**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 32 - Part 2**

**Episodes 4181-4256 (S32 Total: 4046-4256)**

**Episode 4181**

Lilac tried to move past me. “I’ve made up my mind, Cali. I’m leaving. Don’t try to stop me. Please. This is my decision to make, and I’ve made it.”

I moved a little ahead of him. “I’m not trying to stop you, Lilac, but this is a really big deal, and I do think you should take a minute to consider what you’re doing.”

Lilac was instantly on the defensive. “Don’t you think I already have? Believe me, Cali, I’ve considered the consequences. I’m not just some little kid flying by the seat of his pants. Besides, Violet and I already got into a fight about it.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Lilac,” I said. “But you have to understand how hard this must be for your sister. She already lost you once before—it must be devastating to think she might be losing you again.”

Lilac looked away, his expression heavy with guilt. “I know,” he mumbled. “But I have to do what’s right for me. Don’t I have that option?”

“Of course you do. All I’m suggesting is that you don’t go to the Samaras *today*. Xavier isn’t even there right now; he’s away with Greyson. Wouldn’t it be better to be welcomed by the Alpha?”

I didn’t want to push too hard, and I hoped he couldn’t hear my desperation. There was no way that I wanted to let a pack member leave on my watch. Greyson wouldn’t blame me, but I’d certainly blame myself.

Lilac sighed. “I suppose. But what about Perrie?”

I glanced at Artemis, who gave me a slight nod of encouragement to continue.

“Well, what about Greyson?” I countered.

Lilac looked puzzled. “What about him?”

“Well… Don’t you think you owe your Alpha an explanation?” Artemis said. “Obviously, I’m not a werewolf, so I don’t completely understand the ins and outs of werewolf culture, but it seems like it would be the right thing to do. Just common courtesy, really.”

Lilac was silent, and I finally sensed that we were making some headway.

“I understand how much you want to be with your mate, Lilac,” I said. “But waiting a day or two shouldn’t matter in the grand scheme of things. Like Artemis, I’m not a werewolf, but I do know something about being a mate. Maybe I know a little more than some werewolves do, on that front.”

Lilac arched his eyebrows and jerked his head in agreement. “I suppose.”

“So believe me when I tell you that whether you go today or tomorrow, Perrie will welcome you,” I said. “But right now, Greyson is still your Alpha. If you leave without talking to him first, without giving him the respect he deserves, that damage might not be easy to repair. You’re a Redwood, Lilac, but once you leave, you won’t be. Everything will be different, and you might not get another opportunity to talk to Greyson about this.”

Lilac plied me with a searching gaze before sucking his teeth. “I guess I hadn’t thought about it that way. I just want to be with Perrie, and that was all I could think about. It’s *still* all I’m thinking about.”

“I get that. But are you willing to wait until Greyson gets back so you can do this the right way?” I sensed that he was coming around, but I didn’t want to get ahead of myself. I needed to finish strong.

“And if he tries to talk me out of it?” Lilac countered. “What then? Because I don’t want that. I’m willing to talk to him, but I’ve made my decision.”

“I can’t promise he won’t try,” I said. “Greyson values you, just like he values everyone else in the pack. Honestly, wouldn’t you be a little offended if he *didn’t* try to convince you to stay?”

Lilac didn’t say anything right away. He looked past me into the woods, and then back at the pack house. “Fine. I’ll wait for Greyson to come back so I can do it right.” He turned his determined stare back on me. “But after that, I’m leaving.”

Lilac gathered up his bags and headed for the house without looking back.

I watched him and let out a long breath. “That was a close one,” I muttered.

“You handled that like a pro,” Artemis said. “Lilac’s a tough kid. Headstrong, too. But you managed him well.”

“I hope so,” I said. “I just hate that Lilac is planning to leave the pack. Will Violet be next? And then someone else after that?”

Artemis shook her head and turned to head inside. Before she walked through the door, she turned to look at me. “Are you coming?”

“Go ahead,” I said, waving her off. “I’ll be in in a minute.”

Artemis disappeared inside, and I stared off into the woods. Everything I’d told Lilac was true, but I couldn’t help but think of Xavier, who’d done exactly what Lilac had been planning to do—leave the pack without any credible explanation. Not only had he burned bridges with some of the pack members, but he’d also broken my heart.

*I have to believe that all that can be repaired, somehow. There’s no way that things between us can end like this. It’s not right. It hurts too badly to be right. I saw the look in Xavier’s eyes, too. He can’t want this. He* doesn’t *want this, so why isn’t he making things right? Why won’t he come back and talk to me so we can fix whatever’s going on, together?*

I slowly made my way toward the house, wondering who else might be considering leaving the Redwoods for the Samaras. Luring Lilac away was just yet another way for Xavier to hurt not only the pack, but me, too.

I’d never thought in a million years that Xavier would do anything like this, and it made me think again of what I’d told Greyson—that Xavier was hiding something. Up until he’d turned everything upside down, he’d really cared about the Redwood pack and had protected it with everything he had. To see him not only abandon it but begin to strategically dismantle it was just too much to wrap my head around.

Once I was inside the house, I started looking for Violet. She had to be devastated. I sighed as I ducked in and out of the rooms, searching for her. At least I’d bought her some more time, and hopefully a chance to change Lilac’s mind.

I finally found Violet in her room. She was sitting alone on her bed and staring off into space, looking upset. She looked up and gave me a weak smile when I came in.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey.” I sat on the bed beside her, my heart hurting for her. “I talked to Lilac.”

“Yeah? Is he still being a massive jerk?”

“I get why you feel that way, but you have to admit that Lilac should be able to make up his mind about where he gets to live.”

*How hypocritical of me. Technically, Xavier should be able to live wherever he wants, too, but there’s no way I’ll ever give him a pass. I just can’t. Somehow, his situation feels different. And he’s already poached four of our people. Who will he go after next? Will he be ringing Jay’s phone off the hook soon?*

My heart skipped at the thought of Lola leaving with Jay. But there was no way she’d ever do that—nor would she ever let Jay do it. I doubted I actually had anything to worry about, there.

“When we were kids, Lilac and I took a blood oath to never be apart,” Violet said. “To always stick together, no matter what. When he died…” She paused as her voice broke. “When he died, I was shattered. I thought I’d never see him again. I’d lie awake at night crying as I thought about him. It hurt so badly to know that we’d never have the opportunity to make any new memories. When he came back, I remembered the oath and he told me—he *promised* me—that he’d never leave me again.” I could tell that she was holding back tears. “He lied.”

I draped an arm around her shoulders. “Sometimes when we make promises, despite our best intentions, the world around us changes in ways that make those promises hard to keep. But that doesn’t make those promises any less meaningful.”

Violet sniffed. “I don’t know. His promise seems pretty meaningless right now.”

“I know, but I don’t think Lilac’s decision was an easy one. And it might not feel like it right now, but he loves you.”

Violet shook her head. “Right now, I’m not so sure about that. But I’ve been thinking.” She turned to look at me, and she had the same determined look on her face that Lilac had been wearing only minutes ago. “I think I know a way to keep Lilac here, but I’m going to need your help.”

**Episode 4182**

**Xavier**

Still in wolf form, Greyson and I went through the abandoned campsite, rummaging through tents, nudging at bedrolls and clothes, overturning pots and pans, looking for any clue that might give us the answers we were looking for. But like I’d mentioned earlier, most of what was left over was garbage. Leave it to a bunch of werewolves to litter the fucking forest.

We kept up the search for a while, but I’d already drawn the same conclusion that Greyson had—not only had the Bitterfangs retreated, but they’d left in a panicked hurry. Still, we went through every nook and cranny of the place. Neither one of us was willing to accept what appeared to be so obvious.

*They’ve clearly left, but to go where?* Greyson mind linked. *Regardless, I can’t see the point in sticking around here for much longer. What do you think we should do?*

I laughed in surprise. *Strange to hear you asking instead of telling. Are you sure you’re feeling all right?*

Greyson stared at me. *Are we really going to get into that right now? Believe it or not, I’m asking because I value your opinion.*

I stopped myself from laughing again. Greyson only ever accepted my opinion when he didn’t have one of his own. But since this was bigger than the two of us, I decided to let it go. The safety of the Redwood and Samara packs was at stake—not to mention Cali’s.

Malakai and his pack had specifically targeted Cali, and that was something I doubted either of us would forget. That meant we couldn’t assume that the Bitterfangs had cleared out, just because all signs pointed to a hasty retreat. That would be the best-case scenario, but we’d been through too much to just blindly trust it.

*What if they staged things to make us think that they’re gone when they’re really not? Where’s the proof, either way?* I mind linked, after we’d looked around a bit more.

*So, we keep following their scent until we get the proof we need*, Greyson said, finishing my thought. *That’s the only way we can be sure.*

*Agreed*, I said, aware of how rare it was for us to be on the same page. It almost felt wrong to agree with him when there was so much about him that I took issue with.

Greyson nodded toward the various trails that the Bitterfangs and their allies had left while fleeing. *Which one should we follow? They scattered like leaves when they left.*

*It might not matter which one we follow*, I replied. *If they really did scatter, then they’re most likely gone. But if not, then all the divergent trails will cross somewhere, indicating that they’re regrouping.*

*And what about Malakai?* Greyson asked. *How the hell are we meant to confirm that he’s dead? It’s not like we’re going to find his death certificate lying around somewhere.*

*I don’t know*, I said. *We might just have to move on without knowing for sure.*

Greyson mulled that over, and I could tell that that outcome wasn’t sitting any better with him than it was with me.

*I think we need to do whatever it takes to get proof that he’s dead—or not*, Greyson finally said. *Proof has to be out there somewhere. We’ll know it when we see it.*

Once again, I agreed.

*All we can do is try*,I replied. I gestured toward a trail to our left. *Let’s take the trail with the strongest scent. That way, we might actually catch someone and interrogate them before they get too far away.*

As we made our way toward the trail, I thought about Adéluce. I rarely *wasn’t* thinking about her, to be honest. I hoped to hell that she wouldn’t cause any more issues—I absolutely wouldn’t be surprised if she created fake Bitterfang scents to throw us off the trail, while also just generally being a distraction with the potential to make me stumble into a fatal mistake.

*Doesn’t she realize that if she interferes with our search, it might allow the Bitterfangs to mount a surprise attack? And if that happens, there’s a chance I could die*, I thought to myself. *She made it clear that she wants to keep me alive so she can keep watching me suffer. Me being dead would cut that short.*

I was still stewing over this an hour later when Greyson suddenly skidded to a halt in front of me. I didn’t have to ask why—I smelled the smoke, too. It was possible that there were more human campers out and about. But that didn’t explain the other scent I caught on the breeze.

*Death.*

That wasn’t usually what you had with a hot dog.

Staying low and moving without making a sound, Greyson and I cautiously followed the smoke. Before long, we found a large, smoldering pile of ash in the middle of a clearing. We paused, scanning the area for any sign of campers, but the site seemed abandoned. I didn’t immediately smell humans, which could’ve been a good thing or a bad thing.

It didn’t take Sherlock Holmes to deduce that whoever had built the campfire couldn’t have left too long ago. Flanking each other and moving with our heads low, Greyson and I approached the smoking ash. The smell of death was cloying, and it seemed to worsen the closer we got to the fire.

I took a quick look around to confirm that no one was watching us, and then I shifted back to human. I crept closer to the fire and poked at it with a stick. Greyson appeared at my side and shifted back, too, and I arched an eyebrow when the stick hit something solid.

“Are those bones?” Greyson asked, leaning closer to get a better look. “Charred flesh? Teeth?”

“Yeah. Human?” I asked.

Greyson shook his head. “Werewolf.”

A sudden gasp drew our attention, and we turned to see someone darting off into the trees. Greyson and I wasted no time shifting and leaping into pursuit.

*It’s a werewolf for sure*, I mind linked to Greyson as we raced through the trees. *I couldn’t smell him at first over the smoke, but now I smell him clear as day.*

Whoever it was, they were moving fast, doing their best to get as far away from us as they could. But I wasn’t about to let them get away. If it was a Bitterfang or one of their allies, I was going to take them alive. This might be our only chance to get answers, and I wasn’t about to squander it. I wanted to go back to my pack—back to Ava—with confirmation that we could finally let our guard down. And I wanted Greyson to be able to take that same news back to Cali.

The sound of the wolf’s footfalls was getting closer, and Greyson broke away from me and sped up to circle around. At the same instant, I saw a flash of movement up ahead and lunged, tackling the fleeing wolf in a tangle of flailing claws and limbs.

Our growls tore through the air as we tussled in the dirt. The werewolf wasn’t going to go down easy, and I narrowly avoided fierce bites to my ear and my neck—glancing bites that wouldn’t have killed me, but would’ve slowed me down and made me vulnerable. Still, I easily could’ve gone in for the kill, but I needed this wolf alive.

Snarling and growling and matching strike for strike, I rolled the wolf toward Greyson as he emerged from the trees. Acting fast, Greyson sank his teeth into the wolf’s hind leg and flung him away from me, then dove after him before he could recover, pinning him to the ground.

*Got him!* Greyson said.

I jumped to my feet and stalked over to where my brother had the wolf’s face and body pinned to the dirt. The wolf was still thrashing around, trying to get free.

*Surrender, or we’ll kill you right now*, I told him*.*

The wolf kept struggling, attempting over and over to nip at Greyson, who kept him firmly pinned. When he kept trying, Greyson responded by shoving his face into the mud until he couldn’t move at all. Greyson was straining with effort, but I knew that he’d be able to keep that position for hours if he needed to.

The wolf sensed it, too. Finally, he shifted back to human—a sign of total surrender. Both Greyson and I shifted back too, hauling the man to his feet. He didn’t have one of those silver capsules, so maybe we could actually have a conversation with this guy.

“Who are you?” I demanded. “And don’t bother lying. That little fight back there truly taxed my patience.”

“I—I’m a Bitterfang,” the man panted.

Greyson and I glanced at each other before I lunged forward and grabbed the man by the throat. “Perfect. That means that you can tell us what happened to Malakai. Is he alive, or is he dead?”

**Episode 4183**

“What did you have in mind?” I asked Violet.

I’d only been able to get Lilac to stay by invoking Greyson, and if he hadn’t even listened to Violet to begin with… I just wasn’t sure if we were going to be able to convince him. I wasn’t surprised that Violet was prepared to pull out all the stops to get Lilac to stay, though. I would’ve been more surprised if she *hadn’t* formed some kind of plan.

“Just leave it to me,” Violet said. “I’m going to make him realize that things with Perrie will be better if he stays. I’ll let you know what part you’ll play once I’ve ironed out the details.”

“What part I’ll play? What does that mean?” I asked.

Violet smiled mischievously. “You’ll see. I really think this is going to work, especially with your help.”

“Sounds good,” I said, trying not to sound too dubious. I couldn’t fathom what Violet was going to ask of me, but whatever it was, I would be ready.

Violet nodded, and I stood to leave.

“By the way, thanks for coming to talk to me about this,” Violet said. “It means a lot that you’re looking out for my brother, too. I’m feeling a lot better than I was a few minutes ago, and that’s thanks to you.”

I was touched. “I really do care about Lilac, and I care about you, too,” I said. “And so does Greyson. I hope you know that, Violet.”

“I do,” she said firmly.

She stood to hug me, and I felt like I might cry. I hugged her back, happy that I’d been able to make an impact and do something that mattered. I was curious and slightly nervous about what part Violet wanted me to play in her plan, but I’d do whatever I could to make sure Lilac realized that he belonged with the Redwood pack.

“Well, I’d better get to work,” Violet said. “I’ve got to get everything in motion before Greyson gets back.”

“Good idea, thanks,” I said with a smile.

I left Violet to her preparations, realizing that I’d really needed that hug. I’d been so nervous about being in charge while Greyson was away—to have real confirmation that I was doing a good job meant so much. It had given me a degree of resolve, too. It had made me remember what it meant to be a Luna—it meant taking care of the people you care about and being there for them when they needed you.

*I only hope I can pull off my part of Violet’s plan. I don’t want to be the reason why it doesn’t work. But of course I’ll do a good job. I’ll do whatever it takes. When it comes to the pack, there’s really nothing I* won’t *do. I’m proving that to Violet, and I’m looking forward to being able to prove it to the rest of the pack, too.*

I was about to head back outside when I heard someone call my name. I turned and was surprised to see Dani and Tabitha coming my way.

“Are you busy?” Tabitha asked.

I turned to face them, suddenly feeling a little on edge. “Just about to go back to training. Why? Is something going on?”

It would be just my luck to have to deal with something horrible right after my nice moment with Violet.

The sisters exchanged a look.

“We have an idea that might help the pack out,” Dani said.

“Oh, really?” I was surprised, but eager to hear what they had to say. “What do you mean? How?”

It was heartwarming to see how far the sisters had come—from searching fruitlessly for each other to working together as a unit. And now they were working together for the good of the pack, too.

“Well, for starters, it involves you,” Dani said. “Actually, without you, the plan won’t work at all.”

*Ooh, another opportunity to prove myself! I can’t wait for Greyson to come back and see how well I did while he was away.*

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s hear it.”

“So, we were thinking about how we might be able to help if the Bitterfangs attack again—assuming that Greyson comes back with bad news,” Dani said.

I nodded. “I’m all ears.”

“We’re thinking we might be able to amplify your shield. Or Dani could, at least,” Tabitha said.

I considered that. The last time my magic had interacted—albeit accidentally—with Dani’s, it hadn’t gone so well. We’d blown up a car and had nearly torched the entire lawn—and the pack house, too. It had been a close call, and I wasn’t interested in a repeat performance. Would actually trying to plan to use our magic together create a better outcome? Or more of the same?

“I know what you’re thinking,” Dani said, probably spotting the skeptical look on my face. “But back then, we didn’t have the skill and control that we have now. I’ve trained with Okorie, and you’ve been working with Adair, and I think we both have a better handle on things. So I don’t think we’ll blow anything up like we did last time.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “But when you say you want to amplify my shield, how much amplification are we talking about?”

The explosion that had destroyed the car had been massive, and I wondered if amplifying any magic to that scale, even my shield, was a good idea. Plus, I was still practicing with my magic. In my own eyes, I still had training wheels on. This was maybe something I wasn’t ready for yet.

“Since Kira’s gone, we’re down to one witch—Big Mac,” Tabitha said. “If the house is attacked, we won’t have as much witch firepower as before, so Dani and I have been trying to come up with ways to take advantage of the resources we still have. One way to do that could be to play with your shield, Cali. With some practice, Dani could amplify it to cover the entire pack house, if necessary.”

I was surprised, and a little thrown off. They were right about us being down a witch, but I wasn’t sure that my shield would be able to fill that void, even if Dani *could* amplify it.

“That sounds like a cool idea,” I said, “but I’m not sure I’m capable of that. Besides, it wouldn’t work the same way a witch’s shield would. I’d have to hold it up constantly. That would take a lot of effort. I’m not sure I’d be able to handle that—or if I’d even be able to manage the amplified version.”

“The idea isn’t that you’d hold it up forever like a witch shield,” Tabitha said. “It would be a strategic thing. If the Bitterfangs were to show up, we put your shield up so that they think we’re scared, but then we drop it when they least expect it and attack.”

Dani nodded. “That’s where Tabitha comes in.”

“Exactly,” Tabitha said. “Dani would amplify your magic, and then I’d negate it entirely and bring the shield down at the right moment. And on the off chance that your magic went haywire with Dani’s amplification, I’d be there to stop it.”

I nodded, taking it all in. I pictured wielding a massive shield, and how shocked the Bitterfangs would be to see it. “That could work. I’m glad that you two have so much faith in my abilities, but I have to admit that I have some reservations…”

It was an interesting idea, and I wanted to be ready for the Bitterfang more than anyone, but I couldn’t stop thinking about how badly things had gone the last time I’d combined my magic with Dani’s. I didn’t want Greyson to come home to a pack house that had been smashed by my massive shield, for instance.

“Should we try it out?” Tabitha said. “Do a dry run to see if it’s even something we can do?”

“I don’t know.” I said, biting my lip. “Do you two really think it’ll work? More importantly, is it really safe?”

“It’ll be fine, Cali, I promise,” Tabitha said firmly. She sounded confident. “And if anything goes wrong, I’ll be able to stop it right away. I’m sure of it.”

It was tempting, for sure. I was excited to see what else my magic was capable of, and if we tried it and it worked, it would be a great addition to our arsenal—not just to use against the Bitterfangs, but against any other entity that tried to challenge us. It was clear that we were never going to have a life without threats, so having new and unique ways to face them was almost a requirement if we wanted to keep the pack protected and thriving.

I sighed. “Well, if it’s for the pack’s protection—”

“No,” Adair interrupted, appearing at my side and looking *angry*. “None of this will be happening.”

**Episode 4184**

**Greyson**

I was worried that Xavier was about to squeeze the life out of the captured Bitterfang. The man was choking and unable to answer as Xavier slammed him against a tree and tightened his grip on his neck. The man’s face was turning a sickly shade of red, and I knew that if Xavier kept going at this rate, the man wasn’t going to last much longer.

I was just about to step in when Xavier finally released him. We needed answers, not another dead Bitterfang, and I was happy that my brother seemed to have remembered that.

The Bitterfang was coughing and heaving, and he gasped out something that sounded a lot like a claim that Malakai was dead.

Xavier shot me a look and then grabbed the man again. “Who’s dead? Malakai? Is that what you said?”

The man was choking again, struggling to answer as Xavier tightened his grip on his neck.

“Answer me!” Xavier snarled. “Are you telling us that the Bitterfang Alpha is dead?”

I pulled Xavier back, and he released his hold. “Ease up and let the guy speak.”

Xavier glared at me. “I know what I’m doing.”

“I’m not trying to get into an argument with you right now, Xavier, but if you choke the guy to death before we get some answers, I’m going to kill you myself,” I shot back. I understood Xavier’s anger, but now wasn’t the time to give into it. We needed to be smart about this.

Scowling, Xavier shoved the man to the ground. He rolled over onto his back, clutching at his neck as he coughed and struggled to regain his voice.

“He’s dead,” he finally choked out. “Malakai is dead.”

“How do you know that?” Xavier pressed. “And why should we believe you?”

“For all we know, you helped Malakai escape and now you’re just trying to throw us off the trail,” I added.

“I know because I was there when Malakai fell.” His voice cracked, this time with grief. “Our Alpha didn’t survive that fall from the cliff. No one could’ve survived it.”

I was still skeptical. “How come we didn’t see Malakai’s body over the edge when we looked for it?”

The man sat up and scrambled backwards to lean against a tree. “When we saw Malakai fall, we knew the battle was over. As soon as we could, we took his body away so that we could give him a proper funeral. We didn’t want any of you to get your hands on him.”

He didn’t bother masking the bitterness in his voice.

“So where is he?” Xavier snarled. “And don’t say you don’t know.”

The man pointed back in the direction we’d come from. “He’s in the ashes of the fire. We did the best we could to honor him in death, but we didn’t have much time and we wanted to get out of these woods as soon as possible.”

*Do we believe him?* I mind linked to Xavier. *We found werewolf remains in the ashes, but there’s no way to tell if they’re Malakai’s. They could belong to any dead wolf.*

*Only one way to find out*, Xavier replied. *Let’s see if he can shed any light on it.*

I was skeptical. But maybe we could take a sample of something from the ashes and compare it to Julia’s. Surely one of the witches could do something.

Xavier jerked the man to his feet. “Show us.”

The guy turned and led the way back to the fire. He stood over it, looking down into the ashes.

“We did the best we could,” he said, getting emotional. “Everyone was so upset… But we pulled it together just long enough to give him a proper send off.”

I couldn’t imagine how or why they’d be upset about losing an asshole like Malakai, but the man’s story seemed to add up. And I just didn’t think it was possible to manufacture the grief I was hearing in his voice—not unless the guy was secretly an award-winning actor.

“What happened to everyone else?” Xavier asked.

The man shook his head. “We scattered. We knew you’d probably be coming after us, and without our Alpha to guide the way, we agreed to flee any way we could. We just wanted to get as far away from you and your packs as possible. It was chaos.”

I looked down into the still smoldering ashes. “There’s no way for us to know that this was Malakai.” I leaned closer to the mound and inhaled. “There’s a hint of Bitterfang somewhere in there, under the smell of death and smoke, but nothing more specific.”

“Exactly,” Xavier said. “And unless you have some sort of proof, your story is nothing but a story.”

The guy stared down at the ground, clearly uncomfortable. “I can’t offer you any proof.”

Xavier shook his head and got in the guy’s face. “Well, that’s just not good enough.” He turned to me. “What do you say we add another wolf to the fire?”

The man looked up at us, clearly terrified. He started to back away, his legs shaking.

I wondered if Xavier was bluffing. I didn’t have any qualms about killing the man, but I wasn’t about to torture him by burning him alive. It wasn’t my style, and it really wasn’t necessary to make such a statement—especially if what the man was saying was true.

*Xavier’s always been a vengeful hothead, but would he actually resort to burning this man to death just because he doesn’t like the answers he’s giving? Xavier hasn’t been acting like himself lately, but I can’t believe that he’d do something like that. He has to be bluffing.*

Xavier grabbed the guy by the arm and started dragging him toward the smoldering pyre. “Hey, bro, got any matches? I’m sure it won’t take much to get this fire raging again,” Xavier said to me, his voice thick with menace.

“Please!” the man screamed. “No! I have proof!”

Satisfaction crossed Xavier’s face. “See? He just needed a little encouragement.”

“What kind of proof?” I asked.

The man’s hand rose slowly toward his mouth and I lunged at him, certain that he was about to take a silver capsule that he’d somehow hidden. But when I pulled his hand away, I saw that he was holding a stone ring.

“What the hell is that?” Xavier asked.

“Malakai’s wedding ring,” the man said.

I took it from him and examined the ornately sculpted piece of jewelry. “Why do you have this?”

The man threw a guilty look down at the ground. “I took it.”

“Oh, so you’re a *thief*.” Xavier chuckled darkly. “The Bitterfangs are nothing but a bunch of liars, thieves, and murderers. What a surprise that you’d rip the wedding ring off your Alpha’s dead body.” Xavier shook his head in disgust.

“I was going to take the ring for myself, but then I realized it should be returned to Honora,” the man said. “I thought it might give her some comfort.”

I hadn’t given much thought to the Bitterfang Luna—all of our focus had been on Malakai, which might’ve been a mistake.

“You’re saying Honora is still alive?” Xavier asked.

The man nodded.

“I saw her run off after she attacked Cali,” Xavier told me.

I stared down at the ring, lost in thought.

*If Honora is still out there, she could potentially reorganize the Bitterfangs and attack again*, I thought to myself. *They’d probably fight with even more fervor, since they’d be doing it to avenge Malakai’s death. I can’t allow that to happen.*

“Where is she? Honora?” I asked the man.

The man’s eyes widened. “I-I can’t…”

Xavier slapped him hard across the face. “You said you were going to take the ring to her, so don’t even try to deny that you know where she is. Either you lead us to her, or you die right here, right now—and then we’ll find her ourselves, anyway. I’m not taking a ring as proof that he’s dead.”

I nodded. “I’m inclined to agree with my brother. If you don’t tell us where she is, this isn’t going to end well for you. Think long and hard about whether protecting her is worth your life.”

A pained look flashed across the man’s face. “W-What are you going to do to her?”

He looked like he was about to cry, and I almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

I held the ring in front of his face. “We only want to give her back what she’s owed,” I said. “Just like you wanted.”

The man gasped. “You can’t! You’ve already decimated our pack and killed our Alpha—isn’t that enough for you?”

“Not nearly enough,” Xavier said.

“Now all we want now is to make sure the war is over,” I said. “That’s it.”

I didn’t say any more. Honora hadn’t treated Cali well, and she’d been instrumental in starting this war. She deserved the same fate as Malakai.

“Fine,” the man said reluctantly. “I’ll take you to her.”

We all shifted.

*And if this is a trap?* I asked my brother as we took off.

Xavier’s mind link filtered into my head. *Doesn’t matter. He’ll take us to Honora, and when he does*,he said darkly, *we’ll kill her.*

**Episode 4185**

I wasn’t sure how to respond, at first. I was used to Adair giving me orders, especially when he’d been training us, but for once, it didn’t seem like this particular order was directed at me.

Tabitha crossed her arms. “And why not?”

“Because you don’t need to get mixed up in some werewolf war,” Adair shot back. “This has nothing to do with you. It’s not your fight, so there’s no need for you to get involved.”

“But *you’re* involved, aren’t you? We all are. We’re here, and we’re capable, so we might as well help. Besides, you know I’m not one to sit on the sidelines, Adair,” Tabitha replied. “The pack is fighting for *our* safety, too. Why shouldn’t I contribute to that?”

Dani and I exchanged a glance.

“It was just an idea we were discussing,” I said hesitantly, not sure if my getting involved would help matters. I never quite knew where I stood with Adair. For all I knew, my putting in my two cents would only intensify their budding argument.

“And it was a decent idea, at that,” Tabitha said. “We should at least *try.* It’s not like we haven’t practiced magic stuff before.”

Adair refocused on me, and I suddenly felt nervous. Adair just seemed to have that effect on people.

I decided to offer a bit more context, in the hope that it would calm whatever storm was brewing. “It’s not that I don’t have any reservations about it, given my magic abilities—”

“Exactly,” Adair interrupted. “Cali can barely summon her shield and sword at the same time, so what makes you think that amplifying her magic is a good idea?” Adair let out a dry laugh that wasn’t really a laugh. “It’s actually a really *bad* idea.”

Tabitha spoke before I could. “How can we know that if we don’t try? Greyson’s not back yet, which means we don’t know if we can let our guard down.”

“And I’m not suggesting we do,” Adair retorted. “All I’m saying is that there are better ways to do so than amplifying unreliable magic.”

“I wouldn’t call my magic unreliable,” I muttered.

Before Adair could respond to that, Tabitha jumped in again. “Just let us try it, Adair. There’s no harm in that. If we get it down to a science, it would be a massive asset for the pack, and if it doesn’t work, then no harm, no foul. Either way, we won’t know until we try. And besides, you’re not in charge of the pack—Cali is.” Tabitha turned away from Adair to face me. “So, Cali, what do you think?”

I was taken aback and feeling the pressure more than ever as Dani and Adair turned to look at me, too. Crap. I *really* hadn’t wanted to get in the middle of this fight.

I cleared my throat. “Well, um, if I’m thinking about the pack…”

I was dragging out my response, and I knew it. The others probably did, too. I needed to make a decision and stand by it. The was part of being a Luna—taking charge when necessary.

“We should try it,” I said decisively. “Like Tabitha said, there’s no harm in testing it out. If it works, then it’ll be one more tool we have to defend ourselves.”

I braced myself for Adair’s reaction, and it was deeply alarming when he didn’t respond to me at all. The Fae was as unpredictable as ever.

Instead of yelling at me, he threw a hardened look at Tabitha. “Fine. You’re clearly going to ignore what I want, so I’m done.”

Tabitha looked a little taken aback, but before she could say a word, Adair turned and left, slamming his way through the front door.

Tabitha sighed and looked at the floor for a few seconds before looking up at me and Dani. “Sorry about that.”

“No need to apologize,” I said quickly.

*Plenty of people in the pack have witnessed me and Greyson having disagreements from time to time. Same goes for me and Xavier, too. Hell, a bunch of people even saw Xavier break up with me. I’m certainly not one to judge.*

“But… Maybe we should rethink this?” I said. “Adair might have a point. What if this is us just playing with fire for no reason?”

Tabitha shook her head. “No, he just doesn’t want me getting involved in this fight, that’s all.”

“He just wants you to be safe,” Dani pointed out. “Can you blame him for that?”

Tabitha sighed. “I know that, but it’s not a good excuse. Not when I have the ability to help people I care about. You all helped me, once upon a time. It’s only right that I help you when I can. Besides, I’m a grown woman. He can’t coddle me like a defenseless child.”

“I get that,” I said. “My mates and I have had similar issues.”

I thought back to all the arguments I’d gotten into with my mates simply because they didn’t want me to get hurt—or worse. Adair was probably having a hard time adjusting to the werewolf way of life, where there always seemed to be some reason to engage in deadly battles. But… I guessed the Fae world had a war going on, too, didn’t it? And Adair was from a profile family, so maybe he knew better than me. Maybe it was only me who’d needed to get used to the high stakes of living in a werewolf pack—who’d needed to get used to the supernatural at all.

“I’ve been with the Redwoods for a while now, and I’ve seen the way everyone works together to protect each other,” Tabitha said. “I’ve made a lot of friends here, and I’m so happy about that. But that means I can’t just stand around and watch while the rest of you fight to keep everyone safe. Adair should understand that better than anyone. He’s my boyfriend. Does he even know me at all?”

I couldn’t help myself. “So you two *did* make it official?”

Tabitha blushed. “Yeah, we did.”

I thought about the way Adair had just stalked off and immediately regretted my question. “Sorry—probably not the best time to ask. I don’t mean to pry.”

“No big deal,” Tabitha said through a sigh. “It was never a secret. But I do wish he was being a little less difficult right now. It’s not making things between us any easier.”

I nodded. “You should cut him a little slack. Everyone’s feeling tense right now. And you can’t blame him for looking out for you, even if it is a little frustrating.”

“I guess you’re right,” Tabitha said.

“So… Should we give this shield thing a try?” Dani asked.

Both sisters looked at me expectantly. I thought about what Tabitha had said earlier—that I was in charge. I’d never thought I’d hear those words, but Tabitha was right. Greyson had put me in charge, and that meant that I was the one who had to decide. I had a sneaking suspicion that Greyson would’ve agreed with Adair, but Greyson wasn’t here right now. The call was mine to make.

“Let’s do it,” I finally said. “Adair might not like it, but he can’t stop us. And it’s no big deal, anyway—it’s just a practice run, and we’ll do it far from the house. No need to worry about any casualties or anything. If the idea fails, it fails.”

Artemis, who’d been outside practicing with her magic bow, came walking in to join us. “What did you guys say to Adair? He always looks kind of annoyed, but I just saw him and he looks super pissed.”

Tabitha just frowned and shook her head.

“We had a disagreement about a magic experiment,” I said. “You know Adair—he always errs on the side of caution.”

Artemis arched her eyebrows. “Now I’m intrigued. What did you have in mind? Whatever it is, I want to see it.”

I gestured to Dani and Tabitha. “Let’s head out now,” I said. I’d make sure we were as far away from the house as possible. “If something goes wrong, at least that way, nobody in the pack house will be hurt.”

As we made our way outside, I started to get a little nervous. I was in charge, and I’d agreed to this, which meant that if something *did* go wrong, I’d be the one shouldering the blame.

“Is there anything else we should do to make sure this is safe?” I asked Tabitha and Dani.

“No, I’m the failsafe,” Tabitha said. “If anything happens that looks threatening, dangerous, or out of control, I’ll shut everything down just like that.” She snapped her fingers for emphasis.

That should’ve been reassuring, but I didn’t know. What if we all got startled? It felt like a million things could go wrong. I looked around, then kept moving us farther away from the house and the driveway where all the cars were parked, just in case. I really didn’t want to have to explain why Greyson’s car had been squashed.

I brought us to a clearing that felt like a safe distance away.

“Okay, are we ready?” Dani asked, looking at me.

“Yes,” I said. “But Artemis, Tabitha—you should stand back, just in case.” I turned back to Dani. “Okay, I’m ready.”

Dani took my hand, and I immediately felt a knot in my stomach. My magic surged within me, pulsing as the power grew. I took a deep breath, tapping into all my training to keep it under control.

“Okay, here goes!” Dani said with a nod.

Concentrating, I reached down deep within myself and summoned my magic.

**Episode 4186**

**Xavier**

*I’m all for killing Honora*, Greyson replied. *Seems like the rational thing to do. She threatened Cali repeatedly—enough said. If she hadn’t escaped, one of us already would’ve killed her on the battlefield.*

I was glad that my brother wasn’t going to argue with me on this. It was yet another thing that we’d managed to agree on. Really, the only thing with the potential to cause an argument now was which one of us would do the honors. We both wanted to make Honora pay, but I was probably angrier at her than Greyson—if only because she’d put Cali in danger during a time when I hadn’t been able to watch over her.

Honora and Malakai had caused me many sleepless nights as I lay awake hoping that Greyson was keeping a proper eye on Cali.

Now that we’d scared off the Bitterfangs, all that remained was to see Honora suffer.

Greyson and I stayed close to the Bitterfang wolf as he led us into a denser part of the woods. I abruptly realized that if he was leading us into an ambush, we probably wouldn’t be able to see it coming until it was too late.

*Let’s stay sharp*, I said to Greyson. *I don’t trust this guy, even a little. He lost his Alpha because of us, and now we’re forcing him to betray his Luna. There’s no way he wouldn’t take any chance he could to set us up.*

*He could definitely be leading us into a trap*, Greyson agreed. *It’s what I’d do in his position.*

*Exactly*, I said. Then I hesitated for a moment. *Would it make sense to split up? One of us can stay with the guy, and the other can follow from a safe distance. That way we won’t both be caught off-guard if the shit hits the fan.*

*No, I think it’s better if we stick together*,Greyson said*. If it* is *a trap, at least this way we’ll have each other’s backs.*

I considered that, annoyed that he’d disagreed with me—again—but was resigned for the moment that he trusted me to have his back if it came down to it. The way I’d left the Redwood pack had certainly changed my reputation, and not for the better.

People questioned my motives now, were constantly second-guessing who I was as a person—that was all part of Adéluce’s plan. It meant more to me than it should have, to know that Greyson still trusted me to fight for him. And I knew that he would do the same for me. There were some things that not even Adéluce could destroy.

The Bitterfang wolf gestured with his head as we reached a narrow path. He shifted back to human, and Greyson and I did the same, using the higher vantage point to scan the woods. We exchanged a nod once we were certain that no one was lying in wait.

“Honora’s just up ahead,” the Bitterfang said. “Can I go now?”

I held up a finger to tell him to shut up and wait as I sniffed the air. I definitely smelled Bitterfangs—more than one—but I couldn’t be sure if Honora was among them. I had no idea what we might find at the end of that path, and I wasn’t about to stroll blindly down there. We’d come too far to mess up now.

“No, you’re not going anywhere,” I told him. “You’re going to lead us right to her.”

“No! Please. I did what you wanted—don’t make me do this!” the wolf pleaded. “This will ruin me in the eyes of my pack. Or what’s left of it, anyway.”

“And if you don’t do this, I promise you that Honora will be the least of your worries,” I said. “Don’t make me end you right now. We have their scents, so we can find them on our own, but I’d much rather have you lead the way. You should prefer that option, too, since the only reason we’re keeping you alive is because we need you.”

“*Fine*,” the wolf snarled, curling his lip in anger. He turned and started back up the path.

I stayed where I was. “Let’s shift back. We’ll move faster that way,” I said, and I shifted, hoping my brother would draw the same conclusion as me: we would need to be able to communicate privately during this undertaking, and the obvious method was mind linking.

He seemed to catch on, and he nodded and shifted, too. The Bitterfang followed suit, then continued on his way. Greyson and I hung back a little.

*There are a lot of Bitterfang scents on the breeze*,Greyson said to just me. *Which means that Honora won’t be alone. And there are only two of us.*

*So? Are you backing out?* I asked. *We’re Alphas.*

*I’m trying to be smart*, Greyson retorted. *It won’t do us any good to blunder into a situation that we can’t handle. If we get ourselves killed, then what? What will happen to our packs?*

I eyed him closely. *Is this Greyson Evers speaking? The Redwood Alpha?*

*What’s that supposed to mean?*

*It means that a few minutes ago, you were gung-ho about killing Honora.*

*And I still am!* he retorted.

*Then why are you sounding less like an Alpha, and more like Cali?*

*Are you implying that that’s a bad thing?*

I snorted. *No. Not at all. But we both know how Cali is. She’s always looking for an alternative to killing, regardless of whether it’s deserved. We’re werewolves, Greyson. We can’t indulge that kind of doubt.*

*You’re not making sense, Xavier. I didn’t say anything about not killing Honora. I said that we shouldn’t be stupid and rush into a situation that could easily spiral out of control. I have no doubts about killing Honora—what I* do *have doubts about is running blindly into a trap. That would be reckless and stupid, and I’m neither of those things.*

*I’m not worried*, I replied. *But I can see that you are. Maybe you’re getting soft. Alphas take risks.*

*And I could say the same to you*, Greyson replied.

*We can’t show mercy the way Cali would want to*, I said.

*Again, I’m not saying we should*,he said. *But don’t say that about Cali. Showing mercy is not a bad thing. Neither is logic.*

I groaned. It wasn’t that Greyson was *wrong* about the dubious wisdom of sprinting toward an unknown number of Bitterfangs, but it still irked me that he was acting all high and mighty about it. Greyson was a lot of things, but a coward had never been one of them. We were Alphas, and that meant that we sometimes ignored the odds if it was for the good of our packs, even if doing so put our own lives on the line. It was strange that Greyson seemed to have forgotten that.

*Let’s just wait until we see Honora*, I told Greyson. *Once we get eyes on her, we can decide what to do next. Can we at least agree on that?*

Greyson nodded.

The Bitterfang wolf had slowed ahead of us, and I nudged him, urging him to keep going. He gave a low whimper and kept plodding forward.

*You’d better not try anything*, I warned him. *It would be a mistake to try to warn Honora that we’re coming. If you do, I promise that you’ll be the first casualty.*

*I won’t, and you don’t need to keep threatening me*,he said bitterly. *I’ve done everything you’ve asked, haven’t I?*

He suddenly came to a halt, and I looked past him. Honora was sitting on a log in human form, some distance away, deep in conversation with one of the Bitterfangs. The smell of the pack was thick in the air, and as we’d suspected, she wasn’t alone. There were a lot of other Bitterfangs with her.

I hated to admit it, but Greyson was right. There were way too many Bitterfang wolves for the two of us to take on alone. I was about to suggest a tactical retreat so that we could come up with a plan of attack when two Bitterfangs in human form approached Honora.

“It’s time to make a decision, Honora,” one of them said. “You’ve put it off long enough. What do you want to do?”

Honora’s shoulders were shaking, and her head was buried in her hands. She was crying. “Go away,” she cried. “Do whatever you want. I don’t care.”

The two men lingered, exchanging worried glances.

“We would like nothing more than to leave you to your grief, Honora,” one man said, “but the others are waiting for your command—”

Honora shot to her feet. “My *command*? There is no more command! Malakai is *dead*! Don’t you get it? Tell everyone to go home. We’ve lost. We’re finished!”

The two werewolves skulked away, their heads hanging low. I could sense the sadness in the Bitterfang wolf at our side, too.

*What should we do?* I asked Greyson.

*You heard her—the Bitterfangs lost*,he said. *Let’s tell the alliance that the war is over.*

**Episode 4187**

I was startled by just how much magic began to flow through me as my shield took shape.

“Keep it under control, Cali. You’ve got this,” Artemis said.

My entire body began to shake as I worked to contain it, making it bend to my will. The shield was growing larger and larger, and I’d never imagined that I’d create anything as big as what I was seeing right now. It was both frightening and exhilarating.

“Yes! Cali, this is so cool!” Artemis said, clapping wildly. “Good job, Dani! Cali, try to move it around!”

I was starting to get nervous and hoping that Artemis and Tabitha were standing a safe enough distance away. Dani was right beside me, but I crossed my fingers that she’d be able to get out of the way quickly enough if things went wrong.

It wasn’t that the shield was heavy—it was made of magic and essentially weightless—but the bigger it got, the more unwieldy it became. I didn’t know how long I’d be able to manipulate it.

“This is getting harder to handle,” I told Dani through clenched teeth. I’d barely gotten the words out when the shield flickered and disappeared.

“What happened?” Artemis asked.

“It got a little scary,” I admitted.

“It doesn’t *have* to be scary, though,” Artemis said. “You just have to assert your ownership over the magic. It being big doesn’t really change anything. Small or large, it’s your magic, and you’re the one in control.”

“Well, I’m not *entirely* in control of it this time. Dani has a hand in it, too—you know, the amplification part. And I wonder if you’d be saying that if you were the one trying to control such a massive magical extension of yourself.”

Artemis shrugged. “I just think that if I were the one wielding a huge shield, I’d push myself until I couldn’t do it anymore.”

I bit back a retort and looked at Dani instead. “How are you?”

She smiled. “I’m fine. Barely broke a sweat. Ready to try again?”

I took a deep breath. “Okay, yes. Let’s do it.”

Once again, I let the magic surge inside me. I could feel the tickle of Dani’s influence, and I focused on adjusting to feeling the flow of her power alongside mine as I conjured up the shield again. This time, I felt a little more in control, and it grew larger faster than it had the first time. But before long, I released my hold on the magic and let it dissipate once again.

“Nice try,” Artemis said.

“Really good, Cali. Want to try again?” Dani said.

I was feeling a little tired, but I didn’t want to be the one to throw in the towel. At least not yet.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, and then opened them, feeling determined. “I’m ready.”

Once again, the shield grew, stretching up and out over us all as Dani’s amplification coursed through me. I was feeling way more confident this time, and I even began to compensate for the awkwardness of holding the huge, flat item upright. As it got bigger, I rested the edge against the ground as it continued to grow up and out.

“This is so epic!” Artemis said.

I let out a breath and stumbled a bit as the shield disappeared again. I gave Dani an apologetic look. “I started to feel off again.”

“No problem, let’s do it again!” Dani replied.

By the fifth try, I was panting and starting to feel exhausted. I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to do it a sixth time, but I didn’t want to admit it and let everyone down.

“We should *really* put it to the test, before you’re completely drained,” Artemis said excitedly. “Put the shield around the house!”

I hesitated. “Am I really ready for that?”

I turned to look back at the house. It suddenly seemed so big. How the hell was I going to be able to wrap a shield around it?

“Of course you can do it, Cali,” Artemis said. “You’re so badass. It should be a piece of cake.”

“Artemis is right. You almost got it big enough last time,” Tabitha said. “And you looked way more in control than you did even a few minutes ago. You can definitely do it.”

I nodded slowly, still mulling it over. I knew that being able to create a huge shield wasn’t really worth much if I couldn’t put it to use. But to put it around the house? What if something went wrong and I crushed the house to pieces with the entire pack inside? Tabitha was right—I was definitely feeling more confident—but a whole *house*?

*And it’s not even my house to ruin. It’s Xavier’s. I already destroyed one of his cars with my magic. If I do the same thing to his house, would he ever forgive me?*

I stopped myself. Right now, I wasn’t the one who needed to apologize to Xavier. He wasn’t thinking about my feelings, was he? Still, I wouldn’t want anyone to get hurt—that was the main thing.

*I have to stop considering Xavier’s feelings all the time. He left, so he has no say in anything I do anymore. He’s gone, but I’m still here, protecting the pack.*

The thought of him leaving me filled me with new strength. Once again, I summoned my magic, tapping into Dani’s amplification to make the shield grow larger than ever before. Dani had one hand on my arm and another on my back, pouring her magic into me. I could see the effort of it on her face as we both did everything we could to make this happen.

“It’s big enough now!” Artemis was shouting. “Put it over the house!”

“No, make it a little bigger first,” Tabitha said, putting a hand on Artemis’s arm to quiet her.

I was starting to struggle. The shield was bigger now than I ever could’ve imagined, and I planted my feet wide apart to keep my balance.

“It’s so huge—are you sure it’s not big enough?” I said to Tabitha without taking my eyes off the shield.

“No, at this size it’ll barely clear the roof,” Tabitha said. “Stretch it upward a little more, and then you’ll be ready.”

I was shaking with concentration as I tried to expand the shield and move it toward the house. But then I hesitated.

*Exactly how am I supposed to envelop the house with this thing? If I’m not careful, I’ll have a “Three Little Pigs” moment and knock the entire thing down. I should’ve practiced on something smaller first, like the shed.*

“Cali, what are you doing?” Greyson called from behind me.

I whipped around to face him, knocking a few branches off the trees as I swung the shield along with me. Greyson quickly hit the ground to avoid being knocked down.

*Oh my god! I almost took my mate out with this thing!*

“I’ve got this.” Tabitha flicked her wrist, and the shield disappeared.

“At least now we know that Tabitha’s negation magic works,” Artemis quipped.

Greyson slowly got to his feet, and I rushed over to him.

“Are you okay?” I asked him.

“Yes,” he said, slowly pulling me into a hug. “But what was all that about?”

“Oh, well… We were working on something that might be useful if the Bitterfangs attack again. I used Dani’s amplification magic to make my shield big enough to cover the house.”

“Oh,” Greyson said. He didn’t sound as enthused as I would’ve liked.

“I’ll have to practice a bit more before I can show you exactly how I did it,” I said. “Anyway, what happened with Xavier?”

“Hold out your hand,” Greyson said.

I wasn’t sure what he was up to, and I felt a little squeamish as I extended my hand toward him, palm up.

Greyson dropped a large stone ring into my hand. I stared down at it.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“It belonged to Malakai,” Greyson said.

“Ew,” I said, tossing it back at him like a hot potato. “How did you—”

“We caught a Bitterfang wolf near one of their abandoned camps,” Greyson said. “He’d just finished burning Malakai’s remains. Xavier and I weren’t sure that he was telling the truth, so we had him take us to Honora.”

“So she’s still alive?” I asked.

“She’s still alive—and we overheard her confirming that Malakai’s dead, and that the Bitterfangs are officially retreating,” Greyson said.

I sighed. “I’m glad you didn’t kill her. But what happens now? Where did she go?”

“She went back to her territory,” Greyson said.

I pondered that for a moment, eyeing the ring in his hand. “And the wolf who gave you the ring—what about him?”

“He didn’t exactly *give* us the ring,” Greyson said. “We took it. After he led us to Honora, we knocked him out so he couldn’t follow us back. Last loose end tied up.”

I was relieved. As much as I hated the Bitterfangs, I was glad that Greyson and Xavier hadn’t gone on a revenge-fueled killing spree.

I was hugging Greyson when the reality of what he’d just said really hit me. I pulled back and looked him in the eye. “So, the war is really over. What do we do now?”

**Episode 4188**

**Xavier**

I’d just finished filling the Samaras in on the good news, and I was feeling on top of the world. Malakai was dead, Honora was gone, and we’d all but destroyed the Bitterfang pack. We wouldn’t have to worry about them ever again.

Ava was right by my side as the Samaras cheered, and she pulled me into a kiss.

“What was that for?” I asked when we broke apart.

“I’m just proud of you,” she said.

“Thanks,” I said. “I have to admit, it’s still hard to believe that it’s all over.”

“I know. It’s definitely like something out of a dream. We cut them down so quickly. If that doesn’t prove how strong the Samaras are, I don’t know what will,” Ava said.

I nodded, my eyes catching on Knox—the only person who wasn’t celebrating.

“What’s with your cousin?” I asked Ava.

She followed my gaze and then shrugged. “Maybe he’s jealous that you were able to resolve everything. Some people like chaos, and some people definitely want to be the one getting the pat on the back when the chaos comes to an end.”

“Well, let’s go find out,” I said. “I don’t want anyone questioning this victory.”

I could tell that Knox was trying to manipulate his expression as I came toward him.

“Hey, man,” he said, trying to generate some enthusiasm. “Congratulations on the win.”

I rolled my eyes at his watered-down kudos. “What is it this time, Knox? Jealous? Angry? Or are you just being a good old-fashioned spoilsport?”

“None of the above,” he said. “I was ready to go undercover and spy on the Bitterfangs, but now…”

I clapped the shrimp hard on the back—hard enough to make him wince and jolt forward. “But now you don’t have to, because it’s all taken care of. But thanks for the offer. Now that the Bitterfangs are done for, maybe we can find a better place to focus your energy.”

I wanted to point out that, given Knox’s many shortcomings, there was no doubt in my mind that he would’ve been discovered by the Bitterfangs and killed within a day of “going undercover.”

*Maybe I should be sorry that it’s all over. If he’d actually gone on his little mission, he might’ve been dead by now, and out of my hair.*

I pictured Knox being led to the gallows. Hell, I might’ve even given old Malakai a pat on the back for taking out my garbage.

Ava gave me a weird look. “Why are you smiling like that?”

“Oh, um, just happy everything’s over,” I said. “Maybe now I can get back to doing what I’m supposed to be doing—building up the pack.”

Ava looked impressed. “I never doubted that you would succeed, but it’s crazy that you and Greyson made it through your reconnaissance mission without killing each other.”

I laughed. “That *is* impressive. Though I’d be lying if I said I didn’t feel the urge to rip his throat out a few times. But somehow, we managed to stay on the same page more often than not.”

“I’m glad to hear that. It must feel nice to be home, though,” Ava said.

“You bet it does,” I said, pulling her in close. A strange feeling sprang up inside me.

*I’m calling this house my home, but it was built with magic. It’s an illusion. And I’m here with Ava when I should be back in my real house with Cali.*

I sighed and absently kissed the top of Ava’s head. At least Ava and I could get along. I didn’t hate being with her, these days. Far from it. But nothing could compare to being with Cali. No matter what Adéluce wanted, I would never love Ava the way I loved Cali. It just wasn’t going to happen.

*No magic house, no magic spell, no new pack can change that. I want what I want, and that’s Cali. I know that I have to just accept things the way they are, but that doesn’t mean I’ll ever stop longing for what I really want. What I really need.*

“Congrats, man,” Gabe said as he and Mikah came walking up.

“I’ll admit that I’m happy this war wasn’t long and drawn out. I’m glad that the Bitterfangs are actually gone, too,” Mikah said.

Gabe shrugged at that. “I was looking forward to a little more fighting. I was just starting to get into the swing of taking out the Bitterfangs and their allies and then just like that, we had them beat. It was all kind of underwhelming, if you ask me.”

“Well, good thing no one’s asking you. You’re as bad as the shrimp over there.” I pointed at Knox, who was standing in the corner swigging a beer and looking like he was at a funeral. “A victory is a victory.”

Gabe raised his hands in surrender. “Agreed, agreed. I was just saying! Anyway, I assume that Greyson did all the heavy lifting on your trip?”

I glared at him. “If you think Greyson’s so great, you’re more than welcome to go crawling back to him at any time.”

“Ouch—don’t tempt me. Our room at the Redwood house was way better than this one.”

I stared at Gabe, not amused in the least.

*That house he’s talking about is mine. I paid for it. I own it.*

I stopped myself. There was no point in going down that road and dwelling on something I couldn’t change. At least not right now.

“So…” Gabe said slowly. “Mikah and I are thinking of heading to New Mexico.”

I was shocked. “What? But you just got here! What’s the rush?”

“No rush, exactly. Mike would just prefer to live somewhere… How do I put this? Somewhere with fewer werewolves.”

Mikah glared at Gabe. “That’s not true,” he snapped. “And don’t call me Mike.”

Gabe laughed. “Okay, fine, that’s not it, exactly. We just never planned to stick around permanently. Now that the pack war is over, there’s really no reason to stay.”

I frowned. “I want to make it clear, all jokes aside, that I didn’t invite you to join the Samara pack because of the war. I did it because we’re friends.”

Gabe bugged out his eyes and made a gagging sound.

“Come on, man,” I said. “I know it’s cheesy, but it’s true. I’d much rather have one pain-in-the-ass Gabriel than a hundred Knoxes.”

“Well, I think everyone shares that sentiment,” Gabe said. “The guy’s awful. I mean, just look at him.”

We all did, and chuckled amongst ourselves at how forlorn and pitiful he looked, standing alone and glaring at everyone.

“Anyway,” Gabe continued. “I love you too, man. I guess we can stick around until we all get sick of the sight of each other.”

“Well, I’m already sick of you,” Mikah said with an eye roll.

“The feeling’s mutual, babe,” Gabe said, slinging his arm around his mate’s neck as they ambled off.

Kira left the kitchen and headed upstairs without stopping to chat.

“Hey, how’s Kira holding up?” I asked Ava. “She move in okay?”

I still couldn’t believe that I’d actually convinced her to join the pack. Despite all the crap that Adéluce had thrown at me in her never-ending quest to set me up for failure, gaining Kira’s allegiance was a big win.

Ava shrugged. “I don’t really know. She’s been keeping to herself, mostly, which is probably for the best for now. Like I warned you, not everyone is as comfortable as you are with having a witch under the pack house roof.”

“That might be true, but we need to make her feel comfortable here,” I said. “We don’t want to lose her. We need her, and everyone needs to realize that.”

“I get it,” Ava said. “I’m not saying you’re wrong about that—I’m just saying that everyone’s a little wary of her right now, so no one’s been going above and beyond to get to know her. But I’m sure that’ll change eventually.”

“Well, I’m going to go make sure she’s settling in,” I said.

I left Ava and went upstairs, then knocked on Kira’s door and waited.

“Who is it?”

“It’s Xavier,” I said. “Just came to say hi.”

The door clicked open, and I was happy to see that she’d already settled in. She’d even hung a few pictures, which I took as a good sign.

“Come on in,” she said, stepping aside. “I’m glad you stopped by.” She closed the door behind me. “I wanted to talk to you alone.”

“Oh? What about?” I asked. “I hope the pack isn’t giving you too much trouble. I know how werewolves can be with witches—”

Kira waved me off. “No, that’s no big deal. I’m used to that. Remember, I used to live with Iñigo—no one could be worse than him and his minions.”

I nodded. “Fair enough. I just wanted to make sure you’re hanging in there. It might take a little while, but I’m sure everyone will come around in the end. Besides, they have no choice. You’re here because I want you to be. If anyone has a problem with it, they can take it up with me.”

Kira nodded, suddenly looking at me strangely.

“Um.” I arched an eyebrow. “Are you—”

Before I could finish my sentence, Kira grabbed me by the collar and pulled me into a kiss.

**Episode 4189**

**Greyson**

“I don’t want to be too optimistic, but maybe we can just do… nothing,” I said. “How does that sound, for once?”

“What do you mean, nothing?” Cali asked, clearly confused. “You saw what I was doing, right? I was *this close* to being able to shield the entire house. It would be a really good defense. Not to mention the sheer spectacle of it. If our enemies see what I’m capable of, they’ll think twice about trying to attack us, and—”

“But you don’t need to do that,” I interrupted her. “There’s no point.” I kissed her and started jogging toward the house. “I need to tell everyone else the good news!”

“Wait!” Cali called after me. “Are you seriously just going to dismiss me like that?”

I stopped. “What? How am I being dismissive?”

Cali huffed. “You literally just said that there’s no point in my trying to help defend the pack.”

I sighed. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

“But it’s what you *said*,” Cali countered, pouting. “You said there was no point in my learning how to shield the house—but I disagree.”

I walked back over to her. “I didn’t come back to argue with you. I love you; you know that. I was just being straight with you. In this moment, there’s no need for you to be able to defend the house with an amplified shield. The Bitterfangs are gone. That’s a good thing. I don’t understand why you can’t see that.”

“I know that it’s a good thing,” she said curtly. “But I also know that you hesitated before deciding to leave me in charge while you were away, and now I have a pretty good idea why. You never really *wanted* me to be in charge. You just wanted to make me feel good. It was all just a big ruse. I didn’t want to believe it, but you just proved me right.”

I was stunned. “Are you being serious right now? That wasn’t it at all! I’m responsible for this pack, and their safety is of the utmost importance. Do you really think I’d just leave you in charge to soothe your ego if I didn’t think you were ready? That I would play with the pack’s lives like that?”

“I guess not,” Cali said grudgingly.

“You ‘guess not’? You should know me better than that, Cali. I would never have put you in charge if I didn’t think you were capable. But I’m back now, and you don’t have to prove anything to me or anyone else. That’s why the shield thing is pointless.”

Cali sighed. “Okay, but I should still practice, just in case something like this comes up again. It’s bound to happen, right? Werewolves can’t seem to help themselves.”

I sighed. “I really don’t think it’s necessary, Cali.”

“But why not?”

I stifled another sigh, not wanting things to escalate. I was tired, and I just wanted to share the good news with the pack and put everyone’s minds at ease. “I just got back, Cali. Can’t we just forget this for now, take a break?”

“Sure, we can take a break,” Cali said angrily. “Starting right now!”

She stormed off toward the house.

*Wow. I definitely just made a mess of things… I should’ve been more sensitive. It’s obvious that she’s insecure about her place in the pack. Now we’re in a fight when all I wanted was to come home and celebrate our victory with her.*

I started to go after her, but then decided against it. I figured it would be better to give her a little time to cool off before I attempted to apologize. And I still needed to tell the pack the good news, and also let the other alliance Alphas know that we could all breathe a little easier. Right now, that had to take precedence.

*Lucian’s going to find some way to take credit for ending the war, I’m sure. He wouldn’t be the princeling if he didn’t.*

I went inside, instantly noticing that Cali wasn’t present as I gathered everyone in the living room to make the announcement.

“Redwoods, it’s over!” I shouted. “Malakai’s dead, the Bitterfang pack retreated, and the pack war is officially over!”

The pack erupted into cheers. People came up to shake my hand and clap me on the back, asking for details. I humored everyone as best I could, but Cali’s absence put a damper on my mood. I hated how we’d left things, and having her angry at me dulled the impact of what should’ve been an amazing moment for the pack.

*Cali should be here with me. Whether we’re announcing good news or bad news, she’s supposed to be by my side. She’s my mate. She belongs with me.*

“All right everyone, I’m going to go cook up something special to celebrate! I hope everyone’s hungry!” Torin announced, and was met with another round of cheers.

I shook a few more hands and returned a couple more high fives before heading to my office to notify the other Alphas. I called Mace first, and then left word with Aysel to tell Lucian. Finally, I called Porter and Duke. But hearing their excitement still wasn’t enough to lift my spirits. I kept all the conversations short—especially with Duke, once he invited Cali and me to visit him and his mate at their mountain retreat.

*That guy is as bad as Lucian. Of course they’re friends*,I thought, shaking my head as I slid my phone back into my pocket.

It did feel good to know that I’d been able—with Xavier’s help—to confirm our alliance’s victory against the Bitterfangs. There was nothing quite like coming out on top after a pack war, especially considering the alternative.

My good feeling was short-lived, however. I just couldn’t stop thinking about Cali. I couldn’t let things fester between us like this. I needed to go and straighten things out.

I went upstairs, pulled on some sweatpants, and then found Cali in her room, staring out the window. She didn’t even turn to look at me when I came in. I sat down beside her and took her hand. We didn’t say anything for a long time, and Cali was the first to break the silence.

“It’s the same as you refusing to make me your Luna,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“You tell me that I have what it takes. You tell me that I’ve done so much, proven myself, come so far—but when it comes down to it, it’s just empty words. There’s nothing behind them.”

I was taken aback. “How could you say that? I’ve done nothing but support you, and I’ve meant every word I’ve said about how strong and capable you are. What more do you want from me?”

Cali turned to me with fire burning in her eyes. “I want you to make me a real Luna! Why won’t you?”

I couldn’t believe she was bringing this up again. “We’ve talked about this, Cali.”

Cali pulled down her shirt to reveal her fake Luna mark on her shoulder. “But I’m already acting like your Luna, aren’t I? Everybody outside the pack thinks I’m really your Luna. But it’s meaningless. Like your words. It’s all a lie. And I don’t like living a lie.”

“But, Cali, you know why I don’t want you to be Luna. It has nothing to do with your abilities—it’s about what might happen to you if you receive the Luna mark. We’ve discussed this time and time again, so I don’t get why you’re bringing it up and changing the narrative!”

“I survived a *demon*, Greyson!” Cali shot back.

I kept my gaze on her exposed shoulder, wishing that I could just kiss her. I touched her there gently. “The idea of really making you my Luna is terrifying. It scares the shit out of me. Losing you is the only thing I’m really afraid of, Cali—don’t you get that?”

“And don’t *you* get that you’ll also lose me if you keep being so overprotective?” She turned away from me, looking out the window again. “I’m tired of this.”

She might as well have slapped me.

“I can’t lose you, Cali.” I turned her around to face me again, my voice shaking with emotion. “You don’t understand.”

“Then *make* *me* understand, Greyson,” Cali pleaded. “Explain it to me so that I finally get it.”

“If something were to happen to you, Cali… If I lost you, I would die,” I said bluntly. “I can’t live without you. You know that, don’t you? You know why I can’t risk it? Why I *won’t* risk it? Because you’re my everything, love. My *everything*.”

She had to know that, right? By now? After everything we’d been through?

There was only one person I wanted by my side.

Cali’s eyes met mine, and she started to say something, but then she changed her mind and pulled me into a kiss instead.

**Episode 4190**

I wasn’t entirely sure if my sudden desire—my sudden need—to kiss Greyson wasn’t defensive. He hadn’t said a thing that I didn’t already know. I would die if anything happened to *him*, so I knew exactly how he felt.

I didn’t know exactly what had made me so angry at him—maybe it was the remnants of my anger from when he’d asked me to choose him. It had been a slap in the face when he’d suggested that I’d stayed with him by default because Xavier had left. But he hadn’t been wrong. It’d been difficult to hear. And we’d gotten through the situation, but of course the guilt lingered. The *due destini* never let me forget what a horrible person I was.

Another piece of my anger had grown out of my need to protect him. It was so frustrating that he just wouldn’t let me do it. Throughout our entire relationship, I’d been forced to watch him leave me to go on dangerous missions, and sometimes that really got to me. When he’d brushed off the idea of me shielding the pack house, it had felt like he was shutting down my efforts to actively keep him safe. It was like he didn’t want my help, and that hurt me most of all.

When I’d seen him standing there on the lawn, I’d realized just how much I’d worried about him while he was gone. I couldn’t lose him. If I lost him, I’d die—simple as that. It hurt too much to even think about it.

We pulled out of the kiss, both of us gasping for air. Greyson immediately took my hands and held them to his mouth, kissing them. “I’m really sorry I made you feel so bad, Cali. You know how much I love you. Making you feel less than, or helpless, or like you’re not enough—that’s the last thing I would ever want to do to the woman I love more than anything else in this world.”

“I know,” I admitted.

“And you know I love the fact that everyone thinks of you as my Luna. Until we can figure out how to make that a reality, I’m happy with what we have. It’s safe. It keeps you by my side. That’s all that matters to me, and I won’t apologize for it.”

“You don’t have to,” I said quickly, caressing the side of his face. “I’m happy with what we have, too. I’ve wanted to be in this role for so long that I think I just put a lot of pressure on myself—and on you, too. I just need your support in this. I want to feel like you believe in me.”

“I’ll give you that and more,” Greyson said, his voice rough.

He lifted me onto his lap and pressed his lips against mine again. His strong hands slid down to cup my bottom and he pulled me tight against him, making sure I could feel the swell of his erection against my center.

I linked my arms around his neck and ground my hips against him, situating myself so that his cock lined up perfectly between my legs while I slid back and forth against his impressive length. Greyson reached down between us and cupped me, pressing his thumb against my clit and holding it there while I moved against his hand.

Hungry to see him naked, I quickly pushed down his sweatpants. Biting my lip, I rose up onto my knees while he lifted his hips so that I could slide his pants down to his ankles. Then I peeled off my shirt and moaned when Greyson’s lips and tongue trailed across my nipples, sending shocks of pleasure throughout my entire body.

He quickly helped me out of my panties, and then I took him in my hand and slowly lowered myself onto his shaft. Sighing with pleasure, I took him in deeper and deeper until I was sitting on his lap once again, now with him sheathed snugly inside me. He grabbed my thighs, and I moaned, reaching to pull him back to me.

His mouth met mine, hot and fast. We stayed that way, our tongues dueling and dancing, and he kept my hips locked in tight, unable to move. But I needed more. Slowly, I started undulating my hips, rocking against him.

“You feel so good,” he groaned. “So warm. So wet.”

“For you,” I said.

“That’s my girl.”

Shivers went down my spine, and, testing if he’d let me, I lifted myself up. I hovered there for a moment, teasing the both of us before I plummeted back down, taking all of him inside me once again. Immediately, I saw stars, overcome with how full he made me feel.

“Fuck,” he said. He wrapped his arms around me, his large hands grabbing my hips to help me increase our speed. My knees braced on the bed, and my arms wrapped tightly around his neck as he pumped up into me.

We were safe. *He* was safe. He’d come back to me in one piece.

The war was over, and we could finally make love without the danger of an impending attack hanging over our heads. I was his and he was mine, and while I wasn’t officially his Luna, right now, that didn’t matter. We were together.

Suddenly, Greyson rolled us over so he was on top of me. I squeezed my legs around his waist, my nails digging into his shoulders. He pushed me into the bed, driving into me with strong, hard thrusts that made my entire body shake. I closed my eyes, letting the sensation of him filling me to the brim wash over me.

He started dragging soft kisses against my lips as his hips worked against mine.

“Greyson, that feels too good,” I said.

“Yeah?” he asked.

I moaned in confirmation. Then, without warning, he slid out of me.

“No, what are you do—*ah!*” I said just as he took a sensitive nipple into his mouth. He grazed it with his teeth, rolling the other one between his fingers. He moved down my body, pushing himself between my legs.

I gasped as his tongue lapped at me, parting my slick folds. He circled my clit, pushing against it with the right amount of pressure. I was starting to fall apart, shoving my hands into his hair to have something to hold onto.

“Come for me, love.”

I ran my hands through his hair and rolled my hips against his face until pleasure struck, hot like iron. He didn’t move, not until he’d drunk every last dreg of my pleasure away. Then, he moved back up my body and slid back inside me, his weight pinning me to the bed.

My mind went wild with pure bliss as he hooked my legs over his shoulders. I arched against him, unable to stifle the scream that escaped my lips. At this angle, he plunged deeper inside me and then came undone. We strained against each other, kissing while our bodies remained locked together, siphoning the last bits of pleasure from our waning orgasms, and then, finally, we rolled away from each other, spent.

I draped a leg over his waist and smiled at him. “I’m exhausted,” I said around a yawn. Between conjuring the shield and that amazing lovemaking, I was ready to relax and cozy up with him for the rest of the night.

