out okay.

“Could” being the operative word.

Turning to the others, I mind linked, *The current is steady, but it gets stronger near the middle, where the rocks are slippery.*

The wolves nodded. Xavier ordered Mace to go next, leading his pack ahead. Maren was on Mace’s back, her expression withdrawn. I’d never seen her so quiet. How ironic was it that she had taken Fenrir away from the Redwood pack house because she thought it would be too dangerous to stick around? Look at her now—right there with Mace, trying to escape from the marauding Bitterfang pack.

Mace wobbled only slightly as they passed the slippery rocks, and they made it safely across. One thing less for me to worry about. My eyes flickered to Xavier and Lucian—Xavier watched for a brief moment while Lucian was arguing with Aysel. The princess didn’t want to get wet.

*Fine!* Lucian huffed. *Armin, carry Aysel across!*

Aysel shifted to human and stepped onto Armin’s back. As they figured out their path, Xavier didn’t wait any longer. He started to carry Big Mac and Ava into the river.

Behind them, Knox and the other Samaras followed quietly. At least Xavier was taking it slow. I’d been worried that he would ignore my warnings out of spite. Ava’s expression was pinched, the cold clearly getting to her—even more so because she was naked—but I could tell that her grip on Big Mac was tight. The witch’s head was bobbing up and down, her eyes flickering open and shut. But she was okay.

Until the water came to their thighs, she let out a groan, and her grasp on Xavier’s fur loosened.

“Fuck!” Ava exclaimed, grabbing at her while she slipped.

At that exact moment, Xavier reached the deepest part of the river, where the current changed, where the rocks were slippery and sharp.

Frozen, I watched, as if witnessing a car wreck.

Ava shouted, “Xavier, she’s slipping!” She changed her position to hold onto Big Mac, and Xavier growled, losing his balance with the shift in weight.

All three of them tumbled into the river.

Big Mac was swept away.

**Episode 4047**

I was in danger of falling into the Xavier rabbit hole again. But trying to figure out what motivated Xavier—how he thought and why he did what he’d done—would only drag me away from what was most important right now. And that was everyone’s safety.

Greyson’s and Big Mac’s safety.

I still worried about Xavier, too, though. Which made everything even more complicated. Our lives moved at such a fast pace that I never had a chance to feel my feelings and sort through them.

*What is there to sort through, Cali? Xavier is another pack’s Alpha, and he’s got a Luna. What more proof do you want that he’s over you?*

My thoughts were jarring. They made my head hurt, so I shoved them down, ignoring the ache. I pulled myself away from the door and headed to the kitchen. Gabriel had the front porch watch now. I was supposed to rest, but how the hell was that possible right now?

I just wanted Greyson to get back home.

Everything would be better—all the bad, uncertain stuff—once he was here with me. I felt so exhausted, both emotionally and physically. I thought about trying the mind link with Greyson again, but I shut that down quick. Greyson had his hands full—he didn’t need me acting all clingy and dropping into his mind all the time. No matter how much I missed hearing his voice.

*Is mind linking Greyson merely a way to stop thinking about Xavier?*

The thought of using Greyson to distract myself from Xavier was so wrong. For a brief moment, I imagined a reversed scenario—one where Greyson would be the one to leave me, not Xavier. I froze mid-step at the notion. It felt even *more* impossible than what Xavier had done. It seemed even more disturbing, dark, and fucked up.

*God, I* really *need to stop thinking here!*

My exhaustion was making me a smidge delirious, and I needed it to get a grip. Determined to stay awake and ignore all these chaotic thoughts, I entered the kitchen. I would make myself useful and make a fresh pot of coffee for Gabriel. Lola’s brew had traumatized him, and I needed to fix that.

“Cali?” Mom’s voice startled me. I almost ran into her, not paying attention. “How are you, honey?” Her eyes were wary as they scrutinized my face. “You look terrible—did you get any sleep?”

*First of all, ouch? I know I look tired, but she doesn’t have to be so explicit about it.*

“Haven’t gotten any sleep yet,” I replied. “Have you and Dad made any headway on packing yet?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Why are you asking?”

“Just… wondering,” I said tensely. Because the Bitterfangs could attack any moment, and my parents were still casually hanging out.

*Things are totally fine!*

Mom squeezed my arm. “We said we’ll go, sweetheart, so we’ll go. Don’t worry.”

I let out a laugh. It sounded a bit maniacal. “Don’t worry about me!”

Mom looked like she was the worried one now. “Cali, you don’t seem like yourself. Why don’t you go lie down?”

I felt the sudden urge to cry, my frustration climbing.

“I can’t sleep before Greyson gets here, Mom,” I said, my chest constricting. I hoped he’d be here soon. “Why would you even say that? You know I’m not going to.”

Mom frowned “Cali, I understand you’re concerned about him, but what good will it do if you’re exhausted—”

“Mom, *you* need to pack,” I said, taking a step back before she could touch me. “You can’t be here when the Bitterfangs strike again. *Please*.”

Before my mother could reply, I was out of the kitchen. My heart was pounding in my ears. I wasn’t sure if it was the lack of sleep that was making me so irritable—or Xavier being a dick, or Greyson not being here—but I was definitely *not* okay.

It all got worse when I saw Lola and Jay on watch on the back porch. They were leaning against each other, holding hands. Jay kissed the top of Lola’s head, muttering something in her ear. It was all so tender that I felt… envious. I felt like a petty little monster, but I wished so badly that I could do that with Greyson right now.

“Cali? What’s up?” Lola’s voice made me snap out of it.

I cleared my throat. “I’m taking over the deck duty. You two take a break and get some rest.”

Lola frowned at me before exchanging a look with Jay, as if they were both confused. Probably at my tone. Did I have a *tone*? My god, was I a bitchy Luna? Was that what insomnia had done to me?

Before I could go on an existential spiral, Lola shrugged. “Sounds good.”

“Call us if you need backup,” Jay said as they walked past me.

Lola chuckled, nudging Jay. “She’ll be fine—have you seen Cali with that Fae sword? Badass!”

The two of them went back into the house, but Lola’s words made me feel much better. I did have a sword, which was pretty badass, actually. I sat down on the bench, leaning back. I squeezed my eyes shut for a second before opening them and staring out into the woods. The sky in the distance showed the first hints of sunrise.

Could the Bitterfangs be watching me even now?

I almost hoped they were out there.

I was so tired I could sleep for a week, but I was feeling frustrated in this moment, which in turn made me feel angry and slightly… well, menacing. I was determined to prove to those damn werewolves that they should never mess with me and my pack.

I’d make sure they never did again.

“I bet you think you’re so strong, huh?” I called out into the quiet of the night.

An owl hooted in response, and I was ready to act out an entire fight sequence here.

“Well, I’m ready for you, Honora!” I stood up, my heart beating fast when I raised my hand. “What’s that? Malakai wants my head on a stick? Tell him to get in line!”

My chest vibrated, energy starting from there until it spread to my fingertips. The sword appeared. I waved it in the air—it was so easy to channel it now as my confidence grew.

“I am not one for violence usually, but you two need to be sliced in half!” I waved my sword in the air, my words echoing in the forest.

Perhaps my shit talking needed a bit of work.

“Cali? Everything okay?” Sage burst out of the house, followed by Zainab in full wolf form. “Is there someone out there?”

My cheeks caught fire, and I lowered my sword.

“Oh god, sorry,” I said. “It’s just an owl. I was practicing and… getting a bit carried away. We’re not under attack.”

Zainab exhaled in relief. Sage gave me an odd look. “That’s good, but where are Jay and Lola?”

“I took over their shift,” I said.

“But you must be tired,” Sage said. “Why don’t you go in? It’s our shift now, anyways.”

“You look like you need to catch some serious Zs,” Zainab added.

Everybody kept telling me I looked like crap. I tried not to take it personally. They all meant well, in the end.

I ended up going to the kitchen instead of my bedroom, because I still hadn’t gotten Gabriel his coffee. I poured out Lola’s rancid brew and set up to make a new pot.

As I waited for it to brew, I took a seat at the kitchen table, taking in the sounds of dawn. The quiet was unnerving but calming, too. I leaned forward, resting my hands on the table and my head on my hands. The moment I did, my eyelids felt like they weighed a million pounds.

*Maybe I can shut them for a few minutes…*

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Bright light woke me up. When I opened my eyes, I was in the woods by the summit. The earth was dry under my hands. The Wolf Moon hovered over me, at its peak as it illuminated everything under it.

*Why am I here? Didn’t Big Mac blip me and the others back to the pack house?*

I looked around.

*Where the hell am I?*

There was a sound, and then a figure moved in the shadows. I scrambled to my feet, starting to back away, fear thundering inside me.

Suddenly, I heard my name.

“Cali!”

I knew that voice. It was Xavier. He moved through the trees, walking into the clearing. The moonlight bathed his glorious form, its brightness sparkling in his eyes. He was so stunning that looking at him hurt.

“Why are you here?” I asked throatily. “You told me we would never get back together…”

Xavier reached out, pulling me closer. I shuddered at his touch.

“I was wrong,” he said, cupping my cheek.

And then he kissed me, and it took my breath away. I was surrounded by him, enraptured, so overwhelmed that I wanted to cherish this moment and carve it into my memory. I didn’t understand what was happening—how he could go from cold to so hot—but I couldn’t say no to him. His kiss made me feel drunk.

When he took a second to breathe, though, I needed to ask him why.

“Why are you doing this, Xavier?”

He traced my lips with his thumb. His voice was a whisper. “Because I need you.”

**Episode 4048**

**Xavier**

I was underwater. The current had changed, becoming erratic. As I struggled to break the surface, I was hit by a sudden yearning for Cali. Like I needed her. Where was it coming from? Why now? Why the hell was I thinking about Cali when I needed to—

*Bam!*

I slammed into a rock—more like a fucking boulder—and snapped back into the moment. I surfaced, taking a huge gulp of air before I looked around. Where was Ava? Where was Big Mac?

Greyson was shouting. I heard him, then saw him—he’d shifted back to human, racing into the river, reaching for Big Mac. But what happened to Ava? I looked around wildly to spot her hand break the surface. I dove for her, shifting back to human as I went. I grabbed her and managed to plant my feet on the river bottom to keep us both from being carried farther away.

I pulled her to me, coughing up water. My heart was racing, adrenaline overflowing. Ava fought to catch her breath, her wet, naked body clinging to me. I swam to the bank, pulling her with me.

“Are you okay?” she asked, panting.

I faced her, feeling a relieved laugh in my chest. “You’re asking about *me*? You almost drowned!”

Ava pulled away, rising up. The water dripped down her bare skin. She looked like a damn painting. She stood on her knees, and I felt like a fool—I’d been so worried about her that I didn’t notice the river became shallow.

“I didn’t need to be rescued, Xavier,” she said, but with a cheeky smile. “But I don’t mind it when it’s you…” She threw her arms around me, pressing against me. My wolf stirred, taking in her scent when she kissed me. “Thank you for coming for me.”

I wrapped her tight in my arms. I didn’t say anything, just looked around, half-expecting to see the vampire-witch smirking at me through the shadows. What the fuck was I supposed to say to Ava? That I had freaked out? That I suspected Adéluce was behind this?

“I hope this wasn’t a sign of things to come,” I muttered under my breath.

I hadn’t realized I said that out loud.

Ava pulled back, raising an eyebrow. “What?”

I tried to cover. “You’ve only been my Luna for a day. Are you always going to be getting into trouble?”

She pushed me playfully. “Yeah, right. I need rescuing just as much as you do.”

She had no idea.

“Are you two going to keep making out, or can we get going?” Aysel’s nasally voice cut in.

Gritting my teeth, I stood up and reached for Ava’s hand. “We’re coming.”

As we headed for the riverbank on the other side, I spotted Greyson with Big Mac in his arms. The witch was all right. I felt a rush of relief. She might’ve been a grump, but she’d done a lot of good for me and many others.

I caught Greyson’s eye, and he nodded at me. We’d both done what we needed to do, and we’d succeeded. Big Mac and Ava were secure, and all the packs were either safely on the shore or making their way there.

Ava’s voice brought me out of my head.

“You know, we haven’t had much time alone lately. Wouldn’t it be nice to celebrate our *partnership* in a more intimate way?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Are you asking for a honeymoon when all of this is over?”

Ava laughed. “We’re not married, but we are Alpha and Luna now. Don’t we deserve some time alone at some point?”

I paused. At this part of the river, the water came up to our calves. I looked at her up and down—she was breathtaking, and she wanted to be alone with me. When I thought about aloneness, it was solitary, dark, painful. It was my way of pushing through an obstacle. But could Ava’s presence in my life be a sign of a new way of existing going forward?

Looking at her right now, feeling close to her in this moment, I had to admit the idea was appealing. But it would have to wait—I had to take charge of this fucked-up mission to return home first.

“Let’s go join the others,” I told her, pulling her forward.

On the shore, I called for the packs to gather around so we could continue with our course. Big Mac now lay on the dirt, shivering. She was pale, her eyes closed.

*I hope she’ll be okay*, Ava mind linked.

I did, too.

*I told you this would happen*. Greyson’s voice broke into my head. He didn’t say it with an attitude, so I tried to curb mine. But he wasn’t looking at me. He was bundling up Big Mac with the dry clothes that Maren had given him, and I realized that he was mind linking only me. Nobody else could hear.

That gave me pause.

*As you just saw, the water was shallower just a ways down*, Greyson went on*. We could’ve avoided all this, if you had just taken a moment to think instead of disagreeing with me for the sake of disagreeing.*

*You know what, Greyson? Next time just say, “glad you’re not dead” and leave it at that,* I mind linked back.

I thought we’d had an understanding, and maybe we did. Maybe I was just being too tense about it because Ava’d been in danger too. We’d both been stressed and already fought too much. We’d done what we had to. We needed to leave it at that.

“Xavier?” Ava asked quietly. “What’s wrong?”

“Worried about the witch,” I said. I didn’t want her to die, let alone while I was in charge.

“It’s fine,” I said gruffly. I looked around, speaking louder for the others to hear. “Big Mac will be fine.”

Greyson didn’t say a single word. Didn’t look at me, either.

And I swore to myself that I would get them all back home safely.

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A few hours later, I made good on my vow.

I saw the Redwood pack house—*my* house—as we emerged from the woods. It rankled me. I was the Alpha of the Samara pack, and what did we have to show for it? A shitty Airstream and some tents.

Greyson and the others were living in my house, enjoying it as if it was their own, and I had to live in the shrimp’s former trailer. It was fucking ridiculous. Greyson had a whole other house on the lake that they could move into, but this was a matter of territory—my house came with the land, and the land was the Redwoods’. It didn’t matter how much I wanted it.

Still, technically, I *could* just throw them all out of that one.

I had considered it before, but then I always stopped short. I couldn’t do that to Cali. Not only because I still loved her, but because she hated me enough as it was. The rest of the pack, as well. They didn’t deserve that. Jay, who was usually pretty chill, would lose his shit if I told them to pack up and fuck off. I knew he would feel so betrayed he probably wouldn’t speak to me ever again.

I put a definite *no* next to the idea of evicting them and hoped that Ava would never bring it up.

We were in the front yard when Greyson shifted back to human, making a beeline for Big Mac. Ava helped the witch off my back, and Greyson picked her up in his arms. I heard him mutter in Big Mac’s ear, “We’ll get Torin for you. You’ll be okay.”

I was relieved. We’d made it.

A moment later, all the alliance packs were in the Redwood living room. Rishika and Ravi were offering warm, dry clothes to everybody, along with sandwiches and water. I caught a glimpse of Cali. She looked so tired, like she hadn’t slept in weeks. But she was still so beautiful. My wolf stirred in her direction, yearning for her. The concern on her face was evident, and I wondered if she’d spent tonight worrying about Greyson’s arrival.

Did she even think about me anymore?

Was the last kiss we shared, followed by my Luna ceremony with Ava, the nail in the coffin for us?

I wished I could go to her and kiss her again. I wished I could turn back time and make it all like it used to be, before Adéluce. The thoughts made my head throb.

“Xavier?” Ava’s voice broke through my reverie. “Do you want any water?”

I snapped out of it—I couldn’t afford to look at Cali while my Luna was right next to me. I drank some water and accepted the clothes that Rishika gave us. As I finished getting dressed, I spotted Kira in the living room doorway, scanning each and every one of us severely.

I had an idea.

“I’ll be right back,” I said, squeezing Ava’s arm. She didn’t ask any questions, but I could feel her staring as I walked up to Kira.

The witch eyed me, her gaze narrow. “What?”

I felt awkward. Kira and I hadn’t spoken since our argument. From the way she was glaring, I figured she still hated me. But I needed to talk to her. Silently, I pulled her with me down the hall, away from prying ears.

“What the hell do you want, Xavier?” Kira asked, yanking herself free.

I took a deep breath. “Can I ask you for a favor?”

**Episode 4049**

I felt stressed and relieved at the same time. Relieved because everybody was back, stressed because I hadn’t talked to Greyson yet.

Xavier had barely acknowledged me when he came in. The pull I felt toward him was ever present, but I brushed it off. Along with the guilt I felt about the dream I had had earlier. My cheeks still felt hot at the memory of it.

I had dreamed about Xavier saying “I need you” to me, when—in reality—it was Torin. Who had been speaking to his cup of coffee. Despite the ridiculousness of it all, I still couldn’t get the words out of my head. I could actually hear Xavier saying them.

*Shake it off, Cali! Don’t be ridiculous.*

When I saw Greyson, I was finally able to let it go. The sight of him made butterflies burst inside my stomach and travel up my chest. I’d been so stressed and worried for him that the only thing I needed right now was to run into his arms. He spotted me, offering half a smile, and my heart pounded. I almost collided with him, wrapping my arms around him. My body melded into his as he held me, hugging me tight.

“Everything okay?” he whispered in my ear.

“Why does it feel like the trip took you much longer than it should’ve?” I asked.

“It’s a really long story…” He raised his eyebrows. “It went a little sideways.”

“I was so worried about you,” I said.

He leaned down to kiss my forehead. “I’m here now.”

I went on my tippy toes and brushed my lips over his, eager for him to pull me closer. He kissed me but didn’t press. It felt like he was holding back, like something was wrong. I pulled away, searching his face.

“Greyson, what…”

“Everybody, move!” Torin and Mrs. Smith charged into the room. Mrs. Smith carried Big Mac in her arms, and the witch looked pale and sickly. I gasped, my stomach dropping. Of course Greyson was worried. Big Mac was grumbling under her breath about one thing or another, so at least I knew she had the will to remain her grumpy self, but still. I’d never seen her like this.

“Is Big Mac going to be okay?” I asked.

“Torin said she will be,” Greyson replied. His words were even, but I could trace tension there.

“Is everybody else okay?” I asked.

“Just a few scratches,” he said.

*I suspect “scratches” are more like wolf bites, but let’s not dwell on that right now.*

“I’m so glad that you’re all back and Big Mac’s going to be all right,” I said. “I know you did your best to bring her home safely.”

Greyson held my face, staring deep into my eyes. His voice was hoarse when he spoke. “I love you so much.”

I didn’t have the time to say it back. He kissed me before I could, and he made it count. It was intense, hard. Heat spread from his lips on mine, traveling all over my body. He’d gone from one to a hundred really fast, and when I broke it off to breathe, I searched his eyes.

“Are you okay?” I asked throatily. “Is something else wrong?”

Greyson nodded, resting his forehead against mine. He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. “I’m good.”

I caressed his cheek. “I’m starting to think that maybe things were more dangerous on the way home than you’re letting on…”

He snorted, shaking his head. “I’ll say.”

I frowned. “Do you want to talk about it?”

He shook his head, kissing my temple. “Not right now. I’m just really happy to be home with you.” He tucked my hair behind my ear. “I want you to fill me in on all the Luna duties you performed while I was gone. Was everything pretty quiet here?”

I cleared my throat. “No, actually… Lola and I think we might have killed a Bitterfang.”

Greyson’s eyes widened in alarm. “*What?*”

I waved a hand. “It’s fine! We’re fine! But you can ask Rishika to confirm the Bitterfang scent.”

“I can’t believe they came here,” Greyson said. “Malakai must be commanding his full pack despite still being at the summit. He has them spread out all over the place to cover ground.”

I gulped. “So there could be more around here?”

Greyson nodded.

Shit. “We’ll be as ready as we can be.”

He sighed, running a hand along the back of his neck. “Exactly,” he breathed. “Did anything else happen?”

“There was also the part with Bess.”

Greyson frowned. “Who’s Bess?”

“Gabriel’s bazooka,” I said.

Greyson blinked at me. “Gabriel has a bazooka that he named Bess?”

“Yes. I don’t know. Mikah convinced him to put it away, thank *god*,” I said. “The only other thing is I’ve convinced my parents they need to go back home.”

Greyson’s eyebrows rose even higher up his forehead. “Really? So, they’re leaving? For real this time?”

“I explained to them that it’s for their safety, for everyone’s safety,” I said. “And I’m certain that it’s the best decision for them, given… how the Bitterfangs attacked Mrs. Smith.”

“I agree it’s the best course of action here,” Greyson said. “I just hope they don’t talk themselves out of it. They’ve been planning on this trip back, and we need to make sure they see it through. We can’t let them start bringing up reasons for them to stay.”

“I agree, but it feels like they’re taking me seriously,” I said.

Greyson offered me a teasing smile. “Maybe it’s because you’re acting like a Luna.”

“I want to make a joke about this, considering I faked the Luna confidence thing until I semi-made it, but my change of attitude *could* have helped,” I observed. “Or perhaps my parents saw that I’m really getting a handle on my magic, and that made them feel safer.”

“That might be it. You’ve really been working so hard, Cali. You should be proud of yourself.” Greyson rested his mouth against my forehead, breathing the next words against the skin there. “I certainly am proud of you.”

I smiled. The comfort of this moment, the way he held and spoke to me made me feel warm and elated. My negative thoughts faded away as his presence overpowered them.

He just felt *so good*.

“Come on,” Greyson muttered, lacing his fingers with mine, tugging me toward him. “I need to take a shower and get dressed.”

He led the way upstairs, and I followed. I watched the planes of his back, the muscles there, and I wondered if I would ever get over how incredibly, mind-numbingly hot he was. It was a *lot*. But what was even *more* was all the sweet things he said, freely, with no doubts, no hesitation.

“I thought of you every step of the way while traveling back,” he muttered when we got into his room. He turned to close the door, caging me against it. I rested my palms on his hard chest, over his pounding heart. The way he looked at me took my breath away.

“Were you worried?” I asked quietly.

“Of course, love. Just because the Bitterfangs are fucks—not because I didn’t trust you to deal with this. I know you can,” he said, tracing his hands up and down my arms. “I believe in you, Cali. And I feel honored to have you by my side. You know that, right?”

The praise slipped through his lips and landed on me, spreading all over my body like a wildfire. I went on my tippy toes to kiss him again. He met me halfway, picking me up at the same time. I wrapped my legs around his waist, my arms around his neck, deepening the kiss as he took us over to the bathroom.

“Should we—” I breathed hard against his mouth, my heart fluttering. “Should we really be doing this right now? What about all the people downstairs? Our Luna and Alpha duties?”

He made me sit on the vanity, one hand at the back of my neck, the other gripping my waist. “These past few hours felt never-ending. I missed you, love…” He pressed kisses across my jawline, moving down my neck. “Did you miss me?”

I was squirming against him, trembling. And the one and only truth was that yes—of course I had missed him. I had worried over him, dwelled on his safety so intensely that it had felt like an ache. I gripped his face, making him face me. My eyes burned, right along with my skin where we touched.

“I missed you so much,” I breathed, kissing him again.

I kissed him like I needed him, because I did, and it felt like the surest thing I’d ever felt. My clothes were gone in seconds, and then we stepped into the shower together. He turned on the water and reached for the shower gel as the water started to heat up.

“Let me,” I said. The way he smiled was gorgeous. The way he stared at me as I washed him, his muscles and hard body rippling, shaking under my touch, made me feel dizzy. When I rinsed him off, and all the dirt and dried blood was gone, he reached for me again. He picked me up, and I clung to him, seeking his mouth and warmth once more.

And in that moment, I knew that all I needed was him.

**Episode 4050**

**Greyson**

I was so grateful to be back here with Cali. I knew that we could work well together—to keep the pack safe and each other steady. *Sane*.

The way she kissed me right now drove me crazy, though.

Grabbing her ass, the backs of her thighs, I picked her up. Her back rested against the tile, and her arms wrapped around my neck. Her legs were spread open, her lower body pressed on my abdomen. She was quivering, rubbing up against me right there. I kissed her hard while she grinded on me, a little feral with it. Or a lot. Because in mere moments, she was coming—just like this, with my mouth on hers and her pretty pussy pulsing against my abs.

“*Greyson!*” She shook so violently her grip on me loosened. Her thighs trembled, closing up, and I dropped her to her feet slowly as she clung to me.

Against her mouth, I whispered, “You needed that, didn’t you?”

She shuddered, nodding, her breaths coming sharp. Her nails dug in my arms as she rasped, “I want—I—”

I tucked her wet hair behind her ear, kissing her brow. “What, love?”

“You. Greyson, please…”

Things moved fast after that.

I sat on the shower ledge and pulled her onto my lap. Her back was to my chest. When I led her to sink down onto me, I thought I’d lose it right then and there. She gasped, her grip on my forearms tight. I started moving her on me, gliding in and out of her as she whimpered.

“Can I make you come again?” I asked in her ear. “I want to make you come again.”

She nodded frantically, and I reached between her legs to rub. She almost flew off me at the first stroke, but I kept her there. She choked out my name, melting backward into me. I kissed the back of her neck, then the Luna mark on her shoulder. I would never be over this. The only thing that would make it better was if it were real—if I could give her the mate mark.

If she could choose me forever.

Suddenly, jarringly, Xavier’s voice echoed in my head.

*But don’t you wonder if she’s thinking about me while you kiss her?*

Well, the only name Cali was saying right now was mine. Repeatedly. She was all, “*Greyson, yes*,” and, “*Greyson, please*,” and, “*Greyson, I love you—I love you so much.*”

And when I spilled inside her, my teeth on her shoulder, my hand between her thighs, her body fluttering all over me, taking me in like she couldn’t get enough, I knew the truth.

She was mine.

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After getting dressed, Cali gave me one last lingering kiss before we walked out. The way she wanted me made me want to forget everything downstairs and stay with her in this room, in my bed. To never let her go.

But then she said, “Reality calls.”

A shame, really.

The commotion downstairs was wild. Everybody was talking at the same time. Orla and Tom’s bag were at the front door, and Cali’s eyes widened. She muttered, “This is really happening. I didn’t even have to chase them around to pack.”

We paused at the top of the stairs, and Cali looked up at me. She frowned, her eyes pleading with me. My heart panged, and I felt tangled up inside.

“I know it wasn’t an easy decision to make to send them away, no matter how logical and sound an idea it is,” I said, squeezing her hand in mine.

“It’s—it’s absolutely necessary, though,” she said, as if wanting to convince herself. “It’s all happening so quickly, but we can’t postpone it. They have to go.”

“You’re right.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Why are you not disagreeing with me?”

“Do you *want* me to disagree with you?”

She grabbed the front of my shirt, and her voice got a slightly high-pitched, panicked quality to it. I hated it. “I can’t have my parents here when there’s a literal war going on, Greyson. No matter how much I’ll miss them.”

“I know, love,” I said, taking both her hands in mine, “but don’t judge yourself too hard if you feel sad about letting them go. It’s normal. They’re your parents, your family. It’s okay not to feel ready.”

Cali swallowed, biting her lip. “Is it?”

“Of course.”

She pressed her lips together. “It’s ridiculous, you know.”

“What?”

“How you always know the right thing to say to make me feel better.”

I chuckled, and she wrapped her arms around me tight. The hug lasted just a moment, but I could tell she felt better afterward. I squeezed her shoulder, urging her forward. Everybody else had gathered around to say their goodbyes to her parents, the chitchat spilling onto the porch.

“This is like an obstacle course,” I heard Cali mutter. But with a bit of effort, she made it to the front of the line of people, guiding me through it.

There was one last obstacle left.

It was shaped like a dickhead.

Xavier.

Ava was just a couple of feet to his right, and honestly, why hadn’t they left yet? So long, goodbye, go away. They were literally standing between Cali, her parents, and Artemis. They did not belong in this picture. Xavier must’ve realized that when he and Cali locked eyes, and he stepped aside.

Fucking finally.

“Hey,” Cali said in a throaty voice before hugging her mom. She was holding back her tears, and I wanted to tell her to let it all out. She had nothing to prove to anyone—she was already worthy of the Luna title, of the power it carried. But I understood the pressure she felt—all eyes were on her right now, watching how she handled the moment.

“We’re all ready to go,” Tom said, sniffling a little.

“Just like you asked, sweetie,” Orla said, stroking Cali’s arm. “We don’t want to worry you anymore.”

Cali looked like she was ready to burst into tears. Instead, she shocked me by blurting, “I should drive you to the airport so we can spend some alone time! Yes!”

This was news to me. I was pretty sure it was news to Cali as well—I would bet that she had just thought about it. I wanted to say no—that it might be dangerous with the Bitterfangs out there—but I knew I couldn’t. Cali was clearly trying to buy a little more time with her parents, and from the way she’d reacted earlier, I was certain that she needed it.

“I’ll come with you,” Artemis said.

Cali looked up at me, and I nodded. “Bring one more person with you in addition to Artemis, okay?”

Cali agreed, and I leaned down to kiss her cheek.

“I’ll be right back. I’m gonna check on Big Mac,” I said to her. I let her and her parents to sort out travel logistics.

*You got this, love*, I mind linked.

Cali gave me a smile, but it didn’t seem to meet her eyes.

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Big Mac was with Torin and Sabine. She was pale, brow damp with sweat. She looked as annoyed as ever, but it was clear she was in pain—she had been ever since she was bitten. I was so used to her bossing everyone around. I hated seeing her like this, but it was the sight of my mom that really broke my heart. She was clutching Big Mac’s hand, her eyes brimming with tears.

In a hoarse voice, Big Mac said, “Can you please stop acting like the world is coming to an end, Sabine?”

“But I love you,” Sabine whispered to her. Suddenly, Big Mac’s eyes watered as well.

I felt so horrible about this that I wanted to fall into a black hole.

“Is there anything I can do to make Big Mac’s healing go faster?” I asked Torin after pulling him aside.

Torin shook his head. “She just needs to rest… That’s the only way she’s going to really get better. Trust in that.”

Sabine came up to me, wiping her eyes. “I know MacKenzie is in the best hands and that she’ll be okay. It’s just hard to see her like this.”

“Mom, I’m sorry I—”

“This is not your fault,” she cut me off. “Please try not to worry, we’ve got this. I know you have pack business to tend to.”

I pulled her into a hug. “Sorry I’m back so late.”

“You were just on time,” she muttered.

“Please let me know when there are any changes in Big Mac’s condition,” I said.

Sabine nodded, stroking my cheek. “Of course. Now go. There’s much to do.”

As I returned downstairs, I thought it really was a good thing that Orla and Tom were leaving. If they didn’t, the Bitterfangs could get to them like they’d gotten to Big Mac and Sabine. I despised that it had come to this—that those monsters were targeting the people who were closest to us. I had failed in protecting both my mother and Big Mac, and it was killing me.

It felt like, for me, being Alpha was putting out one fire after another.

This was no way to lead—or was it the *only* way?

The exhaustion was heavy on my shoulders after the battle and the trip back, but I was still needed right now. My pack needed me. Cali was struggling with her parents’ departure, and my duty to my Luna wasn’t done. Would it ever be done?

Would Cali ever live happily, without all this drama and angst?

Would I ever be able to give Cali peace, security, protection, and the life she deserved?

And if I couldn’t give her those things, did it mean that I’d failed?

**Episode 4051**

**Xavier**

Anger flooded through me. Kira wasn’t even willing to hear me out about the favor I wanted? Well, I wasn’t going to give up that easily.

I’d expected her to be mad at me for the way I’d accused her of using me because she was still in love with me, and for the way I’d treated Cali, but I’d figured that she’d at least give me a chance to talk to her. Apparently, I’d guessed wrong.

There was a commotion over at the front door, and I looked over to see that the pack had gathered. There were suitcases next to the door, and everyone was hugging Tom and Orla. It looked like everyone was saying goodbye to Cali’s parents—which meant they were leaving. That was news to me, but then everything that went on in the Redwood pack house was news to me these days.

I felt like I should say something to them. I’d been through a lot with them, and up until Adéluce had forced me to break up with Cali, I’d felt really close to them. But as I looked over at them, I felt a stab of worry. If I approached them now, would they treat me the same way everyone else had been treating me since Adéluce?

I knew I could just not say anything, but that made me feel like a coward.

“I’m going to go grab a bottle of water,” Tom said to Orla. “I’ll be quick.”

As he headed toward the kitchen, I took my chance and followed him.

“Tom,” I said, stepping into the quiet kitchen.

Tom turned, and his expression changed when he saw me. He looked surprised, and a little wary.

I took a steadying breath.

“I heard you were leaving,” I said, and held out my hand.

Tom hesitated for just a moment, then took my hand and shook it. He held firm and looked me straight in the eye. “I don’t like what you did to my daughter. I thought you were a better man than that, Xavier. If I were to guess, I’d say that you’re going through something right now, and I hope you figure it out. But in the meantime, you’d better look out for Cali during this pack war. You hear me? Or I’ll be back.”

“Have a safe trip home, sir,” I said, and walked back out of the kitchen.

As I walked through the house, I passed by the living room, where a knot of Redwoods was sitting, talking about the summit. They went quiet as I passed by, and I saw their eyes turn cold.

It was clear that I wasn’t welcome here.

I took a deep breath as I pushed a hand through my hair. I needed some space, so I headed outside to think for a moment before I took another run at talking to Kira.

Out on the sprawling lawn, I could see that the rest of the alliance packs were gathering in their respective groups.

The Samaras were near the tree line. Ava was talking with Marissa, and she looked over her shoulder at me, catching my eye. For her sake, I forced a smile that I didn’t feel. I was still reeling from my conversation with Tom. I was surprised by how threatening he’d managed to be—he’d always struck me as a gentle soul. But Cali *was* his daughter, and I couldn’t blame him for being protective of her.

That was the effect of Adéluce on my life—not only had she destroyed my relationship with Cali, but she’d blown up my relationship with everyone else around me. Every relationship that had ever mattered to me.

Which had left me with the Samaras.

I shook my head. I needed to get my house in order. Literally. So, I turned on my heel and headed back inside to find Kira.

She was coming down the stairs, but when she saw me, she stopped and turned right back around, heading up again. I took the stairs two at a time and passed her, then stepped in front of her.

“You can’t just blow me off like this, Kira.”

Her eyes widened. “Um, like the way you blew off the Redwoods? The way you blew off Cali?”

I rubbed my jaw, which was tight with tension. “Listen, Kira, I get that you’re upset, but you and I have a history. I helped you when you needed to track down Geoff’s killer. I helped you find Garren when no one else would.”

That reminder hit Kira like I’d known it would, and she dropped her eyes.

“I know,” she finally said, her voice quiet.

“I brought you here, let you stay here, and never asked for much in return.”

She nodded. “What is it that you want?”

I glanced around. No one was looking at us, exactly, but the Redwoods were moving around the house—in and out of the living room and the kitchen—and I didn’t want to have this conversation out in the open.

“Let’s go in there,” I said, pointing to the small study next to the front door.

Inside, I closed the door behind us and turned to Kira.

“I want to apologize for what I said before,” I said, remembering what I’d told her after I’d broken up with Cali, when I’d been desperate to get away. “I shouldn’t have said that to you. It was stupid.”

She raised an eyebrow. “So, we agree on something. That’s a start.”

I took a deep breath. “We’re on the verge of a pack war, here. I’m trying to rebuild the Samaras, but I need your help.”

Kira frowned. “*My* help? What can I do?”

“We need a pack house. And we need it to last.”

That didn’t seem to clear anything up for her. “Okay. Then shouldn’t you be hiring that Phil guy you use sometimes?”

I shook my head. “No, I don’t need Phil. I need you to use your magic to make a house. Will you do that?”

Her eyes widened in surprise, and then she looked away. “You’re asking a lot of me, Xavier.”

My hope rose. She hadn’t turned me down outright, which meant she was at least thinking about it. She could’ve just told me to fuck off.

“I’ll pay you, of course—”

“You think this is about *money*?” Kira snapped, rounding on me. She laughed, but the sound was bitter. “Wow. You’re an even bigger asshole than I thought.”

She pushed past me, heading for the door.

“Kira, stop,” I said. “Wait, please.”

She rounded on me, her eyes flashing angrily. “Why should I?”

“I don’t know what else to do,” I said, starting to feel desperate. “I get that you’re angry with me, but this isn’t just about me. This is about everyone in the Samara pack. They need a home. They need somewhere they can be safe.”

Kira gave me a hard look. “You hurt me. You hurt Cali. I can’t help you, Xavier,” she said. Then she flung the door open and stormed out.

“Fuck,” I breathed. “*Fuck*.”

I shook my head. I didn’t know what else to do. Asking for Kira’s help had been my one idea, and it had failed. Everything was completely fucked up. I only hoped Adéluce was enjoying my misery.

I balled my hand into a fist and slammed it down onto the desk. One of these days, something would go the way I wanted it to, and when I knew how to break myself from Adéluce's spell, I would. No matter what, I’d make vampire-witch pay for everything she’d done to me.

Fury coursed through me, making it hard to breathe. It just felt like nothing I did was ever enough—nothing was working, and I couldn’t think my way through the hold Adéluce had on me yet.

“Xavier?”

I turned. Ava was standing in the doorway, her dark eyes anxious.

“I was looking for you,” she said. “Is everything okay?”

I didn’t know what to say. I’d hoped to surprise her with news of the new house. Fuck. That was another disappointment that felt like a punch in the gut.

When I didn’t answer her question, she stepped toward me.

“X, what is it?” she asked quietly.

I shook my head. “Nothing. It’s just being here, in this house. Coming here was a mistake.”

“Then why are we staying?” she asked, clear-headed as ever. “Let’s get out of here. The pack is ready to go when you are.”

“Yeah, let’s go,” I said, taking a breath. It felt good to make a decision. It always did. “But first, I have to do something.

“What?” she asked.

“Come with me,” I said, taking her hand and leading her out of the den and into the living room.

I was done. I was sick and tired of walking on fucking eggshells in my own house. So when I stepped into the living room and all eyes turned to me—including Greyson’s and Cali’s—I didn’t flinch.

“We need to talk to the other Alphas,” I said to Greyson. “Now.”

**Episode 4052**

Next to me, I felt Greyson tense, and I was instantly worried that he and Xavier were about to get into yet *another* argument. It was never good when they got into it, and I would hate for my parents to have to leave in the middle of a situation like that. Especially because it wouldn’t take much to change their minds about leaving.

Greyson gave Xavier a stiff nod. “The Alphas can all meet in the larger study in ten minutes.” He looked over at me. “I want to make sure your parents get off okay, first.”

I smiled at him. “I appreciate that, thank you,” I said quietly, then glanced over at Xavier, wondering if he was going to argue, but he only nodded and left with Ava.

Seeing him in the role of Alpha made sense, even though he was the Alpha of a different pack. It almost felt natural—he did have Alpha blood, after all. But was I ever going to get used to seeing Xavier and Ava as a couple?

“I’m going to go tell Mace and Lucian about the meeting,” Greyson said, turning to me. He started to leave the room but stopped himself. He pulled a set of car keys out of his pocket and handed them to me. “You’ll need these. Also, I was thinking of asking Rishika and Lola to go with you and your parents to the airport. You know—added security.”

I nodded. “That’s not a bad idea. I know Lola will probably insist, anyway. She’s practically part of the Hart family as it is. And since Artemis is already coming, Rishika will want to come, too. I was thinking along the same lines.”

Greyson smiled at me. “Great minds think alike, I guess.”

I grinned back at him. “I suppose so. I’ll let them know.”

As Greyson headed outside, I walked over to where Artemis and Rishika were sitting on the couch.

“Hey,” I said, “are you two—”

“Give me the keys,” Artemis said, getting to her feet.

“What?” I asked, surprised.

She held out her hand. “I’m going to drive us to the airport.”

I hesitated. “Um, is that a good idea? You don’t have a lot of experience.”

Artemis gave me a stern look. “Hand them over. I’m serious about driving. I never joke about driving.”

With a sigh, I reluctantly handed over the keys to my SUV.

“Let’s go!” Artemis announced, jangling the keys. “All aboard the train to the airport!”

Rishika stood and watched Artemis as she made her way toward the front door. “I don’t know,” she said, shaking her head. “She gets a set of car keys in her hand and just loses her mind.”

I chuckled and turned toward the door.

Rishika carried all the luggage down the porch steps—despite my dad’s protests—but my dad did insist on loading into the trunk himself.

“I’ve got a system,” he said, waving Rishika away.

“Okay, just remember that you drive on the right side of the road,” I said to Artemis, hoping that this wasn’t going to come as news to her. “And you can’t get mad at people who are going faster than you. Or slower. You just can’t get mad at people in general, okay?”

Artemis nodded, grinning widely as she spun the car keys around her finger. She looked excited by the prospect of driving. Maybe a little *too* excited.

I shook my head and looked around. It felt so normal to be at the car, with my dad doing his usual pedantic suitcase Tetris, but all around the pack house, the allied packs had gathered. I was still trying to wrap my head around what it all meant—that my parents were leaving because the danger surrounding the pack house and the Redwood pack had intensified to the point that they were no longer safe. And that sucked.

Greyson strode over to the car. “I’m sorry,” he said to my parents, “I’d like to come see you off properly, but—”

“But you have plenty to deal with here,” I said, cutting him off. That was true, but I also—selfishly—wanted my parents all to myself for the ride to the airport. With Lola and Rishika here, it wasn’t exactly that. Still, this was my last small slice of family time, and I wasn’t going to get more for a while.

Greyson looked at me and seemed to understand. “Okay, drive safe.”

He turned to my dad and shook his hand, then gave my mom a hug, which she returned warmly.

The door burst open and Torin came flying out.

“WAIT!”

We all looked over in surprise.

“Torin? What’s going on?” I asked nervously.

Torin drew up to us, breathing hard. “I couldn’t let Tom and Orla leave without getting one last hug goodbye,” he said, and tears filled his eyes. “I’m just going to miss you both so much.”

“Oh, Torin,” my mom said, as tears filled her own eyes.

My dad wrapped Torin in a tight hug. “We’ll be in touch, Torin. I promise. We’ll trade recipes.”

Torin nodded against his shoulder. “Okay,” he said shakily.

My mom was looking back at the house, and she wiped a tear from her cheek.

“Are you okay, Mom?” I asked quietly.

She looked over at me. “When your dad and I first arrived, I never imagined what we’d end up going through in this house.” She looked back at the house and shook her head, almost in disbelief. “I always knew we’d have to leave, eventually—I just wish it didn’t have to be so soon.”

I threw my arms around her. “I’ll come visit you as soon as I can,” I promised. “Maybe in the spring. Greyson and I will both come.”

“You’d better,” my mom said, hugging me back. “And you too, Artemis.”

“I will, I will,” Artemis agreed. “Now hop in. We have to get going if we’re going to get there on time.”

My mom disentangled herself from me, and she and my dad climbed into the back of the car. Lola and Rishika joined them, climbing into the third row of seats.

Artemis was in the driver’s seat, and I got into the passenger seat next to her. As she started off down the driveway, I turned and looked back at the house. It felt strange to see it moving away from me.

My parents were going back to the house I’d always called home, but *this* was my home now.

Xavier stepped out onto the porch. I hadn’t realized he’d gone back into the house, but there he was, watching as we drove away—with Ava by his side.

That was jarring as always. My stomach tightened. It never got easier, seeing the two of them together. Maybe it would, eventually.

I turned and faced forward. Part of me wanted to ask my dad about the conversation I’d seen him having with Xavier. I wanted to know what they’d talked about, but I really didn’t want to ask while we were in the car with everyone else. Their conversation had looked intense—much more intense than the interactions my dad usually had with anyone.

Artemis turned the radio on as she pulled the car onto the main road, sending everyone flying to the left.

“*Artemis*,” Lola complained, as everyone else groaned.

“Relax!” Artemis chuckled, sounding unconcerned. “I know how to drive.”

“You do have a license, don’t you?” my dad asked nervously.

“Of course I do. A very *legitimate* driver’s license.”

I rolled my eyes. “That sounds questionable.”

“What does *that* mean?” Artemis asked.

“How exactly would you have gotten this license?” I shot back. “You don’t even have a human birth certificate. Or a social security number.”

“Details, details,” Artemis said, waving her hand like she was shooing away a fly. “It’s fine. I don’t know why you’re all obsessing over it.”

I shook my head and tried to settle back in the seat but couldn’t stop myself from glancing at the speedometer as Artemis began to go faster and faster. I bit my lip—I hated to nag, but I had to say something.

“You can’t go that fast,” I told her.

“What are you talking about?”

“You need to slow down, Artemis,” my dad said, leaning forward.

“I’m not even speeding,” she protested.

“You’re speeding,” Rishika called from the third row. “I can tell.”

“Will everyone just *relax*?” Artemis huffed. “My gods. Are you all driving, or am I?”

I swallowed hard and jerked on my seat belt to make sure it was locking, just in case. But when I heard the wail of a siren, my blood ran cold, and I whipped around to see a police car behind us. That was when I saw the flashing lights.

“Oh god, pull over.”

“Why?” Artemis frowned.

“Because you’re speeding!” Rishika yelled from the back of the car.

Artemis groaned and started to pull over, but I was already panicking. The police officer was going to want to see Artemis’s license.

I unbuckled my seatbelt and started to climb over the center console. “Artemis! Switch seats with me!”

**Episode 4053**

**Greyson**

I paced in the study, waiting for the other Alphas to join me. I stopped by the window and looked out at the raw January day, feeling edgy as hell. Cali had just left, but her absence in the house already felt palpable. And it was going to be weird, not having her parents around. Tom and Orla had become part of the pack. I had a feeling Torin was going to take the loss of their presence particularly hard.

I glanced up at the clock over the fireplace. It usually took just under two hours to get to the airport. I wished I could’ve gone with them, but Cali was right—I had enough to take care of here. It was a big trip, and it wouldn’t make any sense for me to be gone from the packhouse for that long. Not when there was so much going on, and all the allied packs had gathered on the lawn. I was worried about Cali, but I knew I didn’t need to be—I knew she was in good hands with Rishika. I could trust Rishika to keep an eye out for anything that might come their way, though I doubted the Bitterfangs would try anything. They were dangerous, but I didn’t think even they would risk a daytime attack on the highway.

“Greyson.”

I looked up to see Lucian standing in the doorway. “Lucian, come in.”

He nodded. “I know I’m early, but I wanted to speak to you before the others arrived—”

“If it’s about Elle, Lucian, I don’t want to hear it,” I said shortly. “I know what you’re going to ask, and we’re not talking about her right now. We’ve got other shit to deal with. We need to focus on the Bitterfang threat.”

Lucian waved impatiently. “We can discuss strategy when the others arrive. I…” He cleared his throat. “I wanted to apologize for blowing up at you, back at the summit.”

I raised an eyebrow. It was a limp apology, but it was something—and it made me wary. Since when did Lucian apologize for anything? I had to wonder what game he was playing.

“And I need your help to bring Elle back,” Lucian finished, instantly proving me right.

I pushed a hand through my hair as I swallowed a frustrated groan. “Lucian, I’m not going to talk about Elle.”

“I don’t want much,” Lucian said urgently. “But since you have such a strong sire bond connection with my Arielle, I was hoping you could use it to draw my forest rose back to me.”

I stared at the guy. “Lucian. I don’t even know how I would go about doing that—but even if I did know, I wouldn’t. What Elle just went through was hugely traumatic, and she needs time to recover. She needs space. If you really cared about her, you’d respect that and give her what she needs.”

I eyed Lucian, wondering how he was going to respond to that. I had a feeling that he didn’t know how to care for anyone except himself, and—once again—he instantly proved me right by continuing to argue.

“Greyson, I really think if you just—”

“Greyson, what’s going on?” Mace asked, walking into the study and interrupting Lucian’s impassioned plea.

Behind him, Xavier and Ava stepped inside. Lucian looked at Ava and frowned.

“I thought this meeting was for Alphas *only*,” he said, sounding peeved.

Xavier glared at him. “You thought wrong.” He looked around. “Anyone else have a problem?”

I rolled my eyes. I didn’t have time for Xavier’s shit. He just seemed to have this permanent chip on his shoulder that got more pronounced whenever anyone questioned anything he did or said.

“Enough,” I said. “We have important matters to discuss. Let’s get to it.”

Mace nodded and dropped into a chair by the cold fireplace. Lucian stood near the window. Xavier and Ava sat together on the couch. I stared at them, and after a moment I realized it was because they looked perfectly matched, sitting together like that—they were both dark haired, and Ava’s small frame was the perfect counterpoint to Xavier’s hulking one. They looked like some kind of perfect power couple, and I found myself missing Cali more than ever.

But I was glad she wasn’t here to see Xavier and Ava like this. I knew it would only hurt her.

Mace looked at Xavier. “I assume you called this meeting to discuss leadership?”

Xavier nodded. “Yeah. I suggest that I continue in my role as leader of the alliance.”

I felt a muscle in my jaw twitch, but I wasn’t surprised to hear him say this. I’d had a feeling that this would be Xavier’s next step.

Lucian scoffed. “We nearly got slaughtered out there. Why do you think—”

“We were attacked *before* I took charge,” Xavier snapped. “And we *did* make it back, didn’t we?” He looked around. “No one from the alliance was killed or even seriously injured.”

That wasn’t exactly true. All anyone had to do to disprove that claim was speak to Big Mac—though according to Torin, she was recovering. But I kept all that to myself. Now didn’t feel like the time to bring any of that up. Anyway, if anything, *I* felt responsible for what had happened to Big Mac. It wasn’t Xavier’s fault, or the fault of the alliance—she’d been attacked on my watch.

But still, Lucian didn’t look convinced. “You were simply a temporary solution,” he said loftily.

Xavier shot him a dangerous look. “If it was a test, then I proved myself.” He turned to me. “I’m guessing I don’t have your support, either.”

I paused and tried to think about the question objectively. If I could somehow remove all the history and the bad blood between Xavier and me, would I still object to putting him in charge of the alliance? I thought hard about it and tried to consider the question from all angles. But no matter how I approached it, my answer was the same—*no*. My brother was a strong fighter, but he was too rash and impulsive, and he constantly let his hunger to be in charge cloud his decision-making.

I met Xavier’s eyes and took a deep breath, knowing that I was about to ignite a firestorm. “I don’t think you’re ready.”

As predicted, Xavier’s eyes instantly flashed with fire, and he leapt to his feet.

“You’re a stubborn pain in the ass, you know that?” he spat.

Mace pinched the bridge of his nose, and I remembered what he’d said to me earlier about not wanting to get caught up in the Evers brothers crossfire. It looked like it was too late for that, but I was still going to try not to escalate things, so I stayed where I was as Xavier stormed over to me.

He looked normal to me, but Mace must’ve thought he looked pretty aggressive, because he appeared at Xavier’s side and grabbed his shoulder, trying to pull him back.

“Xavier, let’s just calm down, okay?” he said. “We’re just talking. We’re not going to solve anything by getting up in each other’s faces.”

I didn’t want another repeat of everything from the woods.

I shook my head, feeling frustrated. Xavier was right—I could definitely be a stubborn ass, on occasion—but this reaction was just another demonstration of why he wasn’t ready to lead the alliance. Another demonstration of his immaturity. Someone had said he couldn’t have what he wanted, and he’d lost his shit. He’d claimed that he wanted to have a discussion with the other Alphas, but he couldn’t even do that. He always took everything so personally.

“If someone has to lead the alliance, it really should be me,” Lucian said, folding his arms over his chest. “I respect the decision to choose Xavier earlier, but I will advocate for myself again now.”

“*You?*” Mace asked incredulously. “Why you?”

“I have the largest pack,” Lucian pointed out. “And I *am* royalty—”

He glared when Mace snorted with laughter.

“People aren’t going to put their faith in you, Lucian,” Ava said bluntly.

“What? Why? What are you talking about?’ Lucian said, sounding deeply offended.

“Are you kidding me? After what you and the Vanguards did with Seluna?” Ava shook her head. “Get real.”

Lucian gaped at her. “That was *not* my fault! I was hoodwinked by that—”

“I don’t even know why we’re having this discussion,” Xavier said, his eyes on Ava. “It should be me. I’m the only Alpha here who has a *real* Luna.”

My whole body tensed. I looked quickly at Xavier, then at Lucian and Mace. No one else knew about Cali’s fake Luna mark. Did Xavier know? There was no way he could. Was he just trying to dig at me?

Lucian and Mace were looking deeply confused.

“*Real* Luna?” Mace looked at Xavier, then at me. “What the hell is he talking about, Greyson?”

**Episode 4054**

**Xavier**

I hesitated, unsure whether I should tell Lucian and Mace the truth about Cali’s Luna mark. Hell, Ava didn’t even know what I was talking about. And Greyson had no idea that I knew.

Greyson was glaring at me, but beneath the anger, I could see the panic in his eyes. I thought of Cali and gritted my teeth. I needed to back off. I didn’t actually want to throw her under the bus like that. Plus, if the Bitterfangs somehow found out about the mark being fake, who knew what they would do? They’d probably see it as an offense, yet another reason to come after us.

I cleared my throat. “All I meant is that Ava is the only Luna who’s here. She’s the only one standing by her Alpha.”

I thought it was a pretty poor excuse, and I wasn’t sure if it worked. Ava was staring at me, questions in her eyes. I just needed all the other Alphas not to question what I’d said again, or I’d be in deep shit.

Mace shook his head. “Yeah, it’s great that you two have each other—big congrats and all that—but we’re not here to talk about Lunas, are we? We’re here to talk about the threat facing us, and what we need is an Alpha who can take control of this situation and defeat the Bitterfangs. We need someone who can hold this damn alliance together.” He shot a look at me, then at Greyson. “I’ve said this before, and I’ll say it again—I like you both, but I’m not going to stand by and let you drag all the packs in this alliance into some family feud.”

Ava got to her feet and stood next to me, her gaze sweeping over the Alphas in the room. “Xavier took over our pack when we were at our lowest point. He has proven himself to every one of us, and earned our respect. You’d all be fools to ignore the role he’s taken on and to let your petty grievances get in the way of all the good he could do for the alliance.”

Ava’s voice was strong, and I was struck by how unwavering she was in her support of me. She had my back, now and always. And that felt really good.

Mace nodded. “Thanks, Ava. I’m glad Xavier has been able to turn your pack around, and I know that means a lot to you, but I still think Greyson should be the one to lead the alliance.”

“What a fucking surprise,” I snarled.

Mace didn’t blink. “Hear me out—the Bitterfangs are coming for us all, but they’ve clearly singled out the Redwoods, so that makes the stakes higher for them. And Greyson has more experience as an Alpha than you do, Xavier. And his Luna is more than capable.”

*His Luna is fake!* Was what I wanted to scream, but I clamped my teeth together. Whatever I wanted to say, I knew I couldn’t do that to Cali.

Lucian heaved a dramatic sigh. “Fine,” he said, with ill grace. “I think you’re making a mistake, not asking me to lead, but I suppose I agree with Mace.”

Greyson turned to me. “Then it’s settled. They want me to lead.”

Ava scoffed and shook her head. I balled my hands into fists, anger pounding through my veins. I wasn’t surprised, but I was pissed. Once again, the Alpha gang was viewing Greyson as the leader and me as his little brother. I grabbed Ava’s hand and started out of the room, too angry to say another word, but Greyson stepped toward me and grabbed my arm.

“Hey. We need to talk.”

“Why?” Ava demanded.

Greyson glanced at her, then at me. “He knows why.”

I suspected I *did* know.

“It’s fine,” I said to Ava, giving her hand a squeeze. She was tense, and I could tell she was angry, too.

Greyson and I stepped out of the den and into the hall, where a dozen or so assorted pack members scattered like startled rats. They’d clearly been gathered around the door, listening in on the discussion.

When they were gone and there was no one in earshot, Greyson rounded on me.

“What the *hell* were you thinking?” he hissed, his voice a seething whisper. “I don’t know what the *fuck* would possess you to disregard and disrespect Cali that way, but don’t do it again.”

“If you were actually listening to what I said, you’d know that I didn’t actually do that—”

“Yeah, because you gave some bullshit excuse and are trying to escape admitting to what you did,” Greyson snapped. “Save me the bullshit. Don’t pull shit like this and try to undermine her, me, or the pack. If you’re done with Cali, then be done.”

My heart lurched. I could never be “done” with Cali. She was who I wanted. Who I wanted to give my entire being to if I were able to.

“You know that Cali’s still my mate, whether you like it or not,” I said. My mind flashed to the conversation I’d had with Tom in the kitchen—when he’d told me that I’d better look out for Cali if this tension with the Bitterfangs escalated to a pack war. “I was pointing out a fact, not trying to undermine anyone.”

Greyson gave me a searching look. “Yeah? Well, you should have thought about that before you left.” He shook his head. “You don’t have to worry about Cali. I’m always going to be there for her.”

Anger and frustration were building inside me, growing so large and so all-encompassing, it felt like they were crowding everything else out. I couldn’t think—I could barely breathe. It was infuriating to be standing here, cursed into silence. Greyson had no fucking idea what I was going through, what I’d already gone through. He had clue why I’d had to leave Cali, or that if I’d stayed, I could’ve killed her.

Greyson eyed me. “Are we clear?”

I stared at him. “Clear? What the hell, man? What do you want from me? You’ve won—again. You’re in charge.”

Something flashed through Greyson’s eyes, breaking up the frustration in them. He shook his head. “There’s too much at stake here. We can’t make this personal, Xavier.”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it,” I spat. “This couldn’t *get* more personal.”

Greyson glanced around. The hallway we were standing in was quiet, but I could hear the pack moving around in the rest of the house. It was a low hum of people moving and talking. The washing machine beeped, and someone laughed in the living room. It was the sound of a pack existing in a pack house, and I hadn’t realized how much I’d missed it.

This was personal. It was *all* personal.

“Until the Bitterfangs are defeated, we need to stop fighting, Xavier. You and me. Mace is right—it’s not going to do the alliance any good if the two of us start our own private war. Can we agree on that?”

I looked at him for a long moment, then shrugged. “Whatever.”

I was finished with this conversation, and pushed off from the wall to walk away, but Greyson caught my arm again.

“I need you to be an ally,” he said, his eyes intense on me. “Not an enemy.”

I yanked my arm from his grasp. “Then *you* need to stop treating me like a little brother.” I stepped into the study, where Ava was waiting. “Let’s go. We’re leaving.”

Greyson was behind me. “That’s a good idea. I think everyone should go back to their pack houses, explain the situation to their whole packs, and then we’ll reconnect. We’ll put a plan in place to fight the Bitterfangs and organize patrols using inter-pack units. And next time we meet, we’ll come up with our offensive and defensive strategies.” He looked around the room. “I’ll be reaching out to all of you. Thanks for putting your trust in me. I’ll try not to let you down.”

I rolled my eyes and grabbed Ava’s hand.

“What happened?” she asked quietly.

“Nothing. Let’s just get out of here.”

I was feeling angry and bitter. It was easy for Greyson to tell everyone to go back to their pack houses when he was currently living in *my* house. Mace and Lucian had their own comfortable pack house to go back to, too, while Ava and I just had Knox’s shitty Airstream.

Outside, Ava and I walked to where the rest of the Samaras were gathered.

“We’re heading out,” Ava called to them. “Make sure you have everything. I don’t want to have to come back here,” she said, glancing back at me.

She was right about that.

Behind us, the door of the house opened and shut, and I turned to see Kira walking down the porch steps. She strode purposefully toward me.

“I’ve changed my mind,” she said, stopping right in front of me. “I’ll do it.”

**Episode 4055**

I felt cold panic wash over me. We were being pulled over by the police. This was *so* not good.

“What are you talking about?” Artemis asked, looking at me in confusion.

“Switch seats with me,” I hissed at her. “Now. Move! We don’t have much time!”

“Stop,” Artemis said, pushing me back into my own seat. “Why are you being so weird, Cali? Just put your seat belt back on so we don’t get in trouble.”

“Artemis—”

“Oh my god, Cali. I’ve got this covered. *Relax*.”

But I did *not* relax. At all. Just the opposite. My whole body went tense as I worried that this was about to get so much worse. I didn’t know exactly what Artemis had in mind, but there was no way a magical driver’s license was going to pass a police inspection. I just wanted to disappear into my seat, but I pulled my seat belt back on as Artemis rolled down her window.

She smiled as the police officer approached the car. “Hi, there.”

“Hello,” he said, without expression. “Do you know why I pulled you over?”

Artemis shook her head. “Nope.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Do you know how fast you were going?”

I had a sudden worry that Artemis was going to try to argue, but—luckily—she didn’t. She widened her smile as she pulled the magical driver’s license out of her pocket and handed it over. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t really paying attention. I was in such a rush to get my parents to the airport. I really want to make sure they make their flight.”

I felt everyone in the SUV holding their breath as the police officer considered this explanation.

Finally, he nodded. “I’m going to go run this, along with your tags,” he said, holding up the license.

I dropped my head back against the seat with a groan. I couldn’t believe this was actually happening.

“Why didn’t you just let me drive?” I asked. “I have a *real* driver’s license.”

“Mine’s real, too,” Artemis protested. “It was just procured in a different way.”

“Yeah, I’ll say,” I said with a sigh. I turned around to check on my parents. They seemed fine, though my mom was biting her lip nervously. On the floor at her feet, I spied Artemis’s training bag.

“What the hell is *that*?” I demanded, pointing at the bag.

Artemis shifted around to see what I was pointing at. “What? I couldn’t leave the house without my favorite things.”

I gaped at her. “Are you *kidding* me? You brought weapons with you? To the *airport*?”

“Yeah. So?” Artemis asked, clearly baffled by my reaction. “I’m not getting on a plane.”

I shook my head. “There are absolutely no weapons allowed, Artemis. They could ask us to step out of the car; they could get a warrant to search it! I mean, what if he looks through the window and *sees* them?” I said, pointing at the bag.

“I’ll cover them up,” Lola said, taking off her coat and throwing it over the bag. “Don’t worry, Cali. He’s not going to see them.”

“Unless he decides to search the car,” I said. “Then what?”

“Shut up, here he comes,” Rishika snapped.

The officer handed Artemis her license. “Everything checks out. I’m going to let you off with a warning, but I want you to slow down, okay?”

Artemis nodded. “You got it.”

He poked his head through the window—a little too far for my comfort. My heart pounded—I just *knew* he was going to see the bag of weapons.

But he only smiled at my parents. “You two have a safe flight.”

“Thank you,” my dad said, his voice choked. My mom only smiled.

When the officer turned to walk back to his car, Artemis floored it.

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At the airport, Artemis pulled up to the curb and threw the car into park. “We’re here!”

I was relieved that the ride was over, but just as I went to open the door, I stopped myself and turned to look at my parents. “I know you two don’t want to leave, but thank you for doing it anyway.”

My mom nodded. “That doesn’t mean we won’t come back the minute you need us.”

My throat tightened, and I had to really work not to cry. “I know.”

We climbed out of the SUV, and Rishika stood back while my dad valiantly hauled all the bags out of the trunk. But he did allow her and Artemis to help get them to the curbside bag check.

While they took care of that, my mom turned to me.

“I meant what I said. We’ll fly back the minute you need us. We don’t need to stay in Minnesota. You girls are the most important thing in the world to us,” she said, looking between Artemis and me.

“I know,” I told her. “But going back is the right call for now. The danger here keeps escalating. It’s making it impossible for me to make good decisions for the pack, because I have to factor you two into the equation. I’m too worried about your safety to think straight.”

My mom nodded. “I understand. I don’t like it, but I do understand. I remember what it was like when I was living in the Fae world, during the war.” She took a deep breath. “I want you to promise me that you’ll be careful, sweetheart.”

“I will,” I told her.

“Okay, bags are checked and on their way,” my dad said, stepping to my mom’s side. He looked at her. “Ready?’

My mom’s eyes went liquid with tears, but before she could say anything, a woman in a security uniform approached us.

“Excuse me, is one of you the driver of this car?” she asked, pointing to the SUV.

“Yes,” Artemis said.

The guard gave her a stern look. “It’s parked illegally. You’re going to have to move it.”

Artemis frowned. “I’m just saying goodbye to my parents.”

The guard was unmoved. “It *will* be towed.”

“Ugh, good gods. Fine, I’ll move it.” Artemis gave my mom a quick hug, then my dad, then she jumped back behind the wheel.

“Have a safe trip,” Rishika said, hugging them both.

Lola threw her arms around both of them at once. “I’m going to miss you,” she said tearfully.

Then she and Rishika climbed back into the car, leaving me alone with my parents.

I hugged them both, trying to savor the moment and remind myself that they were leaving for everyone’s protection. After I let them go, I watched as they walked through the sliding doors into the airport. As the doors closed, I sighed, feeling the weight of the moment as the sadness started to sink in.

Behind me, Artemis honked the horn. “All aboard!”

I rolled my eyes and climbed into the car.

“How dare they insult my parking,” she grumbled as she pulled away from the curb.

“Your parking was a little… *unique*,” Rishika said. She smiled. “But everything you do is unique.”

This seemed to placate Artemis, and she was quiet as we headed back toward the highway.

“Maybe we should stop while we’re out,” Lola suggested. “Get some dinner or drinks or something.”

Rishika shook her head. “I don’t think so. We should probably just get back. This isn’t supposed to be a girls’ trip—it was a mission to drop off Tom and Orla.”

I listened to the conversation, but didn’t feel like I was a part of it. It felt like I was in this separate bubble, far apart from the others. And since when was this a mission? How was a simple trip to the airport a *mission*? How was this my life?

I kept thinking about what my mom had said, about how this situation reminded her of her time in the Fae world during the war, and the anxious expression on my dad’s face. I looked out the window as the weight of it all settled over me. It felt like so much. When did everything get so awful?

“Oh *shit shit shit!*”

I looked over to see that Artemis had gone pale.

“What’s going on?” Lola asked worriedly.

Artemis pointed at the dashboard. “This little light came on while we were driving to the airport, and now there are three more lights. And this one is flashing.”

“*Four* alert lights?” I said, my anxiety ramping up. “What are they?”

“I don’t know!” Artemis said, annoyed. “I can’t read these symbols. One looks like a lamp—”

“That’s the oil light,” I said. “See! That’s what getting a real driver’s license would actually teach you!”

I leaned over to see that the check engine light was also flashing, along with the maintenance required light and the engine temperature light.

A moment later, the engine began to sputter. Artemis looked over at me.

“Pull over,” I said, pointing to the shoulder of the highway. There was no other choice, of course, but the idea of it filled me with dread.

“Wait, you’re going to just stop *here*?” Lola demanded as Artemis steered the car to the side of the highway.

“I have to,” Artemis said. “The car isn’t giving me much choice. Nothing’s happening when I push the pedal.”

We all went quiet as smoke began to billow from beneath the hood of the car.

Lola groaned. “Okay, this was *not* what I meant when I said I wanted to stop somewhere on the way back.”

**Episode 4056**

Lola, Artemis, and I stood on the shoulder of the highway, staring at the smoldering engine in silence. Rishika was on her phone, trying to find a tow truck service.

“No one’s picking up!” she growled, ending another call.

“Can’t either of you use your Fae magic to fix this?” Lola asked, looking at Artemis and me.

Artemis scowled at her. “We’re not witches. That’s not how our magic works.”

I rubbed my head, feeling despondent. None of us had the slightest idea how to fix whatever was wrong with the car, which meant we were stuck here for the time being. That didn’t make me the least bit happy, because I really wanted to get back to the pack house. Things between the Alphas had seemed pretty tense, earlier, and I seriously doubted anything had improved while I was away. And I was Greyson’s Luna—at least as far as Lucian and Mace and the greater werewolf community were concerned—which meant I was needed back there. I tried to remind myself that this was an unexpected delay, but still.

“—and you *can* get someone out here?” Rishika was saying. Apparently, she’d finally been able to get through to a tow service. She nodded, listening to someone on the other end. “Okay. Okay. Wait, *when*?” She sighed. “Okay, that’s fine. Thanks.” She ended the call and turned to us. “So, it might be a while before the truck can come.”

“Should we call someone from the pack house to come get us?” I wondered. I shivered as the January wind blew around us. “We can’t stay out here for hours. It’s too cold, and it’s only going to get colder.”

“I could build a fire,” Artemis offered, already looking around for wood.

“That might not be the best idea,” Rishika said.

“Yeah, I don’t think fires are allowed on highways,” Lola added. “I could flag someone down? Maybe we could get a ride to a diner or something.”

“Yeah, or get slaughtered by a serial killer. Great idea, Lola,” I said sarcastically.

She rolled her eyes. “Come on. That would never happen. Not only are serial killers statistically very rare, but we’re supernaturals. Any human who tried to hurt us would get a very nasty surprise.”

“Cali, why don’t you call Xavier?” Artemis suggested.

I looked at her in shock. So did everyone else.

It took her a moment to realize what she’d said, then she shook her head. “Sorry, I meant Greyson. I’m sorry!”

“It’s fine,” I said quickly. Under normal circumstances, I probably *would* have called Xavier to get me out of a situation like this. But normal wasn’t visiting me anymore.

The wind whipped up, blowing harder, and I shivered again. I was getting really cold, and the jacket I’d thrown on before we’d left the house just wasn’t cutting it. I hadn’t bothered to grab my parka, since I’d figured I wouldn’t need it just to sit in the car.

“That settles it,” Lola said, watching me shiver. “I’m calling Jay. He’s not an Alpha, so he’s not involved in whatever strategy meetings they’re holding. He’ll come get us if I call him.”

“We could shift,” Rishika offered. “We can carry Artemis and Cali back to the pack house.”

“I don’t know…” I said uncertainly. I wasn’t thrilled with that idea. I was already freezing, and the idea of clinging to a wolf as she sprinted to the pack house didn’t sound great to me. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to go running through the woods where the Bitterfangs could very well be waiting for us.”

“You may be right,” Rishika conceded.

“At least out here—in the open—they might have second thoughts about trying anything,” I said, gesturing toward the highway, where cars were still speeding by. “Anyway, I don’t want to abandon my car here. It was—”

I stopped myself. I’d been about to say that it had been a gift from Xavier, but it made me sad to think of that, so I kept my mouth shut.

“Jay? Hey, it’s me,” Lola was saying. “Yeah, well, if you don’t want to sleep alone tonight, you’d better get off the phone right now and come pick us up.”

Artemis must have noticed me looking downcast, because she slipped an arm around my shoulders. “Are you okay?”

I nodded, trying to smile up at her. “I’m okay, just cold. I’ll be better once we get back.”

Artemis nodded. “I know. This sucks. I didn’t know what the lights meant when I saw them. I really am sorry, Cali. I didn’t mean to mess up your car.”

“It’s okay,” I said quietly. I looked over at the grey smoke that was still billowing out from under the hood. “I would’ve been surprised to see the warning lights, too. This shouldn’t really be happening.”

“What do you mean?” Artemis asked.

“I mean, this car is basically brand-new. It’s hardly ever been used. So why is it smoking on the side of the road? I mean, I’m not a mechanic, but shouldn’t cars be able to go longer before they break down completely?”

Artemis shrugged. “No idea. I know less about cars than you do. I’m just bummed because I was having a good time driving.”

I smiled at her. “You know, if we forget the speeding—and the weapons, and the license, and the illegal parking—you were doing a pretty good job.”

Artemis chuckled. We both looked at the car for a silent moment. “I’m going to miss them.”

“Me too.” I sighed. “It’s going to be weird without them around.”

“And poor Torin,” Artemis said. “Who’s he going to cook with?”

I laughed at this, but then the laughter faded, and I looked over at my sister. “This must be really hard on you.”

Artemis looked at me, surprised and confused. “What do you mean? Why would it be any harder on me than it is on you?”

I shrugged. “I’ve had my mom around for most of my life,” I said. “You’ve only been able to spend a short time with her. That doesn’t seem fair.”

Artemis looked back at the car, but I didn’t think she was really seeing it. Her gaze was distant, and when she spoke, her voice sounded like it was coming from far away. “It’s different for me, Cali. I spent most of my life thinking that I had no parents at all. That I was alone. At least now, I know that my mother is real. And that my father might even be out there.”

I threw my arms around my sister. She was such a mystery to me, even after all this time. She was always guarded, but inside that hard shell she used to protect herself, she was so vulnerable, and I was so grateful that she sometimes let me in. I thought of how much she seemed to enjoy spending time with our mom, and decided that I was going to try really hard to be there for over the next few weeks, just to make sure she knew she was loved.

The four of us clustered together, trying to keep each other warm as we waited. I was starting to lose hope when Rishika suddenly perked up.

“Hey! Look!” she shouted.

We turned to see a tow truck approaching in the distance. I let out a relieved breath, glad I wasn’t going to have to worry about abandoning my car on the side of the road.

The tow truck pulled to a stop and the driver—a wiry guy wearing canvas overalls and a baseball hat—hopped out, looking around in confusion. “Rishika?”

“Yeah,” she said, waving as she walked over to him. “That’s me.”

“Sorry,” he said with a laugh. “I passed you a couple of times already. I thought I misheard when you told me about the car.”

“What do you mean?” I asked curiously.

He looked over at me and shrugged. “I was just expecting an older model SUV.”

“Do you think you can fix what’s wrong with it?” I asked nervously.

He smiled. “Well, I won’t know anything until I take a look. Can someone get inside and pop the hood for me?”

“I’ll do it!” Artemis volunteered. She fiddled around inside the car for a while, but when she couldn’t figure out how to open the hood, Rishika went over and helped her.

The tow truck driver, whose name turned out to be Hank, propped the hood open and leaned in to take a look, waving a way a plume of smoke. “What a mess!”

When the smoke cleared, he looked down and frowned.

“What is it?” Lola asked him. “Did squirrels build a nest in the engine or something?”

Hank reached in and grabbed something, then held up the end of a hose. “Did one of you take this off?”

We all shook our heads.

“No,” I said. “None of us even looked under there. We were waiting for you.”

Hank scratched his head, looking confused. “Well, somebody disconnected it.”

“Wait, somebody messed with my car?” An alarm went off in my head, and I looked at Artemis. “Did somebody do this to us on *purpose*?”

**Episode 4057**

**Xavier**

Ava looked around, as edgy as I’d ever seen her. I couldn’t really blame her. We were standing in front of the burned-out husk of the old Samara pack house.

“What are we doing here?” she snapped irritably. “We shouldn’t be here. We should be with the rest of the pack, X. We have things go do—”

I grabbed her hands. “Hey,” I said gently. “I know it’s not easy for you to be here.” I looked around. The pack house was nothing more than a charred foundation—most of it covered in dirty, icy snow. “I know this is where you lived with Nolan and the rest of your pack, before Letifer.” Long before that demon had burned the house down and allowed Silas to kill her brother—though I didn’t say that part out loud. She didn’t need me to say it. “I didn’t bring you back to remind you of all that.”

“Then why *did* you bring me here?” she asked, her voice tight. “I want to leave. Now.”

She started to turn, but I pulled her back, so she was facing me again.

“You’ve been asking me to rebuild the pack, right?”

She eyed me warily. “Yeah. What does that have to do with—”

“I can’t rebuild anything when we don’t have a home. We can’t keep up pack morale when people are camping in shitty tents through the winter. That’s no way to grow a pack. We need a place for the whole pack to live together. Even Lucian knows that much—it’s why he’s got that huge estate.”

She rolled her eyes. “Okay, I don’t think using Lucian as an example for anything is a wise move.”

I laughed. “Okay, you’re probably right about that. But my point is, we can’t run the pack out of Knox’s shitty little trailer any longer. We need a real pack house, and we need it as soon as possible.”

Ava glanced at the remains of the Samara pack house and shook her head. “You’re right, but I don’t know what we can do about it right now. We’ve got more important things to deal with at the moment. It’s not like we have time to go house-hunting. I mean yeah, a house would be nice, but what about the Bitterfangs and the—”

“We can’t defend our home if we don’t have one,” I pointed out.

She huffed in exasperation. “Xavier, what are you getting at, here?”

This was the moment I’d been waiting for. “Ava, we’re getting a home.”

Her dark eyes widened for a moment, then they narrowed suspiciously, and she pulled her hands away. “You’re joking.”

Before I could respond to that, there was a rush of wind and Kira appeared, having just blipped in.

She looked around. “Where do you want it?”

I smiled. “Perfect timing.”

Ava looked at Kira, then back at me, clearly baffled.

“What the hell is going on? What are you doing here?” she asked Kira.

Kira looked over at me, annoyed. “Wait, you didn’t tell her?”

“I was trying to—”

“Will someone please tell me what the fuck is going on?” Ava exploded, taking a step away from me. She was highly agitated, which wasn’t exactly the reaction I’d been going for.

“I asked Kira, and she agreed to use her magic to build us a pack house,” I said.

The color drained out of Ava’s face, and she narrowed her eyes. “Why?”

“What?” I asked. It was my turn to be confused.

“What did you offer her in exchange?”

I thought back to the conversation I’d had with Kira, after she’d said she would help me. I hadn’t been surprised when she’d told me she wasn’t doing this because she forgave me, because she never would. I never expected her to. But she’d said that she wasn’t going to punish the rest of the Samara pack for *my* actions. And that was why she was here.

But that was a lot of backstory, and Ava didn’t need to know all of it. It would only raise more questions about why I’d left the Redwoods the way I had—and those were questions I’d never be able to answer fully.

I could see Kira watching me closely, clearly curious about how I was going to answer Ava’s questions. Honestly, I was curious about that myself.

“I didn’t offer her anything,” I finally said.

Ava shook her head. “No way. No offense to you, Kira, but you’re a witch, and that’s not how your kind work. Am I supposed to believe that you’re just doing this out of the goodness of your heart?”

“Something like that, yeah,” I said, shooting a quick glance at Kira, wondering if she was going to contradict me.

She just shrugged. “Come on. I don’t have all day. Where do you want it?”

I looked around. “I guess we should just put it right on the original foundations. The original Samara Alpha probably built it here for a reason, right? And it makes sense to carry on the Samara tradition by respecting that.” I turned to Kira. “You’ll create it as we discussed?”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course.”

She walked past me and took Ava’s hand.

“What’s happening?” Ava asked, looking at me.

Kira gripped her hand tighter. “Quiet, or you’ll end up living in a shoebox. Literally.”

I chuckled to myself. What was it about witches that made them so damn grumpy all the time? It was like the magic kept them constantly on edge.

“Okay, close your eyes,” Kira told Ava. “Relax your body and cast your mind back. Think back to when you were living in this house. When it stood tall and straight and in good repair. When you lived here with your pack, and your brother.”

I saw Ava tense at those words. She opened her mouth, and I just knew she was going to object again.

*Just do what Kira says. Trust me*, I urged her. *I promise, you’ll understand in a minute.*

Ava held my gaze for a moment, then nodded and closed her eyes.

Kira took a deep breath, almost like she was breathing in part of Ava. She dropped her head and muttered something, her voice low and raspy, then she waved her free hand, passing it over the old foundations once, twice, three times.

For a long moment, nothing happened, then—out of nowhere—the ground began to shudder. There was a low, rumbling vibration, and it only grew in strength. My eyes widened as the burned-out foundations shook off the icy remnants of old snow, then began to grow. Slowly at first, then so quickly that I couldn’t believe my eyes, the house began to take shape. It was faint at first, but after a moment, I could see that it was taking on the size and shape of the original Samara pack house.

I held my breath as it grew and grew. The edges of the house expanded, but there was something odd about them. They weren’t quite resolved. They were still blurry, like the edges of a photograph taken from a moving car. I looked over at Kira and watched as she closed her eyes. She was straining hard, and I could see the physical toll this level of magic was taking on the witch. I’d asked her for something huge—a way to protect my pack—and now I could see how much it was costing her. Hopefully the effects wouldn’t last for very long.

Finally, Kira stopped chanting and opened her eyes. I looked over to see that the house was complete—fully resolved and realized.

I quickly turned to Ava, eager to see her reaction. “Open your eyes.”

When she did, her eyes widened to the size of dinner plates, and she gasped. She looked at the house in complete wonder, taking it in hungrily. Then she turned to me. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. Words weren’t necessary, though. Her eyes had filled with tears, and they said everything she couldn’t find the words for.

“Thank you Kira,” I said. “This means a lot to us and to the Samara pack.”

“Well, you’re welcome,” Kira said, with a curt nod. “Enjoy your house.”

Then, with a rush of wind, she blipped away.

I took Ava’s hand. “Do you want to go inside?”

She nodded, not saying anything else. I led her to the door. When I pushed it open, I wasn’t sure what to expect, but Ava gasped.

“It’s exactly the same,” she whispered. Her eyes were wide as she took everything in. She kept twisting around to look at another part of it. “Xavier, I don’t know what to say.”

I nodded, looking around. It did look like the house I remembered. I turned to my Luna. “Just tell me, do you like it?”

She looked up at me, tears coursing down her cheeks. “Xavier, I…”

She shook her head, grabbed me by the shirt, and kissed me.

**Episode 4058**

**Greyson**

I was pacing the halls of the pack house, anxious as hell. It genuinely felt like I was about to lose my mind.

“Greyson, try to relax,” Torin called out as I passed by the kitchen. “I’ll make you some tea!”

I shook my head. I didn’t want tea, and I knew I wasn’t going to be able to relax until Cali was back. I *knew* I should’ve gone with them—I couldn’t believe I’d decided to go against my instincts. I was just plain *pissed*. If not for the Bitterfangs and the need to choose a leader for the fight against them, I would’ve been with her the whole time.

But I’d stayed here at the house, and now Cali and the others were stuck. Jay had gone to collect them, but I still wasn’t feeling good.

The car breaking down just didn’t sit well with me. It just seemed unbelievable, with everything else we had going on. When Cali had called, she’d told me that the mechanic had been baffled about the car’s condition, too. I just didn’t like how any of this felt. Was something going on? Had the Bitterfangs actually gone beneath the hood of her car in an attempt to hurt someone—or kill them?

I stopped near the front door and looked out the narrow window, surveying the property. I could see across the raw, muddy land to the tree line, and as I looked, I had to wonder—if Cali’s car really had been sabotaged, what else had been tampered with?

I shook my head. I should’ve anticipated this kind of thing. The war with the Bitterfangs was going to be dirty. They’d already shown they were willing to do anything to win. Malakai had been totally prepared to kill his own daughter, for fuck’s sake. That alone should have been enough to warn me to be more cautious when I was dealing with them. We just couldn’t let our guard down. We needed to think through every dirty option they might go for, every trap, every single thing that the Bitterfangs could possibly use to hurt us.

I ran a frustrated hand through my hair. I needed to choose someone to head up more detailed security measures. Rishika and Ravi were probably my best options. It would be sort of a homeland security position.

My eyes went to the driveway and the cars parked there. I made a mental note to go over all of them and make sure nothing was amiss—but before I could take that train of thought any further, I heard the crunching of gravel and ice and looked over to see that Jay was pulling into the driveway.

Yanking the door open, I hurried outside. I was practically running, I was so anxious to see Cali and make sure she was okay.

Jay was out of the car first, and he nodded at me.

“Everything’s fine,” he said. “Nothing weird happened on the way home. I kept an eye out,” he said, tapping his good eye.

“Thanks, man,” I said gratefully. “And thanks for getting everyone home safe.”

Artemis slid out of the car. “We would’ve been fine if the car hadn’t broken down. There was nothing wrong with my driving.” She slung a bag over her shoulder, linked arms with Rishika, and walked inside.

When Cali finally climbed out of the car, I breathed a sigh of relief. She stepped over to me and slid her arms around me, hugging me tight. She was clinging to me, and I could feel the tension in her body.

“Are you okay?” I asked. “Did you find out anything else about the car? What did the mechanic say?”

I had a million questions, but I tried not to overwhelm her. She was pale, and between her parents leaving and this thing with the car, it had been a long day.

She took a deep breath. “Everyone’s fine. Artemis had the time of her life driving, but I don’t feel great about the car. That thing with the hose…” She shook her head.

“At least you’re not hurt,” I said, pushing a lock of hair behind her ear. “And your parents got to the airport safely. That was the point, after all. You should feel good about that.”

She took a shaky breath. “I guess.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t able to go with you,” I said.

She nodded. “It’s fine. I know I should feel good about my parents getting out of here when things are so dangerous, but I can’t stop feeling like I pushed them onto that plane—like I pushed them away. I feel so guilty.” She looked down. “Saying goodbye at the airport wasn’t easy.”

“Cali,” I said, gently angling her face up so she was looking at me, “I think that’s how parents feel most of the time—they do things to protect their children, even when it isn’t the easy choice. You just had to do that in reverse today.”

She gave me a half-smile and hugged me again, pressing close. “Thank you.”

I held her tight for a moment. “Do you want to go inside? I’ll bet you’re starving. You can tell me all about your sister’s driving.”

She giggled. “That sounds good.” She sighed. “I’m glad to be home.”

“I’m glad you’re home, too.” I took her hand and led her inside.

The kitchen was quiet when we walked in, and Cali perched on a stool at the counter. I moved around, turning on the stove to boil water for tea.

“How did the meeting go?” Cali asked.

I shrugged as I pulled out turkey and cheese and bread and started to make sandwiches. I was suddenly starving. “About what I expected. Everyone’s worried about the Bitterfangs, but it’s hard to know if we should act defensively or go on the offense.” I left out the part where Xavier had almost blown her Luna cover. “And you’re looking at the new official Alpha of the alliance.”

She smiled and leaned forward to sneak a slice of cheese. “Of course. I would’ve been surprised if they *hadn’t* chosen you. All the Alphas respect you.” She went quiet and her smile faded. “Well, maybe not Xavier.”

Anxiety clouded her features. I hated to see it, so I shrugged, trying to look casual.

“Oh, I think it’s fine. Xavier’s not going to cause any issues, for now. We’re all just focused on the Bitterfangs. Anyway, now that I’m the Alpha of the alliance, I have to reach out to the other packs—Cobalt, Aspen, and Ironwood—to fill them in on what’s going on. See if we can get more than just words from them.” I cut the sandwich in half, put it on a plate, and handed it to Cali. “In fact, I’ll go call them now.”

She smiled at me. “Thank you for the sandwich.”

“Any time, love.”

I kissed her and headed out of the kitchen. Now that I’d seen Cali—and held her in my arms—I felt like I could breathe a little easier. I knew she was fine, which meant I could focus on everything I needed to do. Which was a lot.

I headed to the study near the front door, eating my sandwich in practically two bites. Everything had happened in such a rush after we’d left the summit, and I didn’t know how the rest of the packs had reacted to what had happened, or even if there was any new information going around. I needed to reconnect with the packs to make sure—at the very least—that they hadn’t changed their minds about which side they were on.

I sat down at the chair behind the desk with a sigh. Now that Cali was back, and things were as calm and stable as they were likely to get for a while, it was nice to finally have a minute to get back to Alpha business. Or at least a moment to think with all the impending doom that was going around.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I scanned through my contacts. I decided to start with the Cobalt pack, since they’d been the first to accept my pitch to join the alliance. I wanted to make sure that they’d made it out of the summit and that nothing had happened to them.

I dialed Porter’s number.

“Hey, Porter, it’s Greyson. I wanted to give you a heads-up about what’s going on with all of us and the Bitterfangs. I met with the Alphas from the Blue Blood, Samara, and Vanguard packs…”

Quickly I explained to him that I was in charge, the attack in the woods, the attack at my pack house again, and how we thought we should move forward.

“You tell me to be there, I will be,” Porter said. “Rowena can bring my entire pack at a moment’s notice.”  
 “Great, appreciate it, man.”

“Of course,” Porter said. “But I did want to ask you something.”

“Shoot.”

“Have you seen Elle recently?”

This stopped me cold. Why would Porter ask me about Elle? I didn’t answer for a moment—I wasn’t sure how to.

“No,” I finally said. Then, more warily, “Why do you ask?”

There was a long pause, then Porter sighed heavily. “The council’s going after her.”

**Episode 4059**

**Xavier**

Beneath the explosive intensity of Ava’s kiss, I could feel her pain, and her excitement, and her joy. I could practically feel the beating of her heart.

I’d known she’d have a strong reaction to seeing the new pack house for the first time, and honestly, I hadn’t even been sure if recreating her old pack house was a good idea. Not until I’d seen the look of joyful wonder on her face. Now, I knew. Now, I had no doubt that it had been the right thing to do. And seeing how happy this had made her made *me* forget about all the shit that had just gone down at the Redwood pack house. Greyson being chosen to lead the alliance had left a bitter taste in my mouth—a flavor I was becoming very familiar with.

At least here, I was free from all that. I didn’t have to think about my asshole brother. I didn’t have to see him—I didn’t even have to be reminded of him.

Ava broke away from the kiss. “I want to see the rest of the house.”

She grabbed my hand and pulled, hauling me into room after room.

“This is the dining room, but for the last few years we were really just using it as a game room. We had two big TVs on this wall,” Ava said, gesturing to a wide white wall in a generous room. “But it would be nice to use the room for what it’s intended for, I guess. And in here was the den, where we just had these massive couches. A lot of the time, people wouldn’t even make it upstairs to their bedrooms. Everyone would just crash after going out running or playing games or having a bonfire or something, and people would wake up next to people they had no business being cuddled up with. There was always drama,” she said, laughing.

I smiled as she pulled me toward the stairs. Her joy was palpable and infectious, and it came as a welcome change to all the tension I’d been feeling, lately. We’d had plenty of drama of our own over the last few days—didn’t we deserve to have something to celebrate?

“And this wall was covered in photos of the pack over the years,” Ava said, running her fingers along the wall as we climbed the stairs. “You could see the pack going back generations.”

Her face fell as she spoke about this, clearly remembering everything she’d lost. I didn’t want to see her happiness dimmed, so I tried to redirect her thoughts.

“Do you think the rest of the pack is going to approve of the place?”

That did the trick, and she turned to me with sparkling eyes. “Are you kidding me? They’re going to go crazy! Why wouldn’t they? They’ve been living in tents for months. I don’t know the last time most of them had a real shower.”

I laughed. “Yeah, this is going to be a pretty big step up.”

“Those are the bunk rooms for new pack members,” she said, pointing down a dim hallway, “and then there’s this. What do you think?” she asked, turning to me as she pulled me into the doorway of a large room.

I looked around. The room was massive, with a high, lofted ceiling. There was thick beige carpet on the floor and windows all along the vast west wall, letting in every bit of pale winter light. “It’s… big?”

She raised an eyebrow. “It’s the biggest bedroom in the house. It’s reserved for the Alpha”—she pressed herself against me—“and his Luna.”

She wrapped her arms around my neck and when she kissed me, I felt my body respond to her. And I let myself feel it. After everything, I knew I owed Ava this house, and I was glad I’d been able to give it to her.

“I’m glad you like the house,” I murmured against her lips.

“I really do.” She pulled back to look at me, her dark eyes wide and liquid. “I was so surprised. Honestly, Xavier, I think this is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me.”

I didn’t know what to say to that startling statement, so I just pulled her back into a kiss. She leaned into me, and I deepened the kiss. The past twenty-four hours had felt like hell, and this moment of peace and quiet with Ava felt like heaven. And for once, there was no chance of us being interrupted. We were alone in the house. It was just the two of us.

Without breaking the kiss, Ava reached down, grasped my wrist, and pulled hard, yanking me into the room. She kicked the door shut and slammed me against it, her kiss growing rough with urgency and need.

It was fucking hot as hell.

I grabbed hips and pivoted, shoving her against the door. I grabbed both her hands with one of mine and pulled them up over her head. She moaned as I plunged my tongue into her mouth.

“Oh god,” she murmured against my lips. “I want to fuck you so bad.”

“Yeah,” I growled. “That’s pretty much what I had in mind, too.”

I loosened my grip on her hands and pressed her harder against the door—hard enough that her feet lifted off the ground. She wrapped her legs around my waist and rocked against me, making my cock grow almost painfully hard in my jeans.

“*Fuck*, Ava,” I moaned, pressing against her.

“Yeah,” she said, smiling at me. “That’s what I had in mind, too.”

I grabbed her ass with both hands and turned, then lowered us both to the floor. We had our clothes off in a matter of seconds. She grabbed my cock, and when she took me into her mouth, I saw stars.

“*Fuck*,” I breathed, closing my eyes. “Keep doing that.”

I didn’t know how long she went on—time and space lost all meaning for a while—but when she moved back up to my mouth and kissed me again, I felt like a volcano about to erupt.

She straddled me, and I drove into her, hard enough that she cried out, her whole body tightening around me. The tightness and her slick wetness were driving me insane, but I took a deep breath, intent on seeing her finish before I did.

She was already starting to shudder as she rode me, and as soon as I slid a finger into her, circling it around her clit, that did it. She bucked her hips and screamed as she orgasmed.

I was right behind her, clutching her, digging my fingers into her skin as I came.

She kept rocking against me as she wound down, waiting until my hold on her relaxed before she smiled and rolled off me, settling into the crook of my arm with a sigh.

“That was incredible,” she said softly.

“Yeah,” I breathed, my body still buzzing.

She was quiet for a moment. “It’s great that we have a real pack house, but we’re going to need a few more things. Like furniture.”

I chuckled. “Well, my ass is already hurting from that, so yeah—a bed would be helpful.”

Ava rolled over, propping herself up on her elbows. “We’re going to need more than *a* bed. We’re going to need furniture for everyone. And stuff for the kitchen. Appliances, washing machines, dryers, linens…” She shook her head. “We have a lot of work to do.”

I groaned. “I already have enough to deal with. I hadn’t planned on becoming an interior designer on top of everything else.”

“I hadn’t, either,” she said. “Maybe we can assign someone to be in charge of it. Or spread it around. Put Marissa in charge of towels and Zipper in charge of plates, something like that. We can order a lot of stuff online, so we don’t have to go out shopping for it. That might be faster…”

She kept talking, but I wasn’t really listening. As I stared up at the ceiling, I was thinking about how surreal this was. To have a house with *Ava*. It was going to take some getting used to, but it was a good place to start this new chapter of my life. And not just *my* life—it was a new chapter for the Samaras, too.

I wasn’t planning on being here forever—just long enough to turn the tables on Adéluce—but for now, this would do. Even when I moved on, I’d helped get the Samaras in place so they could stay together. I’d figure all of it out. I had to trust in that. Greyson would be leading the fight against the Bitterfangs, but there were going to be plenty of opportunities for me to earn the respect of the other Alphas in the alliance.

“Xavier? Hey, are you listening?”

I looked over to see Ava watching me expectantly. “What? No, sorry. I drifted off, I guess. I was thinking about the Bitterfangs.”

She rolled her eyes. “We’ll have plenty of time to do that later.”

“I know, sorry. I’m listening now,” I said, gently nudging her onto her back and rolling on top of her. “What were you saying?”

She laughed and leaned up to kiss me. “I was saying, isn’t this the perfect place for us to start a family?”

**Episode 4060**

I sat in the small study, listening with mounting dread as Greyson filled me in on the details of the conversation he’d just had with Porter.

“—so, yeah, that’s what he heard from his friend who has a contact at the council. They’re on the hunt for Elle. They want justice for what happened to Helix. And how they weren’t able to give it the way they wanted,” he finished grimly.

“Oh god, Greyson,” I said, leaning back in my chair with a sigh. “I’m scared. I’m just so worried about Elle.”

“I know,” Greyson agreed.

“I mean, the council was ready to execute Helix until you intervened—why would they want to hunt Elle down?” I shook my head. “Do they want to kill her?”

Given how they’d wanted to kill Knox, Blaine, and Zipper along with Helix… Killing didn’t seem to be off the table as far as the council was concerned.

Greyson passed a hand over his eyes. “I wish I could disagree with you, or paint you a prettier picture of what’s going to happen, but from everything I know about the council… It just doesn’t look good.”

My heart ached as I looked at him. I could see the worry etched into his face. I could only imagine how hard this was for him. I knew he hadn’t wanted Elle to go to the summit in the first place. And—as much as I hated the thought of it—there was the sire bond to consider. Greyson literally couldn’t help but feel responsible for Elle. Even beyond the promises he’d made to her father, there would always be a connection between them.

If only Elle had stayed at the pack house instead of going to the summit, she could’ve been protected from everything that had happened there. And now she was just out there, unaware.

I looked out the window at the raw January day and shuddered to think of Elle out there, running through the woods with the council on her heels and having no idea. What the hell was wrong with the council, anyway? Why were they spending their time looking for Elle when they could’ve been turning their attention to the Bitterfangs, who were responsible for a lot more death and destruction?

Elle had killed Helix out of mercy, but the Bitterfangs seemed to kill for pure pleasure.

“Do you think Porter and the Cobalt pack would be able to help?” I wondered out loud. “Aren’t the Cobalts from Idaho?”

“Yeah.”

“Isn’t that where Elle’s wolf pack is?” I asked.

“Yes,” Greyson confirmed. “But I’m not sure if we can count on the Cobalts. It was decent of Porter to give me a heads-up about what’s going on, but I’m not sure he’d be willing to do much more than that to help Elle. I don’t know if he’d risk going against the council for her—I don’t even know if I want to ask him to. I’m relying on him and the rest of his pack to help us in our fight against the Bitterfangs. There’s a limit to how much I can ask of him. It wouldn’t be fair to Porter—or the alliance.”

I twisted my fingers nervously in my lap. “I know what you’re saying, Greyson, but we have to do this. For Elle.”

“I know,” Greyson said heavily.

“Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to just ask,” I ventured.

He thought about it for a moment, then shook his head. “No. I understand why you’re saying that, Cali, but I don’t want to put Porter in a position like that. I don’t want to put any kind of strain on our alliance.”

“Greyson—”

“We just spoke,” Greyson said, his voice firm. “He knows that Elle is at risk. If he was open to helping, he would’ve offered. And he didn’t.”

I could feel my anxiety ramping up. “Well, we can’t just sit around,” I said, feeling more worried by the moment. “We have to do *something*.”

He leaned across the desk and took my hand. “Love, listen to me. I hope I don’t have to tell you how much I want to help Elle.”

“You don’t,” I said quietly. And that was true. I could see the pain and stress in his eyes. “But Elle’s my friend, too, Greyson. We have to help her.” I wracked my brain, trying to think of some solution—of *any* solution—that would work. “Should we have Big Mac bring Elle back here?”

Greyson shook his head. “She’s still recovering.”

“What about Kira, then?”

“Maybe,” he said slowly. “But even if Kira agreed, we shouldn’t just send her out there alone.”

“I could go with her—”

“Don’t even think about it,” Greyson said, speaking over me. “And I can’t go with her—I have to stay put for now.” He thought for a moment. “The truth is, love, we’re both needed here. And maybe Elle is safer out in the woods. She can be more anonymous that way.”

I took that in and decided to take some comfort in the fact that he’d said I was *needed*—it was another bit of proof that Greyson believed in me. That he trusted me.

The mark on my shoulder might’ve been fake, but I still felt like a true Luna.

Suddenly, my thoughts went to Lucian, Elle’s mate, and my stomach dropped. “Lucian!” I burst out. “Does he know about this? That could be a disaster.”

Greyson sighed and rubbed his jaw. “I think ‘disaster’ would be putting it lightly. I asked Porter not to tell the princeling, but I don’t know. You know Lucian—it could just be a matter of time before he finds out. He’s got connections with everyone, and it never takes long for him to hear the latest gossip.” He heaved a sigh. “And when he does find out about Elle, he’s going to be even more useless than usual.”

“Or he could try to save her himself,” I put in.

“Oh god,” Greyson said, closing his eyes. “You’re right. I didn’t even think of that, but you’re absolutely right. Lucian is totally swept up in his mate bond with Elle—what *wouldn’t* he do for her?”

*What wouldn’t he do?* I thought about this for a moment. “Hey, what if we have Lucian go with Kira?”

Greyson opened his eyes and looked at me in surprise. He seemed to mull over my suggestion for a long moment.

“Lucian go with Kira?” he said slowly. “Lucian would stop at nothing to save Elle, and there’s the added bonus of it being a mission that would get him the hell out of our hair for a bit.” He nodded. “Yeah, I like it. I’ll talk to Lucian. Maybe you can go talk to Kira?”

“Sure,” I said, getting to my feet. “I’m on it.”

As I headed out of the office to look for Kira, I was feeling good. It was always good to have a plan, and I liked that my role as Luna was taking on a real significance. As I started to search the house, I wondered if Xavier would’ve given me the same level of responsibility—

*Stop*, I told myself sternly. I couldn’t think like that. I didn’t need to be comparing my mates under these kind of fucked-up conditions. And anyway, I just couldn’t *afford* to think like that.

I headed to the living room, but before I could ask any of the assembled pack members if they’d seen Kira, my phone buzzed in my pocket. I picked it up to find a text from my mom.

*We’re on the plane, getting ready to take off. Your father is already asking the flight attendants for snacks. We’ll text you the moment we land. Love you both.*

I was relieved to hear from her, and glad that she and my dad had made it onto the plane without incident. Honestly—in spite of all the guilt—I was just glad they’d managed to leave before things could get even more dangerous.

I spotted Artemis, looking down at her phone. She seemed to be reading the same text I’d just received, because she smiled, and when she looked up and saw me, she walked over.

“Well, that’s a relief,” she said, waving her phone.

I nodded.

“It was almost too easy, really,” she added.

I frowned. *Had* it been too easy? I thought about the mysterious problem with the hose in my car.

“What if they were followed?” I asked, my stomach clenching with sudden fear.

Artemis shook her head. “I don’t think they were.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. We would’ve noticed something,” Artemis said. She glanced down at her phone. “But we should still tell them to be careful after they land. Just in case.”

I nodded. “Yeah, let’s do that.”

I took a deep breath, hoping the car incident wasn’t going to make me super paranoid. But it was hard *not* to keep looking over your shoulder when an entire bloodthirsty pack wanted you dead.

Behind me, I heard the sound of brisk footsteps and turned to see Adair striding toward us. He looked stern as he grabbed us both by the shoulder.

Artemis looked up, surprised. “What’s going on?”

“You two,” he said shortly, “come with me.”

# **Episode 4061**

**Greyson**

I’d completely forgotten how difficult it was to get in touch with Lucian, given the princeling’s aversion to phones.

*Trust the princeling to make everything harder than it has to be.*

In the past, I would’ve just made a house call to the Vanguard palace, as time consuming and annoying as that always turned out to be. But that didn’t seem like a good idea for a host of reasons, foremost among them being the fact that every time I visited the palace, something bad happened—the pack house was attacked, or Lucian sprang some mind game-riddled trap, or Aysel took me captive in her little nightmare cottage.

And since bad things were already happening left and right, I didn’t want to tempt fate. Cali’s car had possibly been sabotaged, and both Cali and my mother had been attacked. *And* we’d had to fight our way through that ambush on the way back from the summit. There was a very good chance there were still Bitterfang wolves lurking around, desperate for an opportunity to attack a Redwood traveling alone. And if they got the chance to sink their claws into the Redwood Alpha, or to hit the pack while I was away, or both…

No, I couldn’t take that chance. I wasn’t going to leave the pack for even a minute—not while the woods surrounding the house were so unsafe.

I hated being a prisoner in my own pack house, in my own territory, but what else could I do? We needed to stay safe while we figured out what to do next. The Bitterfangs were smarter than I liked to admit, and ruthless with it. They’d take advantage of any weakness, any opportunity to gain the upper hand. We couldn’t get locked into a pattern of simply reacting to everything they did, exclusively playing defense. We had to come up with a way to gain the upper hand, to put *them* on the defensive—even if that meant locking down and not venturing out to warn Elle that the council was on the hunt for her.

Which led me back to my initial problem: how the hell was I going to get in touch with Lucian?

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I pulled it out to see Aysel’s name on the display.

*Oh. That could work. But why is Aysel calling me?*

My stomach knotted with dread. Were the Bitterfangs attacking the Vanguards?

I answered the call. “Aysel?”

“This is Prince Lucian,” the Vanguard Alpha said primly.

*Why is he calling on Aysel’s phone?*

“Have you heard anything from Elle?” Lucian pressed. “She hasn’t checked in with the Redwoods, has she?”

I paused, thinking hard. I’d been so preoccupied with trying to figure out *how* to contact Lucian, I still hadn’t decided on the best combination of words to explain the situation.

*I might as well tell it to him straight, right? There’s no nice way to say that his mate is being hunted by the council.*

So, I went with the simplest solution: the hard truth.

“I haven’t heard from her, but I did speak with the Alpha of the Cobalt pack. The council is looking for Elle. She’s not safe.”

Lucian’s gasp resonated through the phone. “No! How could you have let this happen? Oh, my poor forest rose… What are you going to do about this? Have you sent her aid? Are you going to contact her? Find her and collect her and bring her to safety?”

“Cali and I have discussed this at length, and we were actually thinking, if you’re up for it, considering everything going on,” I started, “that you could go find her and bring her back to safety.”

“Of course!” I could practically hear Lucian puffing out his chest at this new information, this call to defend his mate. “I’ll do it. I’m ready to go right now. Where do I go? Should I just leave my lands and head west?”

“Um, no. Nothing like that. We’re hoping Kira will agree to blip you to Elle’s pack, or at least somewhere nearby. If she doesn’t agree to transport you, I don’t know if you’ll reach Elle in time. The council is already on her trail—we can’t afford to lose time trying to track her down.”

Lucian cursed. “The Vanguards need a witch,” he muttered, then raised his voice again to speak to me. “Fine, Greyson. I’ll give you an hour. If you can’t gain the cooperation of your witch, I’ll find my own solution.”

He ended the call without another word.

I stared down at the phone in my hand, still feeling deeply uneasy. *At least I know how to reach him now…*

But the idea of Lucian coming up with his own plan left me on edge. Most of Lucian’s plans blew up in everyone’s faces—they were truly disastrous. It was almost impressive, how bad they were.

*Hopefully, Kira will come through for us.* Though that wasn’t a sure thing—I knew Kira was closest to Xavier. She was still part of the pack, but I didn’t know how she’d feel about doing us favors left and right now that Xavier was gone.

I blew out a breath and dragged my hand through my hair, then glanced at my phone again to check the time.

*Is Cali getting anywhere with Kira?*

I hoped so. We had Big Mac, of course, but she was still recovering. Would she be strong enough to transport Lucian? Would she even agree to it?

I threw myself into my desk chair. I really need to start organizing a plan of attack against the Bitterfangs. I was beyond honored to have been chosen as the Alpha of the alliance, but right now, the weight of that role was heavy. If I made one misstep, it could ripple out and threaten every pack in the alliance. The mantle of leadership was no small burden to bear. But I still felt that I was the best candidate to lead the allied packs through the looming pack war. The others had faith in me—the least I could do was have faith in myself.

I considered the assets at our disposal: four packs, plus the support of the Cobalts, Ironwoods, and possibly a few more packs if I made the right arguments. I needed to contact the others to make sure they were still willing to back us if push came to shove—something that now seemed like an inevitability. Malakai was out for blood, and it seemed like nothing short of an all-out war would satisfy him.

Assuming Big Mac recovered soon, we’d also have the help of two witches. That had to give us a slight advantage over the Bitterfangs. Given how superstitious and traditional they were, I honestly couldn’t see them using witchcraft to fight. We also had a few Fae on our side—and after all the nasty comments Malakai and the other Bitterfangs had made about Cali and Artemis, I knew they’d never seek the help of the Fae themselves. They’d never sully themselves by dealing with vampires and hybrids like Jacs, Mikah, and Lola, either.

Plus, we had a shit ton of experience fighting formidable foes against all odds. We’d taken down Letifer and his army of revenants, Silas, hordes of vampires, Adéluce and her bullshit…

The tightness in my chest loosened. With all that in mind, the Bitterfangs couldn’t truly be so unbeatable, right? We could do this. We had a real chance against them.

I checked the time again. *Why hasn’t Cali come back with news about Kira?*

I mind linked with her. *Any news on Kira?*

*I couldn’t find her*, she said. *I’m with Adair right now. Have* you *seen Kira anywhere?*

*I haven’t. I’ll have to talk to Big Mac. Maybe she’s healed up enough to take Lucian to Elle.*

I headed upstairs, passing Torin on his way down.

“How’s Big Mac doing?” I asked.

“Better. She’s healed, but she’s still tired, as you can imagine.” The Fae grimaced. “I wish I could do more in that regard.”

“You’ve done plenty,” I told him. “She probably wouldn’t have survived without you—don’t forget that.”

I headed to Big Mac’s room, a new puzzle nagging at my mind. *If Kira and Big Mac can’t blip Lucian to Elle, how can we help her?*

I knocked on the door and poked my bed into the room. Big Mac was lying in bed with my mother sitting on the edge of the mattress beside her, holding her hand. Big Mac was already looking more like herself. That had to be a good sign. Still, she clearly wasn’t at her best, and I felt like an ass coming up here to ask her for a favor.

“Is there anything I can bring you?” I asked.

“Everyone thinks I’m helpless,” Big Mac grumbled. “I’m not.”

She started to sit up, but my mother put a gentle hand on her shoulder. “You need to rest.”

“I’m tired of resting,” Big Mac retorted. “I have things to do. I need to balance the books for the moonshine I sold at the summit.”

I sighed. “I’m sorry. I know it’s the worst possible time, but I might need your help with something.”

My mom frowned, and Big Mac scowled. “Haven’t I done enough for you lately?”

“You have, but—”

A summary of the situation with Elle was on the tip of my tongue, but Big Mac suddenly grimaced, slumped back on the bed, and started to convulse.

# **Episode 4062**

*I hope whatever Adair wants doesn’t take up too much time…*

I tried not to show how impatient I was feeling. I wanted to fidget, and I was acutely aware of every passing second. Every moment I spent here with Adair and Artemis was another moment I wasn’t finding Kira, wasn’t helping Greyson, and was leaving Elle to the mercy of the council.

When Greyson mind linked to ask me about Kira, I could tell he was stressed out, too. I needed to keep looking for the witch, but I had no idea where she could’ve gone. We were supposed to be locked down. The pack house was big, but it wasn’t *that* big. Where was she?

Adair led us to his room and closed the door behind us without saying a word.

I exchanged a nervous glance with Artemis. Her uncle was always stoic and severe and a Fae of few words, but this seemed extra dramatic, somehow. Like he was building up to something big.

Or like he had really bad news.

I hoped it wasn’t the latter. We had enough bad news on our hands already.

*Maybe he’s going to tell me off for using my sword when Lola and I killed that Bitterfang wolf?* But… Did that even make any sense? *What’s the point in having the sword if I can’t use it to defend myself?*

I cleared my throat. “Adair, I don’t mean to rush you, but I’m kind of busy—”

My words dried up when he turned to face me, his expression stern.

*Okay then…*

“I’ve been watching the two of you during my time here,” he began. “Monitoring the work you’ve done together, your training, the dynamic between the two of you.”

I swallowed nervously. Yep, this sounded like a lecture. Ugh, this was *not* what I needed right now. Elle was in danger; I needed to find Kira. The Bitterfangs were out for our blood, and a pack war could erupt at literally any moment.

I appreciated everything Adair had done for me, but this wasn’t a good time for a stern reprimand for everything I was doing wrong.

I tried to cut him off at the pass. “Listen, I know my magic might still need a little work, but—”

“Stop,” Adair said firmly.

My mouth snapped shut.

“You’ve both made significant strides in the short amount of time I’ve been here,” Adair continued.

I blinked, stunned. *Wait. Is he actually complimenting us? Me?* I hadn’t thought he was *capable* of that. Still, it wasn’t surprising that he was complimenting Artemis—she was a far better fighter than I’d probably ever be, and it had been painfully obvious from the beginning that I needed *a lot* more training than my sister to be an effective magic user—but maybe I’d been doing better than I’d assumed?

The concept was so foreign, I didn’t trust it. No, there had to be a “but” coming.

“I wish we had more time,” Adair said. “There is much I have yet to teach you, and maybe we’ll get the chance to continue at some point in the future. But unfortunately, your training must be put on hold for now. We’re in a war. The time for training is over. The time to utilize your new skills is upon you, and I want to give you something to help you in your fight.”

I swallowed nervously. Suddenly, a lecture didn’t sound so bad. What was being ordered to train harder in comparison to being thrust into a war? I knew things with the Bitterfangs were bad—dangerous, even. I knew there was no veering from this course. We’d done everything we could to avoid a pack war, and look how that had turned out.

But somehow, hearing such solemn words from a warrior like Adair made me realize the true gravity of the situation. We were on the cusp of a war, one we’d tried so hard to avoid, and there was no stopping it now. The sooner I accepted that reality, the better.

Adair opened a satchel and removed a matching pair of daggers. He held them out, one for me and one for Artemis.

Artemis held the blade, turning it over with delicate moments, like it was made of glass. Like it was something precious.

She pointed at a bird wing that had been carved into the hilt. “What’s this?”

“It is the wing of a raven,” Adair said. “A symbol of the cunning nature a true warrior must possess. The meaning goes beyond mere strength, ability, and courage.” He pointed to his head. “The wing of the raven gives you the wisdom to remain one step ahead of your adversary.”

I looked down at the matching dagger in my hands. We could certainly use some help staying ahead of the Bitterfangs—they were constantly putting us on the defensive.

“Where did these daggers come from?” I asked.

“They’ve been in my family for generations,” Adair said. “I had to sneak them out of the Fae world, and I’ve been looking for a place to keep them ever since. But after watching the two of you, seeing you train together, seeing the connection you have, I’ve realized that you and Artemis are their rightful owners.”

I looked down at the dagger again, completely at a loss for words. “Adair… I’m honored. But I’m not a blood relative. Are you sure you want me to have this?”

He put a hand on my shoulder and offered me his version of a smile. It was more grimace than anything, but there was a kindness in his eyes that told me he was pleased. “You’ve more than earned it, Caliana. You both have. I’m very proud of you.” He turned to Artemis. “And I’m sure your father would be, too.”

Artemis smiled and flipped the dagger in her hand, catching the hilt with ease and brandishing it at an imaginary opponent.

I looked down at my own dagger again, and then at the way my sister was wielding hers like it was an extension of her arm.

“I’ve never trained to use one of these,” I blurted out.

“Keep it with you, and use it only when you feel you must,” Adair said.

*Seems like I might have some chances to use it with the Bitterfangs…* If I was capable of doing so, anyway. There was still so much I didn’t know about fighting in general, and about using a weapon like this in particular. Other than making sure the pointy end faced away from me, I was sort of at a loss.

I pulled in a deep breath. *Maybe I just have to trust Adair on this. And Artemis can probably show me a few tricks, just in case.*

“I know you’re needed elsewhere, Cali,” Adair said, “but I wanted you and your sister to have these.”

I nodded. “Thank you, Adair. This means a lot to me.”

Artemis and I headed out of Adair’s room, pausing outside to look at each other. My sister seemed just as blown away by her uncle’s gift as I was.

She flipped the dagger in her hand again. “I want to try it out on some targets outside. Want to join me?”

I shook my head. “I wish I could. Maybe you can show me some moves later?”

“Absolutely.”

Artemis jogged off down the stairs, and I decided to try Kira’s room again. She hadn’t been in there before, so it was pure desperation that had me knocking on her door now.

To my surprise, she opened it, looking tired. “What is it, Cali?”

“I’m so sorry to bother you, but we need your help.”

She sighed. “What a surprise.”

I winced. This obviously wasn’t a good time for her, but I couldn’t just walk away. We had to find Elle before the council did.

“Would you be able to blip someone?” I blurted out.

Kira’s eyes narrowed. “Who?”

“Lucian,” I mumbled.

“Lucian?” She scoffed. “Why would I want to help that blowhard?”

“Because Elle’s in trouble, and we think he might be our best chance to help her.”

Kira’s expression softened. “You should’ve led with that. What do you need?”

I explained our plan to blip Lucian out to Elle’s former pack so he could bring her back to the pack, and Kira nodded. “I can do that. Just let me know when you need me to go. In the meantime, I’m going to rest up.”

“Thank you,” I said fervently. “You’re a literal lifesaver.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Kira closed the door and I started searching for Greyson, my excitement undimmed by her ominous response.

Greyson would be pleased—we needed some good news. And it felt good to have done something to help. It felt good that Greyson, the Alpha, had asked me, his almost-Luna, to take care of something, and I’d done it.

I found Greyson in Big Mac’s room and nearly dropped my dagger in shock. Big Mac was shaking on the bed. Her face was pale, and it looked like she was having some kind of episode.

“Big Mac?” I rushed to her bedside. “What happened?”

Mrs. Smith was holding the witch’s hand, looking beyond worried.

I turned to Greyson. “What’s going on?”

He shook his head. “We don’t know. She was fine one second, then she started having a seizure or something—”

Suddenly, the witch sat bolt upright. “We’re all fucked.”

# **Episode 4063**

**Xavier**

I tried to keep my expression neutral, but on the inside, I was freaking the fuck out.

*Ava wants to start a family? Since* when*?*

Suddenly, I was hit with the strongest feeling of regret I’d ever experienced. Because if I’d known that talking about having kids would be Ava’s reaction to being presented with a real pack house, I would’ve happily continued bunking in Knox’s shitty Airstream.

I pulled in a deep breath through my nose, frantically searching for some semblance of calm. But all I could think of was Ava waddling around pregnant with a bunch of mini Xaviers racing by—an image that made my heart start beating so fast, I was sure it was about to explode.

*I’m not ready to be a father. I don’t want that yet. Is Ava seriously ready to be a mother? Do either of us have a single “good parenting” bone in our bodies?*

Ava frowned in concern. “Are you okay? You look like you’re going to throw up.”

I couldn’t hold it in anymore.

“A *family*?” I spluttered. “We’re on the verge of a pack war, and you’re thinking of starting a family? Seriously? You want to drag a kid into this shitshow?”

Ava recoiled, her eyes wide. “What the fuck are you talking about? I meant the *pack*. *They’re* our family now.”

Everything she was saying sounded so reasonable, and yet… Was that really what she’d meant? My mind was spinning out of control, and I still couldn’t quite find a way through the panic itching just beneath my skin.

“If you meant the pack, why didn’t you say so?” I demanded. “Why use the word ‘family’ if you meant ‘pack’?”

Ava smacked my chest. “Our pack *is* our family. Don’t you want to have our own?”

“Definitely not.” The words shot out of my mouth so fast, I knew they’d bypassed my brain entirely, and the pang of hurt in Ava’s eyes made me instantly regret being so brash.

Except now I was confused.

*But… Didn’t she just rip into me for assuming she wanted kids? Does she or doesn’t she want them, then? And does she or doesn’t she want them with me?*

Well, the answer to that last question was obvious. If she wanted a family, of course she’d want it with me. I was her mate. Her Alpha. The co-leader of her pack. She’d said she loved me. She was in this for the long haul.

Maybe that was why her feelings were hurt—I’d just reminded her that my feelings didn’t run as deep as hers.

She started gathering her clothes. She still hadn’t said anything after my outburst. I reached for her, my fingers glancing over her arm before she pulled away.

“I didn’t mean—”

“I’m not ready to have kids,” Ava said flatly. “I’m only twenty-two right now. But the way you reacted, with such horror… Is it truly so awful to imagine having a family with me?”