“Me too,” he said as I rolled into the crook of his arm and snuggled up to him. “And hey, I really am sorry about everything, love.”

“Me too,” I admitted. “I think I was just a lot more worried about you than I realized. You being gone just really made me think about how much I depend on having you right by my side, and how I’m so used to having you with me.”

“I feel the same way,” Greyson said. He went in for a kiss—just as a knock sounded on the door.

“Who is it?” I called.

“It’s Ravi.”

“Just a sec.” Greyson got up and pulled his sweatpants back on. He opened the door a crack.

“Hey, sorry for interrupting,” Ravi said. “Just wanted to bring you this—Armin brought it over.”

I saw Greyson take a huge gold envelope from Ravi’s hands. He shot me a look. “Oh god.”

I just groaned. Ornate envelopes from Lucian were never a good thing.

“Thanks, man,” Greyson said to Ravi before closing the door.

I rolled out of bed and pressed myself against Greyson’s back as we both looked down at the envelope. “What now?”

“I have no idea,” Greyson said with a sigh. “I guess there’s only one way to find out.”

He slid his finger under the flap and tore the envelope open. As usual, the paper was gaudy and embossed and no doubt ridiculously expensive.

Greyson pulled the invitation free of the envelope, and we giggled as we read it out loud in our fanciest voices.

“You are hereby invited to the Vanguard palace for a banquet to celebrate the end of the war! Don your most beautiful finery for a wonderful night of cocktails, dinner, dancing, and entertainment, taking place tomorrow evening. Be there or do be square! Fantastically yours, Prince Lucian.”

**Episode 4191**

**Greyson**

“I have to hand it to Lucian, it’s impressive how he manages to get such elaborate invitations made up so quickly,” Cali said. “Do you think the Vanguards have their own printing operation or something?”

“I wouldn’t be at all surprised,” I said dryly. “This *is* Lucian we’re talking about.”

“I assume you don’t want to go—not that I blame you. We haven’t exactly had the best experiences at Vanguard parties.” Cali got a faraway look in her eyes, as if reliving all the horrific things that had happened at Lucian’s bashes.

“That’s an understatement,” I said.

I turned the invitation over in my hands, examining the fancy touches while simultaneously considering tearing the thing to pieces. I’d had enough of Lucian’s over-the-top parties, but as I read the rest of the invitation, I realized that he’d invited the whole alliance—the Redwood, Blue Blood, Samara, Cobalt, and Aspen packs.

Cali reached for the invitation. “Want me to decline? Not like I can call him… But I’ll get the message to him somehow. Does he have an email address?”

I stopped her. “Wait. How would you feel if I accepted?”

I couldn’t believe I was even considering it, but if our allies were going to be there, it would be strange for us not to be.

Cali’s eyes went wide. “You’re joking, right?”

I grimaced. “No. Believe it or not, I’m serious. Since all the packs are invited and we just confirmed that we really defeated the Bitterfangs, it’s be weird if we didn’t go. The pack would enjoy themselves, too—and I actually think I would, too. And with all the other Alphas from the alliance there, we’d most likely be able to avoid talking to Lucian for the entire night.”

Cali gave me a questioning look. “So you actually want to go?”

I smirked. “I know it sounds crazy, but it makes a lot of sense for us if you really think about it. And this way, all we have to do is show up. No planning, no running out to get party supplies, no after-party clean up. There’s really no easier way to treat the pack to a little fun.”

Cali smiled at me. “And it’ll give you a chance to celebrate the victory you sealed for the alliance.”

She was right about that. The alliance had chosen me to lead, and I’d delivered the win against the Bitterfangs that we so desperately needed. I’d helped bring peace of mind not only to my pack, but our allies, too. I didn’t necessarily need validation or affirmation, but I did like that this would help elevate the Redwoods in the eyes of the other packs. And werewolves liked to party—especially when there was good reason to celebrate.

“The more I think about it, the better it sounds,” I said. “This could be fun.”

Cali nodded slowly. I could tell that she was warming up to the idea, too. “And this time, we won’t have to worry about Bitterfangs crashing the party,” Cali added. “Or demons, either. We can actually have fun. And I think we’ve finally set our boundaries well enough that we don’t have to worry about Lucian trying to drag us into any of his… *unusual* party activities.”

“Exactly,” I said. “And now that he has Elle, maybe he’s even put that part of his life behind him.”

“Hopefully,” Cali said skeptically. “And it’ll be nice to see how Elle is doing. A party is the perfect place to have a casual, low-stress conversation with her about how everything’s going now that she’s living at the palace.”

“Great, so it’s decided. I should let the pack know and give them time to get ready,” I said.

I expected some mixed feelings about the party, but assumed most of the pack would be positive about it. We all needed to let off a little steam, and despite the reservations I had about partying with Lucian, a Vanguard party was the perfect way to get our minds off how stressful the last few days had been.

Cali nodded. “Good idea. I think it’ll be welcome news. Lucian’s parties are always…”

“Interesting?” I finished.

Cali laughed. “That’s one way of putting it.”

Grinning, I moved to get dressed, but Cali stopped me with a hand on my shoulder.

“There’s someone you should talk to first,” she said, sobering.

“Oh? Who?”

“Lilac. He’s planning to leave the pack to join the Samaras.” The words tumbled out of Cali’s mouth quickly, almost like she was nervous to tell me.

“Really?” I said. “First Gabriel and Mikah, then Kira, and now Lilac?” I plopped back down onto the bed. “Did I do something wrong? Why is everyone jumping ship all of a sudden?”

Cali sat down beside me and placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. “No, at least with Lilac, I think it has less to do with the pack and more to do with Perrie being a Samara. Lilac wants to be with her.” Cali hesitated. “And… It has a lot to do with Xavier.”

I sighed. “Xavier does have a closer relationship with Lilac than I do. Violet as well. Maybe the only one he doesn’t is Charlie, since he’s pledged to me,” I said. “But I suppose I shouldn’t be too surprised that Lilac wants to join up with him. But you said he’s still here? Why hasn’t he left yet?”

“He nearly did,” Cali said. “He’d packed his bags and was on his way out the door, but I convinced him to wait until you got back so that he could tell you his decision face-to-face. It didn’t seem right, him leaving while you were away. Plus, he also has some concerns about leaving Violet.”

I squeezed Cali’s hand. “Thanks for intervening.” I stood up and finished getting dressed. “I guess I should take advantage of Lilac’s hesitation and go talk to him. Maybe I can convince him to stay.”

“It’s possible,” Cali said. “After all, it doesn’t hurt that we all just came off such a great victory—engineered by you. And now that we know the Bitterfangs are really, truly gone, maybe it’ll reinforce that you’re an Alpha worth standing by.”

“I hope you’re right,” I said.

I gave Cali a peck on the cheek before leaving her room and heading downstairs. I looked for Lilac everywhere before I finally found him in the basement, playing ping pong with Sage and Charlie. I stood and watched them from the doorway.

*It’s nice to see them having fun after so much drama. Maybe I can use that to help sway Lilac. He might have a closer relationship with Xavier, but this is his home, and these are his friends. That has to count for something.*

“Hey,” I said, keeping my tone light as I advanced into the room. “Can I talk to you for a sec, Lilac?”

Lilac put his paddle down and exchanged a quick look with Charlie before coming over to me.

“Sure,” he said.

He seemed uneasy as we headed outside to the porch.

“So, I guess Cali told you?” Lilac said. “About me leaving?”

I could tell that he was already prepared to make his case.

“Relax,” I said. “Cali explained what happened, which is exactly what she should’ve done, since she was in charge and you leaving will affect the entire pack. But now that I’m back, it’s my responsibility to talk to you. And I didn’t bring you here to lecture you.”

“That’s good to hear,” Lilac said.

“I’m not even going to try to stop you from going—not as long as you take some time to think it over, first,” I said. “This isn’t a decision you should make lightly. That said, while it’s unusual for werewolves to switch packs, it does happen. I just want to make sure that if you go ahead and do it, it’ll be for the right reasons.”

Lilac nodded. “I get it.”

I put a hand on his shoulder. “I understand what it’s like to be apart from your mate.”

“Yes,” he said, “and Perrie and I are still exploring what it all means. And I do hate the thought of being away from Violet. But Xavier really wants me to join,” Lilac looked alarmed as soon as the words escaped. “You’re not going to get mad at Xavier about this, are you?”

I shook my head, though I wasn’t thrilled to hear the proof that Xavier was trying to poach him. Again, I reminded myself that I might’ve done the same thing if I’d gone off to lead another pack—but that didn’t make me feel any better about it.

“I have only one favor to ask,” I said. “I want you to think it over. Take your time and really consider what leaving will mean. Once you’ve made up your mind, let me know. I’d like to keep you here, of course, but only if you really want to be here.”

Lilac nodded and went back inside. I watched him go and then lingered on the porch, lazily scanning the darkness of the woods.

*Even though the war’s over, things will never be like they were before. Xavier’s off with the Samaras now and already causing problems.*

I jammed my hands into my pockets as I thought about Xavier’s strange behavior while we were out tracking the Bitterfangs. My brother had never been particularly easy to read, but I used to have a general idea of what he was up to. Not anymore. I didn’t have the faintest idea of what he was thinking these days, and I couldn’t help but wonder who or what else my brother was going to try to steal.

**Episode 4192**

**Xavier**

Kira’s kiss stunned me into inaction while my brain struggled to process what the hell was happening. She was kissing me—and it wasn’t just a peck on the lips, either. Kira was actively urging me into a deeper kiss, and it had already gone on for way longer than it should have.

I finally came to my senses and pushed her away.

“Kira! *What the fuck?*” I gasped out.

I looked at her, fighting to wrap my head around what had driven her to cross the line so completely. We’d been there and done that, and I’d made it clear then that I wasn’t interested, and she’d seemed to understand—so what the hell had gotten into her?

*Clearly Ava was onto something when she said that Kira still has a crush on me. How else can I explain her kissing me?*

Kira’s cheeks flushed bright red. “Um… I was just checking something.”

“With your *tongue*?” I replied. “Were you checking to see if I’d kiss you back, or…?”

Kira hugged herself. “Yeah. Just checking,” she repeated lamely.

“Kira, I’m… so confused.”

I thought back to when Marissa had tried to seduce me. She’d claimed it was a test of some kind, too. Was Kira’s kiss the same thing? Or had she somehow misconstrued the reason I’d asked her to join the pack? Did she think I’d asked her to join because I was into her? Had I given her some kind of signal without realizing it?

“Kira… You can’t be doing that. We’re friends. Friends don’t kiss—especially like that.”

Kira looked painfully uncomfortable. “Sorry. I don’t know what came over me. I think I got some mixed signals from you, and I just wanted to see if I was imagining things.”

I was baffled. So she really *had* gotten a signal from me? But when? “A signal? What kind of signal? And when did I *send* it?”

Kira shook her head. “I don’t know. I’m sorry. It was a mistake. It won’t happen again, I promise.”

“It *can’t*, Kira. You understand that, right? I’m with Cali, remember?” I froze. *Shit*. “I mean….” I trailed off as my entire body flushed with nervous heat.

Kira was staring at me with a bewildered look on her face. “Did you just say…”

*Fuck fuck fuck! I really* did *just say that out loud! Shit!*

“I’m with Ava,” I corrected breezily, cutting her off before she could finish that sentence. “And if she ever finds out what you just did, she won’t be kind. You know Ava—and how she is when it comes to me.”

Kira was silent for a moment, and then finally nodded. “I know. She won’t find out. I’m sorry.”

“Great,” I said. “That’s… great.”

Without another word, I left and made a beeline for Ava’s and my room. I slammed the door behind me and leaned against it as I tried to make sense of what had just happened.

*Thank god Ava isn’t in here right now. She’d smell Kira all over me and would know from the look on my face that something’s wrong.*

I stripped off my clothes and went straight for the shower. I needed to wash Kira’s scent off me as soon as possible. Ava was a lot of things, and territorial was certainly one of them. Plus, she’d had her share of reservations about Kira joining the pack, even though she’d agreed that we needed a witch. If Ava found out that Kira had kissed me, she wouldn’t hesitate to draw blood. I had no interest in seeing the two of them in a feud, especially when I’d only just managed to convince Kira to join us.

I thrust my face under the hot water and scrubbed at my mouth. The water was getting hotter by the second, and I reached down to turn the temperature up just a bit more.

*I can’t believe I made an awkward moment even more awkward by slipping up and saying I was with Cali. What the hell was I thinking? I can’t believe that even came out of my mouth. So fucking* stupid!

Inevitably, I thought back to seeing Cali earlier. I’d been reckless, letting my feet take me wherever they wanted to go—which was right back to Cali. I loved her, and it was only getting harder to suppress that love. It didn’t help that I couldn’t get the way she’d looked at me out of my head. There’d been a spark between us, and I knew she’d felt it, too. For a split second, it had been just like old times—those charged moments we used to share before making love. The thought of never being able to make love to her again caused a pang in my chest.

As the heat of the shower intensified, so did my thoughts. Until now, I hadn’t actually allowed myself to really acknowledge how being without Cali truly made me feel. I felt hollow. A huge chunk of me was missing, and no part of my relationship with Ava would ever be able to fill that void. Cali was what I wanted, always and forever. I wanted her back so badly—in my life, my bed, and my heart.

*I can’t stand this! How am I supposed to live without her? I’ve tried everything to get over her. I’ve done everything I can think of to dull the pain of being without her, but it’s too hard. How long am I supposed to keep this up? How long can I pretend that I don’t want her every minute of every day?*

I pictured Cali again, and her image came through so clearly that it almost felt like she was standing right in front of me. I imagined the curves of her breasts, her beautiful lips, the softness of her skin against mine. I had a flash of a memory: Cali completely naked and watching me while she gathered her thick hair into a bun at the crown of her head. Heat pooled in the pit of my stomach.

I slowly trailed a hand down my body and took my hard shaft in my hand. I captured my bottom lip between my teeth as I stroked it slowly. Shocks of pleasure surged through me, weakening my knees as I visualized Cali’s hands trailing all over my body and dancing across my chest as she pressed her lips to mine. I braced my free hand on the wall and increased my pace, circling my fingers around the water-slicked head while picturing Cali’s tongue there instead. I gritted my teeth as I came, a rough groan escaping my lips.

I braced myself against the wall as the last jolts of my climax ebbed away. The water felt too hot all of a sudden, but I didn’t bother changing the temperature as I took one final rinse under the water.

The empty feeling was still there. It actually felt worse than before.

*I’m sure Adéluce is tickled pink that I feel this way. Nothing satisfies me anymore—just like she wanted.*

I peeked out of the shower to look for a towel, only to realize that there weren’t any.

*Great. I guess today’s just shaping up to be one of those days where nothing goes right.*

I stepped out of the shower soaking wet and dripped my way back into the bedroom, leaving puddles on the floor.

Ava turned around as I walked in and arched her eyebrows. “Well then.”

“No towels,” I grunted.

“I’m not complaining.”

“What are you doing up here?” I asked, even though that was kind of a stupid question, seeing as this was her room, too. But it was the only way I could express how little I wanted to see her right now.

“We got this,” she said, holding up a giant, sparkly gold envelope. “It’s from Lucian.”

“Great, another fucking invitation to one of his crazy parties,” I said. “What fun.”

“Yup.” Ava lay back on the bed and watched me. “The princeling just can’t help himself. If Lucian’s not luring people to his place for a party, he’s just not happy.”

I eyed the handful of clothes in my closet, realizing that could stand to beef up my wardrobe just a little. I plucked a random shirt from its hanger and began to dry off with it. “And? This isn’t a free show.”

Ava’s lips curved up into a smile. “Isn’t it?” She sat up and tore open the envelope. “He’s holding a banquet,” she said, reading the gaudy invitation. “Tomorrow night.”

I mulled it over, thinking back on all the awful experiences that I’d had at Lucian’s parties. Still, it would be good for the pack to celebrate.

“We’re going,” I said decisively. It wasn’t like *we* could host any kind of celebration, since the pack house was still missing some things… Like towels.

Ava nodded and stood. “Good. I think we should.” She looked down at my clothes, strewn across the floor from when I’d undressed in a hurry to shower. Ava frowned and moved toward them. “X, I love you, but we can’t live like this.”

Panic sliced through my body.

*Shit, Ava can’t go near those clothes—she’ll smell Kira all over them!*

“Stop!” I yelled, rushing toward her.

**Episode 4193**

I was glad that Greyson and I had talked things through and that we weren’t still fighting about my becoming his Luna, though I had a feeling that there was more to come on that front. The Luna problem seemed to be haunting us and there was no easy way to solve it, which was why it was such a pervasive sore spot for us. For now, I was happy to let it rest. And the makeup sex had been… well… perfect. I was blushing just thinking about it.

I noticed a light on in Lola’s room, and I popped my head through the door. Lola looked up from her laptop and smiled, beckoning me inside.

“Cali! Just the person I wanted to see. Cybersecurity or Ethical Hacking?” Lola asked, arching an eyebrow as she waited for my answer.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Is this some kind of test?” I asked, crossing my arms and leaning against the doorjamb.

“No, I’m going through the college class catalogue and trying to figure out my schedule.” She patted the chair beside her. “Come sit! You should familiarize yourself with what they’re offering this semester.” Lola gasped. “Ooh! Want to take a class together? How about Advanced Python Coding?”

I flashed Lola an exasperated look. “What makes you think I’m ready to take an advanced course for something I know nothing about? Python? What do snakes have to do with computers?”

Lola’s face fell. “You have to be kidding, Cali. Everyone knows that Python is a coding language.”

I sucked my teeth. “Never heard of it.”

“Okay, then.” Lola shifted her laptop toward me. “You pick something. There are hundreds of things to choose from. Coding might not be your thing, but there are plenty of classes that can help prepare you for whatever you want to do when you grow up.”

I chuckled. “When I grow up, huh?”

Deciding to humor her, I scrolled through the list on her screen. There were so many options, my head started to hurt as I read through them.

“Hold on, Lola,” I said. “This is all a bit much. Especially when I haven’t even made up my mind about this whole school thing yet. Didn’t you say that I have a few weeks to decide?”

There’d been so much going on that I hadn’t even had a chance to really sit down and weigh the pros and cons of going back to school. My parents would probably be over the moon if I did, but was that really what I wanted? Did I have time to take on a full course load at this point in my life?

“Yes, but the best courses fill up quickly,” Lola said. “You might have two weeks before you have to tell the school, but if you wait that long, the only class you’ll be able to get into will be, like, Poetry in the Middle Ages or something.”

I shrugged. “Actually, that sounds pretty cool.”

Lola slapped me.

“*Hey!* What was that for?”

“Are you out of your mind? No one actually reads that stuff! It would be a complete waste of time,” Lola snapped. She snatched the laptop away from me. “You’re not being serious about this at all.” She held up a handwritten list that was almost as long as the one on the screen. “I’m narrowing down my favorites. I’m hoping to have this list of fifty down to twenty finalists by the end of the day.”

I winced. “Then you’ve got a long night ahead of you,” I said, already backing toward the door. “I guess I’ll leave you to it.”

There was no way I could even begin to think about picking classes when I hadn’t even made up my mind about whether or not I wanted to go back to college. Not to mention that I hadn’t even discussed it with Greyson, yet. Lola had a point, though. If I waited until the last possible minute to confirm my enrollment, I’d miss out on all the classes that would make going back worthwhile.

Violet accosted me as soon as I left Lola’s room. “Hey, Cali! Glad I ran into you.”

“Hey, Violet.” I decided not to mention that she’d obviously been lying in wait for me. I didn’t actually mind—helping her through her Lilac predicament was a worthy distraction from everything else that was going on. “What’s going on? Did you figure out what to do about Lilac?”

“Glad you asked. I have a plan to make him want to stay here, and I need your help,” Violet said.

She took my hand and tried to drag me toward her bedroom, but I stayed put.

“Violet, I can’t commit to anything until I hear the details of this plan of yours,” I said.

“Okay, fair enough,” she said. “So there are two things pulling Lilac toward the Samara pack, right? Xavier and Perrie. I don’t think there’s much we can do about Xavier—he’s always been like a big brother to both of us, and Lilac really looks up to him.”

“Go on,” I said.

“But we *can* do something about Perrie,” Violet said.

“Okay, I’m intrigued,” I said slowly. “What are you thinking?”

“I’ve already done it!” Violet said excitedly. “I invited Perrie over, and I’m planning to surprise Lilac with a super romantic evening for two.”

I raised an eyebrow. “And how is that supposed to change Lilac’s mind?”

“Because Perrie’s parents aren’t in the Redwood pack. The most romantic thing that Lilac can do under the Samara pack house roof is hold Perrie’s hand. Boring, right? He’s probably itching for some quality alone time with her.” Violet waggled her eyebrows.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’ve always thought that holding hands is one of the most intimate—”

“Cali, please,” Violet said, clearly exasperated. “I can’t believe you’re trying to convince me that holding hands will be enough for them—especially in the long term.”

I relented. “Okay, okay, I see what you’re getting at.” I definitely remembered how awkward things had been with Greyson and Xavier when my parents had first arrived at the pack house. “But I’m confused, what part am I supposed to play in all this?”

“Since it’s supposed to be a surprise, I need you to lure Lilac to the dinner with Perrie,” Violet said.

“But why can’t *you* just do that?” I said.

“Because Lilac’s already suspicious of me as it is, and he might not come if I ask him.”

I shook my head, suddenly wishing that I hadn’t gotten myself involved in this. Violet’s plan was way more convoluted than I’d expected it to be. But she was so worried about keeping Lilac in the pack that I didn’t have the heart to bail on her, even though that was exactly what I wanted to do.

“Okay,” I finally said, sighing internally. “I’ll do it.”

Violet pumped a fist in the air. “Great! I knew you’d come around.” She checked her phone. “Okay, so Perrie should be here any minute.”

“Wait, this whole plan of yours is going down *right now*?”

“Don’t you see? It *has* to be tonight. I can’t take the chance that Lilac might make up his mind and leave before I get the chance to throw a monkey wrench into his plans,” Violet said. “So, are you really down to help?”

I nodded reluctantly. “So down,” I said dryly.

“Great. Bring Lilac to the smaller study in five minutes, okay?”

“And then what?” I pressed.

I didn’t have the best feeling about this, but I was really trying to see Violet’s vision—which was hard, since she wasn’t being all that forthcoming about the details of her plan.

“Just get him there, and I’ll do the rest,” Violet said ominously.

I left her and went to find Lilac, wondering what excuse I could use to get him to the study. I hated lying, but maybe a lie would work best in this case, especially since it was for a good cause.

I found Lilac in the basement, engaged in a pretty heated game of ping pong. I lingered in the doorway for a few seconds before I got up the nerve to interrupt the game.

“Can I borrow you for a second?” I asked Lilac, throwing Charlie and Sage apologetic glances.

“Seems like you’re the man of the hour tonight,” Charlie said, moving around to the other side of the table to take Lilac’s spot.

“Guess so,” Lilac said. He eyed me coolly, and I wondered if he could sense that I was up to something. With werewolves, you could never be too sure, since they had a pretty good sixth sense. “What can I do for you, Cali?”

*What’s a good excuse? I could tell him that Torin needs him to be sous chef… But that wouldn’t work, because Torin’s already finished cooking. What else? Oh! I’ve got it!*

“Could you help me with something?” I asked, already walking away. To my relief, Lilac followed. “There’s a book in the study that I want to read, but I’m not tall enough to reach it.”

Lilac looked confused. “I’m not the tallest guy here. Hell, you and I almost see eye to eye, so if you can’t—”

I grabbed Lilac’s shoulder, interrupting him. “You’re tall enough!”

I whisked him upstairs and down the hall to the study, then stopped in front of the door.

Lilac reached to open it. “Which book do you want?”

“Promise you won’t be mad at me,” I said.

“Huh?” Lilac turned to look at me, but it was too late.

“Have a good night!” I said, then I shoved him into the study.

**Episode 4194**

**Xavier**

I darted in front of Ava and snatched my clothes up from the floor before she could get to them. I nearly careened into the wall in the process, but that would’ve been a small price to pay to keep things civil between Kira and Ava. Everything was finally starting to come together for the Samara pack, and I didn’t want there to be a rift between our Luna and our witch, of all people.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Ava asked. “You nearly ran me over to get to those clothes!”

Thinking fast, I said, “You’re my Luna, not a maid. I don’t expect you to pick up after me. I’m a big boy—I can clean up after myself.”

“Oh… So does that mean your clothes are going to start picking themselves up?” Ava replied with a skeptical smirk.

“No, I’ll do it. I was just exhausted after I got back. That’s all. Though it would help if we invested in some hampers, among other things,” I said. I was still damp from my shower, and drying off with a T-shirt just didn’t cut it. I still couldn’t believe that we’d somehow neglected to stock up on towels.

“Hampers are on backorder,” Ava said. “In the meantime, just toss your dirty clothes in the closet. Anywhere but on the floor, okay? We should at least try to keep our room halfway presentable.”

“Agreed,” I said. “Actually, I’ll do you one better and throw these right in the wash.”

I started toward the door, hoping to get the clothes as far away from Ava as possible. With almost as much speed and effort as I’d employed to keep her from picking up the clothes, Ava hurried to block my way.

“Somehow, I find this whole ‘taking on a domestic role’ thing you’ve got going on right now pretty sexy,” she said. “It’s so… *different*. I’ve never even heard you suggest washing your own clothes. It’s extremely hot.”

“Hot? You’ve got to be joking,” I said, holding the clothes as far away from her as I could without looking obvious.

She shook her head. “I’m not joking. But to be fair, there isn’t much you do that I don’t find hot.”

“Well, don’t get used to this,” I said.

Ava threw her arms around my neck. “What other chores can I get my naked Alpha to do?” Her hands glided down my back, and my wolf began to stir. “I’m sure I can think of a few things around the house that need doing. Or at least one thing.”

Ava arched against me, her eyes on mine.

*This really isn’t a good time. What if she catches Kira’s scent on my clothes? Or what if she’s just able to sense what happened? She’ll either kill me, kill Kira, or kill us both. I didn’t do all of this just to end up a victim of Ava’s jealous rage. Adéluce would probably love it… Or not, since she’d lose her main source of entertainment.*

Ava stopped abruptly and pulled back. “Is something wrong? You seem distracted.”

“Just thinking about the Vanguard banquet,” I lied. “I should really go and tell the pack about it.”

“Right now?”

I nodded. “Yes, right now is perfect.”

I tucked the clothes under my arm and started for the door again.

“Wait.”

I froze.

*Shit. She knows. Somehow, she knows! What am I going to do? Should I make a break for it and go warn Kira? Then maybe she can blip away before Ava rips into her—literally.*

But when I turned around, Ava was holding out dry, clean clothes. “You might want to put on some clothes first. I know we’re werewolves and all, but we do tend to cover ourselves when it’s practical.”

I grabbed them. “Good catch.”

I quickly maneuvered into the new clothes while trying to maintain my hold on the dirty ones. There was no way I was going to let Ava get her hands on them.

“Thanks again,” I said, before stumbling out of the room and letting out a breath of relief.

*Maybe I should just burn the clothes. Might be safer. And what if—*

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” Ava called.

I slowly turned around and saw her holding out the invitation.

“Thanks.” I managed a weak smile as I took it from her, realizing I was being paranoid. It wasn’t like Ava catching Kira’s scent on my clothes would be all that weird, since Ava knew I’d just gone to check on her. Still, I didn’t want to give Ava any reason to suspect me. I needed to keep things good between us to keep Adéluce off my back, since she was now weirdly invested in Ava and me being together and getting along.

Downstairs, some of the pack members were still celebrating our official victory against the Bitterfangs. Kira was deep in conversation with Marissa. She glanced at me when I entered the room, but she quickly looked away.

Ava came up behind me. “Your Luna should be included in this little announcement,” she said. “They need to see me by your side, whether you’re delivering good news or bad news.”

“Can’t argue with that,” I said.

My paranoia flared again as I switched to worrying about what Ava would do if she caught *my* scent on *Kira*.

*Fuck! I just have to hope that Kira knows to be careful. She’s been around werewolves long enough to realize that our sense of smell is second to none—which means she needs to give Ava a wide berth for now.*

I pushed all that to the back of my mind as I prepared to address the pack.

“Can I have everyone’s attention, please?” I held up the invitation. “We’ve been invited to the Vanguard palace to celebrate our victory over the Bitterfangs.”

I paused at the mixed reactions that whipped through the pack, including some derisive remarks about Lucian. I let the clamor die down before I continued.

“I get it. Lucian’s a… polarizing figure, so I guess he doesn’t have many fans among our ranks, but still, I think it’ll be good for us to celebrate. Our allies will be in attendance, and it’ll give us a chance to get to know them better and keep showing everyone that the Samaras are back and stronger than ever.”

There was a smattering of cheers and claps.

“Thanks to our Alpha!” Marissa added, prompting a few more claps, whistles, and cheers.

Ava reached out via mind link. *You’ve won their trust. That’s a good thing. They’ll all listen to you, now.*

*Nice of you to say, but I’m not convinced that Blaine will* ever *listen to me. Surprisingly enough, though, Knox and Zipper do seem to be on board*,I replied.

Kira had moved to the back of the group, putting as much distance between us as she could. That was for the best. Not only were our scents all over each other, but the awkwardness of what had happened was still very much alive—at least on my end—and I didn’t even know what I’d say to her if she did approach.

Josephine and Fausto came walking up.

“Hey, can we have a word with you two?” Fausto asked.

“Sure,” I said, glancing questioningly at Ava, who shrugged minutely.

I led them to the den, which was still pretty much empty except for a card table and a random love seat that had been delivered ahead of the rest of the furniture set.

“We’re worried about Perrie,” Josephine said. “Did you notice that she wasn’t here for your announcement?”

I hadn’t noticed, actually—I’d been too busy worrying about Ava finding out what had happened with Kira.

“Could she be in her room?” I asked.

Fausto and Josephine exchanged a look.

“No, Marissa told us that she went to the Redwood pack house to see Lilac,” Josephine said.

I sighed, thinking of how I’d caught Lilac escaping from Perrie’s window the other night. Things were heating up between the two young wolves, and Perrie’s parents clearly weren’t happy about it.

“But Lilac is Perrie’s mate,” Ava pointed out. “Isn’t it normal that they’d want to spend time together?”

“Yes…” Josephine said hesitantly. “But we’re concerned that they may be rushing things just a bit.”

“And she broke her curfew,” Fausto added.

“Yes,” I said, “but she did tell Marissa she was leaving, so it’s not like she’s sneaking around. Maybe you should cut her a little slack.”

Would this tension get worse if Lilac agreed to join the pack? What if Fausto and Josephine made Lilac’s life a living hell just for wanting to spend time with his mate? I’d hate for Lilac to change packs, only to run into a bunch of drama.

There was a sudden loud knock on the front door, and I was grateful for the interruption.

“Sorry, excuse me,” I said, rushing over to answer the door.

I was surprised to find a few council members standing on the other side, but I tried not to show it. I didn’t know why they’d come, but somehow I doubted they were here to celebrate our victory over Malakai and company.

I didn’t know these particular council members very well, but I did recognize one of them as one of Cesaries’s shadows.

The man pinned me to the spot with an appraising glare before he finally spoke. “We have some questions about your brother, Greyson Evers.”

**Episode 4195**

**Lilac**

Confused and a little annoyed, I turned back to question Cali, but before I could get a word out, she slammed the door in my face.

*Rude. What’s going on here? Why’s Cali being so strange? She’s too nice to slam a door in my face under normal circumstances—not to mention her little white lie about needing help reaching a book. Did someone put her up to this?*

I turned away from the door, and was surprised to see Perrie standing beside Violet. So someone had definitely put Cali up to this, but it was a *pleasant* surprise, at least.

I smiled at Perrie and then turned my attention to my sister. “What the hell’s going on here? Why is Cali acting so weird?”

I took in the rest of the room. Someone had prepared a charcuterie spread on the coffee table, and there were so many candles clustered around the room that I worried we were standing in the middle of a fire hazard.

I looked back up at my sister. “Violet?”

“Isn’t it so nice that you can be alone with your mate here at the Redwood pack house instead of over at the Samara house?” Violet said. “Endless privacy, endless cheese, meats and fruits, all the quality time you can stand… Amazing, right?”

I looked at Perrie, just as her mind link came through. *What is she talking about? Did you tell her what happened with my parents last night?*

I winced. *I might’ve mentioned it.*

Perrie gave me a look. *Did you tell her what happened?*

*No! Well, not in detail.*

Perrie crossed her arms and shook her head slowly, looking slightly amused and still a bit confused.

“Whatever you’re doing, you don’t have to do it,” I said to Violet.

“Oh, but I do,” Violet said. “If you’re so keen on joining the Samara pack—no offense to Perrie—”

“None taken,” Perrie said dryly.

“—then you have to realistically consider the pros and cons. Here, you can be alone with each other without worrying about parents getting on your case. You can hang out with me or Charlie or any of the others—all your friends, who you’ve grown so close to. You’d be able to explore your mate bond together, without any naysayers cramping your style,” Violet said. “The Redwood pack house is certainly looking like the place to be.” She nudged Perrie. “Am I right?”

I grimaced in embarrassment. I couldn’t believe she was doing this. Perrie and I were still new, and I wasn’t psyched that my sister was inserting herself into our relationship before Perrie and I had even totally figured things out.

“I know I’m overstepping!” Violet said quickly, probably in response to my horrified expression. “But at least consider how good you have it here, okay? I asked Torin to put all this together. Just enjoy the food and the privacy, and really truly think about what you want.”

With that, Violet made her way to the door. But before she left, she spun back around to face us.

“And don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!” She turned off the light and walked out, leaving the room bathed in flickering candlelight.

“I’m so embarrassed!” I groaned. “Please forgive me for… whatever that was. I’m so sorry. I had no idea that Violet was going to do any of this.”

We collapsed onto the couch together, and Perrie laughed.

“It’s fine,” she said. “I don’t mind having a bunch of snacks made for us without even having to ask for them.”

She plucked one of the grapes from the fancy dish Torin had undoubtedly hand-picked and fed it to me. I couldn’t stop myself from flushing. Violet had butted in where she didn’t belong, but I wasn’t mad at how things had turned out.

“And…” Perrie hesitated for a moment. “I have to admit that your sister has a point. There seems to be a lot more freedom here. We’d have plenty of opportunities to be alone without worrying about my parents coming in and you having to jump out the window.” Perrie tilted her head. “You’re okay after that, aren’t you? You didn’t get too banged up?”

I swallowed audibly and shook my head as she fed me another grape. She was just so pretty that it overwhelmed me, sometimes.

“You have a point,” I acknowledged. “But is that what you want? To keep going back and forth between pack houses?”

Perrie shrugged, popping a grape into her own mouth and chewing it thoughtfully. “With the war over, I guess I don’t really mind all that much. And let’s be honest—most new couples don’t move in together right away.”

“That’s true,” I said. “I was seriously considering joining your pack, though. Xavier asked me to.”

Perrie looked surprised. “Really?”

I nodded. “Yes, and I was pretty tempted by the offer. I mean, Xavier’s like an older brother to me—and then there’s you, of course.”

Perrie smiled and looked away. I could tell that she was flustered now, too.

“Right now, though, there’s nothing stopping us from staying with our respective packs,” she said. “We’re still exploring. And if I’m being honest, I like having you as an escape from the Samara house. It’s not that things are *bad* there, I guess. There have just been a lot of changes lately.”

“I bet.” I reached up and smoothed a lock of her hair behind her ear. “I feel that way about you, too. You’re my favorite escape. I like whatever this is between us… What it’s becoming.”

I leaned in and kissed her softly, inhaling her scent.

“I like it, too,” she said, between kisses.

She gently slid her tongue into my mouth, and I leaned back on the couch as she straddled me. She was so warm, and she smelled so good, and I loved the way she moaned against my lips whenever our kisses got really deep—which was pretty much all the time. We hadn’t taken things much further than kissing yet, but I was happy right where we were.

Tentatively, I slid a hand under her shirt, and Perrie leaned into my touch. The kiss deepened, and before long we were lying entwined on the couch, our tongues slowly sliding against each other, as if we were taking our time to learn what each other liked.

Perrie’s phone vibrated in her pocket, and we broke apart, the moment over.

She pulled away and sat up. “Crap. It’s late. I have to go. It’s already past my curfew, and my parents are going to be pissed. They’ll be sending out a search party soon, if they haven’t already.”

“But what about the charcuterie board?” I asked. “It would be a shame to let it go to waste… Or for me to eat the entire thing all by myself,” I added, not actually hating that idea too much.

Perrie laughed. “I’m sure it’ll just be torture, having all this delicious cheese and fruit all to yourself.” She leaned in and kissed me again. “Next time?”

I nodded. “Next time.”

The kiss quickly heated up again, and Perrie pulled back.

“Nope, really gotta go,” she said as she stood up and started gathering her things.

“I’m walking you home,” I said.

“Lilac, that’s sweet, but you don’t have to.”

“Of course I have to,” I said. “I’m not about to let you walk home all by yourself. And… Well, it’s not a completely selfless act—I wouldn’t mind another kiss or two.”

Perrie smiled. “That can be arranged.”

As we left the pack house, I slipped my arm around her waist and pulled her close. I liked the way she felt against me. It was like she was meant to be there, right by my side. We were even walking in step as we made our way to the edge of the yard.

We stopped just shy of the woods and peeled off our clothes. I couldn’t help but steal a few glances at her. She looked so sexy and beautiful in the moonlight, and I was instantly transported back to our session on the couch, and how soft and sweet her lips had felt against mine. I wanted more. A lot more.

Our eyes met, and we both giggled.

“I’m glad you’re escorting me,” Perrie said.

“Not as glad as I am.”

Nudity was nothing to werewolves, but there was just something different about standing naked in the moonlight with your mate. I couldn’t help but think about us being naked in a different context, and that made me giddy.

I stored my clothes with Perrie’s in her duffel bag, then we shifted and took off into the woods. We ran shoulder to shoulder, and I thought about how this was something I never would’ve been able to do with Marta. I hadn’t even considered how amazing it would be to run through the woods with my mate, both of us in wolf form. I’d cared about Marta and had never faulted her for not being a werewolf, but I definitely hadn’t realized how much I was missing.

Suddenly, a wolf stepped out from behind a tree a few feet ahead of us. I moved closer to Perrie as I realized it was a wolf I didn’t recognize.

**Episode 4196**

**Xavier**

“Why do you want to talk about my brother?” I asked, instantly on guard. It was never a good thing when the council showed up unannounced, and I wasn’t going to go out of my way to make them feel welcome.

“It concerns Arielle of the Redwood pack, a Rogue named Helix, and the murder of Evan of the Northwind pack,” the councilor said. “We thought you might be able to help us with our preliminary investigation.”

I laughed, though I was hardly amused. “You’d know more about all that than I do. I’m not a member of the Redwood pack. No one here has any knowledge of Evan’s murder, so I don’t think we’ll be able to help with your investigation. And if you have questions, you should go ask Greyson himself.”

I started to close the door, but the councilor thrust his foot out to block it.

“We plan to, but we don’t expect Greyson to be forthcoming. So, we’re asking *you* about your brother.” The man flashed me a smile. “I hope we weren’t wrong to assume that you’d want to help the council maintain order and safety within the werewolf community.”

I was about to say something snide when Ava appeared at my side. “Is there a problem?”

I responded through mind link. *The council sent their monkeys here to ask about Greyson, Elle, Helix, and Evan’s murder.*

Ava turned a smiling face on the council members. “We’ll be happy to tell you anything we can. Won’t we, Xavier?”

I was hesitant, worried that Ava might reveal something that would be better left unsaid. Not too long ago, I probably would’ve loved the idea of throwing Greyson under the bus. But things were different now in a lot of ways, and I would never be the one to put him there.

Moreover, I certainly wasn’t about to help the council after they’d turned a blind eye to the Bitterfangs’ awful behavior and constant threats at the summit. They’d essentially enabled Malakai, while simultaneously claiming to be devoted to maintaining peace. They were hypocrites who hadn’t bothered to help us when we needed them, so why would I want to help *them*?

I looked at Ava out of the corner of my eye, knowing that I had no reason not to trust her. It wasn’t like she was going to answer all their questions without any regard for the big picture—but Ava could be unpredictable, and she had her own ideas about how we should move forward in our relationship with the Redwood pack. I didn’t want her saying something about my brother that could be less than ideal for our current circumstances.

The councilor dragged his hard gaze away from me and nodded at Ava. “The council would appreciate your cooperation,” he said. “This is a matter that concerns every werewolf, after all.”

“Certainly,” Ava said, her voice saccharine sweet. “What would you like to know?”

“We believe that Greyson is hiding Arielle. Have you any idea where?” he asked.

I nearly burst out laughing.

*Are they really this clueless? Lucian spent the entire summit drooling all over Elle. But if they can’t put the pieces together themselves, it’s not my job to do it for them. At this rate, their investigation will be doomed before it starts.*

I shrugged. “I have no idea.”

Ava nodded. “Same here. We’ve been very busy fortifying our pack, so we haven’t been all that involved in what the other packs have been getting up to.” She looked at me. “I wasn’t even aware that Elle was missing. Were you, Xavier?”

I shook my head. “No. I don’t know her well enough to keep up with her comings and goings.”

The councilors exchanged a look before one of them cleared her throat and spoke up. “We know that a Rogue named Helix attacked you, Alpha Evers. Helix had a link to Elle, as we understand it.”

“Maybe, but that doesn’t change the fact that I barely know Elle,” I reiterated. “And yes, Helix attacked me, but that was just a misunderstanding. Though he’s very lucky I didn’t kill him.”

“Why didn’t you?” the councilor fired back.

I smiled. “Why would I? He was just a young, reckless wolf. Besides, there was a no violence rule at the summit, and I didn’t want to violate it. I respect and support the council’s mission to make the summit a safe place for all.”

The councilors exchanged annoyed looks.

*Too bad*, I thought. *It’s not my fault that you’re all too useless to figure this out on your own.*

“And you all have no idea where Greyson has hidden Elle?” one of the councilors asked. “Because we have reason to believe—”

“We already told you—we don’t know,” Ava interrupted. “Talk to Greyson if you want to know what he’s been doing. This interview is over.”

Ava closed the door in their faces.

I was surprised, but also pleased. “Screw them,” I said. “Why would they come here thinking I was just going to give Greyson up because they asked?”

“Yes…” Ava said hesitantly. “But do you want to tell me *why* you’re covering for your brother?”

I knew what she was getting at. “I know what you’re thinking, but this has nothing to do with Cali.”

Ava’s eye twitched. “I never said that it did.”

She flipped her hair over her shoulder and walked off.

“Shit,” I muttered. Not wanting this new rift between us to widen, I chased after her. “I only meant—”

“I know what you meant, Xavier.” Ava’s expression was calm, but I could see the turbulence underneath. That, and a bit of weariness. She was as tired of talking about Cali as I was.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It’s just that whenever the Redwoods are involved in a situation, you’re usually so quick to connect it to my feelings for Cali. That’s why I brought her up just now. There’s no other reason beyond that. It’s just frustrating, because I’ve told you so many times that Cali and I are done.”

I couldn’t help but think back to my slipup with Kira, where I’d mistakenly said that I was with Cali. I hoped Kira hadn’t put too much stock in that, but I knew she’d definitely noticed it.

Ava sighed and allowed her shoulders to relax. “Okay. Fine. But I still don’t get why we’re protecting your brother,” she said. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m no fan of the council, but lying to them seems a little risky—especially to protect Greyson. I know he’s done some helpful things in the past for me and the Samaras, but I don’t know that helping him in this mess with Elle is worth risking our pack.”

I shrugged. “I *don’t* care about protecting him. But if the council has questions about Greyson and Elle, let them find the answers on their own. Why would we do them any favors when they didn’t lift a finger to help us when we talked to them about the Bitterfangs? They did absolutely nothing to maintain the peace they’re always going on about, and as a result, we wound up in a pack war.”

“Fair enough,” Ava said, but I could see that she was still skeptical.

“I think it’s best we just stay out of it. Don’t ask questions, don’t get any new information. We don’t know what’s going on with Elle, so the less we do know, the better,” I added. “If anyone knows what’s going on with her, it’s Lucian. You saw them at the summit—they were joined at the hip by the end of it. Lucian’s made Elle *his* business, so there’s no reason to assume that Greyson’s wrapped up in this.”

*I wonder if Elle will be at the banquet?* I thought to myself. *Should I warn Lucian that the council’s poking around?*

I immediately decided against getting involved. Elle wasn’t my problem. From here on out, I needed to focus on the Samaras and the Samaras only. It was bad enough that I’d refrained from pointing the council in Lucian’s direction at all.

“I agree,” Ava said finally. “You’re right—we don’t know for certain where Elle is. It’s not our place to get in the middle of something we don’t know anything about. We have enough to worry about on our own front without getting mixed up in that.”

I was relieved to hear that. We were finally on the same page. I’d been worried that our latest little disagreement over Cali would taint the rest of the day, and I wasn’t in the mood to fight with Ava right now.

Ava’s gaze fell on the bundle of clothes that I still had clutched under my arm. “Why do you still have these?”

She playfully snatched them away from me and sprinted toward the laundry room. I tried to catch up, but smacked right into Knox.

“Watch it!” Knox shouted as I shoved past him.

I burst into the laundry room, where Ava was standing next to the washer with a grin on her face.

“Looking for these?” she asked, dangling the clothes out in front of her.

As I reached for them, Ava’s smile faded. “Why do these smell like Kira?”

**Episode 4197**

**Greyson**

Cali and I were enjoying a pretty fun and intense game of ping pong when Artemis and Rishika rushed in.

“When did we get this?” Artemis asked, her eyes on the table. “It’s amazing!”

“I think Torin got it,” Ravi said after he took a swig of his beer. “You know how much he likes group activities—and it’s been a big hit so far.”

“You’re all very welcome,” Torin said with an exaggerated bow. “I aim to please.”

“Well done, Torin,” Artemis said. “There was a game like this in the Fae world, only instead of a ball, we used toadstools. Hours of fun, let me tell you. It could sometimes take a bit of time to collect enough toadstools, though.”

I laughed. “Toadstools? How the hell did that work? Do toadstools even bounce?”

It was nice to talk about something that had nothing to do with the pack’s safety or its problems. Now that Xavier and I had confirmed the Bitterfangs’ defeat and Malakai’s death, it was the perfect time to relax. We all deserved to have some fun, and I was happy to spend some light, carefree time with Cali.

“We should pair up,” Rishika said. “Get a doubles match going. Me and Artemis versus you and Cali. It’s not a fair matchup, but it’s not our fault that we’re so damn good.”

She and Artemis high fived each other without looking.

“I’m down!” Cali said, tossing her paddle in the air and catching it neatly. “I’ve been working on my serve, so don’t count us out just yet.” She demonstrated her serve and missed the ball completely. “Wait, let me try that again.”

Artemis caught the ball before Cali could hit it again and smiled. “Oh no, you’ll have plenty of time to show off your skills during the game.”

She and Rishika shared a look and snickered.

We all got into place, and the game started with more fervor than I’d expected. Rishika and Artemis were all business on the other side of the table, all but glaring at us. Rishika had even rolled up her sleeves and cracked her knuckles before carefully gripping the paddle and dropping into a half-crouch. Artemis was just as intense.

“They look like they’re about to go to war,” Cali whispered to me.

“Then it’s a good thing I always win those,” I said, then I returned Rishika’s powerful serve.

It was nice playing ping pong beside Cali instead of against her. We made a good team—whether we were fighting a pack war or pairing up for a game of ping pong. Thinking of how good we were together made me regret my reaction to Cali pushing me about the Luna issue again. I knew why she wanted to go through with the ceremony, and I really didn’t doubt her ability to be a good Luna, but I just didn’t know what I’d do if I agreed to put her through the ceremony and she didn’t come out okay on the other side. It just seemed like way too much of a risk.

The ball whizzed past me, and Artemis cheered. “Not off to a good start there, Alpha!”

Cali eyed me. “You weren’t paying attention!” She gave me a playful swat on the butt with her paddle. “Get your head in the game, Evers! We can’t let them steamroll us.”

“Sorry!”

I rushed to retrieve the ball, just as Lilac came in. Without meaning to, he stepped right on the ball as it rolled into his path, crushing it into a pancake.

“My bad,” Lilac said, blushing as he scooping up the flattened ball. “I didn’t mean to do that.”

Torin took the ball from him. “It’s okay—I bought extras because I know that werewolves tend to play rough.” He showed us a huge canister of multi-colored balls. “Best of all, I got them on sale!”

I could tell that something was bothering Lilac, so I pulled him aside. “Are you good? You’re not upset about our conversation earlier, are you?”

Lilac shook his head and lowered his voice. “No, it’s not that. Could we talk somewhere more private?”

“Sure,” I said, leading him out into the hall. “What’s up?”

Lilac seemed nervous as he started talking. “I was walking Perrie home when we were stopped by a werewolf claiming to be a member of the council.”

I tensed, wondering why the hell the council was snooping around in our woods. I didn’t think for a minute that it was because they wanted to congratulate us for defeating the Bitterfangs.

“Why were they sniffing around?” I asked.

“I’m not entirely sure, but they kept asking about you and Elle. They didn’t give us many details.”

I tensed up even more. “What did they ask, exactly?”

“They wanted to know if you were hiding Elle—but I didn’t tell them anything,” Lilac said quickly. “I played dumb, and I think they believed me. Did I do the right thing?”

“You did,” I said. “Thanks, Lilac. Elle is still a part of this pack, and if they have any questions about her, I’m the one they should be talking to. It’s just like the council to try to trip you up.” I clapped Lilac on the shoulder. “Thanks for handling them so well. But in the meantime, don’t worry about it.” I was concerned, but I didn’t want to show that to Lilac. This wasn’t his problem. Time to change the subject… “So… how’d your romantic date with Perrie go? Cali told me.”

Lilac blushed. “It went great. It was nice to see her without having to worry about her parents bursting in on us. We got to… Um… We got to spend some real quality time together.” Lilac’s blush deepened.

“That’s good,” I said lightly. “Something to keep in mind when considering where you want to land. Well, thanks again for how you handled the councilor. If they corner you again, just send them my way. They shouldn’t be questioning you about stuff like that at all. Okay?”

“Got it,” Lilac said. “Good luck with ping pong,” he added, before heading off.

I watched him go, knowing that it was time for me to have a chat with Lucian and Elle. I didn’t have much faith in the council’s investigative abilities, but I knew it wouldn’t take them long to realize that Lucian was involved. I also knew that Lucian would do everything in his power to protect Elle—that was the one good thing about the lovestruck princeling.

*This can’t have anything to do with the war, can it? For all we know, the council isn’t even aware that things escalated so dramatically, seeing as we heard nothing from them either way.*

Cali came over and slapped me on the ass with her ping pong paddle again.

“I like this thing,” she said wickedly. “Are you coming back? I think we can really trounce them if we focus.”

“We might have a new problem,” I said wearily.

Cali’s eyes widened. “What? Did something happen with Lilac and Perrie? It was just supposed to be a romantic date! Violet said—”

“No, the date went fine. It’s something else. A council investigator cornered Lilac in the woods and questioned him about Elle’s whereabouts. It’s only a matter of time before they come to question me.”

“What do we do?” Cali asked grimly. “Should we hide you, too?”

“What? No, I have to face this. I’m not about to go into hiding. Whatever the council’s got up their sleeve, I’m not afraid to face it.” I for damn sure wasn’t going to scuttle away from them with my tail between my legs. The council was a joke, as far as I was concerned. I just needed to figure out how to get ahead of them.

“So what do we do about Elle?” Cali asked.

“Nothing for the moment. The palace is probably the safest place for her right now. Lucian’s not going to let anyone take her, and that place is huge. Even if the council sent their goons in to search, they’d never be able to find her if Lucian didn’t want them to. He probably wouldn’t even let them set foot inside the palace in the first place. I was pretty skeptical about her going there, but it seems to have worked out for the best.”

“And you wouldn’t let anyone take her, either,” Cali said.

“Of course not,” I said. “No one messes with my pack. Or with you.”

I pulled Cali against me and kissed her hard, suddenly tempted to ditch the ping pong game to play with my mate one-on-one.

Cali and I broke apart at the sound of someone clearing their throat.

“Are you two finished pushing your PDA on everyone, or should I come back later?” Big Mac inquired, pinning us to the spot with a glare.

“Oh, no, all good. What’s up?” Cali said, flustered. She straightened her shirt and turned to face the witch.

Big Mac turned her gaze on me. “Do you really believe that the Bitterfang threat is over?”

**Episode 4198**

**Xavier**

I laughed a little too loudly, and Ava’s eyes narrowed to slits. Shit. This was already going very badly. Ava knew me too well to take a laugh—especially a loud one—as anything other than an attempt to deflect. I was going to have to redirect her, and fast.

I gestured vaguely at the house. “Did you forget? Kira lives here now. Her scent is everywhere.”

Ava stared at me. “Yeah, but strangely enough, *my* clothesdon’t smell like her.”

I snatched my clothes from her hands and stuffed them into the washing machine. “I went to check on her earlier, remember? I wanted to make sure she was acclimating to her new digs, which she is.” I started the washer. “You know she was a little nervous about coming here—she’s my friend, and I wanted to make sure she was okay. Honestly, you probably should’ve been the one to check in on her.”

“Oh? So it’s *my* fault that your clothes reek of her?” Ava countered. “That’s rich. You’ve been acting so weird about these clothes—you damn near tackled me to grab them from the floor—but now you want to deflect and try to make me feel like a bad Luna for not rolling out the welcome wagon for Kira?”

“No, I’m not saying that. It’s just that you were originally against her coming, and I suspect the others might feel the same way, so it might’ve been a nice olive branch for you to check in on her instead of me.”

I was proud of myself for shifting the focus on the conversation, but Ava was smart, and there was a good chance that it wouldn’t work. I leaned back against the washer and feigned nonchalance while I waited anxiously for Ava’s response. I knew that if she caught even a *hint* that I was lying, things would go south very quickly.

Not wanting to leave it to chance, I decided to kick things up a notch.

I stepped toward her. “You sound like you’re jealous.”

Ava’s eyes narrowed, but she didn’t say anything.

“What if I told you that I kissed her?” I asked.

“Then she’d be leaving this house in a body bag,” Ava said coolly. “And you wouldn’t be far behind.”

I swallowed roughly, knowing that she wasn’t kidding. That was exactly why it was so important that she never found out the truth.

I forced myself to smile. “Do you really think I would kiss Kira?” I threw an arm around Ava’s waist. “Why would I do that when I have you?”

I moved to kiss her, but she planted her hands on my chest and pushed me away.

“You’re so full of shit,” she informed me.

Her bite in her words didn’t match her expression, and I could see that her anger had already given way to desire.

“And you love it,” I said.

Ava scoffed. “I’m not that easy.”

“I disagree.” I trailed a fingertip down her cheek. My wolf was enjoying the closeness, despite the reason for it. “You’re right. You’re a brat.”

Ava’s eyes flashed. “And what does that make you?”

I pressed against her. “An asshole,” I said. “But I think you love that, too.”

I leaned over her, boxing her in against the washing machine. I was being a little disingenuous here, which didn’t feel great. Still, my wolf was clamoring for more, and what had started as a distraction had quickly snowballed into something more. There was no harm in indulging myself, especially if it would save Kira’s life—and my own.

I lifted Ava up onto the washing machine and slowly pushed her shirt—a super sexy tube sweater—down to reveal her braless breasts. Her nipples stood out in stark relief from the weighty globes of her breasts, and I licked my lips before diving in and suckling at each one.

“Xavier, anyone could come in,” Ava said, with a sharp intake of breath.

I ignored her and kept flicking my tongue against one nipple while rolling the other between my fingers. I could feel the heat rising from her body, and the ache of my own arousal drove me to lift her up from the washing machine and peel off her pants.

Clinging to me, she helped me remove her pants then her panties, then I lowered her to her feet and gently turned her around so that she was facing away from me. I ran a hand from her neck all the way down her back, enjoying the softness of her skin. She leaned into my touch, and I heard a sigh escape her lips.

“Bend over,” I said, gently pushing her forward.

I wasted no time yanking down my pants and boxers to let my cock pop free. It pulsed with need, and Ava reached around and took it in her hand, expertly stroking it until it was at its full length and girth.

Ava spread her legs and bent over until her breasts were resting against the top of the washer as it clicked into another cycle, and the rush of water filling the barrel echoed through the room. I wondered if it would be enough to drown out the sounds of what we were about to do.

I reached around to tease her clit between my fingers, then I slid a finger into her, testing her wetness before adding another. I slowly stroked my fingers in and out, curving them so that I could hit her just where I knew she wanted it. Ava moaned, loud enough to drown out the churning of the washer.

“At least close the door,” Ava whispered.

“If you insist.”

I kicked the door shut, then immediately returned to cover her body with mine. I slid my hands up and down the soft mound of her ass, then entered her in one smooth thrust that had a loud cry spilling from her lips.

“I guess I closed the door just in time,” I whispered in her ear as I thrust, pressing her against the washing machine.

“I guess so,” she moaned.

Using my knee, I pushed her legs further apart. Rather than slide out of her, I thrust in even deeper until she slammed a hand against the washer and cried out again, even louder this time.

“Xavier, what are you doing to me?”

“Giving you exactly what you need,” I said. “Giving it to you just the way you like it.”

Finally, I retreated from her smooth, velvety warmth, pausing just before my tip sprang free. Stifling my grunts of pleasure, I slid deep inside again and then fell into a quick rhythm of deep, solid thrusts. She fell into sync with me, driving her hips back against me to meet every plunge.

“Fuck,” I hissed.

Pleasure coursed through me, weakening my knees and driving me to thrust even harder until she was all but slamming against the washer.

A voice filtered through the door. I was in no state to figure out whose it was. “Hey, is someone in there?”

“Yes,” I grunted. “Just got a lot of laundry in here. I’ll let you know when I’m done,” I added, not breaking the rhythm of my thrusts for even a second.

Ava reared back, flipping her long hair so that it cascaded over my back as she pressed against me. I reached around and slid my fingers between her hot, slick folds, then softly tweaked her clit.

Wanting to feel her breasts against my chest, I spun her around and lifted her back up onto the washer before I entered her again. She fell forward, and I wrapped my arms tightly around her so that we were pressed together as we bucked against each other, her breasts flattened between us. I closed my eyes and kept plundering her depths, circling my hips so that I could slide against every inch of her with every move.

“Is everything okay in there?” someone else called. The laundry room apparently got a lot more traffic than I’d realized.

“Everything’s fine!” Ava called breathlessly. “Out in a minute!”

We locked eyes and smiled.

“Oh fuck, yes, Xavier. Are you really mine?” she asked.

I hesitated for only a moment, too lost in the mind-numbing pleasure of her slick, tight channel to overthink the question. I *was* hers.

At least for now.

I slid deep inside her again and was just about to answer her when a deep rumble vibrated around us, shaking the entire room and sending laundry detergent and other odds and ends tumbling from the shelves.

“What the hell?” Ava demanded. “What’s happening?”

“No idea.”

Screams reached us from the depths of the house, and the rumbling wasn’t stopping. I struggled to keep my balance as I disengaged from Ava and pulled my pants up. I had to go see what the hell was happening and if everyone was okay.

“Ow,” Ava said as the room shook again and I fell against her.

A shelf overhead head broke away from the wall. I reacted quickly and pulled Ava back to shield her. Again, the room lurched violently, and we both tumbled to the ground.

We stayed down and held each other while the house continued to sway and tremble.

“Is this an earthquake?” Ava asked, her voice small.

“I don’t know,” I said, pulling her tightly against me.

As the rumbling and screams of confusion continued, I couldn’t help but wonder if Adéluce was behind this.

**Episode 4199**

Suddenly, I was really worried. If Big Mac was questioning the Bitterfangs’ defeat, did that mean she knew something that we didn’t? Big Mac didn’t spook easily, so if she was feeling uneasy about the Bitterfangs, maybe that meant we needed to be, too.

“Xavier and I were definitely skeptical to begin with, but now we’re convinced that Malakai is dead and the Bitterfangs have left the area, defeated and depleted,” Greyson said calmly. “I can show you Malakai’s ring as proof. I’ve got it upstairs in my room.”

Something about that creeped me out. I would’ve preferred to keep the ring as far away from us as possible—preferably in another state, if not another continent. I didn’t want to have any reminders of Malakai anywhere near us, especially within the sanctuary of our pack house. Truthfully, I fully intended to forget the man and his awful pack, as if they’d never existed.

“Why are you so skeptical, Big Mac?” I asked. “Is it because of your vision? The one where Lucian was knocked off the chess board?”

Big Mac shrugged uneasily. “I don’t really know. I’m not used to having visions. It could mean anything.”

I turned to Greyson. “What if the vision was really about the council and Lucian? Or maybe even Elle?”

Big Mac frowned at me. “I have no idea what you’re going on about. I just came down here to ask about the Bitterfang pack.”

“The war is over,” Greyson said, looking between me and Big Mac. “It’s probably a little hard to swallow because it happened faster than we thought it would, but I’m convinced that there’s nothing to worry about. We’ve been through plenty of fights that raged on for days, even weeks—luckily for us, this just wasn’t one of them.”

“If you say so,” Big Mac finally said. “By the way, I’m not coming to the Vanguard party,” she added. “There’s no way in hell I would *choose* to spend time with Lucian. If I never see that man again, it’ll be too soon.”

I smiled. “I understand your reluctance, but has my mother weighed in yet?”

Big Mac sighed and rolled her eyes. “No, but she’s not going to talk me into it, either.”

Without another word, she turned and headed back upstairs.

Greyson heaved a sigh as he watched her go. “I’m sure Big Mac’s not the only one harboring some doubts about Malakai and the Bitterfangs. I’m the first to admit that the war was a lot faster and cleaner than I anticipated. It might take everyone a little time to accept the truth, and I get that. But let’s be sure to get ahead of anyone who seems overly worried about it. We all deserve to feel safe right now, and if anyone thinks there’s even a chance that the Bitterfangs are still a threat, they won’t be able to relax.”

“For sure,” I said. “I’ll admit that it almost seems like a dream. Just a couple of days ago we were fighting for our lives, and now everyone’s celebrating.” I arched an eyebrow. “And maybe we should be, too.” I held up the ping pong paddle. “How about we play a few more games?”

Greyson threw an arm around my waist. “I love playing games with you, Cali. What do you have in mind?”

I felt heat gathering in the pit of my stomach. “Ping pong,” I said. “We still need to assert our dominance as the Redwood pack house ping pong masters.”

Greyson laughed. “I love your optimism.”

We returned to see that Jay and Lola had taken our spot opposite Rishika and Artemis. I wasn’t sure how any of them were able to concentrate, since Lola was chatting about college courses with Jay as she distractedly helped him return Rishika and Artemis’s volleys.

“So now the question is: Cybersecurity or Data Architecture?” she told him. “They both sound like fun, but I don’t want to have *too much* fun. It *is* college, after all. It’s like my high school physics teacher said—if you’re having fun, you’re not learning.”

Artemis rolled her eyes as she smacked the ball, sending it sailing past Lola, who was still talking a mile a minute.

“Yet another point!” Artemis said as she and Rishika tapped paddles.

I watched them for a while. Jay was nodding automatically at Lola as he tried to focus on the game. Lola wasn’t showing any signs of shutting up, but I couldn’t blame her. She was so damn excited about going back to school, while I still hadn’t even talked to Greyson about the possibility of my going back, too. Maybe it was time for me to fill him in.

“What would you think if I went back to college?” I asked him.

He arched an eyebrow. “Do you *want* to go back?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted.

Greyson looked puzzled. “You must be thinking about it, if you’re asking me the question.”

I sighed. “Lola sent in my application without asking, and I got in.”

Greyson chuckled.

“Don’t laugh!” I said, swatting him on the arm. “It’s not funny.”

“It kind of is,” he said. “Most people struggle to even get into college—leave it to you to get accepted without even applying. It’s hilarious, really.”

“Okay, it *is* a little weird,” I conceded. “I don’t know what Lola did to get me in. I’m sure she told a lie or two, but that’s not the point. The point is… How would you feel about it? I wouldn’t go back full time,” I added quickly. “And I wouldn’t want it to interfere with my responsibilities to the pack.”

Greyson took my hand. “What I want is for you to do what you want to do. If you want to go back to college, I fully support that. I think it’s a great idea.”

I was a little thrown by that. I wondered if he understood how time consuming it would be, even if I didn’t go back full time. There’d still be homework and tons of studying and group projects and everything in between.

“But don’t you want me to help with the pack?” I asked.

He gave me a stern sort of look. “Whatever you have to do to go to college while still playing an active role in the pack, I’ll help you figure it out. Not a big deal. So, when do you start?”

“Oh, I haven’t agreed to anything yet,” I said. “There’s still a lot to think about—choosing courses, carving out time, and the money, of course.”

“You don’t need to worry about that—”

“No,” I interrupted firmly. “I’m not letting you pay my tuition. I’m perfectly capable of getting a job to pay for school.”

“Of course you are,” Greyson said easily. “I was just going to offer to help, and to let you know that I’ll be there for you in whatever way you need.”

“Thanks,” I said.

Out of nowhere, it hit me all over again how lucky I was to have such a supportive mate. Not only was he on board with me going back to college and the sacrifices I would inevitably have to make, but he was even willing to support me financially while I did it—even though I had no plans at all to take him up on that offer.

Truthfully, just thinking about all the moving parts was overwhelming. Maybe that was why I’d avoided talking to Greyson about it until now. I was still so unsure about whether going back to college was really the right move for me at this point in my life.

“I’m curious,” Greyson said. “Why didn’t you tell me about this before now?”

I shrugged. “We were in the middle of a war. We were both a little busy.”

Greyson laughed. “Fair enough. I probably wouldn’t have been in the right headspace to be a good listening ear, anyway.”

I yawned. “Sorry. Guess I’m a little tired.”

Greyson pulled me into a hug. “Then maybe we should save the ping pong for another day.”

He scooped me into his arms and carried me upstairs. I didn’t even think to object. I was suddenly exhausted, and it was nice to feel safe and protected in his arms. When he held me like this, it felt like nothing in the word could touch me.

Only a few minutes later, we were in bed together. I pressed my face into the crook of his neck, feeling so relaxed that I knew sleep wasn’t far away. I closed my eyes and started to drift off… But then I heard my bedroom door click open. Startled awake, I shot up in bed and looked around.

“Greyson?” I said, reaching for him. But he wasn’t there anymore.

I gasped in shock when I saw Xavier coming through the door. “Xavier, what are you doing here? What’s going on?”

He didn’t answer. He just kept coming closer until he was looming over my bed, his gaze boring into mine as he reached out and caressed my cheek.

“Cali,” he said urgently. “I need you.”

**Episode 4200**

“Xavier, what are you doing in my room?” I asked him, my heart pounding almost painfully.

He stretched out a hand. “I need you, Cali.”

I took his hand and was jolted by the intensity of his touch. I opened my mouth to say something, but I could barely speak. I was worried that something was wrong, but I was also excited that he was here in my room. That it was just the two of us.

“What do you want?” I whispered.

He leaned in close enough that his lips grazed my ear. “You.”

I started to ask about Ava, but the words never reached my lips because he leaned in and kissed me. I slowly fell back on the bed, and he covered my body with his as his lips moved against mine with his patented mix of gentleness and strength. He plundered the depths of my mouth with his tongue and ran his hands up and down my body while I lay pliant and still beneath him, surrendering to him completely.

I spread my legs wide, and he ground his crotch against me, the bulge there pressing against my growing arousal. I reached up to caress his back, but he slammed my hands back down to the bed and pinned me beneath him as he reclaimed my lips and undulated his hips against me in a slow, tortuous rhythm.

He flipped me over onto my stomach and lay on top of me, then he grabbed my chin and turned my face so that he could reach my mouth. All the while, he pressed his erection against my ass, his tongue penetrating my mouth as I longed for his cock to do the same. I arched my back and pressed my ass against him, and he moaned.

I twisted around to lie on my back again, and he wasted no time plunging his tongue into my mouth with even more urgency. Whimpering with pleasure, I broke away from him to catch my breath, but he quickly covered my mouth with his again.

“Cali, are you okay?” The deep timbre of Greyson’s voice pulled me away from Xavier.

In an instant, I woke up and realized I wasn’t with Xavier at all. It had been a dream. A really hot dream.

I blinked up at Greyson as he hovered over me, his face tight with concern. “You were moaning so loudly that I was worried you were having a nightmare,” he said.

My cheeks were burning, and I quickly pulled the sheet up over my head to hide from him. I’d just had an X-rated dream about Xavier *while I was lying right next to Greyson*. And it wasn’t the first time it’d happened, either. He’d caught me after I’d, er, taken care of things myself after talking to Xavier…

Ugh! I was so embarrassed. And more than that, ashamed. And my cheeks were still on fire. I felt like Greyson would know everything if I let him look at me long enough.

“Why are you hiding under there?” Greyson asked.

“To hide from the light,” I said quickly. “The sun’s hurting my eyes.”

There was a pause. “But the blinds are shut.”

I felt his movement and then he was under the sheets with me. I twisted away from him so that he couldn’t see how flustered I was.

“I have morning breath!” I said. “I don’t want you to be grossed out!”

Greyson smiled. “No you don’t.”

He leaned in close, and I felt the tickle of his breath before he started peppering my face and neck with kisses, reigniting the heat between my legs that Dream Xavier had initially brought to life.

Fuck fuck fuck.

*This is* not *helping me calm down. He’s doing all the things he knows will drive me crazy. Am I really about to do this with him after the dream I just had?*

“I had a sex dream!” I blurted out. “That’s why I was moaning!”

Greyson paused. “Was it about me?”

I hesitated. I shouldn’t have felt guilty about a dream—it wasn’t like I’d dreamed about Xavier on purpose, or anything—but the truth would only hurt Greyson. There was no way it wouldn’t. Sometimes, honesty *wasn’t* the best policy. I had no choice but to lie.

“Of course it was about you,” I said.

Greyson nibbled on my ear, driving me insane.

“Tell me about it,” he whispered. “What did I do to make you moan like that?”

I wasn’t sure what to do. I couldn’t give him a blow by blow—that would just be piling lies on top of lies, and one was enough for now.

Thinking fast, I turned to face him. “How about I show you instead?”

I parted my legs and pulled Greyson forward to lie between them, just like Xavier had done in my dream. His erection was hard and insistent, and I pushed against it, gasping as he started sliding it against my clit with just the right amount of pressure, his tongue swirling into my mouth with the same insistence the dream version of his brother had used.

He yanked my shirt up over my head, and I arched my back and offered him my breasts, wanting to feel his mouth on them. When he finally took a nipple into his mouth, I moaned. His tongue was so warm, and the weight of his body pressed me down into the mattress—just like Xavier’s body had done while he’d claimed my mouth as his own.

“You taste so sweet,” Greyson said, coming back up to press his lips against mine.

I quickly squirmed out of my pajama pants and tossed them to the floor. My panties were all that remained. I gasped when I felt Greyson’s fingers dip between us. He moved my panties to the side and gently brushed his fingers over my sex, spreading my wetness around to prepare for his entry.

But rather than enter me immediately, he flipped me over onto my back, and I moaned when I remembered that Dream Xavier had done the exact same thing. With my cheek pressed against the pillow and Greyson’s weight bearing down on me, his lips found mine once again. His length was pressed between us and I reveled in the feel of it against my ass, surging and growing and driving me crazy.

“Do you feel that?” Greyson whispered against my lips before dipping his tongue back into my mouth.

“Yes,” I moaned against his lips.

“Do you want that?”

“*Yes*,” I repeated, pressing my ass back against him.

I just couldn’t stop mirroring everything I’d done and felt in my dream. It felt amazing to relive the pleasure of that moment with my mate, here in real time. I would never be able to express that part of it to Greyson, of course, but I realized that even though Xavier had sparked my desire, I was so happy that Greyson was here to make it a reality.

I shifted onto my back and spread my legs, then looked up at Greyson. His eyelids were heavy with desire, and he kept his gaze locked with mine as he finally took his heavy shaft in hand, pushed my panties to the side, and slid deep inside me.

“*Oh*,” I breathed.

I wrapped my legs around his waist and angled my hips toward him as he retreated, then slid deep inside me once again. He stayed there and pressed against me, his pelvic bone nudging my clit toward an explosion of pleasure that was waiting right on the precipice. I reached up to touch his face, but he took my hands and pinned them to the bed. A flash of Xavier doing the same in my dream ripped through my head.

It was all too much, and suddenly, I couldn’t hold back.

“I’m coming,” I moaned.

Greyson increased his pace, and my body bounced and vibrated against him. I met his thrusts and jerked my hips, riding the rush of my orgasm while images of Xavier and Greyson mingled and meshed in my head.

“Fuck, Cali,” Greyson said as he came a few moments later.

He slid his tongue into my mouth and kept it there until the last currents of his own climax left him, the he collapsed on top of me and rested his head against my breasts. I stroked his hair, feeling good, but still a little weird.

“I’m going to go get something to eat,” I said after a while.

I gently slid out from underneath him and put my T-shirt back on, then picked up my pajama pants from the floor and quickly stepped into them.

“Okay,” Greyson said dreamily before turning over and burying his face in the pillow.

I crept downstairs, hoping it was early enough that I wouldn’t run into anyone. But, of course, Torin was in the kitchen. He turned to greet me as soon as I came in, and embarrassment immediately flooded my body. I wished I’d noticed that my pajama pants were on inside out and my hair was mussed *before* I’d run into him. My renewed embarrassment lit my cheeks on fire.

“Hey, Cali!” Torin said. He didn’t even react to my appearance—probably because he was too busy making waffles. “You’re welcome to take one or two of these when they’re done,” he said brightly.

“Thanks,” I said stiffly.

I ducked into the refrigerator to grab a yogurt and was about to rush back upstairs when the doorbell rang. I went to answer it, wondering who it could be so early in the morning. I felt confident that it wasn’t anyone dangerous, since the patrols would’ve stopped them.

*Maybe it’s Lucian or Armin with more news about the banquet. They always make a big deal about these parties, and they’ve been suspiciously normal about this one so far.*

I smoothed my hair and straightened my pajamas, then opened the door. When I saw who was waiting on the other side, I froze in shock.

It was Julia.

**Episode 4201**

**Xavier**

The entire house was shaking. Was this an earthquake? We *were* in Oregon, after all.

“What the hell is going on? Why won’t it stop?” Ava shoved her legs back into her jeans and bolted out of the laundry room.

I was hot on her heels, my wolf growling. Could this be Adéluce?

People were ducking underneath tables, shouting at one another while the ground rocked. I grabbed Ava before she could stumble, pulling her against me. At the same time, someone behind us shouted, “This isn’t right! The news didn’t say anything about an earthquake!”

“There’s nothing on Twitter, either!” someone else shouted from the kitchen. “What the hell is happening?”

*I* knew what was happening. Adéluce was bringing down what I’d built.

Literally.

“Kira,” Ava rasped, grabbing my arm. “Kira has to know what’s happening!”

Whether the chaos was Adéluce’s doing or not, I couldn’t tell Ava *not* to check with Kira. I let her drag me along as she ran up the stairs. The floor trembled again, and Ava fell into me, knocking me into the wall. I steadied myself, holding her against me. The house didn’t stop shaking, and the pack’s screaming got louder.

“Everyone take cover!” I shouted. There were some shouts of acknowledgement. I had to hope that everyone could hold out. The adrenaline and the million dangerous possibilities unfolding in front of me were making me feel nauseous.

Ava turned to look at me, her eyes wide. “Are you okay?”

That was a loaded question, and I couldn’t give her an honest answer.

“Let’s just find Kira.”

I grabbed Ava’s hand, pulling her up the rest of the stairs. But when I reached Kira’s room and flung the door open, my jaw dropped. Her room was totally stable. No shaking at all.

“What the—”

Ava stumbled into me, the shock of the sudden stability making her lose her balance. We both crashed to the floor, landing in a heap. The solid impact made the fact that there wasn’t a single fucking thing moving in this room even more obvious.

Kira cursed, jumping up from her bed in surprise. Because she’d just been sitting there, chilling. She looked through the open door into the hallway, and her mouth fell open. When she met my gaze again, I could’ve sworn she looked guilty. But *why?*

Was she doing this? Did it have anything to do with the kiss? None of this made sense.

“Oh, no,” Kira muttered as she stared at the hallway. “Fuck, *no*.”

“Oh my god, *why* are you just standing there?” Ava barked at the witch, clambering to her feet. She pointed at the hallway. “Are you doing that? Can you stop it?”

Kira’s shock turned into anxiety. Actually, I’d never seen her so anxious—not even after she’d kissed me. “I’m sorry, I never meant for this to happen!”

I realized two things. One, Adéluce wasn’t behind this, so at least there was that. Two, something weird was happening with Kira, and I didn’t like it.

*Are you sure that Kira’s really the best witch for the pack?* Ava mind linked. *She’s a mess!*

I turned to glare at her. *Do you have a list of witches on call that I don’t know about?*

“Just make her stop this, Xavier!” Ava hissed.

When I turned to Kira, she was pacing the room, biting on her nails.

“Kira, what the fuck is happening with the house?” I demanded.

She stopped moving, dropping her hand from her mouth. Clearing her throat, she said, “It might be reacting to having me here.”

Ava blinked. “What?”

If I didn’t know better, I would’ve thought that Kira was blushing.

“Reacting to you being here,” I said slowly. “Because…”

Kira winced. “I built this place. I think the shaking means…” She hesitated, looking away. “That the house is happy?”

Right.

What the actual *fuck*?

“This doesn’t feel happy to me, Kira,” Ava said sharply.

Kira looked between us awkwardly. “Think of it like a puppy,” she said. With a straight face and everything. “It’s just… bouncing, like an overexcited puppy, you know? It’s still really young.”

If someone had told me that an Alpha’s duties could involve discussing the emotional state of his pack house, I would’ve called bullshit. But this was real life, and I supposed I had to deal with this. In an Alpha-like way, which didn’t involve telling our one and only witch that the situation was deeply fucked up.

“I’m glad the house is happy, Kira—”

Ava choked. I wasn’t sure if she was laughing or groaning.

“—but this needs to stop,” I continued. “We can’t function in a house that… creates a localized earthquake when it gets excited to see its mother.”

Kira nodded determinedly. “You’re right.”

Closing her eyes, she whispered a few words in a language I didn’t recognize and then made some quick hand gestures. The sounds behind us immediately stopped, and the pack’s shouting turned into relieved groans.

Ava rushed to poke her head through the door. “Looks like everything’s calmed down!”

I rubbed my forehead, letting out a sigh of relief. “Thanks, Kira.”

Before Kira could reply, Ava scoffed loudly. “Yeah, thanks. Next time, maybe just skip the preamble and get right down to fixing your fuckup.”

Kira crossed her arms over her chest, thrusting out her chin. Uh-oh.

“I’m *so sorry* that I created a great house for you guys out of thin air,” she said sarcastically. “Won’t happen again.”

I wasn’t sure if she was being defensive because of Ava’s tone, or because of whatever that kiss had been, earlier. But I couldn’t deal with a fight between the pair of them right now.

Ava glared at Kira. “I never said—”

I cut Ava off by grabbing her hand and leading her to the door.

“Thanks, Kira,” I said. “We need to go check on the rest of the house and the pack, make sure no one’s hurt. Can you double-check the house’s structure in the meantime?”

She frowned. “Why?”

Ava scoffed. “Why do you think?”

I tugged meaningfully on her arm and told myself to keep my voice down. Kira did *not* like being yelled at.

“To make sure nothing falls apart again,” I told Kira.

She shrugged. “The house is probably fine, but if it’ll make you feel better, I’ll do a quick check.”

“Thanks,” I said.

Then I led Ava out of the room before she could snap at Kira and make the house decide to light itself on fire out of spite.

“What are you going to tell the pack?” Ava asked once we were out in the hallway.

I huffed. “Let’s just make sure everyone’s okay first.”

“How did this happen?” someone demanded, their voice coming from the living room.

Ava and I followed the sound and found several pack members milling around.

“It was so weird,” Donovan said. “Could it have been a localized earthquake?”

“Localized specifically to us?” Marissa shook her head. “That doesn’t happen.”

The second Ava and I stepped into the room, the volume went up as everyone started bombarding us with questions.

“Xavier! What the fuck just happened?”

“The library almost fell on my head!”

“The tiles in the bathroom fucking rearranged themselves—it was the craziest shit!”

“I just flushed the toilet, and I swear, it’s stopped flushing clockwise!”

“That was *not* an earthquake!”

“The house is trying to kill us! *Why* is the house trying to kill us?”

I whistled loudly, effectively shutting everybody up.

“The house didn’t try to kill you,” I said. “There’s no need to panic.”

Marissa huffed. “So why was it shaking like that?”

“The house was just… happy,” I said lamely.

Nobody spoke for a moment.

I rushed to explain. “I’m aware of how ridiculous that sounds, but it’s the truth. It’s how the magic works. Or at least that’s what Kira told us.”

There were a few awkward chuckles.

“But *why* was it happy?” Donovan asked. “Did we do something?”

I shook my head. “It’s just happy that Kira’s here.”

Perrie gasped. “It’s like an excited puppy with the zoomies!”

I pressed my lips together. “That’s how Kira described it, yeah.”

The awkward chuckles turned into full-blown laughter. Even Ava started laughing, shaking her head incredulously. But then I picked up a single angry voice.

Blaine was muttering under his breath.

“Do you have something to say, Blaine?” I asked loudly.

Everyone else went silent.

“Actually, I do,” Blaine said with a glare. “You can’t even control a stationary building, Xavier. How are you supposed to be our Alpha?”

My anger flared, biting at me. I needed to assert dominance right the fuck now.

Stepping forward, I grabbed Blaine’s arm. “I should kill you for that,” I said coldly, “but I think you and I need to have a chat first.”

“He didn’t mean it!” Knox blurted out. “Blaine, you’d better fucking apologize! Let me come with you guys! I—”

“No,” I snapped, glaring at Knox’s buddy. “Blaine and I are going to have a little one-on-one time.”

**Episode 4202**

“Julia!” I burst out, scanning her frantically for injuries. It was a very mom move, but I couldn’t help it. “What are you doing here? Are you okay?”

“I’m not hurt or anything,” she said, smiling a little.

My mom scan findings corroborated her story, so I believed her. Letting out a sigh of relief, I pulled her in for a hug, tugging her into the house at the same time. “What are you doing here, though?”

“I thought I’d come see you—”

I shook my head. “And *I* thought we’d agreed that you would stay away, for your own good.”

“But I had to make sure everyone was okay,” Julia said. The determination in her gaze made my heart ache. “My father, my old pack—they did this. I just needed to come over and see for myself that you were all okay.”

I sighed. “Julia—”

“I *know* I shouldn’t have come,” she said, squeezing my shoulder. “But I also knew that the fighting was probably over, and I was just feeling so *guilty*. I had to do something before it made me explode.”

I understood that—I did know a thing or two about guilt, after all. But I couldn’t let Julia and her puppy eyes completely eviscerate my resolve, here.

“The fact that there’s no battle right now doesn’t mean that it’s safe for you to be here,” I said, as sternly as I could manage. I glanced over her shoulder into the front yard. “There are probably still a few Bitterfang wolves running around out there, and they’d recognize you in a heartbeat!”

“Cali, *please*. You can’t understand what it’s like, to feel responsible for so much bad stuff. I want to make things right.”

I shook my head, taking her hands. “This isn’t your fault, and it’s not something you have to make right.”

“But you were all in danger, and—”

“Fighting the Bitterfangs and their allies was actually much easier than we anticipated,” I said with a shrug. “None of us were permanently maimed or anything. It really wasn’t a big deal, in the end.”

Julia frowned. “That doesn’t sound like my pack…”

“We’ve fought demons and witches and zombies, and I’ve almost died approximately thirteen million times, so on a danger scale of one to ten, I’d give the Bitterfang situation a five,” I said. “A six if I’m being generous, a four if I’m being stingy.” I waved a hand. “It’s fine.”

Julia just blinked at me in shock.

“*Anyway*,” I said, moving down the hall and closing the front door. “Thank you for worrying about us, but a phone call would’ve been enough to—”

“But if the fighting’s over, what’s the harm in my coming back to see everyone and make sure they’re okay?” Julia asked. “Hearing it over the phone wasn’t good enough.”

“Julia—”

“*Cali*.” She cut me off firmly. “I want to apologize in person. I owe you all that much. The Redwoods saved Russell and me from my father, and that means the world.”

I took a deep breath.

*Okay*, I told myself. *Time to get serious, Cali.*

“What?” Julia scrutinized my face when I fell silent. “What aren’t you telling me?”

I decided to rip off the Band-Aid.

“We got confirmation,” I said. “Your father is dead.”

Julia’s face fell. “Really? That’s—”

I braced myself for the questions, but then movement on the front porch caught my eye.

“What the hell?” I muttered,

We looked through the window to see a giant wolf shifting back to human.

“Russell!” Julia opened the door, alarmed. “What are you doing here?”

Russell threw his arms around her, picking her up. “You finally stopped moving around!”

If you asked me, Russell was being way too playful for someone who’d apparently been stalking his girlfriend across the country. But what did I know about normal relationship dynamics? I was in love with Xavier, for crying out loud.

*Let’s just not touch* that *with a ten foot pole right now…*

“Seriously, what are you doing here?” Julia asked, gently pushing Russell away.

“I followed you,” he said. He looked proud of himself, which I had to admit was pretty cute. Though Julia didn’t seem to agree.

“You weren’t supposed to follow me,” she said seriously.

Russell raised an eyebrow. “And you weren’t supposed to leave in the middle of the night. But am I making a big deal out of that? No, I’m not.”

They both sounded irritated now, but the undercurrent of affection was obvious. They were so sweet.

*I wish my relationships were that simple…*

Greyson and I were in a good place, but my recent Xavier dream had left me feeling shaken. Broken, all over again.

*I hate this.*

“Wait! Cali!” Russell exclaimed, turning to me. “Hi. Hello.” He paused, suddenly looking awkward. “I’m really sorry about everything that’s happened. We—”

“Please don’t apologize,” I said.

The boy smiled, though there was still some guilt to it. At least Julia was letting him wrap an arm around her, so I guessed that was the end of their “fight.” It had lasted, what? Two minutes?

My mates and I could *never*.

“It’s good to see you both,” I said, closing the door behind them again. “Even though you’re not supposed to be here.”

Russell nodded. “Yeah, we both snuck away… My moms are probably pissed.”

Julia turned to face me, her eyes widening like she’d just remembered something. “Cali, what you said earlier—why do you think my father’s dead? Did you see it happen?”

Russell gaped at us. “Whoa, what? Malakai’s *dead*?”

“What happened?” Julia asked.

Her expression was calm, almost blank, and I didn’t know what to make of it. This whole thing had to be a lot for her to process, though. Her relationship with her father had been complicated, to say the least.

*More like “potentially murderous.”*

My stomach twisted at the thought, and I shook my head. “I wasn’t there, but Greyson was. He’ll tell you everything.” I gestured for them to follow. “I’ll take you up to his room, so you can talk.”

But the moment we stepped toward the staircase, a scream brought us to a halt.

“RUSSELL!”

Russell gasped. “TORIN!”

They ran toward each other and hugged, jumping up and down like kids. Despite the heaviness of the moment, I laughed, and Julia did the same. I took her hand and said, “Come on, we’ll leave them to it. Greyson can answer your questions in the meantime.”

“What questions?” Greyson asked. I looked up to see him coming down the stairs. He looked shocked when he spotted Julia.

“Hi,” she said, waving awkwardly.

Greyson paused on the staircase. I saw a variety of emotions flickering across his face—alarm, concern, confusion—before he fixed it into a neutral expression. He climbed down the stairs, the wood creaking under his weight, his loose grip on the balustrade not hinting at even a bit of tension. His presence was as steadying for me as ever.

“What are you doing here?” he asked Julia as he reached the bottom of the stairs. “Is everything okay?”

“Julia wants answers. About her father,” I added, when Julia didn’t speak.

Greyson nodded. “Of course. Follow me.”

*Did she tell you anything important?* he mind linked.

*Just that she came to make sure we were all okay*, I said.

Greyson sighed. *She’s a good kid.*

Julia’s expression stayed blank as we followed Greyson. I could’ve sworn that she was holding her breath, and I felt like holding mine as well in sympathy.

Once we got to the study and closed the door, Greyson turned to her. “Take a seat.”

After we’d all settled in, Greyson didn’t beat around the bush. He told Julia everything that had happened, quickly and efficiently, ending on Malakai’s fall and death.

Julia’s expression stayed blank the entire time.

*What should I do? Comfort her? But she’s not crying, and if I try to comfort her, will she think that she* has to *start crying?*

Julia’s relationship with Malakai had been horrible, but he was still her dad. I had no idea how the news of his death was going to affect her.

“Is that everything you want to know?” Greyson asked, when Julia seemed to have run out of questions.

Julia looked out the window, pressing her lips together.

Greyson’s tone was gentle. “I know that all that was probably difficult to hear, but Cali and I are here for you.”

Julia’s poker face cracked, her gaze flicking between Greyson and me. Emotion flashed across her face quickly—frustration and grief, and then sadness. She settled on that and was quiet for a minute, staring down at her hands.

*What do you think is going through her head?* I asked Greyson.

His eyes met mine. *Not sure. There are so many layers to this situation. She could be relieved, for all we know, and I wouldn’t blame her.*

*You wouldn’t?*

*Her father wanted to kill her mate*, Greyson said. *How do you come back from that?*

Julia cleared her throat, finally breaking the silence. “I don’t need to hear any more. Thank you for answering my questions. But…” She looked up at Greyson, her eyes glistening. “But I don’t believe that my father is dead.”

**Episode 4203**

**Greyson**

Julia watched me carefully, looking like she truly believed that her father was alive.

*Why do you think she’s saying this?* I asked Cali.

*They had a complicated relationship, but maybe she just* wants *him to be alive*, Cali said. *Maybe she’s in denial?*

That had been my first thought, too.

*Yeah*, I said. *He* was *her father, despite everything.*

In order to reach the point of being able to kill Silas with my own hands, I’d spent years going through all the stages of grief. I’d forced myself to realize what it meant to have a father who viewed you as a pawn to own and torture instead of a child to take care of.

“Look, Julia…” I started, and the girl leaned forward slightly. She seemed serious—expectant, almost, as if ready for me to disagree. “I know this is difficult to believe, but we made extra sure.”

“How?” she asked quietly.

“Xavier and I went out, tracked the remaining Bitterfangs,” I said.

After that, I told her about finding the ring and the pyre. I told her about the wolf we’d run into, and then…

“We saw Honora,” I told Julia. “She was talking about your father’s death with other members of the pack.”

At the mention of her mother, Julia flinched, but she didn’t say anything. Her reactions had been so subdued that I was starting to worry that she was going into shock. But whatever she was feeling, we’d deal with it.

“Your mother was…” I paused. “Grieving. She was devastated by your father’s loss.”

A tear slipped down Julia’s face, but she still didn’t speak. Cali put an arm around her. I could hear my mate’s heart pounding, but Julia’s pulse was even louder.

“We have your father’s wedding ring upstairs,” I told her. “Do you want to see it?”

Julia winced. And then she finally spoke. “No. That thing means nothing to me.”

Another tear dropped down her cheek, and she quickly wiped it away. I grabbed a tissue and offered it to her while Cali looked on. Her gaze settled on me, and the sadness in her expression shifted to something more hopeful.

*You can help Julia through this*, *Greyson*, she said. *If anyone understands what she’s going through, it’s you.*

Cali was right. I knew exactly what all this meant, and how it could fuck you up. Nobody had been there to help me, but maybe… Maybe I could help Julia.

“I’ll go check on Russell, okay?” Cali told her. “I’ll be right back.”

Julia barely seemed to hear her. As Cali walked out, she gestured for me to keep talking. She believed in me—she always had. And I usually had no problem believing in myself, but there were some things that felt more… *raw* than others. Things that you couldn’t rationalize or bullshit your way through, unfortunately.

Where the fuck did I even start with this?

When Julia grabbed another tissue, I decided to just go for it.

“So, welcome to the shitty dead dad club.”

Julia’s shock turned into a laugh that quickly shifted into a sob. She reached for another tissue, but the box was empty. I quickly stood up, grabbed a refill from the bottom desk drawer, and returned to sit next to her on the couch.

“Thank you,” Julia whispered when I gave her the box, wiping her eyes. She looked down at her hands, sniffling. Her voice was low and shaky when she spoke. “I hated my father, you know.”

She paused for a moment, and then it all came out.

“He screamed at me, threatened me, locked me in my room. He never hurt me—not physically—but sometimes he got so angry that I thought he’d kill me just because I dared to say something he didn’t like.”

When her eyes met mine, she looked lost.

“I used to wish that he would die, if it meant I’d be free,” she whispered. “If it meant I wouldn’t have to live in fear of his anger. And now that he’s actually dead, I don’t…” She shook her head. “I don’t understand why I’m *crying*! Why am I so sad about this?”

“He was still your father,” I said, shaking my head. “Despite all the terrible things Malakai did and how horrible he was as a person. I get the complicated feelings.”

She swallowed thickly. “You do?”

“My dad wasn’t exactly father of the year, either,” I said.

“What does that mean?”

“Well,” I said wryly, “some people would consider pitting your kids against each other and starting a pack war a character defect.”

Julia looked stunned. “Seriously?”

“And that’s just the tip of the iceberg.” I paused. My next words were serious. Even. “My father was a terrible person, Julia. An evil man who felt no guilt and actively worked to make me and my brothers miserable. He hurt his family deeply. But that didn’t mean I didn’t have complicated feelings when he died.”

Julia wiped her nose and looked away again, taking a deep breath.

“I feel like being sad means I’m a bad person, though,” she whispered. “I should know better than to care that he’s dead, when he…” Fresh tears formed, and she wrapped her arms around herself. “He didn’t care. He *never* cared about me.”

I squeezed her shoulder, and she leaned closer. She started crying harder when I pulled her into a hug. She was shaking like a leaf, like a child, and I wondered when her father had last hugged her. If he’d ever hugged her at all.

Silas had only ever beat me.

“You’re not a bad person,” I said against her hair. “You’re just a kid who lost her father. It’s okay for you to be sad about it.”

After a long moment, Julia nodded against my chest. Sniffling, she pulled back, wiped her eyes with another tissue, and whispered, “Thank you.”

Clearing my throat to push the lump away, I asked, “What are you going to do, now that it’s over?”

“I’m not sure. I can’t help but feel like some of this is my fault. I mean, my father used me as an excuse to start a *war*.”

“You can’t think like that,” I told her. “You just said it yourself—your ‘death’ was an easy way for him to justify something he already wanted to do. If you hadn’t given him a perfect excuse, he would’ve found another reason. You’re not responsible for your father’s choices.”

“I’ll try to keep reminding myself of that,” Julia said with a sigh.

“Would it help you to see the ring?” I asked.

She shook her head vehemently. “I don’t even want to be in the same room as that thing. It’ll only remind me that my father almost killed the people who protected me from him.” Julia sniffed, offering me a bitter smile. “I’m so sorry, Greyson.”

I looked down at my hands, opening and closing my fists. They’d been drenched in my father’s blood, not too long ago.

“When my father died,” I said in a low voice, “I was relieved. But that was because I was old enough to know that it wasn’t my fault that he didn’t love me or care about me. It wasn’t that I didn’t deserve his love—he just didn’t have any to give. And all the messed-up choices he made? Not my fault, either.” I looked up, meeting Julia’s glistening eyes. “I promise you, none of this is your fault. When you’re a little older, you’ll understand that.”

She let out a sharp breath, nodding. She wasn’t there yet—too young to release herself—but she would be one day.

I believed in her.

“I believe in you,” I told her.

Wiping her tears, Julia smiled again. This time, it wasn’t bitter. It felt real.

It made me feel like I’d done something right today.

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“You should get in touch with the Pit Bulls and let them know that you and Russell are here,” I said, after Julia had calmed down. Her eyes were puffy but dry, and she’d gathered up all her tissues and put them in the bin.

She looked chagrined at my words. “Russell’s moms are definitely going to have a thing or two to tell me.”

I snorted. “Tell them we’re happy for you two to stay here for a little while, if that’s what you want.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I appreciate everything you’ve done for us.”

I shrugged. “It’s not a big deal. Actually, there’s going to be a party tonight to celebrate our victory, if you and Russell want to come.”

Julia’s eyes flashed with excitement. “Oh, that sounds nice! Russell would definitely enjoy that. I’ll go find him and tell him what’s happening.”

“Invite the rest of the Pit Bulls too, if you like,” I said as we left the study. “The Vanguard palace has enough space for everybody. Their Alpha is a pain in the ass, but at least the food is good.”

Julia chuckled as we walked toward the living room. “I’ll pass the message along. I think they’d love to come.”

I was about to tell Julia to ask Lola or Violet for something to wear tonight when my train of thought came to a screeching halt.

Lilac was at the front door. He was holding a heavy bag, walking out without even glancing over his shoulder.

What. The. *Fuck?*

**Episode 4204**

I left the study, knowing that Julia was in good hands with Greyson. He’d answered her questions with the utmost care, and the way he was being so attentive made me wonder if he’d ever had someone do the same for him when he was a teenager. I doubted it.

My heart ached for the kid he’d been.

Growing up under Silas’s thumb, Greyson could’ve become a terrifying man, and yet here he was, always taking care of everybody. I felt lucky to be there for him—to know that he had my back, and I had his. I’d have done anything to make him feel safe.

My eyes suddenly started aching. I sniffed, shaking my head to clear it, then took a deep breath, composing myself before I walked into the kitchen. Torin was at the counter, whisking some kind of batter while Russell hovered next to him, clearly very excited.

“Cali, hey!” Russell grinned. “Torin’s making waffles!”

His enthusiasm made me feel lighter. I grinned. “How have you been, Russell?”

“So happy,” he said with a sigh. “Julia’s wonderful!” His face fell a bit. “I don’t like seeing her sad, but I’m glad I can be there for her. I’d hate for her to have to go through this alone.”

I rested a hand on his shoulder. “I get what you mean.”

“I wish there was more I could do for her, though,” Russell said, biting the inside of his cheek. “I wish I could make all the bad stuff go away instead of just, like, awkwardly crashing her visit to your pack house.”

I shook my head. “I’m sure Julia is grateful you’re here. You don’t need to fix anything for her—you just need to be there when she needs you.”

He frowned. “Even when I can’t do anything to help her?”

“Sometimes helping just means being nearby, letting the person know you’re around. And that’s more than enough.”

“Okay,” Russell said, nodding. “I can do that. I *already* do that.”

“I’m glad,” I said, smiling. But my smile quickly died when I noticed him fidgeting with the phone in his pocket. “So, do your moms know where you are?”

Russell blinked at me. “Uh. Define ‘know.’”

*Oh, god…*

“Russell,” I said impatiently. “Tell me your moms know you’re here.”

“They do!” he said. “I texted them.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “And they’re okay with you running off?”

He pressed his lips together. “Define ‘okay.’”

“*Russell!*”

“Okay, I might’ve sent the text and then turned my phone off! Accidentally, but also kind of on purpose?”

It took a couple of seconds for his words to fully sink in.

It was at that point that I, Caliana Hart, fully embraced my Mom Era.

“Russell!” I snapped. “Turn your phone on right now!”

“But—”

“You can’t have any waffles until you talk to your moms.”

He gasped. “You *wouldn’t*!”

I took a step toward him. “Try me.”

Russell frowned, turning to Torin. “Torin! Do something!”

Torin whistled. “Sorry, buddy. Cali’s in charge.”

Russell huffed, looking me up and down. “When did you turn into such a hard-ass?”

“It’s called character development,” I declared.

“Sheesh, *fine*!” He groaned, pulling the phone from his pocket. “I’ll call them. But I don’t understand what the problem is—it’s not like they never ran off and had adventures.”

My eye twitched. “I’m pretty sure their adventures didn’t involve running into a potential war.”

He raised his eyebrows. “You don’t know that. They were pretty feisty.”

“Call your parents, Russell.”

He let out a sigh of defeat and turned the phone on, just as Julia and Greyson came into the kitchen. Julia seemed worn, her eyes a little puffy, but there was a smile on her face. Greyson, on the other hand, was running his hands through his hair, and there was a distracted edge to his expression.

While Russell walked up to Julia, I mind linked with my mate. *Everything okay?*

His eyes met mine. He seemed distracted.

*Fine, yeah*, he replied. *Just thinking about something else.*

I was ready to ask him what, but then he spoke out loud. “I’ll be right back, actually.”

And then he turned around and left.

*What the hell?*

The urge to follow and pester him was a strong one, fueled by worry and the compulsory need to know everything about him at all times. Which was rich coming from me, because Greyson was totally in the dark about certain dreams I’d had.

*But let’s not dwell on that… Denial!*

I told myself that Greyson was fine and decided that suppressing my barnacle tendencies would be the best option for now. Julia made for a good distraction when she reached for my hand and squeezed it.

“I’m really glad I got to come and see you all,” she said.

I started feeling all warm and fuzzy at her words. “We’re glad, too. How are you feeling?”

“Talking with Greyson helped a lot,” she said. “I’m okay.”

Russell hugged her tightly, and judging by the way she sighed and exhaled, I could tell that she needed it. Poor kid. Speaking of Russell, though…

“*Call your parents, Russell*,” I said again.

He grumbled something into Julia’s hair.

*This kid… Good luck to his moms!*

“Actually,” I continued, “maybe you can both go call Russell’s moms? Julia?”

She nodded. “It would be nice to talk to them.”

Russell’s eyes widened, as if a light bulb had just gone off above his head. “That’s a great idea—they never yell at Julia!” He turned to his girlfriend. “You know what? *You* should tell them we ran off.”

*Wow. That boy really* is *devious.*

“We’ll be back for waffles, Torin!” Russell called over his shoulder as he and Julia headed to the living room to make the call.

“Sure thing!” Torin called back. Then he turned to me, smiling. “You handled that well.”

“I guess,” I said. “I just did what I thought was right.”

“The pack’s in a good place right now,” Torin added, “and part of that is due to your talent for making people feel good, Cali.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “You really think so?”

“Of course. You’re doing great, and I’m proud of you.”

I was getting a little emotional, not gonna lie. “Thank you, Torin.”

He beamed at me, pouring batter into the waffle maker. “Now, what toppings do you want on your waffle?”

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One waffle topped with strawberries and whipped cream later, Artemis entered the kitchen. She ignored the waffles, which was alarming all on its own, and made a beeline for me.

“I’ve been looking for you,” she said. “I think we should go find Dani and Tabitha and experiment with your shield again. You in?”

“Sure, let me just finish my—”

Artemis grabbed the last bite of waffle from my plate and threw it into her mouth.

I gasped. “That was mine!”

She cackled like an evil mastermind and rushed outside through the kitchen door.

“You monster! Come back here and apologize!”

I ran after her—offended by the disrespect, the audacity, the absolute *gumption* of this sister of mine—but then she suddenly whirled around and faced me.

“You know, I think your shield is one of the coolest weapons I’ve ever seen a Fae create,” she declared.

I paused, blushing. All my murderous intentions evaporated. “I mean… It *is* pretty cool.”

She nodded seriously, taking my hand to lead me to the area where we usually trained. “And it has a lot of potential, too.”

“I could be a great asset for the pack,” I agreed. “You know, *if* I can figure out how to protect a whole group of people instead of just myself.”

“I’ve never heard of anything like this before,” Artemis said. “But maybe that’s because all Fae have magic, so they didn’t need to think about making their individual gifts work for others.”

“Makes sense,” I agreed. “But my magic needs to be about everybody, since I’m part of the pack. Especially since I’ve got this Luna mark and I’m acting as Greyson’s de facto Luna.”

“That’s true,” Artemis said, looking at the tree line. “I heard Dani and Tabitha say they were going to go for a walk near the woods near the back of the house—we should see if we can find them.”

Sure enough, in a few minutes Artemis had tracked them down. Tabitha was leaning against a tree. But she was with Adair, not Dani. He had his arms crossed over his chest, his face fixed in its usual frown, his presence as imposing as ever. The two of them were talking in hushed tones, and neither of them looked happy.

*Abort mission! Abort!* I thought, ready to turn around and walk away.

But then I got mad at myself.

*I can’t keep being so intimidated by Adair! I’m a big girl, and he’s… Well, he’s a very old Fae, but it doesn’t matter.*

“Shit, Adair’s gonna be a problem,” Artemis grumbled, but I raised a hand.

“Let me handle this,” I said seriously.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I marched right up to Tabitha. Her serious expression cracked into a smile when she saw me. “Cali, hey!”

“Hey, do you know where Dani is? I want to work on the shield thing again.” I turned to Adair, crossing my arms. “Unless you have a problem with that?”

**Episode 4205**

**Xavier**

I shoved Blaine through the front door and onto the lawn. The rest of the pack had remained in the house, but I could feel them watching through the windows.

“Not so tough now, are you?” I said, through gritted teeth.

Blaine growled, yanking himself out of my grasp. “I didn’t sign up for any of this! It’s fucking bullshit!”

Panting, he stared at me, as if expecting me to explode. Under normal circumstances, I *would* have exploded. Mercenary Xavier would’ve slit this kid’s throat at the first misstep. But now I was an Alpha, and an Alpha couldn’t let a punk-ass little bitch ruin his rep, or his relationship with his Luna. Because if I killed Blaine, Knox would turn into even more of a pain in the ass, and then I’d have to kill him, too, and then Ava would be super mad.

I could just picture it—a domino effect coming around to bite me in the ass.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I demanded.

He gestured at the house. “I never wanted to be here!”

I fantasized about ripping his head off. “If you have a specific complaint, we can discuss it. Otherwise, shut the fuck up, or get the hell off my lawn.”

He laughed meanly, starting to pace. “There’s nothing to discuss, Xavier! I had a plan, and you fucked it up!” He pointed at his chest. “I was going to be Knox’s number two. I was going to have real power in the Samara pack, and then you came along and took it all away!”

“It’s not my fault you’re useless and your plans are stupid,” I snapped.

Blaine spat at my feet, and I shoved him. He fell down with a thud, and before he could stand, I planted my foot on his chest, pinning him there.

“I am your Alpha, Blaine,” I said with a sneer. “You agreed to join my pack. You don’t get to take it back now. Do you fucking *understand*?”

Blaine snarled, rolling from under me and jumping to his feet. “I only knelt to you because I didn’t want to lose my wolf! I don’t believe in you, and I don’t follow you! The Samaras aren’t—”

“The Samaras just fought bravely and won a war as part of a powerful alliance. Are you completely goddamn oblivious?”

He shook his head. “That doesn’t matter—we didn’t win on our own. Everyone else might be playing this game, pretending we’re a happy pack with a new Alpha that we love, but I’m not going to be a part of that!”

I wondered how Greyson would’ve dealt with this kind of bullshit. Immediately, a little voice in my head said that nobody would’ve dared to speak to Greyson this way, and my rage erupted.

I grabbed Blaine by the throat. “What the hell do you want? The only reason you’re alive is because you’re in this pack!”

He gripped my wrist. “I’m not going to stay here and kiss your ass!”

“Why, you got something better to do? Sounds to me that you just want to complain like a little bitch.”

He shoved me away only to lunge, throwing a punch. I’d been waiting for that for a while now, though. I gripped his fist before it could make contact, twisting it until the bone cracked. Blaine cried out in pain before trying to kick me in the stomach, but I evaded him easily.

He shifted, and I followed suit.

I could feel the pack watching us through the windows of the house, but nobody dared intervene. I knew I had a point to prove here, though. Blaine couldn’t go around disrespecting his Alpha—unless he wanted to be dead, or exiled from the pack.

The boy was fast and scrappy, throwing dirt in my eyes, biting at my feet, trying to go for my flank. He fought dirty, like any other teenaged wolf. And his tactics were effective, but just not good enough to overpower an Alpha. I ducked and shoved and clawed my way through it, but at the same time, I made sure not to injure him too severely.

When he sank his teeth into my shoulder, though, I decided I’d had enough.

I slammed him backward, the impact strong enough to distract him. I got my jaws around his neck, pinning him down with my paws.

*Had enough?* I mind linked.

Blaine whined.

I let out a low growl and released the idiot. I was so done with this bullshit. I wished I didn’t have to deal with any of these teenage morons. This couldn’t happen again—I needed to force an apology out of Blaine, otherwise he wouldn’t make it out of this pack alive.

Taking a step away, I shifted back to human and waited for Blaine to do the same. Instead of shifting back, though, Blaine scrambled to his feet, taking off into the woods like a fucking coward.

“God dammit,” I muttered.

This was ridiculous. All of it.

I heard the front door slam open behind me.

“Where the hell is he going?” Knox shouted from the porch. “Did you force him to leave?”

I whirled around to look at him, and my anger returned tenfold. “Shut the fuck up, Knox. You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“But—”

“Your friend fought his Alpha, lost, then ran off into the woods like a baby,” I spat.

Knox glared. “Blaine wouldn’t run away like that. He’d keep fighting!”

I laughed. “Why? He’d never win. The only reason why I didn’t fucking kill him for his disrespect is that he’s your friend.”

Knox opened his mouth to say something, but then stopped, gritting his teeth. “Blaine… He didn’t mean to act out. None of this is fair on us, or easy.”

“Blaine disrespected his Alpha,” I said sharply. “*Challenged* his Alpha. Do you have any idea what that means, Knox?”

He stared at me, pressing his lips together. His silence was damning. Somehow, it helped me calm down, refocus. I couldn’t keep exploding like this—I couldn’t keep letting my anger get the best of me. Especially because where Knox was concerned, I couldn’t actually let it out. Knox mattered to Ava, which meant he mattered to the Samara pack, which meant I couldn’t get rid of him.

“I know you want to be part of the pack, Knox,” I said. I wasn’t sure if I believed in his good intentions one hundred percent, but I was trying for a peace offering, here. “You want to take on a more active role, and that’s a good thing. But having the wrong friends will only cause you problems in the long-term.”

Knox’s jaw was set stubbornly. “You don’t know Blaine like I do.”

“And I don’t believe you know him as well as you think you do,” I said. “He’s trouble. Don’t let deadweights like Blaine pull you down when you’re doing better.”

Instead of feeling proud that I’d acknowledged his efforts, though, Knox just got angrier. Glaring at me, he pointed into the distance. “Why shouldn’t I believe that you pushed Blaine away on purpose? You never wanted any of my supporters to stick around!”

I was getting a headache now. I refused to believe that babysitting a bunch of deluded assholes was my life now.

And yet…

“The Samara pack is the only reason why you three idiots are still alive and whole,” I said. “What the actual fuck are you talking about?”

“You’re not listening, Xavier!” Knox ran his hands through his hair. “We feel like you never fucking listen!”

These boys needed a babysitter, a shrink, a mommy, a daddy, and some poison to put them to sleep forever. It was a miracle that I hadn’t played soccer with Blaine’s severed head today, and nobody seemed to be appreciative of that fact.

Kids were so fucking ungrateful these days.

“I’ll tell you one thing, Knox, and I want you to listen really carefully,” I said, fighting to keep my composure. “My life would be a lot easier if you just left and stopped being my problem. But right now, that’s not an option—not unless you want the council on your ass. The Samaras have put our reputation on the line for you three, and you repay me with nothing but bullshit. You’re acting like immature little shits. Do you understand what I’m saying, here?”

Knox glared at me, breathing hard. Then, without another word, he shifted and took off after Blaine.

For a moment, I just watched him, overwhelmed by the urge to chase after him.

And then I realized that these dumb, infuriating kids had just made themselves into an even bigger problem than before. There were already councilors in the area, sniffing around for Elle. I couldn’t let them realize that Knox and Blaine were so out of control—it would make me and the pack look weak, unable to handle the fucked-up assignment they’d forced on us.

I needed to get Blaine and Knox back before the council found out they were gone.

**Episode 4206**

**Greyson**

I left Julia in the kitchen with Cali and Russell, knowing she’d be fine there. I had to go find Lilac and see what was going on. I’d only just talked to the kid about taking some time to think about such a big decision. How the hell could he already be leaving without telling me anything? How could he not respect the Redwoods enough to say goodbye?

Was that how it would be from now on? People leaving right and left, like all the shit we’d gone through as a pack meant nothing to them? And for what? Because I wasn’t good enough? Because fucking *Xavier* was the better choice for them?

No matter what, though, I deserved a goddamn goodbye. An acknowledgement that I had played a role in their lives, and that it had meant… something.

“Fuck,” I muttered, pausing by the front door. I’d intended to rush out, run after Lilac, and then—

What? Demand an explanation? Beg him to come back? What the fuck was my plan, here?

I took my hand off the doorknob and stepped back. Breathing deeply, I took a moment to process my reaction. It felt like an extreme—the emotional escalation too quick to be normal. Was I really that angry about Lilac’s rejection? Or was I reacting like this because I was mad at Xavier for treating people like shit and then getting them to choose him, anyway? Or was it…

Could I be reacting this way because Lilac’s decision felt entirely out of my control?

I hated to even consider that as a possibility. Silas used to get so angry when things didn’t go his way—he’d wanted to control every single aspect of his pack, and no one had been allowed to make their own choices. That wasn’t the kind of Alpha I wanted to be. I’d seen what it could do to wolves, to have their autonomy taken away.

If Lilac wanted to leave without saying goodbye, then so be it.

If his choice was Xavier—no matter how horribly Xavier had been behaving recently—then so be it.

I needed to accept that and move on.

Forcing myself to walk away from the door, I was heading down the hallway when I saw Rishika coming down the stairs.

“Greyson, hey,” she said. “What’s going on?”

Her presence did something to me. It reminded me that she, at least, would always be there. Rishika had believed in me from the get-go, and that was an honor. And then, after those *slightly* mushy thoughts cleared out of my head, I realized that I had to fill her in on the latest council fuckery.

“I need to talk to you,” I said. “Got a minute?”

Soon, I’d brought her up to speed.

She shook her head, pressing her lips together. “Shit.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m going to call a pack meeting to let everybody know what’s going on.”

Rishika paused for a moment. “We may have to be prepared for something to happen at the Vanguard party.”

“Yes,” I said, nodding grimly. “I need you to pull together a small team for tonight, and assign them to watch out for the councilors and any signs of violence.”

Rishika nodded. “If anything happens, we’ll be ready.”

“Let me know if you need anything else from me.”

“I’ll talk to everyone, then give you a fleshed out report of who will be involved, and the specifics of where they’ll be stationed at the palace,” Rishika said. “Sound good?”

I nodded, just as I heard the front door open and close. And then a familiar voice echoed down the hallway. “What are you two whispering about?”

I turned to face Lilac, fighting to hide my surprise.

“I have some stuff to get to,” Rishika told me, walking away. “Talk later!”

I stared at Lilac, then gestured toward the kitchen. “I was just going to find Cali and get some coffee.” I eyed him as he stood there, awkwardly trying to hide his duffle bag behind his back. “What are *you* doing?”

It was obvious that he was leaving, but I was still hoping for that goodbye. I was aware of just how pathetic that made me, but that was who I was now, apparently. I had *feelings*.

“I just—” Lilac cleared his throat. Then he showed me the duffel bag and blurted out, “I put some things together to keep at the Samara pack house, in case… In case I ever stay there overnight. You know?”

It was like a weight had left my shoulders. I had to fight to keep the grin off my face.

“Oh,” I said.

Lilac swallowed. “It’s just—I thought about what you said. And I like being here, with Violet, and everybody, and you. You’re…” He paused. “Easy to talk to.”

“Is there anything else you want to talk about?” I asked.

Lilac nodded toward his duffel bag. “Taking that over to the Samara house… Do you think I’m being too extra?”

I raised an eyebrow. “I don’t care about you being extra—are you being safe?”

His face turned tomato-red. “Please stop.”

“Okay,” I said, trying not to laugh. “But I don’t think it’s a bad idea to keep a few things at Perrie’s. If you two are mates, you’re allowed to want to go all in. Just ask her about it first and see what she thinks.”

Lilac shifted from foot to foot. Then, awkwardly, he said, “Thank you. I will. I’m going to go call her right now, and probably take the bag over there later.”

There was a bit of a question in his voice.

“If that’s what you want to do, then you should do it,” I said. “Just let someone from the pack know when you leave. For safety.”

He nodded and thanked me again. He headed off to call Perrie, and I paused by the kitchen door, leaning against the doorframe. This was the best possible outcome—Lilac getting to make his own choice about what made him happy. I was content to know that I’d helped him get there, and that he’d communicated with me about this instead of running off into the night.

That was what being a good Alpha was all about.

It certainly had nothing to do with telling everybody what was best for them, or ordering them around. I’d never been that kind of leader, and I wasn’t going to start now. Though my reaction to the possibility of Lilac leaving still felt too intense, somehow—like there was something there, under the surface, that I couldn’t pinpoint.

Why did the idea bother me so much?

Did it have something to do with Gabriel and Kira leaving?

I knew that, logically, Gabriel had never been part of our pack to begin with, and Big Mac had been our witch long before Kira had arrived. We’d managed without Kira before, and we’d do it again. Did it suck to know that both Gabriel and Kira preferred Xavier over me? Sure. But it shouldn’t have bothered me as much as it did.

I wasn’t the kind of person—the kind of *Alpha*—who crumbled in the face of rejection. I did my best, and I knew my worth. If that didn’t work for everyone, then so be it.

It *shouldn’t* have fucking bothered me.

Shaking my head, I pushed through the door to the kitchen. Cali and Torin were standing at the counter, laughing. She had a smudge of batter on her nose, and she looked adorable. It made me smile. It made me happy.

*Cali* made me happy.

Most of the time.

Most of the time, it was Cali and me, and all I could think about was how much I loved her, how good it felt to be with her, and how right we were together. And even when we got into arguments—about whether she could officially become Luna or anything else—we bounced back. We were in a good place right now. She was my mate, and she loved me.

But she wasn’t *just* mine. She was a *due destini* mate, and despite everything, she still hadn’t made her choice.

And then it hit me.

My reaction to being rejected wasn’t about Lilac, or Kira, or Gabriel and Mikah. It wasn’t about their choice—it was about Cali’s. Cali, always at the forefront of my thoughts and feelings. And Xavier, always lurking in the background.

Xavier, breaking up with Cali and treating her like shit, leaving us all for another pack, kissing Ava in front of everyone to humiliate Cali, acting erratic and odd, choosing Ava as his Luna, contemplating turning me in to the council over Elle, injuring Lola during that dumb Ludis match… The list went on and on and on.

Xavier, doing his worst, but still in the running to be Cali’s choice.

Me, doing my best, but still not good enough for her to choose me.

And there was a part of me—a vulnerable part I wanted to ignore—that had to wonder what would happen if Xavier stopped being a dick and decided he wanted Cali back? If he told Cali that he was sorry? That he still loved her?

What would Cali do then?

What would *I* do, if Cali left me for Xavier?

**Episode 4207**

**Ava**

I heard raised voices from the lawn, but by the time I made it out there, Xavier was standing there alone, staring at the tree line.

“What happened?” I asked.

He looked angry. Well, angrier than usual. “Your cousin and his idiot friend are making our lives harder,” he snapped. “That’s what happened.”

“What does that mean? You can’t handle them?” I asked, my eyes narrowing.

I didn’t mean to sound accusatory, but stuff with Knox always made me anxious. Xavier was always one minute away from ripping my cousin’s head off.

The look he shot me didn’t say anything encouraging.

Holding my hands up, I said, “Sorry. I didn’t mean it that way. But I thought Knox was at least trying to be a useful member of the pack. Right?”

“I thought so, too,” Xavier muttered darkly. “But Blaine isn’t going to make it easy for Knox. He ran off just now, and Knox went after him.”

I baulked. “*Just* *now?* They ran off just now, when there are councilors…” I paused, swallowing hard. “Xavier, if the councilors catch them and think they’ve fled the pack, they’ll punish them—”

“I know,” he said, cutting me off. “I’m going to deal with it.”

I wanted to believe him, but I knew how Xavier felt about my cousin and Blaine. With the two of them causing trouble all the time, it was getting harder to blame Xavier for seeing them as nuisances. At least Zipper was still on the premises.

“When you say you’ll deal with it,” I said, “what do you mean?”

“What do you think I mean?” Xavier shot back snippily. “I’ll do whatever is best for the Samara pack.”

That was vague, and definitely still threatening.

“It was probably just a teenage tantrum,” I said. “Blaine is a jackass, but he wouldn’t risk his life over something so petty. And Knox is trying to be better. So…” I swallowed. “If you could *not* kill them today, I’d really appreciate it.”

Xavier stared at me for a long moment, scowling. Then, to my shock, he laughed.

“I promise I’ll try my best, Luna,” he said, walking over to me.

The way he said that last word made my stomach flutter. He stared into my eyes, and my heart pounded.

“Don’t worry,” Xavier said. “I will go track them down, deescalate the situation, and bring Knox back.”

I bit my lower lip. “And Blaine too?”

Xavier sighed, rolling his eyes. “Sure. For you.”

I nodded, smiling.

“It’ll be fine,” he said. “I’m going to fix this.” He glanced at the house. “Go back inside and check on everyone, okay? Make sure they’re all fine after all the morning’s excitement. I’ll be back before you know it.”

“Got it,” I said with a nod.

Xavier shifted. A moment later, his wolf ran off into the woods, presumably tracking Knox and Blaine.

I considered the fact that he hadn’t threatened to tear them apart a good sign.

When I got back inside, it seemed like everything had calmed down. I wondered if that was part of the house’s magic. Was the house chilling right now, and projecting that vibe onto us as well? Would we be dependent on a sentient building’s moods for the rest of our lives? Because I was pretty sure I hated that idea.

Shuddering at the thought, I poked my head into the various downstairs rooms. The rest of the pack seemed to be relaxing, thank god. When I checked the kitchen, Marissa was there alone, pouring herself a cup of coffee.

“Want some?” she asked, gesturing to the machine with a second empty mug.

“Yeah, thanks,” I said.

She poured for me and handed me the mug, and the two of us leaned against the counter.

I took a sip, sighing. “This is probably the first calm moment I’ve had all morning.”

She chuckled. “It’s been quite a day already, huh?”

“That’s one way of putting it.” I eyed her, noticing her freshly painted red nails. “Do you have anything going on for the rest of the day?”

She smirked. “Just coming up with a plan for how I want to corner Ravi at the Vanguard party.”

My stomach sank. *Ravi*. Couldn’t I even go ten minutes without hearing about the Redwoods?

“Do you think you and Ravi are getting serious?” I asked tightly.

Marissa raised an eyebrow. “Seriously fun, you mean?”

I gripped my mug, unable to control the frustration bubbling up inside me. “We’re not the Redwood pack 2.0, you know. We’re the Samara pack.”

Marissa looked bewildered. “Excuse me? What does that have to do with anything?”

My jaw clenched. “It just seems like everywhere I turn, there are Samara pack members getting tangled up with the Redwood pack. And I don’t like it.”

Marissa gave me a flat look. “Ava. Xavier was literally a Redwood.”

“And now he’s a Samara,” I snapped.

Marissa’s eyebrows shot up her forehead. “*Okay*… I feel like you’re bringing some baggage to this conversation that doesn’t actually have anything to do with me.”

I opened my mouth to disagree, but I found that I couldn’t. Marissa wasn’t wrong. For fuck’s sake, she could mess around with Ravi if she wanted. It was none of my business.

“Sorry,” I finally said. “I didn’t mean to put that on you. I’m just stressed out.”

She shrugged. “It’s fine. I’ve gotten used to your mood swings.”

I scoffed. “I do *not* have mood swings.”

She raised an eyebrow.

I sighed, rolling my eyes.

“You know what?” Marissa said, smirking. “Maybe Xavier’s the one who needs a good *cornering*, if you catch my drift.”

I was *not* going to talk to Marissa about my sex life with her Alpha. It just felt… invasive.

I kept my tone dry. “As much as I’d love to discuss ways to seduce Xavier, I need to find the witch and double check that the house is fine. Otherwise, we’re all going to get crushed under the weight of these walls before you get to see your Ravi tonight.”

Marissa chuckled, waggling her eyebrows. “*My* Ravi, huh?”

“You said it!” I called over my shoulder, heading upstairs.

Kira’s room was in the far-west corner. A pretty good spot, I realized. She got to see all the nice sunsets. I frowned at the thought—why would Xavier have given her such a nice room? Or had she given the room to herself because she’d made the house?

This was just too much.

I opened the door, entering her room without knocking. Kira might’ve created this house, but it was still mine, and she needed to remember that. The moment I set foot inside, she yelped and scrambled to cover something up. She was directly across from me at the desk she’d set up for all her witchy shit.

“What are you doing?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Nothing,” she said quickly, seeming out of breath. “Just finishing up the spell I started this morning to solidify the house.”

I got the sense that Kira wasn’t being completely honest. She was a witch, though, so what else did I expect from her? Friendship bracelets? No.

“So we’re safe from any further magical earthquakes?” I pressed.

Kira nodded, fiddling with her duvet cover. “I fixed everything; the house will be fine.”

I rarely saw her so nervous—what was going on with her? Was she still embarrassed about the house thing? I knew I’d have been mortified, in her shoes.

I decided that I should at least *try* to put Kira at ease, since she was going to be part of the pack. Logically, I knew that she was powerful, and a good ally to have. She might’ve had a thing for Xavier in the pack, but I couldn’t exactly choose to despise any woman who’d ever wanted to fuck my mate. That would just get inconvenient.

“Did you need anything else?” Kira asked. Her awkwardness had melted to something else. Indifference? Snobbery? She wasn’t easy to read, I could give her that.

“I understand why Xavier wanted you to join us,” I said honestly. “I can’t even imagine the kind of power that’s required to build an entire house in seconds.”

Kira raised an eyebrow. “Thanks?”

Well, then. This was going… not badly.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I added awkwardly.

Kira paused, looking at her duvet again. She nodded, not saying anything. Was this how it was going to be, between us? Me trying to be—somewhat—friendly with her, and her just ignoring me? I was the fucking Luna, for crying out loud. Did she expect to only interact with Xavier?

Well, she needed to get that idea right out of her head. Get *Xavier* out of her head.

“You like Xavier,” I said bluntly.

That sure caught Kira’s attention. Her gaze darted up to me.

“Liked,” she said. “I *liked* Xavier. Past tense.”

I stared at her. “Don’t bullshit me, Kira. I know you have feelings for my mate.”

**Episode 4208**

“Of course not,” Adair said coldly. “I’m not your keeper, Caliana.”

Nobody spoke for a moment, all of us waiting for the other shoe to drop. Tabitha sighed. “Come on, Adair. Just go ahead and say it.”

As ever, Adair looked all pinched and annoyed. Then he turned to me. “*But*—”

“There we go,” Tabitha said with a wave of her hand.

“—I’m worried,” Adair concluded. “For several reasons.”

Tabitha scoffed. “Get ready to hear his list.”

He shot her a look. “Will you let me speak?”

“I guess so,” she said haughtily.

“Thanks,” he replied in the same tone.

Was it me, or had they just leaned closer to each other? Okay, the staring thing they were doing was taking way too long. Not that I didn’t enjoy the unresolved tension vibes as a casual observer and rom-com watcher, but we had a problem to deal with, here.

I cleared my throat. “Adair? Your list of reasons?”

He snapped out of it, turning to me.

“Right.” Shooting a glance at Tabitha—who looked a little flushed, actually—he started talking again. “The first thing that troubles me is that this giant shield leaves both you and Dani vulnerable. And then there’s Tabitha, a third magic user. Magic requires complete control, so adding three parties is a recipe for disaster.”

“Okay. That’s fair,” I admitted. “But how am I meant to learn how to control something larger otherwise? How will I evolve?”

“That leads me to my second objection,” Adair said. “Working on powerful magic like this at your current skill level is like giving a baby who already had a gun an even bigger gun—before they even know how to use the first gun.”

“I don’t know what that means,” I said, scowling. “I’m not a baby. I am a mature and collected young woman. For the most part. Like, seventy percent of the time. Fine, sixty. Anyway, I’ve never been a baby, not once in my life!”

“Technically, you were a baby *once*,” Artemis interjected.

She was NOT helping.

“What I mean is that you still seem impossibly young, by Fae standards,” Adair said impatiently. “You know nothing.”

Tabitha huffed. “Adair! You could’ve said that to her more nicely.”

“That *was* the nice way of saying it,” Adair said defensively. His reactions to Tabitha were borderline entertaining to watch, but I had other things to worry about right now.

“I know *some* things,” I insisted. “And anyway, that’s exactly why I’m doing all this. So I can learn, and be in control, and be able to protect my pack.”

“Those are all very ambitious goals, considering you can’t consistently hold onto a single magical sword,” Adair said.

Both Artemis and Tabitha gasped. Before they could say anything, I spoke up, irritated.

“Now you’re just being rude, Adair,” I snapped. “What am I supposed to get out of this conversation if you just keep putting me down?”

“I’m just trying to set some realistic expectations,” he said.

“But what is it that you’re actually annoyed about?” I asked, glancing at Tabitha. “Is it that we’re doing this? Is it that Tabitha is helping? Or is it that she came up with this idea without talking to you?”

“I’d also like the answer to that question,” Tabitha said firmly.

Adair paused, looking between us, and then at Artemis. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, and drew in a deep breath. He turned to Tabitha. “That’s not it at all. Of course you’re free to use your power however you see fit. I’m sorry if I ever made you think otherwise.”

Tabitha blinked at him slowly, looking surprised. She didn’t pull away when he took her hand and squeezed.

*Aw! They’re cute! Wait, no—I’m mad at Adair!*

He turned to me. “I want all of you to grow and be powerful. But this is different. I am Fae, and what my understanding of magic comes from being Fae. This…” He gestures to Tabitha and me. “It’s not something any of us understand.”

“That’s true,” Artemis said. “I was just telling Cali earlier that the way she wants to use her shield is brand-new.”

Adair nodded. “I’ve been working with you and Artemis to make you both stronger, to help you get a better handle on your gifts. But that was always within the scope of what Fae understand. We use our weapons as individuals. Our own power, whatever its limits may be, defines that use. The partnership between you and Tabitha and Dani is something new. And that’s always dangerous. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

I wasn’t sure, exactly, but he was making me nervous. He seemed genuine—truly worried. I’d come to rely on Adair’s teaching and his guidance, even when he was being a pain in the ass. At the end of the day, I knew that he meant well.

*Should I be more worried that he’s clearly not on board?*

“What am I missing here, Adair?” I asked him. “Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“What you, Dani, and Tabitha want to do is brand-new,” he said. “It’s unprecedented. And we don’t know who’s watching. The Dark Fae council are always searching for me. If they get too close…”

My stomach twisted into knots. I understood now.

“I’ve been on the run for so long. The last thing I want is to put any of you in danger,” he said. He glanced at Artemis and me, then settled his gaze on Tabitha.

“Even if that’s the case,” I said, “I think it’s a risk worth taking. If I can make the shield work, I’ll be a much better asset for the pack. And if the Dark Fae do come for you, I’d be able to do something about it.”

Adair didn’t speak. He just stared at me.

“I’d much rather try to learn how to do this with you on our side, Adair,” I said. “You’ve helped us a lot so far.”

Adair frowned, as if I’d just surprised him with feelings, and he didn’t know what to do with them. Finally, he gave me a short nod. Tabitha reached for his hand, so at least it felt like the two of them were okay. That was a relief—I would’ve hated to be the cause of ongoing conflict between them.

“So,” I said. “Where’s Dani?”

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After finding Dani, we all walked to the same training spot we’d chosen last time.

“I’ll monitor,” Adair said, looking between Dani and me. “I want you to try extra hard to control the size of the shield. Start small and then grow it slowly.”

Dani nodded. “Makes sense.”

“I want you to stop when the points of the shield are ten feet away from each other, Cali,” Adair said sternly. “No bigger, no smaller. Got it?”

*Hah!* I thought. *I only hope I can manage that kind of precision.*

“Are you sure you want to be so specific?” Artemis asked Adair. “Cali isn’t very good at measuring stuff.”

I shot her a look. “I messed up the pancake recipe *one time*, Artemis.”

Artemis nodded, giving me a thumbs-up. “I believe in you!”

I nodded, taking a deep breath. Dani came to stand next to me. Everybody went quiet, and then Dani put a hand on my shoulder.

I reached for my magic, and it felt like a huge wave inside me. Dani’s magic was magnifying it, and the warmth that spread outward from my chest was almost soothing.

I started to build the shield like normal, watching it glisten and sparkle under the morning light. For a few moments, it was as easy as it had been the day before. It grew slowly but surely. I smiled to myself. This was working. This could work. This was something unprecedented, and we’d manifested it.

*But what if the Dark Fae* do *find out? What if they sense all the magic? What if you’re putting everyone in danger?*

Adair’s warnings erupted in my head, and my breath caught. Greyson didn’t even know that I was out here doing this—I hadn’t asked him. I *should’ve* asked him. This was his pack, and I’d made a big decision without telling him.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

My magic had gotten more intense without me realizing. The power just kept flowing into the shield, making it bigger and bigger. My heart was beating fast, my pulse ringing in my ears, but that wasn’t the only thing I could hear.

Someone was yelling.

*Adair?*

“Cali! Stop!”

I couldn’t stop, though.

*Oh, no… I can’t fucking stop!*

Dani’s grip was tight on my shoulder, and my power poured out of me like a wave, the shield unfolding and rolling and growing faster now, far more than ten feet wide, and then—

Another touch on my shoulder, and the shield blinked out of existence.

“Cali? Are you okay?” Tabitha was standing right next to me.

“Yeah,” I said, panting. “Dani?”

“I’m okay,” Dani replied shakily. She was breathing hard as well.

I let out a sigh of relief and reached for my power again, searching for that familiar warmth.

*Wait.*

My relief turned into horror.

I couldn’t feel *anything*.

My magic was gone.

**Episode 4209**

**Xavier**

I raced through the woods, following Knox and Blaine’s scents. The brats were really testing my fucking patience. We’d just ended a war—couldn’t I have a single morning without some horrible shit to deal with? Couldn’t everyone just be cool for five minutes? Was that too much to ask?

I growled as I ran, asking myself the same questions over and over. The scents grew stronger as I gradually caught up to Knox and Blaine. Suddenly, I heard a shout.

“*Blaine!*”

I slowed down, walking over to a fallen log and ducking behind it. Several feet ahead, Knox and Blaine were squaring off in human form. I couldn’t *believe* they’d just shifted back and decided to have a little screaming match in the woods while they knew that the council was parading around. I felt like I was watching one of Lola’s teenage soap operas.

“Just come back to the pack house, you stupid ass!”

“Shut the fuck up and leave me alone!”

“You know you can’t leave! Don’t you get it? This is it!”

Blaine’s teeth were bared, and he stopped pacing, glaring at Knox. “I’m *done* listening to you. You’re the reason I got into all this mess in the first place. I regret everything.”

Knox went rigid. When he spoke this time, his voice was lower. “You don’t mean that.”

Blaine looked away, crossing his arms.

Knox took a step closer. “Come to the pack house. We can make this work.”

Blaine flinched, glowering. “Is this who you are now? *Pathetic*.”

Knox growled, shoving him in the shoulder.

Blaine stayed put and kept shouting. “You’re a dumbass if you think Xavier will ever truly accept you as part of the pack. He’ll *never* make you his third.”

“What the hell do you know about what Xavier’s going to do?” Knox snapped. “You have no idea how pack politics work!”

“Shut the hell up!” Blaine got in Knox’s face. “If we’d just stuck together, we would’ve been fine!”

Knox seemed dubious. “What the fuck are you talking about?” He shook his head. “We were caught. We lost. Xavier won, fair and square, and now we have to do what’s right for the pack. That’s it.”

The silence that fell between the two of them was heavy.

I was surprised to hear Knox speak so blatantly, stating the facts without trying to twist them to make himself look good. There was no reason for him to lie out here, where he thought he was alone with his little buddy. He easily could’ve agreed with Blaine and said that they needed to bring me down or whatever the fuck.

Instead, he’d spoken clearly. Like he meant every word. Like he actually cared about the pack itself—not just about being powerful, or being Alpha. I definitely hadn’t expected that. Had the shrimp grown up while he’d been in the council’s custody?

Could this be… *progress*?

I didn’t dare to hope, but I’d take what I could get.

“You know what?” Blaine hissed. “Fuck you!”

He lifted his hand, getting ready to throw a punch. Before his fist could make contact, I leapt forward and landed between them with a growl. Both of them jumped backward, screaming in shock.

*Kids*.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Blaine demanded, scrambling to stand.

I shifted back to human. “I’m saving your stupid ass,” I said, then looked between them. “You both need to get back to the pack house before the council finds out you left.” I glared at the little dick. “Or do you want to lose your wolf, Blaine?”

Blaine looked so angry, I thought he’d explode any second. But then he shook his head, growling and shifting again before running off in the direction of the pack house.

“Fuck,” Knox muttered.

He looked ready to shift as well, but then I spoke up. “Hang on a second.”

Knox turned to me, scowling. “What?”

I decided that I would try to be nice. Or at least less of a dick. Just… good. Yes. It was what Greyson would’ve done. It was gross, but it was also necessary. For Ava’s sake, and for the pack.

“I overheard a little bit of what you and Blaine were arguing about,” I said. “I appreciate what you said.”

Knox crossed his arms, glaring at me. “So, what? I have to worry about being spied on now?”

“Did you just completely miss the part where I told you I appreciate what you said?” I demanded. This kid didn’t listen to anything, did he? “This is a good thing. I believe you now when you say that you care about the Samara pack more than yourself. You could’ve backed down or agreed with Blaine, but—”

“I would fucking *never* back down from a fight!” Knox said sharply.

“We both know that’s not true,” I said. Knox growled, but before he could get madder, I kept talking. “I’m glad I caught this fight. I wanted to know what you really thought when you weren’t performing for me, trying to get into my good graces. Now I see that you really care about the pack, and not just your own ass.”

Knox didn’t speak for a moment. Slowly, he lowered his hands from his chest, and I saw some of his earlier frustration tapering off. Looking away, he said, “Okay. That’s… good, then.”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “That was the realest I’ve ever seen you. So we’re good.”

Knox swallowed, meeting my eyes. “I’m glad you’re starting to realize that I mean what I say.”

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When we made it back to the pack house, Knox and I shifted back to human on the front porch.

Sniffing the air, he said, “Blaine’s here, but I think he’s at the back of the property. I’ll go find him and try to talk some sense into him.”

“Keep it civil,” I said.

Knox shrugged. “Sometimes Blaine just needs someone to hit him until he comes round.”

I shrugged. “Fine, then. Whatever works.”

I left Knox to it and headed back into the house. Nothing was shaking, nothing was broken, nobody was screaming. That was an improvement, at least. I could hear murmurs and a bit of laughter—all normal stuff, just people hanging out. I was grateful for it. Earlier felt like it was all out of control.

But now, I felt almost… *good*, about my talk with Knox.

Climbing up the stairs, I tried to wrap my head around being on the same page as the shrimp. If someone would’ve told me it would happen, I would’ve said they were crazy. Maybe the kid had truly experienced a change of heart and was ready to help build up the Samara pack. His own ambition seemed to have taken a back seat—at least for now. Or maybe he was scared shitless of the potential consequences of his actions, and his arrogance had been brought down a peg or two. He would never be the Samara Alpha after everything he’d done, and maybe he’d finally realized that.