“No, it’s not—”

“We’re *mates*,” she interrupted again. She pulled her hair aside to show off the Luna mark on her shoulder. “Does this even mean anything to you? Anything at all?” Her voice broke, and her lower lip trembled. “Is it so hard to imagine the two of us having children together? Actually, no—don’t answer that.” She stood and tugged on her clothes with jerky motions. “I already know the answer. Message received, loud and clear.”

“Fuck!” I shouted as the door slammed shut behind her.

I’d really screwed things up this time, and hurt Ava in the process—badly. I hadn’t *meant* to hurt her; I’d just been so shocked by what she’d said. The idea of starting a family was something I wasn’t even prepared to *think* about. Something I’d barely considered at all. But it seemed more impossible than ever with a pack war on the horizon. For so long, I’d been focused exclusively on surviving, and protecting the people I cared about. I was *still* in that mode, especially with Adéluce calling the shots.

Plus, on the rare occasions when I’d had any thoughts about settling down and starting a family, those thoughts had always included Cali, not Ava. Which, now that I thought about it, probably wasn’t the secret I’d assumed it was.

“*Fuck*,” I snarled again.

I jumped up, pulled on my clothes, and chased after Ava. I needed to nip this thing in the bud before it blossomed into a full-on shitshow.

I found her downstairs, staring out the window. She looked so vulnerable, so hurt, it was hard to believe how incandescently happy she’d been when I’d given her this pack house. It felt like so long ago, though it couldn’t have been more than an hour.

“Hey,” I said gently.

Ava didn’t turn, didn’t give any sign that she’d heard me. I gently turned her to face me.

“I’m sorry. I… I overreacted. I didn’t mean to imply that you and I couldn’t be parents—good parents. It’s just that we both know what bad parenting looks like, and I’ve always worried that I wouldn’t be able to break the mold.”

Ava put a hand on my chest. “I’m sorry, too. You aren’t the only one who overreacted. We don’t need to have this conversation now, or even for a long while. But you should be aware that since we’re now the official Alpha and Luna, we’ll be forced to answer a lot of questions about the pack’s future, and its growth. The Samara pack needs a legacy.”

I nodded, but there was no denying the dread that settled in my stomach. It wasn’t focused on Ava in particular—I just couldn’t wrap my head around all these thoughts of legacy, and the future.

*How can I figure out the fucking future when I can’t even fix the present?*

I’d once so clearly had a picture of what my future would look like. Me as the Alpha of the Redwood pack and Cali by my side. But I was the Samara Alpha now. That wasn’t something I could simply walk away from, was it? And Ava… She was my Luna now.

That future of me and Cali together with the Redwoods was nothing anymore. It was a hope I kept clinging to, but what did I think would happen? That somehow this would all end and everything could go back to how it was? Ha.

“Xavier?” Ava asked, breaking me from my thoughts

I silenced her with a kiss—an apology and a way to change the subject, all at once.

She held me close for a moment before pulling away. A small smile tugged at her lips, and I took it for the olive branch it was.

“Should we share our shiny new toy with the rest of the pack?” she asked.

I did want to show the pack their new home—it was just one more way to demonstrate my ability as their Alpha. After all, I’d promised to rebuild the pack to its former strength, and what better way to do that than to give them a home? A real one, with walls and a door and electricity?

If I got really lucky, perhaps the house would even silence the remaining few who were still resentful of me—mainly Knox, Blaine, and Zipper. If Knox thought he’d been such a great Alpha to the Samaras, then why had he let them live in tents and squalor? Maybe this would shut him up for good.

“Should we make a plan first?” Ava asked.

“What plan? We have a house—why do we need a plan? Or are you talking about furniture again?”

She shook her head. “Maybe we should assign rooms first, before we tell them the news. That way they can’t get into any fights about it.”

“Smart idea,” I said with a nod. In addition to keeping the bickering to a minimum, assigning rooms would also demonstrate that Ava and I were in charge—that we were the ones calling the shots. “And if anyone complains, they can stay in one of the tents.”

“You think anyone’s going to complain about all this?” she asked.

“I can think of one or two people,” I hedged. “Maybe three.”

“Knox and his buddies,” she said. It wasn’t a question. “Well, worst-case scenario, he can get his precious Airstream back.”

She took my hand and let me back upstairs, and I was struck by how surreal it all felt, and how quickly my life with Ava was taking shape. It was almost happening *too* quickly.

*Did Adéluce have a hand in any of this? Is she letting me build this foundation with the Samaras just so she can take it from me, force me to keep rebuilding my life from scratch?*

We walked along the hallways, mentally assigning rooms like we were camp counselors or something.

“All done.” Ava smiled. “See? Not so hard.”

Her smile dimmed a little as she stared down the long hallway at all the unassigned rooms. “I guess we still have plenty of room to expand.”

I thought back to what she’d said earlier, about the pack’s growth. We’d need to fill those rooms if we really wanted to strengthen the pack, but I wasn’t ready to delve into that topic right now. There was a chance I’d never be ready. For now, the Samaras had a pack house, and that was a hell of a lot more than what they’d started the day with. They—and Ava—would have to be content with that.

“How about we go get the rest of the pack?” I suggested.

“Let’s do it.”

As we started down the hall, a sound resonated from the first floor, and we froze.

Ava mind linked with me. *Is someone downstairs?*

# **Episode 4064**

**Greyson**

Well, this was fucking fantastic.

*“We’re all fucked”? What the hell is she talking about?*

I hoped to hell that Big Mac was kidding, but the whole pale-faced convulsion thing made that seem really unlikely. Plus, when had she ever joked about anything, much less while she was bed bound and we were facing down a looming war *and* one of our own being executed by the council?

“Fucked” seemed like a pretty good way to describe it, honestly.

“MacKenzie, please! Just lie down,” my mother said. “You need to be *resting*. You just had some kind of seizure.” She looked up at me. “Maybe we should bring Torin back and see if he can help?”

Big Mac shook her off. “It wasn’t a seizure. It was a vision.”

*A vision. Big Mac had a vision. Fantastic.*

Cali and I had experienced our share of visions, and most of them had been more like nightmares. They tended to contain terrible omens and warnings, but they never actually provided much in the way of helpful, actionable information. The last thing we needed was to be worrying about preventing some kind of horrific, vague vision when we had so many other (extremely tangible) threats pressing in on us.

Cali exchanged a troubled look with me before turning her attention to Big Mac. “What did you see in the vision?”

“A giant chessboard,” Big Mac said, her focus turning inward. “With the Bitterfangs at one end and the Redwoods and our allies at the other.”

Cali glanced at me. “A chess game?”

I shrugged. That didn’t mean anything more to me than it meant to Cali. I didn’t even play chess. But the metaphor was pretty easy to figure out. Chess was a game of war strategy—it involved carefully selecting a plan of attack to take the other side’s king, even if it meant sacrificing pieces from your own side.

My gut clenched. There were no acceptable sacrifices on the Redwood side. That much was for fucking sure.

“Were we winning?” Cali asked hopefully.

Big Mac shook her head, then shrugged. “I’m not sure. I… I don’t think so. The alliance had already lost many of its pieces, and then Lucian was captured by someone—Malakai, I assume—and knocked off the board.” She swallowed convulsively. “And then he died.”

Cali sucked in a breath. “And then?”

The witch scowled. “That’s it. That was my vision. Sorry if you were expecting more.”

“No, it’s fine.” Cali sighed. “I just… I don’t like what it means.”

“What, that we’re fucked?” Big Mac snorted. “Yeah, apparently the Bitterfangs are going to slaughter us all, including Lucian.”

Anxiety squeezed my chest, and I forced myself to pull in a deep breath, to stay calm. Big Mac was usually unflappable, but she’d clearly been shaken by her vision.

“That’s all very worrying,” I said carefully, “but we have to remember, it was just a vision. We can’t be sure if any of that is going to happen. For all we know, it was just a warning. Nothing prophetic about it.”

Big Mac glared at me. “You think I don’t know the difference between a vision and a nightmare?”

“I mean, it’d be good news if it *were* a nightmare, right?” I pointed out.

“It would be. But it was a vision,” she retorted.

“Okay,” Cali said. “But was it a vision of events that are set in stone, or was it one possible version of what might happen? I’ve had visions before too, but they were always sort of… flexible. They were potential paths the future might take, but there was always an opportunity to avoid them. Do you think we have any control over whether this vision comes true or not?”

“I suppose there’s always a way to change the future, fate, provenance—whatever you want to call it,” Big Mac conceded.

“So, things aren’t hopeless, then,” Cali said.

“Maybe not,” the witch grunted. “But don’t think for a second that this means we’re out of danger.”

“I don’t think anyone believes we’re out of danger,” I said quietly. Still I’d cling to the possibility of a future that wasn’t defined by Big Mac’s vision. As long as we had the power to write our own destiny, to change the course and avoid the worst-case scenario, I wasn’t going to let one vision destroy my hope.

All our assets, all our strengths, all our experience—those factors would all help us beat the Bitterfangs. That hadn’t changed.

And as for Lucian… Sending him off to get Elle right now might play into what the Bitterfangs wanted. And being an Alpha down didn’t make sense. We certainly didn’t want to lose him; he was an asshat, and more than a bit of an idiot, but he commanded the largest pack in the alliance and likely had more resources than the rest of us put together. Losing Lucian and the Vanguards would deal a serious blow to both the alliance and our chances of survival against the Bitterfangs—which was exactly why Malakai would choose to target him. But I didn’t know if I’d be able to talk Lucian out of it at this point. He seemed set on going to get Elle.

*Elle’s not going to like that…* Ithought.

But had Cali ever found Kira? Big Mac certainly didn’t seem capable of blipping herself at the moment, let alone Lucian and Elle.

“Get some rest,” I told Big Mac.

She narrowed her eyes at me. “How the hell do you expect me to rest with everyone standing around in my bedroom?”

I smiled. “Message received.”

At least she was acting like her usual cranky self. That had to be a good sign.

I led Cali out of the room to give Big Mac and my mother some much-needed peace and quiet.

“What do you think about Big Mac’s vision?” Cali asked once we were in the hallway. “Are you worried?”

I shook my head. “I can’t allow myself to worry. We can’t lose focus. What about Kira? Did you ever find her?”

Cali’s eyes lit up. “Actually, yes—and she agreed to help.”

“Thank god.” I sighed. We’d never needed a win so badly, and if Big Mac’s vision had any merit, we needed to get Lucian out of the way as soon as possible.

“It actually didn’t take much convincing,” Cali continued. “Once I explained the threat to Elle, Kira was right on board.”

“Thank you for handling that,” I said. If we can get Elle to safety, we’ll have one less thing to worry about. I’ll contact Lucian, and we can coordinate our plan to get her.”

I turned to head downstairs, but Cali put a hand on my arm.

“Wait,” she said. “Should we tell Lucian about Big Mac’s vision?”

I paused. It was a good question—I just wasn’t sure of the right answer. Would it make things better or worse to give Lucian reason to believe that he was in particular danger?

*No. Telling the man who almost married a demon that a witch had a vision about him could be a recipe for disaster.*

I shook my head. “Let’s keep this to ourselves for now.”

Cali nodded. “I was thinking the same thing. Let’s go talk to Kira.”

As we headed toward Kira’s room, I couldn’t help but think that I was the luckiest man in the world to have Cali by my side. She was really becoming more and more confident in herself and the role she’d carved out in the pack.

*Is that because of the fake Luna mark? Kind of like when an actor puts on a military uniform and feels like a leader?*

Not that I saw Cali as an actor. She’d more than proven herself worthy of being the Redwood Luna. I wished I could give her a real Luna mark, but there were still too many unanswered questions about the ceremony, and I refused to put Cali’s life in danger.

I knocked on Kira’s door.

*If I’d been the one to ask Kira for help, would she have said yes? She’s always been closer to Xavier, though my brother’s recent dickery might have changed her mind about him.*

Kira opened the door. “I’m ready.” She looked around. “Where’s the so-called prince?”

“He’s at the palace. Can we call and tell him you’ll pick him up there?” I asked.

She sighed. “Fine. I’ll do it, for Elle.”

“Thank you. As for payment…” I trailed off. “*Are you* expecting payment for this?”

Most witches seemed to expect some kind of quid pro quo, at minimum.

Kira shrugged. “I’ll think about it.”

The three of us headed downstairs, and I called Aysel on the way to let her know that Kira would be there momentarily.

“Once you two find Elle, blip all three of you back here,” I told Kira. “I want to keep Elle close.”

“Do you think Lucian will be okay with that?” Cali asked.

“If he’s not, I don’t really care.”

Kira nodded. “I’ll be back soon.”

She blipped away. Seconds later, a howl from outside caught my attention.

Cali frowned. “Is that someone from one of our patrols?”

I jogged toward the porch. “No, that wasn’t a Redwood wolf.”

# **Episode 4065**

**Artemis**

I was showing off my new dagger to Rishika when we heard the howl echo from the woods. I didn’t have to ask Rishika if it belonged to a friend or a foe—the look on her face told me that this wasn’t a good development.

“Bitterfang,” she said, her voice low.

We met Greyson and Cali as they burst out onto the porch.

Greyson stared out into the woods, his expression every bit as grim as my girlfriend’s. “The Bitterfangs are out there.”

This wasn’t exactly news to me. Between Cali’s car issues, the attacks on the pack house, and the ambush the alliance group had run into on the way back from the summit, it was fair to assume that the woods were full of Bitterfang wolves, just waiting for one of us to drop our guard. But they hadn’t been advertising their location before now, which didn’t bode well. If they weren’t worried about moving through the woods undetected, what horrible thing did they have planned?

Greyson turned to Rishika. “Get everyone on this.”

“I’ll send Ravi, Sage, and Zainab first,” she replied automatically. “Though they might be tired from their earlier shifts.”

She knew the inner workings of the pack house, particularly the comings and goings of the patrols, better than anyone else in the pack. My chest swelled with pride for my girlfriend. She was such a badass. The Redwoods would be so screwed without her. In another life, she probably would’ve made one hell of a Luna. Or an Alpha.

I toyed with the dagger in my hand, flipping it, carefully testing the blade’s edge with my fingertips while Rishika and Greyson discussed options for responding to the wolf’s howl. The dagger was deadly sharp—Adair had certainly taken great care of it. It was the biggest honor he could have given me, to entrust the dagger to my care. My uncle and I might never have a warm fuzzy relationship like Cali had with her family, and there was certainly an ocean of information Adair was keeping close to his chest, especially where our shared family was concerned, but the gift of the dagger had made a few things clear: Adair respected me, trusted me, and was proud of me.

For now, that was enough. More than enough, really, coming from a closed-off, stoic Fae like him. I’d been riding on a high ever since I’d left his room.

“We need eyes out there,” Greyson said, “to see what’s going on and make a plan to respond.”

“Yes, but the howl could be a trap,” Rishika reasoned. “For all we know, there’s a group of them waiting to ambush whoever goes to check it out. Sending out a patrol group might not be the smartest move, especially if they haven’t had a chance to rest.”

“Why don’t Rishika and I go?” I suggested. “We both have loads of experience in spying, hunting, and fighting. And with just the two of us, they have a better chance of surprising the enemy.” I gave Rishika a sly smile, tossing my dagger into the air again and catching it neatly. “Plus, I wouldn’t mind a chance to try out my new toy.”

“Fine,” Greyson said, to my surprise. I’d assumed I’d have to work a little harder to win him over.

*He must be more desperate than he’s letting on.*

“But your *only* goal is to gather intel,” he added firmly. “If there’s any question of your safety, come back as quickly as you can. Only fight if you have to.”

Cali caught my arm. “I should come with you. Give you two some backup.”

I gently eased my arm out of her grip. “I appreciate the thought, but Rishika and I will move faster with just the two of us.”

I didn’t say that if Cali came with us, she’d likely be more of a liability than a help, but she could read between the lines easily enough. My sister, for all her flaws, was truly becoming a powerful fighter, but she lacked the training in stealth that we’d need for this job. Plus, if she came, I’d be worried about protecting her—to say nothing of Greyson’s potential response to the idea of sending his mate out into a potential Bitterfang ambush. I knew he didn’t like that.

“If you said so,” Cali said with a weak smile. “Just… don’t be reckless, okay?”

“We’ll be careful,” I said. “I promise.”

With that, Rishika and I headed for the woods.

Another howl echoed through the trees, and we paused at the tree line.

“Do you think I should shift?” Rishika asked.

I frowned. “I’m not sure. If you do, we won’t be able to communicate.”

She nodded, then breathed deeply. “The wind is in our favor. Let’s just try to be fast and quiet. Maybe you won’t have to use your new toy at all.”

I grinned. “Maybe not.”

We moved through the woods as quickly and quietly as possible, pausing at every sound. I couldn’t help but think of my time as a bounty hunter. I’d been pretty damn good at my job, but if I’d had Rishika working with me, we would’ve been unstoppable. Nobody would’ve been able to beat us.

I’d never met anyone like Rishika, and I doubted I ever would.

She sniffed the air. “They’re out here, but I can’t tell exactly how many there are.”

“Let’s split up,” I suggested. “Just enough to cover more ground and make sure we aren’t an easy target. The Bitterfangs are probably doing this to lure people away from the pack house. Let’s not fall into their trap.”

Rishika paused. “I’m not crazy about separating. Won’t that just make us easier to take out?”

“Not if we stay just close enough if that if either one of us is attacked, we can offer backup in seconds. Besides,” I added, “I doubt anyone can get the jump on you.”

A smile tugged at her lips. “You have too much confidence in me.”

I seriously doubted that. I’d seen what Rishika could do.

I veered off to the one side, making sure to keep track of Rishika in my peripheral vision as we pressed forward. My heart raced with adrenaline, and every one of my nerves felt oddly tense, ready to respond to the slightest stimulus.

Still, I was glad it was just the two of us. Cali would’ve been a distraction, and I wouldn’t have been able to offer Rishika the backup this job called for. It wouldn’t have been Cali’s fault, necessarily, but she was my sister, and I’d never stop worrying about her. The Bitterfangs seemed to truly hate her, and it was entirely possible they’d put it all on the line for the chance to kill her, and I could never let that happen.

Another howl ripped through the woods and pulled my attention back to the forest around me. This one was much closer than the others had been. Either there was more than one wolf out here, or that one wolf was moving in our direction. The wind hadn’t changed, but werewolves were uniquely suited to hunting in this environment.

*But who’s the hunter and who’s the prey?*

I glanced over at Rishika. She’d stopped moving and was crouched low.

There was a sudden burst of movement, followed by another howl. The sound of cracking bones filled the air as Rishika shifted to meet the werewolf charging toward her. I raced toward the two wolves as they collided.

I reached for my dagger, ready to plunge it into the Bitterfang wolf, but then I heard another growl. I spun around as a wolf leapt toward me, slamming me to the ground and knocking the dagger out of my hand.

I was just able to keep the wolf’s glistening teeth from sinking into my arm as we tumbled through the forest.

I could still hear Rishika and the Bitterfang wolf fighting, but I couldn’t help her right now. I had my own enemy to deal with. I struggled with the wolf, almost wrestling with it as I tried to summon my magic while simultaneously avoiding being bitten. I fumbled around with my not-so-free hand, reaching for my thigh.

Sharp pain sliced into my hand—not werewolf teeth, but the blade of my dagger. *Yes.*

I didn’t think twice, just grabbed the dagger and plunged it into the wolf’s chest. It yelped, then went limp.

I shoved the now-dead wolf off me and scrambled over to help Rishika, but she was already heading toward me. She shifted back to human and spat blood out of her mouth. “The other wolf ran off. I didn’t want to chase after it and leave you alone.”

I wiped the blade of my dagger on my pant leg and pointed at the dead wolf. “There’s nothing to worry about. We’re one Bitterfang down.”

Rishika’s eyes widened. “Shit. That’s not a Bitterfang. We have to get back to the pack house, right now.”

**Episode 4066**

**Xavier**

Ava grabbed my hand as we both froze and strained to listen. My mind was racing. Who could be here? Who would’ve just walked in without being invited? Other than me, Ava, and Kira, no one else even knew that this house existed.

I lifted my nose to the air to see if I could catch a scent, just as I heard what sounded like footsteps on the hardwood floor downstairs—but I couldn’t be sure. Was the sound really coming from inside the house?

*Wait here*,I mind linked to Ava. *I’m going to go check it out.*

Ava’s response was quick. *The hell you are. Not without me.*

I had a feeling that I wouldn’t be able to dissuade her, and I didn’t really want to. We always had each other’s backs, and if the intruder downstairs was a Bitterfang, then two would definitely be better than one. Underestimating the Bitterfangs wasn’t smart—that had been made crystal clear during the fight in the woods near the summit, when they’d shown just how fiercely they could fight.

With me taking the lead, we slowly started down the hall toward the stairs. The sounds below had stopped, and I could hear nothing but our breathing. I waited for a beat before moving slowly down the stairs. I partially shifted one hand, just in case. My every sense was searching my surroundings, and I was ready to take on whatever might be waiting for us.

We reached the first floor. Keeping close and staying low, we went room to room, searching. I still hadn’t managed to pick up a scent, and I was starting to wonder if maybe we’d imagined it all and there really was no one in the house but us.

*What the fuck?* Ava said. *I know I heard some—*

Something banged on the second floor. Ava and I looked at each other, then stared up at the ceiling.

*I don’t get it. We just came from up there, and there’s only one way up. What the hell is going on here?* I asked Ava, who shrugged.

I moved past her and raced back up the stairs as fast as I could. Ava was right on my heels, and we frantically ducked into each of the rooms only to shake our heads in disbelief when we discovered that there was no one there. I spun round, frustrated, looking up and down the hall and trying to make sense of what was going on.

*Is this place playing tricks on me? Is Adéluce toying with me? Is this her idea of a joke? Banging around this house and making sure that I’m on edge?*

“This is weird and all, but this place *was* created by magic,” Ava said. “It’s possible that the sounds we heard—or think we heard—are happening because of that. It wouldn’t be the first time something created by magic didn’t end up being exactly what we expected.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “What does the house being magic have to do with it creaking and groaning and mimicking the sound of footsteps?”

“Maybe just think of the house as a living, breathing thing,” Ava said. “It wasn’t created with wood and nails… It’s something else altogether.”

I wasn’t sure what to make of that. I didn’t like the idea of living inside a living thing. It seemed wrong, somehow. I was going to have to talk to Kira about it. If Ava was right, maybe the witch would be able to do something to fix it. How would we even be able to distinguish real sounds from fake ones if the house was busy living—loudly—all around us? It seemed risky.

I turned and led Ava downstairs. “Once we bring the others here, we’ll have to let them know about how noisy the house can get so they don’t constantly think they’re under attack.”

Ava snorted. “Just what the Samaras need, constant false alarms.” She looked around and hugged herself. “But maybe it *is* time we bring the pack here to show them their new super noisy home?”

“Maybe,” I said with a small chuckle.

As we left the house and made our way toward the tents, I thought about how I’d had to “borrow” a witch from Greyson’s pack, just to provide shelter for my own. I really hated that.

When we finally reached the campsite, all I could think about was how I never wanted to look at the place again. A house full of strange noises was still head and shoulders above a trailer in the middle of a ramshackle camp.

“Hey, everyone! Pack meeting!” I shouted as I moved to the center of the campsite.

I could tell by how quickly everyone emerged from their tents that they’d probably been waiting for an update ever since we’d returned from the summit. Ava came up to stand beside me, and together, we shared the news.

“So, we have something big to announce,” Ava began. “But first, I want to take this chance to thank you all for sticking together and showing the kind of loyalty that will keep the Samara pack united and strong for years to come. I hope you all know that this is just the beginning of our pack’s renewed legacy. Now, I’ll hand you over to our Alpha.”

I stepped forward, my unease about having to use a Redwood witch to secure a home for the Samaras slowly melting away, at least for the moment.

“The Samaras have a new pack house,” I said simply. “Brand-new and ready to move into.”

“Really?” Marissa asked, stepping forward. “That’s fucking great!”

“It’s the least I could do to get us back on track,” I said.

It felt good to know that I’d been able to come through for them on this. Everyone seemed pumped about our new digs—except for Knox and his minions, who looked like they’d been born to sulk, they did it so naturally. I didn’t understand how they could find anything to hate about finally getting a roof over their heads. They were miserable assholes, and I was just going to have to accept that.

I was half-tempted to tell them that they could stay out here in the tents until they earned their way into the pack house, but I knew that probably wouldn’t go over well with Ava.

“Come and see the house,” Ava said. “It’s right where the old one used to be.”

We all followed her on the short walk from the campsite to the new pack house. When we arrived, I was pleased to hear gasps of appreciation and excited chatter whipping through the pack. We all filtered inside and Ava immediately started showing everyone around, everyone clearly enjoying having their home back. I hung back a little, watching her move proudly though the house with real happiness on her face.

Knox’s voice came from behind me. “So, we have a house. Now what?”

I turned to face him, my hands seeming to clench into fists of their own accord. *Now, I’d like to smash you in the face.*

“I’m not in the mood for your shit right now,” I said tightly. “We have a roof over our heads and a base to operate from. That’s more than we had even an hour ago. You should be pleased that we’re not living like animals anymore—or is that what you’d prefer?”

“What I’d *prefer* is to know how any of this is going to help us fight the Bitterfangs,” Knox retorted. “If we had to rank the packs in the alliance, the Samaras are dead last in just about every way. The Vanguards outnumber us, and have enough money to buy the US Army’s entire arsenal. The Blue Bloods have a solid rep as amazing hunters and deadly fighters. Your old pack has an experienced Alpha, a bunch of Fae and vampires, and *two* witches. What do we have? Team spirit?”

“We are in the rebuilding phase, no thanks to you!” I snarled. I couldn’t believe this asshole had the nerve to challenge me when he was one of the reasons why the Samaras had fallen so low.

“We don’t have *time* to rebuild,” Knox countered. “We’re in the middle of a pack war. It won’t take long for the Bitterfangs to single us out as the weakest, and when they do, a pack house isn’t going to protect us.”

“Unless you have a solution, you should shut your fucking mouth!”

“I did have one! We should have accepted Malakai’s offer. Now it’s too late!” Knox snarled, before storming off like the riled-up toddler he was.

*Is he seriously that much of an idiot? Why would I ever form any kind of alliance with the Bitterfangs? They threatened Cali’s life, for shit’s sake! It’s never going to happen.*

But as much as I hated to admit it, Knox *had* pointed out a truth—albeit one that I was already aware of. The Samaras were in a fucked-up position. Even though the new pack house was nice, it didn’t elevate our standing much, if at all.

With a heavy sigh, I stepped outside. I enjoyed the silence for a while before Ava came out to join me.

“So far, everyone seems to be happy with the house,” she said, then she got a good look at me and her face fell. “What’s wrong? Did my shithead cousin say something?”

I looked back at the house. “The Samaras need a witch. How do we get one?”

**Episode 4067**

I was pacing back and forth in the living room, worried about Artemis and Rishika. They hadn’t been gone long, but I knew that the unthinkable could happen in seconds. I wasn’t going to be able to relax until they were safely back at the pack house. It didn’t help that the suddenness of all this had only served to hammer home the dangerous new reality we were living in. This was a war. There was no other way to think of it now.

We were in a pack war, and this was just the beginning. Things would only get worse from here. The attacks were going to increase, and blood was going to flow. There was no avoiding it now.

Greyson walked in. “They’re on their way back.”

I followed him out onto the porch, just as Artemis and Rishika came running out of the woods. My relief at seeing them was torpedoed when I saw the blood dripping from Artemis’s hand.

“Torin!” I yelled. “We need you!”

Rishika reached the porch first. “There were two of them,” she said breathlessly.

I rushed up to Artemis. “You’re bleeding! We need to get you healed.”

I was about to call for Torin again, but Artemis waved me away. “It’s nothing. It’s from the wolf I killed.”

I looked closer. “No, Artemis—you’re actually bleeding. Your hand is cut! Don’t you feel that?”

The cut looked deep and painful, but Artemis barely seemed to even notice it.

She shrugged. “It’s from grabbing my dagger. Not the worst cut I’ve ever had, believe me. I just need to put some pressure on it and get it wrapped up, and it’ll be all good in no time.”

I looked down at her dagger. It was covered in blood, too. Artemis didn’t seem shaken, but I certainly was. Everything was happening so fast.

“One of the wolves got away, but that’s the least of our worries,” Rishika said. “The wolf that Artemis killed—it wasn’t a Bitterfang.”

I looked at her, confused. “What? But they attacked you. Who else would do that? And how could you even know that it wasn’t a Bitterfang?”

“Because she remembered seeing the wolf at the summit,” Artemis said.

“He was a member of the Northwind pack, I’m sure of it,” Rishika added. “The scent was familiar, too.”

*That’s weird. Why would the Northwinds be here in our territory—and attacking us, no less? That doesn’t make sense.*

I took in the grim look on Greyson’s face.

“That can only mean one thing,” he said. “The Bitterfangs have at least one ally.”

Greyson sighed and turned away. He was stressed, but trying not to show it, and I was already trying to figure out what it meant for us that the Bitterfangs weren’t operating alone.

“Is it possible that it was just one wolf acting on its own?” I asked, though even I heard the skepticism in my voice. “Maybe the entire Northwind pack isn’t against us.”

I didn’t even want to consider the possibility that we’d have to watch our backs against two packs instead of one. I also just didn’t understand why *any* pack would want to team up with an evil, temperamental pack like the Bitterfangs.

Greyson winced. “I don’t think it was one rogue Northwind wolf. Ethaniel all but blamed us for Evan’s death. He probably saw joining the Bitterfangs as the perfect way to get revenge.”

I wrapped my arms around myself as I imagined the woods teeming with Bitterfang and Northwind wolves, ready to charge at us. For all we knew, they were watching us right now. I shuddered, wondering if there was anything we could have done to avoid this outcome, but knowing that we’d tried our best to avoid a war. It was all out of our hands, now.

“This was just a test, if I had to guess,” Rishika said. “They were probably checking out our defenses, maybe even trying to draw a few of us into an ambush. It’s exactly what I would do in their position. But Greyson’s right—the only explanation is that the Bitterfang and Northwind packs are working together. We need to be even more vigilant.”

Greyson nodded. “I’m just glad you both got back in one piece, more or less,” he nodded toward Artemis’s hand. “Go inside and get that hand looked at, Artemis. Both of you get cleaned up, and let me know if you need anything.”

Artemis and Rishika went into the house with their arms slung around each other’s waists. They looked tired, and Artemis was wounded, but they were okay. The Bitterfangs and their Northwind allies would have to try a lot harder if they wanted to shake us up—but I was hoping they wouldn’t.

Once Artemis and Rishika were gone, I stepped closer to Greyson. I suddenly felt exposed. I couldn’t help but think about Elle, away from the security of the pack house.

“Greyson, I’m worried about Elle,” I said. “She’s already being hunted by the council, and if you heard about it, couldn’t Ethaniel have heard the same? He must be desperate to get his hands on her after she stole his chance to torture Helix… The Northwinds could be hunting her down right now.”

“It’s possible,” Greyson admitted. “I get the feeling Ethaniel would risk a lot to get to Elle. If he’s willing to send his people this far into our territory to attack us, I can’t really put anything past him.”

I chewed my lip anxiously. “Is there anything else we can do to help her?”

“I wish there were,” Greyson said. “We’re just going to have to trust that Lucian’s feelings for Elle will drive him to do everything he can to get her to safety.”

I could tell that Greyson’s confidence in Lucian was forced, but what other choice did he have?

“For all his bluster, Lucian does have a pretty tight grip on the Vanguard,” I said. “They must believe in him for a reason, even if we have a hard time seeing it.”

Greyson smiled. “You have a point. We don’t know him as well as they do—maybe there *is* something in him that’s worth their extreme loyalty. I guess we’ll see. I don’t know, maybe this will be the princeling’s chance to redeem himself.”

I nodded. “Maybe.”

I was starting to feel a little better. I knew better than anyone how Lucian could get when he was obsessed with something. He got complete tunnel vision, and would do whatever it took to get what he wanted. Hopefully that would work in our favor when it came to getting Elle back.

Greyson took my hand and led me inside. “I’m going to have to rethink the house’s security. I’m going to increase patrols, and double their size, too. It’ll be harder on the pack, but we have to make sure that the Bitterfangs can’t just walk in and attack us whenever they feel like it. This is probably part of their strategy—to make us feel like we can’t stop them, like they can get to us any time they want. They want to rattle us, but we’re not going to let them.”

*Rishika and Artemis went up against those wolves, and they don’t seem rattled in the least. I need to take cues from them and think outside the box when it comes to fighting the Bitterfangs and their allies.*

An idea was slowly starting to form in my mind, but I wasn’t sure if Greyson would see things the same way I was starting to.

“I have an idea,” I said slowly. “But I’m not sure you’re going to like it.”

Greyson arched an eyebrow at me. “Now I’m intrigued. I trust you, Cali. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

He took my hand and led me into the study.

“It’s almost the opposite of your idea,” I began, as soon as he shut the door behind us. “And I know that I don’t have the experience to argue against you, but—”

“A good idea is a good idea, Cali, no matter who comes up with it,” he said. “So, come on, tell me. I’m sure it’s not as off base as you’re making it sound.”

I was still hesitant, but Greyson’s encouragement was giving me the confidence to come out with it, even if what I was about to propose was a little risky.

“So, I was thinking… What if instead of making the patrols bigger, we keep the teams small and spread them out—make it seem like there are more of us than there are?”

Greyson nodded slowly, thinking it over.

I was growing more invested in my idea by the minute, and I only hoped that Greyson felt the same. We needed to do something, and as the sort-of-Luna, it was my job to come up with ideas. I wanted to keep the pack safe, but I didn’t want the Bitterfangs to think that we were weak.

“So…” I bit my lip. “What do you think?”

**Episode 4068**

**Elle**

No matter how hard or fast I ran, I just couldn’t shake the image of Helix’s death from my mind. I kept seeing the light go out of his eyes over and over again, and I didn’t think I’d ever forget it. It had been the right thing to do, but that didn’t make it easy. My mind couldn’t stop thinking about different possibilities. If I hadn’t done it and he’d been able to get away. If he could’ve had a good life somehow away from the council.

*He pleaded with me, begged me to kill him. I gave him honor. I really thought I was doing what was best for him. How was I supposed to know that the council would decide to spare him? But would they have even kept their word?*

Helix had been a wild wolf before he was turned, which meant he’d been free to run and to go wherever he wanted without following anyone’s rules. Spending the rest of his short life in captivity, awaiting a brutal execution for something that he hadn’t done on purpose… Well, neither of us had been able to handle that idea. I’d had to kill him. There’d been no other choice… Or at least that was what I’d thought, before I’d discovered that there *had been* another choice. It almost seemed like a joke from the universe that I’d made such a permanent decision about Helix’s fate before I’d found out that there was another option.

*If only he’d stayed away from the summit like Greyson told him to, none of this would have happened. Even if he’d wanted it, he didn’t deserve this. But I did what I thought was right…*

No matter how many times I told myself that I’d only been trying to do the right thing, the merciful thing, I couldn’t stop myself from wondering what could have been. If I’d only waited until Greyson had talked to the council…

I shook my head and increased my speed. My thoughts were my enemy right now, and I needed to focus on other things. Like the fact that I was being hunted. From the moment I’d decided to kill my friend, I’d known that I’d be chased to the ends of the earth. It was one of the reasons why I’d had to leave Greyson and the Redwood pack behind. I’d known that the council and the Northwind pack would stop at nothing to make me pay for what I’d done, and I didn’t want the Redwoods swept up into all that. This was my problem, not theirs. I was going to have to face my consequences all on my own. There was no way around it.

*I could just give up and hope that death comes quickly. That might be the easiest option. Besides, how will I be able to live a full, happy life knowing that I killed my friend when I didn’t even have to? I could just stop running and face whatever’s coming for me. It’s what I deserve.*

But something inside me just wouldn’t let me quit. It was almost like Helix was guiding me, urging me to keep going, urging me to live another day—something he could no longer do.

I reached the top of a hill and skidded to a stop, then looked back. Somewhere out there, a hunting party was coming for me. I couldn’t see them, but I could hear them. I looked ahead, into the thick shadows of the forest. Somewhere out there was my father’s pack. A way for me to blend in—to hide. If my father let me.

The last time I’d seen them, not long ago, my father had told me to stay away. But I needed to tell Helix’s family what had happened. I had faith that my father would allow me to do that, at least. And then, if he still felt the same way, I could be on my way again. Where I would go, I had no idea.

The Redwoods would welcome me back, I had no doubts about that. Especially Greyson. My desire to see him again burned through me. If I wanted to protect him and the pack, I’d have to make my own way for a while. At least until I figured out how to fix my mess.

I couldn’t help that I had strong feelings for Greyson; feelings that were growing stronger by the day. I assumed it was the sire bond at work, but that didn’t change the way I felt. If anything, it only confirmed how strong our connection was. It was all getting so confusing. I liked Cali a lot, and I knew that she and Greyson really loved each other and shared a powerful mate bond. I also knew that Greyson wasn’t my mate—Lucian was. But that didn’t stop me from thinking about Greyson in ways that went far beyond my appreciation for him as my Alpha.

*Think of Lucian instead*.

I tried.

*You’re attracted to Lucian. On a physical level, you can’t deny that. He’s even starting to earn your respect, bit by bit. You once thought that he wasn’t Alpha enough, but maybe there’s more Alpha in him than what you’ve seen so far. He proved himself a few times at the summit, too. That definitely counts for something.*

I wondered what would’ve happened if I’d accepted his proposal to become his mate and join him in marriage. Would I still have felt an uncomfortable pull to Greyson, even then? That wouldn’t have been fair to Lucian, that much was for sure. But none of that mattered now. I couldn’t go to Lucian, either. Me being anywhere near him would put him and his pack in danger, too. I wasn’t going to go back to my friends until I did. I cared too much about them to pull them into the mess I’d made.

I leapt down from the top of the hill, landing hard but gracefully. I immediately took off again, pushing myself as hard as I could as I moved deeper into Idaho. I kept changing course every so often to throw the hunters off my trail, and I only slowed when I thought I heard something out in front of me.

*What was that?*

I pricked up my ears, trying to sense the location of whatever was making the sound. I couldn’t be sure of much, but I knew if I didn’t keep my speed up, the hunting party would catch me in no time.

*I have to keep moving, no matter what. I can’t stop and wait for them to come for me. I have to put as much distance between us as I can. There’s no way I’m going to make this easy on them. Helix wouldn’t want me to die… Though Helix can’t want anything anymore. He’s dead.*

The truth of that thought hit me all over again, like a huge wave.

Aside from my guilt, I was starting to worry that if I kept going, I’d lead my pursuers right to my old pack. I’d need to veer way off course and lose them before I went to my family.

*Maybe I should find a river or a stream and follow that so they can’t pick up my scent. I have to throw them off somehow…*

I decided to start veering westward and follow the tree line in the hopes that it would lead me to a river that I knew was nearby. Once I reached it, I’d go from there.

I ran for a long time before stopping again to listen for the sound that had put me on high alert earlier. I edged close to a tree, almost with my back to it so that nothing and no one could come up behind me and catch me off-guard.

I strained my ears to pick up any strange sounds, but all I heard was my breath coming in short gasps and the pounding of my heart. But then, in the distance, I heard it: the sound of paws thudding against the ground. I couldn’t tell by that sound alone how many were pursuing me. Maybe three? Four? Five? I’d probably be able to take on one or two, but against a group larger than that, I would be in trouble.

I took off again, and soon I stumbled across the icy cold water of the river. The surface was made up of chunks of slippery ice, and I leapt between them, taking care not to lose my footing. I raced along the river for as long as I could stand before I found the perfect place to jump back onto the bank.

I hit the ground hard, lost my footing, and went tumbling down a slope. I tried to dig my claws into the ground to stop myself, but the earth was too frozen, and I wasn’t able to get a good enough grip to slow my fall. Finally, I came to a hard rolling stop, right where the ground leveled off—just as two figures emerged from the woods.

Ignoring the pain from the fall, I scrambled to my feet and prepared to attack.

**Episode 4069**

**Xavier**

“Try Craigslist?” Ava joked. “Or maybe you could put an ad in the paper? ‘Werewolf pack seeks witch for various functions in brand-new magical pack house.’” Ava started laughing. “I can just see it now. We’ll hold interviews and compare notes on candidates until we find the perfect one.”

I gritted my teeth, annoyed. Try as I might, I couldn’t find the humor in what Ava was saying. It was all too raw for me at the moment. It didn’t seem right that Greyson was in such a position of power while I was being forced to start from scratch. I’d done just as much to build and strengthen the Redwood pack as he had, and it wasn’t fair that I was out here struggling to get my footing.

*Why should Greyson’s pack have the advantage of two witches when I don’t even have one? I’m the one who brought Kira into the fold. If there was any justice, she would’ve left with me. If it weren’t for me, she wouldn’t even* have *a place at the Redwood pack house.*

“Okay, okay, you’re not in the joking mood, I get it.” Ava bit her lip and looked out into the woods for a moment before she spoke again. “I doubt Big Mac would ever agree to join us… But didn’t Kira have a crush on you, once upon a time?”

I groaned. “Yes, and it was awkward as hell. And it’s irrelevant now, since I’m pretty sure Kira hates me for leaving the Redwoods.”

Ava eyed me coolly. “You mean for leaving Cali?”

“Whatever,” I huffed.

Ava jerked her thumb back toward the house. “Kira did this for you. That counts for something, right?”

“Correction—she made it very clear that she wasn’t doing it for me, but for the pack.”

Kira had barely wanted to be near me when she’d come to conjure up the pack house. She could barely even tolerate me—there was absolutely no chance that she still harbored feelings for me.

Ava smiled. “Still, that means something. If she’s really as upset with you as you think, wouldn’t we still be living in Knox’s trailer? Think about it.”

“I guess,” I mumbled.

“I think you should take advantage of it,” Ava said. “Play that card and make her think you’re into her.”

I turned to look at Ava. “What? You’re joking, right?”

Ava just looked at me and shrugged. “Desperate times…”

“I’m not desperate. I’m never desperate.” I turned away from her and shook my head. “I can’t believe you’re actually suggesting that I seduce Kira.”

Ava rolled her eyes. “Why not? I know better than anyone that feelings can be more tenacious than people realize. All I’m saying is, use it to your advantage. Besides, the Redwoods don’t need two witches.”

I silently considered Ava’s words, but I knew there was no way I could go after Kira. She was already back at the Redwood pack house, no doubt, and if I went back there I’d probably run into Cali. I needed to keep my distance from her until I figured out what the hell to do about Adéluce. I wasn’t going to give the vampire-witch any more opportunities to hurt Cali.

*Besides that, Kira got pissed as hell when I suggested that she still had feelings for me. That’s a big part of why she’s siding with the Redwoods in all this. She doesn’t feel some overwhelming loyalty to me… And I can’t really blame her.*

“Forget it,” I said. “Kira’s too pissed at me.”

Ava laughed. “Tell me, is there anyone you *haven’t* pissed off?”

I chuckled, despite myself. “Sure doesn’t seem like it at the moment.” I turned at the sound of animated talking from inside the house. “Why don’t we go and see how everyone is doing? I’ll put the witch problem on the back burner for now.”

“Sounds good to me,” Ava said.

We went back in to find most of the pack gathered in the big empty living room, discussing what kind of furniture we should get and what colors to paint the walls. I couldn’t help but roll my eyes.

“Not to be a killjoy, but decorating is the least of our worries right now,” I said.

Marissa nodded. “Maybe, but we do need some stuff if we want this place to be even remotely functional. Beds are probably a good place to start.”

“We can handle all of that,” Fausto said.

“We know a guy,” Josephine added.

“Good, let’s iron out the details,” Ava said, pulling them both aside.

Donovan came walking up to me. “So, which room did you two pick for yourselves?”

I thought back to earlier when Ava had showed me the Alpha-designated room. “The biggest one.” I didn’t tell him that Ava and I had christened the room not too long ago, but I still had mixed feelings about the space—among other things. I shrugged. “Figured Ava and I should probably take it as Alpha and Luna.”

“No arguments here,” Donovan said.

“I’m going to start moving my stuff in!” Perrie said excitedly before dashing out of the house.

“Go with her,” I told Donovan. “We need to be careful in the woods still. I want patrols with everyone as they get their things.”

He nodded and followed her out of the house, calling for some of the others to join him.

Ava came walking back over, and I could read the excitement on her face, which almost made me forget how far behind the Samaras were in comparison to the other packs.

“Josephine has some really good ideas about sprucing the place up. Hopefully it’ll start to feel like home in no time.” Ava hooked her arm through mine. “I can’t believe this is really happening.”

“I’ll admit, it feels like this can’t possibly be real,” I said. “It’s almost too good to be true.”

*Or too crazy to be true. I still can’t believe that this is where I’ve ended up. Alpha of the Samaras, with Ava as my Luna. And I just staked a claim on a bedroom for us to share… I can’t fucking believe it.*

I looked over at Knox, who was huddled in a corner with his friends. I nodded toward them, unable to keep the bitterness from rising inside me. “But not everything is dreamy. You were all for him coming back to this pack, so you’re going to need to keep an eye on him and his dumb friends.”

Ava nodded, following my line of sight. “I will, don’t worry about that.”

Donovan grabbed Ava. “Oh, I have a great idea for the kitchen. Walk with me, talk with me!”

I watched them go and then went upstairs. I needed to separate myself from the others. Alone time had been hard to come by lately, and I needed some space to think. I entered my room—correction, *our* room—and shut the door behind me. I paused and leaned against it, listening to the muffled sounds of the pack as they talked and moved throughout the house.

I played back Ava’s words about making this a real home. Was any of this actually real? The house had been built out of magic, and I’d fallen into a relationship with Ava that had started out as convenience. On top of all that, I was suddenly responsible for the destiny of a pack that I’d never really cared about.

*I suppose things could be worse. At least Ava and I aren’t constantly at each other’s throats anymore. We’re finally working together. On the same page.*

“Would you look at you—a real Alpha with a pack house. And a Luna now, too. How domestic, Xavier, really.”

Startled, I turned to see Adéluce standing near the far window with a twisted smile on her lips.

“Don’t you ever fucking knock?” I snarled. I bunched my hands into fists and moved toward her.

Ignoring me, the vampire-witch kept talking. “I’m worried about you, Xavier.”

“Yeah, right. Since when do you worry about me?” I edged a little closer.

“You’re making quite a life for yourself. New house. New Luna. In fact, things aren’t so bad for you right now, are they?” She took a look around and whistled. “This place has good bones. Nice hardwood floors, smooth walls, nice fixtures…”

I stopped my advance, suddenly on high alert. She was up to something. “What are you getting at?”

Adéluce’s evil scowl of a smile disappeared, replaced by a cold, hard expression. “You do realize that I didn’t do all this to make you happy, right? I didn’t work to break your life apart bit by bit only for you to create a second life of equal pleasure. I did this to see you *suffer*. To make you pay for what you did.”

I started toward her again, tired of her constant reminders of the absolute torture she was putting me through.

“Oh no, don’t even try it,” Adéluce said. She waved her hand, and searing pain shot through my body, dropping me to my knees. She came to stand over me, and the sadistic smile returned to her face. “You know, I wouldn’t get too comfortable with your Luna if I were you.” Adéluce leaned close. “Remember, Ava already died once.”

**Episode 4070**

I held my breath and waited for Greyson’s reply. I’d made my speech, but was Greyson going to nix my idea? Did he understand the thought process behind it, or did he think I was way off base? His expression wasn’t really telling me anything. Greyson was the king of the poker face.

He finally sucked in a breath. “I don’t know, Cali. Sending out lots of smaller groups might make each of them more vulnerable. They run into a big group of Northwind or Bitterfang wolves, and then what? There’s always safety in numbers. With smaller groups… I’m not so sure.”

I wished I could explain it a little better, but the image in my head made a lot more sense than my words. Maybe I needed to read a book about war strategy or something… I waited for him to shoot me down, but to my surprise, he didn’t.

“But I suppose we can give it a try,” he said.

I was stunned. “Really?”

I couldn’t believe it. I’d expected him to list all the reasons why my plan wouldn’t work, or at least ask me to flesh it out a bit more, but he was putting it into action just the way it was.

“Really. You shouldn’t look so surprised. I do think there’s merit to making them think that there’s more of us than there actually are,” Greyson said. “But we need to be careful.”

“Definitely.”

I was beaming, and I thought about what my mother had said about seeing glimpses of Grandpa Innes in me. Right now, I really felt like that could be true. I wished my mother could’ve been here to see this. It would’ve made her so proud. At the same time, though, I was glad that my mother was far away. We were on the brink of war, and the pack house was no place for my parents right now.

“Let’s call a pack meeting so we can present your plan,” Greyson said.

I was taken aback, and my nerves immediately shot into overdrive. “Really? Do you think they’ll even listen to me?”

“Why not? You’ve earned their respect.”

“I like that you’re being so positive about this, Greyson, but I’m not so sure. If I were a real Luna—”

Greyson’s sharp look stopped my words cold. “You know we can’t risk that, right?” he said softly. “Not right now. There are too many uncertainties around the ceremony, and I don’t know what I’d do if anything happened to you.”

He didn’t mention how rough the Luna ceremony had been for Ava, a full-blooded werewolf—but I knew he was thinking about it.

“You’ve been acting like a real Luna, and you had the other packs and the council convinced that you were, so whether or not you have the official mark, you can command the respect that a Luna should receive.”

I swelled with pride and took Greyson’s hands. It felt so good to hear him express his confidence in me at a time like this.

“I promise to try,” I said.

Greyson squeezed my hands, then pulled away toward the door. “I should go contact the other packs and warn them about the Northwinds taking up with the Bitterfangs.”

I stopped him before he could go. “Okay, but one more thing. Since you think so highly of me, I want to go out with the first teams on patrol.”

Greyson’s expression darkened. “What? No, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why?” He’d just said that I was as strong as a real Luna, and a real Luna would go out and fight with her pack. She wouldn’t just hide out in the house watching the others through the window without actually supporting their efforts.

“Because, Cali, you’d be dealing with werewolves out there. Werewolves who want to kill you.”

“I can’t believe you!” I burst out. “So all that stuff about me being just as strong and capable as a real Luna—that was all talk? Did you even mean any of it? Or were you going to let me present my plan to the pack only to pull the rug out from under me right afterward?”

Greyson took me by the shoulders. “No, and that’s not what I’m doing at all. I meant what I said, Cali. I believe in you.”

“Then you need to start acting like it. If I don’t go out with the others, what will they think of me?” I paused. “You wouldn’t have held Joss back.”

Greyson opened his mouth to say something but then snapped it shut and sighed. “You’re right. I know you are. It’s just that I love you so much, Cali. I can’t deal with the idea of putting you in harm’s way. I want you to be safe, and I know it’s only going to get harder to make sure that you are. I just want to keep you out of the warzone for as long as I can, I guess.”

“We’re long past that,” I said. “It’s time for me to pull my own weight, like any other member of the pack. It’s only right.”

Greyson lifted his hands from my shoulders and held my face. “Is that what you really want? To go out and fight with the patrols?”

I nodded as a bloom of anticipation formed in the pit of my stomach. It wasn’t that I wasn’t afraid—I was. I just wanted to get past that fear and do what I could to hold my own with the rest of the pack. How was I ever going to really get anyone’s respect if I didn’t actually fight for the pack? I’d come a long way since the fight with Silas and the revenants. My magic was growing stronger by the day, and I knew that I could be a real asset in this war.

Greyson finally gave me a bittersweet smile. “Okay. Fine.”

I stretched onto my tiptoes to kiss him. *I love you, Greyson*,I mind linked.

Greyson left to go tell the other packs about the Northwinds and to call everyone to the living room for the pack meeting. I went into the living room and watched everyone file in with nervousness circling in the pit of my stomach. I didn’t know if I was imagining it, but it felt like everyone was looking around for Greyson as they took their seats, waiting for him to come in and kick things off. Maybe that was all in my head, but I really was starting to wonder if they were going to listen to what I had to say like Greyson thought they would.

“Hi all!” I said once everyone was settled. “As you all know, things are heating up, and we need to figure out how best to fight the Bitterfangs. So, to counteract the Bitterfangs’ attacks, we’re going to try something new with our patrols. Rather than sending out large groups, we’re going to break into smaller groups that will spread out to cover more ground and indicate a larger presence to the Bitterfangs.”

It felt both amazing and terrifying to be in this position, but once I’d gotten it all out, I felt relieved and even more confident that my plan would work.

Zainab raised a hand. “Why are you telling us this?”

I looked at her, confused. “Because it’s my plan?”

Zainab shook her head. “That’s not what I mean. Why isn’t Greyson telling us this? He’s the one who called us all here.”

I nodded at her. “He did, but he asked me to present the plan, so that’s what I’m doing.”

“Continue to think of Cali as the Redwood Luna,” Rishika added. “It matters now more than ever given the Bitterfang situation.”

Everyone nodded.

“Got it,” Zainab said.

I gave Rishika a nod of thanks before I continued. “I’m going to head out with the first group. I’m hoping to create the teams in a way that takes advantage of everyone’s strengths. I’m Fae, so it makes sense for me to team up with a werewolf. Same with Artemis. Since Lola is a hybrid, she can go with just about anyone.”

“I want to go with Jay!” Lola shouted.

I laughed, just as there was a sharp pounding on the front door. I turned toward it, wondering if it might be Elle. I raced to the door and opened it, only to find Rowena standing on the porch. I blinked. Was I seeing things? What was she doing here? I looked past the Luna witch. “Hey, Rowena… Did you come alone?”

“Yes, I have important news,” Rowena said. “One of our patrols was attacked.”

“Shit. Really? The same thing happened to two of ours,” I said. “Rishika and Artemis were attacked by Northwind wolves, which we’re assuming means they’ve formed an alliance with the Bitterfangs. Greyson’s calling the other Alphas right now to tell them about it.”

Rowena nodded, her expression grim. “If the Bitterfangs keep amassing this kind of support from the other packs, they’re going to win this war before it even begins.”

**Episode 4071**

I was doing my best to stay calm and not freak out as Rowena kept talking, but she hadn’t come bearing good news.

“The attack on our pack wasn’t just the Bitterfangs and the Northwinds. It was a coordinated effort, and a few of the attackers were from the Hackberry pack,” Rowena said.

I shook my head. “The Hackberry pack? I’ve never heard of them. Were they even at the summit?” I searched my memory, trying to remember if I’d heard the name before.

“No, they weren’t. They’re from Orange County,” Rowena said. “Which means that the Bitterfangs are reaching out across California to bring more packs into their alliance. If the Northwinds have joined the Bitterfangs, it begs the question—how many more packs have they already recruited? The more packs that join their side, the more deadly this pack war will become.” Rowena shook her head, and I could see the stress written across her face. “So, what are you planning to do?”

I took a moment to think. “I guess the first thing is to tell Greyson this latest bit of bad news.”

Rowena nodded. “Just a suggestion—even though you’re not technically a Luna, if you want to take on the role, and I mean *really* take it on, you need to start thinking like a Luna.”

I looked at Rowena in confusion. “What does that mean? Greyson’s our Alpha, and he’s also the leader of the alliance—”

“All I’m hearing is that you intend to put all this on your Alpha,” Rowena interrupted. “It’s okay to inform him—of course you have to do that—but what are *you* going to do? A good Luna has to take on responsibilities, to act, to do everything she can to ensure the security and unity of her pack. You have to be way more than your Alpha’s messenger.”

*What* have *I done for the pack so far? I’ve tried to support them as best I can, but have I done enough?*

“I helped reorganize the patrols,” I said weakly.

Rowena nodded. “That’s a good start, but you have to keep generating ideas, taking action, and doing everything you can to fill in where your Alpha needs you. He has a lot on his plate, and a good Luna helps to lighten the load. Just something to think about.” She turned away and jogged back down the porch steps. “I have to get back to my pack, but if you need anything, Cali, don’t hesitate to reach out.”

I was about to thank her, but before I could, she’d blipped away.

I closed the door and leaned back against it, my mind racing. Up until my talk with Rowena, I’d thought I was doing a good job as acting Luna… But now, I had doubts. Lots of them. Was I really doing everything I could? Had I been passing every responsibility onto Greyson without even realizing it?

Lola came walking up. “What’s wrong? Just a minute ago you were all gung ho over your patrol idea, and how you look like your puppy just died.”

I looked at Lola head-on. “Be honest with me—don’t hold back or pull any punches or cushion anything. Do you think I’m a good Luna?”

Lola stared at me. “Um… You do know you’re not really a Luna, right?”

I slumped against the door. “Exactly. And now I really believe it.”

Lola sighed. “Where’s this coming from? I don’t get it.”

“It’s coming from me trying my hardest to be Luna—a good one—without really knowing what being a Luna actually means for me.”

Lola draped an arm across my shoulders. “It’s not like there’s an instruction manual or an online tutorial. To be a Luna you just have to… be a Luna. Think and act like one.”

I groaned. “Thanks, but that’s not really helpful. I don’t know… I just keep comparing myself to the other Lunas I’ve met and wondering how to really prove myself, but I keep coming up short. Am I supposed to be more like Joss?”

Lola shook her head. “I’m not really sure… I mean, Joss was killed.”

“I know,” I muttered. My frustration was building. “How am I supposed to know what to do? How do I know whether I’m really making an impact? Making a difference? I thought that organizing and accompanying the patrols would be enough, but now I’m not sure. It seems like there’s so much more I could be doing, but I don’t even know where to start.”

“I wish I had more answers for you,” Lola said. “If you’re really looking to take on the role of Redwood Luna, I have to tell you, there isn’t a lot of practice time left—and I’d go so far as to say you don’t have any time at all. We’re on the cusp of a pack war. Maybe you should just wing it.”

“I’m not sure if I can,” I said.

Rowena was right. When she’d told me the news about the Bitterfangs gathering more allies, my first impulse had been to run to Greyson so he could figure out what to do about it. It hadn’t even occurred to me to come up with a solution for a problem so big. I felt inexperienced and out of my depth.

“I have to disagree with you there, Cali,” Lola said. “You *can* do it, and so far, you’re doing alright. Just keep at it and over time you’ll get better and better.” She clapped me on the back. “Just… don’t get killed.”

I watched Lola walk away to join the others, and I wasn’t amused. I didn’t want to get killed—obviously—and I didn’t want to get any of the Redwood killed, either. I was starting to realize just how much pressure Alphas were under at all times.

*I wish I could’ve spent more time with Rowena at the summit. Too bad there’s not a Luna apprenticeship or something. Though I’d rather drink a whole pot of Lola’s coffee than ask Ava for help… Still, I hate to admit it, but she does seem to have the whole Luna thing down pat.*

I was feeling overwhelmed, but I wasn’t going to give up. Greyson was going to need all the support I could provide, and the Redwoods would need the same. I wasn’t exactly sure what form that support should take, but I was going to have to figure it out without getting trapped in my own head.

*Lola’s right—maybe I just need to trust my intuition and wing it. Take it step by step… And the first step is to tell Greyson the bad news about the Hackberry pack. If I start there, maybe everything else will become a little clearer.*

I made my way to Greyson’s study. As I approached, I could hear him yelling. *That can’t be good.* I hovered outside the door, wondering if I should wait outside the study or knock. Then I thought about what Rowena had said. A good Luna needed to take action and be decisive. When we went to the summit, Greyson had told me that we’d be working as equals. It was time to test that statement and act like we were on the same playing field.

With a deep breath, I walked into the room, just as Greyson shouted, “You saw what the Bitterfangs did at the summit!”

I hovered near the door, wondering who he was talking to. I figured it had to be one of the allied packs. Greyson glanced at me for a beat as he listened to whatever was being said on the other end.

“Yeah, and if you do that, I won’t forget,” Greyson said, before ending the call. He slammed his fist into the desk, startling me. I wasn’t used to seeing Greyson lose his temper. He took a breath and then looked up at me. “Sorry about that.” He dropped into his desk chair and leaned back, crossing his arms. “What’s up?”

“I hate to have to add to your troubles, but Rowena just stopped by with news,” I said.

“Oh? What kind of news?” he asked. The edge in his voice was obvious, and I reminded myself that his frustration wasn’t directed at me.

“She said that her pack was attacked—and that one of the attackers belonged to the Hackberry pack, from Orange County. She thinks they’ve joined up with the Bitterfangs.”

Greyson sat up in his chair and cursed under his breath before dragging a hand down his face. “Amazing. Just great.”

“That call, what was that about?” I asked tentatively, almost not wanting to know.

Before I’d taken this position at Greyson’s side, I’d been involved in plenty of the pack’s troubles, and had definitely worried about everyone in the pack. But now, things were different. Now, I felt completely connected to and responsible for the fate of the pack. One wrong decision from me could spell disaster, and that was a lot of pressure.

Greyson shook his head. “It was Wade, the Ironwood Alpha. He’s threatening to pull out. The alliance is falling apart.”

**Episode 4072**

**Xavier**

Frozen and frustrated and still down on my knees, I glowered up at Adéluce. If looks could kill, she’d have been reduced to mush by now. She leaned close, and every part of me longed to grab her by the neck and choke the life right out of her, but she was in control, and no matter how much I wanted to lunge at her, I couldn’t.

“Are you threatening Ava now, too?” I asked.

She’d mentioned Ava’s death like she was planning to make it a reality once again, and just the thought of that was like a punch to the gut. I thought back to the trick Adéluce had played on me during the Luna ceremony. I’d really thought Ava was dead. It had hurt me then, and I could only imagine the pain I would feel if it actually happened.

Adéluce smiled. “You’re smart enough to understand what I’m getting at, Xavier. Do you really think I’m going to just sit by and allow you to happily move on with your life? What would be the point?”

“I’m hardly doing anything happily,” I said bitterly. “You should be pleased with yourself. You took away just about everything that matters to me. Isn’t that enough?”

Adéluce placed a cold hand on my neck and bared her fangs. “But there’s so much more to take! It will never be enough, Xavier. I plan to take until you’re a shell of the man you used to be… And then I’ll take even more.”

In that moment, I almost wished that she would kill me, just drain me dry and end this torture once and for all. But I knew she wouldn’t do that. That would be too quick an end for me, and she’d made it crystal clear that all she cared about was seeing me suffer.

She squeezed my neck hard and leaned in even closer, her fangs inches from my face. “From now on, you should think of your life as a rollercoaster. There will be highs, sure, but for me, the pleasure will come from all your lows. Just when things start to look up for you”—she snapped her fingers—“it’ll all come crashing down. Gravity always wins, and so do I.”

She shoved me backward, and I collapsed to the floor.

“If you get too cozy with Ava for my liking, the rollercoaster will change course.”

“What am I supposed to do?” I hissed at her, my frustration boiling over.

“The same thing you always do, Xavier. Suffer. Suffer for the rest of your cursed life.”

I screamed at her, just as she released me from the spell keeping me paralyzed on the floor. I leapt up to my feet and lunged at her, but she’d already blipped away, and I crashed back down to the floor.

“Fuck!” I growled.

“X, are you okay?” Ava called from downstairs. I could already hear the sound of her footsteps coming up the stairs.

I got up and looked out the window, half expecting to see that miserable vampire-witch out there laughing at me, but there was nothing but the trees. Not having realized that Ava had entered the room, I jumped when she touched my arm.

“Whoa, is everything all right?” she asked.

*How am I supposed to answer that? Everything’s even more fucked up than it was before. I’ve already lost Cali, and now Adéluce wants to take Ava from me too. How am I supposed to navigate this? How can I live with the knowledge that I’ll never be happy because Adéluce gets her pleasure from my pain?*

I tried to shrug off Ava’s question. “Just thinking about the pack war, the alliance,” I lied. I hoped to hell that she couldn’t hear the tremor in my voice.

Ava cocked her head. “You know that you don’t have to do all that by yourself, right?”

She reached for me, but I stepped away and moved toward the door.

“I should get back downstairs to check in with the pack. Have you heard any complaints about the house? And Knox and his stooges don’t count,” I added quickly.

Ava just stared at me. “What aren’t you telling me, Xavier?”

“Nothing.”

It was the most honest statement I could’ve made, since there really was nothing to say. I was in a prison of Adéluce’s making, and I wasn’t going to be freed anytime soon. I had no idea how to fix this, and I was feeling more hopeless than ever. But again, I couldn’t tell Ava any of that.

Ava took a step toward me. “*Nothing*. That’s the problem. You’re doing it again. You’re keeping everything inside. It’s almost like you’re afraid of me all of a sudden. Did I do something? Did I mess up somehow?”

Ava was trying so hard to make sense of my sudden change in behavior. She deserved so much better than this, but how much could I give her before Adéluce decided it was *too* much and made good on her threat? If I pushed Ava away too quickly, the pack would suffer. The pack needed us both, more than ever before. And they needed us to be on the same page.

*If I’m going to create distance between us to keep Ava safe, I’m going to have to do it slowly—not like how I did it with Cali.*

I took Ava’s hand. “You didn’t do anything.” I forced a smile. “But you’re right. I *am* trying to do everything myself, and probably not asking for help as often as I should. I promise to share more with you from now on.”

Ava smiled, satisfied. “Okay, that’s more like it,” she said. She squeezed my hand and tugged me downstairs.

The moment I hit the first-floor landing, I knew exactly who was doing all the complaining. It was just as I’d suspected. *Knox*. I could see it all over the shrimp’s face. He was scowling in my general direction, and I stalked over to him, more than happy to vent some of my aggression at a deserving party.

“You got a problem?” I asked him.

“Yes, actually. My room is too small. The ceiling is low as hell, and the windows face east.”

He was literally pouting. It took everything I had not to lose my patience, because if I did, I knew I’d probably take it too far.

“I guess we can assign you a new room,” I said through gritted teeth.

“I don’t get why you and Ava were the ones who assigned the rooms in the first place,” Knox griped.

Ava stepped between us. “Are you really that clueless? You’re not the Alpha anymore, and honestly, you never really were. Xavier *is* the Alpha, and I’m his Luna. *We* make the decisions around here, not you. You’ve been assigned a room, and that’s the only one you’re getting. Period.”

Knox was so mad, it looked like his head was about to pop clear off his shoulders.

I smiled. “Sometimes the truth hurts. Get used to it.”

I pushed past him and headed for the front door, needing some fresh air and a moment to clear my head.

“I’m not staying here!” Knox called after me. “Blaine, Zipper, and I are going to stay in *my* Airstream.”

Both of his minions looked at each other in surprise. “We are?”

“Yes, we are. We don’t need their charity,” Knox yelled.

“Charity? How is it charity? This is our pack, and this is our pack house,” Zipper said. “I think you’re a little out of line this time, Knox.”

“What? How dare you?” Knox hissed.

“How are three grown men meant to stay in that tiny Airstream?” Blaine retorted. “You know I’m usually on your side with whatever you’re mad about on any given day, but in this case, it seems like we’re getting the short end of the stick. Besides, I think your room’s fine. It’s bigger than mine, and you don’t see me complaining.”

“You *would* think it’s fine! You wouldn’t know class if it bit you in the ass,” Knox spat.

“And three men stuffed into an Airstream and showering in plain sight of each other is *class*?” Zipper asked.

“Both of you shut your fucking mouths and come with me now!” Knox yelled.

I smiled, loving the sight of the cracks forming in their little bromance from hell. If Zipper and Blaine had any sense at all, they’d see Knox for the loser he was and integrate more fully into the pack.

*I never thought that seeing people fight would bring me so much pleasure. I guess this is life under Adéluce. The misery of others is my happiness.*

I shook my head in disbelief at the state of my life, but I was still smiling as I walked onto the porch. Things were shit right now, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t enjoy a quick moment of pleasure.

Unfortunately, my smile fell when I checked my phone. I’d missed a flurry of phone calls and text messages from Greyson. I opened one text message after the other, and they all said the same thing.

*Call me immediately*.

**Episode 4073**

**Greyson**

“What can I do?” Cali asked. “This isn’t good, and you’re clearly stressed. How can I make this easier on you?”

I wondered if she could tell how shocked I was to hear her say that. I hadn’t expected that response to the news that the alliance was falling apart.

“I’m not sure,” I said slowly. “But I’ll deal with it.”

I was considering going out to get the support of other packs, but that was as far as I’d gotten.

“No, *we’ll* deal with it,” Cali countered. “We’re supposed to be equals, remember? I assume that arrangement didn’t just apply to the summit? If the Redwoods can’t afford to lose pack support while the Bitterfangs are getting stronger, then we have to do whatever we can to stop it. I want to help fix this.”

I could see the determination on Cali’s face. She was right. This wasn’t just my problem—it was a pack problem. Even though Cali wasn’t the official Luna, she was stepping up in every way it counted, and I knew it would be stupid to refuse her help when I needed every bit of support I could get.

“I wish I knew what to do,” I said with a sigh. “Going out to gather support from other packs is the first thing I thought of, but even that’s a long shot. I had a hard enough time doing it at the summit.”

“Have you spoken to the other alliance packs?” Cali asked.

“I filled Mace in, but I’ll have to wait until Lucian gets back with Elle to update him.”

“What about Xavier?” Cali asked. “Have you talked to him?”

I hesitated. Of course I’d thought about my brother and the Samaras, but I was so pissed off at him that I didn’t really trust myself to have a productive conversation with him—if I could even get in touch with him to have one, that was. I’d called and texted him a million times and, of course, my pouty little brother hadn’t bothered to answer a single one.

“I left him a message,” I said simply, deciding not to mention that I’d left him *multiple* messages.

Cali looked away for a second. “Maybe he’s busy? I’m sure he’ll reply as soon as he can.”

*Why is she making excuses for him? What about Xavier’s behavior lately makes her think he’s not ignoring me on purpose? It makes no sense. But I do love how she always sees the best in people.*

I gave a stiff nod but said nothing.

“So, what’s next?” Cali asked breezily.

“Mace and I discussed arranging a meeting with all the Alphas in the alliance,” I said. “Just a quick check in to solidify things and make sure everyone’s on the same page. We can tackle any doubts any of the Alphas might be having, too; make sure we don’t lose anyone else.”

“Why just the Alphas?” Cali said. “What about the Lunas? Why not include them, too? They could offer some good insights, I bet. And Lunas always have their Alpha’s ears, so if you can win over the Lunas, the Alphas will most likely follow.”

I nodded, thinking that over. “It’s not a bad idea… I think I’m still just getting used to the idea of having a Luna at all.”

Lunas were such an integral part of pack life, but the Redwoods had been without one for so long that I’d forgotten how much impact they could have on the success—or failure—of a pack.

Cali nodded. “Well, I can’t blame you for that, especially when I’m not actually your Luna.”

I saw a flash of sadness in Cali’s beautiful eyes, and I rose up from my seat and took her in my arms. “I wish I could make it official, but—”

“I know, I know, it’s too risky,” Cali finished for me. She buried her head in my chest and I felt her heart beating against mine.

“Yes, that’s part of it. But I do want you to continue as Redwood Luna.”

Cali’s face brightened, and I was happy to see that she was pleased. There was nothing I wanted more than to have Cali as my real, official Luna, but I wasn’t willing to risk her life to get it. I hoped she knew that that was really the only thing standing in the way.

I reached over to grab my phone and start arranging the meeting, but Cali stopped me.

“Let me do it,” she said.

“What? Why?” I asked, surprised. “It’s just a few calls, nothing I can’t handle.”

“I know, I know, but it’s a good way for me to start taking my role more seriously. I’ll learn what a Luna should do—and it’ll take a little something off your plate. Accept the help, Greyson.”

I wanted to tell her that it wasn’t necessary and that I could handle things—especially something as simple as arranging a meeting—but I didn’t. It was important for her to feel like she was making a difference in the greater scheme of things, and I wasn’t against that.

“Okay, you’re right,” I said. “See if you can set something up for tomorrow.”

Cali grinned. “On it!”

Then she spun around and left the room with a skip in her step. I watched her go, even stuck my head out the office doorway until she disappeared around a corner. I was just so grateful to have her by my side. With everything seemingly about to fall apart, I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to keep pushing ahead without her.

My phone rang, and I looked at the screen to see that it was Xavier. *About fucking time.* I took a moment to collect myself, knowing that I wouldn’t gain Xavier’s cooperation if I immediately started venting. I let out a breath, and then finally answered the phone.

“Hello?” I said.

“What?” Xavier snapped, not even bothering to start off on the right foot.

I bit my tongue. “We have a problem, that’s what.”

It was in moments like this that I realized how completely wrecked our relationship was. It was no secret that we’d never been the best of friends, but now there was wild animosity buzzing between us at all times.

“We? Or you?”

Ignoring my brother’s jab, I pressed ahead. “The Bitterfangs are forming alliances with other packs.”

“Really? Who would want to work with those assholes?” Xavier said. “Getting in bed with the Bitterfangs is like getting in bed with a hungry viper.”

“True. For all we know, Malakai brought them in by force—absorbed them against their will. Or maybe he just convinced them. Either way, they definitely pose a threat. A couple of Northwind wolves attacked Rishika and Artemis, and the Cobalt Luna stopped by and said that they were attacked, too, by a pack from the OC—the Hackberry pack.”

Xavier sighed. “The Samaras haven’t been targeted. At least not yet.”

“It’s probably only a matter of time,” I said. “We’re planning to bring the alliance together for a meeting to discuss the situation.”

“*We’re* planning? Who’s ‘we’?” Xavier asked.

I hesitated before answering, unsure how Xavier was going to react. We were managing to have a conversation right now, and I didn’t want things to go sideways.

“Me and Cali,” I finally said.

Silence.

“Did you hear me?”

“When?” Xavier asked, choosing not to even acknowledge it.

“Sometime tomorrow. Cali’s arranging it. Lunas should come, too.”

“You sure are putting a lot of faith in Cali,” Xavier said. “That’s good.”

I was stunned. I couldn’t remember the last time Xavier had said anything that even remotely indicated that his care, concern, and respect for Cali had endured since he’d left the pack.

I recovered quickly and said, “She’s really stepping up.”

There was another long pause before Xavier finally asked, “Where?”

“I assumed that we’d hold it here, at the Redwood pack house,” I said.

“No,” Xavier interrupted. “We’ll have it at the Samara house.”

I was confused. “You want to hold a pack meeting in a trailer?”

I winced when I realized that that probably sounded like a dig. It wasn’t *not* a dig, but I certainly didn’t want to get into a screaming match with Xavier right now. We had important matters to discuss, and us fighting wasn’t going to help that.

“We have a pack house,” Xavier said.

“What? How?” I asked.

“We needed a place, and I made it happen,” Xavier said.

“Congrats, man… But I still think the meeting should take place at the Redwood pack house.”

Another long pause. “Why? Because you’re the Alpha of the alliance?”

Picking up the bitter edge to my brother’s voice, and tired of walking on eggshells, I said the first thing that came to mind. “No, because that’s where I want it to happen.”

Xavier chuckled. “Tell you what—you can have your meeting wherever the hell you want, but the Samara pack won’t be there.”

And then he hung up.

**Episode 4074**

**Elle**

Running on pure adrenaline, I slammed into the closest of the two figures and tackled him to the ground. I was moments from ripping into the man’s neck when a familiar scent hit my nose and I realized it was Lucian.

He looked up at me with a huge smile on his face. “My forest rose! I’ve found you! Happy day!”

I was absolutely stunned. What was he *doing* here?He hadn’t even tried to fight me off when I’d gone for his jugular, which was strange in general, but in character for Lucian.

*Thank goodness I realized who he was.*

I quickly shifted back to human, but I didn’t lift myself off him. Lucian wrapped his arms around me and pulled my naked body close.

“I was so worried about you!” He gently brushed my hair away from my face. “Destiny brought me right to you, just like I knew it would.” He buried his face in my neck. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

He pulled my face to his and kissed me, and for a moment, I forgot about everything else… Until someone cleared their throat.

*Oh yeah, he brought someone with him.*

I looked up to see Kira standing with her head turned away from us. “Do you two need some time alone, or…?”

I didn’t understand why Kira seemed so embarrassed.

“No… Why would we need time alone?” I asked. “Do *you* need time alone?”

“No, it’s because—never mind. Forget it. I’m old enough; you’re old enough. I can handle this.” Kira sighed and held out some clothes. “I brought these for you. Had a feeling you might need them.”

I finally untangled myself from Lucian and took the clothes.

“What are you two doing here?” I asked as I got dressed. I hadn’t expected anyone to come after me, least of all Lucian and Kira. I’d already run so far, and no one really knew exactly where I was headed, so it was almost uncanny that they’d managed to track me down so quickly.

“I came to rescue you, of course,” Lucian said. “We searched far and wide, but I’m an amazing tracker, and I used my skills to pinpoint your location with ease.” He beamed at me proudly.

Kira rolled her eyes. “Apparently, I had nothing at all to do with it.”

Lucian was watching me dress with a glint in his eye that somehow made me want to kiss him again—longer, this time. I’d had a lot of time to think while I was running away from everything I cared about, and my fondness for Lucian had certainly grown.

Lucian cleared his throat and pulled his attention back up to my eyes. “The council is coming after you, my darling, and I’ve come to take you back to the pack so you can be protected. I’m not going to let the council—or anyone else—get within a foot of you. But we do need to head back now if we want this whole rescue mission to go smoothly.”

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to go back, or even if I could. Lucian had found me, and I was happy about that, but nothing had changed. I was still on the council’s bad side, and I was still devoted to keeping the people I cared about out of danger. But even though I knew all that, the way Lucian was looking at me right now was scrambling my thoughts.

“I’m not sure about going back with you,” I said as I buttoned my pants. “I left the pack so I could be alone.”

Lucian nodded. “I understand completely, and would probably do the same in your position, but things have changed, my forest rose. It’s too dangerous for you to be out here by yourself.”

“Did Greyson send you?” I asked, my stomach flipping.

The light in Lucian’s eyes dimmed the slightest bit. “Greyson… Well, yes. He asked if I would go after you,” he said. “And here I am.”

I was disappointed. “But why didn’t Greyson come himself? He’s always trying to protect me… Does he not want to anymore?”

“It’s really cold, can we go now?” Kira interrupted. “We can talk when we’re back at the pack house.”

I hesitated, not knowing what I should do. “I want to go back with you, I really do… But if I go back, won’t I be putting the packs in danger?”

Lucian draped an arm across my shoulders. “You don’t need to worry about that. Nobody will bother you as long as you remain under my care. I promise you that.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end as I once again picked up the unmistakable sound of the council hunters closing in.

“Hey, you two, I hate to be pushy, but we need to get going right now,” Kira said, glancing in the direction of the sound.

Lucian took my hands in his. “Please, Elle, come with me. Let me take care of you. I’ll make sure no one can hurt you.”

Before I could respond, a familiar howl cut through the air.

“Decide now!” Kira said. “We don’t have much time!”

I recognized that howl. It was my father. I started running toward the sound, my heart pounding.

“Elle, where are you going, oh tender one?” Lucian called after me.

I raced ahead, stripping off my clothes as I sped toward the howl. I shifted—and nearly slammed right into my father and his pack.

*What are you doing here, Father?* I asked as I got my bearings.

*I’m wondering the same thing about you, Daughter. And where is your Alpha? Why isn’t he with you?* my father asked.

*I left them behind—for their safety. I’m being chased by the werewolf council, and—*

“Elle?” Lucian said as he and Kira came running up to me. He came to a stop and looked between me and my father.

*Is that… Are they your pack? The pack you belonged to before?* Lucian mind linked.

I ignored Lucian, knowing that I was going to have to tell my father about Helix and dreading it. *Father, there’s something I have to tell you.*

My father cocked his head to the side and waited.

*Helix… He’s dead. I was forced to kill him because the werewolf council was holding him captive. He couldn’t take it, and he asked me to kill him before they could do it themselves. I was trying to honor his wishes, Father. You have to know that.*

My father took the news stoically. *I understand. I will convey this news to the others*, he said. *And you… Are you well?*

I wanted to cry and tell him every single thing that was on my mind, but I knew that my father wouldn’t understand. He was a wolf. He didn’t experience all the emotions that came with being part human. My human emotions were still puzzling even to me, and I’d been dealing with them since I was turned. They would be completely incomprehensible to my father.

“Are you going to introduce me to your father, Elle?” Lucian asked.

My father looked at Lucian and Kira. *Who are these humans?* he asked me.

*She’s… a friend. And he’s my… my mate.* I hadn’t known whether I was going to admit that to my father or not, but there didn’t seem to be any real reason not to.

My father didn’t seem impressed. *Is your mate protecting you?* he asked.

*He’s trying to*, I replied.

My father ducked his head, accepting this.

The council hunters’ footsteps were getting closer, and panic surged within me. *Father, you should turn back. The werewolf council, they’re after me for killing Helix, and their hunters are heading this way.*

*Yes, we will go*, my father said. *We heard them approaching a while back.* He took a long look at me as he slowly started to back away. *Be careful, my daughter.* His gaze went to Lucian. *And make sure that your mate serves his purpose.*

Without another word, he turned and led the pack away.

I watched them go with sadness in my heart. I hadn’t expected to feel so much longing for them once they were gone, but I knew that I didn’t belong with them anymore, and would only bring danger their way. I was living in a new, exciting world and I’d never want to leave it, but that didn’t mean it was easy to watch my father walk away. I didn’t know when I’d see him again.

Lucian’s voice broke into my mind, eclipsing my thoughts. *Did he say anything about me? Do I have his approval?*

Kira had picked up my clothes, and she held them out to me. “Here.”

I took one last look in the direction that my father had gone before shifting back and taking the clothes.

Lucian waited until I was dressed, and then he placed his hands on my shoulders and looked me in the eye. “So, Elle, have you made up your mind? Are you going to come back with me?”

**Episode 4075**

**Greyson**

I stared at the phone, shocked. *Wow. That could* not *have gone worse… But should I really be surprised that Xavier hung up on me?*

I thought back to Mace’s warning that the hostile feelings festering between me and Xavier could destroy the alliance. I was starting to realize that I should’ve taken that a bit more seriously. It was all coming to a head way faster than I’d thought. In the back of my mind, I’d been thinking of the Samaras as a certainty in the alliance—even if Xavier and I were at each other’s throats—but now, I wasn’t so sure.

Cali came walking in, and I wondered how best to fill her in on the conversation—or lack thereof—that I’d just had with Xavier. It was no secret that things were tense between the two of us, but that conversation had certainly revealed just how bad things were getting.

“I talked to the Cobalt and Blue Blood packs. They’ve both agreed to come here tomorrow.” Cali’s eyes narrowed. “Wait—what’s wrong?”

I slowly slid my phone in my pocket, still trying to think of the best way to share the news that my relationship with Xavier had just degraded even further.

“I just got off the phone with Xavier,” I said, then I hesitated.

Cali gestured at me. “And?”

“And… Well, he hung up on me.”

Cali looked taken aback. “Why? What did you say to him?”

I knew that I had to be careful. I didn’t want to drag Cali any further into the middle of this, but it definitely irked me that she’d just assumed I was the one at fault, and had said something to make Xavier end the call. She knew as well as I did how short Xavier’s fuse had been, lately. I wasn’t sure that there was much I *could* have said that would’ve gone over better with my brother, since he resented my very existence right now.

Seeming to read my mind, Cali stepped close and put a hand on my shoulder. “Just tell me what happened.”

“Xavier got upset because I want to hold the meeting here at the Redwood pack house. There was a little back and forth, and then he ended the call.”

Cali nodded, taking that in. “And where does he want to hold it?”

I hesitated again. I hated to have to tell her this, but she was going to find out sooner or later.

“The Samaras have a new pack house,” I finally said, then I watched a mix of emotions pass across her face and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

Cali forced a smile. “That’s good. Good for them.” There was a weighty silence before she added, “I’m happy for him.”

I kissed her. “I know this is probably hard for you to hear,” I said.

Xavier was actually putting down roots, and that had to be tough for Cali to see. It legitimized Xavier’s move in this strange new direction, and showed that he was planning to be with the Samaras for a while.

Cali pulled back. “Does it really matter?”

I looked at her, confused. “Does what really matter?”

“I mean, we could hold the meeting anywhere. Why *not* just have it at the Samara pack house?”

I was shocked. “Why would you agree to that? Surely that’s the last place you’d want to go.”

It was definitely the last place *I* wanted to go. I didn’t want to give Xavier any indication that I condoned the way he was acting—though I was starting to realize that if I didn’t, things between us were going to break down even further.

“This isn’t about me, or you,” Cali said. “It’s about coming together to stop the Bitterfangs.”

“But I’m Alpha of the alliance, so the meeting should be here. What kind of message would it send if we hold it at the Samara pack house?”

Cali shook her head. “I don’t see it that way. And besides, that’s just it—*you’re* the Alpha of the alliance, no matter where the meeting takes place. It’s not about location. I doubt any of the other packs will care where the meeting takes place or draw any conclusions about your leadership from the location.”

Speechless, I wrapped my arms around Cali and pulled her close. “I love you.”

Cali pulled back and gave me a confused look. “I love you too…”

“It’s just that you’re right,” I said quickly. “It doesn’t matter where we hold the meeting. It could be at the Rockaway Diner and it wouldn’t matter. The truth is, I just couldn’t see past my personal feelings toward Xavier.” I kissed Cali again. “You’re the best Luna an Alpha could ever have.”

I immediately felt Cali tense up.

“But I’m not really your Luna,” she said quietly.

I hugged Cali tight again and just held her for a while.

“I know you’ve been struggling with that,” I finally said. “But if you really believe what you told me about the meeting location, then you should think about the Luna mark the same way. As long as you fill the role, the mark doesn’t matter.” I brushed the hair away from her eyes. “Does that make sense?”

Cali nodded, then briefly pressed her lips to mine. “Thank you.”

“No, thank *you*,” I said, before deepening the kiss.

I wrapped my arms around her waist and gently pushed her back against the desk. It felt so good to forget everything except the feeling of her body against mine, the heat of her invading my every sense. I plunged my tongue deeper into her mouth, and she moaned. I gently parted her legs and pressed myself against her, wanting more but not knowing if this was the right time.

*I take my strength from Cali while she takes strength from me. We’re here for each other. She has my back, no matter what, and I have hers. This is everything I need. With her by my side, I can face anything, and I have to remember how lucky I am. I have her all to myself. I should really be* thanking *Xavier for leaving.*

After a bit, Cali gently pulled away. “Are you going to call Xavier back and tell him?”

I nodded. “I will, and you should let the others know about the location change.”

I couldn’t believe how much better I felt about the whole thing now that Cali had given me a new perspective.

She nodded. “I’m on it.”

She hopped down off the desk and jogged toward the door.

She’d just walked out into the hallway when I heard her say, “Elle!”

Dropping everything, I rushed out into the foyer just as Elle, Kira, and Lucian walked through the front door. I was overcome by a momentous sense of relief. Elle was safe, and she was back. I was so happy. I realized then that I’d been more worried about Elle than I’d known. There was so much going on that I hadn’t had much time to really stop and think about what it would mean if Lucian hadn’t been able to bring her back. Luckily, I wouldn’t have to worry about that.

“Hello, Redwoods! We’re back from the trenches!” Lucian said proudly as he maneuvered himself further into the house. “It was a long, hard journey to find my forest rose, but with some quick thinking and ingenuity—and my Vanguard sensibilities—I was able to track her down in no time.”

“Elle, I’m so glad you’re back!” Cali said, pulling her into a hug. “We were so worried about you!”

“Thanks for your help, Kira,” I said. “I know this wouldn’t have happened without you.”

I glanced pointedly at Lucian then gave her a knowing look, and she flashed me a weary smile.

“Thanks, Greyson.” She side-eyed Lucian. “Listening to the prince’s account, you wouldn’t know that I was there at all.”

“You know Lucian,” I said under my breath. “He takes his moments wherever he can get them.”

“Yes, and now I know him a little *too* well.” Kira headed for the stairs. “I’ll see you all later, I’m going to bed.”

I turned to Elle and waited for Cali to finish hugging her before I moved in to get my turn.

“I’m so glad you made it back,” I said, pulling her into a tight embrace.

“Me too,” Elle replied, her voice muffled by my chest.

I realized I was still holding her when Lucian cleared his throat and placed a not entirely gentle hand on my shoulder.

“I’m more than happy to help Elle pack,” he said. “So, you can all get back to… whatever it was you were doing.”

I pulled away. “Pack?” I turned to Elle. “But you just got here.”

Elle nodded. “Yes, I know, but I’m not staying.” She turned to the princeling, and I didn’t love the look in her eye. “I’m going to move into the palace with Lucian.”

**Episode 4076**

I noticed the tension in the air right away. I could see it in Greyson’s eyes, in his posture—even in the way he was holding his mouth. He shifted his gaze to Lucian, and I felt a near-overwhelming urge to duck for cover.

“Is this your idea?” Greyson asked Lucian.

“I thought we both agreed,” he said flippantly.

I quickly inserted myself between the two Alphas. “Maybe this is a question that Elle should answer.”

Lucian turned to Elle. “Am I forcing you to come with me?”

She scowled and shook her head. “No.”

“And would I have needed to, anyway?” Lucian asked. “The Vanguard palace is…” He looked around with derision. “Well, it’s a palace. And I’m a prince. I don’t have to convince anyone of anything.”

Greyson snorted and rolled his eyes.

I zeroed in on Greyson, wondering why he was so opposed to the idea given the current circumstances. It wasn’t that I was thrilled by the idea of sending Elle off to Lucian’s demonic palace of horrors, but she was smart enough to decide where she wanted to live. Greyson needed to trust her enough to know that. Plus, it would protect her from the council.

“You let Elle run from the summit all by herself, which was far more dangerous than her staying at the palace,” I said. “At least with Lucian she’ll be protected from the council.”

“And you have my word as a gentleman that she’ll be safe,” Lucian said.

“A gentleman?” Greyson huffed. “Ha.”

Lucian puffed out his chest, indignant. “What is it that you’re objecting to, exactly?”

I looked between the two men, sensing that things were starting to escalate—and desperately wanting to defuse the situation. I wondered if having Elle standing right in the middle of things was only adding to the tension.

“Maybe you should go upstairs and start packing,” I said to her.

Greyson turned on me. “What, are you *encouraging* this?”

I was taken aback. “I’m not trying to encourage it, I’m just saying it makes sense right now. The council is after her, and Lucian’s house is huge.”

Lucian smirked. “You hear that? Huge.”

Greyson shoved a finger in Lucian’s face. “*You* are twisting my words.”

Lucian slapped Greyson’s hand away. “And? Just who do you think you are? A wordsmith?”

Lucian looked fiercer than I’d ever seen him. He was usually pretty good at keeping his cool, but not today.

“I’m her *Alpha*,” Greyson growled.

In a split second, they were fighting. Greyson had two handfuls of Lucian’s silk shirt and was walking him backward to slam him into the wall, but then Lucian stuck out a foot and tripped Greyson, sending him flying headfirst into the console table beside the door and knocking a cloud of keys and mail onto the floor.

Greyson recovered quickly and ran at Lucian, swinging at him with enough force to break his jaw. Lucian stepped out of the way, then caught Greyson with a kick to the shin that Greyson barely reacted to.

“Fuck you!” Greyson snarled as he countered with a swift punch to Lucian’s stomach.

Lucian bent at the waist, coughing and wheezing, but he wasn’t deterred for long.

“You peasant!” he cried out as he ran at Greyson and tackled him to the floor.

I was barely able to think straight as I watched them rolling around on the floor, exchanging blows that would’ve put a normal man’s lights out.

*I have to stop them! But how? My options are pretty limited, since they’re so much stronger and faster than me.* I looked down at my hands. *I could use my magic, but then I might hurt them—and I only want them to stop.*

I ran over and tried to pull Greyson off Lucian. I used every bit of strength I possessed, but Greyson didn’t even seem to notice that I was there.

“Stop it!” I screamed, pulling at Greyson’s shirt until I damn near ripped it off him. “Greyson Evers, get a hold of yourself!”

I grabbed onto his shoulders and threw all my weight back, yanking him off Lucian. Finally, he released his hold, and we both tumbled backward onto the floor.

“I’m going to kill him!” Greyson was shouting.

He was scrambling to break away from me and get back to Lucian, but I got right in his face and shook him hard.

“What the hell is the matter with you?” I shook him again, hoping to clear the crazed look from his eyes as he stared daggers at Lucian.

“You just made a big mistake!” Lucian was mumbling over and over again as he straightened his shirt, which had been torn to shreds in the fight.

Greyson looked completely stunned for a moment, and then he slowly focused on me as if only just realizing that I was there.

I got up from the floor, just as Lucian was climbing to his feet.

“Why don’t you go wait in the living room?” I said, shoving him in that direction before he could object.

Then I grabbed Greyson and dragged him to the study, slamming the door behind us. I plied him with a hard stare and waited for him to explain himself.

He opened his mouth a few times without saying anything before words finally escaped his lips. “I—I don’t know what…”

“You were just *fist fighting* with Lucian!” I snapped. “He may be an ass, but he’s still part of the alliance! We can’t afford to lose the Vanguard!”

“I know!” Greyson shouted. “I know! I just got so…”

“*Jealous?*” I finished for him.

“No, I swear that’s not it. I was just trying to protect Elle!”

“Well, I think you might’ve done the opposite,” I retorted. “You probably scared her off—possibly for good. You were acting like you’d lost your mind!”

I turned around and pressed my fingers against my temples. I could feel the beginnings of a headache coming on. I was trying to make sense of what I’d just witnessed, but the only explanation I could come up with was the sire bond. I wondered if it could be affecting Greyson in the same way it had affected Helix.

*Could it work in reverse and transform the werewolf who turned someone into a raging maniac? If so, that’s a deeply unsettling thought. But that’s the only way I can describe how Greyson was acting—like a maniac. I didn’t even recognize him. It was like he was in a trance.*

“I’m sorry, Cali,” Greyson muttered.

“I appreciate the apology, but maybe you should offer it to Lucian instead.”

“I will,” he said.

He looked so guilty that part of me wanted to hug him—but a bigger part of me was still upset. He’d acted so unlike himself, and I just kept picturing that crazed look in his eye.

*I shouldn’t blame him. It has to be the sire bond at work. It might be beyond Greyson’s power to stop it.*

“I think it’s best that Elle goes with Lucian,” I said bluntly. “Maybe keeping the two of you apart will keep anything like this from happening again.”

Greyson nodded and crossed the space between us to pull me into his arms. “I really am sorry, Cali.”

I looked up at him. “I know you are, and I appreciate that you’re owning up to it.” I kissed him. “Now, how about going out and apologizing to Lucian?”

“Okay,” Greyson said. “But only this one time—and you’d better not tell anyone about it.”

I followed him to the living room and waited, wondering if he was going to bail at the last minute. I was pleased and relieved when he actually apologized, half-hearted as it was.

“Hey, Lucian. My bad,” he said, holding out a hand.

Lucian still looked mad, but he took Greyson’s hand and gave it a hard shake. “Yes, it *was* ‘your bad.’”

Greyson winced and gritted his teeth. I held my breath, but he recovered nicely and managed a crooked smile. “Things just got a little out of hand. Won’t happen again.”

With that, Greyson turned and disappeared into his study.

I left Lucian in the living room and went to check on Elle. She was already half-packed by the time I got to her room—though she still didn’t actually own much. She was sitting on her bed beside her unzipped duffel bag and looking totally depressed.

I sat down beside her and threw an arm across her shoulders. “You good?”

“I don’t know… Is Greyson mad at me?”

“No, he’s not mad. He was just… worried. He got a little emotional, is all.”

Elle looked at me. “So is it okay if I go to Lucian’s?”

I nodded. “Yes, it’s okay—and honestly, it’s probably the best thing to do under the circumstances.”

Elle’s face brightened, and she seemed a little less unhappy as she got up to continue packing. She threw one last pair of socks into her bag before zipping it up with a finality that kind of tugged at my heart strings. I was going to miss her.

I got up and lingered in the doorway as Elle took a deep breath and looked around her room like she was memorizing it.

“Take your time. Come down when you’re ready,” I said.

I was just starting toward the stairs when a horrible buzzing sound cut through the air. I covered my ears, only to realize that it was coming from *inside* my head. Greyson’s voice joined the static, but I couldn’t quite hear him. He was trying to mind link with me, but something was going wrong.

I leaned against the doorjamb, the static growing deafeningly loud. “What the *fuck*?”

**Episode 4077**

**Greyson**

After sulking in the study for a bit, I decided that I wasn’t going to hide out in my own house and emerged to clean up the mess Lucian and I had made of the foyer during our fight. I’d just picked up a set of keys from the floor when Lucian descended on me and started talking a mile a minute. I stared up at him with the usual bored annoyance—but I couldn’t quite hear what he was saying. That wouldn’t have been such a bad thing, except suddenly all I *could* hear was loud static, and it was coming from inside my head.

I stood up and pressed my hands to my ears, looking around for the source. Lucian gave me a strange look but kept on talking, and I dropped my hands to my sides and leaned toward him, still unable to hear a single word.

*Cali, are you hearing this?* I reached out via mind link. I heard a hint of her response, but it was almost completely muffled by white noise.

Cali came running downstairs and bounded over to me, and just like that, the static stopped. Lucian was still talking, clearly unaware that I hadn’t heard him. I doubted he would care, anyway, since he had such a fondness for hearing himself talk.

Cali looked at me, her eyes wide. She held up a finger to make Lucian shut up, then turned her concerned gaze on me. “Did you hear—”

I cut her off with a look and glanced pointedly at Lucian. I didn’t really want to talk about this in front of the princeling. Luckily, Cali got the message.

“Elle—is she good? Is she ready to go?” I asked, changing the subject.

“Uh, yeah! She should be down any minute.” Cali turned to Lucian. “Just so you know, we’re having an alliance meeting at the Samara pack house tomorrow. All the Alphas and Lunas are coming. Be there or be square.” She gave an awkward chuckle.

Lucian looked surprised. “At the Samara *house*? Don’t they all live in tents? How grotesque. The summit was quite enough for me, personally.”

Cali’s face fell for a second before I jumped in to explain. “The Samaras have a pack house now. A real one.”

I felt a little defensive about my brother—which was extremely strange, considering how bad things were between us right now, but I wasn’t about to let Lucian of all people insult Xavier.

Lucian still looked skeptical. “That’s… highly irregular. They can’t possibly have things in order there, yet. There probably won’t be any snacks, and the furniture will probably be dreadful, if there’s even any at all!” Lucian shook his head and looked absolutely horrified. “You’re joking, right?”

“No, we’re not,” I deadpanned.

I secretly wondered if Lucian was confused about why I was holding an alliance meeting at the Samara pack house instead of here at the Redwood pack house, but I reminded myself of what Cali had told me—it didn’t matter where the meeting took place. I was the alliance leader, and there was no reason to be threatened by a simple location change.

Elle appeared with her bag slung over her shoulder. She gave me a long but blank look before turning her attention on Cali and Lucian. “I’m ready to go.”

I looked at her, searching for any hint of unease or fear, any sign that she’d changed her mind, but I didn’t see anything. I supposed that was a good thing. I didn’t want her to feel pressured to go to Lucian’s. If she was going, I wanted it to be her choice, and not just something she was doing to get away from me—though after my little dust-up with Lucian, I wouldn’t have blamed her if that were the case.

“Amazing! Come, come, I can’t wait to get you home and settled,” Lucian said.

He quickly hustled Elle out of the door, almost like he was afraid that I was going to stop her, or that Elle was going to come to her senses and change her mind.

“Bye!” Elle said, throwing a wave over her shoulder as she linked arms with Lucian.

I went out onto the porch and watched them walk out to Lucian’s waiting limousine that he’d called. Something inside me stirred as Lucian opened the door for her and she slid into the car’s dark interior.

“I’ll see you tomorrow at the meeting,” I said tightly to Lucian before I quickly turned and went back into the house.

*The less I see of them, the better. Cali was right. Maybe Elle and I need to maintain a little distance—at least while I figure out what the hell is going on with me.*

“Do you think she’ll be okay?” Cali said, watching through the screen door as Lucian’s limousine coasted down our driveway and then disappeared.

“I have no doubt that Lucian will treat Elle like his queen,” I said, hating the words and believing them, all at the same time.

“I hope so.” Cali shut the door and then turned a bright gaze on me. “I need to finish calling the alliance packs to let them know that the meeting’s going to be at the Samara pack house.” She turned to go, but then paused and turned back to me. “Did you try to mind link with me earlier?”

“Yes, and I wanted to talk to you about that. Did you hear a bunch of loud static?”

Cali nodded. “Yes, that’s exactly what I heard. Any idea what it means?”

“No clue… Maybe it was some kind of a… I don’t know, a glitch or something?” It sounded pretty incredible even as I said it, but I didn’t know how else to explain it. I’d never heard a sound quite like it before—at least not inside my head. It was strange that both Cali and I had heard it at the exact same time. That wasn’t a coincidence, was it?

“We should probably test it out to make sure we even *can* still hear each other,” Cali said. She reached out via mind link. *Can you hear me?*

Her words came through a little on the choppy side, but it was a far cry from the deafening static that had assailed my ears before.

*I hear you*, I replied.

Cali smiled. “Maybe you’re right. It was probably just a glitch.”

She gave me a peck on the lips before heading off and leaving me alone with my thoughts.

*I’ve never heard of a mind link glitch, but I don’t want to make a big deal out of this. At least we can still mind link, which is what I was really worried about.*

I went up to my room and had just settled into bed for a quick nap when Cali knocked and stuck her head in. “Hey. I’ve confirmed the time and new location with all the alliance packs.”

“Thanks,” I said. I finally realized how nice it was that Cali had handled those phone calls. She was really taking this Luna thing seriously, and I was grateful for the help. “I suppose I should send a text to Xavier to let him know, too.”

I got up and pulled out my phone, making sure to keep the message as terse as possible. I didn’t want to invite any extra conversation, and I didn’t want to say the wrong thing and pour any more salt into the gaping wound in our relationship.

I sighed and tossed my phone onto my dresser, not wanting to see Xavier’s reply. I’d spent enough time communicating with people I didn’t particularly like. I remembered my fight with Lucian and cringed internally, wishing that I hadn’t let things get to that point. Lucian was an asshole of epic proportions, but my behavior had been a total overreaction. I had to hope that Lucian wouldn’t blow it out of proportion, or the alliance would be in even more trouble than it was already.

Cali came to stand in front of me. “Are we okay?”

“Yes, of course. Why wouldn’t we be?” I asked.

“Well… Between your strange fight with Lucian and that screwy mind link glitch or whatever it was, I’m a little worried. Something feels a little… *off*. Not that I can even begin to put my finger on what it is.”

I lifted her chin. “Look me in the eye, Cali.”

She did, and it nearly took my breath away. She was just so beautiful, and I was reminded of when I’d first met her—how her eyes had drawn me in while the rest of her had kept me entranced and begging for more.

“I love you, Caliana,” I said firmly. “Nothing is ever going to change that—not static, not stupid fights with Lucian. I’m not going to let the sire bond play any more games with me. I know that our mate bond is far stronger than any transient link that might randomly come into play, and I’m sorry that I did anything to make you feel otherwise.”

I leaned in and kissed her, her soft lips sending currents of electricity through my lips and spiraling through every inch of my body. I scooped her into my arms and laid her gently on the bed, ready to prove exactly how much I meant what I’d just said.

**Episode 4078**

Greyson had me pinned to the bed and was staring down at me, his gaze roving across my face like he was committing me to memory. There was a time when I would’ve been shy or embarrassed if anyone had looked at me the way Greyson was looking at me now, but those days were long gone, and I was enjoying my mate’s attention.

*He loves me. I never doubted that for a second. The sire bond has been on my mind, but that doesn’t matter right now. I want him. I want to feel his hands on my body, his lips on my skin, my tongue against his…*

My craving for him boiling over, I took his head in my hands and pulled him down and into a deep kiss. He released his weight on top of me, and I spread my legs until I could feel his erection pressing against my center. There was something about feeling the proof of his desire and passion for me that sent me into a frenzy, and I felt a sudden, intense need to have him inside me.

I reached down and tugged his pants open, then pushed them down his legs. I squirmed out of my own pants and yanked off my panties while Greyson kept his mouth pressed to mine, his tongue plunging in and out in a slow rhythm.

“I love you so much, Cali. You’re everything to me,” he said, his voice choked with passion.

He rose onto his knees and pulled off his shirt, and I marveled at the etched muscle of his broad chest. I reached up and ran my fingers over it, then gasped when he entered me with a smooth thrust that I hadn’t seen coming.

He lifted my legs over his shoulders and, still on his knees, plied me with slow, languid thrusts, his strong thighs smacking against mine in a delicious rhythm that rocked my body against the plush softness of the bed.

The overwhelming need to take control overcame me. I needed to show him how much I wanted him, how much pleasure I could bring him. I slipped my legs off his shoulders and pressed my feet against the bed to brace myself well enough to guide our pace. Then I bucked my hips against him, his shaft swirling and retreating and plunging inside me according to the movements of my hips. Greyson released a sharp breath and threw his head back, his eyes closed, the muscles in his neck and arms flexing as he moved to meet my thrusts. He braced his hands on my knees and took his bottom lip between his teeth, sighs of pleasure escaping his mouth as I surged against him.

I rose up onto my elbows and slid myself smoothly up and down his shaft; fast then slow, edging him closer and closer to his climax while my own waited on the brink.

“*Fuck*,” he breathed, collapsing on top of me. “You feel so fucking good.”

Greyson’s strong hands gripped my hips, and he took control again. I dropped my hands onto the bed and surrendered myself to him as he jerked his hips against mine. The nearness of his climax turned his thrusts frantic and hard, his pelvic bone sliding against my clit, one hand kneading my breasts while the other kept him braced on the bed.

“Cali, *fuck*,” he groaned as his hips jerked against me, the surge of his climax causing both our bodies to vibrate.

I hadn’t come yet, and, sensing this, he pulled out, slid lower on the bed, and pressed his lips and tongue against the quivering folds between my legs. He slid one finger inside me, and then the other, and then he removed them both and slid his tongue in to replace them.

Then it happened. My orgasm built up, the sensation taking me over. Eagerly, my hips jerked against his face as I came so hard that I lost all sense of time and space.

When I opened my eyes, I was in his arms, and seconds later, I drifted off to sleep.

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“This is one of my favorite songs,” I said, turning the dial to increase the volume on the radio.

Greyson gave me a look. “Sorry to tell you this, but this song is awful. It’s not quite rap, not quite rock, not quite good.”

I giggled. “I didn’t say it was *good*, I just said I liked it. Thanks for driving, by the way. I would’ve done it myself, but my car is still in the shop. They haven’t been able to find the right part. It’s on backorder or something.”

Greyson glanced at me. “No problem.” His expression grew serious. “I know I don’t have to remind you not to talk about Elle during the meeting.”

I nodded. “Agreed. Anyone at the meeting could tell the council that she’s with the Vanguards.”

“Even Porter,” Greyson added.

Porter was the one who’d told us that the council was after Elle, but that didn’t mean he’d be supportive of the Redwoods helping her escape. I was beginning to understand the complexities of being in an alliance. On paper, it seemed simple, but in reality, it was very complicated.

“Remind me who’s coming?” Greyson asked. “Did we get RSVPs from everyone?”

“I spoke to the Alphas and left messages for a few others. I have a good feeling about this. We’re not at the summit anymore, where I kind of had a hard time fitting in.”

Greyson looked at me. “Is it going to be distracting? That the meeting is taking place at the new Samara pack house?”

I looked away. I’d been trying to block that detail out of my mind, but that was about to become a useless effort.

“It won’t be easy,” I said, deciding to be honest with my mate. “But nothing about this situation has been easy so far. Still, given what’s at stake, I’m not about to let it bother me.”

“But it’s okay if it does bother you, Cali. I’d be surprised if it didn’t.”

I thought that over, knowing that he was right. But still… “I’m attending this meeting as Luna—or at least *like* a Luna. I can’t afford to be distracted.”

As soon as the new Samara house came into view, my stomach twisted into knots. It had completely popped up overnight. It looked exactly the same, like it had never been burned down to begin with during the battle with Letifer and Silas… Then my gaze fell to who was waiting for our arrival. Xavier was waiting on the porch with Ava, and they looked like a couple straight out of a Rockwell painting—only a lot better-looking.

Off to the side, I spotted Knox behind the wheel of a rusty pickup truck, towing his Airstream while a couple of Samaras directed him. They melted into panic and started waving their hands wildly to get him to stop, just before Knox rammed the Airstream into a tree.

Knox immediately hopped out of the car and started yelling at his helpers as he went to assess the damage.

Greyson sighed. “Here’s hoping that’s not an omen.”

We parked the car, and Greyson came around to open the door for me. He took my hand as we walked up the path to the Samara pack house. I looked at Greyson, wondering if he’d taken my hand to give me confidence, or if he was just doing it to rub our relationship in Xavier’s face. I supposed I didn’t mind either way.

We climbed up onto the porch, and an awkward silence passed between the four of us before Ava finally broke the tension.

“We’re still waiting on the Aspen pack,” she said. “Lucian insisted.”

I nodded. “Good to know.”

I felt a twinge of jealousy when I saw how Ava’s hand was resting easily on Xavier’s shoulder. She looked so comfortable, so familiar, so… *happy*. It was in moments like these that I got lost in disbelief at how things had turned out. Never in a million years had I imagined that I would see Xavier and Ava together like this. It was still kind of blowing my mind.

I took Greyson’s hand and pulled his arm across my shoulders. His touch was comforting, and I even got a bit of a kick out of the way Xavier watched the movement with the slightest hint of distaste tugging at the corners of his mouth.

*He still cares. He’s doing everything in his power to show that he doesn’t, but he cares. He can’t hide it, no matter how hard he tries.*

Xavier glanced at me and then cleared his throat. “We don’t have any furniture yet, so we’ll have to sit on the floor.”

Greyson’s gaze found mine, and I could tell he was about to laugh. I smacked him on the arm, and he cleared his throat—did I detect a muffled laugh in there?—and nodded. “Excellent.”

As soon as we entered the house, my head began to pound. It hit me all at once that this was Xavier’s new life—his new pack, his new home, and his new mate.

*Technically, Ava’s not a* new *mate, but she might as well be.*

A deep sadness fell over me just as a car came roaring up. The driver’s side door flew open before the car had even come to a complete stop, and Paige jumped out, covered in blood and screaming, “We were ambushed! We need help!”

**Episode 4079**

**Xavier**

I kept stealing glances at Cali. I just couldn’t help myself. I hated seeing her with Greyson, and I hated that she was entering my house as a guest and not as the rightful occupant. I pushed all that away, knowing that now wasn’t the time to wallow in how wrong this felt.

We all turned to watch as Paige came squealing up, barely letting her car roll to a stop before she was climbing out and screaming about being ambushed. And just like that, all hell broke loose.

I leapt off the porch to join Greyson and Cali, who were busy trying to calm Paige down. In the confusion, I couldn’t tell if she was seriously injured or not. There was blood everywhere, but only some of it appeared to be hers.

Ava ran over to join us. “Tell us what happened!”

Paige took in gulps of air. “D-Duke and I were driving to the meeting when one of our tires blew out.”

I glanced at the tires. The front right one was shredded to ribbons.

“Duke got out to check it, and then we were attacked!” Paige continued. She glanced up the dirt road behind her. “He’s fighting them right now. He needs your help!” She started pulling on Greyson’s arm. “Come on!”

I grabbed her. “Where? Where is he?”

Paige pointed. “About a mile back!”

That was all I needed to hear.

“Ava, go get the rest of the pack!” I shouted. Then, without another moment of hesitation, I shifted and took off. I felt responsible for this, since it was happening in Samara territory. Paige hadn’t actually said who’d ambushed them, but there was no doubt in my mind that it was the Bitterfangs or their allies.

I’d been running for a while before I realized that Greyson had fallen into step beside me. I wasn’t bothered by this. Greyson was an asshole—a *huge* asshole—but he was a good fighter.

I could hear the sounds of a fight up ahead, and I smelled blood and the scent of unfamiliar werewolves. The fact that there was still fighting was a good sign. It meant that Duke was still alive.

I realized then that I should’ve asked Paige how many wolves had ambushed them. If we were about to run into ten or fifteen Bitterfangs, that might pose a problem. Greyson and I were good, but we weren’t a match for five times as many Bitterfangs. Even with help coming our way, that would still be a lot to handle.

*Should we go straight in shoulder to shoulder, or should we spit up and come in from the flanks?* Greyson asked me.

I was surprised that my brother was asking, for once. He was usually one to just bark orders and wait for everyone to fall into line.

*We should go straight in*, I replied. *It might make them ease off Duke and buy him some time—which he might really need, depending on what state he’s in.*

*Got it*, Greyson said.

Moving in perfect sync, we pressed ahead, just as Mace, his second Spencer, and Ava came up behind us.

*Paige said that there were at least five, maybe six!* Ava said.

I couldn’t help but feel a swell of pride that my Luna had had the presence of mind to ask Paige how many wolves we were up against. Really, I couldn’t have picked a better Luna. She was smart, had good instincts, and was an amazing fighter.

We burst out of the woods and onto the dirt road that led back up to the pack house. Duke was right in the thick of things, snarling and covered in blood. He was limping a bit and looked absolutely exhausted, and there was telling how much longer he’d be able to keep fighting.

He was surrounded by five wolves, and was snarling and lunging out at them to keep them at bay. If he made one wrong move, they’d pile onto him and overwhelm him in seconds.

I spotted a dead wolf bleeding on the ground nearby, then shifted my attention back to the fight. I let out a long, loud howl to distract the attacking wolves, hoping to let Duke know that he wasn’t alone anymore in the process.

Taking the bait, the five wolves shifted their focus in our direction and charged.

I was the first to make contact. I shot after a large wolf that was headed straight for Ava, slamming into him and sending him tumbling head over tail, skidding down the dirt road in a cloud of dust and gravel.

Greyson and Ava moved so that they were back-to-back and took on a wolf who was a little smaller than the one that I’d just plowed into. Mace was snarling as he and Spencer faced off with a third wolf. We hadn’t quite evened the numbers, but we were getting there.

The fight quickly shot into overdrive as wolf faced off against wolf. My target had recovered and lunged at me, sinking his teeth into my leg and wrenching me to the ground before speeding off and away, only to come at me again from an entirely different angle. On the ground and trying to recover, I watched the other wolves do the same, attacking Ava, Mace, and Greyson viciously before speeding off to change their approach and sow confusion about which direction they’d be coming from next.

*They’re doing it again. It’s the same style of fighting that almost got our asses handed to us on the way back from the summit.*

I did my best to remain focused and not let their unorthodox methods distract me. I had to keep a cool head. The huge wolf came barreling toward me again with his head low and his gaze fixed on the leg he’d wounded last time. He was fast, but I was faster. I ducked out of his way and managed to rip into his side as he raced by. He lost his footing and slid to the ground. Still healing, I took a moment to survey the rest of the battlefield.

Blood and fur were flying in every direction, and I let out a howl of triumph as I watched Ava make the first kill by tearing savagely into one of the wolves’ necks. When he was dead, she flung him into the woods.

*Way to go*, I told her.

I’d barely gotten the words out before I was knocked to the ground and well on my way to becoming a corpse myself as a wolf pinned me to the ground and went for my neck.

Out of nowhere, Greyson slammed into the wolf, freeing me. Wasting no time, I leapt to my feet, jumped onto the wolf’s back, and ripped a chunk of flesh from the back of his neck. Together, Greyson and I took the wolf down easily, and my brother wasted no time ripping out his throat.

*Like I said, my brother is an awful person but an amazing fighter. It’s nice to be able to depend on him for* something*.*

I spat out a glob of blood and did a quick head count. We’d started off with five enemy wolves, and now there were three. The odds had shifted in our favor. Greyson sped off to help Duke, who wasn’t looking too good. His limp had worsened, and he was barely holding his own against one of the large wolves, who was making it his mission to keep ripping into Duke’s already wounded leg.

*We need to get him the hell out of here*, Greyson said to me.

*On it*, I replied. I turned to Ava, who was circling two of the three remaining wolves, both of whom were both locked in a fierce scuffle with Mace. *Ava, grab Duke and get him the hell out of here.*

Ava turned her attention to me, hesitating. I knew that she didn’t want to leave the fight.

*Yes, she’s my Luna, and yes, she’s a very skilled fighter, but she’s also my mate. She can hold her own and I know that, but that doesn’t mean that I want her in the thick of things, risking her life like this. Not when I can’t be sure that I can protect her.*

Finally, Ava took off after Duke, and I protected them both from the remaining wolves while Duke shifted and struggled to climb onto Ava’s back. I winced as I watched him cling to Ava for dear life. He looked even worse in human form, and I was worried that he was at the point where he wouldn’t be able to heal quickly enough to recover from his many wounds.

I rushed over and helped nudge him onto Ava’s back.

*Let’s hope he makes it back okay*, I mind linked to Ava.

*He’s in a really bad way*, she said.

I caught sight of Greyson and Mace, who were teaming up against one of the wolves and backing him into a line of trees.

*Go!* I said to Ava.

She took off, drawing the attention of one of the wolves, who immediately sprinted after her. I chased after him, determined to kill him before he could get any closer to Ava, who was being forced to slow her pace so that Duke didn’t bounce right off her back.

I was crossing the road when I heard the roar of an engine. My heart pounding, I whipped around and saw a car barreling straight toward me.

**Episode 4080**

My eyes went wide as Xavier dashed out in front of the car. I blared the horn and slammed on the brakes, then wrenched the wheel to the left, swerving wildly to avoid hitting him. I lost control and flew off the road in a crescendo of squealing tires and grinding metal, colliding violently with a tree. The airbag exploded out of the steering wheel and I slammed into it, stars bursting in my vision.

My head throbbing, I watched in a red tinged haze as Xavier, now in human form, yanked the car door open and reached for me.

*Am I dreaming? Is this really happening? Is Xavier really saving me right now?*

Xavier gently pulled me free of the wreckage, and I fell against him.

My head still pounding but my vision clearing, I looked up at him to see him looking at me with fear in his eyes. “Are you okay, Cali? Are you hurt? How’s your head?”

I gulped in a large breath of air. He was so close, and I felt an overwhelming desire to kiss him, but I knew that would be wrong. I pulled away from him and tried to stand on my own two feet, but I faltered a bit before Xavier placed a gentle hand on my back and pulled me back into his arms.

“Take it easy, Cali,” he said. “That was quite a crash. Relax, it’s okay. Everything’s going to be okay.”

I could hear the fight raging on around me, and I suddenly remembered everything. “What happened to the wolf who was chasing Duke and Ava?”

Everything had happened so fast that I was only just now starting to piece together what had happened just before the crash.

Xavier threw a grim glance at the side of the car. “Yeah, you don’t have to worry about him.”

I knew what I would see, but I looked anyway. I couldn’t help it. I cringed at the sight of the dead werewolf pinned between the ruined car and the tree. He was a bloody, mangled mess. A wave of nausea overtook me, and I turned away and threw up.

Xavier kept holding me, and even pulled my hair out of the way. “It’s okay, Cali. It’s okay.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, when I finally had nothing left to throw up. “What—”

“You swerved to keep from hitting me, then you rammed right into the werewolf and—”

“No,” I interrupted. “That’s not what I mean. Why are you being so nice to me?”

Xavier opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. There was a flash of pain in his eyes before his gaze hardened.

“We’re in an alliance,” he said, his voice devoid of emotion. “And we need you. We can’t have you out of commission because of some stupid car crash. I just wanted to make sure that you were okay and that you hadn’t suffered any serious injuries.”