Whatever the reason, Knox seemed to be one less problem for me to worry about for now. Blaine still seemed to be an issue—what with his surly attitude—but I hoped that Knox would deal with him. Zipper basically kept to himself, which was great. He was my new favorite.

Shaking my head, I stepped off the last stair and caught Ava’s voice. She was talking to someone down the hall. Even though the door was closed, I could hear her clearly.

“I mean what I said about Xavier,” she said. “I hope we can agree on that. And I’m glad we’re finally starting to understand each other.”

I frowned, taking a few steps forward. Who was she talking to? The only person who lived on the west side of the upper floor was…

*Kira*.

“It’s all good,” Kira told Ava.

Kira was *agreeing* with Ava.

Oh no.

Oh *fuck*.

That couldn’t be good. What were they agreeing on, and what did it have to do with me? And what the fuck would the two of them do to me if they caught me eavesdropping? I did *not* want to have to deal with them when they were both pissed.

I turned in the opposite direction, rushing into my room to get some pants. My thoughts were going a mile a minute, the implications of that snatch of conversation weighing heavy on me. Had Kira told Ava about the kiss? Kira wasn’t dead, so probably not. Ava’s tone hadn’t been particularly reassuring, though. She’d sounded all fake-nice and appeasing, but also deeply threatening.

How the fuck did she *do* that?

Bottom line—something had happened while I’d been off hunting down the shrimp parade. I didn’t like not knowing.

I grabbed a pair of pants from the floor and was pulling a shirt over my head when I heard the bedroom door open. I turned around to see Ava standing there.

“I know what you did, Xavier,” she said.

**Episode 4210**

I was on my knees, shaking, panting, my ears ringing. I felt empty inside.

All my magic, gone.

*Where… Where did it go? What’s happening? What if I never get it back? I just got used to feeling like I can protect myself and my family, and now… Now I’m weak and useless all over again—*

I couldn’t breathe.

There was yelling everywhere around me as I fought to even out my breathing. Artemis’s voice suddenly got closer, and then there was an arm around my shoulders, squeezing. I wasn’t going to freak out. I shouldn’t freak out.

I should be calm, and collected, and mature, and—

*WHERE THE FUCK IS MY MAGIC?*

I wanted to speak, but I was terrified that I’d burst into tears. In front of Adair, who’d already called me a baby today. It was taking everything I had to just sit there and stay calm.

Adair’s voice came into focus, suddenly, his shadow covering me before he dropped to his knees in front of me.

“Cali?” His voice was soft. I’d never heard it like that before. “Can you speak? We need you to say something so we can make sure you’re all right.”

I looked up from the icy ground and met his gaze. His face came into focus, and he looked worried. His reaction was unprecedented, but also normal, so it oddly made me feel a smidge better. When I opened my mouth, only one thing came out.

“How long do the effects of Tabitha’s magic last?”

Adair paused, frowning. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t think I’d describe what I do in that way,” Tabitha said.

I looked up at her—both she and Dani were staring at me in concern.

“Are you okay?” Dani asked.

“Yeah,” Artemis said, pushing Adair aside. “Are you hurt?”

She inspected my hands, my face, while I shook my head no.

“Your pulse is going nuts,” Artemis said with a frown, her thumb pressed to my wrist.

*That’s because my magic is gone and I’m fighting not to panic!* I screamed inside my head.

“Tabitha,” I started again, taking a deep breath. “How *would* you describe what you do?”

“It just… works,” she said, shrugging helplessly. “I just make it all stop. I can negate any spell, positive or negative.”

“Why are you asking these questions, Cali?” Adair’s eyes were narrowed on me. “We can’t help you if you don’t tell us what’s wrong.”

I pressed my lips together.

*Don’t cry, Cali! He called you a baby, and you’re not a baby! YOU ARE NOT A BABY!*

“I can’t feel my magic,” I whispered. My eyes burned, but I forced the tears down with sheer stubbornness.

Nobody spoke for a moment.

And then Adair burst out laughing.

I was so enraged by his reaction that I shoved him. “Why are you laughing? You think this is *funny*?” I looked up at Tabitha, aghast. “Tabitha! Your boyfriend is a monster!”

Tabitha blinked at me. And Adair just… laughed harder?

“Oh my god!” I grabbed him by the shoulders, forgetting that he was my elder, and potentially murderous, and had the personality of a tiger. “What is so funny about me losing my access to magic, Adair? I’m helpless! Like a—” I gasped. “*Like a baby!*”

“I’m sorry, it’s—it’s fine,” he said, removing my hands from his shoulders. He was still laughing slightly, and I felt about ready to murder him.

*Too bad I don’t have my magic to do it!*

“You don’t know,” he said. “Of course—how could you possibly know?”

My eye twitched. “What don’t I know? What are you talking about?”

“This is completely normal, Cali.”

I paused. Slowly, I turned to Artemis.

She nodded. “It’s happened to me before, too.”

“Every Fae has a limited well of magic to pull from. This is just a magic burnout,” Adair said. “Sorry I laughed. It was just… Your face! But that wasn’t really funny—”

“*You* *think?*”

“I’m sorry,” he said again, sobering. “I should’ve thought to let you know about this earlier, but I didn’t realize how big you were going to go with the shield.”

I took a few deep breaths, trying to focus on the positives.

*My magic’s not gone. It’s just burned out.*

I turned to Artemis. “So it’s going to come back? It’s not gone forever?”

My sister nodded. “It’ll be okay.”

“Don’t worry,” Adair said. “You’ll be fine in a few hours.”

Relief washed over me, and I felt like standing up and doing a little dance. I still felt a little weak, though, so maybe I’d save that for later. I had no idea what I’d have done if I’d actually lost my magic forever. It would’ve caused one hell of an existential crisis.

*Even worse than my usual existential crises.*

“It won’t last that long,” Artemis said, patting my shoulder. “At least you didn’t break a Fae promise or something.”

I shook my head. “That’s not actually applicable here, but thank you.”

“I need you to take me through what happened, though,” Adair said, cutting in. “Why did the shield get out of control like that?”

“Did I do something wrong?” Dani asked worriedly.

“It wasn’t you!” I rushed to reassure her. “I just… *I* should’ve had better control.”

Artemis frowned. “But that’s why we’re doing this. So you can *learn* control.”

“I guess we should’ve started smaller?”

“Yes,” Adair agreed. “And now it seems like you’re starting to understand *why*. You don’t want to go too big and lose your magic in the middle of a battle.”

“And now *you* understand why I need to keep practicing,” I said. “If we hadn’t insisted on this, I never would’ve found out about magic burnout.”

Adair’s expression was pinched, but he nodded.

Tabitha, Dani, and Artemis fussed over me for a while longer, until I finally got to my feet. I felt normal, but very tired, and I definitely needed a break.

“I’m going back to the house to eat another one of Torin’s waffles and take a nap,” I announced.

“I should go with you,” Artemis said, linking her arm around mine.

I shook my head. “No, stay back and do whatever training you want to do.”

Artemis frowned. “Are you sure? I can go inside with you and hang out.”

After I convinced her to stay back with the others to train, I headed to the house. Every time I glanced back over my shoulder, I saw everybody watching me, as if they were making sure I didn’t suddenly keel over.

*Great job, Cali! Definitely not a baby!*

I kept reaching for my magic and finding nothing. I’d been told not to worry, but I was getting more and more frustrated. I’d gotten used to having my magic right at my fingertips, and now everything had come crashing down. It reminded me of the beginning, when it had been so difficult for me to feel my magic, let alone use it.

*When will it come back?*

I hadn’t felt this miserable in a long time.

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I kept reaching for my magic as I ate my waffle, as I climbed up the stairs to get to my room, as I sat on my bed and stared at the wall. Every few minutes, I checked to see if there was anything there, and every time, I was disappointed. I felt numb, in a way—like something had been torn out of me.

*It will come back. But when?*

A knock on the door startled me. Flinching, I turned to see Greyson leaning against the doorframe.

“Hey,” he said. “Are you okay?”

There was something strange in his tone, in his stance, in his beautiful face that should *not* have been distracting me right now. He had no right to be so distracting. It wasn’t fair. I felt the urge to curl into a ball, just to hide from him and his *effect*.

“I’m fine,” I said. Lied.

*Why the fuck did I just* lie *to Greyson?*

I looked away. I didn’t want to talk about this. I wanted to focus and recharge my magic, and *then* we could talk about it as much as either of us wanted to.

Greyson didn’t say anything else, though. He walked in, taking a seat next to me on the bed. He reached for my hand, the feeling of his touch distracting me as he started playing with my fingers. In any other moment, I would’ve loved this. I would’ve reached for him, kissed him, pulled him close. But right now, the only thing he was doing was distracting me from the task at hand.

*FIND THE DAMN MAGIC, CALI!*

Annoyed, I pulled my hand away from his grip. “I’m trying to do something, here.”

He let out a laugh. “So am I.”

He opened his arms, pulling me into a hug just as I reached for my magic again, expecting to find nothing, expecting to feel the cold.

Instead, all I felt was warmth.

Sudden, violent warmth.

Beams of light exploded from my hands, bleeding out and bursting free, shooting toward—

*Greyson*.

Hitting him square in the chest.

“Greyson!”

He went flying backward, smashing through the window.

*BANG!*

I screamed, running to look over the windowsill.

My mate lay unmoving on the ground below.

**Episode 4211**

“OH MY GOD!” I screamed in pure horror. My whole body went colder than the icy winter wind blowing in through the broken window. “Greyson! Greyson! Can you hear me? Are you all right?”

Down on the ground below—*two stories* *below*—he didn’t move, and my heart thumped painfully. What the *hell* had I just done?

I had to get downstairs, *now*.

I whipped around and sprinted out of the room. I couldn’t *believe* I’d just done that! I hadn’t even been thinking; I’d only been reaching for my magic—I’d had no idea I was going to activate it—and now I’d hurt one of the people I cared the most about in the world.

If Greyson wasn’t okay, I would never forgive myself.

“Cali? What’s going on? Why are you screaming?” Lola poked her head out of her room, but I didn’t stop to answer the question.

“Emergency!” I said as I flew by her. “Talk later!”

I ran down the stairs and blew through the front door.

My only thought was Greyson, and I needed to be at his side. I hurried down the porch steps and took off, running at top speed around the corner of the house, but it felt like it was taking forever. God, this house was so freaking huge!

When I finally rounded the corner and saw him on the ground, surrounded by shards of broken glass, I could’ve burst into tears. Why wasn’t he moving? What had happened? But I pushed that down and hurried toward him. It didn’t look like he was bleeding, which was something, I supposed. Maybe he was just dazed? But he was an Alpha!

I fell to my knees by his side, cupping his face in my hands.

*Greyson? Can you hear me? Are you okay? Oh god, please tell me you’re okay!*

He didn’t reply, and his eyes stayed shut. I could hear my racing pulse thundering in my ears as I listened for his voice, but nothing came.

“Oh god,” I murmured.

I pulled his head into my lap, smoothed his light hair away from his face, and looked him over carefully. There wasn’t any blood, and nothing looked broken or like it was starting to swell. Even if he *had* been hurt, the injury would already be healing… So why wasn’t he waking up?

My head started to spin as I thought about all the terrible possibilities. Tears filled my eyes. *What had I done?*

“Greyson,” I whispered, leaning close. “Greyson, please, open your eyes.”

Then, to my immense relief, he flinched. His eyelids fluttered for a moment, then cracked open, and after a moment I realized that his lips were moving. He was speaking, and I leaned closer to hear him.

“What did you say?” I asked.

“I said that if you wanted some space, you could’ve just said so,” he rasped.

With a sound that was half-laugh, half-sob, I threw my arms around his neck. “You’re okay!”

“I’m fine, love,” he said with a weak laugh, patting my back. “But could you try not to choke me?”

I pulled back. “Sorry, I was just worried. You weren’t moving.”

He gave his head a gentle shake. “Maybe I got the wind knocked out there for a minute, but I’m okay, I promise.”

“You’re sure?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” he said. “Though I have to admit, this is the first time a girl has thrown me through a second-story window.”

“Well, as proud as I am to have attained that distinction, I don’t think we should make a habit of it. And this *isn’t* funny,” I said, giving his shoulder a gentle shove. “Stop laughing.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll stop,” he said, pulling himself into a sitting position. “But it is kind of funny.”

“Greyson!”

He smiled. “So, what happened, exactly?”

I groaned. “I don’t know. I’m experiencing some, like, magic burnout. Adair told me that it happens when you use too much magic too quickly, which is what I did. He said it was just temporary, but I couldn’t feel my magic, and I was really worried that it wasn’t going to come back, so I kept testing it, searching for it, and when you grabbed my hand, I must’ve reached for too much of it.” I shook my head. “Adair said it would come back, but I wasn’t prepared for how *abrupt* that return was going to be.”

Greyson chuckled. “Well, I’m happy to have given you the extra push you needed,” he said with a wink.

I rolled my eyes. “I think maybe you hit your head too hard when you landed. Should we have Torin check you out?”

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” he said. “I think I’ve already healed.”

I sure hoped so.

“Greyson! Are you okay?”

We looked over to see Artemis running toward us, Adair and Dani right behind her.

“I’m okay,” Greyson assured them.

“Cali? Greyson? Is everyone okay?” Lola asked, coming around the corner of the house.

“We saw what happened,” Adair told us. He looked at me, and my stomach dropped. I couldn’t tell if he was disappointed or at least a little impressed…

Artemis looked at me and raised an eyebrow. “So, I’m guessing your magic is back?”

Turning away from Greyson, I tried reaching for my magic again, just to test it out. I had to reach further than I was comfortable with before I felt that familiar hook, and even then, it felt a bit distant. Tenuous.

I turned back to the group and nodded. “It’s there.”

And it was, but I decided I was going to let it grow and—more importantly—*stabilize* before I tried reaching for it again.

“Are you okay, Greyson?” Dani asked.

“I’m fine,” Greyson told her. “It was just a training accident.”

I felt my face flush, but figured he wasn’t completely wrong about that.

“You should go inside and rest,” I told him. “I’ll deal with all this broken glass.”

He shook his head. “I really don’t need to rest, love. I’m feeling fine—you don’t need to worry about me.” He got to his feet and reached for me, pulling me up, too. “You should get inside, though. It’s cold out here and you’re not wearing a coat.”

Just then, the wind whipped up and wrapped around me, making me shiver.

“Are you *sure* you’re feeling okay?” I asked again. I just couldn’t shake the dread I’d felt, looking down at his unmoving body from the bedroom window.

He leaned down and pressed a kiss to my lips. “I’m sure. Completely, positively sure. I don’t want you to feel bad about this, Cali. It was an accident. Accidents happen.”

“I know that,” I said. “But I never want to hurt you again.”

“But I’m not even hurt,” he insisted. “I promise. Now, I’m going to clean up out here, you go inside and warm up.”

I wanted to keep protesting, but Lola took my arm.

“Cali, Greyson’s right. It’s freezing out here, and you’re cold as ice. Just listen to him and come inside,” she said. “You can help me figure out party outfits with Jacs.”

Finally, I gave in and nodded. “Okay. Let’s go.”

Lola and I headed inside, and—as badly as I felt about everything—I was glad to get back into the warm house. I followed Lola up the stairs and into her room, where Jacqueline was sitting on her bed, surrounded by piles of clothes. Looking around, I recognized some of Lola’s dresses in the piles.

Jacs looked up as we entered. “See? I told you she was fine. She was fine, wasn’t she? I knew she was.” she rolled her eyes theatrically. “This house has so much drama. I keep telling you—you can’t respond to every little thing that goes wrong, or you’ll never get anything done.”

“Yeah, you *do* keep telling me that,” Lola confirmed, though she rolled her eyes as she spoke.

Jacs didn’t notice and pulled a red dress from a pile of clothes. “I’m going to wear this one.”

“Fine by me.” Lola turned to me. “Start looking for something to wear.”

I took a deep breath, trying to fight back the dizziness that was threatening to overtake me. I felt like I had whiplash—not three minutes ago, I’d been kneeling over Greyson’s still form, begging him to open his eyes, and now I was browsing through evening gowns?

I knew this was supposed to be fun, but something about the whole thing just didn’t sit right with me, and my stomach clenched with fear and anxiety. It just felt ominous, somehow. Like it was a bad start to what was supposed to be a night of celebration.

Some of what I was feeling must have shown on my face, because Lola paused her dress perusal and looked up at me.

“Cali?” she said. “You look really pale. Are you okay?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean?”  
 “I just can’t stop worrying about what might happen at the party tonight.”

**Episode 4212**

**Xavier**

*I know what you did.*

My heart began to race, and I pulled my shirt down so I could see Ava’s face. I tried to read her expression, but it was so shuttered that it was impossible to interpret. What the hell did *that* mean? What did she know about? *I know what you did*… Did that mean she knew about the kiss? I needed to play it cool. This could be about anything. I just had to read the room and not implicate myself.

“It didn’t mean anything!” I blurted.

Fucking hell. So much for that plan.

Ava’s expression darkened. “What do you mean? And how *couldn’t* it mean something?”

“I—I’m just not reading anything into it,” I said, trying to recover from my total fuck-up, “and you shouldn’t either.”

She frowned, now looking very confused. What the hell was going on? Had I been wrong about this whole situation? What was Ava talking about?

“Hang on, what are *you* talking about?” I asked slowly.

She narrowed her eyes. “Kira told me everything.”

“Okay, what’s ‘everything’?” I asked.

“I know that you drew a hard boundary with her, and that you told her that you and she were just friends, and that you’d never be anything more. And that you said all that for me,” she said, searching my face as she spoke.

I breathed again, relief flooding through me. Thank god. But then—almost immediately—I started to wonder why Kira would say all of that. Had she meant it? And if she *had* meant it, then why had she kissed me earlier? What was going on with her? What game was she playing? Was she just trying to get out ahead of this thing to save herself from Ava’s wrath?  
 If that were the case, I wouldn’t blame her. In a fight between Ava and Kira, I’d put my money on Ava, no question.

“Yeah,” I said, nodding. “That’s what happened.”

Ava narrowed her eyes. “Then what did you mean just now, when you told me not to read into it?”

She took a step closer to me, and I wasn’t sure if I was meant to interpret it as a threat.

“I was just being honest,” I told her. “It’s for the good of the pack. I don’t want you to think of the whole Kira thing as a big deal. But you’re the pack’s Luna, and I know you’re worried about this—”

“I wasn’t worried,” Ava interrupted.

That made me smile. “Okay. You’re not worried. But I just wanted everyone to know where we stood.”

She looked at me for a moment more, then she broke into a smile. It was lovely and lit her face like the sun. She took my hand and gave it a squeeze, then pulled me over to the bed and tugged me down to sit beside her.

“Okay, and where *is* that?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Where *do* we stand?”

I sighed. I had no idea how to answer that question, or what answer she wanted. Was she looking for something more than just Alpha and Luna of the Samara pack?

There was a rumble in my head, and I heard the echo of Adéluce’s voice in my mind, ordering me to fall in love with Ava. I felt my shoulders tense as I remembered her command. I couldn’t do that. I wouldn’t.

“What do you mean?” I asked hoarsely.

She gave me a quizzical look. “With Knox and Blaine. Where do we stand? I saw they came back. What happened?”

And for the second time in the space of five minutes, I was flooded with relief. But even as I let out a long breath, I wondered how much more of this I’d be able to stand. I wasn’t sure how much longer I could continue to navigate this minefield. It just felt like someone was going to end up hurt by the time this was over—but I was going to do my damnedest to make sure that *someone* was Adéluce.

I cleared my throat. “Well, I still think Blaine is a little shit, if you’re interested in that,” I told her. “And I’m sure we can’t rely on him for much of anything.”

“Okay,” she said, nodding. “No surprises there.”

“But Knox…”

“What about him?” Ava asked when I didn’t go on.

I looked up at the ceiling, searching for the right words to describe what had happened out in the woods. “I think I got to hear the *real* Knox out there.”

“What do you mean?”

“He was arguing with Blaine, and didn’t know I was listening, so he didn’t have any reason to lie, or put on an act about how much he cares about the pack. But he really does. He really cares about the pack.”

Ava looked surprised, and then a small smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. “Oh.”

I smiled at her. “You can say it, if you want.”

She grinned. “All I’m going to say is that it’s a relief to hear that.”

“I’ll bet.”

“And I know that you were prepared to do whatever was necessary if Knox didn’t come through, so I’m definitely glad to hear that he did,” she added.

I looked at her carefully. “And?”

“And what?” she asked, not quite meeting my eyes.

“It feels like there’s something you’re not saying,” I said.

She glanced away. “It’s just… It’s starting to feel like the pack is on its way to being I want it to be.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I had a list in my head going into this, and it feels like I’ve been checking things off one by one. We have a powerful Alpha in charge, I feel good about my place as Luna, and now there’s even room for my family to grow.” She shrugged. “It’s everything I wanted.”

I tried to ignore the gnawing ache of guilt in my gut and put my arm around her shoulders.

“I’m glad you’re happy,” I said huskily.

That was true, at least—I *was* glad that she’d gotten so many of the things she wanted, and I felt good that we’d accomplished those things, too. They were the things every pack needed not just to survive, but to thrive.

When I stepped back and took an objective look at the pack, there was so much about what we’d built that was *so close* to the life I’d always wanted, too, and I could appreciate that as I sat here with Ava—if only for a few minutes. As long as I didn’t think of Cali.

But by deliberately *not* thinking of her, I created an empty space in my mind, and in an instant, Cali filled it. She was there, in my head, like always. She was a constant in my thoughts—a specter, presiding over everything.

My thoughts went back to when I’d seen her in the woods. I hadn’t been thinking about her, I’d just ended up near her.

It didn’t seem to matter how much I told myself to forget about her, or not to think of her—she was just always going to be there.

Ava leaned against me with a sigh and rested her head on my shoulder. I gave my head a quick shake and tried to refocus as she started speaking.

“I also have to admit, it feels good to know that real change is actually possible.”

“Yeah?” I asked her.

She nodded. “I don’t feel like I’m the same person I used to be, and I can see that it’s possible for Knox to change, too.” She was quiet for a beat. “The pack is on the right track, and I think we’re headed in the right direction, but…” She trailed off, and I felt her body tense.

I looked down curiously. “But what? What is it?”

“I’m glad we’re growing,” she said slowly, her face set, “and that people are choosing to join the pack. It’s a testament to where we are and what our potential is, but…”

“*But?*” I urged.

“But I think we’re relying too much on poaching Redwood pack members.”

This wasn’t what I’d been expecting her to say, and my defenses automatically went up. “I know they’ll be loyal to us.”

She nodded. “Probably. And loyalty is important, you’re right about that.”

“I feel like there’s another *but* coming,” I said tightly.

She glanced at me. “But we need to remember that our pack is more than them being loyal to you and me. I know that the people you’ve asked to join will be loyal to *you*, but we need people who are loyal to the Samara pack. To something bigger than just one person, even if that person is our Alpha. The Samara pack has its own identity.” She was quiet for a moment, clearly thinking. “Is there anywhere else we can find wolves?”

I considered the question, then nodded. “Actually, yeah. I think I know a place.”

**Episode 4213**

**Greyson**

I bent to pick up the largest pieces of glass from the lawn. Considering how many wolves we had running around, I wanted to collect it all before someone got sliced up.

Rishika—who’d come out to see what the chaos was all about—was next to me, helping with the glass and bringing me up to speed on her plans for the party and the council.

“—and I think I’ll set up some teams so everyone knows who they’d be with in case anything happens. That way, we can be ready to go, just in case,” she was saying.

I nodded. “I think that sounds like a good plan.”

She straightened and looked over at me. “What do *you* think the council is planning?”

I sliced my finger on the jagged edge of a piece of glass. The pain was quick and sharp, but I felt my healing start almost immediately.

“I’m not sure. And honestly, it’s pissing me off.” I looked down at my finger. “I don’t understand why they won’t just come talk to me.”

“You’re right, it doesn’t make any sense,” she said thoughtfully. She paused. “Unless they’re trying to build a case against you.”

“It’s a possibility,” I admitted grimly. “But I’m not sure why they’d do that.”

“Got me,” Rishika said. “But I don’t think I’ve actually understood a single council decision, so maybe I’m not the best person to ask.”

I chuckled darkly, and we finished cleaning up the last of the glass and headed back into the house.

“I wonder if the councilors will show up at the party tonight,” Rishika mused as we dumped the glass into the trash. “It would definitely make a statement, if they do intend to go after you.”

“Yep,” I agreed. “They could handle the Elle issue quietly, but if they start interrogating my pack members, they have to be aware that it’ll get back to me sooner rather than later.” I shook my head. “I’m just frustrated. This is all such shady bullshit.”

“I know,” Rishika said, brushing the tiny shards of glass off her hands.

“Why can’t they just knock on the door and ask me whatever the hell they want to ask me?”

She shrugged. “Who knows?”

“Can you let the pack know that if any of the councilors approach them, they should just tell them to come talk to me?”

Rishika nodded. “I’ll get the word out.” She started to turn away, but then she stopped and looked back at me. “The council coming here—what do you think this is all *really* about?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted, though privately I knew that it could be about any number of things—and none of them good. It could be about Elle killing Helix against council orders, about Xavier’s and my fight with the Bitterfang wolf after the summit, it could be about the death of Evan from the Northwind pack.

“The only possibility that really concerns me is if they’re sniffing around because I turned Elle,” I said.

Rishika raised her eyebrows. “Say that *is* why they’re here. What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “But I do know that we won’t let them take her.”

“But what about you?” Rishika asked pointedly.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I assured her. Internally, I was praying that this council visit *wasn’t* about the sire bond. That was a problem that I just didn’t need to be dealing with at the moment.

“That’s good to hear,” she said with a smile. “Okay, I’ll let everyone know what you said about the council.”

“Thanks.”

As she headed into the den, where a big group of pack members were watching a football game, I headed upstairs. I wanted to clean up and change my clothes—my shirt still had little shards of broken glass embedded in it.

As I headed up the stairs, my thoughts went to Cali. I was glad she was feeling better and that her magic was coming back, but I hoped I didn’t have to get thrown through a window every time she went through a magic burnout.

In my room, I took a quick shower and was just pulling on a fresh pair of jeans when there was a knock at my door.

“Hang on,” I called, hurriedly buttoning up my jeans and grabbing a T-shirt. I pulled it on, then opened the door to find my mother on the other side. “Oh, hi.”

She smiled. “Hello, Greyson.”

I pulled the door open wider. “Come on in. What’s going on? Is everything okay?”

She shot me a sideways glance as she stepped into the room. “Always so on guard, Greyson. I’m fine. I just wanted to spend some time with my son. I feel like I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“I guess we haven’t had much time, lately,” I admitted, pushing my wet hair out of my face.

“Not to mention, I hear there was a defenestration this morning,” she said. “What kind of mother would I be if I didn’t check in on you after that?”

“What’s a defenestration?” I asked blankly.

“It is the action of throwing someone out a window,” she said with a wry smile. “Like your mate did to you, for instance.”

I laughed at this. “Have a seat,” I said, gesturing to the desk chair.

She sat and eyed me closely. “Honestly, Greyson, how are you doing? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I said quickly.

“That was a quick answer.”

The way she was looking at me made me feel very exposed, and I couldn’t help but think of the realization I’d had earlier—that Cali could still choose Xavier over me, no matter how badly he treated her. Thinking about it again made my stomach twist with anxiety. I knew my mother would be a sympathetic ear for anything I had to say to her, but the idea of actually talking to her like that was still something I was getting used to.

“Greyson?” she asked. “I can see that you have something on your mind. You know you can tell me anything, right?”

I took a deep breath. It was possible that talking to my mother would actually make me feel better. It might be nice just to say the words out loud—then, she’d at least be able to tell me if I was just being ridiculous.

“I’m worried about Cali leaving to be with Xavier,” I blurted out.

This clearly had not been what she’d expected to hear, and she leaned back, surprised. “Has something specific happened to make you worry about this?”

“No, not exactly—”

“Did Cali say anything or do anything that leads you to believe she’s thinking about that?” she pressed.

“No, nothing like that,” I said. “But she won’t commit to choosing me, and I sometimes feel like she’s just here with me by default because Xavier left her. And now we’re losing pack members to the Samaras left and right,” I said, all in a rush. “What if he decides that he wants Cali back? What if he apologizes and she accepts it…” I trailed off, looking down at my hands.

My mother nodded, clearly understanding what I’d said—and hadn’t said.

“I think it’s an understandable fear,” she said gently. “The *due destini* is deeply complicated, and Cali probably feels the weight of it all the time, even if Xavier did essentially make her choice for her.” She paused. “But Xavier did handle everything extremely poorly.”

“Tell me about it,” I muttered.

“Cali was so hurt by his actions, and it would take a lot of work on his end—and multiple apologies to her and the pack—to even start getting back into anyone’s good graces. No.” She shook her head. “I don’t think you have to worry about any of that happening, and I don’t think you’re in any danger of losing Cali.”  
 I nodded, something warm and comforting unfolding in my chest. My guess had been right—it felt good to talk about my fears. And it felt good to hear my mother spell out the logic of Cali’s possible choices in the way that she had. But—even though I felt better—the fear wasn’t gone. It was still there, aching like a sore tooth. It was one thing to knowsomething, to agree with an idea on a rational level, but it was another thing entirely to *feel* it.

I was still anxious about Cali, but I supposed I was just going to have to learn to live with that for now—until Cali finally did decide to choose me.

“Thanks,” I said, glancing at my mother. “It’s nice to be able to talk to someone—”

My door burst open, and Big Mac blew into the room.

“MacKenzie!” my mom half-shouted, clapping her hand to her chest. “Good lord, you scared me. What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

Big Mac looked at my mother, then turned the force of her gaze on me. “It happened again.”

“What?” I asked.

“The vision,” she said ominously. “I had it again.”

**Episode 4214**

Lola and Jacqueline stared at me. I looked back, nearly squirming with discomfort.

“What?” I finally asked. “I was just saying…”

“*What might happen at the party tonight?*” Lola repeated incredulously.

“What?” I asked again.

“Pessimistic, much?” Jacqueline muttered under her breath.

She shook her head. “I know you accidentally tossed Greyson out a window, but that was dark, Cali.”

“*How?*” I demanded. “How is that a dark question? I’m just trying to approach this thing realistically. Things always seem to go wrong for us—and why should tonight be any exception? We have all these packs getting together to celebrate, but it’s not like we’re all best friends.”

Lola was eyeing me with a strange, knowing look on her face. “Why don’t you just say what you’re really thinking, Cali?”

I stared at her. “What do you mean?”

Jacqueline looked at Lola, then at me, clearly annoyed. “She *means* that you’re clearly talking about Xavier, so why don’t you just come out and say it?”

I cleared my throat uncomfortably. “Well, while that *is* a good example of what I’m talking about, no—I wasn’t specifically talking about Xavier.”

Jacs rolled her eyes. “Sure you weren’t. You’re just here to make good points.”

I gritted my teeth. “I just know that there’s something weird going on with Xavier and me—”

Lola put up a hand to stop me. “Can we just not, Cali? I can’t keep revisiting the Xavier saga. I don’t have the energy for it. There’s no new information, and I’m officially putting a moratorium on talking about that asshole until there’s a damn good reason to bring him up again.”

My hackles rose at this. “Listen, all I know is that there’s a weirdness, there—whether it’s Xavier randomly showing up at the pack house or all the other stuff he’s done since he broke up with me. There’s something going on with him—”

“Yeah, maybe there is,” Lola said. “But we’ve already talked about this, Cali, and that’s just not your problem anymore. He’s been nothing but an asshole since the minute he broke up with you—”

“And, I mean, we have to consider the *way* he dumped you, which was epically brutal,” Jacqueline interjected helpfully. “That we all heard, too. He couldn’t even do it in private. That’s low.”

“That’s true,” Lola agreed. “Seriously, the minute he broke up with you in that totally shitty way, he gave up the privilege of having you obsessing over his problems. He chose the Samaras, Cali.” She gave me a long look. “He chose *Ava*.”

As soon as Lola said her name, my stomach clenched with pain. It was so hard to separate Xavier from Ava now. They were a package deal—the Alpha and Luna of the Samara pack. But Xavier was still my mate. I took a deep breath, trying to think rationally. I knew that Lola was just trying to protect me and believed it was better that I just face facts, but she just didn’t get it.

“Listen, Lola, you weren’t there for any of it,” I said, trying my best not to sound too defensive. “I know that Xavier broke up with me, but I also know that we’re still connected. We’re mates. I can feel our connection, and so can he. I know he can. I just have to figure out what’s going on with him.”  
 “How?” Lola asked bluntly, shrugging. “How are you supposed to figure that out? I mean, he’s not here—he’s barely in your life anymore. And that’s how he wants it, remember?”

“But he *will* be at the party tonight,” Jacqueline put in.

“Shut up, Jacs,” Lola hissed.

“What?” Jacqueline asked. “I mean, it’s true—he’ll be there. And thank god for that. With him there, at least we know the party won’t be boring. The *due destini* just won’t let that happen.”

I gave Jacs a hard stare. “I don’t love your motivation for reminding me, but that’s not a bad point.”

“Okay, but did you happen to hear the *other* point she made, about Xavier’s asshole behavior?” Lola demanded. “Because that was also good. He doesn’t deserve you to be fighting for him, Cali, and Xavier’s my friend—or he was, I don’t know. But he’s got a lot of apologizing to do, and he’s not doing it.” She shook her head. “And anyway, how are you so sure that what you’re feeling isn’t just the *due destini* putting batshit ideas into your head—”

“Because it doesn’t work like that!” I burst out. I took a deep breath, trying to calm down. “Listen, I know you don’t get it, but this is the right move. I’m sure of it. I think that tonight will be the perfect time to get Xavier alone and try to find out what’s going on with him. The palace is huge—there’s literally no way I won’t be able to corner him somewhere. I’ll just get him alone and make him tell me what’s happening with him.”

Lola had crossed her arms and was shaking her head. “I really don’t like the sound of this, Cali.”

“Lola—”

“I just want to go on record that I think this is a really bad idea,” she said.

I glared at her. “Your opinion has been noted, and your displeasure will be recorded in the minutes of this meeting, but I’m doing it. This is just something that I *have* to do.”

Lola looked at me for a moment, then heaved a gusty sigh. “Fine.” She shrugged theatrically. “I think this is absolutely the wrong move, but you’re my best friend, Cali, so obviously I’ll help you with your dumbass plan in whatever way I can.”

“Thank you—”

“But I’m going to spend the whole night telling you what a bad idea it is,” she added.

“Thanks, Lola,” I said dryly. Then I turned back to the piles of dresses. “I’m not really in the mood to pick out a dress right now.”

What I really wanted to do was start thinking about what I wanted to say to Xavier, but I didn’t want to say that out loud—not while Lola was looking at me with that judgmental expression.

Even as she looked at me, Lola’s eyes narrowed, like she could guess what I was thinking, though she didn’t say anything.

“I—I’m going to go make myself some tea,” I stammered, heading for the door. “I’ll see you two later.”

Once I was in the hallway, I breathed a sigh of relief, grateful to be out of the lion’s den. I’d been lying so I could get out of Lola’s room, but now that I thought about it, a cup of tea actually sounded pretty good, so I headed for the stairs.

But as I passed Greyson’s room, I saw Big Mac standing in the doorway. I didn’t know what she was doing there, but it must’ve been for something important, because Greyson and Mrs. Smith were staring up at her in total shock.

“What’s going on?” I asked, approaching the doorway.

“Oh good, you’re here,” Big Mac said, turning to me. “You need to hear this, too.”

“Hear what?”

“Remember that vision I had, with the chess board?”

Remember it? How could I forget it? “Yeah, I remember.”

“I had it again,” she said flatly.

My heart dropped. “*What?*”

“Yep.”

I tried to take a breath, but I couldn’t seem to pull in any air. “But—why? Why did you have it again? Wasn’t it about the war?”

Big Mac raised an eyebrow. “Now *that* is an interesting question, Cali. The question of the hour, really.”

This was met with silence from Greyson, Mrs. Smith, and me. The quiet felt loud, and it filled my ears with a distant ringing.

“Okay,” Greyson said, his voice slicing into the stillness. “Tell me again. The vision—describe it.”

Big Mac sighed deeply. “There’s a chessboard, remember? But I’m not actually seeing the entire vision anymore.”

Greyson frowned. “What do you mean?”

She looked tense. “I’m only seeing the part where Lucian gets knocked off the chessboard, over and over again.”

My pulse had started to race. What Big Mac was saying was freaking me out, but—more than that—it was the way she looked while she was saying it. She looked scared. Tense and nervous and pretty freaked out. It was strange to see her looking like that, and it freaked me out, too. If a witch as powerful as Big Mac was unnerved by what she’d seen, then I didn’t like the sound of it one bit.

“Do you have any idea what it could mean?” I asked worriedly.

When Big Mac looked over at me, her expression was grave. “It means that whatever event the vision is referring to hasn’t yet come to pass.”

A shudder crawled its way up my spine as the meaning of her words sank in. I turned to Greyson, who looked as worried as I felt.

“Well?” I asked.

He looked up at me. “Well what?”

“Do you think this is a sign that we shouldn’t go to the party tonight?”

**Episode 4215**

**Violet**

“What do you think of this?” Charlie asked, holding up a brightly patterned shirt.

“I don’t think that’s quite the vibe,” I told him, shaking my head. I turned back to my own closet and continued rifling through my clothes, trying to find something that would work for the party. “I’m excited to have somewhere fun to go tonight. We don’t get to do this all that much—dress up and feel like grown-ups.”

Charlie laughed. “True.”

“And this is going to be a really fancy party. The Vanguards always go all out. This is so much better than fighting in the woods.”

“I’ll say,” Charlie said. He pulled a navy-blue suit jacket on over his T-shirt and jeans. “What do you think about this?” he asked, holding out his arms stiffly.

I looked at him over my shoulder with a smile. “It’s great. You look fantastic in that color.”

He grinned. “Thanks.”

I turned back to my closet with a sigh.

“Violet? What’s wrong?” he asked, stepping toward me.

“Nothing,” I groaned. “It just looks like I’m going to have to repeat an outfit.”

“What?”

“I don’t have enough dresses,” I said miserably.

Charlie started to laugh. “That’s okay. You look good in everything.”

I rolled my eyes. “Thank you, but I do wish I had another dress.”

Charlie grabbed his phone from the bed and checked the time. “I wonder if there’s time for us to do a little shopping.”

That made me smile. “Oh, that’s okay. I mean, that’s nice of you to think about that, but no. Maybe I can just go raid someone else’s closet for something new.”

“That’s a good idea,” Charlie said. “You should ask Lola—I bet she’d help you out. She has tons of clothes, and it seems like everyone’s always wearing something of hers.”

“That’s a good idea,” I said brightly. “I’ll go ask her now.”

But when I looked over at Charlie, he looked so hot in his suit and jeans combination that I instinctively stepped closer to him.

I smoothed the lapel of his jacket. “You know, you really *do* look great in this. It fits you like a glove.” I let my gaze range over him. “I can’t wait to see you in the full suit.”

Charlie’s golden eyes started to blaze. “Maybe before you see me in the suit, you can see me *without* the suit.”

Without waiting for a response from me, he leaned down and pressed a kiss to my lips. I responded immediately, going up on tiptoe to slide my hand around the back of his neck and pull him closer, deepening the kiss. He groaned as his arms slid around my waist, pulling my body flush against his. Instantly, it felt like butterflies exploded in my entire body. He always made me feel like this, like he was touching me for the first time. I clung to him, loving how close he was.

Charlie walked me backward until we hit the bed, then tumbled down onto it. We were immediately engulfed by the messy sheets. We stayed like that for what felt like forever until I knew I needed more. I tugged at his suit jacket.

Charlie obliged, taking the jacket off and quickly hanging it nicely on the back of a chair. I laughed, but it died in my throat when he took off his T-shirt, then his jeans. Next, he eased me out of my clothes slowly—patiently—all while my body heat rose higher and higher. By the time he slid under the sheets with me, I was nearly out of my mind with want.

He smiled. “You could wear the fanciest dress in the world tonight, Violet, but I don’t think you could possibly look more beautiful than you do right now.”

My breath caught in my throat. I couldn’t speak to reply to that, so I just reached up and kissed him, hoping that would do the speaking for me.

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Afterward, I lay back on the bed, breathing hard. But when I glanced at the clock on the bedside table, I sat up again with a groan.

“If I’m going to borrow a dress from Lola, I should go talk to her.” I reached for my T-shirt—which Charlie had flung to the foot of the bed—and started to pull it on. Then I started laughing. “You do know that I can feel you smiling behind me, right?”

Charlie chuckled, and the sound warmed my heart. “I’m just glad that you seem to be feeling better, now. Nothing like a little exercise to drive away the blues.”

“I guess so,” I said, grinning. I turned to look at him. “And I really am feeling better.”

His eyes lit up mischievously. “Maybe you’d feel *fantastic* if we did a little moreexercise—like right now,” he added, reaching for my hand.

I laughed and gave his shoulder a playful shove. “Cut it out, Charlie.”

I rose from the bed and grabbed my panties and jeans.

“I’m going to go talk to Lola. I want to talk to her about the dresses, and I want to ask her something else, too.” I bit my lip as I buttoned my jeans. “I really am feeling better about things. I’m pretty sure Lilac isn’t going to leave the pack.”

Charlie put his hands behind his head as his eyes swept over me. “If this is how you feel when you’re pretty sure, maybe we should go for a hundred percent sure, because I’d definitely like to see how that looks on you.”

I rolled my eyes but laughed and threw him his jeans. “Okay then, get up. Let’s go find Lilac and find out.”

We headed toward Lilac’s room, but as we drew closer, I started to hear loud bangs and what sounded like frustrated grunts.

Glancing up at Charlie, I knocked tentatively at the door. A second later, Lilac wrenched it open. He looked stressed and harried, and behind him, the room looked like a bomb had gone off. Clothes were everywhere, as if his closet had exploded. Shirts were strewn across the bed, and pants were piled in a heap next to it.

“Are you okay?” I asked carefully.

“*No!*” Lilac snapped. “No, I am *not* okay!”

“What’s going on?” I wondered.

“I’m *so* stressed out,” he said, running a hand through his hair, which was already standing on end. “We have this stupid party tonight, and I know Perrie is going to look hot as hell, and I’m going to look like a moron because I have no idea what to wear!”

Charlie and I exchanged a look and stepped into Lilac’s room.

I cleared my throat, ready to just dive right in. “And have you made a decision?”

“*You think?*” Lilac demanded, gesturing wildly around the room.

“No, not about what to wear. Have you made a decision about what we talked about? About Perrie and the packs and stuff?”

Lilac was next to his bed, pawing frantically through a pile of clothes. He looked like he was barely paying attention to the conversation. “I’m going to stay with the Redwoods for the time being and go back and forth between the two pack houses.”

Charlie shot me a look, and I couldn’t stop the big smile from spreading across my face. That was exactly what I’d been hoping to hear. I wasn’t ready to be separated from Lilac—not yet. Not when I felt like I’d only just gotten him back.

I wanted to ask Lilac to elaborate on his plan, but Rishika appeared in the doorway before I could say anything.

“Hey, glad I caught all of you together,” she said briskly.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Emergency pack meeting. Now.”

My stomach dropped at her words. I really hoped this pack meeting didn’t mean anything serious was happening—I’d had enough serious for a lifetime.

“Let’s go,” Charlie said, taking my hand.

The three of us headed downstairs, and when we reached the living room, we were nearly the last to arrive. Everyone else had already gathered, and we squeezed into a corner near the door.

Greyson nodded as we walked in. “Okay, now that we’re all here, we can get started.” He looked around. “I wanted to let you all know that Big Mac has been having visions.”

Lilac and I exchanged a surprised look at this. Visions? What the hell did that mean?

“What’s important for you to know is that we believe the events in the vision have yet to occur,” he said. “I wanted to make you all aware of this, because it could mean that something might go down tonight at the party.”

“And we thought everyone should get a say in how we react to this information,” Cali interjected, stepping forward. “It’s possible that nothing will happen, of course. But on the off chance that something *does* happen, this might not end up being a fun party. So, we’re going to put it to a vote.” She looked around at the sea of faces before her. “The pack will decide as a group—do we stay here, or do we go to the party?”

**Episode 4216**

**Xavier**

Ava tilted her head. “Where would we go, exactly?”

“I was thinking I could take a trip to Portland after the party.”

“Why Portland?” Ava asked. “There’s plenty of other cities.”

“It’s a hub for the supernatural,” I said. “It’s like a crossroads up there, and if there’s a wolf looking for a pack in the Pacific Northwest, they’ll end up in Portland.”

She nodded. “That sounds like a great idea. Is there anything I can do to help? I think I still have the details of some of Nolan’s contacts up there.”

“Yeah, that’d be good,” I said. “I have some leads of my own I want to follow up on, but I’ll take whatever information you have, too.”

“That sounds really good.” She smiled, starting to look excited about the idea.

“Hold on,” I cautioned. “I want you to understand something, Ava. Regardless of where these wolves come from—if they’re Rogues, if they’re from another pack, hell, even if they’re ex-Redwoods—this is about the Samara pack for me, and nothing else. This is about building up our pack. Whatever they were before they became Samaras stops mattering once they step into this pack house.”

She took this in, and I saw a fire kindling in her eyes. “I really needed to hear you say that,” she said quietly.

She wasn’t smiling, but her face was glowing with happiness, and that happiness made *me* smile. I couldn’t help it. Ava hadn’t had it easy for a long time. Hell, neither of us had. We’d been the best at making each other’s lives a living hell, but things had changed. Where we’d once been enemies, now we were united together with the Samara pack. Things were so different between us from how they’d been, and I liked being able to bring that shine to her eyes. Part of me wanted to keep doing it.

“Actually, there’s something else you might be happy to hear,” I said.

“And what’s that?” she asked.

“I’m thinking I’ll bring Knox along to Portland.”

Ava stared at me. “*Really?*”

There was hope in her voice, even a thread of joy, and for a moment all I wanted to do was kiss her. But I pushed that thought away. What the hell was *that* about? Where did that impulse come from?

Dammit, this was all Adéluce’s doing. She had me looking for these charged moments with Ava and obsessing over them.

“—and are you *sure* you want to bring Knox?” Ava was asking.

I pulled myself out of the downward spiral of my thoughts and tried to refocus on our conversation.

“Yeah,” I said, clearing my throat. “I do want to bring him. I think this could be a great way for him to prove himself. And who knows?” I said with a shrug. “Maybe this will be an opportunity for me to get to know him more, perhaps help him learn to be more discerning about his friends.”

She nodded, understanding. “Yeah, I can see how that might be useful. And I feel a lot better about this idea than about sending him to play double agent with the Bitterfangs.”

“You got that right,” I muttered.

She clapped her hands briskly. “Okay, now that that’s settled, it’s time for more important things.”

I looked at her, frowning. “What else do we need to talk about?”

She grinned. “I have something to show you,” she said, getting to her feet. She walked over to our closet and pulled her shirt up over her head. Then she dropped her jeans and kicked them to the side, so she was standing there in only her bra and panties.

I’d seen Ava much more naked than this about a million times before, but that never seemed to matter. Every single time I looked at the curve of her hips and the gentle swoop of her spine beneath her silky skin, it just *did* something to me.

I felt my body heating and started to look away, but then she turned, and the Luna mark on her shoulder caught my eye.

Ava was speaking to me—I could hear her voice, but it sounded so distant, and I was barely registering the words. All I could think about was the mark on her shoulder, and how *right* it looked on her.

She turned and caught me staring at her, which made her laugh. “Xavier, come on. This isn’t anything you haven’t seen before.”

She was right, of course, but I couldn’t keep the hungry look off my face, and I rose to my feet. My wolf was going mad inside me, pushing me toward her.

*That is OUR LUNA*, he reminded me.

Ava held her hand up. “Uh-uh, not yet. *Sit*.”

I sat. I was surprised by how quickly and instinctively I’d obeyed her.

She started to pull dresses from the closet, holding them against herself.

“I like this red one,” she was saying, “but the green one is cool, too, and I almost never wear it, so no one will have seen it before. The fabric’s a little thin for winter, though, so maybe not.” She grabbed a long black dress from the back of the closet and held it up. The fabric clung to her, pressing against her breasts and flat stomach. “What do you think of this one?”

I looked up at her face, and for a split second, it was Cali staring back at me. Her brown eyes were wide, and she was smiling.

What did I think? I *couldn’t* think. My heart was racing, but when I blinked, Cali disappeared. Instead, Ava was looking at me expectantly.

“Do you like this one?” she asked.

I shook my head. “No,” I said roughly. “Not that one.”

Ava looked a little confused, but she shrugged and put the dress away.

I took a deep breath. I couldn’t sit here anymore. I was tired of waiting—tired of thinking. I couldn’t think about Cali, but I also couldn’t *stop* thinking about Cali. I needed to do… *something.*

So I stood and stepped toward Ava. I was tired of fighting, ready to give in to my desire for her. I pulled her into my arms and kissed her roughly, almost desperately. She pressed her naked body against me and slid her arms around my neck, deepening the kiss even more.

I swiveled us around and started walking toward the bed. I was ready to take her, I was ready to ravish her, I was ready to—

“Xavier, wait,” she panted, pulling away. “Hang on. We can wait.”

She was breathing hard—we both were—and when she spoke, it sounded like she was trying to convince herself as much as me.

I groaned and clutched her tighter, but she shook her head and pushed me away.

Her face was flushed with desire, and her eyes sparkled as she smiled at me. “Just be patient. There’s more to come.” She grabbed a handful of dresses from where she’d tossed them onto a chair and stepped around me toward the bathroom. “Obviously, I’m not going to be able to figure out what to wear while you’re in the same room. You’re the opposite of helpful,” she added with a smirk. “So just sit there and wait to be surprised.”

She shut the bathroom door behind her, and I dropped onto the bed with another groan. I rubbed my hand over my face, trying desperately to clear my head.

“What the hell am I doing?” I wondered aloud.

“Well, well, well.”

I jumped up and looked around wildly. My whole body tensed when I caught sight of Adéluce standing just behind me.

She looked around, surveying the room like she owned it. Then she stepped toward the bed and crawled onto it, lying back and tucking her hands behind her head.

The sight of her in my bed turned my stomach. I stood and backed away, unwilling to be close to her. “Get the hell out of here.”

She looked at me, a smirk on her face. “Come now, Xavier Evers. Is that any way to talk to me, knowing exactly how much control I have over you and your life?” Her eyes narrowed menacingly. “Do you really think I don’t know about your little jaunt back to Caliana? And don’t try to deny it—that wasn’t her coming to you, that was you going to her.”

I clenched my fists. It would be pointless to argue with her—just as pointless as it would be to lunge for her throat.

She shook her head. “And here I was, thinking you were fully aware of what’s at stake,” she said. “But don’t worry. I have a plan. I’m here to help you—to make sure Caliana doesn’t get hurt.”

“What are you talking about?” I growled.

She sat up on the bed. “Don’t spend a single second alone with her at the party tonight. Not under any circumstances. If you disobey me, you’ll both regret it.”

**Episode 4217**

**Greyson**

“Okay, everyone who thinks we should go to the party tonight, hands up,” I said, looking around at the pack.

For a moment, it was completely quiet, and no one moved. Then, slowly, hands started going up, and I started counting. It was immediately clear that almost everyone wanted to go to the party.

“Okay,” I said with a shrug, “that settles that. We’re going. But it’s not mandatory. If there’s anyone who doesn’t want to go tonight, no pressure. You can stay back.”

Zainab tentatively raised her hand. “Are you sure it’s safe?” she asked, glancing at Sage, who nodded. “I have to be honest, Big Mac’s vision is kind of freaking me out.”

“It should be safe,” I said, keeping my tone neutral. “There will be a bunch of packs there, but if you’re worried… Like I said, it’s not mandatory.” I wasn’t going to force anyone not to go, especially to the Vanguard palace of all places.

“Hold up. Isn’t it better if we all stay together?” Jay asked. “Vision or no vision?”

“That’s actually a good point,” Cali said, looking at me.

I took a deep breath. Everyone was looking to me for answers I didn’t necessarily have. All I knew was I wanted everyone to feel safe and like I had a plan, even if it were only partially true.

“I don’t know, maybe it is a good idea to stay together. But also maybe not. Big Mac’s vision wasn’t really specific, which is the problem. I only wanted to let everyone know about it out of an abundance of caution. There’s really no reason to think anything’s actually going to happen tonight, other than a celebration of Malakai’s defeat—delivered with Lucian’s usual over-the-top style,” I added with a grin, trying to put everyone at ease. “The alliance accomplished something pretty great, and I think that’s worth celebrating.”

Almost everyone chuckled at that, and a big dose of tension left the room.

Ravi cheered. “I’ll drink to that,” he said. “Which is exactly what I’m going to do tonight—on Lucian’s dime!”

Everyone laughed harder, and Cali squeezed my arm.

“You handled that really well,” she said quietly.

“Thanks.”

“Can I talk to you for a second, though? Alone?” she asked, looking around.

“Sure,” I said, noting the worried look on her face.

We stepped into the study, and I closed the door behind us.

“What’s up?” I asked.

Cali sighed as she turned to face me. “I just can’t help but be worried about this.”

“About what?” I asked.  
 She looked pensive, and she twisted her fingers together nervously. “I’ve just been having this weird feeling. First it was about Xavier, and then I *pushed you out the window*—”

“Please stop feeling bad about that,” I interrupted. “What happened this morning wasn’t terrible. It was more funny than anything, really. I’m totally fine. You shouldn’t read anything into that. I promise you, it wasn’t an omen.”

“Okay, okay,” she muttered.

But she still looked anxious, so I gripped her hands. “I really think there are more reasons to go than there are to stay home.”

“Okay, let’s list them out, then,” she said.

“What?”

She shrugged. “I think I might feel better if I heard you talk them through.”

That made me chuckle. “Okay. I think I can do that.” I thought for a moment. “All right, well, for one, it’s always better to be on the offense in situations like these. I wouldn’t want to just be sitting around the pack house waiting for something to go wrong. At the party, we’ll be surrounded by our allies, and there’s strength in numbers.”

“That makes sense,” she murmured. “What else?”

“Well, speaking of our allies, it wouldn’t be a good look for us to skip the party, which is intended to be a celebration of how well we’ve all worked together. And if anyone’s going to get offended by our not showing up, you know it’s Lucian.”

Cali rolled her eyes. “Okay, you’re *definitely* right about that one. He’d probably drive over here and kidnap us all en masse if we didn’t show up.”

“That’s very possible,” I said seriously. “And if we’re going to go, I want to take my own car.”

“And this is probably an ideal time to talk to Lucian about the council stuff, too,” Cali added, starting to warm up to the discussion. “He’ll be in a good mood, and probably a little distracted, trying to show off to so many people all at once. He’ll probably even be a little tipsy. It could be the perfect time to talk to him.”

I grinned. “I like the way you think, my master strategist.”

As I leaned down to kiss her, I thought about how I wasn’t joking about that, even though I saw her rolling her eyes. I *did* love this version of her, where she let her mind really sync up with the concepts surrounding pack strategy. Especially because I knew she was right. The council situation was something we were going to have to deal with sooner or later, and it was better to approach it as prepared as possible.

Cali returned my kiss for a moment, then pulled away and looked up at me, her expression grave. “Greyson, there’s one more thing we have to talk about.”

I suppressed a sigh. I already knew what she was going to say, so I didn’t wait for her to say it. “The sire bond?”

She nodded. “And we have to check in on Elle, too.”

“Yeah, I know.” I ran a hand through my hair, turning my thoughts to Elle. “I hope things are going all right for her at the palace.” I paused. “But maybe not *too* well, where Lucian’s concerned.”

Cali gave my arm a gentle slap. “Greyson.”

“But this thing with the council…” I trailed off and shook my head. “I don’t know. I’m just going to do as much mental preparation as I can, try to think my way out of acting too weird or jealous.”

Cali nodded. “That sounds like a plan. Is there anything I can do to help? I mean, I know it’s never you doing those things—it’s the bond pushing you to act that way. But I do want to help if I can.”

I looked down at her beautiful face, which was tilted up toward mine. I smiled at the sight of her warm brown eyes and flushed cheeks.

“All you need to do is stay with me,” I said softly. I meant those words in more ways than one.

Cali nodded. “Okay, I can do that. I’ll stick with you all night.”

She stretched up onto her tiptoes and kissed me again. It felt amazing, and I slid my hand around to the back of her neck, but just as I started to deepen the kiss, she took a step back.

“I need to go get ready,” she told me with an embarrassed giggle. “I can’t just stay here in the study with you until it’s time to go.”

I reached for her hand. “Well, that sucks. I wish you could.”

She rolled her eyes, laughing. “You should get ready, too.” She glanced at the clock on the wall. “It’s almost time to head out.”

She headed upstairs, and I sighed, then pushed myself up from the desk. She was probably right, so I decided to follow her advice and headed upstairs, too. But when I got to my room, Rishika was waiting for me in the hallway.

“Oh, hey,” I said, surprised. “Did you want to talk?”

She nodded.

“Well, come on in,” I said, stepping into my room and waving her in after me. “I was just going to pick out something to wear for the party. Do you think Lucian would object if I wore a tuxedo T-shirt?”

“I think Lucian would have a stroke if you wore a T-shirt of any kind,” Rishika said.

“In that case, it’s too bad it’s at the cleaners. What’s up?” I asked, turning to my closet.

“I just wanted to fill you in on the plans for the evening. Ravi and I will be group A, and we’ll start the party stationed at the entrance to the palace. Jay and Lola are group B, and we have groups C through F as well. We’ll be rotating through various positions, switching every half hour. We’ll be on the entrance, the buffet table, the pool, which I assume Lucian will have open,” she said, rolling her eyes, “and the bathrooms closest to the ballroom.”

I nodded, listening intently and only paying cursory attention to the clothes in my hands.

“And then we’re going to meet at the rendezvous point at midnight, and—”

Rishika stopped mid-sentence, and when I turned around, she was giving me an astonished look.

“Meet at the rendezvous point and what? What’s wrong?” I asked.

Rishika’s gaze went to the jacket and pants I was holding. “Is that what you’re planning on wearing tonight?”

“Yes?” I said.

Her expression hardened. “No.”

**Episode 4218**

Now that I’d spoken to Greyson about it, I did feel better about going to the party. He always seemed to know exactly what to say to put my mind at ease. I was almost starting to look forward to the party. Even though I had *no* idea what I was going to wear.

That thought gave me pause, and I frowned as I headed up the stairs. Maybe I’d have to take Lola up on her offer to raid her closet… I wracked my brain, trying to remember whether I had anything appropriate in my own collection of dresses. Honestly, I wasn’t in the mood to be cornered by Lola and intimidated into a discussion about any aspect of the party. Not after how incredibly clear she’d just been about her opinion of Xavier.

When I stepped into the hallway toward my room, I spotted Julia and Russell heading toward me. They were holding hands, and they smiled when they saw me.

“Hi, Cali!” Julia said, her face lighting up.

“Hi, you two.” I smiled back at them. They really were very sweet, and it was nice to have them back in the house. “How are you doing?”

“Fine!” Julia said. “We’re really looking forward to the party tonight.”

I looked at Russell. “Your moms said you could go, then? Are they going to come?”

“Yeah, they said it was fine, but that’s making me a little nervous,” he said, nodding. “They’re going to come later, I think.”

“Why are you nervous?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I know they only said yes because they knew you and Greyson were going and would chaperone.”

“*Oh*,” I said. That caught me off-guard, and I was suddenly worried that I was going to have to spend my night following two teenagers around. “You don’t *have* to come—”

“But we really want to,” Julia interrupted. “It’ll be a good distraction. Plus, I want to talk to the people my dad hurt.” Her expression turned sad. “I feel like I have to.”

“Julia,” I said gently.

She shook her head. “I know it’s not my fault, and I know that I don’t actually have to apologize to anyone, but I also know that I’ll feel better if I say *something* to them.”

It was hard to argue with her on that point. Not everyone had had a chance to talk to Julia before the war had started, and I could see how some people could potentially blame her for everything going on. She was the reason Malakai had waged his war and we’d gotten into the entire situation. Luckily, it was over, and we’d all come out pretty unscathed, so hopefully no resentment was festering.

“Well, if it’ll make you feel better, then I’m all for it,” I told her. “You can come, but you have to promise to relax and have a good time.”

Julia nodded. “I think we can do that.”

“Do you think the rest of the Pit Bulls might join us?” I asked. “Would you two feel better if they were there with you?”

Having them there might also remove some of my newly discovered chaperoning pressure, though I didn’t mention that part.

But Russell looked dubious. “I don’t think so,” he said slowly. He reached for his phone. “But I can text them and ask. They’ll probably just come to pick us up afterward, though.”

I nodded, and my own phone started to buzz. I pulled it out of my pocket and looked down at the screen to see that it was my mom trying to FaceTime me.

“I have to take this,” I told Russell and Julia. “I’ll see you when we’re all heading out.”

They nodded and, as they walked away, I answered the call.

“Hi, Mom,” I said, stepping into my room. “And Dad,” I added, noticing that he was in the frame, too. “How are you?”

“Oh, we’re fine,” my mom said. “We’re just calling because we missed you.”

“I missed you too,” I told her.

“How are things, pumpkin?” my dad asked.

“I actually have some good news,” I told them brightly. “The war is over! We’re celebrating tonight.”

“Oh, hey!” My dad grinned. “Looks like it’s good news all around! I didn’t get fired!”

I laughed. “That’s great, Dad.” I set my phone down on my dresser. “I’m still listening, I just need to figure out what I’m going to wear tonight while we’re talking.”

“Oh! You have the perfect thing,” my mom said.

“What? Really? I do?” I asked, surprised. “What are you talking about?”

She grinned. “Just go look in the back of your closet.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “You just might find a little gift I left for you.”

Still puzzled, I opened the closet doors and pushed my way to the back. There was a dark blue garment bag I’d never seen before hanging all the way at the end of the rack—behind a parka I almost never wore.

I pulled the garment bag out and turned back to face my phone. My mom looked like she was about to crawl out of her skin with excitement.

“What did you do, Mom?” I demanded.

She opened her eyes wide in a pantomime of complete innocence. “Why, Cali, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, Orla.” My dad rolled his eyes, laughing at the same time.

My mom giggled with excitement. “Just open it, already!”

I unzipped the garment bag and let it fall to the ground. And there on the hanger was the most beautiful dress I’d ever seen. It was a deep mauve ball gown with delicate straps. The top curved into a sweetheart neckline, and the skirt flared out just the right amount—not so much that I wouldn’t be able to fit through a door, but just enough to make the waist of the dress look impossibly small by comparison. And the dress *sparkled*. It wasn’t glittery or covered in sequins—it just shimmered, like it was lit from within.

“Where did this come from?” I asked breathlessly, not taking my eyes off the dress.

“There’s a little dress shop in town. The woman who runs it—Mirabelle—makes the dresses by hand. Designs them, too. She’s a master. I used to just stop in to chat with her whenever we went shopping for groceries in town. I liked to see her new designs, and when she made this one, I knew it would look perfect on you. It was ages ago, but I just bought it and waited. I figured you’d eventually have a reason to wear it.”

“Mom, I love it,” I gushed. “It’s so, so beautiful. Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome, sweetheart,” my mom said, grinning ear to ear. “I’m glad you like it. I knew you would.”

“I *love* it,” I corrected mildly, my eyes back on the dress. I gave the hanger a little shake and watched the fabric shimmer in the fading winter sunlight.

“When does this party start?” my mom asked. “Maybe you should start getting ready.”

“Well, hold on just a second!” my dad said sternly. “Cali? You listen here, missy—your mother and I want to see a lot of pictures from tonight, do you hear me?”

“A million should be the goal,” my mom put in.

I laughed. “You got it. I’ll send them to you.” I glanced at the clock next to my bed. “Okay, I really should get ready. Thanks again, Mom. I love you both.”

I carefully hung the dress on my closet door, then headed for the bathroom. It felt good to talk to my parents after all the crazy things that had happened. Maybe as things kept going back to normal, I could go and visit them soon.

After my shower, I moisturized, dried my hair, and carefully applied party makeup. Then I stepped into the dress. I didn’t know how my mom or this magical Mirabelle person had done it, but it fit me like a glove. I looked myself over in the full-length mirror and smiled—I just couldn’t help it.

Then I stepped back into the bathroom to curl my hair.

I was just finishing up when I heard my door open and shut.

“Cali? Love? Are you ready?”

It was Greyson. I quickly finished the last section of my hair and unplugged the curling iron.

“I’m ready,” I called.

As soon as I stepped into the bedroom, I gave a coquettish spin, making the skirt of the dress flare and shimmer. Then I stopped in my tracks, and my jaw dropped.

Greyson was wearing a steel-grey velvet tuxedo jacket, which he’d paired with fitted slacks and a black shirt that he’d left open at the collar. He looked *incredible*.

Greyson looked at me, his eyes wide. He ran a hand over his face, shaking his head. My cheeks heated up. “What?”

“You look stunning,” he said, his voice low, making my entire body flushed.

“You’re not so bad yourself,” I said, feeling a bit tongue-tied.

His eyes swept down the length of me, and my toes curled. “You are so beautiful it hurts to look at you, love.”

Greyson growled low and locked his hand around my wrist, pulling me close. My heart beat in my throat, and I clung tightly to him. He even smelled amazing.

“You’re lucky everyone is waiting for us to leave,” he said, his teeth grazing my earlobe. “Because otherwise we wouldn’t even be leaving that bed, and this dress would be on the floor.” I sucked in a breath as he pressed a single kiss to my forehead—presumably trying to avoid smudging my lipstick—then pulled back. “Ready to go?”

**Episode 4219**

**Xavier**

I looked down at my untied tie and gave it an irritated tug. I only had so much patience for ties, and I was already running out. These things were like a damn puzzle to put on. Still, I did like the look of the velvet bowtie—it gave my classic tux just enough of a twist. But tying it was another story, and I was about ready to give it up.

Ava must’ve pulled the outfit together for me, because it had been hanging from the bedroom door when I’d come upstairs. She probably wouldn’t like it if I shredded this tie to pieces. I might, though.

Sighing, I turned my attention back to the tie and gave it another shot. It certainly didn’t help that my fucking hands were shaking, which made it even harder than usual to get the tie to knot properly.

Adéluce’s words were still echoing through my head, and it was hard to calm down. I knew I’d have to be beyond careful tonight at the party. I wished I could avoid going altogether, but I couldn’t think of a good reason for the Samaras to avoid a celebration of the Bitterfang defeat.

All I could hope was that Greyson would keep Cali close, and I wouldn’t have to worry.

That thought pulled me up short, and I gave my head a grim shake. Was that really where I was, now? *Hoping* that my brother would keep my mate away from me?

Angry now, I pulled so hard on the bowtie that I heard the unmistakable sound of ripping fabric.

“Shit,” I muttered.

Annoyed and overwhelmed, I pulled the bowtie out of my collar and dropped it on the floor. To hell with it. I could go without a damn bowtie tonight.

“Hey,” Ava said, stepping out of the bathroom.

I glanced at her, finally getting a look at what she’d decided to wear. She’d decided to go with the green dress, and she looked incredible. The top part of the dress hugged her perfect body and pushed her breasts upward and together, making it hard for me to take my eyes off them. The skirt flowed down her legs like water, and—though it was long—it had a slit that went nearly to her right hip, showing off her long, toned leg. She’d pulled her dark hair back dramatically, and the olive-green color of the dress made her skin glow like gold.

She didn’t seem to notice my close inspection of her body, because she was giving me an appraising look of her own.

“You look good,” she said, her gaze sliding back up to my face.

I grinned at her. “I think I have you to thank for that,” I said, straightening my jacket.

Ava shrugged one bare shoulder. “You wear it well.”

With her shrug, one of the delicate straps of her dress had slipped off her shoulder. I stepped toward her, reaching for it and sliding it back into place.

It was impossible to deny the pure electricity of our attraction. My fingers tingled where I’d brushed her skin, and I could see her shivering.

“We should probably head out,” she said, breathless.

Suddenly, I saw a clear way to get out of going to the party. I reached for the strap I’d just replaced and flicked it, pushing it off her shoulder again.

“Maybe we should just stay here,” I said, staring into her eyes with a look that left no doubt as to the true meaning of my words.

For a moment, Ava’s eyes blazed with desire, but then she blinked and took a step back from me. “Nice try. There’ll be plenty of time for that afterward.” She took a step toward the door, then stopped and looked at me over her shoulder with a smirk. “Or during.”

My body burned, and I groaned, but I followed her out of the room and down the stairs to the front door, where the rest of the pack was waiting.

“Let’s go!” someone shouted, and we headed out.

Ava and I got into my car, and I looked over at her. “Ready?”

She nodded and grinned. “I’m ready. You?”

“As I’ll ever be,” I muttered, and started the engine.

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When we reached the Vanguard estate, there were valets in uniform waiting at the top of the rounded drive. I got out and handed over my keys, then Ava took my hand as we walked toward the entrance.

As I approached the towering doors, I was struck with the memory of the last party I’d attended here. It had been on New Year’s Eve, and I’d come with Cali. We’d both been safe, then. The Seluna ashes had been disposed with, once and for all—or so we’d thought—and I’d been happy.

Ava gave my hand a squeeze. “Remember New Year’s?”

I nodded, because I knew what she was referring to. I’d also kissed Ava at that party—it was the point when things between us had truly started up again.

*Damn Vanguard palace…*

The doors were thrown open by uniformed footmen, and we stepped into the entrance hall. The huge space was already filled with alliance wolves. They were milling around in formal clothes—tuxes and ball gowns, mostly—and were holding drinks and tiny food speared on toothpicks.

I spotted Mace in the crowd, talking with Spencer. Porter and Rowena were standing near a small table overflowing with fancy cheeses and fruit. They looked a little overwhelmed.

Pulling Ava along behind me, I walked toward them.

“Hey, how are you two coping?” I asked. “Vanguard parties can be…” I looked around. “A lot.”

Porter was looking pale. “Is it always like this?”

I nodded. “Yep. Lucian’s events definitely tend to have a Colton sort of vibe—”

“No!” Rowena and Porter burst out in horrified unison.

“That’s not what we’re looking for tonight,” Rowena said.

“Then what *are* you looking for?” asked a commanding voice.

I turned around to see Lucian standing behind us.

Rowena’s face flushed. “We were just saying that we couldn’t possibly want anything *different*— everything here is perfect,” she said smoothly.

I glanced at her. That had been a pretty nice save, and it made me like Rowena even more. But now that Lucian had appeared, I was ready to do some digging about the council.

*Will you get Porter and Rowena out of here so I can talk to Lucian?* I asked Ava silently.

She gave my hand a squeeze, understanding. She looked at Porter and Rowena. “Hey, we should go check out the champagne fountain,” she said, pointing to the other side of the room.

Lucian watched them walk away, then turned to me. “All right, so what do you want to speak to me about?”

“What?” I asked, feigning confusion. I didn’t like how easily he’d read the situation, but—after a moment’s thought—I realized it wasn’t worth my time to lie, so I just shrugged. “Why is the council asking me questions about your mate, man?”

I reminded myself that I wasn’t digging on Greyson’s behalf—I didn’t care what happened to my brother.

“I don’t like being caught unprepared,” I continued. “I’d like some more information on the situation, in case the councilors come back and start harassing my pack members about shit they’re not even involved in.”

I watched Lucian’s face carefully, but I couldn’t tell if I’d caught him off-guard or not. His expression was completely neutral.

“I can’t imagine why the council would be talking to you, Xavier. And everything’s fine on our end. I don’t think there’s anything for the Samara pack to worry about.”

It was amazing how Lucian could say so much without actually saying anything at all.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I wish that were true, but my pack’s already involved because the council has chosen to involve us.”

Lucian shrugged. “Well, I have no control over what the council chooses to do, of course, but from my perspective, everything is perfectly fine. The Vanguard pack has the situation handed. And if the councilors come by again, just ignore them. The Samara pack has no reason to fear the council, after all.”

He said this last part with a strange edge to his voice, and I couldn’t tell if he was trying to threaten me. Or if he was just making shit up to get to me. This was Lucian we were talking about, so both options were possible. In the end, though, he didn’t give me a chance to dig any further.

“If you’ll excuse me, Xavier Evers, I see that my mate is in desperate need of a dance partner.” He walked away before I could say another word.

I turned to watch his retreating form thread through the crowd.

And that was when I saw her.

Cali.

She was staring right at me, her eyes boring into mine.

And even though I wanted to, I just couldn’t bring myself to look away.

**Episode 4220**

I held onto Greyson as I looked past him, straight at Xavier. I could feel myself staring at him, and he was staring back, his eyes blazing with an intensity so heated it made my heart pound. I hadn’t meant to find him in the crowd. I’d just been looking around, taking in my surroundings while Greyson and I danced—but then my gaze had been drawn to him, almost like he was magnetized. I had noticed him, and then he had noticed me.

I studied his face for a moment—my gaze ranging hungrily over his features—before I forced myself to look away. There was nothing in his expression to say that he hated me, or that he was horrified to see me, or that he didn’t want me. Just the opposite. I recognized the look on his face, and it *wasn’t* disgust. I’d seen that look before—many, many times.

Greyson’s hand tightened on my waist. “Is everyone okay, love?” he asked quietly.

I looked up quickly. He must’ve felt me tense when Xavier had looked at me. I nodded and reached up to kiss his cheek. “Everything’s fine. I almost tripped, that’s all. Classic me,” I said with a shrug I fought to keep casual.

Greyson chuckled, and his expression relaxed. I was glad to see it. I didn’t want to mention Xavier. Not now.

Greyson pulled me closer to him. Then closer. His grip on me grew tighter as he held me suffocatingly close.

“Ugh! Greyson, you’re holding me too tight,” I gasped out, pushing away from him.

He let go at once. “I’m sorry, love. I—I wasn’t thinking.”

He looked distracted and agitated, and I turned to see what he’d been looking at that had upset him so much. Behind me, Lucian and Elle were dancing—and they were *not* leaving room for Jesus. I had to wonder, too, if we needed to speed up talking to Lucian. Elle being here so publicly… While we were all friends and allies here, word could get out that she was here, and that would mean trouble.

“I’m sorry, Cali,” Greyson said suddenly.

I nodded. Was he thinking of the same thing as me? Maybe, but I couldn’t help but feel a pang of jealousy. Was it that the sight of Lucian and Elle had upset him?

“I’m trying not to care,” he said. “I’m trying to make it not matter to me, but it’s hard.”

I sighed. I guess it wasn’t the council situation—yet. “I understand, Greyson. I just wish there were a way to fix this—to make it go away. I hate that you feel so out of control about this.”

“I do, too,” he muttered. “That’s it exactly. This whole thing just feels so far out of my control. Like I’m trying to drive a car, but the steering wheel is moving on its own.”

He looked so upset, and my heart went out to him. This time, *I* pulled *him* closer and rested my cheek on his shoulder.

“Hey,” I said, “I get it. And I’m here. I’ll be right here next to you the whole time.”

I felt his fingers flex against my back. “Thanks. That means more than you know.”

We danced until the end of the song, and then a uniformed palace attendant stepped to the front of the room.

“Please take your seats,” he said, speaking gravely into a microphone. “You will all find your names on place cards at your designated seats.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at how predictably extra Lucian always was.

“Do you think Lucian has ever even been to a casual hang in his life?” I asked.

Greyson frowned. “I don’t think Lucian even knows what the word ‘casual’ means.”

We walked to the tables and searched through the place cards. The names had been written in elegant, looping calligraphy below the Vanguard crest, which had been stamped into blobs of scarlet wax. We found our table and were soon joined by Lola, Jay, Charlie, Violet, Sage, and Zainab, who’d decided to come after all.

I turned to Violet and was just about to ask if she was enjoying herself when Lucian’s voice echoed through the room. It was coming from a handful of giant speakers, but the volume had been turned up too loud, and the feedback made everyone wince.

Lucian cleared his throat, and someone must have turned down the audio because when he spoke again, the sound was moderated. He glared at some poor soul in the back of the room, then looked out over the crowd.

“Thank you all for coming to celebrate with us tonight. I am here to welcome you, and to introduce you to the man responsible for our victory over the Bitterfang pack and their allies!”

Greyson tensed. “He *wouldn’t*,” he muttered darkly.

“Throughout this battle, the Vanguards stayed true to our name—emerging victorious from the most dangerous and fiercest battles. We led the charge, paving the way for the rest of the alliance to follow our example of bravery and resolve in the face of mortal danger!”

I looked over at Greyson. I had no idea what Lucian was saying—his speech seemed to be focused on how great the Vanguards were, rather than the alliance as a whole. And Greyson’s perplexed and irritated expression told me that he didn’t know what Lucian’s game was, either.

“—we did what was needed to win this war,” Lucian continued. “And now, as promised, Greyson Evers will address us and give us the rousing victory speech we all deserve!”

“Nope, nope, nope,” Greyson muttered, shaking his head and looking slightly panicked.

Lucian raised his eyebrows and gestured expectantly at Greyson, but he didn’t budge.

Everyone in the crowd was craning around to look at Greyson, now, and they were getting restless. I felt my face flushing and nudged his knee with mine.

“No!” he hissed.

“I know,” I said, with feeling. “But you have to go up there, Greyson.”

He looked at me for a moment, then gave a short nod. He stood and walked stiffly toward the front of the room, stopping next to Lucian. There was a smattering of awkward applause when he appeared, like no one was entirely sure what was going on.

I heard Aysel give a low catcall and frowned in her general direction.

Greyson stood at the front of the room for a silent beat, looking around. Then he stepped up to the mic.

“We won,” he said simply. “The alliance did a good job. Now let’s drink!”

This got a huge cheer, and everyone raised their glasses. Lucian looked annoyed, and a little put out—probably because Greyson had managed to get such a big response with so few words—and it made me laugh.

Greyson hadn’t wanted to say anything at all, but he’d managed to find the perfect way to handle the situation. I reached for my own glass to toast the alliance and found that it was empty. Greyson was heading back toward me, but was being stopped by practically every table for handshakes and slaps on the back, so I figured I had enough time to get a new drink before he made it back.

I stood and headed over to the bar, keeping an eye on Greyson as I went—which meant I wasn’t paying attention, and collided with something solid.

I faced forward and realized it was someone’s chest, and when I looked up, my breath caught in my throat.

It wasn’t just anyone’s chest—it was Xavier’s.

I opened my mouth to say sorry, but when I looked into his eyes, the apology died on my lips.

Looking down at me, I saw a light shining in his eyes for just a moment before his whole expression closed down, turning dark. He looked away, over my shoulder—past me. Then he stepped neatly around me without saying a single word. The whole interaction had lasted maybe five seconds, but I was reeling as I turned to watch him walk away from me.

He didn’t look back.

The difference between the look he’d given me earlier on the dance floor and this icy cold expression was so stark, I felt like I needed to sit and catch my breath. I was dizzy with whiplash, and my stomach was churning. I tried to pull in a breath, but it was hard.

I abandoned the idea of getting another drink and started back toward my table. The crowd made me feel too claustrophobic, so I took the long way round, edging around the perimeter of the tables.

I’d almost reached my seat when a hand shot out from a recessed alcove at the edge of the ballroom and grabbed my wrist.

“What the hell—” I started, but was cut off as I was yanked forward, into the shadowy alcove. When I realized who’d grabbed me, I blinked in surprise. “*Kira?*”

“Yeah, listen—we need to talk.” Her dark eyes flashed in the dim light. “There’s something wrong with Xavier.”

**Episode 4221**

Kira leaned closer to me, and I found myself leaning closer to her as well. There was panic in her eyes, and it was making my heart beat faster. None of this was giving me a good feeling…

“Kira, what are you talking about?” I asked, trying to keep my own anxiety in check. “What’s wrong with Xavier?”

As scared as I was, I also couldn’t help but feel a little hopeful. Something *had* been off with Xavier lately, and maybe I was about to get some answers. There was nothing better sometimes than someone *agreeing* with you.

But then Kira said, “I’m not quite sure, but I’ve been trying to figure it out.”

Well, shit. That didn’t help…

“So you think something is wrong, but you don’t know what it is?” I asked. I’d been really hoping she could be more concrete than my own reasoning. “I need more information, here.”

Kira’s voice lowered even more. “I have an idea of how I might prove it,” she said. “I have a way of figuring out if there are remnants of magic on a person, but it’s kind of a… risky method.”

As she spoke, Kira’s eyes were darting everywhere, and it made me do the same, checking to see if anyone was looking at us or listening in. I had no doubt that if Xavier or anyone from the Samara pack heard us talking about him, they probably wouldn’t like it. Especially Ava.

“What’s the risky method?” I asked. “Or did you already do it?”

She sighed deeply. “I did do it already. It was…” She looked like she was struggling with her words.

“What did you do, Kira?” I asked.

“I had to kiss him,” she blurted.

Instantly, jealousy sparked. She *kissed* him? She kissed my *mate*? Who the hell did she think she was?

“You kissed Xavier?” I asked quietly.

For a moment, I saw myself screaming at Kira, maybe even slapping her, but then I realized that I couldn’t do any of that. I didn’t have any business having *feelings* about someone else kissing Xavier, because I wasn’t with him anymore. The only person who reasonably had that right was Ava, but she would probably kill Kira instead of just slap her.

She nodded. “I had to—”

Her words were cut off by someone drunkenly stumbling into the hallway adjacent to us. Shit. I didn’t want anyone to see us or to risk them hearing us talking about this. I took a breath. I had to let this jealousy fade and focus on the matter at hand. It was obvious Kira hadn’t kissed Xavier for any romantic reasons. It had been a test of some kind.

“Let’s go talk somewhere else,” I said.

I took Kira by the arm and led her away from the party. We passed right by Jay and Lola, who both erupted into greetings when they saw us, tipsily waving their drinks in our direction. I threw on a smile and pretended that I couldn’t hear them asking us to join them, and just kept walking with Kira in tow.

I eventually found a secluded nook where we could talk privately. We waited for a few seconds to make sure we were alone, and then I turned to face the witch. “Okay, tell me everything. Did the kiss help you figure anything out?”

Kira still spoke in a near-whisper. “Somewhat. Okay, well, I think whatever’s wrong with Xavier is magic-based. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but trust me, I have a good instinct for this sort of thing. Since joining the Samaras, I’ve only become more convinced that I’m right, so I decided to test my theory.” She winced. “By kissing Xavier.”

I frowned. “How did *that* go?” I couldn’t imagine that he’d been all that thrilled about it. At least I *hoped* he hadn’t been. If he had been—no. I had to stop this. I crossed my arms, wishing the green-eyed monster would leave me alone.

She shook her head. “Notwell, as you can imagine. Not with Xavier, orwith Ava, if she ever finds out.”

“If she finds out, you’re going to have to move out,” I said. It was barely an exaggeration. “I can only imagine how territorial Ava must be over Xavier, now that she finally has him back.” I tried to ignore the flare of pain that came with that thought. Ava had the life I’d always wanted with Xavier, as his Luna and his mate—but I couldn’t dwell on that heartbreaking fact.

Kira waved this off. “Either way, the kiss was *way* too short, so I didn’t get a good read on him.”

I sighed. Great, so we were taking, like, one step forward and four steps back. “Why do you think something is magically wrong with him, anyway?” I asked. “What gave you that impression?”

While I waited for Kira’s answer, I wondered if I should go and get Greyson so he could hear it. If something really was wrong with Xavier, then Greyson needed to know. He’d be able to talk to Xavier about it, Alpha-to-Alpha. But when I poked my head out of our hiding place and glanced at the spot where I’d last seen Greyson, he wasn’t there. I did a quick scan of the ballroom, but I couldn’t spot him.

Maybe that was for the best. Greyson was still pretty pissed off with Xavier for poaching his pack members. He probably wasn’t the right person to talk to Xavier, after all—especially considering how skilled the pair of them were at getting into fights.

I had to wonder if I’d be able to get Xavier alone and talk to him about this myself, though there was Ava to contend with. But he’d just been so hot and cold with me—even since we’d arrived at the party, not even half an hour ago. It felt like he was avoiding me, for sure. I knew there was tension between us, but I didn’t think he had a reason to flat out *avoid* me—but given Kira’s new claim, maybe there was something I didn’t know.

“It’s just like I told you,” she said. “Intuition. It’s a witch thing.”

Maybe it was a mate thing too.

“There’s more,” she continued.

“More?” I asked, and then I shook my head. “Wait, why are you even coming to me with this at all? Isn’t there someone in the Samara pack you should be talking to? Like Ava? Do you want the Redwoods to help you with an intervention or something?”

She shook her head. “I think you know as well as I do that something like that would *never* work with Xavier.”

I imagined Greyson and me sitting Xavier down to say that we thought something was wrong with him, and I winced dramatically. “Yeah, good point.”

“No, I want to take another shot at testing him with my kissing method,” Kira said. “I think that’s the way to go.”

Confused, I crossed my arms. “And how exactly do you plan on getting Xavier to kiss you *again*? Won’t he have his guard up now? There isn’t a chance in hell he’ll let you get close enough.”

“You’re right—Ican’t kiss him again. He definitelywon’t let that happen. Plus, it can’t just be a peck. Apparently, it has to be a real, true kiss.” Kira’s eyes were wide, and she was staring at me like I was a steaming steak, and I did *not* like where this was going. “It has to be you,” she said. “You’re the only person who might be able to get a real kiss.”

“*What?*” I yelped, a little too loudly, drawing the attention of a few wolves.

“Shh!” Kira hissed.

I lowered my voice, though none of the bite left my tone. “Have you lost your *mind*? I can’t do that! What about Greyson? What about Xavier?” I scoffed. “What about *me*? Just have Ava do it!”

“Come *on*, Cali,” Kira begged. “Something’s wrong with him, I just know it. I need to get that reading, so I can start figuring out how to fix him. I trust *you* to do it.”

“How would that even work?” I asked. “If I’mthe one who kisses him, then how the hell would *you* get the reading?”

“If you kiss Xavier, I’ll be able to extract the remnants of the magic from your lips, as long as you get to me within a few minutes. You’d just have to kiss him, *not* kiss anyone else, and get to me.” I opened my mouth to argue, but Kira cut me off before I could speak. “Cali, come on. You *have* to do this. You’re the only one who can. What if something’s really wrong with him? He’s still your mate, isn’t he? Don’t you want to help him?”

“Of course, I do, but—”

“If you want to help him, then this is the only way,” Kira said firmly. “You’re going to have to seduce him.”

**Episode 4222**

**Greyson**

“Pissed” didn’t begin to cover how I felt about Lucian calling me on stage earlier. This whole spectacle was ridiculous to begin with—leave it to Lucian to take something, even a party, too far. All I wanted now was to get back to my table, but every time I managed to escape one conversation, I was pulled into another. I knew diplomacy was important—as Redwood Alpha, I sort of *owed* everyone the time—but my patience for it was running thin.

I just wanted to get back to my mate.

“There’s the man of the hour!” There was a firm slam on my back, and I turned to see a Blue Blood wolf I vaguely recognized. “I wanted to congratulate you on the win.” He lifted his glass. “A toast!”

Awkwardly, I lifted my glass and smiled at the man. “A toast.”

“To a battle well fought!” the man said, but when I went to tip my glass back, I realized it was empty. The man laughed. “You know, that keeps happening to me too. It’s the strangest thing—I go and get a refill, but then the next time I look down, my glass is empty!”

“Funny how that happens,” I said flatly. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go and get another drink.”

“Of course, of course!” He waved me off. “You deserve it after all your hard work.”

As I stepped away from him, heading toward the drinks, I started scanning the room for Cali, but I didn’t get very far before there was an arm being looped around mine. For a split second, I hoped it was Cali. I needed to have her next to me. Her being there could get me through this schmoozing nightmare. But it wasn’t Cali.

“Can I have this dance?”

“Aysel,” I said, turning to look at her. The look in her eyes told me, in no uncertain terms, that she *knew* I wanted to say no, but also knew that I couldn’t—it would look bad. This party was a celebration; why would I refuse the sister of the Alpha of one of my allies? It wasn’t the time for any of that, so I let out a sigh, said, “Fine,” and set my empty glass aside before I led her out onto the dance floor.

*It's just one dance*, I told myself. *You can be civil with Aysel for that long.* I took Aysel into my arms, trying to keep her body at a safe distance from mine. As I spun us around, I tried to see if Cali was anywhere nearby—she’d be the best and fastest way to get out of this. But I didn’t see Cali anywhere. I was actually starting to get a little worried.

Then Aysel brought my attention back to her by getting rid of that distance between us, pressing *way* too close.

“You’ve done so much for the alliance, Greyson,” she purred, her hands all but caressing my chest. “I hope you know how… *grateful* we are.”

I cleared my throat and kept my jaw set, trying not to react. I shouldn’t have been surprised, and really, I wasn’t. This was just the kind of woman Aysel was, and I could handle it. But that didn’t make her brazen behavior any less uncomfortable, though—particularly when Aysel knew I had a mate. But that hadn’t stopped her before, had it?

“I *do* wish you’d let me show you just how grateful I am,” Aysel teased.

God, it felt like I was doing acrobatics trying to dodge her advances. Did the woman have noshame? Could she even spell the word?

“Though I hope Caliana is showing you, at the very least,” she said. “But Caliana has never struck me as very flexible.”

“I’m not discussing any of this with you,” I said, keeping my tone level.

Discussing sex with either Aysel or her brother was never something I would voluntarily do. Thankfully, I saw Rishika coming over with a serious expression. Thank god.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Rishika said, approaching us. “I need to borrow my Alpha.”

*Please do*, I thought. I was beyond grateful for the rescue, though I didn’t know why Rishika was looking so severe. I almost found myself *wishing* the party would erupt into violence, just so I could escape all this small talk bullshit.

“If you’ll excuse me,” I told Aysel politely, then as we spun past Geraint from the Samara pack, I handed her off to him. “She’s a *fantastic* dancer.”

Geraint looked taken aback, but not upset about the turn of events. If Aysel was annoyed, she didn’t show it, and she let him spin her away so that I could turn to Rishika.

“*Thank you*,” I said with feeling.

“Glad to help,” Rishika replied. “But I do need to talk to you.”  
“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Come on, let’s talk somewhere quieter,” she said. “We might have a problem.”

She led me to the side of the dance floor, and, after looking around to make sure that no one was watching us, turned to face me.

“We picked up the scent of an unknown wolf,” she said. “Someone who *isn’t* from any of the attending packs.”

I frowned at that. “When did this happen?”

“About twenty minutes ago.”

I took in a deep breath. I could smell all the different packs’ scents mixing together. It wasn’t so much that the pack had a signature smell, but you got used to them, so when someone new came up, it was noticeable. Very noticeable. Right now, I didn’t smell anyone but the attending packs.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “There are a lot of wolves here tonight.”

Rishika nodded. “I know, that’s why I double-checked. It’s not one of us, Greyson.”

I nodded. “Can you show me where you picked up the scent?”

She nodded. “Follow me.”

As I fell into step with Rishika, I did another scan of the room, hoping to find Cali, but I still didn’t see her. On the heels of Rishika’s news, I wanted to make sure she was okay, so I mind linked with her.

*Cali*, I called. *You okay?*

There was a heart-wrenching moment of silence before she replied. *Yup! All good!*

Her voice had an odd tone to it, but I didn’t have time to dwell on that, too busy striding after Rishika. She led me out the palace’s front entrances and pointed down the drive. When I approached it, I *did* pick up a faint scent trail, but it was almost totally gone, and I couldn’t follow it. I scanned the darkness to see if anything unusual stood out to me, but I didn’t see anything strange. If a stranger *had* made it onto the palace grounds, they hadn’t lingered in this spot.

“You’re right,” I said, nodding. “Definitely not a wolf I’ve interacted with before. Let’s put the pack on high alert. Organize a perimeter sweep—check every corner. Investigate anything unusual.”

Rishika nodded. “Done.”

In a blink, she’d disappeared into the night.

I stared down the drive, trying to memorize the foreign scent as much as I could before it dissipated completely, and wondered who it could belong to. Maybe some rogue Bitterfang, angry about their defeat? Or someone from the council?

No, there was no way it was a councilor. They were too proud to sneak around—they’d just walk right up to the front door and announce themselves. No, if the council was connected to the strange scent, it had to belong to an operative they’d sent here, and I didn’t like that idea one bit. I couldn’t even count all the ways that would be a problem if anything happened at the party tonight. Elle was right out in the open. The only saving grace was that she was with Lucian, and he would protect her no matter what. But no matter who the scent belonged to, my stomach was contorting with a sort of unfocused dread.

My instincts were tryingto tell me something—I just wasn’t quite sure what.

Deciding that I needed to go find Elle, I turned around and was surprised to find that she was actually right there, leaning against the outside of the house. She was watching me, and I walked up to her, trying to keep my composure.

“What are you doing out here in the open?” I asked.

She recoiled a little, frowning. “I’m just getting some air. Is that a problem?”

I realized there had been a little too much bite in my voice when I’d asked the question, but I needed to be honest with Elle. She expected it. “Yes, it is. We should go back inside. I’m worried that something bad could happen tonight. Maybe I was wrong to bring the pack here.” I put a hand at the small of her back, trying to usher her back toward the palace.

“Why? What’s going on?”

“We picked up a strange scent,” I said.

“Who?” Elle asked.

I opened my mouth to reply, but then my ears picked up the slightest sound of movement behind me. I spun around, placing myself in front of Elle. Whatever was out there had my instincts screaming, but I didn’t see anything. I quickly scanned the darkness for the source of the sound, and at first I didn’t see anything, but then I caught it. Just on the edge of the woods, I spotted the shadow of a person—right before they slunk back into the shadows.

**Episode 4223**

It was taking an active effortto process what Kira was suggesting to me. I was staring at her, waiting for her to tell me that there was another option to help Xavier, but she was looking at me upsettinglyseriously.

“*Seduce him?*” I burst out.

She couldn’t be serious.

Not only was that an outrageous suggestion, but it also felt like she’d punched me in the gut with the reminder that Xavier was still my mate. I knew that—of course I did. My body made a fun little game out of reminding me every single time I looked at him. It wasn’t just that Xavier was handsome—of course he was—but every time I looked at him, I remembered what we had. I remembered what he said to me to break up.

How was I supposed to seduce someone who supposedly wanted nothing to do with me?

I’d hoped that tonight wouldn’t be so *stressful*. This party was supposed to be a celebration of the war being over, not an opportunity to indulge in a little masochism—and certainlynot an opportunity to seduce exes to whom one was still mated, while one’s *other* mate was waiting in the wings.

Yes, I’d been hoping to corner Xavier at some point and get him to explain why he’d been so hot and cold with me, but even the thought of trying *that* had been intimidating. The mate bond kept pulling us together, but every time he rejected me, it was like having icy water dumped over my head. The thought of just *talking* to Xaviertwisted my gut with anxiety—how the hell was I supposed to *seduce* him? Anxiety wasn’t the feel-good, sexy emotion you wanted for a scenario like that.

“Cali.” Kira nudged me. “The sooner you do this, the sooner I can figure out what’s wrong with him.”

“But, like, do I have to seduce him?” I asked. “Is that really necessary for this situation?”

“I need you to kiss him,” she said. “That’s the only way to get what we need.”

Fuck fuck fuck.

On one level, I knew Kira was simply speaking logically. I knew that she wouldn’t ask this of me unless it was the only option, but the last time Xavier had been nearby, he’d acted like I didn’t exist. Somehow, that was worse than flat-out rejection—it was as if he’d erased our past. Sadness and anger swelled inside me at the thought. God, how could he live with himself? Was he trying to be cruel, or did he really just not feel anything for me anymore?

*Stop it, Cali*. I couldn’t afford to start spiraling right now. That couldn’t be the case—not with the way he’d stared at me, earlier. There’d been such intensity in his eyes… No, I *knew* there was still something there. I wasn’t imagining that. It wasn’t my brain making up hopeful lies.

Something weird was at play here, and there was a chance Kira might be able to figure out what. *If* I managed to get up the nerve to play my part.

“Cali, just *do it*!” Kira hissed. “Meet me back at the alcove.”

“Which alcove?!” I asked, but she’d already shoved me in Xavier’s general direction and then disappeared.

My stomach immediately knotted up with nerves. God, this was such a bad idea. I found myself trying not to look directly at Xavier. If he gave me that cold look again, as if he was staring right through me, it would break my heart. I knew that this was about finding out what was wrong with him, not about our relationship, but it was difficult to keep the two separate, given what I was being asked to do. I just had to focus on the fact that if some strange magic *was* affecting Xavier, it had the potential to hurt the Redwood andSamara packs, as well as the alliance as a whole. And when I thought of it in those terms, I realized it was my obligation as Luna—well, almost-Luna—to find the truth.

Still, as I walked toward Xavier, it felt like I was dragging myself through quicksand. I kept stealing glances at him through the crowd as I crept closer, and then I was only ten feet away. This was my last chance to turn back—not that turning back was really an option. I just knew that if I got any closer to Xavier, he’d realize I was there and react, one way or another. He was always on high alert.

Just as I was about to take the next—irrevocable—step forward, someone grabbed my hand, and I was spun around to face a beaming Lucian.

“Caliana!” he said excitedly. “I’m so glad to see you here. How are you enjoying the party? Is the food not the best you’ve tasted in your life?” He frowned, gesturing vaguely at the walls. “I’m sorry about the lack of decor—the party came together so quickly, there wasn’t time to do everything.”

“The food is reallygood,” I told him. “And honestly, the palace is already so beautiful—who needs party decorations?”

He smiled broadly. “Too true!”

I’d been hoping that if I complimented him enough, he’d leave me alone and go bother someone else, but my heart sank when he held out a hand.

“Shall we dance?” he asked. “It will go a long way to demonstrate the unity between our packs.”

Lucian didn’t give me a chance to say no—he just took my hand and dragged me out onto the dance floor. But as I glanced over at Xavier, embroiled in conversation with a couple of Samaras, I actually felt a twinge of relief that Lucian had interrupted us. It felt a bit like a stay of execution.

I was fully prepared to lean into Lucian’s unintentional distraction, and I followed his lead as he spun me around the dance floor, but then I caught a glimpse of Kira, glaring at me across the way. I could practically hear her hissing “What the *fuck* are you doing?”into my ear.

And she was right. What *was* I doing? I needed to get over myself. This wasn’t about me—I’d just been telling myself that. This wasn’t about me, and it wasn’t about my relationship with Xavier—this was about protecting Xavier from whatever magical threat he was facing, and protecting everyone around him by extension. I *did* want to look out for him, and that would have to start with swallowing my fear and my pride and getting the hard part over with.

With new urgency, I stopped dancing and looked up at Lucian. “I’m sorry to cut this short, but I have a headache.”

Thankfully, he was sympathetic. “Oh, of course. Come.” He led me off to the side of the dance floor. “Can I get you anything? Do you want to lie down in my private study?”

“No, no, I’ll be okay,” I said. “I don’t want to spoil your fun. I just need a few minutes. Go—your adoring fans are waiting.”

An arrogant smile crossed his face, and he gave me a quick bow. “Do let me know when you’re feeling better so we can finish our dance.”

Almost like one day ending and another beginning, when Lucian vanished into the crowd, Xavier materialized from it like a gorgeous, terrifying sunrise. I had a direct line of sight to him now, and I forced myself to start walking toward him before another distraction found me—or I managed to talk myself out of it again.

My heart was pounding harder with every step I took toward him. What the hell was I even going to say to him? Did I need to say anything at all? Hell, maybe I should just go in for the kiss. But in front of all these people?

Praying that my instincts would tell me what to do when the time came, I took a deep breath as I reached that ten-foot point of no return once more. But then my notorious bad luck found me again—this time in the form of Ava swooping in to wrap her arms around Xavier.

I froze, suddenly feeling like the loser at prom. I’d finally mustered up the courage to walk over and ask the hot guy to dance, but I was too late. I slipped away as Ava joined the conversation with Xavier and the other Samaras, her arms never leaving Xavier’s waist.

I didn’t even needto *talk* to him to be rejected—I just had to get close.

Numbly, I made my way back over to Kira with my tail between my legs. As soon as I reached her, she grabbed my arm a little too hard and pulled me to the side.

“What the hell, Cali?” she demanded. “Why aren’t you smooching Xavier right now?”

“Because he’s a little preoccupied,” I snapped, pointing at him. When we looked over, he and Ava were actually locked in a kiss. Great. Now I felt even worse. But as I noticed how long the pair of them stayed locked together, an idea took hold of me. I turned back to the witch. “Kira, you need to just ask Ava to do it.”

**Episode 4224**

**Xavier**

I was trying to keep my attention focused squarely on Ava. I knew that Cali had seen Ava kiss me, and I suspected that her nervous approach might’ve been the exact reason *why* Ava had decidedto kiss me—she’d wanted to stake her territory. This was miserable. I felt like a useless pawn in Adéluce’s games, which was exactly what the vampire-witch wanted, of course.

In a weird way, I’d almost have been able to accept that if it hadn’t been so painful for Cali. Every time she saw me with Ava, the pain on her face made me feel like I was being stabbed in the gut. It made me want to run. It made me want to scream. It made me want to shift right in the middle of Lucian’s party, just give in to the rage and tear the place apart. And it angered me even more to know that the anguish coursing through my body was bringing Adéluce true joy.

“Trapped” just wasn’t a potent enough word to describe how I felt.

“What do you think, Xavier?” Ava asked, bringing my attention back to the conversation. “About Ravi?”

I looked at Ava and Marissa, but saw nothing to clue me in to what they were talking about. Finally, I had no choice but to admit it. “I’m sorry, what was the question?”

Before I knew it, I had Ava’s irritated voice in my head. *At least* pretend *to show some interest in your pack members.*

Glancing at her, I gave a tiny nod and then settled in to really participate in the conversation.

“Marissa wants an excuse to get Ravi alone,” Ava said.

I frowned. “Why not just ask him?”

Marissa batted her lashes at me in faux innocence. “I was kind of hoping *you* could do that. I don’t want to seem *too* interested, you know?”

“What?” I scoffed. “That’s ridiculous. This isn’t high school—you’re both adults. If you want to get Ravi alone, go talk to him.”

The look on Ava’s face told me that she was *not* thrilled with that answer, but what reason did I have to play matchmaker? I was almost certain that Ravi didn’t need to be *persuaded* to spend time with Marissa—in fact, I was pretty sure that if she told him to jump, he’d ask how high.

Still, Ava was clearly pissed off, to the point where if a meteor had come flying through the ceiling and knocked me out, I would’ve been grateful for the save.

“Will you two excuse me?” I asked. “I’m going to go get some fresh air.”

Under Ava’s scrutinizing gaze, I left, desperate to get away. It was killing me to be in the same space as Cali. There was no denying that she’d been coming right toward me before Ava had joined me, and I was dying to know why—but I couldn’t even think about letting her corner me. Adéluce had warned me not to spend a moment alone with her. I needed to figure out how to get out of this.

I could only imagine the vampire-witch was enjoying this immensely, which was part of the reason why I needed to get some air and clear my head.

I was walking fast, but just before I reached the exit, my path was blocked.

Cali had come after me.

She slipped into my path so quickly that I nearly ran right into her, so I jerked back and immediately saw the pain on her face. She looked nervous—weirdly so—which only heightened my curiosity, but also the danger. I couldn’t be here with her alone.

Then down the hallway, I saw a drunk Vanguard wolf stumble in and slump to the floor. He was muttering to himself and using one of his hands to conduct the music that was playing. Part of me untensed. I wasn’t technically alone with Cali, but this still wasn’t good.

“Um…” Cali was radiating awkwardness—whatever she’d come to talk to me about, she clearly didn’t have any sort of plan. “Nice party, huh?” She paused, waiting for me to respond, but I didn’t, so she just kept talking. “I know these things can be a little stuffy and lame, but it’s nice for everyone to get together once in a while, I think…”

As her awkward rambling continued, I was barely listening. Not because I was trying to seem aloof, but because it was possible that Cali had never looked as beautiful as she did tonight. Her dress was perfect, and her eyes were almost glistening in the lights. I hadn’t thought it was *possible* for her to get morebeautiful, and yet here we were.

Or was this just another one of Adéluce’s mind games? A trick to make me yearn for my mate even more? If tonight were a normal night, one without Adéluce and her spell on me, I would’ve already torn the dress of Cali. I’d have taken her to some dark part of this palace and shown her that she was mine and I was hers.

*Fuck.*

“I can’t do this,” I said suddenly. The pain from just standing so close to Cali was killing me, so I unceremoniously made an attempt to move past her. I had to get away from her—being close to her felt like pulling against a choke collar. But as I tried to slip by, I felt a touch on my arm that was at once painfully gentle and as shocking as being hit by a snapped tightrope.

“Can’t we just talk?” Cali asked softly, her eyes pleading. “Please, Xavier.”

Just talk? Could we *just talk*? God, I wanted to do a hell of a lot more than talk. I wanted to grab her, I wanted to kiss her, I wanted to fuck her until she cried out my name.

I wanted take her as far away from all of this as I could. But more than any of that, I wanted to end her pain. I wanted to ensure that she never got that anguished look in her eyes again.

But all I could do for now was swallow that guilt—for her own good. I had no choice but to stay the course and affect a hard demeanor. “Do we have something to talk about?”

“*Xavier*,” Cali said. “We don’thave to be enemies, you know.”

“I don’t think of you as an enemy,” I said, and then I painfully tacked on the biggest lie I’d ever told. “In fact, I barely think of you at all.”

Once again, I tried to move away from her, but her gentle grip on my arm tightened. I looked down at her and her gaze was pained, but fierce.

“I don’t believe you,” she said.

Scoffing, I forced myself to smirk. “I don’t really care whatyou believe. Why don’t you run back to Greyson? I’m sure he’s missing you.”

“Is that really what you want?” Cali asked.

I couldn’t help but hesitate at the question. My insides were screaming *Of course not!* so loudly that the words very nearly burst out of me in a roar, but then I heard Adéluce cackling in my head.

*Oh, Xavier*, she said. *It’s such wonderful fun, watching you squirm.*

And I had to bite my tongue. Cali was watching me, waiting for an answer. I felt like I was going crazy—and, to make matters worse, my wolf was starting to stir. Cali was too close. Our mate bond was too powerful to ignore. I couldn’t answer her question. I couldn’t do anything except get the hell away from her, before I did something I couldn’t take back. Before I put her in real danger.

I wrenched my hand out of her grip. But instead of reacting with fear or anger, she looked *exhilarated*.

“Xavier,” she said, her eyes blazing. “I still love you. I still *want* you.”

*Fuck*. That wasn’t… That wasn’t what she was supposed to say. What was I supposed to do now? The look in her eyes was mesmerizing, and reminded me of the moments that had led up to our ill-advised kiss at the summit. She was looking at me in a way I’d seen before, and ignoring that look, not acting on it… It just didn’t feel possible.

*Don’t do it, Xavier*, Adéluce sang into my mind. *You might not be alone on a technicality, but you know the rules. You know what’ll happen if you break them.*

I was struggling physically, mentally, and emotionally. I had to wonder just how far Adéluce was really willing to take her threats—

*No*. No, I couldn’t think that way, couldn’t talk myself into underestimating her. I knew Adéluce was perfectly willing and able to hurt Cali. I couldn’t take that risk.

I walked around Cali, quickly moving away from her as Adéluce gloated in my head. *You should never doubt me.*

All of a sudden, I just couldn’t take the sound of her in my head—not while Cali was there, not in front of everyone. I had to get away.

Despite the attention I brought to myself, I pushed my way through the crowd, toward the palace’s main entrance. I heard Cali behind me, calling out my name, creating an awful harmony with Adéluce’s laughter in my mind. I slammed through the front doors and out into the fresh air, sucking down big gulps of it, almost as if I’d been holding my breath since the moment Cali had first approached me.

Adéluce was still laughing in my head, driving me mad, and I just lost it.

“Leave me alone, you fucking bitch!” I screamed, clutching my head between my hands.

And as my words echoed into the night, I heard a gasp.

When I whipped around, my stomach sank. Cali was standing in the doorway, staring at me in shock.

**Episode 4225**

These days, there were two versions of Xavier Evers.

One of them was my mate. The man who looked at me with love and longing—like when I’d first entered the ballroom on Greyson’s arm. I’d seen that man at the summit, too, and I’d just *started* to drag him out while we were talking just now. I had to believe that man still loved me the way I loved him.

The second version of Xavier was cold and careless. A man who barely acknowledged that I was a person. The one who’d just told me that he barely thought of me at all. The one who’d brutally ended our relationship as if he’d never cared about me at all. That version of Xavier was a mask, perhaps, but he still had a horrible kind of power over me.

I’d been starting to get used to this duality, but now… Now, I was seeing a third, far more terrifying man. One staring at me with wild eyes, who’d just been screaming obscenities into the darkness. I’d thought they were directed at me, at first, but then I’d realized they were meant for someone else.

But who? He was alone out here—well, alone apart from me, and he’d only just realized I was here.

“Go away!” he bellowed at me. I hesitated, but his voice got even louder and harsher. “Leave me the fuck alone!”

Even if his earlier words hadn’t been directed at me, these ones certainly were. With tears pooling in my eyes, I turned away.

I staggered back into the ballroom in a daze, trying to make sense of what I’d just seen, and before I’d really grounded myself, Kira appeared beside me.

“Did you kiss him?” she whispered.

All I could do was shake my head. Kira must’ve been able to sense that something was wrong, because she grabbed my arm and pulled me into one of the palace’s million rooms. When we were alone, she looked at me, clearly frustrated.

“What the hell happened?” she demanded.

It was almost hard to breathe. “I’m not sure I can explain it.”

Kira’s expression softened, and she let out a sigh. “I’m so sorry, Cali. I know this is hard, but we have to find out what’s wrong with Xavier. I need you to pull yourself together.”

After taking a few breaths, I met Kira’s eyes. “I believe you now. There’s something wrong with Xavier. He was… yelling at himself. Or at a person I couldn’t see. Maybe someone he was imagining? There was this crazy look in his eyes, like…” I hesitated, my throat tightening painfully. “Kira, I think he’s going insane.”

“That’s possible,” Kira said thoughtfully. “But if you don’t get that kiss, we won’t know for sure.”

With Xavier’s harsh words still ringing in my mind—along with the scene I’d just witnessed—I shook my head. “Please, Kira. You have to get Ava to do it.”

Kira took me by the shoulders and met my eyes. “Cali, I already told you. Ava might have started trying to smooth things over between us, but I’m not ready to trust her, and I’m pretty sure she feels the same way about me. The decision to move to the Samara pack wasn’t an easy one for me, but I believe in Xavier.”

I recognized the desperation and begging in Kira’s voice—it mirrored the way I felt about wanting to help Xavier if he wasin trouble, which he clearly was. *Of course* I could sympathize with Kira wanting to help Xavier. I believed in him, too, but I had no idea how I was supposed to pull this off after how harshly he’d just addressed me. He wanted nothingto do with me—or at least a part of him did.

“I don’t think I can do it,” I told Kira. “I was going to—I tried—but he… I can’t.”

“Cali.” *She* seemed on the verge of getting emotional, now. “You’re the only one I can trust to do this. I know it’s hard, I do, and I’m so sorry. If there were any other way, I wouldn’t ask this of you, but it’s our only option.”

She was right. There was a feeling deep in my gut telling me that this was the only way.

“Okay,” I said, my stomach clenching painfully. “But—”

“You just have to remember that he’s still the man that you fell in love with,” Kira interrupted, tightening her grip on my shoulders, “It might not seem that way, and he’s been treating you horribly, but somewhere, deep down, I think he’s aware of that. And if there’s something blocking the old him—something that’s turning his feelings for you into a weapon—then don’t you want to find out what it is and help him?”

“I’d love nothing more, Kira!” I snapped, getting a little annoyed, now. “You *have* to know that. But every time I try to approach him, I get the same, awful result. Can’t you cast a spell to help me get this done? Some kind of kissing spell or something?”

But she just shook her head. “That’s a terrible idea. If my suspicions are correct, then there’s already enough magic at play in this situation.” She turned me toward the door and started to push. “Just go in there and kiss him. It’ll be over before you know it.”

“But in front of people? In front of *Greyson*? I don’t think I can do that!”

Kira sighed but looked sympathetic. “I know this is difficult. But won’t it be *worth* it to help Xavier?”

I sighed. She was right. I just had to keep repeating that to myself until I was convinced of it. This was no big deal. All I had to do was kiss him. That was all. Why was thatso hard? I’d kissed Xavier a million times—what was once more?

I puffed out my chest and walked through the door, repeating it to myself over and over and over. *No big deal, Cali. This is no big deal. Just one kiss. Over before you know it. No big deal.*

But then my gaze landed on Xavier, and my false confidence went up in smoke. My little mantra was nothing but words, and desperately hollow ones at that. *Of course* this was a big deal. It was Xavier. After all the back and forth, after the breakup, after the summit, after the harsh words and longing looks, it wasn’t just onekiss. It was akiss that could help him.

I eyed the drinks table, wondering if some liquid courage would help get me through this, but then I thought for a moment and realized I probably owed Greyson a heads-up about what was about to happen. He’d always been really understanding about the *due destini*, but I still wanted to make sure he didn’t read too much into my kissing Xavier.

I started to loop around the dance floor, searching for Greyson, but then someone grabbed my arm. I half-expected it to be Kira, telling me that I didn’t have time to fill my mate in on our plans, but when I turned around, I found myself face-to-face with Rishika.

“Hi,” I said awkwardly. “Uh… What’s up?”

“I just wanted to keep you in the loop,” she said. “When we were running patrol earlier, we picked up a strange scent that doesn’t belong to anyone from the invited packs. Greyson smelled it too, and then he saw someone lurking in the woods. Right now, we’re trying to…”

I was trying to listen to Rishika, I really was—after all, I was supposed to be her Luna—but her voice was starting to fade into a wordless buzz. All I could think about was the kiss, and I still couldn’t find Greyson. Xavier had stopped at the bar, and Ava was clear on the opposite side of the room.

Kira was watching me from the door of the room we’d been talking in, nodding her head vigorously.

This was my chance.

“Excuse me,” I said to Rishika abruptly, stepping away from her, and then I hurried toward Xavier.

I moved fast, because I knew that if I hesitated for even a moment, I’d get cold feet again. My stomach was churning, and my heart was pounding, but I just kept repeating that stupid mantra to myself.

*It’s just a kiss. It’s just a kiss. It’s just a kiss. It’s just a kiss*. *Just one of thousands. It’s just a kiss…*

But I was losing confidence with every step. What if he yelled at me again? What if he said even more hurtful things? But what could he say that he hadn’t already?

His back was to me as he ordered something from the bar, and I got close enough that I could smell his dizzying, comforting scent. I took a moment to steel myself, and then I yanked him around to face me with enough force that he spilled his drink.

Those perfect blue eyes went wide with shock, and he opened his mouth to speak, but I didn’t even give him a chance to react to my presence. Hands shaking, I grabbed his face, and then I slammed my lips into his.

**Episode 4226**

**Xavier**   
“Shocked” didn’t cover how I felt when Cali kissed me. For a moment, I wondered if it was Adéluce in my mind, painting a vision of what I wanted more than anything, but then I felt the warmth. The long-needed return. The ease of pressure, the release of tension. I knew that I should pull away. This was dangerous—for her, for me, for everyone.

But I didn’t pull away. I couldn’t. And I didn’t want to.

Instead, I let my lips move against Cali’s, closing my eyes. She sank into me, and immediately, memories flooded over me—the familiar, wonderful feeling of Cali in my arms, being with her, holding her, kissing her with no need for restraint, no need to lie or pretend that this wasn’t what I wanted. On reflex, I coaxed her mouth open, which she was all too willing to do. She clung to me, pressing her breasts into my chest as she held onto my suit for dear life.

Fuck, how was it that she still wanted me this way? I could feel the heat coming off of her, burning against my body. It was taking everything in me not to hike the dress up her thighs and take her here where everyone could see. She felt too fucking good, and it was like a switch in my brain had been turned back on.

She was my *mate*.

She was *mine*.

Except she wasn’t.

I had to stop this. *Now.*

I pulled away, looking down at her. Cali’s lips were beautifully swollen, her eyes almost sleepy as she gazed up at me. She was breathing heavily, her cheeks painted a beautiful shade of pink. I was going to hate myself all over again for what I had to do next.

“What the fuck?” I demanded, forcing myself to act disgusted.

Cali looked dazed. “Sorry,” she whispered.

I frowned at her, resisting the urge to look around and meet all the eyes that were undoubtedly fixed on us. This was a party, and we’d officially become the entertainment.

“Are you really that desperate?” I asked flatly. “Is Greyson not fucking you properly, so you came running back to me? How pathetic, Cali.”

She gasped, now avoiding my eyes and staring at the floor. “It was a mistake. I… I…”

*Fuck fuck fuck*. I wanted to take what I said back. I hadn’t needed to say it like that, had I? But if I hadn’t, what would Adéluce do next?

Cali’s voice trailed off, and I was dying inside at the knowledge that she was hurting. Fuck, all I wanted was to tell her how good it had felt to kiss her, and how much I missed her, and how happy I was that she’d done it—but I couldn’t. The weight of the things I couldn’t was becoming crushing.

This was torture.

To add to the chaos, Greyson came pushing through the crowd, beelining straight for us. He stopped next to us, looking from Cali to me and back again, his expression twisting between confusion and anger.

Quickly, I threw up my hands. “I didn’t initiate this.”

It was clear from the look on his face that Greyson didn’t believe me—not that I found this overly shocking. I couldn’t tell whether he’d heard what I’d said moments ago about him, but thankfully, before he could act on anything, Cali reached out and grabbed his hand.

“Xavier’s right.” Her voice was barely a whisper, tight with emotion. “It was me. It was my mistake.”

Then she turned away and took off, tears brimming in her eyes.

Greyson watched after her before turning back to glare at me. He wanted to lay into me—I could already hear his snide voice listing all the things that were wrong with me—but in the end he just settled for muttering a curse before running off after Cali.

With them both gone, I was starting to feel very exposed as I realized that dozens of eyes were still on me—only now, I was the last character from our little Shakespearean tragedy still on stage. A few people were whispering and pointing, while others were just staring at me with their mouths hanging open. If Ava hadn’t witnessed the whole debacle, she’d be hearing about it any moment.

That wasn’t my biggest concern, though, or the reason why I suddenly felt like I was about to have a panic attack. I turned on my heel and strode out of the room, inwardly freaking out.

What if Adéluce had seen that?

Who the fuck was I kidding? Of *course* she’d seen it. I hadn’t technically broken the rules, though. We hadn’t been alone thanks to that drunk Vanguard wolf. We’d actually been the exact *opposite* of alone—a fact that was made obvious by the whispers that followed me as I left the ballroom. I stormed down a hallway and into an empty room, shutting the door behind me.

This was bad. This was really, really bad. Why the hell had Cali kissed me? What was going on with her all of a sudden? First, she’d tried to get me alone and I’d been forced to shake her of, and now she’d run up and freaking *kissed me* in the middle of the party. Was this some strange form of punishment for the way I’d been treating her?

No. It couldn’t be. That wasn’t how Cali worked. She was kind and honest. She’d never play games like that.

But if it wasn’t a punishment, then what was she thinking? For the life of me, I couldn’t understand it, and I’d have been lyingif I said I wasn’t putting my whole soul into trying to figure it out. How could she still want to kiss me after everything I’d done to her? Fuck. She was going to get herself killed. But she didn’t know that. There was no way for her to know just how risky her actions had been.

Slowly, I lifted my fingertips to my lips and rested them there. They were still tingling, and I could still taste Cali, and my whole body was aching for her. I wished more than anything that I could’ve picked her up and carried her into this empty room and finished what that kiss had promised. I wanted to just lock myself away with her and make up for all our lost time—reclaim all the time that Adéluce had stolen from us and spend the rest of my life apologizing for how badly I’d hurt her. I wanted to turn our lives into a revolving door of apologies and lovemaking until we melted into one being and there was nothing in the world but *us*.

I burned, just thinking about it.

*No*. I forced those thoughts away. I couldn’t afford to think them—indulging in fantasies would only hurt me in the long run. Worse, it could hurt Cali.

I now had a whole laundry list of things I needed to do. I had to make sure that Adéluce didn’t hurt Cali for what she’d done. I also had to make sure that the alliance between the Redwoods and the Samaras stayed solid. It would be just like my brother to make trouble over this—especially when it wasn’t actually my fault.

Whatever issues he had with the kiss, he’d have to take up with Cali. I hadn’t planned it, and I didn’t want it to disrupt the peace we’d created between our packs.

Fuck, if I had my way, we’d alljust act like the whole incident had never happened. But that was just as much a fantasy as my Cali daydreams.

Bracing myself for unpleasantness, I stepped out of the room and almost immediately ran directly into Lucian.

“Well,” he said with a smug sort of smile. “Quite the show you put on out there, Xavier.”

I scowled and tried to move past him, but he deftly side-stepped, remaining in my path.

“Can I give you some advice, man-to-man?” he asked congenially.

“What about our relationship indicate to you that I would *ever* want your advice?” I asked, my nostrils flaring.

Lucian was clearly unfazed. He just slapped me on the back and laughed, making my hackles rise even further. “You, my friend, need to figure out if you truly want the lovely Caliana. It’s becoming quiteclear that there’s still something between the two of you.”

I yanked my shoulder from Lucian’s grip. “That’s none of your business.”

Still undeterred, Lucian slung an arm around my shoulders. “Of course it is! You and I are something akin to friends now, no?” *No.* “And I always want what’s best for my friends.”

“Me too,” I replied flatly. “Which is why I’m warning you that if you want to keep that fucking arm, you’ll take it off me.”

He lifted his arm from my shoulders like he was surrendering, but still said, “Okay, okay. I see that this is sensitive territory. But just know that you have my permission to use any of these bedrooms, should you have need of them.”

With a disgustingly arrogant wink, he finally walked off.

A lesser man would’ve smacked the shit out of him just to make sure he never tried anything like that ever again, but I didn’t want any more suspicious eyes on me. I sincerely hoped the princeling wasn’t off to spread rumors, or to give Greyson some “advice” about the situation. I was actually about to go after him to make sure he kept his stupid mouth shut, but then someone else stepped into my path.

It was Ava—and she looked *supremely* pissed off.

Stabbing a finger into my chest, she glared at me and growled, “What the *fuck* was that kiss?”

**Episode 4227**

Greyson escorted me to the edge of the ballroom, his body shielding me from everyone. I’d have been lying if I said I wasn’t a wreck. Everyone was still watching me, whispering about my embarrassing display. My face was burning, and my heart was being squeezed tight. As embarrassing and awful as the before and after were, I hated how much I’d liked the kiss itself. In a way, it had felt like I was being restored—like I was finally eating after being deprived of food for years. I was almost shaking with pain.

*Why* did I still love Xavier so much?

For small stretches of time, I was able to forget the pain he’d caused me, but that kiss had brought it all flooding back. My body remembered him. My heart remembered him. And I felt even more hollow than I had before.

And then Xavier had humiliated me in front of everyone. My cheeks went hot, hearing his words replaying in my head.

*Are you really that desperate? Is Greyson not fucking you properly, so you came running back to me? How pathetic, Cali.*

How could he say that to me after kissing me like that? He’d been the one to deepen the kiss, and he’d held me so close… Then for him to say that in front of all those people like that? Greyson had to have heard him, too...

I wanted to crawl into a hole and die.

Maybe I was exactly what he said I was: desperate and pathetic. If Kira and I were wrong about something going on with Xavier, then I was a fool, too. If this just was who Xavier was now, then I had to just accept it and stop trying… anything.

“Are you all right, Cali?” Greyson asked. His jaw was set, and his arms were crossed.

*Shit*. He’s upset, and how could he not be? I’d kissed his brother and been the one to initiate it. He had to have questions. Plus, I’d done it in front of everyone. I hadn’t only embarrassed myself, but Greyson, too. And Xavier had called into question Greyson’s… lovemaking skills. Ugh, why had I agreed to do this for Kira? The only good thing was that I hopefully had enough of the sample to give her—

Oh *crap*, the sample. Would it expire or something if I waited too long to get it to Kira? The last thing we needed right now was for me to need to do that again.

“I-I need to go find Kira,” I said suddenly.

“Right *now*?” he asked.

I nodded. “I’m sorry, I’ll explain everything, Greyson. I swear.”

Hurrying away, and feeling like garbage for doing it, I found Kira on the other side of the ballroom, looking around. Probably for me. I grabbed her by the wrist, and dragged her back toward the empty room we’d been in earlier. I pushed the door open, and it wasn’t the same room, but a bathroom instead.

“Well? Did you do it?” Kira asked, locking the door behind us.

All I could do was nod. But then tears started to flow. I dragged my palms across my eyes to wipe the tears away, but new ones were waiting right behind them.

“Oh, Cali…” Kira said with a frown. “I’m so sorry. Do you want to talk—”

“Can we just get this over with, please?” I interrupted, sniffling. I needed to hurry up so I could go back to Greyson and talk to him about everything. “Get the sample.”

Kira’s eyes widened. “Of course,” she said, then she started to dig through her purse.

I watched as she pulled out a small glass vial and what looked like a Q-tip. She lifted the Q-tip to my lips, and they immediately started to tingle.

I jerked back. “What *is* that?”

“It’s soaked in a mix of herbs that cling onto the sample on your lips,” she said.

I sniffed the Q-tip and scrunched up my nose. “It smells *super* sour.”

“I know. Most magic stuff doesn’t smell great,” Kira said with a shrug.

As Kira continued to swab, I tried not to let my tongue touch my lips at all, worried that the herbs would taste just as nasty as they smelled.

After she’d dipped the Q-tip into the vial and swabbed my mouth four times, Kira nodded decisively. “Okay, I think that’s good.”

I grabbed a tissue and wiped my mouth, hoping to remove both the tingling sensation from the herbs and the memory of Xavier’s lips. Then I pulled out my lipstick and started to reapply it.

Watching myself in the mirror—and trying to ignore my red eyes—I said, “So, I think I understand why you couldn’t have just collected the magic remnants from Ava without her knowledge.”

Kira chuckled. “Yeah, Ava definitely would’ve bitten my finger off if I’d tried to swab her lips.”

I couldn’t help but laugh a little at the image, and laughing made me feel a bit more like a person and a bit less like a collection of conflicted emotions in a trench coat. Finally feeling steadier, I turned to Kira. “So? What are the results?”

But Kira was already packing everything back into her purse, and I got the feeling I wasn’t going to get an answer right away. “I need to get the sample back to the pack house to test it.”

I sighed. “*Kira*. Why can’t you just carry a whole alchemy kit with you everywhere you go?”

The witch laughed at my exaggerated whining. “You’d be surprised how many times I’ve considered it.”

Really, it had been silly of me to expect an immediate answer. I sighed. “Will you pleasemake sure to let me know as soon as you get the results?”

*Cali.* Greyson’s voice in my head actually made me jump a little, but only because Xavier was still plastered across my brain. *Where did you go?*

Given that I hadn’t found the time to explain what was going on to Greyson *before* the kiss, I definitely owed him an explanation now.

“I need to go and find Greyson, Kira,” I said. “I have to explain the kiss… Do you have everything you need from me?”

“Yes.”

I nodded and turned to walk away, but Kira grabbed my arm. When I looked back at her, she had a sad look on her face.

“I really am sorry for asking you to do that,” she said.

“It’s okay,” I lied, shaking my head. “We did what we had to do.”

With a shallow nod, Kira released my arm, and I was finally able to leave the bathroom and go in search of Greyson.

*I’m in the powder room*,I told him. *Where are you?*

*I see you*, he said.

I looked up and saw Greyson walking toward me down the hallway, and I started forward to meet him halfway. I was hoping that this conversation wasn’t going to be *too* bad, but as I got closer to him, I saw that his expression was definitely grim.

Once we were close enough to talk, I just blurted everything out. “I’m sorry. I’m *so* sorry. I wanted to talk to you before it happened, but I couldn’t find you, and people kept interrupting me, and then Xavier said what he did—”

“Cali.” Greyson’s expression had softened a bit. “Slow down. I want to make sure that you’re okay after what my brother said.”

“Oh.” I blinked. “Yeah, I’m okay. I think. Are you?”

“It would take a lot more than a stupid comment from my brother for me to question whether I’m good at having sex,” he said. “But can you please explain what just happened? I’m not mad—well, I *am*, but at him. I’m confused more than anything. Why did you kiss him in the first place?”

That was very fair. If I’d looked up and saw my mate locking lips with his ex in the middle of a crowded room, I’d have been confused, too. Also mad, to be honest, so Greyson was already doing better than me.

“It’s complicated, but you deserve to know everything,” I told him. “Kira asked me for help.”

“In the form of kissing my brother?” He looked even more confused, now.

“Yes. I know it’s weird, but you know how I think something’s off with Xavier?” I said. “Kira thinks so, too.”

Greyson closed his eyes and pressed a hand to his forehead, like he was getting a headache. But he remained calm when he spoke. “Okay? And what does the kiss have to do with that?”

I was beating around the bush too much—I needed to be direct. “There’s a test Kira can do to see if whatever’s wrong with Xavier is magic-based, but it requires a sample of the magic direct from the source, and getting that sample kind of involved… Well, making out with him a little.” Then I frowned. “If it makes you feel any better, Kira tried kissing him herself, but it didn’t last long enough for her to collect any magic remnants.”

Greyson took a deep breath. “So you kissed Xavier… for *science*?”

“Yes,” I said. “Exactly.”

“Okay.” Greyson let out a long sigh. “I get it. You’re worried about him. Honestly, I’m kind of worried about him, too, even though he’s doing his best to piss me off at every turn. If that was your reason for kissing him, then I can accept it.” He grimaced slightly. “Just… Maybe make sureto give me a heads-up next time? So I’m not *completely* blindsided?”

“I know, I’m so sorry. I was trying to.” I nodded vigorously. “I’m sorry, I got caught up.”

Greyson frowned at that, and I wondered if maybe I’d phrased that the wrong way. I remembered how heady and emotional the kiss had made me, and immediately felt guilty. I wanted to reassure Greyson, but the thought of kissing him right now after what had just gone down with Xavier felt really weird. So instead, I took his hand and said, “I hope you can forgive me.”

He nodded. “I do. But in the future, I’d definitely prefer to be clued in when something like this is happening. Especially when it involves my mate kissing other people at very well-attended parties.”

It really *had* been my intention to explain things to Greyson first, but I couldn’t keep using that as an excuse. This whole situation was already complicated enough, and if I wasn’t careful, I was going to end up demolishing Greyson’s relationship with his brother, my relationship with Greyson, and the alliance as a whole. I was a Luna now—almost—I had to be more responsible with my actions.

“I completely agree,” I said. Then I flashed him a playful smile, and, fortunately, he cracked one right back.

“And as for my brother,” he said, “I don’t like what he said to you.”

“I don’t either, but please just leave it… I don’t think I can handle anything else tonight.”

The last thing this party needed was Greyson and Xavier at each other’s throats, no matter how much Xavier’s comments might have stung.

“Greyson.” Rishika came rushing up to us, and Greyson tensed immediately. “We need you.”

“What is it?” Greyson asked.

Rishika’s expression was grim. “I think we found that spy wolf.”

**Episode 4228**

**Greyson**

I’d been hoping that the figure in the woods had only been sent to observe and had run once they’d been spotted, but the news that Rishika had tracked them down had me worried. Of course, I was prepared for trouble—I always was—but the night had already been eventful enough, and I’d been hoping it would end quietly.

So much for that.

Looking down at Cali, I frowned. “I’m sorry. I have to take care of this.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” she asked.

I shook my head. “I’d rather you stay in here, love,” I said. I didn’t want Cali to get mixed up in any of this nonsense if she didn’t need to be.

“Greyson,” Cali said, my name a warning. “You know I’m not exactly a ‘stay here’ kind of girl, right?”

“I know, and I love you for it,” I said. “But I need you to hold down the party on behalf of the Redwood pack. We want to take care of this quickly and quietly. I don’t want anyone to be alarmed about the wolf’s presence if they don’t have to be.”

She nodded, gulping down whatever protests she was going to offer up. “I can do that,” she said. “But, Greyson, please be careful.”

“I will.” I bent down to kiss her on the cheek, and I couldn’t help but add, “And no making out with anyone else while I’m gone.”

A relieved smile spread across Cali’s face, and she snickered. “More reason for you to hurry back.”

It seemed that some of her anxiety had been eased by my joke—I was glad, and it made me feel a little better about leaving her so soon after everything that had happened with Xavier. I had to believe that she wouldn’t kiss my brother twice in the same night. If Kira needed anything else for whatever test she was doing, I would get it. I could clock my brother in the mouth well enough, couldn’t I?

As I took off after Rishika, some of my anger toward my brother resurfaced. He’d been so callous, so *cruel* to Cali. He deserved to be shown a lesson for that. I didn’t like that Cali had asked me not to do anything. She was my Luna in everyone’s eyes here, and he’d insulted her.

If he kept this game up, he’d regret it.

“Where’s the wolf?” I asked Rishika, catching up to her. “Have you talked to them?”

“We haven’t grabbed him yet,” she said, “but we have him cornered.”

“Good. Take me to him.”

Rishika led me out of the palace and across the grounds. I was surprised when she didn’t head for the woods surrounding the palace, but instead took the turn that led to the gardens. Not long after we entered the area, I picked up the strange wolf’s scent. Now that I could smell it properly, undiluted by time, I realized the scent was vaguely familiar, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on why.

Rishika led me to the greenhouse at the far back of the garden. Sage was already there, and she walked over to us immediately.

“We’ve got the place surrounded,” she said. “He hasn’t tried to come out since we cornered him inside, but we have no idea what he’s doing in there.”

I nodded. “Okay. I’ll go in and try talking to him.”

“Be careful,” Rishika warned me. “He’s acting erratically. He scratched Zainab pretty badly when we were corralling him.”

Sage’s expression darkened. “He’ll pay for that.”

I rested my hand on Sage’s shoulder. “I wouldn’t worry about me. I’m sure I can handle him.”

“I have no doubt, Alpha,” she said.

“But let me see if I can resolve this withoutviolence, first.” I knew it was what Cali would want me to do. Besides, I had to treat this very delicately. I didn’t know if it was someone from the Bitterfang pack, their alliance, or even the council. My residual anger toward Xavier couldn’t afford to bleed into this exchange. At least not yet.

I glanced at Rishika. “Stay at the ready.”

She nodded. “We won’t move until you tell us to move.”

With that, I opened the door to the greenhouse and slowly walked inside. The interior was unpleasantly humid, and someone had turned on all the sprinklers, so there was mist everywhere too. I wasn’t sure if this was something the spy had done or if the sprinklers were just on a timer, but either way, it made it harder for me to see—and to find the source of the scent.

“I don’t want to fight you!” I called out. “I just want to talk.”

I strained to hear over the hissing of the sprinklers, and I could’ve sworn that I heard a shuffling sound to my left. I spun in that direction, making sure to keep my head on a swivel. Slowly, carefully, I walked through the maze of workbenches covered in trays of seedlings and plants in the process of being potted, keeping an eye out for the spy.

“Who sent you?” I called, listening for a reply that didn’t come. “Are you part of the Bitterfang alliance?”

There was another sound, this time from behind me. Once again, I whipped around, and I saw the shadow of someone darting past a bench. Rather than continuing to step lightly, I bolted after the shadow.

“Are you from another pack?” I called. “The council?”

Now there was a clattering sound, and when I turned around, I saw a tray of seedlings rolling across the ground. Whoever this was, he was getting sloppier—scared by one of my guesses, perhaps. I stopped walking to listen hard, and just barelyheard the sound of someone breathing. They were clearly attempting to hold their breath to hide from me, but every thirty seconds or so, they quietly gasped for air.

“If you don’t answer me, I’ll have to assume you’re hostile, and I don’t think you’ll like what I have to do next,” I said. “This is a peaceful gathering. We don’t have to fight.”

There was another extended period of silence, during which I could practically hear him trying to decide what to do. Eventually, I heard him take in a deep breath.

“You’ve broken wolf law,” the stranger shouted, still hiding. “You’ll have to bear the consequences.”

I scowled, letting out a low growl. That response certainly narrowed things down. I’d considered the possibility that the stranger was a Rogue, but I knew now that he wasn’t. He was either a council operative, or a holier-than-thou Bitterfang wolf with a head full of Malakai’s nasty, old-fashioned ideas. Why the Bitterfangs couldn’t just accept that other packs did things differently, I’d never understand.

But if this jackass honestly thought it was a good idea to go all rogue vigilante on an alliance party, I was going to have to teach him exactly why he was wrong.

“Well, if I’m the criminal, then why are you hiding?” I asked. “Seems to me that you should come out here and hand down the punishment you think I deserve.”

Just behind me, there was a deep, low growl. I spun around and was immediately met with a face-full of dirt that temporarily blinded me. Before I could get my bearings, something slammed into me, sending me flying backward. I partially shifted, lashing out with my claws, and managed to catch the other wolf. I shoved him off me, slamming him into the nearest workbench. The sound of splintering wood filled the greenhouse, along with the clatter of falling pots.

I blinked against the dirt, trying to restore my vision, but it was still blurry. Mixed with the mist from the sprinklers, the wolf was no more than a shadow moving in front of me.

But that was all I needed.

I lunged for the wolf, and we went flying. He was powerless to catch himself, and we went crashing through the side of the greenhouse, glass shattering all around us. Out in the open air, I could see better, and I managed to get my arm around the stranger’s neck, strangling him into compliance. While he was dazed and breathless, I wrapped my clawed hand around his neck and pinned him down to the ground, staring down at his face.

“You picked the wrong pack to mess with,” I snarled.

Despite the fact that he was clearly on the losing end of this fight, the man looked back at me and laughed. “By the time the council finishes punishing you, there won’t be a pack left.”

I lifted my hand, preparing to rake my claws across his face, but before I could make contact, he hurled a handful of pebbles into my face. It wasn’t so much painful as it was disorienting, and I reeled backward. I turned, my eyes straining as I called out to Rishika and the others. “Don’t let him get away!”

The wolf shifted and barreled into the others, knocking them back one by one. He snapped his teeth at Rishika, getting ahold of her arm before throwing her to the ground. I shouted for her, running to her side. Luckily, she was already starting to heal.

I turned my attention back to the wolf, but it was too late. He was already gone.

**Episode 4229**

**Xavier**

It wasn’t as if I hadn’t known that a fight with Ava was coming, but I really didn’t want to deal with it right now. She was going to demand an explanation that I didn’t really have, an apology that I didn’t really want to provide, and a degree of sympathy for her plight that I was generally devoid of. It was honestly a waste of time for everyone.

But I knew that if I brushed her off, I’d never hear the end of it. I could either deal with it now, or let it do what Ava’s and my problems did best—fester until they exploded.

Besides, even though I didn’t actually knowwhat was going on, I *did* know that Ava deserved some sort of explanation, even if it was just an assurance that Cali had instigated the kiss without any encouragement from me. I needed to respect Ava’s feelings as my Luna and quell whatever fears or concerns she might’ve developed after that whole fiasco. But the truth was that I didn’t know why the hell Cali had kissed me. I couldn’t give Ava an answer to that, and if that’s what she was looking for, I wasn’t going to be able to provide it.