I was stunned. “So, you’re only being nice to me because of the alliance?”

My world was already in disarray, and now it felt like it was crashing down around me all over again.

Xavier pulled away from me and I instantly felt the crushing absence of his touch. “I’m going to check on the others,” he said. “You good to stand on your own?”

I nodded and Xavier left me, not even bothering to look back. I felt like I’d been gut punched.

*Is that really his explanation? That I’m a part of the alliance, and that’s the only reason why he was worried about me? The only reason why he rushed to pull me out of the car? How could he stop caring for me so quickly? So completely?*

I was starting to feel nauseous again. The air was thick with smoke from the ruined car, and the smell of blood somehow overtook even that. I staggered away from the wreckage, but I felt too weak to move and soon, I crumpled to the ground.

I felt weaker than I ever had before. Not because of the wreck, not because I wasn’t strong, but because of Xavier. I’d thought for a moment that whatever had happened between us—whatever had torn us apart—had disappeared, or lost all importance. He’d rushed over to help me, to make sure that I was okay, and it had felt like old times. I’d thought that he’d finally come to his senses, that we’d be able to put all this strangeness behind us and get back to normal.

*But it wasn’t like old times at all. It was just an illusion. I’m just part of the alliance—that’s what he said. That was the only reason why he felt any need to help me.*

But deep down, I just didn’t believe that. I’d seen something in his eyes—the same thing I’d seen at the summit, right before he’d kissed me. Or maybe I’d imagined it, hoping that there was *something* in the new emptiness that filled his eyes every time he looked at me. I’d really hoped that his feelings for me had resurfaced, somehow.

*How stupid can I be? How many times does he have to prove that he doesn’t give a shit about me anymore? Why can’t I get that into my head?*

And just to top everything off, I was crying on the ground in the middle of a werewolf fight. What kind of Luna did that make me? I couldn’t imagine Ava or Joss or Rowena doing that. They’d be up and fighting by their Alpha’s side, not crying over someone who couldn’t care less about them.

I staggered to my feet, just as Greyson came running over. He was bloodied and breathing hard, and I could see a smattering of cuts and bruises across his face, but they were already healing. I was relieved to see that he wasn’t badly injured.

He rested his hands gently on my shoulders and looked me over. “Are you hurt?”

He glanced at the smoking vehicle behind me.

I shook my head. “No, I’m not hurt. I hit my head, but the airbag took the brunt of that, luckily.” I let out a half-sob, half-sigh. “I’m just upset.”

I gestured at the dead werewolf pinned between the car and the tree, and Greyson grimaced. “I’m sorry you had to see that, Cali.”

“You shouldn’t be. We’re about to be in a war. There’s going to be plenty more of that kind of thing, I’m sure. I’m going to have to get used to it.” Though deep down, I hoped that I never did. I didn’t want to become desensitized to violence and blood and gore.

“Yes, but don’t feel like you have to get used to seeing death and blood and all that, Cali,” Greyson said. “With any luck, this whole thing will be over quickly, and we won’t have to deal with much more of this.”

I could hear the hope in Greyson’s voice, but I could also tell that he wasn’t quite convinced that things were going to turn out that way. He took my hand and led me toward the others.

“I was hoping to capture one of the werewolves so we could question them, but the last one bit down on a silver capsule before I could stop him.” Greyson shook his head in disgust. “Now *that* was brutal to watch. I’ve seen a lot of stuff, Cali, but there are some things I’ll never get used to.”

Xavier was talking to Mace as we approached, but my attention was drawn to the blood splattered all over the place. It was an awful sight. I tore my gaze away from it and, in the distance, spotted the Samara pack running toward us.

“You can send them back,” Greyson said to Xavier wearily. “The fight is over.”

Xavier scowled at Greyson but held up his hand, signaling for the pack to hold up. He headed toward them.

“Game over, guys!” he barked. “We’ve got it under control. Be a little quicker on the uptake next time!”

“Hey, Greyson, can I ask you something?” Mace said.

Greyson turned to me. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

I nodded before remembering that I’d left my phone in the car. Yet another stupid move. “I’m good, I just need to grab my phone.”

“Okay, I’ll be here,” Greyson said.

I nodded and started toward the car, doing everything in my power not to look at the mangled werewolf corpse.

*No, I don’t think I’ll ever get used to seeing stuff like this. And even though we’re at war, I hope I never lay eyes on this kind of carnage again. Luna or not, it’s not something I want as a normal part of my life… Though I guess in many ways, it already is.*

I leaned into the car to search for my phone. In no time at all, I was feeling overwhelmed by the thick smoke and the heavy scent of death and blood in the air.

I’d just brushed my phone with my fingertips when I was suddenly ripped from the car and thrown to the ground—moments before the car exploded.

**Episode 4081**

Searing heat engulfed me, and smoke made my lungs burn with every breath. I lay on the ground, shaking, hurting all over. My phone was in my palm as I held onto it for dear life—I had no idea how I’d managed to grab it before the explosion.

*There was… an actual explosion! What the* hell*?*

I pushed up onto my hands and knees and started to crawl away from the fire that devoured the car behind me. This was fine, right? Totally. This would be fine… as long as I figured out which way I needed to go. I was unable to see with all the smoke around me.

“Greys—”

I couldn’t even finish his name before I started choking on the smoke. Pulling at the collar of my shirt, I placed it over my nose. At the same time, I felt and heard the seams rip—the fabric was singed, and it felt as if it was falling apart. My eyes were watering. My breathing was labored, and the last time I’d had to deal with so much fire, Seluna was around.

*Cali! Where—Cali—find—*

Greyson’s voice was staticky in my head. I fought to mind link him back to tell him that I was okay, but when I managed, his only reply was to say my name, over and over. Like a broken record. He’d clearly not heard me, and for a brief moment there, panic broke out inside me. I gritted my teeth together, digging my nails into the dirt as I kept on inching away from the car.

*I sure as hell hope I’m going in the right direction! Greyson! Can you hear me? Grey—*

I never finished the thought. Two strong arms came out of nowhere and grabbed me, picking me up. If I could breathe better, I’d start sobbing. Greyson had found me! I couldn’t see his face through the smoke, but I could feel his strength. I was overwhelmed by the certainty that he was there for me—that he would always be there for me.

His voice was rough, gruff and low, when he whispered in my ear, “Are you okay? I got you…”

I could only nod as his arms wrapped around my middle. He scooped me up bridal style, and I buried my face in his neck, soaking up his warmth and the sense of safety he could make me feel. I shouldn’t have worried. With the way Greyson and I were connected, I should have known that he would find me easily. Through thick and thin, he’d always stick by me, and I would do the same for him. I squeezed my eyes shut, focused on my breathing, and I reminded myself what I’d already known.

*Greyson and I are meant to be…*

Finally, when we were far away from the car, the air started clearing. I could breathe better, and I reached up to wipe at my stinging eyes. At the movement, the arms around me tightened.

“Cali!” I looked up and saw Greyson ahead, his expression panicked, his arms reaching out for me.

*Wait a second… If Greyson’s over there, who—*

“Don’t worry, I got her,” Xavier said.

I twisted around in shock—Xavier was the one who was holding me. Xavier was the one who’d saved me, and as the realization landed, my already dry throat closed up. The shock was washed over by another feeling that I knew all too well when it came to him.

Longing.

Xavier’s face was unreadable, but the way he held me felt just as right as it used to. My body knew him, hands tightening around his neck before I slid them down his chest. My breath caught when I realized his skin was bare. His heart pounded underneath my palm, and the sudden urge to bury my face in his neck and sob hit me hard.

*Get away from him, Cali! He’s trouble!*

I hated admitting it to myself, but I’d missed this so much.

“Cali! Are you hurt?” Greyson’s voice boomed through my reverie, and my focus returned, razor sharp. Reality came crashing down.

*We’re not alone, and Xavier is not my mate anymore. He’s not mine. I have to let him—*

“Go,” I choked out, my voice raspy from the smoke. Pushing against him, I said, “Let me go, I’m fine.”

I didn’t dare look at Xavier’s face as he put me down. In the same second, Greyson was there, his grip on me tight when he pulled me close. His eyes were wild as he patted me down, checking for injuries, his voice breathless as he spoke.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt anywhere? I’m so sorry—I tried to get there first, but the fender flew at me and knocked me back, I tried to mind link you, but—”

“I’m fine,” I rasped, “I’m really sorry for the car, it just blew up and—”

“I don’t give a fuck about the car, Cali,” Greyson said hoarsely, pulling me into a hug. “Are you sure you’re okay?” he breathed in my ear.

I clung to him and felt his warmth envelope me. I couldn’t believe I’d thought Xavier was Greyson.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

The two of them were so different—Xavier’s grip had bordered on painful, like he’d forgotten how to touch me. Greyson traced my back tenderly, like he was afraid I’d break. Only when I said, “I’m okay, I promise,” did his grasp become fiercer. He kissed the top of my head, breathing harshly.

“Did anyone else get hurt?” I asked.

He swallowed hard. “You were the closest to the blast. Everyone else was clear. Just the same injuries from the fight.”

“… I’m all right.” Xavier’s voice came from behind me, piercing. I turned around to see Ava cupping his face before putting her forehead to his. Jealousy twisted in my gut. I’d been trying so hard not to think of them together and to be happy with Greyson. But being in Xavier’s embrace again had torn down the flimsy wall I’d built around my heart.

*Will this pain ever heal? Am I destined to suffer like this forever and detest myself for it?*

The answer never came.

“Take Duke back to the pack house,” Xavier told Ava.

She nodded. “I’ll see you soon.”

“I’ll come with you!” Paige called, following Ava. At the same time, Xavier headed back to the car.

I felt Greyson stiffen against me. “What are you doing? There could be another explosion!”

“I doubt it,” Xavier called over his shoulder. “It’s already blown up. It was weird how it happened, actually—cars don’t just go up in flames like that.”

Greyson frowned, breaking our embrace. Still holding my hand, he asked Xavier, “What do you mean? Was there a gas leak?”

Xavier shook his head. “I’m not smelling that much gas. Hitting a wolf wouldn’t cause that kind of explosion. This feels deliberate.”

Greyson closed his eyes for a moment, cursing under his breath before he said, “You’re right.”

My heart went cold. “Wait, does this mean … you think someone—what, put a *bomb* in your car?”

Greyson took a deep breath, staring at me. “Can you tell me what actually happened in the crash?”

“I slammed on the brakes when Xavier ran in front of me,” I said.

From a few feet away, Xavier spoke up. “I didn’t mean for it to happen. My attention was pretty divided…”

“That doesn’t matter,” Greyson said curtly before turning to me again. “Keep going.”

“I don’t know—it all happened really fast,” I said.

“Did the brakes feel funny or anything?” Greyson asked.

I frowned, trying to recall. Did something feel wrong, or was my memory playing tricks on me after I almost hit Xavier?

“I’m not sure,” I admitted to Greyson. I looked over at Xavier—he’d used a blanket Greyson had had in the trunk to put out the last of the fire, and the smoke had eased up.

“What are you looking for?” I asked him. I tried to keep my voice normal. I tried to stop my eyes from traveling down the expanse of his muscular back, but I failed.

“If this wasn’t a normal car accident, I should be able to smell a different combustible agent,” he said. He wasn’t looking at me, but at least he’d just saved me. And he wasn’t being an asshole at the moment. Though, who knew when that would change?

*The bar is hell, isn’t it?*

“Stay here, okay?” Greyson kissed my cheek before letting go of my hand. He joined Xavier in the wreckage, and seeing the two of them working together made my heart ache. I missed having them both in my life so badly.

“This smells wrong,” Greyson said, bending to inspect the engine. “It was sabotage—they were trying to kill whoever drove this car.”

My heart hammered in my chest. “Which is usually you…”

“Or any of the Redwood pack,” Greyson conceded.

Xavier’s jaw clenched. “So, they’re going to fight dirtier than we thought.”

Greyson stood up, his eyes flashing with anger and frustration. “And we have no idea what else they might have tampered with.” He turned to Xavier. “We’re going to have to check everything.”

**Episode 4082**

**Xavier**

I never thought I would be thankful for not having more stuff lying around. There was a limited amount of things to tamper with when it came to the Samara pack. There was no furniture or central heating system in the packhouse for me to get paranoid about potentially blowing up. So at least there was that.

Standing up from the wreckage, I kicked the car. I hated that Cali was almost hurt by this fucked-up war. If this had been my call, I would—

No.

I stopped that line of thought.

This wasn’t my call. I wasn’t her Alpha, and I couldn’t act like her mate. But it had felt so good to hold her in my arms again. I could feel her approaching right now, looking at me. Her gaze burned my skin, and I had to force myself not to meet her eyes. Any type of connection that still existed between us made everything hurt even more.

Which was exactly what Adéluce wanted.

But even though Adéluce had stopped me from being Cali’s true mate, she couldn’t change some things. Like the way Cali reacted to my touch. Like the fact that I had just saved her life again—easily—because she mattered more to me than anything.

I would take whatever role I could—especially if I got to be Cali’s savior.

I went rigid when I felt her soft hand on my arm. She had come closer to me while I’d been lost in thought. My skin prickled where she touched, but I didn’t move, didn’t react. She withdrew, clearing her throat before she said, “Thank you for saving me.”

I wanted to pick her up again and hold her close so badly. But I knew I couldn’t. So, I settled—pathetically—for patting her hand in the most awkward way possible. “Don’t mention it.”

*Really*. *Don’t mention it. I can’t fucking handle it.*

I took a couple of steps away from her, just to get myself under control before I did something nuts—like grab her and kiss her. Looking up at Greyson, I said, “I wasn’t about to let the Redwood Luna die.”

Greyson’s eyes were sharp on me, his gaze a glare. What he said, though, was, “I’m glad someone was there to grab Cali.”

I knew he meant that.

“We should all get back to the Samara pack house,” Mace said. He’d approached a moment ago. He wasn’t injured, which was good. Staring at me, he said, “This is escalating faster than we’d anticipated.”

No shit.

“Are you feeling okay enough to get on my back?” Greyson asked Cali in a calm voice. Like he was afraid she’d break. She nodded, and he kissed her cheek. I didn’t want to watch, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away when he shifted, and she climbed on his back. She clung to his wolf, her fingers sliding through his thick fur. I fucking hated the intimacy of the moment.

Turning away from them both, I shifted and started racing to the Samara pack house.

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When we got there, Ava was standing on the front porch. She’d clearly been waiting for us.

“Hey,” I said after shifting back to human. “All good?”

“Yeah,” Ava said curtly. Her gaze flickered over me. Earlier, she’d been worried about me being hurt after I’d stumbled out of the smoke and fire. But now, there was an edge to her that I couldn’t interpret.

*Did anything happen on your way back here?* I mind linked.

Ava frowned at me. *No. Everything was fine*.

I frowned back. *Then why do you look like someone killed your favorite pet?*

Ava’s expression immediately smoothed out—as if she hadn’t even realized she seemed upset.

“I’m fine,” she said curtly, in a low voice. “Everything’s fine. Let’s just start this meeting.”

I stared at her. I wanted to push. I wanted to know what was wrong and fix it for her, because she was my mate, and my Luna, and my wolf wanted her to be happy. He needed that so badly I could taste it. But I remembered Adéluce’s warning.

I had to start pushing Ava away, or else she’d have the same fate as Cali. Or worse.

*Fine*, I mind linked. *Whatever.*

Deliberately, I ignored the hurt in Ava’s eyes when I pushed past her to go inside. I ignored the way my wolf whined for me to go talk to her as well. The rest of the Alphas and Lunas were already waiting in the empty living room, pacing around.

Paige was sitting on the hardwood floor with Duke’s head in her lap. She stroked his face. He was wounded, but he seemed like he’d be okay. I was glad, because the last thing we needed was such an important casualty so early on in the game.

Mace, Spencer, Greyson, Cali, and Ava followed me into the room. Porter started talking the moment he spotted us. “Rowena and I only have a short amount of time; we were just attacked.”

“How’s your pack?” Greyson asked.

“Everyone is doing okay, but we’ll need to get back quickly,” Porter said.

I opened my mouth to speak, but Greyson beat me to it. “That’s fine. We called this meeting to deal with these ambushes that are happening.”

I glared at my brother. Why the fuck did he think he was in charge here? *Again?* This was the Samara pack house, not the Redwood. Not everything was fucking his.

“We were supposed to wait for the Ironwoods,” I said, butting in before Greyson could continue, “but it doesn’t seem like they’ll be attending. So we can go ahead and get started.”

Greyson shot me an annoyed look. He clearly didn’t like a taste of his own medicine, but that sounded like a problem he would have to accept. Because I had no intention of letting him run this show as if he were the fucking king of the hour.

When I smiled at him, his expression turned cold.

The fucker could stay mad for all I cared.

“What are we going to do about this?” Mace asked, arms crossed over his chest. “How do we stop fights we don’t know are coming?”

“It’s obvious that Malakai has experience with war tactics. So we need information,” Greyson said. “We don’t know how many Bitterfangs there are, and we don’t know what packs have allied themselves with Malakai.”

“We know the Northwinds have probably joined him,” Cali spoke up. I turned to her—she’d gotten rid of her burned, torn-up shirt, and someone had given her a sweater to cover up.

“We should consider the possibility that the Ironwoods have also joined the Bitterfangs,” Ava said. I dragged my attention away from Cali and turned to her. She seemed serious, in control, as she looked among the other Alphas. “And who knows what other packs?”

“That’s what we need to find out,” Greyson said. “We need to have a grasp on their numbers.”

“After their every attack,” I said, “those wolves have a destination to go back to. We find that destination, we find our answers.”

Greyson’s gaze flickered to me. I expected him to say something like a smartass, but instead he just gave me a short nod. My chest felt funny at the acknowledgement. Did I just feel good because Greyson agreed with me? No. That was bullshit. I didn’t need my older brother’s validation.

“The Samara pack can go on a scouting mission,” I went on, looking at the others. “We can gather information.”

Mace nodded, glancing at Ava. “The Samaras have always done well with scouting.”

Porter eyed Ava as well. “I’ve heard rumors about your Luna being good at getting information without making a fuss.”

Ava raised her eyebrows. “Are you calling me sneaky?”

“It’s a compliment,” Rowena said wryly.

“The Samaras are good scouts, but they don’t have enough pack members that could take charge in the event of a mission going south,” Greyson spoke up. He looked between Ava and me. “You can’t afford any casualties.”

My teeth gritted together. Fucking Greyson—what the fuck did he know? I opened my mouth to speak, but the words were cut short. Because I realized that I wasn’t sure if I was mad at Greyson being a dick, or at the fact that Greyson wasn’t wrong. He had a bunch of people that could take charge if shit hit the fan, in the event that he was injured. Other than Rishika, there was Jay, Ravi, Mrs. Smith, Kira, Artemis. Even Mikah or Adair, both of whom were still sticking around from what I’d heard. Every one of them were solid options.

In my pack, Ava was the strongest link. And I couldn’t afford to send her off anywhere right now. Or any other of my people—we were a small pack, and I couldn’t let anyone get hurt or injured.

But then, suddenly, a thought occurred to me.

And now I knew exactly where I could turn to get more members for my pack.

**Episode 4083**

**Greyson**

I hadn’t wanted to call Xavier out in the middle of this meeting—mostly because he was a grumpy little bitch who got mad easily—but I knew that I was right about this. The Samaras were not the pack to handle this scouting mission. They were just not ready as a whole.

“*Fine*,” Xavier told me with a glare. “Just make sure to find the Bitterfang camp. Or lair or whatever—their people are definitely hiding somewhere if they can just drop by unannounced all the time.”

Xavier had seen the light and didn’t argue for the sake of arguing. For a moment there, I contemplated asking if he had a fever. Then I decided to brush it off and move along, before he changed his mind.

“I think it should be me and Rishika on this mission, plus one other Alpha and second, so that if we have to make any calls in the field, we can,” I said.

Porter and Mace looked at each other. Mace said, “Conveniently, my second is already here. It should be Greyson, Rishika, Spencer, and myself.”

Porter nodded, and I said, “That sounds good.”

“Whoever is going should go soon, before there are more attacks,” Xavier said.

Mace nodded. I was still processing the fact that Xavier hadn’t been difficult, but I made sure not to show it. “I’ll text Rishika to come meet us,” I said. “We can leave as soon as she arrives—I don’t think it’ll take her long.”

“It’s settled, then,” Paige spoke up. I turned to look at her—she seemed calm, but her eyes were puffy. She’d been crying. Duke seemed much better now, though. The color was coming back to his face. In a throaty voice, he said, “I hear you guys saved my ass. Thanks for that. The Aspen pack appreciates it.”

I was ready to say it was nothing, that we were all together in this, when Xavier beat me to it. But he didn’t utter anything that resembled “you’re welcome.” Instead, he said, “Just remember that when this Bitterfang stuff explodes in our faces.”

Mace rolled his eyes. At the same time, Xavier hissed, “Ow!”

Ava had just elbowed him in the side. A good line of action, really, because Xavier didn’t need to remind an already injured man that he could die. But at the same time, as I looked at Xavier and Ava and their casual bickering, I couldn’t believe it. I *still* couldn’t believe they were together.

Nevertheless, the way he’d held Cali earlier told a different story.

But I wasn’t going to think about any of that right now.

“Do we need to make a more detailed plan?” Mace asked, interrupting my thoughts. He’d stepped closer to me while Porter was talking with Duke and their respective Lunas.

“I figure we follow the trail, do some scoping, get in and out as fast as we can,” I said.

“That’s what I thought,” Mace said. “Should be pretty straightforward.”

I eyed Mace up and down. “So… did Maren head back to Portland?”

If Mace was surprised at my bringing her up, he didn’t show it. “Yeah, she wanted to get back to Fenrir.”

My stomach twitched at the thought of the little kid. If anything ever happened to him…

“Good,” I said, swallowing. “That’s good. A kid should be with his mom.”

Mace nodded. “Yeah, I don’t want Maren to be involved with this. She needs to be safe. Both of them have to be safe.”

I was glad to hear a note of genuine caring in Mace’s voice.

“So,” Cali interrupted, placing her hand on my arm. She squeezed, looking up at me with wide eyes. “How dangerous is this mission exactly?”

She had this *look* on her face—the one that was torn between panic and the urge to ask me if I’d eaten yet. I nodded at Mace and took her hand in mine, pulling her aside. She was holding me tightly, her nails digging into my palm.

“Hey,” I muttered, releasing myself from her death grip to place both my hands on her shoulders. “We’re going to be fine. This is just recon. We’re not going to engage at all.”

She gulped. “If it’s so easy, why didn’t you let Xavier or Ava do it?”

Because if Xavier and Ava got caught, there would be nobody to stay at the head of the Samara pack. But I didn’t tell Cali that.

“It’s just better if the Redwoods and the Blue Bloods deal with this,” I said.

Cali shook her head. “But what if they see you? It would be just the four of you against a huge number of them.”

I mock-frowned. “Cali, are you saying you don’t trust me to sneak my way into the enemy’s territory? Should I be offended?”

She pressed her lips together, shaking her head. “This is not about your abilities. But you can’t control everything, Greyson—what if they find you?”

“I can’t promise you that nothing will go wrong, but I can promise you that this will help us win against the Bitterfangs in the long run. I don’t want them to be able to hurt any of us anymore…” I cupped her cheek, brushing my thumb over her chin. “You know this is the right call.”

She pressed her lips together. “I know, but that doesn’t mean I like it. Or that I want you to be the one doing it.”

I squeezed her shoulder. “I get it, but I’m the one who called for this alliance. I’m the one who said we need to go on the offensive. How would it look if I didn’t take the lead?”

Sighing, Cali rested her forehead against my collarbone, hugging me tight. “Not good.”

“We can’t keep dealing with these small ambushes and getting picked off in tiny pieces,” I muttered against her hair, embracing her. “This can’t be it.”

Cali nodded against my shoulder. “All of that makes sense, but I still hate it.”

I kissed her cheek. “I know, love.”

“I just want to take you somewhere away from all this, so you can be safe and I won’t have to worry,” she mumbled against my skin. She sounded almost grumpy about it, and I felt like laughing. Only she could make this kind of messed-up situation amusing.

I faced her, raising an eyebrow. “And then what?”

She blushed, knowing exactly what I was thinking.

*Bang!*

The door had opened and slammed shut, and everyone was startled. Cali looked over her shoulder, startled. “Who the hell—”

“Hello, everyone! We have arrived!” Lucian’s voice boomed from the foyer, carrying into the living room. “What’s going on?”

I sighed. A moment later, the princeling stepped into the living room. “Well? What did we miss?”

“Everything,” Xavier said sarcastically. “Thanks for getting here on time.”

I spotted a hint of red hair over Lucian’s shoulder, and then Elle stepped in beside him.

Fucking hell.

“What are you doing here, Elle?” I asked.

Elle’s eyes flickered to me. Before she could answer, Lucian said, “I asked her to come with me.”

I prayed the universe would give me the patience to deal with this bullshit.

“Why would you bring Elle?” I asked Lucian, stepping closer. “I thought the whole point of her going to the palace would be for her to stay safe and hidden from any prying council eyes—”

“The war planning committee?” Lucian laughed meanly. “I know she’s not my Luna yet, but Elle is my mate, and she deserves to be here. Besides, where could she be safer than by my side?”

My hands turned into fists. Our allies might not tell the council where Elle was, but our enemies certainly would if they had the chance.

*I know he’s annoying*, Cali’s voice echoed in my head, *but there’s not much we can do about this. I’ll keep an eye on her.*

I realized that my anger must’ve been showing for Cali to step in. I couldn’t go down this road again. It was a messy one—that probably had to do with the sire bond, and the fact that Lucian had one working brain cell.

Taking a deep breath, I said, “Fine.”

“I knew you’d agree with me, Greyson. After all, I am always right,” Lucian said with a smug smile.

I could swear I heard Xavier snort in the background. So at least there was one thing we still agreed on. The princeling was a joke.

“If anything happens to Elle,” I told Lucian calmly, “I’ll kill you.”

“I’m glad that my Alpha is looking out for me,” Elle spoke up.

And then, with a healthy dose of disgust and apprehension, I realized that I wasn’t sure if she meant me or Lucian. How the fuck did we end up like this? I turned to Elle only to find her staring between Lucian and me, her lips pressed together. But before I could say anything, before I could ask, Rishika popped into the room.

“The door was open,” she said. “Are you ready to hit the road?”

Composing myself, I turned to her and nodded. “Yes. Let’s find out where Malakai is hiding.”

**Episode 4084**

I joined the rest of the group as we headed outside to see the scouting team off. Everything was moving so quickly that I was feeling a sense of whiplash.

*I can’t believe that just a short while ago a car exploded! And now we’re sending four wolves to stare down the enemy, Greyson included.*

That last part made the unease in my stomach rise up further. It just wouldn’t settle. Something about Greyson leaving right now felt so wrong. But I wasn’t sure if I was having this reaction because I’d just had a near-death experience, or because there was really something wrong with the alliance’s plan. Everybody seemed to agree scouting was a good idea, and I knew that, too, theoretically.

But in practice, I felt so antsy I wanted to bite my nails off.

*If something happens to Greyson…*

No. I couldn’t think that way. Nothing would happen to Greyson. Ever. He’d just stay wonderful and powerful forever. I turned to look at him, and he was watching as Mace and Spencer shifted back to their wolves. His eyes flickered from them to me. His gaze was soft.

Reaching for my hand, he said, “I can tell you’re still worrying…” He cupped my cheek, staring deep into my eyes. “It’s all going to be fine.”

*I wish I had your confidence*, I wanted to say. I believed in Greyson, and I knew he’d do his best, but there were things beyond his control out there.

*If something happens to him…*

*No, no, and no! I will* not *go there.*

I hugged him tightly, wrapping my arms around his neck as he held me close to his chest. I knew this mission shouldn’t take that long, but somehow it felt like a bigger goodbye than it was. He pulled away a bit, lowering his face to kiss me, and I went on my tippy toes to kiss him back. My lips parted for him as I ran my fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck, and he made a soft sound that made me woozy.

Everything around us faded away—it was just Greyson and me, the mate bond soaring between us, more intense than I’d expected in this moment. I couldn’t help but think of those images of women sending their loved ones off to war. This wasn’t the first time I’d said goodbye to my mate before he got himself into a dangerous situation, so why did this feel so different?

*Why does the thought of letting him out of my sight right now make me ache?*

When Greyson ended the kiss, I was breathing shakily. It wasn’t only need that spoke inside me right then—it was this deep craving to cage him from the outside world.

“I’ll be fine,” he muttered, looking into my eyes. “I’ll come back soon. Don’t worry. I love you.”

I placed my hand over his as he stroked my shoulder. “I love you too. Take care of yourself, okay?”

He nodded, brushing his lips over mine one last time.

He and Rishika shifted, and along with Mace and Spencer, the four wolves ran off into the forest. I stood there, arms wrapped around myself, watching them until I couldn’t see them anymore.

*Everything’s going to be fine*, I told myself. *Don’t get all paranoid now, Cali!*

And yet, the unease in my stomach wouldn’t quit.

“… we’re going to head out now,” a voice said from behind me. I turned to see Porter and Rowena standing on the porch, talking with Xavier. “Keep me updated with what Greyson and Mace find, and then we can figure out where the Cobalts need to be.”

While Xavier and Porter shook hands, Rowena walked down the steps to join me. Her expression was serious. “You’re nervous, aren’t you?” she asked quietly.

My chuckle was mirthless. “What gave it away?”

“Your energy, it’s just—” Rowena paused, shaking her head. “I’m sure everything will be fine. But…” She hesitated for a beat. “Don’t ignore your intuition, Cali. I think it will point you in the right direction.”

I frowned.

*Okay, but what’s that supposed to mean?*

Before I could ask her, Porter called her name. She turned to me with a small smile and reached forward. When I realized she was coming in for a hug, I was surprised but happy, hugging her back right away. This was nice, actually. I was happy to have made a new friend.

“We’ll talk soon, okay?” she said.

I nodded. “Yes. Thank you.”

“No, thank you,” she said. “I’m glad I met you.”

The sensation of unease inside me smoothed over slightly. Rowena had been so helpful with the Luna stuff, and she seemed to genuinely care about the well-being of the Redwood pack.

“Be safe,” I said as she and Porter took a few steps back.

With a final wave, she blipped them away.

I felt a chill in the air the moment they were gone. I turned to see Xavier and Ava, standing on the porch, staring at me. That was where the cool wind had come from, I gathered. Without a word, the Ice King and Queen of the Samara pack headed back into the house.

The hospitality around here left a lot to be desired. Just saying.

*What am I supposed to do now?* I wondered. *Should I just leave? But… our car blew up. Should I call a cab?*

I decided that before going anywhere, I needed to see what the rest of the alliance was doing. The Ice King and Queen included. I headed back up the stairs and into the house. Xavier, Ava, Lucian, and Elle were in the living room again. It looked like Paige and Duke had been moved elsewhere, because the blanket on the floor was empty now.

“… we can all probably get back to our own pack business while we’re waiting for intel,” Ava was saying as I rejoined the group.

Ava’s suggestion didn’t mesh well with the clawing feeling still tickling my stomach. I asked, “Couldn’t the Bitterfangs still attack us here, though?” The thought made the words tumble out of my mouth without filtering. “If they went after Duke and Paige so close to the Samara house, they probably knew we were meeting. Shouldn’t we shore up defenses or something? What if there are more of them waiting out there?” I frowned. “Wait, how did they even *know* we were meeting?”

Nobody spoke for a moment. Xavier was expressionless, Elle looked at me thoughtfully, and Lucian seemed impressed. “All very good questions, Caliana!”

As for Ava, she shot me a dirty look. What the hell was *that* about?

*If anyone should be giving anyone dirty looks, it’s me to* her.

“It’s fine,” she said curtly. “Whatever happens next, the Samaras can handle it. You can go back to the Redwood pack house now. I’m sure Lucian won’t mind letting you borrow his driver to take you home.”

“But of course,” Lucian said, “my driver would guarantee Caliana’s safe arrival to the Redwood pack house.”

Lucian was being himself and all, but Ava’s patronizing tone did not escape me. Was she trying to send me away? Was she trying to stop me from being part of the strategizing? Because it definitely felt like it, and I did not appreciate her bullshit one bit. I knew my place—I knew that I deserved to have a voice here. I hadn’t been the naïve girl that Xavier had first met in a very long time, and I had no problem proving that.

“I am the representative for the Redwoods,” I said pointedly, “so I am happy to stay and figure out what’s best for the alliance with you all.”

Ava rolled her eyes at me. “This is a wolf matter, so I’m not sure what you bring to the table, Cali.”

“That was mean,” Elle said, frowning. She turned to me. “Ava’s being mean, and I don’t like it.”

Ava rolled her eyes *again*. I simply did *not* have time for her audacity!

“I don’t know what your problem with me is,” I told her in a sharp tone, “but I’m a member of the Redwood pack. I am the Alpha’s mate. The *Luna*. I represent their interests. Are you saying that the Redwoods shouldn’t be included?”

“That is a good question, and you should answer,” Elle told Ava. Meanwhile, Lucian looked between Ava and me as if he were watching a tennis match.

I didn’t dare look at Xavier.

Ava gritted her teeth together. “That’s not it. You are a Redwood, but this is the Samara pack house, and if they attack right now, they’re attacking the Samaras.”

I shook my head. “No, they’re attacking the alliance. That’s what this is all about, don’t you see?”

Ava slid her glare from me to Xavier. He’d been quiet this entire time, his face as blank as a statue’s. And then, Ava asked him, “Xavier, what do you think? Should Cali go home?”

**Episode 4085**

**Greyson**

Our group of four tore through the woods. Mace, Spencer, Rishika, and me. As we headed to the scene of the ambush, I kept thinking back to Cali’s words. How worried she looked, how she felt like something was off here. I agreed. There *was* something off about this entire ordeal.

I hadn’t told her, though. I didn’t want to worry her even more. She’d seemed so shaken up already after the explosion and me getting right into this mission. I hated to leave her behind. I felt the absence of her like a physical ache that vibrated through me and wouldn’t stop. But this was important. Scouting and gathering information was standard practice. It was a clean, neat plan to get to the bottom of these ambushes and attacks.

In theory, at least.

When we got to the scene of the fight, the car was cold.

*The smell of ash and chemicals is thick in the air*, I mind linked the others. *It’s going to make it difficult to find the scent of the wolf that attacked Duke.*

*But not impossible*, Rishika noted.

I nodded. *Not if we focus.*

*We don’t have to find the one wolf’s scent—as long as we manage to trace the trail that led all the Bitterfang wolves here, we’re set*, Mace mind linked.

We all agreed and got to work, sniffing the ground and the air, inspecting paw prints and all the signs of struggle. The wreckage gave me pause, then, when the image of Cali coughing while Xavier embraced her popped into my head.

I was so fucking grateful that she was okay, and if it meant her safety, I’d accept anything. But at the same time, I couldn’t help but hate that I hadn’t been the one to get to her first. I hadn’t allowed myself to linger on this entire situation earlier, but I knew that it was messed up.

I had seen them together, when Xavier saved Cali.

Now that Xavier was with the Samara pack and had Ava as his Luna, I’d moronically told myself that this whole business of Cali being torn between us was over. But I’d noticed the expression on my mate’s face when Xavier had held her. She still loved Xavier. It cut deeply to see the look I’d gotten so quickly used to being exclusively mine, given to him again.

I had forgotten how much it hurt to share Cali’s love.

Would she ever stop having feelings for him?

What the fuck did it all mean?

*I think I found something*, Rishika’s voice cut into my head.

I joined her at the outskirts of the site, forcing myself to refocus on the mission. I chose to remember the kiss Cali and I had shared earlier and drew strength to move forward from that. There was no time to brood or feel shitty about anything right now. I didn’t have the luxury of contemplating my feelings.

*Can you smell it?* Rishika asked once I drew up next to her.

I scented just the faintest hint of the Bitterfang wolf. *Yes*, I replied.

*Is it enough to track it?* Mace asked, arriving with Spencer right then.

*It’s not much, but I think I can follow it back where it came from*, Rishika said. I felt this strong sense of pride in her. She was my second, and she was so exceptional I felt lucky to have her.

*Lead the way*, I mind linked.

Nodding, she took off. We followed, and the scent grew stronger as we got farther from the Samara pack house. With a start, I realized something crucial.

*We’re heading toward Three Devils Point*, I mind linked.

Mace gritted his teeth together. *That’s supposed to be neutral territory*.

*Nothing about the way the Bitterfangs are approaching this is instinctive or in keeping with werewolf code*, I said. *They fight like humans.*

*I have fought in wolf wars before*, Mace said. *But I’ve never seen or heard of a pack using human means to take out the enemy.*

*Me neither*, Spencer said.

*I’m sure that Malakai is responsible for the car bomb*, I noted.

*For sure*, Rishika said. *And now to aggressively take over a neutral territory—that’s not something that’s usually done in werewolf warfare.*

*Werewolf strategy is about pack strength and outright battle*, I said. *But the Bitterfangs are combining more human militaristic tactics. Which is a bad thing, because when it comes to war…*

*Humans are the worst*, Rishika completed my sentence.

I didn’t tell the others, but this was making me nervous. The sneakiness, the greed, the malice. The humanness of it all.

*We must be close*, Mace mind linked. *The Bitterfang scent is almost overwhelming.*

*I can pick out the Northwinds, too*, I replied. *And that unfamiliar pack.*

Up ahead, through the trees, I could see the small clearing of Three Devils Point coming up. Rishika slowed first, and the rest of us followed. When we looked through, we saw them—a mass of organized wolves, some of them shifted, others still in human form.

It looked like an army camp.

*I’ve never seen anything like this in my life*, Rishika mind linked.

*Why does this feel like the US Army or some shit?* Mace snapped. He was pissed now.

*It looks like something out of a movie*, Spencer said.

*These fuckers are supposed to be wolves, but they’re not acting like* *it*, Mace said.

*Yeah*, I agreed. *But on the positive side, it doesn’t look like nearly as many wolves as we’d been expecting.*

Rishika nodded. *It’s a surprisingly small force.*

Some kind of disturbance occurred on one side of the camp right then, and it caught our attention.

*What’s happening there?* Spencer asked. *Are they fighting?*

I focused my hearing on the scene and realized that it wasn’t actually a disturbance. It was Malakai walking slowly and stopping every few feet to speak to some of the other wolves.

*It’s not a fight*, I mind linked with a scoff. *It’s just the wolves stirring—they’re actually excited to talk to this asshole.*

For a moment, none of us spoke. The sight before us was ridiculous, really. These wolves thought they were invincible, camping out in open air, with their leader prancing around like a peacock in human form, with nobody guarding him. It was easy for a fantasy to form in my head. I was faster than the average Alpha, so in theory, I could just…

Rush into their camp.

I could run in there, charge and evade anyone who tried to get in my way, and go straight for Malakai. I would tear out Malakai’s throat before anyone could do anything.

I’d bite his head off, and all the others would fall into chaos.

There was a good chance they’d surround and kill me after that, which was where my fantasy plan went wrong. But, still, I would have brought that son of a bitch down.

*Whatever you’re thinking, it’s not going to work*, Rishika said. Her voice was a warning.

*I’m not thinking anything*, I said.

She stared at me flatly. *Greyson*.

*We both know that if I just sit here and stew for a bit, I could get angry enough to do it*, I told her. I realized I hadn’t told her exactly what I wanted to do, but Rishika seemed to have an idea already.

*No*, she said flatly. *Greyson, you won’t do it. Whatever it is, it’s going to be dangerous. Too dangerous.*

*I know*, I replied. *I* *won’t do it.*

Rishika narrowed her eyes at me. *But you’re thinking about it.*

*You don’t even know what I’m thinking*, I replied.

*I can imagine*, she countered. *You have that look in your eye.*

*I don’t have a look*, I said. *I’m a normal person. Extremely normal.*

*Most of the time*, she said. *But you’re contemplating going feral.*

*I don’t know what you’re talking about*, I said firmly.

And then Rishika read me like a book.

*I bet you want to rush into camp and attack Malakai, which would be realistic because you’re fast enough and they’d be caught by surprise. But after that, they’d attack you all at once, so the whole thing is moot. It’s a suicide mission.*

I was impressed. I mind linked, *That was so on point, it was scary, Rishika.*

Her tone was even when she said, *I know you by now.*

*What are you two even going on about?* Mace interrupted. Spencer looked completely lost. Rishika stared at me expectantly.

I sighed, nodding forward. *Anyway, is it me, or do their numbers actually seem pretty manageable?*

Mace and Spencer both agreed. Mace said, *I’d expected more manpower for sure.*

*It does seem like a war we can win, with the number of wolves down there*, Rishika conceded.

I was starting to feel pretty good about this.

But then Mace said, *Wait, what’s that? Do you smell that?*

Looking at the other edge of the camp, Rishika said, *Oh, no.*

I followed her gaze and held back a growl.

The Ironwood pack had just broken through the tree line to join the Bitterfangs.

**Episode 4086**

**Xavier**

“Xavier, what do you think? Should Cali go home?” Ava asked me pointedly.

My brain stopped for a second. I had no idea what to do. Why was Ava acting like this? Was it because I saved Cali earlier? What the fuck was I supposed to do—let her die just so Ava would be appeased? This jealousy bullshit was getting old.

But at the same time, how the hell could I look Ava in the eye and say that what happened earlier was *just* about saving Cali? She’d seen the way I held Cali. The way Cali held me, and the way we looked at each other. The attraction and feelings were still there.

And even though there was a part of me that wanted to set off fireworks and revel at the thought, I dreaded Adéluce’s reaction.

I looked between the two women. Ava was glaring, while Cali was looking at me with those eyes, the ones I could never say no to. If I disagreed with either one of them right now, the other would be happy with my choice. And I couldn’t risk either Cali or Ava responding to me with kindness or love, because that in turn would make me content.

And Adéluce didn’t fucking want that.

The witch vampire had warned me about trying to find happiness where I could.

So, the only thing that I could think of doing right now was to back the hell away and make both of them, along with myself, miserable.

“I don’t fucking care,” I snapped.

Cali’s jaw dropped. Ava’s face went cold, shuttering closed. I knew I was going to feel the ramifications of that for a while. But I had to keep going.

“We’re in the beginning of a war, and you’re both fighting over something so stupid,” I went on, digging myself into an even deeper hole. “I really don’t care. Figure it out, and then join the grown-ups.” I gestured at Lucian to follow me before adding, “We’ll be in the kitchen, figuring out an actual strategy. I have more important things to worry about.”

As we headed to the kitchen, I could just fucking *feel* the glee rolling off the princeling. He chuckled. “Oh, my stars, I cannot believe you called me a grown-up! And how you angered both Cali and Ava with just a few words—my, my, Xavier, that was *outstanding*.”

I ignored the asshole. Because otherwise, I’d tear his eyes out.

“Stop talking, Lucian,” Elle scolded the princeling. “You’re making things worse.”

Lucian laughed. “Am I?”

“Yes,” Elle said firmly. “Xavier doesn’t like what you’re saying. You have to stop, because he is our ally, and you said that we don’t fight with our allies.”

Elle—the formerly feral wolf—was probably the only sane person in this entire building.

“Of course, my darling forest rose, as you wish,” Lucian told her indulgently.

I hated him.

I also hated Knox, Blaine, and Zipper, and what made matters worse was that they were in the kitchen when we got there. Who the fuck invited them?

“Get out of here,” I snapped, “we have things to discuss.”

Knox glared at me. “That’s why I’m here. I’m part of the Samara pack, and I deserve to know what’s going on.” He said that last part with a growl. And just for that—just for his fucking *tone*—I got in his face and grabbed him by the collar.

“You may be lucky to be alive and part of the Samara pack right now, but that doesn’t give you the right to interrupt an Alpha meeting or to decide what information I give you. Do you fucking understand, Knox?”

The fight went out of Knox’s face. He looked away, nodding. Taking a deep breath, he said, “You’re right. I’m just trying to be what the Samaras need. I swear I can help.”

I was immediately suspicious of this sudden change of gears. I let him go, shoving him the hell away from my space. Looking at him up and down, I said, “I’m shocked that you had a change of heart.”

“What do you mean by that?” Knox asked. Was the fucker playing dumb here?

I crossed my arms over my chest. “You wanted to join Malakai, and now you want to help the Samaras in fighting the Bitterfangs. Big change there.”

Knox shook his head. “I want to help however I can.”

I narrowed my eyes at the shrimp. I wasn’t used to this asshole being so amenable. I glanced over at Lucian—his expression was intrigued, and I detested it. I didn’t want to show to the princeling more inter-pack strife than necessary. So, in the end, I just told Knox, “Fine, you can stay, but your little friends need to get the hell out.”

Blaine and Zipper left without waiting for Knox’s agreement, and I felt slightly better. At least these fuckers realized who was in charge here. But, of course, that didn’t mean that I could trust Knox—his entire demeanor was strange, and I couldn’t ignore the pull of suspicion I felt when I looked at him. Or the anger I felt at his nerve, and how he dared talk back to me. I’d rather eat dirt than trust him.

“Everybody always makes Xavier mad,” Elle said suddenly. “Why?”

“Because Xavier is a hothead, my sweet turtle dove,” Lucian informed her.

Elle frowned. “I don’t think he’s wrong to be mad. But I don’t like it when he’s mean to Cali.” And then she turned and glared at me. “That is *very* bad.”

Just then, Cali and Ava came into the room, followed by Duke and Paige. The Aspen Alpha and Luna had washed, changed, and looked much better. As for Cali, of course she would stay. She was stubborn enough not to let what Ava said stop her.

They took spots on opposite sides of the kitchen island. Ava stood next to me, but she left an open space. I bet she did that just so I knew how pissed off she was at me right now.

*All good?* I mind linked. Ava completely ignored me, and my wolf whined. That needy motherfucker needed to shut up.

After everyone was situated, I looked around and cleared my throat. “While Greyson and Mace are gathering information, we have to decide what to do on our end.”

“I was wondering, actually—should Elle and I return to the Vanguard palace at the end of this meeting? Since Greyson was so against Elle being here in the first place,” Lucian said. “Or should we take one of the rooms here?”

I cringed at the idea of bumping into Lucian in the mornings. Or ever.

“No,” I said right away. Then I paused, processing. Begrudgingly, I added, “Maybe. That’s what we need to decide. Should all the packs come together now? Or should we stay as smaller, separate potential targets?”

Duke spoke up, saying, “I think we should split up.” He glanced at his mate, reaching for Paige’s hand. “We got hit the day we came here to meet you all. The Bitterfangs might be trying to stop us from meeting. They might back down on the attacks if they believe that we’re no longer gathering together to discuss strategy.”

“That’s a good point. But, as you saw, if we’re in separate smaller units, it does leave us all open to being hurt without having backup,” I told Duke.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about how you got attacked,” Cali told Duke, “and I really think they must have known.”

Duke frowned. “Known what?”

“That we were meeting up here in the first place,” Cali explained. “You’d think that they would expect us to meet at the Redwood house or the Vanguard palace, but we chose the least likely location—the Samaras’ brand-new house. And yet the Bitterfangs somehow knew we’d be in this area.”

Ava shot Cali a look—as if she were considering what Cali had just uttered seriously. Evenly, Ava said, “If that’s true, someone must be feeding them information.”

Everybody fell silent.

“So, what?” Paige said, alarmed. “They’ve sent a scout after us? We’re being watched?”

Knox scoffed. “I bet we are. There’s probably someone out there right now!”

I scowled. “But how could this spy evade all of our patrols?”

I glanced at Lucian, who said, “The Vanguards have set up patrols as well.”

“So have the Redwoods,” Cali said.

“We have three separate packs running patrol across our bordered lands, and none of them caught the scent of an intruder?” I shook my head. “I don’t buy it. If there was a scout out there, there’s no way they wouldn’t get caught.”

This had to be something else.

“Maybe they have ways of masking their scent,” Knox said, pointing over his shoulder, through the window. “Otherwise, how did the Bitterfangs make it all the way up here?”

I eyed Knox carefully before looking out, into the forest. My jaw clenched.

That son of a bitch.

*What are you not saying out loud, Xavier?* Ava mind linked.

*I think your cousin’s a mole for the Bitterfangs*, I replied.

**Episode 4087**

Xavier had gone super quiet, but I could just tell that he and Ava were talking about something via mind link. I hated being excluded. This entire thing was irritating, and it was making me mad and sad and just so very…

Jealous.

*UGH!*

“So!” I said loudly, determined to interrupt Ava and Xavier’s inner chitchat. “What do we think?”

“I’m still thinking,” Lucian said, scratching his chin.

Duke eyed Lucian, saying something that I missed. I waited for either Xavier or Ava to speak up, but they did not. They were still staring at each other and obviously communicating. I felt even worse at the reminder that Greyson’s and my mind linking had been glitchy today.

*What the hell was* that *about, actually?*

“What do you think we should do next, Caliana?” Lucian asked, then, interrupting my thoughts.

“I think we could probably split up for now,” I said. I wasn’t sure if I fully believed in that strategy, but I needed to get out of this house before I threw a spatula or something at Xavier and Ava. And their kitchen was empty, actually—no spatulas yet—so my predicament was extra dire here.

“I agree with Cali,” Duke said, taking Paige’s hand in his. “My Luna and I need to get back to our pack and update them. But then the Aspens could meet up with the Vanguards?” He looked at Lucian questioningly.

Lucian nodded. “Yes, indeed—friends should stick together.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” I said. “We can all kind of partner up in smaller pack combinations, so we’re protected without becoming one big target.”

“Interesting idea,” Knox said. I shot him a look—since when did he agree with anyone on anything?

Brushing that off, I turned to Xavier. “You should reach out to Porter and see if the Cobalts would join up.”

Even though there was a part of me—a masochistic part—that wished the Samaras could team up with the Redwoods, I knew that wasn’t going to happen. There was too much history there. Bad history. It all had me at its center, with Xavier as the problematic instigator.

“Yeah,” Xavier said without even looking at me. He immediately turned to leave, Ava following him. The two of them had apparently formed some sort of club that none of us were invited to join.

Lucian and Duke started talking about how great they’d be together in a mini alliance within the alliance, while Paige asked Elle if she enjoyed the idea of staying with Lucian at the palace. In the meantime, I moved quickly around the counter to go after Ava.

This wasn’t just about jealousy—I really did not like the way she and Xavier were behaving. It all felt really shady. My impression was solidified when I found them whispering furiously to each other in a side room. They stopped the minute I entered. While Ava glared daggers at me, I asked, “Did you two seriously just walk away to conspire? This is not how alliances work.”

Crossing her arms over her chest, Ava scoffed. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“We’re in an alliance together,” I repeated. “I don’t know what kind of deep dark secrets you two are harvesting right now, but you guys need to be open with us if this is something that’s got to do with the war. Being cryptic isn’t going to help us beat Malakai.”

Xavier inhaled sharply, shaking his head. “This isn’t about the alliance, Cali. It’s nothing.”

Did this man really think he could lie to me? *Me?* Right to *my* *face*?

“I’m not some stranger, Xavier,” I snapped. “No matter what you say, I know you. I know when you’re keeping a secret, and whatever you and Ava are—”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” Ava cut in.

I turned to her. My voice got louder, and I hated how wounded I sounded, but I couldn’t help it. I couldn’t stop myself from saying, “I get it—you two think I’m weak, that I can’t handle the role of the Redwood Luna.”

“Nobody said that,” Xavier said gruffly.

I laughed, but it was mirthless. “Didn’t you? Aren’t I a burden, Xavier?”

Xavier actually winced, like he hadn’t treated me like shit just a few days ago. His hot and cold behavior was driving me up the wall. “Cali—”

“No, you know what?” I glared between him and Ava. “I don’t care if you two think I’m not capable. But I’ve proven myself over and over, and that was good enough for Greyson and the rest of the Redwoods to agree for me to be their rep right now. Which means that you two”—I pointed between them—“need to give me the respect I deserve and tell me what the hell you’re scheming about.”

Xavier’s coldness cracked again, and he took a step toward me, opening his mouth like he was about to speak. But before he could, Ava put an arm in front of him, holding him back.

“This isn’t about the war, Cali,” Ava said in a sharp tone. “This is Samara business. It has nothing to do with you or your capabilities.” She sneered. “I know it’s hard to believe, but the world doesn’t revolve around you.”

I wanted to believe this wasn’t about the Bitterfangs, but something felt wrong here. If this was Samara business only, why did Ava and Xavier start talking about it during the meeting? Something that happened in that room had set them off, which meant that it was alliance business.

But both Ava and Xavier looked like they were at the end of their ropes and feeling particularly stubborn today. I didn’t think I’d get anywhere by pushing the issue here. Xavier didn’t want to share anything with me.

He only wanted to share his thoughts with Ava, his Luna.

He had chosen her, and I was nothing but a pathetic afterthought that he saved out of obligation.

*Don’t cry, Cali. You can’t keep doing this!*

I needed to get a grip.

“Fine,” I said, taking a step back. “I’ll let you deal with your pack business and get out of your way.”

Before either of them could say anything, I stormed out—not just out of the room, but out of the house. Xavier’s house with Ava. I took in huge gulps of air, trying to calm myself down. Ava had been extra bitchy today—was it because Xavier had saved me?

*Could she really be that jealous? Is she threatened by me?*

My stomach did a little flip.

*No, push it down*, I told myself*. Focus on getting out of here.*

I’d saved my phone from the crash, but I realized it was busted and useless. I hoped the SIM card had survived, but it wasn’t going to get me a cab or a ride from one of the Redwoods right now. I sat down on the front stoop, waiting for someone—other than Xavier and Ava—to come out so I could borrow a phone. There was no way I was going to go back inside now, after those two acted like… a *couple*.

A couple who had secrets.

Xavier and Ava were an Alpha and Luna who had repeatedly kissed in front of an audience. But were they really boyfriend and girlfriend? I knew it was a stupid question to ponder, because why *wouldn’t* they be boyfriend and girlfriend? And did labels even matter when Xavier had admitted to me that they’d been fucking behind my back for a while now?

A fresh wave of pain hit me.

*This is not something I should be thinking about*, I told myself. *Xavier chose this life, and I have Greyson and the Redwoods. We should be happy with our respective packs.*

But even as I thought that, I knew it was a lie.

“Cali? Everything okay?” Elle’s voice saved me from my thoughts. She and Lucian had just come out of the house. I was grateful for the distraction, and I remembered how I told Greyson that I’d look out for Elle.

I had to focus here.

“I’m fine,” I lied. “Are you two leaving?”

“Yes,” Lucian said, “we’ll be heading back to the palace.”

I turned to Elle. “Elle, could you hang back for a moment?”

Lucian narrowed his eyes at me. “What do you want with her?”

Elle frowned at him. “It doesn’t matter—I can talk with Cali if I want.”

Lucian’s entire face transformed right before my eyes. He nodded immediately, taking Elle’s hand in his. “Yes, of course, my forest rose. You can do whatever you choose—I am but the humble love of your life at your service.”

I rolled my eyes while Lucian kissed Elle’s hand. He ignored me. Walking away, he called over his shoulder, “I’ll be waiting in the car!”

“I know he’s stubborn and protective, but he always listens and accepts what I want. He never says no to me,” Elle said.

“At least there’s that,” I mumbled. I felt relieved to hear that from her, actually. “I guess he’s kind of sweet with you.”

Elle looked at me strangely. “What? Cali… I didn’t say anything.”

I frowned. “What? But I heard you.”

Elle frowned back. “I didn’t say anything out loud. I was just thinking.”

I gaped in shock. “Wait, did we just *mind link*?”

**Episode 4088**

**Xavier**

I stared at the door Cali had just walked out of. My chest felt tight. Today had been harder than usual—I’d had to push both Cali and Ava away. And both of them had felt it. Cali was gone now, and I was left here with Ava.

The energy rolling off her was acidic.

“I don’t know what is up with you today,” Ava said through gritted teeth, “but you’re the Alpha of the Samara pack. That means you back the Samaras, no matter what.”

I turned to her, staring. Adéluce was always watching, and sometimes it felt like she was reading my mind, so I couldn’t just agree with Ava, even if she was right. Antagonizing Ava right now seemed like a really fucking bad idea, but what else did I have left?

“I have no clue what you mean,” I told her. “When did I not behave like the Samara Alpha?”

She glared at me. “When you didn’t agree with me. I’m not some random wolf, I’m your Luna, and you undermined me back there.”

Adéluce remained at the forefront of my thoughts. So, I deflected.

*We have bigger problems here, Ava. Your cousin is selling us out to the Bitterfangs*, I mind linked.

The walls had ears in a house with werewolves, so I wasn’t about to risk talking about this out loud before I confronted Knox myself.

Ava crossed her arms over her chest. She mind linked, *You already told me your theory, Xavier. But how can you be so sure?*

*Knox was being a kiss-ass earlier*, I said. *That alone is a fucking red flag.*

*Okay, sure*, Ava conceded, *that’s pretty suspicious, but it doesn’t mean he’s a spy.*

*It was obvious he was doing it so he could stay in the room and hear us talk*, I said. *He was also aware that the pack meeting was here ahead of time. And after trying to convince us to join Malakai, now he’s just fine with us fighting with the alliance?*

Ava shook her head, scoffing. *It doesn’t seem like a smart move to broadcast how much you like the guy you’re potentially spying for, Xavier. Knox has been going on about how much he’d like to join Malakai, and now—what? He just went ahead, did it behind our back, and decided to play double agent? That’s such an amateur move.*

“He *is* an amateur,” I hissed. “That’s the point. That’s who he is. An amateur, immature, idiotic little asshole.”

Ava sighed, looking away with a scowl. She was so desperate to have family that wasn’t the complete worst that I feared the desire could cloud her judgment.

“I get that this is hard for you,” I started, “but—”

“You’ve made some good points,” she admitted in a barely audible voice. In a mind link, she added, *If anyone is going to betray us right now, it’s Knox. He has the motive.*

“I hope I’m wrong,” I told her.

She gave me a sharp smile, shaking her head. “Please don’t lie to me. I know how you feel about my family.”

I swallowed hard. Without thinking, I said, “I’m sorry. I don’t want this for you, Ava…” I stepped closer to her, my wolf itching to comfort her. I couldn’t help myself, I wanted to touch her—caress her cheek, pull her into a hug, let her know that I *was* there for her. Just like she said, she was my Luna, and I was her Alpha. That meant something bigger than me.

The second my fingertips grazed her cheek, though, her hand shot up and slapped mine away. Her eyes flashed with fury. “It’s not gonna be so easy for you to get back into my good graces, Xavier. You were a complete ass earlier. You embarrassed me in front of…” She paused. “Everyone.”

I knew what “everyone” meant here. I had embarrassed her in front of Cali. But what the fuck was the alternative? I had to be this way with Ava, otherwise Adéluce would hurt her. So, even if I wanted to tell Ava that she mattered to me, that being my Luna was beyond important, I couldn’t.

Instead, I shrugged and said, “You were acting childish. I didn’t have time to deal with it.”

Ava’s mouth dropped open, a gasp escaping. She looked shocked, and I couldn’t fucking blame her. We’d gone through a lot to get where we were, and I hadn’t spoken to her with such disrespect in a while.

This was a regression, and she had a right to be furious.

“Screw you, Xavier!” she spat. Through mind link, she added*, You can deal with this Knox bullshit on your own. I need a break from you right the fuck now!*

She didn’t wait for me to say anything before storming off. I wanted to stop her. I wanted to grab her and tell her it was all a goddamn lie. But I couldn’t. I held back. I thought about how pleased Adéluce must be right now and bit the inside of my cheek.

The coppery taste of blood flooded my mouth. I wanted to fucking scream.

Adéluce was really taking everything from me. I had believed it for a moment there—that I would get to be a true Alpha with my very own Luna. And even if this wasn’t the pairing or situation I’d dreamed of, it was a near-thing, and it was as real as could be. But I couldn’t show the vampire-witch that I was elated about any of this.

Or she would swoop back in and burn it all down.

“Is everything okay?” Knox’s voice pierced through my thoughts, and my wolf growled.

I faced the shrimp, glaring.

Calmly, in an almost friendly tone, he added, “I noticed you and Ava left pretty suddenly. Is something the matter with her? Any way I could help?”

Knox was being so slimy that I felt disgusted. There was no subtlety about the way he was doing this—to the point that I was fucking certain he had to be a mole for Malakai. He wanted information.

“What the fuck could *you* help with, Knox?” I asked sharply.

Knox took a step closer, shrugging. “Just wondering if there’s anything I should—uh, know?”

Under any other circumstances, I might have been able to hold my anger in, but it had been a really long and bad day. Knox’s bullshit was just the cherry on top, and I could no longer push down the rage that had been festering inside me.

Without a growl, I lunged forward to attack him, claws bared.

*Wait!* Ava’s voice erupted in my head. At the same time, I felt her hard grip on my arm, pulling me back*. This isn’t how we should do this, Xavier!*

“Let me go!” I snarled, turning to face her, to yank myself free. But when I met her gaze, something in me cracked, and I paused. Her blue eyes were gleaming, fiery and determined.

In a shaky voice, she said, “You’re not thinking clearly. You told me that I was acting childish, and I’m here to tell you the same thing. Calm down.”

My heart was beating a mile a minute, breaths coming out harsh. But with Ava’s hands on me, I fought to calm down. I looked over my shoulder—Knox was there. But he’d moved back several feet, his expression full of shock.

“What the fuck just happened?” he choked out, making a move to head toward the door.

“Don’t!” Ava shouted. “Stay here, Knox. We’re not done with you.”

Knox froze, looking between us. Ava was still holding onto me, her grip viselike. I couldn’t believe she’d come back so soon. She had been furious at me. She had said that I should deal with Knox alone, so I had thought I would have seen her much later. I had thought that she wouldn’t talk to me at all for a while at least, as a punishment for the way I’d treated her.

But she was right here, with me again.

Even when I was at my worst, even when she hated me, Ava had my back.

And the knowledge of that—the reminder of it made me feel much better. Much safer. Through all the fuckery and the toxicity that had gone down between us, Ava was there for me. And although I knew every bit of the way we were together was wrong, I couldn’t help but crave it.

But right now, I couldn’t linger on any of these thoughts.

I had to deal with this damn traitor.

“Let go,” I told Ava gruffly. She did, but her eyes were glued to me as I moved. Stalking toward Knox, I grabbed him by the scruff of his neck. He sputtered, trying to fight me off, but I didn’t budge.

“Are you spying on us for Malakai, Knox?” I snarled in his face. “Tell me the truth, and maybe I’ll kill you fast.”

**Episode 4089**

I couldn’t believe this. What the hell was going on? I’d just heard Elle’s voice *in my head*. I’d never mind linked with anyone except Greyson and Xavier. And what had just happened between Elle and me felt exactly like the mate mind link.

“You just said something in your head, and I heard you in my head,” I told Elle, swallowing hard. “That’s like a mind link.”

Elle looked equally confused. “I don’t know a lot about werewolves, but I know you aren’t one. I thought this was just for wolves and mates?”

“I thought the same thing,” I said helplessly, laughing a little.

Elle frowned. “Is this funny?”

My laughter was cut short. “It’s not funny. And it’s not normal. We’ll have to investigate.”

Elle nodded seriously. “One more thing to do, then.”

At least Elle realized this only meant more homework for us. Taking a deep breath, I took her hand, leading her toward the car where Lucian was. Or it wasn’t a car—it was a whole freaking limo. Before we could reach him, I whispered to Elle, “Please don’t tell him anything just yet. I want to figure this out first, okay?”

Elle nodded again, and I was relieved. I felt like I could trust her in this—she was loyal that way. When we drew up to Lucian, he was dusting off his clothes, preparing to enter the back seat.

“I thought you could give me a ride home?” I asked, holding up my torched phone. “I need some help here.” I glanced at Elle. “Elle said yes already.”

Elle stared at Lucian, not missing a beat. “Yes, I said yes. Because I like Cali a lot, and I want her to be happy.”

I eyed Elle. I had said one tiny little lie, and she’d just embellished it so casually that I was almost impressed.

*I suppose she’s learned how to be human pretty well already, huh?*

Lucian smiled wide, looking between us. “But of course! Anything for the lovely Redwood Luna. We are in an alliance, after all, and once Elle agrees to be my Luna, we’ll be sister packs.” He turned to Elle, the flutter of his eyelashes pretty disturbing, actually. “That is just what I hope for—there is no pressure here, my beautiful forest rose.”

I felt wildly uncomfortable witnessing… whatever this was. But Elle seemed flushed. Was she blushing? How could she be blushing while looking entirely unfazed at the same time? Either way, she didn’t look disapproving, so that had to count for something.

She told Lucian, “I understand. I don’t like pressure. I like doing what I want.”

“Of course, always!” Lucian said.

“Good,” Elle said. And Lucian preened like a dog that had been given a bone.

Witnessing their dynamic—how it felt like Elle was in charge here—was both reassuring and weird. Reassuring, because it looked like Elle could handle Lucian better than anyone, and weird because this was Lucian. He made everything unsettling just by existing.

In the end, I opened the door to the car and got in, pulling Elle in behind me. The fact that Lucian was taking a limo everywhere remained ridiculous, but I wasn’t about to complain here. I did need a ride, and I wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth. Especially if it was a very expensive horse.

“Okay, we’re all here, Armin,” Lucian said after getting in behind us. “You can go now.”

The car started. I just sat there, staring at Elle. She stared back, hard. I wondered if she was wondering the same thing as me right then. Because seriously, how on *earth* did her voice get into my head? I needed to talk to Greyson about this. The fact that it had happened on the day that my mind link connection with my mate seemed to be wonky made it even odder.

*This isn’t right*, I thought. *I’m not supposed to be mind linking Elle—I’m supposed to be mind linking Greyson* without *any static!*

Lucian interrupted my nervous spiraling. “You know, Caliana, you’re really coming into your own as the Redwood Luna. You were excellent in that meeting today, really confident and thoughtful. Greyson is lucky to have you.”

I stared at Lucian, struck for a moment by his unexpected praise. But then I glanced at Elle, who watched us silently. Only moments ago, she had said that she liked me and wanted me to be happy. Lucian could be putting on this little show more for her benefit than mine.

Lucian could be a snake, after all—if one who was well spoken.

“Thanks,” I told him. “I hope it’s the right decision.”

Lucian shook his head. “Of course it was right. If I disagreed with you, I would say so. My pack’s safety is not something I play with; it is paramount to me. I would not lie in this.”

Making sure to keep my tone light, I asked, “But you have already lied about many other things in the past, right?”

Lucian’s calm expression was tainted by an emotion I couldn’t interpret. He didn’t seem annoyed or defensive, which was what usually happened when anyone called him out. He simply seemed resigned, somehow.

“I know my past speaks for itself, but I do not want it to define me forever,” he said. “As someone who has tried to take on the packs in this area…” His mouth curled in disgust. *Self*-disgust. “It was a foolish choice, and even if I was manipulated into it by someone I thought I loved, I regret my actions completely. I hope to see Malakai in a similar state of regret soon enough. I believe we will be victorious here, Caliana.”

I blinked at Lucian, processing his words. I was somewhat dumbstruck. He’d apologized about the Seluna bullshit in the past, but it was always with an air of entitlement and defensiveness. This time, though, it felt much more real. Like a true acknowledgment.

“Wow,” I said. “I didn’t know you had this in you.”

“I mean every word,” he said seriously. Then, he smirked, turning to Elle. “After all, being a graceful orator is one of my many, many talents.”

I sighed. *Well, there’s the Lucian I know.*

Elle’s eyes flickered to me before she turned to Lucian, folding her hands on her lap. I looked out the window, my brain going back to the mind linking situation again. I wondered if I should try to mind link Elle again, right now, just to see what would happen.

I decided against it and realized that trying to mind link Greyson would be better. If our problems with it were a glitch, it should be gone by now.

*Greyson? Are you okay?*

No response. Just the sound of static once more. But I wasn’t sure if that was because he was too far away, or whatever was going on with Elle was interrupting our connection. Either way, this still made me nervous.

“By the way, Caliana,” Lucian spoke up again, grabbing my attention. “I was surprised when we didn’t receive an invite to your Luna ceremony.”

Trying to keep the lie off my face, I said, “We wanted to do something small and intimate. I’m sure you understand that was best after all the drama that has been going on.”

Lucian gave me a long uncharacteristically serious look. Then he said, “Indeed. Either way, I’m sure it was beautiful.”

I wasn’t going to start a conversation about this—the last thing I needed was Lucian asking for details. So, I just nodded awkwardly and looked outside as if I’d spotted something interesting. I was wondering if I should have prepared more lies in case someone asked about my supposed Luna ceremony again, when a sudden static entered my head.

*Greyson?* I mind linked.No response.

But then, suddenly, from amidst the static, there were broken words in my mind.

*Love yo—you’re beautif—so sexy, I can’t wait—want you alone—*

My entire face heated up. Greyson had finally made contact, and that was all he was thinking about? Like, sure, same, but seriously? Right now, while he was on a mission? What kind of timing was this?

*Greyson, what are you doing? Where are you?*

No response.

And then, suddenly, more static and more broken words in my head.

*God, you’re—hot—do you need me like—need you—*

Was he for real? What the hell was happening right now?

*Greyson, are you okay?* I mind linked. *Of course I want you… But where are you? Why aren’t you back yet?* If he was trying to mind link sext me, then the least he could do was be present and put his mouth where his mind was…

I couldn’t hear his voice clearly. And then there were more half-assed sexual sentences.

*I can’t stop thinking—I love how—want to make you feel—*

Good god, this was out of control.

*GREYSON!* I mind linked.

The voice came back. Only this time, it was clear.

*You mean Lucian?*

My head snapped up, and I stared at the man next to me in horror. Lucian’s eyes were wide, his jaw slacked. Was I almost just mind sexting with him?

**Episode 4090**

**Greyson**

Wade was talking to Malakai in the clearing right now. I would give anything to hear their conversation. I couldn’t believe he’d gone through with not having the Ironwoods join the alliance, and, on top of that, had *joined the other side*. What was Malakai offering them? All of Wade’s shit-talking about Malakai being a sick son of a bitch—had all that been for show? Could this have been Wade’s plan all along? How the fuck had I fallen for it?

I should’ve known better.

*We should leave*, Rishika mind linked. *We got the information we came here for.*

*And then some*, Mace replied, sounding both sarcastic and disgusted.

*Did you suspect Wade?* I asked Mace.

*No*, he replied. *He seemed decent.*

He’d fucking tricked us both.

*Should we go back to the Samara pack house?* Mace asked.

*Yes*, I replied.

I needed to get back to Cali. I thought about that bad feeling she’d had—was this what it was about? Had she sensed Wade’s bullshit? Maybe her gut feelings were getting better. Or maybe this was about her Fae heritage. Could the recent growth of her powers have affected her intuition?

I wasn’t sure, but I knew that I needed to be paying more attention here.

*Greyson?* Cali’s voice came through, sounding urgent, although it was staticky. *Lucian’s driving me home.*

*He is?* Leave it to the princeling to actually do something useful.

*Oh thank god it’s you*.

*Why wouldn’t it be me?*

*No reason. I’ll see you at home?*

*Yes, I’ll see you there. Be safe, love.*

If Lucian didn’t get her there safely, he’d be hearing from me.

*Change of plans*, I told Mace. *I’m headed back to the Redwood house. I’ll call Xavier from there.*

*Sounds good*, Mace said, cutting through my thoughts. *Spencer and I will drop by the Samara pack house before leaving for Blue Blood territory. It’s on our way.*

*I’ll check in with a phone call when I get home*, I said. *Talk to you soon.*

Mace and Spencer headed in the other direction while Rishika and I continued on toward Redwood territory.

*What are you going to do about the Ironwoods?* she mind linked.

*This is not great*, I said, *but you saw the camp. It’s still a pretty small force. I’m not worried about fighting them.*

*Still*, she said, *seeing that must’ve stung.*

*Yeah*, I said, ignoring the anger that brewed under the surface. *But our main target is Malakai.* *If the Ironwoods want to go down with the Bitterfangs, then they have it coming.*

Rishika nodded, and we continued running in silence.

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When we made it back to the Redwood pack house, I left Rishika at the door. Cali wasn’t here yet—her scent was present but not fresh. I climbed up the stairs and went to my room, then I took out my phone. Mace had probably not reached the Samara pack house yet, and I had to make sure Xavier was updated. The phone rang once, then twice. When Xavier answered, he was clearly still speaking to someone else on the other end.

“You’re a traitor, so shut the hell up!”

What the fuck? Did Xavier already know? How? Wade and the Ironwoods couldn’t have gotten to the Samara house before Mace—or before I got back to the Redwoods. Had Xavier realized that Wade was a liar already without us telling him?

“Hey,” Xavier said gruffly, finally talking to me. “What’s going on? Did you find Malakai’s base?”

“Are you talking to Wade right now?” I asked.

Xavier sounded confused. “What? No. Why would Wade be here? The Ironwoods never showed up, remember?”

“They never showed up because they’re not joining us. We saw them at Malakai’s camp,” I said.

There was a sharp intake of breath on the other end of the phone. And then silence. Finally, Xavier said, “What did you say?”

He sounded pretty shocked. Even more shocked than I’d been. How the fuck did all of us not see this coming?

“I said the Ironwoods are with Malakai. They’re camped at Three Devils Point. Wade must have been the one who told him about our meeting,” I said.

Xavier was still silent.

I frowned. “But if Wade’s not there—who the hell are you talking to? Who’s the traitor?”

“It’s nothing,” Xavier said quickly. “Not about that. It’s no one. Samara business. Call you—”

“If Wade calls,” I said, cutting Xavier off, “don’t say anything to him or anyone in the Ironwood pack about what we know.”

“Fine,” Xavier said.

The phone went dead, and I rolled my eyes. Did my brother just hang up on me? Rude. And typical. Lucky for him, I didn’t have the time to care about his bullshit. Shaking my head, I started calling the other Alphas in the alliance to update them. I had to leave a message for Lucian with Armin. Then I left my room and went back downstairs to call for a pack meeting. We had to figure out how we wanted to handle these new developments, so I could then propose a plan of action to the alliance.

I already had a pretty good idea of how I wanted this to go—courtesy of my little daydream that Rishika disapproved of. But, first of all, I had to let the pack know what was going on. Soon enough, everyone gathered in the living room.

Rishika arrived with Artemis, who looked pissed off, like she’d already been filled in—though Artemis’s air was always menacing for the most part, so I couldn’t be sure. As more people streamed into the living room, I started counting heads. Violet, Charlie, Lilac, Sage, Zainab, Big Mac, Mrs. Smith, Mikah, Gabriel, Adair, Dani, Tabitha, Kira, and Torin. They spoke among themselves and seemed nervous, so I said, “We have things under control.”

That seemed to help for now. Ravi arrived with Lola and Jay at the end. Both men looked antsy, with Jay eyeing me cautiously.

“Bad news?” he asked.

“We can deal,” I said.

“Cali’s not here yet?” Lola asked, frowning as she glanced over my shoulder. “She didn’t call for us to come pick her up or anything.”

I scowled. Cali’s phone must’ve been fried in the crash—why didn’t I think of that? I realized that since she’d said she would keep an eye on Elle, she must’ve gotten a ride with Lucian. Not ideal, but it was what it was.

While the rest of the pack settled in, I reached out to my mate through mind link. The static was still there, lingering, and I didn’t like this one bit. What kind of glitch was this, and why did it take so long for it to clear out?

We seriously didn’t need any more problems to deal with right now, and mind linking with Cali was crucial. Both because it was part of our connection as mates, but also because we were at war here. There was no wishful thinking anymore about not being at war. If I couldn’t have a private conversation with Cali right now, it would not be good.

*Cali*,I mind linked again, *everything okay, love? Where are you?*

What I got back was broken, like our connection was bad, or she was far away. But I did hear enough to make me feel more at ease.

*On…way, Lucian… dropping… soon.*

I made a mental note to ask Big Mac if she knew why a mate bond mind link might be acting this way. This made no fucking sense. At least the witch seemed better now, sitting on the corner couch, glowering at me while my mother patted her hand.

“Well?” she said. “What happened?”

The pack was nervous, so I decided to move forward. I would fill Cali in separately when she arrived.

“The alliance meeting had representatives from the Blue Blood, Cobalt, Aspen, Samara, Vanguard, and Redwood packs,” I said. “The Ironwood pack did not show up. Since the Aspens were attacked in Samara territory, and the Bitterfangs are a California pack, we figured that they must have a nearby hideaway.”

I turned to Rishika. She said, “Three Devils Point. They’ve camped there.”

“What the hell?” Ravi huffed. “That’s neutral territory!”

“They’re playing dirty,” I said. “But not dirty like Silas. Dirty like humans would.”

“Their camp looked like a mini US military base,” Rishika added.

There were whispers among the pack, so I rushed to say, “Their numbers are manageable. They are just using military tactics.”

“Sounds to me like Bess would be useful,” Gabriel muttered under his breath. Mikah elbowed him. Before the conversation could take another direction, I cut to the chase.

“The Ironwoods never came to the alliance meeting,” I said. “And we saw them at the Bitterfang camp, talking with Malakai.”

Those who knew the Ironwoods seemed shocked. Especially Jay.

“Screw Wade!” Jay said sharply. “What the hell? Was all the shit he said lies?”

“Apparently,” I said. “But the point here is that the Ironwoods don’t know we know about their alliance with the Bitterfangs, so we can use this to our advantage.”

“So, they don’t know that we know,” Lola said, humming. “And we need to keep it that way.”

“But what if they do know that we know?” Adair asked. “Or if they found out?”

“That we know that they know?” Tabitha asked.

“Bess could help, and then nobody’s not gonna know anything,” Gabriel said under his breath. I was trying to remember who Bess was, but Mikah’s sigh said I didn’t want to know.

“We need to establish a plan of action so I can present it to the alliance,” I said. “The Bitterfangs’ numbers aren’t that impressive at the moment—not even if you include the Ironwoods.”

“Greyson’s right,” Rishika spoke up. “As long as they don’t bring in more people, they won’t be much of a fight.”

I nodded. “That’s why I think we should go in fast and quiet and hit them with the element of surprise.”

Artemis’s voice was even. Hard. “What do you have in mind, Greyson?”

**Episode 4091**

**Xavier**

Without waiting for Greyson’s response, I ended the call. I was still rattled from his bombshell, and listening to my brother’s voice wasn’t doing anything to settle my nerves. I stared down at the blank screen of my phone, seething. *Dammit*. The Ironwoods had betrayed us.

When I looked back up, Knox was staring at me, his expression sullen, like a child who’d just been scolded.

*What did Greyson say?* Ava asked.

I looked over at her. *It was the Ironwoods.*

She frowned. *What are you talking about? What was the Ironwoods?*

*They betrayed the alliance. Wade. He made a deal with Malakai.*

Ava’s eyes went wide with shock. *How do you know that?*

*Greyson saw them meeting up. And apparently Artemis killed an Ironwood pack member fighting alongside the Bitterfangs. Rishika said it smelled like one.*

Ava closed her eyes for a moment, absorbing this new information. Then she looked at me. *So, that means that Knox is innocent. That means that he’s not the leak.*

I shook my head. *Not necessarily. Just because Greyson confirmed that Wade’s allied with Malakai doesn’t mean that there’s not another traitor out there. I’m sure Malakai’s working to plant as many spies as possible.*

Ava frowned at this, but she didn’t disagree.

Knox had been looking back and forth between us while Ava and I had been speaking through the mind link, and now it appeared to have gone on too long for his liking. “What are you talking about?” he exploded. “What did your asshole brother say to you?”

I gave Knox a hard shove backward, knocking him into the wall. “You need to shut the fuck up.”

Ava glared at him. “God, Knox. Why is it so damn hard for you to not piss people off?”

“What my brother said to me has nothing to do with you, shrimp. The only thing you need to know is that you are in deep, deep shit with your Alpha and Luna.”

“But I didn’t do anything!” he argued. “I just want to help the Samaras be the pack they’re meant to be—”

“Knox, just shut up,” Ava snapped. “Yeah, you’ve always been so concerned about making the pack great. Using your magical steroids and making just absolute shit decisions while roided out as Alpha was *totally* the best thing to do for the pack. Fantastic job.”

“I only did what I thought I had to do,” he protested. “But it was always about the pack, I swear it.”

“That’s just an excuse for piss-poor leadership, then,” I growled. “You didn’t have the skills then, and you don’t have the skills now to lead this pack. You can’t make a good decision to save your life, and you wouldn’t know what’s good for the pack if it slapped you across the face. Face it, Knox, you never had what it took to be an Alpha.”

Knox glowered at me but was apparently smart enough to keep his trap shut.

*Do we want to do anything with him now?* Ava asked.

I tried to take a deep breath. I wanted to match Ava’s energy here, and her measured, rational tone. She wasn’t letting her anger at me interfere with this pressing pack issue, so I could do the same.

*No*, I said. *Not now. We’ll let him stew for now. But we’ll keep a close eye on him.*

Knox rolled his eyes. “Okay, obviously you two are talking about me. I can tell you’re talking through your mind link. Look, you can do whatever you want; I know I’m not going to do anything to hurt our pack.”

“But you thought that working with Malakai would help our pack, so that’s not really the reassurance you think it is,” I said shortly.

Knox took this in with bad grace. “Look, Xavier, I’m willing to listen to you—”

“Oh, that’s *really* generous,” I said sarcastically.

“When I said I would do whatever it takes, I meant it,” he went on. He looked at me. “Really. I’ll do whatever you think is best for the pack.”

I gave the shrimp a searching look. He was saying the right words, but I wasn’t fooled. Beneath the words, I could hear the anger and frustration threading through his tone. I didn’t know if it was because Knox was angry at being accused of being a traitor, or because he was still angry about me being Alpha of the pack, but it was there, and I didn’t trust it.

“Fine,” I said. “Glad to hear it. I still don’t trust you, and we’ll definitely be watching your every move from now on, but I sure am glad to hear it. Now get the hell out of here before I kick your ass,” I growled.

There must have been enough anger in my voice to convince Knox that I was serious, because he scurried out of the room without a backward glance.

The moment we were alone, Ava turned to me.

“You know, I’ll always have your back on these pack issues, but we’re still a small pack, and you really have to be more…” she trailed off.

It was odd; I didn’t often see Ava at a loss for words.

“What?” I asked. “I really have to be more *what*?” I was trying not to sound angry. The whole thing with Knox was really getting to me, and I was still processing the news about the Ironwood betrayal.

Ava sighed. “You have to be smarter about the way you handle things.”

The room was silent.

“You want to run that by me again?” I asked, my voice dangerously quiet.

Ava’s eyes flashed, and she seemed to realize that hadn’t been the best way to approach the issue. It was like I could actually see the gears turning behind her eyes as her brain worked out how best to deal with me—and I hated that.

“Why does it feel like you’re walking on eggshells around me all of a sudden? You never do that.” Then a realization hit me. “Wait, is this because Knox is your cousin?”

“What are you talking about?”

“What? You think I’m going to fly off the handle and kill him or something?” I demanded.

“Of course not,” she said sharply. “This isn’t about Knox, Xavier.”

“Then what’s it about?” I asked.

“This is about the fact that you don’t have the slightest idea how to be diplomatic,” she snapped.

I stared at her for a long moment, shocked. Then—I couldn’t help it—I started to laugh. It felt weird to smile. I’d been so stressed and so upset for so long, but being called *undiplomatic* in this moment just struck me as the funniest shit in the world.

Ava didn’t share the joke. “God, Xavier, I don’t even know why I’m trying to have a conversation with you about this. You’re fucking impossible. Fine, whatever. Do whatever you want, see if I give a fuck.”

I managed to stop laughing. “Listen, Ava, I’m sorry, but I don’t think either of us are getting anywhere with this conversation. I think I handled the situation with Knox fine, and since I’m not applying for any jobs at the United Nations, I don’t think my lack of diplomacy is really all that big of a deal.”

Ava crossed her arms over her chest as she glared at me. “You really think that conversation with Knox went fine?”

“Yeah, I do. I think he’s now going to be on his very best behavior because he knows we’re watching him.”

“Yeah, that might be true. But what’s *also* true is that now one of our very few pack members is convinced that his Alpha hates him and is statistically less likely to be loyal to us.”

“He shouldn’t need me to be nice to him to be loyal to the Alpha. You know that. You’re just acting like this because he’s family to you,” I said, maybe more sharply because in the back of my head I wondered if Ava might have a point. “Knox has to prove himself to us. He messed up. He’s the one who broke the trust, not us.”

Ava looked at me for a moment, then her shoulders sank. The gritty sparkle in her eyes seemed to dim, like the fight had gone out of her, and she looked away.

I felt a stab of guilt, seeing how worn down she was, and knowing that I had been a part of wearing her down. My instinct was to go to her, but I read the room and stayed where I was.

“Maybe you’re right,” she said, her voice low and hollow. “But I don’t want to keep going around in circles with Knox.” She shook her head. “It just seems like he’s always going to be an issue for us.”

“Not if he proves himself,” I countered.

She looked up at me. “What do you mean?”  
 “I think I might have an idea.”

“What is it?” Ava asked.

“It’s something that will help the Samara pack *and* the alliance.”

**Episode 4092**

Lucian was looking over at Elle with a kind of horrific, lovesick ardor on his face, and he hadn’t seemed to realize that I was staring at him in shock. He *also* hadn’t realized that he wasn’t—in fact—mind linking with Elle at all.

*—and I’ll show you why I’m so much better than he is*, Lucian’s voice rumbled into my brain.

The static around the sound was low, so the full resonance of his voice was echoing through my skull. Instinctively, I put my hands over my ears, but that was a mistake, because it only amplified his voice.

*When we get back, I’m going to take you back to my bedroom. I’ll take it slow—as slow as you want. Then we can… when you’re ready… explore our passions—*

“Lucian!” I screamed, desperate not to hear a word more. “*Stop!* For the love of god, please stop! You are mind linking with me, not Elle! Stop! Please, I’m *begging* you!”

Lucian sat back, stunned. His eyes flashed from me, to Elle, then back to me again. “What? What in the world are you talking about, Caliana? What is going on?”

I knew I must look horrified—because I *was* horrified. Elle was looking between Lucian and me, totally confused.

“How am I—you *heard* that?” Lucian asked me, eyes widening.

“Oh my god, *yes*,” I breathed.

“Really?” he asked, though I noticed that instead of sounding embarrassed at being overheard, he sounded vaguely intrigued by this development.

“Yes,” I breathed, “*very* unfortunately. I don’t know what’s going on or why the signals are crossed, but you were definitely talking to *me*, and not to Elle.”

Lucian paled, as though something had suddenly just occurred to him, and his eyes went wide.

“What is it?” I asked quickly. “Did you just realize something?”

“I don’t know for sure, but my first thought is that it might have to do with Greyson’s sire bond with Elle. I have learned, through all my reading, that the sire bond can manifest in mysterious ways. I wonder if, perhaps, this could be a product of that…”

He spoke as though every word cost him. I knew he didn’t like to think of the connection between Greyson and Elle, and I had to admit that I understood how he felt. I didn’t like to admit it, or even think about it, either, but Elle and Greyson’s connection *did* make me nervous. Especially after seeing what happened with Helix and Dayton.

“But why is it happening now?” I wondered.

“I don’t know,” Lucian murmured.

“I mind linked with Cali, too,” Elle added.

“Did you?” Lucian asked, raising his eyebrows. He shook his head, looking troubled. “This is all new territory—these kinds of sire bonds. Maybe there’s a reason we aren’t supposed to turn real wolves. Maybe the sire bond connection is the bond that supersedes the mate connection.”

I felt my stomach twist at his words. I didn’t like to hear them, but I forced myself to think about them. Could that be the reason my mind linking connection with Greyson had been so staticky lately? And did that mean that Elle had a stronger connection with him than I did?

I looked over at Elle, who was sitting next to me and looking alarmingly calm. There was something about the placid look on her face that rang an alarm bell in my head.

“Elle, are you okay?”

She shook her head. “No. I’m not okay.”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“I don’t want to make problems for my pack,” she said.

“This isn’t your fault, my little forest rose,” Lucian said quickly, taking her hand in both of his. “This is all Greyson’s fault. He turned a natural wolf—”

“*No!*” Elle said hotly. “No, it is not Greyson’s fault. I wanted to be a werewolf. I asked for this. I didn’t know that this would happen.”

My heart ached for Elle. I could see how much all of this upset her, and I knew—after everything that had happened with Helix—how hard things had been for her.

I laid a hand on her arm. “Lucian’s right. This isn’t your fault, Elle. It isn’t anyone’s fault. This is just something that we’re going to have to deal with. And we’re glad Greyson turned you, because now you’re with us. And we’re glad about that.”

“Yes!” Lucian said, smiling toothily. “Especially me. I’m very glad.”

I rolled my eyes. “We just need to talk to Greyson and Big Mac—and whoever else we need to. We’ll figure this out, okay?”

Elle didn’t look completely convinced, but she nodded. “Okay.”

“And in the meantime,” I said, eyeing Lucian, “make sure you *confirm* to whom you are mind linking before you say anything…” my face flushed hot. “*Intimate*.”

“Intimate?” Elle repeated.

Lucian’s smile turned into a leer. “Oh, I’ll tell you more about that later, my little forest rose.”

“Oh my god,” I groaned. This whole ordeal was going from bad to worse.

Desperate to not look at Lucian’s smarmy face anymore, I peered out the window and was relieved to see that we were drawing close to the pack house. We were close enough to be in range of Greyson, and I almost started to mind link—before I stopped myself.

I shook my head. It was so automatic—I had just gotten used to being able to reach out to my mate, and hesitating on that connection was going to take some getting used to.

Armin pulled the limo into the long driveway and made his way toward the house. He parked before the porch steps, and when he turned off the engine, I reached for the door handle, but Lucian reached out to stop me.

“What’s up?” I asked, confused.

“That’s Armin’s job,” Lucian said firmly.

“Oh my god, Lucian,” I groaned. “I don’t care what the hell you do in your own life, just please let me get out of this car.”

The next instant, Lucian’s door opened, and I was desperately grateful to see Greyson standing in the driveway, waiting for me. I had to stop myself from climbing over Elle and Lucian to be the first to get out. I was just so anxious to reach him.

As soon as they had climbed out, I slid across the seats as fast as I could and scrambled out. I must have looked awkward or desperate—or a mix of both—because Greyson’s expression shifted from a smile to a look of concern as he watched me.

He reached for me as I stepped in front of him and drew me into a hug. I wrapped my arms around him, pressing my face against his chest.

“Is everything okay, love?” he asked quietly.

“I don’t know,” I whispered back.

He pressed a kiss to the top of my head. “What’s going on?”

“It’s the weird thing happening with our mind link. It’s gotten weirder. I just heard *Lucian* in my head, and it was *not* fun.”

“*What?*” Greyson started at this. He gently pushed me away from him so he could look down into my face. “Lucian?”

“I didn’t mean to overstep any boundaries,” Lucian put in. He was standing nearby and had apparently been listening in to the conversation. “Just one of those things.”

My thoughts went back to what Lucian had been saying, and I shuddered.

Lucian’s face hardened, and he looked deeply offended. “Caliana, it certainly couldn’t have been *that* bad.”

“It was *awful.* You said things that you were going to do in the bedroom!” I blurted out without thinking.

“*What?*” Greyson reacted immediately. He grabbed my shoulders and moved me behind him, then stepped menacingly toward Lucian.

Lucian put his hands up in immediate surrender, “Greyson, no, allow me to explain—”

“You don’t *need* to explain,” Greyson snarled.

“I truly think that I do,” Lucian said, his voice growing a little desperate. “It is not what it sounds like. Though your Caliana was the one who heard me, it was not to her that I was speaking. I believed I was speaking to my own beautiful forest rose! I thought I was speaking to Arielle through the mind link, of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Greyson stopped and looked at Lucian for a long, confused moment. Then he looked at me, then back at Lucian. He looked like he was having trouble piecing all of it together, and I had to admit—I didn’t blame him.

“Are you telling me that you mind linked with *my* mate?” he asked incredulously.

“Yes,” I said, stepping back to his side. “That’s what I was saying. I was also able to mind link with Elle. That’s what I’m talking about, Greyson. Something weird is going on. I’m not sure what’s happening, but Lucian is wondering if it has something to do with your sire bond.”

“What?” Greyson asked, surprised and dismayed. “The sire bond? I’ve never heard of anything like that happening.”

“How many sire bonds have you heard of, though?” I countered. I thought for a moment. “I have an idea, Greyson. I think you should try mind linking with Elle.”

**Episode 4093**

**Greyson**

Mind link with Elle? I didn’t have a chance to answer—hell, I didn’t even have a chance to *think* about Cali’s question—before Lucian responded.

“Absolutely not,” he said flatly.

I took a deep breath, reminding myself to stay calm and not to punch the Vanguard Alpha in his smug face. This was all just one more thing to add to my ever-growing list of shit gone wrong. I shook my head. The last thing I needed—or wanted—was my connection to Cali being screwed with.

I didn’t even bother disagreeing with Lucian out loud—it really wasn’t worth the conversation—I just looked over at Elle and tried to mind link.

The ability to mind link was a little like breathing—it worked best when you didn’t think too much about it. So, trying to focus on communicating with someone in particular felt strange, but I gave it a shot.

*Elle? Can you hear me?*

She stared at me—because I was looking at her—but didn’t respond to me either mentally or out loud. Though, that didn’t mean it didn’t work. I couldn’t be sure if I’d been able to communicate with her. I wanted to ask her, but when I looked at her more closely, I saw that she looked strained. Elle was usually such an open book, but she seemed strangely shuttered now, and there were waves of anxiety rolling off her so strong I could nearly feel them.

Had she heard me? Was she hiding it?

“It’s okay,” I said aloud. “We’re not going to worry about this right now. We have other things to concern ourselves with.”

I caught Cali’s eye and glanced quickly at Elle. She understood at once and nodded. I felt a wave of relief—even without our mind link, it was clear we were still able to connect and communicate.

“We have information about the Bitterfangs that takes precedence right now. We’ll deal with this problem with the mind link later,” I said briskly. Part of me was glad to have a reason to push the cross-signals of the mind link off until another day. It seemed like a thorny problem that would require a lot of untangling, and I needed to focus on the war that felt like it was fast approaching.

“And what exactly are we supposed to do until then?” Lucian asked, looking annoyed. “Just *not* mind link with our mates?”

Cali heaved an irritated sigh. “I told you—just make sure you know who you’re talking to first.”

Lucian didn’t look happy with this solution, but he nodded. “Fine. But I want this taken care of. I don’t want this to last much longer.”

When I rounded on him, I was too frustrated to even try to keep my tone measured. “It’ll last as long as it needs to last for us to deal with the fact that the Ironwood pack has betrayed us to the Bitterfangs.”

This announcement was met with a stony silence from Lucian, Cali, and Elle. The three of them stared at me in shock.

“Well,” Lucian finally said, “that’s not great.”

“No,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck. I’d been carrying a lot of tension in my shoulders, and my neck felt painfully tight. “It’s not great.”

“I’ll need to get back to the palace as soon as possible to let my pack know. We’ll need to make some plans,” Lucian said gravely.

I nodded. “That’s probably a good idea. And, as of now, Malakai doesn’t know that we know this. It’s probably best for him to continue to think he can catch us off-guard.”

Lucian gave me a wry look. “Greyson Evers, this is not my first war.”

I chose to ignore his attitude. “I’m working on a plan that I’ll share with the Vanguards as soon as I’m done. I’ll be in touch.”

Lucian nodded. “Yes, I’ll wait for further information from you. Elle, we should go.”

Cali had stepped next to Elle and had been speaking quietly to her while Lucian and I had been talking, but when Lucian called Elle’s name, Cali cut herself off. She looked over at Lucian, then gave Elle a quick hug.

“Goodbye, Elle,” she said quietly.

Elle didn’t say anything to Cali, or to me, which I found odd. She tapped my shoulder as she walked by me, then slid into the car.

Lucian made to follow her but stopped himself and turned to look back at me. “Greyson Evers, I know that you and I have had our differences in the past—especially where our mates were concerned. But I want you to know that whatever I said to Caliana tonight was said in complete ignorance that she was the one I was speaking to. I truly thought I was speaking to Elle. I would never again overstep in that way, as I know you would offer me the same consideration.”

I looked at him. “Is *overstep* really the word you want to use here, man? That seems like kind of an understatement, don’t you think?” I didn’t deign to respond to the rest of Lucian’s speech, because it didn’t seem to matter all that much. Not to me. The Vanguard Alpha could say whatever he wanted, but he wasn’t ever going to convince me that he was a good mate for Elle.

Besides, I knew the only reason Lucian was saying any of that was to extract a guarantee from me that I wasn’t going to try to take Elle away from him. That’s all he really cared about. If he was actually worried about offending Cali, he would have apologized to her, not to me.

But none of that mattered. What had happened between Elle and me after we’d saved her father had just been a result of pure adrenaline and the effects of the sire bond. It wasn’t real. *Cali* was real. *Cali* was the only bond in my life who really mattered.

My gaze stayed on Lucian, and after a long moment, he climbed into his limo without another word.

I didn’t bother to wait for them to drive away before I turned away and headed back into the pack house, pulling Cali to my side as I went.

“The Ironwoods?” she asked.

“I’m afraid so,” I said, and I filled her in on everything else she had missed.

“I can’t believe it,” she murmured. “I wouldn’t have thought that Wade would betray us like this. I mean, not that we were best friends, but he seemed to really dislike Malakai.”

When we reached the living room, everyone was still sitting where I’d left them, and they all looked relieved to see Cali.

“Oh, thank god,” Artemis said, when she saw her sister.

“Glad you’re back,” Sage said with a smile.

“Thanks, me too,” Cali said, dropping into an empty place on the couch.

“Okay, so, can we go over whatever plan you’re thinking of, Greyson?” Artemis asked, clearly ready to get back to business.

Cali looked around. “It sounds like I got here just in time.”

“I don’t have a specific idea just yet, but my gut is telling me that we can use the information about the Ironwoods,” I said, taking my place at the front of the room.

“Maybe we can divide the packs and take them down one by one,” Ravi suggested.

“That’s not a bad idea,” I said, nodding slowly as I thought about the idea. “We do know now that the numbers aren’t that big, so splitting them up would make it even easier.”

“Yeah, okay, but how would we even do that?” Rishika asked.

“Actually,” Cali piped up, “I think there’s a way we might be able to hit them all at once.”

“What do you mean?” I asked her. “Why would we want to take them on all at once?”

“If we split them up, that’s multiple battles we’d have to fight, but I think there’s a way that we can use Wade to make it easier for us.”

I almost smiled. I really appreciated how willingly Cali was jumping into this and stepping up as my Luna. I knew that the mark on her shoulder wasn’t real—not yet—but planning with her like this made me feel like we were one step closer. Even in the midst of all the darkness of this war, my heart warmed at the thought.

“Okay, what’s your idea?” I asked her.

She leaned forward. “We’ll tell Wade that there’s an Alpha meeting, make it seem like we *really* need the Ironwoods on our side—like we don’t already know what they’ve done. Then, we know Wade will go off and tell Malakai about the meeting. The chance to take out all the alliance Alphas at once might be too much for him to pass up. But if he shows up to do that, we’ll actually be there to attack *them* from behind, and we can kill Malakai.”

She looked around, her face glowing with confidence in her plan, and she looked so beautiful, it was all I could do to not sweep her into my arms and carry her upstairs to my bedroom to ravish her, right then and there.

But I managed to contain myself. “Yes. I like it. We’ll catch them in a trap they think they’ve created.”

**Episode 4094**

When Greyson looked at me with that kind of heat in his storm-grey eyes, I didn’t need to mind link to know exactly what he was thinking. I felt my whole body start to heat as I looked back at him. We were in a room filled with pack members, but we were going to make good on that look later if *I* had anything to say about it.

Around me, the rest of the pack was discussing my plan—trying to figure out how exactly to make it work.

“—and when they hit the tree line, that’s when we’ll come at them from behind,” Ravi was saying, gesturing with his hands, “as they’re coming toward the house to get the Alphas.”

“Right,” Rishika said. “I just think it’ll be easier if we use flanks, coming from two directions. That way we’re not giving anyone any chance to break off and head back into the trees.”

I listened along, feeling good about the plan I’d proposed. I knew it was a good one, and I felt like I was really starting to get a feel for this strategy thing.

Artemis scooted down the couch, so she was sitting next to me. “Hey,” she said, smiling as she knocked her shoulder into mine. “That was a good idea you came up with. I’m proud of you, Cali.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Yeah, you’re kind of becoming a strategy badass,” Lola added, leaning toward me.

I felt myself flush. “I guess I kind of am,” I admitted. It felt good to be part of things, though—as I looked around the room—I felt a familiar twinge of sadness. The pack just didn’t feel whole without Xavier, and that knowledge was always with me.

I shook my head, trying to shake off the feeling of sadness that had descended on me. If there was one thing I had learned, it was that I couldn’t control what he did. He made that more than clear back at the Samara pack house. Anyway, he had his own pack business to deal with.

“Thanks,” I said, smiling at Lola and Artemis. “It’s weird, but it feels like I just know how this stuff works.”

Artemis shrugged. “That makes sense to me. Our grandfather was a celebrated Fae general. So, this kind of tactical strategy is kind of in our blood.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” I said, feeling heartened by this connection to my family legacy. There was so much about being a Fae in a werewolf world that felt difficult—or like I wasn’t good enough—so it was awesome that this aspect of being part of the pack felt instinctive to me. It made me feel like I could finally play a role in really protecting my pack.

Greyson had moved over to talk to Ravi and Jay, but when I looked at him, he caught my eye. He raised an eyebrow and gave a subtle nod toward the stairs.

Head flooded through me, and I bit back a smile.

“I’ll be right back,” I said to Artemis and Lola as I got quickly to my feet.

I headed toward the stairs and—starting to feel my needs more urgently—took them two at a time. I headed straight for Greyson’s room and sat down on the bed, my heart thudding in my chest. It was partly from the run up the stairs, and partly from what I knew was about to happen.

A moment later I heard the sound of his footsteps in the hall. I sucked in a breath when I heard his hand on the doorknob.

He stepped into the room, his eyes blazing, kicked the door shut behind him, and stepped toward me. Without a word spoken, he wrapped his arms around my waist and guided me down onto the bed as he kissed me.

Whatever heat I’d been feeling before this moment was *nothing* to what I felt when he touched me—it was like a wildfire had engulfed me and was raging beneath my skin.

“That was the hottest thing I’ve ever seen,” he said, speaking against my lips. “I don’t know how you did it, but you’re amazing.”

“I hope we can win,” I said breathlessly.

Greyson paused and pulled himself a little away from me, so he could see my face. “The two of us together, love?” He shook his head. “We can do anything. I know that might sound arrogant or cocky, but I really believe that. I *know* it, deep in my gut.”

This was exactly what I needed to hear—it was what I’d been waiting to hear for months—and it was just what I needed after a day like the one I’d just had. And the best part was that Greyson wasn’t saying it because he knew I needed to hear it, he was saying it because he really believed it. Because—to him—it was true.

“I love you so much,” I murmured, and leaned up to press my lips against his. I was hungry for him, and I tried to pour all the love I felt into that kiss.

Greyson deepened the kiss, pressing me down into the bed. I gasped when he unbuttoned my jeans and slid his hand inside.

“Oh god,” I breathed, moaning against the pressure of his hand. My entire body was pulsing. “Don’t you have to get back downstairs? You need to talk to the other Alphas, don’t you?”

Greyson gave me a sly smile as he moved my panties aside. “I think I have time for this.”

My toes curled when he slipped a finger inside of me, followed by one more. I was already so wet, so needy for him. He circled his fingers around in slow, lazy circles as he kissed me again, his tongue plunging into my mouth.

Pleasure coursed through me, stealing my breath, and I grasped fistfuls of the blanket in both hands. He moved slowly, then began to pick up his pace.

“Greyson,” I breathed. I slid my knees apart, opening up to him, lifting my hips so he could plunge in deeper. “Oh my god.” My head fell to the side as my orgasm crested, crashing over me. “*Greyson!*”

My head was spinning like I’d just gotten off a roller coaster as I finally relaxed onto the mattress. I opened my eyes when I heard Greyson’s soft chuckle, and I saw him looking down at me, an adoring smile on his face.

“That was…” I struggled to find the word to describe the feelings coursing through me, so I just nuzzled into his chest. “*Thank you*.”

I felt the laugh rumble through his chest before I heard it.

“I’m just glad to be of service, love,” he said softly.

I looked up quickly and swatted his shoulder. “You don’t have to make it sound like I called an escort service.”

That really made him laugh. “I hope I’m getting a tip for this.”

I rolled my eyes. “If you’re good, maybe,” I said, pushing his shoulder back so he was lying flat on the bed.

He smiled but shook his head. “I wish I could—I *really* wish I could—but I actually do have to make those calls to the other Alphas. But when we get a chance to be alone again, I’m looking forward to seeing what you come up with.”

He got off the bed, and I sat up, buttoning my pants again. I missed having him next to me, and I wanted nothing more than for him to stay here. As he moved toward the door, I felt reality returning to me, and it felt cold and heavy and unwelcome. Greyson mentioning the Alphas had reminded me of something else, too, and I needed to ask him about it.

“What about Big Mac’s vision?”

He turned to me. “What about it?”

I pushed my sex-rumpled hair out of my face and tried to think, though my brain was still a little fuzzy from our encounter. “Well, we probably need to take it into consideration as we strategize.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, if we’re setting up a fake meeting as a trap for Malakai to kill the Alphas in the alliance, then aren’t we going to be playing into that vision? I mean, shouldn’t we be worried about becoming pawns in some kind of larger chess game?”

Greyson considered this for a moment, then ran a frustrated hand through his hair. “I don’t know. Honestly, that hadn’t even occurred to me.” He thought for a moment more. “I really think we could drive ourselves crazy doing this—trying to look at the situation from all these different angles and trying to figure out what that vision means. I think all we can do is just act on the credible information we already have.”

I nodded. Logically, I knew he was right, but there was a knot in my stomach that I couldn’t ignore.

“What is it?” Greyson asked. “You look anxious all of a sudden.”

“I am,” I admitted. “This plan seemed bulletproof, but is it? Or is it actually more dangerous than we think?”

**Episode 4095**

**Xavier**

Ava frowned at me, but she didn’t look angry, just confused. “What is it?”

“How are wars won?” I asked her.

She shrugged. “The strongest pack, the pack that fights the hardest, wins in a war.”

“I disagree,” I said. “I don’t think it’s always about strength. Sometimes it’s about information.”

Ava took this in, then nodded thoughtfully. “I can see that. A tactical advantage can sometimes win over brute strength.”

“Exactly. You don’t always need a huge pack with the strongest fighters. With the right information as your weapon, you can cut down the strongest Alpha.” I swallowed, thinking about the bitter truth of that in my own life. Adéluce had done exactly that. By knowing enough about me, she had known exactly what to target to take me down.

*For now*, I reminded myself sternly.

“Okay, I’ll bite,” Ava said, eyeing me warily. “What does any of this have to do with Knox?”

I couldn’t help giving her a malicious grin. “Knox is going to keep on doing what he’s doing. And he’s going to get us that information about Malakai.”

Ava narrowed her eyes. “And how is he going to get that? What’s he going to do? Just ask him?”

I laughed. “Kind of,” I admitted. “Knox is in the perfect position to play double agent.”

She shook her head. “Oh my god, Xavier. Isn’t this why you were mad at him in the first place? Because you think he’s selling us out to Malakai?”

“And this is the perfect way to prove his loyalty, which he claims to be so desperate to do. We know what kind of information he currently has access to about us, so if Malakai acts on any of that, then we can assume it came from Knox. But if we can get Knox to pass *us* details about Malakai’s plans, then he can prove that he’s a true Samara. Loyalty proven.”

Ava took this in. Her mouth twisted, like she was biting back a sharp response. “I want to disagree with this, because on its face this sounds batshit, but it’s actually kind of a good plan.”

“I know,” I said, starting to feel a bit excited about the idea. “Think about it—Knox has already been so vocal about how good allying ourselves with Malakai would be for the pack, and how much he hates having me for an Alpha. No one would even question it if he went running to the other side.”

Ava nodded, though she still looked reluctant. “You’re not wrong, but I still don’t like this.”

“Ava—”

“I don’t want to put what little family I have left at such risk, Xavier—”

“I really think—” I started, but she held up her hand to stop me.

“I know that it’s a good plan—the logic is there, I’m not saying it isn’t—but I don’t want to do it if we don’t have to, and it doesn’t seem to me like we have to. Not right now.”

I considered her words. “Okay. I’ll agree not to approach him about this right now, but—Ava—I’m going to need you to get used to the idea, because we might have to do it at some point.”

She glanced around, and I could see that she was starting to look a little wild. “And there’s really no one else who could do this?”

“Can you think of anyone?” I challenged her. “Because I sure as hell can’t.”

She was growing more agitated and had started to pace. I could feel her anxiety and the tension between us growing by the moment, and there was nothing I could do about it. I hated this. I hated that I felt like this—so far away from her with no way to bridge the gap between us. It was only a few days ago that we’d been in this house together for the first time, and I’d shown her what I had been planning for her, and her eyes had lit up at the sight of it. We had been in such a different place then—such a better place.

I knew I could count on Ava to have my back, even if we were disagreeing about my approach, but the conflict just made everything feel so much more difficult. It made everything feel cold and lifeless, like we were going through the motions, not like we were trying to build something together. But was that what I was trying to do? Or was it what I was resorting to?

Fucking Adéluce. My hands closed into fists as her image appeared in my mind. I didn’t know how much longer I could take this—her coming in and fucking up everything I was working to build in my life. How much longer was I going to have to go through this kind of shit before I could kill that vampire-witch?

I knew I needed to build up the Samara pack, but a big part of that was fostering a strong Luna relationship. The weaker my connection to Ava was, the weaker the Samaras were likely to become. I was the Samara Alpha now; I had to live up to that.

Ava was still pacing, her eyes down as she ran over all the possibilities in her head. I could see her calculating all possible outcomes and scenarios. Finally she threw up her hands in frustration. “What we really need are more pack members.”

“Ava—” I started.

“I know we had to pause that discussion because of the stuff with the Bitterfangs and the Ironwoods, but I think we need to pick it up again. This needs to be part of our security plan. There’s safety in numbers—literally.”

I thought for a moment. “You’re right.”

She stopped pacing and looked at me, stunned. “What?”

“You’re right. And I actually have some ideas about where to start.”

She gazed at me for a moment more. “Okay,” she said, then turned to leave.

“Hang on,” I called to her, surprised. “Don’t you want to know more?”

She turned back to me. “I told you, with pack stuff, I’ll have your back. You said you have a plan to get us more members—so get us more members.”

I stared after her as she left, a little shaken. I knew she was still pissed at me, but this distance just felt… chilly.

I shook my head. I needed to focus. I wasn’t sure who was in the pack house at the moment, but I knew I didn’t want to be overheard, so I headed outside into the raw winter air. It felt good on my face, and I took a few deep breaths, trying to shake off the memory of Ava’s shuttered eyes as she walked away from me.

I made a mental list of who I’d I thought would help build up the Samara pack. Redwood members were off the table, of course, for the time being. I was still smarting from that conversation with Jay, and I had no interest in repeating anything like it. I guess I never really thought Jay would leave the Redwood pack, but I was also pretty shaken by how cold he had been in his reaction to me.

The other person I would kill to have around was Colton. Not that my brother wouldn’t be pissed at me for how I handled everything when I left the Redwoods, but that wouldn’t matter. Colton was like my right hand—he’d always be with me, and I knew I could rely on my twin brother, no matter what. I had never once questioned Colton’s loyalty—so maybe that was a good place to start. He was captain of my dream team, and it would feel encouraging to start off recruiting on the right foot.

I pulled out my phone and scrolled through to Colton’s number. His phone rang once… twice… three times. Then his voicemail message clicked on.

Disappointment flooded through me. I hadn’t realized until that moment how much I wanted to hear my brother’s voice. I was feeling pretty alone, and it would have been nice to talk to Colton. I sighed as the message announcement beeped.

“Hey, Colton, it’s me. I could really use you around right now. There’s a bit of a situation going on—a few, actually. Anyway, call me back. Soon as you can.”

I ended the call and looked up. The Samara pack house was surrounded on all sides by woods, and I looked into their darkness, but I wasn’t really seeing anything. I was just thinking and trying to center myself, getting ready for the next call.

Looking back at my phone, I scrolled through my contacts for the other name I’d thought of—Gabriel. I had no idea what Gabe would say when I told him what was up, but we had known each other for years and had been friends for a long time. It was worth asking him. And if he wasn’t interested, then I was going to have to get more creative. A lot more creative.

I dialed the number, and barely halfway through the first ring, Gabe’s voice echoed into my ear.

“Why the hell are you calling me?”

**Episode 4096**

Greyson stepped back over to me and reached for me, running his fingers lightly down my cheek. “Love, it might be dangerous, but this is war. We can’t account for every risk. That’s just not possible, and we’d make ourselves crazy trying. All we can do is make the best choices we can.”

I frowned. “I guess I just wasn’t prepared for how responsible I would feel for everyone’s safety when the plan that they were carrying out was mine. If people get hurt—”

“Stop,” Greyson said firmly. “Don’t do that. You can’t go down that road. This is part of being a leader, Cali. I know what you’re feeling—I hate that my choices might end up meaning that pack members are hurt or put at risk. But if I let myself focus on that, I would get buried under that fear, and I wouldn’t be able to be the Alpha they needed.”

I nodded. “I know you’re right,” I said with a shuddering sigh. “But internalizing that is easier said than done.”

Greyson gave me a wry smile. “Tell me something I don’t know. It took me a long time to figure out how to do it. But I believe in you. You were made for this, love.”

It felt incredible to have Greyson’s support, and I stood on tiptoe to press a kiss to his lips. “You’d better get going,” I said, giving his shoulder a gentle nudge. “We have a war to win.”

He grinned and nodded. “I need to start making phone calls.”

Alone in the room, I felt my smile fade. I knew Greyson was right, but I couldn’t help feeling anxious about what was going to come next. Putting my plan into play could mean that we might gain a huge advantage over the Bitterfangs—maybe even win. Or it could mean that this conflict would escalate even further, maybe even explode into an even bigger fight than it already was. I had to be ready to reckon with whatever result came out of this, because—for better or worse—this was *my* plan. But I believed in it. I thought it could work. And I knew that it was better to act in this kind of situation than to sit around and wait for the fight to find you.

If this plan didn’t work out, then we would cross that bridge when we came to it.

I took a deep breath. Now that we had decided on a plan, I figured I might need a distraction from stressing over things I could not control. So, I made sure my pants were buttoned and my shirt was straight and walked out of Greyson’s room…

… and straight into Lola.

“Hey!” I said, smiling widely. Lola was the perfect person to provide a distraction.

She looked me over with a studied eye and burst out laughing. “So, what have you been doing with our esteemed leader, oh badass Luna?”

My face flushed. “What do you mean?”

“It’s just that I didn’t realize that it took two people to dial a phone. Or that phone calls often resulted in sex hair.”

“Shut up,” I said, blushing.

“No, no, I get it. We’ve all got that wartime heat.”

“*What?*” I exclaimed. “No! What are you talking about?”

“I mean, me and Jay just got down in the pantry,” Lola said, shrugging, without a shred of embarrassment.

I backed away from her a few steps, waving my hands. “You know, we don’t have to tell each other *everything*, Lola.”

Lola laughed. “I know. It’s just funny to see what happens to your face when I talk like that. I’m just messing with you. Like the pantry would ever be private enough to get it on. You know how this pack eats.” Her expression sobered. “Seriously, though, things are going to get intense around here, and I’m going to be here to make sure that you’re still Cali and that I’m still Lola, okay?”

I felt a warm rush of affection for my friend, and I nodded. “And that’s why I love you.”

She smiled. “What are you doing right now? You wanna hang out for a little while? It feels weird that we’re all just sitting around, waiting for some big fight to happen.” She shuddered. “I feel like I’m going to crawl out of my damn skin.”

“I’m not doing anything,” I said. “And I know what you mean. It does feel weird around here.”

She nodded. “Let’s do something. I need to chill out.”

“Yeah. Oh, wait! I have an idea. Let’s do manicures!”

Lola laughed. “Why? You want to make sure you have perfect nails for battle?”

“It’s one of those meditative activities, you know? It’ll force us to focus, but also relax,” I reasoned.

“Okay, I’m down,” Lola agreed easily. She looked down at her hands. “I haven’t been able to do anything like that in a long time.”

We headed to Lola’s room, and she headed into her bathroom to riffle through her bathroom cabinets, pulling out all the manicure essentials.

“What color do you want?” she asked, dropping an armful of clinking bottles of polish onto her bed.

I leaned over to look and chose a powder-blue with an iridescent shine.

“Good choice,” Lola said, grabbing a bottle of orange.

She started in on her cuticles like they had done something to personally offend her. I sat back against the pillows of her bed, feeling like a tween, remembering when Lola and I would gather at her house and paint our nails, do our hair and makeup, and then insist that her dads take us to the movies.

We were quiet as we each worked, and I felt the silence of the room wrap around me, safe and comfortable, the way only the silence with a good friend could feel.

I was just thinking that we should put on some music when Lola spoke.

“So,” she said, glancing up at me, “how are you doing?”

“With the war thing?” I asked. “Nervous, like everyone else.”

“No, not just the war,” she said, reaching for a nail file. “I mean, like—everything. We’ve gone through a lot recently. The summit and all the shit that went down there, and now this thing with the Bitterfangs and Ironwoods.”

I swallowed a groan. “Not to mention this whole sire bond thing.”

Lola frowned. “What do you mean by that?’

I paused, wondering how I was going to tell Lola what was going on. It *was* a secret—should I really even be talking about it? But I felt like I needed to talk to someone about it—preferably someone who wasn’t directly involved and could maybe see the situation with fresh eyes.

I hadn’t tried mind linking with Greyson since Lucian had unexpectedly spoken into my head, and I didn’t realize how much I would miss that easy communication with my mate. And I couldn’t help but focus on the idea that Greyson hadn’t tried either. It made me wonder if he was more upset by all of it than he was letting on.

And I wondered what had happened when he had tried mind linking with Elle. Did Elle say anything back to him?

“Cali?” Lola asked again.

I took a deep breath. “Okay, buckle up,” I warned, and let it all out, pouring out the whole story, along with all my worries and anxieties. The sire bond, the mind linking, wondering if Elle responded, what happened with Dayton and Helix, Elle and Helix, what that might mean for Greyson and Elle, and whatever that could mean for Greyson and me.

When I finished, Lola was just staring at me, the file frozen above her nail.

“Holy shit!” she finally said, exploding into sound once again. Her eyes were wide as dinner plates. “That is *so* much, Cali!”

“I know,” I said grimly. Because—yeah—I did know.

“You could have told me about some of this,” she reminded me. I mean—I’m definitely here for you, but… You know Greyson loves you, girl.”

“Of course I do,” I said slowly, “but how can this sire bond be screwing with my mate bond? I mean, isn’t the mate bond supposed to be *the* bond? What if this sire bond breaks my bond with Greyson?”

Lola looked at me, surprised. “Is that something you’re really worried about?”

“I don’t know,” I said, my heart rate starting to tick up. “Sometimes it feels like something is pulling Greyson and Elle together in a way that I can’t stop.”