“I didn’t initiate that,” I told her levelly. “I don’t know what Cali was thinking. She just walked up to me, and…” I stopped talking. Partly because there just wasn’t much else I could say, and partly because if I allowed myself to recall the kiss, I’d end up in the worst possible frame of mind to deal with Ava.

Though Ava’s lip was still curled in annoyance, she let out a frustrated sigh. “But you kissed her back, X,” she said, glaring at me. “I *saw* you.”

“If you saw me, then you must have also heard the part where I called her desperate and pathetic?” I asked, hating hearing myself say the words again. Might as well add it to a list of things I would have to apologize for, if I could even do that one day. “I thought you would’ve liked that part.”

Ava clicked her tongue. “Fine. Well, since *you* don’t know what happened, then maybe I should go have a word with Cali about kissing other Lunas’ Alphas.”

With that, she turned around and actually started to walk off. I reached out and grabbed her arm. That was one conversation I wasn’t going to let happen.

“Hey, just let it go. It’s over,” I said.

Ava scowled darkly. “Are you seriously *protecting* her right now?”

Given how many headaches I’d been getting lately, lifting my hands to rub at my temples was practically instinct. “No, I’m trying to protect *you* from unnecessary drama. You know the Redwoods would back Cali up if you went for her, and the Samaras would drop everything to help you. Do you really want that kind of trouble? Greyson probably already wants to rip me a new one.”

She watched me for a moment, but then her expression softened, and my shoulders dropped with relief.

“Fine,” she said. “I’ll let it go. For *now.* But if I get a chance, I’m going to make it very clearto Calithat I don’t give a shit about her history with you. You and I made a promise to each other at the Luna ceremony—I plan on keeping that promise, and I expect the same from you.”

I nodded at her. “I know. And I’m sorry.”

Ava’s eyes widened in shock when I apologized, but then she relaxed even more—apparently, my apology had mollified her. But she still looked conflicted about something, and after a few minutes, she asked, “How are you feeling?”

“What do you mean?” I asked with a frown.

“I mean, Cali kissed you. In your words, desperate,” she said. “But did you… Do you feel… anything?”

I sighed. “Ava, I’m trying to make a habit of being honest with you,” I said. “I’m going to ask you once if you really want to know the answer to that question. If you do, I’ll tell you.”

Her eyes widened, then she nodded. “No. I don’t want to know. But thank you. I appreciate you being honest with me.” She looked out over the sea of people, and then her gaze came back to me. “Do you want to rejoin the party?”

“Honestly? I really fucking don’t.”

A laugh bubbled out from Ava’s lips. “Then why don’t you go take a seat in that sitting room down the hall, and I’ll bring you a whiskey?”

Why she was being so nice was a mystery to me, but I wasn’t about to spit in the face of kindness from a woman who’d probably been toying with the idea of castrating me not even ten minutes ago. Maybe it was because she didn’t want to know the answer to the question she’d posed. Maybe she thought if we ignored Cali and the *due destini*, it would go away.

“I’d actually reallyappreciate that,” I said.

She started to go, but only got about ten feet from me before she turned around, stomped back up to me, and planted a hard kiss on my lips. When she pulled back, she said, “Just to remind you who your Luna is.” And thenshe *actually* walked away.

I shook my head as I walked to the sitting room, trying to wrap my head around how confusing and complicated my life still was. I flopped down into an armchair in front of the fireplace and let my head fall back. I was trying to will away the nasty headache I was developing when a low laugh sounded in my head.

God, I did *not* want to look, but I knew she’d only bother me more if I pretended to ignore her, so I lifted my head and opened my eyes. Sure enough, I found myself looking at a hazy, spectral Adéluce, standing between me and the fireplace.

“What do you want?” I growled.

“You really shouldn’t use that tone with me, Xavier,” she chided. “You know it upsets me.”

If *that* upset her, my elaborate fantasies of choking the life out of her and/or ripping out her heart would really send her over the edge—but I couldn’t afford to anger her by voicing those desires.

“Fine,” I said. “Why are you here? I’m obeying all your orders.”

She tilted her head. “You *could* be trying harder with Ava.”

“I’m committed to her. I’m *with* her,” I snapped. “What more do you want from me?”

“Yes, you have done those things, but you don’t loveher,” Adéluce said. “I need you to *love* her, Xavier.”

I threw my hands in the air. “You can’t actually control a person’s heart, Adéluce. Even if you could, I still don’t understand why you want me to loveher. Doesn’t that go against your whole ‘torture Xavier’ life philosophy? Being in love with my Luna would only benefit me.”

Adéluce let out a loud, shrill laugh. “Sure, keep believing that, Xavier.”

My eyes rolled so hard that it made the pain from my headache double.

“You know,” Adéluce mused, “I’m pretty sure kissing Cali is counterproductive to you falling in love with Ava.”

My whole body tensed up. “I didn’t initiate that. I didn’t know she was going to do it.”

Her eyes widened. “But you forget, Xavier—I knowwhat you’re feeling, and you liked it. You kissed her back. They all saw it.”

“No.” I shook my head vigorously. “I pushed her away.”

Adéluce clicked her tongue at me. “That’s what you’d like me to think. I heard your little speech, too, but it’s not good enough. You broke a rule. You’ll have to face the consequences.”

Jumping up out of my chair, I barked, “That wasn’t a rule! You said not to be alone with Cali, and I wasn’t alone with her.”

I’d known there was a chance that Adéluce could use the kiss as an excuse to hurt Cali, but I’d been hoping that she’d be pacified by the sight of me shoving her away. Adéluce wanted to torture me, after all, and pushing Cali away and pretending that I didn’twant her was certainly torture. It was hard just being at this party with her. This should’ve been enough. I hadn’t broken a rule, and I was verymuch in pain.

“Oh…” Adéluce cupped her chin and threw on a faux-innocent expression. “Did I forget to make ‘no kissing Cali’ a rule? Honestly, I just thought that was a given.”

“It wasn’t a rule,” I repeated. The obvious desperation in my voice made me sick, but I didn’t care. I’d protect Cali, even if I had to get down on my hands and knees in front of this raging bitch to do it. “I didn’t break any rules.”

Adéluce let out a long sigh. “Fine. Cali can live.”

I let out a sigh of relief as my stomach turned over. Adéluce wasn’t exactly a pinnacle of honor, but I did have to give her the faintest bit of credit for backing down— I *hadn’t* broken any rules, after all. But I knew I’d have to be more careful with Cali in the future. From now on, I couldn’t let her get anywhere near me.

“*But*,” Adéluce said pointedly, and my heart sank, “she *did* interfere with my plans.”

“She didn’t *know* your plans,” I hissed.

“Don’t care.” Adéluce shrugged. “She’ll have to pay for being a nuisance.”

“What? No! Stop!”

But it was too late. I lunged toward her, only to burst through the wisps of her fading image.

Adéluce was gone.

**Episode 4230**

Anxiously, I walked back to the ballroom, ready to do my Luna duty by checking in with the other Redwoods. I was the epitome of Everything Being Fine. Of course, I was concerned that there was a spy lurking around, but Greyson had told me that he had things covered. He was my Alpha, so I needed to trust him. On top of that, I knew that Greyson was perfectly capable of taking care of himself, and he had Rishika with him, who was an amazing fighter.

They’d be fine.

*Fine.*

When I walked into the ballroom, I immediately spotted a few Redwoods. Violet was sitting with Charlie, her brother, and Perrie at our table together. It looked like they were playing some kind of game. But suddenly there was shouting.

“Who the fuck invited you?!”

Twisting, I looked to see an angry Vanguard wolf. He towered over whoever he was yelling at and I craned my head to see who it was. A few people around him were watching wide-eyed, and a few were even backing away.

My gut reaction was to get involved, but I’d made enough of a fool of myself with the whole Xavier kiss debacle… So logically, I knew I shouldn’t attract any additional attention. Plus, this was the Vanguards’ pack house and party, so whatever issues they had with their guests was their business. I started to move awayfrom the confrontation and to the Redwood table, but then the person the Vanguard wolf was yelling at pushed past him, trying to get away.

It was Julia.

Oh my god, how had I not seen her? How had I not been keeping her by my side tonight?! Quickly, I raced over to insert myself between Julia and the Vanguard wolf who was still in hot pursuit.

“Hey!” I snapped at him. “Get away from her!”

The Vanguard wolf pointed at Julia. “Who the *hell* allowed the daughter of that tyrant murderer into *our* party?” he demanded. “She shouldn’t be here!”

“She was invited” I hissed. “And besides, she’s just a kid! She has no control over what her father does! Did you ever think that she’s a victim just like the rest of us?”

“She’s still Malakai’s kin!” he shot back. “For all we know, she’s a fucking spy!”

I took an ominous step forward. “You’d better back off with your accusations. You don’t know anything about her. And the last time I checked, spiesdidn’t make a habit out of standing in the middleof parties, allowing themselves to be screamed at!”

The Vanguard wolf’s nostrils flared. He glanced at our audience, which now included a handful of angry-looking Redwoods like Charlie, Ravi, Violet, and Lilac, all of whom were inching closer. After that, the wolf took a deep breath and sneered at me.

“Just keep her the fuck away from me!” he snapped, then stormed off.

“Then don’t start conversations with people you don’t want to talk to!” I bellowed after him, uncaring of the attention I was drawing—it wasn’t like the whole party wasn’t already talking about me. When I was sure the idiot had really left, I turned around and looked at Julia, who was shaking with fear. I wrapped my arms around her, giving her a comforting squeeze. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t able to help you sooner,” I said. “It’s okay. It’s not your fault.”

Julia spent a few minutes sobbing into my shoulder, during which most of our audience got bored and dispersed.

Finally, she finally pulled away and looked up at me, sniffling and red-eyed. “I wanted to apologize for what my father did, but I think I’m just making everything worse. I don’t think I should’ve come.”

“No, you’re not making everything worse,” I told her firmly. “You’re trying to do the right thing, but you’re not responsible for what your dad did. Those were *his* choices.”

It killed me that someone so young felt the need to face a group like this and take responsibility for the actions of her tyrannical, psychopathic father. Julia was just so sweet and brave—I wished all the idiots in this room could see that.

Maybe we needed to fight an entire war or something to prove that blind judgment of others was reckless and stupid?

Julia nodded in response to my words, though I could see she was still struggling to accept them, and I couldn’t blame her. That shouting moron had probably made her think she was right to be apologetic, and maybe even that she deserved his anger. But I didn’t think I was wrong—Julia *was* a victim of her father. Of her parents. We should’ve been trying to support her and protect her, not tear her down.

“Julia—”

I was cut off by a loud, “*What did you say to her?*”

Russell had just arrived with a couple glasses of punch, but he’d seen Julia’s tear-stained face and was now leaping to her defense—protecting her from *me*, apparently.

“No!” Julia yelped. “It wasn’t Cali! She helped me. I just made a big fat mess of everything.”

He looked at her sadly. “Do you want to leave?”

Julia hesitated, and I set a hand on her shoulder. “No one would blame you if you did. I could arrange to have someone take you back to the house?”

But she shook her head. “No. I want to stay. I want to prove that what he said didn’t hurt me the way he wanted it to.”

I nodded, offering her a warm smile. “You’re much wiser than half the wolves here.”

She gave me a watery grin, and I gestured for Russell to give her the punch he’d brought. It made me so sad that Julia had to deal with all this at such a young age. I wished I could knock some sense into the stubborn wolves who thought it was fine to bully her.

While Russell was working on calming Julia down, I noticed Sage and Zainab walking into the ballroom, which reminded me that I had wanted to check on all the Redwoods. I left Russell and Julia to themselves and started walking toward the girls—just as Greyson walked in, his suit covered in dirt, wood chips, and glass.

I rushed over to him immediately. “Are you okay? What the hell happened?!”

He cupped my cheek and nodded. “I’m fine, I promise.”

My gaze fell to Rishika next to him. “Oh my god, is that *blood*?”

“We’re all okay. Promise. But we should go clean up,” Rishika said. “We don’t need anyone asking questions.”

I grabbed Greyson’s arm and started pulling him toward the bathroom. “I’ll help.”

As I dragged him away, he looked back at Rishika and said, “When you’re done, can you go find Elle and bring her to me?”

Rishika nodded and rushed off, and I got Greyson into the bathroom. I grabbed a towel and dampened it in the sink so I could wipe off the dirt, and he got to work extracting the shards of splintered wood and glass from his hair. I wasn’t sure how bad the fight had been, but it had certainly left him a mess. It made me worry that more had taken place than he was letting on.

There was a cut on Greyson’s hand that wasn’t fully healed yet, which was slightly worrying. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes,” he said. “The spy was from the council. Whoever he was, he definitely wasn’ta fighter, so he just kept throwing shit at me until he found an opportunity to run. He said we were going to pay for breaking wolf rules.”

I frowned. “So you think this is still about Elle?”

“It makes the most sense,” he said. “They’ll want her to answer for what happened to Helix.”

“But if they get their hands on her, they might figure out that she was turned from a true wolf,” I said. “That would put the whole pack at risk—you most of all.”

Greyson nodded. “I know. That’s why we need to hide her again. Maybe have her go up to Portland. She could stay with Maren, or at my apartment—somewhere she won’t be found.”

“I know you’ll protect her,” I told him. “You always do the right thing.”

Sitting down on the closed toilet, Greyson leaned his face against my stomach. I wrapped my hands around his head to comfort him, holding him close as his arms came up to encircle my torso.

“You shouldn’t have to deal with this right after a war, but you’re a good Alpha,” I said. “You’ll figure it out.”

“As long as I have you by my side, I know I will,” he said.

Smiling at his words, I leaned down and pressed a kiss to the top of his head.

He looked up at me with a sly grin. “You missed.”

I chuckled, then leaned down to give him a proper kiss on the lips. But just as we brushed against each other, there was a knock on the bathroom door. I walked over and opened it to find Rishika on the other side.

And was alone.

There was a grim look on her face as she looked at Greyson. “I can’t find Elle anywhere.”

**Episode 4231**

**Greyson**

Cali and I looked at each other, both alarmed by this piece of information.

“You’re sure you can’t find her?” I asked Rishika. “I was just with her—” I cut my statement short. I’d talked to her. I’d told her there was someone we didn’t know out there and that there could be trouble. I should’ve known she might take it upon herself to investigate. *Fuck*. “Shit. She might’ve left.”

“What?” Cali exclaimed. “Why would she leave?”

“I don’t know for sure,” I conceded, “but it seems like something Elle would do. She might be trying to look for this guy. You know Elle, though. She likes to take things upon herself.”

Elle wasn’t one to ask for help, and my not answering her question about the best course of action could easily have pushed her to take the matter into her own hands.

“Where would she even go?” Cali pressed. “She doesn’t know the guy’s scent. Could she have left to go to the Redwood pack house, maybe?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Let’s just hope that she hasn’t left the palace grounds, because that wolf from the council is probably still lurking around nearby. She’s right in their crosshairs.” I got up. “We need to find her before they do.”

“Agreed,” Cali said. “Where should we start?”

“Maybe we should spread out?” Rishika suggested. “I’ll search the woods at the edge of Lucian’s property to start, then I’ll make my way back inside. Cali, do you want to take the front and back lawns? They’re so big that she still might be making her way across them. And Greyson—do you want to head inside and make sure she didn’t go back to the party?”

“Good idea,” I said, happy to let Rishika take the lead on this. “We’ll cover way more ground that way.”

I made my way back to the ballroom and inhaled deeply, hoping to catch Elle’s scent. I slowly worked my way around the room, but I didn’t see—or smell—her anywhere.

*Actually, I can’t find Lucian, either. Where is the princeling? At events like this he’s usually in the center of the room, soaking up attention. Could they possibly be together?*

I supposed that *was* possible, given that they were… mates and all. The last thing I wanted was to walk in on something I didn’t want to see. But, at least if I did, I’d know she was safe…

I’d done a full loop by the time Cali walked back into the ballroom.

“Any luck?” I asked her.

Cali shook her head. “No. There’s so much ground to cover out there, but I didn’t see her anywhere.”

“Well, at least Rishika’s checking the woods,” I said. “She’ll be able to catch Elle’s scent if she headed that way.”

I glanced at the ballroom’s entryway and spotted Rishika, waving at us to join her. Cali and I raced over.

“I didn’t catch her scent anywhere near the woods, but I picked it up when I came back inside. It seems fresh,” Rishika said. “Like maybe she only passed by within the last ten minutes or so.”

“I smell it, too,” I said, concentrating. “But it’s mixed in with Lucian’s scent. That means they’re probably together… So I don’t know what we’ll find.”

Cali sighed. “Let’s just hope that wherever they are, they’re decent.”

“My thoughts exactly,” I said dryly.

“I’ve already seen Lucian damn near naked far too many times,” Cali said. “I’m not in the mood to add to the tally.”

We followed the scent down the main hallway until it brought us to a heavy wooden door.

“Should we go in?” Cali asked.

“I think so,” I said. “The trail definitely ends here, which means they’re probably beyond that door.” I grimaced. “But again, we really don’t know what we’re going to find.”

“We get it, they might be making out or something,” Rishika said. “Aren’t they like… together? Wouldn’t be such a surprise.”

“True, but that doesn’t mean I want to *see* it,” Cali said. “Anyway, here goes.”

She pushed the door open, and we were all surprised to find nothing on the other side but a staircase that descended into the darkness.

“Leave it to Lucian to build a house with secret passages,” I grumbled as I led the way down the stairs.

The staircase was long, and the further we went, the colder and drier the air became.

Cali shivered visibly. “It’s like a cave,” she whispered into the weighty silence. “What is this place? I had no idea all of this was down here.”

“Me neither,” I said. “The palace is a damn maze.”

Finally, we reached the bottom of the staircase.

“Looks like a wine cellar,” Rishika said.

I lifted my nose. I could still smell Elle and Lucian’s scents.

“Why would Lucian bring Elle down here right now in the middle of a party?” I asked. “Besides… Well. We all know what we think they could be doing.”

“Yeah, trying not to think about it,” Rishika said. “Though I thought we’d all given up on trying to figure out why Lucian does what he does.”

“I gave up a long time ago,” Cali said.

“Elle? Lucian?” I called out. “Are you here?”

“It’s just us!” Cali added. “We just want to talk to Elle.”

Rishika walked a little ahead of us and peered into the gloom. “This place is massive. The rows of bottles just keep going and going—I can’t even see where they end.”

“And who knows what else Lucian keeps down here?” Cali said. “Somehow I feel like wine is just the tip of the iceberg.”

We made our way down one of the impossibly long aisles of wine. It was so quiet that our footsteps on the packed dirt floor were the only sound. The deeper we went, the more obvious it became that this really *was* a cave. There were even what looked like prehistoric paintings on the walls behind the bottles of wine.

“Did Lucian literally turn an ancient cave into a wine cellar?” I asked.

“Looks like it,” Rishika said, her voice tinged with wonder.

“Of course he would,” I grumbled.

“That looks like a giant wolf,” Cali said, pointing at one of the paintings. “Weird.”

“Everything about this is strange. I don’t get it. What *is* all this stuff?” I asked.

“Found them!” Rishika said, stopping suddenly.

Cali and I rushed to her side, where she was peering into an alcove. Inside, Lucian was frantically adjusting his shirt, but Elle just looked at us like everything was normal.

“What are you doing down here?” Elle asked.

“Remember the wolf scent I told you about? Well, it’s a wolf from the council. And he’s looking for you,” I said. “We wanted to warn you.”

Elle’s eyes went wide. “What?” she asked. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I said. “We found him and confirmed it.”

“That’s impossible,” Lucian said, waving a hand. “Only invited guests can gain access to my property.”

“Well, clearly that’s not the case,” I replied.

Lucian looked back the way we’d come, his mouth set in an angry line. “Apparently, I’m going to have to give Armin a talking-to.”

“That can wait. We need to figure out what to do right now,” I said. “Clearly, Elle isn’t safe here anymore. I’m pretty sure the council wants to bring Elle in because she killed Helix.”

“And deprived the Northwinds of their revenge in the process,” Rishika added.

*I wonder if the Northwind pack is applying more pressure to the council since they lost the war? They couldn’t beat us in combat, so maybe they’re trying to come at us from another direction. Wouldn’t put it past them. Werewolves hate losing. How ironic that the council doesn’t even care that the Northwinds and their Bitterfang buddies are the ones who started the war in the first place.*

I looked at Elle and Lucian. “Please just agree with me that we need to send you away, Elle—for your own safety.”

Lucian shook his head. “Whyever would we do that? I’m perfectly capable of protecting her.” He pulled her close. “She’s safe here with me.”

“Funny that you’re saying that right after a council wolf easily got past your supposedly unbeatable security,” I said acidly. “Seems like Elle isn’t safe here as you’d like us to believe.”

“Exactly,” Rishika said. “And the council will stop at nothing to make an example of her.”

Elle glanced between us all, her brow knitted in worry. “I’m sorry for bringing this upon all of you,” she said. “It was never my intention.”

“You didn’t bring this upon anyone,” I told her. “If anyone did, I did, and I’m sorry you’re caught up in it. We need to figure out what to do though.”

“Should I leave?” she asked.

“My forest rose, it’s your decision,” he replied. “I want nothing but your safety.”

“Okay,” Elle said. “Then I’ll do it. I’ll leave.”

Lucian smiled at her warmly. “Wonderful. I’ll escort you to my country estate at once—”

“No,” I interrupted, an idea suddenly coming to me. “I’m going to take Elle to Portland.”

**Episode 4232**

**Ava**

Champagne glass in hand, I took a moment to glance around the ballroom. I could’ve sworn that I’d seen Cali a moment ago, but she’d since disappeared into the crowd, and I hadn’t seen a trace of her for a while. I’d barely been able to escape the damn half-Fae before the kiss, and now she was like an apparition. I’d just managed to find her scent, but then a server had passed by with a smelly platter of fishcakes and I’d lost her scent completely.

No matter what Xavier had asked of me, I was going to have a word with the slut.

The one thing keeping me sane was the fact that Xavier had humiliated her. I’d be lying if it hadn’t felt good. To hear him reject her like that, so publicly, had sent tingles down my spine.

I was his Luna. And he was my Alpha. There was no way a half-Fae could compete with that.

I moved away from the stench and lifted my nose to the air. I perked up when I got a whiff of her, but then I lost it again just as quickly. There were so many people here—so many scents lingering in the air—that it was no wonder I was having a bit of trouble tracking her.

I sighed as the server with the funky tray of finger food passed by again. This wasn’t going well, and I was getting frustrated. I had to admit it to myself—Cali had pulled another desperate stunt to get Xavier back. Her kissing him was entirely different to him initiating the kiss. If he’d kissed her, it would’ve meant that he was still thinking about his mate bond with her, and that just wasn’t going to fly. I’d made it clear at the Luna ceremony what would happen to him—and to us—if he pursued her.

*Our bond should be stronger than theirs in every way by now, anyway. Fuck the stupid* due destini*. Besides, Cali still has Greyson following her around like a puppy. Isn’t he enough for her? Why can’t she just leave Xavier be? Is she seriously* that *obsessed that she’d kiss him in the middle of a party? To what, prove a point?*

Cali coming on to Xavier like that in front of everyone meant only one thing: she had her sights set on him. As if she’d ever taken her sights off him in the first place. Cali was someone I couldn’t control, and that only increased my frustration. The thought of her trying to weasel her way back into Xavier’s life made my blood boil.

*I just got Xavier back. Her feeble attempt to get to him is a setback, but one I can handle. I’m not letting him go any time soon. Maybe she’ll get that through her head once I find her and set the record straight.*

I could hardly wait to make things really fucking clear for her. That way, there would be no room for her to encroach without directly insulting me—and then I’d be justified in whatever revenge I chose to pursue.

*Xavier’s* my *mate. I’m his Luna, not her, and I’m going to make sure she knows it. But where is she? I want to get this off my chest so I can get on with my night.*

Aysel’s voice pulled me from my thoughts. She’d cornered Marissa and was talking her ear off about how difficult it had been to find the right drapes for the ballroom.

“You know, you’d think that any old thing would work, but that’s just not true,” she said. “There’s a method to this, a cohesiveness that must be achieved for people to get the best visual impression. The Vanguards have the highest standards when it comes to décor, and I have to admit that choosing the right fabrics, colors, and tones comes easily to us.”

“Uh huh,” Marissa said before grabbing my arm and literally dragging me into the conversation. “Funny you’re talking about decorating, Aysel, because Ava has done an amazing job decorating the new Samara pack house.”

Marissa plied me with a pleading stare that I completely understood. She wanted out of this conversation, by any means necessary.

Aysel gave me a polite smile. “Oh? I’d love to see it. The key to picking the right fabric…”

I wanted to save Marissa from the horrors of this inane conversation, but I had more important matters to deal with—like finding Cali and working out what the hell she was up to.

I gently tugged out of Marissa’s hold, but before I could make a break for it, Aysel grabbed my other arm.

“Emerald or hunter green?” Aysel asked.

“Um.” I shrugged. “They’re both green, so…”

“But they’re completely different!” Aysel said. “Perhaps I can recommend one of my decorators? Someone who appreciates the subtleties of color?”

I took a look around at the palace’s garish, gaudy decor. *No fucking way.* But rather than express my lack of appreciation for the Vanguards’ decorating choices, I simply returned Aysel’s smile. “That’s very nice of you, but we already have our own decorator.”

Aysel arched an eyebrow and opened her mouth to respond, but before she could, I cut her off.

“Has anyone seen Cali?” I all but shouted. I turned and took another quick look around the banquet hall.

*Where could she be?*

I spotted Xavier talking to a group of Samaras, sipping from a champagne flute.

*If I didn’t have eyes on Xavier right now, I might start to wonder if she’d cornered him again so she could finish what she started.*

Neither Marissa nor Aysel answered my question, and the awkward silence extended for a few long moments before Aysel finally broke it.

She cleared her throat. “That kiss was rather…”

“Fucked up?” Marissa finished. “Out of line?”

Aysel nodded. “All of the above. I was appalled by the display.” She turned her eyes on me. “I can’t help but wonder what it was all about. I assumed the *due destini* had been resolved when Xavier left the Redwood pack and made you his Luna, Ava.”

“So did I,” I snapped, my annoyance quickly reaching a fever pitch. “If you’ll excuse me, ladies, there’s something I need to take care of.”

I finally broke away from them and continued my search for Cali. I threaded my way through the crowd, wondering why she’d felt the need to go and ruin my night. I just wanted to be with Xavier and my pack, enjoying our victory and taking advantage of the free food and booze. But instead, here I was, trying to track down Cali. My least favorite person in the world.

I didn’t get very far before Marissa came running up to me.

“Sorry about that,” she said. “I’ve been trying to escape from Aysel for a freaking eternity—but I didn’t want to make it too obvious. Heaven forbid I offend the Vanguard princess. I know she and her brother can be vindictive if you do the wrong thing.”

“It’s fine. No big deal,” I said distractedly, my eyes still raking through the crowd for any sign of Cali.

“How are you doing, anyway?” Marissa asked. “That must have been upsetting, seeing Xavier and Cali carrying on like that right in front of you—and in front of everyone else, too. Super disrespectful.”

Marissa’s words rubbed at me, setting fire to my already blossoming anger. I gritted my teeth, thinking about all the things I wanted to say to Cali—and all the things I wanted to *do* to her for embarrassing me like that.

*Maybe it’s a good thing I can’t find her right now, since I feel all too capable of doing something I might regret. That wouldn’t go over well, since we’re supposed to be in an alliance and all—though no one seems to be chastising Cali for throwing herself at a man who doesn’t belong to her. That sort of thing can hurt an alliance, too. But no one will confront sweet, delicate Caliana, will they?*

“Have you talked to Xavier about it yet?” Marissa asked.

“I did,” I said. “According to him, that kiss was all Cali. That’s why I’m looking for her now.”

Marissa’s eyes widened. “Are you going to gouge her eyes out?”

I chuckled. “Believe me, I’ve thought about it.”

“I bet.” Marissa shifted her gaze out to the crowd of people dancing in front of us. “You should make it clear that Xavier’s not her plaything anymore. It’s obvious that she hasn’t quite gotten the message, yet.”

I nodded. “And I intend to change that. But I can’t do anything if I can’t find her. It’s like she’s hiding out of shame.”

Marissa smiled darkly. “Or out of fear.”

I was about to go search the many rooms leading off from the banquet hall when Marissa poked me in the side and gestured. I looked across the room to see Cali locked in an intense conversation with Kira.

“What do you think that’s about?” Marissa asked. “What, she’s conspiring with our witch now, too?”

“Or our witch is conspiring with Cali,” I said. “How interesting.”

I couldn’t help but wonder—what if Kira had only joined the pack so she could work to undermine my relationship with Xavier from the inside? Maybe she’d been working with Cali all along.

**Episode 4233**

Rishika and I had left Lucian, Elle, and Greyson in the cellar, arguing about who was going to take Elle and where they were going to go. I’d tried to get a word in, but I hadn’t been able to. After a few minutes, it just hit a point where nothing I said, or anyone else for that matter, was going to get through to either Greyson or Lucian. I couldn’t say that I was surprised that Lucian and Greyson couldn’t agree on the safest place to take Elle—they really never agreed on anything.

After a few minutes waiting outside the cellar door, Greyson, Elle, and Lucian still hadn’t emerged, so I assumed that they still hadn’t come to an agreement—which wasn’t surprising. Part of me wished that Greyson would just leave it to Lucian to deal with… But that was the jealous part. Greyson was only looking out for Elle, which was a natural part of him being her Alpha.

*But there’s still the matter of the sire bond. Every time I think I’m done worrying about it, it teases me at moments like this and makes me question Greyson’s motives. I know I shouldn’t do that. I* have *to trust Greyson on this. And I do. Still, I don’t* love *watching him argue about protecting another woman. I know that there’s really nothing between him and Elle, but that doesn’t make it any easier to watch.*

Even though that council wolf had slipped through Lucian’s defenses, I knew Lucian would do his absolute best to protect Elle. I wished Greyson could see that, but it was obvious that he didn’t think Lucian was capable.

“I think they’re probably going to be a while,” Rishika said.

“I think you’re right.” I sighed. “I wish I knew what Greyson was thinking about the Portland thing.”

“Time will tell,” Rishika said. “Should we head back? I want to check in with the others if they’ve seen anything.”

“Yeah, let’s go.”

Rishika and I started walking back to the ballroom when Kira appeared in the hallway. “Cali! I was looking for you.”

“Go on ahead. I’ll meet you in the ballroom,” I told Rishika. She nodded and walked on ahead.

“I’m going to blip back to the Samara pack house and start my magic testing,” Kira said. “I have a good enough sample from your kiss, so it should be a piece of cake from here on out. I hope.”

Hope fluttered in my stomach. “Really?” That was good, considering what it had taken to get it… “How long will it take you to get the results?”

“I’ll know something by tomorrow,” she said.

I sighed, though if I was being honest with myself, I was hopeful but also a little afraid to find out the truth. If Xavier really was under a spell, that would explain why he’d been acting like an ass. It would also beg the question of who or what had cast said spell on him in the first place. On the other hand, if he *wasn’t* under a spell, it would mean that he’d really chosen to leave the Redwood pack to be with Ava. It would mean that he was treating me terribly because he wanted to.

It would mean that he’d broken my heart on purpose.

*That can’t be true. That’s too painful to accept. There has to be a reason, and soon I’ll know what it is.*

“Should I tell Xavier that I’m leaving?” Kira asked, glancing at the corner of the ballroom where Xavier and the Samaras had gathered.

I looked at her, alarmed. “I guess? You’re not going to tell him *why*, are you?”

Kira arched an eyebrow. “What? No, of course not. I’m not stupid. I actually think I’ll just steer clear of Xavier for a while. I already tried to talk to him about whatever’s going on with him, and it didn’t go well. If I keep questioning him, there’s no telling how he’ll react. He’s just been so unpredictable, lately.”

*That’s putting it mildly. I never know what Xavier’s going to do from moment to moment—or even what version of him I’m going to get when we interact.*

“I know what you mean,” I said. “It’s almost like there are two different versions of Xavier, these days.”

“And one of them might be under a spell,” Kira added.

I thought about that. It would explain so much. If Kira blew the lid off whatever was actually going on with Xavier, it would change everything. Now that it was a possibility, it was all I could think about.

“Even if you do discover that Xavier is under some spell, do you think we’ll be able to do anything about it?” I asked.

I jumped when a someone grabbed me by the shoulder and whirled me around.

“What the *fuck* are you talking about?” Ava demanded. “A *spell*?”

Oh, this was not good. I shot Kira an anxious look, wishing she could cast a quick spell to make Ava forget anything she’d just heard. Could I? I had never been very good at that, not like Artemis…

“Tell me now! Xavier is *my mate*, and I demand to know why you’re talking about him and magic. What, are you trying to get Kira to cast a spell on him?”

I was taken aback. “Cast a spell on Xavier? No! That’s the last thing I want to do.”

Ava rounded on Kira. “That’s probably why you agreed to join the Samaras. Not to act as our witch, but to try and steal Xavier back for the Redwoods, and for Cali.”

Ava said my name like it tasted bad.

“That’s ridiculous!” Kira snapped. “I would never do anything like that.”

“What’s ridiculous—and pathetic—is that you and Cali thought you could get away with it,” Ava continued, apparently on a roll. “One word from me, Kira, and you won’t be so welcome in the Samara pack house.”

“You are really overreacting and jumping to the wrong conclusions, here,” I said. “You don’t even know what you’re talking about, and here you are, threatening someone who came to your pack house because she wanted to *help* your Alpha!”

“Says the woman who just kissed *my* mate!” Ava hissed.

Outrage lit a fire in my gut. “I’m sorry, *what*? Do you recall how many times you came onto Xavier while he was with me?!”

“Excuse me if I don’t give a flying fuck about what you have to say.”

“But that’s not what—” I cut myself off. There was no way I could tell Ava the truth about why I’d kissed him. If I did, there was no doubt in my mind that she would go straight to Xavier. And if Kira was right about the magical influence hanging over Xavier, then we’d be powerless to remove it. Ava would make sure of that.

*Why* would *Ava help us fix Xavier? If we did that, she’d lose everything she’s gained, everything she’s always wanted: Xavier for a mate, a new Samara Alpha, and a Luna mark. She’d never risk losing the things she cares about so much.*

The only thing I really knew was that I needed to help Kira get the hell out of the palace and back to Samara pack house so that she could get to the bottom of what was going on. At least if Ava stayed here at the party, Kira would be able to start her testing without her interfering.

*If only I could send a mind link to Kira. It would make this whole situation so much less awkward and stressful. I have to do something.*

I suspected that the main thing driving Ava right now had absolutely nothing to do with Kira. I was the one who’d just kissed Xavier in front of the whole alliance, after all. I turned my back on Ava to talk to Kira.

“Let me deal with Ava,” I said quietly. “This has nothing to do with you.”

Kira glanced between me and Ava and hesitated. “You sure? She’s, like… madder than I’ve ever seen her.”

“And I’m going to get even madder if you keep talking about me like I’m not here!” Ava spat. “But Cali’s right—leave. I have a bone to pick with your friend, here.”

I watched Kira head off and then finally turned back to face Ava.

“Well?” she said, putting a hand on her hip. “I’m still waiting for an explanation. Why did you grab Xavier and kiss him like that in front of everyone? Aren’t you supposed to be a goody-two-shoes? Where do you get off pulling a tasteless, low-class stunt like that?”

I let the insults flow over me, aware that getting into a screaming match with Ava in the middle of the party right after I’d kissed her mate probably wouldn’t be a good look. I’d already created enough of a spectacle by kissing Xavier in the first place.

“Ava,” I said calmly. “You’re upset, and I get that, but this isn’t the place to hash it out. Why don’t we go somewhere private to talk?”

Ava eyed me warily. “Why? You don’t want people to hear how conniving you are?”

“Oh please,” I said. “Look in a fucking mirror, Ava. You’re nothing but a hypocrite.”

Ava glared at me, looking *furious*.

I crossed my arms, suppressing the urge to fight her. My magic was at my fingertips, but that would be a bigger problem. But before I could get a word out, Armin’s booming voice interrupted me.

“If I could have everyone’s attention, please!” he shouted. “Please make your way back to the main ballroom!”

**Episode 4234**

**Greyson**

I’d thought that Elle would put up the most resistance to the idea of leaving the Vanguard palace for Portland, but she was being pretty agreeable about the whole thing. Lucian, on the other hand, was being a complete dick about it. Admittedly, this didn’t surprise me in the least.

“Why don’t you understand that your *country estate* doesn’t offer the degree of protection that Elle needs right now?” I said, fighting for patience. “It wouldn’t take the council long to find out about it—if they don’t know about it already.”

Lucian rolled his eyes. “And having Elle in the middle of a bustling city would be safer? How?”

“Because she’d be at my personal apartment,” I said. “It has nothing to do with the Redwood pack, and the council knows nothing about it. And hiding Elle in the city makes more sense precisely because it *is* buzzing there. She’d just be one of over a half-million people. Not to mention the fact that Maren’s there, and she could look out for her.”

“And how would Mace feel about that?” Lucian demanded. “You calling in favors from your ex?”

“Mace would understand what’s at stake,” I snarled.

I truly did believe that Mace would understand, but it pissed me off that Lucian had the audacity to bring Mace’s relationship with Maren into this. That was none of his business, and he had no right to comment on it.

“This is *my* decision,” Elle said, stepping between us. “I’m tired of being told what to do, and I don’t want you two arguing over me like I’m some piece of property. I’m going to Portland.”

I was relieved, and I couldn’t help but take satisfaction in the fact that Lucian obviously wasn’t.

We all turned to see Armin making his way toward us. “Sorry to interrupt, my prince, but the guests are all gathered in the ballroom and waiting for you, as requested.”

Lucian’s annoyance clearly deepened. “What? Didn’t I tell you to wait for my word?”

Armin looked nervous. “Actually, you told me to have everyone gathered by ten o’clock.”

“Semantics!” Lucian grumbled. He shot a glare at me. “We’re not done.”

“Aren’t we?” I retorted as Elle and I followed him and Armin back up to the first floor.

We filtered into the bustling ballroom, and I immediately went to Cali’s side. She looked a bit angry. Had something happened?

“You okay?” I asked.

She smiled thinly. “Oh, I’m fine, just had a conversation with Ava. I’m sure you can imagine how well it went.”

“That well, huh?” She nodded. I directed my attention to what was happening around us. “What’s all this about?”

Cali shrugged. “I have no idea, but you know Lucian. Just about anything could happen right now.”

“Fredo, please join me up here at the podium please!” Lucian called out after taking the microphone from Armin. He’d skillfully masked his annoyance, and now seemed every bit the gracious host.

I rolled my eyes as Fredo—whoever that was—made his way out of the crowd to join Lucian on the dais. The princeling was all too happy to continue with the night’s festivities, but I was still pissed off about our argument. I couldn’t have cared less about whatever spectacle he had planned.

I spotted Elle standing near the dais, watching Lucian. I wasn’t trying to micromanage Elle’s life or treat her like a piece of property, like she’d accused us of doing. I was just trying to help her—as her Alpha. That was my duty, and I took it seriously.

“In honor of the battle and our resounding success, I’ve commissioned Fredo here to write an epic poem about our tale,” Lucian announced proudly.

I looked at Cali. “What?”

“An epic poem… Like the *Odyssey*?” Cali whispered back.

I groaned. “Is he serious? We’re going to be here all night! How long is this stupid poem going to be?”

“I don’t know, but if it’s anything like the *Odyssey*, we could be here for a while,” Cali replied.

Lucian handed the microphone to Fredo, then stepped aside.

“Hello all,” he said. “I’m Fredo Marks. As Lucian said, I have a poem to recite. I was so honored to be asked to write it for all the wonderful packs assembled here today, and I thank you for your brave service.” He pulled a gold tube from his pocket and unrolled it into a long sheet of paper.

“Oh brother,” I muttered.

Cali pinched me. “Stop. It’s not his fault Lucian asked him to do something lame.”

Fredo cleared his throat and began. “Great, powerful Lucian, masterful prince of the Vanguard, a pack whose fearlessness in the face of battle is only rivaled by that of their brave leader, plunged into the thick of the battle. Prince Lucian held his head high and led his allies to victory. How, you ask? Well, let’s start at the beginning…”

I dragged a hand down my face, suddenly wanting more than anything to run out of the palace and never return. I’d thought that coming here would allow the pack to cut loose and blow off some steam, but so far, it had been a drag—just like Lucian’s parties always were.

“… Greyson, Alpha of the Redwood pack, whose diversity of skill makes up for their middling prowess in battle, did his best to match the fervor of the fighting prince. He was often taken to the brink of defeat, but, by relying on his Vanguard bolster, was able to hang on throughout the battle, if only by a thread! He fought hard, he fought with honor, and while his countenance could never match that of the prince he supported in battle…”

Cali snickered. “Did Lucian *really* ask his writer to imply that you’re ugly?”

“Imply? I think he said it pretty plainly.” I snorted. “This whole thing is a hot mess. Lucian is clearly incredibly insecure, as if we didn’t know that already.”

*I’ve always known that the princeling is threatened by me. The only question is, what is he threatened b*y*, exactly?* *Is it my leadership qualities? Or is it my sire bond situation with Elle?*

“… the Vanguard Alpha’s rippling muscles struck fear into the hearts of his attackers, and with one fell swoop….”

I couldn’t take it anymore. I leaned over toward Cali. “Hey, you want to get out of here?”

“*Please*.”

I took her hand as we got up and left. I was relieved that we were kind of on the fringes of the crowd, which made slipping away all the easier.

*Should we be leaving like this? Lucian will be able to see us, right?* Cali mind linked.

*No*,I replied. *Plenty of people are still walking around and getting drinks and food and stuff. We’re totally fine. I can guess that most of the people here aren’t all that interested in hearing the princeling’s bullshit poem. I won’t be surprised if more people leave.*

*It’s so bad. I wish I could scrub it out of my memory*,Cali said. *At least I haven’t been mentioned, yet.*

“You’re right! We’d better get out of here quick, before that changes,” I said, gripping Cali’s hand and running away from the ballroom as quickly as we could.

“He totally noticed us sprinting out of there!” Cali said around a laugh.

“No, he didn’t. He was too enraptured by the poem to remember that other people exist,” I said.

Our laughter echoed through the halls as we kept running, getting farther and farther from the ballroom. I realized that this was one of the rare light moments we’d shared recently.

“Now *this* is a party,” I said as we slowed to a stop in front of three doors. I turned to Cali “Which one? Door number one, door number two, or door number three?”

Cali winced. “Oh no, you’re not making me decide.” She bit her lip. “Knowing Lucian, there’s probably an orgy raging behind all three!”

We both melted into raucous laughter.

“Either that, or two of the doors lead to orgies and the last one’s a vortex to hell,” I said.

“I’d take the vortex any day,” Cali said. Once our laughter died down, she pointed to the third door. “I choose that one. Door number three!”

“Your wish is my command.”

I pushed open the door to reveal an indoor pool. Strangely enough, I didn’t think it was the same one I’d seen before. Leave it to Lucian to have a palace with more than one indoor pool.

“I think we’re alone in here,” Cali said as we slowly walked in, shutting the door behind us. “I have to hand it to Lucian, this pool is amazing.”

I looked at her and arched an eyebrow. “So… Want to take a dip?”

“Seriously?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Why not? We’re here, we’re alone, and there’s no one reciting an epic poem full of lies.”

Cali tittered as I started to take off my jacket. I threw it over the back of one of the many poolside chairs. Keeping my eyes on Cali, I began to unbutton my shirt.

“Why are you blushing?” I teased. “It’s not like you’ve never seen any of this before.”

“I guess it’s just something I’ll never get used to,” Cali said.

“I hope you like what you see,” I said, grinning as I unbuckled my pants.

“I do.”

I let my pants drop. “So, are you going to stand there and watch, or are you getting in with me?”

**Episode 4235**

For a second, I was thrown by the sudden turn that things had taken with Greyson. I definitely wasn’t *against* what was happening, but I was flustered all the same. I’d planned on following up on my uncomfortable conversation with Ava, but giving in to Greyson’s seduction seemed like a *much* better option. And why not? This was supposed to be a celebration, after all.

Greyson kicked away his pants and started walking down the steps that led into the pool. He looked absolutely immaculate in the blue tinged light of the room.

“Coming?” he asked.

I drew in a shaky breath and slowly reached for the zipper of my dress. I saw the hungry look in Greyson’s eyes as I let the dress fall off and pool at my feet. I took a step toward the pool with my arms wrapped around my breasts as I hazarded a glance at the door.

“What if someone sees?” I asked. “Anyone could walk in and catch us!”

Greyson glided out into the water with a smooth backstroke. “I couldn’t care less. I’ll show them how it’s done, then.”

I dropped my hands from my body and finally stepped into the pool. It was heated, but a shiver still raced down my spine. It did thrill me to know that Greyson would be unaffected by anyone walking in.

Once I was fully submerged, some of my anxiety slipped away. I swam toward Greyson, and he reached for me, pulling me easily into his embrace. Things felt charged between us, somehow. There was something that I needed to say, and I knew that I had to say it now.

“I am sorry about kissing Xavier,” I said without preamble. I braced myself, waiting for Greyson to open up and tell me how much I’d actually hurt him. Maybe he’d been holding back before, for my benefit, or because we’d still been somewhat in public.

Greyson looked away from me, but his embrace tightened. “I don’t want to talk about that. It’s already behind us.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

He was taking this so much better than I’d thought he would. Once again, he was proving how secure he felt about our relationship. I loved how understanding he always was, no matter what.

“I’m sure, Cali,” he said. “I’m just happy to be here with you right now. Nothing else matters.”

“I’m happy, too,” I said. “I’m glad we could steal a moment alone to enjoy the win.”

“Oh, we’re going to need a lot more than a moment, love,” Greyson said, his voice rumbling. “Try *hours*.”

His words set off a shock of anticipation inside me, and my heartbeat quickened. Greyson’s lips met mine only a second later, and our tongues tangled together as his hands fanned out over my hips.

I clung to him as he slowly made his way back toward the shallower water, all the while deepening the kiss until it felt like we were devouring each other.

The contrasting sensations I was feeling only seemed to heighten my arousal; the subtle warmth of the water clashed deliciously with the searing heat of Greyson’s body, sharpening all my senses.

“This is all I’ve wanted, from the moment I saw you in that dress,” Greyson said, breaking our kiss. “All I’ve wanted is to get it off of you, love.”

Then he quickly covered my mouth with his again. He pressed himself against me, and I spread my legs and angled myself so I could rub against his erection.

“You, feel good, too,” I said. “You’re so hard.”

“I’ve basically had a hard-on since we left.”

“Then we better do something about that.”

I reached down between us and wrapped my fingers around him. I began to stroke his cock, my other arm looped around his neck. The pool made every movement fluid, and my hand glided easily up and down his cock, eliciting a series of curses. He started moving his hips in time with the languid strokes of my hand, and when I stopped stroking for a moment to tighten my hold on his tip, he let out a loud groan.

“Fuck, I can’t wait to be inside you, Cali.”

He reached up and ran a hand through the wet tangle of my hair, tugging at it gently to pull my head back, exposing my neck to his warm lips. He dragged kisses down my neck, then lifted me up so that he could take my nipples into his mouth. A jolt of pleasure went through me as he suckled my breasts while his hands kneaded my ass, grinding me against his erection.

“Greyson,” I gasped. “I need more.”

“I’ll give you what you need, love.”

Then he slid a finger between us and pushed it into me. I moaned, and he silenced it with a kiss. His tongue teased mine in time with the thrust of his fingers, deep inside me. He pulled me close so that my clit pressed against the heel of his hand.

“I can’t wait any longer,” he said.

“*Please*, Greyson.”

And then he slowly guided me down onto his cock. I cried out, swearing as he filled me, and my voice bounced off the tiled walls around us. I gripped his flexing biceps as I rolled my hips into him, going up and down on his cock.

“You look so fucking sexy when you ride me,” he said. I gasped as he reached between us to find my clit and begin to circle it. “Touch yourself.”

Almost drunkenly, I reached to cup my own breasts. My nipples were so pebbled from arousal that they practically hurt. I rolled them between my fingers, whimpering as he kissed me once more. My orgasm built slowly, overwhelmed by Greyson’s hands on me, his cock in me, and my hands doing what I wished his mouth was. My pleasure began spreading out from my center and then seizing every corner of my body.

Greyson held me tight, and I felt him grow even harder inside me as his own release overtook him at the same time. He let out a deep sigh and held me tight as his hips jerked against me, creating ripples in the pool. We held each other, gasping.

“I love you,” he said, breathing heavily.

“I love you too.”

When we were finished, Greyson carried me over to the wall of the pool, and we stayed there for a while, clinging to each other, both of us trying to catch our breath.

I felt good. I was relaxed, and calmer than I’d felt all night. I was also enjoying the rush of doing this with Greyson at the palace. This time, there was no demon army waiting in the wings to attack. Just being with my mate, far away from Lucian’s nonsensical poem, reminded me of just how much I adored him.

*He takes me away from every sliver of stress with just a look, a smile, a kiss…*

I finally pulled away and looked him up and down, taking in the glistening muscles of his chest, the ripples of his abdomen, and the length and girth of his cock—still impressive, even in its resting state. I bit my lip without even realizing I was doing it, unable to take my eyes off him.

His eyes met mine, and he smiled. “I like it when you look at me like that,” he said before kissing me.

Our kiss grew more passionate, and when I pulled away, we smiled at each other.

“I could go again,” he said. “How long do you think we should stay here? Should we get out, dry off, and head back to the pack house?”

“I don’t know…” I said hesitantly. “I’m sure most of the pack is still having a good time—despite Lucian’s poem. It would probably be good to stay for a bit longer. If you decide to leave, the rest of the pack will feel like they have to leave, too, and they deserve to have fun.”

Greyson threw his head back in mock exasperation. “Fine, fine, I’ll stay.” He shot me a sly grin. “But only because you twisted my… arm.”

We kissed again, and I felt the same heat that had led to us having sex.

He pulled away and grinned mischievously. “Any ideas for how we should pass the time? I’m sure what’s-his-name still hasn’t finished reading that poem. Going back out there to listen to *that* would definitely kill my good mood.”

Greyson licked his lips and kissed me slowly before pulling away to look me in the eye. I stared right back at him. I knew that look well and was immediately flustered all over again.

I kissed him. “I might have a few ideas for what we could do in the meantime.”

At that moment, the door to the pool room flew open, and a raucous, clearly tipsy group of people came stumbling in.

“And this is the second indoor pool—Olympic-sized, naturally!” Aysel’s voice echoed all around us. “Glorious, isn’t it? And there are plenty of towels for everyone!”

I pushed away from Greyson and rushed to cover myself—just as I locked eyes with Xavier.

**Episode 4236**

**Xavier**

I clenched my jaw at the sight of a very naked Cali, flustered and rushing to cover herself. I was tempted to toss her dress to her, which was lying in a heap next to Greyson’s clothes, but I stopped myself. I was far too shaken by the implications of them being naked in the pool together to do anything but stare and seethe.

It didn’t take a rocket scientist to infer what had just gone down between them. I knew Cali’s current expression well, had seen the same wild look in her eyes so many times after we’d finished making love. There was a very real possibility that I’d never make love to Cali ever again, and that thought was enough to drive me crazy.

Greyson rushed to wrap his arms around Cali and shield her, which was good for Cali, but only made me all the more envious, and even more pissed off than I already was.

Only a short time ago, she’d pulled me into a kiss, and I still didn’t know why she’d done it. A quick apology had been her only explanation, and she’d run off after I’d horribly humiliated her in front of everyone.

I knew why Cali was in a constant state of confusion about our relationship or lack thereof, and that was all my fault. Cali had tempted me one too many times, and I was always at odds with my instincts—whether they called on me to save Cali or to kiss her.

But her kiss had come out of nowhere. She’d sought me out, and she’d kissed me. Right in front of everyone. Like she didn’t care who saw it, or what anyone thought about her kissing the Samara Alpha.

And then I’d humiliated her. Because of Adéluce.

I couldn’t get the kiss out of my mind, Adéluce or not. Why had she done it? It wasn’t like she’d done it just to annoy Ava. That just wasn’t her style. Cali always saw the good in people—that was one of the many things I loved about her. The kiss had to have happened for her own personal reasons, but hell if I could even *begin* to figure out why she’d done it here and now.

*I still love you. I still want you.*

Fuck. Hearing those words had done something to me; they’d fueled my part of the kiss. All I wanted was to return those words to her.

But Adéluce had heard that conversation and that wasn’t good. I had to tread lightly, or not at all.

“Wow, I guess I should have knocked!” Aysel quipped.

Everyone laughed, and I quickly blocked them from coming any farther into the room.

“You’ve all seen enough,” I said, pushing them back across the threshold and shutting the door behind us. I didn’t care if they thought this was a 180 from what I’d done earlier.

Aysel rounded on me as I ushered her out. She planted a surprisingly strong hand on my chest and all but shoved me against the door. “Take your filthy hands off me! This is my house, and you don’t call the shots here. I want people to enjoy my pool—just like Cali obviously already did, with her *mate*,” she added pointedly.

I gritted my teeth. “Aysel, you have plenty of pools—pick a new one.”

Aysel pinned me to the spot with a hard stare before dissolving into laughter and turning her back to me. “Come on, everyone—he’s right, there *are* plenty of other pools that are less… sullied. Better not to get involved in another episode of the Redwood soap opera, anyway. They’re all so serious, they suck the air right out of any room.”

I lingered by the closed door and watched her lead the group away. Part of me wanted to go back in and pull Cali away from my brother, but I knew that wasn’t an option. Adéluce had warned me that she was going to punish Cali for that—as if I’d had anything to do with it. I only hoped that Adéluce would leave Cali alone, and that she’d just been trying to make a point.

*Who am I kidding? I can’t trust Adéluce to spare Cali. I have to make sure that kiss never happens again—at least not until I’ve dealt with Adéluce once and for all.*

I stepped away from the door, knowing that I didn’t want to be there when Cali emerged with Greyson. It would be too hard to hide my emotions. I needed to stay away from her. That was the only way I could really protect her, the only way to avoid bringing down more of Adéluce’s wrath.

*Besides, I need to go check in on Ava and make sure she’s really dealing with the kiss as well as she claims she is. She’s still pissed, most likely, and hurt, too, but she’s also practical. I just need to go smooth things over again, make sure she stays that way. Can’t say I’m looking forward to talking to her, though.*

I’d known before we’d arrived that Lucian’s party had all the makings of chaos, but I hadn’t quite expected… *this*.

I finally turned away from the pool room door and made my way back to the ballroom. I needed a drink. I only hoped that Lucian’s strange false history recitation was finally over.

It wasn’t. The poet was still going strong when I entered the ballroom and was showing no signs of slowing down.

I sighed as I negotiated my way through the crowd. At least the Samaras were enjoying themselves. That was what this night was supposed to be about. Not that I’d enjoyed a single damn moment.

*That’s a lie. I fucking* loved *kissing Cali. That was easily the highlight of my night. Of my* year. *If nothing else goes right tonight, at least I’ll have the memory of her lips on mine to carry me through…*

It would’ve been so much easier if I *hadn’t* enjoyed Cali’s kiss. But it was like Ava had told me before—I couldn’t just flip a switch and be over Cali. No matter what Adéluce had in store for me, my heart would only ever beat for Cali, my one true mate.

*But how am I supposed to protect her from whatever Adéluce has planned for her if I’m not even supposed to go near her?*

I needed help.

I spotted Gabe dancing with Mikah. Gabe would help me. He’d left the Redwood pack to join up with the Samaras, after all—though that did mean he wouldn’t be able to stay as close to Cali as I needed him to be. Add to that, Gabe was one of the few people who knew that I was still deeply in love with Cali, which complicated things. He also wanted me to steer clear of Cali and the Redwood pack, so maybe he wasn’t the best option.

I caught sight of Jay arguing with Ravi about something. Jay was a good friend, he’d never leave the Redwood pack to join the Samaras, and he cared about Cali. I had a feeling that he’d agree to help me.

I grabbed a flute of champagne from a passing tray, downed it, and then made a beeline for Jay.

“I don’t care what you have to say about it, man. Chickpeas are beans, and that’s that,” Jay was saying to Ravi as I approached.

I smiled at them both. “Hate to interrupt this… very important conversation, but I need to ask you for a favor, Jay,” I said. “Don’t worry, I’m not asking you to switch packs again.”

He nodded, crossing his arms. “Good, because I’m happy right where I am,” he said. “Not to mention the ass kicking I’d get from Lola if I ever even considered it.”

“Understood,” I said. “What I need is for you to keep an eye on Cali.”

Jay frowned. “Why?”

I hesitated. “I wish I could explain.” But, of course, I couldn’t. The worst part of Adéluce’s influence was the way she’d stripped me of the ability to tell anyone what she was doing to me. It complicated every interaction I had. “I’m just worried about her, okay? I need someone close to her to keep her safe.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have run off with—” Jay stopped himself and took a deep swig of beer, shaking his head at me.

I scowled at him. “I know what you think of me and my choices right now, but if you could just stay close to Cali and tell me if—”

Lola came storming over.

“You have no right to boss my mate around,” she hissed at me. “You’re not our Alpha. You’re not even part of our pack anymore.” She turned to Jay. “And *you’re* not spying on my best friend for him.” She whirled back around to face me. “You have no right to even *think* about Cali anymore. Fuck off!”

And with that, she grabbed Jay’s arm and pulled him away.

Ravi winced. “Ouch,” he said. “Tough break.”

Then he turned on his heel and walked away, too.

I stood there alone and frustrated, wondering how the hell I was going to protect Cali from Adéluce.

**Episode 4237**

I was absolutely mortified. All the fears I’d had about swimming naked with Greyson in the Vanguard pool had been realized in the worst possible way. I’d been worried from the start about being caught—literally—with my pants down, but somehow, I hadn’t thought that it would really happen.

I certainly had no interest in becoming further entertainment for all the alliance packs, especially post the Xavier kiss. But I supposed I was lucky that they hadn’t burst in five minutes earlier—being caught in the act after all the insults I’d thrown around about Lucian’s hypersexual parties would’ve been too much to live down.

*Aysel’s probably already out there, spreading the word. She’s a worse gossip than Lola. Why did* Aysel *of all people have to come in? And Xavier, too? How much worse could that have gone?*

I was grateful that Xavier had ushered everyone out of the room. Once they’d left, Greyson and I had quickly hopped out of the pool, dried off, and gotten dressed. We’d shared a quick kiss, and then I’d hustled into the bathroom to fix my hair and makeup.

*Is Xavier mad? Does he have any right to be? What does he even think of me right now, kissing him only to jump in the pool with Greyson not even an hour later?*

Lola suddenly came barreling in. Still on edge, I screamed in surprise.

“You scared me!” I gasped out, pressing my hand to my chest as I tried to calm my breathing.

Lola didn’t even seem to notice that she’d startled me. “You know who’s officially getting on my last nerve? Xavier fucking Evers!”

I turned to look at her. “What? What’s going on now?”

“What’s *going on* is Xavier having the gall to order Jay to look after you, especially after he *insulted* you and Greyson in front of everyone. We all know that Greyson knows how to fuck. Just look at him!”

“*Lola*—” I said, blushing.

“Besides,” she said, thankfully steamrolling onward, “as if the Redwoods don’t know how to take care of our own! The days of him ordering us around are *long* gone. He doesn’t have the right to tell Jay to do anything. The fucking *nerve* on him!”

I was shocked. “What? He told Jay to look after me? Why?”

Lola shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe Ava’s planning to beat you up or something. But whatever. We can take her.”

“Hold on,” I said, putting a calming hand on Lola’s shoulder. “We just got through one pack war—I’m not about to start another.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “So dramatic. I’m not talking about a pack war—I’m talking about protecting my friend!”

She threw an arm around my neck and led me out of the bathroom, back toward the ballroom.

“Lola, I don’t get it,” I said. “Why would Xavier ask Jay to look after me? What’s going on with him? He’s so damn hot and cold with me. And what’s he so worried about, anyway? Should *I* be worried?”

Lola gave me a look. “Maybe shoving your lips against his in the middle of an inter-pack party wasn’t the *best* idea. Just saying.”

I squirmed, aware that I hadn’t told Lola the real reason for the kiss. Now wasn’t the time to get into it, though.

“It was just a stupid mistake,” I muttered.

“Obviously,” she said. “And besides, if anyone should be looking after you, it’s me. I’m the only one equipped to make sure you don’t make the same stupid mistake again.”

We returned to the ballroom to find Ravi, Lilac, Violet, Charlie, Julia, and Russell huddled together, their expressions serious.

“It’s okay, Julia. We’re here,” I heard Violet say as she pulled the girl into a hug. Russell had his arms around Julia, too.

I hurried over to them, feeling a little guilty that I was so grateful for the distraction from my own issues.

“What’s wrong, Julia?” I asked.

“Julia’s still upset about how all the wolves are treating her,” Violet explained. “They’re still giving her hell about Malakai.”

“Oh, Julia, just ignore them,” I said. “They don’t matter.”

“That’s what I keep telling her,” Russell said. “But it’s not helping.”

Julia shrugged. “I know I should ignore them, but it’s not that simple. I thought I’d be able to deal with it, but it’s hard. If only everyone understood that I considered my dad a tyrant, just like everyone else! But no, they’re all just looking at me and whispering things—condemning me for being sad that he’s dead. But I can’t help that I’m sad about it!”

I felt for Julia. I knew all too well what it was like to be the topic of negative conversations, innuendos, and rumors. Being a *due destini* mate had a way of catapulting you into the minds and mouths of everyone who knew about it. But this wasn’t about me—it was about Julia.

“What did Greyson tell you, earlier?” I asked. “Did he give you any pointers for dealing with all this?”

“Yes,” Julia said quietly. “He told me that it’s okay to be conflicted about my father. He said that even though my dad was a bad guy, at the end of the day, he was still my dad. It’s okay to be sad, mad, and relieved that he’s gone, all at the same time.”

Julia was crying now, and both Russell and I were patting her back, trying to calm her down.

“I wish I could just hate him completely, but I don’t!” she burst out. “Even though it’s so hard to remember the good things. They just don’t seem to fit the man he became in the end. It’s so *frustrating*.” Julia looked up and caught my eye. “Maybe that’s what I need—for Big Mac to pull all those good memories out of my head so that I can hate him properly. Then maybe everyone won’t judge me so much for how I feel.”

I couldn’t tell if Julia was serious or not, and that worried me. “Take it from me, Julia—magic isn’t usually the best way to deal with your emotions.”

Julia nodded wearily. “You’re probably right. Maybe I should talk to Greyson some more. He really understands what I’m going through, because of how things were with his dad.”

“That sounds like an amazing idea,” I said.

Julia turned around and rose onto her tiptoes, scanning the room for Greyson. Soon, she spotted him, and rushed off with Russell close behind. I watched her go, hoping I’d given her the right advice. I didn’t want anyone to hurt anymore. We all deserved happiness. Every single one of us.

I spotted Xavier and quickly looked away, still embarrassed about the kiss and the way he’d caught Greyson and me in the pool. I could’ve sworn I felt his eyes on me, though, and I stole another glance at him, wondering if I was imagining it.

*No, he’s definitely watching me, and trying to look like he isn’t. Why is he being so freaking* weird*?*

Xavier was absorbed in a conversation with one of the Samaras—or he was attempting to make it look that way. But I knew the truth. The only thing he was paying attention to was me.

Deciding to test my theory, I moved across the ballroom, watching him out of the corner of my eye. He was acting like one of those creepy old paintings, where the eyes followed you wherever you went.

I circled back around and grabbed Lola. “Let’s go get a drink!”

“What? But I already have a drink,” she complained as I towed her toward the bar. She gently pulled away from me. “What’s up with you? You’re acting really strange.”

I looked over Lola’s shoulder and then pulled her through a mass of people to the spot where I’d seen Xavier standing before, but he was gone. “Wait, where’d he go?”

“What? Who?” Lola asked.

“Sorry! I have to deal with this!”

Without another word, I rushed away from her and through the closest door and spotted Xavier hurrying down a hallway. I started to call after him, but then stopped in shock.

*What the hell, is he… Is he* running away from me*? Like, literally sprinting as fast as he can so I can’t catch up?*

It certainly seemed like it. He was practically booking it down the hallway, now. He kept glancing over his shoulder at me, like he was checking to see if I was following him.

“What the fuck?” I shouted. “Xavier, are you serious?”

He didn’t stop. In fact, he sped up.

“Slow down!” I called. “I need to talk to you! I’m not going to kiss you again, if that’s what you’re worried about!”

“No!” Xavier shouted. “Just go back to the party and leave me alone!”

“Because of Ava?” I demanded, increasing my speed, too.

“*What?* No!”

“Then why? Why can’t you seem to be alone with me? I thought we had talked about not being enemies! Why are you being like this?”

I couldn’t believe it had come to this—I was literally chasing him down to get him to talk to me.

Xavier suddenly dipped into a room and slammed the door behind him. I rushed to fling it open, and my eyes landed on a spiral staircase.

I had no idea what part of the palace I’d just stumbled into, but it didn’t matter. I wasn’t going to let Xavier escape my questions about what the hell was going on with him. Not this time.

**Episode 4238**

**Elle**

I was sitting patiently, listening to the recitation of Lucian’s “epic poem.” I’d learned about this sort of writing with Jacqueline—she was a very thorough teacher—and it seemed to me that this poet had strayed a little too far from the conventions of an epic poem. It was just… epically boring. I’d fought in the battle, and it hadn’t been boring. It had been intense, exciting, fast-paced, and brutal—and the poem made it sound like we’d all just been standing around arguing.

*Even the descriptions of the Alphas are wrong. He’s making Greyson sound weak, Porter like he’s made of red hair, Mace like he’s short, Duke like he’s handsome… And, of course, he’s making Lucian sound like the most capable of all the Alphas as he led the alliance to victory. It’s fake history, through and through.*

It was no secret that Lucian thought very highly of himself, which I actually considered a good trait of his, but sometimes it was too much. I wasn’t always in the mood to listen to him wax poetic about, well, himself. It was strange that he just couldn’t see how his behavior turned him into a joke. If he’d just tone it all down a bit, I felt like he’d get along better with the other Alphas.

Greyson, on the other hand, was confident without being full of himself. Lucian was just plain full of himself. I’d once heard Lola describe him as an “arrogant, conceited ass.” This was possibly a little harsh, but there was definitely some truth to it.

I looked around, wanting to get up and grab something else to eat or drink, or talk to someone from the Redwood pack—anything to get my mind off how awful the poem was. I’d been lying low at the palace for a while, and I missed my friends. I missed Sage’s bad jokes and Jacqueline’s lessons and Lola’s drama. There was a sort of magic in the Redwood pack house, a sense of community that I just hadn’t been able to find with the Vanguards.

I’d come to the palace partially to satisfy Lucian—he *was* my mate, after all, and I didn’t want to upset him—but it had also seemed like the best way to stop Lucian and Greyson from fighting. That hadn’t quite worked out, though. The two Alphas continued to butt heads, most recently over where I should go to hide from the council. The two of them were proving over and over again that they could literally fight about anything.

*Does the council really want to punish me for killing Helix? Something they were ready to do themselves, before Greyson stepped in? It doesn’t seem like they’d waste their time and resources on something like that… But I’m new to werewolf politics, so maybe it’s normal.*

I just didn’t understand why the Northwind pack would demand any further justice beyond Helix’s death. He was the one who’d killed their pack member, not me. I’d done exactly what their Alpha, Ethaniel, had wanted. I didn’t think for a second that Ethaniel would’ve accepted anything less than Helix’s death, and I’d made that happen. They should’ve been thanking me for saving them from an unpleasant task, but instead, they were hunting me down.

*This is all just Ethaniel throwing a temper tantrum because he lost the battle* and *the chance to get “justice” himself. There’s really no other way to explain why the Northwinds have sent the council after me. Werewolves always seem to be worked up about something. I have to admit, things were a lot less complicated when I was just a normal wolf.*

“Is everything all right, my forest rose?”

Lucian’s voice broke through my thoughts as he plopped down beside me and threw his arm across my shoulders.

“Yes,” I said. “The poem is just long. Way, way too long.”

“Well then, I’ll end it now!” Lucian said. He stood up. “Thank you so much, Fredo, but that’s enough!”

“But, I’m not nearly done!” Fredo spluttered. He held up his scroll and unrolled it, showing that there was still a lot of scroll left to read. I shuddered.

“I’m afraid that for now, yes, you are,” Lucian said. “We’ll continue the next installment of this epic poem in an hour or so. For now, let’s take a break! Everyone, get more champagne, eat more food, have more fun!”

Lucian clapped his hands and did a little shimmy that made me wince.

*No one can say he’s not full of energy. A little* toomuch *energy.*

A subdued cheer rose from the few people who’d stayed seated to suffer through the poem, then they all launched out of their seats and scattered.

“I’m so sorry, my dear. I thought that everyone would enjoy the poem, but I can see now that it isn’t quite the highlight of the night that I thought it would be,” Lucian said. He looked around, probably noting how sparse the ballroom crowd had become.

I looked around, too, noting how many people were yawning and checking their watches. There were even a few people slumped over, asleep in their chairs.

“Why did you have the poet portray Greyson that way?” I asked.

Lucian arched an eyebrow. “What do you mean? What way?”

“Like he’s incompetent,” I said. “He’s not. Greyson was in charge of all the Alphas, and he led us all to victory.”

“I can’t help the way Fredo interpreted the events. I gave him the bullet points, and he took his own artistic liberties from there!” Lucian said defensively.

“I still think it’s wrong,” I said stubbornly. “It’s not good to lie through epic poetry.”

“Speaking of Greyson,” Lucian said tightly. “Are you *sure* you want to go to Portland? My estate is as vast as it is protected. We could—”

“I’m sure,” I interrupted. “And I don’t want to talk about it anymore. We talked about it enough in the wine cellar, don’t you think?”