Lola didn’t respond to that. She looked at me, like she was waiting for me to go on, but I didn’t know what else to say, or how to say it.

All I knew was that I had already lost Xavier, and that had nearly destroyed me. And it still hurt, every damn time I looked at him. Was I going to lose Greyson, too? The thought sent shivers down my spine. I just didn’t think I would survive losing another mate.

**Episode 4097**

**Xavier**

I gripped my phone, immediately on edge. I was taken aback by Gabe’s tone and his harsh words—I hadn’t expected that.

“Well, why the hell did you answer?” I demanded.

“Oh, I was just curious to see why the black sheep of the Redwood pack would be calling me,” he said, and I didn’t think I was mistaking the mocking edge to his voice.

I gritted my teeth. “I think you mean the *Alpha* of the *Samara* pack,” I corrected him, working to keep my voice tightly controlled.

There was a moment of silence, and then, to my surprise, Gabe started to laugh.

“What the hell—”

“I’m just screwing with you, man,” he said lightly. “I mean, I do think that you’ve been a pretty big dick to the Redwoods, but you’re dick, so that comes as no surprise to me. And—honestly—what you do in your packs isn’t really any of my business.”

“God, Gabe, you’re such an asshole,” I said, shaking my head.

“Though, I guess I am curious,” he added.

“Curious about what?” I asked warily.

“*About what?*” He laughed. “About what made you want to blow up your whole life like that.”

I felt my shoulders tense. “Who said I blew it up? I left the Redwood pack, and look at me now.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s what I mean,” he said thoughtfully. “I mean, we’re talking major life changes. You went from being a foot soldier in the Redwood pack to being an Alpha with a Luna at his side pretty damn quick.”

I looked out at the trees, which stood dark against the sky. I knew what I had done, and I knew why I’d done it, but no one else in the world knew what had motivated me, and I had a sudden realization of just how incredibly bad my actions must look to anyone outside the situation. For so long, I’d been so worried about how much I’d hurt those close to me, I really hadn’t given much thought to public perception, but—hearing Gabe ask about it—I could see how badly my actions were being perceived by outsiders.

I’d spent all my time worrying about how the hell I was going to get out from under Adéluce’s influence, but I realized that I needed to start thinking about how I was going to make up for everything I’d done once I managed to get free of her.

I shook my head. That wasn’t my most pressing worry at the moment, and I wasn’t going to say any of that to Gabe. As much as I wanted people to understand what I was going through, I knew that it was impossible. That was an explanation Adéluce would never let me get into.

“None of that matters,” I said quickly. “I’ve always known that I was meant to be an Alpha, and now I am.”

“Okay,” he said easily, accepting this explanation. “So, why the hell are you calling me?”

I took a deep breath. “I want you to join the Samara pack.”

Gabe’s end of the line went quiet, and I felt my heart start to pound. I had known my friend for a long time—we had been through a lot together—but I still had no idea what he was going to say in response to my request. There was a time—back when I was on my own and Colton and I were bounty hunting for cash—when Gabe and I were so in sync that I could read every one of my friend’s signs, even down to these kinds of rare moments of quiet. But that was no longer true, and those days were a long time past. I had hoped to get back into regular touch with Gabe after we ran into him in New Orleans, but then Adéluce had come along and screwed that up for me, too—her curse had been all I’d been able to think about for a long time.

“Gabe?” I pressed.

Finally, he spoke.

“Come on, man, you know I could never kneel to you. I’m not looking for a pack, or an Alpha. I’ve been a Rogue for a long time, and that’s not something I’m looking to change.”

My stomach dropped. This was not how I had wanted this conversation to go. Like the disappointment when Colton didn’t pick up, this hurt more than I was expecting it to. Gabe had been in my life for a long time, and I hadn’t realized how much I’d been counting on him to come through for me.

“I’m not asking you to kneel,” I said. “You’re a Rogue with the Redwoods right now, so just come be a Rogue with the Samaras instead.”

“Not to mention,” he went on, ignoring me, “I’m not sure how the rest of the Samaras would feel about me being mated to a vampire. I know some wolves are cool with it, but I get that’s not everyone’s cup of tea. I don’t know if you need that additional drama while you’re trying to rebuild this thing.”

“That wouldn’t be a problem,” I said quickly. “My pack looks to me to take the lead, and you know I don’t have a problem with Mikah.”

“Yeah, I know. That’s good to know,” he said. Then he grew quiet again.

“But I guess it doesn’t matter enough.” I felt the heaviness of my words.

“I don’t think so,” he said, and I could practically *hear* the somber look on his usually laughing face when he spoke. I guess I could still gauge a few cues from my friend.

I pushed a hand through my hair with a sigh. “Okay.” I needed to get off this call. It was bumming me out, and if Gabriel wasn’t going to work out, then I needed to start brainstorming other ideas—fast. “It was good to hear from you, man. Tell Mikah—”

“Listen to me a second, Xavier,” Gabe broke in.

“What?” I asked shortly.

He sighed. “You’re my friend, so I can come help you.”

I paused. “What do you mean?” I didn’t want to assume anything, so I waited for him to fill in the blanks.

Gabriel made an impatient noise. “I mean exactly what I said. I’ll come help you. I’ll stay with the Samaras. A Rogue with you instead of the Redwoods. But I’ll have to talk about this with Mikah.”

This gave me pause. I wondered if Mikah would try to stop Gabe from coming. The vampire had a friendship with Cali, and maybe even with Greyson at this point. But Gabe was still talking, so I tried to focus.

“You and I used to be partners, man, and we fought together. I think that’s a pretty damn good asset for any war you might be facing right now.”

“Hell yeah it is,” I agreed.

“But I want to be really clear, man,” he went on, “I’m not joining up under you. This isn’t the first step to me becoming a Samara or anything. I’m just coming there to be a friend to you, and a partner.”

“That’s great,” I said, and I meant it. “That’s enough. I’ll take it. I know you’ll always hold your own.”

“Damn straight I will.” Then he chuckled. “Your brother is going to be so pissed about this when he finds out.”

I grinned. “Well, that’s just an added bonus, then, isn’t it?”

We both laughed at the idea of Greyson freaking out when he heard about Gabriel coming to back me up. That was going to come as a shock for my brother, who was used to the world coming to him. This was what I needed—especially after the interaction I’d had with Jay. I needed to talk to a friend, someone who had my back and was willing to give me the benefit of the doubt. Talking to Gabriel was a reminder that I still had people in the world who cared about me—I still had friends.

My phone beeped, and when I looked down and saw the name flashing on my screen, I rolled my eyes.

“Speak of the douchebag himself, that’s Greyson calling now,” I said.

“Okay, listen, good talk, and we’ll head out immediately. See you soon.”

“Yeah, see you soon. Thanks, man.”

“Later.”

When I ended the call with Gabe and clicked over to Greyson, he didn’t even wait for a greeting before speaking.

“We have a plan. We’re going to tell Wade we’re holding an Alpha meeting for the alliance, but the rest of the alliance packs will get together a few hours earlier to work through a battle plan to ambush the Bitterfangs and Ironwoods and kill Malakai when they come to attack the meeting—as I’m sure they will. All the other packs have already agreed.”

He said this all flatly, like he was reading from a memo.

“Great. Glad to hear that I was your last call,” I said sourly.

There was a brief pause. “Technically, you were my first call, but you hung up on me.”

I didn’t bother to respond to that. “What time is Wade planning to meet?”

“Midnight.”

**Episode 4098**

I waved my hands as I walked out of Lola’s room, trying to make the light-blue polish on my nails finish drying. Our manicure session hadn’t been quite as calming as I’d hoped—I still felt pretty keyed up—but I supposed that was to be expected, and as I walked into the hall, I knew it was time to get my game face on. Even if the sire bond was screwing around with my mate bond, none of that mattered. Not now. Right now, I could fight for what I wanted—for what was mine. And Greyson was *mine*. If I thought Xavier wanted me to fight for him, I would.

I stopped short in the middle of the hallway, thinking suddenly of the way he’d kissed me before the Luna ceremony at the summit. I put a finger to my lips, remembering the pressure of his there. *Could* it be that he wanted me to fight for him?

*No.* I gave my head a hard shake. I couldn’t think of that right now.

“Hey there.”

I looked up to see Greyson stepping into the hallway from the stairs, and I smiled at him. “Hi. Are you done with your calls?”

He nodded. “All but the one. I wanted to talk to you before this last one.”

“Oh, okay,” I said, somewhat surprised. “What’s going on?”

“I only have Wade left to call, but I’m not sure what to say to him, so I wanted to check in with my master strategist.”

I felt myself blush. “Well, let’s wait and see how my plan plays out before we start throwing that title around,” I said. But it felt good to hear him think so highly of my plan. Of me.

He shook his head as he took my hand and pulled me down the hall and into his room. “Hey, I want to see that sexy confidence back again,” he said, shutting the door.

“I’m working on it,” I said with a laugh as I dropped down on his bed. “So, what do you want to talk about?”

“All the other Alphas are on board with your plan. So, what do I say to Wade to make sure he ends up where we want him to?”

I thought about that for a moment, running over possible scenarios in my head. “Okay, well, Wade needs to expect that he’s only going to be meeting with the Alphas and the Lunas of each pack, right?”

“Right,” Greyson agreed.

“And that we’re desperate for his help. I think making sure he sees the rest of the alliance as vulnerable is important. You need to make him think that he’s the make-or-break element to the alliance—he’s the linchpin here.” I paused for a moment, thinking again, and found my thoughts forming more clearly as I walked them through to their logical conclusions. “He has to see us as weak and disorganized—vulnerable, like I said. We don’t want him to know that we’ve been talking or agreeing on anything. When you’re talking, make it sound like this meeting is kind of it.”

“What do you mean?” Greyson asked.

“Like a last-ditch effort you’re making to bond the alliance back together.”

Greyson nodded. “Yeah, that makes sense.”

I grinned at him. “Do you think you can sound credibly incompetent when you talk to him?”

He looked surprised for a moment, but he smiled back at me. “Oh, it’ll be a stretch, but I’ll give it a try.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone.

“Hang on,” I said, shocked, getting to my feet. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?” he asked calmly, scrolling through his contacts for Wade’s number.

“Wait, you’re doing this *now*?”

Greyson shrugged. “Why not? No time like the present. Now or never. Insert whatever cliché you want.” He dialed Wade’s number and put the phone on speaker.

Still stunned, I sat back down beside him and closed my mouth, my heart hammering in my chest. I had not expected to be on the call when Greyson tipped over the first domino of my plan, but here I was.

“What’s up, Greyson?”

Wade’s voice came through the speaker of Greyson’s phone, sounding tinny and far away, but remarkably casual for someone who was actively stabbing us all in the back.

Greyson shot a look at me, winked, and looked back at his phone. “Thank god you answered, Wade,” he said, making his voice quaver in a way I’d never heard before. He sounded small and scared. “We’re in trouble, man.”

“Whoa,” Wade said, sounding surprised. “What’s going on?”

“We’ve got to meet. Tonight. As soon as possible,” Greyson went on, sounding almost hysterical now. “Shit’s going sideways—”

“Hold on, Greyson. Take a breath. Tell me what’s going on,” Wade instructed.

Greyson took a shuddering breath. “Take a guess, Wade. The trash alliance is going to fall apart. It’s a fucking mess. No one’s willing to do a single damn thing. I managed to get everyone to agree to come to a planning meeting tonight, and that was like pulling teeth. It’s just Alphas and Lunas. You missed the last one, but there was an ambush, and Xavier blamed Lucian for it, and now the whole thing is going straight to hell.”

“Oh god,” Wade said, sounding almost sympathetic. It made me sick to my stomach to hear him.

“Come on, man. I need to know that I can count on you,” Greyson pressed.

I stared at Greyson with wide eyes. I couldn’t get over how believable he was. I never knew he was such a good actor. Nothing about the situation was funny, but I really wanted to burst out laughing at the absurdity of the whole thing. Even Greyson’s body was acting, though Wade couldn’t see that part—his shoulders were slumping forward, his head dropped down, and his expression was that of a scolded puppy. It was terrible and amazing, all at once.

I pressed my lips together to keep myself quiet.

“Yeah, man, I’ll do whatever I can. Whatever you need, man. We have to take those Bitterfang bastards down, right?”

I rolled my eyes, feeling anger coursing through me. He had a lot of nerve, talking like that.

“Yeah, exactly,” Greyson said, not breaking character for even a moment to share a glance with me. “Thanks for coming tonight. I think you could be the thing that finally binds us together. And we need it. You know that we all have such a complicated history, but you have a clean slate. That’s why we need you, Wade. You can come in, be dispassionate, and prove to the rest of these alliance bastards that we have to work together because that’s the pragmatic thing to do.”

“Yep, that’s right. I can totally do that,” Wade said. “Come in and clean house. You can count on me. I’m in. I’m sorry I missed the last meeting—I would have liked to have been there, but we—uh—had some pack issues. I’m sure you understand what that’s like, as a fellow Alpha.”

At this, Greyson looked over at me and shook his head, finally disgusted enough to show it. He pretended to retch, and I had to put my hand over my mouth to stifle my laughter.

“Yeah, of course I do,” Greyson said smoothly. “An Alpha’s work is never done.”

“That’s right,” Wade said, chuckling.

“Okay, I’m glad you’re in. That’s a big weight off my shoulders. Honestly, I was at the end of my rope—I didn’t know what I was going to do.” Greyson made his voice sound carefully encouraged. “I’ll text you all the details, but the meeting’s at midnight tonight, Redwood pack house.”

“I’m there,” Wade said. “Don’t worry, Greyson. I’ll take care of you.”

Greyson shot me a knowing look. “I believe you, Wade. See you then.”

He ended the call, and I threw my hands into the air.

“You were amazing!”

Greyson chuckled as he tossed his phone onto the bedside table. “Thanks—”

“No, I don’t think you understand—you were *amazing*! Like, that performance was Academy Award-worthy! I have no idea how you did it, but you convinced me!” I pounced onto Greyson and pushed him backward onto the bed as he laughed, offering up no resistance.

“I have a lot of hidden skills, Ms. Hart. I’m offended that you think you know everything there is to know about me,” he said with a sly grin.

“Oh, I would never presume.” I moved myself upward along his body, so I was looking right into his storm-grey eyes. “So, Mr. Evers, you said you were looking forward to *my* turn—”

For a moment he looked a little confused, like he didn’t know what I was referring to. Then the penny dropped, and his eyes lit up. “I *did* mention something like that, didn’t I?”

I nodded and leaned forward so I could whisper in his ear. “You did. Now don’t you move…”

**Episode 4099**

**Ava**

I stormed up the stairs and slammed into the room that Xavier and I had chosen for ourselves. I looked around the giant space, taking in the high ceilings and the wide windows—hating it all. I was furious—furious at Xavier, furious at my idiot cousin Knox, and furious at myself. Nothing was going the way it should. Not one single damn thing. Why couldn’t everyone just do what they were supposed to do to make the Samara the pack I knew it could be?

It felt like every time I turned around there were the most ridiculous obstacles for us to face. I had thought—I had *convinced* myself—that once Xavier became Alpha, it would all be smooth sailing. That once we had a strong leader at the head of our pack, everything else would fall into place.

What a crock of shit that had turned out to be.

I leaned against the wall, the energy of my fury waning. I thought of what my aunt had said to me at the summit. On some level, I agreed that a baby would cement the legacy of the Samara pack, but—I just didn’t know. Was that something I was prepared for? And did I want to take that step with an Alpha who was being *such* a huge asshole?

Or was a baby exactly what Xavier needed to ground him?

I shook my head. I was going about this all wrong. I shouldn’t be thinking about a baby as a tool to change someone’s behavior. That wasn’t a healthy way to approach being a mom, or a realistic expectation to put on a baby.

The thing was, I did want to be a mother… someday. And maybe it would be exactly what Xavier and I needed… It was tempting.

But right now, I had other family to focus on. Which brought me around to one of the biggest thorns in my side—what the hell was I going to do with Knox?

I didn’t think Xavier was wrong about him—Knox did need to prove himself. Both to Xavier and to the rest of the pack. He had lied and cheated and put his own needs above the needs of the pack, which was the opposite of what a dedicated pack member did, never mind a strong Alpha. But I was torn—he was basically the only family I had left, and—as much as he sucked—that meant something to me.

I looked around the bare room. I would have absolutely *killed* for a bed to fall into right now. All I wanted to do was shove my face into a pillow and scream.

I jumped when I heard the knock at the door. “Go away!” I snarled. I did *not* have it in me to deal with Xavier at the moment.

“That’s fine,” a voice said, and I was surprised to recognize that it belonged to Marissa. “I’ll leave if you really want me to, but I do think you are going to want to see this.”

Moving quickly toward the door, I pulled it open. “Sorry,” I breathed. “I—I thought you were someone else.”

She raised her eyebrows but didn’t ask who I thought she was. Instead, she stepped aside to show me the long box behind her.

“What is it?” I asked, flummoxed.

“It’s a bed,” Marissa said. “I think you and our Alpha probably need one, right? I had it delivered.”

My hands curled into fists at my side at the thought of Xavier and me sharing a bed. But I *had* just thought about how badly I wanted one, and her timing was impeccable, so I just gave Marissa a short nod. “Right. Thanks.” Then I stepped forward and grasped the box, pulling hard to move it into the room.

Marissa moved to the other end and shoved, and together we got the thing in. “I’ll be honest, that wasn’t *quite* the reaction I was expecting from you, Ava,” she said.

I could only shrug. I’d told Xavier I would have his back with the pack, and I meant it. That included not gossiping about him, so I kept my mouth shut.

Marissa still looked confused, but she didn’t press for any more answers. Once we’d gotten the box into the room, she moved to open it, but I stopped her.

“It’s fine, I’ve got it.”

Marissa gave me an incredulous look and started to laugh. “Are you kidding? I’m not going to make you build this bed by yourself. What are you doing, Ava? Punishing yourself?”

“No,” I said quickly. “No, I was just saying…” I trailed off as Marissa started to pull the metal pieces of the bed frame from the box and laid them out on the floor. Once the box was unpacked, she hunted around for the instructions and found them in a small bag filled with brackets and screws.

“So,” she started, not looking at me and clearly trying to keep her tone casual, “everything going okay?”

I hesitated. As much as I would have loved to have someone in the pack to confide in, I had to remember that I was the Luna. And that meant something. I couldn’t just go around talking about the cracks in my relationship with Xavier like it was any other fight between a couple—like it didn’t mean anything. It did mean something. Our relationship was significant, and not just to us. If news of our fight got out—and spread—that could have ramifications for the entire pack. That could decrease trust and undermine confidence. It could fracture us.

I shook my head. “Oh, you know, this thing with the Bitterfangs and everything. Tensions are just running kind of high.”

Marissa had been unpacking the screws and laying them out in neat rows, but she paused and looked over at me, her gaze level. “You know, I get it if you don’t want to tell me everything, but I do want you to know that I’m your friend.”

I was surprised by the warm feeling spreading in my chest. It was sort of surreal to have friends again. I had, a long time ago, back when the pack was strong and my relationship with Xavier didn’t feel so tenuous. Back when I had family around that I could rely on, and I didn’t feel like I was fighting so hard just to survive. But that felt like it was a long, long time ago. Lifetimes ago.

But I had Marissa. I had Perrie. I had my *pack.*

I smiled at Marissa. “Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Marissa nodded and got to work. We worked for a while in companionable silence, speaking only when one of us needed the other to hold part of the frame higher, or to hand over the small wrench. I was glad to have something to take my attention off all the drama happening, and, as I glanced up at Marissa’s profile, I wondered if she had arranged this on purpose, just for that reason.

“I think we’re almost done,” I said as I stepped back, looking at our work.

There was the sound of someone clearing their throat, and I looked up to see Knox standing in the doorway of the room. He was clearly waiting for me, and I had to bite back a groan when I saw him.

Marissa looked at Knox, then at me. “I can step out, if you need to talk?”

I nodded. “Yeah, thanks. And thanks for your help with the bed.”

She smiled and walked out. Knox stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.

“What do you want?” I demanded, crossing my arms over my chest.”

Knox cleared his throat. “I’ve been doing some thinking…”

“Yeah? And?” I pressed when he didn’t go on.

“About what Xavier said…”

I was surprised to see that he actually looked almost contrite. “Okay?” I asked again. I wasn’t about to apologize for Xavier’s actions, if that’s why he’d come looking for me.

“The thing is—and I hate saying this—but he’s not wrong. I need to prove myself to everyone,” Knox went on.

I stared at my cousin, eyes wide with shock. I couldn’t believe he had just said that. Honestly, I never thought I’d see the day when he’d admit that. “I have to say, Knox, that’s the last thing I would have expected to hear from you,” I said honestly.

“Actually, there’s something I was thinking, too,” he went on, looking uncharacteristically uncomfortable.

“What is it?” I asked.

Instead of answering right away, Knox stepped into the room and picked up the Allen wrench Marissa had left on the floor. He began to tighten the screws on the bed frame. I figured he was more interested in avoiding my gaze than he was in actually trying to help.

“God, Knox, just spit it out. What are you thinking?”

Knox stopped messing with the screws and looked up at me. “I think I can spy on Malakai. And report back. Do you think Xavier would trust me enough for a mission like that?”

**Episode 4100**

**Greyson**

Intrigued—and turned on—I looked up at Cali. Her smile was playful, and her eyes were flashing as she straddled my hips. Fuck, I loved the feel of having her there. She kissed my lips, then moved across my jawline, then to my ear, where she nibbled my earlobe hard enough that I sucked in a breath. I was already semi-hard; how could I not be?

I heard her laugh, her breath warm in my ear. Then she began to move her kisses downward, her lips on my neck, then my collarbone, my chest, her mouth hot even through the fabric of my shirt.

“Cali,” I murmured, moving my hands up to encircle her waist, “you know you’re driving me crazy—”

Quick as lightning, she grabbed my hands and pinned them beneath her knees. “I *told* you not to move,” she said, her voice sizzling with heat. She rolled her hips against mine, and I felt myself growing even harder. “And no touching.”

Oh, so it was going to be like that?

She kept her mouth moving down, flipping up my shirt so she could trail her lips along my chest, which felt like it was burning with heat. My whole body felt like it had been lit on fire, and my hands twitched, wanting so much to grab her and put her right where I wanted her. The impulse was almost overwhelming. I wanted to tear her clothes off and make her shake with want—basically everything she was doing to me.

“*Cali*,” I said again, but this time my voice was a warning.

“Now, now,” she scolded, all the while grinding against my cock.

My eyes were hazy with want, but I gazed up at her, captivated by her confidence. It was like when she had come up with the plan to ambush the Bitterfangs and Ironwoods—in this moment, she just looked completely sure of herself. There was no second-guessing as she sat up and began to unbuckle my belt. The buttons of my pants were next, and she moved off me so she could slide them down my hips. Then she pulled her hair up into a messy bun, and my mouth went dry.

*Fuck*, I needed to touch her.

“Cali—”

The words stalled in my throat the second she took my cock into her mouth. My eyes closed, and I groaned as pleasure coursed through me like a shot of the best bourbon I’d ever had in my life.

I reached out for her head, to encourage her movement, but she immediately grabbed my hand in a tight grip. She pulled her mouth away, her lips already looking plump. She pushed my hand down into the mattress.

“I said *no touching*,” she said sharply. “You do that again, and there will be consequences.”

I grinned. “Maybe that’s exactly what I’m looking for, love.”

Keeping one hand locked with mine, she put the other at the base of my cock. I swore when her mouth closed around me again, stroking up and down in rhythm with her mouth. There was nothing like having her mouth on me.

Stars exploded behind my eyes as her hands and mouth and tongue played over my body, moving with certainty and confidence, never pausing to ask permission—which I would’ve granted in a heartbeat, anyway—just taking and giving and pressing and rubbing as the pressure within me started to mount higher and higher.

“Oh god. *Fuck*.” And then I was coming, spilling into her mouth as she greedily drank me down.

I was panting, breathing hard, my head still spinning as I came down from that high. When I was finally still beneath her, she gave my hand a squeeze, then crawled up the bed to nestle into my arms.

“Hi,” she murmured.

“Hi,” I said. Leaning forward, I pulled her to me for a kiss. It was slow, languid, and exactly what I needed. I knew I had so much to do, but I just felt so happy and content, and I was allowing myself a moment to escape the heaviness of everything around us. I broke the kiss, pulling her into the crook of my arm as I draped the blanket over us.

We were quiet for a few seconds, then I felt Cali tense in my arms.

I looked down at her. “Cali? I can practically feel you thinking about something. What is it?”

“It’s the mind link thing,” she said. She gave her head a small shake. “I just tried to talk to you and remembered that I couldn’t. I guess I’ve gotten so used to just… having you in my head.”

“Oh, love,” I said, smoothing down her hair.

“It’s just that—on top of everything else—I’m worried about our mate bond,” she said, her voice so low the words were barely audible, like she didn’t want to say it out loud.

It was clear that she was feeling really shaken by this, and I felt terrible about it. I put a finger beneath her chin and lifted it so I could look into her eyes, then I leaned toward her and pressed a kiss to her lips.

“I get it,” I said softly. “I hate that I have to pause before reaching out to you through our link. But it’s just a temporary obstacle. Nothing will ever come between us.”

She nodded, but when she smiled, there was something sad about it, and I felt my stomach twist.

I really believed that Cali and I belonged together—I’d always believed that, from the moment I first met her—but I had to admit that Xavier’s absence in our lives was as much of an issue as his presence had ever been.

But I didn’t want to say any of this to Cali; there was a part of me that believed that saying something aloud would make it more real, so I kept it to myself. I pulled Cali close to me for a minute longer, knowing that my moment of escape was coming to an end. Reality was calling, and I had to return to it.

“When this stuff with the Bitterfangs is wrapped up, we are going to figure out what is going on with the mind link. I promise you.”

She nodded and looked up at me. “We didn’t have a chance to talk about it with Lucian glowering at everyone, but did Elle respond when you tried to mind link with her?”

“No, she didn’t.” I frowned to myself. Elle hadn’t responded, but I couldn’t stop myself from remembering how strangely she’d been acting, and I had to wonder if she had, in fact, heard me when I spoke through the mind link.

Cali took a deep breath. “Okay.” She sat up. “You’re right. We have to focus on what’s in front of us right now, and what’s in front of us is this Ironwood-Bitterfang trap. We should see if there’s anything else we need to do to prep for the meetup with the other packs.”

I smiled and sat up, too. “Whatever you say, Master Strategist.”

She just laughed and tossed me my pants.

I headed for the bathroom to take a quick shower, and when I was done, we headed downstairs. At the bottom of the steps I saw Gabriel and Mikah, and I was surprised to see they were both carrying their bags and headed for the front door.

“You two going somewhere?” I asked.

Gabriel and Mikah stopped and exchanged a look I couldn’t read. I didn’t know Gabriel all that well, but he’d been pretty handy to have around, and this wasn’t exactly an opportune time to lose fighters.

“Um, this is awkward,” Mikah muttered.

But Gabriel looked right at me. “We’re joining up with Xavier.”

I stared at him. I knew I shouldn’t have been shocked. Gabriel was Xavier’s friend, after all, but I couldn’t help but feel like this had come out of nowhere.

“What about Tabitha?” Cali asked, sounding concerned.

“She’s staying here with Adair,” Mikah assured her. “She’s fine. She’ll be well looked after.”

Gabriel looked at me with a shrug. “No hard feelings, man. It’s been nice here, but Xavier’s my boy. He asked me to come, so I’m going. It’s been good here—there’s nothing you or anyone else did. It’s just time for us to head out. You get it.”

I did get it, and there didn’t seem to be anything to say in response to it, so I just nodded. “Sure.”

At least they’d be on our side of the war, when and if it came to that, so that was something.

“Take care,” Mikah said, waving awkwardly as he and Gabriel headed out the door. “Okay, *that* was uncomfortable,” he said, just as the door shut behind them.

Cali and I stood looking after them in shocked silence for a moment.

Finally she turned to me. “Are you okay?”  
 I shrugged. “I’m fine.”

I was fine—or I would be—but I could admit to myself that seeing Gabriel and Mikah leaving had been a blow. I wasn’t technically losing them in the battle in the larger scheme, but it still stung. I had never expected anyone to leave my pack for my brother’s—even if Gabriel and Xavier had a history.

It felt strange, and—even though the pack house was still jammed full of people—it felt strangely empty without them. Everything had just felt settled in my pack, and now nothing did. Why would Gabriel shake things up like this now? Was this going to be something I was going to have to worry about? Was Xavier going to start poaching Redwoods next?

**Episode 4101**

Greyson *said* he was fine, but I didn’t buy it. It wasn’t hard to tell that he was more upset about the news of Gabriel and Mikah’s departure than he was letting on.

“You’re sure you’re okay?” I asked again.

“Yeah.”

His answer was too quick.

“Are you bothered because Gabriel is siding with Xavier?” I asked. “They *are* old friends—”

Greyson shook his head. “No, it’s not Gabriel in particular,” he said, rubbing a hand along his jaw. “I know he and Xavier go way back. It’s just… The idea that my brother is poaching from the Redwood house at all is just weird. I mean, I get why he’s doing it—the Samaras are a small pack. They were small to begin with, and not all of them came back after they scattered. They’ve been struggling. It makes sense for him to try to get people from us to boost their membership, but it does nothing for the alliance. Strengthening one pack to weaken another?” He shook his head. “Where’s the logic in that?”

“But Gabriel was never an official member of the pack,” I said. “The only reason he and Mikah were even here was because they wanted to keep an eye on Tabitha—”  
 “I know that,” Greyson said quickly. “I know. But it’s more the idea that Xavier would do this. *Now*.”

I nodded, but I was thinking about when Xavier had kissed me at the summit, and how he had pulled me from the car. I took a deep breath. “I think we’re all having a hard time understanding Xavier’s actions and motives lately,” I said quietly. “But the good news is that nothing has really changed.”

Greyson looked down at me. “What do you mean?”

“The Samaras are in the alliance. Gabriel and Mikah will still be on our side, fighting on the side of the alliance. And they did tell you what they were doing.”

Greyson scoffed. “Yeah, they told me, all right. Only because I caught them sneaking out with their suitcases. Did it look like they were headed upstairs to find me and let me know what they were up to?”

I winced. “Okay, yeah, good point.” I knew I needed to find another positive angle to this. “But in the end, the alliance isn’t going to lose out on their skills.”

“I know,” Greyson said, but his agreement was grudging. He shot me a sidelong look. “You know, you’re a better Master Strategist than I think you even know.”

I laughed. “Please stop calling me that.”

He grinned. “Why? It’s true.”

I gave him a playful swat on the arm. “I’m good at making toast in the morning, but you’re not calling me a toast master.” I really didn’t mind him calling me that, I only hoped I’d keep living up to his estimation of me. And, in my heart of hearts, I wished that he would just call me his Luna.

“Toast master, huh?” Greyson said, pretending to think about it. “Has a ring to it. Anyway.” He shook his head. “I have some other things on my mind, I suppose.”

I nodded. “Listen, I know you have a lot of things to worry about, Greyson, and I hate to bring it up right now, but what about the sire bond?”

Greyson pushed a hand through his light hair. “Cali, I was thinking about plans for the war, not plans for Lucian and Elle.”

“I know, I get that,” I said, “but I just wonder if the mind link problem we’re having is going to become a dangerous issue if we go into battle while it’s still messed up. What if we can’t communicate clearly? Or what if I think you’re giving me an order, but it’s actually Lucian?”

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “Well, I’d like to think that you would know the difference between my voice and the princeling’s.”

I rolled my eyes. “Greyson, all I’m saying is that it’s going to make things confusing—and maybe dangerous—in the heat of the moment.”

He took this in and nodded. “Yeah, you might be right. What do you think we should do about it?”

I thought for a moment. “Maybe we should start by talking to Big Mac. See if she knows anything about the sire bond, or if she has any suggestions.”

Greyson took my hand in his. “Okay. That sounds good to me. We might as well ask her, anyway—though I’m not sure she has any more insight into the sire bond than we do.”

“Well, we have almost *no* insight into it,” I pointed out. “All we know about it is what Lucian’s told us. And we both know how reliable *that* source is.”

Greyson chuckled as he laced his fingers through mine. “That’s true.”

We headed back up the stairs and down the hall to Big Mac’s room. When we got there, the door was partially open, and we could see the witch inside. She was sitting on the bed, and spread across the duvet were dozens of leather-bound ledgers, covers open to show pages filled with her cramped scrawl.

I knocked softly on the open door. “Big Mac?”

The witch looked up and scowled. “Oh, it’s you two,” she said, looking characteristically displeased to see us. “What do you want?”

“We wondered if you had a minute—” I started hesitantly.

“Do I *look* like I have a minute?” she snapped, gesturing at the open books on her bed. “I’m busy.”

“What are you doing?” Greyson asked, looking over the open ledgers.

“Not that it’s any of your business, *Alpha*,” she said sarcastically, “but I’m trying to balance my books for the moonshine sales during the summit.”

“You balance your books?” I asked incredulously. I didn’t know why that surprised me, but it did.

“Of course I do,” she said. “I run a small business, and I pay taxes. I’m three cents short somewhere, and it’s pissing me off,” she said hotly. She looked up again. “Now, what do you want from me?”

I cleared my throat. “We had a question about the sire bond—”

“Stop right there,” she said, holding up her hand. “Sire bond problems are werewolf problems. Do I need to point out to you two that *I* am a witch? Not a werewolf?”

I took a deep breath. I knew I had to tread carefully here. It was always a dance with Big Mac. I always had to be careful of what I said to her in order to keep on her good side. “That’s the reason we came to you first,” I said cautiously. “You’re always so knowledgeable in the supernatural realm that you’re always the first person we trust to turn to when something comes up.”

Big Mac looked at me for a long moment, then she rolled her eyes. “Stop kissing my ass, Fae.”

I blinked. Had I been that obvious? I’d thought witches liked compliments.

Big Mac crossed her arms over her chest. “Okay, what is it you want to know about the sire bond?” She was looking at me, but her eyes kept straying down to the open ledger in front of her, so I knew she was itching to get back to her bookkeeping.

“It’s about the mind link,” Greyson said. “It’s been getting all crossed up with Lucian and Elle.”

Big Mac eyed Greyson, then me. “*Crossed up*? What do you mean?”

“We can all hear each other,” I supplied.

Big Mac’s eyes widened, and she looked genuinely surprised by this. “Wow. That’s weird. Even for you two.”

She’d stopped looking down at her books, which meant that we’d caught her interest. That was good, though it was worrying that even Big Mac thought this was weird—that witch had seen everything.

“Do you think there’s anything you can do to help it?” I asked. “Like a magic filter or something?”

Big Mac thought for a moment. “I would suggest talking to Kira. I’ve never even heard of such a thing. I’d have to do some research. Start by asking Kira.”

“Asking me what?”

Greyson and I turned to see Kira standing behind us in the hallway.

“Oh,” I said, flustered, “we wanted to know—”

“Take your discussion elsewhere, if you please,” Big Mac commanded. “I’m busy here.”

She was already buried in her ledgers, and Greyson and I stepped out of the room, joining Kira in the hallway.

“What’s going on?” the younger witch asked.

I gave her a quick rundown of what was going on with our mind link, but when I was done, Kira looked as confused as Big Mac had looked.

“I’ve never heard of anything like that before,” she said. “Sorry.”

I rubbed my eyes, feeling frustrated. “When you did the fake Luna mark on my back, it enhanced the mate bond with Greyson,” I pointed out.

Greyson raised a brow at me.

Kira shrugged. “So?”

I swallowed hard. I hadn’t wanted to bring this up in front of Greyson, but I was tired of hitting brick walls. “Is there anything you can do to make the Luna mark stronger?” I asked Kira. “I mean, it worked before, so couldn’t that fix things?”

Kira shook her head. “I don’t think so, Cali. It’s not a real Luna mark, so it really won’t help.” She thought for a moment. “The only thing that might work is if you were really Greyson’s Luna.”

**Episode 4102**

**Xavier**

I stood back as the pack carried a truckload of furniture into the pack house. I was amazed at the volume. Honestly, I couldn’t believe how fast Marissa had pulled it all together.

Geraint was hauling a mattress through the door when I stopped him.

“Where is that going?” I asked.

He grinned at me over his shoulder. “Take a look at it, Alpha. It’s a big one, for you and your Luna.”

I stepped back again, scowling. I wasn’t thrilled with that. It meant that I was going to have to sleep with Ava while trying to maintain distance—that was going to be a trick.

After a moment, Geraint was still looking at me, his expression expectant.

“What?” I asked.

“Aren’t you going to give me a hand?”

“Oh, right.” I reluctantly grabbed the far end of the mattress and headed toward the stairs. We hauled it up, and as we approached the bedroom door, I slowed my step. I could hear Knox’s voice from behind the door, and I dropped my end of the mattress.

“What the hell?” Geraint complained, but I ignored him.

I shoved the door open and found Knox standing with Ava, leaning over the bed frame. They both looked over at me, surprised.

I glared at the shrimp. “Is there a good reason the two of you are talking behind closed doors?”

Behind me, Geraint cleared his throat. “Uh, well, if you’ve got this, I’m going to go see what else I can help with,” he muttered and hurried away.

Ava’s surprised look disappeared in an instant, and she rolled her eyes. “Oh, give me a break. Do you think I’m conspiring against you behind your back?”

“Anything’s possible,” I countered. “At least when it involves him,” I said, nodding toward Knox.

Knox huffed, looking offended, but Ava gave his shoulder a shove.

“Just tell him what you were telling me.”

Knox looked at me, and I could see the trepidation on his face.

“What is it?” I demanded.

I must have spoken more harshly than I’d intended, because Knox took a wary step back. I had to admit that I didn’t mind seeing it—I liked that I could still make the shrimp tremble with fear. That would help keep him in his place.

“Tell him,” Ava urged him again.

Knox cleared his throat. “Okay, I’m doing it.” He looked over at me. “Listen, Xavier, I know you don’t exactly trust me, and maybe I’ve never given you reason to—”

“*Maybe?*” I asked incredulously. “Give me a fucking break. You’re lucky you’re alive, man—”

“Xavier,” Ava snapped, “just listen to him, will you?”

I glared at her and turned back to Know. “Okay, fine. I don’t trust you. We’re agreed on that. Next?”

He looked down at the small wrench in his hand. “This pack war really made me realize how much we stand to lose. Me and the rest of the pack. And it also made me realize that I want to do everything I can to help out.”

I stared at him, waiting for the catch. I wasn’t buying any of this. “You know, Knox, historically, you’ve only been concerned with looking out for yourself. You’re like Lucian, but without the money, the pack, or the palace.”

Knox looked up at me for a moment, then back down at the floor. “I guess I still am looking out for myself, but this time what I want lines up with what everyone wants. And what’s good for the pack.”

“What do you mean?” I demanded.

He shrugged. “What I want is to defeat the Bitterfangs and to save the Samaras.”

I looked over at Ava, but she was watching Knox. I was getting impatient with this whole performance. “Okay, so? What the hell’s your point, man?”

Knox looked over at Ava, like he was looking for encouragement. She gave him a single nod, and he took a deep breath. “I want to defect.”

I stared at him, incredulous. “*That’s* your plan?”

“Oh my god, Xavier, let him finish,” Ava said hotly.

“I just keep thinking about how Malakai already tried to convince me to join the Bitterfang pack,” Knox continued. “So, what if I did, you know?”

“I really don’t,” I said.

“What if I pretend to take him up on the offer. I could be a spy for the Samaras,” Knox said eagerly.

I was immediately suspicious. This idea was not that different from the idea I’d just been contemplating. I looked over at Ava.

*Was this your idea? Did you tell him what we were talking about?*

*No*, she told me. *He came to me with this. I didn’t say a word.*

I wanted to believe Ava. Even if Knox was her cousin, Ava had never betrayed me. And although things between us were far from perfect, she was still loyal to me—and especially to the Samara pack.

“So?” Knox asked hopefully. “Will you let me try? Because I really think I could be an asset to the pack. I know Malakai would trust me if I went over to the Bitterfangs, and once I got embedded in there, I could really get a sense of their operations…”

Knox went on, pleading his case for why he’d make a good spy, but I was already tuning him out. Would this work? I’d thought of this plan myself, but now that we were actually talking about it, I needed to go over the hard logistics in my head. How far was I willing to trust Knox? This was what I had wanted—this was the only idea I’d had for how we could undermine the Bitterfang. But now that Knox was actually offering to do the job, I found myself feeling wary about it.

“So?” Knox said expectantly. “What do you say?”

I looked over at Ava, who was watching me carefully. “I’ll think about it.”

I could see the displeasure register immediately on Ava’s face. Well, that was just too bad, because the last time I checked, *I* was still the Alpha around here.

In a surprising turn of events, Knox seemed to understand my hesitation, and he simply nodded. He pointed to the mattress, which was leaning against the doorway.

“You want some help with that?”

I ran a hand through my hair. This was going from bad to worse, and I eyed the door, wondering if I could just take off. Honestly, I would love to be literally anywhere else.

“No, Xavier’s got it, Knox,” Ava said shortly. “You can take off.”

Knox shrugged. “Okay. You’ll let me know about the… thing,” he said, and headed out, squeezing past the mattress and out the door.

When he was gone, I lifted the giant mattress and threw it on the bed, making the metal frame shudder.

Ava glared at it. “It’s upside down.”

“What are you talking about? It’s a mattress. There’s no wrong way,” I said dismissively.

“That’s provably untrue,” she retorted. She pointed at the mattress, which looked expensive. “It’s a pillow-top mattress, Xavier. There *is* a right way up, and you’ve put it on the frame upside down.”  
 I looked to where she was pointing and was annoyed to see that she was right. With a huff I grasped the mattress and flipped it. “Better?” I snapped.

Ava narrowed her eyes at me. “I’m not the enemy,” she shot back, and whipped around to face the windows.

I looked at her for a moment, taking in her dark hair and the tense set of her narrow shoulders. This fucking sucked, but maybe this unhappy distance was what I needed to keep Adéluce from hurting Ava.

I was pulled from those thoughts by the sound of the front door opening and slamming shut, then the call of a loud voice.

“I didn’t mean—” I started, but I wasn’t even sure what I wanted to say, so I stopped myself. I pushed a hand through my hair and turned, heading out the door.

I started down the stairs, but I stopped halfway, shocked to see Gabriel and Mikah.

“Hey!” I called in surprise.

Gabe grinned up at me. “Hey, yourself. Why do you look so surprised to see us? You asked, and here we are.”

I stared at them for a moment, then hurried down the rest of the stairs. “I can’t believe it, man,” I said, pulling Gabe into a back-slapping hug. “The Samaras have another werewolf. And a damn good one, too.” This was great news. And not just another werewolf, but—if I was reading things right—we also had a vampire to fight with us. Things were starting to look up for the Samaras.

“Remember, I’m not here to join your pack, man,” Gabe reminded me. “Or any pack. The Rogue life is too appealing for me.” Mikah glared at him, and Gabe grinned. “But I’ll do what I need to do to help my bro in his time of need.”

“Thanks, man,” I said gratefully. I was so glad to see my friend, I began to wonder who else I could get to join us—even if it was just temporarily, like Gabe.

My thoughts went to Lilac and Violet. Those two had always looked up to me like a big brother, and I’d treated them like a little brother and sister. After my less than successful conversation with Jay, I’d been reluctant to try to take anyone from the Redwood pack, but I couldn’t pretend like the idea wasn’t tempting. Maybe I’d reach out to them.

And I was feeling really good about having Mikah here. I’d never thought about it before, but recent history had taught me that having some supernatural diversity in your werewolf pack could be a good thing, so I was glad to have a vampire. But I still needed a witch…

*Could I convince Kira to join us?*

**Episode 4103**

*The only thing that might work is if you were really Greyson’s Luna.*

Kira’s words echoed around in my head, and my heart began to race. I thought immediately of the Luna conversation I’d had with Rowena and turned to say so to Greyson, but he was already shaking his head at Kira.

“There’s no way,” he said firmly, immediately slamming the door on the idea. “Not right now. Forget it.”

I stared at him, and I couldn’t stop myself from feeling hurt by his easy dismissal of the idea. It wasn’t that I didn’t know there were risks—I did—Greyson had voiced them before. But ever since I had taken on more of the Luna role for the pack, the idea of actually becoming the real Luna felt like it had been gaining momentum—for both of us.

Kira looked between us for a moment and—reading the vibe—took a step backward. “Maybe you two should talk this through.” She cleared her throat. “In the meantime, I’ll ask around and see if there’s anything else I can do to help.”

She hurried away down the hall, leaving Greyson and me alone.

I turned to Greyson, but he seemed to anticipate my argument.

“Cali, I don’t want to talk about this.”

“Greyson—”

“We’ve gone over this,” he went on.

I glared. “Hey, I’m not about to let you just walk away from this, Greyson. I know I’ve done enough to prove myself, and I keep trying every day to show that I’m worthy of being the Luna of the Redwood pack. I mean—come on—everyone around her already thinks of me as the Luna, so what’s holding you back? Why not just do it?”

“Cali—”

“Greyson, I’m serious,” I said defiantly. “I want an answer.”

He shook his head, looking frustrated. “Why isn’t that enough? You’re right, you’re already acting like the Luna, and everyone already thinks of you as the Luna, so why isn’t that enough?”

“What are you talking about—”

“We don’t need to put you at risk if everyone already believes it!”

I stared at him—open-mouthed—for a long moment. For a minute, I didn’t know how to respond to that. That wasn’t the argument I had been expecting to hear from him. “Having everyone think of me as the Luna and actually being the Luna isn’t the same, and you know it. Is this about the Luna mark ceremony?” I asked him. “Rowena survived it, and she’s not a wolf—”

“But she’s a witch,” Greyson retorted. “You’re Fae. It’s different. You aren’t even full Fae. There are too many variables. Too many unknowns. It’s too risky.”

“Greyson—”

“Cali, *no*,” he said, and his voice brooked no argument. “It’s *not* happening. And please understand that that’s not easy for me to say. You know how much I want that, but right now, we just can’t. This conversation is over.”

And with that he turned and strode away, leaving me alone.

I stared after him, stunned by his abrupt exit. It was like being hung up on—but in person. I wanted to go after him, chase him down and tell him that the conversation *wasn’t* over until I said it was—but then my phone buzzed. I looked down, ready to silence the call, but stopped when I saw that it was my mom.

I hadn’t spoken to her since she and my dad had left for Minnesota, so I wiped my eyes, cleared my throat, took a deep breath, and tried to sound as normal and cheery as I could when I answered.

“Hi, Mom!”

“Hi, Sweetheart,” my mom answered. “Oh, I’m so glad to hear your voice. How are you?”

“Fine,” I said quickly. “I’m good.” It was good to hear my mom’s voice, too. It soothed the raw ache in my heart. “How are you? How’s Dad?”

“We’re fine. Taking our time getting unpacked. It feels strange to be back here after all this time. How are things there? How is everyone? Are there any updates on what was going on?”

I sighed to myself, wishing that I could say nothing had changed since she’d been gone and there was no update to give, but that wasn’t the truth.

“Yeah. It’s still looking like it’s going to happen.”

There was a long silence on my mom’s end of the phone, and I could practically hear her anxiety churning.

“But try not to worry. I mean, I know it sounds bad, but the alliance is holding strong,” I said, though this wasn’t completely true. “And we have a good plan in place to stop the war before it has a chance to take a real foothold and do too much damage.”

“Do you? Well, that’s something,” my mom said.

“In fact,” I went on, “it’s actually my plan.”

“Really?” my mom asked, sounding pleased. “Well, that’s wonderful. I’m proud of you, Cali. It sounds like you’re really coming into your own.”

“Yeah,” I said, leaning against the wall of the hallway, “I guess I am.”

“Well,” my mom said with a sigh, “I just wanted to call and say that I was thinking about you, and that I love you. And that I want you and Artemis to promise to be careful, whatever you’re doing. Just the thought of you two—” she broke off with a shuddering gasp.

“Is Dad back in the kitchen yet?” I asked quickly. It was clear she was working herself up, and I wanted to try to steer the conversation in a less painful direction. “I’ll bet he’s going to miss Torin’s help. No one’s as enthusiastic about food as Dad and Torin.”

This worked, and my mom laughed. “They’ve been video chatting, trying out new recipes.”

“That’s good,” I said, chuckling.

“Your sister is okay?” my mom asked.

“She’s great,” I said. “Rishika’s good.”

“And how’s Greyson?”

I felt a sudden lump form in my throat. I couldn’t answer her question—I couldn’t even find my voice.

“Cali?” my mom asked. “Are you there?”

Desperate, I made a static sound in the back of my throat. “I think there’s a signal problem, Mom,” I lied. “We’ve been having some trouble with the reception around here. I should probably get going anyway, I told Rishika I’d help her with…” I cast around for an idea, “with her laundry.” I shook my head at my own idiocy. “I’ll call you soon. Give my love to Dad, okay?”

“Okay,” my mom said, sounding understandably confused. “I love you, sweetheart. Take care.”

I ended the call, feeling like an ass. I had just lied to my mom. And it was Greyson’s fault.

I was furious. Not because Greyson wouldn’t make me his Luna. I was furious because he refused to even *talk* to me about it. That just wasn’t going to fly with me.

Blood pounding in my ears, I marched down the stairs and straight into Greyson’s study, just next to the front door. I stormed in and slammed the door shut behind me.

“We are *so* not done having this conversation!”

Greyson looked up at me. *I’m on the phone*, he mouthed. “I’ll have to call you back, Mace,” he said into the phone. “Something just came up. Okay. Talk soon.”

He ended the call and started to stand, but I held up a hand to stop him.

“Hold it right there, buddy. This time *I’m* going to do the talking, and *you’re* going to do the listening.”

He raised an eyebrow but sat back down in the desk chair and gestured. “Okay. Go ahead.”

I took a deep breath, fighting to not keep my anger from overwhelming me. “At the summit, you made such a big show of making all the other packs believe that I was your Luna. You keep telling me that I’m doing such a great job at being—what are you calling it?—the Master Strategist. But, despite all of this, you don’t even respect me enough to talk things through with me.” I gave him a long, hard look. “It’s like my voice, my opinion doesn’t even matter to you sometimes.”

He opened his mouth to interrupt, but I didn’t let him.

“*I’m* talking,” I reminded him. My eyes were brimming with tears. My throat was tight, the way it always got when I became emotional. “I never agreed to be a figurehead. I’m a part of this pack, and I want to do all I can to help. But I can’t, if you refuse to recognize that—and me. I can’t if you won’t even see me.”

I stopped talking and realized that my heart was racing. I took a moment to catch my breath.

Greyson stood from the chair and walked out from behind the desk. He stepped toward me. “I understand everything you just said, love.”

I looked up at him, frankly surprised, and even a little hopeful.

But then his eyes darkened. “You want me to make you my Luna. Which is my choice and it’s something I want, love. But in order to do that, I need you to make your choice.”

“*What?*” I gasped.

His eyes bore into me. “Cali, you need to choose me before I can make you my Luna.”

**Episode 4104**

**Greyson**

Tears immediately filled Cali’s eyes. She opened her mouth to speak, but she stopped herself, almost like she was afraid to say anything.

A wave of guilt washed over me, and I was instantly sorry I’d said what I’d said. I reached out for her, but she stepped back, as though my touch would burn her.

“You always told me you would never pressure me about the *due destini*, Greyson,” she said, her voice a low whisper. She looked at me just long enough for me to register the hurt in her eyes, then she turned and strode quickly away.

I looked after her, not sure if I should follow her and apologize, or if speaking to her now would only make matters worse. I wanted to say *something* to her, but would an apology just be a lie? I felt awful that I’d hurt her, and she was right—I *had* promised not to push her on the choice around the *due destini*. Of course, I’d always wanted her to make her choice of her own accord, because she wanted to choose me, not because I’d pushed her or given her some sort of ultimatum.

But I also couldn’t pretend that I wasn’t frustrated by the lack of clarity. Maybe that was selfish, but I couldn’t help the way I felt. It wasn’t safe to make Cali my Luna—it never had been. All my concerns about the risks concerning her being half-Fae were still just as relevant—no matter what had happened with Rowena.

It was bad enough that the other packs believed that she was the Redwood Luna. That was already enough of a risk. I would never forget what happened with Joss. In a war, rival packs would always target the Alphas and the Lunas. Taking out leadership was the quickest way to destabilize a whole pack, making them an easier target for an attack.

Blowing out a frustrated breath, I rubbed the heel of my hand along my jaw. This whole thing reminded me of Big Mac’s vision—chess opponents always tried to capture the queen before they could defeat the king.

But even the knowledge of all that context still didn’t explain why I’d treated Cali the way that I had. She was right—I wouldn’t even agree to listen to her—to talk to her. That was one of the things I loved best about her—I could always talk to her. So why couldn’t I listen?

I shook my head. I knew the answer to that question: I was afraid to listen because I was scared of losing her. And because I was angry. But I wasn’t angry at her—I was angry at Xavier.

“*Fuck*,” I said to myself, my hands tightening into fists at my side. Anger flared in my chest, hot as fire. I could keep putting a band-aid over it, but it wasn’t going away. I wasn’t going to get over the fact that Xavier had kissed Cali at the summit. He was playing games with her—pulling her toward him while simultaneously pushing her away. And then *he* had to be the one who had found her and pulled her from the car.

I wasn’t blind, I had seen the look that had passed between them when he’d held her in his arms. Cali might have been dazed and scared and confused in that moment, but Xavier sure as hell wasn’t.

I took a deep breath, trying not to let these feelings of anger take over. I couldn’t let my emotions get the better of me. That was not a good way to start a war campaign. Too many people depended on me. Too much depended on me. When I let myself get upset like this, I made mistakes.

Like the one I’d just made with Cali, when I’d let my anger with Xavier come between us. I couldn’t let that happen again. It only pissed me off, put Cali in the middle of us, and confused everything between Cali and me.

The solution was clear—I needed to apologize to Cali. I needed her by my side if we were going to make it through this war. I hadn’t changed my mind—I wasn’t going to make her my Luna—the risks were still too high—but she was my partner in this, and I needed to make sure she felt like that. She was right about the fact that she was acting as a Luna in our pack. That’s how the pack was treating her, and that’s how I was treating her, and I needed to make her feel like she was everything a Luna was and deserved to be.

As much as I truly wanted her to be my Luna—as much as I fantasized about it—I just wasn’t going to do it. I set my jaw. Cali was too important to me, and no matter what I wanted, I wasn’t going to risk her safety for it.

Decided, I turned and left the study. In the hallway, I ran into Ravi, who was just coming into the house, wiping what looked like grease from his face.

“Where are you coming from?” I asked, confused by the grease and his dirty clothes.

“Out there,” Ravi said, jerking his head over his shoulder to the driveway. “Zainab and I just did a thorough check of all the vehicles.”

“Oh, right. Yeah, thanks for taking care of that. What’d you find?” I asked.

“Two of the cars are due for an oil change. Someone should make some calendar reminders for that,” Ravi said. “You can’t fall behind on routine maintenance like that if you want to extend the life the car—”

“What about the cars being tampered with?” I growled.

“Oh, right. No, nothing suspicious,” Ravi said, wiping his hands on his jeans. “But given what happened with Cali’s SUV, I think we should add the cars to the patrols so we can keep them under watch, just to be sure no one’s messing with them.”

I nodded. “Yeah, that’s a good idea. Let Rishika know and she’ll tell the outgoing patrol groups.”

“Will do. And I replaced the windshield washer fluid, too. You’re welcome,” Ravi added with a grin. He started to turn away but stopped and eyed me. “Hey, man, you okay? Is there anything else I can help with?”

“What? No,” I said, surprised.

Ravi raised his eyebrows. “You sure? You look all…” he raised his shoulders. “*Pensive*.”

“No, I’m fine. I just have a lot to deal with right now.”

Ravi nodded. “I get it. Okay. Just let me know if there’s anything I can do to make your job easier.”

As he walked away, I looked after him, thinking how much I appreciated having the guy around. He was a good kid, and I was glad he had chosen to join up with the Redwoods. I appreciated his loyalty and dedication to the pack. If every pack in the alliance had someone like Ravi, then then odds of victory would definitely tilt in our favor.

As I thought about this, I could feel the sharpest edges of my mood start to soften. But I knew I wouldn’t feel better until I spoke to Cali and fixed things between us.

I looked around. I didn’t know where she had gone, and—honestly—she might not even want to talk to me right now. I guess I couldn’t blame her if she didn’t. I had been an ass. All I could hope was that if I was just totally honest with her about how I felt and where I was coming from, she might understand.

She wasn’t in the living room or the kitchen, so I headed upstairs. I thought about what I was going to say to her as I walked down the hall, but when I got to her room, I found that it was empty, the door slightly open.

Maybe I should mind link with her, but after all that weird shit with Lucian and Elle, I didn’t feel fully comfortable with that, so I held back. I didn’t want to take the chance of Lucian hearing anything about the personal issues between Cali and me.

And that wasn’t just for the sake of privacy—and because I thought Lucian was a nosy ass. If Lucian heard anything about our fight, it might give the impression that there was trouble within the ranks of the alliance, and we simply could not afford that at the moment.

I walked down the hall to Artemis’s room, figuring that Cali might have sought her out to take some sisterly comfort, but that room was empty, too.

“Where the hell is everyone?” I muttered to myself.

Downstairs I heard the front door slam shut. “*Hey! Someone! Anyone!*”

It was Zainab yelling, and she sounded scared.

I hurried down the stairs. “What’s up?”

Zainab looked up at me. She was standing in front of the door, smeared with grease, a wrench in her hand, her eyes as big as dinner plates. “Greyson, thank god.”

“What’s going on?”

Using the wrench in her hand, she pointed outside. “There’s a *wolf*!”

**Episode 4105**

“—and I just don’t get it, you know? Like, how much more do I have to do to prove what a good Luna I’d be to this pack? And why won’t he even *talk* to me about it? I’m in this, too? I feel the pressure of the pack war. I feel the pressure of what he’s feeling. I could help him, but I feel like he’s not even letting me try.” I flopped back onto Lola’s bed, frustration and worry, anger and sadness coursing through me.

“That sucks,” Lola said sympathetically. “Greyson just doesn’t get it. I know what you should do, just tell him to go to hell.”

I propped myself up on my elbows. I had come to Lola for a sympathetic ear, but I was a little wary of her advice. Lola tended to favor the nuclear option, no matter what the situation was. I really just needed someone I could vent to, not who would tell me what to do.

“It’s just unfair,” I muttered.

She nodded. “It’s totally unfair. One brother’s being a dick, and now the other brother is *also* being a dick.”

“Greyson never should have thrown the *due destini* in your face like that,” Lola said, frowning. “I mean—I get where he’s coming from. It’s confusing as hell, but it’s not your fault,” she added quickly, seeing the look on my face. “And it’s never been your fault. Why would Greyson say such a stupid thing to you?”

I sighed. “I supposed because he’s frustrated. And I guess I get why. Xavier seems to have made his choice, so I guess I get why Greyson would think it’s time for me to make mine.”

“Yeah… but that’s not the point,” Lola said. “Doesn’t he understand what a choice is?’

“I’m pretty sure he does,” I admitted.

Lola’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t start making excuses for him. He’s a dick, and he sucks.”

“They’re not excuses,” I said heavily. “It’s the truth. Greyson is under a lot of pressure, and I don’t doubt that he loves me.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “Sounds like excuses to me.”

“I guess he could have handled it better—”

“Ya think?” Lola asked. She shook her head. “ “The *due destini* does a number on you both.”

“Won’t be our first or last argument about it,” I said.

“No, but at least you’re fighting about something important,” she said. “Jay and I sometimes fight about whether he sleeps under the bed sheet or not.”

“Does he… not?”

“*No!*” she said. “He just pulls up the comforter! Why can’t he just get underneath the damn sheet?”

I smiled, but before I could say anything else, we heard muffled shouting from downstairs and both looked up.

“What’s going on now?” I asked, getting to my feet.

Lola opened the door, and we both headed down the stairs to find out.

At the bottom of the stairs, Greyson was standing with a grease-stained Zainab, who was gesturing wildly with a wrench.

I stopped and looked around, trying to make sense of what I was seeing. Beyond them—outside the closed door—I could hear the wind howling.

When I stepped off the stairs, Greyson looked over at me, and the air between us grew charged with tension. There were a lot of things I had realized since we’d last spoken that I wanted to say to him, but I kept my mouth shut. Now wasn’t really the time.

“What’s going on?” Rishika called, hurrying over. “I heard someone yelling.”

“Did you find something with one of the cars?” Ravi asked, on Rishika’s heels.

“Zainab said she spotted an unknown wolf out in the woods,” Greyson said briskly. “We need to organize a search party to figure out what’s going on. Rishika, Ravi, Zainab”—he looked over at me, then his eyes shifted to Lola—“you. And where’s Jay?”

I stared at him in shock. Had he just *purposefully* excluded me from this? Why was it okay for Lola to go, but not me?

“Greyson,” I said firmly, stepping toward him. “I’m going to help.”

He opened his mouth to say something but stopped himself. “Okay,” he said simply.

I was thrown by this. He agreed with me—just like that? I had expected pushback—another heated argument, maybe.

He turned to Rishika. “The five of you with me. Now. Let’s go.”

We headed toward the door.

“What’s going on?” Sage asked, sticking her head out from the kitchen.

“Keep an eye on the house,” Greyson called back to her. “We’re going out. Watch the exits.” Then he opened the door, and we headed down the porch steps.

The wolves started to strip off their clothes in the cold winter air, and—with the sharp crack of bones—began to shift to their wolf forms.

I swallowed a sigh. It was one more reminder that I was not one of them—I was not a werewolf. Another strike against me being Greyson’s Luna.

Hang on. I frowned. Was that why he had agreed so quickly to let me come with them? Had he wanted to make a point?

Grinding my teeth, I felt my face heat up. I felt humiliated, standing here as everyone around me shifted.

Greyson—magnificent now in his grey wolf from—started toward the woods. Then he stopped and tipped his head toward me, gesturing for me to hop onto his back.

I started toward him, but stopped myself, still feeling the sting of embarrassment. “No.” I turned to Lola. “Can I ride with you?”

I could see the surprise register in her eyes, but she lowered her head, and I scrambled onto her back.

When I looked up, I saw Greyson staring at me for a moment and I felt a wave of guilt for rejecting him, but then he turned and charged forward, toward the trees.

I felt kind of badly, but I was still mad at him. And there was another element to my choice as well—I was worried that if I was riding with Greyson, he would be more focused on protecting me instead of hunting the wolf we were after. I didn’t want that—I didn’t want to be a distraction. And I knew I didn’t have to worry about that with Lola.

I held on tight to her fur as Lola followed the others, sprinting through the snowy woods. The air was cold as hell and cut right through my clothes—I hadn’t had a chance to grab my parka. Lola was fast, and she ran loose—taking big jumps and swerving across the rough path through the trees. I wanted to tell her to slow down, but I kept my mouth shut. I knew that would only make me seem weak, and that was the last thing I wanted.

It was moments like this that made me wish I had been turned. But at least I had my magic. I was feeling more secure about that than I ever had. So that was something—provided I actually got a chance to use it.

I looked up when I heard Greyson’s growl up ahead of us. He was leading the small search party, and he must have picked up on something. Maybe the strange wolf’s scent. I looked around, peering hard into the dense trees. I thought I saw something moving through the trees far ahead of us, but I was never certain because—at that moment—my grip on Lola’s fur slipped and I slid back. Lola jumped over something in the path and that was all I needed to go tumbling off her back, landing hard on the frozen ground.

Lola must have felt the change in weight because she turned and started back toward me, but I scrambled to my feet and waved her onward.

“Go!” I shouted, trying to get my breath back. “Go on! I’ll catch up!” The wind whipped around me and my voice seemed to disappear into it. “Go!”

Lola hesitated for just a moment, then turned and raced after the others.

Alone, I looked down at myself, brushing dirt and snow from my jeans. I moved carefully—testing myself, but I seemed to be okay. A little bruised maybe, but nothing was broken.

Peering into the woods, I saw that Lola and the others had disappeared. I’d been lying, of course. There was no way I’d be able to catch up with them, but I hadn’t wanted to slow them down. Not when they were on the trail of the wolf they were looking for. Which left me alone. In the woods.

*Great.*

But I wasn’t helpless, I reminded myself firmly.

I felt in my pocket and pulled out the dagger Adair had given me. I unsheathed it and—with that, my shield, my blasting power, and my sword—I figured I was pretty well protected.

I wanted to stay in the same general area as the rest of the search party, so I started after where Lola and the others had disappeared. But I had only gone a few steps when there was a rustling in the underbrush to my left. I looked over, and a massive wolf leapt out of the darkness at me.

**Episode 4106**

**Xavier**

I moved Kira to the top of my mental list of potential Redwood defectors. She’d been pretty pissed at me for leaving the way I had, but that was in the past. The Samaras badly needed a witch, and since there was no way in hell I was going to be able to convince Big Mac to desert the Redwoods, Kira was the next best thing. She was the only witch I had any real connection with, so she would have to do.

*All I need is a convincing argument to win her over. If I play up the benefits of joining up with us, there’s no way she’d say no. Besides, she and I had a relationship before she met the others. Hopefully she’ll keep that in mind and see the value in staying by my side.*

I thought back to Ava’s suggestion that I flirt with Kira to get her on my side. That method wasn’t wise. I had no interest in misleading Kira, and it would most likely backfire and then I’d be right back where I started: witch-less and in an even worse place with Kira.

Blaine nudged me in the side, interrupting my thoughts. “Who are they?” he asked, pointing to Gabe and Mikah.

“They’re joining the pack for now,” I said bluntly. I didn’t bother explaining that they weren’t officially a part of the pack. Blaine didn’t need to know that, and I wasn’t in the mood to explain myself to him.

“A vampire?” Blaine hissed. “What’s next? A witch?” He laughed and eyed Mikah with distaste.

I grabbed Blaine by the shirt and slammed him against the wall. “They’re both way better fighters than you. And they’re also a hell of a lot more loyal. And if you’d managed to pay even the smallest bit of attention to what’s going on around you, you’d see that both the Cobalt and Redwood packs have witches. The Redwood pack alone has two vampires in its ranks. They give us an edge, and we need one right about now.” I hated that Blaine and Knox and Zipper got under my skin so easily, but I didn’t see that changing any time soon. They were insufferable.

Blaine glared at me. “But—but—vampires smell!”

“I don’t have time for this bullshit.” I was tempted to hand Blaine over to Mikah and see who the last man standing was, but the Samara pack was in a delicate place, and it probably wasn’t a good idea to introduce Mikah to the pack in that manner. I doubted the others felt as strongly as Blaine about a vampire joining the pack, but it still wouldn’t be a good look for me to allow Mikah to attack one of our own out in the open.

“Listen. The Samaras need to do whatever we can to grow. Having a former mercenary and a vampire join up with us will not only help us grow but boost our chances in battle. So, stop complaining about shit you know nothing about.” I tightened my grip on his shirt and slammed him against the wall again. “Or, if you prefer, I could send your ass back to the council and let them know that you’ve changed your mind.” I gave Blaine one final shove before releasing him and heading outside.

I stopped when I saw Zipper and Knox trying to fit a mattress through the small Airstream doorway. It wasn’t going very well. The mattress was bending at almost a complete right angle as they tried to force it through the tight passage. Both men were grunting and straining but making little progress. I sighed.

*Maybe the Samaras need smarter pack members, too. These bozos are embarrassing.*

I stomped over to them. “What the hell are you doing? Can’t you see that it isn’t going to fit? It’s almost twice the size of the Airstream itself!”

Zipper frowned. “But the mattress in the trailer is too small and uncomfortable!” he whined.

I rolled my eyes. “So why the fuck don’t you stop playing house with Knox and Blaine and move into the pack house like all the normal werewolves?”

Zipper looked a little surprised. “You’d let me do that?”

“In a heartbeat.” Of the three holdouts, it was starting to seem like Zipper might be the most malleable. He wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed by a long shot, but he was a useful body, nonetheless. If I could get him on my side, it would show off my ability as an Alpha to get people to fall in line. And I had to admit that it would be cool to win over one of my toughest critics.

Zipper shot an uneasy look at Knox. “Dude, would you be mad if I…?”

Knox looked as taken aback as Zipper. “When your Alpha makes an offer like that, you better take it. I’m not going to stand in your way.”

Zipper looked relieved. “Thanks, Knox. Way to be cool about this.” Zipper turned his attention to me. “And I really appreciate it!” With a few savage tugs, he finally managed to dislodge the mattress from the door of the Airstream. His muscles flexing with effort as he struggled to keep the mattress upright, he began sliding it toward the pack house.

I turned to Knox. “The same holds for you. If you really meant what you said about doing what’s best for the Samaras, then you shouldn’t be hiding out here. Get a room in the pack house. One that’s not sized like a closet.” The constant push and pull with Knox and his stooges was getting old, and I wanted to focus on something more than sparring with members of my own pack. If I could extend even a sliver of an olive branch, it would be a load off my mind.

Knox looked stunned. “For real?”

“Yeah. No use having the pack fractured. We need to be on the same page. All of us.”

*And it’ll be the perfect way to keep an eye on you.*

Knox nodded slowly and then headed into the trailer to start gathering his things.

*Not bad. Two out of three.*

I turned to see Blaine watching from the porch and I headed back toward the pack house. As I passed Blaine, I said, “And if you want to stop being a dick, you can move into the house along with your buddies.” I glanced back toward the Airstream. “I know from experience that it gets plenty cold in that thing at night. Why make things harder on yourself?”

Blaine said nothing, and I shrugged as I moved past him. I’d done my part and made the offer. It was up to him now. If he wanted to keep the chip on his shoulder and live in the Airstream just to maintain his pride, there wasn’t much I could do about it.

I entered the house to find Ava standing in the foyer waiting for me, her arms crossed over her chest. “I heard what you did out there. I have to say, I’m surprised you’re inviting them back in. Are you sure that’s the wise thing?”

“Are you questioning me?” I asked evenly. I knew exactly what I was doing, and I would’ve thought that Ava would support my trying to mend the cracks within the pack—even if my main motivation in smoothing things over with them was to keep my enemies close.

“No,” Ava said coolly. “I just hope you’re not doing it to make me happy.”

I scoffed at her. “And why would I do that?” I moved past her and started up the stairs. I’d only made it halfway when I turned back to look at her. “What is it with you? Ever since we helped Duke and I saved Cali, you’ve been a pain in the ass.”

Ava glanced around at the other pack members who had stopped what they were doing in favor of watching what was unfolding between the two of us. Ava marched up the steps after me, grabbed my arm and hissed, “We’re not talking about this right here with everyone watching us. What’s your problem?” She pulled me upstairs, yanked me into our room and slammed the door hard behind us.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. “Why are you so afraid to have the conversation out there? Don’t want people to see you being jealous of Cali?” There was so much going on right now that I wasn’t at all in the mood for a knock down drag-out with Ava. Still, I knew it was better to just let her get whatever was bothering her off her chest. At least if Ava and I were in a disagreement, it would throw Adéluce off Ava’s scent. The vampire-witch was probably loving this, seeing us at odds again.

Ava’s eyes flashed. “I am *not* jealous.”

“Sure,” I said. I regarded her closely. “You’re not jealous at all. What was I thinking?” I smirked as the flame in her eyes grew.

*She’s definitely jealous, but she’s too prideful to admit it. I know the feeling.*

I stepped closer to her, my eyes on hers. I slowly dragged my gaze down to her lips and then back up to meet her eyes. “But, Ava, if you’re not jealous, then what are you?”

**Episode 4107**

I stumbled back in shock. I had no idea how the wolf had managed to escape the others and turn on me, but I realized that I was going to have to face this wolf on my own. The others were too far away by now to help. It was a scary thought, but I had to remember that this wasn’t the first time I’d had to fend for myself. Xavier wasn’t going to magically appear like he had when the car blew up, nor did I need him to. All I had to do was keep my cool and take him out quick.

*Greyson probably has no idea that this wolf evaded them. Or maybe there’s more than one out here. Either way, I have no choice but to stop him.*

I realized that I was holding the dagger out in front of me. It was useful, I guessed, but also kind of like bringing a squirt gun to a shootout. It was better than nothing, but I wasn’t as good with it as Artemis was, and there was a chance the wolf would be too quick for me to use it against him. Still, I held it strong and sure in my hand.

The wolf stalked in a circle around me, eyeing me hungrily. He was primed to attack at any moment, and I pushed down the surge of fear rising up inside of me.

*Don’t be afraid, Cali. You’ve faced bigger threats than this before. Keep your cool. This wolf is child’s play compared to some of the wolves you’ve gone up against. Just be smart about every move you make, and you’ll come out of this okay.*

I waved the dagger in front of me and jabbed it forward a few times like I’d seen Artemis do so many times before. “I know how to use this thing!” I said. “So you better not mess with me!” The words had barely escaped my lips before the wolf lunged at me. I had no time to think. His paws hit me hard in the chest and the dagger flew from my hands as we both crashed to the ground.

I splayed my hands against the wolf’s massive chest and kept my arms rigid, doing everything in my power to keep him from biting me. He was stronger than I’d even imagined and huge—way bigger up close than I’d realized. His weight on top of me made it almost hard to breathe and I was straining and fighting hard to keep him from tearing me apart.

*I’m not going to panic. I have weapons, so I need to use them!*

With a burst of energy, I vaulted up from the ground and pushed the wolf off me, and then immediately rolled out of the way of his counterattack. His sharp claws kicked up a clod of moss and dirt instead—right where my head would’ve been.

Back on my feet, I spun around to face him just as he took another running leap at me. I gritted my teeth and summoned my shield. I extended it out in front of me and he collided with it, the force of his impact pushing me backward into a tree. I recovered quickly and stood my ground, maneuvering the shield expertly to fend off his attacks. I thrust the shield forward and hit him right in the snout, and he howled and reared back, stunned.

“Didn’t see that one coming, did you? I’ve got more tricks than that up my sleeve!”

The wolf recovered and then growled as he charged me again, his teeth bared and his eyes wild with rage. I raised my other hand, the one not holding the shield at the ready, and blasted him with all the magic I could summon. The wolf flew back as if hit with a baseball bat. He slammed hard against a tree and then slumped to the ground in a heap.

I was stunned. I let my shield dissolve as I stepped forward to check out my handiwork.

*I did it! I really did it all on my own! I can’t believe that I took down a wolf this big. It was hard, but also kind of easier than I thought it would be.*

I pumped my fists in victory, and at the very same moment, the wolf rose to his feet, aimed his mouth at the sky and howled as he came storming toward me. I stumbled back in shock and tripped over an exposed tree root. Screaming, I went down hard, and the wolf was on me in an instant. It snarled and snapped its powerful jaws open and closed, mere inches from my face and trying its damndest to get to my neck.

I wrapped my hands around the wolf’s neck and squeezed hard, hoping to choke him so that he would let up even a little. He didn’t even seem to notice. He shook his head and one of my hands flew free of him and landed on the hilt of the dagger. Wasting no time, I grabbed it and plunged it into the wolf’s front leg. The wolf howled as he toppled over and landed on his side with a thud.

I quickly got to my feet and blasted the wolf with another wave of magic, and I didn’t stop there. I blasted the wolf again and again until it finally stopped moving. My heart was pounding like crazy, and the adrenaline was definitely flowing. I let out a breath only after I was sure that he wasn’t about to get right back up and lunge at me again like before.

*Did I kill it?*

I summoned my sword and approached the wolf with caution, not wanting to make the same mistake twice. This time I was going to be sure that he was really down for the count before I let my guard down. I lifted my arm, preparing to strike the prone wolf with the sword, to be sure, when I heard a loud growl behind me.

I whipped around to deliver a death blow and stopped short. It was Greyson! He looked back and forth between me and the wolf before shifting back to human.

“Cali, are you okay?” he asked breathlessly. He must have sprinted back the moment he realized I was no longer with them.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. Not only had Greyson come back to save me, but he was naked. No matter how many times I’d seen him this way, it was always a distraction. And a pleasant one at that.

As the adrenaline began to ebb away and I got over the pleasure of seeing him, my anger at him returned. “Why did you come back? Didn’t you think I could handle myself?” I sliced my sword through the air for emphasis, reveling in how right it felt in my hand.

Rishika, Lola, Ravi, and Zainab came running up behind Greyson, all of them still in wolf form. They began chattering excitedly amongst themselves once they caught sight of the fallen wolf, but I couldn’t understand any of it. They started moving toward the wolf, and I blocked them.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“The wolf’s still alive,” Greyson said. “I want to bring it back to the house and see if we can get some answers from it.” He turned his attention back to the others. “Keep going.”

I stepped aside, and Greyson and I watched as they dragged the wolf away.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Greyson asked once they were gone.

I nodded, realizing that I was trembling as the high from the fight began to fade.

“Come on, I’ll give you a ride back,” he said.

He shifted, and I slid onto his back, hoping that he couldn’t feel me shaking. I’d told him I was all right, and I didn’t want him to think otherwise. I bent forward and wrapped my arms around his neck, not wanting to fall off again. Though I was still angry, I couldn’t ignore the solid, comforting sensation of him beneath me. It made me feel so safe and secure. Even though I’d proven that I could handle myself, it was still nice to know that I had him to fall back on.

Greyson took off toward the pack house, weaving quickly through the trees. By the time we arrived, all my lingering fear and anxiety had left me. The others were just arriving with the still unconscious wolf, and Greyson shifted and ordered them to take it to the basement.

I followed them. There was no way I was going to sit this one out. If it weren’t for me, the wolf might have escaped or killed someone. I deserved to see this through.

“Remember to take the silver capsule from around his neck,” I said as they set about shackling him. Ravi nodded and then removed the capsule and put it aside.

I gasped as the wolf began to stir, already on the defense. He growled and tried to jump at us, but the chains held him back.

Greyson leaned in. “We’re going to ask you some questions, and you’re going to answer them. Or else.”

**Episode 4108**

**Greyson**

The wolf snarled at us as he pulled against his restraints, trying his best to break free. He must not have realized that he was a Bitterfang trapped in a pack house full of Redwoods. Even if he did manage to free himself, we’d cut him down in no time. I almost hoped that he would escape so that I’d have an excuse to eliminate yet another of Malakai’s foot soldiers.

“Shift to human. Now.” I demanded. “And don’t make us wait. We’re not feeling very patient right now.”

The wolf growled in response.

Rishika grabbed him and shoved him back hard against the wall. “Shift now, or you’ll never have a chance to again.”

The wolf shook himself free of her hold but finally complied. I noticed that Cali turned away as soon as he did.

“You okay?” I asked her again. I still wasn’t convinced that she wasn’t shaken up from fighting this wolf all by herself, no matter how much she was trying to prove otherwise. I’d been in so many fights that I didn’t feel fear any longer, but I certainly remembered how much of it there’d been during fights when I was younger. Cali was still new to this lifestyle, so there was no question in my mind that she still held fear, even if she didn’t want to admit it.

“Yes, I’m fine,” she said. “There’s just still something weird and awkward about seeing a strange man chained up naked in our basement. It feels… wrong.”

*Just as a reminder, this naked man tried to rip your throat out*,I mind linked.

*I don’t need a reminder.* Cali huffed. *I was there, remember? That still doesn’t make this feel any more… normal.*

She was still upset with me, that much was clear, but I couldn’t let that distract us. The fact that we’d been able to capture this wolf alive because of Cali was a great bonus, and I was going to take full advantage of it. I considered asking Cali to go back upstairs, but I suspected that she wouldn’t listen to me and that it would only worsen things between us. She wanted to be part of this, and I couldn’t blame her. She was my Luna, and she deserved to be here with the rest of us.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

He simply looked at me, his mouth pressed tight in defiance.

“What’s your fucking name? Tell me now. I don’t think I need to remind you that we’re the ones holding all the cards right now.”

The man kept looking at me with a steady, hateful gaze. Deep down, I respected his loyalty to his pack and his mission, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t going to do everything in my power to break him.

“That’s a shame,” I said. “If you won’t tell me your name, how else will I tell your loved ones about your heroic death?”

The man glared at me. “It’s Alvin,” he said. “But that’s all you’re going to get from me. I don’t have to tell you Redwood scum anything.”

I turned to Zainab. “Bring Big Mac.”

The man’s eyes flashed with uncertainty. “No, thanks. I’m a vegetarian.”

I whirled back to face him. “What the fuck does that have to do with anything?”

“He thinks you’re bringing him a burger,” Cali interjected. “*A* big mac.”

I groaned and turned back to look at the man. “Not what I meant. Big Mac is a witch, and a powerful one at that. She packs a hell of a bigger punch than a burger does. That, I can guarantee you.”

The uncertainty returned to the man’s eyes. “It doesn’t matter if you bring in a witch. I still can’t tell you anything.”

Big Mac came clomping down the stairs and heaved a loud sigh. “What now?” She stopped short when she saw our prisoner. “Oh great. Who’s this?” She shook her head and advanced into the room, keeping her eyes above the man’s waist.

“This is an uncooperative Bitterfang who needs a little convincing that being open and honest is better than being quiet and dead. Can you help us?” I asked her.

Big Mac scowled, and then without any warning, she waved her hands while mumbling something under her breath. The man’s bones began to crack and pop as he shifted back into a wolf. He moaned in agony. Big Mac stopped the spell, and the man stood before us trapped between wolf and human form. “Maybe this will make him talk,” Big Mac said, her tone bored. “And then maybe I can get back to what *I* was doing.”

The man’s breath escaped his clenched teeth in ragged bursts, and he was shuddering so hard that I wouldn’t have been surprised if he passed out.

*This has to be so painful for him, but it’s the only way we’re going to get him to do what we want. I don’t see any other way. If he’d just been cooperative with me and realized that he has no leverage at all, he wouldn’t be in so much pain right now.*

Cali turned away and ducked her head. It was obviously too much for her, just like I knew it would be. Cali liked to be in the middle of the action, but she never took into account why I wanted to spare her from things like this. It wasn’t always because I thought she couldn’t handle herself, I just figured she’d rather not be exposed to this kind of brutality—and I was almost always right about that.

I turned back to the prisoner. “So, are you going to answer my questions now?”

Defiant, Alvin spat on the floor and turned his nose up at us. “Never.”

“Guess you need a little more convincing.” I gestured to Big Mac, and the sickening cracking and popping began again. The man screamed out in pain.

Cali whirled around to face me. “Enough!”

Her sudden outburst startled everyone into silence.

“Cali, if this is too much for you then—”

Cali shook her head, cutting me off. “No, it’s just wrong.”

I was surprised. Her voice wasn’t trembling at all. She was firm, commanding, confident. It was a side of her that I rarely got to see. It was intriguing.

“Undo the spell,” Cali said to Big Mac.

Big Mac looked to me, and I nodded. I wanted to see where Cali was going with this. Big Mac reversed the spell, and the man shifted back to human, clearly relieved. Cali stepped up to the prisoner and with a flick of her wrist, conjured her sword.

“Do you need a reminder of what I did to you in the woods?” Cali said. “You know what I’m capable of.”

A flash of fear appeared in the man’s eyes.

“We want to know about Malakai,” Cali hissed. “Tell us, and all this will be over.”

The man started to shake his head but stopped when Cali lifted the sword above her head and lowered it until it was only inches away from his cheek.

*How far is she going to go with this? This is not at all what I expected…*

“Should we stop her?” Rishika whispered to me.

I considered how things might go if I stepped in. If I didn’t, I knew Cali wouldn’t kill him. If I did interfere, she would accuse me of not trusting her.

*I trust her more than anyone else in the world. I don’t want her to think that I doubt her abilities as a force at my side when that couldn’t be further from the truth.*

I shook my head at Rishika. “Do nothing,” I said. My fascination with Cali’s behavior grew. She’d changed so much from the shy woman I’d met what seemed a lifetime ago, and now she was coming into her own as Luna. She might not have the official title yet, but seeing her like this was enough to make me forget that.

“He’ll kill me anyway if I reveal anything! I-I can’t!” the man sputtered.

“And I’ll kill you if you don’t. At least if you answer and give us what we need, we’ll protect you. The choice is yours.”

I was growing even more amazed at this new Cali as she made demands that I truly believed she wouldn’t hesitate to follow through on.

The man shook his head. “Fine.” He scowled at Cali, the hate in his eyes evident. “What do you want to know?”

“We want Malakai’s battle strategy,” Cali said.

The man hesitated, licking his dry, cracked lips before he finally began speaking. “Malakai always puts his strongest forces at the front, facing off against the opponent. He leaves the rear exposed.”

Cali glanced at me with a stunned expression on her face and I smiled back at her. She’d done it. She’d managed to get the one piece of information that would make all the difference in our fight against the Bitterfangs.

I stepped forward, preparing to ask a few more questions just as the man lunged for the silver capsule.

**Episode 4109**

**Xavier**

I was on thin ice with Ava right now, but I could still feel the attraction surging between us. She wasn’t the only one with a reason to be pissed off. She’d treated Cali like shit, and if things were different and I wasn’t hanging on the ends of Adéluce’s strings, I would’ve called her out more for it. Maybe I still would… But how would Adéluce respond? Me sticking up for Cali? It was yet another sign of the narrow path I was going to have to learn to navigate to keep the people I cared about out of Adéluce’s crosshairs.

“I’m not jealous of Cali!” Ava repeated. “Stop saying it because it’s not true. That’s the simple explanation you have in your head even though it couldn’t be further from the reality. Truth be told, I couldn’t care less about Cali!”

I didn’t point out that even the way she said Cali’s name suggested otherwise. There was no point poking that bear. I knew as well as Ava did that jealousy was coloring a lot of our conflict right now, even if she wouldn’t admit it. There was no use stating the obvious and getting her even more pissed at me.

“No, I’m not jealous of her, but I *am* pissed at you. I know I can’t do anything about the way Cali feels about you. I can’t even blame her for it because of the *due destini* and all that shit. But I saw how quickly you ran to her rescue out there when that car exploded, and I saw the way you held her afterward. How dare you try to confront me about being jealous when you’re making it painfully obvious that Cali isn’t the only one with lingering feelings!”

“And what would you have had me do?” I asked, incredulous. “Let her die?” I didn’t even want to touch the lingering feelings part. I didn’t want to lie to her and say that it wasn’t true. I also didn’t want to prove her right.

“Oh, please. Greyson was right there. He would’ve fallen all over himself to be the one to rescue her. Too bad there was another hero waiting in the wings to do it for him,” Ava said bitterly.

“But Greyson got hit by the explosion,” I pointed out.

“True, but let’s not forget the kiss at the summit. You might tell me over and over again that you’re my Alpha, and you may have even made me your Luna, but you rarely ever act like it. You continue to carry on like Cali is the most important thing in your life. I’m sick of it. I’m tired of having it thrown in my face! Do you think I’m stupid? Do you think I don’t see the way you look at her?”

Ava raised a hand as if to slap me, but I caught her wrist and shoved her down onto the bed. I crawled on top of her and pinned her hands at her sides.

“Let go of me!” she hissed.

Ignoring her, I leaned close so that I was only inches from her face. Her cheeks were burning red with anger… or maybe something else. My wolf began to stir inside of me.

“Fuck you, Xavier!” she said, struggling to free herself. She gassed out quickly and finally lay still, obviously realizing that I was far stronger than she was and there was no use fighting me.

“I thought you weren’t jealous,” I said.

“This isn’t about me. It’s about *us*.”

I was only half listening. I was too focused on the way her lips moved while she spoke and the scent of her long hair where it lay fanned out on the bed. Even the fire in her eyes was driving me crazy. It was dangerous to be this drawn to her, but fuck if I could help it. I had to hand it to Adéluce. She certainly knew just how to torture me.

“You say you’re not jealous, Ava, but I saw how pissed you were when I didn’t side with you about Cali leaving. Weren’t you the one who said I needed to get along with Greyson?”

Ava narrowed her eyes at me. “Don’t use that as an excuse. It’s not the same thing, and you know it.”

I sighed, exasperated and finally feeling spent from the day’s events as everything seemed to fall down on my shoulders all at once. “What more do I have to do to convince you that I’m only doing what any true Alpha would do? Think about where we are. Look around you. We have a house. A house that you wouldn’t have if it weren’t for me.”

“Oh, how thankful I am. Want me to kiss your feet while I’m at it to properly thank you for saving little old me?” Ava said.

“That’s not how I mean it, and you know it. I’m just trying to remind you of all the things that I *have* done to prove my devotion to you and this pack. Take a look in the mirror at yourself, Ava. That’s a real Luna mark on your shoulder. That’s proof and a symbol that you’re *my* Luna. We have furniture, food in the pantry, a warm fire burning downstairs. We are on *our* bed. What more do you need to get it, Ava? What more can I do to show you that it’s not the way you think? How can I convince you that there’s nothing to be jealous of?”

“For the last time, I *said* I’m not jealous!”

“Sorry, sorry. I guess I keep forgetting that you’ve said that because it’s so not true.” I couldn’t keep the playful lilt from my voice, and Ava’s expression finally softened.

She lifted her head, and her lips grazed my ear as she whispered, “just because we have all these things doesn’t mean that I’m going to sleep with you in *our* bed.”

I smiled. “Why? Because we’re going to be too busy doing other things in it?”

Ava scoffed at that, but she didn’t move away from me. Her lips were so close to mine. Deliciously close. I still had her arms pinned down at her sides, and she wasn’t fighting me anymore. That was a good thing since I didn’t want her to.

I leaned closer and brushed her lips with mine. She took in a sharp breath and closed her eyes.

“Nothing’s changed between us. We’ve never been good for each other, and yet, we still find ourselves drawn to each other, over and over again. We both thrive on our friction. Why don’t we stop pretending? Why don’t we lean in to our dynamic and accept it? Things would be a lot easier that way.” I brushed my lips against hers again, loving the way her breath felt tickling against my lips.

“I hate you, Xavier. Do you know that?”

“I know, because I hate you too, with all my heart.”

Ava suddenly started struggling to free herself again and this time, I let her go. But instead of shoving me away, she wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled me into a kiss. “This doesn’t change anything,” she whispered against my lips before snaking her warm tongue into my mouth.

“I don’t care,” I breathed. I kept trying to fight her—because of Cali, because of Adéluce, because of my own misgivings and confusion about the state of things, but I always failed. No matter what I did, I always found myself right back in Ava’s arms.

*I need this as badly as she does. I don’t care about the consequences. Not right now. We have to prove to each other that we still have enough between us to get through this and to keep the Samaras strong and raise this pack to the glory we deserve.*

I had to keep reminding myself that Adéluce could appear at any moment and pull the rug right out from under me, but I wasn’t in any state to let that stop me. I only hoped that I wouldn’t end up taking Ava down with me.

I rolled on top of her, pinning her arms to the bed once again. She didn’t fight me this time. As my tongue plunged deep into her mouth, she wrapped her legs around my waist and moved her hips against me. I pulled back and looked into her eyes.

“What am I going to do with you?” Ava said, her voice low. She ran the tip of her tongue along her lips, and the wolf growled inside of me. I pressed my lips against hers again, hungry to taste her, hungry to show her just how much I wanted her. I pressed my lengthening erection against the warmth between her thighs and held it there, wanting her to know exactly what she was doing to me.

I pulled back and ripped off my shirt, then made quick work of removing my pants. Not wanting to wait, I slid her pants down over her hips and lifted her shirt up and over her head. I stood back and marveled at her nakedness, enjoying how the long tendrils of her hair fell across her breasts.

Desire clouding my thoughts, I climbed back on top of her and pressed my lips hard against hers as she spread her legs, inviting me inside.

**Episode 4110**

Alvin slipped his wrist from one of the chains, lunging forward to lash at Rishika. He got her across the chest with one of them and sent her crashing into a table—the same one that held the silver capsule. It began to roll toward the floor, and I lunged for it, but I wasn’t quick enough, and it fell to the ground.

Greyson tackled Alvin, and they both skidded across the floor and smashed into the wall. All hell broke loose after that. Alvin was showing himself to be a hell of a lot stronger than I’d thought possible. And faster. I recalled all the people who had been chained up down here against their will and none of them had ever managed to slip out of the chains before.

*What the hell do the Bitterfangs put in their diet to have power like this?*

Alvin still had one of the chains clutched in his hand and he struck Greyson across the face with it, drawing blood.

I snarled in anger. *He better not ruin my mate’s beautiful face! How dare he?*

I stood frozen, wanting to use my magic but knowing that I couldn’t without risking injury to Greyson or the others. I had no choice but to fight. I leapt into the fray, Lola jumped in and tried to pull me off Alvin until she realized it was me.

“Come on, Lola!” I screamed.

“My bad, I didn’t realize!” Lola said.

Alvin was still wielding his chain like a champ, and he slapped Ravi with it next, sending him flying back against the wall. Alvin quickly turned his attention to the silver capsule on the floor and made a dive for it, but I scrambled fast enough to beat him to it and kicked it away.

“Bitch!” Alvin screamed. He grabbed my leg and twisted it. I grimaced in agony and fell to the ground, clutching my leg as jolts of pain rushed through it. Alvin scrambled over me and lunged for the capsule while I tried to hold him back.

*Why is someone who was so afraid of dying only seconds ago trying to kill himself now?*

I yanked on his leg, stopping him from reaching the pill. With a growl, he partially shifted and bit down hard on my arm.

I screamed in pain and released him, and he finally reached the capsule. He grabbed it and popped it in his mouth.

“Someone stop him!” I said, fighting through the pain to reach for him once again. “He just took the pill!”

It was too late. Alvin trembled as the veins in his throat turned black. Bloody foam spewed from his mouth as he gagged and spasmed on the floor like a fish out of water.

I got to my feet and jumped away from him, clutching my bleeding arm as he finally stopped moving. His head slumped to the side, and the disgusting red foam pooled out of his slack mouth. He was dead.

I looked down at him with a sick feeling rising in my stomach. I felt horrible, but he’d done it to himself. I looked around the room, noting the chunks of the wall that had been ripped away when he blasted through the chains, the blood on the floor, and Greyson’s and Ravi’s bleeding faces.

“Cali!” Greyson said as he rushed over to me. “You’re hurt!”

“I don’t think it’s as bad as it looks,” I said, though it surely *felt* as bad as it looked. “Are you okay?”

Greyson waved me off. “I’m fine. This will heal in no time.”

“Welp, that didn’t work out so well, eh?” Big Mac said. “Well, see ya.” She turned and went upstairs without even a parting glance.

I stared at Alvin’s body, my breathing finally starting to slow back to normal.

*Did we get enough information? I tried so hard… I just couldn’t take how they were torturing him. It didn’t seem right, and I couldn’t watch them do it a second longer. I threatened him, but I didn’t torture him. I would never do that.*

I knew why Greyson had taken that route, but if I had a say, I was always going to say differently. If we started torturing folks, what would set us apart from packs like the Bitterfang? We had to be better than them, not stoop to their tactics.

Greyson and I exchanged a look and then quickly looked away. Things were still so awkward between us.

*I don’t like that we’re so off right now. But it is what it is. He said what he said. It might be stubborn of me, but he should be the one to apologize or at least take the initiative to talk this through, not me.*

“Well, we got some info out of him, at least,” I said finally, pushing all other thoughts away.

“I suppose,” Greyson muttered. “But we don’t know if we can really rely on it.”

Rishika came over, rubbing her back where the chain had struck her. “Agreed. Maybe he was blowing smoke up our asses.” She glanced at his body where it lay crumpled only a few feet away. “Though I can’t imagine he would have killed himself if the information wasn’t good. Maybe he was afraid that if he ever did get out of here, Malakai would find out that he’d talked and kill him. And knowing Malakai, it wouldn’t be an easy death. Obviously, death by silver was preferable.”

“Is everyone good?” Greyson asked suddenly. The wound on his face was already healing. Same with Ravi, but I could tell that everyone was still quite shaken up. Things had gotten out of hand quickly.

“We’re good,” Ravi said.

“Good. Can you take care of the body?” Greyson asked him.

“Of course,” Ravi said. He nodded at Rishika, and they dragged the man out of the room, leaving a trail of blood in their wake.

Greyson grabbed me by the arm. “You’re coming with me.”

“Why?” I said, pulling back.

“Because you got bitten by a werewolf. That’s why.”

I hadn’t really thought through the implications of that, but now that the reality of what happened was setting in, I was starting to get worried. What if I turned? I would be linked to the Bitterfangs forever, having been sired by one of their pack members. I’d often thought about what it would be like to become a werewolf, but this certainly wasn’t the way that I’d dreamed it would happen. What if I didn’t turn at all and it killed me?

*What does this really mean? Could I die? It has to be worse than what I’d have to go through to become a Luna.*

“I’m scared,” I admitted. “What’s going to happen to me?”

“This isn’t the first time you’ve been bitten, Cali,” Greyson said, firm but reassuring. “All we have to do is make sure the lupus sputo is drawn out. Then everything will be fine.”

I let him take my hand, and he led me upstairs into the bathroom attached to his bedroom. He pulled me over to the sink and gently guided my arm under the warm water to wash the bite out. It hurt, but the blood had made the wound look much worse than it really was.

“See, not so bad,” I said.

“No, not at all. As soon as we get the lupus sputo out, you’ll be good as new.” He drew my arm to his mouth and placed his lips against my skin. I gasped.

Greyson pulled back, concerned. “Does that hurt?”

I shook my head. “I can handle it.”

He nodded. “I have no doubt that you can.”

I looked at him, happy to hear him say that. Still, I remembered that he’d had plenty of doubts about me before. That was one of the reasons I was still so mad at him. I watched as he pressed my wound to his lips once again before gently sucking out the lupus sputo. I gritted my teeth against the weird combination of pain and pleasure that the sensation of his lips and tongue drawing out the sputo brought me.

He pulled away and spit a glob of blood in the sink. Then he looked at me. “Are you okay? Hopefully that didn’t hurt too bad?”

“I’m okay,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

He put his lips to the wound again and sucked and spat a few more times before he finally released me. “Now, I’m going to go get Torin so that he can heal you.” He turned to go, but I stopped him. We locked eyes.

I had trouble finding my voice, and when it finally came, I rasped out a “thank you.”

Greyson nodded and took a few more steps toward the door before turning to face me again. “I’m sorry about earlier, Cali. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“But you did say it,” I said. “And it hurt.”

Greyson reached out and placed his warm hand against my cheek and stroked it. “I know. I was just frustrated. I was hurt, too. I couldn’t help myself in the moment, but now I know that it was wrong, that I should’ve never said that. If I could take it back, you know that I would.”

He reached out and lifted my chin so that I was looking him right in the eye. My heart was pounding hard in my chest as he leaned in close.

“Can you forgive me, love?”

**Episode 4111**

**Xavier**

Ava’s legs were wrapped tightly around my waist, and I pressed against her, one hand palming her left breast while the other began a slow reach down between us, heading for her center. It was easier than I’d thought it would be to simply lose myself in her. She was familiar, warm, and sexy. She was everything I needed right now, and I didn’t want to stop.

A knock on the door broke us apart. “Don’t move, maybe they’ll go away,” I said against Ava’s lips. I slowly tunneled my tongue deep into her mouth just as another knock came, louder and more frantic than the last. I looked up at the door, annoyed.

Ava pulled me back to her and kissed me. “Forget everything else,” she said. “Focus on me.”

Whoever was at the door clearly had other ideas. Their knocks quickly turned into pounding so hard that the door swung open. Marissa came charging in, stopping short and rolling her eyes when she spotted us entwined on the bed.

“What the fuck?” I said, resisting the urge to whip a pillow at her. “What in the hell gives you the right to come barging in here?”

Ava caught her breath, her eyes wide. “Can’t you see we’re busy?”

Marissa snorted. “I see it and can believe it.”

“Is there a reason you’re here?” I snarled. Not only had she charged into our room, but now she was trying to banter instead of just telling us why the hell she’d come in here in the first place.

“I just thought you would want to know that the last patrol is on its way back,” she said.

I groaned. “Shit, and I’m supposed to lead the next one.” I swung my feet to the floor, realizing that Marissa was still lingering in the doorway. I shot her an annoyed glance. “Take a picture, it might last longer,” I grumbled.

Marissa shrugged. “What? It’s nothing I haven’t seen before.” Then she turned and left, not bothering to close the door behind her.

*That was a stupid interruption, but it’s probably for the best.* I snuck a glance at Ava who was still lying on the bed with her arm bent over her eyes. *Things between us are still pretty muddled. Having sex with her right now will only complicate things even further—if that’s even possible.*

That didn’t make it any easier for me to pull away. My urge to have her remained strong, even if that urge had been fueled by yet another one of our arguments. It was easy to forget everything else going on when I was… preoccupied. I started to get up, but Ava grabbed my arm, stopping me. “Send someone else. You’re the Alpha, you don’t have to jump when someone tells you to. Besides, we’re not finished.” A slow smile spread across her face.

I hesitated. “What do you mean? We’re not finished having sex… or we’re not finished arguing… or both?” I was so tempted to stay, but I chose duty over my own desires and hopped out of bed. I picked up my shirt and jeans from the floor and began to pull them on.

Ava got up and followed behind me. “I’m coming with you.”

I stopped and looked at her. “I’m not sure that’s a great idea. We can’t be fighting while on patrol.” We were on decent terms at the moment, but that could change in the blink of an eye. Patrol wasn’t the time or place to fall into yet another one of our arguments. Bickering would leave us both unfocused and exposed.

Ava smirked. “Was that what we were just doing? Fighting?” She arched an eyebrow. “Because you and I have fought many times before, and I’m not quite sure it looks like that.”

I was getting annoyed. “You know what I’m talking about.”

Ava shrugged. “Sometimes it’s hard to tell.”

“Tell me about it, Ava. That’s what I was trying to tell you earlier. Our relationship is like fire and ice. We need to keep that in mind at all times… and pay attention to the times where that might work against us. For example, out on patrol where we need to keep our heads on a swivel.” I started toward the door as I yanked my shirt down over my head. “You stay. I’ll see you when I get back, okay?”

Ava plucked her shirt from the floor and started to pull it on. “I’m the Luna. I should be going out on patrols and supporting the pack whenever I can—our petty arguments aside. I don’t know why you’re so worried about us fighting out on patrol. We’ve fought side by side millions of times before, and we’ve never let some argument get in the way of things.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “Come on.”

As we made our way downstairs, shoulder to shoulder, Ava’s hand kept brushing against mine. I hated that even that fleeting contact felt so good. I wished that I hadn’t agreed to take the next patrol, but I’d also had no idea that things with Ava would go in the direction they had. One minute we’d been trying to kill each other, and the next, well the next, we couldn’t keep our hands off each other’s bodies. It was frustrating and made even more so by the fact that Adéluce was probably pleased by my predicament. The more complicated my life became, the more pleasure Adéluce took from it.

*I still don’t know what would happen to Ava if things between us changed. I can’t just assume that Adéluce is bluffing and that she won’t make Ava suffer if things start going too well between us.*

And what would it mean for the deep love I had for Cali?

Marissa smirked at us as we came walking down the stairs. “Sorry again to have interrupted that deep conversation you two were having. But pack business calls—you know how it is.”

I glared at Marissa as Donovan and Simon came in from patrol. “Nothing to report,” Donovan said. “It’s all quiet.”

“Thanks,” I said, though hearing that didn’t bring me even a shred of comfort. If they thought nothing was happening, they might fall into a false state of comfort and lower their guard. I couldn’t let that happen.

Josephine came walking over. “I’m ready for our patrol,” she said.

“That won’t be necessary,” Ava said. “You can take next shift.”

“Thanks,” Josephine said, surprised. “You don’t have to tell me twice.” She gave Marissa a nod as she raced upstairs and out of sight.

Ava turned to me. “Shall we?”

“We shall,” I said. Marissa threw us an amused glance as we stepped outside onto the porch, and I scowled at her over my shoulder. We’d have to make sure to lock the door next time… if there was a next time.

I started to undress, wondering why I’d even bothered to put on clothes in the first place. Probably because Marissa catching us in the act had thrown me off so much that I didn’t want to give her the satisfaction of getting another eyeful of my goods.

Ava put a hand on my chest. “Let me.” She slowly lifted my shirt off, her eyes on mine. I knew that she was teasing me, and it was a good way to remind me of what I’d just missed out on, but it didn’t feel right.

*I have to stop things from getting too comfortable between us. I can’t have Adéluce witnessing us getting along this well. It’ll only set us both up for something bad to happen. I absolutely have to keep things cooled off between us. I don’t want to see the consequences otherwise.*

I put my hand on Ava’s, stopping her. “I’m a grown-up. I can get undressed without help.”

Ava eyed me for a moment and then stepped away. She began to quietly undress, and I stole a longing glance at her naked body before I stripped off the rest of my clothes, shifted, and leapt off the porch.

A few minutes later, we were running side by side in the woods. It almost felt like how it used to when we were young and would run around for fun. Only back then, the tension between us had been purely sexual. I wasn’t sure what to make of the energy between us now. It was sexual… at times. But there was a tenseness between us now that certainly hadn’t been there when we were younger.

*Are you annoyed that I’m out here with you instead of Josephine?* Ava mind linked.

*If you keep talking, I will be*,I replied.

I was distracted enough having Ava beside me and I needed to focus on our patrol. We were following one of the many forest paths when a familiar scent drifted by.

*Bitterfang?* I said to Ava. *Do you smell that?*

*I do*,Ava said.

We followed the scent and it led us farther away from the pack house and right toward Redwood territory. I was about to alert Ava to be careful and keep her eyes peeled just as we collided with two wolves on the path ahead of us.

**Episode 4112**

Greyson’s question yanked me right out of the moment. I couldn’t let my feelings for him overshadow what he’d done to me by calling me out for not making a choice between him and Xavier. Even though there wouldn’t be any real consequences for me making the choice as far as the *due destini* was concerned, I still wasn’t ready.

Before our disagreement, I’d thought that Greyson understood the struggle with the *due destini*—at least he’d always made it seem that way. He’d apologized for pressing the issue, and now he wanted forgiveness. I wanted to forgive him, but the problem was that I didn’t forgive myself. Xavier had thrown me to the wayside and done it so cruelly. Why couldn’t I stop the love I had for him? The *due destini*’s grip on me was still so tight it hurt.

Greyson was looking at me with expectation in his eyes, and I felt myself being drawn in. I stepped back. “I need more time.”

His eyes flashed with disappointment, and I worried that he was going to argue. To my surprise, he shook his head and said, “I understand, love. Just know that I feel really bad about how everything went. I regret what I said. It was stupid and cruel, and I never should have said it.”

“No, I’m sorry. I know none of this *due destini* crap is easy.” I was making this too hard on him even though he’d suffered almost as much as I had with the *due destini*.

“I let my frustration get the best of me. I swear it won’t happen again, Cali. You have to believe that I’m sorry enough to make sure that I never hurt you that way again.” Greyson stepped close, and I could tell that he wanted to reach out and touch me, but he was holding back.

“I know. Thank you,” I said around a sigh. “Everything about the war with the Bitterfangs is frustrating and complicated. I know all too well how feelings can get twisted by outside forces. I hate to leave you feeling bad, though. I forgive you, but I still just need the time for myself.”

Greyson gave me a bittersweet smile. “I know, love.” He kissed me on the cheek. “I won’t bring it up again.”

I wasn’t sure I believed that he wouldn’t. The *due destini* always weaseled its way into our lives. It didn’t seem to matter that Xavier had broken up with me, and it didn’t matter that he was with Ava. It just hurt me to know that my actions made Greyson feel this way. I had no doubt he was probably feeling that way for some time. There was no way that it had just come out of nowhere. Why couldn’t it just go away?

“I’m going to go find Torin so he can take a look at your wound,” Greyson said. “I think I got all the lupus sputo out, but I don’t want to take any risks. It could still become infected.”

I looked at my wound. It didn’t look so bad. “It hurts but I think I can handle it. You did a good job cleaning it out. Maybe there’s no need to bother Torin.”

Greyson shook his head. “I’d rather not take the chance. Better safe than sorry, and we have the resource, so why not use it?” He turned to go, and I followed him downstairs.

*Even though I want to be thought of as a tough, kickass Luna, there’s something wonderful about having Greyson take care of me like this. Knowing that he always has my back like this no matter what means a lot… Which is why hurting him makes me feel so awful.*

We found Torin puttering around in the kitchen with his headphones on. He looked so in the zone that I almost felt bad about interrupting him.

“Hey, Torin,” Greyson said, waving his arms to get his attention.

Torin nearly jumped out of his skin when he noticed us. He pulled his headphones off one ear and smiled. “Who needs healing this time?” he said cheerfully. “Let me guess… Cali?”

“Yes, me,” I said sheepishly. We’d come to him for his healing powers so many times that now he knew exactly what we wanted before we even asked, kind of how Big Mac gave us an eye roll every time we approached because she knew we were going to ask for something.

“Okay, have a seat and I’ll get to it,” Torin said. “Was just listening to some tunes while I prepared the batter for a chocolate cake I’m going to make later.”

“Sounds yummy,” I said, settling into a seat. “Thanks for taking a moment to heal me.”

“Anytime,” Torin said distractedly. He leaned close to examine my wound, his warm, soft hands gently prodding at the skin around it.

“I’m going to go make a run around the territory,” Greyson said. “I want to make sure that the Bitterfang we captured came alone.”

I jumped up. “Not without me!”

“Cali, come on. You’re wounded, and Torin’s about to heal you. You can sit this one out,” Greyson said.

Torin waved his hand over my arm and then straightened, shifting his attention to Greyson. “She’s good as new!” he said.

I rushed over to show Greyson. “Look, not even a scar.” I wanted to see this thing through and prove that not even a werewolf bite could throw me off my mission. We needed to make sure that our woods were free of Bitterfangs, and I wanted to be a part of that. I owed it to the pack as their acting Luna.

Greyson sighed and nodded. “Fine. If you insist—and I know that you do.” He gave me a lopsided grin.

Out on the porch, I began to help him undress. “No need to shred your clothes if you don’t have to, right?” I lifted his shirt up over his head. “I have to admit, I’m surprised you let me come with you without more of an argument. I expected just a little more back and forth than that.”

“Yeah, well, I knew you weren’t going to take no for an answer… and I’m trying to learn not to be so protective. Isn’t that what you want?”

I cocked my head to the side as he backed away and stepped out of his pants. “I don’t mind you being a little protective of me from time to time… but yes. That’s what I want.” I thought for a moment about what it would be like if Greyson didn’t show any concern for me at all, if he finally behaved as if I could take care of myself completely and began to treat me like just another one of the pack in the face of danger. That didn’t seem right. We were going to have to find the middle ground—and we were well on our way to doing that.

Greyson was finally completely naked, and I stepped back to admire him, taking in hungry eyefuls of his amazing body. I drank in the chiseled planes of his chest and the bulges of his biceps. His ass was taut and firm, and I thought about all the times I’d squeezed it while he made love to me.

*I have to stop. This isn’t the time or the place for me to get all hot and bothered over Greyson’s body.*

“Ready?” Greyson asked. Without waiting for an answer, he shifted, and I hopped onto his back. *I’m going to go pretty fast here*,he warned me through our mind link. *And I have to admit that it’s a little risky doing patrol like this.*

I took that to mean that going out without another wolf and carrying a half-Fae on his back didn’t make for an ideal patrol setup.

*Got it*, I mind linked. *I promise I won’t be a burden.*

*You’re never a burden, love.*

I wrapped my arms tightly around his neck as he took off. He hadn’t been exaggerating about his speed. He was going so fast that I had to dig my knees into his sides to hold on. He raced through the woods so fast that his feet barely seemed to touch the ground. He pivoted sharply from one direction to another, and I was doing all I could not to go tumbling off his back like I had with Lola.

He suddenly came to an abrupt stop and froze. I froze, too. All I could hear was his ragged, elevated breathing and the beating of my own heart.

*Why did you stop?* I asked him. *Did you smell something? See something?*

*I hear werewolves*, Greyson replied.

I tensed. *Bitterfangs?* I reached down inside myself to touch my magic, wondering if I should draw my sword so that I could be ready for whatever might pop out at us unexpectedly. I imagined myself as a knight charging into battle on a strong stallion… Only my stallion was a powerful werewolf.

*Not sure. I thought I picked up a Bitterfang scent earlier. That’s why I went in this direction in the first place. I think you should get off and wait here. Sorry*,he said before I could object. *I know that you want to be in on the action. Hold on tight, okay?*

He charged ahead, and soon we came upon Xavier, who had Charlie pinned to the ground.

**Episode 4113**

**Greyson**

I saw nothing but red as pure fury boiled up inside me. What the fuck was my brother doing? Things weren’t great between us, or between our packs for that matter, but had things gotten so bad that he was attacking Redwood pack members, now?

*Get off*, I mind linked to Cali. *I have to take care of this.*

As soon as Cali hopped off and had backed a safe distance away, I charged forward and slammed into my brother. We both went tumbling into the dirt. Xavier snapped at me as Cali began to scream.

“Stop it! Why are you doing this?” She sent a blast of magic at the ground near us, giving both me and Xavier pause. It was only then that I noticed Ava, Violet, and Sage standing nearby, watching. They weren’t fighting, so it was clear that this wasn’t an all-out battle.

*What’s going on here? Why is Xavier attacking Charlie while everyone’s just standing around?*

I reached out to Xavier via mind link. *Why were you attacking Charlie?*

*Get off me!* Xavier growled.

*Not until you tell me*,I shot back.

*I’m not telling you a fucking thing until you get the fuck off me!* Xavier snapped. *I’m trying to keep things from escalating, but if you don’t get off me right now, I’m going to make you get off, and that won’t be pretty, brother.*

“This isn’t the time!” Cali said. “Stop fighting. We’re better than this!”

Xavier and I glowered at each other before I finally stepped off Xavier. As soon as he was on his feet, he threw his body against mine, shoving me backward into a tree. I was just about to lunge at him again, when Cali’s voice stopped me.

“Cool it, the both of you! Everyone needs to shift so we can discuss this like civilized people,” Cali said.

Charlie was first to shift back, and he wasted no time pointing an accusing finger at Xavier. “He jumped me out of nowhere!”

Xavier shifted, already on the defense. “Stop being so dramatic. We thought you were a Bitterfang. Why the hell would I attack you otherwise?” He and Ava shared an eye roll.

Everyone else began to shift back, and I realized that Cali was the only one wearing clothes. I imagined that must be awkward in itself, being out here with me, Xavier, Ava, and the others, all of us naked and acting like it was the most natural thing in the world. It had to be a bit much for her…

I threw an arm over Cali’s shoulder and was happy when she didn’t push me away. Hopefully she was starting to feel better after our fight. I turned to Violet. “What happened?”

“Why are you asking her? I just told you what happened. You don’t believe me?” Xavier said.

“It’s not that, I just want to hear someone else’s perspective,” I said.

Before Xavier could respond, Ava stepped forward. “My mate is telling the truth. Get all the perspectives you want, but it won’t change the facts. We picked up the Bitterfang scent, and seconds later, Charlie and Violet appeared. We reacted fast.”

“We picked up the scent, too!” Charlie interrupted. “But before we could discover where it was coming from, Xavier jumped on me.”

I turned to Violet. “Just tell me what happened.”

“How many times and ways does he need to hear it? I thought Alphas were better listeners than this,” Xavier grumbled to Ava.

“He just wants to feel like he’s in control. Let him have his way so he doesn’t throw a fit,” Ava said with a smirk.

I shot Ava a lingering glance that she didn’t flinch away from before I turned my attention to Violet once again.

“Me, Sage, and Charlie were on patrol when we picked up a Bitterfang scent,” Violent began. “We were tracking it when we ran into Ava and Xavier. Or… they ran into us. It all happened so fast.”

I was getting the picture. “Sounds chaotic,” I said. “Sensing a Bitterfang presence can do that.” I sighed and looked around at everyone as I shifted gears, deciding to be as diplomatic as possible. “I’m just glad no one is hurt. But this does bring up another concern, the possibility that this might happen again—us mistaking allies for the enemy. And what about the Bitterfang scent? Any idea what direction it came from?”

“If I had to guess, it was probably a lone scout who has since returned to the Bitterfang camp,” Xavier said, making sure to avoid my gaze as he talked. “The scent has already weakened, so I doubt they’re still around.”

“They might have been scared off by the patrols,” Sage suggested.

“Maybe. Each patrol should continue, just to make sure. But we should try to limit ourselves to our respective territories so something like this doesn’t happen again.” I was just about to tell Cali that it was time to head back when Xavier grabbed me.

“The next time you send a Redwood patrol into my territory, you might want to let me know,” he growled.

“And you might want to learn how to distinguish ally from foe before you attack. I know that attention to detail hasn’t always been your strong suit, but since it might mean the difference between life or death, you might want to sharpen that skill,” I said through clenched teeth. “Not to mention how costly a mistake it would be if you got confused in the heat of battle.”

Xavier glared, but Ava pulled him away before he could say—or do—anything else.

I turned my back to Xavier and faced Charlie and the others. “Report in when you get back.”

“You got it,” Charlie said.

“Cali, come on, let’s go,” I said. I shifted and, as soon as Cali was settled on my back, I turned and raced back toward the pack house.

My anger at Xavier was still simmering in my belly. I knew that if I’d stayed even a minute longer, Xavier and I might have come to blows. Now wasn’t the time to double down on the obvious dissent between our packs. I didn’t want Cali caught in the middle, nor did I want the pack members to see yet another confrontation between me and my brother. Mace’s words of warning about how our constant conflict was hurting the alliance echoed in my head again. I didn’t want to be the reason for the fractures in our alliance. It was already on shaky ground as it was.

*You handled that well*, Cali said.

I was glad she thought so. I’d had to act on instinct and nothing else. It hadn’t been an issue between me and my brother, but rather me trying to protect my pack member. Luckily it hadn’t developed into more.

A short time later, we were back at the pack house. I’d picked up my clothes off one of the porch chairs and was getting dressed when I realized that Cali hadn’t said a word since we’d gotten back. It was frustrating. I’d hoped that things wouldn’t remain so awkward between us, but it was obvious that Cali wasn’t ready to forgive yet. She’d said as much not even an hour ago in the bathroom, but I’d still been hopeful that she would get over it sooner rather than later.

*I wonder if there’s a way for me to make it up to her. A way to prove that I didn’t mean what I said—at all.*

I hated that I was responsible for erecting this wall between us, especially now when there really shouldn’t be anything standing in our way. I supposed what troubled me more than anything was that no matter how much I wanted to believe that what I’d said to Cali had been born out of frustration alone, that wasn’t true. It truly bothered me that she hadn’t made a decision, and more than that, it was starting to eat me alive.

*She hasn’t made her choice, and I know that the* due destini *is hard on her… But I can’t ignore how that makes me feel. Xavier has abandoned her and continues to treat her like shit, but she’s still holding out hope for him. What more does she need? What’ll it take for her to realize that I’m the one she should choose—and that the choice should be easy?*

Despite the random kiss at the summit and their closeness when he’d rescued her from the car explosion, he hadn’t shown Cali much compassion—or even much respect. He was with Ava now, that much was obvious, but still, Cali couldn’t make up her mind. Though I knew the *due destini’s* effects remained powerful, the stakes were nowhere near as high as they’d been before. I really believed that I could overcome it and prove that my love for her was stronger than any curse.

*I just need to figure out how. I have to show her that I’m the right choice—whether Xavier comes to his senses and comes back around or not. And when I finally figure out how to do that, I know that she will finally choose me.*

**Episode 4114**

I took a moment to study Greyson’s face, which was hard to do since he was busy getting dressed. He looked like he was lost in thought, a million miles away. I imagined that he was expecting me to throw my arms around him and whisper how I’d already forgiven him and that all was forgotten, but I couldn’t do that. It would be a lie. As much as I wanted things to return to normal between us—or at least our version of normal—I couldn’t quite get there yet. I felt bad, but I couldn’t ignore my feelings.

*I told him that it would take time, so he can’t have thought that meant an hour later. I’m still angry and hurt, and it’s not like I can put a time limit on how long I’ll be upset with him. Feelings don’t work that way. He should know that as well as I do. There’s no way I can brush something like this under the rug. Hopefully he gets that.*

One thing I knew for sure was that it wasn’t a question of if, only of when. I would know when it was time for me to forgive him. But that time wasn’t now, no matter how awkward things would probably remain between us until I finally decided to put all of it behind us.

I left Greyson to his thoughts and stepped into the house. I passed through the living room where some of the pack members were discussing battles and strategy. They seemed so knowledgeable and sure of themselves. I slumped. How could I be a proper Luna when I didn’t even know the first thing about war strategy? It was nice and all that Greyson called me his master strategist, but I didn’t quite deserve it. As good as my ideas sounded, I’d only been guessing about the best moves. There wasn’t really any strategy involved.

*There must be something I can do to beef up on how to fight a war. But how am I supposed to research something I know nothing about? I don’t even really know where to start. I could ask the others, but I don’t want to seem like I don’t know anything, especially when they’re probably already having a hard time seeing me as Luna. No, I have to figure this out on my own.*

Then it hit me: the Obaltarion! Duh. Why hadn’t I thought of that sooner? I rushed upstairs, trying to remember where I’d put the library card that Steinar had given me. I collided with Artemis on the way, and she stumbled back, giving me a confused look.

“What are you doing?” she asked. “Or do I even want to know?”

“I’m about to go learn the art of werewolf war!” I said excitedly.

Artemis scowled. “The art of what? I’m pretty sure there’s no ‘art’ involved in werewolf battles, but knock yourself out, I guess.”

I left her on the stairs and sprinted into my room. I quickly dug through my desk and dresser drawers until I finally located my library card. I quickly slid behind my desk and opened my laptop then navigated to the website. The chat box popped up on my screen.

*Cali! So happy to hear from you!* Steinar typed. The gargoyle was always so cheery, wasn’t he? *How can I help you today?*

*Hi, Steinar!* I typed quickly. *Do you have any books on strategy of war?*

I couldn’t wait. Soon, I’d be reading myself into being the best war strategist any of the packs had ever had. I could see it now, how proud Greyson would be.

The chat box filled with a wall of text as Steinar listed off a bunch of titles. My head was already spinning.

*Steinar, if you don’t mind, could we narrow this list down to werewolf wars only?*

There was no way I would know which book was best out of that many titles. A more curated list was what I was after.

*Hold on*, Steinar typed. A few seconds later, the screen filled with yet another massive list of titles.

I groaned. *What about pack wars of only the last century?* *Something specific, but useful.*

*Why are you asking about werewolf wars? What’s going on?* Steinar typed.

*Just trying to be prepared*, I replied. *Just in case anything happens.*

That was sort of true, I guessed. The pack war was already happening, but I didn’t want to draw Steinar into it.

*I’ll have to look into it*, Steinar said. *Is there anything else I can help you with in the meantime?*

I was about to give up and tell him never mind when I thought about the screwed-up mind link situation with Greyson, Lucian, and Elle. From weird static to us crossing signals, it seemed like something was going on with our connection. Steinar may not have had much—or too much, rather—to offer on pack wars, but perhaps he’d have better insights about our mind link capabilities.

It was becoming painfully obvious that Greyson had no plans to make me a real Luna any time soon, which meant that our connection would remain dubious unless one of us did something about it. It had been working okay the last few times we’d used it to communicate, but for how long? If we did end up in a full-blown war and I was supposed to play an important role in it, what would happen if I needed to pass Greyson an important message through mind link only to have it bounce over to Lucian instead—or vice versa? Things could get dire very quickly. Not to mention how embarrassing it would be to mistakenly share a very private mind link with Lucian—or Elle.

*Does the Obaltarion have any information on sire bonds?* I asked Steinar. I held my breath, hoping that he wasn’t going to reply with another massive list. I needed targeted information.

The three dots appeared, signaling that Steinar was typing. *That sounds like something you need a witch for. Please hold.*

I’d already asked two witches about the sire bond and still had very few answers, but I supposed it wouldn’t hurt to get one more opinion. As I waited, I wondered how far the whole mate bond/sire bond thing could go. Would it end up screwing with my mind link capabilities with Xavier, too? Maybe it only applied to Greyson. It wasn’t like I could test my link to Xavier since he’d decided not to respond to me anymore whenever I reached out. It occurred to me that I shouldn’t even be thinking about the state of the mind link between me and Xavier. If things kept going the way they were, I doubted that we were going to have much cause to use it. But things could change. I hoped that they would.

Hypatia’s chat box appeared beside Steinar’s. *What’s this about a sire bond?* she typed.

*I don’t really have time to go into all the sordid details, but what I really need to know is if there’s a way to break it, or at least suppress it?* I hoped that she would have more to offer than the other witches.

Three dots blinked on the screen as Hypatia typed. *I’m going to need a few more details than that, I’m afraid. Who are we talking about?*

I groaned. *Well… that’s kind of complicated. There are quite a few people involved, and one of them died, so I don’t know if he’s even pertinent anymore.*

I thought about Helix and how the sire bond seemed to have driven him crazy. *Let’s just put it this way, someone turned someone else, a wild wolf, into a werewolf and now they have this bond that*—

I paused when I saw the three dots pulsing on the screen.

*There might be a couple of things*, Hypatia typed. *Give me a sec.*

I was hopeful as I waited for Hypatia to send a list of possible solutions. Maybe it would be something that I could do right away. It might not be a strategic war thing, but it would certainly ensure that we could communicate properly during our battle.

*I’m sending over a list. Do the first one on it*, Hypatia began. *But I have to warn you not to attempt any of the spells in these resources on your own. Only a witch has the proper training and tools to leverage these solutions safely.*

I looked at the list as Hypatia sent it through. It appeared to be a bunch of spells that required some questionable ingredients.

*I promise I won’t attempt any of these without a witch’s guidance*, I typed.

I’d gone down that road before and had no interest in suffering similar consequences as last time. Besides, there was no need for me to risk it when I had witches right here in the pack house that I could consult with.

I thanked Hypatia and then sent the list to the printer. I grabbed it on my way to Big Mac’s room, all the while wondering if there was any chance in hell that this would actually work.

**Episode 4115**

**Violet**

I ran along the Redwood-Samara border with Sage and Charlie by my side. I was trying to finish out this patrol strong and keep my eyes on the woods around us, but I was still reeling from the confrontation between Charlie and Xavier.

It was the first time I’d seen Xavier since he’d become Samara Alpha, and I wished it had been under much better circumstances. He just seemed so… different now. I couldn’t really put my finger on it, but he just was. He was colder. Angrier. The Xavier I knew never would have attacked Charlie and pinned him to the ground like that, but I supposed it was a surprise to everyone. Xavier had thought he was a Bitterfang, and I guessed I believed him, but it was still hard to get that image of him bearing down on Charlie out of my mind.

And then there was Ava. I’d heard that he was back with her, but to actually see them together with my own eyes was jarring to say the least. Alpha and Luna of the Samara pack. Wow. I never thought I’d see the day where Xavier even tolerated Ava let alone made her his Luna and became romantically involved with her again. It was so strange.

*That must have been so rough on Cali, seeing them together like that. And because we’re in the alliance together and our territories border each other, she’ll have to see them all the time. It’s probably like the twist of a knife in the gut each and every time. I don’t know what I would do if Charlie just up and left me for his ex without so much as a warning.*

I tried to shake it off. We had a job to do, and I needed to stay focused. I couldn’t get lost in worrying about stuff that truthfully didn’t have much to do with me. The Redwood pack was intact and flourishing even without Xavier, and it was up to us to keep it that way.

I increased my speed to catch up to Charlie. *Hey, are you all right?* I mind linked. He hadn’t spoken much since we’d returned to our patrol route. I’d wanted to ask if he was okay right after it happened, but I figured his pride was bruised enough without me stepping in and fussing over him in front of the others.

*Yes. I’m not hurt or anything*,he replied.

I sensed that the only thing that might be hurt was Charlie’s pride. I knew it wouldn’t seem like it to Charlie, but we were lucky that Xavier was the only aggressive wolf that we’d run into out there because if it had really been the Bitterfangs…

I thought back to the time that Charlie and I had gone up against one of them—the wolf who’d attacked Mrs. Smith. It had been an intense battle, and the Bitterfang wolf had been a formidable opponent that easily tested the limits of our abilities. I’d felt confident and capable with Charlie by my side and we’d more than held our own, which made me feel confident that we would be able to handle one of them if it came down to it.

*One being the operative word. If we got ambushed by three or four, it might be a different story. The Bitterfangs fight in a way I’ve never seen before. It’s like they’re using military maneuvers or something.*

*Looks like the coast is clear*, Sage mind linked, breaking through my thoughts.

*I agree, seems like we’re the only ones around at the moment*, Charlie replied.

It was quiet now, but I was still worried about the scent we’d picked up earlier. Had a Bitterfang wolf really just cut through Redwood and Samara territory unnoticed despite all the patrols? How were they able to do that? The whole point of the patrols was to stop anyone from approaching our pack house undetected, but it seemed like this was one wolf we had missed. Sage and Xavier had suggested that the wolf had caught wind of us, too, and run back to home base, but even if that were the case, the wolf had still managed to evade us. That wasn’t a good thing—even if it meant that we’d avoided potentially being outnumbered in a fight.

Once we finished our rounds, we trotted back to the pack house and shifted back as we made our way across the backyard. We went inside, and I was about to head to the shower when I saw Charlie stop and check himself out in the mirror.

He caught me looking and smirked to cover a sheepish look. “You know, it’s good that Greyson intervened when he did because I was two seconds from pulling a few hunter moves on Xavier.”

*Now I know for sure that Charlie’s pride took a hit. It’s too bad that he’s letting it get to him since he has nothing to be ashamed of. Xavier is not only an Alpha, but a former mercenary. There aren’t a lot of wolves that could go toe to toe with Xavier and come out on the other side victorious.*

“You know that Camp Bridgeham still wants me to come back and teach—you know, share my skills with the new class. I’ve been thinking about it, but I don’t know if I have the time.” Charlie shrugged and did a few more flexes in the mirror.

“Charlie, you don’t have to prove anything, least of all to me. I hope you know that. I know better than anyone what an amazing fighter you are.” I leaned in to pull his attention away from the mirror and gave him a kiss. I was glad to be able to share some downtime with my mate. Things were growing more intense by the day, so I had a feeling that moments like this might soon become few and far between.

Charlie leaned into the kiss and pulled me into a tight embrace. Then, with impressive ease, he picked me up and cradled me in his arms. “I’m not *just* an amazing fighter, you know. There are lots of things I’m good at.”

A swarm of butterflies came to life in my belly, and my cheeks warmed. “How did I live so much of my life without you?” I asked him.

Charlie kissed me and then said, “I feel exactly the same way. It’s a good thing we found each other.”

I wrapped my arms around Charlie’s neck and slowly twirled my tongue into his mouth just as Lilac came crashing in. “What the hell?” I said as Charlie and I flew apart in surprise.

Lilac didn’t even bother to apologize for interrupting us. He was too busy shoving his phone into my face. “What do you make of this, sis?”

Charlie groaned and put me down as we both leaned in to read his phone. It was a text from Xavier asking him if he wanted to join the Samara pack. I was shocked. “What nerve!” I sputtered.

“The dude just attacked me, and now he’s trying to swipe our pack members? Has he no shame at all?” Charlie said.

I smacked Charlie playfully on the arm. “He did attack you, yes, but it was a misunderstanding.”

Lilac looked down at his phone, shaking his head in confusion. “Why would Xavier send this to me?”

“And why didn’t he ask me, too? I thought we were close!” I grumbled.

Charlie shook his head. “Things are really messed up between the packs right now. Even with our alliance, Xavier and Greyson just can’t seem to get on the same page. You saw how they acted earlier, Violet. Greyson wasted no time attacking Xavier, and Xavier came back at him just as hard. If Cali and Ava hadn’t stepped in, who knows what would have happened?”

“They probably would have killed each other,” I said. I grabbed Lilac’s phone to look at Xavier’s text again. “Greyson’s not going to be too happy when he sees this.”

Lilac’s eyes went wide. “What? No! We’re not telling him! We need for them to at least pretend to be getting along. No use throwing fuel on the fire, right? If we show this to Greyson, he’s only going to get angrier at Xavier, if that’s even possible.”

“Yeah, and I don’t want to take sides… but while I’ve always been cool with Xavier, I pledged my loyalty to Greyson. Xavier, on the other hand, doesn’t seem to even understand loyalty. He abandoned our pack and abandoned Cali,” Charlie said.

Lilac nodded. “Yes, that’s true, but Xavier’s always been like a big brother to me. I can’t forget that just because he’s in a fight with Greyson and Cali. I’m sure their situation is more complicated than we realize, so I, for one, am not judging.”

I was growing a little concerned. I couldn’t imagine the idea of Lilac leaving the Redwood pack to join up with the Samaras. It would feel like I was losing him all over again after already losing him once to the spirit world. I had to know that he wasn’t seriously considering leaving to go join the Samara pack. “Lilac, you’re not really considering leaving the Redwood pack, are you?”

**Episode 4116**

I approached Big Mac with enthusiasm, hoping a little preemptive dose of my excitement would spread to the ornery witch and help my latest ask go over a little better. If I could convince Big Mac to try one of Hypatia’s spells, the sire bond issue would be nipped in the bud in no time. If even one of the spells worked, I wouldn’t be just solving my own issue with the sire bond, but helping the alliance as a whole. As far as I was concerned, it was a win-win.

*But that’s only if Big Mac agrees to help, which is never a guarantee. I have to approach this just right so that she won’t turn me down.*

Big Mac was sitting at her desk nose deep in her ledgers as I came walking into her bedroom. She slammed them closed and slid them into her desk drawer when she saw me. “Oh, Cali, it’s you! What a surprise. Let me guess, you want me to magically put an end to the pack war?”

I assumed that she was joking, which was a rare occurrence. “I imagine you would have stopped it already if you could,” I said brightly.

Big Mac shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not. What can I do for you?”

“I’m here about the sire bond,” I said.

She rolled her eyes. “You do remember that I already told you that I don’t know much about it? I haven’t had a chance to even do any research on it with everything else going on, not that it was at the top of my list. It’s a wonder I get anything done at all with one of you knocking at my door every hour on the hour.” She cursed under her breath and looked longingly at the desk drawer where she’d stashed her ledgers. “My own business comes second to every whim and problem of the pack.” She sighed and looked up at me. “But I shouldn’t bore you with my problems, you have enough of your own without me throwing mine on top of the flaming pile.”

*Okay, we’re not off to the best start, but when are things ever easy with Big Mac? I just need to press ahead and ask her.*

“Luckily, you don’t need to do any research because I’ve already done it all myself.” I held out the list. “Take a look,” I said proudly.

Big Mac leaned forward to read the list and then sat back in her seat and looked at me. “Where did you get this?”

“I got it from Hypatia. You know, the witch that works at the Obaltarion.”

Big Mac gave me a skeptical look. “And did Hypatia mention ever actually using any of these spells personally?”

“Um… I didn’t ask. She just said to use the first one listed.”

“Shocker. You do know that doing spells like any of these provided by good old Hypatia carry a lot of risk, right? And since it involves you, Greyson, Elle, and that annoying prince, I’m not doing any of these without their consent. Plus, they probably need to have this done on them anyway for it to really work. I have principles, you know.”

“But, Big Mac, that’s going to take way too long! And Lucian doesn’t even have a phone.”

Big Mac sighed. “And I assume you’re willing to take the blame if—I mean when—something goes wrong?”

“Yes… but any idea what could go wrong?” I asked her, the smallest bit of doubt creeping in.

“Oh, well, it could be something as minor as your hair falling out, or it could be something far more serious. There’s really no way to tell.”

I tried to picture myself bald and a shudder wracked my body. Not a pretty sight. I supposed I could always wear a hat if I didn’t like it. “Would it grow back?”

“Who knows? But I’m going to lean toward no,” Big Mac said matter-of-factly.

“That’s definitely a bummer, but I can’t worry about that. I’m acting Luna, and I should assume all risks. This is war, after all, and if the spell works it will be for the good of the pack.”

“Whatever,” Big Mac harrumphed. She took the list from me and began reading it over, grumbling to herself. She looked up at me. “And you’re sure that Hypatia said that these were for the sire bond?”

I nodded nervously. “Yes, that’s what she said. I wanted to find something that could negate its effects, and this is what she sent me.”

“At what point are you going to stop messing with things? You’d think you’d have learned your lesson by now with the sheer number of your little plans that have blown up in your face. Some of them quite literally,” Big Mac chuckled at that.

“I’ll stop messing with things when things stop messing with me!” I said defiantly.

Big Mac shook her head. “Famous last words,” she mumbled. She finished reading the rest of the list in silence before she sighed and stood up from her desk. “I’m going to have to gather a few things. There are some ingredients on this list that I’m not sure I have. I’ll let you know when I’m ready.” She waved me off and set about checking the jars and canisters on her shelves.

“Thanks!” I said before hurrying off. I’d barely cleared the threshold when I ran right into Mrs. Smith. “Mrs. Smith! So glad I ran into you.”

“Oh?” Mrs. Smith said, glancing past me at Big Mac before returning her attention to me.

“Yes, I was wondering if you might be able to tell me anything useful about pack wars. Do you remember anything from wars in the past that I might be able to draw from to help in our fight against the Bitterfangs?” I asked her.

Mrs. Smith raised a brow. “I spent a good deal of my life trying to forget all of that, Cali. I’d rather not talk about it.”

“Please, it would be such a huge help!” I pressed.

“Didn’t you hear her? She said no. Do you ever consider that your emergencies and desires aren’t everyone else’s problem?” Big Mac said. “If we looked self-centered up in the dictionary…”

Mrs. Smith sighed. “It’s okay, Mackenzie. Maybe it’s good for me to chat about it. And if it could help Cali, maybe it’s worth it.”

“Great, well, do it far away from here. I need to concentrate on solving yet another of Cali’s problems,” Big Mac grumbled before shutting the door.

“She’s not very happy with me right now,” I said.

Mrs. Smith shrugged. “Let’s go to the kitchen. I just put on some white chocolate mocha. We can drink it while we chat.”

I followed Mrs. Smith downstairs while working through the sting of Big Mac’s words. I didn’t think I was self-centered, not when everything I was doing was for the benefit of the pack. Hopefully, once Big Mac saw the positive outcomes of the spell she was handling for me and realized how much Mrs. Smith’s knowledge would help us in battle, she’d understand where I was coming from.

I took a seat at the kitchen table, and Mrs. Smith set out two mugs and filled them to the brim with her delicious concoction. She sat across from me, and I warmed my hands on my cup as she took a deep breath and then let it out slowly. “Cali, I hope you understand that this is very difficult for me to talk about. My son came out of the last pack war reviled because of horrific rumors, when all he’d been trying to do was protect his family. Ava killed Xavier’s mother and then Xavier turned around and killed her… and of course, any talk of pack wars must include Silas.” She shuddered. “It’s not something I sit around talking about for fun.” Her voice broke on the last word.

*Maybe I shouldn’t have pushed so hard. It’s obvious that this is painful for her to talk about. Should I end the conversation before we get too deep in? I really didn’t mean to upset her like this.*

“It was a dark time,” Mrs. Smith continued. “Packs that were once allies turned on each other. Silas made it so that no one trusted each other.” She paused for a moment and seemed like she was a million miles away. “So, what do you want to know?”

“I don’t really know what I want,” I said. “Anything that you can tell me that will help us fight the Bitterfangs would be great.”

Mrs. Smith nodded. She still had that faraway look in her eyes. “Whatever you do, don’t let them split us up. Avoid the chaos that Silas used to gain power. Our only hope is to stay strong. The alliance will only work if it holds under pressure—and there will be pressure. As soon as it begins to crumble, Malakai will exploit it. Any good opponent would.”

I thought about the confrontation I’d just witnessed between Greyson and Xavier. Any chance for victory and any hope of keeping the alliance together and strong had to begin there. Mrs. Smith’s words had put it all into perspective.

*My two mates are going to have to put aside their differences, or we’ll all perish.*

**Episode 4117**

**Xavier**

I was back at the Samara pack house and still feeling pretty pissed off after that encounter with the Redwood pack. It couldn’t have gone any worse, and it tore me up inside that Cali had seen it all. If it weren’t for Ava and Cali, I was sure that my brother and I would have gone at each other until there was nothing left.

*The whole thing was sloppy. That’s the only way to describe it. It shouldn’t have happened. Everyone’s on edge right now, but that was still too much. Not everything’s going to be perfect, and I know that—it certainly wasn’t perfect during the last pack war—but there’s no room for stupid mistakes like that.*

I’d beaten myself up the whole way home about jumping on Charlie. Ava, for once, had left me alone to sort through my thoughts and feelings about what had happened without pressing me to talk about it. I was sure she already knew how I felt, anyway.

“I’m going to grab some clothes,” I said to Ava. “Could you get everyone gathered in the living room for a meeting? I want to make sure that everyone’s on the same page for what’s going on tonight during the meeting with Wade and the expected Bitterfang attack.”

Ava nodded. “For sure. Having everyone aligned is going to be pretty important if we want this to go well. If we hadn’t had the pissing contest with Greyson moments ago, we could have talked with him about it.”

“I don’t need to talk with my brother about something like this. I know the plan. We all do,” I snapped. A huge part of me taking on the mantle of Samara Alpha was to be able to make decisions without having to run them by Greyson first. If Ava thought I’d gone through all of this only to follow Greyson’s rules, she hadn’t been paying attention.

Ava crossed her arms over her chest. “And you don’t think whatever you tell them in there will contradict anything that Greyson’s going to tell us?”

I bit back a quick response, knowing that Ava was pushing the Alpha button on purpose. I could see it in her eyes. “No,” I said simply. “I’m not going to contradict Greyson during this fight. I will always help this pack, yes, but tonight, we all have the same goal—to lure out Malakai and kill him.” I paused, trying to read her expression. “Does that sound good to you?”

Ava just waved her hand at me. “I’ll go gather the pack.”

Once she was gone, I went to the laundry room where someone had dropped a huge pile of clean clothes for people to take from. I grabbed a shirt and some sweats and then jogged up the stairs to my room, which was really starting to come together. That wasn’t to say that it wasn’t still a little weird that this wasn’t just any pack house room, but the room that I shared with Ava.

I shook my head, chuckling to myself at the new state of my life. I hoped that one day I would really be able to look back on this time and laugh for real without the tinge of bitterness and disbelief.

*Maybe I should give Greyson a call and smooth things over before this meeting. We don’t have long, now…*

Pushing that thought away almost as quickly as it formed, I scrolled through my notifications and saw that Lilac had called. I was pleased to see it. I’d texted the kid earlier about him potentially coming over to my side and joining the Samaras. I had no idea what the reception to such an ask would be, and I knew my brother would be pissed that I’d even asked, but that didn’t matter to me. I doubted that there was any scenario where Greyson wouldn’t take offense to me trying to poach from his pack. I wanted us to come to some sort of common ground, but being on the same page about how to handle the meeting and the battle tonight was very different from us being on the same page about literally anything else.

I called Lilac back, and he answered on the third ring. “Xavier?”

“Hey, kid, how’re you doing? All right, I hope, all things considered?” It was nice to hear his voice. I realized that it had been quite a long time since we’d actually had a chance to chat.

“I’m good, yeah,” he said. “Let me just find a private place to talk.” There was silence on the line and then some scratching around. It didn’t feel good to know that my calls had to be taken in secret over at the Redwood pack house, but I’d become a pretty controversial figure lately, so it certainly wasn’t a surprise.

When I really thought about it, it still wasn’t as bad as what Greyson had faced when he showed up as a Rogue and everyone had thought he was a ruthless killer doing Silas’s bidding. This, like so many other things, was just another matter that I would have to fix one day if I ever figured out how to get the upper hand on Adéluce.

Finally, Lilac’s voice came back over the line. “Okay, I can talk now.”

“Great,” I said.

“I got your text earlier, and I just wanted to tell you that I sort of…” He lowered his voice. “I sort of do want to join you over there.”

I felt a strange surge of excitement, but I held it off. “That’s great… even though I think I sense a ‘but’ coming.”

Lilac chuckled nervously. “Er… yeah. I guess I’m just afraid that my sister will kill me.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. Violet was tough and that certainly gave me a funny visual. “I don’t think she would do that considering everything that we had to do to bring you back to the land of the living.”

“You’d think that, but I wouldn’t underestimate her… Violet is a firecracker, and you know how dangerous those can be. And loud, oh so loud,” Lilac said.

“Don’t worry too much about giving me an answer right this second, Lilac,” I said. “I don’t want you to stress about it. Just know that you’re always welcome here. That’s the most important thing, really. It doesn’t matter that I’m the Samara Alpha now, and this doesn’t need to be some sort of pack versus pack thing. I care about you, and I care about Violet, too. I always have and I always will—no matter what pack you belong to.”

“Thanks, Xavier,” Lilac said. “We care about you, too. You’re family to us, and that won’t change, either.”

That actually made me smile, even though it was clear that Lilac wasn’t ready to leave the Redwoods behind. “Just know, when and if you decide to join, you’ll be welcome,” I added. “I’d better go, but you can call me any time. Okay?”

“Thanks, I’ll remember that,” Lilac said.

We ended the call, and I went downstairs to see that Ava had gathered everyone just as I’d asked. I nodded to Gabe, who was standing along the edges of the group with Mikah by his side. He gave me a thumbs-up.

*It’s been rough separating myself from the Redwood pack, but seeing that I still have some supporters means a lot. Even that conversation with Lilac helped. I was forced to leave the Redwoods and Cali and all of my pack members, but that doesn’t mean that I can’t redeem myself or that I can’t make the best of this… insofar as Adéluce allows.*

“Hello, everyone,” I said, looking around the room and connecting eyes with as many of the pack members as I could. “As you all know, tonight we’re making a move against the Bitterfangs. We’re going to try to cut them off at the head. Malakai.”

A few murmurs rose up from the group, probably a mix of uncertainty, excitement, and maybe even some skepticism.

“You won’t be in this alone,” I said quickly. “We’re going to have the power of the entire alliance behind us. Rely on them, fight with them, and trust them, and I’m sure we’ll come out of this thing victorious. The Bitterfangs are going to regret the day they ever crossed us!”

“Yeah!” Marissa shouted. “We’re going to show them that the Samaras pack a punch!”

“Exactly,” I said. I was still a little miffed at Marissa for barging in on me and Ava earlier, but I definitely respected her, and having her cheering me on would go a long way with the pack. “So, are we ready?” I turned in place and looked each and every pack member in the eye. There was a smattering of “yeahs” and “yeses,” but I wanted a little more than that.

“I said, are we ready for this?” I repeated, louder this time.

“Yeah!” Everyone finally cheered together. There were high fives and fist bumps, and as I looked around, I was really starting to think that we could do this.

Donovan stepped forward. “We’re ready, Alpha. But I have a question… If one of us gets a hold of Malakai…?”

I clenched my jaw as I met Donovan’s gaze. “You don’t touch him. Save him for me.”

**Episode 4118**

**Greyson**

I was in my study, still annoyed that Xavier and I had come so close to getting in another fight. I was angry at Xavier, of course, that went without saying, but I was angrier with myself. My ability to mend my relationship with Xavier was pivotal to Cali forgiving me. If I couldn’t at least appear to be working with Xavier, as opposed to fighting him at every juncture, then things with Cali were only going to get worse. What had just happened between us showed just how far we were from achieving that result.

I had no idea how to get on the same page with my brother. We were oil and water right now, and we always had been. I had no idea how to even begin to bridge the Grand Canyon sized rift between us. We’d never been friendly and had barely even tolerated each other before Xavier abandoned the Redwood pack, so it wasn’t like we had a good foundation to build on.

We’d tried again and again to resolve things, but it never worked. Even after Xavier had left me behind in the Fae world zoo, I’d managed to forgive him and move on… more or less. But now Xavier had turned on Cali and the Redwoods, the biggest affront so far, and I had to somehow find it in my heart to forgive him. Not only did my harmony with Cali depend on it, but so did the success of the alliance.

Mending things wasn’t going to be easy. I hadn’t the slightest idea of what I could say or do to make it so we could even talk to each other without it turning into a fight. At least I’d understood why Xavier had left me at the zoo, since back then, he’d wrongly thought that I was working with Silas. But nothing about his recent behavior made any sense. It was going to be hard for me to forgive something that I didn’t understand.

*But I suppose it doesn’t matter how hard it will be or how little I understand what’s going on with my brother right now. I still have to try. Our success depends on it.*

My eyes caught on one of my mother’s huge wedding planning books sitting open on one of the lounge chairs across the room. I groaned.

*Wasn’t I supposed to help pick music for the reception? I completely forgot. There’s so much going on that normal life, weddings, birthdays, anniversaries—all the normal milestones—seems to get pushed to the background. That’s still no excuse for me blowing off something that really matters to my mother.*

I got up and went to find her. I hoped I wasn’t too late to help with the music selection. Since I’d dropped the ball, I was open to taking care of anything else she might need.

I raced upstairs and caught my mother just as she was coming out of her room. “Greyson, honey! How are you doing? Is everything okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine… but I’m really sorry about dropping the ball on the music thing for the wedding. Do you still need me to do that? Or is there anything else I can take care of for you and Big Mac? It’s just with the pack war and the summit and fighting with Xavier, everything else just kind of fell by the wayside.”

My mother placed her hand on my arm. “No… no need to worry about any of that. I’ve decided to postpone the wedding.”

I was stunned. “What? Why? You and Big Mac were so looking forward to it. You both have done so much planning, and everyone’s really excited.”

“It’s okay, Greyson. MacKenzie and I discussed it. We’re not canceling, just postponing. We made the decision fairly easily, and we’re adjusting to it fine, even if we are a little disappointed.”

“But why?” I pressed. I was starting to feel really guilty. “You know that the pack would have come together no matter what to make sure that day was as special as you deserve.”

“I know that, honey. I also know that the wedding would make everyone happy and bring the pack even closer together, but then Cali pulled me aside and asked me questions about pack wars of the past and that got me to thinking. I don’t want my wedding to take place in the middle of a pack war. Honestly, I couldn’t think of worse timing for an event that means so much to MacKenzie and me. Postponing seemed like a no-brainer.”

I didn’t know what to say. We both stood in silence while I fully absorbed what my mother had just said. I was stunned even though it made complete sense that she and Big Mac wouldn’t want to have a wedding at a time like this. Thanks to Silas, my mother was all too familiar with the horrors a pack war could cause.

“I get it, but that doesn’t make me any less disappointed,” I said. I gathered her into a hug. “And I’m sorry about the war, too. I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

She pulled away and looked me in the eye. “Don’t you dare apologize for this war. I know that you did all you possibly could to avoid it. I just want you and everyone we care about to survive it.” She sighed and looked off into the distance. “People like Malakai, they live and breathe conflict. It gives them purpose and meaning unlike anything else can. They thrive on misery and pain. For those reasons alone I doubt that anyone could have stopped this war from happening.”

“I did try,” I said with a sigh. “And I’m glad you see that. I hope the rest of the pack does, too. I don’t want them to think that I get any pleasure out of fighting all the time.”

She squeezed my arm. “No one thinks that. They know you wanted peace, just like we all do.”

“Thanks, Mom. Also, you mentioned that you’d talked to Cali about the war?”

She nodded. “Yes. She came to me and was adamant about learning more about previous pack wars. She had hopes that it would give you all an edge against the Bitterfangs. I told her all that I know, though I’m not sure how much it helped.”

“You sure that she didn’t pull you aside to talk about me?”

She did a double take. “About you? Why would it be about you?”

I sighed. “I said something really stupid, something I totally regret, and things have been weird between us ever since. She’s in no rush to forgive me, either.”

My mother smiled. “Cali loves you, Greyson, and that means she’ll forgive you… but maybe first you need to give her a little reminder of how much you love her, too.”

“Thanks,” I said, thinking over what she’d said. I pulled her into another hug. “And let me know what the details are for the rescheduled wedding. I’ll make sure to be available whenever you need me this time.”

I left her to go back downstairs, wondering what I could possibly do to show Cali that I loved her. I thought I did a pretty good job of showing Cali how much I loved her already, and I’d certainly told her as much countless times. But I knew that wasn’t what my mother meant. I had to present Cali with a meaningful, romantic gesture that removed all doubt about how much I adored her. Not like flowers and a card, but something thoughtful and personal to both of us that would remind her of the love I felt for her and the hope I had for our future together.

*I have to do the kind of thing that makes people stand up from their seats during the climax of a cheesy romance movie and cheer for the couple.*

I didn’t have time to order anything, and it wasn’t like I could just head off to the mall right in the middle of a war. I was wracking my brain for what to get her when Cali passed by my room.

*How nice it would be to just snap my fingers and conjure up some magical gift that will blow Cali’s socks off.*

Then a thought hit me. Xavier had gotten Kira to magic up an entire pack house. I didn’t need anything as grand as that, but was there something Kira could do to bring a smile to Cali’s lips and show her just how much I loved and cared about her?

I thought about all the best times I’d had with Cali, and I remembered how magical the time we’d spent in Portland had been for the both of us. Back then, it had been rare for us to steal a moment of alone time for ourselves, and now that we had more one-on-one time than we knew what to do with, it still didn’t match how special that time had been. It was an escape that I would never forget.

*There’s no way I can bring Cali to Portland right now, but can I bring Portland to her?*

**Episode 4119**

I had to let go of what had happened with Greyson. It was the only way I could do my part in helping to bridge the differences between Greyson and Xavier. It was a small step, but given that Xavier was still being a huge dick, it was a necessary one. It was going to take a lot to get the two of them to stop fighting, and if I could finish smoothing things over with Greyson, it would be one less problem for us to focus on.

Greyson had enough working against him without having to worry about how I was feeling about the *due destini* right now. Letting this go would not only benefit of our relationship but also the benefit of the pack, when it really came down to it. Plus, holding onto it wasn’t going to help me be a good Luna, real or not.

I spotted Greyson coming out of Kira’s room. He’d probably been discussing how they could best use magic in the fight against the Bitterfangs. It was a good and necessary discussion to have; the Bitterfangs wouldn’t have magic at their disposal since it went against their outdated beliefs. But I didn’t want to think about the pack war right now, I needed to get back on track with Greyson.

“Thanks again, Kira,” Greyson said as he backed out of her room. He seemed startled when he saw me standing behind him. I couldn’t tell if he was happy to see me or not. In truth, he seemed a little nervous and his nervousness seemed to transfer to me, and we both started speaking at the same time.

“Cali—”

“Hey,” I said, cutting him off. “Oops!”

“Hey, I—”

“I just wanted to—” I laughed awkwardly. “My bad, you go.”

“No, I’m sorry, I interrupted you,” he said with a sheepish smile.

“No, I’m sorry. I just wanted to talk to you.”

“Okay… and I wanted to show you something,” he said.

“Really? What?”

Greyson hesitated. “It’s something that I have to show you. Telling you about it won’t do it any justice. Let me go first, and then we can talk about whatever you want.” Greyson said.

“Deal,” I said. I was too curious to object. I wondered if he’d drawn up some battle plan or had prepared a list for tonight’s meeting with the Alphas. I followed behind him, and he led the way to his room. I paused at the threshold, not quite ready to follow him in. “I thought you were taking me to your study?”

“What? No.” He pulled out a blindfold. “What I have to show you is in my bedroom… So… can I blindfold you?”

I held up my hand, stopping him from coming any closer with it. “Is right now really the time for this? Not that I don’t find it sexy, but how can you show me anything if I can’t see?” I was confused by the look in his eyes. He looked happy and mischievous all at the same time.

Greyson chuckled. “It’s a surprise.” He placed the blindfold around my eyes, and this time I didn’t resist. His hands gently brushed my skin as he tied the kerchief around my face, and I felt the tickle of his breath against my ear as he leaned close to adjust the blindfold to make sure I wasn’t peeking.

I was starting to get a little weak in the knees. It was like my body had been deprived of Greyson for so long that his nearness was doing all kinds of things to me.

*It’s so much better to be on good terms with my mate than bad. I miss him. I miss talking to him without being awkward. I miss laughing with him.*

I started to get nervous as he ushered me into his room. The sharp sound of the door closing behind us startled me. My throat began to tighten, and my heart was pounding. “Greyson, what’s this all about?” I didn’t know why I was reacting so strongly to this. It wasn’t like he was about to lead me to my doom, but I was still uneasy.

Greyson’s breath tickled against my ear again as he whispered, “Do you trust me?”

I gulped and nodded as he steered me deeper into his room and then stopped me before I could go any farther. His breath was hot against my cheek as he pulled the blindfold free. I was startled. I was facing the bedroom door, but it took me a moment to realize that it wasn’t the actual bedroom door, but another door entirely.

Confused, I turned to Greyson. “Where did this door come from?”

Rather than answer, he nudged me toward it. “Just open it. All questions will be answered.”

“But I’ve never seen it before. Was it always here?”

Greyson gave me a strange look. “Did you really just ask me if this door was always here?” he teased, holding back a laugh. “Of course not.” He put his hand around mine, sending shivers down my spine, and placed my hand on the doorknob. “Now quit asking so many questions. It’s a surprise, remember? Open it.”

I took a breath, thinking that I better not open this door only to plunge into the yard below… but I knew that Greyson wouldn’t do that. He was already on thin ice, and I doubted he’d risk pissing me off any further with some tasteless prank. Greyson wasn’t a prankster, anyway, so there was a slim chance that this door led to anything that would make me look or feel stupid.

“Okay, here goes,” I said. After one last second of hesitation, I flung the door open and gasped.

I was facing a balcony, complete with twinkling lights, a plush loveseat, flowers, and candles. It was one of the most romantic setups I had ever seen. I relaxed into his touch when Greyson placed his hand at the small of my back to gently guide me onto the balcony. I was cautious as I walked out and looked around, afraid that it might disappear.

“Greyson, this is absolutely magical,” I said. I spun around to take it all in. It felt like we were a million miles away from the pack house, and it wasn’t until that very moment that I realized how much I longed for just that—to be away from the pack house and all the stresses of living there. I would give anything to go away with Greyson and enjoy some peaceful, amazing alone time together, just like when we were in Portland together.

“It’s pure magic,” Greyson said. “Kira helped me. I knew that we couldn’t leave with the pack war raging, so I wanted to bring a piece of Portland to you.”

He picked up a blanket and wrapped me in its soft warmth.

“What’s all this for?” I asked, breathless.

Greyson pulled me to him and lifted my chin so I could look him in the eye. “It’s for you, Cali. I wanted some way to show you how sorry I am about everything. I don’t want to fight with you. I never want to fight with you. I hate it. And you mean everything to me. I’m sorry if what I said made you doubt that, even for a second. I don’t want you to take it out on yourself. You know how much you mean to me, Cali, don’t you?”

I was too mesmerized to speak. The balcony was truly magical, and I loved it, but it was nothing compared to the look in his eyes. The soft lights strewn around us made his eyes sparkle, and in them I saw hopefulness and yearning. I started to speak but I wasn’t sure what to say, so I answered him the best way I could. I pulled him to me and kissed him deeply.

“I know,” I whispered against his lips. “I know how much you love and care for me, Greyson. I love you, too. You know that, don’t you?”

He kissed me back, his warm tongue slowly nudging my lips apart before gently plunging inside. I’d missed this so much and I was happy to let all my anger and resentment go and finally move on.

“I never doubted it for a second,” he said. “And I don’t want anything like that to ever come between us again. I hated having all that tension between us. It just felt so wrong. It’s bad enough with the war looming over us, but I couldn’t face going into battle knowing that you were angry or hurt because of me. I couldn’t bear it.”

“I love you so much, Greyson. I really do.” I couldn’t believe I’d ever been so upset with him. He was my person, my mate, my everything, and loving him meant understanding that even though he might make mistakes, his love for me never faltered. Mine never would, either.

Our kiss deepened as the clouds parted, revealing the almost too bright orb of the moon. Greyson pulled back, breathing hard and his eyes still sparkling as he looked at me. “We’ll have to save this magic moment for later. Now, it’s time to go to the meeting.”

**Episode 4120**

The closer we got to the meeting spot—a small rocky clearing in the woods—the more nervous I became. We were making our way carefully but quickly through the trees, not talking and not even mind linking, just concentrating on reaching our destination.

I was relying on Greyson to guide me since the moon wasn’t offering quite enough light for me to see clearly. I wondered how we even knew where we were. I figured that it must help to have werewolf senses because I was having a hard time even seeing a few feet ahead of me. If this were a Fae battle, it would happen in the middle of the day so that we could actually see what we were aiming for. Plus, I preferred sunlight over moonlight any day.

I peered into the darkness, knowing that the alliance packs were out there watching and waiting, ready to burst out of hiding and catch the Bitterfangs by surprise as soon as they tried to surprise us. Our Fae and witches were ready, too, and I could feel the anticipation in the air. There were so many variables to consider, so many things that could go wrong, and that was why I was a nervous wreck even though I was trying my hardest not to be.

I was squeezing the life out of Greyson’s hand. “Are you okay, love?”

“I will be,” I replied, loosening my grip. “Sorry about your hand. I’m just so nervous!”

“No worries. It’s not like I’ll need it tonight, anyway,”he teased.

I almost gave him a playful swat on the arm, but I knew this wasn’t the time or the place. We both needed to stay focused. All I could think was that if this plan worked, I’d be a hero—and finally worthy of the annoying title Greyson had given me, Master Strategist. But if it failed… Well, I supposed that if it did fail, it wouldn’t really matter because I and everyone else would probably be dead. I shuddered at the thought.

“Greyson, what if my plan fails or something goes wrong and… and… I end up leading all the packs into a death trap?”I asked, unable to keep my misgivings to myself.

Greyson stopped and pulled me close. I could feel his eyes on mine even if I couldn’t see them all that well in the thick darkness. “I would never have agreed to this plan if I thought for a second that it wasn’t a good one,” he whispered. “I’m responsible for the pack’s safety, and that means vetting any plan we use. Your plan passed muster, so don’t worry.”

I felt a bit of relief, but I was still worried. I knew that I probably wouldn’t be able to relax until the battle was over and we were victorious. Until then, I was going to have to do my best to control my nerves and keep my head in the game.

Greyson and I kept walking. Despite his assurances, I couldn’t stop thinking about all the ways this could go wrong. *How can you even tell that all our allies are out there?* I asked, trying the mind link. It sounded a bit staticky still. *Didn’t Big Mac and Kira mask their scents?*

*Don’t worry. They’re in their places, Cali. I made sure of it*,Greyson replied as I strained to hear him.

I wished that I could see them, but then again if I could see them, that would mean the Bitterfang and their allies could see them, too, and that would blow the plan wide open.

Greyson and I finally came to a stop in the middle of the clearing. We were the only ones there so far. *Oh no. Has my plan fallen through already? Did the Bitterfangs catch wind of what we were doing?*

A noise drew my attention, and I stifled a yelp as Lucian and Elle emerged from the darkness. We all greeted each other as Paige and Duke appeared, followed by Porter, Rowena, and Mace. I looked around at our group, wondering where Xavier was.

*Is Xavier still so pissed about his run-in with Greyson earlier that he decided not to show up? He knows how important this moment is in our fight against the Bitterfangs. He wouldn’t let his anger get in the way of us getting the upper hand in this war, would he?*

I wanted to believe that Xavier wouldn’t pull something like that, but he wasn’t the man I used to know so I really couldn’t put it past him. I’d hoped that he would get here early so that I would have a chance to talk to him about trying harder to get along with Greyson for the sake of the alliance.

A few long minutes slid by before I saw Ava materialize from the darkness of the trees. She gave me an absent glance as if she were looking right through me, before turning to look at Xavier, who came walking up behind her. It was at that moment that I realized that it wasn’t just Xavier and Greyson that I had to fix, but me and Ava, too. That was going to take a lot of effort. At least in Xavier and Greyson’s case, they were brothers who had managed to work together well enough in the past. But me and Ava? That was a different story. All we had in common was the very thing that was driving us apart: our love for Xavier and our mutual distrust of each other. There wasn’t a lot there to work with, but I had to try.

I took Greyson’s hand and pulled him in their direction. I could see the questioning look on Xavier’s face and the look of disdain and annoyance on Ava’s as we approached.

*Great. She’s already staring daggers at me, and I haven’t even said a word yet.*

“Hey there,” I said. “So… before the meeting begins, I wanted to clarify something. After what happened earlier today, I think it’s important that we move past it and work together. The success of the alliance depends on us being—”

“We’ve already covered this, Cali,” Ava said.

I gritted my teeth. “No, we haven’t.”

Ava flashed her condescending smile, the one that I was sure she reserved just for me. The one that made me want to smack her. I took a deep breath and tried to control my temper. Now wasn’t the time for infighting, especially when I was trying to tell Xavier and Greyson to stop theirs.

“This is a conversation we don’t need to have, Cali. We’ve already forgiven Greyson,” Ava said in a bored voice.

I looked back and forth between them, incredulous. “*You’ve* forgiven *him*?” I repeated. I turned to Xavier. “Seriously?”

Xavier shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. Yes. We’ve forgiven him, and it’s all good.”

I bristled. It was trying very hard not to fly off the handle. Xavier was doing it again, being cold and dismissive to me and overly accommodating to Ava.

*Fine, if that’s how he wants to play it, then I’ll let it be. I have to, for now. We have far more pressing issues to contend with.*

Before any of us could say anymore, Wade came strolling into the clearing. He immediately started making the rounds, shaking hands and thanking each Alpha for calling the meeting.

“This is exactly what we need,” he said. “This is super important for the alliance, and I regret that I wasn’t able to make it to the first meeting.” He sounded eerily like a politician.

*He’s a pretty convincing liar*, Greyson mind linked through the static.

I was about to agree when Lucian replied instead.

*A good liar makes a great traitor*, the princeling said, coming in and out like a radio station. *At least that’s what I always say.*

I was thrown. Was the mind link sire bond issue already rearing its ugly head? This was exactly what I’d worried would happen. I wished that Big Mac would’ve been able to complete the spell before we left, but when I’d gone to check in on her progress before we left for the meeting, she’d snapped at me for interrupting her pre-battle nap and I’d all but run away from her room.

“If I could just reiterate how amazing it is to see all of these amazing packs here together on the same side, working toward a common goal,” Wade said. “I’m so honored that myself and my pack were asked to join. These packs here today signify the best and brightest of werewolf kind, and I’m so happy to count myself among your ranks.”

*Is he really giving a speech of lies right now? This guy is the worst.*

As Wade continued talking nonsense, I noticed that he kept scratching his right cheek. He’d done it so many times that it didn’t seem random. I nudged Greyson. *Check out the way he keeps scratching his face. It’s a pattern.* Wade did it again. *See! Can you hear me?* I asked. *Two long scratches followed by three short ones, over and over again. Could it be a signal?*

*Just be ready, Cali*, Greyson said back, but the mind link was so staticky I almost couldn’t hear him. *Something’s definitely up. We were right.*

My eyes had finally adjusted to the dark, and I glanced into the woods beyond us, wondering who might be lurking out there reading Wade’s signal. My question was answered when a pack of werewolves emerged from the darkness. We all acted surprised.

Wade abruptly ended his speech and smiled. “I see you’ve realized that I didn’t come alone.”

Greyson tightened his grip on my hand and took a step toward Wade. “We didn’t, either.”

**Episode 4121**

My heart pounded as I wondered if our hidden allies would show. The suspense was killing me. Right now, we were vastly outnumbered, surrounded by Ironwoods and likely others… The Bitterfangs had to be out there, too. This was their war, wasn’t it? I gulped, not knowing what to do, but Greyson projected such an air of confidence that I took a deep breath and reminded myself that he knew what he was doing. He was following my plan—our plan—and everything would be okay.

*I sure as hell hope it will be, that is.*

Wade, for his part, hesitated for a moment as he and Greyson stared each other down. His eyes flashed with uncertainty, but then it faded. He smiled, shaking his head at Greyson. “Bluffing isn’t your strength, Redwood Alpha.” His face turned severe again, which was the expression he’d worn throughout the entirety of the summit. “To avoid unnecessary bloodshed, you and the others should surrender.”

“Sounds to me like you’re confused,” Greyson said. “You’re the one who should surrender if you know what’s good for you. Or just go. It’s not too late to back out.”

I eyed the tall, hulking man. Wade didn’t seem like the type to retreat or admit that he was wrong. But it would be the smart thing to do. Wade had no idea what Greyson and I had in store. I bet his tune would change drastically once he realized he’d been tricked.

*But by then, it’s going to be too late*, I thought, eyeing Greyson.

I knew he was determined to push this to the point of no return. And the rest of the allied Alphas agreed. Every Alpha from our team—Mace, Lucian, Porter, Duke, Xavier—was watching Wade closely. As I glanced among them, my gaze couldn’t help but linger on Xavier. He was with Ava, obviously, but that was the least of my concerns. He seemed furious already. I’d witnessed him go from 1 to a 1000 many times over, so when he opened his mouth to speak to Wade, I braced myself.

To my shock, despite Xavier’s dark expression, his voice was calm.

“You should take my brother’s offer,” he said. “Siding with the likes of Malakai is a foolish mistake. Forget the Bitterfangs and their outdated beliefs and join us.”

*Oh wow*, I thought, letting out a breath. *Look at Xavier acting like… like a real Alpha!*

After our disastrous little run-in in the forest earlier, I wouldn’t have put it past Xavier to think with his temper instead of his brain. And even though the bar for Xavier’s behavior was hell these days, this meant progress. The two brothers agreeing was a good sign of the alliance’s strength, and Wade would notice that. They appeared to be united against the common threat, and considering all the bad blood here, I was glad that Xavier hadn’t messed up the illusion of unity in front of Wade.

“When I asked you about joining the alliance,” Greyson said, “you told me you were undecided, Wade. That you needed to do what is best for your pack. I didn’t know that betraying our trust and throwing any semblance of honor out the window was your idea of strategy.”

Wade gritted his teeth together. “Don’t speak to me about honor. I am doing what is best for the Ironwood pack. A good Alpha must weigh all considerations, project various outcomes, and right now, the odds are favoring the Bitterfangs. You’re blind not to see that.”

“*You’re* blind to believe that we’ll just roll over before a tyrant,” Greyson said coldly.

Wade sneered. “Don’t you understand that fighting the Bitterfangs is fruitless? They have superior numbers and resources. It’s a lost cause.”

Lucian spoke up, laughing sarcastically. “You poor man. You should go back to school—you clearly can’t count. The Vanguards are superior in every way.”

Wade scoffed, “That’s rich coming from the self-proclaimed prince who sees strength in hiding within garish palaces.”

“My golden spoons and diamond plates alone are worth everything the Ironwoods and the Bitterfangs have ever owned,” Lucian said with a sneer. “The Bitterfangs’ resources are miniscule in comparison to the Vanguards’, and if you cannot see that, it is *your* problem.”

“Numbers are just numbers,” Xavier spoke up with a scowl. “Many of us were victorious in the war against Silas, and he was the biggest threat werewolves had ever seen. What makes you believe that the Bitterfangs are more dangerous?”

Wade looked between Xavier and Greyson. I held my breath, agitation coursing through me at his silence. And then, Wade said, “You two—Silas was your father.” His face was serious. “What do they say about the apple and the tree?”

From beside me, Greyson’s snarl was so loud I felt it in my bones. Xavier’s mixed in a moment later, and alarms went off in my head.

*Danger, danger, danger! De-escalate immediately!*

Both sides were pushing too hard, and I knew I had to at least try to do something to smooth things over. The second I took a step forward, toward Wade, both Greyson and Xavier fell silent. Wade’s eyes darted to me, narrowing.

“Do you truly believe this is how things should be?” I asked. I kept my tone calm, because I had no idea what could set this man off. “You said yourself that an Alpha must do what is best for the pack. But what you have done is drag the Ironwoods into a dangerous situation that is only going to bring them loss. Is war the best option for your pack, especially when it’s not even your war to begin with?”

Wade fixed me with a cold stare. “Ah. The Redwood Luna speaks. *Without* being asked.”

My hands turned into fists immediately. This bullshit again? *Seriously*?

“You should keep her in line,” Wade told Greyson. “Her behavior is… inappropriate.”

I had told myself that I would stay cool and collected. Super diplomatic. But when this asshole spouted the same kind of nonsense as Malakai and his followers, I couldn’t ignore my anger, or the way it triggered my magic. My fingertips felt tingly and hot as the power surged. I flexed my hand to keep it at bay.

However, I still couldn’t stop myself from glaring at this jerkface. “Are you brainwashed? This isn’t the fifties, Wade. Wake up!”

Greyson placed a calming hand on my shoulder, pulling me back toward him gently.

*That’s right!* I thought. *Keep me back before I blast this son of a gun to oblivion!*

“My Luna has a mind of her own,” Greyson said. “And how I run my pack is none of your business, anyway.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” Wade said. “But this will be the last moment you will be in command of your pack.”

Wade seemed hell-bent on provoking Greyson. And as furious as I was, I couldn’t fucking understand his behavior.

“The Bitterfangs have a vendetta against us,” I said. “They have a reason to attack—you do not. Why the hell are you doing this? What do you want? What do you aim to gain? It makes no sense!”

Wade looked at me for a moment, his gaze sharp, full of disdain. I wanted to bring out my sword just to shake him up right now. But the moment he opened his mouth to reply, one of his pack members approached, still in human form.

“Everyone is waiting for your command, Alpha,” the man said. “We’re ready.”

*Goddammit, stop this! Just stop!* I screamed inside my head.

I said nothing on the outside, though. I couldn’t, not when I looked around and saw all the Ironwood wolves champing at the bit to attack. How could I prevent this when these werewolves seemed so set on shedding each other’s blood for nothing other than power?

It all came down to that. Their attack was about ego, greed, and power. Otherwise, they wouldn’t be so obsessed with pursuing such a high-risk mission. Unless they were *really* that delusional and believed that they could take our packs easily.

“I’m giving you one last chance to stop,” Greyson spoke up. He looked at the Alphas of the alliance, nodding at them.

“We are willing to let you go if it means preventing bloodshed,” Mace told Wade.

“We do not want lives to be lost today, not like this,” Porter said.

Xavier’s eyes flashed with fury as he glared at Wade. “If you go on right now, you will be signing your death sentence.”

“I don’t think what you’re doing is a good idea,” Duke noted.

Lucian snorted at Duke’s words. “Oh, please!” He pointed at Wade and his pack. “These imbeciles wouldn’t know what’s good for them even if it hit them over the head.”

“They *should* care about preventing bloodshed,” Greyson said sharply.

“It’s too late for that now, Alpha Redwood,” Wade hissed. “We’ve already crossed that line.”

Wade shifted with a roar, followed by the rest of the Ironwoods. Their heavy paws made the ground under me rattle as they landed. The sight of them made my heart race, my hands burn with power begging to be unleashed.

“Stay behind me!” Greyson grabbed and pulled me back before he shifted into his wolf.

And then, he howled the attack signal and lunged toward Wade.

**Episode 4122**

**Xavier**

When Wade shifted, my first instinct was to shield Cali. Greyson had that covered, though—pulling her out of the way immediately. I ignored the bitterness that shot through me, because this wasn’t the time.

This was war.

Greyson’s howl was the call to arms. One that I had hoped we could avoid, but it had been dumb wishful thinking. It was obvious from Wade’s bluster that the fight was a foregone conclusion. In the end, it wouldn’t matter who started this bullshit. Only who finished it.

My focus was pinned on Wade, I shifted into my wolf, feeling the power of it course through me. I was determined to taste Wade’s blood before the end of this. The Ironwood Alpha was a liar, a fool, and a traitor. It didn’t help that he’d talked to Cali with such disdain either. I imagined he would’ve treated Ava with similar contempt. Or he would have leered at her.

Either way, he deserved a lesson.

He had it fucking coming.

*Their numbers are limited*, Ava mind linked. She had shifted, standing by me. *I don’t think they realize the trouble they’re in*, she added as we started to move toward the snarling mass that was Greyson and Wade. The Ironwood wolves had taken a moment to watch their Alpha fight with Greyson. But when Wade let out a yelp of pain, followed by a growl, they snapped out of it.

They moved in on our group. I looked over my shoulder—where the hell were the hidden pack members? I didn’t have the time to wonder any further—not when one of the Ironwoods charged at me.

I was ready to attack, but Ava was quicker—quickly jumping between us and tearing into the Ironwood’s throat. These idiots were definitely not as good as the Bitterfangs in battle. As Ava and I got rid of another two quickly, I wondered why the hell the Bitterfangs had even agreed to associate themselves with the Ironwoods.

A howl from the woods cut into my thoughts.

*Rishika*.

She led a group of charging Redwoods from the forest, but at the same time, a large number of Bitterfangs emerged from the tree line, right behind the useless Ironwoods. And then, only seconds after the Redwoods threw themselves into battle, the rest of the packs of our alliance surged forward.

They joined the battle, surrounding the now outnumbered Ironwoods and Bitterfangs. There were so many more of us. I couldn’t help but feel pleased here—we had outplayed Wade, and now he and his pack were going to pay for it.

*Good evening, motherfuckers!* Gabe’s voice boomed in my head. As Ava and I took out one Ironwood after another, I saw Gabe work his way through the lines fighting to come to me. As ever, he was way too fucking cheerful while there was chaos raging all around him.

*Hey, dude!* He bumbled my shoulder with his snout, clawing through an Ironwood at the same time. *This feels like old times!*

I nodded forward. *See that Bitterfang?*

There was a large one, who had Porter caged against a tree.

*On it*, Gabe mind linked, and he charged forward. Both of us herded the asshole away from Porter and ganged up on him. I went for his flank while Gabe went to claw out his eyes, but the son of a bitch evaded both of us at the same time, his speed practiced and outrageous. He managed to graze my shoulder with his massive paw.

*Did you just evade us by twirling like a ballerina, dude?* Gabe mind linked. I realized that he was talking to the Bitterfang. Gabe’s words bewildered the wolf for a moment too long, distracting him. He snarled, enraged at the implications, but it was too late. His brief pause gave me the time to slice through his back, and then Gabe chomped down on him.

*Enough of that*, Gabe mind linked, spitting out the Bitterfang’s blood. I nodded, silently thanking him for his help when another Bitterfang attacked. Then Gabe and I got to work again.

The entire time we were fighting, I kept shooting looks at Ava and Cali. Cali especially. She had joined Artemis, and both of them were wielding their magic weapons. Cali pulled out the sword and stumbled at the same time. My heart throbbed at the sight of her losing her step. It was enough of a distraction to pull me out of the moment.

*Behind you!* Ava mind linked.

I spun around just as an Ironwood leaped on me. The two of us fell to the ground with a thud. We tumbled, rolling around, and I realized that this one was twice the size of every other Ironwood I’d had to deal with. Even if his fighting style was standard, his mass was immense enough to catch me off guard. I bit into his shoulder before thrusting my paw forward to slice through his stomach, when suddenly—

The werewolf wailed in pain and fell on top of me, immobile.

Breathing hard, I kicked him off me, scrambling to get up. Who helped me? Was it Gabe? Ava? Was it…

*Cali*.

She was standing over the dead Ironwood, panting and shaking, her magical sword in hand. Her eyes flickered from the mass on the ground to me. Without thinking, I mind linked, *Thank you.*

Her gaze widened in surprise. Then she replied, *I owed you one.*

I had to suppress a shiver. It had been a while since I’d heard Cali’s soft voice in my head. I knew she was talking about me rescuing her from that fiery car explosion—as if it hadn’t been second nature for me to seek her out. To protect her.

*Don’t think that way*, I mind linked her. *We’re mates.*

As soon as the words were out there, I immediately wished I could take them back. Cali stared at me, her lips parted in shock, but there was another emotion there as well, one that I couldn’t pinpoint. And if that emotion was hope or pleasure, it would draw Adéluce’s ire.

Cali was supposed to hate me. That was what Adéluce wanted, and my mate was way too vulnerable here. It would be so easy for the vampire-witch to hurt Cali in battle, and then place the blame on me. So, when Cali stared at me as if she was going to say something, I felt both thrilled and sick to my stomach.

The moment was interrupted by another attack.

It was an Ironwood, so I wasn’t too worried. Cali instantly used her shield to fend off her attacker, while Artemis barreled through to get to Cali. Dagger raised in her hand, she screamed, “Stay the fuck away from my sister!”

I told myself that Cali would be fine. I forced myself to look away, and, of course, the first person my wolf wanted to check in on was Ava. She was holding her own against a Bitterfang that seemed to be among the slowest. Gabe had sliced through at least three Ironwoods and two Bitterfangs in the meantime, so there was no issue there either. A few feet away, though, I spotted Donovan. He was clearly overpowered by three attackers at once.

With a growl, I leaped over to join Donovan. I crashed into one of his attackers, clawing through his chest as he yowled in pain. The other two took off into the woods, rushing away. Donovan was panting, staring at me.

*Thanks*, he said.

*Anytime*, I replied. I nodded forward. *Now, let’s go get those bastards*.

Donovan and I went after the two who fled, and I felt good about this. I felt in control, knowing that I had just helped someone from my pack, and now I was chasing down the enemy.

*Over there!* Donovan mind linked. A moment later, both of us jumped over a giant boulder and landed in a small clearing.

The two wolves were right there, breathing raggedly.

But just as I thought we had them cornered, more wolves came out from the tree line.

Unfamiliar wolves that growled, fixing their attention on me, then on Donovan.

Fuck.

This had been a trap, and I had fallen right into it.

I could not admit that to Donovan.

*Do you know who these guys are?* I mind linked him.

He shook his head after sniffing the air. *Never seen them before.*

There were too many of them. If they were good fighters, Donovan and I were going to have a hell of a time surviving this. I was ready to mind link my pack to ask for reinforcements, but the werewolves closed in on us fast, and I realized I had to stall for time. I mind linked them instead.

*Who the fuck are you?* I asked. *This is not your battle.*

One of them, a big black one, laughed. *Dude, you’re about to get wiped out, and you don’t even know it!*

A smaller red one added, *This is one wave you’re not going to ride out, brah!*

And then they both charged toward Donovan and me.

**Episode 4123**

Artemis and I were fighting as one. We were pretty badass, actually, and I wasn’t going to listen to any self-doubt about it this time. Based on Wade’s dismissive tone, and Malakai’s previous disdain toward Fae, I suspected the Bitterfangs and their allies had underestimated our Fae powers.

*Look at them now! Dead on the ground because of a couple of little Fae!*

I felt delirious and slightly hysterical, lost in the fierceness of battle. I realized that I had been forced to make the Bitterfangs and the Ironwoods see what I could do the hard way. They had pushed us into this fight. And as much as I wanted to win, a part of me screamed at the wrongness of it all.

I stepped back from a wounded werewolf, an Ironwood that couldn’t even stand to fight me back by now. Then I glanced around for Xavier, shaking, breathing heavily. I had been unprepared for his mind link. For his thank-you. If it hadn’t been for Artemis defending me, I might have been seriously wounded.

I wasn’t sure what to make of Xavier’s reaction to me saving him—it was both wonderful and cruel to hear his voice in my head again. *He* was cruel. He had been cruel to me repeatedly after leaving the Redwood pack. And if I could stay mad at Greyson for asking me to make a choice, I definitely *should* stay furious at Xavier for treating me like shit in the past.

I was furious with Xavier.

But I still missed him, and I didn’t know what that said about me. I didn’t know if I could blame the *due destini*, the mate bond, or myself. I didn’t know if there was something irrevocably wrong with me, deeply wrong on a fucked-up level, for not choosing Greyson, when the worst thing Greyson had ever done was ask me to choose.

But I still loved Xavier, even after he’d humiliated me repeatedly.

*Why the hell did he have to remind me that we’re mates?*

Especially when he had pretty much ignored our mate bond ever since the day he walked away from the pack and me. I thought back to the kiss, to how he’d held me after the car explosion. Those were the moments that confused me—those little things that pointed to the fact that our mate bond was still strong. When Xavier wasn’t kissing Ava publicly and fucking her privately and insinuating that I was a parasite on the Redwood’s back, that was.

*Fun! This is just—*

My thoughts were cut off when a random werewolf nearly bit my face off. Artemis felled it with an arrow before whirling around to glare at me. “Cali! You can’t lose focus!”

I gasped as the wolf dropped at my feet with a nightmarish thud. My sister was right—I couldn’t fucking do this. I would *not* let Xavier’s confusing signals distract me from the battle, because that could cost me my life. Or even worse—the life of someone I loved.

“I’m focusing, you’re right!” I nodded at Artemis.

“Let’s catch our breath and assess,” Artemis said. Panting, she grabbed my hand, as if to make sure I wouldn’t run off. Together, we looked around. I searched for Greyson and spotted him with Ravi. They were working together to take down a couple of Bitterfangs. The Bitterfangs were fast, but Ravi and Greyson seemed to be holding their own, and relief was the strongest emotion inside me.

As I took in the scene all around me, I realized that our allies did seem to be gaining the edge. Could it be that my plan was actually working?

*How’s* that *for being a burden, Xavier?*

I shook my head to clear it and pondered our next move. I had hoped we would’ve avoided this entire war—that was Greyson’s and my goal when we’d gone to the summit. But when that didn’t work out, I had still held out hope. Both of us had tried so hard to fix this, to stop these battles from happening, but it had been to no avail.

*At least now I am proving myself capable*, I thought. *Another notch in my quest to finally become a real Luna.*

“Let’s go help Sage and Elle,” Artemis said, tugging on my hand, ready for action again.

I stayed put. “Wait!”

“What?”

As we’d been examining the battlefield, I had noticed something. The Bitterfangs and their allies were coming in using a trail that was on the far end of the clearing.

“We need to cut off their warrior supply,” I said, grabbing her arm to run in that direction. “We need to stop their fighters from joining the battle and make them retreat!”

Artemis huffed, running next to me. “And how do we do that?”

I pointed ahead, and realization dawned on her. She and I started toward the path, and I alerted Lola, Torin, and Jacqueline to join us.

“What’s happening?” Torin asked.

“The enemy passes through there to join the battle! When they try to pass next, we block them and attack!”

“Nice,” Jaqueline said, while Lola’s wolf yipped her agreement.

I directed everybody to take opposite sides on the trail, reminding them to wait and not make sudden movements. I was a little bit shocked at my idea, or how I’d noticed the Bitterfangs coming down through here. I was also surprised how it felt natural for me to be in charge right now. Greyson would be pleased.

*Unless of course, this fails, and we all die!*

No, but that was not funny at all. The sounds of fighting nearby reminded me how deadly serious the stakes were right now.

“Do you hear that?” Jacs hissed.

A second later, a couple of Bitterfangs started to come down the trail quietly.

“Get ready, everyone,” I whispered. “This might be our only shot.”

When a third Bitterfang passed by, I raised my hand, giving the signal. Torin, Lola, Artemis, Jacs, and I jumped out from hiding, surrounding the Bitterfangs. The element of surprise gave us an edge that we hadn’t had earlier. Their militaristic way of fighting required that they were the ones doing the ambushing, so when we took that away from them, their formation cracked easily. Between mine, Torin’s, and Artemis’s magic, and Lola and Jacqueline, the fight ended quickly.

We weren’t the ones who died.

Our enemies lay at our feet, bloodied, broken, and the sight made something in me twist. This wasn’t what I wanted—this had *never* been what I wanted. But if anyone had to pay the price for this war, I wasn’t about to let it be my sister, or any of the Redwoods. If we hadn’t killed these three, who knows how much damage they could have inflicted?

“It’s okay,” Artemis said, squeezing my shoulder.

“It’s war,” I replied. And that said it all. Looking around at the group, I said, “Let’s go back.”

“You know,” Artemis started once we turned, “I think you should—”

Artemis never finished her sentence. One of the downed werewolves, the ones we’d taken for dead, leaped up. He jumped onto my sister, slamming her to the ground, claws raised to slice through her face. She screamed.

I screamed.

*NO!*

My hand burned, and then the sword was in it—I had no idea when I’d channeled it or how, but it was there. My reaction had been automatic, like breathing, like my heartbeat, like the instinct to protect my own at any cost.

My sword sliced through the wolf like he was nothing but air.

Blood flew everywhere before the wolf tumbled off Artemis.

“What the fuck,” Jacs breathed from behind me. “That was *so* fast.”

Lola’s wolf huffed in agreement.

Torin sounded amazed. “Crazy fast, Cali. Like never before.”

“That’s training for you,” Artemis said, looking up at me with wide eyes. I helped her stand, and she was still dazed. “You’ve gotten so good, Cali!”

I nodded, pulling my sister in a tight hug. I couldn’t speak, the heaviness of the moment settling over me. What would’ve happened if I hadn’t trained? What if I had hesitated for a second there? What if I were unsure of myself? What would’ve happened then?

*That could have cost Artemis her life…*

I fought the nausea as the smell of death surrounded us.

“Let’s go back,” I whispered, heading to the main fight.

“No!” Jacqueline hissed. “There are more coming!”

My heart was beating so fast that my chest ached. When I turned around, a couple of large wolves were coming toward us at a slow pace, growling. There was something about the one at the front, something familiar in their gaze. And then it shifted to human, and I knew who it was.

Honora.

She looked at the dead wolves at my feet before lifting her menacing gaze to me. Teeth bared, she glared. In a cold, hissing voice, she said, “Let’s see how a little Fae can deal with a real Luna.”

**Episode 4124**

**Greyson**

Ravi and I were fighting side by side. It didn’t feel as natural as when I fought with my dickhead of a brother, but it was enough for us to continuously gain and maintain the upper hand. Ravi was a good, loyal fighter, and he came without the headache that Xavier brought.

Rishika might have an edge over both of them—Ravi, because she had better technique than him, and, Xavier, because she was cooperative—but I wasn’t about to complain here. I felt good about having Ravi by my side, and we’d kicked some Bitterfang and Ironwood ass.

One of those motherfuckers had bitten me on the shoulder, but I ignored the pain. It was already healing and at the bottom of my list of concerns. At the top was, of course, Cali. I saw her leading a group toward the woods, sneakily heading off like a Little Red Riding Hood with a deadly Fae sword.

I didn’t want to let myself become too worried. Cali had improved as a fighter, and she probably had the sickest weapon out of everyone on the field. She was going to be fine…

But I should know where she was. As her Alpha. And her mate.

I could try to mind link her, though I wasn’t sure if it was worth the risk. Hearing me in her head could distract her if she were in the middle of a fight.

Okay, I would just go find her.

*This is going well*, Ravi mind linked before I could tell him I would head off. I turned to see him spit blood after he’d finished our opponent. *Your plan is working*, he said.

*It was Cali’s plan*, I said, reminding him.

I was surprised—not because things were going well, since I wouldn’t have agreed with Cali’s suggestion if I didn’t believe in it. But because I hadn’t expected this strategy to be so effective, so quickly. I had thought that we would encounter more resistance, or at least a surge in fighters.

On the one hand, this was good for our alliance. This was *great*. But on the other hand, I couldn’t fucking believe that Malakai had underestimated us so badly. What the hell did this fucker think? That he could just walk in with a moderate amount of fighters and come out victorious? Did he have no idea what it meant to be a Redwood?

We had made it through Letifer and his revenants; and above all, Xavier, Colton, and I had beaten our own father. I had torn his heart out. And Silas had been considered an unbeatable tyrant among all werewolves, whereas Malakai was merely a knockoff, who’d ignored who his enemy was. That would be his undoing.

As for my *own* undoing, that would have to be Cali running off where I couldn’t see her. I knew she had Artemis with her, and Lola and Jacs and Torin, and that was a good group of fighters. But still. I knew she’d be fully freaking out if the roles were reversed, and suddenly I vanished. I needed to find her.

*Have you seen Artemis?* I asked Rishika as she trotted over to me. She had patches of red all over her, and red jaws, but the blood wasn’t her own.

*Artemis? No, why? Is she okay?* Rishika asked.

*She was with Cali, and now I can’t find either of them*, I told her. *Hold the fort, and I’ll be back.*

*No*, she said, *I’m coming with you. Let Mace know, he can stay in charge as we—*

A werewolf growled a few feet away, cutting Rishika off. It came charging toward us, and we both went into fighting mode. It hadn’t been necessary, though—Charlie and Violet intercepted with a tackle, tearing through the wolf in unison. It had been a Bitterfang, but they’d surprised him, and that had meant a quick kill. I was grateful to have such good fighters in my pack.

*Great work*, I mind linked as we passed by them.

Charlie gave me a bloodied, wolfish grin.

*Here*, Rishika mind linked, *I just picked up Artemis’s scent!*

I sniffed in that direction and realized that Artemis’s scent was mingled with Cali’s. I ran in that direction at full speed, Rishika following behind me, when suddenly, I heard a yelp. I whirled around to see Rishika pinned on the ground, struggling as a very large and menacing Bitterfang snapped at her.

*Get the fuck away from her!* I snarled, jumping into the fray.

The wolf growled back, opening his mouth to bite into Rishika’s throat, when she sliced through his chest and distracted him. It was the two of us against the one. His wolf was strong, slightly bigger than mine, and he used those Bitterfang fighting moves that I would have to fucking study up close and personal.

At this stage, though, this battle had been going for a while, and I had noticed the patterns in their fighting. As daunting as going after this particular Bitterfang was, it was much more manageable when you focused on strategy. I could tell that Rishika was thinking the same thing, and we were ready to come on top, when he suddenly evaded my claws.

He went for Rishika’s leg.

The scent of her blood hit me, overpowering everything else. *Goddammit*. I roared, jumping onto that lowlife’s back, teeth sinking into his neck before I tore his throat out. He dropped on the ground, almost crushing Rishika before I kicked him aside.

*How bad is it?* I mind linked, examining the nasty wound on her leg.

*I’m fine*, she replied, *trying to get up*. I leaned forward to help her keep her weight off it, but she let out a whine and tripped. I grimaced, looking closer at the wound. Her leg was broken, and the bone was showing.

*You’re not fine*, I replied. *This will heal, but it’s not gonna be quick.*

Rishika huffed in my head when I called Ravi.

*Protect Rishika*, I mind linked Ravi. *I’m going to find Torin to help speed up the healing process.*

*He’s with Artemis and Cali*, Rishika said.

Three birds with one stone.

Picking up Cali’s scent again, I moved through the ruckus and what seemed like the last of the battle. There were pools of blood and dead werewolves everywhere. They smelled like Bitterfangs and Ironwoods. The scents were muddied up, but I could also make out Artemis’s, Torin’s, Lola’s, and Jacqueline’s scent. At least they had all remained together. There was strength in numbers.

The question here remained, though: Where the hell were they?

As I ran past, I spotted Lucian fighting side by side with Elle. It was unsettling, but I couldn’t do a damn thing about it right now. At least the princeling could hold up his end—I had noticed throughout that he wasn’t a bad fighter. Which was surprising. During the Seluna battle, he’d fought in an erratic, uncoordinated way, so I had not expected much better here. But perhaps not having Seluna around made all the difference. Besides, I could tell that Lucian was trying to impress Elle.

The thought left a bitter taste in my mouth.

*Where’s Xavier?* a voice said in my head. I paused to see Ava passing by me, her fur bloodied.

*Where’s Cali?* I countered.

Ava grunted, moving along.

I realized I hadn’t seen my brother in a while. Could he be with Cali? It wouldn’t surprise me. Xavier kept coming to her rescue lately and acting all casual about it. He said it was about the alliance, but I couldn’t help but feel the undercurrents there. I hated everything he’d done and how it meant I couldn’t trust him now. I didn’t like any of his bullshit, but knowing that he’d help protect Cali topped everything else.

I didn’t find his scent mingled with Cali’s when I kept on looking for her, though. They were probably not together. Nevertheless, as I moved farther from the clearing, it was getting harder to sort out the scents. Between the various packs and the blood, it was all a mess. And Cali was still gone, along with Artemis and another three members of my pack.

This wouldn’t do.

I paused, sniffing the air one last time. Still, only blood and death. No Cali. I had two choices here: return back to the fray, or mind link Cali to check in on her despite the risk of startling her during battle. Shaking my head, I settled on option two. Cali had become a good enough fighter to maintain focus, mind link or no mind link.

I needed to believe that contacting her wouldn’t put her in danger, even if there was still static between us. I needed to believe in her. I already did. She was the one who had brought us here, and with her plan, everything was moving toward a resolution. That was my girl.

But just as I was ready to send out a message to Cali, I saw a large figure moving through the trees. I recognized it—I recognized *him*. Both his scent, and his wolf.

Wade.

**Episode 4125**

**Xavier**

*Stop!* I yelled.

The two wolves who were ready to attack us paused. This was not how things normally went during a war—you didn’t say *stop* and the other person listened—but these punks didn’t seem like experts. The weird surfing references they’d used earlier were a testament to that. Who the fuck shit-talked in surf code?

*I don’t like to fight people I don’t know*, I mind linked, looking among them. *So, I’m asking again, who are you?*

The big black one puffed up. *We are from the Hackberry pack. SoCal born and raised.*

*I’ve heard of you*, I said. *But you have taken one wave too far—you are way out of your territory here.*

The smaller reddish wolf turned to the big black one. *That was a good surf pun, dude.*

*It was. But we’re still gonna kill these two!* the big black one declared.

I took a deep breath. These morons were too young, and obviously dumb, to die like this.

*You have no idea what you’re doing or who you’re dealing with*,I said. *I will count to three and give you a chance to turn back now*. *One, two—*

The Hackberry wolves laughed. There were four of them in total, but now that I had spoken with them, they didn’t exactly seem like a threat. They just felt really fucking annoying.

*Should we teach the surf rats a lesson?* Donovan asked.

*Since they don’t know what’s good for them, I’m more than happy to*, I said. *Let them come closer, and then I’ll make the first move*.

Donovan nodded as the four growling wolves came at us from the front. Another amateur move—they should’ve surrounded us. But they didn’t, so when I howled and slammed into the first two at once, their entire group got frazzled.

Donovan, thankfully, did not. He reacted, jumping into the fray with no hesitation. I was impressed—this was a good test for Donovan to show me what he was made of. He held his own with two of the wolves, taking one out, and I absorbed a couple of bites before delivering a fatal blow to the large black one. Donovan bit the small red one, who scampered away to hide. But before I could turn my full attention to the final one left, more werewolves came at us.

*To your left! They got reinforcements!* I warned Donovan, tearing into the closest wolf.

Someone bit into my flank before I kicked him off, and that was when I realized that we were outmatched. I could take two or three of the Hackberry wolves at once—like the Ironwoods, they were not nearly as skilled fighters as the Bitterfangs. But now there were too many of them, at least ten. I was about to order Donovan to retreat, figuring we could run and lead the Hackberry wolves to the other allies and shift the odds, when there was a familiar growl behind me.

Ava.

Ava, Knox, Zipper, and Blaine came leaping toward us.

I never thought I’d feel so good at seeing Knox and his buddies, but I sure as hell was happy right now. This was a chance for the three of them to show their loyalty and what they could do as fighters. A win-win all over for me.

*What the fuck were you doing out here?* Ava mind linked. Before I could reply, she slammed into the wolf who had bitten me. I reared back to stomp on him, but she didn’t need the help. The wolf yelped before Ava ripped his throat out.

She turned fiery eyes to me, blood dripping from her mouth. She mind linked, *Don’t scare me like that again!*

I didn’t know what to say, how to respond. I settled for fighting by her side, making sure she stayed safe as she charged at another wolf. Knox and his buddies worked on the remaining Hackberry wolves, with Donovan doing a great job among them. The fighting was over in a few minutes. A bunch of Hackberry wolves were injured, two more killed, and the others fled.

You could say that they rode the wave.

*Do you want me to hunt them down?* Knox mind linked. He wasn’t a being a little dick right now, thank fuck.

*No, it’s better to return to the clearing*, I replied. *I don’t want to take the chance that our forces will be separated and possibly led into a trap.* I looked among everybody, nodding forward with my snout. *Let’s go.*

Ava’s wolf trotted by my side, and I couldn’t help shooting a glance at her. *Thank you*, I said. *I was about to reach out for help. It was as if you read my mind.*

Ava shot me a glare. *You should’ve mind linked me sooner. And next time, let me know if you go running off.*

*Should I wear a bell, too?*

*This isn’t fucking funny, Xavier*, she snapped. *I was…*

*Worried?*

She didn’t reply, but I knew the answer. And no matter what, it made me feel warm inside. Secure. I was tempted to thank her again, but I didn’t know what she’d do in response. And Adéluce was always watching.

*Greyson was looking for Cali*, Ava mind linked, then. *He didn’t know where she was.*

From the cold tone of Ava’s voice, I could tell that she wanted to see my reaction. The last thing I needed right now was to get into an argument with her, so I played down my worry.

*Cali can take care of herself*, I replied.

Ava slowed her running, coming to a stop. She wasn’t going to let this one go. Shocker.

*Go ahead, we’re coming*, I mind linked the others. Donovan, Knox, Blaine, and Zipper followed my direction, running back into the clearing. Ava and I were alone now. Her eyes narrowed on me.

*It’s okay if you want to look for her*, she said.

As much as I was sure Adéluce would love to see us fight right now, I wasn’t about to take the bait.

*It’s not my job to look for her*, I replied.

Ava shook her head. Her gaze was hard. *I don’t want you to be distracted while there’s a battle going on. If you’re going to be worried about Cali—*

*I’m not worried*, I said, cutting her off.

Ava scoffed. *You’re either lying to me or yourself here. But I don’t give a damn. You should go and help Greyson find Cali, so we can stop talking about this.*

Was this some sort of game of Ava’s? I couldn’t help but feel wary.

*Why are you doing this?* I asked, cutting to the chase.

*Cali and I aren’t friends*, Ava replied, *but she is important to the alliance.* *She’s also a half-Fae fighting a werewolf pack war. She might be a little in over her head, and nobody wants her dead. It would be counterproductive.*

Ava’s cold logic made sense, at least. It wasn’t that she cared about Cali. It was that the alliance needed Cali. If anything happened to her, Greyson would be devastated, and it would create a chaos of problems all over. And *I* would have to hide how destroyed I would be.

Of course, I would never admit that to Ava. I had to be careful with her. With Cali too.

*You’re right*, I said. *Cali is crucial to the alliance*. I paused, eyeing her. *I could use your help to find her.*

Ava’s wolf huffed in what had to be both shock and surprise. *Did you get hit on the head, Xavier?*

*You are part of the alliance and my Luna*, I said. *You and I would search for Cali for the common good. Will you help me?*

Ava paused. I worried for a moment that she’d call out my bullshit. But in the end, she said, *You’re my Alpha, so I’ll do whatever you ask.*

Would she be helping me if I weren’t her Alpha? I doubted it. Then again, you never knew with Ava. She was tricky and slippery like that. If Ava considered Cali key to this entire operation, I could see her tolerating Cali. Ava always had an agenda, and I realized that we were all probably really fucking lucky that that agenda included Cali staying alive.

*The first step is to pick up Cali’s scent*, I said after we started running toward the clearing again. I could hear the sounds of battle in the distance. And then much closer, followed by a familiar scream that made my blood curl.

*What the hell is happening?* Ava asked, coming to a dead stop.

Only a few feet ahead, there was Kira, trapped in a circle of three werewolves. She waved a knife around, shouting, “Back the fuck off!” But she looked terrified, like she was trapped and didn’t know what to do. I had seen that shaken expression on her face before. I knew what it meant, and it was nothing good.

*Why isn’t she using her magic?* Ava asked me. *What is she waiting for?*

We needed to help Kira before it was too late.

**Episode 4126**

“Let’s see how a little Fae can deal with a real Luna,” Honora said.

I stumbled back in shock and fear, because what the fuck was *that* supposed to mean? Did Honora know that I was a fake Luna? But how? Outside of the Redwood pack, there were only two people who knew the truth—Xavier and Rowena.

*Could Xavier…*

No. Just no. No matter how weird and horrid Xavier had been lately, he would never betray his former pack like that. Or me. And while I hardly knew Rowena that well, the witch was out there, fighting the Bitterfangs alongside her Alpha and her pack. She had no reason to expose me.

“You’re delusional!” My voice was loud, laced by bravado. Even if I was shaking at the possibility of the truth coming out. What would the summit elders do if they knew we’d deceived them with a fake mark? I lost my footing at the thought, slipping back to bump into Artemis and Torin. Both of them held onto me, solid behind my back.

“Oh, how nice,” Honora scoffed, sneering. “The three Fae in one little group. Now you can all witness how inferior you are to a Luna who is a proper werewolf.”

*Oh.*

So, that was what it was all about. Honora was talking about being a werewolf Luna, not a Fae Luna. It was merely her usual bullshit and bigotry. She didn’t know my mark was fake. Okay, then. This was fine! Crisis averted.

Or not really.

Lola’s wolf growled, stepping between Honora and me. My confidence returned, knowing that I had my friends by my side. I turned to Artemis and Torin and said, “How about we show Honora what three little Fae are capable of?”

“None of these wolves want to see me at my worst,” Torin said gruffly, picking up his spear. A real, physical spear, that he knew how to use very well. He hadn’t used any actual magic during the battle so far, even though I knew he could do irrevocable damage by using his healing powers in reverse.

“Shooting an arrow through that arrogant Luna’s eye should be fun,” Artemis told me, channeling her bow and arrow.

I did the same with my sword, feeling the power rise inside me. Lola growled again, Jacs snapped her teeth, and among the five of us, I thought we made a great team.

And yet, instead of growing fearful, Honora seemed amused when she looked at us.

*Seriously? What is wrong with this lady? I know that if I were facing a magic sword and arrows, I wouldn’t be smiling!*

Did Honora have something up her sleeve?

“You are all going to die,” she said simply.

She waved a hand, and the Bitterfang wolves charged forward.

Honora stayed back, watching us impassively while her minions did her dirty work. The Bitterfangs roared and went for each one of us, but my sword had been at the ready, and I threw myself into the fight. Artemis just missed a werewolf with her arrow, but that didn’t matter—she was fast enough to evade him. She then blasted the next wolf that attacked her to slow it down as she drew a dagger from her side.

At the same time, Torin lowered the spear he had slung over his shoulder and charged toward a wolf that tried to bite me, jabbing it in the leg. I screamed my thank-you to him before I swiped at the wolf, chopping off its leg. The sounds of bodies hitting the ground, of howling and snapping, of flesh tearing were as nightmarish as ever. But I was in fight mode, and I couldn’t stop.

I didn’t have the choice to stop.

I waited for Honora to attack me. I expected her to do it sooner than later—maybe once she figured her wolves had tired me out. But for all the Luna’s bluster, it was her minions that were doing the fighting. Honora was standing back, away from the fray.

“Your Luna is a coward!” I spat at another incoming wolf, blasting him with my magic. Two more heard me and rushed to attack, as if determined to punish me for my disrespect. I didn’t give a fuck, though. The Luna who had mocked me, ridiculed the *due destini*, called me a harlot, and threatened to kill her own daughter was too afraid to get her hands dirty.

Too afraid, or too arrogant.

*Either way, I’m not letting her get away with it!*

Since Honora wouldn’t participate, it was time to take the battle to her. I slashed my way toward her, in control of the sword but not completely—not enough to guarantee I wasn’t going to accidentally behead these assholes. I didn’t need the nightmares, so I was almost relieved when they realized the damage the sword could do and got the hell out of my way.

“Well?” I shouted at Honora. “Isn’t a fight with me what you wanted? What the hell are you waiting for?”

Honora’s cold expression broke into a grimace of fury. She roared, shifting back into her wolf form and leaping at me. The sight of her wide-open mouth made me take a step back, bumping into someone who shouted, “Hey! Watch that thing before you chop my hand off!”

The realization that I had accidentally almost hit Jacqueline with the sword made my blood run cold. It was jarring and fucked-up enough as a possibility—to hurt my own friends with a too-dangerous-for-me weapon—that I froze for a moment, seized by panic.

It was a moment too long.

Honora’s paws were the first thing I saw, ready to land on my face before I toppled to the ground and lifted my hands, blasting her the hell away from me. Her wolf yelped and fell backward. The magic hadn’t been enough to injure her, but enough for her to be down for a few precious moments.

Scrambling to my feet, I looked around to make sure the others were okay. Torin had killed one wolf, Jacqueline was biting the neck of another, while Lola and Artemis were cornering the biggest one of the lot. Right then, Adair joined us with his spectacular energy whips, attacking another one of the Bitterfangs when they tried to hit Torin from the back. We were putting up one hell of a fight, and it was so obvious that Honora couldn’t ignore it.

When our eyes met next, hers narrowed.

“Where’s all your Luna pride now?” Shaking, I walked toward her, both my hands outstretched to my sides. Ready to fight. “Why aren’t you fighting me?”

With a growl, Honora turned around and flew back into the forest.

For a second, my brain short-circuited.

*Is she… Is she fucking* serious*? After all this, she’s going to run away?*

*Honora*, the proper Luna, ran away from *me*, the Luna who she believed would never be worthy. After all the humiliation she had put me through, after all her intimidation tactics, after being one of the main reasons this war even started, she was running away from me like a fucking *coward*.

Then I heard her voice—she must’ve shifted back to human once she felt she was far enough away—as she taunted, “We’ll never be evenly matched, Cali. I cannot be bested by a filthy, *human* half-breed. The Redwood pack certainly *has* fallen to have such a sorry excuse for a Luna—and one who isn’t even *fully* committed to her Alpha.”

And in that moment, all I saw was red.

She had insulted me one too many times, and now, it was personal.

Now, I was running.

Fury pulsed through me, charging me with so much power and adrenaline as I raced in Honora’s direction, throwing blasts of magic to hit her and slow her down.

“Come back here, you coward!” I screamed. “Come back here and face me!”

I hit trees and bushes and boulders, but not her. She was back in wolf form now, and it was hard to aim at a moving target when I was moving myself, fighting not to trip over the uneven forest floor. Until I did fall on the goddamn ground, and I was shaken out of my haze of anger.

*Um, not to interrupt your rage delirium here, but do you* really *think it’s a good idea to follow a Luna into the woods all alone, Cali?*

I pushed myself up and started running after her again. The tiny voice in my head was yelling now.

*This isn’t smart! Honora is a powerful werewolf, a Luna! If you didn’t have your magic, you would stand no chance against someone like Honora.*

But I *did* have my magic, and I had grown more experienced in using my magic in new ways in the past few weeks. Plus, I had more than magic on my side. Honora clearly looked down on me, on all Fae. She was underestimating me. I could use that to my advantage.

The only true obstacle here was that I was a half-human Fae chasing a werewolf. Werewolves were fast as hell, and I was decidedly *not* fast. Like, at all.

I paused in the middle of the woods, looking around and panting.

“Where the fuck did she go?” I asked myself, fighting to catch my breath.

“I’m right here,” a cold voice said.

I whirled around to see Honora leaning against a tree, in human form.

*What the hell? Did I wound her with my magic? Why is she just—standing there?*

I channeled my sword, thrusting it forward as I stepped toward her. “You’re coming with me.”

Honora raised an eyebrow. “Oh, dear. Poor me.”

Something was wrong here. Seriously fucking wrong. “What are you—”

I never finished my sentence.

When Honora raised her hands as if in defeat, a ring of Bitterfang wolves emerged, forming a circle around me.

**Episode 4127**

**Xavier**

*Use your magic!* I wanted to shout at Kira. *Fight back! What are you waiting for?*

That was before I remembered what had happened when I had first met Kira. During the time that I’d agreed to help her track down Geoff’s—her dead partner’s—murderer. She hadn’t been comfortable using her magic to fight back then. But she had overcome that ever since, and she was going to have to overcome it now again. Or she would be killed.

I couldn’t articulate that to her, not unless I shifted, which would make me easy prey. There were three Bitterfangs, so the odds weren’t good, especially with their type of fighting. That made Kira snapping out of this even more important.

*I’m taking the one on the left*, I mind linked Ava as we ran toward the fray. *You get the one on the right.*

*What about the small one in the middle?* Ava asked, rushing behind me.

*We fucking pray it doesn’t get to Kira in the meantime*, I said harshly.

I leaped forward, jumping over the three Bitterfang. With a growl, I came to land right in front of Kira, shielding her from them.

The Bitterfang in front of me growled back, their surprise overshadowed by anger.

“Xavier?” Kira sputtered behind me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her drop her knife in shock. As if she had just now realized that it was useless against them. But I couldn’t wait to see if she’d come back to her senses—I had to make my move. While Ava took the Bitterfang on the right, I attacked the one on the left as planned…

And I ended up landing hard on the ground.

How the fuck did the wolf evade me so quickly?

I scrambled to my feet, snarling as I whirled around to see—

Kira, using her magic to lift the wolf I had charged into the air. She swung him like a bat into the others. They all tumbled to the ground like a row of bowling pins, giving me the opportunity to attack. All of them were scrambling to get up, but I had the biggest one pinned down. He put up a good fight, though he was no match for me.

I ducked when another tried to bite at my shoulder, then I bent and tore out the big wolf’s throat. At the same time, Ava clawed his buddy’s eyes out and left him whimpering and yelping on the ground. He started running toward the woods, followed by the one who’d tried to bite me, both of them retreating.

Kira didn’t let them.

She raised both her hands, and they fell on the ground with a deafening thud.

It was as if they’d been knocked out.

I paused for a moment, breathing hard, looking at Kira with wide eyes. I remembered how she’d fought the vampires and werewolves that night we had been on the run together. I knew that when push came to shove, Kira got down to it. And she was amazing, actually.

“Are you okay?” I asked her after shifting into human. She was staring at her hands, as if not believing she’d just used magic to fight. I came closer to her, resting my palm on her shoulder. “You good?”

She closed her eyes tight, taking a deep breath. She seemed to have finally snapped out of her fog when she looked up at me. “I got too into my head, thinking about… Geoff.” She swallowed hard. “It hadn’t happened in a while. I guess…” She chuckled bitterly. “I relapsed.”

“It’s fine,” I said, squeezing her shoulder. “It’s over now.” I glanced ahead. “But the battle isn’t finished yet, so you have to keep your head above water. Are you going to be able to do that? Otherwise, you should blip the hell out of here. We can’t afford to lose you.”

Kira nodded, turning her hands into fists. “I’ll be okay.”

“Have you seen Cali?” I asked. “I have to find her.”

Kira glanced at Ava at my question. She said, “I saw Cali run off that way.” She pointed ahead, and Ava and I locked eyes.

*Let’s go*, she mind linked.

I squeezed Kira’s shoulder one last time before running forward behind Ava, shifting back to wolf as I went. I immediately caught Cali’s scent and followed it in the direction Kira had gestured. Then I glanced once over my shoulder to make sure Kira wasn’t just staring at her hands. I saw her turn and head back toward the clearing, her head held high. That had to mean something good, at least.

*Why did Kira seem so lost back there?* Ava asked, interrupting my thoughts.

*Sometimes fighting isn’t easy for Kira*, I said. I couldn’t get into her past right now, not when I was trying to focus on Cali’s scent.

*I* *get it. Pack wars aren’t easy for anyone*, Ava said. *Even the victors tend to suffer great casualties.*

*This pack war is the most fucked one I’ve ever been in*, I replied. *It’s not a fight over territory, which would be the usual. It’s a war of ideas.*

*I think it’s about Malakai’s daughter as well*, Ava reminded me.

*True*, I agreed. *But the reason why Malakai went after his daughter for falling in love is that he can’t handle that the world has moved on. He’s stuck in some kind of twisted time warp, and he wants to bring chaos.*

If this messed up, sick war cost us one of our own, I didn’t know what the fuck I’d do. If it cost me Cali, it would mean my world crashing down into pieces. Even worse than it already had. I told myself that I needed to find her—that was my only goal right now. Her scent flickered under my nose one moment, only to get lost in the blood and grime of the battle the next.

When finally I saw movement up ahead, I slowed down. I brought myself in front of Ava so I could assess before she could move forward. But then I realized that it wasn’t a Bitterfang, Ironwood, or Hackberry. I smelled Redwood.

Artemis, Lola, Torin, Jacqueline, and Adair.

*Cali should be with them*, I mind linked Ava, racing forward.

Ava followed silently. I didn’t allow myself to think how she was feeling right now.

Cali wasn’t with the group.

*Where’s Cali?* I mind linked Lola once I came to a halt before them. *Where’s Greyson?*

*No idea about Greyson*, Lola responded, her wolf panting. There were dead Bitterfangs all over the trail.

*But he was looking for Cali—*

Lola interrupted me*. Cali went chasing after Honora.*

I couldn’t fucking believe my ears.

*And you let her? I* demanded.

Lola growled, gesturing at the dead bodies. *We had our hands full, Xavier! If you have a problem, take it up with Cali.*

Lola was still pissed at me. I didn’t know if I could blame her, but it irritated me right now. She and her drama queen bullshit weren’t fucking helping.

*Which way did Cali go?* I asked.

Lola gestured behind her. *Over there. We’re coming with you.*

I huffed. *Why didn’t you go after Cali when she ran off?*

Lola’s eyes flashed with anger. She opened her jaws, grabbing one of the dead werewolves by the scruff of its neck, dragging it forward to drop it at my feet. In a sarcastic, biting tone, she mind linked, *We were busy, remember?*

I stepped back, avoiding the carcass. I wasn’t going to waste any more time arguing with Lola. Seeing her acting out like this made me realize that it could’ve been a good thing that Jay turned down my offer to join the Samara pack. If Lola came along as part of the package—which would have happened, because Jay would never leave his mate behind—it would’ve been hell for me.

*Are we going?* Ava spoke up.

When I turned to look at her, I couldn’t tell if she was eager to secure my other mate, or eager to get the search over with. Either way, we needed to move forward, find Cali, and return to the battle in the clearing.

Lola moved first, leading the way. I took the front with her, and the rest followed. She didn’t say another word to me, and that was good. I doubted her bullshit would help with my mounting panic. This wasn’t a backyard drill.

Those werewolves had wanted to kill Kira, and if Ava and I hadn’t come across her when we did, Kira might have been gone. Could Cali be in a similar position right now? She had been specifically targeted by the Bitterfangs. Malakai was fucking obsessed with her, like—

*What the fuck is that?* Lola’s voice pierced through my head. She halted, and I realized that she was right—something was wrong. She led the way, and I could hear the sounds of a fight ahead to the left. After covering twenty feet, we emerged into a small clearing.

And then, I saw my older brother.

Greyson was battling Wade. The two of them were clawing and snapping at each other, roaring in fury. Before I could think, instinct took over.

I ran toward the fight.

**Episode 4128**

My heart was hammering under every inch of my skin. Sweat beaded along my forehead, the back of my neck. Fear clawed at my insides, my stomach twisting over and over. I swung my sword around, fighting to keep the Bitterfang wolves away.

“Stay back!” I shouted, gritting my teeth together.

*It’s working! I can fight them! All of them!*

That was a big fat lie. I could strike one werewolf, sure, but then the others would pounce. Even if I used my magic to blast them, I still wouldn’t be able to get all of them. I wondered what Adair would do. He seemed like the kind of fighter that was rattled by nothing, never. I would have felt so much better if he were here right now, even if he was grumpy and annoying. If he along with Artemis were with me in this moment, we would’ve been able to take on these ass wipes and show them exactly what a trio of Fae could do.

Though Artemis and Adair would totally judge me for running after Honora alone.

*Why did I have to do that? Why am I like this, goddammit?*

I knew why. I was furious, and I had wanted to prove myself. I was blinded by my wounded ego. It hadn’t been a very strategic move for the Master Strategist, but one solely driven by emotion. I couldn’t be a great Luna if I let my feelings cloud my judgment, and that realization ate at my confidence. Worst of all, my impulsiveness seemed to prove Honora’s point.

*Don’t dwell on all that, Cali*, I told myself, gripping the sword tight. *You can’t turn back time—you have to find a way out of this without dying!*

I refused to die like this. Not in the name of a pointless, useless war with a pack that had hated their very own daughter enough to threaten to kill her for disobeying them.

*Greyson!* I mind linked. *Can you hear me?*

There was static all over again. Was the distance between us messing it up? I hated to think about it, but could the sire bond be breaking down our connection again? The idea made my stomach clench, doubling the fear I felt, the sensation of being caught and trapped.

*Could I…*

Could I mind link Xavier instead?

He had reached out first earlier, and I was shocked to feel that. To hear his voice in my head again. If I mind linked him now and told him I was in danger, surely he would—

A growl cut off my thoughts.

A second later, one of the wolves in the circle charged toward me. Like before, I didn’t think. Like breathing, in the same way my heart was beating, I swiped at it with my sword, striking it in the leg, hitting an artery. Once more, blood flew everywhere.

Everywhere.

I did that.

I felt sick yet elated as the wolf stumbled to the ground, howling in pain.

“Who’s next?” I shouted, shaking, running on adrenaline. I imagined looking at myself from the outside right now—would I like what I saw?

Would I be proud of my bravery or horrified of who I’d become?

The wolves growled and snapped as their comrade bled out on the ground.

“*Get her!*” Honora screamed at her underlings. I took pleasure in seeing her rattled, finally, and I braced myself when the wolves jumped at me all at once.

I didn’t sit idle, though.

This was who I’d become now, a brand-new Cali who swung her sword wildly, with its blade so sharp it could cut through a tree. If someone died by my hand right now, they wouldn’t be the first today. I swung and didn’t stop, and I was a girl who didn’t care if she hit an artery, who did not mind if she cut off an arm or a leg, because fighting meant surviving.

In this moment, *killing* meant surviving.

I struck one of the Bitterfangs, then two, but there were too many. Too much force and muscle in warriors that had been trained all their life just for this, and I was only one girl. I lost my balance, falling to the ground.

My heartbeat stuttered, same as my sword. It vanished from my hand, evaporating.

*The shield! The* shield*, Cali!*

I was screaming in my head, I was screaming on the outside, and I raised my hand to protect myself, when suddenly—

A blur of motion.

And then *nothing*.

Not a sound, no movement, nothing but my shaking body, my broken breaths.

“Cali!” Rowena’s voice startled me, and then her hands were on me, dragging me away from under the wolf who had been ready to bite my head off. Helping me stand, she said, “I can’t hold this for long, there’s too many of them!”

Everything was frozen.

Rowena had done that for me.

“Come on,” she said, breathing hard, “we can do this—we can fight them together, okay? Get your sword ready!”

Her words and presence made power curse through me.

“Okay,” I breathed, laughing a little, fucking hysterical at this point. “Okay!”

I clapped my hands like I’d seen Adair do with his whips, but instead of just the sword, I had summoned my shield as well. The joy was short-lived, though, because when the wolves broke free of Rowena’s spell, the shield flickered and dissolved.

“Duck!” I shouted at Rowena, using the broad side of the sword to smack at a wolf who charged at her. She ducked and came to stand right behind me, raising her hands at the same time. Muttering under her breath, she flicked her wrist, and another two wolves were knocked back into a tree.

The Bitterfangs circled us and didn’t stop—one snapped at my leg before I kicked it and slammed my sword on it, another went after Rowena before she twisted her hands and cut off its air supply. Moments passed by, and each time, a new wolf took the place of the one before it, but we took them on. We were in the middle of their circle, back-to-back; all we had was each other’s back and our magic.

Right now, those things were more than enough to fend off Honora’s precious lackies.

I hoped she was watching this.

I hoped she could see how I rose to the challenge and made her men bleed.

*But for how much longer can we do this?*

I ran and dragged Rowena with me in the one precious moment the Bitterfangs seemed to falter. We were forced to stop a few feet away, in front of a gigantic tree. But this was good—at least this way, we wouldn’t have to worry about being attacked from the rear. Rowena told me as much, but we had no time to talk about anything else, because more wolves came at us.

I was giving it my all. All I could to protect both of us, but I was starting to grow tired. Not even my anger could fuel me right now. Drawing this much magic, with so much intensity without any pause was beyond draining. I was close to exhaustion—I could feel it from the way my hands and eyes burned.

*What do I do now?*

I couldn’t fail Rowena. But when I took a swipe at one of the wolves and missed for the very first time, I knew I was in deep trouble.

“Stand behind me!” Rowena called.

“I’m not leaving you to face them alone!” I knew that witches lost strength, too, from using spells continuously, so she had to be in the same boat.

“Cali, just—”

“No!” I shouted. When a wolf came at me now, I stopped it with the pointed end of my sword, piercing its eye. The wolf yelped but pushed through anyway. Not giving a fuck apparently, because he was *that* brainwashed. I was ready to blast him, or at least try, but I didn’t have the time.

The werewolf was whipped up into the air and slammed to the ground.

Rowena lowered her hands, panting.

“Thank you,” I choked out.

She turned to me, offering a weak smile. But before I knew it, she lost her footing, faltering. Just then, a roar rang out. In the blink of an eye, a werewolf slammed into Rowena, shoving her to the ground. Rowena looked terrified when he stood over her with a roar and opened his jaws to bite.

I charged forward with a scream.

*Get away from my friend, you fucking psychopath!*

I wasn’t sure if I’d said that out loud or not. But the sentiment was real, and I knocked the wolf back, slicing through him with my sword. Blood everywhere again. I had done that to save Rowena, and I would *not* fucking regret it. Because fuck the Bitterfangs and fuck this war and fuck—

Honora.

When I wasn’t looking, she had drawn close to me.

“You think you’re powerful, Fae?” she hissed, stepping forward ominously.

I tripped, swiping at her with my sword, fighting to raise it and attack. But I…

I was too tired. Too slow.

Honora slapped the weapon from my hand. It dissipated when it hit the ground, as if it were dust. As if it hadn’t sliced through beasts for hours on end today.

“The ridiculous, useless little thing,” Honora spat.

The Bitterfang Luna grabbed me by the throat, then, because this was how little honor she had. This was how she wanted to win a war.

And in my ear, Honora hissed, “I don’t even need my wolf to kill you.”

**Episode 4129**

**Xavier**

I plowed toward Greyson and Wade. I wasn’t thinking—I just burst into action, ramming into the Ironwood Alpha. I took him down onto the ground in an intense body slam, and I went all in, aiming for his throat, to rip it out and end this once and for all.

Unfortunately, though, Wade was a big bastard. He was large enough that when he pushed me off him with the force of two werewolves, I fucking felt it.

Greyson ran to me, nudging me up as he mind linked, *What are you doing here? I had this under control*.

*Didn’t look like it*, I bit back.

*You’ve proven your point; you can just go now. I’ve got this handled*,he snapped.

At the same time, Wade got to his feet and growled. The size of him was insane. He was even bigger than Lucian in wolf form, and that said a lot.

*Just go, Xavier.* Greyson shoved me, and I wondered if I *should* go.

I wanted to find Cali. I needed to. There had been a time when I would’ve jumped at the chance to look better than Greyson in her eyes—to be her one and only hero. Part of me still craved that, but right now I knew I had to act as the Samara Alpha, not as Cali’s mate. And being the Samara Alpha meant helping Greyson any way I could.

I hadn’t thought of any of that when I sprinted over to help my brother out, though. It had been instinctive—and to a jarring degree, because I had run forward and left Ava behind. My wolf was fucking obsessed with Ava. The fact that he chose to leave her to come help Greyson was just…

Fucking weird.

I chose not to dwell on it further, especially not right now.

*If you two are done chatting*, Wade snarled, *I have a war to win!*

He lunged for me, but Greyson got in the middle, intercepting him. We became a ball, a giant mass of claws and teeth and fur as we fought, all together. The two of us against Wade, battling it out. Fighting alongside Greyson felt as smooth as ever, which surprised me somewhat. I had thought our dynamic would be way more fraught. It stirred up feelings I wasn’t ready to examine.

After all that had happened recently, Greyson hated me. I knew he did. He told me that I could never go back to the Redwood pack after I left, but now here he was fighting alongside me. He repeatedly brought himself in front of me to shield me and he targeted Wade with menace. The asshole had sold us out—maybe that was why Greyson was so fixated on ending Wade himself, and it had nothing to do with me. I couldn’t just walk away now, though. I had to make sure Greyson triumphed here. The alliance needed him.

However, while the Ironwood soldiers had been pretty textbook to deal with, their Alpha was anything but. Wade was fighting as if his life depended on it. And he wasn’t wrong. He knew that there was no way he would walk away from this alive. Greyson had given him an out earlier—the entire alliance had all given him an out. But when he’d stayed, he had signed his death sentence.

It was one thing to take on an experienced fighter like Greyson, but the two of us? The Evers brothers might hate each other, but we knew how to fight. Perhaps a little too fucking enthusiastically at times.

Because when we accidentally slammed into each other trying to get to Wade’s throat, he slipped through.

*What the fuck!* I snapped. *Watch it.*

*You fucking watch it!* Greyson snarled back before looking over his shoulder. *The son of a bitch is escaping.*

We pounced after Wade, and he got a bite or two in, but nothing I couldn’t heal from. I was actually enjoying this. I probably shouldn’t have been—Wade was a strong Alpha that could kill either of us if he got one good, deep bite in. Then again, Greyson and I had survived Silas, Letifer, Seluna, and a million types of danger in New Orleans. We should be able to handle a werewolf pack.

It would be funny, though, if I died during this stupid war. If I went out without any glory, but just because I didn’t pay enough attention, and some random Alpha bit my throat out with his large teeth.

Maybe this was why I was enjoying the feeling of fighting with Greyson instead of against him so much. I felt like Wade wasn’t a real threat. And even if he was, he paled in comparison to Adéluce. The Ironwood Alpha had ended up being just a means to bring my brother and me to a place of comradery—something that hadn’t happened in a while.

This small peace between us was only temporary, though. Once this pack war was over, Greyson and I would have little need for each other. And when we would be forced to interact, it wouldn’t be to hang out. I doubted Adéluce wanted me to be all buddy-buddy with my annoying-ass, fucking infuriating older brother who got on my nerves more often than not.

Adéluce didn’t want me to have a single thing that could make my wolf feel right.

At least Wade was getting tired. He was covered in scratches and bites, and the only reason he wasn’t dead yet was his body mass. But things were getting worse for him, and he was coming closer to the end. He ran forward a bit, stumbling, before he came to stop in front of a giant pit, a natural dead-end. He didn’t have the strength to jump over it.

*You have nowhere to go*, Greyson mind linked to him. *Accept your fate.*

Wade was bleeding, shaking, while Greyson and I closed in. Which one of us would deliver the final blow? Before I could call dibs, and with ten feet between Wade and us, Greyson froze.

*What?* I mind linked.

Greyson turned around, toward the clearing where the main battle was. Malakai was there—with a group of wolves. They were moving toward the action.

Greyson growled.

I could swear Malakai’s wolf sneered triumphantly.

*Go*, I mind linked to Greyson. *I’ll deal with Wade.*

Greyson glanced at Wade, then looked at me as if hesitating.

*Go before some serious shit goes down, Greyson!* I mind linked, shoving him.

Greyson nodded, his wolf growling. He ran off, charging in Malakai’s direction.

I didn’t have the time to see what happened next, because Wade had come closer—way too fucking close. I realized that Malakai’s arrival had distracted both Greyson and me long enough for Wade’s wounds to heal. Just enough for him to get bold again.

He snarled, ready to move on me, but I was done with his bullshit. I barreled into Wade, ready to take him down. I was my own Alpha, and Greyson and I had tired the bastard out. This should be easy—I’d fought against much, much worse.

Though, and I hated to admit this, fighting a wolf as gigantic as Wade was easier with Greyson’s help.

*What’s the matter, Samara Alpha?* Wade taunted, ducking to evade my claws before his teeth grazed my front leg. *Are you having a hard time playing with the big boys now that your big brother is gone?*

His words were what triggered my anger further, pushing me forward. I growled, shoving him onto his back with all my strength. Rage and adrenaline coursed through me.

*Shut the fuck up*, I snarled, digging my claws into his chest, breaking skin. *You know nothing!*

Wade’s eyes flashed as he struggled beneath me. He laughed inside my head. *I know that you left the Redwood pack like a broken dog, and now your mate loves your brother more. How does that sound, you piece of shit?*

His words hit such a tender spot inside me that my grip loosened. He shoved me backward. When my claws dislodged from his chest, his blood spilled everywhere. But Wade didn’t give a fuck—he pushed me down onto the ground, his enormous paw pressing against my windpipe. His weight on me felt crushing.

*Next time*, he snarled, *you better fight someone your own size.*

I dug my teeth into his paw, and he wailed, flinching backwards. I was ready to kick him the fuck off me and finish the job, when suddenly I heard a familiar roar.

Ava.

Wade was shoved off me, but I hadn’t been the one to do it.

Ava, Marissa, Geraint, Donovan, and Simon were here, surrounding that fucking megalodon, all of them attacking Wade at once. The Samara pack—they were here to defend me. They were here to protect me, because I was their Alpha. They cared about me, about the pack.

They were *my* pack.

We were a unit. We were one, and when I joined the fight, we fought as one.

Wade stood no chance.

*Take out his legs*, I mind linked them all at once. *Get the son of a bitch down on the ground.*

The big lug went down with a thud that rattled the earth below us.

But he was done for.

Ava’s voice echoed in my head, as intense as ever. *End this, Xavier*.

I tore Wade’s throat out with my teeth. Hot, bitter blood burst through my mouth.

Victory.

The Ironwood Alpha was dead.

**Episode 4130**

Honora lifted me off the ground, tightening her grip around my throat. The way she had trapped me, glaring at me with such hatred and arrogance, thrust me back to a foggy nightmarish memory. In it, fire surrounded me, and the villain grabbing me by the neck, ready to choke the life out of me, was Seluna.

I had fucking killed Seluna. A demon. The kind of foe that not even Greyson or Xavier had managed to escape. And maybe some of it was luck, but a lot of it was determination.

Out of sheer stubbornness, I refused to die.

*Especially not at the hands of a brainwashed, fucked-up werewolf!*

I kicked at Honora, but it did little to stop her. She laughed at my flailing and jeered, “Is this uncomfortable?”

I had never deluded myself into thinking a little kick would’ve done the trick here. No. All I had wanted was to distract her enough, to make her mock me, in order for me to grab the dagger Adair had given me from my pocket.

*Now, Cali!*

I swiped at Honora, cutting her arm. She gasped, hissing in pain before dropping me. I rasped for air, fighting to get more oxygen.

“You will pay for this,” Honora said between gritted teeth, wiping the blood from her skin. I scrambled backwards, but she marched toward me.

“Stay back!” I shouted, raising both my hands to summon my magic. I blasted her but missed by a few inches.

*Fuck!*

I was shaking, tense with nerves and rage and the distinct impression that talking right now would only make things worse. But I couldn’t help myself. And I didn’t care what happened next. My pride demanded I speak.

“This is it, then?” I asked, lying there. Pretending to be broken, and waiting for her to come to me. “This is how an honorable Luna fights? You have your underlings tire me out and then you pounce when I’m weak?”

Honora came to stand over me, towering. Her gaze was full of menace. “You cost me my daughter. You deserve a fate worse than death.”

“You were the one who hurt your daughter, Honora,” I said in a low voice.

And then, just as Honora’s gaze flared in rage, I raised my hands and blasted her, sending her several feet backward. She groaned and fell, dazed. More dazed than I’d expected a werewolf to be. But she wasn’t shifted right now. The fact that she had been human while I attacked made all the difference in the effect my magic had on her, I realized. I knew it was only a matter of time before she shifted to werewolf and fully healed.

*Run… I should run!*

No. I couldn’t run. Honora was a werewolf, and she would be able to catch me easily soon enough. The only positives in the situation were that there were no more Bitterfangs to attack, and Rowena lay on the ground, exhausted but breathing. She would be okay, as long as I kept Honora occupied.

What I needed here was strategy. Things that had worked for me in the past. The only memory that came back to me right then again was when I fought Seluna. I had surprised the demon by using a sword from a suit of armor.

*The element of surprise! That’s it!*

There were no swords here, but could there be something I could use to surprise Honora? The Luna knew about my magic already, so that wouldn’t be a shock. But what if I could summon both sword and shield? Honora might be prepared for one weapon, but not both.

I had no doubt that she underestimated me, and that pissed me off above all else. When she groaned and rolled onto her back, fighting to stand, I realized that it was now or never. I moved toward her, channeling my magic, doing my best to draw both my sword and shield.

*All I need is one good blow, and Honora can spend eternity in the spirit world…*

I never wanted to do this. Any of it. But I might need to kill Honora if I wanted to survive.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Honora sat up, finally, glaring at me as I approached.

“Magic,” I said simply, just as the sword formed in my hand, and the shield materialized in front of me, out of thin air.

*I can do this! I can—*

Honora was faster than I expected. She leaped out of the way as I attacked, and I tripped and fell to the ground. All of my weapons dissipated, and fear and adrenaline shot through me. Shaking, I rolled over as Honora leaped toward me.

“You can’t escape me!” Honora hissed, and I scrambled backward, getting to my feet, managing to evade the Luna by inches.

*This is* not *going well, Cali! You can’t surprise her!*

The voice in my head sounded hysterical. I felt too exhausted to try the sword and the shield again, and I didn’t know what the hell to do. Honora jumped up to her feet, partially shifting, and now she had razor sharp claws.

“See these?” She mocked. “I’ll tear your eyes out!”

I glared at her, backing into a tree. I felt both terrified and furious, and the two emotions crashed against one another.

“Something’s seriously wrong with you,” I snapped. “You drove your daughter away, now you’re setting up a war, ready to kill so many people—do you realize how outrageous and sick it all is?”

Honora laughed, stalking toward me. “Do you really think anything you say makes a difference?”

I stared at those claws as she walked toward me slowly, gracefully, like a predator playing with its prey. If it came down to a fight, considering how exhausted I was, I knew I wouldn’t stand a chance. Honora would gut me like a fish. And she would *enjoy* it, having no qualms about taking a person’s life.

I was nothing to her.

*What’s the strategy now, hmm? What do we do?*

Perhaps the best strategy was to retreat. But, in order to do that successfully, without getting caught, I needed to stall Honora somehow.

“It’s over, little Fae,” Honora said coldly, interrupting my thoughts.

And then she lunged at me. I screamed, jumping out of the way. That made Honora slam into the tree, embedding her raised claws into its bark. This was my opportunity. I stumbled back and started to run off for real this time. But not before I hit Honora with another blast of magic that made her cry out.

I ran through the forest, knowing that if I waited for her to fully shift, it would mean my death sentence. Honora’s growls echoed behind me. It was only a matter of time before she broke free from the tree and came after me. I was too exhausted to fight, so I needed to outsmart her and find a way to hide. But how could I outsmart a werewolf who could smell and hear me?

*How the fuck do I fix this?*

A guttural howl behind me sent cold tremors down my body. Honora must have shifted fully. I needed to weigh my options. I could keep running and hope for a miracle, or I could hold my ground, summon my worn out magic and fight. Neither idea sounded formidable or realistic enough for me to stay alive. And then I thought of a third option, one that I’d considered earlier before all hell broke loose.

*Greyson?* I mind linked. *Greyson, help!*

There was no static, but the silence was deafening. I had no idea if Greyson even heard me. He would be able to take on Honora one on one, I was certain of that, but that would only work if Greyson got here before Honora caught up with me.