“Of course, my forest rose,” Lucian said quickly.

“I appreciate everything you’ve done for me while I’ve been here at the palace, Lucian,” I said. “You’ve been here for me not only as my mate, but as my friend and my protector—but I agree with Greyson. The best place for me right now is the city. Also, I like the idea of it. I haven’t had a chance to spend time in the city. They have giant bookstores there, and I want to go to one.”

“Maybe I can go with you? Turn it into a romantic getaway?” Lucian asked.

“No,” I said. “A missing Alpha doesn’t look very good, you know that. And don’t worry about me. I won’t be there all alone. I can always go to Maren if I need anything.”

Lucian sighed and squeezed my hand. “I just hate the idea of being away from you. The time you’ve spent here with me has been simply amazing. I’m going to miss you.”

I didn’t often see Lucian so vulnerable. It wasn’t that he didn’t let me know how much he cared about me, but the way he was acting now was different, somehow. Part of me felt the same way. Despite his self-centeredness and how over-the-top he could be in situations that didn’t call for it, I was going to miss him, too. I’d been slowly exploring things with Lucian, and I was starting to like him more than I’d thought I would—and he was definitely lots of fun to kiss.

Greyson came walking over, and my heart skipped a beat—though I tried to ignore it.

“Have either of you seen Cali? I was with her in the pool earlier and haven’t seen her since,” Greyson said, not meeting our eyes.

“In the pool?” I asked. “Were you swimming?”

Greyson shifted uncomfortably. “Kind of. We were mostly… relaxing.”

“Well, Cali’s a busy Luna, as always,” Lucian said. “I’m sure she’s around somewhere. Now, if you’ll excuse us, we were in the middle of an important discussion about Portland.”

“Oh?” Greyson said, his expression hardening as he eyed Lucian. “What about it?”

“About the possibility of me accompanying Elle,” Lucian replied.

Greyson looked at me. “Don’t you think it’ll just complicate things if he goes? Especially when there’s absolutely no need for him to join you.”

I looked between the two men, already feeling the tension rising. I was trying to think of what to say so they wouldn’t start fighting again. I’d had quite enough of that in the wine cellar, and honestly, it made me like them both a little less. The easiest thing would be for me to go to Portland on my own, but I knew that wouldn’t go over well with either of them. And really, I supposed I wouldn’t mind having one of them with me…

But before I could respond to Greyson, Lucian took a step toward him.

“Are you trying to use the sire bond to tell Elle what to do?” he asked, his voice low and dangerous.

**Episode 4239**

**Greyson**

I had to hold myself back from grabbing Lucian and slamming him into a wall. I couldn’t *believe* he’d just suggested that I was somehow using the sire bond to manipulate Elle.

I took a deep breath and felt a bit of my anger slip away as a thought tickled the back of my mind.

*I really hate to admit it, but maybe there’s some truth to his accusation? I can’t completely ignore the strange feelings I get about anything involving Elle… It has to be the sire bond at work. What else could it be?*

Realizing that Lucian wasn’t entirely off base only made me angrier. There was no way I was going to admit that the princeling was *right*. Besides, I mostly had the sire bond under control, and I still didn’t believe it was the reason why I wanted to keep Elle in Portland rather than see her go to the countryside with Lucian. Sire bond or no, that just wasn’t a good idea.

“I’m not telling Elle what to do,” I said. “I’m only pointing out that bringing you along would only draw unwanted attention.”

Lucian rolled his eyes. “Oh, *please*. That makes no sense. It sounds to me like you just want Elle all to yourself.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I snapped. “Are you seriously still jealous?”

Lucian scoffed. “Me, jealous? Look around at everything I have, everything the Vanguard pack has built! And when you’re done doing that, look at *me*. What would I have to be jealous of *you* about? I’m far too perfect to be jealous!”

“You *both* sound jealous,” Elle snapped. “I’m starting to think that the best thing is for me to go Portland by myself!”

She hit us both with a glare, then stormed off.

Lucian started to follow her. “Wait! My forest rose!”

I grabbed his arm and yanked him back. “You wait just one damn minute! I want to get something straight with you, Lucian. I’m not crazy about you and Elle being mates, and I’ve been pretty upfront about that, but my only goal here is to ensure Elle’s safety. She’s still a part of my pack, and I’m still her Alpha. Protecting her is my duty and my right. That is the *only reason* why I want to take her to Portland.”

Lucian twisted out of my hold and eyed me angrily. “Are you sure that’s the only reason? Elle is quite enchanting,” he spat. “Are you sure there aren’t… *other reasons* why you’re so adamant about taking her to Portland all on your own?”

I rolled my eyes. “I want to take Elle to Portland because I’m her Alpha and I want to protect her. That is the only reason. Do I really need another?”

Lucian smirked at me. Before he could say another word, I walked away. I needed to find Rishika, anyway. All that talk about Elle having to go to Portland had reminded me about the council spy. Unlike Lucian, I was focused on what was important—the fact that a council minion had managed to break through the Vanguards’ defenses.

I searched for Rishika for a while before I spotted Sage and went up to her. “Have you seen Rishika?”

Sage nodded. “I saw her go out to the garden a few minutes ago.”

“Thanks.”

Glad to step outside and put a bit of distance between me and the princeling—not to mention all his annoying pomp and circumstance—I made a beeline for the garden. Rishika came over to me as soon as she saw me, clearly irritated.

“I went to talk to the Vanguard wolves who were supposed to be patrolling, and they were slacking off,” she said.

“Really? How bad are we talking?” I asked.

“I found two of them leaning against a tree comparing their dating app profiles, another was fast asleep, and I couldn’t even find the last two. When I asked the other patrols about them, they said that they’d last seen them heading off for a bathroom break—an hour ago. Who knows if they’re even still on patrol? They probably ended up in the ballroom, getting smashed and listening to bad poetry.”

“Shit,” I muttered, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Well, then it’s no surprise that the council wolf was able to slip past them. Lucian insisted that his guards were the best. I should’ve known that he’d embellish that, just like he embellishes everything else.”

“Yep,” Rishika agreed, scowling. “His guards, if we can even call them that, suck pretty hard.”

“Did you pick up any other weird scents?” I asked. “Or see anything out of the ordinary?”

“I grabbed a couple of our people to take a few laps around the property, but no, we didn’t find anything else.”

“That’s reassuring, but it’s not going to stop me from taking Elle to Portland. We need to get her out of here *before* the shit hits the fan, not after,” I said. “We’ll leave as soon as it makes sense to go.”

Rishika fell silent, and I could tell that she had something on her mind.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I don’t know… I don’t want to question you, but… Do you think there’s a chance that we’ve let our guard down too soon, with Malakai and his people?” She stared out at the dark woods that loomed beyond the garden.

Her words struck me. Rishika was nothing if not levelheaded, and, though vigilant, she was rarely overcautious. If she was worried about something, it was best to take that worry to heart.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Sometimes, when a tyrant like Malakai dies, he becomes a martyr to his people.”

I hated the idea of Malakai inspiring his followers from beyond the grave.

“Do you think that his pack is so fanatical that that would happen? Would they get behind Honora?” I asked, then I sighed. “I kind of thought that deep down, they’d all be relieved to have him gone—even her. It had to be hell, following a guy like that.”

“You’d be surprised,” Rishika said grimly. “There’s no way of knowing what they’re thinking right now, after suffering a blow like that. What if you’re off in Portland and the Bitterfangs regroup and come after us again?”

“I won’t be staying in Portland,” I said. “I’m going just long enough to get Elle there safely and make sure she’s settled in. I’ll be gone for a couple of days, at most.”

Rishika nodded, her expression unreadable. “And have you told Cali this?”

“Yes, she’s aware,” I said. “Which reminds me—I was looking for her before my latest run-in with the princeling.”

“Another face-off between you two? Shocker!” Rishika said with a smirk.

“I know,” I said dryly. “We’ve become predictable. Anyway, I should go find Cali. And thanks for everything, Rishika. I really appreciate having you by my side through all of this. Why don’t you go take a break and try to enjoy yourself? Maybe have a dance or two with Artemis? That’s why we’re here, right? To celebrate?”

“Sure,” Rishika said. “Though I’m not sure how interested Artemis will be in dancing. The last time I saw her, she was mesmerized by all the ancient weaponry Lucian has mounted on the walls.”

I chuckled. “That sounds like Artemis. Still, I think you’d be able to convince her to leave the pretty weapons for a moment or two. I think we’ve all learned to appreciate times like this, when we can all kick back and enjoy ourselves.” I thought about my run-ins with Lucian and how, apart from my time with Cali in the pool, I hadn’t really had a chance to enjoy myself. “Relaxing nights are few and far between.”

“You’re right,” Rishika said. “I guess I owe it to Artemis to force her into some fun.”

“You deserve some fun, too,” I reminded her. “You could both stand to blow off a little steam. You’ve earned it.”

“Thanks, Greyson,” Rishika said. “I’ll try.”

We both went back inside. I did a quick sweep of the ballroom, looking for Cali, only to come face-to-face with Julia and Russell instead.

“Hey, how are you two holding up? Having fun, I hope?” I asked, even though I could tell by the look on Julia’s face that she was distressed.

“Go ahead, ask him,” Russell prompted her.

I waited, hoping that I wasn’t somehow intimidating her. I wanted Julia to feel comfortable coming to me whenever she needed to. She should’ve realized by now that I was on her side, and would be there for her whenever she needed me. Protecting her was basically how this entire Bitterfang mess had started in the first place.

Julia was clearly struggling to come out with whatever was on her mind, so I gave her a reassuring smile. “What is it, Julia? Ask away.”

She started chewing her lip and looked at Russell.

“Come on, Julia. Go ahead,” he said.

“Okay…” she said. “So I was thinking about what you said, Greyson—about how it’s okay for me to feel both relieved and sad about my father’s death. Even though he was an evil tyrant, it’s still hard for me to completely let go of him. Right now it just feels like I need something to remember him by, but I feel crazy for feeling that way.”

I nodded. “No, don’t. It makes sense and you need time to process it all anyway. Something physical could help you do that. Why were you so nervous to tell me that?”

She glanced at Russell before looking back at me. “Because I changed my mind about his ring. I need to see it.”

**Episode 4240**

**Xavier**

I raced up the stairs, hoping that Cali wouldn’t follow me. I had no idea where these stairs led, but I had to lose Cali. If I gave Cali another chance to corner me—to even talk to me—I knew I wouldn’t be able to shield her from the vampire-witch, who was already out for blood.

The palace was so huge that I hoped I’d find another hallway or something at the top of the staircase—somewhere I could duck away and hide. But when I reached the landing, I pushed through a door only to be met with a strong gust of wind that nearly knocked me back down the stairs.

*Great. I’m on the roof. No hallways, rooms, or closets to slink into. Just an open space with nowhere to hide.*

I sprinted to a rectangular structure at the center of the small space that I thought might have a door, somewhere, but there was nothing. *Shit.* I looked back toward the passageway that had brought me out onto the roof, realizing that if that was the only way up here, then I was sure to run into Cali if I went back down. There was no question about it—I was trapped.

*Fuck. Maybe she won’t find me, after all? It’s not like she’s a wolf. She can’t follow my scent, right? I might have given her the slip.*

I ran to push the door closed. If she hadn’t seen me come up, then I could easily hide from her up here. But I was too late. Cali already had one foot through the door. I backed away in an attempt to maintain a safe distance from her, but there wasn’t much room for me to work with. I hoped that Adéluce could see that I was struggling to follow her rules, that I wasn’t willfully defying her. If she saw that, perhaps she’d spare Cali.

Cali looked directly at me, breathing hard from sprinting to catch up with me. “What are you doing, Xavier? Why are you running from me?”

I quickly weighed my options. I could try to shove past her and run back down the stairs, or I could stay on the roof with Cali and test the limits of Adéluce’s patience. That second option didn’t seem like a good idea at all. I had to at least *try* to follow the vampire-witch’s rules.

*I might as well go for it. What choice do I have?*

I vaulted forward and tried to get past Cali to race down the stairwell, but the moment she stepped onto the roof, the door swung shut behind her. Panicked, I tried the door handle, but it wouldn’t budge.

“Shit! Now it’s locked!” I snapped. “Fantastic!”

“Good,” she retorted. “I’m glad it’s locked. You and I are finally going to talk. You can’t run away from me now.”

I spun around and started frantically searching for a fire escape, another staircase, anything that I could use to escape, but there was nothing. We were trapped at the top of one of the palace’s turrets, and there was no way down.

*Shit. What now? How can I get her to leave me alone?*

I turned back to face Cali, just as she stepped toward me with her arms crossed. “You’re going to give me some damn answers, Xavier. Lola told me what you said to Jay. Why were you asking him to look out for me? Do you know something I don’t? What’s going on? Am I in danger?”

*Shit! Shit! Shit! How the hell am I supposed to get out of this? Thanks a lot, Lola, for making everything impossibly worse!*

It was pure torture, not being able to just come clean with Cali. There was nothing I wanted more than to confide in her. We’d made a promise long ago to never keep secrets from each other, and it pained me that I couldn’t tell her everything. But I simply couldn’t. It was beyond my control.

Cali stepped close to me as the wind shifted and blew her scent into my face, causing my wolf to stir.

“Just be honest with me, Xavier,” she said. “Tell me the truth. Am I in danger because of Ava? Is she after me because I kissed you? Is she planning something?”

I looked at her, wishing I could explain everything that I couldn’t. I wanted nothing more than to take her in my arms and hold her—but that wasn’t an option, either.

“I already told you it wasn’t that,” I said tersely.

The wind picked up, whipping Cali’s hair and gown around as she took another step toward me. “Then what is it, Xavier? Why are you running from me? Why can’t you be alone with me? What’s going on?”

“I…” I trailed off, knowing that I couldn’t say another word.

*Fuck. This is* not *how I wanted this night to go. After everything I’ve done to stay away from Cali, I’m up here alone with her—the one thing the Adéluce forbade me from doing. I’ve been trying my best to avoid her, but now I can’t. And now what? We’re locked on a roof, trapped together. It’s almost like Adéluce orchestrated this situation as a new way to torture me.*

I turned away from Cali and glanced down at the ground, far below.

*I could shift and jump off the roof. It wouldn’t be pretty, but I don’t think the fall would hurt me too badly. But could I really leave Cali up here all alone? I would never do that under normal circumstances. But this puts both of us in such a precarious position, and I don’t have a clue how I’m going to get out of it.*

“I know something’s wrong, Xavier,” Cali said. “You haven’t been acting like yourself for a long, long time. Other people see it, too.”

On the inside, I was freaking out, but outwardly, I kept my cool.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said.

Cali made a frustrated sound. “Come on, Xavier. You’re not hiding it as well as you think you are.”

I was starting to sweat. This was too much. We were both in dangerous territory, and all the work I’d done to keep Cali safe from Adéluce was crashing down around me.

*I can’t let this happen. What if Adéluce is listening? Scratch that, I* know *she’s listening. There’s no “if” about it. I just have to make Cali believe that nothing’s going on so she’ll stop trying to figure out what’s wrong with me.*

She took a step toward me, and I quickly skittered back. If she got too close, Adéluce was going to hurt her. Period.

Cali narrowed her eyes and took yet another step forward. She almost had to shout to be heard over the roar of the wind. “Xavier, please! Don’t you see that I want to help you?”

I wanted to tear my hair out. “Cali, please *stop*!”

She shook her head and took another step. Soon, she was going to be right on top of me. “No! I want to know what’s going on with you, and I want to know now!”

She was shouting in earnest, now, struggling to be heard—and I suddenly realized that the wind wasn’t blowing so strongly because of how high up we were. It was supernaturally strong.

I looked up at the sky, my heartbeat quickening and panic rising in my chest as I realized that this was definitely Adéluce’s doing. Not only was she watching us, she was making her presence known.

“I didn’t do any of this on purpose!” I bellowed at the sky. “Don’t hurt her! It’s not my fault!”

Cali stopped short. “What?” she screamed, over the wind. “What are you talking about? Who are you talking to?”

I looked back at Cali and realized that she wasn’t even a breath away from me. I backed up until my heels were almost sticking out over the edge of the roof. One false move and I’d topple over the side.

“Get away from me, Cali!” I shouted. “Please! I’m begging you!”

Cali frowned as she circled me, looking around. “Is someone else here, Xavier? Tell me!”

I forced a smile, trying to brush it off. I was losing confidence, and I’d lost control long ago. “What? Of course not. It’s just me and you.”

Cali shook her head. “Is someone doing this to you, Xavier? Someone who won’t let you talk to me? Someone who won’t let me be near you? Just tell me! I can help!”

I was in full freak-out mode, now. I had to stop her from talking before she said something that angered Adéluce even further.

“Cali, I’m begging you to stop,” I pleaded. “Just stop talking!”

“No, Xavier! I won’t stop talking! I’m not going to drop this! Don’t you get it? I still love—”

A strong gust of wind crashed between us, knocking Cali off-balance. She stumbled to the side, right to the edge of the roof.

“*Cali!*” I roared, lunging forward as she pitched over the edge.

**Episode 4241**

**Greyson**

Julia hadn’t wanted to see Malakai’s ring when I’d first asked her about it. Why had she changed her mind? If the situation were reversed, if Julia had offered me some item that had belonged to Silas, would *I* have wanted a reminder of the horrible man who’d been my father?

I’d done my best to forget about him, but I’d never be rid of him for good. Sometimes, his shadow still felt heavy over me. No. I didn’t need any physical reminders of him.

“Are you sure you want to see Malakai’s ring?” I asked Julia.

“I can’t be sure, but…” Julia wiped her eyes. “So many people here tonight have reminded me what a monster my father is—*was*.” She shook her head. “I don’t need or want to remember that, but there are reminders everywhere. It’s the whole reason why we’re celebrating tonight—the defeat of my father and his twisted pack.”

“We didn’t have an alternative, though,” I reminded her. “We tried to avoid a war, but your father didn’t give us a choice.”

She sniffled. “No, I know. That’s kind of the point—he did all these horrible things, but there were times… There were times when he was like a real father to me.”

Her devastation had my stomach in knots. I glanced at Russell. His expression was grim, but he didn’t say anything. I nodded for Julia to continue.

“He was generous,” she said quietly. “He always went out of his way to find the perfect gifts for my mom and me. He liked to talk about books with me, and he taught me how to sail. He was strict, and I was terrified of him and his rules, but I guess…” She paused. “I guess I do want to believe that he cared for me. In his own way.”

Julia seemed to have thought about what we’d discussed earlier. I couldn’t relate to anything she’d just said, though. If Silas had ever been a loving father, I had no recollection of it. I suspected my mother would agree. Silas meant terror to us, nothing more. There hadn’t been any nuance in the horror that had been his life.

“I guess… I want to see the ring as a reminder that my father wasn’t all bad,” Julia whispered. “That he had some goodness within him. I know that he started a war, that he wanted to kill Russell and Cali just for existing, but…” Her voice cracked. Russell gave her another tissue to wipe her eyes. “I feel like I need to figure out a way to accept both sides of who he was to me in order to move on. Otherwise, I’m scared that I’ll be stuck in this misery forever.” She looked up at me, her expression pleading. “Do you see what I mean?”

I didn’t. Not exactly. But I wasn’t about to shame a teenager for her complicated emotions. This was important to her, and I wanted to help her out as much as I could.

Looking around, I said, “I can’t show it to you right here, out in public. It could provoke people.”

“You brought it with you to the palace?” Russell asked. “Why?”

“So I could show it to the other Alphas as proof that Malakai’s dead—in case they still had any doubt.” I glanced between the two kids before my gaze settled on Julia. “I think we should wait until we get back to the pack house, where you can have some actual privacy.”

“I agree,” Russell said. I’d never seen him so serious. Turning to Julia, he said, “Does that sound good to you?”

Julia’s hands had been hanging loosely at her sides, but now she wrapped them around herself, shaking her head as she looked at Russell, then at me.

“No, I just—I can’t—don’t you get it?” Her wounded expression had a twinge of panic to it—like she’d been carrying it around all night and now it had exploded to the surface. “I can’t wait till we get back to the house, not when all these people—”

“Maybe I should take you back right now,” Russell said quickly. “You shouldn’t be here if this is so upsetting to you.”

“*No*,” Julia said firmly, sharply. She was breathing shakily, staring up at Russell. “I need to do this. Right now.” Her eyes were brimming with tears when she turned to me. “Greyson, *please*. I need something to remember him in a different way than everybody else. All these people…” She gestured at the party. “They hate him. They’re right to hate him, but I’m…” She looked down. “I’m a part of him, so it’s like they hate me, too.”

Her words were heavy. A punch in the gut. A familiar one, too.

I reached out, squeezing her shoulder. “Are you afraid that you’re destined to end up like him? That the bad things your father did might have rubbed off on you?”

Russell pulled Julia into a side hug after she whispered, “Yes.”

I knew that feeling all too well. I knew the fear of it. Every time my anger became too slippery to hold back, I thought of Silas, and what I had the potential to become. What was in my blood.

“You’re nothing like him,” Russell told Julia vehemently, squeezing her tight.

“The fact that we’re having this conversation is proof enough of that,” I told her honestly. “I get that it’s not easy to convince yourself of that when his actions are hanging over your head, but it’s like I told you before, Julia—I believe in you.”

She swallowed audibly, looking up at me. “What if you *shouldn’t* believe in me? What if I always feel this way about my father?”

“Don’t sell yourself short.” Russell shook his head. “Time fixes everything—it has to.” He turned to me. “Right, Greyson?” He looked just about ready to cry as well.

I fucking hated every bit of this.

“Time does make everything more bearable,” I said. As cliché as it sounded, it was true. I looked around, at the chaos of the ballroom. My voice dropped when I told Julia, “If you need to see the ring right now, I’ll show it to you. Just not here.”

“Thank you,” she said breathlessly.

I started to lead the two of them out of the ballroom, but then someone grabbed me by the arm.

“We need to talk,” Lucian said through gritted teeth.

Fucking hell.

I yanked myself out of his grasp. Gesturing at Julia and Russell, I said, “As you can see, I’m in the middle of something.”

“This cannot wait, Greyson! We need to settle the Elle problem right now.”

“We *have* settled it,” I retorted.

“I have not yet made my case! There is more information you need to know,” Lucian said with a huff.

I reminded myself that punching the princeling would be the equivalent of an international diplomatic scandal in the werewolf world.

And then I took a deep breath and turned to Julia.

“I’m sorry. Can you wait just a little longer?” I asked.

Julia glanced at Lucian and nodded shakily.

Russell put an arm around her. “She’ll be okay with me.”

I squeezed Julia’s arm before walking off, certain that Lucian would follow me like an obsessive pilot fish. I was certainly feeling like a shark right now.

“We need to discuss Elle’s—”

“I told you, the Elle thing had been settled,” I interrupted. “I am taking her to Portland. End of story.”

Lucian grabbed my arm. Again.

“It’s *not* the end of the story,” he said sharply, “and I’m going to explain why.” He looked around. “But not here.”

I eyed his hand on my arm. Then I eyed his face.

Whatever he saw in my expression made him let go.

“Just follow me,” he ground out.

With a long-suffering sigh—the only kind I was capable of, with the amount of bullshit I had to deal with on the regular—I followed Lucian out of the ballroom. I took one last look before I left and frowned, though. Where was Cali?

It seemed like every time I went looking for her, I was interrupted. I was going to have to fix that.

But first, Lucian.

He led me to one of the gardens. It looked familiar, but there were so many gardens in the palace—who could tell if I’d been there before? It was a very quiet spot, though. The perfect place to murder someone, I couldn’t help but notice. Lucian truly enjoyed tempting fate.

He was lucky I was determined not to be my father’s son.

“Why are we here?” I asked.

Lucian huffed. “Just because you say something is settled, doesn’t mean it *is*. I have more to say.”

“Then *say it*.”

Lucian’s gaze was sharp. “You *will* listen, Greyson. I know that your interest in my forest rose *isn’t* just based solely on the fact that you’re her Alpha.”

I realized there was a chance that there would be *actual* epic poems written in my honor in the future, just to commemorate the fact that I hadn’t ripped Lucian’s head off.

“We’ve been through this,” I ground out. “Anything you feel the need to add, I can hear it *later*.”

I brushed past the princeling with a scoff that quickly died in my throat. Because I’d just heard screaming, coming from somewhere above me.

*Cali*.

**Episode 4242**

Time no longer made sense. One second, I was screaming at Xavier, telling him I still loved him, and the next I’d been shoved off the roof by the wind.

This wasn’t like the voluntary times I’d climbed out of windows at the pack houses. This was the Vanguard palace. There was no way I’d survive a fall from this far up. There was no way Greyson would find me and cushion my blow like he’d done time and time again in the past.

It was just me here, the icy clawing wind, and—

“Xavier!”

I screamed his name in vain. The wind felt like a vortex, time still had no meaning, and I had no idea why I hadn’t already crashed into the gardens below. And then, suddenly, the crash came, the impact shuddering through my entire body.

But I wasn’t dead—I was sliding down the tile roof. My eyes burned in the wind, my throat burned from screaming, and I fought to dig my fingernails into the roof, skin scraping away, pain shooting through me—

Everything came to a screeching halt.

I’d reached the end of the roof, and now my legs were dangling over into the void.

*Okay, NOW I’m going to fall!*

But I didn’t, because there was a firm grip on my hand*.*

I looked up and saw Xavier—his hair flying in the wind, his lips parted, his eyes wide with terror. Xavier, hanging over the edge of the tower, gripping my hand, halting my fall—but that didn’t last. The momentum from the sudden stop forced my entire body to change direction, and then…

*BANG!*

I slammed to the side, into the wall of the palace. I waited for the pain to come, but it didn’t. I was probably too stunned to feel it. Too stunned to ache, to speak, or even to scream.

In my head, I screamed his name. *Xavier!*

This time, I did fall. But I wasn’t alone—we were falling together. Xavier had been pulled over the edge with me when I’d hit the wall. He had one hand wrapped around mine; his other hand was partially shifted, his claws digging into the edge of the tiled roof. He fought to gain a foothold while I dangled limply. Uselessly.

I wanted to laugh and cry, all at once. This was it. This was how I was going to die.

But he didn’t have to go down with me.

*You should fully shift*, I told him. *You can claw your way up, just let me—*

*I’m not fucking letting go!*

His voice was a hiss in my head, and then I heard a scraping sound. I looked up to see pieces of tile and dust falling from the roof, the tendons in Xavier’s neck more pronounced than I’d ever seen them, like his jaw was ready to break from the tension.

He was fighting to pull us both up.

*Let me go*, I told him.

*Never.*

The wind still bellowed, like it was laughing at us, like it knew that this couldn’t possibly work. And then it got worse, picking up speed until I was being blown back and forth. I let out a cry at the shooting pain that burst into life in my shoulder joint, so startling it made me loosen my grip on Xavier’s hand.

But he didn’t let go.

*Don’t panic, I’ve got you*, he told me, staring into my eyes. *I’m getting you out of this.*

I had a hard time believing him. I had a hard time believing that he was here at all, trying to save me, risking his life for me after everything that had happened between us. Right now, it was like he’d never left me—like he was the same man I’d fallen in love with.

Had he been here all along?

Had it taken me almost fucking *falling to my death* to make him reveal that he’d never stopped loving me?

I glanced down, which turned out to be a big mistake. We were even higher up than I’d thought, and my stomach convulsed. My sweaty palm grew hot in Xavier’s, my arm burning as I dangled into the air and the void called from below.

It was ready to swallow me whole.

*No*, Xavier’s voice echoed through my head. He sounded calm, collected—a state so rare for him that it was startling all on its own. *Don’t look down*. *Just look at me.*

I looked up at him, into his eyes. Once upon a time, I’d thought those eyes were terrifying. Things were different, now. I trusted him—and I’d always fought to keep that trust, even when he’d tried to rip it into bloody pieces.

*I’ll get you to safety*, he told me. *Just keep looking at me.*

I did. And I saw the strain on his face, saw how he was using all his strength. Pieces of the roof were crumbling away, and dust was getting in my eyes. But Xavier’s grip stayed strong, relentless—even when a tile slid right off and his grip on the edge of the roof loosened.

We both started to fall.

My scream was cut short when I was jerked to a stop once again. The pain that shot through my arm made me yelp, but it paled in comparison to the relief I felt when I saw that Xavier had dug his claws into the wall, between two massive stones. He managed to find two footholds as well, then he turned to look at me.

*I’m going to try to swing you over to the balcony just off to the side, down to your right*, he said. *Do you see it?*

I glanced down and felt like sobbing.

*It’s too far*, I told him. *I’ll never make it.*

*Cali—*

*No! Even if you did manage to swing me over there, your momentum would make you lose your grip on the wall. You’d fall!*

*I’ll be fine*, he growled in my head—the calm was long gone. And then, without any kind of build-up, he said, *Brace yourself!*

He started to swing me toward the balcony. I screamed in pain and fear, but the wind screamed right over me. The wind was too strong—there was no way I’d make it.

*Xavier, please, let me fall, it’s—*

*I’d rather fucking die than let you go!*

The words were so loud in my mind, they overwhelmed me. When I looked up next, I saw the back of his head. He was looking up, over us. He mind linked again.

*I think I can make it to that gargoyle. It’s not too far. Hold onto my hand with both of yours.*

The moment I did, the pain in my arm eased slightly. And then, inch by slow inch, Xavier climbed up the stone wall with one partially shifted hand, gripping my hand with the other.

Once more, time ceased to have any meaning.

I watched him, straining and clawing his way up until he lodged himself behind one of the stone gargoyles. I realized, with a mixture of incredulity and fucking hysteria, that it was a caricature of Lucian as some kind of gargoyle warrior.

“That’s it.” Xavier was speaking out loud now, pulling me up and right to him, right into his arms. The two of us ended up huddled behind the stone monster, the wind still howling around us, but we were safe.

I was safe.

Xavier had made sure of it.

*It’s okay, it’s over*, he told me, all soft whispers in my head, his arms wrapped tight around me.

I was shaking so hard I thought I’d break out of my skin. I didn’t know if it was because of the shock, or because of his touch. Within his embrace, the pain in my arms seemed to subside, and my mind was invaded by memories of being with him, feeling secure and safe in his arms.

I wished this moment could last forever—just the two of us, the way it used to be. I would go through it all again if it meant ending up in his arms, just like this.

“*Cali!*”

I didn’t know if Greyson’s voice was in my head or in my ears—the wind made it hard to tell. I had no idea what was happening, but when I looked up, there were people on the roof, calling for us.

I squeezed my eyes shut, holding onto Xavier.

And then we were moving again.

Someone had thrown a rope, I realized, and Xavier had tied it around us. I opened my eyes and felt like everything was moving in slow motion, all sound muffled in my ears. Xavier walked us up the wall as we were pulled onto the roof. I kept my arms and legs locked around him the whole time, as if I’d fucking shatter if he let go.

I would have. I could have. I would’ve fallen to my death if he hadn’t been there to save me.

*You also wouldn’t have been on the roof in the first place if you’d just let him walk away…*

There was shouting everywhere, people asking what had happened, if we were okay. I wasn’t really listening.

*You’re okay*, Xavier told me, breathing hard as he stared into my eyes. He was staring at me like nothing had changed between us.

Greyson’s voice was the only thing that managed to pierce through the fog.

“Cali!”

I was shocked back into reality. Time started back up again. I whirled around to see Greyson rushing over, running to me. He pulled me close, and I let Xavier go. I did it easily, as if he hadn’t just risked his life for me, and the thought made me swallow down a sob.

When Greyson wrapped his arms around me, he was shaking like he was the one who’d almost died. He opened his mouth to speak, but no sound came out. He looked feral with worry.

And then, when he looked at Xavier, he looked feral with rage. “What the *fuck* did you do to her?”

**Episode 4243**

**Xavier**

I wasn’t listening to my brother’s bullshit. I was focused on Cali—the only person who mattered right now. She was no longer in danger, but I had to keep looking at her. Make sure that she was safe, uninjured. I had been terrified of losing her, earlier. My only solace while we’d been hanging from the edge had been that if I’d failed, we would’ve died together.

Adéluce’s games would finally have been over.

Greyson was still speaking, and even though I wasn’t listening, I realized that his voice was clear. Loud. Not murky because of the wind. It had stopped completely—there wasn’t even a breeze left. The night was starry. Perfect. All my suspicions solidified at once, and I knew that this hadn’t been some freak accident. It had been Adéluce.

Had it been some kind of test? And had I failed it by saving Cali? Had blowing Cali off the roof been Adéluce’s punishment for our kiss? I knew the vampire-witch would shed no tears if Cali died—especially if it was because I’d failed to save her. She’d savor my devastation while I spent the rest of my life grieving and full of guilt.

But perhaps my saving Cali had been the point. Adéluce wanted to make me suffer, and by putting Cali’s life in danger, she’d certainly done that. And she would continue to derive pleasure from my dilemma—but only as long as Cali stayed alive.

I was certain that Adéluce had done this. And she was going to pay.

She fucking *had to* pay, sooner rather than later. Otherwise, I’d lose my mind.

“—Xavier!” Greyson’s voice came into focus. His face did, too. He marched toward me, grabbing me by the shoulders as he hissed, “Fucking answer me!”

I didn’t even know what the question was. I owed him nothing, anyway.

“Get the fuck out of my face!” I growled, shoving him.

“What *happened*?” Greyson snarled.

There was something wild in his eyes, a kind of anger that I’d seen him wear once or twice. Both times, our father had been involved. Both times, I’d known he was right on the edge of snapping. My wolf grumbled low in my chest, and the only thing I wanted to scream back at him was, “Where the fuck were you? Why the hell didn’t you come sooner? Do you have any idea how terrified she was?”

I wanted to blame it all on him, but I couldn’t. This was *my* fault. I swallowed my rage, because I knew that there was no room for it right now. Not when Greyson’s own anger was ready to overflow between us. The last thing Cali needed after all this was to witness a fight.

With a glance at her, I said tightly, “It got windy.”

“What were you doing up here with her in the first place?” Greyson asked. His voice had turned low. His stance was rigid. Still. Like a predator, waiting to attack.

My wolf let out a low, guttural sound. And if it sounded on edge, I’d never fucking admit it.

“None of your business,” I snapped.

I walked away, past the small crowd that had gathered. When I got to the door, I glanced back.

Cali was in Greyson’s arms, but she was staring at me.

I wished I could relive that brief moment we’d shared together, right after I’d pulled her to safety. But I knew I couldn’t, and there was no point in dwelling on it. With a shake of my head, I started climbing down the spiral staircase.

“Xavier!”

Ava’s voice startled me.

I spun around to face her—she’d been on the roof and was now climbing the down stairs behind me. I hadn’t even seen her. It hadn’t even occurred to me to look for her, and wasn’t that just fucked up? I hoped the guilt didn’t show on my face.

I didn’t trust my voice when I said, “I need a drink.”

Ava’s gaze was sharp. Assessing. When the hell *didn’t* she look at me like that, though? I’d gotten used to it.

She followed me downstairs without a word, but I doubted she was going to let this go. She never let anything go. The moment we got to the main floor, she proved me right.

Ava grabbed my arm, yanking me into a study and slamming the door shut.

“Why were you up there?” she demanded. “With *her*? *Alone?*”

The anger in her voice was obvious, even if she kept her tone even. I revealed the only piece of truth I could share with her and admitted, “Cali followed me up there.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Why?”

I couldn’t answer that. Adéluce would never let me. So I just shrugged. “I think she still has questions about why I left the Redwood pack.”

Ava crossed her arms over her chest. “Or why you left *her*.”

“Perhaps. Now, if you could just let me get that drink—”

She blocked my path to the exit. “So you climbed to the top of that tower by yourself. Why?”

I was done with this interrogation, but I tried to show some patience. I knew I’d be furious, in Ava’s position, so I couldn’t exactly blame her. I had to give her enough to placate her, otherwise we’d be here forever.

“I was trying to avoid Cali,” I said. “I didn’t want to explain again that we’re through. I’m over the drama.”

Ava tilted her head to the side. “And then?”

“And then it got insanely windy and she almost fell off the fucking roof, so I caught her,” I snapped. “What else was I supposed to do?”

Ava paused, raising an eyebrow. “Maybe you should’ve let her fall.”

She had to be joking. But there wasn’t a hint of a smile on her face. I wasn’t surprised, but at the same time, I didn’t want to fucking see this.

“How can you suggest something like that after all the times Cali’s helped us?” I demanded. “*All* of us.”

Ava shrugged. “I’m just saying—wouldn’t things be easier if she weren’t around? For all of us?”

I laughed bitterly, shaking my head. “So all this time, you’ve been acting sympathetic to the position I’ve been in, telling me that you understand what I’ve been through—that was all just bullshit?”

“I never said—”

I took a step closer. “You *said* that you weren’t expecting me to just flip a switch and cut off all my feelings for Cali. Have you been fucking lying to me?”

She looked caught. Guilty.

Shaking my head, I walked over to the door, ready to leave. But then she spoke again, her voice quiet.

“If it had been me—if I’d been the one hanging off the roof—would you have risked your life to save me?”

What the fuck kind of question was that?

“Do you really want to know?” I asked.

She flinched, hurt. I wanted to shake her.

“Don’t be fucking ridiculous,” I snapped. “Of course I would’ve risked my life to save you—I’d do anything to protect you. You’re my mate.”

She swallowed audibly, looking up at me. “Sometimes you seem to forget that.”

“Sometimes *you* seem to forget that, Ava.”

She scoffed. “It’s not like you never give me reason to.”

I pulled in a deep breath, fighting to stay calm. It immediately did the trick—Ava’s scent invaded my senses, and my wolf was soothed. It was pathetic, but true. I felt steady enough to remind myself to see things from her perspective. She only knew half the story. And even though none of what had happened tonight had been my fault—Cali had kissed *me* in front of everyone, and she’d chased *me* up the roof—it must have been hard for Ava to watch.

Through her anger and jealousy, I could see the hurt. It was plain as day in her posture, her crossed arms. I saw it in the way she wasn’t meeting my eyes. I’d told so many lies tonight, but it was an incontrovertible truth that Ava was the only real thing in my life right now. Regardless of my confusing mess of feelings for her, I didn’t want to hurt her.

“Do you really want to fight over this, Ava?” I asked quietly. “Again?”

I was surprised by the gentleness of my tone. Ava seemed startled, too, and she finally met my eyes.

Swallowing hard, she said, “The fact that we’re mates doesn’t change the fact that Cali’s your mate as well. She kissed you tonight, in front of everyone and I’m still pissed about it. Do you have any idea how fucking humiliating that is for me, regardless of what you said to her after?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. But I was lying to her, and to myself as well. “You’re still the one I chose. You’re my Luna, and I’m your Alpha.”

I stared at her for a moment as I stood there by the door. And the more we looked at each other, the more her scent changed, becoming cloying, honeyed. Turned on. My wolf stirred, every instinct howling at me to fix this. To take what she was offering and gorge myself on it.

She was all I had left.

I closed the door.

Walking toward her, I said, “Maybe I need to remind you that I’m your mate. Your Alpha.”

Her voice cracked. “And how do you intend to do that?”

I reached for the back of her neck, my fingers tangling in her hair before I pulled her closed. I trailed my nose across her cheek. When she shivered, I said gruffly, “Like this.”

And then I kissed her.

**Episode 4244**

I was still shaking, my body aching and bruised after slamming repeatedly into the tower. Greyson held me, his arms strong and warm. I felt safe and cherished with him, as always. But I still couldn’t stop my thoughts from straying back to the sight of Xavier and Ava leaving the roof together.

*Of course they left together. Why did I expect anything to change?*

And yet, something *had* changed.

Xavier had saved me numerous times before, but this time felt different. There had been a connection there between us. In the middle of all that chaos, our mate bond had *soared*. I knew I hadn’t imagined that.

The people who’d come up the roof to see what was going on were starting to head back down. Greyson gently broke our embrace to take my hand and lead me toward the door. He’d barely said a word to me since his argument with Xavier

He’d barely looked at me in the eyes, actually.

My stomach twisted.

“Hey.” I paused, tugging on his hand. “Are you okay?”

He paused, looking startled. “Am *I* okay?” Now he looked confused. “You’re the one who nearly fell off the roof.”

“I can tell you’re upset,” I said, pressing my lips together.

“Because you *nearly fell off the roof*.”

I let his hand go, wrapping my arms around myself. “You know that’s not what I mean.”

“I was worried, and I took it out on my brother,” he said calmly. “I’m *still* worried. We should find a first aid kit. More to the point, we should get home and have Torin heal you.”

“We’re representing the pack—we can’t just leave early.” I shook my head. “Besides, I’m not really hurt. It’s just a few bruises, and—”

“Yet another near-death experience?” he finished.

His words landed hard, and I felt my eyes burn. He came closer, and then his hands were on me. Gently, he pulled my arms away from my chest so he could examine my wrists. The one that Xavier had grabbed to keep me from falling was red and swollen.

“This isn’t *nothing*, love,” Greyson muttered. He brought my wrist to his lips, pressing a tender kiss to the forming bruise. My skin tingled at the feel of his mouth, more blood rushing to the surface. The pain there became unimportant when he was at the forefront.

It became unimportant when *he* was in pain.

He could say that everything was fine, that we were good, that he understood why I’d kissed Xavier, but I could still feel the hint of hurt bleeding off him. I could see the slight hunch to his shoulders, and it filled me with guilt.

“I need to explain—”

He cut me off. “It’s fine, you don’t have to—”

“But I want to,” I said firmly.

He stared at me, waiting. He was devastating when he looked at me like this—like he’d rather die than upset me, when all *I* did was upset him, especially when it came to Xavier.

I cleared my throat. “I know that seeing me kiss Xavier tonight was a shock…”

“We’ve gone through that,” Greyson said, looking away, shaking his head. “I get why you did it—Kira’s doing her magic test. You don’t have to say anything else.”

“But you asked Xavier how we ended up on the roof together, and I have the answer. I followed him up here,” I said. My heart was pounding. Greyson looked at our joined hands, his jaw set, and I kept talking. “I thought I could get some answers out of him, but he literally tried to run from me, which I thought was strange, so I followed him to the tower, and then…” I paused. “Well, then all this happened.”

Greyson looked up at me. Slowly, he dropped my hands. I immediately missed the warmth of his touch, took a step closer to him, but then he said, “You shouldn’t have done that.”

I paused. “Why?”

“Because if Kira’s suspicions are correct and Xavier really *is* being influenced by magic, being around him could be dangerous. You should’ve just waited for Kira, Cali.”

I swallowed roughly, staring up at him. “You’re upset.”

He shook his head, running a hand through his hair. “No. It’s fine. It is what it is.”

*It is what it is*. God, he sounded so *resigned*—so fucking exhausted and worn down that I felt my eyes sting.

*Look what you did*, I thought to myself. *Look what you’re doing to him.*

Xavier was my mate, and I couldn’t just turn off my feelings toward him. But that didn’t change the results of my actions. It didn’t change the fact that Greyson was my mate as well, and that his hurt made me ache.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, reaching up to touch his cheek.

Greyson nodded, but he gently pulled my hand away and refused to meet my eyes again. This whole conversation had been one red flag after the other, and there was a part of me that was keening with a strong sense of loss.

Greyson had just refused my touch.

It felt horrible.

“Whatever you want to tell me, you should just say it,” I whispered. “I don’t want you to hold back. I hate seeing you like this.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose, glancing at me. Not a full look, but enough for him to say, “I understand why you’re trying to find out why my brother is doing what he’s doing, but…” Another glance. That one cut even deeper.

“Greyson, *please*,” I said. “You can tell me anything.”

Now, he stared at me properly, and the force of his gaze was as heavy as his words. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

The implication was obvious—he thought my feelings were more important than his own. *Shit*.

“Please,” I urged him. “Just tell me.”

He took a deep breath, like he was bracing himself. “I know why you kissed Xavier. I know why you followed Xavier up to the tower. But that knowledge doesn’t make it any easier to see you obsessing over him like this. I can’t tell you to let this whole thing go, but I wish you would.”

I wasn’t about to lie to him.

“I wish I could let it go, too,” I muttered. “I hate hurting you, and I’m so sorry that I did, but I just…”

“I get it,” he said. This time, when I reached to touch his cheek, he let me. He pulled me close, covering my hand with his before sliding it down to his neck. I felt his pulse thundering there as he spoke. “I can deal with all this, Cali. But what happens if Kira comes back with an answer that you don’t want to hear?”

I slowly let him go. Took a step back. “What do you mean?”

“What if it turns out that there’s no magic involved?” he asked. “That my brother is just making these decisions, and there *is* no other explanation? What if you can never go back to the way things used to be, and this is just the new Xavier?”

“I’ve thought of that,” I admitted. “But I’ll deal with it when I hear from Kira.”

Greyson looked away, nodding once before he gestured toward the staircase. We climbed down, an awkward tension hovering between us.

*I wish this night could just* end*—I could use a hot bath and a big mug of white chocolate mocha.*

My hope of an early end to the party was smashed when we returned to the ballroom just as Armin announced, “The dance is beginning!”

Greyson frowned. “Hasn’t it been going on all night?”

I noticed that the guests had moved to the edges of the main dance floor as Duke and Paige and Porter and Rowena moved to the center, joining Lucian and Elle. At that moment, Aysel sauntered past, and I grabbed her elbow.

“What’s going on?” I asked her.

“My brother has asked that all the Alphas and their mates celebrate our victory with a special dance.”

She shot a look at my dirty, ripped dress, wrinkling her nose.

*I’d like to see* you *fall from a tower roof without some wardrobe damage!*

“We don’t have to do this, Cali,” Greyson said, shaking his head with a sigh. “You’re hurt. If you don’t want to go home, you should at least sit down and rest.”

“I’m fine,” I said quickly. “I’ve survived much worse.”

Aysel clapped her hands. “Brilliant! Come along now, you should already be out there dancing!” She pushed the two of us forward before I heard her asking someone if they’d seen Xavier and Ava.

*Xavier is with Ava*, I thought. *They’re together, and alone, and—*

And Greyson’s grip on my hand felt all wrong—tense and awkward. That distracted me more than anything. We moved to the dance floor, and I felt all eyes on us. He pulled me closer, looping an arm around my waist, and we started dancing. He didn’t look at me, though, and I missed his gaze so badly it made my heart ache.

I wanted to pull him down and kiss him. I wanted to tell him I loved him, and that nothing in this world could ever change that. But I said none of that. I couldn’t—not right now, not with everybody watching. Not when this uncomfortable silence was stretching between us. I leaned into him instead, taking in his scent, and he felt it.

He felt *me*.

For a moment, our eyes locked. His hold on me tightened, and the pleasure I felt, the sense of belonging… It was *searing*.

“Cali!”

Someone hissed my name, and I almost stepped on Greyson’s foot. Porter and Rowena swept in close to us, still dancing. As they brushed by, Rowena leaned in close to me to whisper, “I need to talk with you. I had a vision.”

Before I could speak, she was swept away, leaving me with an ominous feeling.

What fresh hell was *this*?

**Episode 4245**

**Xavier**

I threw myself into Ava’s kiss. I knew I was a fucking horrible person for doing this right now, right after what had happened with Cali only minutes ago, but this wasn’t new. Self-destruction was my constant state of being, these days. It was the only time I felt in charge. In control.

With Adéluce watching my every move, opportunities to make my own decisions were few and far between, and I took every one of them as a win. Even if this—kissing Ava, fucking Ava right after saving Cali—was a bad decision, it was *my* bad decision. And that was enough.

I needed to shut down all my hesitations and second thoughts, because this moment had to be enough. It certainly *felt* like enough—distracting enough, real enough, passionate enough. Ava’s body melted into mine, and she moaned into my mouth before breaking off the kiss, her breath hitching as she kissed her way down my neck. My eyes closed, then immediately flew open again when she bit at the tendon there.

When I looked over her shoulder, I almost choked.

“Holy fuck,” I breathed.

I couldn’t believe this. Though I shouldn’t have been surprised.

“What?” Ava asked breathlessly, grabbing at the lapels of my jacket.

I pointed behind her. She turned to see the giant portrait of Lucian in a fancy hat. He looked like a Napoleonic general, or a president from hundreds of years ago.

“What the hell?” Ava blurted out. It kind of sounded like she wanted to laugh and cry at the same time.

“Yeah, I can’t look at that,” I said, dead serious. “He’s staring at me.”

“Me too.”

I shook my head and walked up the portrait to take it off the wall, turning it around so that Lucian wasn’t watching us. He was the last thing I wanted to think about right now. Ava wasn’t the first thing I wanted to think about, but when I looked at her, I knew that she could be. And that in and of itself was playing directly into Adéluce’s hand. But this was fucking, not falling in love.

She’d taken off her dress and was standing there naked, making my wolf go wild. She was gorgeous. She shivered when our eyes locked, and when she spoke, her voice was hoarse.

“You said something about reminding me who my Alpha is…?”

I was done thinking.

I closed the distance between us and pulled her in for another kiss. This one was more biting—my tongue in her mouth, my hand at the hinge of her jaw to keep it open. This was how I wanted her, how she wanted me, how things were supposed to be between us.

She clung to me, whimpering, trying to get my jacket off, unbutton my shirt. I didn’t let her. Grabbing both her wrists with one hand, I broke off the kiss. Still cradling her jaw, I traced her red lips with my thumb, dipping it into her mouth.

“This is mine,” I said. She licked my thumb. Her breaths were sharp and hot, her body trembling. She trembled even harder when my other hand slid between her legs. She was so wet, it was dripping down her thighs. “This is mine, too.”

“Xavier—”

“*Say it*.”

“Yours.”

“Show me how much you want me.”

Ava dropped to her knees, right in front of me. I unbuckled and unzipped as she watched, breathless, licking her lips. Her scent, the sight of her was enough to make my wolf howl.

Moments later, my fingers were tangled in her hair, and her lips and tongue were on me as she whispered, “Fuck my mouth.”

It sounded more like a challenge than a plea, but that was her. That was Ava, and I’d take it. I felt her throat constrict, the brief scrape of her teeth, her burning eyes on me. I twisted her hair into a ponytail and led her on as let herself be used. When she started to touch herself and moaned against my skin, I knew I was a goner soon.

That wasn’t the plan, though.

The plan was to pull her up, bend her over the desk, bite into her Luna mark, and fuck her hard until she screamed. I grabbed at her hip, my fingers digging into her flesh while I dragged her back against me. My other hand was at the apex of her thighs, moving in quick circles so I could feel her entire body shake and spasm as she took me in and mewled my name. I had her pinned, owned, and I knew I was going to hell, because I was loving every fucking second of it.

She reached back, clawing at the back of my neck, pulling me impossibly closer.

“Say I’m yours,” she whispered, between panting breaths.

I did. I called her my Luna, and she shattered. Her body clamped down on me, dragging me over the edge with her.

For a moment, the only sound in the room was our harsh breathing.

I straightened my spine, but I didn’t move away from her. I looked down at the spot where our bodies met, where she was still impossibly needy. That was the thing about Ava—she’d never get enough of me. With her, I was wanted. I was goddamn *needed*.

With her, in this moment, I was powerful.

I started thrusting again, slow and deliberate. Just to feel her breath hitch and her body twitch with aftershocks. I went for it again, because I could. Because I wanted to, and because this felt fucking amazing when everything else was agony.

Sliding my nails down her bare back, I rasped, “Every wolf out there will smell me on you. They’re going to know exactly how much you love it when I fuck you.”

Still panting, Ava looked at me over her shoulder. Over her Luna mark.

“Good thing that’s exactly what I want,” she whispered, a sharp smile on her lips.

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Ava got dressed, I straightened my clothes, and then we cleaned up as much as we could in the closest bathroom. We headed to the ballroom without any words exchanged, but Ava didn’t move away when I linked our arms. I wanted to ask her if we were good now, but I got sidetracked when we reached the main space.

“Are they *setting the table*?” Ava asked. “I thought all those appetizers were the meal. Now there’s more?”

Before I could reply, Aysel came fluttering up to us. “My goodness, I’ve been looking for you two all night! You missed the Alpha-Luna dance!”

Ava and I exchanged a look. I turned back to Aysel. “What a shame.”

Aysel came closer yet. “Where *were* the two of you, by the way?”

Ava offered Aysel a haughty smile. “None of your business.”

She might as well have told her *exactly* what we’d been doing—Aysel could surely smell it anyway—and I knew she wanted to make a point. Cali had kissed me earlier, and I’d saved Cali from falling from the roof, but it was *Ava* who I’d fucked right in the middle of the party. Every wolf there would know it, and Ava would regain face after what would otherwise have been a humiliating night for her.

“I’m so glad to see you’re enjoying each other,” Aysel said slyly. “Oops! Enjoying the *party*, I mean.”

“Sure,” Ava said dryly, raising an eyebrow.

“We’ll be taking our seats for the banquet very soon,” Aysel said, gesturing at the attendants who were setting up the table. “I imagine you two must have worked up quite an appetite,” she added with a wink before sauntering off.

“At least I’m hungry, so this won’t be a complete waste of time,” I grumbled.

Ava didn’t say a word. She just stared at Aysel, who was already speaking with some of the other quests, glancing at us and giggling. I was certain that as annoying as Aysel was, she’d already served her purpose of circulating the kind of gossip that would make Ava look better. And the worst part was that after everything that had happened tonight, I couldn’t even fault Ava for setting that train in motion.

Ava grabbed a glass of champagne from a passing server, and I reached for her waist, pulling her close. Leaning close to her ear, I asked, “Are we good?”

Her gaze flicked up to meet mine. She glanced at my mouth before taking a sip of her drink. “Yes,” she said. Then she kissed me lightly, the taste of champagne lingering. “For now.”

“For now” was good enough. I’d take it as a win—I certainly needed one.

I grabbed a drink myself and looked over at the massive table being set up, eyeing the food. The food, nothing else. No matter how much I wanted to, I was *not* going to scan the room to look for Cali. Ava would notice. More to the point, *Adéluce* would notice, and I had no idea what particular can of worms *that* would open.

*Fuck*.

The feeling of being trapped came roaring back.

“Heads up,” Ava whispered, cutting through my thoughts. “Knox is heading our way.”

I looked ahead and spotted the shrimp. What was he going to bitch about this time?

His expression was intense as he made a beeline for Ava and me. When he stepped in front of us, I looked him up and down. “What is it?”

“Xavier, uh…” He swallowed roughly, glancing at Ava. “I wanted to talk to you.”

I frowned. “Yeah, I got that. Spit it out.”

Knox glanced around nervously. He leaned in close to me, and his voice was low when he spoke. “Someone’s here who’s not supposed to be.”

**Episode 4246**

Greyson, Porter, Rowena, and I had gathered in one of the ballroom-adjacent rooms after I had very—*not*—subtly waved at her to follow us. My anxiety was tap dancing all over my chest, marking yet another great moment in the history of me.

*I just hate any talk involving witches and visions. More often than not, those visions are nightmares, both literally and metaphorically. Can they just…* not*?*

As Rowena told us about her vision, I was squeezing the life out of Greyson’s hand. He just stood there, all calm-looking, and let me use him as an anchor-slash-stress ball. At least the awkwardness between us had taken a back seat, for now.

“… a giant chessboard,” Rowena was saying. “The alliance versus the Bitterfangs and their allies, and then Lucian is captured by Malakai. He’s knocked off the board, and he dies.”

“Well, shit,” Porter said. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“Big Mac saw the exact same thing,” I said grimly. “What does it mean when witches share visions?”

I doubted it would be anything good.

“I had no idea Big Mac was having visions about the pack war,” Rowena said. She seemed as surprised as I was, which I didn’t love.

“When did you have the vision?” Greyson asked.

“Just before we were dragged out onto the dance floor,” Rowena said, looking over at Porter.

“What do you think it means?” I asked. “Big Mac says it’s a sign that we’re all screwed.”

“Great,” Porter deadpanned.

Greyson squeezed my hand comfortingly, and my heart fluttered.

“That’s one way to interpret it,” Rowena said. “But there could be other interpretations.” She looked around, as if to make sure nobody had snuck in the room with us. And then she lowered her voice. “Perhaps it only means that *Lucian* is screwed.”

I blinked.

Greyson’s tone was wry, and he exchanged a glance with Porter. “Now, would that be so bad?”

I whirled around to look at him. “That’s not funny, Greyson! If Malakai is somehow involved in this, it’s nothing to laugh about!”

Greyson’s expression remained smooth. “He’s a knock-off Silas, Cali. We’ve dealt with much worse.”

I sighed, pressing my lips together. “But still… Aren’t you worried about these visions?”

“The main thing they’re trying to tell us is that Malakai is going to kill Lucian,” Greyson said. “But since Malakai is dead and Lucian is unfortunately still with us, that outcome seems like an impossibility.” He turned to Rowena. “Perhaps you should revisit your interpretation?”

I frowned. “But you both had the same dream, or vision, or whatever. That has to mean something,” I said. “How do you even tell the difference between a vision and a dream, anyway? Are they the same?”

Rowena bit her lip, shaking her head. “Sometimes it’s difficult to tell. A dream is something that comes from within—the subconscious at play. A vision comes from forces outside of yourself.”

“But how are you supposed to know what’s what?” I asked.

“I can usually tell,” Rowena said with a shrug. “It’s happened to me before. Sometimes it’s challenging to tell the difference, but in this case…” Her gaze flicked to Greyson. “Well, since Big Mac saw the same thing, I’m pretty sure it’s a vision.”

I turned to Greyson, tugging on the hand I’d been mercilessly squeezing. “But who sends visions to witches, and why?” I asked. “What if what you and Big Mac shared is more like a prophecy?”

Rowena balked visibly. I instinctively did the same. *Shit! What did I say?*

“Do *not* go there,” she said, the warning obvious in her tone. “Nothing like this is ever written in stone.”

“Big Mac said something similar,” Greyson spoke up, “that there’s always a way to change the future.”

“That makes sense to me,” Porter said. “Otherwise our choices would be meaningless.”

“But how do we change things?” I asked him. I followed that up with even more aggressive hand tugging, which he seemed entirely unbothered by. “Couldn’t attempting to change things just make them worse?”

Greyson just shook his head. “I think we should take a breather here, Cali. It isn’t going to do us any good to worry about something we can’t do anything about—at least not right now.”

I turned to Rowena, who nodded. “He’s right. Visions, prophesies, the future—they’re all uncertain.”

I did agree with both of them. In theory.

*In practice, I just want to bang my head against the wall, or go to sleep and wake up when this whole mess is over.*

“Please let us know if you have another vision, Rowena,” Greyson said.

“Of course. Come on, Porter, let’s go check on the Cobalts,” she said, starting to move the both of them toward the door. “Sorry to ruin your evening, though.”

Greyson shook his head. “Not at all. Thanks again for letting us know.”

Rowena offered Greyson a grateful smile before she left.

“It wasn’t Rowena who ruined our evening,” Greyson murmured as the door closed behind her.

I winced.

*God, there it is… He’s mad. And upset. And it’s all my fault.*

I couldn’t beat around the bush.

Letting Greyson’s hand go, I said, “Was it Xavier who ruined the night?”

“There’s a long list of reasons, love.” Greyson turned to me, raising an eyebrow. “Lucian. The poem, the dancing, the entire spectacle—it was all too much. This should’ve been a celebration of a hard-fought victory, and instead it’s…” He paused, trying to find the right word.

“It’s become another overblown tribute to Lucian?” I asked.

Greyson snorted, crossing his arms. “And it’s not even done yet! But are we really surprised?”

“Nope,” I said.

Greyson chuckled, and for a moment neither of us spoke. We just stared at each other, and it felt normal. Like all of that horrible awkwardness from before had vanished.

“Greyson, about before…” I started. Then I stopped speaking, because I didn’t know what to say. I started to apologize again, but he didn’t let me. He just reached over and took my hand. The warmth of his touch made my skin tingle.

“Why did you let go of my hand?” he asked softly.

A lump grew in my throat, but I swallowed it down. I couldn’t cry right now—I couldn’t make this moment about my own comfort when he’d been hurt tonight, too. Relief flooded me when I felt the mate bond between us, clear and strong like it always was. The awkwardness was gone, and we were back to being us again.

I had to make sure that what had happened earlier didn’t repeat itself, though. I had to make sure not to hurt Greyson again. But that meant I’d have to pay less attention to Xavier for the rest of the night. It sounded impossible, but I needed to try.

I was worried about Xavier, especially after everything Kira had told me, but that didn’t mean I could forget about Greyson. I tended to think of Greyson as the strong one, steady as a rock. But he wasn’t made of stone, and I needed to stop taking him for granted.

*The last thing I want is to hurt him again.*

I went up on my tiptoes and brushed my lips over his. He sighed into the kiss, and I felt warm all over.

Caressing his cheek, I said, “Come on. Let’s go back to the ballroom to see what else Lucian’s got in store.”

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“I actually need to find Julia,” Greyson said once we moved into the hallway. “She changed her mind about seeing her father’s ring.”

I was surprised. “Is that a good idea?”

“I’m not sure,” he admitted. “But I don’t feel like I have the right to keep it from her.”

Before I could ask more questions, people started rushing toward the ballroom, giggling and shouting.

Greyson scoffed. “Well, then. Sounds like Lucian’s at it again.”

“Ugh,” I groaned. “What is it this time?”

A laughing Perrie and Lilac passed by, but then Lilac spotted us and twisted around. “Hey, what are you guys doing here? Hurry up!”

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “For what?”

“We heard that Lucian’s giving out awards,” Perrie said happily.

“Again—for *what*?” I asked, completely bewildered.

Lilac’s expression turned gleeful. “I have no idea! But knowing Lucian, it’s going to be fun!”

With that, he and Perrie ran off.

And now I was even more alarmed.

“Should we be worried that Lilac considers Lucian ‘fun’?” I asked Greyson, making air-quotes around the word.

Greyson shrugged. “Nah. The kid’s chaotic at heart. A certain affinity for Lucian’s antics was to be expected.”

I let out a laugh that sounded more like a groan.

Greyson pulled me ahead, toward the ballroom. “Come on, how bad could it be?”

We stepped into the ballroom, and, as if in response to Greyson’s question, Lucian shouted, “Come one, come all!”

He was standing on a stage. Of course. He’d also changed his outfit for the third time. Now, he was wearing a dark teal suit with a deep purple shirt and a navy blue bowtie—all jewel tones, of course, because what kind of prince would he be without them?

He scanned the crowd eagerly until he spotted Greyson and me, and his eyes widened in excitement. “Ah, there she is!”

I blinked.

*What.*

“The very first award of the night,” Lucian bellowed, gesturing at me, “goes to the lovely and enchanting Caliana Hart!”

**Episode 4247**

**Xavier**

Dinner was being held up because of an “awards ceremony”—which I assumed was code for “another way for Lucian to make himself the center of attention.” And where had that stage even come from? I was largely not paying any attention to the princeling, more focused on wondering when we’d get to eat, but then Lucian said Cali’s name.

“The very first award of the night goes to the lovely and enchanting Caliana Hart!”

“My, my,” Ava muttered. She shot me a look. “Do you have any idea what this is about?”

I shook my head, looking ahead. At Cali. I figured I could look at her right now, considering Lucian had directed everyone’s attention to her. I was allowed. But I made sure to keep my voice neutral when I told Ava, “I never know what Lucian’s doing.”

Cali seemed to feel the same way. She looked both surprised and embarrassed as she made her way toward the stage. The crowd was applauding, and I looked over at Ava. She was clapping—albeit very slowly—so I figured I could join in. Without much enthusiasm, though. I knew that after the incident with Cali in the tower, I had to tread carefully with Ava.

It wasn’t easy, though. Just seeing Cali made my pulse quicken. The memory of holding her on the roof had my heart working overtime. I ached for her, always, and every time I got a hit of her, it became even harder to let her go.

But who was I kidding? I knew I’d *never* let her go.

She smoothed her skirt and paused at the stage, picking up the fabric to start climbing the short set of stairs that would lead her to Lucian.

On the second step, she lurched and tumbled.

I went rigid, taking an instinctive step forward before Ava grabbed my arm.

“Cali tripped,” she said, no emotion to her tone. “She’s fine. You don’t need to check on her.”

My throat dried up, and I turned to look at Ava.

Her gaze was sharp when she added, “*Unless* you feel you need to.”

I shook my head right away, for both Ava and Adéluce to see. “No. Of course not.”

Ava said nothing, and I turned to look at Cali again. Armin had helped her up, and she seemed okay, but I couldn’t assume anything here. Just an hour or so ago, she’d had yet another fucking near-death experience. She was probably feeling weak right now.

Come to think of it, where the fuck was Greyson? Why was Cali still here? If it were up to me, she’d already be safely back at the pack house. Yeah, she’d have kicked and screamed and argued about being dragged home, but her still being here after what she’d been through was ridiculous.

“God, what a klutz,” Ava mumbled, like she was talking to herself.

I knew she wanted me to hear, though. She wanted me to hear and not disagree with her, just to solidify the fact that I’d chosen *her*. Not Cali. In all fairness, Cali had once been famous for her clumsiness, but that had changed. In fact, in the time since she’d first arrived at my pack house, she’d turned into a person who was sure-footed about plenty of things.

I couldn’t call it *my* pack house, though.

It was the *Redwood* pack house.

Shoving that unpleasant thought aside, I watched as Cali came to stand right next to Lucian. No more stumbling. Could Adéluce have made her trip? That seemed possible. I was convinced that Adéluce had pushed Cali from the tower, after all.

I wanted to tell myself that I was being paranoid, but it was impossible to ignore the facts. I just couldn’t fucking relax. I looked around, expecting Adéluce to pop up somewhere—maybe from behind one of Lucian’s ice sculptures. Worse, I kept expecting her voice to echo through my head, mocking me, taunting me like it always did.

“Ah, yes, those steps are tricky,” Lucian told Cali, patting her arm. “My apologies! Now, I welcome you to the stage! Let me bestow this upon you!” He held out a shiny golden medal and grinned widely at a clearly weirded out Cali. “It is awarded to the one who is most likely to!”

What followed was a collective silence. Everyone was clearly waiting for the rest of the award’s title. Someone—*Was that Lilac?*—broke the silence when he called, “Most likely to do *what*?”

Lucian chuckled, waving a hand. “Now, now, here you go, Caliana,” he told Cali, pinning the medal to her dress. “You are beautiful even when your gown is sullied from what I heard was an adventure up on the roof! You are brave and courageous, and your smile lights up every room!”

Cali just blinked at Lucian, very much *not* smiling. She looked both lost and annoyed. None of the shit he’d said explained why she was being singled out. But nobody asked again, and Cali seemed too fed up to care. Ava, on the other hand, looked amused.

“What the fuck was that?” she asked.

“No idea,” I grumbled.

Cali was ushered to a spot behind Lucian, and then Lucian announced his next award winner.

“Mace of the Blue Blood pack has won this medal for his cunning! A mighty man indeed!” Lucian said, and there was more applause. A lot of it came from the Blue Bloods.

I tried to focus on them, on anything other than Cali. I knew that both Ava and Adéluce had to be watching, and the last thing I needed tonight was more drama. I allowed myself just one glance at Cali.

She was looking down at her medal, frowning, clearly as confused as everybody else.

“Yes, come along!” Lucian waved Mace over as he climbed up the stage stairs to the sound of the Blue Bloods’ cheering.

Among all the noise and movement, something caught my eye. Knox was just a few feet away, gesturing for me. It had to be the first time I’d ever been glad to receive the shrimp’s attention—any excuse to get away from this nonsense, and the temptation of running up to Cali and doing something reckless that would hurt us both.

“Your cousin’s asking for us,” I told Ava, taking her by the arm.

We headed over to Knox as Mace received his award.

“Oh! Would you like me to make a speech on your behalf, Mace?” Lucian was asking in the background. I actually heard Mace’s pointed denial over all the commotion. It was that loud.

“Moving along now!” Lucian said. “The next award goes to…”

I tuned Lucian’s voice out as Knox led Ava and me out of the ballroom.

“Any updates on what you mentioned earlier?” I asked.

He nodded. “The guy I told you about is still here.”

I turned, peering into the ballroom. “Which one?”

“Like I said, I don’t know,” Knox admitted with chagrin. “I just picked up the scent. So did a couple of the others.”

I didn’t have time for this. “So you picked up a strange scent, and that’s cause for alarm? How do you know the guy isn’t supposed to be here?”

Knox huffed. “I’m not stupid, Xavier! Whoever this guy is, he’s not from any of the alliance packs. I overheard some of the Vanguards talking—something about how your brother got into it with a council spy, earlier.”

I scowled and glanced at Ava. She raised an eyebrow. “Funny how your brother failed to mention any of this.”

I scowled harder.

Ava shrugged. “I suppose it just doesn’t concern us. It probably has something to do with what happened at the summit with Elle.”

“That’s fucking bullshit,” I said sharply. “My brother could’ve had the decency to mention it.”

Ava pressed her lips together. “The way I see it, Greyson’s just minding his own business. I hope you’re not going to make this into something, Xavier. The need for the alliance is coming to an end, but that doesn’t mean you should start fighting with your brother.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “I’m *not* going to get into a fight with Greyson.”

Ava squinted at me. “Sure. That’s not defensive at all.”

I shot her a glare before turning to Knox again. “Do you have any idea who the guy is? The one you scented?”

Knox shook his head.

I ignored Ava’s cutting gaze and searched the crowd for an unfamiliar face. I didn’t know all the different pack members, either. I knew everybody from the Samara and Redwood packs, and almost all the Blue Bloods. But the members of Porter and Duke’s packs, not to mention Lucian’s? No idea. They were strangers to me. The scent could’ve belonged to just about anyone.

“And finally, the moment you’ve all been waiting for has arrived!” Lucian announced, his voice getting high enough to catch my attention again. I turned to see him standing tall on the stage, smiling self-indulgently. “The MVP award for the person who led the alliance to victory over the Bitterfang pack goes to…” Lucian pointed at his chest. “Me!”