I rushed through the forest, shaking with both terror and anger, fighting to remain standing.

*Greyson!* I screamed inside my head, trying again.

This time there was some kind of reply, but it was garbled and static-filled again. I had no idea if this was Greyson at all. My throat closed up. My chest felt like it was about to cave in, and I ran ahead, trying to go in a zigzag pattern, as if that would help.

Behind me, I could hear Honora approaching. Her ominous growls were the only sound I heard. I looked over my shoulder to see if I could spot her, when suddenly—

I tripped over something. Something sticky and cold.

Of fucking course.

“Fuck, shit, fuck—” I gagged when I came to face with a dead Bitterfang werewolf. Its throat was ripped, blood everywhere.

I covered my mouth to smother a scream and slid back onto my feet, fighting to get away from this thing.

But then I got another idea. A kind of crazy idea, but it was me after all, wasn’t it? It was an idea nonetheless.

Could this blood be a blessing in disguise?

Could I use the dead werewolf’s blood to mask my scent and evade Honora?

**Episode 4131**

**Greyson**

I hesitated, but only for a second. As I neared Malakai, I realized that he hadn’t yet noticed me as he seemed to gesture for the other wolves in his unit to go off in other directions, leaving him alone.

This was my chance. I couldn’t let him get away. If I could cut off the serpent’s head, the serpent would die, and the war would end.

I hurried toward Malakai, keeping low to the ground. I knew I was moving farther away from the main fighting group, and that was a big risk. If I needed backup, it would take longer to arrive—if it came at all—but I still felt it was worth the gamble.

A sudden static noise sounded in my head, echoing around my skull. It was distracting and I shook my head, trying to rid myself of the sound. Was that the mind link—or was I just imagining it? Was Cali trying to contact me?

I couldn’t sort it out, and I couldn’t stop to figure it out—not now. If I could do this—if I could kill Malakai—this would all end, and Cali would be safe, once and for all.

I dropped my head and sprinted. I had to move fast. Malakai hadn’t noticed me yet, but if he caught my scent on the wind, it would ruin the element of surprise, and I needed the advantage. There was no time to waste—I had to make my move *now*—so I charged forward, holding back my natural instinct to howl as I did so. My heart was racing, and my whole body was primed—this was my chance to even the score. I was angry in a way that had little to do with this pack war. This had more to do with Malakai’s so-called righteous beliefs, and my anger toward him came from a primitive, feral place. I was furious about the humiliation our pack had suffered at their hands in the Ludis grudge match at the summit, how blatantly they’d cheated to win, and the way they had insulted Cali—all of this was running through my head as I lunged. I could practically *taste* Malakai’s blood in my mouth. I was finally going to make the bastard pay for his crimes. *I* wasn’t some cowed and corrupt werewolf council. *I* wasn’t going to let him cheat his way out of this one. This wasn’t a game—this was a war—and there weren’t any rules to break. There was no one around to help him now. This was Alpha against Alpha.

It was almost too easy. For all his threats and power, the great Bitterfang Alpha had made a grave mistake—he had found himself alone in the woods. He couldn’t rely on anyone else to save him now. There were no referees to bribe, no one to throw the game for him.

I was in my element now, and I practically smiled. No one knew these woods better than I did.

Just as I leapt toward him, Malakai turned. His eyes widened and the two of us collided and crashed to the ground with bone-shattering force. I didn’t hesitate now and went straight for the kill—this was not a time to think about diplomacy or negotiating a surrender. And back in the logical part of my brain, I suspected Malakai wasn’t thinking along those lines anyway. This was going to be a fight to the death.

Malakai roared and snarled and snapped with fury, but I barely registered this. I wasn’t intimidated, and I wasn’t afraid. Malakai was so certain, so sure, but he’d been wrong coming out here. He was wrong about everything. I had more motivation to win this battle than he did. Malakai was motivated only by the darker forces of his nature—his hatred and envy and spite. I had only to think of my love for Cali and my desire to protect my pack to feel motivated, and I knew that fire would burn brighter and longer than anything else. When Malakai took his last gasping breath, Cali would no longer be under any threat. My pack would be safe. The packs of the alliance would be able to live in peace. That was all the motivation that I needed.

Malakai rolled out from under me and snapped, but I stepped back before he was able to get his jaws around me. A mystery at first, I was starting to better understand the Bitterfangs’ unusual fighting style and was learning to effectively counter it. But strategy was only part of the battle here. Malakai was strong and fierce and fought like he had nothing to lose.

He lunged for me and—though I tried to step away—he caught my back legs and pulled me down. We rolled through the underbrush, snapping and snarling and swiping at each other with outstretched claws. I caught a powerful blow to the face that I felt tear the skin near my eye and countered it with a kick right to his abdomen. That hit the mark, and he groaned, but he doubled down, snapping toward my neck. Malakai was trying to kill me—that much was clear.

During the Ludis match—as terrible as Malakai was and as dirty as he fought—he had been holding back. But he wasn’t holding back now.

His powerful jaws snapped again, this time catching my shoulder. Pain like lightning strikes shot up my shoulder into my back, and I nearly howled with the shock of it, but I kept my head. Even through the fog of pain, my mind was clear—I never doubted that I was going to end this. I was going to persevere.

Gritting my teeth, I rolled Malakai over and pinned him down. That worked for only a moment before he kicked out, jostling me enough that he was able to knock me off him. Then he leapt on me and managed to pin me down.

My heart raced as I tried to use the same trick on him, but his hold was tight. He was looming over me, his jaws outstretched, my own blood dripping from his mouth onto me.

*You seem surprised, Greyson Evers*, Malakai spoke into my mind. *This is just like the Ludis match. Of course I will be victorious. How could you expect that I would not win?* He laughed. *I always win.*

Fury coursed through me. *Not this time.*

There was no way this was ending like this—I wasn’t going to give this asshole the pleasure.

Malakai’s smile dissipated and he opened his jaws, dropping toward my throat, but I managed to dodge just time. Malakai’s face hit the ground with tremendous force, and the blow seemed to stun him for just an instant, but that was all I needed. I used the window to get my back legs under me and deliver a powerful kick, throwing the surprised Alpha off me.

He flew five feet and hit the ground with a surprised yelp. I jumped, ready to resume the fight, but when Malakai scrambled to his feet, he turned and sprinted away, disappearing into the woods.

I stared after him for a startled instant, and—ignoring the shooting pains in my shoulder—took off after him. As painful as my front leg was, I knew the wound wasn’t serious, but I couldn’t believe Malakai was retreating. That was so… *uncharacteristic*. Maybe he had finally realized that I was more than he could handle.

I couldn’t stop myself from smiling at that thought.

Ahead of me, Malakai glanced over his shoulder at me, but when he took his eyes off the path in front of him, he tripped over a root and tumbled down, crashing hard into the underbrush that closed in around the path.

Lunging forward, I leapt on top of him, and the force of my jump skidded us forward another six feet. When we stopped, Malakai was beneath me, his head hanging over the rock edge of a deep ravine.

*There’s no getting away now*, I snarled down at him.

There was something in Malakai’s eyes that made me think he had just realized the same thing. He snapped and snarled, but my paw was on his neck, and it was easy to avoid his sharp teeth.

Then I heard something that made my blood run ice cold.

*Greyson! Greyson! Can you hear me? Please! Help me!*

It was Cali, and she was screaming for help.

*Where are you?* I called desperately back. Beneath me, Malakai was trying to break free from my grip, but I couldn’t just not listen to Cali’s pleas from within the mind link.

There was no answer from her.

*Cali! Where are you? Answer me!*

There was nothing. Only some static and a muffled response that I couldn’t make out.

Cali. I had to get to Cali.

Malakai surged beneath me, my distraction enough that he was able to fight his way free. He grabbed me and pushed, nearly throwing me over the edge of the ravine, but I managed to pull away.

We faced each other and—my mind still on Cali, I lunged. As soon as I moved, I knew I had made a mistake, and it was going to cost me.

I had gone left, and all Malakai had to do was move right to get to safer ground.

But then—to my total shock—Malakai didn’t move right. He moved left. He misjudged, then backed up to avoid me, then started to lose his footing on the ravine’s rocky edge.

I stopped myself and stepped back, watching—stunned—as Malakai tumbled over the edge and disappeared.

**Episode 4132**

Waves of nausea were crashing over me as I rubbed the dead wolf’s blood all over myself. The blood was still warm, but it was cooling as it was exposed to the air, and it was growing sticky. Touching it was revolting, and slathering it on my arms and face and neck was almost more than I could bear. It was like some kind of demon sunscreen.

I wanted to scream, but I gritted my teeth, forcing myself to keep it together. I needed to do this. If I kept gagging and whimpering like a freaking baby, Honora was going to find me with very little problem, and then I’d *really* be in trouble.

“Sorry about this,” I whispered to the dead wolf, whose eyes stared glassily up at me.

I looked away from its unnerving stare, but as I stood and stepped away, I hissed in pain, as I realizied that not all the blood on me belonged to the wolf. I looked down to see that I had a nasty gash on my leg just above my ankle, about three inches long. And it was deep.

“Dammit,” I muttered, looking down at it. I’d probably gotten that when I’d fallen, though I hadn’t felt it at the time. There had been too many other things going on to scare the shit out of me.

I was limping, so moving quietly was harder, but I managed to move through the underbrush soundlessly. I had to keep breathing through my mouth, because the strong iron smell of the blood was turning my stomach.

The woods were quiet, but I stopped every few steps to listen hard, making sure no one was sneaking up just behind me. Honora was behind me somewhere. She had probably come upon the dead werewolf by now and was putting the pieces together.

My heart raced and my leg throbbed with pain. It was growing worse as I went on. There was no way I could keep going. But what choice did I have? If I stopped…

Ahead of me, a tree loomed out of the darkness. As I moved close to it, I saw that it was dead, probably killed by a lightning strike. It was taller than the surrounding trees and would have been a target in any storm.

My heart thumped in my chest. If it was dead, then there was a chance…

I hurried toward it, hoping against hope—*YES!* The tree was hollowed out inside. If I could get inside, maybe I could hide for a while, recoup my energy, summon my magic again and try a surprise attack.

I knew I only had one chance to hide—if I messed up, Honora would find me, and it would be over. I hobbled to the tree and climbed inside the narrow split, then pressed myself as far back into the darkness as I could. My heart was pounding in my ears, but I did all I could to breathe slowly, trying to calm myself down.

Closing my eyes, I practiced summoning my magic the way Adair and Artemis had taught me. I was trying to distract myself from my fear, and it kind of worked. When I opened my eyes again, I noticed that it was quiet—eerily quiet.

I felt a small glimmer of hope in my chest—had my trick worked? Had Honora lost my trail and given up?

I slid forward and pushed my head out of the tree. I looked around, trying to see why the forest had grown so quiet. Suddenly, I heard a scratching noise behind me that scared the crap out of me. I looked around quickly. Had I disturbed an animal’s lair without realizing it? My thoughts went to raccoons or squirrels—and then to bears. I was of two minds—not knowing if I should stay in the tree and risk an animal attack, or get the hell out and risk whatever was waiting out in the woods.

There was the scratching sound again, and I scrambled out of the tree and back into the underbrush.

Then I heard a sound that made my heart feel as though it had stopped beating—it was Honora’s low cackle. I looked around and saw that she was behind the tree, partially shifted to her wolf form, so that her arms and torso were that of a wolf, but her head and legs remained human. It was *she* that had been scratching, and it had been Honora who had driven me from the tree.

Startled, I stumbled back. My leg was throbbing worse than ever, but I knew I had to do something. I fired a blast of magic, but it was a misfire. It hit the branch of the tree but was close enough to Honora that she had to shield her eyes as shards of bark rained down on her.

It wasn’t my best work, but I used her moment of distraction to my advantage and spun around. I tried to run—trying to ignore the pain in my leg—but it was too much. I had only gone a few paces when I fell to the ground with a gasp.

“You can’t run; you can’t hide, you little half-Fae,” Honora called behind me, taunting me.

“Watch me,” I breathed. Something inside of me forced me to keep going, but I was practically crawling as I dragged myself forward.

I stopped when I realized I had reached the edge of a rock. My pulse raced as I looked around and realized that it wasn’t just the edge of a rock—it was the edge of a ravine. Below me, there was a long, sharp drop into distant rocks and trees.

I looked desperately around. There was nowhere else for me to go. Honora was coming for me, and I was going to have to fight her. Or die trying.

Gritting my teeth together to keep from crying out in pain, I grabbed onto an aspen sapling and hauled myself to my feet. Most of my weight was on my good leg, but I steadied myself as I turned to face Honora as the partially shifted werewolf made her way toward me.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady my breathing. I wasn’t confident my aim was going to be accurate, so I opted to summon my sword. I closed my eyes, focused all my energy, and summoned it with a determination and focus that shocked me. I knew I should be shaking like a leaf, but with the weight of the sword in my hand, much of that fear suddenly drained away. When I swung it and heard it whip through the air, I knew I had power. I had *summoned* this sword—I knew it, and Honora did too. She hesitated, pausing as she stalked toward me, when she saw it flash in my hands.

Our eyes met, and we glared at each other warily.

Then she feinted left, but I didn’t fall for it. I was keeping my eyes on her eyes—that was something Adair had taught me. *It’s a way to anticipate your opponent’s moves*, he’d said to me.

Honora lunged toward me, but I was ready for her, and I swung the sword, blocking her, then struck out, forcing the wolf to back off with a long, deep cut to her shoulder.

Honora howled in pain as she stumbled back, then her eyes widened in shock. “You bitch!”

She fully shifted to her wolf form and charged at me so fast I didn’t have the time or the strength to raise the sword.

I could only close my eyes and brace for the impact—but it never came.

There was a snarl and the sound of impact, and when I opened my eyes, something had slammed into Honora and sent her tumbling toward the edge of the ravine.

I stared, open-mouthed. “Xavier?”

He was standing in his wolf form, looking at me. Maybe it was the shock or the pain or the exhaustion, but at that moment my legs gave out from under me, and I slid to the ground.

Xavier shifted to his human form and hurried toward me.

I looked up at his naked form and wondered if I was dreaming. How had he found me?

“God, Cali, what happened? Where did all this blood come from?” he asked, looking frantically for the source of the blood smeared all over me.

“It’s not mine,” I managed, finally finding my voice.

Xavier frowned at me, confused. He reached out his hand for me, but before either of us could say anything more, Honora began to rise up to her feet behind his back.

“Xavier!” I shouted.

Understanding, he spun around to face the wolf, who had started to growl. Xavier shifted and I tried desperately to summon my magic. But I was distracted when I heard the distant sound of wolf howls. It was just one, but then another joined the first, then another, then another.

Honora heard them too. She looked at Xavier, then at me. She took a step back, then spun around and sprinted away, disappearing into the darkness.

Xavier started to follow but seemed to stop himself and turned back to me. I staggered again to my feet as he shifted back to his human form and rushed to his side. All around us, the howls grew louder and more intense.

My head swam. “What the hell is happening?”

**Episode 4133**

**Greyson**

My eyes scanned the bottom of the dark ravine, looking for any sign of Malakai’s fallen body. I was looking for anything moving—or not moving—that could indicate where he’d ended up. I just wanted some confirmation, but I looked up when I heard the howling in the distance.

I knew in an instant the howling wasn’t coming from any of the allies. And I knew from experience that during a battle, this sound could mean one of several things—but more often than not, it signaled a retreat. Or an attack.

I listened hard, my whole body straining, but I didn’t hear it—there was no response from Malakai, and I took that as a good indication that Malakai hadn’t survived the fall from the cliff. I needed to make certain, but—as I looked around the rocks for a way down to the bottom of the ravine—I heard another one of those bursts of static in my head.

Shaking my head, I looked quickly around. What the hell *was* that? Was that Cali? I listened hard, but I couldn’t quite make it out. It almost sounded like she was asking for help.

Dammit. The mind link was so intermittent and unreliable. I wanted to go to her, but how? Where the hell was she?

*Cali? Love? Can you hear me? Where are you?*

Not paying attention to anything except the static in my head, my foot slipped on the edge of the ravine, and I had to scramble back to safer ground. My heart was beating hard, but it sped up even faster when a voice came to me—

*By the brook.*

I had been hoping for something a little more specific, but at least I knew where the brook was. I turned and looked into the ravine, taking one last look for Malakai’s body, before I turned and bolted into the woods, heading toward the brook.

As I ran, I thought about my fight with the Bitterfang Alpha. It had been strange—Malakai could have easily avoided falling into the ravine. He was older than me and an experienced fighter—experienced enough to avoid those kinds of costly mistakes—but his misstep had likely cost him his life.

It was what I had wanted, but the way it had happened was unsettling, and I couldn’t stop thinking about it as I ran.

The howling seemed to be everywhere around me, building to a crescendo before it faded quickly away.

I looked around the woods as I ran and noticed that they were quiet. I didn’t see anyone, and I didn’t hear the sound of fighting anywhere in the trees. It was strange—I didn’t know what to make of any of it.

I reached the brook quickly and stopped, breathing hard. I listened and smelled the air, trying to pick up Cali’s scent or the sound of her voice—anything that would help guide me toward her.

In the distance I could hear the rumble of voices. I couldn’t identify them, but they were something, so I took off toward them.

At least Cali had responded to the mind link, so I had known where to go. Our connection might be suffering, but in the end our mate bond had proven strong enough to overcome any interference we were facing, and that made me feel heartened.

In the distance I saw a group of werewolves. Some in wolf form, some in human form. I quickened my pace as I raced toward them and shifted as I drew near. I saw Mace standing in his human form, talking to Porter. Rowena and Lucian were there—Lucian with a bloodied arm around Elle.

I looked around, my nerves on edge. “Cali? Where is she? She said she was here. She called for help.”

Elle looked at me, confused. “Cali? Greyson, you asked me where *I* was.”

I stared at her, equally confused. “Did you ask me for help?”

She shook her head. “No, I didn’t”

*Dammit*. Dammit all to hell. I balled my hands into fists. I could have punched through a tree. The fucking sire bond between Elle and me had screwed things up. Which meant that Cali was still out there—and still in need of help.

A thought occurred to me, hitting me like a crashing wave—was I too late?

I *had* to find her.

“Okay, Rishika, Artemis, Lola, Torin, we’re going to go find Cali. She’s hurt and needs help. Let’s move out!”

The pack members gathered without question, but just as we were about to leave, Mace called out to me—

“Greyson! Hang on!”

I looked back, annoyed. “What?”

“What’s the plan now? Do we go after the Bitterfangs? They fell back.”

I shook my head. “Malakai is gone.”

Mace looked floored, and I heard a round of gasps from the others.

“I’ll explain what happened after I find Cali,” I said shortly, preparing to shift.

“Hey, has anyone seen Xavier?”

I looked over to see who had spoken. It was Perrie, who was standing with Lilac, Violet, and Charlie. No one answered her question; there were just a few blank stares. It was clear no one had seen him, but I didn’t have time to worry about my missing brother at the moment. Cali was my only concern.

“Wait,” Lucian said, pointing into the trees, “there they are.”

I turned in the direction he was pointing and stopped, floored. Xavier was walking toward us, carrying Cali in his arms. Relief quickly replaced the shock, but then that was cut short when they drew near, and I saw that Cali was covered in blood.

“Oh god, *Cali*.” I rushed forward and pulled her from Xavier’s arms. “What happened to her? Is she okay? Where’s the blood from? God, what happened?”

“It’s okay,” Cali said weakly, looking up at me. “It’s not my blood. Well, some of it’s my blood, but most of it’s not.”

I was baffled by this, but I didn’t care. She was alive and in my arms, and that was all I cared about at the moment. I hugged her to my chest, then looked up at my brother for an explanation.

He shrugged. “Honora had her cornered. I must have scared her off.”

“And how did you happen to find Cali?” I asked sharply.

Xavier rolled his eyes. “We’re still mates. She mind linked.”

I gritted my teeth. I *hated* to hear that. It was majorly fucked up that Xavier—who was with Ava now in every way that really mattered—could still mind link with Cali, while my mind link with *my* mate was completely screwed up.

I looked down at Cali. “What did you mean some of the blood is yours?”

“I cut my leg,” she admitted, pointing down to her ankle.

I looked down at the wound, which looked deep and dirty from being out in the woods. “Torin, can you come over here and heal this?”

Torin hurried over and bent to examine Cali’s wound. “No problem,” he said, starting to move his hands over her.

“So, what happened with Malakai?” Mace asked.

I turned to face him, making Torin shuffle along to keep healing Cali as I moved with her in my arms. “We fought, and he fell into a ravine.”

There was a moment of shocked silence in response to this.

“So, is he dead?” Mace asked.

“Wade is,” Xavier offered.

“*What?*” Mace exclaimed, surprised.

I was surprised myself. “I’m not sure about Malakai,” I had to admit. “I can’t say that he’s dead with any certainty. I didn’t see the body.”

“We’re going to need to check on that,” Xavier said, glaring at me. “We can’t assume anything.”

There was a clear edge to Xavier’s voice, but I chose to ignore it. I had a lot to deal with at the moment, and Xavier’s attitude was not at the top of my priority list.

“Okay, let’s go,” I said.

I gently set Cali down on the ground as Torin continued to work on her, and I led the Alphas back the way I’d come, toward the ravine where Malakai and I had fought. Xavier found a way down to the bottom, and we all searched for Malakai’s body. But there was nothing.

“Maybe the Bitterfangs already recovered the body,” Mace said, wandering toward me, looking tired and frustrated.

“Maybe,” I muttered, but without any certainty.

“Sir! *Sir!*”

We all looked over to see Armin sprinting toward us. The guy looked a little worse for wear and was covered with blood from the battle. Behind him trailed a small band of equally bloodied Vanguard pack members. When they reached us, Armin hurried to Lucian’s side and whispered something into his ear.

“Do we *really* need secrets right now?” I growled, my frustration at an all-time high.

Lucian nodded and looked over at me, grinning. He looked almost giddy. “We did it!”

I stared at him. “Did what?”

“Malakai’s on the run, and his forces have been decimated. His allies are gone, and we’ve had no casualties on our side!” Lucian was all but jumping up and down.

Mace shrugged, but it was clear he was trying not to smile. “I always hate to say when Lucian’s right, but—”

“*Yes!*” Lucian bellowed. “Yes! The point is, we’ve *won*!”

My eyes scanned the rocky expanse of the ravine once more. Malakai’s fall still troubled me, but I nodded. “I hope you’re right.”

**Episode 4134**

**Xavier**

Looking over at Greyson, I could sense his unease—and it was with good reason. No one knew better than me that you should never assume an enemy had been defeated without *rock solid* proof—like a dead body. When Greyson had said that Malakai had fallen over the ravine, everyone else had started talking about him like he was dead, but not me. All I could think about was how Greyson had stopped me from confirming Adéluce’s death when we were at Crater Lake. That moment rang like a bell in my memory. So much about my life would be different right now if I had been able to search that night—I would still be with Cali.

The thought clawed at me, filling me with anger, but I tried to push it down. I couldn’t let it overwhelm me. I was the only one who knew the truth—that Adéluce was still alive—and I couldn’t share that information with anyone. That was my secret to carry alone, and the vampire-witch had made it her mission to destroy my life.

Around me, the other Alphas were talking, but I was only distantly aware of the words.

“—I think we’re good. He fell off the damn cliff. He’s gone,” Mace was saying. “I’ll bet the other Bitterfangs just came and got the body.”

“We should send out a scout party to see where the Bitterfangs pulled back to,” Greyson suggested. “They could still be out there, regrouping for another attack.”

Lucian puffed out his chest. “If they are, we’ll be ready for them.”

I rolled my eyes at this. “You know, the only one here who actually killed an Alpha in that last battle was *me*,” I reminded him—and every Alpha present.

This was met with a beat of silence.

“It was the alliance that won this battle,” Greyson said pointedly, with a look in my direction. “I think every Alpha should offer a pack member to join the scout party. Let’s head back up.”

We made our way back to where we’d left the rest of the group, and when we got there, I looked over my own pack. Ava had joined the others, but there was no way I was going to waste her on a scouting mission. She was a Luna, and way too good a fighter and strategist to send for a look-around mission. I was about to tell Geraint to join the scouts when Marissa walked over to me.

“I hear there’s a scouting party heading out,” she said.

“That’s right.”

“Can I go?” she asked.

“You *want* to go?” I asked, surprised.

She nodded. “Yeah. I know the area well, and I’d like to help out.”

I glanced over at Ava. I was used to doing things unilaterally, but I was trying to remember that we were supposed to operate as a team, so I raised my eyebrows in a question, wondering what she thought of the idea of sending Marissa.

Ava thought for a moment, then nodded.

I turned to Marissa. “Knock yourself out. Be safe out there, okay?”

Marissa grinned. “I will.”

As the scouting party headed off, I realized that Marissa had been the right person to send. She did know the woods well, and the party needed someone who could navigate them.

I pushed a hand through my hair with a sigh. I figured it was going to be a while—several hours at least—before we got a report back from the search party, so I looked around. “We should probably all head back to our pack houses,” I suggested. “Everyone needs to clean up, regroup, get some rest, eat, chill out, whatever.”

No one argued with my suggestion.

As everyone got to their feet and headed toward their packs, Cali walked over to me. I was glad to see she wasn’t limping, which meant that Torin had been able to heal her leg.

She cleared her throat. “Thanks for scaring off Honora,” she said.

I remembered what it had felt like when I’d come upon her and found her covered in blood—how freaked out I’d been. My first thought had been that she was seriously hurt, maybe even dying—and I’d been nearly consumed with rage. I’d wanted to shred Honora to pieces in that moment. And then, when I realized it wasn’t her blood, I’d wanted to hold her, kiss her, comfort her—just like I wanted to do now. But I had to refrain. More than anything about Adéluce’s curse, I hated that every time I was worried about Cali, I couldn’t do what came naturally to me. I just couldn’t risk it.

So, I just shrugged. “It was just good timing.”

I could see the hurt in Cali’s face as she took in my words, but I forced myself to turn away.

I looked over at Ava and slung my arm around her shoulders. “Come on, let’s go to *our* house,” I said, knowing that my words were cutting Cali like a knife. But what choice did I have? Hurting her like this was better than her dying at the vengeful hands of Adéluce.

Ava and I gathered our pack, and I looked around at their faces, dirty and bloody and defiant.

“I want to thank you for fighting so hard and so bravely out there,” I told them. “I’m proud of the Samaras, and you should be proud of yourselves. You can all head off. I’ll see you at the pack house.”

The pack cheered at this and—as they shifted—sprinted into the woods toward the house.

Ava turned to me. “You know, they are proud of themselves. The pack is getting stronger.”

I nodded. “They should be; they did good work today.”

“But they’re proud of their Alpha, too,” she said, her eyes sparkling up at me. “You did good too. And killing Wade like that?” She grinned. “That was an added bonus.”

I smiled back at her and took some comfort in her words. I didn’t want to read too much into this—everyone was still riding high from the apparent victory of the alliance. But she was right—taking down Wade was one more thing that demonstrated I was capable, loyal, and a fucking good Alpha. All things I never got a chance to show when I was a foot soldier spending my days carrying out Greyson’s orders.

And it felt good to hear praise from Ava. Especially after the sharp exchange we’d had after I’d saved Cali from the car. She hadn’t yet said anything about my saving Cali from Honora—though maybe she still would—but she was smiling at me now, and I had a hopeful feeling in my chest. Maybe we were going to move past some of this stuff for now.

“Let’s get going,” Ava said, tipping her head toward the woods.

We both shifted and started to run. I’d always liked running with Ava—we were well matched for pace, and the weather was cold and perfect for running. It felt good to sprint and release some of the energy I had built up from the battle. I hadn’t realized how edgy I still felt from it, but I was glad to stretch my legs as we bolted through the woods toward Samara territory.

We were quiet as we ran and had just emerged into the clearing where the pack house stood when Ava pulled to a sudden stop.

I looked over at her in surprise. *Are you okay? Something wrong?*

Ava looked up at the house and shook her head. *No. Nothing’s wrong.*

*What is it?* I asked.

*It’s just—that*, she said. *The house. The sight of it—standing so tall like that—it just catches me off-guard. It’s overwhelming. It’s hard to believe it’s real.*

When I looked up at the house, I understood what she was saying. I knew it had been devastating for her when the original house had burned down. That—along with the loss of her pack and the betrayal of her brother—had shaken her to her core.

I pushed my shoulder against hers, letting her know I was there with her. *It’s time to believe, Ava.*

She nodded. We shifted to our human forms and walked to the house. The rest of the pack had beaten us back, and they were spread out in the living room and kitchen. We headed upstairs without stopping, but when I saw the door to our bedroom, I was immediately reminded of the argument we’d had earlier.

I sighed. Maybe I needed to explain to her what happened with Cali and Honora before it blew up in my face. “Listen, Ava, I want to tell you what happened with Cali back there. I know you might have heard—”

Ava stepped in front of me, into the doorway, blocking my path. When she looked at me, her eyes were blazing. “When we cross this threshold, we are not going to mention her name.”

I hesitated, not sure where she was going with this—but it became clear when she threw an arm around my neck and kissed me.

“Once we go inside, we have *other* things we can spend our time on,” she murmured, her lips against my lips.

I nodded and wrapped my arm around her waist, kissing her as I walked us into the bedroom. But as I kicked the door shut behind us, I couldn’t stop myself from thinking about Adéluce. Was she going to let me enjoy this moment with Ava and the victory we were celebrating over the Bitterfangs? Or was I going to be putting Ava back in her crosshairs?

**Episode 4135**

I clung to Greyson’s back as he ran through the woods toward the pack house. The wind was cold on my face, and it cut through my clothes, but I lowered myself closer to his body, taking comfort in the feel of his fur and the movement of his muscles moving beneath me. I was still covered in wolf blood—which had dried and now felt uncomfortably tight on my skin—but it was a reminder of my ordeal with Honora. I knew I had fought hard through this battle, but I couldn’t stop myself from feeling disappointed. I hadn’t been able to beat her. If it hadn’t been for Xavier, I might have been killed or captured.

I sighed. Even with all the work I’d put into honing my skills, I knew I had a ways to go before I was ready to face someone like Honora again. The worried look on Xavier’s face when he’d found me was etched into my mind. I turned that picture over and over in my head—trying to figure out the message of the mixed signals from a mate who had left me for someone else.

Concern for me had been there in his eyes. I had no doubt about that—I’d seen it. He’d been so scared for me, and once he’d seen that I wasn’t seriously hurt, he had wanted to say something to me and he’d started to move toward me, like he wanted to touch me… or even hold me and kiss me. He couldn’t hide those feelings, though he was desperately trying to. He was resisting them—but *why*?

He was acting like they didn’t matter—like those feelings didn’t even exist within him—but they kept coming up. There was the kiss at the summit, and the way he’d held me after the car explosion. And now this fight with Honora.

For someone who claimed he didn’t even want to be near me, he sure seemed to go out of his way to find an excuse to be around me.

I felt myself starting to smile at the thought but stopped myself with a firm shake of my head. *No*. I couldn’t do this to myself. I couldn’t let myself forget how cruel he was to me when he tried to push me away. How dismissive he was and how cold. I couldn’t let myself forget that.

Anger welled up in my chest, like it always did when I thought too long about how Xavier had been treating me.

I gritted my teeth. I was annoyed I was even thinking about Xavier right now. I shouldn’t be thinking about him at all. We had just beat the Bitterfangs! Which was amazing! I should be rejoicing in our victory. And grateful to the man who was bringing me back home.

I hugged Greyson tighter and tried to banish Xavier from my thoughts. The wind was getting colder, and I was glad when I looked around and saw that we were nearing the pack house.

When we reached the clearing, Greyson stopped and bent low so I could slide off his back onto the ground.

When I looked back at him, I grimaced at the trail of dried blood I’d left on his fur. That was so gross. Greyson shifted back into his human form and reached for me, pulling me into a hug.

“Greyson,” I protested, half-laughing, but he stopped me by leaning down to kiss me. His naked body was warm and pressed against me. It felt amazing, but also… weird. This couldn’t be how a normal person would react if his girlfriend was covered in blood. I didn’t have any data on that, but my gut instinct said probably not.

I pulled away from his embrace. “I’m sorry about this mess,” I murmured, looking down at myself. “I know it’s really gross—”

“Hey,” he said, interrupting me, “are you okay?”

I looked up into his grey eyes, which were steady on me. I nodded and looked down at my leg. “Yeah, I’m fine. The cut was pretty deep, but Torin did a great job—”

“I’m not talking about the cut,” he said. “It was tough out there. I want to know if you’re okay—” he put his hand on my chest, just over my heart, “in here.”

I looked down and swallowed hard. “What do you mean?”

“We maybe have emerged victorious, love, but I’ve been through enough battles to know that earning victory has its price.”

I nodded, thinking back to the fight, and how many Bitterfang, Ironwood, and Hackberry wolves had died all because of their unyielding—and tragic—devotion to a bigoted asshole. I thought of how lucky I was that the cut to my leg was the only physical wound I had suffered, and that Torin had been there to heal it. I heard the truth of Greyson’s words and dug deep, but was surprised to find that I wasn’t as devastated about what had happened as I was afraid I might be. And that—while I’d had a close call with Honora—I had been able to use my magic in the fight against some formidable adversaries, and I’d done all right. I was proud of that.

Taking his hand in mine, I looked up at Greyson. “I’m fine. I really am,” I assured him. “Now, come on. Let’s get inside.”

He squeezed my hand. “You got it.”  
 We walked toward the house, and as soon as we stepped inside the door, the entire pack house erupted in a chorus of cheers.

“There they are!” Sage shouted.

I looked around, stunned. The whole pack was gathered in the living room—spilling out into the hall. Everyone was still dirty, and some even bloodied, so it looked like everyone had just gotten back themselves, but they were celebrating. Torin was spraying everyone with champagne, which Violet was dodging and Zainab was chasing. Artemis and Rishika were kissing. Big Mac and Mrs. Smith were hugging. Jay was hauling a laughing Lola toward the stairs.

Looking around, I felt myself grin. It was hard not to enjoy the party mood, but it was a wild scene. The witches, Artemis, Torin, and I were the only people wearing clothes. And when Torin’s champagne rain showered down on me, the dried blood re-liquified and began to run into my eyes.

“Oh, gross,” I said, wiping my eyes. I eyed the stairs. I really needed to shower.

Glancing over at Greyson, I saw that he was being congratulated by a receiving line of pack members, so I took the opportunity to slip quietly away. I headed up the stairs, thinking that nothing had ever sounded better to me than a hot shower, soap, and shampoo.

All my stuff was already in Greyson’s bathroom, so I just headed in there. Shutting his bedroom door behind me, I stripped off my blood-stained clothes, which were now stiff and smelled terrible. I dropped them onto the floor of the bathroom. I didn’t even bother throwing them into the hamper. Washing them would probably be useless—burning them was likely my best option. I hunted under the sink and pulled out a plastic bag, which I stuffed the clothes into.

As I stood again, I caught sight of myself in the mirror, and my eye went to the Luna mark on my shoulder. I turned so I could see it better. It might be fake, but I sure felt like I had earned a real one out in that battle tonight. Greyson might not be ready to take that step anymore—and I knew there was still a risk—but how much more did I have to prove?

I shook my head and turned to the shower. I flipped on the water and turned it high, making it as scalding hot as I could stand. I slipped in and closed my eyes. I didn’t want to see the blood swirling around the drain as it washed off my body—I’d already seen enough carnage for one night.

I washed my body and my hair—twice. I was just starting on a third round when I heard a noise. I opened my eyes to see Greyson at the shower door. “Hey,” I breathed.

“Hi,” he said, smiling. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I called your name a couple of times, but I guess you were really in the zone—”

I didn’t let him go on. I just grabbed him and pulled him in, pressing a kiss to his lips. I wrapped my arms around his neck, and he pulled me close to him and we just stood together, letting the water run over us.

“Have I asked you how *you’re* doing?” I asked, leaning back to look up at him. I pressed my hand to his firm chest, just over his heart. “In here?”

He took my hand and kissed my fingers. “I’m fine. It seems like we won that round of chess.”

That rang a bell for me. “I hate to bring it up in here,” I said, gesturing to the shower, “but speaking of chess—”

“What?” Greyson asked.

“What about Big Mac’s vision?”

**Episode 4136**

I braced for the impact of the question—a question, which I knew was the equivalent of throwing a bucket of cold water onto Greyson and basically ending our romantic shower moment.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured. “I don’t know why I brought that up now. I didn’t mean to kill the mood. I just—”

“Cali, stop,” he said, pressing himself against me. “You didn’t kill anything.”

I looked up at him. The closeness of him and the pressure of his body made my face flush, even in the heat of the shower.

He shook his head and pushed his wet hair away from his eyes. “I’ve been thinking about it, too, Cali, but you have to listen to me about this. I know it’s worrying you, but Big Mac’s vision is just that—a vision. It’s not fact. It’s not necessarily the future as it will happen. It’s not set in stone. That’s not how the future works. Ask her yourself—she’ll tell you—prediction is very unreliable magic. It changes because people change. Circumstances change. And until we hear back from the scouts, I don’t think we should make any decisions based on anything as vague and unreliable as a vision.”

“You really think so?” I asked.

“I really do,” he said firmly. “I prefer to deal with the facts.”

I took this in. I saw the merit in what Greyson was saying, and—last I checked—Lucian *was* still alive. Alive and obnoxious and pompous as ever. Which meant that the vision hadn’t happened as Big Mac had seen it. Maybe Greyson was right, and Big Mac’s vision was nothing more than a dream.

“Yeah, I guess so,” I said, wiping water from my eyes.

“We won, the alliance is still intact,” he said. He smiled at me. “And out there we showed that you and I make a good team, didn’t we?”

I grinned. “Yeah, we did.” I liked to hear him say that, and it was true. We *had* made a good team, and with a little more training in my magic skills and a little more practice in combat, I thought I could help us become a *great* team.

I leaned into him, and he pulled me close. His hands were on my back, and he rubbed them across my shoulders. I thought of the fake Luna mark—but I didn’t want to bring that up. Not now, anyway.

Any doubts about Malakai and the Bitterfangs wouldn’t be settled until the scouts returned. Greyson was right. There was no use in stressing about information we didn’t have and couldn’t know.

I took a deep breath, trying to release some of the anxiety gathered in my shoulders. Greyson must have felt it beneath his hands, because he rubbed his fingers along my shoulder blades, trying to massage out the knots.

He leaned down and kissed the side of my neck, just below my ear. “I promise, we’ll talk more about this later, but right now”—he moved to my ear, where he bit down on the soft tissue of the lobe maybe just a little harder than necessary, making me suck in a breath—“all I want is *you*,” he whispered.

I breathed out a moan. My whole body tingled, and I pulled myself against him, practically squirming with desire. My body was flush with his—touching his skin all the way down—but somehow even that wasn’t enough. I wanted more. I wanted everything.

I looked up at him and he leaned down, pressing a kiss to my lips. This wasn’t the kiss he’d given me when we’d gotten back to the pack house, which was one of relief and care and worry. The kiss he gave me now was one of pure desire. This one was all electricity. This one was forgiveness. This one didn’t ask me a damn thing—it just took.

His hands slid across my slick skin and cupped both my breasts. I felt his cock harden against me and he walked me back, pressing me against the shower tile. I arched against him as he moved his kisses down my neck, then my chest, then to my breasts, kissing each one in turn.

“Greyson,” I moaned, closing my eyes as he lavished each breast with careful attention.

He slid one hand down my stomach, then farther down, slipping a finger into my panties. He pushed aside the fabric, his fingers teasing my clit in lazy circles, finding the sweet spot that made my eyes roll back into my head. Then he dipped that finger inside of me.

“You’re wet,” he said. “So ready for me.”

“*Yes*,” I panted. “That feels *so* good.” The strength of what was building within me was stunning. It was as though the intensity of battle was hitting me all at once, and my need for Greyson had reached epic proportions. It wasn’t that I *wanted* him in this moment—I *needed* him. I *had* to have him. Right here, right now.

I reached for his cock. It was hard and slick in my hand, and as I ran my hand along the shaft, I felt his body shiver. I drew him toward me, and—understanding—he stepped toward me, lifted my hips, and drove into me. I gasped with the shock and pain and pleasure of it, then wrapped a leg around his waist, drawing him in deeper. I wanted more—I wanted him to fill me completely.

“*Fuck*, love,” he groaned, pumping into me.

I was starting to quiver. He plowed into me again and again, harder and harder.

I gasped as I came, screaming his name, every muscle in my body drawn tight.

He came right after me, kissing me and groaning into my mouth, digging his fingers into my flesh as he pumped into me.

“Oh my god,” I panted, leaning back against the tile wall. My heart was racing, but I finally felt like I had let go of the tension in my neck.

Greyson pulled away and looked down at me with a smile. He grabbed the soap, rinsed off, and stepped out of the shower. He wrapped a towel around his waist, and when I stepped out, he had a towel waiting for me, too. He wrapped it around my shoulders and hugged me close.

I hadn’t noticed before that moment how tired I was, but I practically melted against him. He put his arm around me, and we walked into the bedroom and climbed into bed.

As we settled in, I snuggled into his chest and closed my eyes. Greyson was stroking my still-wet hair, and as he touched me gently, the memories of the battle began to fade. I was safe, I was warm, and I was no longer covered in dried blood.

“Tired?” he asked.

“Mm-hmm,” I hummed, too tired to actually answer. Everything felt heavy with fatigue, and I drifted off to sleep.

So, I was surprised when I woke to find myself being swept up into Greyson’s arms.

I frowned. Why were we getting up already? Hadn’t we just gone to sleep? What was the hurry?

But when I opened my eyes, I realized that the arms didn’t belong to Greyson—they belonged to Xavier. And we weren’t in the bedroom, we were in the woods. Behind us, a car was burning, filling the air with acrid smoke. I was baffled and my brain felt slow and sluggish. How had a car gotten there?

I looked around. There were too many trees. Why were there so many trees?

Xavier looked down at me, and I could see the love in his eyes. It was there, burning like the sun. I tipped my face up to him, ready for the kiss I’d been longing for ever since he’d kissed me at the summit. But it never came. No matter how far I reached up toward him, I just couldn’t seem to get close enough. Xavier’s lips remained just out of reach.

*I know you want to kiss me*, I chided him through the mind link. *What’s holding you back?*

His eyes were still on me, and now they flashed with a deep sadness. He gave me a half-smile that was sadder than any smile I’d ever seen, and stopped, starting to put me down, but I clung to him.

*No, don’t. Just tell me*, I begged him. *What happened to us?*

Xavier opened his mouth to answer. “The scouts are back.”

I stared at him, baffled, trying to parse his meaning. “What?”

“Cali, the scouts, they’re back.”

I blinked, opening my eyes. Xavier’s face was just above me, but when I blinked again, his face disappeared, morphing into Greyson’s face, and I realized that I’d been dreaming.

Bolting upright, I looked quickly around the room, my heart racing. “What happened? What’s going on?” I looked at Greyson and saw that his expression was grave. It was so serious that for a moment I was worried—terrified that I might have said something about Xavier out loud while I was dreaming.

But Greyson leaned in and kissed me. “You can stay here. Get some more rest if you can.”

“What’s going on?”

He swung his legs out of bed and got to his feet. “I’m going downstairs. The scouts are back.”

**Episode 4137**

**Greyson**

When Cali pushed back the covers and swung herself out of bed, I couldn’t muster any surprise.

“You can stay here,” I said again. “You must be exhausted. Get some rest.”

She rolled her eyes. “You think I’m going to be able to sleep? Come on. I want to go down with you.”

“Cali—” I started, but her look stopped me.

“We make a great team, remember? And that team doesn’t end just because the fighting stopped.”

“Okay,” I said. I grabbed a robe from where it was slung over a chair near the dresser and held it out for her. When she reached for it, I grinned and pulled it playfully away, taking the opportunity to let my eyes range down her naked body.

I felt my own body heat in response to the sight of her perfect curves, and there was a part of me—a part of me growing bigger every moment—that wished I could just grab her around the waist and pull her back into bed. Pull the covers up and forget everything else going on.

But that wasn’t possible, and I knew it. I was the Alpha of this pack and the Alpha chosen to lead the alliance. Whatever news was waiting for me downstairs needed to be handled.

Cali grabbed the robe from my hands and wrapped it around herself. “I’m going to go to my room and get some non-bloodstained clothes. I’ll meet you downstairs.”

“Cali, hang on,” I called out to her.

She stopped and turned toward me. I looked at her, standing in the doorway, her hair still damp and disheveled, the robe too big and falling off one shoulder. I stepped toward her and bent to kiss her.

“What’s that for?” she asked quietly.

“We should make it a point never to leave each other without a kiss,” I told her.

She smiled and nodded. “I’m going to hold you to that, though it might be awkward from time to time.”

I laughed. “Okay, how about we’ll say goodbye with a kiss whenever it’s *not* awkward?” I suggested.

She went up on tiptoe and kissed me again. “Deal.” Then she turned and hurried away.

The sweetness of her kiss was still with me as I grabbed a pair of jeans and a blue T-shirt from the dresser and pulled them on. As I ran a hand through my damp hair, I wondered if I was clinging to her and the memory of the kiss because I was still feeling uneasy about the battle today—and Malakai’s strange mistake in battle. Cali had always had a grounding effect on me. She had a way of making me feel calm and secure, even if the world was falling apart all around me.

I turned this over in my head as I headed downstairs and tried to hone in on why I was feeling so uneasy. It wasn’t that I was worried about what the scouts had come back to report. If they’d come back to say that the Bitterfangs were regrouping and planning a second attack, I wouldn’t be surprised. That was essentially what I’d been expecting they’d do.

But if they were to tell me that the Bitterfangs had fully retreated and had given up—thrown in the towel? *Then* I’d be surprised. There was something about that idea that just didn’t sit right with me.

And I kept coming back to Malakai’s actions up on the ridge during our fight.

I shook my head, trying to shake off the thoughts. Maybe I was reading too much into it. Everyone made mistakes in battle.

Downstairs, I heard the buzz of talk and I headed toward the living room, where it seemed the entire pack was gathered around Ravi.

“—and where did you look?” Sage was asking him. “Were you able to sweep the whole range?”

Ravi shook his head. “I’m not telling you anything until I talk to Greyson,” he said, like the good soldier he was.

I had just reached the bottom stair when I heard someone on the stairs behind me. I turned to see Cali coming down. Maybe it was because of how recently I’d seen her covered in blood and dirt, but seeing her walking toward me, her hair smooth and shining, flowing away from her shoulders as she moved, her jeans hugging her curves, and her eyes bright on me—she took my breath away.

I waited for her, and when she reached me, I held out my hand to grasp hers. “We should go in together,” I told her. “A team.”

She smiled as I led her into the living room.

Seeing us, Ravi disentangled himself from the group and walked over.

“Do you want me to tell you what Marissa and I found here—in front of everyone?” he asked.

I raised an eyebrow. “Hang on—was it *just* Marissa and you out scouting? Where were the others?”

Ravi looked panicked. “No, I mean—no—there were others. It was just that we…”

I tried not to smile, but I did kind of like watching Ravi squirm. I glanced over at Cali, who raised an eyebrow of her own at Ravi.

“Oh, so now you and Marissa are a *we*?” she asked him.

“What? No! Well… maybe? I don’t know,” Ravi sputtered.

Cali grinned and nudged him with her elbow, which seemed to increase his discomfort.

I clapped him on the shoulder. “I’m just messing with you, man.” I looked around at the pack. “Okay, quiet down everyone.” I looked back at Ravi. “Let’s have it.”

Ravi nodded and cleared his throat. “Okay, we—” he stopped himself. “The scouts and I searched the combined territories really thoroughly, but we didn’t find anything. Nothing.”

A heavy silence met this news.

“What do you mean you found nothing?” Rishika finally asked, breaking the quiet.

Ravi looked over at her. “Just what I say. We did a complete sweep of Three Devils Point, and there’s nothing there. No sign of anyone. It’s as if the Bitterfangs just ran off. They didn’t even bother packing up their stuff. Everything’s still there—tents, supplies, food, firewood stacked up. But they’re gone. It looked like they were in a hurry to leave.”

“Hell yeah, they were! And good thing for them that they did!” Sage shouted.

This was like a rallying cry, and everyone cheered. Except for me. I was still looking at Ravi.

“Tell me more. Did you look beyond Three Devils Point?” I asked him.

He nodded. “Oh yeah, we searched well beyond it, but it was the same. They’re gone, man. No sign of them hiding out anywhere. We”—he gritted his teeth, looking annoyed with himself—“all the scouts were on the same page. We all think it looks like the Bitterfangs have retreated. Hell, maybe they’ve even gone all the way back to California!”

This was met with another cheer from the pack. Even Cali joined in this time, but when she saw the look on my face, she stopped and frowned at me.

“What’s up?” she asked. “Why aren’t you celebrating? This is good news! We won! They’re gone!”

I forced a smile. Cali was right. I trusted that the scouts had done a thorough job searching the area, and that there was no sign the Bitterfangs were still around, planning to attack anytime soon. But my heart wasn’t in it. I just couldn’t shake the feeling that something didn’t feel quite right. I couldn’t stop thinking about how quickly we had been able to defeat an enemy pack that—by all accounts—should have been far more difficult to battle off.

My smile must have not been convincing enough, because Cali caught my hand and pulled me away, into the small office near the front door.

“What’s going on?” she asked, frowning at me. “You don’t look like a man whose alliance just won a war.”

I blew out a frustrated breath. It was no good—I couldn’t lie to Cali. “I guess I’m a little worried.”

“About what? We won,” she said.

“About *that*. Our victory.”

“What do you mean?” she asked. “Why does that worry you?”

I leaned against the desk. “It’s hard to explain—it’s not like I have anything really to go on—it’s just a feeling I have.”

She looked troubled and took a step toward me. “What kind of a feeling?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. I’m not making any sense. Wasn’t I just telling you that I only deal with facts?”

“I guess…” she started.

“And right now, the facts are that Ravi and the rest of the scouts have searched the area and reported back that the Bitterfangs and the rest of their bastard allies have cleared out of our lands. So, that should be enough. Right?”

Cali eyed me, her gaze searching. “But it’s not enough, is it?”  
 I shook my head. I had to be honest with her.

She took a deep breath. “So, what should we do?”

**Episode 4138**

**Xavier**

When Marissa had knocked on the door to tell us she was back from scouting—interrupting what was promising to be a *really* good time between Ava and me—I had been majorly annoyed. We’d all been waiting for news from the scouting team on the Bitterfangs’ retreat, and when Ava and I came into the living room, the rest of the pack was waiting expectantly, ready for an update. Of course I wanted to hear what they’d found as well, but it was just that Marissa had managed—*yet again*—to interrupt things between Ava and me.

Though maybe it was for the best. As I dropped onto the couch next to Ava, I wondered if I should take the continued interruptions as some kind of a cosmic sign and get some distance from Ava. Maybe I should be thanking Marissa for the interruptions. It was too easy to get close to Ava—both because of proximity and because we honestly cared about each other—and I needed to remember not to get too comfortable with her. Because if I did, Adéluce might well decide to take her rage out on her, which would create a giant guilt tsunami I’d be dealing with for the rest of my life.

And—in a way—putting Ava in Adéluce’s blood circle would be even worse. With Cali, at least I’d had the option of just walking away. I’d been able to put physical distance between us, but that wouldn’t be possible if Adéluce decided to target Ava. I was the Samara Alpha, and I’d made Ava my Luna. How the hell was I supposed to distance myself from my Luna—especially one I was mated with—all while remaining the Samara Alpha? Where would I even go? I had come to the Samaras when I’d left the Redwoods, but if I were to leave the Samaras, I would have nowhere to go.

I suddenly realized that Marissa had already started to speak, and I’d missed half of what she had said, so I quickly tuned back in and tried to focus.

“—and there was no one there. We looked around Three Devils Point, but they’re gone. It looks like the Bitterfangs and their allies have completely cleared out, tails between their legs,” Marissa announced with a grin.

This was met with a cheer from the pack, and Geraint clapped my shoulder.

“Congrats, Alpha!” he said happily. “We did it!”

“Yeah, maybe,” I said.

“What do you mean *maybe*?” Marissa asked.

I shook my head. I hated to point this out when everyone looked so happy about our victory, but it was important to say. “I think we need to think about a few things before we start congratulating ourselves too much.”

“Think about what things?” Ava asked me.

“Like about the fact that we have absolutely no actual evidence that Malakai is dead. And that the last time I saw Honora, she ran off, but I don’t know where she went. It would be foolish to assume that either of them is dead, or that the Bitterfangs are gone for good. I think it’s totally possible they’ve fallen back and are waiting to attack again.”

It was as though my words had sucked all the oxygen from the room. Everyone stared at me in the sudden quiet—the celebratory vibe snuffed out like a candle.

I shrugged. “I hate to ruin the mood, but we all need to be aware of the dangers of being complacent in a war. We can’t assume anything, and until we know for sure that the Bitterfangs are fully defeated, we can enjoy ourselves, but we also need to keep in mind that this might not be over.”

This too was met with silence.

Then Knox raised his can of beer. “To Wade, good riddance! What Alpha’s next?”

This made the rest of the pack cheer again, but I was annoyed by the comment. Wade had been a royal douchebag to turn traitor the way he did—he had deserved to die, so I didn’t feel any guilt over that. But all this bullshit could have been avoided if Malakai hadn’t drawn Wade—and the rest of us—into this war. Wade was dead, but it was Malakai who should have been killed. The way I saw it, all of this was his fault. And maybe Malakai *had* been killed. There were clearly those who were willing to take Greyson’s story about Malakai’s fall off the cliff and run with it. But where was the proof of his *death*? Where was his body?

I shook my head, thinking hard. I needed to find out. I wasn’t going to just sit back and let Crater Lake happen all over again.

Getting to my feet, I started toward the door.

“Hey, where are you going?” Ava said, stepping to my side.

“Out,” I said shortly.

“You should get some rest.”

I shook my head. “I want to see just how far the Bitterfangs have gone.”

She frowned, looking confused. “But didn’t Marissa just say—”

“We know the Bitterfangs ran away,” I said, cutting her off. “But we don’t know why, or how far they went. That’s what I want to find out.”

“They probably retreated because they realized they were losing,” Ava pointed out. “They know strategy—why fight a battle you can’t win?”

I thought about this for a moment. “I don’t buy it. I don’t think they *had* an exit strategy. Guys like Malakai never think they’re going to lose. I’m going to go after them and follow their retreat until I get some answers.”

“Hang on,” she said, putting her hand on my arm. “What about Greyson?”

Annoyed, I shook my arm loose. “What about him? You think I need his permission?”

She pressed her lips together, and I could tell she was trying not to roll her eyes. “No, but I think that if you’re right and the Bitterfangs have just fallen back to regroup and ready themselves for another attack, then the alliance is still vital for our survival—”

“You think I don’t know that?” I snapped.

Ava’s eyes hardened like flint. “I don’t know *what* you think, Xavier, because you never tell me a damn thing.”

I shook my head. “That is such bullshit. I just told you that I’m leaving to go track the Bitterfangs—”

“You think you’re doing this alone?” she demanded. “Do you really think that I’m going to just let you run after this brutal, bloodthirsty pack by yourself?”

“I suppose my Luna wants to join me?” I asked sarcastically.

She closed her eyes for a moment and sighed. When she opened them, her eyes were strangely distant. “I will, but only if you want me to. But I do think that if you’re going to do this, you should at least inform the alliance before you leave. They just completed a joint scout mission. Why do you think you should take this part of it on all by yourself?” She shook her head. “Say you do find them? What then? The Samaras can’t afford to lose their Alpha.”

“You don’t need to worry,” I growled at her. “I’m going to let the other Alphas know now. Will *that* make you happy?”

She blinked at me, then narrowed her eyes. “*Fuck. You*.” She spun on her heel and stormed away.

I watched her walk away, then I turned and wrenched open the front door.

“*Fuck*,” I growled, as I slammed the door shut behind me. I had—once again—managed to screw everything up with Ava.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

But I was tired of everyone questioning my every move—especially Ava. Was that what a true Luna did? Questioned everything the Alpha said?

In the back of my head, there was a small part of me that could admit that maybe I was fighting her so hard because I was trying to keep a wall up between us, as a safety measure to protect her so that Adéluce didn’t swoop in and suddenly make everything worse.

That small part of my head was *also* willing to admit that I was angry because Ava was right—I *should* talk to Greyson about my concerns about the Bitterfangs.

But I was right, too. I didn’t need his permission, so I wasn’t going to ask. I would tell him what I was going to do, and then he could do whatever the hell he wanted to with that information.

The freezing winter wind whipped around me as I stood outside the house, thinking. I was trying to decide if I wanted to shift or if I wanted to take my car, when I heard a shuffling sound coming from above me.

I turned to see something tumble out of one of the upstairs windows down into the bushes below.

“What the fuck was that?”

I hurried over to see what the hell had just happened, and my eyes grew big when I saw Lilac in the box hedges beneath the window, struggling to pull up his pants as he scrambled to his feet.

I stared at him in shock. “*Lilac?* What the hell are you doing here?”

**Episode 4139**

Greyson was quiet as I waited for him to answer my question. I didn’t want him to think that he couldn’t tell me the hard stuff—the stuff that was really bothering him, and the stuff that really scared him.

“If there’s more we should be doing to figure out the Bitterfangs’ retreat, tell me what you’re thinking, so we can work on finding an answer together,” I urged him. When he still didn’t say anything, I gave him a playful prod in the ribs. “Come on. You don’t call me your Master Strategist for nothing, right?”

That got him, and he finally smiled. “Nope, you’ve earned the title.”

I almost said, *Luna would be even better*, but I bit my tongue just before the words slipped out. I didn’t want us to get back into the fight we’d been in earlier.

He sighed. “Honestly, I don’t know what else we *can* do about the Bitterfangs. I wish I had more, but what I’m feeling is just this vague gut instinct. It’s nothing I can sink my teeth into.” He looked at me. “It’s not that I’m downplaying your concern, love, but—honestly—I really don’t have an answer.”

I nodded, accepting this. “We’ll figure it out.”

He stepped toward me and pulled me into him. “I have no doubt we will.” He looked down at me, his gaze searching. “You know, I didn’t really get a chance to ask earlier, in the shower—how *are* you really doing?”

“I’m fine,” I said quickly.

“Cali,” he said, his voice low, “I know the battle was intense, and I wasn’t with you for part of it.”

I felt his body tense, and he looked away, out the window.

“What is it?” I asked him.

When he spoke, his voice was tight with pain and frustration. “I should have been there when Honora attacked you.” He looked down at me. “I’m sorry I wasn’t, Cali.”

I hesitated for a moment, not sure if I should bring it up. But he was feeling so much guilt, I felt like I had to tell him. “It’s okay, Greyson. I was okay—Xavier came.”

His eyes flashed with something angry and hurt for just a moment. “It should have been me,” he said, looking away again.

“Hey,” I said, reaching up for his face. I took his chin in my hand. “Look at me.” When he did, I looked right into his eyes. “Listen to me, Greyson. When I was in trouble back there—when I needed help—I didn’t call for Xavier. I called for you.”

He sighed, and I felt some of the tension leave his body. “It’s this damn sire bond.”

I nodded, though I felt my shoulders slump. This was exactly what I had been afraid of when we’d first started having trouble with our mind link. I had been worried about this—that our connection would fail us when we really needed it, like during a battle.

He ran his hand through his hair. “I heard you, but then, the signal got crossed up with Elle somehow and…” he trailed off, shaking his head. “It’s a good thing Xavier found you,” he said, though his voice sounded hollow.

I thought about our conversation earlier, and how luck had played into our victory over the Bitterfangs. It *was* lucky, but we wouldn’t need to have quite so much luck if the sire bond wasn’t messing up our mind link the way it was.

Then a thought occurred to me. “Hang on, what about that spell Hypatia sent? I wonder if Big Mac had a chance to gather the ingredients for it. Hypatia said that it might help fix the wonky mind linking caused by the sire bond.”

“Ah, I see,” Greyson said. “Well, I guess the only way to find out is to ask.”

I glanced over at the wall clock and winced. “It’s pretty late, but this mind link problem is really serious. We need a solution, like, *yesterday*. Big Mac has to understand that, right? And we can ask her about the vision, too. And Malakai—maybe she can help us figure out if he’s really dead, too—”

“Hey, slow down,” Greyson said, taking my hand in his. “I know the mind link problem is a big deal to us, but this is Big Mac we’re talking about, and it’s not likely that she’ll see it as a big deal to her. We both know how she is.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I conceded. “Every time I see Jay’s eyepatch, I’m reminded *how* Big Mac is.”

“And you also need to remember that even if Big Mac is willing to try some of this stuff for us, witch magic is never a guarantee. Even she’ll tell you that.”

“I know that, too,” I told him.

He gave me a long look. “I just don’t want you getting your hopes up about what we’re going to be able to accomplish.”

“This isn’t just for me,” I explained.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Greyson, think about that battle. This mind link problem we’re having will affect the alliance if it keeps happening. We got lucky in this last battle, but if we can’t communicate, then we might not get so lucky again—if there *is* a next time.”

Greyson nodded. “Okay. Let’s go talk to her. See what she has to say.”

We headed out of the office and up the stairs. In the hallway, we stopped outside Big Mac’s door. Greyson raised his hand to knock, but I stopped him.

“Hang on,” I said in a whisper, my stomach fluttery with nerves.

“Why?” Greyson asked, confused.

“I’m just having some second thoughts. Maybe we *should* come back later.”

Greyson eyed me. “Is my Luna suddenly afraid of the pack witch?”

“Yes,” I answered honestly. “I’m totally afraid of her. She’s very scary. Besides, she’s probably exhausted. I’ll bet she’s asleep. It *is* late—”

“I think she’ll understand,” Greyson said, and knocked confidently—and loudly—on the door.

There was a beat of silence, then a grunt that might have been a word I couldn’t decipher, and Greyson pushed open the door.

Inside, Big Mac was lying in her bed, propped up on one elbow, and she was glaring at us.

“Whatever it is, forget it. Come back in the morning,” she said flatly.

“Technically, it is morning,” Greyson said with a smile.

Big Mac did *not* return the smile. Her scowl deepened. “Then come back in the afternoon after I’ve had a chance to sleep.”

“Okay,” I said, reaching for Greyson’s hand. “We can talk to you about Hypatia’s spell later.” I really didn’t want to make the witch any grouchier than she already was, so I tried to pull Greyson back into the hallway, but he didn’t budge.

“Cali almost died today,” he said, looking evenly at the witch.

Big Mac looked at him for a moment, then over at me. “Is that true?”

I gulped and nodded. “Yeah,” I said quickly, feeling a little sick to my stomach. It was as though admitting it had brought me right back to the moment in the woods, when I’d been alone, covered in blood, and certain that Honora was about to kill me. The room started to sway, and I took a deep breath, trying to clear my head. Maybe I had blocked most of it out when Greyson had asked me if I was okay—because I definitely did *not* feel okay all of a sudden.

Greyson was still looking at Big Mac. “We’re here because we need help. From you. The sire bond affected our mind link, and I wasn’t there when she called for me. She could have been killed because I couldn’t hear her.”

Big Mac looked at him for a moment longer, then sat up and swung her feet to the floor. “Okay,” she said with a gusty sigh. “Let’s do this. I’ve gathered everything I need.”

She stepped over to her desk where there were small bags of what looked like leaves and herbs, all separated out. She looked down at a page of notes she had written and began dumping the ingredients into a stone bowl on the desk. She picked up a pestle and began to grind the leaves.

Almost immediately, a noxious smell from the ingredients filled the room, and I put my hand over my mouth, trying not to retch. The smell was overwhelming, but Big Mac looked unbothered by it and kept glancing down at her notes until she finished adding the ingredients.

“And that’s it for that,” she said to herself, putting down the pestle. She waved her hand over the stone bowl, and the gelatinous goo within it began to bubble. After a moment, I realized she had used her magic to bring the mixture to a boil.

I shot a look at Greyson and swallowed hard, wondering if he and I were supposed to drink that horrifying mixture.

Big Mac glanced over at me. “Are you sure you want to do this? You two don’t have anywhere you need to be, right?”

“Um, no,” I said nervously.

What the hell was this potion going to do to me?

**Episode 4140**

**Xavier**

Lilac jumped and looked around, his eyes wide and startled. He clearly was not expecting me—or anyone—to see him there.

I crossed my arms over my chest and raised an eyebrow. “*Well?* Are you going to tell me what you’re doing chilling out in the hedges?”

“Oh, well, I…” Lilac sputtered, as he frantically tried to both button his pants and finish pulling them on. This proved to be too complex for him and he stumbled.

I reached out to catch him before he tumbled to the ground. “Hey, slow down, man. What’s the big rush? And why are you jumping out of my windows?”

“Ah, well…” Lilac’s face flushed. “I was just with Perrie.”

“*Oh*.” I nodded. I should have known—or at least guessed it was something like that. The kid was eighteen—or was he still technically seventeen since he came back from the spirit world? Either way, the kid was a teenager with a girlfriend. Of course he was in this position.

“—and then there was a knock on the door, and I was worried that it might be her parents, you know?” Lilac went on. “And I panicked, so I went out the window, because I was thinking that if I hid in the closet, they might smell me.”

“Right, exactly,” I said. “That makes sense. Like the way they’re going to smell you anyway, given that you were literally just in her room.”

Lilac’s eyes went even wider. “Oh shit!” He looked upward at the window. “Oh *shit shit shit*. I didn’t even think—do you think I should say something?” He looked back at me. “Do you think I should run?”

I shrugged. “Your choice, kid. Josephine and Fausto are reasonable people, but I don’t know how they might react to Perrie having a guy in her room. Even if he is her mate,” I added.

Lilac looked so terrified at this, I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Relax, kid,” I said, throwing an arm around his shoulders. “Don’t worry. I’m sure you’ll be fine. I don’t think anyone’s plotting your murder tonight. Next time, though, just let me know that you’re planning on sneaking in and out of here, because I don’t want to accidentally rip your throat out, thinking you’re trespassing. Got it?” I asked, giving his shoulders a little shake.

Lilac nodded. “Yeah, I got it. I guess I didn’t think of that either. I guess I didn’t think any of this through. Sorry about this, Xavier.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said with a smile. “I’m glad to see you. Even if it is”—I gestured to his half-buttoned pants—“like this.”

Lilac laughed, and watching him, I realized I missed the kid. I missed Violet, too. I really wished I could somehow get him to change packs and join us, but I supposed that would never happen without his sister. Those two were basically inseparable.

“Anyway, you better get going, unless you were planning on sneaking back in,” I said, glancing up at the window.

Lilac shook his head. “No, I’m not sure I could scale the house again anyway, and I wouldn’t want to get Perrie into trouble. I’m just going to take off. Thanks for being cool about this. It was nice to see you, Xavier.”

He disentangled himself from the hedges, but as he started to walk away, I called after him—

“Lilac, hang on.”

He turned. “What’s up?”

“I need a favor.”

Lilac looked surprised. “Sure, what is it?”

“Could you give Kira a message for me?”

“Kira? Of course.”

I took a deep breath. “Would you ask her to come here to the house? Tell her that I want to talk to her.”

“You got it,” Lilac agreed easily. “I’ll tell her as soon as I see her.”

“Thanks.” I watched as Lilac walked away from the packhouse. I felt for the kid—I’d had to scramble out of Ava’s room a few times myself when she and I had first started hooking up. If Ava’s father or her brother Nolan had found us together in bed, I might not have made it out of my teenage years.

I stared after Lilac long after he’d disappeared into the trees. I really hoped Kira *would* show up. I wanted to show her the packhouse she’d built, and how we were living in it. I wanted her to see that the Samara pack wasn’t just something I was playing around with. It might not be enough to convince her to join up with us, but it couldn’t hurt. The Samaras were coming together—we’d showed that during the battle today. And Kira had to see that.

I turned to look at the house, which rose from the clearing like a fortress—massive, strong, and solid. If Kira could build us a house like this, who knew what else she could do for the pack?

As I looked at the house, the front door opened and Gabe strode out, a can of beer in each hand. Behind the house I saw the sun was starting to rise just behind the trees.

“It’s either too early to drink, or it’s too late,” I noted, nodding toward the rising sun.

Gabe glanced at it over his shoulder as he walked toward me but shook his head. “Well, the good news is that they’re not for you.” He took a long pull from one can, then from the other. When he reached me, he turned back to the pack house, taking it in. “You did all right, man. It’s a great pack house.”

“Thanks, man.”

“Though it is missing Torin’s excellent pancakes, so it’ll always come second for me.”

I snorted a laugh. “I’ll buy you some frozen waffles, and you’ll make do.”

“I think it’s haunted, though,” he said, turning to look at me.

“What do you mean?”

“Stuff keeps moving around. It’s weird.”

I chuckled again. “It’s not ghosts, Gabe. That’s probably magic. The house is made of the stuff, after all.”

“Oh,” Gabriel said, looking relieved. “That’s good to know. I thought I was going crazy.”

I grabbed one of the beers from his hand and took a long sip. “Did you really come out here to talk about the house?”

Gabriel grinned. “Nah, not really. Mikah is resting. I think I wore him out.”  
 I shook my head. “You really think you’re that hot?”

He laughed. “I think I’m just too pumped up to sleep.” He gave my shoulder a nudge with his own shoulder. “It’s like the old times, but on steroids or something.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah,” Gabe said, his voice growing quiet. He looked thoughtful for a moment. “I’m glad I came here, Xavier. It was nice to be able to fight alongside an old friend.”

I looked over at him, surprised. That kind of genuine sentiment wasn’t usual from Gabriel, but I appreciated it. I slung my arm around his shoulder. “I’m glad you came, too.”

We clinked our beers together.

“To old times and to new times,” I toasted, and we both drank.

We were quiet for a moment, the only sound the gentle rustle of the earth waking up for the morning.

“You still set against joining up with the Samaras?” I asked, looking over at Gabe. “We’d love to have you and Mikah.”

He took another drink of his beer and shook his head. “There’s no fucking way I’m going to pledge to you or to anybody else, man. That’s just not my style. But I do plan on sticking around for a while. So I can save your ass from time to time.”

“Yeah right,” I snorted.

He turned to me, his gaze uncharacteristically searching. “What’s your end goal here, Xavier?”

I was caught off-guard by the question and wasn’t quite sure how to answer. “Isn’t being an Alpha and building the Samaras into a powerful pack a decent enough end goal?” I asked, trying not to sound choked as I spoke.

Gabe’s gaze still bore into me. “Do you want to be Samara Alpha forever?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“What about Ava?”

“What about her?”

“Is she your girlfriend now?”

“She’s my Luna,” I said evasively.

“Yeah, I know, but is she your girlfriend, too?” Gabe pressed. He wasn’t going to be put off.

I was starting to feel overwhelmed. Gabe had been right—he was seriously pumped up. He had too much energy, and he had decided to turn it all onto me.

“We’re—uh—still figuring it all out,” I said, uncomfortably. “Me and Ava.”

“Would you marry her?” he asked bluntly.

“*No!*” I said, too quickly.

Gabe’s eyebrows shot up, and I heard how it had sounded. It was too fast and too abrupt and too certain. I tried to cover.

“Come on, man, what are you talking about? We’re just in our early twenties. Who’s talking about marriage?” I said, trying to laugh it off. “You’re pushing too fast, Gabe. Also, I did just make her my Luna.”

He nodded. “Huh. I see.”

“What?” I said, starting to feel really uncomfortable. “What do you see?”

He shrugged.

“No, what is it?” I asked, feeling edgy as hell. “It seems like you want to say something.”

“Nah,” Gabe said, shaking his head. “You don’t want to hear it.”  
 That pissed me off. “God, you’re such a drama queen, Gabe. If you have something to say, just fucking say it.”

He turned to me. “Okay,” he said with a shrug. “I think you’re still in love with Cali.”

**Episode 4141**

My mind was completely awash with bad spell outcomes. I considered myself to be a forward-thinking person, but I could lean into pessimism on a bad day, and right now my senses were off the Richter scale.

“What do you mean, hopefully we don’t have anywhere to be?” Greyson asked Big Mac in a gravelly tone. “I can’t afford to be laid up all day. I have a pack to run. Do you think this is going to fuck us up?”

Far be it for him to take a break for a few hours. I knew we were in a holding pattern while we waited to see if the battle with the Bitterfangs was truly over, but a man could only do so much—not that I could *ever* convince Greyson of that.

But Big Mac waved a dismissive hand in Greyson’s face. “I’m hardly worried about you. Your Alpha werewolf blood should prevent anything from affecting you too much. But Cali…” Her piercing gaze turned to me. “She’s a different story. Half-human, half-Fae.”

My alarm bells started to go off again—this was exactly the kind of thing that I was worried about. What if my Fae blood interfered with the spell somehow? Could it hurt me? Could it hurt my mate? Hell, as strong as Big Mac was, I’d be afraid of it having some sort of blowback on her as the caster. Enough people had gotten hurt. I didn’t want it to happen to anyone else.

“What does *that* have to do with anything?” Greyson asked.

“The sire bond spell was created to help *werewolves* deal with sire bond issues,” Big Mac said.

A frustrated groan growled out of me. *Damn, I could use just* one day *of not being reminded of my shortcomings.* “Look, I’m not comforted by any of this, but what is the worst that could happen?”

Big Mac’s resulting shrug made me grit my teeth in annoyance. She said, “I don’t know. It’s not like you can look this stuff up on the internet. Did Hypatia say anything? A warning?”

“She didn’t,” I replied.

“Then it’s probably okay,” Big Mac concluded.

Greyson’s chest billowed up in the way it did right before he was about to blow his stack. “Probably?”

“I doubt she’ll die.” Big Mac was so matter-of-fact that it made me wonder if she even cared if I did or not.

“*Die?*” I yelped, eyes wide. “I want to solve this sire bond mind link issue, but *dying* shouldn’t be one of the remedies.”

“Exactly,” Greyson said. “We’re not doing it. It’s not worth the risk.”

Big Mac seemed put out by our flipping, as though we were keeping her from an afternoon tea or something. “It’s up to you, but I really think you’re overreacting. Chances are, you will both be fine.”

Chances. How many of *those* had I taken and come up short? Still, if another dangerous situation came up and we needed to mind link, we might not be as lucky next time. “I think we should do it.”

Greyson turned his head in my direction. “I don’t think—” but he caught my gaze, and even without a mind link, we spoke to each other. I saw that small bead of growth in him—a step forward—as he took a deep breath and nodded at me. “Okay. If you’re sure, I’ll drink whatever potion Big Mac recommends.”

“You don’t drink this,” Big Mac scowled.

She continued to toil over her materials, but I kept a relieved gaze fixed on Greyson. He was doing what he’d promised to do—treat me as an equal. Might I have liked him to pick a different time to grow in this way, because he could have been the reason *not* to try this sketchy sire bond spell? Maybe. But a victory was a victory. I was well aware that magic spells often had unintended side effects, and if Greyson *had* continued to protest, I probably could have been talked out of it. But this was what we had to do.

I believed this was the solution to a very big problem.

“Okay,” I said finally. “Let’s give it a try.”

Big Mac stabbed a finger toward my face. “Remember, you said that you would accept full responsibility if something goes wrong. I told you this would be better if everyone involved did it, but you didn’t want to do that. So I don’t want any fingers pointed at me if we don’t get the results we’re looking for. After all, this isn’t one of my tried-and-true spells.”

“I know, I know.” God this woman knew how to drag out a process. “I just want to get this over with before I lose my nerve.”

I reached out for the bubbling bowl Big Mac had been working on, but she slapped my hand away like a scolding schoolteacher. “I told you, this isn’t something you drink.” She lifted the bowl and carried it over to an unlit candle. “You both need to breathe in the potion.” It sounded kind of like spa therapy—the sort Lola and I might do together at the mall. “Which one of you will go first?”

Big Mac held the bowl over the candle and then waved a hand, and the candle blazed, warming the liquid inside, eventually creating fresh bubbles. I started to step forward, but Greyson interfered. “I’ll go first.”

“Fine.” Big Mac nodded at a white towel next to the candle and bowl. “Take that towel and hang it over your head.” He did as he was told, draping the towel over his face like a veil—he made quite the bride—and walked over to Big Mac. She situated the towel over the bowl so that Greyson’s face and the bowl were hidden behind it and then instructed, “Breathe deeply, hold for three seconds, exhale, and repeat two more times.”

For that handful of seconds, all that could be heard in the room was the bubbling of the goop and Greyson’s deep breaths. I counted along with him, memorizing the amount of time he was spending, so that I could be sure to get as close to his count as possible.

After the last cycle of breaths, Greyson stood back and pulled the towel from his face. Based on his wrinkled nose and watering eyes, it wasn’t a pleasant experience. He held the towel out for me, but when I reached for it, he pulled it back a little. “You don’t need to do this.”

“I can’t afford to hesitate.” I took the towel from him. “If I do, I might not go through with it.”

Mimicking what Big Mac had Greyson do, I draped the towel over my head and leaned over the pungent bowl. The flame beneath the bowl on the candle flickered, giving me *just* enough light to see the goo crackle and pop—dwarfed by the noxious steam it was releasing. I recoiled as the odor reached me—a horrific mixture of cigarette ash, rotten eggs, and sweaty socks. It felt like Big Mac could have at least *warned* us we’d be inhaling the scent of death to do this.

Maybe that was why she thought I might die?

Closing my eyes, I gave myself a little countdown and then inhaled. My stomach churned in disgust as the steam filled my lungs. I was counting to three, trying to remind myself it was just a blip in time. My stomach was burning, and I was contemplating if that was bad or not when I remembered I was supposed to exhale and repeat two more times. I did, letting the breath out and then starting over again…

… and again.

I was trying not to gag as I exhaled the final time, before backing up and yanking the towel off, gasping for non-smelly air.

“Enough with the dramatics,” Big Mac scolded. “It can’t be that bad.” Then she leaned over it herself and took a whiff and then backed off with a grimace. “Okay… so it’s not so good.”

“How are you feeling?” Greyson asked me in a gentle voice.

I thought about it. The burning in my stomach was fading, and the swirling in my head was alleviating. “I don’t feel anything, other than wishing that smell would go away.” It felt like it had hooked itself into my nostrils—like I might never smell anything else ever again. “How do *you* feel?”

He shrugged. “Nothing, other than a little tired, although we both have reasons to be tired.” A mischievous glint twinkled in his eyes. “We barely slept…”

My face burned as a blush no doubt rose to my face with the memories of earlier. All that was wrong with me now was that my brain was flooding with naughty ideas of getting my mate alone again. We certainly needed sleep, but what better way to relax? It seemed that my fears of something going wrong with the spell were unfounded, and perhaps Big Mac’s as well. I opened my mouth to try and quip something back, but nothing came out.

And then, just like that, everything went black.

**Episode 4142**

**Greyson**

Cali passed out so fast that I almost thought I was imagining it. One second, she was standing there talking to me as if nothing was wrong, and the next, she was falling toward the floor. Thankfully, I managed to get my arms under her to catch her as she went down, but it was so unexpected that it took me down as well and I collapsed on the floor with Cali in my arms.

“What the hell?” I barked at Big Mac.

She was unmoved. “I did warn you both. I even told you that it would have a greater effect on her.”

I was hardly mollified by that weak explanation. “What’s happening to my mate?”

“Oh, relax.” She waved me down. “She’s not in a coma or anything. She’s just sleeping.”

Standing up off the ground, I scooped Cali up properly into my arms, and relief bled into me as she moved to snuggle herself against my shoulder. If she didn’t look so damn cute and peaceful, I’d be more worried, but she looked so comfy I was almost jealous. Could she have at least waited for me to get some rest?

“Why did it take hold of her so quickly and suddenly like that?” I asked.

“It’s probably the iron,” Big Mac said simply.

My eyes widened. “*Iron?* Fae are susceptible to iron!”

She turned and looked at me as if I’d just told her the goddamn sky was blue. “This is why I said her half-Fae blood might be an issue. It’s used in a lot of sedation spells. Don’t worry, I knew her half-human blood would protect her from the harsher side effects. I said she probably wouldn’t die.”

“You couldn’t have *mentioned* that there was something Fae were vulnerable to in the potion?” I asked.

Rather than responding to that, she put her hands on her hips. “Didn’t you say you didn’t get much rest?” It was said less as an excuse and more as an accusation. “Just let her sleep it off, and you might want to get a few hours yourself. You look tired, and I don’t want Sabine to point fingers at me.”

Looking down at Cali, she *did* seem okay, but so did Sleeping Beauty, and she was asleep for a hundred years. “How long is this going to last?”

“The spell will last as long as it lasts.” What the *fuck* kind of answer was that? “Remember, this isn’t one of my spells.”

I shook my head. “I’m not worried about the whole spell; I just want to know how long Cali is going to be knocked out.”

Big Mac looked her over like the answer was written on Cali’s forehead. “I assume she’ll wake up when the iron is totally out of her system. Probably a few hours? At most a day. Her body will continuously break it down until it’s no longer working against her, and then she’ll come to, pretty groggy and probably hungry.” When it came to Big Mac, that was about as reassuring an answer as I was going to get, so I turned my back to the woman and started out the door with Cali in my arms. As I stepped into the hallway, I heard Big Mac call out, “You’re welcome!”

Whatever. Yeah, she’d done us a huge favor, but it wasn’t like it wasn’t her job, and she was about as elusive and aloof as she could have been. She *could* have made that an easier process for us, but she chose not to, and with my mate unconscious in my arms, I wasn’t feeling particularly gracious at the moment.

As I made my way down towards Cali’s room, Lola came walking back up the hallway and gave me an exasperated look when she saw the state her best friend was in. “What happened to her now?”

I didn’t want to explain, especially to Lola, who was no stranger to playing pop-up games of twenty questions, so instead I said, “She’s just exhausted from the battle.”

Lola smirked at me. “Yeah… I heard you two *fighting* all night long.”

Shit. It was *impossible* to have any privacy in a house filled with werewolves. I’d be happy when this war was behind us, and Cali and I could finally escape to somewhere where we could be alone. Just the two of us. Although the idea of not having to worry about all of this seemed almost foreign, it was worth looking forward to, even if it was a pipe dream at the moment.

“Well, I’m going to go put her to bed now,” I said to Lola. “Excuse me.”

I walked around Lola and carried Cali the rest of the way into her bedroom, then balanced her against me so I could peel back the covers of her bed and gently lower her down onto it. As I was reaching down to undress her, she actually stirred, opening her eyes with heavy lids and reaching out for me with a sleepy smile.

“Greys…” she mumbled quietly, but then her eyes closed again, and she fell back to sleep.

I’d take that as further reassurance that she was okay, just needed the rest, and I finished getting her more comfortable. I removed her clothes and tucked her into bed before giving her a gentle kiss on the lips. I was unsure if she could actually hear me, but I mind linked to her, *Sleep well, love*, and hoped that it didn’t go to Lucian or Elle over at the palace. I tried not to think about how *that* was going considering what Lucian had accidentally mind linked to Cali instead of Elle.

Stepping back, I stretched my hands high above my head, and a yawn tumbled out of me. As much as I hated to admit it, Big Mac was right—I could use a few hours of sleep myself, but until I knew that Cali had fully recovered, I knew I’d be restless. So, I figured I’d better help myself stay awake.

I couldn’t inject coffee directly into my bloodstream, but downing a few cups in rapid succession should give me a similar response.

Even though a hurricane could roll through and not wake Cali in her current state, I was still quiet as I slipped out of her room, and then I made my way downstairs. I was hoping a pot was already brewed, but I *quickly* took back those words when I walked into the kitchen and saw Lola standing by the pot. Drinking her coffee was almost as bad as inhaling Big Mac’s bubbling potion.

I wondered if I should just bide my time until she left and then make my own pot?

No sooner had the thought crossed my brain when Rishika, Ravi, and Jay came walking into the kitchen. Jay was going in toward Lola for a kiss, but Rishika stepped between them to snatch the coffee pot from Lola’s hands and poured the swill down the sink.

“Hey!” Lola yelped. “I just made that! It’s fresh.”

“‘Fresh’ isn’t a word that can be used when describing your coffee,” Rishika snapped back. “Until you learn to make a decent brew, you’re banned from coffee-making.”

Even as a human, I felt like I could see Lola’s fur standing on end. “You’re such a bitch sometimes, Rishika. I swear. Being honest doesn’t mean you have to be an asshole!” Lola stormed out of the kitchen with a slightly amused Ravi looking after her.

“Fuck, Rishika,” Jay said, and then he took off after Lola.

Rishika’s eyes crawled over to me, and she shrugged. “*Someone* had to say it.”

I held up my hands. “That’s between you two. Leave me out of it.”

Still, I was grateful that Rishika was now working on a fresh pot of coffee, so I sat down at the kitchen table and tried to keep myself awake as it brewed.

“You know, Greyson, Rishika and I think we shouldn’t just assume the Bitterfangs have left for good,” Ravi said. “I’ll admit that the way they hurried off, leaving behind a lot of their stuff, *does* suggest they made a full-on retreat, but it just doesn’t track. It’s not like them.”

Rishika nodded. “I think they could be regrouping somewhere beyond where we scouted.” I gave them both an appreciative nod. Their thoughts lined up with my own doubts about our victory. “If you want, Ravi and I are willing to go on a reconnaissance mission to find out just how far the Bitterfangs retreated.”

“I appreciate that,” I said. It was reassuring to know that my pack was loyal and willing to put themselves in harm’s way for the safety of others. “And I thank you for the offer, but this isn’t just a Redwood problem.”

Their echoing of my own feelings filled me with an urgency, however, and I stood up from my chair, not even waiting for the coffee to be finished.

Ravi noticed my look of determination and exchanged a glance with Rishika before looking back at me. “What are you going to do?”

**Episode 4143**

**Xavier**

I stood looking at Gabe, a little gut-punched by what he’d said. Whatever I had expected him to come out with, it wasn’t such a spot-on observation of something I was already painfully aware of.

Because *of course* I was in love with Cali. Of course I was. Looking at her with Greyson hurt me in a way that I didn’t think was possible. Even now, my whole body was filling from toes to head with the painful reality of how much I loved her while knowing that she was just out of reach. The more I thought about that love and how messed-up everything had gotten, the harder it was to not reveal any of that on my face. It would have been so easy to get twisted up in the frustration of my lost love, but I couldn’t. I needed to not show the shock or the pain or any of it.

I couldn’t.

The last thing I wanted was for Gabe to get roped into this Adéluce situation when it was already spiraling too far. This storm had already swept up too many people, and I didn’t want my friend to get caught in it, too.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” I told him finally, turning my face away. He could read me, frustratingly, and if I showed him my face for too long, it would be to my detriment. Instead, I started back inside the house, hoping he would drop the subject.

But he fell in step and stride with me, following me into the house as he continued. “Yes, I do, and you’re in love with Cali. Do you seriously not know that by now, Xavier?”

My mood with Gabe was quickly going sour. I didn’t want to take any of this out on him—he didn’t understand the territory that he’d stepped into—but he was asking a very dangerous question. He didn’t even *know* how dangerous. If he was aware of the fact that I didn’t have full control over this conversation, he would never even *think* about getting this close. But I couldn’t tell him that. I couldn’t tell him anything.

I simply had to get him to change the subject.

“You think you know me?” I barked at him. “I’m not in love with Caliana Hart. I broke up with her for a reason. Reasons that the *entire* pack house heard.”

Glowering, he retorted, “I don’t believe you for a second. Do you *know* how disgustingly gaga you have been over that girl? I’ve seen it with my own two eyes, Xavier.”

We’d made it to the kitchen, and I stopped short, unsure of how to get out of this. Gabe was a determined man—that, I knew quite well—and I also knew that when he thought he was helping, he was even *more* stubborn, but we needed to get off this subject.

Trying my best to keep my voice level, I turned to Gabe and said, “That might have been the case once, but I was too deep into that *due destini* bullshit. You have no idea what it’s like to know that she’s in love with someone else, and it’s my own damn brother. You have *no* idea, Gabe. I couldn’t stand it for a second longer.”

We stood watching each other silently for a moment as I realized I probably only bolstered his point instead of disproved it. What I truly couldn’t stand any longer was any of this shit with Adéluce. I needed to regroup in that regard, but what was I supposed to do when the war got in the way? I couldn’t be selfish—not the way I was *always* going to be when it came to Cali.

What I’d just said to Gabe wasn’t totally correct, but it wasn’t totally wrong, either. At times, the *due destini* had been extremely difficult—harrowing, even. It wasn’t the worst thing that could ever happen to me, of course, but it was difficult all the same. But it was the love I had for Cali that pushed me through it. Knowing that it was going to be the two of us in the end.

*It was going to be the two of us…* I thought again.

Wait… *Was*?

No. Fuck. I couldn’t let Adéluce get so into my head that I was now referring to my love for Cali in the past fucking tense. I loved her. Nonstop, nonnegotiable. She was the love that brought me back from the brink of everything. She brought back my wolf. She brought back *me*. She was the one who made me better—made me want to be better for her.

Denying my feelings to myself about Cali would only hurt me. I couldn’t express them because Adéluce wouldn’t let me, but that didn’t mean I had to self-police the inside of my own damn head. I could keep lying to Gabe about Cali, but I didn’t ever want to start believing what Adéluce wanted me to.

My love for Cali was stronger than that.

Gabe cleared his throat, pulling me out of my own thoughts, and looked at me with a lifted brow. “Well, I said what I think. You can keep being in denial or whatever it is you’re doing right now, but I *do* know you, Xavier.” He looked directly into my eyes, unwavering. “I know you’re lying to me, but I can’t figure out why. Maybe you’re right. Maybe the *due destini* is too much, but you’ve never been someone to give up. That’s where I *do* see how you and Ava could have something in common. But you’re not someone who lies. Not to friends. Not when it really comes down to it.” I opened my mouth to respond, but Gabriel held up a hand to stop me. “No. Stop. I’m donehearing bullshit for now. If you want eggs or something, let me know.”

He turned his back to me then, heading over to the stove before starting to rummage around for some pots and pans.

I watched him as frustration bled into guilt. No, I wasn’t a liar. I didn’t like lying to my friend—I didn’t like lying to myself. But just like with anything I did, there were reasons I was treading the way I was. I knew that, and the hope was that one day I could have a candid conversation with Gabe about everything, but knowing that right now I was losing the trust my friend had in me wasn’t a good feeling.

As he started to work to put together a meager breakfast, I sat down at the kitchen table and remained silent. There were a few things for him to work with, but the kitchen was far from well stocked at the moment. Gabe was the kind of guy who could turn a few ingredients into a full-course meal, though. A survivor if I ever knew one. He didn’t seem stressed at all by the lack of resources, and he slowly began to craft a passable meal.

As for me, I didn’t know what to do anymore. I was feeling awkward, but I was also on edge. Adéluce had just let that conversation happen—I wasn’t delusional about that—but why? Was it just because now I felt like garbage? It felt dangerous to have Gabe running around thinking that I was still in love with Cali. It felt dangerous that I was going around still somehow letting it show that I was in love with Cali—which of course I was—but I thought I was hiding it better.

Fuck, I needed some air. I *clearly* didn’t get enough during that conversation.

My chair screeched as I stood up again, and Gabe looked back at me, but he said nothing. Instead, I told him, “You might need someone to run to the store. Just ask Donovan or Marissa if you need anything,” and then I trudged back outside. I took in a long, deep breath, letting the dew-strewn morning air fill my lungs.

One thing that the Samara house could benefit from was a new back porch. Kira had certainly brought the house back exactly how it had been in Ava’s memory, which meant that some places could use a bit of work. The porch was a bit rickety with some pieces of wood looking almost rotted. It would be nice to have a place to sit under the cover of the house but still enjoy the outdoors where you didn’t have to worry about possibly falling through it—

*No, fuck, wait.*

What *was* my goal here? I was the Samara Alpha now, and there was no turning back from that. I was so far in already, but I never really stopped to ask myself if this was what I wanted for the rest of my life. To me, that’s what being an Alpha was—for life. But if and when I was finally able to stop Adéluce, was I going to want the Redwood pack back, the same way I wanted Cali?

**Episode 4144**

Alex, Lola, and I walked into the start-of-the-year mixer at our college, dressed to impress and ready to take this year by storm. There was an entire row of tables stacked with all manner of snacks and drinks, music was thumping throughout the entire place, and some people were mingling, while others were dancing.

“I’m going to go get something to drink,” Alex said, before turning and looking deeply into my eyes. “Do you want anything, Cali?”

Smiling at him and feeling my face burn, I shook my head. “No, thank you.”

He nodded before walking off, and Lola held up a hand. “I’m fine, too, Alex. Thanks for asking!” She sucked her teeth and then turned and looked at me with a lifted eyebrow, nudging me in the ribcage. “So… What are you going to do if Alex asks you to dance?”

My stomach twisted up, and I shook my head. Lola was damn good at winding me up for no reason. “Oh god, don’t say that. I really don’t think he will.”

Lola rolled her eyes so deeply I was shocked they didn’t fall out the back of her head. “No, I *know* he will. He’s practically salivating to get to you.”

The heat in my face grew as my blush no doubt deepened, but it wasn’t because I liked Alex—quite the opposite. “Maybe I need to make it really clear to him that I just want to be friends.”

“But you *did* kiss him,” Lola replied.

“Ugh.” I frowned at her. I swear, for a woman who was *supposed* to be my best friend, she sure seemed to get a lot of pleasure from torturing me. “You’re not making this any better.”

She snickered. “I have Ant, so I had a good excuse if Alex had set his sights on me, but you? You’re a free agent. You don’t have a boyfriend.”

I stared at her with flared nostrils. “I’m fully aware of that, thanks.”

Even though I knew Lola didn’t have any love lost for Alex, I also knew she was right. I couldn’t just continue to hope that he eventually got the hint, because knowing my luck, he wouldn’t. If I didn’t rip off the Band-Aid, then I was going to be in this weird will-we-won’t-we thing with Alex when I already knew the answer.

*We won’t.*

Alex had only just now managed to get through the crowd to the drink table, so I still had a couple minutes to decide what I was going to say to him. He wasn’t a bad guy, so I wanted to let him down easy, but how did one do that? Was Alex’s bruised ego and a potentially squandered friendship just a sad reality of what was about to happen, or was there a way to salvage it?

Better question, how much did I *care* about Alex’s potential bruised ego or loss of friendship? I wasn’t a cold person, but I had to think of myself first, and I didn’t want to put myself into any more of an awkward situation with him than I already was.

“I could just hit him with the old, ‘It’s not you, it’s me,’ line,” I told Lola as I brainstormed. “But that always sounds bad. It’s so obvious. To me, ‘It’s not you, it’s me,’ translates to, ‘By the way, it’s *definitely* you, but I’m trying to spare the sole shred of dignity you have left.’”

“So just be honest,” Lola replied. “Be blunt. ‘I don’t like you.’ After all, sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind.”

“No, I don’t want to be cruel.” I crossed my arms. “Alex may not be hot to me like that, but he’s a good guy and a supportive friend—at least when he’s not being clingy. I’m not about to destroy him when he hasn’t done anything wrong. I just don’t feel anything special toward him, you know? No magic chemistry.” Still, Alex was hanging on for dear life to that kiss that we shared *years* ago. Clearly it meant something to him all this time later, whereas for me, the more I thought about it after the fact, the less I liked it.

Letting my eyes scan back toward the drinks table, I saw that Alex had moved, and I noticed that he was already on his way back over to us.

“Shit, he’s headed this way,” I whispered. “What do I d—”

Before I could finish the question, a hand grabbed mine and spun me around. Suddenly I was staring up into the most beautiful blue eyes I’d ever seen. They were enrapturing, like I could get lost in them and still feel totally safe and at home. They set my heart to racing, and the longer I stared into them, the more stunned I was by them.

I opened my mouth to ask their owner his name, but my words were swallowed up by his lips against mine. Soft at first, but then consuming, begging me for more, and I wanted to give him more. I bent into the kiss until I was overcome by it, hoping that it would never end.

Finally, he pulled back, and when my eyes landed on his face again, I immediately recognized who it was. “Xavier?”

“Cali.” Lola pulled on my arm. “Alex is coming. What are you going to say?”

Taking my arm back from her, I totally ignored her, keeping my eyes locked on Xavier, confused by his presence. “Xavier, what are you doing here?”

His handsome face was smiling wickedly at me. “Do you want me to leave?”

“N-No!” I sputtered. “Of course not.”

My hands were cupping his face before I knew what I was doing, dragging him down into another kiss. I felt his powerful arms wrap around me, bracing the crook of my back as I leaned into him and breathed in all of his weight against me, powerful and strong. It was a comforting return—to what, I wasn’t certain—but in that moment, I felt totally at peace.

When we finally came up for air, Xavier and I were all alone. The party had disappeared, and we were in a room, just the two of us. His hand folded perfectly along my cheek, and his mischievous smile softened into something different. “I knew you missed me.”

With my hands holding onto his arms, I looked up into his eyes and felt my heart squeeze. “I can’t believe it. I’ve wanted to kiss you and hold you for so long. You came back to me… I knew you would.”

But then my reverie was pierced by Lola’s voice. “Cali?”

“Go away!” I snapped. I didn’t want her or anyone to interrupt this moment with Xavier. Even if it was just a dream, I didn’t want it to end.

I reached out for Xavier, to try to cling to him and prevent him from slipping away—from leaving me again—but he was already moving. He still held his arms out to me, and he continued watching me with soft eyes, but his body was moving backward, almost like he wasn’t even aware of it. I raced after him, trying to capture him before he was too far gone when I smacked into something and fell flat on my ass. When I looked up, it wasn’t into Xavier’s welcoming blue eyes that I stared, but into Alex’s needy ones.

“No!” I screamed, closing my eyes.

And then when I opened them again, I was back in my bedroom at the pack house, staring up into Lola’s face.

I groaned, grabbing a pillow and folding it over my face, trying with all the desperation in my body to go back into the dream—to return to that kiss with Xavier—but it felt like I was chasing a phantom.

“Ca-li!” Lola said, poking me through the pillow. “You won’t believe it!”

She grabbed the pillow and whipped it away from me, tossing it across the room before shoving a letter in my face. My vision was blurred, and my brain was foggy as the last images of those blue eyes dissipated. Knots formed in my gut as they left for good, and I was forced back to my reality.

I took the paper from Lola’s hands and sat up, blinking away the blur in my eyes as I looked it over. “What is this?”

“I got in!” Lola yelped.

“What?” I tried to focus on the paper in my hands, but before I could read it, Lola had snatched it back out of my hands. “Okay, give it. Or I won’t read it.”

“Dear Aaliyah Spillane,” Lola started aloud. “We are pleased to offer you admission for the upcoming spring semester at Central Cascades University.”

“Wow, I’m shocked,” I said, but then I quickly held up a hand. “Not that you got in, of course—I knew you’d get in—but that you’re so excited. I thought you had a lot of reservations about returning to school.”

Lola sat down on the end of my bed, looking at the letter with sparkling eyes. “I mean, I still do, but I’ll be taking online classes, and it will make my dads so happy!”

A smile came to my face. “Congrats, Lola. I’m happy for you. It’s funny… I just had a dream about college.”

Slowly, Lola’s eyes lifted to mine, like she’d just seen a ghost. “It’s a sign. You dream about college, I get accepted into college—it can only mean one thing.”

“What’s that?” I questioned.

With an excited grin, she threw her arms around me and squeezed her face to mine. “You have to come with me.”

I snickered. “Yeah, they typically don’t admit students into a college they didn’t apply for.”

Lola pulled back and looked at me, her face twisted with guilt. “Yeah, so, about that…”

My eyes went wide, because I’d seen that scheming look on Lola’s face many times before. “Lola… What did you do?”

**Episode 4145**

**Xavier**

When I imagined becoming an Alpha, there were all sorts of things I envisioned having to take care of. I was prepared to lead a pack, fight if I had to, defend my title, empower those below me, and generally continue to prove my strength and leadership.

I didn’t really think I’d be going over a laundry list of miscellaneous items from toilet paper to sofas, trying to prioritize what to buy.

Yet here we were, Josephine, Geraint, and me, discussing what we still needed for the pack house. *It is what it is*, I supposed. If my pack wasn’t comfortable, I couldn’t really call myself a good leader, so I was going to file this under “necessary” to keep myself from jumping headfirst into a paper shredder.

Besides, it was also a way to avoid further talk with Gabe about Cali. No good could come from continuing that conversation, but Gabe was smart enough to avoid me while I was handling pack business. So as long as I was *always* handling pack business, there would be no reason to have that discussion again.

Right…?

There *was* something nice about calling the shots, but I was quickly learning there was quite a lot to call the shots about. It was a little intense having eyes *constantly* turning toward me for every single thing, big or small. But I was taking the wolf by the fangs as it were—this was all part of the job.

“We definitely need a huge table, maybe one with benches,” I said, “and for sure some stuff for outside.”

“Totally agree,” Geraint replied. “I also heard Marissa and Ava discussing some things for the house, too.”

I nodded at him. “Whatever they want, we can get.”

Just as I said that, Jesse walked by, but he stopped to say, “What about a hot tub? We should *really* get one of those.”

We all turned to look at him, and I resisted making a face. “A hot tub? Seriously?”

“I’ll make a case for it, I promise,” Jesse said.

Rolling my eyes, I agreed. “Fine, you can make your case, but there are no promises.”

That didn’t stop him from lighting up like a goddamn Christmas tree. “Done!”

“Oh, hey, there you are.” We looked over, and Donovan was walking toward us with the same look that Josephine and Geraint approached me with an hour ago when this conversation of furniture began. “I’ve got a *really* long listfrom Gabriel for food… Does anyone have anything they want to add?”

Jesse, Josephine, and Geraint all closed in on him to start adding things to the list, but something caught my eye that was more important to me than that—Kira was standing outside the front door of the house.

“I’ll be right back,” I said to absolutely no onelistening to me, and then stood up and walked over to her. “Kira.” She gave me a fierce side eye. “You got my message from Lilac?” She nodded but didn’t say much else. Was she still pissed off at me? Leaning back against the side of the house, I crossed my arms and asked, “And? Aren’t you curious why I wanted you to come by?”

Kira’s eyes turned fully and snapped into mine. “Something wrong with your house? Need another addition?”

I tilted my head, thinking about the backyard. “Well, if you’re offer—”

“Just cut to the chase, Xavier. Does it *look* like I have all day?” Kira spat.

“Happy to,” I replied. I’d been playing over and over in my head what I was going to say to her, but rather than beat around the bush, I took her advice and decided just to be direct. “I want you to join the Samara pack.”

The look of dismissive rage that had been there faded away behind wide-eyed confusion. “What? Join the Samara pack?”

I nodded. “Yes, join. Be *our* witch.” Kira looked… confused, so I continued. “I know I’ve been a dick, and I can’t promise that there won’t be times in the future when I’m *still* a dick, but I care about this pack and the people in it, and I care about you, too.” Kira crossed her arms and narrowed her gaze. “We both know what happened during the battle. You froze up, and then we helped each other out. *I* helped *you* out. If you join, I can always look out for you.”

That was the pitch that I’d brought to the table, and hopefully it was the one that would sell Kira. There was a mutually beneficial relationship waiting if she chose to join up with the Samara pack, but it didn’t take a rocket scientist to know that Kira’s and my relationship prior to the battle had been strained at best. Ours was a checkered history, and she happened to be one of the most fiercely loyal people I’d ever met—which didn’t bode well for me considering my position. Still, she couldn’t deny that what happened during the battle was just a glimpse of what *could* be a powerful allyship.

If only she’d agree to it.

I waited anxiously while Kira stared at me, processing what I’d said. She had a damn good poker face, so it was difficult to tell which way she was leaning. Eventually, however, she sighed and let her crossed arms drop. “Look, I’ll agree that you *did* help me out during the battle, and I appreciate that, but one good deed doesn’t take away from the fact that you were a dick to me. No more than it takes away from the fact that you were *also* a dick to the Redwood pack and to Cali.” This was what I feared—Kira’s true loyalties. “You say you care about the Samaras—about me—but you once felt the same way about the Redwoods and Cali.”

Obviously, I couldn’t deny that. “Yes.”

“So, what’s different now?” Kira asked. “You going to turn your back on the Samaras if some other opportunity arises?”

That question, I was *not* anticipating, and I hesitated as I thought about how the hell to answer it. Ever since Adéluce, my game plan had always been to keep Cali safe and play this out until I could stop Adéluce, and *then* I was going to return to Cali.

But I’d never really thought it through beyond the present.

What did the future look like *after* Adéluce? How could I get Cali back while I was still tied to Ava and the Samara pack? I’d been keeping my eye on the prize up to this point, but I didn’t stop to think what the prize would actually be. Frustratingly, Kira’s questions weren’t actually all that far from the questions Gabe threw at me. They both were forcing me to think about an eventuality that I’d accepted but hadn’t defined. Maybe I didn’t have the answers yet, but I knew I would figure it out eventually, simply because I had to.

That wasn’t a good answer for Kira, though, and I didn’t want to make her a promise that I couldn’t keep. I knew what she was looking for—not to get burned again—so I figured that was a better line to tread than selling her some future that I was totally unsure about.

“*If* something were to come up—some situation that forced me to leave—you wouldn’t be tied down. You could go wherever you wanted,” I explained.

She snorted at me, almost as if that was what she expected me to say. “That isn’t how I work. I know how supernaturals like to treat their witches.” I was just about to question her when she barreled on. “I had to deal with Iñigo. I *know* how this all works better than you think I do.”

“I’m nothing like Iñigo,” I responded, almost insulted at the implication. “He used you and forced you to do things that you would never do. I’m *vowing* to you that I would never make you do something you don’t want to do, and I will never keep you against your will. I may be a dick from time to time, but not like that, and you *have* to know that about me. You know I’m not like him.”

Kira fell silent again, and I was back to not knowing what side of the fence she was teetering toward. I believed that Kira knew I was a better man than Iñigo, and she probably couldn’t deny that I was a far superior leader, but the fact that I couldn’t look her in her eyes and guarantee that I was with the Samaras for good was a problem for her. Kira wasn’t an overly emotional person, and if I had to guess, she was making a list of pros and cons in her mind right now. Filing the fact that I was a dick and hurt Cali into cons and adding the Samaras’ obvious benefits and the way we worked together during the battle into pros. Obviously it would be helpful if I knew which list was longer, but I didn’t have that luxury.

I simply needed to *ensure* that her pros list was the stronger contender.

Stepping up to her, I set my hands on her shoulders and looked right into her eyes. “Just tell me. What do I need to do to get you to join?”

**Episode 4146**

**Greyson**

I set my phone down on the table, having ended my call with Mace, and sighed at it as if I were looking at the man himself. I could tell that the Blue Blood Alpha was tired—I probably woke him up in the middle of getting some much-deserved rest—but I had to get his take on the way the battle ended, including the Bitterfang retreat. It still wasn’t sitting right with me, and I needed to know if other people in my position felt similarly. Mace wasn’t there when Malakai made that misstep…

… Or was it a misstep at all?

It just didn’t make sense to me.

Mace agreed that we should stay on the Bitterfangs’ tail and see how far they actually went, which wasn’t too far from my own line of thinking. He agreed to send a couple of Blue Blood pack members to work with me if I needed them, which I was highly appreciative of. After speaking with Ravi and Rishika, there was a team of scouts forming, but I still needed to get a few ducks in a row first.

At least attempt to get them in a row. It felt like my ducks were all over the fucking place at the moment.

Next on my list of calls to make was Aysel, and though I was planning on leaving her a voicemail, I was surprised when she actually answered the phone. I didn’t know what to say at first because I was soconvinced I wouldn’t actually get the chance to speak to her directly.

“Hello?” she growled after thirty seconds of silence.

“Hi,” I said. Was there some sort of pleasantry I should offer or just go straight for it? “How are you?”

“What do you want, Greyson?” she asked.

Thank god. I hated small talk. “I need you to relay a message to your brother. I want to talk to him. It’s important.”

Aysel let out a long sigh. “I’m getting pretty tired of playing messenger for Lucian.”

“Well, then maybe you should convince him that as the Vanguard Alpha, it’s time he joins the modern world and gets a cell phone,” I replied.

She scoffed. “Oh. Is *that* all I have to do? I never considered that before. Just convince him to get a cell phone. Easy.”

“Right,” I grumbled. “Well, sorry to make you the woman in the middle, but will you please deliver the message for me? It’s urgent.”

“Fine,” she said.

“Thank you… Bye.”

“Wait,” she said quickly. “You should know that Elle is settling in quite nicely.”

I gritted my teeth. “Why are you telling me that?”

“I thought you’d be curious,” she replied. “I know that you’re *very* protective of her.”

Shaking my head, I swallowed down my irritation—I couldn’t get into that right now. “Just tell your brother it’s important he contacts me immediately.”

Before she had a chance to say anything else, I ended the call and moved right on to the last item on my list—Xavier. The call went straight to voicemail.

I left a very simple message: “Call me.”

Dealing with Xavier could be tricky, especially lately. Maybe the fact that he didn’t answer was a blessing in disguise. He was hard enough to read, let alone over the phone. It probably meant that I should just plan to go and see him face-to-face. It would also serve as a reminder that our alliance still wasn’t done with—we may still have work to do.

But… *ugh*. He was still being such a pain in the ass. And seeing him was only going to remind me that it was Xavier who rescued Cali *twice*. That wasn’t really a factoid that I wanted to revisit or think about too much more than I had to.

Speaking of Cali, I noticed the time on my phone and figured it was time to go and check on her. I had no idea how long she was going to remain asleep in the wake of the sire bond spell, but given how anxious it was making me that she had passed out at all, I’d been keeping a pretty close eye on her. I’d made all the calls on my list anyway, so I stood up and made my way to her room, where I was pleasantly surprised to see her, not only awake, but engaged in a *very* animated conversation with Lola.

“Oh,” she said when she saw me, and then she smiled—knocking me in the gut with her beauty. “Hi.”

“Hey. How long have you been awake?” I asked. “I was worried about you. I wish you’d let me know.”

A look of annoyance crossed her face, and I was nervous I overstepped when she side-eyed Lola. “I *was* still asleep until Lola woke me up.”

“Yes, but…” Lola stood up off the bed. “I should let you two talk.”

She tried to make for the door, but Cali snatched her by the wrist and held her in place. “Oh no you don’t. You’re not going *anywhere*. We still have some things to talk about.”

Lola deflated. “Fine…”

Whatever was going on between these two, it was probably something I didn’t need to know about. If it was something important, I imagined Cali would tell me, so I wasn’t too concerned with sorting it out. “I didn’t mean to interrupt. I just wanted to see how you were feeling.”

“I’m a little tired,” Cali said, shooting Lola another irritated look, but then she softened her gaze to look back at me. “But I’m not knocked out, so that’s good.”

I was wondering if the spell did anything besides make Cali a zombie for a couple of hours, so I decided to try a mind link.

*Can you hear me?*

She lit up and replied, also via the mind link, *Loud and clear! No static!*

That left me hopeful. She sounded the same, no interference. Though one try didn’t guarantee anything.

“That’s good,” Cali said aloud. “Although, I wonder if we should try it with Lucian and Elle nearby. That would be the real test.”

I nodded. “I agree.”

Though, truth be told, I wasn’t *thrilled* about seeing Lucian with Elle, especially after my brief talk with Aysel. It still bothered me even more than I cared to admit that Elle was still at the Vanguard palace—I couldn’t help but feel like she belonged here, with the Redwoods—but I didn’t have any leverage to bring her back. Lucian appeared to be her mate. I certainly wouldn’t allow *anyone* to stop me from being with Cali, so how could I honestly expect to stop Lucian from seeing Elle? If anything, allowing them to spend some “quality” time together might work in my favor. It would show Elle that Lucian was the annoying little princeling that he was, mate bond or not.

If anyone could cause a mate to want to sever the bond, it was Lucian.

“Hey,” Cali said, calling my attention back to the present. “Are you okay? Why aren’t you more excited about the mind link potentially being fixed?”

Both she and Lola were watching me quizzically, and I forced a small smile. “Sorry. Just lost in my own thoughts. I think it’s a great sign; I’ve just got a lot to deal with, and it’s all buzzing around my mind.”

Cali nodded, seeming to understand. “Anything I can do?”

I crossed my arms. “I’ve been talking to the other Alphas about what to do next…”

“You know what?” Lola interjected. “You two are talking pack business, I’ll just see myself out. I’ve got a face mask I promised I’d try with Jay, and—”

“Nope!” Cali yanked Lola right back down onto the bed. “You just sit tight.”

Lola had a death grip on a piece of paper in her hand, but though she seemed defeated by Cali’s refusal to let her leave, she didn’t seem *unhappy*. Whatever the two of them were discussing before I came in, I had to assume it involved Lola trying to goad Cali into something, as she tended to do. This pair of friends made me nervous on a good day, but again, I didn’t want to overstep into Cali’s business. If what was going on between them was something I needed to know, I had every faith that, as my mate, Cali would tell me.

My curiosity would just have to burn until then.

With Lola locked in place, Cali looked back at me with a look of serious curiosity. “What did the other Alphas say?”

“I only spoke to Mace, who agreed to discuss it further, and I left a message for Lucian with Aysel, so I need to wait for him to get back to me. I called Xavier, but his phone went straight to voicemail.”

The way Cali raised her eyebrow at me, I knew I wasn’t going to like what she was about to say, even if I’d already thought it myself. “You know, calling him probably isn’t the best way to talk with him,” she said. “Why don’t you go and talk to Xavier in person?”

**Episode 4147**

Greyson sighed heavily at my suggestion, which was to be expected. I didn’t push him, because I knew that forcing interactions between these two brothers was a pain in the ass—I should know.

“I was hoping to avoid leaving you after you passed out from the spell,” Greyson said.

I eyed him with a narrowed gaze. “I’m fine, never mind the fact that that was just a thinly veiled attempt to make it seem like it’s about me and *not* the fact that you’re avoiding going to see your brother.”

“Ah,” Greyson said, dropping his head and chuckling. “Read me like a book.”

“What can I say? I know you pretty well,” I replied.

Lola raised her hand. “Uh, I don’t know you all *that* well, but it was pretty obvious.”

“Regardless, I’d actually already had the thought myself, although I was hoping not to have it echoed by you…” He looked at Lola. “And Lola, apparently.”

I snickered. “It’ll be fine. Despite being a little sleepy, I actually feel okay, and I think it’ll be good for both you and Xavier to talk in person.”

It felt a little strange encouraging Greyson to go see Xavier, especially after that dream I had. I even felt a little twinge of guilt, which was nuts, because it was just a dream—it wasn’t like I had any control over it. I was wondering if I should tell Greyson about my dream, but then I realized there wouldn’t be much point. Not unless all I wanted to accomplish was upsetting my mate, even if he would never reveal that he was upset.

What a delightful reminder that navigating this was about as much fun as navigating a carpet of Legos barefoot.

Greyson walked over to me and leaned in close. “Maybe I was trying to avoid *him*, but I am legitimately worried about *you*. Are you sure you’re going to be all right without me?”

I pushed all thoughts of Xavier and the kiss away, telling myself once again that it was just a dream. To remind myself of what was real, I wrapped my arms around Greyson’s neck and pulled him closer for a kiss. I let the delicious feeling of his very real lips wash over me before parting. *This* was my truth. Greyson was my mate.

“I promise, I’ll be fine,” I told him. “Besides, it isn’t like I’m going to be left all alone.” I slapped a hand on Lola’s shoulder. “My good ol’ best friend is going to keep me company, aren’t you, Lola?”

Looking uncomfortable, Lola tried to stand up again. “Of course, but first, I really should check in with Jay about that face mas—”

Squeezing down on Lola’s shoulder, I pulled her back down onto the bed and held her firmly in place. “No, I think Jay will be fine, and the face mask can wait.”

“Okay,” Greyson said. “I really don’t think I’ll be gone that long, but if you start to feel *anything* out of the ordinary, you should let me know immediately.”

I nodded at him. “I will, but it won’t be necessary, because I’ll be just fine.”

He gave me one more kiss on the forehead and turned around to head back out of the room. Yanking herself from my grip, Lola jumped up and exclaimed, “You know what? I’ll go with you!”

She was wily, and to her credit, she nearly made it to the door with Greyson, who was mumbling, “Uh, no, I really think you should stay with—”

“Ahhh!” I went flying across the room as I flat-out lunged at Lola, taking her down to the ground. I flashed Greyson a smile and waved him off, and he left, giving us a strange look over his shoulder.

Standing up, I pulled Lola to her feet and dragged her back toward my bed. “Get your butt back here.” I slammed her down on the bed and stood over her. “I know that look, and I know that weaselly little ‘*wellll*.’ *I* didn’t apply to college, so what did you do? You can’t say something like that and then not explain, so start explaining.”

Lola twiddled her thumbs as she avoided my gaze. “I mean… You *might* get mad at me.”

“It’s safe to say I already am, so why don’t you just skip ahead?” I growled at her.

“Well… I *miiiiiight* have applied to college for you,” Lola said quietly.

I tilted an ear in her direction, even though I was pretty sure I’d heard her correctly. *Surely*,I had to be mistaken. “What’s that now?”

“To be fair, all I really did was apply to college *twice*. I just happened to misspell my name on one of the applications.”

“How did you spell it?” I asked, my nostrils flared.

“Um…” Lola gazed toward the ceiling as if she was trying *really* hard to remember, then she finally shot me a guilty look. “Caliana Hart.”

“Lola!” I screamed.

She held up her hands in defense. “Okay, I can see that you’re mad. I’ll come back another time.”

She tried to bolt for the door, but I leapt out and blocked her path. She tried to push past me, and, given that she was part werewolf *and* vampire, she was strong. But I kicked out a leg and wrestled her to the floor. We went down yelping, and I wrapped my arms around her torso, pulled her onto her back, and locked my legs around her so I was holding onto her like a backpack.

“Oh my god, that tickles!” she screeched, half-laughing. “Let me go!”

“Not until you *explain why you did this*!” I barked.

Though Lola was struggling, I used one of my hands to tickle her and she started to wiggle. “No, no, no. Okay. Okay,” she said between breaths. “I’ll talk!”

I unwrapped her slowly, both of us panting like dogs from the scuffle. Lola twisted around and faced me, crossing her legs. “First of all, I know what you’re going to say about ethical hacking, but *this* hacking came from the right place in my heart.” I crawled over on all fours, getting as close to a wolf’s stance as I could in my human form, but Lola threw her hands up before I could tackle her. “Wait! So, I know you’ve been going through a lot right now, and I have, too. It might have been a little selfish, but sometimes I feel like we dropped out of school because of me. It was my plan that brought us to Oregon and because of Colton and dick-who-must-not-be-named. And I just wanted to do something nice and apologize for that… Sort of.”

All I could do was blink at her and take this in. It wasn’t as if Lola had *never* hinted at feeling guilty about the whole thing before, but it had never been on this grand a scale. Hearing it now, partnered with the gesture, was honestly a little surprising.

After a few seconds, I turned and sat cross-legged as well, sitting so that my knees were nearly touching Lola’s, and rested my head in my hand. I was still upset that Lola would go so far as to fake an application for me. “Why didn’t you just apologize like a normal person would do? You had to apply to school for me?” Then I paused, my mind spinning as I thought back on the conversation and Lola saying she actually wanted me to attend with her. “Wait… Did I even get in?”

It was only now that Lola reached into her back pocket and pulled out another, unopened letter. She held it out toward me, guilt still written all over her face, and said, “I don’t know… I didn’t feel right opening it.”

I snatched it from her. “You’ll commit *some* fraud, just not *mail* fraud, is that it?”

Lola sighed and shrugged. “Even *I* have my limits.”

Turning the envelope over in my hands a few times, I actually felt a surge of nerves, which was *dumb* because I didn’t even apply! What business did I have being nervous about whether my best friend’s *forged* application with my name on it cleared the sniff-test of some stuffy college admissions office?

“Are you going to open it?” Lola asked.

“Yeah! I’m just taking my time. Don’t rush me!” I snapped, but it was more because I was annoyed with myself. “Don’t acceptance letters always come in big packets anyway?”

Finally, and purely because I was about to start clawing off my own skin, I ripped open the envelope and pulled out the letter. I unfolded it and immediately started to read it out loud. “Dear Caliana Hart, we are pleased to offer you admission…” My jaw dropped as I scanned the rest of the page. “I—I got in.”

“Yes!” Lola screeched, grabbing me by the wrist and shaking me. “It’ll be just like the good ol’ days!”

Still shocked, I shook my head. “I’m not so sure about that. Things have changed a *lot* since we were in school. I mean… What GPA did you give me?”

Lola shook her head. “No, no, no. I didn’t fake any of that stuff. That’s where the hacking came in—for your old transcripts. All I did was write your essay.”

“What?” I couldn’t imagine what she could have written. “I want to see it.”

“Er… I’ll have to find it. But it doesn’t matter, because it got you in!” she squeaked.

I glowered at her. “Without my ever asking you to apply for me.”

“You know, I really think that’s a minor technicality.” She grabbed my hands and pulled until I was looking in her eyes. “Think of how much fun it would be to study together, to find some classes that don’t suck, and to put in all of the work and actually end up with a *real* college degree this time. Think of how proud your parents would be!”

Yeah, I could think about that. I could also think about how Greyson was going over to talk to Xavier *right now* because he was worried that the war wasn’t over. “Things could kick up again with the Bitterfangs. I don’t know that now is the best time to worry about exams and essays.”

“Maybe it’s time for you to do something for yourself, Cali.” Lola crossed her arms in a huff. “Don’t you *want* to go back to school?”

**Episode 4148**

**Xavier**

I knew Kira had to have a price; I was just waiting for her to name it. Even though she was probably fully aware of the control she had over me at the moment, I couldn’t imagine she was going to ask for my right eye or anything like that—thank god she wasn’t anything like Big Mac.

Whether or not she realized it, however, there was quite a lot I’d be willing to part with for the cause. Call it a lack of emotional attachment, but if she wanted to take Knox and two of his knuckleheaded buddies off my hands, that would be well worth it.

Eventually, though, she just looked me in the eye and said, “I’m not saying no, but I’m not saying yes either.”

In my book, that was a positive. The door was still open, and that was what counted. After Kira confronted me the first time about leaving the pack, I wasn’t sure she would ever even talk to me again, so the fact that she was considering moving to the Samara pack was huge. And it was enough for me for now.

“It took me a while to become comfortable living in a house of werewolves, and I imagine some of the Redwoods had their doubts about a witch moving in. If I’m being totally honest, I’m not sure I want to go through that all over again. No offense, but Greyson isn’t a bad Alpha. He treats me well, and I have a decent connection with Big Mac. I’m actually not really sure what the upside of me starting over with another pack would be at this point,” Kira continued.

And just like that, it seemed like I was losing her. Moreover, I was trying to ignore the slap in the face over the fact that she seemed to contend that Greyson was a better Alpha than I was. “I get your reservations, but remember, you’re not a stranger to the Samaras. Besides, I want you to think of me less as an Alpha and more as a friend.”

Kira tilted her head to the side at that explanation and lifted an eyebrow. “A friend?”

“Yes,” I replied. “I know it’s difficult to believe, but it isn’t *just* that you’re a witch that I’m looking for here.”

“You wouldn’t be asking me to join the Samaras if the pack didn’t need a witch,” she retorted quickly.

Once again, I was faced with not wanting to lie to her, but at the same time wanting to move the needle in the right direction. “I won’t deny that the pack needs a witch, and maybe that was part of my reasoning for reaching out to you, but it wasn’t the *only* reason. I’m not lying to you when I say I could really use another friend around here.”

She quietly considered this before giving me a nod. “Like I said, I’ll think it over, but in the meantime, you should think about what I told you. I need you to show me that you’re not just using me.”

I understood that. Kira was a person who had been used way too often. Going into this conversation, I knew that I would need to prove that my request wasn’t just another attempt to use her.

Before I could say anything else, however, the front door opened, and Ava came through it. Kira side-eyed Ava for a moment, and the instant their eyes met, Kira blipped away and was gone.

That was an obstacle I hadn’t quite considered until this moment. Kira was nofan of Ava’s. Obviously, if Kira came to be the Samara witch, the two of them would be working closely together, so I if I was going to continue pursuing Kira and trying to convince her to join the pack, I was going to have to figure out a way to smooth over their prickly relationship as well.

“What was that about?” Ava asked as she approached me. “Secret conversations with a witch? Is there something you should be telling me?”

The others were still standing relatively close by, going over the grocery list, so I grabbed Ava and pulled her farther from the house before answering, “I asked Kira to join the Samara pack.”

Ava’s face twisted up like she just smelled rotten eggs. “Isn’t that something you should have talked to me about first?”

My defenses immediatelywent up. “We’ve talked about it, and I’m telling you now. What’s the problem?”

She scoffed. “Inviting a witch into our pack house is something that needs to be discussed *first*, not *after* you’ve done it.”

Her tone and candor took me slightly by surprise. “That’s not what you wanted before. You’d practically been begging me to get her to join. You said we needed a witch.”

“Well, things have changed,” she spat. “Just because *you* came from a pack that embraced witches and vampires, doesn’t mean other packs are ready for something like that. You can’t just operate as if you haven’t changed packs. That’s not how it works.”

“Hmm. You’re starting to sound a lot like Malakai,” I accused.

Her eyes flashed with rage at the words. “Don’t you *ever* accuse me of that. I fought the Bitterfangs just like everybody else.”

“You did,” I replied. “Which is why you should know that the pack could use a witch like Kira. *You’ve* even brought it up.”

“Yes, I have, but I’ve thought about it, and the Samaras did just fine without a witch,” Ava said. “Besides, did you not see the hesitation just at bringing a Rogue into our midst who is mated to a vampire? Mikah isn’t exactly wanted around here, Xavier.”

“Look, I don’t know what you want from me.” I shrugged. “Didn’t you all want another ally?”

“I’m just reminding you of how they reacted, that’s all,” she retorted.

“And *I* hate to remind *you*, but Nolan died, and up until I took over, the Samaras were a mess.” I didn’t want to throw this in Ava’s face—I knew she had pride in her pack—but I couldn’t have her interfering with my attempts to get Kira to join. Kira was already *looking* for reasons to turn me down, and Ava was a huge one. “A witch will strengthen us.”

She crossed her arms, her frustration clearly growing. “I think you’ve forgotten—”

“No, I think *you’ve* forgotten,” I cut her off. “*I’m* the Alpha now, not Nolan.”

A bolt of lightning flashed across Ava’s eyes, and she took an ominous step toward me. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

I stepped toward her as well. “You wanted me to take over the pack, so don’t get in the way when I try.”

Her eyes darkened. “Is that what I am to you? An obstacle?”

*Damn*. I might have taken things a little too far, but I needed to prove my point. “I want to shape this pack. Mold it into my vision of what it *could* be, not what it once was. The Samaras were nearly wiped out. I won’t allow that to happen again. If you want me to be Alpha, then let me be Alpha.” Ava turned her back to me, her hands balled into fists. “I’m sorry to be so hard on you about this, but—”

Ava whipped around and stepped up to me. “You know, I *had* come out here to apologize for telling you to fuck off earlier, but you can forget it. You’re still the same dick you always were.”

“I’m not going to apologize for that,” I growled. “I never pretended to be anyone but myself.”

She snorted. “I’m not so sure about that. You made me your Luna, and I believed that you really wanted me to be your Luna. That’s the only reason I accepted. Maybe that was a *big* mistake. You don’t need a Luna. You think you can manage this pack all on your own.” She bowed and fanned her hands out. “Well, good luck.” And with that, she stormed off, into the house, letting the screen door slam in her wake.

A dick though I was, I wasn’t a monster. If Ava didn’t feel valued as a Luna, that was a problem, and I actually did feel bad about it. I also didn’t expect the news of Kira to affect Ava this way. Surely, she could see the advantage of having a witch.

But then I stopped myself.

Maybe this was a good thing. I could hold off on smoothing things over with Ava, only because it would keep Adéluce happy. It sucked, but maybe it was best for now.

As I was heading back to Josephine and Geraint to resume shopping conversations, I was annoyed to see my brother’s familiar car pull up. Greyson stepped out, and my nostrils flared.

*What the hell does he want?*

“You can turn around and head right back to where you came from,” I hissed at him once he got out of his car and started to approach me. “I’m really not in the mood.”

He completely ignored me and continued to walk over anyway. “We need to find out where the Bitterfangs have gone, and I think you and I should be the ones to do it. Are you in?”

**Episode 4149**

**Lilac**

It was beginning to look like the Rocky fucking Mountains in the laundry room with all the piles I was making. I *hated* being put on laundry duty. On a good day, there weren’t a ton of clothes in here, because the pack house was almost exclusively werewolves who just hulkedit out of their clothes when they shifted, but somehow right now things had piled up like the back room of a Macy’s.

And *I* was the unlucky bastard who had the honor of trying to get it sorted and cleaned.

Starting with the massive pile of pants, I started to load it all into the washer when I came across a pair of my own jeans. There was a pretty sizable rip down the side that I’d somehow missed when I took them off.

“*Dammit*,” I hissed when I noticed the tear. I must have snagged them on something earlier this morning when I was scaling down the side of the new Samara pack house in my underwear…

Well, *free-falling* was a better description.

My face burned as the memory washed back over me, but at least it was Xavier who caught me and not someone else. He’d been pretty cool about it, at least. One time, Big Mac walked in on me and Marta making out, and I almost died.

Again.

So, to think that Perrie’s parents almost happened upon the two of us last night… That would have been, um, *regrettable*, to say the least. I hoped that Xavier was wrong, and they actually hadn’t picked up on my scent. If they did, then it was only a matter of time until these massive mounds of clothes were the leastof my problems.

I tossed my pants into the washing machine and finished loading the rest of the pants and then took a quick break to check my phone. I still didn’t have any messages, so Perrie must still be asleep. Things between the two of us had been heating up lately, for which I was very glad. We hadn’t had sex yet, but it certainly seemed like we were getting there. Maybe we would have sealed the deal last night coming off the high from the battle if we hadn’t been interrupted. A smile crossed my face at the thought.

Who knew, maybe the next time we saw each other, we’d finally go the distance.

As I grabbed the laundry detergent, a pang of guilt washed over me. I’d been in a pretty good mood lately, especially since I was enjoying my time with Perrie. It felt… different from how things were with Marta. Different in a good way, but not necessarily better…

*Should I feel bad that I’ve moved on so quickly?* I wondered.

I tilted the laundry detergent over the load of pants and started to pour it out. My mind was on Perrie as the blue liquid rained down over the clothes, and almost as if my thoughts summoned her, my phone rang, and I saw that it was her.

“Okay, be cool,” I told myself quietly, but my palms were already sweating. I pressed the button to answer the video call, and as nonchalantly as I could, I said, “Hey, how are you?”

“I’m good.” Her sweet voice sang into my ear, and her stunning smile washed over me and sent a chill down my spine, reminding me of our time last night. “How are you, you little escape artist?”

I snickered. “I’m fine, just got a little scraped up on my way down, but I’m in one piece, so—*shit!*”

“Is everything okay?” Perrie asked.

In getting lost talking to Perrie, I poured *way* too much laundry detergent into the load—even knowing how rank these werewolves could get. “Uh, yeah… I’m great!” I propped the phone up on top of the dryer and then cupped my hands and started trying to scoop some detergent out. “How about you? Did your parents come into your room?”

“Yeah,” Perrie replied. “My mom did.”

I paused, grimacing. “And…?”

“Didn’t suspect a thing,” Perrie said. She let out a quiet sigh, and it twisted up my stomach. Man, she was gorgeous. “At least, if she *did* suspect anything, she didn’t let on. She did, however, make it a point to go closer to my window and lock it.” Then she scoffed. “I mean, I don’t get it. I’m eighteen. Why do my parents feel the need to be breathing down my neck about a boyfriend?”

Halfway through scooping detergent, I stopped and looked at Perrie, my lips curving upward, but I tried not to fully smile. “Boyfriend?”

Perrie’s eyes went wide before they turned into a glare. “Slip of the tongue.”

“Sure it was,” I replied. “So… You want me to be your boyfriend, huh?”

She rolled her eyes, clearly playing coy, and it made me feel *really* good. “I’m just teasing, but…” I wiped my hands off and looked directly into the phone. “I would like to see you later.”

Her expression softened, and she nodded at me. “Yeah. Me too. Hopefully there’s not another attack.”

“Hell yeah to that,” I replied. “Stay safe. I’ll text you later.”

“You stay safe yourself, Lilac,” she said, and then she waved, and the screen went dark as she hung up.

I thought I’d managed to scoop out enough of the laundry detergent to not drown the load, so I closed the top and twisted the dials to start the machine. Not thirty full seconds after I turned it on, Violet came running into the laundry room with a dress in hand. She deflated at the sight of me pulling my hands back from dials.

“No!” she yelped. “I was hoping to get this in the wash.”

“Sorry,” I said, pocketing my phone. “I just started it. Do you want me to stop it? Maybe we can still add it.”

She shook her head. “No.” But she still sighed. Then she studied me briefly and then furrowed her brow. “Who was that on the phone?” I shrugged in response, and a mischievous grin slithered across her face. “Oooh, Perrie?”

Determined not to let my nosy twin sister tease me, I quickly replied, “Yes, it was, and it’s none of your business.”

Violet waggled her eyebrows at me. “You’ve been spending a *whole* lot of time with her lately.”

“Yeah, and you *literally* share a room with Charlie, so what’s your point?” I snapped back.

Her eyes narrowed, and she seemed less amused, shrugging at me. “Nothing…”

“Right,” I told her. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ve got other things to take care of.”

I started past her and was preparing to walk out of the laundry room when she stuck out an arm to stop me. “Are you going to keep going over there?”

Side eyeing her in confusion, I replied, “With Perrie? Yeah, we’re mates and we’re… figuring stuff out, so…”

Or we *were* until my untimely roof exit.

Violet shook her head. “Ew, no, I mean the Samara pack house, now that they have one again…”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “That’s where Perrie lives, so yeah?”

It seemed like Violet was starting to get irritated with me. “That’s not what I meant. Did you see Xavier? Did you talk to him after he sent you those texts?”

Ah. Now I understood. “Yeah, I saw Xavier briefly, but we didn’t discuss it. Why? You made yourself pretty clear about how you felt about him leaving the Redwoods to be there.”

“Yeah,” she replied. “I still believe that.”

“But honestly? It might make sense this way,” I told her. “Greyson’s been okay—I’ve got nothingagainst him—but Xavier’s like our older brother, and with Perrie as my mate… If things keep going well, it might make sense for me to be over there.” Violet’s body went rigid, and her eyes grew wide. “You could come, too, if you wanted,” I added. “I’m sure Xavier wouldn’t mind.”

“I can’t do that, Lilac,” she replied.

It was impossible to hide my disappointment, especially from Violet, who knew me like the back of her own hand. “Why not?”

She opened her mouth to respond, then stopped and thought about it. It was almost as if she didn’t have a clear answer. Violet was a loyal person, and it really bothered her when Xavier left our pack, but I also knew that she cared about Xavier still and that she would naturally want to be anywhere I was—that was just how we were. It wasn’t like we were co-dependent per se, but Violet wasn’t just my sister, she was my best friend.

That was why she reacted so harshly to hearing that I might want to go there, and that was why I needed to convince her that it might be a better move for us both.

“Well?” I pushed. “You wouldn’t hate it there—we both know that.”

“I don’t…” She frowned, averting her gaze. “I just don’t know.”

“And?” I said, but she didn’t give me anything further. “Exactly. So why don’t we just talk to Xavier? Together.”

**Episode 4150**

Watching Lola’s face and knowing what she wanted me to say was *excruciating*. I mean, damn, how was thisa fair question? If someone had asked me if I thought Lola wanted to go back to school, I would have assumed she either didn’t or felt indifferent about it—I didn’t think she was champing at the bit. It was nice that she wanted to do it for her dads, but I didn’t know if this was in the cards for me.

For fuck’s sake, I hadn’t even known that “I” applied until less than thirty minutes ago.

“Honestly, Lola, I don’t know if I want to go back,” I admitted. “But please don’t tell my parents that. Not yet anyway.”

Lola was clearly disappointed, but she said, “Of course I won’t say anything, but you are going to have to decide.”

“How long do I have to decide if I accept or not?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. Maybe a couple of weeks?” she replied. “It’s all in the letter.”

I looked down at the acceptance letter in my hand and sighed. “I actually have to think about it, you know? There’s a lot to figure out. Not the least of which is whether I can actually pay for tuition. Part of the reason I agreed to meet Xavier in the first place was because I needed money. It’s one thing for me to live in the pack house as a member of the pack, but I can’t rightfully ask Greyson to pay for my school.”

“If *that’s* all you’re worried about, we can figure that out,” Lola insisted. “There are always ways to make money.” Then she snorted. “Can you grow your virginity back?”

“Ew, Lola.”

She waved me off. “Kidding. Just trying to lighten the mood.”

“It’s not like I can get a job,” I said. “I mean, can I honestly balance being a part-time Luna, part-time student, *and* having a part-time job?”

“Like I said, we’ll *figure it out*,” she repeated.

My mind was only half-focused on her, and half-moving on to the next area of concern. “What would I even major in? This would be my junior year. Isn’t that when you’re supposed to decide? I’m assuming that CCU doesn’t have a Luna degree.”

“Oh my god,” Lola groaned. “Can you stop freaking the fuck out? It’s just a few classes, not the rest of your life we’re talking about here. You can major in anything you want—who cares?”

“The point is that you’re supposed to major in something that interests you and get a career related to that major,” I explained.

Lola laughed. “Damn, if that’s true, why are there philosophy degrees? Poetry degrees?” I narrowed my gaze at her, and she lifted her hands. “That was another joke, Cal.”

All of a sudden, Jay poked his head in, his face covered in a face mask. He looked at Lola. “Are you coming?”

I snorted in response to the sight. I’d assumed Lola was just lyingto get out of having this conversation, but Jay really was doing a mask. “Looking good, Jay,” I joked.

“Why didn’t you wait for me?” Lola sneered, clearly pissed off.

Jay framed his face like he was voguing. “Beauty doesn’t wait, my love.”

Lola looked back at me. “*Clearly*, I have to go. Besides, you have some thinking to do. I’m not trying to pressure you, but don’t forget that you need to make up your mind before the deadline.”

“You talking about college?” Jay asked. “You got in, too, huh? Congrats, Cali!”

Lola was trying to shush Jay, but it wasn’t working, and I glared at her. “Is there anyone else you told?”

She pointed up at Jay. “How long have you had that on? If you leave it for too long, it’ll be… You know what? I’ll help.”

“Lol—” I tried to reach out and grab her, but she was up and out the door before giving me an answer, dragging Jay with her as she went.

I shook my head. Lola and her loose fucking lips.

Frustrated, I decided I needed some air, so I folded the acceptance letter back up and set it aside, then made my way out to the yard. In order to relieve some of my pent-up anger, I started to practice summoning my magic and testing my strength. It seemed the aftereffects of the sire bond spell had worn off. To punctuate this point, I summoned my sword and started to swing it around, enjoying the feeling of it resisting the wind in my hand.

“Uh-oh, who pissed you off this time?” I turned and saw Artemis, who quickly jumped into training mode with me.

Not wanting to get into any of the school stuff with anyone until I had a chance to make a decision, I simply said, “I took an… *unexpected nap* after spending the morning with Big Mac.”

“Ah,” Artemis replied. “Who hasn’t?” I chuckled. “You know, I haven’t had the chance to tell you, but I was talking to Adair earlier about the battle. I got him to admit that he was proud of us.”

The magic that I had summoned fizzled in an instant due to my shock. “You got *Adair* to admit that? Did he suffer from some sort of head injury or something?”

Artemis laughed, “Trust me, I was just as surprised. Getting praise from my uncle is as rare as a schnozzle on a grump.”

“A what on a what?” I asked.

She waved it off. “It’s a Fae world thing. The point is, he thinks we have great potential and has agreed to continue our training.”

“Awesome!” I said, but then I deflated just as quickly. Lola and the college question popped back into my mind, and I frowned. Was I really ready to go back to the life I had before I met Xavier? Especially when I was on the cusp of being a great Luna?

“Cali?” Artemis said, eyeing me. “What’s wrong?”

I took a deep breath in and then let out a sigh. My decision to keep school to myself went right out the window in light of the circumstances, and I admitted, “I’m thinking of going back to college.”

Artemis snorted at me. “What for?”

“Because I can learn things? Get a career?” I replied. “You know… The stuff *most* people go to school for.”

“I don’t get why you need that stuff, though?” she said. “You have everything you need living here. *And* you’re a warrior.”

A warrior? Hearing that surprised me. “I haven’t really thought of myself like that.”

“Are you kidding?” Artemis replied. “You could be a *powerful* warrior. Protecting your pack. Or, you could be stuck behind a desk doing whatever humans who are stuck behind desks do. Whatever that is, it can’t be nearly as exciting or fulfilling as this.” She gestured to the pack house and to the woods, and then for flair, she threw up a quick burst of magic.

“The way you put it really gives it some appeal,” I told her. “But my dad has a desk job, and he seems happy.”

“Yeah, that’s because he made that choice long ago and grew to be satisfied with it,” she explained. “We’re still young. If, say, ten years from now, you decide that you would rather be working at some company, go to college then. Me, I’d rather go back to being a bounty hunter in the Fae world than committing to a boring office job.”

Not *every* human job was boring—not that I had any hope of convincing Artemis of that. I had a dream once; that was why I’d wanted to go to college in the first place, way back when, but it seemed so far from me now. A lot of who I used to be before I met Xavier felt so far from me now. Maybe it actually *would* be worth it to talk to my parents, let them help remind me of what was on the other side of this world. Though, I suspected they would like it if I went back to college. Most parents did.

“Hey,” Artemis called me back to the yard. “Let’s set up some targets and start the day with some real training.”

“Sounds great,” I said. It would take my mind off college for now. My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I pulled it out, hoping it was Greyson with good news about Xavier, but it was a number I didn’t recognize. “Sorry, I gotta get this.”

Artemis nodded. “Go for it. I’ll go get us some targets.”

As she walked away, I actually wasn’t sure if I should answer an unknown number, but given what we just went through, I realized it could be important. If someone needed to contact me in a pinch, they might *have* to do it from an unknown number. It was probably better to answer and have to cut off a solicitor than miss something potentially crucial.

I pressed the button to answer it and then lifted it to my ear. “Hello?”

“Cali,” Julia’s panicked voice squeaked back. “I think they found me!”

**Episode 4151**

**Greyson**

“I’m listening,” Xavier said with a sigh.

Though Xavier didn’t offer any more than that, I considered it a small, positive step in the right direction. There was a time when Xavier would’ve told me to fuck off without even taking a moment to hear what I had to say. We were making progress, however slight.

“We both have our doubts about the Bitterfangs’ strange retreat, and for good reason. We’ve been through the pack wars, Silas… So maybe it’s just a hunch, but I’ve learned to trust mine,” I said. “My gut hasn’t steered me wrong yet, and right now, it’s telling me that things with the Bitterfangs aren’t quite what they seem. If we go out and do a little investigation, I’d be able to breathe a little easier.”

“Sure… But why do you need me? You have a pack full of werewolves willing to go along with whatever you say. Why not send Rishika or something?” Xavier asked. “Or Ravi… or anyone else?”

I didn’t answer right away, knowing that I needed to proceed with caution here. If Xavier got even an inkling that I was trying to control him in any way with this request, it was all going to blow up in my face.

Ever since I’d returned to the Redwoods, Xavier had developed a chip on his shoulder that grew bigger and stronger by the day. And, of course, now that I was with Cali and he wasn’t, it had only gotten worse. It didn’t seem to matter that *he* was the reason that he and Cali weren’t together.

“Because out of all the Alphas in the alliance, you’re the only one I really want fighting beside me,” I said.

We’d been in perfect sync during the battle against the Bitterfangs, and that had meant everything in the heat of the moment. Xavier and I had never been on the same page about much of anything, but luckily, that wasn’t the case when we were fighting side by side.

Xavier snorted a laugh. “Really? That’s funny. I would’ve thought I was the last person you’d want to fight with.”

“Hear me out, Xavier. When we were under attack from Silas, Iñigo, Letifer, the revenants… we were good together. We may have had our differences even then, but when shit hit the fan, I knew I could rely on you. The Bitterfangs may not be the same threat as Silas, but they’re still dangerous enough that I wouldn’t be comfortable having anyone else by my side while pursuing them. It’ll be risky and a mission like this requires the kind of experience that only a select few like you and me have.”

“Don’t you think it’s riskier to leave both of our packs exposed without their Alphas? What if the Bitterfangs attack our pack houses while we’re out looking for them? Hell, for all we know, that might be their plan,” Xavier said. “I get why you want to pursue them, but I don’t know if it’s the safest thing to do right now.”

I nodded. “I admit that it’s a risk, but it’s a small one in the grand scheme of things. The way I look at it, it wouldn’t make sense for the Bitterfangs to attack again so soon. We crushed them. After a battle like that, they’re probably busy licking their wounds, not mobilizing for another attack on our pack houses.”

Xavier laughed. “We did give them an epic ass kicking. They’d definitely need some time to recover and regroup after a thrashing like that. But if they caught wind of us leaving our packs unprotected, it might be too tempting for them to pass up the opportunity for a surprise attack. We know as well as anyone how much opportunity guides wartime tactics.”

“Listen, even if we have to go as far as California, it would still only be for a few days, tops. Don’t you have anyone in the Samara pack that you trust to watch the pack while you’re gone?”

“Focus on your own pack, Greyson,” Xavier said coolly. “You don’t need to worry about the Samaras. Besides, that’s hardly the point, and you know it.”

I held up a hand, backing off. “Got it, didn’t mean anything by it. I just really think that this is the right move, but only if you’re making the move with me. So, what do you say? Will you join me?”

Xavier sighed and looked off into the distance. “*If* I decide to go with you, when would we leave?”

“I don’t have a specific date in mind, but it would be sooner rather than later. I want to get this over with. I want peace of mind, and I want it fast. Closing this Bitterfang chapter is the only thing that matters to me right now.”

Xavier mulled that over. “Okay.”

“Okay?” I was surprised. I’d thought it was going to take a lot more convincing than that, but I was happy that he was on board. With him by my side, we would be able to face down anything that came our way.

“Let’s see how things go for now, keep patrols up and remain vigilant. I still don’t think it’s a great idea to leave both our packs without Alphas just in case the Bitterfangs are planning a surprise attack. But if things stay good and calm around here, I’d be open to going with you in a few days.”

I nodded, waiting for the other shoe to drop. That was usually the case when trying to come to an agreement with Xavier. It was hard to believe that it was really going to be this easy, that we were actually agreeing on something without a heated argument or one of us coming out on the other side with a bruised ego. It was almost too good to be true.

I was starting to think that Xavier becoming Alpha of the Samara pack might actually end up being a turning point in our relationship. Perhaps him no longer feeling subordinate to me would release some of the pressure between us. When I really stopped to think about it, Xavier and I had been like oil and water the entire time we’d been in the Redwood pack together. Maybe a little separation would do us good.

But there would always be a degree of tension surrounding Cali—there was no getting around that. The *due destini* was still in play, and there were still so many unanswered questions around Xavier’s recent behavior. And, of course, it was a few days ago that Xavier had kissed Cali and pissed me the fuck off. His erratic, unpredictable behavior had left Cali confused once again and made an already messy situation worse—which seemed to be his M.O. lately.

*There’s no way for me to know how things will be between Xavier and me if we go out on the road, but if we keep our focus on the Bitterfangs, then we might just be able to make this work.*

Xavier shifted uneasily on his feet and threw a glance back at the pack house as if he were itching to go back inside. The conversation had stalled awkwardly, and I knew that I wasn’t going to get a handshake from Xavier to end things. There was no use expecting that. We were a long way from those kinds of gestures, though deep down I held out hope that we might get there one day.

I cleared my throat and looked past Xavier at the pack house. “This is the first time I’m really seeing your place in the light of day. I’m impressed. How’d you get it built so fast?”

Xavier shrugged. “Called in a favor. The Samaras deserve more than a trailer and a bunch of tents, so I made it happen. It was the morale boost we needed.”

I nodded my agreement. “Especially after the battle. A pack needs a comfortable, warm place to come home to after something like that. Glad you could make that happen.” Xavier would never believe it, but I was actually happy for him.

“Exactly. They’ve had a hard time of it, lots of changes in such a short time. They’ve finally learned to trust their Alpha,” Xavier added.

I nodded, noting how Xavier hadn’t been able to resist slipping that in. He wanted to drive the point home that the Samaras’ recent turn of good luck was all due to him. I started to tell him that he didn’t have anything to prove—least of all to me—but I stopped myself. What was the point? We were getting along so well, and Xavier was like a raw nerve: touch him the wrong way, and things could go sideways quickly.

“We should talk again in a few days,” I said. “Once we’re sure that things are calm enough to make a move, we can work on scoping out a solid plan.” I turned to go, but Xavier stopped me.

“I assume that whoever I choose to watch over things while I’m gone will be dealing with Rishika on your end?” Xavier asked.

“Not this time,” I said. “I’m going to put Cali in charge.”

Before I knew it, Xavier had grabbed me by the collar. He put his face close to mine and growled, “What the fuck are you thinking?”

**Episode 4152**

My insides churned at Julia’s panicked tone. I hoped to hell that it was some kind of mistake, that she hadn’t really been discovered. We’d done so much to protect her and Russell that I couldn’t wrap my head around the Bitterfangs somehow getting to them anyway.

“This is the worst thing ever, Cali! We tried to be so careful, but obviously it wasn’t enough! They’ve found us, they’ve tracked us down somehow, and I don’t know what we’re going to do!” Julia was beside herself and talking a mile a minute. It took me a couple of tries before I was finally able to cut in and get her to calm down.

“Slow down, Julia. How do you know? What makes you think that they’ve found you?”

“I don’t know for sure. But me and Russell think we picked up a Bitterfang scent while we were out for a walk, and we both freaked out, and then I called you!” Julia said. “Russell said he wants to go out and search, but I told him not to.”

“No, he shouldn’t do that. All you did was catch a scent, right? Did you see anyone?” I asked.

“We didn’t, but the scent was enough. Why would there be a Bitterfang in our area if not because they’ve found us? We’re all the way in—”

“Stop,” I said quickly. “Don’t tell me where you are. The less I know, the better. What if I get captured and forced to talk?” A shiver rolled through me at the thought of someone tying me up, taking me away, and torturing me until I told them everything I knew. I quickly suppressed that thought. There was no use getting swept up in Julia’s hysteria.

“Wait, are you worried that will happen? Do you really think that’s a possibility? Oh no!” Julia wailed.

I thought about Greyson’s skepticism about the Bitterfangs’ retreat and Malakai’s “death” and wondered if Julia had any idea that her father might be dead. “We think we defeated the Bitterfangs, but you never know,” I said tentatively, not ready to reveal the news about her father just yet. Not when she was so worked up already.

“Oh no!” Julia said, starting to sob into the phone. “This is all so messed up! I heard about the war, and I’m so sorry. This is all my fault. If I’d never come to you all for help, none of this would be happening.”

“No, Julia, please calm down. This isn’t just about you and Russell. You have to believe that. There’s way more at play here than you realize. Your father was looking for any reason to hate the Redwoods—and not least of all because I’m a *due destini*. Chances are, the war would have happened anyway. Don’t beat yourself up over this. This is your father’s fault, no one else’s.” Malakai was a werewolf extremist and had even taken it personally that we had witches in our pack. He’d been looking for a fight, and he’d found one.

“B-But he and my mother blame you and the Redwoods for my death. And I’m not even dead!” Julia sniffled hard, trying to stifle her sobs. “Russell and I have been talking, and we both agree that if I show them that I’m still alive, it might end all this death and fighting. I don’t know if it’s worth it anymore.”

I was stunned. “No, Julia, you *cannot* do that. Remember, your father was going to kill Russell and was even going to kill *you* before he knew anything about your ‘death.’ If your father learns that you and Russell deceived them like this, do you think he’ll be forgiving? No!”

Julia’s sobs intensified again. “I know! But I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to believe. I just feel so responsible for all of this. It’s tearing me apart!”

I paused, my heart breaking at the sound of her sobs. “Julia, listen to me. I won’t have you blaming yourself for this. Nobody forced us to do what we did. You didn’t force us, and Russell didn’t force us. It was our decision to get involved, and we stand by that, okay? There isn’t one person in our alliance who would even think to place the blame on you.”

Julia finally went quiet for a moment before saying, “But what if they attack you again?”

I sighed. “I hate to admit that it’s a possibility, but we really do think that the Bitterfangs might have learned their lesson and retreated.” Even as I said the words, something in the pit of my stomach told me it wasn’t true. Greyson’s concerns were now my own, but I didn’t want to tell Julia that. There was a chance that we were just being overly cautious and the Bitterfangs were really down for the count, but we needed proof, and we didn’t have that yet.

Julia sniffled. “You don’t know my father. He will never give up.”

“Julia… It’s possible that your father was killed,” I said reluctantly. No matter what her father had done or how awful he was, I knew that it would still be hard to hear news like that.

Julia gasped. “W-What?”

“Yes… But the circumstances around his… possible death… are fuzzy, so there’s also a chance that he escaped and is still plotting to attack us. We just don’t know. So, you and Russell need to stay safe for now. Keep lying low.”

“But, Cali, that doesn’t seem right. We shouldn’t just be sitting around here when everyone’s fighting for us back—”

“Julia, this isn’t a discussion. This is the way it has to be, or everything we’ve done will have been in vain. Do I make myself clear?”

Julia was silent for a long while before finally saying, “Yes.”

I felt a little bad for coming down on her so hard, but I wasn’t about to let someone so young throw her life away because of her asshole father. “Call me anytime, Julia. Whenever you need to talk, I’m here. If you ever feel like this again or like you need to do something to fix this, call me first. And as for the Bitterfang scent, if you haven’t seen anyone, if no one has confronted you, I think it’s a fluke.”

“Okay,” Julia said. “You might be right.”

“I am right. But if you do come across any Bitterfangs, or you get any solid proof that you’re being stalked or watched, you call me immediately, okay? And when in doubt, let the other Pit Bulls know. Don’t keep it to yourselves.”

“Okay, we will. Thank you, Cali!”

“Anytime,” I said before ending the call. I put my phone in my pocket and let out a deep breath. I hoped that I’d gotten through to her. I wished that Greyson had been by my side to reinforce things. My warnings and advice probably would have sounded way more convincing coming from an Alpha.

Artemis came walking toward me. “Are you ready?”

I looked past Artemis at the targets she’d set up. “I didn’t realize that you were going to set them up so far away. How am I supposed to use my sword against those?”

“Good point,” Artemis said. “I wonder if we could use the daggers that Adair gave us. Or…” Artemis had a gleam in her eyes. “Maybe you could try throwing your magic sword?”

“Whoa, I never thought of that. Is that even possible?”

Artemis conjured up her bow and arrow and quickly zinged one into one of the targets. “Bullseye!” she said, pumping her fist and then shaking her magical bow and arrow away. “If I can launch a magic arrow, I don’t see why you couldn’t do the same with a magic sword.”

I shrugged. “I can see the logic in that.” I conjured my sword and aimed, keeping one eye shut to focus in on my target. The sword felt a lot heavier than I remembered, but I still wanted to try. I reared back and sent it soaring. It barely grazed the target, and I threw myself against Artemis, both of us crashing to the ground.

“Cali, what the hell is wrong with you?” Artemis shouted, already squirming to disentangle herself from me.

I looked toward the targets. “The sword is going to come back this way, and it might hit us!”

Artemis scowled and pointed to the sword glimmering on the ground a few yards away from the target. Its glow began to dissipate, and then a few seconds later, it disappeared.

“Sheesh,” Artemis said, getting to her feet and then thrusting a hand down at me to help me up. “You do know that magical weapons aren’t like conventional ones… and you do know that a sword isn’t a boomerang, right? Why would it come back at us?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, it was just a feeling I got, I guess. Better safe than sorry, right?” I uttered a sheepish laugh as I dusted myself off.

“I guess,” Artemis grumbled, wiping a smudge of dirt off her cheek. “Try again, and this time, no tackling me after, okay?”

“Okay,” I said, smirking as I conjured up another sword. Just as I drew my arm back, Lucian and Elle came bounding out of the woods in wolf form. Startled, I misfired and launched the sword right at Elle.

**Episode 4153**

“Watch out!” I screamed.

Elle stopped in her tracks and the sword landed well short of her and dissipated a few seconds later.

Lucian shifted to human and came stalking toward me, his hands on his hips. “Why are you trying to smite my precious forest rose, Cali? You had your chance with me, and you blew it, and you should know that jealousy doesn’t become you!”

“What?” I sputtered. “That’s not—”

“Oh, give me a break!” Artemis yelled. “Why are you stupid enough to run into the middle of target practice?”

“I’m not stupid,” Elle shot back as soon as she shifted. “And neither is he,” Elle said. She caught up to Lucian, and I watched her closely as she strutted toward us. I became painfully aware of just how flawless and beautiful she was. It was no wonder that Lucian had pounced on her as soon as he could.

“Well, you’re lucky that Cali’s aim is awful, or things might have gone pretty badly. And go put some clothes on!” Artemis grumbled. “We don’t need to see all your goods.”

“Hey! My aim isn’t awful!” I complained. “This is my first time throwing my sword, give me a break.”

“Maybe ‘awful’ was a strong word,” Artemis said.

Lucian glared at Artemis as he pulled clothing from the bag on his shoulder. “Here you go, darling,” Lucian said, handing Elle a long, flowy dress. “Obviously the Fae don’t appreciate natural beauty.”

Artemis groaned and sent another arrow into a target. “Yeah, that’s it,” she muttered.

Lucian pulled on a ridiculously flowing, silken tunic that matched Elle’s dress, and he and Elle linked hands as they walked toward me. I had to admit that they were a striking couple, almost too good-looking to stare at head-on.

“What are you two doing here?” I asked. “Is something wrong?”

Lucian looked confused. “What? Isn’t Greyson expecting me?”

Now it was my turn to be confused. “No, Greyson isn’t here.”

Lucian’s confusion quickly morphed into annoyance. “He left a message for me with Aysel. He asked to see me, so here I am.”

“Maybe you misunderstood? Or maybe Aysel relayed the message wrong? Greyson wants to talk to you… but over the phone,” I said.

“Over the phone? Everyone knows that I don’t have a phone. They’re too common, and I don’t need one. One mustn’t ever be *too* available. A prince must maintain a certain degree of elusiveness.”

“But having a phone might have saved you the trip, Lucian. Maybe you should think about getting one?”

Elle nudged Lucian in the side. “Tell her,” she whispered.

I eyed them both as Artemis zinged yet another arrow and got another bullseye. “I’m on fire today!” she cheered.

“Tell me what?” I pressed.

Lucian sighed. “That neither of us is happy with the current mind link situation. We’d like to keep our intimate conversations private.”

Artemis made a gagging sound, and I shot her a sharp look.

“I want to know what Greyson plans to do about it,” Lucian continued after cutting his eyes at Artemis and raising his nose in the air even higher.

“I’ve actually already done something about it,” I said. “Big Mac created a spell to help. Maybe you’d like a magical facial, too?”

Elle wrinkled her brow. “A magical what?”

“Oh, I mean… not a *facial* facial, more like a steam bath for your head.”

Elle wrinkled her brow even more. “It sounds hot.”

“It’s a little smelly, but not so bad.” I decided not to mention that it had made me pass out. That was a minor detail.

“A facial sounds absolutely amazing right about now, especially after that skin-drying battle against the Bitterfangs,” Lucian said.

“As a reminder, it’s not *that* kind of facial,” I said.

Lucian wasn’t listening. “Who knew that the Redwoods actually understand the value of pampering oneself? They sure don’t look like it,” Lucian said. He gestured at Elle, and they both started toward the pack house. “Where’s Big Mac?”

“Hey, I think you should check with Big Mac first before you go parading the prince in front of her,” Artemis said, lowering her bow and arrow. “You know how she can be.”

“I know better than most,” I said. I hustled to catch up with Lucian and Elle. Just before we reached the pack house, Greyson pulled into the driveway. Relieved, I motioned for Lucian and Elle to wait and jogged over to greet him. I wanted to ask if he’d talked to Xavier, but I figured I should wait until we could talk alone. Lucian didn’t need to be present for that conversation.

Greyson stepped out of the car and gathered me into a hug, then pulled away to eye Lucian and Elle questioningly.

“They’re here because apparently you told Aysel that you needed to speak with them? I figured you meant by phone, and they misinterpreted the invitation, but you recall how Lucian feels about phones. Anyway, Lucian just complained about the whole mind link crossed wires thing, and I was going to take them to see Big Mac.”

Greyson nodded as he snapped the car door shut. “I always forget about Lucian’s aversion to phones—because it’s so stupid,” Greyson said with an eye roll. “And I don’t think we need to bother Big Mac with this. Let’s just test out the mind link now and see if the spell worked.”

*Does that make sense?* he mind linked to me.

I nodded and then threw an anxious glance at Lucian and Elle, wondering if they’d heard Greyson. To my relief, neither of them reacted.

*Makes sense*,I replied, *but Big Mac did mention that all of us should try the spell.* I waited, but there was still no reaction from Lucian or Elle.

“Hey, looks like the spell is working,” I said to them. “No need to go see Big Mac.”

Lucian frowned. “It doesn’t matter. I still want a magical facial.”

Greyson looked between me and Lucian. “What? What did you tell him?”

“Just a misunderstanding,” I said quickly. “Should we get Big Mac?”

Greyson sighed. “Sure.”

We went inside and found Big Mac in the living room. She rolled her eyes as soon as she saw us. “What now?”

“We’ve brought Lucian and Elle in to see you—you know, to get their dose of Hypatia’s spell?”

Big Mac rolled her eyes again. “Great.” She shifted her attention to me. “I hope you had a good nap after your dose?”

I nodded. “Not a long one, but a good one.” I thought about the dream I’d had about being in college and Lola’s real push to get me into college with her. I still wasn’t sold on the idea, and frankly, I was in shock that Lola had taken it upon herself to apply on my behalf.

“Luckily, I still have some of the potion left, so it won’t take too long,” Big Mac said. “Otherwise, I would have told you all to buzz off,” she said with a pseudo-pleasant smile. She motioned for us to follow her up to her room.

“An unexpected facial is the best kind,” Lucian said as we followed Big Mac up to her room.

Big Mac gave me a look. “Long story,” I said, “best not to engage.”

“My pleasure,” Big Mac grumbled. “At least this time, it won’t be all your fault if something goes wrong. That’s new for you, right?” She chuckled as she opened her door and ushered us inside.

*She’s teasing me, but the truth is, I am actually happy that I won’t hold the responsibility this time if things go wrong. Takes a lot of the pressure off to not have someone’s life in your hands for once.*

Big Mac pulled the bowl of bubbling goo down off a shelf and gave it a shake that seemed to activate it. She held out a towel. “So, who’s going first?”

Lucian took the towel. “Normally, I’d say ladies first, but since there’s some risk involved, I’ll go before Elle.”

“Now what you want to do first—” Big Mac began.

Lucian waved her off. “I’m very familiar with facials, no need to explain.”

“It’s not a facial!” Big Mac snarled. “And if you do it wrong, you’ll have no one but yourself to blame!”

“Listen to Big Mac,” I said, jumping in to mediate. “This is a spell, Lucian, so treat it with respect.”

Lucian nodded and draped the towel over his head and did as Big Mac told him without any resistance, which was a surprise in and of itself. When he removed the towel, his nose was scrunched up against the smell, and his face was glistening with sweat.

He handed the towel to Elle. “Be prepared, my forest rose, it doesn’t smell nearly as nice as the cucumber facials we get back at the palace.”

“For the last time, it’s not a facial!” Big Mac snapped.

Lucian shrugged as Elle took the towel and draped it over her head. She leaned over the bowl and breathed in the potion. A few seconds later, she removed the towel, grimacing. “Ew, that was nasty.”

Big Mac snatched the towel away from her. “Well, it isn’t supposed to be perfume!” she said.

Lucian pulled Elle close and looked into her eyes. “How do you feel, my sweet?”

Elle started to say something, but then she faltered and fell into Lucian’s arms.

“My poor forest rose!” Lucian exclaimed. “Are you okay?”

Elle’s eyes fluttered beneath her closed eyelids for a few long moments before she finally opened them again. Her voice was breathless when she finally spoke. “I missed you, Greyson.”

**Episode 4154**

**Greyson**

I arched a brow in surprise and immediately turned to Cali, who looked absolutely shell-shocked. It was strange hearing Elle whisper my name—and right in front of everyone to boot—but it wasn’t entirely disagreeable.

I couldn’t help but take pleasure in Lucian’s wounded expression. He looked like Elle had just slapped him across the face. It was no doubt a result of the lingering sire bond, but I was sure that wouldn’t make it any easier for Lucian to swallow.

The princeling was the most stunned out of everyone, of course. His pride had just taken a very public thrashing. His expression slowly changed from hurt to shock as he looked down at Elle, whose eyes were fluttering as she struggled to stay awake. It was maybe one of the first times I’d ever seen the princeling at a loss for words. He sputtered a few sounds and then turned an accusatory gaze on Big Mac.

“What have you done to her? That little funky concoction of yours just scrambled her brains!” he shouted. “I demand the antidote because surely that was poison! I should have known that no one in this pack house has the slightest clue what they’re doing.”

Big Mac flashed Lucian a bored look. “Chill. It’s just the potion. Elle probably just needs to sleep it off like Cali did afterward,” Big Mac said. “I guess you were too busy talking over me to hear me when I told you that there might be some side effects.”

Lucian looked confused. “What are you talking about?”

I could tell that the princeling was taking this a little too seriously. I put a hand on his shoulder. “What Big Mac is trying to say is that Elle doesn’t know what she’s saying. Don’t take it so hard.”

Lucian brushed my hand away and pulled Elle tightly against him as if protecting her from us. “You’ve all done enough for one day, don’t you think? I don’t need your piddly reassurances.”

I looked at him, baffled. “‘You all?’ What did I do? Taking the potion—I’m sorry—the facial, was all your idea. I tried to tell you that it wasn’t necessary. And besides, nothing’s wrong with Elle.”

*Except that she’s mated to you*,I wanted to add, but I knew that now wasn’t the time or the place. I wasn’t in the mood for coming to blows with the princeling in the middle of Big Mac’s room. The witch would probably blip us all to Antarctica if we tried that, and I wouldn’t blame her.

Lucian lifted Elle’s chin so that they were gazing into each other’s eyes. “It’s me, darling. Prince Lucian, your savior. Come back to me.”

I couldn’t help but roll my eyes. Lucian just couldn’t help himself. I was starting to think that the princeling fed off turning every single situation into a cringe-fest.

Elle looked confused and reached up to caress Lucian’s face. I rolled my eyes again and resisted the urge to gag. This was not what I wanted to be doing with my time. I wished that I’d been more adamant about Lucian and Elle not needing Big Mac’s spell.

Lucian clutched Elle’s hand and pressed it tightly against his face. “Yes, darling, you *do* remember me. How could you ever forget?” He leaned in and kissed her, but Elle pushed him away.

“Why aren’t you kissing me like before, Greyson?” Elle said in that same, breathy, dreamy voice.

Lucian was livid. “*Before?*” He turned his accusatory gaze on me this time. “You kissed my mate?”

Cali jumped between us. “It’s not what you think, Lucian.”

Lucian’s eyes went wide. “And you *knew* about it? What is this? Some kind of conspiracy to steal my beloved forest rose away from me? You should all be ashamed!”

I sighed. “Big Mac, can you watch Elle and make sure she’s okay? Lucian and I need to go and have a little talk.”

“Sure. It’s not like I have *anything* to do but babysit,” Big Mac grumbled as Cali gently pulled Elle from Lucian’s arms.

I grabbed Lucian and dragged him out of Big Mac’s room. Lucian looked mad enough to kill as he faced off with me in the hallway, his eyes wild with unchecked rage.

“Lucian, you do realize that you’re blowing this out of proportion? You’d better chill the fuck out, or I’ll do it for you,” I warned. “We don’t want this to get out of hand, now, do we? It won’t end well for you.”

“Oh, so first you put your filthy, already-spoken-for lips all over my mate, and now you have the audacity to *threaten* me? Have you no decency? Why would I even ask that question—of course you don’t! A decent man wouldn’t kiss another man’s mate when he already has a mate of his own!” He balled his hands into fists. “What else have you two been doing behind my back?” he asked through gritted teeth. “Or are you going to tell me that you never kissed Elle and it was just the potion talking?”

I shook my head. “No, I’m not going to say that. I did kiss her.”

Lucian looked like he was about to explode. “*What?* You dare admit it?”

I shoved him back. He was getting a little too close for comfort. “Take it easy. It’s not what you think. It happened right after I helped save her father. It didn’t mean anything then, and it doesn’t mean anything now.”

Lucian turned away from me. “Have you… slept with her?”

“*What?* How dare you? I love Cali and only love Cali. And if I’m being honest, I’m having a hard time not kicking your ass for even suggesting that! And have you forgotten what *you* did? You not only put a whole *demon* into Cali’s body—a demon that caused problems that we’ve only recently gotten rid of—but you kissed Cali on numerous occasions! You’re lucky you’re still alive.”

Lucian whirled on me and pushed me back before thrusting a finger in my face. “That’s where you’re wrong. *You’re* the one who’s lucky to be alive. You kissed my mate!”

“Get your finger out of my face before I rip it off!” I said, slapping his finger away and grabbing him by the shirt. I walked him back against the wall, unable to ignore the fact that Xavier had put me in a similar hold not even an hour ago. “Calm. Down. I’m not going to tell you again.”

Cali popped her head out of Big Mac’s room and eyed us warily. “Is everything okay out here? There’s a lot of shouting… Should I call in reinforcements?”

Lucian and I glared at each other for a few seconds before I finally released my hold. “Everything’s fine,” I said, my eyes still on Lucian. “Lucian was just about to apologize.”

Lucian snorted and pushed past me, straightening his ridiculous tunic. “If anyone should be apologizing—”

“Listen,” Cali interrupted, “you both need to take it down a notch or two. We’re still allies, remember? This isn’t the way two people who are on the same side should be acting.”

Cali was right, and I kicked myself for letting Lucian drag me down into the mud with him. I shouldn’t have taken any of Lucian’s bluster so seriously. I pinched the bridge of my nose and took a few deep breaths, trying to calm down. “How is Elle?” I asked.

“Nice of someone to ask,” Cali said, shooting a glance at Lucian. “She’s fine; resting. Big Mac thinks she’ll be okay. Just the aftershocks of the potion. Nothing out of the ordinary. Same thing happened to me after, too. The fainting part, not the ‘mistaking my mate for another man’ part.”

Lucian bristled but quickly calmed down. “I—I should go check on my delicate forest rose to make sure she’s okay,” Lucian muttered. He rushed past us and went into Big Mac’s bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

Cali and I shared a long glance before I finally reached out and pulled her into a hug. I wrapped my arms around her and buried my face in her hair. “Sorry I lost my temper,” I said. “And thank you for intervening before I did something stupid.”

Cali relaxed against me, and I was relieved that she wasn’t angry at me for allowing myself to get so worked up. “I get it,” she said. “I know better than anyone how easy it is to want to murder Lucian.”

I laughed and held her tighter. “Not going to argue that.” I leaned down and pressed a kiss against her lips. Cali linked her arms around my neck, our tongues dancing together as we both deepened the kiss. In a swift movement, I picked her up and pressed her against Big Mac’s door, all of my anger slipping away as my desire for her grew.

We broke apart when we heard Lucian’s angry voice booming through Big Mac’s door.

“What now?” I said, reluctantly putting Cali down.

We hurried into the bedroom to see Lucian pointing a finger in Big Mac’s face. What the fuck? He needed to step back.

“You’ll do it, and you’ll do it now, witch!” Lucian shouted. “Break the sire bond this instant!”

**Episode 4155**

**Xavier**

I slammed my mallet down hard on the edge of the bookshelf, my anger swelling inside me. I shifted around to the other side of the bookshelf and brought my mallet down again on the other edge, knocking the bottom shelf into place. Putting the bookshelf together was a perfect excuse to hit something, but it wasn’t taking the edge off my anger like I thought it would.

*I can’t believe that Greyson had the audacity to suggest putting Cali in charge if we go off on that mission. Is he a complete idiot? Putting her in the line of fire like that? It’s like he wants to throw her in harm’s way.*

I was angry at myself, too, for slipping up when I shouldn’t have. My reaction had certainly made my brother raise an eyebrow, and I was surprised that he hadn’t responded with the same fire that I’d thrown at him. Or maybe it wasn’t all that surprising. He wanted me to go on the Bitterfang search mission with him and probably wanted to stay on my good side. Him lashing out at me would have been a surefire way for us to get in a fight that would have torpedoed any chance of us working together.

Despite my reaction, I hadn’t said what I was really thinking—that Greyson was putting a target on Cali’s back yet again. Between the fake Luna mark that I had to help conceal for her safety and him even thinking of putting Cali in charge of the pack during our absence, he was playing a dangerous game. One that would end in Cali getting hurt. My anger flared all over again.

It wasn’t that I didn’t think Cali was capable… because she was. That was the whole damn problem. It was a protection thing. I wanted her safe more than anything in the world, and I couldn’t be there to protect her in the same way I used to be. And I just didn’t trust Greyson enough to do it the right way. At least, not the way I would do it.

After my outburst, the most I’d been able to suggest was that the job was better suited for one of our seconds. Greyson had disagreed, of course, and said that our Lunas should be able to handle the job. Then he’d twisted the knife by suggesting that I harbored doubts about my Luna. That had pissed me off even more. I’d laughed in his face and countered with the truth: that Ava was a real werewolf and a *real* Luna for that matter. Cali might be willing and capable, but she was still a pretend Luna. Greyson had kept his mouth shut after that, and I didn’t blame him. There wasn’t anything more to say.

*He was grasping at straws, anyway, to even suggest that I might think Ava unfit to lead in my absence. He can think or say what he wants about Ava and my relationship with her, but he knows as well as I do that she’s more than capable of holding her own.*

I finally finished the bookshelf and stood it upright. I pushed it against the wall and then stood back to take a look around the living room. We’d done a pretty decent job in a short amount of time. Everyone had been pitching in and pulling their weight to make the pack house feel like home.

If it weren’t for everything going on between me and Ava right now and that conversation with Greyson, I’d probably be feeling pretty good right now. But I wasn’t. So that was that.

*I should go clear things up with Ava… maybe not to the point that we’re 100 percent, but at least enough so that the others don’t realize that there’s any trouble between us. The Samaras need to see a united front between their Alpha and Luna right now. They don’t need to deal with any more of our drama.*

I wondered how much I could even do to repair things without raising threats from Adéluce. That was the million-dollar question, and I was no closer to an answer than I had been when all this first started. I hated that I couldn’t just keep things civil with Ava. Based on past experience, if I tried to do that, we’d end up way *past* civil. Not that my wolf minded that at all, and I couldn’t deny that I’d enjoyed my close moments with Ava. It had all just become too dangerous and too difficult to navigate.

I was starting to feel the same frustration that I’d felt from the moment that Adéluce appeared and started doing everything in her power to completely fuck up my life. I was trapped, and that was maybe the worst thing about it. There was nothing I hated more than feeling trapped.

I headed toward the front door, thinking that maybe I should go on a run to blow off some steam. I ran into Simon and Donovan in the foyer. They were busy preparing to go on patrol.

“Hey,” I said. “Take a break. I’ll handle this patrol.” I figured I could kill two birds with one stone—go for a long, hard run while patrolling at the same time.

“Want me to join?” Donovan asked.

“Thanks, but no. I think I’m going to take this one solo.”

“Fine, good luck out there,” Simon said.

I was pleased that neither of them had even thought to argue with me about my decision. With the way I was feeling right now, that was probably for the best. I was more on edge than I could ever remember being, and I knew that I might snap with even the slightest provocation.

I went out on the porch and shed my clothes, throwing them in my typical spot over the porch banister. I hopped off the shitty porch and shifted before I hit the ground, then took off into the woods. The farther away from the pack house I got, the better I felt. I was happy that we had it—the pack seemed to love it, and Greyson had even offered a compliment—but right now, it was just a reminder of everything that I’d lost, and everything that Adéluce was still trying to rip away from me.

*I just need to get away from it all and clear my head. Maybe a little fresh air and physical activity will help put everything into perspective. I could really use some clarity right now.*

I kept my eyes sharp on the patrol, but I didn’t really expect to find anything that would concern me. I agreed with Greyson that the Bitterfangs probably weren’t in the position to try anything over the next few days. Even though there were a few things we still weren’t too sure about, we’d definitely struck a hard blow to their pack. There was no way they were in any position to come at us again so soon.

*If nothing else, this is a good opportunity to get a nice run in and enjoy some alone time. No Ava, no Samaras, no Greyson, no nothing.*

I thought about the last time I’d been out on patrol with Ava, and how I’d run into Charlie and how that had turned into a whole thing. It was a reminder that with our proximity to the Redwood territory, I was never really safe from running into anything that might shift things from bad to worse at any moment.

As I moved deeper into the forest, I picked up a familiar scent. I slowed and tried to place it—and that didn’t take me long. Bitterfang. I stopped and listened, not moving a muscle.

*Could there be spies out here? It’s not out of the question. Even if they’re not planning to mount another attack, that doesn’t mean they don’t have their eyes and ears out here trying to keep an eye on us.*

I wasn’t picking up on any unusual sounds, but I wasn’t ready to just assume that everything was okay. From the concentration of the scent on the breeze, I gathered that I was only dealing with one wolf, but if it turned out to be more than one, I didn’t want to be caught off-guard. I needed to be careful. There was no use being stupid and letting my guard down.

I kept low to the ground and followed a partially frozen creek, keeping my steps light and as quiet as I could. It wasn’t long before I’d lost the scent. I took a quick look around, trying to pick it up again, but it was gone.

*Was that all my imagination? Is my mind so burdened that I’m smelling things that aren’t there?*

I shook my head. No, my nose had never been wrong before. I knew what I’d smelled. But it was strange that it was there one minute, gone the next. I supposed the wind might have shifted. That was the only explanation that made sense.

I turned and started to backtrack when a laugh rose up behind me. I quickly spun around and saw Adéluce standing not even five feet away from me with a smile on her awful face.

Her smile widened as she came closer. “It’s due time for us to have a little chat, Xavier.”

**Episode 4156**

I jumped in and pulled Lucian away from Big Mac, worried that she was seconds from using one of her powerful spells to disintegrate the raving Alpha into a puddle of slush. At this point, it was what he deserved, but we were in an alliance, and it wouldn’t serve the Redwood pack well to have his blood on our hands.

“What in the hell do you think you’re doing?” Greyson boomed. “Stay away from her!”

“I’m sure you heard me, Greyson. I’m demanding that your witch remove this sire bond fully from my mate!” Lucian turned his attention back to Big Mac. “I demand that you use your powers and fix this, now! Fixing the mind link isn’t enough. I don’t want this… man… to have *any* claim on my beautiful mate!”

“Believe me, I don’t want that, either,” Greyson shot back.

Big Mac looked like she was about to kill someone—and at this point, I doubted she cared which one of us it was. “Like I already told Cali and Greyson, sire bonds aren’t in my wheelhouse. In fact, this stupid mind link spell isn’t in my wheelhouse, either. I did it out of the kindness of my heart, and I’m sure we can all see where that has gotten me. I knew better. I should have never gotten involved.”

She got right in our faces, and we all took a collective step back. “The next time you have issues, find another witch! I’m finished with each and every one of you!”

Greyson jumped in to apologize. “Big Mac, I’m so sorry. I had no idea this was going to happen. Lucian spoke out of turn, as usual, and I’m sorry this got so out of hand. That was never my intention.”

“Don’t apologize on my behalf, because I’m not sorry! I want this sire bond broken, and I want it done *now*!” Lucian roared. “Now, witch, cast your spell and break us out of this torment!”

*Lucian is so dramatic! I don’t know how Elle can stand him!*

I stood back and poked my fingers into my temples, thinking about how much of a mess this was all turning out to be. I hadn’t been pleased, either, to hear Elle say what she had about kissing Greyson. My stomach had dropped, probably the same as Lucian’s, once I realized that she’d confused Lucian with Greyson. I didn’t even understand how that was possible when Greyson was so much better-looking.

*I’m just smart enough and confident enough in Greyson to know that my mate has no romantic interest in Elle and that all of this is probably just because of the sire bond. I questioned all of it before, but Greyson has assured me, and I believe him, so I won’t question him again. Lucian obviously hasn’t reached that point.*

In the back of my mind, however, I supposed it was possible that Elle still had feelings for Greyson, feelings that might have been aroused by the sire bond. I’d thought there was something between Elle and Greyson once, back when Greyson had turned her and she’d come to join the pack, but now I was confident that there was nothing like that between them.

But was it possible that while under the spell, Elle had become like someone who started talking too much when they were drunk? Could Elle still have feelings for Greyson hidden deep down inside? Was it possible that Greyson was aware of Elle’s feelings and just never told me about them?

“I want everyone out of my room. Now!” Big Mac said, ushering us all toward the door. “I’ve had enough werewolf drama to last me a lifetime!”

As I stumbled through the doorway, I asked, “What about Elle?” I hated to point it out, but she wasn’t in the best condition at the moment. “She still needs to rest, doesn’t she?” I looked at her. She was splayed out on Big Mac’s bed, floating in and out of consciousness.

“I refuse to leave her!” Lucian said, bracing his hands on the doorframe as Big Mac tried to push him out.

“And *I* refuse to have you in my room unguarded!” Big Mac said.

“I am a true gentleman, and I don’t require guards!” Lucian huffed.

Greyson snorted derisively. “Is this guy serious?”

“What if Lucian takes Elle to her room? You know, because she has one here? Can he just come back in to get her, Big Mac?” I asked.

“Fine, yes, do that,” Big Mac grumbled, stepping aside.

Lucian quickly rushed to Elle’s side and scooped her up in his arms, then rejoined us outside the witch’s door.

Big Mac cast us all one last glare before slamming the door. Greyson and I led the way to Elle’s room, and Lucian placed her gently on the bed.

“Oh, my forest rose,” Lucian said as he sat at Elle’s side and took her hand in his. He raised it to his lips and kissed it, tears shimmering in his eyes. “What have these brutes done to you?”

Greyson rolled his eyes again and was about to say something when I nudged him.

“We should go,” I said. “Let’s give them some time alone.”

As we left, Lucian shouted, “I meant what I said. I’m going to find a witch to break this damn sire bond if it’s the last thing I do!”

Greyson and I stepped out and closed the door behind us, only for Greyson to turn back and push it open a crack. “Just to be safe,” he said.

We stopped in front of Greyson’s room, and I was about to tell him about my alarming conversation with Julia, but before I could, he pulled me into a kiss. I was pleasantly surprised, and I leaned in and took his tongue into my mouth, realizing how much I’d wanted to finish what we’d started outside Big Mac’s room before Lucian’s outburst.

After we broke apart, I gave him a questioning look.

“I just wanted to make sure that you had no doubts where my heart is, and where it will always be,” he said.

I hugged him, burying my face in his chest. “I don’t have any doubts,” I said. “Not a single one.”

Greyson smiled down at me. “If only we could get Lucian to feel that way. One thing I’ll say for the princeling is that he’ll stop at nothing to get what he wants, so maybe he really will find a way to break the sire bond. Honestly, that would be good for everyone.”

“It would be. One less complication to worry about. And once Elle is better, we should do another complete test of our mind link to make sure that it’s really fixed,” I said. “It would be awful to have gone through all of that only to find that we’re still getting our signals crossed.”

“Agreed. The last thing we need is to mix up any conversations with Lucian or make him privy to anything he shouldn’t know. And if the Bitterfangs do return, we can’t afford not to be able to mind link.”

That reminded me again of my call with Julia. “Speaking of which, Julia called today in a panic.”

“Really? What about?” Greyson asked, guiding me into his room.

“Everything, really. She heard about the war with the Bitterfangs, and I think it’s all starting to get to her. She said that she felt responsible—and she mentioned wanting to go and show her parents that she’s still alive!”

“What?” Greyson said, stopping short. “She can’t do that!”

“I know. That’s what I told her; I’m pretty sure that I talked her down. She really believed that it was the right thing to do, but I convinced her that it was literally the worst thing that she could do at this point.”

“I hope she listened to reason,” Greyson said. “We don’t know if Malakai is still alive or if he’s dead, but if he *is* alive, he wouldn’t hesitate to kill Russell, and I doubt very seriously it would change anything between our packs. It would probably make things worse. Malakai made it clear how he feels about the *due destini* and how he doesn’t respect the way I run this pack, so there’s no love lost between us either way.”

“Good, I’m glad you agree. I was hoping that I was telling her the right thing. It felt like I was, but you know how it is. You wonder if honesty is the best policy, but this is one instance where it wouldn’t help things in the least,” I said.

“No, nor does Malakai, Honora, or the Bitterfang pack deserve it. By the way, I did talk to Xavier about the strange way things ended with the Bitterfangs. I asked him to help me, and I think we’ll probably team up to go find out where the Bitterfangs retreated to.”

“Wow. I’m really surprised to hear that, but I’m excited that you two will be able to put aside your differences for the good of the alliance.” I was shocked, actually. Greyson and Xavier had too many differences to count at this point, and it was big of both of them to be able to look past that to do something that would ensure that the Bitterfangs wouldn’t be able to hurt us again in the future—with or without Malakai.

“There’s one more thing,” Greyson said. “While I’m gone, are you prepared to take over the pack?”

**Episode 4157**

**Xavier**

*Shit. I should have known that the vampire-witch was behind the Bitterfang scent I was following. It makes sense that she would use something that always puts me on high alert just to toy with me.*

“Don’t mind me, I’m just busy trying to figure out whether you’re Hansel or Gretel,” Adéluce said. “I left a little candy trail, and it brought you right to me.”

I growled and shifted back to human. “I’m happy to be either one. If I remember correctly, things didn’t end so well for the witch in that story, or don’t you understand that reference as well as you thought you did?” I smirked as I imagined pushing her into an oven and watching her burn to death.

Adéluce scowled and drifted closer to me. “You should be more respectful when you talk to me, wolf. I’m the one holding all the cards here,” Adéluce said. “Don’t you forget it.”

“How could I forget that when you use every opportunity you have to remind me? And I’ll be damned if, on top of everything else, you expect me to kiss your ass, too. It’s not happening. Now what do you want?”

“I understand that you’re having a little trouble in paradise,” Adéluce said.

“Paradise?” I snorted. “Do you think this is paradise? This alternate life that you’ve pushed me into? The one I never asked for? Hell is more like it. Just like you wanted.”

Obviously pleased, Adéluce’s smile widened. “I saw that you and Ava have been playing together in your brand-new shiny magic house. I’m not sure I like that.”

I bristled. “I’m not an idiot. You’ve already threatened Ava, and you’re a fool if you think I’m going to let you hurt her. I’ve already distanced myself, so you can shut the fuck up about Ava already!”

Adéluce cackled. “But who says that’s what I want? What if I *don’t* want you to push her away?”

I narrowed my gaze, growing uneasier by the second. “Then I’d say that you need to get your shit together and figure out what you really want from this whole thing, because I’m starting to think that you don’t even know that yourself.”

“Oh, believe me, I know exactly what I want,” Adéluce said. “And I know just what to do to get it, too.”

“Then what is it? What the hell do you want, Adéluce? Whatever it is you’re up to, I’m not playing along.”

“How cute that you think you can stop me from doing anything, or that you have a choice in the matter. You’re my little puppet, Xavier, don’t you get that? You exist only to make my every command a reality.”

Adéluce drifted even closer, and I felt the vibration of her magic surging around her, a reminder of why I could never get close enough to hurt her. I hoped to one day overcome whatever kept her safe from me and kill her with my bare hands.

“Great, I get it. You’re the boss,” I said through clenched teeth. “We’ve been through this whole song and dance a million times by now. So just tell me what you want already! If it’s to kill Ava, you can just forget it. I won’t do that again. Not in a million years. I don’t care what you do to me.” I was going to have to draw the line somewhere, and that seemed like the right place. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I did that to Ava again.

Adéluce waved that off. “You should know by now that I don’t like easy solutions, especially knowing that part of you might enjoy choking the life out of your beloved Luna.”

“That part of me doesn’t exist anymore,” I growled. “I thought you knew everything there is to know about me, but clearly you don’t if you would even think that I would do that to her.”

“Good, good. I’m glad to see that you’ve grown as a person. And it will prove useful since I want you to embrace Ava. Stop trying to push her away, Xavier. Enjoy her. Be with her fully.”

I shook my head slowly, trying to understand what the vampire-witch was up to. “But you threatened her. You told me, under no uncertain terms, that you wouldn’t allow me to be happy with her. That I had to push her away the same as I did Cali. Isn’t that what you told me?”

Adéluce pouted. “I did, but clearly, I made a mistake. It was no fun watching you hold her at arm’s length, especially knowing how much it really pains you to be with Ava. In a way, it made you happier, rejecting her, because of where your heart truly lies. You so long for your little Fae Caliana, but you can never, ever have her.”

“I’m sorry, but you’ve lost me,” I said. “I don’t get your angle here. I’ve already embraced Ava. I left Cali, I became the Samara Alpha at Ava’s urging, and I made Ava my Luna. On top of that, we’re mates. We just bought a fucking mattress for shit’s sake. What more do you need?”

“All of that’s true, yes, but your motivation has always been to save Cali. Every choice you make, every move you make, is all for Cali. What if that motivation were to change?”

I sighed. “I don’t follow. What are you suggesting? Change?” Not only was Adéluce ruining my life, but she was annoying on top of it. It was like she was starting to run out of ideas. Maybe she didn’t realize that all good things eventually came to an end and lost their luster, even torturing someone for pleasure. She seemed to be scrambling, and it pained me to know that I was still under her thumb even though she didn’t seem to know what the fuck she was doing anymore.

Adéluce’s eyes sparkled. “You’ll catch on soon enough. I’ll make it clearer for you, Xavier. What if you were to fall in love with Ava? Really, truly fall in love with her?”

“How?” I scoffed. That was the one thing that Adéluce couldn’t control, no matter how hard she tried. My heart belonged to one person, and that person wasn’t Ava. “Are you going to force feed me some kind of love potion? Because that’s just about the only way that would happen.”

“Oh, Xavier, you disappoint me! Once again, that would be way too easy. I don’t want some inorganic, magic-induced love. No, that would be boring. I want the kind of love that makes your heart ache, the kind that inspires all the artists and musicians of the world.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s impossible. You can’t *make* someone fall in love. Surely, you’re not deluded enough to think differently?”

“Deluded? No. But I do disagree with you, and I’m going to prove it. Besides, most of the work is already done. Ava already loves you… though I’ll never understand why. She seems like such a smart girl… until it comes to you, that is.”

“Why? Why would you want this? Why is this so important to you?”

“Maybe I’m just a romantic.”

I spat at her feet. “Unlikely.”

Adéluce’s eye flashed. “It seems that you must have forgotten the terms of this arrangement. Don’t trouble yourself with useless questions because they don’t matter. Whatever I say goes. Now listen to me, worm. Fall back in love with Ava, now. I command it.” Without another word, Adéluce blipped away, and I was finally alone.

The Bitterfang scent surged for a moment and then dissipated. Adéluce’s laugh echoed around me before fading away. She’d appeared, twisted her knife through the center of my life, and then disappeared, just as she had so many times before.

I shifted and then continued my run, pushing myself harder than before. I slowed down only when my breath began to erupt from my mouth in painful gasps, but I didn’t stop running even then.

*What the hell does Adéluce want from me? Why does she care who I love? Is she so damn twisted and bitter that she doesn’t even understand how love works? It can’t just be commanded of someone, no matter how much she wants it. Even if it could… is it possible that I could possibly find some kind of happiness with Ava? Somehow?*

But is that what I really want, deep down?

I ran for a few more miles before the answer filtered through my brain. *No*. There was no way in hell. But could we reach some kind of… understanding… at the very least? A shadow of a life?

*Adéluce has to be fucking with me. There’s no way she believes she can dictate who has my heart. She’s crazier than I thought if she truly thinks that’s something within her power to manipulate. This is ridiculous. It’s madness.*

I realized that I’d been running for a while, so consumed with my latest run-in with Adéluce that I hadn’t paid much attention to where I was even going. It wasn’t until I came upon the edge of the woods that I realized that I was standing in front of the Redwood pack house.

My feet had done what my mind and my heart wanted above all else. They’d brought me back to Cali.

**Episode 4158**

I wasn’t sure that I’d heard Greyson correctly. Had he really just asked me to lead the pack while he was gone? “The summit’s over, Greyson. I don’t have to pretend to be Luna anymore… And isn’t Rishika usually the one who takes charge of the pack whenever you’re away? What will she think about this?”

“Rishika will follow my lead like she always does. And yes, the summit is over, and typically Rishika does take over for me, but I’m still asking if you think you would be able to handle it.”

“B-But I was in charge of the pack for like two minutes!” I sputtered. “And I know that you call me your Master Strategist, but we both know that’s flattery… right? We both know I’ve got a long way to go before I’m even an *okay* strategist.”

“But your plan for taking out the Bitterfangs worked, didn’t it? So yes, maybe I was trying to boost your confidence by calling you that, but I wouldn’t have even entertained your plan if I didn’t have faith in you, Cali.” Greyson took my hand in his and smoothed his thumb across my knuckles. “Just like I have faith in you now. You can do this, Cali. Don’t sell yourself short.”

I was floored. I couldn’t believe he was serious. Before the summit, I’d never even thought I’d ever *be* a Luna, and now he was asking me to take over Luna duties. “Do you really believe that I can take charge of the pack?”

Greyson smiled, and my heart threatened to melt right then and there. “The better question is if *you* believe you can take charge of the pack. There’s not a single doubt in my mind that you can do it, Cali. You’ve proven yourself time and time again, and now, I think you would be the best person to watch over the pack in my absence.”

“Honestly, Greyson, I’m not sure. I’m so flattered that you would even ask me, but it sounds like a lot of responsibility. I don’t know if I’m prepared for all of that just yet.”

“You don’t have to answer right away. Think about it. And you should know that you won’t be alone. You’ll have the pack to back you up—Rishika, Artemis, Ravi—whoever you need, they’ll be there for you. But before you make up your mind, I want you to know that I trust you with my life, Cali. There’s no one else in the world I feel that way about. And I hope you feel the same about me.” He kissed me and then reached up and smoothed the back of his hand down my face. “Think about it. There’s still a couple of days before I leave, so you have a bit of time to consider it.”

“Okay, I promise I will,” I said. “And if you really do want me to take charge… then I better get back to my training.” I shot a glance toward the window. “I was outside training with Artemis before Lucian barged in.”

Greyson released me. “Then go ahead. I’ll keep an eye on Lucian and Elle.”

I left him and went downstairs and ran into Rishika and Ravi. They were standing at the bottom of the stairs, talking.

*Does Rishika know that Greyson wants me to take charge of the pack while he’s gone? Rishika was supportive of me during the summit, but that was then, and this is now. Before, it was always her or Xavier who took the reins when Greyson was away for any length of time. Will she be offended that I’m taking over a duty that typically falls to her?*

I eyed Rishika and Ravi as I hurried past them, wondering if I should talk to Artemis about it. Normally, I’d have a pretty good idea of where my sister would stand on an issue, but this was different since it involved Rishika. I hoped that it wouldn’t put Artemis in a tough position by forcing her to choose sides between her sister and the woman she loved. I didn’t want to be in the middle of that, especially when I wasn’t even sure that this was something I wanted to do.

*I’ll think about it some more before I mention it. I haven’t even decided yet, so there’s no use getting everyone worked up if I’m not even sure I want to do it. But if I do decide to do it, will Artemis be mad if I didn’t give her a heads-up, first? No, why would she? I’m probably overthinking things.*

Outside, Artemis was right where I’d left her, except she’d exchanged her magical bow and arrow for her dagger. I stood back and watched her throwing her dagger violently at a tree. The tree in question looked like it had been victimized by a band of assassins.

“What are you doing?” I asked as I sidled up to join her. “And what did that tree do to deserve that?” I asked with a chuckle.

Artemis gave me a quick glance before winging her dagger at the tree again. She stalked over to the tree and wrenched the dagger free before she answered me. “I learned a long time ago that when you’re training, it always helps to picture your most despised enemy.”

I looked at the shredded tree. “Who do you hate that much?”

Artemis cast the dagger at the tree again with so much force that I felt a blast of wind on my face as she threw it. I took a cautious step back as the dagger struck the tree with amazing force. “The woman who kidnapped me when I was born. Taleena.”

Artemis marched over to the tree and then came back to stand beside me. “And if I ever find that bitch…” She whipped the knife so fast this time that I didn’t even see it leave her hand. One minute she was drawing her hand back to throw it, and the next it was buried in the tree—nearly to the hilt.

*Wow. I almost feel sorry for Taleena. But maybe she shouldn’t have kidnapped my sister.*

Artemis yanked the dagger free and finally turned her full attention to me. “Everything work out with the prince and Big Mac?”

I sighed. “Not exactly as I’d planned… but I think it will. Eventually.”

“That bad?” Artemis asked, shining the dagger blade on her shirt before dropping it into the holster on her hip.

“That bad. But like I said, it’ll be okay soon enough.” I thought back to Lucian’s rage-filled demands and pictured Elle lying unconscious on the bed. It had been quite the scene. I hoped that Elle would get better soon.

“Good. I’m going to go get something to drink. Why don’t you start practicing with your sword?” Artemis suggested.

I was eager to do just that, but I hesitated, wondering if I should bring up my conversation with Greyson first. Artemis had always been good for lending a listening ear, but sometimes her opinion was a little too straight for my tastes. I didn’t know if it was worth it just yet.

“Hello, earth to Cali?” Artemis said, waving her hand in front of my face. “You with me?”

I nodded quickly. “Yes, I’m with you. I just… zoned out for a second.”

“Okay, well, get all your zoning out out of your system before you start throwing your sword,” Artemis said with a lopsided grin. “Now magic that thing up and start throwing! And try not to take anyone’s head off while I’m inside.”

“You got it,” I said weakly. I watched Artemis disappear inside the house, and then I turned back to face the targets. I conjured my sword and was just about to throw it when I saw a wolf watching from the woods. Without making it obvious that I’d noticed it, I turned slightly to get a closer look.

*Is it a Bitterfang wolf? Have they come to mount a surprise attack?*

I leveled my sword and braced myself. I was about to send a mind link to Greyson to warn him, but then the wolf stepped out from the shadow of the trees. I lowered my sword in shock.

*Why didn’t I recognize his blue eyes right away? I should know them anywhere.*

I wondered for a moment if I were imaging it, like in the sexy dream I’d had about him earlier. I almost couldn’t believe it was really Xavier, and he was heading right for me. Flustered, I nearly dropped the sword blade first into my foot. I caught it at the last moment, thankful that I wasn’t going to have to go find Torin and tell him I’d cut my toe off by accident because my mate—the one who didn’t want to even *be* my mate anymore—had gotten me all hot and bothered.

Xavier shifted, and my heart went into overdrive as his naked body loomed closer. I was surprised to see him here. Surprised and pleased, but I struggled to keep my expression blank. I wasn’t sure if I was pulling it off or not.

“Xavier?” I winced as my voice cracked. “What are you doing here?”

**Episode 4159**

**Greyson**

I wished that I could just kick Lucian out and be done with the whole thing, but I did need to fill him in about my concerns regarding the Bitterfangs as well as the plans I had in place with Xavier to track them.

*Why does Lucian always barge in on us like this? It’s almost like he doesn’t* want *us to like him. Maybe I should lay down some ground rules… as long as I can do it without jeopardizing the alliance. Lucian is nothing if not touchy.*

I hovered in Elle’s doorway. I could hear Lucian talking to Elle, and I opened the door wider, doing it slowly so as not to alarm them both. I stepped into the room, relieved to see that Elle was standing on her own two feet and looking fully awake.

She gave me an awkward smile when our eyes met. “Sorry about before. I was just… confused.”

“It’s fine,” I said, waving her off. “Cali was knocked out completely after her… facial.”

Lucian sniffed. “I would like to bring my mate some refreshments before we return to the palace,” he said, clearly still miffed about the kiss. “Where’s that Torin?”

“Torin is not your Armin,” I said, cutting him off. “He’s not a servant. You can find whatever beverages you want in the kitchen. Help yourself.”

Lucian looked around with distaste. “It’s so uncivilized around here,” he huffed before heading off.

Elle looked a little uneasy as she watched Lucian leave, and I felt bad for her. She’d hitched her wagon to one of the most insufferable people I’d ever met, but that wasn’t her fault, and I didn’t want her to feel bad or like she was responsible for Lucian’s behavior. We didn’t get to choose our mates. But more than that, I didn’t want her to feel bad about her potion-induced slip-up.

“It’s okay, you know. This whole… ordeal. No one was hurt, and that’s all that matters,” I said.

“I’m sorry for bringing up the kiss,” Elle said. “I didn’t mean to mix you and Lucian up. It really was the potion. My head felt all fuzzy and cloudy. It’s hard to describe. I hope Cali isn’t angry.”

I shook my head. “No, not at all. She has no reason to be, anyway.” I was curious about something else, but I wasn’t sure whether or not to bring it up. But, since Lucian wasn’t around, I figured I might as well ask. “You never told Lucian about our kiss. Why?” I had my suspicions, but I wanted to hear it from her first before drawing any conclusions.

Elle looked a little flustered before she finally answered. “Because I didn’t think he’d want to hear it. He gets jealous, and I figured since it didn’t mean anything, there was no use upsetting him. Besides, I know it was wrong to kiss you. And it won’t happen again, so…”

“Maybe, but it wasn’t entirely your fault. It was the sire bond. There was no reason to hide it from him since we both know that it was beyond our control.”

“I know, but still, I thought it was better to keep it private—between you and me. But now I wish I’d told him… I never thought it would come out like this, and I realize that him being surprised by it is way worse than if I’d just told him.”

I nodded. “Okay… I guess I’m trying to understand, but I just don’t get it. I came clean with Cali fairly quickly. I didn’t want her to find out like Lucian did.”

Elle huffed. “Maybe I’m not expressing it right. What I wanted was… to keep our special connection… special. I know the sire bond was behind why it happened in the first place, but I didn’t want it to be like how it was with Helix. I guess I just want to believe that my bond with you is different.”

“I think I’m finally starting to see what you mean,” I said. “And you’re right, we do have a special connection, and I suppose we always will because I turned you.”

“But the sire bond—”

“Even without that,” I interrupted, knowing where she was about to go, “I will still look out for you. Always. I take turning someone into a werewolf very seriously. You’re the only one I’ve ever turned, Elle.” I paused, thinking about how I’d once dreamed of turning Cali, but I hadn’t because I’d been so worried about what it would do to her since she was Fae. Just like I worried about how she would handle the Luna ceremony.

“Do you think Lucian will ever understand? Or will he always have a sore spot about it?” Elle asked.

*I don’t think anyone knows what goes on inside the princeling’s head except the princeling himself. I certainly have no desire for a front-row seat to whatever madness he’s got going on in that mind of his.*

“I’m not sure,” I said. “You’re his mate, and even though he overreacted… I kind of get it. It’s a natural instinct to want to protect your mate. And no one wants to think about their mate kissing someone else. But I also have a responsibility to you, a desire to protect the one I turned. Sometimes that can cause problems like the one we have on our hands now with Lucian.”

Elle and I both turned as Big Mac appeared in the doorway. “Well? How is she?” she asked shortly.

“Fine now. Thank you f—”

“Good. Now do as I said, and keep that Lucian the hell away from my room.” Big Mac turned abruptly and charged out of the room as quickly as she’d burst in.

I shook my head with a small smile. My mother’s fiancée was brusque, but she cared, no matter how much she liked to front otherwise.

“Come on,” I said to Elle and stepped toward the door. “We shouldn’t leave Lucian alone for too long. He might wander.”

“Why is Big Mac always so grumpy?” Elle asked as I led her downstairs. “She was grumpy when I lived here, too. Is she always this way?”

I started to say no, but that would be a lie. I could count on one hand the number of times Big Mac hadn’t been grumpy or cranky. “I don’t really know why she’s like that. It’s the way she is, I guess. But she has a heart of gold,” I said.

“That’s nice, I guess,” Elle said skeptically.

As soon as we got downstairs, we bumped into Lucian as he came out of the kitchen carrying a tray of drinks.

*Why couldn’t Lucian just bring one drink and give it to Elle? Why is he always so hung up on presentation?*

“Darling, I’ve brought you a few beverage options to choose from: fresh squeezed orange juice with orange zest around the rim, fruit juice”—he rolled his eyes and looked like he was about to puke—“from a *can* if you can believe that. And chilled water, both cucumber and plain. Take your pick.”

Elle chose the plain glass of water and gulped it down sloppily while Lucian watched her with adoration. “Oh, my forest rose was so parched. Do you want another glass, sweetness?”

Elle shook her head and slammed the glass back on the tray with a “Sorry!”

“Maybe we should try out the mind link before you leave, Lucian? Just to make sure that everything’s in order?” I suggested.

Lucian spat his orange juice across the room. “I am *not* leaving without Elle.”

I rolled my eyes, probably for the millionth time that day. “That’s not what I meant,” I said, unable to hide my irritation. I would never say it aloud now that Elle had chosen to be with Lucian, but I would’ve been absolutely ecstatic if Elle decided not to go back with him. It would serve him right. But given Lucian’s jealousy, there was no way I was going to even joke about that.

“Don’t we need Cali for that? To test the mind link?” Elle said, thankfully moving us back on track.

“Cali’s training right now, so why don’t you and Lucian exchange a mind link and we’ll see if it works?” I said, eager to confirm that things were back to normal so I could get the princeling out of my hair.

Lucian and Elle connected gazes and fell quiet for a few moments. I waited for the static, but to my relief, it never came.

“Well?” Lucian said.

I smiled. “I didn’t hear a thing. I think Big Mac’s spell worked.”

From the stairs, Big Mac barked, “Correction! It’s not *my* spell, so I’ll tell you what I told Cali. If something goes horribly wrong, don’t come crying to me because I am *not* to blame.”

Lucian raised a brow. “Then whose spell is it?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I assured him. “Let’s just focus on the fact that it seems to have solved our problem, which was the point of all this, right?”

“I suppose you’re right,” Lucian said tightly. Lucian took Elle’s hand. “Let’s be on our way, Elle.”

“Great,” I said. “Thanks again for stopping by.” I literally couldn’t wait to be rid of Lucian. This visit had been even more unpleasant than usual.

Just as he and Elle stepped through the threshold, Lucian dropped back and leaned in close to me. “And if I ever find out that you kissed my mate again, I’ll kill you.”

**Episode 4160**

Xavier wasn’t answering me, so I started toward him. His silence was starting to freak me out. “Xavier?” I said again, louder this time just in case he hadn’t heard me before. He was just standing there watching me—and he was so very naked—which was a blessing and a curse at the same time.

*Is he here to torment me? What is he doing here?*

Without a word, he turned and took off into the woods. I stared after him, bewildered. Why was he running away? Knowing that it probably wasn’t the best idea, I took off after him. If he’d come this far, there had to be a reason. But even in human form he was way too fast for me, and I quickly lost ground.

*Xavier!* I said through mind link. *Stop running! Talk to me!*

I had no idea if he’d even heard me until I saw him pause up ahead, half obscured by the trees, his muscular back facing me. I was so confused.

*Xavier? What’s going on? Why are you here?* I mind linked.

I started to wonder if something had happened, and he’d come to warn Greyson. They’d spoken not too long ago, after all. What could have happened that would have led him to the Redwood pack house?

He finally turned around to face me, and I was shocked to see that his expression was… pained?

*Xavier, you’re scaring me. Just tell me what the hell is going on!* I knew there was a huge chance that he wasn’t going to respond to me, but I had to try. His eyes finally met mine, and my heart skipped a beat.

*Nothing’s wrong. I came by here by mistake. Forget it.*

I was confused. He knew these woods better than anybody. How could he have come by mistake? He wasn’t making any sense, and he was just worrying me more.

*Is this about the mission with Greyson? Do you not want to do it?*

I was shocked when Xavier’s reply bit out at me. *Cali, it was just a mistake, like I said! Let it go. I’m heading out of here.*

*Wait!* I said. *You mind linked me during the battle!*

Xavier shrugged. *Yeah. So?*

*Ever since you left, you’ve been ignoring me—blocking my calls and ignoring my mind links. Why did you suddenly decide to listen? Why did you respond all of a sudden during the battle?*

He said nothing, and I moved closer.

*It’s because you still care for me, don’t you? You know, I really tried to hate you after you hurt me. You treated me so badly… but then you ran to me when you thought I was in trouble. Why? And when you thought I was hurt, you were frantic to help me.*

I started moving close to him as I talked, emboldened by the fact that he wasn’t running away.

*You pulled me from the burning car*,I mind linked. *And I thought I’d been caught in some kind of time warp. It was like you were the Xavier I fell in love with. What am I supposed to do with that? How am I supposed to feel?*

I was just inches away from him now, and my emotions swirled into chaos as he silently fixed his eyes on me. The only sound was our breathing, our breath visible in the cold air. Tentatively, cautiously, I brought my hand up to his face. I wanted to touch him so badly, to feel his skin beneath my fingers. Just as I made contact, he grabbed my hand and pulled it away. But he didn’t let go. His firm grip was comforting, somehow.

We stood there for I wasn’t sure how long, just staring at each other. I wanted him to speak, to say something, to explain, to merely acknowledge this moment. I could practically see it in his eyes. I rose up to my tiptoes, drawn to his lips.

“We shouldn’t be here,” he said in a hoarse whisper. “Go back to your pack.” His eyes darkened, and just like that, the moment was gone, and I felt like I was staring at a stranger.

I stumbled back in shock at the sudden transformation. I couldn’t believe that he could look at me like that—like I meant nothing.

Xavier dropped my hand and then took off into the woods. I heard the crack of his bones as he shifted, and then he disappeared through the trees in a soundless blur.

I knew that I couldn’t follow him. The look he’d just given me had made it clear that he didn’t want me to, either. But before that, in that split second when our eyes had met and the air between us had come alive with memories of what used to simmer between us… there’d been hope. A glimmer of what could be and what was still there. The thing between us that he was trying so hard to deny. His denial couldn’t erase it. It remained, reappearing over and over again, and drawing us together no matter how much he tried to fight it.

He’d hurt me so badly so many times that I’d tried my best to deny it, too. To deny him. I wanted to protect myself, just so I could move on and let him do the same. But it would never stick. There was no way. Neither of us would ever be able to deny what had just passed between us.

I felt a stirring inside of me, and it lingered long after Xavier had disappeared. I wrapped my arms around myself and took one last, long look out at the silent woods before I rushed back to the house, needing… I wasn’t sure what I needed. I felt like I was frozen at the top of a rollercoaster, poised to go down, but I was stuck, unable to get free.

I passed by Artemis who gave me a questioning look. “I’ll be back,” I squeaked. Without waiting for her reply, I rushed into the house and sprinted up to my room. I closed the door behind me and locked it. My heart was still beating super fast, and I was trying to catch my breath, but I just felt… *flushed*.

Without knowing what had come over me, I touched the place where he’d touched my hand. I could still feel the warmth of his skin and the smell of him sparked in my memory. He’d been so close, his heat had wrapped around me just like his strong arms used to.

My eyes drifted closed, and my hand seemed to move under the waistband of my jeans practically of its own volition. I arched against my hand, my head still pressed against the door. Feverishly, I unbuttoned my pants and slid them down my thighs while my other hand slid under my shirt and palmed my breasts. I imagined Xavier’s rough hands rolling my nipples between his fingers, and then I could almost feel his tongue darting against them, first one, then the other.

I moaned as I dipped a finger inside of myself, unable to stop picturing the slope of Xavier’s shoulders, the rigid angles of his chest, and the V of his pelvis leading down to his cock, which had brought me so much pleasure so many times before.

I caught my lip between my teeth and slid my other hand down to press against my clit, already slick with my arousal. I remembered the rhythm of Xavier’s hands against my softest, warmest parts. The way his tongue would lap at me until I couldn’t take any more, the movement of his hips slamming against me, the weight of him on top of me, his moans of pleasure invading my senses.

I spread my legs wide and dipped another finger inside of me and drove them both in as deep as I could.

Xavier had left me behind, and still I couldn’t stop wanting him. I couldn’t stop fantasizing about him. I wanted him now, I’d wanted him then, and I thought about what I would have done if he’d taken me right then and there out in the wintry air.

I slammed back against the door as a wave of pleasure snaked through my body. I imagined my hands braced against a tree while Xavier took me from behind, his strong hands moving around to cup my breasts as he plunged deeper and deeper. I swirled my fingers around, diving deeper, while my other hand kept working my clit.

“Xavier, yes. Yes, fuck me!” I panted, unable to keep my mouth closed despite my best efforts. Xavier used to come so hard, and he’d push so deep inside of me that my breath would catch in my throat. And I wouldn’t breathe again until I came, too.

I dampened my lips with the tip of my tongue and pressed my fingers against my clit, just as I felt the familiar tickle of my release. I turned around and braced one hand on the door while the other cupped my sex as I rode the waves of my orgasm. It built in the depths of my pulsing channel and swirling from the taut nub of my clit, two sources of pleasure mingling together and tearing a moan from my lips. “*Oh my god*.”

I snapped my mouth shut when a knock vibrated against the door. My eyes shot open just as the last shocks of pleasure ripped through my body.

“Cali?” It was Greyson.

**Episode 4161**

**Xavier**

I was running full speed back to the Samara pack house, fighting not to fall apart at the seams. What the fuck had I been thinking, just showing up at the Redwood house like that? And why had I let Cali get so close to me right after my conversation with Adéluce?

I sure as hell hoped I’d been mean enough to keep Adéluce off Cali’s back. The last thing I needed right now was that damn vampire-witch going after my mate. Not that there was *ever* a good time for Adéluce to attack Cali, but with Greyson and me leaving soon to hunt for the Bitterfangs, Cali would be vulnerable.

My pace slowed the farther I got from the Redwood pack house. I paused for a moment, breathing hard. The urge to howl was strong, my wolf’s agitation climbing. I didn’t want to run right back to Ava like nothing had happened, but I couldn’t go back to Cali, either.

Everything was fucking terrible.

However, despite all the accompanying frustration, fear, and agony, it had felt good to be close to Cali again. To have her nearly touch me. I wanted to go back in time, back to when wrapping my arms around Cali had felt like the easiest, rightest thing in the world. Back when she’d wake me up with a kiss, and I would wonder how the hell a man as fucked-up as me had gotten so lucky as to end up with her.

I needed this war to be over. When the Bitterfangs were really gone, I’d finally be able to dedicate some time to figuring out a way to take Adéluce down. The vampire-witch was the closest thing I’d ever seen to invincible, but I was an Alpha. Silas had seemed invincible as well, before my brothers and I had gone after him.

I couldn’t lose hope, but at the same time, I was terrified of hoping. Every time I thought I’d found a way to live with Adéluce’s game, she’d show up with a new rule to throw me off. And now I was supposed to fall in love with Ava, just because she’d said so. I felt like Adéluce’s doll, a dehumanized toy. And even if I did have feelings for Ava, forcing myself to fall for her just because Adéluce wanted it would irreparably taint those feelings.

I wasn’t going to do it.

I couldn’t.

But, of course, Ava wasn’t going to make anything easy for me.

As if she’d heard me thinking about her, she walked outside just as I reached the Samara front porch. My wolf whined for her, but I ignored him and shifted back to human. I didn’t want to talk to her right now—it was all too fucking much.

But as I tried to blow past her, Ava grabbed my arm.

She was never, *ever* going to make anything easy for me.

“Wait,” she said, gripping my arm tighter. “We need to finish our conversation from earlier.”

My anger at Adéluce and this entire fucked-up situation reared its ugly head. Glaring at her hand on my arm, I said, “I thought you said I could handle it myself?”

Ava snatched her hand back and growled at me. “You’re just—” She cut herself off, squeezing her eyes shut. “Why do you have to make everything so difficult?”

I faltered. Her voice was soft. It made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I hated this. I cared about Ava, and I felt bad when she was hurt. But that was one thing, and love was entirely another.

Love was Cali.

“An Alpha and Luna who are constantly at odds… That’s not good for the pack,” Ava continued, her eyes open now, and fixed on mine. “You have to know that.”

When Ava looked at me like that, seeming so wounded and at such a loss, I hated the fact that I was hurting her. I didn’t know how I’d be able to keep living with myself, and with my wolf, if I had to keep abusing both my mates.

I hated the man I’d become.

“You’re right,” I admitted. Because she *was* fucking right.

Ava’s expression twisted with surprise. “Oh, wow. I didn’t expect you to back down so quickly.”

That said a lot about our usual way of communicating.

“I know we…” I paused. How the fuck could I put this delicately? “We get passionate, sometimes—”

Ava raised an eyebrow, crossing her arms. “That’s one word for it.”

I rolled my eyes. “You know what I mean. We get angry, but that’s because we both care about what happens to the pack. We just have to get better at discussing it.”

“So we should both try to control our tempers?” Ava asked wryly. “Next thing you know, you’ll be asking to play house with me.”

The way she phrased it made the absurdity of it all even worse. But I still laughed, because what the hell else was I supposed to do?

Shaking my head, I said, “I know this is asking a lot, but you’ve worked hard on building this pack back up. I know you just want the Samaras to be strong, and I respect that.”

Ava’s eyes narrowed. “You’re being so… *reasonable* right now. Are you okay?”

No, I wasn’t. Not at all. But even though I knew I’d never fall for Ava, no matter how good things were between us, I could at least exploit the loophole in Adéluce’s new orders and stop pushing her away.

“I’m just saying we should try to stay calm when we’re disagreeing over something,” I said.

“I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to think before we speak,” Ava conceded with a shrug.

“It’s a pretty low bar, but I have a feeling it’s going to take a lot of work to get there,” I said.

She scoffed, shoving me. “Speak for yourself. You’re the hothead here.”

I opened my mouth to tell her that she was at least half as bad as I was when I heard a voice calling my name from inside the house. I groaned, shaking my head. That was Knox.

“What the fuck does he want this time?” I asked Ava.

She raised her eyebrows. “He’s trying, Xavier. At least hear him out.”

“Fine,” I grunted.

I headed inside with Ava and found Knox waiting for us in the game room. He was leaning against the pool table like a douchebag. Unsurprisingly.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“That battle was too easy,” he said seriously.

The shrimp was right, but I wasn’t about to agree with him out loud. The last thing we needed was Knox starting to build his ego back up.

“Why should I care about what you think, Knox?” I asked. “We won. Malakai is probably dead, and his forces are scattered.”

Knox shook his head. “I hope that’s true, but Malakai always struck me as being smarter than that. Stronger.”

I crossed my arms. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were impressed by Malakai. Oh, wait!” I scoffed. “I know you are, because you wanted us to join him.”

Ava sighed from behind me. “Xavier—”

“No, I can answer for that,” Knox told her, raising a hand. He stared at me seriously. “I only did that because I thought it was the best way for the Samara pack to survive. I won’t apologize for it.” He glanced at Ava. “The three of us all want the same thing—for the Samara pack to be as strong as can possibly be.”

I hoped that was true. For his sake. Maybe for mine a bit, too.

“Why did you call Xavier in here?” Ava asked, eyeing him. “I know you well enough by now to realize you’re cooking up a plan.”

Knox cleared his throat, straightening his shoulders.

“Well?” Ava prompted. “Spit it out!”

“I still want to go through with the plan,” Knox said sharply.

“What plan?”

“I still want to be a spy for the Samaras—I can go undercover with the Bitterfangs and prove myself. If only you’d let me—”

I laughed in his fucking face.

“What are you laughing at?” Knox demanded.

“We don’t have any intel, Knox,” I said, laughter dying out immediately. “We don’t even know where the remaining Bitterfangs *are* anymore. Where exactly are you planning on going undercover?”

He gritted his teeth. “We can figure out the details. I’m asking you if you’ll consider the possibility of me becoming your spy. I just want a chance to prove myself to you.”

This goddamn kid. Why was he like this?

“You need an answer right now?” I asked with a sigh.

“Yes,” he declared.

“Then no,” I snapped.

Knox glared at me. “Are you saying no because you think the war is over, or because you don’t trust me?” His lips twisted into a sneer. “*Or* are you really so naïve that you think the war is over after just one battle?”

**Episode 4162**

**Greyson**

When Cali didn’t answer, I gripped the doorknob and turned it, surprised to find some kind of weight leaning against the door from the other side. Huh. What was that about? Was Cali not inside? I could’ve sworn I’d heard—

“Just a minute!” Cali squeaked from behind the door.

She sounded… weird.

After a few seconds, the door swung open. Cali was standing there, her face flushed, a light sheen of sweat on her forehead. I could feel the heat coming off her in waves.

“Are you okay?” I asked, cupping her cheek.

She flinched. “I’m fine!”

This was strange. Very strange. Borderline suspicious.

I took a step into the room. “Cali, what—”

Then the scent hit, silencing me. Suddenly, I knew exactly what had been happening in here before I’d knocked on the door. She’d been aroused. She’d *come*. I turned to Cali, raising an eyebrow. Impossibly, she got even redder than before.

“So,” I said, smirking. “Just taking a break, huh?”

With a groan, Cali turned around and walked to the bed, dropping onto it and covering her face with a pillow. Was she screaming into it? Because it sounded like she was.

“Okay,” I said. “So that’s how we’re doing this?”

She groaned even louder. I was trying really hard not to laugh.

“Cali,” I said, sitting down next to her. “You’re incredibly sexy—”

She removed the pillow. “Oh my god, Greyson, just leave me alone to die!”

Now I did laugh. I couldn’t help myself. “You don’t need to be shy about this, love.”

Still cringing, she sat up. Shooting me a sideways look, she muttered, “Let’s just pretend it never happened, okay?”

I reached over to wrap my arm around her, pulling her close. Against her temple, I said, “Maybe next time, you could invite me? How’s that sound?”

Cali made a strangled noise and fell back onto the bed again, out of my embrace. She grabbed the pillow to cover her face and groaned once more. I eyed her skeptically. Sure, Cali got embarrassed about this stuff sometimes, but it was usually a lot easier to pull her out of it.

“Is there something else going on?” I asked, gingerly removing the pillow from her face. “What’s wrong?”

Cali stared at me for a brief moment before looking up at the ceiling. Squeezing her eyes shut, she sat up. Finally, she muttered, “I saw Xavier in the woods.”

My hackles immediately went right the fuck up.

“You did? Did he want something? What happened?”

I had no idea what the hell my brother was doing on Redwood land. We’d just spoken to each other a few hours ago—did he miss me already? Obviously the fuck not. So what the hell had he said to Cali? And why had she locked herself in her room immediately afterward and—

Oh.

*Oh.*

“I think I understand,” I said, calmly but stiffly. This was a balancing act. It had been since the very beginning.

“Ugh!” Cali covered her face with her hands, rubbing it before running her fingers through her hair. “This is the worst!”

“I get that all of this is messed-up,” I said. “It’s nothing new, Cali.”

It wasn’t. I knew Cali was attracted to Xavier—it was obvious. The fact that he’d behaved like an absolute piece of shit when they’d broken up didn’t mean she’d stopped wanting him. She couldn’t escape the lust, because they were mates. But that didn’t mean it didn’t sting. She’d wanted his touch, not mine.

If she could just commit to choosing me, we’d be happy together. But she had to make the decision herself for it to be real, and I didn’t want to be the default choice just because Xavier was out of the picture—even if sometimes, I felt both upset and ready to erupt over the entire situation.

“I’m sorry,” Cali muttered, folding and unfolding her hands in her lap.

“You don’t need to apologize,” I said. I did mean that, despite everything. “I know you can’t help yourself. The stuff with Xavier is… complicated.”

Cali snorted bitterly. “That’s one way of putting it.” Her expression shifted to something serious. Looking up at me, she muttered, “Actually, I think it might be even more complicated than we thought.”

“What do you mean?”

“I just can’t shake the feeling that something is wrong with Xavier,” she said.

“You mean apart from the usual things that are already wrong with him?”

To Cali’s credit, she didn’t try to defend my asshole of a brother. “Yes. We were in the woods, and there was a moment today when he looked at me…” She looked away, sighing. “Sorry. I shouldn’t be talking to you about this. I don’t want to hurt you.”

I reached for her hand. When our eyes met, I said, “No matter what, I know you love me. I need you to feel like you can tell me everything.”

I pulled her into a hug, and she wrapped her arms around me tight, nestling her face in my neck.

“What happened in the woods with you and Xavier?” I asked gently.

She sighed. “There was a moment where he seemed like his old self again. Like he really cared about me and regretted all the horrible things he’s said and done,” she whispered. “It’s just… Sometimes, I feel like there’s something wrong with him. But I can’t figure out what it is.”

My jealousy hadn’t blinded me enough to disregard Cali’s feelings as wishful thinking. She had an undeniable connection with Xavier. And yes, he’d been a horrible dick, but the way he’d abandoned her and the Redwood pack had just never made sense.

“We’ll figure it out together,” I said, kissing her temple. “I’m about to head out on this mission with Xavier. It’ll be the first time in a while that we’ll have time together one-on-one. I’ll do some digging.”

She swallowed roughly, looking up at me hopefully. “You’ll do that?”

“You know I agree with you,” I said. “Something *has* been off with him. Like, there’s being an asshole, and then there’s all the shit he’s done. Not only his behavior toward you, but the rest of the Redwoods as well. He’s been going back and forth a lot—one moment he’s like his old self, then next he’s injuring Lola during a dumb Ludis game.”

Cali swallowed. “But what if we’re both wrong and just lying to ourselves? What if there’s nothing wrong with Xavier, and that’s just who he’s been all along?”

The pain in Cali’s face made my heart ache.

“Then at least we’ll know for sure,” I said. I knew I needed more time to process all this. but I hadn’t had a spare moment lately. “With all the Bitterfang bullshit, it’s been hard to focus on anything else,” I said. “But now, we might actually have a second to spend on figuring out Xavier’s… whatever’s going on with him.”

Cali gave me a watery smile. “Thank you, Greyson.”

“Don’t thank me,” I said, shaking my head. “He’s my brother—even if I want to tie him up in iron-laced rope and leave him out in the snow until he turns into a werewolf popsicle.”

Cali choked on a laugh, shaking her head.

I squeezed her hand. “Hey,” I said. “You’re okay.”

She nodded. “I am.” I watched as she pulled herself together, her shoulders going back and her spine straightening. “And for now, we’ll press pause on the Xavier stuff.”

Her voice was still a tiny bit shaky, but I only noticed it because I knew her so well.

“Have Lucian and Elle left yet?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Yes, thank god.”

Cali cringed. “Ant developments I need to know about?”

I rolled my eyes. “He’s just being a dick—but I can’t really blame him. If the roles were reversed, I’d probably be handling it the same way.”

Cali huffed. “You’d never act how Lucian acted over a thing like this. You let him live after he kidnapped me multiple times and put a demon in me!”

“I appreciate your vote of confidence—”

“Damn straight!”

“*Anyway*,” I said, taking her hands to stop their flailing, “I’m not particularly worried about Lucian or our sire bond mind link issues, since Big Mac went through the spell with everyone. Our number one priority right now is to see if the Bitterfangs are actually gone.”

“You’re right,” Cali agreed, nodding firmly.

“So, have you thought about what I asked you before? Are you okay with being left in charge when Xavier and I head out?” I asked.

Her spine straightened again. “Yes. For sure.”

I smiled. It felt good to see the leader she’d become.

But then she deflated right before my eyes, a pretty little pufferfish that had lost all its water.

“But what if Rishika’s upset?” she asked anxiously. “She’s usually your second. Not to mention, she’s the best. Ever.”

“Rishika will be fine,” I said. “Exactly *because* she knows her worth. She’ll be happy to help you if you need anything. She’s probably the most level-headed person in this house.”

Cali swallowed. “But I don’t want her to think I’m trying to undermine—”

“Cali!” Torin’s shrill voice echoed from the first floor, cutting her off. “Greyson! You need to get downstairs right now!”

**Episode 4163**

Greyson and I rushed down the stairs, my hand in his as he led me forward. Under his breath, he said, “What the hell is this time?”

I swallowed nervously. “Nothing bad, I hope. Torin sounded frantic, I think—”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Greyson said flatly.

We’d both spotted Torin at the bottom of the stairs. He was holding two cans of beer and had a huge smile on his face.

“Hello, friends!” He stretched the beer toward us as we finished climbing down the stairs. “Would you like a beer? Did you know beer is basically barley fungi juice?” He eyed one of the cans, chuckling. “Genius!”

“*Torin*.” I huffed, flicking his shoulder. “We thought you were in trouble!”

Torin shot me a sheepish look. “I just wanted you to get you two down here. I understand that having very loud sex is your favorite hobby—”

Greyson facepalmed. I was probably as red as a tomato.

“—but it’s time for you to spend some quality time with us. The pack has to decompress, now that the battle’s over. They deserve to have a little fun. It would get morale back up,” Torin finished, waving one of the beer cans in Greyson’s face.

He took the beer. “I appreciate the thought, Torin—”

Torin blushed. “You do? How nice!”

“But we have to work on your tactics,” Greyson finished.

Torin raised his eyebrows. “Well, it did work, so by definition it was a good tactic.”

Greyson raised his eyebrows as well. “When did you get so devious?”

“I aim to surprise,” Torin said. “Always pleasantly! Okay, now come with me.”

He waved for us to follow him outside. The rest of the pack was already there, it seemed. Artemis and Rishika were sitting together at the firepit. Zainab, Violet, and Charlie were playing cornhole. There was light music floating out from the house, laughter and conversation echoing all around.

Torin’s surprisingly sneaky tactics notwithstanding, it was nice to see everyone relaxing. They deserved this, and I loved the idea of spending time with everybody, here in our home. The moment the word “home” entered my head, another thought popped in, startling me.

*How could I possibly go to school with Lola?* I thought. *How could I leave this? Leave Greyson?*

As if he could hear my thoughts, Greyson took my hand and squeezed it. “You okay?”

The way he was attuned to every little change in my mood was almost spooky. “Yeah. I—”

The light music turned into a full blast, making the house’s windows vibrate. A second later, Lola and Jay burst through the door. Or rather, Lola burst, and Jay followed in his usual cool way, wearing sunglasses over his eyepatch.

“Come on, guys! This is a party! Let’s get loud!” Lola shouted that last part right in Greyson’s face.

“No,” Greyson said flatly. Then he moved past Lola, clearly ready to turn the music back down.

“What a buzzkill,” Lola huffed.

I raised an eyebrow. “I think we still have to be a little careful about calling attention to ourselves—at least until we know for a fact that the Bitterfangs are gone. Let’s just relax and unwind.”

Jay turned to Lola. “Babe, they might be right.”

Lola looked mildly chagrined. “Okay, fine, that’s true. But we can still drink!” She grabbed Jay’s hand and pulled him toward the firepit to join Artemis and Rishika, who were making eyes at each other.

“Come on, Cali!” Lola called over her shoulder, but I waved her off. I had to talk to Greyson, but I also didn’t exactly know what to say.

*How many times does one need to apologize when their mate catches them doing* that *while thinking about their other mate? Hmm?*

I was still so embarrassed that Greyson had found me. What had come over me? It was like my body was so starved for any sign of hope from Xavier that I hadn’t been able to control myself.

*This is problematic, is what it is! For shame, Cali!*

I just wished I understood what was going on with Xavier. When he’d gripped my hand and held it, it had been just the two of us, as if nothing else existed. He’d acted like Xavier—the real one, the one I’d known for a while now. The one who loved me. I kept catching glimpses of that love.

Ugh, everything would’ve been so much easier if he were more decisive and solid in his hatred! I couldn’t choose between Xavier and Greyson as long as there was even a *chance* that Xavier still loved me. Not that I’d automatically choose Xavier if things went back to normal. Because I also loved Greyson.

*Bottom line, I’m not choosing either way! Hah. Nope.*

Right. Sure. Of course.

*Well, this is all so fucking fucked I don’t know what the hell—*

“Cali!” Greyson called to me from inside. “I’m going to grab Big Mac—you stay and enjoy the party!”

I turned to see him shooting me a smile before he turned to climb up the stairs. My heart fluttered, a sigh escaping me. I wished I could think of no one but Greyson. I wished the *due destini* wasn’t a thing at all.

I wished we could all be free.

“Cali!” Lola called, marching toward me. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” I said, sighing again. “Just having an existential crisis about the *due destini* and all that. You know how it goes.”

“Well, you can do that later on—it’s nothing new.” Lola grabbed my hand to pull me down the front steps. “Now, come hang out with us.”

“You’re right,” I said. “No more deep thoughts for me today.”

“But wait, did you think about the school stuff?” Lola asked eagerly. She glanced back at the house, her voice lowering to a whisper. “Have you told Greyson?”

“No,” I muttered. “I’m not sure what to say yet.”

I knew that Greyson would support me no matter what, and that was what scared me. I would have to actually make a decision.

*And we all know how I feel about making decisions! Hahahahah—*

Okay, this wasn’t actually funny.

“Hey, Cali,” Artemis said, waving for me to sit next to her.

Rishika shot me a smile, and I remembered how Greyson had said that she was the most levelheaded person in the entire house. I smiled back.

Lola, meanwhile, fell into Jay’s lap, taking off his sunglasses.

“I was trying to be cool,” he told her seriously.

Snickering, Lola put his sunglasses back on and kissed his cheek before looking around. “I’m glad we’re doing this. We needed a break from all the tension.” She cracked her neck, shooting Jay a sly look. “My shoulders are probably more knotted than they’ve ever been.”

“Is that a hint that you want a massage?” Jay asked.

Lola grinned coyly. “Maybe.”

While Jay massaged Lola’s shoulders and Rishika and Artemis cuddled by the fire, I looked around at the pack and took a moment to just feel *good*. Everyone seemed to be okay in the aftermath of all the fighting. We’d suffered no casualties, and everything was okay.

*Apart from Xavier…*

A loud cheer startled me. The pack had just welcomed Big Mac, Mrs. Smith, and Greyson as they came down the porch stairs. My eyes lingered on Greyson. His smile lit up the entire yard as he looked around, his presence immediately settling, grounding for everybody. He carried so much on his shoulders. Tirelessly.

I loved him so much.

“Okay, okay,” Big Mac said, waving off the cheers. “Relax, we’re here! Now, someone get me a drink.”

As I looked around, I realized that the only person missing was Kira. Huh.

“Have you seen Kira?” I asked Greyson when he came to me, pausing by the firepit.

His expression turned guarded. Reaching for my hand, he pulled me up, wordlessly pulling me away from Artemis, Rishika, Lola, and Jay. His behavior made my anxiety spike.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I’m not sure where Kira is,” Greyson said.

I frowned. Greyson usually had a handle on what all the members of the pack were doing. “Do you think she’s okay? Do we need to go find her?”

Greyson shook his head. “I don’t think so.” He swallowed, looking away. “Xavier was Kira’s tie to the Redwood pack, and now that he’s gone…”

“You don’t think she’s going to stick around,” I said, finishing his train of thought.

Greyson nodded. “I don’t see what reason she has to stay.”

I took his hand in mine. I knew he was trying to brush it off, but I could tell this was bothering him. “Why can’t you *give* her a reason to stay? Kira’s been here with us through so much—she might just need someone to tell her she belongs.”

Greyson opened his mouth to speak. I didn’t catch what he said, though. Lola’s voice was overwhelming in my ears as she said, “Maybe I could take this class with Cali?”

I sputtered, rounding on my friend. What the hell was wrong with her? I’d just told Lola that I wasn’t sure what I was going to do about school. I’d told her that I hadn’t even told Greyson yet, and yet here she was, loudly talking about it with everybody? Unbelievable!

“Lola!” I hissed. “*Why* are you rambling about school stuff right now?”

Lola was startled. She got this strange look on her face. “I didn’t say anything.”

“Then why did I just hear you talking about your classes?” I demanded.

Lola’s gaze flicked to Jay, then to Greyson. Both the boys looked confused. And then, suddenly, I heard Lola’s voice in my ears again.

*Cali, are you inside my head?* she demanded. *How the hell are you hearing my thoughts?*

Was *I hearing her thoughts?!*

I gasped, whirling around to face Greyson. “I think something went very wrong with the spell!”

**Episode 4164**

**Xavier**

I grabbed the collar of Knox’s shirt, shaking him roughly. “You want to try that again? Maybe a bit more fucking respectfully?”

Knox’s eyes widened. He lifted his hands in surrender. “Sorry, I—I didn’t mean it like that! I know you’re not naïve, and that you’re doing what you think is the right thing to protect the pack.”

I shoved him away, and he stumbled before straightening. “You really need to work on your delivery, kid. I’m your Alpha. Never forget that.”

Knox nodded, looking away. “Right. I’m trying to do better.”

“Just fucking do it, then.”

Ava sighed. “Xavier—”

I shot her a sharp look, and she rolled her eyes.

Knox took a deep breath and started again. “I really think this is the right call, though. If we have someone on the inside, we can be prepared for anything. I was at the battle too, and there’s no way *that* was the end of the war. We got out of it totally unscathed, and that’s not Malakai’s M.O.” He glanced at Ava. “We all saw how ruthless he was at the summit.”

I sized up the shrimp. Then I nodded. “You’re not wrong about any of that. But we still don’t have the information we’d need in order for you to play spy. Do you get that?”

Knox nodded. “Yeah.”

Ava stepped closer to Knox. “We appreciate your continued initiative, Knox. But it may not be the right timing.”

After thinking for a moment, I said, “We can revisit this once we know more.” Or not. It depended on Knox’s behavior. Right now, his eyes flashed defiantly again.

“When might that be?” he asked.

“Soon,” I said flatly.

He rubbed his forehead, shaking his head. “So, is there a plan here, or what?”

“There’s a plan,” I said. “But it’s not one I need to share with you.”

Knox fucking dared to get in my face as he snarled, “Why the fuck not?”

I growled as Ava pulled him away. This little shit just kept pushing his luck, didn’t he?

Shaking her head, Ava grabbed Knox by the scruff. “Maybe Xavier isn’t sharing the plan with you because you keep proving his point.”

“What point?” Knox demanded, yanking himself free from Ava’s grip.

I glared at him. “I can’t trust someone who can’t keep his shit together when something doesn’t go his way. You’re fucking lucky Ava’s here to keep me from killing you.”