A good majority of the crowd was silent, a few people laughing awkwardly, but there was riotous applause from the Vanguards. I just laughed. For real. Mostly because I knew this had to bug the shit out of my brother. Even Ava snorted at the spectacle, shaking her head.

Armin pinned the medal to Lucian’s jacket as Lucian bellowed, “By the gods, this is such a surprise! What a huge honor, my thanks to all of you!”

I was about to look for Greyson, just to see the look on his face, when Knox grabbed my arm.

“Xavier!” he hissed, jerking his head to the right. “That’s the guy!”

**Episode 4248**

**Greyson**

“Is Lucian really taking credit for leading the alliance to victory?” Artemis asked me. Her expression was somewhere between annoyed and dubious.

Rishika snorted. “Are we even surprised, though?”

The two of them had joined me right after the beginning of the “awards ceremony.” They did *not* share Lilac’s enthusiasm for Lucian’s shenanigans, so the three of us were in the same boat.

“Lucian will take credit for anything and everything,” I told Artemis. “His ego is never satisfied. It’s a miracle he can still prance around while carrying that gigantic head of his.”

Rishika snorted. Artemis was still confused. “I don’t get it. I’m not sure how things work in the human world, but who the hell awards *himself* a medal?”

“Lucian,” I said promptly. “Along with every other deluded dictator.”

“Lucian’s narcissism could be viewed as confidence, though,” Rishika mused. Nudging me, she added, “Maybe you have a thing or two to learn from him about self-love, Greyson.”

I gave her a flat look, not dignifying that with a response. Rishika cracked up.

Meanwhile, Artemis was still trying to make sense of the madness.

“At least Cali got an award,” she said. “I’m not sure what for, but I’m happy for her, anyway. That girl needs more confidence, and she definitely deserves to be recognized. She’s a hero, for sure.”

I smiled at the notion. It was sexy as hell to think of Cali as heroic. She really *was* heroic. I’d consider myself lucky to be rescued by her. She’d save me from some bad guys or a natural disaster or something, and then I’d go down on her for hours on end to express my gratitude.

I was having a good old time thinking about that, but apparently, a man couldn’t even fucking fantasize around here without Lucian spoiling his groove.

“… Greyson Evers!”

*Why*, though?

“I would be remiss if I didn’t give credit where credit was due!” Lucian declared. “I have to call Greyson Evers up here to receive his award!”

Again. *Why?* Had I not dealt with enough tonight? The whole Xavier-Cali kiss and subsequent roof debacle, driving myself mad with worry about Cali, the awkwardness afterward, the Julia ring thing—did I not deserve a break?

“Greyson, come on,” Rishika teased. “Be a good sport and go up there. In the name of self-love!”

“Greyson Evers!” Lucian called. “Where are you, my dearest friend?”

I didn’t bother to hide my grumbling, even as Rishika pushed me toward the stage. Lucian the Hypocrite acted all ecstatic to see me, of course, even though we both knew he wanted me to vanish and never look at Elle again. As for me, I did *not* need a stupid medal from a spoiled princeling who fancied himself the spiritual descendant of General MacArthur.

“But there he is, come along!” Lucian waved at me as the crowd cheered. I reluctantly climbed the stairs. Cali was standing behind Lucian, and she grinned at me, clearly amused. At least she was having fun with the ridiculousness of it all. That was enough for me to feel better as well.

And then Lucian spoke again, because life was full of trials.

“Greyson Evers.” He cleared his throat officially. “I present to you the award for ‘Most Likely to Succeed in a War’!”

The crowd was making a whole lot of noise, wolf-whistling included.

Someone yelled, “Yeah, Greyson! Get it, girl!”

That was definitely Gabriel.

Meanwhile, Lucian got all up in my space, trying to pin the medal to my lapel.

“Is this necessary?” I asked him. “Do you really need to do this?”

Lucian looked at me like I was the insane one. “But of course! Everyone needs to feel valuable, especially during times of war. Right?”

“Right.” I smiled at Lucian tightly. “Though some are far more valuable than others.”

“Now, now,” Lucian said, ignoring my jab, “take a bow and go stand with your peers.”

Seeing as I would’ve preferred to set both Lucian and myself on fire rather than bow and indulge this charade any further, I just turned around and joined Cali. Who looked even more amused, now.

“Wow, Greyson,” she said with a smirk. “Aren’t you handsome with your medal?”

“I try my best,” I deadpanned.

She covered her mouth to smother a laugh, and all I could think about was how much I wanted to kiss her right now. Then I realized there was no reason for me to hold back, so I reached for her arm. Her breath caught, she glanced at my lips, and then—

From the corner of my eye, I saw Elle marching toward the ballroom exit, pushing people aside.

“What the fuck?” I said.

Cali followed my gaze, and her expression filled with alarm. “Wait, where’s she going?”

“Elle, my forest rose, where are you going?” Lucian bellowed into his microphone.

Elle completely ignored him and kept rushing toward the exit.

“Mind link with her and find out what the hell’s going on,” I told Lucian.

He glared at me. “You think I haven’t tried that? She’s not answering!”

Even though I was thrilled by the idea of Elle ignoring Lucian, none of this felt right.

“We should go talk to her. This isn’t normal,” Cali said, gripping my arm. I turned to her—she was full of determination and strength, despite all the chaos she’d endured tonight. “And before you say anything about me staying here,” she added, poking my chest, “just accept the fact that I’m coming with you.”

“I’d never keep you away from the action,” I said, pressing a dramatic hand to my heart. “After all, you have an *award* now.”

She scoffed. “You’re one to talk—you got an award as well.”

“If the two of you can stop flirting, my forest rose is gone!” Lucian wailed.

From our vantage point on the stage, Elle was still barely visible as she rushed down one of the long hallways that branched off from the ballroom.

I immediately refocused. Elle wouldn’t just go running off for no reason. Something was wrong here—I could feel it. I had to make sure she was okay.

“Let’s go,” I said.

Grabbing Cali by the hand, I pulled her down the stairs, Lucian on our heels. We dodged questions from the guests while Armin started calling everyone to the banquet hall to eat. The seating chart had been mounted on a massive easel, because why the fuck not?

“Do you think something upset her?” Cali asked me, her breathing sharp as she fought to keep up. I shook my head, because I had no idea. Cali let go of my hand, gesturing forward. “Go ahead, catch her—I’ll follow.”

Nodding, I moved quickly, surpassing Lucian and bursting into the next hallway. I was just in time to catch a glimpse of Elle as she disappeared around the corner at the far end. Why did this place have to be so damn huge?

“Elle!” I shouted.

She ignored me as well, which was fan-fucking-tastic.

I turned to Lucian. “Where does the door she just ran through lead?”

“To the courtyard,” Lucian said, keeping up with me as I ran.

“Why would she be going there?”

“Well, there are statues of me and my ancestors,” Lucian said. “Perhaps my mate wishes to see how beautiful our children will be? Genetics do matter, after all.”

I rolled my eyes, but could I even blame Lucian for this one? I’d fallen right into it the moment I’d asked the question.

*I’m going to pick up speed so I can get to Elle, okay?* I told Cali, glancing over my shoulder. She was still with us, flushed and lagging behind but still moving quickly.

*Yes, go!* she replied.

I ignored Lucian’s rambling about how his and Elle’s kids would be the peak of werewolf beauty and burst into a full sprint. I sped around the corner that Elle had taken, almost hitting my head on a lamp.

I saw the light from the courtyard up ahead and immediately picked up Elle’s scent. There was a hint of stress to it, a wrongness that made my gut throb. Something deep inside me stirred—a visceral, burning need to make sure that Elle was safe. That nothing bad would ever happen to her.

It had to be the sire bond flaring up.

And then I caught another scent. One I didn’t recognize.

“Fuck,” I muttered, running faster.

What the hell? Was Elle following someone?

I raced farther into the courtyard, just in time to see Elle leap over a wall. The statues Lucian had mentioned were right here, getting in my way just like *he* always did. I moved through a row of life-size sculptures that had been positioned in a zigzag pattern, losing my footing on a patch of grass and sending one crashing to the ground.

Oops?

“Great grandmother!” Lucian yelped from behind me. “What did that brute *do* to you?”

I headed for the wall that Elle had just leapt over and was getting ready to jump when I heard shouts and movement from my left.

Ava, Knox, and Xavier barreled right into me.

“Hey!” I snapped, pushing Xavier off me. “What are you doing here?”

Xavier glared at me. “I could ask you the same thing! Didn’t you see that guy?”

I looked around, then at the wall I still hadn’t jumped over. Starting to climb, I demanded, “What guy?”

Xavier followed me up the wall, glaring all the while. “Oh, you don’t know? Like *I* didn’t know about the spy from the council, because you neglected to pass on that information?”

The asshole shoved me just as we reached the top of the wall, sending us both crashing to the ground on the other side, swearing at each other the whole time.

“You coward!” The screamed words caught my attention. *Elle*. Up ahead, she was pinning someone to the ground, shouting at him. “If it’s me you’re after, then come get me!”

**Episode 4249**

There was shouting from up ahead, the drama unfolding without me there to witness it. Which was pretty rude, actually. I fought to climb over the wall, cursing both my dress and my half-human physique.

*These damn werewolves are so fast! And my Fae magic is exactly useful in this situation!*

But wait, *could it* be useful? Was there some way I could conjure up a magical hoverboard or something, like how I made my shield? Because it felt like climbing this wall was taking *forever*.

When I finally landed on the other side, I was met with a group of shouting people. Lucian was the loudest, naturally, and Elle was growling at someone. She had them pinned to the ground, her eyes flashing with fury. Just then, Lucian grabbed the man out from underneath Elle and slammed him against a statue, growling.

“You will never touch my mate again, you cretin!” he snarled.

I was simply not following the plot, here.

*Who is this man? Why is Elle screaming at him to come get her? Why would he be after her?*

And then I remembered—Greyson had fought one of the council goons, earlier. My stomach lurched, and I turned to look at Greyson. His expression was thunderous, his breaths coming out sharp. I had to hope that this was about Elle killing Helix and nothing else. But I couldn’t help but wonder whether the council knew something about Greyson turning Elle… Had they figured it out?

*Be careful*, I told Greyson as he moved forward. *We don’t know what he knows!*

Greyson shot me a glance and a nod. Then he came to stand right in front of the wolf, who had been struggling against Lucian’s hold. In an even voice, he asked, “Who are you, and what are you doing here?”

“None of your business!” the man spat.

Lucian huffed. “How dare you—”

Greyson moved so quickly, I barely registered it. One moment, the man was in Lucian’s hands, the next Greyson had him by the throat and was choking him. Greyson’s voice was cold when he told the man, “Wrong answer. Try again.”

Elle crossed her arms, glaring at the spy. “Now look what you did! Greyson’s mad!”

Lucian just blinked at Greyson and Elle while Xavier said, “We should tie him up, make sure he can’t escape.”

My eyes burned when I looked at Xavier, pulse quickening. The memory of us on the roof earlier, his arms around me, came crashing back, but I pushed it away. Greyson was here, and he was… furious.

Greyson looked so furious that I was startled.

“We can beat the truth out of him,” Knox suggested.

Ava’s tone was dry as she eyed Greyson’s hands, still wrapped around the squirming man’s throat. “Strangulation could be effective, too.”

Greyson’s expression was impassive. His hands looked massive on the spy’s neck, and my heart panged at the sight. Greyson never got like this. Only when it came to me, only when it came to…

*Elle.*

My stomach lurched.

“Okay!” I shouted, clapping my hands together before I moved closer to my mate. “Nobody’s torturing or strangling anyone. Greyson?”

Greyson’s jaw was set. He glanced at me, taking a deep breath before shaking his head to clear it. He let the man go. The spy sputtered and choked, falling to the ground on all fours.

“Everybody should calm down,” I said. “Okay, Greyson?”

Greyson swallowed, nodding.

“I can use my magic to make the man talk without any bloodshed,” I said. “Or we could get Artemis over here.”

The man eyed me warily, still on his hands and knees. “This has nothing to do with anyone other than Arielle.” He glared in Elle’s direction. “She killed Helix at the summit. The council expects justice.”

At least this wasn’t about Greyson. But it *was* about Elle—and just what the hell did “the council expects justice” mean in this context?

*This can’t be good!*

“You’re wasting your time,” Greyson told the man. “We’re not turning Elle over to the council, or anyone else for that matter.”

“That’s a dangerous mistake,” the man hissed.

He jumped up from his knees, partially shifting as he lunged at Elle. It looked like she’d expected it—her expression was almost bored—but Lucian leaped on the man before he could reach her. Greyson shifted partially, along with Knox and Xavier. When the spy realized he was surrounded, he started trying to lunge past everybody, one by one.

I ended up just standing there, watching the fight with my magic shield in hand. Ava was busy looking mildly annoyed, a few feet ahead. Elle was standing next to me, frowning at the spectacle.

“I did catch him on my own before, you know,” she told me. “I don’t know what the fuss is about now, or why the Alphas are chasing him around like he’s a squirrel. I could catch him again if they let me.”

A good point, that.

“Do you think my shield could help break up the fight?” I asked her.

Elle pondered this. “It is shiny and beautiful, but it seems very big.”

“It is,” I agreed. “It’s a little unwieldy, too, and I could end up hitting everyone except the council goon. And a shield doesn’t seem very threatening…”

I shook my hands until the shield faded. And then I channeled my magic again and drew my sword. “How about this?”

Elle nodded, looking pleased. “Very shiny and beautiful too, but also more dangerous.”

Just then, the council spy-slash-council member-slash-whatever he was ran straight toward Elle and me, his eyes wild with fear and fury.

“Leave her alone!” I barked, waving my sword to deter him. I accidentally nicked him in the arm, and he screamed, falling backward. I balked. Shit, I could’ve seriously injured him. Like, *mutilation* seriously.

*Magic swords are all fun and games until you chop someone’s arm off…*

“What the fuck is *that*?” he screamed at me, like *I* was the problem here.

Greyson grabbed the man by the back of the neck, and a moment later, both he and Xavier slammed him into the wall. At the same time, a group of Vanguard wolves rushed over.

“Soldiers!” Lucian seethed. “Take this trespasser to the dungeon—the one with the sharks!”

The man snarled. “That won’t do you any good, you fools! The council will still come for Arielle of the Redwood pack. She has to pay for what she did!”

“Elle only did what Cesaries originally wanted,” Greyson told the council spy. “Helix killed Evan, and the council wanted to condemn Helix to death. The only reason they didn’t is because I convinced Cesaries not to.”

The man showed his teeth at Greyson. “But justice wasn’t served! The Northwind pack should have been the ones to administer punishment.” He glared at Elle. “And *she* robbed them of that.”

“I’ve had enough!” Lucian growled, gesturing at his soldiers. “Take the vermin away. This is my palace, my kingdom—how *dare* the council send spies!” He marched over to us, pulling Elle close. “My darling, light of my life—did that lowlife harm you?”

Lucian’s clothes were tattered from half-shifting, hair a mess, his eyes wild. Meanwhile, Elle was standing there, not a single red hair out of place, still super-model levels of put together and gorgeous. She frowned at Lucian. “I had him pinned, remember? The man was lucky you came when you did.”

“He’s also lucky I didn’t accidentally cut his head off,” I added helpfully.

Elle nodded. “It’s true. Cali’s sword is *very* sharp. And also shiny.”

First thing tomorrow, I’d have to start sword training again—mainly to avoid the potential decapitation vibes.

“Yes, yes, excellent,” Lucian said, pulling Elle with him as he waved for all of us to follow him. “Now, let’s go back inside—no need to climb over walls, there is a door right here that leads to the main courtyard.”

“How many courtyards *are* there?” Knox asked in confusion.

Nobody replied. Probably because nobody knew the answer.

“Everything okay?” I asked quietly, walking up to Greyson.

He shook his head. “This is just one more fucking problem to deal with.”

I nodded, reaching for his hand. He pulled me closer as we walked behind the rest of the party, ending up in the main courtyard. It was filled with a group of guests, including Artemis and Rishika.

“What happened to *you*?” Rishika asked, eyeing Greyson’s clothing in alarm. A few of the seams were broken, after his half-shift.

“Just a little council trouble,” Greyson replied.

Artemis and Rishika started peppering him with questions as I looked around.

Xavier and Ava were there, talking to Knox. I ignored the jealousy that bit at me when I noticed the way Xavier was holding Ava’s hand.

*No, Cali. No more Xavier for you tonight! You’ve caused enough trouble already!*

I’d just have to wait and see what Kira found. In the meantime, I needed to make sure I didn’t mess things up with Greyson, and figure out what was going to happen with Elle.

“Do you really think the council is going to keep coming after Elle?” I asked Greyson.

He rubbed his forehead, taking a deep breath. “Yeah. That’s why I still intend to take her to Portland—the sooner the better.”

“Alas, the fun is over!” Lucian clapped his hands. “Everyone should get back to the ballroom—dinner is about to be served, and it would be a shame to let it go cold!”

We all moved forward. Rishika was up ahead with Artemis, already at the entrance.

Artemis turned to wave at us. “Come on, you two, pick up the pace!”

I looked up at Greyson, admitting defeat. “My feet hurt after running in these shoes.”

His earlier troubled expression melted into fondness. “I can carry you, love.”

I didn’t get the chance to swoon.

A screeching sound from up ahead cut off whatever reply I had in mind. Gasping, I whipped around and saw a massive shape come shooting toward the ground—only to slam right into Artemis.

**Episode 4250**

“*Artemis!*” I screamed, running to my sister.

Nothing mattered but the sight of her, lying unmoving on the ground. My heart was beating so fast, I thought it would burst.

*No no NO!*

Rishika grunted, struggling to lift the stone statue. “Help! It’s crushing her!”

Greyson and Xavier were already there. They pushed the thing off just as I arrived, dropping to my knees next to my sister.

“She’s not moving,” I said. I sounded like someone else, my voice icy cold, my cheeks wet. When had I started crying?

*No. She’ll be fine. This is just one more thing to deal with. She’s going to be okay. She’s—*

“Someone get Torin!” Rishika screamed, cradling Artemis’s face.

“Going!” Ava shouted, rushing inside.

I didn’t have time to process how she’d actually volunteered to help. Not when Artemis was bleeding on the ground.

Stroking Artemis’s cheeks, Rishika whispered, “Hey, hey, I’m right here, can you hear me? Please, wake up for me, *please*…”

I grabbed Artemis’s hand, squeezing, fighting down the tightness in my chest. The last thing anyone needed right now was me succumbing to a full-blown panic attack.

I leaned over Artemis, finally realizing that she was still breathing. “Her hand’s warm, and she’s got a pulse. She’s going to be…”

Artemis grunted, making both Rishika and me jump.

“I’m *not* planning to go back to the dance floor,” she rasped, her eyes still squeezed shut.

I let out a sound of relief—more like a sob—and quickly wiped my eyes.

*Oh my god, she’s okay! And grumpy as ever, too!*

Greyson’s hand came to rest on my shoulder while Rishika leaned in and kissed Artemis. I’d *never* seen Rishika’s hands shake so badly.

“Where does it hurt?” she asked Artemis in a whisper.

Artemis groaned, opening one eye. “Everywhere.” She looked down at herself. “I think I broke a couple of ribs. What happened?”

My heart was still fighting to fly out my chest from the adrenaline. Taking a deep breath, I pointed to the thing that Greyson and Xavier had pulled off her. “That statue fell on you.”

I looked up. A tower was looming over us. A very familiar tower.

*No way…*

Greyson knelt down beside the statue, examining it. Slowly, he turned to Lucian, looking both furious and disbelieving. “Is that supposed to be *you*?”

“But of course! Why wouldn’t it be me?”

Chagrin and guilt hit me when I realized that the statue wasn’t a statue, exactly. It was the gargoyle from the tower that Xavier had used to keep us from falling. It must have been knocked loose by our weight.

*God*.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered to Artemis. “It’s my fault.”

Artemis winced, frowning up at me. Then she looked confused. “What’s your fault? You dropped a Lucian gargoyle on me? Why would you do that? And stop crying all over me. I’m fine!”

I wanted to laugh at the way she was being so obviously herself, but I felt too terrible. What the fuck had just happened?

“Cali didn’t do anything,” Xavier said from behind me. “The statue was loose.”

My pulse accelerated all over again at the sound of his deep, familiar voice, but I forced myself not to look at him.

Rishika glared up at Lucian. “Your house is a deathtrap!”

Lucian looked appalled, but Elle nodded seriously. “Since Artemis got hurt, it’s obviously true.”

And just then, Torin and Ava arrived.

“Artemis! Gods dammit, I can’t leave you out of my sight for five minutes! Last time, you picked a fight with a wasp hive, and now…” Torin huffed, dropping down to his knees next to my sister. “Well, what is it this time?”

Artemis winced. “Attempted murder by Lucian gargoyle?”

Torin was too stunned to speak for a moment, but when Rishika poked his shoulder, he snapped out of it and got to work.

Greyson reached for my hand, helping me stand and give Torin more space. Gripping Greyson’s arm to steady myself, I looked over at the gargoyle. Lucian’s cracked stone face was staring back at me.

Icy dread filled me.

“Are you okay?” Greyson asked, cupping my cheek, clearly concerned.

I looked up at him. *Could this be the vision?* *Is Lucian’s statue meant to be the chess piece?*

Greyson stared at it. *Could be. Good catch.*

I swallowed, taking a breath. *Either way, it’s a bad sign. Do you think we should leave now?*

“As you know, the healing of bones can be painful,” Torin said in the background, catching my attention, “but you *will* heal, Artemis. You’ll be fine and ready to terrorize the wasps again in no time.”

Artemis pouted. “They started it.”

Elle nudged Lucian, and he turned to her with a start.

“Right, of course,” he said, under his breath. A second later, he turned to Torin and Rishika. “You must bring Artemis to one of the bedrooms, for her comfort. I insist.”

While Rishika helped a grimacing Artemis to her feet, I pulled Greyson aside.

“Greyson, I’m serious,” I said quietly. “Artemis may have survived, in no small part thanks to Torin, but what if this was meant to be a warning? And we all heard what the captured wolf said—the council’s going to come after Elle. What if there are more loose gargoyles waiting to fall on us?”

“I’m pretty sure the gargoyle thing and the council thing are two separate problems.” He glanced upward. “The gargoyle could’ve been an unfortunate accident that we shouldn’t read too much into. Don’t you think?”

I swallowed nervously. “But what about Elle? I feel like we should take her back to the Redwood house.”

He shook his head. “As much as I’d love for her to leave Lucian, as long as Elle is here, with all these around her, there’s little chance that the council can get to her.” He glanced over his shoulder at Elle, who was quietly talking with Lucian. “She’s the one who captured our spy, after all.”

“She did do it faster and more easily than any of you Alphas,” I conceded.

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “Fair point. Anyway, bottom line, one spy is in Lucian’s dungeon, and I chased the other one off. If there are any more here, we’ll catch them. And I doubt they’ll send anyone else in—it would be foolish.”

I pressed my lips together, trying to absorb some of his calmness. “But what happens when the council realizes we’ve captured one of their people? Isn’t that going to just piss them off more? We need to let him go, or—”

“We’ll figure all of this out,” Greyson said. “I agree with you, we don’t need any more problems from them, but let’s take a moment to process here, okay?”

I swallowed hard, letting out a sharp breath. “Okay.”

“Let’s go inside now,” he said. “Get something to eat.”

I wanted to say I wasn’t hungry, but food didn’t actually sound so bad right now. Hand in hand, we headed inside. I hadn’t seen Xavier or Ava in a beat, but I wasn’t going to look for him.

*Wait for Kira’s results, Cali!*

I had to listen to my own advice.

We’d only walked a few feet into the entryway when Julia and Russell came rushing over. Russell looked fine, but Julia’s eyes were red, like she’d been crying.

*Poor girl…*

“My parents are here to take us home, so we just wanted to say goodbye,” Russell said. “We’re glad that Artemis is going to be okay.”

Julia spoke up, her voice throaty. “I’m not leaving until I see the ring.”

Greyson sighed. “If you think that’s what’s best for you…”

Julia nodded. “I need to see it, for closure.”

Greyson hesitated for a moment, then he said, “Okay. Let’s go somewhere private.”

*I get that this whole thing must feel wrong to you*, I told Greyson as he led us away. *But it’s her choice.*

*I know*, Greyson said. *I just wish I could protect her from all of this.*

I squeezed his hand. *But you can’t, and that’s okay. You’re doing your best.*

Greyson squeezed my hand back, and a surge of warmth flooded me.

“Okay then,” Greyson said, once we were in a more private spot.

He turned to Julia, reaching into the inside pocket of his jacket. I stared at the girl, basically bracing for the worst. Sure enough, Julia started to shake, reaching for Russell’s hand. She squeezed it tightly, looking between Greyson and me.

“I’m so, so sorry about everything,” she said.

I felt horrible, seeing her so devastated. “You have nothing to be sorry about.”

Greyson cleared his throat, extending his hand toward Julia. He opened his palm, revealing the ring. It wasn’t really anything special. Gold, with a thick band and a square front with some markings.

Julia looked like she’d seen a ghost. Russell stroked her arm, wincing in obvious sympathy.

I rested a hand on Julia’s shoulder. “I know this must be hard for you—”

“No.” She shook her head, hot tears rolling down her cheeks. Her wide eyes darted up to Greyson. “You don’t understand—that’s *not* my father’s ring.”

I froze, stunned.

*Wait… What?*

I turned to Greyson, ready to ask him what—

*BOOM!*

There was a massive crash, and the entire Vanguard palace was shaken to its core.

**Episode 4251**

**Xavier**

The crash rattled the foundations of the palace, and I swung a protective arm around Ava. The move was pure instinct—I didn’t even think before I did it—but my thoughts were on Cali. I looked over at her and saw that she looked terrified. I was hit by a pang of jealousy as I watched Greyson pull her protectively against him.

I knew he and I were in the right places and with the right women—but it was hard to turn off the way I felt about that. I just couldn’t stop myself from wishing it could be *me* with Cali. But at least I hadn’t just screwed up in front of Ava again.

There was another ear-splitting crash, and we all flinched.

“Another one of those creepy gargoyles fell!” someone shouted.

*Another* gargoyle had fallen? What the fuck was happening? Whatever it was, I had a sinking suspicion Adéluce was at the bottom of it. Maybe this was all just a not-so-subtle reminder that she was watching me.

There was another crash and then an anguished scream.

Ava gasped. “Oh my god!”

As one, we all ran toward the sound. My stomach twisted when we found that one of the falling gargoyles had landed on a Vanguard wolf. The woman was lying on the ground, blood spreading from his head. Two other Vanguard wolves were next to him, trying to lift the stone statue, but they were struggling.

I stepped forward without a second thought and helped them to lift the impossibly heavy statue. The thing must have weighed at least two thousand pounds.

When we’d finally managed to move it, I got a proper look at the Vanguard wolf it had fallen on. I looked away. The sight was gruesome, even for me.

“Oh shit. This is bad,” Ava breathed, standing next to me. “I don’t think even Torin’s going to be able to fix this,” she said quietly. She looked up. “Are more of them going to fall? We should get out of the way.”

“You’re right.” I looked around. “Everyone should get back inside. Now!”

No one argued with my order, and as everyone surged toward the doors, I shot a glance up at the roof. What was going on up here? Was I right? Was Adéluce doing all this?

It certainly *seemed* like her, but it also didn’t make any sense. Why would she want to kill a Vanguard wolf? She had nothing against them—at least not that I knew of.

I wanted to believe this wasn’t her—that would make the whole situation slightly less terrifying—but if this wasn’t Adéluce’s work, then what the hell was going on?

I watched as pack members streamed through the doors back into the ballroom and wondered if I should slip away and try to contact the vampire-witch. It was one thing to torture *me*—it was another thing entirely to be fucking with people who’d had nothing to do with the Duquettes.

We were all moving inside—to what I hoped was relative safety—when we heard another scream. It came from far away, but there was no mistaking the desperation in the cry.

“That came from the West Garden,” Lucian said grimly.

I looked wildly around. I had no idea where the West Garden was—or even which direction was west. My sense of direction was always thrown off by the sheer size of the palace.

“Xavier! Help! It’s Fausto!” Josephine was running toward me, anguish twisting her face.

I took off after her without hesitation, the sight of her desperation making my heart pound. The Samaras couldn’t afford to lose any members—especially any as strong as Fausto.

Ava was running behind me, and Lucian was at my side, and I soon realized that Josephine was leading us toward the West Garden.

A knot of people was gathered around something—or some*one*—and I pushed my way through the crowd. Fausto was at the center, bloodied and bruised, but sitting up.

He immediately pulled Josephine into his arms. “There you are. I’m okay, I’m okay.”

I wasn’t convinced of this, but at least he was sitting up and speaking—that was something. Josephine helped him as he struggled unsteadily to his feet.

“What happened?” I asked, looking around.

“I was talking to one of the Cobalts when we were hit by that gargoyle, there.” He gestured toward one of the gremlin Lucian statues, which was lying on the ground and looking significantly worse for wear after its tumble from the roof. “It just fell out of nowhere.”

Ava’s gaze went to the roof. “We need to get everyone inside.”

“Yeah, agreed. Get everyone back to the ballroom,” I said. “We have to figure out what’s going on, here.”

“I was lucky,” Fausto said. He was looking over at the Cobalt wolf, whose still, bloodied form was being cradled by a weeping woman. “I don’t think he’s going to make it.”

“Okay, everyone, into the ballroom!” Ava shouted.

There wasn’t any argument to that, and everyone started streaming out of the garden. Knox, Blaine, and Marissa made their way over to me.

“Hey, Xavier, was the palace built with magic, like our pack house?” Knox asked.

“What?”

He shrugged. “Could that be what’s causing this?” he asked, looking over at the battered gargoyle.

I pushed a hand through my hair. “I have no idea. It’s possible, I guess, but as far as I know, the Vanguard pack doesn’t have a witch. Though I wouldn’t put anything past the princeling.” I looked around. “I guess I could talk to Lucian about it.”

“This place sucks,” Blaine muttered, sounding edgy.

“Get inside,” I told the three of them.

But just as they headed in, I heard a rumbling that was starting to sound familiar, and I looked up to see a shower of rock and gravel falling from the roof—directly onto the spot where Blaine and Marissa were walking.

I didn’t think twice—I just threw myself at them, knocking them out of the way as yet another stone gargoyle slammed into the ground.

For a moment no one moved, then Blaine angrily shoved me away.

“What the hell?” he snapped.

I looked at him, figuring he was upset about the falling gargoyle, and was shocked to see that he was glaring at *me*.

I got to my feet, and Knox and I both helped Marissa up. She looked pale and scared, and was staring at the gargoyle with wide, terrified eyes.

“What the *fuck*, man?” Blaine went on, scrambling to his feet. “What’s wrong with you, Xavier? Why’d you tackle me? The thing wasn’t going to hit me,” he spat, glowering at the statue that had practically shattered on impact.

I was floored. “Are you fucking *kidding me?* Oh, I’m *so* *sorry* for not correctly calculating the trajectory of the deadly projectile, man. Why the hell are you complaining?”

“Hey, Blaine, he was trying to help—just thank him, dude,” Knox said quietly.

But Blaine didn’t look like he was planning to do anything of the sort. He opened his mouth to say something more, but Marissa grabbed his arm.

“Hey, stop,” she scolded. “Didn’t you see what happened to that Cobalt wolf? Xavier just tried to save your life—and getting tackled is a lot better than being crushed to death by a statue of Lucian.”

“Yeah, well, next time—”

“How about this?” I snapped, cutting Blaine off. “If there *is* a next time, I’ll just leave you to work it out yourself. Better yet, I’ll shove you into its path. Would that work better for you?” I shook my head. “Whatever, man. I’m not going to waste another minute with you. Get him inside,” I snapped at Knox. “Before something worse happens to him.”

“Marissa!” Ava rushed out to the garden. “Are you okay? What happened?”

“*That* happened,” she said, pointing at the gargoyle. “But Xavier got us out of the way. We’re okay, thanks to him.” She nodded at me, then she and Knox manhandled Blaine back into the palace.

Ava turned to me. Her face was pale, but she was smiling. “You did good, X.”

I shrugged it off. “I just did what any Alpha would’ve done. Though you wouldn’t know it, talking to Blaine. What an ass.”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t worry about him.” She looked around. “Do you have any idea what’s causing this?”

My thoughts went to Adéluce, but that idea still didn’t make any sense.

“I don’t,” I admitted. “But I can’t shake this feeling…”

“What feeling?” Ava asked curiously.

I shook my head. “Just this gut feeling. This sense of doom. Like everywhere I go, a dark shadow is following me around.”

And that dark shadow had a name—Adéluce.

“There he is!”

Ava and I looked over to see Lucian marching into the garden. He was flanked by three Vanguard soldiers, and he pointed an accusing finger right at me.

“Xavier Evers! This is all your fault!”

**Episode 4252**

“—and I don’t know if it’s too late, but just take a look at him, could you?” I asked Torin.

We were both looking at the Cobalt wolf, who was being carried into the palace by one of his pack mates. The injured man was limp and pale, and Torin looked worried. I just hoped it wasn’t too late to help him.

Torin nodded. “Yeah, I’ll see what I can do,” he said, and hurried after the Cobalts.

I looked around and was just wondering if Rowena was aware of what had happened when I heard an angry voice.

“Xavier Evers!”

It was Lucian, and his tone was harsh and accusing.

Frowning, I hurried back toward the West Garden, where I found the prince in the middle of a shouting match with Xavier and Ava.

When I burst into the garden, Lucian rounded on me, his eyes narrowed. “And *you*, too.”

“Excuse me?” I demanded.

Lucian looked between Xavier and me. “It’s both of you. You’re *both* responsible.”

I stared at him in shock. I had no idea what he was talking about, but Xavier spoke before I could tell him so.

“Did it ever occur to you, Lucian,” Xavier said, with scathing sarcasm, “that this is happening because your fucking palace was built with straw?”

This was *not* what Lucian wanted to hear, and he began to visibly expand, like he was filling up with rage.

“This palace,” he spat, “was built to the *highest* standards, constructed by the world’s greatest craftspeople. There is *nothing* wrong with this building!”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Was Lucian actually trying to blame Xavier and me for the gargoyle rain shower?

“Stop!” I said, holding up my hands. “What are you talking about, Lucian? We didn’t do anything.”

He glared. “You were both on the roof, though *why* you were up there remains a mystery. You must have done *something* while you were up there—loosened the gargoyles, somehow. There’s no other explanation.”

Ava shot an icy look at me, then turned the same look on Lucian. “Are you suggesting,” she began, in a cold, haughty voice, “that my mate went around prying your hideous gargoyles loose? To what end? To embarrass you? To try to kill members of the very alliance that he helped build? To nearly kill his own pack members, and himself? One of them almost hit Xavier,” she reminded Lucian, pointing at the shattered statue.

“Exactly,” I said, admitting—only to myself—that Ava was pretty great at holding her own with the likes of Lucian.

“What the hell, Lucian?” Greyson demanded as he strode into the garden. He seemed to have heard enough of Lucian’s argument to be pissed about it. “You’re blaming people for this? Pointing fingers isn’t going to help anyone, right now. And we need to get the hell inside before any more of those things decide to fall.”

Lucian looked dissatisfied with this, but nodded, glancing up at the roof.

“I can assure you all,” he said, “there will be a *thorough* investigation.”

“Looking forward to it,” Xavier muttered.

As we headed back inside, I fell into step next to Lucian.

“How could you accuse us of such a thing?” I demanded.

He drew in a sharp breath. “Caliana—”

“Honestly, Lucian, think about it,” I interrupted. “What you’re suggesting makes no sense at all. And if you weren’t so upset right now, you’d see that too. I know this whole situation is unnerving, but you’re letting your anger cloud your judgment.”

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Perhaps I am,” he admitted. “I… I suppose I *have* let my emotions get the better of me. I’m sorry, Caliana. I should never have accused you of such a thing. Of course I know better than that. Please accept my apology.”

“Of course,” I said quietly.

“But I *will* get to the bottom of this,” he added, his voice hardening again. “*Someone* has caused this, and I won’t rest until that person is held accountable.”

I nodded and watched as he stormed away.

Greyson appeared beside me. “I hope he calms down.”

“I think he will,” I said. Then I shook my head. “I just can’t believe he even thought for a *minute* that Xavier and I were responsible for this.”

Greyson looked out into the gathering crowd and didn’t respond to that. His silence felt heavy, and I wondered if reminding him that Xavier and I had been on the roof together had been a bad move.

I was just getting my nerve up to say something about it when he turned to me.

“Have you seen Julia?” he asked.

“No, I haven’t. Not since…” I trailed off, suddenly remembering. “Hang on—Julia said that ring didn’t belong to her father, but you told me it did. Which is it?”

Greyson’s jaw clenched. “Everything points to that ring belonging to Malakai, but it’s not like Julia would lie for the sake of it.”

I thought for a moment. “I wonder if it was all just too much for Julia.”

“What do you mean?” Greyson asked.

“Seeing the ring, realizing that her father was really dead. All of it. She’s dealing with a lot right now. Maybe she’s in some kind of denial, you know? Like she just can’t accept that he’s finally dead. For better or for worse, he was a huge part of her life, and now he’s gone. It must be a lot to process.”

Greyson took that in. “I really don’t know, but I guess that could make sense.” He shook his head. “Maybe I shouldn’t have shown it to her at all. That might have been a mistake. I should probably go find her.”

I looked around the ballroom, but I didn’t see Julia or Russell. Maybe they’d gone off somewhere to talk, or just to be alone so Julia could process everything.

Greyson slipped his arm around my waist. “Hey,” he said, “I’m glad nothing happened to you out there.”

I looked up at him. “Yeah, you and me both.”

He smiled and leaned down to kiss me, but instead of the usual sense of comfort and warmth I usually experienced, I felt a creeping sense of dread that was starting to seem terribly familiar. It made my stomach clench like a fist, but I couldn’t shake it. It was the same fear I’d felt earlier, when Artemis had almost been killed.

It was as if the witches’ vision was starting to become reality.

“Cali?” Greyson asked, pulling back to study my face. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m just wondering if this is all proving that the witches’ vision is—”

“Cali,” Greyson interrupted. “The vision showed Lucian being knocked off the chess board. Right?”

I nodded. “Yeah. So that means maybe dying or maybe not.”

He tipped his chin toward Lucian, who was shouting and pointing and doing everything he could to prove that he was in command of the situation. “Look at him. There isn’t a scratch on him.”

“I guess not,” I admitted.

“The only thing hurt is his pride, and that’s likely to heal pretty quickly. He’s angry and embarrassed, but that’s it.”

I thought about this for a moment, then shook my head. “Maybe you’re taking the vision too literally.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, this is Lucian’s house. His palace, his fortress—whatever he wants to call it. And all those creepy gargoyles were carved to look like him, right?”

Greyson gave me a small smile. “Are you trying to tell me you think the vision was about faulty construction practices? Should we call OSHA?”

I didn’t laugh. “Greyson, *something* is knocking the gargoyles off the roof. And to have that happening after Rowena had the same vision as Big Mac… It just feels, I don’t know, like it could be connected somehow.”

“But how could Malakai be the one doing this?” he asked, looking incredulous.

I rubbed my eyes. “I know it doesn’t make a lot of sense, Greyson, but I just feel like *something’s* going on. I’m really unnerved about how Rowena had the same vision. I don’t know what to think anymore. It feels like something could go wrong—*again*—at any moment.”

“Cali, I really think you’re making too much of a few unrelated incidents,” he said. “I’m not saying you’re wrong, but sometimes when we’re looking for things to fit a pattern, we can start to shove a square peg into a round hole.”

I huffed. “That’s not what I’m—”

“Hey, Greyson, Cali, I’m sorry to interrupt, but can I talk to you?”

Greyson and I looked up to see that Charlie had just joined us. He seemed anxious as he pulled at the sleeves of his suit jacket. The top button of his shirt was undone, and his hair seemed a bit disheveled.

“What’s going on?” Greyson asked.

Charlie shot a glance over his shoulder, then looked back at us. “Something is seriously wrong. I need to talk to you both, immediately.”

**Episode 4253**

**Charlie**

Cali and Greyson were both staring at me, questions in their eyes.

Their intense gazes made me squirm, and I glanced around.

“Can we talk somewhere a little more private, maybe?” I asked.

I started toward a door, but Greyson grabbed my shoulder, holding me in place. “What’s going on, Charlie? Just tell me what it is. What’s ‘seriously wrong’?”

I felt immediately uncomfortable. I was in a room full of werewolves, most of whom didn’t know me, and were unaware that I was both a werewolf *and* a hunter. But—I reminded myself—I trusted Greyson.

“Okay,” I said, taking a deep breath, “Listen, I know this is going to sound weird, but I have a feeling…”

“A feeling?” Cali pressed, when I trailed off. “What kind of feeling?”

“More like a sense, I guess. That something is… *off*.”

Greyson gave me a long look. “You mean aside from the fact that it’s raining gargoyles?”

Frustration surged through me. I wasn’t frustrated with Greyson, but with myself. I just didn’t know how to articulate what I was feeling.

Cali must have guessed at that, because she gave me an encouraging smile. “Just try to explain it, Charlie. Describe it however you can.”

I nodded and gave it another shot. “Okay. You know how, being a hunter, I have some innate abilities. I was over there talking to Violet when I got this feeling, like I was being watched.”

“Watched?” Greyson asked.

“Yeah, but not just me,” I said. “It felt like we were *all* being watched. I tried to write it off—I mean, we’re at a huge party—but it just kept giving me goosebumps.”

Cali looked around. “But who would be watching us? Another council agent?”

“I—I don’t know,” I admitted. “I looked, of course, but I didn’t see anyone. Neither did Violet. But the feeling never really left.”

“And now?” Greyson asked. “Do you still have the feeling?”

“Yeah,” I said, nodding. “I do.”

Cali turned to Greyson, her eyes blazing. “Do you think it could be the same feeling that I’ve been having?”

“What feeling have you been having?” I asked quickly.

“Something kind of like you’re describing,” she told me. “This feeling of dread, maybe? Like something is wrong, or off.”

I didn’t feel relieved to have my hunch confirmed by Cali. I’d hoped that Greyson would be able to offer some kind of logical explanation, or some simple explanation for why I was feeling the way I was feeling. Hell, I would’ve been happy if he’d just told me to shut up about it, like I was being crazy. But if Cali was feeling something, too… That didn’t seem like a good sign.

“Look, I’m—I’m sorry,” I stammered. “I don’t want to freak anyone out. I know it could be nothing.”

“Don’t apologize,” Greyson said. “I’m glad you came to me. That was the right move. If anything else comes up, I want you to let me know about it immediately.” He rubbed his forehead. “But for right now, I’m going to go talk to the others and try to regroup, here.”

“You got it,” I assured him.

He and Cali turned away, and I headed back over to where Violet, Lilac, and Perrie were waiting for me.

“What did Greyson say?” Violet asked.

“Well, he didn’t tell me I was nuts, so that’s a plus,” I said, shrugging. “He took my concerns seriously.”

Violet smiled. “Greyson’s a good Alpha.” She shot a pointed look at Lilac. “A *really* good Alpha.”

Lilac glared at her. “I never said that he wasn’t, Violet—”

“Let’s not get into any ‘my Alpha’s better than yours’ fights right now,” Perrie said, ending the argument before it could really start. She looked around. “I’m going to go check on my dad.”

“Your mom said he was okay,” Lilac reminded her. “She said he was healing.”

“I know,” Perrie said. “But it really freaked me out to see him covered in blood like that.”

She shivered, and Lilac put his arm around her shoulders. “I’ll go with you,” he offered, and the two of them headed off.

“I’m glad Fausto wasn’t seriously hurt,” Violet said, watching them go. She looked over at me. “Did Greyson say why the gargoyles are falling like that?”

“No,” I admitted. “I don’t think anyone knows. All I heard was Lucian grumbling about Xavier and Cali being up on the roof earlier and causing this all to happen, but that doesn’t make any sense to me. I don’t know why they’d do something like that—or how they’d manage it, even if they wanted to. Besides, they’re on our side, even if they are having some personal problems at the moment.”

Violet’s eyes searched my face. “Are you still getting that bad feeling?”

“Yes,” I admitted. Then I shook my head. “I just wish there was something I could do about it.”

“Maybe there is.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why don’t you go up to the roof and look around?” she suggested.

I thought about this, then glanced over at Lucian. He looked pissed, and as I watched him, he snapped something at Armin that sent him scurrying away. “Do you think Lucian would be pissed if I went up there?”

“Are you kidding?” she asked. “He’d probably be thrilled. Look how mad he is about this. If you could figure out what’s causing the statues to fall, he’d probably rush order an extra medal, just for you.”

I thought about that, then shrugged. “Maybe you’re right. That kind of makes sense. Maybe I *will* go check things out.”

I started toward the exit, but Violet put a hand on my arm.

“Hang on,” she said. “When I suggested you go up there, I didn’t mean you should go *alone*, Charlie.”

“What?”

“What if you’re right and there’s something sinister making the gargoyles fall?”

“I don’t know if that’s what I’m going to find,” I said. “I don’t know if what I’m sensing even has anything to do with the gargoyles at all. I just think I might be able to get some clues if I head up there and look around.”

Violet’s expression was determined. “I’m still going with you. You need someone to watch your back.”

I didn’t love that idea. I didn’t think I was going to find anything dangerous up on the roof—but what if I did? Maybe it was just the mate bond making me act extra protective, but my mind cast around for other ideas.

“What if I got someone else to go up with me?” I suggested.

“Like me?” Violet asked.

“Like someone who’s not my mate who I won’t worry about the entire time,” I said. Violet rolled her eyes. “Besides, you have to be on the lookout down here for everyone in case something is wrong.”

“Fine,” she said.

I looked around the room and caught sight of Greyson. He was approaching Lucian and Armin, who had their heads bent together, talking. “I’ll tell Greyson about the plan. See if he and Lucian want to head up there with me.”

Violet thought about that for a moment, then shrugged. “Okay. Just be careful, okay?”

She reached up and kissed me.

“I will be. Nothing would ever keep me from coming back to you,” I said, then walked over to the three men.

It took a moment to explain my plan, and just a few minutes later, Greyson, Lucian, Armin, and I were stepping out onto the roof. Lucian had insisted on bringing three additional Vanguard wolves, which had made Greyson roll his eyes, but I kind of appreciated the backup.

“Over here,” Lucian said, leading us across the sloped roof. “This is where the first gargoyle fell—the one Xavier and Cali almost fell with,” he added, an angry, accusatory edge to his voice.

“Stop trying to blame Cali,” Greyson warned him.

Lucian narrowed his eyes. “I’m simply stating facts, Greyson Evers—”

“Don’t bullshit me, Lucian, I’ve got ears, and I know what you’re saying when you say shit like that…”

They kept arguing, but I wasn’t listening. I was searching the roof, scanning the dark expanse of it. I didn’t even know what I was looking for. I was just hoping that my hunter instincts—combined with my werewolf sensitivity—would help me out.

At least the wind had died down. That would make scenting easier—

“Shit,” I hissed, my foot slipping out from under me. As I fell to my knees, something caught my eye, and I turned back to Lucian. “Lucian? How are the gargoyles attached to the building?”

But Lucian was too busy arguing with Greyson and didn’t reply.

“They’re bolted on,” Armin supplied. “Why?”

I reached forward and picked up a stray metal bolt. “What’s this doing here?”

Armin frowned. “I just told you—they’re used to secure the gargoyles to the roof. It must’ve been thrown here when one of them fell.”

“Then why isn’t the bolt broken?” I asked. I stood up and stepped toward the edge of the roof, peering down at the ground. “The gargoyles didn’t just fall.”

“What are you saying?” Armin asked.

“Someone was up here,” I said, looking at the unbroken bolt in my hand. “Someone removed the bolts.”

**Episode 4254**

My heart pounded as I watched Greyson walk out of the ballroom with Lucian and Charlie. I was anxious about him going up onto the roof to check things out, even though Charlie and some of the Vanguards were going with him. I knew that Lucian was still angry about what was happening, and I knew Greyson had a short temper when it came to Lucian. Still, this was affecting Lucian’s palace. Surely he would be cooperative about everything.

I glanced out the window and felt a shiver travel up my spine. I’d been out on that roof earlier, and it had been terrifying. It had been so windy up there, and I was scared that something bad would happen to Greyson, too.

I rolled my eyes and almost laughed, imagining his response if he heard me saying that. I knew he was strong and that could take care of himself, but I just couldn’t help worrying. I’d just never be calm or relaxed when he was in danger. How could I be? He was my mate.

My gaze slid over to Xavier, standing across the room, and my heart skipped a beat. I knew I shouldn’t have been reacting to him that way, but I couldn’t help that, either. I thought of the way he’d held me when he’d rescued me—how he’d kept me from falling from the roof. Try as I might, I just couldn’t shake the feeling I’d had when I’d looked at him in that moment. There’d been fear in his eyes. It wasn’t the look of the man who’d said what he had earlier. It was the face of the man I still loved.

Something *was* going on with him, and it was driving me up the wall.

I really hoped that Kira would be able to find something—*anything*—that gave us an idea of what was going on with him. Especially since that information gathering kiss had caused so much drama.

But Greyson was right—I needed to prepare myself for the possibility that Kira might find nothing. That there was no magic at work, and everything that had been happening was just Xavier being… this new version of Xavier.

I hadn’t realized I was still staring at him until Xavier looked over at me, his gaze meeting mine. I felt myself blush as his eyes bored into me, and I quickly looked away.

I had to move. I had to get out of here. I couldn’t be caught staring at him again, and I didn’t want to just stand around waiting for Greyson and Charlie to get back from their inspection of the roof. I looked around for a distraction, then strode over to where Artemis was sitting with Rishika. They were at one of the small tables, and Rishika was holding out a glass of water to Artemis.

“How are you doing, Artemis?” I asked.

She took the glass and drank it down before she shrugged carefully, wincing a little. “I’ve been better. But I think my ribs are healing.”

Rishika looked past me and raised her eyebrows. “Hey,” she said in a low voice. “Look who’s here.”

I twisted around and saw Russell’s Pit Bull parents—Joan and Paris—standing framed in one of the ballroom’s large doorways. They were scanning the crowd, probably looking for Russell, and I remembered that he’d told me that his parents were coming to pick him and Julia up from the party. That was probably for the best—with all the weird stuff that had been happening, it would be safer for the two of them to get out of here.

“Excuse me for a minute,” I said to my sister and her girlfriend, then wove my way through the crowd to Joan and Paris, feeling extremely grateful that neither of the teenagers had been crushed by a gargoyle. I would *not* have enjoyed explaining that one to Russell’s moms.

Joan and Paris hadn’t moved from the doorway, too busy staring at the ballroom in clear astonishment.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” Joan breathed.

I almost wished Lucian were here—the prince would’ve been so proud to hear that. He lived to impress.

“Hey, would either of you like something to drink?” I asked. “I’d ask you to join us for dinner, but it’s been… Um… It’s been held up due to…” I trailed off. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to get into the whole “it’s raining Lucians” drama.

But Joan and Paris didn’t seem to be listening, which meant they hadn’t caught my awkward hesitation. They were still staring at the ballroom, taking in the vaulted ceilings—high as a cathedral’s—the elaborate moldings, and the opulent frescos on every wall.

“It’s… definitely something,” Paris said. “Though maybe a little over the top.”

“I can’t argue with that,” I said.

Joan shook her head, like she was trying to clear it. “Cali, we’re here to bring Russell and Julia home. And we drove here, so we’ll pass on the drinks. Have you seen Russell?”

I groaned. “Okay, so they *were* here, but then there was an… incident.”

Paris and Joan looked immediately alarmed.

“What kind of incident?”

“Was anyone hurt?”

“Where’s Russell?”

“Where’s Julia?”

“They’re both safe,” I assured them. “Nothing happened to them, I promise.”

“So what *did* happen?” Paris demanded.

For a moment, I was swept into the memory of dangling over the edge of the roof. I took a deep breath, trying to slow my racing heart. “There are gargoyles on the roof, and a couple of them fell.”

Joan and Paris both looked up, but I shook my head.

“I think we’re fine in here,” I said.

“Still, I think we should get going,” Joan said, an edge to her voice.

“I’ll go find Russell,” I offered. “This place is pretty big. It’s easy to get lost.”

The palace was so huge, I was worried that if Joan and Paris went looking, it would be the last I ever saw of them. I still got lost, too, but at least I had some inkling of how to navigate the maze-like hallways.

“Why don’t you two try some of the appetizers while you’re waiting?” I suggested.

When I turned to look at the ballroom, I had to admit that I had no idea where to start looking for the kids. But I hadn’t seen them in a while, so I was pretty sure they weren’t in the ballroom. I headed for the hallway, but just as I stepped into it, Rowena appeared in front of me.

“Cali!” she burst out.

“Rowena,” I said, surprised.

She was visibly upset and shaken.

“Did you hear about Aldo?” she asked in a shaking voice.

“No,” I said. I didn’t recognize the name, but I figured she was talking about the Cobalt wolf who’d been hit by the falling gargoyle. My stomach dropped. How horrible. “Talk to me, Rowena. What happened?”

She shook her head sadly. “He didn’t make it. Your healer, Torin, tried to help, but Aldo’s injuries were too severe. Thank you so much for trying, and please given Torin my thanks as well. He was rather upset, I know.”

I felt a lump form in my throat. I thought about Torin—“upset” wasn’t a big enough word to describe the way I was sure he was feeling. Not only did Torin have a huge heart, but I knew he avoided thinking of Astrid as much as he could. Not being able to save Aldo probably brought that whole nightmare back to him.

“Is there anything I can do?” I asked. “Or my pack?”

Rowena shook her head. “Thank you, but I think we’re okay. Porter is arranging everything, but I wanted you to know. And our pack will be leaving pretty quickly.”

“Of course,” I murmured. They needed time to be together, to mourn.

She nodded. “Obviously, none of them are in the mood to keep celebrating.”

“Of course not; how could they be?” I said quickly. I took a deep breath, hating that this celebration had turned so dark so quickly. I certainly wasn’t in a very celebratory mood anymore either. “Maybe everyone should leave.”

Rowena shrugged. “Anyway, I just wanted to let you know. It was good to see you, Cali. I hope we’ll see each other again soon—under happier circumstances.”

“I hope so, too,” I said.

“With the pack war behind us, we all deserve something to look forward to.”

She pulled me into a hug, which I returned, but as she stepped back, she faltered, swaying on her feet.

I grabbed her arm to support her. “Rowena? Are you okay?”

Her expression had gone dark, and she looked down, her black hair falling forward to cover her face. What was going on? Had the grief of the night hit her all at once?

“Rowena?” I said again. What was happening?

Then she looked up, and I gasped. The witch’s dark eyes were blank and glazed over. She stared straight ahead, unseeing.

**Episode 4255**

**Greyson**

“—and I’m telling you, you’d better get Cali’s name out of your mouth, Lucian,” I growled. I was growing increasingly irritated with the princeling. He opened his mouth to protest, and I felt my shoulders tense. What the hell was his problem? Why wouldn’t he just drop this stupid argument? Here we were on the roof of his stupid palace, and I was trying to help him out. The least he could do was cooperate himself.

“And I am telling *you*, Greyson Evers—”

Fucking hell, would this guy ever shut up?

“HEY!”

Lucian and I looked over at Charlie, who was staring at us.

“*What?*” Lucian demanded.

“Look at the bolts,” Charlie said, holding up a large steel bolt. “The ones that were holding the gargoyles to the roof.”

“What about them?” Lucian snapped.

“We’ll never find out if you keep interrupting him,” I said. “Let him talk.”

Charlie nodded at me, then continued, “They aren’t broken. The gargoyles didn’t fall by accident. Someone unbolted them.”

My heart pounded. Fuck. That wasn’t good.

“Hang on. Are you saying that someone came up here and intentionally pushed those things off the roof?” I asked.

“Aren’t you listening, Greyson, that’s the *only* possibility!” Lucian said. “The gargoyles were custom carved from *Italian granite*. They’re extremely heavy, and I specifically had them secured with titanium bolts to ensure the safety of my home.” He sniffed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “As I said, I spared no expense.”

“Yeah, well, it seems that didn’t work out too well,” I said flatly. I looked around the shadowy rooftop. Could someone really have been up here, unbolting monstrously heavy gargoyles and pushing them down on unsuspecting people below?

Who would do something like that?

My thoughts immediately went to the council, and their propensity for spying and stalking. They were sneaky enough, that was clear. But could they really be behind this?

Spying was one thing, but attempted gargoyle-based homicide didn’t really feel like their MO.

I stepped to the edge of the roof and looked over. The ground was a *long* way down. I narrowed my eyes. Was it possible that the culprit was still hiding up here? Maybe on the other side of the building?

“Greyson!”

I glanced at Charlie, who was waving me over.

“What’s up?” I asked, walking toward him.

He opened his hand to show me more bolts. “I caught a scent on them.”

Lucian heard that and hurried over. “Did you?”

I grabbed the bolts and sniffed them, then shook my head. “It’s too faint.”

“Let me try,” Lucian said, snatching them from me. “I have a more sophisticated nose.”

I rolled my eyes. “Be my guest.”

Lucian drew in a deep breath, like he was trying to inhale the bolts. “There’s *something* there,” he said slowly. “But it’s too faint to distinguish.”

“Do you think it could be from the workers who installed the gargoyles?” I asked. “If so, maybe you should ask for a refund.”

Lucian waved me away. “No, this scent is more recent.” He sniffed again, frowning. “It’s almost like the scent’s been masked with…” Another sniff. “It smells like *pine*.”

Charlie was watching us, standing right next to the edge of the roof.

“Charlie, you’re too close to the edge,” I told him, stepping toward him to pull him back. The last thing I wanted was for him to slip. I had no intention of having to explain that to Violet.

“Hey, Greyson, what do you make of this?” he asked, kneeling down.

“What is it?” I asked, leaning in for a closer look.

“There,” he said, pointing at a set of long, jagged gouges on the tiled roof.

My blood ran cold. “Those look like claw marks to me.”

Charlie looked at them, then down at the ground below. “I’m not an expert or anything, but wouldn’t you want to be standing right about here if you wanted to push a gargoyle over the edge?”

“I guess you would,” I agreed.

Charlie’s brow wrinkled as he thought it through. “Someone could’ve loosened the bolts and then waited up here for the perfect time to push the statues off the roof. They could’ve used their claws to keep from falling.”

Lucian, who’d been listening intently, drew in a sharp breath. “ARMIN!” he bellowed. “There’s been a breach!”

“Sir?” Armin asked, hurrying over.

“I want every gargoyle, every carving, every *everything* on this roof checked. Then double-checked. And take a squad with you—whoever did this could still be up here.”

I looked around. The palace was huge, which meant the palace’s roof was huge. If the gargoyle assassin *was* still up here, there were plenty of places to hide.

“Maybe we should split up,” I suggested. “Charlie, you’re with me.”

“Fine,” Lucian said briskly. “Let’s go, Armin.”

I turned to Charlie. “Let’s go that way,” I said, tipping my chin toward the west end of the roof. “And take it slow. Lucian’s right—whoever did this could still be up here. Use your senses. If you pick up on anything weird, let me know.”

Charlie nodded. “Got it.”

We started our search, scaling a short wall that led to a roof so sloped, I knew it was too dangerous to climb. I looked down at it, tempted to shift, but before I could make up my mind, Charlie grabbed my arm.

“Greyson! Look!”

I followed his pointing finger and peered into the darkness. There, in the distance, something was moving.

*Shit.* I didn’t relish the idea of chasing anyone around on this rooftop—it was slick, and dangerously steep in places. The ground was bone-crushingly far away, and it would be only too easy to lose our footing on the tiles.

“Do you see a path we could use to get ahead of whoever it is and surprise them?” I whispered to Charlie.

He pointed at a narrow walkway at the apex of two sections of roof, running parallel to the figure’s path. “How about that?”

I eyed it warily. The pathway was narrow, and even one wrong step would mean disaster—if we slipped, there was nothing to stop us from tumbling right off the roof.

I glanced down at the ground. We were werewolves, so it was possible that we’d survive the fall—but it was also possible that we wouldn’t.

“Okay,” I said, “we’re just going to have to risk it. But *be careful*.”

Charlie nodded and I started out, taking the lead, carefully moving along the narrow path. I tried to focus on the figure we were chasing and ignore the sheer drop just to my left.

I just had to stay focused.

As I moved, I thought of Cali, and took a moment to be deeply relieved that I hadn’t brought her up here with me. If she’d been here, I would’ve been so worried about her falling that I probably would’ve fallen myself. That worry had nothing to do with how capable she was—when it came to her, I just couldn’t turn off my protective instincts, no matter how hard I tried.

But Cali wasn’t with me. I was with Charlie, and he wasn’t my mate. I’d look out for him, of course, but without the constant, paranoid hypervigilance I would’ve applied to Cali.

Suddenly, Charlie surged forward.

“What are you—” I started, but before I could finish my sentence, Charlie had slammed into someone, landing with a heavy thud on the flat part of the roof.

Then, the pair of them began to struggle, rolling and taking them to the edge of the roof where it started to slope down. If they rolled onto it, there would be no stopping them. Charlie would fall, no question.

“Shit!” I barked out, leaping into the fray, grabbing hold of Charlie’s jacket.

I partially shifted as I moved, digging my claws into the tiles. My momentum slowed, and I prayed that my claws wouldn’t break.

This impromptu fight had the three of us sliding farther and farther down the roof, and I dug my claws in deeper, desperate for a solid anchor.

Finally, when we were close enough to the edge of the roof that my toes brushed the lip of the gutter, Charlie grabbed the guy’s hands. This gave me a window, and I rolled on top of him, managing to pin him down.

We finally stopped moving, and I got my first look at the guy’s face. “Who the hell are you?”

The stranger was still struggling, grimacing as he tried—unsuccessfully—to free himself from my grasp. “Fuck off!”

“That’s not very polite,” I snarled.

The stranger snapped his head to the side, and I heard a popping sound. Then he spasmed beneath me, and foam began to bubble from his mouth.

“Oh god,” I said, dread creeping through me.

“What’s happening?” Charlie asked, clearly baffled.

“He just bit down on a silver capsule.”

“What? *Why?*”

I looked at the figure, who was still twitching as foam spewed from his mouth. “He’s a Bitterfang.”

**Episode 4256**

I could feel the panic building in my chest as I stared into Rowena’s blank eyes.

“Rowena? Hey? Are you okay?” I waved my hand in front of her face. “Rowena? Can you hear me?”

She didn’t react. She didn’t even blink when I waved my hand an inch from her face. I didn’t understand what the hell was happening, but it didn’t look *good*, and I was about to call out for help when she finally moved. She blinked and shook her head, then stared blankly at me, her gaze confused but clear.

“Oh my god!” I burst out as relief washed over me. “What happened? Are you okay? Where did you go?”

She looked around. “Where is he?”

I stared at her. “Who? Porter?”

“No, Lucian,” Rowena said.

“He’s up on the roof,” I said. “He went up to look around. Why?”

Rowena’s eyes went wide. “I—I had that vision. Again.”

I shuddered. It couldn’t be good that a witch was having the same vision twice. What the hell did *that* mean?

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“I’m sure,” she said. “And whatever it’s trying to warn me about is going to happen tonight.”

My heart fell through to my stomach. I trusted Rowena—she was reliable, she was honest. If she thought the vision was going to come to pass… This mixed with Charlie’s hunter senses feeling like something was watching us… *Shit*.

I thought of Greyson, up on the roof with Charlie. They were *with* Lucian. If Rowena’s vision was true—if it was some sort of prediction or prophecy—then Greyson and Charlie could be in danger.

I had to warn them.

“Get to safety,” I told Rowena. “I have to go find them.”

Without waiting for Rowena to respond, I started running down the hallway, praying I’d be able to remember the way up to the roof when I’d gone up there after Xavier. We needed to get everyone together; we needed to get everyone out of here.

Then it hit me. We didn’t know where Russell was. Crap crap crap. Quickly, I turned around and hurried back into the ballroom, searching frantically for Paris and Joan.

“There you are! I’m so sorry, something just came up,” I said, hurrying over to them. I didn’t want to alarm them too much just yet… “I’ll be right back, and I’ll help you find Russell as soon as I can. Just go with the other Redwoods. Tell them I said to stay together.”

I didn’t wait for them to respond before I rushed back out into the hallway. I stopped, taking a moment to think. *Concentrate, Cali. Which way is the roof?*

Then I remembered—the door down the hallway to the left.

I sprinted down the hallway and yanked open the door, then charged up the stairs, holding my dress up as I ran. The stairs were a tight spiral and as they wound upward, I cast my mind out, trying desperately to mind link with Greyson.

*Greyson! Greyson! Can you hear me? If you can hear me, answer me! Please! Greyson!*

There was no response, and my heart hammered even harder in my chest. The dread I’d been feeling all night was nearly consuming me as I reached the top of the stairs. I was gasping for air, but I didn’t pause as I pulled the door open. The freezing winter air bit into my bare shoulders as I stepped out onto the roof. I looked frantically around and nearly sobbed in frustration. There was no one here. Where had everyone gone?

Terror gripped me like a gigantic fist, but I forced myself to keep moving. I *had* to keep moving. I stepped across the roof until I was close enough to the edge to peer over the edge. My pulse pounded in my ears, and I had to fight to keep my eyes open. I was scared out of my mind that I was going to see Greyson’s body, sprawled on the gravel below.

But there was nothing there. Nothing I could see, anyway.

I stepped back and forced myself to take a deep breath. Then another. I couldn’t panic. Not now. I needed to think clearly. It was entirely possible that Greyson and Charlie and Lucian had just left the roof. Maybe they’d gone back inside and were sitting in one of the palace’s studies, discussing what they’d found. That would be a better place to talk, anyway. Much more pleasant than the dangerous roof with the icy wind whipping around the gables.

I turned to move back toward the door, but my foot caught on a loose tile. I stumbled, my arms windmilling before I got my feet back under me and I found my balance. My heart pounding, I started for the door again, but then I heard a shuffling sound behind me.

I spun around to see a dark figure moving toward me in the darkness. Was that Greyson? I squinted into the shadows, trying to see through the dark. Then, as the figure drew closer, I saw that it wasn’t Greyson—it was Charlie. And he was carrying a limp body over his shoulder.

My stomach tightened so painfully, I nearly cried out.

“Oh god,” I breathed.

Had it already happened? Had Rowena’s vision come true? Was Greyson hurt—or worse?

It felt like the breath had been stolen from my lungs, so I couldn’t call out to him. Instead, I started toward Charlie so I could see for myself. But I hadn’t made it even a step before a hand shot out and grabbed my shoulder.

I gasped as I was spun around to face—

“*Greyson!*” I stared at him, shocked to my core. I made an embarrassing sort of squeaking noise and then threw myself at his chest, hugging him as hard as I could.

“Love,” Greyson said, his arms coming around me. “Cali? What’s wrong? What happened? Why are you up here?”

I needed a moment to collect myself before I could speak again.

“I thought something happened to you,” I said, taking a shuddering breath. “I came to check on you.”

“I’m fine,” Greyson said.

I nodded, then I remembered the body Charlie was carrying and swung around.

“Is that Lucian?” I asked, my eyes wide. “What happened?”

“No, it’s not Lucian. He’s with a Vanguard search party on the other side of the roof,” Greyson told me.

“What are they looking for?” I asked.

Greyson’s expression hardened. “They’re making sure there aren’t any more Bitterfangs hanging around.”

Just hearing the pack’s name sent a wave of fear crashing over me.

“What?” I demanded, my stomach twisting. “*More* Bitterfangs? I didn’t know there were any Bitterfangs around to begin with.”

“There are,” Charlie said grimly.

He dumped the body he was carrying onto the ground, and I looked down into the dead face of a stranger. I shivered again, and it had nothing to do with the wind.

“He’s a Bitterfang?” I asked quietly.

“He *was*,” Greyson said, looking down at the body.

“What was he doing up here?” I asked, almost afraid of the answer.

“We think he was responsible for the falling gargoyles,” Greyson said.

I nodded and—with a deep breath—forced myself to look down at the man’s face. It was contorted into a rictus of pain, and his veins were black and bulging. There was a foam on his lips, and—all at once—I realized what that meant.

“Silver poisoning,” I said dully.

Greyson nodded. “From one of those capsules they all carry.”

I looked away from the dead man’s face, fighting my rising nausea.

“Did you find anything when we split up?” Charlie asked Greyson. “Any signs of more Bitterfangs?”

Greyson shook his head. “No, I didn’t. I wonder if Lucian’s found anything.”

“I don’t get it,” I said, my eyes still on the dead man.

Greyson looked at me. “What don’t you get?”

“Why did this guy choose to *die* rather than talk to you?” I asked. “I mean, if he’s just trying to avenge Malakai, why would he feel the need to kill himself when you caught him?”

Greyson looked troubled as he shrugged. “I don’t know. It was almost like he was afraid he’d reveal something he wasn’t supposed to.”

“Like what?” Charlie wondered.

“Like Malakai still being alive?” Greyson asked.

Shit. It was the inevitable reality none of us wanted to face. I looked out over the roof, scanning the maze of eaves and gables and chimneys. I was searching hard—I had the weirdest feeling that the answer was *there*, and I just had to find it.

Suddenly, there was movement in my peripheral vision.

Far off—at the very edge of the property, where Lucian’s manicured lawns met the wilderness of the forest—something was moving.

I took a step forward and squinted into the distance, trying to make out what I was looking at. Whatever I was seeing was massive, and moving in a tight formation.

At that point, I realized I was looking at a pack of hundreds of werewolves, swarming toward the palace.

And there, leading the charge, was Malakai.