Knox scoffed, throwing his hands up. “Fine. Whatever! You do whatever you want—”

“Yes, I will,” I interrupted. “Because I’m the fucking Alpha.”

He huffed, shaking his head. His voice dropped. “Just don’t come crying to me when it all falls apart.”

I had to physically keep myself back from reaching forward, grabbing him by the neck, and fucking snapping it. “There is no universe in which I’d ever come crying to you, Knox. I’m not the one who had a chance to be Alpha and fucked it up.”

He flinched, clearly wounded. Good. After that, he stormed off, and Ava and I were left alone in silence. I was stewing. She was frowning, watching Knox’s retreating form.

“It’s like he’s so close to growing up, but he just can’t stop being that little toddler who wants more than he deserves,” Ava mused. “Or more than he can handle.”

I nodded. “He’s lucky to be alive. Did you hear that goddamn tone he took with me?”

Ava sighed. “Xavier. Please. You were a teenager, too, once—not even all that long ago.”

I scoffed. “I was never like fucking Knox.”

Ava raised her brows. “If you say so.”

I shook my head, huffing.

Ava leaned against the pool table, crossing her arms over her chest. “So, you said you had a plan? Want to fill me in, or is it just another secret you’re not going to share with me?”

I bit my tongue to keep from lashing out at her. I needed to stay chill. I couldn’t believe I was saying this—who the fuck was I? *Greyson?*—but we really had to work on our damn tempers here.

Taking a deep breath, I said, “I should’ve told you that Kira was coming.”

Ava stared at me, her eyes wide. “Did you just… Did you just *admit* *that you were wrong?*”

I took a deep breath. Then another one. “Don’t push it.”

She smirked. “Okay. Thanks for saying that.”

The thing about Ava was that she was a smug smartass. But I couldn’t call her out on it and ruin the tentative peace we were building. I really did need her on my side. And now that Adéluce’s threat wasn’t hanging over Ava anymore…

None of this meant that I would or even *could* fall in love with her. But I could get used to having someone in my corner again. I fucking needed someone in my corner when I felt this trapped and alone. Besides, being with Ava, the companionship—it felt good. More than good. My wolf craved her, no matter what.

“Okay,” I said. “What do you want to cover first? Witch plan or Bitterfang plan?”

Ava smiled again. “I like this side of you so much better.”

“What side?”

“The side where I ask for something, and you deliver,” she said in a mild, teasing tone, pushing herself up to sit on the edge of the pool table.

Her gaze was coy. It was effective. It was elative as well, because no matter how many times Ava and I fought, I could come back to her, and she wouldn’t shut me out. I had to give her that.

“Start with the Bitterfangs,” she said. “What’s the plan there?”

“Greyson and I are going hunting,” I said.

Ava arched her eyebrows. “Just the two of you?”

I gave her a short nod. I didn’t want to dig any deeper, here. It was what it was.

“I’ll need you to run things with the pack while I’m gone,” I said.

“Of course,” she said easily. “Now, what about the witch?”

“I meant what I said—having a witch on our side will only make the pack stronger,” I said. “I know you see that. You’ve witnessed all the things that Big Mac and Kira have done for the Redwoods. Plus, Kira is our best chance at getting a witch on our side.”

She eyed me sharply. “Are you going to use your wiles to lure her in, then?”

The look on Ava’s face made my wolf stir. I couldn’t help it, and I didn’t want to stop it. I’d been in too deep for a while now. And at least for now, Ava was safe.

Stepping toward her, I came to stand between her legs, resting my hands on either side of her where she sat on the pool table. “You think I have wiles?”

Ava put a finger to her chin, pretending to think. “Actually, no. You’re super awkward and act like a moody dick half the time. You’re just really good-looking and have”—she waved a vague hand at my face—“all that.”

I leaned closer. Her scent was as intoxicating as ever. “All that?”

She rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean.”

I grabbed the back of her head and pulled her in for a kiss, just so I could feel her melt against me, cling to me, want me. She always wanted me, and it drove me wild—both her desire and how unhinged it was, always floating under the surface.

But, again, wanting Ava didn’t mean I was in love with her. The physical chemistry we had was part of a strong partnership, part of representing the Samara pack as a united Alpha and Luna. That was all our relationship was—all it would be. It was what I needed right now.

When Ava ran a hand down my back, I had to bite back the groan that threatened to spill out of my lips and into her mouth. The heat of her body burned against mine as we pressed up against each other, as I felt her tremble. I gripped her waist, about to push her down onto the table—

A yelp echoed behind me.

Ava and I pulled apart, and I twisted around with a growl, ready to shift and attack. But it was just Kira. She was standing behind me with her hands over her eyes.

“Sorry, I was—” She cleared her throat. “Not looking.”

“Well, you can look now,” Ava said curtly. “We’re not doing anything.” Her eyes flashed with annoyance. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

Kira removed her hands from her face and scowled. “I thought you knew about Xavier’s offer, Ava.”

Ava shot me a look. “I’ll let you two discuss this.”

As she walked past me, I mind linked, *Could you call Greyson for me? Tell him I want to leave ASAP.*

When Ava nodded and offered a small smile before leaving, I knew she was pleased. Calling Greyson was a Luna thing to do. It showed I needed her. Ava and I would be good.

I had no idea where I stood with Kira, though.

“So?” I leaned against the pool table. “Did you think about my offer?”

Kira remained serious. “First, I want to know why you’re doing all this.”

“All what?”

Kira gestured vaguely at the room. “*This*, Xavier. Everyone is so confused by your behavior. Why did you leave the Redwoods? Why did you shack up here? Why would you treat Cali like shit and leave us all behind?”

I should’ve been more prepared for Kira’s third degree. She wasn’t stupid, and she wasn’t blindly loyal to me.

“I’m afraid those aren’t questions I can answer for you,” I told her. At least I was being honest.

Crossing her arms, Kira gave me a cold look. “Then I guess it’s too bad that I’m not joining your pack unless you tell me the truth.”

**Episode 4165**

**Violet**

I grabbed the beanbag and pulled back before letting it loose, hurling it toward the target. It dropped to the ground with a pathetic flop. I’d missed by a mile, and I let out a frustrated sigh.

Charlie chuckled, nudging me. “Better luck next time, sunshine.”

I hadn’t told Charlie what my real issue was, here. Lilac and I had never finished our conversation, and it had been weighing on me all afternoon. I just couldn’t *believe* he had no second thoughts about joining Xavier and the Samaras. And he’d just assumed that I would follow suit, just like that, even though he knew I loved being part of the Redwood pack. I loved the Redwoods themselves, and Greyson was a strong, compassionate Alpha. How could Lilac think that this was an easy decision?

Up ahead, Charlie took his shot and, of course, cleared it easily. He smiled at me, winking. I smiled back. I was trying to hide my anxiety. If Lilac and I went to talk to Xavier, that conversation would have to include Charlie, too. I’d never leave him behind. But I didn’t actually want to leave at all. Greyson would lose three pack members if Lilac, Charlie, and I left, and he didn’t deserve that. Greyson had been nothing but kind to all of us, and it just… It didn’t feel right.

Gabriel and Mikah had already left, and I’d seen the pack’s disappointment—I’d felt it myself. How could Lilac even think about adding to that stress? A pack losing five wolves was a big deal, and I didn’t have to be an Alpha to know that. The pack would look weak, and I just couldn’t do that to the Redwoods. They were my friends. *Our* friends.

How could Lilac not care about any of this?

“Hey, are you okay?” Charlie’s voice startled me out of my thoughts. He’d come over to me, lowering his face to bring it to my eye level. “You looked totally lost for a second, there.”

Charlie’s proximity, his scent, and the way his gaze made me feel would never get old. I wanted to bury myself in his arms and never let go, but my brother and I would have to deal with this issue sooner rather than later.

“I’m okay,” I said, taking Charlie’s hand and squeezing. “It’s just something going on with Lilac and me, but we’ll figure it out.”

“Hey, cornhole kids!” Rishika called out from the firepit. “Come on over and join us by the fire!”

“You coming?” Charlie asked Sage and Zainab.

They fixed each other with serious glares.

“No,” Zainab said.

“This is a beanbag battle to the death,” Sage declared. Then she added, “Or at least until one of us gets too bored to keep going.”

Despite my bad mood, I couldn’t help but chuckle. This was the kind of thing I was talking about—Sage and Zainab were such lovable, sweet dorks! How could I possibly leave them behind? Charlie seemed to be having fun as well, grinning at them before taking my hand. We headed toward the group sitting around the fire.

“There they are,” Artemis said, smirking up at us. “We thought we’d lost you to that human game.”

Gesturing at the empty spot beside her, Rishika said teasingly, “Sit, little ones, and listen to your elders’ stories.”

“In case it wasn’t clear, we’re the elders,” Jay told Charlie and me seriously. For some reason, he was wearing sunglasses.

Lola smirked, nudging Jay. “I love a mature, experienced man.”

Everybody laughed apart from Artemis, who said, “*Gross*.”

In the meantime, Charlie had taken a seat and pulled me down to sit between his knees. I leaned back against his chest, listening to the pack members around me sharing stories from past battles. I felt so at ease here. I loved this.

Everyone in the Redwood pack felt like an older sibling I could turn to if I ever needed help. The warm feeling of belonging increased tenfold, and my wolf curled up in my chest, all cozy and satisfied. This was my *family*. How could Lilac even think of leaving?

How could Xavier have left us?

“I can feel you tensing up,” Charlie whispered in my ear.

I swallowed hard, taking his hand. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” he murmured. “You can always talk to me, about Lilac or anything else. I’ll always be on your side.”

I sighed. “I know. I’ll tell you about it soon—I feel like I need to process first. Figure a few things out.”

However, what I’d already figured out was that I needed to convince Lilac to stay.

“… I’d never seen Greyson so furious,” Jay was saying in the background, “but in that calm way of his that makes you go, ‘oh, shit.’ That was when I knew Silas was toast.”

Lilac walked up to the pit just then, and Jay’s words faded to the back of my mind. My brother eyed me, and I nodded, standing up. Charlie gave me a look, his touch lingering on my hand.

“I’ll be right back,” I said, leaning down to kiss his cheek.

Lilac and I stayed quiet until we’d walked a few feet away from everybody. My brother was rarely so stoic, so it felt weird. All of this felt weird.

Suddenly, Lilac whirled around, staring at me. His voice was low. “Have you thought about when you want to talk to Xavier?”

There was laughter coming from the firepit, and fake-battle screams coming from the cornhole game. My decision had been made.

“I don’t want to talk to Xavier at all,” I said firmly.

Lilac blinked in shock. “What?”

“Why did you assume that I’d just go with you?” I demanded. “Why did you think you’d be able to convince me to leave? Why can’t *you* be the one who’s convinced to *stay*?”

Lilac stared at me dumbly for a moment. Like none of the words I’d said had even registered. “*What?*”

I stood firm.

“You said that Xavier’s like our older brother, but we both know that Greyson’s been a great Alpha to all of us. We don’t need another older brother—we have a whole pack of older brothers and sisters who care about us. What we *need* is a strong Alpha, one who’d never abandon us.”

Lilac huffed. “I know Xavier left the pack—”

“Greyson would never leave without an explanation,” I interrupted fiercely. “And he’d never talk to *anyone* the way Xavier talked to Cali.”

Lilac’s eyes flashed with indignation. “Okay, I get that that was shitty! But Xavier’s never treated you and me that way, so—”

“That doesn’t make it right,” I said. “I never liked the way Xavier spoke to Cali when the two of them first met, either. But he hadn’t been that mean to her in ages, so I thought that was in the past. But when he broke up with her, it was even worse than before. Would you ever talk to Perrie like that? Would you cheat on her?”

Lilac frowned. “What? Fuck no!”

“If Xavier were still in the Redwood pack, would you choose him as Alpha over Greyson?” I pressed.

Lilac scowled, looking at the ground. “Greyson has more experience, and people seem to listen to him. And he never yells or glares, which I guess is nice.” Lilac shook his head. “But still, Xavier’s family.”

“The *Redwood pack* is our family,” I said. My voice was sharper, now. “Rishika, Sage, Zainab, everybody over there!” I waved over at the group. “They love us. Why would we want to leave them to join a pack full of strangers?”

Lilac groaned, looking up at the sky. “But what about Perrie, Violet? She’s not a stranger.”

“Why can’t Perrie join the Redwood pack?” I asked.

Lilac sighed, shaking his head. “I don’t think she’d ever leave the Samaras. Their pack is already so small. And her parents are Samaras, too—I don’t think she’d leave them.”

I shook my head. “Xavier’s already taken Gabriel and Mikah. He doesn’t need us, too.”

Lilac rolled his eyes. “Gabriel and Mikah were never Redwood pack members to begin with. Plus, I’m pretty sure Mikah likes Greyson much better than Xavier, but he went with Gabriel because they’re mates.”

“That doesn’t say anything good about Xavier, Lilac,” I pointed out. “I’m not doing this—I can’t be part of Xavier’s poaching tactics. It’s not fair to the Redwoods, or to Greyson.”

Lilac’s mouth turned into another scowl. “Xavier deserves our support more than Greyson. We have a history with Xavier.”

“Are you sure you want to join the Samaras because of Xavier?” I demanded. “Or is it about being closer to Perrie?”

Lilac looked taken aback. “I never said that.” He paused. “I never thought about it.”

“Maybe it’s time you did,” I said firmly.

Lilac shook his head. “This is about Xavier. We’ve been through a lot with him. He’s saved our lives multiple times. We owe him our loyalty.”

“Except this isn’t just about Xavier or Greyson,” I said. “It’s about the Redwoods in general. Cali, Rishika, Mrs. Smith, the entirety of the Redwood pack—they make me feel safe. They make me feel loved. Do you understand what I’m saying, here?”

Lilac crossed his arms. “No, actually.”

By now, my heart was pounding. I stared at my brother, mirroring his posture. When I spoke the next words, they were the truth.

“Why does our allegiance have to be a package deal, anyway?” I asked. “I’m a separate person, Lilac.”

Lilac’s eyes widened. Slowly, he dropped his hands to his sides. “Are you saying that… That I should go to the Samaras by myself?”

**Episode 4166**

Greyson’s head was tilted, his eyes narrowed as he looked over my shoulder, at the group sitting around the firepit. What was he even *doing* right now? We were in a crisis! Again! He had to pay attention!

“Greyson!” I grabbed his arm, shaking him. “Did you even hear me?”

He flinched, shaking his head. “Sorry, can you repeat that?”

Practically vibrating out of my skin, I said, “I think something went wrong with the spell.”

He took in a breath. “I think you’re right.” He glanced over my shoulder again. “I can hear the thoughts of all the wolves sitting at the fire.”

“Yes!” I grabbed his arm again, shaking him some more. He barely flinched. He was like a rock that all my anxious babbling could crash against, and I appreciated that. “Jay won’t stop thinking about food, and I think it’s making me hungry, even though I just ate! I do *not* like this. How many times can one person think about nachos?”

Greyson took both my hands in his, his eyebrows arched. “Don’t worry, everything’s going to be okay. I’ll get you some nachos.”

“Thank you!” I took a deep breath, relieved. “Wait, that’s not the point! The point is—”

“We need to get Big Mac,” Greyson finished my sentence. He looked around. “Where’d she run off to? She was just out here.”

Meanwhile, Lola was loud and proud in my head again. *Cali! Why can you hear my thoughts? What’s happening with you and Greyson?*

Looking over my shoulder, I called, “Don’t worry! I’m sure Big Mac will have us fixed up in no time.”

“Wait, what’s happening?” Rishika asked.

“Cali, are you okay?” Artemis asked.

*God, what is it this time?* Rishika thought.

*It feels like I’m always worrying about Cali.* Artemis paused. *That’s a nice jacket she’s wearing. It will be mine.*

“Artemis!” I huffed. “Don’t steal my stuff!”

Artemis stared at me in obvious shock.

“Let’s go find Big Mac.” Greyson grabbed my hand, leading me away.

I swallowed nervously, remembering that Big Mac had said that if anything went wrong with the spell, it would be on my head.

I groaned out loud. “Crap!” I moved to follow Greyson’s lead. But not before I said, “Stop thinking about nachos, Jay! It’s distracting!”

He gaped at me, confused.

Thankfully, the farther away I got from Lola, Jay, Rishika, and Artemis, the less I could hear their thoughts. Did that mean that it was all over, though? Of course not. I could hear Zainab’s voice coming through, now.

*This beanbag is very squishy—I wonder why they’re called beanbags? No, focus, Zainab! Get the thing in that hole!*

I shook my head, fighting fruitlessly to clear it. Everybody I passed had some very loud thoughts to share.

By the buffet table, Torin was piling food onto his plate. *Snacks! I love snacks! Snacks snacks snacks! Oh no, we’re out of nachos!*

A few feet away from Zainab, Sage was singing off-key. *There once one a ship that put to sea, the name of the ship was the Billy of Tea, the winds blew up, her bow dipped down, oh blow, my bully boys, blow—*

Then Charlie walked past us, bringing some wood to the firepit. *Violet’s been talking to Lilac for a while now. I hope she’s okay.*

Greyson’s hand tightened around mine, and I saw his shoulders tense. I remembered that he was hearing everybody’s thoughts, too. And then there was a mixture of everything all at once.

*Torin will know I ate all the nachos—*

*Maybe school isn’t a good idea—*

*Beanbags are otherwise useless—*

*Soon will the Wellerman come to bring us sugar and tea and—*

*Violet said—*

*Snacks! SNACKS!*

*Cali never notices when I steal her clothes. It’s kind of sad—*

“Okay,” Greyson said gruffly, whirling around. “EVERYONE, STOP THINKING!”

His voice was so loud that I wasn’t sure if it was inside my head or outside or both. He stood there, scanning the area while the pack fell silent, staring at him.

Immediately, Ravi’s thoughts came barreling into my head. *How are we supposed to stop* thinking*? Am I thinking right now? I don’t know!*

Greyson took a deep breath, bringing his hand up and pinch his nose. At the same time, Zainab thought, *Why would Greyson ask us not to think?*

“For some reason,” Greyson said out loud, as if answering her unspoken question, “Cali and I can hear all your thoughts, so try not to think so hard.”

Murmurs broke out among the pack.

When I turned to Ravi, he balked. “Hang on—you can hear all our thoughts? Even…”

*I wonder what Marissa would look like in that tiny red bikini I saw in that ad yesterday. She is so fucking hot that—*

“RAVI, WE CAN BOTH HEAR YOU!” Greyson bellowed.

Ravi took several steps back, his eyes wide. “*No*.”

Greyson’s expression was thunderous. “Yes.”

Ravi buried his face in his hands, letting out a wordless wail of embarrassment. I felt like laughing at how ridiculous this whole thing was, but then I got a sudden vague sense of unease. Where had that come from? I looked over my shoulder and saw Violet. She was all the way back beyond the firepit, staring my way.

Was Violet okay? Charlie *had* said something about her talking with Lilac, right? Or had I imagined that during the whole thought overload episode? I contemplated approaching her for a moment, but I knew that would mean hearing her thoughts, and I was pretty sure that would be invasive and uncomfortable. Like it had been with everybody else. Apart from Sage, who was still happily singing her sea shanty.

“We need to stop getting distracted and find Big Mac,” I told Greyson, tugging on his hand. “Now.”

He nodded, looking around. He called, “Where’s Big Mac?”

A cacophony of voices came through, both out loud and in my head.

*She went back inside!* someone thought, and Greyson and I immediately headed for the house.

“What’s happening with you two this time?” Big Mac demanded, coming out the front door as we climbed the porch steps. At least now that there was some distance from the others, all the clamoring thoughts dissipated. Except for Big Mac’s.

*All I wanted was to cuddle with my fiancée by the fireplace without an audience for five minutes, and now these kids—*

“We know, we’re sorry to interrupt,” Greyson told Big Mac, letting out a deep sigh.

Big Mac gaped at him. “Did you just hear my thoughts?” She turned to me. “Cali?”

I nodded, cringing.

“Something went wrong with the spell,” Greyson said. “Cali and I can’t stop hearing voices.”

Big Mac’s eyes widened. A moment later, I stopped hearing her thoughts.

“I can’t hear anything you’re thinking right now,” I told her.

Big Mac scoffed. “That’s because I shut you both out. I need my privacy!”

“It’s nice that you like cuddling, though,” I told her encouragingly.

Big Mac looked at me like I’d just spat out her moonshine.

“*Anyway*,” Greyson cut in, clearing his throat. “Now that we’re farther away from the others, the voices have quieted down.” His tone became urgent. “But this wasn’t supposed to happen. Why *did* it happen?”

Big Mac fixed us with a glare. “I told you that things could go wrong, but clearly you didn’t listen.” She stared at me only now. “I told you it would be your fault, Cali.”

“I know,” I said, wincing. “I’m sorry—the spell was my idea, and then Lucian acted like an asshole. And whatever’s going on right now… Well, it isn’t what was supposed to happen, obviously. But can you do anything to fix it?”

Big Mac huffed, shaking her head. “Contrary to popular belief, I can’t just pull a spell out of thin air whenever you have a problem. That’s not how any of this works.”

“Then how *does* it work?” I asked.

“I’ll do anything to stop hearing about nachos, sea shanties, and Marissa,” Greyson said earnestly.

Big Mac gave me a flat look. “First, you need to find out if this is happening to the other wolves who invaded my room earlier.” She paused. “I’m talking about Elle and the delusional prince who needs to be poisoned.”

Greyson nodded. “Yes, we got that—”

I shrugged. “Didn’t need to hear your thoughts to get that—”

“That’s the first step,” Big Mac interrupted. “Otherwise, for now, there’s nothing more to be done.”

Greyson and I shared a look. My heart was pounding so hard I was pretty sure I could hear it. It was a welcome *thump thump thump* in my head in comparison to the earlier craziness.

“But… How long is this going to last?” I asked Big Mac.

“We can’t function like this,” Greyson said, laughing dubiously. I rarely saw him so rattled. Oh god, who would’ve thought that this would be the thing to break his composure? “We can’t keep listening to everybody’s thoughts,” he added. “We’ll go nuts. When is it going to stop?”

Big Mac shook her head solemnly. “You want the truth?”

I huffed. “Always.”

Big Mac looked at me. “I have no idea.”

**Episode 4167**

**Greyson**

Big Mac had to know how to deal with this spell. She couldn’t *not* know—she was supposed to know everything, always. She was supposed to save our asses, and we were supposed to annoy her. That was just the way things were, end of fucking discussion.

“I don’t know what this spell will do, and I don’t know when it might wear off.”

Well, that was honest, wasn’t it? Alphas weren’t supposed to panic, but I was one sea shanty away from locking myself and Cali in my room.

“So what? We could be stuck like this forever?” I asked Big Mac.

She flinched. “I’m really not sure. I’m sorry, Greyson.”

I sighed, nodding. She scowled, crossing her arms over her chest. “This cannot continue.”

“That’s what we’re saying!” Cali burst out. “You have to have *some* sort of idea about when this spell will wear out—it can’t just go on forever!”

“That’s true,” Big Mac conceded. “My best guess is that it could be any time within the next day.”

Cali let out a soft exhalation of relief, turning to me. “Okay, we can do a day, right? That’s not too much! The way she was talking about it, I thought we’d have to deal with months of this!”

Big Mac glared. “It’s not my fault you jumped to conclusions, Cali. You love catastrophic thinking.”

She paused. “That I do.”

“A day sounds like the best possible scenario,” I said, squeezing Cali’s shoulder. She leaned into my touch, taking a deep breath before turning to the witch again.

“Okay, but when you say a day, you mean *within* a day, right?” she asked.

“It could be an hour, it could be the full twenty-four, there’s no way to know,” Big Mac said. “That’s what I meant when I said I didn’t know.”

I shook my head. “Hope it’s sooner rather than later, especially if Xavier and I have to leave on this mission soon.”

Big Mac eyed me. “You sure you can’t postpone it?”

“Not possible,” I said. “If the Bitterfangs are out there, we don’t want to give them any more time to regroup than they’ve already had.”

Big Mac nodded. “Good point. But for now, all you can do if you want some peace and quiet is to keep your distance from other wolves and people in this pack house.”

“That’s going to make it hard to hold pack meetings,” I said, wincing.

Big Mac shrugged. “Not my problem. Cali got this spell from the internet—what did you expect?”

Cali huffed. “I got it from the library! From a very, very old witch.”

Big Mac looked so unimpressed she could’ve fallen asleep.

“*Anyway*,” I said, taking Cali’s hand. “Thank you for the info, Big Mac.”

I tugged Cali back inside the house, heading for one of the studies. The moment I closed the door behind us, Cali started pacing.

“If this doesn’t go away, I might need to contact Hypatia again and ask for more information,” she said. “Or we could ask her if she knows someone else who could help us? Or we could ask Steinar to find something in the library that—”

I stepped in, breaking her stride and resting my hands on her shoulders. “It’s going to be okay,” I said, keeping my voice steady. “We can handle anything together, yeah?”

“Yeah…” She looked up at me, eyes wide. And then she looked horrified. “Wait, no! How can I be your number two if this doesn’t go away? How am I going to lead anyone if my head is full of sea shanties and Ravi’s sex thoughts? What if someone gets killed because I’m not able to think straight? Oh my god, I—”

When Cali was like this—spiraling into the abyss without a parachute—the only way for me to calm her down was to squeeze her. To literally just grab and pull her into a strong embrace until she was too squished to flail. It worked, thank god. She tightened her arms around me immediately, pressing her face against my chest.

“I’m right here,” I whispered in her ear. “Breathe for me.”

She breathed in and out, calming down enough that I finally got a chance to process. And then I realized something.

“We’re looking at this too negatively,” I said. “There’s a chance we could use it to our advantage. You can’t communicate with most werewolves when they’re shifted, but now… If it doesn’t go away, what if it could help?”

Cali paused, leaning back a little to meet my eyes. Her lips were pursed. “That makes sense, actually. I just…” She shook her head, loosening her grip on me. “I’m sorry for freaking out like that.”

“Don’t apologize,” I said. “It was a lot.”

“But it was a lot for you, too,” she muttered, resting her hand on my chest. “I could tell it stressed you out, but you kept it together.”

“I have more experience with stuff like this,” I said. “And don’t forget, we did just fight a battle. You must be exhausted.”

Cali laughed weakly. “I guess I needed that decompression party more than I thought.”

I offered her a smile, stroking her arms. “Every leader goes through shit like this, love. No one can be strong one hundred percent of the time.”

She pressed her lips together. “I just don’t want to fail the pack, and I can’t…” She shook her head. “I can’t fail you. I’d rather explode into a million tiny little pieces than fail you, so—”

“Cali, *no*,” I said firmly. “You could never fail me. You’ve grown into someone I trust implicitly with the safety of our pack. You believe me when I say that, right?”

“I do. Thank you.” She paused, tracing patterns across my chest. She stared at the spot where my heart pounded for her. In a lower voice, she said, “It’s amazing that you believe in me. But it still feels like I need to work on believing in myself, and the person I could be.”

I opened my mouth, ready to reassure her, to hug her tight and kiss her, but then there was a knock on the door. I looked up to see Rishika hovering by the entryway of the study.

Had she overheard any of our conversation?

“I can’t hear your thoughts, Rishika,” Cali said. “We didn’t even hear you coming! How did you do that?”

Rishika laughed a little, both awkward and pleased. “I’m really good at the ‘emptying your mind’ part of meditation.”

That was what Rishika had said, but I could feel the effort she was putting into keeping her thoughts quiet. She was projecting the words, *I’m not thinking, I’m not thinking, I’m not thinking*, on a loop, but that was about it.

“I appreciate the effort, Rishika, but we can hear you *not* thinking,” I said.

Rishika frowned, her voice echoing through my head. *Dammit.*

I snorted, but Cali sighed. “You’re doing your best, and we’re grateful,” she told Rishika before looking at me. “I think I’m going to take a nap now, though.”

I eyed her, stroking her shoulder. “Feeling any better?”

“I just need some quiet,” Cali said.

She leaned in, hugging me tight for a brief moment before heading upstairs. I worried about her—I always did—but this felt like nothing in comparison to all the other things she’d been through.

This was just one more thing.

In the meantime, I had to push forward—fill in Rishika on the plan. I hoped we’d be able to get through the conversation without any mind reading awkwardness. Though if anyone could get through it, it was Rishika.

“So,” she said. “What’s next?”

“Xavier and I will be heading out soon to hunt down whatever’s left of the Bitterfangs and make sure Malakai has really retreated. Or, better yet, make sure he’s dead.”

*Good plan*, Rishika thought. “Good plan,” she said out loud. “What do you want me to do while you’re gone? What am I telling the pack?”

“What I need you to do above all is support Cali as the person in charge,” I said.

Rishika paused. For a moment, she stared at me, and suddenly, her thoughts cut sharply into my head. *Is that really the best idea right now?*

My eyebrows arched in surprise, and Rishika’s eyes widened.

“Shit, you heard that, right?” she said. But before I could respond, she changed gears, owning up to it. “I’m not taking it back. I just think that we might’ve won the battle, but we haven’t officially won the war. And if that’s truly the case, then whoever leads the pack in your absence will need to be both confident and extremely competent.” She paused. “Cali is smart and powerful, and she has potential, but do you think this is the right time to put her to the test?”

I stared at Rishika, processing. I wanted to tell her she was wrong about Cali, but a small part of me worried that this *was* too much for her to handle. She’d been through a lot recently, and even though the Seluna handprint was gone, she hadn’t had a second of peace to recuperate. I opened my mouth to say as much to Rishika when my phone rang.

I frowned when I saw the caller ID.

“Who is it?” Rishika asked.

“Ava,” I said dubiously, picking up. “Hello?”

“Hey,” Ava said. “I’m just calling to let you know that Xavier wants to leave tomorrow morning.”

**Episode 4168**

**Xavier**

I wondered if there was a way to respond to Kira’s question without breaking any of Adéluce’s rules. Telling the full truth was, as always, impossible. Finally, I settled on a half-truth—something that sounded believable enough and wouldn’t add more danger to an already fucked-up situation.

“If I’d stayed with the Redwood pack, I never would’ve been Alpha,” I said. “The only way for me to get what I wanted was to leave. I couldn’t live under Greyson’s rule anymore—not when we were both born to be Alphas.”

Kira stared at me for a brief moment. Then she said, “What about Cali? Why did you have to leave like that and be such a dick about it?”

My jaw clenched. “You asked why I left the Redwood pack. I gave you an answer. Is that not enough?”

Kira paused, crossing her arms. Her eyes narrowed as she took me in, and for a moment, I thought she was about to call me out on my bullshit. But then she said, “Fine. That makes sense, at least.”

I tried not to seem relieved. “So, are you going to join my pack?”

“Do you really want me to join, or is this just some weird power play for you to stick it to Greyson?” Kira asked coldly.

I had to give it to her—she didn’t fuck around.

“You know you’d be a strong addition to the Samara pack, Kira,” I said. “We’d be lucky to have you. And it wouldn’t have to be permanent, if you don’t want to be—it could just be for the duration of the war. What do you say?”

She shrugged. “I guess I’m in.”

I scoffed. “You could sound a little more excited.”

“You’re not the one who’s going to have to tell Greyson I’m leaving, Xavier,” she said sharply.

“I could tell Greyson, though,” I said.

In fact, I very much *wanted* to inform my brother that I was poaching another of his pack members. He thought that everybody would always choose him over me, but that was bullshit. I was pretty sure I’d be able to get even more Redwoods on my side if I put my mind to it. Greyson wasn’t the king of everything.

“I don’t want you talking to him about this,” Kira said, cutting off my thoughts. “He deserves to hear it from me.”

I frowned. I didn’t like that Kira was so reluctant to hurt Greyson’s feelings or ego. It wasn’t like they had any history.

“Fine,” I said. “Whatever.”

“I’ll be back soon,” Kira said, blipping away.

I decided to ignore Kira’s comments about Greyson and focus on the positive. There was no real reason not to.

The moment she was gone, Ava walked back into the room. *How did it go?*

*Why are you mind linking? We got her*,I told Ava. *Kira’s joining us.*

*Because your brother’s on the phone*, Ava said, handing me her phone. “I told him you want to leave tomorrow morning.”

I brought the phone to my ear. “So, does tomorrow work? We need to get this out of the way.”

“Hey to you, too. The morning works,” Greyson said. “When?”

I scowled. “What do you mean, *when*? I just told you—tomorrow morning.”

“Right.”

“Are you drunk?” I asked. “It feels like you’re not paying attention.”

Not paying attention wasn’t like Greyson. If anything, he was detail-oriented—just one of the things that made him such a pain in the ass.

“I’m fine,” he said. “There’s just some stuff going on here.”

I scowled harder. “Should I be worried?”

“No, everything’s fine. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“When will you be here?” I asked.

“First light?”

He was asking me, not telling me. Not ordering me. And that was a strange thing all on its own, but it was no longer my place to figure out what the hell was going on with Greyson. Or the Redwoods. I couldn’t go down that rabbit hole again.

“I’ll see you at the Samara pack house tomorrow morning, first light,” I said.

Greyson hung up without another word. I glared at the screen.

“So, that was a weird phone call,” Ava said, one eyebrow arched.

I shook my head. “Something’s going on with the Redwoods. Like always.”

“And?” Ava prompted.

“And nothing. It’s their problem. They’ll deal with it,” I said.

Ava grinned at my words, and I knew that had been the right thing to say. She took a couple of steps back, her ass bumping into the pool table before she lifted herself onto it like before.

“That’s a first,” she said. “Usually you’re all up in their business.”

I shook my head. “I’m unlearning bad habits.”

Ava chuckled, and my wolf stirred. She seemed pleased, and he enjoyed it. *I* enjoyed it. Things were so much better when Ava and I got along. It made me feel better, and I knew it also gave the pack a sense of stability. It lifted the atmosphere in the house, along with everybody’s spirits. With a united Alpha and Luna, the pack became much harder to take down, even if we were relatively small.

If I could rely on Ava, and she could rely on me, our confidence would climb, and the pack would feel it as well. That would make things easier for us as we continued to build our numbers. It all just made sense—in a pragmatic way.

Not a *falling in love* way.

I wasn’t going to fall in love with Ava.

But if Adéluce was prepared to offer me a way to get some actual support—especially support from my mate—I would’ve been a fool to ignore that chance. Keeping my wolf happy meant keeping myself stable, and that went for Ava as well.

We worked well that way.

And yeah, it wouldn’t be love, but it could be companionship. Partnership. And it could also be some fucking amazing sex. That was pretty important, too, for keeping morale high, and my wolf agreed. Of course he did.

“You seem less annoyed than usual,” I said, stepping into Ava’s space as she sat on the pool table. I came to stand between her parted thighs, and she slid them open further. Inviting me into her territory.

“I’m less annoyed because you’re being less annoying, Xavier,” she said sarcastically.

I rested my hands on either side of her waist, leaning closer. “I got you a witch, too.”

She rolled her eyes. “You didn’t *get me* a witch. You recruited a witch for the *pack*.”

“But you agree that Kira’s going to make us stronger.”

Ava pressed her lips together. “Right. Tactically, it’s a good decision.” She shoved lightly at my shoulder. “Are we done talking about Kira now?”

“Let’s talk about something else, then,” I said, gripping her wrist. I moved her hand from my shoulder to my chest. “It felt good to have you back me up, earlier.”

Pleasure flashed through Ava’s eyes, and my wolf let out a low growl.

Smiling, Ava said, “Oh?”

“Yeah.”

I leaned closer still. This time, she didn’t push me away. She rested both her arms on my shoulders and linked her hands behind my neck.

“Well, everything’s easier when you’re not being a dick.” She glanced at my mouth, then. That was all the invitation I needed.

In a quick movement, I grabbed her hips and pulled her closer to me with one hand, reaching to cup her nape with the other. Her breath caught. Her legs came to wrap around my waist, her arms locking around my neck. Her scent was rich with desire and warmth, and I’d barely touched her. She always wanted me so fucking badly that it set me on fire.

“It’s not like I’m always a dick,” I whispered against her mouth. “I can be *very* nice when I put my mind to it.”

Smirking, she said, “Prove it.”

I let go of her hip to grip her jaw. Her lips parted immediately, and then I kissed her the way I knew she liked it. Messy, all tongue, her own version of what “nice” was meant to feel like. Because that was the thing—I knew Ava. I knew that when I took her top off and bit at her neck, her collarbones, she was having the time of her life.

She clawed at me, tore off my T-shirt and touched me all over. She cursed when she felt how hard I was. But when she reached for my zipper, I grabbed her wrist and pushed it behind her back before pushing her back down onto the pool table.

She rested her weight on her elbows, panting. She watched as I tore her leggings off, then as I leaned forward to do the same with her bra. When it was gone, I put my mouth on her to lick and suck.

“Fuck!” She moaned the word, her fingers tangling in my hair as I started kissing a path down her chest, her stomach, lower…

I grabbed her thighs, spread them wide, and looked up at her for a moment. I stared at her gorgeous body. She was all flushed, her gaze heated, sharp. Like this was a dare.

Because this was Ava.

She wasn’t love, but she was here.

And my wolf craved her.

Lowering my face between her thighs, I said against her skin, “Let me show you just how nice I can be.”

**Episode 4169**

I had my pillow shoved over my head—like *that* would block out the thoughts I heard flowing up from the first floor. I had been right! Rishika, the most levelheaded person in the house, had reservations about my leadership ability.

*Just leave me alone to* die*.*

Perhaps I was being dramatic, but this hurt very much, actually. It was like my worst fears had come to bite me in the ass. Could Greyson be having second thoughts about me as well, now? Why hadn’t Rishika voiced her reservations earlier? Why had she been so supportive of me in the past? Had she just been telling me what I wanted to hear? Had something changed? Did she no longer think I was good enough to be Luna?

I wanted to turn into a worm and go live in the dirt.

*Well, that might be a touch dramatic.*

I shoved the pillow away and glared at it. This was so unfair. I had just started to feel comfortable with my place in the pack. It was my plan that had gotten us the win in the battlefield. I’d fought werewolves one-on-one and survived, and my Fae magic was blossoming. I had a sparkly magic sword, for crying out loud! What more did Rishika want? What more was I supposed to do? Why did something *always* have to go wrong just when I was starting to feel more confident? Who had I pissed off in a past life? Why couldn’t I, for once, catch a—

Suddenly, Rishika’s voice appeared in my mind again.

*Okay, that makes sense. Greyson has some good points about Cali. She’s always been good for the pack. I’ll help her.*

Wait.

Rishika loved me!

I grabbed the pillow and squeezed it, trying to recover from the emotional whiplash. That had been quite the rollercoaster for a while there—far too many ups and downs for the span of a few minutes. I was actually so grateful that I could hear Rishika’s thoughts right now—even if they were what had freaked me out to begin with.

At least now I knew that Greyson had stuck up for me, and that Rishika did see my potential. My initial impression of her belief in me hadn’t been wrong. And for that, I was so grateful that I wanted to run downstairs and give her a hug.

A knock on the door interrupted my visions of chasing Rishika around to annoy her with my friendship. It was probably Greyson coming to check in on me.

“Come in!” I called.

When the door opened, though, I was surprised to see Artemis on the other side.

“Thought you could use a friend who keeps her thoughts to herself,” Artemis said, walking over to sit next to me on the bed.

“How did you know?” I asked.

“I know a thing or two about keeping my thoughts to myself,” Artemis said. “I had to do it all the time with the Kollector. I couldn’t let on what I really thought, in my own thoughts, in my expressions, anything.”

I sighed. “I did hear that you want my jacket, though.”

“I mean, we’re sisters; what’s yours is mine, right?”

I sighed. “You can have the jacket, Artemis.”

She grinned. “Thank you!”

I ignored the ramifications of sibling-on-sibling theft and kept talking.

“Big Mac did say that it was only the wolves who’d be affected,” I told her. “But Greyson and I heard her thoughts as well, before she kind of… closed them off? Managed to clear out her head? I don’t know how it all works exactly, but I’m glad it’s quiet with just the two of us in here.”

Artemis took my hand. “I will totally be your hangout buddy until this goes away. Did Big Mac say how long the spell will last?”

“Twenty-four hours max,” I replied. “But I’m a little worried that if it lasts too long, I won’t be able to handle being Greyson’s second while he’s away.”

Artemis shook her head. “Cali, you’ve proven multiple times that you’re ready for this. Stop questioning your abilities—you’ve got this.”

I nodded, taking a deep breath. “You’re right. I guess I have to be better about not listening to that evil little voice in my brain that keeps telling me I’m not good enough.”

Artemis bumped her shoulder with mine. “Exactly. Why don’t we plan on practicing with Adair tomorrow? You handled yourself well in the battle, but imagine what we’ll be able to do when we’re both experts.”

Artemis’s grin almost looked bloodthirsty, and I blinked at her in alarm. “What is happening with your face right now?”

Her tone was gleeful. “I’m just picturing a future where we’re a powerful sister warrior duo, feared by all.”

I’d have laughed if what she’d described wasn’t wildly problematic. “Artemis, no. I just want to be the best I can be so I can *protect* everyone.”

Artemis deflated. “Eh. I guess that’s good, too.”

I scoffed, and she laughed, leaning in to give me a side-hug. She’d been so stiff about physical affection when we’d first met that I felt all warm inside at the idea that she felt comfortable with me.

“Everything’s going to be okay,” she said. “We’ll protect each other.”

There was another knock on the door, and Greyson popped his head in. “Just checking in to see if you’re feeling better.”

“I’ll leave the two of you alone to make eyes at each other,” Artemis said, standing up.

“What? We do *not* make eyes at each other,” I said, blushing.

Artemis paused halfway to the door, turning to me. “Right, sorry—*you’re* the one who looks like you’re melting into a puddle of cheesy goo. Greyson’s too cool for that.”

I gasped in outrage, throwing the pillow at her. She ducked and walked past Greyson, giving him a joking salute.

Greyson smirked at me, leaning against the wall. “So. You want to make eyes at me, huh?”

I wanted to run to him and kiss him, but unfortunately, we had other things to deal with.

“As tempting as I am by the prospect of messing around,” I said, “I think we should focus on the fact that you’re leaving in the morning, and I’m going to be—”

I was cut off by a *POOF!*

Kira appeared in the middle of the room, and I let out an undignified scream.

“Sorry, sorry!” she rushed to say. “I clearly didn’t think this through.”

“Kira?” Greyson looked worried. “What’s going on? Where were you? Is everything okay?”

Kira shifted on her feet, looking away. She didn’t speak.

My stomach dropped. I actually wished I could hear what she was thinking.

Greyson’s expression was closed off, now. He suddenly looked so resigned that my heart broke for him. “Just say it, Kira.”

She opened her mouth. “Greyson, I…” She stared at him, her face the picture of contrition, along with something else I couldn’t categorize.

“I need to hear you say it,” Greyson told her. “I think I deserve that, at least.”

Kira’s jaw clenched. And then it came out. “I’m leaving the Redwood pack. I’m joining the Samaras.”

I sucked in a breath. I’d figured that this was what Kira was going to say, but hearing it… I felt awful for Greyson. This was going to be a huge hit for the pack. But through the disappointment, the sadness, and the anger, something else bloomed inside me. There was a small thread of jealousy squatting in my chest.

Kira could just go join Xavier. She got to make that choice. Xavier had made sure I couldn’t choose, because he’d chosen for me. He’d rejected me like I was nothing.

*And it still hurts.*

“Well.” Greyson put his hands in his pockets. “I guess that’s all there is to say. Thank you for everything, Kira. Good luck.”

“I want you to know that it wasn’t an easy decision, but I know it’s the right one,” Kira said stiffly.

Greyson didn’t speak for a moment. Then he said, “It’s your choice. Your right. But if you’re going, I don’t see a reason for us to stretch this out any further.”

Kira stared at him. She opened her mouth as if to say something, but then closed it. Without another word, she blipped away. I had no idea if she’d already moved all her stuff, or if she was in her room right now, packing up.

It had been different with Gabriel and Mikah—Gabriel was a Rogue, and Mikah was his mate, so he’d likely go where Gabriel did. But Kira? She’d been through so much with us.

I swallowed, stepping closer to Greyson. I started to rub his back. “Are you okay?”

Greyson didn’t look at me, and that was the biggest red flag. He’d spoken to Kira without any drama, but the rejection had to sting. Especially because Greyson was a good Alpha. A *great* Alpha. I could see why the Redwoods—even Jay—had chosen him over Xavier as their Alpha in the past.

But now Xavier had his own pack. He was his own Alpha.

He’d made his choice.

*Without me.*

Running a hand through his hair, Greyson let out a sharp laugh. “If this mind reading thing’s not gone by tomorrow, I don’t know how I’m going to be able to get through a mission with Xavier with his thoughts in my head.”

**Episode 4170**

**Ava**

Xavier looked up at me, eyes dark. His grip on my thighs as he kept them spread was almost bruising. His tongue and mouth had me writhing, arching up, trembling, and grabbing at his hair. There was nothing *nice* about what he was doing to me.

It was fucking *amazing*.

He worked on me with single-minded intensity, watching my every reaction, not stopping when I came the first time. He just went for it again, pressing down on my stomach. He bit at the inside of my thigh before he licked a stripe there, then he swept his tongue all over me and whispered, “I love seeing you come.”

I was shaking, both from the aftershocks and from the thrill of hearing him say those words. He kissed a path up my stomach, my chest, wiping his lips and chin on my skin. And then he was kissing my mouth, soft and tender. This was something rare. He slid inside me easily—deep but smooth, in no rush, almost gentle. He never stopped kissing me.

There was something about this, about the way he was fucking me, that felt different. He seemed so focused on my pleasure, so determined to get me there that it sent a violent shiver through me. My wolf howled at the rightness of it, at the acceptance she felt from her mate.

I moaned out his name over and over, delirious, wrapping my arms and legs around him. He rotated his hips, driving into me, his groans of pleasure vibrating through me when he kissed me once more. And then he gripped my hand, brought it down between us, and said, “I need you to come again.”

That was enough to make me rub furiously, gasping, watching as he watched me arch up against him, my orgasm triggering his. He kissed me, staying inside me, still thrusting, pinning both my hands over my head.

Staring deep into my eyes, he rasped, “You feel so fucking good, Ava…”

He took me upstairs, afterward. We fell into our bed and fucked again. Again, Xavier had that single-minded intensity, like he was there for me, to take care of me—in a way that felt like… *more*. In a way that felt like it used to, when we’d first met, years ago.

And in that single moment, I allowed myself the tiniest sliver of hope.

Hope that maybe, just maybe, Xavier was on his way to meeting me where I already was.

*In love.*

\*\*\*

I woke up in bed with the heavy weight of my mate’s arm across my middle. I knew I probably had the goofiest smile on my face, but I didn’t care. Last night, there hadn’t been a moment when I’d questioned Xavier’s commitment to me or the pack. I knew that he wanted to be here—in our bed, with his hands on me and his warm breath tickling my ear. I could feel it in my bones, my wolf’s instincts pointing out just how right this was.

Just how good it felt.

Xavier huffed from behind me, groaning awake. How domestic and normal this felt made me feel like laughing. Or rolling my eyes. Settling on a mixture of both, I lightly pushed against his arm, trying to escape the muscled prison of his embrace.

Instead of pulling away, Xavier’s response was to tighten his arm around me, pulling me closer. His eyes fluttered open when I rolled over to face him. He leaned in to brush his lips over mine. My heart was beating so fast, I could feel it all over.

“Good morning,” he said gruffly.

“Good morning,” I murmured.

He nuzzled my cheek, and I shivered. I wanted this ease between us to last for as long as possible, but I knew that Xavier would have to meet with Greyson soon. When he pulled away, muttering something about dealing with his pain-in-the-ass brother, I sighed deeply and sat up as well.

“Party’s over,” I grumbled.

Xavier chuckled, looking over his shoulder. “What? You want to stay in bed all day?”

This simple moment, with Xavier soft from sleep, would always be imprinted in my memory.

I cocked an eyebrow at him. “Tell me you’d say no to that.”

He snorted, zipping up his jeans. “If there was any way we could spend the rest of the day in bed, I’d do it. But unfortunately, there is what I’m guessing is a very pissed-off Alpha on his way over here right now.”

Grabbing my own jeans to put on, I asked, “Are you ready for that? To spend time with Greyson after everything with Gabriel and Kira?”

He shook his head, heading to the bathroom. After splashing water on his face, he said, “I’m not worried. My brother didn’t build the Redwood pack alone, so he shouldn’t just assume that he gets to keep the whole pack now that I’m gone.”

I nodded as I pulled my shirt over my head. “Makes sense. Gabriel and Kira were your friends first.”

“Exactly,” he said.

I watched him for a moment as he rummaged around the bathroom, his spine straight, his every move steady. I liked seeing him so confident and in charge. No jitters, no angry outbursts. A more mature version of himself. This Xavier made me feel like the Samaras had a chance to be the pack I knew we could become.

And I couldn’t help but start my day with a smile.

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“The Redwood Alpha’s here?” Knox called from downstairs a few minutes later. I could hear the question in his tone.

Tying my hair back, I turned to Xavier. “How much do you want Knox to know about your mission with Greyson? He and the pack are going to have questions.”

“I’ll tell the pack everything before I leave. There’s no reason for them not to know that we’re heading out,” Xavier said, gesturing for me to follow him downstairs.

The first floor was surprisingly active this early in the morning. Greyson’s arrival had put the pack on the alert, and they were looking at Xavier questioningly.

“So?” Donovan said. “What’s going on?”

“Greyson and I are going to track the Bitterfangs to make sure they’ve truly retreated. We also need to make sure that Malakai’s dead,” Xavier said.

Everyone made noises of agreement. Even Knox wasn’t whining, for once. *Finally*. My cousin had been pushing Xavier to the point where I was genuinely surprised that Xavier hadn’t torn his head off.

“In the meantime, Ava’s in charge,” Xavier said, finishing his briefing. “Listen to her.”

Everybody nodded. I pressed my lips together to hide a smile, standing there next to him.

This really felt good.

Xavier took my hand, and the two of us went outside. Greyson was waiting for us just outside the front door. He looked… not like himself. He seemed aggravated, irritated, and borderline angry.

I was suddenly struck by an anxious feeling.

Xavier and Greyson were usually so different, and often fighting, that it was hard to think of them as brothers. And even when they were clashing, their styles weren’t alike—Xavier was aggressive and loud, and Greyson was cold and sardonic.

Right now, though, with Greyson standing there glaring at Xavier like he didn’t give a fuck about diplomacy, he reminded me of Xavier. In that moment, I could see the resemblance between the brothers, in their strength and in their fury.

Greyson opened his mouth to speak, but Xavier beat him to it. “Let’s go.”

“Good morning to you, too, sunshine,” Greyson shot back.

“Don’t call me that,” Xavier said sharply.

Greyson scoffed. “What would you prefer? Mr. Big Alpha? I mean, you’re out here poaching witches from other packs and all—you must be feeling pretty pleased with yourself.”

Xavier’s jaw clenched. Greyson was goading him—which was a first, since Xavier was usually the one doing the goading—and Xavier was holding back. The role reversal was weirding me out.

“You’re a big boy, Greyson,” Xavier said. “You can’t be mad about that. Kira coming here is just pack politics.”

Greyson tilted his head to the side and moved closer, getting in Xavier’s space. I held my breath.

“Right,” Greyson said flatly. “Pack politics. Nothing personal about it. It’s not like you want to prove a point.”

Xavier’s eyes flashed with anger, and I knew I had to step in.

*Xavier*, I said. *You guys have to work together.*

*Yeah, yeah*, Xavier grumbled back.

Without another word, Greyson moved backward, shifting into his wolf before starting to jog toward the tree line. Scowling, Xavier turned to me. I expected him to curse or grumble more, but he just leaned down and kissed me. A pleasant surprise.

“Take care of things while I’m gone,” he murmured against my mouth. “I’ll be back soon.”

Every Samara who was awake right now had seen and heard that. Had witnessed Xavier treating me exactly how a Luna was meant to be treated.

“Okay,” I breathed.

Xavier nodded, then he shifted and jogged after Greyson.

Knox came to stand next to me, staring into the distance, where the two Alphas had vanished.

“Do you think their plan will work?” he asked.

“Honestly, I just hope they don’t kill each other.”

**Episode 4171**

**Greyson**

I was pissed. I was running twenty feet or so ahead of Xavier as we made our way through the trees. Leaping over a log, I landed hard and sprinted onward. I was constantly looking around, keeping my eyes open and my nose to the ground, searching for any clues about where the Bitterfang, Ironwood, and Hackberry packs had been, and where they might have gone.

In a rare stroke of luck, I wasn’t hearing Xavier’s thoughts. Maybe the spell had worn off. Something felt different than it had the night before—

*You seem pissed today*, Xavier said, his mind link cutting into my thoughts.

I blew out a quick breath. I could tell he was trying to push my buttons. Xavier had always known how to provoke me, but I wasn’t going to dance to his tune. I didn’t want to get pulled into any shit with him—not now.

So, I didn’t answer and just kept running.

*Are you seriously going to give me the silent treatment?* he asked after a few seconds of silence.

I stopped and pivoted so that I was looking right at him.

*Oh,* now *you want to act like brothers?* I demanded. *You want to play nice with me after you pull my people from my pack? Tell me, was that your plan all along when you left?*

He looked at me, his blue eyes flashing. *No. I didn’t plan this, but I can’t help it if I have a stronger connection to some of the Redwood pack members than you do.*

Fury washed over me. *And what the hell is* that *supposed to mean?*

He tipped his head. Wolves didn’t shrug, but the gesture came close. *You haven’t even been Redwood Alpha that long, man. And I’m just as responsible for who the Redwoods are as you are. I helped build the pack, too—*

*And then you left*, I interrupted furiously. *Remember that? You gave up any claim you had to the pack when you walked away.*

Xavier was silent in response to this. He had no quippy answer, so I could tell that my words had hit him hard. His eyes looked cold and angry, and he moved forward, pushing past me as he started sprinting again.

I rolled my eyes. *Who needs to be a big boy now, Xavier?*

He shot an angry look over his shoulder. *Why don’t you grow the fuck up? I’m out here trying to do a job. If you want to keep fighting, go ahead. You can keep at it until you’re blue in the face.*

I ground my teeth to keep from snarling… Or doing something worse. I was pissed at Xavier, and beyond frustrated with this whole situation. Maybe I shouldn’t take the loss of Gabriel, Mikah, and Kira so personally. They weren’t technically pack members, but they felt like honorary Redwoods—Kira especially. I just didn’t understand why Xavier was trying to do this during the war with the Bitterfangs. If he wanted to be a petty asshole, he could wait until it was over.

But apparently my brother wasn’t capable of that.

Shaking the thought off, I looked around. There were no signs of the packs anywhere, and it felt like we were just running without a plan. I didn’t like that. I needed to come back to the pack with something concrete.

Slowing to a stop, I glanced at Xavier.

*Come back*, I snapped.

He slowed and turned around, but he didn’t walk over to me. *What’s the problem? Or should I just ask what I was doing wrong? Skip right to the point. Was I not looking for clues in an Alpha enough way for you?*

*Shut up*, I snapped. *I stopped because we need a fucking plan, here. We’re just searching at random, and it’s a waste of time. We can’t just run around, hoping to stumble across something useful.*

Xavier was looking at me, and I could tell by the way he was breathing that he was still mad, but he nodded.

*Fine*, he said shortly. He looked around for a moment. *I think our best bet is to start at the last location we can confirm. We start at the site of the battle and work outward from there.*

I hated to admit it, but it was a good plan—more logical than anything I’d thought of. But I didn’t say any of that.

*Fine*, was all I said.

*Fine*, Xavier repeated, just as shortly.

A bird chirped from the tree next to us and we both looked over, clearly keyed up.

I blew out a frustrated breath. None of this tension was helping, but I didn’t know how to smooth any of the hard edges—not at the moment, anyway.

*We’ll have to be careful*,I said. *Malakai and his allies could’ve left something nasty behind for us to find.*

Xavier rolled his eyes. *My god, Greyson, did you seriously just tell me to be cautious when hunting down a bloodthirsty enemy pack? Thanks for the stellar advice, but I’m not an idiot.*

*I’m not saying you are*, I ground out. *I was just being clear about what we’re facing.* Leaders *know how to be clear*, I added pointedly.

He snorted. *I don’t need Alpha lessons from you, Greyson*.

We stared at each other for a tense, angry moment, then turned and headed back toward the site of the battle.

We ran in silence, and as we moved, I tried to slow down the racing thoughts in my head. I was pissed at Xavier because he was managing to poach people from my pack. It bothered me because I didn’t want my pack to be weakened, and maybe also because of what Xavier had said—because it made me wonder if those people simply felt more connected to him. I hadn’t liked hearing it, but maybe there was a kernel of truth in his words.

And what would I do if the situation were reversed? If I needed pack members, wouldn’t I want to start with people I knew and trusted? I thought of Rishika and Ravi, and I knew that if I were in Xavier’s position, I’d probably want those two by my side.

So, was it really fair of me to hate Xavier for doing exactly what I’d have done in his place?

We scrambled up the side of a rocky hill, then started down the other side.

*I don’t think you need Alpha lessons from me*, I finally said.

Xavier looked back at me, and just for a moment, I saw a flash of surprise in his eyes. But then he looked away again. He didn’t respond, but after a moment, he started to slow his pace.

I was about to ask him why, but then I caught the scent on the air—*blood*. It was old blood—stale—and I knew we were getting closer. I took a deep breath, inhaling the rank smell, and tried to pull it apart, looking for any irregularities.

There was a lot of stimuli to take in. I caught Rishika’s scent, Cali’s, Ava’s, Ravi’s—really, all the members of the alliance who’d been present for the battle. I tried to push those scents aside and focus on looking for the enemy.

There it was—Honora and Malakai. Their scents hit me like a brick wall, turning my stomach. The scent memory of a wolf was often lifesaving, but there were some memories I wished I could forget.

I stepped forward and looked around, taking in the edge of the mountain, where so much of the battle had taken place. I squinted into the distance, where I could see the ravine into which Malakai had tumbled.

Xavier was looking around as well, and suddenly his head tilted, like he’d heard something, and he bounded forward.

*I think I’ve got something*, he told me.

I followed him, and was about to ask what he was after, but then I caught it, too. It was the smell of a Bitterfang wolf. But this scent wasn’t from the battle—it was more recent. This scent was fresh. I didn’t like that.

I looked around quickly. If Xavier and I were both picking up on the scent, that meant there had been a Bitterfang wolf here at the site of the battle, after they’d lost and apparently retreated. Which changed things.

I ran quickly, catching up to Xavier so we were tracking the scent together, side by side.

The battlefield was a mess—broken branches everywhere, trees toppled over, blood splattered across the frozen ground. But none of that was relevant to me, so I tried to ignore the chaos, and as we moved, following the scent, it began to grow stronger.

I glanced up at Xavier, who nodded. He’d noticed it, too.

Then, ahead of us, I heard the sound of something moving through the trees, crashing through the underbrush. It was something—or *someone*—moving fast.

*Wait!* I said. *There’s—*

*Someone coming*, Xavier finished. *We need to get into position. Now!*

**Episode 4172**

I pulled on my jeans, then added a wool sweater and grabbed a pair of socks from the drawer. The house felt cold this morning. Dressed, I sat on the edge of the bed and rubbed my sleepy eyes. I’d woken up early to say goodbye to Greyson before he left, then I’d gone back to sleep for a few hours. Now that I’d woken up again, I was already missing him. But he’d said that he’d be back soon when he’d kissed me goodbye, and I believed him.

As I pulled on my socks, I thought back to the conversation we’d had just before he left. I’d been standing with him on the porch, alone. It had been just the two of us—he hadn’t wanted a big send-off from the pack.

*“I’m heading to the Samara pack house, and then we’ll try to find the Bitterfangs’ trail. Once we do that, maybe we can get some certainty about this win.”*

*I nodded. “It’s a good plan.” I hesitated. “I really just want you to be careful out there.”*

*He smiled down at me and pulled me into a tight hug. “If it means coming home to you, then I’m happy to take that order.”*

*I pushed him playfully back. “Don’t tease me, Greyson. I’m serious.”*

*His face turned grave. “So am I. You’re going to be a good leader, Cali. I know you will. You just have to start strong, so the pack knows who’s in charge. And remember to trust your instincts. You can do this, love.”*

*I nodded slowly, taking in his words. I needed to believe them. “Yeah. I can do that.”*

*At least, I hoped I could.*

*He leaned down and kissed me, then leapt off the porch steps. When he landed on the frozen ground of the driveway, he was in his wolf form. I stood and watched as he sprinted across the property and into the trees, disappearing from view.*

*Be safe. Please.*

Standing up, I shook my head, trying to clear away the memory and the fog of sleep. I headed out of my room and went downstairs. When I reached the first floor, I heard voices coming from the kitchen. So far this morning, I’d yet to hear anyone’s thoughts, and I really hoped it would stay that way.

I took a deep breath and stepped into the kitchen, where Torin was standing at the stove. He smiled at me when I walked in.

“Cali! What do you want?” he asked.

“What?” I asked, confused.

“I’m taking breakfast orders. How do you want your eggs?”

“Oh. Scrambled, I guess. Thanks, Torin.”

He grinned. “No problem.”

Big Mac—pouring herself a cup of coffee at the counter—gave Torin a wary glare, clearly suspicious of his good mood. Lola, Jay, Ravi, Rishika, and Artemis were also in the kitchen, ranged around the large kitchen island. They all looked a little worse for wear in the bright light of morning. I knew that at least Lola, Jay, and Ravi had probably stayed up late last night; they’d been hanging out still when I’d headed to bed.

Still feeling cautious, I listened carefully, but all I heard was the sound of Torin cracking eggs, which meant I still couldn’t hear anyone else’s thoughts. I breathed a sigh of relief and hoped that meant that the episode was fully over.

But I still wanted to make sure.

“Morning,” Lola said, looking up from her cup of coffee.

“Hey,” I said, walking over. “Will you do me a favor?’

“Sure,” she said, putting down her cup. “What’s up?”

“Will you think something at me?”

“Huh?” She blinked, rubbing at her eyes. “Girl, it’s *way* too early for this.”

Ravi—sitting next to her—paled when I spoke, and in an instant, I remembered the bikini. It was a struggle to hold in a laugh, but I fought to keep my expression neutral.

“We’re all thinking, Cali,” Jay said slowly. “How do you *not* think?”

I grinned, feeling even better. He was totally right. They *were* all thinking, and I couldn’t hear a damn thing.

“That means it’s for real!” I said excitedly. “The only thoughts in my head are mine!”

“So, you’re good, then?” Lola asked.

“I think so,” I said hopefully.

“Oh thank god,” Ravi said with a relieved sigh.

I laughed and glanced at Big Mac. She’d just taken a sip of coffee, and her eyes narrowed over the rim of her cup.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“Um, maybe you could just do a quick check to make sure nothing else is wrong?”

Big Mac heaved a gusty sigh. “Fine. I can do it here,” she said, putting down her cup and beckoning me toward her with an impatient hand.

She positioned me right in front of her and began to speak, the words low and unintelligible. She stared right into my eyes, her gaze boring into me.

“Whatever you do, don’t blink,” she commanded.

Of course, all I wanted to do after that was blink. My eyes had begun to water with the effort of keeping them open when the witch finally stepped back.

“Everything looks fine,” she said, picking up her coffee again. “For now.”

“Wait, what does *that* mean?” I asked.

“Yeah, does that mean it might not be okay later?” Lola asked.

Big Mac shrugged. “The spell was volatile. We knew that going in. It’s fine for now, but that doesn’t mean all the effects are gone for good.”

I groaned. I really wanted this to be over and to never have to worry about hearing anyone else in my head—except Greyson. I had to admit, there was a part of me that wanted to hear Xavier as well, but I shook the thought away. I couldn’t think about that right now.

I turned back to Big Mac. “Is there anything we can do to keep it from happening again?”  
 “No,” she replied. “We just have to wait for the spell to fade.” She put down her cup and glared around. “Now, I’m going back up to my room. And now one is to bother me for the rest of the day.”

As she stomped out, I turned back to the other pack members. I thought about what Greyson had said about needing to start strong with the pack, and I made a decision.

I cleared my throat. “Lola, can you go tell everyone we’re having a pack meeting in the living room? Five minutes?”

Lola looked a little surprised to be asked, but she nodded. “Sure,” she said, sliding off her stool.

“Thanks.”

I turned toward the living room, then looked back at Rishika and gestured for her to follow me.

“What’s this meeting about?” Rishika asked, falling into step next to me.

“I think we need to have some plans in place while Greyson is gone,” I said. “A chain of command. I want to make sure everyone is clear about their responsibilities. Until we hear from Greyson, we need to assume that the Bitterfangs and their allies are still a threat. So, we’re going to need safety patrols and battle plans ready to go.”

Rishika raised an eyebrow. She gave me a quick, appraising look, then nodded. “I agree. We need to be ready until we know for sure that we can relax.”

She took a seat, and I stood at the front of the room—where Greyson usually positioned himself—as we waited for the rest of the pack to join us.

After a few more minutes, Jay and Lola walked in, followed by Artemis, Zainab, and Sage.

And no one else.

I glanced up at the clock over the fireplace. “Where is everyone?” I asked.

Lola shrugged. “I don’t know. I let everyone know.”

I kept my eyes on the clock as the minutes passed, but no one else joined us in the living room. I glanced over at Lola, wondering what she’d said when she’d delivered my message, and if she’d made it seem as urgent as it actually was.

Frustration coursing through me, I pressed my hands to my eyes.

“Okay!” I said sharply, looking around at the small knot of people who’d assembled. “Let’s try this again in half an hour.”

Rishika got to her feet. “I’ll be the one to tell the pack that there’s another meeting,” she said. “If they hear it from me, they’ll know it’s not a request—it’s an order.” She gave me another one of her assessing looks. “Or—better yet—they should hear it from you.”

I nodded. She was right—I shouldn’t have sent a messenger. Greyson had told me to start strong, and I’d already messed up.

Rishika walked out, followed by Zainab and Sage. Eventually everyone trickled away until only Lola was left, sitting on the couch.

“Are you okay?” she asked me.

I dropped onto the couch next to her. “I can’t even get them to come to a stupid meeting, Lola,” I said, feeling like I was about to cry. “How the hell am I going to lead everyone during a war?”

**Episode 4172**

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He grinned. “No problem.”

Big Mac—pouring herself a cup of coffee at the counter—gave Torin a wary glare, clearly suspicious of his good mood. Lola, Jay, Ravi, Rishika, and Artemis were also in the kitchen, ranged around the large kitchen island. They all looked a little worse for wear in the bright light of morning. I knew that at least Lola, Jay, and Ravi had probably stayed up late last night; they’d been hanging out still when I’d headed to bed.

Still feeling cautious, I listened carefully, but all I heard was the sound of Torin cracking eggs, which meant I still couldn’t hear anyone else’s thoughts. I breathed a sigh of relief and hoped that meant that the episode was fully over.

But I still wanted to make sure.

“Morning,” Lola said, looking up from her cup of coffee.

“Hey,” I said, walking over. “Will you do me a favor?’

“Sure,” she said, putting down her cup. “What’s up?”

“Will you think something at me?”

“Huh?” She blinked, rubbing at her eyes. “Girl, it’s *way* too early for this.”

Ravi—sitting next to her—paled when I spoke, and in an instant, I remembered the bikini. It was a struggle to hold in a laugh, but I fought to keep my expression neutral.

“We’re all thinking, Cali,” Jay said slowly. “How do you *not* think?”

I grinned, feeling even better. He was totally right. They *were* all thinking, and I couldn’t hear a damn thing.

“That means it’s for real!” I said excitedly. “The only thoughts in my head are mine!”

“So, you’re good, then?” Lola asked.

“I think so,” I said hopefully.

“Oh thank god,” Ravi said with a relieved sigh.

I laughed and glanced at Big Mac. She’d just taken a sip of coffee, and her eyes narrowed over the rim of her cup.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“Um, maybe you could just do a quick check to make sure nothing else is wrong?”

Big Mac heaved a gusty sigh. “Fine. I can do it here,” she said, putting down her cup and beckoning me toward her with an impatient hand.

She positioned me right in front of her and began to speak, the words low and unintelligible. She stared right into my eyes, her gaze boring into me.

“Whatever you do, don’t blink,” she commanded.

Of course, all I wanted to do after that was blink. My eyes had begun to water with the effort of keeping them open when the witch finally stepped back.

“Everything looks fine,” she said, picking up her coffee again. “For now.”

“Wait, what does *that* mean?” I asked.

“Yeah, does that mean it might not be okay later?” Lola asked.

Big Mac shrugged. “The spell was volatile. We knew that going in. It’s fine for now, but that doesn’t mean all the effects are gone for good.”

I groaned. I really wanted this to be over and to never have to worry about hearing anyone else in my head—except Greyson. I had to admit, there was a part of me that wanted to hear Xavier as well, but I shook the thought away. I couldn’t think about that right now.

I turned back to Big Mac. “Is there anything we can do to keep it from happening again?”  
 “No,” she replied. “We just have to wait for the spell to fade.” She put down her cup and glared around. “Now, I’m going back up to my room. And now one is to bother me for the rest of the day.”

As she stomped out, I turned back to the other pack members. I thought about what Greyson had said about needing to start strong with the pack, and I made a decision.

I cleared my throat. “Lola, can you go tell everyone we’re having a pack meeting in the living room? Five minutes?”

Lola looked a little surprised to be asked, but she nodded. “Sure,” she said, sliding off her stool.

“Thanks.”

I turned toward the living room, then looked back at Rishika and gestured for her to follow me.

“What’s this meeting about?” Rishika asked, falling into step next to me.

“I think we need to have some plans in place while Greyson is gone,” I said. “A chain of command. I want to make sure everyone is clear about their responsibilities. Until we hear from Greyson, we need to assume that the Bitterfangs and their allies are still a threat. So, we’re going to need safety patrols and battle plans ready to go.”

Rishika raised an eyebrow. She gave me a quick, appraising look, then nodded. “I agree. We need to be ready until we know for sure that we can relax.”

She took a seat, and I stood at the front of the room—where Greyson usually positioned himself—as we waited for the rest of the pack to join us.

After a few more minutes, Jay and Lola walked in, followed by Artemis, Zainab, and Sage.

And no one else.

I glanced up at the clock over the fireplace. “Where is everyone?” I asked.

Lola shrugged. “I don’t know. I let everyone know.”

I kept my eyes on the clock as the minutes passed, but no one else joined us in the living room. I glanced over at Lola, wondering what she’d said when she’d delivered my message, and if she’d made it seem as urgent as it actually was.

Frustration coursing through me, I pressed my hands to my eyes.

“Okay!” I said sharply, looking around at the small knot of people who’d assembled. “Let’s try this again in half an hour.”

Rishika got to her feet. “I’ll be the one to tell the pack that there’s another meeting,” she said. “If they hear it from me, they’ll know it’s not a request—it’s an order.” She gave me another one of her assessing looks. “Or—better yet—they should hear it from you.”

I nodded. She was right—I shouldn’t have sent a messenger. Greyson had told me to start strong, and I’d already messed up.

Rishika walked out, followed by Zainab and Sage. Eventually everyone trickled away until only Lola was left, sitting on the couch.

“Are you okay?” she asked me.

I dropped onto the couch next to her. “I can’t even get them to come to a stupid meeting, Lola,” I said, feeling like I was about to cry. “How the hell am I going to lead everyone during a war?”

**Episode 4174**

“It’s fine, Cali,” Lola said, squeezing my shoulder. “I really think you’re overthinking this. It’s not a big deal.”

“This was definitely a big deal,” I said, gesturing around the empty room.

She sighed. “People probably just didn’t realize what you meant when you called the meeting. Like, they probably didn’t realize you meant a serious pack meeting.”

“But shouldn’t they have come because I’m in charge, and while Greyson’s gone, they’re supposed to listen to me?” I asked, trying not to sound too petulant.

Lola thought about this for a moment, then she shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess so. But you sent me to tell everyone. Maybe they would’ve listened to Rishika more?”

I took a shaking breath. “Maybe. I should’ve sent her or gone myself. That was a misstep.”

“But,” Lola said, “it’s not one that you won’t be able to bounce back from. It’s really not that big a deal—”

“I just have to be more strategic,” I said, thinking out loud.

She raised her eyebrows. “Strategic, huh? Well, that sounds very leader-y. Look at you. Off to a good start already.”

I looked at her and smiled. “Thank you, Lola.”

“Seriously, Cali, you’ve got this,” she said.” Just don’t overthink it, okay? And if you’re not able to scare everyone into following your orders, just ask Artemis and me to step in. I’m sure Rishika would help, too. Between the three of us, I’m pretty sure we can make people *understand*.” She cracked her knuckles menacingly.

That made me laugh. “I’ll keep that in mind,” I said, glad that I had her on my side. And she was right—I *was* overthinking this. I needed to stop wallowing and start using the resources at my disposal to become the leader the pack needed. Why was it that every time I took a step forward as the Luna, I took what felt like five steps backward?

Lola looked at the clock above the fireplace. “Listen, there’s fifteen minutes before the meeting—the real meeting,” she added meaningfully. “Let’s go grab some coffee. You didn’t get any this morning, did you?”

I shook my head. “Yeah, I could use some caffeine in my system.”

“Good. And don’t worry, I didn’t make it.”

We headed into the kitchen, and I poured coffee for us both, then pulled myself into a chair at the kitchen island. I sipped the coffee, wishing it was one of Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mochas. That would’ve maybe put me into a sugar overdrive, though, which I definitely didn’t need on top of everything else.

“So, let’s go over how you’re going to start this meeting off. Pretend I’m… well, everyone,” Lola said. “What are you going to say to me?”

“Okay.” I cleared my throat, putting the coffee cup down. “I’m going to start by telling them that no matter what Greyson finds on this recon mission, we’re strong and capable, and we’ll be ready to deal with whatever it is. I guess?” I finished weakly.

“No, you don’t *guess*,” Lola said emphatically. “You’re not asking, Cali, you’re telling!”

I nodded. Lola was right. I wasn’t asking permission, here. I just had to say it—and mean it. I was acting as the Luna. I had to have confidence, or else no one else would.

“Cali?” Rishika stuck her head into the kitchen. “The pack’s gathered in the living room, and they’re ready to hear from you.”

My stomach fluttered nervously.

Lola grinned at me. “It’s showtime!”

I took a searing sip of coffee and slid off my chair. I needed to stay calm and just remember what Lola had said. I wasn’t asking—I was *telling*. I was going to be the leader the pack needed. I was going to be certain and decisive.

But when I walked into the living room and saw every face turn toward me and felt every pair of eyes boring into me, I had to fight not to feel completely overwhelmed. This wasn’t the way meetings like this usually went. Usually, Greyson was the focus of everyone’s attention. Or, if people were listening to something I had to say, he’d be standing right next to me, supporting me. But he wasn’t here, and I knew that I had to step up. I had to be able to do this without Greyson.

*I can do this*, I reminded myself.

“Hey, everyone,” I said, turning to the sea of faces. “Thanks for coming. You all know that Greyson left this morning to scout the area and confirm that the Bitterfangs are really gone—”

“Hell yeah, they’re gone!” Ravi yelled from the couch. “We kicked their asses!”

This got a cheer from the pack, and I smiled at him.

“You’re not wrong,” I told him. “The alliance held strong, and all the evidence we’ve seen so far tells us that the Bitterfangs are probably finished. But Greyson and the rest of the alliance Alphas feel that we need to confirm this one hundred percent, so that’s why he went out. And on that note, on the off chance that the Bitterfangs are still out there, the rest of us need to prepare.”

“What do you mean?” Artemis asked. “Prepare what?”

I looked at Artemis, who was watching me with a sort of fierce pride. I figured she probably wasn’t all that confused about how we could be prepared, but I appreciated her teeing me up.

“I want to build the patrols back up,” I said, “and we need to get some strategies in place so that we’re prepared in the event of an attack.”

“Do you really think that’s going to happen?” Sage asked.

“I think that until we know the truth, we need to act as though there’s still a war going on,” I said firmly.

There was a murmur from the pack, and I was pleased to hear that it sounded like agreement.

“Okay, so what do you want us to do?” Sage asked.

I had to fight not to grin at this. I was surprised by how smoothly the meeting was going, but I tried to act like I didn’t find it surprising at all.

“Rishika will be giving out assignments for patrol duty, like always,” I said. “And I’d like Artemis, Zainab, and Sage to start work on shoring up the pack house’s defenses and working out the perimeter checks.”

I stopped talking and looked around. Everyone was still staring at me, and they weren’t moving. My heart was pounding. I wasn’t sure what the next step was, here. I’d given them their orders, so now what?  
 “Are there… any questions?” I asked hesitantly.

Rishika shot me a quick look and gave her head a single shake.

“Because if there are, you can direct them to Rishika,” I said, recovering quickly. “Thanks for coming, everyone.”

I stepped back, out of the spotlight, and breathed a sigh of relief. It was over. I’d done it. I’d actually done it. I’d held my first meeting as a pack leader, and it hadn’t been a disaster. It had been fine. Good, even.

I was working to keep the serious look on my face, but inside, I was beaming and high fiving. I was *really* proud of myself.

“Hey, Cali.” Artemis walked over to me and leaned close. “You did a great job up there.”

“Thanks,” I said with a smile. “That means a lot, and I really think I can only get better with—”

“But I really think we need to have stronger plans in place,” she added.

I stared at her. “What do you mean, stronger plans?”

“I think it’s fine that we’re waiting for confirmation from Greyson before we relax,” she said, “but I really don’t think this is anywhere close to being over.”

“Yeah, I can agree with you on that,” I admitted. “That’s the whole reason why Greyson went out on this mission—because he thinks the same thing and wants to get some confirmation, one way or the other. Better to be safe than sorry.”

Artemis nodded. “Right, agreed. So, if we’re on the same page about this, why are we employing such minimal wartime protocols?”

“What?” I asked, confused. “*Wartime protocols?* Do you really think that’s necessary?”

“Hell yeah, I do,” she said immediately. “We can be as defensive as we want, but I think we’ll be wasting opportunities if we don’t find a way to be more proactive about this. Especially if we’re all in agreement that this conflict or war or whatever you want to call it isn’t really over.”

I wasn’t exactly sure what point Artemis was trying to make, or what she was even asking of me.

“I didn’t talk to Greyson about initiating any wartime protocols before he left,” I said. “So I think we should focus on doing what we can, and then just hope that it’ll be enough to keep us safe.”

Artemis narrowed her eyes at me. “Hope is great, Cali, but I think we both know it’s not going to be enough.”

**Episode 4175**

I frowned at my sister. “Well, we’re going to increase patrols and start battle preparations. What more do you think we could be doing?”

“You and I have training sessions,” Artemis said. “Why can’t we do that for all the wolves? And we should be sending the patrols deeper into the other territories. If the Bitterfangs are looking to attack again, they’re not going to pay attention to imaginary boundary lines. And shouldn’t we be pooling more resources and working with the alliance?”

I took a deep breath, trying not to feel *completely* overwhelmed by Artemis’s barrage of questions. Just a moment ago, I’d thought I’d been as proactive as I could possibly be, given that I still had limited information. But now I didn’t feel so sure about that.

“Listen, Artemis, werewolves don’t fight like Fae, so I’m not sure that structured training sessions would be helpful for them,” I said. “Besides, you saw them out there during the last fight—they’re already battle-ready. And Greyson and I haven’t discussed working with the other alliance packs at this point. I don’t want to make unilateral decisions and create unnecessary complications—not unless there’s a clear reason to take the risk.”

I thought briefly of trying to talk to Lucian about any of this stuff—or, even worse, trying to talk to Xavier—and gave a little involuntary shudder.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “These are good ideas, Artemis, but I feel good about the plan we’ve got.”

“The plan’s fine, Cali, but I just don’t think it goes far enough—”

“What about it feels so lacking to you?” I asked curiously.

Artemis’s expression grew nervous, which was uncharacteristic. She shrugged uncomfortably. “I just hate having to wait around, you know? Not knowing whether we’re still involved in a fight or not… I hate this feeling. I just want to be doing something. And I think there’s more to be done.”

I sighed. “I know what you mean. I don’t think anyone likes to just wait around for answers, but sometimes that’s just what you have to do. I mean, what happens if I do send out extra patrols, and they go farther out, and then someone hits us here, and half the pack is gone and too far out to get back in time to help? What then?”

Artemis didn’t have an answer for that.

“I know it’s hard, but we just have to make the best choices we can with the information we have,” I told her gently. “There are a lot of unknowns, but what I *do* know is that it’s likely that the Bitterfangs are really gone. We probably don’t need to be as careful or as prepared as we’re going to be, but we are, just in case the dregs of the pack show up and want a fight.” I gave my sister a long look. “I know you’re a person of action, Artemis, and that makes this harder for you, but this is the right choice.”

She didn’t look comforted by my words. “Yeah, maybe,” she muttered, not sounding convinced.

“But maybe it’d be a good idea for the two of us to go out and do some training with Adair,” I suggested suddenly.

Artemis finally brightened. “That’s a good idea. Let’s do that.” She looked over at Adair, who was sitting across the room on a wingchair near the fireplace, his eyes out the window. “Adair, are you up for an impromptu training session?”

Adair looked a little surprised but nodded as he got to his feet. “I suppose I could be,” he said, walking over to us.

We headed outside and walked around to the back of the house, where there was a clear, flat space near a stand of trees.

Adair had placed some targets high in the trees, then turned to Artemis. “You’re going to do some sprints. I want you to hit every target—in sequence—as fast as you can. Okay?” When she nodded at him, he moved on to me. “I know we’ve had some… issues with control that need some work.”

I flinched. I didn’t know how he did it, but Adair just had this way of commenting on my magic that seemed to cut through my confidence like a knife through soft butter.

I cleared my throat. “I can use my sword and shield—I just need to learn consistency.”

Adair nodded. “Let’s take a look. Manifest your weapons.”

I turned my mind inward, and almost instantly I felt the familiar buzz of energy radiating down toward my fingers as I started to build first the shield—which appeared at my side—and then the sword.

It seemed to be taking an unusual amount of effort to keep them manifested, and I could feel myself starting to sweat. I had no idea why it was so hard for me today. It wasn’t like I wasn’t focused—I was *really* concentrating. I knew I had to be able to do this easily if I wanted to protect my pack—and I wanted to protect my pack. I had to get better at this.

When the sword started to flicker in my hand, I felt the sweat start to drip down my face. Watching me struggle, Adair frowned.

I let the weapons go, and they disappeared.

“I’m going to try again,” I murmured.

I took a deep breath, flexed my hands, and gave it another go. I focused on pulling the energy in from the world around me, letting it fill me, and then I closed my eyes. The sword came first this time, then the shield.

When I opened my eyes and looked down at them, they looked and felt solid in my hands—no flickering.

Adair gave me a steady look. “That took too much effort.”

I opened my mouth to protest—and point out that I’d been able to do it in the end—but then I shut it again. He was right. That *had* taken way too much effort.

I let my weapons go.

“You need to figure out what’s blocking you,” Adair said. “What’s stopping you from summoning your weapons with ease?”

“I don’t know,” I retorted, before I could stop myself. “Maybe it has something to do with the stress of being the leader of an entire werewolf pack?”

Then, shocked at my own words, I covered my mouth with my hand.

“Adair, I’m sorry—”

“Stop,” he said, holding up a hand. “Let me ask you this, Caliana—don’t you think this is something every leader has to go through? There will always be stress, there will always be pressure and expectations, there will always be a crisis of confidence. But that is *precisely* when you must push through. You cannot let it affect your ability to protect yourself.”

Artemis jogged over, interrupting the conversation before Adair could continue his lecture.

“Greyson was right to leave you in charge,” Artemis said breathlessly.

“What?” I asked, surprised. I felt like I was getting whiplash. Adair had just finished telling me that I wasn’t doing what I needed to do, and now Artemis was telling me the exact opposite?

She nodded. “I couldn’t figure out why I was feeling so weird, back there,” she said, nodding at the house behind us. “I was feeling strange and nervous, but we had one conversation, and you just got it.” She smiled at me. “That’s the mark of a good leader, Cali.”

I smiled back at her. “I’m glad you’re feeling better, Artemis. I figured you just needed to be doing something.”

I was glad that Artemis’s anxieties had been addressed, but I still felt so damn frustrated that *I* was struggling so much. Why wasn’t magic easier for me? Why did I have to work *so* hard for it?

Artemis turned to head back toward her targets, but then she stopped and looked back at me over her shoulder. “I just wanted to say thanks, Cali.”

“For what?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I guess just for understanding. You know—knowing what I needed, even when I didn’t know myself.”

“You’re welcome,” I murmured.

Adair was giving me an assessing look when I turned back to him. “She’s right,” he mused.

“What?”

“Listening to and understanding people is part of being a good leader,” he said. “And you’re good at that part. But that’s not all you need to be good at.”

“I know,” I muttered.

“If you want to be a great leader for this pack and a strong mate to your Alpha,” Adair continued, “then you’re going to need to learn to *fight* like a great leader, too.”

**Episode 4176**

**Greyson**

Xavier was staring at something over my shoulder, and his eyes had gone fixed and wide, like he’d seen a ghost. I whipped around to see what it was he was looking at—my own heart pounding in sudden fear—but there was nothing there.

I looked back at my brother. *Xavier? What’s going on? What are you looking at?*

Xavier didn’t answer. He didn’t even look at me. He took a step toward me, and his whole body looked tense—like he was primed to attack.

I was baffled. I had no idea what was going on with him, or what danger he could be sensing. There was nothing there, and nothing in the air except the scent of the three Bitterfang wolves we’d been tracking for miles. The woods around us were quiet as the grave.

*Xavier?* I tried again. *Are you okay? What are you seeing?*

That was when I realized that Xavier *was* speaking, his voice a low whisper in my head that I had to strain to hear.

*Go away, go away, go away…*

I looked at him baffled. *You want me to—go away?*

I had *no* idea what he was talking about. Nothing about this moment was making sense. We’d been fine a moment ago—better than usual, actually.

Then Xavier shook his head and—without a word—spun around and took off after the Bitterfang trail.

I stared after him for a shocked moment, then burst into a sprint.

*Xavier!* I called, chasing him down.

Xavier still didn’t answer, so I dropped my head and sprinted even harder, trying to catch up to him. As I ran, I went over the conversation we’d just had in my head, trying to figure out where things had gone off the rails. But the thing was, they really *hadn’t*. Xavier had seemed totally okay. I’d actually been surprised by how okay he was being. He hadn’t even pushed back when I’d mentioned Cali—instead, he’d stayed focused on the needs of his own pack.

It had been a surprising moment, but one that had given me some hope, too. Like maybe he and I could be nearing a place where we wouldn’t have to be the bitter rivals we usually were. Where we could just be peers—Alphas of our respective packs—and be okay together. And then out of nowhere, he’d just gone stiff and strange, and I didn’t know why.

I shook my head. I hadn’t done or said anything wrong—whatever was going on had to be about some issue Xavier was having.

Looking up, I spotted him crashing through the trees ahead of me. I was running as fast as I could, but I was barely gaining on him. I was going so fast, I barely registered when my back paw caught on a bulging tree root. This brought me up short, and when I tried to recover, I overcompensated and slipped, tumbling down a sloping hill. The mud on the hill had melted and re-frozen so many times, it was like falling down a steel slope, and the first impact stole the breath from my lungs. I was too turned around to get my feet back underneath me, so I fell down the whole slope, coming to a rough stop at the bottom.

I took a moment to pull oxygen back into my lungs, then struggled to my feet again. Shit. I was going to lose Xavier.

Sinking my claws into the sloping hill, I struggled back up to the path, pushing myself to go faster.

*Xavier!* I called out via mind link. *Xavier! Can you hear me? Slow the hell down!*

When I got to the top of the hill again, I could still see him in the distance. There was no way he hadn’t heard me calling to him through the mind link. But he wasn’t slowing down, and he wasn’t stopping. I don’t think he’d even noticed that I’d disappeared.

I ground my teeth, anger starting to course through me. It felt like we were going backward, here. I’d been joking about it earlier, but I supposed what I’d said had carried a grain of truth—Xavier *did* rush into things. Was that what was happening here? Had he come up with a different plan and just decided not to tell me? But that didn’t make any sense—we’d already been *following* his plan.

I was pissed, and I shook my head, trying to break that cycle of thought. Xavier was sprinting away from like a fucking lunatic, and here I was, trying to find reasons why he was acting that way. That wasn’t my job. It was *not* my responsibility to explain away his batshit behavior. I was an Alpha, and my job was to worry about my pack. The only thing I needed to expect from my brother was that he would act like the Alpha he was supposed to be. It wasn’t my job to go running after him through the woods, calling his name like I was his fucking babysitter.

*Or like you’re his older brother*, a voice in my head reminded me.

*Shit*, I thought. That was exactly what I was doing. I didn’t feel guilty about it, but I also wasn’t going to play that role for him. That just wasn’t who we were. I wouldn’t have indulged any of this nonsense for Mace or Lucian.

I’d started running again, and I saw that Xavier had finally stopped. I caught up to him and rammed him in the shoulder.

*What the hell was that?* I demanded.

Xavier stumbled back a step, then moved forward again and pushed me away. *It was nothing.*

*Like hell it was nothing. You took off like a fucking shot back there. What were you—*

*I thought I caught a new scent*, he said quickly.

He didn’t meet my eyes when he spoke, and I wasn’t buying his explanation. But Why would he be lying to me during a mission like this? He was an Alpha in his own right now. What was there to gain from lying to me? It just didn’t make sense, but I doubted I was going to get any answers.

*Well, maybe next time you should warn me before you just run off like that*,I said. *We’re supposed to be working together, remember?*

Xavier turned on me, anger flashing in his blue eyes. *How could I fucking forget? I could’ve done this on my own just as easily.*

I stared at him for a surprised moment, then rolled my eyes. *God, you’re such a dick.*

Outrage flashed across Xavier’s eyes and his body tensed, but then he just… shut down. He looked away, even turning his body so I couldn’t see his face.

*Just stop talking*, he said flatly.

*What?*

*We can do this without any more talking. Let’s do that.*

I stared at him, thinking about what Cali had said about Xavier acting strangely, and something seeming off about him. I hadn’t fully understood what she meant when she’d said it, but now I absolutely saw what she was talking about. Something was off, here.

*Is there something going on?* I asked curiously.

*No.* Xavier turned and started running again. He wasn’t going as fast as before, and I caught up to him easily.

*Seriously, Xavier, if there’s something going on with you, and it’s going to affect the mission—or the alliance—then you have to tell me about it*, I pressed.

*There’s nothing going on*, he said curtly.

Of course. Why would I ever expect Xavier to be open and honest about anything? I wasn’t asking for the moon here. We had lives at stake, the packs at stake. Didn’t he get that?

*Otherwise*, I added, *you’re just fucking this up and putting us both at risk—*

*I told you*, he snapped, sounding angry again, *there’s nothing going on. And I don’t have to tell you a damn thing, Greyson.*

*Fucking hell, Xavier, why do you have to be so difficult all the damn time?*

I wasn’t Xavier’s Alpha anymore—not that he’d ever listened to me—but I had hoped he’d have some respect for both of our positions as Alpha. Instead, he was just acting like my little brother. I shouldn’t have been surprised. Why would I think that becoming Samara Alpha would change him in any way? He was as selfish as ever.

The sky above us was heavy with clouds. Half my brain was thinking that if it rained, we might lose the Bitterfang trail and have to start all over again, but the other half of my brain was wondering what the *hell* was going on with Xavier.

*I* *say we just concentrate on this damn trail*, he went on. *We do what we need to do to confirm that the Bitterfangs are really gone, and then that’s it.*

*What’s it?*

*That’s it. We can stay the hell away from each other and go back to our own packs and get back to worrying about our own shit.*

*I think that sounds like a great idea*, I said shortly.

But this had bigger implications than us going our respective ways. How were we going to stay away from each other in the long term when Cali still hadn’t made her choice?

**Episode 4177**

**Violet**

As we lay on the bed in the quiet of our room, Charlie’s arm tightened around me. I nestled closer to his chest and closed my eyes, but I knew I wasn’t going to fall asleep. I wasn’t tired, and my thoughts were swirling.

“What did you think of the meeting?” Charlie asked quietly. “That was a lot of information.”

“Yeah.” I sighed. “I don’t know. I just want this whole Bitterfang thing to be done. I hate this limbo, where we’re just waiting around for someone to attack us. I feel like I can’t relax.”

“Yeah,” Charlie said, tightening his arm around me even more. “I know what you mean. I hate it, too.”

“I’ll feel better when Greyson gets back so we can know for sure if we can move on from this. That’s what I want—just to put all of this in the rearview mirror.”

“Yeah, I know how you feel,” Charlie said. He paused for a long moment. “So, is that what’s been bothering you lately?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, craning my neck to look at his face.

He was watching me closely. “Come on, Violet.”

I frowned, not sure how to answer. I’d wanted to handle my problems on my own, but even after last night, Lilac and I were still in the exact same place in our argument. And then when that weird thing had happened with Greyson and Cali and their mind linking, I hadn’t wanted to keep going over my worries in my head, in case they’d heard.

I looked up at Charlie, who was looking down at me, his brown eyes sympathetic. I knew I could talk to him about anything, so I decided to let him in.

“Well, it’s like this,” I said, sitting up in bed. I went on to explain the whole situation with Lilac—namely, how he’d told me that he wanted to leave the Redwood pack and join the Samaras. And that he wanted me to go with him.

Charlie listened silently as I spoke, his eyes wide, nodding and frowning in all the right places. When I had finished the story, he looked surprised. “Wow. I didn’t see that coming. Do you think Lilac will actually go?”

I leaned my head against the wall. “That’s the thing—I don’t know. I know he really *wants* to go, though, which makes me feel very frustrated and very confused.”

Charlie took that in. “Are you confused about whether or not you’ll stay? Or are you confused because you love your brother and you don’t want to be separated from him again now that you have him back?”

I took that in. “Wow, um—I really hadn’t thought of it that way…” I frowned, thinking hard. “When I think about the Redwood pack, of course I want to stay. Greyson’s a great Alpha, and the pack has been good to Lilac and me. I feel safe here at the pack house, and the pack is the whole reason why Lilac was able to come back from the other side.”

When I stopped speaking, Charlie nodded. “Okay, well, from the sound of what you just said, I don’t think you’re confused at all about whether or not you should stay. You’re happy here—your life is here. The Redwoods are your pack.”

“I just don’t understand why Lilac wants to leave!” I said, growing agitated.

Charlie looked at me for a moment, then tugged on my hand, pulling me back down to lie next to him. “Come here, Violet.”

I let him pull me close and rested my head on his shoulder.

“I just want my brother to stay here,” I said quietly.

“I get that,” Charlie said, stroking my hair away from my face.

“*Thank you*,” I said emphatically.

“But I can also see Lilac’s perspective,” he added.

“What are you talking about?” I demanded, pulling away from him.

“If *you* were in the Samara pack, I’d probably want to leave to be with you, too,” he said. “Just like Lilac wants to leave to be with Perrie.”

I took that in, then gave Charlie a teasing smile. “Wait, you’d *probably* want to leave to be with me?”

Charlie looked surprised for a moment, then he grinned at me. “Okay, fine. I’d *definitely* want to leave to be with you. You wouldn’t be able to stop me, actually. And listen, I like the Redwoods. I pledged to Greyson for a reason, and he’s always been good to me. But I love *you*. I’ll do whatever you want to do, here.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“If you want to go be with your brother in the Samara pack, then I’ll go with you,” he said. “But if you want to stay here, and you want my help convincing Lilac to do the same, then I’ll do that, too.”

I looked down at him and felt a fierce surge of love.

“Thank you,” I whispered. “That means a lot. I’m so glad I have you here.” I looked at him a moment longer. “And I guess I can understand that that’s what Lilac wants, too.”

I leaned over and pressed a kiss to his lips, hoping it told him how much I cared for him. He slid his hand around the back of my head and deepened the kiss. I could feel my body responding to it and I shifted on the bed, angling myself so that I could slide my hands up his chest. I could never kiss him enough. When his lips touched mine, it was like a fire ignited within me, each time.

He was everything to me.

I started to climb into his lap, needing less space between us. He grinned, pulling me in tight. But we both froze when we heard a loud knock on the door.

Charlie groaned. “Which pack has the lowest members, and therefore the fewest interruptions?”

“Who is it?” I called toward the door.

“It’s me,” Lilac said. “Do you have a minute, Violet? I want to talk to you.”

I looked over at Charlie, undecided.

He smiled at me. “You should talk to him,” he said in a low voice. “You’re not going to get anywhere by giving each other the silent treatment.” He sat up. “I can leave—unless you want me here?”

“Stay,” I said, taking his hand for comfort. Then I turned to the door. “Come in, Lilac.”

Lilac opened the door and stepped inside, but he stopped short when he saw Charlie sitting next to me. He looked over at me. “You want to have this conversation now?” he asked warily.

I nodded. “Yeah, now. Charlie knows about what’s going on. We can talk in front of him.”

Charlie gave my hand a squeeze.

“Fine,” Lilac said shortly. “Whatever. I want to make a decision today.”

“*Today?*” I repeated, surprised. “Why? What’s the rush?”

“The meeting that just happened,” Lilac said, gesturing out the door and down the stairs.

“What about it?” I asked, frowning.

“What about it? *Everything* about it!” Lilac responded. “Come on, that was ridiculous!”

“What was?” I asked, still not following.

“Putting Cali in charge!” Lilac shook his head. “What experience does she have? How is she qualified to lead this pack? Why would Greyson do that? Why wouldn’t he put someone like Rishika in charge? Someone who’s *actually* capable of doing the job—and who’s actually a wolf? No, that whole thing was a bad call on Greyson’s part. I don’t know what he’s thinking, and that should make you nervous. Think about it, Violet. Look at the Samaras. They have an Alpha *and* a Luna now who are strong and capable, and who are both *wolves*. Come on—don’t you want in on that?”

I stared at my brother in shock. “I—I didn’t know you cared so much about everyone being a werewolf, Lilac. Where is all this coming from?”

Was Perrie putting these ideas in his head? It didn’t seem likely. Malakai making moves against all the packs and stability with the pack was the most important thing. But Greyson was stable, and honestly so was Cali. They were both reliable.

What it seemed like right now was that Lilac was scared, just like the rest of us.

*Do you want me to say something?* Charlie asked, shooting me a glance.

“Is this because of Perrie, not Xavier?” I asked.

Lilac threw up his hands in frustration.

“Fine!” he exploded. “*Fine!* You’re right,” he said, gesturing between Charlie and me. “Maybe this move isn’t about pack politics, but who cares? My mate is in the Samara pack, and I want to be with her. A totally outrageous demand, I know! The Samara pack needs members more than the Redwood pack does, which means that my mate can’t leave, so our options are pretty limited. It’s up to me!”

I looked up at my brother’s flushed face and flashing eyes.

“I get that,” I said, resigned. “I really do. But… I’ve thought about it, Lilac, and I just can’t leave. This is my pack.”

Lilac’s expression hardened. “Well, I’m going to join Xavier and the Samaras. You can do whatever the hell you want.”

**Episode 4178**

**Xavier**

I was running through the woods as fast as I possibly could. I could hear Greyson coming up behind me, but I didn’t turn to look at him. I knew that Adéluce was right behind my brother, and I didn’t trust myself not to try to attack her.

The worst part was that I could still hear her talking. The sound was low and seemed to be reverberating from the base of my skull. The sound of her voice made me sick, but I couldn’t block it out.

*Are you not even going to look at me, Xavier? Whatever could be wrong? Tell me you’re not angry with me. Are you mad that I interrupted your journey to reconnect with your dear, dear brother?*

Her voice was taunting, and I could just picture the cruel smirk on her face.

I clenched my jaw so tightly that my head began to ache, pain climbing up my spine and into my skull. Fury was coursing through me, making it difficult to think and even to breathe. My whole body was tense, and I could feel my claws extending. I was itching to lash out at her. That was all I wanted—to slice my long, lethally sharp claws across that smug face—but I knew it was impossible. Besides, I just couldn’t risk Cali’s safety like that.

*Xavier!* Greyson called again, but I continued to ignore him.

Then a grey shape appeared in my line of sight. Moments later, it barreled right into me, knocking me down.

As I lay on the ground—stunned—I looked up to see that it was Greyson who’d plowed into me, and now he was looming over me.

*STOP*, he ordered.

*What? Why?* I asked distractedly. I glanced around, searching for Adéluce.

*Why do you think?* Greyson snapped. *We’ve lost the trail.*

It was only then that I realized he was right. I’d been so focused on Adéluce—and on not reacting to her in a way that would tip Greyson off—that I hadn’t even noticed that the scent we’d been tracking for hours was suddenly missing.

Dammit. This was bad. This was fucking bad.

Greyson stepped off me and looked around.

*How could this have happened?* he asked, though he was speaking more to himself than to me. *Scents don’t just disappear like that.*

Behind us, Adéluce was laughing, the sound high and sharp.

*Yes!* she crowed victoriously. *How indeed? How* could *a scent just disappear? Who knows? Who will ever know?*

I squeezed my eyes shut. Why? Why would Adéluce do this? Just to fuck with me? Just to watch me squirm? But *why*? What could she possibly gain?

The vampire-witch tutted at me. *I can see by the stupidly confused look on your face that you don’t understand what happened*, she said. *Well, allow me to enlighten you—this is just me adding a little more tension to the situation. It was getting a little too friendly and convivial for my liking. I had to shake things up. Why, you were on the verge of feeling some hope, weren’t you?* She made the tutting sound again. *We can’t have that.*

Greyson looked over at me—I still hadn’t gotten up from the ground. *Do you have any ideas about what could’ve happened to that trail?*

I thought fast, trying to think of something—*anything*—to say that would make even a little sense, but I had nothing. So I settled on shifting back to human and shrugging. “Nope.”

Greyson shifted back as well. “What? Taking a break?”

I didn’t like his tone, so I shot him a glare and dug around in my pack for my water bottle.

Greyson rubbed at his face, looking frustrated. “Great. Thanks. That’s super helpful, Xavier. Thank you for sharing whatever the hell’s going on in your head right now with the rest of the class.” He took a deep breath. “You know what? Just wait here. I want to check and see if we lost the trail somewhere. Maybe it just veered off when I wasn’t paying attention.”

I got to my feet. “I should come with you—”

“No,” Greyson snapped, his eyes flashing with barely suppressed anger. “No. Just stay here. I just need a second alone*.* Let me go do this. I’ll be right back.”

*He means that he needs a break from you*, Adéluce whispered helpfully, her voice nearly in my ear.

I tried to ignore her. “Fine. I’ll wait here.”

Greyson nodded curtly, and I watched as he headed back the way we’d come.

I sat back down on the ground with a sigh. The woods were quiet and still. The rain was holding off, but it really didn’t matter. Greyson wasn’t going to find that trail. Not now.

When I looked up from the ground, I nearly jumped out of my skin. Adéluce had appeared at my side, and she sat down next to me, looking pleased with herself.

“Finally,” she murmured, leaning toward me and running an ice-cold finger along my jaw. “Here we are. Alone at last.”

I flinched away from her touch. The very idea of her hands on me made me feel like I was going to be sick, so I scrambled back to my feet and took a few steps away, just to put even more distance between us.

“What the hell are you doing out here?” I demanded, white-hot anger spiking through me at the sheer sight of her.

She smiled at me. “I already told you, didn’t I? I was getting tired of watching your happy little reunion. You were starting to get too comfortable with your big brother, Xavier Evers, and we can’t have that. What’s next? Repairing your relationship? Learning to communicate?” She shook her head. “Where does your comfort fit in with my plan to make you suffer? They’re incompatible, can’t you see that?”

I was so fucking *sick* of her bullshit. “How much longer, Adéluce?’

“Whatever do you mean?” she asked innocently.

“How much longer can this bullshit possibly continue?” I demanded. “What’s my sentence, here? What is it going to take for this to be over?”

She looked taken aback, like she was offended I’d even thought to ask. “Well, it’s never going to end.”

“*What?*” I spat.

“I *never* want this to be over, Xavier. Why would I? I’m having far too much fun with you.” Now, her eyes narrowed. “Besides, I spent years in soul-crushing pain because of what you did to my family, Xavier. There is no end to your sentence—and anyway, don’t I *deserve* to have a good time after all I’ve suffered?”

I didn’t answer that. What was there to say? It wasn’t as though I was going to be able to reason with her. She was a lunatic—there was no point in trying.

She got to her feet and took a step toward me. “Now tell me, Xavier—back when you were talking to your brother, it seemed as though you were about to say something to him.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said stiffly.

“Of course you do,” she said. “It was something about Cali. And I only bring it up because I was so surprised. I asked myself, now why would Xavier Evers taunt me like that, knowing the rules about what he can and can’t say? And”—she smiled her lethal smile—“knowing what would happen *if he broke them?*”

I was shaking with barely suppressed rage. Everything about her triggered every negative physical response in my body, and I hated the way she spoke to me—like I was an idiot, or a child. Someone or something she could control completely.

Seeing my unmasked anger, she smiled at me, the expression horrifying on her face. “You know what, Xavier? If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were trying to get me mad enough to do something extreme.” She pretended to think hard about this. “Something like killing your pathetic little mate.”

I’d been waiting for her to say something like that, and hearing it out loud was the last straw. With a snarling growl, I lunged toward Adéluce’s grinning face, fist first. She watched me calmly, and at the very last second, her face flickered, then disappeared. Greyson’s face immediately appeared in its place, and, to my shock, my fist connected with Greyson’s jaw. I’d put everything I had behind the punch, and it hit my brother’s face with a wet, breaking sound that I knew I was going to remember for the rest of my life.

**Episode 4179**

*If you want to be a great leader for this pack and a strong mate to your Alpha, then you’re going to need to learn to fight like a great leader, too.*

Adair’s words rolled over me like a wave, and I was left tumbling in their wake. It stung to hear him say it out loud, but the thing was, I knew he was right. I could feel it in my bones. If I wanted to be able to support Greyson, then I had to be able to fight next to him without him having to worry about me. That was distracting, and it put him—and the rest of the pack—in a lot of danger.

I couldn’t stop myself from thinking about how Xavier probably never needed to worry about Ava in battle. Why would he? I’d seen her fight, and she was a badass in her own right.

Gritting my teeth, I nodded, then resolved to do better and try harder. It was what I had to do. It was why I was doing any of this. I just needed to keep as much resolve as I could.

Ready to try again, I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and concentrated. I drew in the energy from the air around me, and in just a moment, I’d manifested both the shield and the sword. I looked down at them, and they were solid—without a flicker.

“Yes!” Adair shouted, uncharacteristically excited. “That’s it,” he said proudly. “That’s what I’m talking about. You did it, Cali!”

Shit. I had done it! Pride surged in me. Adair wasn’t one to give praise so lightly. I grinned, letting the ego boost wash over me. Maybe I was getting better at all of this after all.

“Artemis, come on over,” Adair called.

Artemis jogged over. “Hey, what’s up?”

“Your sister was able to produce her shield and sword, so now we’re going to have a little scrimmage, just to test you out,” he said.

“Okay,” I said slowly. “And what does that entail?”  
“You two are going to team up and spar against me.”

I felt my heart thump. “Wait, *what*? I don’t know—I’m not sure I’m ready for that,” I started, but when I glanced at Artemis, she gave me a reassuring smile.

“Come on,” she said. “We can do it. At least give it a try.”

“Okay…” I finally agreed, though I still felt uncertain.

Artemis and I readied ourselves as Adair took several steps back. With what looked like no effort at all, he manifested his energy whips, then looked over at us.

I drew in a sharp breath and gripped my sword tightly.

“Begin,” Adair said with a nod.

Quick as lightning, a whip flew toward me—heading right for my sword—but I reacted instinctively, jumping out of the way and rolling as I hit the ground. Then I leapt back to my feet and ran forward. Adair had his whips, but my weapons didn’t have that range, and I needed to get closer to him so I could get within striking distance.

“I’ll cover you from behind!” Artemis shouted at me. Almost simultaneously, three arrows shot toward Adair, and he was forced to switch his focus to the arrows so he could whip them out of the air before they landed.

That gave me an opportunity to get close. I could’ve just blasted him from a distance, but I really needed to work on my sword and shield skills, so that was what I decided to focus on.

As I approached, Adair aimed one of his whips at an arrow and—spying an opening—I lunged, slashing my sword in his direction.

Without even seeming to see me, he threw his left hand out and a whip materialized out of nowhere, throwing me backward onto my butt.

“Cali!” Artemis shouted. “Are you okay?”

I nodded and looked down at my arm, where the whip had caught me. The spot it had touched stung like fire, and the whip seemed to have drawn a bit of blood, but I was fine.

“I’m okay!” I shouted back as I got to my feet. “Keep covering me!”

I rushed forward again, dodging the whips and counting on Artemis to keep Adair’s attention occupied.

There was another opening, but it closed as soon as I saw it. The same thing happened with the next. I was starting to get really frustrated.

“Okay,” I muttered to myself. “One more time. You can do this.”

I kept my eyes open for another opening, but when I found one, I stopped myself from running straight for it. I saw Adair’s hand flick out, and I realized that I wasn’t actually looking at an opening—I was looking at a trap.

I grinned and feinted, then dropped and rolled to his other side and lunged forward with my sword. I lashed out, stopping millimeters from his ribs.

Adair hadn’t flinched, and when he looked down at me, he was actually smiling. He let his whips disappear. “Well done. You’re starting to get it, Caliana.”

I stared up at him, panting hard and frankly kind of shocked by the praise.

“Yes!” Artemis sprinted to my side “We did it! We were awesome together!” She yanked me to my feet and gave me a high five.

I looked around, feeling a little teary. I couldn’t quite believe what had just happened.

“Do you think we’re ready for something new now?” I asked Adair breathlessly.

He nodded thoughtfully. “Perhaps you are—next time, I’ll have Artemis team up with me against you.”

“Oh, really?” I asked nervously. “Well, maybe I should try this version of the fight again first. Or—I don’t know—a few times, maybe. It did take me a while to get this far.”

I was excited about how well that had gone, and about my blossoming abilities, but I really wasn’t interested in fighting Artemis just yet. Adding her into the mix would take any sparring scenario to a whole other level. For one thing, I’d seen my sister fight, and she was nearly unstoppable. Add to that the intimidation I felt at her ability to catch on to everything so effortlessly… Yeah, I was going to stick to having her on my team for the time being.

“I’m getting hungry,” Artemis said. “You ready to head back to the house?”

“Yeah, I’m ready,” I said. “Thanks for the workout, Adair.”

He nodded, and Artemis and I headed for the pack house together. Between how well the second meeting had gone and my success in the sparring session, I was feeling really good about the day, and about how I was doing as interim pack leader. Rishika was probably inside, planning out our patrols, and Artemis and I had just beaten Adair.

I still couldn’t get over that.

As we rounded the corner of the house to reach the front, we saw a figure walk out of the front door. Whoever it was was moving slowly, laden with bags, including one perched on their shoulder, so I couldn’t see who it was.

Artemis narrowed her eyes. “Is that Lilac?”

“Oh, *that’s* who it is,” I said, recognizing Lilac’s stride.

“What’s he doing?” she wondered.

“That is a good question,” I said. “I don’t know, but I’d like to find out.”

When we got closer, I called out to him.

“Lilac, hey. What’s going on?”

He stopped at the bottom of the porch steps and looked around, but when he saw that it was me who’d called to him, he just took off again, hurrying down the driveway

I shot a glance at Artemis and jogged after him. “Lilac, what are you doing? Stop!”

Finally, he wheeled around. “*What?*”

“What are you doing?” I panted, jogging over to him.

“What does it look like I’m doing? I’m leaving!”

I stared at him. “*Leaving?* Where are you going?”

“I’m joining the Samara pack.”

“*What?*” I spluttered. “Are you serious?”  
 He gestured to his bags. “Yeah, I’m serious.”

I just couldn’t wrap my head around this news. “What does that mean—you’re leaving…”

I trailed off, faltering. Was this even *allowed*? Could he really just leave like this? Gabriel, Mikah, Kira—they’d all left, too, of course, but they weren’t Redwoods. Not officially. I’d even been the one who’d reminded Greyson that Gabriel and Mikah had never been actual pack members. But Lilac…

*No*, I told myself. *This is different*.

I needed to pull myself together. I needed to convince him to stay—or at the very least buy some time to convince him.

“That is not the right way to go,” I told him, trying to sound firm.

He narrowed his eyes. “What? What’s not? What does that mean?”

“I just—I…” I started.

“Are you telling me that I *can’t* leave?” he demanded.

“I… Well, I…”

I was fumbling this, not sure how to answer. What the hell was I supposed to do? How could I convince him to stay?

**Episode 4180**

**Greyson**

My face was throbbing, and I put my hand to my jaw, where Xavier had—out of nowhere—coldcocked me.

“What the *hell*, man?” I demanded, rubbing my jaw. But I decided that I didn’t actually want an answer, so—without waiting for a response—I threw a punch of my own.

The move was basically instinctive—there were only so many responses to getting clocked in the face—but the weirdest part was that Xavier didn’t even try to dodge as my fist sailed toward his face with the force of my entire body weight behind it. When I made contact, his head snapped back, and he stumbled back a few steps.

“*Fuck*,” he hissed. He rubbed his jaw and looked up at me, something defiant blazing in his eyes. “There. Are we even now?”

I stared at him for a moment.

“*Even?*” I repeated incredulously. Then I shook my head. “I am so fucking sick of being confused by you, man! I just want to know what’s going on with you!”

I’d gone back the way we’d come for a mile or two, trying to pick up the trail again, but there had been nothing. I’d almost made it back when I’d heard Xavier talking to someone. We hadn’t come across anyone out here since the lost hikers, so I’d had no idea who it could’ve been, and my pulse had started to race as I’d sprinted the rest of the way back. But when I reached the spot where I’d left him, Xavier had just been standing there, alone, shaking with what looked like fury. He’d been staring at nothing, but his face had been flushed with rage.

“When I got back, I said your name a few times,” I told him, “but either you didn’t hear me, or you just didn’t answer.”

And then he’d just clocked me out of nowhere. None of it made any sense—except that it did make some sense of Cali’s gut feeling that something was wrong with Xavier. I hadn’t quite believed her when she’d first mentioned it, but I was starting to agree that whatever was going on with him was a lot more serious and a lot more complicated than any of us had thought.

“So, what is it?” I asked him. “What’s going on with you?”

Xavier didn’t say a word. His expression was closed off, and his gaze was distant. He turned away from me, and I didn’t bother asking him again. There was no point. I wasn’t going to get any answers from him—not right now, anyway.

The wind kicked up, blowing cold around us. The temperature was dropping, but I barely noticed. What I *did* notice was a scent in the air. The Bitterfang trail was back.

This time, I didn’t wait for Xavier. I didn’t have the patience to talk anything out with him right now, so I shifted to my wolf form and turned away, following the scent as it led me east. I didn’t want to know where it had come from, or why it had reappeared, or even how. Everything about this mission was already so much less straightforward than I wanted it to be, and I just didn’t want any more complications.

I knew at some point I was going to have to turn around and deal with Xavier and his bizarre behavior, but right now, I just wanted to get through this mission. I wanted to find what I’d come out here to find—evidence that the Bitterfangs had really left the area and weren’t just prepping for another attack—and then I wanted to go home to Cali and the rest of my pack. I’d deal with Xavier’s increasingly erratic behavior later.

I followed the Bitterfang trail for about three miles as it led due east, but another mile after that, a fourth Bitterfang scent joined the other three.

Xavier had shifted and was following me, and when I picked up this new scent, I looked over at him.

We didn’t speak, but a look passed between us, and I knew we’d come to a silent understanding.

We both slowed our pace, trying to move as quietly as possible.

I felt something painful push at my heart. I just didn’t understand how one moment, Xavier and I could work so well together—be so in sync that we didn’t even have to speak—and the next we’d literally be punching each other in the face for no reason. My relationship with my brother gave me whiplash, sometimes.

Suddenly, Xavier raised a paw, indicating that I should stop. We’d been scaling the side of a hill, and when we reached the top, we stopped and crouched down, staying low to the ground as we looked down on the other side.

The Bitterfang scents had been growing stronger, and as we surveyed the valley below us, I could see why.

The bottom of the valley was a large, flat, clear space that looked like a campsite. Though it was empty now, it looked as though it had been occupied in the very recent past. I could see where tent stakes had disturbed the frozen ground, and smoke still billowed from the center of rock-ringed firepits. When the wind blew toward us, I smelled the smoke, along with the scents of Bitterfang, Ironwood, and Hackberry wolves. But there was no one there. No movement, no sound.

I looked over at Xavier and tipped my head toward the site. *We should check it out.*

I started carefully down the hillside to the campsite, Xavier following behind me. There was a stillness to the air, and it was quiet. As we moved down the hill, even the sound of the wind seemed muted.

As the ground flattened out, I looked around. It seemed like there were multiple smaller camps set up, as though the groups that had been here had kept to themselves. But they all seemed empty, now.

*I don’t think there’s anyone here*, Xavier said, finally speaking again.

*I agree*, I said slowly. *But I still think we should make sure.*

Xavier nodded, then I headed east, and he headed west.

Eastward, the campsite got stranger. I passed a fire that was still burning. There was a duffel bag nearby, as well as a half-empty box of granola bars on the ground, the bars all scattered around. It looked like whoever had been here had left so quickly and so suddenly that they hadn’t taken the time to gather their belongings before they left. These didn’t strike me as the movements of packs who were operating with a plan in place.

I stopped and looked around, wondering if there was a chance someone had left something—*anything*—that might give us a clue about Malakai’s full plan. A map, or a note, or a phone with text messages, maybe?

The whole place reeked of desperation and frantic fleeing. I would’ve thought that I would find something, then, that got left behind, but as we searched, there wasn’t much. It was mostly just trash, and the more we looked, the less hope I had that whoever had been here had been privy to Malakai’s plans.

The place was creeping me out. I jogged over to where Xavier stood, surveying the smaller campsites on the western side, which looked just like the ones on the east.

*Find anything?* I asked.

*No*, Xavier said. He glanced around. *Nothing useful. Just a lot of signs that a lot of people left this place in a big-ass hurry. It’s all just trash.*

*Yeah, I see that*, I said, looking around. *It’s the same on the east side.*

*But*, Xavier added, *it doesn’t look like they left as one large pack.*

*What do you mean?* I asked. *Where are you getting that idea?*

Xavier was looking closely at the tracks on the ground. *It looks like they split off into a bunch of smaller groups of wolves, don’t you think? They’re all heading in different directions. That doesn’t seem like an army on the move to me.*

*No*, I agreed quietly, looking at the evidence left behind on the ground. The marks on the ground were as frantic as everything else in the former camp, the mud going every which way. Like they couldn’t get out of here fast enough.

*That seems like wolves running for their lives*, Xavier added*.*

I nodded slowly. *I think you’re right*, I finally said.

We looked around as the wind picked up again, sending the scents of the three wolf packs spiraling around us. In it, I caught scents I hadn’t picked up before—the fear and desperation and grief of each of the wolves who’d stayed here. The wind whistled around Xavier and me as we walked back to the center of the campsite and looked at the silent hills around us.

*You know what this means, then*, I said.

Xavier looked at me. *What?*

I took a deep breath. *It looks like the Bitterfangs are truly in retreat.*